

## Hima: Center of Prehistoric Art and Culture in Southern Arabia<sup>(1)</sup>

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**Abstract.** Highly artistic and very impressive female figures are located in Najran, Asir and north of Yemen in a roughly triangular area. Such figures are not found elsewhere in other parts of the country, thus suggesting unique cultural, social and religious values prevailing in southern Arabia in pre-history. They also reflect social and cultural differences between the northern and southern parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Whereas in the north, male figures dominate the rock art compositions, in the south female figures are overwhelmingly depicted.

Desert life is usually hard and difficult. Living in extremely hot and dry conditions with very little to live upon in harsh and inhospitable environment may not be attractive for us, but for those Bedouins, the real indigenous

Arab dwellers, the desert is their heaven; their love for that land can still be seen until now. Hundreds and thousands of petroglyphs and ancient Arabian inscriptions are located throughout Saudi Arabia, which suggest that

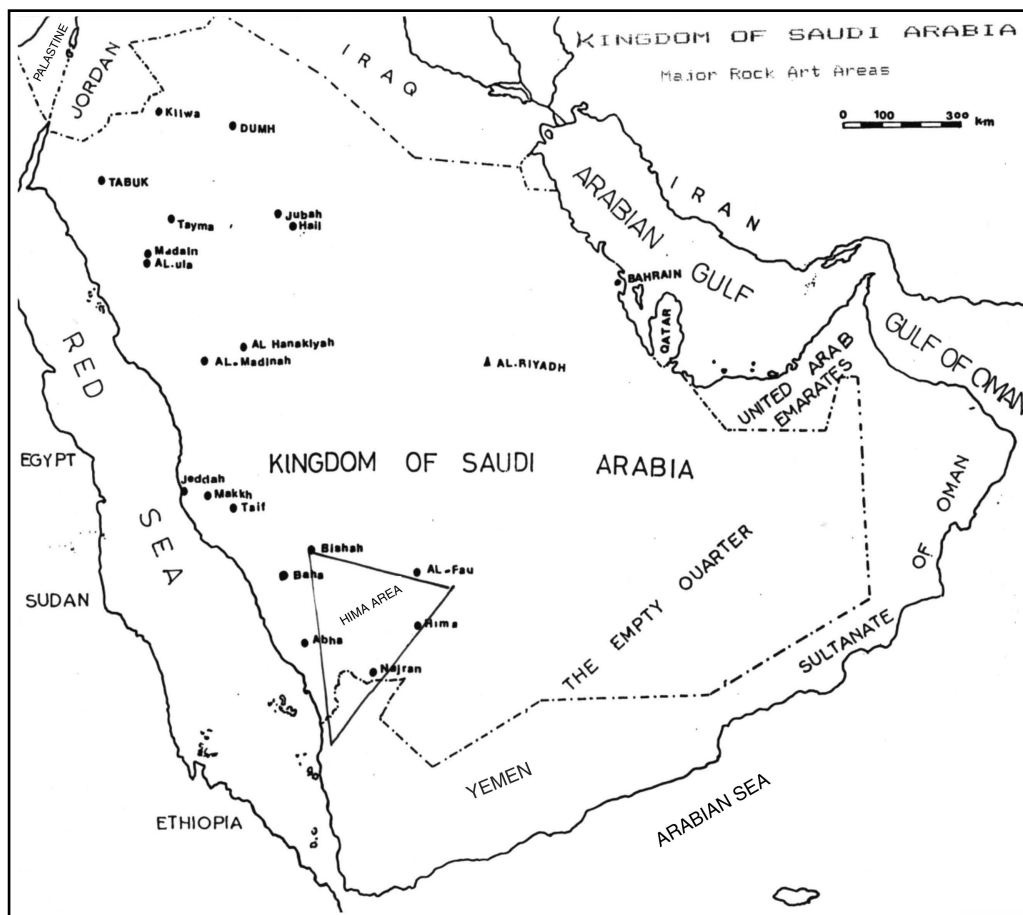


Fig. 1: The Location of Hima Area in Southern Arabia.



Fig. 2: The Buraihi Rock located in Najran area. The inscriptions were added later.

the population of Arab Bedouins in prehistoric times was reasonably large but at the same time sparse and unevenly distributed. The climate at that time (c. 3,500 to 3,000 years BP) was somewhat cool and humid both in the north and south of the Arabian Peninsula (Garrard et. al. 1981).

The Najran area was more attractive to larger human presence due to its greenery and humidity and presence of natural water resources such as artesian wells, springs and moderate rainfall as compared to the central desert areas of Saudi Arabia. Here in the Najran region from Wadi Dawasir, Wadi Tathlith to Hima area we find hundreds of rock art and inscriptions sites (Anati 1968, 1974; Jung 1991a; Kabawi et. al. 1990 and Khan 1993), particularly in Hima and Bisha areas which were probably more densely populated and

were culturally and socially more active than other parts of the Rub al Khali and central Arabia. It can be testified to by appeal to the location of large number of *Wusum* or the Tribal Symbols from Najran area (Khan 2000).

The prehistoric artist chose a smooth vertical surface of a large boulder to create one of the most fascinating and outstanding works of art. When the sun rays fall at dawn on this east facing rock art panel, the figures become shining and illuminating the images. In a moon-lit night, the entire rock shines like a bowl of light creating a strange, calm and soothing atmosphere which fills the heart with joy and happiness. When one stands in front of this rock (to be called Buraihi rock panel thereafter) one feels as if someone is playing a lyre, (figs. 2-3). The moon goddess (look at the moon shaped motif depicted near

the head of the female on the left) is standing with half raised arms in grace and dignity, and the god of power and authority is standing with pride and honor looking at the girl who is playing a lyre-like musical instrument and the moon goddess dancing with joy and happiness.

When the panel was originally created there were apparently no figures or inscriptions on the rock other than the male and female and the deer at the extreme right whose technique of execution and pecked marks are identical to other figures on the rock. What a combination of delicacy, beauty, music and fantasy! It should have been a sacred rock and a very attractive place for the people who lived in this remotest part of the world, in the middle of the Arabian desert, in the Najran area of southern Arabia.

Through time, the rock seems to have lost its importance. The place did not remain sa-

cred and the people forgot their past. Each visitor inscribed his or her name and other messages on the rock and on the figures. In spite of these activities, still until today, the figures are very well preserved with their beauty and fantasy. The date of this rock panel is unknown but can be dated tentatively to more than 3000 years before present, that is before the origin of writing in Arabia.

Although this is not the only rock in the Najran area that contains male and female figures, several female figures in different styles and attitudes are also located in the Najran area (Anati 1968, 1974; Khan 1993; Jung 1991a, 1991b, 1994). The most striking feature of South Arabian rock art is the persistence of certain styles for a long time in a particular area and cultural period, and continuous tendency of schematization from the earliest so called naturalistic to the later schematic and abstract human and animal rep-

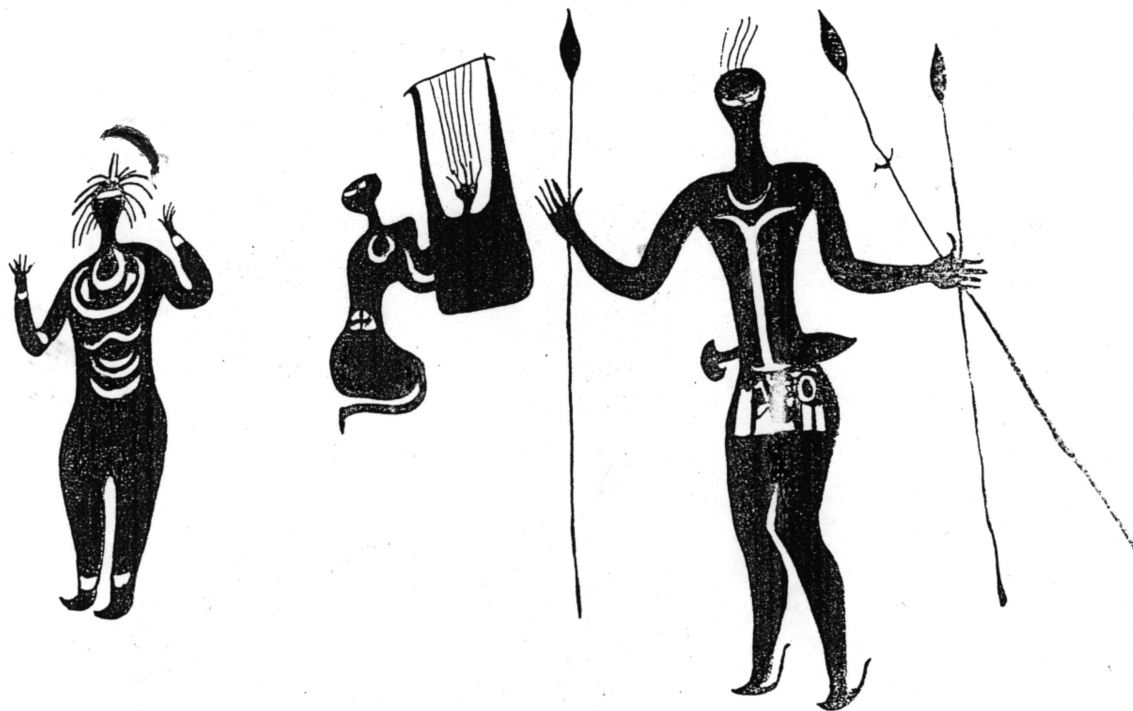


Fig. 3: Tracing of the original panel. Different phases of moon are marked on the body of the female figure.



Fig. 4: A large female figure located on Jabal al-Kaukab, Najran.

representations (Khan 1993).

There is a striking difference in the style, composition and contents of rock art compositions in northern and southern Arabia (Kabawi et. al. 1990; Khan 1988b, 1989 and 1998). If in the north male figures and large compositions of human and animal figures are overwhelmingly depicted, in the south the female figures outnumber the male representations and other motifs (Khan 1993b,c; Kabawi et. al. 1990). The emphasis on female figures and their continuity in a large area and over a long time span suggest that women played an important role in prehistoric cultures of southern Arabia. Although the style remained the same for long, the outlook, the decorative features, dresses and ornaments differed from one school of art to another.

The female figures in southern Arabia are usually shown with triangular torso, narrow

waist, heavy buttocks, long or sometimes short hair and are usually depicted with half raised arms. Such female figures are located as individual representations or sometimes in groups of two, three or more. On the vertical surface of Jabal al Kaukab, north of Hima, Najran region, a large sized female figure is depicted on the steep and much higher hill surface. The figure is prominently located and could be seen from a long distance. The upright standing posture, short hair up to the shoulder, narrow waist, the wide buttocks and half raised arms with stretched fingers give the impression of a modest, dignified woman (fig. 4).

A unique and most prominent female figure is located in the Hima area in southern Arabia. It is depicted on the vertical surface of a large hill facing east and is about 2.5 m in height. Created by deep pecking and rubbing the darkly patinated rock surface, the figure is a highly skilled and superb work of art. Although it is similar in style and physical traits to other female figures located in the Najran region (it has a long narrow neck, triangular torso, narrow waist, half raised arms and ambiguous face), such traits suggest that the artist's aim in all such cases was to portray a single model which is similar to a woman in physical traits but the artist could not conceive the facial features of his unseen model which could probably be a deity or goddess. A crescent is marked on the headdress of this figure probably to represent a moon goddess (fig. 5).

In the same Hima area, on a much higher hill surface, some female figures and a number of camel figures are depicted. There is a natural platform - like space in front of this panel, thereby suggesting that it was perhaps a place for performing rituals. The large female figure with half raised arms and very long neck and short hair is similar in style to those located in Hima area in large numbers (Kabawi et. al. 1990). Its prominent location,

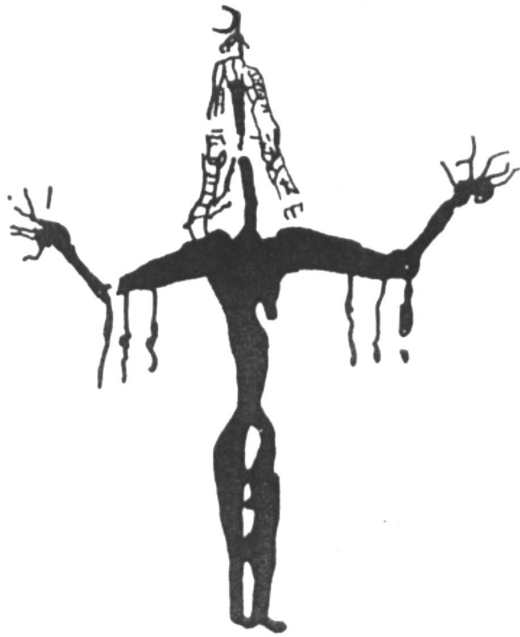


Fig. 5: A very large female representation from Najran area. Note the moon motif on head, as if the moon is rising on the head of the deity.

facing east, and platform are suggestive of a sacred place, perhaps the goddess was worshipped here in pre-Islamic times (Fig. 6).

We have seen two types of hair shown on the female figures in the Najran area, long hair reaching to the waist and short hair falling on the shoulders (figs. 5 and 7); both suggest that even 3000 years before present, women in Arabia were cutting, braiding and dressing their hair.

The question is why female figures in similar style, traits and physical features are depicted on almost every hill and mountain of Najran and as far south as North Yemen (Jung 1991, 1994). What do they represent? Among the local Bedouins (pristine Arab nomads) tradition, these figures are known as the representations of a Pre-Islamic figures of goddess. Apparently, the style, grace and dignity shown in these figures and their location in large number and in a wide area convince a visitor to assume that the artists have portrayed some mythical being such as a deity or a goddess.

These figures are located in a roughly triangular area between Wadi Dawasir, Hima, Bisha in southern Arabia to Abha and Dhahran al



Fig. 6: A very prominent location on Jabal al-Kaukab, platform in front of the female figures where rituals were probably performed.

Janub in the south-western highlands and as far away as northern Yemen. Thus, we can say that a similar religious and cultural ideology was prevailing in Hima area. Although the male figures are also located in this triangle, which also seems to be representing deities or gods, the female figures outnumber the male representations.

The similarity of these female figures, both in style and overall configuration, suggests the similarity in schematization and symbolism in closely located cultural groups of Hima and other nearby areas. Thus, there is no doubt that the concept of these female figures is based on the ideology of the artist or artists, and reveals the social, cultural and religious values of the society in which these panels were created. As viewed in terms of the means-end-schema, there apparently seems to be no conflict in the religious values of the prehistoric society in which the figures under discussion were created.

However, the location of almost identical female figures in Hima area and adherence to the same stylistic patterns may occur because the artist does not depict figures for his own aesthetic satisfaction but only follows social patterns imposed by society. Similarly, art style attributed to this particular period in which these female figures were depicted (c. 1,500 to 1,000 BC - dating both tentative and relative -- see Khan 1988, 1989, 1993), in southern Arabia indicate continuous adaptation to existing traditions for a long time. Thus, within each cultural period, we find little creativity and few new ideas (Khan 1993: 191). Therefore, the restriction of certain styles to particular territories may suggest that the social boundaries limited the movement of cultural ideas. It is why we do not find such female figures outside Hima area.

But in the Buraihi panel (I named this rock in memory of the original discoverer late Mr.

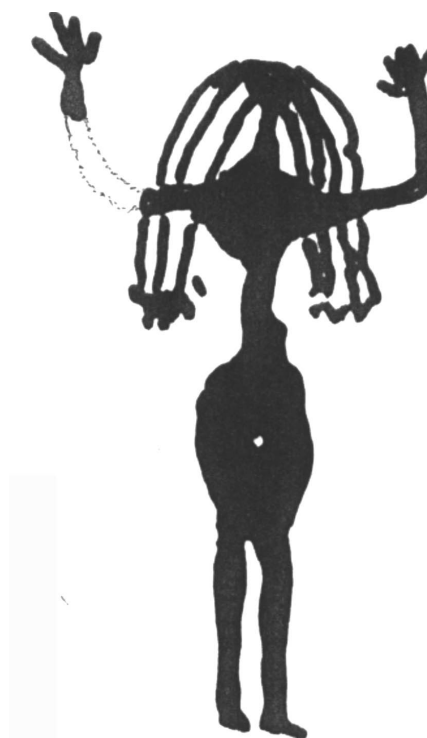


Fig. 7: Tracing of a female figure with long-braided hair.

Buraihi) the artist seems to have deviated from the norms of society. Here the female figure is shown with wide waist and short radiating hair as contrast to narrow waist and either long hair or short hair reaching the shoulders. In fig.5, the crescent is attached to the head or the crown that gives the impression as if the new moon is rising on her head. Also the female's neck is long, the arms are slightly stretched and decorative ribbons are hanging on the arms. On the Buraihi panel, however, the female is shown with various phases of moonrise. Full moon is shown around the neck and three crescents of varying thickness and size (probably suggesting development of the moon during different times) are marked on the belly. Similarly a moon shaped motif is also marked around the neck of the male figure and on the chest of the sitting girl playing the lyre like musical instrument. These moon-like motifs cannot be necklaces as no beads are shown in them; moreover, the necklace

cannot be worn on the chest as shown on the sitting girl or on the belly as marked on the body of the standing lady. Most prominent is the moon motif depicted beside the head of the standing woman.

It will be over ambitious to translate this composition into meaning; we do not know why this panel was created and what was the motive and purpose of the artist. But with our modern thinking we can interpret the Buraihi panel as most likely reflecting a ritual dance in a moonlight night, a dance of the goddess of the moon, that is the goddess of love and fertility, and the male deity of power and strength. The long lancers in the two hands, dagger on the waist, the grace, dignity and elegance shown on the male figure give a strong impression of power and authority. The girl is playing music, the deities are dancing in moonlight in

the desert far away from any human soul. The overall configuration of figures, the meaningful composition, the symbolism in art and the unique and prominent location of the Buraihi rock art panel could very well be aesthetic as well as symbolic .

The Buraihi rock panel is the only one of its type located in Hima area or elsewhere in Saudi Arabia. Thanks to his efforts, this rock shall attract the attention of rock art specialists and archaeologists, and several interpretations and meanings will be put forward and his name shall remain alive in the minds of his colleagues and rock art researchers. I extend my profound appreciation and thanks to my deceased friend and colleague Ibrahim Al Buraihi who provided to me these pictures of a most magnificent site he located just before his death.

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**ملخص:** ثمة رسومات صخرية أنثوية، غاية في الفن والتأثير، عُثر عليها في شبه المثلث، الممتد بين منطقتي نجران وعسير، وشمال اليمن، ولم يُعثر على مثل لها في الأجزاء الأخرى من البلاد. ولذا، فهي تشير إلى قيم ثقافية، واجتماعية، ودينية متميزة؛ سادت جنوبي شبه الجزيرة العربية، إبان فترة ما قبل التاريخ. كما تعكس هذه الرسومات اختلافات ثقافية واجتماعية، بين منطقتي شمالي شبه الجزيرة العربية، وجنوبيها؛ إذ سادت فنون الرسوم الصخرية أشكال الذكور في الشمال؛ أما مناطق الجنوب فقد انتشرت فيها -بشكل مكثف- أشكال الرسوم الأنثوية.

**Note:**

- (1) In memory of my friend and colleague the late Mr. Ibrahim al Buraihi, formerly General Director of Museums, Riyadh.

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