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SAFAITIC INSCRIPTIONS AND POSSIBLE HUNTING SCENES FROM THE NORTH-EASTERN BĀDIYA, JORDAN

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Abstract. Petroglyphs accompanying many Safaitic inscriptions are considered as a direct source of information about ancient Safaitic tribes, specifically their culture and society. Animals, wild and domestic, possible hunting scenes, anthropomorphs, presumed battle scenes and geometric symbols appear frequently in the Safaitic rock art. This research is concerned with a new collection of Safaitic Bedouin rock art containing possible hunting scenes. Data were collected during an epigraphic survey at Al-ʿAusajī al-Janoubī in the north-eastern Bādiya of Jordan. Petroglyphs on nineteen rocks are proposed to depict hunting of animals.

Introduction

Safaitic is the name given to an ancient North Arabian dialect, preserved in the form of inscriptions. The term Safaitic, which was used for the first time by John Halevy in 1857, is derived from the name *Ṣafā*, the basalt desert south-east of Damascus in Syria (Oxtoby 1968).

Safaitic inscriptions, as well as Thamudic and Lihyanite, were derived from the so-called Al-Musnad script of Old South Arabia. Based on references that occurred in the inscriptions, relating to Nabataean kings, Romans, as well as Jews and Persians, it is estimated that those inscriptions date back to the period between the first century BCE and the fourth century CE (Winnett and Harding 1978).

Apart from the inscriptions and petroglyphs, very little is known about the culture of the Safaitic people; the few excavations undertaken do not say a lot. Thus inscriptions compensate for that gap through providing historians and epigraphers with significant data in order to understand the culture of the ancient Bedouin communities in Jordan (Littmann 1943).

The Jordanian Bādiya spreading in the southern and north-eastern regions of the country contains a countless number of ancient North Arabian inscriptions (Fig. 1). What makes the Bādiya more interesting is the usual seasonal floral coverage that inhabitants use for their herds, regardless of the description given to the name as 'dry area'

or a 'desert' (Oxtoby 1968).

Al-ʿAusajī Al-Janoubī is one of the main sites of the Jordanian Ḥarra region, located about 40 km to the east of Al-Safawī village in the north-east of Jordan. Al-ʿAusajī Al-Janoubī consists of a long wide main valley branching into several shallow valleys. The altitude



Figure 1. Map of the research area.

of the region is about 600 m above sea level for the southern part and 650 m for its northern part.

The Bādiya climate is semi-arid; the area experiences high average daytime temperature and low night-time temperature, and conditions vary greatly with summer being the longest season. The temperatures fluctuate from 45°C to -10°C, while annual precipitation ranges from 200 mm to less than 50 mm.

This dry desert climate affects all kinds of life there; for example, as far as the intermittent floral cover is concerned, its life is short (Betts 1998). The seasonal lakes and swamps formed by the floods of the valley (wādi) create an appropriate seasonal environment for wild animals; they find their food in the areas surrounding these lakes. Bedouins take advantage of these conditions for hunting and pastoral activities.

The present survey was conducted by a team of epigraphers from the Queen Rania Faculty of Tourism and Heritage at the Hashemite University of Jordan in early 2015. Hundreds of Safaitic inscriptions were recorded; most of them occurred on the top of cairns, while others were found either to the sides of or in the bottom of the valley. The different 'scenes' and inscriptions reflect the concerns of their authors; for example, hunting scenes, awaiting the rain, possession of animals or other items, sadness after losing a relative and religious invocation.

A total of nineteen rock art compositions, the subject of this research paper, are what the entire survey yielded concerning the activities in the studied site.

Safaitic hunting activities

Safaitic rock art with accompanying written inscriptions provides limited written information about hunting activities. The inscriptions in general contain pieces of information related to the act of hunting. For example, such inscriptions contain the verb *šyd* to refer to the act of hunting (CIS V 3171), and some indications referring to the names of the hunted animals and invocations for deities to help and facilitate their hunting (CIS V 4482).

Hunting generally plays an important role in the life of the nomads and it can be both a main source of food and an expression of social and religious activities (al-Ajramai 1992: 179). First, it provides people with sources of meat for food in addition to the meat of domestic animals (e.g. CIS V 3170: *fhrđw hft tcmt mn šd*; 'O Rađw grant food from hunting'. Secondly, hunting of some predators like lions and hyenas (see Fig. 20) provides them with protection and safety. Thirdly, hunting was practised as a kind of hobby or sport (e.g. Clark 1980: 381: *s¹ bn yšḥḥ w šyd 'r mn- ngd*; 'by 's son of Yšḥḥ and he hunted onagers from Ngd'). Finally, it constituted an important part of religious life of people in the pre-Islamic era.

The religious motivations for hunting were well known in pre-Islamic Arabia. The practice of ritual hunt in ancient Arabia has been studied by many scholars (see Beeston 1948: 183; Maraqtan 2015: 221). We have

no clear evidence in Safaitic inscriptions concerning the ritual hunt; however, some inscriptions indicate invocations to the main deities for helping in the hunt; others refer to animal slaughter dedicated to Safaitic gods. In pre-Islamic Arabia hunters used to dedicate the firstling of the hunt to their deities (Maraqtan 2015: 223)

Apparent hunting scenes, depicting the aforementioned hunting activities, dominate the petroglyphs appearing with Safaitic inscriptions. They occur alone or are accompanied by writing. Such images also depict the context of the 'hunting scene', revealing the fauna at the place of the hunt (Oxtoby 1968: 25). Furthermore, the hunting scenes are considered rich sources for information picturing the hunting techniques, tools and kinds of hunted animals.

Hunting techniques

Safaitic people used to hunt different kinds of animals. The collection reveals some predators, other wild animals and birds; among these are lions, hyenas, gazelles, oryxes, camels, equids, bovids and ostriches. Based on the inscriptions collected from the site investigated here, the researchers thought to identify several hunting tools. Their collection contains swords, spears, darts or javelins, and ropes.

Concerning the hunting techniques, several petroglyphs seem to detail the techniques used by the Safaites, which in general include the following:

- *Pit trap*: large animals were, sometimes, caught through using a pit. To make the capture more effective, nets were apparently also used to cover the top of the ditch.
- *Hunting dogs*: some 'scenes' show 'dogs' attacking the animals. In addition, the noun *darw*, meaning 'a wild dog used for hunting animals and birds, a dog trained to chase prey', appeared in Safaitic inscription from the Duwayleh region.
- *Catching with a rope*: several 'hunting scenes' suggest that a rope was used to secure an animal.
- *Hunting in groups*: Safaites also practised hunting in groups, but mostly when hunting predators. The group used to consist of four or more armed hunters encircling the predator.
- *Animal kites*: kites are known as stone-wall structures found in the Middle East across the deserts of Syria, Jordan, southern Palestine and Saudi Arabia, and were used to capture large numbers of animals (Childress 1989: 46–47). The stone constructions comprise two long low walls called 'antennae', which converge into an enclosure (Crassard et al. 2014: 2). The length of the walls (the antennae) can run to hundreds of metres or one kilometre, and can be best seen from the air. The size of the enclosure itself covers a surface of a few hundred square metres to several hectares (Helms 1981: 39; Crassard et al. 2014: 2).

The kites hunting technique is based on the idea of directing large herds of migrating animals, gazelles for



Figure 2. Hunting kites seen from the air.

example, into a large circle of wall. These kites were erected, most probably, in the Neolithic period (Kempe and Al-Malabeh 2010), but most desert kites have been dated through scientific methods to be between three and five thousand years old (Kennedy and Bewly 2012: 60). Kites of different shapes were discovered in the area surveyed (Fig. 2).

Discussion

After surveying the site, the researchers secured nineteen decorated rock boulders bearing petroglyphs depicting the most common hunting techniques,

weapons and animals related to hunting, together with Safaitic inscriptions.¹

Rock No. 1

This basalt rock appears to show a hunting scene of a hyena. The image is accompanied by two Safaitic inscriptions containing the author's first name and his genealogy; the first inscription reads: *ḥwr bn s'r bn ṭbrt bn smc d ḥṣl whrdy nqm[t] m d'slf*; 'By Ḥwr son of S'r son of Ṭbrt son of Smc from the tribe of Ḥṣl', and an invocation for the goddess Rdy for helping in hunting those who remove/scratch (the inscriptions and the drawing). The

1 Unpublished inscription belongs to the HU (Hashemite University of Jordan) private collection.



Figure 3. Rock No. 1 and our rendering of it.



Figure 4. Rock No. 2 and our interpretation of it.



Figure 5. Rock No. 3 and our rendering.

second inscription reads: *lymlk bn hwr bn s(r bn?) ...*; 'By Mlk son of Hwr son of S'r son of ...'.

The scene is interpreted by us as showing a hyena surrounded by two horsemen and five other persons on

foot. The two horsemen and another one on foot appear to be holding spears while another two 'men' hold bows and arrows. The last 'man' of the group seems to try catching the 'hyena' with a 'rope'.

Based on inscriptions secured from the site and the rock art of 'hunting scenes', the researchers came to the conclusion that hunting predators, like hyenas and lions, was undertaken by groups rather than individuals. The authors reached this conclusion based on the repetitive appearance for the aforementioned scenes on other sites (see rock No. 2).

Rock No. 2

This rock, apparently representing a hunting-in-groups scene, shows a horseman armed with a 'lance' accompanied with three men on foot carrying bows and arrows. The 'scene' shows the group attacking a long-tailed animal, which could possibly be a hyena. Together with the images, the rock bears a small Safaitic inscription, *Jlh*, referring to the writer.

Rock No. 3

This basalt boulder again emphasises the fact that hunting was practised in groups. Seven 'men' on foot seem to be encircling a carnivore, perhaps a lion. The imagery also shows some weapons like 'swords' and 'ropes'. On the other hand, the rock carries an inscription which reads: *l jld]y bn fhrn bn khln hhyt*; 'These animals belong to J[d]y bn Fhrn bn Khln', which



Figure 6. Rock No 4.



Figure 7. Rock No. 5.



Figure 8. Rock No. 6.

seems to contradict the modern interpretation of the images.

Rock No. 4

This rock slab features a drawing and a small inscription. The drawing suggests a person armed with a lance riding a donkey in pursuit of two ungulates. The inscription contains the author's name and the riding animal; *l'bt bn ngft hr*; 'this donkey belongs to 'Bt son of Ngft'.

Rock No. 5

The imagery on this rock seems to represent a large number of ungulates, and we interpret the upper part as depicting the technique of hunting animals by using nets covering the top of a ditch. The boulder also features an anthropomorph on the left, facing the animals with bow and arrow. As there is no accompanying inscription, our interpretation cannot be verified or tested.

Rock No. 6

This rock depicts a probable hunting scene. It shows two horsemen holding 'lances' attacking what appears to be a carnivore, perhaps a hyena. The rock also bears an inscription that reads: *l' njs bn mdy bn qrb bn tr hht*; 'This inscription belongs to Njs bn Mdy bn 'qrb bn T'r'.

Rock No. 7

This rock presents a variety of biomorphs, interpreted by us as two ostriches, an oryx and a bovid, together with two anthropomorphs, a horseman and a male on foot. We also perceive the presence of dogs, which



Figure 9. Rock No. 7.



Figure 10. Rock No. 8.



Figure 11. Rock No. 9.

have been reported in other purported South Arabian hunting scenes (Yule and Robin 2005–2006: 265). Finally, the rock bears a third component, an inscription that reads: *l ḥll bn ṭ bn ʿbd ḥdr*; ‘This settlement place belongs to Ḥll bn Ṭ bn ʿBd’.

Rock No. 8

Unlike other boulders with presumed or confirmed hunting scenes which featured groups, this rock seems to depict an individual human engaged with a carnivore, perhaps a lion. We believe that the drawing also shows a lance and a rope. Above the images is a small inscription containing the name of a person, reading: *l škm*; ‘for Škm’.

Rock No. 9

The petroglyphs and the Safaitic inscription on this



Figure 12. Rock No. 10.

rock are significant. We interpret the scene as images of two men kneeling down facing with an oryx, each of the hunters pointing his bow and arrow at the two-horned animal. However, the composition is clearly related to an inscription surrounding the animal and arranged in a boustrophedon fashion. It contains the author’s name and it reads: *l ḥllt bn fll bn mld bn bnḡfr ḥtr*; ‘This ox belongs to Ḥllt son of Fll son of Mld son of Bnḡfr’. It thus contradicts the interpretation of the zoomorph as an oryx.

Rock No. 10

The composition on this rock shows two semi-rows of zoomorphs, which we interpret as six ostriches, three in the first row and three in the second; two camels (a she-camel and its young), as well as a carnivore (lion?) and a possible dog. The group does not contain any human figure, while it comprises a short inscription revealing the author’s name: *l ʾjmḥ bn ḡdy ḥḡyt*; ‘These animals belong to ʾJmḥ son of Ḡdy’. Since it is unlikely that ʾJmḥ owned a lion and six ostriches, the inscription proves our interpretation false.

Rock No. 11

In this ‘scene’ we perceive a camel, four bovids (or oryxes), and an unidentified zoomorph (may be a feline). A small graffiti comprises a personal name that can be read as: *l šʿl*; ‘for Šayʿel’.



Figure 13. Rock No. 11.



Figure 14. Rock No. 12 and our interpretation of it.

Rock No. 12

The petroglyphs on this rock are interpreted by us as showing a man with a bow and arrow, on the left, shooting at a group of animals. We perceive four bovids in this group. A short inscription is also engraved on the rock: *l ysr bn kf hhyt*; 'These animals belong to Ysr son of Kf'.

Rock No. 13

Another group of zoomorphs is perceived by us as illustrating hunting of four animals, an ibex, an oryx, two equids (wild ass or onager), one on top of the other, and a hunting dog. An inscription on the left reads: *l jš(l) bn b's hdmyt*; 'This drawing belongs to Jš(l) son of B's'.

Rock No. 14

This rock bears a compact group of four 'ostriches' and nine 'deer' 'hunted' by two 'dogs'; one of these 'dogs' appears in the left side of the rock, and the other one in the middle of the composition, between the 'ostriches' and the upper two 'deer'. A brief inscription engraved on the top of the rock, however, reads: *l hl'l bn' t' bn 'md hhyt*; 'These animals belong to Hl'l son of 'T' son of 'Md'.

Rock No. 15

In the petroglyphs on this rock we perceive a camel rider chasing an ostrich carrying a weapon, probably a



Figure 15. Rock No. 13 and our interpretation of it.

sword. The images are accompanied by this inscription: *l 'hwd bn 'fn bn df bn shl h bkrt*; 'This young she-camel belongs to 'hwd son of 'fn son of Df son of Shl'.



Figure 16. Rock No. 14 and our interpretation.



Figure 17. Rock No. 15.

Rock No. 16

We interpret the complex arrangement of petroglyphs on this rock as a hunting scene showing a group of hunters; two men ride a camel, one horseman and six persons on foot, in pursuit a hyena. Bows, arrows, lance and noose are used by the hunters. A drawing of an

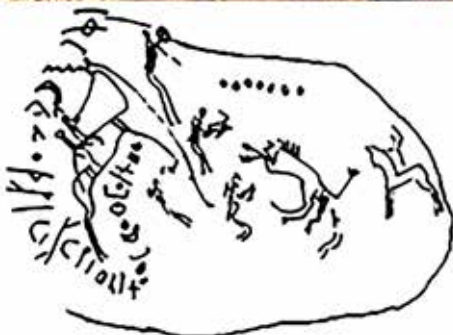


Figure 18. Rock No. 16 and our rendering of it.

animal can be seen in the middle of the lower part of the rock. It looks like a hunting dog.

The 'scene', if that is what it is, is accompanied by a Safaitic inscription that unfortunately does not reflect on the meaning of the imagery. It read: *l qršms bn s'd'l bn 'byn w hlt 'wr m'wr hñtt*; 'For Qršms son of S'd'l son of 'byn, Ô Allât evil eye for who obliterate the inscription'.

Rock No. 17

We perceive the images on this small rock slab as depicting a horseman chasing an animal, which seems to be an equid, using a lance. Another man, a pedestrian, holding a 'lance' appears below. A short incomprehensible graffiti is engraved in the upper part of the rock.

Rock No. 18

This boulder bears two separate engraving episodes; the first comprises what appear to be three men armed with lances, and what appears to us to depict a predatory animal (probably a lion or a hyena) attacking a woman. The second petroglyph phase, clearly more recent than the first one, seems to show a female camel suckling her young, and a nearby anthropomorph surrounded by dots.

Rock No. 19

We interpret the 'scene' on this rock as showing a prominent horseman holding a lance and pursuing a bovid. The rock bears also four Safaitic inscriptions but they contain only authors' names and their genealogy. The graffiti do not reveal any hints concerning the meaning of the imagery.



Figure 19. Rock No. 17.



Figure 20. Rock No. 18 and our rendering of it.



Figure 21. Rock No. 19 and our rendering of it.

Conclusion

The recordings of these nineteen rocks illustrate a variety of assumed scenes of hunting activities practised by the inhabitants of Wadī Al-^cAusajī area in the north-eastern Bādiya of Jordan. The seasonal richness of the floral cover arises from the seasonal lakes and small areas of still water, formed by the Wadī's flood, creating an appropriate seasonal milieu for wild animals; they find their food in the areas surrounding these lakes and pools. Consequently, the assemblage of wild animals attracted seasonally would have motivated Safaitic Bedouins of the region to practise hunting activities. These may have been motivated by different reasons: the Safaites could secure their resources of meat, or they could protect themselves from the attacks of wild animals, or they could simply practice the sport of hunting.

Safaitic inscriptions provide only short and brief information regarding the hunting activities, and in a limited number of cases. In the absence of archaeological information the data on hunting depend mainly on what we are able to interpret from the petroglyphs of

what we interpret as lions, hyenas, gazelles, ostriches, bovids, equids and camels in the purported hunting scenes. It is assumed that lance, noose, sword, and bows and arrows were the main hunting tools. Inscriptions accompanying the studied imagery, unfortunately, do not provide any details about hunting practices, they merely mention the name of the owner or artist, in some cases the animal's name, or a general indication to the animals appeared in it, using the noun *hhyt*, 'the animals'.

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Forthcoming events

The 19th **IFRAO Congress** will be held in Capo di Ponte, Valcamonica, northern Italy, from 10 to 15 September 2018. It will be co-chaired by two member organisations of IFRAO, the Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici and the Società Cooperativa Archeologica Le Orme dell'Uomo. The IFRAO Congress is the largest academic event in the discipline. Proposals for symposia are invited now; only a limited number of such proposals can be accepted. For details please visit the congress website at http://www.ccsp.it/web/Ifrao2018/ifrao2018_it.html.

'**Palaeoart by Neanderthals?**'. A conference to be held in Turin, close to the site of the 2018 IFRAO Congress, immediately before that event, to be chaired by IFRAO member Centro Studi e Museo d'Arte Preistorica. This event will be conducted from 4 to 6 September 2018 and followed by organised field trips on 7 and 8 September 2018, allowing participants one day to travel to Capo di Ponte. The event will address the question of palaeoart production, including rock art production, by *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* and other robust hominins.