

Original article

THE INTERPRETATION AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ROCK ART ARTEFACTS
AT THE MAFRAQ ANTIQUITIES MUSEUM: HUMAN-ENVIRONMENT INTERACTIONS
AND THE SPIRITUAL CONTEXT OF THE BLACK DESERT

Alghazawi, R. & Al-Manaser, A. (*)

Cultural Resources Management & Museology dept., Queen Rania Faculty of Tourism & Heritage, The Hashemite Univ.,
Zarqa, Jordan

*E-mail address: aliy@hu.edu.jo

Article info.

Article history:

Received: 30-2-2024

Accepted: 20-12-2024

Doi: 10.21608/ejars.2026.511060

Keywords:

Mafraq antiquities museum

Cultural heritage

Black desert art

Rock art

Basalt inscriptions

EJARS – Vol. 16 (1) – June 2026: 159-164

Abstract:

This research is concerned with a chosen assemblage of rock art stone artefacts in the Mafraq Archaeological museum. The objects, which have been collected over the decades and are now displayed in an open gallery space, provide the public with a window into the area's long history. The study examines the patterns and inscriptions carved onto the stones, their connection to the initial discovery sites, their archaeological and cultural meanings, and how the pre-Islamic artists captured details of their daily life and surroundings in art. The most common themes are horses and camels, which highlight their central role in the lives of Black Desert societies. The study also, nevertheless, refers to the erosion of interpretive context by taking artefacts out of their deposition context. It concludes by suggesting that rock inscriptions and drawings should be conserved in their natural setting, and that open-air museums should be created to maintain the intrinsic link between inscriptions and geographical and cultural context.

1. Introduction

Rock art is a significant aspect of human cultural heritage, giving insights into the emotions, creativity, and life experiences of prehistoric cultures. Rock art, one of the oldest of all visual arts, consists of pictograms and petroglyphs, which were used to document and convey cultural narratives, environmental characteristics, and social life. These ancient rock art and inscriptions are a gateway to the past and reveal some of the facets of human life and past events for different times. One of the most notable sites for rock art discovery is the Black Desert of Jordan, where thousands of rock art and inscriptions have been found on basalt rocks. These artefacts range in date from the second century BCE to the second century CE and cover a broad region from north-eastern Jordan into Syria and Saudi Arabia [1]. Recording these artefacts has added significantly to our knowledge of the cultural and historical contexts of their creation, informing us about the lives of the people who lived in these desert environments. This study deals with the complicated interaction of the rock art, its makers, and the character of the environment in which it was formed. The excessive heat and harshness of movement in the Black Desert, one of the most hostile environments, add to the complication of the analysis. By examining the content and natural context of

these rock inscriptions, this research aims to bring to light the deeper cultural and spiritual significance of such works of art. Their relocation from natural sites to museums, whilst crucial to their preservation from theft and damage, has resulted in a loss of much of their cultural and interpretive significance. This is because these inscriptions are inextricably bound to their geographical and natural environment (*). Inscriptions tend to include the names of locations or geographical features within the area they were inscribed. For instance, they may describe local landscapes, pastures, deserts, or water springs, or note activities such as sheep or camel herding within these landscapes. When such objects are taken to distant locations or museum displays, their intrinsic spatial and cultural associations are disrupted. Consequently, it is challenging to exactly interpret their meaning, as the context they initially delineated, i.e., a specific water spring or grazing ground, can no longer be definitively established. This disconnection diminishes our ability to fully understand the intent and meaning of the inscriptions [2,3]. These rock paintings can be interpreted only by stepping into the shoes of the person who made them, and most of the time, these were illiterate and uneducated people. For modern researchers, this is certainly an uphill task since an educated person today has a

different cognitive process and cultural awareness than that of the original artist. Even if one tried one's utmost to think as the creators did, there is no way of knowing their intention or the exact reason behind their rock art. The rock art on basalt rocks is, in most cases, either adjacent to or near Safaitic inscriptions, which are plentiful in the northeastern Jordanian desert. Although rock inscriptions are indicative of several various attributes, they aid in interpreting the drawings by illuminating what is occurring or what the purpose of the rock art was. When the rock art occurred and there was no Safaitic inscription, however, they were more difficult to interpret. The rock art of the desert basalt rocks in Jordan would generally fall under three categories: **Animal Images:** Representations of camels, horses, deer, hyenas, dogs, ostriches, and other animals that show the immediate environment and significance to the artist. **Human Figures:** The human representations vary from a completely human figure to half-human figures that may represent day-to-day life, social relationships, or even symbolic meaning. **Geometric Shapes:** These are combinations of circles, lines, squares, sun-like figures, or some other abstract idea, characterized by either creativity or symbolism, fig. (1).

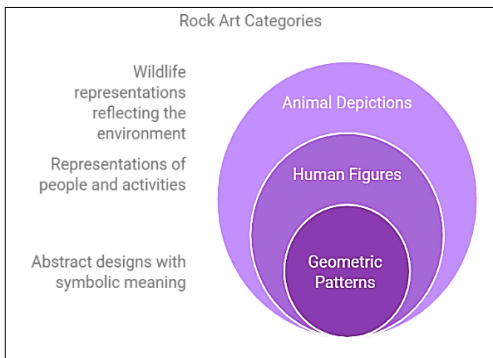


Figure (1) rock art categories

Tactfully, there will be all three of these types of images: animals, people, and geometric patterns of image on one rock surface. Together, these images reflect the larger environmental and cultural training of the artist and provide us with a window into how the artist viewed their own world and their place and position within it. Without all of the contextual data supplied by the inscriptions, some of the deeper meaning is difficult to interpret and understand. It is also common for rock art to reflect aspects of life and activity in present times and aspects of life and activity, like dancing and playing musical instruments, and war and combat and fighting. Hunting. In representations of contemporary activities, they will include some, or all, of the previously described elements: animal, human, geometric, and also some material culture in the guise of tools and artefacts. We would claim that experience of tools, either metal or wood, can be a discernible beginning point for analytical and interpretive potential [4,5]. As a side note, the depictions of spears make clear questions of the material they were made from, whether iron or wood, and how the material was obtained and worked. This leads us to the next question regarding the trend of trade and barter, and what these local societies would have

received from the more cosmopolitan cities (e.g., cities in southern Syria). Camel and horse rock art typically bear elaborate ornamentation, suggesting the animals would have had social or cultural significance. This is a sign we can start to think about exploring the materials upon which decoration is performed, whether upon clothing or upon something else, and the cultural significance of decoration in general. Another important issue is weapons, primarily shields. Warriors in some of these rock art are armed with small shields. The method of how to carry this small shield may suggest adapting to the environment in one way or another. Carrying small or lightweight shields would be better for movement, such as in desert environments. They may also reflect something about cultural exchange, perhaps even trade with the neighbors. The cultural significance and value of functional design compel us to envision a nexus of interactions among desert dwellers, along with the uses and production associated with cultural meaning. All of this points to the elements of trade and cultural exchange that not only would have shaped the material culture of these people but also their cultural identity and sense of place. Rock art is then divided into two: expressing the personal styles and intent of artists, and collective or group and individual drawings. Each will evidence different subject matter and themes. Group or collective rock art are most represented and are largely a combination of animals, i.e., camels, gazelles, and ostriches. While we may recognize only a difference in animal pictures, group pictures could show herds or group behavior that emphasized the environmental or social context within which these animals could enjoy any activity. Individual pictures contain predominantly predator animals, like lions and hyenas. Individual predator animal pictures can also emphasize the strange power or danger, or salience afforded to such animals by the indigenous society. The paintings on rocks also record human beings, both existing in isolation and group wise, as the convention of depicting humans differed! Each of the drawings of human beings also depicted different regulations. Isolated human being drawings are often depicted in a very simple and rudimentary visual image, showing some plausible focus on single identity or action. Group or group-wise drawings of human beings, fig. (2), generally exhibit dynamic motion in composition and depictions of such activities as fighting, playing an instrument, or dancing. The group drawing or group drawings affirm the possibility of social relationships, communal moments, or cultural rituals significant to the society at that time. This isolation of human figures can provide insights into the cultural and natural relationship of the ancient artists and document traces into the artists' everyday lives and symbolic worldviews.

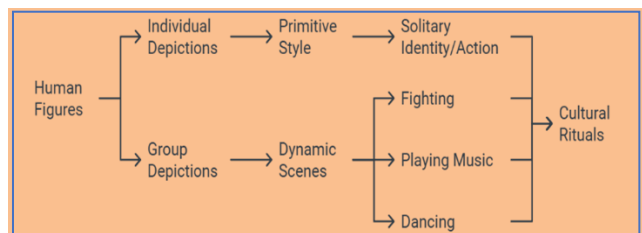


Figure (2) classification of human figures in "Safaitic rock art"

2. Methodology

The current study employed methods customarily applied for rock art research, specifically interpretive analysis, dating, and comparison and context with other rock art traditions. We documented the inscriptions and rock surfaces stored in the museum through photographic documentation, analysis, and dating. Dating of the engravings- customarily applied in association with Safaitic inscriptions- varies from the first century BCE to the 3rd century CE [6]. The engravings appear to be done with sharp tools and have stylistic and technical features in with the technique of incorporating rock engravings into the daily life of tribal groups in the Jordan Desert during those times [7]. The study also took into account the state of the rocks, preservation and display protocols in the museum. The primary findings showed a significant lack of interpretive exhibition coverage, particularly explanatory principles, cultural significations of the rock art, and the meaning of bringing back to life the historical accounts of the origin regions. The documentation and classification were carried out using the IFRAO, 2018 [8] technical rock art glossary. The comparison revealed differences in the methods of engraving such as "pounding" (direct hammering of stone tools), "pecking" (indirect chisel and hammer percussion), and "incising" (engraving fine lines using a sharp tool). The study also revealed figure types, including "anthropomorphs" (human figures), "zoomorphs" (animal forms), "geometric motifs," and complex "composite carvings" that have both imagery and Safaitic inscriptions together in one composition. This study also draws on the interpretive framework developed in the Jebel Qurma Project, which conceptualizes Safaitic rock art as an interactive medium for communication in the nomadic lifeworld. The engravings are not merely interpreted as images of animals or humans, but as mnemonic and social devices signifiers of presence, movement, and memory in a desert landscape. This framework allows for a more nuanced reading of the Mafraq artefacts as expressions of territoriality, identity, and encounter.

3. Results (The rock art artifacts)

The rock art of the Black Desert region predominantly features camel imagery, reflecting the animal's central role in the lives of the area's inhabitants. Analysis of the petroglyphs indicates the presence of approximately forty distinct forms of camel representations, illustrating both single-humped (*Camelus dromedarius*) and double-humped (*Camelus bactrianus*) camels. Double-humped camels were rarely depicted, with numbers below 20 reported; as compared to the single-humped camels, much more common. The imagery was not the same; imagery showing herds of camels, individual camels, female camels, and camel calves, some of which images have been left as models in the Mafraq museum of antiquities. For instance, in fig. (3-a & b) Two camels are beautifully rendered in gigantic proportion in the center of the rock panel, and thus a size emphasis is likely to be aesthetically driven to draw attention to their importance to the artist. The larger-than-life size of the camels can also be interpreted as indicating their importance as being 'honorific' culturally and

economically to the people in the area. These artworks may be a source of pride for the artist, or a source of needing to demonstrate possession of fine animals, which are customary as gifts in the region. Currently, that proud representation environment appears to continue. More recent Bedouin rock artwork often includes representations of automobiles with designs of automobiles and trucks as representations of social standing [9]. This extension demonstrates that it is an ongoing culturally important custom that infers and employs rock art, establishing wealth and identity as valuable social identities over the years - a custom that has not lost its importance in 2000 years, and that is indeed preserved across the region.

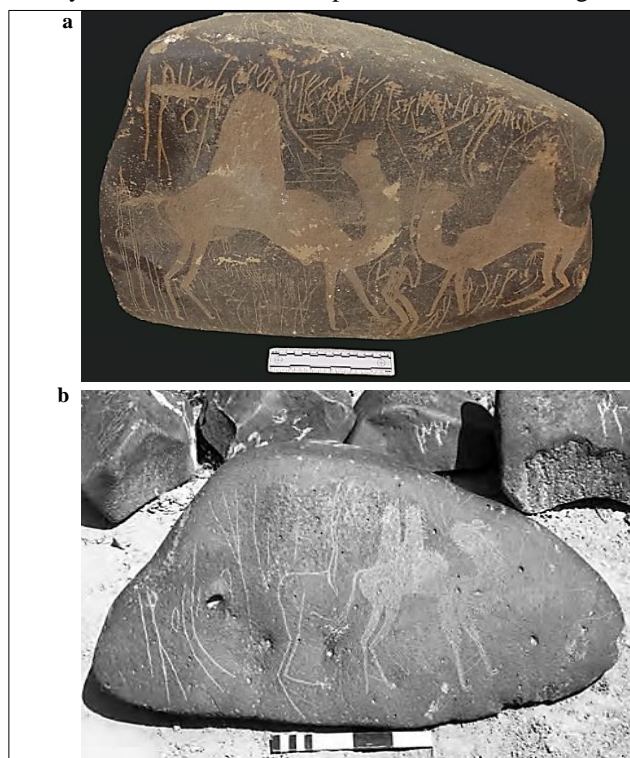


Figure (3) a. the camel scene, b. the camelus bactrianus scene

Figure (3-b) is a camel with two humps, which is not commonly found in "Safaitic rock art." The camel had been drawn on this stone with little preparation at all, but the artist first drew the animal close to the edge of the stone and later, after reconsidering, altered the rock art by moving the camel a little less than half way off the edge of the stone; therefore, we can have our imagination that the artist thoughtfully decided to modify the composition of the drawing while preserving part of the camel's artistic value. Of greater note to this sculpture is the inscription prominently indicating the owner of this work and his claim of ownership, taking some pride in owning this beast. Though double-humped camels (*Camelus bactrianus*) are not found in the Jordanian desert, the artist must have either seen them in commercial travel or other places. This is a biting portrayal of the interactions and cultural exchange in a society that thrives and earns its keep through commerce and attributes personal and social significance to unusual or exotic animals [10]. The animal was not used artistically but also socially; artistic depictions of exotic objects

and animals are conventional since artists borrow or are not influenced by artistic conventions from such distant peripheries. The third example also illustrates a rider riding on a horse pursuing a gazelle on horseback, fig (4-a).



Figure (4) **a.** the hunting scene, **b.** the ostrich scene

The horse was delineated with lines, but the rider appeared to be two-dimensional. The composition showed action, as the spear appeared to hit the body of the gazelle and created the impression that the gazelle had been hunted. At least two different styles of spears used for different purposes existed in “Safaitic rock art”. Hunting or shooting spears were heavier towards the base and longer, likely for counterweighting while being hurled over distance. War spears were shorter and tapered with an exact needle-shaped tip, which was for penetrating. Besides spears, bows, arrows, and swords also occur quite frequently in Safaitic inscriptions, and they suggest a greater diversity of weapons in both warfare and hunting. The horses' poses were metaphorical, and there were postures that conveyed different messages. In hunting scenes [11]. The front legs of the horse move and are indicative of the rider being energetically pursuing prey, and depicting courage and intention. In other hunting scenes of animals, e.g., lions and hyenas, the front legs of the horse were depicted as resting and upright. This would have posed the horse if it had been prepared and indicated that the rider was not going to fall back or surrender in the face of adversity. All these visual communications indicate the rider's capacity or bravery, and these communications would have been important culturally to the "Safaitic people" [12]. Headgear, whether helmet, cap, or crown, of the mounted knight is a sign and shows the elevated social position and importance of the

person of the rider in his society, and perhaps the character portrayed as some sort of tribe leader (a sheikh) or notable individual characterized by his bravery or chivalry. The use of the headgear would have been meant to symbolize the talked-about attributes since the headgear is displayed prominently. In the talked-about "Safaitic rock art", such visual cues were likely used to emphasize the social standing of the depicted figure, especially in relation to the line themes' status, valor, and nobility. Figure (4-b) contains rock art depicting deer and ostriches, which are typical motifs at the sites where water is plentiful. Scenes depicting these animals are usually engraved in groups or herds. Most engravings of this sort are executed in thin lines, often fitting numerous figures into a limited area of rock. These representations depict the local fauna, as ostriches and deer once inhabited the Black Desert, or at least its surrounding areas. They most likely existed in great numbers near the water-rich oases of Azraq, where a modern wildlife reserve has now been established to protect this fauna. This series of rock art includes an inscription in which the artist describes or identifies the depicted animals most likely as a way of boasting or asserting their association with them. This practice shows how significant these faunal depictions were to the people who lived here, indicating that such representations were central to their symbolic and artistic traditions.

4. Discussion

The artist attempted to tell a general story of daily life in the desert landscape by his various sketches of animals, hunting practices, conflicts, and geometric or astronomical objects. The illustrations clearly depict significant stories that make up a core record for comprehending people's way of life, people's social relationship, and cultural tendencies during this period. The paintings had stories and experiences of living people for thousands of years on the face of the rock. While we will never truly know what the artist was attempting to represent, the pictures likely had many possible reasons, whether doing something to pass the time while herding sheep or camels or delivering messages from remote places to members of his tribe. The rest of the Safaitic inscriptions accompanying the sketches typically contained additional helpful information that puts the images into perspective and places them in a wider cultural and historical context. The majority of the animals depicted were indigenous to the region. However, it is fascinating to note the presence of unusual animals such as pigs [13,14], elephants, and two-humped camels (*Camelus bactrianus*). This is an observation of a potential trade or travel component where the region's inhabitants interacted with other cultures and integrated their experiences into their art forms. These depictions were of value in scientific research in understanding the mobility, engagement, and environmental awareness of the desert as an early environment. As to the classification of works of art, most of the designs in engraving belong to the common types of rock-art, that is to say, to anthropomorphic and zoomorphic representations, or to geometric figures, or to composite scenes. In these compositions, the technical skill

of hammering and pecking, both of which are the most usual techniques presented in the "Safaitic rock-art" of the Black Desert, is frequently displayed. Current investigations (for example, the Jebel Qurma Project, 2018-2023 [11]) show that many of the rock art compositions served as social representations to visually state territory, memory and kinds of social relationships. The combination of inscriptions and figures were often positioned at seasonal trails, hunting grounds, or wells and incorporate personal and social identities in the basalt landscape. The concept of pictorial literacy provides a rich interpretive context for understanding the intimate relationship between the Safaitic inscriptions and the imagery paired with them, carved on basalt rock surfaces. Rather than seeing imagery and writing as two separate modes of communication, Safaitic rock art reveals an entwined system of visual and linguistic communication. The association of script and figural motifs, animals, human figures, weapons, and geometric symbols shows that early artists possessed a form of literacy that exceeded normal written language. Pictorial literacy enabled visual forms to function as communicative signs possessing social, affective, and mnemonic meaning. They permitted individuals and groups to leave their mark, assert ownership, recall experiences, or express emotions such as pride, sadness, or nostalgia on the desert terrain. This semiotic mix illustrates how image and script played out as complementary semiotic systems, collectively constructing stories of identity, mobility, and memory across the Safaitic-speaking communities of the Black Desert.

5. Conclusion

Rock art and inscriptions discovered across Jordan's Black Desert constitute a main corpus for researchers of Ancient North Arabian inscriptions (ANA) studies and cultural heritage. These findings not only have provided important information, but they have also enabled researchers to reconstruct an integral story of the prehistoric societies that previously existed across the region for a few centuries. Through this body of evidence, scientists have been able to better understand the political, social, and economic organization of these desert dwellers, particularly during the Roman and pre-Islamic periods. The sheer quantities of inscriptions, particularly the vast corpus of Safaitic inscriptions, have made this reconstruction of ancient lifestyles and inter-tribal relations possible. Together with the inscriptions, the accompanying rock art gives graphic visual evidence that makes our appreciation of the interdependence of humans and their living animals around or domesticated as part of their subsistence strategy all the more vivid. The depictions leave no doubt about the key role of the animals in ensuring survival in a harsh, desert environment. Although the aesthetic form of these carvings is one of simplicity, largely drawn-out figures, their cultural significance is rich. Anthropologically and socially, they are manifestations of emotion, identity, and perception demonstrating how those groups interacted with the world they lived in and the beasts, which inhabited it. In etching these designs on the faces of the rocks, humans were trying to articulate what had been known, to assert pride, and to inscribe information about their everyday lives along the periphery of the Roman world. In efforts to preserve this cultural heritage, many inscriptions have been transferred to the Mafraq antiquities museum. However, this practice brings to light a most pertinent question: does extracting such artifacts from their rightful setting really aid their preservation, or does it isolate them from contextual and interpretive background? Under a new project, the Jordanian government is building a museum in as-Safawi to sort these inscriptions geographically. While the intentions of the project appear noble, removal of artifacts from their context has drawn criticism among academics and heritage professionals. Furthermore,

the Mafraq museum has been criticized for substandard curatorial practices; numerous artifacts are unlabelled or haphazardly presented, and tourists are left perplexed, unable to grasp their historical significance. There is a growing professional consensus among researchers and cultural heritage professionals that inscriptions on site enhance their authenticity, integrity, and interpretive value. Open-air museums or protected cultural heritage reserves in the Black Desert landscape might be more of a sustainable option. By preserving artifacts within their original environmental and cultural setting, these sites would be dynamic, living heritage destinations where the inscriptions and rock art can continue to exist told in the stories of the people and land that gave Jordan's Black Desert its historical character. To conserve Jordan's rock art and written heritage properly, there is a need for a national approach that embraces scientifically based and clearly defined preservation methodologies. This is to ensure that these cultural resources are safeguarded as an integral component of Jordan's historical and national heritage, and to bequeath them to future generations in a true and comprehensible form. This research represents the first in-depth study of rock art artifacts returned to museum storage in Jordan. It extends the scope of the discussion about the literate heritage of Jordan beyond epigraphy into its visual and symbolic components; this is applicable both to heritage management and to interpretive archaeology. Future conservation should adopt a landscape approach, recognizing that the significance and integrity of rock art cannot be divorced from its spatial context. The BES Project has demonstrated that in situ conservation, digital documentation, and community participation together represent the most sustainable framework for protecting Safaitic rock art.

Endnote

- (*) It is essential to clarify that the term "Safaitic rock art" "Safaitic tribes," or "Safaitic art" is purely hypothetical and used metaphorically in this context. The actual names of the peoples or tribes responsible for creating these inscriptions and rock art remain unknown.

References

- [1] Al-Manaser, A. (2023). Documenting Jordan's epigraphic heritage: Preliminary remarks on newly discovered Safaitic inscriptions. *Arabian Archaeology & Epigraphy*. 34 (1): 173-182.
- [2] Winnett, F. (1957). *Safaitic inscriptions from Jordan: Near and Middle East Series 2*, Toronto Univ. Press, Toronto.
- [3] Winnett, F. & Harding, G. (1978). *Inscriptions from fifty Safaitic cairns: Near and Middle East Series 9*, Toronto Univ. Press, Toronto.
- [4] Harding, G. (1969). A Safaitic drawing and text. *Levant* 1: 68-72.
- [5] Al-Manaser, A., & Macdonald, M. (2024). Ancient and modern inscriptions in the basalt desert: News from the 2023 season of the Badia epigraphic survey in north-east Jordan. *Arabian Archaeology & Epigraphy*, doi: 10.1111/aae.12244.
- [6] Al-Jbour, Kh. & Alzoubi, M. (2021). Newly discovered north Arabian inscriptions from Jordan. *EJARS*. 11 (2): 265-270.
- [7] Al-Manaser, A. & Al-Rawabdeh, N. (2023). Gl'd and Ngd: some new epigraphic heritage from the black desert in north-eastern Jordan. *EJARS*. 13 (1): 153-159
- [8] IFRAO. (2018). <https://www.ifrao.com/ifrao2018/> (10/5/2025)

- [9] Macdonald, M. & Al-Manaser, A. (2017). Report on the Wādī Salma area epigraphic survey, April 2015, *Bulletin for the Council for British Research in the Levant*, 12 (1): 36-39.
- [10] Macdonald, M. & Al-Manaser, A. (2019). Recording graffiti in the Black Desert: Past, present, and future. *J. of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology & Heritage Studies*. 7 (2): 205-222.
- [11] Brusgaard, N. (2019). *Carving interactions: Rock art in the nomadic landscape of the Black Desert, north-eastern Jordan*. Archaeopress, Oxford.
- [12] Brusgaard, N. & Akkermans, K. (2021). Hunting and havoc: narrative scenes in the Black Desert rock art of Jebel Qurma, Jordan, Ch. 9. In: Davidson, I. & Nowell, A. (eds.) *Making Scenes: Global perspectives on scenes in rock art*, Berghahn Books, Oxford, pp. 134-149.
- [13] Al-Manaser, A., Alsoleihat, F. & Al Turki, H. (2021). Pigs on stone: Some rock art from the eastern part of al-Harrah, north-eastern Jordanian Badia, *Rock Art Research*. 38 (2): 131-136.
- [14] Harding, G. (1953). The Cairn of Hani'. *ADAJ*. 2: 8-56