

The Archaeological Heritage of Oman

MESSAGES FROM THE PAST

Rock Art of Al-Hajar Mountains

ANGELO E. FOSSATI



Sultanate of Oman
Ministry of Heritage and Culture



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Cover image: Artwork by the author overlapping different rock art panels from various
locations and periods.

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Foreword

Dr. Angelo E. Fossati's book on the rock art in Oman represents a major contribution by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture as the first scientific catalogue of a coherent part of the pictographs and petroglyphs present in the Sultanate.

Rock art contains some of the greatest artistic masterpieces of humankind. In Oman, rock art sites are scattered across the country and represent the rich spiritual values of our millenarian culture with great significance to both their creators and their descendants. These artistic images are undoubtedly invaluable source for studying past human experiences and the thoughts that guided and influenced our ancestors. Nowadays, archaeologists and historians are reconstructing in great detail the social, economic and political organization of ancient societies as reflected in the material evidence. The decoding of the artistic renderings documented by Dr. Fossati in the rock art sites of Oman provides us with a fundamental tool to understand also the intellectual abstractions that led to their creation. Moreover, their locations in Al-Hajar Mountains and their relationships to other known archaeological manifestations tell us about their social and psychological functions linked with either individual needs or communal practices.

Equally important is the fact the rock art is a highly vulnerable heritage under constant threat emanating from infrastructural development and natural hazards. The Ministry of Heritage and Culture, in coordination – among others – with the Ministry of Transport and Communications, has acted in time to prevent major losses to the rock art heritage of Oman. I am therefore, particularly pleased by the attention that this publication will bring across the spectrum that leads to raise public awareness about our multifaceted cultural heritage, among both Omanis and foreign visitors.

Sultan Saif Nasser Al-Bakri
Director General of Archaeology

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Finally, yet importantly thank you very much to my parents, Lucia and Edoardo[†], together with my sisters and brothers they have constantly supported my researches in Oman.

This volume is dedicated to the memory of the late Prof. Maurizio Tosi, Chair of Palaeoethnology at the University of Bologna and Adviser for Archaeology to the Minister of Heritage and Culture, for offering his precious friendship, for giving me the opportunity of studying the rock art of Oman and for sharing with me his valuable knowledge on Omani archaeology.

Introduction

My involvement in the study of the Omani rock art dates back to February 2009 when, in occasion of a meeting of the Italian Institute of Prehistory and Protohistory in Florence, I met the late Prof. Maurizio Tosi (1944-2017) who sounded out my interest of being involved in this area of research in Oman. He told me that this subject had been in fact poorly studied in Oman, but that the preliminary evidence suggested the need for a thorough and extensive exploration. Tosi's proposal intrigued me since I had read the articles by Clarke and Preston and I knew the manuscript work of Rudi Jäckli, sent by the author himself to the library of the Camuno Center of Prehistoric Studies of Capo di Ponte in Valcamonica, northern Italy, where years ago I was working. Tosi was not a rock art specialist but he was fascinated by the topic and, as for many other field of the archaeological and historical research, he did not underestimate its scientific value and immediately understood the potential of conducting a rock art survey in Oman. Rock art is, in fact, one of the few fields of archaeology that provides evidence of the ideological aspects of an ancient culture complementary to writing sources and the retrieved material remains.

At the beginning, I was particularly interested in better understanding the chronology of some famous rock art panels discovered in Oman, such as the engraved monolith of Hasat Bin Salt, the felines of Wadi Sahtan and the T-shaped figures of Wadi Aday near Muscat. Numerous South Arabian inscriptions were also known. In October 2009, I made a first series of visits to some of the sites that are described in Chapter 9 of this book. A subsequent visit followed in March 2011, when I began the actual research and documentation work at the base of this volume. In the meantime, the Ministry of Heritage and Culture contacted me to commission the survey a number of *wadis*, which would have been soon interested by the construction of new asphalt roads and the related infrastructures. Therefore, between 2012 and 2015, I scientifically documented and investigated a series of panels engraved in Wadi Sahtan in collaboration with a small team of from the Ministry. During those years, thanks to the invaluable assistance and financial support from the Ministry of Heritage and Culture and the Ministry of Transport and Communication of Oman, I was able to organize various documentation works not only in Wadi Sahtan, but also in Wadi Bani Kharous, Wadi Bani Awf, Wadi Aday, Shenah, Kasr Al-Sleme, only to mention some of the sites investigated.

This volume is divided into nine chapters that address the various topics for rock art in Oman. It starts with the history of research (Chapter 1) and describes the places and environments of rock art (Chapter 2). I provide also a detailed explanation of the techniques used by artists to make rock paintings and engravings and of the methods used to study them (Chapter 3). The core of the book describes the systematic study of the various themes that enrich the rock art of Oman (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). The next chapters propose a chronological framework for these themes and their interpretative investigation (Chapters 7 and 8). The volume closes with a section providing the logistic and historical information necessary to organize self-guided visits of seven different areas in the Omani mountains (Chapter 9). This part is designed to bring the general public closer to a theme that is not always properly known and understood. I hope that a better understanding and appreciation will also help in the conservation of the beautiful and important rock art of Oman.

I have conducted research in many of the *wadis* where rock art was known but not studied. I have researched and traced some of the most significant panels engraved or painted in order to document them and to propose both a chronology and meanings for these. I have also been able to observe the engravings and paintings of the Dhofar region even though I have not yet been able to study them in depth, an area that would benefit greatly from dedicated research. In this book, I propose an initial chronological and interpretative overview of the rock art of Al-Hajar Mountains based on the analysis of the overlapping of the figures made in different styles and hands, on the recognition of datable objects (above all weapons) and of the related stylistic recurrences. I am sure that this is not a definitive vision but a good documentary base from which to begin. Certainly, future research, both mine and from other scholars, stimulated by these grounding observations and research, will be able to better define and make substantial contributions and changes to this chronological and interpretative system.

Chapter 1

History of Research and Studies

Even though farmers, hunters, traders and various travelers probably saw paintings and engravings on the rocks or boulders of Al-Hajar Mountains *wadis* and occasionally on the walls of shelters, the presence of rock art in Oman was only officially reported in the nineteen thirties. The British explorer Bertram Sidney Thomas (1892-1950), on his camel journeys in the Sultanate (Figure 1.1), noted the presence of the rock art in the gorges that characterize the country's desert topography. Between 1925-1932, when he was appointed as Minister of Finance to the Sultan of Muscat and Oman, he made several expeditions into the desert areas, and on these occasions he saw some rock engravings. In the chapter "With the Sultan through the Shamailiyah" in one of his first books "Alarms and Excursions in Oman" (pp. 198-199), he mentions a boulder near the town of Kalba, at Khutma Al-Malaha (today in UAE), with anthropomorphic engravings and he made a tracing that he published in the book, probably one of the earliest images of rock art in the Arabian Peninsula ever published (Figure 1.2). He also mentioned that he later saw another engraved boulder with figures of mounted camels in Wadi Ghaf and near to this an inscribed *shahada* in *Kufic* characters (Thomas 1931). In his most famous book, "Arabia Felix" he included some drawings that he made of several inscriptions engraved on the slabs of the so-called "triliths" that he found in different *wadis* in Dhofar, especially in Wadi Dhikur (Figure 1.3). It is of archaeological interest that he mentioned that from these sites he took back one slab with a camel engraved on it, and delivered it to the British Museum (Thomas, Sidney B. 1932).

The first serious interest in rock art only arose in the 1970s thanks to the work of Rudolf (Rudi) Jäckli (1924-2000) (Figure 1.4). At that time, he was working as managing director for the Petroleum Development (Oman) Limited and had the occasion to visit several *wadis* for his work (Figure 1.5). Through his work he discovered various rock art sites in the mountains in the north of the country. Occasionally, other scholars accompanied him on these surveys. In his reports, which were largely unpublished manuscript and collections of writings, photographs and sketches, but well distributed to scholars, colleagues and libraries, he stated his theories and thoughts on the distribution, techniques, conservation, themes and chronology of the rock art in Oman. Jäckli's work displays a very systematic and taxonomic methodology, unusual for an enthusiast, but given his geological background it is not surprising.¹ The work of Jäckli remains, until the publication of this present volume, the most comprehensive work on the rock art of Oman. The photographic repertoire is vast and includes scenes and/or single figures: most of the pictures representing engravings, show almost all the figures chalked in white, a common method at that time, used to highlight the engravings so they could be easily seen (Figure 1.6). Jäckli himself probably found this photographic technique necessary but unnatural, as he often mentioned that, after the shot, the color was always washed away to return the figures to a pristine state. He usually avoided chronological assertions, but he recognized that the rock art could belong to the prehistoric and protohistoric time. He considered several reasons for this theory: weathering and re-varnishing of some figures, presence of extinct animals, proximity of the surfaces with engravings of ancient archaeological sites of clear chronology, resemblance of depicted weaponry with real arms and finally comparisons between the rock art and the art on objects.



Figure 1.1. Bertram Thomas on his camel Khuwara (Thomas 1931).

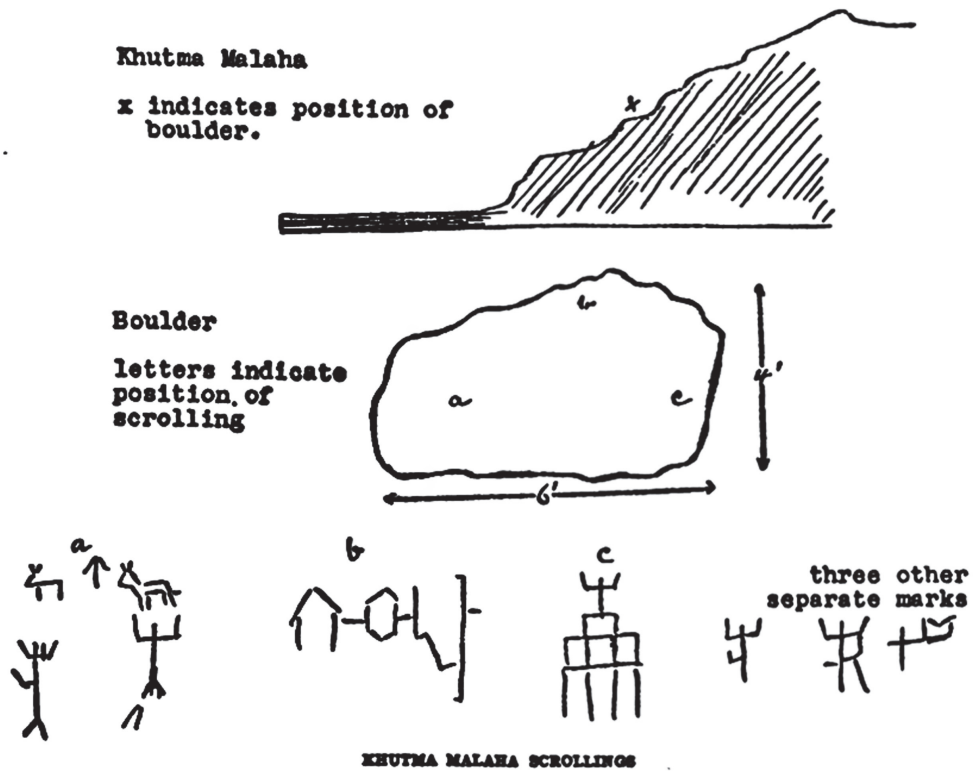


Figure 1.2. Boulder at Khutma Al-Malaha (present-day UAE). The first Omani rock art engravings ever drawn (Thomas 1931).

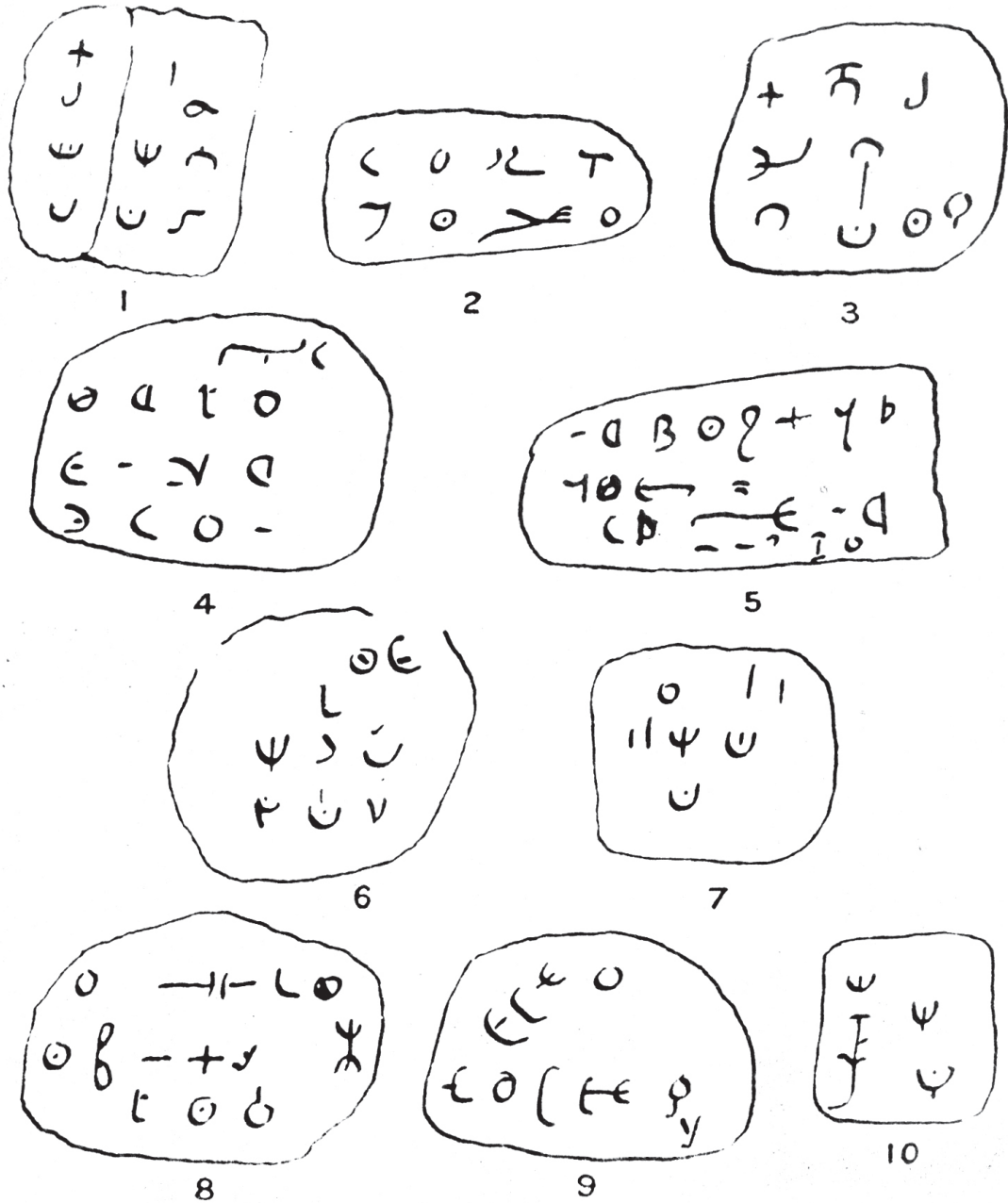


Figure 1.3. Drawing of the inscriptions written on stone slabs of the triliths monuments from Dhofar (Thomas 1932).

As such he was the first to propose a comparison between the figures of zebus incised on a stone seal found in 1980 at Al-Moyassar site (Figure 1.7), near Wadi Samad (Weisgerber 1980; Jäckli 1981) with the zebus engraved on the rocks of Wadi Aday (Figure 1.8). This is the last research he carried out on Omani rock art, then he dedicated his life to the International Red Cross, even though he continued to be interested in the matter, as witnessed by David Insall that recalled his visit to the newly discovered site of Shenah in October 1997 (Insall 1999). In his script, Jäckli mentioned two young British anthropologists, Christopher Clarke and Keith Preston, who sometimes accompanied him on his rock art research trips. They both published the only papers regarding rock art in Oman after the short piece by Jäckli from 1973 (Clarke 1975a, 1975b, Preston 1976). The work of Clarke, whose study of the rock art of Oman was for his MPhil in anthropology, was a general review of the rock art discoveries to date. He quotes the work undertaken by Jäckli during the first five years of the seventies, and cites the general survey made along with Keith Preston “from January until April 1975, as the British Rock Art Survey of Oman”, that received support from several private and public agencies.²

They not only observed panels with engravings but also rock shelters with black paintings, as in Wadi Bani Kharous. In his papers, Clarke publishes for the first time two important panels for establishing the chronology of the rock art in Oman, even though he did not suggest any exact date. The two panels he published were the inscriptions in Ancient South Arabian alphabet discovered by himself in Wadi Sahtan, on the south of Rustaq, and the sculpted natural monolith called Hasat Bin Salt, near Bahla (Figure 1.9). The inscriptions in Ancient South Arabian alphabet from the Wadi Sahtan were the first of their kind to be discovered in Al-Hajar Mountains. Several such inscriptions were already known to exist in Yemen. These recorded “figures” boasted an ability to be dated, as the chronology of this type of inscription is confined to between the 3rd century BC and the 3rd century AD (Woodard 2008; Maraqtan 2013). Clarke also published the image of a large human on the same panel of the ancient inscriptions in Wadi Sahtan that clearly resembles the style of some sculpted human figures on the Hasat Bin Salt boulder. This massive rock, at that time more widely known as Coleman’s rock as named by the geologist of the US Geological Survey who brought it to the attention of the scientific community in the 1970s, is an impressive monument, a naturally enormous boulder on which human figures have been sculpted using the bas relief technique.³ Clarke could see nine figures and he describes that to obtain the best photographic results, to capture all the possible details, they used “the changing oblique sunlight” to achieve this. Preston also focused on Hasat Bin Salt, as in his paper he was dealing with the “Anthropomorphic content” of the rock art in Al-Hajar Mountains. In this work, Preston divided the anthropomorphs into two main groups: riders and “unmounted” figures. He then briefly described the riders, but concentrated his study on the last group, the humans on foot, that are further divided depending on their stylistic features (Figure 1.10).



Figure 1.4. Rudolf Jäckli (1924-2000) (from Schlatter 2000).



Figure 1.5. Cover of the 1974 report made by R. Jäckli for the Petroleum Development Oman (from Jäckli 1974).



Figure 1.6. Engravings colored in white to enhance them (Jäckli 1980).

This recognition of the presence in the rock art of different styles is probably the major value of Preston's work. In his paper it is clear that the lack of other more in-depth approaches would have required a major amount of time for surveying and research. The base of these in-depth approaches is mainly the study of the superimpositions that can provide links between style and chronologies. In any case, Preston also gave a list of the weaponry that accompany the warriors or the riders, and this is also the first attempt to suggest that within the rock art it is possible to recognize objects that can have a chronological value. But then he did not try to give dates for the art and he restricted himself to considerations about the freshness or the weathering and re-varnishing of some figures, a theory that can be considered valid only when discussing the images found on the same surface, but a concept that is not supported if used to compare engraving on different surfaces and rocks. It is well known, in fact, that the weathering and the re-varnishing of the figures depends only on the type of rock, the exposure to the natural elements, and the inclination of the surface and so on.

In 1988 some painted inscriptions were discovered in a cave in the south of the Sultanate, in the Dhofar region, by Said Muhammed Tajar Al-Shahri. He showed these inscriptions to Ali Ahmad Mahash Al-Shahri who realized that the walls of the caves nearby, especially those in the area affected by the monsoon, contained not only the painted inscriptions but several other subjects: humans, animals, plants, boats, unidentifiable figures and abstracts features (such as stars, suns, circles, and dots) (Figure 1.11). Finding the discovery of extreme interest, he decided to start a systematic survey of all the caves in the area with the idea of studying both the inscriptions and the other subjects. He then considered also checking the other area called Nejd, situated between the plateau and the desert area (Figure 1.12). Here he discovered, engraved on the limestone outcrops of the *wadis*, both inscriptions as well as rock art with similar subjects as found in the first caves (Al-Shahri 1994). But Al-Shahri noticed different styles generally and individual artists' styles in the figures, both within the paintings and engravings, suggestive of the possibility of a different identifiable chronology for the art.



Figure 1.7. Stamp seal from Al-Moyassar (image by H. David-Cuny, courtesy Oman National Museum).



Figure 1.8. Zebus, humans and goat-like figures engraved in Wadi Aday (photograph by A.E. Fossati).

In fact, the engravings showed different types of re-varnishing on the same surface, various kinds of pecking techniques, and several different stylistic elements. The paintings had been executed in different colors and techniques, mainly black and red, green being quite rare, and with various stylistic features, from the very schematic to the very naturalistic (Figure 1.13). In his papers and book *Al-Shahri* used photographs and sketched tracings. He did not chalk the engravings for photographic purposes as Jäckli and Clarke, but sprayed the paintings with water to make them more visible (Al-Shahri 1994).

In January 1997, important rock art sites were discovered at Shenah, a village to the east of Ibra, in Wilayat Al-Qabil (Ash Sharqiyah Governorate). Here David Insall (1939-2015), at that time officer of the Ministry of Regional Municipalities and Environment of the Sultanate of Oman, was on a visit to control the state of conservation of several Hafit beehive tombs that in the past were robbed or destroyed.⁵ Whilst he was there he was requested by a young villager to accompany him to see two rock art sites (Figure 1.14). During their visit, they realized that the engravings of the two sites visited were generally quite different from the rock art that had up until then been observed in Al-Hajar Mountains through the work of Jäckli, Clarke and Preston. The figures were in fact realized on the sandstones bedrocks and boulders mainly in deep contour (and more rarely completely pecked inside). These figures were representing animals, often horned, that Insall thought could be the Arabian tahr, as well as camels, donkeys and horses, sometimes ridden, but warrior images were rare in these two sites in comparison with other rock art sites in Oman. At one of the sites there is also a unique inscription in Ancient South Arabic Alphabet, and some standard Arabic scripts. During that year Insall, with the help of the villagers, listed a total of 15 sites, and made a photographic catalogue of every rock engraved without chalking the images.



Figure 1.9. Boulder with human figures sculpted in the 3rd millennium BC at Hasat Bin Salt (photograph by A.E. Fossati).

He was in fact concerned about the possibility of a negative impact that chalking could create in the local population, maybe suggesting to them to replicate the chalking process on other art causing conservation and research issues. More over the figures, especially those really deeply engraved were generally highly visible, without any need for chalking or other methods of visually enhancing the images. In any case, he did not suggest any date for the age of the petroglyphs. Unfortunately, this is the only existing paper published by Insall about Shenah. His contribution to the rock art research at Shenah was twofold. Insall first pointed out the value of more effective conservation of the sites, that were in danger due to geological and anthropic factors, being the deterioration of the engravings already in process and the risk of human interventions (graffiti, use of the stone in construction and theft of engraved boulders) very pronounced risks due to the proximity of the rocks engraved to recent constructions. Secondly, even if he did not venture too far into the problem of the chronology of the images, he did suggest a way of interpret the types of the animals represented, especially the numerous horned figures (Figure 1.15). With great detail and passion, he suggested that these goat-like figures were in fact the Arabian tahr, and not the oryx or the Nubian ibex or the wild goat. Unfortunately, the documentation of the rock art sites, undertaken by Insall, remains largely unpublished, even if it is clear, by the quantity of the superimpositions, that this would be a key area for understanding the sequence, if not the precise chronology, of the different figurative styles that are visible on the rocks.

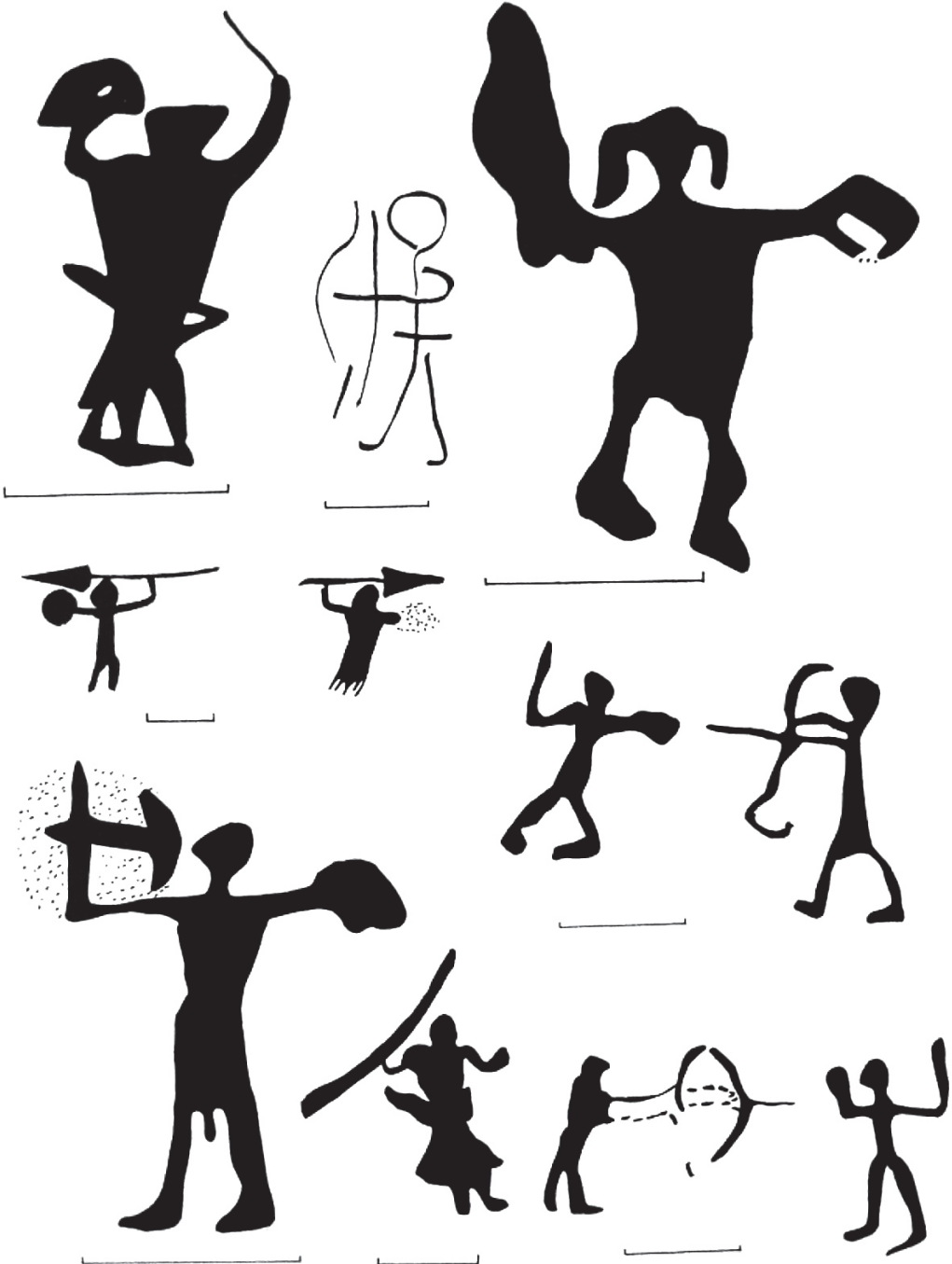


Figure 1.10. Plate showing human figures in several styles from various sites (from Preston 1976).



Figure 1.11. One of the numerous caves/shelters with rock paintings in Wadi Darbat, Dhofar (photograph by A.E. Fossati).



Figure 1.12. Boulders in a shelter engraved with several mounted camels in Wadi Jezz Leet near Raysuit, Dhofar (photograph by A.E. Fossati).



Figure 1.13. Figures of riders on horses and on camels engraved with a visible different re-varnishing on a bedrock in Wadi Jezz Leet near Raysuit, Dhofar (photograph by A.E. Fossati).



Figure 1.14. A rock engraved at Al-Qatarah near the village of Shenah. Goat-like and wild ass figures are visible, showing several superimpositions (photograph by A.E. Fossati).



Figure 1.15. A boulder engraved at Falaj Al-Zam near the village of Shenah. Goat-like and wild ass figures are visible, showing several superimpositions (photograph by A.E. Fossati).

A paper regarding the archaeology of the Shenah area was written by two scholars of the Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat, profs. ElMahi and Al-Belushi that in 2009 published a report of the research undertaken in 2006/2007 (ElMahi and Al-Belushi 2009). They surveyed the site in 2006 and excavated some beehive and Iron Age tombs in 2007. They also located five rock art sites, but they did not research these, instead referred to Insall's research. Prof. ElMahi demonstrated his interest in Omani rock art in other papers, two regarding the following themes, the scenes of ibex hunt (ElMahi 2000) and the presence of ostriches in rock art (ElMahi 2001). More recently he wrote a couple of publications about a rock art site with Prof. Nasser Said Al-Jawahari (Al-Jawahari and ElMahi 2010, 2013). This site is in Wadi Al-Jifr, in the province of Ja'alan Bani Bu Hassan (Ash Sharqiyah Governorate). In this area they located 63 rocks, mostly boulders, engraved with three main motifs: feet, hands and horse riders. The subjects are stylistically quite schematic. The proposed chronology for these figures spans a long period, starting from the Late Iron Age, especially due to the presence of the horsemen, and lasts until recent times, also because the re-varnishing of these engravings is very minor and the figures have a still quite a clear patina. The authors think that this kind of rock art with specific subjects (hands, feet and horse riders) was used by the inhabitants of the *wadi* to determine the control of the territory and "define boundaries, ownership, domination and identity" (ElMahi and Al-Jawahari 2010).

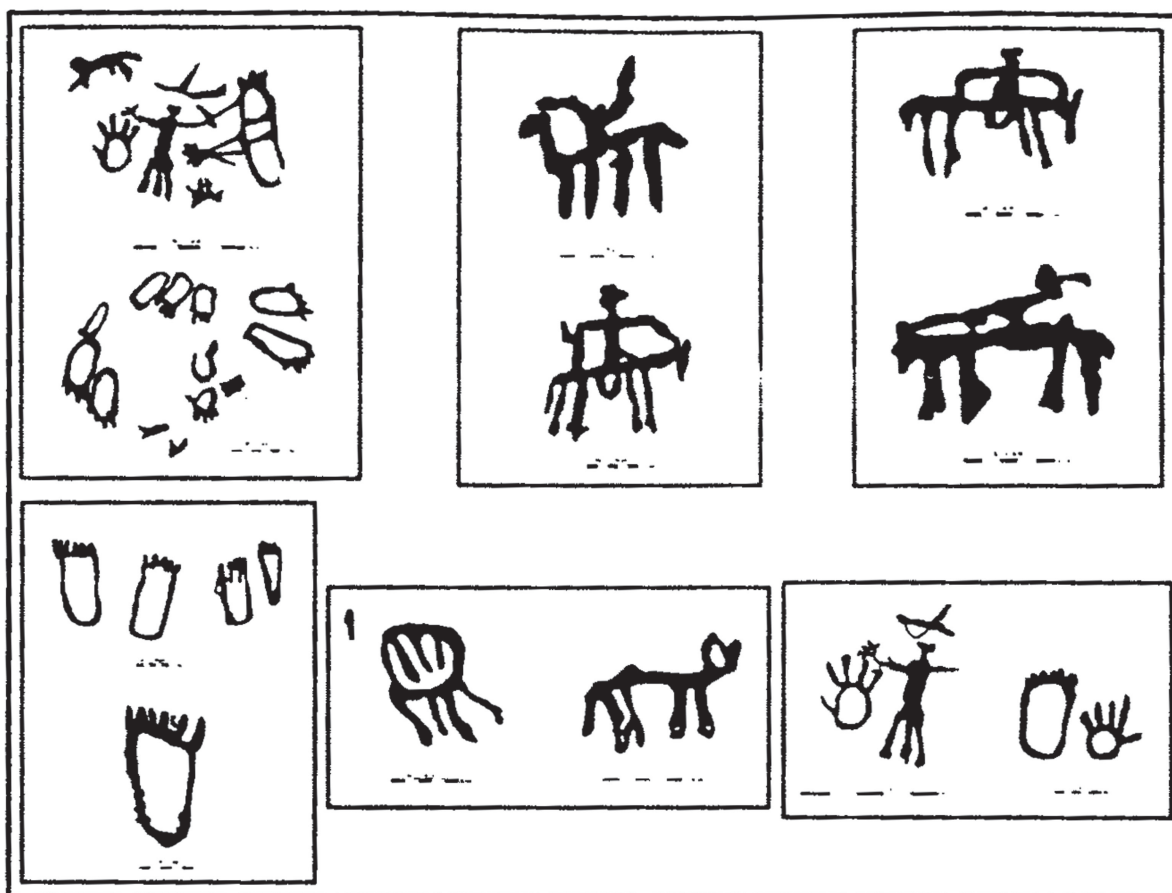


Figure 1.16. Main themes in Wadi Al-Jifr Rock Art (Al-Jawahari and ElMahi 2010).

On October 2009, I was requested by the Ministry of Heritage and Culture, subsequent to the suggestion of the late Prof. Maurizio Tosi, Adviser to the Ministry of Heritage and Culture for Archaeology, to initiate a general survey of the rock art in Al-Hajar Mountains. The work had several aims:

1. to check the state of conservation and control the value of the rock art in the different sites;
2. to try to define the possible chronology of the rock art images and suggest possible interpretations for the various rock art traditions;
3. to rescue some panels engraved in Wadi Sahtan near Rustaq, where an asphalt road was in construction, providing suggestions on how and which to remove from the route and to transfer the saved rocks to safe areas and trace the images on them;
4. to give a general overview of the rock art in Oman, which this book is attempting to address.

I have visited several *wadi*, mountain and desert areas. This book represents the result of this research initiated seven years ago. I hope to be able to take the reader on a fascinating and beautiful journey through the different ages and cultures that have populated Oman during the millennia.

Notes to Chapter 1

¹ In contrast, to attest his diffidence in publishing a real work on Omani rock art, there is a handwritten note on a manuscript left to the library of the Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici in Capo di Ponte, Italy, on the 28 July 1979, where he confirms that his work is only a “modest catalogue” and that he will “leave for C.F. Clarke” the study on interpretation, style etc.

² Among them the Government of Oman, the Churchill Memorial Trust, and the Margary Fund of the Institute of Archaeology of London University where Clarke was studying.

³ Later on, at the beginning of the 80s, the main sculpted panel was casted and drawn by Italian archaeologists led by Prof. Maurizio Tosi.

⁴ This technique is today forbidden as it may impact on the conservation the figures.

⁵ The visit was made with the Director of the Environmental Affairs for the Northern Ash-Sharqiyah Region, Hamud bin Said Almahruqi. In his paper Insall recalls that he visited the village also in the late 1970s, in 1981 and in 1994 but he did not see the rock art until the 1997 visit (Insall 1999). He listed in his late 1970s visit 230 Hafit tombs, but a recent survey made by the Sultan Qaboos University cataloged 325 structures of this type (ElMahi and Al-Belushi 2009).