Early Islamic and Ancient North Arabian graffiti and petroglyphs in Tabūk province — Saudi-Japanese al-Jawf/Tabūk Archaeological Project (JTAP), March 2017 field season (poster)

RISA TOKUNAGA, SUMIO FUJII & TAKURO ADACHI

Summary
This paper provides an overview of early Islamic and Ancient North Arabian (ANA) graffiti and petroglyphs discovered by the Saudi-Japanese mission in Tabūk province, Saudi Arabia. Along with excavations in Wādī al-Muḥarraq, the March 2017 field season also focused on the epigraphic survey of Wādī al-Khirqah (c.75 km north-west of Tabūk), which yielded 105 new early Islamic Arabic graffiti and thirty-three ANA graffiti with some petroglyphs. Although no dated graffiti were found, we were able to establish the relative chronology of twenty-eight early Islamic graffiti by using the genealogies shown in the personal names. As for the ANA graffiti, the majority are Hismaic, but some show characteristics of Thamudic D. In addition to some graffiti, the team also found numerous petroglyphs of animals and humans in Wādī al-Ghubayy, al-Suwaylimiyyah, and Wādī Ḍamm. The importance of these petroglyphs is immense, as they provide us with clues for approaching the lives and spiritual aspects of the ancient hunters and pastoral people in the Ḥismā highlands.

Keywords: Arabic, Ancient North Arabian, Hismaic, graffiti, petroglyph

Introduction
The Saudi-Japanese al-Jawf/Tabūk Archaeological Project (JTAP) led by Prof. Sumio Fujii (Kanazawa University), and the Saudi Commission for Tourism & National Heritage (SCTH) conducted field surveys in the al-Jawf and Tabūk provinces of Saudi Arabia to clarify the process of pastoral nomadization in the Arabian Peninsula from the Neolithic to the Early Bronze Age. During the course of the survey, however, the team discovered a number of ancient and early Islamic graffiti as well as petroglyphs. In the March 2017 field season, along with excavations in Wādī al-Muḥarraq, the team conducted an epigraphic survey in Wādī al-Khirqah, which had the largest concentration of graffiti, and also visited supposedly prehistoric petroglyph sites in al-Suwaylimiyyah, Wādī al-Ghubayy, and Wādī Ḍamm.

Locations of the sites
The surveyed area lies in the southern part of the Ḥismā highlands in Tabūk province. Wādī al-Khirqah is situated c.75 km north-west of Tabūk (Fig. 1), about 20 km west of Darb al-Bakra, the ancient major trade route that connects Hegra (Madāʾin Šāliḥ) and Petra via al-Qurayyah. The locations of al-Suwaylimiyyah, Wādī al-Ghubayy, and Wādī Ḍamm are shown in Figure 1.

Wādī al-Khirqah graffiti site
The graffiti site of Wādī al-Khirqah is divided into three groups. Group I is a concentration of early Islamic graffiti and Group II, situated c.130 m south of Group I, is a concentration of ANA graffiti. Group III, located between them, is a small group with only two early Islamic graffiti with some petroglyphs. Several natural water reservoirs were observed on the wadi bed near Group II. It is highly probable that people used to stop at this place for water and left graffiti there.

Early Islamic graffiti
A total of 105 early Islamic Arabic graffiti were registered in Wādī al-Khirqah. The graffiti contain neither the nisbah (adjective indicating the person's place of origin or affiliation) in the personal names nor

---

1 For the survey of Darb al-Bakra, see al-Ghabban 2007.
Risa Tokunaga, Sumio Fujii & Takuro Adachi

the date, although the personal names in the graffiti indicate that members of a few families incised many of them repeatedly throughout the generations. Present are names that represent up to four generations, which enables us to order the graffiti in an approximate chronological sequence and, accordingly, to trace the development of the formulaic expressions, orthography, and scripts in the first–second century AH/c. mid-seventh to early ninth century. Whereas the graffiti texts from the earlier generation are in the very simple format beginning with anā PN ‘I am PN’, Allāhumma ighfir PN ‘O Allāh, forgive PN’, those from later generations are more diverse in their formulae (Tokunaga 2019). Among them is a graffito composed of an 18-line text woven with shahādah (a confession of faith) and Quranic expressions (Fig. 2).  

Ancient North Arabian graffiti

Among the thirty-three ANA graffiti in Wādī al-Khirqah, thirty-two were found in Group II and one in Group I. These ancient graffiti mainly consist of Hismaic invocations to the goddess Lāt (Fig. 3/a), but some graffiti partly show the features of Thamudic D. Names in some graffiti show genealogies up to eight generations long (Fig. 3/b). The shape of the letters reveals that a limited number of people wrote these graffiti repeatedly. Some of the ANA graffiti are accompanied by petroglyphs of animals such as camels, a lion, an oryx, and a horse/ass rider.  

Petroglyphs

Apart from the petroglyphs mentioned in the previous section, petroglyphs were found in Groups I and II

**Figure 1.** The locations of the surveyed sites (red triangles represent sites discussed in this paper, blue triangles represent other archaeological sites).
Text:
1. bi-ism Allāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm
2. ḥādī hādī kitāb
3. Mūsā bin ʿAbd al-Wahhāb
4. b wa yashhad anna lā ilāha illā Allāh wāhda-hu lā shari'ka la-hu
5. wa anna Muḥammad ʿabdu-hu wa rasūlu-hu wa anna al-sāʿatah
6. ātiyāh lā rayba fī hā
7. wa anna Allāh bāʿith man fī ʾl-šahādāt li Allāh
8. yaḥyā ʿalayhā wa yamūtu wa (sic) ʿalayhā
9. inna Allāh yabʿathu ḥayyān Allāhumma ʿallim hu al-kitāb wa al-ḥikmah wa ṣalīm al-muṣībun min al-muḥtadīn wa ʾl-ʾrzuq fī ʾl-šahādah
10. 'l-qubūr shahādah li-Allāh

Translation:
1. In the name of Allāh, the most merciful and the most compassionate, this is the writing
2. of Mūsā b. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb
3. and he bears witness that there is no god but Allāh, He is one and has no associate
4. and that Muḥammad is His servant and His messenger and that the hour is coming and there is no doubt in it
5. and that Allāh resurrects those who are in the graves. Testimony for Allāh,
6. he lives on it and he dies on it.
7. Indeed, Allāh resurrects him to life. O Allāh, teach him the Book
8. and the wisdom, and make him one of the rightly guided people and bestow upon him
9. the testimony for him for Your sake, that he is advancing, not fleeing.

Expression from the Qurʾān: lines 7-10 (22:7) and lines 14-15 (3:48).

**Figure 2.** An early Islamic Arabic graffiti in Wādī al-Khirqah (KhRQ-I-Ar 53).
as well as on the wadi bed between them. The highly stylistic figures of an elongated human with uplifted hands, probably depicting a worshipper (Fig. 4), can be seen on the rock surface of Group I and on the wadi bed. Similar petroglyphs have been found in the Arabian Peninsula but at present their secure dating is quite difficult. Interestingly, there is also a petroglyph depicting what seems to be an oared boat on the left of the worshipper of Group I. Although depictions of boats are not common in Arabian rock art, we found similar depictions of boats in al-Suwaylimiyah.

---

**Petroglyphs and graffiti in the surrounding area**

The team also discovered various petroglyphs in Wādī al-Ghubayy, al-Suwaylimiyah, and Wādī Damm. In spite of many challenges such as the difficulty of dating, the petroglyphs, along with the excavation results in this area, will provide us with clues for understanding the lives and spiritual aspects of the ancient hunters and pastoral people in the Ḥismā highlands. Some graffiti were also found in Wādī al-Ghubayy and Wādī Damm.

**Wādī al-Ghubayy**

The petroglyphs of Wādī al-Ghubayy are unique. Their depictions are compact yet bold and powerful. Archers with exaggerated feet (Fig. 5/a); handprints, a sitting
Early Islamic and Ancient North Arabian graffiti and petroglyphs in Tabūk province

human, an archer (Fig. 5/b); possibly a snake blowing darts and an ox (Fig. 5/c) are carved on the rocks in the wadi. On the other hand, several footprints with a pair of enigmatic motifs (Fig. 5/d) were found on the top of a rock hill. In addition, ten early Islamic Arabic graffiti; eight ANA graffiti; three Aramaic graffiti and petroglyphs of gazelles, an ox, a camel, and an ostrich; and some predacious animals and archers were observed in a different location. One of the early Islamic graffiti is by Qurra bin ʿAbbās, a member of the Hurmuz family, who left two graffiti in Wādī al-Khirqah. Most of the ANA graffiti were declarations of love in Thamudic C. The script of the Aramaic graffiti shows the characteristics of Imperial Aramaic and can probably be dated to around the fourth century BC.

al-Suwaylimiyah

We visited this site for the first time while guided by a local elder who was grazing sheep in this area. Near the trace of an ancient water stream is a huge rock that has been used as a shelter since early times. Near the shelter, we discovered a large rock covered with numerous figures including supposedly prehistoric representations of wild animals (Fig. 6), which appear to have been carved at different periods. The observation of this rock surface enables us to grasp their relative chronology. In the earliest phase, oxen with big curved horns⁴ and kudu⁵ with wavy horns were depicted on a large scale, followed by smaller depictions, and later oryx or cattle featuring straight horns with curved tips. Numerous gazelles and lions, an ass and an ostrich were depicted along with many hunting dogs and hunters holding clubs or bows and arrows. On different rocks nearby, we found a dappled ox, gazelles with exaggerated horns, archers and men wearing daggers, and footprints, and interestingly, a possible oared boat with a mast similar to the one found in Wādī al-Khirqah. We also found three boat-like figures of the same type but without masts (Fig. 7). The shape of these boats is strikingly reminiscent of a Protodynastic Egyptian model of a boat found in Tall al-Farkhah in the Nile Delta, although the latter has a narrower body (Chłodnicki 2012: 108, 110, fig. 9).

On the bedrock of the ancient water stream, depictions of footprints, a human with exaggerated hands and feet, and a gazelle and an archer (hunting scene) were found. No graffiti were found at this site.

Wādī Ḍamm

We paid a brief visit to a few graffiti sites in Wādī Ḍamm. Petroglyphs were found on some scattered rocks around the rocky hills in the downstream basin of the modern dam. These include depictions of oxen, worshippers with their hands uplifted, horse riders, ostriches, camels, etc. From the stylistic features it would appear that the horse riders were incised either in late antiquity or in the early Islamic period. We also found an ANA graffiti

⁴ Oxen with curved horns can be seen in Shuwaymis, al-Ḥanākiyyah, etc. (Olsen 2010–2018; see Khan 2007: 110–111).
⁵ Guanin et al. (2018) identified similar animal carvings from Hāʾil province as kuda.
Figure 5. The petroglyphs of Wāḍī al-Ghubayy.

Figure 6. A large rock in al-Suwaylimiyyah covered with various depictions.
(Thamudic C). M. Khan (1993a; 1993b) has already studied many petroglyphs in this wadi.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the SCTH and to the members of this survey, Mr Abdulrahman al-Mansoor, Mr Saud Al-Tamimi, Mr Abdullah al-Shehri, and Mr Fahid al-Harbi (SCTH), for their kind cooperation and for organizing this study.

Abbreviations

KhRQ-I-Ar Early Islamic Arabic graffito of Wādī al-Khirqah, Group I.
KhRQ-II-ANA Ancient North Arabian graffito of Wādī al-Khirqah, Group II.
PN Personal name.

References


Authors’ addresses

Risa Tokunaga, Kanazawa University & Arabic Islamic Institute in Tokyo, 3-4-18, Motoazabu, Minato-ku, Tokyo 106-0046, Japan.
*e-mail* risakou@gmail.com

Sumio Fujii, Faculty of Letters, Institute of Human and Social Sciences, Kanazawa University, Kakuma, Kanazawa 920-1192, Japan.
*e-mail* fujiikun@staff.kanazawa-u.ac.jp

Takuro Adachi, Faculty of Letters, Institute of Human and Social Sciences, Kanazawa University, Kakuma, Kanazawa 920-1192, Japan.
*e-mail* mppnb@staff.kanazawa-u.ac.jp