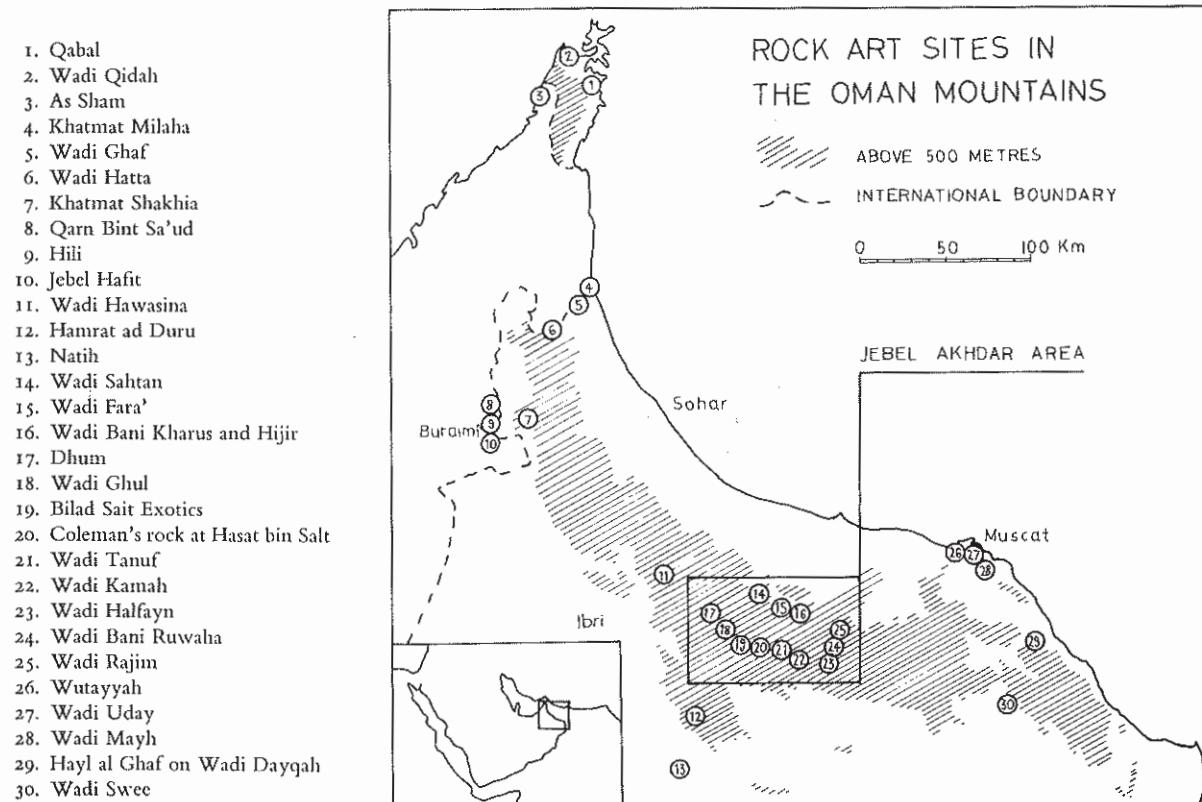


The Rock Art of Oman 1975

Christopher Clarke

SINCE Bertram Thomas published the first reports of rock art sites in Oman, in 'Alarms and Excursions in Arabia', archaeologists, geologists and geographers have added to the list as a by-product of their own activities. In an initial attempt to bring these reports together, a survey by Mr. Rudi Jackli and myself in 1973, and further extensive discoveries by him and others in 1974, showed rock drawings to occur widely along the Oman mountains, from Ruus al Jibal in the north-west, to the Sharqiya in the south-east. Mr. Jackli also pointed out that the clustering of the sites, which had otherwise appeared an accident of the pattern of discovery, did in fact conform closely to the formations of Cretaceous limestone, which is particularly suitable for the 'pecking' technique used for most of the drawings. The smooth limestone walls of wadis are the usual location, sometimes main wadis of passage, and sometimes blind wadis providing only very local pathways. Drawings are found also on the boulder beds of wadis, and on outcrops of limestone exotics. Carvings have been found on the stone slabs of prehistoric graves, as at Hili-9.

The drawings consist mostly of figures of humans and animals in differing styles, from an apparently long but undetermined timespan. The human figures include life-size figures in bas-relief, with such details as headdress, breasts and divided skirts; angular-shouldered figures, some breasted and



seated; bi-triangular figures with tapering trunks and flared skirts, and swords carried across a narrow waist; and a variety of stick figures, see *Plates 1-4, 7*.

There are animals of pasture and transport, and wild animals including animals of prey, and animals no longer indigenous, such as the ostrich. The tahr, unique to Oman, may be represented. There are scenes of battle, caravanning, and hunting or herding. There are boats and more recently vehicles, there are cup-marks and 'cutting'-marks, there are inscriptions, and there are designs, including the decoration of sloping ledges apparently worn smooth by sliding.

Most of the drawings appear to have been hammered, probably with stones in a 'pecking' technique, on smooth limestone surfaces, producing impressions of varied intensity. Some figures, particularly certain groups of outlined animals, have been deeply grooved and polished. There are finely scratched 'filiform' figures, often elaborate and almost invisible. There are tiny figures on the black polished mountain pathways, apparently carved with a minute rocking motion of a sharp blade, see *Plate 11*. There are paintings in modern paint; and in red ochre of varied faintness, in sheltered locations.

From January to April 1975 I returned with Mr. Keith Preston, as the British Rock Art Survey of Oman, to undertake a closer study of the main area. We were supported by the Government of Oman, the Churchill Memorial Trust, and the Margary Fund of the Institute of Archaeology of London University, where I am studying the material for an M.Phil.

We visited Wadi Swee-30, an unusual site of paintings and pecked and engraved art in the Sharqiya south-east of Muscat. We also made a brief but unsuccessful attempt to relocate the south-western sites of Hamrat ad Duru-12 and Natih-13. But apart from this we confined our attention to the largest single concentration of thirty sites, half the known total, in the wadis draining from the Jebel Akhdar, the central massif of the Oman mountains, and the outcrops of limestone exotics flanking it. The Jebel Akhdar area contains most of the known varieties of Omani rock art, including the important bas-reliefs of Coleman's rock at Hasat bin Salt-20 to the south, and on the north side sites with many inscriptions.

After discovery and mapping of the sites, the first problem is to distinguish styles and to see whether they are related to differences in age. We could perhaps discover more about the styles by looking at them separately and as a sequence, than by seeing them only as an interesting but rather confused palimpsest. The most useful sites for this are those where many styles of apparently different age appear together on the same rock surface, allowing direct comparison. Therefore our first task was to visit all the known sites in this area to find the surfaces most suitable for this. Keith Preston made a particular study of stylistic differences in the representation of anthropomorphs (human forms).

We worked from Rostaq for the northern sites, and from Bahla for the southern, making a general record in colour slides and black and white negatives, and concentrating for more detailed records on the multi-style sites. We restricted ourselves to a photographic record this season, but suffered from the inaccessibility of much of the art, and the variable natural lighting in the deeply shaded gorges. We would like to contemplate a return with such aids as scaffolding and artificial lighting, and tracing materials, in order to improve our records, at least of the key sites.

Most sites bore only single styles, or had their surfaces so streaked with bands of varied effects of weathering that their appearance was confused. Wadi Sahtan-14 provided the richest concentration of different styles in the gallery at the end of the upper gorge. There are large skirted human figures, seated figures with breasts, ostriches, a modern panel of vehicles, and a number of Old South Arabian inscriptions. Wadi Bani Kharus-16, to which we returned later in the season, provided the other main northern site. There is interesting art at the entrance near Awabi, with large solidly pecked bovids as in *Plate 5* from the Bilad Sait Exotics-19, and further styles in the gorges of Hijir. But we concentrated on

the three gorges above Istal, which provided several hundred metres of almost continuous rock drawings and inscriptions on both sides. Again there is a rich variety of styles, and evidence of relative age from figures of different styles occurring together and exhibiting weathering to different degrees on surfaces apparently evenly exposed. The inscriptions are varied in script and weathering, and some may be associated with accompanying figures of mounted lancers. There are also several panels of deeply engraved ibex and other animals, similar to groups in the Bilad Sait Exotics-19 on the south side of the Jebel Akhdar, and as far away as Wadi Swee-30 in the Sharqiya. Wadi Bani Kharus also has art in red ochre, including styles paralleled in pecked art.

On the south side of the Jebel Akhdar, the sites with many styles, such as Wadi Tanuf-21 and the Bilad Sait Exotics-19, tended to have surfaces streaked with bands of erosion and deposit, complicating the comparison of weathering effects by dividing the surfaces into many tiny 'weathering zones' often cutting figures into segments of dissimilar appearance, see *Plate 6*. On this side is 'Coleman's rock' at Hasat bin Salt-20, the massive limestone boulder 8 km. north of the Bahla-Haimra roundabout, bearing nine human figures in bas-relief, four of them full length and life-size, and deeply carved on the south face, see *Plate 1*. These we photographed in changing oblique sunlight to bring out maximum detail of dress or other features that might assist identification. We also noticed on the west face some curious figures part in relief and part in flat pecking, which may provide a link between these techniques. We spent some time on the many and varied galleries of the Bilad Sait Exotics-19, and at Dhum-17 at the upper end of the Wadi al-Ain. Here there is one particular panel with complex weathering zones, and figures in different styles superimposed apparently to create a deliberate symmetry of composition—see *Plate 7*.

Rock art is notoriously difficult to date, as it is seldom found by excavation in deposits of other archaeological materials that might help to determine its period, as at Hili-9 on the stone slabs of graves. It is not suitable for a direct dating technique, neither can it be placed in an established typology of dated styles like those that have been developed for pottery and stone tools. The evidence that exists is sparse, and can generally be used only to suggest the order in which different styles have appeared, rather than to fix their exact age.

Figures may be superimposed on one another in such a way that evidence is lost of their order, as at Dhum-17, *Plate 7*. Or, on a rock surface subject to uniform weathering, differences in the preservation of the figures may suggest their relative age. This kind of evidence, however, is particularly difficult to interpret. Evidence may be sought from inscriptions found with the art in some sites, as in Wadi Sahtan-14, *Plate 3*. These range from modern and historical Islamic inscriptions to Old South Arabian pre-Islamic inscriptions, that may provide a comparative sequence of their own, apart from their own intrinsic interest. Some forts such as Hazm, *Plate 8*, and Nizwa, have graffiti on their walls with some parallels to rock art styles. The content of the art itself, including vehicles and types of boat, dress styles and weapon forms, riding styles, types of activity and species of animal, may suggest something of the period or way of life of the artists. Dr. David Harrison of the 1975 wild life survey of the Jebel Akhdar has kindly offered his advice on identification of animals.

With over sixty sites and many thousands of figures emerging from just two years of discovery and compilation of reports, exhibiting a variety of styles, there is an obligation to see what can be done to bring this material within an archaeological and historical context. But the limitations of rock art as an archaeological material make it unlikely that styles can be tied closely to periods of particular interest known from other finds or documents. We may hope for a general tentative sequence, and some illumination of the more distinctive or elaborate types, such as the bas-reliefs, for which useful parallels may be found outside Oman.



PLATE 2

PLATE 1

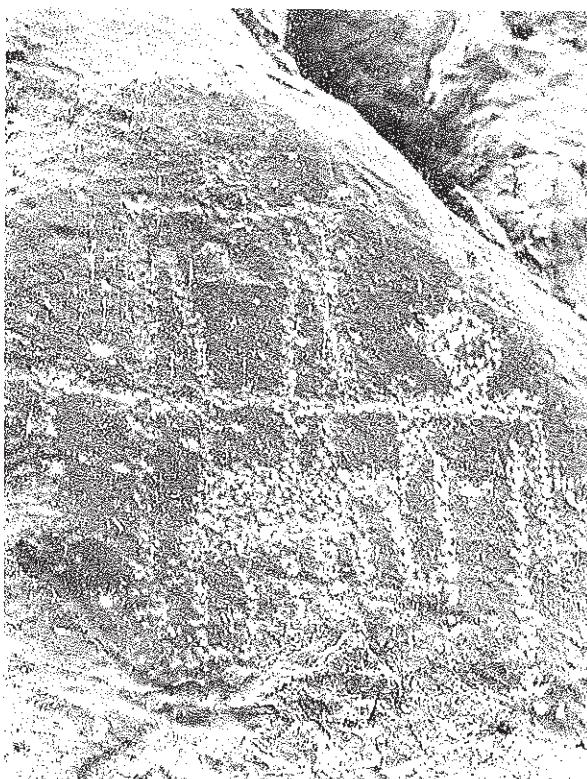


PLATE 1. *Coleman's rock-20. South Face.* Four life-size bas-relief human figures. To centre-right, a rounded muscular figure with divided skirt and weapon in raised hand. To centre-left an angular figure with headdress and breasts. Compare plates 1-4.

PLATE 2. *Wadi Sahtan-14.* Seated human figure with breasts, and legs extended to right towards second figure.

PLATE 3. *Wadi Sahtan-14.* Top left, Old South Arabian inscription. To right, a pair of fighters superimposed on trunk of large human figure with angular shoulders and skirt, flanked by smaller human forms.

PLATE 4. *Bilad Sait Exotics-19.* Large bull, scale similar to nearby life-size humans of Coleman's rock 20, plate 1.



PLATE 3

PLATE 4

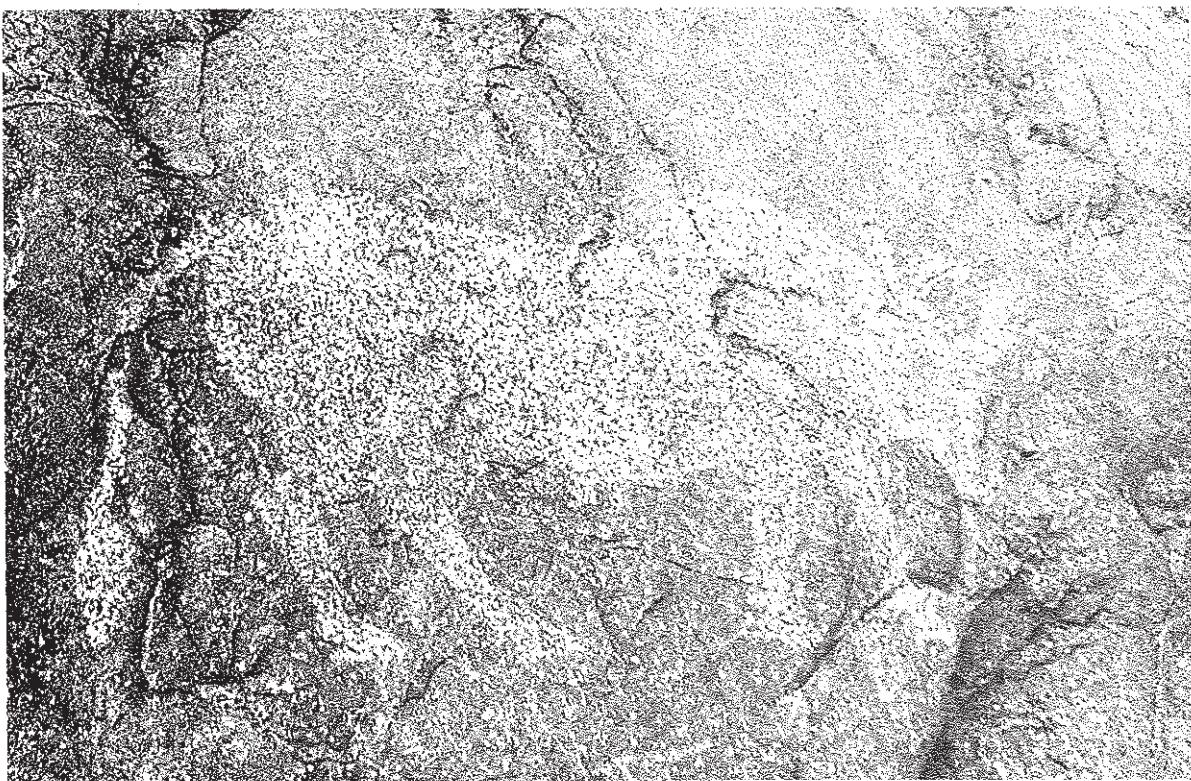




PLATE 5. *Bilad Sait Exotics-19*. At bottom, clear human figure with eyes, angular shoulders and divided skirt. Similar but obscure figure above.

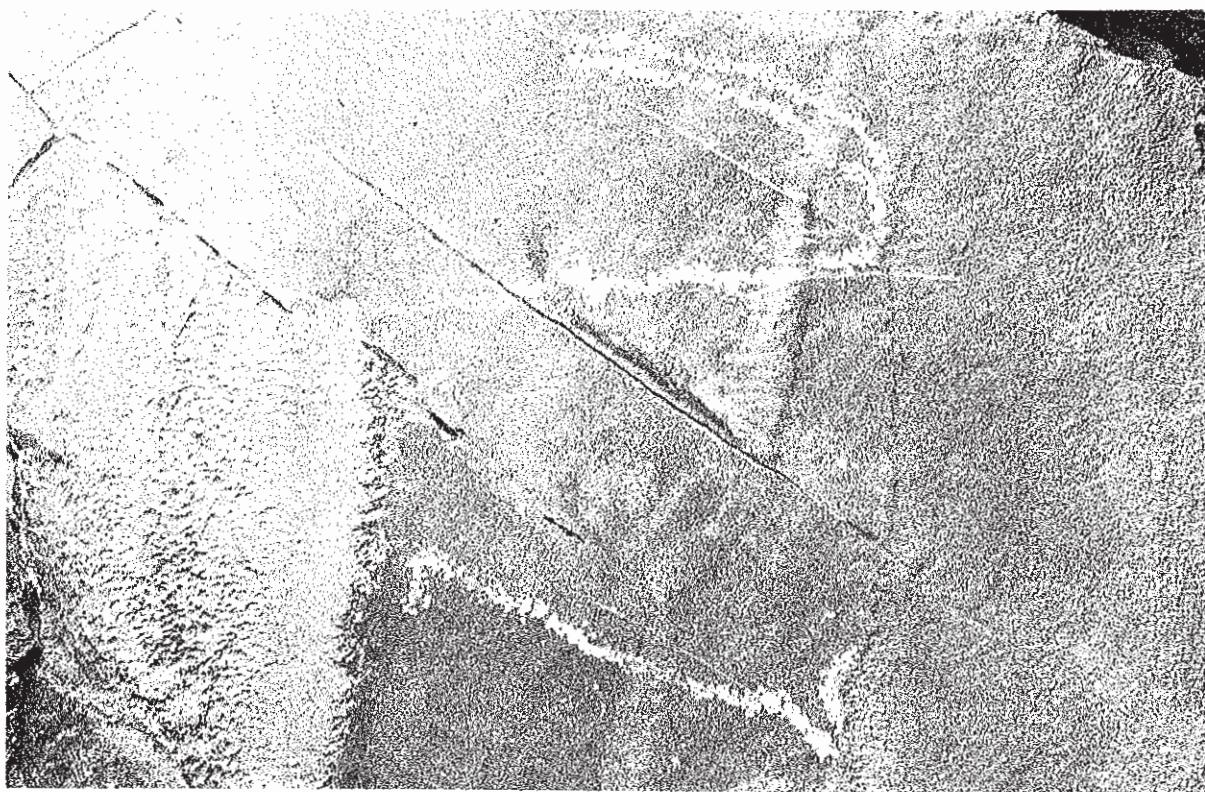


PLATE 6. *Wadi Halfayn-23. Animal figure truncated at both ends by surface erosion.*



PLATE 7. *Dhini-17. Camel superimposed on human figure, forming symmetrical composition.*

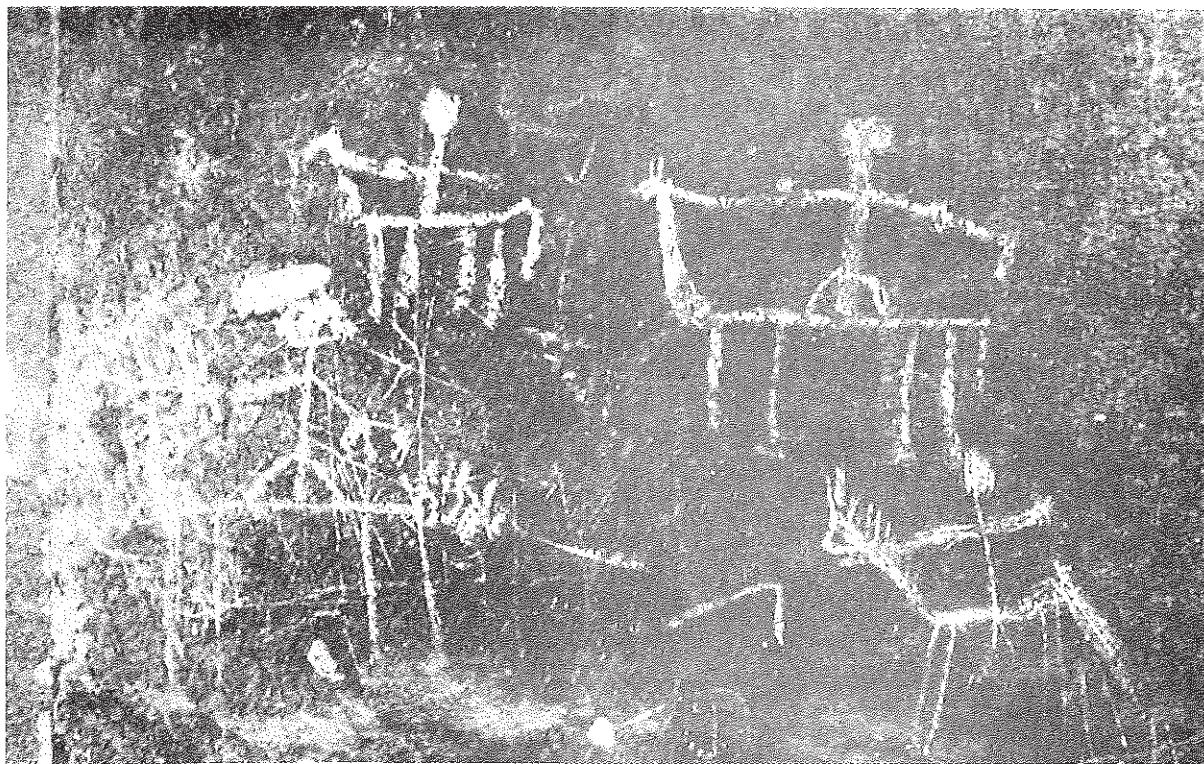


PLATE 8. *Hazm fort, early 18th C. bears on its walls graffiti with some similarity to rock art styles.*

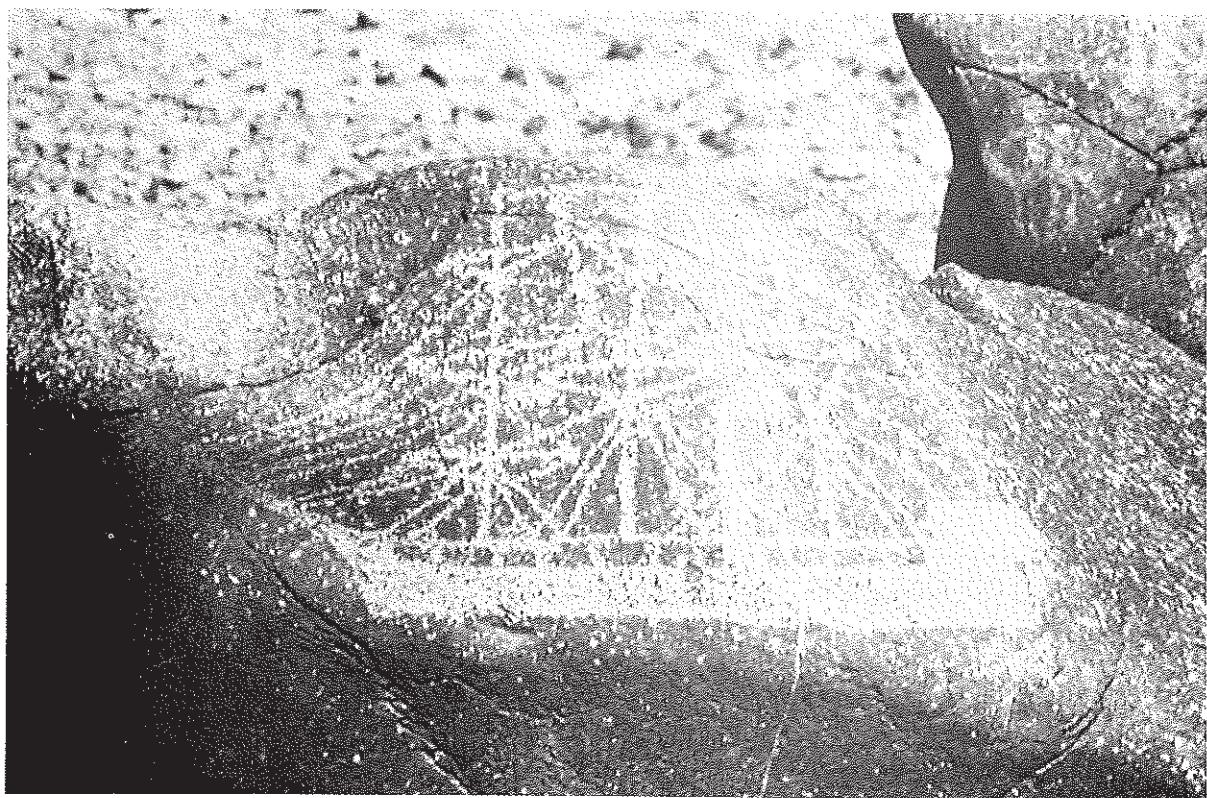


PLATE 9. *Wadi Far' - 15. A ship.*



PLATE IO. *Wadi Bani Kharus*—16. One of the common lancers.



PLATE II. *Wadi* between 14 and 15. A tiny intricate design on the black polished rock of a mountain path, probably formed by rocking a blade in a zigzag motion.



PLATE 12. *Wadi Rajim-25. A design, perhaps floral, chalked in for the photograph.*