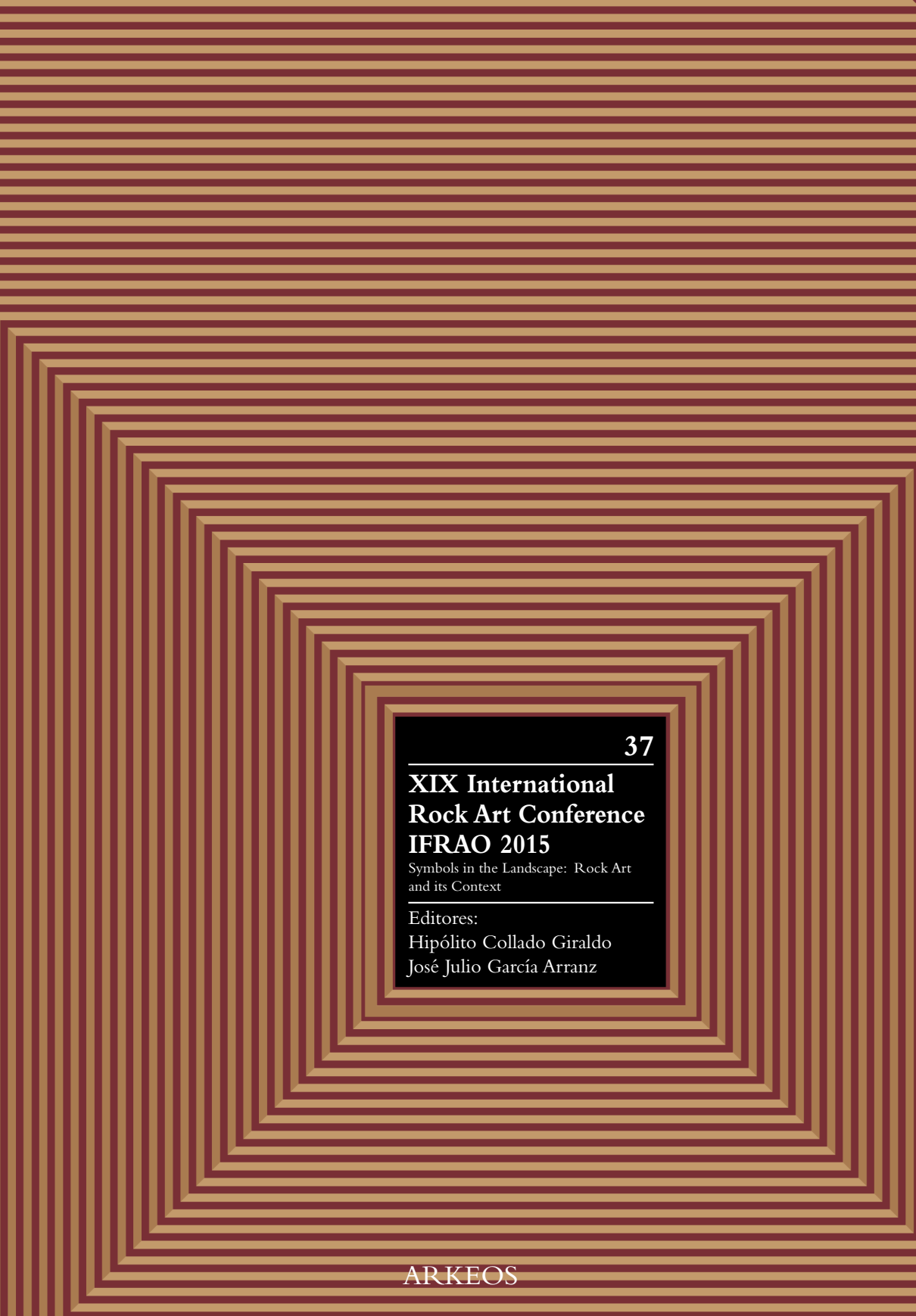




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**XIX International
Rock Art Conference
IFRAO 2015**

Symbols in the Landscape: Rock Art
and its Context

Editores:

Hipólito Collado Giraldo

José Julio García Arranz

XIX INTERNATIONAL ROCK ART CONFERENCE



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Symbols in the Landscape: Rock Art and its Context

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Presentation

Anthropologist and philosopher, Ernst Cassirer, wrote at the beginning of the past century that man is, by nature, a creator of symbols, an authentic, “symbolic animal”, in any place, time and activity that develops; he came to say, even, that the specificity of the human being lies in their ability to avail themselves of the symbolic function. Through symbolism, understood as the interrelationship or tissue that make up religion, myth, art, science and language, man is able to react to external stimuli, and translate his particular conception of reality. Rock art, an authentic symbolic corpus of very different societies and forms of expression, constitutes a unique legacy that approaches, due to its graphic dimension, the particular interpretation that men and women of all cultures and continents carried out in their social, natural, and transcendent universe.

This anthropological conception evinces rock art as a heritage element of the natural environment in which it was created. Only there, in a cave, a rock shelter, on a block of stone, in a valley or gorge, or on a mountain, engravings and paintings reach their *raison d' être* and full significance. With those “marks” on the landscape, which represent an effective appropriation of the selfsame and of its main resources, this is humanized and acquires a cultural dimension to different economic strategies. Therefore, in rock art, the study of its support, enclosures or natural environment is as important as its graphic expression. This argument has served basis to propose the main theme of the XIX International Rock Art Conference IFRAO 2015:

“Symbols in the landscape: rock art and its context”

Professors, investigators, consultants and all kinds of people who are interested in understanding and conserving cave paintings across the world have been invited to this congress which aims to recognise the cave art in their countries and regions as a symbolic and cultural expression, to show us their investigation techniques and procedures, and to stimulate

common reflection on the diverse ways in which these creations can be inserted into, or interact with, their diverse scopes of existence.

Speakers will provide presentations in a busy week from 31 August to 4 September at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University Campus of Extremadura (Cáceres, Spain), alternating work sessions with guided tours to the main enclaves that have cave paintings in Extremadura and its surrounding area, and with diverse cultural activities (displays and exhibitions) that are related to this area of knowledge.

The present volume gathers the summaries of the numerous talks that will be presented at the 32 Congress sessions, in addition to the Digital Minutes in a DVD which has a selection of around 180 texts (full articles, extensive summaries and posters) corresponding to a large part of these talks, along with a special edition of the magazine *Arkeos. Perspectivas em Diálogo*, which is a periodical by the Instituto Terra e Memória de Maçao (Portugal).

We would like to thank those responsible for *Arkeos*, in particular its Director, Luiz Oosterbek, for their kindness in providing us with their prestigious publication as support and scientific material for our minutes. We would also like to thank the Extremadura Foundation for Culture (Fundación Extremeña de la Cultura) and Beta Analytic Ltd. for the economic help that has made this publication possible. And, of course, we thank all the authors of the summaries and texts presented, and our Session Coordinators, students and colleagues who have tirelessly collaborated with us during the months of editing and revising these texts. Thank you very much to everyone who has made this project possible.

The Editors



XIX INTERNATIONAL
ROCK ART CONFERENCE

IFRAO 2015

CÁCERES (Extremadura, Spain)



**NEW DISCOVERIES AND LANDSCAPES FROM
ARCHAEOLOGICAL ROCK ART FRONTIERS**

**NUEVOS DESCUBRIMIENTOS Y PAISAJES DESDE LAS FRONTERAS
ARQUEOLÓGICAS DEL ARTE RUPESTRE**

(Andrea Jalandoni and Rachel Hoerman, coords.)

Pastoralist rock art in the Black Desert of Jordan

(Extended abstract)

NATHALIE Ø. BRUSGAARD

An immense desert stretches across the northeast of Jordan. It is appropriately named the Black Desert for it is not sand but dark basalt stones that cover the majority of its surface. This basalt expanse, or *harra*, and the adjacent limestone plains, or *hamad*, make up the Black Desert, which extends from southern Syria, through northeastern Jordan into northern Saudi Arabia. It is generally considered an arid and inhospitable terrain, inhabited today only by a handful of Bedouin groups. The traditional assumption has been that due to its harsh climate, the basalt covered landscape offered little potential for occupation. Yet scattered throughout the landscape is a myriad of evidence that humans have been present in the area for thousands of years. Archaeological structures and artefacts attest to the long, yet punctuated, inhabitation history of the desert (Akkermans *et al.* 2014), while tens of thousands of petroglyphs and inscriptions encompass the permanent mark of the people who lived there. These aspects are the focus of the new research project *Landscapes of Survival* at Leiden University that seeks to understand the societies that inhabited the Jebel Qurma region of the Black Desert between c. 1000 BC and AD 500 (Fig. 1). It comprises three PhD projects that investigate the archaeology of the region (carried out by Harmen Huigens), the inscriptions (carried out by Chiara Della Puppa), and the rock art (carried out by the author of this paper). This paper discusses the current problems that exist with the rock art research of the Black Desert and presents some preliminary field results of the author's research on the petroglyphs. It also explores the possibilities that the rock art affords to learn more about the elusive desert societies and the limitations about studying rock art in archaeologically unfamiliar territories.

Carved into the desert's dark basalt stones, the rock art depict an array of zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, and geometric motifs, ranging from wild and domestic animals, such as lions, oryxes, dogs, and camels, to anthropomorphic figures, such as women and archers (Fig. 2). Often these motifs are combined in scenes that may depict hunting, raiding, travelling, and dancing. Frequently, the petroglyphs are accompanied by inscriptions, written in an Ancient North Arabian script called Safaitic, which provide a rare glimpse into the lives of the nomads who once inhabited the desert

FIG. 1. Jordan and the Black (basalt) Desert. The Jebel Qurma region is marked in red (Huigens 2013:12, adapted from Aerial Photographic Archive for Archaeology in the Middle East).



FIG. 2. A panel covered in carvings, looking over the landscape of the Black Desert. The panel features, among others, a camel, an onager, an ostrich, a horseman, and Safaitic inscriptions. Further away on another rock surface, another camel can be seen (Photo: Peter Akkermans 2014).



(Fig. 3). They mention, among other things, personal names, prayers, activities such as mourning and pasturing sheep, and authorship of the associated rock art (Al-Jallad 2015). The dating of the inscriptions has traditionally provided a relative age for the rock art. However, the chronology of the Safaitic inscriptions is highly contested. They are traditionally dated to between the 1st century BC and 4th century AD, but the evidence for this is unsatisfactory and their chronology may equally begin much earlier and end later (Al-Jallad 2015:42). Furthermore, little is known about the societies that created the rock art, except that they were presumably pastoralist communities, which survived on sheep-goat herding and camel nomadism (Macdonald 1993). The lack of information is complicated by the fact they were nomadic societies who moved across thousands of kilometres and therefore that the rock art in a region may not have been created by the same people or communities. Indeed, there is no evidence to suggest that the people who wrote Safaitic considered themselves to be one cultural or ethnic community (Al-Jallad 2015:18). Archaeological information does not yet clarify the matter as the Black Desert societies of antiquity have been studied mainly through the epigraphic and external historic sources with little analysis of the archaeological context. A similar problem exists for the rock art. It has until now been researched only parenthetically in studies of the Safaitic inscriptions and never as a material category in its own right. For this reason, there still does not exist a chronological, typological, or interpretative framework for this rock art.

There are several theories about the general purpose of the rock art. These have been developed for the Safaitic inscriptions in epigraphic studies and have by extension been applied to the petroglyphs. One of the dominant theories was proposed by Michael Macdonald, who argues that the inscriptions and rock art were works of graffiti, created to pass the time during the long, often solitary, hours of nomadic life (e.g. Macdonald



FIG. 3 An archer hunting two lions. Under the scene are seven dots, an often recurring symbol in the Black Desert rock art. The Safaitic inscription reads: "By Rāgel son of Zamhar son of 'Aus are the animals" (Photo: Peter Akkermans 2014).

1993, 2010). In contrast, Eksell (2002) has suggested that the carvings had a fundamentally magico-sacral origin. Other theories are largely variations on and combinations of these, with the zoomorphic figures often being considered profane and the geometric and some anthropomorphic motifs magical and/or religious (e.g. Oxtoby 1968, Clark 1980). Al-Jallad has recently argued that one should not seek for one single purpose, intention, or meaning for the Safaitic inscriptions (Al-Jallad 2015:7), an argument which may be extended to the rock art. Yet as interpretative frameworks for the rock art, the theories are problematic because they have the inscriptions, not the petroglyphs, as their basis for understanding. Furthermore, and in relation to the previous point, many of the theories do not account for all the complexities, variations, and similarities in the rock art. However, this is not an oversight of the theories, but rather a result of the data collection and analysis that has taken place until now in the Black Desert. The only research projects focussing on the Classical Antiquity of this area so far have been mostly epigraphic surveys that have understandably concentrated on the Safaitic carvings rather than the rock art. Therefore, little is known about the images in comparison to the inscriptions.

Leiden University's systematic survey in the Jebel Qurma area has, however, yielded some preliminary results. Zoomorphic motifs appear to dominate the material, with the dromedary camel as the most common figure. Interestingly, however, depictions of the Bactrian camel have also been found in Jebel Qurma, as they have in other areas of the Black Desert (e.g. Ababneh 2005). Other domestic animals that are featured frequently are mules, dogs, and, to a lesser extent, horses. When dogs are depicted they are nearly always part of a hunting scene in which they are hunting a wild animal, often together with one or more archers. The wild animals featured include lions, ibexes, gazelles, the Arabian Oryx, ostriches, and onagers. These depictions attest to the presence of these animals in this area for at least two thousand years, animals which have sadly nearly all become extinct in Jordan in the last two centuries. The wild animals are occasionally artistically depicted with horn details or coat markings emphasised. In comparison, domestic animals sometimes appear to be 'decorated'. There are numerous examples of depictions of camels and horses whose bodies have patterns on them in the form of incisions or deliberate lack of pecking. These 'decorated' animals are attested in Safaitic rock from other areas of the Black Desert as well (e.g. Ababneh 2005). Occasionally, anthropomorphic figures also have patterns on their bodies, often when they are depicted individually or riding horses. In general, anthropomorphic figures tend to be featured in relation to animals, such as the aforementioned archers in hunting scenes, men riding camels, horses, or mules, and men leading animals. In contrast, women are usually depicted individually and in a particular way in Safaitic rock art: they stand with their arms out and up in their air, their hair flows outwards, and their hips and breasts are emphasised. There are various theories on how to interpret these women, ranging from them being goddesses to slave-girls to dancers (see Macdonald 2012 for a good overview). Few of these women have been found in Jebel Qurma so far, but they resemble those known from other areas (Fig. 4). Another often recurring theme in Safaitic rock art is lines or dots in sets of seven (Fig. 3). Again, the theories vary on their



FIG. 4. A typical image among the rock art associated with Safaitic inscriptions. The anthropomorphic figure is usually interpreted as a woman with flowing hair. However, the theories vary on whether this woman represents a goddess, a dancer, or something else altogether (Photo: Peter Akkermans 2014).

meaning, but the symbol of seven is commonly considered an apotropaic sign (Macdonald 2012).

Just as the inscriptions provide unique insight into the authors' lives, the rock art offers opportunities to understand the desert societies from another perspective. For example, the scenes of men on horses touching camels with their spears have been suggested to represent the raiding of other communities for camels (Macdonald 1990). The hunting scenes can provide information on how and which animals the societies hunted; they would suggest that they hunted animals such as oryxes, onagers, and gazelles with bows and arrows and with the use of dogs. However, it is not yet clear to what extent these scenes depict real events and whether they were frequent or not or if they were instead idealised activities. The geometric motifs such as the seven dots or lines are still too poorly understood to allow for interpretations of the symbolism or cosmology of the desert societies, but the pattern of widespread use suggests that there was a particular belief system in the use of these motifs. The interpretation of the various motifs and scenes and its application to a cultural system is complicated by the current lack of a cultural context. For example, it is currently only possible to speculate about the meaning of the 'decorated' animals and humans. On the animals, the designs could represent coat patterns, brand marks, or a type of armour or other equipment. On the humans, the patterns could represent clothes or armour. However, the decorations on both the humans and animals could also signify aesthetic choices made by the creator of the rock art. We currently know too little about the material culture of the societies who carved the petroglyphs to confirm the one or the other.

The lack of an archaeological context and the lack of a chronological and interpretative framework for the rock art is a limiting factor in understanding the figurative carvings of the Black Desert. However, this

research project aims to remedy this through, on the one hand, carrying out a systematic analysis of a large collection of petroglyphs (currently 3000 panels and counting) and on the other hand, integrating this with the epigraphic and archaeological data. At the moment, on the basis of the work carried out by scholars such as Michael Macdonald and the data that has been collected in Jebel Qurma, it is possible to say that the basalt-covered desert holds a fascinating phenomenon: a vast amount of rock art with intriguing variations, patterns, and complexities, which suggest that the ancient societies of the Black Desert left their cultural mark on what it is commonly considered an ecologically marginal landscape.

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