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Carving interactions: rock art in the nomadic landscape of the Black Desert, north-eastern Jordan

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Summary

‘Carving interactions: rock art in the nomadic landscape of the Black Desert, north-eastern Jordan’

In the late 1st millennium BC and the early 1st millennium AD, nomadic herding groups inhabited the Black Desert of northern Arabia. With herds of camels, horses, and ovicaprids, the nomads moved through the desert and left behind a wealth of so-called pictorial and textual engravings, carved into the basalt rocks of the desert. Despite a long tradition of research on the inscriptions, many questions still remain about these societies and their carvings. Why did these peoples make carvings in the desert and what was the significance of this cultural practice? What role did they play in the relationship between the nomads and the desert landscape? While the rock art can provide important insights into these issues, it has so far received little attention from scholars. In general, rock art remains an under-utilised source of information about herding societies and their very particular interaction with the domestic and wild landscape.

This dissertation investigates these questions through a comprehensive study of over 4500 petroglyphs from the Jebel Qurma region of the Black Desert in north-eastern Jordan. As the first-ever systematic study of ‘Safaitic’ rock art, this dissertation explores the rock art as a cultural practice and investigates what it can tell us about the nomads’ relationship with the desert landscape. It studies the content of the rock art, how it was produced and consumed by its makers and audience, and its relationship with the landscape. Through exploring these issues, this study reveals that the rock art was strongly intertwined with the herders’ way of life and places of importance. Images of camels, wildlife, hunting, and raiding reflect the importance of these themes to the desert nomads. They were carved to be seen by others at vantage points in the desert region, places that would have been socially significant to the nomads due to their importance when watching over pasturing herds, searching for game animals, and being on the lookout for enemies. By creating rock art in these places, the nomads were leaving behind their permanent mark where others could find them and where others had been before them. As such, they were adding to the historical significance of these locations and becoming part of their history. Furthermore, through creating visual narratives in these places, the nomads connected with the landscape and with each other through time and space. The rock art thereby ensured a lasting visual reminder for generations of the nomads’ presence in and interaction with the desert landscape.