

Pre-Arabic Inscriptions from Wādī Saḥtan, Wilāyat al-Rustāq, Governorate of the South al-Bāṭinah Region, Sultanate of Oman

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The following lines are dedicated to a scholar of extraordinarily wide interests, interpersonal and linguistic abilities. I thank him for his sustained support of our Zafār (Yemen) field research. This project would not have been possible without his personal commitment.

The Jebel Akḥḍar is noted for the quantity and unusualness of its rock art (CLARK 1975)¹. At the southern end of the Wadi Saḥtan above 500m altitude a few experts have long been aware of a concentration of rock art images. C. CLARK describes his *Wadi Sahtan-14* site as, „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” (1975, 113 map, 114). The petroglyph sites here contain zoomorphic images, inscriptions in Arabic letters which literate Arabs cannot read as well as pre-Arabic writing (Fig 1 and 2).

With the expansion of road building in recent years into remote areas, rock art sites are far more endangered than previously as the result of vandalism. On 4 March 2012 M. TOSI had a look at the rock art and inscriptions of the Wadi Saḥtan with the idea of gathering information preparatory to their preservation. In the Ministry prior to this discussion regarding future research had taken place. In the face of damage to the petroglyphs also owing to road building and other forms of encroachment, D. INSALL has mapped dozens of rock art sites around the Wadi Saḥtan, which for years had escaped the attention of others. These he has entered into Google Earth so that numerous sites have geographic coordinates. Unfortunately, these identifications are not publicly accessible.



1 I thank MAURIZIO TOSI (Ministry of Heritage and Culture, Muscat) here for providing me information and photos for this note, part of which I wrote up (16.03.2012) to summarize the site importance for the Ministry. Thanks also go to MUHAMMED MARAQTEN (Marburg) and PETER STEIN (Jena) for their critical discussions. An important source is, unfortunately unavailable: R. JÄCKLI, *Rock Art in Oman: An Introductory Presentation*, Zug 1980. The drawings of the inscriptions are based on photos made by A. TODARO (Fig 1 & 2) and D. INSALL (Fig 3). The original photos are published in HeidICON:
<http://heidicon.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/module/extlinks.php/pool/oman>

One site in particular attracted the attention of visitors: At 23°20'75"N; 57°18'53"E a line of 10 pecked characters resembles at first glance those of the Old South Arabian alphabet (Fig 1). A second contains 12 characters. To judge from the photo these appear to be pecked through the patina – a rough indicator of relative age.



Fig 1 W. Sahtan inscription 1.



Fig 2 W. Sahtan inscription 2.

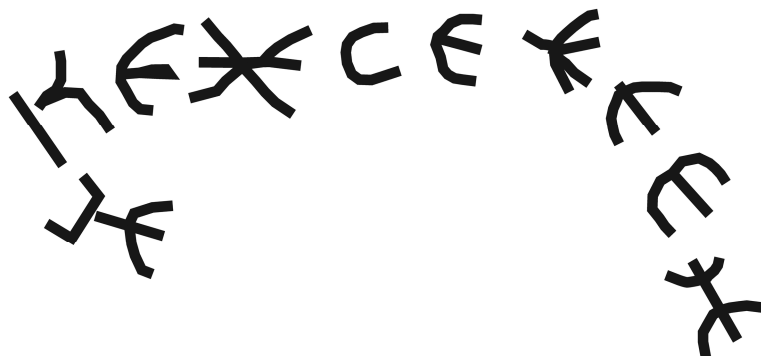


Fig 3 Al-Sharqiyah/Shenah/Qaṭārah west/site 1 (near al-Baṭīn) inscription. Each letter is about 3 cm wide. The inscription is nearly horizontal so that up and down are not strictly definable. (information D. INSALL).

Other pecked inscriptions came to light a few years ago near Shenah in the Sharqiyah, such as Fig 3 (KING 1999; INSALL 1999). At the time G. KING pointed out that the signs resembled most closely ones which A. AL-SHAHRI had published from Dhofar, but the ḥ (the 6th to 8th signs, counting clockwise) resemble those of Himaic and Dedanic (1994; 2000). D. INSALL published a photo (Fig 3, originally 1999: 234 fig 7) from Shenah, which is a bit unclear in the printed article. Clearly, as originally described it is deeply pecked. It belongs arguably together with Fig 1 and 2 in terms of style. Fig 3 is drawn with 10 'letters' D. INSALL originally published nine and in the same volume of *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* G.

stated that there were only eight letters, evidently feeling that the first one was not literal. Fig 3 suggests the imponderables of such research.

There is no doubt that the petroglyphs in Wadi Saḥtan are priceless unique documents for Oman. In addition, visitors disfigure them or add their names. I recommend that some action be taken to preserve or at least document them. In 10 years they will be completely disfigured. Their loss is equivalent to the loss of biodiversity which we regularly deplore (MORRIS 2007: 12).

The above-mentioned rock inscriptions are impossible to date precisely. The oxidation (patination) of the rock face onto which the inscriptions are pecked allows at best a vague reference possibly from 500 BCE–1900 CE.

Since the inscriptions are improbable as Old South Arabian language, an alternative explanation for them in Modern South Arabian. Despite the names, Modern South Arabian is considered to constitute the substrate for Arabic in the southern part of the Peninsula as it is for Old South Arabian (SIMA 2004; LONNET 2009: 297; RUBIN 2010: 8). But does Modern South Arabian (like Ethiopian) stem linearly from a single node (RUBIN 2010: 7–8)?

In this connection, the theory of a Mehri population settled in Central Oman during the 9th–12th centuries CE seems a possible explanation (DOSTAL 1962: 58; LONNET 2009: 297). For some time now, Mehri speakers concentrate geographically around the border between present-day Oman and the Yemen.

The characters resemble those painted on the walls of abris in Oman's Zafār Governorate in terms of the signs and composition (images: AL-SHAHRI 1994: 61–145). A. AL-SHAHRI'S list contains 33 signs (2000: 45–46), which he derives from a far larger number.

The main issue regarding these inscriptions is their linguistic association. The 23 known Old South Arabian inscriptions are a closed corpus in Ḥaḍrami dialect (AVANZINI 2002; YULE 2012) and have few points of contact with those in Figs 1–3. Although these nominally are related to those of Old South Arabian alphabets (INSALL 1999: 234), G. KING pointed out the resemblance to the painted signs in Zafār/Oman and their first appearance in the north of Oman (1999: 246). Thus, “Since the alphabet of the inscriptions from Zafār has not yet been deciphered and it is not possible at the moment to assign values with any certainty to the letters of the texts that have been found there or to this text from Shenah” (1999: 247). We can as easily consider the inscriptions from W. Saḥtan and Shenah to reflect not Old South Arabia, but rather Modern South Arabian languages.

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