

# The Hasat Bani Salt in the al-Zahirah Province of the Sultanate of Oman<sup>1</sup>

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This note is dedicated to a scholar of international standing whose broad interests range from the Himalaya over Arabia, to Turkey and then Europe. Over the years in Heidelberg as a Near Eastern archaeologist, he actively has supported the excavation and rock art studies of distant places outside the usual bounds of this field.

## *Introduction*

The Hasat Bani Salt is South-eastern Arabia's largest and most important rock art monument (Fig. 1)<sup>2</sup>. Often referred to as Coleman's Rock, it is named after the geologist Robert Coleman, who by word of mouth made it known in the 1970s. Most rock images in Oman are of small dimensions and are pecked, sometimes scratched, into the stone. Many in the South Province Zufar, whatever their age, are painted. But the Hasat Bani Salt is the only one in all of South-eastern Arabia that is sculpted in low relief. Moreover, pre-Islamic art monuments in Oman are rare indeed and seldom dealt with seriously. R. Jäckli, C. Clark, and K. Preston investigated the rock art of the Sultanate's central area in the mid 1970s. Located near al-Hamra, the Hasat Bani Salt is an "exotic" over 6 m in height. Exotics are large fragments of eroded metamorphosed marble which contrast with the surrounding mafic rock. The Hasat Bani Salt lies in the deepest part (*sail wadi*) of the Wadi al-Abri between Ghumar and Bilad Sait (Fig. 2). Situated close to the eastern wall, the rock is prominently visible in the wadi. Its reliefs have been admired by many visitors, both local and from abroad. The Hasat Bani Salt is located in what is considered to be the country's major area for rock art<sup>3</sup>. Clark and Preston published the first useable photos of part of the reliefs, but had little to go on for the relative and absolute chronology, a key question to be discussed briefly below. Inasmuch as over 20 years has elapsed since first publication, it seems appropriate to reconsider this topic.

Over the years others have studied the Hasat Bani Salt reliefs. In the mid 1980s, an Italian team made a silicon impression of the reliefs on the south-south-west side and prepared a detailed drawing<sup>4</sup>. Some, including the author, have visited the stone in order to determine the most favourable time of day for viewing and photographing. Morning light casts a slightly more raking light on the reliefs of the "south" face than western evening light. Given the importance of these rare reliefs and the cumulative effects of vandalism, we recorded them in some detail and assigned numbers to the

<sup>1</sup> My thanks go to our colleagues in the Department of Antiquities who have enabled my work over the years. The main recording took place in 1997 with the help of a grant from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and support from W.M. Domke. Except for Fig. 5 (G. Weisgerber), the photos are the author's. Peter Pahlen measured the Hasat Bani Salt with an infrared tachymeter. Joseph Eiwanger and Martin Bemann made particular suggestions in the text. Diacritics not possible in this format. Published: *Lux Orientis Archäologie zwischen Asien und Europa, Festschrift für Harald Hauptmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, R.M. Boehmer/J. Maran (eds.), Rahden: Leidorf 2001, pp. 443-450. ISSN 1433-4194.

<sup>2</sup> C. Clark 1975, 113 no. 20 on the map "Coleman's rock at Hasat bin Salt" pl. 1. K. Preston 1976, 30 names it the "Jebel al-Abri". This site is not visible on his map on p. 18-19.

<sup>3</sup> In Dhofar numerous sites have been identified by the archaeologist Ali b. Ahmed b. Ali b. Mahash al-Shaheri. See his book of 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Oral information from M. Tosi.



Fig. 1 Photo of the main relief grouping.

figures. In all, seven men, women, and a child are recognizable. The coarse grey-greenish metamorphic marble conglomerate weathers along the cleavages between the individual rock inclusions. Owing to the particular chemical composition of the rock and surface erosion, unlike so many stones in Oman, it is not dark-ened by a desert varnish. The reliefs appear to be complete, the obvious exception being the right arm of the man no. 4 and the legs of the woman no. 2, which have weathered away. No traces of colouring are preserved. Figure no. 4 is the only figure which shows clear damage since it was first published in 1976. Since the mid 1980s, the Hasat Bani Salt reliefs on the “south” face have been defaced partially by graffiti and by stone throwing. On the “north” face, Figure nos. 6 and 7 are nearly impossible to see. Their poorer preservation owes perhaps to the more friable composition of this part of the stone. On the whole, the damage to the stone and its reliefs arises from the exposure to rain, running water, and alternating daily extremes in temperature.

#### *Description of the Reliefs*

The main group of figures are located on the flattish south-south-west face of the rock (Figs. 3 and 4). The lowest edge of the relief stands over 2 m above the present floor of the wadi. In this flood area, the gravel could easily have eroded or been deposited and/or both over the centuries. Thus, whether the sculptors stood on the ground or on scaffolding is a moot question. The north-north-west face (Fig. 5) shows three figures best viewed in Preston’s plate 4 on page 31 of his aforementioned article. Beginning with the “south” face, the following figures are visible:

*Figure no. 1.* This large central male figure (in all 2.5 m high) dominates the figural group. Its outline carving is deep. The torso and face are depicted frontally with the

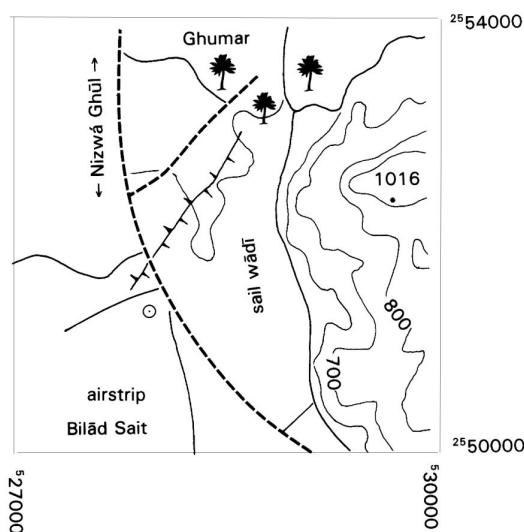


Fig. 2 The area around the Hasat Bani Salt (after sheet NF 40-03).

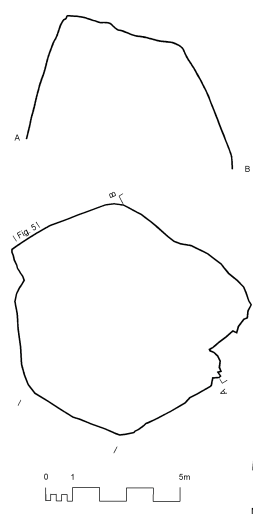


Fig- Plan and profile of Coleman's Rock (P. Pahlen).

lips, nose, and eyelids emphasized. The torso, arms, and head are more plastically rendered than the lower part of the figure. The arms are clumsily connected to plastically emphasized shoulders. Simple hands and arms lack any verisimilitude to nature. The legs are short and the club-like feet face to the figure's left. A pointed unidentifiable object, probably a weapon, projects from both sides of the figure's raised right hand. The figure wears a patterned belt which binds up his kilt in a fold. His right leg is patterned with five circles, perhaps from trousers.

*Figure no. 2.* This frontal depiction of a woman (1.25 m preserved height) is located to man no. 1's immediate right. Clearly indicated are breasts, arms, left hand, and a skirt. The shoulders are formed by a straight horizontal line. Hair or head gear are indicated simply on both sides of the face. The carving is not nearly as deep as that of man no. 1. Lower extremities are not visible.

*Figure no. 3.* Standing small child with the feet together, frontally depicted (0.8 m height). The left arm hangs and the right one is raised. The navel is plastically emphasized. The carving is similar in its soft volume to that of man no. 1.

*Figure no. 4.* Positioned at the same base height as the man no. 1, this figure measures c. 1.55 m in height. It is the poorest preserved of those in the "south" group and the most difficult to photograph. Visible are the face, torso, and legs. The left arm and hand are visible. In a published photo, both sides of the upper right arm are visible<sup>5</sup>. A male figure was probably intended. Traces of a skirt are visible on the figure's right side. But the figure's left side is obscured by the effects of erosion and by the spalling of the stone. Possible fragments of a base are preserved upon which the figure stands.

Three further individuals are hardly recognizable on the north-north-west side of the stone. *Figure no. 5.* The standing figure's face is in its proportions and frontality similar to those of man no. 1 rendered on the "south" side of the stone. The figure meas-

<sup>5</sup> C. Clark 1975, 116 pl. 1.

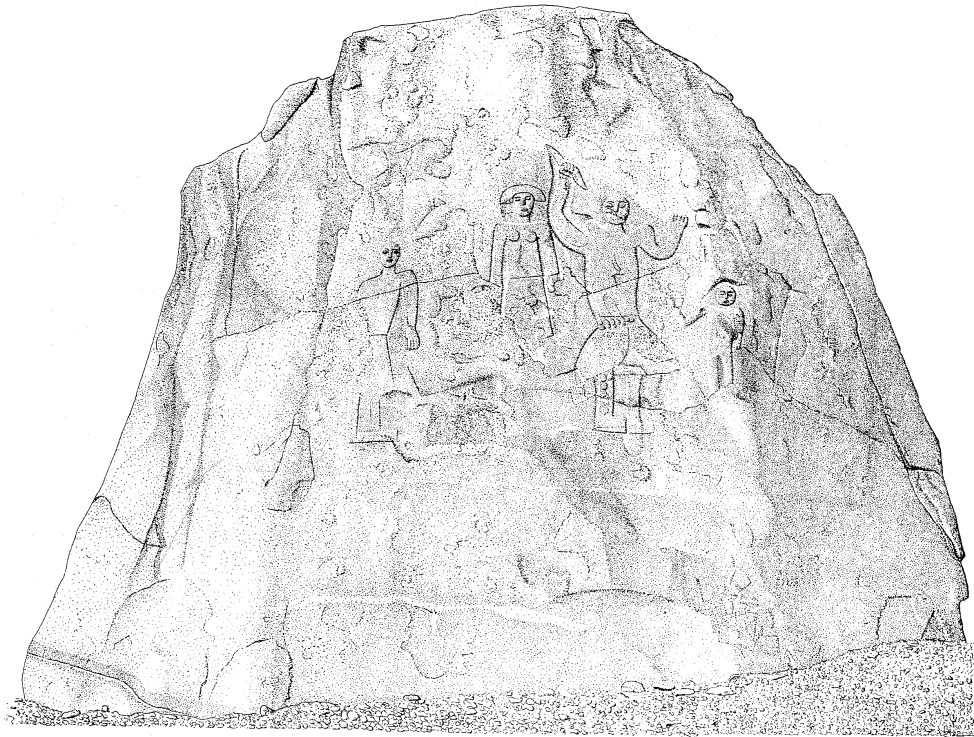


Fig. 4 The main group of reliefs (G. Endlich).

ures 1.5 m (preserved height) and the shoulders are 66 cm wide. It is poorly preserved. The right arm is inorganically rendered and is composed of two vertical strips which define each side of the arm. A large right hand is scarcely visible. The treatment of the lower extremities resembles that of the female no. 2.

Less than a meter to the left visible are the face, hairdo as well as traces of the torso and the left arm of *Figure no. 6*. Still further to the left, the third and poorest preserved figure of the two groups (*Figure no. 7*) has the same hairdo as do *Figure nos. 2* and *6*. The left arm and possible traces of the left breast are visible. On the strength of the shared hairdo, women seem to be depicted.

#### *Subject Matter*

Common archetypal themes of rock art in Oman, including mounted riders with tridents and those pertaining to hunting magic, are present in the wadi. With the possible exception of man no. 1, which can be compared to depictions around the Mediterranean of a smiting figure which wields a weapon or thunderbolt (e.g. pharaohs, *dieu au l'ingot*, Levantine metallic figurines, Zeus, Jupiter Dolichenus)<sup>6</sup>, the figures depicted have no obvious supernatural attributes.

<sup>6</sup> H. Müller-Karpe 1980, pl. 188 B1 (pharaoh); pl. 188B1 (Levantine deity brandishing a weapon with one arm, Megiddo); pl. 149B2 & 3 (Ra's Shamra); pl. 153.3-5, 8-9. M. Hörig/E. Schwertheim 1987, no. 279 pl. 51; no. 587 pl. 128. Naturally, no direct historic connection with the figures under discussion can be determined.



Fig. 5 Detail of the south-south-west group.

The identification of purported “negroid” and “caucasoid” physiognomy<sup>7</sup>, which rests on the prominent lips of the Figure nos. 1 to 4, is not particularly convincing, given the arbitrary conventions which the sculptors worked out for other anatomical and physiognomatic features.

#### *Style*

Shared elements of style of the reliefs include a consistent treatment of the heads and faces combined with frontal depiction, the silhouette carving, as well as the large size of the Figure nos. 1, 3-5. Figure nos. 2, 6, and 7 form a second group in which the arms appear as flat solid bodies, as opposed to the double outlines characteristic of the other group. Not surprisingly, the discontent of scholars in recent years with regard to style as an analytical tool for the study of rock art<sup>8</sup>, combined with the simple style of the reliefs, result in the present note in a largely non-stylistic approach to the reliefs.

#### *Composition*

To answer the question of the iconology of the stone reliefs, one may first turn to the composition of the “south” face for a hint. The male no. 1, crowds the central and otherwise dominant woman no. 2 to its immediate right. Male no. 1 is also far larger than woman no. 2 and is cut in a different relief technique (see above). While the central figural pair stand at the same approximate height, man no. 4 is positioned somewhat lower. The child, no. 3, is posed above the ground level used by the others. On the “north” face, the composition is nearly random, and the figures do not interact with each other. The male no. 5 is positioned slightly higher than the female (no. 7). The head of the female (no. 6) between them is located nearly 1 m below those of the other two.

#### *The Context*

Within 300 m to the west of the Hasat Bani Salt some of the South-eastern Arabia’s

<sup>7</sup> K. Preston 1976, 21.

<sup>8</sup> O. Soffer/M. Conkey 1997, 1-16.



Fig. 6 The largest relief on the north side (Figure no. 5), drawn from a Foto taken obliquely (I. Steuer).



Fig. 7 Foto of male no. 5.

most interesting and attractive rock art images are to be found<sup>9</sup>. But these are rendered in other entirely different styles, techniques, and vary in their subject matter as well. There is no reason to date all of the diverse images in the immediate area to one and the same period<sup>10</sup>. The nearest settlement associated with the Hasat Bani Salt reliefs lies some 1000 m north in the low lying oasis at Ghumar. For geological reasons, conditions have enabled settlement here for centuries. This local ancient population created and/or at least knew of the reliefs.

In their style and figural proportions, the figures are nearly unique. The only other parallel known to the writer is located in the immediate vicinity<sup>11</sup>, an image 2 m in height, scratched into one of the exotics near Bilad Sait. As opposed to the anthropomorphic reliefs of the Hasat Bani Salt, this one is scratched in a simple manner into the rock. The arms are long and straight, the legs are short. The garment is similar to that of man no. 1.

<sup>9</sup> C. Clark 1975, 117 pl. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Some have been dated to the 2nd millennium B.C.E. by means of comparisons with the pottery decoration of the Wadi Suq Period.

<sup>11</sup> C. Clark 1975, no. 19, 118 pl. 5.

### *Relative Chronology*

The composition of the figures and the technique of carving on the “south” face suggests two phases of carving. The female no. 2 is more shallowly carved than the other figures. As mentioned above, the large male no. 1 crowds it and does not appear to belong to the original composition. In addition, Figure nos. 1, 3, and 4 form a group with the circular shape of the face and in their general proportions as common shared features. These postdate the woman no. 2. Man no. 4 is difficult to relate to the others stylistically, but is more similar in style and carving technique to the later figures than to woman no. 2. Possibly man no. 1 is carved over the companion of the woman, no. 2, effacing it. It seems unlikely that a woman would be carved alone asymmetrically as the main figure. On the “north” face man no. 5 also is more deeply carved than are the women nos. 6 and 7. The hairdo of the latter resemble that of the female no. 2. Summing up, the first phase includes the Figure nos. 2, 6, and 7. The remaining images belong to the second phase. The amount of time lying between the two cannot be judged.

### *Absolute Dating*

Given the constant weathering of the surface, extreme stone age datings are implausible. The lack of a baseline on both faces of the rock is typical of prehistoric rock art, and less so that of later periods. Also potentially important for the dating of the reliefs is the lively style of the figures and their composition. Obviously the depiction of women’s breasts (female no. 2 and probably no. 7) is unacceptable to the principles of Islam. The spread of Islam provides a rough *terminus ante quem* for the figures, but not a very exact one because this religion did not take hold all over the country at just one point in time after the arrival of the ambassador from the Prophet in 628 C.E.<sup>12</sup>. Antiquarian details do not date the figures, which as mentioned, have no close relatives in either style, technique or iconography in adjacent areas. During the Parthian and Sasanian periods an important region for rock art lies in nearby south-western Iran, across the Arabian Gulf. Large scale figures carved there might have served as an inspiration for our reliefs. Extensive early historic contacts between Fars and Oman are well known which would possibly have enabled the transmission. But the Parthian relief figures (mostly official personages) in Fars are frontal, immobile, and are hieratic in character<sup>13</sup>. Despite these objections, the large size of the figures still may have provided an inspiration for the Hasat Bani Salt reliefs. While Sasanian reliefs also provide no specific iconographic parallels, these numerous large scale reliefs may well have provided the inspiration for the equally large reliefs across the Gulf. Common to both is a movemented composition, which is lacking in the Parthian reliefs.

### *The Sculptors*

Since the reliefs and the above-mentioned parallel to man no. 1 belong to the same geographically remote area, their creators probably were locally based. The carving is not professional, as one might expect from an area with an indigenous tradition of otherwise strictly simple rock art. As already mentioned, the next prehistoric and

<sup>11</sup> C. Clark 1975, no. 19, 118 pl. 5.

<sup>12</sup> P. Yule 2001, 4.

<sup>13</sup> L. Vanden Berghe/K. Schippmann 1985, 118.

historic settlement lies 1 km to the north. Nearby and beyond it are others such as at Ghāl qaddim where the carvers also could have lived.

### *Summary and Conclusion*

For the iconology of the reliefs we have little information. Behind the simple figures stands complicated social behaviour. The identity of the figures is enigmatic. It seems unlikely that gods are depicted on the Hasat Bani Salt. Except for the large male no. 1, none has an attribute that could be interpreted as supernatural. If life-size human figures were worshipped in the Pre-Islamic religion of the area, this would be the first known such case. To date known cult objects include a small pottery anthropomorph from Amlah<sup>14</sup>, metallic anthropomorphs from Bahla/al-Aqir<sup>15</sup> and animistic places. These range in date from the late third millennium until the arrival of Islam. We are not dealing with art in today's sense that a pleasant, aesthetically significant, or decorative content is being communicated.

The content of the reliefs jibes poorly with the aniconic precepts of Islam. The name "Hasat Bani Salt" is no doubt secondary and recent. The "rock of the Bani Salt" names a tribe which inhabits the Wadi Ghul a few kilometers to the north. During the Parthian and Sasanian Periods possible or even likely parallels from neighbouring Fars depict mortals. These reliefs are the most likely source of inspiration for those under discussion, owing to their size and subject matter. The main carving of the "south" face suggests the boundary stone of a family or tribe for those approaching from the south. But given this line of thought, the figures on the north side of the stone are difficult to explain. Alternative suggestions include a ritual carving of figures into the stone. It also seems that the large male no. 1 has literally been imposed over the previously depicted figures. The figures on the "south" face were originally composed as a group, but one which changed over time.

### *Literature*

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<sup>14</sup> P. Yule 1999, 180 Fig. 37.14, p.140 Pl. 12, evidently a cultic object.

<sup>15</sup> Previously in the Department of Antiquities, Sultanate of Oman.



A. b. Ahmed b. Ali b. Mahash al Shahri, *kaifa ibtindina wa kaifa irtiqina bilhadarati al-insaniyati min shibhi al-gazirah al-arabiyah* (Zafar) kitabatuna wa nuqush una al-qadimah (Dubai 1994).

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