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Rock art: Life-sized sculptures of dromedaries found in Saudi Arabia

At a remarkable site in northwest Saudi Arabia, a CNRS archaeologist1 and colleagues from the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) have discovered camellid sculptures unlike any others in the region. They are thought to date back to the first centuries BC or AD.2 The find sheds new light on the evolution of rock art in the Arabian Peninsula and is the subject of an article published in Antiquity (February 2018).

Located in the province of Al Jawf in northwest Saudi Arabia, Camel Site, as it is known, was explored in 2016 and 2017 by a Franco-Saudi research team. The sculptures, some incomplete, were executed on three rocky spurs there. Though natural erosion has partly destroyed some of the works, as well as any traces of tools, the researchers were able to identify a dozen or so reliefs of varying depths representing camellids and equids. The life-sized sculpted animals are depicted without harnessing in a natural setting. One scene in particular is unprecedented: it features a dromedary meeting a donkey, an animal rarely represented in rock art. Some of the works are thus thematically very distinct from the representations often found in this region. Technically, they also differ from those discovered at other Saudi sites—frequently simple engravings of dromedaries without relief—or the sculpted facades of Al Ḥijr (Madâ’in Ṣâliḥ). In addition, certain Camel Site sculptures on upper rock faces demonstrate indisputable technical skills. Camel Site can now be considered a major showcase of Saudi rock art in a region especially propitious for archaeological discovery.

Though the site is hard to date, comparison with a relief at Petra (Jordan) leads the researchers to believe the sculptures were completed in the first centuries BC or AD. Its desert setting and proximity to caravan routes suggest Camel Site—ill suited for permanent settlement—was a stopover where travelers could rest or a site of worship.

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1. The archaeologist is a research engineer at the Orient et Méditerranée research unit (CNRS / Sorbonne University / University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne / EPHE / Collège de France). This project involves another researcher in France, from the TRACES research unit (CNRS / University of Toulouse–Jean Jaurès / French Ministry of culture).

2. These discoveries were made within the scope of the Dumat al Jandal archaeological project, directed by researchers Guillaume Charloux (CNRS) and Romolo Loreto (University of Naples L'Orientale), and supported by the SCTH; the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Labex RESMED, part of the French Investissements d’Avenir program; and the French Center for Archaeology and Social Sciences (CEFAS).
Rock relief depicting recumbent dromedary raising head towards an equid, possibly a donkey or mule. ©Antiquity - CNRS/MADAJ, G. Charloux

Sculpture (probably not completed) of two dromedaries in single file on Spur C at Camel Site. ©CNRS/MADAJ, R. Schwerdtner

Bas-relief of dromedary head. ©Antiquity - CNRS/MADAJ, photo C. Poliakoff, drawing G. Charloux

High relief of standing dromedary on sandstone spur at center of image. ©CNRS/MADAJ, R. Schwerdtner
Bibliography


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