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Saudi Arabian rock art complexes inscribed on World Heritage List

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On 3 July UNESCO's World Heritage Committee decided unanimously to add two major Saudi petroglyph properties to the World Heritage List. They are the massive rock art complexes of Jubbah and Shuwaymis in the Hail region of northern Saudi Arabia. The first includes the numerous sites on Jabal Umm Sinman and some adjacent sites next to the

oasis town Jubbah; the second area covers Jabal al-Raat and Jabal al-Manjor, two rocky escarpments about 40 km from the village of Shuwaymis, 300 km south of Jubbah. Both sites are surrounded by highly arid landscapes.

Until 2001, the massive site complex at Shuwaymis was unknown except to some local Bedouins. In that year it was



Figure 1. Neolithic petroglyphs at Jabal al-Raat, Shuwaymis, Saudi Arabia: World Heritage.



Figure 2. *Jabal Umm Sinman, Jubbah, section of 8 km long fence protecting rock art sites.*

discovered by the principal of the local school, and studied intensively in November 2001, i.e. as soon as the find was reported (Bednarik and Khan 2002). This study included the first direct dating results from the site complex, but at the time only one of its components, Jabal al-Raat, was examined, as the full extent of the vast rock art corpus was still unknown: ‘So far only a very few of these cliff localities have been examined’ (Bednarik and Khan 2005: 57). And yet, already then it was concluded that ‘one of the major petroglyph complexes should be selected for nomination to the World Heritage List’ (Bednarik and Khan 2005: 79).

The most outstanding aspect of the rock art at both properties is its content of Neolithic relief petroglyphs (Fig. 1). This is especially the case at Shuwaymis, which features comparatively little rock art of more recent periods. The Neolithic panels, dated to about 6000 BP, are among the most spectacular rock art in the world. Indeed, the most outstanding Neolithic rock art known, comprising many thousands of painstakingly made magnificent figures, is that of the Shuwaymis sites. Although there is at least one larger rock art complex in Saudi Arabia (Bednarik and Khan 2009), in terms of visual grandeur Shuwaymis is unsurpassed.

About twenty years ago, IFRAO faced a quite specific dilemma in the Islamic countries: some of the world’s largest concentrations are located in regions governed by Moslem states, and with the exception of Algeria, these vast bodies of rock art were poorly protected or unprotected. The only country with a rock art organisation was Morocco, one of several where pilfering of rock art sites was common. The underlying reason for this neglect was that, according to religious beliefs, imagery was perceived as unseemly, and was accorded relatively low heritage value, especially as many of the countries concerned were in possession of rich architectural and other cultural heritage remains. I realised that these public attitudes were not going to change unless a different set of priorities would somehow be introduced. Accepting that it would be a Sisyphean task to try and convince all these many nation states of the Islamic world individually, I decided to adopt a very deliberate strategy. Saudi Arabia is perceived as the paragon, the example to be followed in Mohammedan culture and religion, so if that

one country were to adopt policies of regarding rock art more highly, and worthy of preservation and protection, I figured other Moslem states would follow.

Therefore focusing my attention on Saudi Arabia in the past fifteen years has been a calculated stratagem, and it has achieved the changes hoped for. Today, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has one of the world’s best rock art protection systems in place. Numerous sites in very remote desert locations have extensive physical protection, in many cases amounting to solid steel fences many kilometres long (Fig 2). Local caretakers have been appointed at selected sites, responsible for controlling access to them, and the Ministry of Antiquities and Museums has long established a register of rock art sites. The Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities

(SCTA) has recently been established and taken over the responsibilities for the Kingdom’s rock art heritage.

Since these changes began, which will hopefully become reflected in a greater awareness and appreciation of rock art in the rest of the Islamic world, other developments have taken place. As the number of properties listed as World Heritage began approaching one thousand, UNESCO has begun to tighten the submission criteria in the face of increasing numbers of proposals, and the standards required have been significantly upgraded. During 2008 and 2009, I attended several consultation meetings with UNESCO, three in Paris and one in Johannesburg. During these deliberations I presented a strong viewpoint on behalf of IFRAO, in one instance with the support of IFRAO Representatives Dr Jean Clottes and Prof. Giriraj Kumar. My outspoken position as Convener of IFRAO was that the World Heritage List (WHL) is seriously impaired, in that it is Eurocentric and does not credibly represent the cultural heritage of the world. Secondly, I argued, that its emphasis on monuments of History (the arbitrary period so named) was counterproductive to the underlying goals of UNESCO, the unification of humanity. Historical monuments, I argued, were often subjects to disputes between political, ethnic and religious factions, and that some of these disputes had led to bloodshed. Pre-Historic monuments, on the other hand, were not hostage to political, ethnic or religious views, they were elements likely to unify rather than divide. I argued that dozens of European rock art sites have been inscribed on the WHL because they are thought to be of the Pleistocene. Most Pleistocene rock art clearly resides in the remaining continents, and not a single one of such sites has ever been nominated for the WHL. This is not just an oversight, it is an important factor in shaping the ideas of where advanced cognition of humans first developed — and it is the basis of a Eurocentric cult of Palaeolithicity. The severe imbalance evident in the WHL thus supports distorted and Eurocentric notions about humanity’s origins, and yet some of this European rock art on the WHL for being Palaeolithic is not even of the Pleistocene. It is salutary to note that the subsequent report (UNESCO 2008: 29) states:

It is accepted that the World Heritage List is currently not



Figure 3. One of the sixty-six petroglyph panels of Jabal al-Manjor, Shuwaymis rock art complex, Saudi Arabia.

representative or balanced, because historical and European properties are greatly over-represented. Some regions, such as the Arab states, Asia and Australia, are severely under-represented. The example of Asia, the largest continent, demonstrates the point.

The same report also recommends that in future inscriptions on the WHL, preference will be given to three kinds of properties: rock art sites, important pre-Historic places and hominin find sites. This decision has a direct bearing on the prospects of rock art properties, especially those from continents other than Europe, to secure WHL in this climate of very stringent requirements for nominations.

The two Saudi petroglyph complexes were placed on the Tentative List two years after these developments, and then Prof. Majeed Khan from the SCTA drafted an initial submission. It was not acceptable and I wrote the submission document in 2013. Dr Janette Deacon assisted with the final draft, and Dr Aylin Orbasli authored the required Management Plan. The submission was made by the Saudi Ambassador to UNESCO in January 2014. Following the required site inspection there were requests relating to minor aesthetic issues at the Jubbah property, which are being complied with. The nomination was unanimously accepted by UNESCO on 3 July 2015.

What are the immediate and long-term implications of this listing? Saudi Arabia has expressed limited interest in international tourism at the sites; the principal motivation for seeking WH listing is to raise the status of rock art among the public of the Kingdom, and to cater for domestic and educational tourism. The government is committed to completing the installation of visitors' facilities. A 40 km long sealed road through the desert to Shuwaymis has been completed, as have visitors' centres at both complexes. Both the core zones and buffer zones have been secured at the two properties. Climate monitoring stations supplied from Australia will be installed at both Jubbah and Shuwaymis.

A detailed rock art monitoring program is to commence shortly to act as an early warning system in case increased visitation of the sites has a deteriorating effect on the rock art. The protocol for this was submitted to UNESCO only a month before inscription took place.

In the long term the inscription of the two Saudi properties on the WHL will significantly raise the awareness and appreciation of rock art in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and predictably also in all other Moslem nations. Hopefully it will help redefining cultural heritage in the region, drawing attention to the unifying patrimony of all humanity — and away from the bloody divisions created by History. Obviously such changes to attitudes will be slow, but in the case of Saudi Arabia, these developments can certainly be expected to facilitate the establishment of rock art conservation and condition monitoring practices as routine government policies. Already there are early signs of the establishment of a rock art research tradition in another major Moslem nation, Iran, to which a spate of recent papers in *RAR* bears witness. Hopefully such developments will have a flow-on effect in other countries of northern Africa, the Middle East and beyond.

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