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

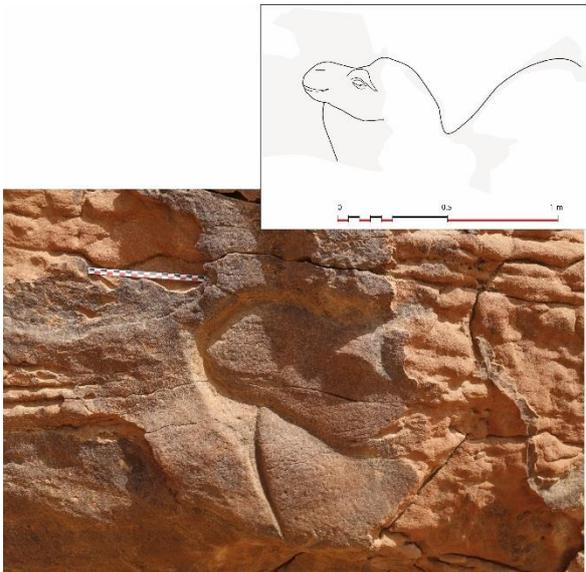
At a remarkable site in northwest Saudi Arabia, a CNRS archaeologist¹ and colleagues from the Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTH) have discovered camelid sculptures unlike any others in the region. They are thought to date back to the first centuries BC or AD.² The find sheds new 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 camelids 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 Hijr (Madâ'in Şâliḥ). 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.

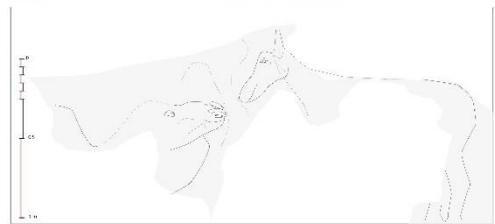
Though the site is hard to date, comparison with a relief at Petra (Jordan) leads the researchers to believe the sculptures were completed in the first centuries BC or AD. Its desert setting and proximity to caravan routes suggest Camel Site—ill suited for permanent settlement—was a stopover where travelers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

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).



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



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



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



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Spur with rock reliefs of dromedaries (left and center).
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Relief of two dromedaries: calf following adult (legs alone visible). ©CNRS/MADAJ, G. Charloux

Bibliography

The art of rock relief in Ancient Arabia: new evidence from the Jawf Province. G. Charloux, H. Al-Khalifah, T. al-Malki, R. Mensan & R. Schwerdtner, *Antiquity*, 92, 361, 2018, p. 165-182, February 2018, <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2017.221>

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