

Traditional Music or Religious Ritual?

Ancient Rock Art Illumined by Bedouin Custom

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Abstract

This paper deals with four basalt stones found in Wadi Salmā, in the desert of north-eastern Jordan, during a survey of the OCIANA project (Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia) in April 2015. These stones bear depictions of musicians with their instruments alongside Safaitic inscriptions. This paper will present an analysis of the musical instruments represented on these stones. It appears that five distinct musical instruments are depicted. It can be surmised that these instruments needed to be light and easily transportable on account of the pastoral, nomadic life that the peoples inhabiting the region led. It also appears from the depictions that women played a prominent role in musical gatherings.

Introduction

The four new inscriptions published in this article were found in Wadi Salmā in Jordan. The site is 35 km north-east of the village of aş-Şafawī (fig. 1). The wadi itself is approximately 13 km long and contains a remarkable concentration of Safaitic, Greek and Islamic Arabic inscriptions on the black, patinated basalt stones that make up the landscape of the *ḥarra*.

The inscriptions

Inscription no. 1 (fig. 2A)

l s' d bn gd h-ḥtt

“By S' d son of Gd is the carving”.

This inscription begins as the vast majority of the Safaitic inscriptions do, with the letter *l*, sometimes known as the *lam auctoris* and usually translated as “by” (al-Manaser 2008: 75). The two names are well-known from the Safaitic corpus,

although the exact combination has not been seen before. Next to the Safaitic inscription are engravings of four figures and an incised line surrounds the inscription and the drawings. Between two of the figures there are seven lines which form an apotropaic sign very common in Safaitic inscriptions. Three of the figures appear to be male and all are looking towards a fourth, the largest, which appears to be a woman playing a double pipe instrument. The artist depicts the female figure's breasts as two dots in front of a hatched pattern on her upper body, which could be intended to represent her breasts covered by her clothing. If this is correct, the horizontal line at the level of her groin was presumably accidental or added later. The other three figures have no distinguishing sexual characteristics and are presumably male. The figure at the top right of the engraving appears to be holding a *daf*, a type of frame-drum made of hardwood over which is stretched a membrane, usually made of goatskin. The figure below appears to be clapping. M.C.A. Macdonald suggested to me (p.c.) that the central figure is dancing with a swinging belt and wild hair which was later hammered over. She is holding the lyre in an unnatural position, at arm's length. The wavy lines to the left of the lyre are the most difficult feature to explain. It is possible that this final figure was originally depicted as a woman since previous research on Safaitic drawings of musical instruments has shown that the lyre was typically played by a woman (see HSD fig. 1). It is possible that the hair was hammered over at a later date.

Inscription no. 2 (fig. 2B)

l k't bn ġt h-ħtt

“By K't son of Ġt is the carving”.

The figure on the left appears to be playing a double pipe. The style of the hair suggests that it is a woman, since similar hair arrangement has previously been found on a woman (HCH 79; WH 442, 568). However, her hair is shorter than that which has been previously found on female figures (see Macdonald 2012: fig. 3). The artist may have tried to depict the subject wearing loose trousers since her calves are considerably thinner than her legs above the knee. This figure's

grip of the double pipe with both hands is similar to the one found in HCH 79 and figure 2D here. The tubes of the pipe are separated to show that there are indeed two of them.

The position of the three fingers of the left hand shows that both tubes of the double pipe are being held at once. Other depictions (see HSD fig. 3) of a double pipe show the pipes closely bound rather than with a space between them and all these depict the pipe as held with the hands overlapping both segments. The right figure on the stone is probably a male figure – because of the lack of visible hair – who may be holding castanets. The triangle drawn in front of him is difficult to interpret: it may be a mistake or intended to represent part of a musical instrument, such as a drum, but there is not enough detail to decide.

Inscription no. 3 (fig. 2C)

l ḥṭm bn s'mm bn 'wḏ w h ylt wqy{t} m {b}'s' h-s'nt w ḡnmt¹

“By Ḥṭm son of S'mm son of 'wḏ and so Lt [grant] protection from distress this year and booty”.

This stone has been damaged in several places but fortunately the inscription remains unscathed. On the left-hand side of the stone there is a male human figure. This type of figure is common in Safaitic inscriptions (see WH 2502, 2669, 2673; Ababneh 2005: 258). There is another figure playing a lyre in the lower right. It has short, spiky hair, and is in the typical playing position. In the upper left corner, there are some random letters that are not part of the inscription.

Inscription no. 4 (fig. 2D)

l 's'lh bn ḡṭ h-ḥṭṭ

“By 's'lh son of Ḡṭ is the carving”.

On the left-hand corner of this stone there is a female figure, as suggested by the cleanly engraved hair, playing a double pipe which the artist has evidently tried to

¹ Editorial sigla: { } enclose doubtful letters, [] enclose letters which are restored, ---- represents a passage in which one or more letters are completely destroyed, / between two letters indicates an alternative reading. Semitic roots are represented in capital letters, e.g. RWH.

show as tied together at various points along the pipe. The form of the woman shows a belt hanging from either side of her waist. The only other known similar example of a woman wearing such a belt while playing an instrument is the one found in the basalt etching published by Harding (1969: fig. 1; shown as fig. 4B here). These belts are however very common on figures of singing or dancing girls (Macdonald 2012: fig. 1, 6a, b, 7a, and 8a, c). The female figure is standing with the same posture as the others so far examined, half-bent in a stiff stance. This is known to convey that the performer is concentrating and that it accordingly requires great prowess to carry out this activity.

The artist has made the female figure much larger than the male figures standing either side of her. It could be suggested that this was to show that her activity was the most important of those being shown (the male figure to her right plays the *daf* and the one to the left appears to be clapping). The relatively large size of the female figure is significant as it clearly shows the central role that women played in musical activity in this society. In all known rock drawings where the gender of the figures can be determined, only women are depicted as playing the pipe.

Another inscription, kept in the Damascus Museum (Museum no. 29067; fig. 4A), is accompanied by a drawing which depicts a scene in which a horseman carrying a spear is chasing (or possibly raiding) a foal. A dog² and a scorpion³ are also illustrated in the drawing and between them is a woman with long hair and wearing what appears to be a belt the ends of which hang down from her waist. She is playing what appears to be a single pipe, perhaps a *šabbābah*. The author has written that the drawing (*dmyt*) belongs to him (*w l-h h-dmyt*), but beyond giving us his name he does not tell us anything about it (al-Mu'addīn 1995: 24).

It is interesting that the author of the inscription who claims the drawing, *s^lkrn bn ḥmy bn s^lkrn*, also carved his name on the stone bearing the inscription and drawing published by Harding (HSD, fig. 4B here). However, on the latter, it is not he but another member of the same lineage group (*ḥr bn s²rk bn ḥr*) who

² Compare the dog in the scene on HSD (fig. 4B here).

³ This is one of only a very few rock drawings showing a scorpion.

claims the drawing. The drawing includes two women with lyres who resemble the Yemeni-Ethiopian type, and a male rider (Braun 1999: 163; *idem* 2002: 221).

Discussion

Many scholars have interpreted depictions of musical gatherings in rock drawings as having a religious function, for example rituals such as a rain ceremony. The figures with hands held aloft in KhBG 17 (fig. 3A) have thus been interpreted by al-Khraysheh as taking part in a ceremony to attract rain (2002: 17–18).

Depicted in MSSH 12 (fig. 3B) is a scene in which a group of men on the right stand in a row clapping. A male figure in the bottom-central portion of the engraving is possibly playing the castanets. In the middle of the scene, another possibly male figure dances. He appears to be wearing trousers, decorated below the knee with tassels that may be made of tails, quills or hair of some kind. On the far left, a woman plays the double pipe, while another claps. In this scene, it is very clear that we are dealing with some kind of dance ceremony which can be compared with the *dahdiyyah* dance. This dance is known today in the north of Saudi Arabia and across Jordan and Syria, as well as among the Bedouin in Sinai and among Iraqis in the western Iraqi desert. However, only Bedouin practice this style of dance at present. The origin of this dance is unclear but the tradition maintains that a group of men travelling in the desert stopped to make camp and discovered a rival group intending to attack them during the night. The first group gathered themselves with their camels and began to clap. The camels made a lot of noise in response to the clapping, frightening the rival group away and averting the attack. This could explain why contemporary performers of the dance make a sound that has been described by modern observers as sounding like the grunts of camels.

Another theory about the origins of this dance is that the people in the desert may have devised it as a way of keeping warm during cold desert nights, huddling together to share body heat and clapping to keep moving. However, this explanation does not account for the meaning of the sounds made during the dance, which may just be lost to us. The geographical spread of this dance has led

to different names for it, *daḥiyyah* in Jordan, *daḥah* in Saudi Arabia and *daḥiyyah* or *sāmr* in Iraq but, despite the variety of names, the movements and sounds are exactly the same, pointing to a common origin from one specific locality. The performance of this dance begins with a group of men who separate into two groups. A poem is recited which requires a call and response between the two groups: the first group utters a line of poetry, the second group must repeat it with the difference that the second group must start with the letter that the first group finished on (for example if the final letter in the final word was L, the second group must start by repeatedly saying the sound of that letter, i.e. “*lala*”).

An inscription published by Harding (HCH 79, see fig. 3C) depicts two figures, one dancing and one playing what appears to be a double flute. It is clear that the woman is playing the double flute. Next to the drawing is a Safaitic inscription that includes the word *zmrt*, which derives from *zamara* “to play on the flute” (Lane 1251b). In this inscription, *zmrt* could be interpreted as a verb, the inference being that the woman or slave girl is playing music for the other figure. On the other hand, al-Jallad has proposed that the *h-* in *h-dmyt zmrt* is a presentative particle. He would then translate “behold, a drawing of a flute player”. Alternatively, he suggests that *dmyt* is a first person singular verb of the suffix conjugation meaning “behold, I have drawn a flute player”. In both cases, the expression would so far be unique (see al-Jallad commentary of HCH 79 in OCIANA).

The word *zmr* occurs in C 1104 (fig. 3D). Since the drawing there clearly shows a woman, one might have expected *zmrt*, the feminine form of the verb, as in HCH 79, and it is possible that the *t* was omitted by the copyist. However, if *zmr* is correct, it could be related to Classical Arabic *zawmar* “playing”, “a player” (Lane 1251a). In Arabic, the root specifically concerns flute playing, as can be seen in the drawing next to HCH 79. However, in C 1104 the woman has no instrument.

In *Lisān al-‘Arab* we find the expression *‘imra’at^{um} zāmirat^{um}*, meaning the woman who plays music “piped through reeds” (Ibn Manẓūr: 327). The nature of

pastoral communities required lightweight instruments that were easily transportable, especially the instruments that were used by shepherds. Of the five main instruments depicted in Safaitic drawings, three are wind instruments. The first could be the double pipe, called the *yargul* (fig. 5A) which is generally used by Jordanian and Palestinian peoples and consists of two tubes, one shorter than the other. The second could be the *majwiz* or *maqrūn* (fig. 5B), two pipes of equal length tied together.⁴ The third wind instrument, called the *šabbābah*, is a single pipe with seven holes. All three wind instruments are traditionally made from reeds though today some are made of metal, plastic and other materials.

Conclusion

Scenes of musical entertainment occur in a number of Safaitic rock drawings. There is nothing to suggest that these scenes represent anything other than entertainment and there is no evidence at all that they had a religious significance (see HCH 79; C 2839-2840; HSD 1-5). The majority show the double pipe known today as the *majwiz* or *maqrūn* which consists of two pipes of equal length bound together (fig. 5B) but in some cases they might be what is known today as the *yargul* which consists of two pipes of unequal length bound together (fig. 5A, see Ababneh 2005: 258 and MSSH 12). There is no evidence in these drawings for the use of the double *aulos* in which the pipes diverge forming an inverted V. In those cases where the gender of the player can be discerned, only women seem to be playing the pipes (see Landels 1999: 24–30). The other popular instrument in these scenes is the lyre, which seems to be played mostly, if not entirely, by women (see HSD 1–5). Small drums, like the modern *daf*, also occur in some scenes, as well as what may be castanets or small bells. These seem to be played by men. There are finally scenes in which those not playing instruments are clapping and/or dancing.

⁴ Each word comes from a different dialect but they describe the same instrument. The first, *majwiz*, comes from *zawj*, meaning “two together”. *Maqrūn* means “to tie” together.

Given that so many Safaitic inscriptions describe the unhappiness and insecurity of their authors, it is good to see that they were also able to enjoy themselves and were willing to record it.

Sigla

C. Ryckmans 1950–51.

HCH. Harding 1953.

HSD. Harding 1969.

OCIANA. The Online Corpus of the Inscriptions of Ancient North Arabia project at the Khalili Research Centre, University of Oxford. Accessed September 5, 2016

<http://krc.orient.ox.ac.uk/ociana/index.php>

KhBG. Al-Khraysheh 2002.

MSSH. Al-Maʿānī 1999.

WH. Winnett and Harding 1978.

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A



B

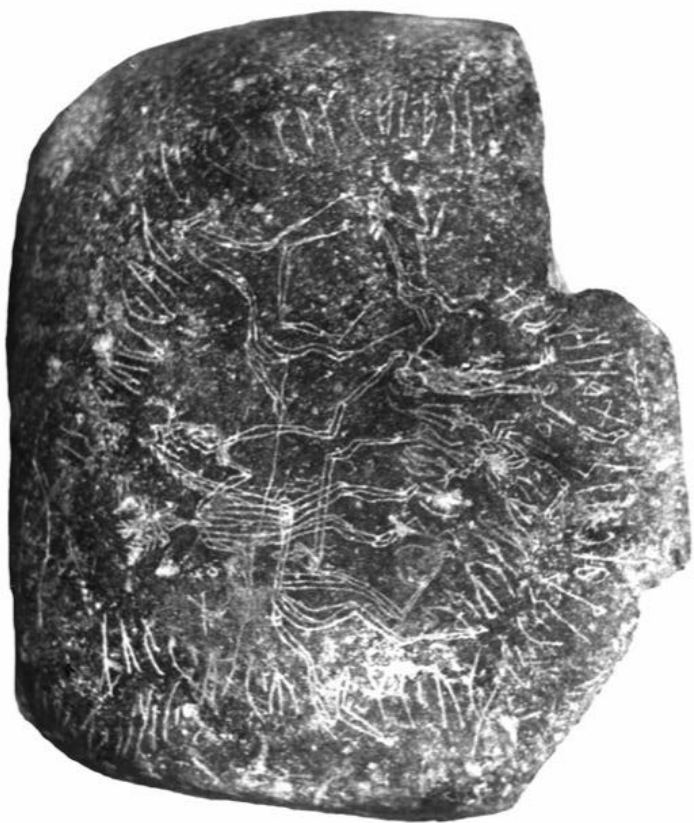


C



D

A



B



