



# Sacred Images of Metaphysical World – Perspective of Prehistoric Religion in Arabia

by Majeed Khan\*

## ABSTRACT

*The Northern area of the Arabian Peninsula, has always been a land of intelligence and philosophical creativity. From this region comes the creation of art, religion, magic, science and medicine. Here emerged the monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam.*

*Several images, representing deities and gods, have been found on the rocks and caves. They belong to metaphysical world and are early steps of the origin of religions.*

*The attempts of this paper is to shed light on the prehistoric religion and beliefs in the Arabian Peninsula through the testimony of rock art.*

## RIASSUNTO

*La parte settentrionale della Penisola Arabica è da sempre terra di creatività intellettuale e filosofica. In questa regione ebbero origine l'arte, la religione, la magia, la scienza e la medicina. Qui nacquero religioni monoteistiche, l'Ebraismo, il Cristianesimo e l'Islam.*

*Numerose immagini, raffiguranti divinità e dei, sono state trovate su rocce e nelle grotte. Esse appartengono ad un mondo metafisico e sono antiche manifestazioni religiose.*

*In questo articolo si cerca di far luce sulla religione e sulle credenze preistoriche testimoniate dall'arte rupestre della Penisola Arabica.*

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Arabia – the land of cradle of civilizations, the land of religions from where emerged Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the center of worlds' geo-politics, has always been a land of wisdom and philosophical creativity. From the origin of writing to the erection of mysterious pyramids, the creation of art and religions to the creation of magic, science and medicines all come from the land of Arabia.

On the rocks, hills and caves of Saudi Arabia various images of apparently metaphysical world are located. Do they represent prehistoric religion and belief? Are these images represented the first step towards the creation of religions and whether these figures are those of deities and gods is the main subject of this paper.

A number of human like figures are located from various prehistoric rock art sites in Saudi Arabia. These figures though contain basic human like physical features, cannot be treated as human representations because some of their traits and canons are abstract, strange and imaginative. From these images we may assume that the prehistoric artist did not mean to portray real human beings but his creation was probably based on abstract religious ideologies and mythological beliefs.

Fig.1 represents a unique example of what apparently seems to be a deity of rain, lightning and thunderstorm. It is depicted in double perspective, with face in profile, and the upright torso and lower body in plan as seen from front. The face is ambiguous with a beak like nose, and a prominent eye is marked as a small circular dot on the beak. The shoulders are wide and muscular while the arms are thin and linear. The right arm is shown in full, and is placed in a horizontal position resting on the waist, while the left arm is stretched forward. Small thin wavy lines are depicted near the fingers of the stretched arm as rays, associated with a star-like motif. It gives the impression as if the rays are radiating from the fingers and the star.

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\* Majeed Khan  
majeedkhan42@hotmail.com



It is the earliest example of what appears to be the representation of a deity or god located at the Neolithic site of Jubbah, northern Saudi Arabia.

Religious symbolism is more prominent in Arabian rock art where hundreds of religious icons of deities and gods are located particularly in the northern and southern parts of the country. Fig.2 is an excellent example of an open air temple located at Tabuk, northwestern region. Obviously, in the desert, where sand and wind storm are so common, it would have been difficult to built temples. For the nomads who do not stay at one place for long time the best way was to create open air temples such as shown in fig.2.

Idoliform representations of deities and gods are commonly located in almost all parts of Saudi Arabia. Figure 3, represents the image of a deity or god, superimposed on an ibex and is associated with an ancient Arabian inscription written in *Musnad al Janubi*, a pre-Arabic script.

At the edge of Al-Tuwaiq mountain range, overlooking the ruins of the ancient town of al-Faw, this spectacular panel of a large sized human like figure and several ancient Arabian inscriptions is prominently visible from a long distance (fig.4). Identical figures are found on several sites in the southern region of the country. Some archaeologists believe that it is the portrait of a god "*Khal*" who was worshipped in pre-Islamic times. Dated c.3,000 - 2,500 years before present. The name of god *kahl* is engraved besides the figure and is written in Musnad al Janubi script.

Another example of idol and bull composition can be seen in fig.5. It is located in northwestern Arabia.

Saudi Arabia is enriched with a variety of human and animal petroglyphs in addition to geometric and non-representational motifs. The culture in which above religious icons were created reflects a quite significant cognitive system in which all the social groups, tribe or clans, appear to have share a common cosmology in which s single animal species, *the cattle*, was particularly and overwhelmingly depicted and worshipped.

The deities were both male and female, thus images of goddesses are also found on several locations, but female figures are extremely rare in northern region while these are overwhelmingly depicted in the south of the country. Almost al the deities in the north are male, which is quite contrary to the rock art of the southern Arabia, in which female deities considerably outnumber the males. In Najran and other parts of southern Arabia, on almost each rock art site petroglyphs of female representations are located. These are usually shown with half raised arms, wide buttocks, triangular torso, narrow waist and long neck. The hairs are both short and long, some time lying on shoulders and some times reaching the waist. Almost all such female figures are identical in their physical traits and style. Among the local people these are known as the figures of "*Alia*", a popular pre-Islamic queen and goddess well known in southern Arabia and northern Yemen. It may be assumed that the location of a group of identical mythical images on a single rock was a result of a long tradition and that each image was depicted separately on different occasions.

It is obvious that the rocks and the place where these idoliform representations and images of goddesses were depicted should have been sacred. We can imagine that on these places in the desert, in front of these images, thousand of years ago, ritual ceremonies were performed. The icons of deities and gods created by their ancestors were approached with rituals at the same time new images being executed on the same rocks. The rocks, the platform in front of them, and the sacred images are still at the same place and in almost the same state of preservation as were left by the pristine Bedouins of Arabia hundred and thousands of years ago.

The open air temples in the deserts of Arabia were certainly created before the walled temples of the later settled communities. It is interesting that, instead of a tradition of superimpositions and overlapping, the images of deities and gods remained untouched and undisturbed. It appears as if these images were equally respected by the people of even later periods although religious ideologies should have been changed in the long course of time, which is apparent from the change in the form and shape of idoliform representation of later periods (Khan 1987).

There is no doubt that some of the most significant advances in religious development took place in prehistory. The abstract images or "symbolism" in religious art is the earliest record of Bedouin conception of spiritual and mythological beliefs. Although we cannot interpret these images due to total absence of oral or otherwise tradition, and that the prehistoric religions ceased in the Arabian Peninsula with the advent of Islam about 1,500 years ago. However, the visible evidence suggests that offering and perhaps sacrifices were made, presumably in association with certain rituals and other religious ceremonies in front of the rocks on which are depicted sacred images of unknown deities and gods.

In each cultural period from Neolithic onward a change in form, shape, traits, schematization and abstraction in the idol figures can be observed. Thus in the Neolithic, the religious anthropomorphic representations are depicted with naturalistic human like bodies, stick or linear arms and bird like or ambiguous faces. In the Chalcolithic, the faces are naturalistic showing eyes, nose, mouth etc but the bodies are absolutely abstract with no resemblance to human traits. While in the Bronze/ early Iran Age the idols are absolutely abstract. This change in the schematization and abstraction of idoliform representations in each

cultural period could possibly be the result of change in social, cultural and religious ideologies and beliefs. In other words, it is the cultural, social and ideological context which gives the meaning and the theme to an idoliform representation. It may also be said, that the artist played an important role in the origin, development and propagation of religious ideologies in the prehistoric societies.

Thus, we find different religious and mythological ideologies in different archaeological or cultural periods of Arabian Peninsula. Development of the idea of the supernatural being is a philosophical and intellectual development of human mind which ultimately led the prehistoric people towards the understanding and origin of religions. Every tribe and people in the world seems to have developed their own ideas and beliefs about a metaphysical world where a supreme power controls the life and death of living beings. The manifestation of ancient Arabs' religious expressions can be traced and understood through the sacred images they left on the rocks. However, from the available evidence it is clear that there was in Arabian prehistory a society with well developed and well organized religious ideologies. Rock art was therefore, a social and religious phenomenon and not a pastime leisure individual activity only.

#### **CAPTION OF ILLUSTRATIONS**

*Fig.1 Representation of the deity of rain, lightning and Thunder storm.*

*Fig.2, Images of deities and ox figures, an open air temple in the desert, northwest of Saudi Arabia.*

*Fig. 3 Icon of a god, located at Bisha, southern Arabia.*

*Fig.4 Icon of god Khl, near Najran, southern Saudi Arabia.*

*Fig.5 Idols and bulls were worshipped in Pre-Islamic Arabia.*

*Fig. 6,7. Images of so called Alia, the goddess of love and fertility are located in large number in Najran, southern region of Saudi Arabia.*

*Figures 8 and 9. Image of goddess located on top of this hill near Bisha, southern Arabia*

*Figure 10. Moon goddess located at Najran, southern Arabia. Various phases of moon are depicted on the body in addition to a large moon image over the left hand. Bedouin or Thamudic inscriptions are later additions. Date unknown.*



fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4



fig. 5



fig. 6



fig. 7

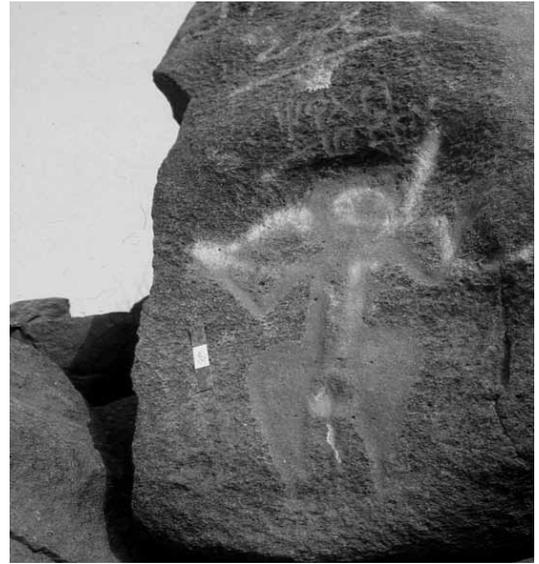


fig. 8



fig. 9

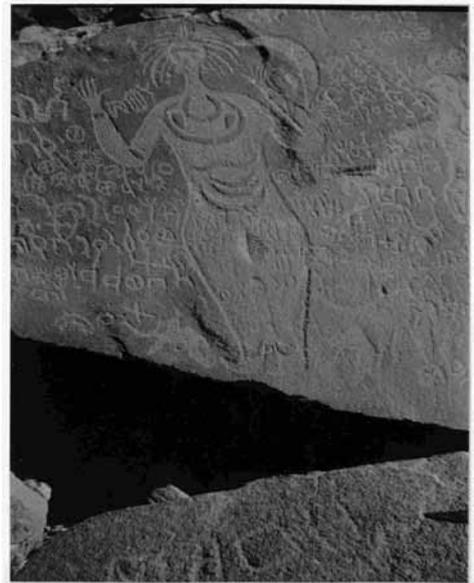


fig. 10

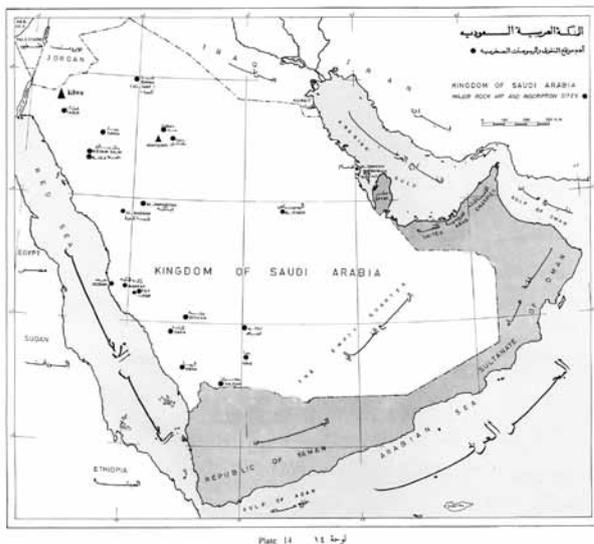


fig. 11



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