

Once again I return to Luxor after reluctantly leaving the Eastern Desert far behind and now find myself staring longingly at my retreating bath water as it gurgles its way through the complexities of the Egotel's unique plumbing system. In its wake there is a miniature wadi map of wet sand running the entire length to the plug hole. I am tempted to reach for my GPS, tape measure and compass to record its exact position, but alas I must face reality, and survive to the following spring.

# Prejudice and Pride in the Eastern Desert

Some thoughts and observations by Mike Shepherd



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I have been privileged now to be part of the EDS team on many occasions. Those who have shared in this work will understand the true nature of comments like 'life changing', for no matter how enthusiastically or graphically we try and relate this experience to others, it really does only work first hand. They may nod politely at the photographs of four-wheel drives cutting white tracks into the thin black desert crust or show interest when you tell them you were driving on a track that has been wearing down and widening since pharaonic times, but their pulses aren't racing, the hairs on the backs of their necks are still flat, and, their feet are very firmly on the ground.

For me the desert offers a clean start, it strips away all the unwanted clutter of our 21st century lives (wet wipes perhaps the exception); each time I return I vow to learn from this lesson, to simplify my life.

As soon as we leave the tarmac road and plunge down on to the track with our bums leaving the seats up to thirty times a minute, the sense of exhilaration and freedom shows on every face.



*The delights of 'The Desert Breakfast'*



Air conditioning is as popular as a scorpion in the shorts, and the windows are slid open in rapid succession. Each breath of desert air says, welcome home, welcome home.

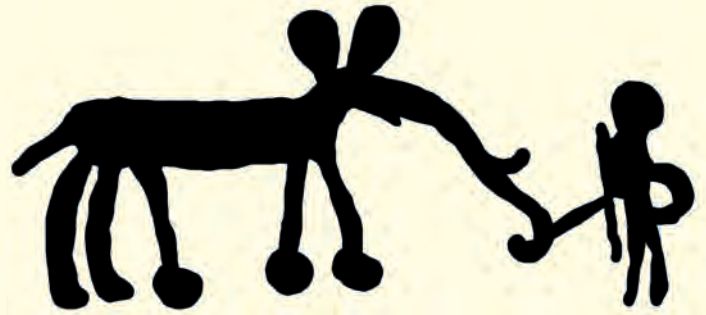
For our accompanying antiquities inspector, however, this is not the case. Last year it was exactly the same. Plucked from a comfortable desk job, the bosom of his family, and told to live in a tent for a week in the company of mad foreigners, and all during Ramadan, it is hardly surprising that our inspector sat wedged and miserable behind his firmly closed window and drawn curtain. This year's model is certainly no exception: the expression is the same, and with his polished shoes and neatly creased trousers our hearts go out to him.

I turn to him, and smiling through the thickening dust, assure him that he will love it, really love it. He is not convinced but manages a tight smile. I smile again, returning my gaze to the breathtaking landscape ahead, feeling very smug — the reason being that I know he will come to love it.

With the passing of each magical star-rich night and the coming of each pink-yellow dawn painting our twenty metre shadows across the wadi floor, he will love it.

Standing in the very spot that a cattle herder did 4,000 years ago to proudly peck into the rock the image of his favourite cow, he will love it.

And when I traced the lines and brought alive before him this elephant in Wadi Dunqash, I knew by his expression that he



felt the same sense of wonder, and his mind too was racing back in time to conjure up a very different landscape for this creature to roam in.

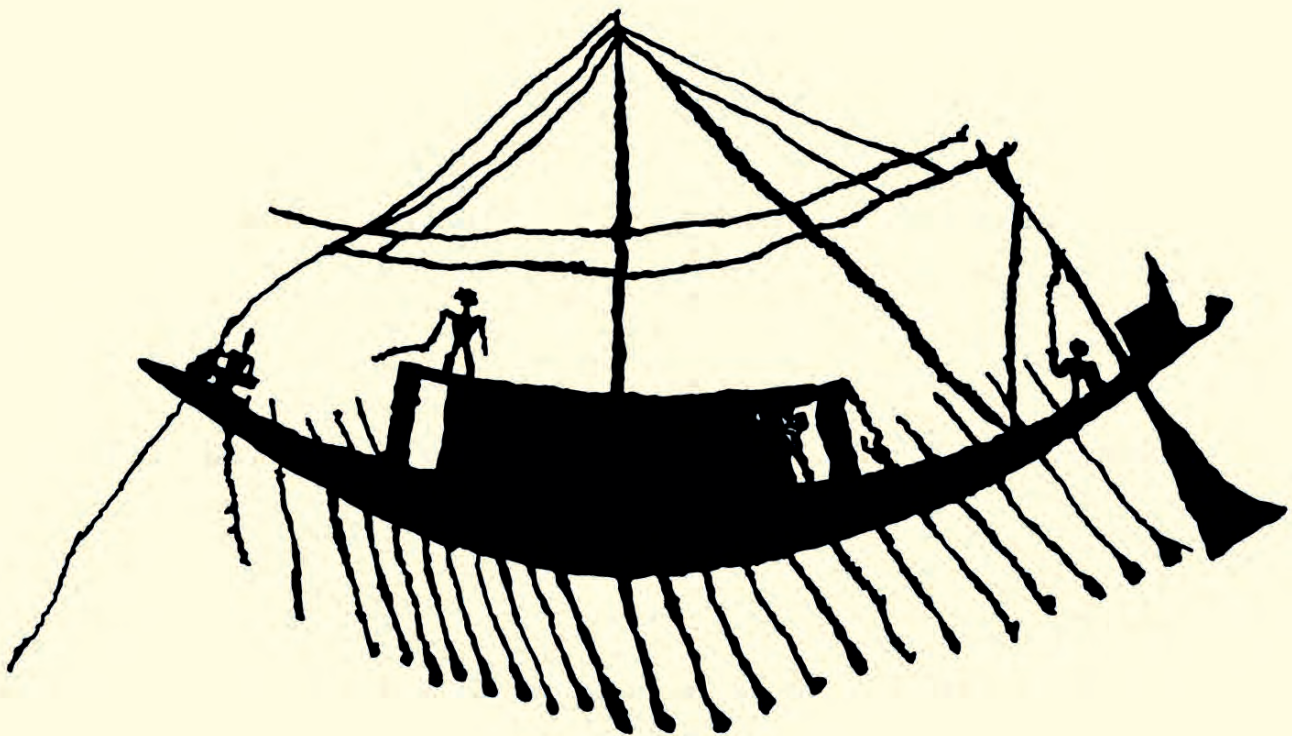
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So, when the time comes to leave the desert and the rough track, when the permanent accompaniment of pinging and popping of rocks on tyres goes silent on the tarmac, he will now share our sense of loss, and understand a little of why we return again and again to subject ourselves to a week of 5 am alarm calls, 5km walks in the midday sun, scrambling down crumbling rocks to feast on bread as hard as the mountain itself. When the first mobile phone breaks the silence he too will know it is all over, and he may even shed a small tear.

I may be shot down here but I think it fair to say that in the early days (it has now changed) the prime objective of the EDS was to record 'boats'. When an average site was discovered the dialogue went along these lines; "Yes, not much here, an ibex, lots of ibex. An ostrich. Oh! and a small hunting scene. Wait. There's a boat! Yes, there's a boat! And other, with a raised-arm figure and palm fronds. Start recording".



Of course it is always wonderful to find a boat. On this trip I was scanning a cliff wall in Wadi Midrik with my binoculars when both lenses filled with this magnificent craft as it sailed into view.



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For a split second I was looking out to sea, the yellow rock was blue sky and I fancied I could hear the crew shouting orders to one another. Then the reality dawned. My heart raced and I developed sea legs, the eternal question followed: What is a two-meter-long rendering of such a ship doing 20 metres up a wadi wall?

Endless smouldering acacia embers and empty single-malt bottles bear witness to previous evening's camp fire debates of that very question. I have never felt intelligent or learned enough amidst my many highly qualified travelling companions to express an opinion.

But a valid point has since been put to me, that my first hand experiences make any comments and observations I have, relevant, even if my academic understanding is at times slight, and at most, non-existent. Emboldened by this, I now lower my head gently on the block.

Firstly, I feel that one of the greatest hazards we have today in evaluating the rock art, is our intellect. It's difficult enough to appraise work from another culture, but go back 6,000 years, and with our cluttered modern minds full of stereotyped images, we stand very little chance of being open minded enough to enter the true mind of the prehistoric artist. If we see the image on the right for instance, 99.9% of us will scan our mental data bases and come up with 'tree'. For prehistoric man, however, it could represent an abstract feeling or emotion.



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We all need to stand back from our conventional ideas, and be as lateral as possible in our thinking if we are to solve the 'rock-art riddle'.

It is certainly dangerous when in attempting to date rock art, some experts resort to words like; 'absolute proof' when making comparisons between the rock-art styles, and designs found on pottery; in some cases, from a single item.

I would prefer the expression; 'this is a strong possibility,' especially as we know from the abundance of rock art we have found to date, that there are undoubtedly thousands more drawings out there still to be recorded, any one of which could turn present theories upside down.

Yes, we have to form these theories as we go in order to progress our understanding, but these must remain open, to allow not only for fresh thinking to develop, but also the full acceptance of future discoveries that do not fit the given pattern. If not, we are in danger of distorting the truth or being selective with the facts, merely to save face, or avoiding having to admit that perhaps we were wrong.





If a drawing of a raised-arm figure on a rock in the desert has strong similarities to one on a pot from a distant tomb, as in the Nagada I comparisons, does that really, conclusively, put them in the same time horizon? Is there not the remotest possibility that raised-arm figures were already in the desert long before the Nagada people passed through, taking their inspiration from them?

When it comes to the significance and uses of the boats, there is a tendency to generalise when referring to their ability to negotiate the wadis, large and small are grouped together. Some of the larger ones (page 5) would have found it difficult, if not impossible, but there are many others that could. In wadi Midrik we saw standing water and much vegetation. Many, very old water courses were evident, and even today flash flooding is a real threat. 6,000 years ago it was much wetter, so could the early, smaller boats we see have been a type of canoe, capable of being carried from wadi to wadi during the rainy season? After all, we have noted this drawing of one being carried upside down on a man's head.

*Illustration from memory.  
Awaiting recording*



Another observation about all boats, and I think I am right in saying this, that so far, we have not seen a single representation of what could pass for a boat in water; not even a hint of a child-like wavy line. And, on the subject of what is missing from the art so far; where are the pictures of their homes? If, as has been suggested, the desert was then a savannah, and their annual escape from the Nile floods for several months, wouldn't they, along with the other Nilotic images attributed to them, have included some visual representation of their Nile homes?



Another question. Why do we assume that the wadis were the only routes? Is it because we are all so focused on looking in wadis for the art, that we forget, wadi walls aren't always mountain sides, but often plateau cliff faces? These when climbed can reveal vast plains on their summits, in effect, placing us in holes. So when we ask the question;

### “Why did they go right up there to draw?”

Maybe, they didn't, maybe they came down a little! There would have been life on the top levels as well as below in the valleys.

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This could explain the 'upside down' boat we see here. A suggestion at

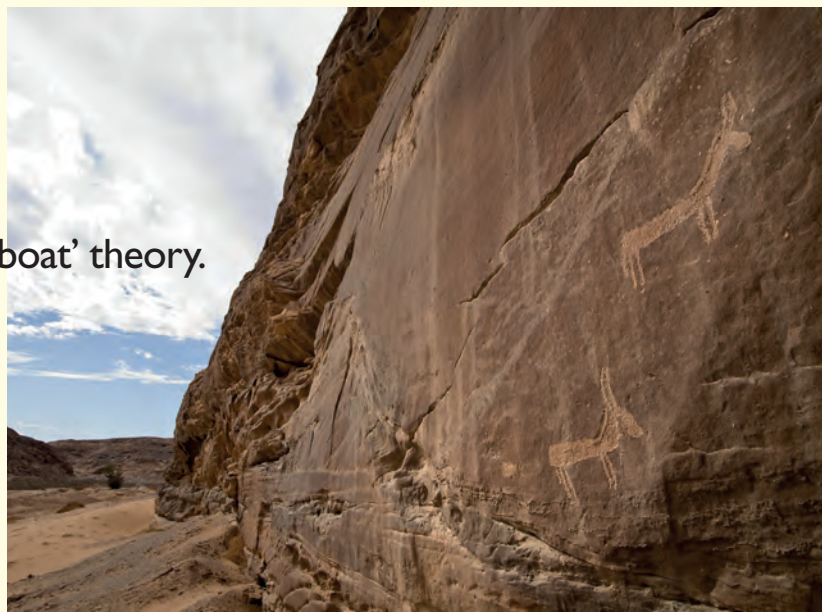
the time that it was an early form of traffic sign, warning that the river below was too dangerous, was dismissed because of its height above the wadi floor; on the cliff top. But if we are already at the top with our boat or canoe, then we have been cleverly warned; not to launch from here! The massive boulders, on the now dry wadi floor, would have made it a very dangerous stretch of river.

Or is there a connection with a battle? Many Egyptian drawings of fighting scenes show the defeated or dead enemy, 'upside' down in front of the, 'right way up' hero. I like this notion, but would prefer to see two different boat styles, head on, instead of an identical pair travelling in the same direction.

This would have made a more likely scenario.

**Still, it doesn't rule out the 'dead boat' theory.**

Does it?







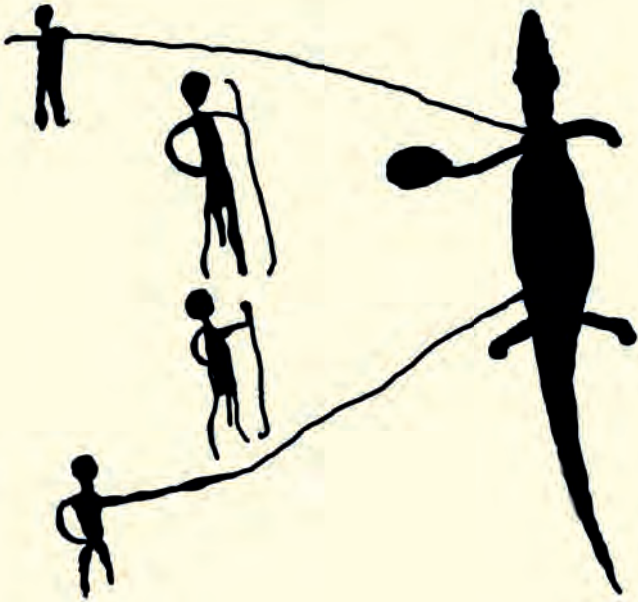
One thing is very clear, however, in our search for the artists and their motives, we must not lose sight of the simple beauty and truth found in much of their work. Tracey, one of our new recruits, cut through all the GPS, tape measure and recording book clutter, with

this simple statement when she was recording this cow at a site, again in Midrik, largely made up of cattle:

**“The owner of these cows must have really loved his animals to put in such fine detail, look at the hooves and the exaggerated horns.”**

I agree with her. Can we then take it a stage further, and say that something is drawn beautifully or crudely not simply because of ability, but because of the association with the object itself? Could this partly account for the many styles of art found in the desert; that of owners (locals) and observers (passers by)?

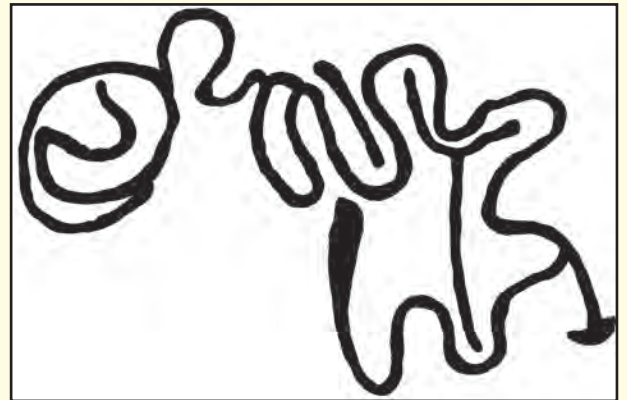
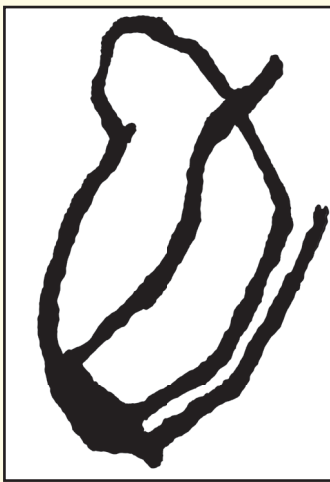
No great academic breakthroughs here, I simply want you to consider the basic human involvement with these drawings; to know how it feels to walk a wadi, getting into the minds of these early peoples, and sensing where they may have left their mark; a shady resting place, a cliff overhang for a night's shelter, a settlement on a high plateau. To thrill at being right, and finding art in these places. To be humbled when you realise you may be the first in 6,000 years to view it.



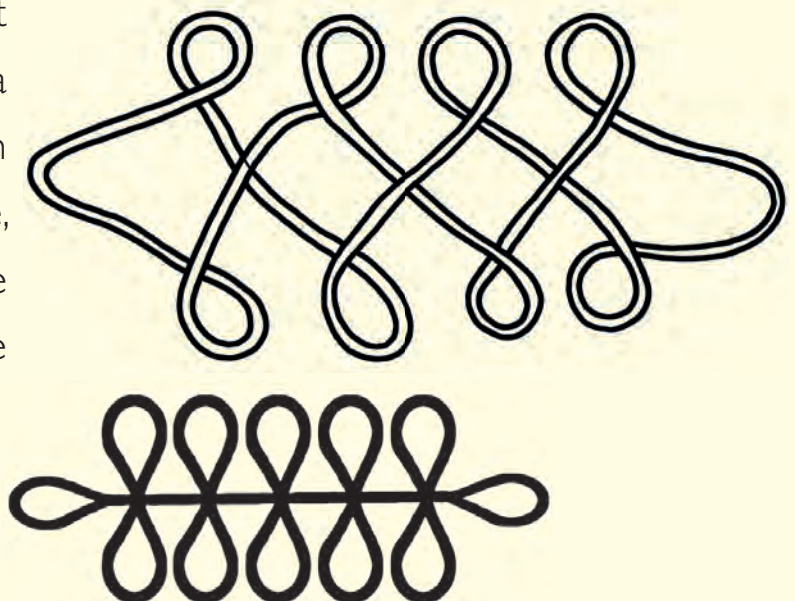
I mentioned earlier the gradual change in the boat-driven objectives of the EDS. Many of us now feel as privileged to record a simple hunting scene, or as in this picture from Wadi Abu Hijlij, two figures restraining a crocodile, as we do a 20-man-crew boat.

I was particularly pleased on this trip to see a variety of symbols, and as yet unexplained motifs.

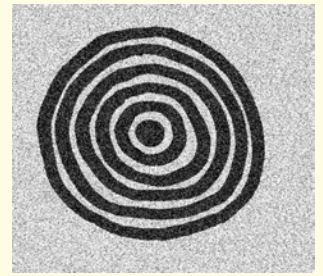
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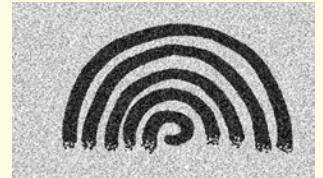
What is the significance for instance of this skillfully pecked design below (hard enough to draw accurately on paper) measuring 52 cm on an isolated bolder top? Is it just a pretty pattern drawn on a lazy, peaceful, hot afternoon whilst watching cattle graze, or is it a rendering of a cattle hobble? Could it even have been the original inspiration for the zA hieroglyph?



There were symbols found in Wadi Abu Hijlij, that at first glance were logged as spirals and concentric circles. This type of design is believed to be one of the oldest forms of rock art, and their very weathered and subtle appearance helped to bear this out.



A closer inspection to produce an acetate tracing, however, showed them in this instance, to possibly be a little more

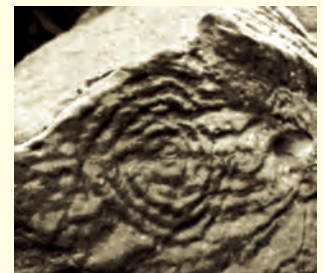


complex. I say possibly, as they were very indistinct on the rock surface, and the natural 'design' weathering in the rock itself, made it difficult to be 100% certain. But I feel sufficiently convinced to present the more complex versions shown on the left, as there were three separate



locations, on three separate rocks, where this confusion occurred. With this in mind I should very much like to re-examine the motif on the right, found on

an earlier desert survey, in Wadi Umm Salam.



Perhaps even more remarkable is the stone below, found not 20 miles from my home in Cumbria in 1984. It is

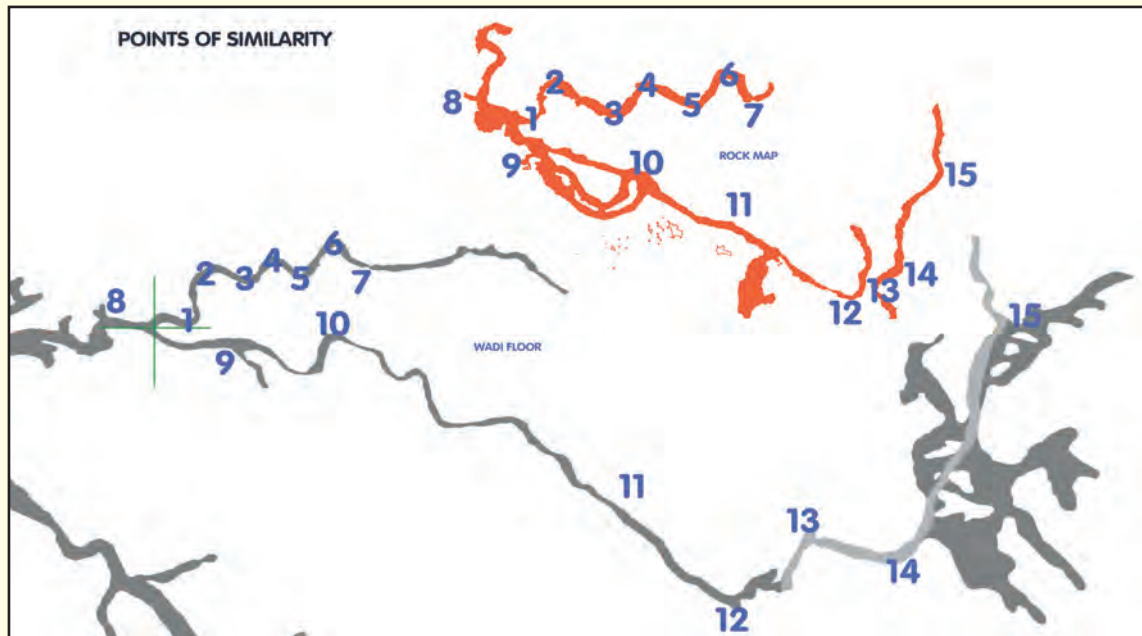
believed to be a possible inclusion in a burial structure forming part of a Cist. Many similar single rocks and standing stones from the UK bear this 'cup and ring' design, some as old as 6,000 years. What then is the



common link or inspiration for these designs found so far apart? Today we take circles very much for granted, we are surrounded by them in countless man-made objects, but early man had no such devices, all his circles

came from nature; the human eye, plants, fruit, water rings, rainbows and the sun and moon. Is the connection with one of these?

There were also occurrences of lines and squiggles that we now tend to examine more closely than on previous surveys, as in several cases, these have since been shown to be possible 'maps' of the wadi itself. I've always felt that the process of pecking a design into rock, is far too laborious to



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waste time doodling random lines over its surface, sometimes over 3 metres, without there being a meaning or purpose. In the case of the example above, recorded two years ago in Wadi Umm Hajalij, on a flat boulder at the wadi junction, I made these comparisons between the rock art and a modern wadi map. Surely, too many similarities just be a meandering doodle, especially when you take into account the perfect location and vantage point the rock is in.

This years 'map' candidate from Wadi Midrik is going to be a tougher puzzle all together. As you can see from the drawing over, it is very complex, taking in many twists and turns. The first problem is scale. Does it represent a large area with other wadis or is it a single location? Sitting behind it's flat rock canvas some 25 metres up the cliff, and looking out at the 180° panorama stretching into the hazy, hot horizon, it has all the hallmarks of a 'you are here' map.

We also found a further 5 metres above it on the summit plateau, the remains of a settlement with a magnificent 360° vista.

In other words, a perfect spot for a map or area guide. The next question is, that if it is not a map, then what does it represent? Perhaps you have to really have sat there with the warm-wadi-breeze playing with the pages of your record book, and with only the occasional hum of a passing fly to distract you, to be as convinced as I am, that there is no other answer.

It's a map. You are here!



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Even more exciting for me, striking evidence of design for its own sake. Several grinding holes approximately 40 cm in length were found cut into a boulder top (Abu Hijlij). Many of them had a simply pecked boarder framing the edges, and the drawing on the left clearly suggests, to my mind, animal motifs deliberately placed in order to decorate the edges. And,

what were they grinding? Could it have been pigment for face and body paint, applied before hunting, or some other ritual? There was a natural bath sized depression in the adjacent rock lined with sediment from a previous rainfall; was this a designated washing and make-up area?

I take great pleasure in witnessing a sense of humour. It makes us realise that even 5,000 years ago, people had similar thoughts to us now. There could be 2,000 years between the rider appearing on this donkey, and the time it was originally drawn. I find it utterly charming.



Friends repeatedly ask why I want to keep going back to the desert, sometimes to the same wadis. I hope this article goes some way in answering that question. I know I am privileged in seeing this art first hand, and, I have to confess, a little proud that as a complete amateur I am contributing to its future.

I am also passionate about stale bread, grit in toothpaste, being constantly woken at night by a symphony of zips, other people's snoring, and, best of all, not washing for a whole week.

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