OpenEdition Journals

SEARCH All OpenEdition

Syria

Archéologie, art et histoire

Book reviews
2026

Ch. J. ROBIN *et al.*, *Une halte dans la steppe. Les gravures rupestres de ʿĀn Jamal près de Ḥimà (région de Najrān, Arabie saoudite) / A Stopover in the Steppe. The Rock Carvings of ʿĀn Jamal near Ḥimà (Region of Najrān, Saudi Arabia)*

IRENE ROSSI

https://doi.org/10.4000/15rau

Bibliographical reference

Ch. J. ROBIN, J. SCHIETTECATTE, S. FĀYIZ AL-SAʿĪD, M. ARBACH, G. CHARLOUX, H. DRIDI, *Une halte dans la steppe. Les gravures rupestres de ʿĀn Jamal près de Ḥimà (région de Najrān, Arabie saoudite) / A Stopover in the Steppe. The Rock Carvings of ʿĀn Jamal near Ḥimà (Region of Najrān, Saudi Arabia)*, Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres / Peeters, Paris / Louvain, 2022, 472 p., ISBN: 978-2-87754-688-1.

Full text

1 In 2007, the French-Saudi Archaeological Expedition to Najrān (MAFSN) started exploring the vast region extending for approximately 100 sq. km to the north and east of Ḥimā—a locality on the edge of the desert in southwestern Saudi Arabia. Now inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the Ḥimā area in antiquity was the passageway for incense originating in Southern Arabia: from Ḥimā, renowned for its wells, the caravans took the northern route towards the Levant and Egypt, or headed towards the Gulf via Qaryat al-Fāw. This area, characterized by the environmental

features of a steppe, comprises a large group of mountains whose rock façades are engraved with clusters of drawings and inscriptions.

2 The present book, published under the auspices of the *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres*, is the first, praiseworthy volume dedicated to the results of the MAFSN's surveys in the area. It focuses on the site of ʿĀn Jamal, a rocky outcrop located a few kilometers east of the Ḥimā wells, where MAFSN expeditions between 2007 and 2010 recorded the region's most extraordinary concentration of carvings.

3 The ʿĀn Jamal corpus, comprising over 750 texts and drawings, is edited in full in the *Rock-art catalogue* section of the book (p. 149-426), available in English. The material is grouped by the eight areas of the site (designated A to H) whose location is shown on fig. 62. The edition of each record—identified by a "JML" siglum—includes the transliteration of the texts in Latin characters and a remarks section where descriptions and textual commentary are included. From a methodological point of view, the authors addressed the well-known challenge of identifying carving units (what was made by a single carver in one session), reasonably opting to treat uncertain connections of adjacent carvings as separate records (p. 71-73). The coordinates of each cluster of engravings—GPS-located—are provided, allowing for absolute and relative positioning.

4 An extensive visual documentation, consisting of photographs and facsimiles integrated alongside the editions of the carvings, allows readers to conduct their own autoptic analysis. As the sizes of carvings can vary greatly and are often difficult to perceive in photographs, most useful is the notation of the dimensions of each carving, as well as the inclusion of a scale in many figures.

5 Particularly appreciated is the extensive *Introduction* of the book, providing the geographical and historical context of the site and offering a comprehensive presentation and discussion of the textual and figurative rock engravings. It is given in both French (p. 9-57) and English (p. 59-106), followed by a figurative (p. 107-139) and bibliographic apparatus (p. 141-148).

6 A detailed history of investigations of the site opens the *Introduction* (p. 61-70).[1] Special attention is paid to the Philby-Ryckmans-Lippens ("PRL") expedition of 1951-1952, which was crucial for the study of the site, especially for its focus on inscriptions. While Arabic texts and petroglyphs were published,[2] a volume with the manual copies of the pre-Islamic texts was prepared but never printed. Interestingly, the present book includes images from that unpublished work along with excerpts of an unfinished manuscript which was intended to accompany it and of the expedition diary by J. Ryckmans (figs. 44-61). In addition, between the *Rock-art catalogue* and the *Index*, a *Table of Acronym Concordance* (p. 427-432) matches the inscriptions' JML and PRL sigla.

7 The core of the *Introduction* is the discussion of the ʿĀn Jamal corpus of carvings recorded by the MAFSN, consisting of 566 texts and 187 figurative drawings.

8 The study of the figurative drawings, often referred to as "petroglyphs" in the book, primarily focuses on identifying the themes of the figures (cf. also the "Thematic index of images" part of the final *Index* section, p. 463-468), while not neglecting observations on carving techniques and methods of depiction (p. 73-74, 81-87). The authors refer to current knowledge on the introduction, domestication, and extinction of animal species in the region to propose an absolute chronological range for their representations at ʿĀn Jamal (p. 96-98), while direct analytical dating methods have been shown to provide imprecise and even mistaken results (p. 88-89).

9 Though dromedaries and other animals appear (e.g., ibexes, bovines, ostriches), the most depicted figure at ʿĀn Jamal is the mounted horse. The authors suggest that images of horses date to a period after the late 1st millennium BCE; those shown in the "flying gallop" style are typically dated to Islamic times. So are the human figures with raised arms as well, confirming J. Ryckmans's hypothesis discarding an earlier dating based on the Islamic prohibition against imagery.[3] On the other hand, representations of people with flexed knees, weapons, and distinctive hairstyles

should predate the introduction of writing in the area.

10 The most significant contribution of this volume to the research on Ancient Arabia is the study of the epigraphic repertoire of ʿĀn Jamal, which is made of 342 Ancient South Arabian texts (ASA, including 3 monograms), 193 Ḥimāʾite Thamūdic texts, and 31 Arabic texts dating to the Islamic period. This corpus is discussed in the context of the textual landscape of the wider Ḥimā region (p. 74-78). Emphasis is deservedly given to the decipherment and definition of the Ḥimāʾite Thamūdic script (previously called Southern Thamūdic or Thamūdic F) which are closely tied to the activities of the MAFSN at Ḥimā, as seen in targeted articles published by Ch. J. Robin, M. Gorea and A. Prioletta in the last decade.[4] This script shares several signs with ASA, though some have a different phonetic value (fig. 40).

11 The authors employed the criterion of classifying ʿĀn Jamal inscriptions featuring ASA characters as "ASA", and those featuring at least one diagnostic Thamūdic letter as "Thamūdic". The few inscriptions that display both ASA and Thamūdic diagnostic letters are classified as "mixed". Although the authors' stated intention not to multiply categories is understandable, introducing an additional category for texts which cannot be definitively attributed to either script would have been useful to the reader. Helpfully, the authors clearly explain the criterion adopted, underlining that the edition provides the interpretation that best fits the meaning or root, without detailing all possible decipherments (p. 77-78, 149-153).

12 Bearing this in mind, the reader can consciously approach the comparative study of ASA and Ḥimāʾite texts and the conclusions proposed in the book.

13 As regards the spatial and temporal distribution of the two corpora (p. 79-81), the authors observe that ASA texts are concentrated along trade routes, suggesting they were mainly left by people crossing the region, while Ḥimāʾite texts, more widespread, likely belonged to local populations.

14 Determining the absolute chronology of the texts is challenging. None of the ʿĀn Jamal text is dated. The hasty carving of most graffiti complicates palaeographical analysis, though certain well-crafted ASA texts show significant changes in letter shapes that occurred after the Christian Era (for a list of texts with relevant ASA paleographic features, as well as other linguistic, content and script features, see also the "Thematic index of texts" at the end of the book, p. 461-463). The use of Thamūdic was already established in the North by the sixth century BCE, and this likely applied to the South as well. Ḥimāʾite graffiti made by Abraha's troops at Murayghān demonstrate that this script was still in use around 552-553 CE. Overall, the evidence challenges previous theories of Ḥimāʾite texts predating ASA texts. After its earlier appearance at Ḥimā around 470 CE, the Arabic alphabet was quickly adopted with the transition to Islam in the South around 630-632 CE.

15 As regards the content (p. 98-100), most ASA and Ḥimāʾite texts of this corpus consist of person names, rarely including patronymics and lineage names. Theophoric names are paid special attention in the discussion as well as in the final "Lexical and onomastic index of the pre-Islamic texts" (p. 433-460), where theonyms are provided with references to related theophoric names (e.g., "*–wd*, See *ʿbdwd, Whbwd*", p. 457). Their comprehensive study leads to conclude that the same deities are attested in ASA and Ḥimāʾite texts (p. 100-103). Most of them are common Semitic or Arabian, often Central or North-Arabian, in some cases specifically local (as for Yaghūth), but they are not as predominantly Sabaean as one might expect given the presence of Sabaean aristocracy in Najrān. This supports the idea that both scripts were used by the same populations, more closely related to the tribes of Desert Arabia than to South Arabia. However, these conclusions should be considered in the light of the criterion expressed above as regards the ASA/Ḥimāʾite texts distinction. Additionally, it should be noted that many ASA theophoric names also refer to common Semitic or Arabian deities, especially during the 1st millennium BCE.

16 Lexicon is confined to a few verbs appearing in Thamūdic, and to nouns indicating

titles and offices which are typically ASA. The scarcity of lexical items limits linguistic analysis, even though some data are derived from the onomasticon (p. 103-104).

17 In summary, this book stands as an exemplary edition of a corpus of rock carvings of ancient Arabia, encompassing both epigraphic and iconographic repertoires, provided with thematic and words' indexes. It offers thorough contextualization and discussion in an exhaustive bilingual introduction, accompanied by an excellent figurative apparatus. The format and quality of the printed edition are also commendable.

18 The main challenge that readers may encounter is fully appreciating the specificities of the ʿĀn Jamal corpus in the *Introduction*, due to the extensive focus on the broader Ḥimā region, leaving the ʿĀn Jamal site often briefly mentioned or difficult to identify in various parts of the discussion. This can be attributed to the fact that the present volume is the first work on one of the region's sites investigated by the MAFSN, offering a comprehensive overview of the wider Ḥimā area and serving as an introduction to further publications.[5]

19 The present volume is expected to inspire future catalogues of graffiti and rock art from crucial sites across the Arabian Peninsula, thanks to the flourishing of survey projects in recent decades, with the common aim of reconstructing the dynamics of settlement and the movements of people along the ancient Arabian routes.

20 BIBLIOGRAPHIE

ĀL QURĀD & ROBIN 2025
M. ʿA. A. Āl Qurād & Chr. J. Robin, « The appropriation of land by King Abraha at Ḥimà in Saudi Arabia (NETEN. 5) », *Semitica et Classica* 18, p. 231-236 (https://doi.org/10.1484/J.SEC.5.152645).

ANATI 1968a
E. Anati, *Rock-art in Central Arabia. Vol. 1. The 'Oval-Headed' People of Arabia* (Expédition Philby-Ryckmans-Lippens en Arabie, Ire partie, Géographie et archéologie, tome 3), Louvain-la-Neuve, Université de Louvain, Institut orientaliste (Bibliothèque du Muséon 50/1).

ANATI 1968b
E. Anati, *Rock-art in Central Arabia. Vol. 2. Part One: Fat-tailed Sheep in Arabia, Part Two: The Realistic-Dynamic Style of Rock-Art in the Jebel Qara* (Expédition Philby-Ryckmans-Lippens en Arabie, Ire partie, Géographie et archéologie, tome 3), Louvain-la-Neuve, Université de Louvain, Institut orientaliste (Bibliothèque du Muséon 50/2).

ANATI 1972
E. Anati, *Rock-art in Central Arabia. Vol. 3. Corpus of the Rock Engravings, Parts I & II* (Expédition Philby-Ryckmans-Lippens en Arabie, Ire partie, Géographie et archéologie, tome 3), Louvain-la-Neuve, Université de Louvain (Publications de l'Institut orientaliste 4).

ANATI 1974
E. Anati, *Rock-art in Central Arabia. Vol. 4. Corpus of the Rock Engravings, Parts III & IV* (Expédition Philby-Ryckmans-Lippens en Arabie, Ire partie, Géographie et archéologie, tome 3), Louvain-la-Neuve, Université de Louvain (Publications de l'Institut orientaliste 6).

BRIQUEL CHATONNET, KIRAZ & PRIOLETTA 2022
F. Briquel Chatonnet, G. Kiraz & A. Prioletta, « A first Syriac inscription from the

area of Ḥimā (Najrān province, southern Saudi Arabia) », *Wiener Zeitschrift Für Die Kunde Des Morgenlandes* 112, p. 37-50 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/27313312).

GATIER, ROBIN & ĀL QURĀD 2025
P.-L. Gatier, Chr. J. Robin & M. ʿA. A. Āl Qurād, « Les graffites grecs de Ḥimà (Arabie saʿūdite) [NETEN. 6] », *Semitica et Classica* 18, p. 237-244 (https://doi.org/10.1484/J.SEC.5.152646).

GROHMANN 1962
A. Grohmann, *Arabic Inscriptions* (Expédition Philby-Ryckmans-Lippens en Arabie, IIe partie, Textes épigraphiques, tome 1), Louvain-la-Neuve, Université de Louvain (Publications de l'Institut orientaliste).

LISCHI, HAQUET, HILBERT & PRIOLETTA 2023
S. Lischi, J.-F. Haquet, Y. H. Hilbert & A. Prioletta, « First results of the 2020 and 2021 seasons of the Saudi-French Archaeological and Epigraphic Mission to Najrān in the area of Ḥimā (Najrān, Saudi Arabia) », *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 52, p. 237-253 (https://archaeopresspublishing.com/ojs/index.php/PSAS/article/view/1637).

LISCHI, HAQUET, SCHIETTECATTE & PRIOLETTA 2025
S. Lischi, J.-F. Haquet, J. Schiettecatte & A. Prioletta, « Two anthropomorphic stelae connected with a platform-like structure in the area of Ḥimā (Saudi Arabia): New data from southwestern Arabia », *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 36, p. 39-51 (https://doi.org/10.1111/aae.12260).

PRIOLETTA 2022
A. Prioletta, « The inscriptions in Ancient South Arabian script from Ḥimā: A preliminary historical and cultural appraisal », *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 51, p. 271-282.

PRIOLETTA 2025a
A. Prioletta, « The onomasticon of the Himaitic and Ancient South Arabian inscriptions from Ḥimā: a comparative overview and insights into their cultural and linguistic layers », *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 54, p. 201-212 (https://archaeopresspublishing.com/ojs/index.php/PSAS/article/view/2809).

PRIOLETTA 2025b
A. Prioletta, « Himaitic lexical notes. 1, Selected semantic domains in the Himaitic inscriptions », *Semitica et Classica* 18, p. 99-114 (https://doi.org/10.1484/J.SEC.5.152635).

PRIOLETTA & ARBACH 2025a
A. Prioletta & M. Arbach, « Minaeans at Ḥimā: The epigraphic corpus and its historical, linguistic and cultural implications », *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 36, 253-276 (https://doi.org/10.1111/aae.12261).

PRIOLETTA & ARBACH 2025b
A. Prioletta & M. Arbach, « An Omani visitor in Ḥimā: Insights into connections during the Hellenistic Era », *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* (https://doi.org/10.1111/aae.70012).

PRIOLETTA & ROBIN 2018
A. Prioletta & Chr. J. Robin, « New research on the 'Thamudic' graffiti from the region of Ḥimā (Najrān, Saudi Arabia) », in M.C.A. Macdonald (ed.), *Languages,*

Scripts and their Uses in Ancient North Arabia (Supplement to volume 48 of the Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies), Oxford, Archaeopress, p. 59-69 (https://archaeopresspublishing.com/ojs/index.php/PSAS/article/view/1202).

ROBIN & ĀL QURĀD 2023
Chr. J. Robin & M. ʿA. A. Āl Qurād, « Un graffite de Ḥimà (Région de Najrān) commençant en écriture arabe et s'achevant en écriture sudarabique (vers 750 de l'ère Chrétienne) [NETEN. 3] », *Semitica et Classica* 16, p. 211-212 (https://doi.org/10.1484/J.SEC.5.137278).

ROBIN, AL-GHABBAN & AL-SAʿĪD 2014
Chr. J. Robin, A. al-Ghabban & S. al-Saʿīd, « Inscriptions antiques récemment découvertes à Najrān (Arabie séoudite méridionale) : nouveaux jalons pour l'histoire de l'oasis et celle de l'écriture et de la langue arabes », *Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, Comptes Rendus des séances de l'année 2014*, p. 1033-1127.

ROBIN & GOREA 2016
Chr. J. Robin & M. Gorea, « L'alphabet de Ḥimà (Arabie séoudite) », in I. Finkelstein, Chr. J. Robin, & T. Romer (eds.), *Alphabets, Texts and Artefacts in the Ancient Near East. Studies Presented to Benjamin Sass*, Paris, Van Dieren, p. 312-377.

RYCKMANS 1963
J. Ryckmans, « L'apparition du cheval en Arabie ancienne », *Ex Oriente Lux* 17, p. 211-226.

Notes

1 The numbers of pages refer to the English version of the *Introduction*.

2 GROHMANN 1962, ANATI 1968a and b, ANATI 1972, ANATI 1974.

3 RYCKMANS 1963.

4 ROBIN, AL-GHABBAN & AL-SAʿĪD 2014, ROBIN & GOREA 2016, PRIOLETTA & ROBIN 2018.

5 Cf. BRIQUEL-CHATONNET, KIRAZ & PRIOLETTA 2022; PRIOLETTA 2022; LISCHI *et al.* 2023; ROBIN & ĀL QURĀD 2023; ĀL QURĀD & ROBIN 2025; GATIER, ROBIN & ĀL QURĀD 2025; LISCHI *et al.* 2025; PRIOLETTA 2025a and b; PRIOLETTA & ARBACH 2025, 2026.

References

Electronic reference
Irene Rossi, "Ch. J. ROBIN *et al.*, *Une halte dans la steppe. Les gravures rupestres de ʿĀn Jamal près de Ḥimà (région de Najrān, Arabie saoudite) / A Stopover in the Steppe. The Rock Carvings of ʿĀn Jamal near Ḥimà (Region of Najrān, Saudi Arabia)*", *Syria* [Online], Book reviews, Online since 24 February 2026, connection on 23 March 2026. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/syria/18557; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/15rau

About the author

Irene Rossi

- **IDREF :** https://idref.fr/242799671

- **ORCID :** https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5820-8256

- **VIAF :** http://viaf.org/viaf/159815923480650337278 2

Copyright

The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) may be subject to specific use terms.