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TWO ANTHROPOMORPHIC STELAE CONNECTED WITH A PLATFORM-LIKE
STRUCTURE IN THE AREA OF ḤIMĀ (SAUDI ARABIA): NEW DATA FROM
SOUTHWESTERN ARABIA

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Abstract

Since 2020, the Saudi-French Archaeological and Epigraphic Mission to Najrān (MAFSN) has been conducting additional archaeological surveys and small-scale excavations in the Ḥimā area, providing a wealth of data from different historical periods. Preliminary analysis of the structures and artefacts discovered revealed a complex landscape characterised by patterns of continuous human activity from the Palaeolithic to modern times, underlining the historical importance of this area as a transit hub along the caravan routes. The identification of various structures has made it possible to establish a basic typology and enabled a distribution study of the human presence, allowing comparisons with neighbouring regions. This paper presents the discovery of two anthropomorphic stelae associated with a platform-like structure excavated in November 2021 on the eastern side of Jabal al-Kawkab, al-Gharaziyyāt area. The documentation of these stelae lays the groundwork for a re-evaluation of the Bronze Age occupation of the area.

Keywords: anthropomorphic stelae, platform-like structure, Hima, Saudi Arabia, Bronze Age

Introduction

The Saudi-French Archaeological and Epigraphic Mission to Najrān (MAFSN) has been conducting research in the area since 2007. Initially focused on developing a comprehensive inventory of rock carvings (Arbach et al., 2015; Robin et al., 2022), the mission has recently added the systematic recording of archaeological remains to its objectives. This addition aims to provide a detailed reconstruction of the occupation of the area and to improve the contextualisation of the epigraphic data collected. The systematic recording of archaeological remains is crucial for identifying and defining the local population, which has remained elusive due to its mobility.

Since 2020, the research has been directed towards the Ḥimā region, located approximately 100 kilometres north of Najrān, with lesser emphasis on Wādī Najrān, which is located to the north-east of the urban centre of Najrān. The current investigation focuses on the governorates of Yadamah, Thār, and Khubāsh within the Najrān province (Figure 1).

In antiquity, the area was strategically located on the caravan route linking the north and south of the Arabian Peninsula, running along the edges of the Rub‘ al-Khālī and just south of the diversion route from Qaryat al-Fāw to the Arabian Gulf (Covington, 2011, pp. 23–24; Lischi et al., 2023, p. 237). Its location made the area heavily frequented, resulting in a rich palimpsest of archaeological and epigraphic traces that provide a continuous record from the Lower Palaeolithic to the present day (Robin et al., 2014).

A preliminary examination of this wealth of archaeological evidence has already been presented by the MAFSN team (Lischi et al., 2023). In that paper, the discovery of a platform-like structure and two anthropomorphic stelae was only briefly mentioned (Lischi et al., 2023, pp. 245, 249). In the following paragraphs, the discovery and excavation of this structure and its implications for the preliminary understanding of the Bronze Age in the area are presented and discussed in detail.

Description of the site and the structure

The al-Gharaziyyāt area corresponds to a cluster of archaeological structures to the east of the Jabal al-Kawkab, ca. 2 km north of the ‘An Halkān area (Arbach et al., 2015, pp. 18, 20–23, fig. 16). It

lies in a flat zone bordered to the east and southeast by series of rocky outcrops and high sand dunes which separate it from the desert plain stretching towards al-Mundafān. To the west is Jabal al-Kawkab. The area is partly covered with shifting dunes driven by the wind, often hiding archaeological structures (Figure 2).

The excavated structure (GRZ02.20) was located in the middle of a densely anthropised area. As a result of the ongoing survey campaigns, several funerary structures have been discovered, including tower tombs with platforms and wall tombs (Lischi et al., 2023, pp. 244–245). The presence of slab alignments and other small circular structures is also noteworthy. Its proximity to a frequently used off-road track that crosses the area from north to south and vice versa may partly explain its limited state of preservation.

The remains of structure GRZ02.20 consist of numerous stone slabs of various sizes, which do not show any clear traces of craftsmanship, and the use of materials appears to be non-selective, comprising different types of sandstone. The slabs were arranged side by side or overlapping to form a platform, of which only two groups were preserved at the time of investigation: one to the northeast (G1) and one to the southwest (G2). In the more or less central area of these two groups, there is a roughly rectangular space without stones, which seems to be consistent with the possible accommodation of the two anthropomorphic stelae found nearby. However, they are positioned horizontally and lack their lower part, which theoretically should have been inserted into the rectangular recess.

Notably, a significant amount of lithic slab fragments is present on the occupation surfaces (SU14 and SU16), suggesting a potentially larger extent of the platform that may have been disturbed by human activity and weathering, probably resulting in the displacement of some platform slabs. During excavation, no binding material was found to prevent the slabs from shifting, including natural movement.

Stone groups G1 and G2 follow an elongated pattern from northeast to southwest, widening the area where the stelae were located (Figure 3).

Immediately to the east of the platform were nine elongated rectangular stones (S1 to S9). They clearly belong to a different category, probably indicating a different function. Their uniformity in material and shape — made of anthracite sandstone and resembling flattened parallelepipeds — suggests a deliberate selection based on shape, as their dimensions are remarkably similar. Their placement indicates a specific purpose; they are all inserted into the lowest stratigraphic unit identified (SU19), suggesting that they were deliberately embedded into the contemporary occupation surface (SU18) during construction, unlike the slabs that make up the platform, which rest primarily on the upper surface of this stratigraphic unit.

The upper surfaces of stones S1-S9 are flat and are arranged in an almost semicircular pattern around the eastern side of the platform (Figure 3).

Excavation

Structure GRZ02.20 was not very well preserved. On the surface, there were numerous stone slabs of various sizes, apparently unrelated to each other and to the stelae. Therefore, it was decided to carry out an 8x3m trench (Table 1 and Figure 4) to investigate the area and better understand the structure and its relationship to the surrounding area (Figure 5).

The removal of the uppermost layer (SU13), which consisted of windblown sand, revealed a large number of stones scattered in an amorphous arrangement covering a significant part of the area investigated. No other materials were found within this stratigraphic unit.

In addition, the removal of SU13 exposed a more compact, fine-grained, and greyish layer (SU14). Given its consistency and shape, this layer appears to represent a possible occupation surface, serving as a support for numerous lithic fragments associated with the structure.

The removal of this more compact accumulation layer (SU15), albeit devoid of material, led to the identification of a new occupation surface (SU16). This moderately compact, uniform, and brownish surface contained many of the stones from the structure. As a result, a deeper trench was excavated in the northernmost part of the trench.

Excavation within this trench revealed a rather compact, brown accumulation of sand (SU17) with scattered small and medium-sized stones. This layer was removed to reveal a more compact, uniform and greyish occupation surface (SU18). A significant number of the lithic slabs forming the structure were embedded within this surface. Two relatively well-preserved groups were identified, one to the northeast (G1) and one to the southwest (G2). These groups were arranged to leave an elongated space in the centre, possibly to accommodate the stelae. The presence of vertically inserted elongated rectangular stone slabs in this surface, firmly embedded in the underlying accumulation layer, is noteworthy.

In the central part of a small area to the east of the trench, a deep trench was excavated in order to understand how the structure related to the virgin substrate of the hill. Excavation of this trench revealed a relatively compact and greyish layer (SU19), devoid of material, resting on the virgin rock of the hill, which appears to be relatively flat and uniform (Figure 6).

Anthropomorphic stelae: typology and description

The two large fragments of anthropomorphic stelae (GRZ02.20.38 and GRZ02.20.39) were found on the ground during the survey of the area that later led to the excavation of the structure to which they belonged, as described in the previous paragraphs. Both fragments represent the upper part of the stelae and correspond to two different pieces (Figure 7).

GRZ02.20.38 (Figure 8) is made of dark grey sandstone with a fine texture. The shape of the stele is that of a flattened parallelepiped of considerable thickness (Table 2). The surface on which the anthropomorphic figure is engraved is smooth and uniform, while the back shows no treatment or attempt to make it smooth and flat. However, no traces of smoothing or working can be seen with the naked eye on the front surface. The shape of the stone suggests that this stele was set vertically in the sandy soil and was held in place by the stones that made up the excavated platform. Unfortunately, only the upper part of the stele has been preserved. The head is rounded and reaches

its maximum diameter at the level of the eyes before narrowing towards the short neck, which is instead treated as a simple transition between head and shoulders. It appears that the shoulder on the right side of the figure is the only one preserved. It can be observed that the shoulder line sharply descends and merges with the arm, which, unfortunately, is not preserved. A small circular protrusion is visible at the top of the shoulder. The preservation state is insufficient to have a clear idea of its use, but it could be identified as a decorative element, perhaps belonging to a necklace or a garment. On the maximum diameter of the head, there are also two elongated marks, which seem to indicate the presence of ears. The physiognomic features, on the other hand, are represented by a continuous horizontal curved line indicating the eyebrows. From this line, a straight line descends in the centre of the semicircle and the head (in the form of a T), indicating the nose, with two dots on either side depicting the eyes. There are no visible signs indicating the presence of the mouth.

In general, the representation of the human figure is highly stylised, as is the representation of the physiognomic features, which sketch a face without showing all the details. In addition, there is an incomplete symmetry both in the neck, which has a wider curve on the right and a narrower one on the left, and in the ears, the left being smaller than the right. The predominant method observed is the carving technique, especially as opposed to a pecking technique, particularly evident in areas with wider and non-linear fillings, such as the ears and the circular motif on the shoulder.

GRZ02.20.39 (Figure 9) is made of sandstone that is less dense than the other and has a brownish colour. It is a rectangular slab, much thinner than the other (Table 2). The surface is heavily weathered and shows no particular working traces. The slab fragment is smaller than the previous one and shows only the head. Like GRZ02.20.38, the head has a rounded shape, formed by a continuous line that reaches its maximum diameter at the level of the eyes before tapering towards the neck, which is not preserved. The head appears slightly elongated in height. As in the previous case, at its maximum diameter, some signs seem to indicate the presence of ears.

The physiognomic features consist of a single horizontal semicircular line indicating the eyebrows, a vertical line halfway along the arc indicating the nose (in the form of a T), and two punctate eyes on either side. The mouth is not present. As for the other stela, the predominant method observed is the carving technique, as opposed to the pecking technique.

Discussion

In the previous sections, we have described in detail all the characteristics of this discovery, which enriches the landscape and the distribution of anthropomorphic stelae in southwestern Arabia. The two parts of anthropomorphic stelae just described appear, in terms of shape, vertical positioning and style, to be positively comparable with the statue-menhirs described and presented in numerous scientific publications on southwestern Arabia (e.g. McCorrison et al., 2011, p. 160; Newton & Zarins, 2000, p. 165, fig. 8; Pirenne, 1990, pp. 28, plate xxxi; Robin & Vogt, 1997; Steimer-Herbet, 2007, 2020). They are easily distinguished from anthropomorphic statuettes, which are much smaller, fully carved, and generally represent a human figure with arms placed in front of the abdomen in a more peaceful and respectful pose (e.g. Steimer-Herbet, 2020, p. 458, fig. 15.3). The function of statue-menhir is still a controversial issue, probably due to their sporadic discovery in clear contexts. Of the thirty-six statue-menhirs currently known (for a summary, see Steimer-Herbet, 2020, p. 457, fig. 15.2), only a few have known discovery contexts (McCorrison, 2011; Robin & Vogt, 1997); most others are decontextualised, found in private or museum collections, or reused in structures from later periods (e.g. Steimer-Herbet, 2007). This condition not only adds complexity to the interpretation of the statue-menhir, but also poses a challenge in establishing their exact chronology. The known contexts and associated phenomena, apparently related to the Bronze Age in Yemen, tentatively suggest a dating spanning between the end of the fourth and third millennia BC (Antonini de Maigret, 2012, p. 18; Buffa & Vogt, 1999, p. 437; De Maigret, 2000, p. 60). Furthermore, it can be inferred from the discovery of the majority of these statue-menhir in the Ḥaḍramawt region that they may be considered as one of the expressions of the ‘Ḥaḍramawt

Megalithic complex', which characterised the easternmost province of Yemen during the Bronze Age (McCorrison et al., 2005; Schiettecatte, 2011; Vogt & Sedov, 1998). A similar timeframe is postulated for the anthropomorphic stelae and platform-like structure discussed in this paper. The existence of tower tombs with platforms (Steimer-Herbet, 2004, p. 81; Zarins et al., 1981, p. 31) and wall tombs (Crassard & Hitgen, 2007; McCorrison et al., 2011, 2012; Steimer-Herbet et al., 2006) nearby potentially supports the idea of dating this site to the Bronze Age.

The uncovered fragments do not show any features that would allow the sex of the individuals to be determined. However, in accordance with all other statue-menhirs found to date, the individuals on the stelae should be male. The partial state of preservation also makes it difficult to determine the attributes, which in most cases include a decorated or unadorned belt, a dagger with a crescent-shaped pommel, and sometimes a sheath, and a blade. Attributes that seem to give these figures a martial aspect, probably with attribution of authority, and contrast rather strongly with the more relaxed poses of the statuettes. The lower part of the stelae is often undecorated, probably because they were intended to be buried in an upright position, as is sometimes the case (Robin & Vogt, 1997). The upper part of the body, the head, is well preserved. The stelae described here have physiognomic features very similar to those found in literature: nose and eyebrow arch in the form of a T, and eyes, while the mouth is missing. However, looking at the simplified drawings of the stelae reveals considerable variability, not in the main attributes, but in their graphic representation, with too few examples to identify distributive or chronological patterns (Figure 10).

The distribution of statue-menhirs in southwest Arabia appears to be concentrated in Ḥaḍramawt, specifically in the Jawl and Mahra (Steimer-Herbet, 2020, p. 471). Although not identical, anthropomorphic stelae with parallels to South Arabian statue-menhirs have been found in the northern half of the Arabian Peninsula and may testify to a common cultural background in iconographic practice and the representation of a form of sacredness (Loreto, 2024, pp. 159–161,

fig. 4). This area extends to the region of Hā'il and al-'Ulā (Steimer-Herbet, 2010), and further north in southern Jordan at Qulban bani Murra (Gebel & Mahasneh, 2013) and Khirbet Riqseh (Kirkbride, 1960, 1969a, 1969b).

The phenomenon of anthropomorphic stelae is widespread, extending beyond the Arabian Peninsula into Mesopotamia, Syria and Anatolia by the middle of the third millennium BC (Antonini de Maigret, 2012, p. 19), albeit with marked aesthetic differences. Stelae GRZ02.20.38 and GRZ02.20.39 show characteristics that are closely comparable to those from Yemen, although the absence of the lower part prevents a complete parallel. Another observation is the probable absence of a beard, at least in GRZ02.20.38; the statue is preserved up to the shoulders without any trace of a beard or decoration at the neck level, suggesting its possible complete absence. This possibility implies the existence of regional differences linked to different aesthetic traditions and tastes. It is clear, however, that these stelae enter an area previously devoid of such monuments, suggesting strong links with eastern Yemen, specifically Ḥaḍramawt and Mahra (Figure 11).

Finally, it is important to highlight their discovery in the context of a platform-like structure. The excavation of this structure did not reveal any specific traces of use, but it was found in spatial association with funerary structures. It should be noted that the tombs identified in the area are arranged around a lower central area rich in stelae, most of which are undecorated (a more thorough study of the entire area is currently underway). These features suggest a plausible ritual use for the structure, as in the case of the structure found at Rawk, Wādī 'Idim (Steimer-Herbet et al., 2007, p. 290), which was likely associated with one of the anthropomorphic stelae previously discussed (Figure 10: 30). The central part of the structure, composed of G1 and G2, seems perfectly explained by the need to create a stable base for the stela. In fact, the lower layers in which they were placed are made of sand, which, although compacted over time, would have been in danger of collapsing and causing the statues to fall to the ground.

The significance of the vertical, elongated, rectangular slabs (S1-S9) remains uncertain. Although they do not appear directly related to G1 and G2, their vertical arrangement around and between them suggests a strong structural or functional correlation with the stelae. Possible interpretations for their presence include the formation of a sacred boundary delineating the stelae and their immediate surroundings. Alternatively, given their consistent height, they may have served as orthostats supporting a wooden structure surrounding the stelae (Kuijt & Finlayson, 2009, p. 10968).

Conclusion

The discovery of anthropomorphic stelae at al-Gharaziyyāt presents a significant addition to the documented repertoire of styles and techniques used to depict the human figure in the Ḥimā region. This diversity in representation likely reflects socio-cultural changes that occurred over the extended period of human activity in the area. Alternatively, it may point toward a certain intrinsic value associated with the figures and scenes portrayed.

Pending a complete understanding of the chronology of the human depictions in the rock art of the area, it can be argued that these stelae embodied a model of human representation sporadically observed in the local rock art corpus (Vartin, 2023). These figures (Figure 12C) are characterised by an extreme degree of stylisation, manifested through the use of a single line to delineate their contours without any infill. This style contrasts with the prevalent depictions of filled figures and hair/headgear (Figures 12A and B).

The fragmentary state of the stelae, particularly the absence of their lower portions, prevents from determining the possible presence of a dagger with a crescent-shaped handle. However, based on the previous discussions, it seems highly probable. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that these schematic figurative representations in rock art typically lack decorative attributes (Figure 12C).

Another comparison can be established between the anthropomorphic figures in Figure 12C, and the anthropomorphic stelae based on the positioning of their arms. It is worth noting that the stelae depicted in Figure 10 have arms that point downward with fan-shaped hands.

This posture deviates from the norm observed in human figures commonly found in the area, which typically have arms raised upwards, but is closely related to many anthropomorphic stelae (Figure 10: e.g. 1, 10, 28).

The co-occurrence of the anthropomorphic stelae with the platform compels us to consider a symbolic function for these elements. The lack of burials associated with the structure or other deposits precludes them from being seen as funerary markers yet gives them a broader meaning.

The central positioning of the structure in relation to the other undecorated stelae, tower tombs with platforms, and wall tombs suggests a possible symbolic or ritual significance. This interpretation of the platform as a potential Bronze Age ritual structure becomes even more interesting when considering the presence of another open-air sanctuary, located approximately 2 km to the south and dating to the Iron Age. This latter sanctuary, likely dedicated to the god *ḏu-Samāwī*, features a throne facing a small, stele-like sandstone outcrop. Unfortunately, the inscription upon this outcrop is eroded, but it is possible to read the name of the deity. Both the throne and the aforementioned stele are oriented towards the east, in the direction of the rising sun (Arbach et al., 2015, pp. 21–22, figs. 9–10). The presence of the open-air sanctuary and the stele inevitably draw parallels with our discovery.

Ultimately, this study confirms the wider prevalence of anthropomorphic statue-menhirs beyond Ḥaḍramawt (southern Jawl and Mahra). These findings suggest a wider distribution area encompassing a significant portion of inland Yemen and southwest Saudi Arabia, between the mountains and the desert, extending at least as far as Jabal Kawkab. While shifting sand dunes might preserve these sites, they are also a significant obstacle to their identification, necessitating ground survey for comprehensive discovery. Furthermore, the distinct human representations on the

stelae may expose them to incidental encounters and vandalism, thus hindering a detailed distribution analysis of this type of archaeological evidence.

However, the existence of this site undeniably suggests a territorial connection for the communities that constructed them. This association may not necessarily reflect permanent settlement, but rather a designated location frequently crossed during nomadic movement. Additionally, observable variations in the stelae likely stem from both local artistic traditions and diverse customs and practices, which could exhibit significant divergence across regions or tribal affiliations (Steimer-Herbet, 2020, p. 472).

Finally, this discovery further supports the connection between the statue-menhir and the Bronze Age ritual practices, potentially associated with open-air sanctuaries. This association contributes to the understanding of the Bronze Age in Ḥimā, as well as the cultural influences and connections of the area. Additionally, it enhances our knowledge of the phenomenon of anthropomorphic stelae in southwestern Arabia.

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Tables list and captions

| Stratigraphic Unit | Description |
|---------------------------|---|
| SU13 | Very soft windblown sand with some scattered stone slabs on the surface. |
| SU14 | Compact, fine-grained, and greyish layer (occupation surface) |
| SU15 | Medium compact accumulation layer, devoid of archaeological material. |
| SU16 | Moderately compact and uniform surface brownish in colour. It leans against the stones of the structure, which seem to continue downwards (occupation surface). |
| SU17 | Fairly compact accumulation layer, brown in colour, with scattered small and medium-sized stones scattered inside. |
| SU18 | Compact, uniform, and greyish occupation surface. The stone slabs of the structure lean on this surface. |
| SU19 | Compact and greyish layer, devoid of material, resting on the virgin rock. |

Table 1. List of excavated stratigraphic units mentioned in the text and their brief description.

| Stelae | Height (cm) | Width (cm) | Thickness (cm) |
|---------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| GRZ02.20.38 | 50,1 | 38,6 | 17,4 |
| GRZ02.20.39 | 25,4 | 45,2 | 5,3 |

Table 2. Summary of the most significant dimensions of the two stelae found.

Figures captions

Figure 1. General map of the area. The bottom left corner shows the location of the area surveyed by the MAFSN; the bottom right corner highlights the province of Najrān; the top shows the area within the province of Najrān that is the focus of our research, including identified sites and the boundaries of the relevant governorates from top to bottom: Yadamah, Thār, and Khubāsh (ESRI topo/Esri Gray/S. Lischi).

Figure 2. General map of the area north of Ḥimā with identified sites (left); and detailed view of the surveyed area in proximity to ‘An-Halkān (right) (Google satellite/S. Lischi).

Figure 3. Above, the plan of the excavated structure with the two stelae highlighted. The vertical stones (S1-S9) and the two groups of slabs belonging to the platform (G1 and G2) are highlighted below (drawings S. Lischi).

Figure 4. Section of the central excavation area, the only area where the bedrock was exposed (drawing S. Lischi).

Figure 5. The investigated area immediately after removal of the surface sand layer SU13 (left) and after excavation (right) (© MAFSN).

Figure 6. Photogrammetric representation of the structure. Above is the area after the removal of SU13, with SU14 visible, while below is the end of the excavation, with SU16, SU18 and the bedrock visible. In both images, the anthropomorphic stelae are highlighted by the red asterisk (3D-models Jérôme-F. Haquet).

Figure 7. The two anthropomorphic stelae just discovered. On the left, GRZ02.20.38, and on the right, GRZ02.20.39 (© MAFSN).

Figure 8. Front, side, and rear view of stele GRZ02.20.38 (© MAFSN).

Figure 9. Front, side, and rear view of stele GRZ02.20.39 (© MAFSN).

Figure 10. Summary table of the statue-menhirs found in southwest Arabia and the places where they were found (after Steimer-Herbet, 2020, p. 457, fig. 15.2)(McCorriston, 2011; Newton & Zarins, 2000; Pirenne, 1990; Sedov & al-Saqqaf, 1992; Steimer-Herbet, 2007; Vogt, 1997). On the right is the drawing of the anthropomorphic stelae found in Al-Gharaziyyāt, GRZ02.20.38 and GRZ02.20.39 (drawings S. Lischi).

Figure 11. Distribution map of statue-menhirs in southwestern Arabia. The localisation of the statue-menhirs found in southern Jawl and Mahra is approximate due to the lack of precise coordinates in the references (after Steimer-Herbet, 2020, p. 457, fig. 15.2) (Stamen terrain / S. Lischi).

Figure 12. Some examples of human figures in the rock art of Ḥimā. (A) site GRZ07.06, (B) site GRZ05.41, (C) SSA01.48 (© MAFSN).