

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# UNVEILING JORDAN'S ROCK ART LEGACY: THE FLUTE PLAYER AT THE JORDAN MUSEUM AS A CASE STUDY

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Figure 1. The inscription of Wādī Swī 'ad, Jordan (© Ali Al-Manaser).

**ABSTRACT.** *This research focuses on the study of rock art found in the Jordanian Harrah, specifically comparing it to a notable artifact at the Jordan Museum. The museum's artwork depicts a woman playing the flute, which can be dated to the period between the second century BC and the second century AD. The stone bearing this art features a distinctive Safaitic inscription that includes the verb "Zamra," meaning "a flute player." The research aims to compare this artwork with other examples, exploring their historical significance and the ways they are interpreted within the museum context. It also examines how visitors perceive this rock art as part of the broader narrative of the Jordanian Harrah. This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the significance of musical instruments and rock art in understanding Jordan's cultural heritage. The final objective of this study is to emphasize the importance*

*of interpreting and presenting the stories of these artifacts in the museum. By doing so, the research seeks to convey the correct messages to museum visitors, enhancing their understanding and appreciation of Jordan's rich cultural legacy.*

**KEYWORDS.** *Jordan Museum, rock art, written heritage, epigraphic heritage, Badia Epigraphic Survey, Jordanian Harrah, Safaitic graffiti.*

## INTRODUCTION

Rock art is one of the most significant cultural artifacts found in the Jordanian Harrah, alongside ancient northern Arabian inscriptions. Many of these inscrip-

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Figure 2. Safaitic inscriptions from Cairn of Hani’.

tions are accompanied by rock art that depicts various scenes, often featuring animals or elements from nature, such as the sun, as well as various patterns and motifs. Rock art serves as an expression of the culture of a specific society during a particular period.

“Rock art” encompasses anything drawn, painted, carved, or engraved on rock surfaces. A common form of rock art are petroglyphs, which specifically refer to carvings or engravings made into the rock. One of the most famous examples of rock art in the Safaitic inscriptions is the one discovered at Cairn of Hani’ in 1951, which was later transferred to the Jordan Archaeological Museum in Amman. While Harding also published another Safaitic inscription featuring a woman playing the *simsimiyya*, the image of the flute player remains the most renowned “Safaitic artwork” known to date (Harding 1969). This piece is celebrated for its display in museums and its representation as a model of pre-Islamic Arab art. The stone bearing this rock art includes a Safaitic inscription featuring the verb *zamar*, confirming that the woman depicted is indeed playing the flute, likely as part of a celebration. The figure is identified

as female due to the prominence of her chest, which contrasts with later inscriptions that typically depict male figures playing similar instruments. More than ten examples of such depictions have been found since 1951, highlighting a shift in representation. In Safaitic inscriptions, two types of flute-like instruments are commonly identified: the *yarghul* and the *majwaz*, named based on the geographic regions where the rock art is found. The abstract style of this rock art reflects a simplicity of execution and a clear intent to communicate specific messages to future viewers.

Typically, the accompanying rock art is rendered in a two-dimensional style, with no three-dimensional representations identified to date. Musical scenes frequently appear alongside these inscriptions, as do depictions of animals, geometric shapes, and expressive symbols such as the sun, circles, and various lines. Among the animals depicted, the camel stands out as one of the most prominent figures in the rock art found throughout the Jordanian Harrah region (Brusgaard 2019). This rich tapestry of imagery not only provides insight into the cultural and social practices of the time



but also underscores the significance of music and nature in the lives of the people who created these enduring works of art.

Some rock art depicts figures engaged in dance-like movements or rituals that appear to have a specific, albeit unknown, purpose. It is believed these scenes may have religious significance, possibly performed during specific times of the year, such as during droughts, as part of a ritual to appeal to the gods for rain.

In the inscription found at Wādī Swi‘ad—approximately 34 km to the southeast of aṣ-Ṣafawī (H5) region (Figure 1)—rock art depicts people engaged in what resembles a dance, with hands raised straight upward, suggesting an organized movement to fulfill a specific purpose.

An example of musical practices depicted in the inscriptions shows a group of people arranged in a circle, with one person playing the flute in the center. This tradition, still alive today, is performed at weddings and celebrations among Bedouins and in some Levantine villages. Although this dance—known by various names across the Levant and northern Saudi Arabia—has origins that remain unclear, it may date back hundreds of years. The style of singing and movements varies by region, yet the custom of forming a semicircular or circular line in dance remains widely practiced across these areas.

## VISUALIZATION AND INTERPRETATION OF THE ROCK ART IN THE JORDAN MUSEUM

The authenticity of this figure is well-established, but its handling and maintenance show a lack of proper curatorial methods in Jordanian museums. It was discovered in the Jordanian Harrah at the Cairn of Hani<sup>7</sup> (Figures 2 and 3) and was initially transferred to the Jordan Archaeological Museum, founded in 1951 by the same researcher who excavated the site (Harding 1953). Alongside this stone, many others bearing Safaitic inscriptions were also moved to the museum, where they were displayed for years before being relocated to storage below the museum, fading into obscurity. Later, this stone was transferred to the Jordan Museum, established in the downtown area to serve as a national museum representing the various eras of Jordan’s history. However, a common question among visitors regarding this inscription is why white paint was applied to the lines of the engraving. This inquiry of-



Figure 3 (© Ali Al-Manaser).

ten leads to doubts about the authenticity of the inscription among those unfamiliar with its true story and the circumstances of its transfer to its current location.

The application of white paint to the letters and lines of this rock art was likely intended to enhance its visibility for visitors. Over time, however, as display and interpretive technologies have advanced, questions have arisen about why this paint has not been removed, given today’s modern techniques. Many visitors may not realize that nearly all inscriptions found at Cairn of Hani<sup>7</sup> were faint and required the addition of white paint to render them legible and presentable. In 1951, when this paint was applied, museum practices did not prioritize modern display methods or visitor engagement as they do today. The focus at that time was primarily on displaying archaeological artifacts found in the Jordanian

Harrah, thereby adding context to the history of the location where the inscription was discovered. To enhance visitor understanding, the museum could have provided interpretive panels explaining the inscription's history and the rationale behind the color application process on the original engraving. Displaying other examples alongside this inscription would also help to create a fuller picture of the culture that flourished in the Jordanian Harrah during the early centuries AD, often referred to as Arab desert culture, which includes thousands of inscriptions in Safaitic, the predominant Ancient North Arabian attested in that era. By doing so, the museum could foster a deeper appreciation for the rich cultural heritage represented by these artifacts and clarify the historical context in which they were created.

### Figure 3

The figure at the top of this engraving appears to be playing a double pipe. The hairstyle suggests that it is a female figure, as previous research indicates that clear depictions of hair are often associated with femininity. However, this hair is shorter than what has typically been observed on female figures in earlier representations. The artist may have intended to depict the subject wearing loose trousers, as her legs below the knee appear noticeably thinner than the upper portions. Particularly noteworthy is the way this figure grips the double pipe. This is the first instance we have seen of a V-shaped double pipe being held with both hands. The positioning of the three fingers on the bottom hand proposes that both sides of the V-shaped pipe are being grasped simultaneously. In previous depictions, closely bound double pipes have been shown held with overlapping hands, while the only other known representation of a V-shaped double pipe features the figure holding each side with separate hands.

The other figure is likely male, as there is no visible hair. He may be holding castanets. However, the triangular shape engraved near his body raises some questions: it could be a mistake or perhaps part of a musical instrument, such as a drum, but its exact nature remains uncertain (Macdonald 2007).

### Figure 4

This stone features a depiction of a knight on horseback, holding a long spear in his hand as he attempts to hunt a deer. The rock art is shown in a two-dimen-

sional view, rendered by the artist with simple lines. Through these lines, the artist aimed to highlight the importance of the knight. The knight's head is raised, as if looking directly at the viewer, holding the reins to emphasize his control over the horse, while his right hand grips the spear. In most similar rock art, the right hand is extended backward, creating the impression of the knight preparing to strike the deer.

The horse's front legs are illustrated as if chasing the deer, suggesting the animal's fear and panic in response to the knight's prowess. Meanwhile, the horse's hind legs are depicted in a semi-natural stance, symbolizing the strength, nobility, and quality of the animal. The hooves are drawn with simple lines to convey the speed and agility of the horse. The horse's tail is depicted as flying in the wind, as if being gently caressed, indicating the high quality of the horse, a well-known trait in purebred horses. One of the indicators of a horse's quality is the general shape of its tail. Interestingly, the most important musical instrument among the Bedouins, the *rababa*, is made from horse tails. The artist also emphasized a distinct feature of the horse by adding something resembling feathers on its head, proposing that the rider is a person of importance, possibly a tribal sheikh or prince.

In rock art depicting spear hunting, the chase of a gazelle is shown through the forward movement of the horse's legs, indicating pursuit. In contrast, when hunting lions or hyenas, the animals are depicted as the attackers, with the horse's front legs drawn in a retreating position. The authors of the Safaitic inscriptions also made a distinction between hunting spears and fighting spears in their rock art. Hunting spears are shown as longer and featuring something like a weight at the end. This suggests that the authors understood that the greater the weight and length of a spear, combined with a swift thrust, allowed it to penetrate the victim's body more deeply than a lighter, shorter spear would.

The figure of the gazelle appears as if it is trapped between the knight and the person holding the bow and arrow. It is drawn with simple lines that indicate the agility and young age of the animal, giving the impression that the hunting process was carried out by people skilled in hunting packs and prey. The depiction of the person holding the bow and arrow is also rendered with simple lines, lacking any representation of the third dimension, which is a general characteristic of the human form in "Safaitic rock art." However, the rock art suggests that the person is hiding or crouching on their knees, waiting for the prey. The artist did





Figure 4 (© Ali Al-Manaser).

not pay attention to the details of the face or show its features. It is noted that human representations of men predominantly depict hunting and fighting activities, while the rock art of woman appears alone.

The circular shields depicted in the rock carvings of the ancient Near East are prominently feature shields that resemble the late Assyrian design. These shields were likely favored for their lightweight design, which allowed knights to move swiftly during battle. The Harrah inhabitants, known for their agility and speed, may have utilized these shields to enhance their combat effectiveness.

The rock art found in the Jordanian Harrah serves as an important source of information about the lifestyle of Harrah inhabitants, shedding light on their environmental, spiritual, economic, and social interactions with their surroundings (Al-Manaser 2012). The existing examples reveal the “Safaitic” particular interest in certain animals over others. So far, representations of thirty different animals have been discovered, with camels,

horses, and deer being the most prevalent. The artist’s clear focus on these animals reflects their importance in the Harrah environment; camels were essential for various aspects of life, while horses symbolized social status and served as weapons in warfare. So, in essence, the art serves as a powerful record of life at the time.

In addition to animal depictions, the Safaitic inscriptions include human figures, celestial bodies like the sun and moon, geometric shapes, labyrinths, traps, animal pens, musical instruments, and more. The inscription under examination suggests a historical context in which these tribes had a social system led by individuals who took pride in their ancestry, including princes and kings known for their hunting prowess.

The emphasis on such activities echoes the reliefs found in ancient Near Eastern art in Egypt and Assyria, which frequently depicts. The lion, often portrayed in these artworks, symbolizes the apex of power, as hunting it conveys the idea that the king has dominion over all earthly rulers, both human and animal. Similarly,





Figure 5 (© Ali Al-Manaser).

the drawings in the Safaitic inscriptions likely serve as symbolic representations of a prince or sheikh's power and social standing within their tribe. This tradition has persisted in Arab culture, exemplified by artistic portrayals of figures like Abu Zayd al-Hilali, depicted on horseback as an unmatched knight among Arab warriors.

## CONCLUSION

From the figure above (Figure 5), it is evident that five primary instruments are depicted in Safaitic inscriptions. Three of these are wind instruments: the first is likely the double pipe, known as *yarghol*, commonly used by Jordanian and Palestinian communities, consisting of two tubes. The second instrument could be *majwiz* or *Maqrūn*; both terms, derived from different dialects, refer to the same instrument. The term *majwiz* comes from the word *zawj*, meaning "two together," while *Maqrūn* translates to "two tied together." The third wind instrument, called *shabbabah*, features a single pipe with seven holes. Traditionally, all three instruments are made from reeds, although contemporary versions can also be found in materials such as metal and plastic (Al-Manaser 2017).

Previous research on engravings of musical instruments from this period has concluded that a lyre and a pipe are consistently depicted as being played by a female figure. Displaying rocks with rock art from the Jordanian Harrah regions in various museums will significantly enhance visitors' understanding of Jordan's cultural heritage. Presenting these artifacts in their original form will also bolster the credibility of the archaeological research conducted on them. However, current methods of conservation and display in Jordanian museums continue to lag behind more modern methods and are ineffective in conveying the intended messages of these artifacts.

To improve visitor engagement and education, museums could adopt more innovative and interactive display techniques that highlight the historical and cultural significance of the rock drawings. Enhanced interpretive materials, such as multimedia presentations, guided tours, and educational programs, could further enrich the visitor experience and foster a deeper appreciation for Jordan's rich archaeological legacy. Rock art serves as a vital expression of the culture and identity of the people who created these drawings. Through these images, they unconsciously convey aspects of their heritage, beliefs, and daily experiences, making rock art an integral part of their historical cultural narrative.

Studying rock art is crucial as it complements the examination of inscriptions, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the lives of the people who inhabited the region (Al-Manaser & Macdonald 2024).

These artistic expressions can reveal insights into their social structures, spiritual beliefs, hunting practices, and interactions with the environment. By analyzing the

themes and motifs present in rock art, researchers can gain a clearer picture of the community's values, traditions, and challenges. Ultimately, the study of rock art not only enriches our knowledge of past societies but also highlights the enduring legacy of their cultural expressions, offering a window into the human experience across time.

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