

## **Bir-Hima: Civilizational Features in the Light of Historical Findings**

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### **Abstract**

*The Hima civilization is located at the momentous trade and commercial junction at western region of Najran in Saudi Arabia. Najran is one of the ancient populous sites in the country that is enriched with historical and archaeological evidences discovered in a variety of historical sites ranging from the prehistoric Stone Age through the Islamic period. The Bir- Hima Complex chronological period is from 2500 to 1000 BC. It was a primary road for merchants, militaries and Hajj pilgrimage for the presence of sparkling water wells. Caravans; mostly from southern sections of desert; such as; Mesopotamia, Levant and Egypt were accustomed to stop over at Bir- Hima. Besides, this historical route was also used by commercial caravans from Greece and Rome, owing to which countenance of birth of new notions and intellectual advancement in the area was surfaced. In fact, it was oldest known toll station in Arabian Desert. This site is a hub of historical-cultural evidences which brings into light several traits of pre Islamic and afterwards cultures. The land and its surrounding area are as well enrich in unexcavated archaeological resources, including that of cairns, stone buildings, interments, stone tool scatters, and old wells. In the light of above argument, this article attempts to underscore distinguish civilization traits of Bir- Hima through historical findings. This is historical narration of the civilizational features of Bir-Hima site.*

### **Key Words**

Archeology, Bir- Hima, Culture, Historical, Najran.

### **Introduction**

Human existence in the Bir Hima is traced dated back to one million years. This site was discovered by the Philby-Ryckmans-Lippen in an expedition transpired in 1951. The site features were first time published by E. Anati in 1969. Since the commencement of writing about the site, the archeologist and historians started to decipher the evidences related to it.1 Bir- Hima cultural site was formally

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acknowledged by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a world heritage site in the online session, presided from Fuzhou, China dated 24 July 2021.<sup>2</sup> The news of incorporation of the site in UNESCO was welcomed by the government. In the words of Dr. Jasir Al-Herbish, chief executive of the Heritage Commission. "We are thrilled to have this exceptional ancient site recognized by UNESCO as a world heritage site. The area has outstanding universal value, providing us with many lessons about the evolution of human culture and life in ancient times"<sup>3</sup>

Bir- Hima is sandwiched between Najran and Wadi Addawasir, directed towards south-west of Saudi Arabia. The Bir- Hima civilization traced back to middle and late stone ages as well as pre-Islamic times. The Bir- Hima is geographically important as it was a link between Africa and Asia. It was a meeting point for commercial caravans which came to Bir- Hima to take either of the two routes. One route lead to Fao, Yamamah province, Bahrain province, Mesopotamia and then to Persia whereas other route was to way to reach Tathleeth, Al-Hijaz and Egypt.<sup>4</sup> It was an important path of migration for nomadic caravans as well as for town settlements. The most ancient settlement found in the area had transpired in first BC. Bir- Hima contains more than 200 historical sites enrich in art, inscription, castles and cemeteries and stone circles. This site depicts the migration of Homo sapiens from Africa to Levant. Along with humans, the mammoth animals like mammals had also travelled in the region. The size of the site is 557 square kilometers. This site has been declared as tourist site and the populace of the Bir-Hima is high cultured who offers full support and cooperation to the government regarding the preservation of its past.<sup>5</sup> Bir- Hima was a dry mountain range area having some limestone cliffs. It had little shrubby vegetation like Acacias, grass and perennial legumes etc. These native plants are still found at the site.

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<sup>1</sup> Med-O-Med, "Bi'r Hima Rock-art and Najran area Cultural Landscape," accessed January 21, 2022, [https://medomed.org/featured\\_item/bir-hima-rock-art-and-najran-area-cultural-landscape-saudi-arabia/](https://medomed.org/featured_item/bir-hima-rock-art-and-najran-area-cultural-landscape-saudi-arabia/).

<sup>2</sup> Xinhua News, "Hima Cultural Area in Saudi Arabia inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage Site list," accessed March 6, 2022, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-07/25/c\\_1310083487\\_2.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-07/25/c_1310083487_2.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Arab News, "Ancient rock art in Hima listed as Saudi Arabia's sixth UNESCO World Heritage Site," accessed July 25, 2021 <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1899561/saudi-arabia>.

<sup>4</sup> Saleh al Murahi, "Arabian Rock Art Heritage at Bir Hima," آثار ومتاحف السعودية آثار, Jun 17, 2012, YouTube Video, 1:52, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d-pyWW-QKjo>.

<sup>5</sup> Arab News, "Ancient rock art in Hima."



Bir Hima Site at Najran

Source: Bir-Hima-Panorama-1024x289.jpg (1024×289) (bp.blogspot.com), accessed on: 5 March 2022.

### **History of Bir- Hima Wells:**

The presence of the ancient wells is an indicator that it is an ancient settlement site. A few cairns can be seen on the surrounding hills, plus a small cave under an overhang. The age of the wells is about 7000 years. Walls of the ancient wells are round shaped, made up of stone and unexcavated was formed with the use of stone tool scatters. The well outer walls are thick characterized of nature rocks and kiln bricks. Entrances of the wells are identifies with a rock paths. Ponds, dams and shafts of springs were the main water channels. Some well had a few bushes or a date tree around the wells. Some of these wells dried up seasonally but generally flow all over the year.<sup>6</sup> The wells are among the arid Rocky Mountains, surrounded by the shining stones. The most of the archeological sites in Bir-Hima are currently fenced off but human access to the wells is permitted.<sup>7</sup> The presence and functionality of these wells till date is a vivid expression of technological progression of the people of Bir- Hima civilization. Freshwater is a prerequisite for life and its importance increase more when it is located in that part of the desert where people and animal stay for rest. The area around the wells depicts the then culture of Arab as it was hub of human activities at that time.<sup>8</sup> The wells are one of the essence site in Bir- Hima due to its location and history. They are located on the road that extend among seven rocky wells. This site is a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Meandering Mari, "Exploring Bir Hima and its ancient wells and inscriptions," July 29, 2021, YouTube Video, 3:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqwCiKtKrAU>

<sup>8</sup> Tamara Abueish, "Saudi Arabia's Hima rock art added to UNESCO World Heritage List," Alarabiya News, July 25, 2021, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/07/25/Saudi-Arabia-s-Hima-rock-art-added-to-UNESCO-World-Heritage-List>

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clear expression of ancient people lifestyle for it contains several site related to rock arts and drawings are prevailed on more than 13 sites.<sup>9</sup>

#### **Art of Inscriptions on Rocks:**

The principle feature of the civilization is related to the realm of inscriptions. The art of rock inscriptions highlight the cultural continuity of 7000 years. According to French researchers "The inscriptions of Hima reveal a strong movement of cultural unification of the Arabs, from the Euphrates to Najran, which manifested itself by the use of the same writing."<sup>10</sup> All these inscriptions are preserved and present the narrations of the caravans that took this route to travel. The inscription illustrates several patterns of then life such as hunting, botany, zoology, tools, wardrobes, decorations, armaments, stone stoves and symbols (rectangular and narrowed structures) etc. The site's human pursuits were attributed regarding supplies of wild life, water channels, and lime stone landscape. The rock art of Bir- Hima is considered as the richest complexes along with others found in Australia, South-Africa, and India.

Inscription location of Bir- Hima site is fenced off which is located at low hill and one major rock panel, which is twenty five meters wide and about two meters high and broken into four parts with a smaller end piece on right side. Eighty percent of the panel space is covered by one of the longest texts found in Saudi Arabia. The first portion from the left side shows a single camel with a sign of cross on top of his back and a short three line text. The second panel is carved with a date palm tree and two small text groups with seven and five lines. In addition two unknown signs or symbols were added, which are assumed not to be wusum (tribe name marked on animals' necks usually in Arab culture, it was originally begin by the Bedouins to identify their animals from other tribe's herds). With the third panel the large text really starts. This space is fully total area. Here again another unknown sign or symbol was added. Finally we find two more signs or symbols plus a very nice depiction of an ibex ram with big horns and beard. Unfortunately many rock art depictions have been used by Bedouins as shooting targets and some bullet holes damages can be seen here.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Marwa Mahmoud, "6 Saudi archaeological sites appear in the UNESCO list," Leaders, July 25, 2021, <https://www.leaders-mena.com/6-saudi-archaeological-sites-appear-in-the-unesco-list/>

<sup>10</sup> Ariel David, "Before Islam: When Saudi Arabia Was a Jewish Kingdom," Haaretz, Nov 29, 2017, <https://www.haaretz.com/archaeology/2017-11-29/ty-article/.premium/before-islam-when-saudi-arabia-was-a-jewish-kingdom/0000017f-eb0c-d4cd-af7f-eb7c1c2e0000>

<sup>11</sup> Kummert Thomas, "Bir Hima: Saudi Rock Art in the South," accessed March 12, 2022, <http://paleolithic-neolithic.com/data/documents/NEW-Bir-Hima.pdf>

These inscriptions are cited in divergent ancient scripts, viz a viz: Musand, Aramaic-Nabataean, Greek, Thamudic, South Arabian, Kufi and Arab.<sup>12</sup> The presence of these scripts engraved on rocks also evident that all above-cited scripts had pre-Islamic history.

Inscriptions includes some names such as; Saad, Awathat and Rafadat. Al and Kahl were names of deities which were inscribed too.

Some inscriptions are related to the battle shows. One 12 line inscription is related to the king Dhu Nuwas in which his victory over the Ethiopians had been explained. As per the chronology this event occurred in 512. Till date 3616 Thamudic, 2775 South Arabian and three Nabataean have been found. These inscriptions are the legacy of thousands of caravans.<sup>13</sup> This site is emerging as the most researched rock art time in contemporary times.

Nabataean alphabets are of pre-Islamic era, invented by the Nabateans, which is historically ranked as the power nation that constructed Petra and influence the trade routes from Levant in south to Arabia in north. The patterns and shapes of these scripts are different and does not resemble with any other nation's alphabetic structure.

The inscriptions shows the history of the inhabitants of the land. It begin with the Jews migration in the area which is followed by the Christian settlement. It is observed that the name of Thawban; son of Malik; along with eight other Christians are mentioned in the inscriptions. It is also inscribed that round about in 470, the Christians were oppressed by the Jews and had been martyred. This narration is found in Thawban and Arabic scripts. The inscriptions also reveals that the last King of the Arabia was a Jewish and he was either killed in a combat or died by suicide by riding his horse in the Red Sea.

Heritage of inscription at Bir- Hima in the words of French researcher is described as; "The inscriptions of Hima reveal a strong movement of cultural unification of the Arabs, from the Euphrates to Najran, which manifested itself by the use of the same writing."<sup>14</sup>

#### **Archaeological Findings:**

Bir- Hima provide a view of scattered prehistoric blocks, fences well as dismantled constructions which once utilized as houses, pantries etc. This area particularly and Najran generally considered as land populated by the Jewish community 2,000 years back when ten lost tribes of Israelite tribe weaved a settlement here. Some of the important archeological findings are cited below.

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<sup>12</sup> David Tusing, "Saudi Arabia's Hima cultural area added to UNESCO world heritage list," The National News, July 25, 2021, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/travel/destinations/2021/07/25/saudi-arabias-hima-cultural-area-added-to-unesco-world-heritage-list/>

<sup>13</sup> Tareq Al-Thaqafi, "Historic Hima Well reveals the journeys of Arabia's ancient caravans," Arab News, April 9, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1840351/saudi-arabia>

<sup>14</sup> David, "Before Islam."

**Citadel of Okhdood:**

Al- Okhdood is a site located in the southwestern part of Najran It has experienced many historical eras. It had a castle known as “Citadel of Okhdood”, and more than twenty five buildings. Some archeological excavations have made and some are in process due to which the importance of this site will more increase with time.

The prehistoric fortress of Okhdood, built in 7th-6th BC are located in the southwest of the site. “Al-Okhdood” is an Arabic word which means “The ditch/trench”. On the huge structural tablets related to the boulevard for arriving into the fortress has an image of heavy built horse illustrating Nisean breed of 6th BC under the use of Persian people. The image of the serpent is also found on the building blocks.<sup>15</sup>

The account of the Al-Okhdood is very renowned to the natives. Under advice from the “Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage”, archaeologies are working to seek further remnants. So far, some articles of pottery are excavated which are made up of silver, bronze and glass.<sup>16</sup> The history depicts that “People of Ditch” had burnt alive Christians who refused to convert to their beliefs. This incident is recorded in the form of inscriptions as well as narrated in the Quran in the Surah Al-Burooj. Later on, this site was sacked by the Himyarites (Jews) in 523 CE.

**Theological Building:**

It also shows the fragments of religious building resembles with mosque and constructed in first A. H. Some sculpture such as lion’s head in bronze matter is also found. The Najran Museum has displayed some of this site discoveries for visitors. The religious rituals and remnants of the ancient locals has just started to excavated and more will be known with time.<sup>17</sup>

**Emara Building:**

This building had been constructed near the site of ancient wells 1363 A. H and it is approximately at the center of ancient Najran city. It is the model of traditional architecture in the area, encompassing 65 rooms. This construction has served as a governor office and his Deputy and personal companions (Khawis), later on as telegraph post and also as police headquarters. The building is in the shape of

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<sup>15</sup> Med-O-Med, "Bi'r Hima Rock-art."

<sup>16</sup> About Her, "A Look At Al-Okhdood Archaeological Site In Saudi Arabia," accessed 5 March, 2022, <https://www.abouthere.com/node/33621/lifestyle/travel-food/look-al-okhdood-archaeological-site-saudi-arabia>

<sup>17</sup> Xinhua News, "Hima Cultural Area in Saudi Arabia."

castle having high walls. There were round towers for watch over the castle at its four corners. Now this building has been declared as museum to public.<sup>18</sup>

### **Al-Aan Palace:**

Al- Aan Palce is also known as Sedan Palace. This palace was constructed by Sheikh Mohammed bin Ismail Al-Makrami in 1100 A. H. The owner of the palace was people of Almkarma tribe and it is located at the peak of the Alan Mountains. This was comprised of building blocks and had four vertical floors. The building is surrounded by a mud wall with four towers and a main gate.<sup>19</sup>

### **Petroglyph:**

Great treasure of petroglyph exists in Bir- Hima. One of the important petroglyph goes back to 518 CE. This narrates the story of King Yousif Assar Yathar and his army when they invade the Najran region. It's also indicates the number of causalities and amount of booty won by the King in his campaign. Travelers and armies have left petroglyph since ages to the late twentieth AD epoch. Maximum of these are conserved in original form.<sup>20</sup>

It came to surface that the illustrations on the rocks were engraved dated back 300-200 BC. The legacy of rock petroglyph received the consideration of the Department of Antiquities' in Saudi Arabia in the post 1976 era. First time this art was found by one the expedition member near the well where he made the record of these petroglyph through two hundred and fifty images. <sup>21</sup> Most of these petroglyphs are rather weathered and therefore it is difficult to identify many animal species.

### **So-Called Post Office Rock:**

When we reach at the rock in an open desert area about five kilometers following to the Najran - Wadi Dawasser road it is obvious how it came to its name. Ancient travelers used nearly all rock surfaces to leave the messages and stories to others that what kind of experiences that had encountered while their travelling. The rock

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<sup>18</sup> Robert, "Hima Cultural Area in Saudi Arabia inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage Site list," *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry (MAA)* 17, No. 4, accessed 12 March, 2022, 49.

<sup>19</sup> Mohamed Samir, "Hima Cultural Area: Discover Saudi Arabia's Latest Addition to UNESCO World Heritage Site List," *Leaders*, 29 August, 2021, <https://www.leaders-mena.com/hima-cultural-area-discover-saudi-arabias-latest-addition-to-unesco-world-heritage-site-list/>.

<sup>20</sup> New China TV, "Hima Cultural Area in Saudi Arabia inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage Site list," 27 July, 2021, YouTube Video 1:26, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D4e9ttuNmZU>

<sup>21</sup>"Bir Hima Rock Petroglyphs and Inscriptions," <https://www.touristlink.com/saudi-arabia/bir-hima-rock-petroglyphs-and-inscriptions/overview.htm>.

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art here was created over various periods possibly between 3,000 - 1,000 BC. The oldest rock art was done in low relief, but 70% was engraved over desert varnish covered rock panels and fallen boulders. Some panels are rather large and measure up to five meters square or more. Many images were superimposed by their creators on other early rock art images and therefore making it rather difficult at times to recognize some figures. A high degree of weathering has taken a further toll to identify animal species. Here we find predominantly horse riders holding long hunting lances and short throwing clubs on galloping horses carved in the typical oval style with wide stretched front and hind legs. Most of these images were scratched on rock surfaces covered with desert varnish, but some were also created in deep relief and represent earlier works. The second most frequent images are those of human figures in three different forms, naturalistic, box type and stick figure. One interesting composition also includes a rare scene of fighting men, as horse riding fighters are more common images. A small boulder measuring one and a half meters square is covered with two periods of rock art carvings including an elaborate hunting scene with more than six horse riders hunting ostrich and other animals with long lances or short throwing club. They are accompanied by at least one dog. Interestingly hoof marks are depicted as small circles here. The rock art depictions also include other animals such as camel and ostrich. Some are depicted very naturalistic with the impression of dynamic movements. Lesser appearing animals are ibex, gazelle, oryx and a single cheetah. About 30% of the rock art work is done in low relief, including images of camel and horse riders, humans both female and male, plus one rare palm tree, which is the only tree shown here. Unfortunately various bullet holes destroyed the animal depictions.<sup>22</sup>

### **Drawings Site :**

#### **7.1 Images of Animals:**

The drawing on rocks presents images of camels, goats, geese, accompanied by wild beasts for instant; lions and wolves. Most of the drawing are related to ostriches of Arabic breed and it's seem that it has been used as a symbol of beauty and decoration. The drawings show massive size of the ostriches and it has been drawn in different styles and postures. The drawing of palm trees are also found all over the site, it happened to be the important animal of Bir- Hima.

The oldest image is of over-sized domestic cattle. Few cattle images had been ornamented with lines as well as added symmetrical patterns. The kind of cattle shown in images highly resemble with the one found in Egyptian art, having average to large upward pointing lyre-shaped horns having a minor bulge at shoulders. Images of the sheep with fully fat tail are also found at Bir- Hima.

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas, "Bir Hima: Saudi Rock Art."



The breed of the camel with a patina is discovered which is relatively older than other breeds. In one of the battle scenes a camel is shown with saddle and tassels. Thousands of the images have shown cavalrymen riding on the horses which are non-Arabian breed. The cavalry men were styled with waist coat, laces, swords, spears, curved knives and scimitars. Dots were also illustrated on the skin of horses that depicts war trained status of the horse. The images depict that spears were used by the knights and dogs were trained for goat hunting.

The illustrations show that the climate in this region was cooler in prehistoric days, allowing cattle, ibex, lions, baboons, and even giraffes and ostriches to survive.<sup>23</sup>

### **7.2. Images of Human Begins:**

The drawing of the human beings had large structure and in some pictures men had covered their heads. Men were shown wearing short loin cloths with waist belts. Beard was another substantive feature of men pictures. People mostly wore necklaces, and collars besides some drawings also present the presence of the anklets to produce a musical sound to sing and dance. The musical instruments are also captured whereas in some drawing plots, people were dancing while holding musical instruments.<sup>24</sup>

Female's images in rock art also provide glimpses of day-to-day life of Neolithic and Chalcolithic societies. Some of the female images were of two meters in heights showing no facial features but pronounced lower body characteristics. Hundreds of female images are also discovered having two braids down over their faces with ringlets and even metal tips and forelimb soared in atmosphere, curved from the prod as a symbol of joy.<sup>25</sup> Theoretically, raised arms could be a ritual dancing or praying and worshipping pose. It also could be the ancient indication for a divine status, which many female images represented. A unique depiction with women seated on three legged stools and male pipe player entertaining them might be further proof of the dominant or divine status of women in the southern region during ancient times.<sup>26</sup>

### **7.3. Images of Religious Deities:**

Along with the over-sized human figures, cavalrymen and infantrymen images wielding various weapons and drawings of goddesses, entitled; "Alia or Alliah and Al Lat" are found at various locations at the site. Al- Lat was the most substantial female God of pre-Islamic era. Al-Lat deity had possess the power related to fertility and wars' strength. Whereas, till today the story of ancient goddess Alia is very much alive in the minds of Bedouins as a power hub of fertility and love. The

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<sup>23</sup> Merike Joosep, "Petroglyphs of Bir Hima," Facebook, 30 July 2021, 4:14 am, <https://web.facebook.com/groups/Archaeology.Prehistoric/posts/2023364737812725/>

<sup>24</sup> Al-Thaqafi, "Historic Hima Well."

<sup>25</sup> Med-O-Med, "Bi'r Hima Rock-art."

<sup>26</sup> Thomas, "Bir Hima: Saudi Rock Art."

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illustration of the goddesses are mostly adjacent to the battle scenes. Till date approximately 1293 human drawings, 5121 animal drawings have been discovered.<sup>27</sup>

Female deities images are dominate and all over the south they are very similar almost identical. The identical various images represents the idea that different tribes have more or less same theological concept related to female goddesses. They believed in female gods and consider them the source of healers.

The images of the male gods are devoid of sexual features whereas the female deities' sexual features are enhanced and prominent in every image. Female images are carved as long slender bodies with more of a triangular torso, narrow waist and wide heart shaped buttocks. Moreover, some deities have hairstyles, either of shoulder or waist length.<sup>28</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

The Bir- Hima civilization is fascinating discovery which offers the vast insight over the nomadic and settled life in different eras of history. This area encompasses several sites but the most three important one so far are rock art, wells and archeological sites. This cultural reflection brought by the site are unique in a sense that it fills the gaps related to the past lifestyle of Arabian Desert. It deciphers how the humans, ecology, socio-political cultures had evolved with time. The archeological finding indicates that that people had manage their lives with disciplines and also develop socio-political, economic etc. set ups for the functioning of ancient Arab society. The appraisal of the facts illustrates many features of Bir- Hima that are similar to modern times; such as; water channels, segregation of responsibilities and construction of different departments/institutions in separate buildings. In coming times it will provide more aspects to researchers to work upon.

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<sup>27</sup> Med-O-Med, "Bi'r Hima Rock-art."

<sup>28</sup> Thomas, "Bir Hima: Saudi Rock Art."

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