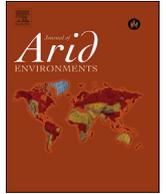




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Foot/sandal prints and ovaloids in the rock art assemblage Ramat Matred, the Negev Desert, Israel

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ABSTRACT

Studying the prints from Ramat Matred, their place within the different engraving phases and their relation to other motifs, abstracts, zoomorphs and inscriptions, several observations can be made referring to their date and possible meaning. Foot and sandal prints are not one of the most common motifs found in the Negev rock art. When examining the data globally, foot/sandal prints account for around 1–2% of images displayed. These prints present a rich variety of forms with many found clustered on a single panel. At Ramat Matred, prints are presented roughly ten times more often than at any other rock art site in the Negev with some 208 examples. These engravings are stylized, some represent feet, others sandals, though most are rather simplified elongated ovaloids with little other detail. Prints appear either as a single print or as a pair, with the feet/sandals set side-by-side or 'stepping' forward.

Looking at the 'Islamic' rock art phase, the relationship between the foot/sandal prints and the formalized Arabic inscriptions, clarifies the cultural distinction and change in religious concepts and traditions that have occurred during the early historic period.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 10 years there has been an increasing awareness of the international importance of the Negev Desert rock art as a cultural heritage resource. The rock art, with many thousands of engravings, date as far back as 3000 BCE, if not earlier, and up to recent times. This assemblage includes figurative imagery such as equids, camelids, canines, ibex and anthropomorphic figures. Alongside this imagery are abstract marks: geometric shapes and symbols. The rock art is usually arranged in distinct clusters, occupying the various boulders and rock outcroppings of the Central Negev. Foot and sandal print petroglyphs can be considered a world phenomenon - found in the rock art assemblages of China, Indonesia, North America, and Northern Europe as well as in the Near East.

This paper discusses this particular engraved image-type and suggests that it once played an important role in the daily lives of the communities that occupied the Negev. Particular attention will

be concentrated on the foot and sandal prints from the Ramat Matred rock art site as these provide important historical/cultural implications, especially in terms of chronology and context.

1.1. The case of the Ramat Matred assemblage

Geographically, Ramat Matred is set in the Negev Highlands, located on the Avdat Ridge. The area receives 50 mm annual rainfall supporting Irano-Turanian vegetation. It is difficult to define the boundaries of the Ramat Matred rock art site as rock art is found almost continuously along the Avdat Ridge and the Negev Highlands. The rock art is found pecked and engraved on outcrops of Eocene hard limestone which have developed a dark patina. At Ramat Matred the rock art is found mainly along the plateau and upper parts of the slopes. Arable lands are found generally 'below' the rock art, next to the riverbeds and along the floodplains.

The Ramat Matred site was surveyed as part of an Israeli Emergency Archaeological Survey, covering a 10 × 10 km stretch of landscape (Lender, 1990). Sites from various prehistoric periods through the Intermediate Bronze Age were noted in the survey. After a hiatus in the Middle Bronze Age, several Iron Age sites and fortress were noted. The area seems to have been deserted a second

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time, around the 10th century BCE to be then repopulated towards the Roman era. Remains from the Roman period include watch towers, small farmstead sites and campsites. Two hundred and thirty three sites dated to the Byzantine-Early Islamic periods were also identified. These present evidence to the great efflorescence witnessed in the area during this period in the survey map of the Ramat Matred area. The Negev appears to have been completely abandoned by the 10th century CE, repopulated around the 18th–19th c. CE. The date of Sheikh Ab'd tomb, set on a hill top along the southern edge of the Ramat Matred where rock art concentrations also occur, is unknown but pre-dates the 18th century CE and is maintained by a local Bedouin community to this day (Galili, 2013, 124–136). A small cemetery with a *terminus post quem* of the Byzantine period is set near the northern edge of one of Ramat Matred's hill tops (*personal observation*).

1.2. History of foot and sandal print research and its classification in the middle east

Following a Czechoslovakian-led survey in Nubia in the early 1970s, expedition team leader Verner (1973, 28–39) formed the first foot and sandal typology. Verner divided the prints into three generic types:

- **Type I**, footprints with indications of toes,
- **Type II**, footprints with no indication of toes, and
- **Type III** for sandal prints, either worn or shod.

The basic structure of Verner's typology, with variants reflecting the way in which the toes and footprint were formed, seems suitable for most engraved prints found in the Mediterranean Basin and Northern Europe but is rarely referred to. This may be related to the fact that with continuous fieldwork and the difference between regions and sites, a number of complex issues concerning the relationship between foot and sandal prints and other engravings, and chronology emerge. For example, foot/sandal print variants found at two rock art sites in the Negev almost double Verner's original 24 variants. Even with the additional number of foot and sandal variants now recognized, a single definitive form prevails in the Negev rock art. This variant consists of an outlined print with no indication of details such as the arch, toes or sandal straps or sole

(Fig. 1). Many of these prints are rectangular in shape with rounded corners or forming a suboval form, what we identify as a slightly degenerated variant of Verner's type II/1. As it is not entirely clear whether certain petroglyphs represent a foot or sandal print, in this paper we cautiously use the term 'print' or 'prints', to refer to footprints, sandal prints and ovaliods.

2. Foot and sandal prints of Ramat Matred

The majority of Negev rock art are petroglyphs: marks of human agency on natural surfaces formed by various techniques of reduction such as incision, pounding, pecking, and abrasion. This assemblage is mostly engraved on limestone bedrock that, over time, developed a distinct dark brown, iron-rich patina crust. Rock art images are configured by pecking out the patina and exposing the lighter-colored limestone underneath. The contrast between the dark patina and the lighter, exposed limestone surface causes more recent petroglyphs to stand out and be visible from a distance. However, in time, the patina begins to reform over the exposed limestone, causing the engravings to become less visible. The hue of the re-patinated engraving element in relation to the other elements on the same panel, can assist in forming a relative chronology (Eisenberg-Degen and Rosen, 2013). As a general rule, the darkest elements of each panel are usually the oldest within the panel sequence.

Alongside the prehistoric rock art of Ramat Matred are Nabatean and Thamudic inscriptions which are dated to the 1st - 2nd century CE (Halloun, 1990, 36*) and Arabic inscriptions dated to the mid 7th–10th century CE (Sharon, 1990, 9*). The Arabic inscriptions may relate to pilgrim activity that took place around the sheikh 'Abd tomb (Lender, 1990, vii) or to the numerous Late Byzantine – Early Islamic sites found throughout the region (Lender, 1990, xxxiii-xxv, Magness, 2003, 149–154). This unusual occurrence of Byzantine but especially Early Islamic sites, Arabic inscriptions, and large concentrations of foot/sandal prints in a relatively limited area, has created a superficial likeliness that the three components are related and all date to the Early Islamic period. The micro-spatial distribution and the relationship between the Arabic inscriptions and the foot/sandal prints however, may suggest otherwise for some of the prints.

Foot/sandal prints represent a meager percentage of the total



Fig. 1. A small panel bearing a single foot/sandal print (Verner's Type II/1), Ramat Matred rock art site, Israel.

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