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Rock Art on Socotra Island/Yemen*

In 1993 I delivered a paper on rock art sites in Southern Yemen at the Seminar for Arabian Studies in London. This paper, later published in the *Proceedings of the Seminar* represents a continuation and completion of my study on the rock art of Northern Yemen, which was published as a supplement to *AION* in 1991. During the London Seminar other archaeologists interested in the same subject asked me to complete my paper forthcoming in the *Proceedings* with the rock pictures of Socotra Island. Socotra is located ca. 230 km east of Rās 'Asīr (Cape Guardafui) in the Indian Ocean (fig. 1). Geographically the island belongs to North-East Africa, but is politically part of Yemen¹.

For the *Proceedings of the Seminar* I did not have the time to fulfill this request. Many of the articles dealing with the history and culture of this island, especially those published in the previous century, were difficult to find and had to be provided by interlibrary loan. The purpose was to check as many publications about Socotra as possible to find reports or mention of graffiti. A glance at the bibliography presented here, listing only works directly concerning our subject, will show that references to the rock pictures of the Island are not very frequent. Furthermore, the same information on sites and graffiti was often merely repeated by different authors.

It is striking that until now only a few sites with graffiti have been discovered on the island. I do not know if this merely reflects the current state of research concerning Socotra. But considering that several archaeological expeditions² have largely traveled and surveyed the island, one may venture to suggest that rock art was probably of little importance there. Though the results of my

* I would like to express here my gratitude to Prof. Umberto Scerrato for his generous advice during the writing of this article and I am grateful to Dr Linda Lappin, Dr Anna Valeria Jervis, Leonardo Jervis and Wolfgang Bartoschek for their kind help.

¹ Already in the *Periplus* the island, called Dioskouridou, ...is subject to the king of the Frankincense country (*Periplus* 31 = Schoff 1912: 34), namely *Eléazos* (= Ill'azz Yaluṭ son of Yada'īl), king of Ḥadramawt., cf. Robin 1991: 13, 23. Cf. also Agatharchides (2nd Century B.C.), V, 105 (= Burstein 1989: 169 and n. 2).

² On the explorations and archaeological researches carried out on Socotra, cf. the fine compilation in Doe 1992: 5-8, see also Naumkin 1993: 84-8.

desk-work seem to be quite modest, I want to present them in this small contribution. This study summarizes all the information known about the subject and may serve as a parameter with which to compare the graffiti of Yemen. It could also be a starting point for further researches on the rock art of the island.

In presenting the graffiti of Socotra, I have followed the example of the two above-cited contributions. First I have given a brief catalogue of the sites with their topographical description, if possible, then a list of the figures depicted and the bibliographical sources. Then follows a short discussion of the motifs and a comparison with the rock pictures found in Yemen.

Sites

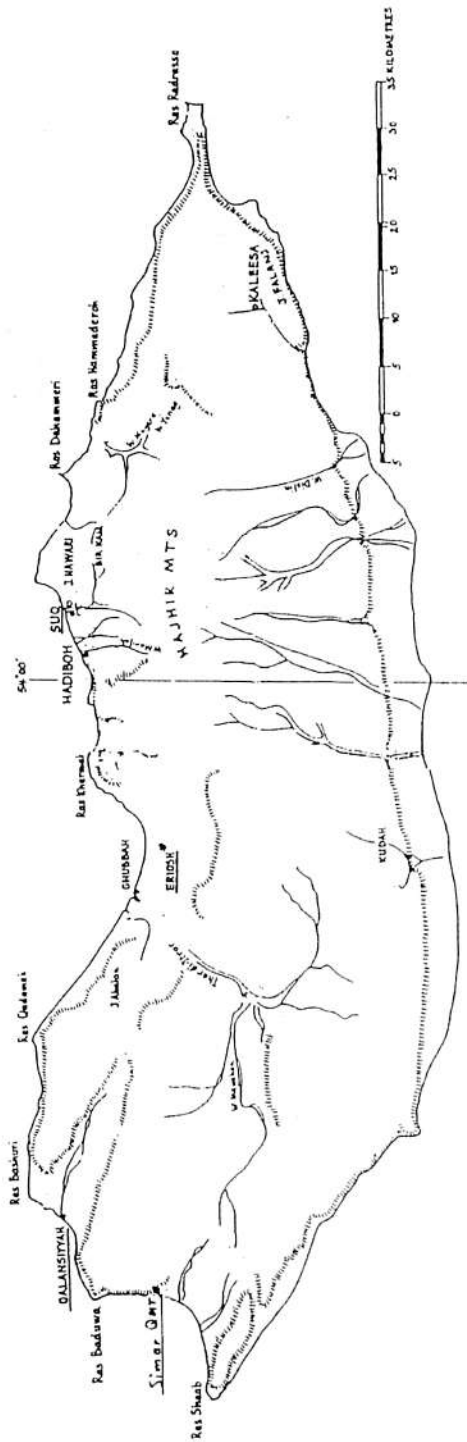
1) Erioš

Erioš is a flat limestone plain located approximately 27 km to the west of Hadibu, 5.5 km east of Ġuba (Khor Dehagihan) and 2.5 km inland from the Socotri north coast. There are three sections of exposed limestone. Graffiti is present only in the central section (about 30 to 230 m east to west) which is partly surrounded by a roughly built wall.

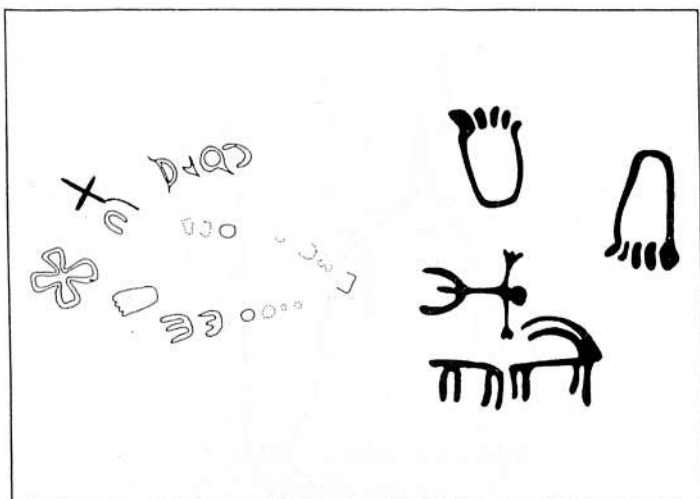
Graffiti of human and animal figures such as ibex, camels, sheep, oxen and snakes are reported (cf. figs. 2-3). Among them is one figure obviously in a posture of prayer («orant»). Crosses are frequent. There is also a figure with a snake's head. One of the pictures reported shows what appears to be a man hunting a camel. Human footprints are numerous. Footprints of camels, sheep, and oxen are also reported. Some of these footprints are small, others are three times natural size. There are also geometric signs and *Wasm* (?) and characters presumed by several authors to be South-Arabian. According to Schweinfurth, Greek and Roman letters also appear along with some signs borrowed from the hieroglyphic script, such as the Uraeus serpent. There are also figures of hands. Geometric signs, characters, crosses and footprints are sometimes found in combination. Most interesting is the frequent representation of a cross placed between two footprints. There are a number of single crosses enclosed in circles. These crosses, according to Bent are exactly like the ones appearing on Ethiopian coins. Some graffiti, reputedly Ethiopic, arranged in serpent-like trails, have been compared by Bent to figures appearing on the steps of a church in Axum and in the hills around Axum. The same author mentions a rock with crude representations of the Ethiopic cross found at the top of a hill in the eastern part of Socotra island (cf. site n° 6). Boxhall also reports graffiti representing «symbolic plants».

The great number of graffiti and the constant repetition of the same motifs induced Wellsted to suppose that Erioš was a place of worship or pilgrimage. Shinnie mentions that copies of some of the graffiti were made by Hunter, and by Riebeck and Schweinfurth but were apparently never published.

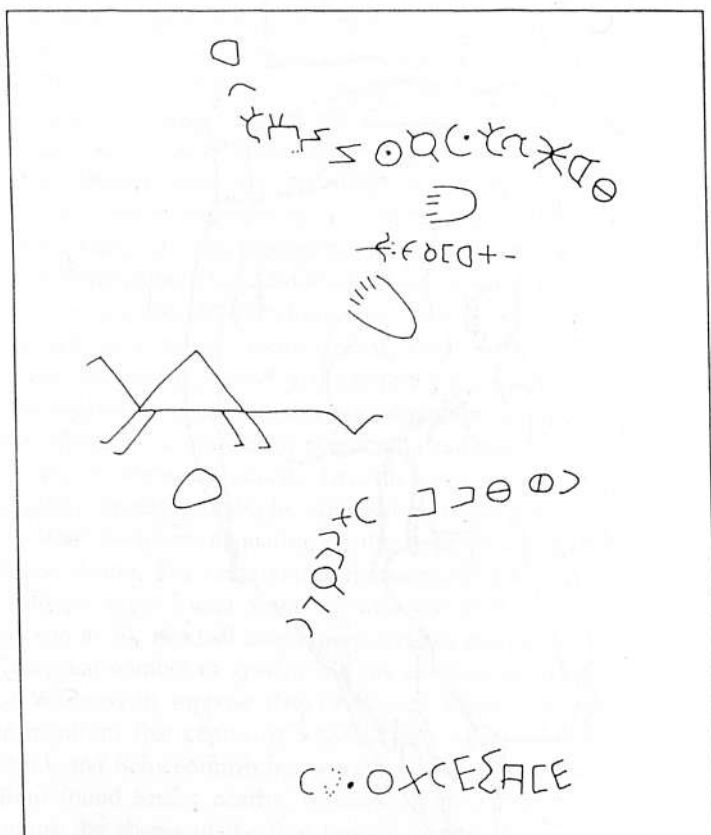
Bent found tombs nearby, resembling those built by the Beja race, who dwell along the shores of the Red Sea north of Suākin, Doe however could not find any tombs at this site.



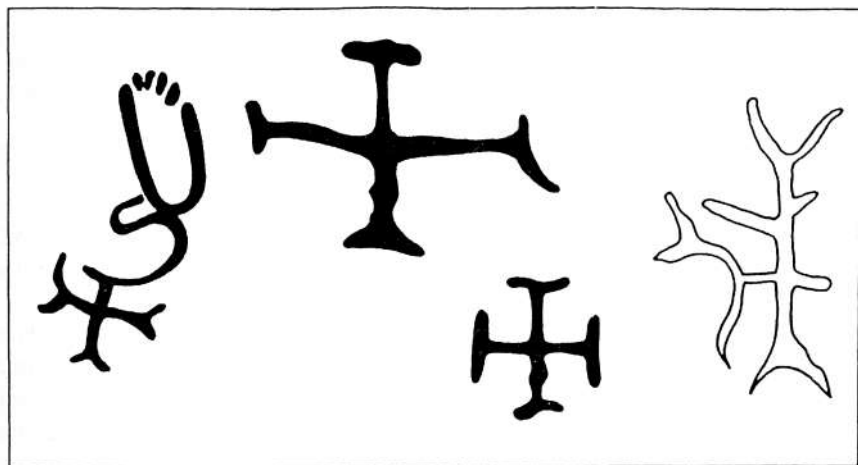
1) Sketch map of Socotra Island, sites with graffiti underlined (map modified after Doe 1992: 110f., map 3).



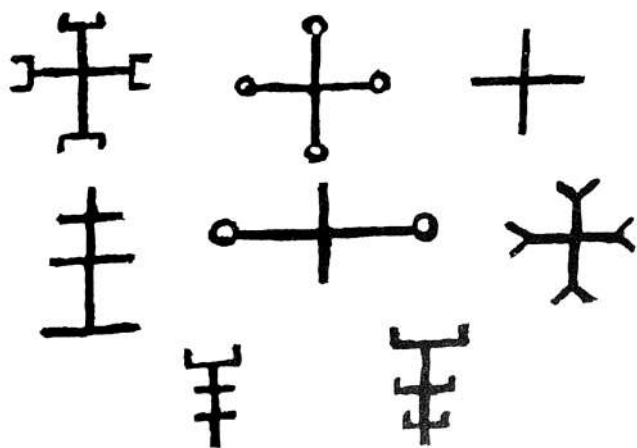
2) Graffiti of Erioš (after Doe 1992: fig. 4).



3) Graffiti of Erioš (after Doe 1992: fig. 12).



4) Graffiti of Sūq (after Doe 1992: fig. 19).



5) Graffiti of crosses of Ditrerre (after Bent 1900: fig. on p. 438).

Ca. 180 m south-west of the graffiti, rectangular structures are located. In 1897 Bent thought these were churches.

Bibl.: Wellsted 1835a: 146f.; Id. 1935b: 155f.; Ravenstein 1876: 120; Hunter 1878: 371; Glaser 1890: 184f.; Schweinfurth 1892: 52; Bent 1900: 354-6; Botting 1958: 205; Shinnie 1960: 107f., fig. 7; Boxhall 1966: 222; Doe 1970: 5f., figs. 8-10, pls. 20, 22; Id. 1971: 248; Id. 1992: 55-7, 108, note 7, figs. 4, 12-3, pl. 35; Naumkin 1988: figs. 17a-d, 18a, b; Id. 1993: 93-6, figs. 4.4.a-d, 4.5. a,b.

2) Sūq

The graffiti are found about 180 m south of the church or mosque of Sūq. They have been sketched on an area of flattish limestone located on the same level as the ground surface.

The predominant figure is that of the cross, usually with arms of equal length. According to Doe, some of the crosses are similar to ones appearing on Portuguese coins; others are fanciful and flowerlike. One of these graffiti resembles an aloe flower and is similar to a carved motif found on the old doors of a house in Hadibu. There is at least one figure of a foot, which forms part of a cross-design (cf. fig. 4).

According to Doe, the crosses may be compared with at least one of the designs appearing near a South-Arabian inscription (CIH 621) dating from the 6th century AD at Ḥuṣn al-Ġurāb near Bīr 'Alī.

It is presumed that the graffiti of Sūq were made during the Portuguese stay on the island. In this context the ruins east of the village of Sūq on the Ġabal Hawari must be mentioned. They may have been part of a fortress used by the Mahri population and stormed by the Portuguese in January 1507, who restored it and renamed it St. Michael's³. In Sūq there is a building presumed by Shinnie and Doe to have been a church⁴.

Bibl.: Doe 1970: figs. 29-30; Id. 1971: 247; Id. 1992: 82, figs. 19-20; Naumkin 1988: figs. 19a, b.

3) Simar Qar (Ġubbat Šuab)

This site is located about 7 km south of Rās Badu, along the bay immediately south of the Ġabal Simar Qar and of the outcrops of Rhiy di-Isfir. *Site 2* (as numbered in Doe's classification) consists of a group of rectangular structures. Near a low, semicircular stone platform is a small piece of limestone with two circular hollows and a geometric design incised on the front face. In Doe's opinion this stone may have been a libation altar. The geometric pattern appeared to him to have affinities with early Southern-Arabian letters.

Bibl.: Doe 1970: 1f., pls. 5-6; Id. 1971: 249; Id. 1992: 45f., fig. 6, pl. 26; Naumkin 1993: 98.

³ On the fortress, cf. Doe 1970: 46f.; Naumkin 1993: 127-9, fig. 4.15.

⁴ Cf. also Naumkin 1993: 131f., fig. 4.17, 1 and 2. In 1983 the Soviet expedition discovered a small ellipsoid structure in the Wādī Qalisan which they presume could also have been a church or chapel, cf. *ibid.* 133.

4) Qallansīya

Bent reports letters and other geometric designs (like water-signs) not far from Haidi village near Qallansīya.

Bibl.: Bent 1900: 351, appendices IV.

5) West end of Socotra island

Botting reports that cave-drawings were discovered on the western end of the island during the Second World War, without giving more detailed information.

Bibl.: Botting 1958a: 206; Id. 1958b: 218.

6) Ditrerre

Bent published in his appendix several crosses of varying design, which he had copied from the rocks of Dihaiterere on the hill Ditrerre, a spur of Hamar (cf. fig. 5). I could not find on the maps available any references indicating this site. In the text one finds a mention, without specification of the location, of a hill in the eastern part of Socotra Island covered with crude figures of the Ethiopic cross. This reference may be connected with the figures above.

Bibl.: Bent 1900: 356; appendices on p. 438.

Notes on the subjects depicted

As far as I know, figures of men and animals have been discovered only at Erioš. One of the human figures there is reportedly in an «Orant» posture with arms raised and open, generally interpreted as a gesture of prayer. Examples of figures in such a posture are frequently found in Southern Arabia. Their chronological setting seems to range from the Bronze Age up to quite recent examples⁵.

The figure with a snake's head and the representations of snakes themselves found at the same place may be connected with some kind of snake-cult, traces of which appear in Socotra folk literature⁶. It is interesting to note that the famous *Periplus maris Erythraei*⁷ tells us that the island was inhabited by many snakes. We must mention also that Golénischef⁸ proposed to identify the «mag-

⁵ Cf. the short discussions with bibl. notes in Jung 1991: 42–4, figs. 10, 13–4, 27, pls. I, IXb; Id. 1994a: 148f., fig. 2, pl. I.

⁶ Cf. on snakes in Socotra literature, Johnstone 1974: 16f., 22; On the graffiti of snakes in Southern Arabia, cf. Jung 1989: 278, pl. XIIb.

⁷ Cf. *Periplus*, 30 (= Schoff 1912: 33). On the Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, cf. also the monography of Huntingford 1980, further Robin 1991.

⁸ Cf. Golénischef 1882: 102–6, 112; Tkatsch 1934: 498. The great master-piece of the literature of the Middle Kingdom, composed probably in the XI or early XII dynasty, is preserved in the

ic island». *A-a-penenka* or *Pa-anch* (= island of the *Genius*), the home of the king of the frankincense country, described in the famous Egyptian *Narrative of the shipwrecked Sailor*, with the island of Socotra. The royal genius of the island had the form of a snake. Nowadays scholars anyway suggest that the island described in the Papyrus, is a mythical place like the island of Paradise⁹.

Lastly, we have the graffiti arranged in serpent-like trails at Erioš described above, supposed by some scholars to be Ethiopic (cf. fig. 3)¹⁰.

A scene showing a camel-hunt is known also from Northern Yemen¹¹. The depicted animals belong to the species frequently represented in South Arabian graffiti. Unlike South Arabian graffiti here pictures of horses, the animal most frequently depicted in Yemen rock art¹², are missing.

A feature unknown in Southern Arabia are the footprints of animals reported from Socotra, whereas human footprints and pictures of hands are also found frequently in northern and southern Yemen rock art sites¹³. A combination unknown to the Yemen graffiti is the cross placed between two footprints, often found at Erioš. Furthermore in Sūq a footprint as a part of a cross-pattern has been found (cf. fig. 4). Certainly the many depictions of the cross are of Christian origin¹⁴. The shape of these crosses has been compared by some authors to those found on Ethiopian or Portuguese coins (see above). Judging from the descriptions and from the few illustrations of these crosses given in the literature (cf. fig. 5), they¹⁵ are similar in shape to the *Latin cross* (*crux immissa*), the *Greek*

Hermitage at Petersburg. The *Pa-anch* of the Egyptian papyrus reappears as the land of incense *Panchaea* in Vergil's *Georgica*, II, 136.

⁹ Cf. Guglielmi 1980 and Simpson 1984 with rich bibl. The products of the island are in any case typically African and characteristic of *Punt* like elephant tusks and giraffe tails. The serpent has been identified as a manifestation of Re-Amun and the 75 serpents as the forms of Re in the litany of Re.

¹⁰ Cf. Doe 1992: fig. 12.

¹¹ Graffiti found by the IsMEO expedition at Ġabal al-'Asāl, cf. Jung 1994b: 235, fig. 4, with a short discussion on the question of camel-hunting or raiding, see also Macdonald 1990.

¹² On the fauna presented in South Arabian rock art, see the notes in Jung 1989: passim; Id. 1991: 49; Id. 1994b: 232f., fig. 2 (= distribution of the different animal species represented in Northern Yemeni rock pictures).

¹³ On the footprints, cf. the notes with bibl. in Jung 1991: 48f.; Id. 1994a: 149; Id. (forthcoming) on graffiti showing hands, Id. 1991: 47f., figs. 12, 28; Id. 1994a: 149, fig. 6, see also Robin 1991-93: 143f., figs. 36-7, on the symbol of the right hand in ancient Yemen.

¹⁴ The population of the island was probably converted to Christianity by the Abyssinians during their reign over Arabia. But according to an old tradition they were converted by St. Thomas A.D. 52 while on his way to India. When the Portuguese under Tristão da Cunha and Alphonso d'Albuquerque seized Socotra in 1507 (abandoned in 1511) they found that a part of the people were still Christians. Padre Vincenzo, a Carmelite, visiting the Island in the seventeenth century discovered the last traces of Christianity, cf. Tkatsch 1934: 499 with bibl. notes.

¹⁵ On the iconography of the different cross forms, cf. Dinkler & Schubert 1970: 569-71, with fig.; Stafford & Ware 1974: 65-67, with figs.; Restle, ed., 1991: 25-30, figs. 2-3. See also the rich collection of pre-Christian and Christian cross emblems in Petrie's classical book on decorative patterns, 1930: pls. LVII-III, LIX-LX.

According to Hunter, 1877: 370, who visited the island in the last century, the sign of the cross was still in use in Socotra on the headstones of graves.

or *equilateral cross*, the *cross potent* with the straight arms finishing with cross-beams, the *Greek cross* with arched extremities or ending in knobs or bifurcations. There are also crosses enclosed in circles or in squares. Others are plant-like and present fanciful configurations. Let us return to the footprints of Socotra Island, mentioning three interesting features. First, the inscription or inscription-like signs between two footprints at Erioš, which no doubt had a magical or religious meaning connected directly with the footprints (cf. fig. 3). Second, graffiti of footprints were found next to an «orans» figure (and ibex, cf. fig. 2). We can only suppose, assuming that both representations had a religious meaning, that these graffiti are interrelated and are not simply set side by side. We may mention here a rock panel of the Ġabal Haquab at Fuğairah/ Emirates, which shows a footprint beside two orantes¹⁶. Third, the two footprints of the same panel at Erioš (cf. fig. 2) are pointed in two opposite directions. In the Roman world examples of figures, graffiti and reliefs showing two pairs of footprints pointed in two opposite directions have also been found. According to Guarducci¹⁷, who dedicated an article on the phenomenon of footprints in Rome and the Mediterranean world, these Roman examples symbolize the pilgrim's thankfulness for having reached the sanctuary, his appeal for a safe return home or gratitude after a safe journey (*pro itu et reditu*).

The common occurrence with the cross would seem to prove that the footprint graffiti are also of Christian origin. Anyway we cannot ignore that footprints are an extremely characteristic feature of Indian religious conception¹⁸. As early as the *Periplus*, Indians living in Socotra are mentioned¹⁹, and the name of the island, too, is thought by some scholars to derive from the Sanscrit *dvipa sukhatara* (= the island abode of bliss)²⁰. On the other hand these Christian symbols may have been added later in an apotropaic manner to rock pictures of a more ancient or different religion.

The small piece of limestone, perhaps an altar, with two hollows found at Simar Qar represents one of the few examples of cup-holes known in the Yemen²¹,

¹⁶ Many thanks to Grégoire de Ceuninck, Geneva, who kindly sent me the preliminary report of the research of the Fuğairah rock pictures in which a drawing of this panel appears, 1995: fig. at p. 24.

¹⁷ Cf. Guarducci 1942-43: 318-21, figs. 8-9. On more recent discoveries of footprints in the Roman world, especially in baths, see now Dunabin 1989: 41f. with notes.

¹⁸ Cf. Castiglione 1971.

¹⁹ *The inhabitants (of Socotra) are few and they live on the coast towards the north, which from this side faces the continent. They are foreigners, a mixture of Arabs and Indians and Greeks, who have emigrated to carry on trade there, from the Periplus*, 30 (= Schoff 1912: 33). See also Agath. V, 105 (= Burstein 1989: 169): *Merchants sail to these islands from everywhere, but especially from Potana, which Alexander founded beside the Indus River...* Potana is identified with Patala, a port near modern Hyderabad at the head of the Indus River delta. There Alexander the Great repaired his ships (325 B.C.) prior to his voyage to Babylon, cf. Burstein, *ibid.*: note 3 with bibl. notes.

²⁰ Cf. Tkatsch 1934: 497 con bibl. notes; Huntingford 1980: 103, n. 30.

²¹ I know actually only two other sites in Yemen with cup-holes, one is in the Wādī 'Uš, cf. Jung 1990: 49 with a short discussion on cup-holes in general, pl. Xa, the other in Beitwan Mugraf Sa'ad/Wādī Ġirdān. There a footprint is found with a circular bowl beside it, cf. Doe 1971: 195; Jung 1994: 142, 149, note 6.

whereas more cup-holes have recently been discovered in Oman²². Sacrificial liquids like blood, milk or food were once possibly poured into them. Padre Vincenzo may possibly have witnessed such a rite in the seventeenth century. He reports that the Christians of Socotra ...had churches called *moquame* ... and they daily anointed with butter an altar²³.

Little can be said about the people, who sketched the graffiti, and when they were made. We have already suggested that the crosses were made by Christians. These could be Socotrians themselves or perhaps the Portuguese, who conquered the island in the early 16th century (1507)²⁴.

Several scholars sustain that the geometric pattern resembling characters at Erioš may have affinities with ancient South Arabian letters. In their opinion these affinities show a link between Socotra island and the mainland in pre-Islamic times. The Soviet expedition, after a *detailed examination* (sic!) of the same graffiti, was unable to identify any characters which resemble South-Arabian epigraphic writing and presumed that the makers of the graffiti were possibly imitating writing which they might have seen but did not understand²⁵.

With regard to the Erioš rock pictures, Naumkin does not discuss in detail the crosses depicted and presumes that the graffiti there date from the second half of the first millenium B.C going back to the same period as the cemetery excavated at Raquf²⁶. The supposed affinities linking graffiti with South-Arabian, Greek or Roman letters or with the hieroglyphic script noted by some scholars at Socotra still requires a detailed examination of these signs in the field.

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²² Cf. the examples in Jäckli 1980: 88, photographs at pp. 89-92.

²³ After Bent 1900: 355.

²⁴ On the Portuguese on Socotra, cf. Serjeant 1974: 157-9, pls. 10-2, fig. 2 and passim.

²⁵ Cf. Naumkin 1993: 96.

²⁶ At Raquf on the Eastern plateau the Soviet-Yemen expedition found a workshop for making flint tools. Close to Raquf they also excavated a small cemetery with dolmen-like structures. The material discovered in the graves did not allow them to propose a narrow date for them, but similar burial sites in Southern Arabia, Oman, South India and the Arabian Gulf area may indicate that the Raquf graves may date from the second half of the first millennium BC, see Naumkin 1993: 93 with bibl. notes.

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