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# ***TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION***

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## **OLD *WUSŪM* AND NEW *RUMŪZ*: A NOTE ON THE VISUALISATION OF THE IDENTITY OF THE SINAI BEDOUINS**

**Abstract.** The paper investigates the visualisation of Bedouin tribal identity over time. The first part provides a detailed account of the phenomenon of *wasm* in the Arabian Peninsula within Bedouin culture. For centuries, *wasm* has served as a distinguishing sign among the Bedouins, and has been used mainly for camel and cattle branding, but also in rock art, carpet weaving, tattooing, etc. The second part is an attempt to lay the foundations for future research into the new phenomenon of tribal codes consisting of Arabic numerals and Latin letters. These codes are said to have gained popularity in Saudi Arabia in the early 21st century and subsequently spread to neighbouring regions. While these codes have an obscure origin and may not have a direct connection to *wasm*, they are nevertheless intertwined with it in discussions of the nature and functions of such symbols. The paper does not provide a comprehensive account of this subject, which would require more extensive fieldwork. Instead, it offers a perspective on how these codes are used in South Sinai as a means of asserting the visibility and presence of the Bedouin community among Egyptians and foreign lifestyle migrants.

**Keywords:** *wasm*, camel brand, tribal symbol, South Sinai, Arabian Peninsula, digital ethnography, visualisation, Bedouin, ethnic identity, petroglyphs, graffiti

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### **On the Essence of *Wasm***

As humans developed language and abstract thought, they became increasingly able to perceive the world around them in a more detailed and analytical way. This process led to the emergence of the human as an optical being. The relentless pursuit of optimal strategies for survival and adaptation to the environment necessitated the development of the most effective means of transmitting information in the space-time continuum. One of these methods involved engraving of visually distinguishable, stable images that represented the most valuable objects. The images were employed in intraspecific communication to address pragmatic issues. Humans depicted themselves and scenes of their interaction with the animals and plants that constituted the basis of their diet.

Simultaneously with figurative compositions demonstrating an understanding of the uniqueness and multiplicity of specific objects and qualitative differences between humans and different animal species, unrepresentative simple and composite geometric shapes appeared. The meaning embedded in them probably expressed the need to visually represent abstract, mentally observable functional differences through an extremely simplified depiction of certain associative intermediary objects. The geometric shapes acquired a specific, coordinated meaning and became signs. The invention of these signs was driven by the desire to facilitate their recognition and correct interpretation by others, based on comparisons with abstract concepts stored in memory. The

emergence of distinctive signs can be attributed to the perception of being part of one of the numerous collectives of biologically related individuals which, like other similar collectives, exercised autonomy in the management of economic activities.

The primary conventional distinctive signs demarcated the habitat zone and protected the limited resources from unwanted encroachment by extraneous human groups. In a similar manner, many species of territorial animals use a chemical communication strategy and emit scent signals. The distinctive signs that circulate in different ethno-cultural environments have a semantic independence. At the same time, they expand their repertoire by borrowing graphic elements from neighbouring writing systems. Despite the emergence and development of permanent, non-intuitive sign systems, which allow the coding and recognition of long and complex messages with great accuracy, the effectiveness of signs containing an idea that goes beyond the image remains unaffected.

The Arabian distinctive signs, dating back to the Neolithic period, have been found to accompany numerous other samples of anthropogenic rock engravings with diachronic layers for several millennia. In the present day, we can observe the functional and typological transformation of this phenomenon of the past, preserved and updated by cultural tradition.

Since the end of the 19th century, Western explorers and travellers who encountered the vastness of Arabia have noticed a variety of geometric brands (coll. *wasm*, pl. *wusūm*) on the bodies of camels, indicating the tribal affiliation of the animals' owners, the Bedouins. Similar distinctive signs have been found in a large number of engravings on rocks, on piles of stones along the main migratory and caravan routes and near campsites, on stone fences around wells and cisterns, on the slopes of *wādīs*, and in burial grounds. H. R. P. Dickson highlighted a number of characteristics of the phenomenon of *wasm* in the Bedouin world:

All camels are branded with tribal marks. *Wasm* is never placed on banners or war flags. Tribes have dozens and dozens of different brands in accordance with the number of sections and subsections into which they are divided, or the number of their *shaykhs* who think they ought to have their own distinguishing mark for their camels [1].

In his travel journal, the French explorer Ch. Huber observed that camel brands are schematic images of specific household items and implements from the daily life. Thus, the Bedouins associate the corresponding *wasm* with the name of the object it represents [2].

After the rainy season, Bedouins from different tribes would lead their camels to green pastures for a long period of grazing. A brand with a distinctive sign helped members of the tribe to identify their camels in a large herd, for example at a waterhole, or to find an animal that had been stolen. The Bedouins regularly used their distinctive signs to mark the territories of their habitat and the water sources that belonged to them. The situational diversity of distinctive signs may be associated with the addition of minor graphemes to an already existing old *wasm* within

closely related collectives in order to avoid confusion. This may be the case, for example, when a father and an adult son graze camels on a common pasture, but a change of ownership may lead to the abandonment of a technical *wasm* with additional graphemes [3]. Scratched into stone and even sand, distinctive signs signalled the recent presence of certain tribal groups in a given location, or the direction of their future movement [4].

Wusūm, as signs of ownership and affiliation to specific sections or subsections of numerous tribes, were used primarily to prevent undesirable but unavoidable property conflicts in the conditions of the fiercest struggle for survival, which could lead to prolonged and bloody wars. Moreover, the Bedouins believed that wusūm could help prevent fatal mistakes, not only by humans but also “by Allāh”. Murray offers an illustrative anecdote about a Bedouin from al-Tiyāhā tribe whose homeland of Wādī al-‘Arīsh was suddenly flooded. The man became infuriated and screamed: “I am a Tihi! I am a Tihi! God, if you don't believe me, look at the brand on my camel!” [5].

Isolated cases of documentation and classification of Bedouin *wasms* were of practical importance in understanding the social structure and relationships of the Bedouin tribes and their sections and subsections that controlled certain areas [6]. The first attempts to compare the valid camel brands with the images of the distinctive signs of the distant and recent past, engraved on rocks and stones, were made with the aim of solving the problems of ethnogenesis and reducing the uncertainties of historical knowledge. The researchers also sought to establish the relationship between the distinctive signs of tribal affiliation and the ancient writing systems of Arabian epigraphy [7]. Ch. M. Doughty writes:

The frontispieces [of rock-cut monuments in Madā'in Šālīh] are often over-scored with the idle *wasms* of the ancient tribesmen. I mused to see how often they resemble the infantile Himyaric letters [8].

In the context of ancient Arabic poetry, the image of a camel with a *wasm* on its body serves to emphasise the rivalry between different tribes. In a poem by al-Jumayh (6th century CE), the protagonist laments a quarrel with his wife and reports that she has left him with a rider whose camel was “branded in the angle of the lower jaw”. The term *malhūz*, as a type of *wasm*, refers to a representative of another tribal section who, out of a sense of superiority, encouraged a woman to mock her ex-husband because he had lost his former wealth in camels [9]. The al-Sira al-Nabawiyya contains the poetic lines of Abū Ṭālib (ca. 535 — 619 CE) in the context of the declaration of Mecca's special status as a centre of pilgrimage for numerous Arab tribes, whose representatives used to arrive on their *rikāb muwassama* — “camels marked on the shoulders or neck, tamed, between six and nine years old” [10] — to participate peacefully in the trade fair — *mawsim* — safe from tribal wars and raids.

The Qur'ānic text indirectly mentions the tradition of branding animals with negative connotations by using metaphors of nomadic life. The idea of the doom of critics of the prophetic message is expressed in the threat of

painful punishment with red-hot metal: “We shall brand him upon the muzzle (*sa-nasimu-hu ‘alā l-khurṭūmi*)” (Q 68:16); “and therewith their foreheads and their sides and their backs shall be branded (*fā-tukwā bi-hi jī-bāhu-hum wa-junūbu-hum wa-zuhūru-hum!*)” (Q 9:35). In these two passages, the roots *w-s-m* and *k-w-y* are semantically synonymous and recall the traditional method of healing disease by cauterising various parts of the human body according to a certain scheme and in the form of various combinations of geometric shapes [11].

The term *wasm* shows its cultural significance in the calendar cycle of Arabian nomads and semi-sedentary pastoralists. It refers to the longest and most important rainy season of the year. From pre-Islamic times until the beginning of the 20th century, Bedouins determined the change of the seasons based on a variety of factors, including their astronomical observations. The stars were important for orientation in space during night-time crossings of the desert, as well as for regulating agricultural work and grazing. For the Bedouins of northern Arabia, Sinai and the Negev, the season comes into its own when a cluster of the Pleiades appears on the eastern horizon at nightfall, and is called *wasm al-thurayyā*, or *al-wasm*. The season lasts about 75 days, beginning in late October and ending with the appearance of Sirius in the dark sky in mid-January. The *wasmī* rains, which fall mainly in the first third of the season, facilitate the prolific growth of grasses and the expansion of vital pastures. In the southern region of the Arabian Peninsula, the season of the most abundant *wasmī* rains occurs in the spring, according to the solar calendar. The influence of celestial bodies on weather and wildlife has been a subject of interest since ancient times. It can be traced back to samples of pre-Islamic poetry analysed by medieval scholars [12]. Meanwhile, anthropological field material collected in the early 20th century in North Arabia and the Syrian desert [13], and in the 1970s in Sinai and the Negev, reflects the poetic images preserved in Bedouin memory of the knowledge of the past, and remains an important part of their oral creativity [14].

In the 1930s, the Middle East began a transition from nomadism to sedentism, driven by the emergence of nation-states, the development of the oil industry and the introduction of new technologies. This process intensified from the middle of the 20th century. In the extreme conditions of the endless desert, the camel is no longer the optimal means of rapid movement and transport of goods. As a result, it has lost its status as a means of accumulating wealth and is no longer the main medium of exchange.

Today, the nomadic way of life is in decline, as technological advances and a number of other factors have led to a decline in the camel population in the Middle East. This trend is depressing, as the camel's valuable qualities have shaped the material and spiritual lives of the Bedouin for several millennia. Despite the different political and economic circumstances in different countries, there is a widespread belief in the importance of camel husbandry in maintaining the traditional Bedouin way of life [15].

The phenomenon of *wasm* as a marker of tribal affiliation is evident in traditional Bedouin weaving [16]. As a domain of female self-expression, this type of artistic

craft facilitates the preservation of tribal identity in the context of changing socio-economic structures of society. In the 1980s, J. T. Hilden observed that the geometric patterns on traditional Bedouin rugs were directly related to the brands on different parts of the camel's body. In fact, women who maintained the traditions of nomadic life introduced tribal distinctive signs into the decoration of their products. The attempt to establish the identity of woven patterns with the *wasms* of certain tribal groups raises the problem of the museification of traditional skills and knowledge. With the advent of cheaper and easier to use materials, new technologies and ready-made industrial products, the need for the energy-intensive production of household items from livestock wool using natural dyes and simple tools has disappeared. The loss of utilitarianism and ordinariness results in the acquisition of a handmade object by the art market, where its value is enhanced. “For collectors of weavings, location of origin is one of the primary concerns. I believe that by understanding the use of *wasm* in weaving, we may be able to identify their origins” — writes Hilden [17]. However, the evidence of consultations with renowned experts on local customs and the study of relatively rare publications led the researcher to conclude that the rules governing the use of one or another graphic representation of *wasm*, assigned to one or another tribal collective, were less strictly observed at that time. The author emphasises that women who continue to weave traditionally are interested in decorating their products not only with *wasm*-like patterns, but also with Arabic and English words or graphemes [18]. Researchers of al-Sadū weaving in the Arabian Gulf also note the representation of tribal identity in textiles through the *wasm*, confirming that the once widespread use of a tribal distinctive sign is now giving way to personal signs of contemporary weavers and brand logos [19].

Epigraphic studies in Arabia, which began in the 1970-80s, have produced a number of successes in dating rock art in order to correlate it with archaeological, cultural and technological time frames. The analysis of a series of figurative engravings has clarified certain questions concerning the chronology of the appearance and domestication of the camel in the Arabian Peninsula, as a consequence of climatic changes that provoked a radical shift in the economic landscape and the abandonment of agriculture and sedentary pastoralism in central Arabia in favour of a nomadic lifestyle. An integrated approach to the study of the whole range of petroglyphs of different types has enabled researchers to focus on the many repetitive and abstract features common to different periods [20]. M. Khan, an expert on petroglyphs in Saudi Arabia, notes that, despite the high status of the camel in the nomadic society, “it was not a totemic animal and never worshipped or considered as a sacred animal even in pre-Islamic period. However it was sacrificed as an offering to the deities and god” [21]. Similarly, the distinctive signs do not reveal any direct link with religious worship and belief in the supernatural.

The ever-increasing need to preserve the historical past and disappearing traditions in the face of the urbanisation's relentless onslaught has prompted reflection on the origins and evolution of the *wasm*, sparking an inter-

nal interest in collecting and publishing the corps of the valid *wusūm* of various tribes and their numerous sections [22]. Tribal distinctive signs in Saudi Arabia have gradually acquired the status of a link between past and present, and seem to be an important visual component of Bedouin identity.

Recent extensive studies of the petroglyphs of the Negev desert have allowed valuable conclusions to be drawn about the date of the last wave of Bedouin migration from Arabia in the 18th and 19th centuries, the characteristics of their economic activities adapted to the landscape, and the methods of territorial division through the various methods of applying tribal distinctive signs to resistant surfaces [23]. The distinctive signs on the graves may reflect the peculiarities of the Bedouin historical consciousness and deeply archaic mythological layers about the origin of man from earth and stone. Researchers of the Negev petroglyphs suggest that “for the Bedouin familiar with the desert environment, *wusūm* performed like signs on a gatepost: they announced to visitors the protocols for engaging with a specific locality” [24].

It should be noted that almost all researchers of the *wasm* phenomenon agree that the variability of the distinctive signs in their visual embodiment and location on the animal's body is related to the flexibility and instability of the branched and living tribal structure of the nomads in space and time, and therefore it cannot be an absolutely universal tool for solving practical problems of accurate dating and attribution when comparing *wasms* belonging to different time periods [25].

Modern anthropological studies of the Bedouin of Sinai and the Negev reflect the problem of the economic and cultural significance of *wasm*. Due to regional conflicts, constant political and ideological pressures, limited natural resources and global economic changes, Bedouin tribal collectives in these regions experience multiple difficulties in adequately maintaining their traditional way of life, based on a harmonious combination of agriculture and semi-nomadic animal husbandry. The breeding and maintenance of camels is a costly enterprise, and the limited number of camels currently used is mainly in the tourism industry [26].

In conditions of marginalisation and poverty, the Bedouin are searching for strategies to preserve their own identity, which is expressed in an inseparable holistic reproduction of the biological and social aspects of

human existence. Intuitively responding to the orientalist demands of the tourism industry, the Bedouins project to the outside world the trendy idea of preserving the fragile ecological balance of the earth they consider their own, positioning themselves as guardians of nature. Within the community, the Bedouin display a characteristically rational and pragmatic perception of their existence, masterfully using the peculiarities of their dialect and their excellent command of figurative poetic language to protest against the authoritarian indifference of the authorities and the invasion of their land by outsiders, to ridicule the dominant culture or to lament the results of its influence. They have no effective incentives for political activity to defend their civil and property rights, but they manage to maintain their complex tribal structure and a special system of values based on ideas of honour within the framework of customary law [27].

S. Lavi's impressive anthropological work, based on her unique experience of living among the al-Muzayna tribe in Sinai during the Israeli occupation of 1967—1979/82, contains a single example of the use of *wasm* in a rather extraordinary rite of passage. In keeping with the traditions of Bedouin hospitality, the old man who took a young Israeli woman into his home decided to make her a *ṭanīb*, which means a “person with a fictitious kinship to protect” [28]. The old man made her hold on to a symbolic pole supporting a corner in the courtyard that pointed towards Mecca; then, using the blood of a goat slaughtered for the subsequent shared meal, he drew on Lavi's forehead “a design like a backwards L followed by a straight up-and-down stroke” [29]. Later, as Lavi notes, she found out that “this was a *wasm* of the old man's phratry, branded with hot irons onto camels' necks in case they got lost, tattooed on some women's foreheads or on the backs of the hands of those men and women who wanted it as a sign of belonging to the phratry, and also marked on hut doors for good luck and on storage boxes for identification” [30]. G. W. Murray describes the legal nuances of the same custom, but says nothing about the symbolic application of a tribal *wasm* to the forehead of a “refugee who has taken hold of a tent peg” [31].

In a purely utilitarian way, but not too strictly, the Sinai Bedouins continue to use the traditional *wasms*. At the same time, in constructing the identity, they resort to additional identifying visual images that initiate a specific discourse in this regard.

### New Codes of Tribal Affiliation

The impetus for considering the historical context and fundamental issues of the *wasm* phenomenon came from an observation made by Olga Slepukhina during her occasional field experience in South Sinai [32].

In teaching Arabic to her friends who had moved to South Sinai a year ago, Olga's aim was to facilitate the learning process and help them to adapt to their new life in an Arabic-speaking environment. The teacher set her students the task of photographing all the inscriptions they wanted to understand and translate together. In addition to a plethora of graffiti, advertisements and the Ḥajj greetings, the students photographed a cryptic inscription,

“F-15”, and reported coming across it frequently, on walls, fences and vehicles (*figs. 1—2*). Unable to give an immediate answer as to the meaning and purpose of this alphanumeric combination, the teacher turned to social media [33], which tends to be more useful in such cases than standard search engines such as Google. The first steps in unravelling the mystery were taken through the TikTok platform. It was discovered that Bedouin tribes have been actively using different combinations of numeric and alphabetic symbols as *distinctive codes* of tribal affiliation for some time, and that this practice has spread throughout the region traditionally inhabited by

Bedouins. In South Sinai, for example, al-Jabāliyya tribe, who live near the famous St Catherine's Monastery, uses "E-11", Tarābīn uses "F-70", Ḥuweitāt uses "111", and the aforementioned "F-15" code belongs to al-Muzayna, the largest tribe in the region.

Arabian media report that this is a relatively new phenomenon that has spread in recent years, especially among young people. Although the exact date of the appearance of these tribal symbols, which we have agreed to define as codes (coll. *ramz*, pl. *rumūz*), is obscure, it is likely that they first appeared in Saudi Arabia and later spread throughout the neighbouring region — Jordan, the Negev, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates and the Sinai Peninsula. The earliest mention of these codes that we could find was in the Saudi digital newspaper *Al-Riyadh* in an article published in September 2007. Aḥmad al-Jamī'a gives a detailed account of the phenomenon of tribal codes and suggests that they are mainly used to express pride in the strength of the tribe [34]. To provide a list of possible origins, he uses the codes of some Arabian tribes as an example: some people from the 'Utayba tribe, as al-Jamī'a claims, attribute their *ramz* "511" to GMC cars, which are considered to be the most powerful, while others trace it back to the tribal *wasm* — a circle that became a "5" and two lines, so-called "hammers", that turned into "11". There is also a more religious but also a more dubious explanation: "511" is the page where *sūrat 'al-Faḥr* begins in one of the popular editions of the Qur'ān; and the political one, "511", was a number attributed to a candidate in some elections in one of the Gulf countries who belonged to this tribe, and then it went around and other tribes also got some numbers or alphanumeric combinations as their *rumūz* [35].

But while the exact origin is uncertain, and explanations for the codes' meaning abound, some recur more frequently than others, notably the comparison between the *wasm* and the *ramz*, whether it be that the people who came up with the idea were merely inspired by the ancient tradition of branding camels with the *wasm*, or that they are its modern replicas: "The numbers were set by the organising committee of the King Abdulaziz International Camel Festival to represent a specific tribe. And the codes are the tribal *wasms* for the cattle and camels" [36].

However, even if this explanation does point to the original source of the phenomenon, not all tribes participated in the Festival and had to invent the codes themselves. Some tribes in South Sinai also have codes that can be traced back to their traditional camel branding, for example the mentioned above *ramz* of the Jabāliyya tribe is "E-11", and the *wasm* of this tribe looks like this Latin letter [37].

It is also worth noting that while some are inspired by the centuries-long tradition of putting *wasms* on camels and cattle, others see a problem with this source of inspiration: "Numbering is only for animals. And unfortunately, we are proud of these numbers and have forgotten that we are Muslims in the love of one God" [38]. Another Facebook user echoes the previous quote: "A man does not define his worth by a number" [39]. Other critics argue that the tribal codes are not legitimate because they have no historical background and are therefore meaningless fantasy. And while some condemn the

codes for their similarity to *wusūm*, others suggest using *wasm* as a distinctive sign of tribal affiliation instead of these new numbers and Latin letters.

As we can see, the *wasm* phenomenon could serve as both an inspiring reference and a meaningful source for the creation of tribal codes. However, the question of the origin of a new visual symbolism is of secondary importance. What is more significant is the similarity between the old *wusūm* and the new *rumūz* in terms of their functional purpose. In this regard, it should be emphasised once again that *wasm* indicates belonging to a collective, ownership of property, and therefore symbolises high social cohesion. In his work on tribal pilgrimages to the tombs of the saints in South Sinai, E. Marx comments on the current state of tribal organisation: "... there are not even constant reminders of its [meaning — a tribe as a political group] existence, such as tribal identification marks. Even the tribal camel brands are rarely applied these days" [40].

The situation changed, however, when *rumūz* became popular. They are used within local communities to express the joy of being a proud al-Muzaynī, Jabālī, etc. On the TikTok platform, most of the comments on the videos with these tribal codes are very short and contain words such as "honour" (*sharaf*), "pride" (*fakhr*) and "greatness" (*ʿazama*) and their synonyms. Thus, these codes support the sense of belonging to the tribe and facilitate the process of self-validation.

A number of journalists and historians have criticised this new way of demonstrating tribal affiliation, fearing the rise of tribalism and the revival of old tribal conflicts. In our view, these codes are neither a cause nor a consequence of the deterioration of intertribal relations. On the contrary, we dare to suggest that they play a unifying role: in these roll-calls being of tribal ancestry is more important than belonging to any particular tribe. On social media, lists of tribal codes are often presented on a single slide (fig. 3), with an appeal to all participants to mention their tribe in the comments. Each commenter is welcomed with traditional greetings, accompanied by emojis of an eagle, a smiling face, a muscular arm, a crown, a heart, and so on. While there is a place for discussion of tribal ancestry, place of origin, age and size of this and that tribe, these dialogues cannot be described as hostile. Furthermore, we did not encounter any examples where the tribal codes were used to degrade or diminish other tribes. Even the videos and comments on the main annual competition of South Sinai, the Zalaqa camel race, are generally devoid of the tribal insults that would have included the *rumūz*.

Several informants from the coastal town of Dahab in South Sinai have suggested that new *rumūz* originated from TikTok. However, while the origin of the *rumūz* remains a point of contention, the TikTok platform undoubtedly plays an important role in the spread of this phenomenon. This is evidenced by a subsequent comment on the Facebook post about the tribal codes, which states, "It is the first time I hear about these numbers, maybe because I don't have a TikTok account" [41]. In fact, the "F-15" code is present in account names, hashtags, video captions, comments and other relevant data (fig. 4).



Fig. 1



Fig. 4



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

However, the use of *rumūz* is not limited to social media. Alphanumeric tribal codes can even be observed on a flag next to a tribe's name, for example at a wedding or other community celebration [42]. As mentioned above, *rumūz* can be found everywhere in Dahab, from house fences to car windows. One day, while one of our informants was sketching on the beach, some local children decided to join her. They asked for paper and pencils, sat down next to her to draw, and many of their drawings included the ubiquitous “F-15”.

When discussing this phenomenon with Russian-speaking residents of Dahab or Egyptians who have resided in the area for three to five years, they often express surprise and claim that they have never seen the inscriptions. As a result, while Bedouin children and teenagers draw these inscriptions in various places, they often remain unnoticed and invisible to those who do not come from the Bedouin environment.

Following the Israeli withdrawal from Sinai, Egypt sought to transform the peninsula into the country's principal tourist destination. While a few Bedouins benefited financially, they also experienced significant cultural and

social losses, including the erosion of their nomadic lifestyle and discrimination in land ownership.

Tourism served as a political instrument to facilitate internal migration from the mainland to Sinai, contributing to the process of nationalisation. Government policies favoured urban Egyptians for employment and land ownership, thereby exacerbating existing inequalities. Many Egyptians were encouraged to relocate to Sinai as part of a presidential initiative to reshape the demographic landscape of the region [43].

While foreign tourists perceive no distinction between local Bedouins and the “mainland” Egyptians, Bedouins tend to view the latter as “intruders”. The words of a Muzaynī from Dahab illustrate this antipathy: “If I meet an Egyptian [on a narrow mountain road] when I'm driving a 4×4, I'll never move to let him pass, I'll just start honking the horn”.

The Bedouin have lost the privilege of unconditional ownership of the land and the way of life they once knew. And in this context, these ubiquitous tribal codes can be interpreted as a means of claiming rights to the land where they have been living since long before the influx of Egyptians and foreign tourists.

## Conclusions

Complex, often contradictory socio-political processes have been taking place in Arabia for almost one and a half thousand years. What is important to us is that, at one time or another, there has been a recurrent updating of social practices, images associated with them, and mechanisms for their implementation. We have tried to show that the social processes characteristic of the contemporary Bedouin environment of Greater Arabia, including those associated with the awakening of tribal identity are carried out with the tools and practices whose history goes back many centuries. In turn, new field materials allow us to highlight the characteristics of a range of social practices that are essential to research in the field of Qur'ānic ethnography.

Although camel branding still uses distinctive signs of tribal affiliation, the new visual form of collective tribal identity spread rapidly throughout the region. In a work published almost a century ago, G. W. Murray observed that “just as each Highland clan has its tartan, so every Arab tribe has its *wasam*” [44]. Today we can rephrase his

quote by changing the last part — every Arab tribe has a *ramz*. These new tribal codes meet with a controversial reaction from tribal members, who often criticise the new practice. While some people eagerly inscribe these codes on walls and cars, others are less sanguine about the phenomenon. Some of the critics are concerned that the intense interest of young people in the codes could give rise to a new wave of intertribal conflict and aggression.

The scope of this presentation is limited to a brief overview of the subject matter. However, it is our hope that this will serve as a catalyst for further research. As with any symbol, the meanings attributed to these codes can vary depending on the socio-political context in which they are used. As we suggest, in South Sinai these codes are used by the locals to assert the visibility and presence of the Bedouin community among Egyptians and foreign lifestyle migrants. However, it would be interesting to compare the circulation of tribal codes in different Bedouin societies with different political and economic backgrounds.

## Notes

1. Dickson, 1967: 419—428.
  2. Huber, 1891: 178.
  3. *Ibid.*: 176.
  4. Murray, 1935: 44.
  5. *Ibid.*
  6. See: Field, 1952.
  7. Winkler, 1952: 26, 30—31.
  8. Doughty, 1921: 117; see also: Huber, 1891: 176.
  9. Al-Jumayh, IV: 2 (Lyall, 1918: vol. 1, 25; vol. 2, 8).
  10. Ibn Hisham, 1990, vol. 1: 305; Guillaume, 2004: 123.
  11. Rodionov, 1994: 134; Morano: 2019; Rezvan, 2018: 4.
- It is important to note that the prohibition of altering Allāh's

creation, as set out in Q 4:119, was linked to the campaign against popular pagan practices (Kudriavtceva & Rezvan, 2019: 186—187).

12. Varisco, 1987: 261—262.
13. See also: Musil, 1928: 8—9, 13, 16.
14. Clinton, 1974: 588—591.
15. Degen, El-Meccawi & Kam, 2019: 198.
16. For further details see: Hilden, 2010.
17. Hilden, 1991: 1.
18. *Ibid.*: 5.
19. Al-Ogayyel & Oskay, 2020: 147.
20. Bednarik & Khan, 2005: 74—76.

21. Khan, 2000: 7; 2022: 23.
22. See for example: Al-Ḥarbī & al-Ḥarbī, 1423/2002; Sa'dūnī, 2005.
23. For further details see: Eisenberg-Degen, Schmidt & Nash, 2018.
24. Eisenberg-Degen, Nash & Schmidt, 2016: 166.
25. See for example: Krol, 2022.
26. Degen, El-Meccawi & Kam, 2019: 201—202.
27. See: Gilbert, 2013.
28. Lavie, 1990: 14.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*: 14—15.
31. Murray, 1935: 40.
32. The research is based on the data collected during the field trips to Dahab in November 2023 and February 2024.
33. Facebook is owned by Meta Platforms Inc., whose activities have been banned in Russia.
34. Al-Jamī'a, 2007.
35. *Ibid.*
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44. Murray, 1935: 44.

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### Illustrations

- Fig. 1.** *The Tribal Code on a Car Window.* Dahab, South Sinai. February 2024. Photo by O. Slepukhina.
- Fig. 2.** *The Tribal Code on a Wall.* Dahab, South Sinai. November 2023. Photo by O. Slepukhina.
- Fig. 3.** *A List of Arabian Tribes and Their Codes.* Above the list there is a question: “What is the code of your tribe?” Muḥammad ‘Umar (@nz0k2) (2024), “Screenshot of an unnamed TikTok video”, *TikTok*, Online. Video posted on 16 June 2024. Available from: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSYmdm9Rf/> [Accessed 18 June 2024].
- Fig. 4.** *The Code F-15 on a Video and in a Hashtag.* Ibn al-Badū (@aymanalnawasra\_0) (2021), “Screenshot of an unnamed TikTok video”, *TikTok*, Online. Video posted on 5 August 2021. Available from: <https://vt.tiktok.com/ZSYmR6bm4/> [Accessed 18 June 2024].