

# New insight into how dog and man hunted side by side, over 8 000 years ago

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Credit: Any Lane from Pexels

Ancient carvings recently discovered in caves in the Saudi desert are the first to show dogs on leads.

Rock art just discovered shows hunting [dogs](#) bringing down prey and others standing by the sides of men, ready to be loosed from leads. The carvings are believed to be from the Holocene period, which came just after the end of the Paleolithic ice age, says Dr Michael Petraglia, an archaeologist from the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History, in Germany. He is a co-author of a study, which appeared in the *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* and was first reported by *Science*.

Working through EU support to the PALEODESERTS project, Dr Petraglia found the images carved under those of cattle, indicating that the depictions of dogs predated those of the cattle. The researchers acknowledge that they are unable to date the images directly because of the nature of the etchings. Instead the team correlated the rock art with nearby archaeological sites that they had dated.

They maintain earlier evidence had suggested these particular ancient humans had domesticated dogs before they began keeping cattle and explain that the transition from being hunter-gatherers to herding probably happened between 6 800 and 6 200 B.C.E. They hypothesise that the rock art featuring dogs appeared before humans began herding.

## **Silent testimony of the role of dogs in prehistoric hunting**

The dogs, people and prey are clearly defined once the carvings are highlighted in the photos. Some stand next to men, leads running from their necks to the hunter at their sides: in one scene two lines connect the necks of two dogs to the hips of the humans. Others are frozen in the act of bringing larger prey down, working together as a pack: three at a time, hanging on the lips and pulling at the necks of the antelope, much like African wild dogs today. The dogs have pricked ears, angled chests,

curly tails and resemble modern-day Canaan canines. The men stand by, many with bows and arrows, to kill the prey, which seem to be ibex and gazelles.

Speaking to the *New York Times*, Dr Melinda Zeder, a curator of Old World archaeology at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, who was not involved in the study says, "You can almost hear the dogs barking and the humans yelling."

Although Dr Zeder believes there is room for argument on the dating of the scenes, and that more research is needed to establish the period in which the art was created, she acknowledges the importance of the find, "This is giving us an actual window into the visceral thrill of the hunt," she said. "With the rock art you're putting flesh on the bones."

## **A rich find in the heart of the Saudi Arabian desert**

Dr. Guagnin, an archaeologist from the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History and lead author, analysed more than 1 400 panels of rock art containing more than 6 600 animals across two sites. The images showed dogs helping humans hunt equids, or African asses, as well as lions and leopards. Some artwork depicted the dogs taking down medium-size prey, and in others they were used to corner larger prey. The team found it impossible not to be moved: the prey animals were frequently accompanied by their young, "It's a little bit heart wrenching (...) It's quite interesting to see these scenes with the dying animals and there are dogs hanging off them."

She adds that it is now possible to say that around 9 000 years ago people controlled their dogs with leads and used them in complex hunting strategies.

The PALAEODESERTS (Climate Change and Hominin Evolution in

the Arabian Desert: Life and Death at the Cross-roads of the Old World) is aiming to set out a series of testable hypotheses to address the relations between humid and arid climatic periods and population expansions, contractions and extinctions. They are taking an interdisciplinary approach using information from palaeoenvironmental studies, palaeontology, geography, geochronology, animal and human genetics, archaeology, [rock art](#) studies and linguistics.

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