

The Use of Wasm (Animal Brands) in Beduin Weavings

by Joy May Hilden

A wasm is an ancient form of branding used by Beduin on camels and other livestock. In my research on Beduin weaving, conducted mainly on the east coast of Saudi Arabia for the last seven years, I have seen numerous examples of wasm (a collective noun) in weavings. This article will describe the use of wasm on animals, the technique of making and using Beduin weavings, and what the significance might be of understanding wasm as they appear in the weavings.

Both Beduin weavings and wasm are parts of a vanishing lifestyle, that of nomads who depended on their animals for survival, and who depended on their weavings for shelter, everyday use, and beauty. That lifestyle has changed dramatically in the last fifty years, and with it their dependence on these material things. One can find weavings for sale in Beduin markets, antique markets, and the homes of weavers. There is still handspun and hand-dyed yarn of many different types for sale if one knows where to find them. But in many places, women no longer weave with handspun wool, instead they buy bright colored synthetics and ply them on hand spindles.

Wasm, too, are still in evidence on animals. In camel markets, in private pens, and roaming in the desert are many camels identified with wasm on various parts of their bodies. However, the use of wasm is not as strictly observed as in the days of migrations, raids, and wars. Now, I am told, many animal owners do as they please, using the wasm more loosely without the conventions of earlier times.¹ As with vanishing lifestyles and artifacts the world over, there is concern with preserving for future generations the knowledge that remains. 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. However, the subject of wasm is complex, and does not lend itself as an ideal tool for identifying weavings.

Sources of Information on Wasm

Finding reliable current information about wasm is difficult. Among my

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primary sources have been members of the Saudi royal family, Dr. Darwish Mostafa Al Far of the Qatar National Museum, the Emir of Uray'ura, Mohammad bin Jim'a, and numerous Bedu. I meet many of these Bedu in the old style market of Nu'ayriyah, in the desert and villages between Uu'ayriyah and Hofuf, and in the women's market, Souk al hareem and camel market in Hofuf, in the Al Hasa Oasis. In these places one finds remnants of the old traditions and their products.

I have consulted three literary sources, one written for *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* by the anthropologist Henry Field, based on expeditions between 1927-1950 in Jordan, the Sinai, North Africa, North Arabia, and Qatar. He listed many wasm from the northern areas visited, including some gathered from wells and roadsides where Bedu wanted to communicate their dominance or passing. A page from *Derasat al ibl fil watan al Araby (A Study of camels in Arab Homelands)* published in Khartoum, listed Arabian wasm with accompanying information. H.R.P. Dickson, in his *The Arab of the Desert*, listed wasm by tribe, clan, name and location on the animal. These were collected in Kuwait. In the journal by Henry Field, Hans Winkler, of the University of Tubingen wrote a chapter on wasm and their relationship to the origins of writing. Mention is made of the occurrence of wasm in weavings in Topham's *Traditional crafts of Saudi Arabia*.²

The wasm shown in the above literary sources represent distant times and places and have so far not been useful in identifying specific weaving. Conflicting information has caused confusion. For instance, the chart in *Derasat al ibl fil watan al Araby* shows a wasm identical to the Al Saud one currently in use. The Al Saud's is shown with a slanted bar: However, primary sources of information, in context with weavings bought and seen in the same area, have been helpful. Some specific examples of wasm, together with accompanying photographs, will help the reader in understanding some of the problems involved in identification of wasm and weavings.

Examples of Wasm

The primary complicating factor in using wasm to determine weavings' origins is that location on the animal tells as much as the design in identifying the owner. The symbols are simple linear geometric shapes and are used in many combinations and on various parts of the animals. Also, the camels

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and sheep have separate wasm, both of which may appear on weavings. Another complicating factor is that there is a basic wasm for the tribe, which can have variations made on it. The sub-tribes will have additional symbols. As subtribes continue to split off, the complexity multiplies. Any given camel is likely to have two wasm on it, one for the tribe and one for the subtribe. Within a family, there may also be variations on a wasm. To illustrate variations and relationships in wasm some examples are shown below:

Basic Wasm of the Al Saud



Their Royal Highnesses (brothers) King Khalid Prince Abdullah, and Sultan Abdul Aziz:



Wasm of Prince Migrin bin Abdul Aziz al Saud:



His brother, Prince Mit'ib bin Abdul Aziz al Saud:

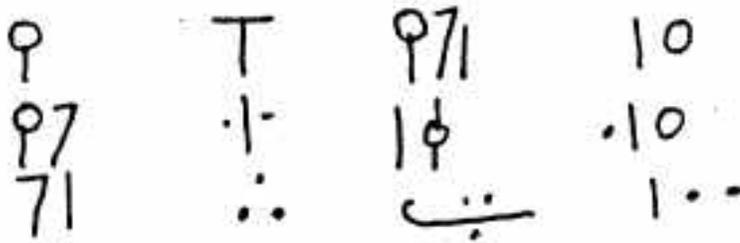


Basic wasm of the Al Ajami tribe, used on the neck³ :

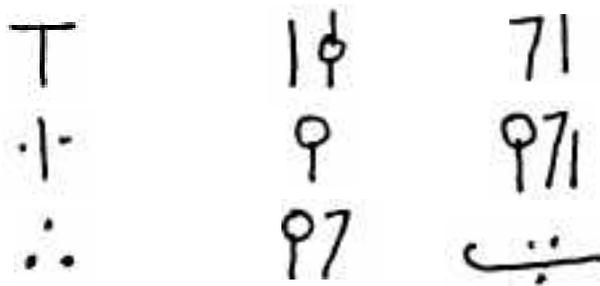


Wasm of some Al Ajami sub-tribes, used in various parts of neck and jowls:

from: "The Use of Wasm (Animal Brands) in Beduin Weaving," *Al-Ma'thurat Al-Sha'biyyah*, #22, April, 1991.



Some of the symbols seen above appear in the wasm of other tribes. They may even be in the same location on the animal, but accompanied by a second identifying wasm. The chart in *Derasat al ibl fil watan Al Araby* shows a wasm identical to the Al Saud one currently in use. The Al Saud's is shown with a slanted bar:



Here are some examples of symbols used by more than one tribe:

Al Murrah, a subtribe, used on the right thigh; Al Manasisr, used on left cheek:



Al Ajami, a Kuwaiti subtribe, used on left thigh; Al Murrah subtribe, used on left jowl.



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Beduin Weavings: Aesthetics, Function, and Production

In order for the reader to understand more fully the relationship between wasm and weavings, I feel it is necessary to discuss the weaving. It is important to know that the wasm, as with other patterns, is woven deliberately into the pattern with care and skill. The patterns may have names and represent known objects or ideas, or they may be designs free of meaning. But they are woven in purposefully.

Weavings were an integral part of the lives of the Bedu. The women of the family weave their black tent, the house of hair, *beit issha'ar*, from yarn spun by them from sheep's wool or goat hair of their own flocks. They also made rugs, cushions, saddle bags, and numerous types of animal trappings and ornaments. One of the most impressive of their weavings, and a woman's showpiece, was and still is the *ruag*, also called *qata'* or *saha*. This is the dividing curtain which separates the men's and women's portions of the tent, sometimes extending outside and dividing that space as well. It may be as short as six feet or as long as thirty-five. As travelers approach they can see the *ruag* as a sort of banner which can identify the tribe by color and pattern.

Traditionally the *ruag* and other ornately decorated weavings have been made by settled or seminomadic women in villages on the edges of the desert. Emir Abdullah bin Jim'a says that nomads had to be ready to move at a moment's notice and weren't as interested in wasm, since they saw them so much. Since more and more Beduin women have settled and have easier and more comfortable lives. it is possible that more intricate weaving has been produced within the last fifty years than previously. They may be incorporating their wasm into the weavings out a sense of pride in their tribe and family, which are under threat of homogenization into the culture as a whole. In a weaving commissioned for another party, the woman may weave in the purchaser's wasm and her own.

Along with the women's pride in tribe and family, I also sense a pride in learning. There are many weavings incorporating writing and numbers, in English and Arabic. The more complex of weaving techniques lend themselves to intricate patterns, which include wasm, which is also a form writing⁴. A brief description of the technique will explain how this is made possible. Beduin weaving is a flat, warp faced weave made with tough,

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tightly spun and plied yarn. The weaving is done on a horizontal ground loom made simply of rods staked into the ground. The tools, too, are simple: sticks and a hook beater. The warp yarns are stretched firmly and close together over two strong rods staked into the ground at four corners. The patterns both simple and complex, are determined by the manner in which the yarns are chosen and stretched. These yarns will be on the surface of the cloth when the arduous process of weaving is complete. The skilled and practiced weaver can painstakingly create detailed drawings using the following techniques. A pickup technique ;called shajarah, tree, is most commonly used to create complex solid and linear patterns. Here a dark and a light yarn are threaded together as a pair. With each shot of crosswise yarn, one of the pair is chosen to create the pattern, and the other pushed to the back of the weave. (See examples). Another technique that can be used to create intricate designs is weft twining or shinoof. Similar to tapestry weaving in appearance, it twists horizontally over and under groups of yarns and lies over the vertical warp yarns. It is used variously as narrow edging, wider intermittent bands, or forming whole rugs.⁵

Conclusion

It is clear that the study of wasm is in itself as complex as a language, and that its relationship to the identity of weavings is elusive. My primary purpose here is to introduce readers to the fact that wasm are used in weavings and are a potential means of identification and verification of source of origin for Beduin weavings, which are not yet well known or valued internationally. In addition, I point out that though Beduin weavings are made on simple ground looms with simple tools, they can be objects of beauty and intricacy, requiring skill and endurance to make.

from: "The Use of Wasm (Animal Brands) in Beduin Weaving," *Al-Ma'thurat Al-Sha'biyyah*, #22, April, 1991.

Notes

1. Opinion expressed by Emir Mohammad bin Jim'a.
2. Topham, John, *Traditional Crafts of Saudi Arabia*, Stacey International, London, 1981.
3. Topham, John, p. 23. See References.
4. This and most of the following information about wasm obtained from Emir bin Jim'a.
4. Field, Henry, p. 30. See References.
5. For more information on weaving techniques, see articles by Hilden and books by Weir and Sadu House.

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Captions with Wasm Examples

*Wasm found in
photograph*

Picture 1: Detail of ruag by Murrah woman, executed in a weft-twined band. Old koot, Doha.



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Wasm found in
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Pictures 2, 3: Details of khurj, storage bag, by Murrah woman in shajarah pattern, Old koot, Doha.



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Pictures 4,5: Details of different parts of a ruag in shajarah weave by Murrah woman who teaches at Red Crescent Society, Doha.

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photograph



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Pictures 6,7: Small camel saddle, heylani, from Hofuf. Girth strap has Murrah wasm woven into the shajarah weave.

*Wasm found in
photograph*



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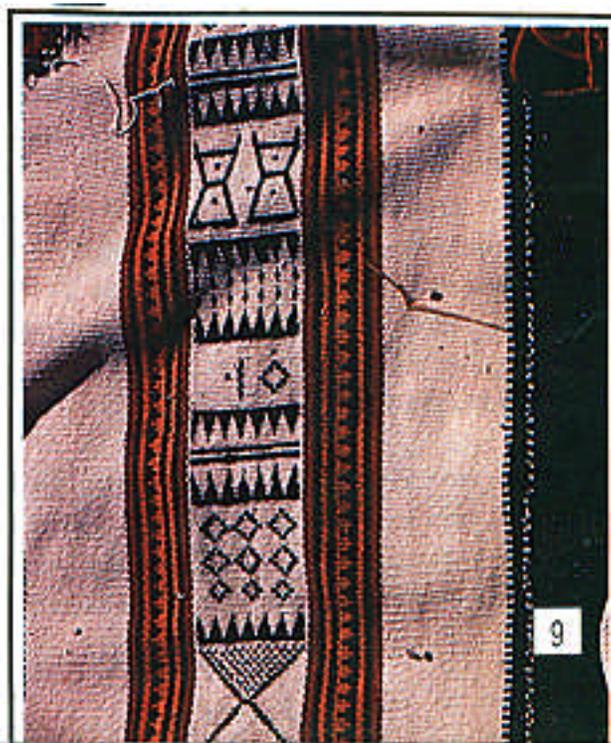
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Pictures 8,9: Ruag by Al-Ajami woman, Nu'ayriyah, showing details from two bands of shajarah weave.

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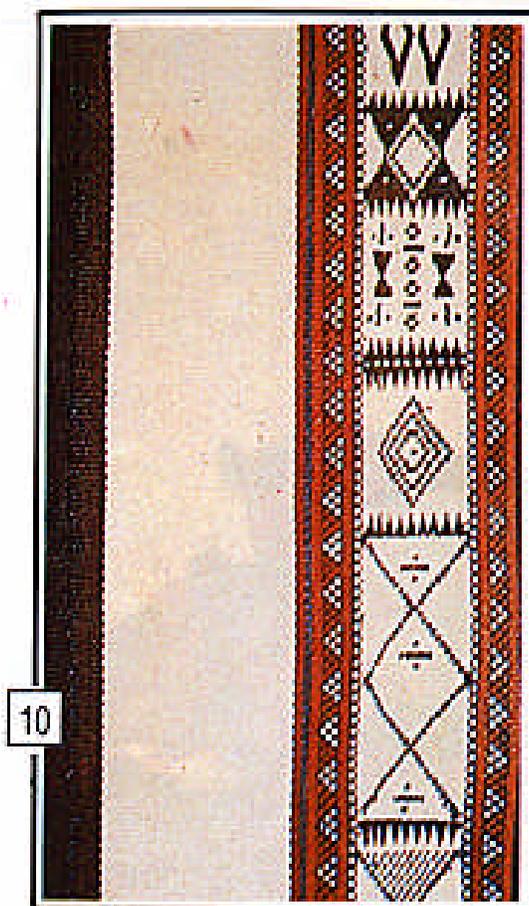


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Details from a ruag by the neice of the woman of Pictures 8,9, showing details from two bands of shajarah weave. The one on a black background is unusual because of the three colors in the shajarah pattern. *Wasm found in photograph*



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Picture 12: Detail of manthar by Al-Ajami woman from Judah, shows camel wasm (a) and sheep wasm (b) in side bands in shajarah pattern, along with geneology in center panel.

Wasm found in
photograph

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b. —



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Picture 16: Camel with wasm, Prince Migrin, Hail.

*Wasm found in
photograph*

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Picture 17: Camel with wasm, Prince Mit'ib. Hail.

*Wasm found in
photograph*

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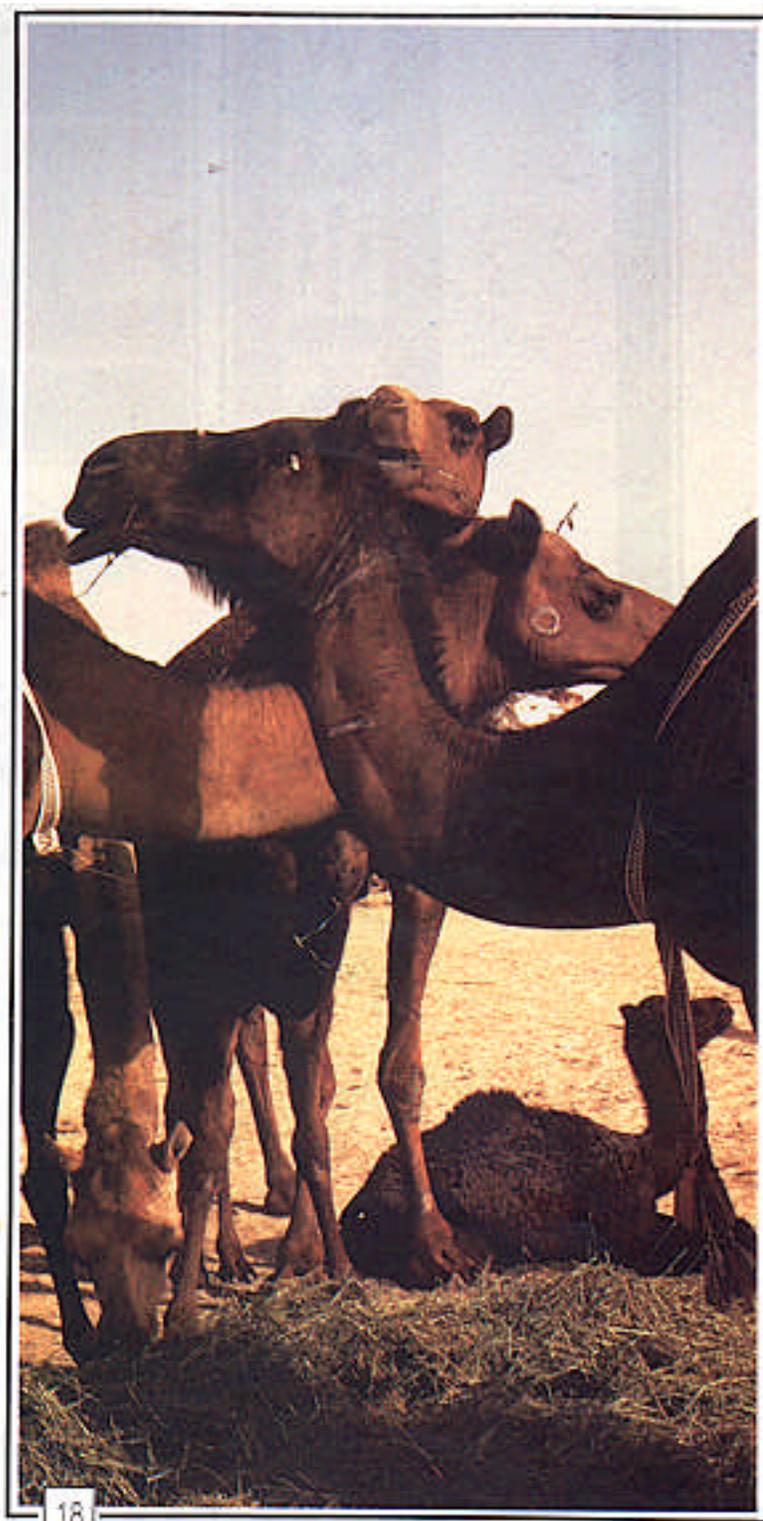


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Picture 18: Camels in the Hofuf camel market, "O" wasm is Al-Dossary.



Wasm found in
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Picture 19: Camel with wasm of Al-Ajami woman from Nu'ayriyah.
(See Pictures 8 and 9).

*Wasm found in
photograph*

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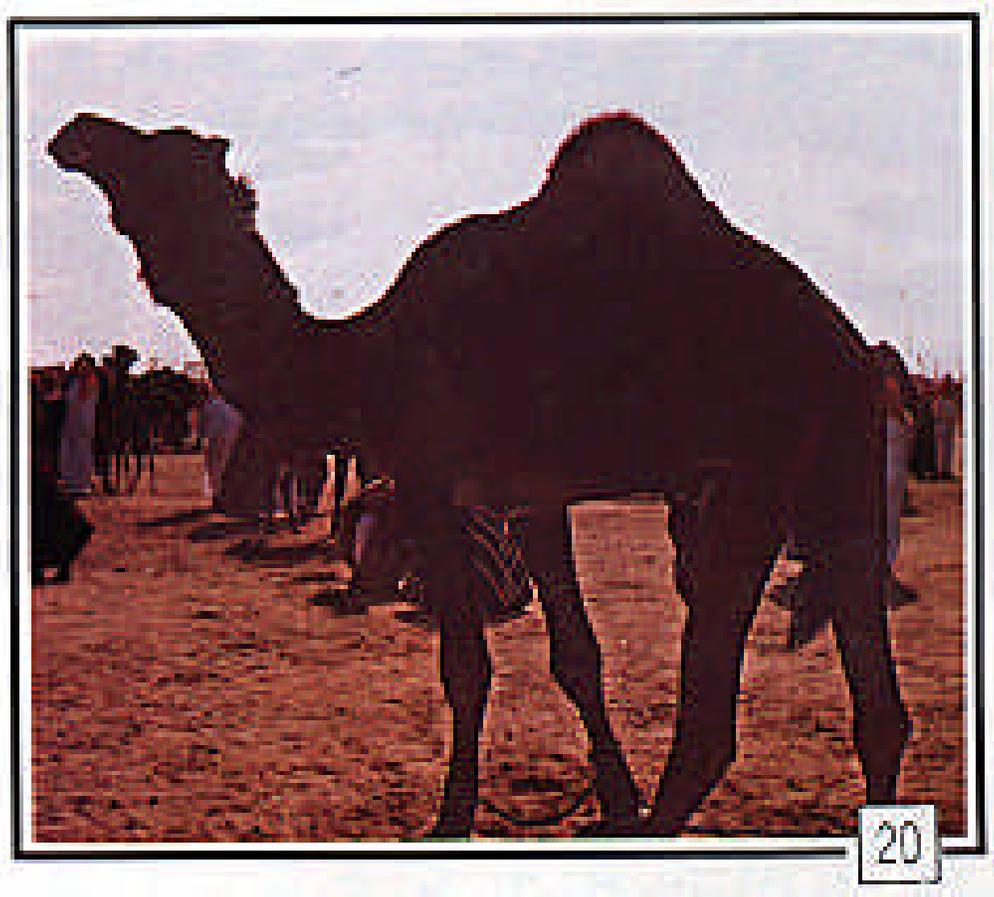
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Picture 20: Camel with Murrah wasm in the Hofuf camel market.

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