



New Perspectives on Predynastic and Early Dynastic Rock Art in Egypt (c. 4500-2600 BC)

Dorian Vanhulle *

SUMMARY

Although Predynastic and Early Dynastic rock art in Egypt and Nubia is scientifically addressed for almost a century, interpretative analysis of the thousands of engravings currently catalogued remains scarce and tentative. If important progress has been made in the past two decades, recent approaches rarely take into account its great variety and often fail to address all its informative potential. Such studies are focusing on specific areas of the Nile Valley and the surrounding deserts, thus providing local or, at best, regional insights.

This paper underlines the extent to which rock art can usefully complement archaeological data. Indeed, rock art has the potential to inform about the various communities that navigated the deserts and were in contact with dominant archaeological assemblages, namely the Naqadan cultural facies in Upper Egypt and the "A-Group" ones in Lower Nubia. Moreover, data at hand are now consistent enough to attempt a reassessment of all the available corpora in the perspective of comparative analysis. Preliminary results highlight major disparities between the main concentrations of rock art which are, on the one hand, the Eastern and Western Deserts and, on the other hand, the Nile Valley and its hinterland. It notably appears that Predynastic engravings along the Nile cannot be easily compared with their Eastern Desert counterparts and sometimes share affinities with Lower Nubian rock art, while Protodynastic productions are well attested in the Valley but far less in the Eastern Desert. These observations allow suggesting new research perspectives.

Keywords: Egypt, Nubia, Deserts, Predynastic, Interculturality

RIASSUNTO (NUOVE PROSPETTIVE SULL'ARTE RUPESTRE PRE E PROTODINASTICA IN EGITTO. C. 4500-2600 AC)

Sebbene l'arte rupestre predinastica e protodinastica in Egitto e in Nubia sia scientificamente studiata da quasi un secolo, l'analisi interpretativa delle migliaia di incisioni attualmente catalogate rimane scarsa e incerta. Se importanti progressi sono stati compiuti negli ultimi due decenni, gli approcci recenti raramente tengono conto della grande varietà di questa arte rupestre e spesso non riescono ad affrontare tutto il suo potenziale informativo. Tali studi si concentrano su aree specifiche della Valle del Nilo e dei deserti circostanti, fornendo così approfondimenti locali o, nella migliore delle ipotesi, regionali.

Questo documento sottolinea quanto l'arte rupestre possa utilmente integrare i dati archeologici. Infatti, l'arte rupestre ha il potenziale per informare sulle varie comunità che hanno attraversato i deserti e che sono entrate in contatto con gruppi archeologici dominanti, come quelli della cultura di Naqada nell'Alto Egitto e quelli della cosiddetta cultura "Gruppo A" nella Nubia settentrionale. Inoltre, i dati a nostra disposizione sono ora abbastanza consistenti da tentare una revisione di tutti i corpora disponibili nella prospettiva di un'analisi comparativa. I risultati preliminari evidenziano grandi disparità tra le aree con le principali concentrazioni di arte rupestre che sono, da un lato, il Deserto Orientale e quello Occidentale e, dall'altro, la Valle del Nilo e il suo entroterra. In particolare, sembra che le incisioni predinastiche lungo il Nilo non possano essere facilmente paragonate alle loro controparte nel Deserto Orientale e talvolta condividano affinità con l'arte rupestre della Nubia settentrionale, mentre le produzioni protodinastiche sono ben attestate nella Valle del Nilo ma molto meno nel Deserto Orientale. Queste osservazioni consentono di aprire nuove prospettive di ricerca.

Parole chiave: Egitto, Nubia, Deserti, Predinastico, Interculturalità

1. INTRODUCTION

Studies dedicated to the rock art scattered in the Egyptian and Nubian Nile Valley and deserts went through several phases of development in the span of almost a century (HUYGE 2009a; SUKOVA 2017; POLKOWSKI 2018). If one excludes isolated mentions in early Egyptological works and travelogues (PETRIE 1888, p. 15; 1893, p. 75; CHESTER 1892; GREEN 1903a-b; WEIGALL 1909), three main phases can be highlighted: one of exploration, documentation and salvaging (WINKLER 1938, 1939; DUNBAR 1941; ENGELMAYER 1965; RESCH 1967; BASCH, GORBÉA 1968; HELLSTRÖM, LANGBALLE 1970), one of consolidation of the gathered knowledge (e.a. ČERVIČEK 1974, 1982, 1986; PITROVSKI 1983; VAHALLA, ČERVIČEK 1999; SUKOVA 2011a-b) and one shorter but crucial phase of rediscov-

ery of the Eastern Desert material (ROHL 2000; MORROW, MORROW 2010; LUFT 2010). These main publications, which are overshadowing punctual works published throughout the 20th century (e.a. MURRAY, MYERS 1933; NEEDLER 1967; REDFORD, REDFORD 1989; FUCHS 1989, 1991; BERGER 1982, 1992; ČERVIČEK 1993), led to the development of a new stage in rock art research which mainly consists of tentative interpretative works, but also takes advantage of new archaeological investigations and improved recording techniques (HUYGE 2002; DARNELL *et al.* 2002; DARNELL 2009; STOREMYR 2009; RIEMER 2009; HUYGE 2009b; HENDRICKX *et al.* 2009; GATTO *et al.* 2009; IKRAM 2009, 2018; JIMENEZ-SERRANO 2009; JUDD 2009, 2010; DARNELL 2011; LIPIELLO, GATTO 2012; HUYGE *et al.* 2012; GRAFF *et al.* 2018; CURCI *et al.* 2012; HARDTKE

* F.R.S.-FNRS - Université libre de Bruxelles. Email : dorian.vanhulle@ulb.be

2012, 2013; LANKESTER 2013; LUCARINI, MARIOTTI 2014; DARNELL 2013, 2015; HAMEEUW *et al.* 2016; GATTO 2016; HENDRICKX, DARNELL, GATTO, EYCKERMAN 2016; HARDTKE 2016, 2017; URCIA *et al.* 2018; EVANS *et al.* 2020; POLKOWSKI 2020; DAVIS, WELSBY eds. 2020)¹. Hopefully, the next phase will consist of new discoveries (VANHULLE *et al.*, in prep.) coupled with the reconsideration of past interpretations thanks to the adoption of new research paradigms.

Although rock art was practised in Egypt since the Palaeolithic (STOREMYR 2009; HUYGE, STOREMYR 2012; HUYGE, CLAES 2013-2015), the bulk of documented figurative engravings belong to the Predynastic period (c. 4500-3100 BC). These compositions, which combine boats with desert and Nilotic fauna, but also male figures often armed with bows, display an iconography reminiscent of what archaeological material belonging to the so-called "Naqadan culture" has offered (GRAFF 2009; HENDRICKX, EYCKERMAN 2010, 2012). Recent contributions focusing on the way the authors of these productions conceived and used their environment through rock art are probably the most convincing and enduring results of the past twenty years. They hypothesise that rock images dispersed in the deserts testify to the desire of Upper Egyptian populations to "niloticize" these barren territories (DARNELL 2021: 2). The superpositions of petroglyphs also suggest that many of these engraved spaces were "reactivated" and updated during several generations following a process of iconographic attraction (DARNELL 2009, 2021, p. 64). Based on stylistic and technical observations, it can also be suggested that engravings in the Eastern Desert progressively diminish during the Early Dynastic period (c. 3100-2600 BC) and give way to strategically located productions progressively restricted to the Nile Valley and its hinterland; commissioned by local authorities, these "tableaux of royal ritual power come to replace earlier images, suggesting an attempt to bring activities in the deserts directly under royal control" (DARNELL 2013, p. 787).

This paper aims to bring some clarity to the current situation of rock art studies in Egypt and Nubia, considering that they are at a crossroads as a sub-discipline of Egyptology and that a change of paradigm is needed to overcome enduring obstacles.

2. THE INTERPRETATIVE QUEST

Three interpretative schemes had some lasting impact on research (HUYGE 2002, pp. 192-196; JUDD 2009, pp. 89-100): Egyptian rock art has been considered as the expression of religious, cosmological, ideological, or else funerary considerations. Not exclusive to each other, none of these manage to satisfactorily explain all the available data. As stipulated by D. Huyge, "the existence of religious ideas and pious practices in the later sense cannot be demonstrated directly with regard to the Predynastic period (...) However, it can be

conjectured with confidence that (at least) substantial seeds of religiousness must have been present in the Predynastic" (HUYGE 2002, p. 193). Twenty years later, this statement remains all the more true that figures with raised arms and feather headdresses are not considered to be gods anymore (contra ČERVÍČEK 1986, p. 90), but rather depictions of Naqadan elites (LANKESTER 2013). Cultic deposits and temples (BUSSMANN 2010) are not attested before the Early Dynastic period and only communal, ceremonial, and ritual activities can be inferred from Predynastic archaeological material.

Naqadan iconography is currently considered to convey ideological considerations linked with the exaltation of the elite's wealth and power, and with the concept of the primacy of a cosmic order over a permanent chaos (ASSELBERGHS 1961; HENDRICKX 2006; for a reassessment of this concept: BRÉMONT 2018). Because of the familiarity between Naqadan iconography and rock art, it is generally considered that both convey similar, if not identical, concepts which are abbreviated in rock art through the sole depictions of hunting scenes, boats, and arms-raised figures. This approach led to other suggestions such as the hypothetical association of rock art with the accomplishment of rites of passage by these elites (LANKESTER 2016). The hypothesis of a funerary nature of rock art is strongly criticised: "the very specific elements and combinations on the "classic" D-ware vessels, including women, boats, the "Naqada plant" and the "skin on a pole", are completely lacking in rock art. These elements are accepted as being related to the afterlife and to regeneration, meanings that were not expressed in the rock art of the Eastern Desert, thus explaining their absence from that corpus of representations" (HENDRICKX 2018, pp. 438). Cemeteries and necropolises were located at the margin of settlements, near the River or, as in Abydos and Hierakonpolis, in the low desert. The only Predynastic installations in the Eastern Desert found to date belong to the Badarian period (c. 4500-3900 BC) (DEBONO 1950, 1951) while the very few tombs documented are attributed to the "Tasian culture", a Nubian related archaeological assemblage which was roughly contemporary with the Badarian (MURRAY, DERRY 1923; FRIEDMAN, HOBBS 2002). Moreover, the fact that Naqadan iconography mainly appears on artefacts coming from funerary contexts does not necessarily mean that this iconography is primarily funerary in nature. Finally, the boat was an important symbol inside Naqadan iconographic repertoire, expressing fundamental concepts such as order, control and social cohesion (VANHULLE 2018). It was used in activities involving processional events of political and ritual nature (WILLIAMS *et al.* 1987). This is most probably these concepts that the boat was conveying when inserted into Predynastic funerary assemblages thanks to models (MERRIMAN 2011) or depictions on ceramics (GRAFF 2009), so on objects that had non-funerary functions before being

¹ We voluntarily omit to discuss Saharan rock art, which constitutes a distinct problematic (LE QUELLEC 2010; RIEMER, KRÖPELIN, ZBORAY 2017; POLKOWSKI 2018, pp. 7-11); about the contested attempts to weave a filiation between Saharan rock art and that of Egypt: e.a. BARTA 2010, 2018).

deposited into a grave.

The possibility that rock art, and more particularly boat depictions, “were some sort of memorial or cenotaph” (JUDD 2009, p. 93) that commemorate deceased members of the Naqadan elite (LANKESTER 2013, pp. 120-121) does not seem likely either since such practice, which would supposedly be supervised by the elite and performed by commissioned artists in specifically chosen places, would require a certain amount of aesthetical and, supposedly, geographical consistency; such consistency is precisely what is lacking in rock art.

Because the solar/cosmological symbolism identified by D. Huyge at Elkab could not be extrapolated elsewhere than in the direct vicinity of this site so far, one is left with only one major interpretative scheme: rock art consists of the accumulation of the main Naqadan symbols to express complex socio-political and ideological concepts through iconography. If the “iconographic syntax” probably at play on valuable objects produced in Nile Valley workshops (GRAFF 2009; DARNELL 2009) cannot be observed on rock panels, the presence of ubiquitous motifs which were intrinsically eloquent (such as the boat) was probably sufficient for the image to perform on rock.

If this brings an acceptable explanation for a certain amount of rock panels, most of them dating from the final Predynastic (Naqada IIC-D, c. 3500-3300 BC) and Protodynastic (Naqada IIIA-B, c. 3300-3100 BC) periods (e.a. HENDRICKX *et al.* 2016; DARNELL 2018), the bulk of those generally attributed to the Early Predynastic period (Badarian to Naqada IA-IIB, c. 4500-3500 BC), remain difficult to grasp for various reasons and rarely appear outside of the old catalogues into which they have been published once. This difficulty could potentially be overcome if we consider that the Naqadans were not the only ones that have drawn on rock² and that means and goals regarding rock art practice diverged depending on geographical and socio-political contexts.

3. THE NILE VALLEY AND THE DESERTS: TWO WORLDS, ONE UNIVERSE

Available data testify to the divergence, both in nature and composition, between the rock art scattered in the Nile Valley (understood as the regions comprising the riverbanks and desert hinterlands) and the deep desert (subjectively understood as areas beyond a few hours’ walk and from where returning to the Valley is not feasible on the same day). Nile Valley rock art remains quite poorly apprehended: most of what is available lies in decades old catalogues (WINKLER 1938; RESCH 1967; ČERVIČEK 1974; HUYGE 1995) and can hardly be used for comparative analysis. Documented petroglyphs are scattered between el-Hosh and Aswan (HUYGE 2002; DARNELL 2002; GATTO *et al.* 2009; JIMENEZ-SERRANO 2009; HARDTKE 2012, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2020; HENDRICKX *et al.* 2012, 2016; DARNELL 2013, 2018; GRAFF

et al. 2018; EVANS *et al.* 2020; GATTO, CURCI, forthcoming; NILSSON forthcoming), which is consistent with the original core area of the Naqadan culture (fig. 1).

Although these catalogues only offer a selection of isolated engravings, it nevertheless seems that complex compositions in the Valley cannot be equated to those of the Eastern Desert: the former mainly consist of the accumulation and superposition of Badarian-Early Predynastic animals, among them giraffes and elephants, along with human figures (fig. 2); Early to Middle Predynastic panels saturated with boats, members of the elite and lassoed animals like those of the Eastern Desert (fig. 3) are less common. Currently, no pre-Pharaonic rock art is known in Lower or Middle Egypt, nor, and this is quite striking, in the Abydos region where First Dynasty kings were buried. This tends to confirm that figurative rock art is indeed narrowly linked with Predynastic occupations in Upper Egypt. As far as the Western Desert is concerned, Predynastic rock art is less numerous (POLKOWSKI 2018, p. 7) and has mainly been documented near the Oasis of Dakhla (POLKOWSKI 2019), Kharga (IKRAM 2009) and Farafra (LUCARINI MARIOTTI 2014). It offers stylistic and typological peculiarities when compared with what the Valley and the Eastern Desert have offered (e.a. IKRAM 2018, pp. 356-357). This divergence must be better acknowledged since it has the potential to inform further on how rock art was practised and why. Pre-pharaonic engravings in the Nile Valley are closely related to important sites and strategic gateways to the deserts. It is thus not particularly surprising to denote political and, potentially, religious (HUYGE 2002) messages in such locations.

Nile Valley rock art offers several “formal” commissioned productions (e.a. HENDRICKX *et al.* 2016; DARNELL 2018; fig. 4) while Proto- and Early Dynastic rock art is relatively rare in the Eastern Desert. Indeed, with the exceptions of rare *serekh* (BÉGON 2018; POLKOWSKI 2018, pp. 11-12), no Protodynastic and Early Dynastic official productions are attested in the deserts. This observation is particularly important since it allows discussing how these territories were perceived, used and controlled by the nascent state. It is also in connection with the Valley that rock art is for the first time associated with proto-hieroglyphic inscriptions (DARNELL 2017; DARNELL *et al.* 2017). A possible liminal nature has been postulated for some specific localities associated with regular human activities, such as hunting grounds or sacred spaces (LIPPIELLO 2012; GATTO *et al.* 2009). Such sites are difficult to identify and future research will have to address their true nature. In that vein, an unpublished panel recently discovered in the direct vicinity of Elkab shows a flotilla of numerous “frond boats”, the Predynastic ceremonial barque, on a rock that was “lapped if not occasionally covered by the water of the inundating Nile (...) [The boats] “may have appeared to sail out on the waters of the Nile”

2 D. Huyge postulated that some of the rock art might have been produced by what he provisionally called “proto-bedouins” (2003; 2004), that is to say, “nomads who resided in the desert on a semi-permanent basis, but were in regular contact with Nile Valley dwellers and had an intimate knowledge of the natural and cultural Nilotic environment” (2009, p. 6).

during the flood (Darnell, Vanhulle, forthcoming). Most of Eastern Desert rock art could tentatively be associated with Predynastic expeditions sent for economic purposes (see KLEMM 2008 about pre-Pharaonic exploitations of Eastern Desert mineral wealth). These images probably quite prosaically ensured the appropriation of punctually important areas of the desert and, perhaps, also played an apotropaic role by extending the concept of order and control into hostile regions. Also, one could not leave aside too easily the possibility that “non-Naqadan” people engraved desert rock surfaces. Indeed, « the desert was inhabited and used by a pastoral nomadic segment of the Nubian society, many among other groups, which surely also played an important role in the management of long-distance travel and trading » (GATTO 2012, p. 57), « these mobile communities became fundamental in expanding the superregional sphere of cultural contact and in creating, during the 5th millennium BC, a shared set of beliefs and practices, instrumental to the dispersal of the ‘Neolithic package’ across the Greater Nile Valley and for the rise of the earliest African complex polities in both Nubia and Egypt » (GATTO 2019, p. 284). Among other groups erased from history were nomad “pastor-foragers” (POLKOWSKI 2018, p. 7) who are attested the Eastern Desert of Egypt and Nubia from at least the 6th millennium BC (BOBROWSKI *et al.* 2013; COOPER 2019). The hypothesis that such groups practised rock art alongside the Naqadans cannot be easily verified since such productions would offer the classic Neolithic combination of human and animal figurations. A potential way to distinguish nomad productions from Naqadan ones would be to reassess compositions generally considered to depict symbolic hunting activities. Because the bow does not necessarily make the hunter but could simply be an integral part of men paraphernalia, some scenes could relate to the daily pastoral life of nomadic communities (fig. 5) rather than the capture of wild animals (fig. 3). Arguably, these groups were in regular contact with the Naqadans and have been progressively impregnated with ideological concepts resulting from the social hierarchisation at play in Upper Egypt at the time. The codified Naqadan iconography and the concepts it conveyed spread along exchange networks in Egypt and Nubia (COOPER, VANHULLE 2019). It is likely that it influenced the artistic practices of other communities to an extent that cannot yet be determined.

4. EGYPT AND NUBIA: TWO FACES OF THE SAME COIN?

If the first phase of research saw Lower Nubia being far more investigated than Egypt, the flooding of crucial areas by what is now the Lake Nasser makes it impossible to check those decades old recordings, nor to provide data which are in line with current scientific standards. Although the kinship between the engravings distributed in Lower Nubia and those of Upper Egypt has long been acknowledged, their true relations have never been properly addressed. It is generally assumed that cattle depictions are reminiscent of the pastoral way of life of neolithic Nubian popula-

tions, while boats images are rather testimonies of a Naqadan influence beyond the first cataract.

This strict dichotomy between Egypt and Nubia during the 4th millennium BC is outdated: archaeology has demonstrated that the traditional image of an omnipotent Naqadan culture is now nuanced by a very different scheme according to which the whole of Upper Egypt, Lower Nubia and the surrounding deserts formed a vast region characterised by a strong interculturality (GATTO 2014). Deserts formed broad communication routes crossed by mobile communities (RIEMER, LANGE, KINDERMANN 2013). This cultural diversity, which gradually diminished in the Nile Valley as the Naqadans spread throughout present-day Egypt, Levant and Lower Nubia in the second half of the 4th millennium BC is likely to have remained important in the deserts. Rock art certainly bears the testimony of such intercultural environment.

This new understanding of human occupations in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia during the 4th millennium BC invites us to reassess the rock art of this whole region outside of modern territorial conceptions and cultural categories. The Aswan area and the first cataract, where Upper Egyptians and Nubian related people were cohabiting during most of the 4th millennium BC (GATTO 2019), stand out and recent comparative analysis tentatively showed that “the typological peculiarities attested in the area of Aswan and in Lower Nubia suggest that this region had its own iconographic and cultural identity” (Brémont, Vanhulle, forthcoming). This study, which focused on animal and boat depictions, should be extended to other categories of representations such as anthropomorphic figures to assess the real extension of this cultural entanglement. Indeed, depictions of men with a bended feather on their head and a penis sheath (e.a. HELLSTRÖM, LANGBALLE 1970, corpus A) are well attested both in Nubia and in Egypt, especially in the Aswan area (GRAFF *et al.* 2018) and in the Eastern Desert (fig. 6).

Rock art thus complement archaeology in suggesting that Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia formed a mixed cultural complex during most of the Neolithic. It changes only progressively, as the “Naqadan variant” developed centres of power and evolved into a structured, hierarchical society. The higher percentage of boat depictions contemporaneous with the Protodynastic and Early Dynastic phases in Lower Nubia (BRÉMONT, VANHULLE forthcoming, map. 6-7) could be explained by the necessity of expressing the control of these more loosely inhabited regions by an authority which was located far to the north. Economic development in Lower Nubia due to the increasing needs of Naqadan elites probably motivated some Nubian groups to reach a socio-political level comparable to the Naqadan one, but their attempts ultimately led to their dismissal by the then forming Egyptian State (WILLIAMS 2011; TALLET, SOMAGLINO 2014).

NEW RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

Because rock art studies are dependent on our current interpretation of Naqadan imagery and symbolism,

it might be argued that focussing only on the potential meaning of rock art is not sufficient anymore: “to reduce rock art research to the study of meaning is (...) to overlook information on past cultural developments, practices and interactions that can be obtained through descriptive, quantitative and archaeometric analysis (SMITH *et al.* 2016, p. 1614).

The correlations between the thematics expressed in Eastern Desert rock art and those on Naqadan archaeological material confirm that most of these productions have been made by Upper Egyptians, so mostly by people belonging, or affiliated, to the Naqadan culture. The great stylistic diversity of Egyptian rock art is not sufficient to suggest the presence in the desert of other complex cultural units since, obviously, “different styles can coexist within the same culture” (LAYTON 1991, p. 151). However, it is surprising to observe that what is generally considered to be a coherent, homogeneous, culture could adopt so many different styles in rock art and far less in other types of media. This could be explained in several different ways, not exclusive to one another: perhaps the “Naqadan culture” was not as homogeneous as it is generally considered to be and that regional disparities, especially visible through ceramic (FRIEDMAN 1995), lithic (HOLMES 1989) and iconographic (BRÉMONT 2018) productions are not mere epiphenomena but rather indications of local idiosyncrasies (BRÉMONT 2020). Although far from being unanimously accepted, potential artistic and even subcultural regional variations might explain the cohabitation of roughly contemporary but nevertheless stylistically dissimilar engravings. As already suggested, an additional possibility is that groups sharing with the Naqadans a common symbolic universe engraved rocks using a similar “syntax”. Such groups could either be older (e.a. Badarian and Tasian people), contemporary or slightly younger (“Eastern Desert people” and pastoral nomads: BINTLIFF, BARNARD 2012) than the Naqadan cultural facies.

A global and holistic approach of the rock art documented between the Qena bend and the second cataract coupled with a comparative analysis of the three main areas where rock art is distributed has the potential to lead to the adoption of new research paradigms and to reassess current knowledge, this time on a supra-regional scale. It is also time to consider Egyptian and Lower Nubian rock art as one social action

performed by different though contemporaneous and entangled cultural traditions. Only then could we usefully address questions such as styles, functions and meaning and could we make the best of what rock art still has to offer.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Thanks to a renewed dynamism in Egyptian rock art studies, it is now possible to go beyond mere descriptive and interpretative approaches by raising new problematic. Rock art is an archaeological source which has the potential to bring crucial nuances to our current interpretative schemes and research paradigms. In order to overcome enduring obstacles, this sub-discipline of Egyptology needs to abandon both egyptocentric and nubiocentric approaches and rather adopt innovative interdisciplinary methods. “(...) early tradition of rock art persisted for tens of thousands of years, but rock art changed dramatically throughout the world during the Holocene as a consequence of changing environmental conditions, the adoption of agriculture in various regions, and the resulting cultural changes that they together brought about (...)” (TAÇON *et al.* 2014, p. 1062). This is obviously valid in Egypto-Nubian contexts since most of figurative rock art has been produced during the Predynastic period, so a time of great sociological, economic, political and religious innovations in the Upper Nile Valley.

If rock art studies might today appear to be a “new Eldorado” for Egyptological research, the meanings and functions of figurative petroglyphs remains largely elusive. Pre-pharaonic rock art allowed conveying symbolic and ideological messages in quite a pragmatic way. It does not seem to be primarily invested with sensorial dimensions, nor making any references to gods or spirits. A funerary role is most unlikely either, at least as far as the Eastern Desert is concerned. As it currently stands, one might suggest that Eastern Desert rock art, which marks the landscape through a Naqadan “iconographic syntax”, primarily highlights the routes taken by multiple mining and exploratory expeditions during the entire Predynastic. Productions from the Nile Valley, located at crossroads between strategic localities and gateways to main wadis, were executed in a very different context and with motivations that remain to be specified further.

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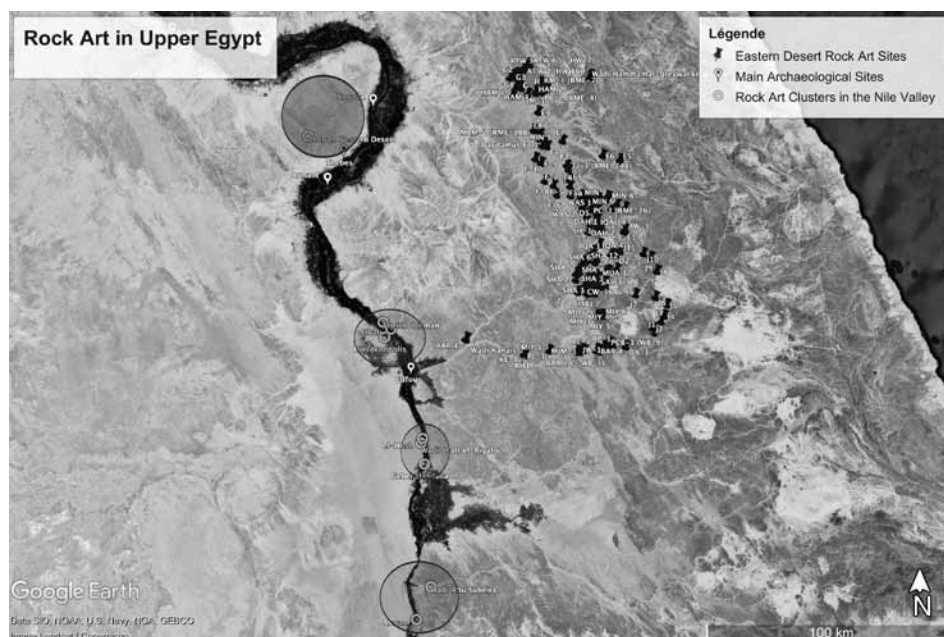


Fig. 1 - Map of Upper Egypt illustrating the main clusters of rock art in Upper Egypt and in the Eastern Desert.



Fig. 2 - Unpublished panel recently discovered in the vicinity of Aswan (© AKAP).

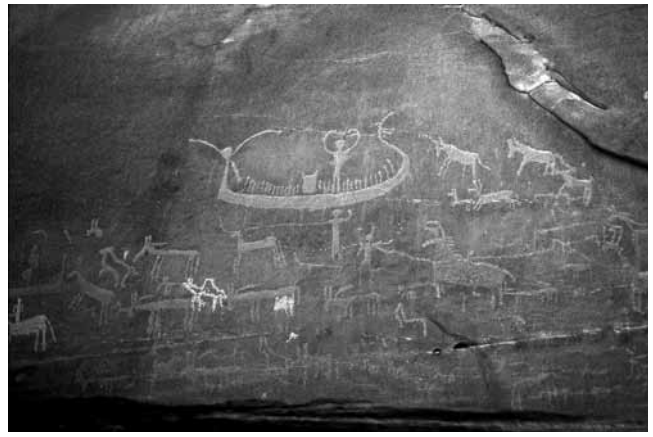


Fig. 3 - Decorated panel from Wadi Barramiya showing the capture of wild animals and a large boat reminiscent of Naqadan iconography (Rohl 2000, p. 41, n°9).

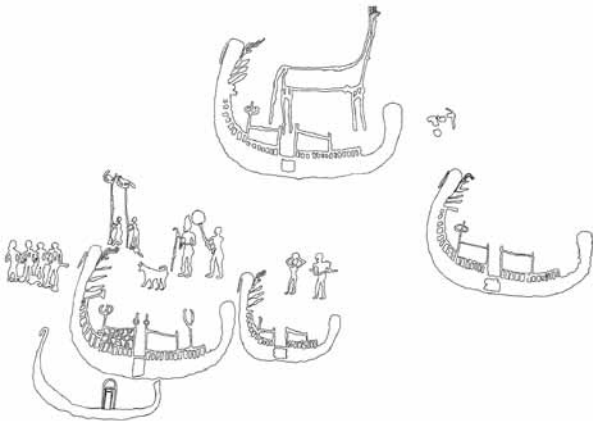


Fig. 4 - A flotilla, a king, and its court on Panel 7a at Nag el-Hamdulab (from Hendrickx *et al.* 2016: fig.16).



Fig. 5 - Unpublished panel recently discovered in the desert east of Aswan and decorated with with figure showing both Naqadan and Lower Nubian stylistic features (© AKAP).

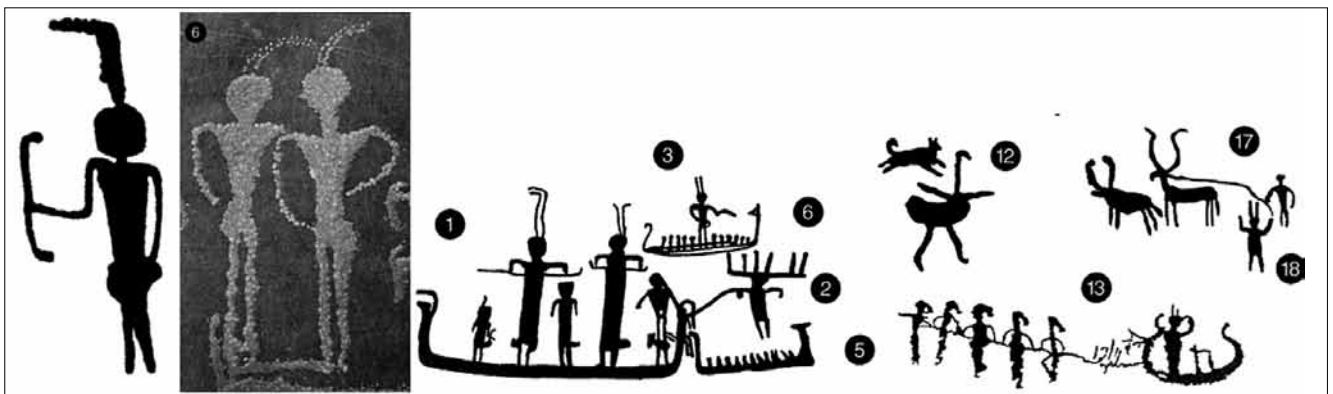


Fig. 6 - Selection of anthropomorphs from the Eastern Desert with one or two bended feathers on their head and/or a penis sheath (Rohl 2000, pp. 32, 39, 105).