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CURRENT RESEARCH IN THE ROCK ART OF THE EASTERN SAHARA

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The area of the Eastern Sahara (Egypt and Sudan) has been a crossroads for people, goods and ideas from the Paleolithic onward and their inhabitants have left testimony of their lives, beliefs and history on the rocky landscape across deserts and along the Nile.

In the last decades, research on rock art has increased considerably breaking grounds in advancing theoretical and methodological approaches, as well as in contextualizing art in its cultural and natural settings.

This session aims at discussing current research in the rock art of the Eastern Sahara, focusing on the following topics:

- Regional overviews and rock art distribution
- Rock art and the landscape
- Style analysis
- Chronology and advances in dating rock art
- Rock art within archaeological contexts
- Multidisciplinary approaches
- Interpretation
- Recent discoveries

A case study in cultural contacts in rock art: The First Cataract area as a Predynastic hub

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Keywords: Predynastic, animal depictions, intercultural relations, Nubia; travel routes

Rock art from the 4th millennium in Upper Egypt and Nubia overwhelmingly features animal figures; while most differences in their morphologies correspond to diachronic differences, some definitely point to regional variations. Indeed, some animal depictions cannot be related to Predynastic iconography appearing on Naqadan artefacts and may instead be ascribed to local traditions in the Dakhla/Kharga oases on the one hand, in A-Group Nubia on the other. When plotted on a GIS, their geographical distribution yields very promising information on these populations' rough territory and movements through the desert (see Fig. 1), as well as probable cases of hybridization due to cultural contacts, where two iconographic traditions meet on the same panel. Fig. 2 (featured in Dunbar 1941) is one such example: much the same way M.C.Gatto has pointed out "the presence of a regional variant of the Naqadian culture combining [...] both Egyptian and Nubian traditions" (Gatto 2006), the co-presence of iconographical types known to be proper to Nubia (no. 2) with others definitely from the Naqadan tradition (nos. 3, 4, 5) and possibly a type of oryx usually clustered in the Oases region (no. 1) corroborate the hypothesis of the First Cataract serving as a hub connecting the Naqadan, Oasian and Nubian cultural ensembles.

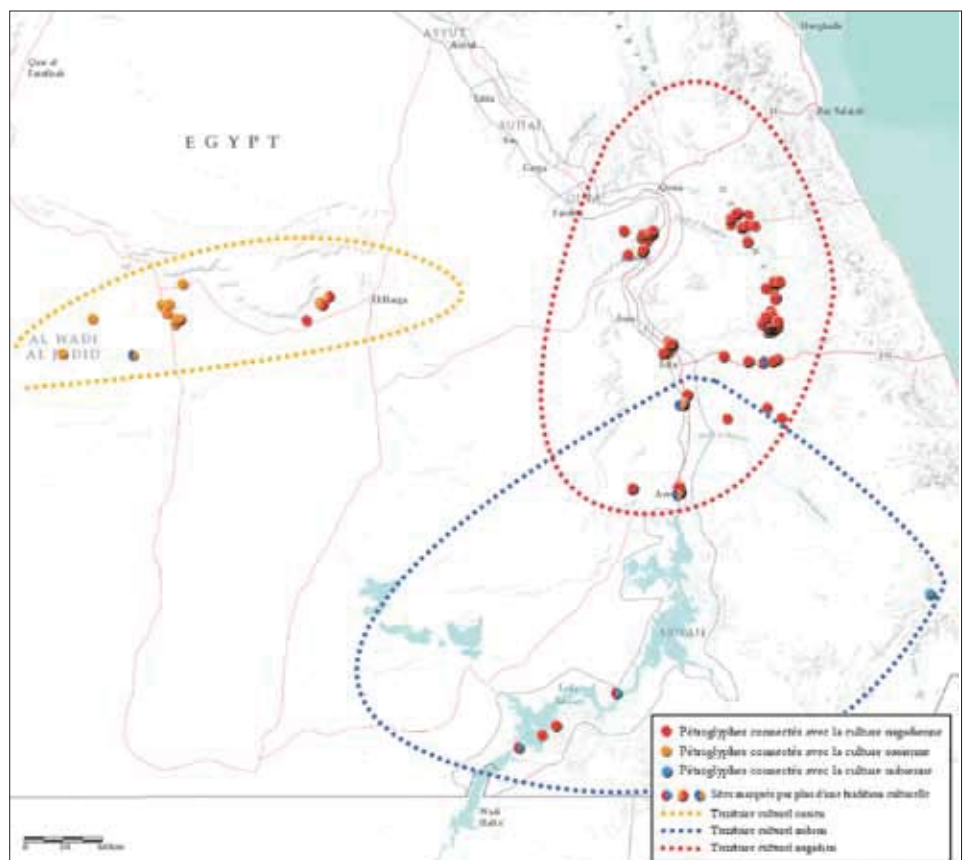


Fig.1 - Rock art sites sorted by cultural ensemble and cases of 'culture palimpsests'. (map by the author)
Fig.2 - Example of 'culture palimpsest' panel - El Malki (from J.H. Dunbar, 1941, *The rock pictures of Lower Nubia*, Cairo, Government Press)

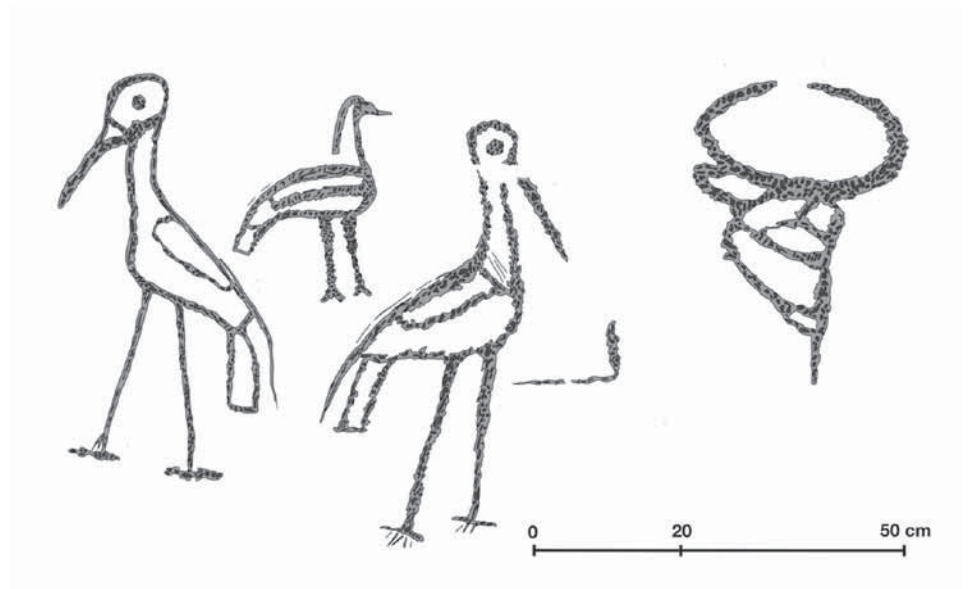
The Earliest Monumental Hieroglyphic Inscription and Rock Art of the Elkab Area, Egypt

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Keywords: rock art, Predynastic Egypt, Protodynastic Egypt, Early Dynastic Egypt, Elkab, ritual hunting

The rock art and rock inscriptions of the greater Elkab area extend over a broad area, between es-Sebaiya in the north and the area of el-Atouany in the south. Presenting a hybrid corpus linking the styles of the Thebaid, the Wadis of the Eastern Desert, and more southerly traditions, the Elkab region demonstrates a progression from ritual hunting imagery, through festival navigation, to official royal inscriptional “seals” as means of marking place, and linking maker, viewer, and landscape in a performative interaction. During four field seasons in the hinterland of Elkab, the Elkab Desert Survey Project of Yale University and the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels, has discovered a number of important rock art and rock inscription sites, augmenting and geographically greatly expanding those already known from the Wadis Hilal and Mahamid. These include the earliest thus far identified monumental hieroglyphic inscription at the el-Khawy site. This inscription is particularly important, revealing the geographic and conceptual range of early writing in Egypt, and providing a transitional stage of inscription between the elite and ritual imagery of the late Predynastic Period, and the overt statements of royal authority that come to dominate many such sites during the Dynastic Period.



Competition, conflict and control; Suggestions of motive in the use of petroglyphs recently recorded from the northern eastern desert of Egypt (Kom Ombo basin)

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Keywords: asses, giraffe, elephant, narmer palette, figures

From previous surveys, (Rohl, 2000; Morrows, 2002; Luft, 2010; Judd, 2009; Lankester, 2013) of the region, evidence of group/cultural interface has been sourced from palimpsest clusters of petroglyphs. Distinctions between figures, their styles and associations, provided the patina agrees, can be reasonably dated to the pre-dynastic periods (Huyge, in Friedman, 2002, *Egypt and Nubia: gifts of the desert*, pp.192-206). The placing of one motif over that of another might seem incidental in many cases at obvious sites as waterholes or vantage points. However, if certain motifs display regional significance, such as elephant and specific giraffe, their use might suggest potential rivalry regarding 'ownership' of the area and therefore claim to its resources by competing chiefs/elites. Hints of how one groups strategy succeeds another's in this respect may be also in the same data. A rare depiction of direct conflict between a 'soldier' and a female religious 'orant' figure will be discussed using a wider analysis of associate figures from the locality to illustrate potential use of data from the region.



Fig.1 - Wadi Bezeh, Feb. 2017. (photo G. Dicks)

Fig.2 - Wadi Bezeh, Feb. 2017. (photo G. Dicks)

The present state of rock art sites in Ayn Sukhna, Egypt

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Keywords: rock art, Ayn Sukhna, Suez Gulf, Wadi Recess, Wadi Sukhna

The rock-art of the Eastern desert is not particularly well known and is situated in military or remote areas where permits are required to undertake visits or research. Furthermore, it is still vulnerable to many threats. Ayn Sukhna is located on the western bank of the Suez Gulf, 120km east of the city of Cairo. The rock art at Ayn Sukhna is highly homogeneous, and there are a great number of significant images, which date back to ancient periods. The images constitute not only evidence for the ancient activities in these valleys, but also purely reflect the economic activities, the faunal presence, and the importance of the site. Unfortunately, the rock-art sites in Ayn Sukhna are increasingly under threat and recently a number have already been destroyed, due to efforts to establish an effective road network and the huge national project in Gebel el Galāla. The aim of this paper is to explain the importance of the rock art in the Ayn Sukhna sites especially in two main valleys (Wadi Recess, Wadi Sukhna), tracking the infrastructure work in these valleys, which recently destroyed several sites and completely changed the topography. Furthermore, suggest a plan to preserve and manage the remaining sites.



Fig.1 - Wadi Recess during my first visit in 2013 before the disappearance of the site. (© Mahmoud A. Emam)

Fig.2 - Wadi Sukhna during my second visit in 2015. The construction work appeared to the left of the photo. (© Mahmoud A. Emam)

Rock art of the Nile First Cataract region

Cross-road of people and ideas, and ancient frontier between Egypt and Nubia, the region of the Nile's First Cataract provides one of the longest rock art sequences of the entire African continent, starting from that produced by hunter-gatherer groups of the Late Palaeolithic up to that associated with more recent periods. The present contribution aims at discussing the corpus of rock art identified and investigated by the Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project in selected areas of the region, to include a section of the west bank north of Aswan, Wadi Abu Subeira and its southern extension, and a portion of the desert east of Kom Ombo. It shall highlight variability in chrono-spatial distribution, technology, iconography and meaning. Emphasis shall be given to the Predynastic/Early Dynastic rock art, its regional context and its importance in the frame of the rising Egyptian civilization. In this respect, the site of Nag el-Hamdulab shall be examined in detail. In particular the technologies used for documenting rock drawings and landscape shall be examined and theoretical approaches shall also be cited.

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Cataract region, variability,
predynastic/early dynastic,
Nag el-Hamdulab



Fig.1 - Main panel at site Nag el-Hamdulab with virtual restoration of the king figure. (AKAP Archive)

Fig.2 - Panel from Wadi RasRas representing an herd. (AKAP Archive)

The Hierakonpolis Petroglyphs - Chronology, Attribution and Interpretation

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Keywords: Hierakonpolis,
predynastic Egypt, fauna,
boats, geometric motifs

Since 2009, the Hierakonpolis Rock Art Survey has conducted in-depth analysis of all markings of human agency in the areas surrounding the archaeological excavations. The resultant corpus is unique in a number of ways. Found in context with extensively researched archaeological excavations, relations are observed in the distributions of settlements, cemeteries and rock art localities. The corpus, while strongly conformant to the repertoire and characteristics found in Egypt generally, carries its own distinctive traits. These offer opportunities for correlation with motifs on other media, providing a key to chronological placement and attribution. This, along with connections to other types evidence to be presented here, indicate production of rock markings and petroglyphs from at least the Early Predynastic to Dynastic and possibly Roman periods on the site. Stylistic features on some petroglyphs hint at the producers' intimate knowledge of decorative schemes prevalent on other media at the time. Such knowledge might be linked to the production and use of decorated wares known to have occurred on the site.

Predynastic rock art in its environmental context (Egypt)

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Keywords: Egypt, Predynastic, Early Dynastic

Over the last decades, an important amount of new information became available for Predynastic and Early Dynastic rock art, but the possible diversity in the concept of rock art sites in different environments has not attracted sufficient attention. Based on case studies from the Eastern and Western Deserts (including the western Theban desert) as well as from the Nile valley (Elkab and Aswan region), the semantic interpretations and differences will be discussed. Comparison with different types of objects mainly found in cemetery contexts will in the end allow a better integration of rock art within the visual world of Predynastic times.



Fig.1 - Wadi Abu Subeira, site KASS 1, Aswan, Egypt. (© Kom Ombo Archaeological project)

Fig. 2. Nag' el-Hamdulab, site 7, Aswan, Egypt. (© Kom Ombo Archaeological project)

The Rock Art of North Kharga Oasis, Egypt

Rock art presumably served many diverse purposes, including delineating boundaries, guiding people through the landscape, identifying marks of specific groups or individuals, a way of passing the time, documenting the landscape, presenting information about the landscape, an aid in wish fulfilment, doorways into another world/ dimension, and as a surface to place icons for reverence. This paper discusses how rock art was used to shape and control the desert landscape of North Kharga Oasis, in Egypt's Eastern Sahara, at times even serving as a point of dialogue between people far removed in time.

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Keywords: Egypt, Eastern Sahara, giraffe, oryx, elephant, rock art

The Boat as a Liminal Object in Egypt's Eastern Desert Rock-art

The Eastern Desert can be seen as a liminal zone between the normally ordered social world and the supernatural otherworld. It is in this area, where as a sacred domain the usual rules can be suspended and a connection made with the sublimity of the cosmos, that we see hundreds of boat images many miles from the River Nile. These vessels can be observed being dragged in much greater numbers in the middle of the desert than adjacent to the cataracts and river shoals where we might expect them. Moreover, they occur in combination with animals and human figures in hunting scenes-in some cases appearing to participate in the chase. Images of boats are also prevalent on pottery found in Naqada I and II predynastic graves in the Nile Valley, while in the Pharaonic Period boats are seen prominently in tomb scenes representing the otherworld. This paper explores the desert as a liminal zone, examines why the boat is such a prominent liminal object in the rock-art scenes and on grave pottery, and also seeks to explain how the boat's transformative power operates.

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Keywords: desert, boats,
liminal object, pottery, rock
art, Egypt



'Hippopotamus hunt' petroglyphs from the Nile Valley and surrounding deserts as symbolic images of prestige in the threshold of Egyptian State emergence

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Keywords: hippopotamus
hunt, petroglyphs, State
emergence, Upper Egypt,
Naqada

In this paper I will discuss the available examples of the petroglyph motif compositions known as the 'hippopotamus hunt' found in the Nile Valley and surrounding deserts, paying close attention to the formal elements that compose the image and their relation to socio-cultural processes affecting the Nile Valley, especially during the first half of 4th millennium BC (Naqada I-IIc). This period witnessed some of the most important changes in Egyptian history, most notably the emergence of chiefdoms and of course a new type of communal leadership. While the faunal record shows that wild animals did not play a considerable part in Naqadian diet, petroglyphs depicting the hunting of great, dangerous wild animals abound. Moreover, the fact that in many instances the hunter struggles with animals from different biotopes in the same representation challenges the idea that they simply portrayed what they did and saw. The aim of this paper is to suggest that petroglyph carving had less to do with registering facts than with constructing a symbolic narrative which in fact shows the emergence of a new type of communal leadership, expressed graphically by certain attributes of prestige such as headdresses, staves, penis sheaths and fake tails.



Fig.1 - Wadi Midriq - Ancient World Tours

A Pharaoh in Valcamonica: egyptian rock art in the archives of the Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici

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Keywords: Sinai, Timna Valley,
Egypt, rock art, CCSP Archive

The Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici (Valcamonica, Italy) has carried out missions beyond the Alps to research and document rock art sites in Italy and the world, creating thousands of archived reports. Between the '80s and the early 2000s the institute has participated in several missions to the Near East, in particular the Negev desert, but also in neighbouring regions, such as the Egyptian Sinai, with a special focus on rock-art sites. The CCSP archive thus obtained a wide breadth of documentation, in particular a range of photographic forms of data (film, both black and white and colour, and coloured slides), related to the rock art of the Sinai region. This covers areas in South Sinai: Wadi Hadra, Gebel Hamman Fara'un, Wadi Hagag Ein Hundra, Wadi Mukateb, Wadi Mughara, Sarabit El Khadim; and in North Sinai a site with engraved surfaces that was found emerging from the sand dunes (not always visible); also, in the Timna Valley (Israel) rock-art sites of the area close to the Shrine of Hathor and the pharaonic copper mines were located. The research presents the documentation, as yet unpublished, gathered by the CCSP between the '80s and the early 2000s, and highlights areas of interest for rock art research.



The emergence of an artistic canon at the Tamada discontinuity (Ennedi, Chad)

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Keywords: Tamada, Ennedi,
Chad, rock art, Manda China

In the decorated shelters of the south-western Ennedi, the appearance of a standardised iconography at the inception of the Iron Age marks the most visible stylistic discontinuity. The Manda China and Tamada sites possibly host the oldest examples of this art, relying on the recursive reproduction of humans in a standing pose with flexed arms and open hands. In the Tamada canon, even sleeping humans and seated women are represented by simple rigid rotations of the whole body or part of it, starting from this basic pose. Individuality was expressed through small differences in hairstyles and body decorations. The cattle figures appearing at the Tamada discontinuity are characteristically healthy, curvaceous animals. Drafts of uncompleted motifs indicate templates may have facilitated the countless reproductions.

How the original Tamada art became a shared graphics fated to proliferate, with variants until the introduction of the camel, is a mystery. However, these orderly compositions indicate the artists' focus was on the social portrait of families, with well-defined gender roles, and possibly well-structured clans. The placement of highly visible, distinguishable cattle figures at the same spots, or central to of the most elaborate compositions, reflects the centrality of cattle for the societies thriving in the Ennedi at the time.



Fig. 1 - Manda China shelter, south-western Ennedi. (photo Alessandro Menardi Noguera)

Fig. 2 - Manda China shelter, south-western Ennedi. (photo Alessandro Menardi Noguera)

GIS-systems and rock art. Spatial and artistic analysis of Nubian rock art sites and their landscape

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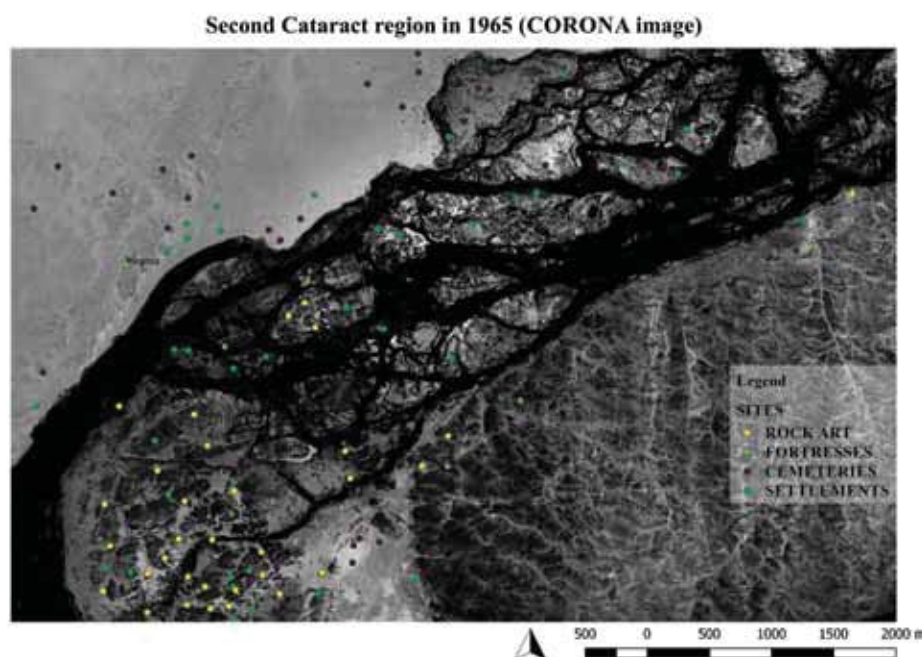
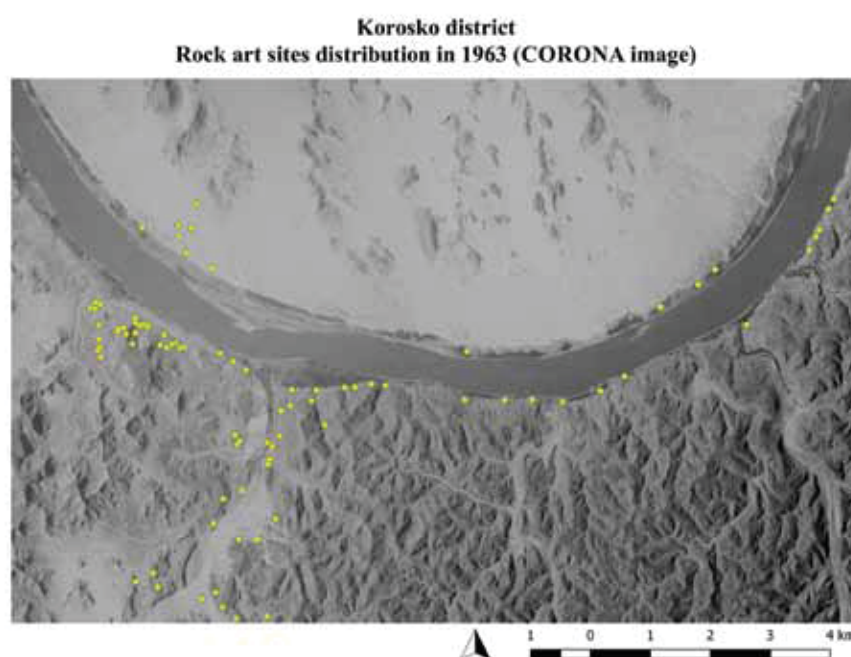
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Keywords: rock art, Nubia, landscape, GIS-database, spatial analysis

Fig.1 - Korosko District (Egypt). Sites distribution from Suková, L., *The rock art of Lower Nubia: Czechoslovak concession*, Charles University, Prague, 2011.

Fig.2 - Abka Region (Sudan). Sites distribution from Hellström, P. and Langballe, H., *The Rock Drawings*, Andelsbogtrykkeriet, Odense, 1970.

Rock art constitutes a peculiar characteristic of both ancient Egypt and Sudan, in particular during the prehistoric and Predynastic periods. The connections between the subjects of rock art panels and their geographical setting has been highlighted by many scholars because the artistic expression is strictly integrated with the specific area in which it has been created. However, it is not always possible to study rock art in its original context, given the natural or human influenced environmental changes. Nonetheless, modern technologies (Remote Sensing, satellite imagery, GIS systems) can be useful to examine the links between rock art subjects and the landscape in which they could be seen, because visibility is also an important factor. The 'Heritage and Dams in Nubia Workgroup' aims for the creation of a GIS-database which includes all the Nubian archaeological sites effected by the building of the Aswan High Dam. The current research focuses on the significant rock art sites and, specifically on their spatial connections with the original Nubian landscape, as it can be inferred through the GIS-database analysis and published material. The study of the geographical setting of the rock art subjects will allow for a series of results which could be compared with other sites and locations.



Stylistic diversity and spatial distribution. Recent Rock Art documentation at Gebel el-Silsila (Upper Egypt)

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Keywords: Egypt; Gebel el-Silsila; Stylistic diversity, rock art, rock inscriptions

The site of Gebel el-Silsila lies in Upper Egypt, approximately 65 km north of Aswan. While previous academic reports describe a landscape more or less empty of any rock art, the ongoing Swedish expedition (Lund University) has documented close to 100 prehistoric and early dynastic rock art and rock inscription sites in the region. In addition, 104 individual dynastic and Graeco-Roman quarries have been documented and studied, of which the majority bear inscribed and painted commemorations of the site's ancient visitors. Indeed, the quarriescape of Gebel el-Silsila displays an astounding concentration of rupestrial material, among which abstract geometrical patterns, concrete pictograms and wide-ranging graphic motifs. This paper aims to present a general introduction to the rock art and pictorial designs illustrated at Gebel el-Silsila, including their stylistic, technical and chronological diversity, as well as considerations for their spatial distribution, archaeological context, and – if possible – an interpretation of their significance. The material with which the current paper will be concerned are geographically distributed on both sides of the Nile, from Gebel el-Silsila in the south to Wadi Shatt el-Rigal in the north, and a chronologically range from Epipalaeolithic to Roman imperial history.



The current state of rock art research in the Dakhleh Oasis

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Keywords: Dakhleh Oasis, Anthony Mills, Egypt, rock art, Petroglyph Unit D.O.P.

The Petroglyph Unit of the Dakhleh Oasis Project (D.O.P) has been investigating rock art for over 30 years, discovering numerous petroglyphic sites from various periods. There is no doubt now that Dakhleh should be considered among the biggest rock art complexes in the Western Desert of Egypt. However, fieldwork has ceased due to the 2014 socio-political conditions in the region. This situation provides, on the one hand, an opportunity to evaluate and analyse the rock art documentation collected during the last three decades, but on the other, also forces us to re-think research strategies, aims, and possibilities. In this paper I aim at providing an overview of rock art categories and traditions as recorded in Dakhleh, as well as enumerate and discuss selected interpretational issues. This will form a basis for evaluating the current state of our knowledge on rock art in the region and will act as a background for discussing the future of rock art research in the region. As 35 years have passed since Anthony Mills published the first rock art findings of the D.O.P., it seems a timely résumé of the research. It will hopefully serve to establish new goals for our research, even if the current challenges prevent fieldwork.

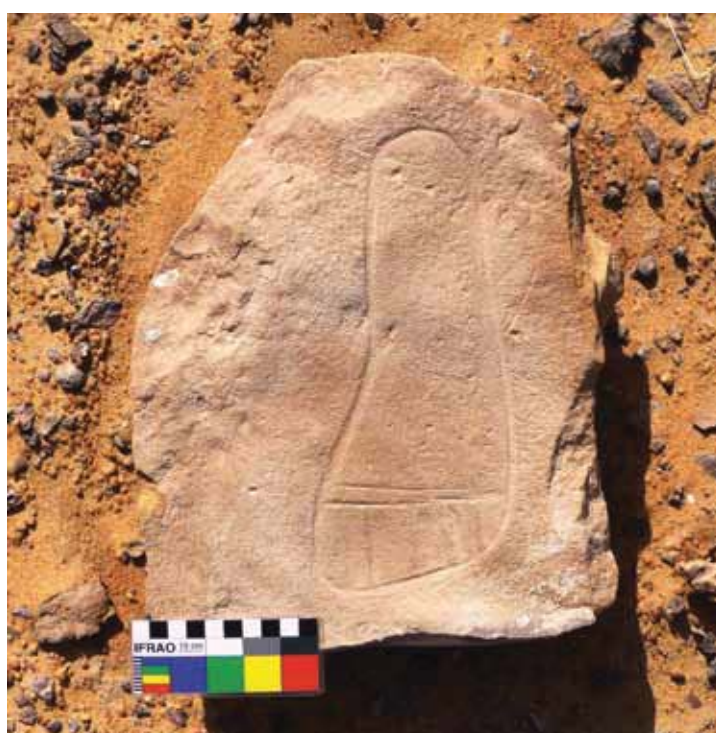


Fig.1 - Prehistoric engravings depicting pregnant(?) females. Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt. (photo by the author)

Fig.2 - A dynastic depiction of a foot. Dakhleh Oasis, Egypt. (photo by the author)

Veneration scenes in the graffiti of the royal necropolis at Thebes

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Keywords: graffiti, rock art, Valley of the Kings, Thebes, Deir El-Medina

The workmen of Deir el-Medina, who carved the royal tombs of the Valley of the Kings during the New Kingdom (1550–1050 BC), left around 4000 elements of graffiti across the mountain of the royal necropolis. Only 120 of these graffiti depict veneration scenes, where the artist is shown worshipping the deities. The small number of veneration scenes illustrates their particular significance for the producers of those graffiti. In this paper the first comprehensive and collective study of these 120 veneration scenes is undertaken. This study not only analyzes the content and spatial distribution, but also the titles and biographies of their authors as well as the specific fingerprints of the artists, in order to identify them, especially to understand their social status, and subsequently their motives for drawing this graffiti. The study correlates the deities depicted in the graffiti to the spatial distribution, to explore the connection between the depicted deity and the place where it is drawn. In addition, a comparison between the graffiti veneration scenes and their counterparts in all kinds of religious expressions, in Villages such as on stelae or in tombs, was undertaken to better understand the Deir el-Medina religious life during the New Kingdom.



Pedis (in) Memoriam A study of feet graffiti, their signification and contextual relationship within the mortuary landscape of Gebel el-Silsila

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Keywords: Egypt, Gebel el-Silsila, fieldwork, feet graffiti, mortuary landscape, current research

Feet graffiti appear throughout Ancient Egypt, known as personal markers of priests in temples and voyagers along trade-routes, and similar contexts have been documented also within the area of Gebel el-Silsila, which will be considered. However, the current corpus appears within a cemetery, habitually adjacent with physical remains. The aim of this paper is to explore the function and relationship between a series of feet graffiti engraved within the New Kingdom necropolis at Gebel el-Silsila. What was their significance? Who produced them and for whom? How were they interpreted by later ancient visitors?

Their locality and contemporaneousness with the mortuary landscape raise questions concerning their meaning: were they representations of the deceased, thus grave markers, possibly denoting position or orientation? Or were they possibly carved by family mourners wishing to honour their departed loved ones?

In addition to questions of signification, this paper will explore spatial distribution, individual styles, sizes, attributes and other contextual rupestral details (previous, contemporaneous and later), such as game boards and quadrupeds. By analysing the placements of these feet, it is hoped that this paper opens to further discussion regarding placement and orientation, and if this corpus relates with our modern rituals of mourning our dead.



The Nubian rock art: history of the research

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Keywords: Nubia, rock art, research history, methodology

The research of Nubian rock art, in the context of the more general archaeological research, begins between the second half of the XIX century and the XX century. The rich repertoire of sites is known through a series of publications in different languages and with various kinds of approaches.

The research will address the following points:

- 1- The history of the research.
- 2- The methodological approaches adopted by the authors of the publications.
- 3- The debate concerning the chronological problems.
- 4- The analysis of the synthesis of the general rock art features, particularly the techniques used to make the rock art and the styles evident in Nubian rock art.
- 5- The types of interpretations proposed for the regional rock art contexts.



Fig.1 - History of research on Nubian Rock Art (D. Zampetti)

The Jebel Uweinat rock art survey: results of the past 20 years

A systematic survey of Jebel Uweinat and the surrounding smaller massifs in the centre of the Libyan Desert (Eastern Sahara) have yielded over a thousand new rock art localities in the past 20 years. This corpus of new material, and the availability of novel digital image processing technologies permitted the re-assessment of previously defined styles and cultural units and the establishment of a firm relative chronology that corresponds well with absolute dates provided by archaeological and climatic studies. There is a clear cultural succession spanning over 4000 years, from the middle Holocene until the time of first contact with Dynastic Egypt in the early Middle Kingdom.

Examining the Gilf/Uweinat region in a broader Saharan context, some very clear parallels may be observed with the rock art and cultural development of the Central Saharan regions (Tibesti, Tassili N'Ajjer).

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Keywords: Eastern Sahara, Jebel Uweinat, rock art, regional context, Libyan desert



Fig. 1 - Archers, Karkur Talh, Jebel Uweinat. (photo Andras Zboray)

Fig. 2 - Same photograph after processing with DStretch© RGB0 filter (DStretch software developed by Jon Harman)