



JAN JELINEK

## BIR MIJI — THE NORTHERNMOST TRIPOLITANIAN ROCK ART SITE

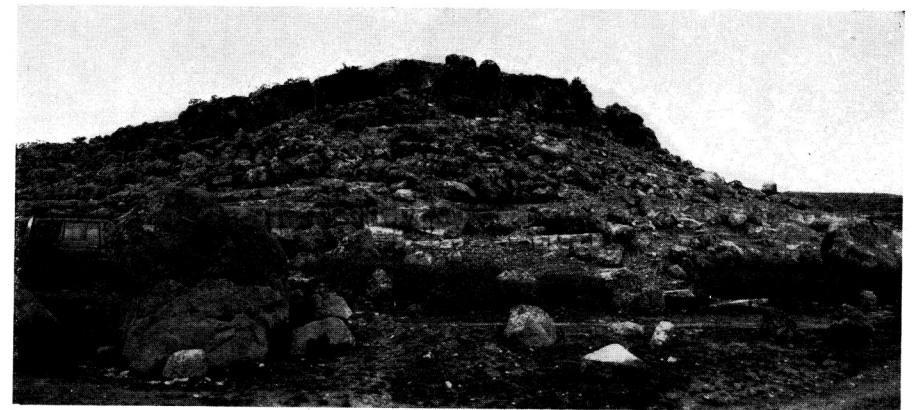
**ABSTRACT.** — *Bir Miji, the northernmost Early Neolithic Tripolitanian rock art site is described in a comparative analysis and is recognized as a connecting link between south European and Saharan rock art.*

Bir Miji is a village on the Tarhuna Plateau, near the town of Tarhuna, some seventy km south-east of Tripoli. South of the village, near the road to Tarhuna and opposite to a small petrol station in the small rocky valley is situated the hitherto northernmost Tripolitanian rock art site (*Fig. 1*). The importance of the site has been stressed by the discovery of stone artefacts (Neuville P. 1956a, 1956b). Even today there is a water well in the valley and there is no doubt that there existed a spring and a temporary stream was draining the valley in prehistoric times.

The area outside the valley is strewn with scattered stone remains of Roman buildings and associated archaeological finds (Neuville P. 1956b).

There are rock engravings on three large boulders at the floor of the valley and on the slope of the valley below the Roman ruins, where the rock

FIG. 1 *Bir Miji locality. The two boulders with the rock art are in the foreground left and extreme right. The majority of engravings are situated higher (arrow).*



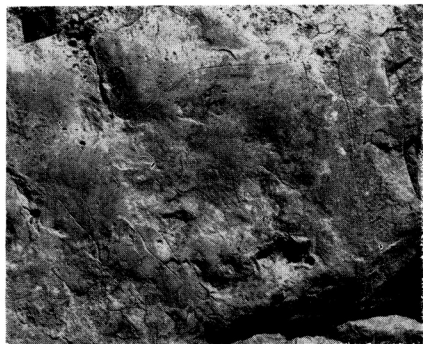


FIG. 2a, b *Bir Miji*, engraving No. 1, situated on boulder No. 2 in the valley: a 58 cm long bovid figure with a characteristic horn. Note the slight lines decorating the horn. On the hind part of the animal there is another engraving (Fig. 3a, b), picturing an antelope (9 cm long).



FIG. 3a



FIG. 3a, b *Bir Miji*, engraving No. 2. Detail of Fig. 2 with the engraving of an antelope.



FIG. 4a



FIG. 4a, b *Bir Miji*, engraving No. 3. A 17 cm long elephant-like animal. Note the atypical head and tail.

face overhangs a small abri; here the rock engravings are situated on the horizontal and vertical rock faces in front of the abri and inside it. On the

first big boulder at the bottom of the valley we can see irregular engraved lines and scratches in various places. These graffiti are fine and could not have been caused by polishing or grinding bone or stone tools. They are situated also in a rather irregular way. Under the boulder we found a small cave or overhang that could serve as a shelter against sunshine or rain.

There is a large number of irregular engraved lines on the horizontal and vertical faces of the second boulder nearby. A detailed study of the boulder reveals four animal figures:

No. 1. A bovine figure (*Bos brachyceros*) measuring fifty eight cm, with a simple forward curved horn. It is presented in lateral view, with fine, simple outlines. Its characteristic horn is decorated with wavy lines resembling "flowing water" (Fig. 2a, b). The head of the animal is of a rather simplified triangular shape and its forelegs have been pictured with several irregular thin lines. Better presented are the neck, tail root and the two hindlegs, incomplete in their distal part. On the back of the animal there is another small engraving, probably representing an antelope.

No. 2. It is only 9 cm long, drawn in simple

FIG. 5 *Bir Miji*, engraving No. 4.



thin lines in lateral view. The distal parts of the legs are incomplete also here (Fig. 3a, b).

No. 3. In the vicinity of the above-mentioned figures there is another animal figure measuring 17 cm. Its tall and strong body and the head with trunk seem to represent an elephant (Figs. 4a, b). This, however, is contradicted by a thick tail and two pointed ears. The vertical lines, probably representing the legs of the animal, are situated irregularly and are not representative. The drawing looks like a disintegration of the realistic form to such a degree that we cannot recognize what kind of animal is it representing.

No. 4. The last figure on this rock face is a shallow engraving of an animal measuring 10 cm. Only the back line, tail and round head of the animal can be made out. One leg of the animal is represented by two long lines. In front of engraving No. 4 we can see several other irregular lines (Fig. 5).

The third large boulder at the bottom of the valley, near the second one and similar to the first two boulders, has many irregular engraved lines on its surface. On its upper horizontal face we can see a large number of engraved lines and among them there are two characteristic figures:

No. 5. The first figure shows a highly stylized animal with its head turned backwards (Fig. 6a, b). The figure is in simple straight lines — this geometric style strongly differs from the bulk of the other engravings found here. The individual lines are also deeper and less weathered. Their colour is lighter and they are of more recent origin. The figure is 32 cm long and 55 cm high. The head consists of a number of parallel lines.

No. 6. On the same rock face there is a 15 cm large symbol similar to the head of the preceding figure (Fig. 6a, b). The main outline has the shape of an elongated arc and is filled with parallel lines (Fig. 7).

The above-mentioned three boulders fell down to the floor of the valley long before prehistoric man used them for engravings. This is clearly documented by the distribution of the figures and engraved lines.

No. 7. If we climb up the rock slope to the small abri and to the rock overhangs, which — as documented by archaeological finds — served as dwelling places for the prehistoric man, we can see many slight and deep irregular engraved lines overall on the rock face. On the flat rock face in front of the cave there is a group of short lines grouped around a small empty space (Fig. 8). The situation is similar also with engraving No. 8 representing an eleven cm large animal figure in lateral view and with the head bowed (Fig. 9a, b). The big head and the large pointed ears seem to belong to a donkey.

Although the figure is engraved in a clear way, its foreleg is not well pictured and the hindleg has not been finished. There are several short engraved lines around the figure.

No. 8. A 18 cm long figure of a hoofed animal in side view, again with its head bowed (Fig. 10a, b).



FIG. 6a, b Bir Miji, boulder No. 3 in the valley. A highly stylized 32 cm long animal figure.

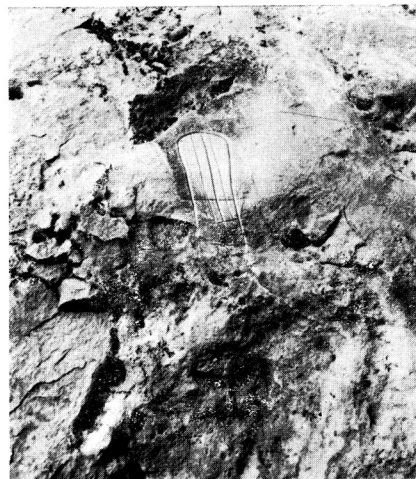


FIG. 7 Bir Miji, boulder No. 3 in the valley; a 50 cm large symbol.



FIG. 8 Group of sgraffiti.

Part of the head, the neck and the distal parts of the legs were not designed. Inside the body there are four slight vertical lines — a frequent feature with north-African engravings. The whole figure is presented in simple outlines.

On the side of same rock there are two fine engravings of hoofed animals. The first figure (No. 9) is 22 cm long and represents a sheep — judged from the characteristic head and neck. The other figure (No. 10), measuring 16 cm, is very indistinct and difficult to identify, but according to the shape of the head and body it seems to be a goat (Fig. 11a, b).

On the upper face of the next large flat rock we can see the outline of a 33 cm long bovine-like figure (No. 11) in side view, with a single horn curved forward. Its hind legs are in poor style. On the breast there is an engraved oblique line (Fig. 12a, b). Close to the above figure we can see a 12 cm high engraving showing the front part of an antelope (No. 12). The pointed ears are in front view, while the two horns appear in side view. The engraving is in side view, with an incomplete head, strong neck and one leg (Fig. 13a, b).



FIG. 9a, b Bir Miji, upper group of engravings: a donkey surrounded with several straight lines.



FIG. 10a, b Bir Miji. Engraving of an animal.

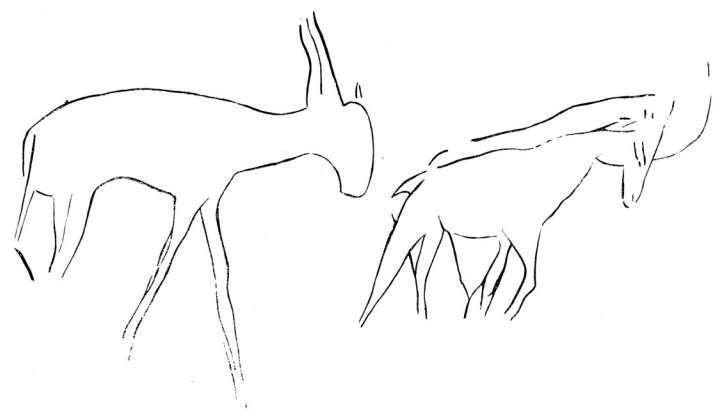


FIG. 11a, b *Bir Miji*. Two animal figures.

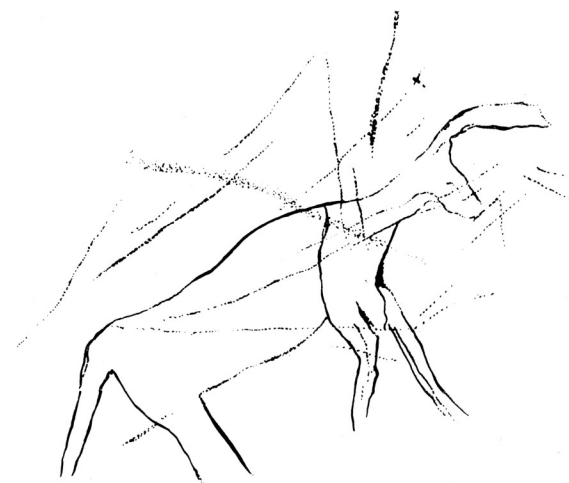
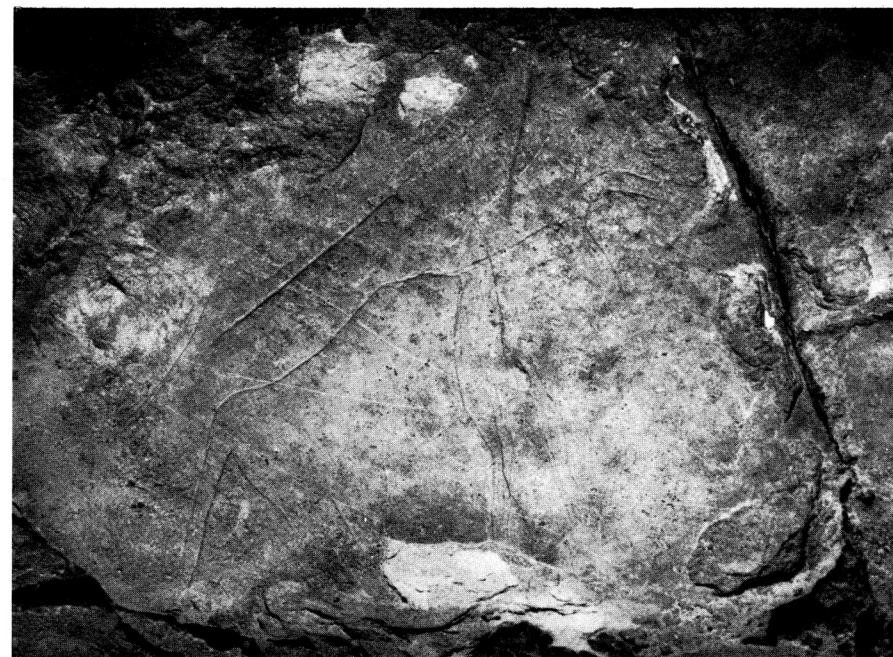


FIG. 12a, b *Bir Miji*. A bovid figure (33 cm long).

No. 13. In the small cave behind the flat rocks, or more precisely between the rocks and the vertical rock face, there is a 13 cm large figure of an antelope. It is very difficult to take a photograph of it because it is situated in a narrow passage between two rock faces. Although the figure is in a simple static view, its forward-leaning body gives the picture a strong dynamic character (Fig. 14a, b). This feature is quite frequent also in other north-African engravings. The geographically nearest engraving of this kind can be found in Wadi Zigza II in North Fezzan, described by P. Graziosi (Graziosi, 1962) as



FIG. 13a, b Bir Miji. Part of the antelope engraving (12 cm).



FIG. 14a, b Bir Miji. Antelope engraving (13 cm).

an antelope (*Dorcas neglecta*). He put the engraving to the precameline period. I am using this comparison to demonstrate a similar artistic design, not for chronological or other reasons.

Nos. 14. and 15. The two figures (a bovid and a human) on the vertical rock face make a single



FIG. 15a, b Detail of human figure No. 16a Bir Miji.

composition. The 30 cm large bovid figure has a simple oval symbol between its horns: the oval is divided in the middle by a vertical line (Figs. 15a, b, 16a, b, c). The style of the two figures is the same as that of other local engravings. Stylistically they are not quite perfect. They are engraved in simple fine lines and are presented in side view.

Higher up on the rock face there are two other rather indistinct engravings. The first of them (No. 16) is 20 cm large and represents an antelope in vertical position (Fig. 17a, b). Adjoining No. 16 is another composite engraving of two or more figures (No. 17), measuring 55 cm in height. These figures are not very distinct, it is so due to the rather weak lines, weathered rock surface, and last but not least also due to a high degree of schematisation. The figure on the left is ityphalic (Fig. 18a, b). In the vicinity we can find several other simple unfinished or broken figures (Fig. 19a, b, 20, 21, 22, 23).

No. 18. A few metres aside we can see the remains of another animal figure measuring 75 cm. It is situated next to a small cave on the vertical rock. Compared with the other engravings this figure is relatively deep-cut, nonetheless the upper part of the picture, the head and the back of the animal have been completely weathered (Fig. 24a, b). The curved lines seem to represent a circular symbol, the long tail and legs seem to represent a bull. In any case the deeply engraved lines belong to a style different from that of the other engravings.

On studying these northernmost Tripolitanian engravings we can consider the style, subject matter, method of engraving, and of course the chronology of the locality:

FIG. 16a Detail of a cattle figure.





FIG. 16b



FIG. 16a, b, c Bir Miji. Engraving of a bovid figure followed by a man. Note the symbol situated between the horns. The bovid is 30 cm long.



FIG. 17a, b Bir Miji. Antelope figure.

#### SUBJECT MATTER OF THE ENGRAVINGS

In most engravings we can recognise some hoofed animals. Anthropomorphic figures appear in three cases only. In the group of animals there are two bovids with their horns curved forward and downwards, the type appearing frequently in the north-African or Saharan rock art. We find it in *Acacus* in Neolithic paintings (Mori, 1965) and there are engravings of this type in Wadi Zigza (Graziosi, 1962) and in Mathrendush, or in Wadi Djerat in Tassili (Lhote, 1976). Chronologically this type is associated with the *Bubalus* period, with the Neolithic bovidian paintings, or with the later paintings or engravings of the caballine period of the Saharan art. The donkey and antelopes are also broadly represented in the north African art.

Figures 16a, b, c are highly interesting. The symbol situated between the horns of the bovid has many analogies in North Africa and in Central Sahara (Wadi Zigza IV, Graziosi, 1962). The shape of these symbols ranges from a disc (e.g. Maia Dib, Graziosi 1941. Saharan Atlas or Hogar, G. Camps 1974. tabs. XIX and XXIV) to complex structures to be found in Tibesti, Fezzan, north Algeria and



FIG. 18a, b Bir Miji. Two weathered figures — 55 cm high. One of them is ityphallic.



FIG. 19 Simple animal engraving.



FIG. 20 Engraved lines and part of an engraved figure.



FIG. 21 Simple engraving.



FIG. 22 An anthropomorph figure.

elsewhere (Huard, 1961, Graziosi, 1932. In Leludj — not yet published research made by the author in Fezzan, H. Lhote, 1976). Extensive comparative studies show that symbols of this kind between the horns of animals are traditional in the north-African and Saharan art. Huard (1961) interprets them as pictures of an extraordinary animal (the king of the animals). As regards the human figure situated behind the bovid, we can find again numerous analogies in the north-African and Saharan art representing various animals, including bovids. Both the symbol between the horns and the human figure situated behind the animal are African elements, unknown in the European part of the circummediterranean area. The shape of the human figure in Bir Miji (Fig. 15a, c) with its beak-like face reminds of the human figures from Addaura in Sicily (Marconi, 1952—1953, Graziosi, 1960), showing analogies in artistic style. An important fact should be kept in mind — the Sicilian rock art is archaeologically dated as Epipalaeolithic (Graziosi, 1950, 1953, 1960). Most archaeologists, however, consider the north-African rock art Neolithic, i.e. younger. However, the Tripolitanian Neolithic hasn't got an absolute dating as yet.

## STYLE AND TECHNOLOGY

The study of the Bir Miji rock art reveals three different styles and technologies. Most figures have been designed in indistinct thin lines, in side view. One of the characteristic features of these pictures is the unfinished design of the distal parts of the limbs and the fact that some of them are partly schematic, while the rest of the figure appears to be quite representative. The head is sometimes schematically triangular. Broad comparative studies have revealed that these engravings are linked with the well-known north-African and Saharan rock art on the one side, but also with the European littoral

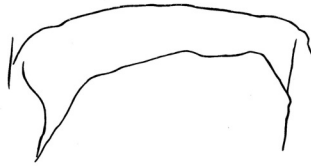


FIG. 23 Simple-line animal engraving.

of the Mediterranean Sea, on the other. The comparison with Sicilian engravings (Mt. Pellegrino, Ad-  
daura, Levanzo), with the bull from the Grotta di Romanelli, or with the engravings from the Ebbou Cave in South France show strong analogies, both in subject matter and in style (Graziosi, 1932–1933, 1950, 1953, 1954, 1964, Marconi, 1954, 1955, Glory, 1947). All these sites abound in similar subject matter (bovids and some other hoofed animals) and have similar style (simple indistinct lines, frequently schematized outline in lateral view, the legs are often unfinished and the hooves are missing). I do not think these similarities are the results of regular and direct contacts and relationship. They seem to be, much more likely, the result of life in the same large geographical and ecological region, in a period when North Africa formed an organic part of the Mediterranean region and the Sahara had not yet been isolated from North Africa by vast desert areas as it is now; only the post-Neolithic desiccation is responsible for the isolation of Central Sahara from the Mediterranean regions.

FIG. 24 Bir Miji. Badly weathered deep animal engraving. The surface weathering of the deeply engraved lines is the same as that of the natural rock face. It differs in style and age from the bulk of the Bir Miji engravings.



The common ecological situation in the past has brought about the distribution of similarities both as regards subject matter and the stylistic elements in the rock art. They are similar results of similar development. Under such circumstances even the weakest and most indirect influence can produce similar results in the rock art, namely in the rock art style.

There are also other two styles to be found in Bir Miji. Engravings Nos. 5, 6 (Figs. 6a, b, 7) found on the third boulder in the valley are strongly geometrically stylized. Differences in style, weaker patina and their better state of preservation point to younger age.

A representative of the third different style is engraving No. 18 (Figs. 24a, b). It has been deeply cut into the rock face and the incisions have the same patina as the rock surface. Due to the mode of cutting and advanced degree of weathering we must regard this engraving as different in style and older than the other engravings in Bir Miji.

## ARCHAEOLOGY

There are two shelters and a smaller cave on the rock slope. The sediments represented by several layers have been preserved up to these days. P. Neuville on excavating the two principal abris found seven different layers in stratigraphical position. According to the archaeological and palaeontological content of these layers he distinguished three Neolithic layers and the lowest layer belongs possibly to Mousterian (Neuville, 1956b).

The earliest Neolithic level (Phase I) contains "graffiti nombreux et de rares gravures naturalistes, d'ailleurs très schématiques". Unfortunately P. Neuville fails to mention which naturalistic engravings did he find in this level.

The second Neolithic level (Phase II) contained: "Art rupestre comprenant des scènes de chasse et des gazelles finement incisées, de petites dimension, situées sur le paroi d'un (Abri A II) et recouvertes par le remplissage 13 contenant une industrie de la Phase II". I did not find any hunting scene mentioned by P. Neuville. Our engraving No. 13 (Fig. 14a, b) represents without doubt the above-mentioned group of engravings. Today it is on the rock above the ground as the respective layer had been excavated. Anyhow, if this engraving (and the other mentioned by P. Neuville) were covered by the layer of Phase II, then they come from an earlier period, i.e. from the period of Phase I. The third Neolithic level (Phase III, the latest one, contains: "Figurations animalier: boeufs domestiques aux dimensions plus grand que dans la phase II." Such larger bovine engravings are No. 14 (Fig. 15a, c) and No. 1 (Fig. 2a, b).

From the above notes follows that P. Neuville found engravings in all Neolithic levels. He considers the sgraffiti the oldest and the large bovids the latest rock art of the Neolithic age.

An important fact is that during his excavations he did not find any Neolithic pottery sherds.

We fared equally during our six visits to the site in 1976–1980. The situation is similar also in other Neolithic open-air sites in Tripolitania (Fabbri, Winorath, Scott, 1965), where pottery sherds are very rare.

There is stone industry scattered on the slope under the upper group of engravings, at the bottom of the wadi along the stream bed and sporadically also on the surface of the plain overlying the engravings. The technological and typological structure of this industry was described by P. Neuville (1956) as Tripolitanian pre-pottery Neolithic.

The raw material used for the manufacture of the stone industry was almost exclusively silex. Sporadically occur also jasper, quartzite and other materials. Few of the artifacts were burnt in fire.

The Capsian traditions detected at the Bir Miji site suggest the possible existence of relations with the nearby Capsian stations in Wadi Ar Ribat (del Fabbro, 1968). The Bir Miji complex, however, differs with its high percentage of side-scrapers.

## CHRONOLOGY

Certain South European rock art finds have been archaeologically dated and due to this fact most rock art students consider the South European group of Mediterranean rock engravings Late Palaeolithic, regarding the North African engravings as later, chronologically following the South European rock art. The rock art of the Bir Miji site in North Libya differs from all known North African rock arts of the caballine or later historical periods. It forms part of the rock art of the Neolithic pastoral populations. Its style and technology point to the early stages of the Neolithic pastoral period. The archaeological finds also support this view. The style, technique and subject matter of the Bir Miji rock art clearly indicate its connection with the South European Upper Palaeolithic rock art.

The crossing of the Mediterranean presented no problem in the Late Palaeolithic. Even sporadic contacts sufficed to bring about similarities regarding subject matter and style. It is surprising that the links between the South European Late Palaeolithic art on the one hand, and the Neolithic North African and Saharan art, on the other, have not yet been seriously considered and studied. In fact we are still waiting for exact absolute datings of the Tripolitanian Neolithic period.

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Dr. Jan Jelínek, DSc.  
 Anthropos Institute  
 nám. 25. února 7  
 659 37 Brno — CS