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THE GARA UM IL MANSÚR ROCK ART SITE IN TRIPOLITANIA

With the contribution on archaeology by Jiří Svoboda.

ABSTRACT. — *The article deals with the study and description of the Gara Um il Mansúr rock art gallery in Southern Tripolitania. Most of the engraved figures belong to the local style of the pastoral and horse periods of the north African and Saharan rock art. Important are the five ram figures with head symbols and ornaments.*

FIG. 1. General view of the Gara Mansúr locality in southern Tripolitania.



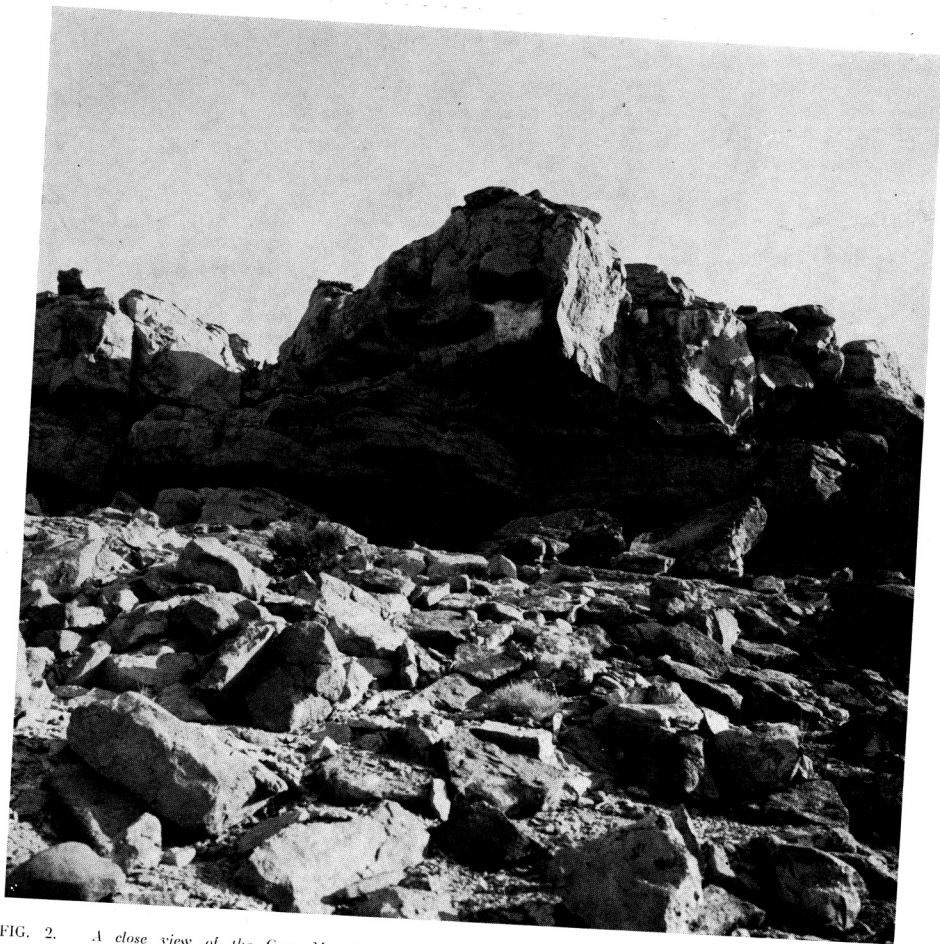


FIG. 2. A close view of the Gara Mansûr gallery (southern part).

The village Shahva is on the road leading from Nalut to Ghadames, in western Libya. Two km south-west of the village we find a low "gara" (table-shaped mountain hill) called "Gara Um il Mansûr". In its upper part there are large overhangs with two groups of rock engravings (Fig. 1, 2). Near the site there are deposits of flint; in the prehistoric times they were important sources of raw materials for the manufacture of stone tools. Numerous broken pieces and precores prepared roughly for the manufacture of stone tools can be still found here — including also a few unfinished Late Neolithic tools.

Most of the flint material to be found around Gara Mansûr has no patina.

In the northern abri there are seven important engravings on the 400 cm long rock wall. Starting from the north we can see here:

1. A 27 cm long engraving of an antelope or goat in lateral view (Fig. 3, 4). The head is characteristically shaped, with a long "beard". On the head instead of horns there is a high triangle, most probably of decorative or symbolic meaning. There is a "beard" hanging from the neck. We are not sure whether it represents a natural mane or whe-



FIG. 3. Engraving of a he goat with a "beard" and with conical head ornament.

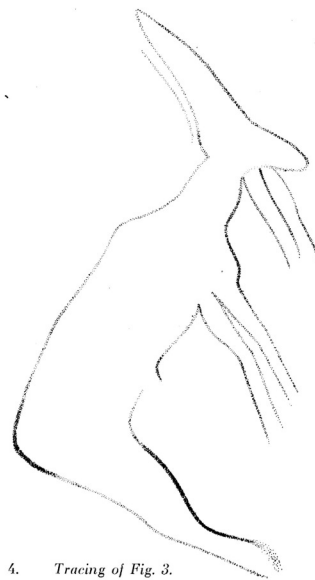


FIG. 4. Tracing of Fig. 3.



FIG. 5. An animal figure with an oval head symbol.



FIG. 6. Tracing of engraving Fig. 5.



FIG. 7. Animal figure with a "beard" and with a conical head ornament.

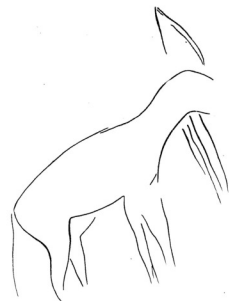


FIG. 8. Tracing of the engraving Fig. 7.

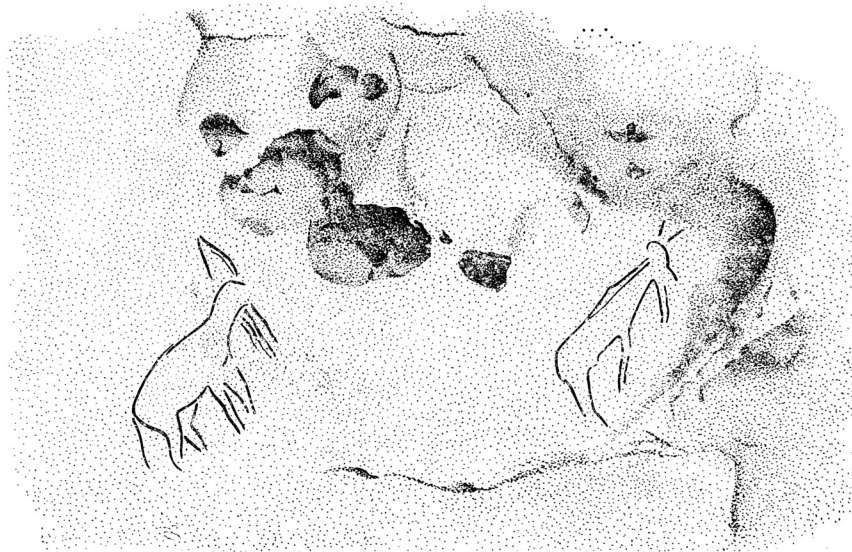


FIG. 9. The situation of figs. 5 and 7.

ther it has decorative meaning. The sexual organ is represented, indicating that it is a he-goat. The tail of the animal is short, as in antelopes or goats.

2. Thirty cm to south-west we can see a similar engraving (Fig. 5, 6) measuring 16 cm. On its head there is a long "beard" and an oval symbol. The reproduction of the engraving is rather difficult as it is strongly weathered. It represents a ram in simple lateral view.

3. 25 cm aside there is a 15 cm long engraving of another ram with a conical ornament and with a "beard" on its head (Fig. 7, 8). Its style is identical with that of the above figure.



FIG. 10. The earliest Gara Mansir engraving of an animal followed by an unfinished figure.

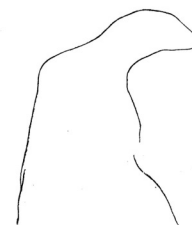


FIG. 11. Tracing of the unfinished figure No. 10.

horns on the head signal that the engraving pictures an antelope or a cattle figure. The hind part of the engraving was later completed with simple lines. The figure is followed by an unfinished engraved outline of another animal.

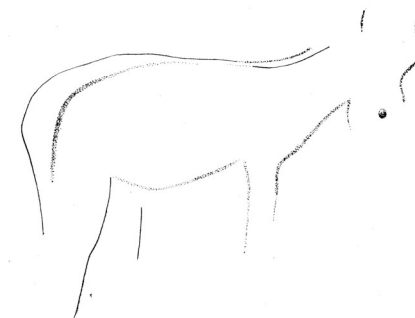


FIG. 12. Tracing of the animal figure No. 10.

30 cm further to south-west there is a chronologically important 47 cm long engraving (Fig. 10, 11, 12) of two animal figures. The first picture is heavily weathered. It is covered with the same patina as the rockface. The outline of the figure is a broad but shallow groove. Two frontally situated

40 cm further on the rock face there is an incomplete and damaged animal figure, in fact it is only a head with a beard and two legs are presented (Fig. 13, 14). The rest of the engraving has peeled off with the rock face. There is no conical head ornament in this figure.

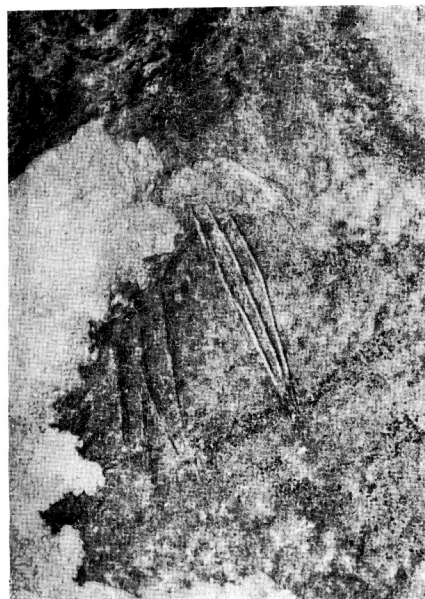


FIG. 13. Fragment of an engraved animal figure with a "beard".



FIG. 14. Tracing of the animal figure No. 13.



FIG. 15. Engraved ostrich figure.



FIG. 16. Tracing of the ostrich figure No. 15.

50 cm to south-west there is a badly weathered and damaged group of four birds, probably ostriches (Fig. 15, 16). In three of them we trace only the outlines of their bodies. The third bird is better visible, it has long legs and neck, the characteristic shape of the body has simple outlines. The engraving is 32 cm high.

55 cm farther we see a lovely figure of a ram measuring 32 cm. It has a conical head ornament and a "beard" (Fig. 17, 18). It is presented in side view, its outlines are simple. The shape of its head, body and tail leaves nobody in doubt that this engraving represents a ram.

These are all figures that can be traced on the first part of the Gara Mansúr gallery. All of them face the same direction.

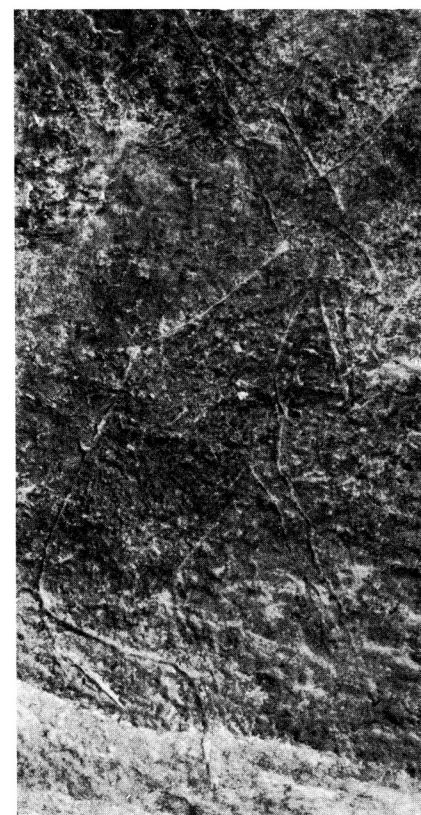


FIG. 17. Engraved ram figure with a beard and with a head ornament.



FIG. 18. Tracing of the fig. 17.



FIG. 19. Engraved cattle figure with an arrow-like symbol and with a human figure (orant).



FIG. 20. Tracing of figures No. 19.

After a 35 m brake begins the southern part of the gallery. Here we can see further four groups of engraved figures on a 200 cm long rockface.

The first one is a 24 cm long cattle figure with a long tail and lyra-shaped horns represented in frontal view (Fig. 19, 20). The whole figure is in simple lateral view with all four legs represented. There is an arrow-like symbol engraved into the body of the animal. The cattle figure is adjoined by a human figure with raised arms (orant). It is not quite clear whether the human figure is sitting on the animal's back, or whether it has been engraved in superposition over the animal figure. The human figure is probably a late addition to the earlier cattle engraving. 40 cm further there is a 13 cm long oval symbol with three transversal lines. Its meaning is unknown.

35 cm aside there is a group of several ostriches, each of them is 20–25 cm high (Fig. 21, 22). The body neck and head of the central figure are very well presented. Instead of legs there are numerous irregular lines, more or less in vertical di-

FIG. 21. Sgraffiti with ostrich figures and with an engraved arrow.



FIG. 23. Engraving of a human figure with a horse.



FIG. 22. Tracing of ostrich figures No. 21.

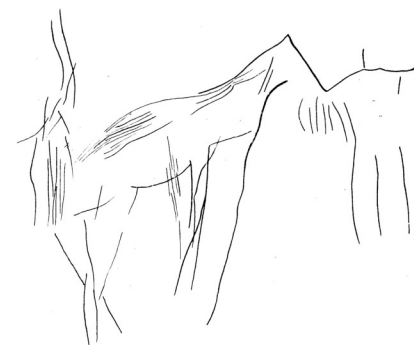


FIG. 24. Tracing of the engraving No. 23.

rection. The remaining figures consist of many fine irregular lines so that it is very difficult to trace them. A tendency to repeat several times the engraved outline can be observed also in other figures at the Gara Mansur gallery, out of this group of figures it has the character of sgraffiti. In the left part

of these engravings there is an engraving probably representing an arrow shaft.

65 cm further we can see a 10 cm large engraved human figure with a horse. Both figures, man and horse, have been engraved only partially and in a rather careless style (Fig. 23, 24).

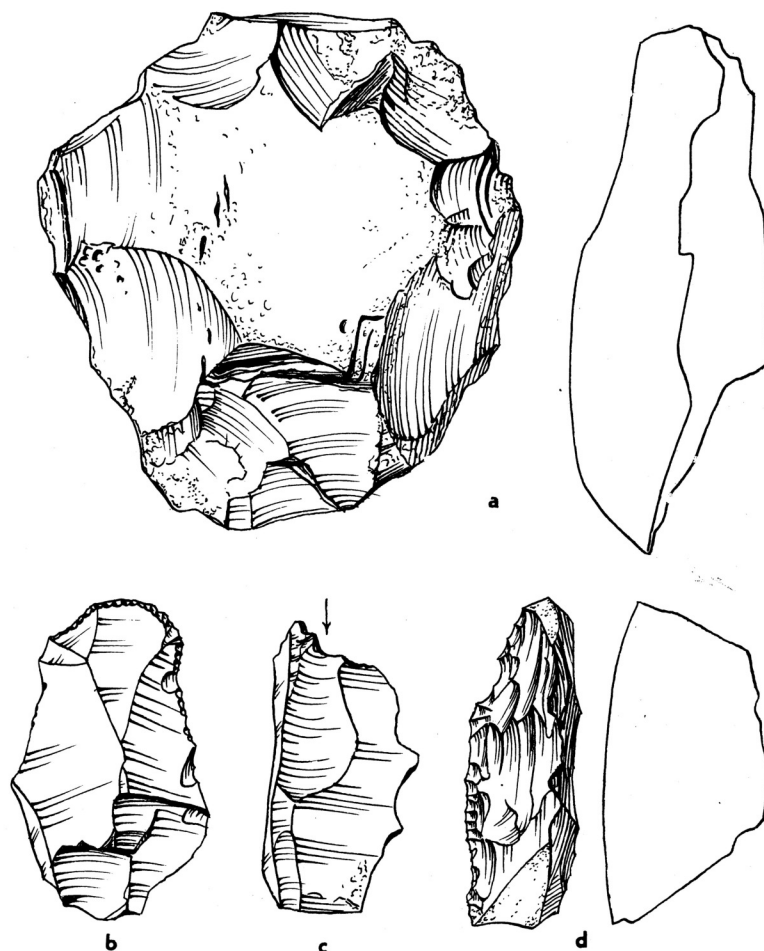


FIG. 25. Stone tool types from Gara um il Mansur.

STYLE

The style of the studied figures is diverse and together with other characters it demonstrates that the engravings at Gara Mansur do not belong to a single period. The outlines of animal figure No. 10, 11, 12 are strongly weathered broad and shallow lines. Originally it was a deep engraving made in a different way than the rest of the figures. It was a true rock carving. Of different style are the ram figures, they have simple fine outline and their legs are unfinished. The lines are evidently less weathered than in Fig. 10, 11, 12. The third style is represented by Figs. Nos. 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24. On the rock wall there are many fine engraved lines, but only some of them can be recognized as animal or human figures. These sgraffiti and figures are only slightly weathered.

It is interesting to compare the ostrich engravings (Fig. 15, 16) in the northern gallery with the ostriches engraved in the southern gallery (Fig. 21, 22). The birds in the northern gallery belong stylistically to the same group as the ram engravings made in simple line. The ostriches of the southern gallery remind of the sgraffiti, they are in multiple, fine, and often irregular lines. Their outline has disintegrated and is often unclear. The entire southern group of figures (Nos. 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24) belongs to this style. Important is also the size of all figures of the Gara Um il Mansur gallery. Larger figures, so typical of the earliest Saharan art periods are missing here. The largest figures do not exceed 32 cm in length.

SUBJECTS REPRESENTED

The most characteristic animal of the northern gallery is the ram with its typical beard and with a conical head ornament. No horns can be represented by such a conical shape. We should remember that these symbols, oval, circular or other, are very frequent in the North African rock art — an oval symbol of this type can be seen also here, in Fig. No. 5, 6. The head ornaments can be of diverse shape ranging from complicated structures between the horns to ornamented neck bands or pendeloques. For these reasons the "beard" symbol should also be considered with reservations only. In wild Saharan sheep we can often see a rich mane hanging from the neck of older rams. But they are much broader than the "beards" in the Gara Um il Mansur engravings. It is impossible to say with certainty whether these things pictured in the engravings of rams represent natural "beard-like" manes or artificial ornaments. The number of these animals in the small Gara Um il Mansur gallery suggests that they had some special meaning. Other well represented animal is the ostrich. We find it represented in both styles, i.e. in the earlier style in simple outlines and also in the later style characterized by multiple fine lines. Unfortunately the ostrich engravings do not offer any chronological evidence.

These birds roamed the plains of North Libya since the Pleistocene period up to the recent times.

The earliest figure in the northern gallery is without any doubt engraving No. 10, 11, 12. It is difficult to decide whether it represents a cattle figure or an antelope. It has no tail and its horns are not representative.

In the southern gallery there is a human and a horse figure made in the same style like the adjoining figures. The horse figure puts this part of the gallery and its style into the "horse period", that is into the late period of the rock art in Sahara and in North Africa.

CHRONOLOGY

Unfortunately we were unable to realize an archaeological survey of the broader surroundings. The large workshops and deposits of raw flint were situated on the slopes of the Gara. The broken flint rocks in most cases had no patina. Higher in the southern gallery we found a large Late Neolithic stone hoe blank on the floor, right below the engravings. The style of all engravings and sgraffiti in the southern part of the gallery is homogenous. They all belong to the "horse period" of the Saharan art. The major part of the figures of the northern gallery belongs to the early pastoral period documented by several goat figures, mostly with some head ornaments or symbols. The animals are represented in simple lateral view in outline. The unfinished distal ends of their legs, their size and degree of weathering put them into the early pastoral period. Only a single figure (No. 10, 11, 12) belongs to an earlier epoch — i.e. to the pre-pastoral period as documented by its evidently advanced weathering and style. Its more accurate chronological setting has been so far impossible.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS (by J. SVOBODA)

On the slope under the engravings of Gara Um il Mansur, the raw material in form of blocks and debris appears. It is a blue or grey siliceous material covered by white patina. This material was utilized in the Neolithic, and, perhaps, in the previous periods too.

The pre-cores (Fig. 25a) and cores are of the flat Levallois type, but some other principles (cf. a cubical core with changed orientation) occur too. The flakes are not so often Levallois as at the nearby site of Ataf ben Dalala, and their striking platforms are mostly of the flat, non-prepared type. The share on non-retouched flakes is high. The blades are frequent, and some special preparation flakes (corner flakes) occur.

The retouches are quite typical. Pieces with extremely steep retouche, of the La Quina and denticulated type, are present (Fig. 25d). Among the other types, an endscraper (Fig. 25b) and a burin (Fig. 25c) are to be noted.

In conclusion, character and composition of this industry are quite typical for places of raw material exploitation and for the workshops.

SOCIAL MEANING

It is difficult to determine the social meaning of the gallery. We can be perhaps helped by its situation — the gallery we are studying is linked with raw stone material workshops, as is the case with many other Saharan Neolithic rock art sites. We can imagine that the rock overhangs invited the prehistoric man involved in mining raw stone materials to repose in their shade. The ram figures with ornaments or symbols bring us to the idea that these repeated figures had some special meaning. Huard (1961) thinks, and rightly so, that the symbols and ornaments do not represent the worshipped animal, but much more an animal prepared for sacrifice. If this is really so, then it can be also the possible explanation of the presence of ram figures at Gara Mansúr. The social meaning of the southern part of the gallery remains unknown. The picture of the orant signals some religious meaning. If the arrow symbol inside the cattle figure is correctly interpreted then it can be compared with similar symbols found in Kaf Eligren in Cyrenaica (Paradisi, 1965)

and in several West European Palaeolithic cave art representations (e.g. Niaux).

PROTECTION

All engraved figures are situated in the upper part of the rock face, protected by a rock overhang against the downpour of the rain water. The overhang is deep enough to prevent the surface water from flowing in. The situation is different in the lower part of the rock face not protected by a rock overhang against direct rainfall. Here the entire rock surface has peeled off due to temperature differences, when the wet rockface with rainwater soaked in quickly dries up in the Saharan sunshine. As a result the entire rockface has peeled off in flat slates. If there were any rock carvings in this lower part of the gallery, they have been fully destroyed. To preserve the existing engravings effective protection against rainwater should be realized.

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