



JAN JELINEK

## THE TARHUNA ROCK ART SITE IN TRIPOLITANIA

With the archaeological contribution by J. Svoboda.

**ABSTRACT.** — *The Tarhuna-Sharshara rock art locality in Northern Tripolitania is described and analyzed. The subjects (rhino, lion, cattle figures) suggest an early neolithic-prepastoral or early pastoral age, numerous bull figures reflect some religious meaning. The style and size points to Saharan early neolithic rock art. The numerous neck appendages in bulls are so far north of Sahara unique.*

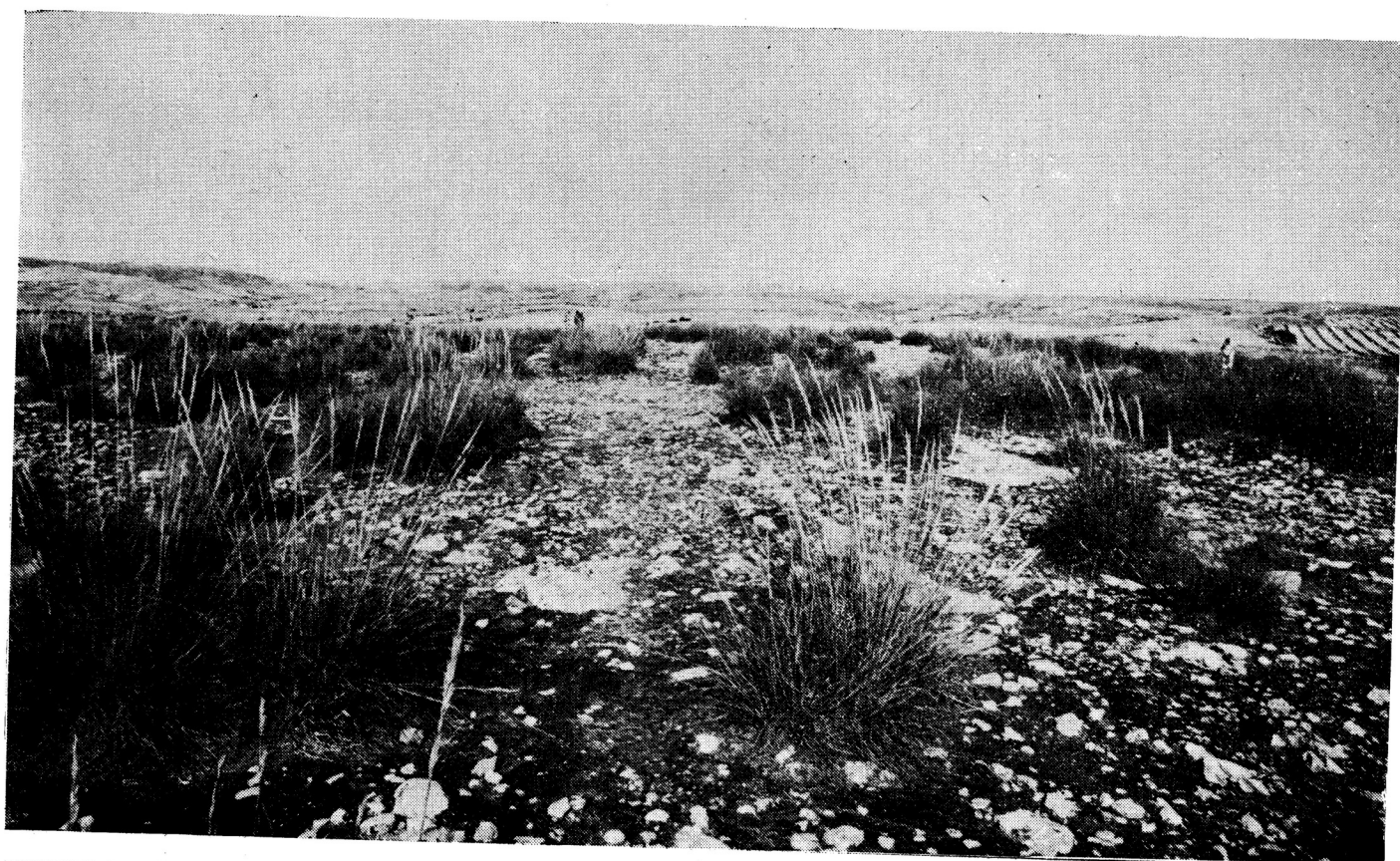


FIGURE 1. General view of the site.

# THE LOCALITY AND ITS SITUATION

The Tarhuna Plateau is in the northern part of Tripolitania, south-east of Tripoli. It is about 40 km long in east-west direction and some 20 km wide (north-to-south). Near the small town of Tarhuna the plateau reaches the altitude of 420 m above the sea level. In the north the plateau ends in steep slopes facing the Geffarah coastal plain.

On the road connecting Tripoli with Tarhuna there is a crossing close to Tarhuna — it crosses the local road leading to Sharshara. Approximately 2800 m to the east of the crossroad is situated the site of rock carvings discovered by Essayed Fathallah Ezzedin, a local resident, in 1968 (Anonymous, 1971).

It is a rolling country of rounded ranges covered with high bunches of halfa grass growing among limestone slabs, containing often veins of hornstone, a favourite raw material used by prehistoric man for the manufacture of stone tools. (Fig. 1.)

The rock art locality is on one of the not-too-high rounded ranges and is situated in the vicinity of the ruins of Roman buildings, with the remnants of a low tower built of stone, visible from far away.

In the surroundings of the locality there are permanent water wells and in the area of Sharshara there is a permanent creek even today. It can be presumed that there existed prehistoric settlements near these wells or on the banks of the creek. It seems, however, that the rock art location on top of the hill was not connected with any permanent settlement. In the vicinity of the engravings, namely on the northern side, we can find numerous stone tools accompanied with a large number of flakes — refuse of a stone tool workshop — scattered on the surface. This fact and the surface layers of hornstone in many places in the vicinity indicate that the prehistoric man was attracted to this place by the abundance of suitable raw material for the manufacture of stone tools. We can find analogous situations also in other North-African and Saharan rock art localities in places relatively distant from water resources and not suitable as living places.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS (Contribution by Jiří Svoboda)

The stone industry sample was collected on the surface of the limestone plain, near the engravings (Tarhuna I), and on the northern slopes of the same elevation (Tarhuna II). The artifacts are made of hornstone of light colours, and of limestone.

### 1. Cores

Most typical are the unipolar non-prepared cores; they occur in cubical, prismatical and pyramidal forms, intended mainly for microblade production (Plate I/1–3). Flat cores, frequent in the Neolithic of southern and western Libya, are rare and atypical in Tarhuna. Among the pre-cores, the

semi-globular type appears (Plate I/4). Various nucleiform pieces are very numerous in the Tarhuna assemblages. They are worked in irregular way, and some of them were used as tools.

The technology applied at the nearby Bir Miji site is quite similar; the flat cores and the bipolar prismatical cores, however, are slightly more frequent in this assemblage, and irregular nucleiform pieces, on the other hand, are rare.

### 2. Flakes

The flakes are of non-Levallois type, and most of their striking platforms are non-prepared (flat). The share of short microblades is relatively high. The special preparation flakes (from the striking platform; from the core crest) are present, and the assemblage is accompanied by large and coarse limestone flakes.

### 3. Tools

From the typological point of view, the presence of backed implements is important (small points, blades; Plate I/5–7). Typical Neolithic elements such as small bifacially worked pieces (atypical arrowheads, Plate I/8) are to be noted.

Among the most frequent types rank the short endscrapers (Plate I/12–13), while the endscrapers on larger flakes and on blades are less numerous. Exceptionally, appear also nosed microendscrapers (Plate I/16). The sidescrapers, some of them almost Mousterian in form, are made mainly by steep lateral retouches. Quite typical are the several blade-like implements bilaterally retouched by steep or flat retouches (Plate I/11), and the limaces (Plate I/9). The denticulated pieces (Plate I/14) and isolated notches are relatively frequent. Burins are rare but typical (Plate I/19), and borers of different forms (Plate I/10, 17) occur sporadically.

There are numerous pieces of limestone debris with steep and alternating or irregular retouches, and denticulated pieces showing marks of intensive utilisation, mainly of trimming on the working edges. Some of them are perhaps natural pseudo-artefacts, but the most typical pieces seem to form a specialized part of the stone industry. Although the typology of the Tarhuna site is similar to the Bir Miji assemblage, these irregular debris pieces are typical of Tarhuna only (cf. Neuville 1956).

The Tarhuna industry dates probably to an Early Tripolitanian Neolithic stage. It is important to note that no pottery sherds were found with the artefacts. A similar situation is to be found in other Neolithic open-air sites in Tripolitania.

The elements of Capsian tradition at Tarhuna suggest possible relations to a nearby Capsian station in Wadi Ar Ribat (del Fabbro 1968). The complexes of Tarhuna and Bir Miji, more recent in age, differ mainly in a higher share of sidescrapers.

Typological parallels may be observed as far as in the Neolithic of South Egyptian Desert (Nabta Playa E-75-8; Wendorf et alii 1976, Plate I/6), firmly dated to about 6000 BC and after.

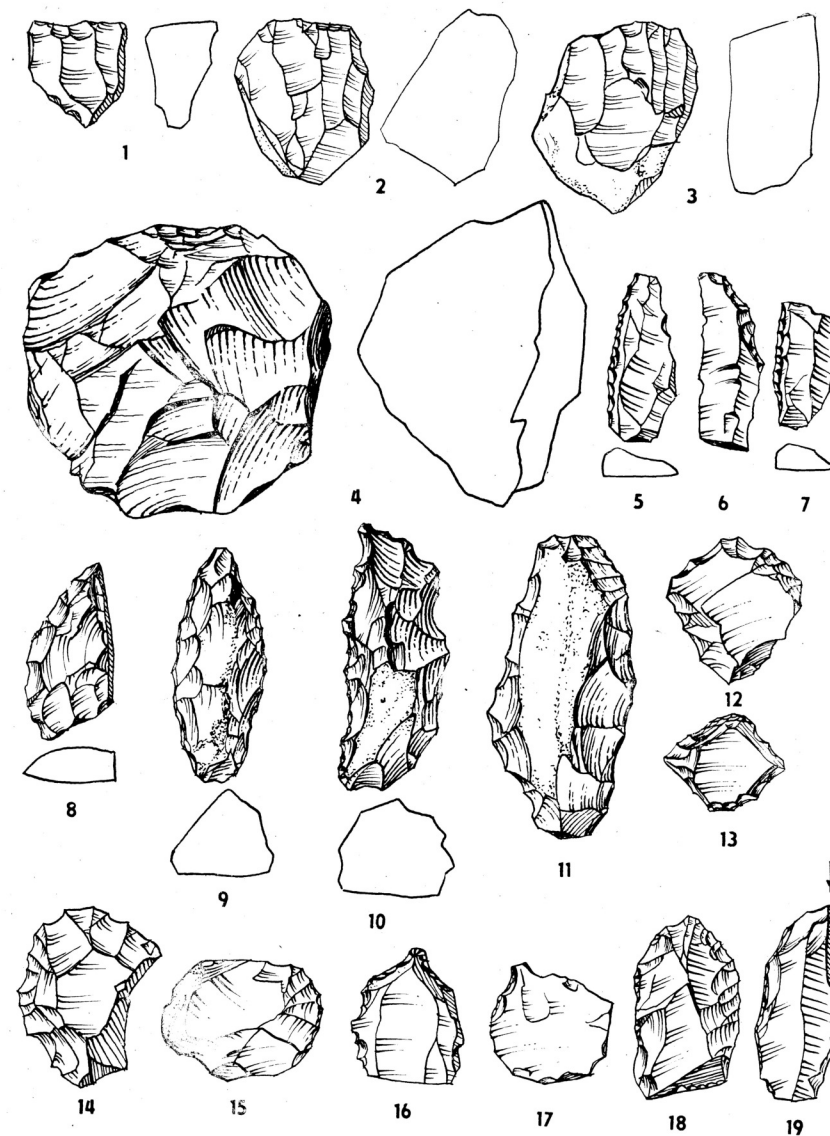


PLATE I. Selection of stone tools from Tarhuna Rock Art Site.

# LOCATION OF THE ENGRAVINGS AND THE ENGRAVED ANIMALS

The engravings occupy an area of  $40 \times 70$  m, most of them concentrated into the northern and south-western section of the area (see attached plan of the location — Fig. 2). Most engravings are situated individually, on flat horizontal rock-slabs (Fig. 3). In few cases we can find two (in three cases) or three engravings (in two cases) together. All engravings picture animals, the only exception is the engraving of a man with a bull. Geometrical motifs or other pictures are missing. Out of the thirty-three engravings discovered here two have been destroyed by weathering to such a degree that it is impossible to recognize the animals they originally represented.

One engraving (Figs. 6, 7) pictures a rhinoceros in simple lateral view. The characteristic features of the animal are presented in a simple way, but the shape is rendered exactly. It has a big horn and besides the two ears above the front it has an oval symbol reminding of the disk-like and other symbols so frequent in the north-African and Saharan animal engravings. We found another similar symbol at this locality, together with the engraving of a bull (Fig. 44). At the nearby Bir Miji locality too, there is an engraving of a bull with a strange oval

symbol between its horns (Jelinek 1982b), and Graziosi (1942) mentions another engraving of a bull with a circular symbol between its horns, from Maia Dib, another Tripolitanian locality.

The special literature mentions numerous Saharan and north-African analogies (Huard 1961).

Only a few meters from the engraving of the rhino there is a rock face with three engravings picturing a lioness with a cub and a dog. Best preserved and most characteristic is the engraving of the lioness (Figs. 4, 5). Very interesting is the way of picturing the fingers on the paws, the strong chest, the raised tail with the typical brush at its end and the round eyes in the head. One of the forelegs is lifted. The lion faces the engraving of a smaller animal, according to the shape of its trunk, raised tail and length of the legs probably a dog. Behind the lioness we can see poorly preserved remains of other small engraving, most probably a lion-cub. There is no doubt that the three engravings form a composition, a scene, with the lioness protecting her cub against the dog. The topic reminds of the well-known scene from Safsaf in southern Oran, in which an elephant-cow protects her young against a leopard (Frobenius 1936). Although similar scenes are quite rare in the north-African and Saharan engravings, they are not unique.

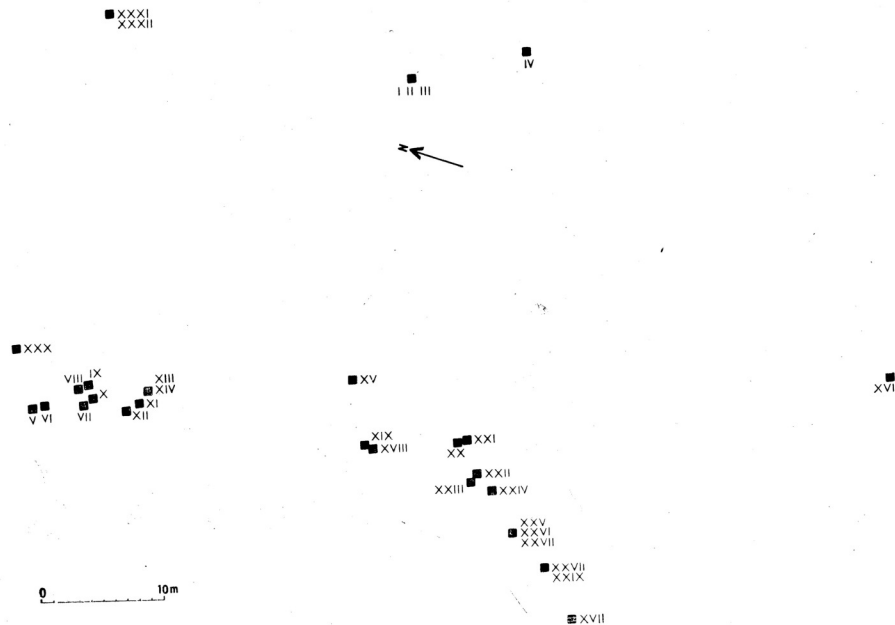


FIGURE 2. The distribution of rock engravings.



FIGURE 3. An example of a carving on a rock block.



FIGURE 4. Rock carving of the lioness. The cub and the dog are not seen here.

On the northern end of the locality there are two big bull figures walking one behind the other (Engravings Figs. 26, 27, 28, 29). The first of the two figures is 200 cm long and two ornaments are hanging from its neck. This is an exception, the other

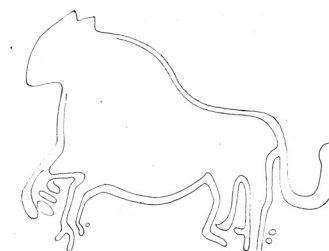


FIGURE 5. Tracing of the lioness.

engravings of bulls have only one pendant each, although of various shape and length. The first bull figure has a horn curved forward. Between the hindlegs far apart we can see a bag-shaped scrotum and a tassel of hairs on the belly, representing the bull's penis. The second bull engraving is roughly of the same size, but it is in a much poorer state of preservation, namely in its dorsal part. The two engravings belong among the biggest in the whole locality.



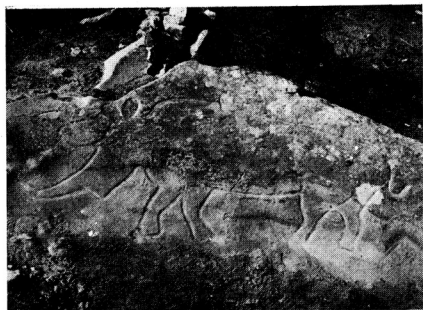


FIGURE 6. Rock carving of the rhino.

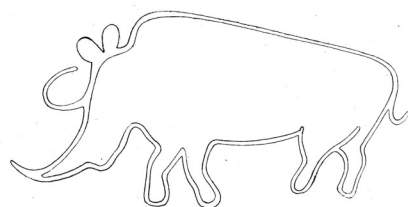


FIGURE 7. Tracing of the rhino rock carving.



FIGURE 8. Rock carving of the bull No. V.

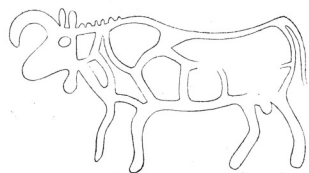


FIGURE 9. Tracing of the bull No. V.



FIGURE 10. Rock carving of the bull No. VI.

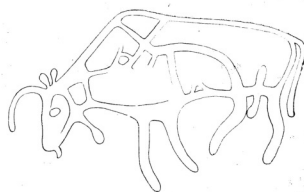


FIGURE 11. Tracing of the bull No. VI.



FIGURE 12. Rock carving of the bull No. VII.

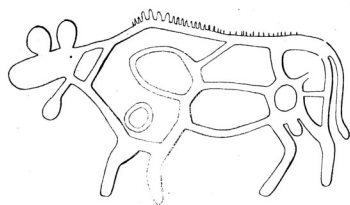


FIGURE 13. Tracing of the bull No. VII.

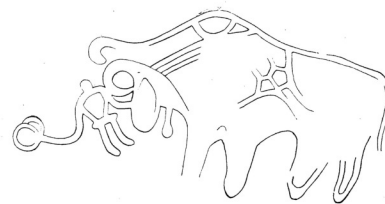


FIGURE 14. Tracing of a bull and of a human figure No. VIII.



FIGURE 15. Tracing of the back part of a bull carving No. IX.



FIGURE 16. Heavily weathered bull carving No. X.

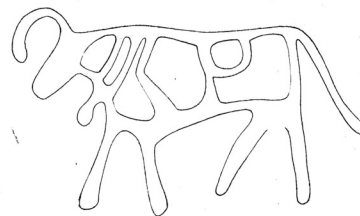


FIGURE 17. Tracing of the bull No. X.



FIGURE 18. Rock carving of the bull No. XI.

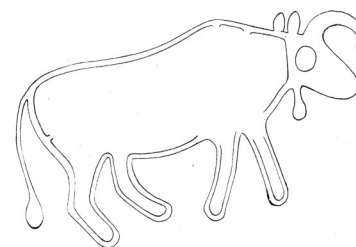


FIGURE 19. Tracing of the bull No. XI.



FIGURE 20. Rock carving of the bull No. XV.

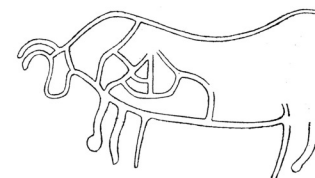


FIGURE 21. Tracing of the bull No. XV.





FIGURE 22. Rock carving of the bull No. XVI.

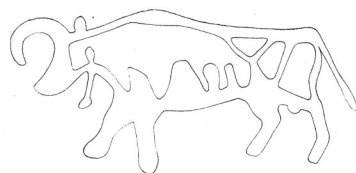


FIGURE 23. Tracing of the bull No. XVI.

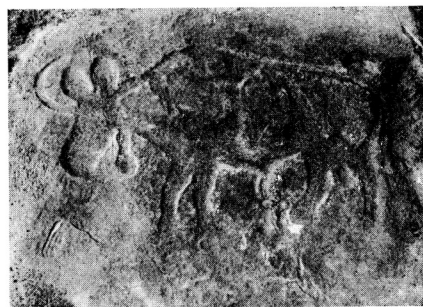


FIGURE 24. Rock carving of the bull No. XVII.

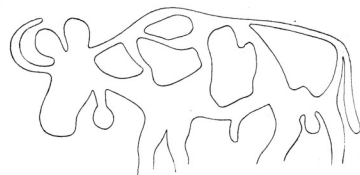


FIGURE 25. Tracing of the bull No. XVII.

The other two bull figures (Figs. 43, 44) are smaller (70 cm and 80 cm) and are situated one above the other, not one behind the other as in the above case (Fig. 26). The upper of the two bulls has its horn curved forward, the lower one has a circular symbol instead of horns. Both have well-represented bag-like neck pendants or ornaments.

The third group of engravings pictures a bull and two smaller animals. According to their horns, slightly inclined backwards, and the short tail, they seem to be goats. The big bull (118 cm long) has a well represented sexual organ. There are two ears on its head and the small protuberance between the ears stands for a horn (Fig. 38).

In several other bull engravings we can see big circular eyes. In five figures there is a line around the neck — it is probably a sling of rope connected with an appendage.

In one figure measuring 158 cm with small horns there is an appendage hanging from the neck. There is a series of oblong engraved dots arranged into a curved line in this figure. For lack of analogies we cannot find out whether this is an ornament, special marking, numerical record or some symbol (Fig. 37).

The sexual organ is represented altogether in 13 bulls. Sixteen figures have bag-shaped or circular appendages. There are rope slings around the neck of five bulls. The trunks of all bulls and of a goat are divided into several fields representing probably colour patches, as we know it from other prehistoric engravings from Fezzan, Tassili or Oran and many other Saharan rock art. This is common in later rock paintings, namely in the rock paintings of the bovidian pastoral Neolithic culture, picturing without the slightest doubt cattle already domesticated. In Tarhuna the fields, into which the trunks of the bulls are divided, are not polished, in contrast with some archaic engravings from the bubalus period in Fezzan. The horns of twelve Tarhuna bulls are curved forward. This type of horns is described by Herodotos, as a characteristic feature of the Garamantic cattle. Nevertheless, we can find the same type of horns also in the oldest engravings of the "big wild fauna", e.g. in Mathrmdush in Fezzan (Frobenius 1936), in Tassili in Oued Djerat (H. Lhote 1975) and in Southern Oran (H. Lhote 1975). It is found over large areas of northern Africa from prehistoric times to the historic period and it cannot be regarded as a chronological indicator. On the other hand we do not find in any of the Tarhuna engravings the long lyra-shaped horns of African cattle, so frequent in the paintings of the later Neolithic bovidian pastoral populations.

#### SIZE AND STYLE OF THE ROCK CARVINGS

Almost all rock art figures in Tarhuna exceed 100 cm in size, some of them reaching almost 2 metres. Their outline is made in a broad U-shaped groove. Both the size of the engravings and their technique have their analogies in the south, namely,

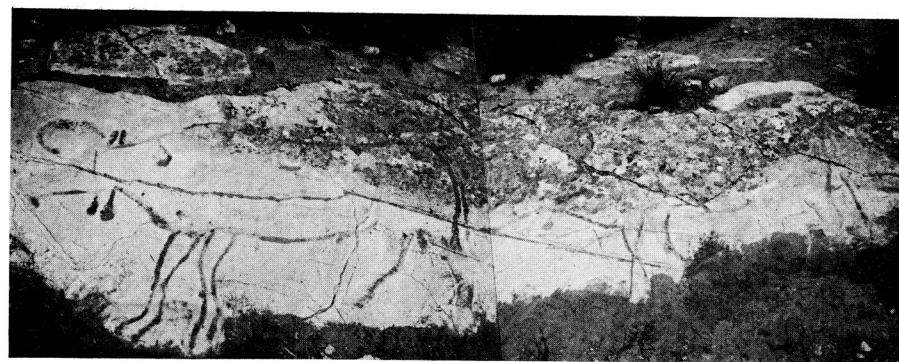


FIGURE 26. Rock carving of two large bulls No. XVIII, XIX.

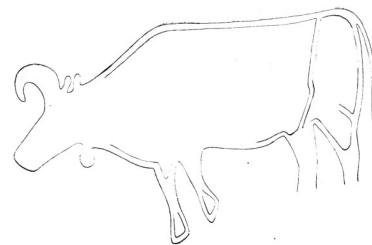


FIGURE 27. Tracing of the bull No. XIX.

in Fezzan, where the fairly early engravings belonging to the period of the big fauna with *Bubalus antiquus* were often made in a similar way. The only difference is in representing the eyes; in Tarhuna they are circular, one eye only with each animal.

#### CHRONOLOGY AND AGE OF THE ROCK CARVINGS

All engravings found in this locality have the same style and they belong to a single chronological period. Engravings of lions, bulls and rhinoceros are typical of the archaic rock art, but in Sahara we can find these animals also in the Neolithic paintings of the bovidian period. However, they differ completely as regards their style and technique (paintings). Their outlines also differ and they have smaller dimensions. The patina, i.e. the weathering of the surface of the engraved lines is the same in Tarhuna as of the natural rockface. This fact, together with other characters indicates that the en-

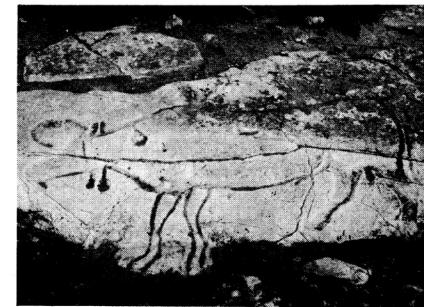


FIGURE 28. Rock carving of the bull No. XVIII.

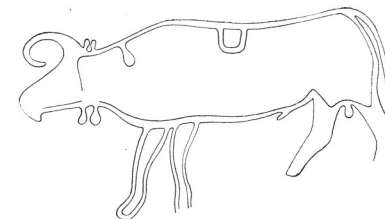


FIGURE 29. Tracing of the bull No. XVIII

gravings are of considerable age. The same is supported by the presence of the rhino engraving.

The above-mentioned facts and the archaeological finds place the entire locality to the early Neolithic period.

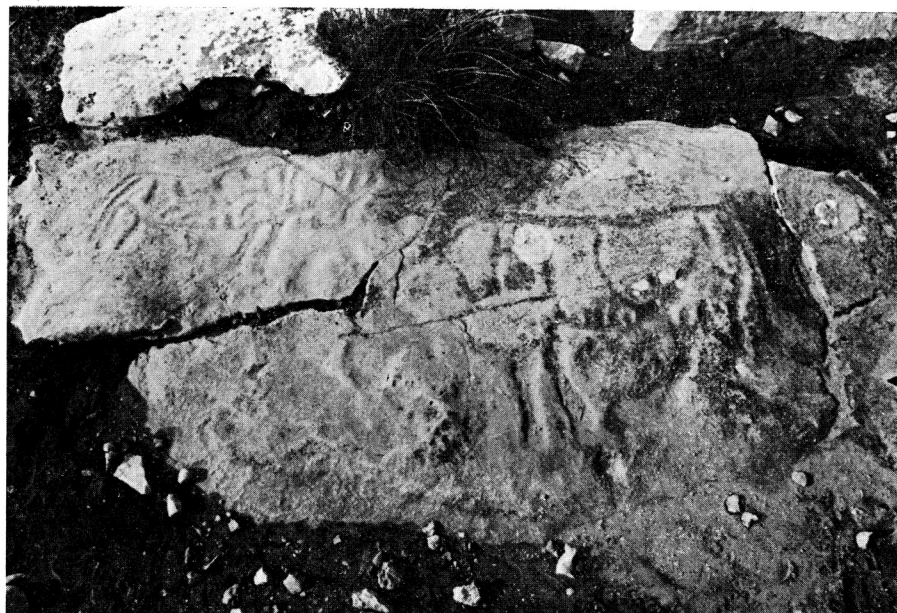


FIGURE 30. Two figures, probably bulls No. XX, XXI.



FIGURE 31. Rock carving of an animal No. XXX.

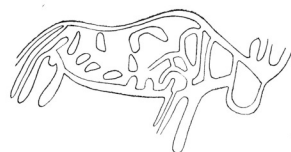


FIGURE 32. Tracing of a bull No. XXX.



FIGURE 33. Rock carving of a bull No. XXI.

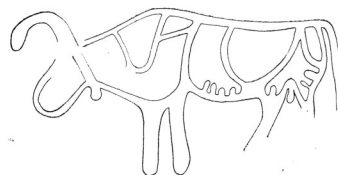


FIGURE 34. Tracing of a bull No. XXI.



FIGURE 35. A heavily weathered bull figure No. XXII.



FIGURE 36. Tracing of the bull figure No. XXII.

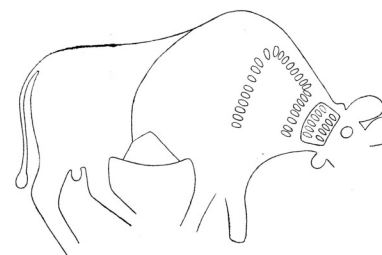


FIGURE 37. Tracing of the bull figure No. XXIV.

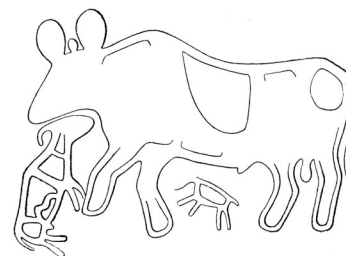


FIGURE 38. Tracing of three animal figures No. XXV, XXVI, XXVII.



FIGURE 39. Rock carving of the bull No. XXVIII.



FIGURE 40. Tracing of the bull No. XXVIII.



FIGURE 41. Rock carving of the bull No. XXX.

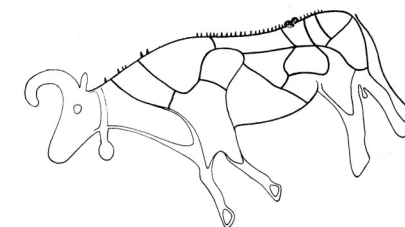


FIGURE 42. Tracing of the bull No. XXX.



FIGURE 43. Two bull figures No. XXXI.

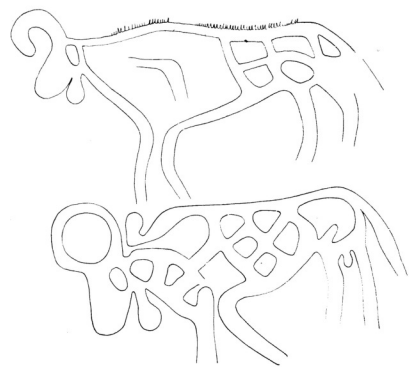


FIGURE 44. Tracing of bull figures No. XXXI.

## DISCUSSION

The ancient origin of the engravings and the numerous figures of bulls with characters of domestication (slings of ropes and ornaments hanging from their necks) bring us to the following consideration: The ancient origin and style, the size of the engravings and the pictured fauna all point towards the south. Naturally contacts towards the south were possible in the Neolithic North Africa — the desert barrier, as we know it today, is of more recent origin. In the early Neolithic period the Sahara was covered by an arid savannah, presenting no obstacles to the migration of peoples and to new contacts. H. Lhote (1975) holds according to the analogy between engravings from Oued Djerat in northern Tassili and the engravings in southern Oran that in those times the same cultural traditions prevailed both in northern and southern Algeria. Naturally, at such large distances the artistic manifestations have also their secondary, local features. In this way arise the local variants of a widespread regional style. The situation was obviously similar also in the territory of Libya. The problem remains, however, to explain the existence of the engravings in the nearby Bir Miji, which seem to be chronologically close, but stylistically are completely different. The frequent occurrence of bull figures in Tarhuna cannot be accidental. It seems that these engravings had most probably ritual motivation. The extraordinary position occupied by the bull in the Saharan and North African cultures is documented by a number of bull figures found in this area, along with special symbols and entire ritual scenes. In 1978 a Tuareg, a native of the Acacus Mountains, called my attention to paintings of bulls from the round heads period. The paintings picture a complicated ritual taking place around three big bulls (Jelinek 1982a). After all it is generally known that the cult of bull was widespread in the Neolithic period over large parts of the eastern Mediterranean. The unique quality of Tarhuna locality is in its northern geographical position, near the Mediterranean coast.

The picturing of slings around the necks of the bulls and the appendages hanging from their necks document their keeping by man. It would be worth to pay further attention to the views that domestication could arise in fact as a direct result of the bull ritual, connected with catching, worshipping or sacrificing the bulls. Such customs could easily lead to the beginning of the process of domestication (Jelinek 1982a). These hypotheses, deserve attention during further expeditions and studies.

We can conclude that the Tarhuna locality indicates that the bull played an important role in the life and in the imagination of the early Neolithic north-Libyan populations, especially in the time of its probable domestication. In contrast with the nearby locality in Bir Miji, where besides contacts with the Sahara we can trace also features common with southern-Europe, the rock art in Tarhuna shows links with other southern localities in Tripolitania and mainly with Fezzan, but not with Europe.

When Huard (1967) considers some cultural characters of the Nubian C. group (neck appendages, body decoration, horns deformation, frontal discs and ovals) he is right finding the roots of these characters in much older central and eastern Saharan localities. Nevertheless, at least some of these characters as is documented in Tarhuna were present even far more north from typical Saharan rock art centers.

## INVENTORY OF TARHUNA ROCK ART

### No. I (II, III)

Rock carving of a lioness (Fig. 4, 5). Note the characteristic tail, broad chest and unusual way of presenting the fingers.

### No. IV

A rhino with an oval symbol over the front (Figs. 6, 7).

### No. V

A bull facing left. Its horn is curved forward. Note two ears, sling on the neck and the appendage hanging from it. The mane and the scrotum of the bull are also represented (Figs. 8, 9).

### No. VI

Situated next to No. V. A bull facing left, with its horn curved forward. Note the two ears, neck sling and appendage hanging from the neck, the round eye and scrotum (Figs. 10, 11).

### No. VII

A bull facing left. It has no horn, the two large ears are profoundly engraved. There is an appendage hanging from its neck, probably a neck sling, round eye and scrotum are also pictured. The mane of the bull continues from the neck to its back (Figs. 12, 13).

### No. VIII

Heavily weathered carving of a man with a bull. The human figure is holding the bull with one hand. With the other hand it holds a circular object or symbol. The outline of the human figure is simple, with nearly triangular chest. The horn of the bull is curved forward and there is an appendage hanging from its neck. Its sexual organ is not represented, but the shape of the chest indicates that it is a bull (Fig. 14).

### No. IX

Only the rear part of the bull engraving has been preserved, the rest of the carving has been destroyed by weathering. We can see the tail, hindlegs and the belly of the bull, originally facing left (Fig. 15).

### No. X

Heavily weathered bull carving facing left. Its horn is curved forward. An appendage hanging from the neck and the scrotum are also represented. This figure is somewhat smaller than the other bull carvings (Figs. 16, 17).

### No. XI

Carving of a bull facing right. Note the horn curved forward, a well rendered round eye, an appendage, two ears and the tail ending in a tassel. The scrotum is not represented (Figs. 18, 19).

### No. XII

Heavily weathered figure of a bull facing left. The horn is curved forward. There are no traces of an appendage or scrotum.

### No. XIII

The carving is so heavily weathered that we cannot make out its meaning. It is situated in front of No. XX.

### No. XIV

A small carving of a quadruped. Its head is fully weathered.

### No. XV

Figure of a bull facing left. Its back is represented by the margin of the stone. The legs and belly are represented without much care, in contrast to the other carvings. The horn is curved forward. No ears are represented. The hind part of the animal is so poorly pictured that we are unable to trace any detail. The appendage is round and is hanging on a long string (Figs. 20, 21).

### No. XVI

This bull figure is facing left. Its horn is curved forward. A long appendage is hanging from its neck. Only one ear is represented. The sexual organ is not visible properly (Figs. 22, 23).

### No. XVII

A bull facing left, with its horn curved back. As this is the only case with the horn is curved back, and because it is thin, as compared with the other horn representations, it can be a circular symbol. The two large ears and an appendage are well carved, so are the scrotum and penis (Figs. 24, 25).

### Nos. XVIII, XIX

Two large bulls walking one behind the other. The horn of the first figure is curved forward. It has two appendages and two small ears. The scrotum and penis are well represented. The second figure is not so well visible, we can trace the horn and some details of the head, not the sexual organ. The appendage is well represented (Figs. 26, 27, 28, 29).

### Nos. XX, XXI

Two figures facing each other. The first figure is small, facing right, it is carved with little care, but the body design is rich. According to the two slightly curved horns it can be a goat. But the long tail and the characteristic shape of the chest points to a bull. Interesting is also the short broad head. The second figure is larger and faces left. Although the details of the head are not clear, we can make out a short appendage and a horn curved forward. The line of the belly is followed by a group of small pits (Figs. 30, 31, 32, 33, 34).

### No. XXII

A heavily weathered bull figure facing right. It has no horn, but two large ears, an appendage and a round eye. The lower part of this carving is so badly weathered that the details cannot be followed (Figs. 35, 36).

### No. XXIII

A right facing badly weathered bull figure. Only the body can be made out, the head has been fully weathered. It has no sexual organs represented.

### No. XXIV

A large figure of a bull facing to the right, with two large ears and a small appendage. The chest of the



animal is ornamented with a group of small pits. The sexual organs are not represented (Fig. 37).

Nos. XXV, XXVI, XXVII

A group of one large and two small animal figures representing a bull (facing left) and two small animals, probably goats. The bull has two large ears with a small knoll-like horn in between. It has no appendage. The sexual organs are well visible (Fig. 38).

No. XXVIII

A strongly weathered bull figure facing left. The horn is curved forward. An appendage can be traced. The figure has no sexual organs. The forelegs cannot be made out properly due to advanced weathering (Figs. 39, 40).

No. XXIX

On the adjoining rock above No. XXVIII there is a rock carving, but it is so badly weathered that it cannot be made out what it represents.

No. XXX

A well preserved bull figure facing left. On the head we can see a horn curved forward, one ear, an eye and an appendage. The bull has a mane designed along its whole back, from the head to the tail. The scrotum is well visible between the hindlegs. There is a sling around its neck (Figs. 41, 42).

No. XXXI

Two bull figures, one above the other, both facing left and both strongly weathered. The upper figure has a forward curved horn and an appendage. No sexual organ is represented. The lower figure has

one ear and an appendage and instead of the horn there is a circular symbol. Between the hind legs we can see the scrotum (Figs. 43, 44).

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