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CAF ATJUR, THE CAVE OF BIRDS IN CYRENAICA AND ITS ENGRAVINGS

ABSTRACT. — *The Cave of Birds — Caf Atjur, situated in Libyan Cyrenaica near the Mediterranean seashore, some 25 km south-west of the town of Tobra is one of the northernmost localities of the African rock art. It is exceptional due to the numerous engravings of various species of birds, and thanks also to the highly developed artistic feeling demonstrated in some engravings. The gallery belongs to the treasures of the world's prehistoric art. Chronologically the studied engravings belong to the Libyan Early Neolithic with Epipalaeolithic economy. The quality of the engravings in the gallery proves that its artistic development matches the qualities of other north-African and European rock art and that some of these engravings can be compared to the aesthetically most impressive examples the artistic genius of the prehistoric man created. The gallery is of great importance for the study of prehistoric art and its traditions.*

Caf Atjur, the Cave of Bird is situated in Wadi Zaara in northern Cyrenaica, 25 km south-west of the town of Tobra. The wadi is a deep almost canyon-like valley and the cave is far inside, on the wadi's western slope, some 200 m high above the floor of the valley. The access is very difficult, we had to advance through thick shrubs and to climb high to the rock wall. The entry of the cave is 2 m high and 7 m broad and is situated 2–3 m high in the rock wall. The cave is 10–12 m deep and in its rear part we see a group of large stalagnates, i.e. drip stone pillars connecting the floor with the cave ceiling. There are no sediments or archaeological finds inside the cave, the cave floor is formed by bare rock. The front part of the cave is more spacious and its ground plan is roughly semi-circular in shape. Here we find on the cave walls and on the ceiling, and exceptionally also on the floor, prehistoric engravings accompanied often by numerous irregular sgraffiti. We find here even Greek inscriptions, evidently of much later date. These inscriptions are less weathered, lighter in colour and are roughly carved. The prehistoric engravings are mostly in fine lines. Deeper carvings (e.g. Fig. 14) are exceptional.

DESCRIPTION

Fig. 1. The first engraving at the cave entry is on the horizontal bank or threshold on the floor. The fine parallel lines remind of numerical notations. The next carving is deeper. It seems that it represented the horns and an ear of a gazelle (compare it with gazelle figures 3, 4 and 5). The size of these lines is 16 cm.

Fig. 2. There is another similar engraving, nearby, on the rock floor of the cave. It is better conserved and it measures 10 cm. Here, too, we can recognize the engraved horns and an ear of a gazelle (compare with figures 3, 4 and 5).

Fig. 3. The third engraving is also on the cave floor, in the vicinity of the first two engravings. It consists of several irregular lines covering a 15 cm long space. If we look carefully at these lines in the correct orientation, we find out that it represents an easily recognizable simple geometrical design of a gazelle. We can see its characteristic head with gracile horns, the ear, thin neck and simplified legs, with one foreleg stepping forward.



FIG. 1a, b Simplified symbolic design of an antelope. Parallel lines left are ornamental design or counting report. Size 16 cm, situated on the floor.



FIG. 2a, b Another symbolic design of an antelope. Size 10 cm, situated on the floor.



FIG. 4. Realistic design of an antelope (dorcas). Size 18 cm, situated on the cave ceiling.



FIG. 3a, b Simplified design of an antelope. The horns, ear and neck are well seen. Size 15 cm, situated on the floor.

Fig. 4. Near the above engravings, but already on the cave ceiling we can see the engraved figure of a gazelle among a number of diverse lines and sgraffiti. It has a beautifully engraved fine head with slightly opened mouth, with an eye, typical horns and great ear. The fine neckline continues in the back. The rest of the body has not been finished. The total length of the engraving is 18 cm.



Fig. 5. The next engraving adjoining engraving No. 4 on the ceiling is a completed and perfectly rendered fine figure of another gazelle measuring 34 cm. The head measures 12.5 cm from the mouth to the horns. Although there are many other lines around, the outlines of the gazelle figure are clear. The gazelle has a characteristic high back — there is no doubt that it represents a dorcas gazelle. This engraving is one of the finest specimens of the prehistoric rock art, comparing with the most outstanding pieces of the European Palaeolithic art. A look at the engraved horns and the ear leaves no doubt that engravings Figs. 1 and 2 also represent the horns and the ear of a gazelle. The prehistoric artist followed here already a developed style, dictated by the tradition, or perhaps all five engraved figures, namely Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 were made by the same artist.

FIG. 5a A beautiful and complete antelope figure (dorcas). Size 34 cm, situated on the cave ceiling.





FIG. 5b Stencil of the preceding figure 5a.

Fig. 6. The next engraving is also on the ceiling. It is an incomplete outline of the body of a bird. The lower, unfinished part of the body leaves the door open to our speculations whether it was the outline of a bird, or of a combined human and bird figure. The engraving is 17 cm high.



FIG. 6. A simple bird (bird-man?) figure. Size 17 cm, situated on the vertical cave wall.

Fig. 7. Farther inside the cave we find higher on the ceiling a 12 cm large engraving of a bird head with a long neck. Even part of the back is designed with a curved line. The short beak, long neck and the shape of the body point to a bustard (Otis).



FIG. 7a, b Unfinished bird outline. Size 12 cm, situated on the cave ceiling.

Fig. 8. This engraving comprises five bird heads. Without any doubt this is the central and most interesting engraving of the whole cave — not only due to its composition, but also due to its perfect execution. The five birds are represented head-down. They make a symmetrical design, starting with the central bird head. Two heads on the left side are facing down and to the left and two on the right side facing down and to the right. The distance from the beak of the first bird to the beak of the fifth head is 14 cm. There are some special char-

acters on the individual bird heads arranged in this decorative way. The first head is medium-sized. On its neck there are two parallel transversal lines and lower on the neck are two oblique lines and two V-shaped lines. The beak is short and strong. The second head is the biggest one. Its outline is clear and perfect. On the vaulted head there is a thin and slightly curved beak. There is a line running from its long eye to the tip of its beak. Below the eye there is a short line and further on the neck there are two other V-shaped lines as in the first bird head. Another transversal line is on the neck. The line of the vault of the head continues in the neck

and turns to the back, designed only partially. From the tip of the beak runs the ventral line, forming an elegant curve of the throat and continuing in the lower side of the bird body and ending in three lines symbolizing the bird's footprint.

At the centre of this composition there is a third bird head, slightly engraved, in fact it is only the head and the beak — the latter is straight and thin. It is interesting that the line leading in other bird heads usually from the eye to the tip of the beak, dividing the beak naturally into its upper and lower halves, in this particular engraving starts in front of the tip of the beak and ends behind the eye. It

FIG. 8a Decorative group of birds symmetrically situated. Size 30 cm, on the cave wall.





FIG. 8b Stencil of the preceding fig. 8a.

seems that the outline of this engraving can be interpreted as a footprint of a bird, with three fingers forward and one backward. The fourth bird again has a short stocky beak and a medium-long neck. Here too, the line going from the eye to the tip of the beak continues further, forward. The fifth and last bird head is medium-sized and is not well done. The artist used for the top of the head the line representing the lower part of the fourth bird. Another flaw is that the line dividing the beak into its upper and lower halves goes much above the tip of the beak. The head is separated from the neck by a transversal line. The length of the second (the largest) bird from the tip of its beak to the end of its foot is 23 cm.

Fig. 9. Adjoining the composition of bird heads on the ceiling is an irregular, or rather unprecise, roughly 12 cm long spindle-shaped engraving with two obliquely running parallel lines. Over this engraving and around it we can see on the rock wall

a maze of other irregular lines. The meaning of the symbol is unknown.

Fig. 10. Next to engravings Nos. 8 and 9 we can see on the rock wall a large number of sgraffiti. We cannot reconstruct any realistic figure here but in the lower part of the rock wall, the engraved lines seem to represent the legs and trunk of a standing figure, probably continuing higher up, measuring 47 cm. In the upper part there seems to be represented an arm, but if it is so, it had been engraved in a rather unprecise way and had not been completed. This problematic figure is accompanied by a number of irregular lines. In the upper part of the rock wall we can see two parallel lines connected with several short transversal lines. This engraving also seems to be a symbol or a simple sgraffito. Up on the right side there is a natural hole in the rock wall. Its lower margin is in the length of 15 cm decorated with short lines (5 cm long) in regular intervals.



FIG. 9. Oval and other sgraffiti of the unknown meaning. Size 12 cm, situated on the vertical cave wall.

Fig. 11. Left of the "legs" of the figure No. 9 there is a group of sgraffiti. We can make out a short — 5 cm long — engraving, probably the beginning of an unfinished figural engraving.

Fig. 12. The last figure on this rock wall is a small engraving. The most interesting thing about this figure is the high degree of its stylization. It is a rather simple image of a head and body, which

in its simplest shape can represent a bird, as well as a man. The head has been halved by a line which can symbolize the beak.

Here the engravings end, but the cave continues in the form of a low couloir in the length of several metres, without a single engraving.

On the opposite side of the cave there are only three interesting engravings.

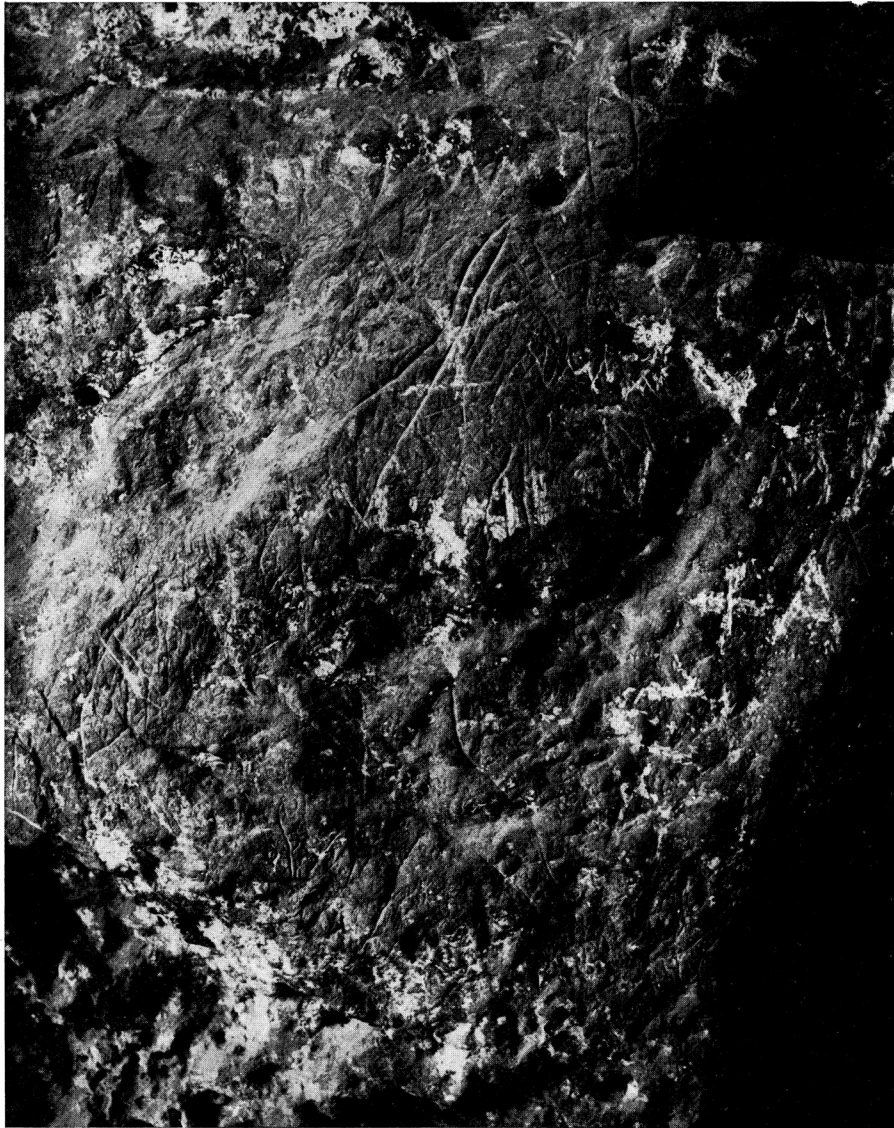


FIG. 10. *The cave wall with sgraffiti.*



FIG. 11. *Detail of the sgraffiti group.*

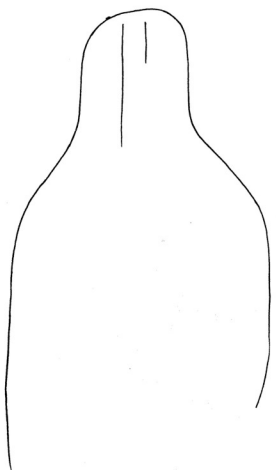


FIG. 12. Simplified human-bird figure. Size 12 cm, situated on the cave wall.

Fig. 13. A 17 cm large bird head on a long neck, with a part of the bird body engraved on the ceiling of the cave. In the short round head we can see a round eye and a strong short beak. On the long neck there are two parallel running transversal lines. The line designing the bird's throat and breast ends divided, resembling a bird's footprint, similarly as in engraving No. 8. The backline of the neck turns to the bird's back in a right angle and suddenly ends. At this place we can see a number of irregular sgraffiti on the rockface.

Fig. 14. At the cave entry there is an interesting, exceptionally deep engraving of two bird heads. The larger and at the same time the upper one represents the head, beak and neck of a large strong bird. The small oval eye had been enlarged by additional engraving. The line starting from the eye does not reach the tip of the beak, it reaches another line, separating the upper and lower parts of the beak. From the top of the head it continues in an arched line forming a strong neck. It seems that the engraving pictures a raven, a bird relatively common in this region.

Below the throat of the bird we can see another beak and part of the head of another bird engraving.

These two bird engravings are of outstanding expressivity. The larger bird head measures 18 cm from the tip of the beak to the top of the head.



FIG. 13a, b A bird engraving. Size 17 cm, situated on the cave ceiling.

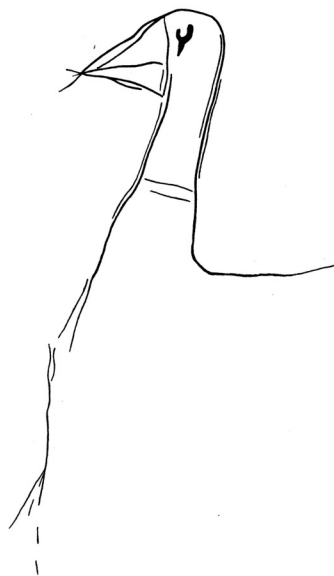


FIG. 14a, b Deep engraved bird heads. Size 18 cm, situated on the vertical cave wall.



SUBJECTS REPRESENTED

The subject of the bird heads prevailing in this cave is quite a unique one. We know a few Palaeolithic bird engravings from the European Franco-Cantabrian art, but engravings of this kind are rare also there. In the European circum-Mediterranean rock art bird figures are completely unknown. In north Africa bird engravings are rare, however not exceptional. In Cyrenaica in the Kaf Eligren cave near the town of Shahat, described by Paradisi (1965) two small bird engravings were recognized. They probably represent bustards. They were situated among other engravings of bulls and uaddans (Ammotragus). In the south Tripolitanian Gara Mansur rock art gallery near the village of Shahva, there are also several engravings of ostriches, the location is already on the margin of the Sahara desert (Jelinek 1982). In north Algeria we find also several beautiful bird engravings, e.g. the engravings of a bustard and of an ibis in the Hesbaia gallery, near the town of Djelfa, and also elsewhere (Jelinek 1982). But such a large number and so decoratively presented bird engravings are unknown from other North African localities. The cave is therefore rightly named — according to these engravings — Caf Atjur — the Cave of Birds. According to the shapes of the beaks it is obvious that various kinds of birds are represented. This fact is reflected also by the diverse shapes of the heads and necks. The concentration of so many bird engravings had without doubt some special reason. Very interesting are the highly stylized bird figure No. 12 and bird profile No. 6. Both can be interpreted as bird-man figures. Unique is the group of decoratively composed five bird heads. Their symmetrical design on both sides of a central axis is perfect. It shows that the artist had a high degree of aesthetic feeling.

The other group of paintings picture Dorcas gazelles. While engraving No. 3 is a highly stylized picture of an antelope in few, almost straight lines, engravings Nos. 4 and 5 are perfect realistic representations.

The next interesting group are sgraffiti comprising also regular series of short parallel lines — either decorative design or counting report. Both main subjects, that is the gazelles and the birds are game, i.e. wild animals living in the free. No domesticated animals are represented in this gallery.

STYLE

Most engravings are in fine lines. The animals are usually shown in lateral view. This kind of engravings accompanied by numerous sgraffiti is frequent in the Epipalaeolithic engravings of the European part of the circum-Mediterranean area. In north Africa we find similar technology of rock engravings in Bir Miji, in north Tripolitania (Jelinek 1982) and in Kaf Eligren in Cyrenaica near the town of Shahat (Paradisi 1965). In both cases it belongs to the aceramic, Early Neolithic culture,

most probably earlier than the Neolithic of Maghreb (Neuville 1956a, b). The style of engraving No. 8 is surprising as it shows not only decorative composition, but also symmetrical arrangement of the individual engravings. In the gazelle engravings, as well as in the bird engravings, we can trace the formation of a certain conventional style. In the gazelles it is manifested in the way the horns and ears are represented, and the common features in the bird figures are the eye and the line leading from the eye to the tip of the beak. Engravings Nos. 1 and 2 picture gazelle horns and ears. They seem to be symbols as in the places where these engravings had been placed there was no space for the picture of the whole figure and thus complete representation of the animal could not had been the goal of the prehistoric artist. Evidently he was satisfied with the picture of characteristic horns and the ear of the gazelle.

Also in bird engravings we find stylizations reaching nearly the shape of geometrical symbols (Nos. 8, 12).

We cannot assume that the different artistic styles, that is the realistic style and the stylized or geometrical one represented some chronological or cultural differences. The situation, distribution and also the same degree of weathering, the mode of conservation and the accompanying sgraffiti speak against such differences. In figure No. 8 stylization and realism are combined within a single composition, the second bird head is the most realistic figure of the group, while the adjoining third bird head is the most stylized one. It is evident that both above-mentioned styles belong to the same artistic tradition. Both are accompanied by a third type of engravings — by sgraffiti. Analogical conclusions have been reached also by various students of the European cave art. Well-known is the case of the Lascaux Cave, where all styles of paintings and engravings, both realistic figures and geometrical symbols belong to the same Magdalenian period, to the same artistic production (Leroi Gourhan 1979).

THE SOCIAL MEANING OF THE ENGRAVINGS

On searching for the social roots of these engravings we can start with the cave itself and with the subjects represented. The cave is not too large. It is situated high on the slope of the valley, far from water, in a place difficult of access. There are neither sediments, nor any traces of settlement inside the cave, except the engravings. The cave could have served as a shelter for a short stay only. The

pictures of birds and gazelles could have magical, ritual, religious or some other meaning.

According to our contemporary state of knowledge we do not have a clear answer as regards their real meaning. The situation is similar as in many other rock art galleries made by prehistoric hunters and representing game only. The pictures of birds can also be regarded as pictures of game birds as they represent large birds, such as bustards, partridges and the like. Of course we cannot exclude the presence and contribution of the aesthetic feeling and the feeling of self-realization of the prehistoric artist. All speaks for a complex situation and not for a simple reason.

CHRONOLOGY

The described engravings are of different origin and much more ancient than the Greek inscriptions found in the same cave. Their style, technique, the represented subjects and their weathering are the only criteria for considering their age. With all these aspects in mind and after a broad comparative study of other north African materials I consider these engravings to be part of the Early Neolithic engravings of the north-African hunters with epipalaeolithic economy. The bird engravings throw an interesting light on the economy and way of life of those hunters. The fact that the engraved birds belong to various species speaks more for economic than for religious meaning.

Of special importance would be a detailed archaeological survey of the wider surroundings of the cave — we were unable to realize such a survey due to lack of time. Isolated finds of stone flakes indicate that the entire nearby Karstic region was inhabited or at least frequently visited in the prehistory.

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