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AFARRH AND THE ORIGIN OF THE SAHARAN CATTLE DOMESTICATION

ABSTRACT. — *New discoveries of Saharan "round head" period Neolithic rock art are announced and an independent Saharan center of cattle domestication caused by religious activities is proposed.*

In 1978 during a survey in the southern part of Acacus Mountains (Southwest Libya) we discovered in Wadi Afarrh a locality with rich rock paintings and engravings of the "round head" period of the Central Saharan Neolithic. The paintings were situated below three small overhangs reminding of the "rock chapels" or "sanctuaries". The most important of the paintings were 4 bulls, two surrounded by many human figures evidently in some ritual (Fig. 1, 2). This concentration of expressive bull paintings clearly illustrating some kind of ritual was stressed by a nearby engraving of a simple but monumental human figure with bull horns as head ornament (Fig. 3). A similar figure was found also in Wadi Imha (Central Acacus) by Mori (1967).

Most archaeologists specializing in the Saharan Neolithic consider the "round head" rock art style not younger than 5000 years BP that is preceding the bovidian rock art style of the pastoral populations so well represented in Tassili and Acacus Mountains (Mori 1967). As for the lower time limit the "round head" period is usually recognized as following the monumental rock carvings of the hunting people (probably between 9000–7000 BP). But the relation between the two earliest Saharan rock art styles is not clear. Mori (1978) succeeded in dating a "round head" cultural layer in Fozzigiaren (South Acacus) at 6122 ± 100 BC.

When visiting the famous Sefar localities in the neighbouring Algerian Tassili Mountains my inter-

est was raised by a painting of a large bull with ornaments bound to its legs and by the impressive painting of a female dancer with horns as a head dress (Figs. 4a, b). Both these Tassili paintings belong also to "round head" style (Lajoux 1975). If the ornaments attached to the legs of the bull are not a mythological idea but a picture of reality than they picture a ritual in which the bull played an important, most probably a central role.

If the generally accepted dating of the Saharan "round head" rock art style is correct than its latest paintings touch the earliest known finds of domesticated cattle in this region.

In Acacus in Uan Muhuggiag Mori (1965) excavated domesticated cattle bones in a layer dated to 5488 ± 220 BC. In Adrar Bous in Air the first skeleton of domesticated cattle was excavated by J. D. Clark (1971) and dated 5760 ± 500 BC. In both cases the discovered remains belonged to a short-horned cattle breed.

On considering the distribution of all the known Saharan and north African cattle finds two models for the origin of domestication in this part of Africa were proposed (Smith 1978):

1. The autochthonous cattle breeding of Saharan origin independent of other centres of the "Neolithic revolution".

2. As there is now accepted the early existence of domesticated cattle in Greece and Crete (7th millennium) (Higgs 1967, Higgs, Jarman 1969) the introduction of domesticated cattle from there is

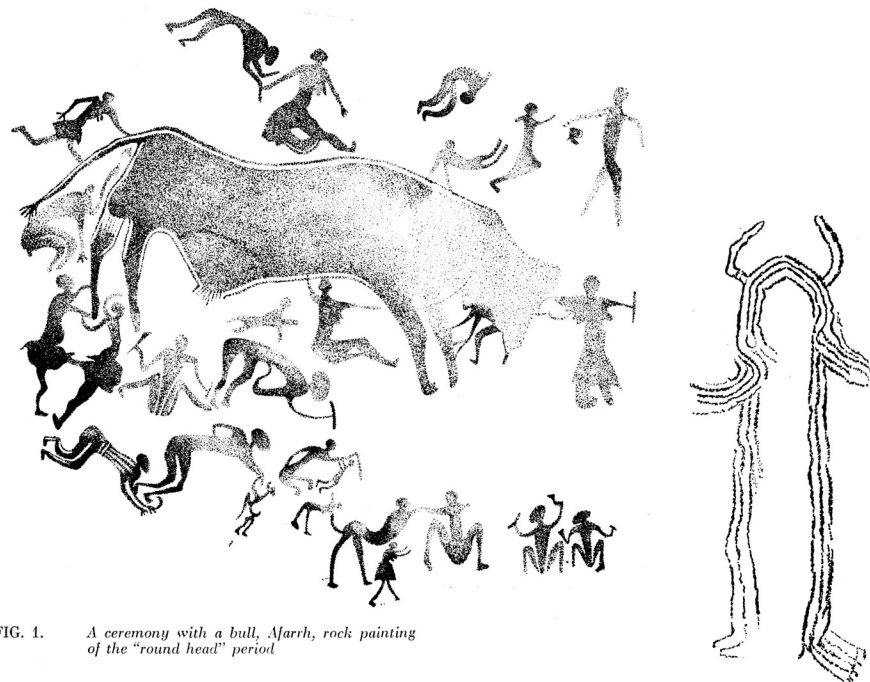


FIG. 1. A ceremony with a bull, Afarrh, rock painting of the "round head" period

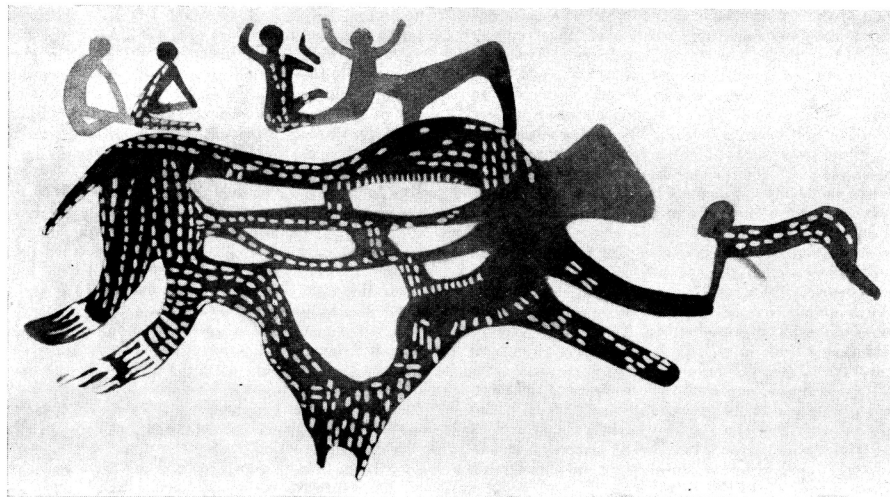


FIG. 2. Painting of another bull. Afarrh

FIG. 3. Engraving of a figure with horns. Afarrh



FIG. 4a, b Sefar, a bull and a human figure with horns, both paintings of the "round head" period. (After Lajoux)





FIG. 5. Tarhuna: a human figure with a bull

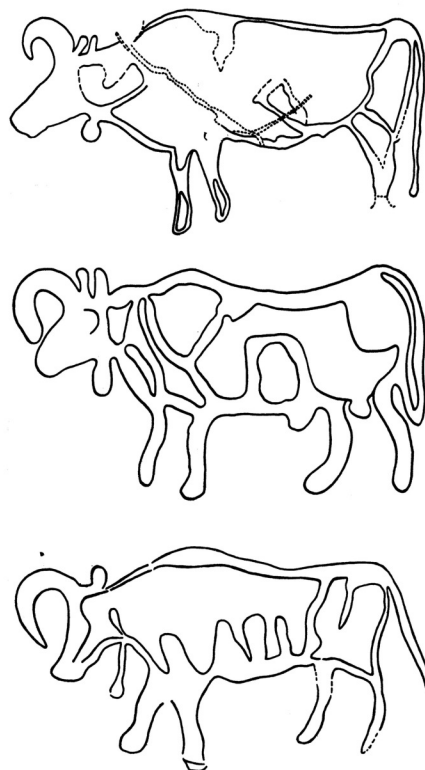


FIG. 6a, b, c Tarhuna, examples of bull engravings with neck ornaments

weathering is of the same degree as that of the rock surface. Their size can be compared to the size of engravings of the oldest Saharan art. Out of the total number of carvings three are not clear. 22 of the remaining 29 carvings picture bovids, eleven of them are bulls as documented by their well visible sexual organs. The remaining eleven engravings also seem to represent bulls, as far as the shape of their body is concerned, but the sexual organ is missing. There is not a single carving picturing a cow. Other important animals appearing in this rock art site are a rhino, a lion with its young and a dog. In one carving we can identify a human figure holding a bull with one hand, and a circular object or symbol with the other (Fig. 5). The animal carvings (the rhino, lion), namely their size and style document that they are older than the carvings of the pastoral or bovidian period. The interesting fact is that in 15 out of the bovinds we can see some kind of simple or double neck pendants or tassels, in most cases hanging from a sling situated round the neck (Figs. 6 a, b, c). These characters can be proofs of domestication or ornaments hanging from worshipped animals prepared for sacrifice or other religious ceremony. The large number of bulls among the Tarhuna carvings cannot be accidental. Evidently extraordinary importance was attached to this animal.

Now let us have a look at another important group of the earliest rock art sites in Central Sahara.

Mathrmdush, studied by L. Frobenius (1936), is regarded as a typical site of the "Great wild fauna" period, i.e. of the early rock art of the Saharan hunters. Here we can see the engravings of scores of short-horned bulls, but not a single cow. In several carvings the male sexual organ is clearly discernible.

Another locality of similar age in Fezzan is In Leludj only few kilometers south-west from Serdeles (Auenat). Here again numerous bull carvings are found together with human figures, elephants and

giraffes. There is not a single cow among these animals. Here too prevail bulls with their male sexual organs represented. In several of them the horns are deformed, which is usually regarded as a consequence of domestication. The situation is similar also in the south Tripolitanian locality Atf Bendlala, not far from the village of Shahva on the way from Nalut to Ghadames. Several Early Neolithic carvings of the hunters period style show bulls and not a single cow. The large frequency of bull carvings in this early time must evidently have some reason. The situation becomes even more clear if we go through the famous publications of P. Graziosi (1941, 1962). The illustrations of his publications show the same prevalence of bulls also in other Libyan galleries. The engravings of the hunting period and the paintings and engravings of the "round head" period show often many common features and the exact relationship between the two styles is not yet clear. Most probably at least some of the hunting period engravings are contemporaries of the "round head" rock art.

In the later bovidian period the well-known paintings from Tassili and Acacus (Lhote 1961, Mori 1965) already frequently show domesticated animals, namely bulls used for transporting burdens and people, but bulls appear also frequently in some of the mythological or ceremonial scenes (Lhote 1961). Finally not only in the eastern Mediterranean (the Near East, Greece, Crete, Egypt), but also in the western part of the Mediterranean Basin (Spain, France) bulls had a prominent role in the prehistoric mythology. This cult of bull was widely dispersed over a long period of time.

The early age of the "round head" period paintings together with the geographical situation

of central Sahara suggests that the Saharan people domesticated bulls for religious ceremonies, quite independently of other centers of domestication in other regions.

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