ANTHROPOLOGIE * XXII/1 * 1984

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AIN NAGA AND SOME NOTES ON THE EARLIEST NORTH AFRICAN ROCK ART

ABSTRACT. — The Ain Naga rock art belongs according to its style, subjects, weathering and archaeological situation to the Early Neolithic or Capsian period. According to the supperposition of figures on the rock face of the same gallery there are at least three or four other styles which are earlier.

KEY WORDS: Algeria — Capsian rock art — Early Neolithic — Ain Naga — Supperposition — Relative dating.

In 1980 I visited several rock art sites around Djelfa in the northern part of Algeria. I studied four of them in Ain Naga with rock carvings of human figures, of a hare, of a ram—mouflon and of two bubalus. Most complex of these four Ain Naga sites was the small gallery with human figures. In 1982 H. Lhote described the two main figures of this gallery (H. Lhote, 1982), comparing the head ornaments found in the Capsian burial at Ain Meterchem.

However, if the Ain Meterchem head ornament in question is dated as Capsian, it gives the possibility but not the prove that the Ain Naga figures are Capsian as well. They can be later and the specific ornament can be a cultural relic from earlier times.

A detailed study of the rock wall will bring further interesting observations. The bigger kneeing male figure has a quiver with several arrows on its back *(Fig. 1, No. 1).* No doubt the man is a hunter. Behind it there is an animal figure, probably a ram *(Fig. 1, No. 2).* There are two interesting features in this figure: 1. two parallel lines representing a collar, and 2. the head of the animal is partly hidden under the quiver of the male figure; the animal figure's head was ground and replaced by the quiver. The human figure is thus later than the ram. However, we do not know how much later it is. Higher up on the wall there is a geometrically ornamented object or symbol *(Fig. 1, No. 3).* An identical — or very similar — object can be found at the other end of the gallery *(Fig. 1, No. 7).* The degree of weathering of engraving No. 7 is stronger than that of the two human figures (No. 1), and even than that of the animal figure (No. 2). Further there are four heavily weathered lion footprints on the rock wall — *(Fig. 1, No. 4).* The fact that one of these footprints is on the female body, not respecting the female figure, together with its heavier weathering speaks for higher age. Right behind the female figure *(Fig. 1. No. 1)* there are two simple, thin, round headed figures, executed in a characteristic style *(Fig. 1, No. 5).* Both have the same body shape, with simple legs without feet. It is obvious that they are earlier than the two main figures *(Fig. 1, No. 1),* as the headdress and the back of the female figure *(Fig. 1, No. 1)* do not respect the arm of the first of the round headed figures *(Fig. 1, No. 5).* If we proceed further along the rock wall we find a human figure with stretched arms and legs *(Fig. 1. No. 6).* It holds a quadran-

FIGURE 1. *Ain Naga principal rock art site with seven interresting subjects, some of them in superposition:*
1. Two human figures, a male and a female. The kneeing male figure with quiver and arrows on its back has an interesting head dress with small beads made of an ostrich egg shell (see Ain Meterchen Capsian burrial).
2. Shepp or ram. Its head is ground off and replaced by the quiver of the preceding male figure.
3. Geometrical figure (shield?).
4. Lion traces not respecting the previous human figures. They are earlier.
5. Round headed figures not respected by the human figures. The round headed figures are earlier.
6. Male squatting (erotic) figure strongly weathered.
7. Another geometric design similar to No. 3.

FIGURE 1a. *Simplified design of the Ain Naga principal rock art site.*

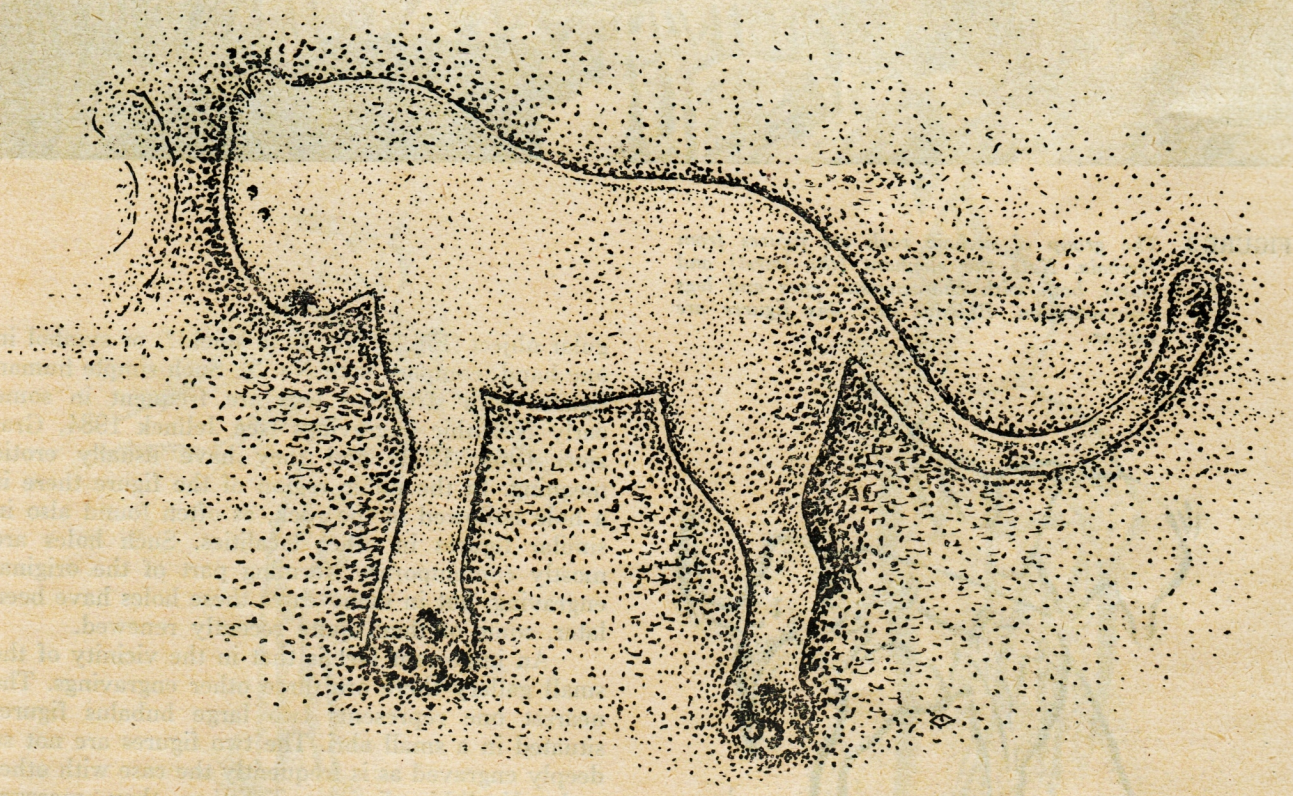

FIGURE 2. *Lion's figure tracing from Oued Remailia. It is finely engraved in simple lateral view. The paws are represented by tracks. No doubt this is an archaic style figure and explains the Ain Naga lion foot prints No. 4.*

FIGURE 3. *The group of archaic rock art figures from Hesbaia. Note the elephant (the latest) and rhino, both with characteristic eyes and legs representation. Bubalus and ibis figures are earlier.*

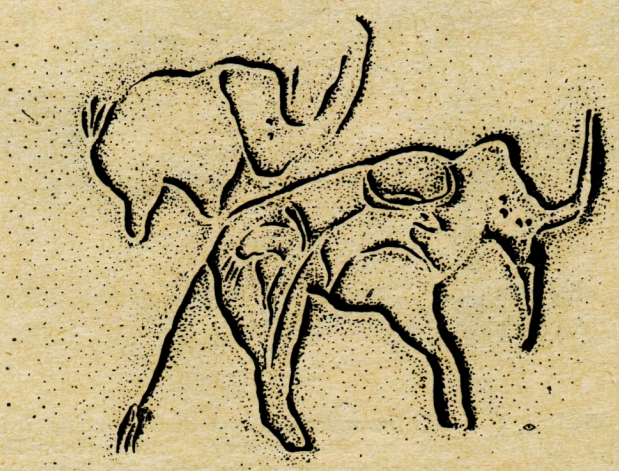

FIGURE 3a. *Design of the preceding four figures from Hesbaia.*

gular object *(Fig. 1, No. 7)* (a shield?) or symbol in one hand (compare with No. 3). Such simple human figures with stretched legs are frequent in some early Neolithic engravings (see Jelínek 1984, Graziosi 1965, 1971) and they have usually erotic meaning. In the pubic region of the figure there is a hole hollowed in the rock, as often found also in similar figures in other localities. Such holes are mostly contemporary, forming part of the original engraving, but in many cases these holes have been later, some of them quite recently renewed.

An important fact is that in the vicinity of the small gallery there are three other engravings. The nearest one represents two large bubalus figures situated in a small abri. The two figures are not so deeply engraved as is frequently the case with other early Neolithic figures. Together they measure 215 m. Some 300 m aside there is another rock shelter without engravings, but the numerous surface finds of Neolithic stone tools show that in the prehistoric times it was used as a shelter. Not

FIGURE 4. *The round headed figure (seems to be in dancing position) from Hesbaia rock art gallery. This engraving was later dammaged. Note the round head, the characteristic bent figure and the fact that the feet are not represented. Compare with two round headed figures (No. 5) from Ain Naga.*

FIGURE 5. *Detailed photograph of the round headed figure from Hesbaia.*

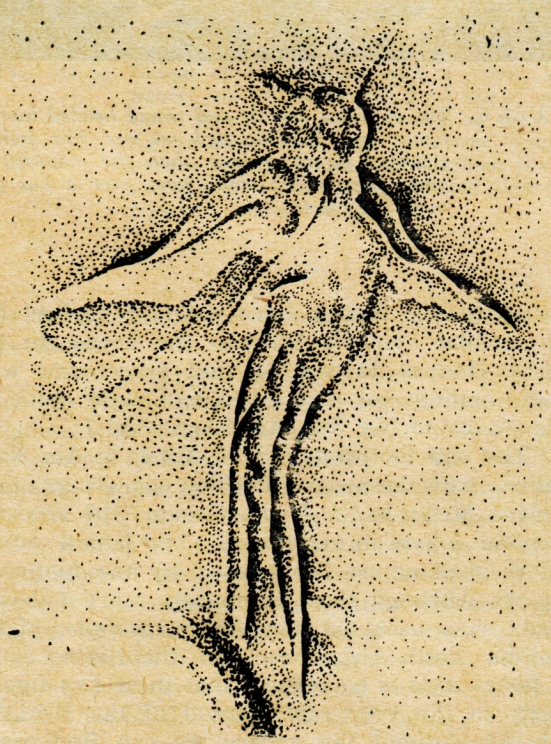

FIGURE 4a. *Design of the Hesbaia round headed figure.*

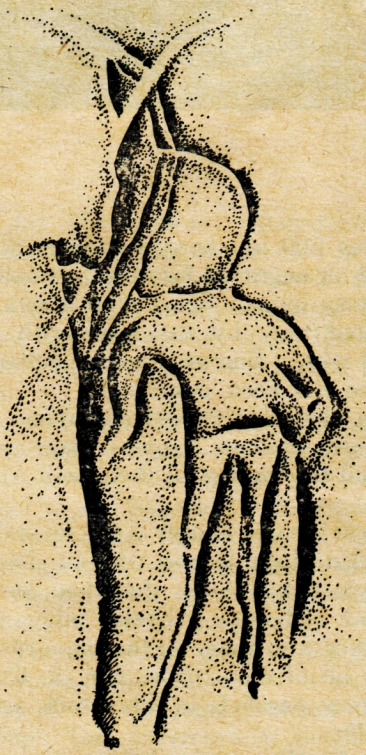

FIGURE 5a. *Design of the round headed figure from Hesbaia. Note the superposition of lines.*

FIGURE 6. *The elephant, bovide and round headed human figure from Hesbaia rock art site. The archaic elephant figure is later than the majority of other figures. Its trunk goes over a bos primigenius figure.*

too far (some 500 m) there is another place where we can find an engraved figure of a small hare and a large clumsy human figure with a ram. The ram is represented only by the head with a circular symbol and with a fine ornamented collar. The rest of the figure has been destroyed.

All the above-mentioned engravings belong to the well-known archaic (bubalus) style regarded as Neolithic and the earliest of the North African rock art.

The two human figures ("the lovers") *(Fig. 1, No. 1)* in Ain Naga belong without doubt to this rock art style but it seems that they are more developed and elaborate. All the other engravings found together with them on the same rock wall are earlier. For all of them (Nos. 2, 4, 5, 6) there can be found some parallels in other rock art localities around Djelfa.

Fig. 1, No 2, an animal figure (a ram ?). This partly ground 65 cm long figure can be compared with the ram figures from Safiat bou Rhenan, where several similar figures have not only collar, but also circular symbols between the horns. In the nearby Hadjrat Erebeg we find other rams with simple outline and also a simple human erotic figure similar to No. 6 in Ain Naga *(Fig. 1).*

The lion footprints *(Fig. 1, No. 4)* in Ain Naga compare with the magnificent lion engravings found in Oued Meilia in the Djelfa Region. The lions are represented here in very simple, fine lateral outline and their paws are represented by the footprints *(Fig. 2).* Although these engravings are not deeply carved as is usual in many other examples of the Neolithic North African rock art, there is no doubt (as far as style is concerned) that these lion figures belong to the very early period of the Neolithic rock art. Around the gallery we can find many Neolithic stone tools and some Neolithic fireplaces

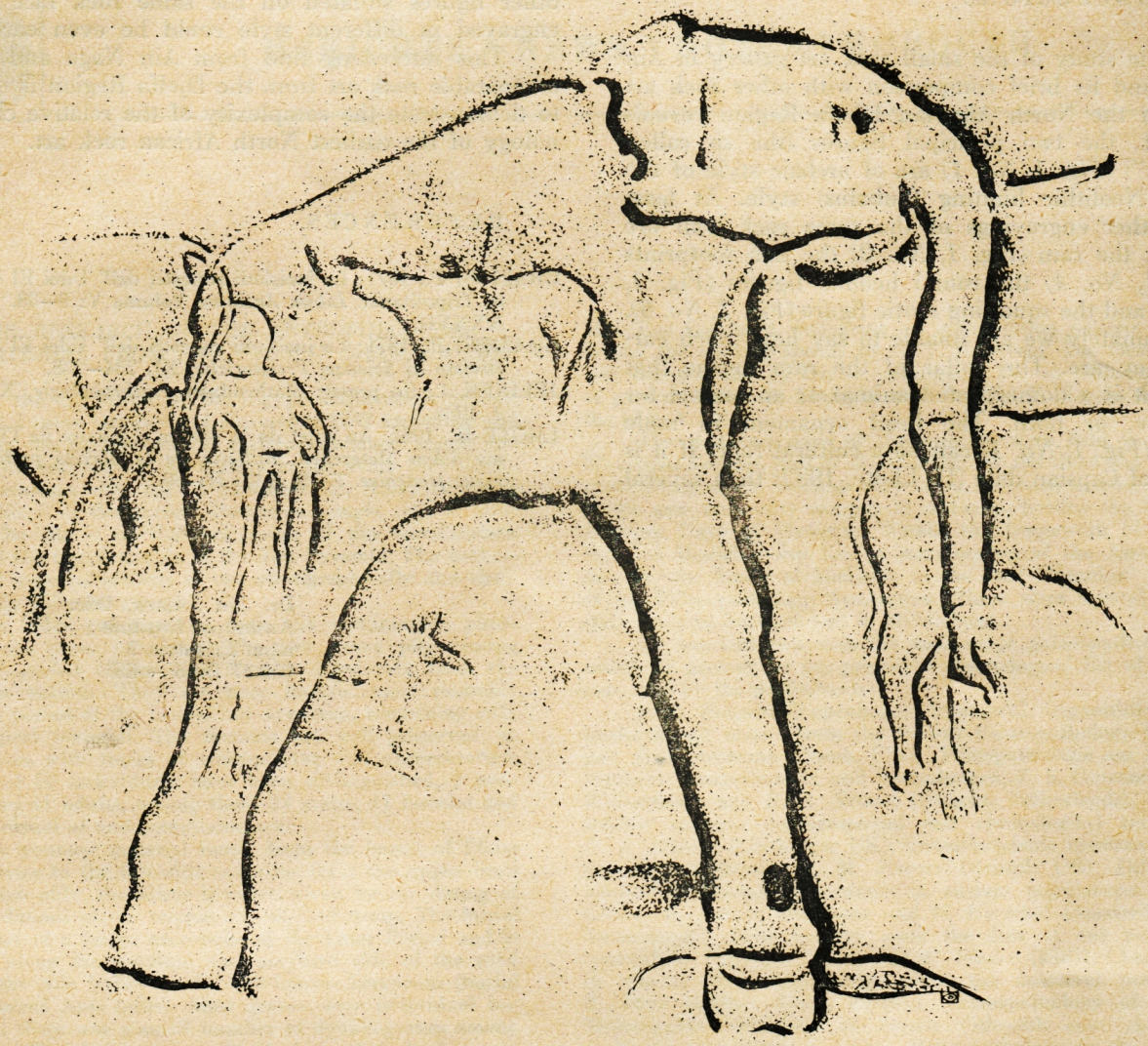

FIGURE 6a. *Design of an elephant with a round headed figure, covered (the head) by a tail of another cattle figure. The superposition of these three figures demonstrate that the round headed figure is the earliest and the elephant the latest one. Compare this round headed figure with figures No. 5 in Ain Naga.*

(with burned stone accumulation) and not decorated potsherds.

Next to the two principal figures *(Fig. 1, No. 1)* in Ain Naga there are two gracile round headed figures with characteristically bent bodies and this long arms and legs *(Fig. 1, No. 5)*. We found very similar figures in another important gallery in the Djelfa Region, namely in Hesbaia. The Hesbaia rock wall is covered with rock carvings of various, age, most of them coming from the Early Neolithic period. This is documented by the subjects (elephant, rhino, bos primigenius, bubalus antiquus) *(Fig. 3, 3a)* as well as by the style (simple deep outlines in lateral view, two eyes in frontal view, two legs only, etc.). One of the round headed figures in Hesbaia has its body bent in the same way as in Ain Naga and its legs have been represented in the same way *(Fig. 4, 4a)*. The arms are outstretched. One leg is covered by a cattle figure executed in archaic style. The other round headed Hesbaia figure with a slightly bigger head is superimposed by the tail of an animal figure of archaic style. The legs again are represented in the same characteristic style. *(Figs. 5, 5a, 6, 6a.)*

The next figure in the Ain Naga gallery *(Fig. 1, No. 6)*, the erotic figure, has many parallels in the northern parts of Algeria and elsewhere in North Africa and in the Sahara. In the Djelfa Region we can find two similar figures e.g. in Hadjrat Erebeg, but Ain Naga is different holding a shield or a rectangular symbol with composite design in the one hand (compare similar design *Fig. 1, No. 3* in this gallery). The interesting thing is that the weathering of the human figure differs (it is more advanced) from that of the rectangular object (less advanced weathering). This difference in weathering and the occurrence of a similar object in the same rock face without a human figure suggest that the rectangular object is a later addition.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of the small rock art gallery in Ain Naga and its brief comparison with other rock art sites in the North Algerian Djelfa Region reveals that: 1. the two principal figures (the so called "lovers") *(Fig. 1, No. 1)* are of archaic style of the Early Neolithic hunting (bubalus) style. At least four other engravings of the same rock wall are earlier: the ram *(Fig. 1, No. 2)* the lion footprints *(Fig. 1, No. 4)* the round headed figures *(Fig. 1, No. 5)* and the squatting erotic figure *(Fig. 1, No. 6)*. Unfortunately we are unable to say how much earlied they are. The collar of the ram means that either it is a domesticated animal or an animal for sacrifice, or both. The head ornament in male figure *(Fig. 1, No. 1)* can be a cultural relic. If it is really of Capsian date (H. Lhote, 1982) then several other figures situated on the same rock face but engraved in different style could be even earlier.

This interesting find from Ain Naga and the comparable rock art from the Djelfa Region is used to demonstrate the complexity of the relative chronology of the earliest North African rock art.

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