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GESUBA: A NEW SITE WITH ROCK ENGRAVINGS IN SIDAMO (ETHIOPIA)

ABSTRACT: *The article deals with the discovery of a prehistoric site with rock art, found in Southern Ethiopia (Sidamo). It is a rock-shelter; a large amount of engravings are preserved on its walls, representing cattle and symbolic motifs; a male anthropomorphic figure is represented, too.*

Taking into consideration only stylistic comparisons, most of the figures belonging to the complex may be dated back to a period ranging between the end of the third millennium B. C. and the second millennium B.C. Further information could be obtained by excavating the archaeological deposit lying in the rock-engraving site.

KEY WORDS: *Ethiopia – Engravings – Rock art*



FIGURE 1. The Gesuba rock-shelter as seen from the river-bed of Weyo.



FIGURE 4. View of the eastern wall of the Gesuba rock-shelter.



FIGURE 5. Engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: anthropomorphic figure and ox.

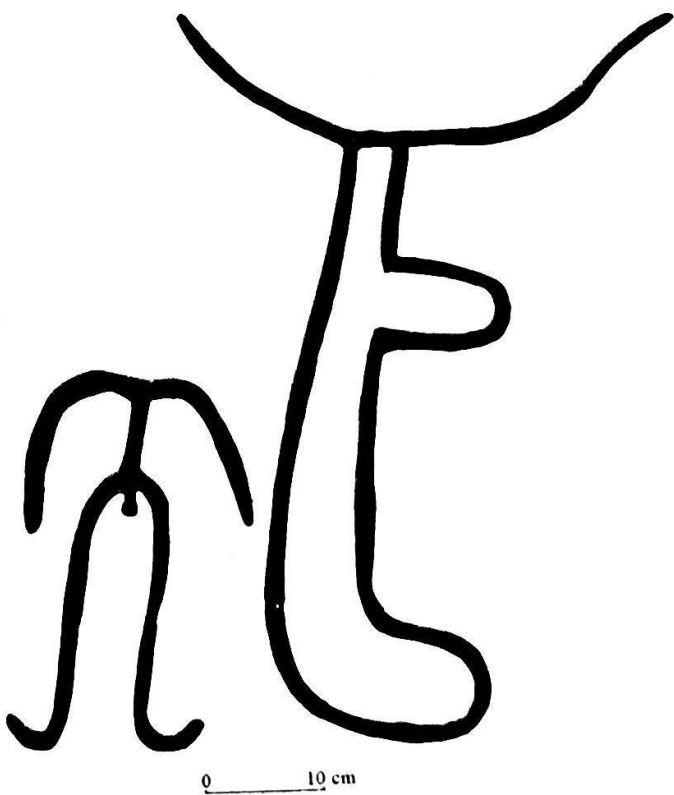


FIGURE 6. Tracing of the engravings of Figure 5.



FIGURE 7. Engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: cow and symbols.

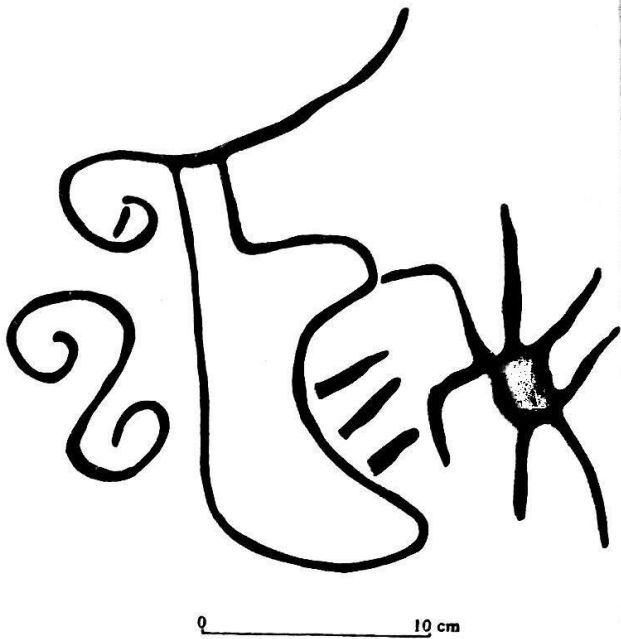


FIGURE 8. Tracing of the engravings of Figure 7.



FIGURE 9. Engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: figure formed by a row of cups.

All the engravings have been made by a semicircular stroke.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ROCK ART

Eight main units of engravings can be identified by detailed study (looking from east to west):

1) A group consisting of an anthropomorphic figure without head, drawn near the representation of an ox, vertically outlined. The height of the human figure is of 31.2 cm; the length of the ox is of 60.2 cm (*Figures 5, 6*).

2) A panel with cattle and symbols. The cow in the middle measures 25.6 cm; the double spiral associated with the animal measures 9.2 cm; the solar symbol, associated with the representation of the animal too, measures 16.4 cm (*Figures 7, 8*).

3) A big panel comprising many representations of cattle and symbols. In some cases it is difficult to read the engravings because they are shabby. In the middle of the panel there is a figure formed by adjacent rows of cups; taking into consideration the condition of the patina that engraving seems to be more recent than the other ones. The measures of animal representations range between 20.4 cm and 39.6 cm; the symbolic and abstract signs measure up to 20 cm; the figure drawn by the cups measures 41.2 cm in all (*Figures 9, 24*).

4) A big panel, adjacent to the preceding one, also consisting of figures of cattle and symbols. The dimensions of the animals represented there range between 20.8 and 28.4 cm.

5) A quadrangular figure with the interior divided into four parts by a cross-shaped pattern; two signs of uncertain meaning have been drawn inside the parts. The patina of that engraving appears to be lighter than the one on other engravings, thus it could be more recent. Dimensions: width 19.6 cm; height 23.6 cm (*Figures 10, 11*).

6) A group consisting of circular signs and a half-moon-shaped sign. Many modern strokes have been superimposed upon them, due to the sharpening of metal weapons, probably iron axes like those largely spread among the people. The largest measure of the semicircular pattern is of 24.8 cm (*Figures 12, 13*).

7) A group of twelve cups deeply engraved into the rock, forming a vaguely semicircular figure. The whole group measures 22.2 cm (*Figure 14*).

8) A complex figure with an obscure meaning; maximum height 106.8 cm; maximum width 84.8 cm (*Figures 15, 16*).

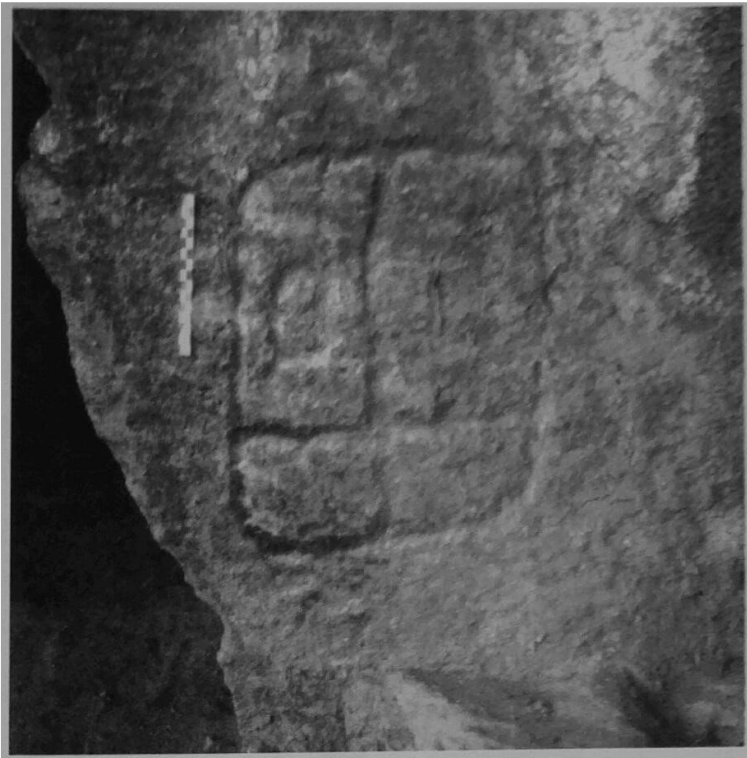


FIGURE 10. Engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: quadrangular figure.

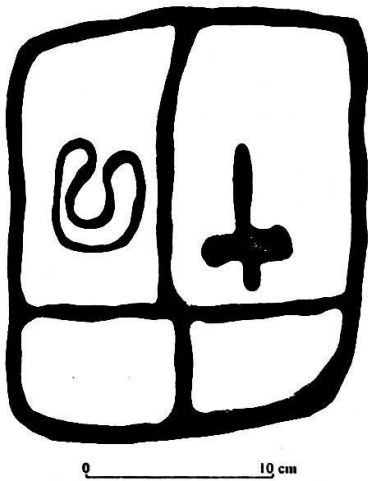


FIGURE 11. Tracing of engravings of Figure 10.

Some other engravings are likely to have existed on the right of that figure, but only weak traces, unreadable to the naked eye, are left, because of the atmospheric agents that have worn out the rock in that part which is outside the shelter.

As the chronostratigraphic data are completely missing, comparisons and relations between the site of Gesuba and other Ethiopian localities with rupestrian art may be made only by considering the stylistic features of the engraved representations.

At Gesuba, as well as in many other African localities with prehistoric art, there are two predominant patterns: the representations of cattle and symbols; at Gesuba the human figure appears only once, and it is tightly linked with the representation of an ox.



FIGURE 12. Engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: circular signs and a half-moon-shaped sign.

The engravings of cattle reproduce stylized animals, without hump, drawn in profile and generally facing right; the dimensions of these engravings range approximately between 20 and 40 cm (*Figures 17–19*).

In Eastern Africa, the chronological sequence of pastoral art is almost exclusively based on the style of the most widespread figures, that is representations of cattle. In that area, the appearance of late-prehistory rock art is marked by peculiar features known as the Ethiopian-Arabian style (Cervicek 1971, 1978–79, Joussaume 1981), an artistic current which spread mainly among Central Arabia, Hijaz, Eritrea, Ethiopia and, to a smaller extent, Northern Africa (Cervicek 1978–79: 8). According to that artistic trend, cattle are always drawn without humps, seen in profile with only one of their forefeet and one of their hind legs represented, and their heads with big horns outlined as if they were seen from above. The Ethiopian-Arabian style has been divided into two different stages (Cervicek 1978–79, Joussaume 1981): the first, restricted to Southern and Eastern Ethiopia, is called Surre from the name of the eponymous site, Surre or Genda-Biftou, in the Ethiopian region of Harar; the second, called Dahthami (Anati 1972) from the name of a locality in Central Ara-

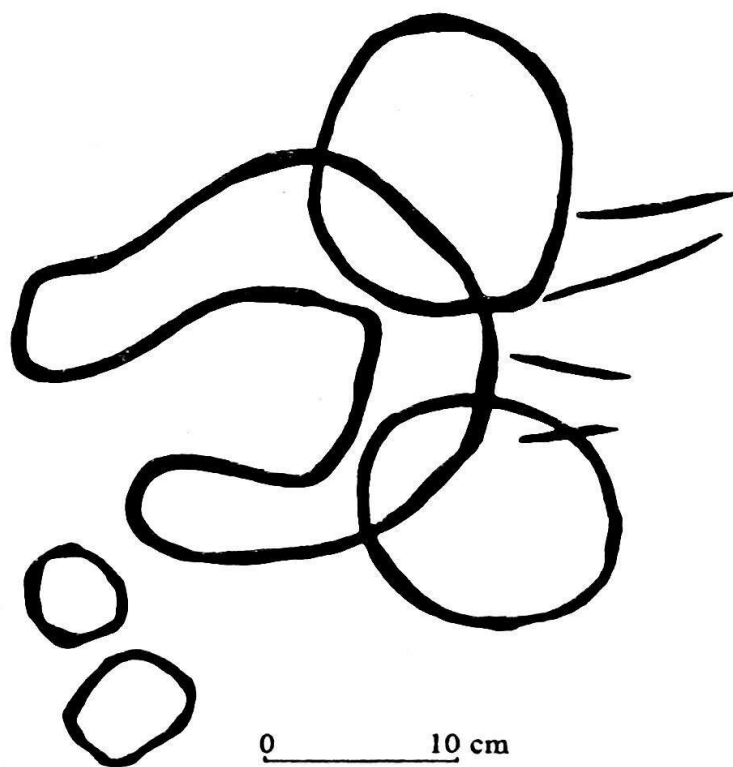


FIGURE 13. Tracing of the engravings of Figure 12.

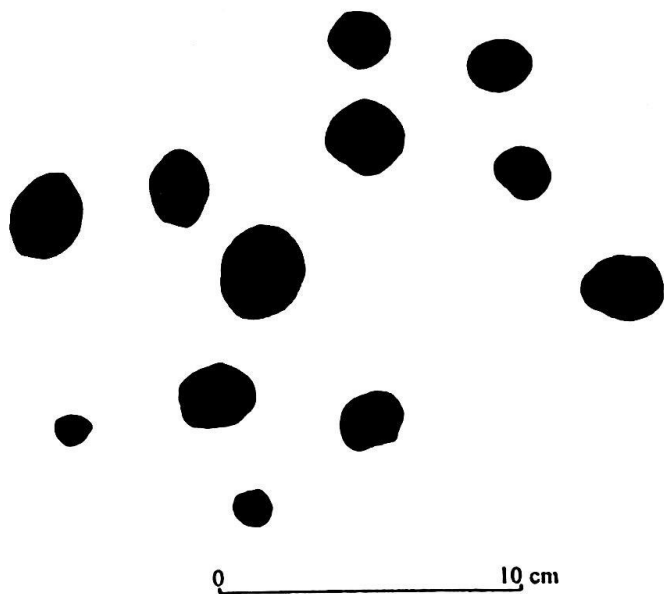


FIGURE 14. Tracing of the group of twelve cups deeply engraved into the rock.

bia, is characterized by a larger geographical diffusion (Central Arabia, Eritrea, Eastern Ethiopia, Northern Somaliland) and by a wider range of drawing styles; comparing the second stage with the older figures, a trend towards schematism can be recognized: animal bodies lengthen, horns bend, ears are completely missing, heads are never distinguished from the body. The more recent phase of that second stage is marked by the appearance of zebras, camels and a large series of schematic or abstract patterns in the iconographic list.

The stylistic patterns of our engravings can be well considered as proper to the first stage (Surre) of the Ethiopian-Arabian style; strictly confining ourselves to the Ethiopian territory, we can find the Surre stage in the paintings of the localities of Laga Oda (Cervicek 1971), Laga Gafra (Cervicek & Braukämper 1975), Genda-Biftou (Breuil 1934, Clark 1954), Ourso (Bailloud 1963), Wayber (Joussaume 1981), Saha Sharifa (Von Rosen 1949, Clark 1954), Errer Kimiet (Von Rosen 1949, Clark 1954), in the Harar region and in the alto-rilievos of the localities of Chabbé (Anfray 1967) and Galma (Anfray 1976), in the Sidamo region.

The engravings at Gesuba show no remarkable feature, with the only exception of a cow included in a group (Figures 7, 8) which has an unknown meaning to us, but certainly meaningful to those who draw it. It is generally the ox which is represented, but in that engraving a cow with a double spiral on the left can be observed, and a star-shaped or solar symbol on the right. The meaning, as we have just said, remains obscure. The spiral is an all-over widespread pattern no matter what the period: it has been associated with any kind of figures, or it appears isolated, it is formed by strokes similar one to the other. So there is practically no possibility to attribute a definite meaning to it. In this case we may suppose the double spiral could represent a human figure, created by a disso-

ciation of elements and by a bending metamorphosis (Graziosi 1980: 63–68). As for the solar symbols, they are also largely widespread all over African art, with a full range of types; as to the meaning of the symbols, we can only suppose a general “worship” of the sun. Anyway, we point up that a man-ox-solar symbol association can be found among the paintings at Laga Oda, although it is rendered in a different graphic way (Cervicek 1971: Fig. 47).

We can also find out that humps – one engraved and the other obtained by polishing the rocky wall – have been later added to two of the figures, in order to change the animal without hump into a *Bos indicus* (Figures 20, 21); thus we can suppose that the shelter had been frequented until more recent periods, because the zebu is likely to have been introduced into that area only a few centuries before Christ (Clark 1954, Cervicek 1978–79, Muzzolini 1983: 494–517).

The only human representation at Gesuba, rendered in a very stylized way and without head, appears to be linked with the figure of an ox (Figures 5, 6). Although it has no precise comparison with the style of the Ethiopian ones, that representation is quite similar to other human figures found among the paintings in Eritrea (Graziosi 1964); trunk and genitals are represented by a single vertical stroke, arms and legs are reproduced by two bent down lines cross-

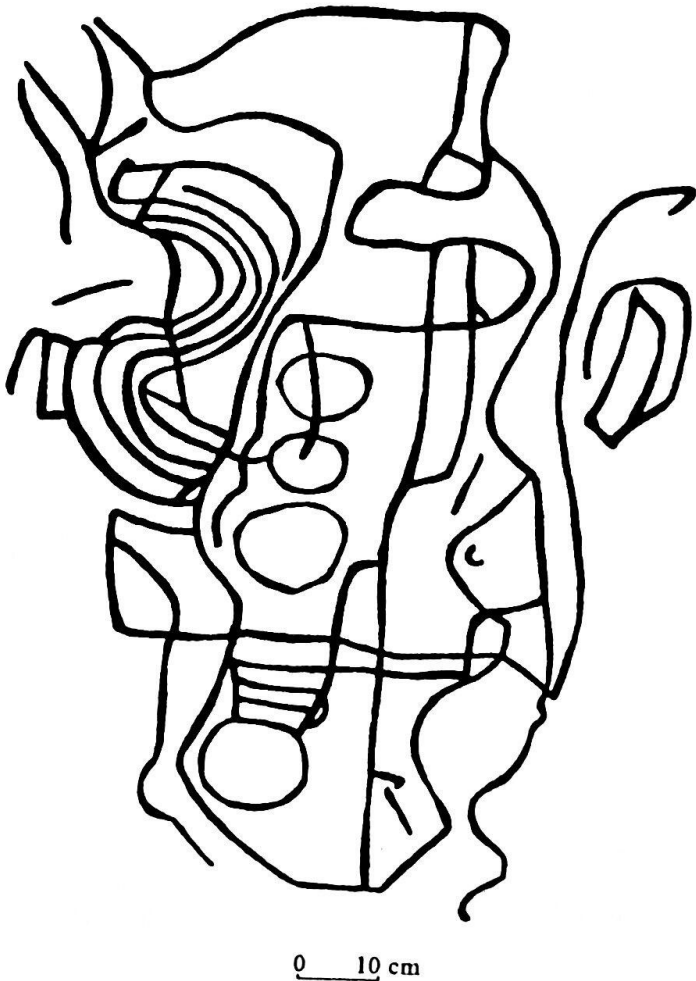


FIGURE 15. Tracing of the engraving of Figure 16.



FIGURE 16. Engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: enigmatic figure.

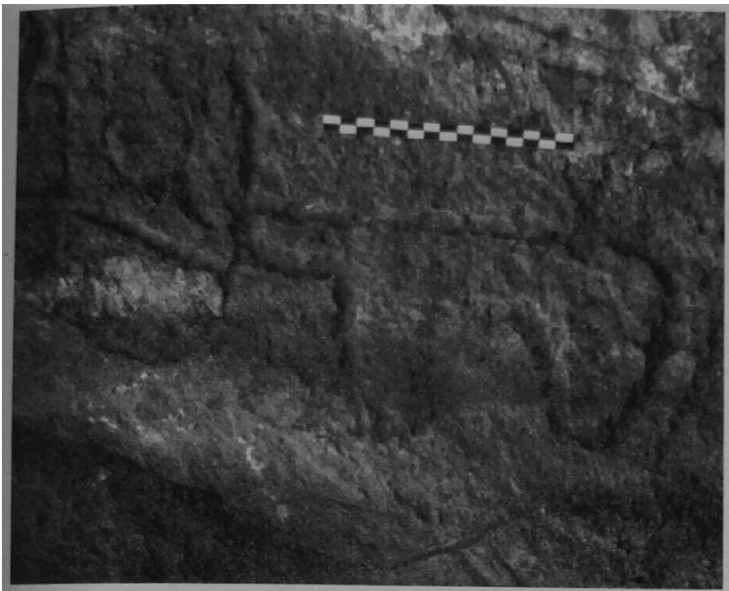


FIGURE 17. Engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: ox.



FIGURE 18. Engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: cattle.

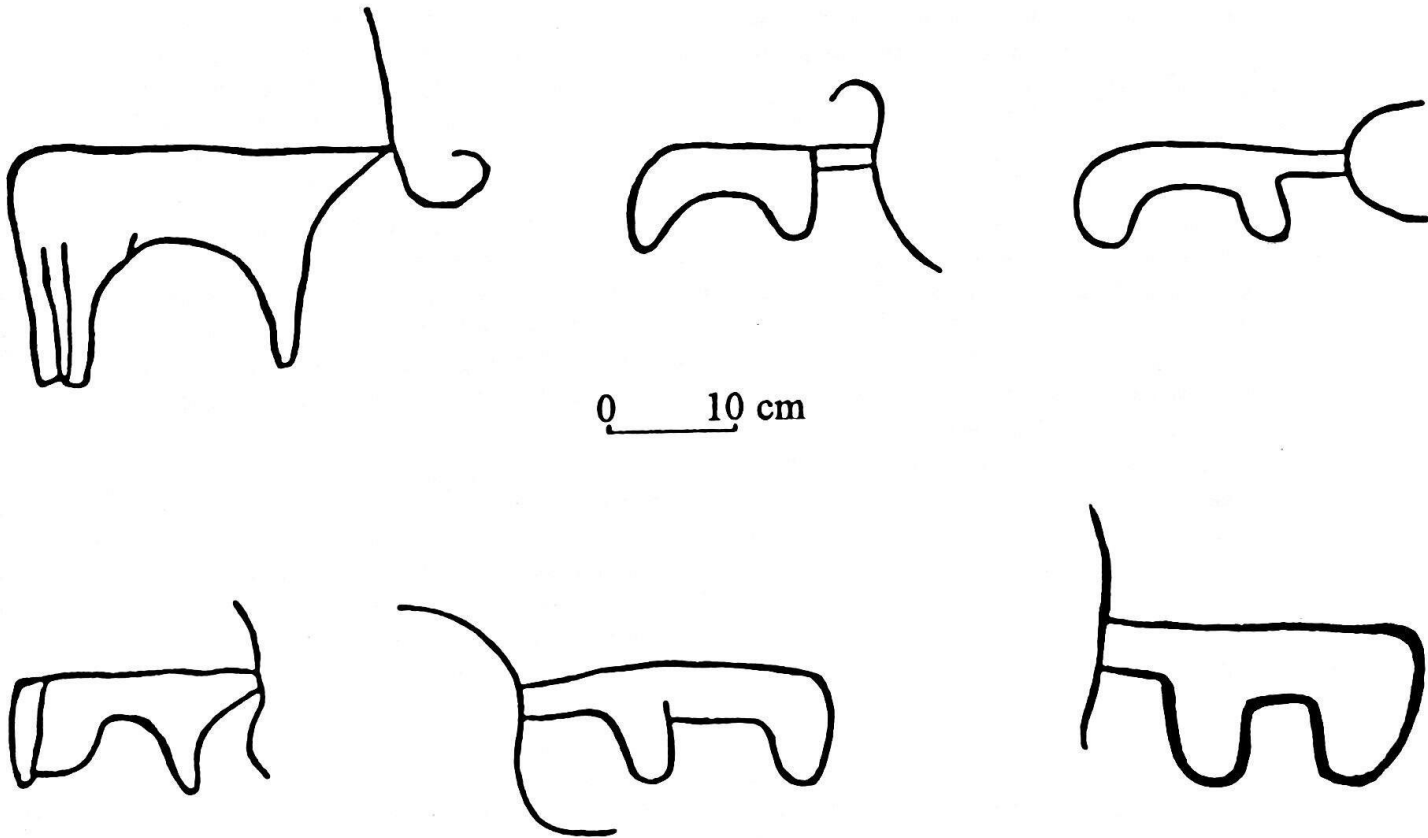


FIGURE 19. Tracing of the engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: cattle.

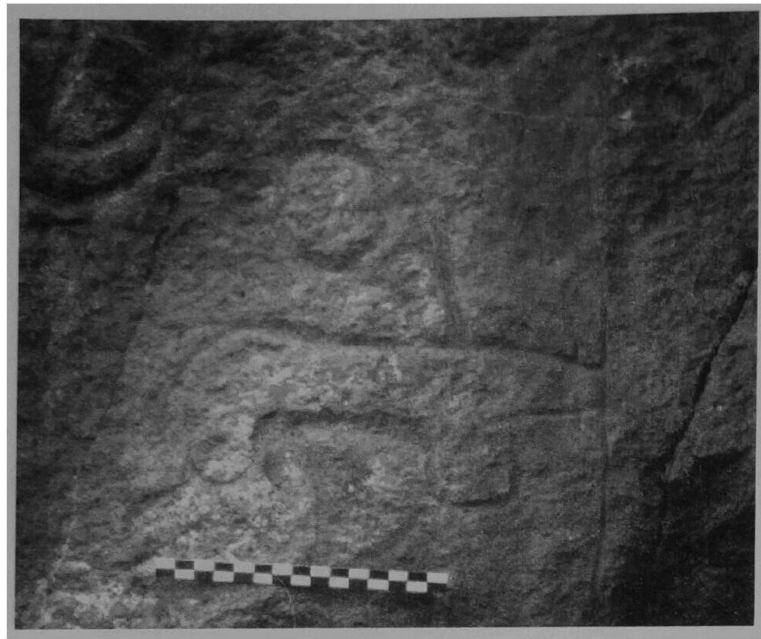


FIGURE 20. Engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: ox (zebu).

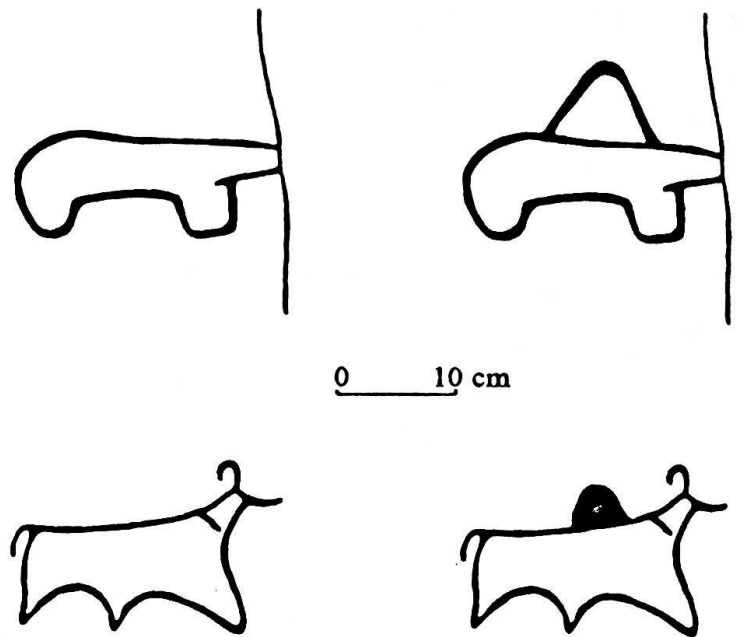


FIGURE 21. Tracing of the Gesuba rock-shelter engravings: cattle with hump subsequently applied.

ing the trunk. Cervicek (1971: 132, note 49) asserts that the figure without its head could be considered as a peculiar stylistic feature of the Ethiopian-Arabian artistic trend.

The remaining symbolic or abstract patterns found at Gesuba appear to be less distinctive.

Figures formed by one or more segments, straight or curved (*Figure 23, 1–2*), are largely widespread all over African prehistoric art, and in some cases they are interpreted to be tribal marks as a matter of fact (Clark 1954: Tab. 28). The quadrangular figure with the interior divided into four parts with two symbols (*Figures 10, 11*) at the entrance of the cave is likely to have a similar meaning, being indicative of possession; according to some members of the local people it is something like a tribal mark. Moreover, that engraving seems to be more recent than the other ones at Gesuba, taking into consideration the condition of the patina.

A circle with a cross inside (*Figure 23, 4–6*) is another largely widespread pattern, with an important geographic and chronological diffusion: we can find it at Abka, Sudan since 7,000 B.C. (Myers 1958, 1960); in Europe that symbol is linked with the cult of the Sun since the Neolithic (Maringer 1989: 222–226); the same symbolic patterns can be identified in the Nubian C-Group pottery (Cervicek 1974: 192). In modern times the same symbol is used to brand camels (Field 1952) and, in Tanzania, nomadic breeders use to draw it, meaning pen, in order to propitiate the gods (Cervicek 1971: 133).

A large number of different meanings could be attributed to the figures made of cups (*Figures 22, 23, 3*); one of the most pertinent comparisons is the one with several pictures in the Melsetter District, Zimbabwe, where groups of cups are likely to represent villages that are sometimes painted with walls and streams surrounding them (Summers 1959: 225–231).

The big central figure formed by a row of cups (*Figures 9, 24*) is in all likelihood nothing else than a sort of *Mweso* (Lanning 1956), a well widespread game, known all over Africa and called *Garre* in Ethiopia. Taking into consideration the patina, that engraving is supposed to be less ancient than the other representations at Gesuba.

The meanings of the grouped half-moon-shaped and circular figures (*Figures 12, 13*), and especially of the complex drawing at the western border of the shelter (*Figures 15, 16*), remain completely unknown. Is the latter a map? The only thing we do know is that all the lines making it up have been definitely drawn at the same time.

CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, all the engravings at Gesuba seem to date back to the same age, except for the “mark” near the entrance of the cave, the “game” formed by a row of cups, and the humps applied later on two cattle, as we said above. Some uncertainty remains concerning the schematic or abstract patterns, consisting of geometrical or stylized symbols, that usually appear to be typical during the later phase of the second stage (Dahthami) of Ethiopian-Arabian style; those patterns are often associated with representations of zebras and camels (the latter picture being not present at Gesuba).

As the archaeological tokens are completely missing, the only data usable to date chronologically the Gesuba engravings are the stylistic features used in representing cattle; those features can be well included in the first stage of Ethiopian-Arabian style which can be dated to the period between the end of the IIIrd and the whole IInd millennium B.C. (Cervicek 1978–79, Joussaume 1981). That chronological dating is suggested by style affinities with artifact assemblages (Clark 1970: 206) and art (Cervicek



FIGURE 22. Engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: figure with cups and curved lines.

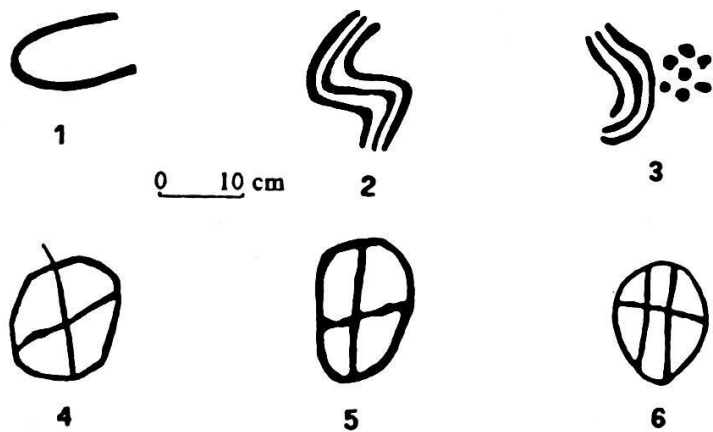


FIGURE 23. Tracing of the engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: symbols.

1974: 182–183a) of the Nubian C-Group; so we can date the Gesuba engravings to the same period.

Although we did not make excavations, being only allowed to survey and photograph the works of art, we observed some archaeological material lying on the ground of the site: they are microlithic artifacts mostly made of obsidian, with backed tools (segments of circle are present too) and end-scrapers. That set of stone tools can be included in the so-called “Wiltonian” manufacture, as it has been called until a few years ago. The “Wiltonian” lithic assemblages are typical of sub-Saharan Africa and have been found in drifts of various caves that show artistic pictures as well (Van Rosen 1949, Clark 1954, Clark & Prince 1978). Unfortunately, these data are of no use as for the chronological dating, because that kind of tools has been produced since at least the IVth millennium B.C. until the modern times (Clark 1954: 260–292, Joussaume 1981: 159).

To sum up, the new prehistoric locality of Gesuba represents a further evidence of the flourishing of art in the Ethiopian area during the last millennia before Christ; the prevailing representation of cattle shows the fundamental role that those animals played in the ideology of natives who were mainly breeders. That site enriches our knowledge of the Southern Ethiopian zone which has yet to be discovered in all its aspects, as far as archaeology is concerned. Moreover, by making archaeological excavations,

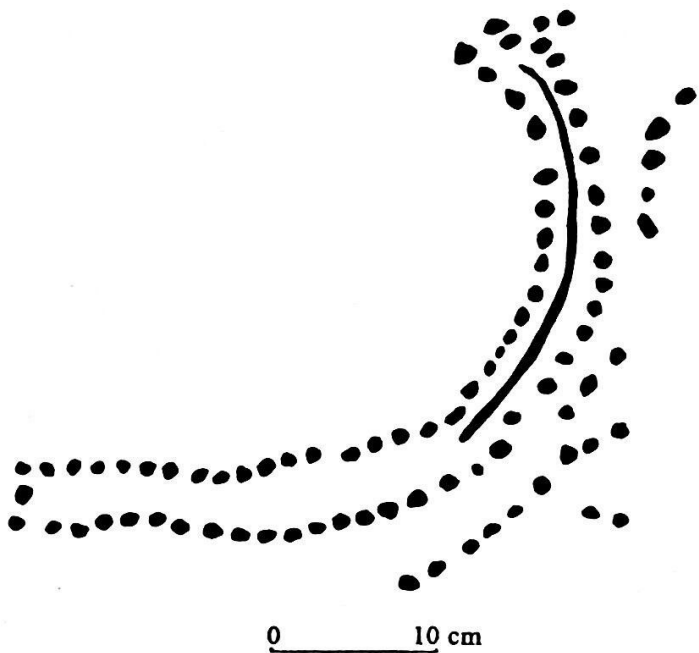


FIGURE 24. Tracing of the engravings of the Gesuba rock-shelter: game.

Gesuba could surely provide us with valuable cultural and chronological results that would be important to fill the gap concerning Eastern African recent prehistory – a gap essentially due to the poor archaeological data we have at our disposal.

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