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ACTION, RITUAL, AND MYTH IN THE ROCK ART OF EGYPTIAN WESTERN DESERT

ABSTRACT: *This paper reviews the techno-stylistic structure of the rock art in the Egyptian Western Desert in general, and focuses on narrative scenes painted in four caves of the southern Gilf el-Kebir area in particular: El-Qantara, the Cave of Archers, the Cave of Swimmers, and the Cave of the Beasts. Some of these panels repeatedly depict two archetypes: the “weightless humans”, and the “central monster”. It seems that both acrobatic and mythological aspects similar to these early pastoral scenes may be reflected in later cultural contexts and traditions.*

KEY WORDS: *Egypt – Western Desert – Neolithic pastoralism – Rock art – Archetype – Tradition*

INTRODUCTION

During the desertification of the Sahara, larger basins filled with lakes served as principal human refuges. In addition, elevated plains and mountains such as Gilf el-Kebir, Gebel Awenat, Ennedi-Tibesti, Fezzan, Acacus or Tassili, profitted from higher precipitation rates, their escarpments were furrowed by numerous at least periodically active wadis, and water reservoirs were forming in basins along the foothills. This favourable situation allowed the concentration of human settlement around the elevated rocky formations, and its persistence longer than elsewhere on the open desert plains. Selected rocks, rockshelters, smaller caves, or boulders in these favourable landscapes were covered with rock art.

THE TECHNO-STYLISTIC FRAMEWORK

Chronologically, human occupation of the Egyptian Western Desert reflects the periods of Pleistocene/Holocene transition, Holocene climatic optimum, and Sahara desertification. Radiometric dates from longer occupation sequences in Gilf el-Kebir, namely Wadi el Akhdar and Wadi Bakht, range between 8 ky–3.5 ky calBC (Nicoll 2001, Le Quellec *et al.* 2005: 274). Even if a general outline of the techno-stylistic development of the rock art is being

established, any precise correlations between hydroclimatic changes, palaeodemography, cultural development, and rock art are not yet available. The topics – animals and humans, static and in action – are similar through the evolution, but the size, style and technology of the images changed constantly: paintings, engravings, both deep and shallow, ground-off surfaces, functional traces of tool polishing, *grattage*, *picquetage* a. o. The same topics may be represented at various places using various techniques (“rounded heads”, “bird’s face”, “swimmers”, etc.), and at larger sites overlaps may occur of a variety of techniques within one broader time interval. Therefore, besides the basic evolution line of the rock art in Sahara, coexistence of its various forms is encountered as well.

The “large fauna” style is considered the earliest one in the inner Sahara. Following Dirk Huyge (2008), some large contour engravings of bulls, birds and females in the Nile valley, el-Hosh and Qurta, may be Late Pleistocene in age. How deep we can go into the Pleistocene, however, remains uncertain, basing on the style of the animal figures. Associated are female figures depicted in the “Magdalenian” side-view, with exaggerated buttocks. However, this typical perspective is an element of cross-cultural rather than strictly chronological significance, and has previously been recorded elsewhere in context of the large African fauna

(Wadi Buzna, Fezzan). In terms of technique and topics, the large African fauna style is relatively well-defined in the inner Sahara (Ennedi, Fezzan, sites in Niger, etc.), and is considered to be more recent, terminal Pleistocene/Early Holocene in age. Typically, there are realistic, life-sized, and mostly static engravings of buffalos (*Bubalus antiquus*), aurochs, giraffes, rhinos and elephants produced by deeply engraved contour lines. If they are accompanied by anthropomorphs, then the humans tend to be smaller, some of them have rounded heads, some display completely decorated bodies, and some are therianthropic. Only individual elements of this style are present in Gilf el-Kebir such as the rounded heads of the large males in the Cave of the Beasts. As a complex, the large fauna style was not recorded in the Egyptian Western Desert.

From the seashore, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica were influenced by the *Mediterranean style*, characterised by smaller, finer, and realistic or elegantly stylised (simplified) engravings of animals and humans. J. Jelínek (1982a) pointed to formal analogies between engravings of humans with typically pointed faces at Grotta dell'Addaura, Sicily, and Bir Miji, northwest Libya. As shown by Le Quellec *et al.* (2005), the pointed or bird's face ("*bec d'oiseau*") appears also as a painting at Gebel Awenat (anthropomorphs at Karkur et-Taht), and as we will show below, the engraved bow-shaped or "weightless humans" of Grotta dell'Addaura are frequent topic among the paintings of Gilf el-Kebir. In terms of form and technique, however, the Mediterranean style of typically small and fine engravings was not recorded in the Egyptian Western Desert.

The most typical feature in sheltered caves and rockshelters of the Gilf el-Kebir and Gebel Awenat areas represent the colourful and lively *paintings of animals and humans* (Figure 1). This style may be formally compared to the Bovidian style of Tassili and Acacus, and divided into a variety of sub-styles (longilinear, filiform, Sora style, rounded heads' style, miniature style, swimmers' style a. o.; Le Quellec *et al.* 2005). Size of the animal figures is small, varying between 10–40 cm. The images depict scenes of pastoral life (cattle, milking), warfare (bowmen), domestic scenes (humans, dwellings, pots), social actions and actions of ritual and mythological significance. Thus, this group of sites is the most narrative one in what concerns topics and scenes, realistic as well as supernatural. The painted figures are frequently accompanied by hand and foot stencils, by animal engravings and animals with ground-off bodies. Superposition of painted and engraved figures at large sites such as the Cave of the Beasts demonstrates that the various techniques overlap each other in an irregular manner, and therefore date from approximately the same time interval. Four sites, identical in style but variable in terms of the topics, are described below in more detail: El-Qantara Cave, the Cave of Archers, the Cave of Swimmers, and the Cave of the Beasts.

Another technique, broadly distributed in the Egyptian Western Desert, combines engravings and polishing (Figure 2). The figures, mostly antelopes, giraffes, and ostriches, are composed of deep and long parallel lines with V-shaped

section, some of which may be traces of tool polishing. Preferentially, the long lines were used to express the extremities and horns, while the surface of the trunk is completely ground-off. Size of the animal figures is generally small, comparable to the paintings: 10–20 cm, maximally 40 cm. A series of individual sites with this technique were recently discovered by Carlo Bergmann at the conical rock formations in the area between Gilf el-Kebir and Dakhla (area of Abu Ballas), and revisited in 2008 by our expedition led by Miroslav Bárta. Radiometric dates from the Abu Ballas area range between 7.5 ky–5.5 ky calBC (Nicoll 2001).

A specific style represents the isolated cave of El Obeid, located in whitish limestone escarpment of the White Desert, in 173 m a.s.l. The technique used here is *grattage* covering the surface of the bodies of highly schematised antelopes (Figure 3), accompanied by signs: engraved and ground-off footprints of large carnivores and coloured human hand stencils.

Later styles show a unification of techniques and a certain degeneration of forms. The predominating technique at this stage becomes the *picquetage* made by hard hammerstone (Figure 4), used to represent simple body contours, and/or to cover the whole body surface of the animals: antelopes, giraffes, and ostriches. Humans are highly reduced into geometric or even naive shapes. Size of the figures is comparable to the earlier paintings and engravings. The *picquetage* expands from the Gebel Awenat (Karkur et-Talh) and Gilf-el Kebir (several sites at Wadi Hamra) towards the dispersed conical rock formations around Abu Ballas and Dakhla. A specific isolated site located further to the north, Gara, is an abyssal cave forming an underground floor decorated with stalagmite formations, where the technique of *picquetage* was applied on bodies of antelopes and ostriches, but *grattage* (as at El-Obeid) occurs as well on bodies of antelopes and humans. Radiometric dates from the Gara region fall into the interval from 8 ky to 4.3 ky calBC (Classen *et al.* 2009), but the pecked figures are probably quite late.

One of the Western Desert sites, named the Water Mountain or Chufu's Well, is important as evidence for coexistence of the late derivation of this style with inscriptions of the Egyptian Old Empire. It is a good example of acculturation in contact of the old Saharan traditions affected by gradual desertification of their homeland, with the newly formed civilisation of the Egyptian Nile valley. The Egyptians, probably looking for sources of red ochre ("*mefat*") and for water, engraved here symbols and cartouches typical of their age and culture (periods of Chufu and Rajedef). The autochthonous inhabitants, in search of water as well, tried to copy these subjects without understanding their meaning properly, as shown by the naive copy of a stereotypic Pharaoh's stature (Figure 5). Other human figures were simplified into highly reduced, linear and arrow-shaped signs.

Another, even more recent case of meeting of the two cultures is recorded on walls of the Middle Empire rock tombs at Beni Hassan, where the dynastic funeral paintings are overlain by simply pecked bodies of fantastic monsters.

El-Qantara Cave, Wadi Wasa

El-Qantara is a rockshelter 11.7 m long and maximally 2 m deep, located in elevation of approximately 1,000 m a.s.l. The paintings on its back wall are clustered in three panels.

The left panel (A) includes 11 colourfully expressed individuals of cattle, 10 of which walk to the right. They are accompanied by several smaller animals, dogs or other carnivores, and by miniature human figures. The middle panel (B) shows three individuals of cattle only. The right panel (C) represents the most complex association. A white arch depicts a dwelling with a central sitting person, obviously a female, and with globular containers hanging from the roof. A tall individual with long white hair and a rock stands in front of the dwelling. Six individuals of cattle, two carnivores, probably hyenas, and several schematised human figurines are distributed around. As a whole, the paintings at El-Qantara display pastoral and domestic themes, where animals predominate over humans.

Cave of Archers, Wadi Sura

This cave is 9 m long and maximally 4.40 m deep. It opens at the foot of a remarkable conic rock, on the bank of a dry river bed, in elevation of 620 m a.s.l. (Figure 6). The surface of the decorated walls is highly damaged. The preserved panel, 1.60 m long, shows a group of humans in the middle, some of them armed with bows. Seven individuals of cattle oriented in both directions flank the scene at the sides, and a human is shown milking one of the cows. As a whole, the panel combines themes of peaceful pastoralism with those of defence and fighting, where the figures of humans and animals are almost equally represented.

Cave of Swimmers, Wadi Sura

The Cave of Swimmers, adjacent to the left from the Cave of Archers, lies at the foot of the same rock formation, and it is 13.8 m long and about 8 m deep (Figure 6). The paintings are damaged and weathered, and the preserved panels are located in the left portion of the cave, starting from the entrance area to the middle of the concavity. They include about 7 scenes composed predominantly of human figures, standing, in action, or “weightless” (Figures 7–8). In this cave, humans clearly predominate over animals. There is a group of giraffes at the entrance, and several individuals of cattle and ostriches dispersed among the humans. Finally, several hand stencils are present, sometimes overlain by small human figures.

A typical feature of this cave is represented by the miniature, bow shaped and horizontally lain anthropomorphs which were also recorded in the Cave of the Beasts, and, surprisingly, as far as the Grotta dell’Addaura in Sicily (Figure 9). They were baptised “swimmers” by László E. de Almásy, but looking at their body position realistically, it is clear that these people do not swim, in fact. Instead, their curved silhouette has recently been explained symbolically, as the reflection of death and of passage into the Underworld. As noted by Le Quellec *et al.* (2005), classical Egyptology provides us with numerous parallels in analogical depictions of captives and dead, and the Egyptian Book of the Dead

offers an ideological background to such considerations (Wallis Budge 1969). In the sense of D. Lewis-Williams (2002), the strange positions of anthropomorphs in rock art may not refer to death but to neurological commensality of human mind when experiencing hallucination in altered states of consciousness.

All these assumptions may be generally correct in their own contexts: reflecting captivity or death when connected with fighting scenes, or other states of being in a supernatural composition (such as the one in the Cave of the Beasts). However, the Cave of Swimmers displays standing and “swimming” individuals associated in groups, as if performing a collective ritual (Figures 7–8). The arched humans seem to be thrown in the air by some of the standing humans. Looking at actual African folklore, jumping is a typical component of ritual dancing, as in the Lion’s dance of the Masai, for example. Another recent analogy is the acrobatic dance of the Guere tribe in West Africa, where the morphology of the human body being thrown into air displays a perfect analogy to the anthropomorphs of the Cave of Swimmers (Figure 10). Naturally, this formal observation does not contradict the above-mentioned explanations suggesting social status, state of consciousness, or life or death of the depicted humans. Should we go to the roots, the original meaning of actual African acrobatic dancing may have been symbolic as well. It is possible that we are dealing with a long-term African tradition, or an archetype of the “weightless humans”.

Cave of the Beasts, Wadi Sura Gidida

This deeply-vaulted rockshelter, 17.5 m long and 4–4.6 m deep, is located in Wadi Sura Gidida, in 700 m a.s.l. (Figure 11). The interior is partly filled in with a large dune formed on the slope in front of the entrance. It is the most complex rock art site in the region of Gilf el-Kebir. Over the whole surface, the rockshelter represents an exciting painted panel of deeper religious and fatal meaning (Figure 12). Higher up, there is a compact zone of numerous coloured hand stencils and deep engravings of antelopes and ostriches (Figure 13). An independent composition of six large and deep animal engravings, mostly antelopes, is located even higher, dominating the rock wall above the cave portico.

The scenes with human figures are predominantly ordered around one central monster, the “beast”. It is a headless carnivore, showing a cordiform opening (“mouth”) instead the head, obviously for eating the miniature human figures around. This topic is multiplied, and reappears rhythmically in two or three horizontal zones. Almost 10 monsters, each about 20–45 cm long, are painted in dark and light colours, some of them with unrealistically elongated extremities, and some decorated with yellow patterned bands. The small, curved and weightless anthropomorphs may just circulate around, but some are evidently directed to the „mouth“ in the missing head of the animal, and some even disappear in it (Figures 14–17).

Natural shapes of the rock wall were respected by the painters: in one case, two lines of standing human figures are ordered as mirror-image along a natural rock fissure



FIGURE 1. Rock paintings (Bovidian style). Gilf el-Kebir, El Qantara. Photo by M. Frouz.



FIGURE 4. Technique of picquetage. Gilf el-Kebir, Wadi Hamra. Photo by J. Svoboda.



FIGURE 2. Technique of ground-off surfaces. Southern zone of Western Desert. Photo by M. Frouz.



FIGURE 5. Egyptian dynastic painting meeting a naive pecked replica. Southern zone of Western Desert, Chufu's Well. Photo by M. Frouz.



FIGURE 3. Technique of grattage. White Desert, El Obeid Cave. Photo by J. Svoboda.



FIGURE 6. Cave of Swimmers, location of the site (centre). The Cave of Archers is on the right. Photo by M. Frouz.



FIGURE 7. Cave of Swimmers. Group of anthropomorphs, probably a ritual scene. Photo by J. Svoboda.



FIGURE 10. An archetype: Guere, West Africa. Acrobatic dance showing throwing of human bodies into the air.



FIGURE 8. Cave of Swimmers. Another scene, probably ritual. Photo by J. Svoboda.

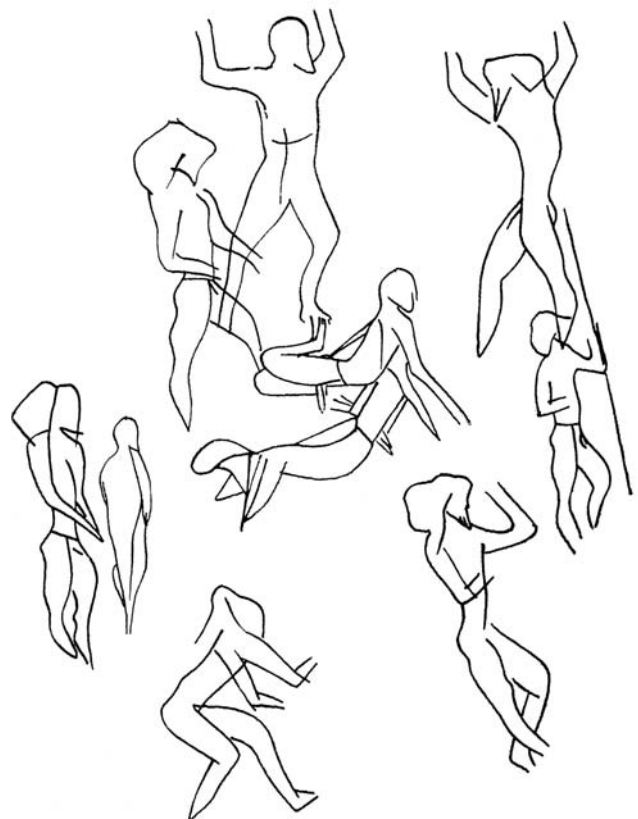


FIGURE 9. Grotta dell'Addaura, Sicily. Engraved scene in the Mediterranean style, similar to the "swimmers" of Gilf el-Kebir.



FIGURE 11. Cave of the Beasts, location of the site. Photo by J. Svoboda.

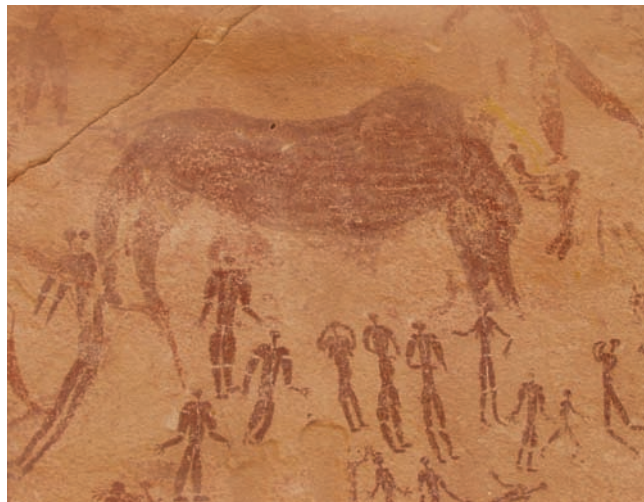


FIGURE 14. Cave of the Beasts. Anthropomorphic figures clustered around a headless monster. Photo by J. Svoboda.



FIGURE 12. Cave of the Beasts, general view of the decorated panel. Photo by J. Svoboda.



FIGURE 15. Cave of the Beasts. Anthropomorphic figures clustered around a headless monster. Photo by J. Svoboda.



FIGURE 13. Cave of the Beasts. Zone of the hand stencils. Photo by J. Svoboda.



FIGURE 16. Cave of the Beasts. Monster and a weightless figure. Note the fine yellow decoration of the monster's body. Photo by M. Frouz.



FIGURE 17. Cave of the Beasts. Monster „eating“ a human. Photo by M. Frouz.



FIGURE 20. Cave of the Beasts. Anthropomorphic figures clustered around a headless monster. Note the weightless humans around and the impacts from blows on the monster's body. Photo by J. Svoboda.



FIGURE 18. Cave of the Beasts. Humans ordered to action, mirror image along a natural rock fissure. Photo by M. Frouz.

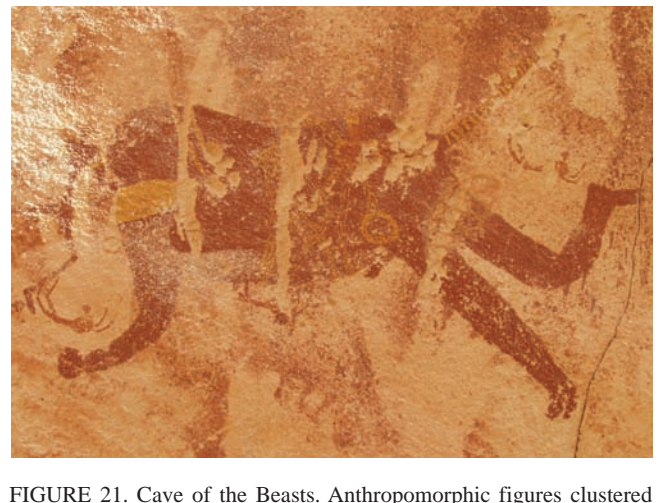


FIGURE 21. Cave of the Beasts. Anthropomorphic figures clustered around a headless monster. Note the weightless humans around, patterns of fine yellow decoration, and the traces of damage on the monster's body. Photo by J. Svoboda.



FIGURE 19. Cave of the Beasts. Example of a domestic scene. Photo by J. Svoboda.



FIGURE 22. An archetype: vault of the Baptistry of Saint John in Florence. Monstrous Devil eating the sinners.

(Figure 18). In addition, several scenes of profane life are incorporated into this composition, with circles/ovals depicting a village, and with humans ordered for dance or for other activities (Figure 19). Realistic animals such as cattle, giraffes and ostriches, and a large white lion, as well as hand and foot stencils complete the composition from place to place. At both ends, the panel is flanked by two long round-headed human figures, the guardians, the right one being deeply engraved and the left one dark-painted. However the largest round-headed male, about 140 cm long, is engraved inside the composition, and another one, yellow-painted, appears just in the centre of the panel. Several perforated “ears”, functional and evidently serving for attachment of something, were carved in the rock wall about 1 m above the ground (similar attachments are recorded from other decorated rockshelters such as the Chufu’s Well, or as far as from the Roc-aux-Sorciers rockshelter at Angles-sur-l’Anglin, France, but their function and relationship to the art is unknown).

Additional traces of human activity demonstrate that the scene was not static but has been changing considerably during human activities, probably during rituals performed in this cave. The paintings and engravings overlap in some cases, so that the both techniques were applied within one time span, the exact duration of which is hard to estimate. In some zones, earlier paintings were evidently ground-off or polished-off and then repainted. On bodies of the central males and monsters, repeated impacts from heavy blows with stone are visible, directed especially against the front and the head (Figures 20–21). Such blows may indicate a destructive prehistoric ritual, as recorded repeatedly in various contexts of prehistoric art (unless it is a much later effort to destroy figural depictions along the Islamic rules).

The central topic of human figures clustered around a dominant animal – standing or moving, sitting or jumping – is also repeated elsewhere in early pastoral art of Sahara and the Near East, and may reflect an archetype of the “central monster”. The closest analogy to the Cave of the Beasts, the so-called “Korossom myth”, is painted in a similar style on the Ouri plateau in Ennedi, but the shape of the central monster recalls a hippopotamus in this case (Simonis, Scarpa Falce 2008). Another, highly schematised variation may be represented by a simple engraving on a boulder at Bir Miji near the Tripolitanian coast (Jelínek 1982a: Fig. 9): the wedge-shaped opening recalls the “mouth” of a headless beast (not the ears of a donkey as interpreted by Jelínek), whereas the arrow-shaped lines and polishing traces around may correspond to humans (as at the Chufu’s Well). In Afarrh in the Acacus, Libya, and in Sefar, Algeria, small humans are clustered around a large central bull, including some “weightless humans” (Jelínek 1982b). On the house walls at Çatal Hüyük, Anatolia, the central beast is represented by a bull or by vultures, again surrounded by small humans (Mellaart 1965).

Should we follow the African archetype later in human history, there are two lines of tradition, both of which may have been originally interrelated. The acrobatic line leads to the bull sports as depicted on Minoan frescoes and Roman

mosaics. The mythological vision of the punishment by a Monster of the Underworld recalls the Devourer of the Unjustified, a crocodile-shaped monster depicted frequently in the Egyptian Book of the Dead (Wallis Budge 1969), or the medieval vision of the Hell dominated by a monstrous Devil eating the sinners (as on the vault of the Baptistry of St. John in Florence, Figure 22).

CONCLUSIONS

Recent critiques focused on a tendency towards teleological interpretation of primarily functionalist representations of topics from everyday life. As we show in this paper, both aspects of prehistoric art may have been equally represented in early pastoral scenes of the Egyptian Western Desert.

The narrative painted panels of Gilf el-Kebir depict repeatedly two archetypes: the “weightless humans” and the “central monster”. Both topics were originally interrelated because in some cases the humans are depicted around the monster. Whereas in social scenes, as in the Cave of Swimmers, Grotta dell’Addaura, and in the actual West African folklore, we observe throwing humans into the air as a part of acrobatic dance, in religious or mythological scenes, as in the Cave of the Beasts, the humans seem to be punished and eaten by the central monster. Obviously, acrobatic and mythological aspects typical of these early pastoral African scenes may be followed in some later cultural contexts and traditions.

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