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CONSIDERATIONS ON SAHARAN ROCK ART SYMBOLISM

ABSTRACT: The author considers the possibility to advance in our study of symbolic rock art representations by means of comparative approach through different figurative associations. As examples he presents 1) the simple signs with known meaning clarified by comparative analyses, some of them originating by simplification of figurative representations, 2) some non-realistic figurative associations and features and 3) the possibility of symbolic meaning of realistic figurative representations. This article is a reprint of a previously published article (Jelínek J., 1995: Anthropologie (Brno) 33, 3: 213–219).

KEY WORDS: Symbolism – Rock art – Central Sahara – Figurative associations – Figurative simplifications

It is surprising to see already in the earliest Palaeolithic art simultaneous use of figurative representations and simple geometric signs. To avoid truisitic repetitions I give only two evident examples: the small figurines found in Aurignacian layers in Wuertemberg where on the sculptured bodies of humans and animals we find simple geometric signs – small cups, crosses etc. The other example can be the newly discovered Chauvet Cave dated 31,000 BP with numerous figurative cave paintings of Pleistocene animals, with hand stencils and handprints and with some simple geometric quadrangular signs. Today we know that the use of these two pictorial systems, of figures and of signs, was simultaneous and this simultaneity was repeated

convergently not only in Europe but also in different other continents and periods. It is a component of species specific symbolic behaviour.

While the modern anthropology has acquired rich insight into the everyday profane life of prehistoric man in many fields of his activities, the understanding of his spiritual and social life is still very fragmentary. Some experts considering methods of prehistoric science and methods of history of religions doubt on the chances to proceed deeper with different methods which they claim for these two fields of our knowledge (Muzzolini 1995).

I would like to demonstrate – with the help of new Central Saharan rock art discoveries – that a new insight into the spiritual culture of prehistoric man can be

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acquired if we have enough of new study-material at our disposal. It can be acquired through rock art, studied by archaeological methods on broader comparative base.

I selected some examples of relationship between figurative representations and simple signs in Central Saharan rock art.

The simple signs can be the geometric ones with unknown meanings and origins or with recognized origin by simplification of figurative design.

As another example of symbolism in figurative rock art I selected some non rational figurative representations or their associations.

SIMPLE SIGNS WITH UNKNOWN MEANING

The simplest signs like the circle, cross, point or a line are usually most difficult to understand without direct interpretation of their creator. Also they can be used and they are used in different ways. As an example I give the two kinds of circular signs associated with a perfect giraffe figure in Mathrdush gallery (*Figure 1*). When interpreting this group of engravings most specialists do not hesitate to

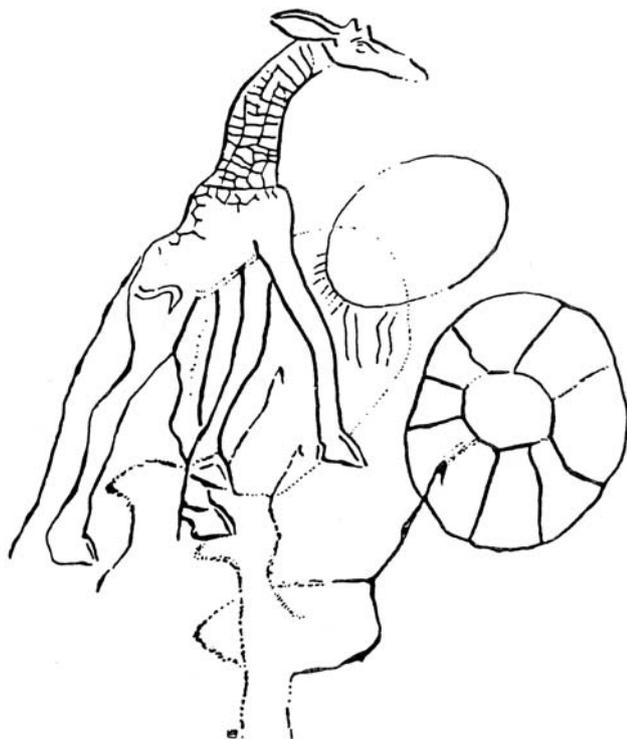


FIGURE 1. Figurative design of a giraffe associated with two circular signs. Mathrdush, Fezzan.

describe the giraffe figure as a representative of this animal species, not feeling any need for further explanations and not considering any possibility of symbolic meaning. In the case of circular signs they declare their unknown meaning or they try to present some speculative explication (in this case, e.g., a trap).

A modest advance in our knowledge through the study of associations of rock art representations appears in another example of two circular signs associated with large elephant figures. The first example comes from the Wadi Buzna rock art gallery (Jelínek 1994) where a simple circular sign is situated not only at the end of the elephant's trunk but also on the rock wall between the trunk and a foreleg of the same elephant figure. If we consider only this example we are not sure how – and if at all – is this second circular sign associated with the mentioned elephant. The help comes from the other site situated not far down in Wadi Buzna (Le Quellec 1985) where we see a similar elephant figure, similar in size, style, weathering and associations and with similar circular sign at the end of the elephant's trunk. Having at our disposal this second example, our knowledge has advanced. We know now that the circular sign is really associated with the elephant figure also in the second circular sign in the first example. Nevertheless the meaning remains obscure (*Figure 2*).

SIMPLE SIGNS WITH KNOWN MEANING CLARIFIED BY COMPARATIVE STUDY

An illustrative example of this kind of signs is the vulva sign, a simple sign with known meaning – thanks to the broad convergent distribution of such and very similar comparable signs in different continents. For our considerations its simple shape is interesting – a hole or a cup in the vertical rock face and its associations helping its interpretation.

Paolo Graziosi has published an agglomeration of erotic signs and figures in an important rock art gallery in Wadi el Chel in southern Tripolitania (Graziosi 1968). On the vertical rock faces of this gallery we can find natural holes of different size. Some of them were more or less shaped by man that means they were enlarged with the help of a piece of rock or any simple object. Graziosi mentions that not all of such features are of one (Neolithic) period. True, majority of those artificially enlarged or shaped holes are simultaneous with the earliest figures – human and animal – which are of Neolithic age. Some are later or later reshaped and it is known that even nowadays some Tuaregs, when visiting

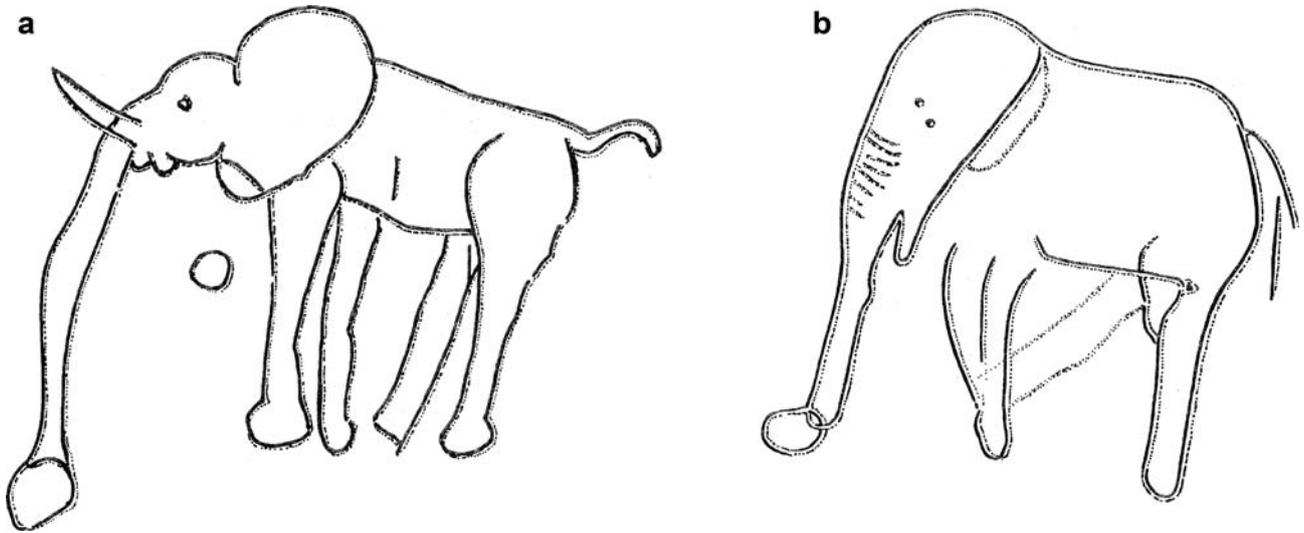


FIGURE 2. A comparison of an elephant figure associated with a circular sign in Wadi Buzna gallery (a) (Jelínek 1994) and Wadi Buzna mouth (b) (Le Quellec 1985).



FIGURE 3. Examples of vulvar signs from Wadi el Chel (Graziosi 1971).

the site, reshape or renew the holes as well. It is certainly difficult to define the psychological background, motivation or approach of a modern Tuareg for such an activity but the erotic ventilation is probably the nearest explanation. We should also have in mind the possible

change of the meaning of the picture or of the whole gallery during past ages. Anyhow it is interesting to follow our survey: some of the shaped holes have changed into clear vulvar signs by addition of a horse-shoe shaped, simple but characteristic line (Figure 3).

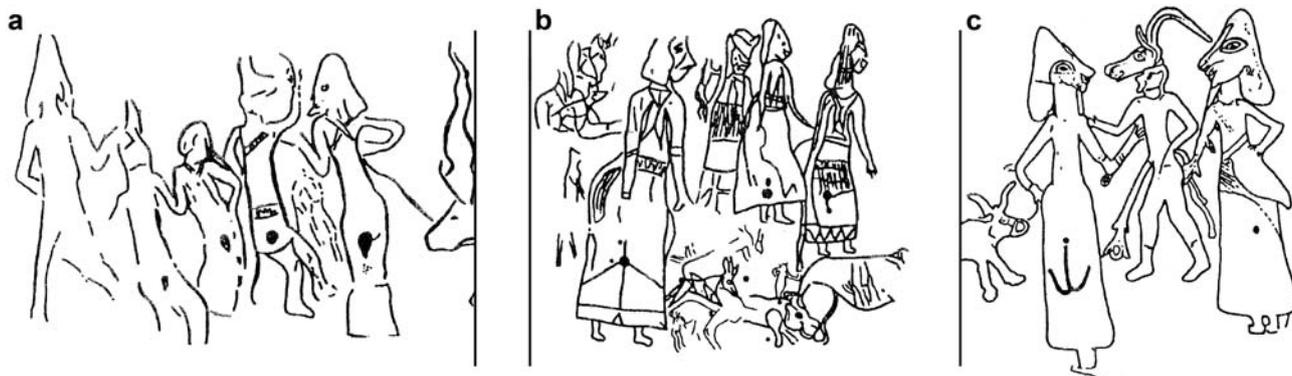


FIGURE 4. A hole showing the female sex of the figure: a, b, Wadi Alamasse; c, Wadi Taleschout.

In many sites of Messak we find female figures dressed in long gowns. Often there is a rough round hole in their pubic region or lower part of the body, stressing that they are female representations. Some of such holes are later additions but this does not change their signification of femininity. Because it is evident even by the outline and the costume of the figure that it is a female, the hole is somehow superfluous as for the female identification. Its explanation waits for more profound analysis (*Figure 4*).

Another example of only roughly known meaning of a simple sign brings us the simple heart-like sign found in Messak, in Wadi Buzna, in Wadi Metchia and in Wadi el Chel. It is clear already from the geographical distribution of this heart-like sign that it was once quite common, widely distributed and well known. Already this is certainly an advance in our knowledge, reached by comparative study of associations. In Wadi Buzna (Jelinek 1994) we find some isolated signs of this kind, in one case associated with a human figure replacing its head, in another held in hand. In Wadi el Chel a female

figure ("la femme ouverte") holds such a sign in raised hand and a similar association with female figure was found also by Le Quellec in Messak (Le Quellec, Gauthier 1993: Fig. 5). It is evident that the association of this heart-like sign points to its erotic meaning but its exact explanation is not clear yet (*Figure 5*).

SIMPLE SIGNS ORIGINATING BY SIMPLIFICATION OF FIGURATIVE REPRESENTATIONS

If we proceed our study of associations to simple signs originating as the simplification of figurative representation we present here two interesting examples: the first example are human figures associated with elephants. In Wadi Imha (Acacus) we find a male figure following an elephant and reaching with one hand to the elephant's tail. Both figures, man and elephant, are realistic with many characteristic details. Another example of similar association comes from Wadi Buzna

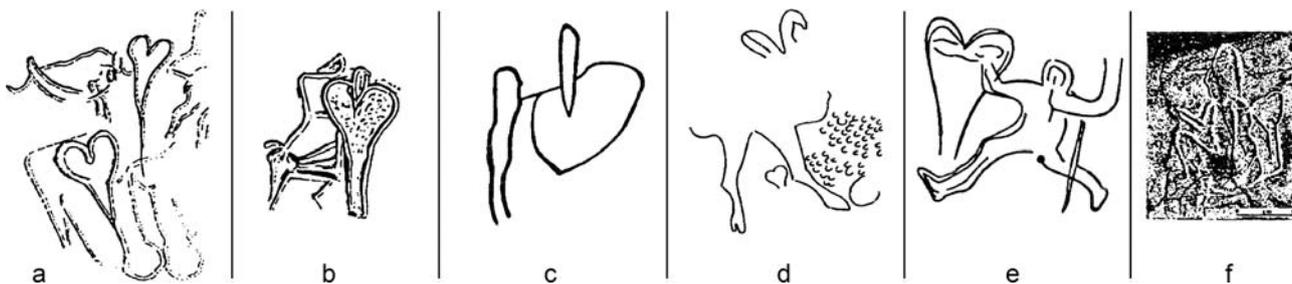


FIGURE 5. Comparison of heart-like signs of erotic meaning: a, Wadi Buzna (Libya); b, Wadi Buzna; c, Hesbaia (Algeria); d, Wadi Metchia (Libya); e, Wadi el Chel (Libya); f, Messak Mellet (Libya).

gallery (Jelínek 1994) where behind the realistic elephant figure we see a poor human figure in an advanced stage of simplification. Nevertheless the head, body and arm are well recognized. Not far from this mountain gallery we find inside Wadi Buzna (Le Quellec 1985) another realistic elephant representation followed by a simple vertical line. Nobody would be able to interpret this vertical line behind the elephant without the comparative knowledge of the other two examples from Wadi Imha and Wadi Buzna gallery (Figure 6). Certainly, we still do not know why the representation of the elephant remains realistic and why the male figure behind it is in different degree of simplification, even in such an advanced one that anyone uninitiated cannot grasp its meaning.

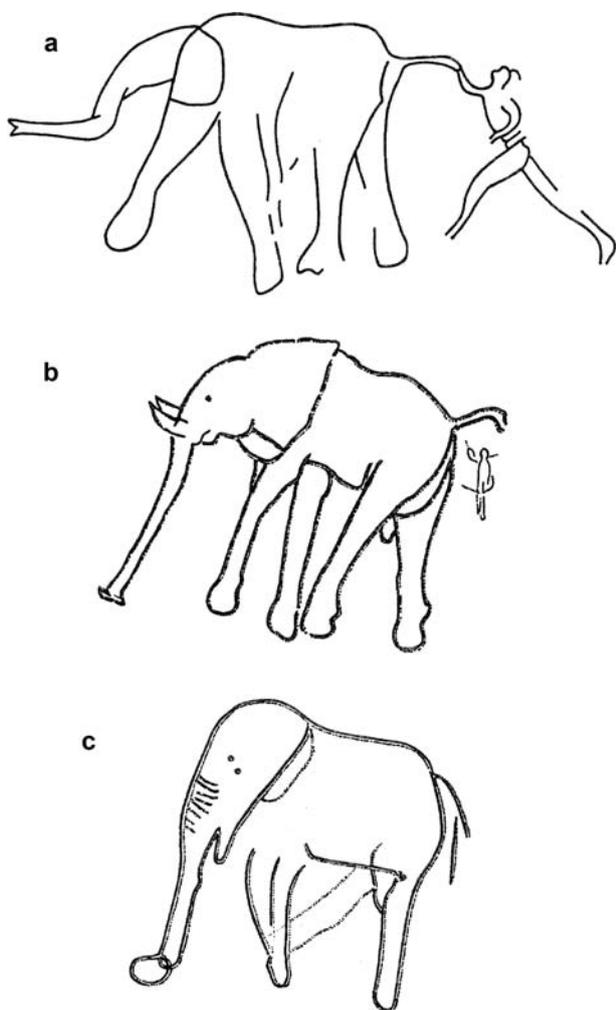


FIGURE 6. Three examples of the different degree of simplification of human figure associated to an elephant: a, Wadi Imha; b, Wadi Buzna; c, Wadi Buzna mouth.

The other example of different degree of simplification from a realistic figure to incomprehensible design is the case of *la femme ouverte*. Let us return to Wadi el Chel. The figures of females in gynaecological position are found here in greater accumulation than in other Fezzanese galleries. Usually they are quite figurative and easy to recognize. Other similar representations were found in Messak (Wadi Aramas, Wadi Alamasse, Wadi Imrawen, Wadi Isser, Wadi Tin Sharuma,) or in Acacus (Tin Lalan). Some such figures document the different degree of simplification reaching finally shapes which are incomprehensible without comparative knowledge (Figure 7).

Even if we do not know whether the figures of *la femme ouverte* demonstrate simply the intercourse invitation and their meaning is only erotic, or whether they have some more complex, mythological or other meaning, the discovery of the varied representations including simplified signs helps us to recognize them and to approach the sphere of the interpretation of their symbolic meaning.

IDEOGRAMS, A COMMUNICATIVE USE OF SIMPLE SIGNS

An illustrative example of symbolic function of simplified or simple signs are the quite rare examples of ideograms. In Wadi Tilizahren was found in 1980

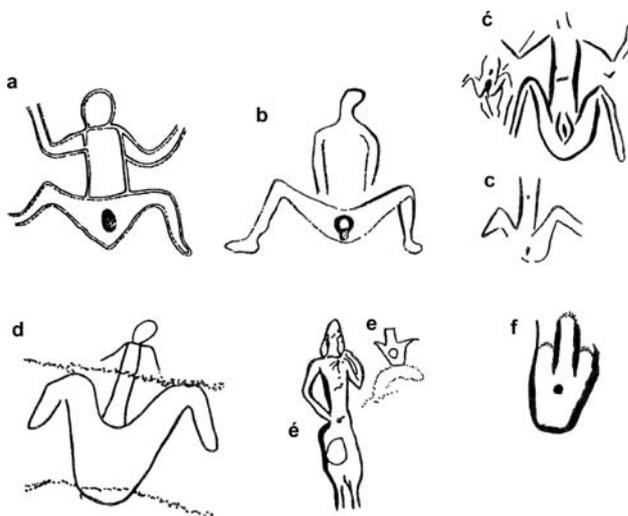


FIGURE 7. The simplification of female figures in gynaecological position (*la femme ouverte*): a, Wadi el Chel; b, Wadi Aramas; c, Wadi Imrawen; d, Wadi Tin Sharuma; e, Wadi Imrawen; f, Wadi Aramas.

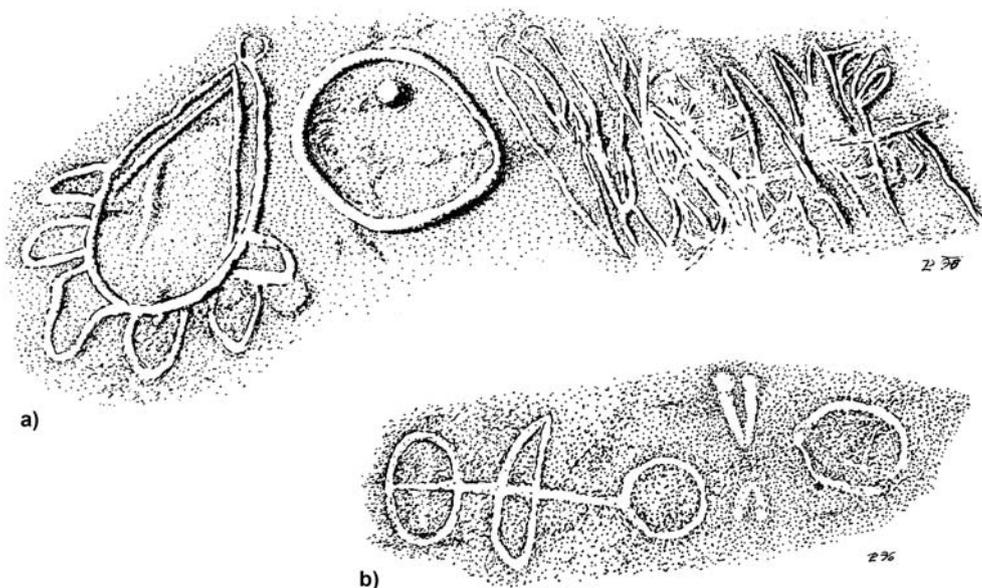


FIGURE 8. A comparison of two ideograms from Wadi Tilizahren (a) and Wadi Tin Iblal (b).

(Jelínek 1985: Fig. 38) an ideogram consisting of four signs ordered in horizontal line. The first sign is necklace-like, the second is like a vulvar sign and the following two are similar to hands or trees. They are represented in horizontal sequence.

R. and G. Lutz have found (Lutz, Lutz 1995: Figs. 135, 136) another ideogram in Wadi Tin Iblal, Messak Settafet, consisting of a simple Ben Barur stone design followed by an arc with an arrow, a circle and a trace of an antelope (*Figure 8*).

It is clear that simple and/or simplified signs were used for pictorial communicative needs. Of course the meaning of such a communication cannot be understood yet. Some advance can be reached with more and more numerous comparative material.

UNREALISTIC FIGURATIVE ASSOCIATIONS AND FEATURES

Let us turn our attention to the figurative representations of animals, humans and their associations. Happily the rich concentration of the Early Neolithic rock art in Messak and in Wadi Djerat gives us the possibility to select some extraordinary examples.

The jackal-man represented in sexual intercourse with an elephant evidently cannot be a representation of reality (Jelínek 1995: Figs. 49, 50). It is a symbolic representation, mythological or other. Similar is the case

with the jackal-man licking or eating elephant's excrements (Van Albada 1995: Pl. 19, Fig. 3). Another unrealistic example is the figure from Wadi Djerat with a theriomorph figure ejaculating sperm into the eye of a large rhinoceros (Lhote 1975: Figs. 1565, 1566). These figures do not represent reality and mythology can be easily responsible for their existence. But even less striking examples sometimes lack any realistic message. The whole group of human figures with animal masks is doubtful as far as the realistic function of their mask is considered. This is the case of men with a large elephant mask and some other large animal head constructions situated on the top of male heads (*Figure 9*). Such examples do not support the idea of practical use of a real mask but more probably of some symbolism. Also the position of those animal heads is not the position of a real mask (situated on top of the head and not covering the face). Some symbolic representation of social status or structure is possible and should be followed in future studies, when sufficient comparable material is at disposal.

Another evidently unrealistic representation is in many associations of men with elephants. In front of an elephant there is a kneeling human figure in subordinate position, or an archer which in no way can be considered as a real hunter menacing an elephant. In el Aurer we find even a man facing the elephant with a crooked short weapon, probably a metal knife. Even if this man with the crooked knife is a later addition the question of the

meaning of such a figurative association still remains (Figure 10).

Now after these few examples of unrealistic figurative associations we can approach the realistic animal figures, e.g., the bulls or elephants.

REALISTIC FIGURATIVE REPRESENTATIONS

Interesting aspects appear when studying the cattle representations frequently found in the Fezzanese and especially in the Messak rock art galleries. Already the first impression is that often the bulls are preferred. The examples of cows, when the udder is clearly seen, are extremely rare. Only three such figures have been published till now. The cattle figures are nearly equally divided between those with clear male sex and those without such a clear feature. Evidently bulls were

preferred for some reason in the local rock art. In this way the cattle figures found in Fezzanese galleries do not reflect the normal sex ratio. The reason for such

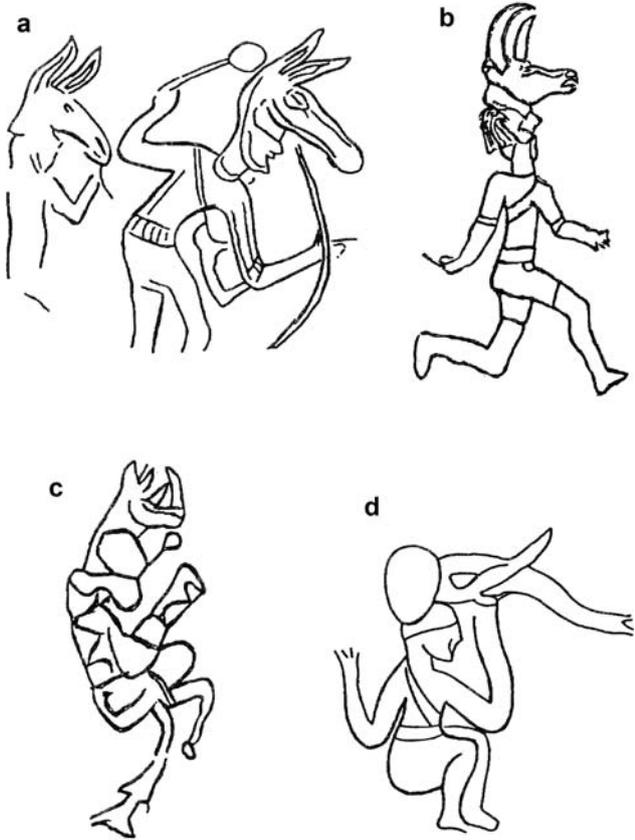


FIGURE 9. Unrealistic representations of masks on top of male heads. Messak Settafet: a, Wadi Imrawen; b, c, Wadi Mathmdush; d, Wadi Adroh.

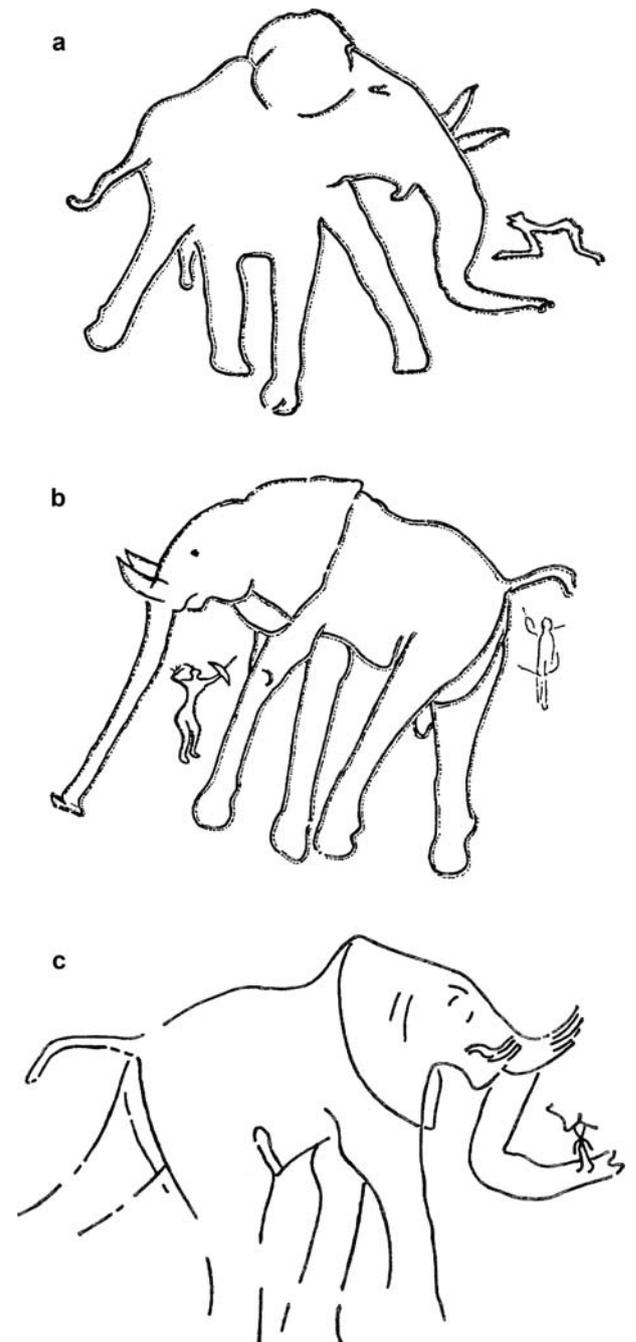


FIGURE 10. Three examples of unrealistic associations of human figures with elephant ones: a, Oued Djerat; b, Wadi Buzna mouth; and c, el Aurer.

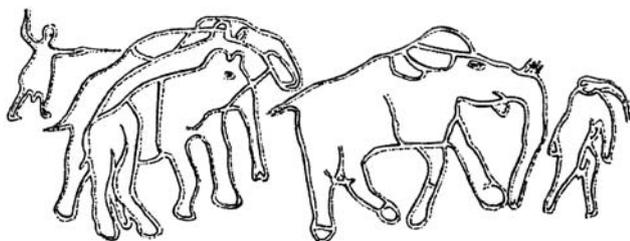


FIGURE 11. The group of elephants with a young in front of them, represented in erect posture. Wadi Djerat.

prevalence of bull figures can be their vigour, their sexual capacity, religious reason or other. For similar features they were worshiped e.g., in the whole circum-Mediterranean area. It seems highly probable that not only those cattle figures which are in some unrealistic associations but also isolated realistic figures have not the descriptive meaning but a symbolic one. Their numerous representations support this idea.

The situation is similar with realistic figures of elephants. We can find them in many unrealistic associations but illustrative for our needs is especially an example from Wadi Djerat. It is a group of three large elephants, a human figure touching the last of them and in front of them another small elephant is marching in erect posture on its two hind legs. Only this figure and the human one signal that the whole association is not merely descriptive. The three large elephants without any supplementary information seem to be simple realistic descriptive representations, which, as the other two associated figures show, is evidently not the case (*Figure 11*). Only painstaking patient comparative study can bring other additional knowledge if – as was already mentioned – the material is rich enough.

The reason for this short exercise was to demonstrate the complexity of symbolic imagination of prehistoric man, in this case of the Saharan Neolithic hunter-pastoralist. And to introduce also our possibilities and limits when using comparative archaeological methods in the study of his spiritual culture.

It is evident that the symbolic considerations were a very early and fairly complex part of human behaviour.

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