

5. ROCK ART RESEARCH IN EGYPT, 2000–2004

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As already mentioned elsewhere in this volume (Le Quellec, p. **), two recent publications have been devoted to the rock art of el-'Uweynât and Gilf Kebîr: a large illustrated volume (Le Quellec *et al.* 2005) and a DVD (Zboray 2005b).

András Zboray is now the leading expert in the rock art of the region of Gilf and the 'Uweynât, which he surveys regularly, meticulously and systematically (Zboray 2003b). In the journal *Sahara* he has presented a series of particularly significant documents without aiming to be exhaustive, since during the expedition of October 2002 alone he and his team discovered 66 new sites in the Karkur Talh and the Karkur Murr (Zboray 2003a). The documents published fit very well with what is already known in this region (apart from what looks like a painting of an ithyphallic figure seen from the front, in site 33 of Karkur Talh), but the new sites at Wâdi Sora stand out because of their numerous superimpositions including images of different styles – and some yellow paintings – which raises hope that a local chronology will be possible.

A white disk visible on satellite photos of the Hassanein plateau, in the Jebel el-'Uweynât, had attracted András Zboray's attention, during his explorations of this region. He went to see it, after a difficult ascent in February 2003 and again in March 2004, which enabled him to verify that it is a crater, around which he was surprised to discover seven sites with rock paintings, including a hundred-metre shelter entirely decorated in the style of the local pastoralists, with images of bovines, "bird-headed people", goats, and a combat of archers. One should also note two anthropomorphs carrying a kind of hod, and the theme of a person in a hut is also present (Zboray 2004). The same tireless researcher has also explored the Wadi Wahesh, where he found other examples of anthropomorphs painted in dark flatwash in the "Sora style" (Zboray 2005a, fig. 3–5), two of which are clearly holding a giraffe on a

leash (Zboray 2005a, fig. 7). There are also hand stencils on an ochre background (*ibid.*, fig. 7 and pl. Z, Ax), but the rest of the bestiary is limited to gazelles (*ibid.*, pl. Bx), goats (*ibid.*, pl. Cx) and a few dogs. Through their extreme elongation and their atrophied limbs, the new people in the "Round Head style of Uweynât" (*ibid.*, fig. 8, 9) are somewhat different from those known hitherto. Finally one should also note the existence of motifs drawn with series of dots (*ibid.*), and which could be plants, because they resemble others at Karkûr Talh, which are being grazed by bovines.

These remarkable discoveries by András Zboray, which compel one to revise ideas about the peopling of the whole of the region concerned, are completed by a few sporadic finds made by various travellers. Hence, an engraved panel comprising an elephant among numerous giraffes has been noticed east of the trail from Kufra to 'Uweynât (Berger and Berger 2003, fig. 2) and, not far from there, there are also a few engravings of bovines, apparently from a different school and period (*ibid.*, fig. 3). In the southern part of the Jebel Arkenu, a shelter decorated with numerous paintings has yielded a composition of bovines and people that is well within the local pastoral style (*ibid.*, fig. 4–5), but also carriers of a new kind of hod (*ibid.*, fig. 7) and geometric motifs that were finely engraved and then painted (*ibid.*, fig. 8). Alessandro Menardi Noguera and his collaborators have enriched the site-inventory of the south-west quarter of the massif: five at Karkûr Gabor, three on the Emeri plateau – with some anthropomorphs that the authors compare with the style of Karnasahi in the Tibesti (Menardi Noguera *et al.* 2005, fig. 8) – two at the water source of Ain Duarme where fourteen palm trees still grow that bear witness to an ancient plantation. The most interesting site is one of the shelters of Karkûr Gabor, whose ceiling (*ibid.*, pl. A) is decorated with more than 300 subjects: antelopes, giraffes (*ibid.*, pl. B), archers, people in a hut with vessels hanging

from the ceiling (*ibid.*, pl. C), bovines and caprines (*ibid.*, pl. D) as well as various anthropomorphs including an embracing couple (*ibid.*, pl. F). All these images are of the usual type for the pastoralists of 'Uweynât, and thus can be placed in the 4th millennium BC (Linstädter and Kröpelin 2004). A few new paintings and engravings have also been reported in the eastern branch of the Wâdi Abd el-Malik (Berger and el-Mahdy 2003, fig. 2, 3).

The images of the Wâdi Sora and Jebel el-'Uweynât clearly correspond to the artistic activity of a succession of different human groups, and the whole of the region's archaeological dossier leads one to suppose that there was a possible influence of desert populations on Egyptian artists. Certainly it has been proved that relationships were formed between the populations of the Libyan desert and the Nile valley, sometimes in the predynastic era. Whatever their nature, these exchanges required the knowledge of precise and sure routes, with water sources and supplies, making possible the survival of men and beasts of burden, which for a long time were asses.

Among these routes, the most famous, known as the trail of Abû Ballâs, marked by remains of jars, meets this requirement, stretching at least 350 km from Aïn Asil, in the Dakhla oasis (Bergmann 2001). Nevertheless, as it was only discovered recently by Carlo Bergmann, and its study is underway (Smith 2001; Kuper 2001, 2002, 2003; Kuper and Förster 2003), much remains uncertain about the period of its creation and its final destination. It may have had multiple objectives: a hunting territory, the Gilf Kebîr; an area of pasture, el-'Uweynât; commercial trading towards the west and south – Libya, the region of present-day Koufra for example, or even farther away, Chad and the Ennedi. It is probable that this trail was never really “created”, and it could rather be the result of the development of an ancient route, the memory of which had survived, but which had gradually become impracticable: the very route that could have been used by the ancient inhabitants of the Jebel el-'Uweynât and the Gilf when they feared the growing aridity of their traditional territory and headed for the river. To survive after the exhaustion of natural resources and the disappearance of the fauna certainly implies taking refuge in more clement regions, to try and find places more favourable to life. Having found some, the memory of the lands from which they came could have survived for a long time, passed on to the young by the old, and perhaps gradually mythified, by a process that ethnology has documented in many other parts of Africa. Did the rituals perhaps even require periodic returns to the ancient cult places, a pilgrimage to ancient important sanctuaries? In the Gilf Kebîr, the Wâdi Sora seems to group such sanctuaries. The iconographic analysis of the Cave of the Beasts shows in particular that this place is different from the vast majority of the region's sites through the presence of true scenes: the famous “swimmers”, unique to the Sahara, with their filiform and deformed bodies, heading in a series of lines towards the devouring beasts,

are very reminiscent of the *nmi.w* (“drowned people” with a “drifting” or “floating” body) of Egyptian mythology and thus evoke the (aquatic) world of the dead (Le Quellec 2005). Just like the famous “cave of the Swimmers”, this site with its exceptional iconography could illustrate a mythology of the next world, similar to some of the mythical tales recorded in the Nile valley (voracious hybrid beats, evil spirits caught in the net).

A new assemblage of engravings has been discovered two kilometres north-east of the Roman site of Qaçr Gib, north of Kharga (Rowe and Ilka 2004). Above all they comprise geometric figures, one of which has been interpreted as a boat by the authors (which is open to doubt), others being comparable to tribal marks like those of the Arabs of Rashaïda, Zowia and Ulâd ben Mîryam. One of these drawings resembles a Teda clan mark, and others have reminded their discoverers of Tuareg marks and Libyco-Berber characters, but as these are very simple geometric signs, and in the absence of any developed inscription, this type of comparison needs to be treated with great caution. Apart from a few camels, including one mounted in front of its hump, three anthropomorphs of a new type deserve attention here, including two surrounded by Arabic inscriptions that the authors did not see fit to put on their tracings, but which seemed to them more recent than a nearby Greek inscription – also not published. The authors suggest that certain of these engravings could have been made by the Tuareg and African slaves accompanying a caravan (*ibid.*: 120–121), which is certainly possible, but impossible to prove. It has been noticed that the south-east face of a hill at Regenfeld contained caches of “Clayton rings” organised with semi-circles of stones; among these was a small slab decorated with a finely engraved antelope (*Oryx dammah*) (Riemer and Kuper 2000: 95).

Rock art of historical age has also been reported from other oases in the Western Desert. Of post-dynastic age exclusively (Islamic period) are the finds of geometric signs, schematic camels and schematic human figures recently made in Bahariya (Colin and Labrique 2001: 170–177). This ‘Bedouin’ repertoire is closely related to the above-discussed finds at Kharga, but also features a number of curious erotic representations, in particular some individual male genitals servicing long-haired, open-legged women. The major site, Qasr el-Zabu, also presents several examples of equid-drawn carts or chariots, which is a relatively rare subject in the rock art of the Eastern Sahara. Further south, at Dakhla Oasis, Olaf E. Kaper and Harco Willems (2002) have documented a number of petroglyphs found on hilltops in evident connection with roughly constructed stone huts or windbreaks. These constructions have been dated to the late Old Kingdom (about 2500–2200 BC) on the basis of associated archaeological remains and seem to have functioned as military watch posts controlling access points into the oasis. The rock art is stereotypical: incised sandals, outlines of feet, hunting scenes, mammals, birds, men (some with a feather on the head) and pubic



Fig. 5.1. Detail of the “Cave of the Beasts”, discovered in 2002.

triangles. One stone slab, found at a location called Nephthys Hill, features, among other figures, a soldier with his equipment: a leather wrist-guard, a bow with arrows and a possible rucksack. Also at Dakhla, Polish archaeologist Lech Krzyzaniak has continued his survey of petroglyphs conducted from 1986 onwards in the scope of the Canadian Dakhleh Oasis Project (most recently Krzyzaniak 2001, 2004). Several more figures of so-called goddesses (sitting or standing obese women dressed in often elaborately decorated long skirts) have been discovered in the central and eastern parts of the oasis, in some cases in apparent association with giraffe drawings. Such figures, already reported by Hans Winkler in the 1930s, are believed to date to the older periods of the Holocene, possibly to the 6th or 5th millennium BC. Other rock art is similar to what has been investigated by Kaper and Willems, and has also been found in connection with Old Kingdom huts. A fine bas-relief of a slender waisted dancing girl from one of these shows what the bored residing soldiers had in mind. Sadly, Lech Krzyzaniak passed away in 2004, but it is to be hoped that his rock art research at Dakhla will be continued by his collaborators and students.

In the whole of the Sahara – where rock-shelters abound – only Egypt has true decorated caves. A group of researchers

from the Barth Institute in Cologne has carried out a total recording of the engravings of the henceforth famous cave of Djara (Classen *et al.* 2001; Pastoors 2003), which had previously only been the subject of a few preliminary publications. The floor of this cave, formed by drainage of surface waters, is about ten metres below the surface, and the rock engravings that are incised and pecked into carbonated rocks (stalagmites) must have originally appeared dazzling white. One can recognise four schematic anthropomorphs and thirty-seven depictions of wild animals, including definite figures of ostrich, oryx, addax, ibex and gazelles. These engravings are not precisely dated, but they cannot have been made after 5400 BC – the period when the region was abandoned, as shown by the most recent radiocarbon dates. The material from the two fireplaces unearthed close to the cave entrance comprised bifacial pieces, arrowheads and a scraper which charcoal dated to between about 5680 and 5400 BC, and thus shortly before the appearance of this same bifacial technique in the sites of the Fayum and Merimde, in Lower Egypt. Among the objects of worked flint discovered at Djara, one of the most remarkable is a retouched knife which strongly resembles many of the predynastic objects found in the Nile valley. The whole of the zone where the cave is located was first frequented at the beginning of



Fig. 5.2. Stone slab with the depiction of a soldier and his gear from Nephthys Hill, Dakhla Oasis (after Kaper and Willems 2002).

the Holocene (around 7700–6700 BC) by epipalaeolithic hunters who left some of their weapons there. After 6400 BC, the region seems to have been far more densely populated by nomads who settled there a little longer (in view of the grindstones and pestles which must have been used to grind wild cereals) and occupation of the site was even more intensive after 5800 BC. Contacts with the Nile valley, which can be perceived through technical characteristics of tools, have been confirmed by the discovery of the shells of a big bivalve mollusc which can only have come from the river: *Aspitharia rubens*. The faunal remains discovered in excavations echo the rock imagery: it has been possible to identify two antelopes (*Oryx gazella dammah*, *Addax nasomaculatus*) and three species of gazelle (*Gazella dorcas*, *G. dama*, *G. leptoceros*), as well as the ostrich. Only the caracal, present in this faunal assemblage, and which the

hunters of Djara therefore exploited, was not depicted on the cave's walls. Finally, around 5400 BC, the increasing aridity led the people who were still leading a nomadic life in the Djara area to withdraw towards more clement regions.

Another remarkable cave in the Libyan desert is that of the Wadi el-Obeydh, excavated by Barbara Barich (Barich 1998, 2001), which comprises an ancient series of feline prints engraved in the wall, as well as 21 hand stencils (Campbell 2005, fig. 9). It has been visited by Alec Campbell (*ibid.*), who presents two unpublished images to add to the series of fine engravings which are the most recent here: antelopes, goats, and a giraffe that was later transformed into a bovid (*ibid.*, fig. 4 b–f). A series of lines in this cave, which had been interpreted as a schematic boat by Barich (1998, 2001) has been reinterpreted – even less convincingly – as a metaphor of rain (Campbell 2005, fig. 7 and p. 141), and some vague comparisons with South African data have led to a supposition that rain rituals were performed in this place. In the course of making his argument, Campbell presents the (not very faithful) recording of an engraving at Jebel el-'Uweynât which he interprets as the image of a rowing boat (*ibid.*, fig. 10). But he would have done better to publish its photograph, because when one reads it with the right orientation, it becomes clear that this engraving actually depicts a quadruped of a type that is common in the region!

Deborah Darnell has reported the existence of a third decorated cave, the “Cave of the Hands”, discovered between the Nile and Kharga, in which there are a few positive hands, and a greater number of negatives (Darnell 2002). After having remarked that no cave with negative hands had ever been found so close to the Nile, Darnell reckons in her preliminary study that the context of these hands implies that they cannot be more recent than Naqada II (about 3650 to 3360 BC). Although those which have long been known at the Wâdi Sora have curiously escaped her bibliographic analyses, she concludes that “the motif of negative hands in the Cave of the Hands is one of the most remarkable and strongest proofs of the existence of connections between the ancient Egyptians and the Sahara/the African interior” (*ibid.*: 161). Since the hundreds of hand stencils in the great new shelter of the Wâdi Sora were not discovered until May 2002 by the Foggini-Mestekawi expedition, and as those of Jebel el-'Uweynât were only found in November 2003, Darnell could not take these elements into account. The appearance of these new points on the map of the Libyan desert henceforth makes the latter a region of exceptional density of figures of this type on the Saharan scale, and strengthens Darnell's claim, at least regarding relations between this desert and the Nile.

Some of the remarkable discoveries of the Theban Desert Road Survey, conducted by John and Deborah Darnell of Yale University since 1992, have now been published more exhaustively (Darnell 2002a, 2002b). Within the Theban Desert area, immediately north-west of Luxor, a wealth of rock inscriptions, as well as an impressive array of early to



Fig. 5.3. The Gebel Tjauti tableau in the Theban Desert, probably a record of a military expedition from about 3200 BC (after Darnell 2002a).

terminal Predynastic rock art, have been recorded, including depictions of boats, various animals and superbly detailed human figures. Much of this rock art is closely linked to ancient caravan routes short-cutting the Qena Bend of the Nile and/or leading from the Nile Valley to the oases of the Western Desert. Some of the panels studied may provide important historical information regarding the period of early state formation in Egypt. One of these, the already famous and much-discussed Gebel Tjauti tableau, dates to about 3200 BC and possibly commemorates a military operation carried out by a ruler from Abydos, either King Scorpion or King Elephant, in the early part of the Naqada III period (see also Kahl 2003; Hendrickx and Friedman 2003). Rock art with a possible similar political-ideological connotation has also been reported from elsewhere in Egypt (for instance, Regulski 2002).

The most recent discovery is that of the “extremely

ancient” engravings of Abu Tanqurah Bahari, in the region of el-Hosh, which are very different from the usual pre-dynastic images. According to Dirk Huyge, their discoverer, they could be “late Palaeolithic or early Neolithic” (Huyge 2005: 246–247, and fig. 13), but their study has just begun.

The book by Toby Wilkinson (2003) on the Genesis of the Pharaohs is presented as follows on its jacket: “*The ancestors of the pyramid-builders were not village-dwelling farmers, but wandering cattle-herders, and pharaonic civilization was forged in a remote region, now one of the most forbidding places on earth. These are the startling conclusions of Egyptologist Toby Wilkinson, based on his own discoveries in the heart of the Eastern Desert, between the Nile Valley and the Red Sea. Here, the pharaohs’ distant ancestors left a stunning legacy that remained hidden for 6000 years: hundreds of intricate rock carvings that tell*

us about their lifestyle and their deepest beliefs. [...] Genesis of the Pharaohs traces the discovery of these ancient records, dates them, and identifies the artists who made them.” After reading such a presentation, any normal lover of Saharan rock art will not rest until they have procured this book and devoured it. Alas! They will be extremely disappointed. Because the “*dramatic new discoveries*” of which the author boasts were, for the most part, reported in the books published by Winkler in 1937 and 1938, by Resch in 1963 and 1967, and by Fuchs in 1989 and 1991 (and more recently by Rohl in 2000, and Morrow and Morrow in 2002). Only nineteen unpublished rock engravings are used by Wilkinson, and they in no way add to the knowledge acquired beforehand. So what is there in this book? A first chapter is devoted to the pioneers of predynastic archaeology, with quite a long treatment of the biography of Hans Winkler who, curiously, is presented as both a victim of the Nazis and a propagator of the myth of “Aryan” supremacy. According to Wilkinson, Winkler only had a single idea in his head: to prove that the miracle of ancient Egypt resulted from an invasion of “Aryans”: which seems a serious misunderstanding, since Winkler does not use this term in his publications. Wilkinson stresses the fact that Winkler’s field notebooks “*are full of sketches – not of the fantastic boats and hunting scenes he discovered, but of later Bedouin, Coptic and Arab signs. These fascinated Winkler, and not only because he had a detailed knowledge of Egyptian folk culture. The signs which he took greatest pains to copy were those which resembled the swastika...*” (Wilkinson 2003: 21). But one only needs to glance at the excellent inventory of Winkler’s unpublished documents, produced by Pavel Červíček in 1986 (and of which Wilkinson is aware), to see that this is completely wrong. Winkler recorded everything he saw... of the 508 figures in Červíček’s catalogue, there is a single swastika! So it would seem that before levelling such a serious accusation as that of crypto-Nazism at Winkler, one really ought to have a rather more substantial dossier. This first chapter then obligingly dwells at length on the supposed “discoveries” by Toby Wilkinson who, in fact, mostly revisited the sites actually discovered by Winkler (even rediscovering the chalk marks left by him on the engravings – cf. p. 45)... one can then understand that Wilkinson’s constant efforts to discredit his predecessor so unjustly proceeds from a strategy of presenting himself to advantage. Modesty clearly not being his most conspicuous quality, he presents us with his own (rare) discoveries in the most eulogistic terms. Thus a vague graffito made up of several linked meanders receives thirteen lines of comments which suggest that this could be “the world’s oldest map” (Wilkinson 2003: 50–51; and this “idea” has, moreover, been taken from Cherry 2000, without acknowledgement!). The second chapter is devoted to the dating of rock art. Nothing new here either: the author makes comparisons with the decoration on predynastic pottery, like everyone, and for this he uses the same (extremely well-known)

documents as his predecessors (the fresco in tomb 101 at Hierakonpolis, the cup in the Golenischeff collection in Moscow Museum, the vases in tombs U-329, U-279 and U-502 at Abydos...), without ever mentioning that this work had already been done before him. And he would like us to believe (ibid.: 74–75) that the idea for these comparisons came to him from a “*flash of inspiration*” (ibid.: 74) which struck him when he noticed a (well known) vase of Naqada I kept in Cairo Museum, and “*overlooked by generations of scholars and visitors*”! Not to mince words, the author has really got some nerve to do this. Nerve is in fact too weak a word, because where the Abydos vases are concerned, which Wilkinson discusses for three pages, he can only have obtained his information from their publication by G. Dreyer in 1998... which is not cited in either the text or the bibliography! The following chapter is entitled: “*Hunters and Herders. Unmasking the artists*”. Here it is repeated that Winkler “*in a language redolent of the Nazi ideology*” (ibid.: 84) thought that the engraved boats he had discovered were of Mesopotamian origin. Once again, Winkler is accused of Nazism simply because he supported the idea of oriental influences from hypothetical “*Eastern Invaders*” of Egypt. So much insistence on disparaging and defaming Winkler (without whom the author would never have taken an interest in his subject) is more than tiresome. The fourth chapter starts on p. 113, and one is still waiting for the “*dramatic new discoveries*” trumpeted on the book’s cover. Instead, here, the author put forward the idea of a predynastic Egyptian shamanism. But first he placidly presents a piece of unforgivable stupidity: “*it is scarcely surprising*”, he writes on p. 119, “*that large-scale sculpture is unknown in early Predynastic times; it only became feasible with the widespread adoption of metal tools some centuries later.*” Then, doubtless drawing his information from some personal revelation, Wilkinson tells us that in predynastic villages “*great reverence was also reserved for the shamans: men – and quite possibly women as well – who possessed the ability to make contact with the spirit world. At births and deaths, at important festivals and moments of crisis for the village, these spiritual figures could enter trance-like states, to commune with the supernatural forces that controlled the lives of ordinary people*” (ibid.: 121–122). The only point of this claim (with no supporting arguments) is to open the way for a shamanic interpretation of predynastic engraved art, introduced in chapter five: “*At many rock art sites, scenes seem to reflect the trance-like dreams of shamans. As far as the petroglyphs of Egypt’s Eastern Desert are concerned, this shamanistic interpretation is particularly attractive when considering Site 26 in the Wadi Abu Wasil. At one place, a prominent flat rock that is literally covered in images, the human figures are shown with strange braided hair, sticking up on end like the teeth of a comb. It is tempting to think that they represent shamans during the trance, or altered state of consciousness, that allowed practitioners to make temporary contact with the sacred*

realm” (ibid.: 137–138). Hence, faced with a rock “literally covered in images”, the author can find no better method than to isolate a single human figure, and to forget its context, in order to concentrate only on its hairstyle, in order to conclude that there is a shamanic connotation for all of the engraved art of the Eastern Desert! This really shows the utmost scorn for all the contributions of the past ten years, in terms of reading predynastic graphic arts (on which see Midant-Reynes 2003: 309–345; and, for rock art specifically, Huyge 2002). But it is true that the whole book rolls along amid a general ignorance of fundamental research, such as, for example, that carried out in the Fayum or Nubia. The book ends with a chapter with a bombastic title: “Cradle of Civilization. Re-thinking Ancient Egyptian Origins.” As if there were any further need, this title would suffice to prove that the author does not have the means of his pretensions, and that he is merely taking a new look at old ideas, which is doubtless an excellent way of producing a bestseller and getting on television, but he could at least have dispensed with letting his public believe that archaeologists are still seeking the “cradle of civilisation” in Egypt!

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