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ANIMALS IN PREHISTORIC ART
The Euro-Mediterranean region and its surroundings

ANIMALIAK HISTORIAURREKO ARTEAN
Euro-Mediterranean eskualdea eta bere inguruak

LOS ANIMALES EN EL ARTE PREHISTORICO
La región Euro-Mediterránea y su entorno



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REVISTA ARKEOGAZTE ALDIZKARIA

N.º 11, año 2021. urtea 11. zbk.

Animals in prehistoric art: The Euro-Mediterranean region and its surroundings

Animaliak Historiaurreko Artean: Euro-Mediterranean eskualdea eta bere ingurua

Los animales en el arte prehistórico: la región euro-mediterránea y su entorno

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ANIMALS IN EGYPTIAN ROCK ART

Animaliak Egiptoko labar-artean

Los animales en el arte rupestre egipcio

Pawel Lech Polkowski (*)

Abstract

No doubt, Egypt is best known for its monumental architecture and art from the Pharaonic period. However, the archaeological remains in that land are far more diversified and include a wealth of both post- and predynastic material. It should not be surprising then that prehistory constitutes a large field of research, encompassing remains from Lower Palaeolithic until the onset of historical times. Egypt's Nile valley and, particularly, its deserts are very rich in prehistoric sites, among which rock art is found in abundance.

In this paper a brief overview and characterisation of the main periods of rock art production is provided. Firstly, the oldest Saharan petroglyphic tradition, dated to Late Palaeolithic, is presented. All the subsequent rock art traditions are dated to the Holocene period and are associated, respectively, with the Epipalaeolithic groups of hunter-fisher-gatherers, mid-Holocene "pastor-foragers" of the Western Desert, late Holocene cattle pastoralists, and Nile valley's first agricultural societies of the Naqada period. This paper focuses solely on the theme of animals and describes all the mentioned rock art traditions in this respect. In order to contextualize the studied material, a short overview of climatic fluctuations in the Eastern Sahara is first provided.

Key words

Zoomorphic figures; Egyptian rock art; Late Palaeolithic petroglyphs; Geometric rock art; Savannah animals; Predynastic iconography

Laburpena

Zalantzarik gabe, Egipto ezagunagoa da garai faraonikoko arkitektura eta arte monumentalagatik. Hala ere, herrialde honetako aztarna arkeologikoak askoz ere ugariagoak dira, horien artean, aurreinastiako eta dinastia ondorengo material oso aberatsak izanik. Ez luke harritu behar historiaurreak Egiptoko arkeologiarentzat osatzen duen ikerketa-eremu zabalak, kronologikoki Behe Paleolitotik hasi eta garai historikoetara arte iristen diren aztarnak baititu. Egiptoko Nilo bailara eta, batez ere, basamortua, oso aberatsak dira historiaurreko aztarnategiei dagokienez eta, horien artean, askok, labar-artea dute.

Artikulu honetan, panoramika sinple bat eta labar-artearen ekoizpenaren aldi nagusien karakterizazioa eskaintzen dira. Lehenik eta behin, Saharako petroglifo bidez tradizio zaharrenak

aurkeztuko dira, Paleolito amaierakoak. Ondorengo labar-artearen tradizio guztiak Holozenokoak dira eta, hurrenez hurren, honako loturak dituzte kronologia eta gizarte motaren arabera: ehiztari-arrantzale-biltzaileen talde epipaleolitikoak, Erdi Holozenoko mendebaldeko basamortuko artzain-laborariak, Holozeno berantiarreko abeltzainak eta, azkenik, Nagada aldiko Nilo bailarako lehen nekazaritza-gizarteak.

Artikulu honek animalien gaia lantzen du eksklusiboki eta aipatutako labar-artearen tradizio guztiak deskribatzen ditu. Era berean, aztertutako materiala testuinguruan jartzeko, Ekialdeko Saharako klima-gorabeheren deskribapena ere egin da.

Hitz-gakoak

Irudi zoomorfoak; Egiptoko labar-arte; Paleolito berantiarreko petroglifoak; Labar-arte geometrikoa; Sabanako animaliak; Ikonografia aurreindianakoa.

Resumen

Sin duda Egipto es más conocido por la arquitectura y el arte monumental del periodo faraónico. Sin embargo, los restos arqueológicos en este país son mucho más diversos e incluyen ricos materiales de fase post- y predinástica. No tendría que sorprender el amplio campo de investigación que constituye la prehistoria para la arqueología egipcia, incluyendo restos que cronológicamente van del Paleolítico inferior hasta el surgir de los periodos históricos. El valle del Nilo en Egipto y, sobre todo, su desierto, son muy ricos en yacimientos prehistóricos, entre los cuales hay muchos con arte rupestre.

En este artículo se ofrece una panorámica sencilla y una caracterización de los periodos principales de la producción de arte rupestre. Primeramente se introduce la tradición más antigua de petroglifos del Sahara, datados en el Paleolítico final. Todas las tradiciones de arte rupestre sucesivas son del Holoceno y están asociadas respectivamente a los grupos epipaleolíticos de cazadores-pescadores-recolectores, al Holoceno medio de los pasto-cultivadores del desierto occidental, al Holoceno tardío, con ganaderos y a las primeras sociedades agrícolas del valle del Nilo, del periodo Naqada. Este artículo se enfoca exclusivamente sobre el tema de los animales y describe todas las tradiciones de arte rupestre mencionadas. Para ofrecer una contextualización del material estudiado, se traza también una descripción de las fluctuaciones climáticas en el Sahara oriental.

Palabras Clave

Figuras zoomorfas; Arte rupestre egipcio; Petroglifos del tardo-Paleolítico; Arte rupestre geométrico; Animales de la sabana; Iconografía predinástica.

ANIMALS IN EGYPTIAN ROCK ART

Animaliak Egiptoko labar-artean

Los animales en el arte rupestre egipcio

Pawel Lech Polkowski (*)

1. Introduction

1.1 *Sahara and Egypt in prehistory: a climatic perspective*

Africa, no doubt, is a continent of rock art. Large rock art complexes, both with petroglyphs and paintings, can be found at nearly every latitude, from the mountains and deserts of South Africa and Namibia, to the Sahara in the north. The latter, although exceptionally rich in rock art, is today barely inhabited. In late prehistory, however, being subjected to many climatic changes of a varying impact, the Sahara was widely inhabited and exploited by people. Especially in the times of the early and middle Holocene, large swathes of the present-day desert must have looked “*greener*” due to greater availability of water and the presence of a much more developed vegetation cover (e.g. GASSE *et al.*, 1990; GASSE, 2000; ZERBONI and NICOLL, 2019).

The so-called “*African Humid Period*” (AHP) was a direct result of a northward shift of the Intertropical Convergence Zone and the monsoon rainfall belt reaching as far north as

the latitude 24°N. Such conditions, gradually evolving from the late 12th/early 11th millennium BP, certainly favoured human and animal re-occupation of much of North Africa after a long and severe late Pleistocene hyper-arid period (BARICH 2013; CANCELLIERI and DI LERNIA, 2014). The AHP, however, was not stable and uniform, as the Sahara at that time had been undergoing numerous climatic oscillations, namely transitions from wet to dry stages. The dry spell corresponding to the 8.2 ky BP worldwide cooling event should be mentioned here in particular, as it had a large impact on both the environment and the people inhabiting the Sahara (ZERBONI and NICOLL, 2019: 31-2). Following this dry spell, at the onset of the middle Holocene, the monsoon rainfall returned, only to gradually decrease towards the end of that period (GATTO and ZERBONI, 2015: 311). A decline in precipitation accelerated the processes of aridification, which transformed the vast areas of the Sahara into an arid desert (except for some ecological niches, such as oases fed by underground water reservoirs). Although these processes had already started in the middle Holocene, the desertification developed fully with the onset of the late Holocene, sometime around

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5,500 BP, and the Sahara eventually reached the current conditions shortly thereafter.

Egypt fits into this scenario extremely well. There, too, after a long hyper-arid period the first serious signals of a changing climate occurred at some point around the 11th millennium BP (BUBENZER and RIEMER, 2007; KUPER and KRÖPELIN, 2006). From ca. 10,500 BP to the end of the 8th millennium BP, climatic conditions, particularly in the area of the Western Desert, became much more favourable than ever afterwards; the main factor being the northward extension of the monsoon rain-belt, and, most probably, the southward expansion of the Mediterranean winter rains, influencing mostly northern Egypt, e.g. the Fayum area (PHILLIPPS *et al.*, 2012).

However, for many millennia before the AHP rainfalls affected the Eastern Sahara, the Western (or Libyan) and the Eastern (or Nubian) deserts of Egypt had been largely uninhabited. The late Pleistocene witnessed a hyper-arid climate regime, and only the strip of the Nile Valley was providing relatively favourable conditions for habitation. Thus, unlike the large desiccated areas flanking the Nile Valley, the Valley itself constituted a long but narrow “oasis” with a river and, perhaps, lakes – usually short-lived – that originated due to the damming of the Nile by wandering sand dunes (VERMEERSCH and VAN NEER 2015). The onset of the AHP was directly preceded by the so-called “Wild Nile” stage, dated to ca. 13,000-12,000 BP – the time when the river level became drastically higher (PAULISSEN and VERMEERSCH, 1989; HUYGE, 2009a). As a consequence, the environs of the Nile Valley, being extremely humid, marshy and often flooded, had been mostly abandoned and the reoccupation of the Sahara commenced shortly afterwards (KUPER and KRÖPELIN, 2006: 805; KUPER and RIEMER, 2013: 37).

1.2 *Egypt in prehistory: a cultural perspective*

A substantial number of recent overviews and syntheses of Egyptian prehistory,

encompassing the Palaeolithic times until the dawn of the Pharaonic civilization, is currently available (MIDANT-REYNES, 2000; WENGROW, 2006; TASSIE, 2014). The amount of prehistoric archaeological material is, no doubt, voluminous, even though not all the regions have been investigated equally. In the last few decades, it has been the Western Desert, geographically the largest part of Egypt, that has become the focus of archaeological attention and produced a large amount of data. As it seemed to be the main arena of socio-cultural development of the Holocene, particularly the early and middle era communities, the prehistory of that region may thus serve as a reliable template for the narratives below. The Nile Valley enters the world stage for good in the 5th millennium BC, to become a significant cultural axis for the subsequent millennia until the modern times.

According to the model proposed by Rudolph Kuper and Stephan Kröpelin (2006), four phases of human occupation can be distinguished after the monsoonal rainfalls affected Egypt following the terminal Pleistocene. The early Holocene reoccupation phase (ca. 8,500-7,000 BC) witnessed a spread of highly mobile hunter-gatherer groups with an epipalaeolithic toolkit. These quickly reached distant areas as far as the Great Sand Sea, as well as playas and oases of Nabta, Dakhleh or Farafra, situated somewhat closer to the Nile Valley. Some scholars consider the latter being generally unoccupied during this phase, with the only recorded exception of the Elkabian culture settlement traces (VERMEERSCH, 1978). This may be, however, a biased picture due insufficient research, as well as various taphonomic processes (such as sites covered by the modern cultivation and settlements) (GATTO, 2011: 21).

The mid-Holocene formation phase has been dated to ca. 7,000-5,300 BC. It is considered a period of substantial cultural change, the main one being the domestication of cattle, sheep and goats. Hunting and gathering, however, had still played a crucial role, that is why the communities of this time are best described as multi-resource pastoralists or “pastro-foragers”. The date of

5,300 BC is a conventional date marking strong depopulation of the desert, coinciding with the retreat of the monsoon rainfall and thus the beginning of the aridification processes. One may note, however, that the Mediterranean winter rains regime was a significant factor contributing to much more humid conditions in various niches, such as the oases.

This is the reason why during the mid-Holocene regionalisation phase (5,300-3,500 BC) communities of the now specialised herders most probably limited their transhumance activities to various ecological niches: mostly oases with permanent water sources. Other groups migrated to the south and the east. The date of ca. 5,000 BC marks the first agrarian communities settled along the Nile Valley – in Merimde and Fayum. The Western Desert, except for the niches, becomes strongly depopulated, while the Predynastic communities begin to flourish.

The final phase, the late Holocene marginalisation (ca. 3,500-1,500), designates the time of arid to hyper-arid conditions and a lack of habitation in most of the desert. It is, however, a period of Pharaonic conquest of these lands, and encounters with indigenous communities inhabiting the last relatively favourable ecological niches occurred during this time. The Egyptian colonisation of the Kharga and Dakhleh oases may symbolically mark the end of prehistory in the land of Egypt.

Although a lot of evidence for this Holocene cultural sequence comes from desert sites, the fullest archives originate from, in particular, the above-mentioned oases and palaeo-oases. The record from Kharga (DACHY *et al.*, 2018), Dakhleh (McDonald 2016), Farafra (BARICH *et al.*, 2015), or Nabta (WENDORF and SCHILD 2001), provides an almost complete habitation history from the onset of the humid conditions to the times of total abandonment or the colonisation by Egyptians.

1.3 Prehistoric rock art in Egypt: a short introductory note

Rock art has been produced in Egypt since at least the Late Palaeolithic (HUYGE, 2009a), through the Epipalaeolithic (HUYGE, 1998a), Neolithic (RIEMER, 2009), Predynastic (HARDTKE, 2017), Pharaonic, Graeco-Roman and Byzantine periods (HUYGE, 1998b), until the Islamic (COLIN and LABRIQUE, 2001), and colonial to modern times (WINKLER, 1939). Its diversity is thus tremendous and the research potential – huge (for an overview, see: HUYGE, 2009b; VARADZINOVA, 2017; POLKOWSKI, 2018a). We find rock art in four main geographical units: the Eastern Desert, the Nile Valley (with dry tributaries on both its sides), the Western Desert, and the Gilf Kebir-Gebel Uweinat mountainous region¹. In all these areas rock art displays many peculiarities, but, except for the last region, many similarities can also be demonstrated (cf. POLKOWSKI, 2018a).

The prehistoric paintings and petroglyphs constitute an enormous archive, both in terms of quantity and content, which is an extremely valuable source augmenting the knowledge based on “traditional” archaeology. However, it is by no means a coherent assemblage, as, depending on the time period, the subject-matter, stylistic features and social significance, can strongly differ and be separated into various classes and types. Nonetheless, certain “meta-subjects” were employed by people across the entire timespan of rock art production. These are mainly the anthropomorphic and the zoomorphic images. They often co-occur alongside each other within the same compositions, but one can also attempt to study them as separate themes. The conference proceedings entitled “What ever happened to the people? Humans and anthropomorphs in the rock art of northern Africa” (HUYGE and VAN NOTEN, 2018) may serve as an example of such a motif-oriented approach to rock art. Much space in the

¹ In this article, the rock art known from Nubia, which culturally has always been strongly related to Egypt, has not been accounted for. It is thus the Aswan area that marks here the southern limit of rock art occurrence under study; whereas the southwestern boundary is delineated by the Gebel Uweinat complex.

book has been dedicated to Egyptian petroglyphs and paintings, and the topic of anthropomorphs is thoroughly explored. It is, however, the animals which constitute, most likely, the largest group of images in the prehistoric Egyptian rock art, and this, arguably, may reflect their paramount significance for past societies. Let me then turn my attention to this subject and describe the current state of research on animals in prehistoric rock art from particular periods.

2. Animals in Egyptian rock art

2.1 *Late Palaeolithic: the world of aurochs*

The idea of the Palaeolithic origin of some of the rock art in the Sahara, although controversial, is not new (cf. MORI, 1974). Although the settlement history of the Egyptian Late Palaeolithic had been well recognised across the years, for a long time no rock art tradition could be, however, associated with any of its stages. When first found, such petroglyphs

were not identified as pictures originated in the Pleistocene². It was owing to the Belgian Archaeological Mission (BAM), conducting rock art research since the 1980's, that a revolution in our understanding of petroglyphic traditions on the Nile finally took place. First, in 2004, a site with some completely varnished zoomorphic figures was discovered in Abu Tanqura Bahari 11 (ATB11), south of the village of el-Hosh and north of the Kom Ombo Plain. Moreover, the large depictions of naturalistically carved bovids highly resembled the petroglyphs discovered more than forty years earlier by the Canadians; the location of the latter was, however, already forgotten. The BAM, led by Dirk Huyge, soon managed to rediscover the lost panels and find new ones in the vicinity of the Qurta village (Figure 1). The unique imagery found on those four sites (ATB11, QI, QII, and QIII) constituted a homogenous

² They were discovered in the northern part of the Kom Ombo Plain in Upper Egypt by the Canadian Prehistoric Expedition in 1962/1963. The possibility of Pleistocene origin of these petroglyphs was considered, but finally it was the (early) Holocene that was suggested as the time for their production (Smith 1985)



Figure 1. Qurta, Upper Egypt. The late Palaeolithic zoomorphic rock art. © The Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.

assemblage, not paralleled by any other known rock art tradition in Egypt. Soon, several new sites with potentially related petroglyphs were discovered by other expeditions some 45 km south of Qurta, in the Wadi Abu Subeira (WAS), close to Aswan (STOREMYR *et al.*, 2008; KELANY, 2012; 2014). This has proved that this rock art “style” is not limited to just one small area near Kom Ombo.

Using the words of D. Huyge and S. Ikram (2009), the Qurta petroglyphs, and in fact the entire Late Palaeolithic rock art in Egypt, is a true “art animalier”. It is so, as the vast majority of images comprise zoomorphic figures (at Qurta ~93%). This category of depictions is, in turn, dominated by one particular species, that is *Bos primigenius* or aurochs, constituting approximately three quarters of all known zoomorphic figures. The bovids are complemented by several other species, all in fairly small numbers or as individual attestations. These include: gazelles, hippopotami, birds, fish, a Nubian ibex, as well as hartebeests and an African wild dog, both definitely more difficult to identify (Figure 2).

Even before it could be confirmed by means of direct dating methods, the Belgian mission had advanced a hypothesis of the Late Palaeolithic chronology of the ATB11 and the Qurta images. It was based on stylistic grounds, but also corroborated by the observation of complete varnishing of petroglyphs and their landscape setting. The latter arguments, albeit reasonable, were by no means conclusive; the former, however, even if subjective, were surely very persuasive. The bovids, often large in size (some exceedingly well over a meter), are unlike any other “cattle” depictions known from the Nile Valley. Unlike younger Neolithic/Predynastic figures, these are drawn in a naturalistic way; with elegant body curvatures and considerable attention to detail (hooves, ears, horns, etc.). Moreover, they often seem to be shown in motion; sometimes in awkward positions. This concerns mostly unnaturally bent legs. Some bovids seem to be unfinished, as parts of their limbs are missing. All these features can be found in Franco-Cantabrian zoomorphic depictions of South-western Europe and, indeed, the aurochs from Qurta, ATB11 and WAS, seem to bear a too



Figure 2. Qurta, Upper Egypt. Apart from bovids, this rock art depicts also gazelles and birds, albeit in much smaller numbers. © The Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.



Figure 3. El-Hosh, Upper Egypt. A panel containing Epipalaeolithic “fish-traps” accompanied by numerous later additions. © The Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.

strong resemblance to be just purely accidental (cf. HUYGE and VANDENBERGHE, 2011: 24).

The Late Palaeolithic hypothesis could finally be verified when one of the panels at the QII site was found partially covered by a wind-blown sediment and, consequently, OSL- and AMS-dated. The OSL provided dates ranging from 10 ± 1 to 16 ± 2 ky, meaning that the terminus ante quem for the creation of petroglyphs is at least 17,000 BP (HUYGE *et al.*, 2011). Before the dates were obtained, it had been proposed that the presence of rock art at Qurta may have been related to communities of the so-called Ballanan-Silsilan culture (ca. 16,000-15,000 BP), whose settlement remains are scattered across the region – some even neighbouring the rock art sites (HUYGE, 2009a). Direct dating seems to corroborate this hypothesis and opens up a possibility of an even earlier onset of this rock art tradition.

Most of the sites are located high above the current flood level. This supports the concept of their early origin, as the Nile level in the Late Palaeolithic was much higher than it is today (ca. 15 m); the lower-situated rocks were probably difficult to engrave in those times, but this does not necessarily apply to all cases. Both in the Qurta region and in WAS, the majority of panels are located high upon cliffs or steep slopes, often overlooking vast areas of wadi and desert. It seems that both the size of particular figures and their exponent nature indicates that this was a “public” rock art, intended to be seen.

It is, however, very difficult to propose insights into possible significance and semantics of this rock art tradition. D. Huyge pointed out a close correlation between the fauna depicted on rocks and the archaeozoological remains obtained during various excavations (HUYGE, 2009a; HUYGE and IKRAM, 2009: 169-70). The Late Palaeolithic

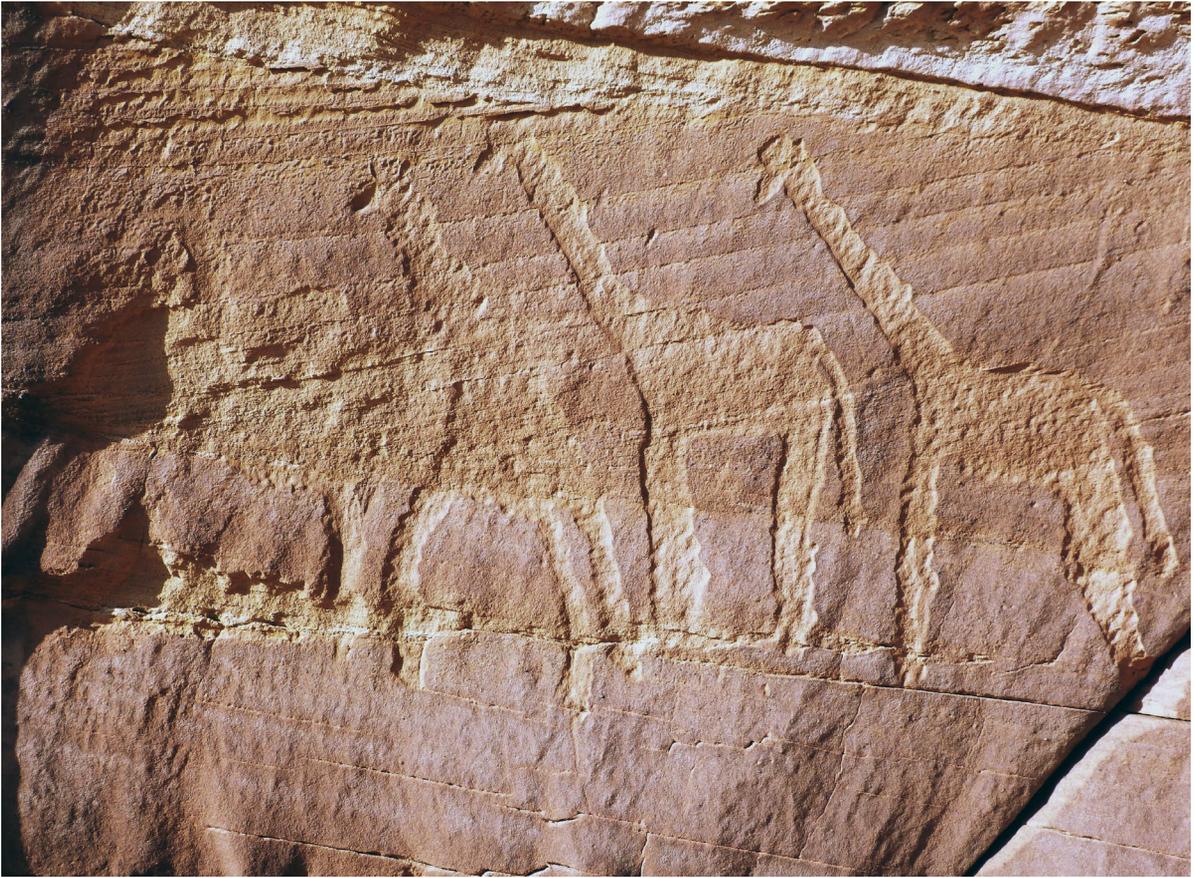


Figure 4. South of Dakhleh Oasis, Western Desert. A row of pecked giraffes tentatively dated to mid-Holocene. (Photo by P. Polkowski).

fauna of the Kom Ombo Plain, reconstructed from excavated remains, indicates the presence of the aurochs (*Bos primigenius*), the hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus*), the hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), the dorcas gazelle (*Gazella Dorcas*), the Nubian wild ass (*E. a. africanus*) and the Barbary sheep (*Ammotragus lervia*). These would be accompanied by various species of waterfowl and fish (PETERS, 1990). Although the ratio between species depicted in rock art as compared to bone remains is slightly different, both assemblages display great similarities. The dominance of remains of wild cattle, hartebeest and hippopotamus is largely reflected in the number of images depicting those species (with some reservations concerning the hartebeest).

The dorcas gazelle features in small but noticeable numbers in both inventories, whereas the Nubian wild ass and the Barbary sheep have not so far been attested in rock art. Instead, another rock-dwelling creature, the Nubian ibex, has been found skillfully carved in WAS (KELANY, 2012).

This faunal match between rock art and bone remains led D. Huyge to advance an idea of some kind of “hunting magic” being practised by the hunter-gatherer-fishers of the Kom Ombo Plain. He supported his argument by showing that a number of specimens have been partially covered, apparently on purpose, with scratches and peck marks (e.g. on their heads). That could mean a symbolic/ritualistic control over fauna

with the help of rock art (HUYGE, 2009a: 113; HUYGE and IKRAM 2009: 171-2).

Finally, an important issue remains to be solved in the future: the potential cultural relationship between the Nile Valley communities and the groups inhabiting Europe during the Late Palaeolithic. D. Huyge was working on this subject intensively and one of his latest articles is devoted to possible links between the two areas basing on the anthropomorphic imagery of the Gönnersdorf type (HUYGE, 2018). Sadly, with his unexpected death, the subject has to await other scholars willing to pick it up and continue.

2.2 *Epipalaeolithic: towards the “abstract”*

Epipalaeolithic (see below for dating) rock art is one of the least recognised and comprehended pictorial traditions in Egypt. In general, this corpus is mainly defined by the presence of “abstract” imagery (called also “geometric” or “curvilinear”), which owes this label to our present-day difficulties with identification of the subject-matter. This type of rock art comprises motifs such as: spirals, concentric and radiating circles, arches, net-patterns, ladders, oval and rectangular shapes, and many more of a similar nature (STOREMYR, 2008; 2009; HUYGE and STOREMYR, 2012). It is possible that some of the meandering lines also belong to this time horizon, as doubtlessly do the



Figure 5. Dakhleh Oasis, Western Desert. Oryx antelope. Mid-Holocene (Photo by P. Polkowski).

“fish-trap” designs, known mainly from the el-Hosh area (HUYGE, 2009a). The latter are actually the only ones that have been 14C-dated, situating this type of rock art prior to or in the early 6th millennium BC (HUYGE *et al.*, 2001). Although it is only a supposition, the abstract petroglyphs were perhaps produced by communities inhabiting the Nile Valley and the nearby Eastern Desert between 7,000-6,700 BC, associated with the Epipalaeolithic Elkabian culture (VERMEERSCH, 1978).

It is interesting to note that the localities with this kind of rock art are generally found in the same areas as the Late Palaeolithic concentrations of petroglyphs. Two main groups of sites are

thus distributed in the el-Hosh environs (Huyge 1998a) and in the Gharb Aswan area, that is on the west bank of the Nile (Storemyr 2008; 2009). The characteristic fish-trap motif, except for one petroglyph, can be found, however, only in the former region. One also has to be aware that the dating of the rest of the supposedly Epipalaeolithic abstract images relies on spatial and/or stylistic associations with the carbon-dated “fish-traps”, in addition to comparisons of the state of preservation. That causes a lot of uncertainty, especially when trying to estimate chronology of other figures juxtaposed with them upon the same surfaces; for instance, animals.



Figure 6. Karkur Talh, Gebel Uweinat. The “classic” Uweinat cattle pastoralist depictions of cattle (Photo by A. Zboray).

The above-mentioned meandering lines constitute one of such undetermined motifs. Not only their identification as snakes is an arguable interpretation (cf. POLKOWSKI, 2015), but also assigning them to the Epipalaeolithic is somewhat troublesome. Moreover, the “Epipalaeolithic” is differently defined in the Nile Valley and in the Western Desert, being dated to the early 7th and 10/9th-8/7th millennia BC respectively (e.g. DACHY *et al.*, 2018: 539, table 2). This surely does not facilitate rock art dating.

The interpretation of other animal figures encountered on panels with curvilinear designs seems equally problematic. If their varnishing is lighter, then we most probably deal with younger rock art, as it was demonstrated by D. Huyge (1998: 100, figure 3). P. Storemyr (2008: 66), on the other hand, reports some quadruped animals associated with abstract petroglyphs, such as a figure of warthog (*Phacochoerus aethiopicus*). This identification seems to be, however, far from certain, whereas its dating cannot be currently more precise than “predynastic” (i.e. predating ca. 3100 BC).

The only relatively certain group of zoomorphs that can be linked with the curvilinear rock art are the crocodiles. Depicted from above, with straight limbs stretched perpendicularly to the body, they constitute a very conspicuous category of figures. Often completely varnished, they accompany geometric petroglyphs fairly often in both main clusters of sites (el-Hosh: HUYGE, 1998: 100, figure 3; Aswan: STOREMYR, 2009: 124, 128, 130, 134, figs. 5d, 13, 16, tab. 1).

Simultaneously with the Elkabian culture of the Nile Valley, the vast areas of the Western Desert were roamed and inhabited by groups of hunter-gatherers, who would eventually adopt domesticated animals towards the end of the 7th millennium BC. Some motifs specific to the Epipalaeolithic of the Nile Valley (e.g. meandering lines) can be found in the west. Their chronology, however, remains unclear. This vast region is, in fact, a home to a number of rock art complexes whose main “ingredient” is zoomorphic imagery. The current evidence, still far from sufficient,

links much of these pictures with communities of the 7th and 6th millennia – hunter-gatherers who eventually became “pastro-foragers”, marking the inception of the “Neolithisation” processes.

2.3 *Mid-Holocene “Neolithic”: the savannah animals*

When speaking about the Neolithic in this region, one has to bear in mind that it is defined differently than in the Near East or Europe (and the very term “Neolithic” is not used by all scholars); for its main defining feature is the introduction of domesticated animals, markedly preceding plant domestication (cf. KUPER and RIEMER, 2013: 46-7). Before the onset of the very first Egyptian farming cultures in Fayum and Lower Egypt in the late 6th millennium BC, the arena for cultural developments had mostly been the Western Desert. The archaeological material allows us to observe a gradual shift from hunting-gathering, through “pastro-foraging”, to developed pastoralism. When analysing rock art, however, it is by no means obvious how to attribute particular classes of imagery to specific prehistoric communities or archaeological units.

Pre-pharaonic rock art in the Western Desert is clearly dominated by zoomorphs, and wild fauna in particular. As remarked above, some rock art, such as meandering lines and associated imagery, could have been produced by Epipalaeolithic communities. This concerns also animal depictions that at times occur as clearly linked with meanders, but as long as the dating of wavy lines cannot be unequivocally confirmed this remains a difficult question to resolve. The wettest conditions in the region occurred during the last stages of the 8th millennium BC, gradually decreasing towards the end of the 6th millennium BC, and the period in-between seems to be the time when a substantial volume of, if not most of rock art in the desert was apparently created. This pertains especially to those sites that we find today in the core areas of the desert or on its margin (cf. RIEMER, 2009). Sites such as Mudpans, Regenfeld, Abu Tartur (RIEMER, 2009), Meri (RIEMER, 2011), Djara (CLASSEN *et al.*, 2009),

or Chufu (KUPER, 2014/2015), all provide strong evidence for a temporal correlation between the mid-Holocene communities and rock art. To this we should add extensive material from the Dakhleh, Kharga, and Farafra oases, which is, nevertheless, slightly more problematic due to a longer habitation history of those places and thus a much larger aggregation (and diversity) of rock art motifs, including the historical ones. For the sake of convenience, and considering both terminological debates and uncertainties in rock art dating, the following group of depictions might be termed the “Neolithic” zoomorphs.

The main feature characterising and linking together rock art assemblages spread extensively over the desert is the predominance of savannah-type animals. The first detail which stands out, is a rather limited choice of depicted species as it is mainly narrowed down to giraffes (*Giraffa camelopardalis*), various taxa of gazelles,

Oryx antelopes (*Oryx dammah*), ostriches (*Struthio camelus*), and elephants (*Loxodonta africana*). The remaining species are found in very insignificant numbers (e.g. hartebeest, Addax [*Addax nasomaculatus*]). It is, however, important to note that these animals are not chronological markers by themselves, as they have been depicted also in the subsequent millennia (cf. ZBORAY, 2018).

Two species that prevail within the petroglyphic corpora all over the desert are: the giraffe and the oryx antelope (RIEMER, 2009). The former is particularly dominant in rock art due to its bigger size, and, consequently, better visibility. Giraffes are often depicted as isolated specimens, but larger “herds” are not uncommon. Unlike the Central Sahara, the vast majority of those zoomorphs are shown in a style which is far from naturalistic. It seems that the primary intention of artists was to present the animals in such a way



Figure 7. Karkur Talh, Gebel Uweinat. A “family scene” (Photo by A. Zboray).

that they would be instantly recognisable; hence the selected body features are usually highly emphasised or even exaggerated. This does not mean, however, that the Western Desert giraffe petroglyphs are executed in a homogenous "style"; for the differences can be significant (cf. POLKOWSKI, 2018b: 16-19). The main feature treated in this way is the neck. In extreme cases, it can be several times longer than the rest of the body. Such simplified renderings of giraffes with exaggerated necks, and not infrequently the legs and the tail, are known from various sites, such as Mudpans to the south, or Farafra up north (e.g. RIEMER, 2009: 37, figure 5; LE QUELLEC *et al.*, 2005: 35, figure 27). Finds from Mudpans, Meri (RIEMER, 2011: 248-51), Khufu or Chufu (KUPER, 2014/2015: 296, Abb. 23), or Dakhleh (MCDONALD, 1990), where giraffes (and other rock art) are spatially strongly related to other better-dated archaeological artefacts and structures, which points to either the 7th or 6th/early 5th millennium BC as the most probable timespan for their creation.

The same can be said about a large group of depictions of oryx antelope. In this case, as well, the stylistic variation is high, although a general simplicity of the form and exaggeration of only the selected body parts (the horns) usually facilitate the identification of this species (RIEMER, 2009: 37). Sometimes it is the only element distinguishing these animals from the other antelopes. Besides oryxes, albeit in significantly smaller numbers, these are usually addax antelopes and gazelles (mostly dorcas), both with characteristic horns. All three species are represented in rock art known for instance from the Djara cave, some 300 km north of Dakhleh, being tentatively dated to the 7th/6th millennium BC or slightly later (CLASSEN *et al.*, 2009). We find depictions of antelopes and gazelles at most desert rock art sites, although addax and various gazelle types are clearly less common than the oryx or the giraffe (but see RIEMER, 2009: 36, figure 3; or POLKOWSKI, 2018b: 22).

In Djara, as well as at most of the other mentioned sites, the quadrupeds are supplemented by depictions of ostrich. These

may accompany giraffes and/or antelopes, similarly to the findings at Abu Tartur (Riemer, 2009: 38, figure 8) or Dakhleh (POLKOWSKI, 2018b: 25-6), or, like other animals, be featured alone (ČERVÍČEK, 1986: n.pag., figure 401). Most of the ostriches are similar in form having their bodies abraded, but limbs and the neck engraved. Finally, one has to mention the depictions of elephants that are found, but in a limited number in the Western Desert. Their numbers seem to be drastically lower than those of giraffes, oryxes or ostriches (POLKOWSKI, 2018b: 23-5).

Although for the most part the identification of species does not pose significant difficulties when this kind of rock art is analysed, to propose reliable insights into its significance and meaning is, however, an extremely arduous task. It is possible that a large share of zoomorphic petroglyphs were created by communities that in their subsistence strategies combined hunting and pastoralism, as well as being in addition highly mobile³. The choice of species to be depicted is fairly constant across a wide region, with only some minor exceptions (e.g. the lack of giraffe images in Djara, see CLASSEN *et al.*, 2009). This selection of pictured taxa must have had a precise set of meanings underpinning such a choice, and surely did not mirror purely economic significance of animals. As H. Riemer (2009: 38) points out, there are at least two major discrepancies between the content of rock art corpora and the archaeozoological remains known from the mid-Holocene sites (for an overview of the latter, see Pöllath 2009). The first one concerns the small animals (like the fennec or the hare) that are known in large numbers from the habitation sites but have not been identified in rock art fauna. The other issue relates to contrasting numbers between the bone remains of some animals in the material record and their counterparts in petroglyphs. The abundance of gazelle remains is not reflected at all in rock art assemblages, whereas the giraffe, almost entirely absent in bone record (not recorded north of Mudpans), flourishes and dominates the pictorial corpora in nearly all known areas (cf. POLKOWSKI, 2018b: 35-7). Various antelope species are usually not as frequent as gazelles in the bone record. In rock

art, however, antelopes outnumber gazelles quite dramatically – the oryx, in particular.

Following the assumption that “pastor-foragers” may be responsible for a large part of rock art in the desert and the oases, we encounter yet another puzzling issue: an apparent lack of depicted domesticates. Except for the Gebel Uweinat/Gilf Kebir region, where the (much later) pastoral rock art plays the main role, the rest of the Western Desert sites do not seem to deliver a lot of pictorial evidence for breeding cattle or sheep/goats. The latter are perhaps depicted in Farafra mid-Holocene cave art (BARICH, 2014: 400-1), while the images of cattle are known from many other areas, however, the majority of them seem to originate from the later periods, including the historical times. Quite possibly, we may not be able to recognise the mid-Holocene depictions of domesticates among large numbers of “unidentified quadrupeds” (cf. POLKOWSKI, 2018b). Alternatively, we can assume that despite introduction of cattle and ovicaprines, rock art had remained wild fauna-oriented (cf. POLKOWSKI, 2018b: 38). It seems, however, that the mid-Holocene incipient pastoralism was largely overshadowed by hunting and gathering practices, which is often manifested in larger numbers of remains of wild than domesticated specimens recovered at various sites. In this context, R. Kuper and H. Riemer (2013: 45) speak about “hunter-gatherer conservatism” that is detectable not only in the economic system, but possibly also in the social and the ideological realms of the mid-Holocene desert communities. Hence, I think that the gradual growth of the cultural role of domesticates does not have to be reflected in the rock art of that time, which can be considered yet another expression of such conservatism.

The case of Gebel Uweinat, and its Egyptian part in particular, shows us that it is the Late Neolithic that is dominated by pastoral rock art, both painted and engraved (ZBORAY, 2018). It even provides evidence that during and after the “pastoral period” wild animals were also depicted, including giraffes and oryxes, proving

that the mere presence of certain species in any rock art corpus cannot be regarded as sole dating evidence.

2.4 Middle/late Holocene “Neolithic”: the cattle horizon of the south-western Egypt

The 5th and 4th millennium BC in south-western Egypt is the time when groups of pastoralists with flocks of cattle and ovicaprines roam across the region in search of grazing land. These communities are, however, strongly tied to various ecological niches, such as the Dakhleh Oasis, Gilf Kebir, or Gebel Uweinat, as advanced aridification increasingly affects large swathes of the Western Desert (KUPER and RIEMER, 2013). Although the oases and their environs are host to herders (e.g. Dakhleh and the Sheikh Muftah cultural unit), it is difficult to define pastoralist contribution to rock art corpus. It is possible that some outlined zoomorphic imagery executed in a schematic manner, and depicting bovids, should be linked with this time horizon (cf. KUPER, 2014/2015: 296, Abb. 23). This, however, bears no comparison to the grandeur and magnitude of the rock art tradition(s) from the very corner of Egyptian territory: Gilf Kebir and Gebel Uweinat.

The “Uweinat cattle pastoralist style” comes as the last clearly defined rock art tradition in a chain of pictogram and petroglyphic “styles” distinguished in both areas (ZBORAY, 2012). In the region’s pre-pastoral paintings and engravings animal depictions, although present, are heavily outnumbered by anthropomorphs. Nevertheless, we encounter petroglyphs and paintings showing giraffes, gazelles, ostriches, and even such unique species as the African soft-shelled turtle (*Trionyx triunguis*) (ZBORAY, 2018: 674, figure 14). In the cattle pastoralist style we observe a reverse situation where the animals clearly dominate in numbers. It seems that the new rock art tradition, different from the previous in most respects, coincides with broader changes in material culture of the region (e.g. introduction of thin-walled pottery with herringbone pattern decoration). Being associated with the Gilf C

phase in the regional chronology, the pastoral paintings and petroglyphs are dated to ca. 4400-3500 BC (RIEMER *et al.*, 2017).

The paintings of cattle herders can be found in both large areas of Gilf Kebir (ZBORAY, 2013: 19, figure 4) and Gebel Uweinat (e.g. ZBORAY, 2009; 2013; 2018). In terms of quantity, however, it is the latter region that stands out with 337 (out of 414 in total) painting sites comprising images in the pastoralist style. To this one should add a large number of petroglyphs, although these pose more problems in terms of cultural affiliation and dating (ZBORAY, 2018). This enormous number of sites, most often shallow rock niches or shelters, are well protected from the elements, often contain large panels crowded with imagery. The main theme of the style is the cattle, the cows and bulls can be counted in

hundreds in the most developed compositions. We thus observe quasi- narrative scenes of herding cattle, as well as goats, that are depicted too, albeit in smaller numbers.

The animals are usually portrayed in a distinctive manner. They can be mono- or polychromatic, where the dominating colour is red, applied in many possible hues. Their bodies are slightly rectangular; particularly the rump area that is additionally built substantially in size (ZBORAY, 2012: 223-7). Also, the tails are frequently exaggerated, but only in length. The legs are usually depicted schematically, being long and thin, either straight or bent, at times somewhat unnaturally. The body marking is often represented by various tints and patterns. Some cattle specimens have a stippled colouring, while others are plain with just a few irregularly shaped



Figure 8. Khor Abu Subeira, Upper Egypt. A typical depiction of ibex. © the author (with permission of M.C. Gatto and the Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project).

spots of a different colour. It is the head that is subjected to a large variability; in terms of its shape, and more notably, the horns, which can be of a varying length (or absent). The majority of cattle have their sex indicated. It is either an udder, or a penis, usually depicted between the hind legs.

A. Zboray (2018: 670-2, figure 12) mentions also a slightly different rendering of cattle which he attributes to the last phase of the Uweinat cattle pastoralist style, observable in both petroglyphs and paintings. These bovinds have a particularly distinctive feature, namely a dewlap protruding from the neck.

Whereas the cattle are depicted in a fairly unified manner, the anthropomorphs display a much higher variability in form. Various categories of human figures can be distinguished, but it is possible that they do not necessarily mirror any diachronic cultural differences, being more of a reflection of intracultural diversity (cf. ZBORAY, 2012: 225-7). Of course, some chronological variations can also be detected, as the “style” had been utilised for nearly a millennium.

The sex of anthropomorphs can be often identified, and scenes that can be termed as “familial” occur on some of the rocks. The rock shelters, which were frequently used as habitation places, were portrayed as well, providing us with an extraordinary opportunity to glance into a prehistoric household and family. There is no doubt, however, that cattle, and to some extent – goats, constitute the main cultural pillar of that period, being the economic, social, and, possibly, religious foundation for the Gilf/Uweinat communities of the 5th and 4th millennia BC.

What emerges from these rock art compositions, is the clear and deep relationship between people and their tended herds. Some scenes show that this relationship could have been extremely intimate and, in a way, could cross the animal/human boundaries: one of the paintings from Karkur Talh, showing a couple of adults and, arguably, their children suckling on a

cow’s udders. This cattle-oriented rock art fits well into the pan-Saharan “Bovindian Period” (e.g. LE QUELLEC, 2013) and a gradual cattle “obsession” of much of the Nile Valley in the 4th millennium BC onwards. The ideas behind the Gilf/Uweinat rock art seem to be particularly connected to Nubian rock art, where especially in the 4th and 3rd millennia BC cattle pastoralism and the related symbolism flourished among the herders of the C-Group and the Kingdom of Kerma (see, for instance, rock paintings found near Korosko in Lower Nubia; Suková 2011). Finally, the cattle, both in the form of cow and bull, will be playing an important role in the subsequent Egyptian Predynastic and Dynastic ideology and religion. Most probably, such an essential position of cattle must have had its roots in the eastern Sahara, where during the millennia of animal herding, many of the future ideas could have been coined first.

2.5 *Predynastic: animals in the network of concepts, symbols and ideas*

The Predynastic Period (ca. 4400-2867 BC) in Egypt begins in the Late Neolithic, and ends a millennium and a half later with the onset of the Thinite 1st Dynasty. It has a very complex history of developments, not only within the realm of economy, technology, or material production, but equally in terms of ideology, symbolism, and social relations. This “evolution” begins with the still largely pastoral communities of the Badari culture (ca. 4400-3800 BC), and reaches its climax when a fully sedentary society of the late Naqada period transforms itself into an incipient dynastic Pharaonic state. The process of state-formation was highly complex and multi-directional, as well as geographically diversified (for an overview, see STEVENSON, 2016). Rock art, as part of the Predynastic visual culture, is similarly manifold and was subjected to changes that were continuously occurring within the social realm. It cannot be characterised as a monolith, but rather approached contextually and in reference to other cultural phenomena in the Predynastic times. For contrary to older classes of rock art, the Predynastic images can be much more effectively

contextualised and discussed in the light of social, religious, or ideological considerations. Nevertheless, due to limited space, only the selected rock art themes related to animals can be briefly outlined here.

To say that animals played an important role in the Predynastic culture is definitely insufficient. Regardless of whichever aspect of that culture we consider, we see that animals feature among its most significant elements. This is extremely helpful in rock art studies, which can draw upon research of various contexts and phenomena. In that way, one can refer to studies of extremely rich pottery iconography (e.g. GRAFF, 2009), as well as to figurines, cosmetic palettes, knife handles, or wall paintings, which are all heavily associated with animals (cf. HENDRICKX and EYCKERMAN, 2012). In addition to zoomorphic iconography, figurines, and sculpture, archaeozoology provides a crucial background for research on Predynastic petroglyphs. A substantial number of researched sites (cf. LINSEELE *et al.*, 2009) serves as a reliable basis for comparisons, whereas a diversity of contexts in which faunal remains are discovered (e.g. the elite cemetery HK6 in Hierakonpolis where various animals, including elephants and baboons, were buried; see VAN NEER *et al.*, 2004), enhances the interpretational pool of ideas. This linkage between rock art and other material sources that are capable of elucidating the chronology and meaning of petroglyphs as such is unique, and has been effectively used by various scholars (JUDD, 2009: 79-80; MORROW *et al.*, 2010: 18-22; HENDRICKX, 2013; HARDTKE, 2017).

Although more ancient origin of some zoomorphic images from the Nile valley and adjacent areas in the Western and Eastern deserts, is certainly possible, the majority of prehistoric animal depictions (except for obvious Palaeolithic and Epipalaeolithic ones, see above) have been dated to the Predynastic Period, particularly the 4th millennium BC (HUYGE, 2002: 195, figure 2; JUDD, 2009; LANKESTER, 2013: 28-49). If we assume that the Predynastic rock art was produced from the Badari Culture period

until the end of the Naqada times, it gives us around 1,500 years during which various animals, such as, barbary sheep (HENDRICKX *et al.*, 2009: 222, figure 27), hartebeests, addaxes (DARNELL 2017: 51, figure 3a), oryxes (REDFORD and REDFORD, 1989: 10, figure 3), gazelles (ČERVÍČEK, 1974:Abb. 135), ostriches, ibexes, wild asses (JUDD, 2009: figure 15), cattle (GATTO *et al.*, 2009:165, figure 20), elephants (HARDTKE, 2017: 24, figure 2c), hippopotami (WINKLER, 1938: pl. XIV), or dogs (HENDRICKX *et al.*, 2009: 223, figs. 28-29), were alternately gaining and losing significance. Such was also the fate of giraffes (HUYGE, 1998c). According to a chronological framework for the rock art from the Elkab region, proposed by D. Huyge (2002: 199-200), and often adapted in studies of other sites in Upper Egypt (e.g. GATTO *et al.*, 2009), the giraffe was the main zoomorph depicted in the first centuries of the 4th millennium, that is the Naqada I period. Even if described by him as executed in a “stylised visual realistic” manner, this realism is somewhat contradicted by often unnatural body proportions, perpendicularity, and exaggeration in length and thickness of selected body features. The dominating role of giraffes in the Elkab assemblage – and by extension the entire Naqada I phase – has been explained by connecting them with the iconography from the Naqada III and Early Dynastic periods, and the concept of the giraffe as a “sun-bearer”. D. Huyge argued that this animal, being the tallest one, and thus “intermediate between the earthly and heavenly spheres”, must have been perceived as a creature aiding the sun-god in his voyage across the firmament. He supported his argument with several observations. The first one referred to a tendency in orientation of giraffes at Elkab, of which more than 60% are directed westwards, against over 70% of all the other figures oriented eastwards. Most of the giraffes, then, seem to follow the direction of the sun. The other observation concerned the petroglyphs of wild asses, depicted slightly later – in the Naqada II phase. Being mostly oriented in the opposite direction, considered, moreover, adversaries of the sun, the asses represent the malevolent forces which pose a threat to the journey of the sun-god (HUYGE, 2002: 203). One

particularly persuasive example of the Vulture Rock site shows lateralisation and orientation of these motifs (and also the boats which were meant to replace giraffes in the Naqada II phase) that perhaps mirror the solar cycle (HUYGE, 2002: 200, figure 5). Rock art plays in this concept the role of a tool – it helps to influence the world in order to obviate the chaotic forces which try to prevent the sun from setting and rising. This interpretation has sometimes been accepted and applied in other case studies (DARNELL, 2009: 87-90 [Theban Desert]; GATTO *et al.*, 2009: 153-4 [Gharb Aswan]), although apparently the occurrence of the prevailing westward orientation finds little confirmation elsewhere (JUDD, 2009: 89 [Eastern Desert]; IKRAM, 2009: 269). The Predynastic giraffe depictions have been found in significant numbers at various sites of the Eastern Desert (FUCHS, 1989; REDFORD and REDFORD, 1989; JUDD, 2009: 12-3; LANKESTER, 2013: 33-6), Western Desert (IKRAM, 2009: 268-70; Darnell 2009), the Aswan area (GATTO *et al.*, 2009), Elkab (HUYGE 2002), Hierakonpolis (HARDTKE, 2013: 109-10) and many other sites (e.g. ČERVÍČEK, 1974: 176-7).

The previously mentioned Nubian wild asses constitute another fairly numerous group of zoomorphs known mostly from the Valley and the Eastern Desert (REDFORD and REDFORD, 1989: 29, figs. 44, 45; FUCHS, 1989: 137-8, figs. 14, 15; HUYGE, 2002). Similarly to giraffes, they are usually fully pecked. Whereas their bodies are rather generic, certain head features seem fairly characteristic – long muzzles and ears in particular. To this we can add a conspicuous element which is a linear appendage sticking out of the neck. Even though it is not observable in all known specimens, the stroke occurs so frequently that it had to have a specific meaning. It was again D. Huyge (2009c) who took on the task of finding a possible interpretation. By examining the meanings associated with asses in the pharaonic period (particularly associations with the god Seth), as well as the available archaeological and archaeozoological material, he proposed the following explanation: asses associated with Seth, were malicious creatures, embodying forces of “evil and chaos”. The appendage protruding

from the neck would have been a knife or an arrow, whose role was to magically suppress the nefarious powers of these animals. For ancient Egyptians, a represented object was capable of acting, and if it was known to have a malevolent nature, they were supposed to neutralise it. Depicting a weapon stacked in the ass’s neck was probably sufficient to achieve that, while the act itself did not seem to have much to do with hunting – the latter being doubtlessly one of the major topics in the Predynastic (rock) art.

Hunting scenes belong to the most ubiquitous themes in those times. They are often found in the deserts far from the Nile. However, since hunting in the Naqada Period was no longer economically relevant, its frequent depiction could have had a more symbolic significance (HENDRICKX, 2013). According to S. Hendrickx, preying on wild animals was the exclusive privilege of the elite, used for various purposes, including legitimisation of power and establishing high status. Animals were rarely killed on the spot, and instead they were captured alive and brought back to the Valley, where, after some time, they were ritually sacrificed. Rock art was, perhaps, executed in these very locales where a hunt could take place (GATTO *et al.*, 2009), sometimes deep in the desert. In the process, hunting journeys to more distant areas could have served as a means to assert control over territories, and more symbolically – could indicate a capability of elites to control the desert. Hunting could thus satisfy religious, social and political needs, whereas it had no significance in terms of food procurement.

Rock art hunt scenes rarely show anthropomorphs. Instead, dogs replace hunters, making the presence of the latter implicit. Only selected species are shown as being hunted, and can be divided into two groups: desert and Nilotic (DARNELL, 2009). Dogs are usually chasing gazelles and antelopes. Of the latter, the Addax appears as a particularly significant species, as it could have embodied the whole of the Western Desert (cf. a discussion of Addax depictions in predynastic D-Ware pottery decoration in HENDRICKX 2013). The Eastern Desert counterpart would be the ibex (example in LANKESTER, 2013: 59, figure 4.18),

whereas the animal depicted as being hunted in both deserts is the barbary sheep (HENDRICKX *et al.*, 2009; BRÉMONT, 2018). The Nilotic hunt scenes focus on just two species, both highly dangerous: the crocodile and the hippopotamus. They show a different way of hunting, appropriate to these creatures as it is a spear/ harpoon and a net that are utilised by the hunters (WINKLER, 1938: pl. XIV; LANKESTER, 2013: 30, figure 3.3). In some cases, the hunt is conducted from a boat (LANKESTER, 2013: 62, figure 4.27). Moreover, these animals are apparently meant to be killed, not captured. Sporadically, other animals are shown being hunted, such as giraffes (JUDD, 2009: 123, figure 16), ostriches (LANKESTER, 2013: 46, figure 3.40), or asses (JUDD, 2009: 128, figure 26).

The Predynastic rock art displays also other themes, which cannot be discussed here at length. This concerns, for instance, a very characteristic the motif of the lassoing of cattle or a seemingly highly related scene of holding its tail (JUDD, 2009: 134-6, figs. 33-35). Another topic raises the question of “territoriality” of “styles”, or how certain zoomorphs were executed (e.g. elephants), or of significance of specific species in particular areas (hippopotamus in Abydos as opposed to barbary sheep in Naqada) (BRÉMONT, 2018). This leads us, in turn, to considerations on the meaning and significance of the depicted fauna in relation to the landscape. An influential concept advanced by J.C. Darnell helps us to understand the presence of Nilotic fauna depictions in desert environs, explaining this in terms of the “Niloticization of the desert”. Rock art would have thus been a tool aiding in a physical and symbolic transformation of landscape (DARNELL, 2009). A symbolic nature of many zoomorphic depictions is revealed, perhaps, by yet another motif – animals in boats. They can be shown as either placed on deck, or attached to the mast. Some of the species depicted in this way comprise: cattle (ČERVÍČEK, 1974: Abb. 343), hartebeests (DARNELL, 2009: 91, figure 13), ostriches (LANKESTER, 2013: 47, figure 3.42), giraffes (ČERVÍČEK, 1974: Abb. 71), ibexes (MORROW *et al.*, 2010: 93, figure B), among others.

Finally, we can mention the species which were depicted only sporadically, such as felines (ČERVÍČEK, 1974: Taf. 6.12; DARNELL, 2017: 51, figure 3a; Ikram 2009, but possibly of Dynastic date), snakes and birds (stork, ibis, falcon), although the latter two categories could have functioned as the proto-hieroglyphs (DARNELL, 2017: 53, figs. 6-7) and thus linking rock art with the emergence of writing (cf. also the image of a falcon on boat that is more a symbol than a representation; GATTO *et al.*, 2009: 162-3, figure 16).

3. Recapitulation

The above inevitably non-exhaustive overview of depicted animals shows clearly that these were a vital, if not the main, component of the entire Egyptian prehistoric rock art. Only the “geometric” rock art, dating from the early to mid-Holocene, seems to be less focused on zoomorphs, but even then it refers to animals indirectly (e.g. the fish-trap motif). The earlier Late Palaeolithic rock art is heavily zoomorphic, and it is the apparent lack of human depictions, that is striking (except for one panel with female figures). Only in the middle and late Holocene, do we find rock art showing both humans and animals in frequent associations and in large numbers (on anthropomorphs, see especially HUYGE and VAN NOTEN 2018). Nevertheless, anthropomorphs are usually outnumbered by zoomorphs, whether it is desert/oases mid-Holocene rock art, or pastoralist paintings of the south-west Egypt in the later periods. Even in the Predynastic times, when animals are ever more increasingly treated as symbols, and when the concept of “order over chaos” (HENDRICKX, 2013) becomes expressed mainly by human domination over fauna, the zoomorphs are still far more numerous than humans among the petroglyphs. Hence, people during various prehistoric periods must have appreciated animals as extraordinary beings, which allowed – for instance when depicted on rocks – to convey meanings, and even the most complex of thoughts. It is, thus, not surprising that in the epoch that followed the prehistory – in the dynastic Egypt – animals retained their

remarkable significance and featured widely in various aspects of iconography.

Our understanding of rock art is still in its infancy. Often, it is not only the meaning, which is elusive, but also the form of a petroglyph or a painting. Unfortunately, many images, including zoomorphic ones, still resist a precise identification or even a simple description. We often label them as “unidentified quadrupeds/zoomorphs” (POLKOWSKI, 2018b), as we are able to recognise the animal form, but cannot specify the taxa. In other words, regularly not just the signified, but also the signifier remains obscured and unreachable. Nevertheless, as the rock art research is a developing discipline, more and more discoveries will surely be made. It is also a question of the very specific nature of rock art – and of any art for that matter. Some petroglyphs and paintings are rendered in such a way that our attempts at identification will probably always be more of a “game of associations”, where all our definitions and labels cannot be conclusively supported with evidence. This concerns particularly simple-form petroglyphs, such as the alleged “spiders” from Kharga (IKRAM, 2013) or “snakes” in Dakhleh and elsewhere (POLKOWSKI, 2015).

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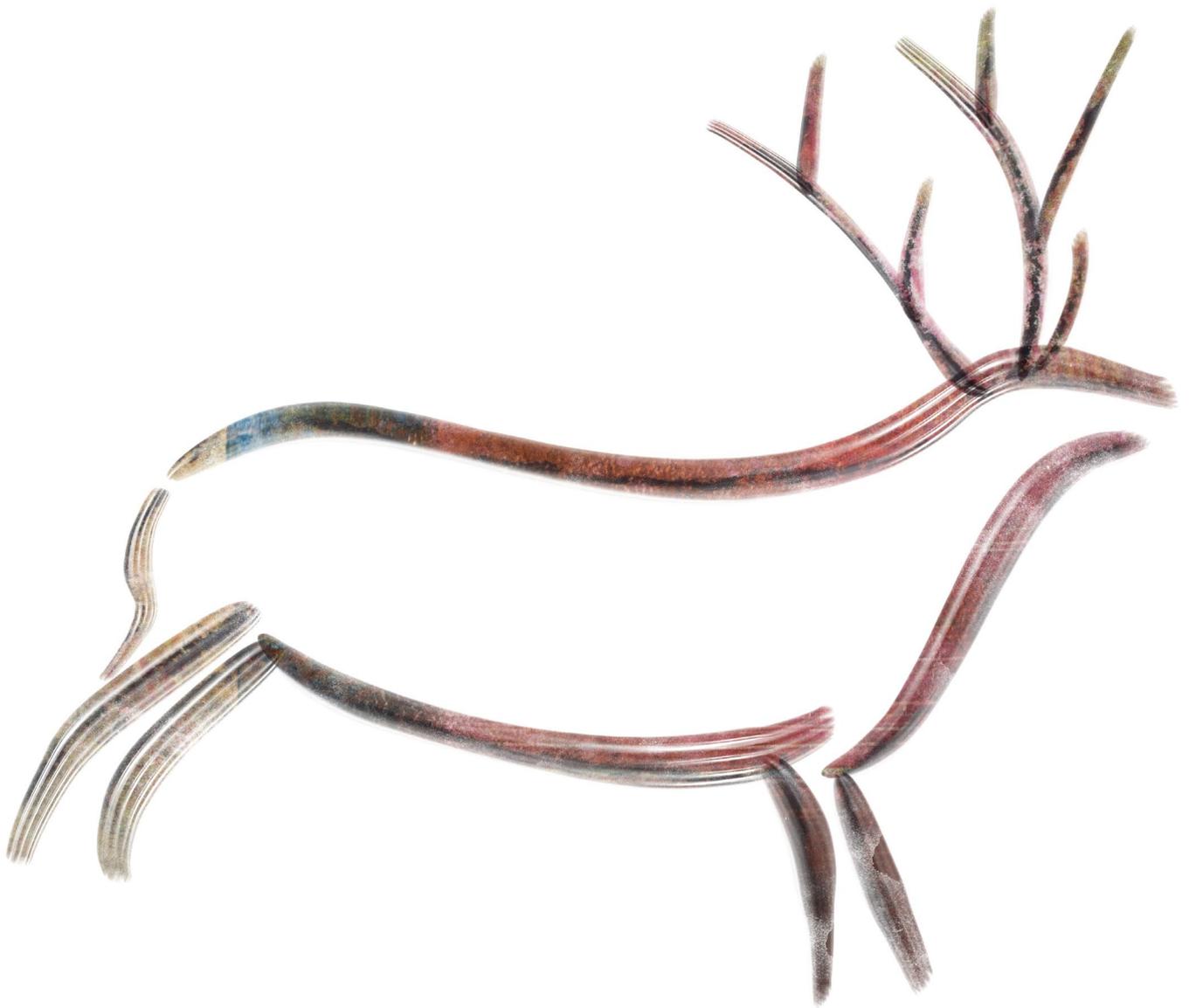
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