

The rock art of Jebel Uweinat. Some results of the ongoing survey

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A series of great sandstone and granite massifs occupy the central Libyan Desert (Eastern Sahara) near the convergence of the borders of present-day Egypt, Sudan and Libya. The highest of them, Jebel Uweinat rises to a height of 1934 metres like an island out of the surrounding flat and relatively featureless desert (**fig. 1**), that stretches uninterrupted for hundreds of kilometres. The mountain is high enough to occasionally capture rain from the last tatters of the summer monsoon, supporting meagre but permanent vegetation in the larger valleys.

Uweinat had long been known to harbour prehistoric rock art sites. At the time of its discovery in 1923, the Egyptian explorer Ahmed Hassanein already noted engraved images of wild animals, which he correctly assumed to be of great antiquity (Hassanein 1925). Subsequently Prince Kemal el Din, Bagnold and Shaw recorded further sites including paintings in the main north-eastern valley of Karkur Talh (El-Dine & Breuil 1928; Bagnold 1931; Shaw 1934). Scientific interest was raised in the area following the discovery of the exceptionally well preserved paintings at Ain Dua by the Hungarian explorer Almásy and the Italian naturalist di Caporiacco in 1933 (Almásy 1935; 1936; Caporiacco & Graziosi 1934). The first scientific expedition to record the rock art of the region was organised by László Almásy and the German ethnographer,

Fig. 1
Jebel Uweinat from
the south-east.



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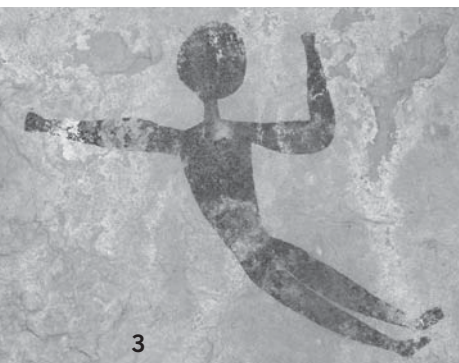
1. www.fjexpeditions.com

Fig. 2

The key to the relative chronology of the rock art of the area, superpositioned scenes from all three principal periods (Site KTW 21/A).

Fig. 3

An "Uweinat roundhead" figure, with the characteristic featureless head (Site KTW 31).



Leo Frobenius in the autumn of 1933. The expedition that included archaeologist Hans Rhotert and draughtswoman Elisabeth Pauli, recorded all the previously known sites and discovered dozens of new paintings and engravings in the valley of Karkur Talh. Unfortunately war intervened, and the results were only published twenty years later (Rhotert 1952). In 1938 Hans Winkler accompanying Bagnold on another expedition made a further survey, finding yet more unreported sites in Karkur Talh (Winkler 1939).

Following the War, exploration and interest in the region subsided. It was only in 1968 that a large scale multidisciplinary expedition was mounted by Belgium, during which a number of spectacular new paintings were discovered that rank among the finest known Saharan rock art (Van Noten 1972). From that time until present, a number of sporadic discoveries were made, however until recently no systematic exploration or recording of sites was attempted, and awareness of the sites remain limited even among rock art specialists.

Since 1998 the author organised nineteen expeditions to Jebel Uweinat, initially with the modest objective of visiting known and recorded sites. However as familiarity with terrain and sites increased with each visit, it soon became evident that large areas of the mountain appeared to be void of any rock art, yet the geography suggested the likelihood of suitable shelters. The first attempt to survey previously unexplored side valleys of Karkur Talh yielded dozens of new sites, some containing spectacular paintings (Zboray 2003).

During the past five years large areas of Jebel Uweinat were systematically explored, and over 250 new rock art sites were discovered (Zboray 2004; 2005a; 2006; 2008). Further discoveries were made at the adjacent massifs of Jebel Arkenu and Jebel Kissu. To date the author documented over 600 sites in the central Libyan Desert. The complete descriptive catalogue with full bibliographical references (including unpublished image archives of early exploration), was initially published on DVD in 2005 (Zboray 2005b), with an updated second edition to reflect new discoveries under preparation for the first half of 2009.

A significant aspect of the new finds was the emergence of several clearly identifiable early cultural horizons at Jebel Uweinat, manifested in a number of well preserved paintings. Their relative chronology is unambiguously established based on several examples of over-paintings (fig.2). The earliest of these are paintings that depict exclusively human figures, sometimes with bow and arrow, garments and body decoration. The most characteristic style feature is that the head is always shown in the round, without any features (fig. 3). The similarity to the classic "roundhead" style paintings of the Tassili N'Ajjer in the central Sahara is striking, however at present no cultural link can be demonstrated between them and the "Uweinat roundheads".

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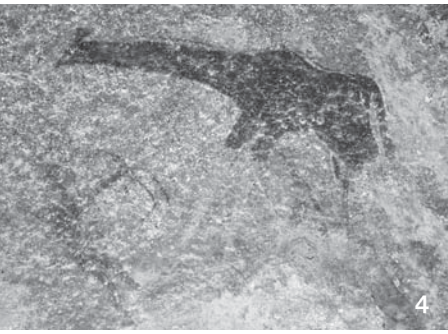


Fig. 4

Giraffe hunt (Site KTN 31).

Fig. 5

“Small human figures” including a mother with child (the child figure is only 2 cms tall, Site KTN 31).

A somewhat later cultural phase consists of paintings in the “small human figures” style. The majority of the paintings show human figures, but there are also some hunting scenes, showing men armed with bow & arrow hunting giraffe (fig. 4). The human figures are drawn very delicately on a small scale, with a recurring theme of mothers and children, the latter sometimes only on a scale of 1.5-2 centimetres (fig. 5). Some compositions of these tiny figures rank among the finest artistic achievements of the rock art of the region.

By far the most numerous paintings belong to the “cattle pastoralist” period. While localities of previous cultural horizons are just a scattered handful, cattle pastoral paintings (and also engravings) may be found by the hundreds within practically all suitable rock shelters across the whole mountain. Survey work focused on the higher altitude areas of the mountain in the past couple of years, and sites of the cattle period were noted on all of the high altitude (1300-1800m) plateaus both by the author and others (Menardi Noguera *et. al.* 2005; Böckli & Marai 2008). Böckli suggests the attractive but yet unconfirmed hypothesis that vertical transhumance was practiced to take advantage of seasonally differing vegetation and possibly water access. The latter is supported by the fact that all high altitude sites appear to be associated with large basins capable of holding rain water for extended periods. On the Hassanein plateau (the easternmost of the high sandstone plateaus making up the upper mass of the mountain) we have found in 2004 a shelter over 200 metres long, filled with paintings of an excellent quality, in perfect state of preservation (fig. 6 & 7). This shelter, that is the second largest both in terms of size and the number of paintings, lies very close to a large guelta (intermittent rock pool) that was observed being full of water in October 2007 following late summer rains (fig. 8), providing a glimpse of how the environment could have appeared in late prehistory, during the Neolithic pluvial.

Fig. 8

The guelta (intermittent rock pool) on the Hassanein plateau, following the 2007 summer rains.



Fig. 6

The large shelter on the Hassanein plateau (Site HP 21/A).



Fig. 7

Scene from the large shelter on the Hassanein plateau (Site HP 21/A).



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Fig. 9
The inscription of
Mentuhotep (II ?)
at Jebel Uweinat.

Though the hypothesis that the Nile valley was occupied by nomads driven by desiccation from the Eastern Sahara is an attractive and plausible one, to date no definite links have been demonstrated between the ‘cattle pastoralists’ of Jebel Uweinat and the Nile Valley cultures. However there are certain aspects of the paintings, which foreshadow some characteristics of the classical Egyptian civilisation. The most notable is the emergence of a standardized iconography over a large geographical area, and over an extended time period. Cattle and humans are always depicted in similar postures, with uniform abstractions. There are several examples of similar composite scenes involving several figures. The paintings convey a sophisticated culture with high aesthetic values.

Archaeological and paleoclimatic research in the southern Gilf Kebir (Kröpelin 2005) established that due to deteriorating environmental conditions, permanent human habitation ceased in the area around 3500 B.C. Further research is needed to establish whether any contacts may have existed between the deep desert cultures, and the emerging Nile Valley civilisations. However a recent find of an early Middle Kingdom inscription (**fig. 9**) at Jebel Uweinat by Mark Borda (Clayton *et. al* 2008) clearly demonstrates such links to have been in existence around 2000 B.C. and may have been based on earlier traditions. Certainly this new find will require the re-assessment of our understanding of deep-desert travel by Ancient Egyptians, and their relationship with the desert people.

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