

Drawing the World: Petroglyphs from Kharga Oasis

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This article presents an overview of a few of the rock art sites discovered and recorded by the North Kharga Oasis Survey (NKOS) in the western part of Kharga Oasis. These images are found on large sandstone rocks and include animals and humans, as well as Pharaonic and later inscriptions.

During the course of its study of Kharga Oasis, the North Kharga Oasis Survey (NKOS) has discovered several examples of petroglyphs inscribed on the local sandstone.¹ While some rock art sites lie in the main body of the oasis, the majority are located in its western part, in the area of the Darb Ain Amur the route that connected Kharga to Dakhla, via the mini-oasis of Umm el-Dabadib (**fig. 1**). Although the survey of this area is by no means complete, NKOS has so far recorded rock art sites of all periods, from the prehistoric onward.² A wide variety of motifs are found in this part of the oasis, including representations of animals, boats, humans, geometric designs, inscriptions (hieroglyphic and later). Some of the deities of Pharaonic Egypt, notably Seth, Amun, and an image of Tawesret are also present. At the time of writing this article none of the Predynastic rock art panels have been published and there is more exploration, recording, and research of the rock art yet to be carried out. Thus, in this article I will present a selection of panels from five out of the 17 plus rock art sites

1. NKOS is an American University in Cairo expedition, co-directed by Corinna Rossi and the author. We are grateful to the Supreme Council of Antiquities for facilitating our work and also to the Antiquities Endowment Fund of the American Research Center in Egypt, the National Geographic Society, and several private donors for supporting our research. The results outlined in this paper draw on several seasons work, with a variety of team members, most constantly Pieter Collet, Alison Gascoigne, Nicholas Warner, and Leslie Warden. I am grateful to them and all of the others who have participated in this project, particularly Dirk Huyge for his generous help, comments, advice, and good humour.

2. The usual problems with dating rock art are relevant to the Kharga material. Most tentative dates are based on parallels from other Egyptian sites, as well as from what is known of the material culture of the Nile Valley.

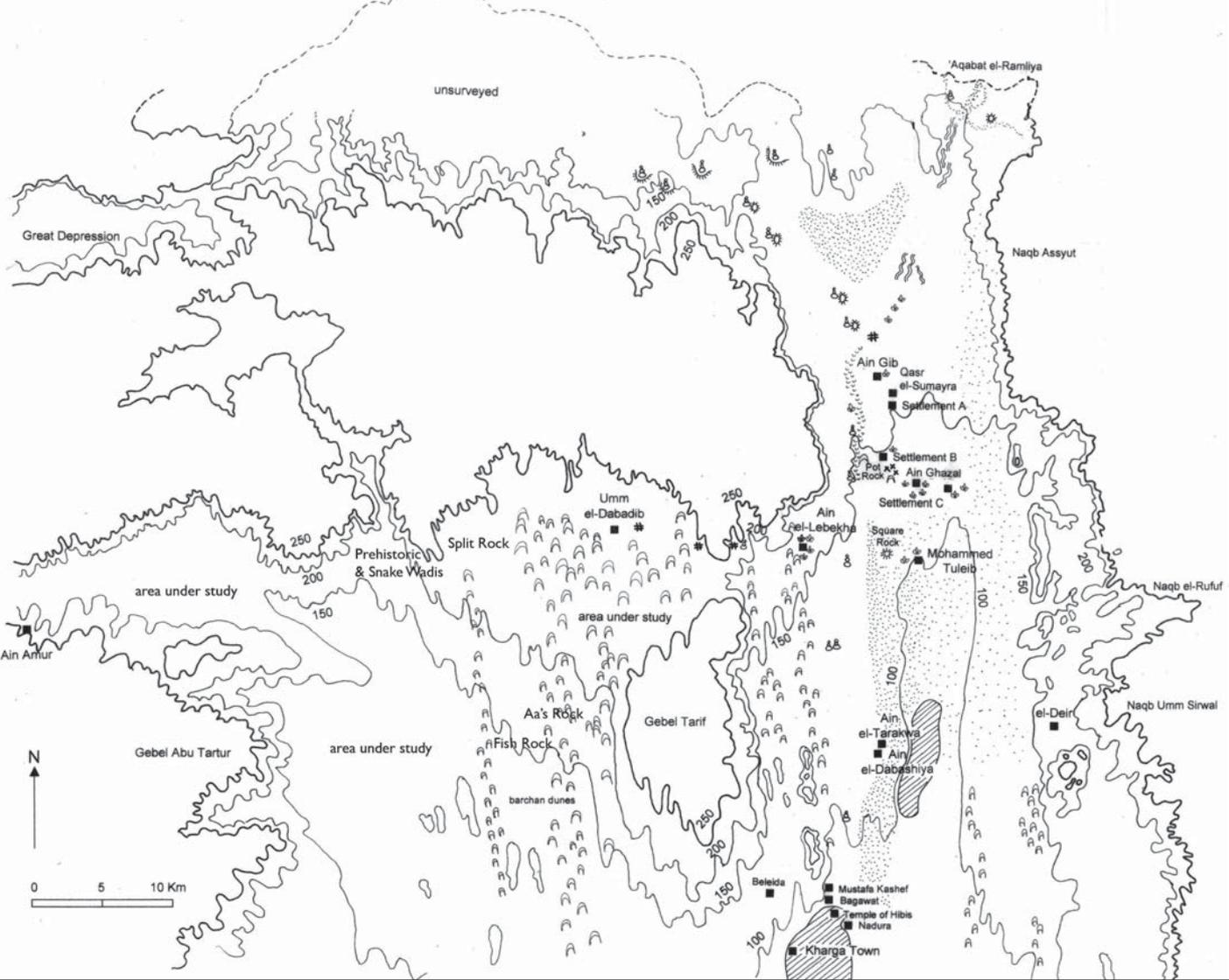


Fig. 1
Map of northern Kharga Oasis with main sites surveyed by NKOS.

found thus far.³ These will show the range of the material from the Darb Ain Amur region, focussing on the non-inscriptional material. I will only provide limited analysis of these here as our understanding of this area and its rock art is in its infancy.

Location and Environment

The topography of the western part of the Kharga depression varies between fields of barchan dunes, vast tracts of powdery sand, playas, and uneven, rocky terrain. Occasional areas where the water table is marginally higher support patches of vegetation in the form of camel thorn, and in rare instances, tamarisk trees. The floor of the depression is periodically punctuated by sandstone inselbergs of different sizes, which provide the sites for the rock art that NKOS has thus far found. Many of these are encircled, if not completely engulfed by sand, and cannot be recorded until the dunes move. Others have surfaces that are unsuitable for rock art. Weathering (sand, wind, and sometimes water) has obviously adversely affected the rocks, in some instances wearing away large portions of rock (particularly the western faces) leaving us with a slightly skewed perspective of what was once on them. The rocks are also quite fragile, with rock art images and panels breaking apart between one year and the next. One site has even seen some vandalism, with evidence for robbers trying to cut out a small inscription. They abandoned their efforts when the panel cracked and half of it crumbled.

³. I am not providing specific GPS points due to security reasons. I would be happy to provide further information to colleagues.

The environment and climate of this area, like the rest of the Western Desert, was very different in the prehistoric period (Schild & Wendorf 1977; Wendorf & Schild 1980; Churcher & Mills 1999; Caton-Thompson 1952; McDonald 2001). At one time some places were even forested. All that remains of these woodlands are petrified logs. The wetter, arboreal environment seems to have gradually changed to a savannah with acacia trees and lakes whose playas are still visible, supporting diverse fauna, similar to that found in Kenya and Tanzania today. Possibly this savannah-like situation persisted into the Early Dynastic Period, with the area gradually becoming increasingly desiccated during the Pharaonic era. Even then, it is possible that small pockets of water, perhaps seasonal, remained to support a reduced group of fauna and local flora. These might also have sustained groups of people, either transiting through the landscape, or staying for longer periods on a seasonal basis.

For the most part the majority of inselbergs that provide the matrix for the rock art of Kharga do not seem to have been chosen for any obvious religious reasons, but rather for practical ones. There is a paucity of large rocks in the depression, particularly ones with surfaces suitable for engraving. The few examples that exist are also important as markers and stopping points that provide shade and protection. Many are along the route⁴ that connected the two watered sites in the area: Umm el-Dabadib and Ain Amur, and thus are the site of images and inscriptions from many periods. Others border the edges of playas, and thus might have been sites for Neolithic settlements, temporary or permanent. Some possible early sites with lithics, ostrich eggshells and the beads made of them, grinders, and crude shelters have been found at or in the environs of the rock art sites. A few sites are situated in the area of the low spurs of the escarpment that borders the northern edge of the depression. Again, some are associated with the Darb Ain Amur, while others seem to be temporary (seasonal?) settlements, primarily dating to the Neolithic, although there might be earlier material (Epipalaeolithic) there as well (Dirk Huyge, personal communication).

The main sites referred to in this article are found at Aa's Rock, Fish Rock, Split Rock and its adjacent *wadis*, Snake Wadi and the associated Prehistoric Wadi. Aa's Rock and Split Rock are large inselbergs located on the different stretches of the Darb Ain Amur, while the remaining sites, although not far from the others, consists of groups of outcrops or *wadis* in the lower areas of the scarp. This latter group seems to have been used over a more limited period of time and show no evidence of Pharaonic or post-Pharaonic usage.

Dating the Rock Art

It is notoriously difficult to date rock art. As the issues involved with dating rock art have been more than adequately covered elsewhere (Whitley 2005; Watchman 1993; Bednarik 1996), these problems will not be addressed here, particularly as the finds presented here come from a survey with no securely associated cultural remains. In some instances I will provide tentative dates based on super-positioning of scenes and parallels from the Nile Valley, both in terms of rock art as well as material culture, particularly decoration found on ceramics. However, the absence of a large corpus of figural evidence from the Nile Valley prior to the Badarian period, rather limits

4. Desert routes, like others, tend to change over time as the terrain changes. They also vary depending on the number of people and animals travelling on them, their respective loads, and a host of other reasons. Thus, the Darb Ain Amur has several strands, all working to connect the two watered areas.

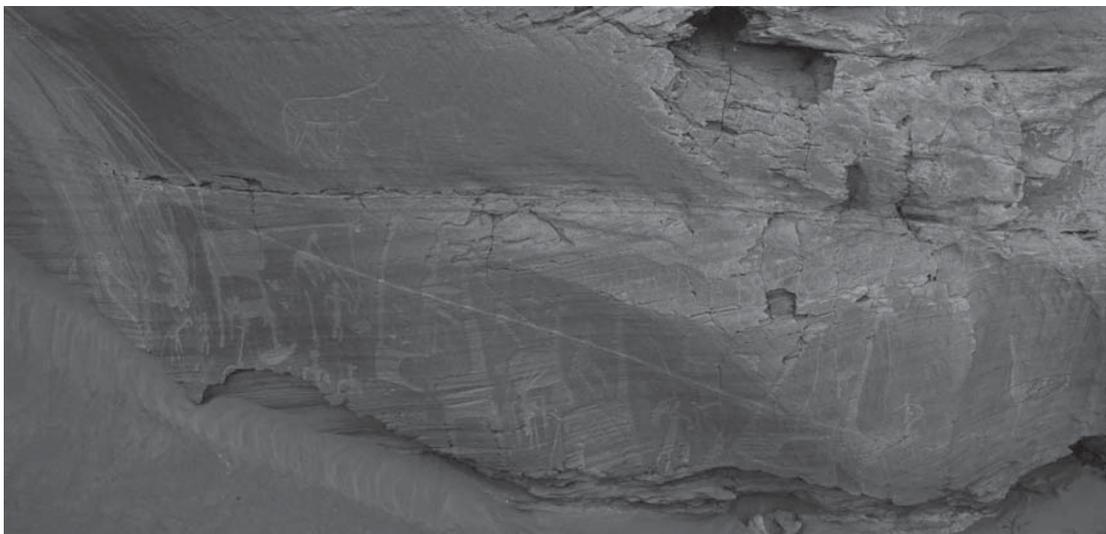
what can be achieved in our attempts to establish a chronology for the rock art of the Western Desert. Within the limited means available, it seems that, with a few exceptions, the majority of rock art thus far documented seems to date from the Epipalaeolithic/Neolithic Periods right through the Islamic period, although the dating is imprecise.

Aa's Rock

This rock is one of the largest and richest rock art sites in the area, measuring nearly two kilometres in length, varying between 750 and 10 metres in width, and approximately 60 metres at its highest point, and is located along a more peripheral arm of the Darb Ain Amur route. It is named for the royal name written in a *serekh* found on the eastern side of the rock, containing the sign of an arm (Gardiner Sign List D36), and surmounted by a falcon (Ikram & Rossi 2004). Different panels of rock art are found on almost all its sides (parts of the southern portion are engulfed by sand), but there is nothing visible on the very top. Obviously the ground level varied over time, as some rock art panels are high up on the rock face, while others are lower, and many bear the marks of being covered by sand. Parts of the rock are very fragile; some panels have broken in two over the space of one year. The remains of playas nearby suggest that this area could have either supported populations of humans and animals either on a permanent, seasonal, or incidental basis. Further evidence for longer-term human occupation takes the form of a crude rock shelter on the southwest side of the rock, with some eroded flint scatters located nearby. The image types found on the rock include animals (giraffe, oryx, dogs, cattle, birds, including ostrich), a boat, human figures, geometric designs, inscriptions (Libyco-Berber, hieroglyphic, and later – even a graffito left by one P. K. Lynch), and an image of Tawesret. Clearly the rock has provided permanent or temporary shelter to humans over many millennia. There are several panels on this rock. Due to practical considerations, I will discuss only a selection of the more unusual of these here. The most spectacular, located on the eastern face, shows a group of giraffes, humans, and elephants that has been created by pecking (**fig. 2**). It is tentatively dated to late Naqada II/early Naqada III based on the form of the elephants and parallels for the giraffe and human images (Dirk Huyge, personal communication; Huyge 2002; Huyge 2003). These seem to

Fig. 2

A panel on Aa's Rock showing a group of giraffes and their 'handlers'. Elephants also feature on this panel. The area above bears the image of a bull (Pharaonic) and the faint lines of a giraffe made at an earlier period.



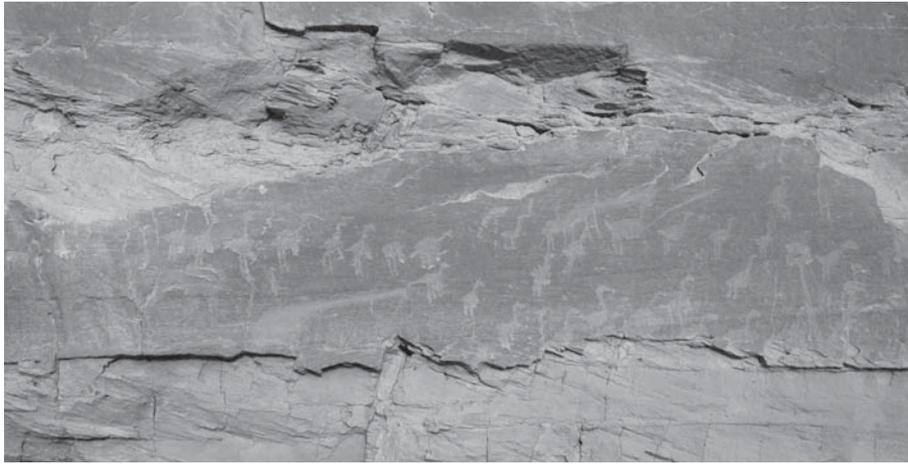


Fig. 3

The storks (?) on this panel seem to be flapping as they come in to land, and then showing themselves standing straight. Other animals also appear on this panel, but do not seem to have been made as part of the bird group.

have been created as a single event. Above this panel are another solitary pecked giraffe (faint) of uncertain date and a much later carved Pharaonic bull. Some of the giraffes in the main panel have leads held by human figures – presumably men. Such images have already been documented in Egypt, both east and west of the Nile (Krzyżaniak 1990; Winkler 1938-1939). Winkler suggests that the leads are actually lassos that have been used to capture the animals (Winkler 1939: 31, pls. LIII, LIV). Leashed giraffes are also known from other parts of Africa, such as Namibia (Van Hoek 2003). Their precise purpose and meaning is much discussed (Van Hoek 2003), with suggested explanations for this motif ranging from the practical to the spiritual. Krzyżaniak (1990) suggests that these depict an attempt to tame or domesticate giraffes, although a Tuareg informant who has seen similar images elsewhere in Africa does not support this idea (Coulson & Cambell 2001: 48). Van Hoek (2003) links the tethered giraffe to the idea that giraffes were kept as they were associated with rain making or predicting. Conversely, Huyge (2002), following on from Westerdorf (see discussion in Huyge 2002), has portrayed giraffes as heliophoric creatures; thus, tethering these creatures suggests some kind of control over the sun. Not all the giraffes in the group are oriented in the same way. A few look as if they are seated with their legs sticking out. Such poses are also documented for other parts of Africa, in particular Namibia. Whether this is due to a reflection of visual systems and perceptual proclivities, a reflection of hunting practices involving the severing of the animals' Achilles tendon (Deregowski & Berger 1997; Van Hoek 2005; Dupuy 1995), or an arbitrary choice made by the artist remains a matter of discussion.

The western side of Aa's rock bears another panel, measuring more than a metre in length, depicting a flock of birds that has been made by a combination of pecking and incising. I have tentatively identified these as some sort of long-legged waterfowl, perhaps storks (**fig. 3 & 4**), although they might be flamingos. More clearly



Fig. 4

Drawing of the main portion of the stork panel.
Drawing by Pieter Collet

identifiable crane or stork-like birds have been recorded in the Elkab region; these have tentatively been dated to the Naqada III/Early Dynastic Period (Huyge 2003: fig. 5), although the Kharga examples look earlier in date and are possibly Naqada II/III in date (Dirk Huyge, personal communication). It is very difficult to date this panel as there are no real parallels available to judge the date. The panel is unusual, as it appears to depict (from left (north) to right (south)) a flock of flying birds coming in to land, with their wings shown flapping down in front of them, with a group of successfully landed birds standing with their wings folded further along. If this interpretation is indeed correct, this panel is an unusual representation that is narrative in nature, showing a connected group of events. Moving birds, generally ostriches have been recorded elsewhere in Egypt, most notably in the Wadi Hammamat. In other African rock art contexts it has been suggested that ground-walking species of birds are metaphors for humans in another dimension, perhaps one dealing with the soul (Coulson & Campbell 2001: 59). This might be tied in to later Egyptian ideas of the *ba* and *akh*, although the species of bird associated with the different aspects of the ancient Egyptian soul is neither a stork nor a flamingo, so perhaps metaphoric interpretations of this panel should be laid aside for the moment.

A pecked and incised image of a left hand (fig. 5) was found on the northwest side of the rock. Although images of hands (generally painted) are well documented in rock art all over the world, thus far this is the sole example found in the Kharga depression. The Cave of the Hands located between Kharga and the Nile Valley shows negative hand-prints, but in paint (Darnell 2002: 161, pl. 90-91). The other closest painted examples, also of left hands, can be found in Farafra (Huyge 2003: 66, 67, fig. 9; Barich & Hassan 2000) and the Cave of the Hands (also known as the Foggini, Mestekawi, or Mestekawi-Foggini Cave) in the area of the cave of the swimmers in the Gilf Kebir. Whether the image of a hand is a record, like the later images of feet and sandals, of someone's presence, or has a deeper spiritual significance is not known.

Various abstract shapes also commonly appear in rock art worldwide. Some of these have been explained as images of fish traps (Huyge 1998a) or maps (Cherry 2000), while others remain obscure and are seen as images reflective of trances (Clottes & Lewis-Williams 1998; Lewis-Williams 2002). Aa's rock has an unusual motif (fig. 6) incised high into the northern side of the rock. This amazingly elegant spiralling shape is made as a single line. Following on the practical interpretation presented by Huyge (1998a), perhaps this geometric shape can be interpreted as an image of some

Fig. 5
An incised image of a hand on Aa's Rock.

Fig. 6
Enigmatic spirals found high up on the northern tip of Aa's Rock.



**Fig. 7**

The broken image of a donkey, dating to the Pharaonic period, found on Aa's Rock. The sandstone is so friable that between one year and the next this panel sheared in two.

sort of hunting aid, perhaps some kind of enclosure or run for trapping gazelles or other creatures. Its date is unknown, but its patination, position and abstract nature suggest a date prior to c. 4500 BC (Huyge 2003).

Another image of interest is that of a donkey that probably dates to the Pharaonic Period. This too is on the north side of the rock, but lower than the abstract image mentioned above. When NKOS initially discovered it, it was intact. By the following year, due to the effects of weathering, it broke (**fig. 7**). Donkeys (our image is clearly male) were the chief beast of burden throughout the Pharaonic Period and are attested as crucial components of caravans travelling anywhere, including in the Western Desert (Förster 2007). Even Aa's rock bears an inscription referring to one Intef and his donkeys. Although no inscription accompanies this image, it is possibly a depiction of one of the sturdy creatures that made the image's creator's trip here possible.

Fish Rock

This name is attached to a group of rocks that are situated within a playa area that is removed from the Darb Ain Amur (**fig. 8**). One of the rocks here bears engravings of three fish in a row (**fig. 9**), which gives the site its name. One of the fish appears to be a *Tilapia (Nilotica) (boliti)*, while the other might conceivably be a (Nile) perch (*Lates*) of some sort; the third fish has been scratched out. In the Pharaonic Period the first two species of fish are often pictured together (Brewer & Friedman 1989: 74-78). The identity of the third fish remains uncertain. Images of fish are rare in Egyptian rock art, both in the Eastern and Western deserts (Huyge *et al.* 1998; Huyge 1998b). It is difficult to date this group – they might be Predynastic or even Pharaonic, although there is no accompanying inscription that argues for the Dynastic date. Stylistically they look more Dynastic than Predynastic and some scholars have even suggested that they might be as late as the Coptic Period (Dirk Huyge, personal communication), although they do not stylistically quite fit such a late date.

Other rocks in the area are adorned with an assortment of images, clearly all of different periods. As usual, giraffes predominate and seem to be of different periods. Other quadrupeds that are probably antelope also figure, with the oryx being the easiest to distinguish. An image of a crocodile or lizard (now badly broken) was also



Fig. 8
The area of Fish Rock.

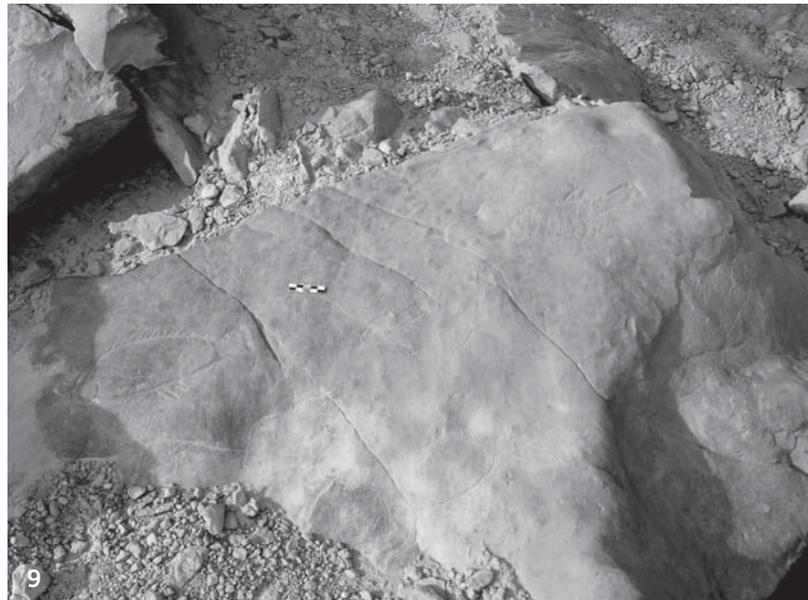


Fig. 9
The three fish carved into a horizontal rock surface at Fish Rock.

recorded here. Although images of reptiles are few and far between in the Western Desert, they are not unknown. A possibly Dynastic, image of a crocodile occurs on Aa's Rock. Winkler (1939: 7) has recorded another possible one at Site 61 on the Darb el Ghubari, an alternate route connecting Kharga to Dakhla oasis, one that the modern asphalt road closely follows, as well as another at Site 69 in the area of Teneida in Dakhla (Winkler 1939: 9). Both these seem to be earlier than the Dynastic Period. Over to one side of the Fish Rock area NKOS has recorded a boat that possibly dates to the Pharaonic Period or even the Late Antique – further research is required to fix its date.

Several sets of parallel grooves that might be interpreted as a calendar are also carved into the rocks here, in an area that might have once served as a crude shelter. Olaf Kaper (personal communication) has noted similar ones in Dakhla and Winkler has recorded similar examples at site 63 (M 720) off of the Darb el-Ghubari. We also noted some vertical deep parallel lines of a much larger scale, measuring about 1.6 m in length. Winkler recorded similar lines at site 63 (M 745). Shorter parallel lines have occasionally been interpreted as residues of knife sharpening; however, this explanation does not seem feasible for such long lines.

Scattered remains of Neolithic settlements in the form of grinders, lithics and ostrich eggs are found on the surface at the western edge of the ancient playa and a group of crude rock huts are located on one of the rocky hillocks – doubtless some of the inhabitants of this area carved the various images that are found here.

Split Rock & Environs

This rock, measuring about 750 metres in length, lies along the Darb Ain Amur. It is named for the ancient break between its northern tip and the rest of the rock. Based on the images carved high on this rock the rock did not split until sometime during or after the Pharaonic Period as it sports hieroglyphics and images of men incised in the Pharaonic style. The original shape of the rock, with its raised northern side, evokes an image of a crouching animal with a raised head, or the rearing head and spread hood of a cobra. Its unusual shape, as well as its location along the Darb Ain Amur, make it a significant site for travellers and might also have given it a spiritual significance. The western side of the rock has suffered a great deal of erosion due to wind and sand and few original surfaces remain; the rock art is concentrated on the east face. The area north of this rock and a surrounding spit of the low hills of the



Fig. 10
A large panel
at Split Rock
showing giraffes,
oryx, elephants
and Fat Ladies.

escarpment also show evidence of some of the area's most unusual petroglyphs, as well as being host to a small group of crude rock huts whose date is indeterminable due to the absence of related archaeological material.

Amongst the many panels of rock art on the main rock is one panel in the south that to some extent typifies the motifs that are frequently found in this area (**fig. 10**). This shows several animals, the majority of which face north: giraffes, oryx, a few gazelles, possibly one ostrich and an elephant. The panel was enhanced at different periods, with most creatures being carved, probably, during the Naqada II or later periods (e.g. the elephant on the far right has a cross between 'butterfly' and 'Mickey Mouse'-style ears, so might even date to Naqada III). One giraffe looks as if it is tethered, although there is no person attached to the other end of its leash. At least one of the giraffes faces south and looks as if it were seated (see above for discussion). At least two images of fat women, similar to those found in Dakhla Oasis and in the environs of Darb el-Ghubari (Winkler Sites 62, 63, 66, 67 [1939: 7-8, pl. XXXIX-XLVII]) also grace this panel; other examples of the Fat Ladies occur in different places on this rock as well as other locations in the area. Initially Lech Krzyżaniak, who discovered and examined many of the Dakhla examples, dated these figures to early or mid-Holocene times (8th to 4th millennium B.C.); however, as in Dakhla the area of distribution of the figures corresponds to that of the local Neolithic (Bashendi A and B) assemblages and they may therefore properly be ascribed to the 6th or 5th millennium B.C. (Huyge 2003: 68). Whether these are fertility figures or mother goddesses remains a matter for debate (Berger 2008). Unfortunately their placement does not provide significant information concerning the dating of the other figures in the panel.

The northern part of Split Rock that is now separated away shows considerable activity. The southern face (**fig. 11**) hosts a miscellaneous set of images ranging from pubic triangles, images of men that clearly date to the Pharaonic Period, some hieroglyphics, a picture of a falcon, different dogs and a Barbary Sheep. Although Barbary Sheep were common in this region, surprisingly few images from Kharga have thus far been recorded. This is one of the few. Another, faded image of the same creature might also exist on the rock, but this is difficult to ascertain. The hieroglyphics (most notably the *hetep* sign) do not seem to form complete phrases, but are randomly placed. They, together with the images of men in kilts, might date to the First Intermediate Period or later. The pack of dogs could date to any point during the Pharaonic Period and the pubic triangles might date from the Old Kingdom onward, if not earlier. These vaginal images are also very common in the rock art of both the Eastern and Western Deserts of many periods, and have been recorded by travelers and



Fig. 11
Hieroglyphics,
Pharaonic figures
and Barbary Sheep
at Split Rock.

scholars in both these regions and elsewhere (Winkler 1938-1939; Krzyżaniak 1990; Olaf Kaper personal communication; personal observation). The interpretations of these images vary, depending on context (Verner 1973: 105-10). A plethora of these occur, together with *wusum* (Bedouin tribal marks), on the northern and lower parts of the eastern and western faces of this part of Split Rock. Whether they signify fertility, are abstract images, or are indicative of lust remains a matter for conjecture.

The upper portions of the western face of part of Split Rock (**fig. 12**) shows a combination of images. These include pubic triangles, long-horned cattle, oryx, a goat, a bird, a man with one leg flexed and resting on his knee and a boat. Cattle do not seem to be the earliest creatures shown in rock art; giraffes, oryx and in the Eastern Desert, ibex, antedate cattle are also present. Although it is possible that some early images show wild cattle, it is more probable that the majority of cattle in rock art date to a time after their domestication, sometime during the Neolithic, c. 6000 B.C. at the earliest (Blench & MacDonald 2000). It is interesting that cattle are concentrated on this one area of the rock rather than anywhere else here. Was this portion of the rock especially significant to cattle herders? Certainly cattle were known in the oases and it is possible that Farafra Oasis was used to graze cattle: one of the writings of its name in Egyptian consists of the land sign followed by a long-horned cow/bull as pictured in Gardiner sign-list E1 (Giddy 1987: 47-8). This might also have been the case for Kharga and Dakhla; an inscription that NKOS discovered along the Darb Ain Amur

Fig. 12
Images of cattle,
goat, boat and
pubic triangles
at Split Rock.



mentions one Userhat whose title implies that he was involved with keeping track of Amun's cattle – perhaps herds located in the oases. The cattle shown here seem to date stylistically to a variety of periods: both to the Predynastic (maybe even Pre-historic) as well as the Pharaonic eras. The representation of a goat (near the top) is also unusual. Perhaps this portion of the rock was devoted to domesticated creatures, while other parts of the larger chunk was reserved for wild animals. The bird is probably Pharaonic or later in date and is some type of waterfowl.

The boat in this panel, located between the legs of the cow and the goat, belongs to the group labelled as 'incurved square boats' by Winkler. It is closest to the one pictured on plate XXV.26, 27, 28 in Winkler (1938), except it has two parallel accoutrements that look like 'Y's on the 'deck' and a steering oar, such as is pictured in Winkler's plate XXXV.26. This must date from sometime during the Naqada II Period or slightly later. The standing man depicted here seems to be part of the culture that produced the 'Fat Ladies' mentioned above; in other areas such thin men are sometimes paired with these ladies (see below).

A couple of shallow *wadis* lie north of Split Rock, nestled between low-lying spurs of the escarpment, facing south. These two are incidental sites for rock art, bearing only one or two images. One tip of these is enhanced by an image of a hippopotamus (fig. 13). Away from the Nile Valley, hippos are rarer in the art of the Western Desert than that of the Eastern (Winkler 1938-1939; Morrow & Morrow 2002, Rohl 2000; personal observation). The style of its carving compares favourably with late Badarian/Naqada I images of hippos. Perhaps one could tentatively date this image to between 4000 and 3400 B.C.

A group of different animals are found on another spur, also facing south. This pseudo-herd consists of gazelle and oryx (fig. 14), animals that were indigenous to the area; only gazelle are found in isolated areas in the Western Desert now. The horns of the animal on the bottom right of the panel look as if they belong to an ibex, but perhaps this is merely a different sort of oryx as ibex are not found in the Western Desert. However, one might argue that an image of an ibex might be a record of an animal seen elsewhere, in conjunction with the creatures with which the artist was familiar. Winkler records a similar mix of oryx and gazelle, together with giraffe at Site 67 (M 796), off the Ghubari Road. As with this panel, the images found by Winkler seem to be made by a single individual.

Fig. 13
An incised hippopotamus north of Split Rock.

Fig. 14
A herd of gazelle and antelope in the area of Split Rock.

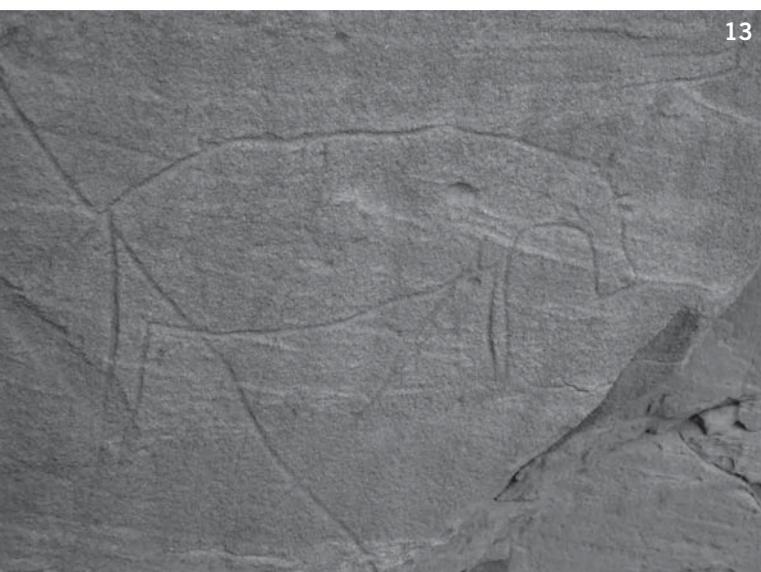




Fig. 15
Spiders near
Split Rock.

In a shallow *wadi*, located about 60 metres or so northwest of the hippopotamus and gazelle rocks lies another site, with images carved into a sandstone curved overhang. The sandstone is fragile: the southern portion of the overhang has cracked and fallen off, depositing a chunk of rock about two metres square onto the desert floor. The overhang originally faced (roughly) east, and is adorned with a carving of an oryx as well creatures that, as far as I know, are unique in Saharan, or even Old World rock art: a group of what I have interpreted as spiders (**fig. 15**). The creatures are made by gouging out an oval, and then incising four legs on each side, and in some cases pedipalp (appendages near the mouth of a spider) or the jaws beneath. The reason for depicting these creatures is unclear; they figure neither in the art of the Nile Valley of any period nor in religious contexts. Certainly spiders inhabit this area, but this is insufficient explanation for representing them. At present they remain an enigma, as does their dating. They seem to be, based on patination and superpositioning, to date to a very old phase of rock art.

Other images also adorn this rock. Some, located near the spiders, consist of groups of lines, some parallel and others in star shapes. The broken portion of the rock sports similar ovals. Although they include sets of two or three, with lines emanating from the sides and sets of three or four lines, extending out of the top and bottom. The only remote parallels that have thus far been identified are those found by Winkler (1939) at Site 52 (M622), south of el-Hosh west of the Gubba of Sheikh Abd es-Salam and at Site 53 (M644) that is near Aswan. These actually look more like sun disks than spiders. Marks on the fallen rock's upper left side might be vestigial remains of a pair of human figures: a Fat Lady and a Skinny Man, although these identifications are by no means secure.

Prehistoric/Snake Wadi

To the west and roughly parallel to the area of Split Rock lies the very wide Prehistoric Wadi. This opens eastward into the Snake Wadi, which runs roughly diagonally northwest to southeast. The Prehistoric Wadi is part of the foothills of the escarpment, with the Snake Wadi cut into one side of it. The areas near the mouth of Snake Wadi and the initial part of Snake Wadi itself have the densest concentration of petroglyphs.

The petroglyphs found in the Prehistoric Wadi include the usual oryx and giraffes, in addition to human figures. One panel facing west, shows giraffes (almost all face

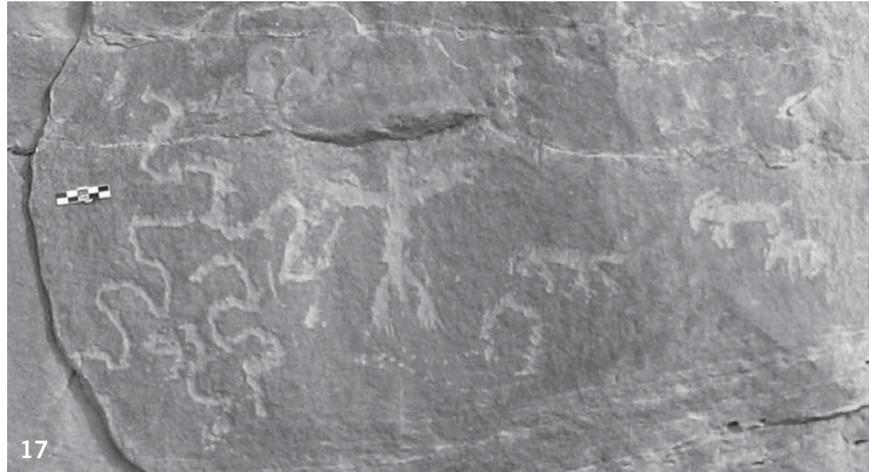


Fig. 16
Images of the Fat Ladies in the Prehistoric Wadi.

Fig. 17
Possibly a *wadi* map carved next to a male figure and some oryx.

south) and the Fat Ladies (**fig. 16**). The giraffe to the far left might be reticulated, has a tail that looks like a sparkler and has been dubbed a 'bushy-tailed' giraffe. This might date it to approximately Naqada I (Huyge 2002; 2003). Another giraffe, with no interior detail, looks as if it might be sitting down (see above). The Fat Ladies noted in Kharga almost always appear in pairs, sometimes with a line attaching one to the other. Generally the pairs consist of two women, although a few examples of one Fat Lady with one Skinny Man have also been found. If the dating proposed by Krzyżaniak (see above) is correct, then these would dramatically antedate the giraffes

Another panel (**fig. 17**) shows a few oryx on the right, followed by a fully frontal person with arms spread wide and a group of meandering lines. The oryx might be a separate event from the frontal figure and the meandering lines. The figure seems to be of a man with a penis dangling between his legs, although there is a slight possibility that it could be interpreted as a top view of a lizard of some sort; however, the length of what would be the tail is unconvincing. The lines to the right might be snakes, or more likely, an ancient map showing intersecting *wadis*. Such maps have been recorded in the Eastern Desert (Cherry 2000). Thus far NKOS has not identified these lines with any particular areas in western Kharga. If the panel is taken as a whole, one possible interpretation might be that a person can find (or has found) oryx in the place indicated by the map.



Fig. 18
Snakes in Snake Wadi.

Fig. 19

Large panel in Snake Wadi showing human figures engaged in various activities, as well as architecture and animals. The rock must have been carved over a long period of time in subsequent bursts of activity.



The Snake Wadi is a shallow meandering valley, named for the images of snakes found within it (**fig. 18**). There is no doubt that these undulating lines with pronounced heads represent serpents. Two panels close together bear the best examples; less elegant examples are also found in the *wadi*. The snakes (far left and far right) are long, sinuous and well-fed. A curious image of what seems to be a bird accompanies the snakes on the right. It looks like a peacock, but this is clearly impossible as these birds are alien to Egypt. It might be a depiction of an ostrich with exaggerated tail feathers. Whether there is any special significance in its juxtaposition with the snakes is, as yet, unknown. The large snake on the far left is particularly well carved – even the scales are hinted at by the artist.

Fig. 20

Drawing of the central and most densely figured portion of the large panel in the Snake Wadi overhang.

Drawing by Pieter Collet

The concentration of images in this area is on the north eastern face, with only a few images appearing elsewhere. In addition to snakes, NKOS has discovered some deeply gouged seemingly random lines with a dark patina nearby. These might be much older than the snakes, but exactly how old is indeterminable at this point. Only a very few images of oryx and giraffe appear within this whole area. Finds of (undated) grinding stones and some Neolithic Period stone tools have been recovered here.



Aside from the snakes, the bulk of rock art in this *wadi* occurs near its mouth in a shallow overhang/cave. This space is covered with images that have been carved at different times, giving the impression that a group of people had regularly visited the site and embellished it (fig. 19 & 20). Possibly this area had religious significance or was noteworthy as a source for some sort of commodity (water, particular stones, pasturage, etc.). A plethora of human figures (all male?) of different types (excluding the Fat Ladies and Skinny Men) engaged in a variety of activities (carrying things, standing, dancing or walking) dominate the space. Other images include oryx at the top left, a pair of elephants with 'Mickey Mouse' ears (tentatively dated to late Naqada II/early Naqada III) below the dominant male figure, dots that might represent calendars and enigmatic structures that might be dwellings of some sort or large enclosures, perhaps of an administrative or religious nature. Clearly, some of the human figures antedate the finely carved oryx that superimpose them. Very limited types of lithics (see above) have been found here; excavations possibly might yield interesting results that will help decode the abundant rock art found here.

The sites and images presented above represent only a few of the sites that NKOS has found in Kharga. As these are recent discoveries, there is much further investigation required before any significant interpretations can be offered. Most probably, as Huyge argues (2003), the main motivations for rock art are religion and ideology and in some way all petroglyphs are tied in to belief systems, including those found in Kharga. However, it is possible that some rock art has more mundane roots, and perhaps each panel should be evaluated on its own merits. Only time and further research, will help shed light on these enigmatic and compelling images.

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