

Following the trail of prehistoric Saharan artists

The Petroglyphs' Code



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Ewa Kuciewicz, a specialist on Saharan rock art, is preparing a doctorate while working on missions to the Dakhleh Oasis and to Tell el- Farkha in the Nile delta

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Rock drawings found in the south Saharan oasis of Dakhleh, dating back some 7,500–6,000 years, portray female figures, giraffes being led by rope, and other scenes. The secrets they hold about the lives and beliefs of the oasis's Neolithic inhabitants are now being uncovered by an international team of researchers



Eliza Jaroni participates in mission to the Dakhleh Oasis and is preparing a doctorate on Saharan rock art



Prof. Michał Kobusiewicz directs the Petroglyph Unit archeological mission in the Saharan oasis of Dakhleh, studying Stone Age rock art

The term 'rock art' chiefly conjures up images of paintings from southern France and Spain, of Paleolithic masterpieces in dark caves first discovered by torchlight in the late 19th century. Yet the notion of leaving behind a kind of message inscribed on rock has appeared in many cultures across all the continents.

Archeology as a science spent a long time neglecting this particular source of information about the past. The established research methodology had no place for such hard-to-classify images, whose understanding simultaneously required knowledge from the fields of archeology, ethnology, and art history. The intellectual ferment at the end of the 20th century proved to be favorable to rock art: researchers slowly came to realize that this unique phenomenon offered a window on the past which no one had yet peered through.

Rock art research still often heads down blind alleys. Even though these images represent messages nearly directly conferred from the past, it is as if the two "devices"



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The view from one of the Oasis hills (gebels) with a stone surface at the summit, showing female figures carved into the rock



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Female figures carved in the rock often have a distinctly “pear-shaped” body outlines - a simple head, spindly torso and vestigial arms, plus a heavily accented lower body

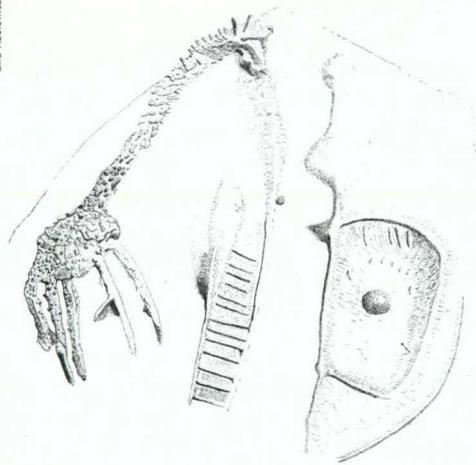
at either end of this “high-speed link” spanning the centuries are running completely different operating systems: the minds of prehistoric artists vs. our minds as their 21st-century audience. Finding some common ground is not easy, although Polish researchers have been striving to do so since 1985, in the Dakhleh Oasis in southern Egypt.

“Islands of the Blessed”

That is how the Egyptian oases were dubbed by Herodotus in the 5th century BC - and aptly so, seeing as they are located in the world’s least hospitable region to mankind, the Western Desert that forms part of the Sahara. These five islets, as enclaves of water, vegetation, and life, must have represented a true blessing for those travelers that managed to reach them.

The Dakhleh Oasis (meaning “inner oasis” in Arabic) is located in southern Egypt, some 600 km from Cairo as the bird flies. This oasis does not look much like the Hollywood image of a pool of azure water surrounded by palms, being in fact a 100 km long conglomeration of small villages and towns with a population of nearly 80,000. This ethnically diverse population, where nearly every village has its own separate dialect, excellently illustrates the oasis’s complex and stormy history. Human communities have inhabited the oasis for some

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Such female outlines with animals being led to them lead researchers to hypothesize that the such “ladies of the oasis” represent images of goddesses

200,000 years without interruption, and so it is not surprising that it is sometimes called “eternal.”

The *Dakhleh Oasis Project* (DOP), an international, interdisciplinary mission led by Dr. Anthony Mills, has been operating in the area since 1977. In Egypt, where archeological concessions are granted to study areas counted in square meters, it was phenomenal when permission was granted to study the oasis as a whole. This made it possible to pursue the project’s main idea: to study the functioning of the oasis as a kind of separate organism, as a microcosm existing in remote enough isolation to make it possible to identify the factors and stimuli affecting it and to trace the mechanisms of change and

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methods of adaptation. While it is mainly under Canadian auspices, the project also includes specialists from Australia, the UK, the US, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, and Poland. There are geologists, botanists, linguists, architects, physical and cultural anthropologists, historians, and of course archeologists.

The first years of research, involving reconnaissance work around the oasis, already turned up numerous rock engravings known as "petroglyphs." This led Prof. Lech Krzyżaniak from the Poznań Archeological Museum, a specialist in Saharan rock art, to be invited to join the project in 1985.

Even though the Saharan region seemed to be maximally exploited archeologically, it was a surprising fact that rock art in the region had previously been studied by few individuals. The first was the Egyptian traveler and adventure-seeker Hussanein Bey, a representative of the Egyptian diplomatic corps who made an epic journey across the Western Desert by camel in 1923, traversing 3,400 km to reach Darfur in Sudan. Along the way he encountered many sites with rock art, which he described in his book *The Lost Oasis*. Next was the Hungarian count Ladislaus de Almasy, later accused of spying for the German Reich, who made discoveries in the region of Gilf Kebir in 1933, including a famous valley with paintings showing "swimmers in a prehistoric lake," as it was then interpreted. Methodical

Rock-art images were produced using various techniques, from engraving to pecking (pounding dents in the rock)

research of rock art in the region was only begun by Hans Winkler, the German art historian, ethnographer, and philologist, who in 1939 published his two-volume *The Rock Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt*, which has already become a classic. The petroglyphs he described included several examples from the eastern Dakhleh Oasis region.

Another 40 years would then have to transpire before this work was taken further, when the Petroglyph Unit was set up under the DOP. The unit now functions as a joint project of the Poznań Archeological Museum and the Polish Academy of Sciences in Poznań, coordinated by Warsaw University's Polish Centre for Mediterranean Archaeology in Cairo.

A Sahara vibrant with life

The desert has many faces, and around the Dakhleh Oasis it is in large part rocky, forming a kind of labyrinth of sandstone rock outcroppings. It is on these rocks that the ancient petroglyphs were carved. Mankind has been shaping the surrounding landscape since the dawn of time, and in this case people turned it into a kind of outdoor picture gallery. Great research efforts, involving methodical reconnaissance work plus hundreds of photos, tracings, and sketches, have been made in the hope of finding some key to interpreting and understanding the prehistoric world portrayed here. Slowly, with the help of knowledge obtained from other DOP specialists, the world of the past encoded in the petroglyphs is beginning to reveal its secrets.

The Sahara was not always a desert. The region's climate has varied over the millennia, oscillating like a sinusoid. The last ice age came to an end some 10,000 years ago, at the start of the Holocene epoch, lasting to this very day. Rains then returned to the Sahara, with the Dakhleh Oasis seeing both summer monsoon rains from the equatorial region and winter rains from the Mediterranean. The landscape we have to picture in our mind's eye is something akin to present-day northern belt of African savannas. Seasonal rivers, reservoirs, and wetlands emerged, with the grassy areas being plied by gazelles, antelopes, ostriches, and predators of various sorts. As vegetation and animals returned, so too did



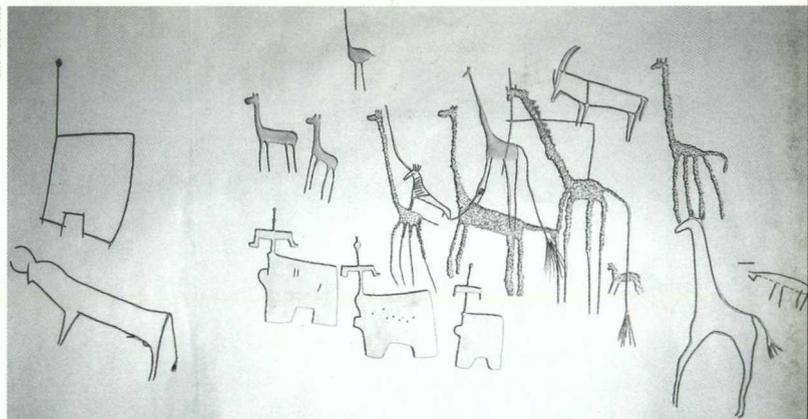
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people. At first during the wettest periods, they moved freely about the entire Sahara – still as nomads and hunter-gatherers, who only periodically made longer stays at the oasis, perhaps during the dry season. Such stays must have offered opportunities for intertribal meetings, exchanging goods, wife-seeking, cult rituals, or simply mutual merriment. Their wanderings sometimes took them far afield, as is evidenced by rock art showing elephants and giraffes, which lived farther to the south.

It seems that the stimulus to begin food production, to enter a new stage of development, came from periodic climactic deteriorations that forced people to stay nearby water reservoirs, to begin agricultural cultivation and animal husbandry. They most likely led a semi-settled lifestyle, wandering with their herds during the wet season around the Libyan Plateau stretching all around, to return to the oasis valley during the dry season. The oasis's Neolithic inhabitants, called the Beshendi culture by archeologists (some 7,500–6,000 years ago) left behind stone tools, stone querns and grinders, piles of ostrich eggshells, and stone architectural structures. But most intriguingly, on rocky faces nowadays lashed by the desert winds, they left behind their own visualizations of the world. These were the earliest producers of rock art in the region.

The world portrayed

We can imagine that what they chose to immortalize in stone reflected what was most important in their lives. The pictures show us various animals they must have seen around them, some of which they hunted. The images are performed using various techniques, ranging from engraving and pecking (pounding dents) to various sorts of abrasions on the rock surface. Just as the animals could once be found gathered at the same water hole, now they appear together on the same sandstone panel. Mighty elephants, with expressively rendered tusks and a characteristic profile, appear alongside delicate and graceful gazelles, executed so precisely that a skilled eye can discern different species. There are processions of ruffled ostriches, moufflons, herds of longhorn cattle, and above all giraffes – they are everywhere, in all possible poses, situations,



configurations, and techniques. Sometimes they are beautifully decorated, with attention to detail and truly artistic taste; sometimes they are merely simplified, schematic outlines. While giraffes represent some 80 percent of all the images, it is astounding to note that their bones do not occur among the remains found in the oasis at all! Some extraordinary pictures show giraffes being led by people with ropes. Did people try to domesticate them? There can be no doubt that these animals must have held some sort of special significance for the oasis community. But what sort of significance? For now, that remains one of many questions.

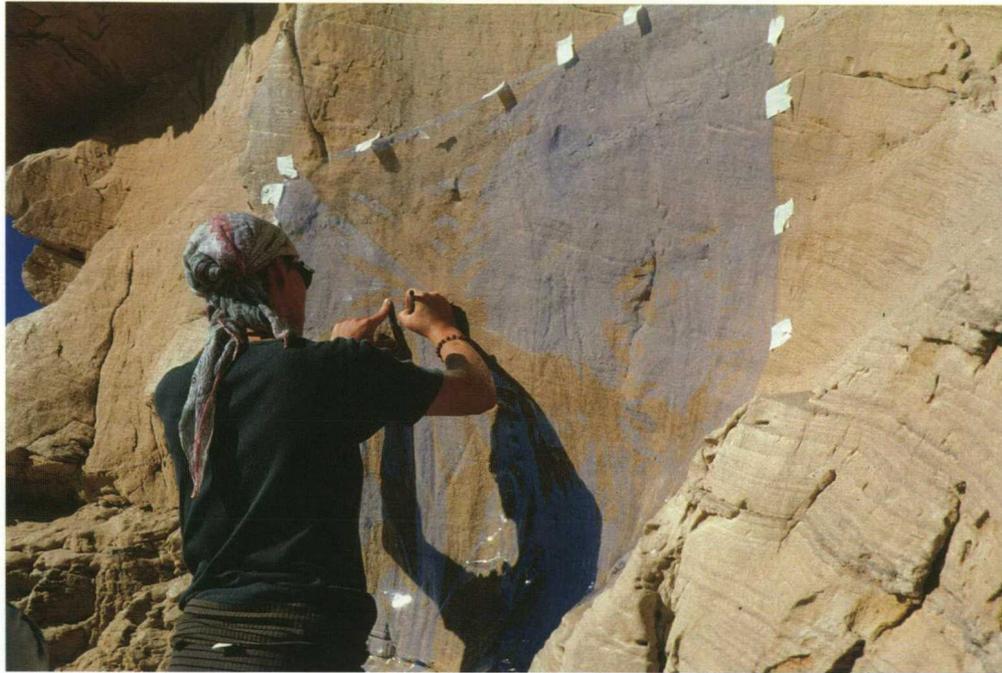
Ladies of the oasis

The greatest secret of the oasis, however, lies in the female figures that are unique within the entire Sahara region. Their stylized outlines are interpreted variously – as being pregnant, or as having a steatopygic

Giraffes are one of the main themes of Dakhleh rock art, often drawn with great attention to detail, but sometimes as simplified schematic outlines (top)

Much as they would once gather at the same water hole, so now mighty elephants, graceful gazelles, ostriches, moufflons, herds of longhorn cattle, and especially giraffes can be found gathering together on the same sandstone panel (bottom)

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Lech Krzyżaniak

Ewa Kuciewicz
copying a rock
engraving in Dakhleh

or “pear-shaped” body. Common traits they share are a very faintly rendered upper body, a merely outlined head, a spindly torso and vestigial arms, plus a heavily accented lower body whose ample dimensions are covered by skirts, frequently richly and inventively decorated. Some of the images are very refined, showing tattoos and body paintings, hairstyles, bracelets and necklaces, and artistic ornamental attire.

Who were these mysterious women of the oasis? What might their significance have been? They are at times shown dancing, at times wearing face masks. Sometimes there are compositions where animals, chiefly giraffes, are being led toward the women. There is a striking disproportion in size between the animals and those leading them on the one hand, and the female figures on the other – the latter being much larger! It has been hypothesized that these are images of real individuals, embodying some sort of female deities.

Petroglyphs showing female figures are very frequently found in particularly prominent locations, such as on specially selected flat panels perched on hilltops. These are veritable altars turned toward the skies. Is it possible that they were related to rain as a source of water (which after all signifies life in societies that produce their own food)? Sometimes female figures are engraved

inside rock depressions used as stationary querns. A quern means food, the basis of subsistence. The female element signifies fertility, fecundity, abundance. Both the potential pregnancy of the female figures and their possible steatopygia naturally suggest reproductive power. Steatopygia was, after all, a very desirable trait in most primitive societies, suggesting fertility. Were the giraffes being led before the “goddesses” to be sacrificed to them? Or were they meant to receive some blessing there, as being particularly important to the oasis community? If the female figures engraved in the Dakhleh Oasis really do portray female fertility-related deities, what rituals might have been performed for them? These and many other questions must remain unanswered for now – we hope that they will not remain so forever. ■

Further Reading:

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