

# Rock Art of the Tassili n Ajjer, Algeria

The Tassili n Ajjer National Park was listed as a World Heritage Site in 1982 on account of its geological formations including 'forests of stone', biological diversity, archaeological importance and prehistoric rock art. In 1986, UNESCO declared the area a Biosphere Reserve under its programme, Man and the Biosphere. It is second on the IUCN List of Protected Areas.

The Tassili n Ajjer National Park (80,000 sq km in extent), one of the richest rock-art areas on earth, is situated in the southeast of Algeria (see Map). In the southwest, the park borders the Ahaggar National Park and in the east and south it borders protected areas in Libya and Niger. Tassili n Ajjer is a Tamahaq name meaning 'plateau' of the Ajjer people, the name of the Kel Ajjer group of tribes whose traditional territory was here. It is a vast, sandstone tableland, its surface now heavily eroded and cut by deep gorges with permanent water pools in the north (Fig. 1), and sandstone forests of clustered, rock pillars (Fig. 2) and

some 300 rock arches in the southeast (Fig. 3). Four species of fish survive in the pools and a variety of plants in the gorges includes 250 Saharan cypress (*Cupressus dupreziana*) known locally as Tarouts; one of the rarest plants on earth (Fig. 4) the Tassili cypress is an endemic species which only exists on the Tassili. It is also one of the oldest trees in the world after the barbed pine (*Pinus aristata*) in the USA. In addition to the living trees there are 150 dead Tarouts on the Tassili. Most large animal species have disappeared, but Barbary sheep (*mouflon*), gazelle, hyrax, wild cats and possibly cheetah are still present. There are over

Fig. 1. One of the permanent water pools in the northern Tassili.

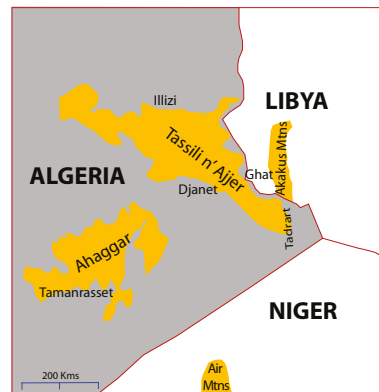


Fig. 2. Typical Tassili moonscape featuring so-called forests of stone.

Fig. 3. One of the many rock arches on the Tassili.

15,000 rock paintings and engravings in the gorges and in the shelters of the sandstone forests (Hachid, 1998) although the true figure is hard to estimate. Until 1960, the shelters were strewn with Neolithic artefacts, ceramic pots and potsherds, stone arrowheads, bowls and grinders, beads and jewellery. Sadly, researchers and tourists have removed most of these artefacts (Keenan, 2002).

Today, the park director, the senior research officer, wardens and guides are stationed in Djanet, a small town north of the Niger border. Other offices with wardens and guides are located throughout the Tassili, especially at Bordj, el-Haouas (Zaouatanllaz), Eherir, Afara and Illizi. This short paper mainly explores the rock art.

## Background

By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Tassili's rock art was already known to the outside world. In the 1930s, French legionnaires visited the art and Lt. Brenans made numerous sketches and notes between 1933 and 1940 which he submitted to the director of the Bardo Museum in Algiers, Maurice Reygasse, who sent them





Fig. 4. The Tassili is the only place on earth where the Saharan cypress or tarout, one of the rarest and most ancient of trees grows.

to the famous prehistorian, the Abbé, Henri Bréuil in France (Keenan, 2002). On several expeditions undertaken in the 1930s, Brenans took Henri Lhote, a French archaeologist, to the Tassili where he and some Kel Ajjer Tuareg guided Lhote through the stone forests and introduced him to the art. Lhote returned in 1956-1957, 1959, 1962 and 1970 with different recording teams.

Henri Lhote was a romantic: Today, some of his theories are considered to be controversial, if not questionable. His team was also accused of 'faking' images (Lajoux, 1962; Soleilhavoup, 1978; Hachid, 1998; Keenan, 2002). Unfortunately, during recording campaigns paintings were sponged down to make them brighter for tracing and photography resulting in serious damage and colours being reduced to a travesty of their original splendour (Hachid, 1998; Keenan, 2002).

Lhote's subsequent book, *The Search for the Tassili Frescoes*, and an exhibition of large reproductions held in 1957-58 at the Louvre, Paris put African rock art on the world map, publicising it as 'fine art' rather than 'primitive art'.

Finally in 1972, part of the area was declared a National Park.

### Changing climate and human responses

Between 12<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BP (Before the Present), Central Sahara's climate was moist; rivers flowed out of the mountains into the surrounding plains forming a mosaic of savannah and woodland interspersed by waterways and lakes. Wildlife was prolific and included elephant, rhinoceros and hippopotamus as well as numerous predators, giraffe and plains animals such as antelope and gazelle (Brooks *et al*, 2005). Some 12,000 years before the present, hunter-gatherers, some of whom also fished, entered the area, mainly from the south but also from the east, probably following the monsoon rains as they expanded northwards (Brooks *et al*, 2005).

Pottery found in Niger's nearby Air Mountains has been dated to 11,500 BP, the most ancient pottery ever discovered, along with the Jomon civilisation of Japan. About 7,000 BP, domestic cattle as well as sheep and goats, first appeared in the Central Sahara, possibly brought in from the Middle East or by Nilotic peoples from the southeast (Brooks *et al*, 2005). Some researchers also believe that the indigenous African aurochs may have been domesticated in the Sahara. At this time some



Fig. 5. Painting from the Round Head Period featuring a large mythical animal and tiny human figures.

Fig. 6. Engraving of a bubalus (ancient, now-extinct buffalo) with huge characteristic horns, surrounded by a group of dog-headed men in the Oued Djerat.





Fig. 7. Bubalus engraving superimposed by a double spiral, Oued Djerat.

Saharans adopted a pastoral lifestyle, while others continued to hunt and gather.

The wet phase was not to last; by 6,000 BP the Sahara had become much drier; rivers and lakes began to disappear and what woodland was left gave way to scrub savannah. By 4,500 BP, many people had taken their livestock and moved south and southeast following the retreating tsetse belt. Wild animal populations changed: hippo disappeared, elephant and rhino became scarce, and animals requiring little water, giraffe, antelope, gazelle and ostrich, inhabited the plains.

### Rock Art

Researchers estimate there are at least 15,000 individual rock-art pictures in the Park, the earliest dating tentatively to 12,000 or more years ago (Mori, 1998). There are however two major schools of thought regarding the chronology and further differences of opinion within these schools. These are the Early/Long chronology (10,000/12,000 BP) proposed by

Fabrizio Mori, Henri Lhote and Malika Hachid and the Recent/Short chronology (6,000 BP) proposed by Alfred Muzzolini and Jean-Loïc Le Quellec. The art itself comprises paintings and engravings on exposed rock faces, and includes pictures of wild and domestic animals, humans, geometric designs, Libyc and Tifinagh inscriptions (ancient and recent Tuareg/Berber script) and a very few plants and trees. Many scenes exist, but these lack background details such as hills, rivers and foregrounds to draw images together: probably the earlier paintings and engravings are all symbolic. While many images reflect large animals such as elephant, giraffe, ostrich and lion, almost certainly they were not drawn for art's sake. Compositions may depict huge animals with tiny men (Fig. 5), men with animal heads and dog-headed men involved with large animals (Fig. 6). Engraved spirals are often associated with animals (Fig. 7) and sometimes with people. Even painted camp scenes with naturalistic cattle, people and objects must have held meaning for the artists (Holl, 2004).



Fig. 9b. Baby hippopotamus from the Large Wild Fauna Period near the Oued Djerat.

Fig. 8. The Oued Djerat, a deep river gorge in the northern Tassili where rock engravings from the different periods occur along a 30-kilometre stretch, extending south from the mouth.



Fig. 9a. Decorated elephant engraving from the Large Wild Fauna Period, Oued Djerat.



It has proved extremely difficult to date the art. Thus, in addition to a few direct (AMS) and Carbon-14 dates obtained in the Tadrart Akakus and OSL dates obtained in Upper Egypt (Qurta), where engravings have been dated to 16,000-15,000 BP (Huyge, 2007), researchers have otherwise used style, content, degrees of fading, superimposition, associated archaeological dates and changing climate to construct a chronology (Muzzolini, 2001): Most researchers accept the general order of art periods, but do not agree on time-span or overlapping of dates. The following chronology has dates that may be amended in future years:

- 'Large Wild Fauna Period', 12,000 BP - c 6,000 BP
- 'Round Head Period', 9,500 BP - c 7,000 BP
- 'Pastoral Period' 7,200+ BP - 3,000 BP and possibly later
- 'Horse and Libyan-Warrior Period', 3,200 BP - c 1,000 BP
- 'Camel Period', 2,000 BP - c 1,000 BP and later

The significance of the very early OSL dates, referred to earlier, which were obtained recently at Qurta in Upper Egypt (Huyge, 2007) cannot be overstated. The earliest dates obtained for the aurochs engravings here are from 16,000 BP meaning that some Saharan rock art was contemporaneous with Lascaux and the Magdalenian Period.

The **Large Wild Fauna Period**, found over much of the Sahara, consists almost entirely of engravings, and is attributed to hunter-gatherer peoples. Some very fine engravings of this style occur along a 30 km. stretch of the Oued Djerat, a river gorge in northern Tassili (Fig. 8) although later art periods are also represented here. Images tend to represent larger animals, depicted naturalistically in outline that lived in the Sahara when the land was fertile; they include elephant (Fig. 9a), rhino, occasional hippo (Fig. 9b), giraffe, bubalus (extinct buffalo) (Figs 6 & 7), aurochs (extinct wild ox), large antelope, and a few geometric designs (Fig 10) and inscriptions. Humans are sometimes shown as tiny figures standing before huge animals, holding 'boomerangs', sticks or axes. Clearly, they do not represent hunting scenes only, but reflect man's relationship with large animals. Other scenes appear to portray

sexuality (Fig. 11 - Campbell and Coulson, 2010) mythology and include humans with animal heads, and masked men (Fig. 12).

On the Tassili Plateau, images of the Large Wild Fauna and **Round Head** periods are well separated, possibly suggesting different artists (Muzzolini, 2001), even though hunter-gatherers must also have been the Round Head artists (see above).

The art consists almost entirely of paintings, probably the oldest exposed paintings found in Africa and some of the largest found anywhere on earth. One human figure stands over five metres and another is three and a half metres high (Fig. 13). Many of the finest paintings on the plateau are located to the east of Djanet, in the southeast corner of the Park. Many Round Head paintings portray 'strange' people with round, featureless heads and formless bodies. Erich von Däniken controversially described these paintings in his 1968 book, *Chariots of the Gods?*, as representing prehistoric, extra-terrestrial astronauts who had somehow influenced human evolution (Fig. 14). The book is still read and his statements perhaps accepted by a gullible general public.

Generally, Round Head figures are seen in profile, sometimes 'floating' or 'swimming' through space, as though experiencing out-of-body travel, which just might be interpreted as a possible connection with shamanism (Fig. 15). It is important to remember however that these images may have been created by many different populations and cultures with different belief systems over thousands of years. In one scene, women are depicted with raised hands, as though seeking blessings from the huge figure that towers above them (Fig.16). Fabrizio Mori (1998) describes the scene: 'We become aware, in them, of a sense of affectionate, fearless subjection (to the divine), of pure worship' The art tends to portray an ethereal world where man is a part of nature rather than standing apart from it.

**Pastoral Period** art, comprising both paintings and engravings, commenced in isolated areas and then spread rapidly through the Sahara. The art presents a very different picture to the ethereal world of the Round Heads: Humans become largely dependant on animal



Fig. 10. Geometric designs on a boulder in the Oued Djerat.

Fig. 11. Life-size engraving of human figure apparently portraying sexuality and probably mythology.





Fig. 12. Engraving of a masked man with a large penis in the Oued Djerat.

Fig. 13. A giant human figure with a single eye, standing several metres tall, dwarfs a visitor to the southern Tassili. Henri Lhote (jokingly) called these strange alien looking figures "martians".



Fig. 14. Paintings like these from the Round Head Period may have led popular author, Erich von Daniken to write about paintings of extra terrestrial astronauts.



Fig. 15. Life-size floating/swimming figure from the Round Head Period.

husbandry and tend to dominate compositions. Scenes painted with brushes depict numerous cattle in variegated colours, and clothed people apparently of both black African and Mediterranean stock (Hachid, 1998; Muzzolini, 2001). There are herders and men hunting with bows (Fig. 17), scenes of camp life with women

and children, sheep, goats and dogs (Fig. 18). Attitudes towards nature and wild animals have changed and property, particularly cattle, has become man's most important possession suggesting stratification of society on the basis of wealth. By about 4,000 BP, most of the art appears to show only people of Mediterranean

Fig. 16. A 3.5 metre high figure which Lhote named the "Great God of Sefar" approached from the left by women with raised hands.





Fig. 17. A life-size painting of a hunter with a bow and arrow followed by a second figure from the Pastoral Period.

Fig. 18. Scene depicting camp life with women, animals and a dog.



origin. Black African peoples have largely disappeared, presumably taking their livestock to better watered areas in the south.

The **Horse Period** introduces the importance of men, particularly men holding weapons (Fig. 19). The artists were ancestral Berbers (Hachid, 2000) some of whose descendants are the modern Tuareg. The paintings and a few engravings commonly depict horses and horse-drawn chariots (Figs. 20 & 21), and warrior-like male figures with 'stick' heads. Men



Fig. 19. Engraving from the Horse Period of Saharan art depicting a mounted warrior with a spear.



Fig. 20. Paintings from the Horse Period on the roof of a small cave in the north-western Tassili depicting horse-drawn chariots, warriors, cattle and women.



Fig. 21. Detail from fig. 20 showing a horse-drawn chariot and charioteer.



Fig. 22. Painting from the Horse Period showing women with long flowing dresses (right) and two young warriors. These figures originally would have had white 'stick' heads which have now disappeared.

armed with metal-tipped spears or javelins are painted in a single colour. Women, when depicted, also have 'stick' heads and wear flowing dresses (Fig. 22). Herders and cattle become less common, while wild animals tend to be those that survive on little moisture. Libyc script, the writing used by ancestral Berber peoples, appears, but is incomprehensible to modern Tuareg (Fig. 23) in its ancient form. This script is the only version in the Berber world that has survived to the present day.

Researchers have noted that chariots are normally drawn by horses at extended gallop (and very rarely by cattle), driven by whip-wielding, unarmed charioteers; these chariots were not being used for fighting but might have been used for hunting. Nor could chariots with wooden wheels have been driven across the rocky Sahara and into the mountains where many of the chariot paintings occur. Possibly, chariots and armed men represented ownership of land, or control of its inhabitants.

Two thousand years ago, cattle had diminished drastically throughout the Sahara leaving goats as the common domestic stock. Camels, which can travel for days without water, began to replace donkeys and cattle as the main riding-animals, and were extensively used in caravans transporting trade goods and salt, and accompanying gangs of slaves on their way to markets in the north.

The **Camel Period** introduces the last phases of rock art in the Sahara. Apart from camels, both engravings and paintings depict a few cows, herds of goats, mounted and dis-



Fig. 23. Ancient Libyc script similar to Tifinagh below a lion from the Horse Period, southern Tassili. Note lion's tail in form of spiral.

mounted men armed with spears, swords and shields (Fig. 24), and a few wild animals, all somewhat crudely drawn. Maybe some of the earlier images are symbolic, but camel images may represent caravanserai, places where halts on long journeys were made. Images are often accompanied by Tifinagh, a later Lybico-Berber script still used by modern Tuareg.

### Conclusion

Although much of Tassili's art has been recorded, new sites will certainly be found. Even today, over 50 years after Henri Lhote took his team into Tassili, much work remains to be done. Who painted the Round Heads and can we ever learn what the art means?

Another question involves the art's conservation for future generations to see, wonder over, enjoy and speculate on its meaning. Vandals sponging paintings for photographic purposes have already diminished their value. Many accessible sites are stained by graffiti (Fig. 25). When we visited the Tassili just over a decade ago, we found Lhote's decaying camping equipment still lying outside a shelter near Jabbaren and a deep crevasse near Sefar stuffed with discarded tin cans and rubbish.

Tourists didn't visit the southern Park during the war against Islamic fundamentalists during the 1980s, but today their numbers are increasing. Fortunately, much of the best art is difficult to access, requiring guides, donkeys or camels and long treks. What does the future hold?



Fig. 24. Red paintings of camels and armed people from the Camel Period.

Fig. 25. Painting site from the Horse Period damaged by graffiti.



Finally we would like to thank Malika Hachid for having generously provided specific up-to-date details and information on the Tassili and its rock art in her capacity as former Director of the Tassili National Park (OPNT) and Head of the current Direct and Indirect Dating Project of Saharan rock art (CNRPH – CNRS). See Sahara 21 : 27-58 and III-IV for the initial published results of this important project which was initiated in 2009. I would also like to thank the Management of the OPNT for welcoming us and facilitating our work in this exceptional rock art area.

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