More 'Lascaux along the Nile'? Possible Late Palaeolithic rock art in Wadi Abu Subeira, Upper Egypt

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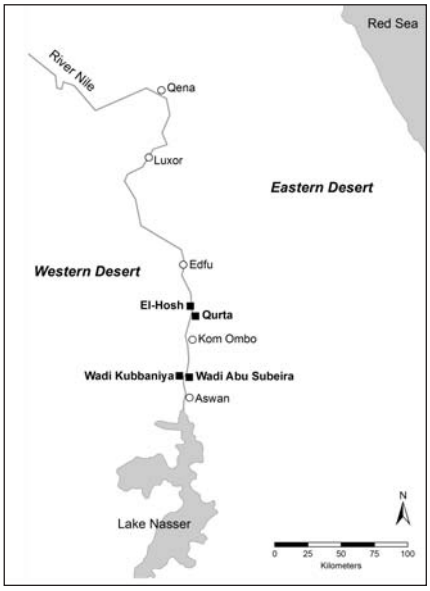

Fig. 1. Overview map of Upper Egypt with places mentioned in the text.

Fig. 2. Overview of the site. The old rock art site is located on the plateau in the middle of the photo, whereas large amounts of younger rock art can be found along the base.

Introduction

During archaeological rescue survey in Wadi Abu Subeira, on the east bank of the Nile 12 km north of Aswan (Fig. 1), a rock art assemblage with naturalistically drawn animals was discovered in 2006. The assemblage has many traits in common with the sites featuring "Lascaux-like" animals at Abu Tanqura Bahari by El-Hosh and Qurta by Kom Ombo about 50 km to the north. The latter was initially found by the Canadian Prehistoric Expedition in the early 1960s, but has been reassessed and is now tentatively dated to the Late Palaeolithic (about 15,000 years old) by Huyge *et al*. (2007). There is reason to believe that the Wadi Abu Subeira group is of a similar age. It has not yet been subject to detailed archaeological study, but it is reported here because of its significance as possibly part of the earliest known testimony of rock art in the Nile Valley. Also, it is at great risk of destruction by modern mining.

The site is located about 2 km from the mouth of the wadi, on a small, slightly projecting rocky plateau along the steep north slope, c. 120 m above sea level, 20-25 m above the wadi floor and about 30 m above the current Nile level (Fig. 2). Judged from the large amount of much later, "stylized" rock art from the Predynastic and later periods at its base, this projecting plateau has been of importance throughout history. The VIII *Deutsche Innerafrikanische Forschungsexpedition* (DIAFE) by Leo Frobenius was the first to document rock art at the site in 1926 (Červiček, 1974: 92-96). Later, other investigators have given accounts of rock art in Wadi Abu Subeira (e.g. Murray & Myers, 1933; Mayer, 1981; Lauwers, 1995), but no one seems to have reported the naturalistically drawn animals.

The drawings

About 30 drawings have yet been found. They are mainly located on the south faces of large Nubian sandstone boulders, but several

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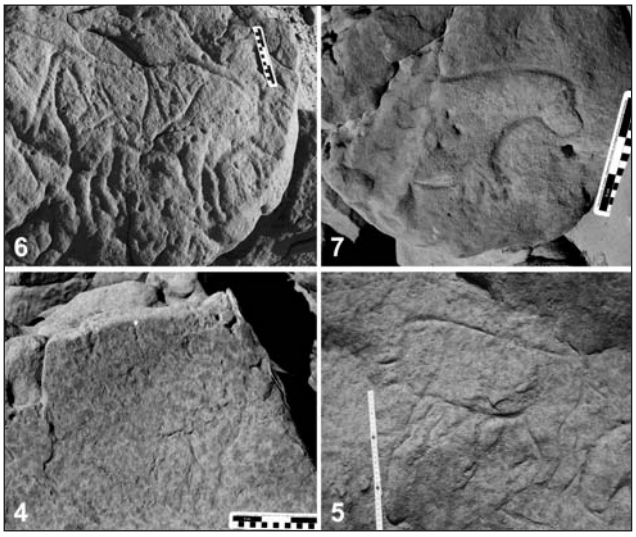

Fig. 3. Incised (and partially pecked?) figures in the rock art assemblage. Parts of the animals are difficult to see due to the light conditions. Numbers refer to panels.

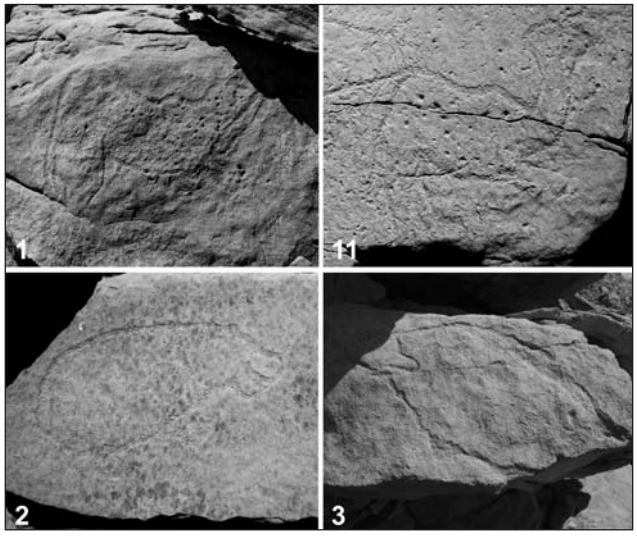

Fig. 4. Pecked figures in the rock art assemblage. Numbers refer to panels. All drawings are c. 50 cm long.

are found on small blocks evidently fallen from the hillside above. So far 14 clear bovids, two fish and one hippopotamus have been identified and the rest also principally consists of animal drawings, probably mainly showing various bovids and fish (Figs. 3-7). This faunal assemblage to a large extent matches the one found at Qurta (Huyge *et al*., 2007). Other characteristics are also similar to the Qurta corpus:

- All animals are drawn in a naturalistic style.
- Techniques used include pecking (hammering) and incision, and also combinations. Some figures are almost made in basrelief (Fig. 3, panels 6 and 7).
- A few animals appear to have been left deliberately incomplete. Front legs are typically missing (e.g. Fig. 4, panels 1 and 11)
- Natural features in the rock substrate, such as fissures and edges are frequently used as part of the drawings (e.g. Fig. 5).
- All figures show weathering patterns and rock varnish that completely merge with the surrounding rock. This is in stark contrast to e.g. Predynastic rock art and an indication that the figures have been made during or before the Holocene "wet phase" (c. 5,000-9,000 BC).

Contrary to Qurta, where animals are often drawn closely beside each other, frequently in different directions and superimposed, there are few panels with such features in Wadi Abu Subeira. However, since several panels are located on fallen blocks there were clearly more figures present in the original corpus. Birds and human figures, which are present at Qurta, have not yet been identified.

The assemblage is very different from "classical" Predynastic rock art and also from animals (e.g. crocodiles) associated with probable Epipalaeolithic geometric assemblages in the region (Huyge *et al*. 1998; Storemyr, this volume). Importantly, except for some rubbed depressions of unknown age and very few Predynastic or later animal drawings, no other rock art has been found in the immediate environs of the animal drawings. In this way they form a homogeneous group at roughly the same elevation, whereas the bulk of the younger rock art is located well away, mainly along the base of the plateau. In addition there is a small group of younger drawings in the hillside and on the plateau above. There may be environmental and archaeological explanations to this distribution pattern, as will be discussed below.

Context

Huyge *et al*. (2007) tentatively attribute the Qurta rock art to the Ballanan-Silsilian or a similar Late Palaeolithic culture on the basis of habitation sites located near the drawings. No Late Palaeolithic habitation sites have yet been reported from Wadi Abu Subeira. However, just in front of the plateau with the drawings, by a partially destroyed *abri* with later rock art, Leo Frobenius is reported to have found "a range of artefacts of Late Palaeolithic character and a microlithic core from greenish stone" (Červiček, 1974: 93, our translation). In his analysis of Frobenius' drawing of the core, Červiček (ibid.) believes that it may be attributed to Vignard's Sebilian III phase. Although some flint flakes are present across the area, we have not been able to verify this, but it is interesting that the core is from "greenish stone", which probably implies a volcanic or metamorphic rock. The Sebilian culture, whose chronological position is still unclear, made preferential use of such rocks for their toolkit, in addition to silicified sandstone (e.g. Hendrickx & Vermeersch, 2000: 30). Of course, these artefacts may have no relation to the rock art, but they may indicate a Late Palaeolithic presence in the area.

Due to modern activity and partial destruction of the area in front of the plateau, it may be difficult to recover Late Palaeolithic material from the site. It is important to recall, though, that occupation in the hyperarid Late Palaeolithic is extremely well attested in Wadi Kubbaniya, across the Nile only 5 km away. These habitation sites were in use by the Kubbaniyan culture between c. 19,000 and 17,000 BP, but limited occupation by subsequent cultures including the Ballanan-Sil-

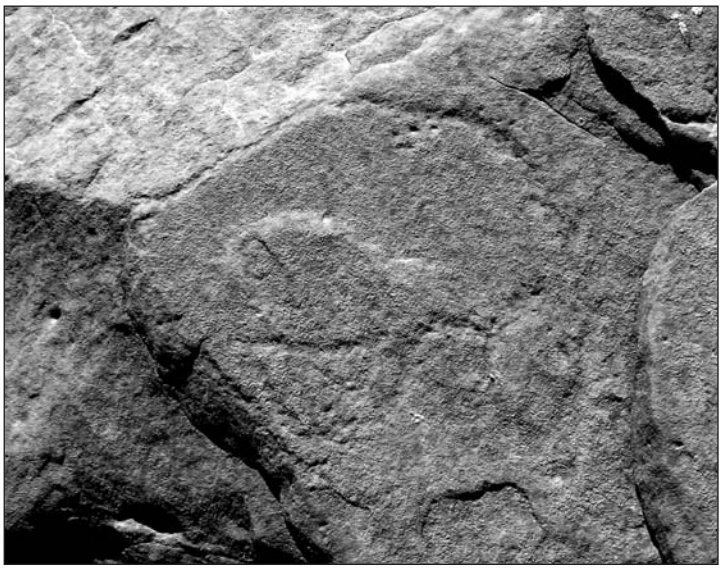

Fig. 5. Probable bovid (panel no. 8) with back and hind legs drawn along edges of the stone. Width of the animal c. 40 cm.

Fig. 6. Fallen block with animal drawing (panel no. 7).

silian and the Sebilian is attested until c. 12,000 BP and the "Wild Nile" phase (Wendorf & Schild, 1989).

According to Wendorf and Schild (ibid.) the Late Palaeolithic floodplain would have ranged around 15 m above the modern one in the area (c. 105 m above sea level). If Wadi Abu Subeira were not blocked by sanddunes, like Wadi Kubbaniya, flood waters would presumably have reached to the foot of the plateau, at times even higher up. This may partially explain the location of the drawings well above the floodplain (a similar situation occurs at Qurta). In the Late Predynastic the flood level was at 94-95 m at nearby Elephantine by Aswan (Seidlmayer, 2001: 81ff), and presumably some metres below the younger rock art at the site. Thus, from an environmental perspective the rock art distribution pattern makes sense, and it could be speculated that the reported Late Palaeolithic artefacts at the base of the plateau indicate specific temporary activities just by the shoreline.

The small occurrence of later rock art in the hill above the old animal drawings may be related to quarrying of grinding stone at the site. The whole area is characterised by remains of quarrying of silicified sandstone ("quartzite") and roughouts of boat-shaped grinding stone have been found close to the old rock art. However, preserved workshops are mainly located on the top of the hill. On the basis of varnish formation on roughouts and debitage many of these workshops seem to be rather young, perhaps Roman, as there is scattered pottery of tentatively Roman date in the surroundings. Many stone-built shelters may also date from this period. However, there are also some indications of much earlier workshops for stone tool production. As to stone quarrying, it must be noted that Late Palaeolithic people in Wadi Kubbaniya quarried and made extensive use of grinding stone for processing wild plants (Wendorf & Schild, 1989). Contemporary quarries are located right by the habitation sites (Roubet, 1989) and presumably also in the wider surroundings (Bloxam *et al*. 2007; Storemyr *et al*. 2007). It is not unlikely that Late Palaeolithic quarries may be present also in Wadi Abu Subeira.

Faunal identification and age

Faunal remains recovered from habitation sites in Wadi Kubbaniya are characteristic of the Upper Egyptian Late Palaeolithic and include species present in the rock art (Gautier & Van Neer, 1989): several types of fish and birds, hippopotamus (*Hippopotamus amphibius*), wild cattle (*Bos primigenius*), hartebeest (*Alcelaphus buselaphus*) and gazelle. Except for hartebeest, large "Ethiopian" faunal elements, such as giraffe, elephant and rhinoceros, are noticeably absent both in the archaeological record and the rock art assemblage (in contrast to later fauna and rock art). This is in line with the findings at Qurta (Huyge *et al*. 2007). Identification of the bovid figures in the Wadi Abu Subeira rock art has not yet been attempted, but there is reason to believe that most show wild cattle. Hartebeest, gazelle and ass may also be present.

Looking at the evidence, comparing with the Qurta site, and though only meagre information on archaeological and environmental context yet exists, there is little that would speak against a Late Palaeolithic date of the rock art assemblage. It is evidently very old, at least older than 5,000 BC (based on weathering and rock varnish) and forming a homogeneous group at an elevated spot. It is very different from probable Epipalaeolithic assemblages in the region, as well as all other known later rock art. Also, the animals depicted match the known faunal assemblage in the Upper Egyptian Late Palaeolithic. Current knowledge of human presence in the vicinity also supports a Late Palaeolithic date. This of course remains a hypothesis until results of further archaeological investigation and possibly direct dating are available.

Fig. 7. Bovid drawing (panel no. 16). Width of the drawing: c. 45 cm.

Destruction and conservation

This significant rock art site is unfortunately thoroughly disturbed by modern activity. It is partially preserved only by chance since a recent attempt at opening a modern clay mine almost in the midst of the drawings ultimately failed. Part of the younger rock art at the base of the plateau has also been destroyed by quarrying. Wadi Abu Subeira is an important location for clay mining, and though this takes place underground, roads, spoil heaps and the general presence of industry is increasingly destroying archaeological sites. Also sandstone quarrying is a general problem. Destruction of other rock art sites in the wadi was reported as early as 1981 (Mayer, 1981; see also Lauwers, 1995), but no action has been taken until recently. The current rescue surveys aim at locating important sites, but also at reducing the most apparent destruction. Conservation, in the form of directing mining companies away from archaeological sites, has been pursued with some success, and it must be underlined that no activity is at the moment taking place directly on the old rock art site, which is now guarded by the SCA. However, much work is needed before an efficient conservation regime can be established. A problem is the vast amount of important, acutely endangered archaeological sites in the Aswan region and the need to prioritise conservation efforts.

Acknowledgements

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