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## **A New Discovery of Recent Prehistory in Djibouti: the Asgoumhatian Culture**

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The Republic of Djibouti has for a long time been unknown to archaeological research. Effectively it was difficult to imagine that a country covered with volcanoes and basalt flows could reveal traces of its past. At the mercy of some of the highest temperatures of the planet and of an extreme aridity, this country is today partly desert through the lack of water. In the north, where our research has taken us, numerous sectors, until recently populated and covered with pastures, are now desert plains. At the centre of the country, the primary forest of Day is seriously degraded by illnesses and will eventually disappear.

Nonetheless, the smallest amount of rainfall and landscape is rapidly transformed temporarily into savannah. It is in this landscape that the previous cultures were living. The first to be identified was the asgoumhatian culture, named after the major site Asgoumhati, discovered in 2001, during a survey financed by the Fyssen Foundation. This discovery allowed new light to be shed on certain artefacts which had been found in previous years as well as those which followed, which could then all be classified under the same name.

### **The site of Asgoumhati**

Situated 15 km to the west of Randa in the north of the country, Asgoumhati is a small hill orientated to the east overlooking by several metres what is today a stony plain (Fig. 2). A wadi, Data Foò, runs along one side, and enlarges to form a small reservoir at its base. At either side of the hill rise other hills of basalt of various heights.

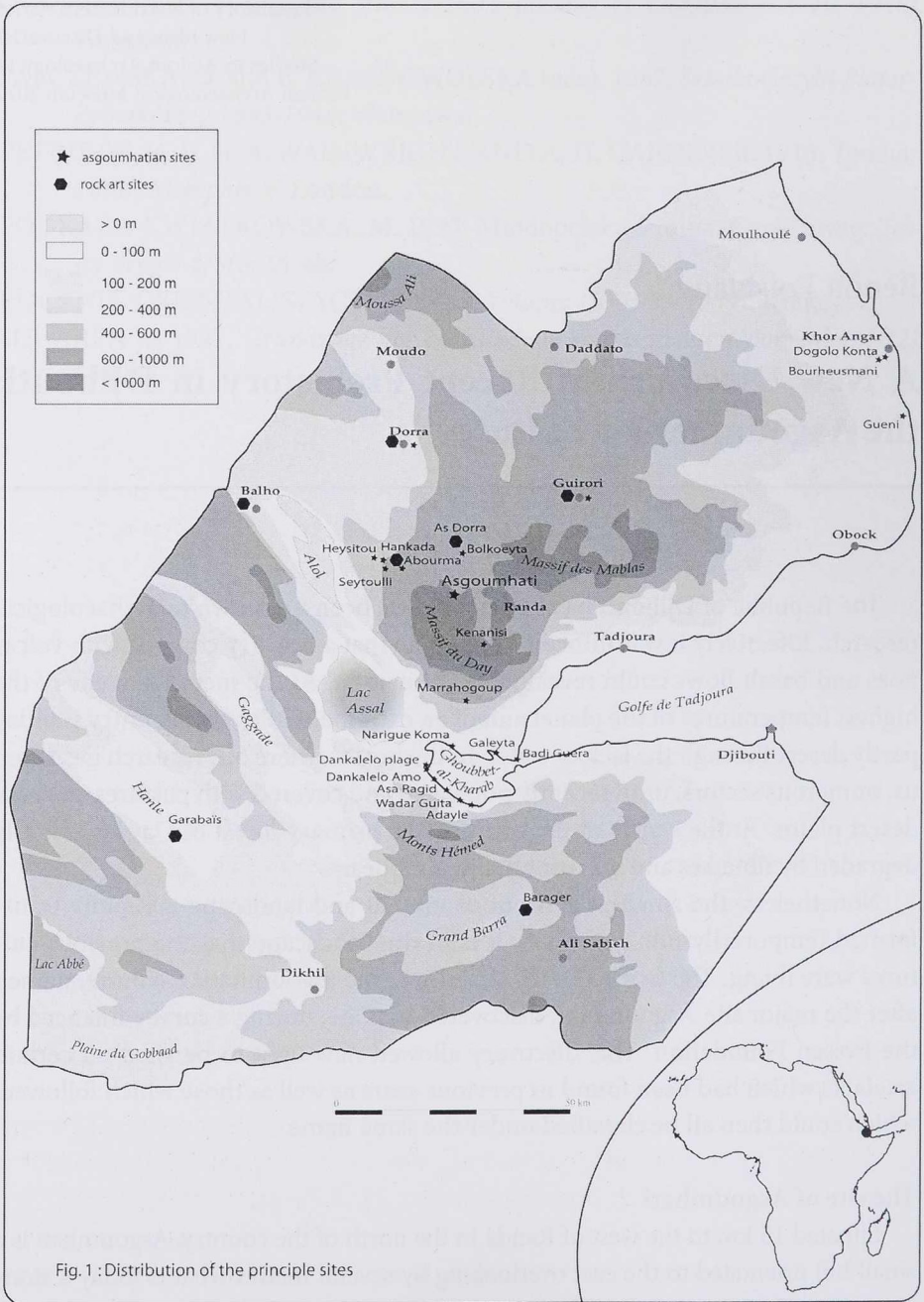


Fig. 1. Distribution of main sites at the territory of Djibouti.



Fig. 2. The hill of Asgoumhati.

Two cairns, *aowelo* in afar language, partially masked the soil of the extremity of the hill. After they were dismantled (and reconstructed), we realised that the ceramic that was found under the cairn was identical to that which was spread about the land, over a surface of approximately 400 m<sup>2</sup>, proving also the *aowelos* to be posterior. Also the total absence of any silt around and under the cairns indicates an important depreciation and we suggest an important lapse of time between the abandonment of the asgoumhatian site and the construction of the *aowelos* (Poisblaud 2005a).

Four pits were found at the extremity of the hill, three of them revealed milling material abandoned after the last occupation. These are the only features conserved from the first installations on the hill. If others existed, it is probable that they were destroyed and the blocks reused in the construction of the cairns. The quantity of ceramic is abundant, despite the numerous restraints of conserved structures. In fact, more than 50 kg of ceramic have been collected which is the reference collection for the asgoumhatian culture. The decoration, perfectly identifiable, is the prime dating element. This is, with some rare exceptions, always



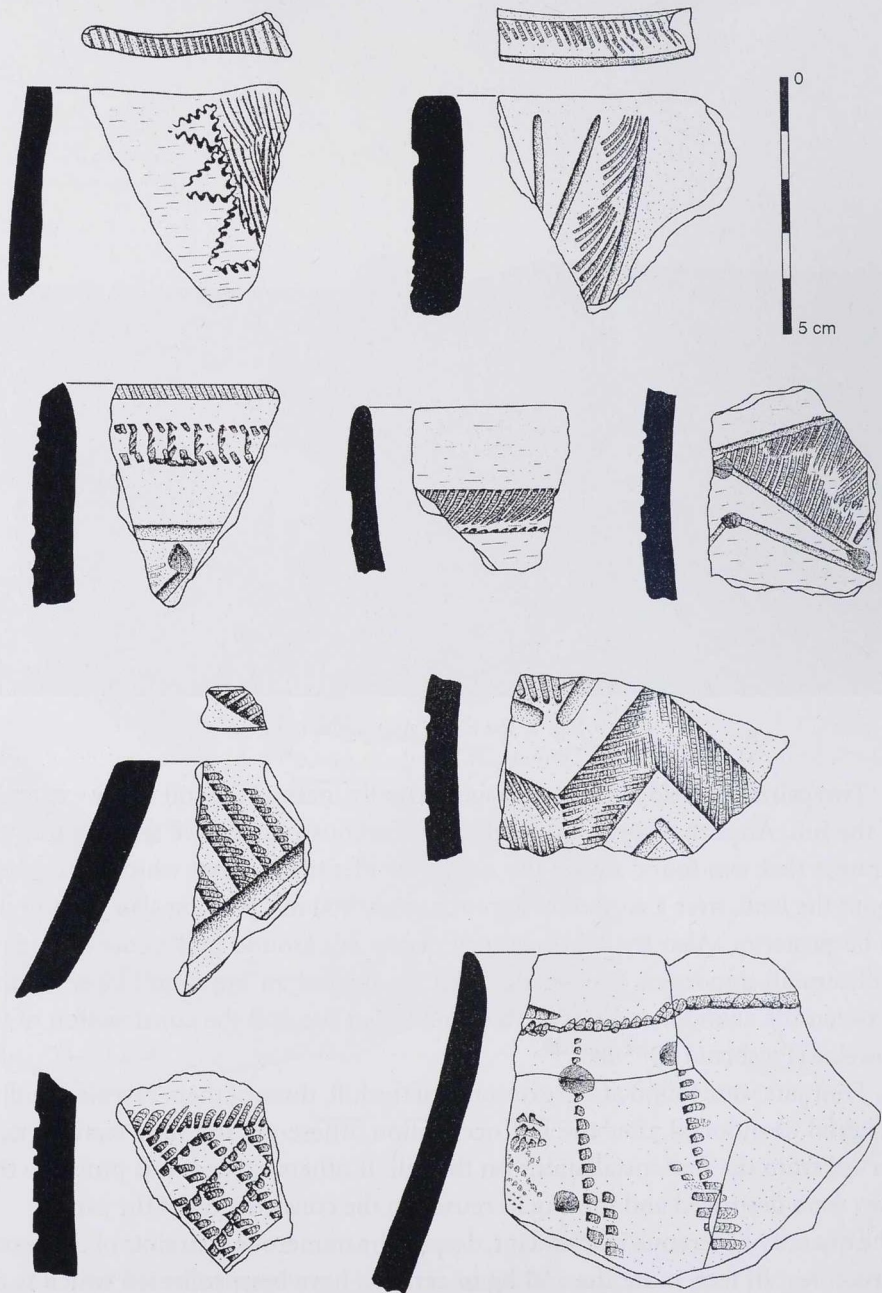


Fig. 3. Decorated sherds of Asgoumhati.





Fig. 4. The two tombs of Asgoumhati.

situated on the upper part of the ceramic. It never covers the entire vase with reserved zone. They were either scribed with a stick or printed using the back or the edge of different sized shells, more rarely with a triangular awl (Fig. 3). To resume, the decoration is composed of:

- vertical and horizontal lines, broken lines, sometimes organised in quadrangles, in triangles, filled and empty.
- horizontal bands, broken or in chains, sometimes framed with lines.
- vertical panels.

The ceramic fabric is always very well fired, and the surface is polished which contributes to its refinement.

The majority of forms are classical: ovoid vases with more or less straight sides, with gentle curves without shoulders, pots and jars of a small size. We found no storage jars. It is worth noting two remarkable forms. One is a cup with a ring foot the other is a beaked vase. Although not numerous, these two forms, associated with the quality of the ceramic, raises the question about their origins. In fact we do not know the earlier ceramic traditions hence no link with local groups can be made. The modern aspect of the forms suggests the influence of a contemporary tradition more



Fig. 5. Skeletons in the second grave.

evolved. Remember that from the fourth millennium B.C. (Inizan *et al.* 2002), obsidian was circulating between the horn of Africa and the south of the Arabian Peninsula. The influences concerning the ceramic could be transmitted along this route.

The site of Asgoumhati is completed by two tombs situated 200 m below the area of occupation. They had not been seen and were disturbed during work at a recent cemetery. The tombs are flat and circular with a diameter close to 8 m (Fig. 4). A circle of stones encircles each tomb and a second delimits an internal circle. The internal fill is made up of one layer of stones on the gravel of the substrata.

The first tomb had in its centre large flat stones which covered a circular pit (diameter : 60 cm, depth : 80 cm) filled with large blocks. It enclosed the first burial at the bottom and a second 20 cm higher which is separated from the first by blocks. This second deposit suggests the reopening of the tomb. The burials had practically disappeared, only some fragments of an adolescent and a young child.

No grave goods accompanied the dead, but six fragments of ceramic, including one pouring beak, were found in the structure of monument. Two of the fragments with decorations resembled the ceramic which was found at the settlement.



Installed on a slope, the second tomb had been installed on a slightly dug out platform to make it horizontal. Flat stones made up the external crown. Made out of basalt with stones 2 cm thick, 3 m were conserved with a width of 20 cm. Once again the bodies were placed in a central pit, 75 cm in diameter, covered by a gravelly sediment mixed with blocks and closed by a large block.

The bones which remained, were badly conserved, more or less mixed up, and corresponded to that of two children (Fig. 5). Two large flakes of obsidian were placed in the hands of one of the two bodies. We do not know the significance of this practice.

The essential of the grave goods was again dispersed in the structure of the monument and more particularly in the external crown. We have counted at least eight ceramics of which one was a bottle, an ovoid vase and some jars. Certain fragments have decorations with lines made with a blade and the back of a shell. Despite an important quantity of ceramic, the absence of storage jars and the small quantity of tools found gives the image of a temporary occupation. The two tombs suggest the existence of other burial areas for the extended family. Asgoumhati appears to be a temporary occupation at altitude. Occupied during the hot period, it would be within a system of seasonal rotation or migration, alternating with sites of low altitude for the cold periods. The temperature differences which have been accentuated today would have already existed in the past.

Asgoumhati is neither a unique site nor an isolated site. We have found numerous other sites belonging to this culture in the northern part of the Republic of Djibouti.

### **The Asgoumhatian sites**

The first surveys conducted in the North of Djibouti gave several indications of asgoumhatian sites in different topographical contexts (Poisblaud 2004 ; 2005b ; 2006). As was the case for Asgoumhati, the essential of the sites were reoccupied, some are still occupied, masking the first settlement. Only the ceramic, sometimes associated with circular flat tombs, has permitted us to identify the area as old place of occupation. In the North-East of the country, we have discovered the first asgoumhatian artefacts in the great plain of Obock at the foot of mount Gueni and on the Dogolo Konta hill. The site of Gueni revealed two circular tombs and one pot fragment. That of Dogola Konta (Fig. 6) yielded two tombs and a fragment of asgoumhatian ceramic in the middle of a burial zone of fourteen aowelos. At the foot of Boureusmani hill (facing Dogolo hill), we also found a flat tomb, but the absence of ceramic does not permit us to attribute this as asgoumhatian.





Fig. 6. Circular tomb Dogolo Konta.

In the centre of the country, the massif of Day revealed two indications of sites. At Marrahogoup, a plateau surrounded by a wadi, we collected some ceramic typically asgoumhatian in the middle of another burial area of aowelos. Only three fragments of ceramic were found on a site situated above the village of Day, on the Kenanisi plateau.

To our knowledge, the North-West has the most indications of sites with Bolkoeyta (a plateau overlooking the plain of As Dorra), and Dorra (a small site situated on a basalt plateau at the centre of the plain) where we have found dispersed pot fragments. The Massif of Makarrassou revealed a strong concentration of artefacts. Seytoulli and Hankada are two neighbouring plains which yielded ceramic fragments and burial monuments. Seytoulli is situated on a small plateau above the plain, at the mouth of a wadi. Two flat circular tombs with a diameter of 8 m are visible in the middle of asgoumhatian ceramic fragments. The site of Hankada (Fig. 7) is situated on the edge of the plain and revealed a flat tomb and ceramic amongst recent habitations. Two plains next to the precedent, Heysitou and Abourma, also yielded some ceramic.

### **The Asgoumhatian organisation, first hypothesis**

The various indications allow us to create a synthesis of the organisation of the asgoumhatian culture. This leaves an image of a society made up of an extended family living in groups, with a nomadic pastoral lifestyle between the lower and high plains. No animal bones were recovered in the occupation area, the asgoumhatian pastoralist society is put forward as a hypothesis, considering the absence of a hunting kit and the presence of ceramic of a high quality.

The settlements, of which we don't yet know the density, are dispersed inside several small territories which remain to be found. They are no larger than 400 m<sup>2</sup>, and have two essential elements: the presence of water and pastures. When the topography presents it, the choice of the emplacement is on a hill. Failing this, the Asgoumhatians make do with a site at the edge of a plain. The funeral areas are generally at a distance from the occupation.

The methods of subsistence of the Asgoumhatians are still unknown to us. The only indication in this domain comes from grain milling material, discovered at Asgoumhati. However, the gulf of Ghoubbet, to the south, sheds some light on some specific food practices.

### **The gulf of Ghoubbet : a singularity**

The Ghoubbet is an area apart in the asgoumhatian organisation. This gulf, situated at the centre of Djibouti and to the south of its cultural sphere as we know it today, was a place of fishing and a resource of salt, essential elements for the population and for the herds. Each group, despite their territory, could go there to replenish their stocks. The collection of salt is difficult to define. We only have indirect evidence, notably a great number of picks of basalt. The majority of these had worn points, which would have served to detach the sheets of



Fig. 7. Tomb of Hankada.





Fig. 8. Fish earth under shell heap.

salt from the salt floe<sup>1</sup>. The permanent tectonic movements could have partially closed the gulf, provoking a lowering of the sea level which resulted in the formation of basins where the salt floes would have formed.

Apart from direct consumption, the salt could have also been used to conserve fish. A large quantity of fish bones from large fish were uncovered in and around hearths which were covered by shell heaps (Fig. 8). It is possible that these hearths also served to smoke the fish as a method of preservation. This activity is however not actually associated with the asgoumhatian society. Of three shell heaps which have been excavated, two have revealed ceramic fragments which were decorated with a comb. This ceramic is close to the complex ceramics

from the south of Djibouti (Cauliez *et al.* 2008). The third heap, partially excavated, has not to date produced any ceramic. Nevertheless, asgoumhatian heaps will be excavated next to verify if the Asgoumhatians practiced the activities of fishing and the smoking of fish.

The shell heaps, which are numerous around the edge of the gulf, are never voluminous. They are principally composed of oysters which would have made up a part of the diet of the groups which were installed on the ancient shoreline. They would probably have moved with new oyster beds but they would have returned to the same place to install for limited periods. These periods were observed in a study of a heap which showed phases of sedimentation in the structure (Poisblaud *et al.* 2002).

The groups which descended onto the ancient shoreline of the gulf to practice these activities must have also lived there for a certain time. Hence four asgoumhatian

1 The climate and geological conditions in this region are so that, without considering the tectonic phenomenon, a salt floe could form very rapidly with the precipitation of sea salt (cf the neighbouring lake Assal where the salt floe is 60 m thick).





Fig. 9. Segment tomb of Ghoubbet gulf.

settlements sites have been detected. They are made up of three elements : tombs, shell heaps and stone circles (hut bases?). Other sites, which have recently been reoccupied, have been identified uniquely by the presence of ceramic (Poisblaud 1999).

Ten tombs have been counted and revealed a style of architecture different to those of the asgoumhatian sites of the mountains. Their structure is a platform of a segment of a circle with a maximum height of 50 cm. These monuments are between 5 and 20 m long, with a width of from 4 to 8 m (Fig. 9).

The dead were never installed at the centre of the monument and were unique, whatever the dimension of the cairn. Four tombs out of ten have been excavated. One of them revealed a structure with a corbelled structure which contained an adult without its head, lying on its back, with its legs folded against its thorax, with its arms by its sides. A simple stone case was installed in another tomb, it revealed a skeleton, in a perfect state of conservation, it was male lying on his left side (Poisblaud, Cros 2008). The individual, aged from 20 to 40 years, was of a large stature and measured between 1, 65 m and 1, 70 m, the two other skeletons were less well conserved. One of these had no development (Poisblaud *et al.* 2002).

However the last was in a shell heap which itself was covered by the platform of the monument. In both cases, we have discovered two bodies that of a woman and child, their respective positions could not be determined. No burial objects were found with the exception of rare ceramic fragments inside the structure of two of the monuments.

Does the particular architecture of these funeral monuments express a particular stature for those who descended down into the Ghoubbet, or differentiate a social group inside the asgoumhatian society? The question remains to be answered. We have however thought of two possible hypotheses: perhaps the groups (possibly those which lived the closest to the gulf) practiced these particular activities and redistributed their products. In this case, specific places would have been necessary to make exchanges. Perhaps members of each group descended to the edge of the gulf to fish and collect salt for their families. If this was the case, the dispersed habitation of this society suggests the existence of assembly places for the population which would serve as a marketplace, a meeting place and a ceremonial place. These places must have corresponded to particular sites, like those of the rock art sites.

### **The Asgoumhatian culture and rock art**

In the sphere of the Asgoumhatian, five rock art sites have been found: Guirori, As Dorra, Dorra, Abourma and Balho. All are localised in the north west of Djibouti and grouped in a perimeter of 40 km maximum. Could this make it the geographical centre of their territory, or was it a meeting place situated on a major axis?

All the sites have ancient engravings (antelope, giraffes, cows without humps) under more recent ones (dromedaries, stylized cows). Four of the five sites have been the subject of surveys which have revealed one presence of asgoumhatian culture in the proximity. The sector of Abourma presents, to our knowledge, the highest concentration of asgoumhatian artefacts and sites. It should be noted that other indications which were present belong to much later groups (Fig. 10).

It is very tempting to associate the rock art sites as a meeting place of the asgoumhatian culture. They probably did not make all of the engravings; their hypothetical stature of pastoralist would designate them principally as engravers of cattle<sup>2</sup>. Several styles of cattle are present in each of the sites but it is difficult to associate one with the asgoumhatian culture. The oldest recognised corresponds

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2 At Abourma, the wild animals (antelopes, giraffes, ostriches, baboons), the scenes of combat and hunting (hunters, dogs, archers) are difficult to attach to another culture prior to asgoumhatian one without artefacts in the area. However, these engravings could have been done by an aceramic culture.



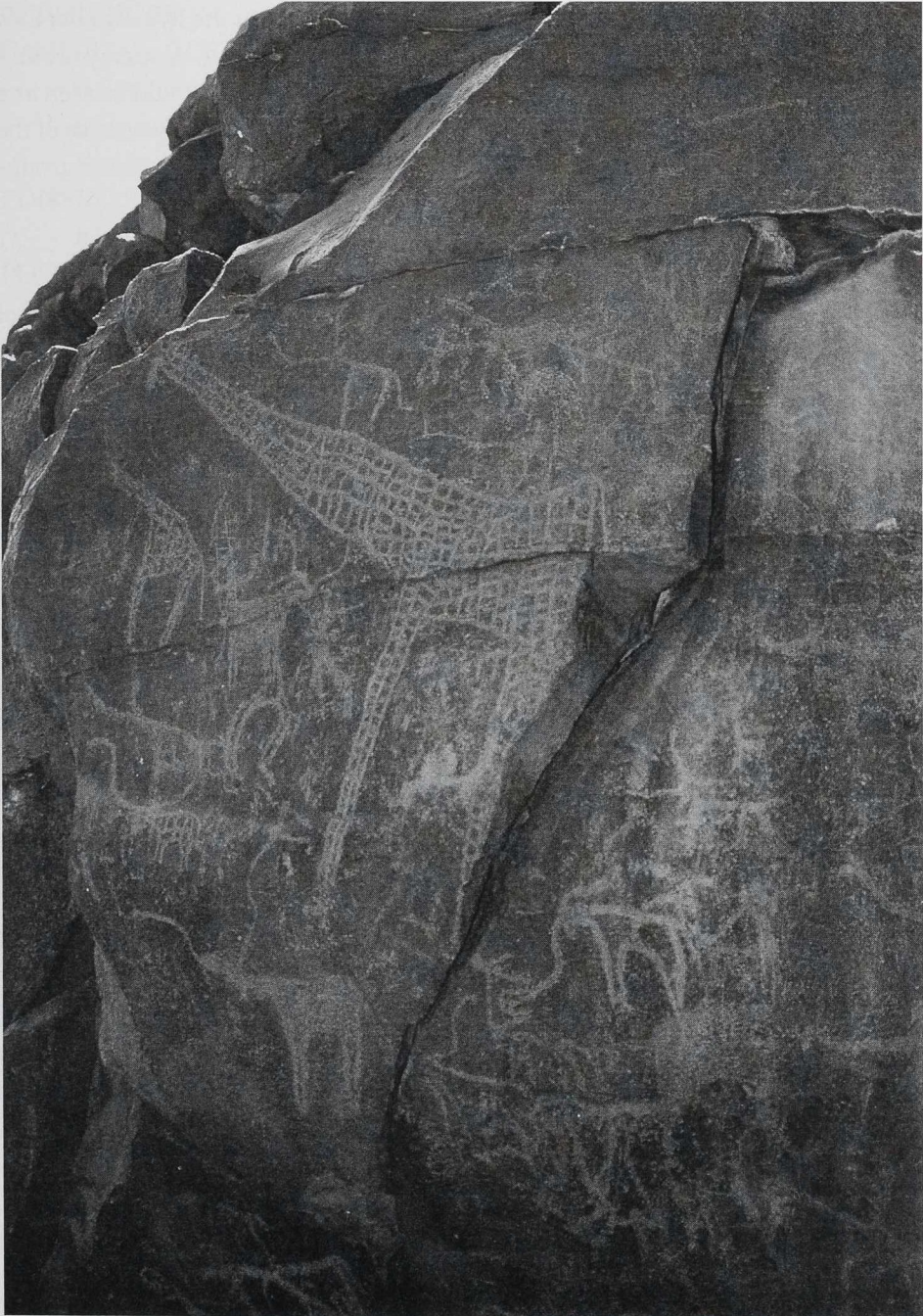


Fig. 10. Engravings from Abourma.



to a cow of the Dorra style (Joussaume 2007). It is present in the five sites but also in the sites of Barager and Garabais, to the south of Ghoubbet. A survey around these sites may detect the presence of the asgoumhatian which would be seen as a link between the engravings of the Dorra cow and themselves. The presence of the asgoumhatian has not yet been found in the south of Djibouti, where other groups exist that in turn are not present in the north of the country.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

Far from being only a ceramic complex, the Asgoumhatian is a culture apart of which we are now starting to understand their territory. The first conclusions take into consideration the organisations of pastoralist populations, with their small, temporary and dispersed settlements, an undeniable relationship with the pastures and some tombs associated with each of their settlements.

The question of the organisation of each territory requires supplementary surveys to complete the distribution map of the sites. We already know that they are present in the north of Djibouti, the coast of the Red Sea up to the plains of Dorra to the north-west, but it is probably that the area of this culture will be extend through our research.

This society also shows a certain degree of complexity with a specialised activity in the Ghoubbet and a possible relationship with rock art. Its origins and its evolution, still unknown, could shed some light on the contact that they may have had with other more distant cultures, notably with those of the Arabian Peninsula, by the sea route. These influences would explain why the asgoumhatian ceramic is exceptional, and the origin of the domestic cows carved in the rock art sites.

A datation for the Asgoumhatian is in ongoing using bones found in one of the tombs in Ghoubbet. For the moment, we can only suggest an evolution of this society during the third millennium BC, which would be contemporary with the groups of the south of Djibouti.

Whatever the results of the first dates, the Asgoumhatian is a cultural anchor point in the sequence of the late Stone Age in the Horn of Africa. It preceded in Djibouti cultures of aowelos, consisting of thousands of funeral cairns of which the chronology extends through several millennia.

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3 Some asgoumhatian sherds have been found in the Grand Bara, south Ghoubbet, in 2011

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