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Cultural areas and interregional relations: the case of the Egyptian and Libyan theriomorphs

A good many publications draw up thematic catalogues of Saharan engravings - compiling on the same plates several figures from different sites but of similar subject matter (the "cultural features") - and finally produce a sort of motif-index of rupestrian art, as the folklorists from the Aarne and Thompson school are doing for oral literature. Whatever the vocabulary favoured, geographical or cultural, the spatial distribution of each cultural feature allows the definition of "areas" and "provinces" or "civilizations" and "cultures" e.g. - the "Hunters' Culture" (Huard & Leclant 1980; contra Muzzolini 1991, 1992). Chronological considerations may be added to elaborate the notion of "age-area", after which one may consider elucidating the relations between various cultural areas: kinship, borrowings, sequences and the like. Those specific modes of investigation were first theorized by the ethno-anthropologists of the Vienna Circle (Wiener Kreis) and, going by the name of "Culture Cycles Theory", were popularized by L. Frobenius at the beginning of the century (Frobenius 1933). That "Kulturkreislehre" did not take long to give rise to ethnocentric views and attitudes justifying its lasting disrepute and its firm rejection by most contemporary scholars.

Nevertheless, it may be asked whether that rejection may not result in some measure from a recent fashion of thought (Clottes 1992), and the French ethnologist P. Erny argues for an improvement and a good use of the method. Some interesting improvements were lately brought into play by J. Poirier, who proposed to distinguish the "cycles" i.e. superstructures representing certain social patterns, from the "circles" i.e. their realization *hic et nunc* in this or that particular geographical and historical environment (Erny 1992).

Actually, the notion of "cultural area" proved to be very useful in various spheres of social sciences, especially dialectology, but it seems possible to adapt it to other spheres, and to apply it to our engravings, under certain conditions. The dialectologists use to make maps with grammatical, lexical and phonological "isoglosses". Those isoglossal lines, drawn between places which differ for each

feature of language, "sometimes agree, sometimes run somewhat parallel with one another, but fairly often cross one another, in the most distracting manner" (Jespersen 1925: III, 41). So, the more elaborated the definition of a linguistic area is, the vaguer its boundaries are, since it is separated from other areas by a bundle of isographs that rarely coincide. In a word, one ought to avoid defining, or comparing, cultural areas solely with detached elements: it is desirable to attach the greatest importance to associations of two or more features.

It is expected that such a method would be productive for the study of several cultural features identifiable among the Saharan engravings. The mapping of the graphic themes should allow us to delineate areas limited by lines that could be called "isothemes". The theme of the theriomorphs associated to rhinoceroses seems a good one to illustrate the application of this approach.

The "Theriomorph - and - Rhinoceros" theme

In central Sahara, it is often difficult to distinguish between masked figures and mythical theriomorphs or even deities (Le Quellec 1992: 483-504). Nevertheless, the second hypothesis sometimes seems the only one fit to explain Fezzanese engravings as, for example, theriomorphs with canine head, carrying big game under their arms or on their shoulders, and striding along without any sign of exertion which cannot be considered as giving evidence about really acted scenes. Among the recorded examples, the following may not be unworthy of notice:

- at I-n-Habeter, two theriomorphs whose heads evoke lycaons are facing each other, and one of them offers an antelope to the other, holding it up with only one hand grasping the neck of the animal, a feat which could not have been carried out by ordinary human beings; each of them is associated with a rhinoceros (Frobenius: pl. LVI);
- at Tel-Isaghen, there is a group of three other theriomorphs with canine heads, and one of them is grasping a big indeterminable quadruped, using the same grip (Graziosi 1970: fig. 176);
- at the same site, a canine-headed theriomorph is shouldering an auroch whose horns show that it is an adult (Graziosi 1970: fig. 175);
- in the Wâdi Iser, another theriomorph with a lycaon head is running along, carrying an auroch on his shoulders (van Albada 1992b: 24).

At I-n-Habeter, the figures of a famous engraving have often been interpreted as walking "mythological beings" or "mythical figures" with jackal heads, and flourishing their *poniards*. One of them is dragging a dead rhinoceros he holds with only one hand, which is impossible even to the most vigorous hunter (Frobenius 1937: pl. LIV). According to P. Huard and J. Leclant, "they are hunting divinities, in a high place like I-n-Habeter, where initiations, rites and cults are expected to have been performed" (Huard & Leclant 1980: 455) and J. Jelinek insists that they "are not masked men, but human-like beings with jackal heads" (Jelinek 1984: 143). This interpretation is corroborated by a composition

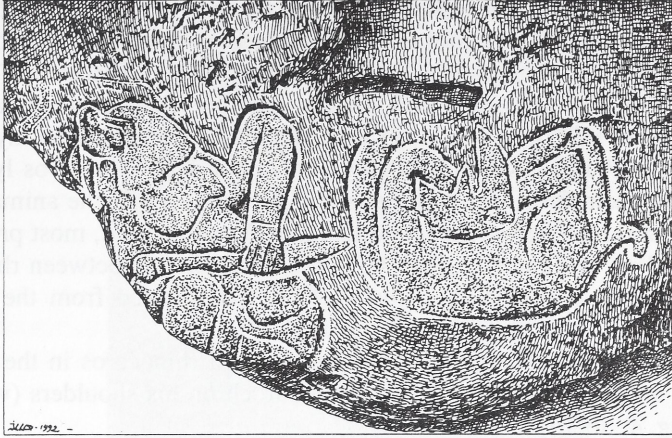


Fig. 1. Mythological figure brandishing a *poniard* toward a dead rhinoceros. El-Awen, Messak Settafet (after a photo by Y. Gauthier).

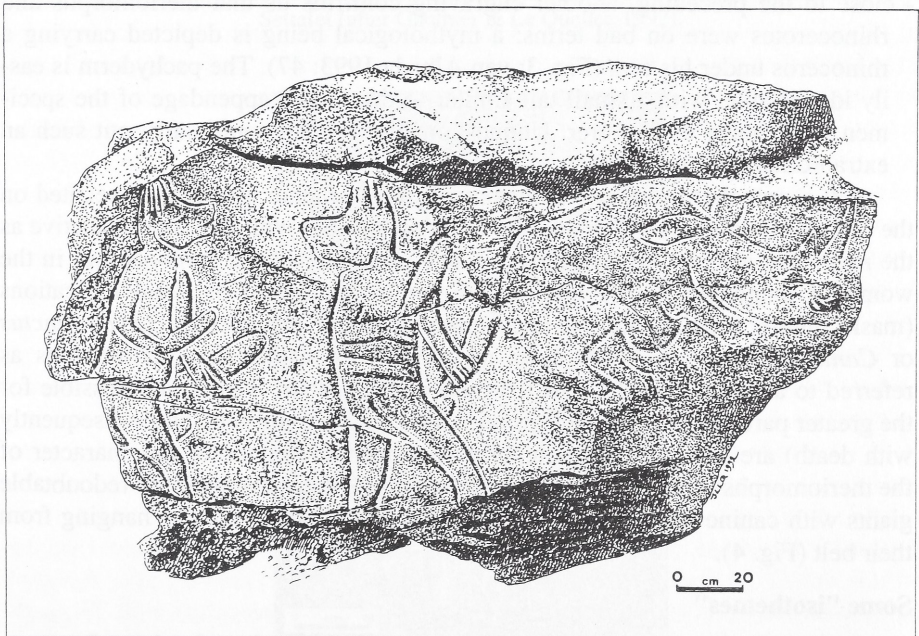


Fig. 2. Rhinoceros followed by two canine-headed theriomorphs. Wâdi Teknîwen, Messak Settafet (after Gauthier & Le Quellec 1992).

engraved in a cave at el-Aurer (Le Quellec & Gauthier 1993; Lutz 1992: fig. 9). It represents a mythical theriomorph brandishing a *poniard* - a type of weapon which is slipped in the belt of the theriomorph carrying an auroch at Tel-Isaghen (Graziosi 1970: fig. 175), and also used by another one, about to sacrifice an auroch mastered with only one hand (van Albada 1992b: 29). The mythological being of the el-Aurer cave turns his head toward a dead rhinoceros lying on its back like the pachyderm of I-n-Habeter, but here the legs of the animal are bent in a non-natural manner (wrenched articulations) and its head, most probably cut off, is placed on its abdomen (Fig. 1). A mythical relation between rhinocerotids and theriomorphs with canine heads may be also inferred from the following scenes:

- two theriomorphs with lycaon heads are facing a rhinoceros in the Wâdi I-n-Hagalas, and one of them is carrying an auroch on his shoulders (van Albada 1992a: fig. 4, no. 23; 1992b: 27);
- a rhinoceros of the Wâdi Teknîwen is followed by two other canine theriomorphs engraved on the other side of a dihedron (Fig. 2); it is uneasy to identify the objects they are brandishing: imagining they were weapons, it would imply the two theriomorphs looking at one another are taking counsel as to how to attack the pachyderm; but those objects could also be simple sticks to be musically clapped during a dance or a ritual, for instance;
- close to the preceding, another engraving confirms us that theriomorphs and rhinocerotids were on bad terms: a mythological being is depicted carrying a rhinoceros under his arm (Fig. 3; van Albada 1993: 47). The pachyderm is easily identifiable, with a small tail similar to the caudal appendage of the specimen in the cave of el-Aurer. Unquestionably no man could carry out such an extraordinary performance.

It seems that those engravings result from graphic operations executed on the "animality-humanity" schemes by other means, but with the same objective as the myth that also acts by organization and arrangements of symbols, but in the womb of language. Rather than search for technological or ritual indications (masks, hunter's dance) and for attestations of this or that species (*Lycaon pictus* or *Canis aurea* ?), it seems more advisable to consider the theriomorphs as referred to a mythological context, whose coded system is quite inaccessible for the greater part, but whose relations with the hunter's traditions (and consequently with death) are henceforth undeniable. Moreover, the mythological character of the theriomorphs is well illustrated by some engravings of apparently redoubtable giants with canine heads, who are wearing rhinocerotids' *protomes* hanging from their belt (Fig. 4).

Some "isothemes"

The possible relationship between Egypt and the Sahara has been frequently questioned especially as regards some themes occurring in the Saharan themes, such as "ornamented" rams and bovinds, or theriomorphs with jackal heads.



Fig. 3. Mythological theriomorph carrying a rhinoceros under his arm. Wâdi Teknîwen, Messak Settafet (after Gauthier & Le Quellec 1992).



Fig. 4. Canine-headed mythological theriomorph, with protomes hanging from his belt. Messak Mellet (after Gauthier & Le Quellec 1992).

The hypothesis of ancient contacts between the two areas involves the existence of a cultural "cycle" ("ovoids with spheroids" for instance) showing itself in a Saharan "circle" on the one hand, and in an Egyptian one on the other. The questioned hypothesis compels us to wonder if the two manifestations belong to the same cycle, or if they could not be "Secondärkulturen" born of an Egypto-Saharan "Primakultur". The multiplicity of ornamented rams in sub-Saharan Africa (Le Quellec 1992) and the recent advances of the applications of glottochronology to African languages (Behrens 1984; Ehret 1984, 1988; Jungraithmayr 1988) also lead to induce an Afro-Asiatic "Primakultur".

Concerning our mythological beings, the hypothetical relationship between Saharan and Egyptian theriomorphs is frequently evoked in literature (e.g.: Camps 1974: 258, 1978: 306; Castiglioni & Negro 1986: 209, 317-319), which is a way of supposing that a particular cultural "cycle" could be defined by the sole presence of those beings. The existence of mythical theriomorphs is well attested in both areas, but the isotheme "Theriomorph-Rhinoceros" only appears in a specific zone of the Fezzanese area, especially in the Messak. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the Egyptian pantheon does not have a place for animals lately introduced in the Nile valley, such as horses, nor does it include the big game animals (such as elephants, giraffes and rhinoceroses) which had already begun to disappear during the Predynastic times and whose fate is particularly interesting for the present discussion (Meeks 1986). Further research will have to examine some closely related isothemes on the one hand, such as "Theriomorph-Elephant" or any other association involving theriomorphs; and on the other hand the case of masked men or figures related to rhinoceroses, because they could belong to the same mythological world. Two examples are illustrative of those new directions of investigation:

- for an interesting case of human being wearing a rhinoceros mask at el-Awen, see A. & A. Castiglioni & G. Negro (1986: n° 80);
- there are also enigmatical scenes such as the famous rhinoceros-headed man ejaculating in the eye of a rhino in the Wâdi Djerât (Lhote 1976: n° 1565-1566), but we do not know if they are to be interpreted as descriptive representations involving masked people during real ritual ceremonies, or if they were illustrating a mythical text, an oral sacred literature whose bearers vanished away for ever.

A better understanding of the scenes associating theriomorphs and rhinoceroses may be possible if one notices that, more often than not, the pachyderm is in a weak and ridiculous situation. It lays twice on its back, and once its legs are broken. In one case, it looks as if it had been decapitated, which should not be surprising, as the protome of another one is hanging from the belt of a mythical giant, whereas the trophy of a bovid is hanging on the other side (Fig. 3). Theriomorphs with rhinoceroses always have dominion over the animal by their stature, their attitude or their weapons, and all the scenes imply a connotation of chase or death. The violent cynegetic activities of these giants attacking rhino-

cerotes are well emphasized by the graphic hybridization between men and lycans. This animal (*Lycaon pictus*, Temminck) is indeed a redoubtable roving carnivore, and the East Africans use to say "it is the death roaming the plain" (Huot 1992: 22). Now the characters permitting to recognize it (large round ears, "molossoid" snout) are not always observable, and it is unprofitable to identify it at all costs on the engravings in question, in so far as they are the traces of invisible divinities, materialized among the rocks by the artists who were once telling their chronicle in the Messak.

It is noticeable that myths of the Dog-Man are widely known since the Antiquity (Lecouteux 1981; White & Doniger 1991) and some of them are still alive. For instance, when I was living in Fezzân, I was told the following legend by an old man of Brâk, on May, 8th, 1979:

"In Sudan, (some Libyans say in southern Libya, around Gaatrûn), there is an area called Barr el-Kelb ("the Dog-Region") irrigated by the Wâdi el-Kelb ("the Dog-River"). Dogs are living on one side of the river, men on the other side. All along the Wâdi, a particular kind of thorn-bush (called "sâ°adên") grows: men can make their way through it, but dogs cannot. Once upon a time, a woman passed through the bushes, and went to live with one dog. They tended the cows together for a long time and, one day, the dog possessed her ("yâkel min fommha wa ya°rifha"). Although she washed herself after the intercourse, the woman became pregnant and gave birth to a son, the first dog-man of a new race, to which the ancestor of the Mandâra (a Libyan tribe supposed to have emigrated from the south long ago, "zamân bukkol") belongs. People say that is the reason why the Mandâra have no Adam's apple, and why other tribes, like the Mgârha for instance, are reluctant to give their daughters to Mandâra boys in marriage, saying: "we are ashamed" (°indna °ayb)."

As they are men-like figures related to death, the engraved theriomorphs with canine heads inevitably evoke the Egyptian Anubis presiding over the tomb and mummification, as well as other cynocephalous Egyptian death-divinities like Wepwawet (Wp-w3-wt: "He who opens the roads") or Khenti-Amentiu ("He who Presides over the Western Ones") (Bianchi 1984). But there is no need to postulate a cultural area "Mythological Cynocephalous Beings related to Death" (Bonnet et al. 1989) including the Saharan and Egyptian evidences, because the concept of the canid as a psychopomp is a phenomenon too widely distributed to be circumscribed to the sole Saharo-Egyptian zone: it is not only attested in all the Indo-European cultures (de Gubernatis 1874: 17-41; Henkel 1973; Lurker 1983; Prieur 1988: 135) and among the American Indians (Neumann 1975; Soustelle 1940: 54), but also in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly among the Serer (Duprire 1985), Ewe, Bena Kanioka, Korongo (Abrahamsson 1951), Nuba (Nadel 1947: 268), Bantu, Azande, Dogon, Minyanka, etc (Frank 1965; Jespers 1983). Consequently, it seems likely that the much more significant association "Theriomorph-Rhinoceros" defines a specific Fezzanese area, without any direct relation with Northeastern Africa.

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