

BARBARA E. BARICH

Uan Muhuggiag rock shelter (Tadrart Acacus) and the late prehistory of the Libyan Sahara

During the winter of 1982, the Libyan-Italian Joint Mission for Saharan Research – which operates in the Tadrart Acacus area – undertook new and more extensive excavations in the rock shelter of Uan Muhuggiag, previously excavated by F. Mori and A. Pasa in the 1960's (Mori 1965) (Fig. 1).

The field work (Barich 1978) yielded a settlement where levels belonging to the so-called Bovidian Tadrart Facies are covered by a later horizon with peculiar technological features which, to the best of our knowledge, have not yet been found in other sites of the Acacus Massif. It seems that the site allows us to follow in detail the evolution of the Bovidian aspect as well as to discuss it within the framework of the late prehistory of the whole area.

The Uan Muhuggiag Rock Shelter is located in the Central Acacus, on the northern side of the wadi Teshuinat. During the 1960's, it became known owing to the body of paintings found on its walls, in which different styles of the Acacus rock art – Round Heads, Pastoral and Horse styles – have been recognized (Fig. 2 and 3).

As has been pointed out above, at that time A. Pasa excavated two small test trenches in the settlement which yielded some information about its faunal and climatic conditions (Mori 1965: 223 - 227).

In 1982, at the time of new investigations, the cultural deposit was practically still intact: previous soundings, made at the eastern and western edge respectively, had not destroyed it.

A sedimentological observation of the settlement revealed that the upper part of the deposit – which consists of five thin levels – has the form of a compounded *crust* sloping eastwards. The *crust* is thus almost non-existent in the eastern part of the settlement.

Lithic tools and ceramics showing "late" characteristics were collected from this part of the stratigraphic sequence. In one of the excavated trenches (A), the *crust* appeared in direct association with some collapsed sandstones which sealed the underlying levels. Thanks to Pasa's investigations, the beginning of this later stratigraphic

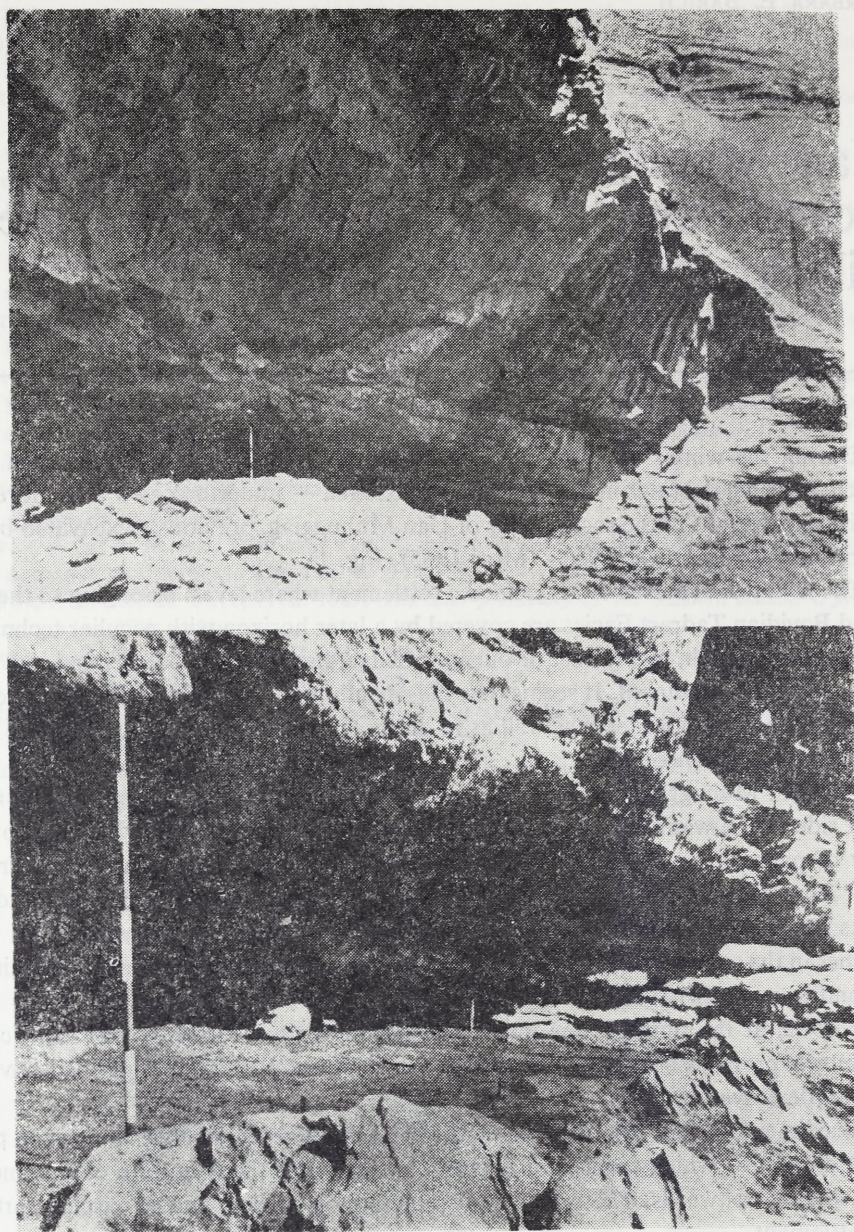


FIG. 1. Uan Muhuggiag (Tadrart Acacus, Libya). Panoramic views of the rock shelter as seen from the wadi

formation may be dated from $4,730 \pm 120$ B.P. Therefore, the *crust* formation would have been formed during the 5th millennium B.P.

The other trench (B) did not allow to record such an unequivocal interruption of the stratigraphy as that observed in trench A. Its stratigraphy consisted of thin levels, similar to each other and was rich in hearths; this may be an indication of frequent abandonments and re-occupation of the site (Fig. 4). This latter trench in particular allowed us to record a stratification that, starting directly from the rock base-ment, developed uninterrupted towards the top. Its thin levels were rich in food re-mains, lithic tools and ceramic sherds. This initial phase of the rock shelter habitation

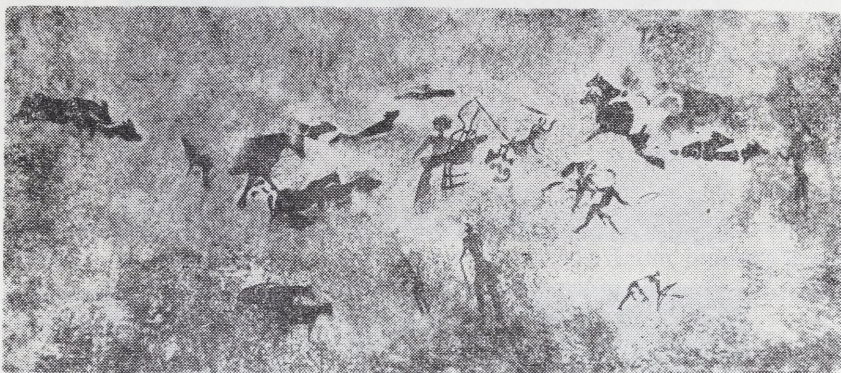


FIG. 2. Uan Muhuggiag (Tadrart Acacus, Libya). Rock paintings belonging to different styles of the Acacus rock art



FIG. 3. Uan Muhuggiag (Tadrart Acacus, Libya). Human figures in the "Horse Style"

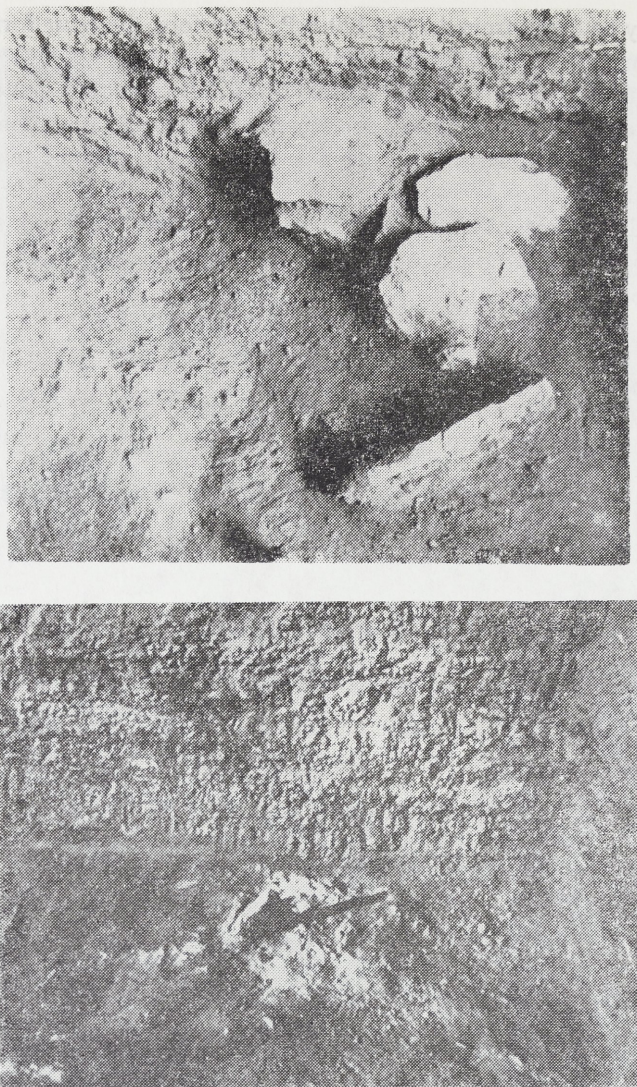


FIG. 4. Uan Muhuggiag (Tadrart Acacus, Libya). Details of the Trench B during the excavation

would have developed, on the basis of the research by Pasa, starting with the 8th millennium B.P.: a date of $7,438 \pm 60$ B.P. indicates the chronology of the base of the deposit.

As regards the palinological material, Schulz (1987) provides a diagram of the environmental development which points to an abundance of moisture and, in consequence, of a rich growth of floral species in the period of the habitation.

The study of the faunal samples (Gautier 1987) collected during 1982 indicates the presence, also in the lower levels, of bovines and ovi-caprines, together with wild fauna.

As regards the artifacts, the Uan Muhuggiag pottery yielded by the Lower Horizon (Levels 2, 2a, 2b, 2c and 2d) is abundant and distinct. It seems to be more representative of the technology of a local human group than the lithic industry. This pottery is consistent with the type defined earlier as the "standard dotted pottery" (Barich 1974) which is related to the pastoral inhabitants of the Tadrart Acacus Massif. In view of its early chronology, the site seems to represent an initial phase of this cultural development.

In the Upper Horizon (Levels 1 and 1a), the sedimentation changes and the soil becomes more compact having an admixture of floral remains and cattle dung. However, the hearths are less numerous and artifacts are scarce. Pottery continues to be the most significant component of this deposit. It belongs to a class completely different from that of the Lower Horizon. The paste is "rougher" and "thicker", the colour is red and the surface is usually rough although some polished sherds have also been found. A carinated-type bowl, decorated with dotted impressions on a ribbon, was successfully reconstructed from sherds. Lithic industry is meagre as well as rough, consisting only of sandstone flakes which are either unretouched or with a discontinuous retouch for use as side-scrapers.

Similar to the Lower Horizon, also the Upper one yielded simple artifacts made of bone.

In conclusion, the Uan Muhuggiag development covers a large span of time, from the 8th to at least the 5th millennium B.P. The stratigraphic break, caused by the rock collapse, corresponds to the period of abandonment of the site. Its re-occupation, from 4,730 B.P., carried the characteristics of a developed pastoralism connected with a transformed technology.

Current studies on the later Saharan prehistory recognize the existence of pre-adaptation conditions to food-production during the Early Holocene. The Lower Horizon at Uan Muhuggiag might well represent, in our opinion, this phase of incipient food-production including the exploitation of *Bos* (Gautier 1987).

The outcome of this initial stage in the Tadrart Acacus was a developed pastoral economy based on cattle with "lunate" horns, extensively represented in local rock engravings and paintings. It seems therefore that a change in the original egalitarian society — typical of the hunters-fishers-gatherers — may be assumed from this moment, and accumulation of wealth and emergence of chiefs may be postulated for this period.

The shift to a more developed pastoralism, together with a structural change of society, seems to have been caused in this part of the Sahara by a gradual immigration of human groups who were mixing with the local population. As regards this

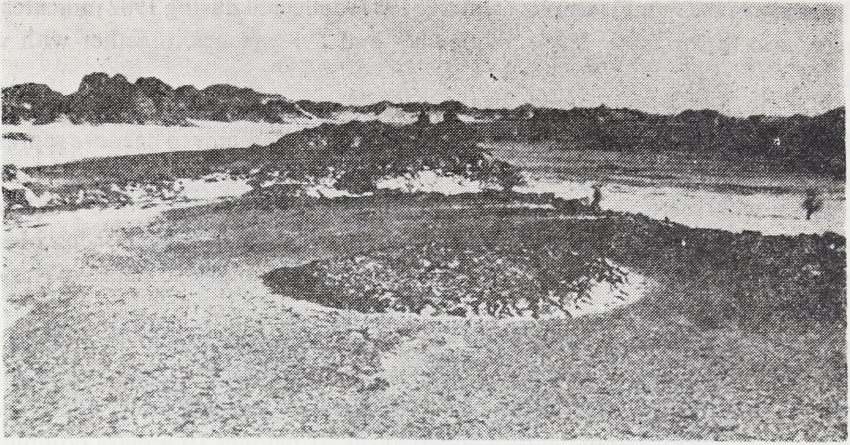


FIG. 5. Tadrart Acacus (Libya). Megalithic building in the Wadi Auis

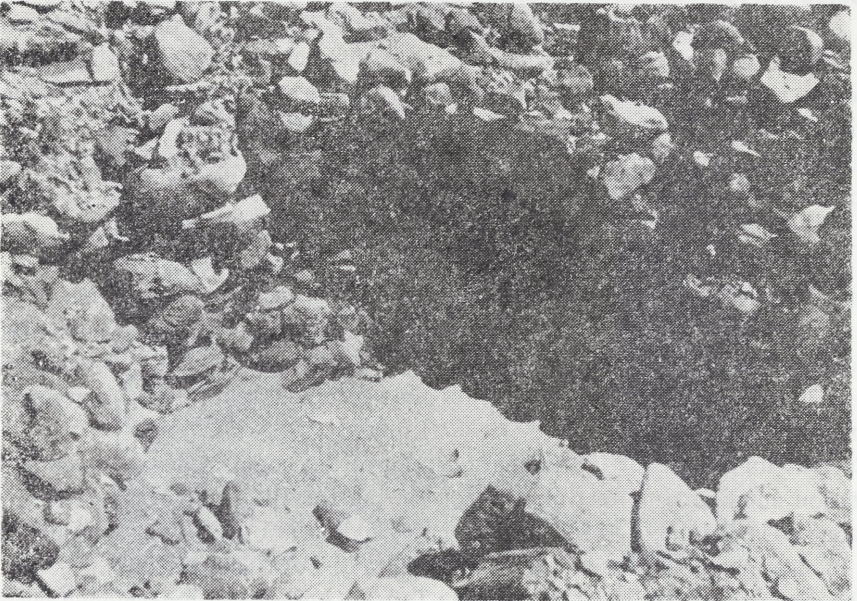


FIG. 6. Germa (Fezzan, Libya). Interior of a tomb in the Royal Cemetery

point, some elements of pastoral Tenerian like gouges and convex-based arrowheads (Hugot 1962) which are also known to be common in the Fayum Neolithic (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934) established the Tenere area as the middle ground between the Nile Valley and the western Sahara. At the same time, the Jebel Uweinat paintings indicate some kind of a relationship existing between the Saharan and the Egyptian communities (Puglisi 1976; 1981).

The introduction of the horse and the war-chariot of Aegean origin around the middle of the 4th millennium B.P. (1,500 B.C.), seems to be a better continuation of the traditional links of the Sahara with Egypt. In view of the nomadic character of the "Horse-and-Chariot" men it seems unlikely that archaeological evidence of their passages through the Acacus might be formed, except for the "megalithic buildings" found in strategic positions and occurring on the eastern side of the massif (Fig. 5).

Finally, it is suggested that the Upper Horizon at Uan Muhuggiag yields the evidence, particularly the pottery, of some North-African proto-historic assemblages and human groups. As these immigrants came into contact with the local pastoralists, they brought about a transformation in the structure of the society. The technological superiority might have allowed the Mediterranean groups to take on the role of dominant class, to control the food-production and, perhaps, to organize first trading network. During the 2nd millennium B.C. these nomadic groups succeeded in establishing their control over the entire region of Southern Libya (Fig. 6), organizing it into a state. Evidence for this process may exist in the schematic scene of chariots in the Wadi Zigza, near Garama, indicating a large expansion of white populations in this part of the Sahara (Barich 1984).

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