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## **Last Research of Petroglyph Unit in Dakhleh Oasis. Western Desert of Egypt**

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The Dakhleh Oasis is the fourth of a series of oases running from the north to the south in the Egyptian Western Desert (Fig. 1). Rock art has been most thoroughly examined in the Dakhleh and the Kharga oasis, located southwest of Dakhleh, owing to the presence of a number of sandstone remnants flat surfaces thereof ideal for engravings. In this paper we shall briefly present the results of thus far undertaken research into the extremely rich rock art of Dakhleh, a vast oasis, 80 km long and up to 20 km wide, stretching from the west to the east and particularly rich in sandstone remnants and cliffs in its eastern and central parts.

The first to investigate rock art in Egypt, including that in Dakhleh, was a German scholar Hans Winkler, who worked there in the late 1930s. He discovered and published a number of engravings, mostly from the eastern part of the oasis (Winkler 1939). Forty years later, in 1985, the research was undertaken by a Polish scholar Lech Krzyżaniak, a head of a group called The Petroglyph Unit working within The Dakhleh Oasis Project. Despite his untimely death, the group has continued the investigation.

Petroglyphs were carved into the surfaces of the above mentioned soft sandstone rocks (Fig. 2), which was easy to engrave with hard, probably flint implements. Petroglyphs were produced using a variety of techniques, particularly differentiated during the oldest, prehistoric period. Figures were outlined with lines of varying depth and width and were sometimes marked with pecking (*piquetage*), and filled with abrasion or pecking, in contrast to linear engraving techniques of later times, when figures or signs were more preferably marked with a continuous line.



Fig. 1. Location of Dakhleh Oasis

Rites were created by people that inhabited the oasis from the Neolithic to almost modern times. Four periods can be roughly discerned here, namely prehistoric, Pharaonic, Christian and Islamic. Dirk Huyge (2009) believes that even earlier, epi-Paleolithic art dated to c. 7000-5500BC should be present in the oases of the Western Desert, albeit it has not been evidenced thus far.

The richest, yet most difficult to interpret prehistoric art, is represented by hundreds of images, both individual and organised in scenes of multiple motifs. More precise chronology of the petroglyphs is difficult to determine, since at-



Fig. 2. Dakhleh Oasis. Example of sandstone panel covered by engravings (fot. M. Kobusiewicz)



Fig. 3. Dakhleh Oasis. Representation of people (fot. E. Kuciewicz)



Fig. 4. Dakhleh Oasis. Representation of wild animal – gazelle (fot. M. Kobusiewicz)

tempts at dating on the basis of the patina produced disappointing results. On the basis of the degree of patination, sometimes of the stratigraphy of representations or the presence of archaeological sites of the Bashendi culture and afterwards Sheikh Muftah culture in the vicinity (McDonald 1999; Krzyżaniak 1990) prehistoric art can be allegedly dated to the period from the sixth to the early third millennium BC.

This period is characterised by representations of human figures (Fig. 3) from realistic to greatly simplified. A number of animals such as giraffes, oryx, gazelles (Fig. 4), ostriches and probably domesticated animals i.e. cattle or dogs are abundant, while elephants, rabbits, lions and zebras are noticeably less common (Polkowski *et al.* 2013). They represent fauna typical of the humid Holocene period before the desertification of Eastern Sahara. Noteworthy is a complete lack of giraffe bones among the remains of fauna from archaeological sites of all periods registered at Dakhleh (Churcher 1999), albeit this does not eliminate the possibility of the animal presence. We shall discuss the giraffe-related issues below.

The analysis of the prehistoric images, briefly sketched above, produced two interesting ideas, comprehensible for the then people, yet largely mysterious to us. The first is a recurrent motif of female figures pictured either in a realistic manner with details of outfit, hairstyle, items of personal adornment and tattoos (Fig. 5) or very schematically (Fig. 6) (Polkowski *et al.* 2013). A common feature of all representations, be it realistic or schematic, is the negligence in depicting the upper part of the body, whilst the lower part - the hips and buttocks - are unnaturally heavily accented. At the same time breast, arms and legs are typically merely marked. These images are registered as single, in pairs or in groups.

The hypothesis of the cult of fertility witnessed herein seems well-grounded (Winkler 1939; Krzyżaniak 1990) as indicated by females' bulging bellies often suggestive of pregnancy as well as overly large, steatopygic-like buttocks, an indicator and a symbol of abundance and prosperity for the south African Bushmen. Oversimplification of the representations to the extent that a human figure is almost indiscernible is a testimony to their symbolic significance. Nonetheless, these shapes were probably immediately understandable for the then people and the message they carried was clear and obvious.

Representations of females are frequently found in particularly prominent locations, such as vertical panels perched on remnants easily visible from the distance. They are also registered on flat boulders lying horizontally on tops of steep sandstone remnants facing the sky (Fig. 7). More often than not such a hill is almost completely or completely devoid of other petroglyphs (Polkowski *et al.* 2013).

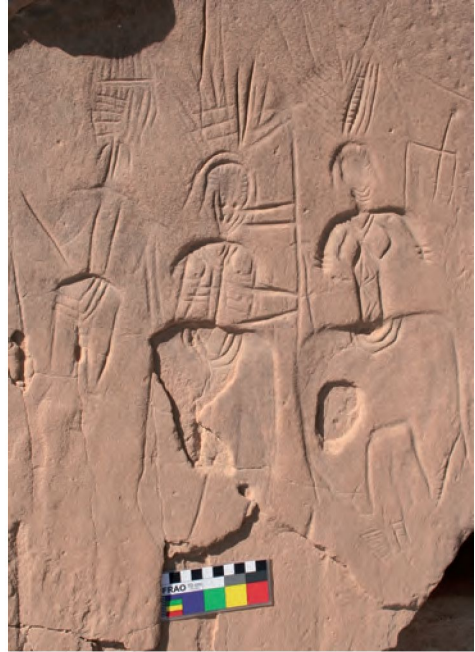


Fig. 5. Dakhleh Oasis. Realistic images of females (fot. E. Kuciewicz)



Fig. 6. Dakhleh Oasis. Schematic images of females (fot. E. Kuciewicz)



Fig. 7. Dakhleh Oasis. Flat boulder covered by images of females, laying horizontally on the top of steep sandstone remnant, facing the sky (Fot. M. Kobusiewicz)

Similar representations of women are known only from the site of Meri 99/36 (Riemer 2006) of the Western Desert, approximately 70 km west of the oasis of Dakhleh (Berger 2006) and more recently from the vicinity of the Kharga oasis (Ikram 2009).

Numerous representations of giraffes, which in accordance to our knowledge were absent in the oasis, stand for another idea, still more difficult to decode. Giraffes are typically fairly realistically depicted on their own or in groups. Interestingly, they are often led on a rope by a man (Fig. 8) or at least connected to a man by constant line. In addition, the foregoing representations of women are frequently accompanied by sometimes pregnant giraffes (Kuciewicz and Kobusiewicz 2008). This animal had certainly a special significance for the local Neolithic community, the nature of which cannot be determined as yet.

In the mid-third millennium B.C., during the reign of the Fifth Dynasty of the Old Kingdom, the oasis was settled by the representatives of the already well-organized Egyptian state. Judging from archaeological sources, the post-Neolithic local shepherds, referred to as the Sheikh Muftah culture, did not abandon the oasis, having undergone acculturation with time.

The rock engravings of the Old Kingdom and probably also of the later dynasties are relatively easy to distinguish owing to the typically Egyptian way of presenting hu-



Fig. 8. Dakhleh Oasis. The giraffe led on the rope by a man (Fot. E. Kuciewicz)

man figures (Fig. 9) or, even the images of tools typical for the Old Kingdom Egyptian dynasties (Fig. 10-11). Registered at various points in the oasis, they are most common in the immediate vicinity of the Egyptian watch posts, scattered in the area (Fig. 12) and occupied by guards sent from the then centre of power located in the centre of the oasis, namely a fortress and the settlement now called Ain Asil. The rites include realistic representations of people, abundance of single or double images of bare feet or sandals, of varying degrees of realism (Fig. 13). Known also from other parts of Egypt and Nubia, similar representations of feet were produced for a very long time, until the Roman period. According to one hypothesis they were meant to signify the symbolic domination over the place, area or even the state. Frequent are also feminine symbols in the form of a triangle cut across with a vertical line (Fig. 14). Watch posts are often accompanied by groups of parallel cuts in the rock (Fig. 15), a mark perhaps of guards counting days in the services while tracking the caravans or movements of nomads crossing the oasis.

Similar, yet chaotic cuts and geometrical figures should probably be dated to the Pharaonic Period as well. Sparse representations of boats, so characteristic of the pre-dynastic period and later times by the Nile and in the Eastern Desert, are also registered. Egyptian art should be dated since the end of the Fifth Dynasty, i.e. since c. 2300 BC at the earliest. It was certainly created until the beginning of the First Intermediate Period, while whether and how long it continued is hard to say.



Fig. 9. Dakhleh Oasis. Picture of Egyptian soldier (Fot. M. Kobusiewicz)



Fig. 10. Dakhleh Oasis. Representation of the Egyptian bifacially retouched flint knife (fot. M. Kobusiewicz)



Fig. 11. Dakhleh Oasis. Original of the Egyptian bifacially retouched flint knife (fot. M. Kobusiewicz)



Fig. 12. Dakhleh Oasis. Watch post of the VI dynasty Egyptian guards (fot. M. Kobusiewicz)



Fig. 13. Dakhleh Oasis. Images of bare fits (fot. M. Kobusiewicz)

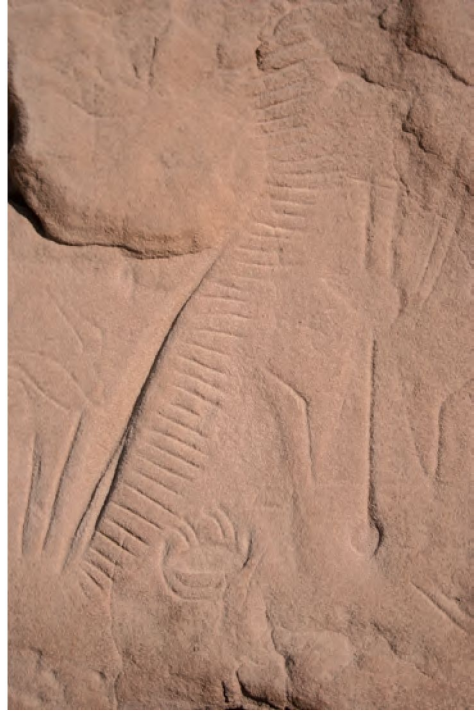


Fig. 15. Dakhleh Oasis. Group of parallel cuts (fot. E. Kuciewicz)



Fig. 14. Dakhleh Oasis. Feminine symbols (fot. M. Kobusiewicz)



Fig. 14. Dakhleh Oasis. Bedouin tribal mark – wusum (fot. E. Kuciewicz)



The Pharaonic period was followed by fairly less frequent rock art related to Christianity, present mostly in the form of various types of crosses. Finally, the art of the Islamic period is represented by images of camels, Arabic inscriptions and numerous tribal marks (Winkler 1939), the so-called Wusum (Fig. 16).

There is no rule with regard to the location of the petroglyphs. They are at found at different heights and at different slopes of sandstone remnants, with the presumptive exception for a relatively rare choice of southern slopes. Judging from the results of thus far conducted research, some places in the oasis attracted the attention of artists of successive generations, which is evident in case of the coexistence of rites from different periods. The question arises therefore whether, and in what way the existence of rock art of previous generations influenced the work of their successors.

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