

Rock drawings at the mouth of Wadi Hellal, Elkab (Upper Egypt)

During the 1979 - 80 campaign of the Belgian Archaeological Mission at Elkab (Upper Egypt) we had the opportunity to make a small-scale survey of rock drawings in the mouth of Wadi Hellal. This wadi, cut deeply through Cretaceous Nubian sandstone, opens into the Nile Valley forming a vast hemicycle. Its lower course exhibits numerous affluents, creating recesses and isolating sandstone buttes. Although rock drawings have been known from this area for a long time, only a few have been discussed in detail (Porter and Moss, 1937: 190). Moreover, the several hundreds of textual graffiti, recovered and copied by Janssen and Mekhitarian (1951), still await final publication.

Amongst the sites listed during our survey several attract attention for the antiquity of their drawings. Unlike fully Dynastic engravings and texts most of these drawings face the east and may be found alongside the north-western part of the wadi. All the decorated surfaces are fairly easily attainable and situated only a few meters above the present level.

Lacking appropriate material aids and due to shortage of time, it was impossible to obtain a complete and satisfactory account of the graffiti. Nevertheless, some preliminary suggestions may be put forward as regards their chronology and association with the habitational history of the Elkab area.

Nonrepresentational geometric designs, according to Davis (1977; 1978) the earliest known rock art achievements in Upper Egypt and Nubia seem to be wanting. Moreover, no decisive arguments can be put forward as to the attribution of drawings to the local Epipalaeolithic Elkabian, 14C-dated about 8,000 B.P. (Vermeersch, 1978). Faunal remains from Elkabian sites indicate preferential hunting of dorcas gazelle and aurochs, the latter and hippopotamus accounting for more than 90% of the meat supply. With the possible exception of dorcas gazelle, which occurs however in uncontested Predynastic/Early Dynastic context, this game is not depicted amongst our series.

The portrayal of large mammals, such as elephant and giraffe, should not ne-

cessarily be thought to predate Predynastic times. These animals, in fact, fit well into Predynastic (especially, though not exclusively, Amratian) iconography. On the basis of style, technique, patination and, in one instance, superimposition they may be marked out from the great mass of Gerzean/Early Dynastic graffiti depicting boats and associated scenery. For the present, we would thus feel inclined to attribute elephant, giraffe and associated drawings (Fig. 1) to a Badarian or Amratian age. Human presence in the area at that time is attested by stray finds of red polished and black topped ware as well as rippled pottery within and near the great enclosure wall of Elkab (Vermeersch, 1978: 144).

Until now, no direct archaeological evidence of Early Gerzean occupation has been recovered. Some rock drawings, however, bear so close a resemblance to Early Gerzean figurative art, that not much doubt could be expressed as to their cultural affiliation. Amongst these, representations of sickle-boats with rounded stem and



FIG. 1. Elephant and ibex (Badarian or Amratian?)

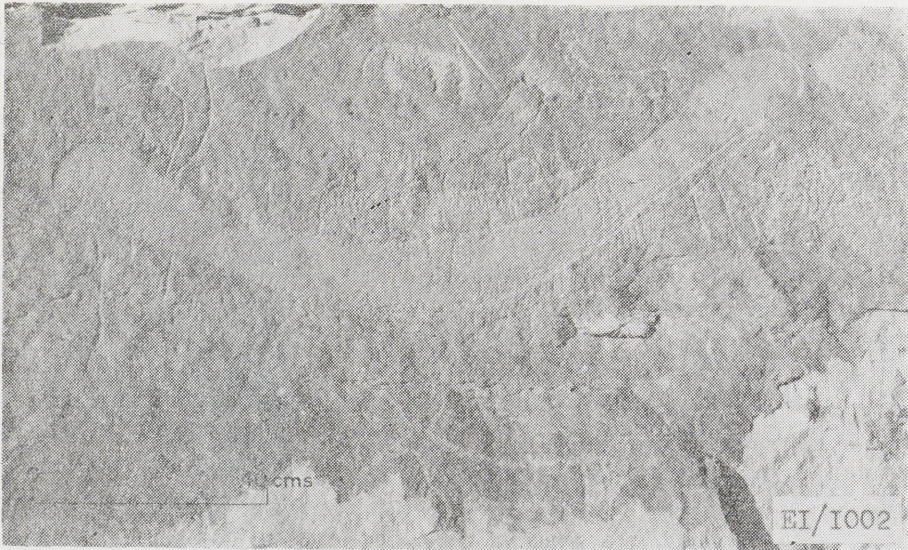


FIG. 2. Sickle-boat (Early Gerzean)

stern (Fig. 2) and human figures with upraised arms may be closely paralleled with painted ware motifs.

The numerous boat-drawings recorded display a great variety of styles and techniques. In addition, numerous transitional types between sickle-boats and square-boats may be noted. According to Engelmayer (1965: 71), these hybrid forms may well account for the methodical translation of indigenous papyrus boats (or their wooden replicas) into wooden square-shaped vessels in the Late Gerzean period. The plausibility of this theory, anticipated by Scharff (1942), may well be supported by the obvious late date of square-boats and their derivations in the Elkab area (Fig. 3). The associated scenery includes wild fauna, amongst which ibex, ass and gazelle predominate, as well as human representations. The latter are quite rare and appear most often in hunting scenes. In all likelihood the dog was used for hunting, thus presenting the only decisive evidence for animal domestication. Depictions of oxen (indifferently cows or bulls) do not show clear indications of domestication and on the basis of patination and superimposition can mostly be assigned to full Dynastic times. Thus, the assumed importance of animal husbandry in Late Predynastic/Early Dynastic society is not at all reflected in contemporary rock art.

The numerous Late Gerzean/Early Dynastic rock drawings accord well with the known archaeological record at Elkab. A recently excavated Late Predynastic cemetery (Hendrickx, this volume), sustaining the burial-needs of probably a relatively large community, may indeed account for an important demographic growth in the area. As all the evidence points to an archaeological continuum from Predynastic to Dynastic times in this area, it is not clear to what extent the rock drawings

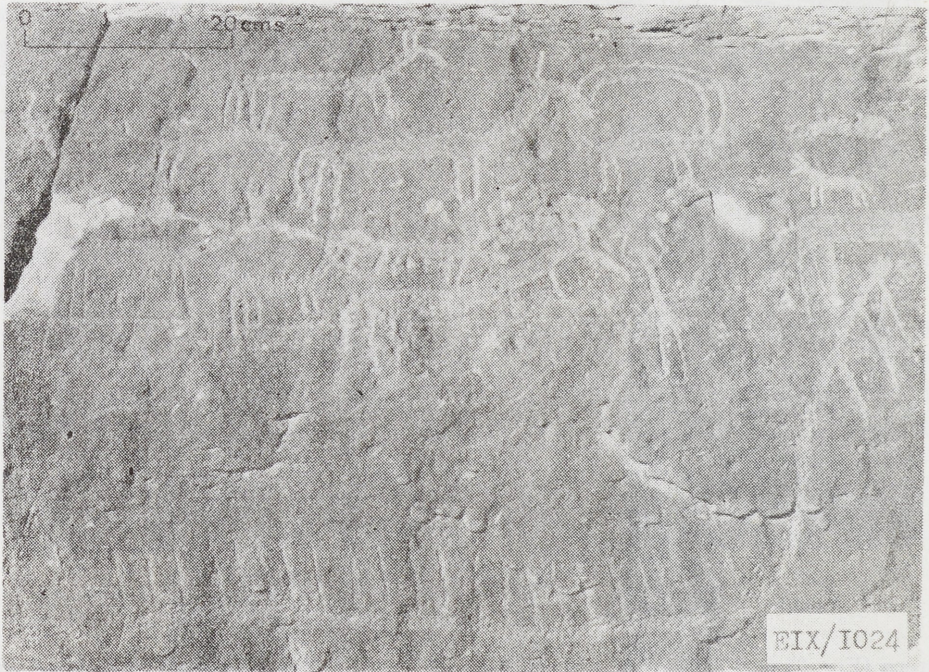


FIG. 3. Square-boat derivation and associated drawings (Late Gerzean/Early Dynastic)

fall into the historic period. On the basis of patination and superimposition it seems, however, that their greater part substantially predates local Old Kingdom textual graffiti belonging essentially to the 6th Dynasty (reigns of Teti and Pepi).

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