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## **The Birth of Supernatural. On the Genesis of Some Later Ancient Egyptian Concepts**

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The following text represents a new way to understand rock-art preserved in the caves of Wadi Sura I and Wadi Sura II in Gilf Kebir, located on the southwest border of modern Egypt<sup>1</sup>. The sites are dated to the late seventh and the sixth millennia BC. The principal aim of this paper is to show that there are several elements featuring in their decoration which indicate that creators of this art formulated some very basic ideas which were later on elaborated in the Nile valley and that we traditionally connect with the specific character of Ancient Egyptian civilization. These include the following motifs: running chieftain (renewing his magical powers and physical forces), chieftain smiting his enemies, the ethiological myth of Earth and Sky, swimmers as the souls of the deceased individuals, creatures protecting the Netherworld and eventually what seems to be the earliest depiction of the hereditary principle. Surprising as it may be, the suggested link between the Gilf Kebir local populations of hunter-gatherers and cattle keepers, or the Western Desert popula-

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tions in general, and the much later populations inhabiting the Nile valley finds additional support in the recent discoveries at Gebel Ramlah cemeteries located in between Gilf Kebir and Aswan and slightly later in time (Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2010.). This cultural transfer and a major movement of the local populations in an west-east direction may be explained by the increasing environmental stress and deteriorating climate which started in the sixth millennium BC.



Fig. 1. Cave of the Swimmers (photo: M. Bárta)

## Introduction

What makes prehistory of the Sahara in general and Egyptian Western Desert in particular such a fascinating subject to modern scholarship is in my opinion above all the fact that it provides rich evidence for how past communities of hunters, gatherers and pastoral nomads coped with their changing environment and how they were able to readjust to major climate changes, during the Holocene in particular. Obviously, much less is known about the intellectual dimension of these past communities. Indeed, except of some indications provided indirectly by the artefactual evidence, very little has been on offer.

Except, perhaps, of some surviving remains of rock-art left behind by these populations. Few in numbers, rock-art sites pose itself as a very challenging scientific endeavor. Generally difficult to date and even more complicated to interpret, decorated surfaces present themselves as frequently used, reused, expanded, complemented and/or reduced sets of motifs likely imbued with different layers of meaning. From this observation results yet another stressful characteristics of the rock-art, namely that more often than not it doesn't seem to follow a single master plan. Decorated surfaces incorporate different motifs juxtaposed next to each other, with frequent superimpositions, other without any significant relationship to one another. This is at least what we seem to anticipate based on our current knowledge of the issue.

The research on the Western Desert Holocene prehistory has been revolutionized by two dominant figures and their expeditions – American prehistorian Fred Wendorf to whom this volume is dedicated and a German scholar Rudolf Kuper. It is thanks to their decades long focus on archaeology of the vast expanses of what is nowadays barren and life-threatening desert, in particular between the Gilf Kebir and the Nile valley, that we can seriously appreciate specific forms of subsistence strategies and visual expressions of many local populations (compare the current state of research with the one reflected in Kuper *et al.* (1978).

Yet even today we tend to think in categories born out by our modern perception of the world based on sedentary principle of our everyday life and clear-cut boundaries lending support to our use of mutually exclusive categories of experience – be it art, language, culture or history. Deep prehistory, however, may offer, completely different experience. During the middle Holocene, the whole Sahara was far from a vast emptiness. It was a region with rich forms of life occupied by populations of hunters, gatherers and pastoralist nomads. Only from the late seventh millennium BC the climate started to deteriorate and as a consequence Sahara became largely dry region within the following two millennia (Kuper and Kröpelin 2006). This had serious impact on the local populations which were forced to withdraw towards the east and started to experiment with sedentary forms of life in the Nile valley.

Until recently, the prevailing if not the only opinion among the scholars specialized in the prehistory of Sahara and specifically of what we call today Egyptian Western Desert was that the prehistoric populations living there had barely anything in common with the later Egyptians from the Nile valley. To explore this view we have to turn to two most important sites with rock-art in Egyptian West-

ern Desert dating to the so-called Gilf B phase, the so-called Cave of the Swimmers – Wadi Sura I and Cave of the Beasts – Wadi Sura II.

The painted scenes there were most frequently made with red ochre in combination with white pigment. The compositions are distributed rather irregularly within the whole complex of other scenes, yet they seem to represent self-contained independent units. Most importantly, many of the scenes are difficult to comprehend based on contemporary rock-art or within their own context. Therefore, in order to explore their significance, one has to turn to later formal parallels, which make a sense in historical, environmental, chronological and regional context.

### 1. Hans Rhotert and Wadi Sura I

Wadi Sura I cave (Fig. 1) was discovered by the renowned Hungarian desert explorer Láslo Almásy in 1933 who gave it its original name based on preserved human figures formally resembling swimmers – hence the name Cave of the Swimmers (Almásy 1998). Following Almásy, it was then German explorer and archaeologist Hans Rhotert who concluded that a very small human male figure (Fig. 2), which today stands isolated in the left part of the cave, shows similar traits as much later parallels known from Ancient Egypt. The Wadi Sura I figure features about 12 cm high figure oriented to the left. It has a body painted red with stretched-out arms. The man holds in his right hand an elusive artefact similar in shape to an adze. On his right knee is fastened a double band and his left knee is decorated with two hanging strips of cloth. The figure wears on the head a prolonged, cone-like object closely resembling the shape of the much later Upper Egyptian white crown (the earliest attestation of the white crown dates from the Naqada I period; Ciałowicz 1997). The overall appearance of the figure suggests that it portrays a person in a frozen moment of an intensive run. Moreover, due to the elements indicating decoration, it may be suggested that this was a ceremonial or festive performance. Within the context of the known rock-art of the Western Desert there is no parallel motif known to me and the closest parallel is known only from much later period from the Nile valley. As will be shown, this is notably the case with many of the scenes attested from Wadi Sura I and II and discussed in this text (Le Quellec *et al.* 2005). H. Rhotert therefore considered the scene to be very close to what Egyptologists recognize and interpret as a prototypic *sed*-feast scene, as performed by much later ancient Egyptian kings (Rhotert 1952: 55, pl. XXIX, 5).



Fig. 2. Cave of the Swimmers, running man (photo: M. Frouz)

In Ancient Egypt, the earliest evidence for the *sed* feast representations dates to the late Predynastic period (around 3300 BC). It is fragment of a mace head traditionally connected with King Scorpion (Hornung and Staehelin 1974: 16; Hornung and Staehelin 2006: 13; Serrano 2002: 51 and fig. 18). Later on, similar motif is known from around 2900 BC. from the reign of the first king of unified Egypt, Narmer (Hornung and Staehelin 2006: 13). Finally, the third early attestation is provided by the seal of Den dating to the First Dynasty (Decker 1987: 40, fig. 10). The *sed* feast represented an ancient ceremony which comprised many important symbolical activities related to the renewal of the physical and mythical powers of the king implying his exclusive possession of the rule over his com-

munity bestowed on him by the gods. At the same time, this ceremony became very important part of the king's afterlife existence (Hornung and Staehelin 2006: 91–95; Kaiser 1971: 87–105; Martin 1984: 785–786; Serrano 2002: 44–46). Significant part of it was a ritual run. This was a specific way how to manifest that he was the true ruler of the world (Hornung and Staehelin 1974: 43).

Another dominant though much damaged feature in the cave represent the figures of the so-called swimmers (Fig. 3). This element occurs also in the Cave of Beasts. It shows small human figures portrayed on the belly prostrate formally resembling attitude of the swimmers. For Almásy they represented swimmers whom he thought were referring to the times when people used to swim in the local pools. Later, Hans Rhotert considered them to be images of dead persons (Rhotert 1952: 105). In this context, a reference to the Coffin Texts spells where the 'swimmers' are representing the souls of the dead floating in the waters of Nun (Le Quellec 2008: 31–33). The Ancient Egyptians ascribed to the swimmers quite specific status because they played an important role in resurrection ritual as attested by some Egyptian texts:

*O drowned ones, who are in the water, swimmers, who are in the stream, see Re, who enters his boat, great of mystery... Well, then, get up, tired ones. See Re. He takes care of you. Re says to them: Exit for your heads [= your head above the water], O sinking ones. Movement of the arms for your arms, O overturned ones. Circulation for your legs, O swimmers.*  
(Zandee 1960: 236)

The figures of the so-called swimmers occur in different caves in Gilf Kebir area including the Cave of the Swimmers and the cave of the Beasts. Recently, Rudolf Kuper and his team discovered that in the Cave of Beasts they form a kind of a "arc" overarching the most part of the cave (Kuper *et al.* 2013: 58, fig. 7). This allows to assume that their arrangement followed a preconceived plan and that the individual compositions in the cave were imbued with specific meanings. In fact, looking at the preserved similar arc in the Cave of the Swimmers indicates that the same solution was taken there as well. Thus we encounter a motif that was not local but had a generous meaning and was used in different locations as we know that the "swimmers" were preserved in more caves in the area.

It is above all the observation that these figures were intentionally arranged in an arc which renders the original notion of them being real swimmers rather obsolete.



Fig. 3. Cave of the Swimmers, detail of the “swimming” figures (photo: M. Bárta)

## 2. Wadi Sura II – Cave of the Beasts

Unlike Cave of the Swimmers, this cave was discovered almost a century later, by an expedition led by col. Ahmed Mestekawy and Italian explorers Massimo and Jacopo Foggini in 2002 (Fig. 4). In this case, the decoration of the cave was incredibly well preserved and consisted of several thousands of painted elements/units. It features figures of the swimmers as well as several other motifs for which we can find parallels in the valley of the Nile only much later. As is the case with the swimmers, also all the below-mentioned motifs and scenes are unique within the context of the Saharan rock-art and parallels to them can be found only considerably later in the Nile valley.

To start with, the left-hand side of the cave contains a small scene with a male, perhaps a chieftain, holding in his hand a mace (Fig. 5). To the left of the chieftain we can see a fallen male upside down, perhaps a defeated enemy? Two rows of human figures are to the right of the assumed chieftain. The individual human figures are either standing or shown upside down. These two asymmetrical groupings are separated by a horizontal natural rock fissure that divides the upper and



Fig. 4. Cave of the Beasts (photo: M. Bárta)

lower row rendered in different attitudes. The upper row contains robust figures with their arms lifted above their heads. The lower row shows figures almost half the size of those in the upper row. Their bodies are slender (could they be females?) with their heads down. Their arms are arranged in a different way: while one arm is always hanging along the body, the other is raised above the figure's head.

Very close parallels to the composition consisting of a victorious chieftain and a killed enemy occur much later in ancient Egyptian sources where the standard elements of the so-called smiting scene show the king (in earliest scenes a chieftain) with a raised mace above his enemies, about to smash their heads. This ideological feature of a victorious king successfully protecting his territory and people from evil forces and enemies permeated the whole ancient Egyptian civilisation. Typically, Ancient Egyptian fashion of rendering defeated enemy was to show him upside down. The king was, from the very early stages of the civilisation in the Nile valley, considered to be a superior force whose task was, among many others, to maintain order, drive off the forces of Chaos and protect his subjects from



malevolent forces including enemies from different territories. One of the earliest examples of this iconographic element is attested from the late Predynastic tomb L 100 at Hierakonpolis belonging to one of the rulers of a local chiefdom (Quibell and Green 1902, pl. LXXVI).

One of the most important scenes in the Cave of Beasts features a large figure of a composite creature with body painted white (Fig. 6). It consists of a combination of beast's legs and a female torso with a clearly visible breast. The figure is leaning against the ground with her outstretched arms and legs, making an arc. There is a red figure – probably of a male, which seems to support the body of the white creature, reclining on his right elbow and with his left arm touching/supporting her body. His legs are unnaturally long and nine men are depicted walking on them upwards on the right side. In their hands they carry large elongated items in a similar fashion as the later offering bearers attested in Egyptian tombs from the Old Kingdom (27<sup>th</sup> cent. BC) onwards. Based on the scheme of the scene, it may be said that the largest and thinnest figures in the composition which are painted red represent one species of creatures in human shape but with exceedingly long arms and legs, most likely beings of different, perhaps supernatural substance.



Fig. 5. Cave of the Beasts, chieftain smiting his enemy (photo: M. Bárta)



Fig. 6. Cave of the Beasts, the composition with the white figure (photo: M. Bárta)

It is in this context hard to resist equation of the White being with much later depictions of the sky goddess Nut in ancient Egypt, being supported by an Earth-god, called in Ancient Egypt, Geb (Bonnet 1952: 536-9; Wells 1992). Geb, for instance, is in one passage of the Pyramid Texts (Spell 510) described as a god whose one arm touches the sky while other rests on earth:

*...while Geb, with his (one) arm to the sky and his (other) arm to the earth, is extending Meryre to the sun...*

(Allen 2005: 153)

Quite specific is also a group of scenes dominated by headless beasts which are rendered in a way that prevent their reliable identification (Fig. 7). They are always surrounded by smaller human figures. Some humans are rendered in a way implying that they may be swallowed by these creatures. They have been considered by most of the scientists as headless beasts. The problem with this proposal is simple – to our knowledge the Saharan rock-art does not incorporate mythological creatures. Thus this solution assumes a completely new approach to the rock-art in Gilf Kebir.

If we were to find out a more mundane solution, we encounter difficulties and no reliable explanation seems to be at hand. However, I am inclined to identify these “headless” beasts hypothetically being baboons. This suggestion is based on observation of their contours, body attitude and profile view of their “double” heads. The “double” head visual impression is what you can actually see when looking at baboons from the profile. Be it as it may, the concept based on a scheme where an animal is devouring a human is quite unusual within the context of the rock-art of the day and, again, may be much better understood with the help of Egyptian sources preserved in the literary composition of the Book of Dead. Following the text, we can understand these creatures as protecting the cave, the place of resurrection and the entrance to the Nethewor from being entered by those who were not worthy of it. This is to me the only feasible way how to explain the animals devouring the humans (Bárta 2011: 61). In connection with these headless beast some authors posit another interesting observation claiming that the vertical cuttings across some of these figures envisage yet another Ancient Egyptian mythological practice – namely “neutralising” potentially dangerous animals by means of cutting them into several separate parts and thus keeping their negative and harmful forces at bay (D’Huy 2009).



Fig. 7. Cave of the Beasts, the “headless beast” (photo: M. Bárta)

Another piece of unique evidence provided by the Cave of the Beasts seems to relate directly to the social organisation of the community which devised the decoration of the cave and used the place. It shows an adult pair and a child (Fig. 8). The adult pair shows a male with a mace held horizontally or alternatively, with a symbol of his masculinity. The woman is standing beside him and holding a basket (?) on her head. The child is attached to the mother by means of umbilical cord. If this interpretation is correct, we may consider this scene to be the earliest heredity rendered in iconography.



Fig. 8. Cave of the Beasts, the pair with a child (photo: M. Bárta)

To finish this brief overview of the selected scenes in the decoration of the caves, let us conclude with yet another element in the decoration, in fact a dominating one. It is human hands, mostly occurring in pairs which take up significant part of the decorated surface of the cave. While a human hand is a common element used independently by many populations throughout prehistory on several continents, in this case, in this place and in this particular context, it is difficult to refrain again from a direct comparison with Ancient Egyptian culture. Shall we hypothetically agree that some processes portrayed in the caves have something in common with etiologial concept and concepts of death and rebirth, the pairs

of hands only add to the religious relevance of the scenes. In such a context, they would symbolise souls of the deceased which made it to the Afterlife.

## Conclusions

Despite the general acknowledgement that prehistoric populations of the Western Desert played an important role with regard to the Egyptian civilisation, primary attention has always been paid rather to the Egyptian – Near East connection (Wengrow 2006: 21–29). A direct connection that would link the populations of the Western Desert living in the area of Gilf Kebir and the early inhabitants of the Nile valley has been, however, missing. Only recently the Combined Prehistoric Expedition led by F. Wendorf and R. Schild has indicated that there might have been a connection between the Sahara Neolithic and the Neolithic in Upper Egypt (Wendorf *et al.* 2001).

Above all, it was the discovery of the Nabta Playa late Neolithic megalithic culture dated to the second half of the fifth millennium BC that allows to propose a connection between the Egyptian Western Desert populations and the rise of the Predynastic cultures in Upper Egypt (Wendorf *et al.* 1993: 7–16). The Nabta Playa settlement area also featured unique tumuli with cattle burials (Applegate *et al.* 2001: 468–88). The burials prove clearly that these prehistoric cattle keepers practised a cult of sacred cows which later became one of the dominant features of ancient Egyptian religion (Hassan 1998: 98–112).

The Gebel Ramlah cemeteries dating to the middle of the fifth mill. BC may be used along similar line of argument (Kobusiewicz *et al.* 2009). They display the very same characteristics: the placement of the dead, the grave construction and the grave goods. The graves assume the form of oval pits with burials in flexed positions, head west, face south. Typical representative of the pottery are beakers of caliciform shapes and black-topped pottery. Quite frequent are also polished axe heads, palettes, shell and ivory bracelets, needles etc. Prominent was the effort of the grave builders to keep older bodies together despite the fact that they had to move them aside during later interments. They took every measure to preserve the earlier skeletons intact and yet they were making mistakes such as reinserting wrong teeth into mandibullas or maxillas. A rather manifold collection of parallels to the Nile valley culture of Badari made the excavators seriously consider close links between the community of Gebel Ramlah and the Tasa/Badari culture.

It may be suggested for further considerations that there are quite a few indications supporting the notion of the cultural transfer of several intellectual concepts

originally developed by the local populations of the Western Desert and Gilf Kebir areas (for details see Bárta 2011 with bibliography; for opposing and prevailing opinion comp. Förster and Kuper 2013; Zboray 2013). The scenes in the caves prove that there was significant social complexity existent in the society that conceived the commented concepts. At the same time, these local communities possessed significant intellectual capability to embed their surrounding environment within the framework of complex etiological compositions that later on became a characteristic part of ancient Egyptian culture, mythology and world-view.

The Gilf Kebir decorated caves pose in general a very interesting and multi-layered phenomenon. In comparison with the rock-art known from other locations such as Gebel Uweinat or some minor places in the Western Desert but also including other sites from the north-east Africa in general, it is easy to recognise their unique status. The wide spectrum of individual motifs goes far beyond the traditional and expected genre of hunter-gatherers and early pastoralists.

The topicalization of the chieftain and scenes with suggested transcendental meaning indicates that these sites were of a special nature. This is also indicated by the fact that most ancient routes mapped by the Cologne team in the area of the Cave of the Beasts make the cave their focal point. It would be out of place to consider the creators and users of these caves exceptional within their environment and context of other populations in the region (but this cannot be excluded either). It is more likely to suppose that the preserved decoration communicates the world as it was perceived by that time. We can even speculate that it could be the approaching climate deterioration which mobilised the intellect of the local communities and made them express their thoughts in particular sites developed as special places for communicating with the gods. Similar examples are easy to be named. Take, for instance, the appearance of the Gobekli Tepe monumental complexes in eastern Turkey close to modern Sanliurfa, most likely as a consequence as a Younger Dryas rash cooling on the Northern Hemisphere which led to a radically more difficult life for humans within one's lifetime. Or the genesis of the first Egyptian state in the wake of another serious climate worsening. The human history is rich in examples when serious progress has been made due to internal or external stress. But these thoughts are currently beyond the limits of the presently known evidence.

While it is impossible to state that it was exclusively the populations of the Western Desert that created Ancient Egyptian civilization flourishing in the Nile valley, I fully subscribe to the conclusion that there is and most likely will be increasing evidence showing important relationships between populations which

once lived in the vast expanses of what we nowadays call the Western Desert and those settled in the Nile valley. Simultaneously, in my opinion, the populations originating to the west of the Nile valley contributed intellectually to the genesis of some of the most outstanding pillars which constituted the essence of Egyptian civilization.

Accordingly, it is tempting to assume that we are confronted here with an incipient concept of ethic norms according to which only people following them in their life could enter the afterlife existence following their physical death. Here the earlier commented compositions of the swimmers and the headless beasts merge together in a joined effect to express rather complicated concept of ethical principles on which the community of the day perhaps operated.

Summing up the importance of the evidence provided by the Cave of the Swimmers and the Cave of the Beasts, we may conclude that these caves:

- provided legitimacy to the current social order by fostering the topicality of victory of the chieftain on behalf of his population (smiting and running male figures, likely being chieftains);
- portray a sophisticated etiology how to imagine the physical world, earth and sky, that surrounded those communities;
- introduce ethics appeal – indicating means of resurrection after meeting the ‘qualifying’ criteria in order to attain the afterlife (headless beasts);
- they cemented the current status of the community by perpetuating the hereditary principle;
- they provided each member of the community with individual experience of the transcendental realm (pair-hands).

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