

Egyptian Rock-Art

Introduction

Egypt's rock-art has hitherto not been as well known as that in Saharan North Africa. However, there are a great number of significant images which date from the Palaeolithic through the Predynastic and Pharaonic periods into the Middle Ages and beyond. They occur both in the Nile Valley in the vicinity of settlements and also deep in what are now the Eastern and Western deserts and at the Kharga, Dakhla and Farafra oases. The images constitute evidence for the activities of ancient Egyptians not only in proximity to the river, but point to hunting, mining, quarrying and also ritual activity far away from the comfort and safety of the valley. Due to expanding settlement and economic activity, especially mining and quarrying, and tourism the rock-art sites are increasingly under threat and a number have already been destroyed. Indeed, destruction of rock-art in Egypt has been going on for a long time. Quarrying around Wadi Abu Agag in the vicinity of Aswan destroyed images in 1912, with further damage in the same area occurring thirty years later (Huyge, 1998: 3). The disappearance of rock-art sites due to quarrying is a sadly recurring theme in the history of Egyptian rock-art research.

Summary of rock-art recording

Desert Sites

A considerable amount of rock-art in Egypt, comprising over 300 sites (Lankester, 2012), is located in the Eastern Desert within an arc encompassing the wadis of the Central Eastern Desert and the Kom Ombo drainage Basin. Much of this work, after the Robert Mond Expedition in the 1930's ('RME,' Winkler, 1938), was accomplished by the privately funded Eastern Desert Survey ('EDS,' Rohl, 2000) and the Rock Art Topographical Survey ('RATS,' Morrow & Morrow, 2002). These expeditions displayed all the strengths of private initiatives: enthusiasm, funding commitment and initially quick publication, combined with weaknesses: an uneven recording standard, no co-ordination with academic institutions and the inability to sustain the project over the long term. For example, although sites south of Wadi Baramiya have been located under the formal and professional auspices of the University of Minnesota, not all have been recorded-and of those which were noted by this mission publication has been partial (but where possible accomplished by Judd, 2009). The reopening of gold mining in the area of Wadi Baramiya coupled with the dispersal of the

EDS and RATS teams has brought recording in most of the Eastern Desert to a halt. At the moment there are no archaeological mission undertaking this work. A multi-disciplinary Hungarian team's work around Bir Mineh near the well and some remains of dry stone walls and buildings took place from 1998 to 2004 (Luft, 2010) and needs to be included in a synthesis of the Central Eastern Desert sites (see Lankester, 2012). An important contribution to Egyptian rock-art research was made by John Darnell as part of nine seasons' work of the Theban Desert Road Survey in the 1990's. The recording of pharaonic inscriptions at Djebel Tjauti and 'Dominion Behind Thebes' was extended to recording rock art. Darnell recorded several of Winkler's west bank sites, in addition to new ones which included the so-called 'Scorpion Tableau' at Gebel Tjauti. However, after a comprehensive initial volume (Darnell, 2002) further publication has been patchy. In addition, in the far west in the region of the Gilf Kebir and Gebel Uweinat, painted rock-art at the well-known 'Cave of the Swimmers' made famous by Count Laslo Almasy, and also the nearby 'Cave of the Beasts,' have been systematically recorded and is about to be published (Kuper, 2013).

Valley and near-valley sites

Since 2005 the Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project has been investigating areas between these two towns, particularly the West Bank from Qubbet al Hawa north to Kubbaniya north, Wadi Kubbaniya, Wadi Abu Subeira and a section of desert south-east of Kom Ombo. The team, led by Maria Gatto and Stan Hendrickx has recorded boats, bovinds and hunting scenes, most dated to the Predynastic at Gebel Qurna and Khor Abu Subeira South. They have also re-located a late predynastic or early dynastic scene at Gharb Aswan showing a figure wearing a 'white crown' accompanied by standard bearers. Additionally, Per Storemyr is surveying the hinterland of Gharb Aswan by the first cataract opposite modern Aswan (Storemyr, 2009). Storemyr has found images dating from the Epipalaeolithic to the New Kingdom, including predynastic boats. In addition, a Belgian team recorded very early 'fish trap' designs at el Hosh and recently additionally at Qurta (Huyge, 2009). The American team at Hierakonpolis has located predynastic petroglyphs of boats with 'fronds' akin to those in the Eastern Desert at HK 61 in Wadi Abu Sufian in the desert west of the town. Fred Hardtke from Macquarie University, Australia, is currently engaged in a systematic survey of these petroglyphs, but current events in Egypt have proved an obstacle to continuation of this work (Hardtke, 2012).

Threats to the rock-art

The increase in the amount of recording activity in the last decade has come at an opportune time as Egypt's overwhelming need to develop its economy means that pressure on rock-art sites in the Nile Valley is often intense. Adel Kelany and his archaeological team in Wadi Abu Subeira are attempting to both survey and protect the archaeology of the Palaeolithic sites with images akin to those at Qurta, 50 kilometres to the north (Huyge, in press). They face a serious challenge from hematite and ochre being mined in the area to be made into steel. The historic clay mining has not hitherto caused large-scale damage to the archaeology. However, iron mining in this wadi has greatly intensified, after new concessions were recently given to various companies by the Egyptian mining authorities. The new concessions are very extensive and there is the distinct possibility that they will cause serious damage to archaeology in the wadi. Up to now the recording team have been able to deal with the clay mining companies, working together with them to ensure as little destruction of archaeology as possible (Huyge, in press). A number of the archaeological sites are also guarded by SCA personnel, and some are fenced off. Dialogue and negotiations between the team and the mining companies, backed up by the SCA, are ongoing and constant vigilance is necessary. Near Aswan the recently re-discovered important scene of a ruler with the 'white crown' at Nag el Hamdulab has been vandalised by chiselling (Figure 1). This damage was made before the site could be recorded, although fortunately black and white photographs are available in the Habachi archive at the Oriental Institute, Luxor. Two other sites have been completely destroyed and a large pit dug in front of the images of boats shown in Figure 1 (Hendrickx *et al*, 2012).



Figure 1 Nag el Hamdulab vandalism to Naqada III site, Gatto, 2009: 14

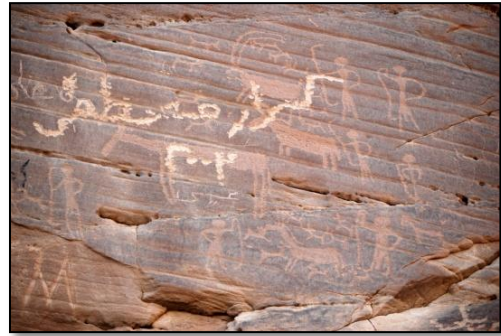
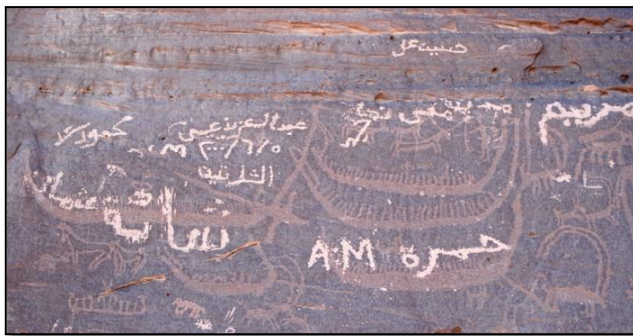
The rock art sites in Wadi Hilal at El Kab, contain images from a wide period of Egyptian history, some of which on the ‘Rock of the Vultures’ and the ‘Rock of the Pigeons’ appear to be related to the content of desert petroglyph scenes. Once isolated in the desert, the ‘Rock of the Pigeons’ (Figure 2) is now accessible by road and is open to damage and graffiti. The expanding activities of a phosphate mining plant constitute an increasing threat and a number of the sites have been damaged by quarrying or lost entirely. In addition, at least one of the rocks with Epipalaeolithic geometric designs at El Hosh has been broken up (Huyge, in press). The situation at Hierakonpolis is similar, in that the rock-art sites’ proximity to the expanding cultivation and the attraction of sandstone, phosphate and gravel to mining operations threaten the work of surveying here too (Hardtke, 2012).



Figure 2 Modern road providing easy access to the ‘Rock of the Pigeons’ at El Kab

Despite much of the rock-art being located in areas perceived to be remote, the desert petroglyph sites are in reality still often as vulnerable as the valley locations are. Sites along the major Quft-Quseir and Edfu-Mersa Alam routes from the Nile to the Red Sea are especially open to graffiti, quarrying or deliberate vandalism. Off-road rock-art sites in the heart of the Central Eastern Desert are endangered by mining operations and treasure hunters, the latter (including the use of specialist equipment) having been an increasing problem from even before the revolution. Indeed, it must be stressed that the petroglyphs have been endangered and damaged almost entirely before recent events in Egypt. Much rock-art is situated in shaded sites along the wadis Baramiya and Hammamat, both modern routes to the coast. Attractive as rest and refreshment stops from ancient times petroglyph panels have attracted modern graffiti (Figures 3 & 4). This is particularly the case in the Wadi Baramiya

where many sites are particularly close to the road, but has also occurred in Wadi Hammamat. The pharaonic inscriptions in the latter wadi have also suffered from the attention of attempts to copy some of them with the taking of impressions adversely affecting the patina of the rock, in addition to the removal of features which may have offended social and religious sensibilities (Figures 5-8). Although these actions have a long pedigree, most of them have occurred in the last decade. The re-opening of gold mining operations in the Baramiya area can only increase the risk of damage to sites in this area. Moreover, the reclamation of Eastern Desert land by irrigation has transformed the situation from that previously where the desert began relatively close to the Nile. This means that human activity is now much nearer to the rock-art sites around the temple of Seti I at Kanais (Figure 9) along the same route.



Figures 3 & 4 Wadi Baramiya-10 with graffiti done within the last half dozen years



Left: Figure 5 Wadi Hammamat-10 recent graffiti over boat, Right: Figure 6 Wadi Hammamat quarry graffiti & vandalism



Left: Figure 7 Wadi Hammamat quarry recent damage & graffiti, Right: Figure 8 Change in rock patina due to the taking of impressions



Figure 9 Google Earth photo showing extension of cultivation towards Kanais in last decade

Petroglyph sites in the heart of the Eastern Desert are also under threat from quarrying and the efforts of treasure seekers. Often, the result of these activities is the digging of pits, as in the Nile Valley, especially in front of an inscription which is presumably believed to indicate the presence of something valuable buried nearby (Figures 10 & 11). The availability of modern equipment constitutes a greater threat than the ‘amateur’ efforts by hand. Illustrative of this is the development at site MIN-14, RME-24b, in the Wadi Mineh. This site consists of a number of boulders forming a cave (a rare feature in the Eastern Desert) and is home to a considerable number of rock-art images ranging from predynastic petroglyphs through to Roman era inscriptions. As well as images within the cave, a number are located on a ledge

to the front and right of the entrance. These include two large images: a New Kingdom or later vessel with sail and a Naqada III boat with a unique falcon on the prow. Previously necessitating a climb on to the ledge (Figure 12), there is now a levelling ramp of chippings dumped from nearby excavation (Figure 13). In the cliff face to the right an underground 'room' of considerable size with a set of steps leading down to it has been carved into the rock (Figure 14). The purpose of this activity is a mystery, but clearly the task involved considerable application of time, effort and the use of modern mining machinery. Although the boulder structure of the site has not been affected, the Naqada III boat image now has a crack running down it (Figure 15). Thus, a petroglyph which has survived intact for five and a half thousand years is now rendered even more vulnerable to the effects of weathering.



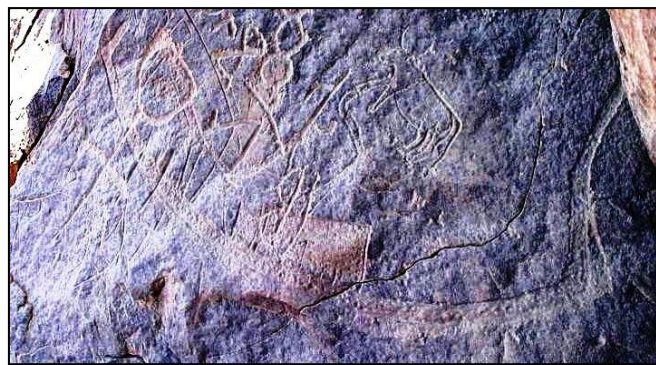
Figures 10 & 11 Wadi Qash-2 result of treasure hunter's digging



Figure 12 Wadi Mineh-14 as it was for millennia



Figure 13 the same site as it is now



Left: Figure 14 Wadi Mineh-14 the entrance to the ‘underground room’ Right: Figure 15 Boat petroglyph now cracked

The rock-art of the Eastern Desert is not particularly well known and moreover is situated in a military area where permits are required to undertake visits. But it is still vulnerable to the aforementioned threats. Due to the fame of the film ‘The English Patient’ and easy access to four-wheel-drive vehicles the sites in the Western Desert are probably more open to abuse, even though a considerable distance must be negotiated to reach them. The scene in the ‘Cave of the Swimmers’ is fading and parts of it are flaking away (Figure 16). It is also clear that vehicles have been driven right up to the ‘cave’ mouth (actually more akin to an overhang) damaging the approach and the surrounding archaeological site (Figure 17). Therefore, the prognosis for the survival of this site and its iconic images is not good. A considerable amount of additional painted rock-art (Zboray, 2009) is likely to be negatively affected by increased tourism.

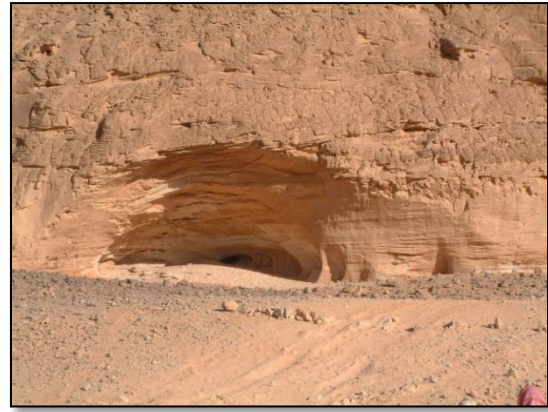
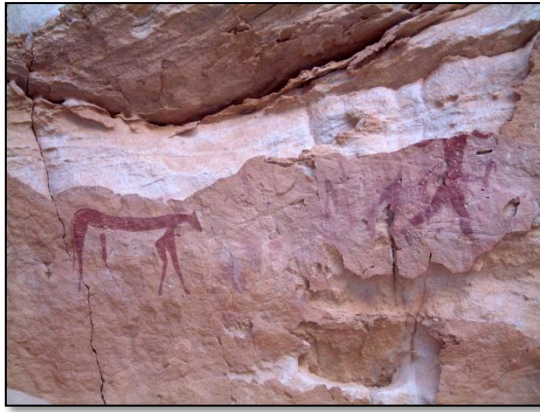


Figure 16 Gilf Kebir 'Cave of the Swimmers' Figure 17 Entrance to the site

The future-preservation and publication

It is not feasible for the authorities to protect more than a small proportion of Egyptian rock-art sites. There are far too many and a large number are desert sites. Those which are currently fenced and guarded are the high-profile Palaeolithic sites which are located in the Nile Valley and amenable to being under close watch by the SCA. The extension of protection could be funded by a suitable visitor charging policy concerning these sites. The construction of facsimiles of some sites would then act as an educator and raise awareness and interest in the protected ones. One solution could be to remove some panels particularly under threat, as has been done in the case of examples from sites now under Lake Nasser and currently displayed in the Nubian Museum at Aswan. However, this destroys the context and should only take place where destruction is otherwise inevitable. All archaeological missions in Egypt should be encouraged to reconnoitre and record rock-art sites in the vicinity of their concession. Above all, there is a need to establish a mission to complete the recording of the Eastern Desert petroglyphs, particularly in the Wadi Midriq area of the Kom Ombo Drainage Basin. Some other sites, such as those at Kanais around the temple of Seti I, need to be re-recorded due to unevenness of publication. A digital database comprising all the rock-art recorded within Egypt would be an extremely valuable resource, but this requires funding and overall supervision by the national authorities to bring all the disparate past publications and future recording efforts together. Destruction of Egypt's rock-art has been taking place for a considerable period. But the acceleration in the threat from quarrying, mining, treasure-hunting, vandalism and the graffiti vandals means that the need for action is urgent.

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