
Rock art in central Sahara: the landscape and the figurative language.

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Résumé

The prehistoric rock art of the central Saharan massifs, in particular the Tadrart Akakus and the Messak Settafet (2001-2008 field missions of the Italian –Libyan Archaeological Mission in the Akakus and Messak), is characterized by a frequent allusion to activities involving wild or domestic fauna. The relationship man-environment is depicted in different ways according to the styles and the executive techniques more or less elaborated. The chronology, a still debated question, encompasses the Holocene or, in another perspective, the final Pleistocene and the Holocene.

The present contribution will deal with a selected series of rock art sites highlighting:

- The accessibility

The majority of the rock art sites recorded are located along the wadi bottoms but there are also higher sites located on a series of terraces. Sometimes, close to the sites, it is possible to observe the presence of temporary water supplies (the so-called "gueltas") which are an important signal of the connection between the human presence and the water reservoirs today and in the more remote past (Cremaschi, Zerboni, Sp'otl, Felletti 2010, di Lernia, Massamba N'siala and Zerboni 2012).

- The typology of the sites

Open-air sites (boulders or small slabs) and shelters are the most frequent kind of context while caves are rare (di Lernia, Zampetti 2008, Gallinaro 2013). It should be stressed that behind the painted and/or engraved decoration, important settlement traces add a specific interest to the artistic record even if, as we know, it is not easy to connect the archaeological deposits to a specific figurative repertory.

- The state of preservation of the sites and of the decorations

The state of preservation of the sites depends both on climatic factors and on human activities, including in past times the recording of rock art using invasive methods and the activities of oil companies. In the question of the preservation of the sites were involved, in a completely different way, small families of tuaregs still living in the T.Akakus (Biagetti 2014). They represented a precious source of information on the recent history of those territories.

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*Intervenant

- The depiction of man-environment relationships and the problems of interpretation

As a consequence of the just mentioned factors influencing the state of preservation, the deciphering of the subjects and of the scenes is not a simple work. Moreover besides the explicit iconic representation, there can be an encoded symbolic meaning. This last topic will be included as the final part of our analysis on the Saharan imagery.

Mots-Clés: Central Sahara, Rock Art, Iconography, Symbolic contents