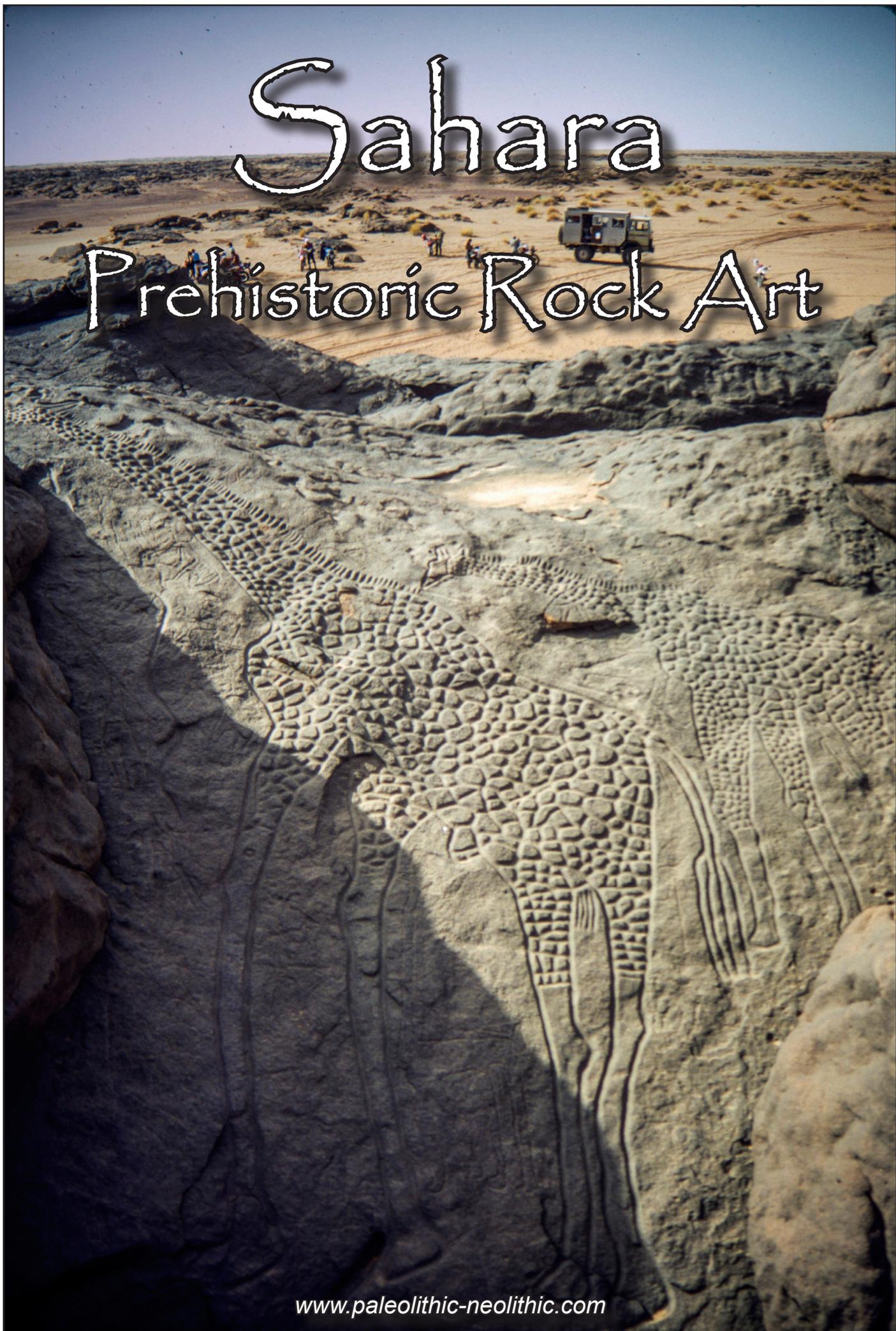


Sahara

Prehistoric Rock Art





It is not surprising to find prehistoric rock art in the Sahara Desert. In the past the northern part of Africa like the whole continent was exposed to regular climate changes. And this included changing periods of human settlements here. Only 2,500 years ago the region became more arid and desert conditions took over more and more.

Sahara Rock Art Age

So far, the first rock art created in this region is dated to an age of 12,000 years. But this is not certain at all as new research results push the time horizons regularly further back. And 12,000 years is not really old compared to other ancient rock art sites worldwide.

And one fact might surprise and was also found at other sites. The prehistoric Sahara rock art started at once and the first works are the most perfect from an artistic and engraving quality point of view. And they were colossal images. There was no trying out period.

Rock Art Areas

The Sahara rock art can be found in five North African countries and specific areas such as: Atlas Mountains in Morocco; Adrar n'Ahnet, Arak Gorge and Tassili n'Ajjer in Algeria; Akkakus and Messak Settafet in

Libya; Tibesti and Ennedi Range in Tchad and Djado Plateau in Niger.

Kind of Rock Art

Here we find two rock art techniques. The oldest are engraving with deep pecking and surface polishing and the more recent are paintings in various organic colors in black, red, ochre, brown and even white. Paintings were normally created under overhangs and in caves.

I have seen in other sites engravings with contour pecking and body polishing, but never so elaborate as here. These seem to be special to the Sahara region. Let's look at the famous example of the Dabous giraffes.

Aiir Mountains

About 100 kilometers north of Agadez and next to the ancient Transsahara caravan route is situated this important Natural World Heritage site with over 800 prehistoric images. The spot cannot be seen by passing travelers as it lies on top of a sandstone rock fifteen meters above ground.

Here were created two beautiful giraffe engravings. The male figure measures over five meters and is the largest of its kind worldwide. Its age is estimated between 8,000 to 10,000 years.

Unique Cultural Treasure

Local Tuareg and Berber tribes have known the site for long but it was only documented in detail in 1997. Its situation on top of a rock outcrop and the existence of a small human figure next to the giraffe might point to a place of cultural practices.

The detailed and most realistic depiction, the exact proportions and the highly artistic work make this prehistoric rock art creation one of the most significant in the Sahara region. This unique treasure, is one of the earliest examples of prehistoric communication and cultural practices in the area.

Analyzing Rock Art

This has to be done with care for various reasons. First, we have no written records to help us understand their meaning. Secondly, we do not fully understand their social structures, tribal world and cultural beliefs.

We have to assume the information given to us via rock art images are not objective and representative. They only represent a given selection of images their creators found important to them and they are subjective to regional, periodic and cultural changes.

Multi Ethnic Groups

No where on earth we find prehistoric rock art created by different ethnic groups living close to each other. This had a great influence on images and motives found across the Sahara region. But nevertheless, cultural scenes are rare compared to other sites where they are often dominant.

Amazing Research Results

Let's take a step back and look at some astonishing recent research results which might force us to rewrite our history books. The "Out of Africa" story of human emigration is well known to us. So far, we believed that humans developed in Africa and left the continent northwards about 2,5 million years ago.

Ancient human footprints found near Athens and on the island of Crete could now be dated with new state of the art analyzing technology to three and six million years ago. That puts our human history and roots in question. Are we Africans or Europeans? Similar surprises we also are confronted with regarding prehistoric rock art.

Rock Art Periods

Can we establish a sequence of Sahara rock art? It seems so if we follow some basic principles and results from other





sites worldwide. First the depictions of wild animals are older than domesticated species. Secondly the earlier images are more natural and realistic. More primitive looking stick figures are more recent creations. This is difficult to believe for the novice to ancient rock art, but is true. Artists seemed to have lost talent or the ritual importance faded.

Bubalus Period

The earliest period in the Sahara region was named after an ancient buffalo with long horns which died out about 5,000 years ago. This period lasted from around 12,000 to 8,000 years ago. At that time this represented about 100 generations of gatherer and hunter clans.

All images created were wild animals such as: giraffe, lion, elephant, rhino, hippo, crocodile, antelopes, gazelle and onager a wild donkey. Therefore, it is also called the hunter period as the creators of these animal depictions belonged to roaming non sedentary gatherer and hunter groups.

Largest Images

During this period the largest engravings were created some measuring up to eight meters. But it is interesting to note that human fig-

ures were shown as very small depictions. This raises the question, were they done at the same time? When we look at the motives, we find some distinctions and can divide the region into two areas the Maghreb and Central Sahara.

Maghreb Differences

The images are similar to Central Sahara but animals are mostly shown with only two legs front and back. This leads to the loss of dynamic movement for the admirer. Most common motives here are bubalus buffalo and horned ibex sheep.

Sometimes bubalus images are seen with humans in adoring position next to them. Ibex depictions seem to be domesticated species and engraved in the so-called sun ibex motive with a round sun like plate between their curved horns.





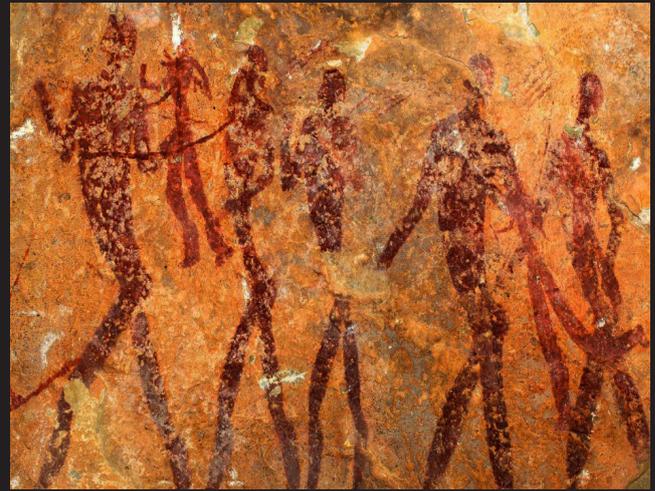
Source of Egyptian Hathor?

Makes me think of Egyptian Hathor. This goddess was depicted as a bull with a sun disc between its horns. Did Egyptians adopt this symbol and belief from earlier desert Bedouins? Possibly not as human figures shown with those ibexes turn their backs on it which makes the god theory impossible.

Or were these ibexes just animals to be decorated before sacrifice? Nevertheless, Egyptians who did not travel away from the Nile might have heard of the ibex images from long distance traders and interpreted it along their beliefs.

Lion Heads

Special to the Maghreb area are the lion



images always in frontal view with impressive lion heads. Lion depictions are nearly absent in the Central Sahara area.

Central Sahara

Here engravings typically were created with polished body surfaces to give them an impressive expression. Some bodies were even decorated with lines. In addition to the above list of animals we see here also ostriches. Human images are either smaller in comparison to animals or larger. When they appear in correct proportions to animal they wear jackal masks and sometimes antelope, bird or wild cat masks.

Special Motives

In this area we see also sexual motives



such as men with long penises. But this could be also penis shafts worn for protection. Sex scenes are also common here. Abstract motives such as spirals are found alone or in connection with humans or animals. Their precise meaning is not clear.

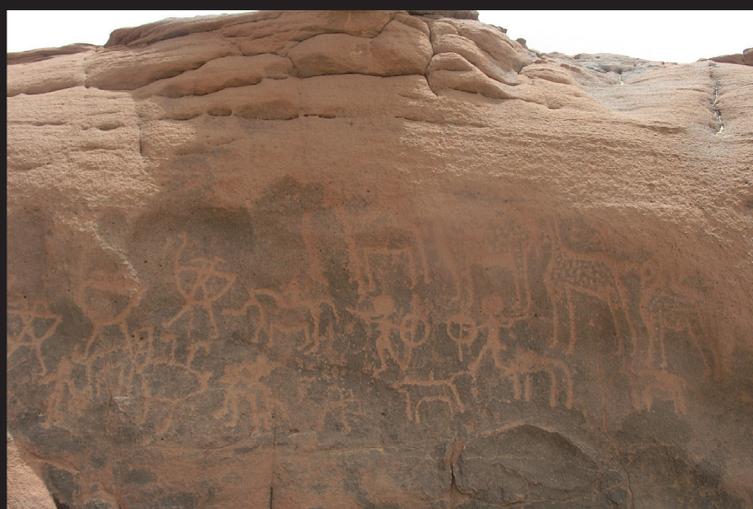
Interesting is an image at Tassili n'Ajjer where a man leads an elephant at a leash. This is not impossible if the hunters killed its mother and reared its calf. Towards the end of this period images lose detail and artistic expression.

Round Head Period

These specific human paintings are limited to the Ennedi, Akkakus and Tassili n'Ajjer areas. The images show humans with enlarged round heads without neck. First depictions were monochrome painted as outline bodies with loin cloth and feathered headdress. Men were carrying bows and various sticks or lances. And women were depicted with larger buttocks. Animals appear seldom.

Later polychrome images were created with reddish and brownish contours and bodies painted in white, yellow and ochre. These figures appear in groups and wear various jewelry items and were decorated with body paintings or tattoos. At Tassili a so-called mars god figure was found with enlarged head and rather large eyes. Certainly, there is no extraterrestrial interpretation possible. It might such be one of the common large helm masks still worn by some tribes for ritual dances.

The group depictions and a three meter large figure surrounded by various adoring females lead to the assumption of cultural practices



similar to those found at other ancient rock art sites outside northern Africa. Towards the end of this period masked figures are very common. Still today a multitude of different animal and ghost type masks are very important in the various traditional tribal dances across Africa.

Towards the end of this period bodies became slimmer and slightly modulated. Also, the bodies were now painted entirely in reddish brown. It is interesting that these figures look very similar to



the painted San figures in Namibia and South Africa over 5.000 kilometers further south. Please refer to the specific article on this website.

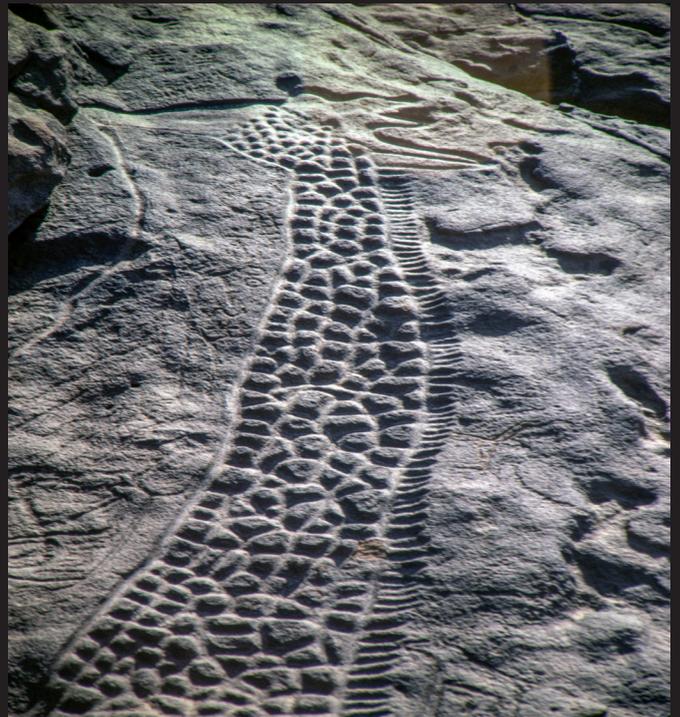
Cattle Period

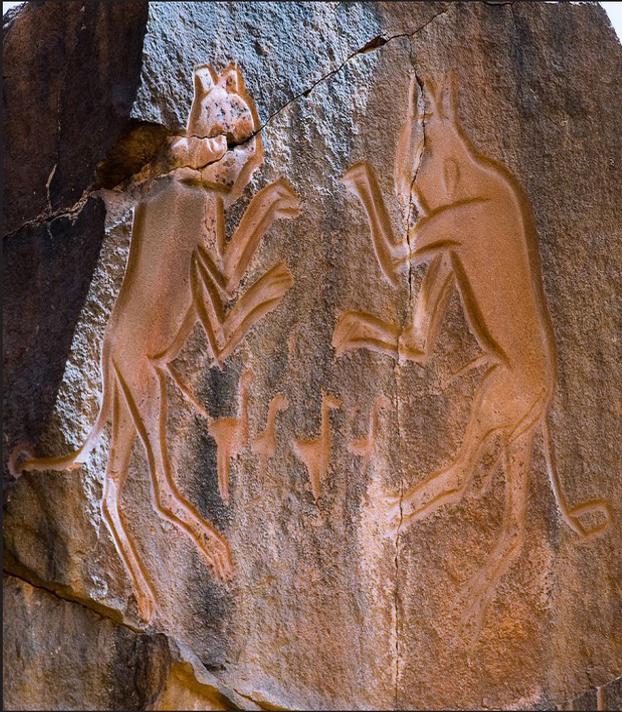
This period lasted from 7,000 to 4,500 years ago and is dominated by domesticated animals such as: cattle, sheep, goats and guard dogs. And they appear in herds for the first time. The image size is with an average of 40 cm rather small.

Both humans and animals were depicted. Despite their small size the figures were still created with detail and good quality. The pictures were painted and engraved but the latter were only found at Tibesti and Haggar.

Human depictions often show them in daily life and work scenes around camp fires, during sex or hunting. For the first time we see protective structures looking like tents made of reed mats.

Experts distinguished three human groups being painted. In the southeast Tassili area the figures are dark skinned and have African features or look similar





to the Fulbe tribe. Pastoral herders here use bow and arrows. In the northwest they are lighter colored and are shown with spears, troughing sticks and clubs together with cattle, sheep and goats.

Horse Period

This lasted from 3,500 to 2,000 years ago but only relates to the central and western Sahara area. Images became even smaller with horses measuring only 30 cm and humans 20 cm. The paintings are monochrome and human images are rather crude as stick figures without anatomic detail. Heads were missing or only marked as a short line. The difference between men and women is men wear loin



cloth and women long dresses.

Animals such as: ostrich, antelope, gazelle and moufflon indicate already an arid climate. New are the fighting scenes between humans with shield and spears. For the first time we also see wagons and horse riders.

First writing appears and belong to the Tifinagh script. This script could be read by todays Tuareg but they are not able to understand this old language. The region was inhabited at the time by Garamantes an ancient Berber tribe named after an old town today called Djerma in the Fes-san area.

Camel Period

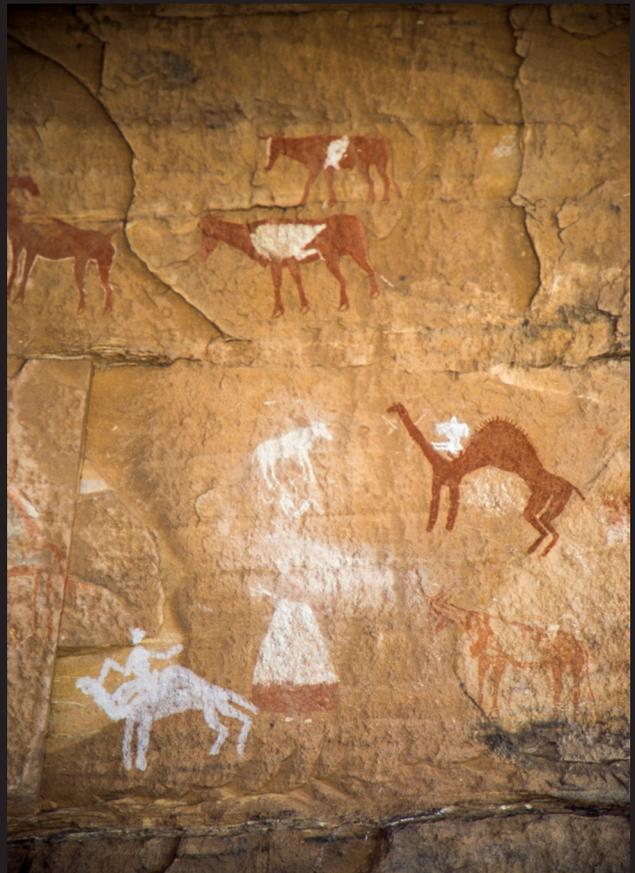
This is the last period of prehistoric rock art creation in the Sahara region starting about 2,000 years ago. The camel is the most prominent depiction in the desert. The mountain ranges and rock outcrops are covered with thousands of motives and some rock panels have over 100 images created at different times.

Therefore, they differ in form and quality. Both engraving and painting techniques were used, but never they were found at the same site. The engraving and painting areas lie quite apart from each other.

Human depictions were reduced to stick figures. Horses are still present but not cattle. Of the wild animals only some ostrich and moufflons images can be attributed to this period. Men now carried daggers and swords as weapons. The period is also the absolute decline of rock art. The total loss of artistic skill and expression is obvious. Images are crude and look rather primitive.

Painting Colors Used

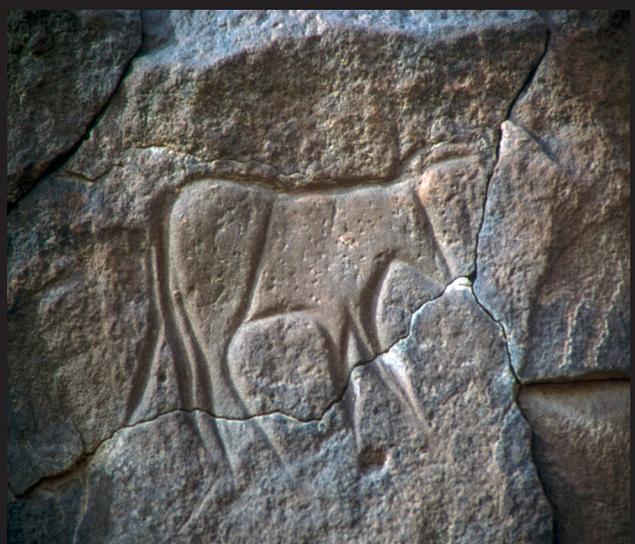
White was produced from calcium oxide and black from soot. All other colors were mixed from ochre such as: yellowish brown, reddish brown as well as violet brown. As binding agent various

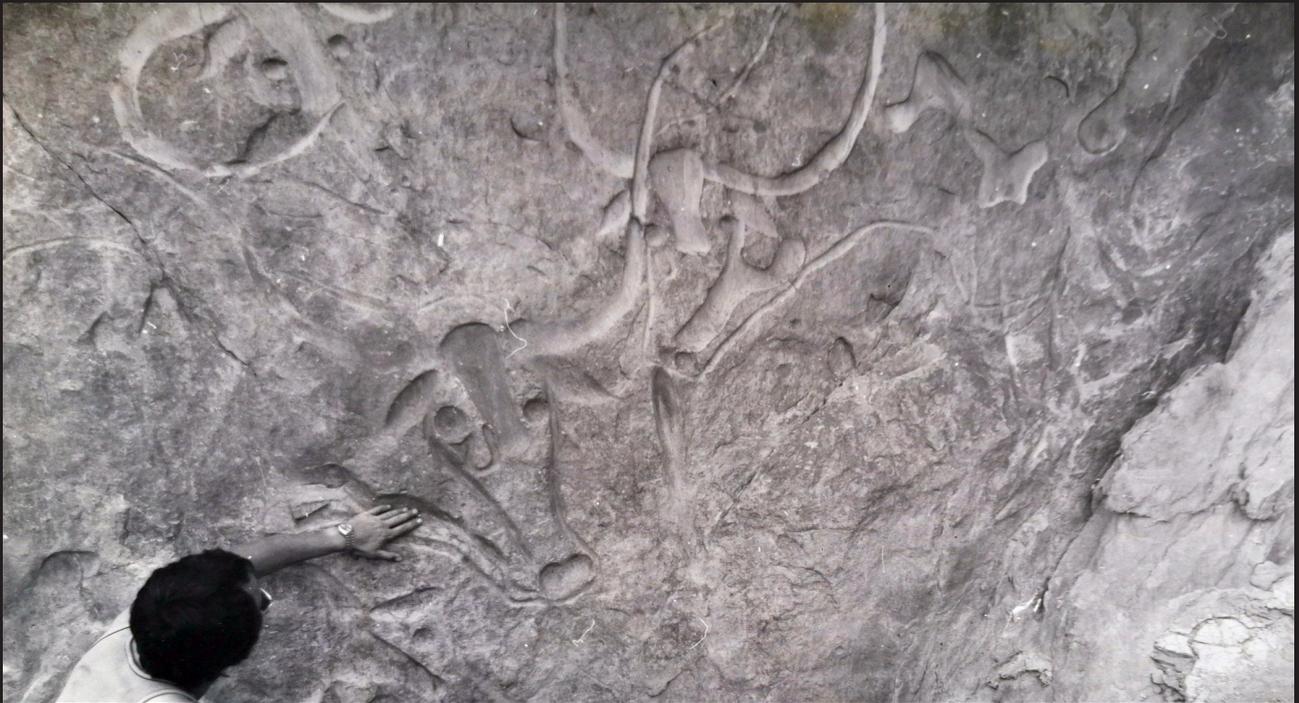


materials were used such as: egg white, acacia resin, blood, milk and other materials with similar qualities.

Dating Methods

In prehistoric rock art dating is always difficult when charcoal and other organic materials were not used for color production which made radiocarbon dating impossible. All other dating technology such as thermoluminescence could also not be used here to gain results with certainty. Only the patina on the engraving





grooves helps to indicate the sequence of periods,

Only horse and camel period could be dated precisely by historic Egyptian sources. Horses were first introduced during the Hyksos period, but came only to the Sahara region 600 years later which was 3,200 years ago. Camels were imported to Egypt 2,500 years ago by Persians, but again arrived only 500 years later in the region.

Summary

The Sahara region is one of the most interesting with regards to prehistoric rock art. Unfortunately, the sites lie quite far apart and involve traveling through five north African countries. And different to other regions various quite different tribes of hunter and gatherer clans roamed the region or were even camping here in proximity. This influenced the engraving and painting works and show interesting differences and techniques. The above pictures speak for themselves.

Picture Credits

We thank Joseph Geltl and his group members for making their pictures available

