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# ROCK ART
# فن الرسوم الصخرية

*Dirk Huyge*

Felsbilder
Art rupestre

*Rock art, basically being non-utilitarian, non-textual anthropic markings on natural rock surfaces, was an extremely widespread graphical practice in ancient Egypt. While the apogee of the tradition was definitely the Predynastic Period (mainly fourth millennium BCE), examples date from the late Palaeolithic (c. 15,000 BCE) until the Islamic era. Geographically speaking, "Egyptian" rock art is known from many hundreds of sites along the margins of the Upper Egyptian and Nubian Nile Valley and in the desert hinterlands to the east and west. Despite clear regional discrepancies, most of this rock art displays a great deal of shared subject matter, such as the profusion of boat figures, supposedly attesting to the existence of a more or less uniform "spiritual culture" throughout the above-defined area. Furthermore, its intimate iconographical relationship to the archaeologically known Egyptian cultures, both in a synchronic and a diachronic perspective, allows for some solid reasoning regarding the* raison d'être *of this graphic tradition. Without excluding other possible meanings and motivations, it seems that the greater part of the rock art closely reflects the religious and ideological concerns of its makers.*

فن الرسوم الصخرية عبارة عن علامات على الصخر بغرض الزينة وخالية من النصوص، ترسم على الاسطح الطبيعية للصخور. ويعتبر فن الرسوم الصخرية أسلوب شائع جداً للرسم والتصوير بمصر القديمة. كان عصر ما قبل الأسرات (حوالي الألفية الرابعة قبل الميلاد) اوج هذا الأسلوب الفني الذي استمر منذ العصر الحجري المتأخر (حوالي ١٥٠٠٠ عام قبل الميلاد) وحتى العصر الاسلامي. عثر على مثل هذه الرسومات بمواقع عديدة على طول وادي النيل المصري والنوبي وبالصحراء الغربية والشرقية. بالرغم من الإختلافات الاقليمية فإن هذه الرسومات بها عناصر كثيرة متشابهة مثل تصوير المراكب. وهذه العناصر المتشابهة تشير إلى وجود <<ثقافة روحية>> موحدة إلى حدٍ ما فيما بين المنطقة السابق ذكرها. بالإضافة إلى ذلك فإن العلاقة الإيقنوغرافية التي تربط بين الرسوم الصخرية والثقافات المصرية المعروفة أثرياً تقدم تفسيراً مباشراً لسبب ظهور هذا الأسلوب الفني. فيما يبدو أن نسبة كبيرة من الفن الصخري تعكس المخاوف الدينية والايديولوجية لصانعها بالإضافة إلى بعض الدوافع الأخرى.

There are probably as many definitions of rock art as there are rock art researchers in existence. It may therefore be useful to first define the term "rock art" as it is used here. According to Bednarik et al.'s *Rock Art Glossary* (2003: 16), rock art refers to "non-utilitarian anthropic markings on rock surfaces, made either by an additive process (pictogram) or by a reductive process (petroglyph)." This definition works well for large parts of the world, but it is entirely inadequate as far as

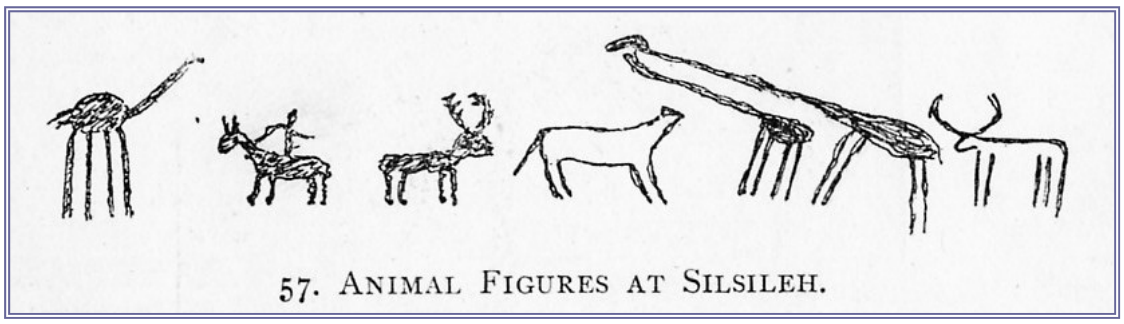


Figure 1. Examples of some of the earliest published Egyptian petroglyphs. Gebel el-Silsila.

Egypt is concerned. According to the above definition, Rameses II's "great temple" at Abu Simbel—which is in fact a gigantic petroglyph—would belong to the study-domain of rock art. Clearly it does not. Abu Simbel, like the Pharaonic adoration scenes on the granite boulders of the island of Sehel and the multitude of Min-images on the graywacke rock faces of the Wadi Hammamat, belongs to the study-domain of Egyptologists, not to that of rock art researchers. It will therefore be necessary to add to the above definition that the anthropic markings on rock surfaces must be "sufficiently different" from images produced according to the officially instigated ancient Egyptian artistic canon. Inevitably and logically, problems of classification arise when dealing with the formative period of "classical" Egyptian civilization, the late Predynastic-Early Dynastic Period, which witnesses a gradual shift from informal or "preformal" (a term introduced by Kemp [1991: 66]) to formal art, a transitional phase also extensively documented in the rock art record. Moreover, there has been, and continues to be, a degree of confusion between rock art and "graffiti." The latter term, which is loaded with diverse meanings, is most correctly used to define informal and unofficial markings (including textual inscriptions) that have been executed on an anthropogenic (man-made) support, such as the pavement of a temple, for instance, or the worked rock-face of a quarry (for an exemplary treatment of graffiti in this sense, see Cruz-Uribe 2008). The term "graffiti" will not be used here. Instead, a distinction is proposed between rock art (or "rock drawings") and "parasitic drawings," the latter being drawings (of whatever technological class) done on a man-made support, but not forming part of any originally planned decoration program. The term "parasitic," used devoid of negative connotations, is appropriate as it emphasizes the non-original relationship between the drawings and the support. Parasitic drawings are of singular relevance for rock art because their particular situation provides them with a *terminus post quem* (which is often more or less accurately known). Furthermore, their connection with specific types of monuments may also help to elucidate their meaning. It should be clear from the above that textual documents, be they rock inscriptions (on a natural rock surface) or parasitic inscriptions (on an anthropogenic support), are not part of rock art research. Like Abu Simbel, they belong to the domain of Egyptology or other "traditional" historical fields of study.

What is probably the oldest reference to Egyptian rock art in the above sense dates back to the early part of the nineteenth century. Between 1815 and 1818, the French traveler Frédéric Cailliaud (1787 - 1869) traversed the Egyptian deserts in search of, among other things, ancient emerald mines. In the Eastern Desert, about halfway between Edfu and the Red Sea coast, he noticed several "hieroglyphic designs traced on the mountain" [consisting of] "small figures . . . sculptured rather incorrectly . . . and which might be taken for the crude attempts of young sculptors exercising themselves" (Cailliaud 1822: 29). Over the decades that

followed many more rock art sites were reported on by explorers both from the Nile Valley and the deserts to the east and west. It was the English archaeologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie who, at the end of the nineteenth century, first recognized the very old, even prehistoric age of some of the Egyptian rock art (fig. 1) (Petrie 1888: 15 - 16; 1892: 75). Petrie based his opinion on the degree of weathering of these figures, superimpositions with hieroglyphic inscriptions, and the representations of archaic fauna (giraffes and elephants in particular) in the rock art repertoire. Around the same time another Englishman, Greville Chester, noted for the first time the close relationship between the rock art and representations (of boats in particular) on painted pottery of the prehistoric Naqada culture (c. 4000 – 3000 BCE) (Chester 1892).

The recognition of Egyptian rock art as something that could be closely linked to the archaeologically known cultures of the Nile Valley served as a strong impetus for further research. Several surveys and recording campaigns were organized in Upper Egypt and Nubia during the last decade of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. The most celebrated accomplishment in the study of rock art is undoubtedly the work of the German ethnographer Hans Alexander Winkler in the Eastern and Western deserts of Egypt. Winkler's magnum opus, *Rock-Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt*, published in two volumes (1938, 1939), is still one of the most important collections of rock art material from Egypt (fig. 2) (unpublished material from Winkler's archive has been presented in recent years by Červíček [1986, 1992, 2000])

An important turning point in rock art research was the Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia launched by UNESCO in the early 1960s. Several areas in Lower Nubia that were fated to be flooded because of the construction of the Aswan High Dam received intensive archaeological treatment by teams from various countries. Much attention was also devoted to the rock art. A substantial

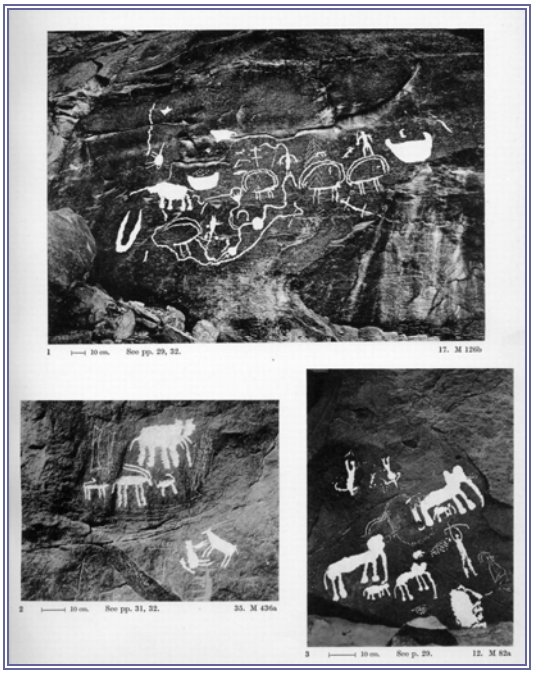

Figure 2. Plate from Winkler's pioneering two-volume *Rock-Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt*.

number of monographs on the subject, both regional catalogs and thematic studies, were produced in subsequent years (listed in Davis 1979; to be completed by Curto et al. 1987; Otto and Buschendorf-Otto 1993; Váhala and Červíček 1999). In most of these, however, efforts at culture-chronological seriation and interpretation are minimal.

Current rock art research in Egypt is mostly small-scale, done by individual scholars or small teams as a kind of appendage to standard archaeological or epigraphical research on sites throughout Egypt. Expeditions with the sole purpose of rock art research are rare, the work done by a Belgian mission at el-Hosh and Qurta in the Upper Egyptian Nile Valley from 1998 onward (fig. 3), and the recent Eastern Desert explorations of David Rohl's "Followers of Horus" and of "Desert RATS" (Rock Art Topographical Survey in Egypt's Eastern Desert) being notable exceptions. Some important new rock art discoveries, direct-dating attempts, and interpretative studies have aroused general interest and it is to be expected that these will stimulate more considerable investment in

Figure 3. Tracing late Palaeolithic petroglyphs. Qurta, 2007.

Figure 4. Rock art from Abu Ballas caravan station, 550 km west of the Nile Valley. Probably late Old Kingdom.

this type of research. Imminent threats to rock art throughout the country, both by natural agents and human actions (see, for instance, Huyge 1998), render such research all the more desirable.

In this brief and necessarily selective overview of Egyptian rock art research, the "Bedouin-oriented" petroglyphs from the westernmost part of the Negev Desert and Sinai Peninsula (see Huyge 2003) will not be discussed. This art, characterized essentially by ibex-hunting and camel-riding scenes, belongs to the Egyptian rock art domain from a geopolitical viewpoint only. Similarly, the vast "pastoral" pictorial complexes of the Gilf Kebir and Gebel el-Uweinat (near or on the Egypt-Libya-Sudan border) will not be considered. This rock art (Le Quellec and Huyge 2008; Muzzolini 1996, 2003), in fact,

Figure 5. Late Predynastic boat representation. Wadi Abu Subeira.

refers much more to the central Saharan artistic repertoire (Round Head and Bovidian schools/periods in particular) than to the Nilotic, and is also quite distinct from anything that has thus far been found in the oases of the Western Desert. As far as rock art is concerned, nothing definitely "Nilotic" or "Egyptian" in content or style has ever been found beyond the Abu Ballas caravan station in the Western Desert, about 550 km west of the Nile Valley (fig. 4) (although a hieroglyphic rock inscription of the early Middle Kingdom has recently been discovered at Gebel el-Uweinat; see Clayton et al. 2008). A recent attempt at "reading" the prehistoric Saharan pictographs of the fifth millennium BCE at Wadi Sora (Gilf Kebir) on the basis of a comparison with Egyptian writings of the second millennium BCE (Le Quellec 2005, 2008) is extremely far-fetched and unconvincing.

Egyptian rock art, as considered here, is therefore limited to the southern Egyptian and northern Sudanese (Nubian) Nile Valley, the Eastern (Red Sea) Desert, and parts of the Western (Libyan) Desert, including most of the oases. Apart from the numerous technical and stylistic similarities, the rock art within this area displays a great deal of shared subject matter, perhaps the most striking of which is the profusion of boat representations (fig. 5). It may therefore be postulated that this rock art reflects a more or less uniform "spiritual culture"—a cognitive consensus or communal sphere of ideas in which communication through rock art (the collective use of certain

intellectual concepts and structures) was possible and stimulated by society as a whole. This vast rock art repertoire can moreover be intimately linked with the local, archaeologically known cultures. These cultures, both prehistoric and historic, are characterized by an overwhelmingly rich iconography. That the latter have often been found in well-documented archaeological contexts holds great potential, not only with regard to dating and culture-historical attribution of the rock art, but also with regard to interpretation (meaning and motivation).

Figure 6. Finely engraved human and animal figures. Theban Desert. Possibly early Predynastic (Tasian or Badarian).

The potentialities of Egyptian rock art have been explored at many different locations throughout the above-defined area. One of the places where highly significant discoveries have been made during the past few decades is the Theban Desert immediately northwest of Luxor. In the scope of the Theban Desert Road Survey, John and Deborah Darnell of Yale University have recorded, apart from a wealth of rock inscriptions, an impressive array of early to terminal Predynastic rock art, including depictions of boats, various animals, and superbly detailed human figures (fig. 6) (Darnell 2002a, 2002b, 2009). Much of this rock art is closely linked to ancient caravan routes short-cutting the Qena Bend of the Nile and/or leading from the Nile Valley to the oases of the Western Desert. The age of many of these figures is well established. On the basis of close resemblances to depictions on painted ceramics and other decorated artifacts, many date unquestionably to the mid- to late Predynastic Period (Naqada I-II, c. 4000 – 3200 BCE). Others may even be older and can be attributed to the early Predynastic (Tasian or Badarian, c. 4500 – 4000 BCE).

Figure 7. Predynastic representation of high-prowed boat with human figures, ubiquitous in the Eastern Desert. Wadi Barramiya. Probably Naqada II.

These new discoveries complement rock art long known from the Nile Valley proper, such as that from the site of Elkab (see Huyge 2002) and from the Eastern Desert. The latter area, already partly explored by Weigall, Winkler, and others in the early part of the previous century, has seen relatively little systematic recording in recent years. However, some surveys, conducted by amateur archaeologists since the late 1990s between the Wadi Hammamat in the north and the Wadi Barramiya in the south, have substantially added to the currently available documentation (Morrow and Morrow 2002; Rohl 2000). One of the most striking features of this Eastern Desert rock art is the preponderance of images of high-prowed boats, more than 240 of which have been logged to date (fig. 7). In this sense and in several other aspects (for instance, a greater emphasis on cattle representations and herding scenes; see Judd 2007a; Judd 2007b),

it is different from the rock art of the Nile Valley. How these regional discrepancies should be explained is still a matter of dispute and speculation. It has been suggested (Huyge 2003, 2004) that the Eastern Desert rock art was the work of "proto-Bedouin"—that is, nomads who resided in the desert on a semi-permanent basis, but were in regular contact with Nile Valley dwellers and had an intimate knowledge of the natural and cultural Nilotic environment.

The suggestion may also apply to the rock art of the Western Desert, the oases in particular, which also has its own particularities as well as many similarities to the rock art of the Nile Valley. One striking feature of Western Desert rock art, that of Dakhla and Kharga Oases in particular, consists of stylized images of sitting or standing obese women dressed in often elaborately decorated long skirts (see, most recently, Berger 2008). According to Lech Krzyżaniak (personal communication) the images are certainly pre-Old Kingdom and should be dated to early or mid-Holocene times (eighth to fourth millennium BCE). As the area of distribution of these figures corresponds to that of the local Neolithic (Bashendi A and B) assemblages, they are possibly associated and may therefore belong to the sixth or fifth millennium BCE. It is possible that rock art from Farafra Oasis, including cave paintings featuring numerous hand stencils, may be equally old (fig. 8) (Barich 1998, 2001). The bulk of the rock art in the oases of the Western Desert, however, seems to be Pharaonic (dating mostly to the late Old Kingdom) and displays a rather stereotypical repertoire: incised sandals, outlines of feet (fig. 9), hunting scenes, mammals, birds, feathered men, and pubic triangles (see, for instance, Kaper and Willems 2002 for rock art related to late Old Kingdom military installations at Dakhla Oasis). Still later rock art, of the Greco-Roman and Islamic Periods, is known from, among other places, Kharga (Rowe and Schacht 2004) and Bahriya (Colin and Labrique 2001). Among its representations are geometric signs, equid-

Figure 8. Neolithic (?) hand stencils from Wadi el-Obeiyd Cave. Farafra Oasis.

Figure 9. Schematic outlines of feet, typical of Pharaonic rock art. Kharga Oasis.

drawn carts or chariots, and schematic figures of humans and camels.

Whereas the bulk of Egyptian petroglyphs can be ascribed to the Predynastic cultures immediately preceding and foreshadowing Pharaonic civilization (mainly fourth millennium BCE), still older rock art has come to light in recent years (see Huyge

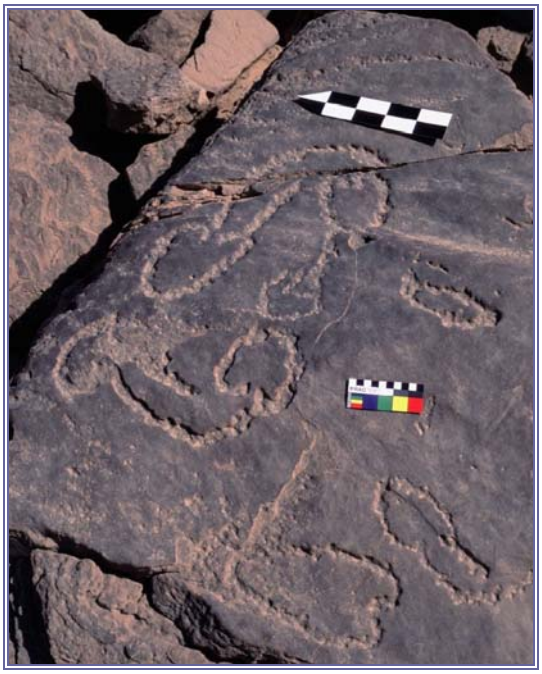

Figure 10. Cluster of Epi-palaeolithic labyrinth-fish-trap motifs from el-Hosh.

2009). Dating to the very end of the Palaeolithic, the so-called "Epi-palaeolithic" (c. 7000 - 5500 BCE), are most probably the bizarre-looking mushroom-shaped designs that characterize the rock art of el-Hosh, about 30 km south of Edfu (fig. 10) (Huyge 2005; Huyge et al. 2001, 1998). Frequently appearing in clusters and occasionally as isolated figures, these designs, which can tentatively be interpreted as representations of labyrinth-fish-traps, are often associated with abstract and figurative motifs, including circles, ladder-shaped drawings, human figures, footprints, and crocodiles. Probably affiliated "geometric" rock art assemblages are known from Sudanese Nubia (Abka) and have recently also been reported from the Aswan area (Storemyr 2008). The occurrence of similar rock art at several locations in the Eastern Desert (and possibly also at Dakhla, Farafra, and Siwa in the Western Desert) suggests that the Epi-palaeolithic image-makers were extremely mobile and must have lived a nomadic existence. Rock art examples pre-dating the Epi-palaeolithic have recently been discovered at three locations in the Upper Egyptian Nile Valley: Abu Tanqura

Figure 11. Detail of late Palaeolithic rock art panel showing bovids. Qurta.

Figure 12. Detail of late Palaeolithic rock art panel showing three highly stylized human figures. Qurta.

Bahri at el-Hosh (Huyge 2005), Qurta (Huyge 2008; Huyge and Claes 2008; Huyge et al. 2007), and Wadi Abu Subeira (Storemyr et al. 2008). The rock art repertoire at these sites is fundamentally different from the Epi-palaeolithic assemblages and consists for the most part of naturalistically drawn animal figures. Bovids (wild cattle or aurochs) are largely predominant (fig. 11), followed by birds, hippopotamuses, gazelle, fish, and hartebeest. In addition, there are also several highly stylized representations of human figures (fig. 12) and a small number of probable non-figurative or abstract signs. For the time being, the dating evidence is entirely circumstantial, but it is likely that this rock art is late Palaeolithic in age. A date of about 15,000 BCE has tentatively been proposed. If this is correct, this rock art is not only Egypt's most ancient art, but one of the oldest graphic traditions known to date from the African continent.

Setting aside simplistic and naive explanations—for instance, that the rock drawings may be merely the result of casual pastime or the exercises of sculpture-apprentices—magical, totemistic, religious, and politico-ideological motivations have been advanced to explain the ancient Egyptian rock art tradition (for a critical evaluation, see Huyge 2002). None of these clarifies the rock art phenomenon as a whole, but it appears that religion and ideology offer more satisfactory and certainly less circuitous approaches than magic and totemism, both of which are grounded on indirect ethnographical comparisons. Inevitably, both the religious and the ideological approach have been carried to extremes. For instance, Červiček, in various contributions (most recently 1994, 1998), has attempted to demonstrate that Egyptian rock art is completely permeated with religion: without exception human figures pose in cultic attitudes, carry out liturgical actions, or represent anthropomorphic deities; boats are meant to be divine or funeral barques, and animals relate to offering rituals or represent a zoomorphic pantheon. Ultimately, creating rock art is performing a devotional act in itself. A more cautious and balanced approach may be required.

On a general epistemological level, it may be suggested that any hermeneutic approach to rock art should ideally be conceived as a historical exegesis. This implies that the search for meaning and motivation should basically be founded on contemporaneous materials and sources. With regard to the prehistoric and early historic periods, however, such information is sparse or even non-existent. Non-synchronous sources then have to be sought. To a considerable extent this is also the case for the Egyptian rock art production. Not unlike many other rock art traditions in the world, Egyptian rock art is truly a "fossil" record, in the sense that no living or oral traditions elucidate its contents, meaning, or motivation. Fortunately, from the Predynastic through the Pharaonic Periods, ancient Egyptian civilization displayed a single line of progress and a considerable degree of conceptual conservatism. Pharaonic culture was a gradual outgrowth of indigenous prehistoric traditions. In fact, what occurred in Egypt between c. 3200 and 3030 BCE (at the time of state formation), was not an abrupt change of iconography but rather a profound formalization, standardization, and officialization. Image-making passed from a less disciplined "pre-formal" artistic stage to a "formal" canonical phase. This change is immense, but, basically, it is cosmetic, with the content of the iconography (the themes) and the underlying beliefs (the meaning and motivation) remaining much the same, as they would for several millennia. With that in mind, a diachronic approach to rock art, in which phenomena are not considered individually but as integral parts of a historical chain of development, can be considered scientifically sound.

Attempts toward such an approach, applied to the rock art of the Upper Egyptian site of Elkab (Huyge 1999, 2002), suggest that petroglyphs were subject to religious, ideological, and other mental shifts traceable through time in the culture-historical record and correspond to a range of meanings and motivations, such as cosmology, ideology, and personal religious practice, as well as more trivial incentives, such as pride and prestige.

Some of the outstanding fieldwork recently conducted in the domain of rock art—for instance, that of Barbara Barich in Farafra (Barich 1998, 2001), John Darnell in the Theban Desert (Darnell 2002a, 2002b, 2009), Renée Friedman at Hierakonpolis (Friedman 1992, 1999), Salima Ikram in Kharga (Ikram 2009), Olaf Kaper and Harco Willems in Dakhla (Kaper and Willems 2002), and Per Storemyr at Aswan (Storemyr 2008)—has amply demonstrated that rock art is not an independent phenomenon, but should be studied and can indeed only be fully understood within its specific archaeological-historical context and environmental setting. Not coincidentally, all of the above-mentioned projects harmoniously combine "material" archaeology (site excavations, ancient road and quarry surveys, settlement

pattern analysis, etc.) and/or "traditional" Egyptology with rock art research. Despite the fact that a recently published and otherwise authoritative survey of early Egypt (Wengrow 2006: 111 - 114) deals with rock art in a most belittling way, this ongoing research convincingly demonstrates that Egyptian petroglyph investigations open promising new avenues of archaeological thought.

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Useful overviews of the history of rock art research in Egypt were produced, among others, by Massoulard (1949: 91 - 106), Červiček (1974: 3 - 10), and Davis (1990: 274 - 279). The latter has also published a specialized bibliography on this subject up to 1978 (Davis 1979). An exhaustive list of references pertaining to rock art can also be gathered from the *Analytical Bibliography of the Prehistory and the Early Dynastic Period of Egypt and Northern Sudan* (Hendrickx 1995), updated annually in the French journal *Archéo-Nil*. Current rock art research in Egypt (from about 1990 to 2004) is covered in the series *Rock Art Studies: News of the World* (Huyge 2003; Le Quellec and Huyge 2008). Issue 19 of *Archéo-Nil* (2009) presents a near-exhaustive survey of ongoing rock art investigations in the Egyptian Western Desert and Nile Valley.

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Figure 1. Examples of some of the earliest published Egyptian petroglyphs. Gebel el-Silsila. (Petrie 1892: fig. 57.)

Figure 2. Plate from Winkler's pioneering two-volume *Rock-Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt.* (Winkler 1938: pl. 27.)

Figure 3. Tracing late Palaeolithic petroglyphs. Qurta, 2007. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.

Figure 4. Rock art from Abu Ballas caravan station, 550 km west of the Nile Valley. Probably late Old Kingdom. (Kuper 1989: 20.)

Figure 5. Late Predynastic boat representation. Wadi Abu Subeira. Photograph by the author.

Figure 6. Finely engraved human and animal figures. Theban Desert. Possibly early Predynastic (Tasian or Badarian). (Darnell 2002a: fig. 17.)

Figure 7. Predynastic representation of high-prowed boat with human figures, ubiquitous in the Eastern Desert. Wadi Barramiya. Probably Naqada II. Photograph by the author.

Figure 8. Neolithic (?) hand stencils from Wadi el-Obeiyd Cave. Farafra Oasis. Courtesy of Barbara E. Barich.

Figure 9. Schematic outlines of feet, typical of Pharaonic rock art. Kharga Oasis. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the North Kharga Oasis Survey, American University in Cairo.

Figure 10. Cluster of Epi-palaeolithic labyrinth-fish-trap motifs from el-Hosh. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.

Figure 11. Detail of late Palaeolithic rock art panel showing bovids. Qurta. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.

Figure 12. Detail of late Palaeolithic rock art panel showing three highly stylized human figures. Qurta. Photograph by the author. Courtesy of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.