



The late prehistory of the Western Sahara according to rock-art

by Joaquim Soler Subils*

ABSTRACT

Due to the lack of excavations the rock-art studies contribute with most of the archaeological data available for the Western Sahara. For this reason during the research on the rock-paintings of the Zemmur region an special attention has been devoted to identify the particular attributes and styles and to propose a local stylistic sequence. As a result, we can analyze in deep the late prehistory of the region and also place it in a broader Saharan context.

RIASSUNTO

Vista la carenza di scavi archeologici, l'arte rupestre offre un contributo importante al reperimento di dati nel Sahara occidentale. Per questa ragione, durante le ricerche sulle pitture rupestri nella regione di Zemmur ci si è concentrati sull'identificazione di caratteri e stili particolari per proporre una sequenza stilistica locale. Ne è emersa un'approfondita analisi dell'antica preistoria della regione che è stata inserita anche in un contesto sahariano più ampio.

INTRODUCTION

Due to its abundance and its geographical extension at this moment we have no better resource as rock-art to explore chronologic, regional, social, ethnic or individual diversity in the late prehistory in the Western Sahara and its relation to the Central Sahara.

As this area is usually described in the recent literature as a cultural marginal area, this statement may sound too much optimistic. However, the results of my research do not support the idea that the Western Sahara was a marginal area during the late prehistory and, on the contrary, indicate many strong regional particularities, at least when rock-art is concerned (Soler 2006, Soler *et alii* 2006).

In this paper I will introduce those regional particularities of the Western Sahara's rock-art and explore what kind of ethnic information they provide.

Most of the data analyzed come from the Zemmur, a hilly region found in the northern Western Sahara (fig. 1). It was expected that the stylistic classification of the images from this region could provide some information about the settlement of this area and the ethnicity of the painters.

Early during this process I realized that the styles defined in the Central Sahara by Henry Lhote were inadequate for the Western Saharan assemblages. In both areas were depicted similar themes but the pictures have other technical and morphological attributes and the images from Zemmur did not fit the styles defined there.

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For this reason one of the main goals of the research was to define new styles and to order them chronologically. From this point, the meaning of the stylistic diversity in the Western Sahara could be better studied.

THE WESTERN SAHARAN ROCK-ART AND ITS REGIONAL PARTICULARITIES

In 1941 the first news about a rock-art site with engravings in the Western Sahara appeared (Martínez 1941). At the same time the entomologist Eugenio Morales Agacino described rock art paintings in the Western Sahara (Morales 1942). Subsequent archaeological surveys discovered many other sites with engravings but much less with paintings.

The last contributions to the study of the Western Saharan rock-art before the war were made by Manuel Pellicer Catalán and Pilar Acosta Martínez (Pellicer *et alii* 1973-1974), Rodrigo de Balbín Behrmann (Balbín 1975) and the Austrian team formed by Herbert Nowak and Sigrig and Dieter Ortner (Nowak *et alii* 1975). Outside the borders of the ancient Spanish colony but still in a Western Saharan context we should mention the early research carried on by Théodore Monod in Mauritania (Monod 1938, 1951) and the study of the Tazina engravings along the wadi Draa, in Morocco, which is still in progress (Wolff 1999).

Some of those researchers, for example Julio Martínez Santa-Olalla and the team lead by Manuel Pellicer Catalán, offered ethnic interpretations starting from the rock-art. And Rodrigo de Balbín Behrmann observed particularities in the Western Saharan rock-engevings. He distinguished two groups of engravings: those with Atlantic influences from those related to an interior Saharan tradition. At the end he did not interpretate them as the product of two different ethnicities but the result of different influences.

Since 1995 and in the context of the actual cease-fire, our team lead by the University of Girona has started over with the archaeological research in the Western Sahara in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture of the Saharawi and Arabic Democratic Republic. Since then research has been developed in several old known sites and many other new discovered ones (Soler 1999).

At this moment the better corpus to analyze the Western Sahara's regional, ethnic or other particularities, are the rock-paintings of the Zemmur, because there research has been developed intensively in the last years. Around 2.700 images have been studied in the doctoral thesis of the author. Short descriptions of the sites, the themes and the styles defined have been recently published (Soler 2006, Soler *et alii* 2006). First several styles were defined, after that they were sorted in a relative chronology by overlaps, and finally some styles were dated in basis of the depictions of fauna, weapons and texts.

As a result, the most ancient, the Dancers' Style (fig. 2), may belong to an early or medium Bronze Age (3.800-3.200 BP), as the depiction of some halberds shows. The most recent, the Lineal Style, should be dated between 2.400 BP and the beginning of the Christian era because of the presence of lybico-berber texts and the lack of camels. The age of the Shaped (fig. 3), Stroked and Dark Figures (fig. 4) styles lie between the ages of the Dancers' and the Lineal styles (besides, all three seem to be contemporary due to overlaps). Finally, there is also a unique ancient Arabic text, which might represent the historic ages after XV century AD. It was not possible to obtain a radiometric age for any style: the chemical tests on some samples of paintings did not detect enough organic material to allow the ¹⁴C dates.

The geographic extension of those styles is not confined in the Zemmur. The Dark Figures style was also found in Laouianate, in southern Morocco (Searight & Martinet 2001-2002) and, as mentioned, in the Devil's cave in Lejuad. Additionally there are some human depictions which relate the Dancers' style to the Tazina style of engravings found in the north of the Western Sahara (Soler *et alii* 2006).

The main difference of the Western Saharan rock-art which differentiates it very clearly from other traditions found in the Maghreb or in the Central Saharan massifs is the already mentioned absence of most of the styles or groups defined in the Central Sahara and the presence of local traditions.

The exception may be the Tazina style of engravings (fig. 5), which is also found outside the Western Sahara, particularly in the Algerian Saharan Atlas. However further occurrences found in the Central Sahara (the Tassili, Mathendous, Air and Djado massifs) (Muzzolini 1995) seem

only anecdotal in front of the dense and the typical examples available between the wadi Draa and the region of Smara, along the tributaries of the Saguia el Hamra (Pellicer & Acosta 1972, Balbín 1975, Soler Masferrer *et alii* 2001) and the wadi Draa (Wolf 1999).

Contrasting with its density in the north of the Western Sahara, examples of the Tazina style of engravings are not present in the Tiris region and in Mauritania. On the other hand in those regions we found other styles of engravings. The sites of Blugzeimat (fig. 6) and Dan-Dan (fig. 7) exemplify this diversity.

Manuel Pellicer Catalán *et alii* (1973-1974), after warning about possible chronological differences between the rock-art from north and south, interpreted this kind of boundary or territorial break as the result of the division of the Western Sahara in the late prehistory between two different ethnicities (they used the word *mentalities*). The rock-art from the northern Western Sahara would be the product of communities belonging to the Capsian Tradition Neolithic while the southern images would be the creation of societies belonging to the Saharan-Sudanese Neolithic.

However, as a recent example from the Devil's cave in Lejuad indicates, we should be prudent before claiming about any detachment between the northern and the southern areas of the Western Sahara only on the basis of rock-art. Or at least, without more chronological precision. In that cave many relieves depicting rows of gazelles and women in Dark Figures style (which is typical from the more northern regions) have been recently discovered. Deeper research in those southern areas of the Western Sahara and in Mauritania is required to enhance our knowledge on those styles and their chronology.

ETHNICITY IN SAHARAN ROCK-ART RESEARCH

Human body morphology, style and particular motifs have been the main criteria used by the rock-art researchers in order to deal with ethnicity. Unfortunately in the Western Sahara we can only rely on the stylistic criteria because the human depictions, although they are very abundant, are not enough naturalistic to observe ethnic attributes as Alfred Muzzolini has done in the Tasili (Muzzolini 1995).

The concept of style has been always used in an ambiguous way among the Saharan specialists and its meaning has constantly evolved in parallel to the research interests (Soler in press). However, the archaeologists working in the Sahara have used style primarily in order to deal with chronology (Martínez 1941, Almagro 1946) and ethnicity (Lhote 1959).

In the first classifications of rock-art, the images were usually grouped in two styles. There was a *naturalistic* style, characterized by the incised engravings, which was considered the most ancient, and then an *schematic* style. This schematic style was identified by the presence of pecked engravings.

In order to explain the existence of both styles, some ethnic interpretations were proposed. Julio Martínez Santa-Olalla's, for example, related the group of the *naturalistic* and *sensorial* images to hunter-gatherers communities. The reasons were the supposed exclusive depictions of big wild animals like rhinoceros and elephants in this style and the also supposed absence of cattle. On the other hand, the group of the *schematic* and *intellectualizing* engravings was bound to a hunterer-pastoral population (Martínez 1941:165).

For these early explorers of the Saharan rock-art the possibility of the existence of several ethnic groups inside the hunter-gatherers or the pastoral groups was unproblematic. Both production modes were equaled to ethnicities.

After Théodore Monod introduced his popular classification and dating framework for the Saharan images (Monod 1938), the *groups* and *periods* replaced *styles* in the chronological sequences. This framework (later enhanced by Raymond Mauny in 1954) did not result in a different estimation of the ethnic characters of the Saharan rock-art. Théodore Monod designed it with the aim to order the images chronologically and not with the goal to deal with ethnicity. On the contrary: their framework masks any kind of regional diversity (Soler in press) and allows hunter-gatherers and pastoral communities to coexist into the same groups (Mauny 1954).

However the interest in ethnicity reappeared in the work of Henry Lhote (1959) and it was strong related to the concept of style. After Théodore Monod and Raymond Mauny solved the



chronological problems with their groups and periods, the concept of style, which had lost his previous chronological meaning, evolved to deal with ethnicity with Henry Lhote.

He not only classified the paintings in several periods, following Théodore Monod, but also discerned other 12 *art-styles* inside those periods (Lhote 1959:205). More important, he gave a new meaning to the styles and interpreted them as the expression of a culture and a people. The stylistic variation in Saharan rock-art became the evidence of population changes and external influences:

With this 'decadent' phase the great period of the 'Round Head' paintings closes. From a time that was, no doubt, but little posterior to the execution of the 'White Lady' of Aouanrhet foreign influences began to be felt and these may be evidence for the first migrations which announced the 'Bovidian' invasion. But however this may be, the art of negroid peoples –already several thousands of years old– was on decline. Soon the Tassili was invaded by newcomers who in no way resembled their predecessors and who pushed before them into upper valleys herds of slow-moving cattle. Thenceforth the walls of the Tassili shelters were to be covered with pictures of an absolutely new style and in an entirely new tradition (Lhote 1959:199).

ARE THE REGIONAL PARTICULARITIES OF THE WESTERN SAHARAN ROCK-ART INDICATORS OF ETHNICITY?

Before answering this question we should be aware that it is very problematic to consider the stylistic attributes only as ethnic expressions. We know in our daily lives, and with examples taken from the Western Sahara rock-art too, that is not always the case. There are other chronological and social elements which influence styles, not only ethnicity. For this reason trying to gather ethnic information from styles may be done with extreme caution. Fortunately the images in the Western Sahara carry not only stylistic information but also attributes related to clothes, hair-combings and weapons which can be interpreted as chronological or ethnic attributes. With all these data in mind we can do the following observations.

First, if we concentrate on the styles defined in the Zemmur we observe that the Dancers' style has strong thematic affinities with the group of the Bovidian paintings from the Central Sahara. However the posterior Shaped and Dark Figures styles have no thematic parallels in the Central Sahara at the same time. This fact is not insignificant. We must have in mind that the Dark Figures style is not a minor style: it is clearly present in a big area confined between the south of the wadi Draa (in Laouianate) and the Tiris.

Both in Shaped and Dark Figures styles oxen were not represented. The typical compositions in the Dark Figures style depict rows of gazelles, rows of women and hunts of elephants. The Shaped style scenes are not so conventional as those from the Dark Figure style but they do not represent herds of oxen. Thus, the paintings of the Shaped and the Dark Figures styles do not seem to be the product of pastoral societies, in contrast with the previous Dancers' style and the contemporaneous Stroked style.

Finally the posterior Linear style depicts again similar themes in both Western and Central Sahara: hunts of ostriches, riders and lybico-berber texts. That means that the Berber populations, the direct ancestors of the actual hassanophones, have settled the Western Sahara.

OTHER EXPLANATIONS FOR STYLISTIC DIVERSITY

There are still other possibilities to interpret some diversities of the Western Sahara rock-art with have nothing to do with ethnicity. Inspired by the research of Juan Maria Apellániz (1992) and Marc Groenen, Didier Martens and Pierre Szapu (Groenen *et alii* 2004) it has been possible to explain some stylistic variabilities as the result of the work of an individual (Soler in press), which I call Outlined substyle.

The depictions in Outlined substyle are characterized by depictions of animal beings of high dimensions (around 1 meter), drawn with wide lines and diffused edges and presented in a strict lateral view. The depictions in Outlined Substyle have no finished legs (fig. 8). Aside from these particularities, the figures depicted in Outlined substyle are strongly related to Shaped style depictions by several morphological similarities.

The particularities of the Outlined substyle are easier to explain as the work of an individual more than the expression of ethnic differences: the substyle is geographically and numerically

very confined, it fits well into a more collective style (the Shaped Style), its thematic is only restricted to animal depictions and, finally, many images were painted on places which were only accessible with some infrastructure. Therefore those Outlined substyle paintings seem to be more the work of a professional than a collective or ethnic style.

CONCLUSIONS

The western edge of the Sahara, far away from the assumptions of being a cultural marginal area in the late prehistory, preserves a rich and diverse rock-art heritage. Only with the painted rock-shelters of the Zemmur the historical change in this area can be traced without apparent interruptions between 3.800 and 2.000 BP.

We should conclude that the Western Sahara communities shared a similar ideological context with the groups living more to the east, as some thematic similitudes found in the Central Saharan rock-art suggest. However, the local stylistic differences indicate the importance of the posterior local evolution and the substrate. Our future research should be oriented towards the understanding of the birth of such artistic or ethnic differences.

Of special interest is the thematic break between the Dancers' and Stroked styles, at one side, and the Shaped and Dark Figures styles, at the other side; since the Stroked and the Dark Figures styles may be contemporaneous as the overlaps show (fig. 8). During this change the herds disappear and the rock-art reflects a world of hunter-gatherers which differentiates enormously, in both the thematic and the stylistic aspects of the images, the Western Sahara from the Central Sahara. The thematic, and also perhaps stylistic, convergence will not arrive until the late Linear style, which also marks the end of the rock-art tradition in the Western Sahara.

Finally, we should be aware that not all the stylistic diversities of the Western Sahara rock-art may be explained as the result of ethnic differences: the example is the probable identification of an individual style in the site of Rekeiz Lemgasem.

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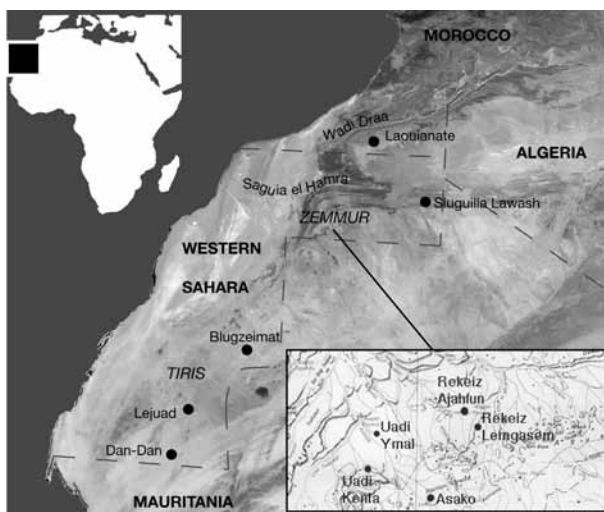


Fig1 Map



Fig2 Dancers

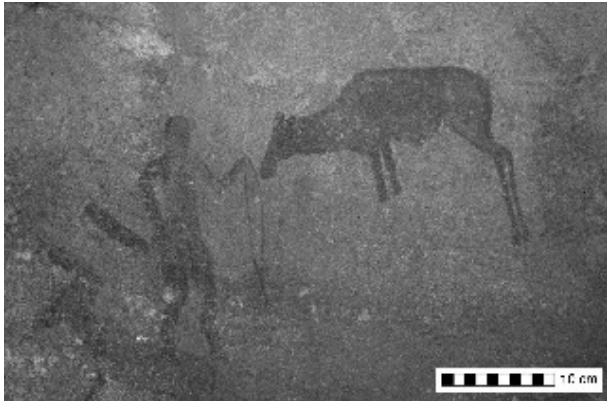


Fig3 Shaped

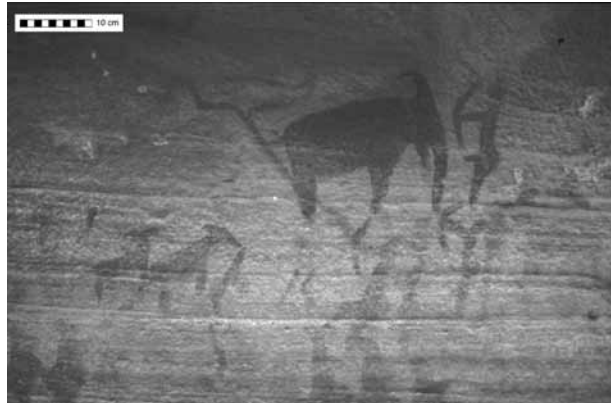


Fig4 DarkFigures



Fig5 Tazina Sluguilla



Fig6 Blugzeimat



Fig7 Dan-Dan



Fig8