Henri Lhote was, no doubt, one of the investigators of the Saharan rock art with the best and most detailed knowledge of the difficult Saharan and North African terrain. This, together with his enthusiasm and endurance, allowed him to report an astonishing amount of discoveries which have given other scholars the possibility of investigating many fundamental problems concerning the cultural development and behaviour of our species, demanding, in the case of the Sahara, an adaptation to difficult environmental conditions.

It is therefore appropriate to dedicate this modest contribution to the memory of our eminent colleague.

Recent decades have brought unexpected new discoveries of Central Saharan rock art. Through these discoveries we know today that there was no “Neolithic Revolution” in our cultural development but a long-lasting process of “Neolithisation”, and that some elements of this process appeared in different regions in different times and with different relationships. In the Sahara one of the important surprises was the very early knowledge (of possibly autochthonous origin) of ceramics and cattle domestication (Fig. 1).

Let us now focus on the cattle representations that are by far the most numerous subject (approx. 60%) in Central Saharan rock imagery (Fig. 2). We can ask: why is this imagery of cattle figures far more numerous than that of humans and of any other subject? Evidently the cattle were something very important for Saharan Neolithic people, and certainly it is not by chance that the majority (60%) of these figures are oxen. Sexually indifferent cattle figures are less numerous (some 40%) and only exceptionally do we find cows with udders.

When analysing sacrifices and milking compositions we see that meat or milk was not the principal reason for cattle representations in the Central Saharan rock art galleries. But we stress again that the frequency differences in subjects are so striking that the reason for cattle imagery must be a very important one.

Let us now focus on the cattle representations that are by far the most numerous subject (approx. 60%) in Central Saharan rock imagery (Fig. 2). We can ask: why is this imagery of cattle figures far more numerous than that of humans and of any other subject? Evidently the cattle were something very important for Saharan Neolithic people, and certainly it is not by chance that the majority (60%) of these figures are oxen. Sexually indifferent cattle figures are less numerous (some 40%) and only exceptionally do we find cows with udders.

When analysing sacrifices and milking compositions we see that meat or milk was not the principal reason for cattle representations in the Central Saharan rock art galleries. But we stress again that the frequency differences in subjects are so striking that the reason for cattle imagery must be a very important one.
If we bring together the considerable amount of documenta-
ry material, we see that many examples clearly demonstrate
the symbolic meaning of this imagery. To illustrate this, for
example, there is the case from wadi Djerat, where the engra-
vings show a group of elephants headed by a small young
elephant marching erect on its two hind legs (Lhote, 1976).
This is certainly not a normal elephant and consequently also
not a normal elephant group. There is some symbolic mea-
ning behind the scene, which unfortunately we do not know.
If the small elephant did not figure in this group composition
we would no doubt consider these elephants as a realistic and
not symbolic representation. A similar situation can be men-
tioned, for instance from In Galghien in the Messak Settafet,
where the famous decorative elephant has a small simple the-
romorphic face hanging on a line from its anus. And this ele-
phant is followed by a small archer with an unusual head,
menacing the elephant from behind. This is again a complex
symbolism not only because of the kind of associated figures
but also for the fact that in normal life conditions there is no
chance for an archer to endanger such a pachyderm. Such
examples are quite frequent if we study the Central Saharan
imagery thoroughly. Certainly we know of some narrative,
some decorative and some other examples of exceptional
engravings, but we see that the majority of representations
has some kind of symbolic meaning.

In 1994, G. and H. Lutz made the first discoveries of inter-
esting compositions of a special event among a women and
a young male. Several other similar compositions from other
parts of the Messak soon followed. It seems that females in
festive costumes hold richly decorated and saddled oxen on
ropes. Between such females there is usually a smaller male
figure, often with a mask - like effigy on his head. A smaller
figure means less important or young. We face here an
important and not unusual event or deal in which the women
play a decisive role. This means that women played an
important role in that pastoral society, and this is the case
which we know historically among past Tuareg nomadic pas-
toralists. Two important social events come to mind: initia-
tion and marriage. The second one seems more plausible. If
this is the case, then the ox here is a dowry. In any case, the
composition demonstrates the value of a single ox. No won-
der, if cattle was the principal item of property, wealth and
welfare.

In many galleries we can find not only single cattle figures
but also elaborate large-size friezes of cattle herds. Such
compositions have to be well planned and demand a lot of
time for their realisation, so a corresponding amount of ener-

gy and endurance must have existed. What property must
have been symbolized by such a herd!
Let us now turn to another important social feature, to the burial mounds, their shape, construction and decorative elements. No doubt, the stone monuments in the Sahara represent several other features, like ceremonial or habitation remains. For our purpose here, we focus on the burials only.

Starting with the well-known Garamantic burial mounds (Face, Sergi, Canto, 1951), thousands of such simple stone mounds are found on the slopes of wadi Ajal, the once famous Garamantic centre. These were burials of the com-moners whereas other, greater and more elaborate monuments were found in certain places, such as, for instance, at the “Royal cemetery” in the side valley near the Old Germa (F. el Rashidy, 1986). Evidently these not so numerous monuments belonged to the Garamantic elites. Social stratification of this settled population was, no doubt, well established.

If we move to the earlier Central Saharan burial monuments of Neolithic age, we are surprised by the variety of their shapes. The datings put them between 5th and second millennium B.C.: Niger: Keyhole monument 4300-3200 B.C.; Conical pile of stones about 3750 B.C.; Platform monument 3800-1200 B.C.; Crescent in relief 3300-1900 B.C. V shape monuments are later, end-Neolithic, 1450-200 B.C. and 1870-120 B.C. (Milburn, 1996). These burial mounds do not form cemeteries. They are usually found isolated and a variety of constructions are used to enlarge the central stone mound. This mirrors social and individual prestige, the tendency to demonstrate a special status. They are the burials of nomads, not living their daily life in large groups and moving constantly from place to place. Corresponding small groups of nomadic dwellings can be recognised in rock paintings in the Tassili (e.g. Sefar) or engravings in the Messak (e.g. Wadi Tiksin), or in poor stone circles, the surviving remains of the circumference of few temporary nomadic dwellings (e.g. Wadi Tabaark, Messak Settafet). Usually only two to three are found together and the advanced patina of the upper surface of these stones speaks for their Neolithic age. In such small nomadic groups the relationship of people to their domesticated animals must have been a close one, and easily supported the development of private property up to the feeling of prestige and social aristocracy, especially if there were also other settled populations with another economy and a less evident concentration of property. The distribution of these monuments has been well mapped in Messak terri-tory by Y. & Ch. Gauthier (1999).

We stress that inside the wadi, close to this mound, is situated the second gallery of Ti-n-Iblal (bubaline tradition). The mound is not isolated. There are three horizontal flat rocks just beside it, all of them with strongly weathered engravings and with a black patina. This patina is the same as that of the stele of the mound. The first flat stone bears the engraving of a large snake with twice coiled body. The second flat rock bears a group of non-figurative designs, lines and shapes impossible to interpret. It is 116 cm wide. We can recognize a striped quadrangular sign and two round, eye-like cups. The next non-figurative engraving (108 cm) is again just close by. We can recognize something like a simplified incomplete antelope, two oblong outlines and a circular sign recalling cattle horns and many straight and curved scribble-like lines. It seems that both these large non-figurative designs were done under strong emotional conditions. Both of them differ strongly in their concept from all other figurative and non-figurative engravings in local galleries. It is highly probable that all the above-mentioned features - that is, the mound with archaic oval signs on its stele and the three horizontal flat stones with the described engravings - are chronologically related or identical and that they are the components of one burial - a composite and exceptional feature. This can be proved by a qualified archaeological study on the spot and by the excavation of the mound. It is important to note that such a large early Neolithic mound is not unique. Van Albad found another one, 25 m in diameter, at wadi Ti-n-Sharuma in the northern part of the Messak Mellet (1996). Still another one is reported from wadi Taleschou.

Many other small monuments with stele which sometimes bear engravings of clearly bubaline tradition are also reported as early Neolithic from the Messak region. Functions other than burial are usually supposed, in view of their smaller size and mostly lack of any real mound, other than some large stones. They are described as monuments “à corbeil”.
The investment of people and working hours which is represented by such a large structures reflects not only a larger group of people but also the existence of an important ceremony or feast. All this situated in climatic conditions allowing such social development.

After the early existence of ceramics and the domestication of animals in the central and southern Sahara, the development of social stratification in early Neolithic local populations is another feature, which should be considered in the study of the Neolithisation process. It is a good illustration of human opportunistic behaviour.

REFERENCES

GAUTHIER Y. & Ch., 1999, Orientazione et distribution de divers types de monuments lithiques du Messak et des régions voisines (Fezzan, Libye), Sahara, 11, p87-108.
JELINEK J., 1985, Tilizahren, the key site of the fezzanese rock art, Anthropologie, Rome, XXIII/3, p223-275.
JELINEK J., 2003, Discoveries and interpretations of Central Saharan rock imagery, Millon, Grenoble, in press.
MILBURN M., 1996, Some recent burial dates for central and southern Sahara, including monuments, Sahara, 8, p99-102.

Their real function should be verified archaeologically. Van Albada found 18 such monuments, ranging from 1 to 5 m wide, in one site in the northern part of the Messak Mellet. The datings of similar features from wadi Tilizahren (4915±80 B.P.) and from I-n-Habeter (5213±80) pose the question of their relationship and/or function compared to the large prestigious burial monuments of middle to late Neolithic nomads.

REFERENCES

GAUTHIER Y. & Ch., 1999, Orientazione et distribution de divers types de monuments lithiques du Messak et des régions voisines (Fezzan, Libye), Sahara, 11, p87-108.
JELINEK J., 1985, Tilizahren, the key site of the fezzanese rock art, Anthropologie, Rome, XXIII/3, p223-275.
JELINEK J., 2003, Discoveries and interpretations of Central Saharan rock imagery, Millon, Grenoble, in press.
MILBURN M., 1996, Some recent burial dates for central and southern Sahara, including monuments, Sahara, 8, p99-102.