

PASTORALISM, BURIALS AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN CENTRAL SAHARA

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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.

rywhere we find traces of the coexistence of hunting and animal domestication. Moreover, we find cattle figures earlier than the early bubalus representations (Pesce, 1967; Jelinek, 1985, Muzzolini, 1989). This fact is not influenced by new finds of late Neolithic representations of bubalus surviving evidently in certain isolated regions into much later times (Soleilhavoup, 2000). For already existing pastoralism, the hunting economy in early Neolithic times was a supporting economy within the same population (Jelinek, 2003).



Fig. 1. Wadi Taleschout: a composition representing some kind of important deal between two women in festive costumes and with profusely decorated saddled oxen. A wedding or an initiation ceremony? What was the value of such one prestigious ox?

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).

In Central Saharan rock art, the traditional consideration of the “bubaline” tradition, or the representation of the large Ethiopian fauna, as artistic activities of Hunter-Gatherers followed only later by pastoralists is no longer tenable: even-

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.

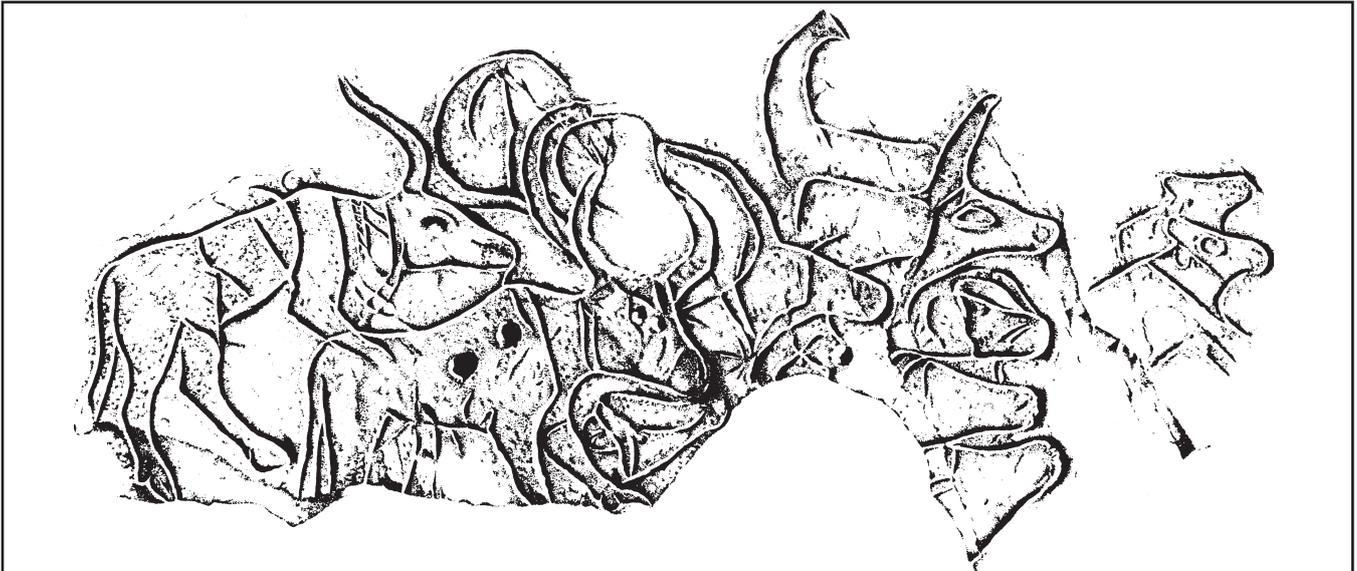


Fig. 2. Wadi Tilizahren: example of a cattle herd. Such a composition represented for Neolithic nomads their principal property and wealth.



Fig. 3. A snake figure carved on a horizontal stone face, a component of the early Neolithic burial monument in wadi Ti-n-Iblal.



Fig. 4. A non-figurative carving on a horizontal rock face, another component of the early Neolithic burial monument in Ti-n-Iblal.

If we bring together the considerable amount of documentary 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 engravings 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 meaning 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 mentioned, for instance from In Galghien in the Messak Settafet, where the famous decorative elephant has a small simple theromorphic face hanging on a line from its anus. And this elephant 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 interesting 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 pastoralists. Two important social events come to mind: initiation 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 wonder, 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 energy and endurance must have existed. What property must have been symbolized by such a herd!



Fig. 5. Another non-figurative carving on a horizontal rock face, another component of the early Neolithic burial monument in Ti-n-Iblal.

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 (Pace, Sergi, Caputo, 1951), thousands of such simple stone mounds are found on the slopes of wadi Ajjal, the once famous Garamantic centre. These were burials of the commoners 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 Rashdy, 1986). Evidently these not so numerous monuments belonged to the Garamantic elite. 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 burials 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 Tiksatine), or in poor stone circles, the surviving remains of the circumference of few temporary nomadic dwellings (e.g. wadi Takabart, 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 territory by Y. & Ch. Gauthier (1999).



Fig. 6. Large burial mound (30 m diameter) situated outside the wadi near its eastern margin. In the background can be seen the stele.

If we proceed to still earlier (early Neolithic) times, we would like to stress the existence of large flat mounds ("en entonoir"). In 1981 we found one such a monument, unusual in size, in decoration of its stele and in its complex additional features, in wadi Ti-n-Iblal. The central construction, situated on the stony plain outside the wadi but near its margin (eastern bank) is a large (30 m diameter) flat mound with a stele with a large triple oval sign. The circumference of this mound is made up of large flat stones in funnel-like position. 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 Albada 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 Taleschout.

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".



Fig. 7. Detail of the stele with the archaic oval signs.

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.



Fig. 8. Ti-n-Sharuma : another large (25 m) early Neolithic burial mound found by van Albada (1995).

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 develop-

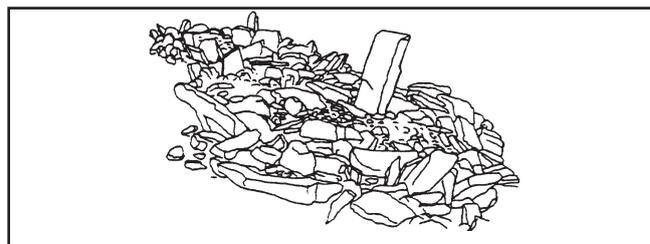


Fig. 9. Wadi Taleschout : another large burial mound (after van Albada, 1995).

ment 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.

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