

# SOME RESULTS OF RECENT EXPEDITIONS TO THE GILF KEBIR & JEBEL UWEINAT

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## INTRODUCTION

In the period 1998-2003 the author had the opportunity to make a total of eight expeditions to the Gilf Kebir - Jebel Uweinat region, located in the central Libyan Desert. Ever since their discovery by Ahmed Hassanein and Prince Kemal el Din in 1923-1925, the great massifs and plateaus near the convergence of the borders of Egypt, Libya and Sudan were known to harbor a great number of rock art sites, both engravings and paintings. The objective of the first expeditions was modest: to locate and visit sites recorded by early and recent explorers. This task proved more ambitious than imagined, especially at the main valley of Uweinat, Karkur Talh, where hundreds of sites have been recorded by Rhotert, Winkler, van Noten and others, however the respective publications provide little clue to the sites' location. To add to the confusion, the various authors used different numbering schemes (or none at all), frequently lumping several close lying sites under a single identifier.

The above state of affairs prompted the author begin a systematic survey and documentation of rock art sites in the Gilf Kebir plateau and at the massifs of Jebel Uweinat, Arkenu and Kissu. This paper presents the early results of the survey, up to spring 2002.

## SITES REPORTED BY HASSANEIN & PRINCE KEMAL EL DIN

Ahmed Hassanein Bey completed what was the last of the great camel journeys of exploration in the spring of 1924. During his four month voyage, he discovered the granite massifs of Arkenu & Uweinat. The native tibou inhabitants showed him a large rock full of engravings of giraffes and other wild animals in Karkur Talh. Hassanein published a single photo of this discovery in his book, *The Lost Oases* (1925).

Encouraged by Hassanein's find, Prince Kemal el Din organised two motorcar expeditions to Uweinat in 1925 and 1926, during which a number of new sites were discovered in Karkur Talh, including one shelter with red paintings. These were published together with Abbé Breuil in *Revue Scientifique Illustrée* (1926). On the second journey the Prince discovered the large plateau to the north of Uweinat, which he named Gilf Kebir.

All the engravings reported by Hassanein and Kemal el Din are easy to locate in the central part of Karkur Talh, however



Fig. 1. *pl R.*



Fig. 2.

the painted shelter remained elusive for a long time. None of the later explorers reported seeing it, and the only record remained a single very bad quality photo in *Revue Scientifique Illustrée*.

In 2002 spring our party chanced upon this shelter completely by accident, a short distance up a narrow and very rocky gully close to Hassanein's 'giraffe rock'. The shelter contains a number of cattle, originally painted red and white, but the white mostly disappeared, leading to much speculation at the time of their original discovery as to what animal they represent (Fig. 1, *pl R.*). More importantly, left of the cattle there are three human figures, including one holding a bow (?) and an unidentified object (Fig. 2).

This figure bears a very strong resemblance to humans shown among cattle in a certain style of engravings common at Karkur Talh (Fig. 3), providing the only established stylis-

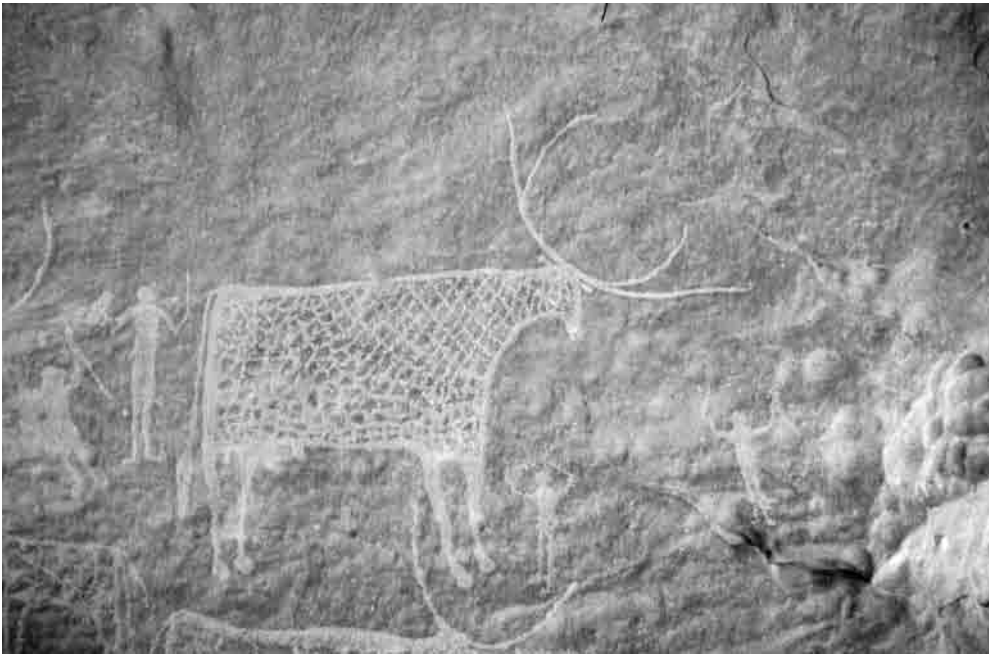


Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5. *pl S.*



Fig. 6.

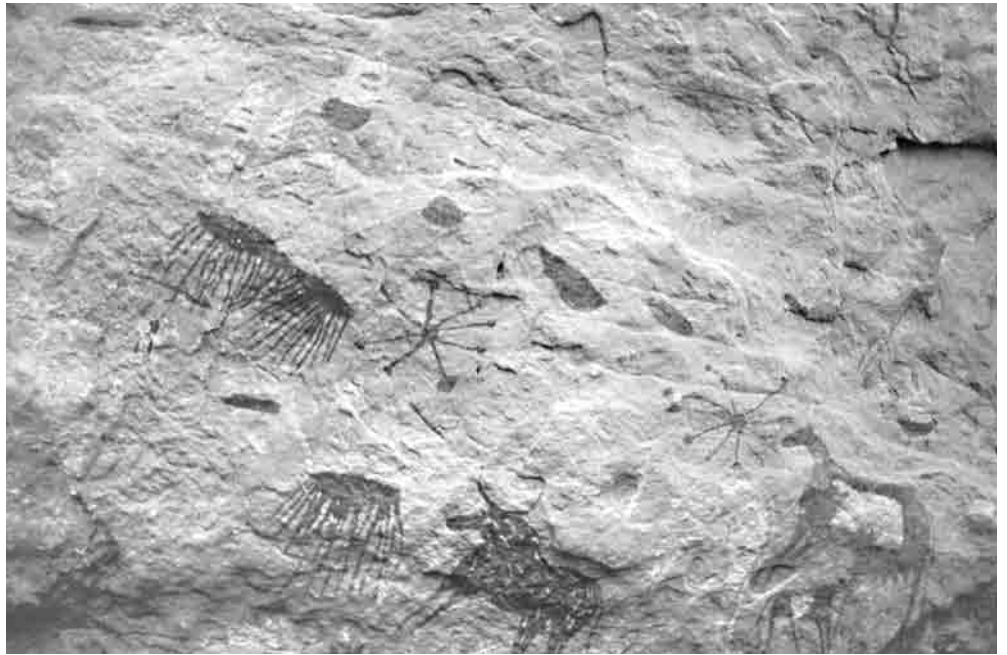


Fig. 7. *pl T.*



Fig. 8. *pl U.*





Fig. 9.

tic link between paintings and engravings of the area. It remains enigmatic, why Kemal el Din saw and photographed this very hidden site, yet failed to notice many others that were exposed and visible close to others he visited.

#### SITES REPORTED BY ALMÁSY & RHOTERT

Following the discovery of the Ain Doua paintings in 1932 by Almásy and di Caporiacco, Almasy and Frobenius organised a major expedition to record the rock art of the Gilf - Uweinat region in the autumn of 1933. This expedition visited all the known rock art bearing areas in the central Libyan Desert, and discovered a number of new sites, principally at Karkur Talh, and the two major and numerous minor shelters at Wadi Sora along the western edge of Gilf Kebir. Almásy published (1934, 1936) a few photos of the most important paintings discovered during this trip, but the full compilation of the results only appeared in 1952.

The archaeologist of the expedition, Rhotert produced what remains to this day the only systematic listing of rock art sites in the Libyan Desert. However as our surveys progressed, it became evident that practically all surveying during the 1933 expedition was made by motorcar driving along the edges of valleys. Many nearby sites, seen by later explorers, were missed by this method. Due to Rhotert's systematic numbering, we have managed to relocate all but a few minor ones of their reported sites at Uweinat and vicinity, and the Gilf Kebir.

#### BAGNOLD AND WINKLER AT UWEINAT

In 1938, Ralph Bagnold organised a multidisciplinary expedition to the Gilf Kebir and Uweinat. A member of the party was Hans Winkler, who was engaged in a monumental survey of the engravings in the desert flanking both sides of the Nile in Upper Egypt. During a one week stay at Karkur Talh, Winkler and companions have located practically all the sites seen by previous explorers, and made a number of new discoveries. Their method of searching on foot proved very productive.

Unfortunately only a small fraction of the recorded sites were published by Winkler (1939), who also made the bad habit of



Fig. 10.

lumping together all sites in a 2-3 km vicinity under a common site number. While this may have made sense in areas with sporadic finds, it is very confusing at Karkur Talh, where dozens of sites may be found along a single kilometre of valley side. Winkler took good photos of all recorded sites (which now rest in the archives of the Egypt Exploration Society in London), however without a thorough field knowledge, it is impossible to match Winkler's photos with actual sites. After several repeated visits, we have relocated most of Winkler's recorded sites, with the notable exception of Site 75.

#### THREE SITES RECORDED BY WINKLER WARRANT SPECIAL MENTION:

One is a shelter in the central part of the valley, about 20 metres above the valley floor. The shelter contains a particularly fine assemble of cattle in red and white. (Fig. 4). Strangely Winkler chose not to publish this shelter, and other explorers before and after assumed wrongly, that all rock art will be found on ground level. When our party found the shelter in 2000, it was thought to be a new find, until the review of the Winkler archives at EES revealed a single photo taken in 1938.

Possibly the most significant of Winkler's finds was 'Site 81' (Fig. 5, *pl S*), located near the footpath linking Karkur Talh and Karkur Murr. Our party relocated this site in 2001. The scenes shown are among the most unusual and enigmatic at Uweinat (Fig. 6), there is no known analogy for the strange abstract shapes and symbols depicted along the 'conventional' Uweinat style cattle and a single elaborately decorated human figure (Fig. 7, *pl T*). Interestingly, just 50 metres from this shelter we have found another, large shelter with many faint paintings of cattle and humans, that was apparently not recorded by Winkler (Fig. 8, *pl U*).

Winkler also reported a very fine shelter in Karkur Murr, 'Site 75', that was discovered by Bagnold. Two thorough searches in 2001 and 2002 failed to reveal this shelter, which remains the single 'lost' major site reported by previous explorers. Our surveys did reveal three minor new sites in Karkur Murr, including an interesting set of engravings in front of a painted shelter, showing male human figures holding some objects above their heads, having no known analogy at Uweinat (Fig. 9).



### THE 1968 BELGIAN EXPEDITION

After a long absence of visitors, in 1968 a Belgian expedition spent several weeks at Uweinat, focusing on the Karkur Talh area. A number of outstanding paintings were discovered in the upper reaches of the wadi, that were published by Van Noten (1978). In his book Van Noten also illustrated a large number of engravings, mainly from the north central area of the main valley, that were unpublished by earlier explorers. A review of Winkler's photographs revealed, that unknown to Van Noten, many have already been noted in 1938.

A major drawback of Van Noten's book is the lack of systematic treatment of sites. Cropped scenes are shown without any site reference, and lacking field experience it is impossible to identify which scenes belong to the same site. The individual sites are not identified, and while we have relocated all the major paintings, a number of recorded engravings remain 'lost'.

Strangely the Belgian Expedition did not make any further exploration other than the area where the new sites were discovered. Even though they reported to have seen "most of the paintings and engravings already reported (excluding Winkler's site 75)", their photos held at the Africa Museum, Tervuren attest that only the main valley sites were seen. Side valleys where Rhotert and Winkler reported a number of sites were left unvisited.

### RECENT SURVEYS AND DISCOVERIES

In the past twenty years the remote region began to see a steady trickle of visitors. However most travelers visited the main known sites, very little further surveying was done. Notable exceptions were Gauthier and Negro (1999), who reported a number of new paintings in the Wadi Sora area in the Gilf Kebir, and Le Quellec and party, who surveyed the western valleys and southern foothills of Uweinat, recorded the main sites and made a number of new discoveries (1998). Further engravings were reported by Aldo & Donatella Boccazzi (1988), Giancarlo Negro (1995) and Uta & Friedrich Berger (1998) in the northern Gilf Kebir.

In 2001 spring Werner Lenz & party chanced upon a small shelter with some well preserved paintings in a wadi some kilometres east of Wadi Sora (Fig. 10, 11, *pl V*). The site contains a number of unique scenes, and presents a very important chronological key, with faint small figures of the 'wadi sora' style and earlier engravings overpainted by the 'Gilf-Uweinat bovidian' figures (Fig. 12, *pl W*). A striking feature of this shelter is a pair of facing negative handprints (Fig. 13, *pl X*).

A few weeks later our party surveyed the Wadi Sora area, and in a small valley north of the main shelters, we located three sites with paintings. Two were very faded and showed only traces remaining, however in the third there is an exceptional, well preserved scene of three running figures (Fig. 14). Below, there are some very faded giraffes, and a group of strange, elongated human figures (Fig. 15).



Fig. 11. *pl V*.



Fig. 12. *pl W*.



Fig. 13. *pl X*.

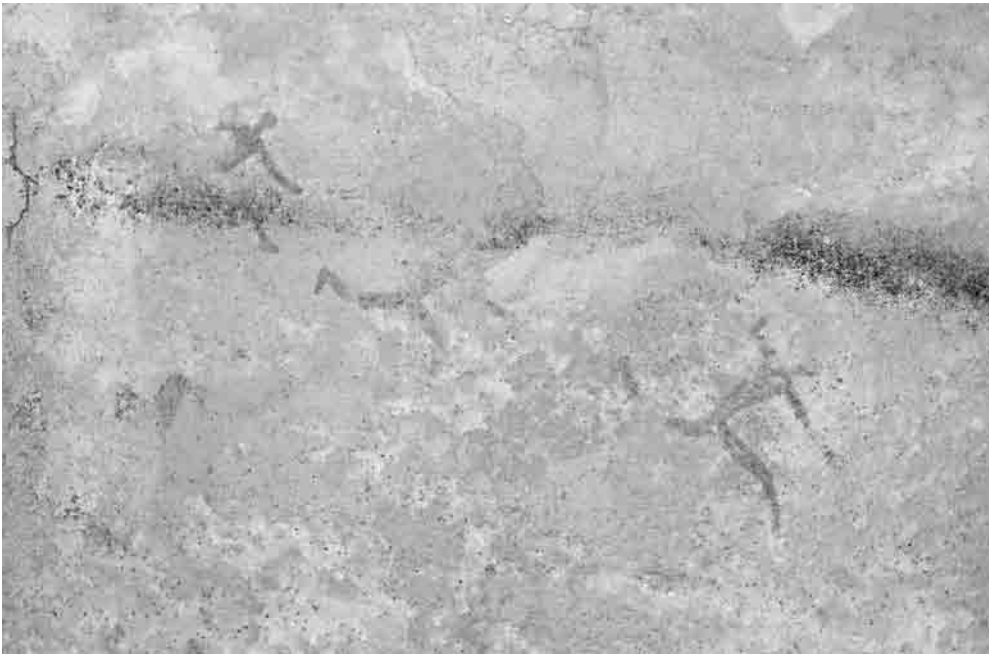


Fig. 14.



Fig. 15.



Fig. 16.



In the spring of 2002, Jean-Marc Mercier and party located three shelters with paintings in Karkur Talh. One, located in the immediate vicinity of known sites in the centre of the main valley, is an exceptionally fine group of cattle painted on the ceiling of a very low shelter (Fig. 16).

The shelter was almost completely filled with sand, it's ceiling only becoming viewable when some of the sand was cleared. A further major shelter was discovered near Winkler's 'Site 80', at an elevation about 20 metres above the valley floor. Aside a faint procession of cattle along the rear wall, there is a remarkable scene of several shelters, with some frequently occurring, unidentified objects (Fig. 17, 18, *pl Y*)

The Mercier party also visited Winkler's 'Site 81', and nearby found a shelter with faint but discernible paintings of groups of small human figures, in a style previously unreported at Uweinat (Fig. 19). (Subsequently our own surveys revealed a number of shelters in a similar style.)

The author graciously acknowledges the permission of Werner Lenz and Jean-Marc Mercier to publish the above mentioned sites.

Also in the spring of 2002, we made (an unsuccessful) search for the paintings in the east branch of wadi Abd el Melik seen by Bagnold & Peel in 1938. During this search we have found a hidden side wadi, with a long shallow shelter at the foot of a dry waterfall containing numerous weathered engravings, principally giraffes and bovids (Fig. 20).

#### FURTHER WORK AT UWEINAT & WADI SORA

By the spring of 2002 we have visited and recorded with a handful of exceptions all of the previously published sites at Uweinat and the Gilf Kebir. About this time NASA made high resolution Landsat images freely available on the internet, and it became possible to plot the location of known sites. At Karkur Talh it became apparent, that a number of side wadis contained no known sites, most probably due to a lack of exploration. Also a number of areas in the Wadi Sora vicinity looked promising for further research.

In October 2002 an expedition was organised to systematically explore the unsurveyed side wadis of Karkur Talh. The results surpassed all expectations, with over 60 new sites discovered in a 6 day period. In February 2003 a further 25 new sites were found in the same area.

Some of the new sites were recorded at high elevations, implying that practically all of the mountain may contain rock art, not only the lower courses of the wadis as previously thought. Approximately 60% of the mountain still remains unsurveyed.

On both these trips a few days were spent at the Wadi Sora area, where several new paintings were discovered. The most important results of the 2002 october survey is published elsewhere (Zboray, 2003).



Fig. 17.



Fig. 18. *pl Y*.



Fig. 19.



Fig. 20.

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