

# SUDAN & NUBIA

The Sudan Archaeological Research Society



*Bulletin No. 10*

2006







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*Front cover:* Beja man by the well at Bir Vario, Eastern Desert (photo K. Pluskota).

# Drawings on rocks, the most enduring monuments of Middle Nubia

*David N. Edwards*

Fieldwork during the 1960s confirmed how rich in rock drawings were the areas of Sudanese Nubia from the Second Cataract southwards. Surveys in the cataract zone and its more extended southward continuation through the Batn el-Hajar (Hellström 1970; Otto and Buschendorf-Otto 1993) have recorded somewhere in the order of 12,000 drawings. A further 28 sites have been recorded on the southern margins of the Batn el-Hajar (Vila 1979, fig. 20). Various exploratory surveys have gone on to confirm the presence of a number of large rock drawing sites as far south as the Third Cataract with some notable clusters of drawings in the Sabu-Geddi area (Chittick 1961; Allard-Huard 1982, 1983). Further north, in Egyptian Lower Nubia, some significant other collections of drawings have also been made (e.g. Almagro Basch and Almagro Gorbea 1968; Váhala and Červíček 1999).

Ongoing survey work in the Third Cataract region has provided an opportunity to further explore some of the rock-drawing sites in the region. Some 65 'sites' of varying sizes have been registered and selective recording has been undertaken. The recording of such drawings has been only one facet of a much more widely conceived project concerned with the landscapes (archaeological and otherwise) of the Third Cataract region and one interest had been to begin to investigate the wider dimensions and significance of such drawings, which are so abundant as well as long-lived elements of the landscape. This paper briefly would like to explore some possible lines of investigation of what Chippindale and Nash have termed this 'engaging, but obscure class of archaeological material' (2005, 1). One noticeable aspect of much past work with rock drawings in Nubia and the Middle Nile has been the emphasis on simple data collection, while analysis of this often painstakingly collected data has remained very limited. My concern here is to briefly discuss a few aspects of rock drawings encountered during survey work in the Third Cataract region of Middle Nubia, some of the questions they have raised, and their potential for analysis.

As is found in the study of rock drawings generally, the possibilities for analysing and interpreting such drawings vary considerably. Where ethnographic information may exist, this may provide more informed insights into the meanings of rock drawings. This may be helpful, at least to some extent, for some millennia. However, once we move beyond the reach of such information, we are forced to rely on more formal analyses. In terms of assigning mean-

ings, cross-cultural and cross-temporal analogies become increasingly tenuous as distance increases. That there may, in fact, be a surviving tradition of rock drawing in the region today does seem likely (in addition to casual graffiti), although we have as yet been unable to gain much information concerning such practices. In particular, our work in the Third Cataract has suggested that some apparently quite recent drawings, mainly of camels, may be related to visits of desert-dwellers (Bisharin?), who occasionally camp near the river. On the other hand, while some drawings may still be 'meaningful' (see below) most were created in periods for which informed insights are lacking.

## Issues of chronology

Issues of chronology are also of considerable interest. At one level, some of the rock drawings we encounter can be identified with a specific period. However, when we are looking at these features in their landscape context, we also need to appreciate the extent to which it may not be useful to think of them purely in terms of monuments of a certain period. While obviously having been created at a moment in time, by their nature they also have potentially very long histories, being seen and experienced by passing generations, sometimes over millennia. This is a point made very forcefully when we encounter drawings, originally made two, three or four millennia ago, which may still have 'meaning' in the Nubia of today.

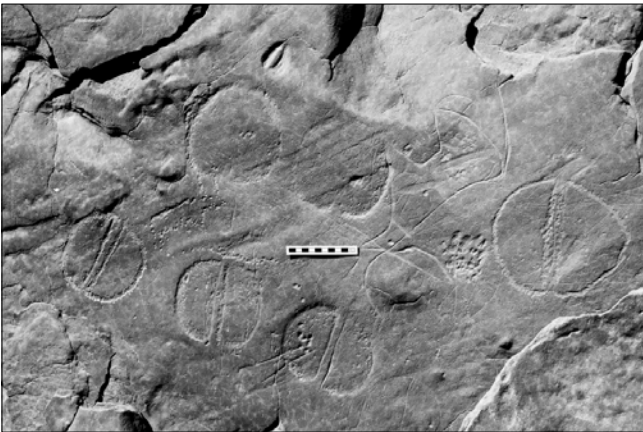
As will be further discussed below, the longevity of rock drawings raises interesting interpretive issues where we may be able to identify meanings attributed to them in recent times, which are clearly not those of earlier periods, and certainly not those which the creators of the drawings attributed to them. We can identify examples which clearly demonstrate the likely multiplicity of meanings such drawings have enjoyed, some of them over several millennia. They do not date just to a single 'period'. There are also interesting questions concerning the extent to which their presence in the landscape also influenced succeeding generations of those who lived in, or passed through, this region. To what extent was the presence of an ancient drawing, its original meaning long forgotten, the inspiration for the attribution of special qualities to a place in the landscape, and potentially the creation of later drawings at a site?

As is commonly the case, establishing the date of the first rock drawings remains problematic. Such formal studies as have been made of Lower Nubian material (e.g. Červíček 1978; 1982) attempt to establish some basic chronological parameters for certain types and styles of representation. However, his suggestions can only be seen as provisional. It also seems likely that a larger scale of analysis will be useful to extend such analyses. In this respect, current work in the Fourth Cataract region is likely to be very valuable in establishing a broader perspective for formal analyses which have, until recently, had to draw on a



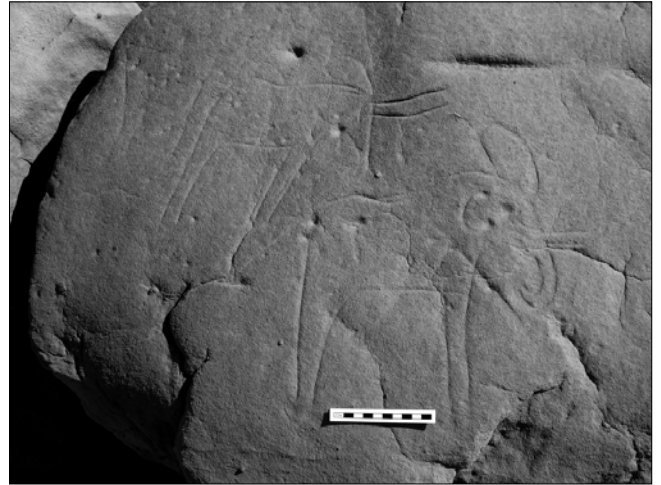
corpus of material relating largely to Lower Nubia and Upper Egypt. One key area of research which certainly needs to be further developed is the extent to which we can distinguish larger regional traditions of rock drawings and how they developed.

Recent work in Upper Egypt has suggested that some petroglyphs may date back to the Epi-palaeolithic (Huyge *et al.* 2001) and some stylistically similar material – largely geometric – may be found in Lower Nubia, for example at Abka (Myers 1958). A range of designs which might be classified in this way, for example circular or spiral patterns of dots, and more sinuous snake-like designs have been recorded previously in the Third Cataract region, notably at sites near Gorgod (Allard-Huard 1982). Further examples have been found at Sabu, a little to the north at Kadein, as well as in Defoi on the west bank. All examples so far identified are very heavily patinated suggesting they are some of the earlier drawings in the area. Other enigmatic and similarly heavily patinated drawings (animal hoofprints, perhaps giraffe?) have been found in a part of the Wadi Sabu dominated by drawings of wild animals (Plate 1). These include some distinctive representations of elephants which display both ears (Allard-Huard and Huard 1983), a style also found in Lower Nubia, and which have been found at a number of sites near the Kajbar rapids (Plate 2).



*Plate 1. Heavily patinated drawings (perhaps representing animal hoofprints?) in the Wadi Sabu.*

When do the first depictions of domesticated animals appear? The first appearance of domestic cattle and ovicaprids in the Dongola Reach was probably during the (early?) 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC. Probably first appearing in relatively small numbers, it may, however have taken a significant period (centuries?) for livestock to take on a more dominant role, and then not necessarily universally. From what is known of Neolithic sites in areas in more northerly parts of Nubia, the spread of pastoralism may have been relatively slow. Earlier Neolithic sites in the Batn el-Hajar, for example, have provided little indication that pastoralism was a significant pastime. Hunting and fishing seem to have remained more important for small populations in more



*Plate 2. A pair of elephant drawings in the Wadi Sabu.*

rugged areas, which may also include at least parts of the Mahas region.

Establishing direct correlations between Neolithic populations and potentially Neolithic rock drawings is exacerbated by the relative absence of rock drawings in exactly those areas which were most densely settled during the Neolithic period, such as the Kerma Basin/Wadi el-Khowi in the northern Dongola Reach. That part of northern Sudan where domestic livestock were probably most abundant and dominant is also the one where there is virtually no outcropping rock suitable for rock drawings. If we turn to another region where we know there were significant pastoral Neolithic populations, such as the Shendi Reach, there is as yet little evidence for a significant body of rock drawings with which it might be associated, either in the Western Butana, or the Sixth Cataract region. Is this the result of erosional factors (possibly a factor in the largely sandstone hills of the Western Butana) and/or the lack of survey, or might we conclude that most of the zoomorphic rock drawings, amongst which cattle are so prominent, are post-Neolithic?

The associations of drawings of a range of domestic animals, mainly cattle, and some dogs (but noticeably very few sheep or goats) with the later prehistoric period of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BC seem rather more secure. However, many of the depictions of game animals may also be contemporary. We can identify depictions of a range of wild species (e.g. gazelle, ibex, Barbary sheep), all of which could plausibly be expected to have been present in the region during this period, although a note of caution must also be observed in such identifications. As has been seen in some Southern African rock drawing studies, where information drawing on ethnographic accounts has been possible, they have shown that some depictions may relate to mythical creatures, while depictions of what appear to be 'real' animals can only be understood through their metaphorical associations (Deacon 1988). That such caveats may

be necessary in Middle Nubia is certainly suggested by one set of images in the Second Cataract area, which depict what appears to be two-headed 'Push-Me-Pull-You' antelopes (Hellström 1970, corpus L184-87).

The likely symbolic significance of cattle, which had developed in some parts of Nubia by the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia BC, is widely recognised, very evident, for example in the often very prominent presence of cattle in Kerma mortuary contexts. However, there are also indications that various meanings may have been attributed to a range of animals. The prominence of cattle, for example, may be contrasted with the similar prominence of sheep/goats in Kerma period burials (at least in the Dongola Reach), but their virtual absence from rock drawings. Gazelle, on the other hand, which are quite commonly found in Kerma period burials in the more northerly part of Nubia, such as the Batn el-Hajar, were also being represented in rock drawings.

If the meanings behind such depictions remain unknown, there are, however, other potentially interesting issues which may be investigated with such drawings. One such area concerns the visual aesthetics being expressed, and the particular qualities of form being represented in these drawings. Such material certainly invites formal analysis to investigate their visual aesthetics, and how these may have changed over time. One example of the potential for such an approach concerns the ways in which cattle are being represented. An interesting and perceptive study of the visual aesthetics of recent cattle-keeping Nilotic peoples (Coote 1994) suggests a number of interesting lines of inquiry concerning these ancient populations of the Middle Nile for whom cattle also seem to have been important in many aspects of their social and cultural activities.

As Coote discusses with regard to modern Nilotic herders, certain emphases in the depiction of the colour configuration of cattle, for example, may be taken as indicators of wider aesthetic concerns and may, for example, be recognised in rock drawings. In the Third Cataract region, as elsewhere in Middle Nubia, similar styles of depiction are commonly encountered in rock drawings, with several excellent examples along the Wadi Sabu/Sabunfarki (Colour plate XXXIII; see also Allard-Huard and Huard 1983, figs 29-31). As well as depicting the colour-configuration of cattle, other details may be highlighted, such as the udders

of cows and pendant features beneath the cows' necks. Combined depictions of cow-and-calf motifs are also quite common (Colour plate XXXIV). Similar features have been noted in drawings in the Fourth Cataract region (Kleinitz 2004, 12). This is certainly not a localised phenomenon; approximately 20% of the corpus of (468) bovine drawings in the Second Cataract zone (Hellström 1970) depict aspects of colour-configuration. Similar styles of depiction are also encountered in representations of cattle in other media, for example in incised decoration on C-Group pots from Toshka (Figure 1). Such representations serve both to help confirm much of the broad chronological outline established by Červíček and others and to relate rock drawings to other spheres of social activity.

An additional feature of many such drawings is the extent to which so many present the cattle in a more-or-less geometrically stylized manner. As Coote observed in relation to recent ethnographic representations of cattle in various media, "that the bodies are rectangular and the configurations geometricised suggest that the cattle-colour classifications represents a set of ideals which can be abstractly stated – or represented – even though real cattle can only ever approximate to them" (1994, 263). This would thus seem to provide evidence for a concern for what he termed a 'bovine aesthetic'. While we cannot know whether such drawings were intended to depict specific animals, they do suggest the depiction of an animal conceived of in terms of a set of ideals more complex than simply a generic 'bovine'.

The significance of the representations may go further. Interestingly, the ethnographic literature suggests the possibility of a range of metaphorical connections between the configurations of cattle colours and other phenomena, including other animals, and a range of natural phenomena (Coote 1994, 256-7). While it is doubtless dangerous to suppose direct parallels or links between recent ethnographic cases and such examples, distant in time and space, such styles of depiction may perhaps be useful as indicators of the history of aesthetic systems. Having their own history, they may in turn have disappeared in Middle Nubia in later periods, as bovine idioms, and perhaps a bovine aesthetic became less relevant, and was ultimately supplanted.

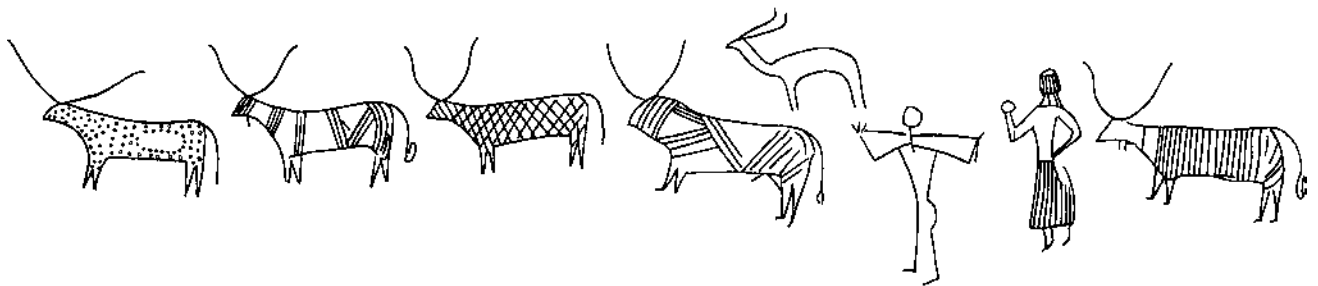


Figure 1. Incised design on a C-Group bowl from Toshka with geometrically represented cattle with varied colour configurations (after Emery and Kirwan 1935, pl. 24, xxi)



While any attribution of ‘meanings’ to such drawings must remain speculative, the possibility that they might function as what we may term ‘shrines’ might be considered. Having a sense of what they *might* be, or *might not* be, may help identify contextual associations of rock drawings, in relation to other elements of the archaeological record, or within the wider landscape. Within the Third Cataract region we certainly have examples of modern shrines being associated with locations with ancient rock drawings (see below), while we also do have ethnographic records of rock drawings as part of active shrines, if some distance away in Darfur (e.g. Balfour Paul 1956). This certainly makes it clear that rock drawing sites *can* function as shrines, although of course we do not know that this was the *original* purpose of the Darfur examples, simply that they came to be perceived as such. In Evans-Pritchard’s discussion of the Nuer, “beasts dedicated to ghosts and spirits are his wandering shrines” (1940, 209). Where cattle may be dedicated to protective spirits and ancestral ghosts, the spirits and ghosts are in turn present wherever the herds are. In such terms, it is perhaps not difficult to see a transformation of mobile ‘beasts as shrines’ into static shrines, where the animals, and their protective spirits and ancestral ghosts, are fixed in the landscape in the form of rock drawings.

### Alien responses to the landscape – the Egyptian presence

A further potentially interesting feature of the drawings on rocks in this region is the evidence it supplies for the responses of alien populations to these landscapes. Such evidence may be found, for example, in the New Kingdom period, when Egyptians were passing through, as well as living in the region. That they could identify, or appropriate ‘significant places’ beyond their more formally constructed religious sites (temples), is apparent from a number of places in Nubia. One excellent example in Lower Nubia, dating to the later 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC is the shrine at Jebel Agg near Toshka East. On this rocky outcrop was a carved scene dating to the New Kingdom depicting worshippers praying to Horus Lord of Miam, Reshep and Senwosret III. Below was a large deposit of pottery, including Pan-Grave sherds (Simpson 1963). In this case the place clearly had resonance with a number of cultural traditions, probably over a long period, and was also quite capable of accommodating Reshep, a Syrian deity.

Further south in the Third Cataract region, apart from the more formal inscriptions at Tombos and Nauri, most Egyptian responses seem to have been focused on the writing of names, personal statements concerning the self which in turn may be linked to the particular self-perceptions and expressions of self amongst

Egyptians of the New Kingdom period (cf. Meskell 2004). Egyptian graffiti and other inscriptions are quite abundant in Lower Nubia, as well as within the Second Cataract zone (e.g. Abdel Qadir, Abu Sir, Mirgissa), but markedly scarcer further south, reflecting the limited penetration of Egyptians south of Semna prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Within the Batn el-Hajar, there was a cluster of sites around the key locale of the Semna Cataract and the Middle Kingdom frontier forts there. In the southern Batn el-Hajar they are found mainly in the Melik el-Nasir area at Sahaba and in a group in the area of the Tanjur rapids and again at Dal, at the southern end of this region.

The places where they are found may often have been determined by relatively practical issues, relating to the vicissitudes of riverine travel through this broken and rocky landscape. The challenges the river posed to travellers were well-expressed in George English’s account of his passage upriver in 1820 through “a succession of partial falls and swift rapids for more than a hundred miles before we arrived at Succoot. I counted nine ...”. He identified those at Semna, Ambikol, Tangur and Dal in particular as “very dangerous to pass” (English 1822, 4-5) – just those locales where we find Egyptian graffiti. The fleet of Thutmose I is known to have nearly met disaster at Tanjur (Hintze and Reineke 1989, 170).

Despite the presence of an Egyptian temple-town at Sesebi, which would seem to have been occupied for some centuries, other recognisably Egyptian attempts to mark the landscape are relatively few. One cluster of inscriptions lies close to the Kajbar rapids at the downstream end of the Third Cataract. On the right bank, the two locations with Egyptian inscriptions were on the southern cliffs of Jebel Wahaba, which overlooks the Kajbar rapids, and at Sabu, just upstream. The hilltop of Jebel Wahaba occupies a very strategic position at the rapids and has been the site of a settlement in many periods. The presence of a large Kerma cemetery near its base (SBU016) suggests a possible Kerma occupation of the hilltop. The Egyptian graffiti there (Plate 3) are merely a small addition to a large group of what are probably mainly later prehistoric/Kerma period zoomorphic drawings.

On the left bank, an interesting addition to these examples was recently identified on the summit of Jebel Kajbar,



Plate 3. Egyptian graffiti on rock faces on the south side of Jebel Wahaba.



overlooking the rapids. The flat hilltop is marked by a varied range of prehistoric and more recent drawings, suggesting that it was a place of some significance in many periods. At sunrise, it certainly commands remarkable views as its horizontal slabs are first flooded with sunlight. Amongst these drawings is at least one recognisable Egyptian inscription. This takes the form of a cartouche which, while poorly preserved in places, carries the title Son-of-Re Ahmose, and some less clear signs (Plate 4). That this represents the name

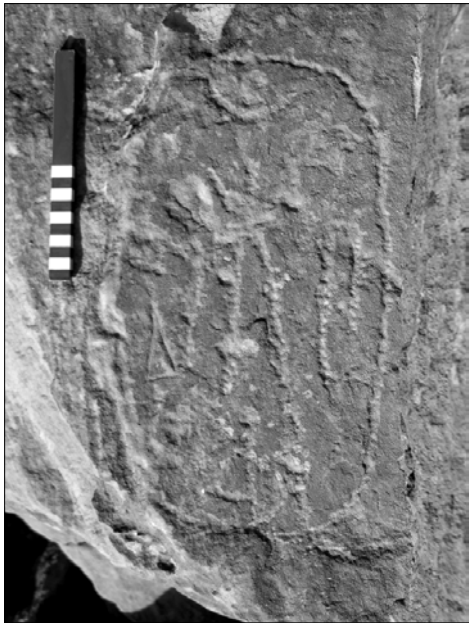


Plate 4. Cartouche from Jebel Kajbar with the name of Ahmose.

of the first 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty king seems certain. However, explaining the presence of this name so far south is more problematic. To date, our understanding of the extent of early 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty penetration into Nubia has never suggested that the Egyptians penetrated so far south, so early. If this small inscription can indeed be taken as evidence for an Egyptian presence on the Third Cataract during Ahmose's reign, some rethinking of the historical narratives may be required.

Other New Kingdom inscriptions all lie on the right bank of the river. At Sabu, a further small group of New Kingdom inscription was carved close to the mouth of the *wadi*, amongst a number of bird drawings, with which they may be associated. The four names include 'the draughtsman Neb from Nekhen', and 'the draughtsman Djehutymose/Thutmose from Nekhen' published by Hintze and Reinecke (1989, 184, nos 611-612). The individual Neb is also known from an inscription at Sehel island, near Aswan (Gasse and Rondot 2003, 45-6). Another graffito of a Thutmose also appears at Tanjur (Hintze and Reinecke 1989, 171, no. 554b). The only other such group in the region is a cluster of similarly

succinct graffiti at Habarab (HBB011), previously noted by Hintze and Reinecke, if misleadingly located near Debeira in the publication! (1989, 186). Explaining their location was initially puzzling, but now seems likely to relate to the presence of a New Kingdom-period settlement (HBB017) a short distance inland of the boulders on which the graffiti were inscribed.

### Medieval Rock Drawings and the Christianising of the Nubian landscape

As in earlier periods, the medieval inhabitants continued to mark their landscape through the continued practice of creating rock drawings, of various forms. Many such drawings can be related to the process of Christianising the Nubian landscape. As in other parts of Christendom, this may have been a lengthy and complex process and it cannot be assumed that earlier forms of 'traditional religious practices', which may have involved the continued use of existing rock drawings, if not the creation of new ones, did not continue during the medieval period. At the same time, new types of drawings, with potentially new meanings, may have been created.

The most common means of marking a Christian presence in the landscape was through the carving of crosses on rocks. The most elaborate of these in Lower or Middle Nubia may well be a large cross carved on Jebel Kajbar amongst other medieval graffiti which were added to the many earlier rock drawings on the peak (Colour plate XXXV). Other examples have been found scattered throughout the Third Cataract region, some singly, while others appear in small clusters on a single boulder or group of boulders. The most striking of these sites is a rock face just north of the large *wadi* at Sabu (SBU007) which holds drawings of perhaps 40 crosses as well some praying orans figures (Plate 5). This may be compared with a site recently

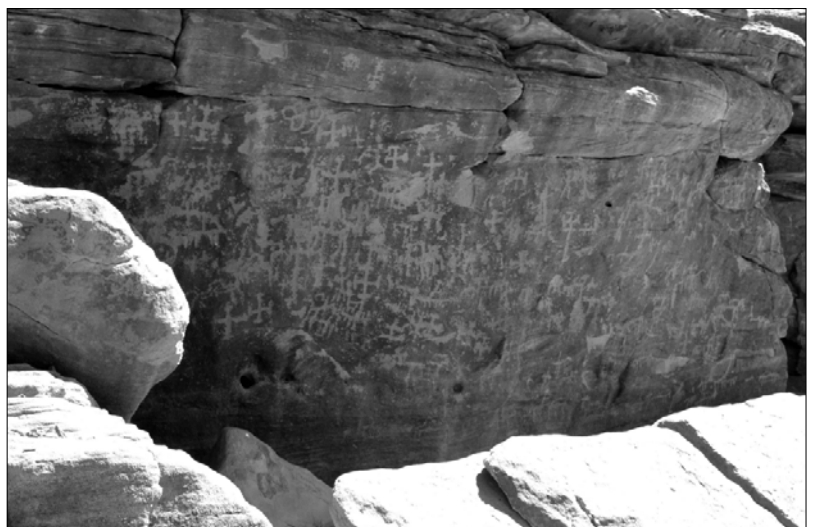


Plate 5. A large group of medieval crosses and other designs on rock face north of Wadi Sabu (SBU007).





recorded in the Fourth Cataract region at Umm Duras (Kleinitz and Olsson 2005, fig. 2). A further large group of medieval drawings, including depictions of church buildings (Hintze and Reinecke 1989, Taf. 265), are located on another rock face nearer the *wadi*. There are extensive scatters of medieval pottery at the base of the rocks at SBU007, a point which will be further discussed below.

As ever, assigning ‘meaning(s)’ must remain a speculative undertaking, although a generally apotropaic role certainly seems likely. In terms of movement through the landscape, it may be suggested that some crosses may be located on routes linking centres of medieval population. Such was the case on Arduan Island where cross drawings on prominent boulders are positioned on a ‘natural’ access route to the medieval settlement on Mugur Island. With groups of crosses on boulders facing both east and west, they do ‘signpost’, literally or symbolically, the presence of the medieval settlement close by, if the traveller crosses onto the island here. Otherwise, little patterning can be discerned except that most are located close to areas known to have had medieval settlement. However, a few examples have been found some distance from the river, for example along the Wadi Farjar, where boulders with what are probably prehistoric drawings of cattle have had crosses added to them.

Such drawings are not uncommon in areas further north, with several occurrences of single crosses or groups recorded in the Batn el-Hajar (Otto and Buschendorf-Otto 1993, 23-4, 71-2, 306, 313, 323). Another motif which

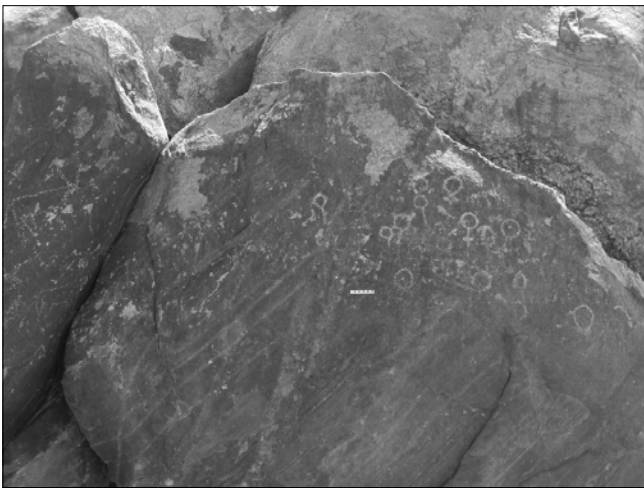


Plate 6. Cluster of cross-and-circle motifs on a boulder ridge at Hannik (HNK023), with cattle drawings on an adjoining boulder. An inscription of Maria is located on another ridge of boulders closeby.

seems likely to be of medieval date is a circle-with-cross design, which appears on a boulder at Hannek (HNK023), along with other drawings, on a series of boulder ridges (Plate 6). This design has not been recorded elsewhere in the region, although it is known from the Second Cataract area, at Shirgondinarti (Hellström 1970, 138, corpus type X12), as well as on a group of at least three panels on the

hill of Tunkid, in Murshid West in the Batn el-Hajar. Further examples of this motif have also recently been found in the Fourth Cataract region (Kleinitz and Olsson 2005, 33, pl. XXIII).

### Medieval inscriptions

Carved graffiti or other inscribed names are relatively rare during the medieval period. Distinctions may be made between personal names, and those of saints/holy figures. In Lower and Middle Nubia the published inventories suggest they are much less common than, for example, the Egyptian graffiti of the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC (Middle and New Kingdom). One rare example from the Second Cataract region is a cluster of three names of the Archangels Gabriel, Michael and Raphael carved on a rock face c. 1.5km from the river to the west of Abdel Qadir (Hintze and Reinecke 1989, 32). These had been carved close to a group of earlier graffiti dating mainly to the Middle Kingdom, but also with what was probably a Meroitic-period depiction of an ‘offering table’.

Just to the north of the cataract zone on the east bank, there is a group of several drawings on the prominent hill of Bintibirra in the Ashkeit area (site SJE76). Amongst 21 groups of drawings of many periods is a personal inscription of Merkē (Merkourios) ‘*presbyteros* of God’, an individual called Patimi, and what may be Stauros (Hellström 1970, 235). At another site on the summit of the hill (SJE77) was another personal inscription of Papi-time, also ‘*presbyteros*’. A further graffiti, of ‘Marisiti, son of Zaēn’, occurs at a small rock drawing site on an isolated hillock in the desert south of Jebel Sahaba. These were the only examples of such named drawings within the Scandinavian concession.

Within the barren and extremely rocky Second Cataract zone only a single, largely illegible inscription in Coptic was recorded, on the island of Shirgondinarti (SJE 159) amongst a mass of rock drawings. Close to a path between the modern villages of Abkanarti and Tinoaman, this area also had a number of medieval villages. To the south, within the Batn el-Hajar, an area which was relatively densely occupied during the medieval period, such texts are also rare. One inscription with the name Michael was recorded at Tunkit in the area of Murshid West, amongst a cluster of numerous rock drawings, probably of several periods (Hintze and Reinecke 1989, 185, Taf. 271). These included several of the cross-in-circle designs previously mentioned.

Such written inscriptions are similarly rare in the Third Cataract region. The only example of a personal name so far recorded is one from the summit of Jebel Kajbar, overlooking the Kajbar rapids. This hilltop is the site of a rich and varied collection of rock drawings of many periods, and is not dissimilar to the hill of Bintibirra discussed above. Overlying a carved footprint is the name of Mariankouda (Plate 7). An individual of this name is also known from an inscription of Theodore, son of Mariankouda, on a hill west of Nag Marsa Kuleig, north of Dendur (Zába 1974,



Plate 7. Inscribed name of Mariankouda on a horizontal slab on the top of Jebel Kajbar.

197 #199). A Mariankouda who was the Tetrarch of Makouria (died 887) is also known from an inscription in Greek on an ‘offering tray’ from Hambukol near Old Dongola (Anderson 1999; Lajtar 2003, 81-2). This individual was the ‘son of T[.]ophena’ (possibly Trophena), a presumably Nubian name not recorded elsewhere (Lajtar 2003, 88). An unpublished inscription left by a Mariakouda is among several located on the high hilltop overlooking the plateau inland from Qasr Ibrim. The only other appearance of an inscribed name so far recorded, invoking the Virgin Mary, is an inscription of Maria at Hannek. This appears in isolation on a south-facing boulder on a prominent boulder ridge, to the west of several further clusters of rock drawings, some at least almost certainly of medieval date (see above).

By comparison with earlier periods, with the abundance of later prehistoric drawings in the region, the ancient rock drawings did not in themselves attract much attention during the medieval period. Relatively rarely have we found Christian symbols superimposed on earlier drawings, and certainly little indication that Christians were concerned to appropriate sites on which earlier generations had left their marks. The one rather spectacular site where there has been such an appropriation may perhaps be found at Masida where a medieval chapel was built against a boulder on which there is a remarkable drawing of a male figure (Colour plate XXXVI). Clearly much earlier than the church, it must also have inspired the construction of the church in this isolated location.

When seen as the product of possibly 1,000 years of a Christian presence in the region, perhaps we should reflect on the scarcity of such marks. The presence of inscribed names of saints at a (small) number of sites in Nubia perhaps deserves some further comment. Rather than representing randomly (?) distributed apotropaic landscape marks, could they represent something more specific? Were the sites created by these inscriptions used for anything, per-

haps performing a function analogous to types of Christian shrines known from medieval (and more recent) Egypt; perhaps revealed through the visions/apparitions of saints and other holy figures as has been such a widespread phenomenon (Meinardus 2002).

Such an interpretation is perhaps not as speculative as it might at first seem, as the establishment of shrines at the site of apparitions/visions/dreams is of course widely encountered in time and space in many religious traditions both within the Sudanese and Egyptian Nile valley and beyond (e.g. Fisher 1979). It is a ‘normal’ way in which places may be given a special significance. It continues to be ‘normal’ in the Nubia of today, as is demonstrated by numerous ‘shrines’ which still exist. These are part of a wider tradition which may include the extant shrines found in many areas of modern Sudan, perhaps no more than a circle of stones (for a possible example see Näser 2005, Abb. 12), or the great ‘vision mausolea’ (*mashâbid al-ru’ya*) and ‘vision mosques’ (*masâjid al-ru’ya*) constructed by the elites of medieval Cairo, many of which remain in use today (Taylor 1990).

While such speculations obviously cannot be confirmed directly, further archaeological observations may be able to provide additional contextual evidence concerning how such sites may or may not have been used. If we focus on practice, rather than beliefs associated with such sites (Brown 2004), evidence for ritual activities associated with them would certainly tend to support their interpretation as ‘active’ shrines of some form. Evidence for such use may, for example, be found in the form of sherd scatters derived from pottery used in rituals at the sites. Such a likely association has been observed in a number of instances at medieval rock-drawing sites in the Third Cataract region. One such site is a boulder outcrop at Simit West (SMW004), where there are a range of later prehistoric (?) zoomorphic drawings as well as medieval crosses, at a site which has also continued to serve as a shrine into modern times. Its recent use is marked by pottery incense burners placed at the foot of the rocks, while earlier phases of use may be marked by the thin spread of medieval pottery around the rocks (Plate 8). Similar scatters of medieval sherds are also found close to the medieval rock drawings at both Hannek (HNK023) and Sabu (SBU007). Further work is still required on the composition of such scatters, but their location would at present seem better explained in terms of ritual use of pottery at these sites rather than in terms of the presence of more prosaic ‘campsites’ or such like. It would be interesting to see if any such associations can be identified in similar contexts in other areas, for example in the Fourth Cataract region.

### Islamicising the Landscape

Before concluding this brief discussion, more recent appreciations of the landscape must also be considered. The extent to which drawings on rocks may have continued to



Plate 8. Incense burners and other sherds scattered along the base of a boulder ridge in Simit West (SMW004), decorated with a number of prehistoric rock drawings and medieval crosses. The rocks have been used as a shrine into recent times.

be part of a more recent process of Islamicising the landscape remains less certain. The abundant shrines found in Middle Nubia today clearly continue to give special meanings to various points in the landscape. Such ethnographic studies as were carried out in Lower Nubia during the 1960s may alert us to the potentially large numbers of such sites which may have existed over the centuries. Just prior to the flooding of Lower Nubia in the 1960s one area (Dahmit), with a population of no more than 1,300 people living in 24 hamlets, was recorded as having some 150 shrines (Messiri 1978, 63). These could take many forms, from prominently built structures (e.g. elaborate *qubba* tombs) to the simplest of markers (a stone circle). A similar variety had been observed in the Third Cataract. Our experience has also confirmed the difficulty of identifying such sites in the absence of an informant. Their abundance on the other hand suggests that we should perhaps be more ready to accept them as ‘normal’ components not only of modern landscapes but also of more ancient landscapes.

Islamic prohibitions against figural representation do, however, largely exclude the continued attribution of significance to most earlier rock drawings. One exception, however, may be found in relation to various natural and artificial landscape features of which rock ‘footprints’ are perhaps some of the most common in Middle Nubia. In the Third Cataract area such ‘iconatrophic’ explanations for natural features have been noted in several locations, where unusual stone features, usually identified by their Nobiin name as *nebinoy*, are identified as the ‘prophet’s footprints’. Examples have also been found, however, where ancient drawings of feet/sandals have been reinterpreted in this way and given a new Islamic meaning as ‘*nebinoy*’ (Plate 9).

Examples of similar sites, with similar interpretations of natural features, can readily be found throughout the Middle Nile, although explicit records of such reinterpretations of carved footprints are less common. Previous fieldwork further north suggests that drawings of feet and footprints generally show distinctive patterning, being commonly found in small groups, often several kilometres from the river, at locations which were identified as ‘shrines’ or ‘holy places’, possibly in several different periods. One example of an Islamicisation of such sites was recorded at a small hill east of Wadi Halfa, named after Sheikh Abu Bakr es-Sadiq (SJE139), where the carved footprints were reputed to be those of Abu Bakr himself (Hellström 1970, 22). In that case, a long history of that hill as a place of special significance was perhaps indicated by the accumulation of other drawings there, including a boat, bovine and human figures as well as a hieroglyphic text.

### Rock Drawings in a wider context?

There are of course many other issues concerning rock drawings which might be addressed. If, by their nature, rock drawings are restricted to certain regions whose geology allows their creation (and survival), how may they be related to more widespread aspects of social practice in the societies which created these drawings? To what extent should we perceive the making of rock drawings as a (significantly?) different form of behaviour restricted to these regions? Or should we perhaps see them as an extension or development of more generalised forms of ritual practices which were also carried out in neighbouring regions, which lacked suitable exposed stone? Did the boulders of the cataract regions simply provide a new medium for celebrating, and inscribing on the landscape the special significance of cattle? Did the (hypothetical) shrines take on new forms?

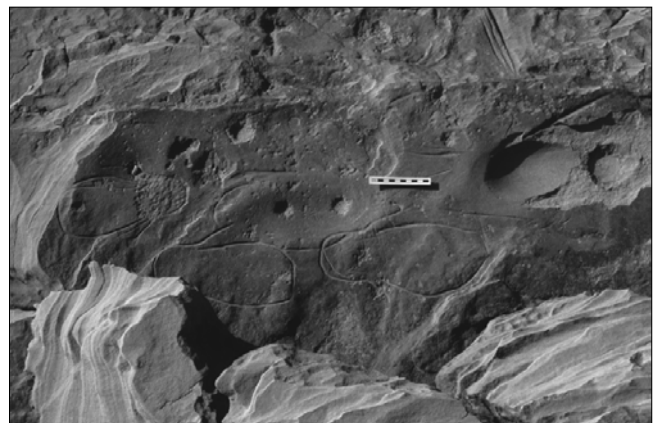


Plate 9. Carved footprints and natural rock features interpreted as ‘the prophet’s footprints’ (*nebinoy*), on the desert edge north east of Jebel Wahaba.



In the open plains of central Sudan, ancient and long-lived trees, for example, may have performed potentially similar roles as landscape foci and ‘powerful places’, as they have in more recent times. On the other hand, that unusual landscapes, as we find between the Third and Second Cataracts (and in the other cataract zones), might have inspired different and novel forms of practice is certainly possible. If we consider the Batn el-Hajar, as well as being a well-known regional name, very familiar to archaeologists of Sudanese Nubia, the significance behind the name of the ‘belly of the stones’, should not be underestimated. To venture into this region, as into the other granite-filled cataract zones of the Middle Nile, does indeed involve moving into a very distinctive landscape. Such regions are, and would have been in earlier millennia, strikingly different to adjoining regions.

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*Colour plate XXXIII. Rock Art. Large panel of cattle drawings in the Wadi Sabu, with details of colour configuration, varied horn forms and neck pendants portrayed in various figures.*



*Colour plate XXXIV. Rock Art. An unusually carefully designed panel of cow-and-calf drawings with attendant herder on a horizontal slab in the Wadi Sabu.*



*Colour plate XXXV. Rock Art. Elaborate medieval cross on a rock face on the top of Jebel Kajbar.*



*Colour plate XXXVI. Rock Art. The faint, but remarkably detailed, male figure at the east end of the chapel at Masida. The figure is wearing a kilt, armlets and holding a decorated spear and what may be a pair of rods/maces in his right hand. Some kind of column/pole stands behind the figure, and a pair of goats(?). Was this figure re-interpreted as a Christian military saint?*