TRAVELLING IN THE CENTRAL SAHARA, NIGER

SEPTMBER 1998

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TARA, Trust for African Rock Art, aims at creating public awareness about the wide distribution and variety of rock paintings and engravings throughout Africa. The Trust aims to create an international awareness of the antiquity, splendour, and artistic eminence of this art and of its endangered situation. This is not only African heritage, it is a world heritage whose great value has only just being recognised. TARA's Founding Patrons were the late Dr. Mary Leakey and Sir Laurens van der Post. The idea of Tara originated from a discussion between Mary Leakey and David Coulson in 1992. Mary was concerned about the way in which the rock paintings in Tanzania, some of which may be several thousand years old, were being damaged by graffiti and vandalism. She had a special interest in the paintings which she and her husband Louis had studied in the 1950's.

The Trust provides a forum for:
(a) Raising funds for the above mentioned aims and activities
(b) Assisting integrated groups and individuals to preserve endangered paintings and engravings
(c) Documenting little known or previously unrecorded sites

The Advisory Board and Honorary Trustees are chosen for their knowledge of the art and dedication to its conservation through:
(a) Research
(b) Public awareness campaigns
(c) Promotion of conservation measures
**MEMBERSHIP**

This Newsletter is currently distributed free to interested persons around the world. In order to cover the costs of producing and mailing this newsletter, and as a further means of supporting the Trusts’ activities, it will be necessary in the future to introduce a small fee.

**FUNDING (INTERIM)**

Tara has continued to receive the support of the Getty Conservation Institute in California and the Anglo American and De Beers Chairman’s Fund in South Africa, as well as several individual donors. During the last year, the National Geographic Society has also become a major supporter of our work.

**CURRENT ACTIVITIES**

During the last nine months Alec Campbell and I have not allowed the grass to grow under their feet. As part of our continuing initiative to document as much as possible of Africa’s most eminent rock art, we have visited more important sites travelling to Namibia, Tanzania, Niger, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Morocco. We have penetrated remote regions and documented engravings and paintings, some hitherto unknown. In the course of this work we have now compiled the majority of the material needed for an illustrated book on African Rock Art, and Alec Campbell has begun work on the text. David Coulson has to edit several thousand pictures, a major job. In September 1997 The UK newspaper, The Independent, carried a half page story about our work and the forthcoming book due to be published by Harry N Abrams Inc. in the autumn of 1999. At the end of last year The Explorers’ Club Magazine (USA) carried a cover story on the project.
In August, 1997 we returned to Namibia where we visited a total of 25 sites over a three week period. Most of Namibia’s art is ancestral Bushman or San art. We started in the South in the Huins Mountains where we visited the Apollo 11 Cave, scene of the discovery of Africa’s oldest C-14-dated rock paintings in 1969. These paintings have been dated between 26,000 - 29,000 years BP. Further North, we visited a number of important paintings in the Erongo Mountains most of them at Phillip’s Cave, first published by the abbé Breuil, and then returned to the Brandberg (Fire Mountain) to the Tsisab (Leopard) Gorge. In the Tsisab we documented the ‘White Lady’ (Maack) shelter, originally made famous by the abbé Breuil, as well as several other lesser known sites in the same ravine. The so called White Lady, in fact not a Lady at all, is the central figure in a wonderful freeze of human figures, one or two of them therianthropes, all of which appear to be processing to the left. The central figure looks vaguely like a person of Mediterranean origin, which in the 1950’s prompted the abbé to say that ‘she’ was a Phoenician. Still further north, we revisited Twyfelfontein, a major rock engraving site with over 4,000 spectacular images almost all of them of animals. This time we recorded several lesser known sites in the area. Many of these engravings are thought to date between 5,000 and 6,000 years old.

In September, 1997 we drove South from Nairobi (Kenya) to the Kondoa District of Central Tanzania. Louis and Mary Leakey were among the first to study the paintings of this area in the 1950’s. It was, in fact, Mary Leakey who first introduced David Coulson to this area in 1993. On our September trip, we visited the Kolo and Pahi sites at the edge of the Rift Valley where Mary and Louis had worked in the 1950’s. Professor Emanuel Anati, who recently worked here on a UNESCO funded project believes that some of these paintings are over 30,000 years old. If true, this would make these the oldest in Africa, yet so far no direct dating has been obtained to corroborate these assumptions. Leaving Kolo, we visited several sites which David Coulson had found in 1995 in the Miondo (Brachystegia woodland) country south-west of Kondoa. The area is still inhabited by Sandawe ex-hunter-gatherers, a ‘click-speaking’ people with a language related to that of the Bushmen of the Kalahari. It is possible that the Sandawe may be descendants of the artists who painted these images long ago. The style of the paintings here is allied to ancestral Bushman art, yet also holds some parallels with Saharan rock art. For instance, one of the oldest styles of painting in the Sahara is known as the ‘Round-head’ style (currently dated from 5,000 - 7,000 BC) and here in Tanzania we found human figures painted in a similar style. The Tanzanian art may form a stylistic bridge between northern and southern Africa. At a number of Tanzanian sites we noticed signs of heavy excavation near the paintings. Our guide told us that there was a group of Tanzanians looking for gold, believed buried in World War I by Germans near some rock paintings. Now the treasure hunters use dynamite in their search.

SAHARA - NIGER

In November 1997 we returned to the Air Mountains in Niger on a visit sponsored by the National Geographic Society, Washington DC. We were accompanied on the first section of this trip by Professor Jean Clottes, President of the International Committee of Rock Art, who is also a TARA trustee. We visited a number of sites here which we had not seen on our 1995 expedition. One of these was a remarkable life size engraving of two giraffe located on top of a low rocky outcrop. These engravings which are situated on a large sloping, almost flat section of the rock may be between 7000 and 9000 years old, and possibly more. We were all stunned by the beauty of the engravings. Jean Clottes described them, and I agree, ‘as one of the most wonderful works of art I have ever seen’. However we were alarmed to see that the engravings were already being damaged by people walking over them. Tarra plans to return to this site in January of 1999, (see Future Plans). Another major site that we visited on this trip was Boulloune, a series of granite hills consisting of mounds of piled up boulders not far from the edge of the Tenere Sand Sea. Some boulders here carried engravings which may have been made between 2,000-3,500 years ago. Among these were many large engravings of warriors with heart-shaped heads and broad-tipped spears. There were also two life size elephants one of which appeared to be bleeding from the nose. Fifty miles to the east in a shallow valley we discovered some engravings which appeared at first to be modern. On closer inspection
we found that these were in fact old but had appeared to have been aesthetically reworked in the recent past, perhaps during the Tuareg war, in order to tap into ancestral energy. They had been coloured in with chalk and charcoal. Some had also been damaged by bullet holes and graffiti.

SAHARA - ALGERIA

Following the Niger expedition, we drove North across the border into Algeria to Djänet and the famous Tassili-n-Ajer, an area that has been effectively closed for several years owing to security problems in Algeria. Fortunately, as a result we had no difficulty hiring donkeys and a guide to take us to the top of the Tassili plateau where we spent nine wonderful days visiting sites in the Tamrit, Sefar and Jabarren areas. Apart from three nomads, we saw no one in this vast area. The Tassili rock paintings, here especially the Têtes Rondes or round-head paintings, were made famous by Frenchman Henri Lhote in the 1950’s. They (the Round-head paintings) are among the worlds most spectacular. Not only are they of an extremely high quality, but they are also the largest paintings on the African continent. The “Great God of Sefar” stands at least 13ft high, for example. It was painted many centuries before Egypt’s earliest dynasties, and still ranks as a masterpiece by world standards. The setting is a lost world on top of a 2,000 foot plateau in the desert with eroded canyons that Lhote likened to forests of stone. The earliest Round-head paintings are thought to be around 5,000 years old and the artists to have been hunter-gatherers, but no one knows who these people were or understands how or why they produced such extraordinary works of art.

EGYPT

In February this year we travelled to Luxor and Aswan in order to look at pre-dynastic engravings in the Nile Valley. We were anxious to compare these with what we had seen further west in the Sahara. On two of the islands in Lake Nasser are temples which had been moved and built above the waterline when the dam was filled in the 1960’s. One of these is the Temple of Kalabsha, near which has been dumped a chaotic jumble of rocks and boulders bearing a variety of inscriptions and engravings on them. Some of these were dynastic but most appeared much older. We were told that they were originally supposed to have been housed in their own museum next to the temple, but nothing had ever been done about them. Now they are badly stained by the corrosive droppings of lake birds which use the rocks as convenient perches. We saw some fine engravings here, two or three of which reminded us of art we had seen in Libya and Chad, which probably date to around 8,000 years ago. North of Aswan, near Kom Ombo we found non-dynastic engravings of Egyptian (dynastic) boats which reminded us of paintings of boats we had seen in the Sahara.
LIBYA

In late February we visited two areas in southern Libya in the Fezzan. One was the Messak Sattafet and the other the Acacus Mountains on the Algerian border. On the Messak Sattafet we saw the most dramatic engravings we have yet seen, many of them over 8,000 years old. These were mainly life-size engravings deeply incised into the rock and often polished. Subjects vary from therianthropes and dancers to ostriches and large wild animals, including a large rhino on its back with therianthropes running over it. There was a life size crocodile which was particularly impressive. We only saw engravings, no paintings. This is undoubtedly the richest concentration of prehistoric engravings on the African continent, perhaps in the world. Despite the remoteness of the area we were disturbed to see that a number of panels had been partially destroyed by bullets and others damaged by amateur archaeologists or tourists(?), making illegal latex moulds of the engravings. By contrast, the Acacus Mountains are known for their paintings and are situated close to the Tassili-n-Ajjer and the Tadrart in Algeria just across the border. Most of these paintings date from the Bovidian period probably about 3,000-5,000 years ago.

We were excited to see scenes which, judging by the dress and hair styles, may have been painted by ancestors of today's Wodaabe or Bororo people. The Wodaabe now live in south western Niger and northern Nigeria. We also saw paintings of chariots, warriors and Barbary sheep and a huge panel of pornographic engravings which may also relate to the Wodaabes' ancestors.

SOUTH AFRICA

At the end of March, we travelled to the Drakensberg Mountains in South Africa. Here, carrying 35lb packs, we walked and climbed for nine hours a day looking for painted shelters, mainly at an altitude of around 8,000 ft. We explored the great Ndedema gorge and slept in a cave in case it rained. This area was one of the last strongholds of the South African Bushman who lived and painted here up until the beginning of this century. However, the area has been continuously visited by Bushmen for thousands of years and some of the paintings are believed to be as much as 6,000 years old. We visited some important sites and saw many exceptionally well-executed and well preserved paintings. Most of the art appeared to be shamanistic and trance-related. There were many paintings of therianthropes (part-man/part-animal) and we documented several hitherto unpublished and perhaps unrecorded images. We were concerned to see a number of instances where sections of rock with paintings had been levered off and removed, seriously damaging or destroying the panels in question. There is evidence that some of the vandalism is recent.

MOROCCO

Early in May we flew to Marrakech. Here, accompanied by Dr. Abdullah Salih, the top rock art man from the Ministry of Culture in Morocco, we crossed the Atlas Mountains to Ourzazate and spent a week visiting sites at the edge of the Moroccan Sahara. Although we saw many different engraving styles in the region the dominant style was similar to engravings we had seen a thousand miles further east in the central Sahara. However we were intrigued by the total lack of early-hunter engravings here. Just as the giraffe and eland dominate art in other parts of Africa, here in Morocco it is the rhino which dominates the art. Most of the rhino depicted...
appeared to be white (square-lipped) rhino. One disturbing feature that we recorded on this side of the mountains was a number of sites which have been damaged by illegal traders in rock engravings. Again and again we saw rocks that had been smashed in order to remove engravings. Often rocks had broken right through the engraved image in which cases the thieves had usually left the fragments in situ. On many occasions all we saw was a fresh hole in the ground where a whole rock had been removed and carried off in a truck.

In the High Atlas Mountains, at around 11,000 ft we visited a small National Park, that was actually created around a rock engraved area. These engravings are different from the Saharan art consisting mainly of engravings of anthropomorphs, circle geometries and bronze weapons of European origin. A number of similar sites with similar engravings exist in Europe e.g. France, Spain and Italy. In other words, at first glance these engravings appear to belong more to Europe than to Africa. We photographed these engravings against an alpine backdrop of snowy peaks. Ironically, the park is also a ski resort whose development has been threatening the engravings. We saw many cases of graffiti and engravings which had been damaged or destroyed by the developers who are erecting buildings around and on top of them.
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