THE BIG GIRAFFES
& OTHER ENGRAVINGS
AT DABOUS, NIGER
ROCK ART OF THE SAHARA AND AIR

The Sahara’s earliest known engravings are usually huge images of elephant, rhino, giraffe, aurochs and ostrich which were made by Stone Age foragers and can date back to 10000 years and more. These engravings were followed first by magnificent and sometimes ethereal paintings of people and wild animals but, after the advent of domesticated livestock about 7000 years ago, less dramatic animal and pastoral depictions occur: numerous images of people and cattle, as well as sheep, goats and dogs. The Pastoral or Cattle period faded as the Sahara dried out, and was replaced by a Horse and then a Camel period. The rock art of the Air Mountains consists mainly of relatively recent engravings, is atypical of Saharan rock art in general.

Most earlier engravings were made after 6000 years ago and belong to the Pastoral period. However, the majority of the engravings belong to the Libyan Warrior period, which lasted from about 3000 - 1000 years ago. Human images, usually armed men facing forward, sometimes holding horses or mounted on them, become common along with Tifinagh script, a writing still used by today’s Tuareg inhabitants, which is found at most sites. The distribution of Libyan Warrior engravings is concentrated in the Air and in Mali’s Adrar des Iforas (mountains) and covers the areas and time of early Berber expansion into the Sahara, suggesting more recent ‘Warrior’ engravings may represent ancestors of modern Tuareg.

THE BIG GIRAFFES AT DABOUS

Most remarkable of all the Air’s extraordinary engravings and perhaps of all the Sahara’s magnificent art, are the big giraffe engravings at Dabous. Two huge giraffes, the largest 5.4 metres high, have been carved into a sloping surface to face the sky. One’s first view of the giraffes is staggering; their extraordinary form carved into the rock, their lines polished, faces and lower legs smoothed and body patterning carefully etched to define texture and shape. They are a miracle of the engraver’s art, perhaps carved between 6000 and 7000 years ago by pecking, chipping and smoothing with stone tools, and made by people who knew nothing of writing or metal implements.

THE OTHER ENGRAVINGS AT DABOUS

In all, there are 828 engravings scattered over this outcrop, concentrated mainly at its east end. Around its base are images of antelope, giraffe, ostrich, predators, rhino, horses, camels and people. On the upper surface of the big free-standing rock at the east end is a complex maze of weathered engravings: large cattle, ostrich, schematic giraffe and numerous other wild animals. Immediately to the south of the ‘Big Giraffes’ is a sloping panel with at least five beautiful giraffe engravings and a bovine image, perhaps a aurochs (wild, extinct species of cattle).

There are other engravings in the vicinity of Dabous such as those on the north side of the riverbed and others near the tarmac road.

The engravings in this region have not been scientifically dated, reliance being placed on a general Sahara Rock art chronology based on the appearance of domestic livestock over 6000 years ago; drying up of the Sahara 4500 - 4000 years ago; introduction of horses and metal before 3000 years ago; arrival of camels between 2000 - 1500 years ago; and the spread of Islam after 1000 years ago when engraving of images, but not of Tifinagh, probably ceased. Dark patina over images suggests considerable age while pink patina is relatively recent.
Most researchers divide the Dabous engravings into two main periods. The first is the Pastoral or Cattle Period in which they include the ‘Big Giraffes’, although these probably belong to the end of the Early Hunter period, a style characterized by large engravings of wild animals which is well represented elsewhere in the Sahara. The end of this period may have overlapped with the start of the Cattle Period. The second is the Libyan Warrior theme, which spans the Horse & Camel periods.

There are also three pre-Islamic stone tumuli near the southern shore of the dead lakebed which once contained burials, and may still.

INTERPRETING THE ART

Only recently have serious attempts been made to interpret the Sahara’s rock art, although study of modern Bushman beliefs in southern Africa has suggested ancestral Bushman rock art images were symbolic, reflecting their artists’ deepest religious beliefs, and were possibly the work of shamans. While interpretations of Saharan art cannot be extrapolated from those of southern Africa, we can assume that this art may also have symbolic and religious meaning. When looking at the ‘Big Giraffes’ we see sinuous lines descending from their muzzles with tiny human figures attached to them, and wonder what this means. Perhaps the artist was attempting to portray man trying to harness giraffe power or felt transformed into a giraffe?

Almost certainly, the ‘Big Giraffes’ are the earliest engravings at Dabous, but exactly how old they are is uncertain. Later images tend to be concentrated around them. Is this a sacred site where later generations, by carving new images, have added power to the first engravings?

In addition, throughout much of the Sahara images of giraffe and ostrich tend to outnumber those of other species, while many animals, particularly smaller animals, are rarely or never seen. Bird images almost invariably depict ground-walking species such as ostrich. Humans sometimes touch, hold and even copulate with wild animals. Today, we do not know whether the engraver of a giraffe saw his image as a giraffe or as symbolic of something else, perhaps a spirit person or even as symbol of abundance.

Whatever we may believe today, for their creators the engravings must have reflected images of great value. They remain on the rocks and if we could read and understand them, we would know more about our distant past and perhaps better understand our modern selves.
Preserving the Site for Future Generations

Already, small pieces of engraved patterning are exfoliating from the ‘Big Giraffes’. Visitors’ shoes create pink wounds in the rock varnish, and a thief has tried to remove an engraving nearby. Unless protected, more damage will ruin forever one of the world’s greatest masterpieces.

In 1998/9, the Trust for African Rock Art (TARA), a Kenya-based organization, with help from the Bradshaw Foundation, arranged for a mould of the Big Giraffe to be made by Ateliers Merindol of France. In 2000, a life-size aluminum cast from this mould was presented to the Niger Government and erected at M'na Doyak International Airport, Agadez. In 1998 TARA also applied to the World Monument Fund, New York and later saw Dabous listed on their 2000 Watchlist of the World’s 100 Most Endangered Sites.

With local help TARA has installed and pays the salaries of two custodians who live at Dabous while a local initiative in Agadez has seen the formation of an organization devoted to the care and controlled use of prehistoric sites in northern Niger. A major aim also involves providing help to tourist operators to develop responsible controlled tourism in this region.

The World Monument Fund has made a grant to TARA to initiate physical protection at Dabous and an architect with environmental skills has designed a hidden wooden walkway, small interpretative exhibit, better approach route, and parking and camping areas located away from the site.

At the Site

This site is fragile and misuse can seriously damage the art and surrounding area. For these reasons it is suggested that visitors:

• Park in the recognized parking area and walk to and between sites, so that the area does not become scarred by vehicle tracks;
• Listen to custodians and do not walk on engravings or mark them with white chalk for photography; and
• Camp only in the recognized campsite, use only wood brought from outside and ensure campfires are kept clean and that all rubbish is taken away.

Further Reading

BACKGROUND

The Sahara's mountains contain the world's largest gallery of rock engravings and paintings, some dating from many thousands of years ago. Although the Sahara is now one of Earth's most desolate landscapes it has not always been so; five millennia ago it was much more humid, elephant and rhino walked along mountain valleys, hippo and fish swam in rivers and lakes, and the grassy plains were home to herds of gazelle, antelope, giraffe and ostrich.

About 4500 years ago, the Sahara began to dry up causing many people and animals to move southward. Today, the artists of the rocks are gone, but a few of their hardy descendants remain, herding their camels and goats.

Not least amongst the Sahara’s mountain ranges is the Air Massif of Northern Niger, a series of jagged granite volcanoes rising high above a red sandstone plateau in a land of little rain where summer temperatures rise to 45°C, while on winter nights it can freeze. Surface water has virtually disappeared, vegetation is often sparse and wildlife has been drastically reduced.

DABOUS

The Dabous Rock Art site is situated some eight kms east of the main tarmac road between Agadez and Arlit, about 110 kms north of Agadez. The approach track is unsuitable for saloon cars.

The main site consists of a sandstone outcrop, lying more or less east-west, some 90 by 60 metres in extent and about nine metres high at its highest point, forming a ridge split into spines along its summit with a few balanced boulders and loose rocks lying at its east end.

An old lake-bed lies to the south and east of the outcrop which dried out some 4000 years ago, while the Dabous River, now a dry sand stream, passes along its northern face.