ENVIRONMENT

The Air Massif (‘Air’ in Temashen, the local Tuareg dialect, means ‘A northbound journey’) lies on a low sandstone plateau covering some 8000 sq. kms (3,088 sq. miles) and stretches from the Sahel northward far into the Sahara Desert. The Massif is spectacular, with jagged volcanic peaks rising more than 1200 metres above the plateau.

The larger mountains are formed mainly of granite, pushed up through the plateau by volcanic action, and in places of capped sandstone. In the central area are basalt lava flows and hills, and scatters of basalt boulders with occasional high black cinder cones. The Blue Mountains in the Ténéré are made of sand blasted dolomitic marble, a creamy-blue rock also found in small surface seams elsewhere on the plateau. To the east lies the Ténéré, a vast windswept plain visible from outer space, meaning in Tuareg, ‘a desert beyond the desert’. Huge formations of sand dunes have drifted up against the eastern Massif such as the great dunes at Akakao and the spectacular dunes at Teniet thought to be the highest dunes on earth.

Summer rainfall, between June and early September, is variable and scarce with less than 100 mm a year falling in the north, sometimes in heavy storms. During summer months temperatures may rise above 45 degrees C, but, for most of the year it is dry and during winter the days are cool while at night it can freeze.

Although today’s landscape portrays a harsh rocky beauty, it has not always been like this. Thousands of years ago, this land was more humid. Rain fell, rivers flowed, lakes formed and its sands were covered by savanna while large trees grew in the mountain valleys. About 4500 years ago, the land began drying out forcing many of its peoples and wild animals to move south seeking more fertile country.

EARLIER HUMAN HISTORY

The human history here reaches back over half a million years and more. The Sahara’s first peoples were Africans, coming from lands lying to the south east. As Saharan climates fluctuated, so its inhabitants shifted back and forth. During the latter part of the last Ice Age, which ended about 14000 years ago, the Sahara was very dry and its few remaining people and animals congregated in mountainous areas where a little rain still fell and some vegetation survived.

With improving climate, people and wild animals again increased spreading across the burgeoning landscape. The people were probably a mixture of those living in the area who had survived the Ice Age and newcomers from the south east. They made tools of stone such as spearheads, scrapers and knives, bone awls and needles, some eggshell jewellery, and skin clothing. They collected wild food, hunted and in areas with lakes and rivers, also fished.

About 9000 years ago, they were molding and baking pots of clay, collecting and grinding seeds of wild grasses and beginning to make very small tools of hard stones such as chert and agate which they mounted onto wood and bone to use as sickles, awls, carving tools and skin scrapers. It was during this period, about 14000 - 9000 years ago, that the diversity of manufactured goods rapidly increased suggesting that Saharan cultures had greatly expanded at the same time. It was not for another thousand years that cattle, whether locally domesticated or imported from the east, as well as imported sheep/goats began to be herded in the Central Sahara; and probably even later still that domestic crops were cultivated.
THE PEOPLE OF THE AIR

Although a great deal of the rock art of northern Niger has been recorded - Henri Lhote traced a huge number of engravings in the 1950's/60's and other researchers have included illustrations in their rock art books - only a very few rather small archaeological excavations have been undertaken and much of the country's history remains little known.

Calcified aurochs' (extinct species of wild cattle) bones recently found near Mt. Tamgak and dated to some 15000 years ago, confirm the presence of large animals in the Air near the end of the Ice Age as well as people.

Excavations at Adrar Bous have also noted the presence in the area of foraging peoples about 9000 years ago, and of pastoralists by about 6000 years ago. Whether earlier foragers obtained domestic stock from the north or if cattle were introduced by immigrants remains uncertain.

Oral history and rock art suggests that before about 3000 years ago the Air region was inhabited by Negroid peoples who owned domestic animals and probably grew crops such as sorghum, millet and melons. Light skinned Berber peoples, some of whom were ancestors of modern Tuareg, had occupied the northern fringes of the Sahara for a long time. Phoenician and Roman occupations of the North African littoral saw Berbers moving southward, some settling to the west of Lake Chad. Berbers from the north also began to settle in the Air and, steadily expanding, eventually overran the region's existing negroid inhabitants and occupied the land as far to the south as Agadez and even beyond. It was probably during this time that trade between the Mediterranean coast and the Black peoples of West Africa became firmly established. The Air Mountains lay on one of the direct routes through the Sahara and must have provided resting areas for passing caravans.

In AD 1084, the introduction of Islam into Chad saw the end of Tuareg power in that area and an exodus westward into the Air. Less than 200 years later, there was a much larger influx of Tuareg into the Air, this time from the north. From that time on, Tuareg have dominated this region.
WHAT IS ROCK ART; CAN IT BE DATED?

The term 'art' when applied to ancient rock paintings and engravings is often disputed by researchers some contending they were not created for art's sake but were made for special purposes such as for contacting and appeasing spirits, maintaining environmental position, success in hunting, rain-making, initiation, fertility and curing ceremonies. Almost certainly, the images were made for some purpose, but this does not deny them artistic status. One look at the form, grace and apparent movement of the Dabous giraffes places them instantly beside the finest art of our time.

The engravings were laboriously chipped out of the rock, first by hunters and foragers without any knowledge of writing or even the use of iron, and later by pastoralists. They either held a hard pointed stone in one hand and with it pecked the surface, or used a stone chisel and hammer to chip the rock face. The painters used various iron ochres crushed and mixed with some binder such as blood or fat, painting with the finger and sometimes a brush.

Some engravings stand alone on the rock and are apparently easy to recognise: a man with a spear, an antelope, an elephant and even a horse-drawn chariot and charioteer. Others are more complex with many images on the same rock. While the nature of individual images may appear obvious, whether a group of them forms a scene is not always certain. Even their very nature may not be so obvious. When the artist carved an ostrich or giraffe, was the image intended to represent an animal or was it a spirit person in animal form? The art should not be interpreted with European eyes, it was created long ago by peoples with very different cultures to those of today.

Can the art be dated? Slowly, scientists are developing ways to date the art, but these are still in their infancy. Desert varnish, the patina which forms on engraved surfaces, can sometimes be dated, but accuracy in
the face of changing environmental conditions over
t housands of years is often suspect. Organic matter
like charcoal, animal blood and fat can also be dated by
radio-metric methods, but so little matter remains on
the rock that this method has proved almost impossibly
difficult. Currently, no Air art has been scientifically
dated; rather, evidence like climatic changes, the
appearance of domestic animals, metal weapons, horses,
camels and writing (Tifinagh) have all been used to
create a chronology and peg this to certain known dates
such as the excavation of cattle bones at Adrar Bous
which dated the presence of domestic cattle in the area
to about 6000 years ago and, thus, gave an early possible
date for cattle images in the Air.

THE ROCK ENGRAVINGS OF THE AİR

Engravings in greater or smaller numbers are found in
almost every area, usually on rocks and low cliffs along
wadi (dry river) banks, never apparently in elevated areas
or in the mountains. In some places, literally thousands
of engravings cluster together where wadis emerge from
the mountains. Even some single outcrops less than a
hectare in extent can have 500 or, like Dabous, 800
individual engravings.

Most of the really large sites such as Iwelene, Arakaou,
Tarakom, Anakom are found at or close to the mouths
of wadis which flow eastward out of the mountains and
into the Ténéré, although a few like Mammanet occur
in the western Air. Some sites, such as at Iferouane,
have only a few but these are often intensely interesting
engravings.

Although the earliest Saharan engravings - huge life-like images of elephant,
 rhinoceros, giraffe, ass, ostrich and wild
cattle often known as Early Hunter or
Bubalus art - were first carved into the rocks
of southern Algeria, Libya, northeastern Niger
and northern Chad perhaps 12000 years ago or
more, the earliest Air engravings are much
younger, the oldest possibly dating before 8000
years ago.

Some areas in the Sahara have a long
history of rock art, now divided
by researchers into periods
although these overlap each
other: Early Hunter, Round

Head, Cow or Pastoral, Horse, and camel. The Air’s
engravings are nearly unique almost all of them
belonging to a single tradition, Guerrier Libyen or
Libyan Warrior (a tradition which covers the Horse
and extends into the Camel Period), and were created
between about 3000 and 1000 years ago.

Only certain subjects are engraved. Most common are
figures of people, particularly armed men often
associated with horses, but sometimes with camels. Of
wild animals, giraffe are the commonest followed by
ostrich and then antelope or gazelle, elephant and
rhinoceros. Predators such as lions occur, but are not
common. The domestic animal featured is the cow
which is prolific, followed by horses and then camels,
while dogs are rare and sheep and goats apparently
were not engraved. The only plants engraved are palms
and these are very rare. There are no backgrounds such as
hills, clouds, or settlements and perspective is generally
lacking.
THE EARLIEST ART

Whether or not there is Early Hunter art in the Air remains uncertain until clear dates are obtained. When compared with the nearest Early Hunter art in Libya and Algeria, the huge giraffes at Dabous, by their very size (5-4m), life-like qualities, style and engraving techniques used appear to fall directly into this period; but curiously they are among the only known examples to occur in an area cut off by almost 500 kilometres of desert from the great bulk of similar works in the north. There are however other, fairly large animal images, e.g. other large giraffe (less finely executed) and a rhino in the Dabous area, as well as elephants at Iwelene.

It is worth spending time examining the giraffes and noting the sinuous lines descending from their muzzles, a small human figure attached to the end of each. Other engraved giraffe in the area also have similar lines, but what do they mean? Is this some spiritual emission from the animal or is it a symbolic portrayal of man trying to harness the spiritual power of the giraffe as he perceived it? We can only guess but, immediately, these lines suggest something more than just representational art.

PASTORAL PERIOD

The next form of engraving, although possibly in part contemporaneous with the Dabous giraffes, includes mainly schematic depictions of cattle, giraffe, antelope and ostrich, usually executed by use of simple curved lines, particularly outlines often polished and with little internal detail except for lines extending into the body from a back or front leg and some rare pecking to express shape. Such engravings are often found on sloping rather than vertical surfaces. Their date is uncertain, but they postdate the advent of pastoralism and may be around 5000 years old.

These engravings are followed by naturalistic depictions of people, cattle, giraffe and a few ostrich and in the main, reflect herding. The technique used is pecking with whole bodies being infilled by careful peck-marks.

Animals are drawn in profile with heads shown in twisted perspective, four legs and hooves. People are also seen in profile, never frontally, and can wear cloaks with flaps and carry bows and arrows but not spears. This type of engraving is limited to very few sites, particularly to Tanakom and Anakom.

It has been suggested that these latter engravings may have been made by ancestors of black or Negroid peoples, possibly by ancestors of those Hausa-speaking peoples who still live in the Air.

LIBYAN WARRIOR TRADITION

Most of the Air’s rock engravings belong to the Libyan Warrior tradition providing a great diversity of human images, although wild species like giraffe and ostrich are still common and domestic animals such as cattle and horses abound. In addition, Tifinagh inscriptions, the ancient Berber writing still used by Tuareg today, often accompany more recent images, although modern Tuareg are usually unable to decipher their meaning except for those made during the last two centuries.
Engravings from this period sometimes appear crude and some scenes are frequently repeated. For example, men wearing elaborate clothes and invariably facing forward hold horses by theers or sometimes ride them. At others they are pictured standing in groups carrying spears or javelins (not bows and arrows), and chase or touch wild animals. There are a few images of horse-drawn chariots, cattle dragging wagons and schematic designs of unharvested chariots. Women, much rarer than men, have wide hips, wear skirts and sometimes carry loads.

The earliest Libyan Warrior engravings include horse-drawn chariots, which could be 3000 years old, and have been attributed to Garamantes warriors, another Berber people who lived in the southwest of modern Libya and between the 12th and 13th centuries, Islam penetrated the Air Mountains and the Tuareg adopted that religion which forbids depictions of human beings. Probably at that time, Islam put an end to the Libyan Warrior tradition of rock engraving.

**VIEWING ROCK ART**

To really appreciate rock art, it is best not to race from site to site, but to choose a few special sites and then spend a whole day at each. Time is needed to wander through large sites, otherwise whole panels and details will be missed.

Engravings are best viewed, and photographed, when the sun slants across them as morning and evening light casts different shadows in their lines and pecked areas, altering shape and even character and making them much clearer.

When trying to determine what images represent, don’t jump to the immediate conclusion that an image is what it appears to be to your eyes; a giraffe may for example have had a different meaning for the artist who engraved it. Think also about the places where engravings are located; these may have held special significance for the artists, perhaps as religious centres.

There are also a few things to beware of. Although they look sturdy, engravings can be very fragile; some are several thousand years old and their rock surfaces have suffered heat, cold, wind and rain; pieces easily break off when stepped on and desert varnish is easily damaged. Be careful when climbing sandy slopes at sites such as Tanakom where loose engraved rocks can be dislodged and slide down to chip those below them. It is better not to touch engravings as repeated fingering will also damage the varnish. Never walk on or over engravings.