
Swimmers and Archers in context: Archaeological investigations along the Wadi Sura, Gilf Kebir, Egypt

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Abstract

This communication presents the results of fieldwork and analyses carried out by the Gilf Kebir Archaeological and Conservation Project in the framework of the Italian-Egyptian Environmental Cooperation. In 2010 a programme of conservation of the caves with prehistoric rock art located along Wadi Sura, Gilf Kebir Plateau (Egypt) was launched. Here we present the results of: 1) the excavation of the Cave of Swimmers deposit; 2) the technological and functional studies of the lithic and ostrich eggshell artefacts; 3) the digital restoration of the caves' rock art images. The caves of Swimmers and Archers are two shallow shelters that open in the Palaeozoic sandstone at the southwestern foot slope of the Abu Ras plateau, northwestern Gilf. During fieldwork seasons carried out between 2010 and 2013, archaeological investigations dealt primarily with both the inventory and documentation of the rock art motifs and the excavation of the Cave of Swimmers deposit. The excavations revealed a regular hardened sandstone bedrock which was likely used as an occupation floor by the groups populating the area. Sub-circular pits cut into this bedrock floor were possibly used as grinding pits. The deposits yielded microlithic artefacts, almost all of which were manufactured from small quartz pebbles. Use-wear analysis carried out on silicone moulds of a selection of the microlithic tools facilitated interpretations of their functions. Besides lithic artefacts, ostrich eggshell sherds were also recovered, some of which derive from different stages of bead production. The excavations also revealed a group of painting and stationery items (watercolour tubes, drawing pins, etc.) that had likely been used by the DIAFE expeditions' members in the 1930s. These modern items shed light on the history of explorations in the area. The rock art images, which are currently seriously weathered, run along the walls inside the two caves. They can be dated to both the Gilf B (6600-4400 cal. BC) and Gilf C phases (4400-3500 cal. BC). Digital images of the rock art images were enhanced using *D-Stretch* software which allowed better characterisation of the images, and an in-depth understanding of the stratigraphic relations that link the images, especially those belonging to different styles.

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