
Augmenting current paradigms: Nilotic rock art reconsidered

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Abstract

The Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project recently discovered an impressive concentration of petroglyphs in a previously unexplored wadi in the desert east of Aswan (south Egypt). A unique panel shows figures and quadrupeds painted in different shades of red and a few instances in white, which according to current understanding, belong to a ‘cattle tradition’ generally attributed to the Middle Nubian period (c. 2500-1500 BC). However, carved over the paintings are several engraved images, for which the best parallels are known from the Egyptian Eastern Desert and usually attributed to the Naqada period (c. 3800-3300 BC).

This quite problematic panel raises the questions of the ‘who’ and the ‘when’. Although a classic set of inquiries in rock art studies, these questions have never been properly addressed regarding Egypto-Nubian rock art. Current scholarship rarely considers the large chronological and cultural spectrum of Nilotic rock art, and published analyses tend to bind these productions to the dominant cultural assemblage attested either in Egypt or in Nubia. Because of this approach, only panels with motifs that reproduce images and themes found on Egyptian Predynastic/Early Dynastic (c. 4500-2600 BC) material culture, and to a lesser extent on the material culture of the Middle Nubian phase, have been thoroughly considered. Part of the available data then remains unaddressed.

However, for millennia the deserts surrounding the Nile Valley were crossed by highly mobile groups. It appears that at least some specific depictions found in desert contexts, usually attributed to the Naqada period, may very well be the expression of those mobile people and could even be later in date than the various dating criteria from the Nile Valley might suggest. This paper aims to augment current paradigms in the study of figurative rock art in Egyptology and Nubiology and to provide new avenues for investigations.

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