

Susan Searight-Martinet

Destruction of rock art sites – the case of Morocco

Key words: Morocco, rock art, damage, destruction

Abstract:

This paper lists the dangers faced by rock art sites in Morocco. The various forms of damage and destruction are indicated and examples quoted. It is underlined that while climate conditions play a large part in the destruction of engravings, anthropic action is also very dangerous. Man-made degradation and destruction comes mainly from ignorance, indifference or theft. The solution must lie, partially at least, in raising awareness among the local populations of the value of this heritage.

Résumé:

Cet article décrit les dangers qui confrontent les sites de gravures rupestres au Maroc. Les différentes formes de dégradation et de destruction sont indiquées et des exemples marocains donnés. Il est souligné que si les conditions climatiques jouent un rôle important dans la destruction des gravures, l'action anthropique est également très dangereuse. La dégradation et la destruction par l'homme vient en grande partie de l'ignorance, de l'indifférence ou du désir de l'argent. La solution reste, au moins en partie, dans la sensibilisation des populations locales de la valeur de ce patrimoine.

Zusammenfassung:

Dieser Bericht befasst sich mit den Gefahren, denen Felsbild-Fundstellen in Marokko ausgesetzt sind. Die verschiedenen Arten von Beschädigungen und Zerstörungen werden beschrieben; Beispiele werden genannt. Die klimatischen Bedingungen spielen zwar eine große Rolle bei der Zerstörung der Gravuren, menschliche Tätigkeit ist aber ebenso gefährlich. Die von Menschen verursachten Beeinträchtigungen sind hauptsächlich auf Unkenntnis, Gleichgültigkeit und Diebstahl zurückzuführen. Eine Abhilfe müsste – zumindest teilweise – darin liegen, der lokalen Bevölkerung den Wert dieses Kulturerbes nahezubringen.

Introduction

Archaeological sites throughout the world are being destroyed all the time, generally by development projects. Fortunately, the discovery of a site of archaeological interest is noted fairly quickly, and in countries with the necessary legislation archaeologists can step in, excavate and get the most out of the ground before the evidence of past activities is lost for ever.

Unlike normal archaeological sites, rock art sites are particularly vulnerable, since while they are rarely destroyed by development works, they attract little public attention and are open to almost silent destruction and damage. In addition, their scattered situation often means that the harm is done long before it is noticed. This article will consider the case of Morocco in particular (Fig.1), though similar dangers exist in other countries. Only recently, a rock art site in Tasmania was wantonly damaged and the Australian petroglyph site of Dampier is threatened by the government itself.

Engravings and paintings

The rock art of Morocco is largely composed of engravings. Paintings do exist – and more and more are being discovered – but they are heavily outnumbered by sites with engravings.

These sites are in the open, generally on sandstone ridges or low outcrops, and often of relatively easy access. One series of engravings is located in an underground cave system, but this is quite the exception. Paintings are found on the walls of rock-shelters, or on rock faces slightly protected by an overhang. So far, on only two occasions have the images been painted in caves (apart from the underground system mentioned above). Nothing comparable to the deep caves of Europe containing Palaeolithic paintings has yet been found in Morocco.

Factors of damage or destruction

These can be natural or anthropic. In the former category, the weather plays the most important role, followed by geological events such as earthquakes, tectonic movements and floods. Animals can also cause degradation by continuous rubbing against engraved or painted surfaces; birds can drop guano.

However, as far as Morocco is concerned, man is responsible for much of the destruction, either through ignorance of the value of rock art as a national heritage, though cupidity (market value of the engraving) or through indifference in the pursuit of other aims.

Natural damage or destruction

- Earthquakes

It is unlikely that earthquakes (which do occur in Morocco) are responsible for any damage to the engravings or paintings. However, a tectonic movement seems to have been the reason for the present separation of the head of an anthropomorph from its body at the High Atlas site of Oukaïmeden, clearly occurring after the engraving was made and not due to human interference. A

sandstone slab containing an engraving of a quadruped at Ait Ouazik is also in two pieces, probably for the same reason (Fig. 2).

- *Floods*

At the site of Foug Chenna (west of O. Draa), some time between 1992 and 1997 (probably in 1994/95, when rainfall recorded in the nearby town of Ouarzazate increased by almost 60%), heavy storms brought raging torrents of water down the valley where the engravings were situated. Big boulders were displaced, engraved blocks were overturned and carried far from their original location, others were hidden under a mass of alluvia and smaller stones. It is probable that several engravings were completely destroyed.

- *Animal rubbing and guano*

Rock paintings are more likely to suffer from constant animal rubbing than engravings. Bird droppings (notably from pigeons or birds of prey), from overhead nests or niches, can have very bad effects on paintings. However, they have also been accused of causing damage to the engravings at the site of Hasbaia in the Algerian Atlas. Nothing of this nature has been recorded for Morocco.

- *Wind, rain and temperature change*

Sand-loaded wind, rain, and, in particular sharp changes of temperature, are by far the most damaging agents for engravings and paintings. Erosion caused by severe climatic changes can be seen in a number of engravings in the High Atlas rock art sites of Oukaimeden and the Yagour plateau lying at an altitude of some 2,500m (Figs. 3 and 4). Sites in the High Atlas can lie under snow for several weeks in the year, while summer temperatures can reach over 35°. But more serious than these seasonal contrasts is the sharp difference between day and night temperatures that causes the most damage.

In the case of paintings in particular, salts accumulated under the surface of the rock can, by a chemical process, break up the rock support, causing flaking and the eventual disappearance of the painted surface. Or they can bring about the disintegration of the cement binding the quartz grains in the sandstone. The resulting damage to the painted image is the same. The development of micro-organisms, such as fungi or lichens, can also have a disastrous effect on rock paintings – as is only too well known in many French painted caves. In fact, studies have shown that the bacteria found at Lascaux are also present in the rock-shelters of the Tassili n'Ajjer in Algeria (Hachid 1998: 188).

Anthropic damage or destruction

- *Ignorance or indifference*

It is hard sometimes to tell the difference between ignorance and sheer

indifference. In any case, both are responsible for much of the man-made destruction of rock engravings in Morocco. Roads, buildings and quarries are the chief offenders.

Countless engraved slabs have been destroyed – and still are being destroyed – to make way for roads or for building houses or animal pens. At Oukamaiden, inscriptions in the old Libyan protohistoric alphabet were sacrificed to make a new road; an anthropomorphic figure was ruthlessly exterminated to make way for a villa; many engravings were noted by Malhomme as destroyed or missing when he was establishing his corpus of engravings (Malhomme 1959).

The constant passage of heavy lorries close to a rock engraving site can set up vibrations that seriously damage engravings by causing cracks and displacement. This does not seem to be the case in Morocco, but has been recorded in the Algerian Atlas, the Libyan Messak and the Western Sahara.

At the prolific rock art site of Azibs n'Ikkis on the Yagour plateau (High Atlas), it was noticed an engraved rock had been incorporated into a house (Fig. 5). Remonstrations only produced from the builder/owner the remark that the stones were his and he could do what he liked with them. Talk of 'informing the authorities' only produced a scornful laugh. A unique frieze of elephants at Oukaimeden is periodically hidden by the construction of a sheepshelter (Fig. 6).

A whole site (probably not very large) near Tata, south Morocco, had been almost completely quarried out of existence by the time it was 'discovered' (Simoneau 1969: 99). The same can be said for a site near the town of Layoune, in what was formerly the Spanish Sahara: it was noted that the site had become (in 1946) a public refuse area and had been entirely destroyed (Almagro Basch 1946).

It was probably ignorance that caused hunters and shepherds sheltering in the cave of Kef el Baroud, near the capital city of Rabat, to light fires and thus obliterate the red-ochre paintings on the ceiling. Always difficult to see, they are now quite invisible.

- *Cupidity*

This category covers theft, whether for sale to a third person or for home keeping. It is one of the biggest dangers that Moroccan rock art sites now have to face.

Among the examples that can be quoted is that of an engraved slab, photographed in place in Msissi (south-east Morocco) in 1985 and seen on sale in a small road-side shop in 1993. The price asked was 1,000 DH (about 100 Euro). In fact, almost nothing remains of the three rock art sites round Msissi.

Most engravings extracted from their site leave the country. Nothing further has been heard or seen of the small engraved feline charmingly lifting up its paw on a slab conveniently placed beside the road at Ait Ouazik (east of O. Draa). But just recently another small slab with an engraved Tazina-style antelope (Fig. 7), discovered in a booth in Casablanca's central market, was bought for 100 dirhams from the owner who was selling his stock and retiring.... The slab is now on view in the purchaser's garden.

The engraving-rich area of Ikhf n'Ouaroun (east of O. Draa) has also seen much looting, combined with a rapid expansion of the local population and consequent need for increased quantities of good building stone. Inspection of carefully heaped-up piles of sandstone slabs, waiting for transport to the nearby villages, revealed at least one engraved (Fig. 8). But not all would-be thefts of engravings were successful (figs.9 and 10).

Another southern Moroccan site (Oum Aleg, well-frequented) lost a sheep between 1987 and 1994. A photograph published in 1969, entitled 'Shepherds with small livestock', showed two men with three sheep/goats (Simoneau 1969: photo 10). Sheep are rare on Moroccan sites and this must have attracted someone's interest, because by 1994 only one man and one sheep remained.

Aborted thefts (without damage) are probably responsible for the change in orientation between visits of two engravings on different sites. In one case, a 1m² slab with an engraved giraffe had been moved at right angles (at Oum el Aleg again); in the other, an anthropomorph (at Aougdal n'Ouagouns, Yagour plateau) had suffered the same fate. In both cases, the slabs were probably too heavy to be transported. More recently, the local press reported in December 2005 that an attempt had had been made to split – and presumably remove – an engraved rock at the remote mountain site of Amzlou, near Tafraout.

- *Deliberate degradation*

Graffiti occur on some sites, generally those close to villages. In some cases – the Algerian Atlas is a good example – this has taken the form of tagging with paint. The use of paint has been noted only once, where the name of a town has been painted close to (but not hiding) an engraving in Oukaimeden (Fig. 11).

But generally graffiti take the form of standard inscriptions in Arabic ('God is great', 'In the name of God'), or crude carvings of the type 'So-and-so was here in 19-something-or-other', (in Arabic or western script). Occasionally other images are added to an existing engraved slab (Figs.12 and 13), but in the experience of this author it is rare that the additions obliterate all the ancient images. This is not always the case in rock art sites elsewhere, which have

often been completely disfigured by clumsy attempts to outline an old painting or engraving, or simply do a new drawing on top.

The great disk of Talat n'lisk on the Yagour plateau, photographed in perfect condition in the 1970s, is now pitted with countless small holes: it had obviously been considered a suitable target for rifle-shooters (Fig. 14).

Deliberate damage was surely not the aim of the team of foreign archaeologists who some years ago made casts of a number of engravings at Ait Ouazik (SE Morocco). But the result was catastrophic: the chosen images are now disfigured by the remains of the white substance used, pieces of the engravings have flaked off and any attempt to study the patination, micro-erosion or other details of the originals is out of the question.

- *Deliberate destruction*

This has undoubtedly occurred at the site of Azibs n'Ikkis in the High Atlas where until at least the spring of 1977, a unique engraving contained an inscription in the old Libyan alphabet perfectly set within an anthropomorph (Fig. 15) Some years later, this inscription had been carefully but almost completely destroyed, leaving the human representation more or less intact (Fig. 16). Was some zealous inhabitant or passer-by anxious to eradicate all pre-Islamic traces? When photographed in 1997, the anthropomorph itself had been attacked and the lower part of the body removed. Today, little remains of the original engraving.

Cattle images making up the whole of a small site near Tafraout were deliberately destroyed by the local people 'to avoid lots of people coming to look at them', according to a woman questioned at a nearby house.

- *Searching for treasure*

An unusual reason for the partial destruction of a bovid overlooking a small watercourse at Oukaïmeden was said to be the search for treasure. Apparently, for many Moroccan treasure-hunters, rock engravings indicate the whereabouts of their hoped-for riches. This vandalism is all the more regrettable as the much-frequented village of Oukaïmeden has a full-time resident rock art guardian.

Conclusion

The object of this article is not simply to add another voice to the cries of alarm at the loss of engravings and paintings in Morocco. Damage and destruction occurs throughout the world. But by drawing up a short list of the dangers run by Moroccan rock art sites, it is hoped that some at least of the damage – theft, for instance – could be reduced if the Western demand decreased. Cases of legal action against museums or private collectors in possession of illegally-exported antiquities are reported regularly in the press.

In Morocco, steps are being taken to increase the penalties for illicit dealing in antiquities. But, of course, the local populations must be encouraged to see these images as part of their identity and an important component of their past, and thus worthy of preservation, as well as an income-generating tourist attraction.

This last line of action is the one favoured by the Moroccan national centre for the rock art heritage (*Centre Marocain du Patrimoine Rupestre*) situated in Marrakech. Several events have been organised in this sense, including an exhibition of photographs and casts of engravings held in spring 2005 in Marrakech and open to the public.

Guardians have been established in some places. But many rock art sites are far from any habitation and round-the-clock guarding is out of the question. And in any event, raising the awareness of the general public, especially the young, is essential if this national heritage is to be preserved. Secrecy over the situation of sites is thought to provide no protection.

The protection and management of rock art sites is indeed difficult. For Morocco, there are additional difficulties in that the country is open and welcoming to tourists. Unlike Algeria and Libya, for instance, visitors are free to come and go as they like, without the obligation to have an official guide or be accompanied by an agent from some state department or another. With the aim of receiving 10 million tourists in 2010, Morocco runs an increasing danger of attracting unwelcome visitors to its rock art sites. Solutions to harmful human action are urgent.

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Captions:

- Fig. 1: Map of Morocco with general situation of Moroccan sites mentioned – 1 Kef el Baroud, 2 Koudiat el Moussiera, 3 Oukaïmeden and Yagour plateau, 4 Jbel Rat, 5 Msissi and Ait Ouazik, 6 Fom Chenna, 7 Ikhf n'Ouaroun, 8 Amzlou, 9 Oum Aleg

Fig. 2: Disconnected quadruped (Ait Ouazik)

Fig. 3 and 4:

Severe erosion in the High Atlas

Fig. 5: Engraved rock (bottom left) incorporated into house construction (Yagour plateau)

Fig. 6: Elephant frieze hidden by sheep-shelter (Oukaïmeden)

Fig. 7: Antelope engraving bought in the Central Market, Casablanca

Fig. 8: Sandstone slabs, some engraved, waiting for transport (Ikhf n'Ouaroun)

Fig. 9 and 10:

Unsuccessful removal (Ikhf n'Ouaroun)

Fig. 11: Name of town (Tahar Souk) painted close to engravings (Oukaïmeden)

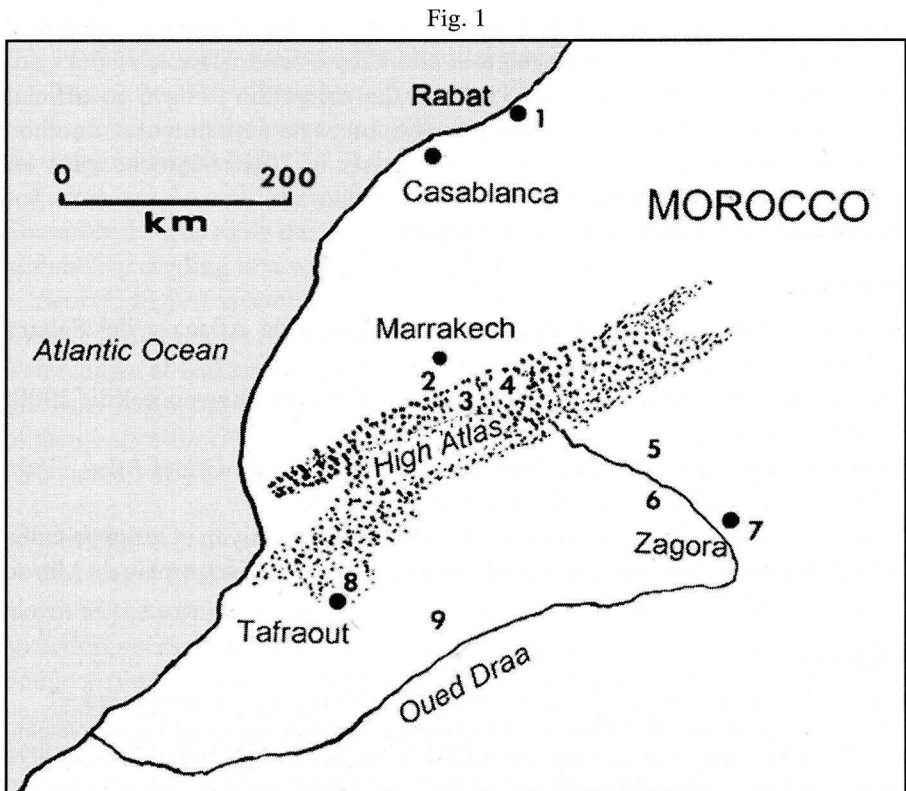
Fig. 12: Recent graffiti (Koudiat el Moussiera, near Marrakech)

Fig. 13: Recent graffiti in High Atlas (Tizi n'Tirlist, Jbel Rat)

Fig. 14: Engraving in High Atlas used as a rifle target (Talat n'Iisk)

Fig. 15: Anthropomorph with inscription, before vandalism (Akib n'Ikkis, High Atlas)

Fig. 16: The same, after first damage



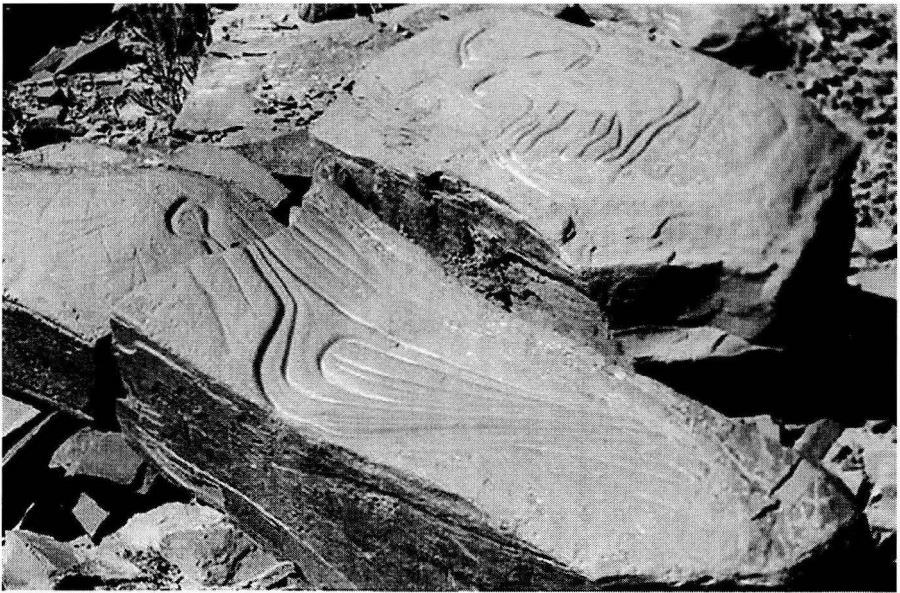


Fig. 2

Fig. 3





Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

Fig. 7

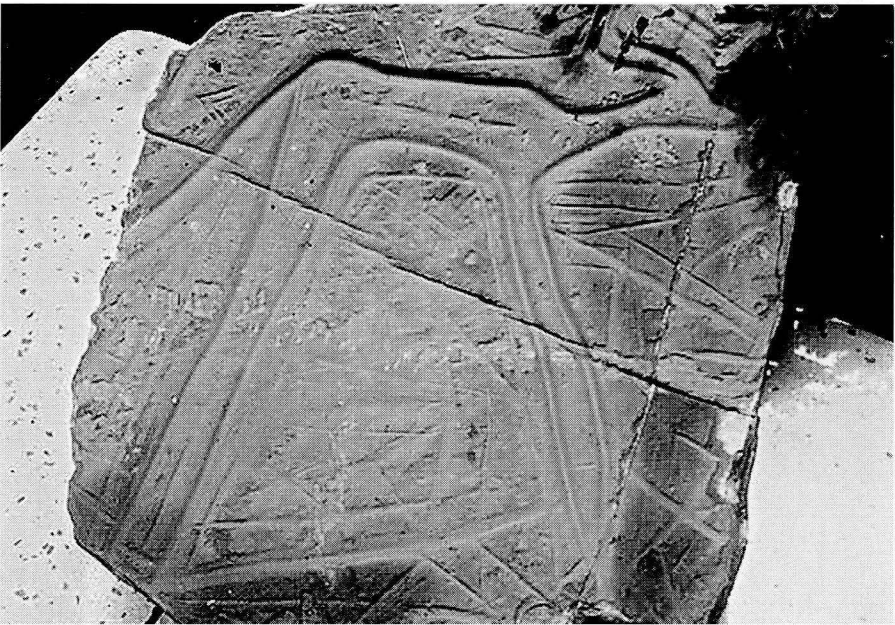




Fig. 8

Fig. 9



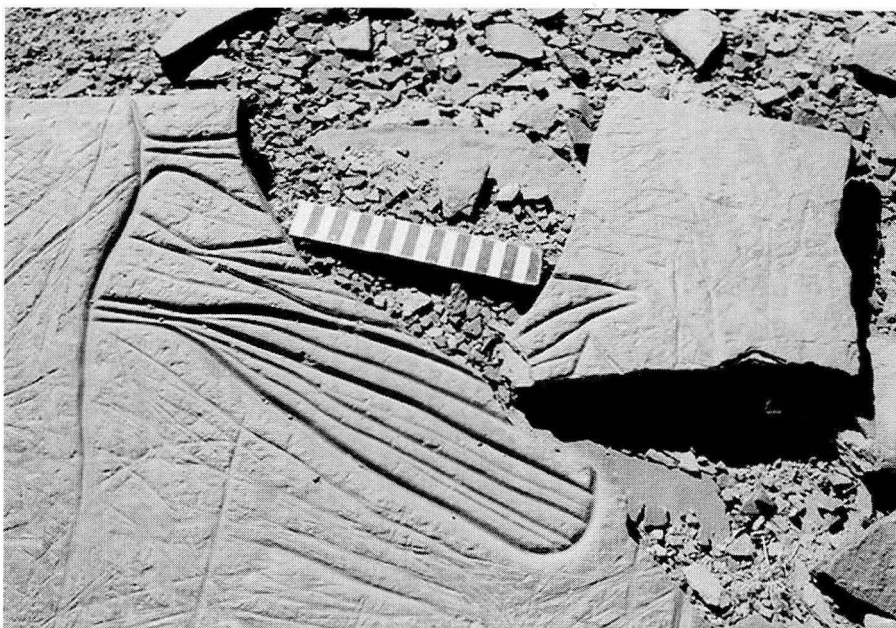


Fig. 10

Fig. 11

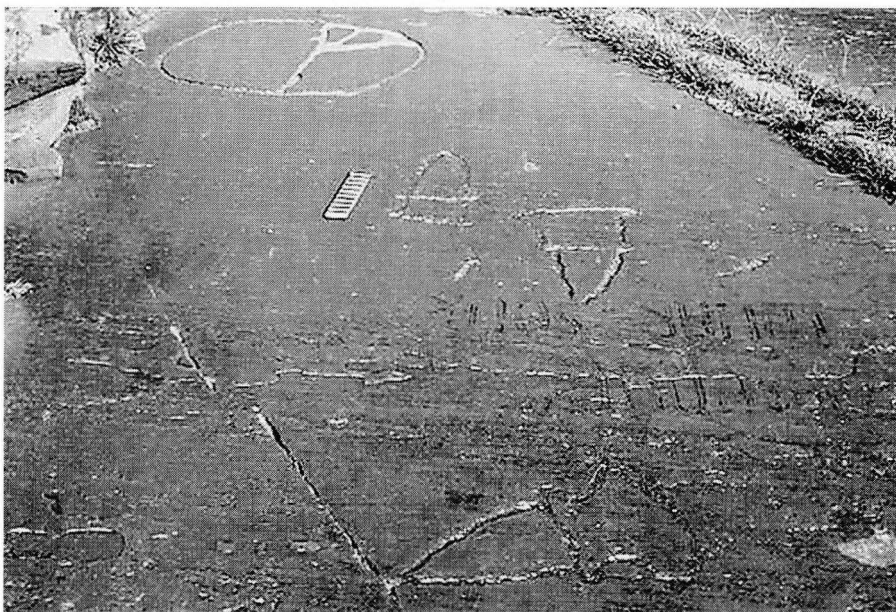




Fig. 12

Fig. 13





Fig. 14

Fig. 15





Fig. 16