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Susan Searight-Martinet

Rock engravings from Asli Bou Kerch, Smara, Western Sahara

Keywords: Western Sahara, Smara, rock engravings, International Workshop on conservation

Abstract:

This article describes 59 rock engravings studied at the site of Asli Bou Kerch IV, a few kilometres west of the Western Saharan town of Smara. These engravings are not among those figuring in a recent publication on the six sites identified on the low ridges running parallel to the Asli Bou Kerch river. Their study confirms the heterogeneity of this series of sites. The October 2010 International Workshop on the Conservation of African Rock Art held in Smara is briefly mentioned.

Résumé:

Cet article décrit les 59 gravures rupestres étudiées sur le site de Asli Bou Kerch IV, situé à quelques kilomètres à l'ouest de la ville de Smara au Sahara Occidental. Ces gravures ne figurent pas dans une publication récente sur les six sites identifiés le long de l'Oued Asli Bou Kerch. Leur étude confirme la hétérogénéité de cette série de sites. La reunion internationale pour la Conservation de l'Art Rupestre Africain, qui a eu lieu à Smara en octobre 2010, est brièvement évoquée.

Zusammenfassung:

Dieser Aufsatz beschreibt 59 Felsgravuren, die bei der Fundstätte Asli Bou Kerch IV – wenige Kilometer westlich der Stadt Smara (Westsahara) – untersucht wurden. Diese Felsbilder gehören nicht zu jenen, die bereits in einer jüngeren Publikation über sechs Fundstellen erwähnt werden, die auf niedrigen Höhenzügen parallel zum Flussbett des Asli Bou Kerch gelegen sind. Außerdem wird kurz auf den "International Workshop on the Conservation of African Rock Art" eingegangen, der Oktober 2010 in Smara stattfand.

General background

During the period when the territory known as the Western Sahara (Fig. 1) was an official Spanish possession (from 1934-1976), considerable archaeological research was undertaken by Spanish archaeologists. In many cases this included the study of rock art, mainly in the northern zone, the Saguiet el Hamra.

The well-known Spanish archaeologists Almagro Basch (1944, 1946, 1971a, 1971b) and Martínez Santa-Olalla (1941a, 1941b, 1944) produced much in-

formation on the subject, as did researchers such as Morales Agacino (1942), Mateu (1945/46), Pellicer and Acosta (1972), Balbín Behrmann (1975), and the Santander Prehistoric Museum team of Cabrillo and Jesus García (1975). Foreign researchers were not absent from the area, notably Milburn (1972) and Nowak (1974/75), again in 1977 and Nowak et al (1975).

Known rock art sites to date

A total of 18 sites for this region was catalogued for the Moroccan Ministry of Culture by Simoneau in 1977 (1), 10 sites not in the catalogue can be included (2) to which should be added two new sites (Rodrigue 2010 (3), one as yet unpublished (4).

It is perhaps the moment here to say that so much looting and destruction, sometimes total demolition, has taken place in this region that it is hard to evaluate the number of sites and engravings it once contained, without taking into consideration natural degradation. For instance, Almagro Basch (1944, 1946, 1971a) noted that the Laayoune site (Safia de El Aiun) had been completely destroyed when he went there in 1946 and that the site of Cerro de El Aslein Bukerch (Udei Asli bou Querch), considered by him (in 1946) to be the "best site" was entirely destroyed from 1935 onwards by visitors (Almagro Basch, 1944). Writing of the site of Asli Gardega, Balbín Behrmann (1975) noted much destruction (at only 10 km from Smara, this is not surprising). Nowak (1974/75) and Nowak et al (1975), saw numerous engraved slabs in different military messes in Smara, the Santander Museum holds a number of engraved slate slabs, most probably from its mission in 1975, as do numerous other Spanish museums.

The densest group of sites is centred on Smara, in the middle reaches of the Saguiet el Hamra river, others stretch down to and around Amgala, four are close to the more northerly town of Hawza, others are more scattered. Tifariti (Soleilhavoup, 1997) and Uad Ymal (Nowak, 1974/75) are sites with paintings, and Pozo de El Farsia is also said to have a few paintings (Almagro Basch, 1946). (See Searight, 2004 p 80, for approximate position of these sites.)

Words of warning

The first is of lesser importance, and concerns the spelling of the names of the sites, as given in notes 1 and 2. Understandably, each researcher rendered the site name phonetically, in his own language, as his informant indicated. This original spelling has been kept here (with occasional alternative spelling) although requiring a certain amount of linguistic gymnastics on the part of the reader.

The second word of warning is more serious. While many researchers have published reports on the area, not all knew exactly where they were. Many judged "their" site to be totally new, whereas in fact part at least had already been published – a fact ignored or simply unknown (see Searight, 2004, pp 225-227, for a discussion on the problem of duplicated sites).

Doubt also floats over another series of sites, still apparently quite unknown, the contents of which are equally curious, corresponding in some cases to subjects unknown elsewhere. But as only the text, without illustrations, is available it is difficult to form a valid opinion.

The site of Asli Bou Kerch IV

The handsome, recently published *Gravures rupestres de la Province d'Es-Semara* (Al-Khatib et al, 2008) (referred to hereafter as *GRPS*) is a welcomed addition to the rather rare and scattered documentation on the rock art of the Western Sahara. Six of the eight sites studied lie to the west of Smara (Asli Bou Kerch I-VI), with two others (Oued Tazouwa (Oued Tasua) and Oued Miran) to the south-east. The authors noted that the engravings west of Smara formed six clearly separated groups on the low sandstone outcrops extending some 50 kms more or less parallel to the river of Asli Bou Kerch. Going from south to north, they called their sites Asli Bou Kerch I, II, III, IV, V and VI, in preference to the original names used by the earlier researchers (5).

It is this nomenclature that is retained in this article.

The authors state (*GRPS*, p 20) that every engraved image was recorded and photographed in the field and its exact position noted by GPS, to be later also reproduced as drawings. They refer to a "corpus", which implies a complete coverage of the eight sites.

The present article concerns a short visit to the site of Asli Bou Kerch IV in October 2010. Some 50 engraved rocks were photographed, starting from the newly opened Conservation Centre beside the Laayoune-Smara road, about 20 km from Smara (Fig. 2), containing 59 images. Four of these engravings figure in the recent corpus of Smara engravings (*GRPS*, Açli Bou Kerch IV, Plates 1,6,8,9) (6).

The engravings are scattered on loose blocks and fixed slabs on the low-lying sandstone ridge that makes up the site. The majority of the images are pecked, some well (eg Fig. 3), others more crudely (Fig. 4). Some with polished lines (but not all) are definitely of the pure Tazina style, well-known elsewhere. However, it can be pointed out here that these elegant polished engravings are, to our modern eyes, far more aesthetic than the rougher pecked images and thus had more theft appeal.

The subjects represented in these 59 engravings are indicated in the table below:

Subject	N°	Technique	Patina
Unidentified animal	17	4 polished, 13 pecked	7 as rock support, 1 darker, 9 lighter
Gazelle, antelope	7	5 polished, 2 pecked	4 as rock support, 2 darker, 1 lighter
Bovid	4	3 polished, 1 pecked	3 as rock support, 1 lighter
Ostrich	8	4 polished; 3 pol.+peck;1 pecked	7 as rock support; 1 darker
Rhinoceros	3	All pecked	All lighter than rock support
Barbary sheep	3	All pecked	All lighter than rock support
Sign	8	All pecked	All lighter than rock support
Enigmatic	9	2 polished, 7 pecked	2 as rock support, 7 lighter
TOTAL	59	18 polished., 38 pecked., 3 polished+pecked	23 as rock support, 4 darker, 32 lighter

Table 1-Subjects engraved, technique used and colour of patina compared to rock support

Comments on the engravings

The high number of unidentifiable animals (Figs. 4-9) is sometimes due to damage to the support or weathering, but more often to doubt about the artist's intentions. Some may be bovids (Figs. 4,7,8), two may be giraffes (Fig. 5), antelopes are perhaps featured in Figs. 6 and 9, the top animal in Fig. 8 could be a dog.

In the gazelle/antelope category (Figs.10-15), one large (about 60 cm), well executed engraving, with firm, flowing polished lines, is an oryx (Fig.10), three are gazelles (Figs.11-13), Fig. 15 may show an oryx, the exact species of the two others is not clear.

The bovids (Figs. 9,16,17,18) have horns that are either forward-pointing or twisted. Two particularly fine large (both around 60 cm long), polished specimens (Figs.16,17) are so similar in execution to the oryx of Fig.10 that it is hard not to see them as part of the same group.

The ostriches are twice shown as a group of three (Figs. 20,21) conforming to their habit of moving as a flock. Fig. 19 shows a particularly elegant bird, unfortunately broken, in true Tazina style. Fig. 22 is only just recognisable as an ostrich.

One rhinoceros (Fig.23) is shown with a small one just in front, again conforming to the known habit of the female rhinoceros of keeping her offspring with her. Fig.24 is more roughly engraved.

Two engravings are certainly Barbary sheep (Figs.3,25) the upward and outward curving of the horns being unmistakable. The third animal (Fig.26), classified here as a Barbary sheep, may in fact be an ibex.

One sign is a small cross (Fig.27), three other signs (on two different rocks) are identical: a circle with an upward curving 'tail' (Figs.8,28), one is a zigzag (Fig.29).

Of the nine engravings defying interpretation, the two polished ones (Fig. 30) have the same patina as the rock support, the seven pecked ones are lighter.

Comments on the site of Asli Bou Kerch IV

The 59 engravings recorded in this article, added to the 65 published in *GRPS* (counting those reproduced again here), confirm the great variability of these Asli Bou Kerch sites. This variety is not surprising, in view of the distance covered by the six sites. Large, firm, well engraved, polished images such as those in Figs. 10,16,17 occurring at the beginning of the Asli Bou Kerch IV site, are followed by a series of pecked engravings in different styles, interspersed here and there with a small, genuine Tazina-style image. Subjects present on the other published Asli Bou Kerch sites, such as anthropomorphs, chariots, elephants, lions and *tifinar* inscriptions, are absent here. Interestingly, none of the six Asli Bou Kerch sites contain Libyco-Berber horsemen, probably due to a later, unsuitable climatic and vegetational environment.

Rock art sites in danger

The engravings described above were studied during a visit to the site of Asli Bou Kerch IV, as part of the activities of the international workshop on "Conservation of African Rock Art. Challenges of Theft and Vandalism" held in Smara from 19-21st October 2010. The workshop was organised by the Moroccan Ministry of Culture's Directorate of Cultural Heritage and TARA (Trust for African Rock Art) in partnership with two Moroccan associations. The workshop participants were present at the inauguration of the site centre of Asli Bou Kerch, designed to protect the site (Fig.2), and were able to visit briefly the nearby site of Asli Bou Kerch IV.

Over 50 participants from 19 countries attended the workshop and addressed the need to create national and international awareness of the threats to rock art in Africa and the challenges of conservation, and were called on to propose innovative and relevant conservation measures. The recent case of vandalism to painted shelters in the Acacus (Libya) was presented by a member of the Italian Libyan Archaeological Mission in the Acacus and Messak.

The meeting ended by emphasizing the universal value of rock art, its vulnerability and the need for communities to play a vital role in protecting it. A massive total of 19 recommendations were made by the participants, and it is to be hoped that some at least will be implemented.

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Comments

- (1) Lomo de Asli, Udei Asli Bou Querch, Smara, Oued Uein Seluan, Odoloa Amgala, Oued Miran, Hausa, Gart Tamar, Tuccat En Haila, Suiel, Foum Oued Ben Decca, Pozo Lemcaiteb, Chelja Mairat, El-Farsia, Sidi Mouloud, Ras Lemtareg, Laayoune, Oued Tasua
- (2) Asli Richies (opposite Loma de Asli), Asli Gardega (central part of Oued Asli), Uad Sfa, Gar Carfarsiat (60 km north of Tifariti), Fet-Seccuna (67 km W or SW of Mahbes), Cerro Noroeste de Amgala (NW of Amgala), Proa Sur de Amgala (near Amgala), Koudia Haratani, Tifariti (c 200 km S of Ras Lentareg), Uad Ymal (SE of Smara)
- (3) Sidi Ahmed Laarosi. This site is presumably not far from the site called Loma de Asli by Almagro Basch (1946:235) and indicated as being close to the shrine of Sidi Ahmed Laarousi
- (4) Laghchiwat (north of Smara), reference Moroccan newspaper *Libération*, 27 May 2010)
- (5) Those working on the earlier published material will find in the new *GRPS* that Lomo de Asli has become Asli Bou Kerch V, Udei Asli Bou Kerch is Asli Bou Kerch VI and (strangely) IV. The sites known in the old literature as Asli Richies and Asli Gardega are also incorporated in this new nomenclature.
- (6) Nowak et al. (1975) also published some engravings figuring in *GRPS*.

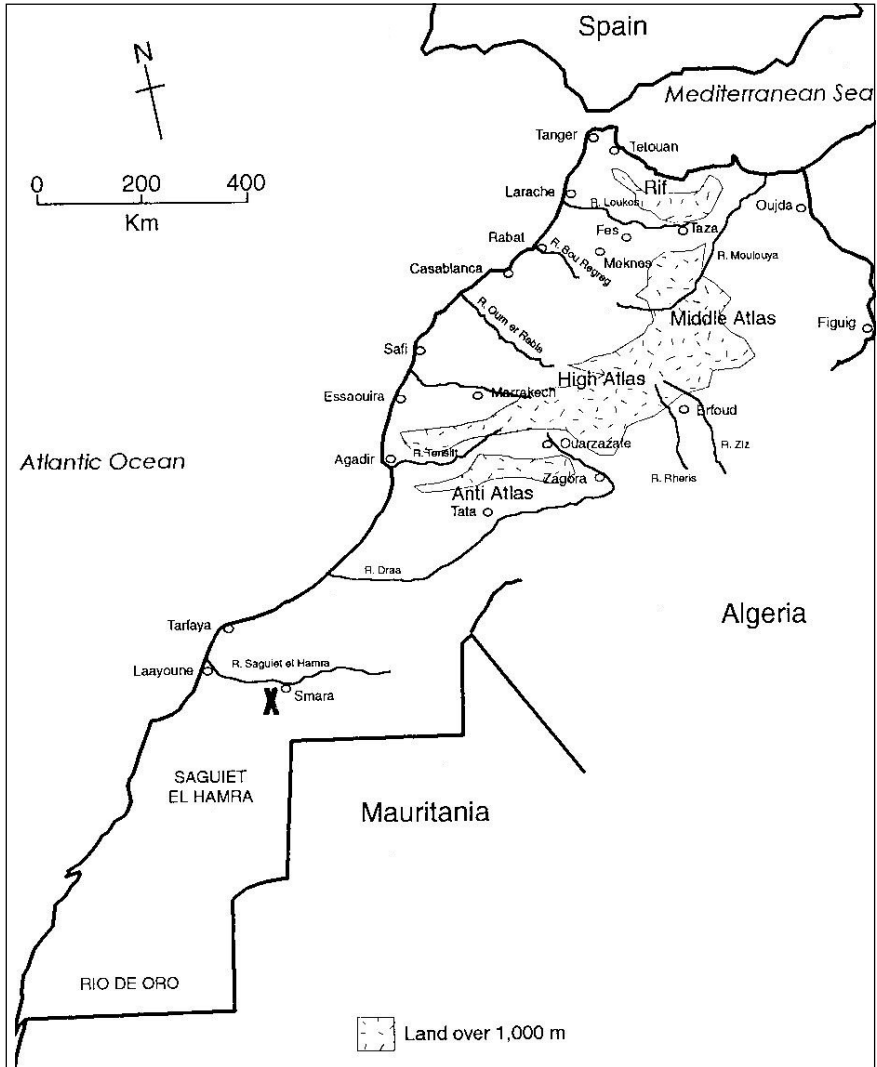


Fig. 1. Map of Morocco. The site of Asli Bou Kerch marked by X.



Fig. 2. Beginning of the site, looking north. Site Centre at top left

Fig. 3. Well-pecked Barbary sheep

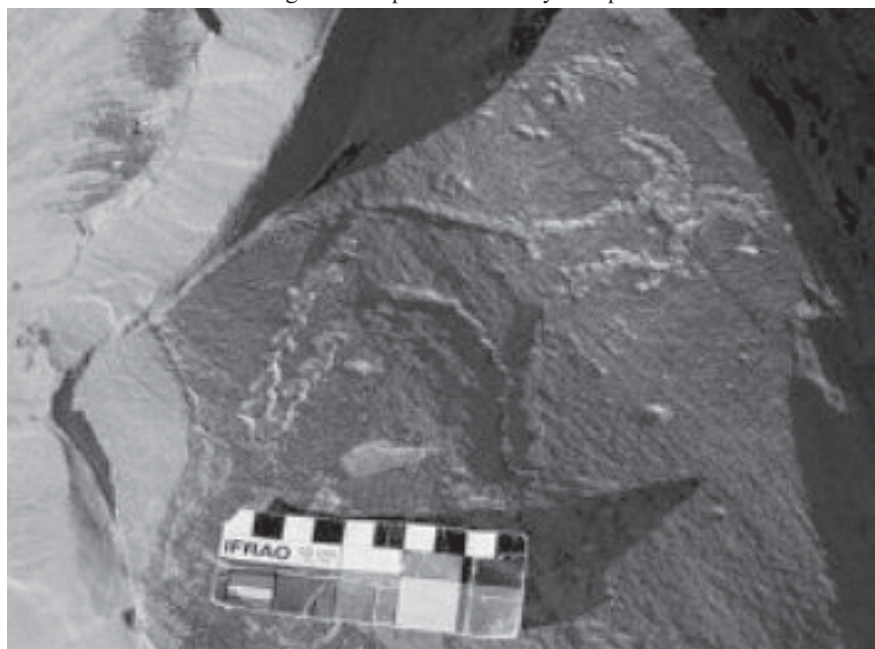
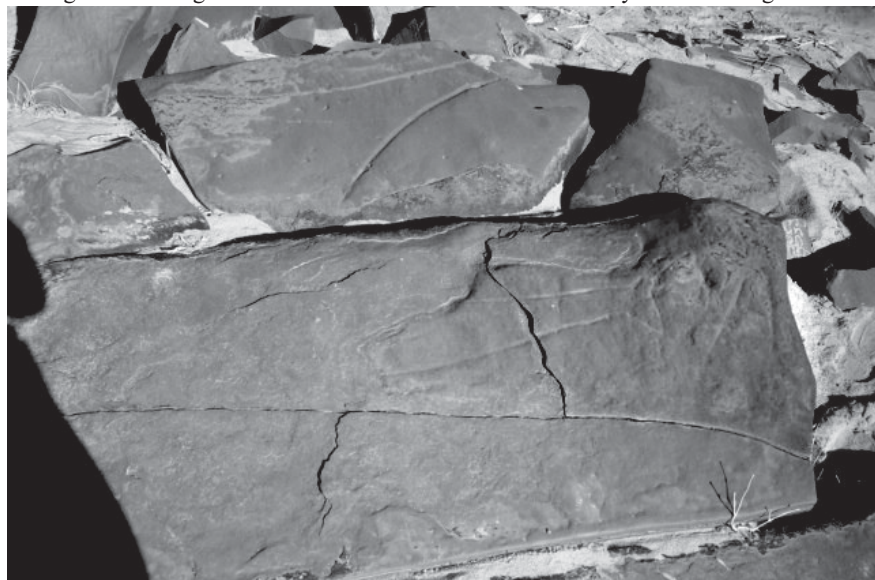




Fig. 4. Crudely pecked inidentifiable animal, possibly a bovid

Fig. 5. The long necks of these unidentified animals may be those of giraffes



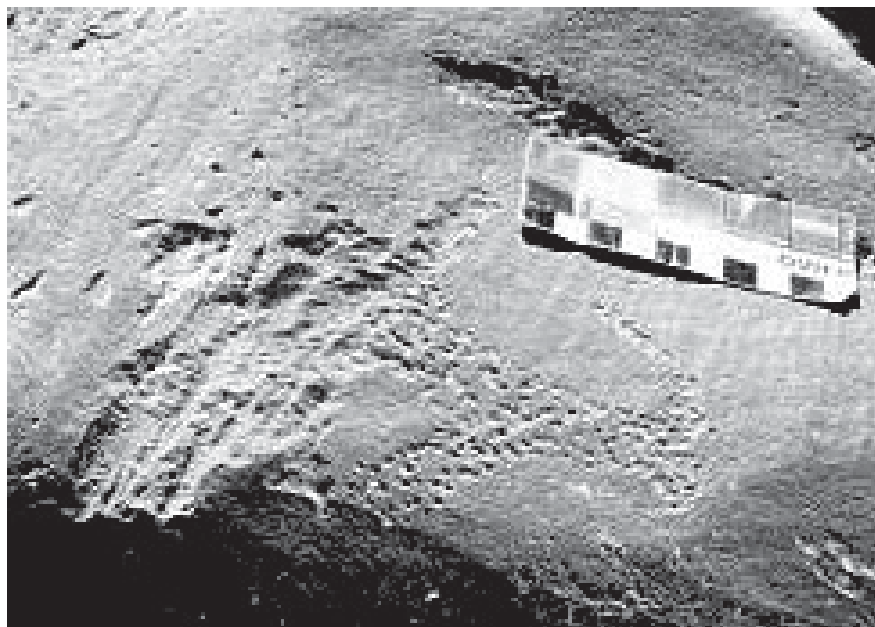


Fig. 6. Possible antelope

Fig. 7. The thin legs might be those of a bovid (or is the image that of a fish?)





Fig. 8. The pointed ears (?) of the top animal could be those of a dog, the large animal with circles on its body possibly a bovid. The circle with 'tail' occurs elsewhere.

Fig. 9. 2 of the 3 animals here are possibly antelopes; the one on the right is the only pecked bovid

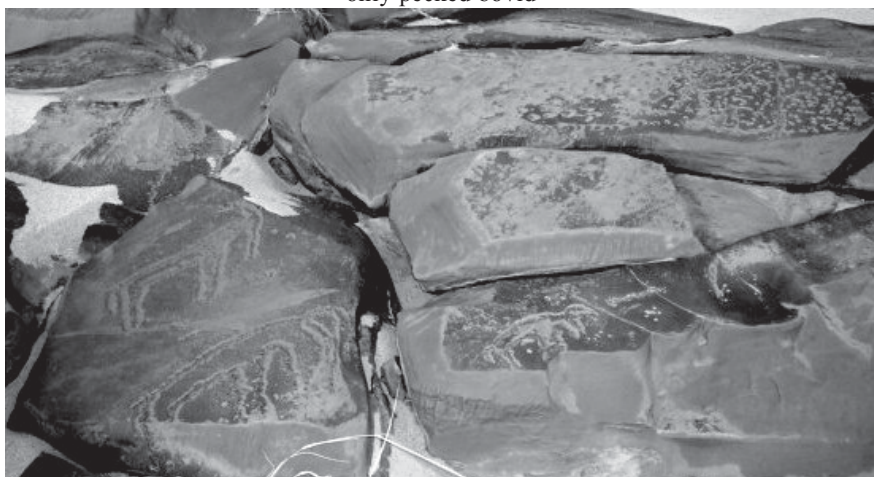
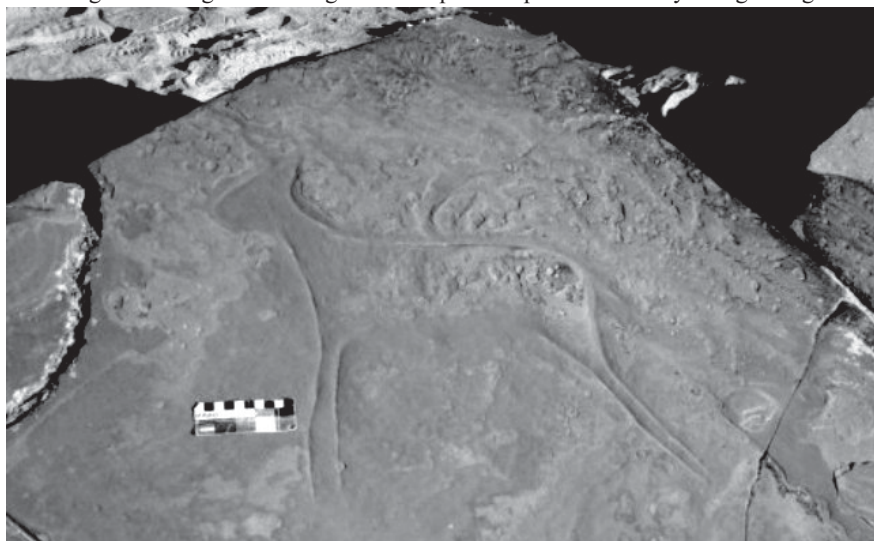




Fig.10. The back-sweeping horns of this antelope denote an oryx

Fig. 11. This gazelle is a good example of a pure Tazina-style engraving



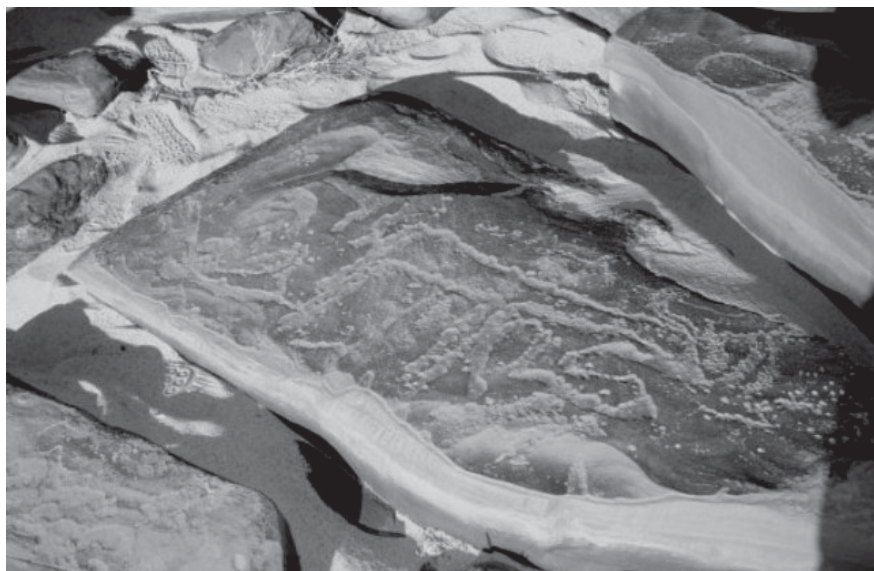


Fig. 12. The horn shapes of this pecked animal show it to be a gazelle

Fig. 13. A gazelle in Tazina style





Fig.14. An antelope on the left, an unidentified animal on the right

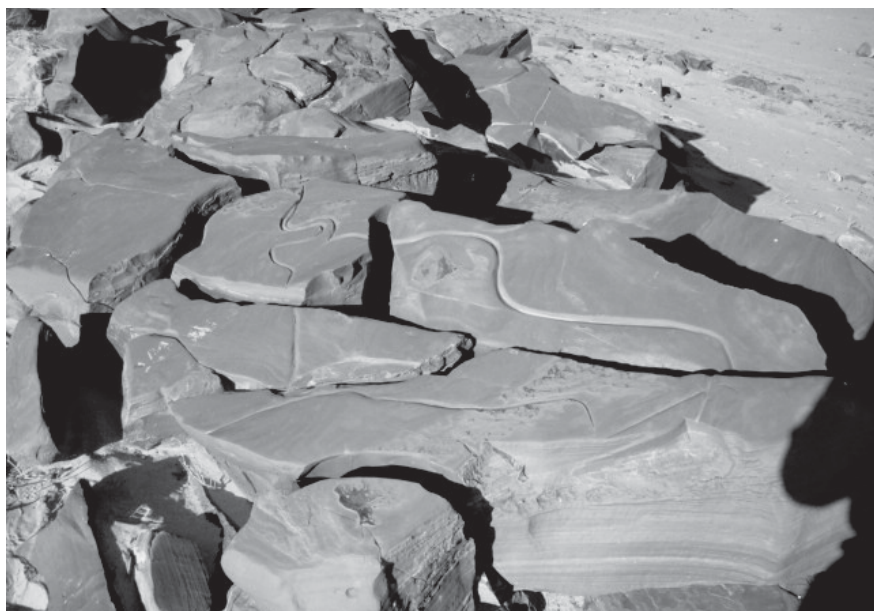
Fig.15. A pecked antelope (oryx?), with body intentionally speckled (?)





Fig.16. A beautiful, well worked, powerful bovid with bent horns

Fig. 17. A very fragmented slab (deliberately broken?) with another polished bovid, this time with twisted horns



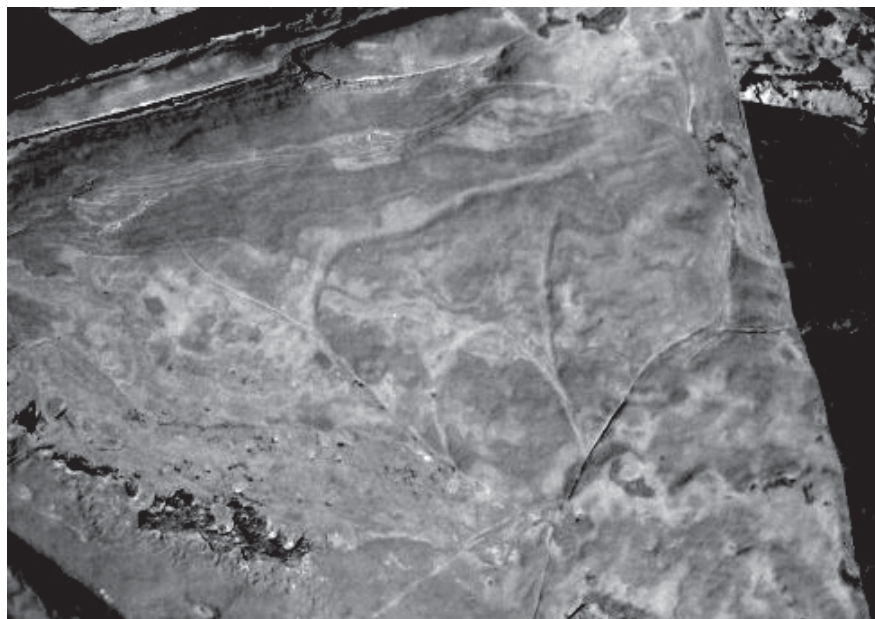


Fig. 18 A small polished bovid, with forward pointing horns

Fig. 19. A polished ostrich whose firm lines assimilate it to Figs. 10,16,17



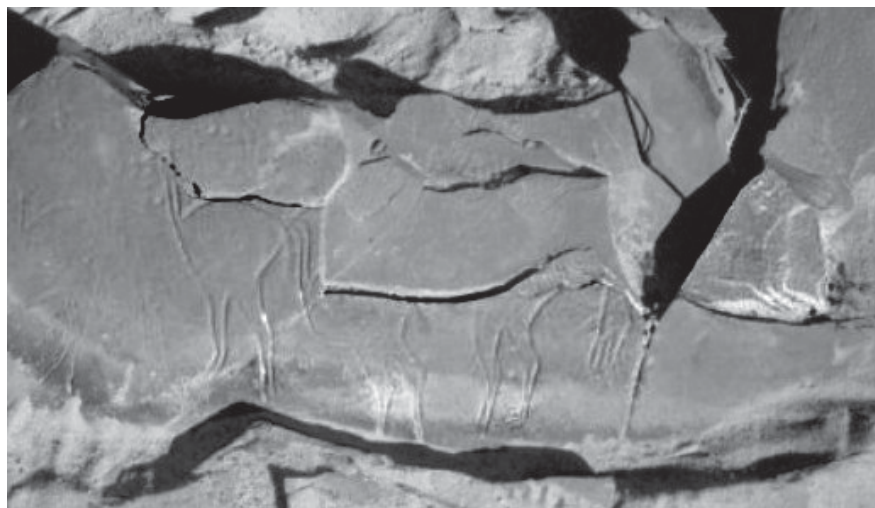


Fig. 20. A group of three ostriches

Fig. 21. A group of ostriches of mixed technique





Fig. 22. The only completely pecked ostrich

Fig. 23. Two easily recognised rhinoceros, the smaller one completely pecked



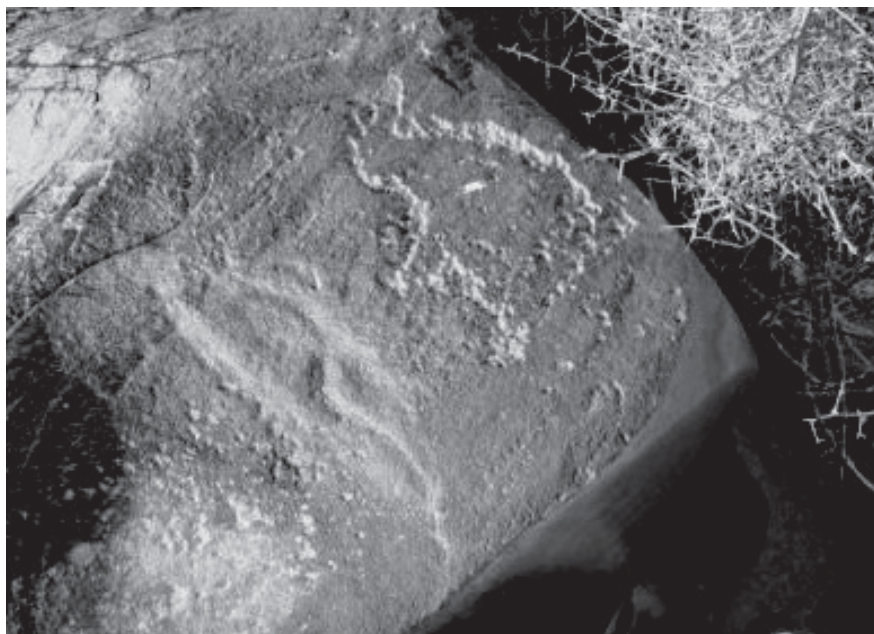


Fig.24. A probable rhinoceros

Fig.25. A Barbary sheep



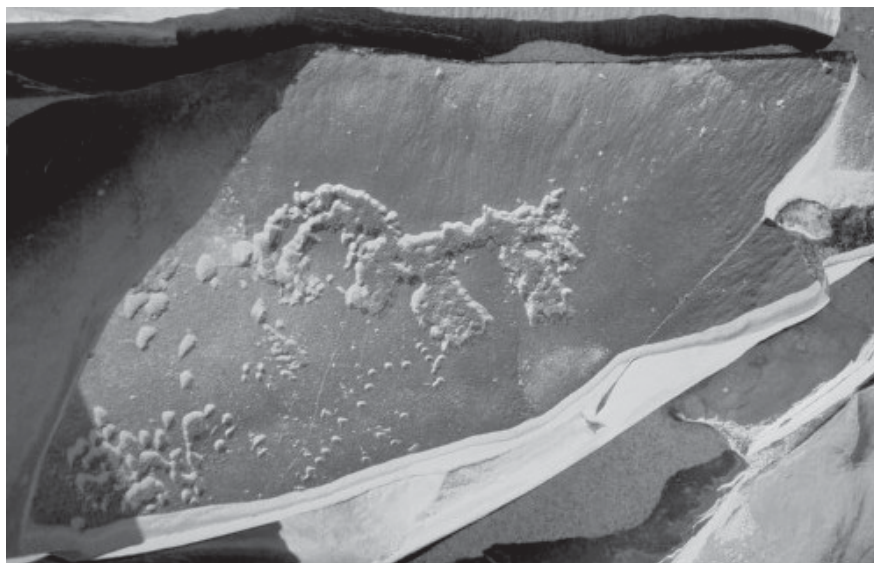


Fig.26. This completely pecked animal with very heavily accentuated forward pointing horns, may in fact not be a Barbary sheep but an ibex

Fig.27. A small cross and an enigmatic figure





Fig.28. Circle with tail (a second one lies further left). See also Fig.8 for similar images

Fig.29. A zigzag

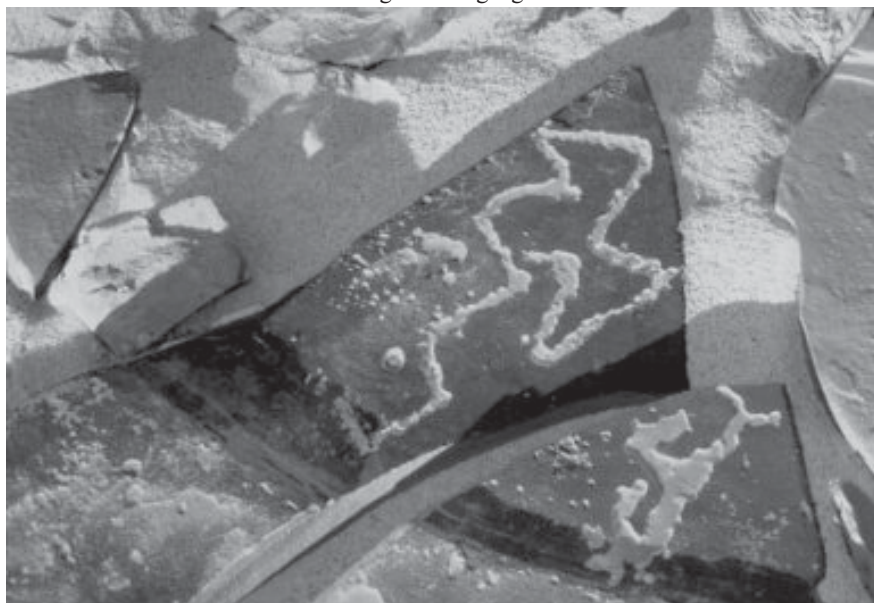




Fig.30 A polished enigmatic engraving