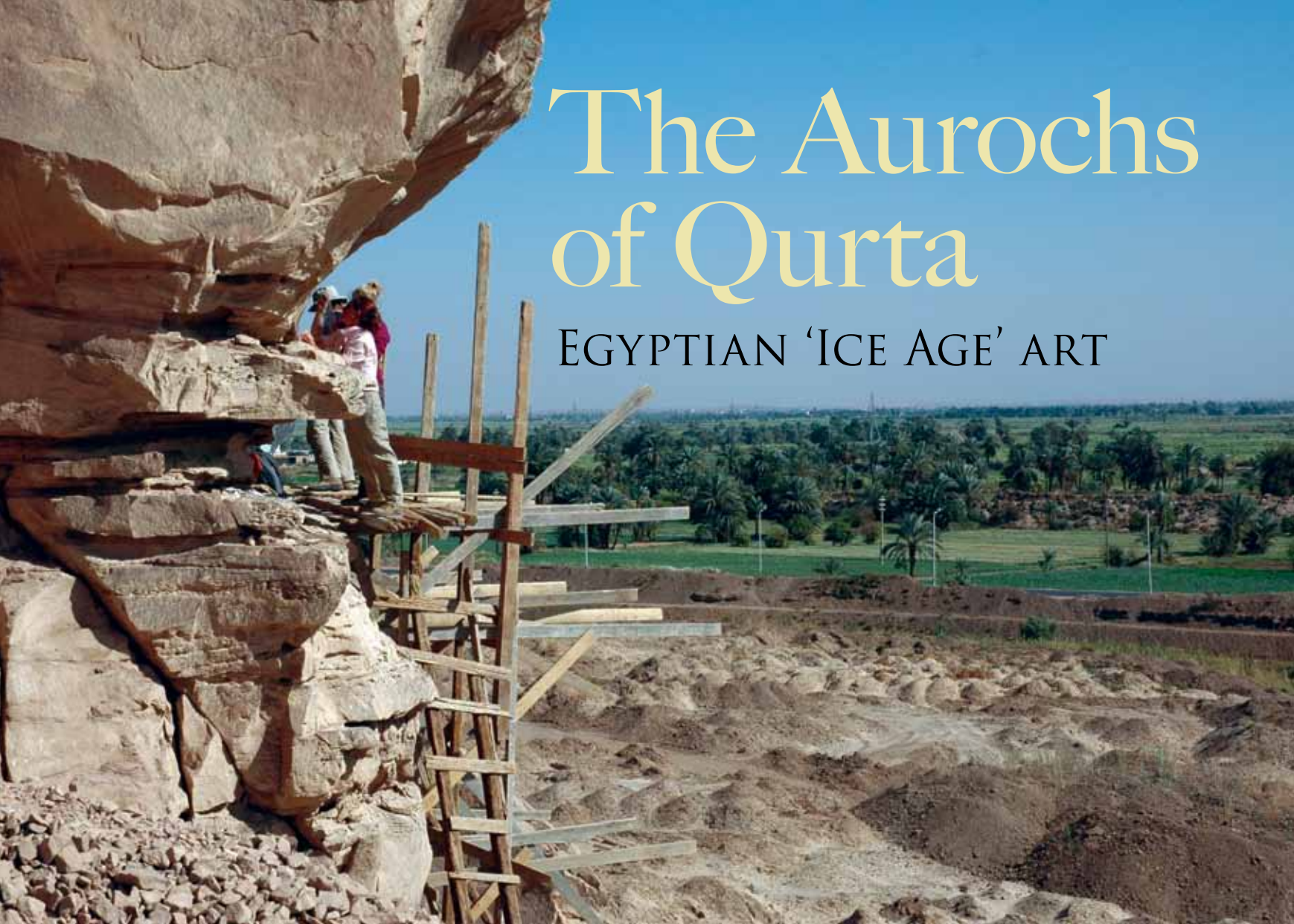


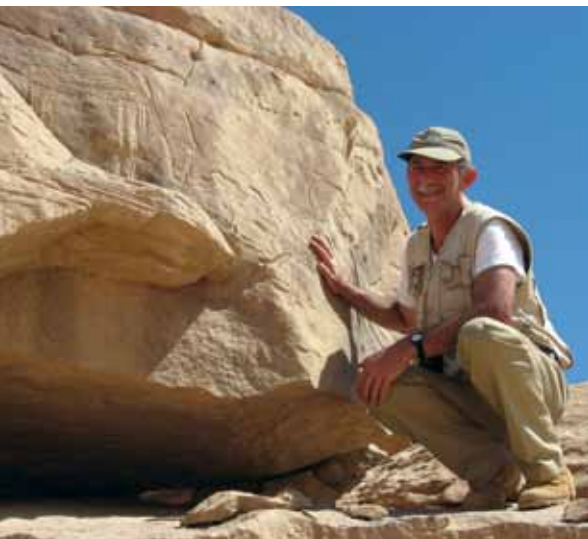
# The Aurochs of Qurta

## EGYPTIAN 'ICE AGE' ART



ABOVE Wooden scaffolding allows access to the rock art at the Qurta I site. The Kom Ombo Plain is in the background.

BELOW Dirk Huyge, at the site at el-Hosh.



Five years ago, *CWA* reported on the discovery of the oldest rock art found in North Africa (*CWA* 24). Dirk Huyge and his team have been back to Egypt to re-examine the site: it seems not only are the petroglyphs even older than first thought, they may show possible contact with Europe.

**T**he rock art discovered close to the village of Qurta on the east bank of the Nile is uncannily closer in style to European cave art, as seen at Lascaux in France, than to Egypt's more typically stylised representations exemplified by the region's 4th millennium BC Pre-dynastic iconography.

Located in the higher parts of the Nubian sandstone scarp bordering the Nile floodplain, the petroglyphs are hammered and incised naturalistic-style images of wild animals. So far, 185 individual figures have been identified, more than three quarters of which are

aurochs (*Bos primigenius*), followed by birds, hippopotamuses, gazelle, fish, and hartebeest, with some indeterminate creatures ('monsters' or hybrids), and several highly stylised representations of human figures.

The subject matter, technique and style, their archaeological and geomorphological context, and their patination and degree of weathering all suggest the Qurta rock art dates to the Late Palaeolithic period (c.23,000-11,000 years ago). While this interpretation has met with little criticism from the archaeological community, direct science-based dating evidence was lacking. Until now.

## Establishing a date

On our team's return to the region, we came across partly buried rock art panels at one of the Qurta sites. The deposits covering the rock art, in part composed of wind-blown sediments, were dated using optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) techniques. This method determines the time elapsed since the buried sediment grains were last exposed to sunlight, thereby establishing at what date these areas of the rock art panels were covered over. The result gave us a minimum age of c.15,000 calendar years – providing solid evidence that this is, indeed, Pleistocene Age artwork, the oldest graphic activity ever recorded in the whole of North Africa. It also makes it more or less contemporaneous with European art from the last Ice Age, as at Lascaux and Altamira caves.

However, these OSL results give us a date for when the rock art was buried – its true age may be much greater. It is clear that some of the buried drawings were already considerably weathered before they became covered by sediment, and an age of about 17,000 to 19,000 years is now being proposed. That would make the Qurta rock art more or less contemporaneous with Early Magdalenian and Solutrean art as known from Upper Palaeolithic Western Europe.

Further fieldwork in 2011 led to the discovery of several more buried petroglyphs, offering additional dating opportunities, using both OSL and other techniques. Whether or not it will be possible to push back the minimum age of the rock art still further, remains to be seen – our research is ongoing.

The Qurta rock art is not an entirely isolated occurrence. Five other sites are now known in the same area, all with a limited but homogeneous assemblage of drawings, which display a very similar art, both thematically and stylistically.

One site, Abu Tanqura Bahari 11 at el-Hosh, is situated about 10km north of Qurta and on the opposite bank of the Nile; the other four, Wadi Abu Subeira 6, 13, 14,



TOP The naturalistic drawings – here depicting wild bovids (*Bos primigenius*) – show remarkable similarities to European rock art. The chalking of the outline of the figures to make them more visible was not done by the Belgian archaeological mission.

MIDDLE Wooden scaffolding constructed in March 2008 to reach the rock art at the Qurta I site. The Nubian sandstone scarp to the left of this location has been completely quarried away for about 200m, using explosives.

BOTTOM American archaeologist Elyssa Figari recording rock art at the Qurta I site. The panel contains 33 images, including 25 wild bovids and a stylised human figure.

and 20, lie about 45km to the south and on the same bank as Qurta.

The el-Hosh site has about 35 drawings, mainly of naturalistically drawn aurochs, but it also seems to include some anthropomorphs similar to the stylised human figures at Qurta.

The Wadi Abu Subeira rock art sites are composed of several dozen animal figures: mainly bovids, but also fish, hippopotamuses, and Nubian ibex, as well as, possibly, hartebeest, African wild dog (*Lycaon pictus*), and Nubian wild ass. None of these other sites, however, offer the dating opportunities that Qurta does.

## Linking continents

While the discovery of sophisticated 'Ice Age' rock art in North Africa is certainly new, it is not entirely unexpected: elsewhere on the African landmass, finds of even older art have been known for some time. In 1969, stone plaquettes with painted animal motifs dated to c.26,000 years ago, were uncovered in Apollo 11 Cave in Namibia. More recently, in 1999 and 2000, complex geometric engravings on ochre pieces were brought to light in a South African coastal site, Blombos Cave; these date back to between 75,000 and 100,000 years ago. Yet how can the similarity in style between the rock art of Qurta, executed in Egypt over about 15,000 years ago, and Ice Age Europe at about the same time be explained?

Perhaps direct influence or cultural exchange over such a long distance is not as improbable as it seems. Finds of Pleistocene rock art in southern Italy and Sicily bear analogies to the Egyptian rock art. In Cyrenaica, near the coast of northern Libya, the cave site Caf Eligren has similar naturalistic images of aurochs. The Mediterranean Sea at the time of the last Ice Age was at least 100m lower than it is now: could it be that Palaeolithic people established an intercontinental exchange of iconographic and symbolic concepts? These are new and exciting challenges to archaeological thought. ■

**SOURCE** Dirk Huyge, Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, [d.huyge@kmgk.be](mailto:d.huyge@kmgk.be)