

‘Ice Age’ art along the Nile

Previous reports in *EA* 13 and *EA* 20 on early rock art at el-Hosh in southern Upper Egypt have made claims for being Egypt’s oldest art. Further fieldwork in this area has shown that even more ancient graphic works exist which are most probably contemporaneous with European Ice Age art.

Dirk Huyge and **Wouter Claes** relate the recent discoveries.

In March–April 2004, while surveying the rock art of el-Hosh, which is essentially characterized by depictions of fish traps, stylized representations of crocodiles and various curvilinear and geometric designs (see *EA* 13, pp.34–36 and *EA* 20, pp.34–35), a mission of the Belgian Royal Museums of Art and History discovered a petroglyph locality with an entirely different rock art repertoire. This locality, situated at the southernmost tip of a Nubian sandstone hill called Abu Tanqura Bahari, about 4km south of the modern village of el-Hosh, shows, among other things, a few dozen images of bovids, executed in a vigorous, naturalistic ‘Franco–Cantabrian, Lascaux-like’ style, which are quite different from the stylized cattle representations in the predynastic iconography of the fourth millennium BC. From the patination and weathering, these bovid representations are definitely extremely old and they are similar to cattle representations discovered in 1962–3 by a Canadian archaeological mission (the Canadian Prehistoric Expedition) on the east bank of the Nile, in the Gebel Silsila area. Unfortunately, all attempts to obtain information on the location of the latter from our Canadian colleagues have proved to be in vain. However, on the basis of the meagre information provided

in the preliminary reports, it has been possible to relocate the previously found images. They were rediscovered by us in October–November 2005 near the modern village of Qurta, along the northern edge of the Kom Ombo Plain, c.40km south of Edfu and 15km north of Kom Ombo. So far as we know, these sites, which are still in pristine condition, have not been revisited by archaeologists since the time of their discovery in 1962–3.

Intensive surveying of the Nubian sandstone cliffs immediately east of the village of Qurta in February–March 2007 led to the discovery of three rock art sites, designated Qurta I, II and III. At each of these sites several rock art locations, panels and individual figures were identified. In total there are at least 179 individual images. Most are naturalistically drawn animal figures. Bovids (cattle) are largely predominant (76 per cent of the total assemblage), followed by birds, hippopotami, gazelle, fish and hartebeest. In addition, there are also several highly stylized representations of human figures (mostly shown with protruding buttocks, but no other bodily features) and a small number of probable non-figurative or abstract signs. All these images bear a substantially developed patination and/or rock varnish that completely merges



General view of Qurta I from the south. Photograph taken from the spot where the Canadian Prehistoric Expedition excavated the Late Palaeolithic settlement GS-III in 1962–3



Elyssa Figari recording rock art at Qurta I, locality 1, panel 1 (QI.1.1) containing 33 images, including 25 bovids and a stylized human figure

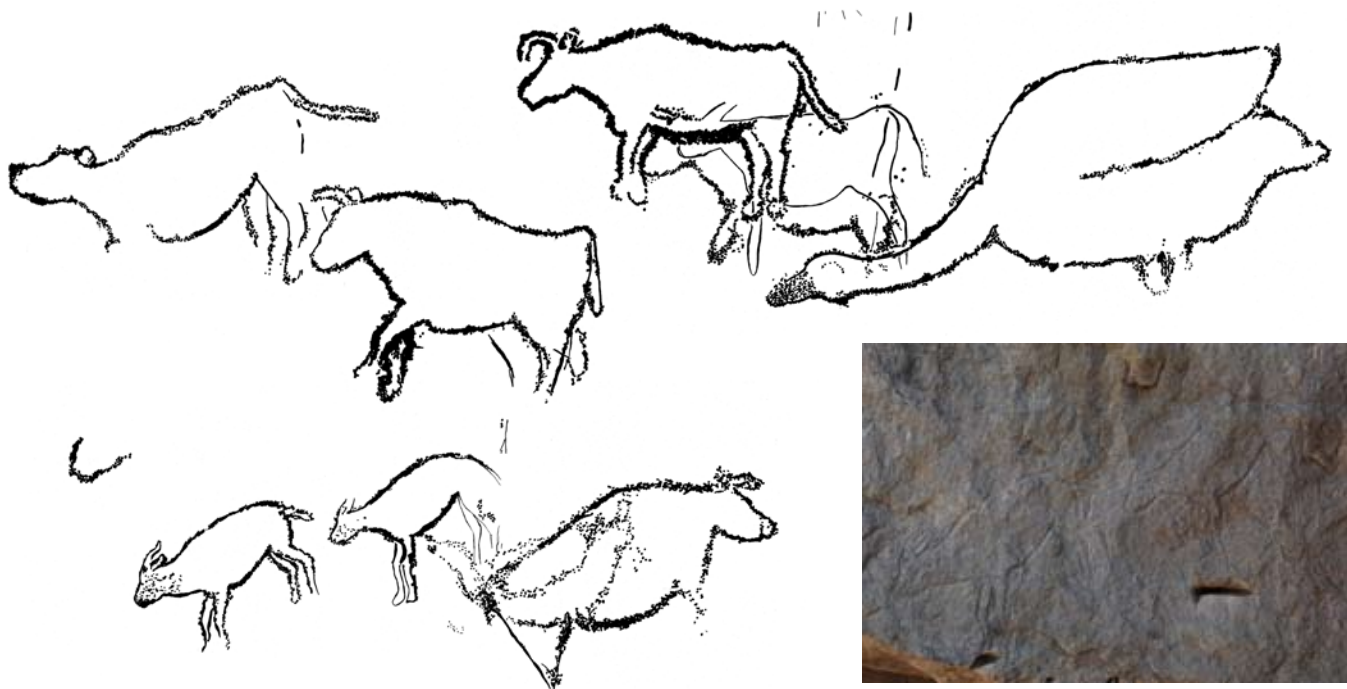
with the surrounding rock surface. This, in itself, is already an indication of considerable antiquity. Most also show traces of intensive weathering through aeolian abrasion and/or water run-off.

None of the animals represented shows any evidence for domestication. There is little doubt that the bovids should be identified as *Bos primigenius* or aurochs (wild cattle). In general, they seem to be rather short-horned, but there is archaeozoological evidence available that the Egyptian form of *Bos primigenius* had smaller horns than the European but was otherwise of about the same size. As far as the spatial organisation of the art is concerned, there are no evident scenes (compositions displaying a narrative content). Figures seem rather to be conceived as individual images. In contrast to the rock art of the

Predynastic Period, there are no imaginary ground lines present. Images can be drawn in all possible directions (and frequently the head is represented upward or downward). Quite often the animals are shown in dynamic poses with their backs curved and their legs bent as if in motion. Some bovids may be rendered rolling in dust or mud or may even be shown dead. In this respect the Qurta animal figures are also different from predynastic images, which are mostly extremely stiff and static. Among the bovids, various types of horns can be distinguished. Also, these animals can be drawn in different ways (for instance, with the horns either in true or twisted perspective and with or without hooves). From a technical point of view, both hammering and incision have been practised to create the images. In a considerable number of cases, both techniques have been combined to create or complete a drawing. Some of the figures are almost executed in bas-relief. Also, the dimensions of the drawings are exceptional. Quite often the bovids are larger than 0.80m (the largest example measures over 1.80m). Natural features, such as the relief of the rock surface and/or fissures in the surface, have in some cases been integrated into images. A further particularity of this art is that the naturalistic images of animals are combined with highly schematized human figures (closely comparable to stylized human figures as known from the Magdalenian cultural phase of Palaeolithic Europe). Quite often the drawings are clearly deliberately left incomplete. Elaborately engraved bovids, for instance, lack front legs or are otherwise unfinished. In a number of cases animals show scratches over the head and neck, which evidently must have some kind of symbolic meaning.



Scaffolding constructed in March 2008 at Qurta I, locality 6, panel 1 (QI.6.1). The Kom Ombo Plain is in the background



Tracing of panel 1 at Qurta I, locality 4 (QI.4.1). The total length of the panel is about 3.20m. The water bird to the right, probably a goose, is over 1m long. Inset: detail of the two gazelles (probably Dorcas gazelle) at QI.4.1. Note the combination of both hammering and incision to create the images

In 1962–3 the above mentioned Canadian Prehistoric Expedition discovered and excavated several Late Palaeolithic settlements in the vicinity of the rock art sites. The most important of these is GS-III, only 150–200m from Qurta I. This site and similar ones found by the Canadian Prehistoric Expedition and other missions in the Kom Ombo Plain in the early 1960s are currently attributed to the Ballanan–Silsilian culture, dated to about 16,000 to 15,000 years ago (BP).

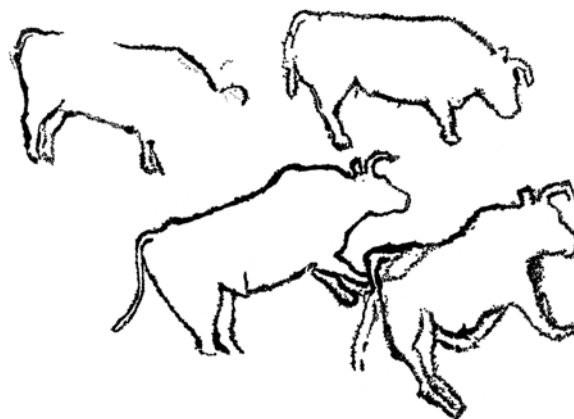
The Late Pleistocene fauna discovered at these settlements suggests a culture of hunters and fishermen with a mixed subsistence economy oriented to both stream and desert for food resources. It is essentially characterized by aurochs, hartebeest, some species of gazelle, hippopotamus, wading and diving birds and some fish species. Large ‘Ethiopian’ faunal elements, such as elephant, giraffe and rhinoceros, are conspicuously absent.



Two superb drawings of bovids with forward pointing horns at Qurta II, locality 4, panel 2 (QII.4.2.). The double belly line of the right specimen is typical of the Qurta II bovids

With the exception of hartebeest, which is rare in the Qurta rock art (only one probable example), this faunal inventory matches perfectly the animal repertory of the Qurta rock art sites. In our opinion, because of the various particularities listed above, the rock art of Qurta shows a true Palaeolithic mentality, quite closely comparable to that which governs European Ice-Age art. We accordingly propose an attribution of this Qurta rock art to the Late Pleistocene Ballanan–Silsilian culture or a Late Palaeolithic culture of similar nature and age. There remains, in our opinion, little doubt that the rock art of Qurta must be about 15,000 years old. Direct ages for this rock art are not yet available, but analyses are under way to explore its potential for archaeometric dating.

Whatever its precise chronological position in the Late Pleistocene, the Qurta rock art is quite unlike any rock art known elsewhere in Egypt or indeed the whole of Africa.



Tracing of panel 2 at Qurta II, locality 4 (QII.4.2). The total length of the panel is about 1.75m



Drawing of a powerfully built humped bovid at Qurta II, locality 4, panel 1 (QII.4.1)

The only true parallels thus far known are the previously discovered rock art at Abu Tanqura Bahari at el-Hosh and a similar occurrence at Wadi Abu Subeira, about 45km to the south of Qurta. The latter site, discovered in 2006 by the Supreme Council for Antiquities (Aswan), is a small rock art assemblage, containing about 30 to 35 images,



Detail of Qurta I, locality 1, panel 1 (QI.1.1) showing a bovid with forward pointing horns, detailed hooves and curiously bent hind legs



Superimposed bovids at Qurta I, locality 6, panel 1 (QI.6.1). The relief of the rock surface has been used in order to lend volume to the animals

most of which are, again, bovids.

Two field campaigns organized at Qurta in 2007 and 2008 have allowed us to document the rock art properly. Thirty panels at 15 locations have now been inventoried, photographed and traced at actual size on to transparent plastic. An unexpected result of the last campaign was the discovery of a Late Palaeolithic settlement at the very base of the cliff bearing the Qurta III rock art site. This site will be further investigated in 2009. It is hoped that its archaeological features and possible faunal remains can shed more light on the age and makers of the Qurta rock art.

□ Dirk Huyge, Director of the Belgian Archaeological Mission to Qurta, is curator of the Egyptian Collection at the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels, Belgium. Wouter Claes, Vice-Director, is chief librarian at the same institution. Funding for this research was provided by the Egyptology Endowment Fund of Yale University (New Haven, USA). In addition, the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC) and Vodafone Egypt offered administrative and logistical support. Photographs by Dirk Huyge. Recording by Elyssa Figari, Anne Lebrun-Nélis and Isabelle Therasse. See: <http://antiquity.ac.uk/ProjGall/huyge/index.html>



Tracing of panel 1 at Qurta I, locality 1 (QI.1.1). The total length of the panel is about 4m