

DAKHLEH OASIS

PETROGLYPH UNIT

ROCK ART RESEARCH, 2006

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The Petroglyph Unit of the Dakhleh Oasis Project,¹ organized by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology in association with the Poznań Archaeological Museum, took to the field between 14 and 26 February 2006. Work concentrated on an area between hills codenamed 1/06 and 9/06, found near the southernmost extremity of the so-called “Painted Wadi”, in a place where it fans out into the open desert. The area had been recorded provisionally in the previous season (Kuciewicz, Jaroni, Kobusiewicz 2007) and this year the Unit proceeded with the documentation.

1 The fieldwork was carried out by Ewa Kuciewicz and Eliza Jaroni, both from the Archaeological Museum in Poznań, and coordinated by Prof. Michał Kobusiewicz from the Poznań branch of the Polish Academy of Sciences. The assistance of Fred Hardtke from Sydney University is gratefully acknowledged. This season of the project was financed jointly by the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology of the University of Warsaw, the Poznań Archaeological Museum and the Patrimonium Foundation in Poznań. Members of the field party wish to express their gratitude to DOP Director Anthony J. Mills and PCMA Director Piotr Bieliński for their ongoing support.

SITE 2/05

Of the sites that were explored, where the glyphs were traced, examined and photographed, Site 2/05 exemplifies the attention that the team paid this season to discerning the “touch” of an individual artist. Many of the details described below become apparent only after a minute examination at close quarters.

The site is an isolated conical outcrop rising from the desert in the semblance of an obelisk [Fig. 1]. A conveniently flat surface on the south side served as an excellent “drawing board”, although at first glance it was difficult to see more than a tangle of lines and hollows.

At top left there is a schematic representation of one of the “ladies of the oasis” with a strange heart-shaped head and below her two more ladies, standing with their backs turned to the fourth, depicted merely as a stick-like human figure [Fig. 2]. The right side of the panel is filled with animals. A creature shown more or less on the same level with the “ladies” is a quadruped, maybe a giraffe, its legs formed like four vertical incisions in the rock. A careful look reveals the back end of an animal with raised tail, made by rubbing. It looks as if one animal was smoothly incorporated into the other.



Fig. 1. Site 2/05 in the "Painted Wadi" in Dakhle Oasis – rocky outcrop with vertical "drawing board", view from the south (Photo E. Kuciewicz)

Indeed they appear to share the trunk, but not the legs, since an additional pair of legs observed in front could belong to the animal at back. The neck of the animal is incised, like the legs, but the head seems to belong to the animal at back for it is rubbed. The meaning of this is unknown. Below again two giraffes, one pecked and the other partly pecked and partly incised, both slightly bent, perhaps because of insufficient available space. Even the muzzle of the pecked one is turned down, so as not to cover up the other image. This attention to avoiding superimposition can be construed as proof of the animals being made more or less at the same time. On the whole, petroglyph artists do not seem to have been very concerned with what was not their current work. Finally, there is the giraffe with long neck stretched horizontally to the right, framing in a sense the “double animal” depicted above it, its legs once again mingling with those of another one above it.



Fig. 2. Tracing of petroglyphs from Site 2/05 (E. Jaroni, E. Kuciewicz)

SITE 4/05

Site 4 is composed of twin hills framing a tower-like form in the middle [Figs 3, 4]. It was on this central outcrop that a flat panel of rock was used for drawing. Interestingly, only a few scratches are to be seen on one of the lateral hills.

The scene is almost 4 m long and 2 m high [Fig. 5]. It is surprisingly like a parade of animals and humanlike figures, all apparently heading for a place somewhere to the left. We have here a masterly use of different petroglyph techniques, creating an almost homogenous unity (with a few exceptions, which seem to have been added later on). The attention to detail and the consistency in the use of techniques are truly the mark of a master artist. There are altogether eight giraffes,

only one of which (at the back) is incised. Two small animals in the front, below the ostrich, have the trunk, neck and head only outlined, very delicately rubbed in the rock, whereas the legs are already sharply incised. The four giraffes following them are completely different, most of them carefully pecked. The second one is made with picketage, but the rest skillfully combine picketage and incision, the latter technique being reserved for horns, ears, tail endings and legs. The tails are exaggeratedly long, with bushy endings, while the legs are so finely outlined, especially in the case of the first animal, that they seem not legs anymore, but some kind of “twigs”. The degree of stylization and the skill in depicting animal



*Fig. 3. Site 4/05 in the "Painted Wadi" in Dakhleh Oasis
(Photo E. Kuciewicz)*



*Fig. 4. The middle one of three hills on Site 4/05 with the petroglyph panel in the center
(Photo E. Kuciewicz)*

mannerisms – how it moves, stands, etc. – testifies to the hand and eye of a true artist. The giraffe in-between the pecked ones is also noteworthy for the beauty of its silhouette; its outline is incised, while the rest is rubbed.

A Seth animal figure of clearly dynastic origin is superimposed on the animals in the central part of the panel and it is almost like a stamp, establishing the chronological sequence.

The 'ladies' are depicted walking with (or leading?) the animals. There are three of them in the lower row, all resembling one another, their square bodies and barely thickened heads made in sunk relief. They have been individualized in surprising ways. For example, the middle one has only one hand, presumably due to poor planning of the composition. But the third one, for no obvious reason, has no hands at all. Finally, there is the figure at the front of the procession, very simple and schematic, but with the apparently round

head being composed of a set of small dots arranged in a circle.

A careful look at the right side of the panel reveals an analogous figure emerging from under the animals. It could signify that the 'ladies' were earlier than the rest of the animals. Another possibility is that the artist's vision had changed as he worked. The entire panel gives the impression of a meticulously created composition, a kind of gallery located in an exposed place, inviting the passer-by to stop and rest. As a matter of fact, there is a kind of watch-post structure of stone on one of the side hills and the view of the desert stretching to the south is boundless. The shaded shelter of the rock art "gallery" must have been a convenient and safe resting place.

Rock art is the work of individual human beings, a reflection of their emotions and needs at specific moment in their lives, whether for better or for worse. Behind these works of art, for that is what

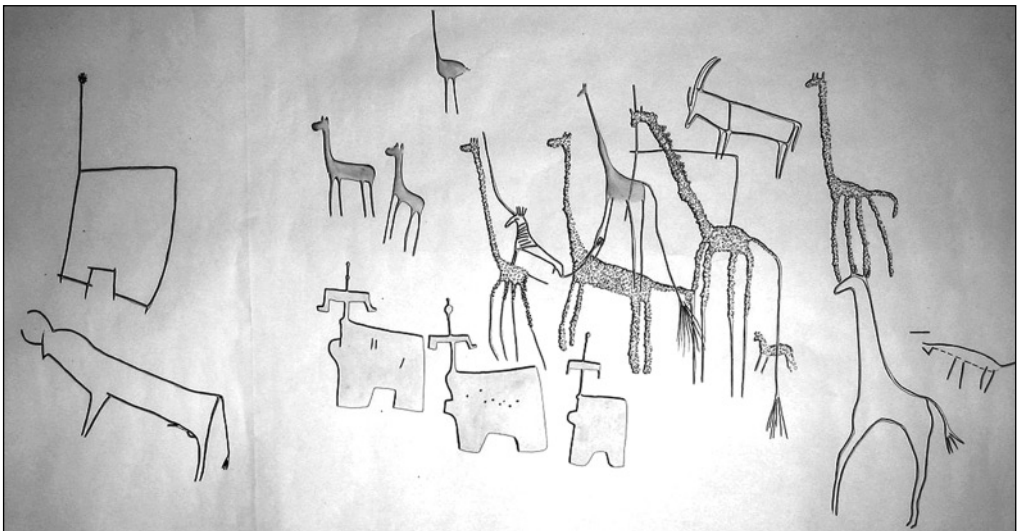


Fig. 5. *Tracing of the panel with petroglyphs from Site 4/05*
(E. Jaroni, E. Kuciewicz)

they are for us today, stand special and unique stories of ancient men. These stories will most likely never be heard or

understood by us, yet the very awareness of this fact allows us to look at these rock drawings with an entirely different eye.

REFERENCES

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