

Report on

“The Rock Art of Northeast Africa: A Case Study of Rock Paintings from the Czechoslovak Concession in Lower Nubia”

by Mgr. Lenka Suková

A Ph D dissertation on Northeast African rock art is a rare thing. A good dissertation on this subject is even rarer. The present work presented by Lenka Suková can definitely be qualified as ‘very good’. Throughout the work, but especially in the introductory Chapter 0, the author makes it clear that she has acquired an excellent background in rock art research. This is not only evident from her adequate use of the available sources, but also from the well-considered and mature standpoints taken with regard to various methodological issues.

There are, of course, a number of questions/issues than can be raised:

1) General

- (p. 17) The author mentions the “*intentional* meaning the images of distant past once had for their creators and direct audience”. What does she mean by “direct audience” (or by “targeted” audience as on p. 82 or by “viewers” as on p. 112)? Why would the rock art necessarily imply a “direct audience”? In my opinion, this is an unwarranted (and maybe too anthropocentric) assumption. There is no reason whatsoever that the rock art necessarily implies a human viewer, observer, participant or “consumer” (p. 119). Visiblensness or non-visibility to the human eye is not necessarily fundamental to the rock art. In my viewpoint (as in Huyge 2002), the rock art is meant to be ‘magically’ active in the landscape. In other words, the rock art is the own beholder of its surroundings and, once it is created, humans do not intervene (unless to add to/modify/update it in view of shifting religious concepts and ideologies). This is a fundamentally different approach from the candidate’s viewpoint, I suppose, and I would like to know if she has properly considered this issue.

- (p. 17-18) I appreciate the distinction made between *intentional* and *unintentional* significance of rock art, but what the candidate writes here, is a bit confusing to me. With regard to the rock-art surface of *Figure 0.1*, she states that “the final result... constitutes an accumulation of these intentions, but is in itself unintentional”. Why is this necessarily so? If artists deliberately add to or modify an earlier layer(s) of rock art, then the final result is indeed *intentional*, no? In Upper-Egyptian Predynastic rock art, for instance, earlier images of giraffe are often superimposed by boats. This is a regional pattern and appears to be deliberate (possibly to be explained in terms of solar symbolism?). If it is indeed a deliberate action, whatever its underlying motivation, it is of course *intentional*. The past meaning(s) of giraffe may not only be ‘interwoven’ with the later meaning(s) of boats, but may have been entirely recycled in a second layer of rock art using the technique of superimposition. The same could be true for other figures, also for those in the rock-art surface of *Figure 0.1*. I therefore fail to grasp the ‘unintentionality’ of the result. Or did I completely misunderstand what the author wrote?

- (p. 21) When speaking of the “varied functions” of rock art, the candidate refers to my

article on “malignant donkeys” in Egyptian rock art (in note 117). It should be emphasized, however, that this magical practice has nothing to do with iconoclasm or with an intervention of the “audience” (if there is indeed an audience!), but that it is a deliberate action by the creators of the rock art themselves, wishing to render harmless the hazardous power of their images.

- What I miss in the various chapters, is a properly illustrated, separate section compiling and detailing the various chronological evidence allowing the attribution of the rock art to specific periods/cultures (e.g., Middle Nubian sequence or C-Group in the case of panel 17 R XIII A). As it is now, the available arguments are rather unsystematically presented in the different sections of the chapter.

- In despite of the intensive surveys carried out in Lower Nubia in the 1960's, relatively few sites with rock paintings have been found. Apart from the sites in the Czechoslovak concession, I know only those of Sayala (Bietak & Engelmayr 1963) and some in the Spanish concession between Nag Kolorodna and Kasr Ibrim (Almagro Basch & Almagro Gorbea 1968). I regret that the present study does not attempt to discuss the Lower Nubian painted corpus in its entirety. The sites known in the Spanish concession are clearly closely related to the Late Nubian sequence in the Czechoslovak concession. But what about the Sayala paintings? These have originally be attributed to the A-Group, but this has been challenged (see, e.g., Huard 1964, who attributes them to the C-Group). Does a comparison with the sites in the Czechoslovak concession shed any new light on the issue? What is the opinion of the candidate in this respect?

- I am surprised to note that Verner (1974) is not referred to with regard to the painted motifs that characterize the sites with Late Nubian sequence rock art, either to point out the similarities or the differences with the petroglyph corpus. In a more general way, I regret that no attempt has been made to more closely compare paintings and engravings within the concession area. In particular, I wonder if there is a clear overlap as far as the subjects and styles are concerned. In other words, were the artists who did the paintings also responsible for (part of) the petroglyphs or is there a clear ‘ethnic’ distinction between the two rock art traditions? This is not properly discussed in the current dissertation.

2) More specific

- (p. 39 ff) I am not fully convinced that the different styles recognized in panel 17 R XIII A correspond to a significant archaeological reality. Especially the fact that there so few superimpositions (which the author acknowledges explicitly on p. 59) and the consistent lateralization to the left (p. 61) suggests to me that the whole panel, maybe with exception of the white-painted cattle, should be treated as one ‘homogeneous’ composition (in which, of course, different artists may have participated).

- (p. 43-44) It is remarkable that very similar possible “acts of iconoclasm” against hippopotami and bovids (grooves cut through the neck) already occur in the much older Late Palaeolithic rock art at Qurta (see Huyge 2009, which is not in Suková's bibliography). Or does the candidate interpret these in another way?

- (p. 48) Several of the cattle seem to have artificially deformed horns (one horn curving in and the other curving out). I am surprised that the author does not refer to Huard (1964) in this respect, which would be another good argument for attribution of this rock art to the C-Group. Specifically with regard to A.30 (bovid with forward-pointing horns), see Chaix & Hansen (2003).

- (p. 67) I like the 'Nile landscape' interpretation of panel 17 R XIII A, but it remains a fact that there is only one boat shown (why only one on this vast surface?) and that there are also several bovid representations 'in the waters of the Nile' (A.77-80). The latter bovids are, in my opinion, both stylistically and technically, not sufficiently different from the bovids in the upper part of the panel to state that they are not related.

- (p. 92) With regard to the human figures in panel 17 R XIX B, I would definitely say that they are 'sufficiently different' from human figures produced according to the officially instigated ancient Egyptian artistic canon to conclude that they were not executed by Egyptians, but by local Nubians that may have been inspired by the Egyptian style. The same is true for most, if not all, of the rock art presented in this volume.

3) On a more personal note, I would like to add the following questions/remarks:

- (p. 13, note 68) In general, the candidate is being very kind to me and my writings in the field of rock art (which is appreciated, of course). However, I do feel somewhat criticized for the hunting magic hypothesis forwarded with regard to the Late-Palaeolithic Qurta rock art. It should, of course, be acknowledged that the situation is entirely different from the Predynastic rock art and that it cannot be expected that two rock art traditions, separated in time by over 10,000 years, should conform to similar meanings and motivations. The candidate knows the Qurta rock art (she has seen it with her own eyes a couple of years ago). If the hunting magic hypothesis does not satisfy her, I would like to know if she has any alternative ideas regarding the *intentional* significance of this rock art.

- (p. 14-15) The candidate reproaches me a "disregard... for the presence of a multi-ethnic component" in the rock art. She refers to a publication of mine (Huyge 2002) which deals with the Elkab area and with the Elkab area only, that is an area of only a few square kilometers adjacent to the Nile Valley. Is it realistic to suppose that there is also a 'non-Egyptian' component to the rock art in such a small Nilotic area? Elsewhere (Huyge 2004, which is not in Suková's bibliography), I have clearly stated that the clear differences between the Nile Valley rock art (such as at Elkab) and the rock art of the Eastern Desert proper may be accounted for by the presence of different ethnic groups of people: Nile Valley dwellers and 'proto-Bedouins', nomads who resided in the desert on a semi-permanent basis. It should also be considered that such differences may be the result of the existence of socially or functionally distinct population groups. In other words, my views are not that different from Suková's. I do not see the "disregard" as far as I am concerned.

As a conclusion to this report, I would say that is always a somewhat frustrating and less rewarding task to work on material that has been collated by someone else and that one has not been able to study firsthand in the field. Lenka Suková is to be congratulated for having had the courage to undertake this study. Taken into account the limitations imposed on her

by the documentation, which was moreover gathered a long time ago and not really according to modern standards, she has done an excellent job. I therefore recommend Lenka Suková's Ph D dissertation to the defence.

References

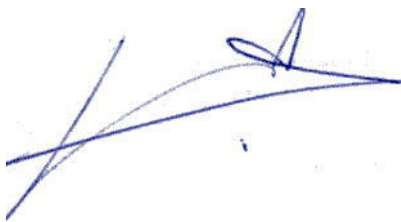
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