

Similarity between Round-Head Paintings and Kel Essuf Engravings

by

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SUMMARY. — All the main central Saharan mountainous massifs present prehistoric rock art. In the Tassili n'Ajjer, Algerian Tadrart and Tadrart Acacus both paintings and engravings are present; however, only in exceptional cases do we find the oldest paintings, called Round Heads, and prehistoric engravings in the same shelter. Only a complex of engravings called Kel Essuf coexists with the Round-Head paintings on the same walls. Except for the same geographical area, these two groups of rock art are similar also for their themes; they are both dominated by male anthropomorphic figures and they present the same characteristic elements.

Saharan Rock Art

The central Saharan rock art is traditionally divided into five main groups/periods, arranged from the supposed oldest to the most recent:

- Bubaline (large wild fauna, engravings only);
- Round Heads (wild animals, paintings only);
- Pastoral (domesticated animals, engravings and paintings);
- Caballine (horse, engravings and paintings);
- Cameline (dromedary, engravings and paintings).

The chronology of Saharan rock art is one of the main challenges for the scholars and the source of persistent controversy. The problem relates to the oldest chronological-stylistic groups, namely the Bubaline, the Round Heads and partly the Pastoral styles, whereas the recent post-Neolithic paintings and engravings are chronologically secure due to the depiction of animals introduced to the Sahara in the historical period (tab. 1). The lack of direct dating gives a wide margin for subjective chronological interpretation, resulting in two chronologies being established: a high and a low period (MUZZOLINI 1995, HACHID 1998).

A group of engravings called Kel Essuf is not included in the classic stylistic sequence. Even though the group was already known in the 1960s (MORI 1967) it has been virtually ignored until recently (STRIEDTER *et al.* 2002-2003). In 1967 Fabrizio Mori discovered unusual small-sized oblong engravings in the Tadrart

Table 1

High and low chronology of central Saharan rock art

| Styles | High chronology (¹⁴ C years) | Low chronology (¹⁴ C years) |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| Bubaline engravings | 10,000-7,500 BP | 7,000-4,500 BP |
| Kel Essuf engravings | before 9,800 BP | from 7,000 BP |
| Round-Head paintings | 9,800-7,500 BP | 7,000-2,800 BP |
| Pastoral engravings/ paintings | 7,500-2,800 BP | 7,000-2,800 BP |
| Caballine engravings/ paintings | from 2,800 BP | from 2,800 BP |
| Cameline engravings/ paintings | from 2,000 BP | from 2,000 BP |

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Acacus, which could not be assigned to any type of engravings in the known sequence. For their approximate resemblance to fish he gave this group the generic term of “ichthyomorphous” engravings (MORI 1967).

In 1994 a number of engravings were found in the Algerian Tadrart, very similar to Mori’s “ichthyomorphs” (STRIEDTER *et al.* 2002-2003). Since the local Tuareg call these images “Kel Essuf”, which means spirits of the dead, the term was adopted to designate this singular kind of engravings. They consist of an oval body with four very short appendages, two lateral and two at the bottom, evoking arms and legs. In most cases, they have a penis and sometimes their limbs present three or four fingers (figs. 1, 2). The “ichthyomorphs” of the Acacus belong to the Kel Essuf group. For the moment, Kel Essuf engravings are known in only a very limited area in the Acacus, Algerian Tadrart and in the Djado (HALLIER & HALLIER 1999).

There are substantial differences between the Bubaline and the Kel Essuf engravings. Whilst the Bubaline engravings are present on boulders in the open and spread over a large area, Kel Essuf are located mainly inside rock shelters and the figures are usually grouped together in one place. Also the theme is completely different: the Bubaline style is dominated by animals, whereas the Kel Essuf style is dominated by extremely stylized anthropomorphic figures, executed by carving or by very fine pecking.

Unlike Bubaline engravings, the Kel Essuf are found nearby, or in the same shelters as those adorned by Round-Head paintings and several superimpositions indicate that these engravings are older than the Round-Head paintings.

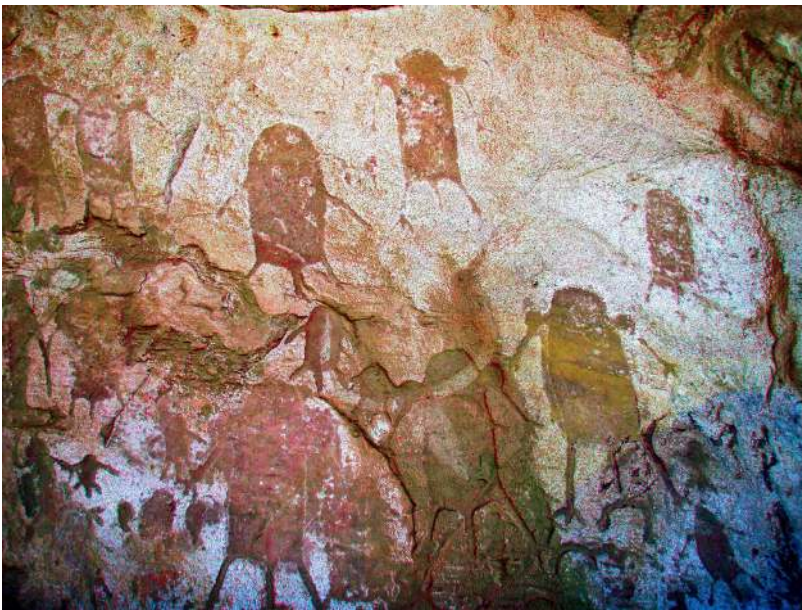


Fig. 1. — Accumulation of Kel Essuf engravings. On the right side down are separated half-moon-like objects (Uan Tabarakat, Algerian Tadrart).



Fig. 2. — A Kel Essuf male figure with half-moon-like objects attached to his shoulders (Uan Tabarakat, Algerian Tadrart).

Round-Head Paintings

In the chronological/stylistic sequence of Saharan rock art, Round-Head paintings have been considered the oldest paintings ever since their discovery in the Tassili n’Ajjer (LHOTE 1958), in the Acacus (MORI 1964) and in the Djado (HALLIER & HALLIER 2009). Round-Head anthropomorphic figures present some characteristic elements typical of this artistic tradition (SOUKOPOVA 2012). These are horn-like protuberances on the head, half-moon-like objects attached to the shoulders or depicted as separated objects. Often the figures are adorned with bracelets, necklaces, a kind of skirt or false tail attached to the waist and they hold short sticks (tab. 2). These attributes are not considered as simple decorative elements, but as functional indicators within the hunting society producing Round Heads (SOUKOPOVA 2011). Except for the body paintings found frequently on women, these attributes belong almost exclusively to male figures, which are also four times more numerous

Table 2

Main characteristic elements of the Round-Head complex

| Element | Min. number of figures* | Distribution |
|--------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Body paintings | 149 | Tassili, Acacus, Alg. Tadrart |
| Holding stick | 85 | Tassili, Acacus, Alg. Tadrart |
| Horned figures | 77 | Tassili, Acacus, Alg. Tadrart |
| Holding bow | 34 | Tassili, Acacus, Alg. Tadrart |
| Bracelets | 55 | Tassili |
| T-shaped attribute | 43 | Tassili |
| Half-moon attached | 22 | Tassili |
| Half-moon separate | 20 | Tassili |
| Great God | 7 | Tassili |

* A large number of paintings are not recognizable or dubious; therefore only the identified figures were counted.

T-shaped form, which are attached to a male figures' back, half-moon-like objects attached to figures' shoulders or painted as isolated objects and large male figures with raised hands called Great Gods (fig. 5), do not appear everywhere but they are limited to the Tassili Plateau. The most varied and numerous elements of the Round-Head painted repertoire are therefore concentrated on the highest altitude of the region, precisely in the central-southern part of the Tassili Plateau. The surrounding lower mountains of the Algerian Tadrart and the Acacus present only those elements common for the whole area and do not seem to have their own particular motifs.

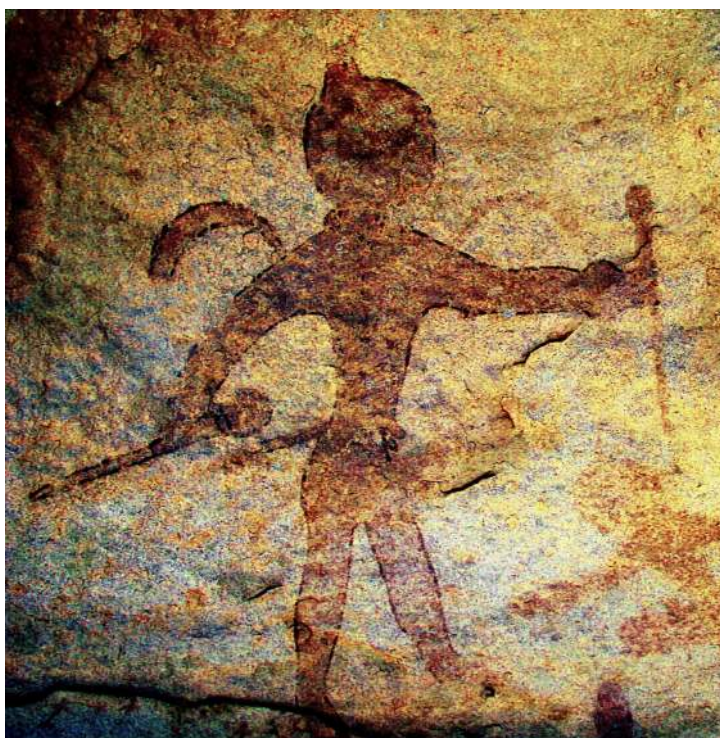


Fig. 3. — Round-Head characteristic attributes: horns, half-moon-like objects on shoulders, rounded sticks, bracelet (Tin Tazarift, Tassili).



Fig. 4. — Round-Head characteristic attributes: horns, bow, bracelet, T-shape object (Tin Tazarift, Tassili).

Masks, although very numerous and typical of the Round Heads, are not included in the list of the characteristic elements. The fact that the heads are most likely painted as simple contours without facial features and often with internal decoration, makes it sometimes impossible to distinguish between a stylized head and a mask.

than the female (figs. 3, 4). All these elements occupy such an important place in the paintings that they must be assigned a fundamental role in the representation of the world they portray.

The characteristic elements can be divided into two groups: those which are present in virtually every site and those which occur only in certain areas. The first four elements of the list, namely the body paintings, sticks, horned figures and bows appear throughout the whole area in the Tassili Plateau, in the Algerian Tadrart and in the Tadrart Acacus. Due to their presence in the majority of the sites, these elements are likely to represent the essential features of the Round-Head culture which are common to all groups producing the paintings.

In contrast, bracelets, objects in an inverted

Some of the characteristic elements also exist in the later Pastoral style, but their context is clearly different. Body paintings of the Pastoral anthropomorphic figures are rare and they present motifs that are not used in the Round-Head tradition. The bow in the Pastoral art usually occurs in hunting scenes, which do not exist in the Round-Head art, except in rare and often ambiguous cases. The half-moon element is present in the Pastoral art, but is never attached to men, as in the Round-Head art, but painted separately in everyday life scenes, suggesting they may be practical objects such as containers. Other elements, for example the T-shaped objects or the Great Gods, do not appear at all in the Pastoral style.



Fig. 5. — Great God figure (Sefar, Tassili).

Why were certain elements represented only on the Tassili Plateau and not everywhere? There may be at least three explanations:

- The Tassili was occupied or frequented only by certain groups who used their own peculiar motifs which were not used by groups in the Acacus or in the Algerian Tadrart;
- The Tassili was frequented by all groups producing Round-Head art but it was an area utilized for special occasions needing the use of these particular elements, reproduced in rock art;
- The difference in painted motifs may be caused by a chronological distinction between the Tassili and the lower mountains.

Furthermore, the characteristic motifs are not distributed equally throughout the Tassili Plateau, but vary according to sites. Sefar, for example, includes all of the characteristic elements, whereas In

Eleghi only displays two of them. If the quantity of the elements in a site indicates its value, it testifies to the unequal status of sites occupying the same plateau.

Origins of the Round-Head Paintings

The Round-Head paintings are mainly concentrated on the central part of the Tassili Plateau with a minor and rather scarce presence in the surrounding massifs of the Acacus and the Algerian Tadrart (fig. 6). Was the area with the greatest accumulation of paintings the birthplace of this art or are there other sites, outside this area, where the Round Heads are present in their, presumably, more primitive form?

The archaeology of regions south of the area with the Round-Head paintings gives evidence for a certain uniformity. The mountains of Air and Adrar Bous in northern Niger present a very similar Early Holocene archaeological sequence as to that of excavated sites in the Tassili and Acacus, namely an Epipalaeolithic (10,000 to 8,800 BP) and a Mesolithic (8,800 to 7,400 BP) phase with an economy based exclusively on the exploitation of wild animals and wild plants (BARICH 1998).

Another important analogy in the archaeological record of northern Niger is the presence of pottery associated with the Early Holocene hunter-gatherers. At Tagalagal in the Air the pottery dated $9,370 \pm 130$ BP (cal BP $10,637 \pm 216$) consists of various shapes, excellent quality and already displayed the whole range of decorated motifs, indicating that the technique and production were already firmly established (ROSET 1983).

The pottery at the site of Tin Hanakaten in the Tassili dated $9,420 \pm 200$ BP but Libyan pottery is more recent, dating to $8,950 \pm 55$ BP (AUMASSIP 1980-1981). In other Saharan regions the pottery seems to be even younger. In the Tibesti ceramics were dated $8,065 \pm 100$ BP (cal BP $8,949 \pm 169$) (BELTRAMI 2007) and in



Fig. 6. — Central Saharan mountains.

northern Sahara pottery appeared only in the 8th millennium BP (CHAVAILLON 1992). The nucleus of the oldest Saharan pottery appears therefore to be the southern Tassili in Algeria and the Air and Adrar Bous mountains in Niger.

The carefully executed impressed decoration on the vessels testifies to the aesthetic perception of the hunter-gatherers. Furthermore, pottery is an indicator of an economic and cultural transformation occurring at the beginning of the Early Holocene and it cannot be excluded that origins of Round-Head paintings are related to the areas where the earliest ceramics were found. Pottery with the same decoration has been found in northern Niger and in the southern Tassili, and the analogous archaeological record in both regions suggests a similar cultural pattern of hunter-gatherers possibly practising long-distance contacts.

Relationship between the Kel Essuf and Round Heads

The Kel Essuf engravings have, to date, only been found in the Acacus, Algerian Tadrart and Djado but their distribution may cover a much wider area. These small-sized anthropomorphic and rarely zoomorphic figures were given little attention until recently. Their relationship with the Round Heads was first postulated by MORI (1967) for the Acacus, then by HALLIER & HALLIER (1999) for the Djado, and it seems to be confirmed by STRIEDTER *et al.* (2002-2003) for the Algerian Tadrart. Whereas in the Djado the engraved and painted Kel Essuf forms are present, in the Acacus and in the Algerian Tadrart, engraved Kel Essuf largely prevail. There are, however, a few paintings, for example at *Abri Freulon* in the Algerian Tadrart, that have a form similar to the Kel Essuf engravings (figs. 7, 8, 9).

MORI's (1967) hypothesis that the Kel Essuf are an original form from which Round-Head paintings evolved is supported by the superimpositions in the Algerian Tadrart confirming the anteriority of Kel Essuf in the relative chronology (STRIEDTER *et al.* 2002-2003). The Kel Essuf engravings are not only very similar in form to the presumed early forms of the Round Heads, but they are also located in the same region. No Kel Essuf engravings have been found so far on the Tassili Plateau, which may confirm the hypothesis that this art originated during the period when the high altitudes were not occupied for their excessive humidity and only the lower mountains were inhabited, *i.e.* in the period before the 10th millennium BP.

In addition to the resemblance in shape, there are other important similarities between the Kel Essuf and Round-Head anthropomorphic figures. Five of the most significant characteristic elements of the Round-Head figures are also associated with the Kel Essuf engravings, namely the half-moon objects attached to one or both shoulders (*cf.* fig. 2), the half-moon objects engraved singularly next to the figures (*cf.* fig. 1) and the figures with sticks and bows. In the Acacus and Djado the Kel Essuf also present horns on the top of the head, the shape and position of which is similar to those on the Round-Head figures. As mentioned earlier, these

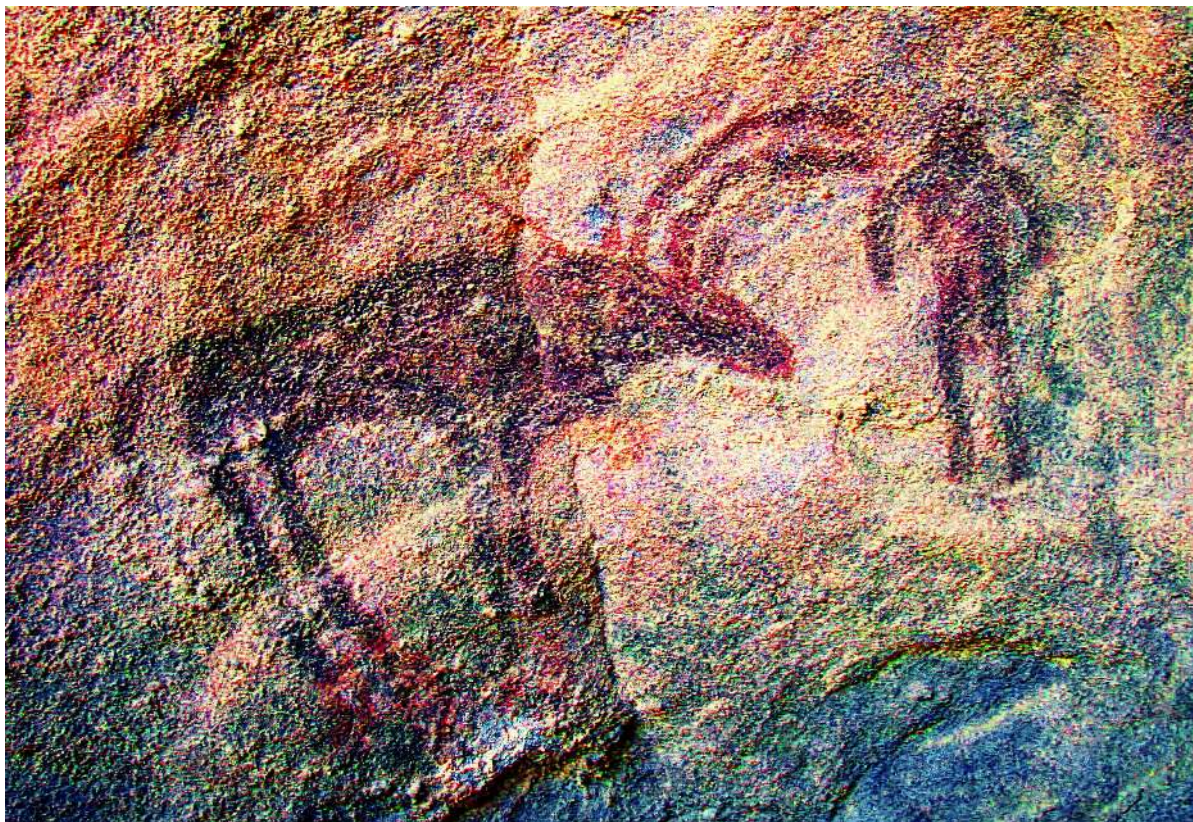


Fig. 7. — Presumed early Round-Head painted figures
(*Abri Freulon*, Algerian Tadrart).



Fig. 8. — Presumed early Round-Head forms. A boat on the left side down testifies abundant water sources in the region
(*Abri Freulon*, Algerian Tadrart).

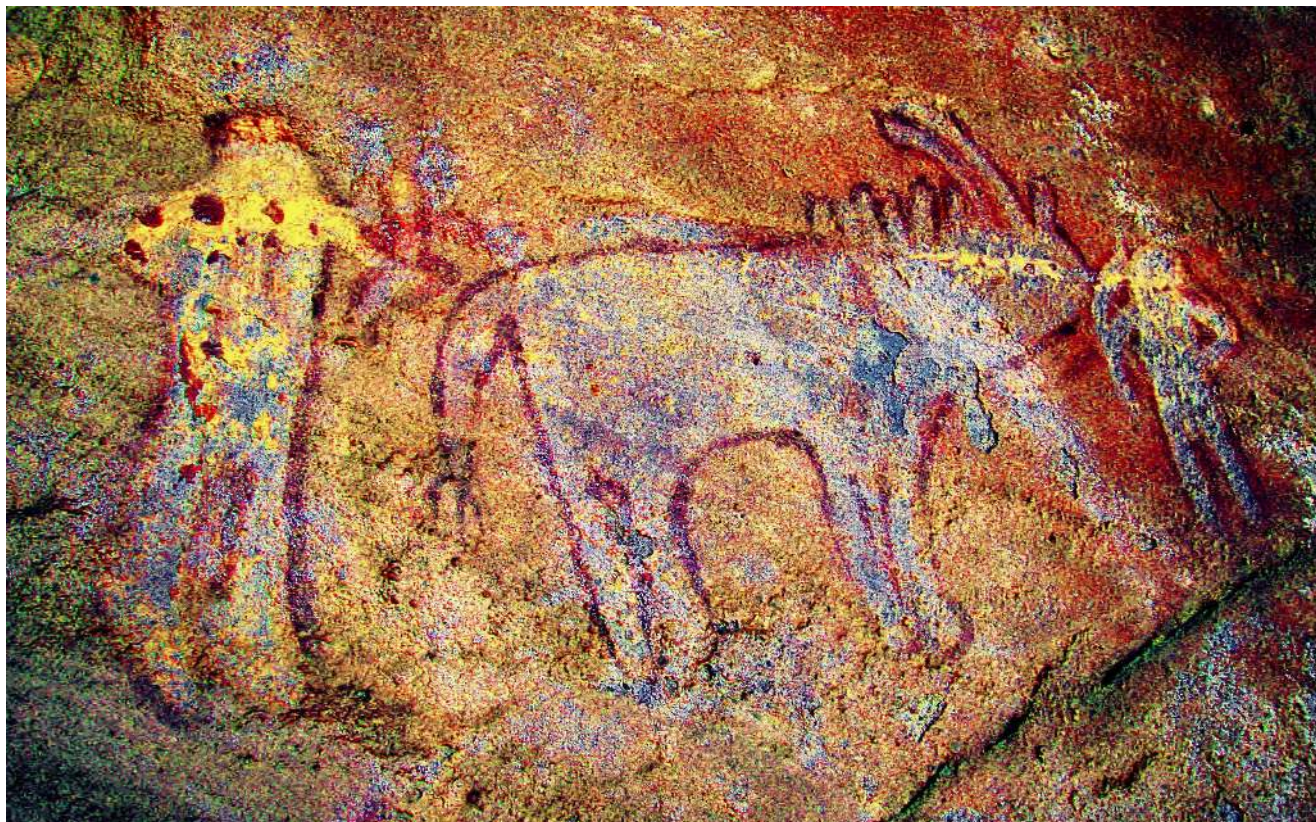


Fig. 9. — Presumed early Round-Head painted figures of males with bows and a mouflon (*Abri Freulon*, Algerian Tadrart).

characteristic elements never occur in the later Pastoral art or they do not occur in the same context, so that they must be considered particular for the cultural heritage of the local hunter-gatherers.

There is, however, one substantial difference between the Kel Essuf and Round-Head anthropomorphic figures, namely the representation of a penis in a great number of Kel Essuf images. Since other anatomical features on the Kel Essuf figures are missing, the representation of the penis was apparently very important for some reason, perhaps as an indicator of the “maleness”. This is in sharp contrast with the Round-Head males who are never represented with penises, as if it were a sort of taboo. Except for the penis, however, both the Round-Head and the Kel Essuf complexes are largely dominated by male figures.

The representation of the penis on the Kel Essuf figures and its disappearance in the later Round-Head paintings could have been a gradual process. Indeed, the presumed early Round-Head paintings in the Djado, sometimes present a third appendage between the legs which is most likely a penis. Its representation disappeared in the later phases of the Round-Head art, which is mostly concentrated on the Tassili Plateau.

The theory of an evolution from Kel Essuf engravings into the Round-Head paintings, which was proposed by MORI (1967), HALLIER & HALLIER (1999) and by STRIEDTER *et al.* (2002-2003), is based on superimpositions and on the presumed evolution of figures, assuming a development of forms from simple towards more complex ones. Thus, the originally extremely simple Kel Essuf engravings would acquire more details such as fingers or other attributes. Later, only paintings were made, leading to the creation of evolved Round-Head figures with more details than engravings.

The difference in forms between Kel Essuf in various areas may also be explained as the intentional differentiation of groups or individuals who created them. Yet, although they differ slightly in form and attributes, the Kel Essuf present, as well as the Round-Head paintings, a strong homogeneity in all regions where they are found.

Conclusions

The relationship between the Kel Essuf and the Round-Head art is suggested by the similarities of forms and body attributes, as well as by the coexistence of these paintings and engravings in the same area, namely the lower mountains of the Acacus, Algerian Tadrart and Djado, which is also the area of the presumed earliest Round Heads. Whilst MUZZOLINI (1995) claimed that Round-Head art is exclusively painted, HALLIER & HALLIER (1999) believe that they consist of both paintings and engravings. The second hypothesis is plausible since the engravings are often present in the shelters, unlike the Bubaline engravings, which are always located in the open. The coexistence of the Kel Essuf and Round Heads in the same shelters indicates that the same places were considered important for image-making, which may have been separated in time but may have also been (at least partially) contemporaneous. Similar body shapes, attributes and locations of both Kel Essuf and Round Heads are likely to indicate the same cultural matrix of their creators.

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