

## WOMEN AND PREHISTORIC RITUALS IN THE ROUND HEAD ROCK ART OF THE SAHARA

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Although the earliest chronology of Saharan rock art remains the subject of controversy, most scholars believe that the Round Head paintings were produced mainly between 9,500 and 7,000 BP (Hachid, 1998; Hallier and Hallier, 1999; Mori, 2000; Jelínek, 2004; Soleilhavoup, 2007). This complex of paintings is dominated by anthropomorphic figures, followed by wild animals. Human figures present some very particular elements, such as horns, masks and body paintings which express the fundamental attributes used during special occasions. Indeed, the images are likely to represent sophisticated rituals and ceremonies held in this ancient society, as well as figures and scenes belonging to the oldest representations of religious systems in the world.

Of the anthropomorphic figures, c. 50% are represented by males and only 10% by females, the rest being unidentifiable (Sansoni, 1994; Muzzolini, 1995; Soukopova, 2012). The male figures are not only more numerous than the female ones but they are also aesthetically more elaborate: males are represented more frequently with body decoration, and body adornments characteristic of the Round Head complex are exclusive to men. There are numerous scenes in which males adorned with ritual attributes are side by side with women with no decoration.

From the analysis of the scenes, it is therefore evident that men had a predominant role in the ancient rituals, whereas the role of women was probably minor (Soukopova, 2016). It is mainly visible from the fact that women, if represented on the rock wall, are usually depicted with no decoration at all. However, there are several scenes in which the protagonists of rituals are women, or in which women are represented with male attributes, such as bows or horns. Here we present five examples of painted scenes where the role of women is significant.

### Women as protagonists of rituals

In the Round Head complex, we find rows of women depicted with raised arms, which may be interpreted as a worshipping posture. Moreover, the ancient Round Head style often represents single women, or groups of women with an umbilical hernia (fig. 1), which could indicate that women with this malformation had a special status within this hunting society. There are also cases of pregnant women, some of them in a worshipping posture (fig. 2).

One scene in the Libyan Acacus represents a row of three masked individuals, two men in a worshipping-like posture and a woman, who face another woman sitting in front of them (fig. 3). She is decorated with body paintings and she is wearing a mask too.

In at least three cases women are depicted around a large unidentifiable animal (fig. 4). Such scenes have been interpreted as possible fertility rituals (Mori, 2000), but unidentifiable DOWN-HEADED animals may also be interpreted as animals of the rain (Soukopova, 2011).

Related to fertility might also be a group of women depicted under an ancient rainwater cascade (fig. 6). During rains, water would fall over the scene and this is significant because the rock wall around the water cascade does not have any painting. The relationship of the paintings to the water is therefore evident.

### Fantastic creatures and women

There are several scenes in Round Head art which represent fantastic creatures, i.e. unrealistic anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures. In rare cases, human-like fantastic creatures have female traits such as breasts (fig. 7). In a scene in the Tassili, a pregnant woman in a worshipping posture is depicted next to a masked male who is touching an unrealistic, possibly zoomorphic, creature (fig. 2).

### Women with male attributes

The characteristic elements of Round Head anthropomorphic figures are horns, bracelets, half-moon objects attached on shoulders, masks, bows, sticks and body paintings. Except for body paintings, which appear also on women, these characteristic elements are exclusive to men. However, in rare cases, they are connected to female figures too.

In the Tassili mountains at In Itinen and Tin Tazarift sites, there are two women holding bows (figs. 9, 5). Bows are normally related only to men; indeed, the eth-





Fig. 1. A row of women with an umbilical hernia and in a worshipping posture (Sefar, Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.

nographic record indicates that the bow is a sign exclusive to post-initiation adult male hunters (Silberbauer, 1965; Lee, 1979). In Round Head art masks are typically male attributes but sometimes they also appear on women (figs. 3, 10).

At the Aouarnhat site in the Tassili, we find a female with two prominent horns coming out of her head (fig. 10). This is a unique association because horns are typically male attributes. Another woman at Sefar has bracelets on her wrists (fig. 11), which seems normal today, but in Round Head art bracelets were only depicted on male figures. A possible explanation is that the bracelet

represented the archery arm guard and it was therefore connected only to male hunters (Le Quellec, 2011).

#### **Women in situations which are exclusive to men**

In rare cases, women are depicted in situations that are normally reserved only for males. This is particularly the case of the so-called flying persons, i.e. human figures depicted in a horizontal position and thus possibly lying or flying. Flying men have been interpreted as individuals in a trance (Soleilhavoup, 2007), swimming individuals (Hallier and Hallier, 2010), or young individuals undergoing rites of passage into manhood (Soukopova, 2012).





Fig. 2. A pregnant woman in a worshipping posture next to a masked male and an unidentifiable creature (Sefar, Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.



Fig. 3. A row of three masked individuals, two men and a woman, who are facing a sitting masked woman (Uan Tamuat, Aca-cus). Photo enhanced with DStretch.



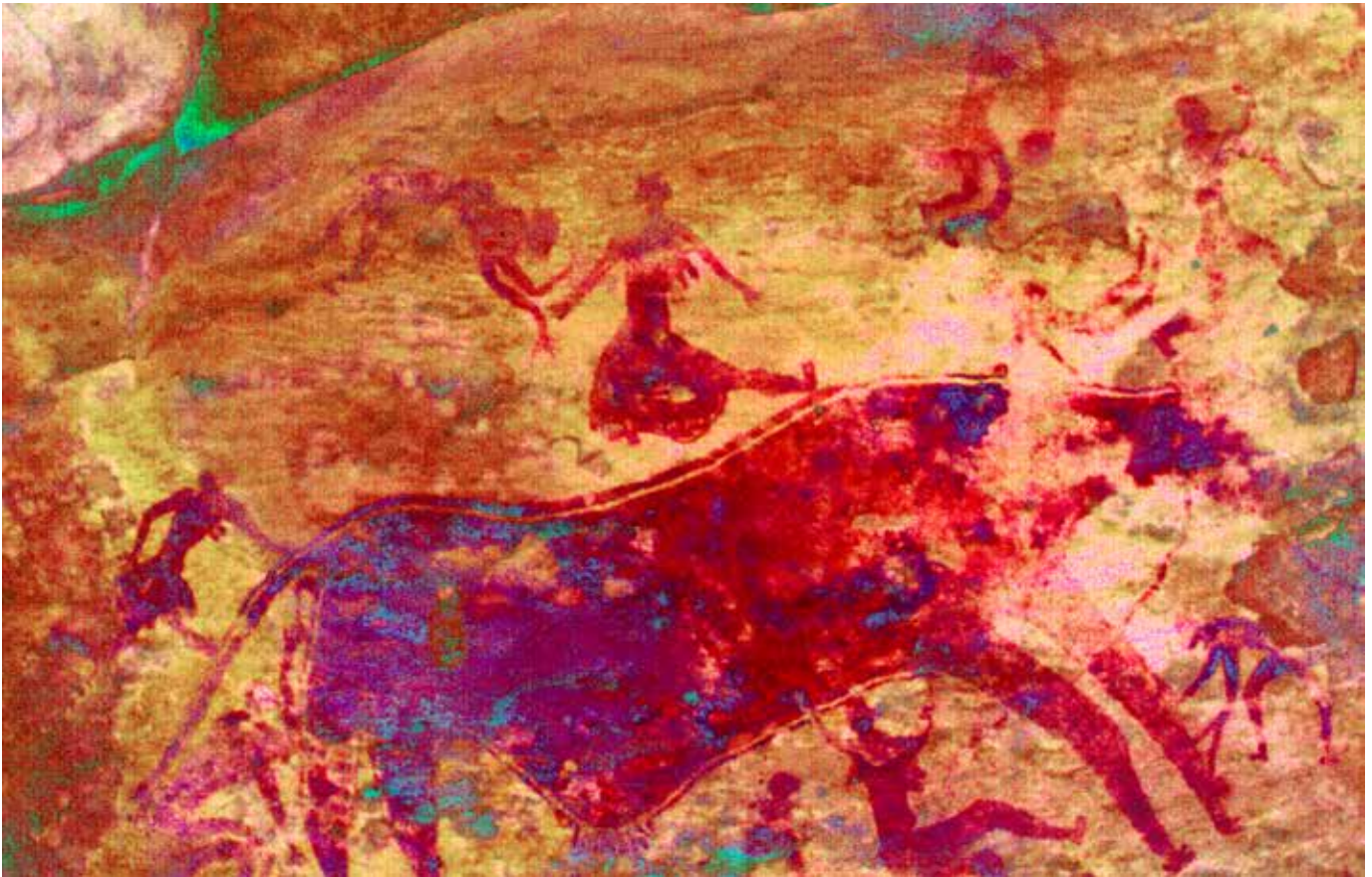


Fig. 4. Individuals around a large unidentifiable animal, at least three of whom are women (Tin Barsaoula, Acacus). Photo enhanced with DStretch.



Fig. 5. A woman shooting a bow (Tin Tazarift, Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.



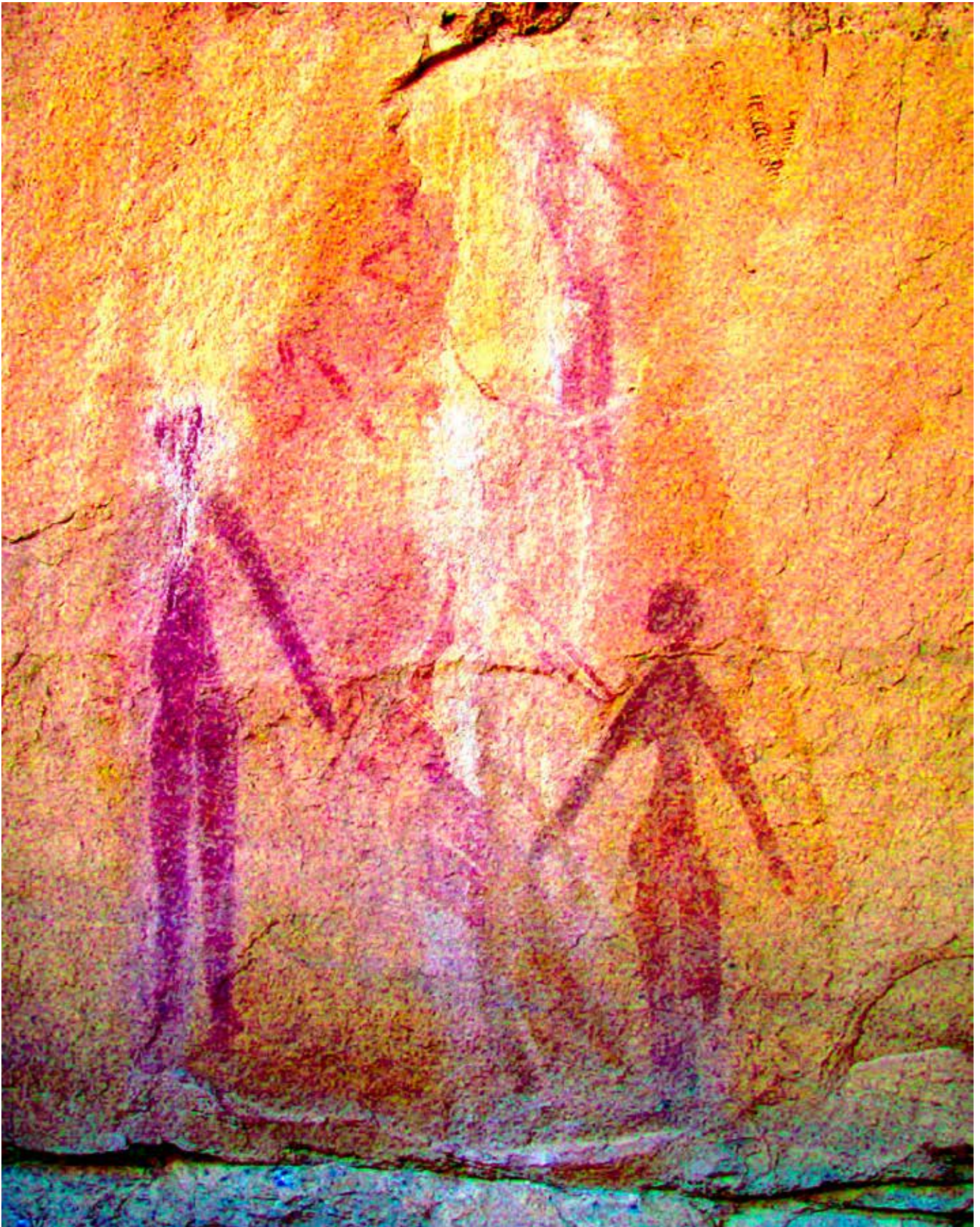


Fig. 6. A group of women painted under an ancient rainwater cascade (Tanshalt, Acacus). Photo enhanced with DStretch.





Fig. 7. A fantastic creature with raised arms, body paintings and breasts (Sefar, Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.

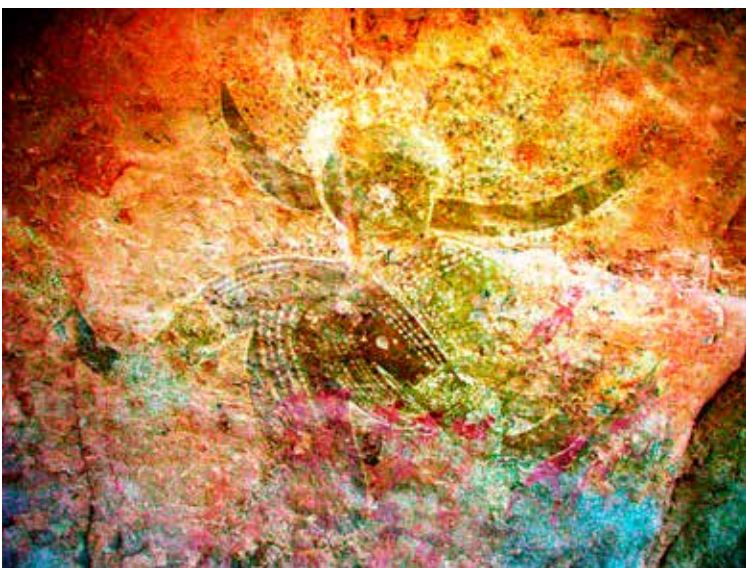


Fig. 8. A woman with two horns coming out of her head (Aouarnhat, Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.





Fig. 9. A woman holding a bow (In Itinen, Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.





Fig. 10. A woman wearing a mask that is normally associated with men (Aouarnhat, Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.



Fig. 11. A woman (on the right) with bracelets on her wrists (Sefar, Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.



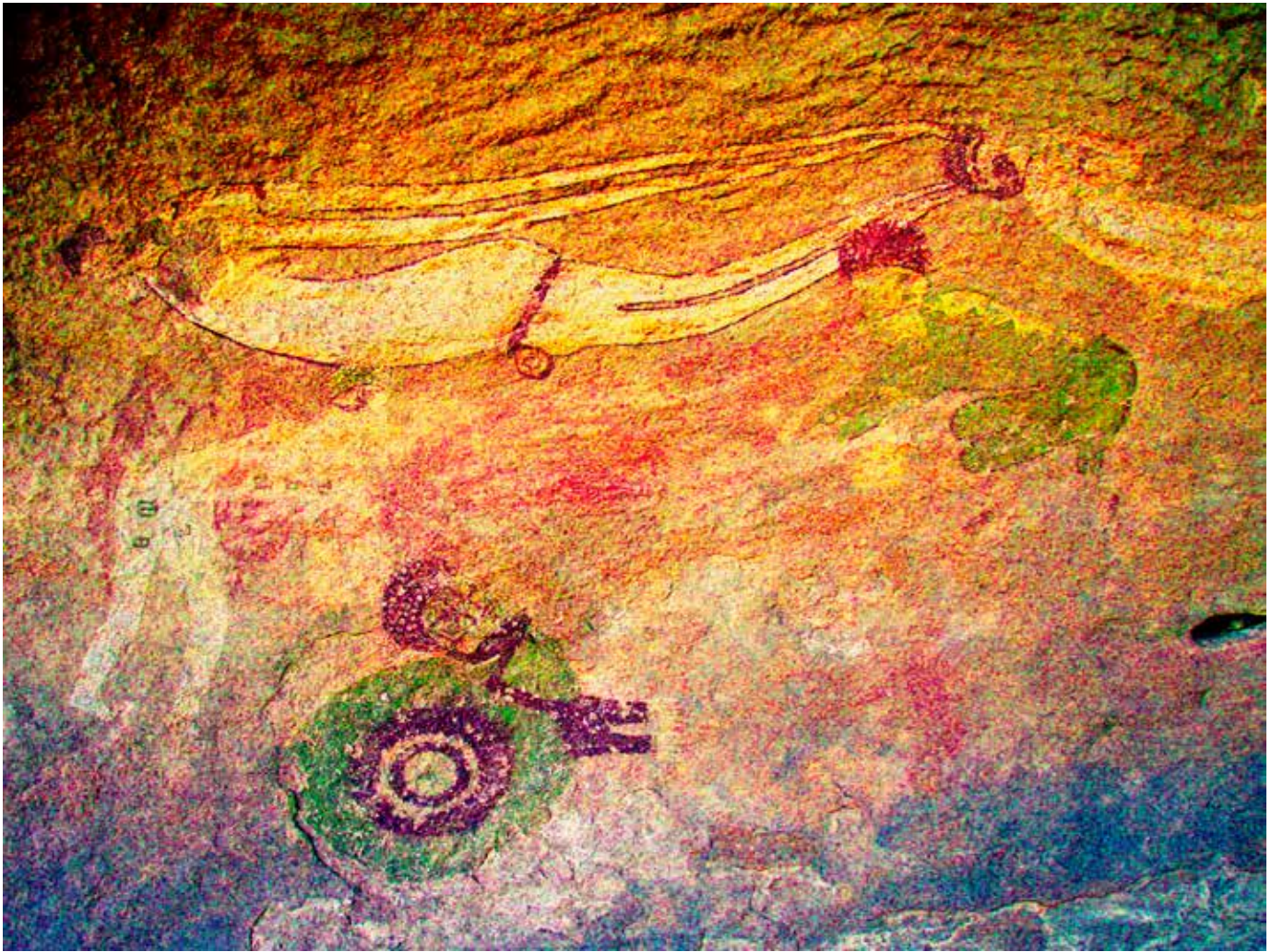


Fig. 12. A flying woman with disproportionately elongated arms and legs (Aouarnhat, Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.

At Aouarnhat in the Tassili, a flying woman presents also unrealistically elongated arms and legs (fig. 12), which is another characteristic indicating an alternated state of consciousness (Lewis-Williams, 2004). One scene in the Algerian Tadrart represents unidentifiable objects and a flying man. However, the whole scene seems to be dominated by a female figure standing above them all with open arms (fig. 13).

### **Egalitarian position of men and women**

Scenes in which there is an evident relationship between a man and a woman are extremely rare in Round Head art. Two scenes in the Tassili mountains represent a sitting couple facing each other (figs. 11, 14). In both cases, the man and the woman are sitting in the same position with bent legs and arms stretching out towards each other.

### **Conclusion**

In the Round Head complex men are more numerous than women, they have more decorative elements and they are often bigger than women. For example, the large-sized figures up to 3 m high, known in the Tassili mountains as great gods, are all males. However, women are present on rock walls often mixed with male figures. Sometimes they are depicted in separated scenes which suggest that certain rituals or ritual behaviors were the domain of women. In a few cases, women are represented with elements that are exclusive to men, such as the bow, horns or bracelets, or they are depicted in situations that normally belong to men, namely the flying position. There are also several fantastic creatures with breasts, which indicate that females were present in ancient mythology or stories.

Although they are less numerous than male figures, a certain importance of women in the spiritual life of





Fig. 13. A woman standing next to unidentifiable objects and a flying man (Wadi Moulenaga, Algerian Tadrart). Photo enhanced with DStretch.

this hunting society is evident. Their lesser incidence in rock art must not be misleading and it may simply indicate that women as mothers and housekeepers could not always afford to venture into the mountains to produce paintings. Rock art production became thus the domain of male hunters experiencing without doubt much greater freedom. Considering also a major incidence of male attributes and body decorations, it is likely that rituals in this ancient Central Saharan society were more frequently performed by men.

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Fig. 14. A sitting couple facing each other (Techakelaouen, Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.

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