

# RAIN ANIMALS IN CENTRAL SAHARAN ROUND HEAD ROCK ART: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

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## Introduction

This paper is a result of prolonged fieldwork undertaken by the author between 2005 and 2023 in the Libyan Acacus, the Algerian Tassili and Algerian Tadrart mountains (Map 1). The field research aimed to study mainly the earliest prehistoric rock art, with special focus on the Round Head paintings. The fieldwork involved only non-invasive techniques based on observation and photography of the rock art, sites and landscape (Fig. 1).

As it became more and more evident over the years, a significant part of the Central Saharan rock paintings and engravings were connected to rainwater, judging from their location next to or directly under ancient water cascades (Soukopova 2016; 2020). In addition

to this, among Round Head animal figures, the author noticed the presence of unidentifiable down-headed animals which had repeating and similar characteristics meaning that these designs were intentional. Some of these animals were already known in the literature and described and classified by various authors as real species, although somehow “weird”. For example, the same animal at Tin Aboteka site in the Tassili (Fig. 2) was interpreted by different researchers as a bovid, hippopotamus and feline (Soukopova 2011).

After a detailed examination of several hundred pictures of Round Head animal figures from the Tassili, Tadrart and Acacus, 57 unidentifiable animals with similar characteristics have been identified and they constitute the basis of this paper. A research hypoth-



Map 1. The Central Saharan mountains discussed in the text (Google maps).



Fig. 1. The mountains of the Algerian Tadrart.

esis is tested here, namely that these images of unidentifiable animals can be categorised as rain animals. Each of these unidentifiable animals presents one or more characteristic features which are listed below (Tab. 1), and they are compared with analogous animals in the South African rock art, which also present these features.

### **The climate and rock art**

The oldest painted images probably originated around the 10th millennium BP, during a humid period which started first in the Central Saharan mountains at around 15,000 BP. This wet phase was preceded by an arid period during which life was possible only in certain parts in the mountains (Maley 2004). The onset of the wet climate also in the lowlands in the 10th millennium BP represented an important change in the Central Saharan environment and corresponded with the beginning of the Epipalaeolithic phase. Thanks to the possibility of human and animal mobility throughout the whole Sahara new subsistence strategies developed and the sites became much more

numerous (Fig. 3). The archaeological record testifies that the Epipalaeolithic hunters were a complex society with excellent quality of lithic tools, grinding equipment and pottery. Several burials were found in the Tassili and in the Acacus; laboratory examinations of cutaneous remains have revealed dark-skinned individuals (Aumassip 1980-1; Mori 2000).

The excavations in the Tassili and Acacus confirm the presence, between 10,000 and 7,500 BP, of hunter-gatherer groups which preceded the advent of the pastoral economy at around 7,500 BP. Although we do not possess direct dating from the oldest paintings, several elements indicate that in this revolutionary period also a new rock art style appeared, namely the Round Head style (Soukopova, 2011). The Early Holocene archaeological stratigraphy is reflected in the rock art where the distinction between the Round Heads without domesticated animals and the pastoral phase with bovine painted imagery is evident. Another similarity between the archaeology and the paintings is the predominance of mouflons since the excavated faunal remains dating before 7,500 BP present a pre-





Fig. 2. This unidentifiable down-headed animal at Tin Aboteka site in the Tassili was interpreted by different researchers as a cattle, hippopotamus and feline.

ponderance of mouffons and this animal species also dominates in the Round Head rock art (Cremaschi and Di Lernia 1996; Sansoni 1994).

The Round Head complex is dominated by anthropomorphic figures (whose head shape gave the name to the style), often with decorated, horned, masked and

dancing people suggesting that many sites were not used for mundane activities (Figs. 4; 5). Animal figures are also frequent, usually depicted in a static pose without any behavioural characteristics and narrative scenes are an exception. The majority of the images are mouffons and antelope, less frequent are the representations of bovid, elephant, bird, giraffe, warthog, rhinoceros and hippopotamus.

After a short arid phase around 7,000 BP, pastoralism spread throughout the whole territory of the Central Sahara (Aumassip 2004). The newly arrived pastoral populations also produced rock art but their art is diametrically different from the older Round Head art, both in theme and technique. Pastoralists mainly depicted herds of domesticated cattle and everyday life scenes, which are not seen in the imagery of the hunters (Hachid 1998). As pastoral art belongs to a distinct cultural group, it will not be discussed here, and this study will address exclusively the Round Head corpus.

<b>ALL RAIN ANIMALS identified</b>	<b>Tassili 49; Tadrart 2; Acacus 6 IN TOTAL 57</b>
<b>Characteristic features identified:</b>	<b>Sites and number of features:</b>
<b>DOUBLE BACK</b>	Tassili 20; Tadrart 2; Acacus 2
<b>DOTS</b>	Tassili 10; Tadrart 0; Acacus 1
<b>ONE HORN</b>	Tassili 8; Tadrart 0; Acacus 0
<b>LINES from the animal</b>	Tassili 10; Tadrart 0; Acacus 3
<b>PROMINENT BELLY</b>	Tassili 2; Tadrart 0; Acacus 5

Tab. 1. Chart showing rain animals identified in the study area and the characteristic features. These are minimum numbers as other unidentifiable animals may be revealed in the future.



Fig. 3. One of the many rock shelters which contain prehistoric paintings and engravings (Uan Tabarakat site, Algerian Tadrart).

### **The similarity with South African rock art**

Whilst there are some ethnographic records for the historical periods of the Central Saharan rock art, there are no ethnographic records for the prehistoric Round Head phase. These paintings were created by hunters who mostly migrated towards sub-Saharan Africa with the onset of an arid climate at around 3,000 years BP (Maley 2004; Brooks *et al.* 2003).

An alternative way to approach the interpretation is to undertake comparative studies with other rock-art complexes. The ethnographic record of South Africa is particularly suitable for the interpretation of the Round Head paintings as there are some striking similarities in the painted scenes, which suggest a similar ideology persisted in time and space. This resemblance

especially concerns the category of unidentifiable down-headed animals.

In Round Head art, animal representations are very simple in their form, however, it is nevertheless always possible to identify the species intended as the painters used conventional marks such as horns or tusks (Figs. 6; 7). There are, however, some animals that are not determinable. They bear marks of more than one animal or they have no marks, as they consist only of a body with four limbs, a tail but no ears or horns (Fig. 8). Since other animals are always recognizable from their distinguishing traits, the particular form of indeterminate quadrupeds must have been fully intentional, especially because their bodies present common features.





Fig. 4. A female figure with body decoration characteristic of the earliest Round Head style (Sefar, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.

Fig. 5. Male figures with body decoration and wild animals, mainly mouflons (Tan Zoumaitak, Tassili Plateau).



Fig. 6. An example of recognisable Round Head animals: mouflons with characteristic horns. Smaller figures of domesticated cows were painted later (Adaba, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.





Fig. 7. An example of a recognisable Round Head animal: an antelope with characteristic horns (Sefar, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.

Fig. 8. An example of an unidentifiable animal: a down-headed quadruped without ears or horns (Jabbaren, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.







Fig. 9. A rain animal painted above a natural hole in the rock (Tin Tartait, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.

When first described (Soukopova 2011), the author noticed two main characteristic features of these enigmatic animals:

- they are intentionally indeterminable.
- they are represented with the head downwards.

The down-headed position is what distinguishes them clearly from the recognizable animals, which are never represented as “down-headed”. These two main traits, as well as the shape of the animals, were likened to the South African rock art, where similar animals exist and were interpreted, on the grounds of ethnographic record, as animals of the rain (Solomon 1992; Lewis-Williams 1981, 2004).

The rain animals feature prominently in South African ritual, myth and art. In the rock art they are characteristically rounded, fat, and herbivore-like (Fig. 14). They bear little resemblance to known species, and their form is therefore not determined by a con-

cern for realism. However, snakes, bovids, antelope, hippos, and non-real confections of these and other animals, also fall into the category of creatures of the rain (Lewis-Williams 2004; Challis 2005).

Rain animals are managed, in altered states of consciousness (trance) by rain men, who catch a rain animal beneath the water surface and lead it through the sky to the place where the rain is needed or to the top of a hill. There the animal is killed so that its blood would fall as rain. Indeed, as Lewis-Williams (1981; 2004) notes, in rock art, down-headed animals represent dying animals in difficulty and not able to stand up.

As for their representation in both South Africa and the Central Sahara, they are not representations of real animal species. However, for the people who created them, these creatures were familiar enough to be able to recognise them from their characteristic traits and body shape, even though their forms may vary. For the hunters of the time, the unidentifiable animals were



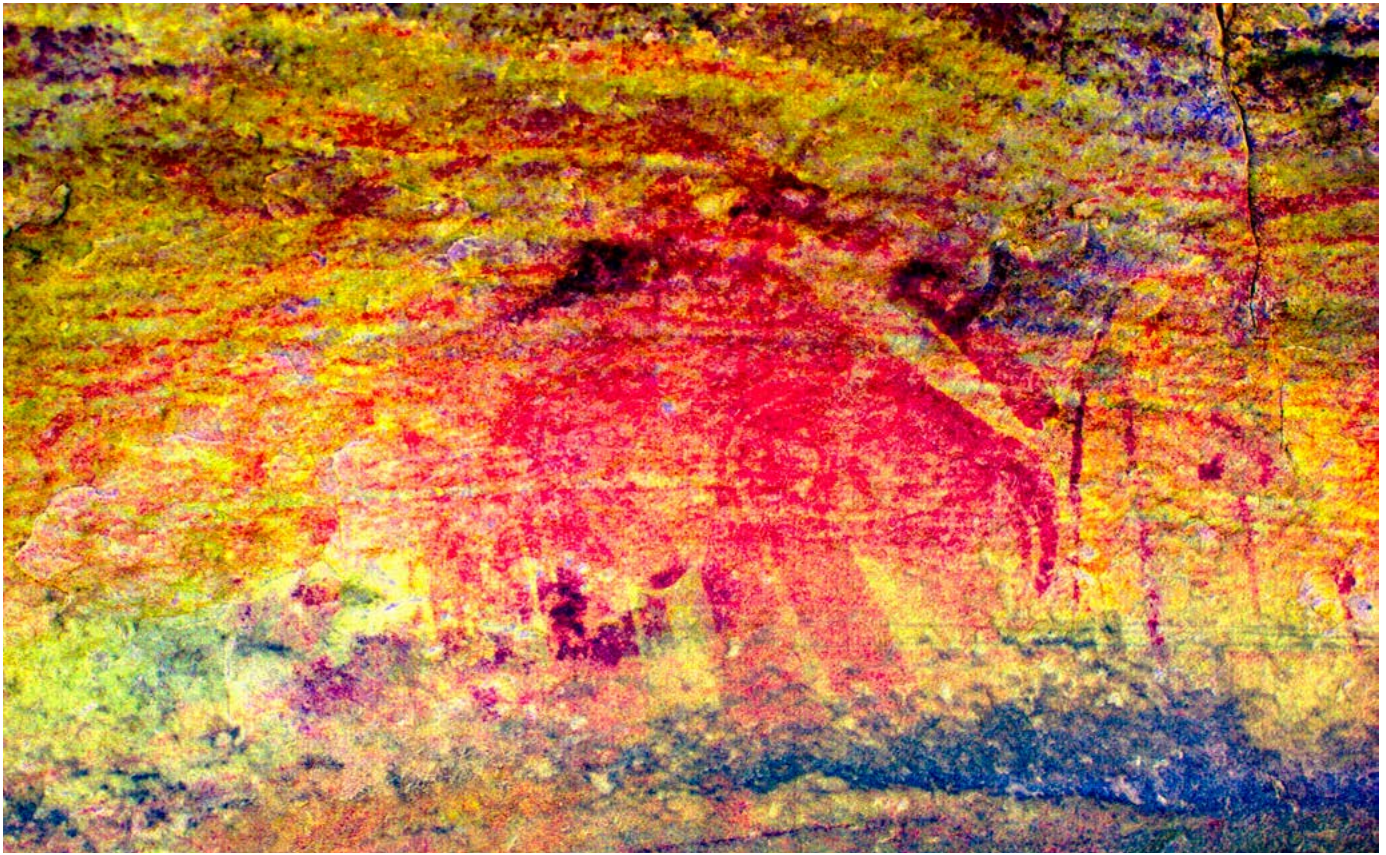


Fig. 10. A rain animal with a characteristic double back (Tin Ibrahim, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.

as real as any other spirits or mythical ancestors, also living in a parallel world.

### **Round Head rain animals**

From examination of the images collected during fieldwork and after a detailed study of the South African rock art, this paper aims to demonstrate that the unidentifiable down-headed animals in the Round Head art are rain animals. Rain animals are creatures used during rituals with the intention of bringing (or perhaps ceasing) rain. Even though we cannot know exactly how, these animals played a fundamental role in rainmaking and for this reason they were painted in rock shelters in selected places (Fig. 9).

Down-headed animals in the Round Head art are of various dimensions, ranging from 3 meters long down to just a few centimetres, but those of large dimensions prevail. They are typically located in the central part of the wall with all other anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figures, usually smaller, being placed around them. Their importance in the rock art is therefore

evident and it suggests the significant role that these animals had to play in the ideology of the painters and their society.

The Round Head rain animals are of two types, one is bulky with short legs, the other is slenderer with longer legs. This distinction might also find an analogy in South African ethnography as the San distinguish two kinds of rain, each having its respective animal: a rain-bull is an unwelcome thunderstorm that destroys people's huts; the rain-cow is the gentle, soaking rain bringing fertility (Lewis-Williams 2004). Besides their unique shape and posture, there are five characteristic features which some of these animals present. They are listed in the chart below and discussed in the following sections.

### **Double back**

The unidentifiable down-headed animals in the Round Head art have one characteristic which distinguishes them from real animals: their back is often made of two parallel lines (Fig. 10; 11; 12; 13). These



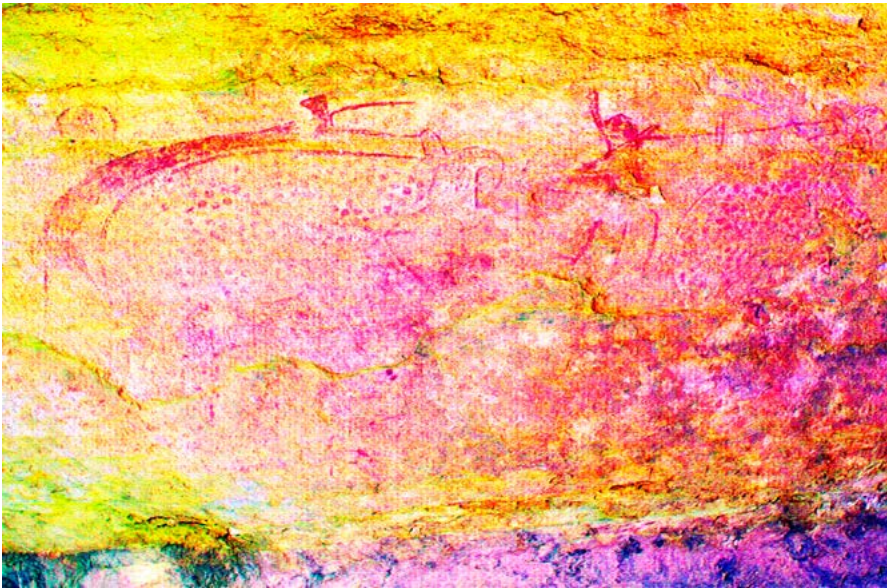
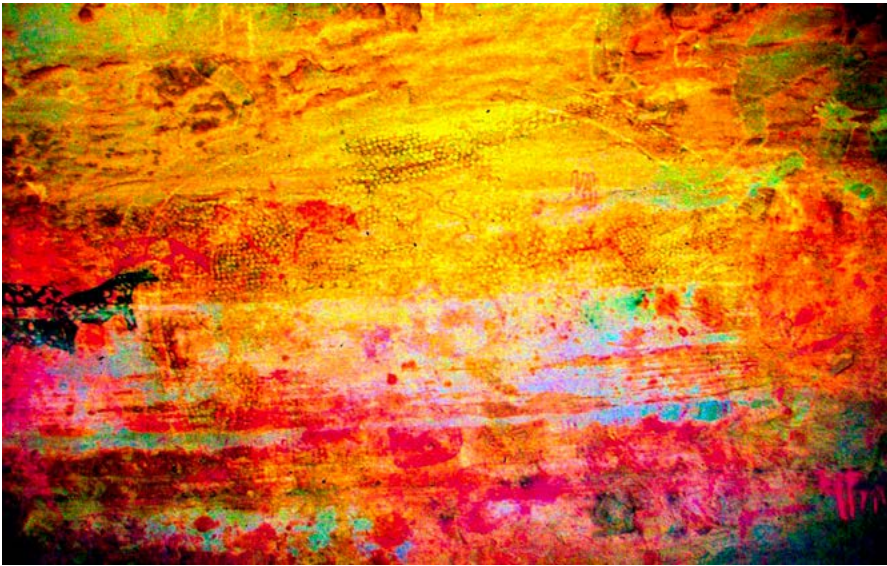


Fig. 11. A spotted rain animal with a characteristic double back (Jabbaren, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.

Fig. 12. A spotted animal with a double back and one horn. In front of it, there is another smaller animal with dots and one horn (Tin Taharin, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.

Fig. 13. This down-headed animal with a multicolour double back evoking a rainbow is covered with spider web like motifs possibly representing snowflakes (Adaba, Tassili Plateau).



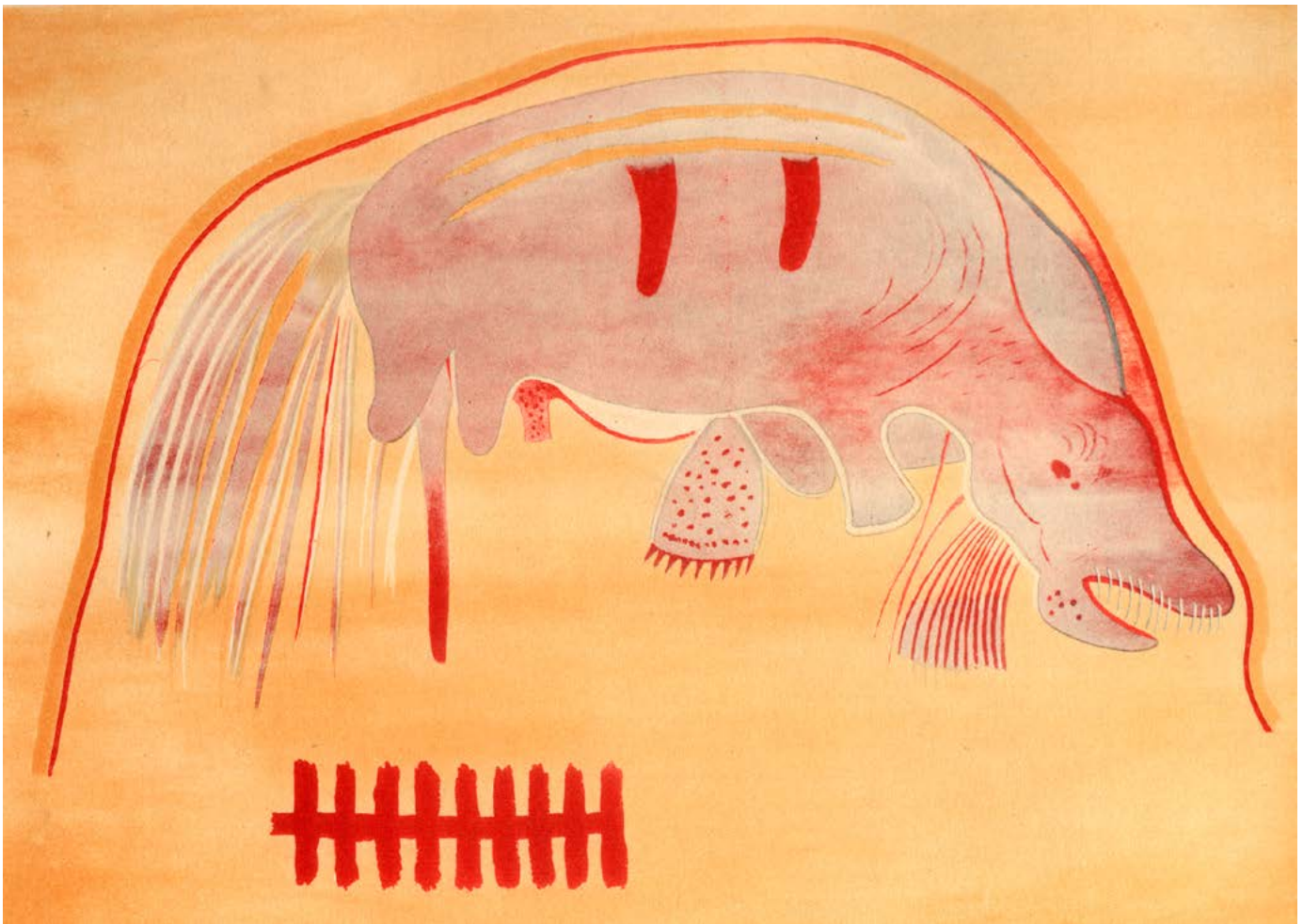


Fig. 14. South Africa: according to the San people this rounded fat quadruped is a female rain animal surrounded by a rainbow (George Stow's copy, from Le Quellec 2004).

double backs were first interpreted by the author as probable later repainting representing occasions of rain rituals, where the existing rain animal was simply repainted instead of making a new one (Soukopova 2020). However, more detailed examination has shown that in most cases the double back was not a repainting, nor a refreshing of an old picture, but the animals were actually intended to have a double line on the back.

This characteristic feature of Round Head rain animals consists of two separated parallel arcs, the lower one representing the back of the animal and the upper one copying it. The lines may be of the same colour or they can have up to three different colours: white, red and dark brown.

Considering the close relationship of the rain with

the sky, we are tempted to hypothesize that the monochrome arcs around the animals represent the sky and the polychrome arcs represent a rainbow. Such a hypothesis is supported by the comparison with the South African rock art where a rain animal surrounded by a rainbow has been documented (Fig. 14). The representation of the sky as a double arc is also known from ancient Egypt, where Nut, the Goddess of the sky and all heavenly bodies has this same shape (Britannica 2023).

### Spotted animals

When further comparing the South African and Round Head rain animals we notice other similarities. Besides the two main characteristics already mentioned, namely the unrealistic form and the down-headed



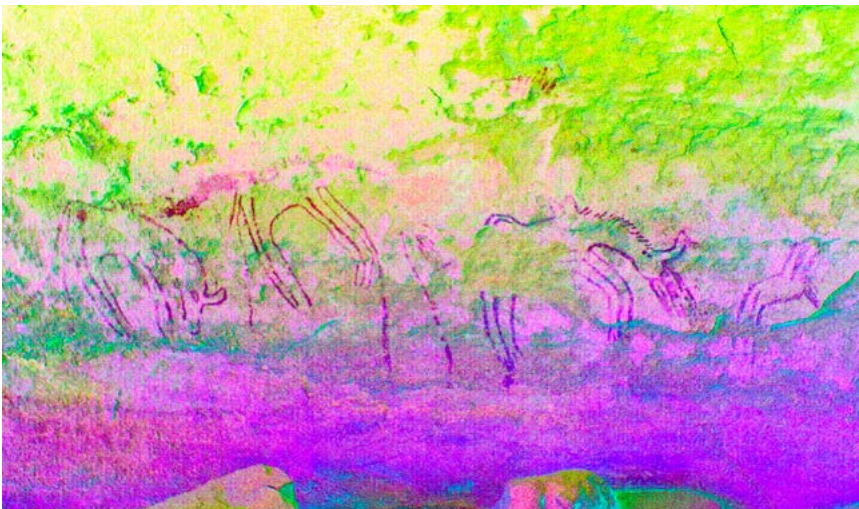


Fig. 15. This bulky one-horned animal was painted under an ancient rain cascade, so that during rain water was crossing its belly (Uan Bender, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.

Fig. 16. A down-headed animal represented with only one horn (Tin Mzghigauin, northern Tassili). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.

Fig. 17. Two down-headed animals with only one horn. The animal on the right has parallel lines leading from its mouth (Tin Taharin, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.



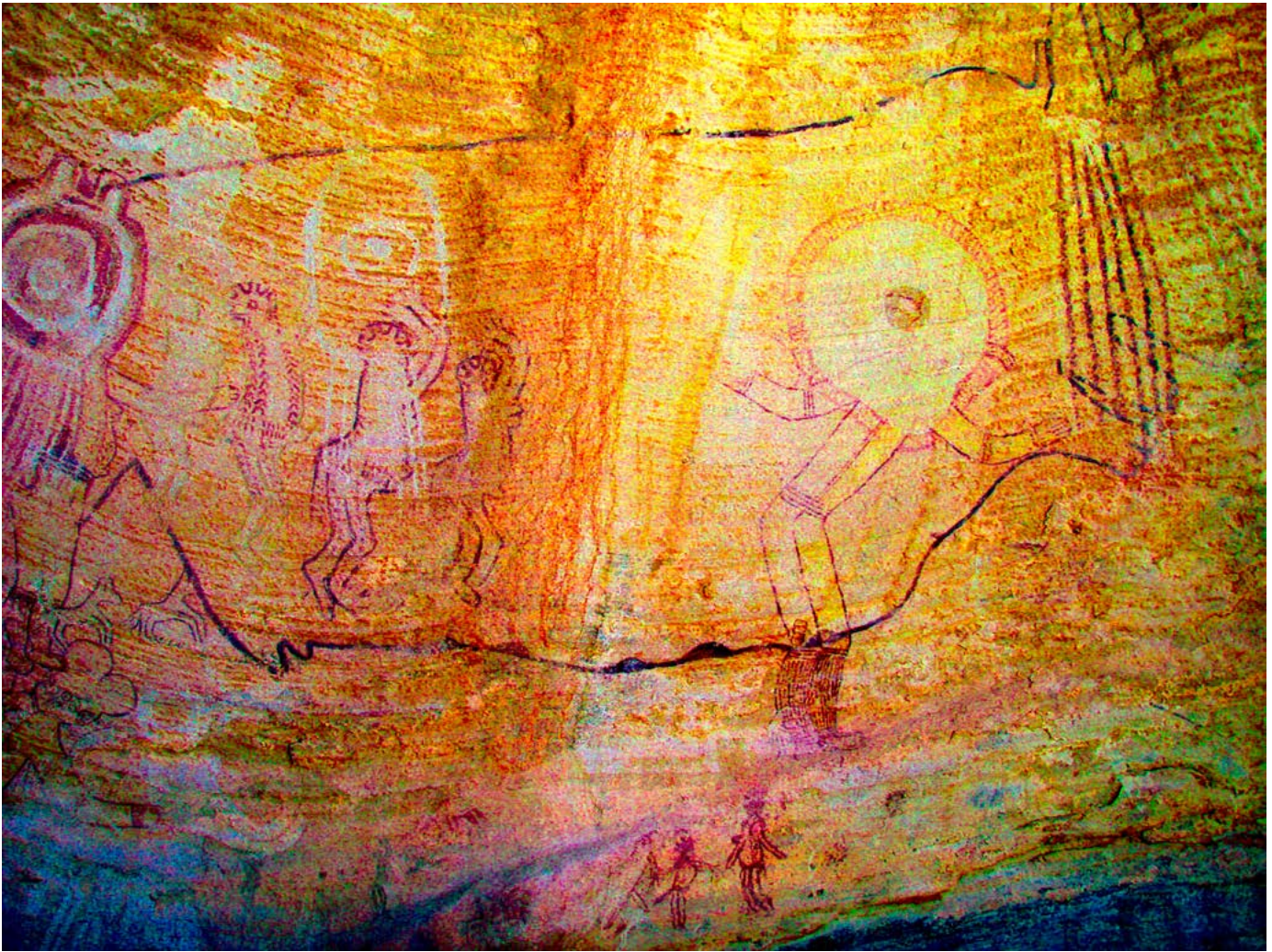


Fig. 18. A bulky animal with parallel lines over its head. Inside its belly there are several women in a worshipping position. The animal was painted on the spot of the wall where water was running down during rains as it is evident from the dark line crossing its belly (Sefar, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.

position, it is the fact that some of these animals (in both geographic regions) are spotted (Figs. 11; 12). Their bodies may be entirely covered with small dots, or they may just appear as dotted stripes, lines or dotted clusters on the body. Sometimes the dots are also painted outside the animal, around it.

According to J.L. Le Quellec white dots inside animals represent raindrops because they are found both on mythical snakes and on other rain animals, and he postulates that spotted bodies are a “monopoly of mythical beings” (2004). Therefore, if dots represent rain, there is nothing more natural than to depict a spotted creature as an embodiment of rain.

In one documented case in the Tassili, a Round Head

animal is not covered with dots but with spider web like motifs (Fig. 13). Considering the climate in this 2,000m high mountainous range with snowy winters even today, we may hypothesize that the motifs inside the animal are snowflakes and the creature represents a snow animal.

### One-horned animals

Another surprising similarity of the Central Saharan and the South African rock art is the presence of one-horned animals which are evidently not rhinoceros (Witelson 2023). Based on San mythology, Dorothea Bleek suggested in 1909 that one-horned antelope are rain animals, as they represent a “water-child” which





Fig. 19. At Anshal in the Libyan Acacus a down-headed animal is depicted with parallel lines exiting from its belly (tracing by the author, from Mori 2000).

have a single horn (Stow & Bleek 1930). These creatures are thus another form of rain animals. To support this hypothesis is the fact that some South African rain rites involve single horn containers for “rain medicine” (Blackwell & d’Errico 2021).

We find one-horned animals in the Round Head art too (Figs. 12; 15; 16; 17). In the Tassili, 8 examples have been documented so far: they are down-headed and some of them are spotted which liken them further to the South African rain animals. The intention to deliberately paint only one horn is clear as all other herbivores in the Round Head style are painted with two horns. In the Tassili one of these one-horned animals was deliberately painted under an ancient rain cascade, so that during rain water was running across its prominent belly (Fig. 15).

### Lines from the animals

Parallel lines leading from rain animals were docu-

mented in 11 cases in the Round Head art (for example Figs. 13; 17; 19). A study of engraved lines in the Algerian Tadrart has shown that they were connected to rain-water and also painted parallel lines have been interpreted as rain running down from a cloud (Soukopova 2020). Lines leading from rain animals would therefore represent falling rain. If we compare this with the South African ethnography, we find that water is sometimes described as a striped horse-like animal. Lines are associated with the rain in San thought, where the “water’s children” are described as striped quadrupeds (Witelson 2023).

### Prominent belly

Rain animals in the Round Head art sometimes have an exaggeratedly big belly, which does not seem to be the representation of an udder. A large belly is also a characteristic of South African rain animals - which is understandable if they are intended to represent crea-



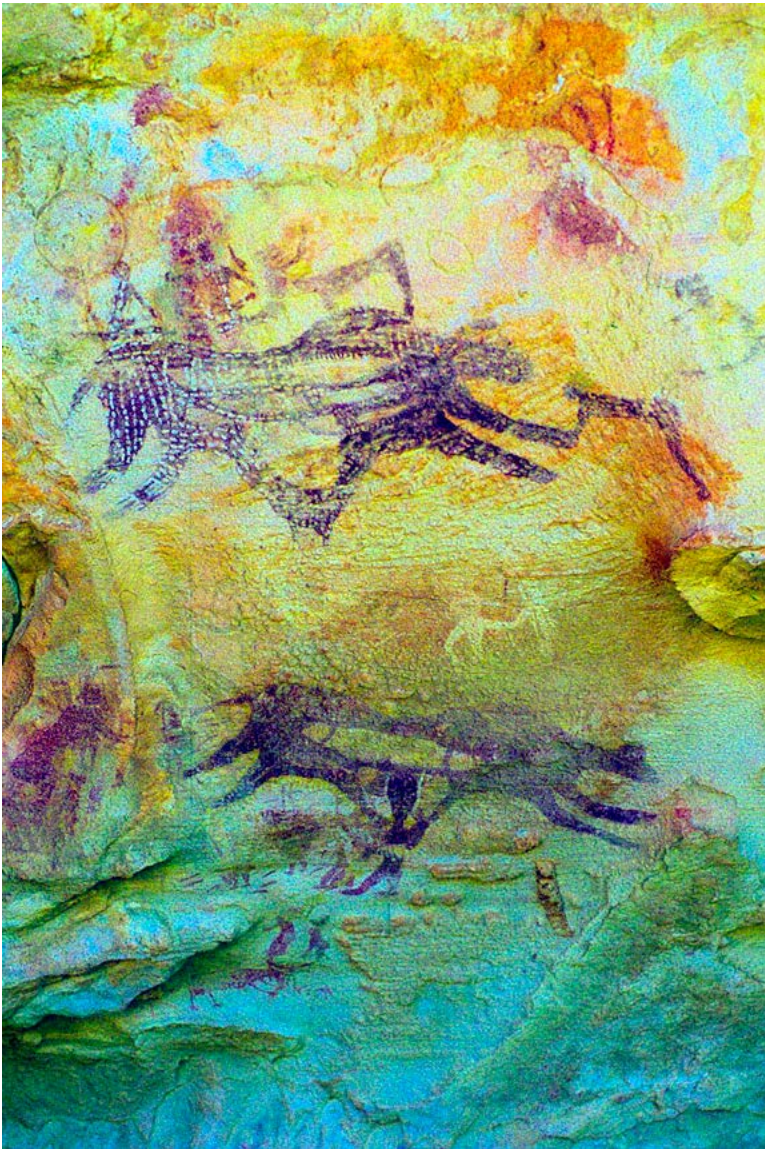


Fig. 20. Two unidentifiable animals with a prominent belly and a particular shape of heads. The upper animal is covered with dotted stripes (Tin Barsaoula, Acacus). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.

Fig. 21. An unidentifiable animal of the Tassili plateau presents a similar shape of head as two animals in the Acacus in the Fig. 11 (Jabbaren, Tassili plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.







Fig. 22. The spectacular rock shapes of the Tassili plateau attracted prehistoric painters.

tures full of water. Painted inside one of the big bellies of a Round Head animal in the Tassili were images of apparently pregnant women in a posture of adoration with their arms raised (Fig. 18). Rain and fertility are two inseparable realities in traditional African belief: rain is considered God's sperm bringing life to the earth (Melis 2002). At Anshal, a site in the Libyan Acacus mountains, a down-headed animal is depicted with parallel lines exiting from its prominent belly which resembles rain running from a cloud (Fig. 19). At Tin Barsaoula site in the Acacus, there are two unidentifiable animals in the Round Head style with prominent bellies, which have been interpreted as domestic cattle (Muzzolini 1995). However, such interpretation cannot be considered correct because these animals are depicted without horns (Fig. 20). Horns were a fundamental part in the depiction of

domestic cattle and indeed, there are no paintings of cattle without horns in the pastoral art. One of the animals at Tin Barsaoula is completely covered with dots which suggests that they belong to the category of rain animals. Moreover, they both present an identical shape of head, and a similar head shape is also present on some of the unidentifiable animals on the Tassili plateau, which signifies that it was a codified form of head reserved for special creatures (Fig. 21).

### **Why rain?**

The attribution of unidentifiable down-headed animals in Round Head art to the category of rain animals may be seen as arbitrary. It may be argued that these creatures represent mythological animals known and understood in prehistory, but their meaning is now lost. This paper proposes the attribution to rain





Fig. 23. Pastoral style: an unidentifiable down-headed animal covered with dots is connected through a dotted line with a spotted cow also head down (Uan Assakamar, Tassili Plateau). Photo elaborated with Dstretch.

animals for two main reasons:

The comparative study of South African rock art (based on the attested ethnographic record) shows that at least six features belonging to rain animals are also present in the Round Head art. These features are: unidentifiable shape of the body, down-headed position, dots on animals, one-horned animals, arc over animals and motif of lines. Such similarity in both geographic regions cannot be considered accidental, on the contrary, we are apparently dealing with a phenomenon which was firmly established and understood over a large territory.

Considering the priorities that prehistoric people would have had, it is evident that nothing would have been more important than water. Their very existence was based on water, water was the essence of animals, humans and plants. Everything else, including fertility, procreation, art and rituals came only after the basic need for water was met. This reality is best expressed in African traditional belief, where God is associated with the sky; the same word is often used for God, rain and sky and rain is the saliva of God (Mbiti 1969; Haruna 1997). To perform rain rituals and depict rain animals is a logical consequence of this primary need. The Round Head rain animals are depicted mainly on the Tassili plateau (Fig. 22) but they are found also

in the lower mountains of the Algerian Tadrart and the Libyan Acacus. It indicates that these creatures were a generally known and used concept, which may be explained by the constant necessity, in all African societies, to assure the rain. Regarding the frequency of these animals, there is another parallel with South Africa. In the South African rock art there are often only one or a few, often large and prominent, rain animals in a rock shelter, whereas there are numerous depictions of eland. It is exactly the same situation as in the Tassili where there are less than 60 depictions of down-headed animals compared with more than 300 antelope and mouflons. The relatively small number of rain animals in South Africa is explained by the fact that the painted image was a manifestation of the rain man's particular rain animal caught in trance (Lewis-Williams and Pearce 2004). It is possible that the Central Saharan rain animals were also painted in occasion of a specific rain ritual performed in the same place.

It would be interesting to conduct the same research in the following rock art complex, namely in the pastoral art, and reveal possible rain animals. The need for rain must have been even stronger for herders, and indeed, there are indices suggesting that rain rituals continued also in this period. For example, at Uan



Assakamar site in the Tassili, there is an unidentifiable down-headed animal completely covered with dots but painted in the pure pastoral style (Fig. 23). This creature is connected through a dotted line with a down-headed cow which is also spotted. The presence of rain animals in other Saharan rock art complexes should not surprise. Rainmaking and rain controlling have always been practiced in Africa and the similarity of this phenomenon in different periods and regions may indicate the same prehistoric origin.

## Conclusion

Rain has always played a fundamental role in life of African societies and the connection to rain-water has been attested in many Central Saharan rock art sites. Based on the ethnographic record from South Africa, where the existence of rain animals has been firmly attested, this paper aimed to demonstrate the existence of rain animals in the Round Head complex as well. It presented the characteristic features of these creatures and it showed evident similarities between rain animals in both geographic regions.

A hypothesis of mythological creatures, rather than rain animals, in the Central Saharan rock art can certainly be tested for those animals which do not fit well into the category of unidentifiable down-headed animals. In the Round Head complex there are truly fantastical animals with multiple horns or legs for instance, who cannot be categorised as rain animals because they do not find analogy in the South African rock art. For such creatures the study of the ethnographic record and oral traditions from the Sub-Saharan Africa region might be useful. As for the category of rain animals in the Round Head art, their substantial analogy with the South African rain animals seems to justify this interpretation, unless a more convincing explanation is found.

Unlike the South African rock art research where interpretation has been carried out for decades, the Central Saharan rock art is still at the beginning of its interpretation. This is mainly due to the lack of an ethnographic record directly applicable to the earliest art. However, if used with caution, comparative study may open a new way of looking at this, not only in the study of the Round Head art, but also in the study of other African rock art. This will only be possible, though, if researchers take the risk and abandon the

comfort zone of research based only on documentation and description of rock art.

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