

THE IDEOLOGY OF PREHISTORIC SAHARAN HUNTERS WHAT CAN WE INFER FROM THE ROUND HEAD PAINTINGS?

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Fig. 1. The Tassili Plateau offers a vast number of high-quality rock walls for painting.

Abstract

The Round Head rock paintings of the Central Sahara, created more than 10,000 years ago, provide a rare source of evidence for aspects of hunter-gatherer life that are not directly accessible through archaeological remains alone. These images contribute to the reconstruction of prehistoric social organization and identities, material culture, ritual practices, and belief systems. Particular attention is paid to human figures and their attributes, including hunting equipment, bodily adornment, masks, ritual postures, and recurring symbolic motifs. The distinction between ordinary hunters and supernatural figures is explored, as is the apparent male dominance reflected

in the imagery. Painted sites appear to have served as important ritual gathering places repeatedly visited by hunter groups.

The World of the Round Head Hunters

There are thousands of rock paintings and engravings in the Central Sahara. The oldest paintings, known as the Round Head paintings, were created by hunter-gatherers more than 10,000 years ago, during a time when the Sahara was experiencing one of its rainiest periods. Archaeological findings show that these hunters lived in organized groups in the lowlands near lakes and in rock shelters in the mountains. They were skilled artisans who produced high-quality everyday



Fig. 2. A man with body painting and a sophisticated hairstyle or mask (Sefar, Tassili plateau). Drawing traced by J. Soukopova.

items, such as stone and wooden tools, ceramic vessels, woven baskets, and leather goods (Hachid 1998; Mori 2000; Aumassip and Chaid-Saoudi 2004).

These hunters created more than just practical items.

They had at their disposal a large number of rock walls, which they decorated with paintings (Fig. 1). These artworks provide information that archaeology alone could not provide: they show that the hunters decorated their bodies with paintings, plants, and bird feathers, wore masks and elaborate hairstyles, played musical instruments, and danced (Figs.2; 3). They constitute visual records of the period and evoke their world. However, they reveal much more. In fact, a significant portion of the artwork depicts the spiritual realm rather than daily routines. They also depict elements that existed in the hunters' conceptual world: their mythology, deities, and social structure. This article is based on a study of more than five thousand paintings and painted scenes from the Tassili and Tadrart mountains in southern Algeria and Libya (Fig. 4).

How to interpret?

When we look at prehistoric images, we tend to interpret them through our cultural and personal experiences, and this can sometimes be very



Fig. 3. Music was part of this hunting society. The horn placed near the mouth is probably a wind instrument (Aiteluaten, lower Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.

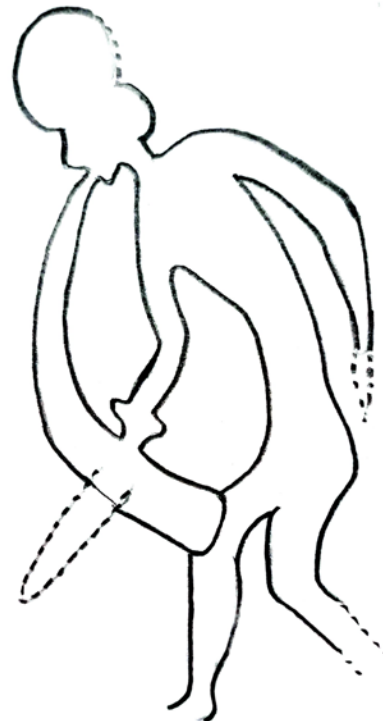




Fig. 4. The Central Saharan mountains discussed in the text (Google Maps).

misleading. Nevertheless, these images arose from human needs that have persisted for millennia. What was essential in prehistoric times is essential today as well: the desire for human and animal fertility, the need to have enough water, and the desire to influence the spiritual world in one's favor.

Prehistoric paintings cannot be interpreted with certainty, because we do not know the mythology and stories of people ten thousand years ago, nor the types of rituals that influenced the rock art of hunters. However, this does not mean that no interpretation

is possible. The paintings offer basic information. The key to understanding the essence of hunter art lies in the themes of the paintings: animals, people, and objects. It is also important to observe what today seem like mere details to us, but in prehistoric times these were essential facts and had their roles in the paintings.

Only what was significant was immortalized on the rock walls. In the Round Head complex, the two main themes are people and animals. This article will examine the depictions of human figures in greater detail. These can be divided into two groups: scenes representing what happened in the material world and paintings that capture events in the spiritual world. Both of these worlds were an everyday reality for hunters because they were interconnected and inseparable.

Paintings of the material world

In the Round Head art, there are both male and female figures, but male figures are far more numerous. The predominance of male figures and their frequent adornments suggest the dominant position of men in the hunting societies of the Central Sahara. Frequently,



Fig. 5. A rock face depicting mouflons, antelopes, and male figures. Some of them have the typical attributes of a hunter: a bow, a bracelet, a short stick, and objects hanging from their waists (Aiteluaten, lower Tassili). Photo enhanced with DStretch.

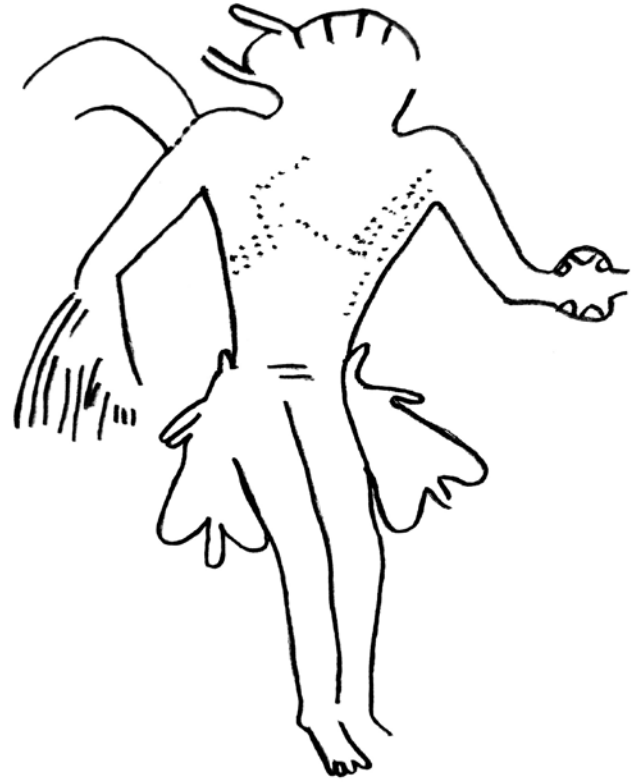


Fig. 6. A man with the typical attributes of a hunter: a bracelet on his left wrist and possible bags made from the skins of small animals attached to his waist (Tin Taharin, Tassili plateau). Credit B. Fouilleux. Photo enhanced with DStretch.

they painted only unadorned, naked male figures, emphasizing the importance of immortalizing a man on the rock. Many men were depicted with typical accessories intended to signal that they were hunters (Fig. 5). The main characteristic is that they hold a bow and arrows in their hands, which shows us that hunting - or the status of a hunter - was a fundamental element of their culture. The hunters of the Central Sahara knew and used both types of bows: the single-curved bow and the double-curved bow. However, note that although they are depicted with bows, no scenes of animals being pursued or killed are depicted. The aim was not to portray dominance over animals, but rather a lifestyle or status that men of that time aspired to. Hunting was at the forefront of their lives and thoughts (Soukopova 2011; 2016).

Hunters often wear a bracelet on the wrist of the arm holding the bow; it may have protected the wrist during shooting and also served as a marker of hunter status. The vast majority wear the bracelet on their left wrist, suggesting that they drew the bowstring with

the right hand and were therefore right-handed. Only a few hunters wear a bracelet on their right wrist, so they were probably left-handed.

Men often wear accessories placed around their waists. The same objects that represent the status of a hunter are repeated: T-shapes, strings, and triangles. Women are not depicted wearing these accessories. The exception is the rare instance where women are depicted holding a bow and arrow. Of course, women could also occasionally hunt, but that was not their role in society. Sometimes men wear only some of the hunter's symbols. Various ornaments could indicate identity, status, a particular stage of a hunter's initiation, or a role in ceremonies.

The triangle at the waist is another symbol of a hunter's status (Fig. 6). Whereas women may generally have remained with children at the campsite, hunters undertook extended expeditions in search of game. They carried their essentials in leather bags, and the most practical way to carry them was to tie them to their waists. Judging by their shape, it is possible that



Fig. 7. A detail of Gwion Gwion painted figures from the Kimberley region of Western Australia showing similar triangular objects attached to hunters' waists, as in the Saharan rock art. Drawing traced by J. Soukopova.

the bags were made directly from the skins of small animals, such as hares. This was likely the simplest solution, since the same triangular bags are found in the Gwion Gwion rock paintings in Australia (Fig. 7) (Walsh 1997). In these triangular bags, they could carry spare arrowheads and other lightweight stone tools, such as whetstones for sharpening arrowheads,

resin for gluing arrowheads, and tools for making fire. The triangles depicted in ritual scenes could have had a similar function and served as bags for carrying sacred objects. Other triangular objects hung at the waist below the belly may have served as genital protection, since hunters ran through bushy and rocky terrain. In this case as well, it was a sign of a hunter.

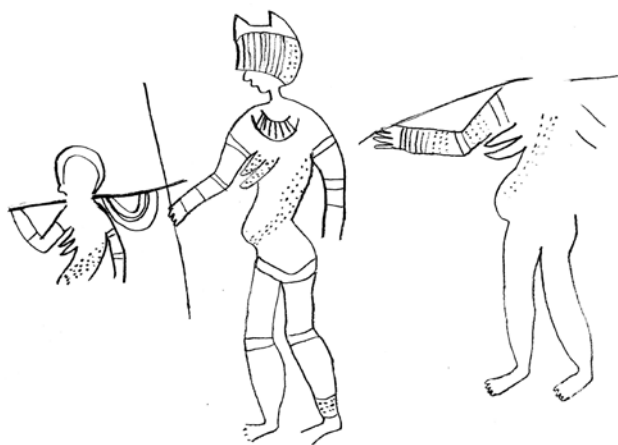


Fig. 8. Three women with body painting are holding sticks. While the woman in the middle is holding her stick horizontally, the two women on either side have sticks on their shoulders with bags hanging from them. This motif is common in the paintings and shows how loads were carried in prehistoric times (Uan Assakamar, Tassili plateau). Photo enhanced with DStretch.\



Fig. 9. The most frequently depicted type of mask is a stylized head of a mouflon. Mouflons were also among the most frequently painted animals. The importance of masks in the hunting societies of the Central Sahara is shown by the fact that masks are painted not only on people but also as separate objects (Tin Taharin, Tassili plateau). Photo enhanced with DStretch.

A short stick appears very frequently in depictions of both male and female figures. For men, it was likely a throwing stick used as a hunting tool. It was used to hunt small game and birds; it could be thrown quickly and accurately and was a common part of a hunter's equipment; in paintings, it is therefore one of the symbols of a hunter's status. For women, by contrast, it may have served as a digging stick for finding roots and fruits in the ground (Fig. 8). However, the short stick also had an important spiritual significance, as it is often represented in scenes depicting rituals.

Paintings of the spiritual world

It is often difficult to determine whether a painting portrays the material or spiritual world, because even seemingly simple and realistic figures can actually represent the spiritual realm. We will therefore focus on those cases where the spiritual aspect of the painting is evident.

Figures wearing masks occupy the boundary between the material and spiritual worlds (Fig. 9). Masks were worn by specific people who, by putting them on,

effectively entered the spiritual world, since the mask was a means by which a person could connect with the world of spirits, ancestors, or deities. During rituals, it was believed that the wearers of the mask ceased to be themselves and temporarily became embodiments of ancestors, spirits, or other supernatural beings.

In what situations did hunters use masks? This is difficult to determine from the paintings alone; ethnographic evidence may, however, suggest possible interpretations. In Africa, masks were used at funerals, initiation ceremonies, harvest celebrations, rain-making rituals, and healing rituals. Some masks were intended to ward off evil spirits, disease, or misfortune, while others were associated with hunting, childbirth, or the well-being of the entire group. During ceremonies, masks were usually accompanied by costumes, music, and dance. In most societies, only selected members of secret or religious societies were allowed to wear masks (Mbiti 1969).

Evidence from the spiritual paintings also points to male dominance within this society. The figures interpreted here as great gods are male. In this art,



Fig. 10. Two different types of raised arms: a great god with an enormous penis evokes protection or blessing. A woman stands in a worshipping position near his belly (Sefar, Tassili plateau). Photo enhanced with DStretch.

there are no paintings of female deities with people praying to them, as there are with the male gods. Who are these gods? Male figures with raised arms and an abnormally large penis; they are always depicted in the same pose - from the front, with their legs spread apart and bent at the knees, so that a large penis can be seen between them (Fig. 10). This makes them completely different from ordinary hunters, who are never depicted with a penis and whose lower bodies are always shown from the side. It is possible that what was depicted was not actually a penis, but a scrotum. In any case, this characteristic completely distinguishes them from ordinary hunters. Women were also depicted only from the side. This unique and codified representation of the gods indicates that they were widely recognized figures. These beings do not have the typical attributes of hunters, nor do they hold a bow, which means that they were not supposed to represent hunters. Some hold a stick and an elongated object, perhaps a bag or a club (Solleilhavoup 2007, Soukopova 2017).

It is more likely that they are indeed gods rather than ancient mythological heroes. This interpretation is suggested by their consistent depiction with arms raised and spread apart from their bodies. This posture is typical of protectors, of someone bestowing a blessing. In ancient Egypt, some deities also have their arms outstretched or raised as a sign of protection or blessing. The significance of this gesture in the African context is reinforced by the fact that in ancient Egypt there was a hieroglyph, 'ka', representing two raised arms (Fig. 11). 'Ka' signified the life force or spiritual essence of a person. Egyptian hieroglyphs used raised arms as a symbol of joy, celebration, or invocation (Teeter 2011).

The motif of raised hands is also common among male and female figures, but their posture differs from that of the gods. Their arms are clasped together in a clear display of a devotional act (Fig. 12). People raise their hands during prayer or ceremonies for several reasons; most commonly, it is an act of worship and reverence through which they express respect and

devotion to a deity. Since gods are often symbolically associated with the sky, raising one's hands represents establishing contact with the supernatural world. This gesture also symbolizes a plea for help, usually a request for protection, health, rain, a harvest, or other blessings. The hunting groups of the prehistoric Sahara used this typically submissive attitude to prove that they were subordinate to more powerful forces that exceeded them and that they actively cooperated with these forces. The figures in the Round Head paintings raise their hands to the great gods, to the rain animals (spirit animals that brought rain after rituals were performed), and to places where water flowed down the rock face during rains (Soukopova 2020).

The figures interpreted as gods are among the oldest known mythological beings of the hunter-gatherers of the Central Sahara. The Round Head paintings

appear to continue a tradition represented by older engravings known as Kel Essuf. These were human figures depicted only from the front and almost always with a large penis (Fig. 13). Paintings of the great gods continued this tradition even in later periods and followed the established norm for depicting gods. This pose was a hallmark of a specific being with a privileged status.

There are many scenes depicting prehistoric rituals: people dancing wildly, raising their arms, bending, twisting, and crawling on the ground (Fig. 14). Ritual behavior, which is still preserved in some parts of Africa, therefore goes back far into prehistoric times. Ancient hunters worked with altered states of consciousness (Altrhouni and Alfallah 2026). Some figures are depicted with extremely long limbs or fingers, which is one of the typical sensations experienced during a trance (Fig. 15). Figures lying on the ground may represent people in a trance, although they could also be dead people. However, this meaning could have been the same, since in some African cultures entering a trance is also called death: the individual must temporarily die in order to carry out their mission in an altered state of consciousness (Lewis-Williams 2004).

Possible reasons for entering an altered state of consciousness included attempts to heal a member of the hunting group or to summon rain with the help of rain animals. The paintings indicate that water played a crucial role in the hunters' lives. At least fifty documented sites in the Tassili mountains feature animals interpreted here as rain animals. Some stand alone, while others are accompanied by an entire ritual scene: dancing men, masked figures, and people reaching out their hands toward the animals. The locations of the paintings also make it clear that water played a major role in the hunters' ideology. The paintings are often located directly in the places where water flowed during rains, which is evident from the different color of the rock wall. The intention to place a painting under an ancient waterfall is evident in those cases where the area around the waterfall is completely free of paintings. (Soukopova 2024).

In ritual scenes, men are often depicted holding short sticks. To understand the hidden meaning of the stick, we can once again draw inspiration from ethnographic



Fig. 11. In ancient Egypt, the ka, depicted as a pair of raised arms, was one of the most fundamental concepts of the human person. The arms symbolize vital life force, contact with supernatural power, or divine presence. This seventeenth-century BCE sculpture represents the ka symbol above the head of King Hor and it served as a physical dwelling place for that spiritual essence after death (Egyptian Museum, Cairo). Credit: Prof. Mortel, Wikipedia CC 2.0.

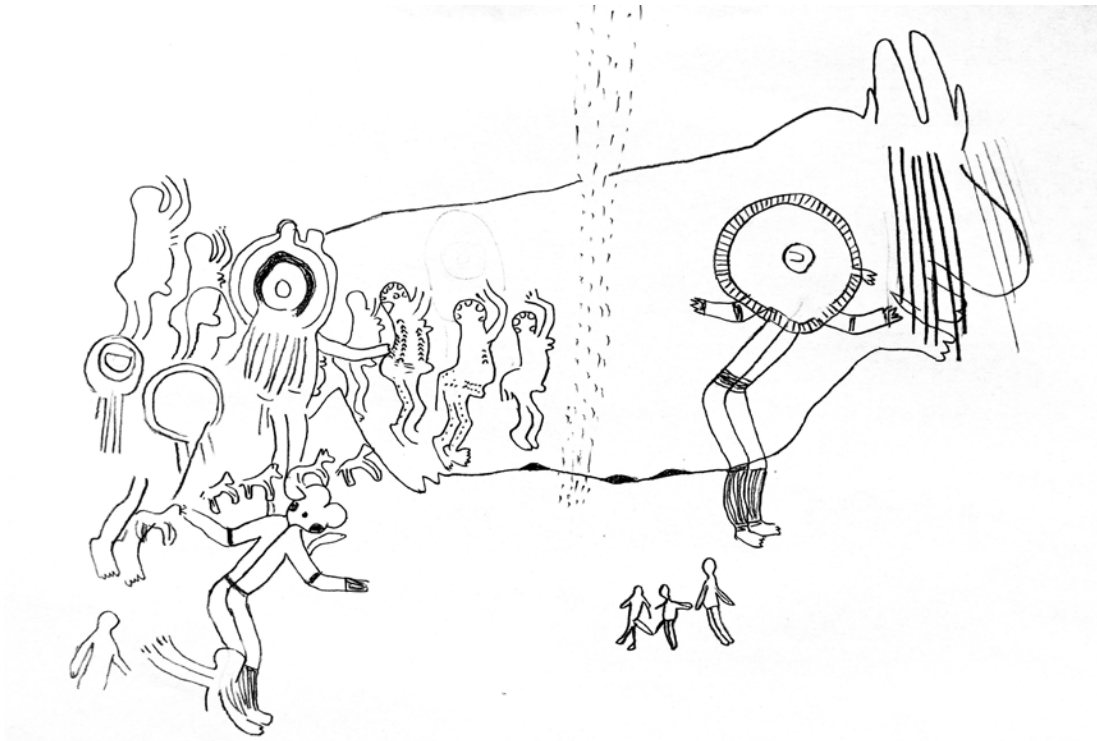


Fig. 12. The women in the row with their hands raised in a worshipping position are painted next to the rain animal, and also next to the spot where water ran down the rock face during the rain. The women have a protrusion on their abdomen that probably represents an umbilical hernia (Sefar, Tassili plateau). Photo enhanced with DStretch.

Fig. 13. The engravings known as Kel Essuf, depicting male figures with their characteristic large penises, predate the Round Head paintings (Uan Tabarakat, Algerian Tadrart).

Fig. 14. The male figure on the left is lying on the ground, which may indicate death or a trance. The figure on the right is depicted in a wild dance. The objects in the middle are a mystery; they show how hunters liked to draw symmetrical lines and dots (Wadi Moulenaga, Algerian Tadrart). Photo enhanced with DStretch.



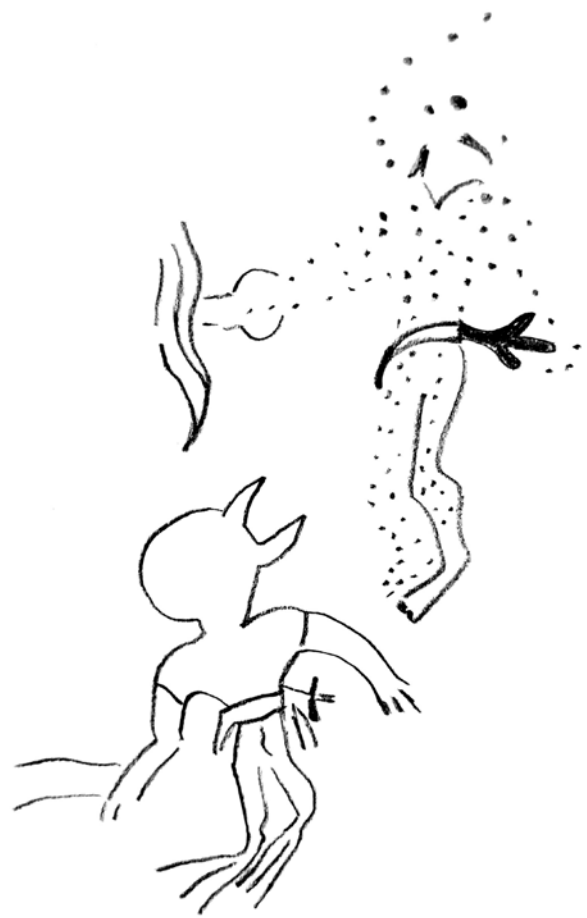


Fig. 15. Figures of hunters from the spirit world: one has extremely long toes, the other is depicted only with dots, as if he were just a ghost (Tamrit, Tassili plateau). Credit: B. Fouilleux. Photo enhanced with DStretch.

records (Lee 1979). The stick represents multiple roles depending on the person and the situation, and it is likely that it had the same meanings in prehistoric times.

A short stick is a symbol of power, wisdom, and justice, especially for elders and leaders. Sticks may also have represented spiritual tools through which healers summoned spirits, warded off evil energies, and healed the sick. They represent a connection to the spiritual world. Since this is one of the statuses of a hunter, short sticks may have been used in rites of passage from boyhood to manhood. It is therefore likely that some of the paintings depict such initiation rituals. The stick during a ritual dance could have served as a rhythmic instrument, as a symbolic prop during a ritual, or as a sign of a role or position, for example, a leader.

The paintings also feature mythological figures -

monsters and creatures with extremely long necks (Fig. 16). The very thin and long figures could represent ghosts (Fig. 17). This depiction may have originated from shadows that are reflections of people, but they cannot be grasped.

It is also important to note what prehistoric hunters did not paint. The most striking feature of human figures is that they never have eyes painted on them. The hunters deliberately avoided depicting eyes, as the eyes were considered a gateway into the body through which evil forces could enter a person. This apparent convention applied only to human beings. Animals are often depicted with eyes, and beings from the spiritual world are also sometimes shown with eyes or they have one large eye in the middle of their faces - for example, the great gods, possible ghosts, or what appears to be a shaman accompanying the rain animal (Fig. 18).

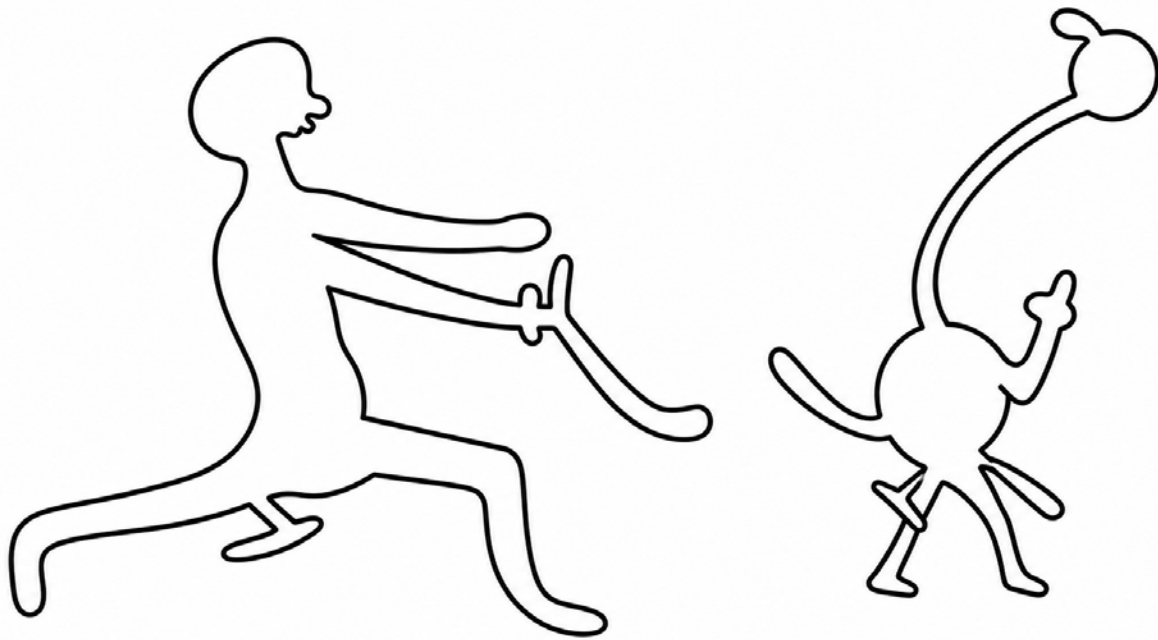


Fig. 16. A man holding what appears to be a musical instrument made from an animal's horn is running towards a fantastical creature with an extremely long neck. This creature is depicted in several paintings in Tassili; it must have been a well-known mythological figure (Tin Tekelt, Tassili plateau). Credit B. Fouilleux. Photo enhanced with DStretch.

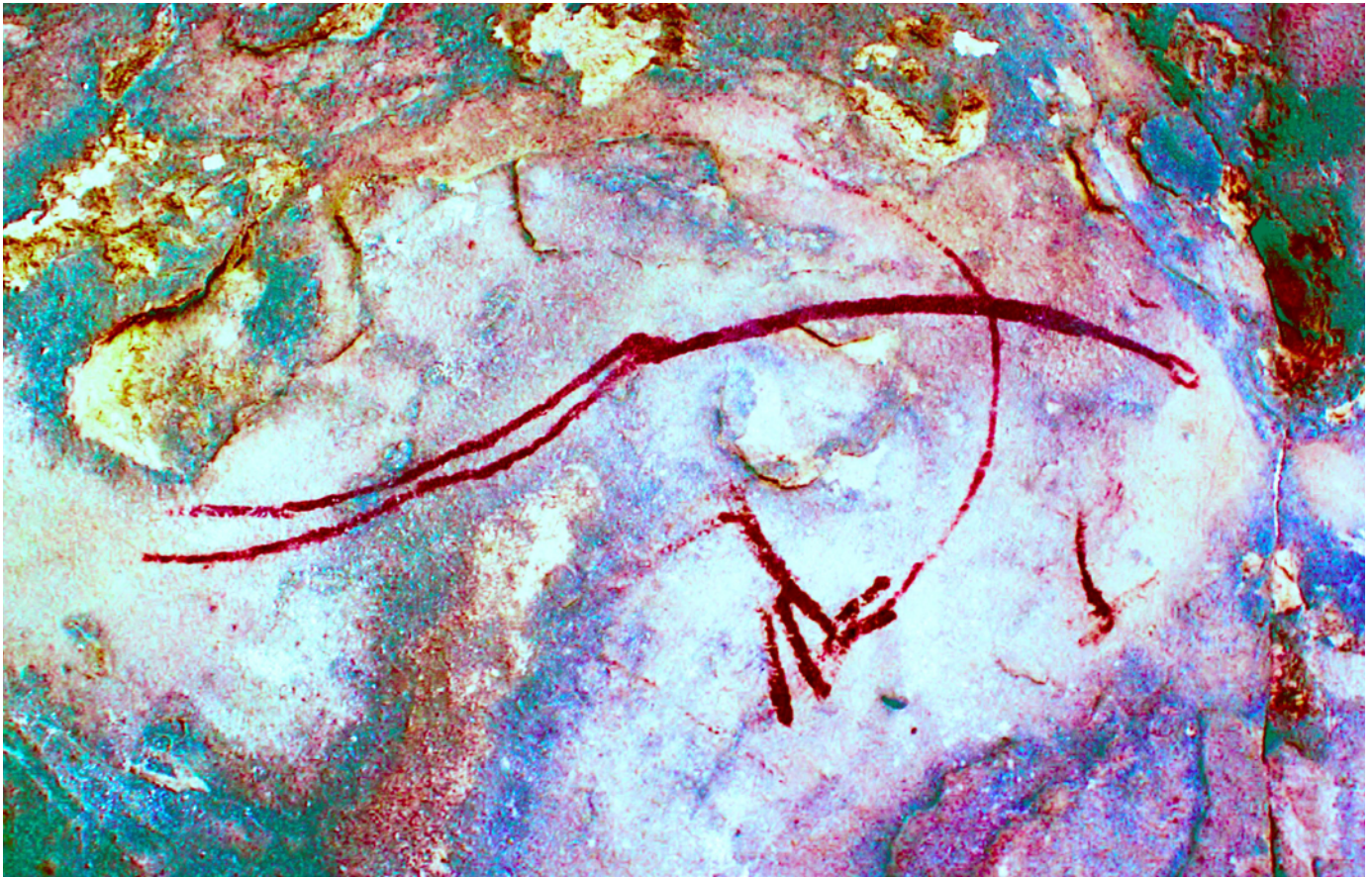


Fig. 17. An extremely thin and long figure represents a being from the spiritual world (Tin Talak, Tassili plateau). Photo enhanced with DStretch.



Fig. 18. A male figure leaning over the back of the rain animal is presumably from the spirit world; this is because he is painted white and also because he has a single large eye in the middle of his face. Only his eye and hands are painted red, a sign of life force. He may be a shaman performing a rain ritual (Adaba, Tassili plateau). Photo enhanced with DStretch.





Fig. 19. In the lower mountains, there is a large amount of non-figurative rock art, mainly cupules and kettles (Aman Samednin, Algerian Tadrart).

Art with clear rules

The Round Head paintings, much like Egyptian art, appear to have allowed limited scope for individual interpretation; painters generally adhered to an established, codified style. The paintings followed a clear visual code. Different figures were subject to distinct representational standards. The paintings may have functioned as communicative messages inscribed on the rock face, rather than simple decoration. They may have recorded rituals performed at these sites and mediated communication with the spiritual world. Maintaining a recognizable style may therefore have made their meaning intelligible to participants and, in their belief system, to spiritual beings. To deviate from the style would mean creating an incomprehensible message.

We observe this codified style not only in large-scale paintings, which were probably intended for the general public, but also in tiny drawings. It is possible that in large sacred sites, which contain hundreds of paintings, not only were communal rituals performed, but they also served as places where individuals added their own personal paintings - something like private prayers to influence fate.

It is also evident from the paintings that the hunters had a sense of order. They loved parallel lines and dots; on some rock walls, there are hundreds of dots carefully imprinted by the artist's finger. The outlines of both human and animal figures were rendered with great care and detail. In many of the paintings, we can see that the outlines have been repainted at a later date. This was probably a site where rituals were performed



Fig. 20. A view from a rock shelter in Tadrart. Engravings predominate in the lower mountains, as there was a lack of quality walls for painting.

repeatedly, and the paintings were refreshed on such occasions.

Places with a high concentration of paintings were probably sacred locations used for rituals. Multiple layers of paintings within the shelters indicate that hunters frequented these locations over time, adding new artwork on subsequent occasions. Jabbaren, for example, was a very popular site. It features large, sophisticated paintings that probably served a wide audience. But there are also numerous tiny, simple paintings of hunters, probably created outside the main rituals. Judging by the number of figures and the intricacy of the masks and ornamentation, it must have been an important meeting place with great celebrations.

Final reflections

The hunters who created the Round Head rock art lived in the Central Sahara, in the Tassili and Tadrart mountains of Algeria and Libya. The recurrence of closely related styles and motifs suggests that hunter groups moved across this wide area and maintained contact with one another. Although the styles and subjects of the paintings are broadly similar across the region, in terms of the type of rock art, there is a substantial difference between the high Tassili plateau and its lower surroundings – that is, the lower part of Tassili and the neighboring lower Tadrart mountains. In the lower mountains, hunters favored stone carving over painting. They created hundreds of cupules and kettles here, which are almost always found in the rock

shelters containing the Round Head paintings (Fig. 19). The paintings are therefore accompanied by non-figurative engravings in virtually all cases. Conversely, on the high plateau, we observe an almost absolute lack of interest in non-figurative rock engraving. Cupules and kettles are rather exceptional here, although there is plenty of rock available for their creation. One possible explanation is that in the lower parts of the Tassili and in the Tadrart, where there are not enough suitable rock walls for painting, the hunters compensated with engravings (Fig. 20). The plateau offers such a huge number of walls that hunters only painted here. Another explanation is that cupules and kettles in the lower mountains fulfilled a function that did not exist on the high plateau. What function? This question requires further research.

Acknowledgments

I thank the University of Pisa, the University of Bristol, the AHRC and CompuNet S.r.o. for the funding of my earliest research. I thank all the local Algerian and Libyan guides for the support during my fieldwork.

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