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Dakhleh Oasis: Research on Petroglyphs, 2003

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DAKHLEH OASIS

Research on Petroglyphs, 2003

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Research on the petroglyphs in Dakhleh Oasis was continued in February 2003.¹⁾ As in previous seasons, the Petroglyph Unit was an integral part of the Dakhleh Oasis Project (D.O.P.) and was organized by the Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology in Cairo in association with the Poznań Archaeological Museum.²⁾ The key objectives of the season were to begin fieldwork in the central part of the oasis and to inspect the already recorded rock art sites in its eastern part.

1) Cf. L. Krzyżaniak, *PAM XII, Reports 2000* (2001), 249-257 (with earlier references).

2) The fieldwork was carried out by the author of the report, assisted by Ms Ewa Kuciewicz and Ms Eliza Jaroni, all from the Poznań Archaeological Museum. The field party received financial support from the following institutions: Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology (Warsaw University) in Cairo, Dakhleh Oasis Project, Poznań Prehistoric Society and Poznań Archaeological Museum. The members of the field party wish to express their gratitude to the Director of the Dakhleh Oasis Project, Professor Anthony J. Mills, and to the Director of the Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology in Cairo, Professor Michał Gawlikowski.

INSPECTION OF ROCK ART SITES

An inspection of rock art sites situated in the eastern part of the oasis opened the season. The sites included those discovered a long time ago by Winkler³⁾ and located and recorded again by the Petroglyph Unit as well as those discovered and recorded in the course of systematic fieldwork by this Unit in past seasons (*Fig. 1*).

Overall, it was observed that the sites have been visited and in some cases the petroglyphs vandalized. The engraved lines and sunken surfaces were occasionally filled with white chalk apparently to enhance photography. Also, the deteriorated visibility of some of the petroglyphs, cut in the generally soft Dakhleh sandstone rock, seems to be due to touching with the

naked hand, if not with a heavier tool. In one case at least, a unique piece of *art mobillier* – a large block of sandstone with one side covered with petroglyphs depicting antelopes and men in dogs, recorded atop a major hill – could not be located by the Petroglyph Unit field party. Traces of vandalism and disappearance were observed in association with numerous vehicle tracks indicating the presence of what were most probably tourists. Therefore, the Unit has decided not to publish any maps showing the location of the petroglyph sites in the Dakhleh Oasis in order to make them less accessible to the public and thus protect them from potential vandals.



Fig. 1. Predynastic petroglyph site being inspected in the Eastern Dakhleh (Photo L. Krzyżaniak)

3) H.A. Winkler, *Rock-Drawings of Southern Upper Egypt II*, The Egypt Exploration Society (London 1939).

FIELDWALKING IN CENTRAL DAKHLEH

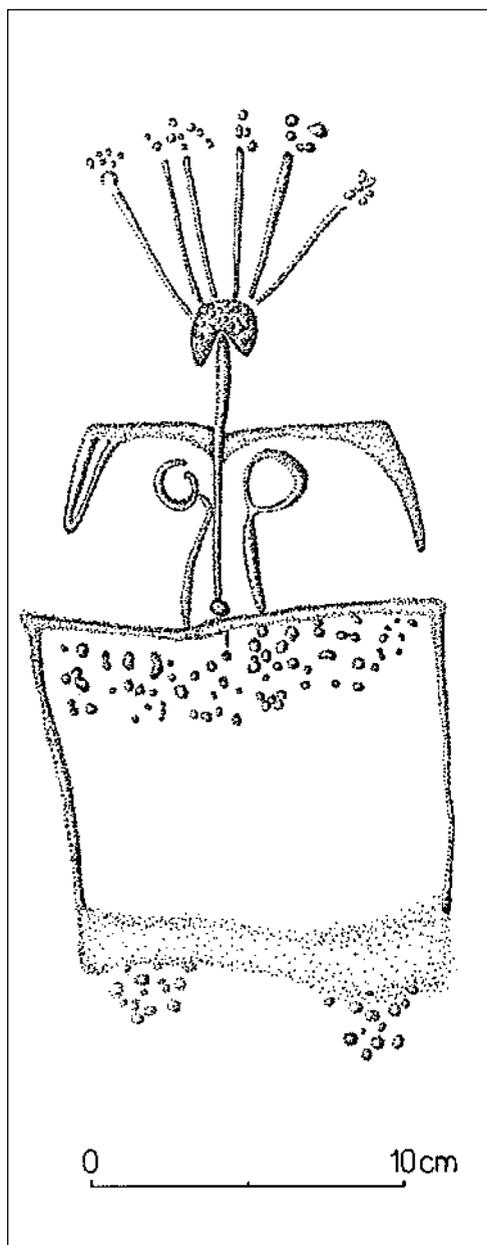


Fig. 2. Petroglyph showing a female figure ("goddess") from one of the sites discovered in the Central Dakhleh (Drawing E. Kuciewicz)

This season the field party walked the rocky, sandstone area in the central part of the Oasis, between Mut and Balat, to the south of the modern paved road. The region is cut by a number of wadis now filled with sand. The survey registered (including GPS locations) a large number of rock art sites with petroglyphs executed mostly on vertical surfaces in the rocky hills and less frequently on the summits of hills or on individual blocks of sandstone resting at the foot of a hill.

The recording of the sites included photographing each site and its petroglyphs (black-and-white 6 x 4.5 cm negatives plus small-size color slides), and in some cases tracing of the petroglyphs on transparent film.

The petroglyphs found in the central part of the Oasis, especially those from the older stage of rock art development, appear to parallel those occurring in the eastern Dakhleh. The presence of game animals is marked at this stage, with giraffes (Fig. 3) clearly predominating over antelopes, occasionally occurring in association with humans. In some cases, the scenes show a giraffe connected by a line to a man (Fig. 4), apparently depicting a successful lassoing.

A second group of petroglyphs shows figures of women, rather schematically executed with engraved lines and sunk (ground) surface (Fig. 2). In a few cases, these female figures occurred in association with giraffes. In one instance, at an especially impressive-looking rock art site (Fig. 5), there were three such schematic figures of "goddesses" with sunken bodies executed in close association with a group of giraffes (Fig. 6). Another petroglyph shows a human figure holding what seems to be a bow in the front of a very

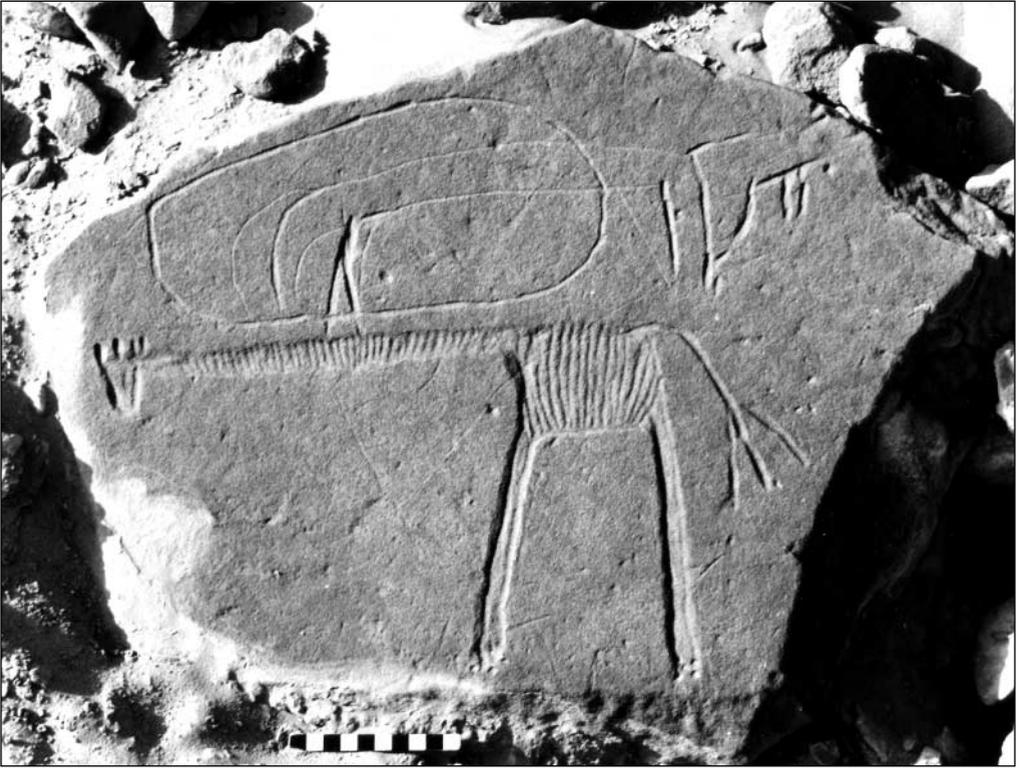


Fig. 3. Petroglyph depicting a giraffe in association with different engravings, found in the Central Dakhle (Photo L. Krzyżaniak)



Fig. 4. Petroglyph from the Central Dakhle, showing a giraffe apparently being led by a man (Drawing E. Kuciewicz)

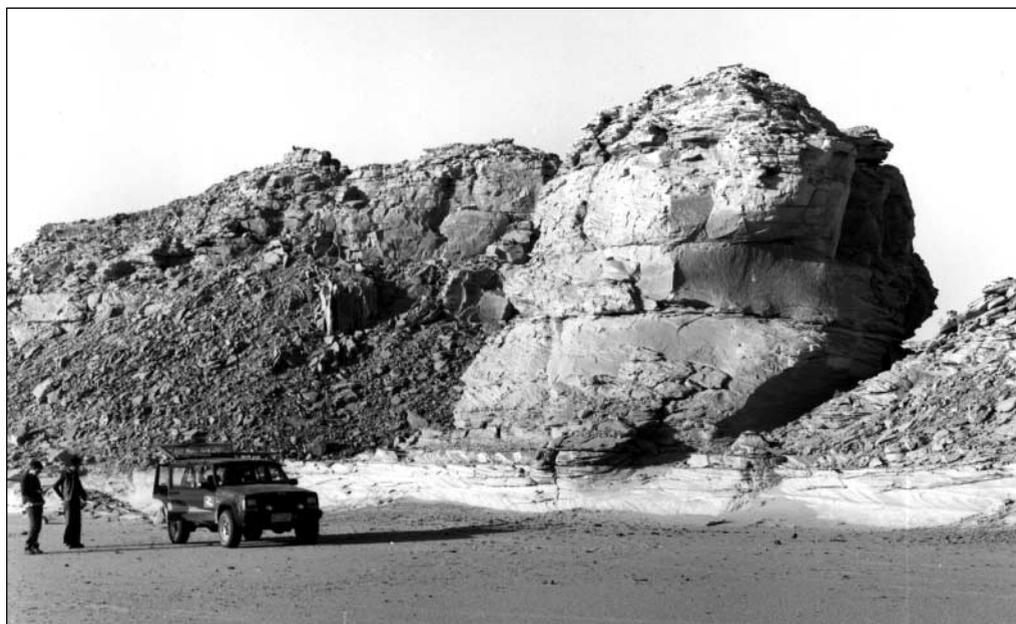


Fig. 5. *Discovery of a Predynastic rock art site in the Central Dakhleh, cf. Fig. 6 for the petroglyphs (Photo L. Krzyżaniak)*

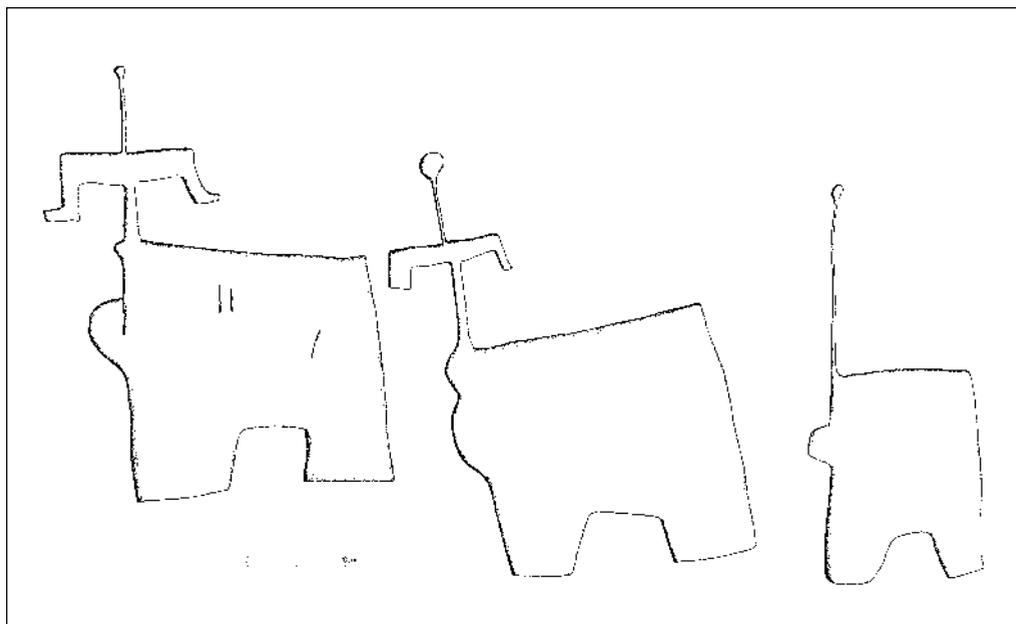


Fig. 6. *Group of three females figures ("goddesses") with sunk bodies from the site in the Central Dakhleh shown in Fig. 5 (Drawing E. Kuciewicz)*



Fig. 7. Petroglyph scene from the Central Dakhleh, showing a human figure apparently holding a bow and standing in front of a schematically depicted female figure ("goddess") (Photo L. Krzyżaniak)



Fig. 8. Engraving of long-horned cattle from a Central Dakhleh rock art site of Dynastic age (Photo L. Krzyżaniak)

schematically engraved figure of a woman (Fig. 7). All these female figures are very similar to the "goddesses" known from the Eastern Dakhleh and dated to Predynastic times.

The third group of petroglyphs is of Dynastic date. In many cases, they represent engravings of long-horn (domestic ?) cattle (Fig. 8), sometimes occurring in association with rather simplified hieroglyphs or other signs (Fig. 9), or humans shown in typical Dynastic style (Fig. 10). Game animals are rare in this set. It seems that the petroglyphs of this group were executed over a long period of time, starting in the Old Kingdom and continuing until the Roman age.



Fig. 9. Engravings of a human figure and bird from a Dynastic rock art site in the Central Dakhleh (Photo L. Krzyżaniak)



Fig. 10. Engravings of two human figures of the Dynastic age from the Central Dakhleh (Photo L. Krzyżaniak)



*Fig. 11. Engraving and painting fresh rock art in the Central Dakhleh
(Photo L. Krzyżaniak)*

ROCK PAINTING ?

While no rock painting has ever been found in the Dakhleh Oasis, the present writer is of the opinion that we should seriously discuss the possibility of at least some of these petroglyphs, e.g. the Predynastic ones, having been painted originally. These pigments would have disappeared due to the climate (severe winds and rains etc.) and/or die to the absence of binders in the paint. It was observed, for example, that white chalk (certainly devoid of any binder) applied in the engravings in the Eastern Dakhleh since Winkler's times at least is all but gone today. Thus, it was decided to

experiment with paint made of finely ground local hematite (ochre) mixed with water which the team members applied to petroglyphs they had personally engraved on the rock surfaces of a sandstone hill otherwise devoid of examples of rock art. One group of freshly-made petroglyphs was painted without use of any binder in the pigment, while in the case of the second group, egg-white was mixed in to bind the pigment (*Fig. 11*). These newly painted petroglyphs will be inspected by the Unit in future seasons in order to check their condition and note any possible changes to the paint.

CONCLUSION

Fieldwork in 2003 has again confirmed the vast potential of Dakhleh Oasis in terms of rock art. It is now clear that petroglyphs dating from different periods occur not only in the Eastern Dakhleh, but also in the central part of the Oasis. The

engravings are among the best pieces of prehistoric and dynastic rock depictions known from the Egyptian Western Desert and they offer us a vast source of new information on human life in these periods.