Western African Rock Art

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A famous interpretative essay was written by HAMPATÉ BA and MRS. G. DIETERLEN in 1966. They advanced an explanation of some TASSILIAN frescoes based on myths and legends of the modern Fulani. Since then, however, despite endless enthusiastic statements about the importance of this conceptual "breakthrough," not a single researcher has ever tried to use this model to interpret another fresco. Indeed, no historical derivation between the Tassilians of 5,000 years ago and current Fulani has been proved.

A more original proposal recently advanced by J.-L. Le Quellec in 1993 attempted to retrieve from a deep level a universal element of Homo sapiens, the symbolic function.

As for the recent period of Saharan rock pictures after the post-Neolithic arid period, things are clearer. Ideology had changed, and the scenes with symbolic connotations were becoming rare. What appears now is a stereotype marked out for a brilliant future, that of the warrior or the dignitary, lavishly glorified, represented frontally and in full length, clothed in ceremonial garments and arms. Women are from now on relegated to second place and by some schools even ignored. The sexual scenes reflecting a hierogamy (priestess), the horned goddesses, and the theranthropes disappear. It is now a widely secularized world marching toward history. The so-called primitive symbolic universe, only rich in spirituality, fades away, and the world of harsh, brutal material values and the weight of arms and conquests, the "modern world"—our world—is setting up, for better or worse.

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WESTERN AFRICAN ROCK ART

Research on rock art in the region south of the Sahara and west of Nigeria has been scarce and irregular and, as a result, much less known than that of the Saharan zones.

The rock art of this part of sub-Saharan Africa was first mentioned in 1907 in the pioneer work of Augustin-Marie-Louis Desplagnes, who surveyed the central plateau of Nigeria as an ethnologist and archaeologist. In 1954, Raymond Mauny published an inventory, together with a brief synthesis, of the rock-art sites then known in western Africa—including the Sahara. In 1979, following a number of limited surveys carried out by various researchers, Eric Huysecom launched his own research program on the Neolithic tradition west of Mali and the rock art associated to it. As a result, a number of homogeneous stylistic groups distributed throughout western Africa were revealed. Séverine Marchi has been studying western African rock art since 1994. Her research has been centered on the Airé Soroa rock shelter, a site found in the Inland Niger Delta on the boundary of the Sahara and sub-Saharan Africa. The art here represents superimposed paintings of different styles.

This synthesis attempts to establish stylistic groups and takes into account clues of relative chronology, independently of the geographical zones. We have considered only the most char-
characteristic sites, thus leaving aside subjects such as cupped stones and polishers.

**The Dotted Engravings from the Baoulé Region.** The engravings in the Baoulé region are characteristic of the art in rock shelters in the national park in Mali and include the popular Fanfannyégéné I and II engravings.

They are often very eroded and constitute one of the most ancient periods of the relative chronology established for rock art in this region. This phase is younger than the characteristic phase of polished grooves but underlies all the paintings on the same site. In all likelihood, the engravings must be related to Baoulé’s Neolithic facies (expressions), which date to the end of the 2nd and the beginning of the 1st millennium B.C.

The engravings are covered in dots whose points of impact are more or less dense. The patterns are recurrent and simple and represent bovid figures where the head, the horns, and sometimes the ears are shown. A few schematic drawings have been interpreted as being giraffes by hunters of the region. In one case, a complete figure of a bovid is illustrated in profile with its head facing forward. Other representations include patterns in the shape of flowers, snakes, and radiating circles. As far as we know, such representations seem to be unique in western Africa.

**Naturalistic Paintings in Nigeria.** South of the Sahara, the rock shelters in the region of Birnin Kudu, Bauchi, and Igbetti in Nigeria are the only ones to include paintings of a naturalistic type. These figures are still poorly dated, but they can be compared the art found in rock shelters from the same region and occupied during the Neolithic.

The representations are painted in red and white and, rarely, in black. They illustrate bovids (anteelope, sheep, and goats) outlined in red or colored in red or white. Other animals, such as antelope, horses, and monkeys are also represented. In Geji, one can observe human figures.

The origin and significance of these paintings, close to certain Saharan representations, are unknown. However, they are very frequently associated with rock gongs (monoliths that produce particular resonances and are used as percussion instruments).

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**Fig. 36 Principal rock-art sites in western Africa**
The representations are always painted in hematite of a reddish-brown color and are characterized by horses with geometrical bodies—that is, two triangles joined by their summits. These animals are generally mounted by characters armed with spears and shields. They are often illustrated hunting ostriches or giraffes. Their heads are sometimes decorated with elements that recall a headdress of ostrich feathers.

These compositions illustrating hunting are known in Saharan rock art, as well as in the regions of the Sahel and the savanna, in particular in Niger and northern Mali.

**Horses with Linear Bodies.** The group of painted horses with linear bodies proves to be homogeneous from the point of view of style. It is to be found in Mali (Aïré Soroba, Niodougou, Point G, and Fanfannyégéné II), north of Burkina Faso (Nabruk and Aribinda), south of the Niger (Kourki), and north of Togo (Nambouanga).

Only the shelters in Aïré Soroba and Fanfannyégéné II provide information on relative chronology. The facies with linear horses is superimposed over the representations of geometrical horses and the dotted engravings. It is covered with Tifinagh and Arab inscriptions.

The figures are painted or more rarely engraved. They also illustrate riders sitting or standing on horses and hunting ostriches, giraffes, antelope, and, in one case, man. Unlike the horses with geometrical bodies from Aïré Soroba, the animals of this group present simplified forms. There are no more geometrical features, but linear silhouettes illustrate different parts of the body. In
most cases, the rider is armed with a spear and shield. Other designs are to be noted, such as geometrical figures and isolated animals. Finally, in Airé Soroba, highly stylized representations of boats carrying schematic human characters and animals seem to be contemporaneous with this style.

Analogous representations of riders are common in the Saharan region. On the other hand, the representations of boats are comparable only to art in the Nile Valley.

**Painted Dromedaries.** Three paintings of camels in Airé Soroba postdate the figures representing horses with geometrical bodies. The dromedaries are in profile and are painted in red and brown. Two of them are driven.

**Engravings of Carts.** In Tondia, Mali, two engravings of carts can be compared to those discovered in the Mauritanian Adrar or in Airé Soroba and remind us directly of the Saharan context. They are extremely stylized and the draft animals (whose species is difficult to determine) are represented flat with their four legs shown on the side. These two examples are the only ones presently known south of the Sahara and could constitute the first elements of a southern group of Saharan carts.

**The Manding Paintings.** Found principally in Mali, in a region occupied by the Malinké and Bambara people as well as in the region of Bandiagara where the Dogon presently live, the Manding paintings are older than those mentioned above. The sites of Sourkoundingueyé and Takoutala, in northern Mali, and Nabruk and Yobri, in southeastern Burkina Faso, also belong to this group.

From a technical point of view, the figures in the Manding group are always painted in red, white, or black. Highly schematic geometrical representations constitute their main features. One can distinguish abstract signs, isolated human characters, and zoomorphic figures, including saurian (reptilian) motifs. According to ethnological information, a number of these paintings

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**Fig. 38** Ostrich hunting in Airé Soroba in Mali
seem to be linked to initiation rites, in particular circumcision ceremonies carried out by populations belonging to the Manding group.

The Fish Engraving of Bamako-Sotuba. An engraving of a unique style represents a fish. Discovered in Bamako-Sotuba on the right bank of the Niger, it is most probably associated with traces of polishers and polishing and is the sole illustration of a fish yet known south of the Sahara. We have no record of its dating.

The Tifinagh Inscriptions. The Tifinagh inscriptions are to be found essentially in the north, covering the semidesertic and Sahelian zones. The sites are in Mali (Zamgoi, Ouagou, Gao, Niangaye, and Airé Soroba) and Niger (Labbezenga) and are often situated along the Niger River. They are painted in a reddish-orange color or engraved.

The Tifinagh features in the Airé Soroba are superimposed on depictions of geometrical and linear horses. However, they cannot be classified chronologically with the Arab inscriptions.

Tifinagh is the written transcription of the language used by the Tuaregs, but it is very difficult to situate these inscriptions chronologically. In the Niger region, Arab sources date the arrival of Tuareg camel-rider populations to the 8th century a.d. The Tifinagh inscriptions could be in agreement with this period.

The Arab Inscriptions. Inscriptions in Arab characters are scarce south of the Sahara. One engraving can be found in Diara, Mali, and a number of paintings—of great interest on a chronological basis—in Airé Soroba. The words found in the Airé Soroba shelter are painted in red and record a pilgrimage to Mecca in the 11th century a.d. Such an observation constitutes an excellent starting point for the Airé Soroba paintings and thus confirms the presence of Arab populations—possibly tradesmen—in the Inland Niger Delta during this period.

The Schematic Paintings in Marghi Country. Schematic paintings were discovered in a traditional context, still present today, in eastern Nigeria in Marghi country. These paintings are done in red or white and represent armed men with shields and sometimes mounting a horse. They can also be seen with various quadrupeds. They are finger paintings, some of which have been freshened up. Nowadays, young men paint them before their wedding ceremonies, and the paintings are often associated with agrarian rites. This seems to coincide with the passage from adolescence to adulthood.
The rock-art sites of western Africa are all found in the Sahelian and savanna zones. The absence of locations more to the south may well be the consequence of insufficient surveys, possibly because of the forested environment.

From a chronological point of view, the first manifestations seem to stretch back to the arrival of Neolithic populations from Saharan and sub-Saharan regions. The same axis of distribution of rock art could also be found in more recent times. For a number of representations of horse hunters, it could be linked to the intrusion of northern populations looking for slaves or more favorable territories. From the 8th century A.D., the inscriptions indicate commercial relationships with the Islamic populations.

Conversely, a distinctive artistic trend, classified here as the Manding group, seems to have spread in multiple directions, from the regions of northern Guinea and southern Republic of Mali, at the time of the fall of empire of Mali in the 15th century A.D. One of the outcomes of this seems to be the rock art of Dogon country.

In the rock art of present-day populations, such as the Dogon or people from Marghi country, one observes geometrical signs and human characters sometimes mounting horses, respectively. This is evidence of the persistence of ancient themes.

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Eric Huyscom and Séverine Marchi

ETIOPIA AND THE HORN: ROCK ART

Distribution and Thematic Content

Rock art is distributed throughout much of the Horn (Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia), although the largest concentration is in Eritrea and eastern Ethiopia. Rock art is also found in southern and northern Ethiopia, Djibouti, and northern and southern Somalia.

Rock art of the Horn can be divided into two broad categories: engravings or carvings (petroglyphs) and paintings (pictographs). Paintings refer to any symbol or representation using a paint (or pigment), while engraving is pecking outlines of symbols or representations. A rock carving is a form of engraving where a feature is carved to form a relief. The term rock art encompasses all of these.

Another distinction that is widely made by investigators is parietal art (art on rock walls) and art mobilier (or "movable" art). Due to the paucity of the latter form in the Horn, the following discussion focuses on parietal art.