

THE SHELTER OF HEADLESS BOVINES: A STUDY OF WG 35 (GILF EL KEBIR, EGYPT)

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The Gilf el Kebir Plateau, located in the south-western Libyan Desert in Egypt, is host to numerous prehistoric rock art sites. Among these, WG 35 is a small shelter located on the edge of a wadi cutting through the north-western flanks of the plateau. Discovered in 2002, this site was described by Andràs Zboray in 2003, initially under the reference “WG 45”.

The aim of this paper is to study different aspects of the WG 35 paintings.

The ceiling of WG 35 shelter bears several layers of paint. Each paint layer will be individualized and stratigraphic methods will be applied in detail in order to determine the relative chronology. Though no pigment sample has been made for a physical-chemical dating, some iconographical and stylistic elements will be used to give an overview of the chronological frame. The archaeological environment of the shelter will also be taken into account for this evaluation.

Thanks to survey drawings and photographs made in 2006, iconographical motives of each layer will be examined thoroughly, inquiring into the thought systems that led to their representation. If animal herds are the main theme, there is also a layer exclusively composed of about 44 persons, looking like a confused crowd despite being lined up in rows. Chaotic human clouds have also been painted in other shelters of the area (*e. g.* WG 21). Besides, right in the middle of naturalistic scenes of animal herds and hunters, there are about twelve white bovines that seem to be headless, despite being alive. They are astonishingly similar to the white headless bovines of WG 45/A. We will investigate the prospect of the absence of the head being the effect of technical or preservation attributes of the paintings, and the discussion will then focus on potential explanations. Could these headless bovines be compared to headless beasts of Wadi Sûra II shelter (WG 21)?

Stylistic features will be reviewed, many of them allow deducing a close relationship with Jebel Uweinat paintings. A comparative analysis of WG 35 (Gilf el-Kebir) and KD 11/A (Jebel Uweinat) will be made on stylistic features of human bodies (filiform head, steatosis, etc.), equipment (shape of the bow and quiver, body ornaments, etc.) and on characteristics of cattle depiction (lines and points on the body, shape of the horns, ears and head, etc.).

Finally, this paper will deal with the function of the WG 35 rock paintings. Rock art meaning and purpose always are a ticklish matter. But for that case in particular, the specific location and ordering of the paintings will allow us both to test some proposals already published for rock art in general, and to issue new hypotheses. Actually, WG 35 paintings are hardly

visible: one has to crawl under the rock to enter in this small shelter where nothing but sleeping could be done.

The ceiling measures about 2,2 meters by 1,5 meters and has the uncommon feature to be very low (about 70 cm high from the basement rock floor and even less). As it is impossible either to stand upright or to seat below it, the painter was probably working in very rough conditions: the back on the rock and the paintbrush held in his arm, right stretched, whose length was probably just sufficient to reach the roof surface. In addition, the painter probably oriented the pictures either perpendicularly, either in reverse compared with his position. In spite of these obstacles, this place was chosen while there were countless propitious rocks for such a work. Furthermore, the motives have not been erased at each new painting phase, so that they are mixed and not easily readable. On these arguments, the paper will try to demonstrate that decorative aspects were an improbable motivation as for WG 35 paintings and that their location had a particular meaning.

In conclusion, the headless bovines' shelter bears a rare example of very well preserved prehistoric paintings on which stratigraphic principles can be applied successfully. WG 35 paintings constitute a crucial part in the definition of regional styles and, therefore, in understanding the degree of relationship between Gilf el Kebir and Uweinat human groups. Last but not least, WG 35 iconography allows penetrating prehistoric intellect domains and thought systems, the motives being a vocabulary and their ordering setting up the grammar.

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