

THE HEADLESS BEASTS OF WADI SÛRA II SHELTER (WG 21) IN THE WESTERN GILF EL KEBIR: NEW DATA ON PREHISTORIC MYTHOLOGIES FROM THE EGYPTIAN SAHARA

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In 1933, Laszlo de Almásy discovered a ten-meter large shelter in the Western part of the Gilf el Kebir, that he named “Wadi Sûra” or “the Cave of Swimmers” (WG 52). This shelter shields prehistoric paintings including negative hands, fauna, and humans, some of them being lined up horizontally as if they were floating or swimming. Almásy found there the picture of an unidentifiable creature that he thought to be a lion. Its long tail is terminated by a round flossy and there is a hollow instead of its head.

In 1991, Y. Gauthier and G. Negro discovered such a second creature painted on a negative hand in a nearby shelter, WG 45/A. They described it as a three-leg canid or felid that they interpret as a “possible mythical animal”. In 2002, Ahmed Mestekawi discovered a new and bigger shelter (about 20 meters large) at the top of a hill, called “Wadi Sûra II” or “the shelter of the beasts” (WG 21). The very well preserved paintings include all Wadi Sûra I motives, along with hunt and village scenes. The headless creature is represented about thirty times. Lastly, in 2003, another rock face was found (WG 73/A), which also bears depictions of the headless creature.

The aim of this paper is first to study the common points and the variations on the “headless creature” theme and to propose a classification. Each anatomical feature of the beast will be compared with characteristics of animal and human species. The results will be put in a synthetic table, showing that some characteristics belong to felids, other remind bovids, while other else look like monkey or human one’s. The conclusion of this study is that anatomical features do not allow comparing the headless beast to any existent animal. This is a composite creature. Sometimes it has a penis. It is hard to conclude on the gender of the creature bearing neither penis nor udder, but sometimes a small similar beast is squatting between the legs of the principal beast (WG 73/A), which could evoke a young following its mother.

Some African cultures have also represented acephalous animals. In the Pahi region (Tanzania), some white zebra and ostriches have been painted without head. In the immediate vicinity of the Wadi Sûra II shelter, WG 35 ceiling bears a herd of white headless bovines. They could be contemporaneous with the headless beast, because these two motives are painted together in WG 45/A.

After focusing on the beast in itself, we will open the discussion about its interactions with its setting. Some specimens are alone (WG 45/A) or do not interact with nearby people (WG 73/A), while others seem to swallow down or to spit humans by their hollow. On some representations, surrounding people form a compact and chaotic crowd. One or two persons sometimes touch the creature, often on its penis. About 25 % of the beasts are covered by white or yellow pricked strips.

Part of the beasts paintings were the target of mutilations, intentionally done with stone arrows or tools. They consist of series of line-shaped lacerations or round impacts on the beast body. A few full-size yellow personages have also been the butt of such disfigurement, as if one tried to injury their existence in damaging their image. Are these wounds connected with hunting? Did one try to destroy a dangerous beast or enemy by this way? Unless would it be due to a later iconoclasm...

Wadi Sûra II paintings have been interpreted in 2005 by the French anthropologist J.-L. Le Quellec, who directly links these prehistoric Saharan representations with Middle- and New-Kingdom religious texts. The Wadi Sûra “swimmers” would be the ancestors of the “drowned of the primitive ocean Noun”. This interpretation however stands in contrast with the regular position of the swimmers. The pricked strips would be a filet prefiguring the “fishing of the bad spirits and sethian demons”, and the headless creature would be the forerunner of the composite animal crocodile-lion-hippopotamus, the “Devourer” of the *Book of the Dead*. Several thousands of kilometers and years separate these two sets of beliefs; and due to the gap which differentiates prehistoric mentalities from historic religions, such a direct link is questionable.

Finally, the only chronology existing today for Wadi Sûra II shelter has arbitrarily been fixed around 4500 BC by J.-L. Le Quellec. During this congress, we will propose a rational chronology. Several clues indicates an earlier chronology. A stratigraphic study of the painting layers will first permit to establish a relative dating. Then, we will present new archaeological data from the immediate surroundings of the shelter to evaluate the absolute chronology of the successive settlements.

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