



KEYWORDS: *Rock art – Sahara – Enigmatic petroglyph – Geographical distribution*

## ENIGMATIC ENGRAVED IMAGES FOUND IN THE PRE-HISTORIC ROCK ART OF THE SAHARA

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**Abstract.** This article describes an enigmatic petroglyph motif known throughout the Sahara with the exception of the Nile valley and the south-western massifs of Gilf Kebir and Djebel Uweinat and, as far as we know today, occurring nowhere else in the world. The different hypotheses put forward concerning its meaning are presented, none of which are convincing. The figure displays a remarkable ‘family likeness’ all over the Sahara, but regional variations exist. It is perhaps in these variations that can be found the reason for its amazing distribution over such an enormous area.

### Introduction

For several decades now, the literature devoted to Saharan rock art has regularly contained articles on engraved images that resist interpretations and hypotheses concerning their meaning. These petroglyphs are ovoid in shape, with one end wider than the other, provided with appendages or ‘antennae’, sometimes long, sometimes short, with or without internal decoration (Fig. 1).

These petroglyphs, whose shape brings to mind a flask, have been called ‘fish-traps’ (*nasses*) or ‘pseudo fish-traps’ by many researchers. We shall list later the various interpretations that have been put forward for these forms. Some are particularly fanciful, others more serious, but none are satisfactory. As far as we know, the image is exclusively engraved.

One of the interests of this type of rock art image lies in the fact that, as far as we know at present, it seems unique in the world and specific to the Sahara. No comparable form exists on other continents; among today’s civilisations, for all their many variations, such forms, objects, signs or symbols just do not exist. No ethnological work refers to any use of these ‘objects’ by the populations of the Sahara or anywhere else in the world. No archaeological excavation has yet dug up any comparable object.

So here we are faced by a real puzzle, and it is understandable that prehistorians, archaeologists and ethnologists should be particularly interested in trying to solve it.

After the general definition of the three basic models of these images (Fig. 1A, B, C), the aim of this article is to show their almost pan-Saharan distribution and, at the same time, their very great regional variability. Some regions seem to have specific forms of these models, which could indicate cultural particularities,

but in several regions morphological varieties of these forms can be found.

We shall try, finally, to flesh out briefly certain interpretative hypotheses, while regretting the impossibility of proposing an undisputed explanation. In the end, we can only agree with Bednarik when he writes ‘[t]he number of such hypotheses we have in rock art is incredible, whereas the amount of truly convincing, hopefully objective data we have is minuscule’ (Bednarik 2006: 87).

### Information about these figures

The model studied here is highly specific and cannot in any way be assimilated with the numerous ovals, ovoids and ‘sandals’ described by many authors. Among the characteristics of our model there has to be:

- A distinct constriction (or ‘neck’) of the narrow part, never present in ovals or sandals.
- Two symmetrical antennae on the left and right of the ‘neck’, never in the wide part.

Interior decoration of our model (Fig. 1) occurs frequently and is very varied: there are, for instance, cupules, generally two, sometimes four, in the wide part of the body. This obviously does not turn the image

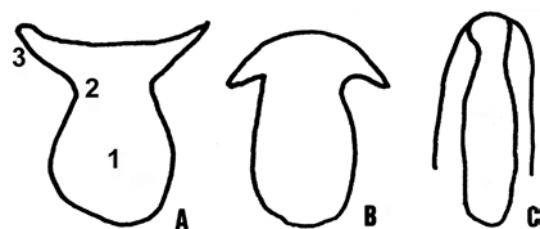


Figure 1. The basic models of the petroglyph motif. 1: the body; 2: the narrowing; 3: the antennae.



Figure 2. Map of the Saharan region under study. From Ibis Press eds., Paris 2010.

into a sandal with its lace-holes.

An full inventory of these figures cannot be established: new examples are found regularly in different parts of the Sahara (already at the beginning of the 1970s, Simoneau (1971: 114) estimated that there were at least a hundred of these images in southern Morocco — today the figure has risen to over 200). One thing is certain: the fact of having been engraved is more likely to indicate a transcultural practice than a specifically cultural one, taking into account the very large geographical distribution of these figures. The question of the chronological place to be given to these images is tricky, as we shall see. This adds to the overall puzzle concerning their presence in the Sahara (Fig. 2).

Almost always engraved on sub-horizontal surfaces, on flat slabs or on the top of large rocks, the figures that interest us here are very easy to recognise, even when they have different interior designs and the antennae are well or little developed. Following a bilateral symmetry, there is a more or less oval 'body', one end of which is narrowed. On each side of this narrowing, two antennae, short or long, suggest an orientation of the object and evoke — perhaps arbitrarily — a 'top' and a 'bottom' (Fig. 1). The general shape conjures up what Henri Lhote (1976) called a 'flask' or, what Searight (2004: 52) termed 'bag-shaped objects'.

Depending on the regional variations of these figures, the decoration of the oval body is more or less elaborate, sometimes looking as though the aim is artistic. Some models, on the other hand, have no internal decoration at all.

We repeat here that the figures which are the subject of the present study all have an oval body with a distinct narrowing and external, symmetrical, lateral antennae which can be short or long. We are not discussing the



Figure 3. Ovoid (A), and 'feet'/sandals' (B) excluded from this study.

hundreds of simple ovals and oval-shaped forms, and sandals (or what are thought to be sandals) engraved here and there throughout the Sahara (Fig 3). If we did this, we would find ourselves completely outside the basic model described above. Many authors

do in fact assimilate these simple figures to the basic model, although they have neither antennae nor body narrowing, which are the two elements making up the specificity of our model and the object of our study.

It is very possible that our model, although we do not know what it means, may not always have had the same meaning, the same function or the same symbolic value.

### Geographical distribution

As we have said, the 'bag-shaped objects' whose general shape we have just defined are spread over the whole of the Sahara with the exclusion of the Nile valley and the south-western massifs. However, the number of these petroglyphs varies considerably from one region to another.

Going from west to east, they can be found in the western Sahara (former Spanish Sahara), Morocco, Algeria (in the Saharan Atlas, Tassili-n-Ajjer and Hoggar), in Libya (Aramat, Akakus, Messak) and in Niger (Djado). Although petroglyphs are to be found in the southern Egyptian Sahara, at Gilf Kebir and Djebel Uweinat, where almost 1000 petroglyphs lie at the base of this massif and about 2000 paintings on the top, our model has not yet been found there.

A statistical study of these petroglyphs would be premature, since every year new discoveries add to the corpus. It is therefore not possible to give exact figures on internal decoration — cupules and other details. Nevertheless, we do have some quantitative data on the regions studies. For instance, about a dozen examples have been recorded in the western Sahara, more than 200 in southern Morocco (but this figure includes forms which do not conform to our model), but none in the High Atlas mountains despite their thousands of

petroglyphs. Lhote (1970) described two in Algeria's Saharan Atlas (Monts des Ksour) and recorded a dozen in Oued Djerat (Lhote 1976). One has been noted in the Tassili-n-Ajjer. Fourteen have been published on the Hoggar. In Libya, a dozen are known in the Aramat area, several dozen in the Akakus, and about the same number on the Messak plateau. In Niger, on the Djado plateau, half-a-dozen have been noted. These figures are subject to adjustments, depending on new discoveries. It seems at present as though Morocco has supplied the greatest number of these motifs. Figures 4–31 illustrate the most characteristic or most specific examples of each region.

### Context

The populations of the Tassili-n-Ajjer and Hoggar in Algeria and those in the Libyan Aramat and Akakus, who have left thousands of rock paintings, have never painted the figures that concern us here (as far as our present knowledge goes). It is interesting to note that they are exclusively engraved, while other subjects – animals, humans, sometimes 'signs' – have been represented both in paintings and in petroglyphs.

Among the numerous scenes of domestic life, such as camps and herds of moving cattle, or scenes showing confrontations, real or symbolic, between people apparently brandishing javelins, bows and arrows, all painted on the walls of caves or shelters – nowhere does one see images of these 'bag-shaped' objects. Does this mean that these figures did not belong to the everyday life of the Saharan populations? Nor to the cultural signs or emblems characterising real or symbolical actions? We remain baffled by the existence of these 'objects', *exclusively engraved and disseminated over most of the Saharan region*: no clue allows us to give them a function in the societies which engraved them.

The rock art context – could one say 'chronocultural' context? – of our objects is that of small-scale petroglyphs, 25–40 cm long, polished, representing animals in a semi-naturalistic style, less frequently humans. Their curving lines continue in the extremities, with legs, tails and horns excessively long (Muzzolini 1995; Le Quellec 1998). These characteristics define a rock art style known under the name of Tazina, after the site of Ain Tazina, Monts des Ksour, in the Algerian Atlas, where these petroglyphs were described for the first time, without however being specifically defined as a 'style' (Lhote 1970).

Recently, the Gauthiers (2010: 169–180) have described a figure similar to our basic model (Fig. 1A), on a site in the Aramat region (Libya), which they call a large 'fish-pot' (*nasse*). The motif, which measures 145 × 135 cm, is larger than any other of the examples that have been found in the Sahara. What makes the petroglyph even more exceptional is that the largest specimens from elsewhere rarely reach 50 cm. The outline was first pecked, then smoothed. A second, simpler and smaller one (57 cm) is engraved close to

this large *nasse* (we keep the French word *nasse* because it is so widely used in the literature). There are no other petroglyphs on the rocks, nor in the vicinity. Both *nasses* are isolated from any context likely to shed light on their meaning and function. By its size, this 'deviation from the norm' is interesting: the determination to make a very large petroglyph, very visible even from a good distance, might invest this object with an importance in the minds of the engravers and in the eyes of the contemporary populations.

Of course one still has to try to understand the value of this object when it appears, reduced in size, on some rock surfaces in large numbers and not isolated.

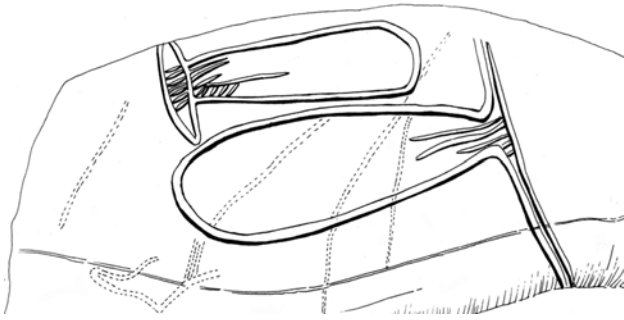
It seems that the environment of our figures has not always been uniform. In Morocco this image is found on almost all the sites where the Tazina style is dominant (that is to say, where more than 75% of *all* the petroglyphs are attributed to this style). But pecked examples can also be found in a western Sahara site (Al Khatib et al. 2008) and in a Moroccan one (Garcin and Garcin 2004), where there are no Tazina style petroglyphs in the neighbourhood; and in the Oued Djerat (Algeria). This is also the case of sites in the Libyan Aramat and Akakus. On the Messak plateau (Libya), these images can often be found among the incised petroglyphs of the 'tazinoïde' techno-style. It is interesting to note that although the Tazina style has been defined from petroglyphs in the Algerian Atlas, practically none of these objects have been found in this region, although they are often found in other recorded Tazina sites in the western or central Sahara.

The frequent correspondence of the Tazina style/ 'bag-shaped' objects encourages one to place these forms in this chronostyle. But the exact chronological position of Tazina petroglyphs still has to be determined. If it is sure that they are Neolithic, as proposed, we can discuss their position in respect of the other pre-Historic periods: naturalistic bubalin, bovidian, perhaps even palaeo-Berber. In other words, we simply do not know exactly where to fit in the Tazina style petroglyphs in the general chronology of the Saharan rock art.

Alfred Muzzolini (1995) places the Tazina school in the schematic bubalin period which follows the naturalistic bubalin. He puts the end of this school somewhere during the period of the chariots and the horses of the Saharan Atlas, although this last period might, nevertheless, not correspond chronologically to the Tassili horse period. Today there is a consensus among prehistorians working on Saharan rock art to give the Tazina school a post-naturalistic bubalin position. But one has to admit that as long as we do not have reliable dates for the petroglyphs, we are stuck in the field of speculation – structured, but still speculation.

But on the other hand, one should be prudent and not attach the objects too much to a specific culture, the Tazinian, whose extremely large distribution raises many questions concerning its validity for the identification of the groups which have used it (see





**Figure 4.** Western Sahara. Straight antennae, slight internal decoration (Ras Lentareg).

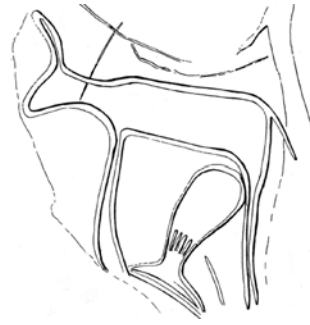
Searight 1999). However, it is perhaps significant that those Moroccan populations who only produced pecked petroglyphs (without any Tazina type images) hardly ever represented this object on their many sites. These populations, called the 'pecked cattle' group by Searight (2004), were probably contemporary with the 'Tazinians' and lasted longer. Should one conclude therefore that the object was no longer useful to them, or perhaps even never had been?

When one comes to consider the frequency of petroglyphs of our object, that is to say, the number of times they figure on the sites, there are two main possibilities: either the object is the only one on a site, or that there are just two or three examples; or, on the other hand, the object is represented several times, a dozen or more. This is the case, for instance, on a site in the Akakus where about 20 of these objects can be seen jostling each other on a small, subhorizontal slab perched on the erosion ledge of a rock face (see Fig. 21).

And what should one think of Masy's remark (1998: 19), faced by the association in Morocco of several forms of this object, not only on the same sites but sometimes on the same rock surface? For Masy this implied that the engraver was to a certain extent free to interpret the basic motif, either because the object represented



**Figure 6.** Concave antennae, single internal line (Jorf Lhammam).



**Figure 5.** Western Sahara. Concave antennae, slight internal decoration, between legs of a bovid (Ras Lentareg).

had itself a variable morphology or because the symbol used was susceptible to various treatments, sometimes simplified, sometimes with some of its components over-emphasised. We show further on that it is possible to indicate the general characteristics of each region, although the most usually represented images are not the only ones engraved in the region concerned.

As we have said, since our image is engraved almost always on sub-horizontal surfaces, one cannot determine which way up it should be considered. However, in the rare cases where it is engraved on a vertical or sub-vertical surface, the 'bulb' (oval body) is almost always at the bottom, the narrowing and the antennae being situated towards the top.

While it is well known that the colour of the patina of petroglyphs provides limited chronological indication without calibration, it is notable that the patina of these objects is generally identical to that of the other nearby petroglyphs (except in the Oued Djerat, where Lhote [1976] noted that the patina of the 'gourd-shaped' objects was lighter than the surrounding petroglyphs).

### Regional characteristics

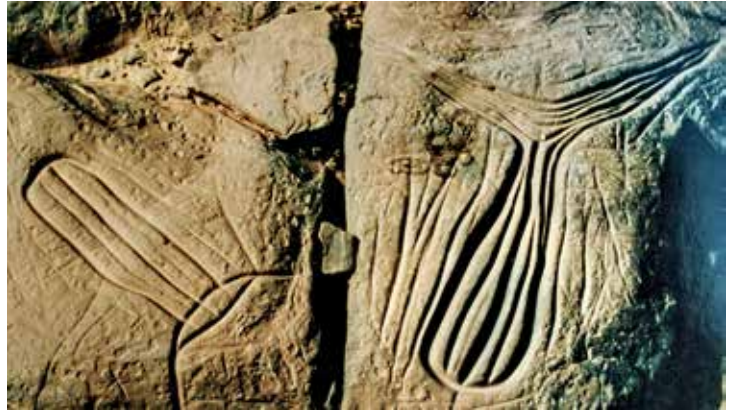
We pointed out earlier that each of the Sahara's main rock art regions seems to have its own particular model, or at least that this version seems the most common there. However, the same region can have several varieties. So, what we are proposing now is a quantitative appreciation after a careful study of all the images available. In the following illustrations we shall show briefly the graphic characteristics of these forms in each of the main regions in which they are found, using the material currently available. While these examples, we repeat, do not represent the only form of this object in the regions indicated, they are the most typical and seem to best represent the specificity of the region.

In the western Sahara, there are few examples and they come mainly from the sites of Ras Lentareg (Milburn 1975; Soleilhavoup 1997), Oued Miran (Nowak et al. 1975) and Asli Bou Kerch (Al Khatib et al. 2008). The shapes are fairly simple, close to our Figure 1A. The exterior antennae are straight or concave, crescent-shaped, but never hanging down on each side of the 'body'. Interior decoration is either absent or limited to a few short parallel lines (Figs 4, 5). The cupules in the largest part of the 'bulb', sometimes present in other





**Figure 7.** Straight antennae, body empty except for two horizontal lines perhaps added later (Ikhlef n'Irouan).



**Figure 9.** Both with concave antennae, joined (on the left), decorated (on the right), bodies of both with internal lines (Ait Ouazik).



**Figure 8.** Both objects with straight antennae, body completely decorated with lines (Tazzarine, Tour de Garde).



**Figure 10.** 'Double' object, concave antennae, one with internal line decoration (Ikhlef n'Irouan).



**Figure 11.** Both with concave antennae, bodies with vertical central line and light decoration (Mcissi).



**Figure 12.** Head to tail, one with open, V-shaped antennae, the other with concave antennae; both with vertical internal line and bodies lightly decorated (Mcissi).



**Figure 13.** 'Abnormal' antennae, no internal decoration, one of two examples with vertically placed cupules (not on same site) (O.Kraoua).

regions of the Sahara, do not exist here.

In Morocco, the examination of all the available publications and photographs shows that the shapes are

amazingly homogeneous, in spite of the considerable number of examples and notwithstanding a few variations (Figs 6–14) (site names in brackets). The





Figure 14. Object with concave antennae (on the right) in a Tazina style context (small human and animals on the left) (O.Kraoua).



Figure 16. A newly-discovered image with drooping antennae (Tassili-n-Ajjer) (photograph by Claude-Noëlle Vaison).



Figure 19. Short horizontal antennae, body undecorated but with two cupules at the bottom (Tissatine Karbetina plateau, Aramat).

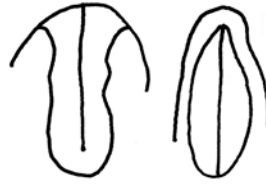


Figure 15. Monts des Ksour (Moghar et-Tahtani).

antennae are almost always concave, sometimes straight, very rarely convex. Sometimes the two ends of the antenna are joined and decorated or the appendices themselves are decorated. Most of these images have one or more vertical lines within the body. The body is sometimes decorated, but cupules are absent except on two petroglyphs of which the antennae are 'abnormal'.

In Algeria, in the Monts des Ksour (Saharan Atlas), there is only one site which has petroglyphs of this kind, and it only has two examples. Both diverge from our standard model but seem sufficiently close to be included here. The antennae consist of a single line, one is convex, almost hanging down, while the other is clearly drooping. The bodies are divided by a central internal line (Fig. 15).

The lines on both petroglyphs are polished. That on the right, rather far off our basic model, is only included here because the two images are evidently associated (after Lhote 1970).

An engraved image of this object recently found in the northern sector of the Tassili-n-Ajjer has strong similarities with those of the distant Saharan Atlas (Monts des Ksour) (Lhote, pers. comm.). The body is not divided but the antennae droop as in the Monts des Ksour (Fig. 16).

Eight representations in the Oued Djerat (Tassili-n-Ajjer) have horizontal or slightly convex antennae, four have concave ones.

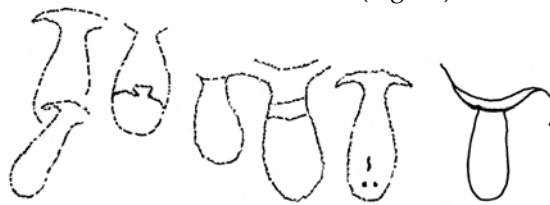


Figure 17. Forms engraved in Oued Djerat: all pecked except the far right, polished. The first three on the left were together; the 4th and 5th were also together on a different panel; the 5th one, with cupules, was further on in the oued (after Lhote 1976).

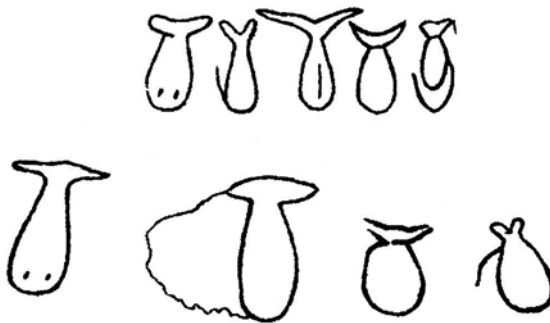


Figure 18. Forms engraved in Hoggar: antennae concave or almost straight, two with cupules (after Trost 1981).

There is no internal decoration, but two have cupules placed like 'eyes'. Two have polished lines, with a dark patina, the others are all pecked (light patina) (Fig. 17).

Seventeen examples have been noted in the Hoggar (Trost 1981) (Fig. 18). Eleven have concave antennae and three straight. One is internally decorated; two have cupules towards the bottom. Strangely enough, three images in this group seem to look like fish (not shown here). They are either stylised images of real fish, in which case they should be left out of our study, or they are graphic variations of our enigmatic engraved



**Figure 20.** Closely packed images of different types (Wadi Afar, south Akakus).

forms.

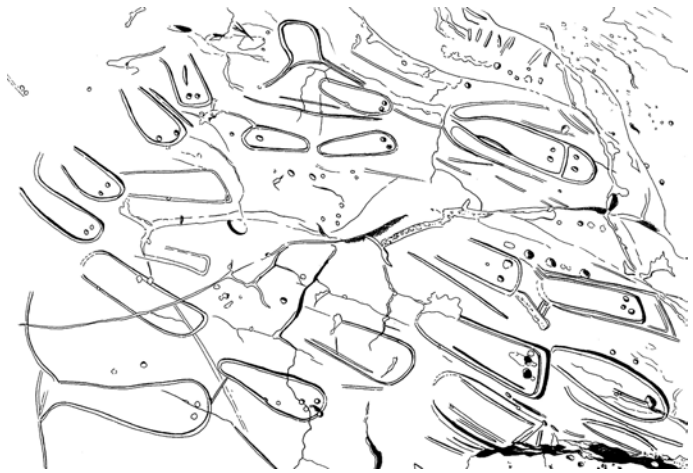
In Libya, the shapes are very varied, depending on the region considered: Aramat, Akakus and Messak. In the Aramat (Fig. 19) the antennae take on several forms: either drooping alongside the body (as in the south of the Akakus), horizontal or open V-shaped. Interior decoration is absent, except in a very few rare cases where it is reduced to a simple central line. Cupules are very often engraved in the broad part of the body.

In the Akakus (Figs 20–23), some antennae hang down along the side of the body, others are straight or concave (Fig. 21). Interior decoration is absent. Two cupules, sometimes four, are very often represented.

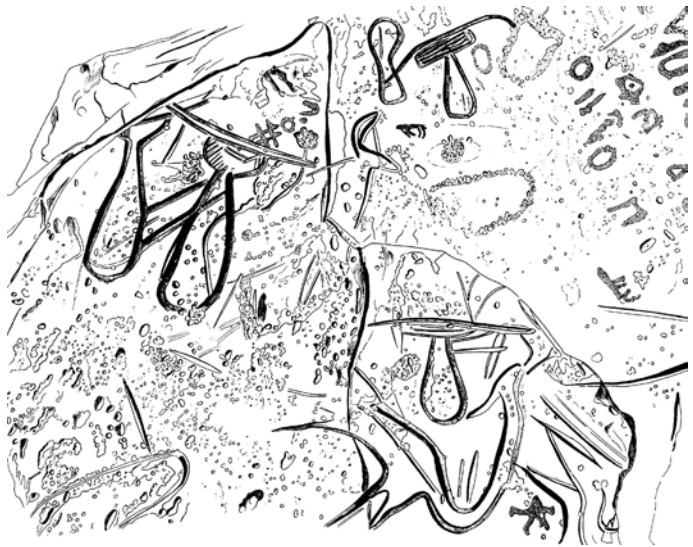
On one site, a group of some 20 images are closely packed on a sloping ledge (Fig. 20). Several models coexist here, of which three correspond to our Figure 1A and 1B. The others, without antennae, would seem, however, to be an integral part of the composition (Fig. 20). Body decoration is absent, but several have cupules.

On the Messak Settafet plateau (Figs 23–26), the classic form exists (our model 1A), with straight or concave antennae at the sites of Aghelad and Taleschut (see Le Quellec 1998, Figs 56 to 58). Our model 1C, with antenna drooping alongside the body, has also been noted at Aghelad (see Le Quellec 1998, Fig. 62) and at Taleshut (*ibid.*: Fig. 24).

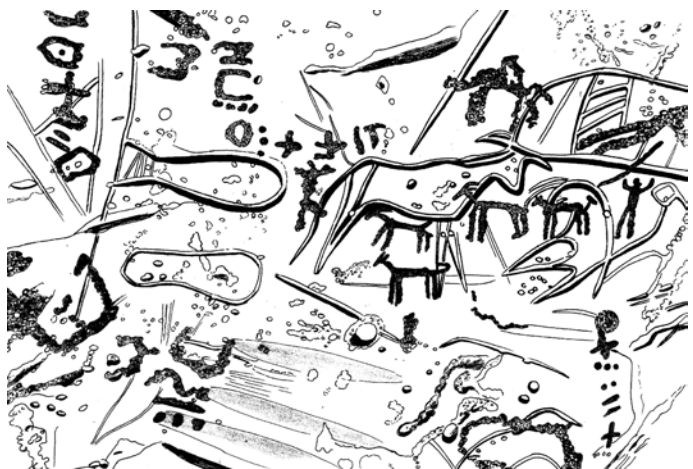
But the most striking form on the plateau differs considerably from the images given in our Figure 1. At present they seem to be confined to two sites, where they are engraved in a finer, thinner technique and occur in groups. In the Wadi



**Figure 21.** Reproduction of the panel in Fig. 20.



**Figure 22.** Three classic forms, antennae straight, no body decoration, no cupules. Another very different type (top middle) with short straight decorated antennae. On same rock as Figure 22 (Wadi Issendjelen, east Akakus).

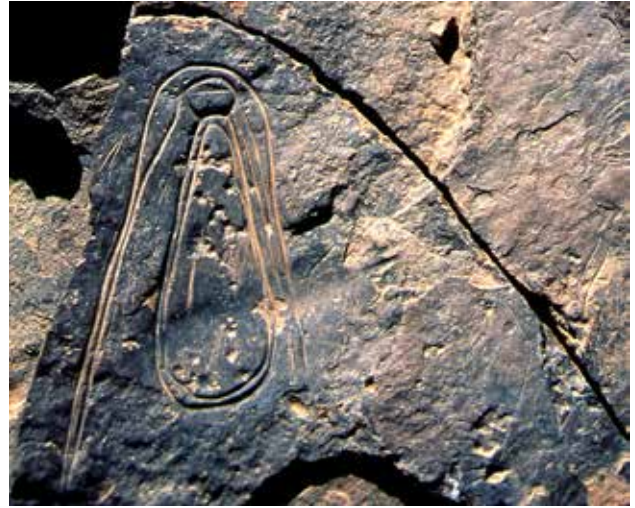


**Figure 23.** One classic form, also with straight antennae, next to an ovoid without antennae but part of the same group. In a very varied context (Wadi Issendjelen, east Akakus).

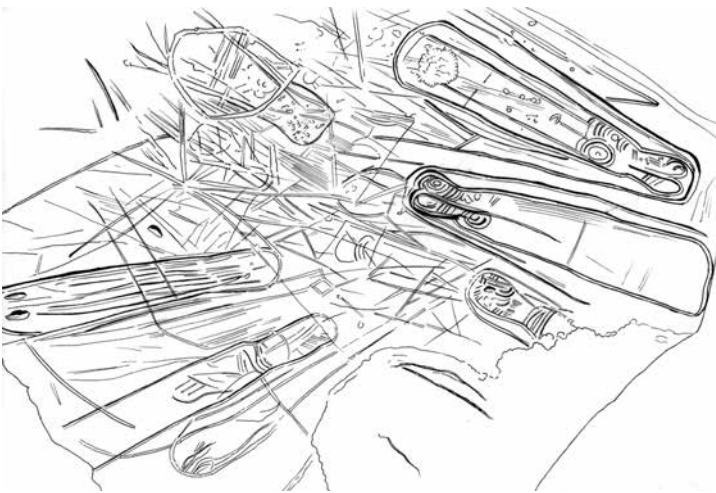




**Figure 24.** Very convex antennae, no body decoration (Wadi Taleshut).



**Figure 25.** Drooping antennae, several cupules (Wadi Taleshut).



**Figure 26.** Several long thin forms, recalling a 'bottle', antennae drooping on either side of the body, decorated in the upper part of the body (Wadi Taleshut).



**Figure 27.** Two 'bottle-shaped' images, antennae drooping on either side of the body, one decorated in the upper part of the body (Wadi Taleshut).

Taleshut especially the shape of some finely incised petroglyphs conjures up 'bottles' (Figs 26, 27). Their interior decoration is very rich, producing a remarkable aesthetic effect. It is probable that this last model is very far from the 'object', both in its conception as in its possible function (real or symbolic). To end this review of the image in the Messak, two cupules are frequent in the broad part of the body.

In the north of Niger, on the Arkana site (Djado plateau) (Figs 28–31), a wide range of forms exist, including a remarkable concentration of shapes coming fairly close to the model studied here, though considerably more angular (Fig. 27). Some of the latter have no interior decor while others are remarkably decorated, both in the body of the image (longitudinal parallel lines, grids, cupules, transversal lines etc.) and in the antennae (parallel or longitudinal segments, numerous cupules etc.).

### Regional round-up

To sum up, we see that these images are more or less similar in the western Sahara and Morocco. Those in Algeria, whether they are in the Saharan Atlas, Oued Djerat in the Tassili n'Ajjer or the Hoggar, are not quite like those in Morocco but are still close to the Moroccan representations. But in Libya (Aramat, Acacus and Messak) and also in the north of Niger (Djado Plateau), the models are extremely varied, including complicated internal decoration. Can it be suggested that the Messak was inhabited by different populations, more or less contemporary or successive? How can one explain the 'bottles' in a finely-incised style? Niger too has a variety of forms, ranging from the western Saharan types to a unique design.

As we have just seen, there is an undeniable 'family likeness' in all these forms which cover





Figure 28. Very angular decorated antennae and body (Arkana).

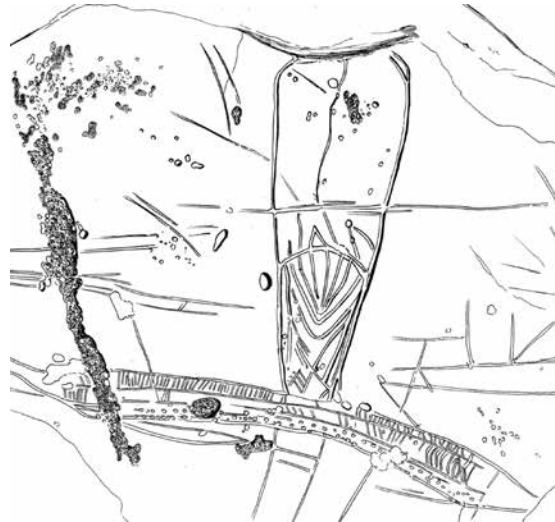


Figure 29. Slightly concave, highly decorated antennae (Arkana).

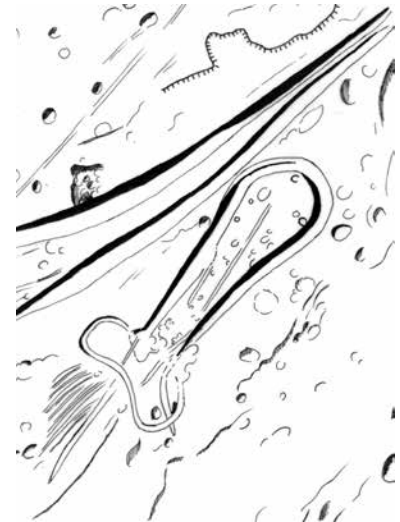


Figure 30. Short heavy antennae, undecorated body (Arkana).

the whole Saharan region. Nevertheless, the characteristics — not morphologic or graphic but certain elements such as antennae, internal decoration, cupules — are noticeably different from one region to another. This is one of the important questions in a global study of these rock art manifestations such as the one we are trying to undertake. What is the reason for these regional differences? Are they cultural and, if so, why always roughly the same basic model? Are they chronological? If so, this would give these forms a fairly long life and perhaps also a long cultural transmission, that is to say, define it as a long-term tradition.

#### Hypotheses concerning the nature of this object

As already stated, our aim is only to show that these forms are to be found in almost all the Sahara (leaving out Egypt). It is not at all to look for some sort of meaning for them. A lot of authors have put forward suggestions concerning these petroglyphs, so we briefly mention them here. They have been called fish-traps (*nasses*) by many authors. Others have considered them to be leaves, flasks, bottles, traps, penis sheaths, fish or bags; 'trap' or 'fish-trap' are the most frequently used descriptions.

Already in 1975, Milburn was asking whether this petroglyph seen in the western Sahara could not represent a trap. This shows that questions about these have been asked for a long time, and the fact that the many discoveries made over the last 40 years have in no way solved the problem. The formidable bibliography drawn up by Masy (the first researcher to study these figures in Morocco) in 2006 (Soleilhavoup 2007: 124–126) highlights the attraction of this enigmatic image.

Let us take the cases where the object is considered to be a trap. It is not enough to note that the object seems to be associated with an animal (antelopes, for instance) — as can be noted in southern Morocco — to consider that it is a trap. This association object-animal has been studied exhaustively by Wolff (1997–98). But if one looks closely at his tables, one sees that Wolff has found 14 cases where a 'trap' touches an animal (our italics), 11 cases where the trap is simply associated with an animal (i.e. they are close to each other on the same panel) and

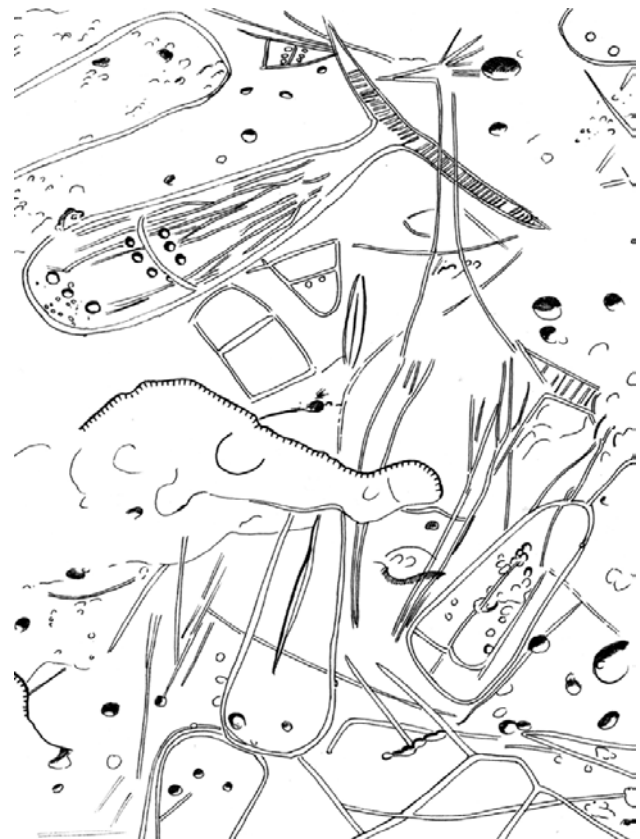


Figure 31. Two examples of the classic form with concave, decorated, antennae (Arkana).

6 cases where an animal seems to have 'stopped short' near a trap. These figures are based on a total of over 250 petroglyphs recorded of this object, of which the author has made 133 detailed reproductions (Wolff 1997–98: 61). In our opinion, only one of these illustrations (Wolff 1997–98: Fig. 72) could come close to that of a trapped animal. With all our respect for the enormous amount of work done by this researcher, we cannot go along with his position concerning the generic meaning of this object. More convincing in this respect are the animals



**Figure 32.** Two forms studied here, with slightly convex and very convex antennae, and in another very similar form, but without antennae, with an anthropomorph.

visibly trapped by the large grooved stones called *ben barur* and found in Libya, or the radial traps known under the name of '*Radnetzen*' (Fig. 31). The latter are still used by the Touaregs. Engraved examples are known in Morocco (see Letan 1967; Rodrigue 2009), always pecked but never associated with an animal. Nor are they ever found on sites of Tazina petroglyphs, which do have the forms studied here.

Without accepting the idea of these objects being '*nasses*', or fish-traps, it has been shown that fish were engraved in the Sahara (Soleilhavoup 2011). So traps for catching them cannot be totally eliminated from our minds. Soleilhavoup describes petroglyphs of shapes looking like 'rooms' or 'pockets' for catching fish, which could correspond, in a very simplified fashion, to our model.

And what about the petroglyph at Wadi In-Hagarin in the Libyan Messak (Gauthier and Gauthier 1995), where a man (of the same age and same technique) is engraved inside one of these very similar forms (Fig. 32)? A manhunt?

The Halliers (1990, 1992), working in the Djado region, are in favour of penis sheaths or pelvic belts, because certain internal decorations in these forms



**Figure 33.** Anthropomorph with a bag (?) at his waist (Wadi I-n-Hagarin).

look like decorative weaving. Indeed, our Figures 28 and 29 support this reading. The idea of pelvic belt was also evoked by Ferhat and Striedter (1993: 214), in the region of Dao Timmi (Niger). They refer to oval-shaped petroglyphs whose appendices could represent 'the cords attaching it to the waist' (their Fig. 12 is identical to our basic model Fig. 1A).

Still looking into the meaning of this image, Wolff (2007) also takes up the hypothesis that certain forms of '*nasses*' are penis-shields, using his ethnological comparisons from two groups of Indians living in Amazonia. He thus compares the Moroccan T-shaped '*nasses*' to these accessories, pointing out at the same time that these observations cannot be applied to all the '*nasses*'. But these '*nasses*' studied by Wolff are rare and do not look anything like the form studied in this article. This idea of penis sheath or pelvic belt has strong supporters, but so far no petroglyph has been recorded of a man — among the hundreds of males proudly showing off their masculinity — wearing anything like the image we are dealing with. To be sure, a penis sheath (a simple close-fitting covering of the penis has been noted occasionally) but not the sort of 'apron' featuring in Niger (our Fig. 28 for instance).

We take the opportunity to point out that in two Libyan sites (Wadi I-n-Hagarin and Wadi Taleshut), several anthropomorphs — either associated with animals or not — have comparable objects at waist-level (but with no thinning at the 'neck' nor visible antennae) (Fig. 33). This has prompted one of us to consider them to be some sort of bag or container, the antennae in this case serving to attach them round the waist (Soleilhavoup 2007).



More recently Le Quellec (2011) suggested a new reading of similar images: they may represent archers' wrist-guards. This idea does not concern our model, which is limited to petroglyphs while those quoted by Le Quellec are paintings. In addition no bow or bowmen are ever featured in association with the model studied here.

Why do we eliminate these hypotheses? Because each of these designations presupposes a function. But at no moment when examining these petroglyphs, is it possible to determine the role that these objects could have played in the pre-Historic communities which placed them on the rocks (except perhaps in the case represented in Fig. 33). A close link between 'nasses' and animals can be found at Ait Ouazik (Morocco) where the joined legs of a bovid form a 'nasse' loosely similar to our object (Camps 1975) (Fig. 34).



**Figure 34.** A spindle-shaped form defining the stomach and legs of a bovid. This idea occurs again in another petroglyph at Ait Ouazik (Morocco).

### Real objects or symbolic objects?

If one supposes that these engraved forms represent a real object, there is nothing to stop one from thinking that they might have a contemporary (or later) use as a symbol. It is not absurd to imagine that a link 'real object/symbol' might have existed. But what object? To do what? For what symbolic function? Here we come up against the age-old puzzle of the function and meaning.

One of us (SSM) puts forward the idea of a trap used currently in the past by certain Saharan populations to catch a small animal, a dassie or a goundi for instance. The animal, lured into the trap by a bait at the bottom, would have been unable to turn over and get out because of the trap's narrow neck. The antenna would have been a draw-string to shut the bag or fix it firmly in place. Hunting of this animal later fell out of use (climate change? change of customs?) and the image of this type of trap would then have become simply a memory; not a symbol but an ideogram meaning 'to hunt' or 'the hunt'. Depending on the region, this ideogram would have taken on different forms, according to the nature of the groups which continued to engrave it. This is obviously pure speculation: no animal has been represented anywhere near the model studied.

If the 'trap' idea, slightly revised and elaborated, is perhaps plausible and applicable to the whole Saharan region (but unproven), other hypotheses cannot be excluded. Indeed, as for many petroglyphs, in the Sahara or elsewhere, the interpretation of these engraved forms risks remaining impossible for a long time, unless a chance archaeological discovery, either material or rupestrian, produces an uncontested meaning.

### Remarks and conclusions

We end the discussion by recalling the proven and objective facts (as they are known today).

- We have shown that these forms are engraved throughout the Sahara, from the Atlantic to the Libyan desert, and that a 'family likeness' enables them to be grouped together in a single category. The vast majority are found in a context of polished (abraded) petroglyphs done in the style called Tazina (supposedly Neolithic, but undated).
- We have noted that there are clear regional differences for certain characteristics of these forms and that, in each region, there are specific features.
- No painted representation of this object has yet been found.

However it is also a fact that we are left with several unverifiable hypotheses concerning their meaning, some of which we have eliminated. But we are still no nearer to knowing what this object and/or symbol represented for the groups which engraved it.

So here is a problem irritating for all those interested in the rock art of the Sahara — a problem which has cropped up regularly in the academic literature for over 40 years. And it is to be feared that in spite of future discoveries of new images of these forms, the riddle of the meaning will remain unsolved.

In this commentary we do not feel we have written yet another article on this enigmatic subject, but have put forward some ideas concerning the regional features of these forms based on the basic model defined earlier. We have in this way reviewed apparently related motifs across the Sahara from the western Sahara, through Morocco and Algeria to Libya and Niger. This leads to the question of whether, if we are dealing with a real object, it had the same function everywhere? And if we are dealing with an ideogram, what does it mean and for whom was it designed?

It remains for us to hope that our colleagues working in the Sahara or in other parts of the world will one day

bring some light on this interesting rock art problem.

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