

This volume is dedicated to  
Hans Rhotert (1900 – 1991)  
whose pioneering research in the Libyan Desert  
inspired us to follow his tracks



*1935 in the Libyan Desert*





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## Wadi Sura – The Cave of Beasts



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## Wadi Sura – The Cave of Beasts

A rock art site in the Gilf Kebir (SW-Egypt)

In collaboration with

Franziska Bartz, Erik Büttner, Frank Darius, Frank Förster,  
Lutz Hermsdorf-Knauth, Sabine Krause, Hans Leisen,  
Heiko Riemer, Jürgen Seidel and András Zboray

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## Foreword

Wadi Sura – Eighty years have passed since this name, ‘Valley of the pictures’ in Arabic, was coined by the Hungarian desert explorer László Almásy for an area at the foot of the sandstone cliffs of the Gilf Kebir Plateau in the far west of Egypt. It was there in October 1933, during an expedition carried out together with the German ethnographers Leo Frobenius and Hans Rhotert, that he discovered a pair of large rock shelters with some striking paintings. In particular he was captivated by the “surprise of seeing in the heart of the Libyan Desert images of swimmers” (ALMÁSY 1936: 79). Today the ‘Cave of Swimmers’ is known worldwide, though in the light of modern environmental studies one is not so much surprised by the apparently swimming people some thousand years ago when, during the early and mid Holocene of the eastern Sahara, in a savannah like environment, temporary lakes might well have existed. However, with the discovery, in 2002, of numerous representations of strange figures, together with some more ‘swimmers’, in the ‘Cave of Beasts’, the perspective has somewhat changed. “Are they really swimming?”, one is compelled to ask, and is immediately engaged in a discussion triggered by speculations about the mysterious ‘monsters’ depicted there. One of the principle aims of this book is to provide a safe foundation for possible informed interpretations, instead of constructing hypotheses on the basis of arbitrarily selected motifs or scenes.

Surely everyone would like to look behind the curtain that veils the spiritual world of the stone age hunters of Wadi Sura. Faced with vivid scenes showing different aspects of human life, already Almásy was preoccupied by such questions, to which probably we will never find a satisfying answer. „Could this be ritual dances or sacrifices?”, he asks, reluctant to give an answer, and stating instead: “What a wonderful material for scientific studies”, and deploring that due to the decay of the porous rock face only a part of the original picture trove has survived. Finally he adds that it is “absolutely necessary that all these paintings be documented carefully [...] before they fade away completely”.

To satisfy this now 80 years old demand is one of the key objectives of this book, even though the paintings discovered by Massimo Foggini and his son in the ‘Cave of Beasts’ (Wadi Sura II) are fortunately not in such a deplorable condition as those discovered by Almásy in the ‘Cave of Swimmers’ (Wadi Sura I). The latter have become subject of an Italian project headed by Barbara Barich, which deals with the developing of innovative conservation measures. These are also a part of the documentation program conceived for the ‘Cave of Beasts’, focusing on a broad spectrum of archaeological, conservational and touristic aspects.

Starting with the latter, the complete presentation of the paintings in half their natural size provides an opportunity to all visitors who only had limited time during their stop-over in Wadi Sura, to delve into the pictures and to study them with the deserved thoroughness. Thus the book is

also an invitation to start another exploration trip, and to immerse oneself into the paintings and to vent one’s fantasy, meeting the stone age people face to face in their daily life as well as in their ceremonies and social events.

The main objective of the Wadi Sura Project and its scientific targets cannot be described more aptly than by quoting Ralph Bagnold, the other great Libyan Desert pioneer of the 1930s. Writing about the protection of the desert’s cultural heritage, especially concerning the rock art, he states: „The differences of style and theme are so great that the artists must have belonged to peoples of different ages and cultures. But when the paintings were done and by what successive peoples we have no direct means of estimating. The most promising approach [...] appears likely to be a wide-ranging and coordinated statistical survey [...] correlating the type or types of painting (recorded in some agreed standard color-photographic format) together with the character of the location [...] with the relative densities of the artifact types found nearby” (BAGNOLD 1982: vii). In this sense, Almásy’s demand for documentation as a means of conservation, completed by photography, statistics and methods of landscape archaeology, defined the cardinal points of our research program that became a pilot project for an integral cooperation between archaeological and conservation sciences. That this finally could be implemented successfully is due to the openness and expertise of Hans Leisen who, in the same way as Stephan Seidlmayer, was ready to join the project as a partner.

An essential step towards achieving the concerted goal was to replace the traditional methods of rock art recording like copying and tracing on foil by non-contact recording methods using the combination of 3D laser scanning and high resolution digital photography, resulting in a complete reproduction of the rock art in the ‘Cave of Beasts’ as close as possible to the natural impression to the naked eye. For this publication any means of image enhancement have been avoided. Such methods perhaps would have made some details better visible or some scenes more attractive, but also could have increased the danger of selective accentuation of certain motifs or traits. Detailed processing of the photographs, especially by applying colour-enhancing software tools like ‘DStretch’, will be part of a following volume by Frank Förster. This will include a comprehensive catalogue and description of the pictures (recorded in cooperation with Reinhold Goss), their statistical analysis and possible chronological classification, as well as advances to the cognitive background of the art.

Placing the paintings into the context of the prehistoric occupation of the larger Wadi Sura region was the main target of an extended survey project headed by Heiko Riemer, which followed various aspects of landscape archaeology. First convincing results can already be found on the following pages, but will be more fully published in a forthcoming volume. The extended surveys, carried out together with Franziska Bartz, also offered the chance

for environmental studies by Frank Darius, who in his contribution to this book presents a new scenario of the environmental conditions in the eastern Sahara. Being temporarily employed by the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency, he and Karin Kindermann took the successful initiative to invite three EEAA rangers – Ahmed Ebaid, Tamer Ramadan Zayed and Wail Ahmed Thabet – to take part in a field school in Wadi Sura, together with the Egyptologist Mohamed Abdelfattah, dealing with conservation aspects of the Gilf Kebir National Park.

An essential precondition for the realisation of the project was our long lasting fruitful cooperation with the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities, represented first of all by Dr. Mohamed Ismail Khaled, who – supported by Hany Abu el-Azm – was always ready to overcome apparently insurmountable bureaucratic problems. In Dakhla we could consistently rely on the active backing of Maher Bas-hendi, the director general of the local inspectorate, and his colleagues Ahmed Gouma, Yasser Farouk Hussein and Mazhar Ezzed Abd el-Raheen, who collegially fulfilled their tasks as field inspectors.

The thanks of the Wadi Sura team to all those mentioned above would be incomplete if not including two men who contributed much to the logistic background and the successful outcome of our five expeditions: Abd el-Salam Saad Mansur who made the whole team to feel at ease with the life in Dakhla as well as in the desert, and Oliver Palm who, backed by Bernhard Buchner in Cairo, played the same role tending the mission's vehicles.

That this book after four years of fieldwork could be completed in such a relative short time is primarily due to the commitment of Hans Leisen's conservation team, above all Sabine Krause. She, with her experience and her indefatigable work in the desert as well as in Cologne, together with Jürgen Seidel and assisted by Erik Büttner, produced

the base for this documentation and shaped it into the form that makes up the major part of this book. The same dedication to the aims of our joint project was exhibited by Heiko Riemer, who stands out not only due to his field activities in landscape archaeology, but also by his special skills and creativity that brought a major part of the book's layout into shape. The main editing job was in the hands of Lutz Hermsdorf-Knauth who – assisted by Frank Förster and Ursula Tegtmeier – gave the book its final appearance.

To András Zboray the authors are not only indebted for his commitment to the field of rock art research, bridging the gap between recreational and professional archaeology as demonstrated by his contribution to this book, but also for assuming the delicate task to correct and polish their imperfect English. That all these efforts finally could take shape perfectly is due to the accurate and flexible mode of operation of Hermann Ellersiek, which for more than 30 years now characterizes our cooperation with the printing house Hans Kock in Bielefeld.

This extensive publication project could not have materialised without the outstanding generosity of Stephanie Buchner-Cross. Her considerable donation to the printing costs, together with the grants from the Otto Wolff Stiftung and the Annemarie und Helmut Börner-Stiftung, are a great encouragement to the Heinrich Barth Institute and its objectives.

On the 50th anniversary of the beginnings of African rock art research at the University of Cologne, it is a joyful duty of the editor to express his warmest thanks and highest appreciation to the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and its anonymous reviewers for their support which, from the very start, fostered the efforts to make rock art research an accepted branch of archaeology, and also made the Wadi Sura Project and finally this book possible.

July 2013

Rudolph Kuper

## *Part I*



*View across the bay of Wadi Sura between the 'Cave of Swimmers' and the 'Cave of Beasts', visible in the far distance (arrow).*

