

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

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Wadi Sura in the context of regional rock art



Fig. 1 Gilf Kebir-Jebel Ouenat region:

- 1 Wadi Sura (Gilf Kebir)
- 2 Clayton's Craters
- 3 Jebel Arkenu
- 4 Karkur Ibrahim (Jebel Ouenat)
- 5 Karkur Talh (Jebel Ouenat)
- 6 Wadi Wahesh (Jebel Ouenat)

At the time of their discovery in 1933, the paintings of Wadi Sura were an oddity, not fitting in with the naturalistic style of cattle pastoralist paintings found throughout the region. In the last ten years systematic surveys revealed hundreds of new sites, including some that may be attributed to a number of pre-pastoralist cultures, demonstrating a clear cultural succession across the entire central Libyan Desert. The Wadi Sura paintings, now much better understood from the 'Cave of Beasts', are clearly a part of this succession, with possible relationships and contemporarity with other rock art producing cultures of the region.

Introduction

The great massifs of the central Libyan Desert were known to harbor numerous prehistoric rock art sites ever since their existence was revealed to the outside world in the 1920s and 1930s (Kuper, this volume). Early explorers reported numerous engravings and paintings at Jebel Ouenat (Fig. 1), and sporadic further expeditions in the 1960s, especially the 1968 Belgian Scientific Expedition revealed some further spectacular paintings at Jebel Ouenat (VAN NOTEN 1978).

A common theme to most of the paintings discovered and published up till twenty years ago were the innumerable cattle depictions, suggesting that the principal prehistoric inhabitants of the area were nomadic cattle pastoralists, taking advantage of a humid interval sometime during the early to mid-Holocene. The only paintings not fitting into this pattern were those of the great shelter of Wadi Sura (the 'Cave of Swimmers', WG 52*). The paintings show a high degree of abstraction, very much unlike the naturalistic representations of the cattle pastoralists seen elsewhere in the region (cf. RHOTERT 1952). Interpretation was made more difficult by the very eroded nature of the shelter, with only a fraction of the original painted surface remaining. MUZZOLINI (1995) observed a superficial resemblance to the "roundhead style" of the central Sahara, but in the absence of any further analogies no meaningful comparisons or detailed analyses could be made.

This picture started to slowly change in the last twenty years. The exploration of the vicinity of Wadi Sura yielded more paintings with the same style and subject matter as the large shelter discovered by Alm s (GAUTHIER & NEGRO 1999; ZBORAY 2003a). The discovery of the 'Cave of Beasts' (WG 21) in 2002 provided a quantum leap in our understanding of the Wadi Sura paintings, showing the same type of humans and wild fauna, superimposed on a 'wallpaper' of negative hand prints, in a good state of preservation. One partial damaged figure in the 'Cave of Swimmers' proved to be an example of the strange 'headless beast', of which dozens of examples were depicted in the new site, together with some of the characteristic 'swimming' figures and thousands of other human figures. These beasts and the 'swimming' figures are key diagnostic features of the Wadi Sura paintings (ZBORAY 2012).

The complete ensemble of figures points to a very distinct, well definable entity with a very narrow geographical range, present along a thirty kilometre stretch of land below the southern cliffs of the western Gilf Kebir. Considering the large number of superimpositions at WG 21,

this artistic tradition appears to have lasted for a significant period of time. Parallel to these discoveries near Wadi Sura, new finds at the more southerly massifs of Jebel Ouenat, Arkenu and the surrounding smaller hills started to change our understanding of the cultural succession in the central Libyan Desert (Eastern Sahara).

Systematic surveying of the Jebel Ouenat region resulted in the discovery of nearly a thousand new rock art sites (e.g., BORDA 2010; 2011a; 2011b; MENARDI NOGUERA & ZBORAY 2011a; 2012; ZBORAY 2009; ZBORAY & BORDA 2010), increasing the number of known sites in the region by a magnitude of five. Many of the new finds depicted human figures in a style clearly different from the cattle pastoralists. With this corpus of new data, a number of previously unrecognised early cultural horizons may be identified in the environs of Jebel Ouenat, evidently all predating the cattle pastoral period. While the Wadi Sura paintings remain distinct and well defined in their narrow geographical niche along the base of the cliffs of the western Gilf Kebir, there are a number of similarities to depictions of other painting styles in the Jebel Ouenat region, suggesting contemporarity and cultural links across the region.

The known rock art sites of the Gilf Kebir-Jebel Ouenat region are almost evenly balanced in the proportion of engravings to paintings. The last published count (ZBORAY 2009) presents 402 sites with engravings and 456 sites with paintings. At Jebel Ouenat there is a very noticeable pattern of engravings (with few paintings) appearing at lower altitudes around the base of the mountain and in the lower courses of wadis, while paintings are concentrated in the upper sections, reaching up to the highest altitudes of the mountain. This pattern of geographical distribution at present remains unexplained.

Unfortunately, with engravings the technique and medium allows for much cruder execution than the detail observable in paintings of the area, thus distinctions may be made more on subject matter and overall execution than any finer stylistic traits. It does appear that at least in part the numerous engravings depicting cattle (more than half of all engravings) are the work of the same people who made the paintings depicting pastoral themes. However, for the wild fauna depictions, of which there are probably some pre-dating the cattle period, and some post-dating, it is very hard to make meaningful and consistent distinctions. It will require much future effort to categorise the various engravings into the currently established cultural and chronological framework; this present study only examines the regional styles and possible interrelationships of the known paintings.

Based on the presently known corpus of sites, four distinct styles of hunter-gatherer paintings may be recognised aside those of Wadi Sura, superseded by the cattle pastoralist horizon.

* All references to individual sites in this paper use the numbering system developed and revised by the author (ZBORAY 2009) unless otherwise noted. All photographs in this article are by A. Zboray.



Fig. 2 Typical Ouenat cattle pastoralist scene, showing a herd of cattle with human figures (site KT 85/A), Karkur Talh, Jebel Ouenat.

The Ouenat cattle pastoralists

The vast majority of the paintings at Jebel Ouenat depict cattle and associated humans. Of 414 sites with paintings, 337 contain figures which may be assigned to the cattle pastoralists. The predominant theme of the paintings is cattle, with some panels showing hundreds of them in a great variety of form and colour (Fig. 2). Some paintings show goats, with or without cattle, but depicted in the same characteristic body proportions, posture, and style. Many of the paintings contain human figures, commonly with accessories like body decoration, waist pouches or loincloths, shoulder bags, footwear, bow and arrows. There are some variations in the style of depicting hu-



Fig. 3 Male figure holding a bow and wearing a characteristic 'tailed' quiver cum utility bag not observed elsewhere among Saharan cattle pastoralist paintings – a key defining element of the Ouenat cattle pastoralist paintings (site KTW 26/B), upper Karkur Talh, Jebel Ouenat.

mans; however, body posture and proportions of cattle, as well as the standardised iconography of some personal accessories clearly present a homogenous artistic tradition ("Uweinat cattle pastoralists", MENARDI NOGUERA & ZBORAY 2011b) (Fig. 3).

While cattle pastoralist paintings dominate the rock art of Jebel Ouenat and the surrounding massifs, a number of scattered rock art sites attributable to the same tradition may be found throughout the Gilf Kebir, providing conclusive evidence that the cattle pastoralist people roamed across the entire region encompassing Jebel Ouenat, the surrounding smaller massifs, and the Gilf Kebir Plateau (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4 Typical Ouenat cattle pastoralist paintings superimposed over Wadi Sura type giraffes (site WG 35), near Wadi Sura, Gilf Kebir.



The 'Ouenat roundhead' style

The first known 'round head' site (BH 4, Karkur Idriss) was instantly recognised as being distinctly different from other known Jebel Ouenat paintings (VAN NOTEN 1978), however being an isolated example and lacking any superpositions, its true significance was not recognised. In the past ten years more than fifty further sites have been found with these characteristic paintings, providing a sufficiently large sample to define the style ("Uweinat roundhead style", ZBORAY 2012):

The exclusive subjects of the paintings are human figures. Sometimes only one is being depicted, but they are generally found in groups. The main defining feature is the circular round head, exaggerated in size compared to normal body proportions, and is completely void of facial



Fig. 5 Typical 'Ouenat roundhead' figure (site KTW 31), upper Karkur Talh, Jebel Ouenat.

Fig. 6 'Ouenat roundhead' figure with exceptional body decoration (site KTW 54), upper Karkur Talh, Jebel Ouenat (photo enhanced with DStretch#).

Fig. 7 'Ouenat roundhead' figure with body decoration and loincloth, holding bow and arrows (site KTW 11/D), upper Karkur Talh, Jebel Ouenat (photo enhanced with DStretch#).

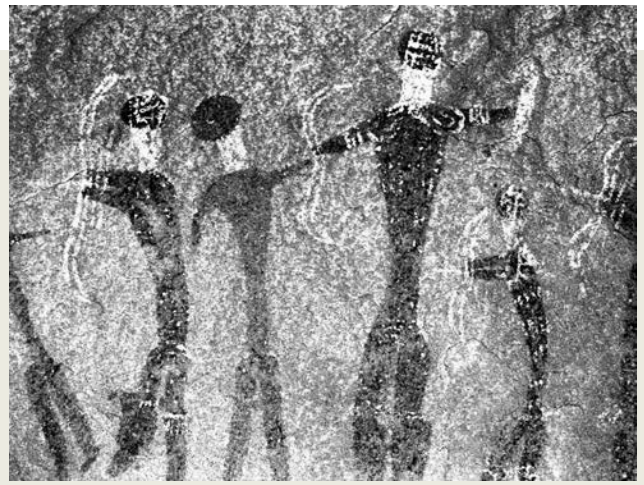
features (Figs. 5–7). The rest of the body is of normal proportions, with a triangular torso and narrow hips; the arms and legs are robust and proportionate; hands and feet are drawn without digits (Fig. 5). Sometimes a secondary white circle or oval is seen attached to, and partially overlapping the head. The figures are shown in contorted body positions which are being repeated across the range of sites. The figures are mostly plain monochrome, but in some cases body decoration can be observed (Fig. 6). In rare examples some kind of dress is discernible, and some figures may be seen holding bow and arrows (Fig. 7). Despite the complete lack of any animals associated with the human figures, depicting bows and arrows suggests hunting to be the primary means of subsistence.

DStretch is a software tool for the digital enhancement of pictographs developed by Jon Harman (cf. p. 57): www.dstretch.com. Photographs in this paper manipulated by DStretch are shown in greyscale.

Fig. 8 Group of 'Elongated roundhead' figures (site AR 42/C), Jebel Arkenu.



Fig. 9 'Elongated round-head' figures with bows and arrows (site KTW 27/G), upper Karkur Talh, Jebel Ouenat (photo enhanced with DStretch).



The 'Elongated roundhead' style

In 1998, Le Quellec recorded (but did not publish at that time) a number of rock art sites to the immediate south of Jebel Ouenat the paintings of which showed distinct round featureless heads, and bore some resemblance to some human figures at Wadi Sura, and also to some extent to the 'Ouenat roundhead' figures. Initially these were considered to be a variation of the "Uweinat round-head style" (ZBORAY 2005a), or even assigned to the "Wadi Sura style" (LE QUELLEC et al. 2005; LE QUELLEC 2009), greatly expanding the geographical range and the narrow definition of the style. Fortunately several well preserved new sites were recorded recently containing paintings of this peculiar style. The corpus of a total of 22 sites at Jebel Ouenat, Jebel Arkenu and environs now permits the definition of a distinct style (ZBORAY 2012).

The theme of the paintings are exclusively human figures, echoing the classic 'Ouenat roundhead' style, however the depiction of the figures is markedly different. The head is completely round and mostly featureless, but here the similarity ends. The head is small in comparison to the rest of the body and is joined to the trunk by an unnaturally long neck (usually executed in white paint which in many cases disappeared) which is the main defining characteristic of the style (Figs. 8; 9). The body is unnaturally thin and elongated, with legs being rela-

tively thick and short in proportion to the rest of the body. The arms are very disproportionate, short and stubby, sometimes just shown as a short featureless line. The figures often bear extensive body decoration, and some hold bow and arrows, sometimes in a shooting posture (Figs. 8; 9). Despite the complete absence of animal depictions, they seem to have been produced by a hunting society, like the 'Ouenat roundheads'. The geographical range of this style appears to overlap that of the 'Ouenat roundhead' style, but the frequency of the sites is less than half.

While some elements of the body decoration and the disproportionate small round head may be compared to human figures of the Wadi Sura shelters, there are some key differences. Most importantly, none of the 'Wadi Sura style' human figures display the elongated white neck that joins the head to the upper body, while all the figures attributable to this style do. Wadi Sura figures display a wide range of body proportions, while the ones at Jebel Ouenat always present the long neck and body with disproportionately short arms. With the present body of evidence, the two styles may confidently be considered to be distinct and not directly related, though this does not rule out possible contemporarity and weaker cultural links.

The Miniature style

The first of these characteristic figures were observed by RHOTERT (1952) in a shelter in southern Karkur Talh (KTS 15/C), underlying several layers of cattle pastoralist paintings. He called them "Miniaturstil", aptly describing their main feature. Rhotert could only work from a single example, but finds of the past decade brought the

number of known sites to 28, including an excellently preserved large shelter (KTN 31, ZBORAY 2003b) which allows the proper definition of the style.

The subject matter is human figures and wild fauna. The human figures are depicted on a very small scale, adults 8–15 centimetres, with tiny figures of children as small as 2–3 centimetres. Family scenes are common, with mothers holding children in various but realistically depicted postures. This 'mother with miniature child' scene is perhaps the best defining element of the style. Males and females are clearly distinguishable, females having prominent breasts and wear skirts, while males wear loincloths, and frequently carry bow and arrows. Hunting scenes are common, with males shooting arrows at very well drawn and proportioned giraffes. There is no hint of any domestication. Overall, the style has a very high degree of realism (Fig. 10).

The geographical range of the style extends throughout Jebel Ouenat, with the main concentrations in Karkur Talh and Karkur Ibrahim, the style being conspicuously absent from the southern part of the mountain. A recent find by Mark BORDA (2010) extended their range to Jebel Arkenu.

Fig. 10 Group of Miniature style figures (site KTN 31), Karkur Talh, Jebel Ouenat.



The Wadi Wahesh style

The Wadi Wahesh style, named after the locality where most of the principal examples are located, was the last distinct style of paintings to be recognised at Jebel Ouenat. Already in 1998, Le Quellec found some figures of wild animals at southern Ouenat which did not appear to fit any of the known categories, but bore resemblance to some of the paintings at Wadi Sura. In the absence of any further analogies, these were assigned to the “Wadi Sura style” (LE QUELLEC et al. 2005; LE QUELLEC 2009) together with the figures now recognised to be ‘Ouenat elongated roundheads’.

In March 2005, a group of large and well preserved sites were found in shelters located in the upper reaches of Wadi Wahesh (ZBORAY 2005b) which placed these isolated and mostly damaged earlier examples into context. A very distinct style was revealed, centered on the southern part of Jebel Ouenat, with a few isolated (and sometimes doubtful) examples elsewhere. There are about twenty sites that may confidently be assigned to this style, the majority of them in the very narrow geographical confines of the upper Wadi Wahesh.

The style is not easy to define. If individual human figures are observed, many features are common to both the Miniature style and to some of the Wadi Sura paintings. Perhaps the biggest set of commonalities are with Wadi Sura, including similarities in body decoration, all digits shown on the hands, and negative handprints underlying some of the paintings. Should some Wadi Sura figures be transplanted into Wadi Wahesh scenes (and vice versa) they would comfortably blend in with the rest of the scene (Fig. 11).

The most conspicuous feature of the style is the frequent depiction of individual digits on the hands of human figures, sometimes in an exaggerated manner (Fig. 12). However, these are intermingled in apparently the same or related compositions with figures lacking the depiction of digits. The scale, posture and appearance of some of the depicted humans echo the Miniature style, suggesting some possible contact or relationship. However, the key feature of the Miniature style, the family scene of mother and child, is absent. There is the presence of two conspicuous non-human elements also present at Wadi Sura, but completely lacking from other Jebel Ouenat painting styles: negative handprints and ostriches without body (Figs. 13; 14). In addition, a variety of wild fauna is shown (giraffes, various gazelles and antelopes), and there are numerous depictions of domesticated dogs, all features common with Wadi Sura. The depicted wild fauna (including a giraffe held by a tether tied to its neck) suggests a hunter-gatherer society.

The separate definition of the Wadi Wahesh style does not preclude a connection with the Wadi Sura people. The key defining features of Wadi Sura, the ‘headless beast’ and the ‘swimmers’ (and many other motifs) are missing, however the large number of superimpositions observable in the ‘Cave of Beasts’ (WG 21) suggest that the Wadi Sura paintings may, with further study, be subdivided into internal periods (cf. Förster, this volume). It is not inconceivable that the Wadi Wahesh style will be found to correspond to one such subdivision, which lacks the ‘headless beast’ and associated figures, but retains other common elements. An alternate hypothesis could be the possible movement of the Wadi Sura people as



Fig. 11 Group of Wadi Wahesh style figures (site WW 52), Wadi Wahesh, Jebel Ouenat.

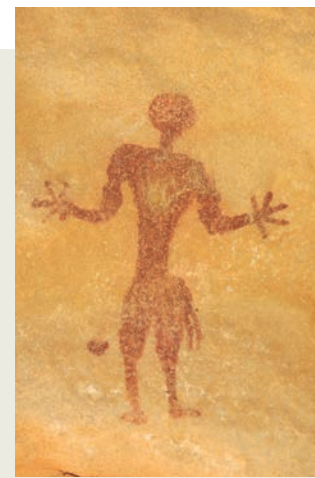


Fig. 12 Wadi Wahesh style figure with exaggerated digits on the hand (site WW 52), Wadi Wahesh, Jebel Ouenat.

desiccation progressed from the arid western Gif Kebir to the relatively more favourable southern Ouenat environment.

One further clue supporting a possible link between Wadi Sura and Wadi Wahesh was the recent finding of a shelter (CC12, BORDA 2009) at Clayton’s Craters, at about one third of the roughly 200 km distance between Jebel Ouenat and Wadi Sura. The shelter contains very weathered paintings, but it is possible to recognise several negative handprints and small scale human figures, which are identical to the more crudely executed ones at the principal Wadi Wahesh sites in every detail.



Fig. 13 Wadi Wahesh style figures associated with negative handprints executed in yellow paint (site WW 52), Wadi Wahesh, Jebel Ouenat.



Fig. 14 Ostrich with only head, neck and legs shown (beneath cattle pastoralist paintings, site WW 52), Wadi Wahesh, Jebel Ouenat.



Fig. 15 'Bird headed' archer of the cattle pastoralists superimposed on faint Wadi Sura type figures and giraffe (site WG 72), Wadi Sura environs, Gilf Kebir.



Fig. 16 The key to the chronology of the Jebel Ouenat paintings, a unique superimposition sequence of the 'Ouenat roundhead', Miniature and Cattle pastoralist (small red figures) styles (site KTN 21/A), Karkur Talh, Jebel Ouenat.

Relative chronologies and possible interrelations

The key to the establishment of a relative rock art chronology in the area is the existence of superimpositions, suggesting a temporal succession of identifiable styles in a given geographical location. Different degrees of weathering of paintings of distinct styles at the same locality may provide further evidence to confirm that styles were separated in time.

In the Wadi Sura area, four sites contain characteristic Wadi Sura figures that are overpainted by Cattle Pastoralist figures (Fig. 15). While none of the sites have a figure of the 'headless beast' in a superimposition, the earlier paintings are clearly of the Wadi Sura type, based on analogies with the large key sites. Thus demonstrably the Wadi Sura paintings predate those of the cattle pastoralists in the western Gilf Kebir. In all four mentioned examples, the Wadi Sura type paintings are much more weathered than the overlying cattle, and in general all of the Wadi Sura paintings in the area show much more intense weathering than the cattle pastoralist paintings (which in some cases appear extremely fresh). Apparently a considerable time period, perhaps thousands of years, elapsed between the Wadi Sura paintings and those made by the cattle pastoralists.

At Jebel Ouenat there are several sites where cattle pastoralist paintings are found superimposed over older scenes. The key site is KTW 21/A, where small red cattle pastoralist figures overlies a giraffe hunting scene attributable to the Miniature style, which is yet over larger 'Ouenat roundhead' figures (Fig. 16). There are several other examples where the Miniature style and 'Ouenat roundhead' paintings are clearly under cattle pastoralist ones. The combined evidence suggests that the 'Ouenat roundhead' style predates the Miniature style, which in turn predates the Ouenat cattle pastoralist paintings.

In the key site of the Wadi Wahesh style (WW 52), there are a number of superimpositions involving cattle pastoralist scenes over earlier Wadi Wahesh type figures,

also observable in one of the adjacent shelters. Moreover, there are a couple of 'Elongated roundhead' figures in the same shelter, fortunately with a small overlap with one of the overlying Wadi Wahesh style figures. Thus the 'Elongated roundhead' style predates the Wadi Wahesh style, which in turn predates the Ouenat cattle pastoralists.

A fortuitous observation made recently at site EH 33 provides the long sought link between the two sequences (ZBORAY 2012). Using image enhancement software, it is possible to ascertain that a 'Ouenat roundhead' figure partially overlaps several small 'Elongated roundhead' figures, suggesting that the 'Elongated roundhead' style is the earliest of the Ouenat cultural sequence.

The 'Ouenat roundhead' sites are consistently among the faintest and most weathered sites in the Jebel Ouenat area, and essentially the same may be said of the 'Elongated roundhead' paintings. In contrast, the Wadi Wahesh and Miniature style paintings show a moderate degree of additional weathering in comparison to the cattle pastoralist paintings, and some well protected shelters show very good preservation (comparable or better than that exhibited by the Wadi Sura paintings in more favoured locations). Overall the relative weathering patterns support the conclusions derived from the superimpositions, and point towards a substantially greater age for the 'Ouenat roundheads' and the 'Elongated roundheads' than for the cattle pastoralists. The Miniature and Wadi Wahesh styles occupy a period in-between with their relative positions at present not clearly established.

There is no direct evidence linking the relative chronological position of the Wadi Sura paintings with any of the pre-pastoralist styles at Jebel Ouenat. However, the circumstantial evidence suggests that the Wadi Sura paintings may temporally overlap or immediately pre-date the Wadi Wahesh style, with the earlier phases of Wadi Sura possibly extending back in time to the 'Ouenat roundhead' and 'Elongated roundhead' styles (Fig. 17).

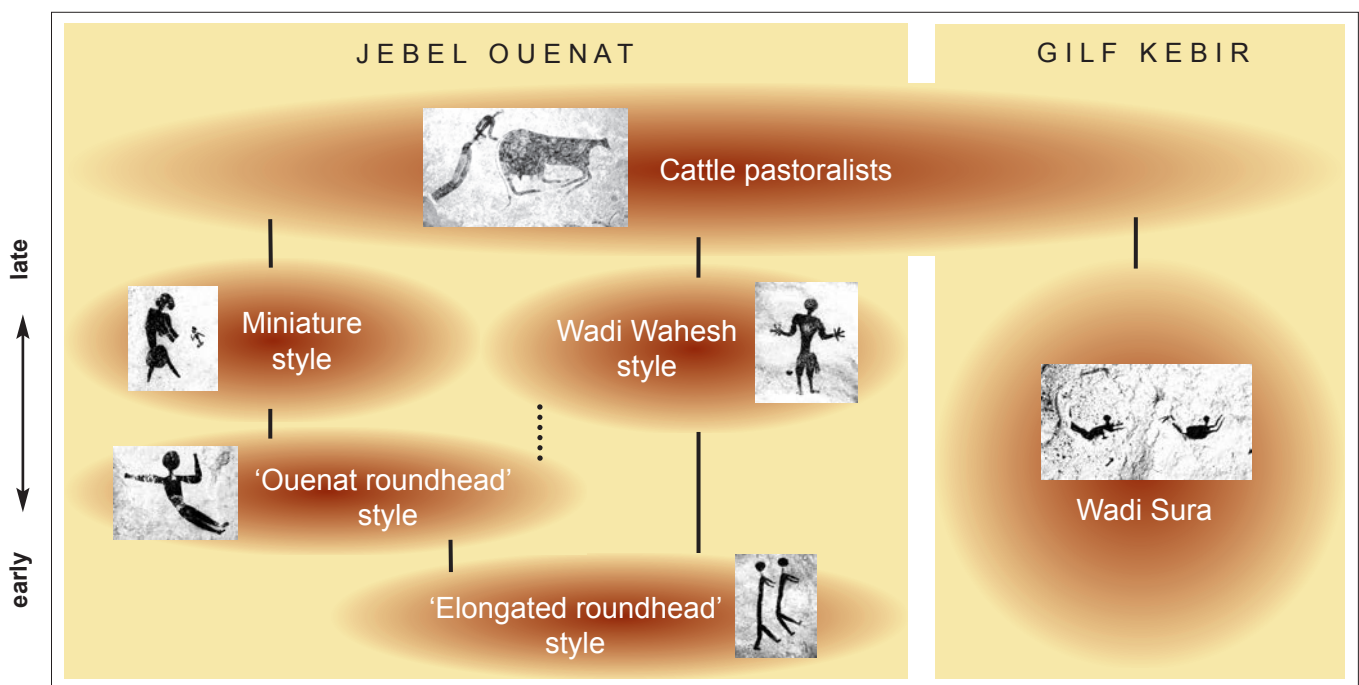


Fig. 17 Chronology chart showing the relative sequence of rock art styles in the Jebel Ouenat-Gilf Kebir region. The solid lines indicate superimpositions; the dashed line refers to indications provided by relative weathering patterns.



Fig. 18 'Headless beast' with a feline-like body over a negative handprint (note missing digit; site WG 45/A), near Wadi Sura, Gilf Kebir.

Felines in the regional rock art repertoire

One of the key diagnostic elements of the Wadi Sura paintings is the strange, apparently composite 'headless beast', practically all examples of which show an upward curving tail with a tuft at the end, characteristic of large felines. In many examples the entire body of the animal appears distinctly feline (Fig. 18). Their prominent position in the Wadi Sura iconography (cf. Förster & Kuper, this volume) warrants an examination of other feline representations in the Gilf Kebir–Jebel Ouenat region for possible analogies.

The four described pre-pastoral painting styles in the Jebel Ouenat region, possibly contemporary with the Wadi Sura paintings, have no comparable depictions. The only paintings clearly depicting large felines are seen in later cattle pastoralist paintings. In two shelters opposite each other in the upper main valley of Karkur Talh, two scenes appear to represent a lion hunt (KT 86/B & KT 88/E). In both cases the hunted animals are very indistinct, but the curved tails are clearly indicative of large felines, probably lions. In the first case the animal is densely covered with arrows and surrounded by archers (Fig. 19). There is a third scene (KTW 27/A) with possible similar interpretation; in this case the animal lacking a head is in some way echoing the Wadi Sura beasts.

A unique scene at site HP 21/B on the top of the Hassanein Plateau, one of the highest regions of Jebel Ouenat, requires special mention. It shows a difficult to identify animal with possible feline attributes, being surrounded and touched by small human figures (Fig. 20). There is a smaller less distinct adjacent scene with similar content. The cattle pastoralist nature of these depictions is confirmed by a nearby panel with similar human figures accompanied by goats. There are no analogies of any sort among the hundreds of other known cattle pastoralist sites, however, this scene is eerily reminiscent of the many scenes in the 'Cave of Beasts', where a number of small figures surround and touch a headless beast (Fig. 21). Naturally, a single example is insufficient to draw any meaningful conclusions, however, it is not inconceivable that some elements of the beliefs surrounding the abstract Wadi Sura iconography passed on to the succeeding cattle pastoralist society.



Fig. 19 Lion hunt (site KT 86/B), Karkur Talh, Jebel Ouenat.



Fig. 20 Animal with possible feline attributes touched by human figures (site HP 21/B), Hassanein Plateau, Jebel Ouenat.



Fig. 21 'Headless beast' surrounded and touched by human figures (site WG 21, 'Cave of Beasts'), Wadi Sura, Gilf Kebir.

The origins of ancient Egyptian religion ?

It must be mentioned that certain authors (e.g., LE QUELLEC 2008, D'HUY & LE QUELLEC 2009; BÁRTA 2010) compared some elements of the Wadi Sura paintings with elements of the dynastic Egyptian iconography, and professed to see the origins of ancient Egyptian religion in the Wadi Sura paintings (cf. Förster & Kuper, this volume). However, the basis of such conclusions was the process of taking isolated elements out of context from both cultures, and only treating the similarities, while ignoring the differences and the lack of any systemic relationship within the remaining corpus of evidence. To confirm such cultural link would require evidence for a systemic evolution of a number of cultural elements across the whole chronological sequence, not just from one isolated and temporally far displaced sample. It is the firm opinion of the author that there is no demonstrable link between Wadi Sura (or any of the discussed other prehistoric cultures of the central Libyan Desert) and the Nile Valley. This is not to say that such a link is entirely inconceivable; however, at present there is no evidence to support it.