

## Some Mauritanian rock art sites

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### Background

In April 2004, the authors visited Mauritania to photograph and make records of rock paintings for inclusion in the Trust for African Rock Art's (TARA) archive and the Andrew Mellon Foundation's website, ArtSTOR. We first visited Guilemsi, a sandstone ridge in the Tagant District; and then went south to visit sites in the Ayoun District (Fig. 1). Stephen Oliver-Taylor, an English traveler and

trader, had recently reported on Guilemsi's stonewall settlements and rock paintings. His photographs of paintings appeared to depict images of dinosaurs (Fig. 2), cavalry in action (Fig. 3 and **Pl. B1**), a leopard led by a string and men riding lions among the more conventional subjects of wild animals, camels, horsemen, cattle, and so on. Based on his photos and reports we decided to go and visit the area. The National Geographic Society in Washington

DC, The British Academy in London and the Trust for African Rock Art in Nairobi funded the expedition.

Mauritania is rich in rock-art sites. Colonial administrators and scholars have reported on and recorded sites since the 1930's (Monod, 1938, 1951; Senones & du Puigaudeau, 1939; Mauny, 1954; Lhote, 1982; Vernet, 1996; and Vernet & Naffe, 2003). For the most part, published reports list sites by names and include

Fig. 1. Location of the rock art sites.



Fig. 2. Guilemsi. Painting of a mythical animal near the cave closely resembling a dinosaur (Brontosaurus), with two mounted horses on left.





Fig. 3. Guilemsi. 'Cavalry' and foot soldiers (in red) cast spears over small, prone figures. A faded red person riding a beast appears not to belong to this scene.

pages of tightly packed line drawings of images – camels, horsemen, cattle, wild animals and some geometric designs. Only in the paper of Senones & du Puigauveau are a number of scenes depicted. There is one drawing of cupules and one of an engraved hand, but no mention of handprints and few illustrations of more complicated geometric designs. None of them recorded, and therefore presumably never saw, any of the sites we visited on our trip, notably Guilemsi.

The art at the sites we visited, with the possible exception of cupules (found at five out of 17 sites visited), is almost certainly less than 3000-4000 years old and some of it, from its content and condition, may be much younger.

### *Guilemsi*

Guilemsi is an east-west oriented sandstone ridge, 11 km long, in the western periphery of the Sahara, about 50 km north of Tad-jikja and 200 km west of Dhar Tichitt (**Pl. B2**). It rises to perhaps 70 m at its highest point with a steep and rugged south face channeled by ravines and pitted with rock shelters. The undulating summit contains a number of flat open surfaces, sometimes resembling a small plateau.

### *The Sites*

Complexes of stonewall enclosures cover the summit, while low stone walling, sometimes in tiers, fronts every shelter suggesting terracing made originally to support now-vanished sand floors (Fig. 4 and 5). Throughout, large lower-grindstones and pottery shards are abundant. These settlements are similar to, although not exactly the same as, other settlements located on ridges throughout Tagant District (Munson, 1980; Holl, 1985).

Farming and pastoral populations occupied this area between about 3800 and 2200 BP, after which date many of its inhabitants moved south (Holl, 1985).

With few exceptions, the paintings are found in the walled shelters, as is the case on other Tagant ridges (Senones & du Puigauveau, 1939). However, we found no engravings, unlike the situation at other Tagant stonewall settlement sites where they abound (Munson, 1980). Apart from paintings, three shelters contained cupules. We visited four other painted sites in the neighbourhood, one on a rock ridge and three in the stonewall banks of a dry river.

### *The Art*

The earlier art belongs to the IV and III millennia BP (Vernet & Naffe, 2003) and comprises wild animals, usually in red, such as an elephant, giraffe, antelope (Fig. 6), and predators (Fig. 7); cattle, usually in red or red and white (Fig. 8), include herded cattle; people riding cattle (Fig. 3 and **Pl. B1**); a group of animals (Fig. 9 and **Pl. B3**); a cart (without wheels) drawn by cattle; and schematic designs in red (Fig. 10), white or black.

Some of the wild animal and cattle paintings we saw could be old but probably most of what we saw dates from more recent times



Fig. 4. View of the entrance to Guilemsi cave. Note stone-walling in foreground.

Fig. 5. View of walled enclosures on the summit of Guilemsi Mountain.





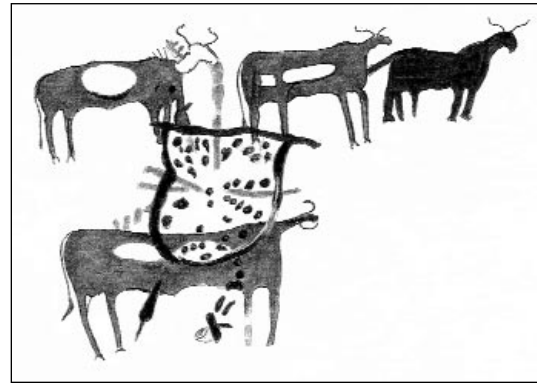
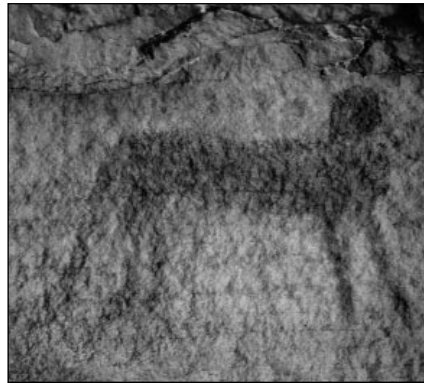
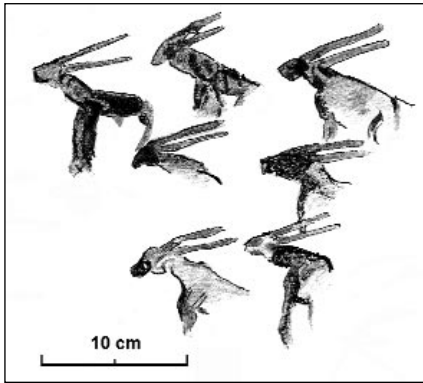


Fig. 6. Guilemsi. Herd of antelope, perhaps oryx, in red, head and shoulders only.

Fig. 7. Painting of a feline, almost certainly a cheetah, on a neighbouring outcrop close to Guilemsi.

Fig. 8. Cattle in red and white, at Guilemsi, superimposed by a complicated design. The white patch on the top left animal was repainted at a later time. Note the metal spearhead overlaying the lower beast.

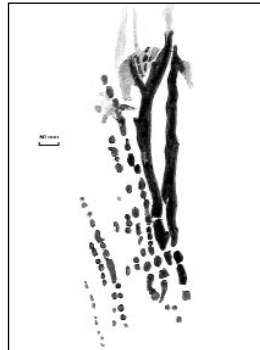
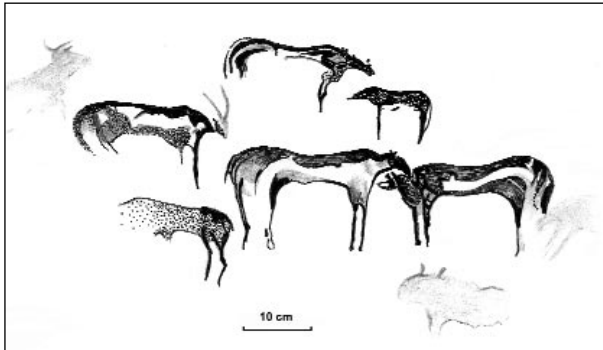


Fig. 9. Guilemsi. A group of animals in red and dark red probably includes mainly horses together with a cow, an antelope and a possible wildebeest. (See also **Pl. B3**)

Fig. 10. Complicated design in red, Guilemsi area.

and includes human figures in red sometimes holding weapons; mounted horsemen in red holding shields and javelins or spears; wild animals in red such as antelope; red camels without riders; red positive handprints (**Pl. B4**); and a few scenes including, in red, a «cavalry» operation (**Pl. B1** and Fig. 3) and mounted men with a mythical animal, like a dinosaur (Fig 2). In addition, we noted *Tifinagh* script in one shelter and under two small overhangs. Schematic designs, in either red, black, yellow or white occur at all but one site and in-

clude overlapping and concentric squares, a ladder, circles, circles with crosses, and more complicated images (Fig. 8 and 10).

With few exceptions, images we saw are generally similar to those reported by other researchers; however, we noted numerous scenes, a greater variety of designs, and cupules (listed only once by other researchers).

### Oued Jrid

The Oued Jrid in southern Mauritania (Ayoum Province) flows through a valley with steep sides

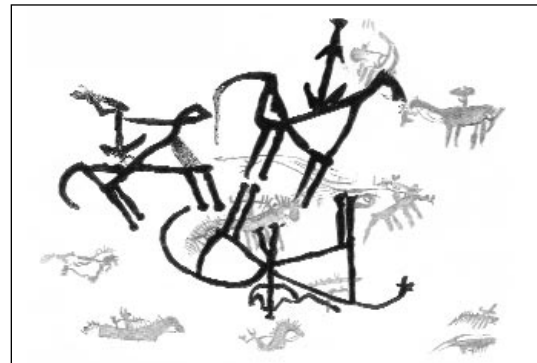
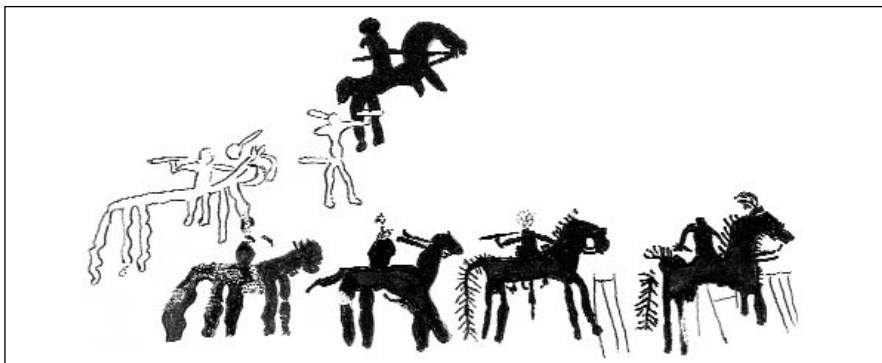
in places developing into cliffs. We visited five sites and made records at four of them. The largest site with numerous paintings involves a ledge and rock-fronted shelter stretching over 70 m along a cliff face some 15-20 m above ground level. Other sites are shallow shelters either at ground level or above massive fallen rock slabs. No walling, artifacts or cupules were seen.

### The Art

Common images at the ledge site include over 60 mounted horses (Fig. 11, 12, 13 and **Pl. B5**), unmounted horses and 'stick' horses drawn mainly with a brush but

Fig. 11. Mounted horses in red, Jrid. A person in white superimposes a red horse and is followed by a mounted horse in white.

Fig. 12. Schematic design of finger-painted bi-triangular horses in red superimposes smaller horsemen painted in violet, Jrid.



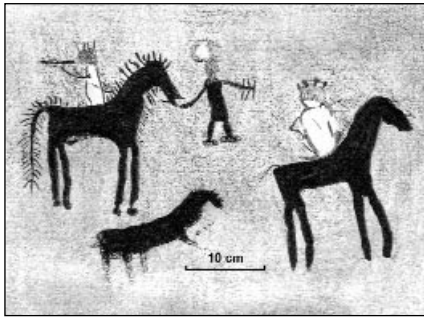


Fig. 15. Four people carry a long object (possibly a coffin). The interior is painted in white, Jrid.

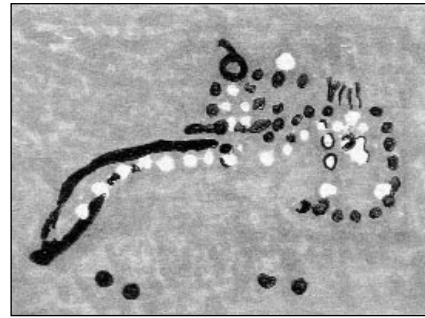
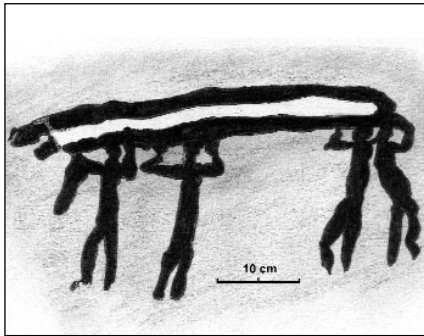


Fig. 13. A person with a white circle above his head leads a man with a white body mounted on a red horse. In front, another white-bodied person rides a red horse followed by an unmounted horse, Jrid.

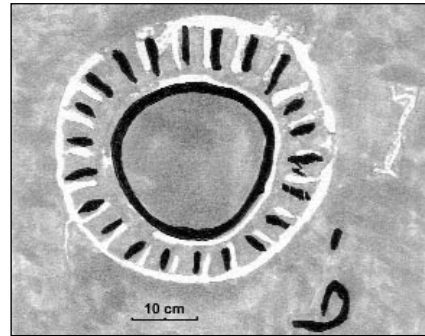


Fig. 14. A schematic horse and rider painted in red and white finger marks, Jrid.

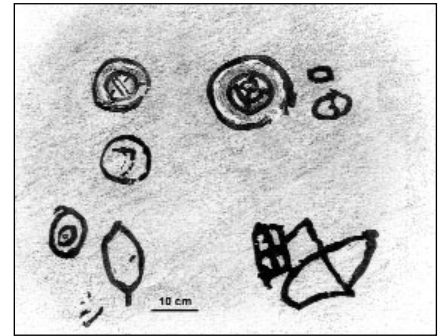


Fig. 17. Geometric designs in red. The designs at top left and centre are painted in red and white, Jrid.

sometimes with the finger. Images are painted in bichrome (red and white), black, red, white, yellow, orange and violet. Some images are drawn in outline using only red and white dots (Fig 14). Many horses are drawn in rows suggesting scenes. Other images include four people carrying what may be a coffin (Fig 15), 28 red men holding bows, a person riding a cow, elongated human figures facing forwards, and schematic designs.

A red and white concentric-circles-design, with rays, (Fig 16 and **Pl. B6**) decorates a ground-level shelter with boulder-strewn floor, while a similar image, although in monochrome, was found in a neighbouring shelter. These images appear remarkably similar to concentric circle designs found in the Lake Victoria Basin which have also been reported in Senegal and Mali although the similarity could be coincidental.

A raised shelter with numerous paintings has two lions facing each other, a hyena, horses, mounted horses, human figures and geometric designs in red, black and white, while a third has finger paintings of geometric designs in red and in white. In addition, Arabic script drawn in

charcoal translates as, 'I start writing with horses'.

## Grotte des Écritures

### The Site

We found herdsmen occupying the *Grotte des Écritures*, an isolated sandstone outcrop with a side pediment that had been hollowed by wind into a low tunnel-like arch.

### The Art

Red and black geometric designs, and one bichrome geometric are finger-painted on the roof (Fig.

17), while numerous cupules and a pecked oval surrounding a single cupule decorate the floor at the arch's upper entrance.

## M'treoka

### The Site

The site is situated at a sharp bend in a rock-walled river valley where a high rock bar creates a series of pools, the largest containing seven crocodiles.

Between the large pool and the eastern valley wall are a number of boulders sloping up to

Fig. 18. Smoothly incised symbols at M'treoka.





a large upended north-facing slab. Engravings are inscribed on this upright face and on two of the boulders leading up to it (Fig. 18).

### *The Art*

The art on the upright slab consists of incised symbols packed tightly together commencing about 30 cm above current ground level and covering at least 12 square metres (Fig. 18). Similar symbols decorate two small boulders near the main panel. These abstract symbols are reminiscent of other engraved images recorded in northern Chad.

### *Dating the Art*

Monod (1938) groups the art we saw into two periods: a Libyco-Berber or pre-Islamic Period; and a modern or Arab-Berber Period. Mauny (1954) divides it into overlapping periods: a Cattle Herding Period, 2000 BC–AD 1000; Horse Period, 1200 BC–present; Libyco-Berber, 200 BC–AD 700+; and Arab-Berber Period, AD 700–present. Vernet & Naffe (2003) consider the art commenced after 4000 BP and that it does not include Central Saharan Pastoral Period art. They place images of chariots, some horses and antelope hunts between 2500–2000 BP; and have a final period of indifferent art that includes camels and commences more or less at the advent of Islam in the country, after AD 700.

It is easier to group the paintings by style and subject matter, but harder to fit them into a coherent chronology. For instance, a large iron-smelting site at Guilemsi littered with pottery shards similar to those found in the settlements suggests Guilemsi was still occupied after many Dhar Tichitt sites had been abandoned (MacDonald *et al.*, 2004). And the fact that Tagant was a centre for breeding horses in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries (Webb, 1993) might suggest that the area could possibly have still pastured cattle as recently as 1700. Thus, cattle could theoretically have survived in Tagant long after they had disappeared from Dhar Tichitt. Thus, for Guilemsi, it is impossible to say for sure that cattle images all substantially predate

our era; artists could have continued to create them into the Second Millennium.

Nor is it easy to date horse paintings. MacDonald & MacDonald (2000) states that horses appear with certainty in the archaeological record by AD 600, although they admit that small numbers may have been present in earlier centuries, perhaps coinciding with the camel's advent in about AD 300. Horses achieved great value in West Africa, became a major commodity in the trans-Saharan slave trade after AD 700, and were employed in huge numbers as war-horses between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries (Webb, 1993).

Vernet & Naffe (2003) ascribe crude stick-like horses and riders to a «Proto-Berber» period (prior to the Historic Period). We only saw stick-like horses at two sites in the Oued Jrid. Such images might represent the earliest horse art here and may date to the time prior to the Arab-Berber intrusions commencing after 700 AD.

Most of the horse art at Jrid we recorded involves fairly crudely drawn images, usually in shades of red (Fig. 11, 12, 13 and **Pl. B5**) with armed riders, and a few smaller images drawn with a brush in shades of violet (Fig. 12). We noted large numbers of stylised galloping horses as well as other cruder groups of assembled horses with armed riders at Guilemsi. The galloping horses were drawn in a more flowing and less static style (Fig. 19 and **Pl. B1**). Such images could have been painted during times of slave raiding or war and if so could possibly date as recently as the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

### *The Artists*

Much of the earlier art, cattle, wild animals and chariots (carts), is similar to engravings reported in the stonewall settlements lying east of Guilemsi (Monod, 1938; Mauny, 1954; Munson, 1980; Holl, 1985; Vernet & Naffe, 2003), and is attributed to the farmers who occupied those settlements. The later art, horses, animals such as addax, oryx, gazelle, giraffe and predators, hunting scenes, and many schematic designs, is generally attributed to Berbers of the Arab-Berber intrusions of the lat-

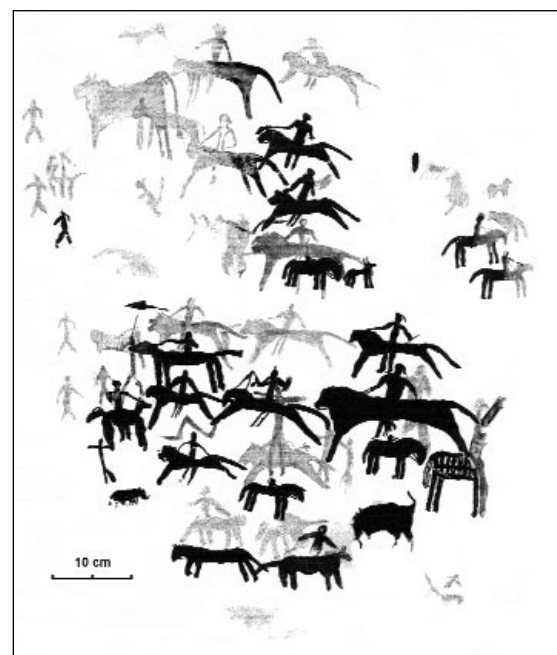


Fig. 19. Main panel in a cave in Guilemsi featuring mounted horses. (See also **Pl. B1**)

er First Millennium. Berbers uninvolved in trade apparently were very slow to adopt Islam, while the Arabs brought Islam with them. Because Islam prohibits creation of images of living things, this would have affected only the Arabs, not rural Berbers, suggesting the latter were the artists.

### *The Meaning of the Art*

For the most part, researchers working in Mauritania have made little attempt to determine if the art has any symbolic meaning, accepting images as they see them:

Fig. 20. Recent schematic design with people, a lizard and red horseman, Jrid.

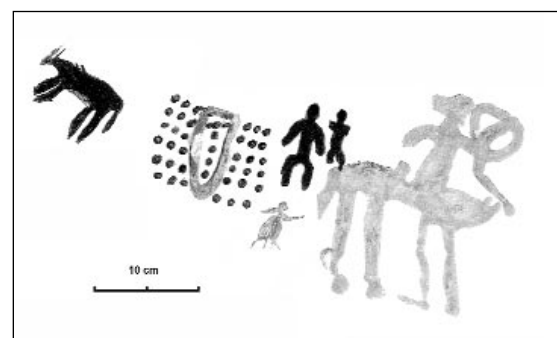




Fig. 21. Detail from main panel featuring a cow with extended legs and an imposing human figure, Wadi Leksor. (See also **Pl. B7**)

camels, horses, antelope and so on. Even so, images of cattle occur in profusion across the Sahara, from the Red Sea to Mauritania, and horses are common from Ennedi to the Atlantic. Their very numbers and the ways in which they are depicted suggest symbolism rather than art for art's sake. They must have some symbolic values.

However, researchers in Mauritania have paid some attention to schematic designs that have no obvious interpretations. Mauny (1954) considers recent designs

possibly to represent tribal symbols, those on level surfaces to be games, or just to be scribbling. Senones and du Puigaudeau (1939) suggest they may have had magical significance, perhaps a means for casting spells.

The large number and variety of schematic designs found at almost every site and sometimes deliberately superimposed over earlier paintings are not graffiti and must have some purpose (Fig. 8 and 20). The symbols on the panel at M'treoka may represent lineage markers or animal brands of people who once had rights to the area. Elongation of animal (Fig. 21 and **Pl. B7**) and human legs may reflect trance states as is believed for this oddity in southern African rock art. Different methods and colours used for portraying horses (Fig. 11, 12, 13 and 14) may also have meaning. We noted with interest the Arabic comment at Jrid, 'I start writing with horses'. How old is this graffiti and does it hold meaning for the paintings? Descendants of the more recent artists must still live in the general area and it should be possible to learn from them something about the images.

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**Pl. B1.**  
**Alec Campbell,**  
**David Coulson, Sam Challis**  
**and Jeremy Keenan.**  
Panel featuring a large number  
of mounted horses in a big cave  
at Guilemsi (Mauritania).  
(Photo David Coulson)

**Pl. B2.**  
**Alec Campbell,**  
**David Coulson, Sam Challis**  
**and Jeremy Keenan.**  
Black rocks near the foot  
of Guilemsi Ridge  
(Mauritania).  
(Photo David Coulson)







**Pl. B3.**

**Alec Campbell,  
David Coulson, Sam Challis  
and Jeremy Keenan.**

Group of animals in red and dark red including horses together with a cow, an antelope and a possible wildebeest (Guilemsi, Mauritania).  
(Photo David Coulson)



**Pl. B4.**

**Alec Campbell,  
David Coulson, Sam Challis  
and Jeremy Keenan.**

Large handprint site  
at the foot of Guilemsi  
(Mauritania).  
(Photo David Coulson)



**Pl. B5.**

**Alec Campbell,  
David Coulson, Sam Challis  
and Jeremy Keenan.**

Section of main panel on the cliff  
face at Jrid featuring horses  
and riders (Mauritania).  
(Photo David Coulson)





**Pl. B6.**

**Alec Campbell,  
David Coulson, Sam Challis  
and Jeremy Keenan.**

Bichrome painting of circle with  
sunburst design in a small shelter  
at Jrid (Mauritania).  
(Photo David Coulson)



**Pl. B7**

**Alec Campbell,  
David Coulson, Sam Challis  
and Jeremy Keenan.**

Wadi Leksor (Mauritania).  
Main panel featuring a cow with  
extended legs and an imposing  
human figure.  
(Photo David Coulson)