SAHARA

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Summary
We recorded 22 engravings of hippopotami, what may be a ritual hippo hunt, six saurians and three penises amongst some 50 engravings on a river pavement. The position of the hippo engravings suggests regular immersion and a possible rainmaking site. Penises and saurians could indicate performance of circumcision at the site. We tentatively speculate on the possibilities of hippo spirituality shifting east to the Nile Valley and circumcision as part of male initiation spreading east and south to the sub-continent.

Résumé
Parmi une cinquantaine de gravures situées dans le lit d’un oued, nous avons relevé vingt-deux représentations d’hippopotames, une possible chasse rituelle à cet animal, six sauriens et trois phallos. La situation des gravures d’hippopotames indique qu’elles étaient régulièrement immergées, et suggère l’existence possible d’un site d’invocation à la pluie. Les images de phallus et de sauriens pourraient indiquer que des circoncisions étaient pratiquées sur ce site. Nous avançons l’hypothèse d’un monde spirituel lié aux hippocotames et qui se serait déplacé vers l’est en direction de la vallée du Nil, alors que la circoncision serait une partie de l’initiation masculine qui se serait étendue vers l’est et le sud du sub-continent.

Background
While recording rock art in Oued Djerat, Algeria, a local Tuareg told members of the Trust for African Rock Art about a site with large engravings in neighbouring Oued Afar which, he said, “had never been visited by foreigners”. He did not know the site’s name and described the engravings as giraffes. We visited the site in November, 2002 and found the engravings to be hippopotami, not giraffes.

Fig. 1. Oued Afar. View from above the site looking downstream. Most of the engravings are situated to the right of boulder seen on left of picture. The penis (Fig. 2) is hidden to the left of boulder.

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For lack of a local name, we call it 'Big Hippo Site' and give a fairly detailed description of site and engravings. We make some suggestions about the art’s possible meanings and purposes and wonder whether our suggested meanings and purposes originated locally when the Sahara was reoccupied after 10500 BP (Brooks et al., 2005; Kuper & Kröpelin, 2006). We also consider whether such meanings and purposes, if indeed they have validity, were exported when pastoral communities began to shift out of the Sahara after desiccation set in around 5000 BP (Brooks et al., 2005; Kuper, 2006).

The site

Big Hippo Site is situated in the Oued Afar where that river exits a gorge, some 20 km or so south of its confluence with the Oued Djerat. The site is described in some detail as its position in the riverbed and its nature may be important to a possible understanding of the engravings’ purposes.

At the site, the Oued Afar lies approximately south-north passing through a fairly deep, but wide sandstone gorge. The river’s flow runs between crumbling cliffs, widens to pass over a smooth, slightly concave pave-

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**Fig. 2.** Oued Afar. Pecked penis with fairly dark patina secluded behind a boulder.

**Fig. 3.** Oued Afar.

a) Pecked saurian with two groups of ground cupules.

b) Five pecked saurians next to the previous saurian.

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**Fig. 4.**

a) Oued Afar. A masked man with headdress, large penis and a double-curved bow fires an arrow at a hippo facing him. A dog runs towards the bowman. Above, hippo stands over fallen man with second hippo in background.

b) Computer-generated outline.

c) Tracing of same subject.

d) Detail of head. Note pointed beard(?).
ment, and then exits the gorge to descend into a lower valley. In November, water filled fairly deep, natural holes in the pavement suggesting that, whenever the river flows, water lasts in these holes throughout the year.

At the gorge’s mouth, the pavement is about 40 m wide with a large boulder lying on its western bed (Fig. 1). Some 50 engravings are loosely clustered on the pavement opposite the boulder. The position of the engravings, where the concave pavement funnels river flow over them and out of the gorge, appears to be significant. We come to this later. Partially shielded behind the boulder is an engraving of a penis (Fig. 2).

Beside a camel path leading from the west down to the engravings, the only obvious approach to the site, are six pecked engravings of saurians together with two small groups of cupules (Fig. 3 a and 3 b).

**The engravings**

Apart from cupules, we recorded some 50 engravings mainly of large animals, and one deeply-engraved spiral. We noted two groups of engravings which possibly comprise a single scene (Fig. 4, a, b, c and d); and 22 images of large and smaller hippo, sometimes joined together. Other than a (black?) rhinoceros (Fig. 5) and lion (Fig. 6), all animals face left, that is down-stream. Super-impositions are uncommon, but do occur.

**Fig. 5.** Oued Afar. Pecked (black?) rhinoceros facing right containing small pecked rhino facing left.

**Fig. 6.** Oued Afar. Lion (see also Fig. 8, left above hippo’s head).

**Fig. 7.** Oued Afar. Possible hyena (or bear?).

**Fig. 8.**

a) Oued Afar. Overview of a very large hippo measuring 4.6 m from nose to rear foot. Beneath its head, a long pecked penis appears to emerge to the left. On its back it carries a baby hippo, left, and a larger hippo on right. A kudu/addax (?) antelope is visible, top centre (see Fig. 21).

b) Same subject as in 8 a) with computer-generated outline.

c) Head and front legs of baby hippo standing on the back of the big hippo.

d) Tracing of same subject. The lion of Fig. 6 is on top left.
With the exception of the saurians and the shielded penis, all engravings are fairly closely grouped stretching from the middle of the river to its eastern bank and are highlighted by the afternoon sun. There are no engravings on the highly-suitable, upstream pavement or the cliffs.

Because the engravings are grouped, and not knowing whether the engravers deliberately positioned them so that one or more would give meaning to, add power or otherwise influence other engravings, we have illustrated most of them, exceptions mainly being single images of hippopotami.

Engravings of hippopotami

There are 22 definite engravings of hippo, and another engraving that may represent a hippo or just possibly a hyena or bear (Fig. 7). A scene (or maybe two contiguous scenes) involves hippo and men (Fig. 4). The largest hippo engraving measures 4.62 m from nose to rear foot (Fig. 8 a, b, c, and d), the second largest hippo measures 2.66 m; other hippo are smaller. With two exceptions, all hippo are engraved in polished outline and mainly occur singly; however, note that two separate hippo, although different in size, are almost identical in shape (Fig. 9 and 10). One hippo has two heads, or alternatively two hippo stand one behind the other (Fig. 11). One hippo has two smaller hippo on its back (Fig. 8). Another hippo (?) has the head of a predator, more similar to that of a hyena or even a bear than a hippo (Fig. 7); one pecked hippo superimposes a deeply-engraved spiral (Fig. 12); and a hippo superimposes the hooves of a giraffe (Fig. 13).

Most hippo are relatively large and portrayed in outline without internal details other than mouth, eye and nostril. Generally, patina in the outlines is fairly dark. We could not determine whether most of the hippo had been engraved at the same time, or whether they were engraved over a period. Certainly, the pecked hippo superimposing the spiral is more recent than those with polished outlines.
The scene

The scene (Fig. 4) has two sections: the main, larger section involves a man with double-curved bow, a hippo and a dog. In the background, the second section (if it is part of the scene) comprises two smaller hippo one of which stands over a man lying on his back.

The bowman has been very carefully engraved with polished lines. He has a large, apparently-circumcised penis and wears a mask, belt with attached cape, has a quiver on his back and holds his bow aimed below the hippo’s head. The hippo faces the bowman with the dog between them leaping towards the man, not towards the hippo.

Above this tableau and in lesser dimensions are two hippo facing left. One carefully executed hippo stands over a somewhat crudely engraved man wearing a skullcap and lying on his back. The second, less well-engraved hippo stands above (behind) the first hippo. Patina suggests all images, with the exception of the crudely engraved hippo, have relatively similar dates.

Later, we compare the bowman with his mask and penis to other engravings in the Oued Djerat depicting similar humans: a man with circumcised penis, a spiral and two outline antelope or giraffe (Fig. 14) (Lhote, 1975-76: T. I, Station XXVII, Fig. 24); a masked bowman with squiggly line stretching from genitals to cow’s head (Fig. 15) (Lhote, 1975-76: T. I, fig. 26 and p. 380-381, n. 1328-1331, Station XXVII); a masked bowman standing with one foot between horns of pecked cow, and spirals (Fig. 16) (Lhote, 1975-76: T. I, p. 378-379, n. 1316-1327, Fig. 38, Station XXVII); a woman wearing hat and skirt surrounded by apparently circumcised penises (Fig. 17) (Lhote, 1975-76: T. II: p. 530-531, n. 1669-1673, Fig. 63, Station XXXI); and to a woman and child associated with a small hippo engraving (Fig. 18, a and b) (Lhote, 1975-76: T. I, p. 338-339, n. 1165).

The two smaller hippo and the unarmed, fallen man may, or may not, form part of the Oued Afar scene, or may be later additions to it (Fig. 4 a, b and d).
Close to the scene, but apparently not deliberately associated with it, are engravings of three bulls, also facing downstream (Fig. 19). The bulls have been positioned so as to be more-or-less surrounded by hippo.

**Other engravings**

Other engravings with polished outlines include more hippo, a bovine (Fig. 20), rhinoceros (Fig. 5), a kudu or addax (Fig. 21) and a lion (Fig. 6), both these latter being positioned in association with the hippo in Fig. 8.

Engravings with a lighter patina include a pecked antelope (Fig. 22), unidentified pecked predator or horse (Fig. 23), a pecked body with human head together with an ostrich (Fig. 24), pecked penises (Fig. 2 and 8) and, not illustrated, another pecked penis and a pair of sandals.

**Hippo (?) with predator’s head**

The animal resembling a hippo but with predator’s head (Fig. 7) differs from other hippo engravings. The outline has been carefully pecked and only lightly polished; its back is ‘humped’ and, although its front legs suggest a pachyderm, one of us believes its head is reminiscent of a bear. Le Quellec (1998) and the Van Albada (2000: fig. 28) describe a hippo at Imrawen, Libya with carnivorous teeth (and ‘crocodile’ tail). It is worth noting that normally engraved hippo images do not display teeth. Le Quellec believes the Imrawen hippo with carnivore’s teeth to be a mythical hybrid.

Lutz & Lutz (1995: fig. 145) describe an engraving in the Messak, Libya as a bear. There is also a Round-Head style painting of what may
be a bear at Jabbaren, less than 200 km as the crow flies from this site (Coulson & Campbell, 2002: Fig. 188).

Bears were once common in nearby Europe, and Crowther's bear, now extinct, once inhabited the Atlas Mountains. Although bear remains have not been found in the Central Sahara, there is little reason to doubt they once occurred there.

Possible animal with human head

A human head with what may be an animal's body facing left and downstream, (Fig. 20) is engraved along the sloping pavement near the east tank. The body has a cut-off foreleg/arm; only one obvious back leg, and a tail that may have been added later. The head has been carefully defined with hair possibly tied behind in a bun. Next to the image is a pecked ostrich. A curved line from the ostrich's beak nearly touches the body with human head forming a tenuous connection. Pale patina and pecking suggest a younger age than that of most hippo images.

We are fairly certain that the figure is correctly illustrated in a plunging position. Rotated upright, the head appears thrust unusually backwards.

While images of humans with animals’ heads or wearing animal masks are common in the Central Sahara, an animal with a human head, if this body does represent that of an animal, is possibly unique.

Cattle

Three head of cattle, all bulls, are engraved together, two facing left and one facing left and down (Fig. 15). The large, central beast has a polished outline and forward-curved horns possibly deliberately so shaped by man (but see Muzzolini [2000] for alternative suggestions). The other two bulls, one with bow-shaped horns and the third with horn-tips joined, have outlines pecked and polished, but possibly casually re-pecked at a later date. Their basic patina suggests they were
originally engraved at approximately the same time and are contemporaneous with at least some of the hippo.

Saurians

There are six small pecked lizard-like animals each 40-50 cm long (Fig. 3, a and b) facing the sky on a sandstone exposure beside the route to the main site. One saurian (Fig. 3 a), similar to a gecko, has two small groups of cupules beside it. It is unknown whether cupules and gecko were engraved at the same time, but their positions suggest the two are associated. Note that each cupule group has larger and smaller cupules together with a single ‘unfinished’ cupule. There is a single, very small cupule by the gecko’s nose.

The position of the engravings, next to the only obvious entry to the site suggests that visitors must pass by and see them.

Penises

Near the river’s west bank and shielded from most other engravings by a large boulder is a pecked and apparently-circumcised penis, 60 cm long, with an emission (Fig. 2). Its hidden nature may indicate seclusion, or at least a deliberate separation from the other engravings, while its fairly dark patina suggests considerable age.

A second, crudely pecked penis (see Fig. 8) has a lighter patina and is relatively recent when compared with the head of the hippo engraved next to it. The third crudely pecked penis with a light patina is not illustrated.

While penises attached to men’s figures are fairly common throughout Africa, images of unattached penises are rare (but see Le Quellec, 1993: 128; Hallier, 2009).

Hippo in Saharan rock art

Hippo images belong particularly to earlier rock art styles, mainly to the so-called Bubalus or Large Wild Fauna Period. The termination of that ‘Period’ depends to some extent on who is writing about it. For us, the style commences well before, and slowly fades out long after, domestic animals first appeared in the Sahara.

Generally, images of hippo are engraved and then depicted in polished outline with little detail except for ears, eye and mouth, and sometimes nostril and toes. The images are almost invariably elegantly defined and are often dramatic. Lines in some engravings can be deeply carved in double outline when body details are also shown. Most hippo images are about one metre or less wide although, a few are much larger. Patina on engravings is generally fairly dark. It is difficult to determine the ages of engravings, but some of them could still have been made well into the Pastoral Period including some of those hippo at Big Hippo Site. There are a few painted hippopotami, sometimes with body decoration and at least two exhibiting curved teeth, mainly belonging to the Round-Head style (U. & B. Hallier, 2009).

Many hippo engravings in Central Sahara (Lutz & Lutz, 1995; Gauthier & Gauthier, 1996) are in fairly elevated areas (as are those at Big Hippo Site), occurring in upper reaches of rivers. Hallier and Hallier (2000) suggest that Oued Djera's engraved hippo date before the dry period of the 6th and 5th millennia BCE. This early date relies on the assumption that hippo as living animals disappeared in Central Sahara when lakes dried up. Even so, larger pools in mountain ravines may have lasted for many centuries if not a millennium or so after lakes vanished, possibly providing sufficiently deep water for at least some hippo to survive. One can argue that hippo confined to pools rather than lakes would be easy targets for hunters and soon become extinct. If hippo were recognized as divine and hunted only for ritual purposes, if hunted at all, they could have survived for a considerable period after lakes had vanished.

Generally, hippo images are not accompanied by people nor, as the Halliers (2009) note, do they reflect hunting scenes. The Halliers (2009: Fig. 6a) point to a scene in the Oued Iheren in which eleven men with
erect penises surround a hippo in what they describe as un culte de fécondité. This clearly represents a mythical enactment or ritual and is, perhaps, the only other recorded Saharan site in which hippo and men are depicted in direct association.

Here it is perhaps worth noting the ancient Egyptian belief that the ritual slaying of a Nile hippo calmed Set, the hippo god of violence, who brought both floods to water the land and death to farmers and fishermen (Budge, 1969; Pinch, 2001). Whether or not such a belief was born in the Tassili and went east is, of course, unknown.

Nor are images of hippo common in the Sahara, although probably more common than records suggest. Le Quellec (1998) notes that recent discoveries in the Messak have listed 40 sites with hippo, although their distribution is irregular with three-quarters of the total 58 recorded images occurring in the valleys of Taleschout and Imrawen.

At one site in Taleschout there are over 14 hippo engraved along 35 metres of a north-facing cliff; Waldock (2010, this volume). Such sites as those at Afar and Taleschout with more than two or three hippo are rare; Lhote (1976: 778) notes a site in Oued Djerat with five large outline hippo (Nos. 2220-2224). More common are sites with one or two hippo, often depicting only a probable cow and her calf.

**Saurians in rock art**

Images of saurians (mainly lizard-like reptiles, but sometimes crocodiles and possibly some anthropomorphic beings) are not common in the Sahara. However, note Striedter et al. (2002-2003) who have recorded some 300 images of what they, for want of a name, have called *Kel Essuf* (spirits of the open spaces) and Mori called 'ichthyomorphous figures', but which they are agreed resemble reptiles (Fig. 25). A majority of the engravings average between 30 and 40 cm, basically similar in size with the saurians at Big Hippo Site. They date these images prior to the Round Head style, probably well predating the saurian images at Big Hippo Site. Whether there is any distant connection between the *Kel Essuf* engravings and those at Big Hippo Site is a matter for future investigation.

Engravings similar to the saurians at Big Hippo have been reported by Soleilhavoup (1988: Fig. 5) in southwest Algeria (Fig. 26), and by Allard-Huard (2000, Fig. 185) in Wadi Imrawen (Fig. 27).

Soleilhavoup noted a small shelter, Akar Akar in western Algeria, containing engravings of saurians and, not far distant from it, a large rock shelter, La cavité des hommes reptiles, with more engraved saurians and designs including crude ovals containing crosses and other geometric shapes. He dated the Akar Akar engravings in the earlier Neolithic and believed they might be ascribed to ancestors of Herodotus's cave-dwelling 'trogloidytes'. He also compared the engravings to somewhat similar modern paintings made by Dogon youths at initiation sites in Mali, but felt no conclusions could be drawn because of the long time lapse between them.

Van Albada recorded similar engravings of two saurians in the Wadi Imrawen (Fig. 27) which were later illustrated by Léone Allard-Huard. The latter noted that the saurian images occur in a pastoral context with cattle. In fact, one associated cow has a forward-curved horn similar to that of the bull in Big Hippo Site.

Pier Paolo Rossi in 2009 photographed a man copulating with what may be either a saurian or a woman (Fig. 28) at Wadi Imrawen, Messak Sattafet. It should be noted that this saurian, if it is a saurian, closely resembles images of seated females with legs outspread and a hole pecked to represent a vagina. It seems, therefore that saurian images may have both feminine or masculine associations.

Relatively recent lizard-like images occur in sub-Saharan Africa (Le Quellec, 2004, page 83 for engraving in Gabon; pages 60-67 for Dogon paintings in Mali, and page 103 for Zambia; Smith, 1996, page 13 for Zambia; Fosbrooke, 1950, Fig. 13 for Tanzania; Masao, 1979, page 273, and 1982, page 37 for Tanzania; Gutierrez, 1996 and 2002-2003, page 79 for painting in Angola; Lindgren and Schoofleers, 1985 page 33 for Malawi, and Zubieta, 2006 for paintings and clay models in Malawi; de Oliveira, 1971, page 67 for Mozambique; and the Eastwoods, 2006 page 39 for paintings in South Africa). Some of these sub-Saharan images have been ascribed to Bantu-
speakers. Where local information has been obtained, the saurian paintings appear to be involved with initiation ceremonies and possibly also with male circumcision. Similarities in use down the length of Africa suggest a common origin, probably in the north as all sub-Saharan images postdate those in the Central Sahara.

**Circumcised penises in rock art**

There are numerous engraved and painted examples of figures with penises in the Sahara and in early Egyptian temples and tombs, and elsewhere in Africa. To our knowledge, most early images of apparently circumcised penises occur in the Central Sahara where they are fairly numerous.

In southern Africa where there are also numerous images of men with penises, but no evidence of circumcision, a bar inscribed across the penis is believed to have been a sign denoting that sex was forbidden the man rather than being a physical attachment.

Some rock engravings in Oued Djerat and one at this site (Fig. 4) portray similar men with enlarged genitalia (Lhote, 1975-76). All the men face right, that is upstream, and two at least (Fig. 4 & Lhote, 1975-76: fig. 24) appear to have been circumcised. They all wear masks and similar belts with a flowing attachment. Three of them brandish bows, two are associated with dogs and two have spirals positioned next to them. Two of them appear to have had a cow/bull engraved, possibly at a later date, next to them, and one has a squiggly line joining his testicles to a cow. Such similarities are unlikely to be accidental.

Generally, earlier human figures tend to be schematic rather than life-like. These carefully engraved, lifelike men are unique in their similarity and may represent a leader, probably mythological but also possibly physical. That they are all masked suggests that they are mythological figures or are involved in ritual activity and lends weight to the proposition that the scene in Fig. 4 expresses a ritual rather than an actual hunt.

An engraved woman in the Djerat (Fig. 14) wears a hat and skirt and holds a smaller person (child?) by the hand. She also faces right and stands over a small upside-down hippo. Another engraving of a similarly-dressed woman facing right (Lhote 1975-76: fig. 63; Hachid, 2000: Fig. 414) is surrounded by men with circumcised penises and stands over the head of a hippo facing left. It is unlikely that coincidence has put a hippo below both women.

**Male circumcision in Africa**

The origins of circumcision in Africa are unknown although male circumcision is practised sporadically throughout much of sub-Saharan Africa. Marck (1997) has pointed out that such male circumcision is generally associated with initiation of boys into manhood, and involves undergoing hardship and formation into some form of age regiment. So similar are the practices that they must have a common origin somewhere in the north from whence the ancestors of many Africans spread southwards.

The engravings of masked men in Oued Djerat, including the circumcised man in Lhote (1975-76: fig. 24), and the women in Fig. 14 and Lhote (1975-76: fig. 63) have been ascribed by Hachid (2000) and others to the Large Wild Fauna or Bubalus Period, probably dating to 6000 or more years ago. Those images are possibly some of the earliest visual records of circumcision in Africa.

Elliot-Smith (1908) stated that male circumcision was practised in Egypt 3000 years before the reign of Ramesses II (about 6000 years BP). However, the earliest documented information for circumcision in ancient Egypt is found in temple reliefs (Saqqara) and in hieroglyphic text and dated to about 4400 years ago.

There can be little doubt that circumcision was practised in North Africa more than 6000 years ago and from there spread southwards through sub-Saharan Africa and possibly also eastward to the Nile.

**Some possible conclusions**

Attempts to give meaning to rock art, thousands of years after the art was created, must be speculative. But, failure to try and understand
the images leaves them as pictures on the rock; it doesn’t help to tell us anything about the beliefs and conceptions of the peoples who made them. For this reason, we make some tentative conclusions:

- Hippo as water-dependent animals were engraved on the riverbed at Big Hippo Site near natural waterholes where river flow must pass over them. This suggests that in some way, the engravings were used to ensure good river flow/rain.

- Saurian engravings at the entrance to the site and the secluded penis, if they can be connected at all, suggest the site was used for some ritual (or education purpose for youths or girls) involved with the penis, possibly initiation and/or circumcision.

- Placing a pecked penis next to a hippo engraving may have added hippo power to the penis or vice-versa. Remember the hippo next to the women in the Oued Djerat (Fig. 14).

- The association of hippo with the bowmen with enlarged penis and with women may suggest hippo had sexual power as well as having the ability to bring rain.

- The use of saurian images down the length of Africa suggests that this type of imagery may have originated in the Sahara and then spread south. Certainly, saurian images appeared in the Sahara long before any of the extant images were made further to the south.

- Circumcision spread from the Central Sahara southwards and possibly eastwards.

- The scene (Fig. 4) reflects a ritual hunt, possibly the conceived slaying of a hippo to quell violence and bring down the river’s flow.

- The circumcised bowmen probably reflect an important mythological figure representing power, particularly sexual power.

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All figures were traced by Alec Campbell from original photographs in the Trust for African Rock Art’s archive with the exceptions of Fig. 28 and 25, 26 and 27 which were redrawn from publications and for which we thank the authors.

References


The Taleschout Hippos: An enigmatic site in the Messak Settafet, southwest Libya

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Summary

During a recent research expedition in the Messak Settafet, our team recorded an unusual and impressive rock art site in the Wadi Taleschout. Stretching for 35 metres along a section of the wadi wall, is a string of about 15 enigmatic hippo engravings. The hippos are striking for their size, ranging from roughly 100 cm to 375 cm in length. More striking perhaps, is the fact that the engravings appear in varying stages of completion. Some are scarcely sketched outlines, others have small sections that are exquisitely detailed and carefully polished, while still others appear to have been re-worked repeatedly. Was the site perhaps abandoned and then re-activated later? And what might have inspired the image-makers to create such a dramatic assemblage of hippos? This article provides an in-depth description of the Taleschout Hippo Site and offers some suggestions as to the motivation for the creation of the aggregates of hippos. Positing the issues explored at the Hippo Site as reflective of broader concerns, this paper examines the changing relationship between humans, their environment and their spiritual world in the mid-Holocene.

Introduction

The Taleschout Hippo Site has been previously referenced by Le Quellec (1998); Gauthier and Gauthier (1996) and Van Albada (2000), however this article provides a detailed site description, and situates the site within its environmental, archaeological and socio-cultural setting. Positing the issues explored as reflective of broader concerns in the mid-Holocene, this paper examines the changing relationship between the Messak inhabitants, their environment and their spiritual world, as evidenced in the rock art.

The site and its broader environment

The Wadi Taleschout is located in the southern part of the Messak Settafet plateau (Fig. 1a), which is flanked by two lowland areas: the Erg of Murzug in the east and the Erg Uan Kasa in the west. Beyond Uan Kasa, lies the Tadrart Acacus mountain range, which borders the Tassili n’Ajjer plateau in Algeria.

Résumé

Au cours d’une récente expédition au Messak Settafet, notre équipe a relevé un site d’art rupestre insolite et remarquable dans l’oued Taleschout. Une frise d’une quinzaine d’énigmatiques représentations d’hippopotames s’étend sur 35 mètres le long d’une section de la paroi de l’oued. Ces animaux sont impressionnants par leurs dimensions, de 100 à 375 cm de longueur environ. Peut-être plus surprenant encore est le fait que les gravures montrent différentes étapes d’exécution. Quelques-unes ont des contours à peine ébauchés, d’autres ont des parties très détaillées et bien polies, d’autres encore ont été remaniées à plusieurs reprises. Ce site aurait-il été abandonné et remis en activité par la suite? Et quelle motivation inspira les artistes dans la création d’un ensemble aussi spectaculaire? Cet article donne une description approfondie du Site des Hippopotames de l’oued Taleschout et avance quelques suggestions quant à la motivation de la création des “ensembles d’hippopotames”. En postulant que les questions examinées sur ce site concernent des prêoccupations plus larges, cet article examine la relation changeante entre les êtres humains, leur milieu et leur monde spirituel à la mi-Holocène.

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During the wet Holocene periods, the Erg of Murzuq was a series of lakes of varying sizes (Cremauchi & di Lernia, 1999) into which the wadis of the Messak plateau drained. The Wadi Taleschout feeds into the Murzuq's central western fringe and the Hippo Site is located a number of kilometres upstream from the broad mouth of the wadi. At this section, the wadi runs northeast, and the engravings occur along a vertical sandstone cliff ranging in height from roughly 1-6 metres.

Due to the site's northerly aspect the engravings receive no direct sunlight in the winter months. The lack of light, combined with the eroded state of the engravings, makes them difficult to see at any time of day (Fig. 1b). Therefore pinpointing an absolute inventory of images will require a subsequent summertime visit. The recording of the imagery was conducted east to west, using the natural cliff jointing to divide the 35-metres into 12 sections. Each section is multi-sided, so this article will refer to 'sections' that may have up to three 'sides' (Fig. 1c).

Other cultural markers comprise cupules and a grinding hollow situated on horizontal rock slabs beneath the engravings. There are also stellae and tumuli located on top of the plateau, however they are mostly positioned some 100 metres downstream, and appear to be more closely associated with a neighbouring site featuring dog-headed therianthropes.

**Detailed description of the engravings**

All the hippos are rendered in profile, with a simple outline created by pecking, incising and in some areas, polishing. Dimensions of the hippos are in centimetres, measuring the length of the hippo's profile, from the tip of the snout to the tail.

In Section 1, the imagery occurs on scattered boulders forming the beginning of the cliff. Set back on a rock behind the general cliff line, is a roughly pecked bubalus (extinct giant buffalo), and to the fore are

**Fig. 1 a.** Map with position of W. Taleschout site.
**Fig. 1 b and 1 c.** Photo and diagram of Hippo Site with sections:

**Section 1:** Bubalus, therianthrope, 2 bovines, feline, 2 ostriches.
**Section 2:** 4 hippo, 1 bovine, 2 very small giraffe and possible small feline.
**Section 3:** Dog-headed therianthrope, 1 ostrich
**Section 4:** Side 1: 3 bovines, possible hippo head. Side 2: 1 hippo. Side 3: several ostriches. Below: antelope and other peckings.
**Section 5:** 2 ostriches
**Section 6:** Side 1: hippo with carnivorous teeth. Side 2: hippo with bovine, and hippo with anthropomorph.
**Section 7:** Side 3: bipedal hippo, 1 smaller hippo.
**Section 8:** Side 1: possible fount hippo. Side 2: Aurochs and dogheaded therianthrope. Side 3: 4 or 5 ostriches, possible elephant.
Below: a grinding hollow (cupule).
**Section 9:** Indistinguishable markings
**Section 10:** hippo, legs barely indicated.
**Section 11:** Side 3: large hippo with ovaloid.
**Section 12:** decorated hippo with bristled tail and triple curl mouth.

**Fig. 2 a.** Section 2 hippos. Many of the Hippo Site engravings are life sized.

**Fig. 2 b.** Section 2 hippos. Large hippo: 287 cm, three smaller hippos, L to R: 108 cm, 110 cm, 112 cm.
Engravings of a therianthrope (dog-headed man), two bovines, a feline and two ostriches, all roughly pecked. Section 2 features four hippopotami covering a rock face measuring roughly 4 metres wide (Fig. 2a and b). The largest of these hippopotami (287 cm) has two smaller, right-facing hippopotami at its feet (110 and 112 cm), while to their left, is a smaller, left-facing hippo (108 cm) which is overlapped by a bovine. Two small giraffe and two parallel lines are engraved over the body of the large hippo.

Section 3 depicts a therianthrope, beautifully carved in bas-relief, with a human body and a dog’s head, approximately 70 cm tall (Fig. 3). Its mouth displays a set of carnivorous teeth, while hanging from a belt at the waist are two trophies: a rhino head and an aurochs head. To the right is an ostrich, probably added at a later date, as evidenced by the less mature patination. In section 4, all three sides of the rock ‘block’ are engraved. Side 1 features three crudely pecked bovines, probably Pastoral period with a possible faint hippo head behind the upmost bovine. Side 2 depicts a scarcely sketched hippo outline, badly exfoliated in places and only partially completed, 126 cm. (Fig. 4a and b). Side 3 depicts several ostriches walking to the right. On the horizontal slab beneath Section 4 is an engraving of an antelope, along with other undetermined peckings.

Section 5 depicts two very faintly pecked ostriches. Section 6, Side 1 features a clearly incised hippo, grimacing and baring a set of carnivorous teeth, 113 cm (Fig. 5a and b). Side 2 is a panel of engravings that includes two large hippopotami placed one above the other; a human figure superimposed on top of the lower hippo, and a bovine overlapping the upper hippo (Fig. 6). These two hippopotami are only partially visible, while the anthropomorph is well defined and boldly incised.

Section 7 depicts two partially pecked, partially incised hippopotami; the larger (approx. 230 cm) left-hand one appears to be balancing on its hind legs, while the smaller, right-hand hippo stands on all four legs (Fig. 7a and b). Section 8 has 3 sides: Side 1 possibly depicts a faint hippo;

Fig. 3. Section 3: Dog-headed therianthrope baring its teeth (approx. 70 cm tall).

Fig. 4 a. Section 4 hippo, only partially complete, and badly exfoliated in places.

Fig. 4 b. Section 4 hippo, 126 cm long.

Fig. 5 a. Section 6, Side 1: Hippo grimacing and baring a set of carnivorous teeth.

Fig. 5 b. Section 6, Side 1: Hippo with carnivorous teeth. 113 cm long.
Side 2 features a magnificent, powerfully incised aurochs measuring 170 cm, while an exfoliated, partial dog-headed figure stands at the back of the aurochs' extended tail (Fig. 8a and b). Side 3 depicts a group of 4 or 5 ostriches facing left. On the horizontal slab beneath section 8, is a grinding hollow. Section 9 has indistinguishable markings, and section 10 features a single hippo (148 cm) rather stiffly carved (Fig. 9a and b). Its back and head are clearly outlined, and appear to have been re-incised. There is an additional triangular shape at the mouth, the groin is polished, and yet the legs are barely indicated.

Section 11 features the third largest hippo at the site, measuring 270 cm (Fig. 10). It has a pecked outline, a small pecked nostril, eye and ear, and there is a small ovaloid across the line of the underbelly. Section 12 depicts the final and largest hippo (373 cm), which is the most detailed hippo at the site (Fig. 11 a and b). It has a fairly elongated body, 'animated' limbs and a bristled tail; the mouth-curl and one nostril are conveyed with multiple circles; there is an additional triangular shape at the mouth yet the eye is entirely omitted.

Fig. 6. Section 6 hippos, Side 2. On upper portion of rock face, a bovine is superimposed on top of a hippo. Below, an anthropomorph (H 74 cm) is superimposed on top of a pecked hippo.

Fig. 7a. Section 7 hippos: detail of larger hippo; hind legs are carved in double line style, and groin is polished. Tail, and rump are only roughly pecked - re-worked a number of times.

Fig. 7b. Section 7 hippos. Two partially pecked, partially incised hippos. The larger one appears to be balancing on its hind legs.

Fig. 8a. Section 7 hippo on left rock face, with aurochs (Section 8) on right. Note human figure on left for scale.

Fig. 8b. Powerfully incised aurochs (170 cm), with a partial dog-headed figure at its tail.
Discussion

Hippo engravings in relation to the natural world

The style of rendering for all the hippo engravings is notably spare, yet with just a few small details, the image-makers have captured the key characteristics of hippos in the natural world. Physiologically a hippo is distinguished by its vast, barrel-shaped body, powerful jaws and stumpy legs (Fig. 12). The eyes, ears and nostrils are located at the top of the head, allowing the hippo to breathe, see and hear while remaining almost fully immersed in the water (Fig 13). The feet have four toes connected by short swimming webs, and the tail is relatively short, laterally flattened, and fringed with bristles. Hippos are purplish grey in colour, with pink undersides, eye-rims, ears and mouth (Kingdon, 2003; Despard Estes, 1991; Eltringham, 1999).

These physical features are clearly represented in most of the engravings. Each hippo is portrayed with a simple outline that reflects the distinctive curves of the eye-socket, nostril and one ear on the top of the head. The second ear is consistently placed lower down on the head, suggesting a certain three dimensionality. The four limbs are depicted in the correct gait pattern with opposing hind and forelimbs shown in lateral sequence. Other details include a triangular-shaped
polished groin, carefully delineated toes, and accurately paddle-shaped tails. Interestingly, every hippo at the site is depicted with a mouthline that ends in a distinctive oval-shaped curl. This likely represents the characteristic fold of flesh where the upper and lower jaws come together, which is similarly depicted on other ‘Messak School’ animal images, such as the elephant. Some hippos have additional circles, while other hippos feature triangular shapes in the mouth, probably representing a tooth or the tongue (see Fig. 14).

Some of the engravings display very specific hippo behavioural traits. For example, the Section 12 hippo (Fig. 11) has legs tucked under in motion, as if swimming (Gauthier, 1996). The broad, flattened shape of its tail has been rendered in frontal view, probably to emphasize the tail’s flailing capability, which aids propulsion and dung scattering (Kingdon, 2003).

Such precise knowledge of varied hippo characteristics suggests that the image-makers not only had close contact with hippos in their lives but also had a keen interest in these mammals. As such, under what conditions might hippo and human converge in the Holocene Messak and surrounds?

Zooarchaeological studies, climate, movement of people

i. Holocene hippo habitats

While the rock art attests to the presence of hippos in certain Messak wadis in the Holocene, zooarchaeological studies have yet to record hippo fossil bones on the plateau. However, Holocene hippo bones have been found in two adjacent regions: the Acacus mountains (Cremašchi, 2001) and the Erg of Murzuq (Peters & von den Driesch, 2003). The wet Holocene periods when lakes and swamps were present in the Murzuq spanned from roughly 10400 BP to 5000 BP, interrupted by several abrupt, dry episodes and a process of desiccation beginning around 6 ka (Brooks et al., 2005: 258). Lake levels reached their highest in the Erg of Murzuq about 6600-6500 years ago, however it is likely that the lakes would have dried into patchy salt flats by 5000 BP (Cremašchi & di Lernia, 1999). Prior to this drying, Holocene humid conditions would have supported marshes, tall grasses and reeds near the lakes; and an abundance of grasslands, shrubs and stands of smaller trees in the semi-permanent water sources such as wadis (Peters & von den Dreisch, 2003).

In general, hippos aggregate in permanent water sources or walls during the dry season, and disperse very widely in the rains (Kingdon, 2003: 324). It is reasonable therefore, to hypothesise that hippos moved seasonally from the Murzuq into the wadi Taleschout, until climate conditions became too dry. On a micro scale, hippos require both pools of water for submersion and substantial pasturage for grazing – they can travel up to 5 km, ingesting up to 60 kg of grass in one night (Kingdon, 2003; Despard Estes, 1991).

The Hippo rock art site in Wadi Taleschout is topographically appropriate for hippo habitation during wet periods. The river’s flow would likely have created deep pooling under the engraved rocks, as evidenced by erosional downcutting (Heather Viles, pers. comment 2009). The

Fig. 12. The average hippo in the wild measures between 2-4 metres in length, with distinct gender dimorphism.

Fig. 13. A hippo’s eyes, ears and nostrils are located at the top of the head, allowing the hippo to breathe, see and hear while almost fully submerged.

1 Personal comments on geomorphology. Professor Heather Viles, School of Geography and the Environment, University of Oxford.
opposing bank is without cliffs or large boulders, and extends as a gentle slope stretching some 100 metres almost up to the top of the plateau. Such a broad expanse of terrain plausibly offered grasses for grazing. While it is not important to establish whether the site itself was an actual hippo wallow, I propose that its power as a place was linked to its suitability as a hippo habitat. This concept will be expanded on later in the paper.

**ii. Human overlap with hippos**

The early Holocene communities in this region were likely to have been hunter-gatherers who practiced specialized hunting and some fishing, living in semi-permanent settlements (Cremaschi & di Lernia, 1999). However, with the deterioration of climatic conditions and the gradual introduction of herding during the 6th to 8th millennia, seasonal movement between the mountain regions and the lowlands became the new pattern of subsistence (Brooks et al., 2005). Cremaschi and di Lernia have outlined a model of transhumance between winter mountain base camps with a focus on goats and sheep, and specialized lakeland sites where pasturage was set aside for cattle in the dry season. By about 5000 BP, a continuous pattern of mobility was in full effect (Cremaschi & di Lernia, 1999: 230-233), and the wadis were probably used as migrational corridors.

It is notable that there is no rock art of sheep or goats at the Taleschout Hippo Site, yet cattle feature quite prominently. In addition to the great aurochs and several cow images at the beginning of the site, there are three instances of a bovine superimposed on top of a hippo in a manner that firmly links the two mammals, and in Section 2, hippo and bovine are clearly coeval (Fig. 2a and 2b). This bovine and others have forward pointing horns, which implies domestication (Lutz, 1995; Chaix & Hansen, 2003), thus indicating that the rock art site was active and meaningful during the Pastoral period.

Significantly, there is no imagery of humans hunting hippos at the Hippo Site. In the broader picture of rock art in the central Sahara, hippo-hunting scenes are minimal. There are two scenes of note in the Tassili that feature a hippo hunt but in both cases they appear to be more symbolic than realistic (Hallier & Hallier, 2009; Campbell & Coulson, 2010). Otherwise, unlike select animal images of elephant, aurochs or ostriches, etc., hippos are not generally depicted with hunt-related items such as trapping stones, tethers or human figures with weapons.

If hippos were not hunting targets in the Wadi Taleschout imagery, why would they be of interest to humans? Examining other hippo engravings in the Messak and surrounds, may offer some clues.

**Comparing the Taleschout Hippo Site with other hippo engravings**

In contrast to other large fauna, hippos are not prolifically featured in the rock art, and represent only 3% of the ‘Messak School’ imagery (Le Quellec, 1998). It has been noted however, that a large number of the existing hippo engravings occur in just three wadis: Taleschout, Imrawen and In Hagarin (Le Quellec, 1998; Van Albada, 2000; Jelinek, 2004). This represents a small area, on a plateau covering some 10000 sq. km, cut across with about 30 major wadis and their network of tributaries. Yet in spite of the paucity of hippo images, an analysis of the current record shows that hippos were culturally valued and carried symbolic overtones expressed in the imagery through content, associations and style.

**i. Style, execution and chronology**

Discussions about style in Saharan rock art have historically been linked to issues of chronology. However, dating is notoriously controversial and is still under debate. This paper is concerned with two periods relevant to the Messak in the early and mid-Holocene: the ‘Early Hunter’ also called the ‘Wild Fauna’ period and the Pastoral period. A prevalent general viewpoint is that the earliest rock art was created by hunters who were later replaced by, or evolved into herding cultures. The start of the ‘Wild Fauna’ period has been dated variously between 12000-
10000 BP, while the herding rock art begins around 7500BP with the arrival of domesticated cattle. The 'Wild Fauna' period is aligned with a style generally described as being naturalistic, larger in scale, and featuring a range of wild fauna of the 'Ethiopian type'. The Pastoral period predominantly depicts domesticated bovids and people, and mostly favours a less naturalistic style with simpler lines.

A number of authors disagree with this framework, positing that hunting and herding were not mutually exclusive. Muzzolini (1995, 2001) for example proposes a condensed time frame of 6000-4000 BP for both styles contiguously. In the case of the Messak, Le Quellec (2008) points out that there are engravings in a strongly naturalistic style depicting cattle that are clearly domesticated, with saddles, collars, leashes, etc. As such, he sees the Messak engravings as being the work of a single cultural group who were adept at a range of styles over an extended period of time.

The author of this paper agrees with Le Quellec and others that a 'naturalistic style featuring wild animals' cannot delimit a chronological period in time; and that hunting and herding can be coeval. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, I shall discuss 'style' without linking it to specific chronological periods.

It has been noted that many of the hippo engravings in the Messak have been executed with particular care (Gauthier, 1996), some with details that create a highly decorative effect. For example, at Imrawen three hippos are embellished with a double line technique (Fig. 15). Another Imrawen engraving features a group of hippos with decorative markings across the neck, which are possibly schematic renderings of folds of flesh (Fig. 16a and b). The specific highlighting of a hippo's 'fleshy' qualities, as portrayed in decorative neck rolls and mouth curls suggests a positive association with the animal's fatness. A third example is an engraving depicting a hippo with juvenile (Wadi Taleschout), that is painstakingly sculpted in bas-relief, creating a very striking effect (Fig. 17).

At the Taleschout Hippo Site, there is only one image that is rendered entirely in a decorative style (Fig. 11) as described earlier, with a triple circle mouth-line and nostril, a boldly cross-hatched tail to convey bristles, and wavy-line shaped toes. However, other hippos

Fig. 15. Three hippos embellished with double line technique.
The hare and the left-hand hippo both have a hook shaped item at the end of their forelimbs. Notice the anthropomorphic body postures of the hippos.

Fig. 16 a. Hippos with decorative markings across the neck, which may be schematic renderings of folds of flesh.

Fig. 16 b. Note the folds of flesh at the neck of the juvenile and also note the adult hippo's paddle shaped tail with bristles at the end. The groin in the hippo engraving in Section 6, may portray a lactating udder, as seen in this photo.
bear the tracings of a decorative style, and yet appear to have been redrawn in a more simplistic, pecked style. In fact collectively, the hippos are composed of a complicated admix of varying 'style elements' suggesting that the imagery was created and then repeatedly reworked over a period of time. The picture is further complicated by the half-finished nature of some of the imagery. For example, the larger hippo in Section 7 (Fig. 7a and b) features the characteristic double lines of the 'Messak School' with carefully delineated hind legs and groin. Yet the rump, head, jaw and forelegs are very roughly rendered. Such crude and tentative lines may represent the original preparatory sketch of the hippo before polishing. Alternatively they may be a later reworking of lines as suggested by the patination, which is markedly less developed than that of the hind legs. It is possible that the original hippo eroded, leaving only the hindquarters and groin intact, and the rest of the hippo was reworked later. However there is another hippo whose hind legs and groin are similarly portrayed, again, with a roughly pecked head and upper body (Fig. 6), and it is unlikely that two hippos on differently aspected panels eroded in an identical pattern.

Another possibility is that the image-makers simply left the upper sections 'unfinished' due to the difficulty of 'reach'. The heights of the upper outline of the hippos are slightly beyond the extended reach of an average human, perhaps necessitating the use of scaffolding or boulders, which would have been balanced precariously on narrow rock slabs. However, this line of reasoning does not hold up, when considering other hippos. Section 4 (Fig. 4) is very easily accessed yet the hippo is only partially rendered, and the section 10 (Fig. 9) hippo has a clear, well-rendered upper back yet its easily-accessed limbs are vague and unfinished.

With no obvious practical reasons for the incomplete, re-incised, re-arranged, repetitive imagery, I propose that the actual action of carving the hippo was significant. 'Completed' or 'refined' imagery may not have been as important as the expressive act of rendering. The bodily practice of image-making may have been a way of invoking a type of power associated with hippos. A chain of memory was being played out over time, and meanings were being re-worked or re-confirmed. This is also evidenced in the spatial arrangements of other animals in relation to the hippos, with new ones being added and old ones being allowed to fade. As time went by and the number of hippo images increased, the site would have been increasingly invested with potency, and the acts of renewing may have had great affect.

ii. Afar hippos

In comparing the Taleschout Hippos with other hippo engravings, I include a discussion of a site in the Tassili, which also depicts an unusually large assemblage of hippos. The Oued Afar, a tributary of the Oued
Djerat, features a site depicting 22 huge hippo engravings (Campbell & Coulson, 2010). In contrast to the linear, vertical positioning of the Talescchout hippos, the Afar hippos are engraved on the horizontal rock of the riverbed, yet in both situations the river is key. At Afar, the concave pavement funnels the river’s flow over the engravings (Campbell & Coulson, 2010); at Talescchout, the wet season river’s deepest flow would have passed directly below the engraved rocks (Viles, pers. comment).

The hippos are similarly striking in their size and similarly rendered in profile outline view, with only the key details of eyes, nose, mouth, tail and toes indicated. However, other details diverge: in contrast to the generally rougher pecked technique of the Talescchout hippos, the Afar hippos are mostly boldly incised, with pronounced round eyes, and two ears that stand up on top of the head, and no curls at the mouth-line. A striking difference is the treatment of narrative. The Afar hippos are depicted in ‘scenes of action’; a hippo is being hunted by a bowman, two hippos are on top of a prone human, hippos are interacting together, etc.

while at Talescchout, the repetitive establishment of ‘hippo potency’ in a chain of single hippos appears to be more important. Yet despite these differences, it will become clear later in this paper, that in fact the Talescchout and Afar hippos share a powerful common symbolism.

iii. Associations and superimpositions

Assessing hippo engravings in relation to superimpositions or associations with other animals yields informative patterns. For example, hippos are often associated with other water-dependent animals such as bubalus and crocodile (van Albada, 2000). For instance, one site in Wadi Imraven depicts crocodile, hippo and bubalus together, with one hippo superimposed on top of a set of bubalus horns.

We have seen evidence at the Talescchout Hippo Site of cattle linked to hippo. Their common dependency on water and pasture is obvious, however their linkages appear to be more complex. The Talescchout Hippos seem to be spatially arranged in a pattern focused on the large and magnificent aurochs. The hippo ‘chain’ to its right, all face left towards the aurochs. With the exception of the small hippo at the start of the cliff, the chain of hippos to the aurochs’ left, all face right. Beneath the aurochs is a small niche, or shelter and a large cupule.

In general, both hippo and bovine appear to have been objects of particular ‘admiration’. For example, at Tinderhert, Tassili, a giant, lone bull engraving (500 cm) (Fig. 18 a) is completely covered in decorative spirals, which Hallier and Hallier (2009) have compared to a similarly elaborately decorated, oversized painted hippo at Tandadoft (360 cm) (Fig. 18 b). Spirals occur very selectively in conjunction with animal engravings, suggesting they have a specific kind of power or significance.

Hippos are quite frequently depicted with unrealistic characteristics or with hybrid or even human qualities. For example a hare accompanies three hippos, one of which appears to have forelimbs with a ‘hook-shaped attachment’ as does the hare itself (Imraven, see Fig. 15). These same three hippos appear as if standing on their hind legs. A hippo is often bipedal in the water, using a series of ‘high prancing steps’ (Eltringham, 1999: 3) which gives them a remarkably human stance. This body position appears on several hippo images at Imraven.

Fig. 18 a. Lone bull engraving with spirals (500 cm) at Tinderhert, Tassili, Algeria, which the Halliers have compared with a large painted hippo at Tandadoft, see 18 b.

Fig. 18 b. Large painted hippo with spirals (360 cm), at Tandadoft, Tassili. Illustration reproduced by kind permission from Ulrich and Brigitte Hallier.

\* See note no. 1.
and is evident on the Section 7 hippo at Taleschout (Fig. 7a and b). Hippos are frequently depicted in groups, perhaps emphasizing the very social behaviour of natural hippos in the water (Fig. 19), who herd together in a highly vocal manner (Kingdon, 2003). Another example at In-Galghien, shows two hippos depicted alongside a hippo-headed human or therianthrope. There are three dog-headed figures among the Taleschout hippos and unique to this site, they appear to have acquired hippo characteristics with snouts that are markedly hippo-shaped (Fig. 3). Such borrowing and blending is not infrequent in Messak rock art, and suggests ephemeral boundaries between human and animal.

A particularly interesting case of hybridity is the rendering of some hippos with a full set of carnivorous teeth, as evidenced by the hippo in Section 6 (Fig. 5a and b) at Taleschout, and similarly, hippos at Imrawen (Gauthier, 1996) (Fig. 20) and Meseknan (Jelinek, 2004). It is likely the teeth are intended to signify aggression as is evidenced by similar carnivorous teeth depicted in dog-headed, warrior-like figures carrying weapons or trophies, such as the dog-head at the Hippo Site (Fig. 3). However it is interesting that ‘hippo aggression’ is not expressed by depicting a hippo’s own impressive incisors, displayed in the classic open gape (see Fig. 21).

**Hippo Power**

It is feasible that the carnivorous teeth were intended to express a particular kind of aggression: that of female protective aggression related to pregnancy or motherhood. There are several clues that point to this idea. In nature, pregnant or nursing hippos are particularly noted for their aggressive behaviour (Kingdon, 2003). In the rock art record, the depiction of a mammal with offspring is rare except in the case of hippos, when it is quite common (e.g. Taleschout wadi; Taleschout Hippo Site; Imrawen; In Habeter). The mother/juvenile relationship seems to be important, and is clear because the two are often physically linked. For example, the Taleschout wadi bas-relief of mother and calf (Fig 17), shows them encircled together within a polished, smooth background. At the Taleschout Hippo Site two scenes depict a larger hippo with limbs deliberately entwined with a smaller hippo (e.g. see Fig. 2a and b), a technique also used at Afar, with two calves perched on the back of a mother hippo. A second clue is the treatment of the groin in the Hippo Site imagery. The groin is always illustrated on even the sparsest of hippo outlines, and is the only feature that is very carefully polished and smoothed. In two cases the groin appears to be the central focus of the hippo engraving (Fig. 7a and b, Fig. 6). Such elaborate attention perhaps emphasizes the procreative power of the hippo. The sex of a hippo cannot easily be indicated because the male hippo has internal testes and a normally retracted penis (Eltringham, 1999) however, in the case of the Section 6 hippo with carnivorous teeth, the groin is very
exaggerated, and is teat shaped suggesting a lactating udder (Fig. 5 a and b, also see Fig. 16 b).

It is interesting to note that the female hippopotamus was an apotropaic deity symbolizing protective motherhood in early Egypt. Taweret and Reret in particular are portrayed with the swollen belly of pregnancy, and a grimacing mouth bearing a full set of carnivorous teeth (Shaw & Nicholson, 2008; Bunson, 1991) (See Fig. 22). Earlier still, in pre-dynastic Egypt, there is evidence that the hippo had special protective significance. At the site of two of Egypt’s earliest temples, Hierakonpolis and Abydos, an abundance of hippo faïences, pottery and figurines were found, some of which are thought to be apotropaic amulets (Hendrickx & Depraetere, 2004). Also at Hierakonpolis, juvenile hippo bones were found in dedicated burials in an Elite cemetery (Droux, 2010), thus linking the hippo to concerns in the afterlife.

While Egypt may seem distant from the Messak plateau, there is a growing number of authors acknowledging a flow of ideas from the Sahara to the east even from the mid-Holocene onwards (e.g. Caneva & Marks, 1990; Garcea, 1993, 2004; Caneva, 1993; Malvill et al., 1998; Bachd, 2000). It has also been suggested that specific pre-dynastic Egyptian beliefs may have been seeded in the central Sahara (Hassan, 1992, 1996; Bachd, 2000).

Certainly the practise of active animal veneration has been attested in the mid-Holocene in the central Sahara, and even specifically in the Messak, with archaeological evidence of a cattle cult involving careful burials of cattle in tombs (di Lernia, 2006; Smith, 2005). This is also reflected in the rock art, with a rich range of examples of cattle veneration, adornment and even cattle sacrifice (Waldock, 2005). However, the claim for a hippo ‘deity’ in the Messak must remain speculative until more fully researched. It is equally possible that the hippo simply functioned as an intermediary, propitiating between humans and their supernatural entities.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that hippos in Holocene central Saharan rock art were considered powerful. They carried a suite of complex, interrelated associations linking them to humans in a variety of different ways. A dominant theme is one of replenishment and fecundity, be it human, animal, or land. The Afar hippos have been similarly linked to concepts of fertility, and Campbell and Coulson (2010) suggest hippo engravings were used to ensure good river flow or rain. They propose that hippos were connected with human sexual power, as evidenced by a range of associated imagery.

The natural hippo is a social animal linked to well-watered, pastured environments, which would have had particular cultural significance for pastoralists with cattle. At a more complex level the anthropomorphized or human-inflected hippo imagery tells of a multi-

**Fig. 20.** Hippo at Imrawen with carnivorous teeth.

**Fig. 21.** A hippo’s teeth comprise large, tusk-like incisors up front, with a row of molars at the back of the mouth. This is not consistent with the row of carnivorous teeth portrayed in the Section 6 Hippo, and other specific hippo images in the Messak, such as Fig. 20.

**Fig. 22.** Taweret was an early Egyptian apotropaic goddess associated with fertility and protection in childbirth. She is depicted as part hippopotamus with a set of carnivorous teeth. Author’s illustration of a hippo faïence in Cairo Museum.
faceted world in which humans and hippos can metamorphose – a world where the natural and supernatural can merge. The Taleschout Hippo Site provides an example of the coalescence of these two spheres. Much has been written about the ‘power of place’, and the humanising of landscapes through the linking of natural features with spiritual or mythological beliefs (Deacon, 1988; Ouzman, 1998; Chippendale and Nash, 2004). The hippo engravings provided a medium for the image-makers to mark a specific place in a very tangible, sensorial way. This paper has proposed that the choice of location for the Taleschout Hippo engravings was linked to its suitability as a natural hippo habitat. This may have been associative: a place where the image-makers and their communities could tap into ‘hippo power’. I have suggested that ‘performance’ was at the heart of the re-working and aggregating of hippo imagery. A bodily practice helps instantiate abstract thoughts and ideas (Bourdieu, 1992; Meskell, 2004) and the repetitive action of re-working and renewing the hippo outlines would have provided a means for an active dialogue between humans and spiritual agents.

It is possible that the Taleschout Hippo Site was abandoned, and then re-activated later at a time when resources were depleting due to a changing environmental pattern. The diminishing resources would have caused not only economic concerns, but very real social concerns. As such, the hippo engravings may be evidence of attempts by the Messak inhabitants to control or negotiate their position in socio-economic and spiritual spheres.

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References


Horse, Hartebeest or Hybrid?  
A puzzling engraving in the Acacus

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Introduction
This article provides a brief report on a previously unrecorded rock art site located in the Acacus in southwestern Libya. The central focus of the site is an exceptionally impressive engraving of an ungulate – perhaps a horse, giraffe or antelope (Fig. 1). The animal stands 130 cm tall, and is not only superbly crafted, but is strikingly embellished with bold patterns. In terms of style and execution, there are elements that make this image quite unique to the region.

Description of the Site
The engraved panel is located at the base of a large rocky outcrop of Paleozoic sandstone that has been heavily eroded into rounded, tower-like formations, the highest of which stands about six metres tall. The imagery is positioned on a smooth, vertical rock-face (approx. 250 cm high x 400 cm wide) that is hidden from easy view, situated behind a dune formation and two large boulders (Fig. 2).

At first glance, the panel appears to simply depict an ungulate, however a closer analysis reveals additional images and a mass of markings that are barely visible. For example, to the right of the ungulate’s muzzle is a finely engraved rhino (Fig. 3a and b), while to the left of the ungulate’s rump is a white-coloured human figure, possibly from the Roman period or early Pastoral period.

The difficulty in discerning the imagery is due to the condition of the rock face. While the panel is clearly weathered by water action, there are some curious anomalies.

The rock surface has developed an overall iron-rich reddish crust, probably formed by water sluicing over the surface, and there are white streaks to the left of the engraving, created by mineral salts washed down by water (Heather Viles, pers. comm. 2009). However, there is an additional whitish film around the area of the engraving that is not obviously attributable to naturally formed salt efflorescence, and underneath this layer there is

Fig. 1. Engraving of Ungulate. See also Plate, back cover.

Fig. 2. The engraving is located on a smooth, vertical rock-face (roughly 250 cm high x 400 cm wide).

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a red pigment of a friable nature. It is possible that the engraving has been abraded, re-worked or possibly even subjected to a moulding process, however further research is required to make a more definitive statement.

In contrast to the degraded state of the surrounding imagery, the incised lines of the ungulate are well defined and relatively uneroded, again suggesting that the image may have been re-worked.

The pronounced lines allow one to see details that raise interesting questions about the nature of the ungulate. For example, with its gently arched neck featuring a decorative pattern suggestive of a mane, one might initially assess the animal as a horse. There appears to be what may be reins dangling beneath its muzzle (Fig. 4). However the ungulate very clearly bears a set of horns (Fig. 5), and its elongated forehead, narrow face and prehensile lips, are equally suggestive of a giraffe. The scalloped, decorative patterning on the head and neck, while not literally replicating the natural markings of a giraffe, are nonetheless reminiscent of the decorative care afforded to select giraffe engravings in the Sahara (e.g. Mathendous, Ankbritt, Tin Lalan and Uadi Kessi in Libya; and Dabous, in Niger). There has been much discussion concerning the relationship between humans

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Fig. 3a. Small, finely engraved rhino, to the right of the ungulate's muzzle.

Fig. 3b. Tracing of rhino.

Fig. 4. Note possible reins dangling down beneath the animal's muzzle.

Fig. 5. The animal has horns on pedicels.
and giraffe in Saharan rock art (e.g. Dupuy, 1995; Huyge, 2002; Van Hoek, 2003, 2005; Ikram, 2009). Possible 'reins or tethers' are depicted in a significant body of giraffe imagery, and may be seen as attempts at giraffe taming, or alternatively may have had more symbolic significances. The giraffe in antiquity is known to have been culturally important to a variety of groups across Africa ranging from Egypt in the north to Namibia in the south (Ikram, 2009).

However the argument for a giraffe representation is weakened when one considers that the animal lacks a giraffe's high shoulders and sloping back, and the horns are not the relatively straight, knob-ended protuberances so characteristic of a giraffe. In fact the horns most resemble those of a hartebeest, with their distinctive, irregularly shaped stems raised on pedicles (Kingdon, pers. comm. 2009). Certainly the comparatively squared-off body, flared muzzle and alcelaphine-shaped nostrils are in keeping with this suggestion. It is known that the Alcelaphus b. buselaphus species of hartebeest was present in the Sahara until its extinction in the 1920's (Kingdon, 2003). It is also attested that pre-dynastic and dynastic Egyptians corralled and tethered antelope, including the hartebeest. Furthermore, the hartebeest was one of the select animals sacrificed in mortuary contexts in pre-dynastic Egypt (Linseele & Van Neer, 2009; Riemer et al., 2009). While the significance of the hartebeest in early Egypt may not be directly relevant to the Acacus, it nonetheless encourages us to consider different lines of thinking about the economic and cultural status of animals in the Sahara in earlier times. Within this framework, one must also consider that this enigmatic ungulate might not portray a horse, giraffe or hartebeest, but may have represented an imagined or a mythological beast with a hybridity of characteristics interpreted schematically.

This engraving was first noted in 2009, by Mohamed Ali Suliman from the Libyan Department of Archaeology, who was accompanying a research team led by Victoria Waldock, University of Oxford, and guided by Saharan specialist, Pier Paolo Rossi. Much of this article is speculative, due to the early stage of our research. We hope current investigations underway using specialised software will produce further clarification on the nature of the faint imagery and the apparently 'worked' aspects of the engraved rock.

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