

# The history of rock art research in the **Tadrart Acacus** (Southwest Libya)

## Abstract

*This research presents and discusses the history of rock art research in Tadrart Acacus which is a massif roughly 150 km long and 50 km wide. It is located north east part of Ghat in the Fezzan region Southwest part of Libya. It is also examines early and late rock art studies in North Africa and central Sahara that were investigated by a number of European travelers such as Heinrich Barth, Henry Duveyrier, Gustave Nachttegall, Ervin De Bary, Paolo Graziosi and then Mori and the Italian-Libyan archaeological mission in Acacus and Messak.*

*Keywords: Tadrart Acacus; Saharan rock art; Fezzan; European travelers*

## Introduction

Tadrart Acacus is located north east part of Ghat about 150 km, and Tadrart Acacus is longitudinal shape located between 24-30 and 25-30 north of equator, east of it is Messak lands and Tanezzuft valley. Tadrart Acacus has thousands of cave paintings in very different styles these styles divided into five major periods: wild animals, round head period, pastoralist art, horse period, and camel period, dating from 12.000 B.C. to 100 C.E. In addition, there is numerous of rock art sites in Tadrart Acacus including hundreds of engravings and thousands of paintings.

The massif of Tadrart Acacus has known one of the richest concentrations of Sahara rock art. It was included in 1985 on the UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. More than a century after the first reports of prehistoric carvings. Moreover, the first geographic exploration of rock art was carried out by the German traveler Heinrich Barth. He discovered a number of rock art sites in Wadi Mathendous in the southern fingers of the plateau. Moreover, Barth represents sculpture in Wadi Telizzaghen which involves a human figure with head of an individual kind of bull with long horns turned and broken at the point.

In 1850 the French traveler Henry Duveyrier also investigated a number of rock art sites in Wadi Al-ajal and Anie in 1864 then explorations of German traveler Gustave Nachttegall in Tebesti and Mizdah between 1896-1874 also the German traveler Erwin De Bary during his journey to Ghat and Air lands between the years 1876-1877, he indicated to some of engravings in Ghat and it is surroundings. By the year 1955-1964 Fabrizio Mori introduced scientific archaeological studies by using absolute methods such as radiocarbon dating (Alsherif 2005). Mori paved the way for the Italian-Libyan archaeological mission in the Acacus and Messak to carried out

Scientific research into the ancient antiquities, anthropology, Palaeoenvironments, and rock arts. The most important excavation was conducted in 1959 in Uan Muhuggiag cave and this recalled the remains of a mummy of a two and a half years child covered with goat leather dated to 3446 B.C. 180 +- In Tadrart Acacus area there are a number of rock caves and refuges including Uan Muhuggiag cave, Uan Tabu cave, Uan Afuda cave, Uan Telocat cave, Ti-n-torha

cave, Ti-n- Aneween, Fozziglaren shelter, and others.

It seems that the caves and refuges were widely used by recent humans, and this recessed nature has allowed that drawings and sculptures are protected from natural factors like wind, rains, flood, and others. Mori established a stylistic sequence for rock art in Tadrart Acacus area using subjects of drawings and styles thereof. He divided these styles into five major periods: wild animals, round head period, Pastoralist art, horse period and camel period.

### Early rock art studies in North Africa and central Sahara

Arab Muslim geographers and scholars such as Ibn Khaldun, Al-Yaqubi, Ibn Hawqal, Yaqut, Ibn sa'id, Ibn- Ali zar, Al-Bakri, Al-Idrisi, Ibn Battuta and Leo Africans had extensive knowledge of the Sahara. They are considered to be the first pioneers in many field of. Their impact was so significant that they were even known as the Berbers of North Africa by the Tuareg.

Research on rock art and the Tefinagh inscription has over the years shown that Saharan rock art began with the engraving tradition. Consequently, Saharan rock art research in the beginning of the 19th century began by focusing on the engraving of the Sahara Atlas. Tassili and Hoggar regions were the first to be intensively researched from about 1930 (Muzzolini 1998a). Of the

many researchers who have been linked with the discoveries of the North Africa and Central Sahara, the names of Frobenius, Breuil, Monod, Huard, Reygasse, Dal-loni, Capot-Rey, Graziosi, Winkler, Vaufrey, Lhote, Mori, and Dunbar are best known (Smith 1968).

Many paintings and engravings were found in Southern Oran, Algeria, the Tassili-N-Ajjer in south eastern Algeria, Fezzan massif in western Libya, Southern Morocco, Ro de Oro, and the massifs of the Hoggar, Adrar de Iforas, Air, and Tibesti Libya- Egyptian frontier (Smith 1968).

Rock art sites in the Tadrart Acacus paintings and engravings found in different locations such rock shelter, caves, cliff, isolated boulders ( Di Lernia& Gallinaro 2011).

By the 1890s Flamand presented his lecture at school of communication in Algeria. The lecture served as a review of his research finding on rock art and inscriptions in the Hadjra Mektouba in the southern part of Oran, Algeria (Flamand 1892).

The French expedition recorded a number of rock art sites in Central Sahara and southern Oran City in Algeria in 1847 (Graziosi 1962). This was followed, three years later, by a German traveler who became the first person to 'discover' rock art in Libya. Henry Barth found a number of rock art sites in Wadi Mathendous in the southern finger of Murzuq plateau (Anag et al. 2002). A further 'discovery' of rock art in Libya was made by a French geographer

Henri Duveyrier. He recorded a number of carvings in Messak Mellet an area located in the Eastern region of the Tadrart Acacus (Keenan 2003). Duveyrier published his work on about 70 books. Amongst his writings, the famous one was the book he wrote on the Tuareg of the North. This book, which made reference to Tefinagh inscriptions, provided the first detailed



Fig.1 A. Bubalus Period, engraving *Bubalus Antiquus*, Wadi Mathendous, Messak Settafet.



Fig.1 B. Round Head Period, Tamuat, Tadrart Acacus

art and provided no details on the chronology of rock art nor stylistic analysis.

As a result, we know where many of the rock art sites occur. At present, we know very little about the artistic traditions, stylistic character applied in rock art, and importantly it is meaning. This is also similar to early discoveries of rock art in other areas within the African continent. For instance, it was not until early 20<sup>th</sup> century that rock art enthusiasts working in southern Africa began providing comment on the chronology and style applied in rock art.

description of the Tuareg (Duveyrier 1864; Hefrnan 1989).

Following Henry Barth, another German, physician Gustave Nachtetal, discovered a number of rock art sites during 1870 in Tibesti, Chad. His discoveries were followed by those of yet another German traveler, Erwin De Bary. He had been on his journey to Ghat and Air between the years 1877-1876 when he identified some engravings (Alsherif 2005).

A review of these discoveries clearly indicates that all the discoverers were not professionally trained in rock art, with the German presence being clearly recorded. However, they came across rock art through their other means. Thus, these early explorers who visited Central Sahara only provided simple descriptions of the rock

Change happened from 1892, with the Swiss ethnographer Yolande Tschudi becoming the first person to not only record the Tassili-n-Ajjer paintings in color, but to attempt dating them (Keenan 2007). This work was followed much later by that of Leo Frobenius and Hugo Obermaier in 1925 when they distinguished among the engravings an older stage of naturalistic style. This stylistical division was later, in 1932, confirmed by Monod when he considered these engravings of ancient buffaloes and Bovine (Muzzolini 2001).

The upper terrace of the Wadi Jerat provides an early account of rock art engravings in the Sahara that were discovered by French Lieutenant Brenans in the 1930s (Perret 1935: 598). Between 1933 and 1940, Lieutenant Brenans also made numerous sketches of the art.

During the 1930s and 1940s, a number of other areas were surveyed for rock art. These are the Jabel Awaynat between the years 1925-1938 (Van Noten 1978), Tassili-N-Ajjer, and Wadi Jerat (Gautier 1935), Wadi Matkhandush investigated by Paolo Graziosi in the 1940s, and frescoes of Tassili



Fig.1 C. Pastoral Period, herders and cattle, Wadi Tanshalt, Tadrart Acacus.



Fig.1 D. Horse Period, engraved human figures on horseback, Awiss, Tadrart Acacus.

In Fezzan region south west part of Libya engraved chariots were found in Messake Settafet and Messake Mellet in each of these areas Wadi Almas, Wadi Adro, Wadi Ti-n-lblal, Auis Acacus (Gauthier 1999).

### The late studies of rock art research in the North Africa and central Sahara

surveyed by Henri Lhote (Muzzolini 1998). Of particular interest was Gautier (1935) noting the presence of chariots in both the paintings and our engravings at Wadi Jerat. The survey of Tassili-N-Ajjer indicated that there were numerous animal paintings.

By the 1950s, Tadrart Acacus, the research area for my research project, had been relatively ignored in previous research undertaken in Libya and thus had not been surveyed. The research activities in Tadrart Acacus can be divided into two zones: northern and central southern (Mori 1998). The northern zone includes places such as the Wadi Auis where there are archaeological sites that were excavated in the Wadi Sughd, Tin-torha East, Tin-torha North, Tin-torha two caves wadi Uan Afuda, Uan Tabu, and Uan Telocat ( Garcea 2004: 121). Moreover, central southern zone wadi involves Wadi Ain- Araien (Mori 1998:56).

Fig.1 E. Camel Period, red paintings of camels and armed people, Tassili-n-Ajjer.



Fabrizio Mori was the first one to organize a small expedition into the interior of Tadrart Acacus. During this expedition, unique rock art scenes in Wadi Teshuinat were extensively and documented. This expedition by Fabrizio Mori paved the way for the Italian-Libyan archaeological mission in the Acacus and Messak. The main aim of this multidisciplinary expedition had been to carry out scientific research into the ancient antiquities, anthropology, palaeoenvironments, and rock art. Mori divided chronology of rock art in Tadrart Acacus into five style (Fig.1), namely:



Fig.2 A. Ti-n-Lalan. one of the most famous scenes discovered by 1960 damaged with black spray-print.



Fig.2 B. Ti-n-Tabarak. Detail of illegible writings.

This stylistic sequence was questioned by Muzzolini. He argued that there is only a single phase for Saharan rock art dating 6000-1000 B.C. (Alsherif 2005:74). The debate about the chronology of Saharan rock art is still ongoing. Rock art paintings and engravings has been removed from many sites in the Sahara such as Morocco,

the Tassili-n-Ajjer in southern Algeria, the Acacus Mountains in south west Libya, the Air Mountains in northern Niger (Keenan 2007).

In 1997 the Italian-Libyan archaeological mission in the Acacus and Messak carried out scientific research into the ancient antiquities, anthropology, palaeoenvironments and rock art.

By 2009 the Italian-Libyan archaeological mission team identified one hundred and eleven sites with Tefinagh inscription were digitally photographed.

An event that could be perceived as vandalism of rock art occurred in Tadrart Acacus back in April 2009. I thus intend to establish the possible reasons behind this 'damaging' act.

During this incident, where black and silver spray-paint was used, approximately 10 sites were damaged (Fig 2) in two different areas of Tadrart Acacus: 5 sites lies in the north- eastern edge of Acacus in the Awiss area and it is surroundings. 5 sites is located 40 km to south along the Wadi Sendar (Di Lernia & Gallinaro 2010). This was not the only incident, as the 'damaging activities' have continued over the years.

Fig.2 D. Carving rock art in Wadi Mat-tendoush. Damaged by plaster casting

- 1) Wild animal period (12000-8000 B.C.)
- 2) Round head period (8000-4000 B.C.)
- 3) Pastoral period from 4000 B.C.
- 4) Horse period 1500 B.C.
- 5) Camel period 1000 B.C.

Fig.2 C. Ti-n-Anneiu. The famous fight scene, painted Tefinagh inscription.



More recently, in 2014, rock art in the Tadrart Acacus has been 'vandalized' by spray-painting graffiti and carving initials over the artworks. This 'damaging' of rock art has accelerated since the country's civil war which began in February 2011. Generally, black and silver spray-paint used to vandalize the rock art sites in the Tadrart Acacus.

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