



RAR REVIEW

Rock art in Africa: mythology and legend, by JEAN-LOÏC LE QUELLEC, translated by Paul Bahn. 2004. Éditions Flammarion, Paris, 212 pages, 272 plates, mostly in colour, bibliography, 30 × 24 cm, hardcover, US\$65.00, ISBN 9-782080-304445.

Peintures et gravures d'avant les pharaons: du Sahara au Nil, by JEAN-LOÏC LE QUELLEC, PAULINE DE FLERS and PHILIPPE DE FLERS. 2005. Librairie Arthème Fayard/ Éditions Soleb, 382 pages, several hundred colour plates, bibliography, 36 × 28 cm, hardcover, €100.00, ISBN 2-213-62488-7.

Jean-Loïc Le Quellec's one dozen or so books are among the most valuable additions to the study of rock art in recent decades, and also among the most handsome. These two volumes are no exception, the production of both is utterly sumptuous and in keeping with the high standards set by so many other French tomes on rock art. French and English versions have been published of *Rock art in Africa*, the latter representing the work of Paul Bahn as translator. Here, Le Quellec, the Sahara specialist, attempts the difficult task of fleshing out a pan-continental summary of African rock art. Previous attempts of this nature, such as those found in Vogel (1997), have only shown the great difficulties of defining, in a single volume, the incredibly rich tapestry of this continent's rich rock art heritage.

Le Quellec, mindful of this inherent difficulty, has succeeded in conveying precisely this richness in this lovingly crafted volume. He chose to divide the African continent into four major rock art regions: the Sahara, the intertropical zone (from Senegal in the far west across the Congo and to Mozambique in the east), Azania (the Horn and the region from Khartoum in the north to Dodoma in the south) and southern Africa (from Zimbabwe southwards). Naturally, his *tour de force* is no attempt to present a comprehensive compilation, nor is it *intended* to be even remotely exhaustive. It is an overview of major trends found in these four zones, which roughly coincide with Africa's major cultural and linguistic divisions, of how they found expression in pre-Historic arts. As an ethnologist and anthropologist, Le Quellec is particularly interested in the mythology associated with rock art, and the engagingly written text returns repeatedly to some of the stories we have been fortunate enough to have had recorded. This aspect alone, which is usually lacking in rock art books because such myths have rarely survived, brings the art alive for the reader and provides the scholar with a legitimate human context. It also serves to explain Le Quellec's staunch opposition to shamanistic interpretations of rock art. We have, as he explains here in considerable detail, a wealth of authentic information about the mythological meanings of specific rock art forms, for instance in southern Africa; why should we invent alternative ones that have no sound

basis in ethnology?

Le Quellec's magisterial command of knowledge about Saharan rock art is amply reflected in the book's first chapter. There is some over-interpretation of motifs where a liberal use of quotation marks would have been of benefit. For instance, the several superb lycanthropic (not 'lycaon-headed') images of the Libyan Messak (pp. 26–29) may well have been intended to depict therianthropes with canine heads — or crocodilian, or whatever else — we simply cannot know. Le Quellec quite rightly emphasises the strong presence of sexual subject matters in the Sahara, particularly in the petroglyphs, and he dismantles the popular interpretation of de Almásy's 'swimmers'.

The section on the 'intertropical zone' focuses on spectacular painting sites in southern Mali, the apparently sparse rock art of Gabon, Zaire and Congo, and the predominantly schematised art forms of Angola, Zambia, Malawi and Mozambique. By comparison, the traditions found in the region of Azania appear to be more diverse, ranging from the monumental bas-reliefs at Chabbé and elsewhere in Ethiopia, to the diverse painting styles of Tanzania. Finally, southern Africa, 'one of the world's richest rock art areas', is generously presented, replete with several more of the invaluable recordings of myths associated with the rock art. This section is dominated by the painted art usually attributed to the San, although the author explains in detail that quite a number of other ethnic groups may also have been involved in creating these traditions. Of the various petroglyph traditions of southern Africa, only a few images are featured, from Namibia. Of particular interest is the inclusion of historical material here, such as several images from the late 1800s. For instance, Figure 11 in this section illustrates the use of sledgehammers, wedges, thermal shock and crowbars to detach petroglyphs to ship them to Vienna.

Le Quellec's tour of African rock art is completed with two very relevant points. Using the example of the 'White Lady' image at Tsisab Gorge, Brandberg, illustrated by the recordings of six different scholars, he demonstrates the necessity of producing high-precision tracings. His second key observation concerns the fashion of recent decades to attribute much southern African rock art to shamanism, which he refutes convincingly as the major element in the traditions concerned.

The book's hundreds of colour plates should not pass without mention; they are another of its outstanding assets. Nor should I fail to cite one more aspect that I find impressive: the author's (and translator's) painstaking effort to use precise terminology in most respects (e.g. the use of 'anthropomorphous' in lieu of the sloppy use of 'anthropomorphic', still so prevalent in contemporary writing) and its avoidance of the anachronistic B.C. and A.D. conventions, using instead C.E. and B.C.E. throughout. These may seem pedantic points, but the scholarly perfection to which this volume certainly aspires

is well served by them.

The second volume reviewed here, presenting the north African rock paintings and petroglyphs predating Pharaonic Egypt, is even larger than the first, weighing in at a respectable 3.4 kg. Here Le Quellec shares authorship with the de Flers. Three chapters are co-written by all three authors, one entitled *Des oasis au désert: des chasseurs aux premiers pharaons*, the chapter on the Wadi Sora, and one on *Du Sahara au Nil: essai d'interprétation*. The de Flers contributed the chapter on the plateau of Gilf Kebir, while the substantial chapters, on Djebel el-'Uweynat, the chapter *Chronologie et culture* and the concluding *Encyclopédie animale*, are Le Quellec's work. Then follows a substantial bibliography and a six-page glossary.

Once again, presentation and production are flawless. Photographs are uniformly of high technical quality, which appears to have been improved with some careful digital emphasising to bring out the very best from a corpus of rock art that has long been accepted as being one of the world's finest. But the text, too, is of a commensurate scholarly standard to do this grand rock art full justice.

Of particular significance to issues of rock art dating is Le Quellec's careful mapping of the first appearance of domesticated bovids, camels and ovicaprines across the Middle East and north Africa. The latter seem to originate >7000 years BP in the northern Levant, reaching Egypt about 6000 years ago, the Maghreb 5400 years ago, and the central Saharan Akākūs around 4900 BP (cf. Muzzolini 1990). Cattle first appear in Upper Egypt 6000 years ago, and then spread across the Sahara at the same time as the ovicaprines. Camels, on the other hand, are thought to originate from southern Arabia, appear in the northern Levant and Kurdistan 3000 years ago, crossing to Egypt only 2650 BP, but reaching the far western Sahara within centuries, about 2000 BP. While these reference points provide only maximum limits, they do help flesh out a skeleton chronology, especially as the early rock art traditions tend to comprise high zoomorphic contents of very detailed, apparently highly naturalistic imagery. Le Quellec's excellent discussion of cultural chronology (p. 268ff.) is also most welcome, featuring as it does a proper discussion of carbon isotope analysis, what it is and what it provides. This is followed by a clear elucidation of the main periods (this reviewer had no idea that the term 'Ice Age' was coined by Goethe in 1823), stratigraphy and climate. But what is perhaps most impressive in this discussion of the scientific basis of rock art research: there is even a consideration of the taphonomy of rock art (p. 275), a key element still ignored in most works in the field. Le Quellec, like the late Alfred Muzzolini, seems to be nudging Saharan rock art studies towards a scientific base, and for this alone his endeavours can only be applauded.

Other laudable features in this book deserve at least brief mention. There is no shortage of the usual sumptuous photographic masterworks we have long become used to from books on Saharan rock art (or, for that matter, from the sumptuously produced journal *Sahara*): the dramatic desert landscapes, the breathtakingly beautiful large petroglyphs, the incredible, gravity-defying rock formations. But this book also catalogues a seemingly endless treasure trove of the less spectacular, yet scientifically often more relevant detail. The myriad small human figures, the cupules, the endless numbers of hand stencils. The latter, especially, come as a surprise to this reviewer; perhaps previous books on Saharan rock art have focused a little too much on the

spectacular. Judging from the dozens of plates with rich arrays of stencils from Wadi Sora alone, hand and other stencils form a major component of the painted rock art in the region. They include a good number of 'mutilated' forms, just as hand stencils in other parts of the world and other periods often do, and just as elsewhere there is no suggestion that the artists were indeed lacking any of their fingers. The universality of this convention is a great deal more interesting than the various fantastic hypotheses we have seen about them. But whereas stencils elsewhere tend to lack later superimpositions in most cases, the Saharan examples seem to often underlie subsequent traditions of very small anthropomorphs painted over them much later.

This volume is a pleasure to behold and to savour, for these and other reasons. Its price is entirely reasonable, relative to quality, and both books considered here can be recommended to even the most demanding reader.

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