



Tertia Barnett: An Engraved Landscape: Rock Carvings in the Wadi al-Ajal, Libya

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This two-volume book by T. Barnett represents the results of a series of preliminary investigations between 2000 and 2002, and subsequent systematic fieldwork carried out in the Wadi al-Ajal (Libyan Fezzan) between 2004 and 2009. The work on rock art of this region began as part of the Fezzan Project, an interdisciplinary research program including archaeological surveys and excavations conducted by C. Daniels and M. Ayoub between 1958 and 1977, and by D. Mattingly between 1996 and 2001, along with the Department of Antiquities of Libya and the Society for Libyan Studies. The main aims of the project were the reconstruction of the environment and history of Wadi al-Ajal during the last 12,000 years, and the history of the Garamantian kingdom between c. 500 BC and AD 500.

The Fezzan Project was succeeded in 2007–2011 by the Desert Migrations Project (DMP), involving the universities of Leicester, Cambridge, Reading, and KCL, and by the Trans-Sahara Project under the auspices of the European Research Council. This last project has focused on state formation, migration, and trade in the central Sahara between 1000 BC and AD 1500. The publication of a series of papers and of four volumes (see, in particular, Mattingly et al. 2007) illustrates the methods, aims, and results of research on the settlements of the Wadi al-Ajal, the Garamantian capital of Old Jarma, and the surrounding area. The engraved rock

art, whose chronology spans from the Early Holocene to the present day, includes a rich repertoire of inscriptions and over two thousand panels—most of them previously unknown.

Volume 1: Synthesis is organized in three sections. The introductory Section 1 (Chapters 1–4) deals with the general aspects of Saharan rock art, synthesizing the history of research, the chronological questions, the climatic changes during the Holocene, and the cultural and social dynamics. Section 2 (Chapters 5–8) is the core of the volume; this describes the methods of rock art surveys, the proposed stylistic chronology, and the analysis of the engravings' iconography and their related social contexts. Chapter 8 reports other kinds of rock surface markings like cups, incisions, and so on. Section 3 (Chapters 9–11) examines the environmental and the cultural contexts of the carvings. Completing the volume is a very accurate bibliography and two important appendices dealing with the Pre-Pastoral and Pastoral sites of the surveyed area and the 3D modeling of some rock art sites.

Volume 2: Gazetteer provides an illustrated catalog of the engravings from the 14 zones of the surveyed area. These are completed by maps, drawing of some selected panels ($n = 150$), and detailed data on the engravings and their topographic contexts.

Beyond a general overview of this book, which is exhaustive, detailed, and well organized, there are a series of topics deserving special mention. The reconstruction of the environment of the Wadi al-Ajal, previously named Wadi al-Hayat, has highlighted the presence of a palaeolake of c. 2000 km² which endured until

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the Late Holocene (vol. 1, Fig. 2.4). The peopling of the area surrounding the lake, and associated activities, were strongly connected to climatic fluctuations influencing the availability of resources. This regional context offers the opportunity to develop a multidisciplinary investigation of a limited area where the rock art is an important component of the landscape history.

One noteworthy result of this research model is the introduction of a change in the classic central Sahara rock art stylistic sequence, which is still considered a valid heuristic tool even if it has been amended (Le Quellec 2016). The sequence of the rock art in the Wadi al-Ajal survey area begins with a new category named “wallpaper,” characterized by small zoomorphic subjects and an absence of anthropomorphic subjects (vol. 1, p. 127). The engravings, hypothetically attributed to foraging communities, were executed by pecking and show a dark patina, rich in manganese, similar to the Bubaline and the Tazina style carvings (vol. 1, p. 84, Table 6.3a, Fig. 6.9b2–6.9b4). The formation of the patina, depending on climatic factors, is one of the proxies useful for fixing a relative chronology of the carvings, as highlighted by the Italian-Libyan Archaeological Mission on the nearby Tadrart Acacus and Messak Settafet plateaus (Zerboni 2008) and by the recent Wadi al-Hayat/Wadi al-Ajal investigations in the Fezzan Project (Guagnin 2014). The systematic application of rock varnish analysis to the engraved panels is another merit of the work, which convincingly supports the adoption of environmental criteria to enhance the evaluation of their chronological attribution. The digital modeling of a sample of engraved panels completes the recording work with a better reading of the more complex panels.

Finally, among the numerous interesting issues, Chapter 10 (vol. 1) develops an interpretation of the social function of the engraved places based on the concepts of cultural landscape and “social agency” (Layton 2003), both of which play a crucial role in the book. One example is the existence of possible “engraving centres” located at “the end of conspicuous escarpments promontories” in pre-Garamantian times (p. 255–

256, Fig. 10.10, Table 10.1). According to the author, these centers were visibly marked in the landscape and conceived as symbolic places. During Late Pastoral and Garamantian times, carving activity increased and became more scattered, often occurring near Horse- and Camel-style engravings, while inscriptions also became more prevalent (p. 258, Fig. 10.12a-b). This change in the distribution and frequency of carved walls is attributed to a shift towards new economic activities like agriculture and long-distance trade, and to growing climatic instability. In the transition to a “socially ordered landscape” (p. 279), rock art played an essential role.

Although the author considers this book a starting point and draws attention to a possible future agenda for research about rock art (vol. 1, p. 281–282), this publication undoubtedly represents a valuable tool for understanding the dynamics of change in the Wadi al-Ajal landscape and for expanding the knowledge of the Fezzan rock art through a well-structured methodology.

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