Petroglyphs in the Djelfa Region During the Prehistoric and Ancient Eras - A Study of Selected Models



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Abstract:

The Djelfa region possesses numerous archaeological sites that document the presence of humans during the prehistoric and ancient eras, much like many other regions. Notably, these sites were discovered during the colonial period through visits by various scholars. These cultural records require preservation and renewed attention to foster new interpretations of these rock panels and inscriptions.

The central question is: What is the cultural and historical significance of these inscriptions, and what is their relationship to those recorded in other parts of the world?

key words*:* Petroglyphs; Prehistoric; Art ; archaeological sites; Djelfa .

Introduction:

The Saharan Atlas abounds with numerous prehistoric sites, containing hundreds of rock art stations that serve as physical evidence reflecting the daily life of prehistoric man within his ancient environment and his religious beliefs. Moreover, these cultural phenomena represent the highest levels of intellectual evolution for early humans. The Djelfa region is considered one of the most significant areas of the Saharan Atlas, harboring a vast cultural record manifested in hundreds of rock art

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sites. Perhaps the most important archaeological site therein, whose name has been inextricably linked to rock art and Neolithic man, is the "Ain Naga" site. We shall review the components and basic elements of these paintings and inscriptions, categorized by their types:

1. **Animal Representations**
2. **Human Representations**
3. **Tools and Weapons**
4. **Symbols and Other Motifs**

1. Definition of Rock Inscriptions:

The writing of ancient history relies on two primary sources: **First:** Historical narratives of all kinds, whether presented in a topographical, geographical, purely historical, literary, or poetic framework, or any other form that can be utilized to understand aspects of history, be they economic, geographical, or environmental. **Second:** Archaeological materials left by ancient man in the places where he resided, frequented, or passed through. Among these archaeological materials are ancient inscriptions or the records of ancient man inscribed on stone, clay bricks, or other perishable materials such as leather, bone, wood, and the like. Written inscriptions include engraved texts and those recorded using colors across various types of inscriptions, through which ancient man documented his events, emotions, systems, and the laws governing his interactions. Ancient written inscriptions can be divided into two categories[1]

Petroglyphs are rock carvings or engravings created by humans. Typically found on natural stone surfaces such as cliffs or boulders, these images consist of symbols, pictures, or patterns made by incising, picking, or scraping the rock face. As a form of prehistoric art, petroglyphs are often located in areas inhabited by indigenous peoples. They are vital to archaeologists because they provide insights into the culture and history of the communities that created them[2].

While it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when rock art began, these practices have been a part of human life since prehistoric times. Due to the striking similarities between ancient and modern art, some researchers argue there is no fundamental difference between them in terms of style, form, or symbolic content. The high level of technical skill seen in these ancient works is comparable to modern artistic methods. Ultimately, these drawings serve as a language for internal expression—much like other arts and sciences—and act as a medium of

communication. In fact, some scholars believe these coloured lines were the first step towards the invention of writing[3].

Rock engravings and drawings are a branch of arts and an aspect of plastic arts, and perhaps they are their roots and early beginnings; therefore, the relationship between them is that of the origin to the branch. Scientific results of archaeological studies in a number of archaeological sites indicate that humans since prehistoric times have created artistic touches in daily life, but it is difficult to differentiate whether the motives and reasons for those touches were linked to other goals or whether they were made for enjoyment and expression such that we can call them art[4], or if they were a means of language and expression. For this reason, humans in particular were able to use symbols as a language for speech that they acquired from the cultural environment in which they lived as a type of adaptation to the environment, and this is evidence of the equality of human brains and the possibility of training them to comprehend any languages to speak[5]. Art in general was linked to the emergence of the universe and its relationship with some phenomena for which it was difficult to find an explanation, and subsequently accepting them as a force with extraordinary capabilities until these phenomena turned into myths and superstitions[6]. Therefore, most Stone Age art had a magical significance that came from a religious belief[7], and thus the interpretative concept specific to cave rock [8]drawings began to be subject to multiple interpretations. The general viewpoint is summarized as animal drawings being of magical significance, and for humans to be able to hunt them, they must first embody them in the form of statues or drawings, which is a magical belief similar to cosmic phenomena such as lightning and thunder that are not easy to perceive[9]. These phenomena soon became embodied in symbols such as human beings, and therefore we find that there is a solid connection between mythology, legend, and symbols as a result of human understanding of nature and its components[10]. The magical [aspect] of drawings and statues is indeed confirmed but does not apply to every drawing or statue[11], and others [believe] that animal drawings express hidden powers; consequently, drawing them is considered a manifestation of appreciation and esteem for them[12].



2. Secteurs et sites principaux à gravures rupestres entre la Mer Rouge et l'Atlantique.

Geographic Distribution of Rock Art in North Africa

2 /Distribution of Rock Engravings in the Djelfa Region :

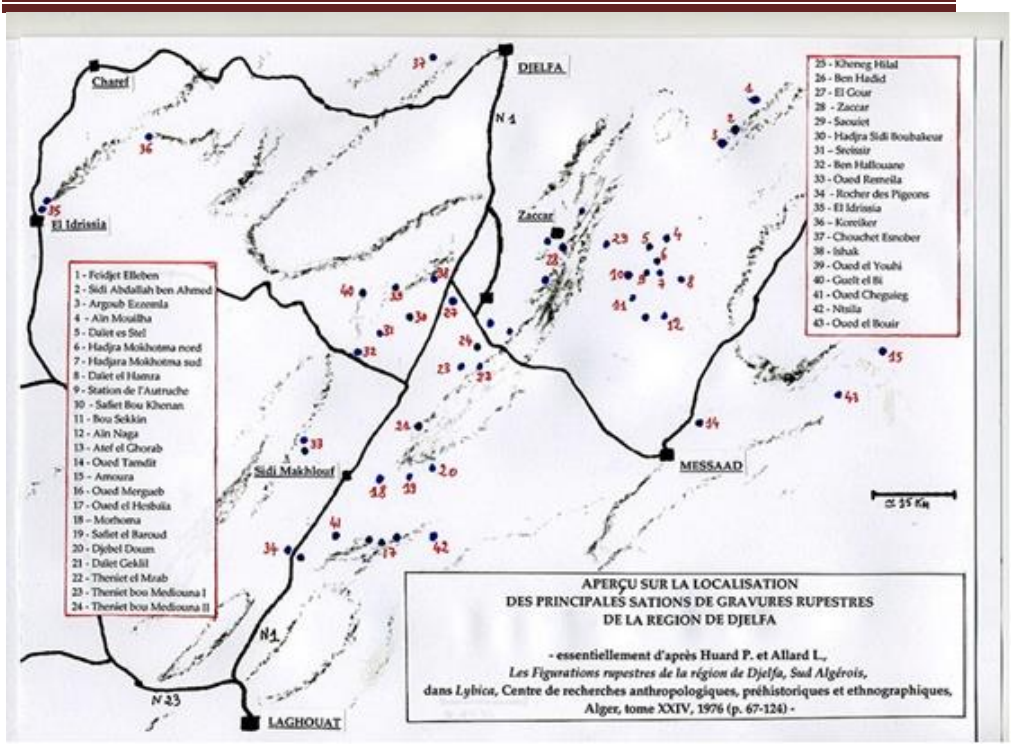
The province of **Djelfa** is situated within the **Saharan Atlas** range, which includes the "**Ouled Naïl Mountains** massifs"—the geographical host for the most significant rock art sites. Meanwhile, an article in *El-Chaab* newspaper indicates that the rock engravings of the Djelfa region consist of prehistoric cave paintings and rock engravings dating back to the **Neolithic era**. Statistics estimate that the region possesses **165 stations** spread across **54 sites**, containing over **1,162 engravings** and more than **89 paintings**. These include animal and human figures, as well as hunting scenes; for instance, human engravings, weapons, and animals such as the **ram**, **ostrich**, **dog**, **elephant**, **ancient buffalo** (*Bubalus antiquus*), **antelope**, **cow**, **hare**, **rhinoceros**, **donkey**, **giant lion**, and **horse**.

As for the human engravings, they are represented by round-head human figures, realistic human forms, and weapons such as the axe, bow, shield, and arrows, in addition to symbols believed to be Libyan inscriptions and certain appendages like the disc atop the ram's head. Some of these sites were classified relatively early, such as "Khanguet el-Hadjaj,""Aïn Naga," and "Dayet ed-Dahane" in Zaccar on May 4, 1982 (Official Gazette No. 18), as well as "Hadjrat Sidi Boubeker" on November 20, 1982 (Official Gazette No. 48), while the remaining stations were included in the Supplementary Inventory List of 2009[13].

Rock art was featured in a study published in 1976 in (*Lybica CRAPE*) under the title: *Les figurations rupestres de la région de Djelfa, Sud Algérois*. In this study, the authors recorded forty-three numbered sites—with some exceptions—located near the interior or on the fringes of a triangle formed to the north of the city of Djelfa and beyond, and to the southeast of the city of Messaad. During the colonial period, numerous studies were conducted, notably by Lhote, who dedicated a comprehensive and detailed book to his studies of rock engravings in the Ouled Naïl highlands and the outskirts of Djelfa. Lhote addressed the rock representations in the region in his book on the rock engravings of South Oran (*Sud-Oranais*), as these sites and stations of stone engravings and paintings in the Djelfa area are a natural extension of the South Oran stations represented by the "Ksour Mountains" and the "Amour Mountains.[14]"

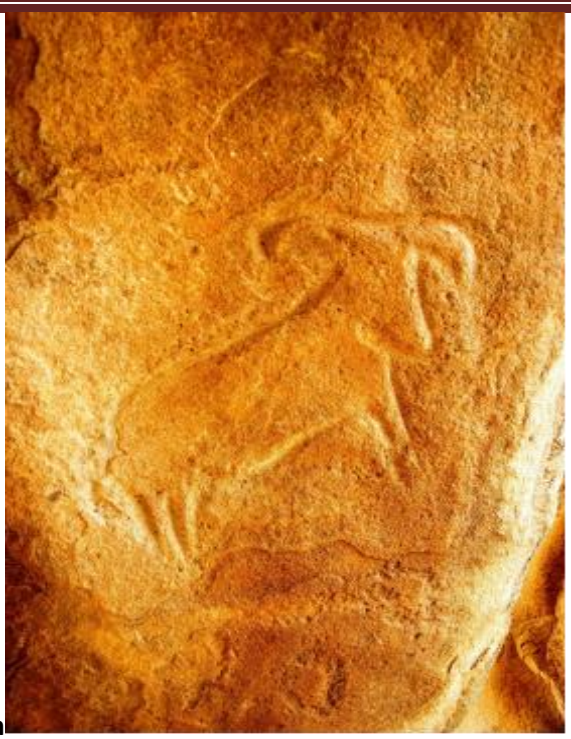
It appears that some of the engravings in the Djelfa region have been known since the 1850s, particularly in (El Idrissia). The first to take interest in the archaeological remains of the region, especially those related to the "Protohistory" (Dawn of History), was Captain Hartmayer. He showed a particular interest in the funerary monuments of the Djelfa region and conducted a study of an archaeological site on the outskirts of Messaad, which contained faunal remains and lithic industries, such as arrowheads[15].

Furthermore, Dr. Raboud described several monuments related to the protohistoric period in 1916, where he studied the fortress of Demmed, also known as *Castellum Dimmidi* in Messaad, noting some Latin inscriptions. In 1961, the researcher Arnoud pointed out during his tour of the region several sites, such as *Al-Hadjra al-Makhtouma* (The Sealed Stone), which he mentioned in an article titled "Discovery of Djebel Boukahil" in the *Revue Africaine* (No. 45, 1961). Additionally, Captain Bernard noted several funerary monuments in the region and numerous archaeological sites containing lithic industries, while Flamand recorded another stone engraving station in 1914, which is *Dayet Staffel*.[16]

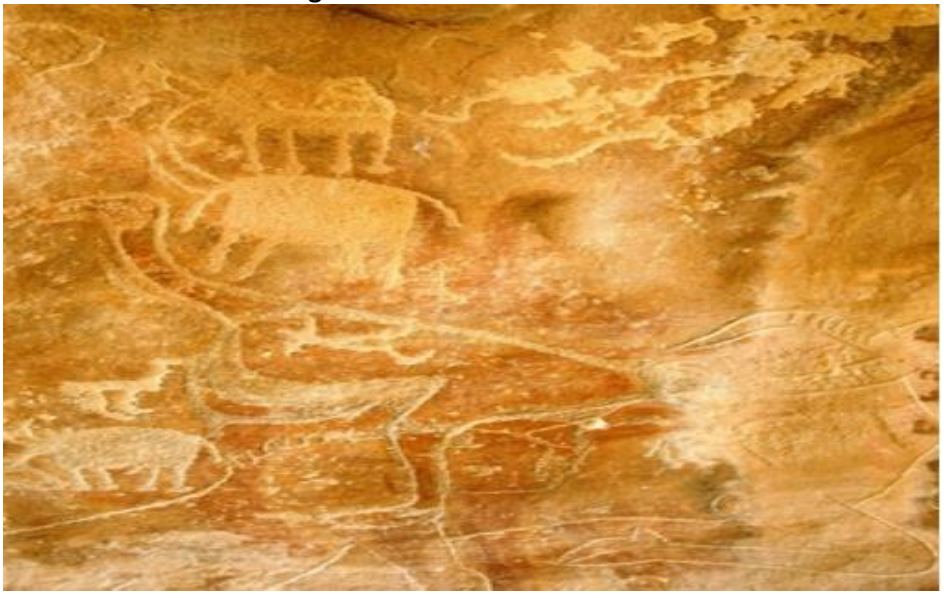


3/ Rock Engravings in the Zaccar Region, Djelfa:

Zaccar is considered among the most famous archaeological sites. In 1907, in a place called "Dayet ed-Dahane," it was discovered by Magny[17]. Among the discovered and classified sites is the "Zaccar" archaeological site, located 37 km south-southeast of the provincial capital. Known as "Dayet ed-Dahane," it was discovered in 1907 by Judge "Magny" and was classified as national heritage in 1982. The site contains a rock shelter displaying a magnificent artistic panel of a dynamic hunting scene, highlighting the realistic, instantaneous motion of a natural predatory pursuit. It features exquisite and precise drawings of an African antelope kneeling while being preyed upon by a smaller-sized lion. There are also drawings of an ostrich and a rhinoceros. In addition, the site holds a collection of animals (an ostrich, four elephants, Barbary sheep, bovids, and a lamb), totaling 37 engravings. Furthermore, the site features two rock faces from the "Hunter Period," where authors group images of large wild animals: the ancient buffalo (or Hartebeest), elephants, rhinoceroses, lions, ostriches, and human figures.[18]



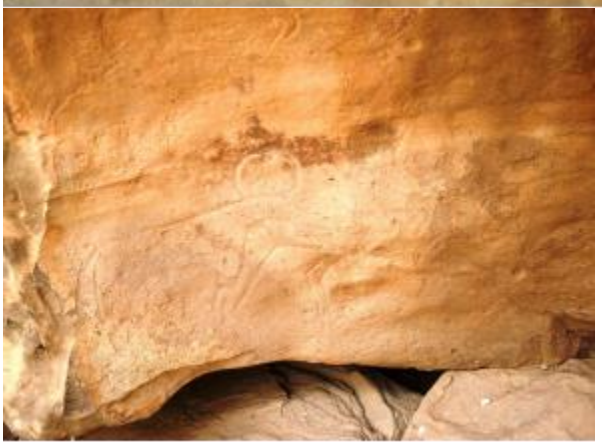
Rock Art of the Zaccar Region



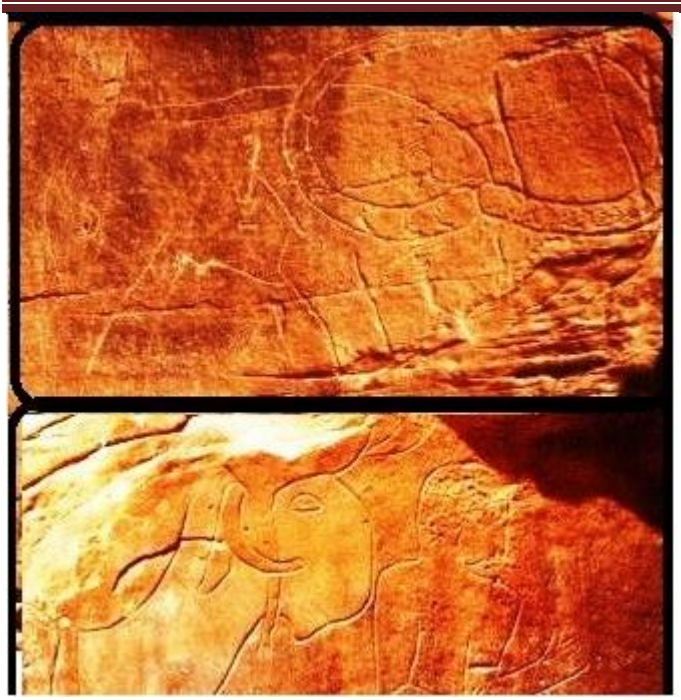








Images of the Rock Art of the Zaccar Archaeological Site

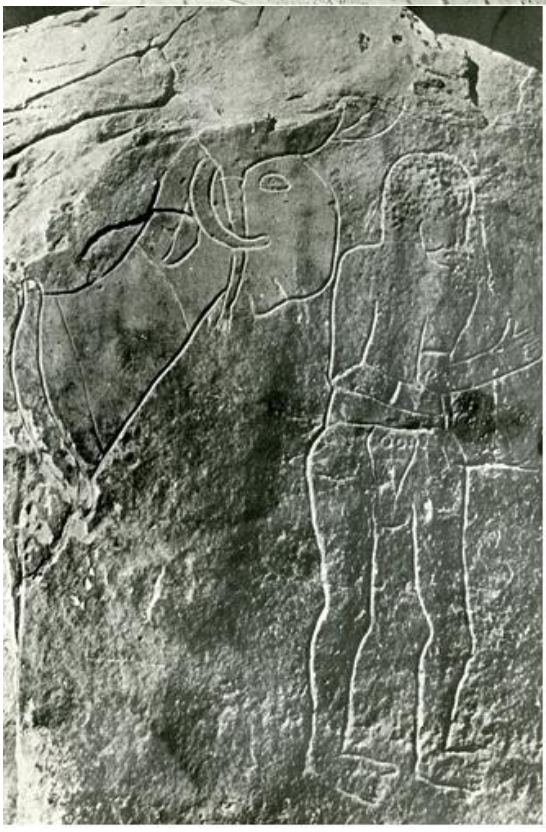


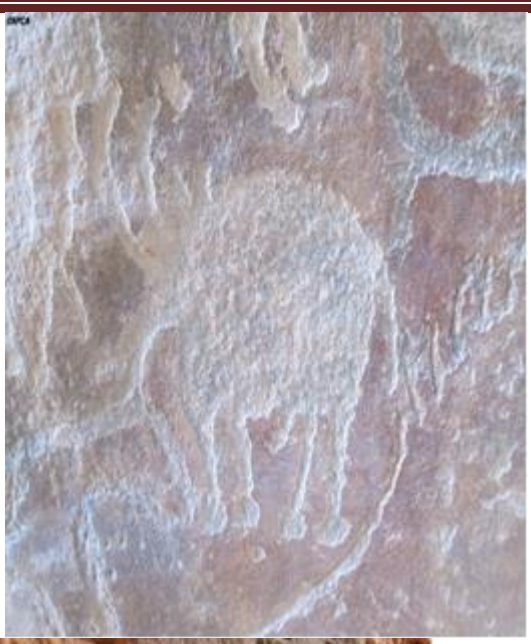
Rock Engravings from the Zaccar Region

4/ Rock Engravings in the Aïn Naga Region:

In the mid-1960s, Father F. de Villaret produced well-known works from about twenty new stations, particularly those of Wadi al-Hasba and Aïn Naga. In total, more than 1,162 engravings were discovered in the region. Henri Lhote referred to these engravings in his major work, *The Rock Engravings of South Oran*, published in 1970 in the memoirs of the Center for Anthropological, Prehistoric, and Ethnographic Research (CRAPE). Among the archaeological sites is the "Aïn Naga" site, located 33 kilometers southeast of the provincial capital, near the urban area of Aïn Naga village, which administratively belongs to the municipality of Moudjebara. The site comprises six murals with a total of 71 engravings. This heritage was discovered in 1965 by archaeology enthusiasts, namely the researcher "Loutillot," Kedid Belkheir, and Father "de Villaret." It was classified as national heritage in 1979. Its panels display a pair of ancient buffalo (*Bubalus antiquus*) and an artistic piece known as the "Shy Lovers," in addition to a mural featuring a hunter carrying an axe accompanied by three dogs, three round-headed figures, a person with raised hands, and a lamb with a round disc...[19]









The inventorying of archaeological sites, as well as conducting soundings and excavations—for example, an artistic rock drawing depicting a buffalo recorded in the region, in Zaccar and Aïn Naga. It appears that elephants, whether large, medium, or small-sized, have been found in Aïn Naga and Zaccar.

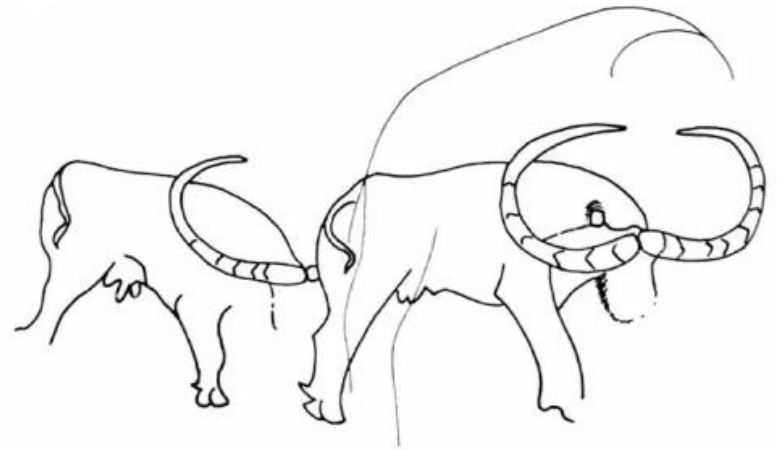


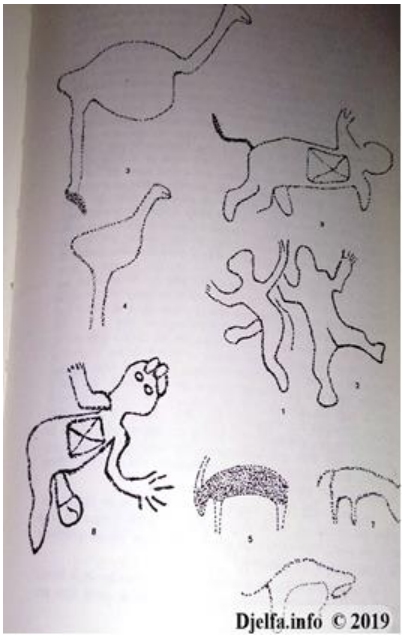
Fig. 2. — Buffles d'Aïn Naga.

"An engraving of a rhinoceros was recorded in Aïn Naga, and 'naturalistic lions in profile view, appearing three times in hunting scenes' were recorded in Zaccar."[20]

As for wild boars, they appear on the other hand and are restricted to the El Idrissia sites (a lost collection). There are a number of human figures, particularly in Aïn Naga and Dayet Staffel. The authors attribute to them the model of "the twenty-five distinctive traits of physical or psychological prowess for the hunter culture," which they identified "in the Nile region and across various Saharan regions." Among the weapons, they recorded bows, long curved weapons, clubs, axes, and shields. Numerous traps were depicted, as well as hands. Thus, all the cultural traits of hunters are evidenced in the Djelfa region. Many antelopes and cattle bear signs of human appropriation, specifically collars. However, above all, this concerns thirty representations of rams that belong to the pastoral world more than the hunter world, extending "over a long period forward into an advanced stage of domestication."[21]
"Some of these consist of rams with spherical bodies, some of which are associated with human figures in the Aïn Naga region. In this collection, some of the most famous masterpieces of the region were found, such as

the 'Aïn Naga Ram,' which is about twice the natural size; it was discovered by Father F. de Villaret and published by the Djelfa Initiative Syndicate. The animal, which wears a spherical shape surrounded by feathers, a cheek pendant, and a collar with chevrons, is accompanied by a man wearing a buttoned loincloth and bracelets, with his hair hanging down the back of his neck in three sections. A group consisting of a ram, ewes, and a large bull symbolizes 'established domestication.[22]' Other rams can be seen in the Aïn Naga area."

5/ Rock Engravings in the Khanguet el-Hadjaj Region (Aïn El Ibel):
The "Khanguet el-Hadjaj" region was discovered by researchers "Pratviel" and "de Villaret" in 1966. It is located near the "Aïn El Ibel" area and features a drawing of a large bull and a ram surmounted, once again, by a sphere. It also contains a drawing of a large lion, whose tail is not visible, facing to the right. Furthermore, in 2016, in the municipality of "Aïn El Ibel"—not far from the classified archaeological site of "Khanguet el-Hadjaj"—a mural was discovered that came to light after being buried under soil, revealed by rainfall. This mural is an archaeological artistic panel whose scene suggests part of a drawing of a woman[23].



Enumerated Figures at the El-Gour Station According to the Inventory Conducted by Henri Lhote



6/ Archaeological Engravings in the South Messaad Region:

The "Hadjrat Sidi Boubeker" region was discovered by the French researcher "François de Villaret" in 1965. Located near the city of "Messaad," it contains numerous rock engravings in various locations, such as a ram surmounted by a sphere atop its head, and to its right, a ewe that does not feature the same shape above its head. The "Hasbaia" region, located approximately 75 kilometers south of Djelfa city, dates back to the colonial period following a French military operation; it was later re-searched and explored by "de Villaret" and "Blanchard" in 1964. It contains stone engravings of elephants, cattle, ostriches, rabbits, and human figures. In this historical landmark, the features of the Neolithic era are clearly manifested. In the "Amoura" region, located in the Messaad district, two engravings of elephants were discovered in 1965. As for "Thniet el-M'zab," situated approximately 45 kilometers south of Djelfa, its drawings date back to 6,000 BCE. On its yellow-colored rocks, the explorer finds a drawing of a massive elephant and another smaller one, as well as a person whose hair appears in a peculiar form[24].

Finally, "Safiet Bournan" came to light in 1954 through "Bellin." It is located between the cities of "Messaad" and "Habbara" and features drawings of a ram, ostriches, gazelles, as well as a group of horses, among others. The researcher "Henri Lhote" believed that the history of the region dates back to thousands of years BCE. We also highlight the

research project that the Amoura region (south of Djelfa) has benefited from since 2013, led by Professor and Researcher Merouane Rabhi, regarding human settlement during the Pleistocene and Holocene epochs. This project involves conducting archaeological survey operations across this region, which covers an area of 800 km [25]



Images of Engravings from the Hasbaia Region

7/ Archaeological Discoveries: Dinosaur Footprints and Rhinoceros Skeletal Remains

In parallel, dinosaur tracks were discovered in the municipality of **Moudjebara** (20 km south of the provincial capital). At that time, the relevant authorities were contacted, the footprints were cast, and excavations were carried out in the area. According to the same source, this resulted in the documentation of **28 tracks** (not all of which are in good condition)[26].

It is also worth noting that a specialized team from the **National Center for Prehistoric, Anthropological, and Historical Research (CNRPAH)** discovered fossilized bones of a **rhinoceros**, a **horse**, and a **small bovid** in the province of Djelfa. These remains are believed to date back hundreds of thousands of years. They were found in the "**Wadi Mellah**" area at the entrance to the city of Djelfa (300 km south of the capital).



"After identifying each specimen in terms of species and animal lineage, it was revealed that these skeletal remains represent three juvenile individuals. The first is a white rhinoceros of the species *Ceratotherium simum*, whose complete skull was found along with the mandible, scapula, ribs, and vertebrae, as well as the carpal bones, in addition to the metacarpals and phalanges."



An image of the rhinoceros remains that were found.

At the same site, a small horse of the *Equus* species (*Equus sp.*) was found, represented by skeletal remains including the pelvis, vertebrae, femur, and tibia, as well as carpal bones and phalanges. The team also

identified the remains of a small bovid through vertebrae, the ulna, the tibia, and metacarpal bones. The spokesperson and the research team believe that the rhinoceros, which has no remaining trace in North Africa, lived in a relatively open savanna-type environment with available water sources, in contrast to the arid climate the region experiences today. He added that this animal has two horns and is white in color. As for the third creature, it is a horse that appears to be the size of a zebra or a donkey, according to the same source, noting that the skeletal remains found were in good condition, except for some parts of the anatomical specimens that suffered from climatic and soil degradation following the valley's erosion.[27]



8/ Conclusion:

Given the importance of these engravings as human heritage, they must be prioritized for research and exploration by mobilizing the efforts of institutions and individuals to better benefit from them. However, it appears that the hand of tampering and vandalism has reached this civilized legacy.

While a number of archaeological sites have been fenced for protection, the issue of preserving this human heritage remains critical, given the significance of these rock panels and engravings which constitute the tangible cultural heritage of the region. Yet, some sites—such as the one

adjacent to the road connecting "Djelfa,""Moudjebara," and "Aïn Naga"—have been subjected to reckless acts. These actions, involving the defacing of monuments with paint and the placement of partisan slogans, suggest a lack of awareness among the perpetrators regarding the civilizational value of these artistic works that have been on display for thousands of years.

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