

Christian period rock art landscapes in the Fourth Cataract region: the Dar el-Arab and et-Tereif rock art surveys

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The 2004-2005 SARS rock art survey

The 2004-2005 SARS rock art survey, in the area to be flooded by the Merowe Dam reservoir after its projected completion in 2008, focused on recording previously identified sites on the left bank of the Nile and some islands in the Dar el-Arab region (Anglo-German Expedition). It also concentrated on surveying parts of the mainland in the et-Tereif region opposite Ishashi island (Central Amri to Kirbeka Survey), which was investigated in the previous season (Kleinitz 2004). The vicinity of the village et-Tereif was subjected to an intensive rock art survey, which resulted in the identification of 71 petroglyph sites (Plate 1). This survey aimed at establishing similarities and differences between the rock art of the island landscape of Ishashi and of the mainland directly across from it. While the rock art of Ishashi is characterised primarily by cattle imagery and a large number of rock gongs (Kleinitz 2004), the wadi systems of the et-Tereif region are dominated by depictions

of camels. In contrast to this apparent dichotomy, the rock art of the Dar el-Arab region is much more diverse, with a larger variety of both motifs and site types. In addition to 32 known petroglyph sites (Wolf 2004), another 54 rock art localities were identified and recorded in this region, which includes the islands of Umm Deras and Umm Ushar (Plate 2). Rock gongs and rock gong complexes are numerous; they were recorded at 29 sites. Due to time constraints no systematic rock art survey was undertaken in this area. A strong component of apparently Christian period imagery, such as crosses, is characteristic for the surveyed region, which was once part of the Medieval Nubian Christian kingdom of Makuria (see Welsby 2002, 26). What appears to be Christian period rock art will be discussed in some detail in this preliminary report.

Cross-shaped petroglyphs

Various types of crosses have long been incorporated into the decorative arts of the Nile valley peoples. While they occur, for example, as marks on Meroitic pottery (c. 300 BC-AD 350), they are most frequently found on pottery of the Medieval Christian period (c. AD 550-1500) (Adams 1986, figs 124, 128, 160, 235, 239; Anderson 1998, 186; Welsby 1998, pls 79-85). Various cross-shapes are also encountered in the wall paintings of churches, such as at Faras (Martens-Czarnecka 1982, pl. 1c). In the rock art of the Fourth Cataract crosses primarily appear to date to the Christian period, which they can be attributed to on the grounds of comparative patination, their individual shapes and their spatial association with other rock art (e.g. superimpositions or juxtapositions) (see also Welsby 2003, 111ff.). Similarities in states of patination and tool marks between crosses and a relatively recent Arab inscription at site 3-Q-100 in the Dar el-Arab region indicate, however, that some crosses may have been made after the end of the Christian period. Indeed, in Nubia they appear to have been regarded as powerful protective symbols until recently (e.g. Wenzel 1972, 62ff.).

Simple equal-armed or 'Greek' crosses are the most common cross-shapes hitherto recorded in the SARS concession, followed in number by 'Latin' crosses with a longer lower arm (Figure 1a-b). 'Wheel-crosses', equal-armed crosses enclosed by a circle, are also relatively common (Figure 1c). Rare finds included equal-armed crosses with bifurcated ends (Figure 1d), and with widened ends, consisting of four triangles joined at the tips (Figure 1e), as

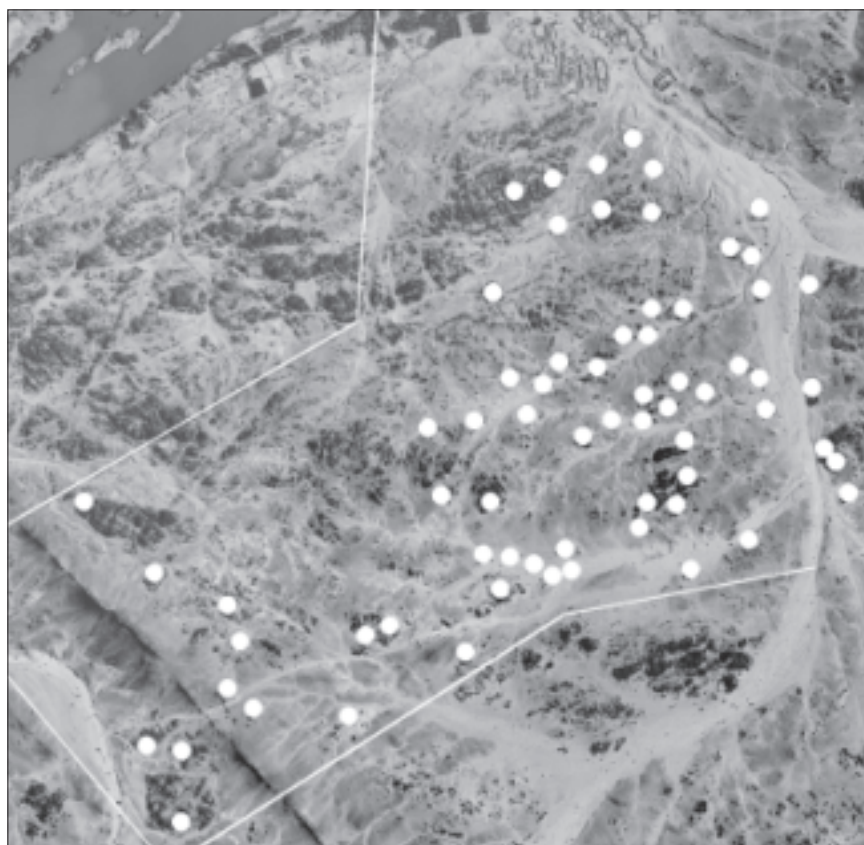


Plate 1. Aerial photograph showing rock art sites located during the 2005 et-Tereif survey.

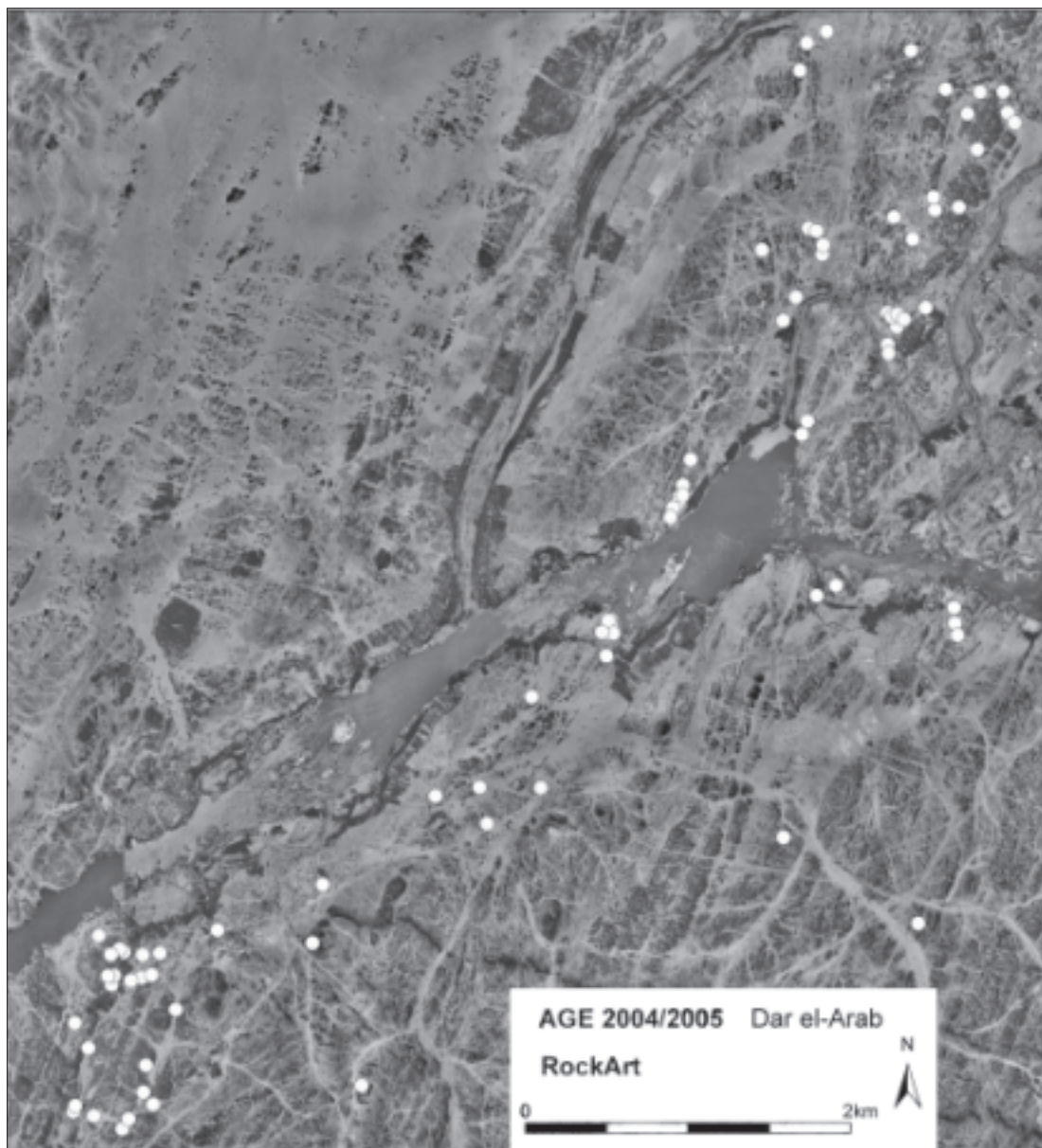


Plate 2. Aerial photograph showing sites recorded in the Dar el-Arab region.

tian period for at least some of the cross-on-circle petroglyphs is suggested by their co-existence on the same rock surface with similarly patinated petroglyphs including an equal-armed cross, a five-pointed star or pentagram and a cross with widened ends at the only rock art site identified on the island of Mis (3-J-056), located just to the north of Ishashi island (Plate 3). In the Fourth Cataract cross-on-circle motifs are found in various orientations, with crosses attached to either the upper or the lower sides of the circles.

well as other manifestations of the cross (Figure 1f-h). Some crosses with long and tapering lower arms seem to depict actual objects: crosses with spikes attached to their lower ends to allow them to be mounted (Figure 1i) (see Allason-Jones 1998, 133; cf. Welsby 2003, 111).

Cross-on-circle motifs, crosses attached to circles, are much more frequent (Figure 1j). In the region between the First and Second Cataracts these have been interpreted as ankh-signs and dated to the Dynastic period, probably the Middle Kingdom (Otto and Buschendorf-Otto 1993, 70f.), where they appear, for example, as marks on pottery vessels (Dunham 1965). Ankh-signs are known also from Meroitic and Post-Meroitic decorative arts (e.g. Adams 1986, fig. 127). They are thought to have been adopted into early Christian symbolism with the development of the 'Coptic cross' and are believed to be common in Medieval Christian rock art, but they are also found in later contexts (Èerviièek 1974, 194; 1982). A date in the Medieval Chris-

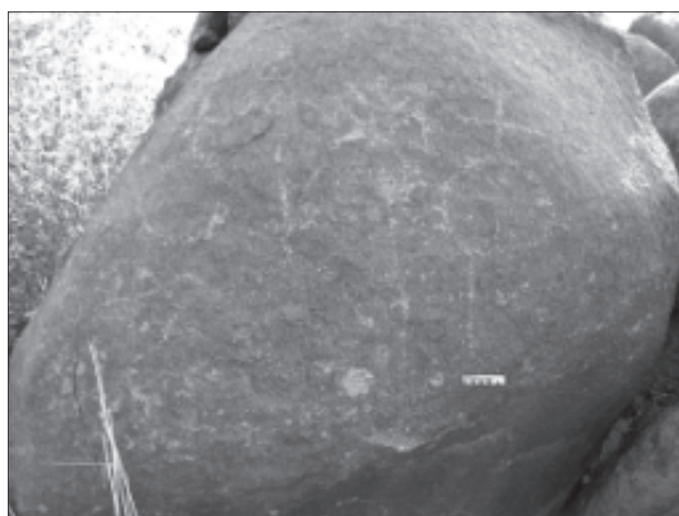


Plate 3. Boulder 1 at 3-J-056 on Mis island.

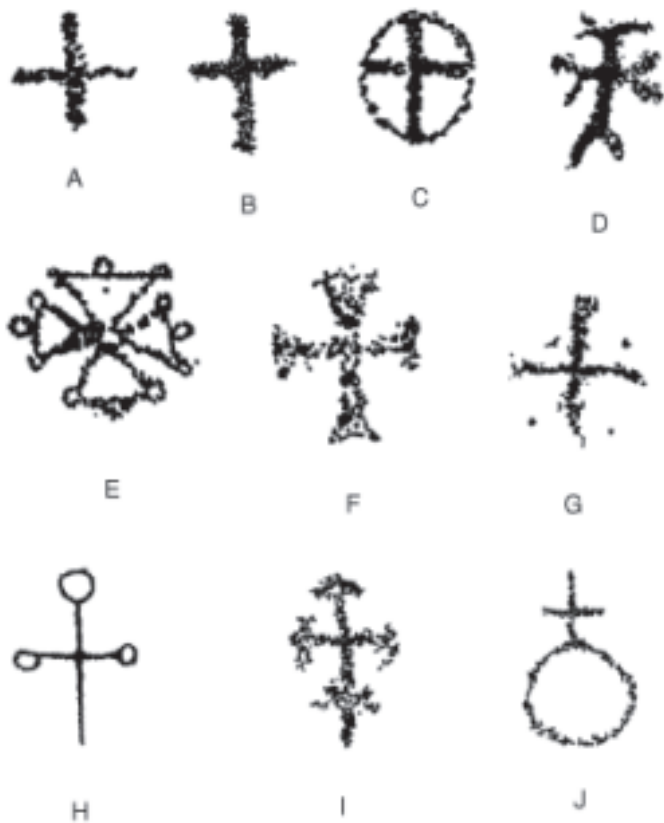


Figure 1. Types of crosses documented during the 2004/2005 SARS rock art survey.

Greek inscriptions and crosses

Greek inscriptions with Christian content in close spatial relationship to crosses, and of a similar degree of patination, also give an indication of the approximate date and context of these petroglyphs. An inscription invoking Jesus Christ at 3-Q-60 in the mainland Dar el-Arab region is located on a large vertical east-facing rock in the immediate vicinity of a church probably dating to the Classic Christian period (Wolf 2004). Latin crosses are located at the same site, while Latin and Greek crosses are found at other sites in the area. The largest number of crosses was recorded at site 3-M-50, a large north-facing rock at the foot of a range of hills with a sizeable Christian period settlement on the island of Umm Deras. In addition to numerous crosses, depictions of camels as well as two monograms invoking Jesus Christ ($\overline{\text{IC}} \text{ O } \overline{\text{XC}}$) are present (cf. Jakobielski 1991, 281, 293) (Figure 2). Judging from differences in patination and manufacturing techniques (fine to coarse pecking made with tools of different tip size) the crosses were successively added to this rock wall, indicating that this site retained its importance for a considerable period of time. It is possible that the petroglyphs were apotropaic in function, invoking blessings, as has been suggested for Christian Nubian pottery marks (Adams 1986, 256). Numerous non-figurative peck marks present at the panel may have resulted from tactile action towards a rock surface and/or a place of significance.

Anthropomorphs and crosses

In a few cases crosses and anthropomorphs are depicted together, probably dating these petroglyphs to the Christian period. At the horizontal surface of a small boulder at site 3-Q-109 a large cross-shaped petroglyph is depicted with a small anthropomorph placed to its lower left (Figure 3). At site 3-Q-78 there is a loosely pecked anthropomorph apparently carrying a cross (Figure 4), which may in fact depict an angel. While it contains less visual information, this petroglyph is reminiscent of the frescoes of Faras, which show angels carrying staffs with crosses over one shoulder (Micha³owski 1967, pls 64-65). Both depictions may stem from the same pool of Christian period topoi. On a large vertical rock wall at the same site, a petroglyph of a bearded anthropomorph is found, his feet visible under his wide bell-shaped robe (Figure 5). These motifs differ considerably in style from the common stick figures, which are frequently shown paired and often carry sticks or swords, and what appear to be shields.

Camel imagery

Depictions of camels, i.e. quadrupeds with a long neck and humped back, are probably the most common motif in the rock art of the surveyed area, and display immense stylistic



Figure 2. Boulder 1 at 3-M-050 on Umm Deras island (scale 1:20).



Figure 3. Anthropomorphic figure and cross at 3-Q-109 (scale 1:10).

variability. While most are rendered as stick-figures, there are also much more life-like depictions (Figures 6a-b). Camel images differ greatly in their overall body shapes, ranging from short bodies with long legs to elongated bodies with short legs (Figures 6c-d), from linear to curved bodies (Figures 6c-f). They also vary considerably in the length and shape of the neck and the shape of the hump. The latter is shown as an outline or filled in triangle or sub-triangle (Figures 6g, i-k), as a more or less regular semi-circle (cf. Figures 6l-o) or, more rarely, as a square (Figures 6c, e). Camel petroglyphs also differ in their size, the degree of motion depicted, the presence or absence of a rider and his posi-



Figure 4. Anthropomorphic figure with 'wings' and a cross at site 3-Q-078 (scale 1:5).



Figure 5. Bearded anthropomorphic figure with bell-shaped robe at 3-Q-078 (scale 1:5).

tioning. Riders are mostly depicted seated on the hump (cf. Figures 6c, h, j, o-p), or more rarely on the withers (cf. Figures 6 g, k, n). They are shown as simple lines, as cross-shapes, or are depicted more life-like (Figure 6j). In some instances they carry what appear to be spears. Often, bridles are depicted. In rare cases anthropomorphs are depicted holding or leading one or more riderless camels by ropes (Figure 7).

On individual rock surfaces and at sites camels are depicted singly, paired or grouped. Scenic compositions are rarely apparent (cf. Figure 7). Marked differences in patination within individual rock surfaces indicate that such motifs were made over a considerable period of time. Camels first appear in the archaeological record of Nubia in the early first millennium BC (Rowley-Conwy 1988), providing a *terminus post quem* for these motifs. Èervièek (1982, 60) sees the positioning of the rider as a dating criterion, suggesting that those riding on the withers date to the Napatan and Meroitic periods and those riding on the hump to the pre-Christian X-Group and the Medieval Christian period.

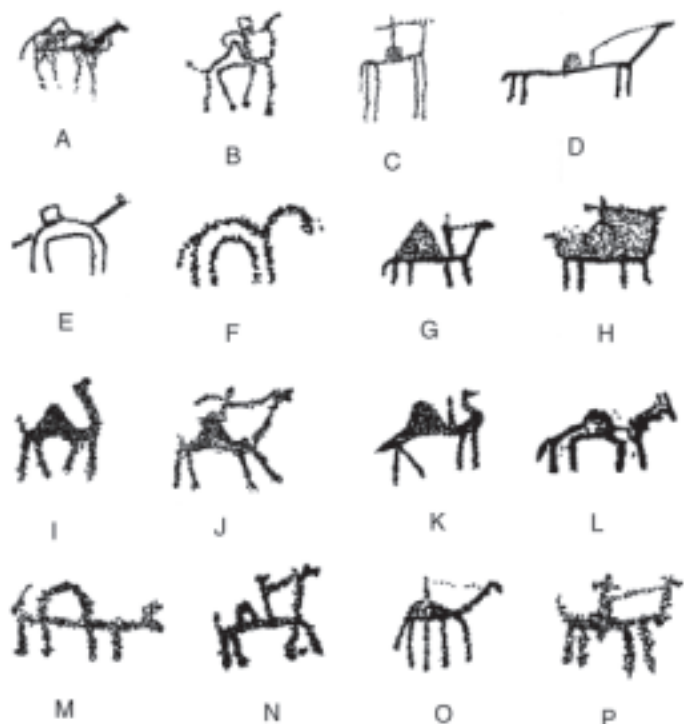


Figure 6. Selection of depictions of camels in the SARS concession.

Several instances of superimposition or juxtaposition show that camel petroglyphs often date older than Arabic inscriptions, such as at 3-L-035 on Umm Deras. In other cases camel depictions show no sign of patination and thus appear to date to the recent past. Camel petroglyphs are frequently found in close spatial proximity to cross-shaped motifs. Camels and crosses in some instances clearly were made during a single marking event, judging from close similarities in technique and patination. Based on motif content, superimpositions, juxtapositions and states of patination,

it appears that a significant portion of the camel imagery recorded in the SARS concession can be assigned to the Medieval Christian period. The chronology of camel imagery certainly deserves further attention, however.

Depictions of camels are found on rock surfaces of greatly varying size and inclination. They are rarely encountered in out-of-reach locations. Often, they are located in the lower parts of vertical or sloping rock surfaces and frequently appear to have been made by people working in squatting positions. In the et-Tereif region depictions of camels are frequently found on horizontal rock faces. It appears that such camel petroglyphs are not primarily made for visual appreciation by the passer-by, or as way-markers. They are, however, often found in the immediate vicinity of pathways, which criss-cross the landscape. In the et-Tereif region camel depictions were found throughout the surveyed area. They are absent only from a ridge with a number of small tumuli.

Depictions of cattle

Some of the cattle imagery in the SARS concession appears to date to the Christian period, such as depictions of humped cattle in the et-Tereif area, which are only lightly patinated and are similar in patination to camel images on the same rock surfaces. These cattle motifs are significantly younger in comparison to humpless cattle motifs with long (and deformed) horns, which are often attributed to the later third and second millennia BC (e.g. Èervièek 1974, 181ff.). At site 3-O-62 a nearly fully patinated long-horned humpless cattle petroglyph was found on the same rock surface as a lightly patinated and fully pecked humped cattle motif (Plate 4). A parallel for the latter is found in the nativity fresco of Faras (Micha³owski 1967, pl. 64-65). Younger cattle motifs

differ from older ones in some stylistic attributes, although there does not appear to exist a unified set of conventions. The bodies are often constructed of angular or irregular, rather than elegantly curved lines, some are rendered as stick figures. Usually, all four legs are shown. Heads may be small or even absent, with the horns appearing to spring from the shoulders. In other cases heads and

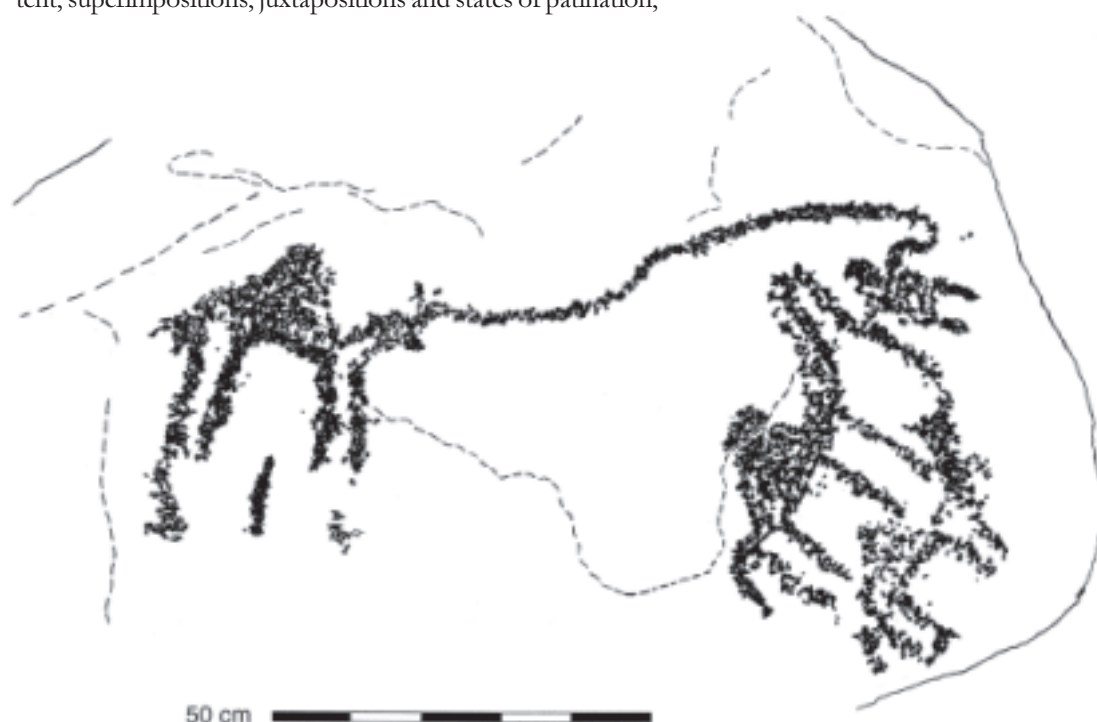


Figure 7. Anthropomorphic figure leading three camels at 3-Q-078 (scale 1:10).



horns are shown as seen from above, while the bodies are depicted in profile. Horns are often depicted as simple curved lines. Some of these cattle images are similar in technique and patination to cross-shaped petroglyphs on the same rock surfaces.

Christian period visual and auditory landscapes

Camels, anthropomorphic figures and crosses are common components of Christian period visual landscapes. Some sites, such as 3-Q-78 and 3-Q-123, a densely marked narrow wadi (Wadi Tabir) and a large hill, respectively, include dozens of boulders with petroglyphs. They also contain an acoustic element in the form of numerous rock gongs and rock gong complexes, single or groups of boulders or slabs emanating metallic sounds when struck with a hard implement (see Kleinitz 2004). At site 3-Q-78, for example, one rock gong and seven rock gong complexes are found beside more than 70 boulders with petroglyphs. This locality, one of the most extensive rock art sites recorded in the region, may have functioned as a Christian sacred space with both visual and acoustic components. Echoes reverberate through the wadi when one or more of the rock gongs are played. The northern 'entrance' of the site is formed by the above mentioned 'angel' petroglyph as well as by a large rock gong complex, its southern 'entrance' is marked by several crosses and camel petroglyphs. While 'suitable' rock surfaces are present throughout the wadi, most panels are located on its western side. Depictions of camels - predominantly oriented facing to the right - dominate, and both camels and crosses are found together on larger rock surfaces (Colour plate XXI).

The use of rock gongs in the Christian period is suggested by Panel 32 at site 3-Q-078, a rock gong with apparent Christian imagery on its upper surface. This large boulder (2.9m width and 1.8m height) is located in the higher part of the hills of boulders adjoining Wadi Tabir; it is not conspicuous. While virtually all rock gongs and rock gong complexes located in the valley floor show relatively recent whitish percussion marks, besides evidence for more ancient use, this panel does not appear to have been used recently, as its percussion zones are patinated to a medium brown colour. Several Latin crosses were placed in the vicinity of the percussion rim (Colour plate XXII). When struck with a hard implement, crosses and percussion zones

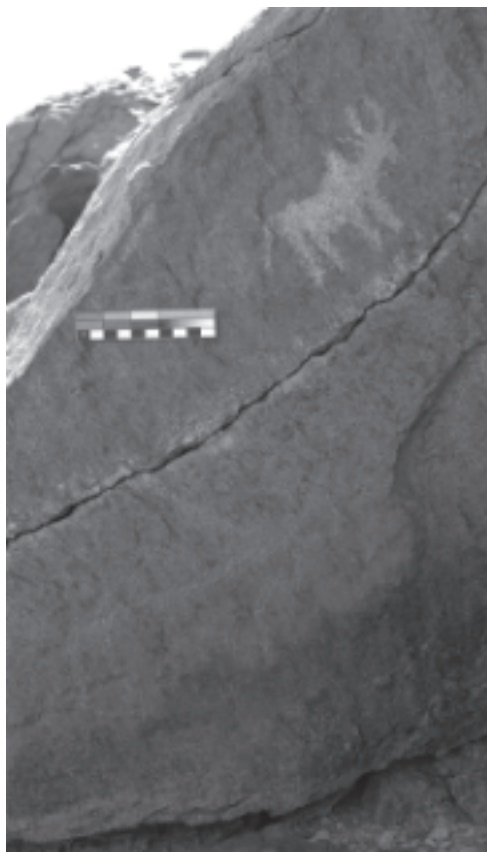


Plate 4. Humped cattle at 3-Q-062 above a nearly fully patinated longhorn cattle motif.

emanate bell-like sounds. Crosses and percussion zones are of a similar degree of patination and thus appear to have been made/used at the same time, potentially dating the last use of the rock gong to the Christian period.

A further rock gong with cross-shaped petroglyphs on its upper surface was recorded at site 3-O-76 in the et-Tereif region. This slab, one of several rock gongs and rock gong complexes at the eastern side of a hill of boulders, is marked with two Latin crosses, one wheel-cross and other petroglyphs (Figure 8). The wheel-cross is partially destroyed by a percussion zone. Metallic sounds would have emanated while making the petroglyphs as well as when beating various parts of the surface of this gong.

Only a few of the other rock gongs in the surveyed area are marked with petroglyphs, mainly depictions of camels, such as at 3-Q-78 in Dar el-Arab and 3-O-76 in the et-Tereif region. On the surface of a large sloping rock gong at site 3-O-55 in the latter region cattle images are superimposed

by camels. More commonly, camel imagery is located in the immediate vicinity of the rock gongs, sometimes together with cross-shaped petroglyphs, or, more rarely, with cattle petroglyphs. The findings from the mainland and from the downstream islands thus are in contrast to those from Ishashi island, where a clear and common connection between rock gongs and cattle images exists, and where camel images are rare (Kleinitz 2004). In the Dar el-Arab and et-Tereif regions the evidence thus suggests that rock gongs were used during the Medieval Christian period (see Hashim and Bell 2000 for an example from the Third Cataract region). The extent of wear at some of the rock gongs and the rare presence of deeply patinated cattle images on and around the vicinity of well-worn rock gongs, such as at sites 3-Q-57 in the Dar el-Arab mainland region, at 3-O-55 in et-Tereif or at 3-L-35 on Umm Deras, could indicate, however, that their use pre-dated the Christian period.

Depositions at and modifications of rock art localities

Besides rock art making, some sites show evidence of other actions that do not appear to belong to the realm of day-to-day activities. At site 3-L-33 on Umm Deras, for example, several Medieval pottery vessels were found behind a large slab with a cross on its upper horizontal face. Similarly, pot-

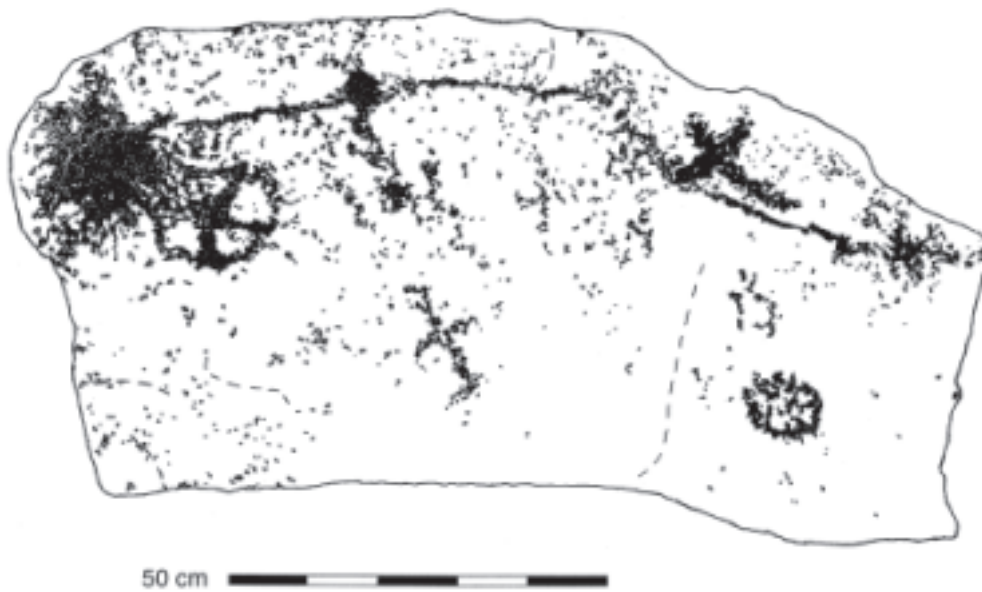


Figure 8. Rock gong with various crosses, 3-O-076 (scale 1:10).

tery concentrations were identified at the foot of a rock face with cross petroglyphs at site 3-M-35 on the same island. In the vicinity of this panel pottery sherds appear to have been placed deliberately in crevices. Within a small niche to the right of the panel traces of soot were found. It is possible that a lamp or other soot-producing device was once placed on the ground of the niche. Similarly, a niche between two major panels (62 and 63) at site 3-Q-078 in the Dar el-Arab region showed traces of soot. In both cases the conspicuous panels are located directly by pathways.

At site 3-R-64 in the Dar el-Arab region a slab on top of a low quartzite ridge was marked with a maze of cross-on-circle motifs on its slightly sloping upper surface (Colour plate XXIII). Small rocks were wedged between upstanding slabs in the immediate vicinity of the panel. Some rocks show signs of artificial abrasion. While the cross-on-circle motifs are of medium patination, at the same site fully patinated petroglyphs, including circles, are present beside and probably beneath the younger motifs. This particular place was, thus, re-used over long periods of time. Piles of smaller stones and rocks are encountered at a few sites in the study region, often in apparent relationship to rock art panels. At site 3-O-69 in the et-Tereif region, a pile of rocks partially obscured a maze of well-patinated cattle motifs and geometric designs on the vertical face of an upstanding, but inconspicuous, boulder. While it is difficult to date such practices, and while they may or may not have had any direct relationship to the rock art, they are expressions of the significance attributed to these places.

Conclusions

In contrast to the preliminary results of the 2004 SARS rock art survey on Ishaishi island (Kleinitz 2004), the 2004/2005 campaign showed that the left bank of the Nile and

other islands are characterised by a rather different set of motifs primarily depicting camels as well as various types of crosses. Both motif types are rare (camels) or nearly absent (crosses) in the Ishaishi island rock art corpus. Where cattle imagery is present in the Dar el-Arab and et-Tereif regions it is frequently of a similarly recent age as the camel motifs. More ancient cattle imagery is present at some sites, but it does not occur in the same frequency and number as on Ishaishi island. The surveyed section of the mainland thus appears to have been extensively marked only during the past two millennia, with a large portion of the rock

art dating to the Christian period. It is hoped that the correlation of rock art sites and panels with other archaeological finds in the study areas, and with landscape features, will eventually enable the reconstruction of Medieval Christian symbolic spaces.

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*Colour plate XXI.
Christian period rock art
landscapes. View of the
northern 'entrance' of
site 3-Q-078.*



*Colour plate XXII.
Christian period rock art
landscapes. Rock gong
with cross-shaped
petroglyphs at site
3-Q-078.*

*Colour plate
XXIII. Christian
period rock art
landscapes. Maze of
cross-on-circle motifs
at site 3-Q-064.*

