

“Korossom Fantastic” and the Karnasahi Pastoralists, the Principal Rock Art Styles of the Eastern Tibesti

by

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KEYWORDS. — Human Figures; Rock Paintings; Ouri Plain; Tibesti Mountains.

SUMMARY. — The innumerable painted shelters dotting the Ouri plain along the eastern edge of the Tibesti mountains rank among the finest manifestations of Saharan rock art. The first sites were discovered in the 1930s, but the remoteness and political instability of the region prevented any systematic surveys. There was a brief window in the early 1990s, when nearly a hundred and fifty sites — the majority previously unknown — were documented during six Italian expeditions, before the Tibesti rebellion closed the area again to all outsiders. With the recent improvement of the political situation in Chad the area became accessible again, our party succeeded in taking the first high resolution digital photographs of some of the principal localities. These photos, coupled with the capabilities of the *DStretch* image enhancement software, permit the viewing of these very little known paintings in hitherto unseen detail. Like at practically all painting-bearing areas of the Sahara, there is a clear cultural succession in the Ouri plain, with the “Korossom fantastic” style pre-dating the very refined Karnasahi cattle pastoralist paintings. While unique in style, some features of the Korossom fantastic figures exhibit resemblance to the Roundhead style of the Tassili N’Ajjjer, and also to elements of the Wadi Sora rock art repertoire.

Introduction

The Tibesti mountains are ringed by a series of Palaeozoic and Mesozoic sandstones which were uplifted during the Tertiary volcanism to form a series of plateaus rising towards the centre of the volcanic massif. Along the eastern edge, a roughly 20-km wide flat alluvial plain formed at the junction of the Devonian and Jurassic (Nubian) sandstones, which extends for over 100 km in a north-south direction. This plain is almost completely enclosed by the rising sandstones and high volcanic plateau (Tarso Dohon) to the east, and a low eroded plateau of Nubian sandstone to the south and the west. The flat sandy plain, at an elevation of around 920 m, has a narrow outlet to the north near the present Libya — Chad border — and a number of dry riverbeds cross it in a west to east direction, continuing in deep canyons towards the flat plains of the Libyan Desert across the western plateau. This protected enclave must have provided exceptionally good living conditions compared to the barren rocks of the Tibesti and the featureless sand plains of the Libyan Desert, as attested by hundreds of rock art sites (fig. 1)** painted in shallow shelters and vertical rock faces along the innumerable eroded sandstone towers along the edges of the plain, extending both upstream and downstream along the main watercourses, and on remaining inselbergs on the plain itself (fig. 2). Presently the plain is uninhabited, the small village of Ouri near the centre of the plain having been abandoned about two decades ago (BOCCAZZI *et al.* 1998) due to persistent drought. The closest permanent settlement is Aozzi, a village of about two dozen traditional Tibu houses located high up in the Enneri (local name for wadi, a mostly dry riverbed) Korossom

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** Cf. figures at the end of the text (pp. 30-34).

about 600 m above the elevation of the plain, where a series of permanent springs emerge at the junction of the sandstones and the volcanic layers.

The first reconnaissance and surveying of the Ouri plain was made in January 1931, when a French multi-disciplinary scientific mission led by the geologist Marius-Gustave Dalloni spent several months in the Tibesti (DALLONI 1934). At the time a number of permanent French military posts were established, including one near Aozi and another one near Ouri. The Dalloni mission already noted some engravings on rocks along some of the enneris crossing the plain (DALLONI 1935), but strangely saw no paintings. The principal painting localities were discovered by a young officer stationed at Aozi, François d'Alverny, between 1934 and 1936. Sadly d'Alverny was killed in action in Indochina in 1945, and his paper and photographs of the discovered sites were only published posthumously (D'ALVERNY 1950).

After the war Captain Scheibling surveyed the area and found several new sites between 1949 and 1951. Paul Huard described the sites in his publications, but he never visited them, so the description was solely based on the few low-resolution photographs of d'Alverny and Scheibling's monochrome tracings of some selected scenes (HUARD & LE MASSON 1964, BECK & HUARD 1969).

During the 1970s and 1980s the area became inaccessible due to the Libyan wars, and with the very limited publications available, the sites remained largely unknown even to specialists of Saharan rock art. Alfred Muzzolini in his definitive monograph on Saharan rock art dismissed the entire region in a single paragraph of sixteen lines (MUZZOLINI 1995), while three chapters were assigned to the rock art of the Tassili N'Ajjer alone.

In 1994 Adriana Scarpa Falce (Adriana Ravenna) and Sergio Scarpa Falce made an expedition to Aozi and the Enneri Korossom to locate some of d'Alverny's and Scheibling's sites (SCARPA FALCE & SCARPA FALCE 1994). This was followed by another five expeditions from 1995 to 1998, joined by Aldo Boccazzi and Donatella Calati, which successively surveyed more and more of the Ouri plain and the upstream and downstream sections of the transverse enneris. A total of one hundred and forty-six sites were documented on thousands of slide positives (BOCCAZZI *et al.* 1998), many of them major sites not reported by earlier expeditions. The sites were published in *Les Cahiers de l'AARS* and the *Sahara Journal* in several articles (BOCCAZZI *et al.* 1995, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2009, 2010; NEGRO *et al.* 1996; RAVENNA *et al.* 1996, 1998; SCARPA FALCE 1994, 2008, 2009).

In the southern part of the plain paintings dominate, while as one moves north the sites are more evenly distributed between engravings and paintings. Both the sheer numbers and the quality of artistic expression rank the Ouri plain as one of the most important and richest rock art regions in the Sahara, on par with the much better known areas of the Tassili N'Ajjer or the Gilf Kebir – Jebel Uweinat region. Despite this, partly because all the recent publications were in Italian, partly because only a fraction of the sites and scenes were published, the Ouri plain sites remain mostly unknown except by name outside a small circle of Saharan rock art enthusiasts.

After 1998 the region once more became inaccessible due to the Tibesti rebellion and the ensuing civil war, during which Aozi and the protected plain became one of the rebel hideouts. During this period all access routes from the east via the enneris, as well as the northern entrance of the plain, were heavily mined, and also minefields exist along many of the key traverse routes across the plain. It was only a couple of years ago, following a peace accord between the Tibu rebels and the central government, that it became possible to visit the Tibesti region once again. However, because of the uncleared minefields along all past access routes, reaching the Ouri plain remained impossible or at least very risky.

In January 2015 the author and party planned a camel-supported expedition starting in Aozi (which could be approached but not reached in the past with motorcars from the west along the volcanic plateau) to visit some of the sites on the southern part of the Ouri plain, with logistics provided by S.V.S. Tchad. While making plans it emerged that during the rebellion a motor track was prepared down a steep pass to Aozi, and the track continues along the bed of the Enneri Korossom (though it is barely passable) to the plain below, avoiding the mined areas. This enabled the visiting of all principal, and many minor sites on the southern part of the Ouri plain with vehicles, much more than originally hoped for. We visited sixty-five sites, mostly paintings, less than half of the known localities. However, these included the majority of principal sites, giving a good cross-section of the rock art styles of the region. The high-resolution digital photographs coupled with the capabilities of the

DStretch image enhancement software developed by Jon Harman (www.dstretch.com) permit the viewing of these very little known paintings in hitherto unseen detail.

Already d’Alverny had observed the varied styles among the found paintings, realizing that they must date from different periods, with successive cattle pastoralist styles, terminating in the camel period paintings (D’ALVERNY 1950). Based on superimpositions he noted that the oldest layer were paintings of humans, cattle and other domesticated fauna in a very refined style, the best examples of which were in the Karnasahi and Fofoda shelters. Huard further developed the definition of the various styles in the area, naming the very fine cattle pastoralist paintings the Karnasahi style after the principal locality (BECK & HUARD 1969). He also noted that in the Korossom Timmy shelter found by Scheibling, some strange abstract figures appeared to be older than the Karnasahi pastoralists.

The Italian expeditions of the 1990s discovered about two dozen further sites with these abstract paintings, including several sites showing some kind of imaginary beasts. The style was named “Korossom Fantastic” (RAVENNA *et al.* 1998) on account of the many apparently imaginary elements.

While there are several other styles observable in the area (RAVENNA *et al.* 1998), the Korossom fantastic and Karnasahi styles account for the majority of paintings and have produced the most artistically-accomplished scenes. In the following the two styles are described in detail, while for other styles and periods the readers are referred to the cited publications. All site references are based on the site numbering system developed by Adriana Scarpa Falce and Aldo Boccazzi.

The “Korossom Fantastic” Style

The main theme of the paintings is human figures, with unnatural body proportions, usually shown in some very contorted body positions. The torso is thin and long ending without any indication of a neck in a bulbous thin head that lacks all features except the eyes (fig. 3). The extremities are shown in a more natural way, but the arms are usually short in proportion to the legs. The sexes are clearly distinguishable; the women have prominent breasts, sometimes shown in profile under each other, sometimes on both sides of the torso (fig. 4).

There is also a consistent pattern in the body postures of the sexes. The men are shown in a variety of contorted dynamic body postures, which is very reminiscent of similar postures exhibited by the “Uweinat roundhead” figures at Jebel Uweinat, who are most likely depicting dancing (MENARDI NOGUERA, this volume). The women are most often depicted in a kneeling posture, with legs closed (fig. 4).

The scale of the figures varies significantly, from a scale of 15-20 cm to figures over a metre, like at the large frieze of site Fofoda South 03, where individual figures exceed one metre in height (fig. 5). In several sites there are hundreds of figures continuously extending along vertical rock faces for up to 25 m.

Domesticated fauna is clearly lacking from all Korossom fantastic scenes. There are a few sites where wild fauna is depicted accompanying human figures; however, these sites are all very damaged and faint, so the association of animals with the Korossom fantastic human figures is not entirely clear, the animals could possibly belong to another style and period (fig. 6).

One of the most intriguing features of the Korossom fantastic style is the depiction of a “fantastic beast”. This animal is shown in a variety of styles and degrees of elaboration, but the standardized elements make it instantly recognizable. It has a clear head with a peg like protrusion on the top (horns?), the eyes are sometimes but not always shown. The body is curved in a crescent shape, and the body ends in a fat unnatural way. The legs are usually shown horizontally, as if the animal were floating (fig. 7). It appears to be an imaginary creature that is integral to the Korossom fantastic iconography, evoking the headless beast of the Wadi Sora style in the Gilf Kebir (ZBORAY 2014). The similarities to Wadi Sora do not end here, the Korossom fantastic figures sometimes also appear over, or in association with a “wallpaper” of negative handprints (fig. 8). At site Karnasahi 06 there is a frieze of negative handprints, apparently all made by the same left hand with the little finger truncated — this is an almost perfect analogy for similar handprints with missing little finger at Wadi Sora (*e.g.* site WG45; ZBORAY 2009).

The Korossom fantastic people clearly had a preference for large-exposed vertical rock faces at conspicuous locations. At the time of their making the paintings dominated the landscape and must have been visible from

afar. However, even at protected locations the paintings are faint and weathered, much more so than the cattle pastoralist paintings at the same locations. There are a few superimpositions of Karnasahi style cattle and humans over the Korossom fantastic figures, confirming their earlier age already suggested by the noticeable differences in the degree of weathering (fig. 9).

A further proof for the relative age of the Korossom fantastic style is their position on the rock faces of the shelters. Almost invariably these scenes occur high up, several metres above present ground level, especially in localities with an active water channel in front of the shelter. This position can only be explained by water erosion removing several metres of sediment during the time elapsed since their making. In contrast, Karnasahi style and subsequent paintings are much closer to ground level, indicating less erosion and a later date for their creation. A similar pattern was recently observed in the Tassili n'Ajjer plateau, when comparing the positions of Roundhead and pastoralist style paintings (HACHID *et al.* 2010).

While other styles observable among the Ouri plain paintings are spread across the entire valley, the Korossom fantastic sites are concentrated in a fairly small area along the Enneri Korossom, Enneri Dabbou and the south-western part of the Ouri plain. All known sites are within a 12-km radius of the major site of Korossom Timmy. In this respect they are also similar to the peculiar Wadi Sora style which is located within a very confined geographical range (ZBORAY 2013). As the actual roaming range of hunters or nomadic pastoralists in search of resources is much larger, this small area must have had some special significance.

The Karnasahi Pastoralists

The Karnasahi pastoralists roamed across the entire Ouri plain, with their sites located at all suitable rock faces and shelters. There are a few sites along the extension of the plain along the Tarso Dohon into Libya (BOCCAZZI & CALATI 2009), and some recent finds suggest that their range on occasion reached the central Tibesti and the Enneri Miski (ZBORAY 2014).

The most characteristic elements of the Karnasahi style are the human figures, consistently drawn with heads which appear to be those of animals rather than humans. Hair is usually depicted with a separate (white) colour, but all other facial features are absent. Humans are depicted with very elaborate clothing, seemingly made of animal skins, and feature a wide range of standardized elements that appear to be decorative rather than functional. Bow and arrows are standard accessories of male figures (figs. 10, 11).

A principal element of the style is the depiction of domesticated fauna, both cattle and sheep in large numbers. Sometimes the herds and flocks are shown in clear compositions, rather than just being a random mix of individual figures (fig. 12).

At some sites the cattle and human figures do not have a colour fill; only the outlines are prepared in an extremely delicate, elegant and refined style showing a very high degree of artistic accomplishment (fig. 13). The only clear parallels may be found in the central Tassili n'Ajjer, where there are similar compositions of cattle and humans in outline among paintings of the Iheren style (MUZZOLINI 1995).

Another recurring theme of the Karnasahi paintings, although fewer in number, are the depictions of circular huts or shelters. The shapes of the dwellings are again very similar to the huts depicted on the Iheren style paintings in the Tassili n'Ajjer (MUZZOLINI 1995), while the depictions of utensils inside or hanging from the roof echo similar scenes among the Uweinat cattle pastoralists (fig. 14) (ZBORAY 2013).

While the range of the Karnasahi people is fairly large, the area where the style occurs can be compared to the other principal cattle pastoralist paintings in the Tassili n'Ajjer (Iheren and Sefar-Ozeneare styles) and at Jebel Uweinat. These different regions exhibit very similar cultural patterns of rock art, with one or more pre-pastoral styles, mostly without any depiction of domesticated fauna and exhibiting a substantial degree of abstraction. These were invariably followed by cattle pastoralists with a naturalistic and very refined style.

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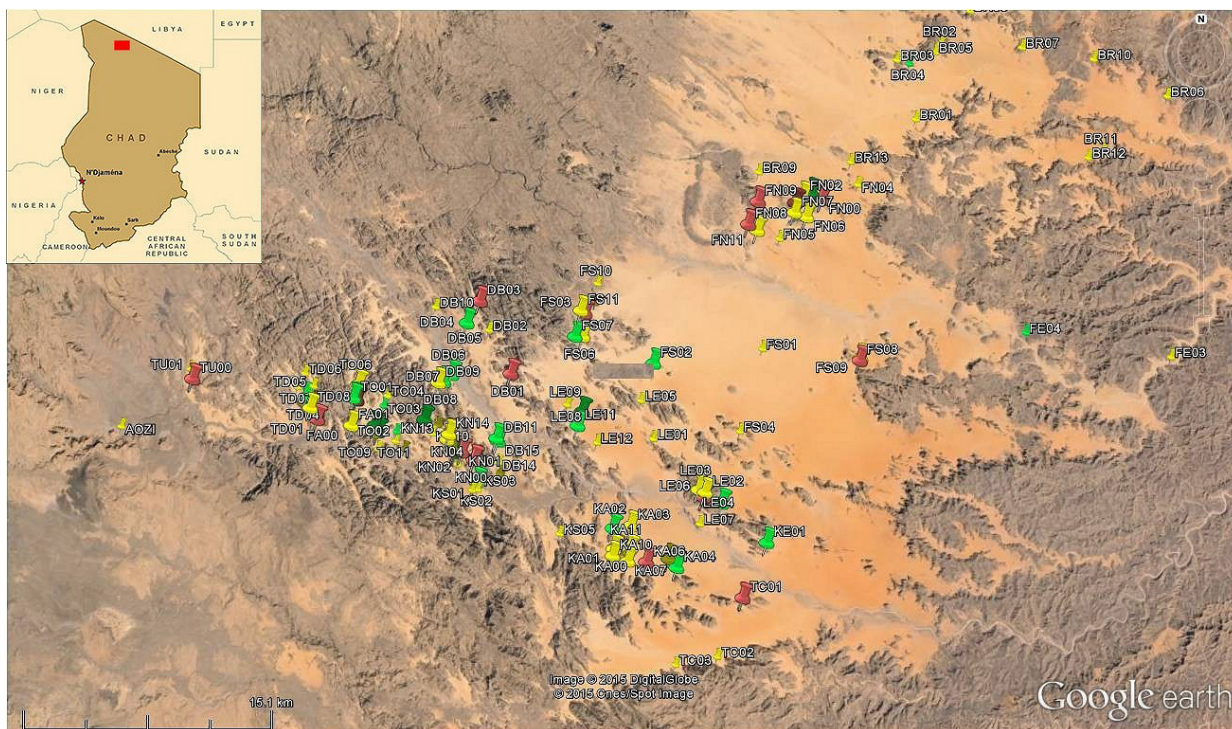


Fig. 1. — Satellite map of the southern Ouri plain with principal rock art sites (inset map of Chad showing location of enlarged area).



Fig. 2. — The southern Ouri plain at Fofoda.



A

Fig. 3A. — “Korossom Fantastic” human figures showing typical bulbous head and prominent eyes (site Enneri Dabbou 06).



B

Fig. 3B. — Same image treated with *DStretch-YBK* filter.



A
Fig. 4A. — Male and female “Korossom Fantastic” figures (site Korossom North 12).



B
Fig. 4B. — Male and female “Korossom Fantastic” figures at Korossom Timmy (site Korossom North 00). Note consistent difference in body postures.



A
Fig. 5A. — “Korossom Fantastic” human figures exceeding 1 m in height at site Fofoda South 03.



B
Fig. 5B. — Same image treated with *DStretch-YBK* filter.



Fig. 6. — “Korossom Fantastic” figure seemingly associated with wild animals (gazelle?, site Fofoda South 07). Image treated with *DStretch-YBK* filter.

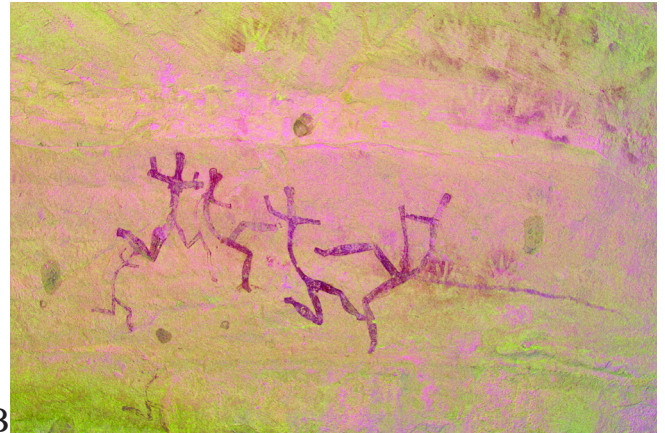


Fig. 7. — Examples of “fantastic beasts” (all images treated with *DStretch* for clarity): (A) site Korossom North 07; (B) site Teffi Drossou 01; (C) site Korossom North 12; (D) site Korossom North 12; (E) site Karnasahi 06; (F) site Karnasahi 06.



A

Fig. 8A. — “Korossom Fantastic” figures over a “wallpaper” of negative handprints at Korossom Timmy (site Korossom North 00).



B

Fig. 8B. — Same image treated with *DStretch-YBK* filter.



Fig. 9. — Karnasahi-style cattle and human figures superimposed over a “Korossom Fantastic” figure (site Fofoda South 03).



Fig. 10. — Human figure at the main Karnasahi shelter (Karnasahi 00).



A

Fig. 11A. — Karnasahi-style human figures (site Fofoda North 01).



B

Fig. 11B. — Same image treated with *DStretch-YBK* filter.



A

Fig. 12A. — Flock of sheep depicted in a very artistic composition characteristic of the Karnasahi style (site Enneri Dabbou 03).



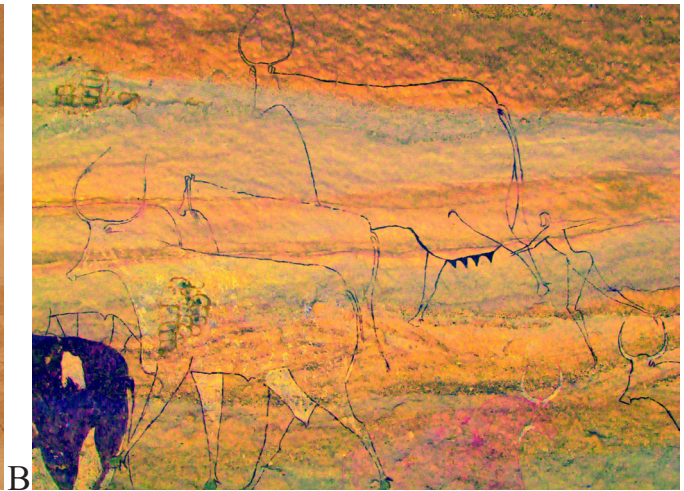
B

Fig. 12B. — Same image treated with *DStretch-YBK* filter.



A

Fig. 13A. — Cattle and humans executed in outline only (site Karnasahi 00).



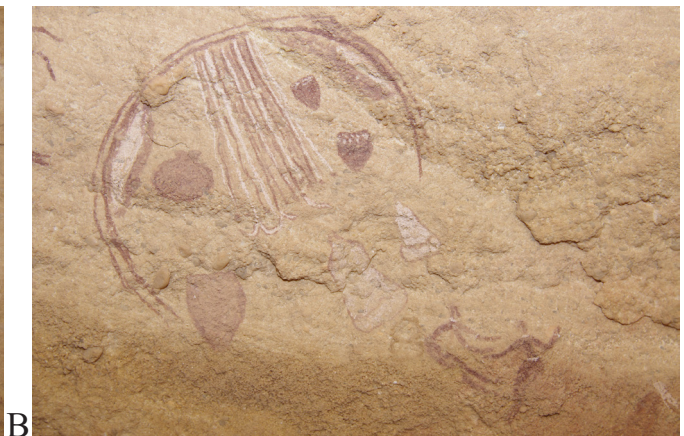
B

Fig. 13B. — Same image treated with *DStretch-YBK* filter.



A

Fig. 14A. — Karnasahi-style scene with hut or shelter, cattle and human figures (site Enneri Dabbou 06).



B

Fig. 14B. — Detail of hut or shelter with utensils hanging from the ceiling.