

## Can one 'Read' Rock Art? An Egyptian Example

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When passing through the Gilf Kebîr (south-eastern Egypt) on his way to Kufra in Libya in April 1933, the explorer Laszlo de Almásy discovered two big decorated shelters at the foot of a sandstone mountain located about 600 km from the nearest oasis. Because of the presence of the paintings, Almásy named this place Bildtal, that is, 'valley of the images' in German, a name that he was subsequently to translate into approximate Arabic as Wadi Sûra (usually 'Sora'). It contained some enigmatic rock images, especially 'swimmers' and a hybrid 'beast', which so far have resisted all attempts at interpretation. But some new discoveries in the vicinity enable us today to attempt a reading using mythology as a key.

### The Cave of the Swimmers

The first of these shelters, henceforth named the 'Cave of the Swimmers', had its moment of fame in 1996 in the film *The English Patient*, made by Anthony Minghella from the novel written by Michael Ondaatje and inspired by Almásy's life (and which takes enormous liberties with an historical truth that is, besides, very difficult to establish).

In 1933–1935, Leo Frobenius organized expeditions to the Gilf Kebîr and the Djebel el-'Uweynât, in which three female artists, a photographer, the ethnologist Karin Hissink and the prehistorian Hans Rhotert took part. Almásy showed these researchers the sites he had discovered, and their scientific publication, which was delayed because of the war years, was only prepared by Hans Rhotert a long time afterwards. In the book which finally appeared in 1952, there is an excellent record of the paintings found by the Hungarian explorer in the Cave of the Swimmers.<sup>1</sup> Its mouth is about ten metres wide at floor level, and it is decorated with numerous small images (maximum size fifteen centimetres). In the main group, one can see four ancient hand stencils and, among a few giraffes, seven gazelles and three or four ostriches, about a hundred people in different styles, including two 'divers', and especially the famous 'swimmers', sixteen of them. Apart from one who seems to be swimming against the current, they are all heading to the right, where there is an undetermined quadruped, damaged by the weathering of the wall, and which one of the swimmers is touching on the leg (Fig. 10).<sup>2</sup> Rhotert saw in this 'beast' a half-human, half-animal being. Its back is profoundly curved, and its long tail ends in a flossy ball and stands at the right. Its head should therefore be on the left,

1. H. Rhotert, *Libysche Felsbilder. Ergebnisse der XI und XII Deutschen inner-afrikanischen Forschungs-Expedition (DIAFE) 1933/1934/1935*, Darmstadt, 1952.

2. *Ibid.*, fold-out opposite p. 52.

but here one sees only two rounded protuberances. Some reticulated white stripes envelop this curious animal.

The inventory of this site's figures also includes two other hand stencils, two bichrome cows with udders between their hind legs (in compliance with the regional canon), a total of nine giraffes, including one bichrome specimen of exactly the same type as certain paintings in the southern part of the massif of the 'Uweynât. The only engraving is an ungulate print.

At the moment of the discovery, Almásy was extremely surprised by the series of small people who gave the impression of swimming (Fig. 11): 'I was impressed,' he wrote, 'by a fresco depicting swimmers; the drawing gives an excellent interpretation of the distortion of bodies seen under the water. How curious to see images of swimmers in the heart of the Libyan desert, in a spot where today there is no water at all for hundreds of kilometres around!'.<sup>3</sup> As he was interested in occult traditions, he imagined that the 'swimmers' painted in this cavity could have been linked to some ritual aimed at obtaining favours from the aquatic spirits, in the period when the desert was starting to become dangerously dry.<sup>4</sup>

Although the Beast has received little comment, people have often wondered, following Almásy, about the exact nature of the famous 'swimmers'. Some have claimed that water may have flowed close to the shelters abundantly enough, at the time of the painters, for them to have been able to develop their swimming talents: 'Standing in front of the pictures one prefers the simple positivistic explanation, especially since his idea is strengthened by the investigation of the geomorphologist, who has reasons to reconstruct extended pools immediately in front of the caves (Kröpelin, pers. comm.)'.<sup>5</sup>

Others have thought that these swimmers were in fact shamans: 'some rock art specialists will argue that they could instead be moving in trance-like meditation into another world'.<sup>6</sup> Hence, Pauline and Philippe de Flers wondered: 'Are these bodies in levitation or in adoration, painted by artists who were themselves in trance, illustrating the different states of consciousness undergone in the course of initiation?'.<sup>7</sup> This type of interpretation has been popularized by J. D. Lewis-Williams, who has proposed that swimming should be seen as a metaphor of trance: 'as subjects move into a deep stage of trance, they experience a vortex that seems to engulf them [...] The sensation of travelling through a tunnel is often associated with water, probably because of the rushing or roaring sound heard in certain

3. L. E. de Almásy, *Récents explorations dans le Désert Libyque (1932–1936)*, Cairo, 1936, p. 79.

4. S. Kelly, *The Hunt for Zerzura. The Lost Oasis and the Desert War*, London, 2002.

5. R. Kuper, 'Routes and Roots in Egypt's Western Desert: The Early Holocene Resettlement of the Eastern Sahara', in *Egypt and Nubia. Gifts of the Desert*, ed. R. Friedman, London, 2002, pp. 1–12 (4).

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

7. P. and P. de Flers, *L'Égypte des sables*, Paris, 2002, p. 226.

altered states of consciousness'.<sup>8</sup> So for this author, it would not be surprising that 'underwater imagery plays an important role in shamanistic thought'.

At first sight, such an interpretation might seem to be supported by the fact that the swimmers are on a wall where there are also hand stencils, insofar as the authors who think that rock art was linked to shamanic practices consider that the making of hand stencils resulted from an attempt by the shamans to enter into contact with another world, located behind the 'veil' of the rock wall.<sup>9</sup>

Yet this type of reading is difficult to accept, insofar as the region of the Libyan desert is not within the known distribution area of shamanism, or even of trance, which is very widespread in Africa but absent in the central and eastern Sahara – except where it is a relatively recent introduction, dating back only to the Middle Ages.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, as long as no equivalent of the swimmer images of the Wadi Sora was known, they remained absolutely isolated, and any other attempt at interpretation seemed pointless. But a new shelter, discovered in the same region in 2002, now provides us with another series of swimmers, in a context which encourages us to risk a new reading.

### The Cave of the Beasts

On 12 May 2002, an expedition organized by Colonel Ahmed el-Mestekawi for two desert enthusiasts, Jacopo and Massimo Foggini, discovered a new cave in the Gilf Kebîr – very big, and richer in rock paintings than any other site in the eastern desert known till then.<sup>11</sup> Its present width is seventeen metres, and it is partly filled by a dune, with the sand covering part of the paintings (Fig. 12). Those which remain visible comprise several thousand figures, essentially a crowd of people, among whom one can see around three hundred hand stencils, about twenty swimmers (and, once again, a few divers), as well as about thirty 'beasts' (Fig. 13) – all of these elements are extremely similar to the images in the site discovered by Almásy. This is the only other place known where one finds a coexistence of hand stencils, 'beasts' similar to the one which perplexed Rhotert, and swimmers of exactly the same type as those which so intrigued Almásy. Certainly, hand stencils

8. J. D. Lewis-Williams, *A Cosmos in Stone*, Walnut Creek/Lanham/New York/Oxford, 1992, pp. 108–9.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 259–60; *id.*, *The Mind in the Cave. Interpreting Religion and Society through Rock Art*, London, 2002, pp. 231–20.

10. E. Bourguignon, 'World Distribution and Patterns of Possession States', in *Trance and Possession States*, ed. R. Prince, Montreal, 1966, pp. 3–34; J.-L. Le Quellec, 'Shamans and Martians: the Same Struggle' in *The Concept of Shamanism: Uses and Abuses*, eds. H.-P. Francfort and R. N. Hamayon, Bibliotheca Shamanistica 10, Budapest, 2001, pp. 135–59.

11. W. Abed, 'A Recent Rock-Art Find in Gilf Kebir in Southwest Egypt', [http://www.zarzora.com/new\\_rock\\_art\\_site.htm](http://www.zarzora.com/new_rock_art_site.htm), 2002; L. Giuliani, 'Altamira, Sahara. Quando il deserto non era deserto', *Vernissage, Il Fotogiornale dell'arte*, 37, 2003, pp. 14–15.; A. Pavan, 'Gilf Kebir. La grotta della meraviglie', *Gulliver*, 6, 2003, pp. 104–22; A. Semplici, 'Arte rupestre: una Capella Sistina nel Sahara', *Airone*, 267, 2003, pp. 59–74.

are found in many other parts of the world (America, Australia, Eurasia...), and they all resemble each other. But the Beast is unique, as is the style of the swimmers which accompany it. So their association is highly specific, and very localized, which must be taken into account in any approach to meaning.

### **A new reading**

It should first be noted that the two readings proposed until now are not satisfactory. The shamanism invoked by one of them is purely hypothetical, and has not the slightest factual confirmation, whereas the other is too reductionist, because the fact that the swimmers are associated with a totally unreal Beast, with the first of them even touching its leg, proves that the intention which motivated this art-work was not that of describing real surroundings. Moreover, while it is true that the sites of the Wadi Sora are indeed located close to ancient water-sources or rivers which have now run dry, one can say the same of most Saharan rock art sites, and so one should find similar swimmers everywhere. But among the hundreds of thousands of rock art images in the Sahara, this is the only place where they exist.

Hence it is necessary to seek another approach to interpretation, taking into account on the one hand the extremely localized geographical situation of our 'Beast + Swimmers' association, and on the other the fact that the act of painting could not have been spontaneous or strictly individual, given the long preparation of colours that it demanded, and the know-how this implies. Without claiming a complete decipherment, our reading will thus take into account to a reasonable extent the mythological or ritual dimension of the works.

### **The hand stencils**

Since hand stencils were made, for almost thirty thousand years, and on at least four continents, by painters from extremely diverse cultures and very different periods, it is impossible to see in them a univocal sign, a kind of 'universal symbol' which a reading grid might enable one to decipher.

In the Sahara, several sites with hand stencils were already known, for example at Korossom Timmy<sup>12</sup> and close to Uri in the Tibesti (Chad).<sup>13</sup> The richest – until the discovery of the cave of the Beasts – was the 'Grotta delle mani', in the Algerian Tadrart, where fifty-seven hands appear on the rock in a whitish halo.<sup>14</sup>

A few rare hand stencils made by projecting a white pigment are to be found in the Tassili-n-Ajjer, in particular at Sefar and Jabbaren,<sup>15</sup> and in the Acacus; those

12. A. & S. Scarpa Falce, 'Korossom Timmy (Tibesti orientale, Ciad)', *Sahara*, 6, 1994, p. 89 and pl. G.

13. A. & B. Boccazzi, 'Riparo delle Mani', in *Arte rupestre nel Ciad. Borku, Ennedi, Tibesti*, Milano, 1996, p. 34 and photo A.

14. G. Faleschini *et al.*, 'Le tracce antropiche preistoriche nell'Oued Berigh, Tassili N'Ajjer', *L'Universo*, 63, 1988, 1, p. 79.

15. J.-D. Lajoux, *Tassili n'Ajjer. Art rupestre du Sahara préhistorique*, Paris, 1977, pp. 31, 66, 68, 85.

which decorate a shelter in the Wadi Awîs were also made with white paint, whereas all the positive hand prints there – except for one – are red.<sup>16</sup> The concentration of those in the Wadi Sora is all the more exceptional in Africa because one should also note here the presence of seven child's hands and five foot stencils – it was doubtless difficult to produce the latter quite high up.

What is the situation in the Libyan desert? We have only found a single engraved hand there (at Djebel el-'Uweynât), and only four positive hand prints. The latter are made with a dark violet colour; one of them is located in the Karkûr Talh (one of the valleys of the Djebel el-'Uweynât), while the other three are on a wall in the region of the Wadi Sora, where they are aligned side by side. As for hand stencils, although the Wadi Sora is the richest zone – and even, as we have seen, the richest of the Sahara – there are at least two, very difficult to see, in the eastern part of the Djebel el-'Uweynât: one is in the site studied by the Belgian scientific mission of 1968–1969, and the other is in a shelter of the high Karkûr Talh. Taken alone, these pieces of evidence are insufficient to establish a solid link between Djebel el-'Uweynât and Wadi Sora, but they form part of an assemblage of thematic and stylistic traits which indicate their cultural relationship.

Another important site is that of the cave of the Wadi el-Obeyd, north of the oasis of Farafra, decorated with animal engravings (giraffe, oryx or gazelle, a mouflon, goat) and with eight feline tracks whose pads are depicted by a large cupule surrounded by smaller ones. Apart from these engravings, the cave contains at least eighteen hand stencils, among which there are a minimum of thirteen left hands. One small specimen could have belonged to a child; two others were apparently made with bent fingers. During her excavation of the sandy deposits that had accumulated at the cave entrance, Barbara Barich distinguished three levels which correspond to ancient activities around 6000 to 5700 BC (7000 ± 75 BP), then to one of the last phases of permanent occupation around 3700 to 2900 BC (4660 ± 140 BP), and finally to a few temporary installations in the course of the first millennium AD. The engraved feline tracks were covered by the second of these levels, and so could only have been made between the sixth and fourth millennia BC.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, the excavation did not yield any lithic or ceramic remains, but the pollen analyses carried out on the goat and sheep coprolites found in the sand bear witness to the climatic deterioration that occurred in the interval between the sixth and second millennia BC. The absence of material in the cave, and the fact that a hearth was found right up against the back wall – and hence not in a

16. F. Mori, *The Great Civilisations of the Ancient Sahara*, Rome, 1998, p. 207, and personal observation.

17. B. Barich, 'The Wadi el-Obeyd Cave, Farafra Oasis: A New Pictorial Complex in the Libyan-Egyptian Sahara', *Libya Antiqua*, nuova serie, 4, 1998, pp. 9–19.

very utilitarian position – leads one to see this as a place that was frequented for ritual reasons by the people who lived in the neighbouring villages of the Farafra depression in the mid-Holocene period, which corresponds to the oldest date obtained in the cave.

A somewhat enigmatic engraving, visible on the western wall, was interpreted by Barbara Barich as a boat. It is drawn simply with a curved line depicting the supposed hull, with a series of vertical lines representing the oars, a little after the style of the Egyptian boats of Nagada II. If this identification is correct, then this image, incised with the same technique as the most recent engravings of the cave, could be evidence for occasional contacts between the last inhabitants of the vicinity of Farafra and the predynastic societies of the Nile valley.<sup>18</sup>

It is very probable that the deterioration of the environment led the inhabitants of the vicinity of Farafra to withdraw towards the Nile. But with whom was this population linked? Rock art supplies a few answers, thanks to the hand stencils and the feline tracks. The former recall those which abound in the Wadi Sora, while the latter also make one look in that direction, provided that one takes an astonishing detail into account: half of them have five digits, whereas the tracks of all felines known in nature only have four. So, through these tracks, the engravers of the Wadi el-Obeyd wished to evoke the passage of an unnatural and indeed mythical feline, since this monster was endowed with characteristics that were both animal (the felid pads) and human (five digits). And it is around a being of this very kind that the ‘swimmers’ of the Wadi Sora are crowded.

In 2002, Deborah Darnell reported the existence of a new decorated cave, ‘The Cave of the Hands’, discovered between the Nile and Kharga, in which there are hand images, some of them positive prints, and a greater number of stencils. The only points of comparison mentioned by Deborah Darnell are the hand stencils of the cave of el-Obeyd and those of the sites of the central and southern Sahara mentioned above. After having noted that no cave with hand stencils had ever been found so close to the Nile, the American Egyptologist estimated, in her preliminary study, that the context of these hands implies that they cannot be more recent than Nagada II (c. 3650 to 3360 BC). Although the examples in the most important site of the Wadi Sora clearly escaped her bibliographic inventory, she concluded that ‘the handprint motif in the Cave of the Hands is one of the most remarkable and strongest pieces of evidence for connections between early Egyptians and the Sahara/inner Africa’ (Darnell 2002: 161). As the hundreds of hand stencils in the big new shelter of the Wadi Sora were only discovered in May 2002 by the Foggini-Mestekawi expedition, and those of the Djebel el-‘Uweynât in November 2003, she could not take these elements into account. The

18. B. Barich, ‘Prima di faraoni: la ricerca preistorica alle radici dello stato dinastico’, in Maria Casini, ed., *Cento anni in Egitto. Percorsi dell’archeologia italiana*, Milan, 2001, pp. 23–33.

appearance of these new dots on the map of the Libyan desert makes it henceforth a zone with an exceptional density of depictions of this type at the Saharan level, and supports Deborah Darnell's claim, at least where relations between this desert and the Nile are concerned.

### The 'swimmers'

First and foremost, it should be noted that all the 'swimmers' known at present are not in small, low-ceilinged rock-shelters, like most of the region's paintings, but in very high and deep, exceptional cavities which are visible from very far away and which, in the Saharan context, certainly merit the name of 'cave'. And for the ancient Egyptians the cave, *krr.t*, was a place of the dead. The Coffin Texts say: 'I am taken to the cavern<sup>19</sup> of Khenty Imentyou'<sup>20</sup> – the latter was a psychopomp god playing the role of chthonic guide to the other world, just as Anubis is *nb qrr.t* 'master of the cave' or *nb ra qrr.t*, 'master of the cave entrance'.<sup>21</sup> One of the numerous Egyptian works relating the fate of the dead is called the 'Book of Caverns',<sup>22</sup> and numerous details prove that the Egyptians considered caves as sacred places, favourable to the passage between two worlds.<sup>23</sup> Could our swimmers be related to the residence of the dead? This intuition was already suggested by Hans Rhotert, who commented on the images of the Wadi Sora in these terms: 'in accordance with an Egyptian parallel, one might think of a cult of the dead'.<sup>24</sup> The question deserves to be asked again thanks to the reading of another passage in the Coffin texts which says: 'The door of the cavern of those who are in the Noun (name of the primordial ocean, considered as the kingdom of the dead) is opened, the cold waters of those who are in the sunshine are thrown open for you.'<sup>25</sup> This shows us that there is a relationship between the cave and the aquatic world into which the dead sink. According to the Coffin texts, the deceased shouts: 'Water is upon me.'<sup>26</sup> And in the 'Livre de la Nuit', the latter are depicted in a swimming position, and are called *nni.w*, 'the tired ones, the swimmers'.<sup>27</sup> Since death is considered as a drowning, and the deceased as a drowned person or a floating corpse, *mbi* or *brp*, the dead are addressed thus in the Book of Gates: 'O drowned ones, who are in the water, swimmers, who are in the stream, see Re, who enters his

19. Faulkner suggests an alternative translation as 'mansion'.

20. A. de Buck, *Egyptian Coffin Texts*, Chicago, 1935–61, II, 253 d–f.

21. 'Anubis is indeed *nb ra qrr.t* 'Lord of the mouth of the cavern' [...] On one relief from Saqqâra, the deity is called *nb-qrr.t.*, 'lord of the cavern' (Th. DuQuesne, *Jackal at the Shaman's Gate*, London, 1991, p. 16); *nb ra qrr.t* is translated "Herr der Höhlenöffnungen" by B. Altenmüller, *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Band I, 1975, s.v. Anubis, col. 328.

22. E. Hornung, 'Höhlenbuch', in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, II, Wiesbaden, 1977, pp. 1230–1.

23. D. Wildung 'Höhlenheiligtum', in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, II, Wiesbaden, 1977, pp. 1231–2.

24. Rhotert, *Libysche Felsbilder* (n. 1 above), p. 105.

25. De Buck, *Coffin Texts* (n. 20 above), VI, 170 a–b.

26. *Ibid.*, III, 360.

27. J. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy According to Ancient Egyptian Conceptions*, Leiden, 1960, p. 83.

boat, great of mystery [...] Well then, get up, tired ones. See Re. He takes care of you. Re says to them: Exit for your heads [= your head above the water], O sinking ones. Movement of the arms for your arms, O overturned ones. Circulation for your legs, O swimmers [= movement of arms and legs in swimming].<sup>28</sup>

Weary, overturned, in a state of exhaustion, these swimmers certainly need help to avoid the net of the ‘fishermen of *nní.w*’.<sup>29</sup> Reciting the ‘formula for escaping the net’ of chapter 153 of the Book of the Dead, they strive to flee magically to the gods who might seize them in their net, at the same time as the spirits of evil and the Sethian animals.<sup>30</sup>

According to another compilation of funerary traditions, it is Horus who addresses himself thus to the deceased: ‘O drowned ones, who are dark in Nun, whose arms are at the height of their faces, o you whose faces are overturned in the netherworld, whose dorsal vertebrae are in the water, O you, who float on Nun, as persons lying on their backs ... breath belongs to your souls [...] Swimming movements belong to your arms [...] You are these who are in Nun, the drowned ones’.<sup>31</sup> Could this not be a description of the ‘swimmers’ of the Wadi Sora (Fig. 14)? Their curved aspect may even have a funerary connotation, since the ancient Egyptians had obviously noticed that death contracts (*krf*) certain parts of the body, which several spells in the Coffin Texts were intended to straighten out.<sup>32</sup>

Other figures which may depict the dead are those drawn head-downward (Fig. 15), and which are always found close to the swimmers. Death was particularly difficult to depict graphically, and a frequent visual trick consists of representing dead beings by showing them upside down. Numerous hymns in the Coffin Texts are aimed at avoiding the deceased ‘being upturned’, or ‘walking head downward’. Chapter 51 of the Book of the Dead is a ‘formula for not walking head downward’ and chapter 189 contains a ‘formula for avoiding someone walking head downward and eating excrement’. Death is conceived as a reversal, an anti-life, and this is why the deceased are said to be walking head downward, in the darkness, while feeding on excrement.<sup>33</sup>

Of course, even if they are not precisely dated, the rock paintings which we are analysing are much earlier than these texts; but the latter are themselves evidence for a late state of ancient traditions, which certainly did not appear *ex nihilo*. Should the ‘swimmer’ images of the caves of the Wadi Sora be interpreted within the

28. Ibid. p. 236.

29. N. Grimal, ‘Les «Noyés» de Balat’, in *Mélanges offerts à Jean Vercoutter*, Paris, 1985, pp. 111–21.

30. M. Alliot, ‘Les Rites de la chasse au filet, aux temples de Karnak, d’Edfou et d’Esneh’, *Revue d’Égyptologie*, 5, 1946, pp. 57–118 (114).

31. Zandee, *Death* (n. 27 above), p. 236.

32. De Buck, *Coffin Texts* (n. 20 above), III, 256 b.

33. Zandee, *Death* (n. 27 above), pp. 74–8.



framework of an early state of the same funerary symbolism, associating the cave with swimming in the other world? This is all the more probable because they are accompanied by the enigmatic Beast, whose otherwise mysterious presence makes sense in this context.

### The Beast

In 1999, Yves Gauthier and Giancarlo Negro visited the Gilf Kebîr, and took the opportunity to explore the vicinity of the henceforth famous 'cave of the swimmers'. In particular, a few kilometres to the north-north-west of the localities reported by Almásy, they found a small shelter decorated with a figure that left them perplexed, although they could see that it was related to the 'very enigmatic' creature previously published by Rhotert. They described it as evoking a canid or feline which only had 'three legs with curious ends' and concluded by suggesting that it might be a 'possible mythical animal'.<sup>34</sup> It is interesting to note that this second example of the Beast was associated with hand stencils (even being superimposed on one), as was already the case in the preceding site.

In 2002 the big cave already mentioned above was discovered, and in November 2003 three new Beasts, accompanied by people, were found in a discreet little shelter, which brings the total number of depictions of this being to thirty-five. With their apparent variety, these figures seem to defy interpretation: in their current state of conservation, at least nine of them are endowed with a penis, four have only two legs, twenty-eight have three, and only one has four; ten seem to have cloven hooves or two digits, while one displays powerful claws; twenty-seven have a long, raised tail (generally ending in a circular floss), four have a short, hanging tail (but one has a short, raised bifid specimen), and fifteen are touched by people. What is one to make of such a menagerie?

First of all, despite their differences and although one cannot identify them as any real, known animal, these Beasts all have a certain similarity which prevents one attributing them merely to the individual fantasy of inventive artists. They often seem to associate characteristics of animals (feline? baboon? bovine?) and humans (articulation of the limbs, sometimes with a kind of foot). It is all the more likely that they correspond to a coherent mythology in that they are only found in the vicinity of the Wadi Sora and in other parts of the Sahara. This zone, formerly populated, became a desert, and its henceforth hostile nature seems to have made it even more remote from the inhabited world. This is a place which is related to the 'limits of the world' which ancient geographers peopled with monsters, those *terrae incognitae* which could only be populated by half-human cynocephalous beings

34. Y. Gauthier and G. Negro, 'Nouveaux documents rupestres des environs du Wâdi Sura (Gilf Kebir, S.-O. de l'Égypte)', *Bulletin de la Société d'études et de recherches préhistoriques des Eyzies*, 48, 1999, pp. 62–79 (66 and fig. 13).

since, to use Claude Doumet-Serhal's expression, 'in the Land of the Unknown lives the Beast'.<sup>35</sup>

On these Beasts, in place of a head, one can only see a kind of curious invagination between two lumps of unequal size, which does not correspond to the anatomy of any known quadruped. This characteristic, linked to a very pronounced curvature of the spine, is to be found on all the examples currently recorded, which does not prevent certain Beasts from engulfing humans, whether swimmers or not. Other people approach them, and even touch them, placing their hands directly in contact with the mouth, belly, penis or tail of these monsters.

In the Wadi Sora, the orientation of these Beasts does not appear significant: seventeen look left, and eighteen right. Moreover, if the 'swimmers' are indeed equivalent to the *mmi.w* of ancient Egypt, that is, to the dead who had sunk in the Other-World as suggested above, and without wishing to explain at all costs every detail of the paintings, one can think that at least certain people represent beings of the next world. Two of these monstrous Beasts seem to swallow some people who are ridiculously small in relation to them (Fig. 15), which recalls Egyptian traditions according to which the dead risk being devoured in the other world by zoomorphic demons, starting with the composite crocodile-lion-hippopotamus animal of the famous scene of judgement of the deceased, in the Book of the Dead, known as 'the swallower' (*m-mwt* or *mmyt*). The Coffin texts cite a hybrid monster 'whose face is that of a hound and whose skin is that of a man' known as 'swallower of myriads'<sup>36</sup> and chapter 127 of the Book of the Dead mentions those 'who gulp down souls, who swallow the bodies of the dead'.<sup>37</sup> Chapter 163 of the same book contains a hymn which the deceased has to recite 'in order to save him from the soul-devourer'. Meeting one of these demons, one of the departed recognizes it and names it: 'Your name is Devourer', while another begs it: 'Don't eat me!'.<sup>38</sup>

All of this could well be applied to the images of our Beast surrounded by swimmers, but one would like to have some evidence capable of reinforcing this assumption. Eight of the Beasts known at present (that is, more than one in four) seem to be enveloped in kinds of nets, whose grid-motif is clearly drawn in white or especially in yellow (Fig. 16); some of the swimmers have bodies striped with these same yellow lines. It should therefore be remembered that several passages in the Book of the Dead mention cynocephalic divinities which, in the other world, use nets to fish for bad spirits and Sethian animals, the 'soul-devourer' being one of these creatures<sup>39</sup>. During the mysteries of Abydos, they cut up and

35. C. Doumet-Serhal, 'Au pays de l'inconnu demeure «la Bête»', *Archaeology & History in Lebanon*, 13, 2001, pp. 51–9.

36. De Buck, *Coffin Texts* (n. 20 above), IV 314b.

37. P. Barguet, *Le Livre des Morts des Anciens Égyptiens*, Paris, 1967, p. 166.

38. Zandee, *Death* (n. 27 above), pp. 158 & 160.

39. Alliot, 'Chasse au filet' (n. 30 above), p. 114.

then burned an image of Seth modelled in red wax 'on which net meshes were painted'.<sup>40</sup>

Contemplating the fearsome devouring beasts painted in the vicinity of the Wadi Sora, and when faced with these monsters moving around among swimmers, and with a body marked with the mesh of a net, is one not in the presence, once again, of the earliest graphic evidence for a myth which subsequently underwent developments which only writing can reveal to us? Through the texts, we know that, for the ancient Egyptians, the fate of the deceased was to drift like tired swimmers floating in the primordial Ocean while trying to escape a monstrous devouring Beast which divinities were also striving to seize with their nets. The theme and the organization of the rock images of the Wadi Sora seem to have been conceived to illustrate a similar myth, well before the appearance of writing, since the florescence of regional rock art is dated to around 4500 ± 500 BC.<sup>41</sup>

### Conclusions

In the Wadi Sora, the Cave of the Swimmers and those of the Beasts are distinguished from the immense majority of regional sites through the presence of veritable scenes whose closeness introduces a quasi-narrative coherence which can be compared to the ancient Egyptian view of the world of the dead:

Wadi Sora	Ancient Egypt
'Swimmers' with a filiform deformed body that seems to float or dive.	The dead are 'drowned' <i>nmí.w</i> with a 'drifting', 'floating' body.
Their depictions are localized in the only true caves of the region (and not in simple shelters like the other rock figures).	Caves and caverns are, for the ancient Egyptians, a place of the dead.
The swimmers are surrounded by composite Beasts with human and animal (especially feline) traits.	In the world of the dead there live hybrid monsters 'whose face is that of a hound and whose skin is that of a man'.
Several of these Beasts seem to be devouring humans.	These monsters are 'devourers' 'which gulp down souls, which swallow the bodies of the dead'.
Certain of these Beasts are caught in nets.	These evil spirits are fished with a net, according to the Book of the Dead.

40. H. Junker, *Die Onurislegende*, Vienna, 1917, p. 151.

41. J.-L. Le Quellec, P. and P. de Flers, *Du Sahara au Nil. Peintures et gravures d'avant les Pharaons*, Paris, 2005, pp. 284-9.

It should be added that the legs of the mythical Beast of the Wadi Sora, sometimes articulated like those of a human and ending in 'feet' which differ from one image to another, recall the half-feline, half-human prints of the cave of el-Obeyd, where one therefore rediscovers the 'cave + hand stencils + mythical feline' association.

So these exceptional sites seem to me to have illustrated a mythology of the next world, because their iconography looks like a homologue of some of the mythical tales recorded in the Nile Valley. This proposed reading may seem all the more adventurous because it is not verifiable given the present state of our evidence, but it should be assigned to the old dossier of possible Saharan sources of at least part of Egyptian mythology.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, some recent discoveries give it a degree of probability, because we now possess the proof that relationships were forged between the desert populations and the Nile Valley by the predynastic era. A donkey track, called Abû Ballâs, marked by deposits of jars of a typical, early Empire shape, stretches west for at least 350 kilometres from Aïn Asîl, seat of the governorate in the oasis of Dakhla.<sup>43</sup> If one follows this track in the direction of Gilf Kebîr, one first encounters, about fifty kilometres from Dakhla, the rock known as 'Mery's rock' where there is one of the westernmost known hieroglyphic inscriptions, which indicates the visit to this place of the steward Mery in the VIth dynasty, at the latest in the Middle Empire.<sup>44</sup> Farther along the Gilf road, at 133 kilometres from Dakhla, there is the 'Rock of Cheops' where, beside the pharaoh's name, some locusts stored in a cache have yielded a date around the mid-3rd millennium BC, while nearby a figure of a hip-swaying woman is engraved in a style that is generally ascribed to between 2300 and 1500 BC.

Moreover, the gryphon incised at the same site represents a mythical being venerated by the Oasis dwellers of the predynastic period. Some hieroglyphs dating to the IVth dynasty tell us of the passage of two expeditions, at least one of which was in search of different varieties of pigments and mineral powders known as 'mefat', probably intended for the tombs of the Nile Valley.<sup>45</sup> Some 65 kilometres farther on, at Abû Ballâs itself, some jars date to close to the VIth dynasty. Besides, some finely cut engravings evoke an Egyptian way of treating the desert themes that are so abundantly represented in the Uweynât: a cow suckling its calf, a mouflon hunter, here wearing a pleated loincloth of Nilotic style. Finally, 53 kilometres

42. Discussion and references in J.-L. Le Quellec, *Art rupestre et préhistoire du Sahara. Le Messak*, Paris, pp. 397–470.

43. K. P. Kuhlmann, 'The "Oasis Bypass" or the Issue of Desert Trade in Pharaonic Times', in *Tides of the Desert – Gezeiten der Wüste, Contributions to the Archaeology and Environmental History of Africa in Honour of Rudolph Kuper*, Cologne, 2002, pp. 125–70; R. Kuper, 'By Donkey Train to Kufra? – How Mr. Meri went West', *Antiquity*, 75, 2001, pp. 801–2; id., 'Routes and Roots' (n. 5 above).

44. G. Burkard, 'Inscription in the Dakhla region', *Sahara*, 9, 1997, pp. 152–3; Kuhlmann, 'Oasis Bypass' (n. 42 above), pp. 156–8.

45. R. Kuper and F. Förster, 'Khufu's "mefat" Expeditions into the Libyan Desert', *Egyptian Archeology*, 23, 2003, pp. 25–8.

farther to the south-west, there are ochre mines which were exploited in ancient times, and which may correspond to the site of 'mefat' reported on the 'Rock of Cheops'.<sup>46</sup> There then remain only 190 kilometres to travel before reaching Gilf Kebîr.

The creation of such a track could certainly have resulted from an official decision, backed by important means which were well within the capacity of the ancient Egyptians. But such a decision could only have been made in response to an exceptional motivation, the nature of which is hard to perceive. More probably, this track was never really 'created', and is instead the result of the development of an ancient itinerary, the memory of which had survived, but which had gradually become impracticable: the very track which could have been taken by early inhabitants of the massifs of the Uweynât and Gilf Kebîr who feared the growing aridity of their traditional territory and were determined to head for the river. Indeed, around 5400 BC, the climate had begun to deteriorate, and the dryness was gradually taking hold. This process first affected the north of the region, where definitive aridity had developed around 3000 BC, before next reaching the Gilf Kebîr. After the exhaustion of natural resources and the disappearance of fauna, it was only possible to survive by taking refuge in milder zones, in an effort to discover more favourable living places there. Once these had been found, the memory of the original lands must have lasted for a long time, and was perhaps progressively mythified, following a process which has been well documented by ethnology in many other places in Africa. Perhaps the rituals even demanded a periodic return to ancient cult places, a pilgrimage to important ancient sanctuaries ... like the great shelter of the Wadi Sora. In this way, the memory of the ancient vision of the land of the dead, as well as that of the land of origin, would have been preserved.

46. G. Negro, V. De Michele and B. Piacenza, 'The Lost Ochre Quarries of King Cheops and Djedefre in the Great Sand Sea (Western Desert of Egypt)', *Sabara*, 16, 2005, pp. 121-7.



Fig. 10. Wadi Sora: detail of the paintings in the cave discovered by Laszló de Almásy. A line of swimmers is heading for the beast, and the first one touches its forelegs. Photo: JLLQ.



Fig. 11. The 'Cave of the Swimmers', detail: two swimmers, and a 'diver' down right. Photo: JLLQ.



Fig. 12. The 'Cave of the Beasts', detail of the painted wall. Photo: JLLQ.



Fig. 13. One of the thirty beasts painted in the Cave of the Beasts. This monster is surrounded by three swimmers: one near the foreleg, one under the belly, one under the tail, and one of its hind legs looks like a human leg. Photo: JLLQ.



Fig. 14. A mythical beast surrounded by many schematic characters, most of them reduced to cross-shaped signs. This monster is devouring a human being who is holding his head with both hands, a gesture bringing to mind the Egyptian funerary texts describing the dead as the 'drowned ones ... whose arms are at the height of their faces'. Photo: JLLQ.





Fig. 15. Another mythical monster from the Cave of the Beasts, devouring one of the human beings heading toward it. Photo: JLLQ.



Fig. 16. This 'devourer' painted in the Cave of the Beasts is one of the monsters caught in nets. These nets are often difficult to see, because they are painted in yellow or white, two flimsy colours which disappear faster than the red-tinted ochres. Photo: JLLQ.