ABSTRACT - The dating and interpretation of the prehistoric rock art that can be found in many countries and also in early Egypt, already since Upper Paleolithic times, is a very thorny subject. Besides the difficulties in dating it due to the flaws in stylistic and many other attempted methods, all the ideas that have been suggested to interpret the images left behind by prehistoric artists have been criticized as not reflecting circumstances at the time or what we know of ancient beliefs and practices. In this paper I support the view that ethnographic evidence from other parts of the world, if cautiously handled, can provide useful perceptions which can also be drawn from correlations with other material evidence found in predynastic sites. I also suggest that some of the predynastic Egyptian rock art would have fulfilled, among other purposes, the role of a propaganda vehicle for the aspirations of big men, chiefs and regional kings.

Before and during the time early cities were being built in Egypt as a result of the social and political development that was taking place in the country, we can wonder about what was going on in the minds of those people five or more thousands of years ago but with few results since writing had not yet been invented or was just being conceived and the archaeological evidence from tombs and settlements is of difficult interpretation and silent on so many issues.

But the art those people left behind in the desert, carved or painted on the rocks, the study of its probable purpose in each case and its evolution through time is a source of information we cannot afford to minimize or ignore due to the problems in dating and analyzing the many examples that have come down to us.\footnote{D. Huyge and W. Claes, El-Hosh et Qurta, Sur les traces du plus ancien art égyptien, in L. Bavay et al., Ceci n’est pas une pyramide..., Un siècle de recherche archéologique belge en Égypte, Leuven, 2012, 33-45; B. David et al., How old are Australia's pictographs, A review of rock art dating, Journal of Archaeological Science 40, 2013, 3-10.}
All over the world in caves and rock outcrops petroglyphs and pictographs have been found and recorded, dating back to Upper Paleolithic times, depicting animals and human forms in various activities as well as geometric and other shapes

Some like the Lascaux and Altamira paintings are considered masterpieces of ancient art while the majority of other expressions of rock art are quite sketchy and often unfinished, but all equally important as evidence for the environment at the time, the social and political organization of the contemporary communities and their religious and other beliefs.

Many of these examples of ancient art are in danger due to natural erosion and decay as well as due to mining and quarrying projects, which makes it imperative the careful recording of each and whenever possible, its preservation.

Interpretations as to the meaning and purpose of rock art have varied in time. The very popular notion that they implied some kind of sympathetic magic to favour the efforts of hunters has been rejected in more recent times for various reasons, among them that in many cases the animals supposedly hunted by human figures actually succeed in escaping thus working against the purpose of those who carved or painted them and also because the animals represented are not the ones the people at the time consumed, as shown by the archaeological evidence associated to such sites.

However, some studies do not dismiss out of hand the possibility that at least some rock art may have had that purpose.

More recently the interpretation that sees rock art as an expression of shamanism has gained wide academic popularity although it has also been justly criticized for a number of reasons. For instance, the lack of other evidence than the images themselves to support it, ethnographic data being dubious at best, the likelihood that such scenes may represent ritual but all not necessarily of a shamanic nature, which would make this approach, although fashionable in this time of new age and drug induced perceptions, hypothetical if not far-fetched.

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A motivation having to do with the rebirth of nature and assuring by magical means the renewed stock of animal species could also have led to drawing or sculpting those herds on the rocks.\(^6\)

Among the spectrum of approaches there is also the neurophysiological according to which rock art was part of rituals that favour group cooperation and unity, thus strengthening the sense of belonging, empathy and social ties, through the release of chemicals in the brain while engaged in such practices.\(^7\)

Images involving dancing, hunting and other expressions of group activities could be linked to recent studies that seem to show that every time people take part in coordinated actions as a team, blood tests taken at the time reveal the release of such chemicals and an enhanced result as to group cohesion and reinforced mutual cooperation.

I can add another early but now mostly discredited view of rock art as art for art’s sake, often debunked with quite arbitrary arguments.\(^8\)

As to art for art’s sake, let us not forget that it was a rare but attested phenomenon in Egypt in pharaonic times and likely examples have been preserved such as the artists’ sketches on ostraca, some of them exquisite works of art in their simplicity. It is true that most reflect in their crudity the early efforts of young artists in the making, but others are too well conceived and done and are probably the work of accomplished artists.\(^9\) It seems therefore an extreme position to deny some hunter-gatherers a similar need for occasional personal expression, something quite different from just entertaining themselves or amuse others, as some have argued in the past distorting even the real motivation that drives modern artists.

Art for art’s sake is a relatively new phenomenon in human history since even Renaissance artists created their masterpieces for people or institutions who sponsored their efforts to suit their specific needs, just like in ancient times.

But all artists engage in different forms of art in the first place not to suit anybody’s whims but as a way of expressing themselves, if necessary, within the constraints placed upon them by others.

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\(^6\) A. Steif, Endless resurrection, Art and ritual in the Upper Paleolithic, Ann Arbor, 2010, 54.


\(^9\) G. Robins, Proportion and Style in Ancient Egyptian Art, Austin, 1994, 21.
Some in the past adopted a craftsman attitude and conformed in all to what was expected of them but others fired up by inspiration, added to the required result their own personal touch, as any self-respecting artist would\textsuperscript{10}.

It seems unreasonable then to deny at least some of our prehistoric ancestors a similar drive reflected in the rock art that has come down to us\textsuperscript{11}.

Where lies the best approach then? I think that there cannot be an all-encompassing interpretation given the wide diversity of expressions of rock art. In some cases one approach will match an ancient intention and in other cases we should look for alternatives, always bearing in mind regional and chronological considerations\textsuperscript{12}.

Ethnographic evidence can and also should be brought to supply probable interpretations of certain scenes\textsuperscript{13} as well as other similar images present in the decorated pottery of Egyptian predynastic communities that throw light on the meaning of certain scenes.

I do not share the dismissive approach that questions the validity of rock art evidence in Egypt as a source of insights into the mentality and other aspects of prehistoric life of the people in the Nile Valley at the time describing it as wishful thinking since it provides valuable information that only needs correct interpretation\textsuperscript{14}.

Some examples of rock art would meet the requirements of sympathetic magic since at least one of the hunted animals was represented as pierced by an arrow and belongs to a species that was part of the diet of the local prehistoric inhabitants.

In other cases in which large numbers of animals belonging to one or several species are depicted, often in the absence of human presence, the interpretation of this naturalistic scene seems adequately explained by the view that this would imply a wish to magically assure the abundance of animal life in its usual diversity, the natural cycle of death and rebirth that at the same time assures human survival.

The similar depiction of numerous different animals in predynastic palettes, knife handles and other objects, status symbols of exquisite manufacture and most likely belonging to local chiefs or rulers or to early pharaohs, appear to have a different meaning, underlining the ruler’s dominion over nature, imposing on it an order which the gods want to see in their creation and for which the king is responsible.

A recent study in another part of the world\textsuperscript{15} seems to confirm that as social complexity increased, a transition was observed in the rock art with a decrease in the representation of animals and an increase in the importance and number of human figures associated to the fauna. As reliable dating techniques are applied to the prehistoric Egyptian evidence, it would be possible to carry out statistical studies in order to determine whether similar or other trends can be detected.

Some of the images in the Egyptian rock art resemble others in Naqada I decorated pottery and differ from the many other scenes depicting humans and animals.

In one of them from a Naqada I decorated pot found at Mahasna\textsuperscript{16} that has its almost exact counterpart in the rock art\textsuperscript{17}, a human figure is standing before hippopotami, a female with its young and another adult animal next to it. Attached to both adult animals there is something that in one case appears to be held at one end by the human figure while in the other, it ends on the ground.

This scene has been traditionally interpreted as a man harpooning the beasts\textsuperscript{18} but that opinion is not convincing at all. First of all, all three animals appear relaxed, not dead or dying as it would be the case if under attack by a hunter, one of the supposed harpoons has one end lying on the ground without anybody represented as having thrown it at the second adult animal.

A more believable interpretation is that a man with superhuman powers has tied both adult beasts, one end in his hand and another tied to a post in the ground, thus showing his complete dominion over two powerful and feared animals that have become subdued and are subject to his will.

For a real scene with a harpoon (or a spear) we can see its above mentioned counterpart in the rock art where we can see a hippopotamus tied to the ground and then a single and obviously superhuman person (not a chance of succeeding in tying it to the ground if that was not the case) throwing his weapon at the immobilized animal.

\textsuperscript{15} M. Sepúlveda, Rock art and social complexity during the Late Intermediate Period, Salado River subregion, north of Chile, Chungara, Revista de Antropología Chilena, Volumen 43, No. 1, 2011, 53-72.
\textsuperscript{17} H. Winkler, Völker und Völkerbewegungen im Vorgeschichtlichen Oberägypten, Stuttgart, 1937, Fig. 8.
\textsuperscript{18} See for example, B. Midant-Reynes, Préhistoire et Protohistoire de l’Égypte, Paris, 1992, 165.
A further record of superhuman exploit is provided by another example of rock art in which a man is pointing an arrow at an elephant. Whoever has any idea of how impervious against such a weapon is any elephant will agree that only a semi-divine being could hope to succeed in surviving such an encounter.

Yet one more example is provided by another Naqada I decorated pot from Mahasna in which another superhuman person holds the end of a rope in his hand with which he has immobilized and put at his mercy a hippopotamus of a pair standing before him. On one side, two human figures seem to be carrying out a ritual dance.

All these images can be properly and realistically understood if we see them as part of the propaganda by emerging predynastic chiefs in order to justify their exalted status and the powers conferred to them over nature by the gods so that they could rule the world on their behalf.

On the other hand, we would also be well advised to refrain from too imaginative explanations that cloud the issues rather than provide acceptable interpretations. In this case a sketchy and difficult to read example of rock art at Gebel Tjauti is described as what looks like a king slaying a prisoner, similar to the scene in Narmer’s palette, but the king’s attitude, if he is indeed an early ruler, is not similar at all, he is holding a mace or a sceptre with the other hand, and the supposed prisoner is hardly discernible, while just above there is the same person in the same attitude but with no victim in his vicinity, unless the Horus falcon could be considered as such. Most likely a military victory or sacrifice is not represented here but perhaps instead a ceremony of obscure nature.

In other examples of early Egyptian rock art we can see what is perhaps the first or one of the first representations in ancient Egyptian iconography of the Set animal, as well as the depiction of other ceremonies of unclear nature or early royal expeditions.

When we see on the walls of later monuments huge images of the pharaoh defeating the enemies of Egypt or being favoured by the gods, besides the religious connotations of such images, one of their purposes is royal propaganda, often exaggerating the royal exploits in order to convey to a mostly illiterate population that they were being ruled by a divine being.

There is no valid reason to think that this practice only started in pharaonic times when we have so many examples of predynastic rock art and decorated pottery which fulfilled the same purpose of underlining the superhuman nature of early rulers.

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19 H. Winkler, Völker und Völkerbewegungen, Fig. 14.
21 A. Jiménez Serrano, From Lower Nubia to Middle Egypt: Strategies in the Late Predynastic Period, Cahiers Caribéens d’Égyptologie 15, 2011, 31 and Fig. 2.
Let us bear in mind that the decorated pots we are mentioning here were not merely confined to the privacy of the tomb but were most certainly used during the life of their owner for the feasts that periodically took place, where the propaganda value of their decoration could be effective. It has been pointed out that many predynastic decorated pots bear marks of having been put to some use before their final funerary purpose.\textsuperscript{22}

There is a continuity as we move into pharaonic times and the birth of ancient Egyptian civilization of this propaganda campaign, as confirmed by the decoration of Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis and the Gebel el Arak knife handle, both almost certainly the possession of early rulers, and both with another superhuman person holding two lions with his bare hands. Then for example in the Narmer palette, the king as an enraged bull destroys with his horns a fortified city.

If we agree that the monumental inscriptions carved on the walls of later temples depicting the great victories of the king as a larger than life warrior trampling over his dead enemies are a form of rock art, then the royal propaganda had a long history going well into prehistoric times.

\textsuperscript{22} B. Midant-Reynes and N. Buchez, Adaïma, Économie et habitat, Cairo, 2002, 571.