

# Sluguilla Lawash, an open air site with Rock Art in the Western Sahara

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## 1. Introduction

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The University of Girona (UdG) has collaborated and is collaborating with The Ministry of Culture of the government of the Democratic Republic of Arabian Sahara (RASD) on various projects in the Western Sahara since 1995. The result of one of those projects was the creation of The National Museum of the Saharan People (Serra et al., 1997). At present it is carrying out a project of documentation and study of the Saharan cultural patrimony, principally in archaeology.

The archaeological patrimony of the Sahara is one of great wealth; extensive zones of rock shelters with prehistoric paintings, open air sites with prehistoric rock engravings, a great quantity of funeral monuments, Paleolithic and Neolithic material above ground, etc. The years of warfare have caused much damage to this patrimony that will be irreparable if urgent measures are not taken.

During August of 1997 a campaign of study was begun on prehistoric rock engravings and paintings of the Western Sahara, precisely at Sluguilla Lawash and Rekeiz (Soler et al., 1997). This work was preceded by two expeditions that included members of The Ministry of Culture of RASD, when we visited the liberated Saharan territory and we prepared the work to be carried out establishing the criteria for priority and urgency.

We present here one of the sites we are studying at present: Sluguilla Lawash. This work is still provisional and incomplete until such time as new work in the field permits an outline of the extension and importance of this area.

## 2. Sluguilla Lawash

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Sluguilla is a zone situated in the Hamada, a stony desert that extends along the Northern part of RASD and to the West of Algeria. It is very flat, stony and arid with night and day temperatures that oscillate by as many as 30° both in summer and in winter.

In the centre of the zone there is an enormous plain that is completely flat covered with clay material. It is in fact an extensive wadi with almost no slope. When flooded it is like a shallow lake and its waters drain slowly towards the basin of Tinduf. It is this wadi that has the name of Sluguilla. This wadi and its banks form an area with its own characteristic scenery, of great simplicity, very arid (the nearest well is about 90 km away) and of great beauty. The route crosses part of this area from Rabuni to Bir Lehlu; when it mounts the southern bank of the wadi it crosses the zone with the greatest density of engravings.

The southern limit of the great plain has gentle slopes, with low hills separated by small wadis (fig. 1). They are formed by sedimentary material of an ancient Devonian sea. Each one of these low hills separated by the wadis will be treated, with their engraved rocks, as different sectors. At the moment we know of 13 sectors.

To the North, the sectors of the site border with the ancient wadi or lake of Sluguilla. Here the blocks that support the engravings disappear and the dark gray of the elevated zones

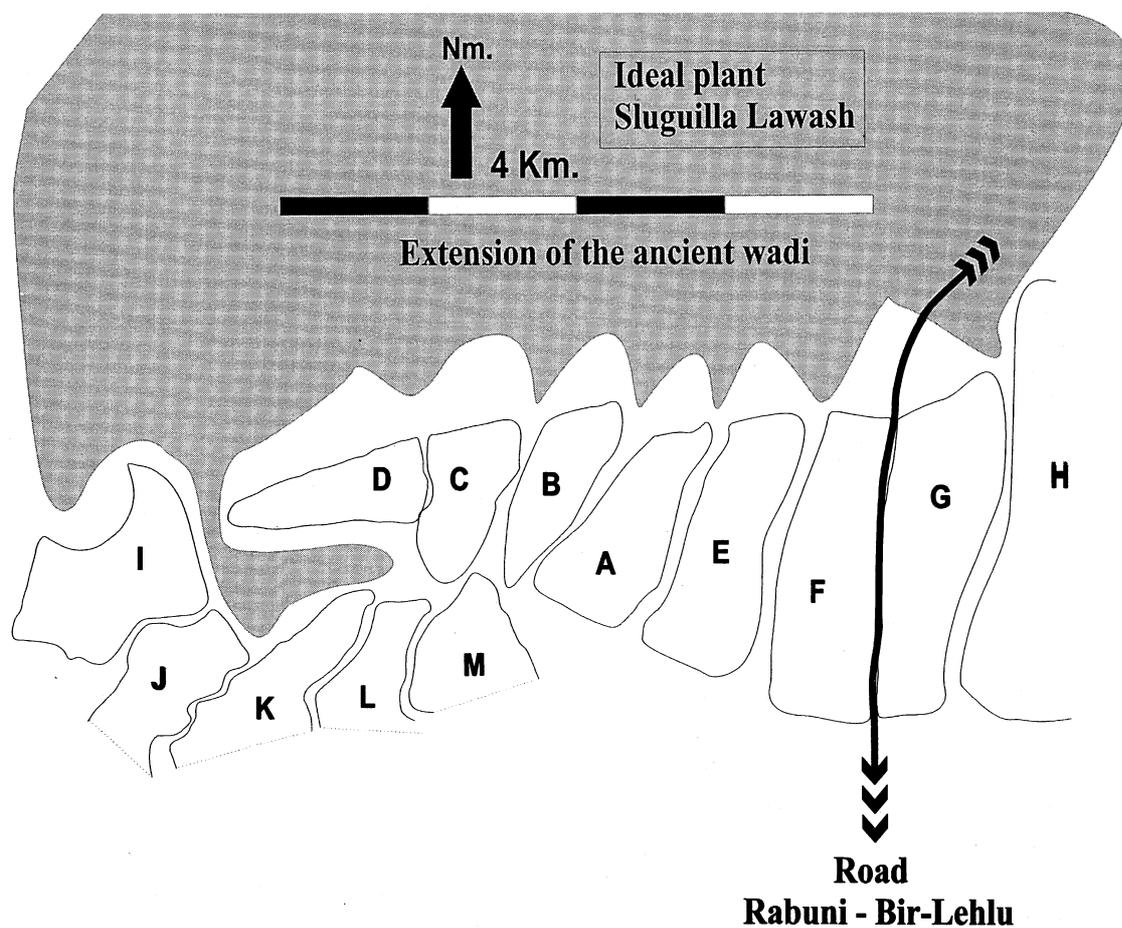


FIG. 1 – Sluguilla Lawash (RASD). The sectors with engraved rocks, south of the lake.

become a light brown and yellowish of the more clayey sediments. To the East and to the West we have not yet been able to find the limit of the artistic representations but it is probable that they continue along the length of the bank of the wadi, as more to the East of sector H and more to the West of the sector I it is possible to see groups of characteristics rocks which we have not yet visited. To limit the rock engravings is an objective to be realised in the next campaigns. Towards the South the group of rocks disappears therefore there are no possible supports for the engravings. The sectors “J”, “K”, “L” and “M”, understood as being elevations between wadis, continue towards the South, and are limited for the disappearance of the groups of supporting rocks. On the other hand the sectors “A”, “B”, “C”, “D”, “E”, “F”, “G” and “I” are clearly framed by the wadis, while “H” is not yet limited by the eastern side.

In all of these sectors layers of dark Devonian rocks appear. On the low rise bordering the level of the Sluguilla Lake stand some flat horizontal blocks. It is here where the engravings are to be found. The majority of the rocks are fractured due to the drastic changes of temperature. More to the South the ground rises and the large blocks disappear and with them the engravings. The ground is covered with rocks with small faces that do not offer appropriate surfaces.

Between the blocks with engravings there is to be found on the ground other archaeological remains, although somewhat scarce compared with what is normal in the Western Sahara. They are of lithic industry of an archaic type: flakes, cores and bifaces worked in rhyolite, with very aeolian surfaces, of leptolithic industry in quartz and flint, and some fragments of ceramics. At the moment we do not know their relation to the engravings.

In some period of the prehistoric times Sluguilla must have had an ecosystem similar to the present savannah with dry and rainy seasons with enough water and gramineae grasslands grazed by many wild animals between scattered woods of acacias trees. Numerous wadis empty into vast shallow wetlands covering an area of tens of square kilometres. Nowadays they are only flooded occasionally by the torrential rains characteristic of this area. During most of the time they are totally dry.

### 3. History

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The first knowledge we had of the prehistoric site that we call Sluguilla Lawash was published in 1973 by M. Milburn (1973) with the name of Ras Lentureg. It announced the discovery of some rock engravings that were found near the route that leads to Tinduf. It included tracings of some of the animals represented on the rocks nearest to the route, which compare with others engravings in the region of Tazzarine and other Sahara areas.

According to information from members of The Ministry of Culture of RASD “*Ras*” means heads and “*Lentareg*” means straight poles or sticks, and this area — *Ras Lentareg* — is approximately 60 km Southeast of Sluguilla Lawash. The toponomy of these regions always presents difficulties, as it must be taken into account that we are speaking of an enormous desert. In spite of this we believe that we must try to describe as accurately as possible the precise toponomy.

In the same text the author mentions other site, Sidi Mulud, which also bears some carved figures, underlining some which are abundant in Sluguilla to, that Milburn considered as being difficult to define and which he thought were signs that probably represented traps used to hunt animals. Our companions from the Ministry of Culture did not recognise this name Sidi Mulud but told us that the wadi Sluguilla passed through three geographic zones that share the name *Sluguilla*<sup>1</sup>. They are consecutive, following the direction Northwest — Southeast. *Sluguilla Lawash* is the central zone, the Southern one is *Sluguilla el gasra*<sup>2</sup> also called *Sluguilla legrad*<sup>3</sup> and the Northern zone, *Sluguilla Ahmed Mulud*<sup>4</sup>. Probably this last one corresponds with the site mentioned by Milburn.

We arrived at the site on the 19th of March 1996. The place was indicated by a rock engraved with two animals, torn from its original place, which like a marker denoted, within the monotony of Sluguilla, the precise place where the groups of engravings could be seen. We visited and photographed many of them. The Minister of Culture for RASD, who accompanied us in person, told us that the place had been discovered by Ibrahim Lili and Mohamed Mojtar, the latter being the guide of our expedition. We took a small loose rock containing a carved ostrich, to Rabuni, where it was kept until it was later exhibited in the National Museum of the Saharian People, where it still remains.

While we studied the place we attracted the attention of a patrol of MINURSO<sup>5</sup> from the base of Bir-Lehlu, who we told of the importance of the remains, at the same time asking them to protect them as much as possible.

The photographs that were taken and the information collected were used to make the panels of the National Museum of the Saharan People. This museum was installed in a building of the camp “27th of February” and inaugurated by the President of the Republic and the Rector of UdG on the 12th of October 1997.

After beginning our study the site were made known by F. Soleilhavoup (1997, 1998). He thought it was unknown and discovered by soldiers of the MINURSO. Captain J.F. Castille, who was posted during those months at the base of Bir Lehlu, having photographed

the engravings, he had them posted. The present author took tracings of the photographs and counted the animals represented attributing the engravings as the school of Tazina.

At the beginning of 1997 members of the Ministry of Culture visited the remains and carried to Rabuni the loose, displaced rock that served as a marker, which at the moment is also in the National Museum.

We returned to visit the place in August 1997. In spite of the climatic difficulties we remained at Sluguilla from the 11th to the 16th of August. We worked over a large part of the site numbering more than a hundred of the groups of engraved rocks, taking numerous photographs and tracings and we began to divide the site into sectors in order to organise a systematic study.

Again in May 1998 we proposed to work in the desert of Sluguilla. We wanted to dedicate the largest part of our stay in the RASD, but a strong wind impeded this and we dedicated our efforts to the paintings at Tifariti. On returning we remained two days, during which time we studied known sectors and enumerated more groups.

#### 4. The carvings of Sluguilla

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At the moment we know engravings in an extension of some 16 square kilometres with 150 groups of rocks, grouped in the sectors previously described. Each group was given a number and consists of one or various nearby rocks and separated from neighbouring groups. The groups are usually separated by several dozen metres. Some or several of the rocks have a decorated surface of variable size as well as variable the number, the size and the quality of the figures they bear. We know of a total of 193 rocks containing more than 275 figures that are more or less complete as well as countless remains of others and a multitude of incomprehensible engravings.

According to the sectors it is possible to appreciate stylistic differences but the similarities between them are striking (remarkable).

The rocks, in many cases with a smooth surface that is more or less horizontal, are an excellent support for the carvings. In spite of being rupestrian art and therefore static, the small size of the blocks, flat with slight thickness, make it possible to remove them with the aid of modern means. We have explained that during our first visit we saw a block that had been dug up and moved from its place, and we thought it was prudent to save another small block that we had documented previously. The danger exists therefore that a large part of the engraved blocks could disappear. This is what has happened to some of the engraved rocks of this type of art of the Western Sahara that was made known and published during the Spanish occupation. They were sacked and many blocks disappeared or were carried away to barracks or museums<sup>6</sup>.

It is worth mentioning the finding of a small plaque, completely decorated on one face, which must be considered as being mobilier art, with the figure of an animal and other markings more confusing.

The carvings present a deep incision sometimes 10 mm in depth and wide, although the most usual is between 4 and 8 mm, with a section in the form of a "U". This characteristic means that the carvings are easily distinguished, although in some cases the erosion of the surface of the support makes it difficult to see. The change of position and the intensity of the sun provoke different visions, varying the colour of the rock, the contrast of light and shade as well as the depth and perspective of the animals. This technique is comparable to the school of Tazina (Muzzolini, 1988, 1995) extended throughout the whole of the

Sahara but has maximum density in the extreme South of Morocco and the North of the Western Sahara in the region of Seguia el Hamra. Sluguilla Lawash is related by its technique to the School of Tazina but the theme is less varied than those attributed to that School in a wider sense. In Sluguilla there are no chariots nor clear scenes of domestication and the anthropomorphous figures so characteristic of that school are scarce; we only counted two clear cases. Neither are there horses nor camels that would help to determine a clear and more modern chronology. To our way of understanding the theme of the figures of Sluguilla evokes the world of the hunter.

According to Le Quellec (1993) the validity of the denomination “School of Tazina” depends on a certain unity of style and culture rather doubtful, even suggesting that it could be deceiving. He states that this apparent unity could be due solely to the utilisation of the same supports and techniques of incision that provoke the realisation of some similar strokes, overall the characteristic of the elongated extremities.

The theme of the representations is principally animalistic, predominated by the groups of bovidae: antelopes, bovines and gazelles, also there are numerous giraffes, rhinoceros, ostrich and elephants, in order of importance. Also appear signs, symbols, some anthropomorphous and many incomplete animals difficult to determine due to the state of conservation, principally in consequence of erosion from the wind, an important factor in that area.

The style is basically figurative, in as such that the artists found their inspiration in the elements of their surroundings, that is to say, the animals that lived around them and which were well known by the inhabitants of that area. This figuratism can be divided into different grades of schematism<sup>7</sup>, which range from the most natural representation, where it is possible to clearly appreciate defined anatomical details — hoofs, horns, hair, manes ... — to animals very difficult to define due to an elevated degree of abstraction of the picture. The animals are generally presented in profile but there are some exceptions, such as that of an elephant head on. One of the most usual motives, seen on many rocks, also pointed out by other authors, like Milburn in Sidi Mulud, is a globe or ellipsis. We baptised it zeppelins as we did not hesitate to interpret it as bovines seen from above, from a perspective that we could call aerial perpendicular (Fig. 2).

One obvious question, but necessary to take into account, is the fact that it becomes more difficult to represent in a natural form the animals that are engraved, even more so when the line to be traced is so thick and for the hardness of the stone all of which make it enormously difficult to represent very small details.

The rock supports, as we have mentioned before, are blocks or plaques of sedimentary stone of the Devonian era, of different colour and hardness. The artists knew these differences very well, only carving the softer light brown ones, while the harder ones that are black or a dark brown colour have no engravings. We only found one exception, an animal with elongated legs that had trespassed onto one of the hardest stones. Apart from these two principal types of rock there are other outcrops of sedimentary plaques with a great abundance of fossils, but here no carvings were found. Probably because the fossils would have distorted and made difficult a clean cut.

The placing of the carvings on the supports are apparently aleatory, but in some cases the artist has clearly taken advantage of corners or cracks, or a natural relief in the rock to place the animals, (not for the realisation). Also the pre-existence of another figure permits them to use some cuts to form another animal together with the previous one, or within the same, that is to say, two animals in one, although this is a question that can be argued because it is difficult to decide whether they have simply made use of a previous cut or if

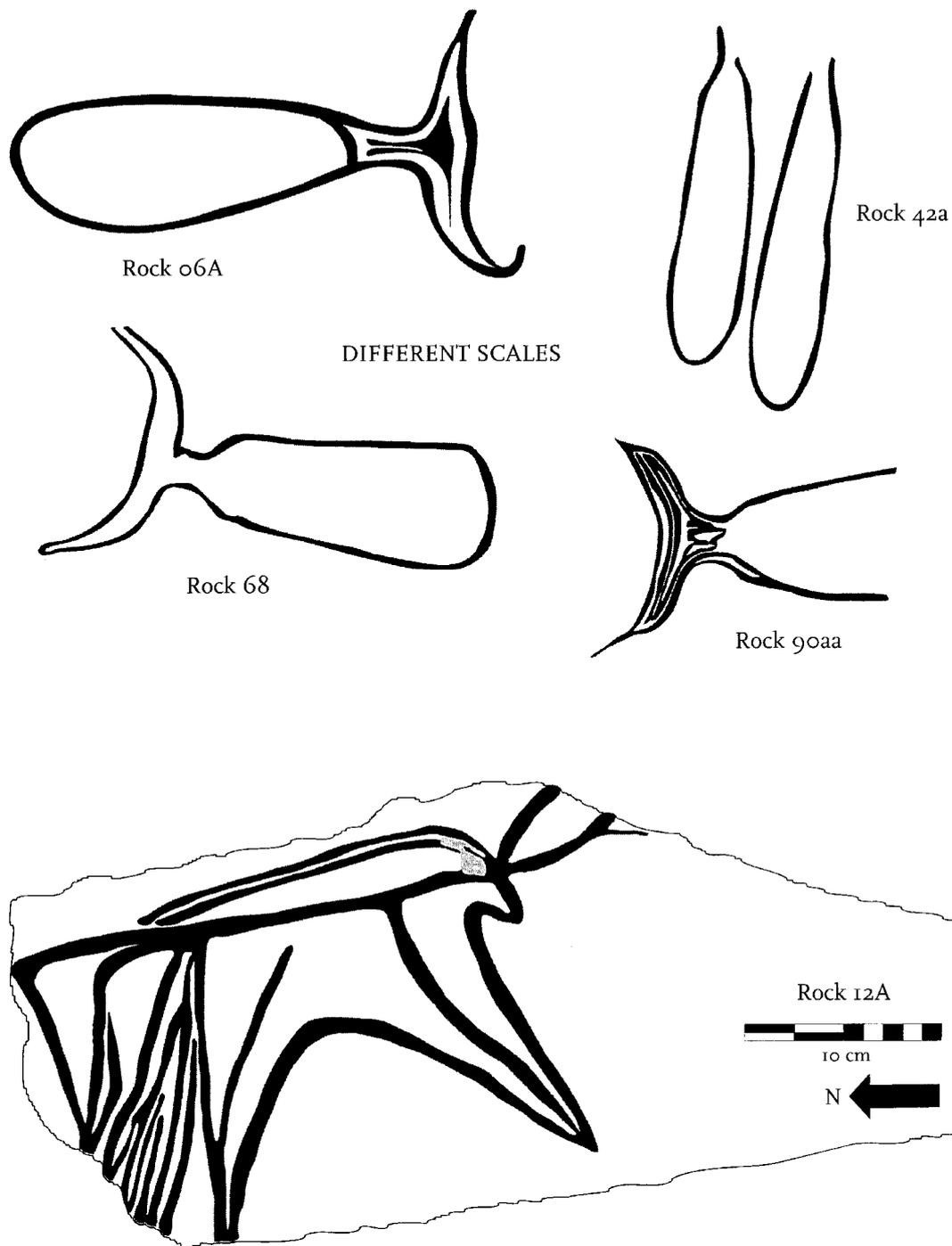


FIG. 2 – Sluquilla Lawash (RASD). The “zeppelins” are possibly bovines seen from above.

they are associations with a special significance (Le Quellec, 1993) (Fig. 3). The difficulty of tracing the cut which they wanted to be deep and wide, obliged a schematism to conform with the convention of style that has been named as the school of Tazina.

This super positioning is unusual although we have documented several cases. Possibly the existence of many supports providing so many surfaces make super positioning unnecessary. These few cases of super positioning do not indicate different chronological horizons nor do they permit the detection of different styles. This leads us to suppose that

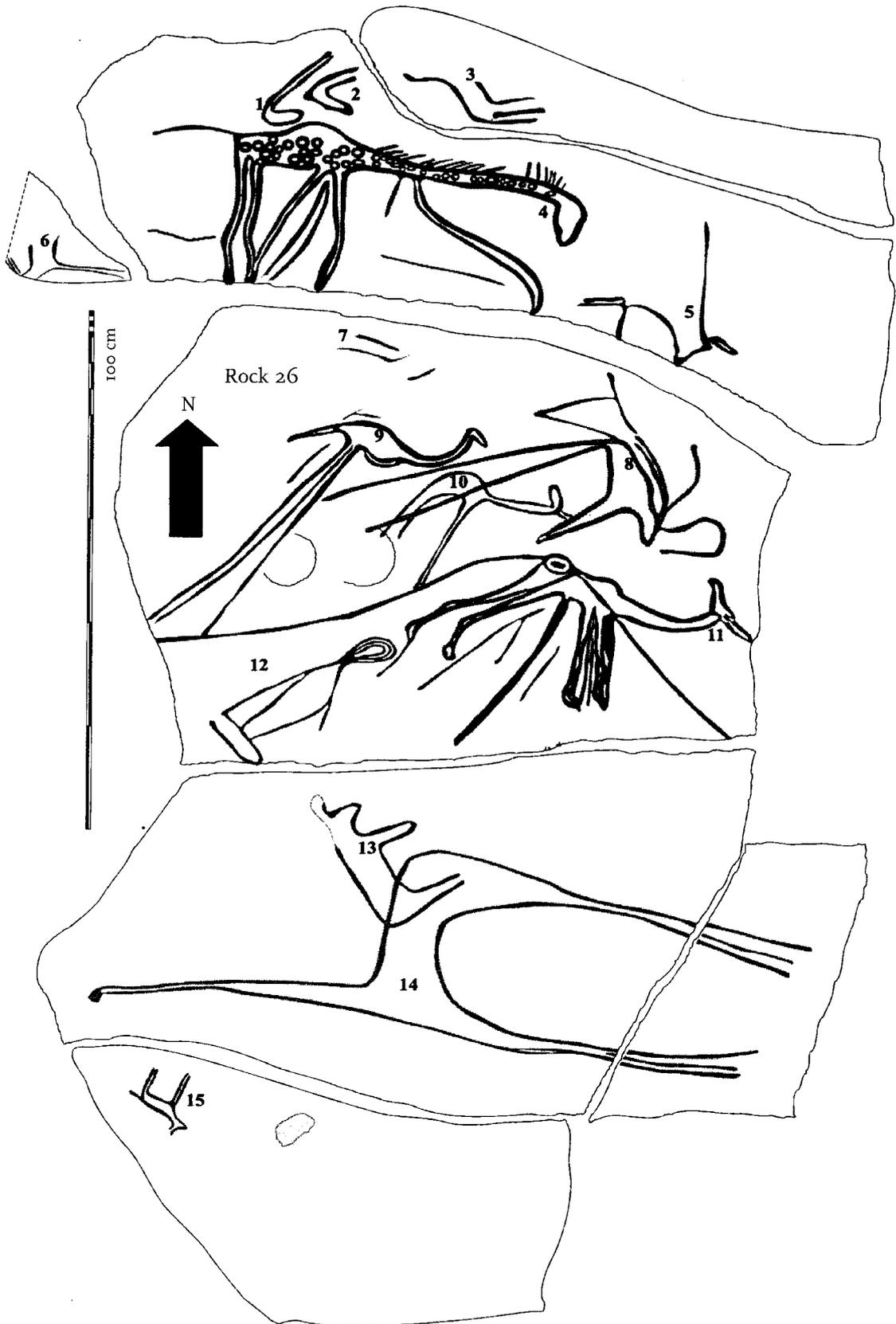


FIG. 3 – Sluguilla Lawash (RASD), Engraved rock 12A. Two animals on one.

the carvings were carried out within the same chronological horizon, within a range more or less wide, but which clearly shows the same cultural stage that was developed in this zone that disappeared when the area dried out and became a desert.

It should be pointed out that the distortion of some figures, especially in their extremities which have a tendency to elongate, some with no possibility of continuation, until the cut disappears. Also there are incomprehensible lines separate from all parts of the body or which cut through them indiscriminately making it enormously difficult to understand. All these characteristics are considered as belonging to the School of Tazina. Another of the particularities of this style is the idealisation or exaggeration in some figures affecting principally the hair, tails, manes and horns.

## 5. Rocks 26 and 27 (Figs. 4 and 5)

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We shall add to this note the description of the rocks 26 and 27.

Rock 26 is one of the most complex in the art of Sluguilla. It is to be found in sector F about 30 m to the West of the route from Rabuni to Bir Lehlu and was described by Milburn (1973) and known through photographs (slides) by Soleilhavoup (1997, 1998). We offer here a direct rubbing (tracing).

The support measures 180 cm wide by 400 cm long and an average thickness of 15-20 cm. The rock has several natural fractures that only affect, in one or two places, the representation and interpretation of the animals. We distinguish 10 determinable figures as well as lines that are indeterminable or very unclear:

1. An indeterminate figure with the shape of a sheep-hook (Milburn 1973) or it could be the head of a giraffe represented without details — horns, ears, and details of hair — which would give a clear description.
2. An indeterminate figure, similar to the previous one. It is possible that it is the head of another giraffe. In this case it is a little more like the head of an animal. Also it is possible that it corresponds to figure 3. In this case the rock would have fractured after it had been carved.
3. An indeterminate figure. It is the hind part where the cervical-dorsal line arrives to the head. It is possible that it corresponds to figure 2 that are separated by a crack.
4. A giraffe, perhaps the principal figure of the rock which stands out because of its beauty overall in the representation of its skin, with circles of different thickness, difficult to carry out, even more so due to the hardness of the rock, and because of the hair of the mane. This giraffe is bending, perhaps drinking. We point out that giraffes, because of their long neck, always compensate by spreading their forelegs, supporting in this way the disproportional weight of their necks. The animal is represented with its forelegs separated with a double line in between that could represent movement. Another confusing line that is difficult to interpret is that which leaves from the neck and with a double wavy line reaches the ground. There are other giraffes represented in great detail but without arriving to the level of this one.
5. The bovine situated in front of the head of the giraffe that we have described. This bovine only presents the head and the chest, without the posterior part of the body. The bovines with the forward horns are characteristic of Sluguilla as all the bovines are represented in this way. We only found a couple of exceptions where they were much more developed, even as filigree.

6. The forequarters of an animal without a head, but with horns pointing backward. Note that the forelegs of the animal are elongated more than normal.
7. Three traces apparently aleatory but could have formed part of an animal that has disappeared with erosion.
8. Antelope with fantastic or double horns. It is not the only case of an animal with double horns. Perhaps it was the intention of the artist to represent two animals but using the same body. This also happens with rock 12A (Fig. 3). Here apart from the double set of horns there is nothing to suggest two animals. Outstanding are the elongated hind legs that are placed over figure 10. Apart from this the antelope is no different from the others represented in Sluguilla as it has the hunchback characteristic of these animals.
9. This could perhaps be an ostrich. Ostriches are animals that appear very frequently in the art of Sluguilla. They are represented in profile, generally complete and often with elongated legs and necks. We also note the ostriches represented with folded wings but here we do not ignore the possibility that in this case they could be some other bird such as the royal bustard.
10. Quadruples with their heads turned back, comparable to fig. 4 although more schematic. They can be identified as giraffe thanks to their long necks and little horns (which do not quite touch the antelope). It is worth mentioning also the lengthening of the hind extremities that reach picture number 11 but do not cross it. It is also worth noting that the use of a single line represents the posterior extremities, belly, and anterior extremities, which is usual in other animals in Sluguilla.
11. We find here a very complex animal. We are inclined to think that it is another giraffe. In any case the identification is not definite, it remains to be compared with other figures of similar characteristics and similar complexity. We could be up against another case of the representation of two animals in one.
12. In the tracing it is not possible to appreciate clearly the detail of the hooves due to the reduced scale of the reproduction but they are appropriate for a giraffe. The head turned to the rear also reminds us of giraffes. On the other hand the back of the animal is doubtful: the two lines which leave from the beginning of the tail carry on to the end of the support, suggesting the possibility that they represent ropes, although it would be strange place to attach ropes to the animal. It is also remarkable the long line of the under belly, which could be an idealised representation of the sex of the animal, but we do not have any proof or sufficient examples to confirm this.
13. An indeterminate figure. Its original aspect causes confusion in trying to establish any identification. Outstanding is the quality of the possible head in the form of a drop, with concentric lines that coincides with what could be the neck.
14. A bovine representation of a characteristic shape, formed as a stereotype, not only in Sluguilla but also in other engravings and paintings in the Western Sahara. It has the horns pointing forward and is in a standing position. Made in one line that is almost lost in the area of the horns and the upper part of the neck.
15. A large schematic quadruped, placed over bovine number 13. Its legs represent a curious bend in the final part, occupying another plaque of rock broken from the original after the animal had been carved. The head is insignificant, almost an anecdote, it has no tail, no main nor other details which would permit further identification. Its general aspect reminds us of a giraffe, but it could also be a gerenuk (antelope giraffe) due to its straight back, not presenting the inclination characteristic of giraffes.

16. Figure of an animal that could be an antelope. The only thing lacking is a larger hump. Its position gives a sensation of being alert with its tail straight and its neck slightly lifted.

The Rock 27 we have decided to incorporate in our work not because it is spectacular — which it certainly is — but to contrast the results with the previous articles about it.

We found this rock also in sector F about 20 m from the route Rabuni to Bir Lehlu and about 20 m North of number 26. It is a support 65 cm long and 57 cm wide with a maximum thickness of 25 cm. It is possible to see on it 5 figures spread over two faces of the rock as can be seen from the tracing. A smaller panel is composed of two zeppelins side-by-side and oriented in opposite directions.

Milburn only described the part with three animals placed one above the other being figure number 9 of his notes; while Soleilhavoup described only the other face of the rock with two zeppelins or what he identified also as traps.

1. It shows a line in the interior like the horns — supposing it is a bovine seen from a perpendicular aerial perspective — more developed and elongated with almost parallel lines.
2. The other smaller one has no decoration within its interior and the horns are slightly curved in elliptic forms.
3. The larger panel is formed by three clear figures and individual lines or crossed with those the function of which we do not understand. Its function could be decorative, complementary; accidental... This rock is the only case with three superpositioning in the whole of the site. Other rocks of Sluguilla have simple superpositions as we have seen in rock 26.
4. Quadrupeds with the head turned backwards, with little detail that permits a clear identification. We suppose that they represent a giraffe or an antelope giraffe because of its long neck.
5. An antelope typical of Sluguilla with an identification of a hump, long tail and elongated legs. It is placed above the previous figure but also takes advantage of the lines of the posterior extremities as its own. That is to say the line of the chest and anterior extremities are clearly placed one above the other; whilst the posterior takes advantage of its line forming one and possibly denoting a short period of time which passed between the carving of one figure and the other.
6. Giraffe with few anatomical details compared to number 4 on rock 26. There is only an outline, but the form of the cervical dorsal line and also the head does not cause confusion.

The characteristics of the terrain and the situation of the carved rocks help to imagine how these ancient settlers could live in Sluguilla Lawash; the animals represented were probably hunted by the men who patiently waited for them behind the gentle slopes, which in those days were probably covered with steppe vegetation, and of which they took advantage to ambush the many animals which go to drink during (beure durant) day and night. The vegetation could not have been very dense, as it did not cover the rocks on which the engravings were carried out.

Due to all these artistic engravings we know that this was a zone occupied by prehistoric men, probably a society of hunters and collectors, where hunting, due to the characteristics of the terrain, had great importance. The artistic representation should be given a great cultural importance so that everyone shall know the significance.

## NOTES

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- 1 “Sluguilla” literally it would be a female greyhound, a very fast dog, which needs great open spaces to develop its speed. This word is used by people to describe a plain surrounded by mountains which in reality describes this scenery.
- 2 “El gasra” in Hasania it means “the little one” indicating that it means a small Sluguilla.
- 3 “Legrad” is the name of an insect which usually bites the dromedaries. But this name has been attributed in modern times, to a missile launcher used by the Saharian army during the war against Marroco, used in this precise zone, near to the wall constructed by the Marroccans.
- 4 This noun could be attributed to either a person who performed feats in this area or to a tomb. It was usual among nomad tribes which traditionally roamed this desert to name areas of land after outstanding people who lived there.
- 5 M.I.N.U.R.S.O. Misión Internacional de las Naciones Unidas para el Referendum del Sahara occidental (International Mission of the United Nations for the Referendum of the Western Sahara).
- 6 So for security reasons we don't write the site situation.
- 7 See the probable giraffes on Rock 26.

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