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## Range and Categories of Human Representation in the ‘Cave of Beasts’, SW Egypt

by

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**KEYWORDS.** — Egyptian Sahara; Gilf Kebir; Wadi Sura; Prehistory; Computer-aided Rock Art Recording and Analysis; Configuration of Human Representation; Typology; Digital Image Enhancement.

**SUMMARY.** — Despite its name, which refers to a few dozen striking representations of mysterious headless creatures, the prehistoric imagery of the ‘Cave of Beasts’ in Gilf Kebir’s Wadi Sura region (SW Egypt), one of the most important rock art sites in the entire Sahara, is dominated by thousands of human figures. They occur in various types, postures and scene compositions, and are often superimposed by other drawings, enabling consideration of the relative chronology. In absolute dates, Wadi Sura’s prevailing rock art can generally be attributed to a society of hunter-gatherers roaming the area sometime between c. 6500 and 4400 cal BC. Based on a detailed computer-aided recording of the individual figures, this paper aims to demonstrate the range and variety of human representation in the ‘Cave of Beasts’ and attempts to distinguish classes, (sub-)categories and types, which might help to shed some light on both the stylistical/chronological development and the meaning and significance of rock art at this unique site.

### Introduction

Discovered by Italian businessman Massimo Foggini and his son Jacopo in May 2002, the so-called ‘Cave of Beasts’ in the Wadi Sura region of the Gilf Kebir Plateau in southwestern Egypt is one of the most important prehistoric rock art sites in northern Africa (figs. 1-2)<sup>\*\*\*</sup>. More an open rock shelter than a cave, it houses thousands of drawings, distributed over an area of c. 18 m in width and up to a height of 7-8 m (figs. 3-4). By far, most of the drawings are paintings, executed in red-brown, yellow and white; the latter colours were also often used to indicate details on motifs painted in red-brown. Much less numerous are engravings, most of which occur in the upper parts of the decorated rock face. Moreover, many hundreds of hand stencils — as well as more limited numbers of foot and other stencils — once covered most of the shelter’s original rock surface like wallpaper, although in many parts they have become almost invisible due to the superimposition of huge numbers of painted figures. The most densely decorated central part of the shelter, termed panel D, averages approximately one hundred figures per square metre (fig. 5). With an estimated total of eight thousand individual images, concentrated on a wall area of some one hundred and twenty square metres and comparatively well preserved, the ‘Cave of Beasts’ is one of the richest single rock art sites in the world.

The common designation ‘Cave of Beasts’ refers to a few dozen representations of mysterious headless creatures, which are among the most striking images in the shelter but appear to be restricted to the Wadi Sura region only. They are often surrounded by small human figures and are occasionally touched by them

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\*\*\* Figures in Arabic numerals are found at the end of the text (pp. 312-319).

(figs. 6-7). The official designation of the site is Wadi Sura II, while Wadi Sura I refers to the famous ‘Cave of Swimmers’, which is situated only about 10 km to the east of the ‘Cave of Beasts’ and was discovered by the Hungarian desert explorer László Almásy in 1933 (for the ‘Cave of Swimmers’, see ALMASY 1936, pp. 78-80, pls. x-xi, XIII; RHOTERT 1952, pp. 52-70, fold-out opposite p. 52, pls. XXIX-XXXII; LE QUELLEC *et al.* 2005, pp. 167-182, figs. 414-455; ZBORAY 2009, site WG 52). Between 2009 and 2015, a joint project of the University of Cologne, the *Deutsches Archäologisches Institut*, Cairo Department, and the Cologne University of Applied Sciences, financed by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG), was devoted to the meticulous documentation and analysis of the ‘Cave of Beasts’ and its imagery, but also investigated the palaeoenvironmental and settlement history of the whole Wadi Sura (‘Valley of Pictures’) region (FÖRSTER *et al.* 2012, KUPER *et al.* 2013, RIEMER *et al.* 2013; for the Wadi Sura Project and its objectives, see in detail KUPER 2013).

One major outcome of the investigations carried out by the Wadi Sura Project is the attribution of the vast bulk of the region’s rock art to a society of hunter-gatherers, or ‘pastro-foragers’, who (seasonally?) roamed the area sometime between c. 6500 and 4400 cal BC (so-called ‘Gilf B phase’; *cf.* FÖRSTER *et al.* 2012, RIEMER 2013; for the position in terms of relative chronology of the so-called ‘Wadi Sura style’ within the succession of identified prehistoric rock art ‘styles’ of the central Libyan desert, see ZBORAY 2012, 2013). This result, based mainly on contextual landscape archaeology and particularly the occurrence and frequency of Khartoum-style pottery as the prevailing pottery tradition of the region, seems to be corroborated to some extent by the absence of any securely identifiable cattle representations in the ‘Cave of Beasts’. Representations of cattle in turn dominate the rock art tradition of the succeeding cattle pastoralists who lived in the central Libyan desert after c. 4400 cal BC. There is reason to assume that the chronological position of the ‘Wadi Sura style’, which is mainly defined by the ‘headless beast’ and ‘swimmer’ motifs as well as by the occurrence of hand stencils, can even be narrowed down to around 5500-5000 BC (H. Riemer, pers. comm.; see now RIEMER *et al.* 2017). However, confirming this assumption clearly needs further study.

During the project’s last field campaign in autumn 2011, much of the shelter’s eolian sand fill — about fifty tons — were removed and the hitherto covered lowermost part of the decorated rock surface exposed (figs. 8-9; *cf.* KUPER *et al.* 2011, pp. 4-9, figs. 2-7; FÖRSTER *et al.* 2012, pp. 201, 206f., figs. 7, 12; KUPER 2013, pp. 30f., figs. 4-5, 13, 16). While no archaeological layers could be detected and only very little archaeological material came to light — some microlithic artefacts again pointing to the Gilf B phase (KUPER *et al.* 2011, fig. 7) and small amounts of animal dung, possibly of sheep or goats — it was possible to complete the detailed documentation of the shelter’s rock art by 3D laser scanning and high-resolution digital photography. Meanwhile, the entire corpus of images in the ‘Cave of Beasts’ has been published in a single volume in a scale of 1:2, comprising one hundred and ninety-six double pages or ‘sheets’ (KUPER *et al.* 2013). The ‘sheets’, each covering an area of 90 x 60 cm of the decorated rock surface, are arranged and numbered according to an overall grid system, allowing precise location of any of the shelter’s rock art motifs (*cf.* fig. 4). With this comprehensive photographic record processed in an equal-area projection now available (LEISEN *et al.* 2013), the shelter’s unique rock art has in a way also been preserved for future generations. This is even more important as, due to the political instability in Egypt, particularly in this border region, it has become impossible to continue field work in Wadi Sura after 2011. At the moment it is uncertain whether scientific investigations in this region may ever be resumed, while the present state of preservation of the ‘Cave of Beasts’, which has been visited by many desert tourists over the years, is also unknown.

Based on the photographic record, the systematic computer-aided capture of all the individual figures and their main attributes — such as colour, size, orientation, shown posture and (inter-)action, superimpositions and body decoration, to name but a few — was carried on by means of the *CaveOne*<sup>®</sup> database software developed in cooperation with R. Goss (FÖRSTER 2013). While it has no longer been possible since 2011 to assess the original rock art, the enhancement of the digital images by applying *DStretch*<sup>®</sup> ([www.dstretch.com](http://www.dstretch.com); *cf.* LE QUELLEC *et al.* 2013, 2015) has often allowed the recognition of faded or superimposed figures or details that would normally be invisible, or nearly invisible to the naked eye (fig. 10; *cf.* fig. 5). Although accurate studies on the spot cannot fully be replaced by informed desk-based research, the latter certainly has its benefits.

The aim of this contribution is to briefly demonstrate the range and variety of ‘basic’ human representation in the Wadi Sura II shelter and to introduce the systematic method applied in our project to define and distinguish classes, types and (sub-)categories. We refer here to whole-body representations, *i.e.* complete human

figures, both painted and engraved. Other ways of rendering the human ‘sphere’ or appearance, for example what might be termed *pars pro toto* representations, such as painted body parts or the hand and foot stencils mentioned above (fig. 11; cf. fig. 7), are not within the scope of this paper (although such motifs may well prove informative in regard to general concepts of human representation; cf. P. Polkowski, this volume). In the following we refer to the status quo of rock art recording as presented during the conference in September 2015, when seven thousand seven hundred and seventy-seven individual figures were entered into the database — a laborious process now coming to an end. Confirming earlier estimates, it can now be stated that the total number of individual figures in the ‘Cave of Beasts’ is indeed about eight thousand, if not slightly more. When the recording is complete, the relational database will be freely available online at a newly-created website (<http://www.wadisura.uni-koeln.de>).

### Main Classes of Motifs and their Percentages

Of the figures so far recorded, the large majority are painted (four thousand eight hundred and eighty-four figures), followed by sprayed stencils (one thousand nine hundred and sixty-two attestations; mostly hand stencils), while engravings — either incised, pecked, scratched, smoothed, or a combination thereof — are much less numerous and amount to two hundred and seventy-two attestations only. The sum of these figures is slightly higher than the total number of recorded drawings mentioned above, due to the fact that for some representations a combination of different techniques was applied, e.g. painting and engraving, as in the case of some depictions of giraffes. Moreover, it was at times impossible to determine whether the faded remains of pigment art were originally part of a painting or stencil.

Despite a name that refers to mysterious headless creatures (which, like other arbitrarily selected motifs, have already raised some far-fetched hypotheses as to their possible connection to ancient Egyptian mythology and religious beliefs; see FÖRSTER & KUPER 2013, HENDRICKX 2015, with references cited therein), the ‘Cave of Beasts’ is dominated by thousands of human figures. As the overview of the main classes of motifs and their percentages shows (tab. 1), representations of humans by far outnumber all other classes. With two thousand eight hundred and forty-seven recorded to date, human figures make up more than 40 % of the inventory — almost six times the number of animal representations (antelope/gazelle, ostrich, giraffe, and others) as the second most common figural subject (five hundred attestations). Neglecting the high number of one thousand four hundred and sixty-seven undefined figures, or rather traces thereof (which could not be identified due to bad preservation or superimposition), the percentage of human figures even amounts to more than 50 %, and furthermore to 78 % if one disregards the stencils. In a word, rock art in the so-called ‘Cave of Beasts’ is very much a human-dominated world in terms of the choice of motifs. In contrast, the famous ‘headless beast’ motif, registered under the heading ‘non-natural being’, occurs only sixty-four times at most, and in eighteen cases this identification remains highly uncertain. For the sake of completeness it may be mentioned that all other classes or categories listed in table 1 — i.e. ‘body part’ (e.g., hand or foot, either painted or engraved), ‘dots’, ‘footprints’ (in a row, indicating tracks), *Gestalt* (labelling of a complex but unidentifiable figural motif), ‘item’ (e.g., a single bag, arrow, or bow), and ‘symbol’ (usually simply structured geometric designs) — together encompass no more than two hundred and thirty-seven records.

**Table 1**

Overview of the main classes of recorded motifs and their percentages within the rock art imagery of the ‘Cave of Beasts’ (status: September, 2015)

Subject	Attestations	Percentage
Animal	500	7.1 %
Body part	38	0.5 %
Dots	9	0.1 %
Footprints	15	0.2 %
<i>Gestalt</i>	33	0.5 %
<b>Human</b>	<b>2,847</b>	<b>40.2 %</b>
Item	106	1.5 %
Non-natural being	64	0.9 %
Stencil	1,962	27.7 %
Symbol	36	0.5 %
Undefined	1,467	20.7 %
SUM	7,077	100.0 %

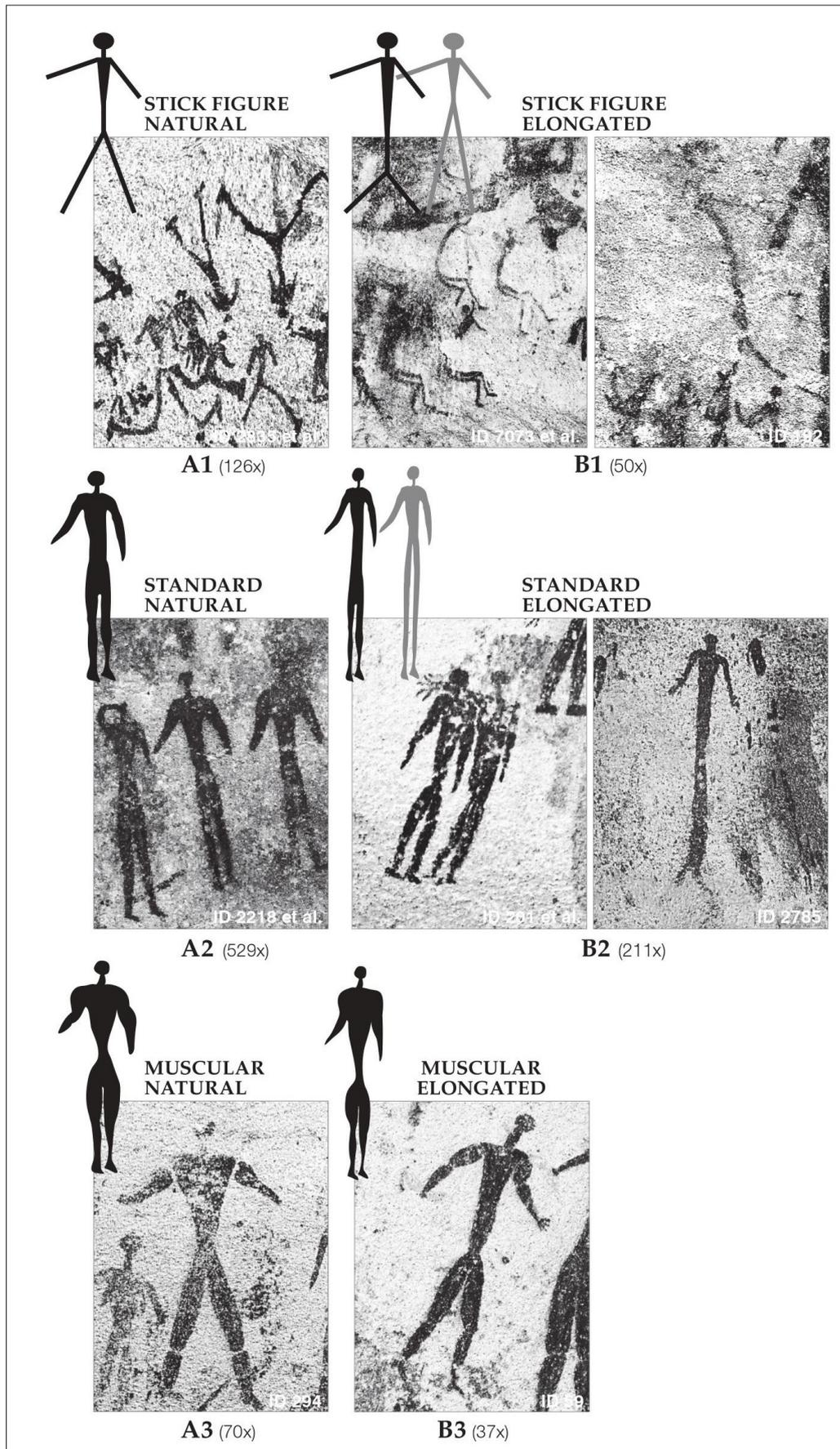


Fig. I. — Human types A1-A3 and B1-B3.

### Classification of Human Figures

The typology applied in the recording of human figures depicted in the Wadi Sura II shelter is based on two criteria: body proportion and shape (for a similar approach to distinguish basic types of human representation in the rock art imagery of the Brandberg in Namibia, see LENSSEN-ERZ 2001, pp. 78f., fig. 25).

The first criterion, body proportion, refers to the size ratio between torso and whole body, or in other words to the grade of elongation of a given figure. Three classes or categories were defined: Category A 'Natural', B 'Elongated', and C 'Filiform' (fig. 12; *cf.* figs. I-IV in main text). 'Natural' refers to representations displaying a balanced, more or less naturalistic relation between the complete figure and the torso, while 'Elongated' encompasses all figures with a distinct lengthening of either the upper body/torso or the lower body, *i.e.* mainly the legs. Finally, 'Filiform' describes human figures that show extremely overstretched, threadlike body parts, especially the legs. Such figures are comparatively rare, both in the Wadi Sura II imagery and at other rock art sites of the central Libyan desert, and do not show as much variation in shape as those of the other two categories (see below).

As for the second criterion, *i.e.* the shaping of the body or body parts, the evidence in the Wadi Sura II shelter suggests to distinguish between five classes: (1) 'stick figure', (2) 'standard', (3) 'muscular', (4) 'cuneiform', and (5) 'plump' (*cf.* fig. 12; figs. I-IV). 'Stick figures' are composed of a few lines and dots only (the latter usually restricted to indicate the head) and represent the simplest way of rendering a human figure by a few brush strokes. The torso is rarely rendered thicker than the limbs. 'Standard' relates to the prevailing type of human representation in the 'Cave of Beasts', which shows an average, more or less naturalistic physique without remarkable characteristics in the rendering of the torso and limbs. However, a slightly stretched appearance of many attestations of this type has been observed, which seems to demonstrate a characteristic general trait of human representation in the rock shelter. Furthermore, a considerable number of depictions show an 'athletic' V-shaped upper body and, more importantly, 'swollen' limbs, apparently indicating a rather muscular (male?) body. Accordingly, such configurations have been recorded as 'muscular'. In contrast, the main characteristics of the 'cuneiform' type are a wedge-shaped, tapered torso, edged shoulders, and rather slim arms (and sometimes also legs). Finally, human figures exhibiting a distinct corpulent torso have been noted under the heading 'plump'.

It almost goes without saying that the transitions between these types — especially between those of categories 'Natural' and 'Elongated' — are fluid, and the attributions therefore remain somewhat arbitrary in a number of cases. As a basic rule it was decided to assign only sufficiently well-preserved human figures to a certain type, meaning that only partly-preserved figures, of which *e.g.* only the upper or lower part remained, or those that had faded away beyond recognition, were excluded. Therefore, out of a number of two thousand eight hundred and forty-seven human figures identified as such, only about half, one thousand four hundred and twenty-one records, were classified according to this typological scheme.

All combinations of body proportion and shaping as defined above occur in the 'Cave of Beasts', except for two (*cf.* fig. 12). Quite naturally, there is no type \*C1, *i.e.* a stick figure in filiform rendering, because 'filiform' already implies a (predominantly) linear depiction. Such figures were therefore recorded as of type C2, 'Filiform / standard'. Secondly, there is, as yet, no attestation of human figures represented as both filiform and plump (\*C5). This is not surprising, since in regard to the main characteristic of a filiform figure, *i.e.* its

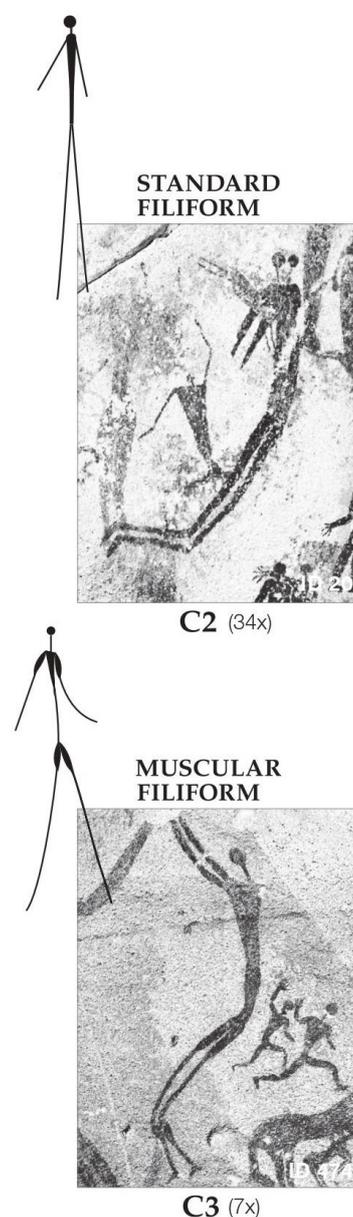


Fig. II. — Human types C2 and C3.

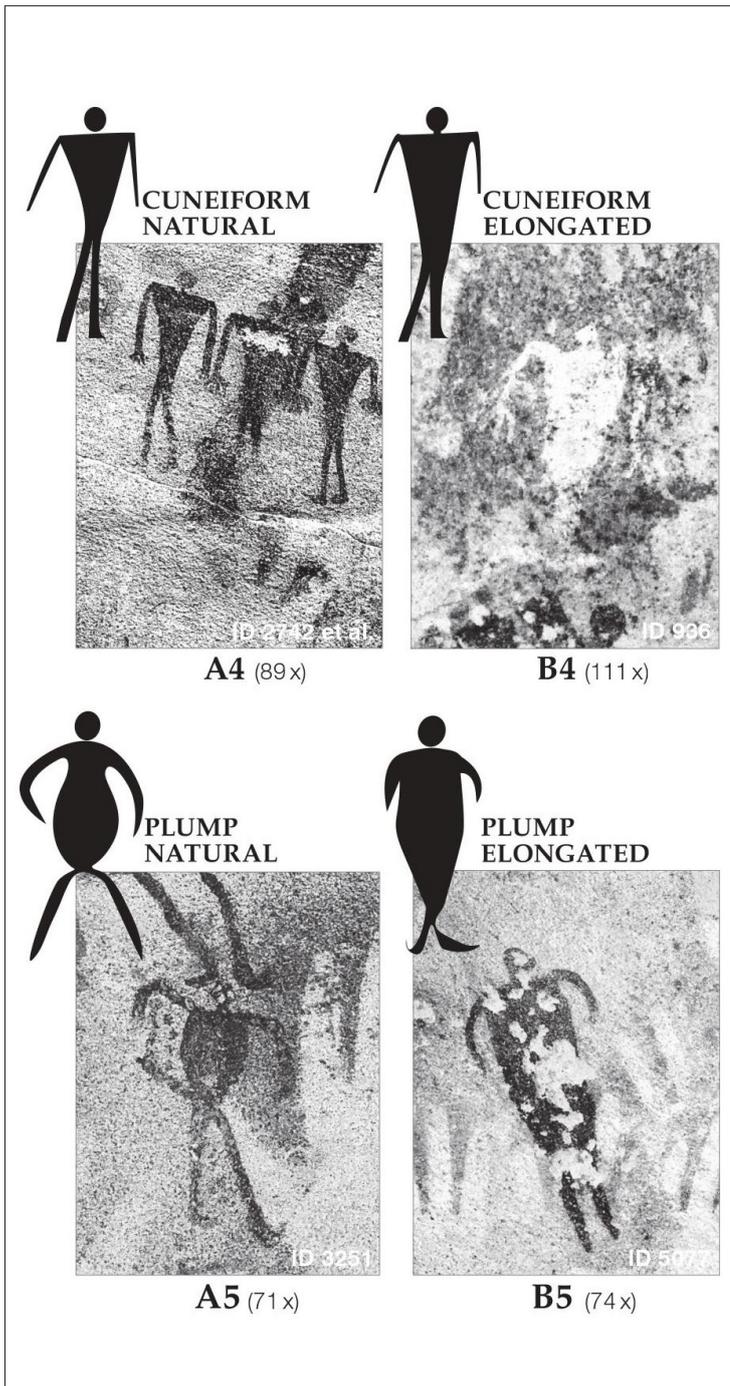


Fig. III. — Human types A4-A5 and B4-B5.

extreme slenderness, a plump torso would probably have been regarded as inappropriate, or even contradictory. Thus the basic typology of human figures presented here consists of thirteen types overall.

As for the occurrence and frequency of the various types (tab. 2-3; *cf.* figs. I-IV), the human figures belonging to category A 'Natural' (types A1-5) make up more than 62 % (eight hundred and eighty-five attestations) of the total amount. 'Elongated' figures of category B (types B1-5) are attested four hundred and eighty-three times (34 %) and therefore considerably less often, while category C 'Filiform' (types C2-4) encompasses no more than fifty-three attestations only (3.7 %). In each of the three categories the 'standard' type (A2, B2, C2) clearly prevails and adds up to seven hundred and seventy-four attestations, or 54.5 %, in total (tab. 3). With five hundred and twenty-nine attestations (37.1 %), type A2 'Natural / standard' (shaded in fig. 12) is the most common type represented in the Wadi Sura II shelter, followed distantly by type B2 'Elongated / standard' (two hundred and eleven attest., 14.8 %). Together, these two types add up to more than half of the total quantity of assignable whole-body representations of humans.

In category A 'Natural', the prevailing 'standard' type A2 is followed in number by types A1 'stick figure' (one hundred and twenty-six attest.), A4 'cuneiform' (eighty-nine), A5 'plump' (seventy-one), and A3 'muscular' (seventy). Remarkably, in category B 'Elongated' the second most common type is B4 'cuneiform' with one hundred and eleven attestations, followed by types B5 'plump' (seventy-four), B1 'stick figure' (fifty), and B3 'muscular' (thirty-seven). Finally, category C 'Filiform' has C4 'cuneiform' (twelve) and C3 'muscular' (seven) as the second and third most types, respectively, both again considerably fewer in number when compared to 'standard' type C2 (thirty-four). Across categories the order of frequency of the respective classes is as follows: 'standard' (seven hundred and seventy-four attest.; 54.5 %), 'cuneiform' (two hundred and twelve; 14.9 %), 'stick figure' (one hundred and seventy-six; 12.4 %), 'plump' (one hundred and forty-five; 10.2 %), and 'muscular' (one hundred and fourteen; 8.0 %) (tab. 3).

The typology presented here is, of course, only one way to structure the systematic recording of basic human configuration in prehistoric rock art. Though exclusively based on the available evidence in the Wadi Sura II shelter, it constitutes a simple, unbiased and empirically reliable approach which also allows for comparison with the iconographic evidence of other rock art sites in the central Libyan desert (ZBORAY 2009).

**Table 2**

Main categories of whole-body human representation and their percentages in the 'Cave of Beasts' rock art imagery so far recorded (status: September, 2015)

Classification	Attestations	Percentage	
A1 (Natural / stick figure)	126	8.8 %	Natural (A1-5): 885 (62.3 %)
A2 (Natural / standard)	529	37.1 %	
A3 (Natural / muscular)	70	4.9 %	
A4 (Natural / cuneiform)	89	6.2 %	
A5 (Natural / plump)	71	5.0 %	
B1 (Elongated / stick figure)	50	3.5 %	Elongated (B1-5): 483 (34.0 %)
B2 (Elongated / standard)	211	14.8 %	
B3 (Elongated / muscular)	37	2.6 %	
B4 (Elongated / cuneiform)	111	7.8 %	
B5 (Elongated / plump)	74	5.2 %	
C2 (Filiform / standard)	34	2.4 %	Filiform (C2-4): 53 (3.7%)
C3 (Filiform / muscular)	7	0.5 %	
C4 (Filiform / cuneiform)	12	0.8 %	
SUM	1,421	100.0 %	

**Table 3**

Main categories of human representation and their percentages in the 'Cave of Beasts' imagery, arranged according to shape (status: September, 2015; *cf.* tab. 2)

	A Natural	B Elongated	C Filiform	SUM
1 Stick figure	126 (8.8 %)	50 (3.5 %)	—	176 (12.4 %)
2 Standard	529 (37.1 %)	211 (14.8 %)	34 (2.4 %)	774 (54.5 %)
3 Muscular	70 (4.9 %)	37 (2.6 %)	7 (0.5 %)	114 (8.0 %)
4 Cuneiform	89 (6.2 %)	111 (7.8 %)	12 (0.8 %)	212 (14.9 %)
5 Plump	71 (5.0 %)	74 (5.2 %)	—	145 (10.2 %)
SUM	885 (62.3 %)	483 (34.0 %)	53 (3.7 %)	1,421 (100.0 %)

inventory, naturalistic representations of humans in terms of body proportion clearly outnumber those that are depicted as elongated or even filiform (*cf.* tab. 2). This may not be surprising; however, the amount of the latter configurations and especially the occurrence and normally detailed rendering of filiform figures in the 'Cave of Beasts' is remarkable. Most of the filiform humans were painted in the central part of the shelter, in panel D (thirty-one attestations), and a little less in panel E immediately to the east (nineteen attest.), while there are only three attestations in panel C, *i.e.* in the westernmost and deepest part of the shelter (*cf.* fig. 4). This distribution and display may well point to a certain significance of the filiform human types in the 'Cave of Beasts' (panels A, B and F in the shelter's upper parts mainly show hand stencils and some engravings, so the absence of the motif there is nothing remarkable). Indeed, there is evidence suggesting that filiform human representations — or at least some of them — should not be regarded as merely 'stylistic' variants or an expression of individual artistry, but rather as signifiers or carriers of specific meaning. A scene in panel E, for instance, depicts a conflict using bows and arrows between two groups of humans, the one composed of filiform figures, the other of humans rendered more or less naturalistically (fig. 13). Apart from obviously stressing the 'otherness' of the two confronting groups, the filiform configuration may well have been used as a way of representing some foreign, strange, extrinsic forces, whether human or, perhaps, even divine or supernatural (though not necessarily

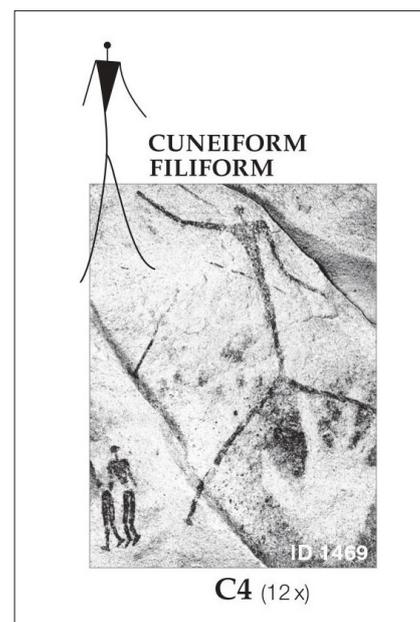


Fig. IV. — Human type C4.

However, drawing any firm conclusions from the occurrence and frequency of defined types, whether in regard to general 'stylistic' developments over time, or individual 'signatures' of (contemporary) groups or artists, or even in regard to semantically meaningful iconographic patterns, would be premature. For the time being, any attempts at interpretation along such lines are open to debate and certainly need further study, especially in terms of the contextual setting of individual figures, groups, or scenes.

Nevertheless, a few interesting and potentially rewarding observations can already be made at this stage. In our

deities known from much later ancient Egyptian cosmology, as has been suggested with reference to other attestations of filiform human types in the ‘Cave of Beasts’; BARTA 2010, pp. 48-59).

Another point may be made concerning the ‘muscular’ types. As already mentioned, such a rendering may well have been used to mark a human figure as male. To some extent this may be corroborated by pair scenes (about fifty are attested so far), which often consist of partners markedly different to each other in physique, *i.e.* robust vs. more delicate, and therefore may well represent couples. If that were the case, the fact that only one hundred and fourteen human figures are rendered as ‘muscular’ (*cf.* tab. 3) would fit well with other observations on visual gender marking in the ‘Cave of Beasts’: only seventy human figures are clearly marked as female by indicating the women’s breasts, and only about the same number of other representations show what might be a penis. As has already been stated elsewhere (FÖRSTER 2013, p. 52), the prehistoric artists in the shelter obviously did not attach great importance to differentiate between sexes. Rather, the ‘generic’ human (LENSSEN-ERZ 2001, p. 331) as a category of pictorial representation, which stresses equality and solidarity of the community beyond gender differences, was clearly favoured. It may be added furthermore that there are only three — and even questionable — attestations for the combination of a ‘muscular’ human type (A3, B3, or C3), on the one hand, and what might be regarded as the indication of a penis, on the other hand. Apparently, if one had wished to mark a human figure as being male, one of the two ways to do so would have fully sufficed.

Human figures that are shown as being equipped with bows and, occasionally, also arrows (one hundred and thirty-five attestations) are possibly to be regarded as — in the eyes of contemporaries — male-marked as well, but this cannot be proven beyond doubt. Nevertheless, such representations again point to groups of hunter-gatherers as the creators of most of the rock art in the Wadi Sura region. Body decoration, mainly evidenced by the indication of white or yellow straps or ribbons on various body parts, probably also had a distinguishing function. It is attested on three hundred and eighty-four figures, including those clearly marked as male or female, thus pointing to a gender-independent meaning or function of such body decoration, or rather its representation.

A further categorization of human figures according to size has also been made. Five categories were defined, referring to the figures’ length from top to toe: XS = 0-5 cm; S = 5-10 cm; M = 10-20 cm; L = 20-30 cm; and XL = >30 cm (tab. 4). The large majority lies within the size range of 5-20 cm (two thousand two hundred and fifty-four records; 79.1 %), while the rest is either smaller than 5 cm (three hundred and ninety-two records; 13.8 %) or larger than 20 cm (two hundred and one records; 7.1 %). Figures exceeding 30 cm in height are quite rare (fifty-five records; 1.9 %). At the opposite end of the scale, it is not surprising to find most attestations of the ‘stick figure’ types accumulated here: one hundred and fifty-nine out of one hundred and seventy-six records (*cf.* tab. 3) belong to categories XS and S (0-10 cm). Nevertheless, seventeen ‘stick figures’ remarkably measure between 10 and 20 cm (category M), and scenes like the one shown in figure 14 suggest that the choice for rendering a human figure in such a ‘simplistic’ way was not always determined by economic reasons, restrictions of space or time, or limited artistic capabilities. On the contrary, this scene shows a very lively and masterly captured moment in chasing a quadruped — probably an antelope or gazelle — by two running humans with outstretched arms, following the animal’s tracks. One gets the impression that the artist deliberately opted for rendering the humans as simple ‘stick figures’ (type A1) to emphasize their movements in a cartoon-like manner — in sharp contrast to the rendering of the pursued (but apparently rather relaxed) animal, which is much more elaborate. It should however be noted that a number of other stick figures of similar size and type immediately follow to the right (KUPER *et al.* 2013, p. 403 [sheet V9]). The hunting scene therefore appears to be part of a larger composition.

### Special ‘Classes’ / Types

Finally, and very briefly, a few special ‘classes’ or types of human representation in the ‘Cave of Beasts’ may be addressed, which fall outside the scope of the basic typology described above. First of all, this concerns the so-called ‘swimmer’ figures, a striking motif first known from, and

**Table 4**

Frequency of human figures according to size categories applied in the recording of rock art imagery in the ‘Cave of Beasts’ (status: September, 2015)

Size Category	Size Range	Attestations	Percentage
XS	0-5 cm	392	13.8 %
S	5-10 cm	1,225	43.0 %
M	10-20 cm	1,029	36.1 %
L	20-30 cm	146	5.1 %
XL	>30 cm	55	1.9 %
SUM		2,847	100 %

coining the name of, the 'Cave of Swimmers' (Wadi Sura I). Without dwelling on the possible meaning and significance of this motif, on which much ink has been spilt (FÖRSTER & KUPER 2013, HENDRICKX 2015, with references cited therein), it may suffice here to say that its occurrence in the 'Cave of Beasts' is, strictly speaking, limited to a coherent row of eighteen figures only (FÖRSTER & KUPER 2013, fig. 1.2; FÖRSTER 2013, p. 53, figs. 6-7). There are possibly seventeen more attestations, but these do not show all of the basic defining features of the motif, namely a horizontal posture, outstretched and slightly raised arms and legs, a bulky upper body, and the head bent backwards. As has already been stated elsewhere (*op. cit.*), the definite 'swimmer' figures in the 'Cave of Beasts' are stylistically uniform and were probably painted by the same person (*cf.* fig. 7). In contrast to the stylistically different 'swimmers' depicted in the 'Cave of Swimmers', they show yellow dots evenly distributed over the upper body (fig. 15). Obviously this special type of human representation remained exceptional in Wadi Sura's rock art history and was not incorporated into the local iconographic tradition(s). It therefore may be regarded as a highly ephemeral visualization of a very specific idea.

The same may hold true for a number of human figures that exhibit pronounced buttocks and a rather broad breast/shoulder area, while the waist is rendered conspicuously slim (fig. 16; *cf.* fig. 10, upper left). Accordingly, such figures have been recorded under the label 'hourglass-shaped'. They occur in various panels of the shelter (B, D, and E) and have been attested twenty-two times so far. Most of them are depicted as standing, with the arms somewhat raised, and many exhibit a distinct cone-shaped head, headdress or coiffure.

A striking posture frequently depicted in the 'Cave of Beasts' (*e.g.*, fig. 13, left; fig. 16, lower left) shows humans standing in a semi-squat position, with legs wide apart and the thighs more or less parallel to the ground (FÖRSTER 2013, pp. 52f., fig. 5). This conspicuous posture has been attested one hundred and seventy-one times so far and occurs in most parts of the shelter's decorated rock face. It certainly conveyed a specific activity (ritual dancing?) and appears as a standard type of human representation which remained basically unchanged over a considerable period of time (in marked contrast to the 'swimmers', see above). However, this already refers to the rather broad spectrum of specific 'types' of human posture, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

## Conclusion

The typology presented here is based on characteristics of human representation identified in the 'Cave of Beasts' (Wadi Sura II), but also provides a basis for comparison with the iconographic evidence of other prehistoric rock art sites in the central Libyan desert (ZBORAY 2009). This might help to eventually determine whether distinct differences in basic human representation relate to evolutionary 'stylistic' and therefore chronologically relevant changes, to 'signatures' of various groups or individuals (whether contemporary or not), or to differences in semantic meaning. Establishing a robust interpretive framework in this regard, however, will require much more detailed study. Apart from the basic configuration, future studies should further consider possible patterns of posture and activity, the interaction with other figures, and the position in scenes and larger compositions as potentially meaningful, to some extent 'standardized' characteristic traits of human representation. Without a doubt such endeavours, however small in their beginnings, will prove rewarding and may finally lead to a better understanding of prehistoric rock art in this remote desert region.

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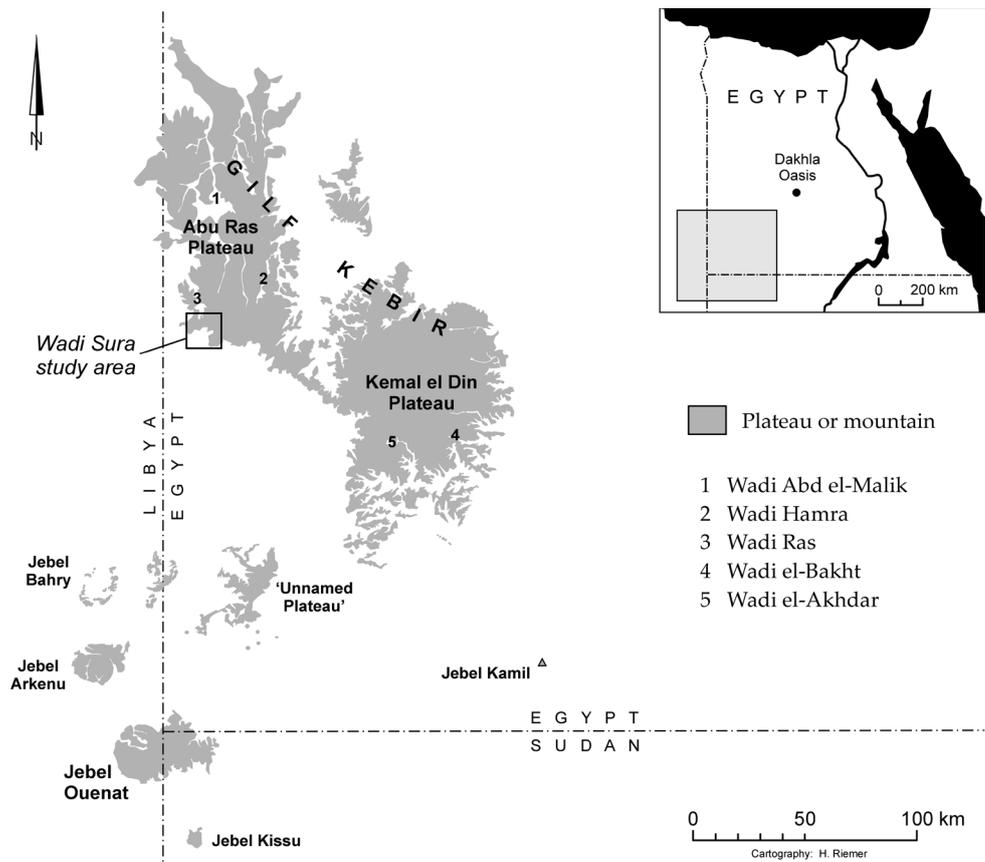


Fig. 1. — Map of southwestern Egypt and adjacent regions, showing the location of the Wadi Sura study area close to the Libyan border (cartography: H. Riemer).



Fig. 2. — View from the south towards the Wadi Sura II shelter ('Cave of Beasts') at the foot of the western Gilf Kebir Plateau.



Fig. 3. — 3D view of the 'Cave of Beasts' from above the rock fall heap after the excavation of the shelter in autumn 2011 (cf. figs. 8-9). Numbered circles indicate the scanner positions selected for 3D laser scanning of the decorated rock face.

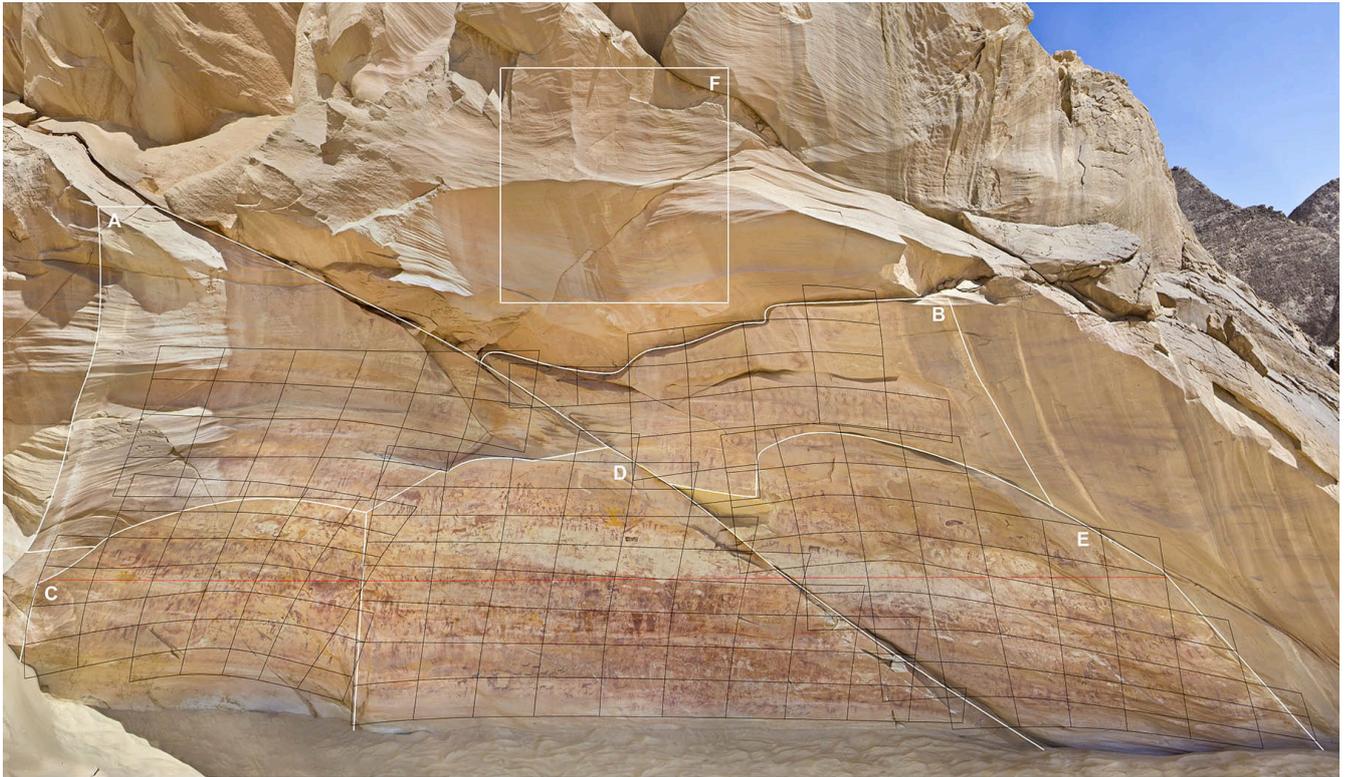


Fig. 4. — Orthoview of the shelter's decorated rock wall with indication of panels A-F (white outlines) and of the applied grid system (black lines). Each grid element represents a 'sheet', *i.e.* a double page in the printed publication of rock art (in scale 1:2; KUPER *et al.* 2013), and covers 90 x 60 cm.

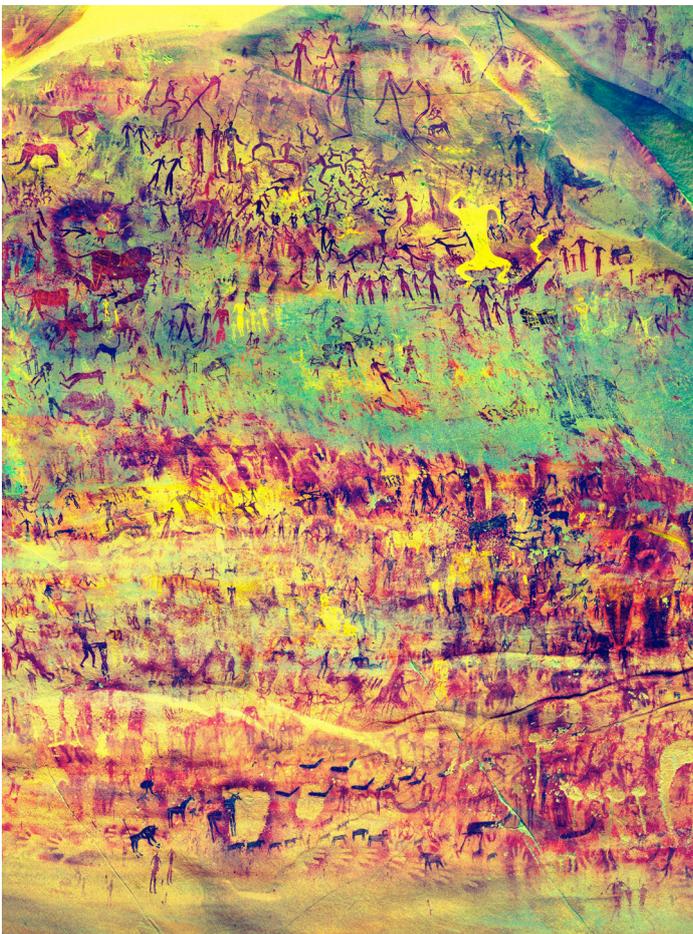


Fig. 5. — Part of panel D (*cf.* fig. 4), the shelter's most densely decorated central area, which averages approximately one hundred figures per square metre. Digital image processed by *DStretch*® with the LDS matrix.

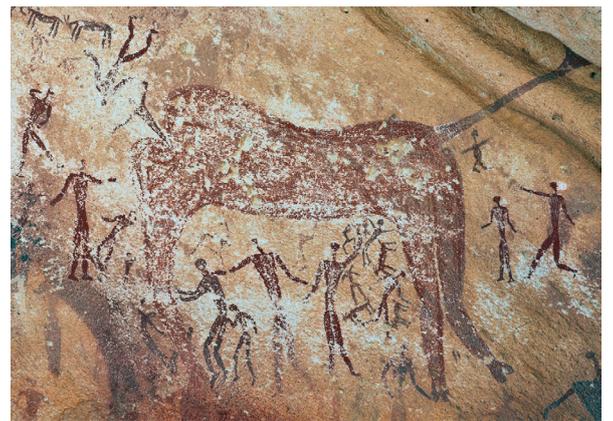


Fig. 6. — One of some dozen mysterious headless beasts after which the shelter was named. As is often the case, it is surrounded by small human figures, some of which touching it. Obviously the creature does not represent a real animal, but is to be regarded as something imaginary.



Fig. 7. — Another of the headless creatures, represented with only three legs and a long, raised tail. Like the human figure in front of it, it appears to show some sort of body decoration painted in yellow. In addition, the image shows three of a number of so-called ‘swimmer’ figures lined up in a row (FÖRSTER 2013, p. 53, figs. 6-7) as well as some foot and hand stencils.



Fig. 8. — Ground plan of the Wadi Sura II shelter after the removal of the eolian sand fill in autumn 2011. To the right, the shelter’s decorated rear rock wall that covers an area of c. 18 m in width and up to 7-8 m in height (cartography: H. Riemer).

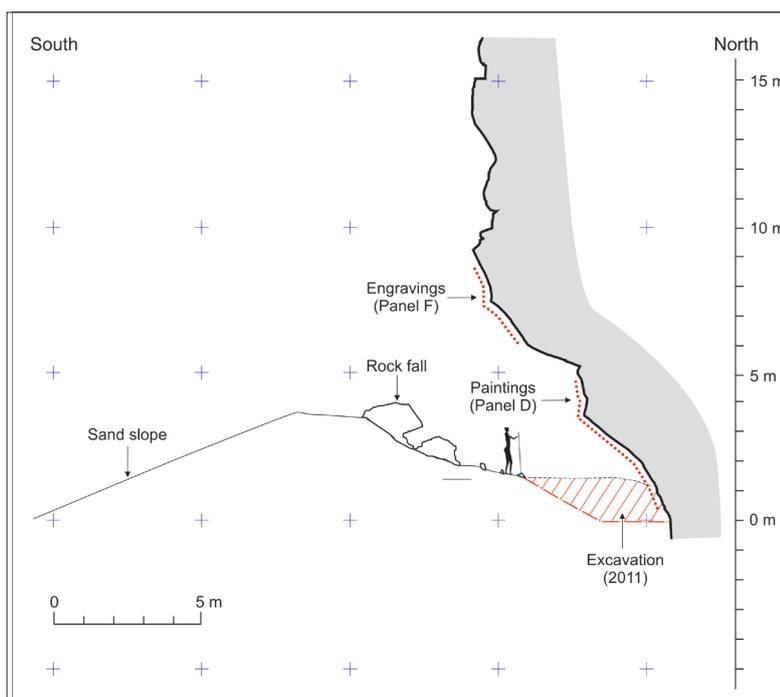


Fig. 9. — Section of the shelter showing the limits of excavation carried out in autumn 2011 as well as the extension of the decorated rock face below the original level of eolian sand fill (c. 1 m; see lower end of dotted line) (cartography: H. Riemer).

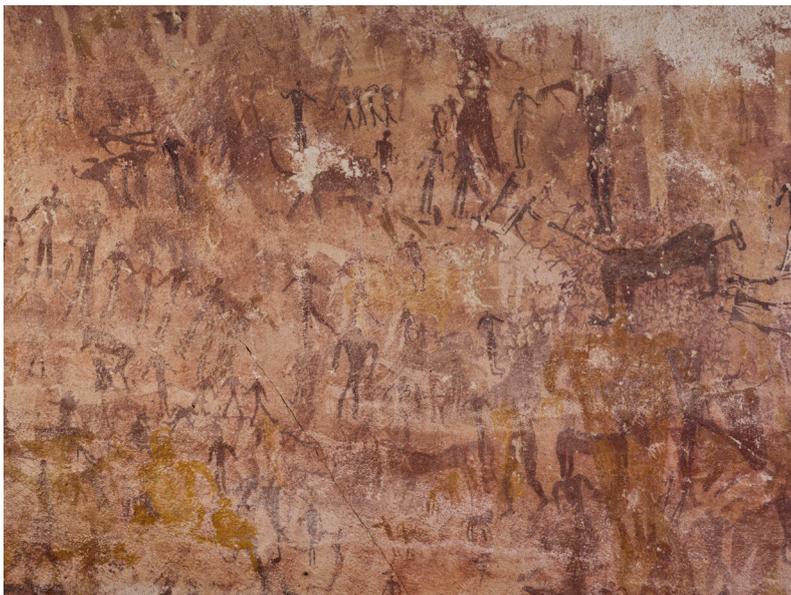


Fig. 10. — Detail of panel D (sheets K12, L12-13) as it appears to the naked eye (above) and the same image processed by *DStretch*<sup>®</sup> with the YBK matrix (below). Apart from a much better visibility of faded figures, such as the yellow headless beast in the centre, the digital image enhancement often helps to determine which painted figures belong together and form a distinct 'layer' of rock art.



Fig. 11. — Sheet W14 in panel E shows, among others, a number of recently exposed hand stencils in the lowermost part of the shelter's decorated rock surface.

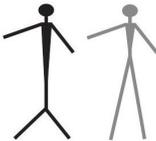
<b>I. PROPORTION</b>			
	<b>NATURAL</b> <i>balanced relation between torso and complete figure</i>	<b>ELONGATED</b> <i>elongation of torso in particular / legs</i>	<b>FILIFORM</b> <i>hyperextension of capillary legs in particular</i>
<b>II. SHAPE</b>			
<b>STICK FIGURE</b> <i>minimalist, slender-delicate shape composed of a few lines, curves and dots</i>	 A1	 B1	
<b>STANDARD</b> <i>average physique without remarkable characteristics</i>	 A2	 B2	 C2
<b>MUSCULAR</b> <i>athletic V-shape + all limbs muscular</i>	 A3	 B3	 C3
<b>CUNEIFORM</b> <i>wedge-shaped, tapered torso + edged shoulders + slim arms</i>	 A4	 B4	 C4
<b>PLUMP</b> <i>corpulent torso</i>	 A5	 B5	

Fig. 12. — Classification of human figures in the ‘Cave of Beasts’: Schematic representations (left) and examples (right).

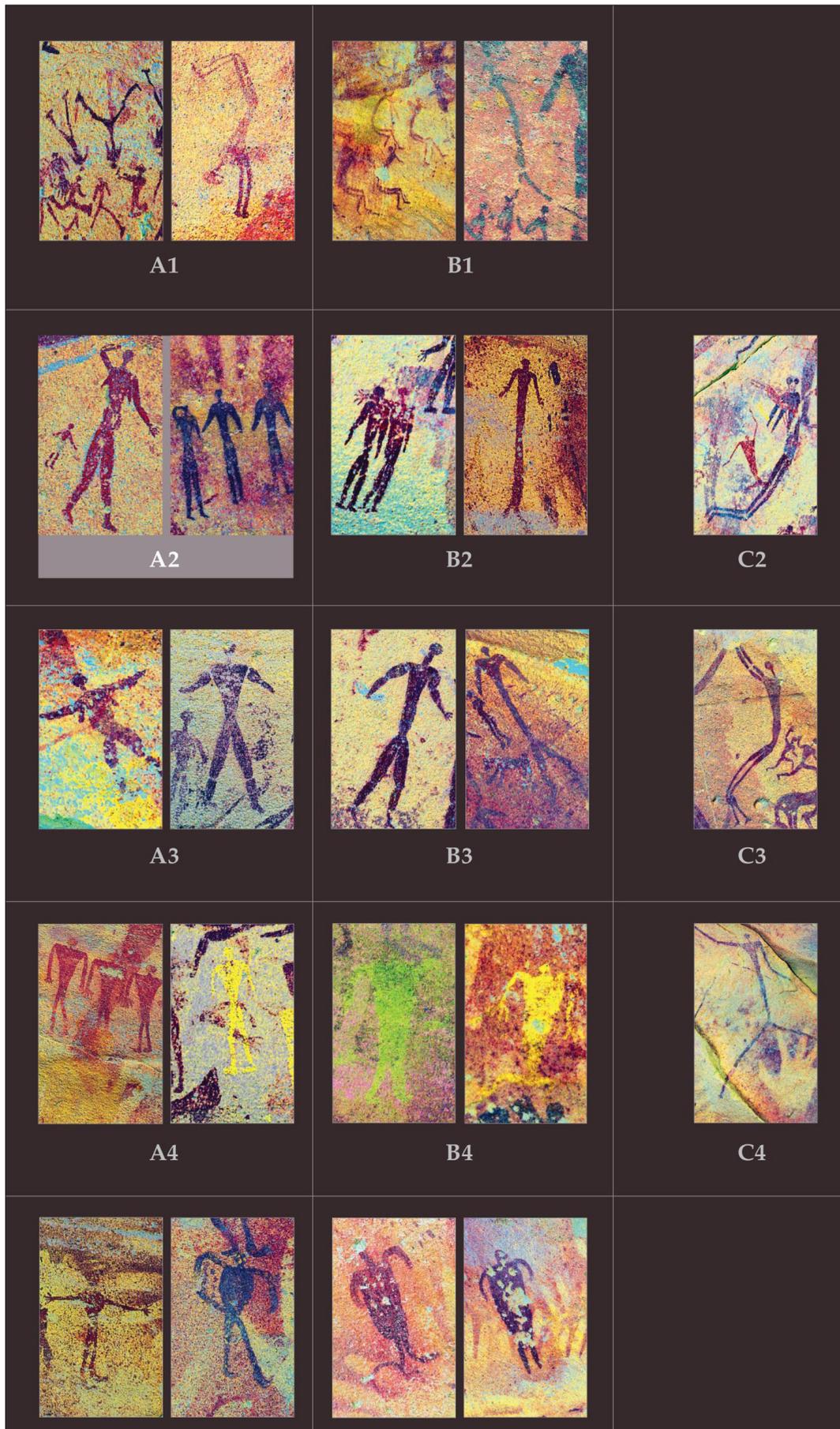




Fig. 13. — Detail of panel E (sheets S9-10, T9-10) showing a fight with bows and arrows between two groups of humans, the one represented by filiform figures, the other by humans rendered more or less naturalistically. Below: same image processed by *DStretch*<sup>®</sup> with the LDS matrix.

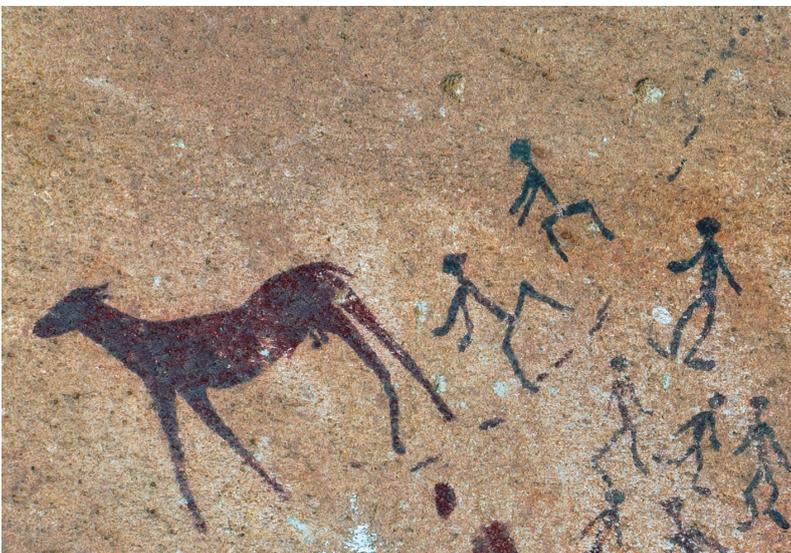


Fig. 14. — Two human 'stick figures' (type A1) chasing a male antelope or gazelle (detail from panel E, sheet V9).

Fig. 15. — One of the so-called 'swimmers' in the 'Cave of Beasts' (cf. fig. 7) showing yellow dots evenly distributed over the bulky upper body (image processed by *DStretch*<sup>®</sup> with the LDS matrix).

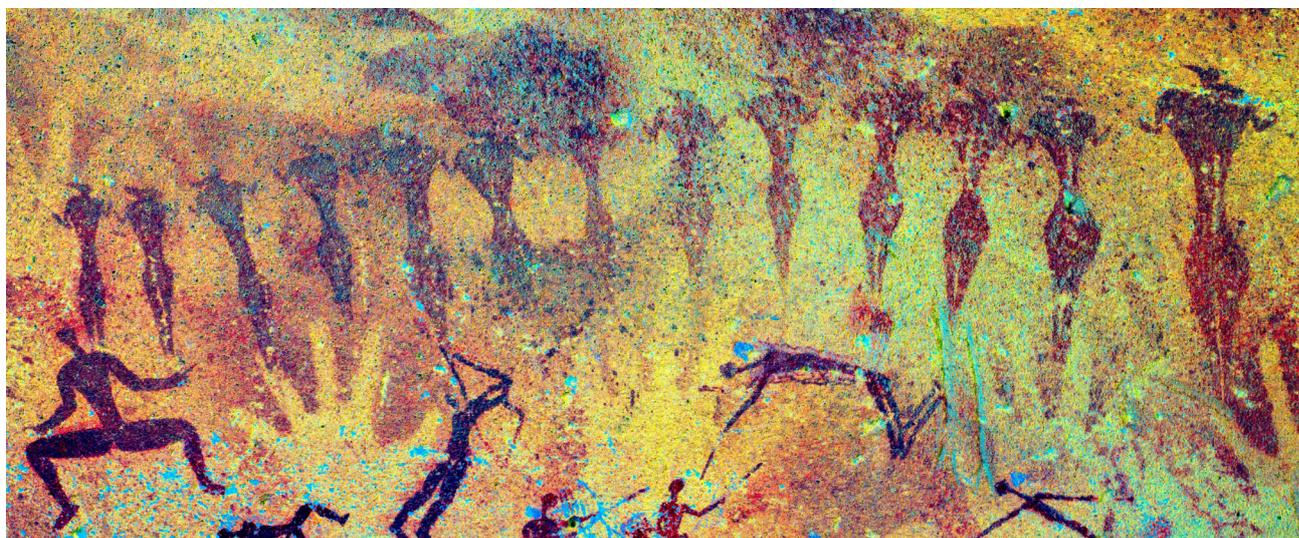
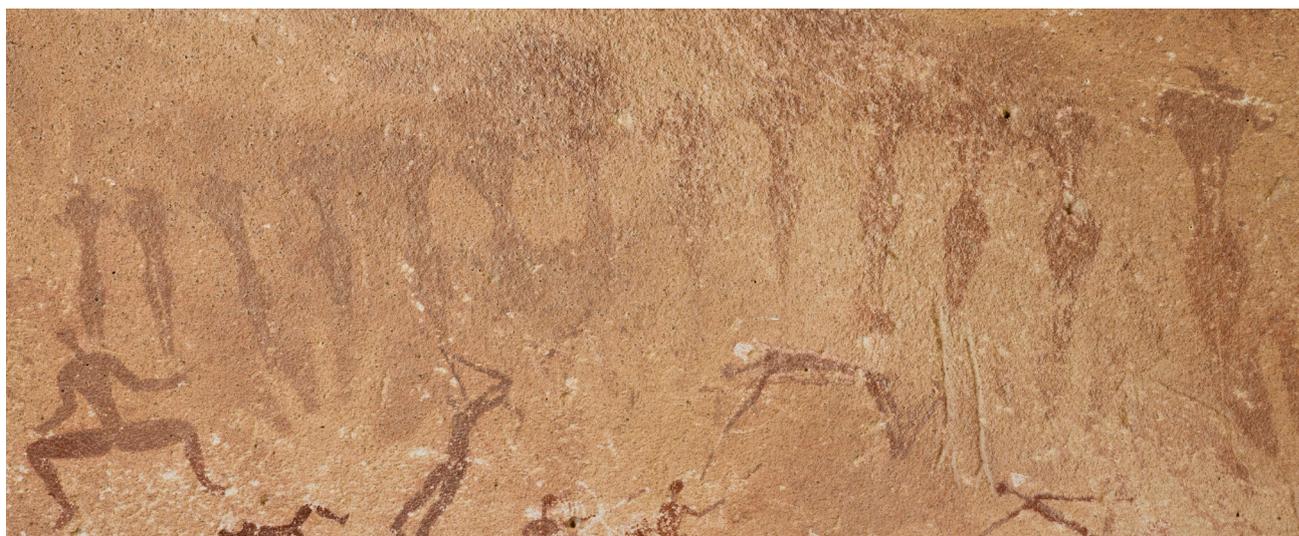
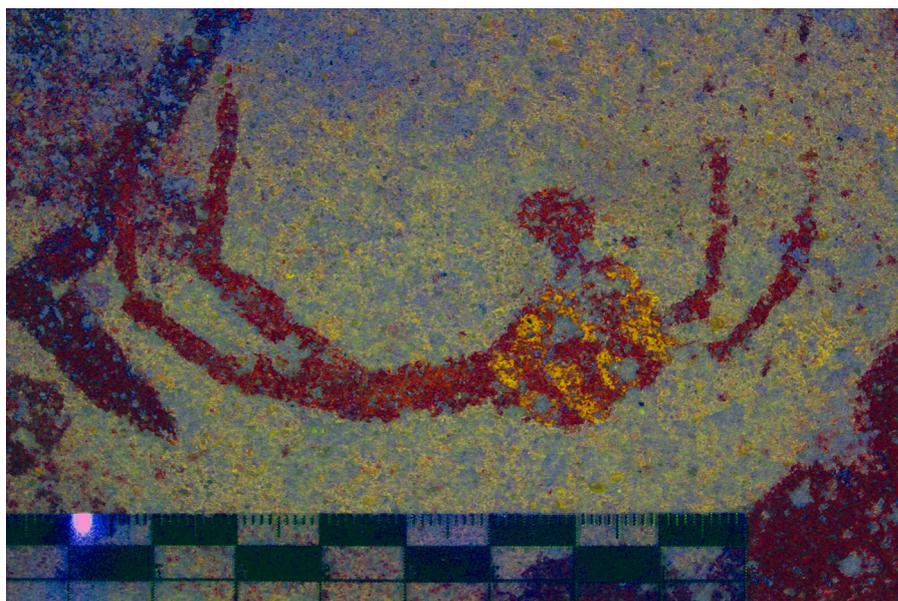


Fig. 16. — Detail of a group of 'hourglass-shaped' human figures depicted in panel E (sheets S9, T9).  
Below: same image processed by *DStretch*<sup>®</sup> with the LDS matrix.