BREVE COMMUNICATION

A FACE-MASK IN THE PREHISTORIC ROCK ART OF THE DAHKLEH OASIS?

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Human figures with animal heads covering the face are frequently depicted in Egyptian art of the dynastic times and may represent humans wearing masks in order to slip into another identity. According to the visual representations these scenes were connected to ritual and magical practices of this time period. For example, the priests present at the mumification and funeral ceremonies may have been wearing jackal masks representing the god responsible for the preservation of the body, Anubis. In other scenes human figures with falcon, ibis, or lion heads occur, in ritual actions during which the presence of various gods was needed, possibly also played by mask-wearing priests.

The tradition of wearing the mask goes, however, deeper into Egypt’s past and was also spread over a wider geographical area in Africa. Masked men were depicted in Egypt in early hunting scenes of apparently magical significance. In the terminal prehistoric and early dynastic rock art the hunters probably wore masks in animal forms, possibly to absorb the beast’s strength and speed (Altenmüller 1980: passim), or more prosaically in order to approach the animal by means of a kind of camouflage. Such masks are also depicted on human heads and bodies in the late prehistoric rock art of the Egyptian Eastern and Western Desert (Winkler 1938:28; 1939;32, pl. LV1) as well as were being engraved or painted in different localities in the Eastern and Central Sahara (Huard et al. 1980:115-133 and fig. 145, 1-2 and 182, 7-11; Striedter 1984:Abb. 104; Kuper 1978:226, Abb. 4; Lhote 1973:fig. 47. and cf. also Hugot 1974:79)(fig. 1).

These occurrences of the mask-wearing figures seem to be associated with scenes of human males as gods, priests, sorcerers, hunters and so on. So far it has been difficult to identify representations of females among these engravings and paintings.

Against this background, the discovery by the present authors of an assemblage of rock art in Dakhleh Oasis, Western Desert of Egypt, is of particular interest. The engravings were found in the course of the field-work carried out as part of the programme of the Dakhleh Oasis Project organized by the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and directed by Professor Anthony J. Mills. During the systematic recording of petroglyphs in the eastern part of the Oasis in 1988 a site was found which had not been mentioned by earlier researchers (cf. Winkler 1939:passim). It is located on a solitary, conical sandstone hill situated in a major, sandy wadi running southward from the limestone escarpment. The petroglyphs in question were found on the northern side of the rocky hill, almost at its summit. The figures were engraved on a flat, fine surface of a sandstone block; the plane is facing the northern sky at ca. 45°. Four female figures are shown, three in detail and one in schematic form. All fully depicted females are shown en face and with a mixture of engraving and sunk relief. Particularly noticable are the overdimensional hip- and buttock areas in
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contrast to the slim upper bodies and small heads. The arms are reduced in scale and importance although decoration in the form of bracelets is indicated, whereas the hands are not shown at all. The legs are depicted schematically with the feet not separately marked; some decorations, probably anklets, are indicated at the bottom of the legs. Different decorative lines, criss-crossing the upper body and partly reaching over the hip may represent either tattooing or other body decorations such as strings of beads (fig. 2-3).

The faces consist of simple ovoid shapes but are distinguishable from each other by certain details. Simpler decorative schemes have been used for the two flanking figures. One has an undecorated face framed at the bottom by neck rings (?) and the top of the head is covered by a kind of cap-like hair (?). The face of the second, also a slightly sunk ovoid shape, is deeply engraved with two parallel lines (scarrings ?)(cf. fig; 2-3). The face of the third (middle) figure has been elaborated with more detail and is covered by what seems to be a mask. The triangular elongated face shape indicated by deeply engraved lines meeting at the chin, seems to be pierced in the middle by four centrally placed holes, probably for eyes and nose. The top of the head is set off from the head-dress by some indications of an elaborate hairstyle with at least four free-hanging bread-like projections. Particularly striking is the elaboration of the head-dresses of these women consisting, probably, of variously arranged feather or straw-woven headgear (fig. 4).

As to the date of "our women", no absolute chronology can be deducted yet. However, a comparison of the patina of various other assemblages of rock engravings in the Dakhleh Oasis recorded during our field-work, confirm the greater antiquity of these "women". Furthermore a simple engraving of a quadruplet is superimposed on the middle female figure (fig. 2-4) indicating that it is later in age than the woman although we do not know how much later.

Broadly speaking this group of female representations might be associated with one group of petroglyphs defined by Winkler (1939:27-30) in Dakhleh Oasis. His group of "Early Oasis Dwellers" dated by him to the pre-dynastic time is characterized by the frequent depictions of female figures ("goddesses") which bear some resemblance to the here presented group. Consequently, our steatopygous group of women may easily have been produced in the same time period.

The intriguing question relating to the function and identification of the figures here depicted, for example: do they represent a kind of totem, female sorcerers, goddesses or the elite of a social group can not be determined on the basis of the presently available evidence. Possibly future seasons and finds may illuminate questions concerning the identification and purpose of this group of petroglyphs.

List of figures


Fig. 2. Dakhleh Oasis. Engraving of a group of females and quadruplets. Scale in centimetres (photo L. Krzyzaniak).

Fig. 3. Dakhleh Oasis. The group of petroglyphs as above drawn from the tracing on transparent folia (made by K. Kroeper).

Fig. 4. Dakhleh Oasis. A detail of the group
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of petroglyphs showing the head-dress and "mask" (photo L. Krzyzaniak).

References


