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New evidence for a closeness between the Abû Râ's shelter (Eastern Sahara) and Egyptian beliefs

Julien D'HUY *

Jean-Loïc Le Quellec has recently suggested a relationship between the Neolithic mythologies represented in an important site discovered at Abû Râ's Plateau and the Egyptian Book of the Dead (Le Quellec, 2005, 2006, 2008; Le Quellec & de Flers, 2005). He detected similarities between these two types of representation. The famous "swimmers" of the cave, heading in a series of lines towards the devouring beasts, seem to be very reminiscent of the *nni.w* ("drowned people" with a "drifting" or "floating" body) of Egyptian mythology and thus evoke the (aquatic) world of the dead. Just like the famous "Cave of Swimmers" in the nearby Wadi Sora, the Abû Râ's site could illustrate a mythology of the next world, similar to some of the mythical tales recorded in the Nile valley (voracious hybrid beasts, evil spirits caught in the net).

This interpretation has recently come under debate because

evidence has been considered as not sufficiently convincing (Dupuy, 2008). Here we report a new piece of evidence in favour of this closeness between Saharan and Egyptian mythology.

Many Beasts, similar to those represented in the Wadi Sora shelter, have been identified in the vicinity of this place. They often seem to associate characteristics of animals and humans, and probably correspond to a coherent and local mythology (Le Quellec, 2008: 33). These Beasts are very dangerous. For example, in the Abû Râ's shelter, several human beings appear to be voraciously swallowed (Le Quellec & de Flers, 2005: fig. 710, 712; Le Quellec, 2008: fig. 14, 15). Moreover, all the Beasts present the long and typically raised tail of wild animals, according to the ancient Egyptians (Verus & Yoyotte, 2005: 64).

Curiously, all the examples of Beasts currently recorded do not

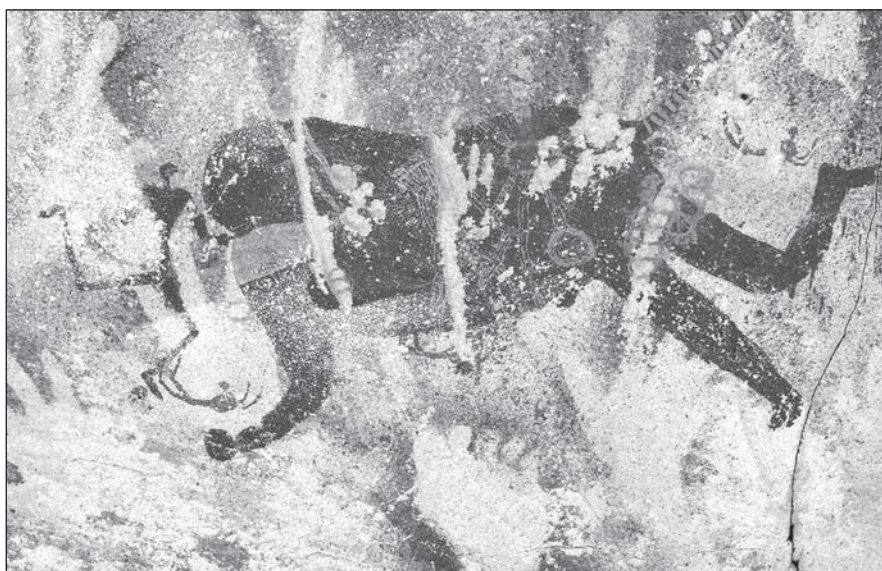
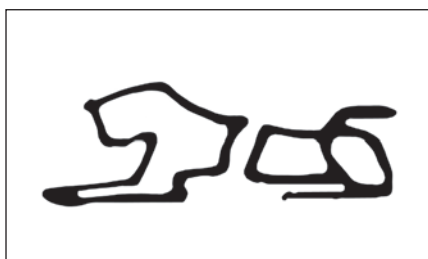
have heads. Instead, one can only see some kind of curious invagination between two lumps of unequal size (Le Quellec, 2008: 34). This choice not to represent the head might be brought together with a similar Egyptian attitude that used mutilated hieroglyphs or sign omissions in some Pyramid Texts and Coffin Texts.

Indeed, a special treatment was sometimes given to hieroglyphic texts written on coffins and in royal burial-chambers of the Old Kingdom and later. At the beginning, animal and human hieroglyphs, especially dangerous animals' hieroglyphs, were suppressed or replaced by those of inanimate objects, while in the later version, these hieroglyphs are either mutilated or only partially depicted. Many Egyptologists (De Trafford, 2004: 430; Fischer, 1974: 9-11; Gros

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Fig. 1. Mutilated lion in Brw rushes (after Rull Ribó, 2007 : 1652)

Fig. 2. Abû Râ's shelter, one of the "Beasts" with profound vertical scores splitting its body.



de Beler, 2003: 91; Junker, 1914: 252; Lacau, 1914, 1926; Mathieu, 1996: 311; Pierre, 1997; Posener, 1959: 158; Vasunia, 2001: 165) suggested that the reason was that texts were magical and thus capable to materialize their content. That is the reason why lions and elephants were often pictured as incomplete and without an essential part: people thought they might be dangerous for the occupant when they became alive (cf. Fig. 1). In this way, complete Beasts' bodies in Eastern Sahara may have been avoided because of the fear they could inflict harm. The absence of head can also be explained by the will to magically eliminate the danger that Beasts represent.

A confirmation of the dread of Beasts' animation is that some of them appear to be object of profound vertical scores splitting their body (Fig. 2) (Le Quellec & de Flers, 2005: fig. 709; Le Quellec, 2008: fig. 13). The authors of pyramid texts slash the body of their hieroglyphic lions in the same way, to neutralize them (Rull Ribó, 2007). Furthermore, to make hieroglyphs representing dangerous animals harmless, the custom was particularly to impose one or several notches on them (Pierre, 1994: 303, 310, fig. 5-7; Vernus & Yoyotte, 2005: 75).

This interpretation is an alternative to another hypothesis: scores on the Beast's body would be due to a later intentional scratching to take painted material, considered as 'magical pigment' and used for magico-religious purposes. In the same shelter, an analogous practice is evidenced by the punctiform scores of many other figures. Such a practice is found elsewhere in Africa (see for example Sassoon, 1960: 50 or Wilman, 1910: 418). But the form of scores, which are vertical, does not suggest pigment taking, and some of them extend a little beyond the Beast's body, where there are no pigments, or very few. This last point indicates that magical taking can probably not explain scores. Other factors, such as dread of animation, can be involved.

If an additional proof was needed to connect the representation of Beasts with the Egyptian dread of figures animation, Lacau (1926) and Pierre (1997: 355-356)

stress on the fact that suppressions and mutilations of signs were found mostly on coffins and in the burial chambers, but not in the superstructure of the tombs that were accessible to the living. If Jean-Loïc Le Quellec is right, the cave discovered at Abû Râ's seems to have illustrated a mythology of the next world. Consequently, according to the Egyptian belief, the cave context is a mortuary one.

The present results cannot resolve by themselves the debated question of Wadi Sora and Abû Râ's influence on Egyptian mythology; yet they corroborate Le Quellec's hypothesis, that there probably was a Saharan source of Egyptian mythology. This population may have migrated toward the Nile Valley, bringing with it its mental universe and contributing to the formation of the Egyptian beliefs.

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