

IC-NACHRICHTEN

Nr. 98

2016



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INSTITUTUM CANARIUM

 **ICDIGITAL**

Separata ICN98-2



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Keywords: Sahara, Northern Europe, rock art, damage, erosion

Zitieren Sie bitte diesen Aufsatz folgendermaßen / Please cite this article as follows:

Milburn, Mark (2016): Prehistoric rock carvings and their fading in several continents.- IC-Nachrichten 98 (Institutum Canarium), Wien, 29-32 [PDF]

Mark Milburn

Prehistoric rock carvings and their fading in several continents

A. The Sahara:

Only recently I recalled that I first became aware of fading carvings as long ago as 1973 at Lemqader in the Dhar Tichit area of Mauritania (N 20 47 W 12 04). A tall pillar with carvings on one side and allied to a tumulus was published by Th. Monod (1948: 24. See Fig. 1). By 1973 the two animal figures in the middle left-hand area had become much fainter (M. Milburn et al., 1973: fig. 30). Finally in 2007 my friend R. Dreikluft visited it again and noted further decomposition, which he did not photograph (in litt., 15 April 2007).

A tall four-sided pillar bearing carvings and inscriptions was recorded by H. Nowak et al. (1975: 63 & figs. 147 & 185) at Gleibat Ensour, some way inland from Villa Cisneros (now Dakhla - N 23 42 W 15 56) in territory then occupied by Spain. This pillar was removed and set up at Dakhla for a time until being returned to its original location, apparently due to local prejudice. H. Biedermann, a geologist in the Nowak group, expressed concern that the sea air might hasten further fading of the decoration on the pillar. I have never seen clear photos of all the features involved nor do I know whether in the 1930s/1940s efforts were already being made to slow down the fading of rock carvings.

One can only regret an inability to view clearly the exact forms of some abstract carvings in a recent fine work on rock pictures of the West Sahara (A. Sáenz de Buruaga et al., 2015), seemingly due to their severe fading.

B. Northern Europe:

As a child living near the Scottish frontier I saw numerous enigmatic abstract carvings in the area. Years later during a visit to Britain in ca. 2005 I heard purely by chance of their current fading. It seemed that people here termed Rock Art Archaeologists, some of possibly non-professional origins, had been at work in northern England and so had the Heritage Authorities, although not always with encouraging results. R. Bradley (2010: xi) has mentioned the difficulties caused to British professional archaeologists by the abstract nature of rock carvings and stressed the huge current reluctance to look below the ground-surface.

But how it can be that professional interdisciplinary teams like those currently used in Scandinavia to temporarily cover sites of interest to tourists (and thus also to the authorities) were not long ago introduced in England? It is understood that a British group visited Scandinavia in 2006, but I have not managed to discover what knowledge was brought back nor whether it may have been

implemented in situ. However the wording of parts of an email dated 18 March 2014 from a participant do not fill one with hope. Was there a subsequent lack of finance for expert help? Or possible mistrust of foreign methods? Or unwelcome recent knowledge, as announced in early 2013, of increasing climate change and its effect on rock pictures?

In 2004 a notice was seen in London proclaiming that there is so much to discover with English Heritage and in 2008 an official north country website became available for consultation. Anyone able to use a GPS could now go largely wherever they wished. Not long later I understood from *Salon* (the newsletter of the Society of Antiquaries) that there existed a lack of heritage training for young people. This was followed by news of a lack of teachers able to provide such training! So the stage was now set for anyone to do more or less what they liked, along with those unable to use a map, a compass or a GPS.

In terms of history, is it possible that rock art archaeologists using teams of voluntary assistants to help document rock art were suddenly out in force in the field, making publicity for that as well as for themselves, while many more scientific entities or individuals were simply caught unprepared by this sudden eruption of activity started long ago by non-professionals? (Cf. R. Bradley, 2010: xi). It has been mentioned (K. Sharpe, in litt., 23.01.2012) that some young people discovered covered rock carvings below ground-level and had even refused to disclose their position to the authorities. Did this unmanageable situation arise due to a lack of people suitably-qualified to deal with its varied and perhaps unpredictable developments and dangers to rock art? Did a wish for publicity and kudos at any price for totally-unsupervised sites perhaps override personal judgement as to what might be best for the environment and for the rock art?

O. Walderhaugh et al. (1998: 134) have mentioned the effects of archaeologists and Heritage Authorities on rock art in Scandinavia. These effects, a number of years later, are evident in Britain. When buried rock becomes uncovered and is not covered over again using suitably-scientific knowledge plus the right material for each individual site, rapid fading can occur. Compare one professional excavation at Hunterheugh (C. Waddington et al., 2005) where the same thing happened.

It is interesting and also perplexing that some hallowed theories are allowed to linger on for years. Although the rules for covering up rock carvings with material compatible in each individual case with the rock concerned have been mentioned by O. Walderhaug et al. (1998a: 131), a "Rock Art Code" in a British publication of 2008 limited its advice to simply covering up sites likely to be

damaged by impact alone. There was no word of needing to suit the actual composition of the covering material to each individual rock. Seven years later this very same advice was copied (Bickle et al, 2015:13) in a text on "Looking after rock art", some seventeen years after the text by O. Walderhaug et al. (op.cit.).

Quoting a statement to the effect that British archaeologists seem "to have been conspicuous by their absence in the detailed study of processes affecting the degradation of rock art" (G. Lee, 2010: 98), has hit the nail firmly on the head. Perhaps one might have hoped that the possibility to slow down the fading of rock carvings could have been made known to such archaeologists long ago. In *Independent Archaeology* (Issue 75, June 2013: 16-17) were quoted some remarks taken from www.sciencedaily.com/release/2013/03/130314 under the heading "Ancient Rock Art at Risk, Warn Experts." The Director of ICCHS at Newcastle University said that "People think rocks are permanent and because rock art seems to have been there a very long time, it will last forever. Sadly this is not the case ...".

On 15 August 2013 I happened to receive from another Newcastle University source a document titled "Project Fact Sheet – End User. Heritage and Science: Working Together in the Care of Rock Art" (<http://research.ncl.ac.uk/heritagescience>). This was seemingly addressed to "owners or users of land on which rock art has sat for around 6000 years" and continued "you are in a unique position to be able to ensure this vital and irreplaceable part of history can be in existence for future generations".

According to the first paragraph above, rock art is not permanent. The second paragraph states that owners and users are capable of prolonging the life of rock art for future generations.

What is one to think of two such conflicting statements from academic sources? In the highly-improbable event that some English authorities might finally decide to undertake interdisciplinary work in covering up certain rock carvings to try to preserve them, do there exist in England experts capable of undertaking such a task? Perhaps there do, but possibly long occupied by scientific duties in other fields and with no archaeological work being suggested to them by the rock art fraternity.

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Fig. 1 - A carved pillar at Lemqader, Mauritania (after Th. Monod, 1948)