

ANTIQUITY

Editor: Martin Carver; Reviews Editor: Madeleine Hummler; Editorial Manager: Jo Tozer
King's Manor, York YO1 7EP - Website: <http://www.antiquity.ac.uk>

Press release
Volume 85 No. 330 December 2011

Egyptian 'Ice Age' art confirmed



An interdisciplinary team of Belgian scientists cooperating with Yale University (New Haven, USA) has discovered the oldest petroglyphs in Egypt and for that matter the earliest rock art known so far in the whole of North Africa. By dating the wind-blown sediment that covers the rock art using optically stimulated luminescence (OSL), the team has been able to demonstrate that the petroglyphs are at least 15 000 years old. The dating results will be published in the December issue of *Antiquity* (Vol 85 Issue 330, pp. 1184–1193).

The rock art sites are situated near the modern village of Qurta, on the east bank of the Nile, about 40km south of the Upper-Egyptian town of Edfu. First seen by Canadian archaeologists in the early 1960s, they were subsequently completely forgotten and relocated by the Belgian mission in 2005. The rediscovery was announced in the Project Gallery of *Antiquity* in 2007:

(see: <http://www.antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/huyge313/>).

The rock art at Qurta is essentially characterised by hammered and incised naturalistic-style images of aurochs and other wild animals. On the basis of their intrinsic characteristics (subject matter, technique and style), their patination and degree of weathering, as well as the archaeological and geomorphological context, these petroglyphs have been attributed to the Late Pleistocene, specifically to the Late Palaeolithic Period (roughly 23 000 to 11 000 years ago). This interpretation has met with little criticism from the archaeological community, but proof in the form of indirect or direct science-based dating evidence has hitherto been lacking.

In 2008, an interdisciplinary team of scientists, directed by Dr Dirk Huyge of the Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels (Belgium), discovered partly buried rock art panels at one of the Qurta sites. The deposits covering the rock art, in part composed of wind-blown sediments, were dated at the Laboratory of Mineralogy and Petrology (Luminescence Research Group) of Ghent University (Belgium) using a method



called optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) dating. OSL dating can determine the time that has elapsed since the buried sediment grains were last exposed to sunlight. Using the constituent mineral grains of the sediment itself, it offers a direct means for establishing the time of sediment deposition and accumulation. This resulted in a minimum age of about 15 000 calendar years, providing the first solid evidence for the Pleistocene age of the rock art at Qurta and making it the oldest graphic activity ever recorded in Egypt and the whole of North Africa. The Qurta rock art is therefore more or less contemporaneous with European art from the last Ice Age, as known from such world-famous sites as the Lascaux and Altamira caves.



The discovery of sophisticated 'Ice Age' rock art in North Africa is certainly new, but not entirely unexpected as, elsewhere on the African landmass, finds of even older art have been known for some time. Already in 1969, stone plaquettes with painted animal motifs, dated to about 26 000 years ago, were uncovered in a cave in Namibia. More recently, in 1999 and 2000, complex geometric engravings on ochre pieces were brought to light in a South-African coastal site that date back to no less than 75 000 to 100 000 years. But how can it be explained that the rock art of Qurta, executed in Egypt over about 15 000 years ago, is stylistically so similar to what we discern in Ice Age Europe at about the same time? Can one speak of direct influence or cultural exchange over such a long distance? It is not as improbable as it seems. Finds of Pleistocene rock art in southern Italy and Sicily bear analogies to the Egyptian rock art. In northern Libya, near the coast, a cave site is known with similar naturalistic images of aurochs. Considering the fact that the level of the Mediterranean Sea at the time of the last Ice Age was at least 100m lower than it is today, it cannot be excluded that Palaeolithic people established an intercontinental exchange of iconographic and symbolic concepts. These are new challenges to archaeological thought.

Funding for this research was provided by the William K. and Marilyn M. Simpson Endowment for Egyptology of the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, Yale University, USA (fieldwork) and the Fund for Scientific Research – Flanders (laboratory analyses). In addition, the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC) and Vodafone Egypt offered administrative and logistical support..

Embargoed until 21 November 2011

To receive an advance copy of the article, please contact Jo Tozer either by calling +44 (0)1904 323994 or emailing assistant@antiquity.ac.uk. Additional images are also available.

Please cite '*Antiquity* Publications Ltd, www.antiquity.ac.uk' as the place of first publication – thank you.

A full list of all articles published in this issue, including those published in the open access Project Gallery, will be available online at <http://antiquity.ac.uk/journal.html> from 21 November 2011.

Notes for editors

Antiquity is a quarterly journal of world archaeology, edited by Professor Martin Carver. The journal was founded by O.G.S. Crawford in 1927. *Antiquity* is currently edited in the Department of Archaeology at the University of York (head: Professor Julian D. Richards).