

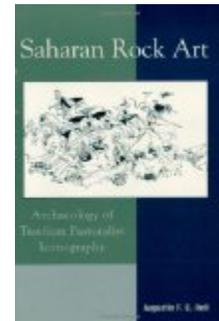


Augustin F. C. Holl. *Saharan Rock Art: Archaeology of Tassilian Pastoralist Iconography*. Lanham: Altamira Press, 2004. Illustrations. 240 pp. \$33.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7591-0605-5.

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## Saharan Rock Art Caught between Fields

In the first chapter, “A New Approach to Saharan Rock Art,” Augustin F. C. Holl sets out his intention of introducing a new method of studying Saharan rock art and applying it to the specific instance of the Dr. Khen Shelter at Iheren, Algeria, in the Central Tassili. These paintings are dated to the third millennium BCE by association with a nearby work. The paintings in this shelter, discovered by Henri Lhote in the late 1960s, have only been published piecemeal and have never been interpreted as a whole. The method presented here was, in fact, developed by Holl for interpreting images at Dhar Tichitt and Tikadiouine.[1] In particular, this text represents the completion of a project first presented in a 1999 article in which the method was used to interpret the first composition at Dr. Khen Shelter.[2]

As opposed to longer standing taxonomic or aesthetic approaches, Holl makes use of an interpretative approach, typified by the work of rock art specialists Karl Heinz Striedter, Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, and Andrew B. Smith. He sees his method as distinct in its focus on a single work, clarity of intent, and openness to a variety of possible interpretations. Holl emphasizes the need to decipher the iconographic language of the images through relating formal aspects to ethnographic research. He perceives rock art as a combination of cultural knowledge with the individual artist’s particular contribution, though Holl rightly points out that it is nigh impossible to determine the degree to which each holds sway. He considers rock art as dependent on general cognition for its imagery. On this point, he stands in opposition to

such authors as Smith who have imported models from southern Africa that emphasize trance or visionary states as sources of Saharan rock art imagery.

Holl very briefly defines “iconographic language” as “sets of elements and relationships creating images with meaning” (p. 10). He points out the numerous fields that treat the subject and references a number of relevant texts. Surprisingly little is defined theoretically, but then the intention of this book is to demonstrate the application of a new research method rather than theorizing iconography. More troubling is the relatively poor presentation of the method itself in the introduction. The essential idea is that the corpus of paintings at a site may be broken down into ever smaller units that must be understood individually before being integrated into a coherent whole, with meaning apparent at each level of analysis. His terminology is, however, confusing and ill defined. Units include elements, motifs (subdivided into minimal and maximal themes, the latter itself subdivided into lower-level and higher-level contexts—none of which is referred to again once defined), action sets (later termed performance units), compositions (later reinterpreted as acts), components, and subcomponents. Even the basis for defining specific compositions is not well defined, leaving the reader to understand them broadly as groups of images that are compositionally and thematically related.

Each of the next six chapters focuses on describing and interpreting a single composition from the shelter.

The first five compositions stretch across the east wall, while the sixth adorns the south wall. This said, the reader is not provided with a solid understanding of the layout of the shelter, that is, of the context in which the paintings would have been viewed originally. The themes laid out in these chapters are as follows: Composition 1 and 2 both portray nomadic pastoralists in transhumance to a dry-season campsite in the highlands. Compositions 3 and 4 focus on marriage and reproduction as social transactions occurring at the dry-season camp. Composition 4 also includes clearly sexual imagery, incorporating the private sphere. Composition 5 is a small scene developed visually in a different manner, understood by Holl as conveying rapid movement. Holl suggests that the scene portrays a ritual performance that might be interpreted as a male initiatory process. Composition 6 on the south wall is composed entirely of pairs of animals, including some young. This constitutes an allegory in the natural world analogous to that of the east wall, and suggests as well a return to the plains in the rainy season. Holl summarizes his findings in the final chapter, seeing the disparate compositions as a unified narrative of seasonal transhumance and social transactions presented in a single mural.

In the final pages, Holl makes a plea for the importance of ethnographic work and urges understanding Saharan rock art within a cultural-historical context derived from ethnographic data. This forms a vital element of his approach. Embedding his interpretation in an adamantly pastoral culture, he stresses the centrality of cattle to the creation of culture in terms of sustenance, status, and wealth, and as a means of accomplishing social transactions. The images also emphasize the importance of gender-based activities, with men primarily responsible for herding and women primarily responsible for domestic affairs.

Holl asserts that the painting sites are ritually significant as they are usually found in elevated highland locations, distinct from the lowlands where most cemeteries and habitation sites have been discovered. He designates these highland locations as dry-season camps where extended groups could gather to carry out social rituals, such as courtship, marriage, and male initiation. The rock art was focused in these places and conversely served to legitimate the social rituals carried out there.

Although the importance of ethnographic research for understanding the paintings of a pastoralist society is clear, referencing specific ethnographic research and discussing its applicability would have made it more useful.

For example, Holl pays little attention to residences represented in the Dr. Khen Shelter paintings. If these are nomadic pastoralists, analogous to the Fulbe or others of today, could the so-called huts represented in the shelter be identified as the mat-frame tents discussed by Labelle Prussin? [3] Indeed, Prussin suggests the images of the Tassili n'Ajjer as possible predecessors of modern-day tents, thinking from the past to the present rather than the reverse, in creating a history of tent use in Africa. She also points out the different principles involved in making mat-frame tents as opposed to tensile tents, and discusses the difficulty of tracing changes in technology over time, to which one might add, changes in population movements.

Despite an ostensibly less aesthetic approach to the paintings, Holl does an excellent job of deconstructing the compositions and recognizing the manner in which they have been organized by the artist. This is perhaps one of the strengths of his approach in recognizing each individual figure and then understanding how it fits together with its neighbors. That said, there is some confusion in his description and approach in relation to his earlier writing. First, Holl seems to contradict himself when he states at the beginning of chapter 4 that “the bottom to top and left to right structure of Tassilian iconography outlined from my analysis of the Tikadiouine paintings ... is explicitly spelled out in composition III by a horizontal, dark red ochre line separating the upper from the lower scenes” (p. 47). While a bottom to top reading can be debated, Holl’s analysis of the Iheren paintings and the manner in which they intuitively read is based on a right to left movement, rather than the reverse. He makes this clear in an earlier article where he notes “an overall movement from top-right to the bottom-left of the panel.”[4] Second, he does not address the process or sequence of creation or the tools used in the Dr. Khen Shelter images in contrast to his discussion of rock engravings in the Dhar Tichitt where he emphasized procedure, though this may have more to do with the relative ease of reading traces of the creative process with engraved lines.[5] Nonetheless, we are left with no sense of the work of art unfolding, except as Holl reads the images. Indeed, he ignores the possibility that overlapping figures may be evidence that a site was revisited or that a single theme was expanded on over multiple visits, treating the final product as an entirely contemporaneous production.

Archaeologist Elena A. A. Garcea at the University of Cassino, Italy, also has criticized Holl’s attempts at interpretation, deeming them “hazardous,” though it seems

that she has missed the point of the book.[6] Hazardous the attempt at interpretation may be, but to ignore the potential of meaning inherent in such symbolic marks is negligent. Instead, Holl should be applauded for making an effort at interpretation, despite its faults. That said, Garcea makes a valid criticism that Holl's work fails to compare the emphasis on cattle versus sheep or goat herding at this site with contemporaneous archaeological evidence at such sites as the Tadrart Acacus in Libya, where sheep and goat herding predominates, or the Adrar Bous in Niger, where only cattle herding was practiced.[7] There is, moreover, a conspicuous lack of comparison with paintings elsewhere.

The most significant problem, however, is the difficulty of actually evaluating the validity of Holl's interpretations of individual images since the illustrations in the book are of such poor quality, consisting of pixelated line drawings. Body decoration, gender, and color are impossible for readers to determine and they must take Holl at his word. This trust must remain tentative since Holl makes clear that he himself worked from tracings made in conjunction with Lhote's expedition in the 1960s rather than from the original paintings (p. xv). That these tracings are problematic is also pointed out by French anthropologist Le Quellec who notes that, while Holl's text can be praised as the first monograph to be published on the paintings of a single rock shelter in the Sahara, the tracings on which it is based are faulty in details as well as general layout of images.[8] Thus, in the end, the reader cannot even be sure that all images are reproduced or that they are reproduced in identical fashion to the original. Holl admits at one point his own difficulty in evaluating an image when he states that "without access to the original painted rock shelter, it is difficult to determine whether the incomplete nature of most of these oxen images was purposeful or the result of differential preservation" (p. 37). Clearly, Holl has no clue as to the current state of preservation of these images. Nor do we as his readers.

*Saharan Rock Art* is to be praised for treating rock art as art created with intention and imbued with meaning

derived from human experience and for focusing complete attention on a single work. The important role that ethnographic research can play in interpreting these ancient paintings is clear. The book also works as an introduction to Holl's method. One wishes, however, that more care had been put into framing the discussion, with more attention to broader sources of interpretative data, and that the author had visited the actual work of art rather than simply consulting potentially faulty reproductions.

#### Notes

[1]. Augustin F. C. Holl, "Pathways to Elderhood: Research on Past Pastoral Iconography: The Paintings from Tikadiouine (Tassili-n-Ajjer)," *Origini: Preistoria e proto-storia delle civiltà antiche* 18 (1994): 69-113; and "Time, Space, and Image Making: Rock Art from the Dhar Tichitt (Mauritania)," *African Archaeological Review* 19, no. 2 (June 2002): 75-118.

[2]. Augustin F. C. Holl and Stephen A. Dueppen, "Iheren I: Research on Tassilian Pastoral Iconography," *Sahara* 11 (1999): 21-34.

[3]. Labelle Prussin, *African Nomadic Architecture* (Washington DC and London: Smithsonian Institution Press and the National Museum of African Art, 1995), 4-6.

[4]. Holl and Dueppen, "Iheren I," 25.

[5]. Holl, "Time, Space, and Image Making."

[6]. Elena A. A. Garcea, review of *Saharan Rock Art: Archaeology of Tassilian Pastoralist Iconography*, by Augustin F. C. Holl, *Journal of Anthropological Research* 61 (2005): 541.

[7]. *Ibid.*, 541-542.

[8]. Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, "What's New in the Sahara, 2000-2004," in *News of the World*, ed. Paul G. Bahn, Nathalie Franklin, and Matthias Strecker (Oakville: Oxbow Books, 1998): 76, [http://rupestres.perso.neuf.fr/page76/assets/JLLQ\\_2008-d.pdf](http://rupestres.perso.neuf.fr/page76/assets/JLLQ_2008-d.pdf).

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