

Rocks in motion. Research on the Dakhleh Oasis petroglyphs in the context of paths, roads and mobility

Rock art research is increasingly being carried out in different parts of the world. Although Egypt may be mostly associated with the monumental remains from the pharaonic times, it is, however, also a large reservoir of highly diversified rock art. The proposed project will investigate one of the biggest petroglyphic complexes in that part of the world – the Dakhleh Oasis, situated in the Western Desert.

Although Dakhleh rock art has been known for over a century, and more than one expedition was set to work on it, it still keeps many secrets. The proposed project will thus undertake research on petroglyphs already discovered in the central part of the Dakhleh Oasis. The previous research in this area brought about not only a lot of new findings, but also substantially enriched our knowledge about the rock art discovered there. It became clear that it has been created for several thousands of years in a relatively limited space, and the subsequent inhabitants of the Oasis regularly used to “discover” many of the petroglyphs, and executed new ones beside them. The new research aims, however, at finding answers to the questions concerning the reasons which impelled people to visit the sandstone ridge in the Central Oasis. The main assumption of the project is the hypothesis that Dakhleh rock art, regardless of the time period in which it was created, has always been related to people’s movement and mobility. We refer thus to the so-called *archaeology of movement* – a set of theoretical concepts, which will allow us to consider petroglyphs production in a new way.

Our project will be investigating the ways in which people create and experience rock art, when they are *on the move*, i.e. research on prehistoric hunter-gatherer communities, which used to create rock art, while living mobile lives due to cyclic migrations over desert. Our aim will be to answer how we should understand their rock art with reference to their immanent movement. Numerous findings of the Pharaonic and Graeco-Roman rock art will be analysed in the context of mobility as well. We will undertake research on the remains of paths and routes, which crossed the Central Oasis in antiquity. We want to explain, in which circumstances these petroglyphs were executed, and what was the relation between the travellers and depictions. Some of the petroglyphs could have been created because their execution might have substantially influenced the very act of journeying, for instance due to help of deities, depictions of which we also find on rock faces in Dakhleh. In times following the Roman Period this area was still traversed by travellers, including the early Christians, and later by Bedouins. They all left their marks in the form of petroglyphs and inscriptions, which will be analysed as part of the project. Finally, we will conduct research on the very modern phenomena, such as rock art destruction by grave robbers, and landscape transformation caused by the continuous development of economic infrastructure. We believe that rock art as an element of the contemporary landscapes of Dakhleh is still perceived and understood in various ways. This is why we want to investigate the dynamics of these issues and perhaps influence the ways in which rock art will be protected in future.

Fieldwork will be associated with producing high quality documentation through the use of various photographic techniques, such as photogrammetry and RTI. Using specialist software we will hopefully be able to generate two- and three-dimensional models of single petroglyphs, panels and the whole sites. We will create virtual paths which will make it possible to “travel” through the Oasis without being physically present there. In addition, producing panoramas in high resolution will enable us to explore rock art site on the computer screen. All these tools will assist in interpretational work, but will also help to popularise research results. They will allow a wide audience to experience the Dakhleh rock art, through both museum exhibitions, and specially designed websites.

It is extremely important to research Dakhleh rock art. Petroglyphs are unique remains which may “tell” us a lot about the past societies. Although they are not easy to interpret, it is of high importance to attempt to undertake such an analysis. Results of rock art research may also possibly be used by other specialties within Egyptian archaeology. This research is also important because the Oasis petroglyphs are increasingly endangered, and many of them have already disappeared during the last couple of years. It is perhaps the last chance to document this extraordinary heritage, which belongs to all of us.