

Atlas of Cultural and Environmental Change in Arid Africa

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Reference address: Heinrich-Barth-Institut e.V. / Jennerstr. 8 / D-50823 Köln
<http://www.uni-koeln.de/hbi/>



Ennedi Highlands, Chad – artists and herders in a lifeworld on the margins



The Ennedi Highlands are located in the east of the Republic of Chad on the southern margin of the Sahara Desert. The regions in the west, north and east of the mountains can only be used by people in years of advantageous climatic conditions. By contrast, the sandstone highland provides relatively rich vegetation and natural water reservoirs which regionally enable permanent settlement. The picturesque precipitous western flank is even more favourable compared to the less spectacular central and eastern parts, due to the permanent water holes at Archeï and Bechikele. A salient feature of the entire highlands is the ubiquitous rock art from the last five millennia.

Rock art in the Ennedi Highlands belongs to the least studied art traditions in the Sahara and beyond. Only around the northwestern tip was intensive research made by G. Bailloud in the late 1950s (BAILLOUD 1997). Apart from this were only short reports on sites such as Niola Doa in the north of the highlands, where magnificent larger than life engravings of women can be found (FUCHS 1957). Other scattered sites along the outer rim of the highlands were reported by travellers in recent years. However, after the first exploration of the inner parts of the highlands by French colonial troops in 1914 there was no mention of rock art (TILHO 1920) although it is hardly conceivable how these first European visitors could have overlooked the pictures.

Due to so little previous research it was an open question whether the central parts of the highlands had a density of rock art comparable to other Saharan highlands. If this were so it would justify more intense rock art research.

Therefore research of the project A 6 ‘Climatic and Cultural History in the Ennedi Mountains and its Surroundings’ within ACACIA focussed on – palaeoclimatic and field archaeological investigations aside – the study of the art of representative sections of the landscape, combining it with archaeological excavations. These regions were intensively surveyed in order to systematically record all archaeological finds. As a result some ‘windows’ were opened allowing a good overview of the character and distribution

of rock art in these regions and also giving insight into the patterns of use of the prehistoric inhabitants.

One of the investigated areas is the landscape west of the renowned guelta of Archeï (a natural water hole), at the foot of the precipitous western cliffs of this highland. Archeï is a permanent source filling a wide pool in which an isolated population of crocodiles is still living today, having survived here for millennia. Today this region is chiefly used by half nomadic herders of camels and goats but occasionally also horses can be encountered (Fig. 4). At the source of Bechikele, some 80 km further southeast, which is also located at the foot of the sandstone cliff, one can see the northernmost cattle in Chad. These parts of the landscape are of monumental beauty with dramatic precipices and deeply incised gorges with vertical walls of 200 m height, contributing to the attraction of this landscape luring more and more tourists to the Ennedi (Fig. 4).

For the modern visitor the other research areas may seem to exhibit less attractive landscapes, but this was not always so, judging by their rich treasure of rock art. In the central areas there is a mixture of wide, flat sandy passages and playas, sandstone inselbergs and long sandstone ridges. The local population of today herds camels in all the regions mentioned and in the central and eastern regions sheep and goats can occasionally be encountered even today, i.e. animals needing open water at least every few days.

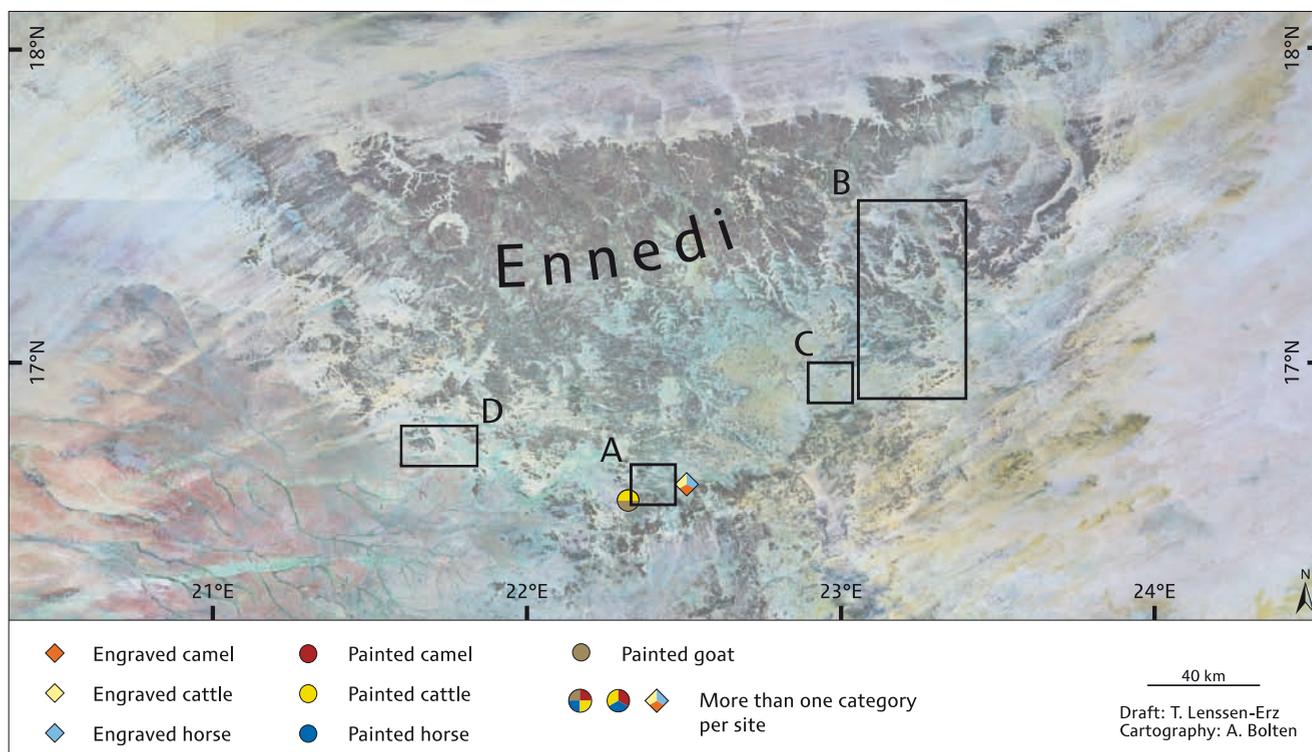
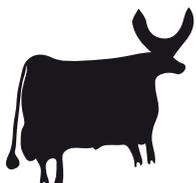
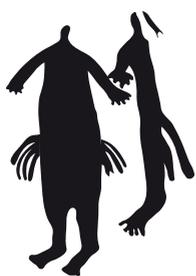
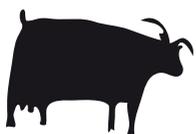
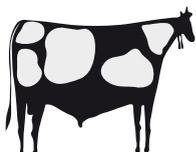


Fig. 1 The research areas marked here are: A = Tori, B = Mornou, C = Shekitiye, D = Archeï (cf. Fig. 2).

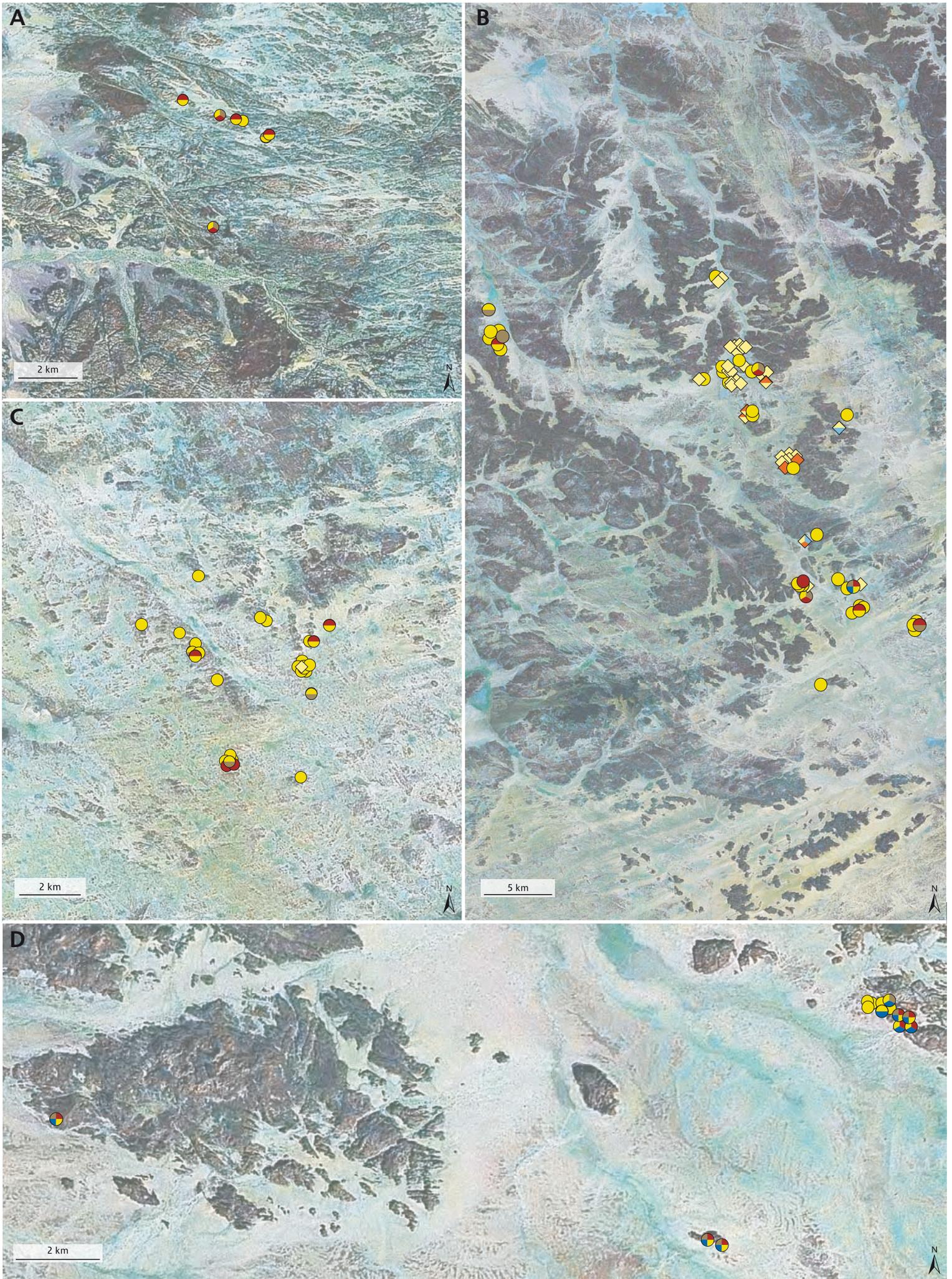


Fig. 2 The record of rock art sites in areas B and C is rather complete whereas areas A and D show locally restricted samples (legend cf. Fig. 1).



Fig. 3 Camels and horses were introduced into the Ennedi region around the beginning of the Common Era. But scenic links such as here are an exception – probably these animals were kept by different groups.

The distribution maps (Fig. 1,2) assemble the few motifs which were the main concern of the artists over millennia. This concern was about their domestic stock with which prosperity and status were indicated. Humans also appear in the art but to a smaller proportion than animals and also, they are frequently seen together with animals: be it riding on horses or camels (but never on oxen) or while guarding them (Fig. 3). Focussing mainly on animals, as is done here, is not only helpful for understanding the main part of the art, but also seems to coincide with the views of the artists who cognitively kept the animals and humans apart: animals always look and act like real animals and humans always look and act like humans.

Looking more closely at the art two basic techniques have to be distinguished: there are paintings with mainly mineral pigments (haematite and ochre for reddish and yellowish hues), charcoal for black and various materials for white (kaolin, chalk and bird droppings). The other technique is labelled engravings or petroglyphs, meaning that no colour is used but rather a hard tool instead with which to engrave the motif into the rocky surface.

Besides this technical distinction there are also differences in contents with cattle, horses as well as humans being more frequent in paintings and displaying more scenic configurations whereas engravings are more often used to depict camels and abstract signs. Moreover, paintings are generally found in shelters while engravings are normally on open walls or on flat surfaces.

Regarding the motifs the most time and effort was invested in depicting cattle which attain a frequency of up to 60 % of the animal motifs in particular regions (Fig. 5-7). In view of this dominance it should not go unmentioned that cattle have been present in the region since 3,000 BCE and could accordingly serve as a motif for 5,000 years. The other important domestic animals, horses and camels, are only available in this region for 2,000 years and this may be the reason for their lesser frequency in the art. Nevertheless they can play an important role among the animal motifs, with camels attaining a frequency of 61 % in the engravings of the region of Mornou, or horses which comprise 22 % of the animal motifs in the Archeï region.

A special problem in examining rock art lies in the assessment of its “ecological credibility” (K. Butzer). On the one hand it is undisputed among researchers that rock art is a deeply felt expression of religiousness, understanding of the world and cultural symbolism while on the other hand the spectrum of motifs is based on models from real world. Even if today almost no researcher still believes that rock artists produced an accurate account of their surroundings, there is still that part of the contents to be analysed which contains hidden ecological information. In the case of the Ennedi highland this means that the distribution of animal motifs potentially equals their herding areas. Under this perspective it emerges that at times cattle were kept all over the highlands which later was not possible with horses. Questioning dwellers of the Ennedi today about the possibilities of pasturing cattle in the central and eastern regions (where masses of rock pictures of cattle can be seen), they deny this categorically even for years with good rainfall. And they assert that this was impossible also generations before. This statement confronted with



Fig. 4 The western margin of the Ennedi highland is characterised by sheer precipices deeply incised by narrow gorges.



Fig. 5 During the first millennium CE cattle are frequently accompanied by men with combat weapons – apparently prepared to fight for their stock.

the mappings of cattle motifs suggests the conclusion that before horses were introduced there must have been sufficient open water at least seasonally to pasture cattle but from the time of the introduction of horses onwards the situation must have worsened. This consideration is based on the fact that cattle and horses have roughly the same need for open water as opposed to camels. If indeed horses and camels arrived in the wider area roughly at the same time (BAILLOUD 1997) this would explain why horse riders made only extremely few outings into central and eastern Ennedi leaving it for the ‘camel people’ while they shared the same area around the better watered places in the west like Archeï. Only in the earliest camel period, there may have been seasonal possibilities to advance eastwards with cattle since there are pictures of men with shield, lance and voluminous headgear who can be seen with cattle and also riding camels.

Pictures of people give clues to understanding social and political developments: Early pictures, which are normally monochrome, exhibit people that are not adorned,

working with their stock (e.g. milking). Other humans of the early times are shown walking or running with bows and arrows, i.e. with their hunting gear. Later during the Iron Age people display lances and shields which are not useful for hunting but for fighting instead. Moreover, people and cattle become more colourful and more individual. Apparently the painters expressed their pride and status and maybe even their clan-affiliation in the pictures. This could indicate a stronger social hierarchy and also a more unequal distribution of wealth. The combat weapons in the context of cattle suggest that there may have been intensified fighting due to this wealth, be it for defence or be it to conquer them. Also at this juncture there may be an ecological background: When water and pasture decreased over time while the population grew (Iron Age rock pictures are more frequent than Neolithic pictures, even though this in itself is no proof for a larger population) then also competition over the resources would have increased. Just as one encounters in modern east Africa, armed disputes are a regrettably normal part of the herder livelihood.

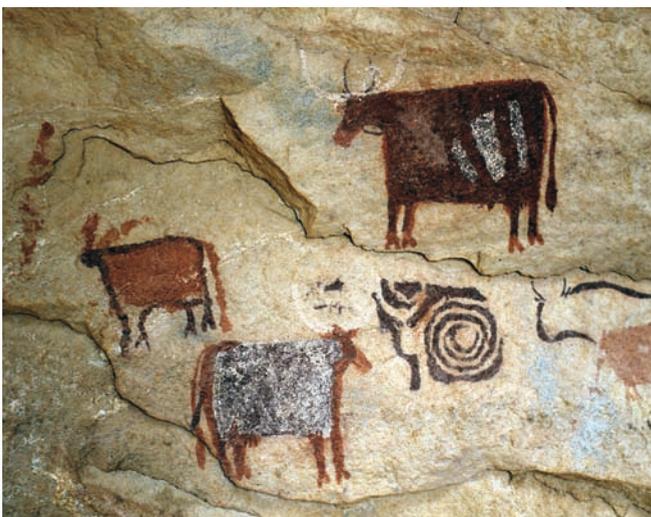


Fig. 6 The longer cattle herding lasted, the more the whole thinking of the herders became preoccupied with their stock. For them each cow was an individual warranting a specific design.

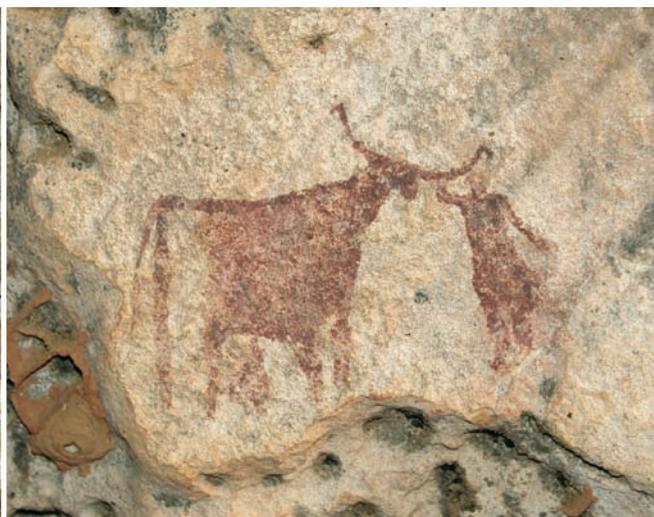


Fig. 7 In the earlier times of cattle herding the relationship of people and stock was as simple as the monochrome pictures: the animals are there to work with. Only later people started to invest a lot of time in painting each cow with an individual coat pattern.