ENNEDI
TALES ON STONE

Roberta Simonis, Adriana Ravenna and Pier Paolo Rossi
Ennedi, Tales on stone

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Publication of this book has been made possible thanks to financial support from Doloresa and Yuri Gleba, sincere admirers of the Ennedi desert and rock art.

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Acknowledgments

We are thankful to all the colleagues and friends who have supported our project in various ways: Aldo and Donatella Bocazzi, Andrea Bonomo, Bernard Choppy, Jacques and Brigitte Choppy, Felice Cesarino, David Coulson (Trust for African Rock Art), Lorenzo De Cola, Vincenzo de Michele, Guido Faleschini, Dominique Fradin, Doloresa and Yuri Gleba, Nicole Honoré, Gérard and Jérôme Jacquet, Verena Jung (Archhunter de), Suzanne Lachaud, Philippe Lafond, Jean-Loic Le Quellec, Luca Massini, Gordon Munden, Giancarlo Negro, Enrico Pezzi, Rocco Ravà (Spazi d’Avventura), Ferdinand Saumarez Smith, Daniela Scapin, Sergio Scarpa Falce, Anne-Marie Sido, François Soleilhavoup, Ursula Steiner, Mie Suy, Maurice Vreugde. We owe a debt of gratitude to the organisations who gave us their assistance on the ground – African Parks and S.V.S. Tchad (Société de Voyages Sahariens) – and to all the local guides who accompanied our wanderings in search of rock art and helped us with toponomastic information.

We are grateful to Savino di Lernia, Università Sapienza, for his useful suggestions and for reading an initial manuscript.

Special thanks are due to András Zboray for sharing with us his photographs and to John Clare for revising our English text and for his helpful comments.
There was a time, thousands and thousands of years ago, when a group of our early ancestors – or more likely many groups at different times and places – decided that their bodies and ornaments would be made more attractive by adding colour. Pigments were in the soil around them. Hematite, goethite and manganese oxides gave ochres their countless shades of red, yellow and brown. Charcoal, calcite or kaolinite provided more hues. By combining these materials with a medium, water or saliva, it was easy to lay colours on any surface.

Then, in the course of millennia, someone realized that colours could be used to make two-dimensional images on rocks or cave walls; that any shape or pattern could also be engraved in stone; and that binders would make colours more stable. Prehistoric parietal art was born, and to this day we can see stunning examples of this ancient imagery.

In the last few decades, a surprisingly large variety of subjects and styles of rock art have been brought to light in northern Chad by scholars and passionate travellers, and is now known not only to local inhabitants but also to outsiders. Currently, Tibesti, Borkou and Ennedi are effectively a huge, open-air art gallery, almost unmatched in the rest of Sahara, and immersed in enchanting landscapes.

For many years, the life-size masked “man of Gonoa”, not far from Bardai, has been the iconic symbol of Chadian prehistoric art. Many engravings of cattle and also wild animals, such as elephant, rhino, giraffe, antelope, ostrich and (perhaps) aurochs, decorate the two-kilometre-long ignimbrite ridge of Gonoa. In the surrounding area, images of humans and cattle are carved into the rocks of some valleys. About two hundred and fifty kilometres to the east, as the crow flies, an amazing concentration of paintings occurs on the rocky hills and along the *enneris*, dry riverbeds of watercourses that once ran across the Ouri plain. Not only magnificent cattle and their wonderfully attired herders, but also fantastic dancing anthropomorphs and mythical animals seem to be there just to puzzle the astonished visitor.

In the southern zone, particularly to the south of Emi Koussi, the highest mountain of the whole Sahara desert (3415 m in elevation), caves and rock walls feature outstanding subjects, among them paintings of giraffe and crocodile hunting, boats and fish, and countless engravings of cattle with elaborate decorations.
To the east, in the Ennedi region, more recent painted scenes of daily life occur, but also earlier human figures and rare events such as a leopard hunt. However, what is really characteristic of this region are the galloping mounted horses and camels, painted in original styles. Interestingly, the DStretch® plugin to ImageJ® has recently made it possible to see that in some cases the visible paintings are superimposed on older, faint images, very different in style and barely discernible to the naked eye.1 In some cases, paintings in an archaic style are revealed by DStretch® where just blurry spots appear on rocks. Farther to the east on the Ennedi plateau, the Niola Doa groups of intricately decorated female figures stand out as a superlative example of Saharan art. Needless to say, all over the mentioned localities, more recent, rough paintings or engravings of camels, horses and cattle occur.

Unable to interpret the circumstances and purpose of rock art, many authors do not dare go beyond arid, though detailed, lists of subjects and styles. Others, though, have put forward a number of explanations ranging from the hunters’ desire for success to a magico-religious significance, sometimes linking the art to shamanic practices. However, none of these assumptions has gained total acceptance, although the shamanic theory of David Lewis-Williams2 shows a remarkable insight, especially when applied to the rock art of the San people of southern Africa. Of course, the art must also in some way be a mnemotechnical device, a first step toward an extension of human memory. But to us prehistoric parietal art is comparable to the shadows cast onto a cave wall in Plato’s allegory: it can hardly reveal reality, but only a partial or distorted vision of life as it might have been thousands of years ago.

There is no doubt, however, that in most areas of northern Chad, such as the Ouri plain in northeastern Tibesti, part of the Borkou region, and the Ennedi plateau, livestock was the main subject to be represented. It was essential to the life of small communities and must have played a very important economic and sociocultural role among cattle herders. The same is true also for central Sahara, where livestock, in most sites, is the focus of parietal art. In northern Chad, petroglyphs and pictograms of cattle are particularly frequent, shown both isolated and in herds, and each subject is given an individual, original coat pattern, ranging from the purely geometrical to intricate meandering designs. In the Ouri plain, a number of images of humans bowing with outstretched arms in front of bulls or cows obviously suggests a tribute to these animals’ status.

It is generally accepted that in Africa, contrary to what occurred in most regions of the world, plants were domesticated long after herding was first established. In the Sahara, faunal remains indicate that domesticated animals (cattle, sheep or goats) were present from the early sixth millennium BCE, and became much more common in the fifth millennium. Unfortunately, the age of the earliest cattle images remains unknown. However, recent studies from the central Sahara (Libyan Acacus, Takarkori), based on the analyses of organic residue on 81 potsherds, present direct chemical evidence for early dairying practice: “Our findings provide unequivocal evidence for extensive processing of dairy products in pottery vessels in the Libyan Sahara during the Middle Pastoral period (approximately 5200-3800 BC) confirming that milk played an important part in the diet of these prehistoric pastoral people”.3

At enneri Bardagué in Tibesti, a date for cattle domestication was set to c. 7500-6500 bp (6679-5983 cal. BC),4 a date that has been later dismissed by some authors on the grounds that there is no reason to believe that this Bos5 was really domesticated.6
In the Ouri plain, we have the impression of being in a region that at some time in the distant past was inhabited by groups of very sophisticated cattle herders, perpetually moving in search of the best grazing grounds depending on rainfalls and climatic fluctuations. Possibly, they were herders and foragers at the same time, as no expressions of their art refer to the cultivation of grains, and cattle for them, certainly much loved and perhaps also considered in some way sacred, represented the security of predictable day-to-day access to food as well as making it possible to plan future consumption.7

It is reasonable to think that the so-called “fantastic” art that is also present in the same Ouri territory, in a number of separate sites, was made during a different period of time and/or by groups of hunter-gatherers subsisting on wild plants and animals. On the rock walls of these sites, cattle do not occur at all, but instead one can see weird anthropomorphic beings and unreal, mythical creatures.

At the eastern end of northern Chad, on and around the Ennedi massif, a completely different art occurs. We no longer see the variety of colours of the Ouri paintings to the west – white and red, but also black, brown, violet, yellow, green. Instead, white and red dominate the eastern scenery. Although cattle are always present, the style and subjects differ a lot and one can observe containers, granaries, livestock enclosures and all sorts of people going about their daily activities or engaged in occasional ceremonial gatherings. Three more subjects of paintings typical of the Ennedi region are the “sentinels”, frontal-view standing figures equipped with shields and spears,8,9 the galloping mounted horses and camels, skilfully represented at their full speed, and a number of enigmatic labyrinths.

To sum up, one of the traits of prehistoric parietal art in Chad is the striking creativity and diversity of subjects at sites that can be approximately grouped into six different areas (Fig. 2). Within these areas, a few sites exhibit painted or carved subjects with unique features, unmatched in other parts of the world.

As Michel Barbaza puts it, “L’art rupestre marque indéniablement, de fait, des territoires”.10

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1 Jon Harman, www.dstretch.com
2 Lewis-Williams J.D. & T.A. Dowson, 1999
3 Dunne J. et al., 2012: p. 392
4 Gabriel B., 1977: p. 40
5 Genus of wild and domestic cattle
6 Le Quellec J.-L., 2013: p. 21
8 Keding B. et al., 2007: p. 28 and pl. AI
9 Lenssen-Erz T., 2007: p. 50-53
10 Barbaza M., 2015: p. 35
Time was the talented sculptor of the wild wonders of the Ennedi, erosion and weathering the instruments. The landscape is shaped by infinite sandstone landforms, such as arches, pillars, caves, overhangs, cliffs, canyons, gorges. All this, and much more, is immersed in an atmosphere of ever-changing hues, the shades of brown turning to orange, red, violet, according to the time of the day and season of the year.

Hundreds of million years were necessary to accumulate the thick sedimentary sandstone layers covering the granite base of the main Saharan massifs, including the Ennedi. An alternation of marine waters, swamps and continental land caused a massive deposition of sediments composed of sand, silt, gravel, dust and clay. A reminder of this untiring work are the *Cruziana* trace fossils – bilobed burrows made by organisms typical of shallow, lightly salted waters – one of the few fossils to be found in the rocks of the Ennedi massif. Then, essentially from 140 to 70 million years ago, the continual movements of the earth’s crust caused the fracture of all the existing sedimentary layers along well-defined lines. Erosion, weathering and the pressure of gravity transformed the Ennedi sandstone layers into the amazing shapes one can see today.

The thousands of images on the Ennedi sandstone landforms are a superb, captivating archive of the human occupation of the territory in the last few millennia, an illustrated record that, to a certain extent, depicts the gradual, and occasionally dramatic, climate changes and their impact on the environment.

During the Early and Middle Holocene, North Africa experienced humid conditions. The “African Humid Period” peak occurred between 11000 and 6000 years ago,
when the landscape in North Africa was completely vegetated and dotted with large and small lakes. A palaeoenvironmental reconstruction covering the past 6000 years using a lake-sediment sequence from northern Chad shows the progressive drying of the regional terrestrial ecosystem. The demise of tropical trees, the reduction of grasslands and the expansion of acacia trees and other plants and herbs typical of semi-desert areas testify to a gradual decline of the flora and growing aridity. An increasing amount of fine sands were transported by winds. About 2700 years ago, the immigration of true desert plants and trees was completed, and present-day conditions were gradually established, with strong northeasterly trade-winds blowing almost year-round.

Yet, despite the conspicuous decrease in precipitation, a few gorges and gueltas survive today as real ecological enclaves in the middle of the Sahara, rich with Sahelian fauna and subtropical flora – a phenomenon significantly evidenced by the crocodiles in the guelta of Archei and the lush vegetation of the gueltas of Maya and Bachikelé.

In many respects, the prehistoric art of the region is exceptional. It may span the last six or seven millennia, but most of it, in all likelihood, belongs to the last two and a half millennia. It is known that direct datings of the Saharan rock art are controversial and difficult to establish. On the other hand, superimpositions of subjects can be of some help in determining relative ages, although the distinction between which of two elements lies on top is often difficult to make even in the field. A tentative chronological sequence was proposed by Gérard Bailloud as a result of his two expeditions in 1956 and 1957. However, not all the photographs of the 155 sites he documented were published in his 1997 book and most of the illustrations are tracings, a flaw that makes it difficult to follow the results of his research on styles in detail – even if, in broad terms, his major chronological phases can be retained.

In the “archaic” phase, a few images seem to materialize from a very distant past. At Sivré the vanishing painting of two imposing humans apparently engaged in conversation, disclosed in the 1950s by the French prehistorian, certainly dates back to a very early period. In recent times, once again at Sivré, a number of archaic, enigmatic paintings have been revealed thanks to new photographic documents and a clever usage of DStretch®. No images of domesticated animals are to be seen in this early period – just a few wild ones, such as elephant, ostrich, leopard. With all the necessary caveats, Bailloud situates the first occurrences of this phase at around six millennia ago.

An abrupt and bewildering change took place after the archaic artistic period. The following phase, the Pastoral period – called the “bovine period” by Bailloud – is by far the most long-lasting and prolific in terms of art. Cattle herding, in times of abundant water and grazing land, had obviously come to be the main subsistence strategy, and the visual expressions of the archaic mythical world fell into oblivion. A new frame of mind set in. The earliest works of art faded out and new subjects of the Pastoral age were superimposed on them.

Among the local styles defined in the 1950s, special consideration is given in this volume to the Hohou style in respect of human figures. Although the best example of this style can be seen at Sivré and not at the Hohou site itself,
this regional style-name established by Gérard Bailloud is retained because it conveniently
designates a particular type of human figure that appears in a very wide area of the Ennedi
region and over a long period of time. If our opinion is correct, in its various shapes, the
Hohou-style figures do in fact show an affinity both with the Niola Doa engraved female
figures with striped gowns and with the Niola Doa life-size engravings of elaborately
decorated figures. The Hohou human figures may represent a guiding thread leading from
the final archaic stage to the following early and intermediate Pastoral phases.

The Pastoral period is divided by Gérard Bailloud into three phases – ancient,
intermediate and final. These stages, though, are not easily distinguishable as they often
merge into each other. During the intermediate and late Pastoral phases the art really
bloomed, and a lively picture of everyday life was produced. In this respect, the art of the
region is unusual. In the late Pastoral phase, which partly overlaps the later Camel period,
cows and goats are shown in large herds, but details gradually become less defined and
the artists’ skills seem to decline.

According to Bailloud, the horse and camel appear at the beginning of the first
millennium, and, strangely enough, at the same time.

A specific feature of pictograms in the areas of Terkey and Archei is that both the
camel and horse are repeatedly depicted at the “flying gallop”. This artistic convention
refers to the unreal depiction of the animal with all its legs extended and simultaneously
off the ground, so that the overall impression is one of great speed. It seems to have first
appeared in Mycenaean art and later emerged in distant parts, such as Scythia, Persia
and China.\footnote{Jaffe I.B. & G. Colombardo, 1983: 183-200} It reappeared in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and
gradually disappeared after 1887, when Eadweard Muybridge captured a galloping horse
in stop-motion photographs, proving that all its feet are off the ground only when its
legs are collected beneath its body, not stretched outwards. In prehistoric art, the stylistic
convention of the flying gallop is present in central Sahara as well; here many images of
galloping horses drawing chariots occur, and also some human figures are shown with
their legs unnaturally stretched out.\footnote{di Lernia S. & D. Zampetti (eds),
2008: p. 169-172}

The flying gallop is only one of many examples illustrating how the human mind may
work in the same way and create similar symbolic images, regardless of time and place,
without people necessarily being in contact and communicating with each other.
“For a week our route lay through a maze of sandstone rocks where no track existed, and through which our guides zigzagged from crest to crest with remarkable sureness. ...Everywhere were narrow gorges and jagged crests... In this uneven ground with its narrow horizons one pasture-ground succeeded another, but we saw no trace of inhabitants.”

In 1914 Jean Tilho was the first European to reach the Eastern and Central Ennedi, with the mission entrusted by l’Institut de France of getting in touch with the nomads. When he finally got to meet a few of the highland nomads, the comments they inspired were typical of the mentality of his colonial epoch: “If I had to seek in the animal kingdom a term of comparison for these tribes, I think I should choose their fellow-denizen the jackal: they possess its cunning, its audacity, its cowardice, its mischievousness, its endurance, its speed, and its predatory instincts...”

After crossing the whole plateau, Tilho’s group reached the western borders of Ennedi: “The cliffs, gaining in height what we lost in altitude, grew more and more imposing... On all sides there rose in the distance rocks, some broad, some slender, but all of the same height and grouped regularly, so that sometimes, when very close together, they looked like groups of men.” On the 17th of December they pitched their tents in the valley of Archei, and saw “the most admirable effects of natural architecture”. No mention of rock art, let alone the crocodiles.1

A couple of decades were to pass by before the French lieutenant-colonel Burthe d’Annelet documented the paintings of two caves in the Archei gorges, and described one of the caves as “a workshop of rock paintings, varied and well executed”. He was particularly impressed by the camels at the flying gallop, to which “has been reserved the white color, perhaps to emphasise that they are meharis”.2

Around the same period, an accurate survey in the region of Fada was performed by Henri de Saint-Floris, Inspecteur des Chasses for French Equatorial Africa. A native of Perigord, the heart of European prehistory, Saint-Floris was fond of this discipline. In 1933 he departed from Abeché to survey the foot of the Ennedi plateau. Upon his
return, he delivered to Dr E. Passemard a collection of notes and sketches of the paintings of the great shelter of Ehi Fada and several more sites in the region, including Atiba, Tami, Béchiké, Bogaro and Archei. It was his misfortune that the photographer to whom Saint-Floris had entrusted the photos lost some of the negatives, but a few drawings were published in the *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*. Passemard insisted on the similarities he saw with the paintings of southern Africa: “There can be no doubt, we are faced with a distinctly Bushman style... the flying style, a voluntary deformation of the human figure, long necks, reduced, geometric heads, broad shoulders, narrow waist... disproportionately developed buttocks and thighs...”.

From then on, reports of rock art sites increased at an incredible pace. Mostly, they were just occasional sightings by the French military or experts of other disciplines engaged in scientific missions.

The greatest spur to a systematic search of rock art in the northern regions of Chad was given by Paul Huard. A colonel, later general, assigned to the Chadian military command in 1948, he visited known sites and found many new ones. In 1950, a crucial event: the discovery of the “masked man of Gonoa”. The quality of the findings persuaded him to include the research of rock art among the priorities of the meharists under his command. At this point, the number of reports rose dramatically. Sketches, photographs, communications, everything the general came to know, was used to compile an inventory, and became part of a larger study of “cultural traits” that was to be gradually released over the following years in many articles and books. Among the major contributors we can recall a number of officers, Scheyer, Scheibling, Lopatinsky, Bacquié, Massip, Le Masson, Fevai, Leonardi, Santamaria, Feat, Kaufmann, Courtet... Paul Huard was to dedicate the rest of his life to rock art and, in collaboration with his wife, Léone Allard-Huard, he persevered with his studies until his death in 1994.

By far the most painstaking research in the Fada area was done by Gérard Bailloud, the prehistorian of Breton origin who accomplished two missions, both sponsored by the *Musée de l’Homme*. From October 1956 to October 1957, travelling with camels for hundreds of kilometres and with no experience of the desert, Bailloud created an inventory that included five hundred rockshelters, only twenty of them previously recorded by Huard, and made two hundred tracings. It was certainly not a task everyone would have relished, as Henri Lhote explains: “Flies seem to have left the most detestable memory in G. Bailloud’s mind, and we can understand it because we know from experience to what extent the odious creatures can be unpleasant when, in hundreds, they come to haunt you as you make a tracing or put the tint on it...”

Thanks to the careful comparative work of Bailloud, the region of Fada could be fitted into the general scenery of Saharan prehistoric art. Stratigraphic surveys were conducted at two sites, Delebo and Soro Kezenanga. Bailloud defined fifteen styles and periods for the paintings, pointed out many local features and emphasised the similarities with the prehistoric art of other areas of the Sahara. In particular, the “archaic style” of Sivré seemed to have “distant but undeniable similarities” with the “Roundheads” of the Tassili-n-Ajjer. Just like the man of Gonoa, so the Sivré figures, similar to ghosts from the dawn of time, became well-known among researchers. Bailloud’s book was published in 1997, exactly forty years after his surveys had taken place.

By pure chance in February 1955 four French geologists, André Bonnet, Jean-Michel Freulon, Albert F. de Lapparent and Pierre Vincent, while travelling with their camels on
the Ennedi highlands to reach Fada from the well of Diona, stumbled upon a huge sandstone boulder on the plateau of Guirchi and, to their amazement, saw a unique engraving: it was a group of the so-called “dancers of Niola Doa”, four life-size human figures entirely covered with intricate body decorations. The geologists delivered their account of the site to Henri Breuil, who published a comment on the exceptional finding. At Fada, the four geologists were informed that lieutenant Courtet had been on the plateau a year before and had taken a few photographs of “some exceptional engravings”. In 1956 the Austrian ethnologist Peter Fuchs, while doing research on the Bideyat nomads, still largely unknown, visited the Guirchi area and recorded a few more unpublished petroglyphs but also some pictograms on the Niola Doa plain, thereby identifying the area as the meeting point of paintings with engravings: in the eastern area of the plateau only engravings had been recorded thus far, and all the paintings had been found in the western area.

In 1960 Chad finally gained independence from France. However, a cycle of violence followed and continued for many years, often inflamed by Chad’s neighbours. Secessionist unrest shook the northern regions and led to an increasingly massive involvement of French troops and the Libyan army.

Only in 1992, having secured an agreement between the parties, the Chadian authorities granted the first permits to enter the northern regions, and travellers gradually returned to visit those rugged and remote lands, where the number of war memories scattered among sand and rocks almost equalled the number of prehistoric remains. Technology had improved but the difficulties were countless, including the presence of land mines, which made it essential to travel in the company of a local resident who knew the location of the invisible minefields.

Rock art research was resumed in April 1993. From then on, a number of expeditions were organised to Tibesti, Borkou and Ennedi with the main purpose of revisiting and recording again the known sites of prehistoric art, but also, possibly, bringing to light new ones, unknown to the international community. Many travellers actively participated, and among them we may mention those who played a particular role in recording rock art: Giancarlo Arcangioli, Brigitte and Jacques Choppy, Guido Faleschini, Giancarlo Negro, Sergio Scarpa Falce, and two authors of this volume (A.R. and R.S.). In the same years, Aldo and Donatella Boccazzi started investigating the occurrence of rock art in the western region, notably in the Ouri plain.

In the Ennedi region, a considerable number of “lost” or unreported sites were recorded over the first decade. The Niola Doa “dancing maidens”, reached in November 1993, surprisingly revealed a further group of decorated life-size figures. The sites of Dour Douro, Azrenga and Erichigué were also reported on that occasion, together with a huge shelter not far from the guelta of Archei, from then on named “Grande Riparo”. During the surveys that took place between 1994 and 2003, many more prehistoric art sites were
revisited or newly recorded, especially in the Ennedi areas of Adougou, Agusi, Archei, Baba, Bamena, Baradergolo, Barakatra, Breyala, Chebi, Chigueou, Dahili Tili, Deli, Diona, Fada, Elikeo, Etakou, Ga Kowrou, Gaora Hallagana, Homechi, Kassala, Katchabi, Ketara, Kettebi, Koran, Mogoro, Nohi, Ourchigué, Sini, Sivré, Taolé Kokoli, Terkey and Tokou.

With the introduction of digital photography and the DStretch® plugin for ImageJ®, a radical change took place. DStretch® is a tool for the enhancement of pictograms developed by Jon Harman in 2005. When a digital image is treated with this powerful tool, details unseen before can often be deciphered. This fast and easy way of processing images reveals faded or blurred pictograms, with little or no interference by the operator.13 The name of the tool refers to “decorrelation stretch”, a technique first used in remote sensing to transform the colours of an image. Each colour space, or combination of colours, gives different results. The type of transformation used to obtain the best result in false colours is indicated with a code of three or four letters after the name.

The aim of this volume is not to produce a catalogue of Ennedi rock art, but to present an overview of the documents resulting from the ten-year long collective research that began in April 1993. Many more sites have been visited and documented over the following years up to the present day, and we may mention, among others, the substantial contributions to this volume of Pier Paolo Rossi and András Zboray.14 The focus of the volume is the most significant art, blended into the spectacular landforms of the region.

We can only imagine the Ennedi landscape at the time the artists were decorating the rock surfaces with their pictograms and petroglyphs, but it must have been a sensational sight.

**Site names and codes**

Most of Bailloud’s toponyms have been kept, and his original Roman numerals of the single sites follow the name of the locality. However, only some of the sites of his inventory are illustrated in his 1997 book, and the sequences of Roman numerals mentioned in his text are discontinuous. Therefore, both the unpublished sites presumably recorded by the French prehistorian and the newly recorded sites are indicated with an alphanumeric code composed of two letters+two digits. No codes are applied to localities with only a single known site. A list of site names and codes is at p. 284.

The toponyms are taken from different local languages, such as Beria or Dazaga, and their dialects. So it may happen that a locality has more than one name. Most of them have been given by the Bideyat and Zaghawa people, who have lived for centuries in the delicate Ennedi environment in a society based on nomadic or semi-nomadic clans breeding camels, cattle, sheep and goats. Both groups call themselves Beri.

Transliteration into French (one of the official languages of Chad) means that “ou” should sound as “oo” in the English word “good”, “ch” as “sh”, and the final “é” should be pronounced [ɛ], much like the vowel sound of “day”.

1 Tilho J., 1920: p. 163-164
2 Burthe d’Annelet J., 1932; 1939: p. 990
3 Passemard E. & H. de Saint-Floris, 1935
4 Camel cavalry
5 Lhote H., 1966: p. 35
6 Bailloud G., 1997
7 Bresil H., 1956
8 Huard P., 1963: p. 35
9 Huard P., 1967-68: 113
10 Fuchs P., 1957: p. 113 (pl. II); p. 120 (pl. V, VI)
11 Negro G. et al. (eds), 1996
12 Boccazzi A. & D. Calati, 2001
13 Le Quellec J.-L. et al., 2013
14 Zboray A., 2009
1. “GRANDE RIPARO”, THE AMAZING CHAOS

The “Grande Riparo” (meaning “Great Shelter”, Fig. 1.1) is just before the entrance to the gorge leading to the superb guelta of Archei, one of the most popular waterpoints in the Ennedi, invaluable to camel herders and truly admired by outsiders. The Italian nickname “Grande Riparo” was given to it in 1993, when it was first recorded and later reported in

Fig. 1.1. “Grande Riparo”. Max H of double arch = c. 14 m.

Fig. 1.2. Mounted horse at the “flying gallop”, and camels.
Fig. 1.3. Tracing of the 15-metre-long, chaotic frieze on the outer wall of the “Grande Riparo” (assembled after J. Choppy, 2002).¹
Fig. 1.4. In the underlying layer, coloured engravings of two cows. The superimposed clumsy white horse is the most recent painting. The large white oval represents a hut or granary standing on poles.
Fig. 1.5. Early figure with long white ornament on the head. Hobou style. H = c. 30 cm.

print by an Italian group of researchers.¹ The two huge natural arches bear many traces of red ochre paint, and an impressive frieze crowded with hundreds of images decorates the curved rock wall to the left of them. What immediately comes to mind is that this broad shelter, high above the wadi plain and with a wide view over the valley, was an ideal stopping place for semi-nomad herders waiting their turn to take their animals to drink at the guelta of Archei – with its plentiful fresh water – just about five kilometres to the north.

An extraordinary feature of the large painted panel is the unusual number of superimpositions, suggesting that many people, over a long lapse of time, recurrently halted here. However, in many cases the colours of two layers are mixed, so that establishing whether a painting is superimposed or underlying is an arduous task. Jacques Choppy, who published his research in 2002, speaks of “up to seven different layers”.²

Mounted horses and camels, many of them at the “flying gallop” (Figs 1.2 and 1.3), are the most remarkable subjects. Their style is unique in Saharan prehistoric art and they are peculiar to this area, although occasionally occurring elsewhere in the Ennedi
region. Their presence in the “Grande Riparo” is a signal: You are entering the spectacular milieu of Archei!

Two engravings of bovines, exceptionally bearing traces of paint, seem to be the earliest art (Fig. 1.4). Dark-red human figures in the style that Bailloud defines as “Hohou” also appear to be early. They have a corpulent build, some of them wear a white adornment attached to their heads (Fig. 1.5), others hold curved throwing sticks (Fig. 1.6).

Special mention must be made of the first two figures on the left (Figs 1.7 and 1.8). They are strikingly reminiscent of the so-called “dancing maidens” of Niola Doa, so much so that they suggest a connection with that area, 130 kilometres away on the northern side of the Ennedi plateau. The large figure on the right, thanks to DStretch enhancement, is revealed as a replica of the life-size engraved Niola Doa figures, with the same body shape and posture. The raised left arm may indicate that the figure was intended to be holding a baton resting on her (?) shoulders. The smaller figure on the left, with a raised arm and wearing a long striped gown, is identical to some engraved figures appearing in three engraved panels at Niola Doa. Many similar figures – again with the help of DStretch treatment – are identifiable elsewhere in the region; they also appear on the smooth surface of the two arches at the right of the main frieze. Such a frequent iteration suggests that they may be symbolic or mythical figures.

The engravings and paintings that make up the formidable chaos of the long fresco show an assortment of styles.