



From art to context: Holocene roots of an Initial Neolithic Pastoralism (INP) in the Atlas Ouled Naïl, Algeria



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ABSTRACT

The Algerian Highlands and their surroundings attracted Holocene communities by 7000–4000 cal BC. Co-existence of hunter-gatherers and shepherds of an Initial Neolithic Pastoralism phase (INP) is documented by cultural contexts from foothill settlements and rock engravings/paintings sites (game and domestic flocks), in the Ouled Naïl and Ouled Djellal areas. Shepherds' signatures on cliffs dated from optimum climatic conditions showed a mosaic of behaviours within a cultural diversity. They add their semantic contributions to a mid-Holocene framework. Further pastoral development lasted until late settlement of an agro-pastoral tribal system in these Highlands, "Country of the Sheep".

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1. Introduction

North-African Holocene pastoralism long remained a marginalized topic. Rock art sites and animal subsistence modes from Holocene settlements are still not yet linked, but are documented. Algerian cases in the Ouled Naïl highlands might also concern Tellian ridges (Kherbouche et al., 2014; Merzoug et al., 2014), Atlas Moroccan sites (Simoneau, 1969; Searight, 1996, 2004; Ouchaou and Amani, 1997; Ouchaou et al., 1998, 2003; Ouchaou, 2000a, b, 2004, 2012; Searight and Martinet, 2001–2002; Linstädter, 2004, 2008; Soler et al., 2006; Rodrigue, 2009; Ballouche et al., 2012; Linstädter and Kehl, 2012; Soler and Subils, 2012; Skounti et al., 2012; Roubet and Ouchaou, 2014), and Tunisian sites (Yahia-Achèche, 2007, 2009; Dridi and Aouadi, 2012; Aouadi et al., 2014).

By 6000 cal BC, according to eastern Algerian cases, a pastoral highland phase (Aurès-Némencha) occurred after an autarkic breeding phase, as an initial step of a non-reversible pastoral development (Roubet, 2003, 2012a,b). This experimental socio-economic pattern, transformed into long-term development, implied integrated and collective behaviours shared by successive pastoral communities (5900–3500 calBC). This eastern Atlas pattern, grafted on a Capsian cultural tradition, was constrained by local rock art characteristics. Holocene pastoralism, an entity free from any cultural traditions, as evident elsewhere in Africa (Ghabbour and Roubet, in press), might have been grafted in Algeria

on cultural contexts, not yet defined. Pastoralism as a potentially federative pattern, acting as a subsistence stabilizer and a symbolic prestige carrier, was investigated through the Tellian Constantine physiographic framework to better understand the north eastern Holocene pastoral engravings (Roubet, 2005a,b; Amara and Roubet, 2014). The Central Saharan Atlas is investigated here.

2. Methodological framework

Coupling rock art and cultural context, a methodological option earlier developed in Algeria by Vaufray (1939: 12–26), is adapted here to a holistic "Neolithization" perception, based on food producer micro-societies of the Atlas, the *Néolithique de tradition capsienne* (NTC) or Atlas Neolithic of Capsian tradition (Roubet, 1979, 2001, 2005c). Aimed at establishing Holocene pastoral activity in Algeria, our synthetic approach focuses on the Atlas Ouled Naïl highlands in tandem with the Ouled Djellal lowlands. Studied for years, these landscapes offer pertinent contributions. For physiographic and geo-ecological conditions (Hachid, 1981–1982), we shall refer to Quaternary studies (Ritter, 1901; Capot-Rey, 1939; Despois, 1949; Estorges, 1959; Mahrouf, 1965; Estorges et al., 1969; Despois and Raynal, 1975; Pouget, 1977, 1980; Claudin et al., 1979; Callot, 1987; Callot and Fontugne, 2008). For rock-engravings and paintings, we shall refer to specialist studies (Bellin, 1957; Tixier, 1958–1960; Camps, 1974; Amara, 1977; Aumassip et al., 1977; Aumassip 1986; Camps and Hachid, 1982; Collignan, 1997a, b; Aïn Seba, 2007); and general works (Flamand, 1914, 1921; Vaufray, 1939, 1955; Lefebvre, 1966, 1967, 1975; Soleilhavoup, 1975, 1997,

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2003; Huard and Allard, 1976; Poyto, 1976; Hachid, 1981–1982, 1982–1983, 1992; Lhote, 1984; Sohbi and Collignan, 1991). Scattered mid-Holocene cultural cases, inside or outside the ridges, linked or not to rock-engravings, were also discussed (Vaufrey, 1939, 1955; Tixier, 1954, 1957; Grébénart 1967, 1968, 1969, 1970, 1971a, b, 1976; Estorges et al., 1969 a, b; Amara, 1977; Amrouche, 1977; Ferhat, 1977; Heddouche, 1977). This aspect represents an important complement to the discussion.

Holocene pastoralism postulates a fixation, a sort of grafting on any cultural context. When it appears inside settlement sediments (domestic animal bones) it is integrated and formed a decisive part within the community development (territorial, economic, social, symbolic). Settled under geographic and eco-climatic optimum conditions, eastern Atlas transhumant movements were seasonally organized from uphill to lowland for special purposes and procurements (Roubet and Carter, 1984; Roubet, 2003). Risky nomadic or wandering behaviours do not characterize this initial Atlas pattern in Algeria.

Moreover, when the cultural character of a pastoral domestic assemblage does not show diagnostic elements, issued from a local Late Palaeolithic or an Epipalaeolithic substrate (lithics and bone tools), potential relict traces of a previous origin are lost, weakening a holistic Neolithization perception. However, although Algerian Iberomaurusian groups might have appeared at Tamar Hat (eastern Maghreb) some 18 000–10 000 BP (Saxon et al., 1974; Saxon, 1975) with more than hunting purposes, they seemed to have focused on the wild caprid *Ammotragus lervia*. Their initial “herding management” did not succeed in starting Holocene husbandry. Elsewhere, some animal burials give a complementary but exceptional source of understanding pastoral behaviour (Di Lernia et al., 2013). The hidden pivotal root weakened perception of the plain pastoral identity and the origin of choices. The semantic purpose inserted in an anthropological approach is thus deprived of answers related to origins of herding in North Africa. This may happened for climatic reasons where local settlements of previous periods are missing (Ahaggar and Algerian Tassili countries). The modern pastoralism of the central Saharan Atlas, adapted to transhumant movements (natural-mechanical means) and diverse resources, has been maintained throughout the Holocene, and marked these Highlands as the “Country of the Sheep”.

Both pre-pastoral and pastoral chronologies are proposed here, because the origin of these domestic flocks remains unknown. Bone collections are missing. No genetic data is currently available on initial Neolithic collections. Herd structure estimation was noticed, for the first time, using Carter and Higgs' data from the Capéletti cave of the Aurès Mountains (Roubet, 1979, 2003, 2005c). Questions about rock-art authors, motivations, locations, periods and technical background, will concern the following parts of this approach, after presentation of recurrent controversial options.

2.1. Controversial options

2.1.1. Coupling context and art

For years, coupling context and art, not interbedded and strictly connected to sediment, remained a controversial and depreciated option. As cases of hidden rock-engravings/paintings under archaeological sediments were rarer in Algeria than were mobile decorative pieces in cultural contexts, this option remained marginal, even for the nearby engraved cliffs. The first Upper Capsian site reference showing geometric motives on hidden cliffs covered by sediments is from Tébessa and Kifène ridges, at Djebel Tazernmunt (Le Dû, 1935–36, 1937). The second, from Brézina and El Arouia caves (Rhar Msakna), was noted by Vaufrey (1939, 1955), “*Les couches néolithiques de tradition capsienne ... recouvraient complètement une gravure rupestre naturaliste, représentant*

probablement un Equidé” Vaufrey, 1955: 362). In contrast, several mobile engraved pebbles from Capsian *escargotières* were considered as roots of North-African rock art development by Camps-Fabrer (1966).

2.1.2. Was rock art an exclusive expression of the Neolithic Capsian tradition facies?

This coupling pattern was neglected as a consequence of the constraining theory (Vaufrey, 1939, 1955), which systematically extended the Neolithic Capsian tradition facies (NTC in French) to all Maghreb rock art stations. Later, when regional investigations led to a geographic limitation of the NTC (Roubet, 1979), the dominant Capsian Epipalaeolithic culture of the eastern Maghreb countries allowed Balout (1955, Chap. X), Camps-Fabrer (1966) and Camps (1974), to accept the Vaufrey proposition, “*Nous rattachons donc l'art rupestre de l'Atlas au Néolithique de tradition capsienne*” (Camps, 1974: 332).

However for Grébénart (1970, 1971a,b), whose discoveries at Ouled Djellal (Fig. 1) and in the Messad (Ouled Naïl) surroundings highlighted successive Upper Capsian and Neolithic settlements, his position was more flexible, “*l'association habitat-art rupestre est assez fréquente autour de Messad* (Grébénart, 1971a,b: 181), but “*elle pose le problème d'un art rupestre antérieur au Néolithique ... qui n'aurait rien d'in vraisemblable*” ... Si l'on retient l'hypothèse de la relation “habitat-gravures” plusieurs de ces sites gravés pourraient donc être antérieurs au Néolithique qui, bien que non admis en Afrique du nord, n'auraient rien d'in vraisemblable » (182). As for the Safiet Bou Rhenan site, he tried to support Vaufrey's NTC theory with reservations: “*Ici, entre les gravures et les restes d'occupation humaine, nous constatons une relation de proximité, et l'on peut admettre, avec beaucoup de réserves, que la date obtenue par le 14C dans les restes de foyers correspond à l'âge des gravures*”, insisting on a strict link between a local engraved decorated ram and a Neolithic context “*les seules représentations de béliers à sphéroïde se trouvant en relation avec des sites néolithiques [sont] Safiet Bou Rhenan et Mokta es Sfa ... la relation habitat-gravure existe et doit être maintenue*” (Grébénart, 1970: 65). This pertinent answer remained almost forgotten and unrelated to pastoral behaviour.

After cave investigations and analysis of several cultural contexts throughout Atlas eastern and central Algeria, data did not uphold Vaufrey's NTC facies. The concept favoured and exemplified the cultural Capsian tradition alone, its lithic tradition (laminar and lamellar products), and its permanent microlithisation impact (geometrics), without any consideration for domesticated animal introduction and a food producing subsistence, or for an irreversible behavioural impact, “*si la tradition semble si vivace, c'est que la néolithisation n'a pas dû pénétrer, ne s'est pas imposée comme un genre de vie radicalement différent des précédents*” (Roubet, 1979: 517). Moreover, the link between NTC cultural context and Saharan Atlas engravings was not supported by a demonstration, “*d'autres facies contemporains du NTC sensu-stricto ne sont pas liés à l'art ... le Maurétanien, les facies du Hoggar*” (Roubet, 1979, 517). Lhote (1970: 189–194; 1984: 261) firmly expressed his opposition, “*il ne peut être question de lier sans nuance sites d'art rupestre et gisements industriels*”.

Outside the western Saharan Atlas, at “Le Méandre”, when F-E. Roubet (1967) discovered a settlement at the bottom of engraved cliffs showing different stylistic expressions for bovids, camels, and chariots, he decided to separate the residual cultural context (without preserved bone) from rock art expressions. Description of this assemblage did not indicate a Capsian tradition. No link with a NTC facies was noticed (lithic industry was studied by C. Roubet). As for a potential pastoral episode, suggested by short-horn engraved cattle, none of the bovid was, from prudence and a lack of bones,

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