

# Using rock images to study cult of the gods in pre-Egyptian society

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Rock image—with ruler boat procession, ca. 3200 BC, Wadi al Agebab. Credit: Mohamed Abdel Hay Abu Baker

The desert in southern Egypt is filled with hundreds of petroglyphs and inscriptions dating from the Neolithic to the Arab period. The oldest date from the fifth millennium B.C., and few have been studied. Egyptologists at the University of Bonn and Aswan University now want to systematically record the rock paintings and document them in a database. Among them, a rock painting more than 5,000 years old depicting a boat being pulled by 25 men on a rope stands out in particular.

"This cultural treasure in the northeast of Aswan has been largely undocumented, let alone published," says Egyptologist Prof. Dr. Ludwig Morenz of the University of Bonn. The petroglyphs are found in numerous and often [remote locations](#) in dried-up river valleys, called "wadis" in Arabic.

At the same time, the petroglyphs, which are sometimes inconspicuous at first glance, are under severe threat, especially from current quarrying activities in the desert. "Especially in recent years, there has already been serious destruction of this cultural asset," says Morenz, who is also a member of the Cluster of Excellence Bonn Center for Dependency and Slavery Studies (BCDSS) and the Transdisciplinary Research Area "Present Pasts" at the University of Bonn. "Such losses can hardly be prevented completely, given the vastness of the area, but all the more important is at least good documentation."

## **Great treasure for science**

Together with the Aswan Inspectorate of the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities, the University of Bonn's Egyptology Department has already documented isolated inscriptions on rocks. "These rock images are a great treasure for science, which will be systematically developed in the coming years in cooperation between the University of Bonn, the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities and especially the Aswan Inspectorate,"

says Mohamed Abdel Hay Abu Baker, who is specifically responsible for researching rock images at the Aswan Inspectorate.

In the course of his doctoral studies at Aswan University in Aswan, Abu Baker will now work together with the University of Bonn to create a comprehensive database with an image archive on the rock images. For this purpose, the University of Excellence Bonn supports the inspector of the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities for one year with a scholarship from excellence funds of the federal and state governments. Prof. Morenz is second supervisor of the dissertation.

## **Testimony from the time before the pharaohs**

The project will now systematically record the hundreds of rock art images in southern Egypt. "The first newly discovered sources shed new light on the pre-Pharaonic period of the Fourth Millennium and the importance of the socio-cultural periphery," Morenz says.

Among the images that Abu Baker captured during his explorations in the field, one in particular stood out to the Egyptologist from the University of Bonn. From this period of high cultural dynamism in the Assuan region of the later Fourth Millennium comes a hitherto unique scene that offers insight into religion and cult practice. It is depicted over the bumps and edges of the rock, how a boat is pulled by 25 men with raised arms on a rope.

A ritual is obviously impressively shown here—namely the great procession of an image of the gods, according to Morenz. This is clear from image details, he said, the boat with shrine and standard and, in particular, the cattle horns, which are typical of sacred imagery. "This [rock](#) image gives us insights into the sacred design of an apparently remote landscape, the Wadi al Agebab, which is still largely unknown in research," says the Egyptologist.

The entire later Pharaonic culture is based on these beginnings of the pictorial staging of religion. Morenz: "Here, the high importance of religion and especially the cult of the gods in the still pre-Egyptian society of the second half of the Fourth Millennium is revealed as a culture-creating factor."

Provided by University of Bonn

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