

WESTERN SAHARA

Some Vanished Atlantic Saharan rock carvings

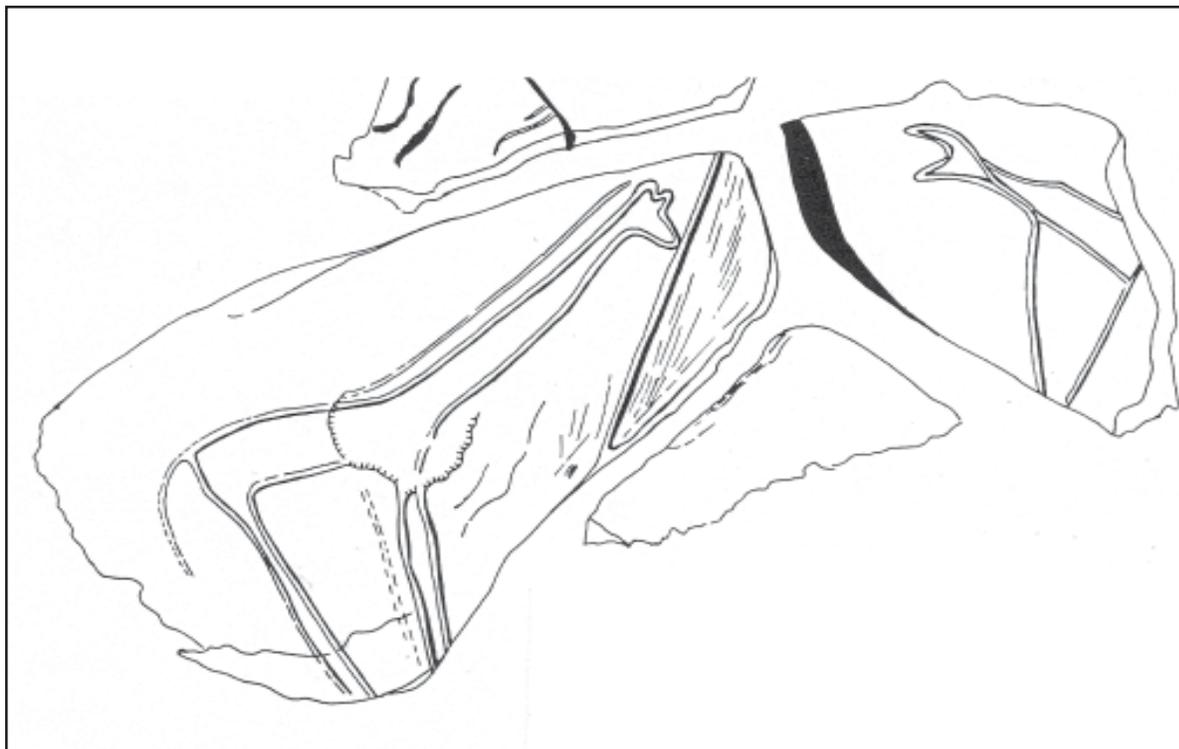
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On 31 January 1973, a single vehicle returning north from Mauritania reached the frontier post at Ain Ben Tili (N 25°48', W 09°32'). Here the occupants were asked to take with them a young man said to be a guide for the onward journey to Tindouf (N 27°00' W 06°00') in north-west Algeria. The usual track in those days led east from Ain ben Tili for some 100 km, parallel to, and just to the south of the Spanish Saharan border prior to turning north for the remaining 150 km. The only map of the immediate

area carried was the Michelin map no.153 with a scale of 1 cm to 40 km.

After leaving the post it soon emerged that the track followed was heading rather more north-east than east, apparently a short cut designed to pass through a large chunk of the north-eastern sector of Spanish-occupied territory. In late afternoon a wide piste (track) running about south to north was reached, which was recognized as a typical Spanish border patrol-route. On a number of rocks at about ground-level were noticed some deeply-incised carvings of the type later called "Tazina style" (Soleilhavou 1997b). Even as a non-"rock art" specialist, it has long seemed to me that the heads and bodies of animals depicted are often more realistic than their legs (Figure 1). The carvings seen at the time included giraffes, a rhino, ostriches, gazelles and several unidentified animals. These have been illustrated and described elsewhere (Nowak *et al.* 1975:62 and figures 139-146). The light was fading and only a few photos and notes were made prior to continuing; in early evening the main track from Mauritania towards Tindouf was safely reached.

Figure1: Rock carvings at Sluguilla (after Soleilhavou). The same giraffe was seen in 1973.



A later enquiry to the jovial and erudite commander of the Nomad Troops at Mahbes (N 27°25', W 09°01'), Fernando de Carranza, who had already provided much hospitality in 1971 and 1972, revealed that the garrison knew the site under the name of Ras Lentareg, whose position is given as 26° 27' N and 09° 05' W (Nowak *et al.* 1975:62; Milburn 1973:197). Compare the official area position given by Official Standard Names Gazetteer (26°28' N, 08°48' W). In those days tourists were not permitted in the region and military maps were not on sale until Spain later vacated the territory. From about 1995 the site currently named Sluguilla Lawash began to be studied in detail by some "rock art" enthusiasts from Girona and turned out to be far larger than first imagined; its geographical position is intentionally not stated by Soler *et al.* (2001, last page). Soler *et al.* (1999:95-97) includes remarks and queries concerning this enormous site, whose carvings are clearly regarded as art.

Even in the 1970s, I noted that some rocks had evidently vanished and that others were broken (Milburn 1973:197). This clearly invalidates a statement by Soler *et al.* (2001) that my article announced the discovery of rock engravings. The same inaccuracy also applies to a text by Soleilhavoup (1997a:10).

If the 1962 Spanish military map NG 29-I (scale 1:500,000) is to be believed, it is logical to suppose that the carvings seen on 31 January 1973 were around the point where the track from Ain Ben Tili cuts a small uad (= oued / wadi) running about south to north shortly before the Mauritanian border some 6-7 km distant. This gives a position of about 26° 49' N, 08° 45' W. The small uad appears to join the larger Uad ben Aamera. Another account (Soleilhavoup 1997b:1) gives the position of the carvings first encountered by the Girona party in 1995 as N 26° 48' 847" N, 08° 50' 928" W, meaning that these could extend over a distance of at least 10 km.

Since the area of Lentareg, printed on the map in large letters, is shown as lying slightly south of the apparent position of Sluguilla Lawash, it might be worth checking in case more rock carvings exist. It is a tragedy that many carved rocks from such sites were removed during the Spanish occupation. These were to be seen decorating various military posts, while others left the country for good. Yet another

problem is that a main Polisario vehicle route passes the site to-day, with resulting further damage. However the importance of its care and protection is now a major concern of the authorities.

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