

Prehistoric Swimmers in the Sahara



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The Neolithic Age underwent a long period when atmospheric conditions made life impossible in the desert. A less arid stage followed over several millennia when desert populations began to settle and civilizations developed. Then a period of renewed dryness set in and these populations were forced to emigrate to the south and also east toward the Nile Valley.

Recent, twenty-first century discoveries have given rise to a series of new questions. Were these movements really as one-directional as previously believed? Could a return to the desert have been possible in spite of the extreme drought conditions that caused the initial exodus? And, what overwhelming attraction could have driven these people to re-confront such conditions?

Journey to a Mysterious destination

Eastern Libya, western Egypt, and northern Sudan contain what are probably the most arid and mysterious massifs and dunes on the planet: the Eastern Sahara. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, archaeologists led explorations of the Nile Valley and the shores of the Mediterranean but ignored the desert zones. This mirrored the partiality of the Egyptians who avoided the desert because they feared it. However, much has changed since then. The search for hydrocarbons in the twentieth century have led to the exploration of regions traditionally difficult to reach, including the Central Sahara.

The two focal points of the Nile and the Central Sahara, each situated on either side of the Eastern Sahara, had attracted their share of attention at the expense of the Libyan desert, which had sunk into relative oblivion. Nevertheless, a handful of explorers ventured into this part of the Sahara during the last century in an effort to unravel the mysteries of this unspoiled region. What could be hidden in these steep slopes, these insurmountable dunes, these legendary places evoked by Bedouin over a steaming pot of tea while huddled around a fire at night? The lost and opulent oasis of Zerkûra? A secret passage to faraway lands?

Title pages: *Wadi Sora, the Cave of Swimmers, discovered by Laszlo E. Almasy in 1933.*

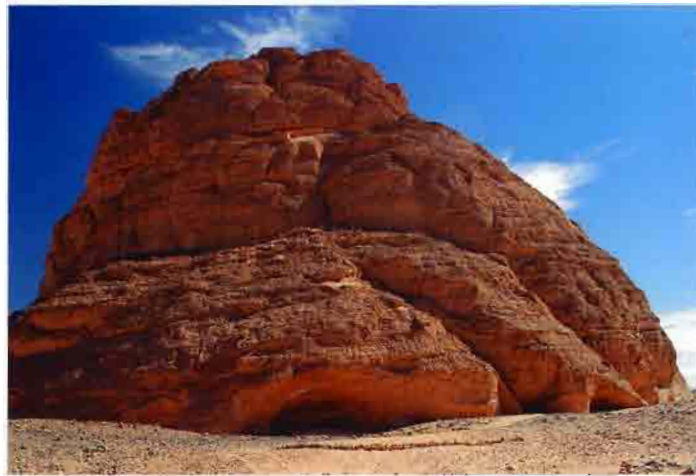


Fig. 1. Two caves of Wadi Sora, southwest of the mountainous plateau of Gifl Kebir: the Cave of Swimmers and, on the right, the Cave of Archers.





Fig. 2. Entrance to the Cave of Animals. The left side is dotted with negative hands, a foot (which is very rare), and enigmatic figures.

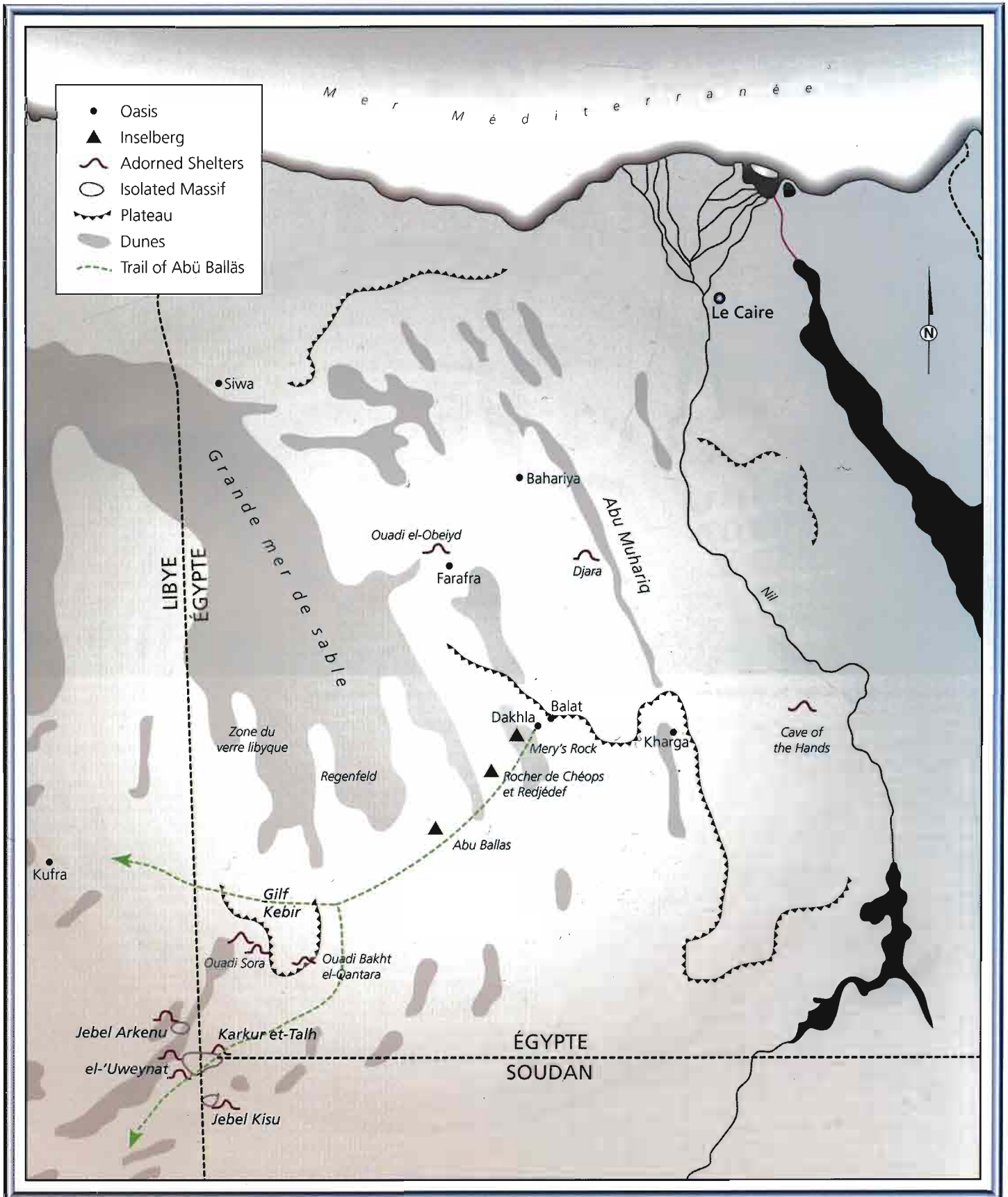




Fig. 3. Entrance to the Cave of Animals, studded with paintings and engravings in the high part.

The stretch of land that runs roughly parallel to the Nile is dotted at regular intervals with oases. One of these, Dakhla, is of particular importance. Excavations carried out there by the French Institute of Oriental Archaeology (IFAO) unearthed the city of Ain Asil, a governorate as well as a commercial and military passageway that

dates back to the sixth Pharaonic dynasty. A major Egyptian garrison would probably have been posted there to maintain order and monitor commercial exchange. It also appears that missions were sent out beyond the oasis. In spite of their fears, they traveled unexpected distances through the desert and into the territory of the god Seth.



Milestones in the Long Journey West

A German doctor, Carlo Bergmann, embarked on a long journey by camel that began in the 1990s. In search of the smallest clues to this past, he came upon ancient routes that stretched over great distances in rectilinear patterns that could only have derived from ancient and recurrent donkey tracks, different from the winding and more recent camel routes. Dromedaries were introduced to Egypt only in the first millennium before the common era, replacing donkeys as the beast of choice for more lengthy journeys. The remains found along these still-visible ancient routes deserve the attention of archaeologists.

Mery's Rock, the first milestone, forms an arch and is about fifty kilometers southwest of Dakhla. On it, hieroglyphic inscriptions discovered by Wally Lama in 1990 provide evidence that such an Egyptian incursion took place under the Ancient Kingdom: "In the year 23 of the Kingdom: the steward Mery, he goes up to meet the oasis-dwellers."¹

On the Khufu (Cheops in Greek) site, still about one hundred kilometers southwest of Dakhla, is a natural stone terrace protected by a ridge that was discovered by Dr. Bergmann in the year 2000 and studied by Rudolphe Kuper of the Barth Institute of Cologne. The hieroglyphic inscriptions inform us that an inspector by the name of Bebi led two expeditions here in search of "mefat" (a mineral pigment or powder) that was probably used to produce paint for tombs in the Nile Valley. This passage dates from the year 25 or 26 of the reign of the pharaoh who built the Great Pyramid, Khufu, depicted here in red. He wears the crown of Upper Egypt and is accompanied by the cartouche of his son and successor, Redjedef. A supply of grilled grasshoppers dated by radiocarbon 14 to 2610 B.C. confirms the period of this incursion.



Fig. 4. Site of the most recent discovery by an Italian-Egyptian 2002 expedition led by Massimo Foggini, the Cave of Animals, situated above the remains of a Paleolithic lake site.

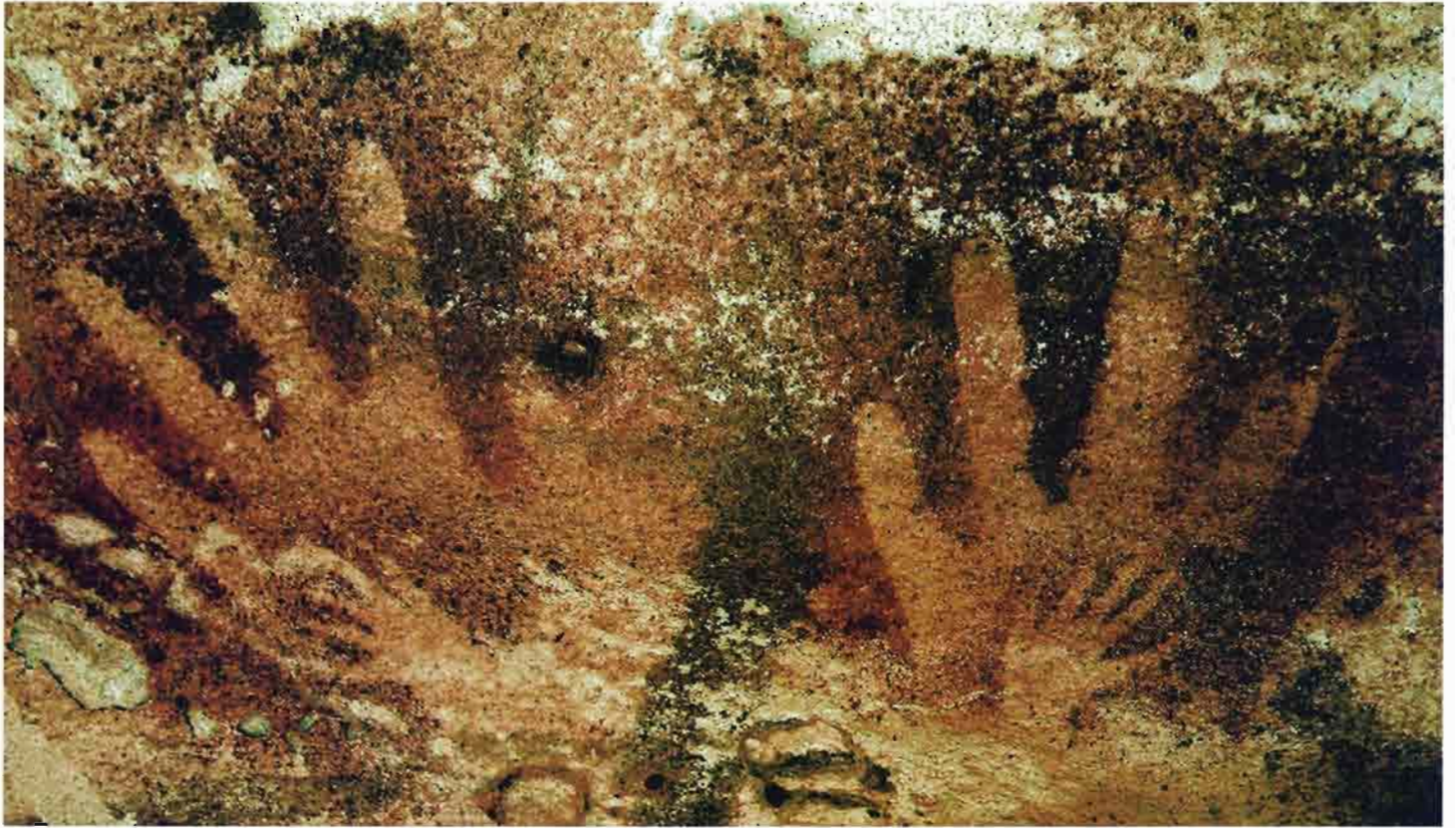


Fig. 5. *Delightful images of adult hands with children's hands shown within them.*





The next stage is Abu Ballas, which was discovered by John Ball in 1918. It is located over two hundred kilometers from Dakhla, at the foot of a hill known as "The Father of Pots" where lie hundreds of earthenware jars from the sixth dynasty. In 1933, the Hungarian explorer Laszlo E. Almasy suggested that Abu Ballas may have served as a depot, ideally located about a third of the distance between the oases of Dakhla in Egypt and Kufra in Libya. The amphorae, too heavy to be transported when full, would have been initially supplied by one caravan and then refilled and used by another before continuing the

Fig. 6. View of the main scene of the cave, showing swimmers moving toward an animal.





journey. Dr. Bergmann continues to discover remnants of ancient sites—around thirty so far—which comprise what is now called the “Abu Ballas Trail.” Some of the broken Egyptian amphorae are engraved, one endearingly illustrated with a donkey. The possible existence of ochre mines, situated some fifty kilometers away, could perhaps explain the nature of the “mefat” sought by the Bebi at the request of Khufu.

Finally, the furthest stage known today is the mountainous plateau of Gilf Kebir or “The Great Barrier,” situated south of the Great Sand Sea. It contains engraved and painted caves and sheltered inlets unique in the Sahara.

Fig. 7. *Figures and swimmers, with one of the distended bodies highlighted.*

A Mythical Place: Wadi Sora (fig. 1)

There are two caves (fig. 2) here that contain paintings of entirely original themes: hands associated with small swimmers and strange creatures. The same hand motifs recur in other small inlets in the vicinity, although additional swimmers have yet to be found.

several hundred hands (figs 3, 4 and 5). Isolated or in pairs, horizontal or vertical, these hands sometimes have tucked or additional fingers, some extend from a clearly indicated forearm, and others are placed near negative images of feet. There are even some delightfully tiny hands placed in the palm of larger ones, the latter belonging to children and even babies (fig. 5).



Hands in the Hundreds

The hands are almost all negative images (fig. 5), obtained by placing the palm with fingers spread against a wall and blowing ochre paint around them, as opposed to the several positive specimens made by daubing painted hands against a wall (a process rarely used in this region). The hand theme is not original in itself as it appears in numerous prehistoric sites around the world; yet these images remain enigmatic and lack a satisfactory interpretation to this day.

Of the two caves, the walls that the team of Massimo Foggini discovered in 2002, called the “cave of animals”, are decorated with

Fig. 8. Scene set around a fissure, evoking a false reflection or possibly an imagined image of the world of the dead.



The Famous Swimmers

In Wadi Sora, hands sometimes appear as a background for subsequent paintings, notably those of the renowned swimmers that Alamy discovered in 1933 and romantically depicted in the film *The English Patient*. These swimmers are noted for their horizontal position and arms stretched out before them, with the exception of

one in a vertical position, like a diver. Their bodies are abnormally distended, with bloated stomachs and sometimes a yellow-colored doubling. Together they move in a line toward a strange animal (figs. 7 and 9).



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Fig. 9. A long line of swimmers with distended bodies move toward the right of the cave where, depicted a little lower, a strange and probably mythical creature awaits them.

What can swimmers floating in this desert world represent?

Is this a fresco from an ancient time when water was abundant? Then why only here, when numerous other *wadi*, in far greater abundance, flowed throughout the Sahara during this period?



trance provoked by the ingestion of hallucinogenic plants, none of the plants required for this purpose grew in the region. What then do the swimmers signify? They appear only in large and relatively deep caves, such as the two at Wadi Sora, which are exceptional in the Sahara and contrast with the smaller and more common rocky inlets. Ancient Egyptian funerary texts draw particular attention to the world of caves, described as a resting place for the dead that is both aquatic and associated with the depths of the Earth. The Coffin Texts inform us that the dead resided in such caves, with Anubis as gatekeeper. The Book of Caverns also highlights the sacred aspect of these locations as obligatory passages into the next world. Is it possible that the swimmers belong to the world of the dead, also known as the Nun, the name given to the primordial waters? Many funerary texts evoke this Afterlife, this Nun, which is both chthonic and aquatic; the dead who dwell here are called *nri.w*, a term signifying deceased, drowned, drifting, floating, or swimming.

Oh drowned ones, sunk into dark in Nun, whose arms are at the height of your faces, oh you whose faces are overturned in the netherworld, whose dorsal vertebrae are in the water, oh you, who float on Nun, as persons lying on their back... breath belongs to your souls... Swimming-movement belong to your arms... You are these who are in Nun, the drowned ones.²



These funerary traditions appear to evoke the swimmers of Wadi Sora. Indeed, this idea becomes more probable given the proximity of figures depicted upside down, which could illustrate the passage into the Afterlife, as death was commonly imagined as the inverse of life. Among the commendations in the Book of the Dead, chapter 51 contains “a formula for not going upside down” and “for not eating excrement in the underworld.” Of course, these Egyptian texts arrived much later than our paintings, which are estimated to date from 4500 years before our era, which, in turn, poses a number of questions in terms of transmission. Could there be other clues?

Fig. 10. Illustration of an exceptional feature discovered in the Cave of Animals: the simultaneous presence of negative hands, swimmers, and a mythical creature constrained by yellow nets. These three elements actually evoke images described in the ancient Egyptian world of the dead.





Strange Creatures

What is the fate of our swimmers? Where are they headed? In both caves, in an orderly line and most frequently from left to right (**figs. 7 and 9**), the swimmers move toward an animal whose hybrid features render it unidentifiable, being both human and animal. The swimmers appear tiny in comparison to this large-bodied monster: it has an unusual hollow in its rump, a tail that generally ends with a tuft like that of a feline and, most noticeably, at the other end of this appendix, there is no apparent head! Indeed, the swimmers move precisely toward the place where the monster's mouth would normally be, and several of them appear to have been voraciously swallowed.

Upon discovery of the first creature in 1933, it was believed that the lack of head was due to part of the wall crumbling away. It was not until 2002 that the indexing of around thirty creatures enabled us to clarify its anatomy and note the systematic absence of a head and the unrealistic hollow along the spine, as well as to eventually grasp its mythical properties.

From as early as the Ancient Kingdoms, Egyptian funerary texts such as the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead contain a judgment scene in the Afterlife that describes a composite monster, a human-crocodile-lion-hippopotamus also known as "the swallower." Chapter 163 specifies the hymn that the deceased must recite "to be saved from the devourer of souls": upon meeting this monster, the deceased-swimmer drifting in the primordial ocean must say to him, "Your name is Devourer. . . . Do not eat me!"



Malevolent Nets

If additional proof was needed to connect the iconography of Wadi Sora and the ancient funerary texts, it would be found in the fact that at least eight of these monstrous creatures are caught up in a type of net of white and often yellow mesh (**fig. 10**), along with certain swimmers with striped bodies. What is the purpose of these nets? The Book of the Dead gives us another key: in the ocean of Nun, cynocephalous (dog-headed) divinities use these nets to fish out the evil swimmer-spirits and thereby prevent them from reaching the Afterlife. Hence Chapter 153 of the Book of the Dead contains formulae to be recited in order to avoid capture by them: "You, the fishers of *nni.w*, do not catch me in this, your net, in which you take up the fallen dead."

In all, this leads us to believe that the swimmers depicted in these paintings are drowned persons who dwell in the world of the dead, that is, in the Nun, the primordial ocean inhabited by a mythical animal that devours the evil ones among them. Here, too, the deceased-swimmers confront the treacherous nets used to catch wicked beings: both the "evil dead" and the voracious creatures. Taken together, these images provide a description of the fate of the dead, an illustration of the path leading to the Afterlife, a route revealed to us several millennia later in the Egyptian funerary texts.

Was Wadi Sora the final destination of desert pilgrims, the ultimate stage of a path that passed through Abu Ballas? We consider the great "cave of animals," the jewel of this *wadi*, to be an exceptional site, decorated by many generations of Neolithic artists before it was abandoned after the climatic deterioration that began around the fifth millennium before our era. It remained, in the memory of the ancient inhabitants who fled the increasingly barren climate, a Mecca for pilgrims, a founding site that prompted their return despite the dangers it entailed, until the day the aridity rendered it definitively inaccessible. Thus, over time, the path from the Nile toward the faraway desert was lost. The myth, however, was not forgotten and is likely to have permeated Egyptian beliefs.³

BIOGRAPHIES

Pauline de Flers received a Ph.D. in psychology. She is a photographer, an enthusiast of pictorial art and human portrayal, and a lover of the sea, even the Great Sand Sea. She has followed the tracks of a woman-swimmer (revealed by Henri Lhote) all the way to Wadi Sora.

Philippe de Flers received a Ph.D. in engineering and management. He is an amateur photographer who has been captivated by deserts from the Sinai to the Libyan Desert via Wadi Hammat. He is fascinated by written forms and was co-laureate of the 1985 Nicephore Niepce Prize.

Jean-Loïc Le Quellec is a mythologist, a prehistorian, and a specialist in African rock art. He is head of research at CNRS (Centre Émile Cartailhac, UMR 5608) and president of the Amis de l'Art Rupestre Saharien (AARS). He is the author of about twenty books and over two hundred articles in specialized reviews.

NOTES

1. Translation by Günther Burkard, University of Munich, see <http://www.carlo-bergmann.de/disc2004/artikel.htm>. "Meet" can mean "greet" or "to meet in battle," an ambiguity that should be retained.
2. *Am Duat X*, 79 sqq.
3. This article is based on the authors' recently published book, *Du Sahara au Nil: Peintures et gravures d'avant les pharaons*. Collection: *Études d'Égyptologie du Collège de France*, No. 7 (Paris: Fayard-Soleb, 2005). On 12 May 2006, the book received the Bordin prize of the Institut de France from the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres.

