

# A possible panel of arachnids in Kharga Oasis (Egypt's Western Desert)

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## Riassunto

Nell'oasi di Kharga (Egitto) è stato rinvenuto un pannello di arte rupestre che potrebbe rappresentare degli aracnidi. In questa breve comunicazione viene presentata una panoramica del sito e si discutono delle ipotesi di identificazione.

## Summary

*A panel of rock art has been found in Kharga Oasis (Egypt) that might depict arachnids. This brief communication provides an overview of the area and a discussion of the identification.*

## Résumé

Dans l'Oasis de Kharga (Égypte) on a trouvé un panneau d'art rupestre qui pourrait représenter des arachnides. Dans cette brève communication on donne un aperçu de la zone et on discute l'identification.

Although a vast array of mammals, and a selection of fish, amphibians and reptiles are represented in Old World rock art, there are fewer amphibians and reptiles, and virtually no insects. A very unusual example of what have tentatively been identified as insects (arachnids)<sup>1</sup> in rock art has been discovered in the area of Kharga Oasis by the North Kharga Oasis Survey,<sup>2</sup> toward the western corner of the oasis proper (*passim* Ikram, 2009a: 78, fig. 15). These were located on the west wall of a shallow sandstone *wadi* (valley) that runs roughly north to south (Fig. 1). To the south there are several other panels of varied dates, decorated with images of oryx and giraffe, commonly found in the rock art of the area. There are also crude stone shelters of undetermined date at the mouth of the *wadi*, and clear indications that the location was, and even today is, a water catchment area and a good stopping place both for animals and humans.<sup>3</sup> The images were incised deeply on a concave rock that faces east and is illuminated by the morning sun; the southern portion of the panel has fallen off and lies on the sandy ground.

The main panel (Fig. 2, 3 and 4) bears a group of carvings depicting a variety of objects: several that are comb-like, some random lines and ovals, one that is star-like, and many that are spider-like. The first two are deeply incised into the rock, with the combs facing skyward. The spider-like creatures consist of an oval depression (c. 0.75 to 1.0 centimetre, equivalent to the abdomen or opisthosoma, see Fig. 7) with eight deeply incised protrusions, some flexed and some straight, indicating legs; smaller, much shallower oval depressions in at least two cases indicate the 'head' (cephalothorax or prosoma). In one instance long incised protrusions emanate from the head, reminiscent of pedipalps, the appendage near the mouth of a spider (Foelix, 2011: 4-5).

The southern part of the panel that has fallen off does not have any star or comb shaped designs. There are some pecked images, possibly of animals and lines, that are very eroded and indecipherable, with the majority of images consisting of deep oval hollows with incised lines emanating from these in groups (Fig. 5 and 6). The incised lines emerging from the hollows in this section are not balanced on either side of the hollow or flexed, to indicate legs, as is the case with those on the main panel.

To this author, the insects on the main panel can be identified as spiders, while the 'legs' of the ones on the broken-off southern

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section are not located in anatomically correct positions for spiders, although the number is generally correct. It is possible that some other insect was meant to be represented by these carvings, but if not spiders, it is hard to determine what other eight-legged creatures were meant to be shown. The only remotely possible alternatives are ticks (Ixodoidea) and harvestmen (Opiliones).

Temporarily leaving aside the identification of these figures as spiders, let us then briefly turn to the other engravings on the rock, and what they all might have signified. Let us start with the identification of these images. The single star-like motif – carved prior to the spider to its left, as the spider's legs seem to have been shaped so as to accommodate the 'star' – might, if one accepts the spider theory, be a depiction of a web. The comb-like objects, with varying numbers of 'teeth' might show insects, but these would be upside down (dead?) and are not really recognizable as such. Are they some sort of plant? Or might they depict some sort of burrow or silken tube, spun by *Ctenizidae* (trapdoor spiders) or *Agelenidae* (funnel weavers)? The author welcomes suggestions for alternative interpretation. The incised ovals on the right (north) of the panel might have been the starting points for more spiders, but such basic geometric shapes are subject to many interpretations.

Returning to the discussion of the eight-legged<sup>4</sup> creatures, the two identifications, other than spiders, are ticks and harvestmen. Ticks, albeit eight-legged, are the most unlikely candidates as they are very small and therefore hard to see, with legs that do not bend in the same way as spiders, and thus do not look like some of the images on the rock. Although known in Egypt, they are unlikely to have been overly common in this area, even when it was greener, as, on the whole, ticks flourish in warm, humid climates (Magnarelli, 2009: 33-37; Hehlhorn and Armstrong, 2001: 608-38). There is no clear reason why they might attract the attention of the ancient dwellers of this area as they are very small, their habits are not immediately remarkable, and probably the ancients knew that these insects survived by consuming the blood of living creatures (hematophagy), and brought disease to them, which is not necessarily a recommendation for an animal whose image would be preserved in stone for eternity.

On the other hand, harvestmen (Opiliones),<sup>5</sup> or a conflation of spider and harvestman are more probable candidates for these representations as, at first, the latter look like spiders, and it is quite possible that these animals were not differentiated from spiders in antiquity but lumped together with them. Indeed, only experts or those in the know differentiate between the two in present times. As with spiders, the body is made up of two portions, the prosoma and the opisthosoma. In harvestmen the connection between the cephalothorax and opisthosoma is broad, so that the body appears to be a single oval, as is seen in the rock art here. However, unlike spiders, harvestmen's opisthosoma is ten-segmented, if viewed closely. These insects tend to be harmless, but, unlike spiders, do not build webs as they lack silk glands. Although these animals are known from Egypt, only a limited amount of work has been carried out on the ones in that country (Cokendolpher, 1990: 9-13). The majority of

Fig. 1. Photograph of the general area where the panel is located, taken from the east in the morning. (Photo S. Ikram)

Fig. 2. Photograph of the northern panel. (Photo S. Ikram)

<sup>1</sup> According to Francis Klingender (1971: 9), spiders within webs were depicted on the walls of open rock shelters in Spain in the Paleolithic period. Unfortunately this author has been unable to access the original publication where this is recorded. However, it has been discussed in a work devoted to Spanish Levantine rock art (Dams, 1984: 254-55; Beltran, 1982: 35), where a delightful panel depicting spiders, webs, and flies are all shown together; this is now thought to date to the Neolithic (Dirk Huyge and Paul Bahn, pers. comm.). In Egypt there are possible images of scorpions at three sites in the Aswan area (pers. comm., Adel Kelani and Rebecca Döhl), four images at el Kab (Dirk Huyge, pers. comm., presented in his unpublished dissertation, 1995), a variety of possible scorpions are presented by Cervicek (1974: 187, n. 737), and images associated with royal names/royalty-bearing in mind that one of Egypt's earliest rulers was called King Scorpion (Darnell, 2002: 10; Wilkinson, 1999: 51-7). A potential image of a centipede might have been represented on Radjedef's Water Hill, west of Dakhla (Frank Förster, personal communication; Kuhlmann, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> The North Kharga Oasis Survey is sponsored by the American University in Cairo.

<sup>3</sup> This is based both on personal observation of rain deposits in 2012, observation of the landscape, and the report of Judith Bunbury, geologist.

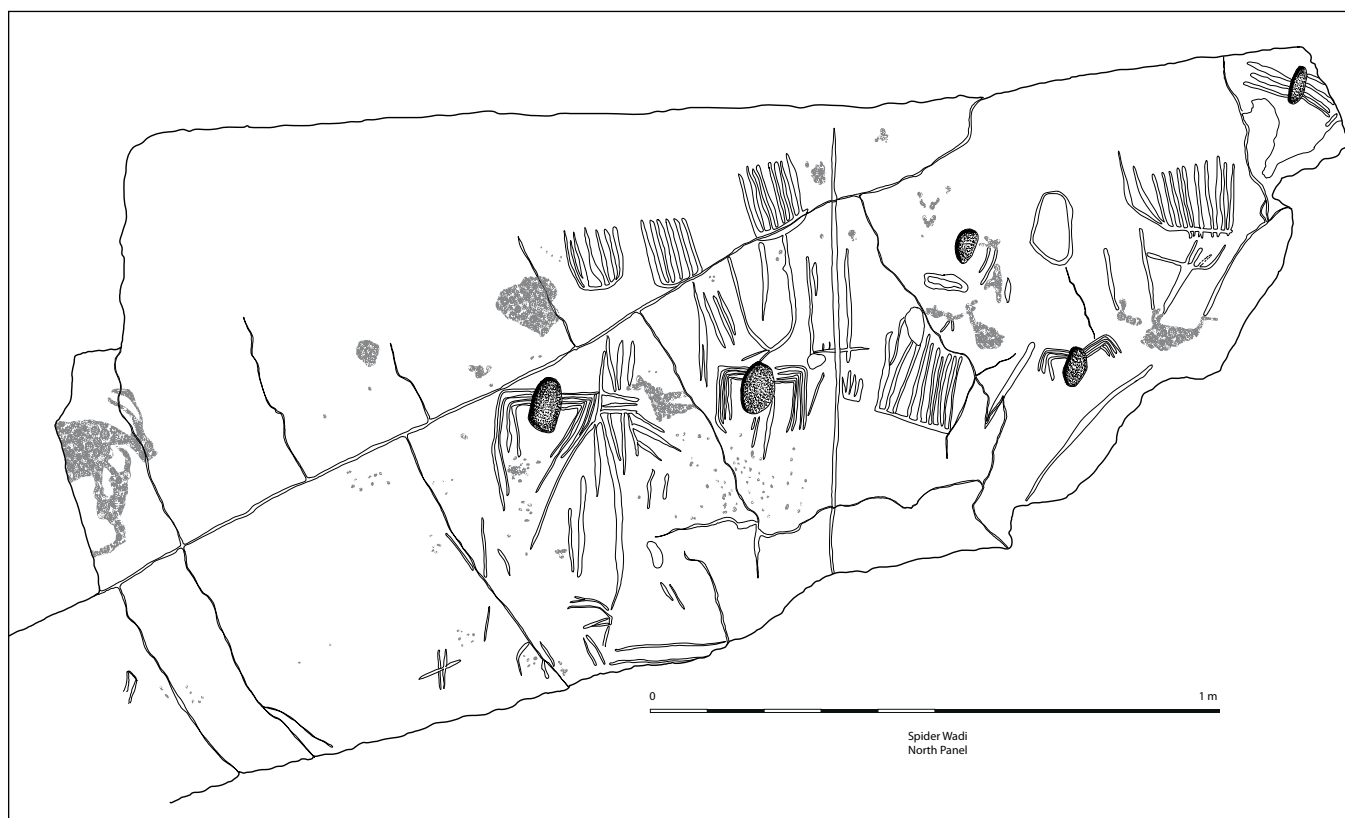
<sup>4</sup> A few only have seven legs; this could be for a few reasons: the spiders had lost a leg and continued to function, as they do in nature; sometimes when spiders are on the move, two legs can be placed close together so that they look like a single one. Often, spiders continue to move with no constraints after losing one or more leg (Foelix, 2011: 189).

<sup>5</sup> The author wishes to thank Richard Hoath, the naturalist, for putting forward this suggestion.



*Fig. 3.* Close-up of the northern panel. (Photo S. Ikram)

*Fig. 4.* Drawing of the northern panel. (Drawing P. Collet)







species are nocturnal, which suggests that they would not have been seen often, although there are some diurnal species, some with vivid patterning. Different species of Opiliones have evolved a variety of means to avoid predators: some attach debris to themselves as disguise, others play dead, and some even detach their legs that continue to move independently (autotomy), or bob about so that the predator is confused (Machado *et al.*, 2007: 1-13). Such behavior, if observed, would no doubt evoke interest amongst the human population and make these creatures an object of interest and perhaps reverence.

Thus, based on the form of the drawings, spiders (or perhaps a conflation of these and harvestmen) remain the most likely candidates for the identification of the insects carved onto the panel, with their eight legs, opisthosoma and occasional prosoma (Fig. 7). Indeed, medieval representations of these creatures are very much like those found on the Kharga panel (Foelix, 2011 Fig. 1.1). Quite possibly more than one type of spider was being shown on this panel, which might explain some of the variation in the depictions (and also the possible presence of a web as well as other arachnid abodes). Spiders are the largest group of arachnids and are found in extremely diverse habitats (Foelix, 2011: 4, 8-16; 287-326). Certainly, they or similar genera (*Arachnida* / *Araneae*) are common throughout Egypt, including the oases and the Western Desert (El-Hennawy, 2006; Dittrich, ed., 2005: 140-144). Specimens have been seen (but not identified to genus by this author) in the general vicinity of this panel. Spiders have long attracted human attention because of their capacity to spin webs in complex shapes, use their silk to almost fly or balloon, their ability to blend into their surroundings, and because of the venomousness of certain species (Foelix, 2011: 136-288), and have thus woven themselves into the mythologies of both Old and New World cultures (Werness, 2006: 383-87).

But why represent spiders at all? Certainly, it is difficult to use Pharaonic culture as a key to interpreting these presumably earlier images as spiders, as these insects neither figure prominently in Predynastic (5000-3000 BC) or Pharaonic (3000-30 BC) art, nor in ancient Egyptian religion and literature until the Graeco-Roman period (332 BC-AD 360).

Fig. 5. Photograph of the southern panel. (Photo S. Ikram)

Fig. 6. Drawing of the southern panel. (Drawing P. Collet)

In fact, this author just knows of a rare occurrence of spiders as hieroglyphs in Pharaonic religious texts dealing with the so-called 'Opening of the Mouth' ritual, a rite that was performed on the mummy or a statue to restore its senses for use in the Hereafter. The probable spider glyph appears in two instances in a section describing the production of a statue used in the ritual. It acts as the determinative for the expression Sekhet-Hr 'face catcher', which has been interpreted as a technical term for the grid drawn by artisans on the stone prior to sculpting it (Fischer-Elfert, 1998: 17-19; Hoffmann in Fischer-Elfert 1998: 93-105; Szapakowska, 2003: 150, 190; Vernus and Yoyotte, 2005: 439), and is most probably a reference to spiders' webs.<sup>6</sup> In the Graeco-Roman Period the emblem of the warrior goddess Neith, identified with Athena<sup>7</sup> at this time, which consisted of a shield with crossed arrows, might have suggested a spider, albeit with four legs, as was the case with the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Inanna's guardian spider (Werness, 2006: 385). Thus, this paucity of evidence makes it difficult to use the Pharaonic era as a possible route to understanding why spiders might be depicted on this rock.

Perhaps the spiders had a symbolic, totemic, or apotropaic value for the people who carved their image in this stone, derived from their characteristics or appearance. It is possible that the images are linked to the sun in some way as the body in our spiders is most often depicted as a circle, surrounded by eight radiating lines, which might be a way in which to show the sun or a creature associated with it. The panel also faces east, and is carved in a place where the sun first hits in this *wadi*.

Certainly other cultures (albeit far removed from Egypt) such as the Prehistoric Mississippian, associated spiders with crosses on their back with the sun, while the Natchez and the Cherokee shared a tradition of spiders retrieving fire (again, an echo of the sun). However, the majority of spiders are not regularly found in sunshine, preferring to inhabit shaded corners, cracks, crevices, or caves. Perhaps, like snakes, they have chthonic significance or might evoke a protected place, sheltered from the sun (the reverse side of solar power). Interestingly, some spiders, such as the *Argiope lobata* which lives in both eastern and western deserts of Egypt, are found, shaded and surviving, in the middle of their orb web under the burning sun at noon.<sup>8</sup> This would combine the force of the sun and the ability of this solar creature to survive its heat successfully, and thus be worthy of reverence or totemic allegiance.

The spiders' ability to spin webs to live on, trap their prey on, and use as a means of locomotion must also contribute to human fascination with these creatures, and certainly earned them a place in Greek mythology (see n. 7), and also were associated in Akkadian, with the goddess Uttu, the goddess of weaving. Plains Lakota's mythology featured Inktomi, the trickster spider (Werness, 2006: 385) who lulled people into a false sense of security before pouncing. A spider (but curiously one that seems to have four legs—maybe they were doubled up in the image?) is said to guard the goddess Inanna's sacred storehouse (Werness, 2006: 385); presumably trapping potential thieves in its web. Interestingly, Inanna-Ishtar is also associated with the Morning and Evening Stars, which is shown with eight points, and is visually evocative of a spider, bringing one back to the idea of some sort of celestial body being associated with spiders.

In addition, spiders do bite and some can be extremely dangerous (e.g., in Egypt, *Latrodectus* [*L. pallidus* & *L. tredecimguttatus*] or *Loxosceles rufescens*);<sup>9</sup> certain arachnid species are also actively aggressive toward humans, such as Solifugae (a separate arachnid order: Araneae), commonly known as the camel or sun spider (or wind or sun scorpion, etc.), (Dittrich, ed., 2005: 141). Thus, it is not surprising that for the Moche, the spider is associated with an anthropomorphic supernatural being known as the Decapitator, who is, no doubt, related to the more vicious species found in that part of the world. Spider webs as well as spiders feature both in Moche (Benson, 1972) and Nazca traditions (Werness, 2006: 386), generally as aggressive entities.

Thus spiders have a manifold fascination for humans as web-spinners, biters, and survivors in varied environments. Although it is unclear as to what role they might have played in the thought/religious process of those who carved their images in this wadi in Kharga Oasis, they clearly held a significant position, even if it was for only a brief

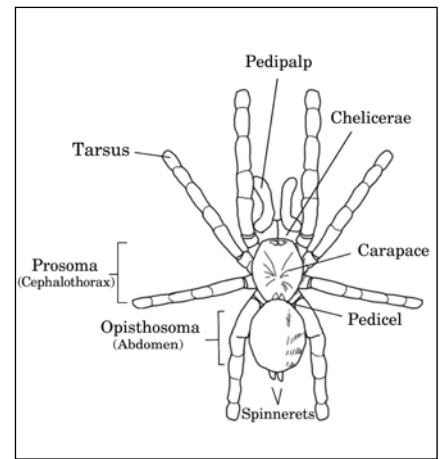


Fig. 7. Drawing of a spider; not all elements are equally visible on different species.  
(Drawing D. Hackley)

<sup>6</sup> The author is grateful to Frank Förster for bringing this reference to her attention.

<sup>7</sup> One should remember that Athena, in a fit of jealousy, was instrumental in changing into a spider Arachne, the young woman who was a talented weaver/spinner. Arachne lives on as she has lent her name to the taxonomic order that includes spiders, some of the best spinners in nature.

<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Hisham El-Hennawy for putting forth this possible identification.

<sup>9</sup> I am indebted to Hisham El-Hennawy for help in these identifications.

moment in time. This might have been totemic, apotropaic, evocative of a celestial entity, or merely an observational scribble. In any case, these images are noteworthy if they are indeed spiders, as these would be unique depictions of such creatures in Old World rock art.

## Acknowledgements

The author is indebted to Dirk Huyge for his comments on the panel in situ as well as on this article, and for his generosity with helping with references; to Hisham El-Hennawy for his enthusiastic help with the spiders; to Emmanuelle Salgues for assistance on spiders in Mesopotamian cultures; to Paul Bahn for kindly honing in on and providing a reference unavailable to me in Cairo; to the Supreme Council of Antiquities / Ministry of State for Antiquities of Egypt, and to the North Kharga Oasis Survey team and drivers.

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