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Begräbnisstätte (Tumulus) der Ureinwohner von Lanzarote,  
Kanarische Inseln (Photo: Hans-Joachim Ulbrich)

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## Note about the "idols" of the Moroccan High Atlas

Keywords: Rock art, Morocco, High Atlas, idol, bull skin

### Résumé

Il est fréquent que certaines gravures rupestres soient classées comme "énigmatiques" ou "symboliques" lorsque l'interprétation pose problème. Tel est le cas de curieuses images du Haut Atlas marocain, jusque là considérées comme des "idoles". Une lecture plus objective est proposée ici.

### Abstract

Some rocks engravings are frequently considered as "enigmatic" or "symbolic" as soon as the interpretation shows some difficulties. Such is the case of strange images of the Moroccan High Atlas, considered until today as "idols". An obvious reading is proposed here.

### Zusammenfassung

Einige Felsbilder werden oft als "enigmatisch" oder "symbolisch" angesehen sobald ihre Interpretation als schwierig oder problematisch gilt. Dies ist der Fall bei merkwürdigen Abbildungen im marokkanischen Hohen Atlas, die bis heute als "Idole" betrachtet werden. Eine naheliegende und logische Deutung wird hier vorgestellt.

Strange engraved images of the High Atlas were, immediately after their discoveries (Malhomme, 1961), diversely interpreted. It is about "idols with a circular body and eyes like a spiral" (Simoneau, 1967). The engraving (Fig. 1, 1) undoubtedly shows a man with his arms and legs and lines on the flank, well known as the representation of the ribs. Since this point of time the lecture does not change:

- "circular idol" (Simoneau, 1975);
- "circular embryo" or "central anthropomorphic in an oval" (Simoneau, 1977);
- "...engraving of an idol, oval, polished, divided in inner sections..." (Searight & Hourbette, 1992);
- it is once again about "mythological or cult figures" (Searight, 2004) and, more recently,
- "engraved hybrid" (Simenel *et al.*, 2017).

This interpretation is looking, as we shall see later, as the most relevant.

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Let's turn to Fig. 1, 1. There are, in fact, two subjects in one: a man, who could be equipped with an halberd and, surrounding him, an oval drawing surmounted by two spirals. This oval is rigged out by a tail-like drawing, followed up with sexual markings (three points), as numerous and well-known examples in the Moroccan high mountains can be found. Large and deep cupules were dug out between the legs of the man.

The second image (Fig. 1, 2) this time shows a man equipped with a probable bow and whose head emerges from the circle in a double spiral. Once again, the drawing of the line and the three points can be seen. Much more schematic, the engravings 3 and 4 – a kind of minimal replicas – show bodies enclosed in a circle. From now on the lobate heads can be noticed.

Another image of the High Atlas, where neither extrapolation nor incoherence are needed this time, was discovered in the high pastures (Rodrigue, 1999). It is about a bull skin (Fig. 1, 5, anatomical details of a leg, the tail and its vertebrae, the neck with reduced pendants), under which a man is lying, from whom only his lobate head (on the right) and his feet (on the left) are showed. It is legitimate to consider this image as a ceremony (burial? / rite of passage?).

We propose here the following interpretation: The "idols" are nothing but images of bodies covered or wrapped in bull skins. The semantic slip works when the head of the bull is clearly indicated (Fig. 1, 1), with the horns in a double spiral. Then, the man borrows the head from the animal (Fig. 1, 2), at last he completely integrates the skin (Fig. 1, 3 and 4), keeping the lobate head of the man, the skin, the eyes and the tail of the bull. The engraving of picture 5, for a long time an *hapax*, was corroborated by recent discoveries (Hoarau & Ewague, 2008), where people are associated with bull skins. The "idols" of the High Atlas indeed lose a part of their mystery, but support the hypothesis of the sacred role played by the bulls, essentially in patrimony – an image of a probable rite as well.

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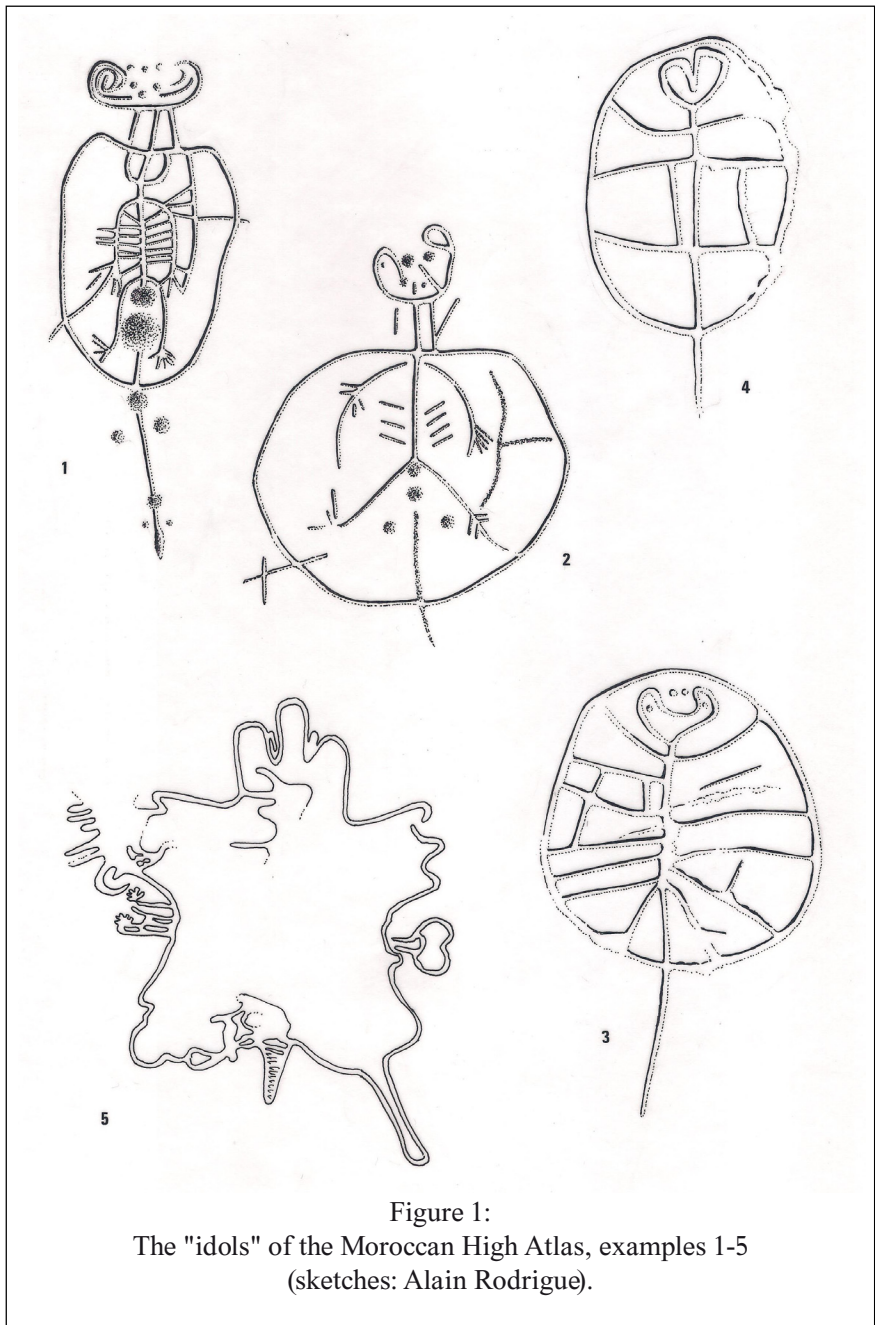


Figure 1:  
The "idols" of the Moroccan High Atlas, examples 1-5  
(sketches: Alain Rodrigue).