

BOOK REVIEW

Méthodes d'approche de la préhistoire saharienne: les gisements, reconnaissance et exploitation. Alif, Tunis, CNRS éditions, Bouchene. Alger. ISBN: 2.271.053 34-X, 1995.

Hala N. Barakat
Cairo University Herbarium
Department of Botany
Faculty of Science
Cairo University
Giza, Egypt
e-mail Halanb@FRCU.eun.eg

This book is a manual of Saharan prehistory and promises to be both pragmatic as well as realistic. It aims to make the study of open air sites in the Sahara more objective, scientifically oriented and less fictitious. The volume was written by a large number of scholars (12 contributors and 14 collaborators) coming from different backgrounds including archaeology, ecology, palynology, archaeobotany, and anthropology, who are all involved in some aspect of North African prehistory and who are members of the project G.D.R. 848 of the CNRS entitled "neolithisation in the saharan region and its role in desertification". Through their contributions in this volume, they wish to share their field experience and present the most suitable methodology for the study of Saharan prehistory. Each site has its own setting, problems and circumstances which require a continuous adaptation of knowledge, so this manual should be seen as a prototype which will be modified and improved as circumstances warrant. Most of the prehistoric sites in the Sahara are open air ones. The presence of sites in the present day hyperarid Sahara suggests that prehistoric peoples enjoyed a much more favourable environmental setting and a different climate.

The book consists of six chapters and ten appendices. Topics include open air sites and their characteristics, how to prepare an expedition, how to excavate sites, and a discussion of rock art sites. One chapter is devoted to environmental research and the last chapter presents the regulations related to archaeological excavation in the different coun-

tries concerned. The appendices include a wide range of lists, advice, and tips for mounting successful expeditions.

Chapter 1 deals with the characteristics of sites and settlement areas in the Sahara. Since most Saharan sites are in open air, their nature is discussed in comparison with protected sites (in caves, rockshelters, etc.). The disadvantages of open air sites relate to their lack of stratigraphy as well as to their being exposed, this entails possible mixing of sediments, looting of artifacts or their disturbance. Advantages, on the other hand, are the relative ease with which such sites could be excavated and their varying dimensions, sand encroachment, spatial distribution and density material present as well as the presence of desert varnish on the objects. Sites are divided into *in situ*, partially *in situ*, and disturbed sites. These are further subdivided into habitation sites (halt, campsite or village according to the density of the material), ateliers, meeting zones such as markets, raw material procurement sites, or burials.

Chapter 2 discusses the preparation of an expedition and includes scientific research, collecting the bibliography, devising a documentation program, choosing the expedition's itinerary and duration and suggesting a multidisciplinary team. It includes advice on when the field season should take place according to climatic conditions in the different parts of the Sahara, and on what photographic equipment to choose. It also discusses the different means of transportation (from cars to camels) as well as details of the daily equipment for the members of the expedition (clothes, luggage, sleeping equipment, toiletry, food, water and items for security and personal comfort). Once in the Sahara, the expedition is now confronted with how to recognize and excavate the prehistoric site. Methods for the study of such places are presented in chapter 3 with information about site recognition, identification, description and documentation. Excavation of a site ranges from a quick visit to sample collection, systematic sampling for detailed analysis to finally fully excavating the site, hints are given on how to decide which stage is to be carried out. Collection of various materials found in the site including human remains, dating samples, how to measure ancient temperatures and how to make a cast of certain objects are also discussed. Tips on how to document the information collected during the excavation are also provided, including pretreatment of different materials

(e.g: conservation of bones) and finally how to pack the material to be transported (bones, charcoal, pottery, lithics, etc.).

Chapter 4 is devoted to the study of rock art sites. Rock art sites have their specific characteristics and are continuously exposed to erosion. The author of the chapter suggests that they should always be considered in relation to other archaeological features, and their spatial distribution should also be taken into consideration. For the description of such sites (the site wall and figures) a card system should be used in order to facilitate comparison with other sites. The second approach would be through a *releve*: pictures, graphics on calque, casts or whenever possible photogrammetrically. This *releve* would allow further studies, either in the field or in the laboratory. Under the title of knowing the environment, chapter 5 addresses the methods used for the study of the ancient as well as the present day environment in the vicinity of the site. Observing the natural landscape requires knowledge of the material, basic forms of the landscape, its alteration and pedological formation, tectonic movements and erosion. Further information about the ancient natural setting should be acquired through topographical analysis, the study of transects, dating, sedimentological analysis, palynological analysis as well as the analysis of

associated botanical and zoological remains. The chapter also deals with the present day ecosystem in the Sahara; its flora and fauna provide a comparison with the prehistoric record. A list of common animals present today is given along with pictures and a brief description. Vegetation is treated by habitat type, followed by a list of the plants, their latin, tamasheq and arabic names and pictures.

The last chapter is devoted to legal regulations related to archaeological activities in the region, beginning with the ICOMOS-ICOM chart for archaeological protection. Article 3 considers the protection of archeological heritage a moral obligation for each person, and article 5 regulates the intervention in the field specifying that information collection should destroy but a minimum of the sites! Then regulations for each of the countries concerned are listed: Libya, Algeria, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger and Tunisia in addition to the special case of national parks. This chapter represents a valuable tool and is an original contribution to manuals of archaeology which will certainly prove useful to foreign prehistorians working in these countries. The ten appendices include many practical tips including advice on how to behave in the Sahara, for driving on different types of soils and a list of all necessary and useful equipment.