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# The Rock Engravings of Taghit: An Archaeological Heritage in Danger

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## Abstract

The rock engravings of Taghit, dating back more than 3000 years, in the Béchar region in southwest Algerian are spread over two stations, one at 18 km, the other at 22 km. This natural environment of 500 hectares reveals a certain beauty by the presence of a river and barriers and the value of heritage.

rock engravings are not the most beautiful or the most monumental, nevertheless, their study allows us to approach the extent of this that we call "art prehistoric" (Boittelle G., 2015). They were discovered at the beginning of the 20th century and were mentioned for the first time in the notes of the captains of engineers military (Devaux and R. Barthélémy in 1902, E. Gautier in 1904), the studies carried out during this period were not developed, but \_ confirm the existence of several stations stretching from north to south of Taghit, along the valley Zouzfana. (Alimen M.H., 1966).

**Keywords:** Taghit ; rock art ; rock engravings; prehistoric art ; Zouzfana Valley.

## 1- Preamble

Rock art is an artistic manifestation on a rocky support. It has reached us in multiple forms unchanged since the origins. The great diversity of this art makes its interpretation complex, ethnological studies shed light on the meaning of motifs and symbols. It is a unique and valuable heritage of diverse practices providing information on lifestyle, clothing, weapons, tools, ceremonies and everything that represents the material and spiritual world of the disappeared civilizations (Clottes J., 2002).

Article 1 of the UNESCO Convention states that rock art sites are considered cultural heritage in the same way as archaeological sites defined as follows: "man's works or combined works of man and nature, and areas including archaeological sites of outstanding universal value from a historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological point of view" cultural heritage (UNESCO, 1972, Article 1)(Figure 1).

Under Algerian law 98-04, archaeological sites in their diversity are considered to be the cultural heritage of the nation (Official Journal n°44, 1998, article 8).

These archaeological sites "are defined as built or non-built spaces which have no active function and which bear witness to the actions of man or to the combined actions of man and nature, including the related subsoil and which have no historical, archaeological or religious value, artistic, ethnological or anthropological scientist" (Official Journal No. 44, 1998, Article 28). According to these normative texts of UNESCO and the Algerian Law on Cultural Heritage, the site of the rock engravings of Taghit is considered a prehistoric heritage inscribed in the special southern program in 2006 (Ministry of Culture, 2007)

The site of TAGHIT contains prehistoric objects that consist of many rocks and rocks on which are engraved rock figures dating from the prehistoric Palaeolithic era. The natural environment reveals a certain beauty by the presence of wadi and slopes, The heritage value of these prehistoric objects can not be dissociated from their natural context. Among the ten UNESCO criteria indicating universal value (V.U.E), the third criterion can be attributed to this site which provides a unique or at least exceptional testimony on a cultural tradition or a civilization living or disappeared (UNESCO, selection criteria). The multiple sites of rock engravings of the Palaeolithic era are testimonies of the presence of man in this vast territory where there is a lush environment, where water, vegetation, and varied fauna constituted a rich ecosystem. The site of the rock engravings of Taghit called station of the zaouia Tahtania is part of many petroglyphic sites (Wikipedia) of Algeria , namely the sites of the region of Boussada, southern Oranais, tassili N'Ajjer and many others (Illustration 2). It is a Neolithic art that cannot be confused with that of the famous European Palaeolithic sites such as the Chauvet cave in southern France (38,000 years) or Altamira in northern Spain (16,000 years). The works of the station of Tahtania can be compared with other

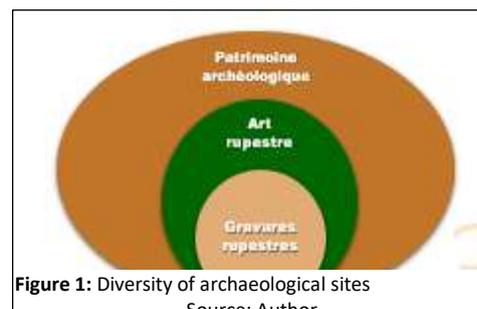


Figure 1: Diversity of archaeological sites  
Source: Author

engravings of the Sahara as the site of Dabous in Niger (5000 to 7000 years) or Mathendous in Libya (4000 to 8000 years) (Alimen M.H., 1966). These figures engraved in stone in a very realistic way and of an imposing size presents a testimony of a particular civilization. The outstanding universal value of this site from the historical, ethnological and anthropological point of view that cannot be dissociated from its natural context revealing a certain beauty. It is unfortunately compromised, it is a vulnerable site that has suffered and continues to undergo alterations caused by man and nature. This art does not present the monumental character of architectural constructions. It is much more vulnerable because it can disappear with the rock. It is a precious treasure from another age in peril.

This open-air museum must be protected and showcased and in this context, the Direction of Culture of the Wilaya de Béchar had launched a study for its protection its enhancement through a protection tool: the Plan for the Safeguarding and Development of Archaeological Sites (PPMVSA) which is an instrument of protection, development and management recommended by law 98-04. To the same extent, this site is inscribed in the master plan of the archaeological and historical zones of the Ministry of Culture in the Southern Programme in 2006 which is identified as archaeological heritage for which a protection plan is provided (PPMVSA) (Ministry of Culture, 2007)

This article will present all the values that this site holds, such as the picturesque value of natural elements, the historical and cultural value expressed by the rock carvings drawn on the rocks. The identification of these values are essential prerequisites for the development of the instrument for the protection and development of archaeological sites (PPMVSA) in which the state of conservation, the tools of the instrument and its regulations will be presented, and the difficulty of its implementation. In conclusion, we will present the recommendations on the management of archaeological sites which advocates the active participation of the local population and its integration in territorial and urban planning as well as the interest to make new prospections of the sites adjacent rock engravings in order to protect them first by proposing them for classification and then to carry out studies for possible protection plan.

## 2- Methodology for developing the protection instrument:

### 2-1-Geographical and natural context of the rock carvings site:

The site of the rock carvings called the station of the zawiya Tahtania is located south of the Saharan atlas in the region of Bechar, wilaya southwest of the capital Algiers about 800 km as the crow flies. Administratively, this site is shared between two municipalities: south of Taghit and north of Igli, it is located in the value of Zouzfana taverse by the wadi of the same name. To the east of the valley the dunes of the great erg, to the west the hamada, between the two the palm grove follow the curves of oued ZOUZFANA extending for 18 km. On the ridges extends a series of ksours some of which are in ruins. Two engraving stations were discovered on this site, the first station 16 km from the ksar of TAGHIT and the second at 22 Km.(Illustration 3)

In addition, the morphology of the valley between the Erg Occidental and the limestone cliff allowed the development of a serie of ksour, fortified villages, overlooking a long oasis. The presence of water in the region and the geological deposits of the Quaternary era have therefore favoured the installation and development of human communities in this region. .( Le Quellec J-L. et al., 2016) The ksar of Taghit is one of the most preserved and best known ksour present in this landscape class national heritage in 1999.

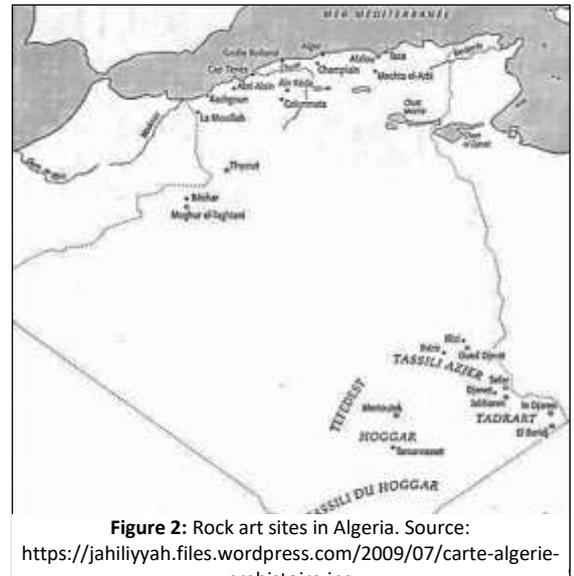


Figure 2: Rock art sites in Algeria. Source: <https://jahiliyyah.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/carte-algerie-prehistoire.jpg>

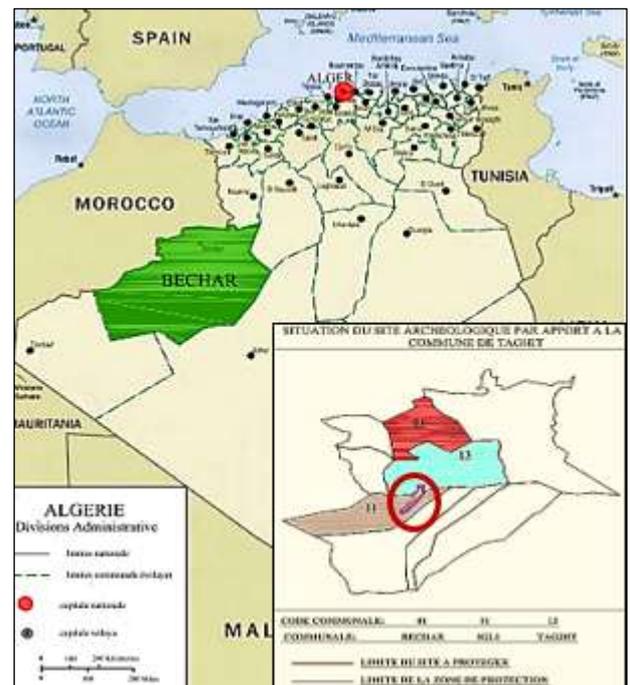


Figure 3: Geographical location of the site of the rock carvings of Taghit. Source: PPMVSA Taghit 2016

## 2-2-Historical and religious context of the site of rock carvings

These engravings are part of a rather vast territory understood in the south of Oran according to the schematics of the main areas of the rock engravings of northern Africa of RAYMOMD VAUFREY OF 1969.

Their discovery goes back to the 20th century, the first notes concerning them are that of the captains Duvaux in 1902, E. Gautier (Gautier 1903) and G.-B.-M. Flmand, 1905, later mentioned in the subsequent works of Vaufrey in 1939, (archeologist, French paleanthologist of the 20th century).

In this vast territory, two regions have been quoted in publications of the bulletins of French prehistoric society:

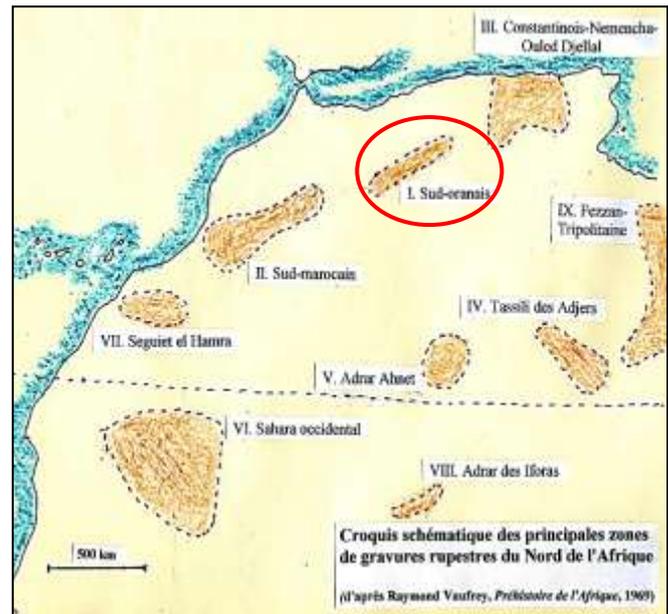
- In 1952 the engravings of the marhouma region
- In 1966 the engravings of the zaoui tahtania south of taghit.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, according to the archeologist, ethnologist and explorer of the Algerian Sahara, Henri Lhote (Alimen, 1966), this rock art originated in the South Oran (Illustration 4), from where it spread in the South-OranAlgiers and in a later phase, towards the Moroccan South.

On the other hand, it should be noted that South Oran must certainly have been the cradle of the parietal art of North Africa, but the knowledge gathered on this art is quite reduced, prospecting and analysis work on site are very rare (Le Quellec J-L., al, 2016). The observations made by the archeologists provide insights into the complexity of the engravings, they have shown that they belong to the Neolithic age according to the geological data. The engravings are sometimes important, representing mainly stylized animal profiles or very schematic human figurations. From the results of rare field investigations, archeologists and anthropologists note that it is very delicate to base a chronology on the technique.

- engravings stitched at all times, and there seem to have been several episodes
- of incised engravings.

In addition, as Alimen points out, there is no opposition between these two techniques, as picketing often precedes incision or polishing, in the artist's gestures (Alimen M. H., 1966,). In addition to the interest artistique, the rural engravings tell us about the climate, the fauna, the culture and the identity of the men that lived there from the neolithic to the historical periods



**Figure 4:** schematic sketch of the main areas of the rock carvings of North Africa.

Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/70/Croquis\\_schématique\\_des\\_principales\\_zones\\_de\\_gravures\\_rupestres\\_du\\_Nord\\_de\\_l'Afrique.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/70/Croquis_schématique_des_principales_zones_de_gravures_rupestres_du_Nord_de_l'Afrique.jpg)

### 2-3-Extent of the rock carvings site and state of conservation

The geographical distribution of the engravings extends along the valley in the north of the desert over a hundred km contains vestiges of Ksour very old with the «paleo berber» gear which are still visible on the escarpments of the right bank of the valley of the wadi "ZOUSFANA. They contain two prehistoric stations. The rock carvings are located on the rocks of the western cliff of the wadi scattered over about 500 hectares. The stations in this region are numerous. They range from the oasis of Taghit to Kerzaz via Igli and Béni Abbes (Illustration 5).

In this set, only the engravings of the zaouia Tahtania 1 and Tahtania 2 (corresponding to a cluster of rocks and rocks each), will be covered by the study of the protection plan (PPMVSA). These two stations are distinguished by the variety of subjects depicted. The first station located north of this site is distinguished by figures representing wildlife (elephants, antelopes, ostriches, gazelles, horses, ostriches, giraffes) and human representations. The second station located south of the first includes representations of wild animals (felines, gazelle, antelope, elephant, equidae, hyena, ostrich, lizard and some oryx) and domestic animals such as cattle in large numbers but also horses, dromedaries, dogs.

As for the remains of cave paintings, it is noted that they are very abandoned in the greater Tassili N'Ajjers region, but in Tahtania zaouia, they are non-existent. Alimen points out that in desert areas with high sand winds the cave paintings may be missing because they have not been preserved to us. (Alimen M. H., 1966).

Since the discovery of this prehistoric site in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state of conservation is very variable, the engravings have undergone and continue to undergo natural and human degradation, the first natural form is due to the effects of the dry climate, which is not particularly conservative of rock surfaces, high thermal amplitudes cause rocks to burst and eventually collapse. Similarly, exposure to climatic aleas promotes the desquamation of the rock under the effect of water infiltration. The second form of degradation is anthropogenic, caused by human action, the human presence especially tourists who actively participate in archaeological looting and vandalism.

According to our findings, the station of Tahtania 1 is the most affected, because it is easily accessible to tourists. Some forms of degradation consist of attempted removal of engraved panels and the addition of numerous graffiti by incision, staking or painting. Since 2009, with the increase in the tourist influx, painted graffiti has become widespread affecting most of the panels, mainly those found at the vertical. For the Barebi station, not included in the study of the protection plan, the floods of the oued Zousfana caused the stripping of the rock surface.

All the engravings of the different stations (Tahtania 1 and 2, Barebi) are exceptional works, figures engraved in stone in a very realistic way, and an imposing size presents a testimony of a particular civilization. This prehistoric site comparable to an open-air museum. This art does not present the monumental character of architectural constructions. It is much more vulnerable, because it can disappear with the rock, it is an endangered heritage.

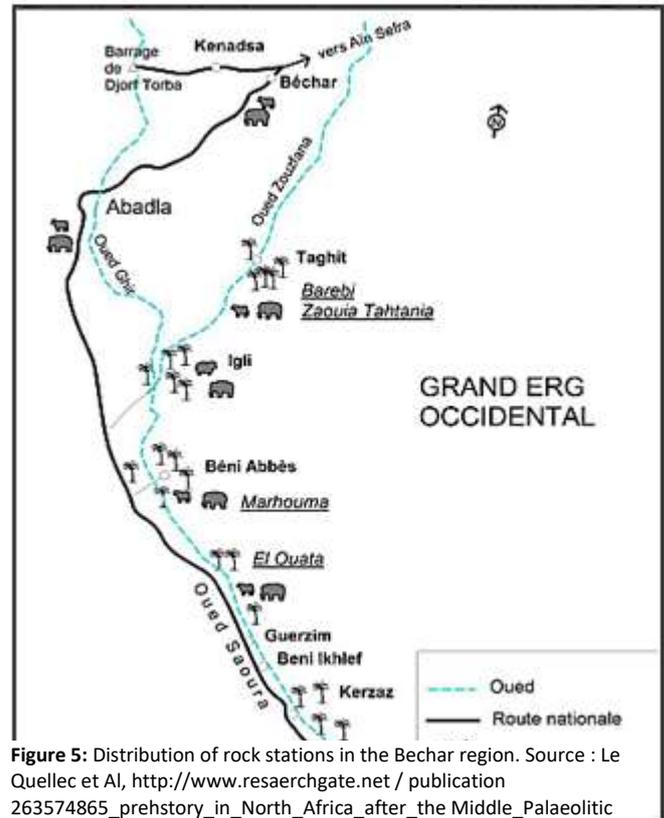


Figure 5: Distribution of rock stations in the Bechar region. Source : Le Quellec et al, [http://www.researchgate.net/publication/263574865\\_prehistory\\_in\\_North\\_Africa\\_after\\_the\\_Middle\\_Palaeolithic](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/263574865_prehistory_in_North_Africa_after_the_Middle_Palaeolithic)

**2-4-Preparation of the protection plan and identification of rocks:**

The protection of archaeological heritage is an act of identification, control and monitoring of cultural property through mechanisms of inventory and classification. The site is not classified as National Heritage and not listed in the supplementary

07	Site de Marhouma (gravures rupestres)	Préhistorique	Tamtert	Inscrit sur l'inventaire supplémentaire Arrêté signé par le wali N° 2020 du 24/11/2007	Arrêté non pub au journal officiel
08	Site El Hadjra des (gravures rupestres)	Préhistorique	Taghit	Inscrit sur l'inventaire supplémentaire Arrêté signé par le wali N° 2020 du 24/11/2007	Arrêté non pub au journal officiel
09	Site khank Tassaouir (gravures rupestres)	Préhistorique	Abadla	Inscrit sur l'inventaire supplémentaire Arrêté signé par le wali N° 2020 du 24/11/2007	Arrêté non pub au journal officiel

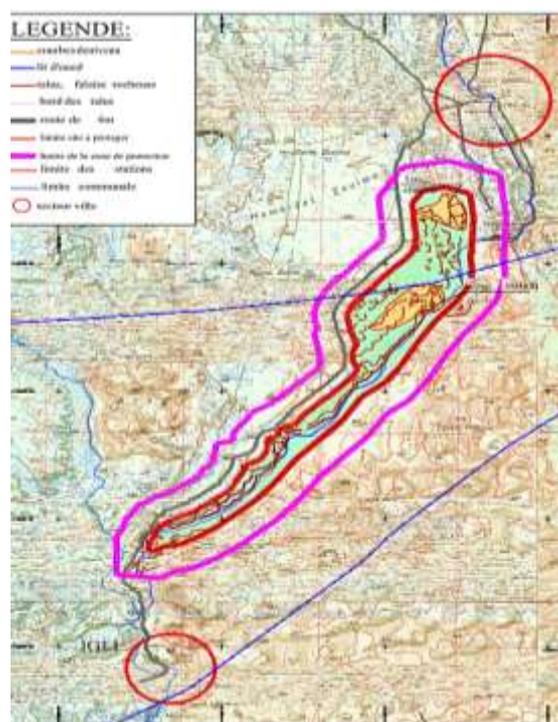
**Figure 6:** List of prehistoric sites inscribed on the supplementary inventory in the wilaya of Bechar.

.Source: <https://www.m-culture.gov.dz/index.php/en/liste-des-biens-culturels>

inventory (Figure 6 ). On the other hand the direction of the culture of the wilaya of Bechar under the supervision of the ministry of culture had launched the study for the elaboration of the protection plan for the site of the zaouia Tahtania, too frequented by tourists, especially after the realization of the path leading to the engravings.

The architectural design office being designed, I was part of the team as project manager for the development of the plan. The study of the plan consisted of three phases (executive decree 03-323, 2003)

- Phase 1: Diagnosis and if necessary emergency measures project
- Phase 2: Topographic and Archeological Survey and PPMVSA Pre-Project
- Phase 3 Final redaction of the PPMVSA, this plan must contain a presentation report that must take reference to the recommendations of the planning instruments, if they take place, on the archeological site. It must show the measures adopted for its conservation and enhancement by delimitation of the site and its protection zone which must be fixed at a minimum radius of 200m, in our case the maximum radius of 500m was adopted in order to consider the whole of the natural and landscape values of the site. The delimitation is defined as follows (Illustration 7):
- To the west, the road leading from the city of TAGHIT to IGLI.
- East the bed of the oued ZOUZFANA
- To the south, the confluence of the wadi and the
- North limited by HAMEIDET ZOUIMA located southwest of the city of TAGHIT



**Figure 7:** The boundaries of the PPMVSA and its protection zone. Source: Taghit PPMVSA, 2016, Bechar Culture Directorate.

**3- Results: location of rocks and inventory sheets**

Within this perimeter of the protection plan are identified two morphologically identical entities. Both correspond to a cluster of rocks and recognizable rocks on which the figures are engraved. The first station located north of this site is distinguished by figures representing wildlife and human representations called (elephants, antelopes, ostriches, gazelles, horses, ostriches, giraffes) The second station located south of the first includes representations of wild animals (felines, gazelle , antelope, elephant, equidae, hyena, ostrich, lizard, and some oryx) and domestic animals such as cattle in large numbers but also horses, dromedaries, dogs.

According to the soundings on the sites of other engraved rock stations exist along the slope along the wadi ZOUZFANA, these stations are not yet explored but they are integrated into the boundaries of the archaeological site.

The second phase of protection is the cataloguing of all existing rocks in the two presumed stations by their identification and location with their geodetic coordinates and summary of all data collected on site on cataloguing sheets (Figure 8 )

The analysis of the motifs and themes treated on the rocks, the styles, the superimpositions appearing on certain engravings and, simultaneously, the attitudes of the represented characters, their clothes, ornaments, weapons and other elements of the associated material culture, allows not only the recognition of distinct expressions, but also a fine characterization of each of them.

These are rich in historical teachings with regard to data recorded in the fields of ethnology, palaeoecology, prehistory, protohistory and the history of northern Africa and the Mediterranean Basin. These engravings are valuable scientific and heritage attributes.

FICHE D'INVENTAIRE TYPE POUR APPROBATION DE L'OBJET ARCHÉOLOGIQUE DU SITE PRÉ-HISTORIQUE DE TAGHIT		N° FICHE: 12	
Station I: X		Station II: X	
N° Roche: 12		N° Roche: 18	
Coordonnées Géodésiques:		Coordonnées Géodésiques:	
X = -02 03 22,4		X = -02 03 23,3	
Y = 30 48 16,3		Y = 30 48 12,8	
Z = 564 m		Z = 566 m	
Le système de projection est Longitude / latitude système (PDS) (PDS/TA/BECHAR)		Le système de projection est Longitude / latitude système (PDS) (PDS/TA/BECHAR)	
PHOTO N°12		PHOTO N°18	
[Image of rock carving]		[Image of rock carving]	
Taille: H: m	Etat de conservation:	Position: Adossée au talus:	Position: Adossée au talus:
Long: 3,4 m	- Bon Etat	Posée verticalement:	Posée verticalement:
Lar: 1,2 m	- Dégradée: Naturel	Posée horizontalement:	Posée horizontalement:
Couleur: Neuf	Humaine		
Nombre: 03			
Nature des figures: Gazeille			
Gravée: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Craquée: <input type="checkbox"/> Piquée: <input type="checkbox"/>			
Référence de la roche: PPMVSAT / 31 / 33/1P		Référence de la roche: PPMVSAT / 31 / 33/1P	

Figure 8: Example of cataloguing sheet.

Source: Extract from PPMVSA, Phase 3, Direction of Culture of the wilaya of Bechar

#### 4-Discussion

The site of the Tahtania rock carvings with its two stations 1 and 2 was landlocked and therefore difficult to access (Alimen 1966). The accessibility to these stations became easier after the realization of the road leading to the site in 2009, which led to the massive influx of tourists and aggravates the degradation of the rocks and therefore graven figures on it.

This rampage provoked a reaction from civil society which, through various channels (print media, social networks, etc.), expressed its indignation at such a disaster. During the visit of the former Minister of Culture in April 2013, an emergency plan to safeguard this heritage in peril decreed in October 2013 to safeguard this invaluable heritage of humanity.

This device is the PPMVSA which provided the delimitation of a perimeter of protection of 500 ha, and elaborate an inventory of the engravings which are there. On the other hand, it provided for the development of roads leading to the two stations of Tahtania, the installation of an orientation and information center on rock art, and the creation of a prehistoric museum. The other part of this safeguarding plan concerns the restoration of damaged engravings (using national and international experts) and their classification as National Heritage before proposing them for international classification.

This plan is an instrument of protection, and according to the Algerian regulation on cultural heritage, it can be applied only if the site is classified national heritage or difficulty in its implementation. The main cause is the low involvement of local authorities in the safeguarding project, on the other hand because of the lack of local specialists in restoration techniques. The emergency measures that must be applied to this site is to ensure a guarding of the sites most vulnerable to anthropogenic action, and to organize regular awareness campaigns to involve as many citizens as possible in the protection of this heritage in danger of disappearance.

The inscription of this site on the additional inventory constitutes a first act of protection and therefore of strict supervision on the part of the direction of the culture as well as the authorities of the wilaya of Bechar. This act implies that the engravings must be maintained in the context that gives them their meaning. As a result, enhancement interventions on this site must be minimized.

#### Conclusions

The rock engravings of the Tahtania station are only a very small part of this impressive set of tens of thousands of sites in Africa. These engravings are not the most beautiful, the most monumental or the oldest, but their study makes it possible to approach the extent of what is called "prehistoric art".

The site of the rock engravings of the region of Taghit requires more interest from the specialists in archeology, anthropology and paleontology to demonstrate the interest of this site that the specialists in preservation of the material and immaterial patrimoine emphasizing the tools of protection and implementation of instruments on the ground, the first action is to continue the delay of cataloguing the gravestones, work already started within the framework of the PPMVSA realized for

the site of the Zaouia Tahtania, station 1et and 2, but many station remain to discover those of Berebi, de Marhouma, those of Igli and many others in this according to old studies (HALIMEN, 1966) and tourist guides of the region. They testify directly to the age of the settlement of the Western Saharan Atlas region, and by the representation of extinct animal species, they make clear the evolution of climatic and ecological conditions.

The knowledge of rock archeology in a general way and rock engravings of Taghit particularly presents a major interest for the knowledge of the history of settlement in the Sahara and in this region of western Algeria which remains very little explored and invested. The rock carvings of Taghit have shown their importance both for scientific knowledge and the development of tourism activity. The irreversible deterioration of which they are the object subtract from scientific knowledge unpublished documents used for a better understanding of prehistory and history of the region. In order to mitigate the effects of anthropogenic degradation, urgent actions must be taken to effectively integrate these sites into the perspective of responsible and sustainable tourism.

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