

Rupert Barclay

Institute of Archaeology, UCL.

Review of:

Keenan, Jeremy 2001. *Sahara Man, Travelling with the Tuareg*. London: John Murray Ltd., 274 pages. ISBN 0-7195-6161 2, £18.99.

During the 1960s Jeremy Keenan lived as a young anthropologist amongst the nomadic Tuareg of Ahaggar in southern Algeria, and grew to love the people and the region with a passion. His work there produced many important publications including the celebrated book *The Tuareg: People of the Ahaggar*, and the prize-winning (Cannes 1972) film *The Tuareg*. Following his last visit in 1971, Keenan did not return to Algeria for many years, his fears growing year by year that the way of life of the people to whom he had become so attached was being increasingly eroded.

Sahara Man is the story of Keenan's return to the Ahaggar in 1999 after nearly thirty years, and his personal rediscovery of the central Saharan wilderness. By the time of Keenan's first visit in 1964, Algerian Independence had already forced change upon the proud and stubbornly resistant Tuareg society, affecting their traditional economy and land rights. The Palaeolithic and Neolithic rock art of the region, especially that of Tassili-n-Ajjer (focussed upon by Henri Lhote in his 1959 book *The Search for the Tassili Frescoes*), had generated a flourishing tourist industry in the 1960s attracting an international audience, and tourism became a vital source of revenue for the Tuareg, as their intimate knowledge of the Ahaggar made them excellent guides.

Increased tourism worsened existing conservation problems however. The vandalism of prehistoric rock art in the Sahara has been a concern for decades, caused by visitors 'cleaning' the paintwork to temporarily enhance the colours for photographs, and exacerbated by the addition of modern graffiti by both visitors and locals. Now there is an additional threat in the form of theft. The removal of Saharan rock art, in parts or as a whole, for sale on the black market is a crime associated more with Libya than southern Algeria. Keenan's fears that it had reached the Ahaggar were proved correct on his return in 1999, and in this book he seeks to expose these crimes alongside his own thoughts on the symbolism and significance of this precious cultural heritage. Keenan's journey in the Ahaggar takes him through the Djanet locality of the Tassili-n-Ajjer towards the Libyan border, amongst some of the most celebrated rock art sites of the region including Sefar and Jabbaren, where he encounters appalling damage and theft. This is also the case in the Tamdjert locality, a personal favourite of his, where Keenan records the damage as evidence to support a case for protective action, without which more of the great treasures of southern Algeria will continue to be destroyed.

Yet perversely, although it was tourism that increased the damage to the rock art, the regeneration of tourism focusing on sustainability would perhaps serve the cause of conservation in the Ahaggar. The Algerian State's maintenance of Tuareg 'gardiens du parc' in the region suggests that there is a foundation for this kind of tourism

when the right time comes – and recognises the valuable role which they might provide as custodians of protected sites, despite the attempts of anthropologists to disassociate the Tuareg from the rock art in the mid 20th century. But the cruel internal struggles within Algeria have prevented any such development. Keenan reports witnessing policing measures which do not match the relative political improvements that are supposed to have occurred. ‘Trabandistes’, as smugglers are locally referred to, continue to ply their trade along the ancient trans-Saharan routes, and often try their hand at banditry, raiding convoys in an ironic return to a traditional Tuareg pastime.

Sahara Man is a book that is rooted in a profound knowledge of the region and its people, written in a tone which give it tremendous accessibility. Keenan invites the reader to consider the complex kinship structures, and cultural intricacies held dear by the vividly, often intimately, portrayed characters he encounters. The search for old Tuareg friends with whom Keenan lived in the 1960s and the traumatic experience of reacquainting himself with places that he once considered a second home, are punctuated by reunions, coincidences and episodes which fiction could not carry off. Keenan’s own emotions and thoughts are not suppressed, and this serves the book well as he is able to convey his wit and passion as his experiences unfold. This is a story which does not attempt to be purely academic, but seeks to draw the reader into the multiplicity of issues – historical, archaeological, anthropological and political – that have moulded the region and its people.