

SAHARA



The creation of the Bradshaw Foundation to handle the publication of the first book on the Kimberley Bradshaw Paintings by Dr Grahame Walsh has led to many adventures around the world involving Rock Art for all of the Trustees.

The book itself was the catalyst to my meeting Dr Jean Clottes quite by chance in Flagstaff, Arizona. He was attending the World Rock Art Conference to lecture on the remarkable discovery of the Cosquer Cave in 1985. The cave entrance was discovered by a scuba diver hunting for lobsters about 75 foot below the present surface of the Mediterranean. The tunnel into the main chamber is nearly 100 foot long and has to be swam blind because of the silt! The paintings inside the cave have been dated as being 26,000 years old and were done when the entrance was 150 foot above the present shoreline. This is a rise in sea level of 225 foot since the end of the last Ice Age!

I was in Flagstaff to help launch the Bradshaw Foundation book. After Jean's lecture I to talk to him and this led to him inviting me to his home town of Foix in south-east France on the way back from Italy to explore the caves of Niaux and see the drawings in the Black Chamber. My introduction to them was a major turning point in my life as it not only cemented my friendship with Jean and led directly to this story about the *Dabous Giraffe* in the Sahara.

The story began because Damon knew David Coulson, the founder of the Trust for African Rock Art in Kenya. David asked Damon if he would like to come on a tour through Cameroon and Niger to photograph Rock Art with Jean. Damon talked to Robert and me but as it turned out only Jean could join David as the rest of us were unable to be away from work for the six weeks that the trip would take.

After the explorers returned, a very excited Jean called and told me that on the trip through Niger's Sahara Desert near the Air Mountains they had been shown one of the most remarkable carvings that he had ever seen. The Dabous Giraffe were about 10,000 years old!

Apparently although the carvings had been discovered a few years earlier they had never been properly investigated. The extraordinary thing about them was that the local Tuaregs seemed to know nothing about them. Jean went on to tell me that he thought that it would be possible to take a mould from the 21-foot long and 18-foot high carving of the two giraffe and perhaps it was something that the Bradshaw Foundation would be interested in backing. He said he had put some photographs in the mail so I promised to get back to him after showing them to Damon and Robert and asking if they were interested in such a project, which sounded very expensive!



Dabous Giraffe

The photographs were astounding. I took them to show Damon and sent copies to Robert and asked them if they would be interested in financing something like this. Both men were intrigued and asked me to investigate how the job could be done and more importantly, how much it would cost! I passed this information to Jean who said that he knew people in France who could do the job and suggested that I should come down to Foix so we could meet them in Avignon. The firm's name was Merindol, after the owner Pierre and, to cut a long story short, a price was agreed and a date set the following year to do the job. All the Bradshaw Foundation had to do was to pay all the costs and for us to visit the site after they had removed the mould from the carving!

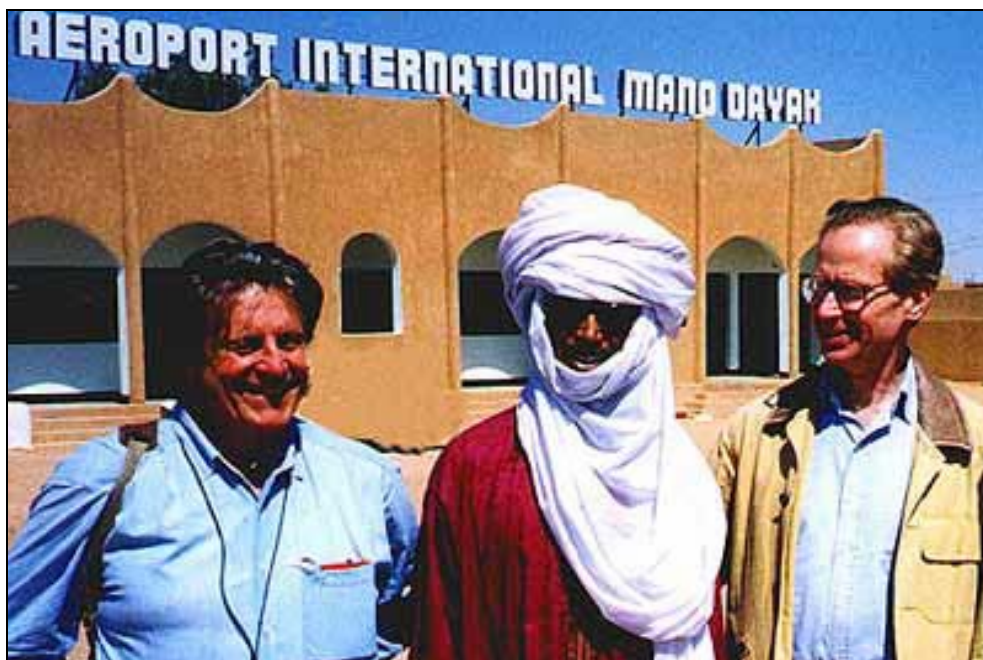
David Coulson was to be in charge of the project as Head of TARA because getting permission from the government to do the job would be tricky. Jean and Renée, his wife, were to be in charge of the scientific study and mapping of the site. Damon, Robert, my son Peter, and I were to fly out for a week to see the carving and then do a tour out into the Tenere Desert and camp for a few days so that David could show us some other Rock Art.

The plans eventually fell into place like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and the Merindol crew left for Niger with David, Jean and Renée. We were booked on a flight to Niamey via Paris and then on to the town of Agadez to arrive after the team hopefully had finished taking the mould. The *National Geographic* had agreed to send a photographer who was an expert in taking aerial shots from a camera hanging from a balloon. David had a satellite-phone to keep in touch, which was very necessary as Agadez is way beyond any landline and the Dabous *Giraffe* rocks were a couple of hours further north up the track.

The first panic happened when the NGS man asked a Tuareg to tie the helium balloon to a rock, which he did as though it was a camel. Balloons are not as docile as camels so the balloon took off and probably ended up in India! David called on his satellite-phone and asked us to bring out another balloon that the *National Geographic* were mailing to London.

Our team, which now included Robert's daughter, Cathy, took off from London for Paris and then on down to Niamey, the capital of Niger. We stayed there a night and next morning flew by charter to Agadez. Not knowing Africa at all our trip was a complete eye-opener to me and utterly fascinating. It was also rather scary because the only language they spoke was a bastard French. During the flight to Agadez I could see the country below getting more desert-like every mile we travelled, and by the time we reached the little mudbrick town we were truly in the back of beyond, the Sahara.

Agadez International Airport was not quite as grand as its name implied, but the town mayor was there to welcome us, along with David and jeeps into which we all piled and headed off for the only restaurant in town.



Robert and Damon and the 'Mayor of Agadez'

Two ministers from the Niger government arrived at the adobe-type building and we sat down to our first Tuareg meal. At the end of the meal Damon presented both ministers with a Bradshaw Foundation TARA medal which I had struck in England with our logo on one side and the two giraffe on the reverse. The medal was on a long tricolour ribbon which caused an awkward moment as Damon was unable to get it over the enormous turban one of the ministers was wearing! As the Tuaregs all wear turbans to protect their heads from the heat David had procured some beautiful blue ones for us, which we later had great fun learning how to wrap around our skulls.



Medal presentation to Niger ministers

After the ceremony we piled back into our jeeps and set off at great speed to follow the ministers and their escort of heavily-armed soldiers. We drove north up an excellent bitumen road towards the uranium mines that provide France with all its nuclear fuel.

After a couple of hours we turned east on a sand track, but immediately came to a halt when we were confronted by a Tuareg welcoming committee dressed in all their finery and mounted on camels. It was quite a sight and our first introduction to the real desert nomads. After establishing that everyone's relatives were in good health we pressed on and within a short time arrived at the campsite that was set up about a quarter of a mile from the Dabous rocks. The Tuaregs had built several beehive shelters for us and decorated them inside with the most gloriously-coloured rug hangings.

We dumped our gear and followed David and the ministers to have our first look at the *Giraffe* carvings. We could see the soldiers stationed on rock outcrops around us, silhouetted against the skyline with weapons at the ready. I hoped it was all just a show of strength and not really necessary!



'Tuareg' reception



A five-star 'Tuareg' beehive shelter



'Dabous Rocks' and petrified wood flats

As we walked across the flat open space between the camp and the carvings I noticed that the ground was littered with petrified wood chips about three inches long. This was my first surprise and absolute proof that the whole area of the Sahara had once been covered by forest in past ages. I keep the chips of stone wood on my desk and play with them. They are as hard as steel and some are shaped like chisels, the perfect sculptor's tool.



A soldier on guard by the Giraffe carving

We clambered up the rocks and were introduced to the *Dabous Giraffe*. They were everything that Jean had assured me they would be and even more stunning than I had expected from the photographs!

David gave the ministers the official tour of the carving and then took them down to see the white rubber mould that Pierre Merindol and his team had taken. The gold Bradshaw Foundation medals looked very good hanging around their necks and gave the whole affair a royal air! It was all great fun but we couldn't wait to send the ministers on their way so we could get down to the serious business of examining the carvings for ourselves.

Once the official party departed we settled in to have a 'hands-on' getting to know you meeting with the *Giraffe*. Running our fingers along the smooth grooves that were done 10,000 years ago was a simply magnificent experience and utterly thrilling. At Chauvet I hadn't been able to touch anything whereas here I could caress the grooves with a sculptor's finger!

It is very hard to describe just how incredible the *Giraffe* are. The lines represent decades of hard work as they are cut into very hard rock and half an inch deep. The carving may have been designed by one man, but because of the man-hours involved, he must have had help to carve and polish the hundreds of lines to produce such a masterpiece with stone tools. When I hold my wood-fossil chip I am sure this is what the artists used to carve and polish the grooves. They had an unlimited supply of chisels right at their doorstep!

Running my fingers along the grooves of the *Giraffe* was like hugging an Easter Island Moai or lying on the altar stone of Stonehenge. I silently thanked Jean Clottes for suggesting we should come and see the *Giraffe* and Robert and Damon for making it all possible. That first moment was incredibly exciting and one I shall always treasure. To be allowed to actually touch such sacred objects is awe-inspiring. It took me back to the days that I was copying the centuries-old carvings of the Apostles on the West Front of Wells Cathedral and had felt an amazingly close bond with the artist. I now had the same feeling with the *Giraffe*, a *Bond of Friendship*.



Dabous Giraffe

Pierre Merindol's team had done a superlative job in very harsh conditions under a blazing Sahara sun. The evening was closing in so we made our way back to the camp. Robert had brought some tequila from the States so we settled in around the fire to celebrate. David had even been able to find some ice in Agadez, so I am afraid we had more tequila than we should have, but we did have something to toast, the successful completion *Dabous Giraffe* mould.

On the team's arrival the first thing was for Alec Campbell, David's partner, to record on paper every single engraving on the surface of the *Giraffe* by using a grid and a tape measure. Once this was finished Jean supervised the placing of several clay slabs on the engraving to protect the surface of some small areas from the moulding rubber. This process was necessary as one day scientists will be able to date the surface of the rock exactly, so it was essential they remain untouched by any industrial chemicals that would interfere with this process when it happens.



Alec Campbell recording

A clay protection slab

The rock surface was also covered with a water-soluble seal before the rubber moulding material was applied. The sealer would be washed off when the mould had been removed. Once the rubber was dry it was backed up with plaster of Paris and a steel mesh to stop the mould twisting. The surrounding rocks were protected by a plastic sheet against drops of stray plaster or rubber.

When the plaster backing was removed it was taken down to the dry river bed at the base of the rocks and set up in readiness to receive the rubber mould. Next the rubber mould was gently peeled back to reveal a perfect mirror image of the Giraffe carving. This all sounds extremely easy but I can assure you that it is very hard work and to accomplish such a job was a miracle in such conditions and staggering heat. Everything had gone according to plan and the end result was that the team had taken a perfect mould.



The rubber is backed with plaster and a steel mesh



A perfect rubber mould is peeled back from the 10,000-year-old carving



The rubber mould is carried down to marry with the plaster backing



The completed rubber mould taken from the NGS balloon

As I looked at the rubber mould lying on the sand I realised that I was seeing a quite unique image as the engraved lines now were raised proud of the surface. Because of this the image was even more realistic, if that were possible, as the carving had become a relief. I was filled with admiration for the artists who had captured the likeness of these magnificent creatures with such perfection. It was a magic moment and I agreed with Jean, the *Giraffe* are a masterpiece.

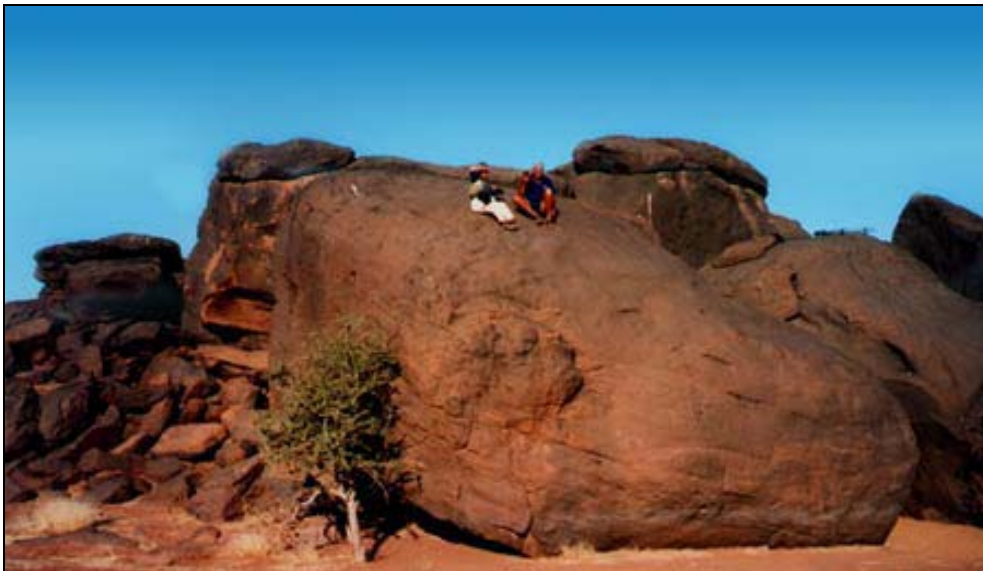
I had planned that we would be at Dabous during the full moon so the desert nights would be flooded with bright silver light. On the second night we had a magnificent party around the fire and ate roasted lamb prepared by our excellent camp cook as the sparks flew up to the heavens. During the meal we had heard drums and laughter intermingled with shrill female tongue-calls, and had wondered what was going on. When we had finished eating, Sidi, the

Tuareg chief, invited us to a 'Tam Tam' out on the flats between the camp and the *Giraffe* to celebrate the end of the moulding.



Tam Tam under the full moon

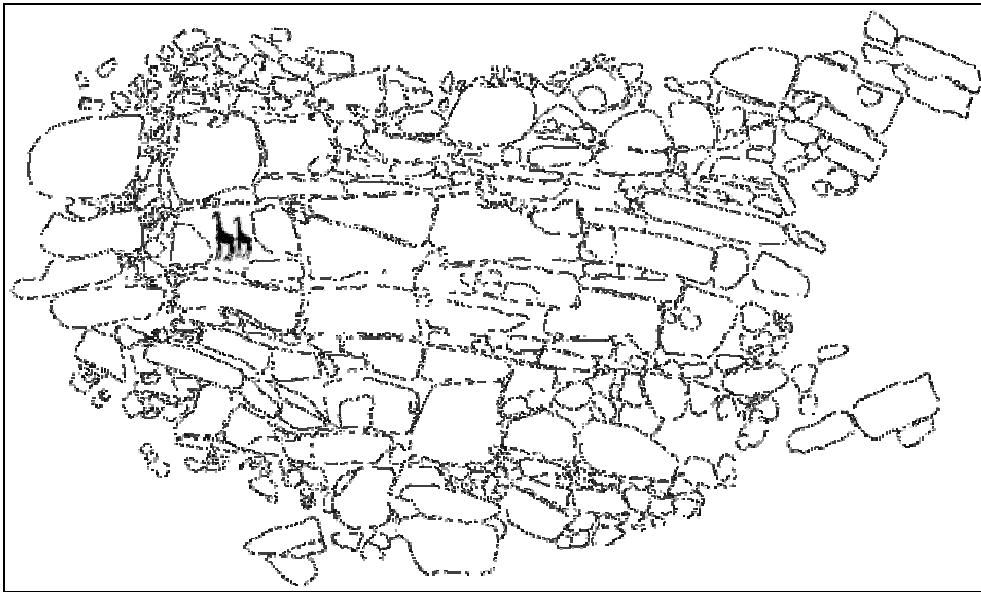
We walked out onto the flats and found a group of brightly-dressed women beating drums as several vibrant men riding camels circled around them enveloping everyone in a cloud of dust. Soon we were also lost in the brown fog and before long, helped along by the tequila, we joined in the dancing which consisted of two men as couples running up to the women, shouting, and then backing off without falling over. Robert, Cathy, Damon, Jean, Peter and I were soon paired off and dashing forwards and backwards through the choking dust. The men and women seemed to be getting more and more excited, if the shrilling was anything to go by, so when our turbans began to fall off our heads, we called it a night and walked back to camp before things got out of control! Not so the Tuaregs, who kept the party going until dawn had begun to outline the horizon in the east.



Cow Rock

We had spent our first full day at Dabous examining the entire outcrop. It really is a spectacular place and you can understand why these cowpat-shaped

rocks were chosen for what must have been a very significant religious centre. Jean showed us all over the outcrop, pointing out the engravings they had found. He and Renée had started to map the rocks, a quite gigantic task.



The map drawn by Jean and Renée Clottes

Jean was desperate to record every single carving and before we left Africa he had persuaded Robert and Damon to let him return the following year with Valerie and Yanick to do just that. In the end they recorded 828 separate carvings on the acre of rocks. (see www.bradshawfoundation.com for full scientific report) Valerie taught our guide Sidi and the Tuaregs to record the rock art by tracing the images onto clear plastic.



Man drinking from a cow's udder



Antelope



Elephant

The *Giraffe* carving is in quite a different class to the other 827 images. Robert looked at the site and suggested that it was a prepared canvas, pointing to a spot where a large boulder might have been removed to make room for the 21-foot long image. Once his suggestion had been made we soon located bits of rock in a fissure beside the carving that must have been the remains of the broken-up boulder, proving him right.

The whole Dabous complex started to look more and more important as a centre of worship and I believe, death. I say this because dotted around the area are several stone cairns that could cover bone deposits. The Tuaregs told us that they contained the bones of horses that they buried standing upright, but I think that must be a myth; besides, the sculpture was done a long time before the Tuareg and horses arrived on the scene. The problem that all people have, past and present, is how to deal with dead bodies.

In Tibet they still chop up the dead and feed the bits to the vultures before collecting the bones for storing. Australian aborigines used to stick the body up a tree and when all the flesh had decomposed they would collect the bones and store them in a shelter. Easter Islanders exposed their dead on Ahu platforms and then put the bones in caves. Digging holes and burying the dead is a hard job without steel tools. I believe that the *Giraffe* platform was a place for exposing the dead for the vultures and when the bones were clean of flesh they were placed in the stone cairns, but of course I have no proof.

The new balloon was filled with helium and launched, with Damon firmly hanging on to it. With careful manoeuvring up over the rocks the NGS cameraman aimed the lens at the *Giraffe* through his laptop and took some aerial photographs. It is amazing to look at one of the bird's-eye images and pick out our heads, my bald one being easy to spot as I talk to Robert sitting at the *Giraffe*'s feet in his blue jeans, just to the right of the three dots. I also believe you can see where vultures have left their mark on the rocks at the foot of the photograph. Perhaps they thought we were their next meal!



The balloon that didn't escape...

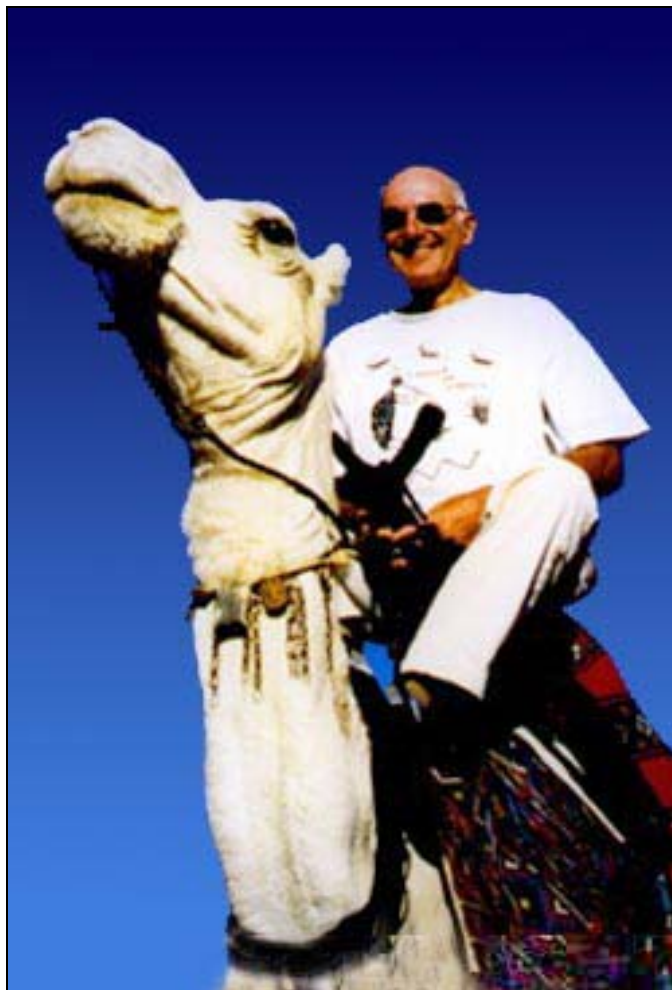


...and the photograph from above with vulture droppings

Pierre Merindol's team tidied up their equipment and packed up the mould ready for transport back to France, while our team took camel-riding lessons from the Tuaregs who suddenly appeared out of the desert.



Professionals...



Jean...



...and learners, Peter and JR

That evening we had a farewell supper around the fire. Pierre and his team were heading south and we were about to set off north into the Tenere Desert on the other side of the Air Mountains. Fatima made us sweet tea while Sidi taught us to tie our turbans properly.



Learning how to make tea and tie turbans with Fatima and Sidi

The full moon came up and lit the 'Tam Tam' ground with silver light. As people started to peel off for their beehive dwelling I suddenly decided that I had to sleep on the *Giraffe* under the full moon. Robert wasn't feeling too well so he said he wouldn't join me, but Damon agreed to come thank goodness otherwise I don't think I would have found the courage to be there on my own. We set off across the flats towards the rocks with a sleeping bag apiece to lie on. It was still boiling hot so our only other requirement was a water bottle each. We reached Dabous and started to climb up to the *Giraffe* platform over

the rocks that threw off as much heat as an open oven door. By the time we got to the *Giraffe* we were both in a puddle of sweat.



Dabous Giraffe in the moonlight

Damon opted for sleeping up on the top of one of the rocks to the side which we had named the *Sacrificial Altar*, as he hoped there might be just a tiny bit more of a breeze higher up. I wanted to sleep closer to the carving as I thought that would be more of a *hands-on experience*, so I settled down by the round indent beside the *Giraffe*, the spot where we thought the boulder had been removed from. Before closing my eyes I gazed straight up at the enormous moon and thought about some of the other places where I had been lucky enough to do the same thing, especially in Kimberley on top of Mt Agnes with Robert. I counted a few of my lucky stars and dropped off to sleep.

I slept like the dead, but woke at dawn from one of the most terrifying dreams I have ever had. A lot of people were involved and they were all

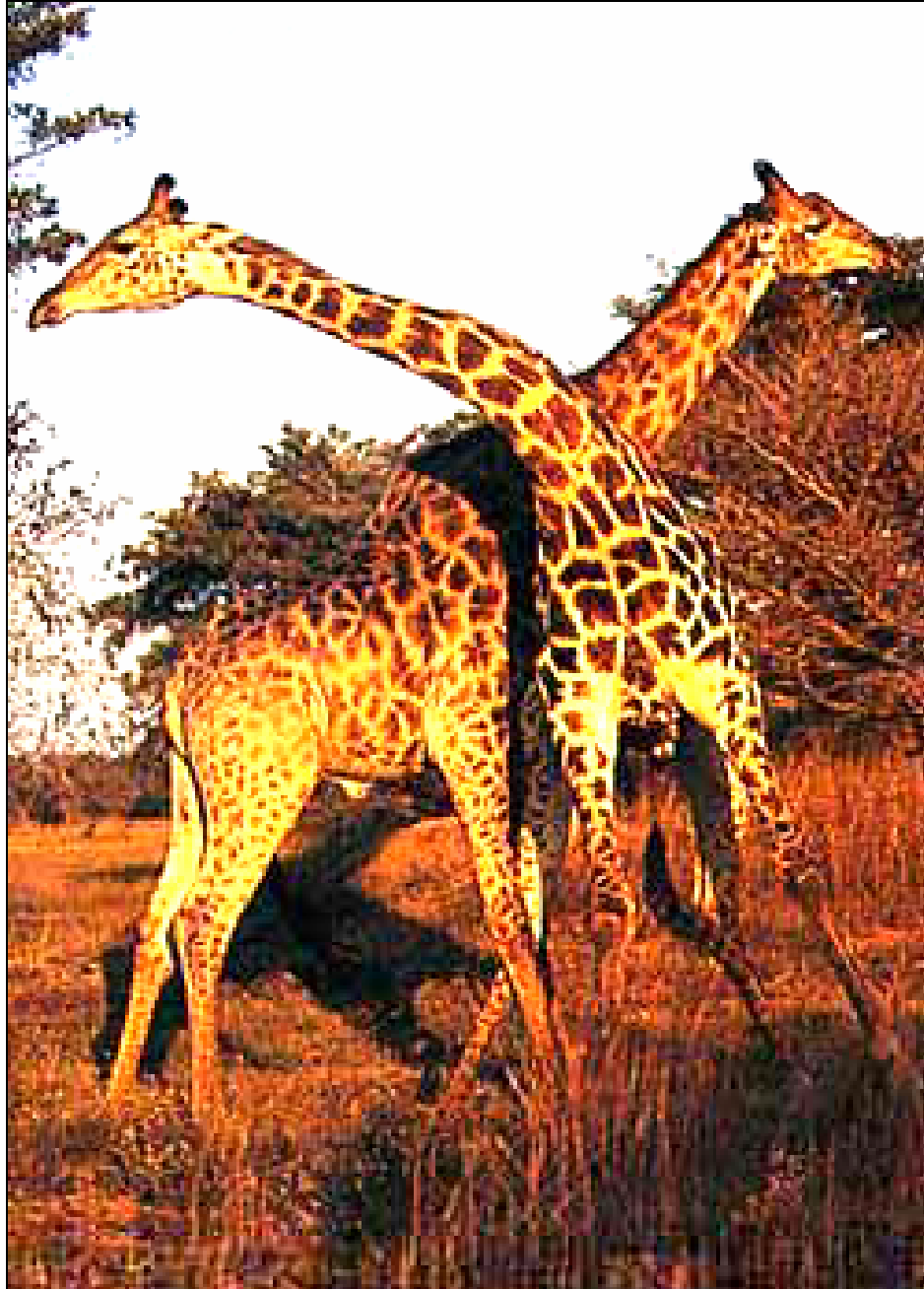
bleeding from open wounds having had a horrendous fight. There was blood everywhere and flowing like water from a fountain! I was freezing cold and frightened. Damon was already stirring, so I called up to him and suggested that we immediately went and got a cup of strong coffee. I told him about my dream as we walked back to camp and it was then that I became absolutely certain that Dabous had a lot to do with death.

Years later when I was in Aspen I tried an experiment on the cast that Robert has on his property. Both *Giraffe* have a polished wavy line coming from their mouths running all the way down to just above their feet, at which point there is carved a little stick figure of a man. It almost looks as though the dwarf man holds the giant giraffe by a halter, but as the animal has never been domesticated, I am sure this is not so.



Water runs down the line from the Giraffe mouth to the Man

A friend poured some of the water from a bottle into the mouth of the giraffe and I watched fascinated as the water trickled all the way down to the little man. I wondered if instead of water, perhaps blood had once followed that same path? Jean has suggested that the line was some kind of spiritual union between man and beast and I am sure he must be right.



Elegant mystical creatures

Our convoy of jeeps left Dabous and returned to the bitumen and then headed north. The Tuaregs like to drive at breakneck speeds wherever possible, or even impossible! After a couple of hours' travelling we arrived at the turn-off for the village of Iferouane and headed east along the valley that would lead us through the Air Mountains.



Thatched huts in Ifrouane

Many of the houses in the village are made of thatch in the traditional style. We stopped for a lunch that had been prepared for us by the locals and soon traders appeared from all directions, set up a mini-market, and offered to sell us Tuareg medallions of beaten silver. I was more interested in the polished-stone necklaces that were on offer and I bought two, although I felt guilty as I hated to see such genuine old artefacts being sold off for dollars.



'Tuareg' necklaces

To ease my conscience a little I thought if I didn't buy them someone else would! I gave them to Margie when I arrived home and as she also thinks they are beautiful, and often wears them, at least they are now appreciated again by a woman, so I don't feel so guilty; besides, I enjoy seeing them!

The village is situated at the beginning of a track which winds between and over sand dunes that lie along a valley passing through the Air Mountains. We raced along followed by a cloud of dust spewing out behind each vehicle. The trick was to be in the leading vehicle! Occasionally we would come to a dune and it was here that we began to appreciate the skill of the Tuareg drivers over sand. When we did get stuck it was all hands to the rear and push.