RE-DISCOVERING THE ROCK ART OF THE LIMPOPO-SHASHI CONFLUENCE AREA, SOUTHERN AFRICA*

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ABSTRACT

Although rock art images from the Limpopo River Valley were first mentioned in 1888, work on this aspect of the archaeological record of the area has been sporadic during this century. Since the early 1990s, however, Palaeo-Art Field Services, a rock art recording team based in Louis Trichardt, has surveyed the Limpopo-Shashi Confluence Area on both the South African and Zimbabwean sides. They have raised the number of documented rock art sites from 40 to 120. This paper presents some of the results of this work. The paper does not set out to provide comprehensive arguments for the interpretation of the imagery; rather, it aims to re-introduce the art to a contemporary audience and point to some interesting features of the art of this region while suggesting possible interpretations as well as avenues for further research.

INTRODUCTION

As research shifts and changes over time, different areas on the southern African landscape come into prominence while others are relegated to the periphery of archaeological consciousness. A case in point is the rock art of the Limpopo-Shashi Confluence Area (LSCA). During the 1960s and 1970s the rock art of this area frequently featured in academic discourse (see Schoonraad 1960, 1963; Willcox 1963; Pager 1973, 1975a, 1977). Then, from the 1970s onwards, there was declining interest in the rock art of this region; instead, research concentrated on the south-eastern mountains, the south-western Cape, the central interior of South Africa, the Matopos of Zimbabwe, and areas in Namibia. Recently, Palaeo-Art Field Services has undertaken extensive surveying of the LSCA for rock art sites.

Discovering rock art sites in the LSCA is no easy matter for it is a vast expanse of wilderness that forms the boundaries between Botswana, Zimbabwe, and South Africa (Figs 1 & 2). The area is characterised by roughly parallel series of ridges running along the Limpopo River. These cream-coloured ridges belong to the Tshipise Member of the Clarens Formation of Karroo sandstone. It is in these ridges that shelters - formed by water erosion or by subsidence from vertical and horizontal joint planes - with rock art are found. Both paintings and engravings occur in these shelters, interestingly, often in the same shelters. Engravings are also found on exposed sandstone surfaces or, in one case, on a horizontal bed of metamorphic rock.

This topography supports a rich plant life. Riparian forest gives way to a mosaic of mopane woodland and scrub interspersed with mixed Bushveld woodland. In turn, this plant life supports a remarkable diversity of animals. Pools at the junction of the two seasonally flowing rivers provide a perennial water-source for the wild animals of this region, local human communities, and their livestock.

This abundance and diversity of natural resources has
long attracted human settlement. Indeed, the Iron Age archaeological sequence of the LSCA is relatively well known. At present, the archaeological evidence suggests that there was a succession of occupation beginning with people of the Zhizo tradition, followed by proto-Shona traditions such as the Mapungubwe, Zimbabwe and Khami cultures, and more recently by Sotho-speakers and, later, Venda groups (Hanisch & Fish 1995).

Although the succession of Late Iron Age groups who occupied this area is well known, the role of the Late Stone Age people in these successive occupations is not. In fact, very little work has been conducted on the Late Stone Age sequence. What has been done, however, suggests that the hunter-gatherers of this region did not live their lives untouched by the Late Iron Age peoples (Simon Hall, pers. comm.). Contact is evident between hunter-gatherers and Early Iron Age farmers from about AD 300 in the nearby Soutpansberg (Steyn et al. 1994; Fish 1995; Hanisch & Fish 1995).

This contact with agro-pastoralists does not appear to have always been beneficial to the hunter-gatherers. During the nineteenth century, for example, many of the region’s hunter-gatherers seem to have fallen victim to the war between the Matabele and Tswana (e.g. Wood 1893; see also Walker 1991:187). This is archaeologically known as the Refuge Period (e.g. Hanisch & Fish 1995). After this period of conflict, very few San groups were reported by European travellers in this disputed frontier territory (see, Elton 1873; Selous 1908).

To what extent the Refuge Period affected the hunter-gatherers is, however, difficult to know. This is because very few early travellers ventured into the LSCA until the 1890s. At the beginning of this century, however, Samuel Dornan (1925:66-67) reported that groups of Hietchware San were still near the LSCA, and that some lived in Tswana villages along the Motloutse and Shashi Rivers. Indeed, San hunter-gatherers were still living in the LSCA well into this century; according to Venda and North Sotho people living in south-western Zimbabwe, the San finally moved away from the LSCA in the 1950s after white farmers settled in the region (Eastwood & Cnoops 1998; cf. Van der Ryst 1998). They still live along the Shashi River in Botswana but have largely lost their identity and customs (Walker 1991). Considered to be Eastern Khoi-speakers, probably belonging to the Hietchware group or Eastern Khoe (Barnard 1992), the San who live along the Shashi are thought to be related to the Central San language family of Tshu-khwe-speakers which includes the G/wi and Nharo (Bleek 1928; Westphal 1963).

The paucity of information on hunter-gatherers of the LSCA is unfortunate because at least 95% of the rock art images documented since 1992 are almost certainly San hunter-gatherer in tradition. Some images appear to have been the work of Bantu-speaking farmers. These are finger paintings of zoomorphic and geometric motifs. In addition, there are finger paintings in red and/or white pigments composed entirely of geometric forms and finger dots, whose authorship is uncertain. Because these images represent such a small sample of the total thus far recorded and because research on them is still nascent, we discuss only the San hunter-gatherer rock art in this paper. As we have mentioned, this art comprises both engravings and paintings. We deal with each in turn, drawing on data collected from 85 sites in the area. Data from the remaining 35 sites has not yet been processed.

We begin by discussing previous and current research on rock art in the LSCA. We then describe some of the central themes in the hunter-gatherer art. We argue that this rock art is unique in several ways, and differs from the art of the Matopos to the north in Zimbabwe, and from that in the south-eastern mountains and south-western Cape in South Africa. As we proceed, it will become clear that the rock art of the LSCA does indeed represent a clearly defined subregion. Current surveys

Fig. 1. Map of Limpopo-Shashi Confluence area (LSCA). The study area is shaded.

Fig. 2. Aerial view of the Limpopo river near its confluence with the Shashi. This photograph was taken in February towards the end of the rainy season when the water begins to recede.
have shown that the art is far more widespread and complex than was previously imagined. In this paper, we describe some of the complexity of the rock art of the LSCA. It is not intended to be an exhaustive account; rather, it aims to present new material from this region and thereby encourage further research and debate.

PREVIOUS AND CURRENT RESEARCH

The first person to publish some of the rock art from the LSCA was Andrew Anderson who journeyed through the area in 1866 and illustrated rock engravings that he found there (Anderson 1888 cf. Mason 1962:22). Little mention of the rock art of the region was made after that time until 1952 when Clarence van Riet Lowe published a catalogue of rock art sites in South Africa; he listed nine. It was another eight years before Murray Schoonraad undertook the first serious investigation of the art. He published a brief preliminary study of nine sites in 1960. In addition to illustrating engravings, Schoonraad pointed out that there were also paintings in the area. These included depictions of fish and birds, as well as stylised female human figures and, importantly, enigmatic Y-shaped motifs.

Though intrigued by the Y-shaped images (see, for example, Sunday Times 1957), Schoonraad, unfortunately, did not pursue research in the area. In 1963, Alex Willcox described the co-occurrence of paintings and engravings at one site (see also, Willcox & Pager 1968 for a description of more engravings in the area). Except for a mention of the paintings by Cran Cooke and H. Simons in 1969, when they excavated small areas of Mpato Shelter in southwestern Zimbabwe, little work on the rock art was done after Wilcox until the early 1970s. At this time Harald Pager conducted fieldwork on the South African side of the river, recording selected images from 36 sites (Pager 1973, 1975a, 1977). After Pager moved his recording programme to the Brandberg in the late 1970s, there was another pause in research for about a decade.

This interlude ceased in the 1990s when the Southpansberg Rock Art Conservation Group produced three unpublished reports on five properties in South Africa (Eastwood & Cnoops 1994a; Eastwood et al. 1994; Eastwood & Fish 1995). Palaeo-Art Field Services, a professional survey and recording group, developed out of this earlier, largely avocational, organisation. Palaeo-Art Field Services persevered with work in the LSCA by recording art on two properties in Zimbabwe near the confluence (Eastwood et al. 1995). Since then, this group has surveyed a further 10 properties on the South African side of the Limpopo River (Eastwood et al. 1997, 1998; Eastwood & Cnoops 1998a, 1999). In addition, previously documented sites have been re-visited. Although work in the region is continuing, the number of located sites represents a significant representative sample from which to make general observations about rock art in the region.

THE ROCK ENGRAVINGS

We recognise five categories of engravings: schematic designs, animal motifs, animal spoor, cupules, and cut marks (Figs 10A & 10B).

Schematic designs
These vary from finely incised patterns to deeply incised grids, crosses, and meandering lines. They are frequently found near Iron Age sites. Sometimes they are near grain-bin remains in isolated shelters where cereal grain was secreted during the Refuge Period. Although difficult to interpret, it has been suggested that some of these designs may represent protective marks or signs of ownership (cf. Cnoops & Eastwood 1995).

Animals
The most striking engravings are those depicting animals. Most notably, there are several engraved giraffe in the region. One of these is the famous Mtetengwe petroglyph that is 2.3 metres in length. Elizabeth Goodall and Roger Summers first reported this engraving in 1951. Other engraved animals in the LSCA include rhinoceroses (Fig. 3), a zebra, a kudu, a gemsbok as well as animals of indeterminate species.

Spoor
Engraved animal spoor are found in five shelters (Fig. 4). Identifiable tracks include those of zebra, kudu, elephant, and impala. Some of these images were very carefully pecked out and then, most unusually, polished. They are often depicted together with cupules and slash marks. Their symbolism is unknown, but it is likely that they had complex symbolic associations (Ouzman in prep.).
Fig. 4. Engraved antelope spoor on vertical rock surface: species indeterminate. Scale in centimetres.

Cupules

The cupules constitute the most numerically significant engraving category. Most of these are randomly situated on vertical or off-vertical rock faces (Fig. 5). They are also found on horizontal surfaces and boulders. Generally, the diameters of the cupules vary between 10 to 60 mm. Current views suggest that the production of cupules worldwide was more symbolic than functional, although specific meanings and functions no doubt varied from place to place (Taçon et al. 1997).

Cut Marks

Another enigmatic petroglyph type is the 'cut mark' (Fig. 6). These are, like the cupules, widespread and they are found in about a fifth of the recorded shelters. They are also found in shelters where there is no other form of rock art. In all cases of superpositioning that have been recorded, paintings have been found over, not under, the slash marks. It has been suggested that these grooves were the result of functional activity such as the sharpening of metal blades. This is, however, unlikely, as this procedure would in fact dull the edge of an iron artefact. Another suggestion is that they were used to shape bone points. This is also an unlikely explanation because the relative softness of bone would not make much impression on the hard quartzitic sandstone on which most cut marks are found. Moreover, many of the cut marks are situated high above the present floor of the shelter; in some cases, they are as much as four metres above ground level. Although it is possible that the ground level has been much eroded in certain places since they were made, in other cases it seems that they were intentionally placed this high. It is more likely that these marks were not the product of some practical function, such as sharpening, but were, rather, part of a symbolic art tradition.

THE ROCK PAINTINGS

We consider three major categories in the paintings: animals, human figures, and Y-shape/spread-eagled motifs (Figs 10A & 10C).

Animals

This category of image includes depictions of both indeterminate antelope and recognisable species, such as kudu, as well as other animals, such as giraffe and elephant (Fig. 10D) (cf. Pager 1975a; Eastwood et al. 1995).

Depictions of antelope, as in most areas in southern Africa, are numerically dominant over those of other animals (Fig. 10E). In addition, as in most areas in southern Africa, 75% (n=187) of these images are of indeterminate species (see, Eastwood et al. in prep. on possible exaggeration of this category in rock art research). Kudu are the most commonly painted identifiable antelope, and they comprise 15% (n=74) of all recorded antelope. Other species-specific antelope, such as tsessebe, eland, impala, widebeest, redbuck and sable collectively make up 11% (n=64) (Fig. 10E). It is nevertheless likely that many of the indeterminate antelope depictions represent kudu, as many of the images possess at least one of its defining morphological characteristics. We now turn to those characteristics and to possible reasons for the numerical prominence of depictions of kudu.

Kudu are usually depicted in red pigment and are identifiable by their large, squarish ears, shoulder humps, robust muzzles and long necks. There are also many finely detailed bichrome and polychrome examples (Fig. 7); the polychrome images are usually larger than monochrome ones. The numerical dominance of kudu in the art and the elaborate treatment accorded to them,
suggest that this animal played a role in the art similar to that of the eland further south (Vinnicombe 1972:198; see also Walker 1996: 68). One interesting aspect of the kudu that may relate to its prominence in the art is its sexual ambiguity. Female kudu sometimes bear horns (Smithers 1983:666). This ambivalence may have placed the kudu as a symbol of liminality, as a mediator between the sexes and between ordinary reality and non-ordinary experience. Certainly, ambiguous animals are often chosen as focal symbols throughout Africa (see, Douglas 1957), and ambiguity plays an important role in San rock art (Lewis-Williams 1981; Dowson 1992; Solomon 1992; Eastwood & Cnoops in prep.). Whatever the reasons, the frequency of kudu depictions in the art of the LSCA and relative absence of eland, suggest that this art was conceptually closer to that found farther to the north in Zimbabwe where kudu are predominant - than to that in the south-eastern mountains and south-western Cape.

After kudu the most numerous animal species depicted is the elephant. Elephant make up 13% (n=56) of animal depictions (n=506) (Fig. 1OD). Most commonly, elephant are portrayed in black pigment and do not have ears and tusks. At least 60% of these images have red dorsal lines. The red dorsal line is also found on depictions of giraffe, another numerically significant image. An earlier survey by Pager (1975a) on the South African side of the Limpopo River revealed that images of giraffe comprised 16% of all animal depictions. Figures from more recent surveys, both north and south of the river, however, show that they comprise only 7% (n=31) of all animal imagery (see, Fig. 1OD; see, Eastwood et al. 1995 for figures on north side of river). These are preliminary figures and will possibly change when data from recent surveys are fully processed and images from both sides of the river are calculated together. Most depictions of giraffe are red monochromes but there are also several elaborate polychromes, some of which have red dorsal stripes extending from the base of the head to the base of the tail (Fig. 8). This line may refer to the supernatural potency (n/om) of the animals (Eastwood in press); in the Kalahari, the giraffe is considered to be an especially potent animal, and it plays an important role in the ritual and folklore of many San groups (Marshall 1969; Biesele 1993).

Other painted animal species include rhinoceroses, lions, leopards (and indeterminate felids), baboons, buffalo, warthogs, antbears, birds, jackals, hippopotamuses, cyprinid and mormyrid fish, zebras, wild dogs, hyenas and mongoose (Fig. 1OD). These collectively make up 17% (n=88) of all animal depictions. In addition to these animals, locusts are depicted at one site and fat-tailed sheep at four sites. It is important to realise that the species diversity, both amongst the antelope and amongst animal imagery in general is high given such a small study area (e. 1 200 square kilometres). In the south-western Cape and the south-eastern mountains the diversity of species depicted seems to be less than that in the LSCA. In those other areas, species diversity appears to be closely related to idiosyncrasy and artistic individuality (Dowson 1988). The high level of species diversity in the art of the LSCA suggests that in this region, depiction of diverse species may have been a 'cultural' practice rather than a result of idiosyncrasy. Nevertheless, most rock art sites exhibit only a few species; it is only at a few sites that a wide variety of animals is depicted, and this is a feature of the area that requires further research.

Human Figures

Both males and females are represented in the art of the region. Typically human beings are painted in linear or linear-like arrangements. Many of the figures in these groups are apparently unsexed (Fig. 10F). Indeed, 47% (n=274) of all human figures so far documented in the LSCA do not have primary sexual characteristics (penises for men and breasts for women). Many of the indeterminate human figures may, however, be male because they are slender and upright, as are those that are clearly male (cf. Solomon 1992). When identifiable, women are usually shown with reverse articulation of the legs, exaggerated lordosis of the spine and, frequently, breasts attached to the thorax by a 'pedicel' (Fig. 9).

Very importantly, these depictions of women constitute 31% (n=182) of all human beings; males account for the remaining 22% (n=128). This is an extremely high percentage of women when compared to other rock art areas of the subcontinent. In the south-eastern mountains, for example, women make up as little as 2% of the images of human beings in certain areas (Vinnicombe 1976:363) and as much as 14.8% in others (Pager 1975b:40). Similar low percentages are recorded from other areas. In the Cederberg, women constitute 9.6% of human figures in some places (Halkett 1987); at Tsodilo Hills they make up 3.2% (Campbell et al. 1994:145) and in the nearby western Southpansberg, they make up only 1% (Eastwood & Cnoops 1994b:44).

Just as important as the high percentage of women in the LSCA rock art, is the observation that they are
Fig. 7. Two polychrome kudu cows. The right-hand animal is in typical head-down posture. Outline represents white, black represents red, heavy stipple represents dark yellow, light stipple represents light yellow. Scale in centimetres.

Fig. 8. Two polychrome giraffe and a woman. Note the red dorsal stripe on the giraffe on the right. Outline represents white, black represents red, heavy stipple represents light red, light stipple represents yellow. Scale in centimetres.

Fig. 9. Alcelaphid antelope with row of women. Typical of depictions of women in the Limpopo-Shashi region, they have large heads, exaggerated buttocks, lordosis of the spine, pedicel breasts and reverse articulation of the legs. Black represents red. Scale in centimetres.

seldom depicted together with men. There are some paintings of a single male juxtaposed with a single female, but for the most part people are portrayed in single-sex groups. The high proportion of women in the art and the separation of men and women into distinct groups suggests that gender division may have been one of the primary underlying structures of the art (Eastwood & Cnoops in prep.).

Procesional groups of men or women sometimes suggest dancing but for the most part they appear simply to be walking. Because San rock art throughout southern Africa has been shown to be more than mere narrative,
Fig. 10. Graphed results of quantitative studies of the rock art at 85 sites in the Limpopo-Shashi Confluence.
Fig. 11. Typical Y-shapes and a 'spread-eagled' motif. Black represents red, stopple represents green. Scale in centimetres.

it is highly likely there is more to the LSCA paintings of human beings than meets the eye. In addition to possible 'dance scenes' of some of these processions there are three possible hunting 'scenes', but non-realistic elements in these suggest that they may also be explained in a manner other than narrative (Eastwood & Cnoops 1998b; Eastwood in press).

Y-shaped/spread-eagled motifs

The most intriguing and enigmatic images in the art of the LSCA are Y-shaped motifs. These images occur in over 60% of recorded sites (n=85). They are often found in a continuum of forms ranging from a simple Y-shape to a form that is best described as a 'spread-eagled' motif (Fig. 11). 'Spread-eagled' images resemble stretched out animal skins. Definitive 'spread-eagled' motifs are found in only about 5% of shelters (Fig. 10G). They are often juxtaposed with Y-shapes. The continuity in form between Y-shapes and 'spread-eagled' figures, however, strongly suggests that they comprise a class of image, even though their significance may not be identical.

In the past, the Y-shapes were interpreted as fish traps (Pager 1975a), but this explanation is unlikely because they are never immediately juxtaposed with depictions of fish. We now believe that these depictions represent items of San clothing (Blundell & Eastwood in prep.). We do not understand why items of clothing should have been painted, but the recognition of these images as such, and not as fish traps, opens new avenues for research.

CONCLUSION

Although brief, this 're-discovery' of the hunter-gatherer rock art of the LSCA has shown that the art is far more widespread, diverse, and complex than has hitherto been suspected. Three very important features of the art that hold possibility for further research and that could shift the way in which San rock art throughout the subcontinent is perceived are:

1. The co-occurrence of engravings and paintings in the same area may shed light on the relationship between the two traditions - an aspect of the art that still eludes understanding. Rock engraving and rock painting regions usually occur in discreet and
separate areas elsewhere in South Africa. In the LSCA, engravings are found on vertical rock walls within shelters where paintings also occur. Indeed, the cupules and cut marks, engravings of animals and animal spoor, and their relation to the unique and intriguing fine-line paintings pose a formidable challenge to researchers.

2. The high percentage of depictions of women in the LSCA rock art points to their significance in the cosmology of the San of the region. A full understanding of women's roles in San rock art is still elusive. It is possible that the art of the LSCA may shed new light on this important aspect of our understanding of the past.

3. The large number of Y-shapes, once identified formally as aprons in the literature, may lead to further research opportunities on an aspect of rock art that has hitherto been overlooked.

These are some of the possibilities raised by the material obtained from recent surveys of the LSCA rock art. There are, obviously, far more possibilities. Whether or not the social significance and the meaning of the art in this area is ever solved, it is certain that the region holds as much potential for understanding hunter-gatherer cosmology as do the better-known areas of rock art to the north in the Matopos and to the south in the southeastern mountains and Cederberg.

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