



Digital technologies in context: Prehistoric engravings in the Northern Cape, South Africa



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ABSTRACT

This project in the Northern Cape of South Africa focuses on engravings, a relatively understudied genre of prehistoric imagery in the region. Combined with an earlier pilot study of paintings, I attempt to identify a digital technique that would allow us to record and analyze prehistoric images. The central criterion in this selection is that the technique be low cost and be suitable for specific postcolonial contexts. Moreover, it should be sustainable into the future, without requiring extensive staff training in museums where the archive would be available to local communities. These prerequisites are a methodological as well as a theoretical challenge to the project in South Africa, and will likely resonate with archaeologists who work in similar contexts. In describing the project design, I discuss some of the challenges of work in remote areas. Multiple images are shown to illustrate the challenges and solutions.

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During the summer 2013, together with my collaborators¹, I embarked on an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation supported research project in the Northern Cape of South Africa. The project follows an earlier pilot study that surveyed painted rock art in the Eastern Cape Province. The current work focuses on engravings, a genre of prehistoric imagery in the region less studied than paintings on rock faces. In both cases, with paintings and engravings, I seek to identify a digital technique that would allow me to record and analyze prehistoric images. My central criterion in this selection is that the technique be low cost and be suitable for specific postcolonial contexts. Moreover, it should be sustainable into the future, without requiring extensive staff training in museums where the archive would be available to local communities. These prerequisites pose a methodological as well as a theoretical challenge for a project in South Africa, and will likely resonate with archaeologists who work in similar contexts.

1. History

The ubiquity of prehistoric rock art in larger Southern Africa – encompassing South Africa, Lesotho, Namibia, Botswana and Zimbabwe – is well known and acknowledged by local and interna-

tional scholarly communities (for recent general surveys see e.g. Deacon, 2007; Lewis-Williams, 2011, or several entries in Smith et al., 2012). Yet the majority of attention has been devoted to paintings in a few specific areas in the region, particularly in the Drakensberg Mountains in the northeastern part of South Africa and Lesotho, and the Cederberg Mountains of the Western Cape. The visual complexity of the painted images, their location, the range of themes, juxtaposition of humans, animals and therianthropes (human and animal hybrids), and the preponderance of specific animals have generated interpretive debates since the pioneering work of Patricia Vinnicombe in the 1970s (Vinnicombe, 1976). No longer is the rock art viewed as merely 'art for art's sake', or the 'sympathetic magic' of simple hunting and gathering peoples eager to capture animals for food. The extensive body of work of such scholars as Blundell (2004), Deacon (2007), Dowson (1992), Dowson and Lewis-Williams (1994), Lewis-Williams (1983, 2002), Morris (1988, 2002, 2012), Ouzman (1995, 2005), Parkington (2003), Solomon (1997, 2011), Smith (2006, 2010) and Vinnicombe (1976) has drawn attention to the sophisticated spiritual and artistic life, and the technical know-how of the ancestral San and Khoe-Khoe people. The richness of this historic record of images, which still expands almost every year with new discoveries, will continue to provide the weave for passionate debates for many years. At the same time questions of heritage, descendant communities, and rights of access have recently emerged as far more pressing issues in the context of post-apartheid change in power structures in South Africa (see e.g. Smith et al., 2012; Weiss 2007, 2012).

While the painted rock art of South Africa has received much deserved attention in the last two decades, unpainted prehistoric

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symbolic representation remains relatively underappreciated. The spectacular colored images of eland or dancing figurines executed in still vivid style have overshadowed carvings, etchings and engravings of rock surfaces. Although lacking in dramatic “color”, this representational form offers no less an insight into the worlds of prehistoric communities of a region or a locale. As I will briefly rehearse below, scholarly interest in the engravings in Southern Africa extends back to the 19th century. However, the resulting articles and books have mainly focused on recording and reproduction for an audience of regional specialists, and comparative and in-depth analyses remain limited.

Visitors noted engraved images in Southern Africa as early as the 1840s and remarked on the mode of production as well as the possible or potential authors of the petroglyphs. For example the missionary Robert Moffat observed:

Lokualo, from which we derive the word writing or printing, is formed generally by herd-boys, who, with a stone, make various figures on stones with flat surface, without any reference to shape. Marks are made by striking the stone on another till curved lines, circles, ovals, and zigzag figures are impressed on its surface, exhibiting the appearance of a white strip of about an inch broad, like a confused coil of rope. (Moffat, 1842: 15)

Andrew Anderson pondered the authorship as well. When writing in 1887 he described another location, which featured animal figures:

Between Christiania and Lichtenburg is a farm called Gestop, situated in a very pretty valley, close to a picturesque hill. On the northern slope are some ancient carvings of animals on the rocks, which are composed of a close-grained kind of freestone; several of them are on rocks at the base of the hill, others half-way up, made no doubt by the people who made the others, the workmanship being similar. (Anderson, 1887: 64–5)

His description contains a theme that would later reappear in descriptions of South African rock art with some frequency—its supposed similarity with Egyptian prehistoric art: “Many of their figures so much resemble ancient Egyptians that it is difficult to distinguish any difference.” (Anderson, 1887: 155, see e.g. Breuil, 1930: 222 for claimed connection between South African rock art and pre-dynastic Egypt). Yet it was a Czech doctor with a desire to “discover the African continent” (Šámal 2013: 89), Emil Holub, who began the tradition of description, collection and ultimately illustration of engravings during his two long term stays (1872–79 and 1883–87) in the northern Cape region:

... but low as is the grade of their intellectual culture, they have the very wonderful art of decorating the rocky walls of their dwellings with representations of quadrupeds, tortoises, lizards, snakes, fights, hunts, and the different heavenly bodies. If ever it be my good fortune to recommence my South African researches, I hope to bring away some larger specimens than my want of proper tools enabled me now to obtain. (Holub, 1881:437–8)

Holub eventually gifted, donated or sold the collections he had accumulated to various European museums and private collectors; all that was left were illustrations later published by his colleague Jan Želízko (1909, 1925).

Interest in the engravings of the Northern Cape continued over the early decades of the twentieth century with travellers and increasingly also with scholars, including such well known figures as Stow (1905): 27–30, or Henri Breuil (1930, 1955). However, the most significant early major contribution was that of Maria Wilman (1933), the first director of the McGregor Museum in Kimberley, who set a high standard for reproductions and rubbings. Gerhard

Fock and his wife Dora, followed Wilman’s early work and made the greatest contribution in the long list of locations and description of engravings, due to their long term dedication to the art form and the region. Dr. Fock was South Africa’s first officially appointed museum archaeologist in 1958, and he dedicated all his energy to augmenting the record of engravings at the museum after retirement from the administrative post in 1967. Starting with his survey of South West African Archaeology (Fock, 1959), Fock published together with his wife numerous papers and volumes on engravings and their contexts in the northern Cape (among the many publications see mainly 1979, 1984, 1989). This work is absolutely essential for any future projects in the region. Interestingly, Scogings (1984), presented photogrammetry in Fock and Fock (1984) as an additional recording technique, including the suggestion of possible 3-D model. David Morris (1988, 2002, 2012), head of the Archaeology Department at McGregor Museum in Kimberley, has tirelessly continued Fock’s work. Other South African scholars included engravings in their broader research on rock art: Deacon (1988), Dowson (1992), Ouzman (1995, 2005, 2008).

Willcox (1964): 56, suggested that the Driekopseiland petroglyphs were made by men who have not reached the required cultural developmental stage to make representational art: “Adult men seem most likely to have made the petroglyphs under discussion but men who never reached the comparatively advanced stage of representational art”. That hypothesis shifted the interpretation from Egyptian influences to local production, but still retained the framework of universal evolutionary stages in art history. By the end of the twentieth century scholars had largely abandoned such universal frameworks, and generally agreed that local and historical circumstances are central to understanding any prehistoric symbolic representations. Recording and cataloguing engravings remains an essential task, particularly as many continue to weather or are destroyed. At the same time, the mass of material still needs analytic treatment, and the ubiquity of this representational form dwarfed efforts to interpret it. Despite historical interest in engravings, technical and interpretive work related to them still lies ahead.

2. Background

Rock engravings, or petroglyphs, are mainly found in the interior plateau of South Africa, particularly in the Northern Cape, the Free State and the North West Province, with some overlap with painted rock art in the western inland regions of the Northern Cape (Namaqualand) and further north in Namibia (see Fig. 1). However, the geographic certainty should be taken with a line-up of caveats. Many regions of South Africa, particularly those remote from major cities have been sporadically, if at all, surveyed, and even less systematically studied. As two prominent South African archaeologist have noted, most researchers prefer to be in a day’s drive from home so as to return in the evening to the comforts of their own beds (Smith and Blundell, 2004). Besides the distinct geographic location of the engraved stone, several other important features distinguish these categories of symbolic expression. While painted images all appear in rock shelters, cliffs or overhangs, engraved images are predominantly located on smaller boulders, for the most part vertically on the ground, and only a few have been found in rock shelters so far. In contrast to painted rock shelters, human figurines are uncommon among engraved images. On the other hand a wide range of animals beyond eland appears on the stones. Ubiquitous are geometric patterns that were seldom painted, engraved in a range of sizes, shapes and sequence configurations. Thus most scholars who have dealt with rock art in the region in a comparative frame agree that the two forms – paintings and engravings – represent different traditions of expressive culture, even if both were still likely produced by ancestral San people. What those different traditions may mean remains to be studied, as we tend to assume ethnic or

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