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Woodcliffs 3721 - II & Freshwater 1251 3028 CC 5 - 7
Maclear District, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

Site Report

Introduction

Woodcliffs is located on the Little Pot River 35 km north-east of Maclear on the Naudesnek Pass road. Freshwater adjoins the western portion of Woodcliffs. The farm is owned by Phyl Sephton of Woodcliffe Cave Trails, PO Box 65, Maclear, 5480. Tel: +27 (0)45 932 1550 or +27 (0)82 925 1030. E-mail:

Important note

Rock art is a finite and fragile resource and the National Heritage Resources Act 25 of 1999 protects all rock art sites. It is an offence to damage rock art or archaeological artefacts, punishable by 2 year's imprisonment and a R1 000 000-00 fine.

Site 1 – Main Shelter

S 30° 59' 39"

E 28° 09' 18"

Site description

The site is located on the 1440 m contour in a narrow side tributary of the Little Pot River facing NW on the boundary with Freshwater 125. This large 26 m long site has two lobes and two tiers. The upper tier has a rock bottom and is ocular in shape. The lower tier follows the high *kranz* line with numerous areas of rock tumble and with more and less-protected areas of overhang. The shelter's floor is a combination of loose and consolidated earth, rock tumble, mudstone blocs and sandstone granules. The floor is mostly dry and the archaeological deposit is deepest in sheltered pockets up to 50 cm thick.

Associated Archaeology

The site is covered in lithics (stone tools). These are made from crypto-crystalline silicates (also known as opalines) that are volcanic in origin and which are brought to the lowlands by mountain streams and rivers. There are also many hornfels (also known as lydianite or indurated shale) lithics that are made from river cobbles. The

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types of lithics encountered range from chips and chunks struck from stone cores that are the residue of the stone tool manufacturing process to finished products such as flakes, scrapers and adzes. The flakes were used for a variety of cutting purposes while scrapers were primarily used to remove hair from hide and to soften the hide before making it into clothing, thongs, shoes, bags and so forth. Adzes were used for woodwork. There is also good bone preservation and several rare fragments of ostrich eggshell were noted. Charcoal is abundant. There are lower grinding hollows on some of the rock tumblers. This shelter was clearly a major focus for the San in times past. Its favourable location, the many other habitable shelters nearby, proximity to the river and a major route of travel combined with spiritual imperatives to make this a nodal point on the San physical and spiritual landscape.

Description of rock-paintings

There are in excess of 500 individual rock paintings in the shelter. These paintings are discontinuously placed the length of the shelter, in both lobes and also on the upper tier's wall. Too numerous to deal with individually, there are a number of image clusters worthy of comment:

1. Circle of figures: At the eastern lobe, to the left and below the upper tier is a remarkable panel of at least 30 human figures arranged in a circle – a remarkable use of perspective continued in the western lobe with the depiction of two eland from the rear. This circle of seated and *karros*-clad figures with two red and white cattle and three white fat-tailed sheep painted partially on top of them in a more recent painting episode. Such circles of people – not apparently dancing – are suggestive of corporate, group activity. The depiction of domestic animals shows an awareness of new, non-San arrivals on the landscape with whom relations were initially positive.

2. Upper tier: The rock-paintings in the upper tier are extremely strange. The main panel is executed in an almost unknown pink paint; a patch of which can be observed on the rock floor. The figure with the bulbous and grossly exaggerated head is extremely atypical, as are the human figures around it. The rhebuck painted in orange and white on the shelter's inner ceiling has been painted with very thick, locally-derived pigment. I am, frankly, stumped by these paintings and do not know who did them or what they mean.

3. Animals and human figures: The slenderly built and long-tailed feline is of interest as it is not identifiable to species. There are dozens of eland and many Mountain rhebuck depicted. Human figures are found in many shapes and sizes including a bizarre white human figure that may represent an instance of Apocalyptic art. There is also a thin red line fringed with white dots that covers over 5 m of rock face. Many of the human figures are very animated – running, dancing and so forth.

Threat(s) to site: The site's rock wall is subject to flaking from the continual growth of calcite crystals that have their genesis in water-soluble calcium carbonate. Dust is something of a problem and many paintings are faded, though this is inevitable in such a multi-component and cross-temporal site.

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Meaning of the rock paintings

The dominant tone of this shelter's art is inclusive and for public consumption. The metaphors displayed – such as the eland, Medicine Dance and thin red line are all well-understood and widespread artistic conventions that all San would have understood. The circle of seated figures also suggests a large, corporate group. Available ethnography tells us that for most of the year diverse San communities existed in small, family type groups of up to a dozen people. Read literally, a circle of 29 plus human figures suggests a larger group and is typical of those occasions where these small family-type groups aggregated into large social groupings so as to exchange goods, information, renew friendships, fulfil family obligations, talk, arrange marriages and so forth. Very much like how we get together for birthdays, holidays and so on. One discordant note is the depiction of the slender feline-like animal. Because this animal cannot be identified to species (and because the San were superbly accurate painters) this does not signify a real animal; rather it shows this to be a Spirit World animal.

For the San the Spirit World was everywhere immanent and made manifest at certain locales, like Woodcliffs. Felines – San ethnography informs us – were things to wary of, embodying potent, anti-social meanings and energies. For example, malevolent shamans (Medicine people or priests) often took the outward form of a feline and marauded about, threatening the very fabric of society. It is possible this feline was painted here to warn people of the perils of not obeying social mores. The threat the feline represents remains latent as long as people behave – as soon as they misbehave this threat becomes manifest, with dire consequences.

The depiction of 'contact' imagery in the form of cattle and fat-tailed sheep shows that the San did not live in indolent idyll but were well aware of the landscape and the people and forces at work on it. They successfully adjusted their social and political formations to better interact with Black and later and less successfully White colonists. San were renowned as potent rain-makers; a service for which the Xhosa paid handsomely in cattle. Further, the Xhosa word *gira* or *gixa* meaning 'sangoma' or 'doctor' is directly derived from the San word for shaman *gi'xa*. Still today, Xhosa divines maintain that to learn one's craft in the 'Bushman way' is the strongest way.

Recommendations

The physical condition of the rock-art at this site varies excellent to faded and is on the whole good. Site visits should take place under the following conditions:

- A site custodian should accompany all site visits.
- This site report and other rock-art information should be made available to visitors that they may gain maximum enjoyment and information from their visit.
- All visits must have the express permission of the farm's owner, Phyl Sephton.

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Site 2 – Three Ladies Shelter
S 30° 59' 33" E 28° 05' 01"

Site description

This site is unusual in that it is located on a hidden Krantz line at 1500 m. The site faces north and east and is a large 18 m long shelter with a good measure of overhang and an undercut of mudstone. The floor takes the form of a small amphitheatre type apron in front of the shelter, upcurved at its ends.

Associated Archaeology

There is very little in the way of lithic (stone tool) scatter in this site with only occasional flakes but no manufacturing debris. The soil is also very leached, making the preservation of organic matter such as bone, wood and leather remote. There is little accumulation of deposit, which seldom exceeds 10 cm.

Description of rock-paintings

There are approximately 75 rock paintings spread across 7 m of shelter wall. These paintings are noteworthy for their numerous and detailed depiction of 'flying buck'.

1. 'Flying buck': There at least 9 red and white paintings of human-like figures whose arms are extended behind their backs. In some cases their legs are tucked up underneath their bodies when seen in profile. There is one view from above too. These extended arms are covered with white dots – 'hairs' or 'feathers'. In some cases the figure's legs have hooves. Looked at closely, at least 5 of these figures have buck-like heads.

2. Other paintings: There is a baboon, several eland, a hartebeest and human figures, some of which may be dancing. At the western end of the shelter are some most unusual and enigmatic figures.

Threat(s) to site: This site is well-protected from the elements and direct sunlight, though the rock is somewhat fragile.

Meaning of the rock paintings

The 'flying buck' or 'alites' as Harald Pager called them, represent shamanic flight and the ascent to the Spirit World. Though the Spirit World was thought of as existing behind the rock face, this rock face occurs in a mountain, which is conceptually the upper skyworld that could be accessed by ascending or flying to it – hence the depictions of birds in San rock art. There was also a lower Spirit World that could be accessed by swimming and many of the depictions of fish and eels in San rock-art symbolise this aspect of their religion. The reason for the 'flight' and 'underwater' metaphors are rooted in human neuro psychology. When entering an altered state of consciousness – for this is how the San accessed their Spirit World – one feels weightless and even suspended with the sound of rushing wind or water in one's ears. These physical sensations may even extend to a person experiencing being out of their physical body and are depicted in the art as winged or finned creatures.

'Flying buck' – so named because of the depiction of human, bird and buck-like characteristics – take this metaphor one step further by adding to the notion of shamanic flight the fount of shamanic potency. All San shamans had to access

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potency in order to perform their tasks of healing and maintaining the San cosmos. This potency derived from God and the Spirit World but was also presented in a restricted range of animals – especially antelope – and things (Honey, falling stars). A shaman could access this potency by physically changing into a potent animal – so the San believed. Thus we have the twin concepts of potency and flight in these very detailed rock-paintings. It would thus explain this site's strange location – between heaven and earth and an appropriate physical setting from which shamans could launch themselves into the Spirit World.

Recommendations

This site is in good condition both because of its sheltered location and because of the minimal human visitation to it. Site visits to this site should be restricted to true rock-art enthusiasts to ensure the continued good condition of the art.

Site 3 – Freshwater 125 - Overnight Shelter

S 30° 59' 27"

E 28° 08' 33"

Site description

This site is a very deep and 13 m wide shelter behind a waterfall that is currently used as an overnight stop for hikers on account of the extensive stone and mud dwelling therein. This site faces east and has a sloping, hard-packed floor.

Associated Archaeology

There is almost no extant archaeology on the shelter's surface given its long history of shelter for shepherds and hikers. There are some hornfels flakes just off the approach path. The history of the dwellings is of interest. Rebuilt by the Sephtons, they are likely to have some antiquity being located at a source of water and shelter on a major *trek* route. There is likely to be some depth of deposit beneath the hard-packed floor.

Description of rock-paintings

There is currently only one visible image cluster. This is encountered on the small frieze immediately as one enters the shelter and 2 m to the left of the fireplace. There are two black, white and orange eland depicted facing each other. The remains of a further two eland are just visible and possibly a red human figure. The largest eland measure 280 mm. These rock-paintings are much covered by soot.

Threat(s) to site: This site is very soot damaged. Stock and humans have caused the art much harm over the years by generating dust and smoke. The dampness of the shelter thanks to the waterfall is also detrimental to the art.

Meaning of the rock paintings

In such fragmented isolation, it is difficult to determine a holistic meaning field. Suffice it to say that the eland was the most potent animal in the San spiritual bestiary, a the favourite animal of the potent trickster God /Kaggen, a polysemic metaphor *par excellence* for San-ness.

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Introduction

- South Africa is home to one of the world's richest rock-art traditions.
- Most rock-art was done by hunter-gatherers known as 'San' or 'Bushmen'.
- **Rock-paintings** are found in rock shelters in the mountainous part of our country.
- **Rock-engravings** are cut, pecked or scraped out of a rock and occur on low hills.
- Woodcliffs and Freshwater have **rock-paintings**.

What does the Rock-Art mean?

- San rock-art was not a simple record of daily life and of what people ate.
- San rock-art was a religious art concerned with shamanism.
- Shamanism was concerned with group harmony and with the spirit world.
- The San believed that the spirit world lay behind the rock face.
- San rock-paintings show us the animals and people of the spirit world.

How old is Woodcliffs and Freshwater's Rock-Art?

- San rock art is Africa's oldest artistic tradition.
- It started at least 25 000 years ago and lasted until about 100 years ago.
- The Woodcliffs and Freshwater rock-paintings seem to cover a great time depth.
- The red paints are typical of the period 600 – several thousand years ago.
- The orange and black paints are more recent - about 150 years – 750 years old.

What did the San use for paint?

- Red paints were made from ferrous oxide -- a type of rusted ironstone. This ironstone was ground to a fine powder and mixed with animal blood and fat. Plant sap and egg whites were used to bind the paints.
- Yellow paints were made from hydrous ferrous oxide.
- White paints were made from clay, bird droppings, calcrete and bone.
- Black paints were made from manganese and sometimes charcoal.

Why is Woodcliffs and Freshwater's Rock-Art special?

- The art is well-preserved and numerous.
- The rare, explicit combination of a site's physicality with its imagery at both Sites 1 (large site with corporate imagery) & 2 ('Flying buck' and elevated location)
- Rare fat-tailed sheep images and sophisticated use of perspective.

Recommendations

This site is very damaged and any interventions will be welcomed, to wit:

- This fireplace should be moved to the northern end of the shelter.
- Hikers should be made aware of the art and asked to keep away from it.

Recommended reading

Lewis-Williams, J.D. 1981. *Believing and seeing: symbolic meanings in southern San rock paintings*. London: Academic Press.

Vinnicombe, P. 1976. *People of the eland: rock paintings of the Drakensberg Bushmen as a reflection of their life and thought*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.

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