

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL EXCAVATIONS IN THE VICINITY OF
HISTORIC ENGRAVINGS AT BORDJIESRIF,
CAPE OF GOOD HOPE SECTION –
CAPE PENINSULA NATIONAL PARK**

Prepared for

Cape Peninsula National Park

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1. INTRODUCTION

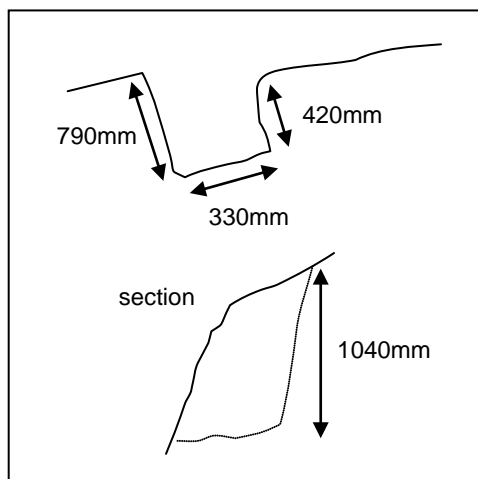
Following submission of an initial report on the engravings at Bordjiesrif (Halkett 2002), the Archaeological Contracts Office was requested to undertake an immediate investigation of a cavity cut into the calcrete ledge immediately to the south-east of the engraved panel. Observations made during the initial inspection indicated that the cavity was man-made, but it could not be directly linked in any way with the available information to either the engravings, or the abundant quarrying activities in the vicinity. Various parties have speculated that the engravings and cavity may mark the position of a *padrao* erected by Bartholomew Diaz. No physical remains of that *padrao* have ever been located.

Excavations were therefore undertaken in an attempt to provide additional information about the origin and purpose of the cavity.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE CAVITY

Two views of the cavity are shown in Plates 1 and 2. Plate 1 is viewed from face on with the engravings on the panel to the left, while plate 2 shows the cavity viewed from above. The view in Plate 2 shows the regular nature of the edges of the cavity and the calcrete outcrop. The regularity of the edges as well as chisel marks at various places on the face are clear indications of human activity. In addition, the cavity has chisel marks on the inside faces.

The dimensions of the cavity are shown on the diagram below.

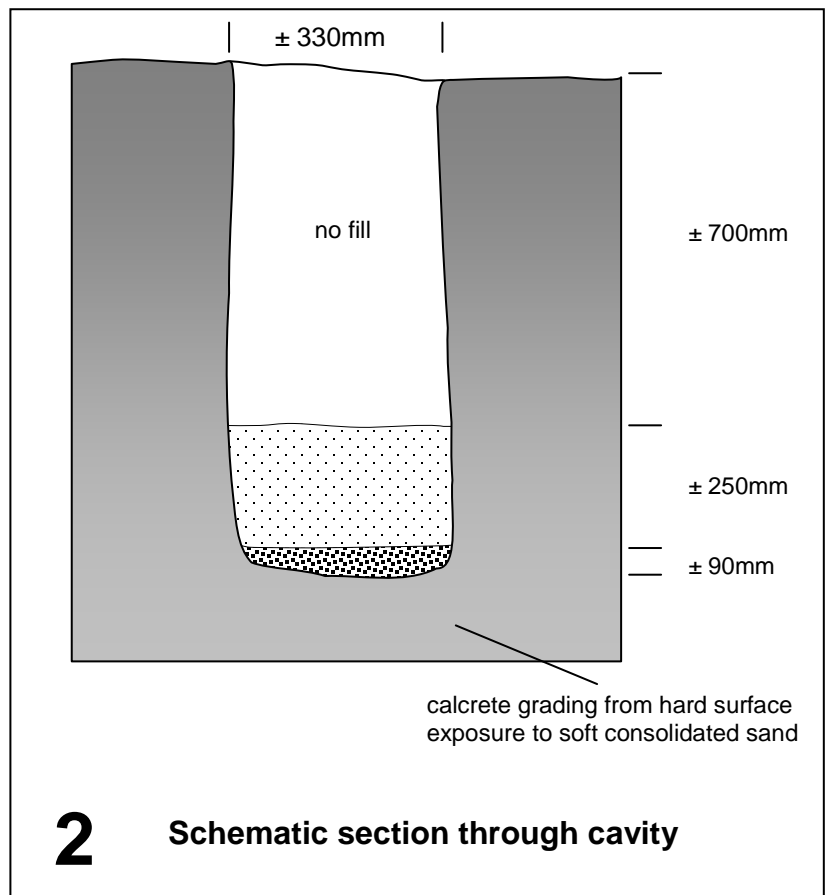


3.

DESCRIPTION OF EXCAVATIONS

The upper part of the cavity did not contain any fill and the sides were clearly visible. Soil fill began at a depth of 700mm below the back lip. Excavation of the fill revealed that there were 2 soil units: the first, some 250-300mm thick consisted of loose brown organic soil, probably aeolian. Almost no rock fragments were present. The second unit, some 900mm in depth, was also similar in colour but contained numerous calcrete fragments. The colour became

lighter towards the bottom where the unit was found to lie above a consolidated yellowish base that extended across the entire area of the cavity and continued below the path in front of the ledge. The consolidated material graded into the harder sides of the cavity. This is shown on the schematic section drawing in Figure 2. The left front edge of the cavity had a number of tuberosities on it. These are probably harder areas that have remained prominent following moderate erosion of material surrounding it. The roughness did not continue below the fill suggesting that either erosion was curtailed by the fill, or that root activity had removed any rough edges at this point.



There were no indications to suggest that any foreign items were ever contained within the hole. No artefactual material was recovered from the fill.

4. DISCUSSION

The excavation has unfortunately not resolved any of the issues surrounding either the age or function of the cavity cut into the calcrete, or the associated engravings. Following his visit to site, Dr. Dave Roberts, a geologist from the Council for Geoscience, was unable to offer any definitive comments on the age of the engravings although he has suggested that more than one quarrying event may be discernible (see Appendix 1). The problem with comparing extent of erosion of quarried blocks at various locations and the engravings is that they vary in hardness.

We can identify many instances of quarrying on the exposed calcretes above Bordjiesrif. While this most likely dates from the 19th century, and is probably associated with (although not specifically for lime production) the lime producing enterprise that operated from the area, we do not have any archival material to fully confirm this assumption. If however this is correct, then it is an indication that the calcretes here patinate fairly quickly. This in turn may have a direct bearing on the age and origin of the engravings as there seems to be little to differentiate between the degree of patination between the two sets of features. The metal (iron) chisels found in the vicinity can be subjected to a number of tests to establish the forging process. These may give clues to at least the approximate period of use.

While we still cannot exclude Portuguese explorers as the agents responsible for the engravings, the cavity or the quarrying, the available evidence seems to point towards a more recent source. We can place quarrymen at the site with the tools needed to carry out the task, who if we adhere to the principle of Occam's razor, are the most likely agents for the engraving.

While it may be argued that quarrying could have been the work of Portuguese, this seems extremely unlikely, at least during the early voyages. It was common for Portuguese vessels undertaking voyages of exploration at that time to carry with them up to six ready-made *Padraos* (Axelson 1938:417), and landfalls at that time were extremely limited in duration. The amount of quarrying would appear to far exceed that needed for a cross and no record exists of any stone buildings being erected by them.

Why would a cross have been located at that point? *Padraos* were erected for several reasons: “partly as proof that the navigator had reached the neighbourhood he maintained; partly as proof of the priority of Portugal in the discovered waters; partly as symbol of Portuguese sovereignty in the discovered waters; and partly as a symbol of Christianity.” (Axelson 1938). Being only about seven foot tall, but weighing about half an imperial ton, the crosses would probably have been placed as close as possible to landing spots on prominent locations, such as the one erected by Dias at Kwaihoek. Da Gama erected both a stone and a tall wooden cross at Mossel Bay (Axelson 1973:23). The reason for the wooden cross is not evident but does indicate that such markers were used on occasion. The absence therefore of either the whole, or fragments of a stone *padrao* so far at Cape Point is not evidence that the area was not proclaimed, but equally does not automatically mean that a wooden cross was erected. A fragment of hardwood was found recently by Mr. Howard Langley in the bush below the engravings. This lay trapped below limestone blocks. We have not yet had a chance to inspect the find but will do so at the first opportunity.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

At present we are still conducting an investigation on the basis of conjecture. We need to first eliminate recent human activities in the area as the most likely source of the engraving and quarrying, before we can hope to convince ourselves and others that they were executed by Portuguese explorers. To do this we believe that a number of steps need to be followed:

- Undertake a study of the more recent historical use of the Bordjiesrif area before undertaking any additional excavation. It is our feeling that if we excavate on the slope below the slot and do not find anything other than quarrying debris, we will be no closer to answering questions regarding the age and purpose of the engravings. If, when the slope is excavated there is found to be no evidence of foreign activity, then at worst, the archival study will have documented a small part of the Cape Peninsula National Park’s history;
- As part of the archival work, an attempt should be made to trace and access Professor Axelson’s field notes of the work he undertook at Cape Point. If these exist they may indicate areas where he felt, based on his extensive research on the subject, the most likely places were for the erection of *padraos*. We also need to ascertain the whereabouts of a piece of wood found by Axelson in a hole at the base of a cairn at Cape Maclear in 1939 (Axelson 1973:18 Footnote 18), so that it can be determined if what he found was indeed a marker raised in 1822 by a Lt. Vidal of H.M.S. Leven as he believed, or if it was from an earlier period. The dating resolution nowadays should be able to distinguish between wood from the 15th and 19th centuries;
- Examine, photograph and retrieve the piece of hardwood timber found on the slope below the engravings by Howard Langley. If, during retrieval, there are no indications of it being very recent, it could be added to the list of potentially datable items from the area and could also be analysed to indicate the wood type.
- Assemble and curate the various iron chisels that have reportedly been found and collected on the koppie. These should be provenanced as closely as possible to the original locations. A metallurgical specialist should look at the specimens to comment on

the possible origin and age. Dr Duncan Miller who operates the Archaeology Materials Laboratory would be able to undertake these analyses;

- Determine if there is any realistic chance of dating of the engravings (e.g. Lichenography). If this is not a possibility then impressions can be made without fear of contamination of the surfaces.

6. REFERENCES

Axelsson, E. 1938. Discovery of the farthest pillar erected by Bartholomew Dias. *South African Journal of Science*, Vol xxxv, 417-429.

Axelsson, E. 1973. *Portuguese in south-east Africa: 1488-1600*. Struik

Halkett, D. 2002. An initial assessment of engravings on calcrete ridges at Bordjiesrif, Cape Point Nature Reserve. Unpublished report prepared for Cape Peninsula National Park. Archaeology Contracts Office, University of Cape Town.

APPENDIX 1

GEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF ENGRAVINGS AT BORDJIESRIF

Dr D. Roberts

Geological Setting

The engravings are situated ~40 m above sea level and were carved in limestone of the Langebaan Formation (Sandveld Group), comprising fossilised aeolian dunes of probable Middle Pleistocene age. The limestone consists mainly of comminuted sea shells and quartz grains. The fossil dunes are usually mantled by pedogenic calcretes (palaeosols). Calcretes may also occur in the cores of dunes.

Calcretes are heavily impregnated with secondary carbonate cement and lack primary sedimentary structures. Consequently, they are hard and more homogeneous than normal dunerock and resistant to weathering. The horizon in which the engravings were made is moderately calcretised and contains rhizoliths (root structures) which are more calcified than the surrounding rock and tend to weather positively. Thus the engraving-bearing rock is likely to be inhomogenous in terms of cementation and hardness.

The Engravings Site

Both the cross and symbol in the rectangle show clear signs of weathering. Probably the micro organisms on the rock surface played an important role in this regard. It would be very difficult to infer the age from the degree of erosion without securely dated controls. The patination (lichens etc.) on the carved areas of limestone is pronounced and apparently as heavy as the undisturbed rock surfaces, also suggesting considerable antiquity. However, the same can be said of the nearby quarried rock surfaces adjacent to the engravings, apparently of post Portuguese age. These surfaces also show signs of erosion, for example the chisel marks. Quarried rock surfaces at the nearby historic lime kiln presumably dating from the latter part of the 19th Century, show much less patination. Again, without securely dated controls, all that can be said is that the engraved surface and quarrying at Bordjiesrif is considerably older.

The sawed surface in the limestone block on top of the koppie above the engraving site shows some patination but very little sign of erosion, suggesting a younger age than the quarry below. Possibly two phases of quarrying activity is involved.