

Report on the Leeuwkuil engraving site, Vereeniging, Gauteng, South Africa

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Introduction

The Rock Art Research Centre (RARC) was invited to visit the site by a Vanderbijl Park resident, Ms Helen Leibel. A RARC research officer, Mr Jeremy Hollmann, visited the site on 25 February 1999. *2022 SAHSA FALA / 05.03.2022*

The site is listed in Van Riet Lowe's Archaeological Survey (Series VIII of 1956). Professor Van Riet Lowe's correspondence on record seems to show that a Mr TW Heslop, who had formerly lived in Vereeniging and who had subsequently moved to Elandsлагте in the then Natal, initially reported the site.

It appears that Professor Van Riet Lowe then asked a Mr SF Le Roux of Vereeniging to investigate the site and to record some of the engravings. The correspondence on record at RARC shows that Mr Le Roux recorded 18 engravings, some (including the rhinoceros mentioned below), badly weathered. He classified four of the engravings as "geometric designs". Mr Le Roux mentions making rubbings of an eland and of the rhinoceros. In a subsequent letter to the Archaeological Survey, he mentions finding another six engravings, making a total of 24 engravings. Amongst these was an engraving of an elephant. Le Roux also refers to copies of the engravings being sent to the Archaeological Survey and Professor Van Riet Lowe acknowledges receipt of them in a letter dated 13 January 1951.

There are no further records of the site at Wits University's Rock Art Research Centre, however, and, to date, none of Mr Le Roux's copies have been discovered.

Description of the site

The engraving site is located on what is now a small island in the Vaal River, just north of the Ascot bridge (1:50 000 map reference: 2627DB Vereeniging). Prior to the damming of the river, the site would have been located on a low sandstone hillock, with the main flow of the Vaal passing by to the south of the peninsula. A smaller, possibly seasonal stream would have flown past on the north, separating the peninsula from the riverbank at times of increased water flow.

The engravings noted during the visit are concentrated in the southeastern part of the peninsula. They appear to belong in the San hunter-gatherer engraving tradition—all the engravings noted were of large animals, with eland and other antelope making up most of the total of engravings observed. None of the four geometric engravings mentioned by Le Roux were observed. The lines of the engravings were made by pecking the patina on the sandstone away with another stone, exposing the

unweathered rock below. The eight engravings noted are listed below, together with a brief comment on their state of preservation. An indication of their approximate localities is given on the accompanying map.

Engravings noted during visit to Leeuwkuil engraving site

- 1 = antelope (well preserved)
- 2 = antelope (probably eland) on broken rock
- 3 = rhinoceros and traces of other engravings (rock smoothed, possibly as a result of water erosion)
- 4 = eland (well preserved)
- 5 = antelope (on broken rock with fallen tree over it)
- 6 = eland
- 7 = antelope or equid
- 8 = antelope on broken rock

Threats to site

Threats to the integrity of the site and to the preservation of the images include;

- damage resulting from the action of water,
- damage from the action of tree roots;
- weathering of the rock on which the engravings were made;
- damage by direct human agency

Damage resulting from the action of water

The higher level of the river has resulted in damage to the engravings at the site. It was not possible to ascertain whether any engravings had been completely submerged as a result of the construction of a barrage in the area. At least one engraved rock (engraving 3) is partly submerged and it appears as if the images have been eroded by the action of the water.

The occasional flooding of the Vaal has also caused damage—the force of the water has shifted entire rocks, dumping them on top of other, engraved rocks in some cases and badly scratching others. It is possible that some engraved rocks might have been swept away entirely.

The high water level is likely to be the most serious and intractable threat to the preservation of the engravings.

Damage from tree roots

The presence of several very large eucalyptus trees and numerous eucalyptus saplings on the island is cause for concern. Tree roots have insinuated themselves into cracks in the rocks. With subsequent growth, these roots have widened the cracks, eventually shattering the rock into several pieces. Dead trees and tree branches have fallen on top of the surrounding rocks, damaging the rocks and engravings, as well as obscuring them.

Indigenous shrubs growing on the island do not seem to have the same destructive impact as the eucalyptus trees.

Weathering of the rock on which the engravings were made

The Eccca sandstone rocks on which the engravings were made are subject to weathering, probably as a result of protracted, alternate heating and cooling, which causes the rock to fragment. The rock is also weakened through the action of water percolating into the rock and evaporating from the rock. There is a lichenous growth on some of the engraved rocks.

Damage by direct human agency

The fact that the engravings are now cut off from direct access from the riverbanks affords them a measure of protection from vandalism. People do visit the island, however, as is evident from signs of fires (which have also damaged the rocks) and litter. Fortunately, no signs of direct vandalism, such as defacement of the images, were noticed.

Recommendations

The site is a valuable part of South African cultural heritage, situated in the midst of the country's most densely populated area. San engraving sites in Gauteng and, particularly, south of the Magaliesberg are not common. In addition, the engraving site at Redan, about 20 km to the north, consists entirely of geometric engravings, which are now believed to belong to a later tradition, associated with Khoi pastoralists. The educative potential of these two engraving sites, which are in such close proximity to each other, is considerable.

The site is badly neglected however. Apart from the constant threat of water damage, the action of the eucalyptus tree roots is a cause for concern. Some of the engravings have rocks and tree trunks resting upon them.

As an initial step, the National Monuments Council should be made aware of the engravings and their present state of neglect. This is the primary intention of this report. An inspection of the site should then be undertaken by interested parties. This should include the landowner, who, according to Ms Leibel is a Mr Plumari (he may be contacted via his representative, a Mr Howard Rawlings (083 442 0974 or 011 794-1732)). Other parties would include representatives from the National Monuments Council, Vaal Technorama, local municipality, and the RARC of Wits University.

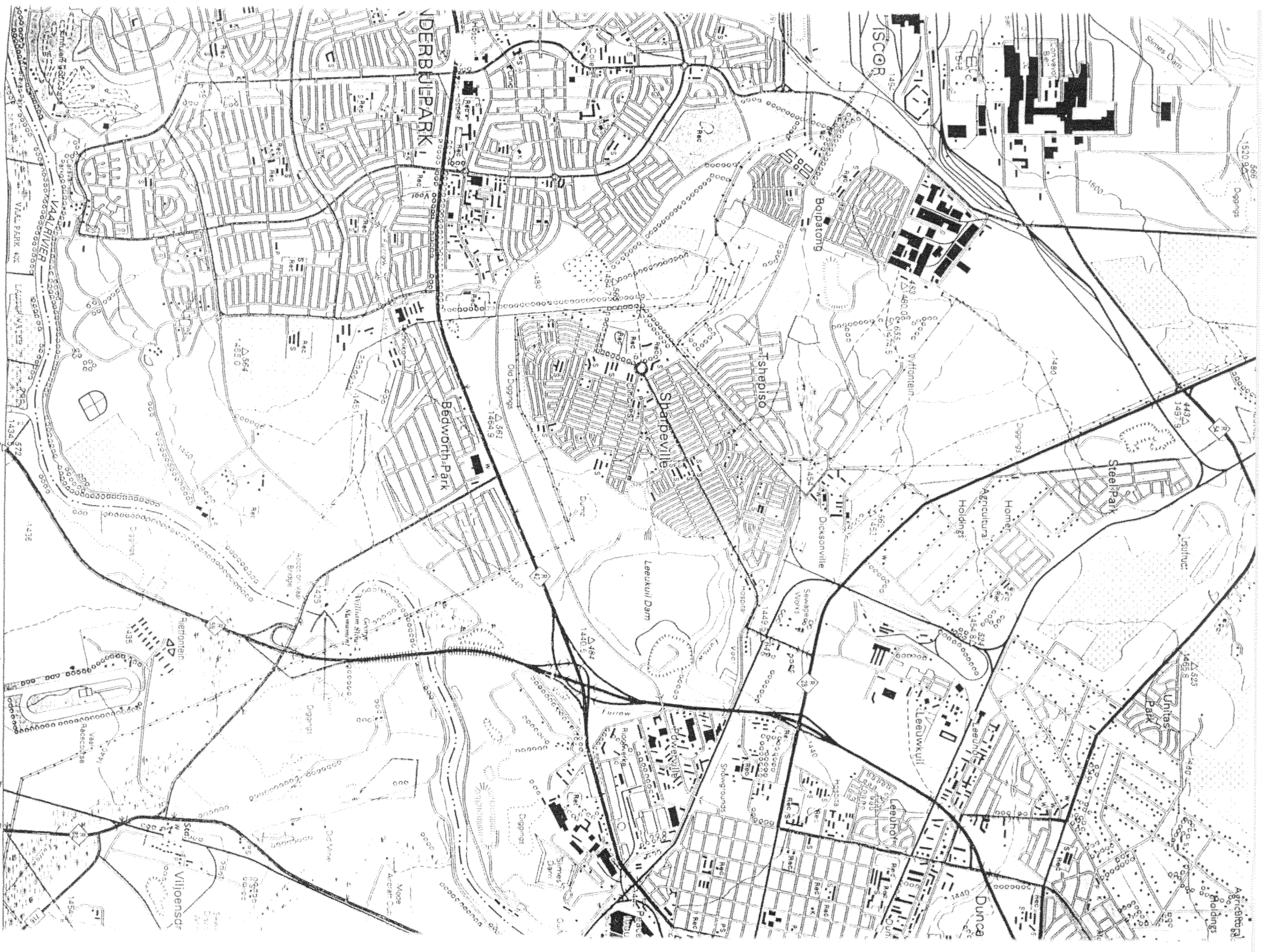
Arrangements should be made for the site to be surveyed, documented and mapped as a matter of urgency, so as to ascertain the number and general condition of the engravings, and to record them. This work would necessarily involve the removal of the large rocks and fallen tree trunks that are presently damaging some of the engravings.

Once the survey has been completed, the future of the site may be assessed. The site is valuable because of its location in Gauteng and proximity to Redan. From this perspective, it is worthwhile to try and secure the engravings against any more damage. This must be weighed up against the nature of the threats to the engravings, in particular, the raised level of the Vaal River, and the costs and effort involved in implementing measures to contain them.

50'

2627 DB Neeringing
1:5000

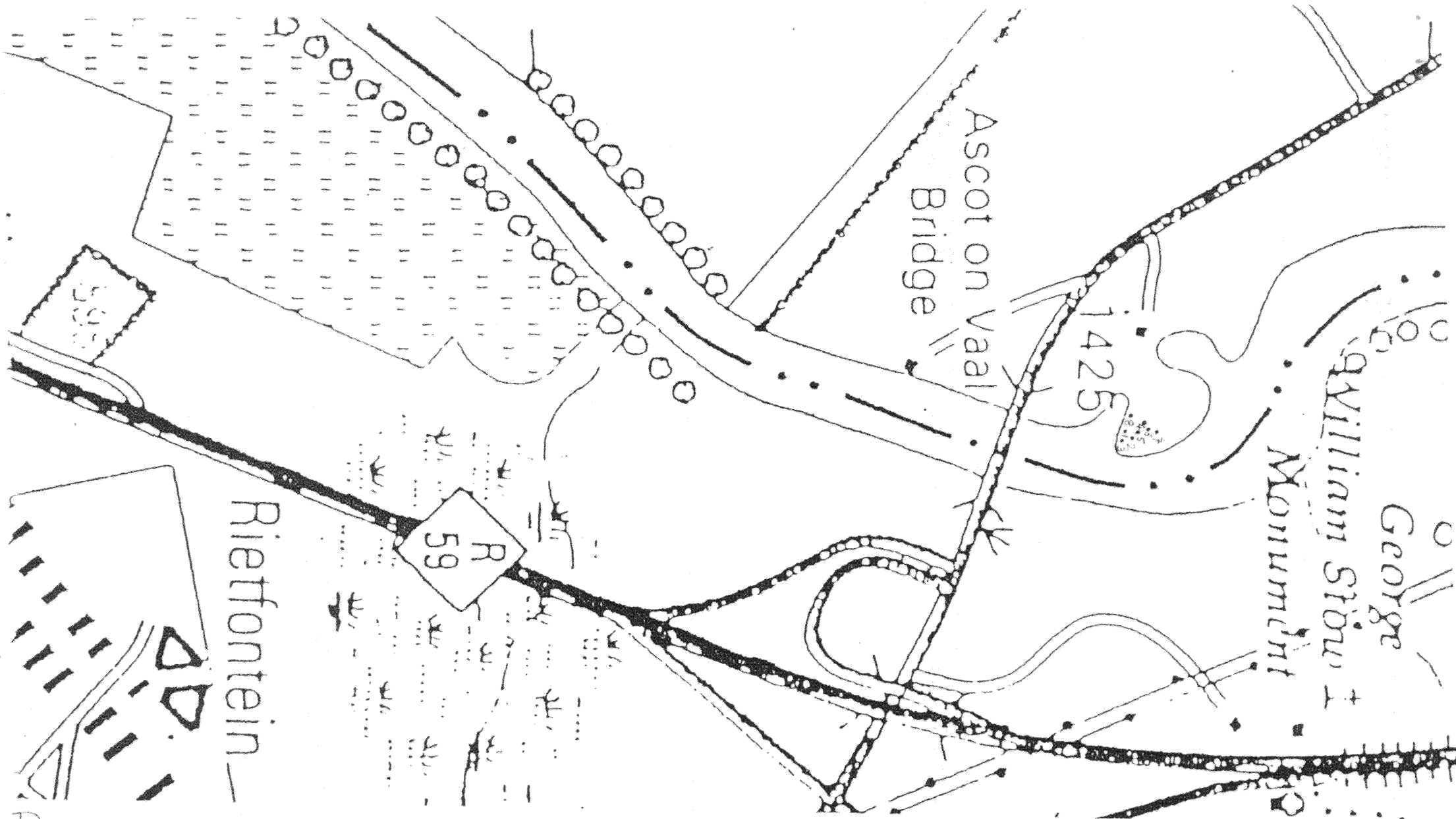
Kroonstad 120 km
Heilbron 63 km



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1520 S.C. 566
Dungas

Agricultural
goldings



Rietfontein

Ascoton Vaal
Bridge

George
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Monument

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Approximate
locations
of engravings
described
in report

From: 2627 DB