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ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HERITAGE INVESTIGATION OF THE PROPOSED MTN CELL PHONE MAST AT BREEKKIERIE NEAR KENHARDT, NORTHERN CAPE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A new cell phone mast is planned at the farm Breekkierie between Van Wyks Vlei and Kenhardt in the Northern Cape. The MTN service provider considers the application for the service as very high priority to supply a communication network to the Van Wyksvlei-community and to implement important farm security systems. The intention is to place the mast on the mountain known as Strontberg or Strantberg / Strandberg.

The site was visited on 16 March 2011. Rock engravings occur on big dolerite boulders on the hill. The pictures consist of dots in rows and line engravings depicting among others, a "European" gentleman on horseback. The intention was not to do a total survey of the rock art, so there might be more.

Surface scatters of lithic material were found at some places along the higher slopes and on top of the hill. The flakes appear as a general distribution of waste flakes and flaked cores. No specific manufacturing sites had been found.

From the relevant literature the Strontberg region proved to be an important Bushman/San heritage site. I requested comments from a number of knowledgeable experts on Southern San rock paintings in the Van Wyksvlei and Kenhardt region.

It became clear that Strontberg and surroundings played a very important role in the lives of the /Xam San. During the 1870s, many of these tribesmen who had been arrested and convicted for stock theft, were sentenced to imprisonment at the Cape and had to do hard labour at the Breakwater.

In their reaction the experts were strongly against any development on the particular mountain and were in agreement that they consider the hill and immediate surroundings as a no-go area. It was mentioned by Janette Deacon that the Strontberg area has been listed for consideration and declaration as a World Heritage Site.

There is a serious need for a reliable communication system in the region and the public demand is putting MTN under pressure to deliver the service. It is difficult to find an alternative site in the specific area. This situation is causing a dilemma for the MTN cell phone service provider.

I realise that developments of this kind could also damage the atmosphere of the site in particular and the view of the landscape in the Strontberg area in general. The question at hand will be between a reasonable solution to stop modern development (in this case the cell phone mast) or to protect an area in the Karoo where people of the past lived only leaving engravings and a few stone flakes.

I recommend that the matter should be put to the SAHRA Council to decide. I trust that we will be able to move forward towards a solution in this matter. I also declare that I will adhere to the final decision by SAHRA and will advise the MTN service provider of the outcome.

INVESTIGATION

The site was visited on 16 March 2011. Manie van Wyk from Spacial Solutions Incorporated, Environmental Consultants from Bloemfontein, gave directions to the site.

LOCALITY

The farm Breekkierie is located between Van Wyksvlei and Kenhardt in the Northern Cape (Map 1). The intention is to place the mast on the mountain known as Strontberg or Strantberg / Strandberg (Figs.5-7).

The farm is reached from the R361 gravel road between Van Wyksvlei and Kenhardt in the Northern Cape (Map 2).

The soil surface on the slopes and on top of the hill is stony and contains typical Karoo vegetation (Fig.2) with a grass cover and hard Driedoring (*Rhigozum trichotomum*) in the lower sandy parts. Several Quiver Trees / Kokerboom (*Aloe dichotoma*) grow along the slopes (Fig.15). Scatters of calcrete occur on the surface at Strontberg (Fig.16).

FINDS

Rock engravings consisting of dots in rows (Fig.14) with line engravings depicting a “European” gentleman on horseback (Fig.12) and initials (GH) engraved on the rock (Fig.13) were found. The intention was not to perform a total survey of rock art on the hill and according to the literature there are more engravings (Deacon 1988). Engravings are most common on the small hill to the north. The engravings depict several eland, other antelope, ostrich, and many elephant (Deacon 1988:134). It is further argued that the elephant could represent rain making ceremonies.

Scatters of stone artefacts (Figs.8&9) were also found on the summit. The flakes occur as a general tendency, mainly as a distribution of waste flakes and flaked cores. No specific manufacturing sites had been found. The lithic assemblages collected during the investigation seem to be concentrated on the higher points overlooking the natural water sources below.

The flakes show convergent sides with single or multiple flaking on the dorsal surface. Some of the flakes form triangular points with no scars or secondary trimming. A number of flaked cores and parallel sided flakes resemble Later Stone Age artefacts. Flakes are unutilised and cannot be described as “tools”. The artefacts were made from the local lithic sources of chert and lydianite. Percussion bulbs are recognisable in most cases. Prepared platforms are narrow and either bent or flat and are either faceted or plain. Through the application of standard tool typology and from basic characteristics, the material could arbitrarily be classified as originating from the Later Stone Age.

DISCUSSION

The topography and natural environment of this part of the Karoo is mainly dominated by the Strontberg and other hills in the vicinity. This part of the northern Karoo became the last outpost of the /Xam San during the final decades of the 19th century. Deacon (1986:136) argues that the name Strontberg probably derives from the struggle for land between the farmers and the San in the area.

The literature on the subject confirmed that the region represents an important heritage site of the /Xam Bushmen / Southern San (Deacon 1986, 1988; Skotnes 2007). To gain a wider insight I requested comments from a number of experts on Bushman rock art in the Van Wyksvlei and Kenhardt districts (See Addendum).

From the feedback received from Dr Janette Deacon, David Morris and Prof Pippa Skotnes, it is clear that the Strontberg region played a very significant role in the lives of a specific group of the /Xam San and that the area represents the cradle of their cultural heritage and historical background. During the latter part of

the 19th century, many of these San tribesmen who had been found guilty of stock theft and other offences in the Karoo were sentenced to imprisonment at the Cape where they had to do hard labour at the Breakwater.

Note that the Strontberg area has been listed for consideration and declaration as a World Heritage Site (cf. Janette Deacon e-mail 19 March 2011).

IMPACT ASSESSMENT

Due to the placing of the mast and other equipment on top of the hill and the difficult terrain in the area it is certain that the developments will have an impact on the present state of the environment.

I realise that developments of this kind could also damage the ambience of the site and spoil the tranquillity of the landscape in general. In this regard I can only agree with an unknown visitor to a guest farm in the Karoo, when he wrote in the visitors-book: "The Karoo is not a mere destination, it is an emotion."

If the emotion is taken into consideration, the placing of a mast on top of the hill could become a sacrilegious act to destroy the total atmosphere of the site.

In their reaction the experts were strongly against any developments on the mountain and were in agreement that they consider the hill and immediate surroundings as a no-go area.

This situation is causing a dilemma for the MTN cell phone service provider. It is difficult to find an alternative site in the specific area. There is a serious need for a reliable communication system in the region and the public demand is putting pressure on MTN to deliver the service.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I can only recommend that the case should be put to the SAHRA Council to weigh the pros and cons and to decide if the proposed developments should be allowed to continue. This can be on provision that certain prescribed conditions and precautionary measures should be adhered to.

The Council should decide if it will be reasonable to stop modern development (in this case the most needed communication service), or to protect and preserve an area in the Karoo where people of days gone by left only engravings and a few stone flakes.

I trust that we will be able to move forward towards a solution to this matter. I also declare that I will adhere to the final decision by SAHRA and will advise the MTN service provider of the outcome.

It is important that a serious effort should be made to find a compromise between the different and opposing elements of the preservation of the important historical legacy against the present public demand for communication facilities to the outside world.

The developers should take note that every archaeological and historical site is unique and should be treated as a non-renewable commodity. All efforts should be made to avoid any unnecessary disturbance or destruction of the sites in the area. I stress, therefore, that in case of the discovery of any stone tools, pottery and archaeological and historical or cultural material of significance during the course of the work, all activities should temporarily be stopped in the specific area for inspection by the appointed archaeologist or other specialists from a museum in Cape Town or Kimberley.

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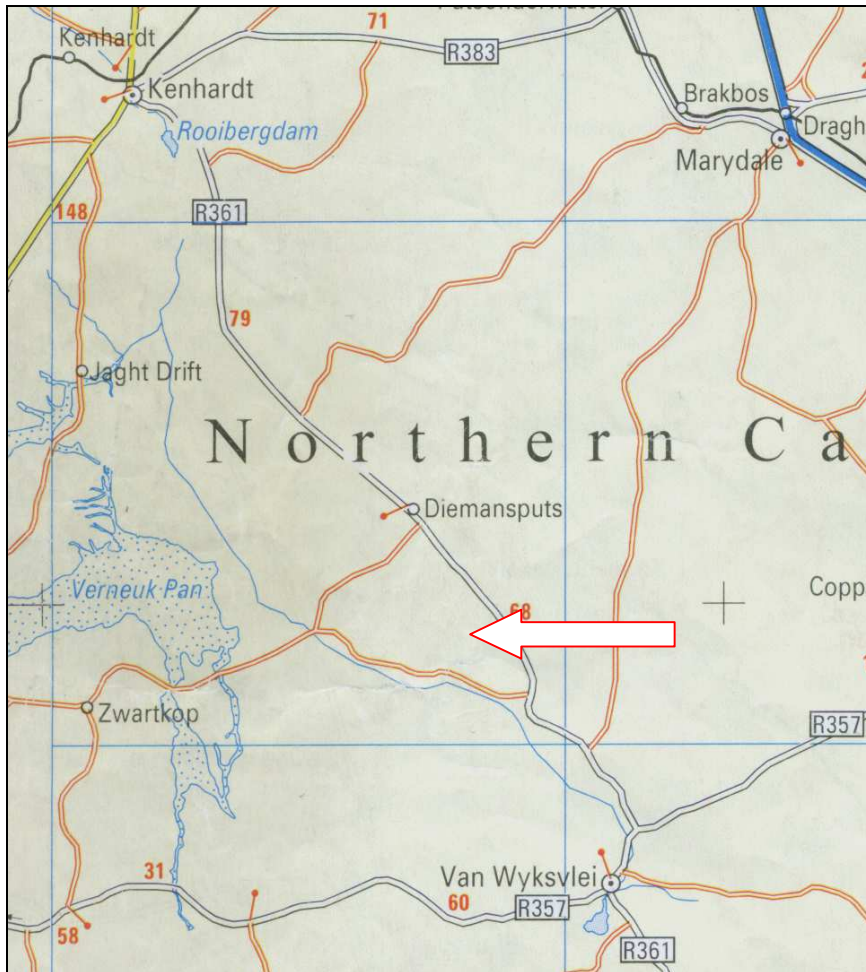
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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS:



Map 1 Locality Van Wyksvlei & Kenhardt south of Upington, Northern Cape.



Fig.1 Strantberg / Strontberg on Breekkierie between Van Wyksvlei & Kenhardt from the east.



Fig.2 View to the north along the Strantberg / Strontberg.

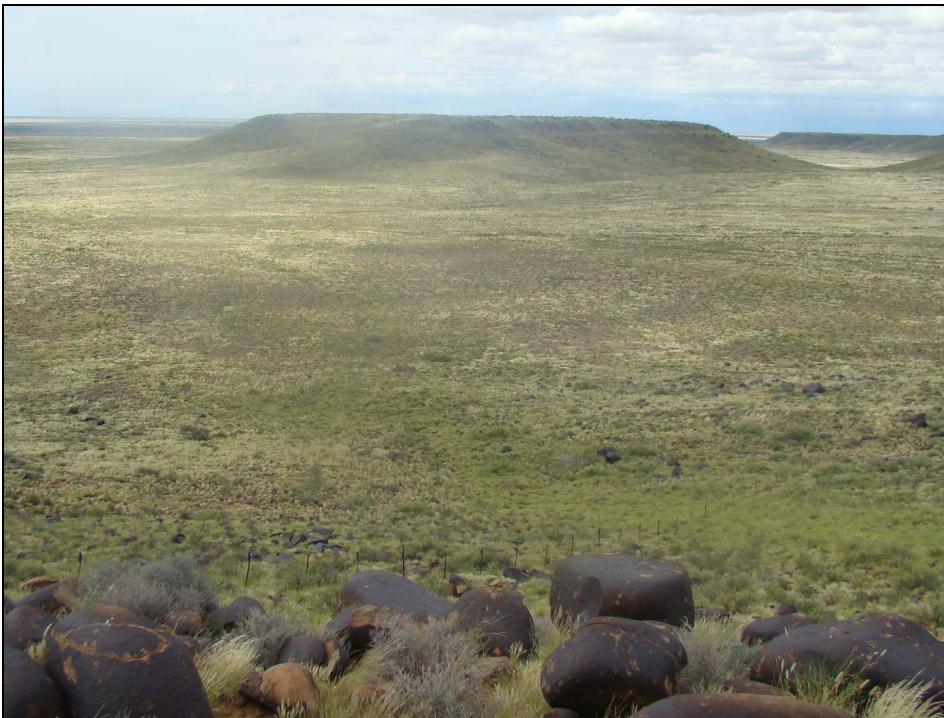


Fig.3 Hill to the north of Strantberg / Strontberg.



Fig.8 Stone flakes on Strantberg / Strontberg (Pocket knife = 83mm).



Fig.9 Stone flakes on Strantberg / Strontberg (Pocket knife = 83mm).



Fig.12 Engravings of Europeans on horse back at C on Strantberg / Strontberg.

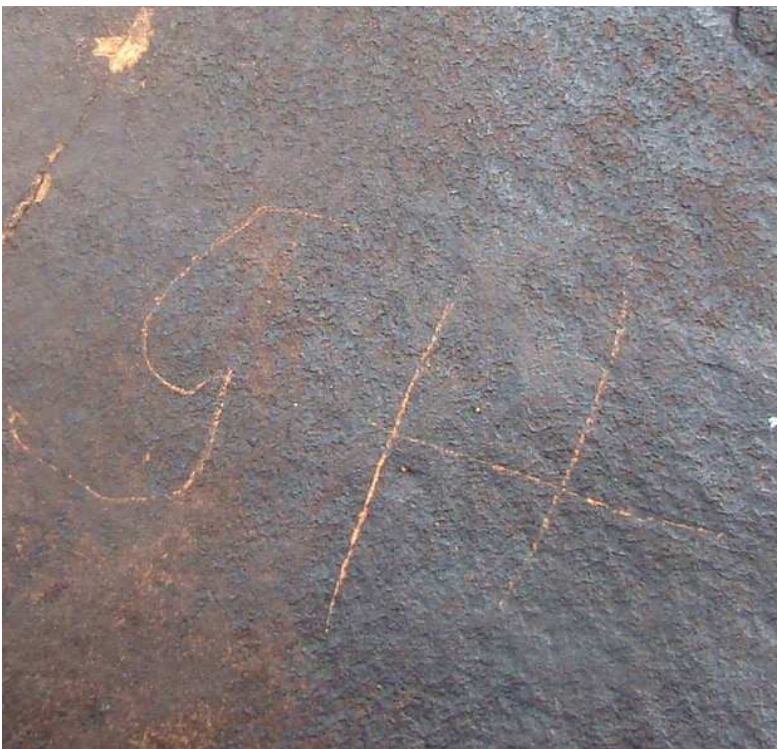


Fig.13 Initials GH engraved at Strantberg / Strontberg.



Fig.14 Dotted engravings at Strantberg / Strontberg.



Fig.16 A small stand of quiver trees on the slope at Strantberg / Strontberg.