

ROCK ART IN KENYA

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Introduction

Until recently, little was known about Kenya's rock art. One of the earliest researchers in this field was W.E. Owen who, in 1937, reported on two petroglyph sites at Majengo, Kakamenga District. In 1967, the *Atlas of African Prehistory* (ed. J.D. Clark) cited one example of a petroglyph and one of a pictograph. More recently, there has been an increase in rock art research (Robbins, 1970; Bower, 1971; Soper, 1971; Sutton, 1973; Chapline, 1974; Gramly, 1975; Phillipson, 1980; Lynch and Donahue, 1980).

Research has, in the past, concentrated on the observation of various aspects of the art, and it was Lynch and Donahue's work (1980) that introduced statistical analysis to the field of Kenyan rock art. This particular study examined over 1,000 examples of different engravings representing 142 geometric designs at the site of Ngamoritunga, southwest of Lake Turkana.

In 1976 the author began a systematic research of rock art sites. The sites that have been studied in detail include the paintings at Kakapeli and Chemasari, in the Mount Elgon region, and the engravings at Goti Chaki, Nyabigena and Muoma in the Kisii area. These sites have been documented, but have not yet been analysed further.

Distribution

The distribution map of rock art sites illustrates the research bias towards sites in western Kenya. Other areas of the country require more study; in central Kenya a number of pictographs and petroglyphs have been reported by various sources. The potential for further research appears to be promising. An inventory of sites has been established, and work continues on the documentation of the sites visited and studied.

Engravings are usually located on exposed rock outcrops, standing slabs or on isolated surface boulders. Paintings are found in shallow rock-shelters and in caves, often behind a covering of bush which renders them virtually inaccessible and ensures their preservation.

For the purposes of studying the geographic distribution of Kenyan rock art sites, the country has been divided into three zones (see map). These correspond to major ecological regions: the highland of the west; the intermediate desert zone; and, to the east, a low area extending to the coastal plain. Current research does not reveal concentrations of rock art in any particular zone; and differential weathering, related to climatic and human agencies, may obscure any such patterns.

Preliminary studies indicate six groupings of sites. The groups have inherent relationships due to both location and stylistical compatibility: (i) Kisii, (ii)

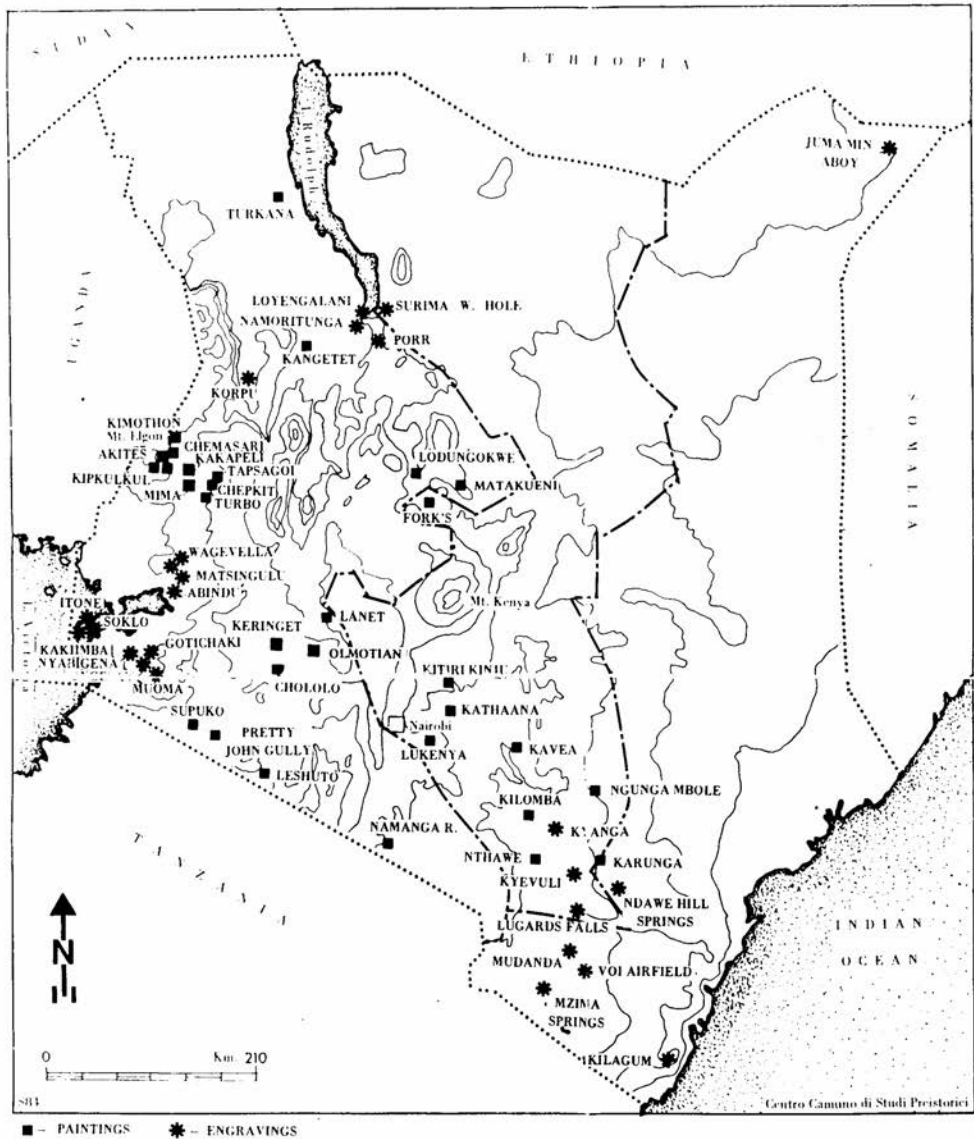
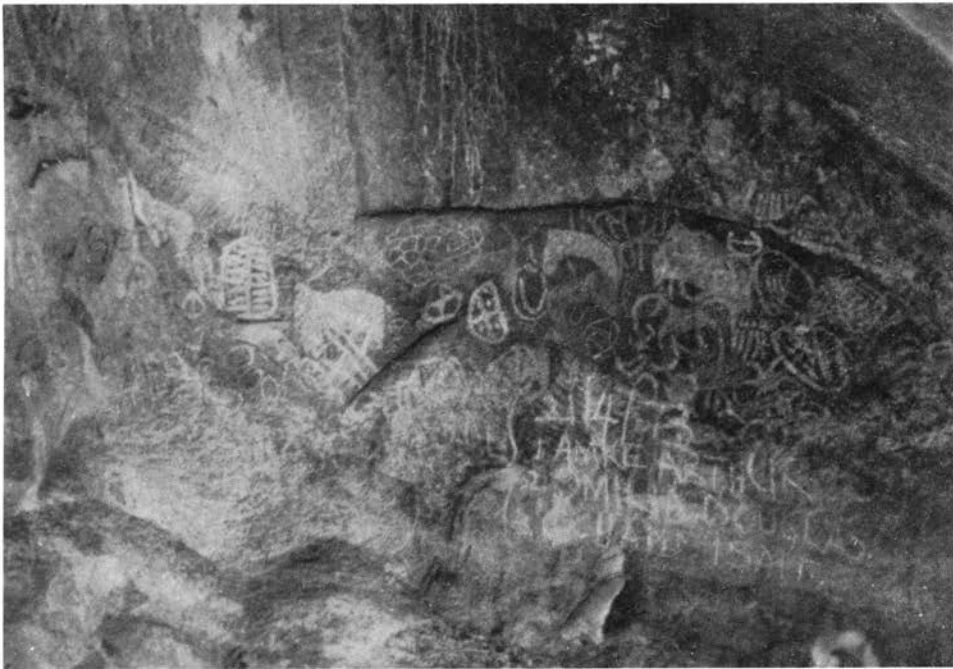
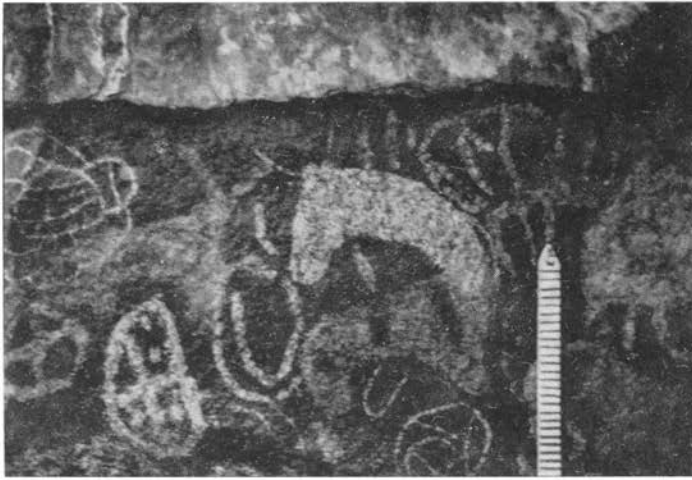


Fig. 45
Map showing tentative distribution of rock art in Kenya.

Figs. 46/47
Rock painting at Kakapeli (Mount Elgon area).

Maragoli, (iii) Northern Kenya, (iv) Lake Victoria Islands, (v) Mount Elgon, (vi) Western Highlands.

Group (i), Kisii sites (e.g. Goti Chali, Muoma, and Nyabigena) (Odak, 1979) in southwest Kenya, is characterized by engravings of the cup marks, concentric circles and associated designs, flower shaped figures, sun images and a variety of linear etchings. Group (ii), Maragoli sites of central west Kenya (e.g. Akite, Kabenyi, Wagevella, Matsingulu) feature engraved and painted linear designs composed of series of parallel lines to which are joined horizontal, slanting lines. In the north are the Group (iii) sites (e.g. Ng'amoritunga, Surima Water Hole; Juma Min Aboy). This group further



divides into three categories: (a) schematic petroglyphs (b) naturalistic petroglyphs, and (c) sites combining (a) and (b). The first category is featured at Ng'amoritunga, where geometric designs predominate. At Surima Water Hole and Juma Min Aboy, the second category is epitomised by pecked engravings of wild and domestic animals - camels, giraffes, gazelles and a variety of anthropomorphic figures; and, at the latter site, depictions of African flora. The third category, which combines both naturalistic and schematic elements, is seen at Kavea and Lukenya (Odak, 1973; Gramly, 1975). Here are representations of both stylised human figures and schematic designs.

The next three groups feature principally paintings. Group (iv), the Lake Victoria sites, is exemplified by the site of Itone. This is a rock shelter containing a painted panel, 9 x 5 metres in extent, of which half is still



*Figs. 48/50
Rock painting at Kakapeli (Mount Elgon area).*



decipherable. Identifiable images include spirals, circles, rectangular and rectangular and cosmic or astronomical associated figures (see table 1).

Group (v) are the sites in the Mount Elgon district. They are located in a hilly, forested area teeming with wildlife. At Kimothon, the paintings include animals (mainly domestic), humans, artifacts and some schematic designs. At Kakapeli, a boulder site, there are paintings of similar content but with greater emphasis on schematic patterns. The objects represented at a third site in the Mount Elgon group, that of Chemasari, are considered in table 2.

Group (vi) features the Mima and Turbo Hills sites; set in an area of low lying hills in the Soy area of Kakamega. The Mima Hill site includes a painted panel 48 metres in length. The images are distributed unevenly across the surface of the panel (see table 3).



Most of the figures are oval-shaped, with internal and external rays. These figures are stylistically similar to those at Turbo Hills (e.g. Chepkit, Kabaragutwa Turbo I and Turbo II) (See Odak, 1977b: 189-192). At the latter sites the main motifs are crosses, concentric circles, stars, ovals, linear motifs, zigzags, meanders and an anthropomorph. At Kabaragutwa, an additional feature is a concentration of white dots; while at Chepkit, there is a comb-like design.

It is not possible, in this preliminary paper, to provide detailed examination of these groups of sites, because rock art studies have not progressed very far in Kenya. Such information is largely unavailable for the eastern zone, although the site of Juma Min Aboy seems to fall within the rubric of Northern Kenyan sites (group iii). Further studies will reveal detailed categories each group and may lead to a modification of this conclusion.

Content of Kenyan rock art

The paintings occur in a variety of colours - black, brown, grey, yellow; but predominantly red and white. Naturalistic paintings are less common than schematic designs (table 4) and occur mainly in the western zone (Odak, 1980). Generally, naturalistic representations are considered to predate the more abstract designs.

Human figures are painted in a stylized manner, depicted as 'stick figures' with a blob-like head and with the arms either hanging in a natural position or with one arm raised, throwing a spear or shooting an arrow. Sometimes, as at Surima Water Hole, the humans are differentiated sexually - the males having pronounced penises. At some shelters the motifs include hands, feet and other members of the human body.

Animals are depicted at various western sites, and those represented include cattle, camels, giraffes, elephants, gazelles and several unspecified 'zoomorphs'. At the Mount Elgon sites the cattle are painted with detached tails and stunted legs. At Kakapeli and Kimothon the horns are particularly emphasised, while in another instance, at the former site, a black cow has especially prominent teats. Cattle are painted with obvious sexual characteristics.

Schematic paintings in the western zone have been attributed to the maa-speaking people, and linked to the initiation ceremonies of the Maasai and Samburu tribes (Gramly, 1975). The figures are generally oval in shape and may feature decorated shields and non-representational motifs. The artistic tradition continues right up to the present, as the nomadic population is still painting the rocks for ceremonial occasions. Earlier paintings are attributed to 'gods' or 'early inhabitants' by the present population, neither explanation being particularly helpful in establishing the identity of the artists.

It is not certain what materials were used for painting, but Kenyan flora and geology provide a wide range of colours. Samples of paints have been collected but await chemical analysis. It is possible that a variety of sources will be revealed: plants, charcoal, rock, bird droppings, etc.

Naturalistic engravings have only been found, so far, in the desert area of northern Kenya, currently inhabited by nomadic people. Some of the engravings at the Lake Turkana site refer to the flora and fauna of the more abundant regions of northern Kenya, which are distinctly different from the present desert ecology. Subjects include elephant, gazelle; rhinoceros and ostrich as well as stylised human figures. Again, the origins of the engravings are not known. Pecking technique was the usual method for the depiction of animals, but was also used for some schematic art, such as cup marks.

Schematic petroglyphs include circles, spirals, lines, rectangular figures, grids, nets, shields, sun symbols, ovals, arcs, crossed or spoked circles, stars, flowers, dashes, combs etc. The relationship between the various figures is still being considered. Etching and engraving was almost always employed for schematic designs. The tool for etching could be either of stone or metal. The profile of the groove - either U-shaped or V-shaped is thought to differentiate between the two types of tool material; the former being characteristic of stone engraving, and the latter typical of metal incision.

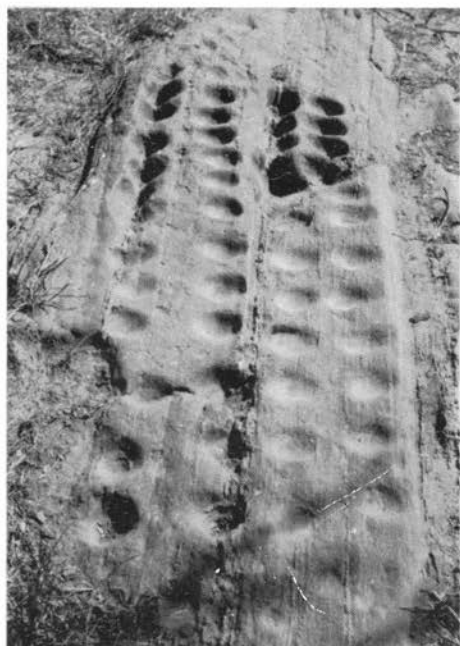


Fig. 51
Cup marks at Korpa Valley, West Pokot, Northern Kenya (Zone 1).

Fig. 52
Rock engravings at Nyabigena, Kisii District.



Chronology

Pictographs in Kenya are chronologically divided into three categories:

- (i) The earliest, without a precise date is typified by the naturalistic pastoral art of the Mount Elgon sites.
- (ii) Iron Age paintings, which are generally schematic are predominantly red in colour. (Phillipson, 1972). A representative site is Kavea in the central zone.
- (iii) The most recent paintings are those of modern populations, such as the maa-speaking people of the Maasai and Samburu tribes; such as Londung'okwe (Odak, 1977b).

Superimposition of paintings provides an important clue to the relative chronology of Kenyan rock art. Generally, white is painted on top of red images and this appears to be equally true for schematic and naturalistic art. It is possible to hypothesise that the naturalistic paintings of the Mount Elgon region are earlier than other Kenyan paintings. This assertion is based on the depiction of the long horned, humpless cattle (*bos brachyceros* species), which were herded by the indigenous population before the adoption of the long-humped Zebu, commonly herded prior to European settlement. *Bos brachyceros* features in the rock art of countries to the north of Kenya, though the artistic treatment of the subject is quite distinctive at Mount Elgon. The latter area features art of a transitional phase linking the naturalistic images of cattle with progressively stylized designs and geometric motifs. It is proposed, therefore, that the Mount Elgon art is later than, for example, the Saharan, but precedes other painting traditions in Kenya. The human figures are too stylised to allow evaluation of racial or ethnic identity.



Fig. 53
Rock paintings at Namangatives rock shelter, Kajiado
(Zone 1).

It is difficult to suggest a general chronology for the engravings, but some attempts at dating have been made by considering the nature of the incisions in comparison to the state of the parent rock. At Ngamoritunga three main periods of engravings have been identified:

- (i) Unpatinated examples, where the grooves are of a lighter colour than the parent rock, are thought to be the most recent. (Lynch, 1980).
- (ii) Motifs with some patination. The incisions are still lighter than the parent rock, but darker than the above category; they have no desert polish.
- (iii) Heavily patinated specimens with desert polish; the engravings are virtually obscured, being of the same colour as the parent rock. These appear to be the oldest engravings.

By analogy with other sites, the first group have similar qualities to those of the Kisii sites and may belong to the Iron Age. The characteristics of the former two groups suggest that they are more recent than the Maragoli (Late Stone Age) sites, and are likely to be of early Iron Age date. Where



Fig. 54
Stick figure paintings at Lodwingokive shelters, Northern Kenya (Modern ritual paintings of the Samburu people, Kenya).



Fig. 55
Rock paintings, Loiengalani.

the groove has a V-shaped profile a metallic tool is thought to have been used, such engravings are thought to be later than those with a characteristic U-shaped groove of stone tool manufacture.

Interpretation

The least acceptable hypothesis concerning the role and motivation of rock art in Kenya is that it exists purely for art's sake. Nor is there any evidence to conclude that the art has magical significance. Ethnographic evidence suggests that ritual and religion are a likely explanations of much Kenyan rock art. The Maasai paintings are related to activities of initiation fulfilling certain ritual requirements (Gramly, cited Odak, 1981). Oral tradition among the Samburu people provides a similar explanation. In other cases, such as at Mandera, the rock art is associated with fertility rites. At Mfanga' no Island the rock art sites are connected with ancestral worship, and the elders beseech the spirits to intercede for rain making in times of drought. More simple explanations are also offered - for example the cup marks that occur in pairs are considered to be associated with the game of BAO.

Preservation

The rock art in Kenya, whether the engraved sites on rocky outcrops or the paintings in shallow rock shelters, is vulnerable to destruction. Factors responsible for the rapid deterioration of the art include:

- (a) Human agency: scribbling on top of the paintings or engravings, are damaging the art. Factor on a larger scale include rural development, opening up the bush to expose the sites, quarrying and other economic activities.
- (b) Natural elements: sun, rain, wind, fire.
- (c) Animals and birds.

Ideally the art should be preserved in situ, but where the art is threatened there is not guarentu of its survival. All sites must be scientifically documented and recorded by tracing, photography, printing and cinematography. The results of the investigations should be studied, analysed and preserved in museums. Sometimes, where sites are reasonably accessible, rock art parks should be created. Much effort is required to save Kenya's rock art heritage.

Conclusions

African rock art, particularly that of Kenya, is facing the threat of destruction. The following steps should be taken:

- (a) Establish an African Rock Art Centre with an International Laboratory of Research and Conservation.
- (b) Base on international research team at the Centre to undertake reconnaissance, recording and documentation of sites.
- (c) Attach a Prehistoric Art-Gallery of tracings and reproduction to the Centre.
- (d) Establish a training programme on preservation, cultural promotion, documentation and interpretation of rock art.
- (e) Ask UNESCO and other international agencies to provide experts to assist African countries in detailed and scientific recording and evaluation of rock art.

Résumé: Le Texte sur l'état actuel des études d'art rupestre au Kenya, qui ont suscité un intérêt croissant depuis 1970. Les origines ne sont pas encore connues. L'auteur espère que des institutions et des experts étrangers contribueront à faire avancer les recherches.

Riassunto: Il testo riporta l'attuale situazione dei siti di arte rupestre in Kenya, che hanno suscitato un interesse crescente dopo il 1970. Le origini non sono ancora conosciute. L'autore spera che degli istituti e degli esperti stranieri contribuiranno all'avanzamento delle ricerche.

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