

NOTES ON SOUTH AFRICAN ROCK ENGRAVINGS

Gerhard J. Fock, Kimberley, C.P., South Africa

South Africa has become known overseas for its wealth of rock paintings mainly by the works of Frobenius, Breuil, Obermaier, Kühn and others. Publications on engravings are far and few between, e.g. Zelízko: *Die Felsgravierungen der südafrikanischen Buschmänner* (1925), and Wilman *The Rock Engravings of Griqualand West and Bechuanaland South Africa*. But both these works had been out of print for many years. Wilman's book originally published in 1933 has now become available again in a reprinted edition (1968). To mention two more recent publications, *The Art of the Stone Age* (1961) contains a chapter of 50 pages by Holm under the heading «The Rock Art of South Africa» which also deals with engravings, while Willcox (1963) in *The Rockart of South Africa* devotes part of this book to engravings.

The author is engaged at present in cataloguing sites of rock engravings and their contents in the Northern Cape Province on behalf of the Alexander McGregor Memorial Museum in Kimberley. This is the main area of engraving in South Africa, embracing Griqualand West and the area referred to by Wilman as «Bechuanaland South Africa» (not the Republic of Botswana) and can best be described as reaching from the Botswana Border to about 32° south, some 100.000 square miles. There are also engravings in the bordering areas of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State, very few in Rhodesia, while

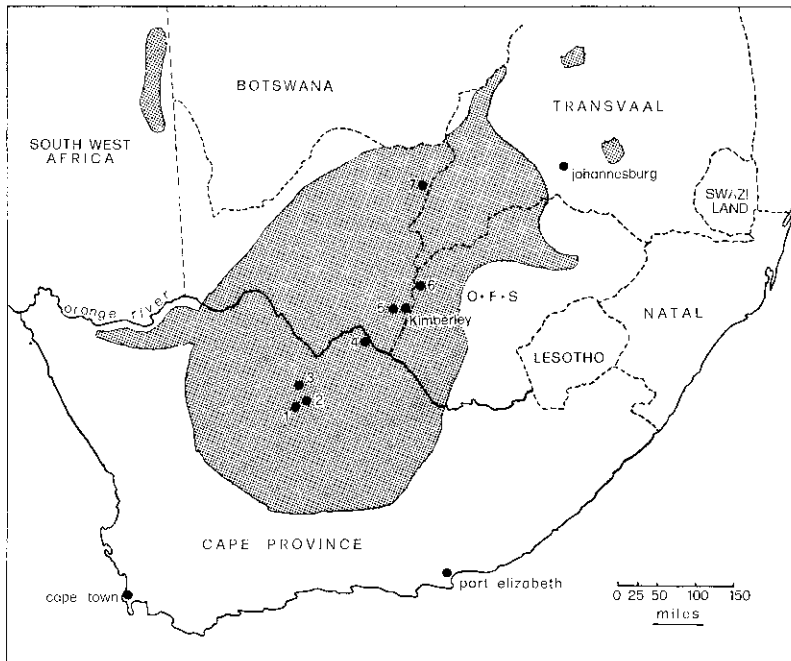


Fig. 50 - Main engravings area of South Africa, in shaded grey. Engraving sites: 1 Jagtpan; 2 Groot Kolk; 3 Springbok Oog, Carnarvon District; 4 Slypsteen, Hopetown District; 5 Vaalpan; 6 Koppie Enkel, Kimberley District; 7 Kinderdam, Vryburg District.

South West Africa abounds in engraving sites and some are known from southern Angola.

The Northern Cape is characterized by outcrops of igneous rock formations of dolerite and diabase supplying the ideal «canvas» for the engraver. Dolerite boulders are mainly covered with a smooth and shiny dark patina. Diabase in addition to occurring as boulders which often have amygdaloid inclusions, also forms large pavements bearing marks of the Permian Glaciations in river beds and on river banks.

From the fieldwork carried out in this area several facts emerge so far: representational engravings and non-representational paintings occur together, while represen-

tational paintings and engravings are only found together in a limited border area. Engravings of individual animals and men predominate but groups of animals or of men, of animals and men are far more frequent than was assumed so far. Superpositions occur but seldom. Engravings of plants are rare, domestic animals extremely rare. The first representation of an ox was discovered only very recently. (Slypsteen, *Hopetown District*, plate 1). Animal spoors as well as human hand and foot-prints occur while mythical creatures are also to be found. One of these is the key-figure of Bushman Folklore, Kaggen, the Mantis or «Flying Buck» which is found in paintings as well as engravings (Fock, 1968). Mythical creatures can be found in the whole area under discussion, but they seem especially abundant at Springbok Oog, Carnavon District. The Orange River is a dividing line as far as the distribution of giraffe is concerned. Mention must also be made of the numerous so-



Fig. 51 - Ox, coarsely pecked outline and markings. Slypsteen, Hopetown District.

called non-representational engravings which occur in connection with water, often men and animals are incorporated in the designs (Fock, 1968).

No basis for absolute dating is available so far in South Africa. One has to resort to relative dating, taking into consideration style, technique and patination. The oldest engravings depict animals in profile with one front and one hind leg only. These animals are rather rigid but executed with great care to detail. This meticulous description is to be observed through all engraving periods, with the exception of the latest one.

The oldest engravings are finely engraved animals in outline in profile which is sometimes filled in with incised lines. The next period comprises finely pecked and sometimes rubbed figures. Coarse pecking also belongs to this period termed by Wilman as the «classical» one. All these engravings were executed with stone tools and belong to the Late Stone Age of Southern Africa. The youngest pe-



Fig. 52 - Scraped out figures of mythical creature. Springbok Oog, Carnavon District.

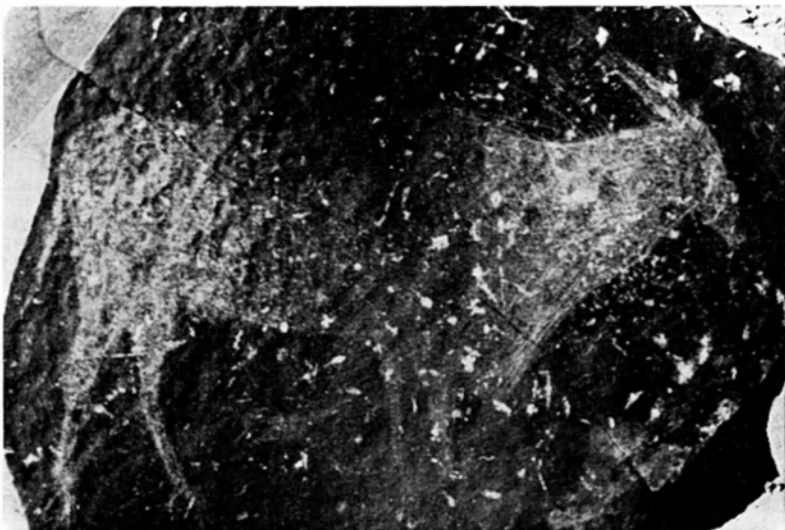


Fig. 53 - Eland, engraving executed by «painter», partly scraped. Jactpan, Carnavon District.

riod belongs to the South African Iron Age but it must not be assumed that the engravings were carried out with iron tools. These are only used in our time when the artists are herd boys. Their works are found in the whole of Southern Africa and represent, mainly, motor-cars, buses and wind-mills.

The «classical» period is by far the most interesting one from an artistic point of view, it also yielded the bulk of the engravings recorded. All plates and figures published here are from this period with the exception of the «mytical creature» of Springbok Oog, and the ox of Slypsteen.

The artists being hunters, centred their artistic activities mostly on animals, on big game animals to be precise. Of these the engravings of eland (*Taurotragus oryx*) are by far the most numerous. It rather puzzles the author why another big game animal, the kudu (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*), which occurs in the same areas, is so seldom depicted. On the scale of preference then follow, though with a large gap numerically, rhinoceros (both species),

gnu (both species), zebra (all species), giraffe (north of the Orange River only), elephant, gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*), hartebeest, buffalo (regionally); in river areas hippopotamus out-numbers rhinoceros. The eland is the main subject for engravings and on sites where only a few engravings occur elands are always found to be depicted. Another group down on the scale of preference is formed by the smaller antelopes although here one of the most common ones, the Springbok is very rare. The list of birds is headed by the ostrich which is found on numerous sites though not in large numbers, then follow crane, secretary bird, heron, paw. Engravings of carnivora occur, but not in great numbers, lion being most often depicted. The animals represented on rock engravings (with the exception of kudu and springbok as already mentioned) provide an accurate picture of their former distribution. The very few engravings of giraffe south of the Orange River are due to the near-absence of this animal there, a fact remarked upon by early travellers and explorers. Roan are found on engravings near Kimberley, where they became extinct about 150 ears ago. Perhaps it should be mentioned that no extinct animal (contrary to rock art in Europe) has been discovered to be depicted with certainty in the rock



Fig. 54 - Wart hog, head and back pecked outline. Kinderdam, Vryburg District.

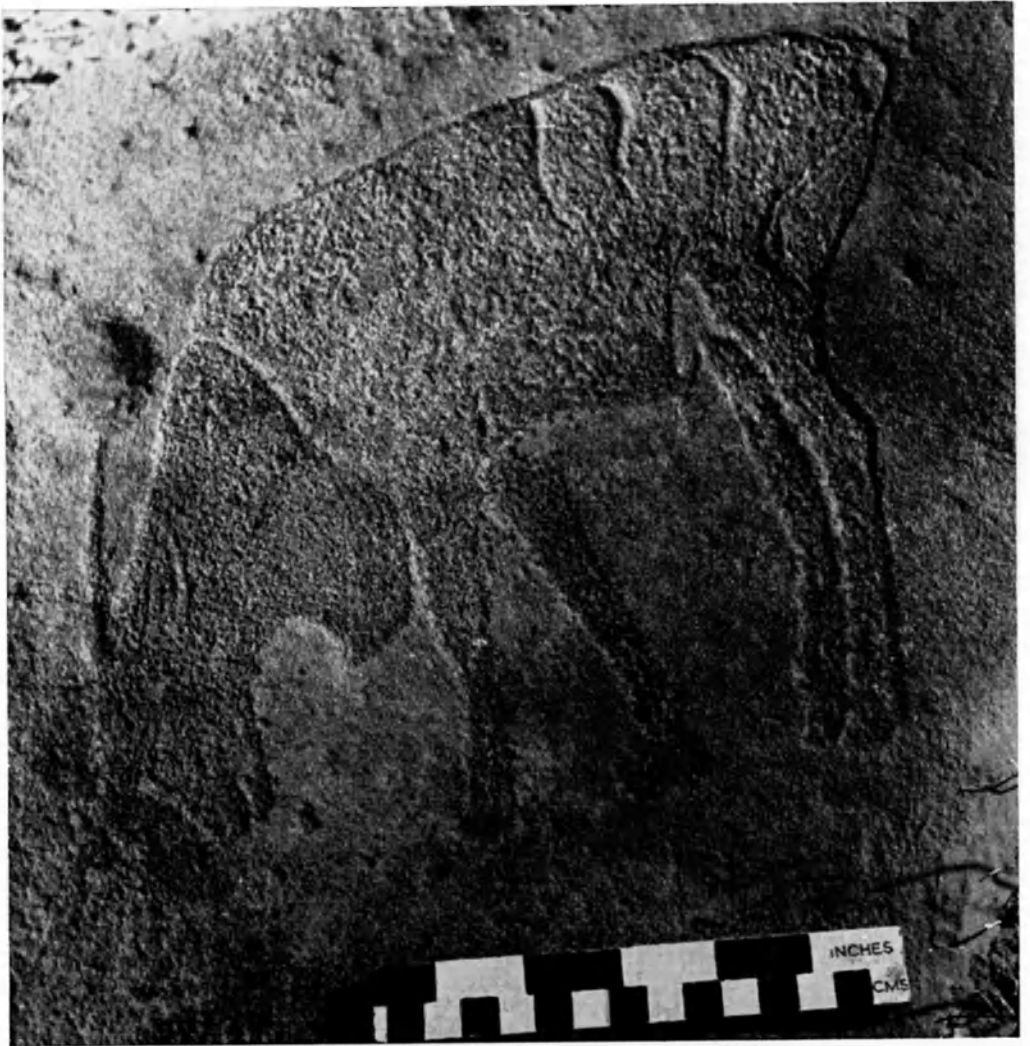


Fig. 55 - Grasing eland, finely pecked. Koppie Enkel, Kimberley District.

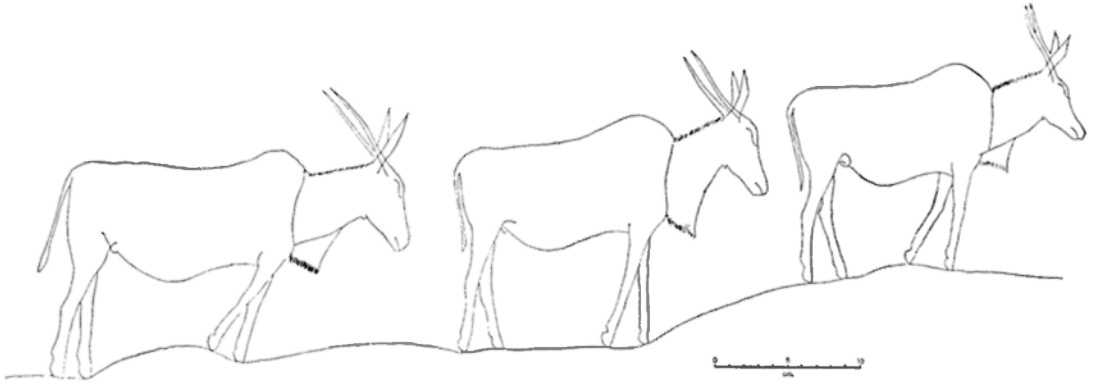


Fig. 56 - Procession of three elands, fine incised lines. Groot Kolk, Carnavon District.

art of South Africa. The quagga (*Equus quagga*) has only become completely extinct in 1890, while other animals have become extinct only regionally.

The majority of engravings recorded are in boldly pecked outlines or fully pecked, but there are a few extremely thin line engravings found in districts as distant as Kimberley and Carnavon. It is suggested here that no mention was made of their presence, by Wilman and other authors, as they are extremely difficult to be made out, and therefore presumed much rarer than is the case. The lines are only 0,5 mm. wide and weathered to the colour of the patina of the dolerite boulder on which they occur.

The careful execution of the animals permits their identification not only as to family but also precisely to species, e.g. square-lipped rhinoceros in contrast to black rhinoceros; black or brindled gnu; bush pig or wart hog; the various species of zebra are not always clearly distinguished but the difference between the zebra and the quagga can always be observed. The eye is nearly always indicated and, often, also the open mouth or wide nostrils of a hunted or dying animal are clearly depicted.

Were the painters and the engravers different peoples or not? This question aroused much controversy over the years but can now be taken as settled. The painters and engravers belonged to the same race; they found an outlet for their artistic urge as painters or engravers depending on the surrounding in which they lived, they painted in shelters and engraved on boulders. A painter of the «classical» period engraved the Eland from Jagtpan, Carnavon District. Great care has been taken to create the impression of shading in colour by partly scraping out the front

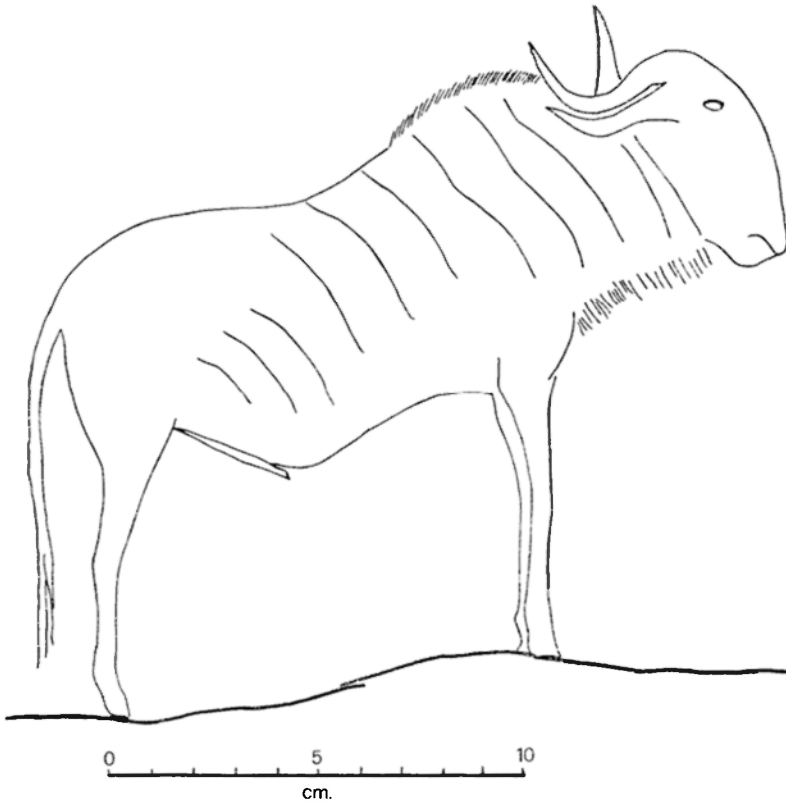


Fig. 57 - Brindled gnu, fine incised lines. Groot Kolk, Carnavon District.

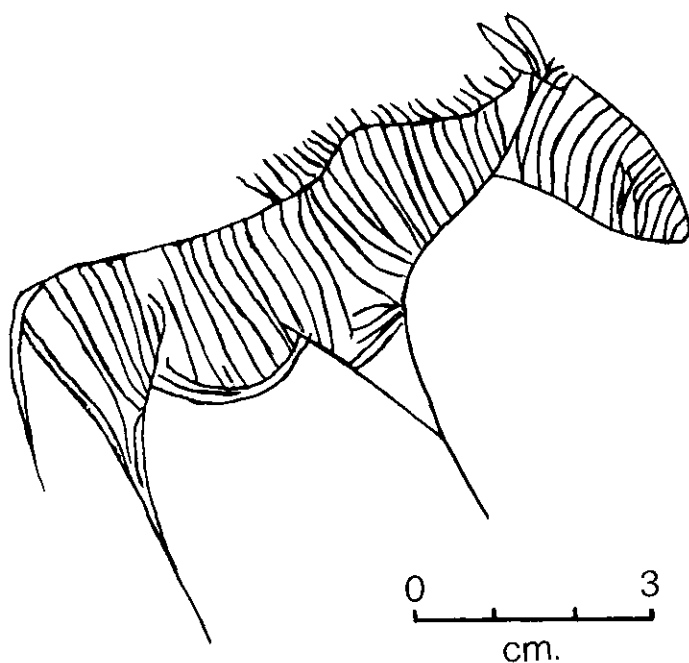


Fig. 58 - Zebra: fine incised lines. Groot Kolk, Carnarvon District.

and back portion of the animal while, in the middle, the natural patina of the stone (diabase) was left untouched, a very fine line marks the silhouette of the entire animal. (The ugly white dots are recent mutilations).

From the profusion of the engravings as well as their perfection, one can deduce not only a complete mastery of the various techniques, but also a progressing degree of intellectual development. Foreshortening occurs, the animal is either depicted full face, three quarter or almost entire profile, or as seen from the rear. Some times only a few salient features are depicted like in the head of a buck illustrated here; the animal could also be «unfinished» but it is perfectly identifiable. A good example of the tranquil mood of the classical period is the grasing eland from Koppie Enkel, Kimberley District. It shows the craft-

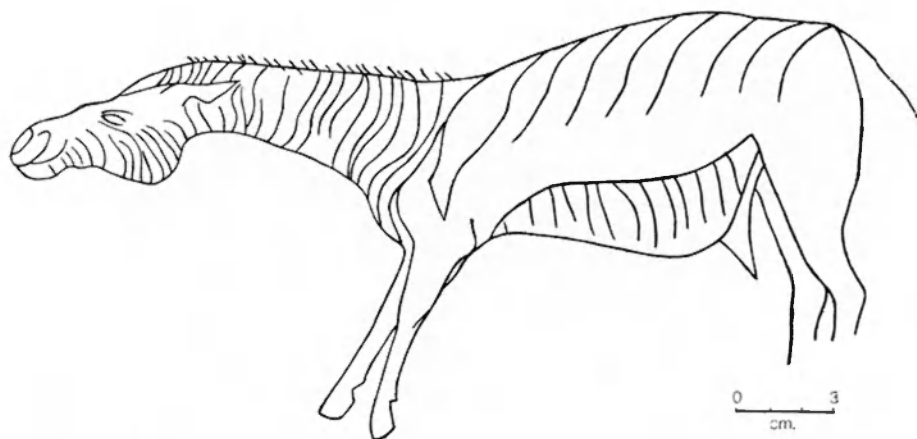


Fig. 59 - Vicious zebra, very fine lines. Vaalpan, Kimberley District.



Fig. 60 - «Eland dance», eland pecked outline, men completely pecked or pecked outline. Kinderdam, Vryburg District.



Fig. 61 - Fighting roans, fine incised lines. Vaalpan, Kimberley District.

smanship which is found over the whole area under discussion during this period. As a counterpart, examples of fine line engravings are given here. Single animals as well as groups are depicted in this technique e.g. the procession of three elands with a line on which the eland march wick could represent a rare indication of the ground. This line is also present in the engraving of a brindled gnu from the same site, Groot Kolk, Carnavon District. The fighting roans from Vaalpan, Kimberley District are full of action although their front portions only are depicted. Also the vicious zebra is from Vaalpan, Kimberley District.



Fig. 62 - Bushman standing on giraffe, pecked. Kinderdam, Vryburg District.

Animals executed in this fine-line-technique range in size from 9 cm. (zebra from Groot Kolk, Carnarvon District), to 99 cm. (an eland from the same site).

An example of a group comprising animal and man is the «Eland Dance» from Kinderdam, Vryburg District. This is a fanciful name given to a group of 11 men in various postures surrounding an eland. It has no relation to the eland dance mentioned as part of Bushman Girls' puberty rites by Schapera (1930). The «Eland Dance» from Kinderdam appears to be the story of 11 men and their exploits with an eland, or an expression of joy over a successful hunt. A similar humorous note is struck by the bushman on the giraffe also from Kinderdam, though here the man seems to be a later addition.

Certain unfinished animals found on engraving sites might suggest that a kind of «art school» was in progress there. From certain traits observed in some engravings on different sites, the author deduces that all these must have been executed by the same master and that not just anybody in a community was a proficient artist and able to produce the masterpieces published here ¹.

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