



eCRAG

The eastern Cederberg Rock Art Group

A project of the South African Archaeological Society, Western Cape Branch

SHORT REPORT ON A ROCK ART RECORDING AT FERNKLOOF NATURE RESERVE, HERMANUS, WESTERN CAPE, 21 NOVEMBER 2020

Introduction

Gilly and Ralph Louw are residents of Hermanus who run guided tours in the area and volunteer on a part-time basis at Fernkloof Nature Reserve. A rock art site was found in 2020 while carrying out alien vegetation clearing and preliminary recordings were made by Gilly Louw and Mariette Pitlo, a member of eCRAG. Following the preliminary visit it was decided to formally record the site on 21st November 2020. Eleven eCRAG members joined Gilly and Ralph Louw to carry out the formal recording, namely Dr Janette Deacon, Cilla Williams, Nic Wiltshire, Kate McCallum, Phil Cohen, Gill Cohen, Noni Vardy, Florentien Wijsenbeek, Mariette Pitlo, Adrienne Brummage, Bill Liltved.

Background to Rock Paintings of the Western Cape

The Western Cape has been inhabited by humans and their ancestors for at least a million years. Earlier Stone Age artefacts that were made between about 1 million and 250,000 years ago are frequently found on old river banks such as amongst present-day vineyards on the Hamilton Russell winery near Hermanus, but very rarely in rock shelters. At that time, these hunter-gatherers apparently did not make rock paintings. Middle Stone Age artefacts, by contrast, are found quite often in rock shelters and at open sites, but they, too, are not rarely linked to the artists responsible for rock paintings in the region. From about 25,000 years ago, the Later Stone Age people living in the Western Cape were regularly making artefacts like bows and arrows, digging stick weights, ostrich eggshell beads and other items that were still being made by San (Bushman) hunter-gatherers at the time of European contact in the seventeenth century. It was during the Later Stone Age that most of the rock paintings were made in the Province. Many rock shelters have stone tools from this time period on the floor and on the slopes outside. Within the last 2000 years, ancestors of the Khoekhoen herders introduced pottery and domesticated animals.

The Western Cape, with the Cederberg at its core, preserves thousands of rock art sites. In the West Coast region alone, including the Cederberg, the University of Cape Town database has about 2500 sites recorded. The quartzites and sandstones of the region have weathered to create a rugged terrain with a high density of rock shelters, overhangs and other rock surfaces upon, and in which, to paint.

Rock paintings are the work of the ancestors of San hunter-gatherers (Bushmen), Khoe pastoralists and people of the recent colonial period. This art includes a wide range of images, types, motifs and themes. This diversity can be reduced to a few broad rock art groups or traditions. These are referred to as:



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- Fine line paintings
- A range of finger-painted images including dots and lines as well as various types of handprints
- 'Crude' images of colonial people, wagons and horses
- Graffiti

The value of this art is that it forms part of a complex belief system and historical record spanning many thousands of years. The four categories broadly correlate with people who had very different ways of living and held different beliefs. The rock art provides a record of this.

A major problem with much of this art is that it is difficult to date. Consequently, much of the pre-colonial art can only be fitted into a general sequence on the basis of the type of images and how they are associated with other types of archaeological evidence.

Earliest in this sequence is the fine line art, which is also numerically dominant in the Western Cape. Fine lines are generally associated with Later Stone Age Bushman hunter-gatherers who have a cultural history of some 8000 years in the region and a much older evolutionary history. The oldest dated fine line images in the region are around 3500 years old, but this simply indicates that older paintings may not have survived, or have not been found in a datable context. As the name implies, this is a delicate art, and the red, yellow, orange, white and occasionally black pigments were applied with fine brushes, quills and possibly feathers.

Human figures dominate the fine line images. Both men and women and many figures of indeterminate gender were painted in a number of different social contexts. These include small groups, sometimes depicting dances; solitary hunters driving game into nets; larger 'processions' of people participating in rituals; and therianthropes, which are combinations of human and animal forms. The painting of animals, eland in particular, had special significance, as did other antelope. Less frequently painted were elephants and felines.

The purpose and meaning of this art is difficult to establish in detail without the help of oral history from the original artists. For many years it was thought that the paintings were literal depictions of the landscape in which hunter-gatherers lived. It is now known that the art is more complex than this, and that it was produced within a number of important ritual contexts, such as healing, rain-making and the initiation of boys and girls into adulthood. The art therefore is essentially religious and relates to complex beliefs and practices.

About 2000 years ago pottery and sheep made their appearance in the Western Cape. These were brought to the region either by immigrants from Botswana, or were diffused into hunter-gatherer society. Whatever the case, by 1500 AD sheep-herding was firmly established and the earliest dated evidence for cattle is about 900 years ago. Herders had different belief systems from the hunter-gatherers and this is reflected in a new set of rock art images that



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comprise handprints, finger dots and finger lines. Unlike hunter-gatherers, who generally painted their fine line images in rock shelters that were used domestically as camps, herders lived in mat-covered huts in larger camps out in the open. Finger-painted images may therefore reflect the use of rock shelters in very different ways that emphasised initiation in seclusion and secrecy, rather than the general communal openness and accessibility of the hunter-gatherer art. Again it is difficult to date these finger paintings but it is possible that they date within the last 1000 years and overlap with fine line paintings.

This overlap means that over the last 2000 years hunter-gatherers and herders both shared, and competed over, the Western Cape landscape. By the time written records were made by the early Portuguese, English and Dutch sailors sailing around, and to, the Cape, the distinction between the hunter-gatherers and herders had become blurred and the historical observations often seem confused, with the use of terms like 'Bosjesman-Hottentots'.

The arrival of the Dutch settlers imposed major social change on the lives of indigenous hunter-gatherers and herders of the Western Cape. Their identities rapidly broke down and by the second half of the 18th century the 'traditional' lifestyles had been displaced and destroyed. Many of these people were incorporated as labour into the rural European farm economy. It is in this late 18th and 19th century context that colonial finger paintings were made. These images depict men and women in European dress, and horses and wagons. When compared to the fine line art, colonial images are certainly crude but do make important statements about the kinds of lives farm-workers lived. This is an important independent record from their point of view, rather than from the perspective of their masters/employers.

Lastly, painted rock art sites in the Western Cape sometimes include more recent historical graffiti comprising the names and dates of farm owners and their families or visitors to these sites, as well as Western symbols such as the Christian cross. The idea of graffiti is generally negative but some graffiti sites provide dates and names that are important at the local level as a record of a family's relationship to their farm. Generally, however, graffiti is gratuitous and often obscures and negatively impacts upon the earlier painted record.

FERN001 (FERNKLOOF 001)

This is the first archaeological site recorded in the Fernkloof Nature Reserve and the site was given the code "FERN001". The site measures 8.5m wide by 2.1m deep by 4.53m high. The paintings are located in a shallow sandstone overhang perched on a steep ridge about 40m above the walking trail on the way to the Fernkloof waterfall. Access to the site, once departing from the path, is hard and the slope is uneven with loose rock and sensitive vegetation.

The site has good views of the surrounding kloofs as well as a view out onto the Atlantic Ocean in the distance. The overhang faces east and a stream runs below the site and below the walking path from the waterfall. No stone tools or other archaeological artefacts were found in



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the overhang. Most of the surface of the overhang is not ideal for paintings as it is uneven and irregular. However, one small spot with an even surface has been painted and this was measured as panel “8-10m”.

The paintings

Two fine line images of humans, probably male, have been painted. The figure on the left appears to be carrying a bag and possibly a bow while the other figure does not appear to be carrying any equipment. Both figures face right and the images are quite faded. While other pigment colours such as white or yellow may have since faded away, what remains are red, monochrome figures. The relatively poor state of preservation and fine line technique used to paint the humans indicate that the paintings were made by San hunter-gatherers. The age of the paintings is likely in the range of 2000 - 5000 years ago, but they could possibly be older as rock paintings are very difficult to date.

We noted that the heads of the figures were painted in a similar fashion to the way the heads have been depicted at Phillipskop rock art site near Stanford. This site is 18km away as the crow flies and has both fine line paintings and hand prints. We cannot be certain that the images were made contemporaneously or by the same artists but it is notable that none of the human figures at either site had the common ‘hookhead’ convention painted at thousands of other sites to the north in the Cederberg.

Significance & Conclusion

Recordings of rock art sites in the Overstrand Municipality are rare due to the lack of rock art surveys in the area. A lot more is known about the Middle and Later Stone Age occupation history of the area through archaeological remains left at shell middens, open air artefact scatters and cave shelters such as De Kelders (Skildergat) and Klipgat. This site is therefore locally significant in that sites containing San and Khoe herder rock art are currently rare in this area. We are of the opinion that systematic surveying will lead to more recordings which provide a better understanding of the distribution of rock paintings in the Overstrand Municipality.

This report was compiled by Nic Wiltshire and Dr Janette Deacon. We would like to thank Gilly and Ralph Louw for identifying the site and leading the site visit to record the paintings as well as the members of eCRAG who attend the survey.

The site recording has been uploaded to the national heritage system, SAHRIS. The public recording is available on this link:

<https://sahris.sahra.org.za/node/546568>

Note the coordinates are not shared with the general public and the site is not recommended for tourism due to the steep slope, access difficulty and sensitive vegetation. Site visits by members

