ROCK ART OF EAST AFRICA

A Brief Summary

Reproduction by Dr. Mary Leakey

TRUST FOR AFRICAN ROCK ART
Nairobi, Kenya
INTRODUCTION

Much of East Africa – Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda – is located on a high inland plateau, a vast area where many different cultures have met and mixed over thousands of years. The rock art found on this plateau reflects aspects of these people’s history, sometimes reaching far back into the past.

The art consists mainly of paintings on rocks, most of which are in central Tanzania and on the shores and islands of Lake Victoria. Other sites are found on the slopes of Kenya’s Mount Elgon while rock engravings (pictures chipped into rock surfaces) are found near Lake Turkana.

ROCK PAINTINGS

The paintings can be divided into five main groups.

Red Paintings

Red Paintings found in the Kondoa/Singida area of central Tanzania include pictures of animals (ref cover picture of “Elephantiad Hunter”, and of people made mainly with red paint. Early pictures of animals painted in outline and filled in with paint can measure up to 2 metres in size. Human figures are finely painted, probably with a brush. Sandawe and Hadza peoples both say that their ancestors are responsible for some of this work.

Twa-style Paintings

Twa-style Paintings are found along the shores and on the islands of Lake Victoria and spread east across Tanzania and southern Kenya. They consist mainly of red geometric (abstract) designs, filled in with white paint which is fast disappearing. These images include circles, concentric spirals and “ladders”. It is thought they were painted by pre-farming hunter/gatherers possibly related to ancestors of modern Pygmies. Earliest examples may be as much as 7,000 years old. The paintings probably stopped about a thousand years ago.

Pastoralist Paintings

Pastoralist Paintings are rare with two known sites found on Mount Elgon. Cattle with tiny heads and long thin horns, together with an elephant and geometric designs are painted in black, white, grey, red and yellow. The artists were probably ancestors of Nilo-Saharan speakers who migrated up the Nile Valley some 3,000 years ago.
Late White Paintings

*Late White Paintings* are the work of Bantu-speaking farmers and were mostly made during the last 1000 years. Found mostly in Tanzania and painted using fingers. The pictures show geometric designs, animals and human figures often facing forward with their hands on their hips.

Meat-feasting Paintings.

*Meat-feasting Paintings* found in northern Tanzania and Kenya, are normally geometric designs and usually drawn with fingers in white, black and also sometimes stick figures and sometimes red paint on rock walls where male Maasai and others who were not allowed to eat meat at their homes have killed and eaten animals. Often these pictures are painted one on another but all seem to be comparatively recent.

Engravings are rare and are only found in the north of Kenya near Lake Turkana and the Chalbi Desert. The pictures were made by hammering small chips from rock surfaces with a heavy pointed stone. There are four types of engraving in East Africa: Sahara-type engravings, Circles, Lineage Symbols and Rock Gongs.

Sahara-type Engravings are found at three known sites and include pictures of giraffe, elephant, ostrich, antelope, camels, people and geometric designs and are similar to engravings found in North Africa's Sahara desert. They were probably done after the arrival of camels in East Africa, sometime in the First Millennium of the Christian Era. Circles have been found on the summit of Por Mountain, at the edge of Lake Turkana, engraved onto free standing rocks, and also near Huri Hills and the nearby Chalbi desert. Lineage Symbols, recognized as such by Turkana peoples, although they themselves deny that they were the actual artists, are carved onto grave-stones south of Lake Turkana dated from 2,300 years ago or 300 BC. Rock Gongs, which are found in the Lake Victoria basin and in the Serengeti National Park (Moru Kopjes) are free-standing granite boulders which ring like a gong when hit. Often the boulders have 'cupules', small depressions in the rock, carved into them, perhaps to show people where they should hit the rock. These appear to represent the different notes. Their age is unknown but the earliest are probably several thousand years old.
THE PAINT

Paints consisted of three constituents, colouring matter, a binder and a liquid. Colour was made from crushed ochre or other mineralised rocks and clays, and charcoal. The binder, which made the crushed rock into a paste, may have been animal fat, blood or plant juice; and the liquid used to thin the paste and spread it across the rock could have been water, plant-sap or white-of-egg.

Different paints were mixed to produce varying colours.

DATING

Scientific dates for the art are not yet available, so current dating relies on a rough chronology determined through (a) Archeological findings; (b) Known dates for the introduction of cattle and camels into this region; (c) The arrival of different peoples and their oral histories and (d) Comparisons with rock art from other parts of Africa. The earliest Red Paintings in Tanzania have now probably disappeared and would by now be well over 10,000 years old if still around. Twɑ-type Paintings may have started before 7,000 years ago and probably stopped around 1,000 years ago. Pastoralist Paintings are probably less than 3,000 years old while Late White and Meat Feasting Paintings are probably less than 500 years old.

WHAT DOES THE ART MEAN?

Based on some understanding of southern Africa’s Bushman art it is possible to guess that most early East African rock art is symbolic and religious in nature, reflecting hunter/gatherer visions of reality and the spirit world, the developing search for supernatural power and the significance of these sites within the landscape itself. Comparing Twɑ-type Paintings with pictures made by modern Pygmies on bark cloth, one researcher has suggested that these geometric paintings were made by women and involved fertility and rain-making rituals. Modern Chewa peoples in Zambia and Malawi, who still drew and were still using Late White Painting sites until the mid-1900s, have said they were teaching aids used by Secret Societies at times of initiation into adulthood and burial. Meat Feasting paintings are believed to represent cattle brands of slaughtered animals.

RED PAINTINGS - TANZANIA

VALUE AND FUTURE OF ROCK ART

Many early paintings are exceptional art in their own right, expressing ideas, beliefs, imagination and a means of visual communication that cannot be found through conventional archaeology. They have great value for modern generations who are interested in their origins and intellectual development.

In spite of sun, wind and rain much rock art has survived for thousands of years; now its future depends largely on us. Already many wonderful paintings are being spoiled by vandalism and graffiti. People chip off the paint and draw or carve their names and dates over the art. This heritage will only survive if valued by all people who see it.

Although national laws protect rock art sites. Governments do not have enough money to provide for guards to look after them. People living near rock art sites can earn funds through careful tourism, provided they value their art and provided that visitors understand and respect it.

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