AFRICAN ROCK ART

Saving a Fragile Heritage

Scotland’s Irish Roots

Rain Forest Medicine
A Maya Cure for Cancer?

Stonehenge in Texas
Windows on the Past

Africa's endangered rock art provides glimpses of vanished worlds.

by Alec Campbell and David Coulson

Africa has the greatest variety of rock art of any continent—truly magnificent, in places huge, and filled with symbolism. Found in almost every region, from the windswept mountains of the central Sahara to the dry plateaus of South Africa, it is a world heritage of incalculable value; it is, however, exceptionally fragile. Millennia of exposure to the sun, rain, and wind have already taken their toll on many works; others, which have survived for thousands of years, are now threatened by uncontrolled development, theft, and ever-increasing tourism and vandalism.

Archaeology can tell us much about people—what they lived; what they made, ate, and traded; whether they owned livestock and moved seasonally; and how they buried their dead—but it often falls short in telling us how ancient people viewed their world, which aspects of nature they valued most, what sort of religious ideas they held, and the different roles of men and women. For more than 10,000 years, the people of Africa recorded their views in rock-shelters and on rock outcroppings. These images speak of a time when the natural environment was a potent subject, and medium, for human expression.

To heighten public awareness of these ancient works, we have...
spent the past six years crisscrossing Africa, documenting all that we have encountered—some 8,000 painted and engraved images at perhaps 500 sites. Knowing the climate history of Africa and its associated flora and fauna and the time of the introduction of domesticated animals such as cattle, horses, dogs, and sheep, we can estimate the date of certain images by the subjects depicted. Factors that aid in dating these works include the amount of the desert varnish over engravings, evidence that metal tools were used in their production, and the presence of cultural remains at rock-art sites.

We have recorded only a small portion of Africa’s rock-art legacy, and to do so has not been easy. We were accompanied by an escort of ten men armed with rocket launchers during our work in northern Niger, drove through a minefield in Chad, and froze for ten days atop Algeria’s Tassili n’ Ajjer Mountains while recording 8,000-year-old paintings, one of them some 20 feet high. Most memorable, perhaps, was an enormous pair of giraffes engraved some 6,000 years ago on a rock outcropping in Niger.

The destruction we have witnessed is appalling. A panel of engraved giraffes in Libya had been pitted by a fusillade of bullets. In Namibia, a spectacular frieze of engravings, which may have been where ancestral Bushmen once initiated youths into manhood, had been incorporated into the entrance of a tourist lodge. In the Drakensberg range of South Africa people had chipped red paint from eland pictures thinking it could be used for rain medicine. Eland are regarded throughout the southern region of the continent as rain makers, their blood used as a binder in religious images. Everywhere there are initials, old and new, scrawled over and carved into prehistoric paintings and engravings. Without an aggressive campaign to protect, preserve, and document these ancient masterpieces, the future of Africa’s rock art is bleak.

The Rock Art Research Centre at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, offers degree courses in rock art studies, and Botswana has built an interpretive museum at its popular Tsodilo Hills site, which boasts some 4,000 finger paintings, executed perhaps 1,200 to 800 years ago. Southern and East African countries have established the Southern African Rock Art Project, which trains administrators and managers of rock-art sites. Aside from these efforts, however, most countries have few if any rock-art scholars or site custodians and minimal funds allocated to rock-art conservation.

In our own way, we have begun to address the problem. In 1996, we established the Trust for African Rock Art, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to survey, document, and monitor sites, be an information resource, create global awareness of the importance and endangered state of Africa’s rock art, and promote and support its conservation.

When we think of the many days we spent hiking in the mountains and nights in the desert sitting around a campfire under the stars, we realize how fortunate we are to experience Africa’s wildest places, and to see the beauty of its artistic legacy. That we have had a chance to participate in ensuring its survival is exhilarating.

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is founder and former director of Botswana's National Museum. David Coulson
is chairman and founder of the Trust for African Rock Art. Their book, African Rock Art: Paintings and Engravings on Stone, has just been released by Harry N. Abrams.
A group of cattle, known as Les Vaches qui Pleurent (the cows who cry) was engraved on a rock face in southern Algeria. The figures have been carved so that, in the evening light after the seasonal rains, they appear to be leaning forward to take a drink from a pool of water that forms below. A giraffe, right, carved some 6,000 years ago on a rock outcrop in Niger.

Schematic human figures, below, have exotic hairstyes or headdresses, were painted on a hillside shelter in central Tanzania. Based on style, they may date to between 3000 and 1000 B.C.
A section of a large, ca. 500-year-old painted panel from the Drakensberg range of South Africa, top right, depicts several male figures. Center, an engraving of an armed man, perhaps a Tuareg ancestor, leading a horse in northern Niger carved ca. 1,500 to 1,000 years ago. Bottom, two sparring, cavallike figures engraved on a boulder atop a cliff in the Massah, Libya.

This panel from eastern Chad is decorated with human figures more than 8.5 feet tall. In Tubu, the local language, they are called Njolle Doo (Beautiful Ladies) although their sex is uncertain. The patterns on the figures are reminiscent of body painting still practiced in Africa.