Divine felines

Why was the cat so revered in Ancient Egypt?

Talking to the best-selling novelist Lindsey Davis, whose detective stories are all set in Ancient Rome
As solid as a rock?

No, it's not, says David Coulson. The spectacular rock art of Africa is under threat for several different reasons — and he and his colleagues from TARA are working hard to save it.

Every continent except Antarctica has its own rock art but Africa has the most and also the greatest diversity, as well as some of the oldest. The largest concentrations are found in the Sahara desert and also in southern Africa where it is mostly the work of ancestral San or Bushmen. The oldest date so far obtained is for the so-called Blombos ochre, pieces of ochre decorated with abstract designs found on the Southern Cape Coast of South Africa. They were discovered about 12 years ago in a cave near the sea together with shell beads from a necklace that had long ago disintegrated. Both finds were dated to around 77,000 BC, making these pieces of ochre possibly the oldest rock art on earth. The archaeologist who made this discovery in the course of his excavations was a Cambridge PhD student named Christopher Henshilwood. Interestingly, pieces of ostrich egg
shell with similar abstract designs were later discovered by Professor John Parkington of the University of Cape Town at Diekploof Cave in the same general area and were dated to around 100,000 BC.

The earliest date obtained so far for African rock paintings was in the Apollo 11 Cave in the Huns

1. Two warrior figures engraved on granite boulders in Niger's northern Air Mountains.

Mountains in southern Namibia in 1969. Rock plaquettes, bearing animal paintings (8), which had been brought into the cave from elsewhere, were found in the sediment on the floor during an excavation by Wolfgang Erich Wendt. Subsequent radio-carbon dating revealed a median date from 15 radiocarbon assays that ranged between 25,000 BC and 32,000 BC. Most extant rock paintings in Africa are believed to date from the last 6,000 years, even though some Sahara engravings (2) and a few Bushman/San paintings may be older than this. It is generally believed that some of the large,
and engraving sites believed to be the work of Twa hunter-gatherers who were genetically related to the Pygmies in the Congo. In East Africa most of these images are geometric designs, spirals and concentric circles, which are assumed to be powerful symbols. On Mfango Island on Lake Victoria (Kenya) one such site was still being used for rain-making rituals as recently as the 1980s (12). Rituals using similar images have also been recorded in eastern Uganda.

But Africa’s stunning array of rock art is under threat from a combination of factors: the gradual expansion of local populations into previously wild, or uninhabited, lands; ignorance about the value of rock art as irreplaceable heritage and what, in 2005, UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan described as ‘official neglect’. This results in defacement, graffiti and other forms of vandalism (13) related to unregulated tourism. In Namibia, for example, important San/Bushman paintings found on the Brandberg Mountain in Damaraland have become seriously faded as a result of tourists throwing Coca Cola or even urinating on to the paintings to bring up the colours for them to photograph. Then there was the extreme case of a tourist driver who deliberately destroyed 4,000-year-old pastoral paintings in three different shelters using spray paint (10).

Recently, in East Africa, we have also seen the growth of a different kind of threat to rock art as people in rural areas have discovered how to break up granite boulders by using fire and water. Having done so they proceed to further break them up into small granite chips that they then sell to local construction companies as building material for $2 per plastic Jerry can. We have recorded dozens of broken rocks right next to places where millennia-old art is found – especially in Uganda and Tanzania, even in the middle of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Without any proper management many great rock paint-ings will soon simply disappear. The most serious threat to African rock art that we have come across so far, however, has been in southern Morocco where, for the last 15 years, local middle men have been removing whole rocks bearing 4,000-year-old engravings in order and selling them to foreign buyers who take them out of the country via Gibraltar and Tangiers. Morocco’s Director of Culture, Dr Abdellah Salih, estimates that over 1,000 engravings have already left the country in this way and, since most sites have not been systematically recorded, we shall never know exactly which art treasures have been stolen or how many (19).

Usually all we have been able to record are the broken fragments abandoned by the thieves when they had failed to remove the engravings cleanly from the host rocks. Dr Salih took us to the foothills of the Atlas Mountains where only a few engravings, as well as chipped and damaged rocks, remained; he estimated that 90 percent of the engravings had been looted.

Outside Africa we have come across examples of rock art from Morocco for sale in Los Angeles, in
New York, and in London (20).
In October 2010, the Moroccan government hosted an international Theft and Vandalism Workshop, organised by the Trust for African Rock Art (TARA) and Morocco's Minister of Culture that was attended by rock art experts from around the world. The main outcome of this was the 2010 Declaration Addressing The Theft And Vandalism of Africa's Rock Art, a 40-point document, released jointly by TARA and the World Archaeological Congress (WAC), which is available on our websites. Today most authorities agree that the only way to protect Africa's rock art is by engaging the communities whose heritage it is. An important part of our work at TARA is working with local people, helping them to appreciate the unique character of this ancient art, the threats to it and the potential economic benefits it can bring, usually through responsible tourism (18).

On Mfangano Island on Lake Victoria, for instance, we met elders near various sites to record their stories and beliefs concerning the origins and use of the paintings. We were able to share with them oral legends concerning similar paintings in eastern Uganda (9), only 200 miles further north, as well as stories of rain-making and fertility rituals that had been conducted until recent times. This had the effect of drawing them out and encouraging them to tell us their own stories that were similar to the Ugandan ones. Here, we were able to put together a project designed to promote rock art tourism on the island. It received support because of the integration of the community in the management of rock art sites.

The project was based on five objectives: increasing awareness at the local level; ensuring long term conservation of the heritage; promotion of the sites; development of basic infrastructure and improvement of community livelihoods. The new community museum and cultural centre, the first of its kind in the region, has meant that at least 100 people are employed directly and indirectly through the project. Other benefits have also come through other infrastructural investments such as piers and telecommunication masts. The greatest success, however, has been the continued interest in the sustainable management of the sites at the community level. We hope this may be repeated throughout Africa.

TARA: the Trust for African Rock Art (www.africanrockart.org) records the rock art heritage of the African continent and makes this information accessible and, to the extent possible, safeguards those sites no matter how remote. In 2014 TARA's digital rock art archive will become accessible through the British Museum's global online collections.