TRUST FOR AFRICAN ROCK ART

CHAIRMAN’S LETTER

TARA, Trust for African Rock Art, was registered in November 1996 in the Channel Islands (UK) for the purpose of protecting and preserving Africa’s rock art. Its objectives are to record as much of the continents’ art as possible, to create an international awareness of its richness, variety and fragility, and to attempt to preserve it for the benefit of future generations.

TARA’s Founding Patrons were the late Dr Mary Leakey and Sir Laurens van der Post, both of whom sadly passed away in December 1996 within ten days of each other. The idea of TARA originated from a discussion between Mary Leakey and myself in 1995. Mary was concerned about the way in which the rock paintings in Tanzania, some of which may be several thousand years old, were being damaged by graffiti and vandalism. She had a special interest in the paintings which she and her husband Louis had studied in the 1950’s. The time Mary spent there was one of the happiest periods of her life. “I’m too old”, she told me a few years ago, “but maybe you can do something about preserving African rock art? I’ll help you as much as I can”.

In pursuit of TARA’s goals I have teamed up with Alec Campbell, former Director (and Founder) of Botswana’s National Museum, an authority on Bushman / San rock art. With some initial backing from the Getty Conservation Institute of California and from Anglo American Corporation and De Beers in South Africa, as well as a few private donors, we are travelling the African continent recording some of the known sites and discovering new ones as we go. The National Geographic Society in Washington DC will be funding our next expedition into the Sahara.

AFRICAN ROCK ART BOOK

As a means of creating public awareness, Alec Campbell and myself have entered into a contract with Harry N Abrams Inc (New York publishers) to produce a large format book on the Rock Art of Africa. We have agreed to deliver our material to Abrams by October 1988. The book is due to be published in 1999, in good time for the Millennium we hope!

MAGAZINE ARTICLES

On June 2nd 1997 TIME Magazine (USA) published a four page story on our work, “Etched in Stone” A copy of this which is reprinted on page four of this newsletter. The same art in the European edition (June 2nd) and in the Southern African edition the same week. The National Geographic Society plan to do a major article on the central Sahara next year incorporating the story of our work.

FIELD TRIPS TO DATE

To date Alec Campbell and I have undertaken six extended field trips together: five weeks in Niger and Algeria, two weeks in Zimbabwe, two weeks in Namibia, five weeks in Chad, three weeks in Kenya and five weeks in South Africa. In addition Alec and I have travelled singly in Tanzania, Kenya, South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho and Zimbabwe.
ROCK ART TRIPS 1995/1987

NIger AND Algeria (SAHARA)-1995

Coming shortly after the end of the Niger Civil War this was an exciting and productive expedition. The first half of the trip was spent in the remote Air Mountains where we recorded many "Lybico-Berber" rock engravings probably around 2000 years old. We subsequently crossed the frontier into Southern Algeria, to an area called the Tadrart where we recorded both paintings and engravings. This year we will travel to Libya. The expedition will be funded by the Research and Exploration Division of The National Geographic Society. An article on the central Sahara is being planned by The National Geographic Magazine and our work will be an important ingredient of this article.

Most of these paintings were from the Bovidian period, probably around 6000 - 3000 years old and some of the engravings we saw were from the Bubalus period, a few as much as 9000 years old. Almost all the Sahara's rock art dates back to a time when this vast wilderness was a land of grass plains, rivers, lakes and huge herds of game. On this first trip we travelled nearly 4000 miles in two 4-wheel drive Toyota landcruisers accompanied by a Tuareg guide. We hope to return to Niger in November this year and to travel on from here to Libya.

CHAD (SAHARA)-1996

After nearly thirty years of war (the war with Libya as well as several civil wars) we felt privileged to be able to visit northern Chad late last year. Once again, this was a five week expedition during which we concentrated on the Tibesti Mountains, highest in the Sahara, and the Ennedi Mountains near the Sudan border. We saw several thousand paintings and engravings on this trip. Most of the art was from the Bovidian period and quite a lot from the early camel period. As before we travelled some 4000 miles in two Landcruisers travelling through spectacular scenery. The most remarkable site we visited was probably Gonioa in the Tibesti Mountains, a valley filled with thousands of engravings, some maybe 10,000 years old. The most exciting area we visited was probably Kozen, a beautiful Tassili region that few outsiders have penetrated.

ZIMBABWE -1996

Zimbabwe has some of the finest rock art in Africa and most of this is attributed to ancestors of the San or bushmen. These rock paintings are probably older than most South African bushman paintings (most are probably between 1500 and 6000 years old and some may be older). So far we have visited the Matopo Hills south of Bulawayo and a number of different sites in Mashonaland, eg Banket, Muturashanga, Domboshawa, Mcllwaine, Mutoko, Murewa, Rusape and Wedza. We hope to return to Zimbabwe to record more sites including some "late white painting" sites next year. As in the Sahara it is still possible to stumble across paintings that have never yet been recorded.

NAMIBIA -1996/7

Here we have so far recorded engravings at three sites, Twyfelfontein and Kamanjab in the north west and Daberas in the south. We have also recorded paintings in the Erongo Mountains and at different locations in the Brandberg Massif. Last year we climbed the Brandberg and visited several very fine and little-known sites high up on the mountain. We plan to return to Namibia this August to visit other sites including the Apollo II cave in the Huns Mountains, where Africa’s oldest recorded rock paintings were discovered at the time of the moon mission (1969), dated to 26,000 years old. We shall also return to the Erongo Mountains and the Brandberg to record other important sites as well as Twyfelfontein and new, lesser known engraving sites.
ROCK ART TRIPS 1995/1987

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KENYA -1997

Earlier this year Alec and I visited two rock engraving sites near lake Turkana in northern Kenya. These sites were first recorded by George and Joy Adamson in 1946. Later we visited an important but little known site in western Kenya near the Uganda border. These paintings appeared to be mainly in the late white style although some were earlier red paintings in the bushman style.

SOUTH AFRICA -1997

In June this year we recorded rock engravings in the southern Transvaal and rock paintings in the eastern Freestate and north eastern Cape near Lesotho. On this trip we received invaluable assistance from Professor David Lewis Williams of the Rock Art Research unit at Wits University. We are delighted that David Lewis Williams, a doyen of San art, has joined us as an Honorary Trustee of TARA.

At the time of writing we have just returned from a second recording trip, this time in the northern an south western Cape. At one of the north Cape sites we visited in the Kimberley region we found acres of glaciated granite covered in complex geometric engravings, probably around 4000 - 2500 years old. At another, we found a low hill in dry open country with several hundred animal and people engravings all facing west, all exquisitely executed. Later, in the south western Cape, about a hundred and fifty miles north of Cape Town we recorded a number of important painting sites. Perhaps the most remarkable of these was a San / bushman painting of a galleon (??Portuguese), probably from the 16th century, with its flags flying! While in the Cape we attended a Conference on the cultural identity of Khoisan people (formerly known as bushmen and hotentots). Afterwards, with other delegates, we joined a post-conference trip to the Cedarberg led by Professor John Parkington of the University of Cape Town.

On this second trip we had invaluable support from the staff of the Kimberley Museum, especially from David Morris. We are also indebted to Professor John Parkington of the University of Cape Town for all his help and advice. We are delighted that John Parkington, another authority on San art, has joined us as an Honorary Trustee of TARA.

FUTURE WORK (during the next eight months)

During the next year, funds permitting, Alec and I plan to visit Ethiopia and Eritrea, Tanzania, Libya, Niger, Egypt, Morocco, Malawi, Lesotho, South Africa (Natal), and Zambia. The task is immense but we are greatly encouraged by the interest and enthusiasm we have been receiving.

Chairman

David Coulson (left) and Alec Campbell
in Chad - November 1996
ETCHED IN STONE

Time is running out for Africa's ancient rock-art masterpieces, threatened by man and nature

Reproduced from Time Magazine
June 2, 1997 (USA) and June 23, 1997 (International)
The images are stunning as they are ancient. Painted or engraved on rock surfaces hundreds, thousands and even tens of thousands of years ago, they portray hunters armed with bows and arrows in hot pursuit of antelopes, lanky men straddling galloping horses, and exquisitely drawn charioteers urging their steeds on. They depict herds of elephants, loping giraffes, elegantly antlered impala and mythical creatures drawn from the imagination of artists long since their grave.

For most people, any mention of rock paintings immediately brings to mind the fabulous Paleolithic cave art at Lascaux in France and Altamira in Spain. But equally beautiful and sophisticated works can be found in great abundance on rock shelters, walls and overhangs of the African continent. Unfortunately, these ancient masterpieces are deteriorating at an alarming rate, and may disappear entirely unless something is done to save them.

In an effort to record Africa’s vanishing trove of rock art, David Coulson, a Nairobi-based photographer, and Alexander (‘Alec’) Campbell, former director of Botswana’s National Museum and Art Gallery, are crisscrossing the continent, visiting known sites, stumbling across new ones and photographing as much of the art as they can. Everywhere they go they have found images dulled by sunlight, wind and water and damaged by chemical seepage from mining operations, tourism and outright vandalism. “There’s an incredible amount of rock art out there”, Coulson says, “and little has been done to preserve it”.

The works range in age from the approximately 26,000 year old paintings in Namibia’s Apollo II cave (discovered at the time of the Moon mission) to the late 19th century Bushmen drawings. “Rock art represents an extraordinarily interesting and valuable heritage”, says Neville Agnew, associate program director of the Los Angeles-based Getty Conservation Institute.

“It’s a page from the past.” The art has “immense” value, says Campbell, not just because of its beauty but because “it comprises much of what we have left of both the creation of art and the development of early beliefs.”

Much of Africa’s rock art remains undiscovered. “We know where the major sites are”, says Coulson, “but we’re always finding new ones.”

He estimates that even in the Sahara, where numerous sites are well documented, archaeologists are aware of only 10% of the existing art. Exploring Chad’s Tibesti Mountains last year, for example, he and Campbell discovered valleys abounding in ancient engravings, most of them unknown to experts.

Campbell is convinced that if Africa’s rock art were inventoried, it would total many hundreds of thousands of individual images. Some 80,000 have already been recorded in Lesotho alone, 30,000 more on the eastern slopes of the Natal Drakensberg in South Africa and more than 4,000 in the Tsodilo Hills in northern Botswana. Indeed, the rock art is so plentiful that despite the hundreds of rolls of film donated by the Getty Institute, Coulson can afford to shoot only the best examples. “We skip over images that are either inferior or too recent,” he says.

The team has found many of its best specimens in the mountains of the central Sahara, where the effects of desertification over the centuries are recorded directly on the rocks. At Tassili n’Ajjer, in Algeria, and the Tibesti Mountains, rock art that has been radiocarbon-dated to periods before about 6000 B.C. portrays a surprisingly fertile environment dotted with forests, lakes and grasslands.
Among the wildlife depicted are gazelles, giraffes, elephants, crocodiles, fish and even aurochs, the same now extinct species of wild ox that appears on the walls of Lascaux. In paintings and engravings dated after 6000 B.C., however, where the Sahara was drying up and the hunters turned to herding images of domesticated cattle predominate. Wildlife and humans tend to get equal billing in African rock art. (In the caves of western Europe, by contrast, pictures of animals cover the walls and human figures are rare.) In southern Africa, home to the San, or Bushmen, many of the rock scenes depicting people interpret the rituals and hallucinations of the shamans who still dominate the San culture today. Among the most evocative images are those believed to represent shamans deep in trance: a reclining, antelope-headed man surrounded by imaginary beasts, for example, or an insect-like humanoid covered with wild decorations. Depictions of eland, the largest African antelope, appear in disproportionate-
African nation that requests access Coulson's photographs and Campbell's drawings and text will also be put together in a book scheduled for publication in 1999.

But their work is far from done. They have yet to explore sites in Morocco, Ethiopia, Egypt, Eritrea, Tanzania and Zambia. They also plan to revisit South Africa and Namibia and hope that a "small advance" from their publisher and grants from two African mining conglomerates will see them through.

Like Coulson and Campbell, France's Clottes feels a growing sense of urgency. "It is certain that a major part of the world's rock art will be destroyed in the course of the next decades," he says. "In less than 50 years, if things continue at their current pace, a large part of this evidence will have disappeared forever."

- Reported by Bruce Cumley/Paris, Andrea Dorfman/New York and Peter Hawthorne/Johannesburg
- Photographs by David Coulson