THE DABOUS GIRAFFES PROJECT, NIGER
Alec Campbell & David Coulson

There have been reports in the international press and on radio about the ‘discovery’ of a huge engraving of giraffes found in the Sahara, and that casts of the engraving are being produced for display in Niger, France and America.

This note, hopefully, provides an intelligible background to the press reports.

In November 1997, together with Jean Clottes, President of the International Committee of Rock Art, we were shown in Niger a magnificent engraving of two giraffes, the taller measuring 5.4 m from horn to hoof (not 20 ft tall and the largest example of African rock art, as some press reports represented; there are giraffe engravings in Algeria of over 8 m). The engraving’s style and method of execution suggest it may be between about 8000 and 6000 years old. Although the outcrop is located only about 6 km from a major road, in 1997 the engraving was little known, but now tourists are beginning to visit it.

Clottes later wrote to David Coulson, who is chairman of the Trust for African Rock Art, TARA, pointing out, "they [the engravings] are just a few kilometres away from the tar road between Agadez and Arlit and easy of access with a 4x4. They are not on a vertical cliff, but on a slab, which means they can be (and are)
compressed air and any remaining small marks toned down by dabbing with solvent and rinsing with local water until they disappeared.

To ensure the shape of the rock slab was maintained, the silicon mould was reinforced with a thick plaster-of-Paris backing strengthened with fibre-wool, wood struts and building rod. Four approximately 200 cm² rectangles, three covering deeply engraved areas and one beside the engraving, were protected and later moulded in clay over a foil lining in case dating of varnish may one day prove possible. The logistics and bureaucracy involved in transporting several tons of moulding materials from France into the Sahara and shipping the negative casts home are best not described.

A study was made of the other engravings on the outcrop, and of two neighbouring sites both of which include large engravings of giraffe, although these do not exceed 3 m in overall size. Time allowed only for a record on form and film of 430 engravings on the main outcrop. At the same time, a video was made of the moulding process, the recording exercise, numerous of the engravings and the general environment. The recording exercise will be completed in January 2000.

After the mould had been removed, both Niger Ministers, travelling over 1,000 km from Niamey, with the Governor of Northern Niger, visited Dabous. They inspected the mould and engravings, and made short speeches expressing pleasure in the rock art and satisfaction with the moulding. Positive casts will be made in France. One cast is to be erected outside the entrance to Agadez International Airport, Niger; another goes to the United States of America, possibly to be displayed in the National Geographic Society building; while others, hopefully, will be sold to Museums and Art Galleries.

TARA has provided initial funding for two custodians to live at the site and for a well (the water level is at about 15 m depth) to be dug

Vol 16 (1) April 1999 2 The Digging Stick
nearby. One custodian was hired before casting commenced, provided with a record book, and given brief training in the handling of tourists. After two years, the Local Government in Agaeded will take over the custodians. During our stay at Dabous two parties of tourists, from Switzerland and Austria, respectively visited the site and were recorded in the book.

This project has several aims. The obvious one is to stabilise and protect a magnificent engraving and to mould it so that whatever may happen to it in the future, casts will survive. Another intention is to sensitize the Niger Government to this really amazing and vast rock-art heritage, its world value and dire need for protection. Finally, everyone is reminded of the artistic ability, incredible beauty, importance and potential fragility involved in Africa’s prehistoric art, much of it many thousands of years old.

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STERKFONTEIN, KROMDRAAI, SWARTKRANS AND ENVIRONS
CONSIDERED FOR WORLD HERITAGE STATUS*

Three South African heritage sites were selected last year for submission to the World Heritage Centre in Paris. They are to be considered by the World Heritage Committee when it meets in December 1999. The three sites are Robben Island, St Lucia Wetlands, and Sterkfontein, Kromdraai, Swartkrans and Environs.

A total of 20 natural and cultural sites and landscapes were identified as meeting the criteria by the South African World Heritage Convention Committee. This country, having rejoined Unesco, became a party to the World Heritage Convention in 1997 and is thus entitled - for the first time - to propose sites for listing.

The Sterkfontein Valley has been described as “one of South Africa’s most internationally valued scientific treasure-houses”. Professor Phillip Tobias has noted that “it includes at least 11 fossil-rich cave sites, over a distance of 15 km. No fewer than seven have yielded remains of the human family”. Clustered near one another in the south are Sterkfontein, Kromdraai and Swartkrans. Sterkfontein and Swartkrans are “the world’s two richest hominid-bearing caves” which together have yielded nearly 1000 catalogue hominid specimens, “the fossil bones belonging to hundreds of individuals who lived between 3.3 million and one million years ago”. Swartkrans has provided, in addition, the earliest signs of human control of fire. Kromdraai is where, in 1938, Dr Robert Broom made the first discovery of a robust Australopithecine, subsequently found also at Swartkrans, which, less than two million years ago, was a contemporary of an early form of the genus Homo.

From Sterkfontein have come some of the most spectacular finds in the history of palaeoanthropology, including the famous fossil known as “Mrs Ples”, found in 1947 - the remains of the small-headed upright-walking Australopithecus africanus. Then, at the very time that committees deliberated on a South African World Heritage submission, one of the most astonishing finds was being made. This was the first ever discovery - by Dr Ron Clarke and fossil preparators Nkwane Molefe and Stephen Motsumi - of a well-preserved skull and associated skeleton of Australopithecus, from the lowest levels of the site. The skull is the most complete Australopithecine skull ever found.

Work at these sites has “brought to light,” as Tobias puts it, “a story of human evolution which takes second place to none other”. If any site deserves inclusion on the World Heritage List - on which Africa is significantly under-represented - the Sterkfontein, Kromdraai and Swartkrans cluster certainly does.