

ROCK ART

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Available information

The rock art of the Soutpansberg is not as well known as the rock art from the Drakensberg and other areas, and consequently was never researched professionally until 1991. The majority of known sites are found in the western part of the mountains, but this disparity may be a result of the limited research done to date in the eastern sector. Moving outside the quartzitic mountain ranges into the northeastern part of the area where the sandstone sedimentary hills and ridges occur, there is an increase in rock art sites. The preliminary surveys that have been done in the western and central mountains, have documented rock art that displays a surprising range of imagery whose authorship is attributed to San hunter-gatherers, Khoekhoe herders and Northern Sotho artists.

The Soutpansberg rock art cannot be divorced from that of the broader Central Limpopo Basin, which extends from the Soutpansberg through to the Limpopo Valley, and includes the Blouberg–Makgabeng area, as well as the Pafuri area of the Kruger National Park. To date over 700 rock art sites have been documented in this basin. Many more will still be discovered in the future, as only a small part of the area has been covered.

There are two styles of rock art in the area, namely engravings and paintings.

Engravings

There are a number of sites in the Central Limpopo Basin that have rock engravings, but only two sites are known from the mountains. This area is one of the few regions where engravings and paintings co-occur, sometimes on the same site.

Paintings

Three painting traditions occur, each linked to a specific cultural group. There are several sites where the traditions are found together, but were produced at different times.

San paintings are distinctive because of technique. They are defined by fineline technique — application by brush, pigment consistency and subject matter. The other two traditions are applied by finger.

San Paintings

San paintings can be generally identified by their finer quality. Images include males, females and indeterminate humans, a variety of animals, some being indeterminate, others again being species specific. Various abstract

shapes also occur, some of which might relate to particular religious activities. Approximately two thirds of all sites relate to this tradition. It overlaps time wise for about 800 years with the early Bantu-speaking agro-pastoralists.

Khoekhoe paintings (Geometric Tradition Paintings)

These consist mainly of geometric images, dots, lines, representational forms and handprints. These paintings are usually red in colour, but white ones occur, and sometimes a combination.

Northern Sotho Paintings

These are made by Bantu-speaking Agro-pastoralists, and comprise white finger paintings with anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and geometric designs. Many of the paintings relate to contact with early colonialists, and depict men on horseback, wagons, trains and motor vehicles.

Because of the sensitivity of these rock art sites full details as to their location are not given.

Summary statistics

To date 41 sites have been documented in the Soutpansberg. The Blouberg—Makgabeng statistics are not included, nor are those from the sandstone belt in the northeastern section. For a summary of image types see Table 1 & 2.

The art is of great value, not only from an aesthetic view, but also for the insight it gives, in particular into the world view and religion of the San, as well as information about types of animals occurring in the environment in earlier times.

TABLE 1: Breakdown of site numbers related to painting tradition.

Type	No
San	23
Khoekhoe	1
Northern Sotho	3
San and Khoekhoe	11
San and Northern Sotho	1
San, Khoekhoe and Northern Sotho	1
White settler	1

Major studies and publications

- BLUNDELL, G. & EASTWOOD, E. B. 2001. Identifying Y-shapes in the San rock art of the Limpopo—Shashe Confluence Area: new ethnographic evidence. *South Africa Journal of Science* 97: 305–308.
- EASTWOOD, E. B. 2003. Identifying a cross-cultural motif in San, Khoekhoen and Northern Sotho rock paintings of the Central Limpopo Basin, Southern Africa. *South African Archaeological Bulletin*.
- EASTWOOD, E. B. & EASTWOOD, C. J. H. 2002. The northeastern Venda rock art survey. Volume two: The Tshiungane and Dambale hills. Unpublished report for the de Beers Fund.
- EASTWOOD, E. B., CNOOPS, C. J. H. & STRAUGHAN, P. 2000. *Results of the Soutpansberg Rock Art Survey*. Unpublished report.
- HALL, S. & SMITH, B. W. 2000. *Empowering places: rock shelters and ritual control in farmer-forager interactions in the Northern Province, South Africa*. The South African Archaeological Society: Goodwin series.

Recommendations for priority studies required to fill any gaps

A complete and detailed survey needs to be done. This is not feasible at present, because of limited funding and trained personnel.

“Hot spots” of particular importance

All rock art sites are potential hot spots, in view of the fact that they are a non-renewable resource, and once lost can never be recovered. Sites that have been opened to the public are required to abide by very strict regulations as promulgated in the National Heritage Resources Act.

Although the National Heritage Resources Act protects all archaeological sites, many are being damaged through the ignorance of the local populace of the legislation and this state of affairs is deteriorating rapidly in many areas.

TABLE 2: Main image categories and individual figure numbers are reflected in the table below.

Type	No
Men	364
Women	36
Antbear	1
Canines	6
Elephant	18
Felines	2
Giraffe	15
Hartebeest	9
Impala	2
Kudu	19
Rhinoceros	2
Sable/Roan antelope	1
Sheep	3
Wildebeest	2
Indeterminate animals	58
Indeterminate antelope	36
Indeterminate humans	430
Spoor - feline	1
Apron - animal skin	2
Apron - fringed	4
Apron-triangle/cordiform	28
Geometric motifs	9

Additional partners

The Rock Art Research Institute, Department of Archaeology, University of the Witwatersrand