

THE DIGGING STICK

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AN ENGRAVED TOUCHSTONE FROM THE FREE STATE

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On the southern banks of the Vaal River in the Boshof District of the Free State is a low eminence peppered with amygdaloidal andesite boulders (Figure 2). Though visually unassuming, this low eminence has a long history of visitation and marking by animals and humans. For example, twenty two of the andesite boulders have been rubbed smooth by rhinoceroses and hippopotamuses seeking to remove ectoparasites from their bodies. In addition, persistent scatters of Later Stone Age lithics at the site provide evidence of human visitation. Evidence of human marking is



Figure 1. Redrawing of the rhinoceros engraved on the touchstone with rubbed area shown in black and flake scars indicated by a dashed line. Scale bar is 30 mm.

provided by the 263 andesite boulders that bear engraved images of the kind most often ascribed to San hunter-gatherers. The Boshof engraving site covers an area of 7 500 m² and features a wide range of imagery including antelope, eland, elephant, geometric motifs, giraffe, hippopotamus, ostrich, rhinoceros and zebra. Many of these images appear true to life but equally, many of the engravings have visual signifiers, such as the impossibly long horns engraved on an antelope, which indicate that southern African rock engravings, like the better-understood rock paintings, relate strongly to San religion. However, unlike rock paintings which have a very structured appearance and distribution at a site, rock engravings often extend over hundreds

and thousands of square metres, making it difficult to define the limits and structure of engraving 'sites'.

THE TOUCHSTONE

I examined the Boshof site and found many tantalising hints alluding to a structure. I was fortunate enough to come across a focal point of the site which I have termed the 'touchstone' (Figure 3). The touchstone is a reasonably large, smooth, 0,8 m high free-standing andesite boulder located near the top of the low eminence at the approximate centre of the site where engraved imagery is most concentrated and plentiful. I consider this touchstone to be an important, even epergnous, element of the site because it bears a remarkable history of sustained visitation in the form of five visual signifiers.

First, the touchstone has a smooth surface that is formally consonant with the twenty one rocks

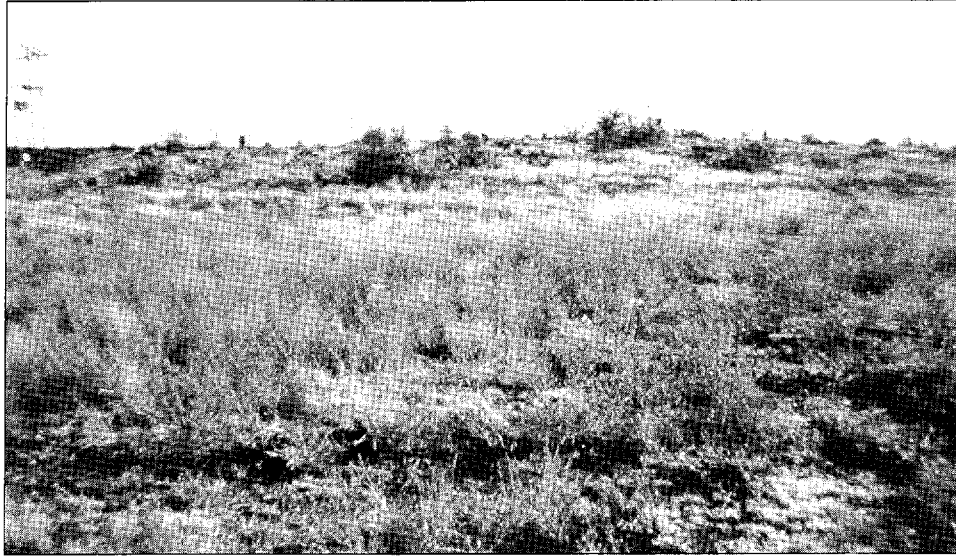


Figure 2. View of Boshof rock engraving site, Free State.

at the site that were, over centuries, used as rubbing posts by large herbivores. Significantly large herbivores such as hippopotamuses and rhinoceroses appear to have held considerable religious significance for San hunter-gatherers.

The visitation and marking of the touchstone by such animals was commemorated by the touchstone's second visual signifier: a pecked-infill engraving of a black rhinoceros (Figure 1). The outer part and forequarters of the rhinoceros display

light, fine pecking while the central part is more heavily engraved. The engraver has paid great attention to detail, with the ears, eye, open mouth, prehensile upper lip and tail of the rhinoceros clearly depicted. Both fore and hind legs appear folded, suggesting the animal is lying down or is in some distress. Below the engraved rhinoceros is an engraved line, three engraved 'patches' and over 340 individual hammer marks.

The third visual signifier of visitation and marking is mimetic in nature. The producer(s) or subsequent user(s) of the rhinoceros engraving has mimicked the rubbing of the touchstone by real rhinoceros by carefully rubbing the horns of the engraved rhinoceros. Rubbing by animals or abrasion by the elements could not have produced such a discrete patch of rubbing. No other part of the engraved rhinoceros has been rubbed.

The fourth visual signifier comprises 340 individual hammer marks located underneath the engraved rhinoceros (Figure 1). Though visually confusing, these hammer marks were carefully placed beneath the engraved rhinoceros and may be the visual residue of a now unobservable ritual.

The final visual signifier of visitation and marking is located on the part of the touchstone immediately above and to the left of the engraved rhinoceros and consists of at least four flake scars. These flake scars differ from the kind caused by lightning strikes and frost fracturing which usually leave single or random scars. Rather, these four flake scars are tightly clustered and formally identical to the flake scars produced when manufacturing stone 'tools'.

CONCLUSION

The Boshof touchstone bears evidence of successive visitations, at least five episodes of which left visible marks. Each mark, in turn, attracted a further mark, the sum of which has left a complex record of rubbing, engraving, hammering and flaking not found elsewhere at the site. In particular, the removal of flakes suggests that the Boshof San believed the touchstone to be imbued with a powerful essence which they wished to possess. This essence may have derived from the physical properties of the touchstone, its central and elevated location and possibly its association with momentous events and important animals, people and beings. Further research into the field of southern African rock engravings will yield many more concrete objects and insights such as are offered by the Boshof touchstone.

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Figure 3. Photograph of the engraved, flaked, hammered and rubbed touchstone.



A REGIONAL MANAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR ROCK ART HERITAGE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA*

Rock paintings and rock engravings, found throughout our subcontinent, represent a common heritage for the region that creates a symbolic unity with no national boundaries. They also constitute a fragile heritage, recorded only

patchily in the subcontinent, and are in need of research, protection and management.

Discussion around these concerns at a joint World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS meeting in