

# THOMAS BAINES' "LOST" ROCK ART SITE

## A 152-year-old mystery solved

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Colonial rock art research in the Free State began on 5 March 1850. This was when artist and explorer John Thomas Baines copied a rare Bushman rock painting of a black rhinoceros in a rock shelter somewhere between present-day Smithfield and Reddersburg. Important as this site is, its precise location was not known until a few months ago. In 1999 Johan Looek, Trans !Garib Branch Patron, suggested that we find this site, which had been "lost" for a century-and-a-half. What followed was an intense three-year, detective-style search. Establishing distances and landmarks was vital to our success. Fortunately, Baines used a tachometer and was a meticulous diarist. He records that after leaving Grahamstown with Joseph McCabe on his Lake Ngami-bound Expedition on 8 February 1850, they reached Aliwal North on 28 February and stopped "for washing our tolerably abundant stock of soiled garments of all denominations". Five days later, after passing Rouxville and skirting Smithfield heading north, Baines writes:

"At twenty minutes past three we came to a range of high mountains stretching nearly east and west, and, turning eastward along their southern face, halted at a quarter to four in a kloof called Klip huis – or Rock house – from two or three caves in the layers of rock which shewed themselves at intervals along the face of the hill, and had formerly been the haunt of wild Bushmen. We visited one rather high up in a kloof and found several drawings of different animals. I copied one of a black rhinoceros, said by my companion [McCabe] to be a very good representation of the animal for which it was designed, but unfortunately, like many more of the few sketches I had the opportunity of making, it is in the missing book. We spread our bedding as usual under the wagon but a heavy shower falling in the night compelled us to take refuge inside; and the people in the Bushman's cave, where, looking out in an interval of the shower in the morning of Wednesday, March 6<sup>th</sup>, 1850, I saw them busily engaged in preparing breakfast

around a cheerful fire, with a group of Mahouri seated around another at the other end of the cave." (Kennedy 1964:29-30).

After studying maps, analysing the diary, making enquiries and doing good old-fashioned foot searching, we tasted success. Retracing the expedition's route, we were able to relocate 'Kliphuis' in a now deserted and hauntingly desolate area about 30 km south-east of Reddersburg. A more populous area then, it was from a farmstead near here that expedition member Roman went to buy wheel grease. Amply demonstrating the antiquities of Free State hospitality, the good *dame* [lady] would not accept payment and gave "a dish of butter too



Fig. 1: 'Cave – Mahouri's people', Brenthurst Library collection MS.049/14/14.

good to grease the wheels with." Shortly thereafter, the expedition outspanned in a small kloof with unusually sweet water. One of two sketches Baines made here (both of which are housed in the Brenthurst Library, by whose kind permission Fig. 1 is reproduced) shows the wagons and kloof. The second sketch shows the interior of the "Bushman cave" and demonstrates Baines' gift of capturing the essential elements of a place.

His sketch exactly matches a low rock-painted shelter that Trans !Garib members and friends scrambled into on 27 October 2001. We were able to find the precise spot – within 100 mm – where Baines sat and sketched, and we re-enacted the "Breakfast in the cave", this time

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with a camera (Fig. 2). In high spirits we set off to find the 'lost' rhino rock painting. After only a few minutes' walk we espied a small stone-walled rock shelter near the kloof's rim. Another short scramble – this time prickly – was rewarded with more paintings! Cattle and anvil-shaped Sotho shields! Red human figures and antelope. Where was the rhino? Had it faded to nothing? No! There it was in white next to a Sotho shield. Elation, even though we realised that people – such as those who had built a stone wall – had "found" this "lost" site before us. It is doubtful, though, that they realised the site's importance in the history of southern African rock art research. We did and savoured the moment.

Looking for "lost" rock art sites is important not just for the thrill of (re)discovery. We also gain valuable information about factors affecting preservation. For example, within the last three years, "Bushman's cave" has suffered a collapse of part of its wall at the spot where the "Mahouri" are depicted. We also learn of colonial attitudes towards the Bushmen and rock art. It is perhaps appropriate that the first non-Bushman to copy Free State rock art was himself an artist and we could do worse than heed his dictum – "I am

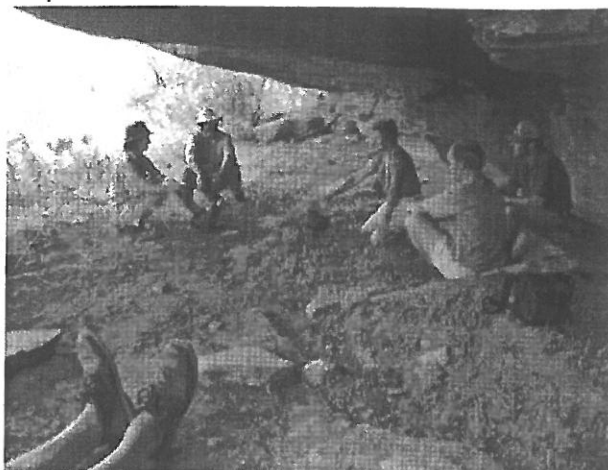


Fig. 2: Re-creation of Baines's "Cave – Mahouri's people" sketch. Feet by Feely.

simply an artist telling what I have seen as truthfully as I know it."

**Note:** Because these two sites have limited access control and have suffered from vandalism, their precise location is not being divulged here.

#### Reference

Kennedy, R F (ed). 1964. *Journal of residence in Africa 1842 – 1853, by Thomas Baines*. Volume 2: 1850 – 1853. Cape Town: The Van Riebeeck Society.

