

THE REDISCOVERY OF ROCK PAINTINGS RECORDED BY GEORGE W. STOW IN THE 1870's*

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Introduction

George W. Stow was born in Nuneaton, England, in 1822. In the years between 1867 and 1882, he travelled 'in the Eastern Province of the Cape Colony, in Griqualand West, and in the Orange Free State. His travels, undertaken chiefly for the purpose of trading or of geological survey, led him into places where rock engravings and rock paintings abounded, and his interest in the Bushmen led him to copy the most striking figures or groups he found on the rocks' (Bleek 1930). The copies made by Stow constitute the foundation for the study of rock-art in South Africa. A large proportion of them was published, in colour, in 1930 with an introduction and descriptive notes by Dorothea F. Bleek. Most of the balance were published in 1953 with a biographical introduction on Miss Bleek by Eric Rosenthal and an archaeological introduction by Professor A. J. H. Goodwin (Rosenthal 1953).

In her introduction to the 1930 publication Miss Bleek wrote: 'he never attempted to copy the whole painted surface of any cave or shelter; he chose a subject here and there, and unless the figures copied formed a group picture on the rock, he did not try to reproduce the actual distance between them on paper'. She also commented on Stow's difficulties of transport, of obtaining paper and the likelihood of errors slipping in as a consequence of the circumstances under which the copies were made.

In 1928 Miss Bleek revisited many of the sites at which paintings were copied by Stow and there are notes based on these visits in the 1930 publication. In addition, some of the reproductions are accompanied by explanations collected from Bushmen prisoners in Cape Town who were shown the copies by Dr W. H. I. Bleek and his sister-in-law, Miss Lucy Lloyd.

Miss Bleek was not able to visit all Stow's sites so those that remained unvisited have presented a continuing challenge to modern workers in this field.

'A Rhinoceros Hunt'

This painting is illustrated in plate 63 of the 1930 publication. Its locality is described as 'rocks on the farm Karefontein on the Caledon River, Ladybrand district'. Miss Bleek reports that the painting was not found and that there 'is no longer any farm of this name in the district'. The fact that Miss Bleek was unable to find the painting is not surprising. It is in a shelter on the farm Zuidoosthoek, No. 100 in the Wepener district. We found it, by accident, on 29 December 1970.

Probably because it is such a compact scene, the copy is accurate except that the figure in the top right-hand corner should be rather more behind the

other figures. Stow has obviously placed him where he is in order to economize on paper.

An addition has been made to the original in the form of two lines, apparently representing horns, running backwards from the ears of the animal. If these additions were there in Stow's time, he did not include them in his copy. He did, however, include the horn which, in the original, also looks as though it may have been a later addition—together with two lines that run backwards from it to the ears. These additions are in a much spottier, less solid paint than the head, body and legs of the animal.

Stow has shown a white belly which is also not quite in accordance with the original where there is some white towards the back of the belly and more of the spotty black.

One gets the impression that someone decided to change the animal as originally painted by means of a little touching-up.

Miss Bleek herself draws attention to the fact that many of the animals in the paintings were somewhat elongated. This one may originally have been intended to portray a hippopotamus, rather than rhinoceros, the horn being a later addition. In either case the legs are somewhat long.

The title 'A Rhinoceros Hunt' is derived from the explanation provided by one of the Bushman prisoners. He also drew attention to the hunters wearing hartebeests' heads and 'petticoats' which might be part of the hides worn with the heads.

This custom was explained by Stow (Stow 1905) in terms of disguises worn when hunting. This explanation has always been accepted but, recently, Pager (1975) expressed some doubt in view of the small number of recorded examples. Here is one possible example. Although not all the figures have such clear masks in the original as those in the copy, there is absolutely no doubt about one of them. They also appear to be in pursuit of the hippopotamus/rhinoceros and the man on the extreme right, who seems to have dropped an artefact resembling a serrated hoe or large leaf, may well be a casualty resulting from an encounter with it.

'Medley from Rouxville'

Plate 19 of the 1953 publication is of three groups, the locality of which has not previously been recorded.

The one in the top right-hand corner and the one at the bottom are both in the same shelter on the farm Tigerhoek No. 114, Rouxville district. They were recognized when Lee and I visited the shelter on 30 December 1971.

This shelter is a small one, approximately 6 metres long x 2 metres high and 2 metres deep. In addition to the two groups mentioned, it contains a number of well-executed and interesting paintings. These include a number of shaded polychrome eland and a lion painted in yellow ochre.

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There is a good deal of superimposition which makes it rather difficult to see the figure with the elaborate head-dress which is painted in red outline.

This figure is accurately reproduced by Stow but its significance remains an enigma. At present it is unique. We know of no other similar painting. The circular objects attached to the wrists in the reproduction are doubtful. If there, they are black.

The walking figure behind is painted in red silhouette. That in front is doubtful but, if there, is in very faded, creamy white.

The bottom group is not easy to explain but it seems most likely that the dark masses (painted in dark red ochre) represent two heavily built figures—the one crouched above the other. The seated group of more lightly built figures, with attractive white girdles, is grouped meaningfully round two amorphous blobs of red paint with white between them. What this represents has still to be determined.

Goodwin's comments do not add anything to the explanation of either of these groups.

'Orange River Bank Miaputti'

This is plate 9 of the 1953 publication. Stow's copy appears to depict two interesting 'monsters' and a cheetah.

We found the shelter on 31 December 1971. The surviving paintings are a little disappointing—particularly as the monsters have virtually disappeared. However, there are one or two that are of interest.

The cheetah, painted in yellow, is still clearly recognizable. Associated with it are some yellow human figures, a red snake and the yellow head and neck of a buck.

A group of a dozen or so red monochrome human figures is associated with a basket-like object. It is a somewhat different colour from the figures, so although associated with them may not necessarily have been painted at the same time. It appears to rest on the back of the largest figure and may just possibly represent a trap or big basket being carried.

What is left of the larger of the two 'monsters' is just visible, painted in red ochre. Only one of the four human figures in Stow's copy can still be seen. It is painted in pale pink.

The two Miaputti monsters appear to belong to a

family of similar paintings, other examples of which are to be found on the farm Limberg 239 in the Smithfield district and Breslau 576 in the Rouxville district. Goodwin says of them 'the animals are mythical'. By contrast Stow recorded the views of a Bushwoman that the Miaputti monster was an animal, by then extinct, to which she gave the name meaning 'the Master of the Water'. It was, she stated, an animal of enormous size, far larger than the hippopotamus, that lived in the country in ancient times. The Bushmen captured it by means of a strong enclosure of reeds and poles but even after the capture three or four Bushmen would usually meet their deaths before the animal was conquered (Stow 1905).

'No Locality'

Plates 46 and 47 in the 1953 publication are both from the farm Kwartelfontein. Both plates form part of the same scene. The individual figures, painted in red with small additions in white, are remarkably accurate but relative positions are altered presumably in order to economize on paper.

'Luther's Kraal'

Plate 22 from the 1953 publication consists mainly of two groups of men brandishing sticks and long knobkerries. The farm Luther's Kraal has now been incorporated in Kwartelfontein and the shelter is very close to the one above. The 'centipede' copied by Stow below the two groups of men has not been rediscovered. It is probably from a different shelter.

Acknowledgements

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