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# on the rocks

## BERT WOODHOUSE

*Photographs in this article by the author*

On 27 November 1836, the famous hunter, Captain (later Sir) William Cornwallis Harris cornered a very large black rhinoceros in a cul-de-sac consisting of "an old stone enclosure", the entrance to which he closed up so that he could more easily despatch the animal. He fired "no less than twenty-seven shots before it fell, dyed with crimson gore and embossed with the white foam that rage had churned around its chops". This is how the 'sporting incident' was described in *Wild Sports of Southern Africa* by Harris himself.

It is not, however, the incident, sporting or otherwise, that I wish to bring specially to your attention – but the place where it occurred: "An old stone enclosure" – one of "numerous stone walls, once thronged by thousands but now presenting no vestige of inhabitants" through which the hunter passed on his return from the Limpopo to the Cape. The ruins were the result of the depredations of the breakaway Zulu chieftain, Mzilikazi, or Moselekatsé as Harris spelt his name. Mzilikazi had rampaged along this "path of blood" only a few years before the hunter met him in 1836. In doing so he had reduced hundreds of kraals to rubble.

The fact that the black rhinoceros was cornered and shot in the ruins of an Iron Age village is interesting, but of even greater interest is the fact that adjacent to many of these ruins were, and still are, some of the finest artistic representations of the rhinoceros ever made. When Harris was in the act of killing his "very large" prey, he was probably close to works that would have appealed equally to the artistic side of his nature which was demonstrated in his own paintings of the animals that he took such pleasure in hunting.

The representations of the rhinoceros in the vicinity of the Iron Age ruins were engraved or

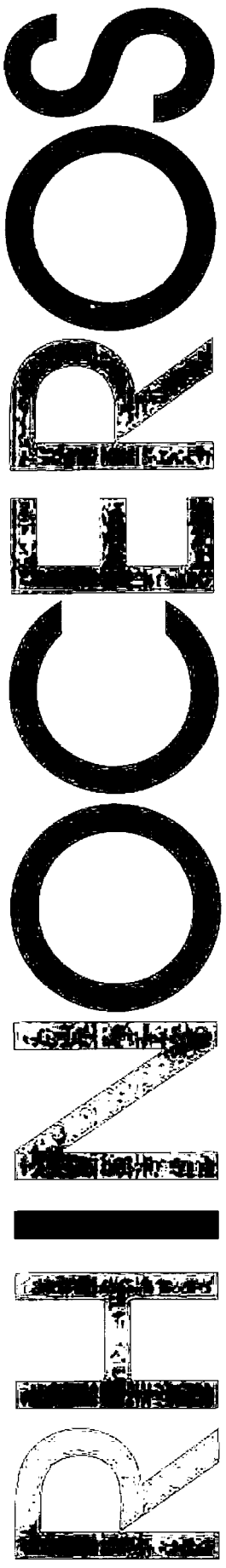
incised into the surface of rocks lying flat on the gently undulating plains of the Highveld. They were what we now refer to as petroglyphs or, more informally, rock engravings. A number of examples have been removed to museums for fear of vandalism and notable collections may be viewed in the Transvaal Museum in Pretoria and an open air museum in the Johannesburg Zoo where the immediate environment is very much the same as that in which they were originally created.

Experiments have established that the outline of the animals had probably been made with a flake of the same rock as that on which they are inscribed. The draughtsmanship is excellent and it is clear that the prehensile upper lip of the black rhinoceros was carefully noted by the prehistoric artist. The browsing habits were also noted: one engraving includes a frond of vegetation protruding from the mouth of the rhinoceros while another includes the trunk and branches of a tree that has been stripped of its foliage.

The manner in which the black rhinoceros carries its head high is a feature of several engravings and the rather ill-tempered nature of the beast has been well communicated in spite of the comparatively simple technique.

In a particularly fine example from the Magaliesburg district, a human figure, apparently without arms, is superimposed on a galloping rhino which has a very vindictive expression. The lack of arms may indicate that the man is facing the animal and is using his arms and hands in front of him, possibly to draw a bow, but this is surmise and the explanation for the man's association with the rhino may be more profound – perhaps in the realm of totemism.

In another example there is no doubt that a man has been gored by a rhino – clearly an actual





On the rhino's arrival, we experimented with different browse offerings and among the favourite foods were the fruit of the sausage tree *Kigelia africana*, various combretum species and *Securinega virosa* (white berry bush). On release, *Euphorbia ingens* was found to be a special favourite and is heavily utilised. Other trees browsed with considerable pressure are *Dichrostachys cinerea*, *Spirostachy africana*, *Pterocarpus rotundifolius* and the acacia species, particularly *A. borleae*.

### Security

The costs of introduction – quite apart from those of translocation which were borne by WWF – were heavy. Confinement was purposefully long to accustom the rhino to their new home and to reduce the chances of wanderlust. A tractor and trailer and a gang of six were employed full-time gathering food and cleaning pens. Extra rangers were employed to step up the security and a special additional


strand of electrified wire was strung at black rhino level on the fenceline. Concentrates to supplement their food were consumed at the rate of over 20 bags a month. Regular horse cubes were also used with great success.

Two observation towers have been erected in strategic locations as an additional safeguard against poaching. The towers are equipped with solar panels, 12-volt batteries and radios. From these, a ground force of rangers can be guided to any trouble spot, and the towers themselves can be controlled by radio from headquarters.

All this has been done in anticipation of increased poaching pressure, which will undoubtedly result from the presence of rhino and elephant at Mkhaya. The same measures are being taken at Hlane National Park.

The operation has so far been totally successful, and we record our deep appreciation to the SA Nature Foundation and the WWF, the Zimbabwean Government, our Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Natural Resources and Agriculture and the Department of Veterinary Services for their roles in making possible the return of black rhino to Swaziland.

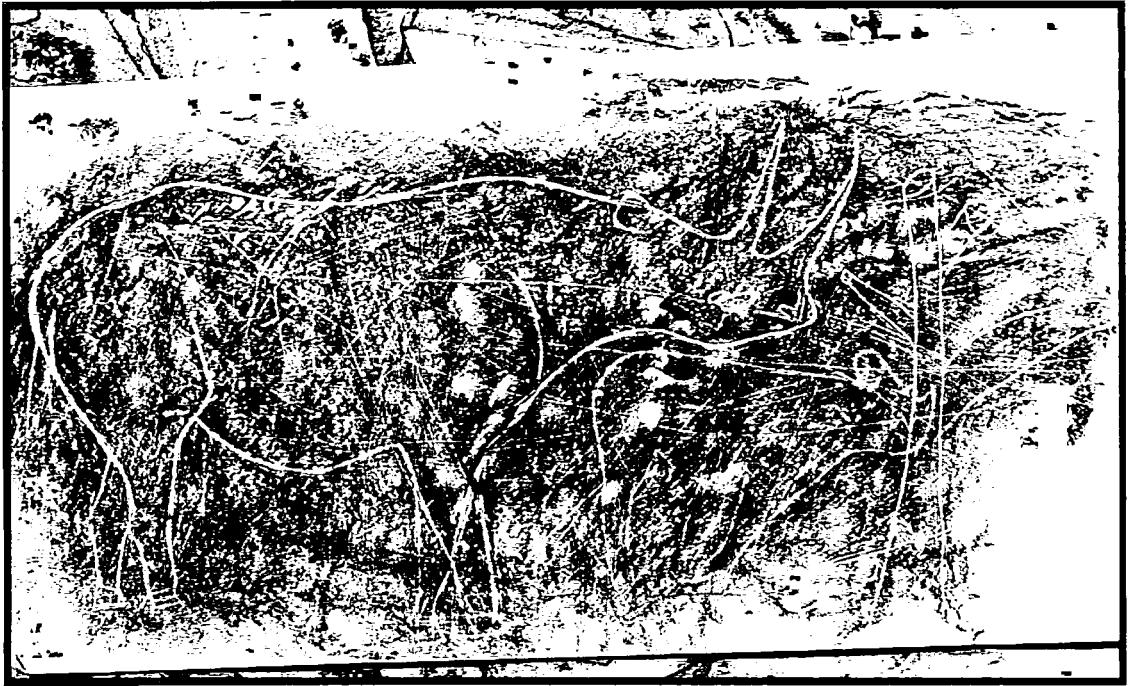
We hope that a further six rhino will join the foundation group soon. On a recent visit to Swaziland, Peter Jenkins, rhino consultant to the Kenyan government, assessed Mkhaya as providing some of the best black rhino habitat he had ever seen. He estimated that this 6 200 hectare reserve was capable of supporting up to 100 black rhino, which lifts Mkhaya's scope for contributing to the conservation of this species to very meaningful proportions.

Mr Jenkins expressed the view that Mkhaya should be considered a priority black rhino reserve. Because of its prime habitat and high level of security, his view was that it should be immediately stocked to near capacity in order that it could begin producing a surplus for redistribution to other areas. 





Rubbing of a rock engraving from the Hekpoort district, Transvaal, depicting a black rhinoceros with a partially destroyed tree and a young rhino.



event recorded as a warning to those who coveted the tasty meat of the animal which the traveller Francis Galton had compared to veal.

Unlike the "rain-elephants" of my previous article, there are no positive examples of a rain-rhinoceros but there is one candidate where two curved outlines rise from the animal's back. These could be interpreted as being similar to the cloud lines associated with many rain-elephants – especially one at the Somerby site in Zimbabwe.

In the Klerksdorp district is a particularly fine example of a galloping rhinoceros executed with a much broader outline, possibly using the pecking technique common in that district. The technique probably involved the use of an adze with a hard stone or metal tip. This particular petroglyph has been declared a national monument – a status which is certainly justified by the excellence of the workmanship and the artistic insight and observation of the artist which have combined to produce a masterpiece. Another masterpiece from the Schweizer-Reneke District records a rhinoceros covered

with birds – presumably the red-billed oxpecker which feeds on the ticks living on the rhino's hide.

Paintings of rhinos are not as numerous as engravings, probably because the animal itself was not as numerous in the mountains and valleys of the typical painting country as in the plains and foothills where the petroglyphs were made. Nevertheless, there are some notable exceptions. The most notable is a very large outline painting in red ochre which provides quite a shock when one has struggled through the surrounding undergrowth to a small shelter under a granite boulder in the Chibi area of Zimbabwe.

At least that was how it seemed to my wife and I when we photographed it in 1971. It is 1.8 m in length but its rear end has been substantially obliterated by water running down the rockface. The front horn is huge and the ears large and pointed. The head is held low and although the draughtsmanship is not as good as the petroglyphs of the black rhino in the Transvaal, I am inclined to think that this painting is

modelled on a white rhinoceros. It should be borne in mind that the difference between the two species is not really their colour – they are both grey – but their size, habits, habitat and physical features such as the lips and ears.

The particularly long front horn which is also a hallmark of the white rhinoceros is shown to advantage in a painting in a dull brownish-red monochrome silhouette at the site of Mrewa not far from the road between Hatara and Mloko. It is painted in company with an elephant, warthogs and a rain-elephant. Near to Hatara, in the Lake Malawi nature reserve, two rhinos are painted with an elephant and a kudu and in the Concession district, a black rhino in silhouette is painted with a crocodile in red outline.

Perhaps the most typical painting of a white rhinoceros is in a very small but well-known shelter not far from Rhodes' grave at World's View in the Maropos. It takes a while to identify the outline among other paintings of wildebeest

Pointing from the Chibi district of Zimbabwe, 1,8 m long – on unusually large pointing in a small rock shelter where it probably had considerable religious significance.





First recorded by George William Stow in the 1870s, this painting was lost sight of until rediscovered by the author and his friend Neil Lee a hundred years later. Although the animal has a rhinoceros horn, it is probably a "rain-animal" as it also has other non-rhino features.

in the same style and hunters in silhouette, but once it has been spotted the long front horn and pendulous lower lip make identification sure.

The association of at least one rhinoceros painting with a rain-elephant has been mentioned, as has the possible cloud outlines in one of the petroglyphs. Many rain-animals are of indeterminate species, having features that recall the eland one minute and the hippopotamus the next. A concept like that of an animal that lived in the clouds and sent the rain was obviously capable of many individual interpretations by the artists who depicted it. One typical example in the Wepener district of the Orange Free State was originally recorded in the 1870s by George William Stow, but he noted it as being in the Ladybrand district so that it disappeared from view until Neil Lee and I rediscovered it in 1970, approximately one hundred years later. It has something of the appearance of a rhinoceros but its legs are too slender and both the horn on its nose and the slender horns on the top of its head





Black rhino in silhouette with the red outline of a crocodile behind it from Concession district, Zimbabwe.



may have been later additions. Looking at it now I am reasonably convinced that it is a rain-animal as is a rare rhinoceros from the Ficksburg district.

To bring this rhinoceros round-up to a close, it should be mentioned that veteran rock art enthusiast Ginger Townley Johnson recorded a rhinoceros family scene, mother and baby, near Clanwilliam in the Cape; that Professor Murray Schoonraad recorded a white rhinoceros painted in orange outline near Nuanetsi in Zimbabwe, and that Mike English on the staff of the National Parks Board of South Africa recorded the somewhat fragmentary remains of a rhino painted in yellow along with two enigmatic circles which may represent honeycombs.

Like the elephant-men of the Cape, there are also paintings of rhinoceros-men. The most striking, first reproduced by Patricia Vinnicombe in her book *People of the Eland*, is in the Impendhle district of Natal but there are other

examples in the Transkei. In the same way that a trunk is the distinguishing feature of the elephant-men, so is a single horn the distinguishing feature of the rhinoceros-men – so it is also possible that they were warthog-men. As yet there is no ethnographical evidence in support of either explanation, so the paintings remain a challenge to enthusiasts.

#### EDITOR'S NOTE

There are some exceptional examples of rhinoceros paintings at Tsodilo Hills in Ngamiland, Botswana. A faint example of one is on an island at the junction of the Shashe and Limpopo rivers. A black rhinoceros painting is situated not far from the Songimvelo Game Reserve in kaNgwane at a beautiful but vulnerable to vandalism site overlooking a small river set amongst granite boulders. Tweefontein in Damaraland has a series of very fine rock engravings testifying to this animal's ancient existence in that, the oldest of the world's deserts. 