

BLACK OR WHITE?

The identification and significance of rhinoceroses in South African Bushman rock art

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South African Bushman rock art is celebrated both as an integrated expression of a people's world-understanding and for its attention to detail. Often minutiae such as the shape of an antelope's fellock or an elephant's swaggering gait are exactly captured in engraved or painted form. It is essential that we observe these details correctly as they fundamentally affect our interpretations of rock art imagery.

A common mistake is to overlook or confuse those physiological and behavioural details that are diagnostic of either black or white rhinoceroses, leading to a misidentification of the species depicted and a resultant skewed interpretation. This mistake may be attributable to the scarcity of rhinos in South Africa's Bushman rock paintings where only 34 examples are known. Conversely, there are well over 1 000 engraved rhinos, but few people are familiar with the rock engraving tradition. Though one must be mindful of seeking too literal an identification in symbolic and religious rock art, even supernatural beliefs have earthly referents and it is necessary to be able to distinguish between black and white rhinos in life.

Recognising rhinos at a glance

The features that distinguish the two modern southern African rhinos – black (*Diceros bicornis*) and white (*Ceratotherium simum*) – are shown in Table 1 and Fig. 1. Any one of features 2 to 6 and 8 can distinguish between the species, while feature 3 pertains only after about two years when the posterior horn emerges. One or more of these features are apparent in almost all depictions of rhinos. As a test, hold up the South African R10 bank note and observe features 2 to 6, 8 and 10 of the white rhino.

Additional, but variable, distinguishing features include the adult black rhino's posterior horn, which is often more than half the length of the

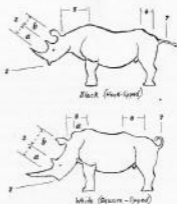


Fig. 1: Distinguishing features of black and white rhinos (cf. numbers in table)

Jim Feely
1988

FEATURE	BLACK RHINO	WHITE RHINO
1. Size	Smaller*	Larger*
2. Lip shape	Upper lip overhangs lower and is pointed and prehensile for browsing	Upper lip does not overhang lower and is square for grazing
3. Horn:ear distance	3a more-or-less equal to 3b	3a distinctly less than 3b
4. Head:neck length (3:5)	Head length less than neck length	Head length more than neck length
5. Neck line	Slightly convex almost straight	Pronounced convex nuchal hump (5a)
6. Lumbar & pelvic humps	Humps almost contiguous	Gap between humps
7. Tail position	Straight and horizontal when defecating, alarmed or running	Curled when defecating or running. Horizontal when standing and alarmed
8. Ear shape	Tip rounded	Tip pointed
9. Mother:calf position when on the move	Calf follows mother	Calf precedes mother
10. Carriage of head	Lower jaw usually horizontal to the ground or angled up to browse	Lower jaw always below horizontal, mouth mostly just above the ground to graze

* Size difference is only apparent when both are seen together in the field - a very rare event. Thus both species are shown the same size in Figure 1.

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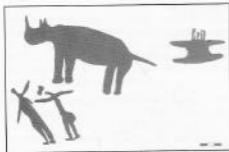


Fig. 2. Redrawing of Thomas Baines' black rhino rock painting associated with Sotho Shield, Reddersburg District, Free State. Black represents grey-white. Scale bar 30 mm.

anterior horn and may even exceed it. An adult white rhino's posterior horn is always less than half the length of the anterior horn. Females of both species may have thinner and longer horns than males. But in zoos, horns appear with shapes and proportions never seen in the wild.

There are thus at least a dozen ways to distinguish the two species of rhino in the field, most of which also apply to depictions of rhinos in Bushman rock art.

Rhinos in Bushman rock art

The earliest recorded identification of a 'rock art rhino' by a European in South Africa was by artist and explorer Thomas Baines. In his journal for Tuesday 5 March 1850 he wrote: "...two or three caves...had formerly been the haunt of the wild Bushmen. We visited one...and found several drawings of different animals. I copied one of a black rhinoceros, said by my companion [Joseph McCabe] to be a very good representation of the animal for which it was designed" (Kennedy 1964:29).

At the time Baines had not seen a rhino, but McCabe had hunted for years in what is today North West Province and Botswana, and he must have been familiar with both species. Last year, we relocated Baines' rhino rock painting near Reddersburg in the southern Free State. Unfortunately, Baines' sketch is in his missing sketchbook, so we reproduce our redrawing of the rhino here (Fig. 2). We agree with McCabe's identification, as the rock painting shows features 4, 5, 7 and 10.

Comparable Bushman rock paintings of rhinos

1 We provide names of access-controlled rock art sites only.

are scarce. The cover of the July 1963 *South African Archaeological Bulletin* shows a black rhino with calf following from the Soutpansberg in Limpopo Province, with features 3 to 6 (Charteris 2001; species not previously identified). This painting is echoed 1 700 km away in the Cederberg by a well-known rock painting that appears on the June 1958 cover of the *Bulletin* (Fig. 3; species not previously identified). Battle Cave¹ in KwaZulu-Natal has two strange creatures once thought to represent bushpigs, but which are more likely black rhinos since bushpig tusks do not protrude above the line of the snout (although those of adult male warthog do). Near Molteno in the Eastern Cape, two black rhinos are shown being hunted with spears.



Fig. 3. Red rock painting of black rhino with calf following Cederberg, Western Cape.

Rock paintings of rhinos are more frequent in Limpopo Province, accounting for 15 of the 34 known paintings. Across the Limpopo River, rhinos occur at about 10 per cent of Zimbabwean hunter-gatherer rock painting sites and they are also noticeable in Botswana's and Namibia's rock paintings.

When one turns to South African rock engravings there is a dramatic change. Rhinos become the second most commonly depicted animal after eland. In their monumental life's work, Gerhard and Dora Fock recorded over 500 engraved rhinos in the Northern Cape, North West and Free State provinces (e.g. Fock & Fock, 1989), a number that has since more than doubled. The cover of the June 1983 *South African Archaeological Bulletin* depicted one example of a black rhino from the vicinity of Vryburg in North West Province that clearly displays features 3 to 6 and 9.

The attention to detail in this and similar rhino engravings is astonishing. One example: the lowered head position of the magnificent charging black rhino (features 3 to 6 and 8) at Bosworth near Klerksdorp is assumed only at the



Fig. 4. Elegant engraved 565 mm charging black rhino. Bosworth, North West.

very last moment before impact (Fig. 4), in contrast to the black rhino rock paintings in the Soutpansberg and Cederberg, there is an engraved example of a white rhino with its calf preceding it (Fig. 5) at the famous San's Fountain site west of Kimberley (features 3, 4, 5 and 9). Significantly, rhinos enjoy more attention to detail than any other engraved animal. Some rhino engravings have had their outlines rubbed smooth, mimicking the rhino habit of rubbing against rocks to rid themselves of parasites. Flakes were sometimes chipped off rocks bearing rhino engravings, perhaps to keep as relics (Ouzman 2001). Rhino engravings also have numerous 'non-real' elements such as square-neck protrusions, zigzag lips and impossibly long horns that also represent keen observation, but at a supernatural level.

Rhinos as extraordinary animals

Part of the rhino's extraordinariness stems from its 50 mm thick layer of subcutaneous fat (Smithers, 1983: 559). Many Bushman communities prized fat as a substance containing Spirit World potency by which they used to ensure the well-being of the world, for example by aiding rain-making (see Bleek, 1933). It seems as if the ever-observant Bushman at one time or another used the aggressive black rhino as an earthly embodiment of the destructive male rain-animal that lived in the Spirit World. Similarly, they seem to have linked the more docile white rhino to the nurturing female rain-animal.

This conceptual linkage is further strengthened by rhinos' habit of wallowing in pools of water, which is also the rain-animal's home, and of giving off copious quantities of sweat from their bodies when running, in the same way the

rain-animal was believed to walk the land and give off rain. These observations find visual expression on some engraved rhinos that have been hammered in the midriff in the same way the rain-shamans 'broke the rain's ribs' (Bleek, 1933: 387). Fig. 6 takes these insights still further. By cutting the rock and adding two rough-pecked horns to a rare pecked and smoothed hippopotamus engraving, a familiar animal is rendered unfamiliar – just like the other-worldly rain-animal. Engravings like these make us realise that they are not depictions of events like rain-making, but objects central to those events. The interplay between belief and observation is best captured in Ogden Nash's dictum: 'If you think the elephant preposterous, you've probably never seen a rhinosterous!'

Conclusion

Rhinos were an important part of Bushman life and were engraved and painted with great care. The long process of uncovering the meaning they had for their makers begins with an accurate identification of what is depicted. This routine activity has led to unexpected discoveries, such as the fact that black rhino outnumber white rhino



Fig. 5. Rock engraving of a white rhino with calf preceding it. San's Fountain, Northern Cape

depictions by a factor of at least five, even in the region north of the Vaal (Hai-!Garib) and Orange (Kai-!Garib) rivers, where both rhinos occurred together. Given that rock art occurs throughout South Africa, the scarcity of white rhino depictions cannot be attributed to the animals' distribution, but must be accounted for by a social mechanism.

Perhaps the violent thunderstorms that typify South African rainfall required the Bushman to pay more attention to the destructive male rain-animal, even to the extent of fixing its earthly

embodiment, the black rhino, onto/into the rock in what we now call 'rock art'. There, caught between the Ordinary and the Spirit Worlds, these dangerous images were rubbed and their ribs broken to control a destructive force, even at the cost of neglecting the desirable female rain.

Rhinos are ideal animals through which to understand both the ordinary and extraordinary elements of Bushman life. By heeding our Bushman forebears' considered and encultured observations of their environment and by studying relevant ethnography and zoology we may once again integrate seamlessly the natural and cultural worlds.

Acknowledgements

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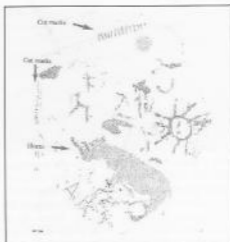


Fig. 6: Engraved 'rhinopotamus'. Stowlands, Free State. Scale bar 30 mm.

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Ancient roots for an African language?

A genetic study in Africa has revealed that the first human language may have resembled today's African click languages. The proposal is controversial, however. Found only in Africa, click-language users include the Hadza of Tanzania and Botswana and Namibian Bushmen.

To determine whether click languages emerged from a common tongue, anthropological geneticists at Stanford analysed cells from the cheeks of several African populations for genetic markers on the Y chromosome, which fathers pass on to sons. The more related click speakers are, it was reasoned, the more likely that click languages arose relatively recently. If click speakers are genetically diverse, that could imply that other speakers lost their clicks after the click speakers diverged into separate populations.

About half the Hadzabe (plural of Hadza), a third of the Bushmen and a third of non-click speakers in central Africa share the variant studied, which is not found elsewhere. Limiting their study to just these individuals, the team then looked at another

Y chromosome marker. Changes there revealed that the Hadzabe and Bushmen "are as genetically distant from one another as two populations could be." Both the Bushmen and the Hadzabe appear more similar to the non-click groups than to one another. The researchers dispute the theory that the Bushman and Hadzabe languages arose independently, maintaining that the dialects are too complex.

360-million-year-old fossil fish

The 360-million-year-old fossil of a species of fish with elegant needle-like spines, previously unknown to science, has been made in a shale deposit near Grahamstown by paleontologist Robert Gess, who has been working on a site exposed by a cutting to reroute the N2 for more than 10 years. Named *Dipleacanthus acus*, the fossil is only 100 mm long, but the distinctive narrow spines on its back and stomach make it almost 150 mm from top to bottom. The new specimen is probably the most complete of all the individual fish recovered from the site, with the bulk of its flesh and fin outlines preserved.