



LAKE SIBAYA AND THE BEGINNING OF THE IRON AGE IN KWAZULU-NATAL

Gavin Whitelaw and Sue Janse van Rensburg

The term 'Iron Age' is a short-hand archaeological convention that refers to the period in which African farmers settled in and spread throughout the summer rainfall zone of South Africa. The term reflects the essential metallurgical skills maintained within these farming communities. Archaeologists divide the Iron Age in KwaZulu-Natal in two based on broad differences in material culture: the Early Iron Age from AD 450 to 1050 and the Late Iron Age from AD 1050 to about 1820, the onset of colonial settlement.



Fig. 1: Sue indicating the 2012 lake level with her hand. The southern basin lies behind her.

The essential outline of the Early Iron Age sequence in KwaZulu-Natal was established by the mid-1980s. It contained four phases: Matola (AD 450–600), Msuluzi (AD 600–800), Ndongondwane (AD 800–950) and Ntshekane (AD 950–1050). These names apply to the pottery styles of each phase and are usually derived from the names of the archaeological sites at which the associated pottery was first described.

Matola is an exception. In 1980 Tim Maggs suggested the name 'Matola' for a style that incorporated pottery from the sites of Silver Leaves near Tzaneen, Matola in Maputo and Mzonjani in Durban. Although Maggs (1980) recognised differences across the three sites, he felt that Matola provided a link that united them within a single style cluster dating from about AD 300 to 600. Menno Klapwijk (1974), who excavated Silver Leaves, had already noted a similarity with Kwale pottery in East Africa. Matola and Kwale pottery

provided evidence for the spread of African farmers from eastern to southern Africa early in the Common Era.

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AFRICAN ROAN ANTELOPE, ETHIOPIAN 'UNICORNS' AND EUROPEAN MEDIEVAL ART

J Francis Thackeray

Unicorns depicted in late medieval art in Europe typically have long straight horns. Such images in tapestries or stained glass windows were inspired by the tusks of narwhals (*Monodon monoceros*) from Greenland, brought to Europe as isolated fully adult male canine teeth (from the left side of the skull), typically 2 m in length with a spiral growth structure. They were sold at extraordinarily high prices, based on the claim that they were the actual horns of the fabled beast with one horn with medicinal properties. However, in 1638 a Danish physician named Ole Worm recognised the truth that the 'horns' were actually narwhal tusks, and in 1646 Sir Thomas Browne ridiculed the unicorn in a book entitled *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, exposing it for what it really was (Shepard 1979).



Fig. 1: The roan antelope (*Hippotragus equinus*). Photo: Jess Thompson.

Initial beliefs associated with unicorns can be traced back to descriptions by the Greek historian Ctesias. In 342 BC Aristotle gave an account in *History of Animals*. In medieval Europe, such descriptions gave rise to perceptions of a fierce one-horned animal having the body of a horse (equid), a goat-like beard (caprid) and cloven feet (bovid). At least some

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medieval beliefs associated with unicorns had an Asian origin. The Chinese one-horned *qilin* or *kilin* was described as having the body of a deer (cervid), the head of a lion (carnivore) and scales (reptile). Marco Polo gave a description of a unicorn that corresponds to a rhinoceros. At least some unicorns depicted in medieval art in Europe have long curved horns. It is clear that these were not inspired by narwhals from the Arctic or by the straight-horned oryx from Africa and Arabia. Here I question whether such European images of the unicorn were inspired partly by the African roan antelope, *Hippotragus equinus*.

The roan

Roan antelope have a horse-like body, hence the species name *H. equinus* (Fig. 1). They have long curved horns; are widely distributed in woodland savanna in west, central, east and southern Africa; and are highly aggressive when wounded. They were first recorded and illustrated by explorers in the early 19th century during an expedition into the interior of South Africa led by William Somerville (Bradlow and Bradlow 1979). A single roan antelope was initially sketched by Daniell (1804) in a rufous colour (Roberts 1951), indicating that it was bearded (Fig. 2).

When the drawing was published in 1804, it was coloured grey-blue, influenced perhaps by a

knowledge of the so-called 'bloubok' (*Hippotragus leucophaeus*), a related species (now extinct) known from the southern Cape. Daniell's image of the roan was considered by some naturalists to be so much like a goat that it was classified in 1827 as *Capra barbata*, distinct from *Capra ibex* which in Africa is found only in the mountainous areas of north-eastern regions. Both roan and ibex have long curved horns and were apparently perceived to be analogous animals in belief systems in prehistory (Thackeray 2014).



Fig. 2: Roan antelope depicted by Samuel Daniell (1804) in South Africa. Reproduced with permission from Alessandra Maggs (private collection).

Despite a reference to ‘the acknowledged fidelity of the figures designed by Mr D’ (Roberts 1951), the goat-like ‘beard’ depicted by Daniell is curious. There is a probable explanation. Dorst and Dandelot (1978) note that ‘longish dark hairs, forming a kind of mane’ can occur under the neck. The length of such hairs would be greater in relatively old adults. This could have contributed to Daniell’s perception of a drooping neck-mane and a dark ‘beard’ on the animal that had the local name *tackhaitze*. In Latin, the accepted scientific name for the genus, *Hippotragus*, means ‘horse-goat’.

‘Unicorns’ in Ethiopia

A Portuguese Jesuit missionary, Jeronimo Lobo (1593–1678), gave two accounts of ‘unicorns’ in Ethiopia. His first report was translated from a French version by Samuel Johnson (1739), stating that their ‘shape is that of a beautiful horse, of a bay [red-brown] colour with a black tail which in some provinces is long, in others very short; some have long manes’. In all of these respects, the description corresponds to the horse-like red-brown (‘roan’ or ‘rufous’) colour of the roan antelope with prominent manes and black tails. Long ‘drooping’ manes in Lobo’s account are interesting in the sense that they would correspond to Daniell’s (1804) record of the same species of an adult roan in southern Africa (Fig. 2).

Lobo’s second account of a ‘unicorn’ in Ethiopia was published in an English translation by Peter Wyche (1669). It referred to Portuguese explorers who had seen the animal ‘in a little valley encompassed with thick woods’ where ‘their horses grazed on the good grass’. In terms of habitat, this would correspond to the fact that roan are grazers and are typically distributed in fertile woodland savanna. The ‘unicorn’ in this instance was said to be ‘a perfect horse of the

same colour, hair and shape’ as the animal that was described initially. It was said to have a straight horn. The relatively short horns of young roan are only slightly curved and when seen at a distance, the skittish animal could easily have been perceived by the explorers (and others) as having had a single straight horn.

In 1682 Job Ludolphus gave a separate account of a unicorn in the *New History of Ethiopia*. The animal was ‘both strong and fierce, called *Arweharis*, which signifies one horn. This beast resembles a goat, but very swift of foot. Whether it be the *Monoceros* of the Ancients I leave to the scrutiny of others.’

Discussion

As demonstrated by this study, historical evidence from Ethiopia strongly suggests that some ‘unicorns’ had a basis in observations of roan. It is not unreasonable to speculate that isolated horns of this antelope could have been transported over considerable distances, as in the case of elephant tusks (Kendrick 1937). Verbal accounts could have served to distribute the notion of a unicorn that resembled roan in some respects, especially in terms of the shape its horn.

A ‘Persian’ unicorn in an illustrated manuscript associated with al-Muṭahhar ibn Muḥammad Yazdī (c. 1184 AD) has the body of a horse that is reddish-brown in colour. Its long, curved brown horn could be considered to have a keratinous ridged sheath. Apart from the single horn, all of these features bring to mind a roan outside its natural range of distribution.

The long curved horn of a ‘*Monoceros*’ unicorn in the *Bestiary* (c. 1183 AD, from York or Lincoln in England), curated at the Morgan Library and Museum in New York (MS M.81 fol. 12v), is also remarkably like that of a roan. The animal is wounded.

As mentioned earlier, unicorns were believed to have been fierce. Roan antelope can certainly be fierce, particularly when wounded, and concepts related to wounded roan evidently contributed to the development of beliefs over a wide area of the African continent, probably with considerable time depth. Within the last 3 000 years, sorghum was introduced from north-east Africa to west Africa and it is in Mali where certain agricultural beliefs (and art) traditionally relate to roan in the context of an agency called *Chiwara* or *Tyi Wara*, the latter being etymologically linked to ‘wounded wild animal’ or ‘wounded roan’ (Thackeray 2005; 2014). Also within the last 3 000 years, domesticated sheep were introduced from north-east Africa to the sub-continent

in association with ancestral Khoi populations who (in southern Africa in the 19th century) believed in a 'supreme being' called *Tsui //khoab*, which can be etymologically traced to 'wounded roan' (Thackeray 2005).

Within the last 2 000 years, Bantu-speaking peoples moved from west Africa to southern Africa and it is among Bantu-speakers in South Africa that we find words for roan that relate to wounding and other concepts. For example, the form *-hlaba* is found in North Sotho words for the antelope and to stabbing. Further to this, I have noted the following (Thackeray 2005):

'isiXhosa words incorporating the form *hlaba* as in *ukuhlaba* refer to making a mark, to stab, pierce or kill (McLaren 1984) ... Words incorporating the form *kwala* or *kuala* refer not only to roan, as in the seTswana term *kwalata* (Walker 1981), but also to writing [making a mark], as in a Basarwa Bushman term *kwala* (Bleek 1956), and to engraving in a (probably Tswana) word *lokuala* (cf. *lokwala*), referring to rock engravings in the interior of South Africa (Moffat, cited by Stow 1905: 27)'.

This linguistic evidence points to conceptual links between roan antelope, wounding, stabbing (thus making a mark), writing and prehistoric rock art in South Africa. Such links can also be found in words incorporating the form *taka*, as in *tackhaitse*, which was recorded by Daniell when referring to roan antelope (Fig. 2), while *taka* means 'to make a coloured mark' in South Sotho spoken in areas where polychrome rock paintings are common.

At Logageng in South Africa there is evidence of a ritual in which a person appears to have behaved like a roan antelope that had been wounded. This event, and rituals associated with the *Tyi Wara* ('wounded roan') in West Africa, may have had a common origin, perhaps in areas of north-eastern Africa where sorghum was first domesticated at least 3 000 years ago (Thackeray 2005).

In the light of observations presented in this study, I propose as a hypothesis that concepts associated with roan contributed not only to belief systems and art in Africa, originating perhaps in north-eastern regions of the continent, but also to art in areas where roan did not occur, as in the case of the 'Persian' unicorn, originating perhaps from concepts held in north-east Africa. In the case of medieval representations of unicorns in England, one example is the wounded Monoceros with a long curved horn in the *Bestiary* of 1183. This hypothesis need not be considered too outrageous, recognising that Shepard (1979) has previously considered the possibility that at least some European medieval concepts associated with unicorns originated from north-east Africa.

This study serves to direct attention towards the roan

antelope (with their long curved horns) as a possible source of inspiration contributing to some extent to the development of at least some examples of *early* medieval art in Europe, just as narwhals (with their long straight tusks) contributed to a large extent as an inspiration for *late* medieval art on the continent and in England.

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Danish king Bluetooth's treasure found

A trove found in Germany may have belonged to king Harald Bluetooth, who brought Christianity to Denmark. A hunt for treasure on Rügen in the Baltic led to the discovery of a piece of silver. A 400 m² dig found a hoard believed to be linked to the king Harald Gormsson, known as Harry Bluetooth, who reigned from around AD 958 to 986. The find includes braided necklaces, pearls, brooches, a Thor's hammer, rings and some 600 chipped coins of which 100 date to Bluetooth's era, when he ruled over what is now Denmark, northern Germany, southern Sweden and parts of Norway. The oldest coin is a Damascus dirham from 714, while the most recent is a penny dating to 983. Bluetooth fled to Pomerania after a rebellion led by his son Sven Gabelbart and died in 987.

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