McGregor Museum Kimberley

Archaeology Department: Driekopseiland: towards a new interpretation by David Morris, 2001.

Background

Driekopseiland is one of South Africa's most extraordinary and renowned rock engraving sites (Stow 1905; Wilman 1933; Battiss 1948; Van Riet Lowe 1952; Slack 1962; Butzer et al. 1979; Fock & Fock 1989; Morris 1990; Lewis-Williams & Blundell 1998). Well known as it is, it has puzzled researchers for more than a century. The site consists of over 3500 engraved images, on exposed glaciated andesite basement rock in the bed of the Riet River, which is submerged when the river rises. More than 90% of the engravings are 'geometric' motifs. Such images are present, and often common; at a significant number of engraving sites in the region (Fock 1969; Fock & Fock 1989), but nowhere in the area do they occur in such numbers and density relative to figurative engravings, nor in quite so singular a locality.

Because of these differences, the question of authorship has arisen in the past in partial explanation of the site - with the most likely candidates cited in the literature being either 'San'/'Bushmen' or 'Khoekhoe'/'Korana'. There is as yet no agreement on the identity/ies of those responsible for the engravings at Driekopseiland. There has been no dearth of interpretive possibilities put forward for the site, including those entertaining ancient exotic involvement. Van Riet Lowe (1952) explored the possibility that some of the engravings, evincing a 'feeling for writing', were more than mere pictographs, and Willcox (1964) wondered about resemblances to child art; but most early accounts were concerned with the authorship issue. At base, many writers displayed a preoccupation with ethnicity and the reified art-making capacities and aesthetic sensibilities of respective cultural groups - Bushmen, Korana, and sundry interbred combinations (not to mention foreigners). These approaches were very much in the "traditional" mode of archaeological explanation, as characterised by Renfrew and Bahn (1991:407). A yardstick implicit in much of the debate was articulated most explicitly by Cooke (1969) in what he termed the "true art of the Stone Age Bush people." Against this measure, Driekopseiland was, for him at least, no match.

Research from the 1960s was increasingly concerned with a quantitative definition of the site, and to appreciate it within the emerging cultural and environmental history of the region (Butzer et al. 1979; Fock et al. 1980; Fock & Fock 1989). The engravings at

the site do appear to span, in part, the last two thousand years, a period of widespread change, when new trajectories become apparent in the rock art traditions of other parts of southern Africa (Parkington 1996; Dowson 1998; Jolly 1998; Denbow 1984:183). In this context it is relevant to enquire in what ways existing art traditions might have been influenced by the appearance of new life-styles and social groupings. It is even possible that an immigrant group might have produced a subset of the art - perhaps a tradition quite distinct from that generally referred to as 'San art'. But the nature of interactions between groups, and the archaeological signatures of this across the landscape (e.g. Humphreys 1988), suggest that some past questions and characterizations in this respect were simplistic. Interaction between different subsistence modes and cultural groupings in the last 2000 years have resulted in a complex 'mosaic' of responses in the region that are not easily resolved in ethnic or techno-economic terms.

A new interpretation

Against this background, significant cross-cultural continuity in key beliefs and rituals within Khoisan society, and even beyond, can be demonstrated (e.g. Wilmsen 1986; Barnard 1992), rendering, in some senses, the ethnic debate at Driekopseiland irrelevant. Ethnography on these rites and beliefs, spanning the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, suggests ways for building on earlier tentative speculations regarding the significance of 'place' at Driekopseiland (Morris 1988; 1990; cf. Parkington 1980) and of 'topophilia' (after Deacon 1988), as the basis for a new interpretation of the engravings here (first proposed in a paper, Morris in press). It is argued that concepts developed by Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1990; Lewis-Williams 1996), on the construal of places and rock faces as meaningful supports, and insights from Deacon's (1986; 1988; 1997) work in the Upper Karoo, are germane to a consideration of metaphoric perceptions of landscape features at Driekopseiland and other rock engraving sites in the Northern Cape. Temporal variability in the rock art suggests that engraving practices, and, perhaps, their local social contexts, were by no means static; that different expressions possibly of similar beliefs may account for the engravings of different character and seemingly earlier periods. The approach has the potential to explain aspects of variability between engraving sites of the wider region without having to invoke different ethnic authorships - while not ruling out the possibility of processes of interaction and a dynamic flow of ideas involving different communities in the landscape.

The hypothesis being proposed is that the unique combination of geographical features at Driekopseialnd, and the way it is marked with rock-art, is a key to its interpretation; and that the variability between engraving sites in the region is a reflection more of different metaphoric understandings of place and of landscape, than of the discrete cultural, ethnic or technoeconomic contexts that much previous writing on Driekopseiland implied.

The concepts of "topophilia" (Deacon 1988), of dynamic landscape temporalities (Ingold 1993), and the construal of places and rock faces as meaningful supports mediating

spiritual realms in Khoisan beliefs (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990), are to be drawn upon in the development of the model. It is the intention to assess this new interpretation of Driekopseiland against archaeological and rock art records from the region, and a wide range of relevant nineteenth and twentieth century ethnography and contemporary remnants of indigenous knowledge.

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