



## McGregor Museum Kimberley

### Archaeology Department: Wildebeest Kuil

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South Africa's rich heritage of rock art occurs in the form of engravings on the interior plains, and paintings in the more mountainous areas, their distributions overlapping in places. Different forager, herder, agriculturist and colonial rock art traditions have been discerned (e.g. Maggs 1995; Ouzman 1999; Smith & Ouzman in press); while some variability may reflect a dynamic interplay of history and landscape which is not easily resolved in purely ethnic, culture and/or techno-economic terms (e.g. Manhire 1998; Morris 2002).

The region bounded by the Vaal and Orange Rivers has a particularly concentrated distribution of engraving sites, of which Wildebeest Kuil (situated between Kimberley and Barkly West) is one (Fock & Fock 1989).

The first systematic work on rock art in the region was the survey published by Maria Wilman (1933). Gerhard and Dora Fock followed up Wilman's work in the 1960s–1970s, documenting in detail the engravings at the major sites of Bushman's Fountain (Fock 1979), Kinderdam (Fock & Fock 1984) and Driekopseiland (Fock & Fock 1989), and at several hundred other locales in the Northern Cape and adjoining districts.

Amongst the earliest records of rock engravings here were the copies made by G.W. Stow who was on the Diamond Fields in the early 1870s. Wildebeest Kuil was one of the sites he visited. In 1875 Stow sent copies of paintings and engravings, including those made here, to Dr Wilhelm Bleek in Cape Town: "their publication," wrote Bleek (1875), "cannot but effect a radical change in the ideas generally entertained with regard to Bushmen and their mental condition." Several of the engravings copied by Stow are still to be seen on site, but others were removed towards the end of the nineteenth century. Some of these were exhibited at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London in 1886, and at least one ended up in the collection of the British Museum. It was Stow's copy

that, in the 1960s, enabled positive identification of its origin (Fock 1965). When G. and D. Fock documented Wildebeest Kuil in 1968, they recorded 178 individual engravings. Detailed mapping has since revealed more than 400 engravings.

Stone circles and clearings, containing Later Stone Age (LSA) occupation debris, on and around the hill were noted by Stow in the 1870s (cf. Clark 1959). One, near the crest of the hill, was excavated in 1983 by Beaumont (Beaumont & Vogel 1989), yielding two LSA aggregates – a Wilton assemblage overlain by Ceramic LSA, with associated radiocarbon readings of  $1790\pm 60$  BP and  $1230\pm 80$  BP.

Power had picked up here a pressure-flaked tanged and barbed stone arrowhead (Goodwin & van Riet Lowe 1929; Clark 1959) – this being an example of distinctive artefacts which occur as unusual “trace objects” at a number of post-2000 BP sites from Lesotho into the western interior (van Riet Lowe 1947; Humphreys 1991; Mitchell 1996), which have been interpreted as stone skeuomorphs of iron originals (Mitchell 2002:294).

A comment made to Péringuey (1909) by missionary Westphal refers to the last Khoes-San occupants of the site being “Scheelkoos’ and his family” – a rare reference to a named individual from the terminal LSA in South Africa. Scheelkoos, also known as Kousop, led resistance to colonial settlement in the region, and was killed with numbers of his followers, in a counter-attack, on the banks of the nearby Vaal River in 1858.

Most of the engravings in the Kimberley area are made with the 'pecked' technique: a hard stone was used to chip away the outer crust of the rock, exposing the lighter coloured rock beneath. Sites north west of Kimberley are often on andesite outcrops (as at Wildebeest Kuil and Driekopseiland) while to the south, in Karoo geological settings, the koppies are mostly dolerite. With time, the exposed portions of the older engravings have become as dark as the outer crust through the build-up of patina.

The pecked engravings of the area are estimated to span a period from perhaps a few hundred to possibly several thousand years ago (Morris 1988; Beaumont & Vogel 1989). Direct cation ratio dating methods applied at Klipfontein (Whitley & Annegarn 1994), giving estimates spanning the entire Holocene, hinge, however, on a calibration curve of uncertain reliability (Morris 2002), and the samples were too small to run more than one assay each (Whitley & Annegarn 1994). Hairline engravings, known from a few sites in this area and more commonly in the Karoo, are consistently beneath pecked engravings in superimposed sequences, and are thus older. Butzer used geomorphological evidence to infer bracketing ages for the engravings at Bushmans Fountain and Driekopseiland, with the resulting scenario being in broad accord with more recent work on palaeoenvironmental change at a regional scale, as well as with findings at other sites, and observations of associated archaeological material (Morris 2002). At Wildebeest Kuil some of the engravings were undoubtedly made by LSA occupants of the site 1200–1800 years ago, as suggested by the radiocarbon readings cited above.

Given a shamanistic understanding of the art, the Wildebeest Kuil engravings may well relate to beliefs about the rain and rain-making. Medicine people or shamans could access the spirit world through altered states of consciousness and harness supernatural power to heal the sick, control animals, and make rain. It is possible that many of the engravings were inspired by visions experienced in altered states of consciousness, and depicted on the rocks so that others could share and draw inspiration from them (Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1993). It also appears that places selected for making engravings were chosen for their significance in relation to these beliefs (Deacon 1988; 1997; Morris 2002).

Colonial era ruins and middens, including those linked with twentieth century farm-workers, occur near the Rock Art Centre (see extracts from the audio-tour text, below).

Since 1996 the farm of Wildebeest Kuil has been owned by the !Xun and Khwe communities. These two San groups, speaking distinct Khoe-San languages and having different histories (e.g. Sharp 1996), had been caught up in political turmoil in Angola in the 1960s and 1970s, and subsequently in Namibia. In 1990, at the time of Namibia's independence, some 4000 of them (men then employed by the South African Defence Force together with their families) were flown to a tent-town at Schmidtsdrift, west of Kimberley. This area was subsequently awarded to its former Tswana owners in a land claim, forcing the !Xun and Khwe to move again. Having purchased Wildebeest Kuil and adjoining farms, resettlement from the Schmidtsdrift tent towns to a new housing scheme on the outskirts of Kimberley is currently in progress (2003-4).

As the owners today of the land on which the Wildebeest Kuil engravings occur, the !Xun and Khwe see in the art a link (as do other Khoe-San descendants in the region) to a broad Khoe-San cultural inheritance in Southern Africa. Plans by the McGregor Museum to develop the site for public access date back to at least the mid 1990s, and these were discussed with the !Xun and Khwe CPA after they took ownership of the farm. Funding became available in 2000 from the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, through the Rock Art Research Institute. The project to establish the Wildebeest Kuil Rock Art Centre (opened December 2001) was driven by a Steering Committee formed in Kimberley, with representation from the Rock Art Research Institute, the McGregor Museum, community members (!Xun and Khwe and other Khoe-San organisations), and a range of further stakeholders. Out of this committee grew the Northern Cape Rock Art Trust which now manages the site.

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