The Rock Art of Zimbabwe
UNIVERSITY OF ZIMBABWE
The University of Zimbabwe is the oldest and largest University in Zimbabwe. It was founded through a special relationship with the University of London, and opened its doors to the first students in 1952. The archaeology section teaches rock art interpretation, management conservation among other archaeology courses.

NATIONAL MUSEUM AND MONUMENTS OF ZIMBABWE
The National Museum and Monuments of Zimbabwe (NMMZ) is Zimbabwe’s premier heritage organization which was established under an Act of Parliament, the National Museum and Monuments of Rhodesia Act (1972), now known as National Museums and Monuments Act (Chapter 25.11). Under this act, Zimbabwe protects more rock art sites as national monuments than in any other African country. For this project, the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences in Harare was the official partner.

TARA - TRUST FOR AFRICAN ROCK ART
TARA is a Nairobi-based, non-governmental organisation committed to recording the rich rock art heritage of the African continent, to making this information widely accessible and, to the extent possible, safeguarding those sites most threatened by humans and nature. To achieve its mission, TARA works closely with communities where rock art is found as well as with national and international heritage bodies including the UNESCO World Heritage Centre.

THIS IS A TARA PUBLICATION - www.africanrockart.org

CAPTIONS
Cover image: Diana’s Vow rock art site - National Monument
Back Cover Inset: Project team at at Surtic near Mazowe Dam
Contents Page: Above: Paintings in Mucheka Cave
Middle Image: Detail from main panel at Diana’s Vow

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ISBN 9966-7453-9-4 © 2017 TARA
Design & Layout: Richard Wachara
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MAP OF ZIMBABWE
Introduction

By the Executive Director of the National Museum of Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has some of Africa’s (and the world’s) most exceptional rock art as well as some of the oldest. Most of these images are paintings, believed to have been made by ancestral San hunter-gatherers during the last 10,000 years. Although similar in style and content to many other southern African paintings, the Zimbabwe art has its own individuality in that it has an amazingly wide variety of images including more complex images and a much wider variety of plants, for example, than anywhere else in Africa. Depictions of “ovals” (also known as formlings or “technoforms”) as well as clusters of “ovals” are common here but do not occur elsewhere in Africa.

This art has immense value, not only as a window into our past, but as an insight into how our earliest ancestors thought and saw their world. But rock art is vulnerable and fragile. As Africa’s populations expand into previously unoccupied areas, these paintings are increasingly threatened with damage and destruction. As former Secretary General, Kofi Annan, said in 2005, “Perhaps the greatest threat is neglect and a lack of awareness ….which has left too many sites unguarded against vandals and thieves.”

In Zimbabwe such lack of awareness among members of the general public has led to the destruction of rock art. Contemporary uses of rock shelters by people who are unaware of the existence of the rock art and its vulnerability has put many sites at risk.

The publication of this booklet is an output of a recent project to document and awareness to promote the importance and value of Zimbabwe’s rock art. This is a joint initiative by Dr. Ancila Nhamo of the University of Zimbabwe and Dr. Happinos Marufu of the National Museums of Zimbabwe and has been supported by the Nairobi-based Trust for African Rock Art (TARA) and the Prince Claus Fund of Amsterdam.

Dr. Godfrey Mahachi

Painting of 2 porcupines on a granite outcrop
Painting of an antbear (aardvark) in a cave (above) on top of big granite hill, in the Banket area.
Main image: Possible shamanistic scene in Gambarimwe Cave featuring a floating figure with wavy lines emanating from it. See also polychrome abstract shapes (centre left) as well as multiple flecks (right).

Inset: Detail showing large white elephants at Ruchera Cave. The elephants form part of an impressive frieze that dominates this cave.
By rock art we mean prehistoric paintings and engravings executed on stone surfaces. Most of Zimbabwe’s art consists of paintings, made long ago by our ancestors. These images which depict animals, humans, as well as abstract or geometric symbols were cultural expressions which held great meaning for the people who made them. Although often beautifully executed, the images were not just the representational art we know and understand in the modern world but were made because of the stories they told and the beliefs they represented. An artist in those days for example might have painted a giraffe, kudu or elephant because he or she believed these animals had the power

Exceptional panel of paintings at White Matari Koppies, Kentucky Farm, near Darwendale. At the top of the panel is what looks like part of a large hippo. It’s head has perhaps been erased by a seep. Below right is a faded oval structure (see P9)

What is Rock Art? - Why is it important?

Detail from main panel at Gambarimwe Cave featuring a Kudu facing right. Kudu are sometimes described as rain animals or power animals
to bring rain. Groups of Kudu might have been depicted to symbolize and teach social cohesion and cooperation, both important components of hunting and gathering lifestyles. Most hunter-gatherers live close to nature and their mythologies and beliefs are thus intertwined with nature, especially with the animals with whom they share their world. Rock art has enormous importance because it shows us how our earliest ancestors thought and how they saw their world. It is also full of cultural information that shows how people interacted with and related to their environment. It also illustrates how people dressed and adorned themselves as well as how they danced and performed certain ceremonies and rituals. This sort of information cannot be gleaned from the study of old bones and other material remains and thereby opens a special doorway onto vanished world.
Mucheka Cave in Murehwa District is one of most beautiful and best preserved sites in Zimbabwe. Some the earlier paintings in the cave may be at least 7000 years old.
What is special about Zimbabwe’s rock art?

Although much of Zimbabwe’s rock paintings were the work of ancestral hunter-gatherers they are different in style and content from the rest of southern African San art. The art contains a wide variety of subject matter and themes. There are many complex scenes with people engaged in a variety of activities including trance related motifs. Although paintings and engravings of fish occur in other parts of Africa, they are not common in Southern Africa. They are however very common in Zimbabwe and include ocean fish although the sea is almost 1000 kilometres away. Likewise paintings of crocodile are not uncommon here and we have recorded images of antbears and porcupines, not found in other parts of the continent. Certain animals that appear to be particularly important in other countries, such as eland depictions in South Africa, are quite rare in Zimbabwe. Rather it is the kudu which are common and clearly important, as well as elephants. Such animals are considered to have been power (rain) animals. In addition, paintings depicting trees and plants are very rare elsewhere in Africa but quite common in Zimbabwe.

Most unusual of all the Zimbabwean depictions are what the late Peter Garlake called “ovals” which have also been termed “formlings”. These ovals are common here and often occur in clusters. Garlake believed them to represent the seat of animal and human potency. They were also interpreted by Mguni as possibly representing technostructures of termite mounds, an important feature in San worldview and cosmology. (See Fig no. 5, 9, 12 and 22)
Circle of antelope on the roof of a small cave in the Banket area
Threats to Zimbabwe’s Rock Art

In 2005, Kofi Annan, then UN Secretary General said, in a filmed interview, “Perhaps the greatest threat to Africa’s rock art is neglect. A lack of resources, combined with a lack of official interest, has left too many sites unguarded against vandals and thieves. It is time for Africa’s leaders to take a new and more active role. We must save this cultural heritage before it is too late.”

More recently, in 2014, at a rock art conservation conference in Morocco, there was consensus that the biggest threat to Africa’s Rock art was a lack of awareness. Lack of awareness that the heritage even exists, lack of awareness of its antiquity and importance and lack of awareness concerning its frailty.

**Threats to the art can be broadly divided into two main categories.**

A) Natural threats, including weathering, seeps, acid rain, natural fires and exfoliation of the rock surfaces.

B) Human threats, including theft, vandalism, graffiti, quarrying, touching the paintings, irresponsible tourism, mining activities, farming activities near sites, modern uses of sites e.g. for church meetings, littering, dancing, dust-raising, keeping domestic animals in shelters and stone-throwing.
Above: Paintings of Ovals at Zombepata that have been damaged by vandals. Note grafitti
Below: Community meeting with Acting Chief Chinamhora near Dombashawa. Co-author, Dr. Ancila Nhamo, left. David Coulson (TARA) and Happinos Marufu of National Museums back row
Makumbe Cave (top centre below cross) now occupied on a permanent basis by independent church groups who light fires and perform rituals at the back of the cave.
A National Monument sign erected by the Museum in the 1950s is still outside the entrance.
Above: Close up of religious group performing ritual in Makumbe Cave

Below: 1960s reproductions of paintings in the cave, courtesy of National Museums and Monuments of Zimbabwe. Today only about 2 paintings out of hundreds may just be seen.
Modern/contemporary use of rock art sites is often the major threats to the art. A good example of such usage for church activities, including Independent Church meetings, healing sessions and prayer vigils. In some cases, these groups take over large rock shelters which have many rock paintings but which provide shelter from the wind and cold in the winter months. Often these church groups are unaware of the existence of the paintings and the damage they cause to it. Church members light fires which sometimes cover the walls, and therefore the paintings, in layers of soot. The congregation also raise dust which settles on the walls and obliterates the images. The people who attend these meetings sometimes leave litter and graffiti at the sites.

Another form of modern use which can damage the art is when herd boys and unsupervised children are allowed to play in the caves and shelters since they usually end up writing graffiti on the walls which can permanently damage the art.

One of the biggest medium-to-long term threats is the expansion of human populations, including urban development, into previously wild and uninhabited land where many of the rock art sites are located. New roads suddenly appear and new houses and other developmental structures. In some cases residential areas have extended into the buffer zones of some sites, e.g. Glen Norah (see page 18). New residents, who do not know rock art or how old it is, interfere with rock art by destroying boulders with rock art to make way for new roads, houses and other developmental structures. Meanwhile the resulting denuding of the vegetation exposes the sites to weathering as well as vandalism.

Perhaps the most serious threat of all is mining and quarrying. As populations increase so also does the demand for mineral resources. Mining companies are often similarly unaware of the existence of rock art. They are legally bound to carry out impact assessments before commencing operations yet many especially small-scale operations do not comply. Quarrying of granite for concrete stone is rampant in many part of Zimbabwe. Many priceless and wonderful art sites have been destroyed in this way.

What can be done about these threat?
The effects of the above-mentioned threats on rock art are varying. Some sites have been damaged whilst others are at risk of damage. However many sites or sections of sites are still well preserved. Urgent action has to be taken to keep the heritage that still remains. This calls for both preventive and intervention measures. Intervention methods of conservation are mostly technical and are for professionals.
What Can You Do?

Nevertheless, everyone can play a part in preventing further destruction to the art. Rock art is everyone’s heritage. Different members of the public can do the following:

It is important for us to teach each other about the proper contact at rock art sites. One should never assume that people know about rock art and that’s it’s old and important, because of their education levels or their social status.

Damage to sites usually arises through a lack of awareness on the part of the local inhabitants and visitors, so the most important thing is to tell people and spread the word through the communities concerning the importance of the art explaining the importance of protecting it. In cases where damage has already been done the National Museum and Monuments of Zimbabwe or other authorities can arrange for professional cleaning and restoration to be carried out, having first made sure that the problem is unlikely to recur.

*Painting of a Kudu under a tree, Matobo*
Important painting site at Glen Norah in the southern suburbs of Harare often known as Crocodile Man (see painting top right). The site is also used by independent church groups.

View from Glen Norah site showing encroaching housing developments.
The Matobo World Heritage Site is one of southern Africa’s five World Heritage Rock Art Sites. The name Matobo refers to the bald-looking granite hills for which this area is famous. These hills contain some of Africa’s, and indeed the World’s most remarkable ancient paintings, some of which are thought to be over 13000 years old.

PHOTO: Granite Mountain in the Matobo hills known as Malindidzumu (Place of the Spirits)
Exceptional painting of a giraffe at Inanke Cave
Main panel of paintings at Inanke. In the centre (left) is an oval structure with giraffes superimposed. Left of the structure are several fish. Some paintings here have been dated to over 8000 years

References

Nhamo, Ancila, Out of the labyrinth. Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications
Walker, Nicholas, Painted Hills. Gweru: Mambo Press
VISITORS CODE OF CONDUCT

You can help conserve rock art by observing this code:

1. Never touch rock art - your fingers leave sweat and oil on the rock that cannot be removed later.
2. Never pour/apply liquids on paintings - they cause damage that cannot be reversed.
3. Do not outline or fill in engravings with chalk as it can never be removed and destroys later possibilities for dating the varnish.
4. Do not walk on the art. Your feet and shoes will damage the paintings surfaces and dislodge loose rock.
5. View rock art from a distance so that you do not erode the soil nearby.
6. Do not make your own paintings or write your name on the rocks. This destroys the value of the ancient rock art and spoils the experience for other visitors.
7. Remember others are coming after you. Take all your litter & rubbish with you.
8. Do not light fires in rock shelters or caves with paintings.
9. Report any vandalism or damage you find and respect sites.
10. Enter sites using designated points.

Rock art sites and all you find there are part of our national heritage and protected by the Laws of Zimbabwe. Please respect them as well as the traditions and requirements of local communities. Lastly, please ask for permission before taking any photos of local people.