

Rock Art in East Africa



TRUST FOR AFRICAN ROCK ART



Fig 1

Fig 1: Rock paintings in Kondo province, Tanzania.

Fig 2: Meat-Feasting paintings in Laikipia, northern Kenya.

ABOUT THE TRUST FOR AFRICAN ROCK ART (TARA)

The goals of TARA are to create a permanent visual archive of Africa's rock art before it is too late, share this priceless archive with the world community, and, to the extent possible, preserve today's most threatened rock art sites, however remote, across the African continent.

TARA believes an important way to realize the value of rock art in Africa for present and future generations is to promote awareness of its richness, antiquity and importance.

Based in Nairobi, Kenya, TARA is the world's only organization dedicated to this cultural imperative. TARA's work has been endorsed by Nelson Mandela, who encourages national governments and local communities throughout Africa to contribute their time and resources

to the challenge of preserving and protecting Africa's rock art.

TARA has also received support and recognition from the Ford Foundation, the Andrew Mellon Foundation and the National Geographic Society, amongst others. TARA's singular contributions have been widely acclaimed in the scientific and popular media.

TARA's chairman, international photographer David Coulson, has made it his life's work to photograph and document rock art in over 20 different African countries. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, in a statement for TARA in 2005, called on African leaders to take a new and more active role, and on private businesses, foundations and individuals to contribute their expertise and resources.



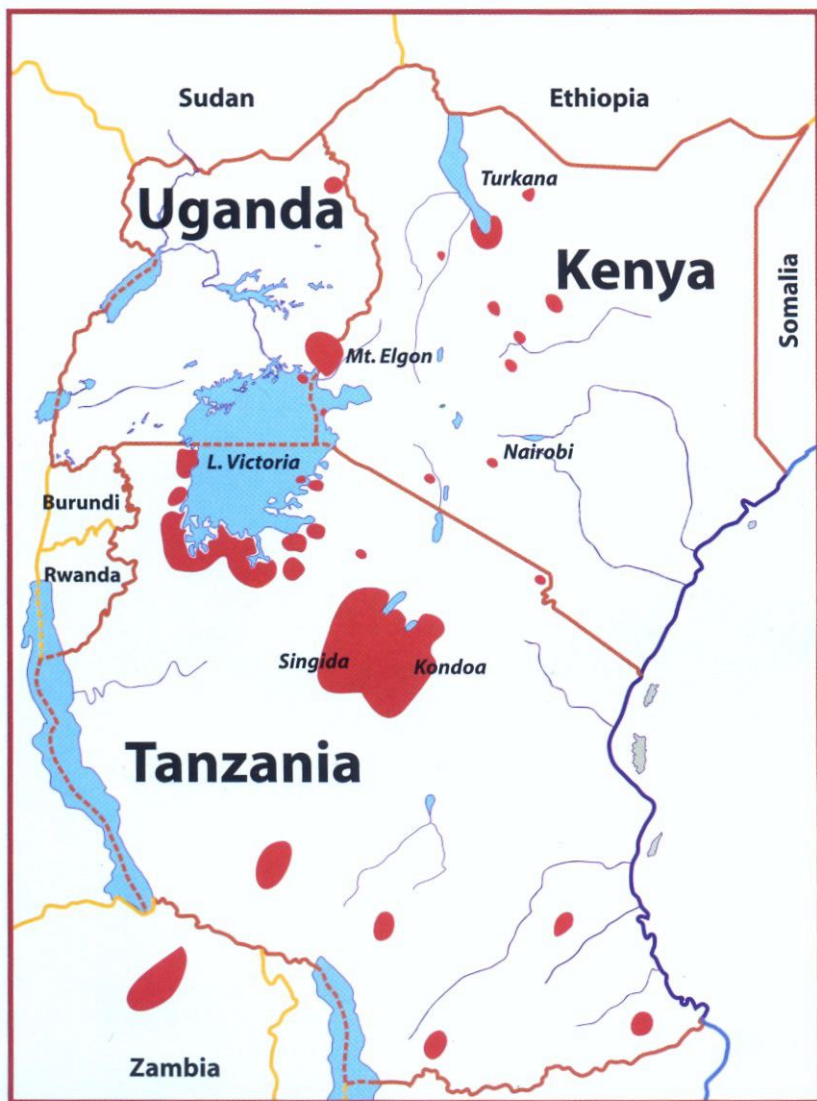
CONTENTS

Rock Art Distribution Map for East Africa	4
Introduction	5
The paintings	6
Paint and its ingredients	8
The engravings	9
How engravings were made	10
Who were the artists	11
Dating the art	13
What does it mean	15
Value and future of rock art	16
Further reading	17
Code of conduct	18



Fig 2

ROCK ART DISTRIBUTION MAP FOR EAST AFRICA



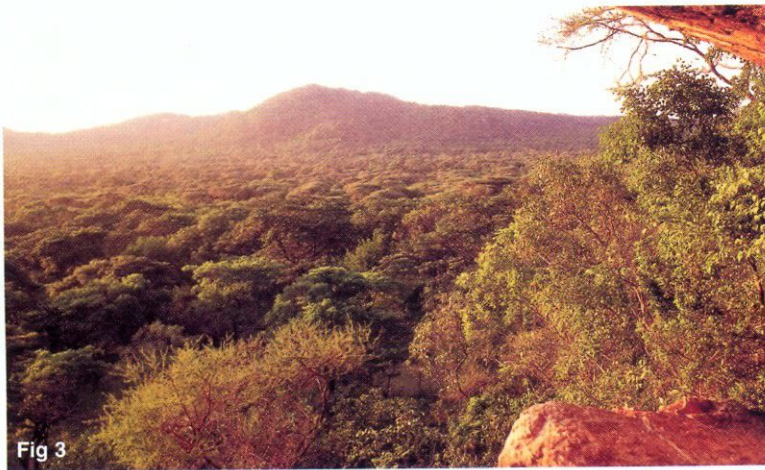


Fig 3: View from a rock shelter over Miombo woodland Kondoia province, central Tanzania.

THE LAND

Much of East Africa - Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda - lies astride a high, well-vegetated inland plateau with a few isolated volcanic mountains and many granite outcrops. The Great Rift Valley, with its long narrow lakes and rocky slopes, divides East Africa from west to east. It is a land rich in wildlife and a meeting place of many human cultures. It is on this inland plateau that almost all of East Africa's rock art occurs.

THE PEOPLE

Over many millennia, a great diversity of peoples has come together in East Africa. Originally, only foragers (Batwa) inhabited the land, people who collected wild foods and honey, and hunted with spears and bows and arrows. Fishing peoples lived along the lakes, supplementing their diet of fish with riverine plants and wild animals. Between 3000-4000 years ago, domesticated cattle began to filter into the area from the north, while a little later and from the west came goat-breeding agricultural iron-workers.

THE ART AND ITS LOCATION

The art, still visible on the rocks today (the earliest may already have faded and disappeared), consists mainly of paintings on semi-protected rock surfaces, the largest concentration being found in central Tanzania in an area stretching from just east of Kondoia to west of Singida. Other areas with paintings include the islands and shores of Lake Victoria, the south-eastern lower slopes of Mount Elgon and isolated granite outcrops in Kenya. Engravings are much rarer than paintings, they are found in all three countries, most are geometric designs and some animal images chipped into the rock surface, and cupules (small cup-shaped depressions ground into the rock). The engravings tend to occur in more arid areas in the north, particularly around the southern shores of Lake Turkana.



Fig 4

Fig 4: Kudu Bull faced by a man holding a bow. Fineline Red Paintings, Tanzania.

THE PAINTINGS

The paintings can be divided into five major categories as follows:

i. **Red Paintings:** Found principally in Tanzania, these fineline and finger paintings include animals and people (Fig 4), and possibly a few geometric designs. Usually, they occur in shades of red but are sometimes found in two or more colours. Some animal paintings are large, a few measuring as much as two metres from head to rear hoof. Generally, an outline has been painted first and then the animal's body filled with a flat colour. While larger animals appear to have been painted with fingers and the body smeared with the hand, smaller animals and most human figures were painted with some implement such as a frayed stick or even a brush.

ii. **Twa Paintings:** In East Africa, these are found mainly on the islands and around the shores of Lake Victoria. Twa paintings include a few animal depictions but consist mainly of geometric designs e.g. concentric circles (Fig 5). Animal depictions have normally been painted only in red and are rare. Geometric designs appear to have been painted in red with a white in-fill that today has often disappeared. The greatest concentrations of *Twa Paintings* are found in northern Zambia spreading into southern

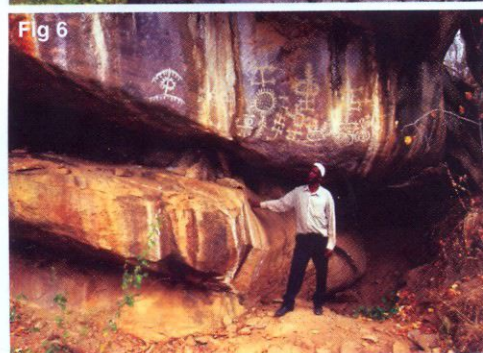
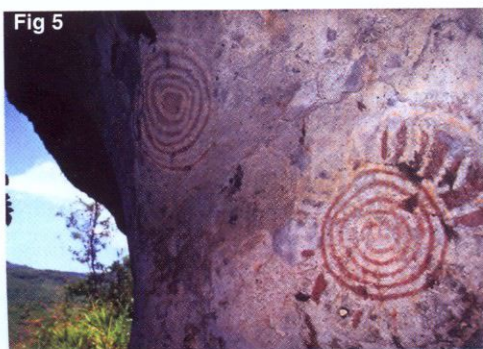
Congo and eastward into Malawi and Mozambique. However, in various forms, the art spreads north and east far into East Africa.

iii. **Late White Paintings:** These paintings are found along the west and south shores of Lake Victoria, stretching eastward through Tanzania into Kenya and Mozambique and south into Malawi, Zambia and southern Africa. They include numerous geometric designs (Fig 6), crudely painted animals (Fig 7), schematic depictions of domestic cattle and human figures, often with hands on hips and facing to the front. The images are drawn with fingers mainly in powdery or oily white, but are also sometimes found in other colours.

iv. **Pastoralist Paintings:** These paintings, usually in black, white and grey, but also in red and yellow, are rare with only a few little known sites occurring on the foothills of Mt. Elgon (Fig 8a). Sites south and north of Mt. Elgon include depictions of cattle with heads in twisted perspective, human figures and geometric designs. *Pastoralist Art* is more common in southern and eastern Ethiopia (Fig 8b).

Fig 5: Concentric circles in red and white with rays, Lake Victoria Basin.

Fig 6&7: Late White Paintings, Tanzania.



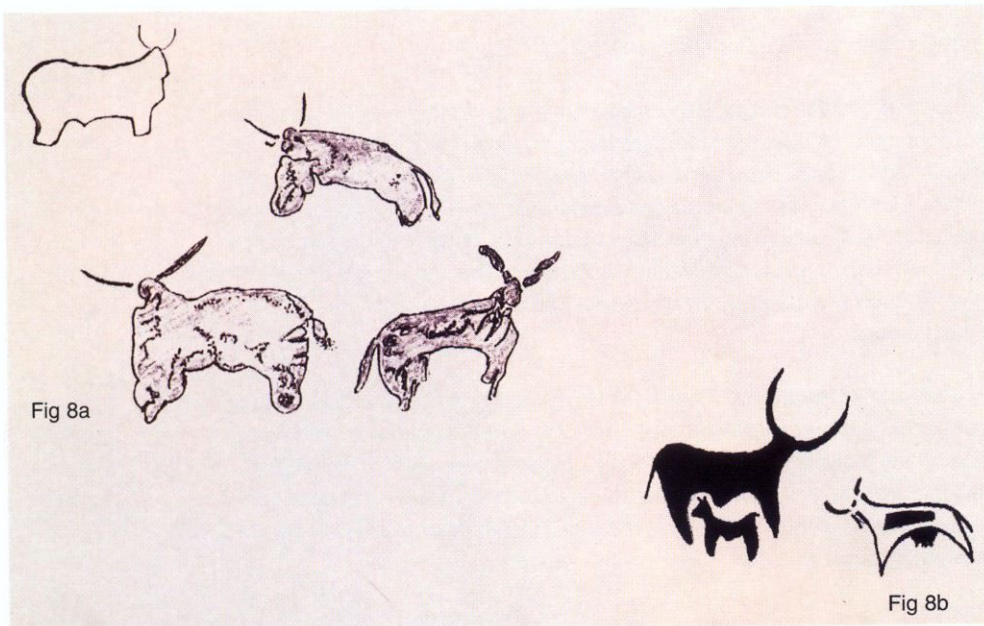


Fig 8a

Fig 8b

Fig 8a: Pastoralist Paintings characterised by cattle with tiny heads and thin horns are found around Mt. Elgon, western Kenya.

Fig 8b: Rather similar paintings from Ethiopia.

v. **Meat-Feasting Paintings:** *Meat-feasting paintings*, crude geometric designs (Fig 9) and sometimes 'shields' (in the south), (Fig 17) appear to be peculiar to East Africa and stretch from northern Tanzania through southern and central Kenya into the drier areas of the north. They may occur in Uganda, but have yet to be reported from there.

PAINT AND ITS INGREDIENTS

Paint was made using three ingredients: pigment for colouration, a binder to bond the pigment together and a fluid to make it liquid. Common pigments comprised iron oxides such as haematite (ochre) for red, limonite for yellow, lime, kaolin and white clays for white, and manganese and charcoal for black paint. Binders probably included one or more of blood, fat, egg white and plant juice and the fluid was most likely water but could also have been made from plant sap or even urine.



Fig 9

Fig 9: Meat-Feasting Painting, northern Kenya.

The pigment was possibly first burnt, finely ground and mixed with a binder. Before application, the resultant paste was diluted with a liquid and then applied to the rock. Mixing pigments together created different colours and shades. For instance, red mixed with black created purple and with yellow it made orange. Most commonly, the paint was applied with the fingers and hand but brushes and other implements were sometimes used.

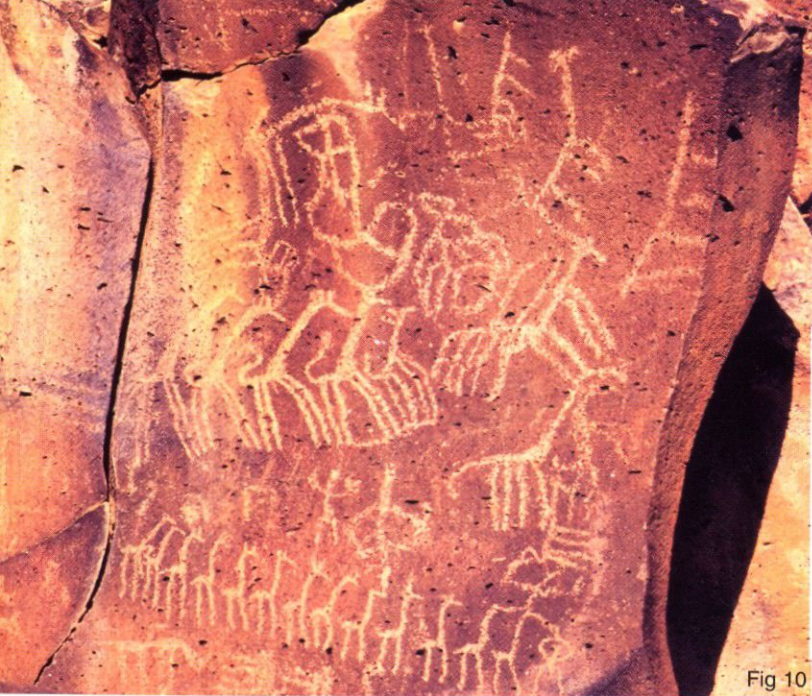


Fig 10



Fig 11

THE ENGRAVINGS

Engravings are not common in East Africa, most of those known occur around the southern shores of Lake Turkana. They can be divided into five categories as follows:

i. **'Sahara-type' Engravings.** These engravings have been found around the southeast shore of Lake Turkana. Images of animals such as giraffe, elephant, antelope, ostrich, camels, riding-animals, human figures and geometric designs have been chipped into the rock surface (Fig.10 & 11). Most images are relatively small, about 300 mm in height, and fairly crudely engraved. Style and content suggest the engravings are an extension of the art found further north in the Sahara Desert.

ii. **Lineage Symbols.** Lineage symbols (Fig 12) have been found engraved into rocks and stones placed on human graves at sites southwest of Lake Turkana. The symbols are recognized by modern Pokot and Samburu peoples as lineage markers. The Turkana still use some of the symbols to brand favourite cattle, but deny ancestral authorship of the rock engravings.

Fig 10: Sahara Type engravings, Giraffe and geometric designs, Lake Turkana Kenya.

Fig 11: Drawing showing rock engravings at a site near Lake Turkana.



Fig 12

Fig 12: Lineage symbols in southern Turkana.



Fig 13

Fig 13: Cupules, northern Kenya.

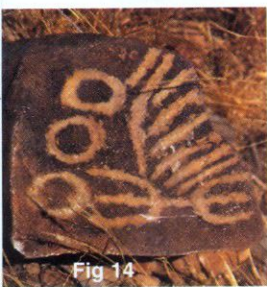


Fig 14

Fig 14: Geometric engravings featuring small circles near Lake Turkana.

iii. **Cupules:** *Cupules* (Fig 13) are cup-shaped indentations ground into the rock surface. Although they often look like a Bao game, we do not know what their original purpose may have been.

iv. **Engraved Circles.** By 2002 engraved circles had only been found east of Lake Turkana, northern Kenya and appear to be unique. They consist of small circles, sometimes occurring singly or in combinations (Fig 14), pecked into free-standing rocks.

v. **Rock Gongs:** *Rock gongs* are normally free-standing granite boulders balanced on the living rock which have a natural resonance (Fig 20). Often they bear numbers of *Cupules*. When the boulders are struck with a stone close to different cupules they emit a ringing tone like a beaten gong. Rhythmic striking produces a series of notes that carry great distances. A number of rock gongs are found in the Lake Victoria basin and in the Moru Koppies in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park, as well as in the Mt. Kenya region.

HOW ENGRAVINGS WERE MADE

Rock engravings or petroglyphs are motifs inscribed into rock surfaces. Normally a 'patina' coats exposed rock surfaces making them darker than the rocks' natural colours. Engravers thus removed the patina to produce desired shapes by exposing the lighter colours of the raw rocks beneath. Often, this also meant removing a thin layer of rock surface as well.

The most common engraving method involved a hand-held, fairly heavy, hard pointed rock which, by hammering against the surface, was used to chip out flakes from the intended engraving. Using sharp pointed stones such as chert or quartz as chisels which were struck with wooden or rock hammers to incise lines into rock surfaces. Coarse stones were sometimes used to grind smooth already-chipped areas, or sharp stones and metal points to scratch or scrape patina from the rock surfaces. *Cupules* were probably first chipped out with a pointed stone and their interiors ground smooth.

The results produced lighter pictures on the rocks framed by darker patina surrounds. With time, exposed surfaces built up their own patinas. Thus, we guess that engravings with dark patinas are old, while engravings much lighter than the rock surface are younger. It is uncertain whether engraved lines were painted or not but, if they were, the paint has almost always long disappeared.

WHO WERE THE ARTISTS?

Ancestors of Sandawe and Hadza, who spoke, and in some cases still speak, 'click' languages perhaps distantly related to those of southern Africa's Bushmen, may have been responsible for some of the paintings in central and northern Tanzania. The Sandawe claim that ancestors of theirs were responsible for some of the *Fineline Red Paintings* while the Hadza

Fig 15: View over Lake Turkana with South Island behind.



Fig 15

claim that their ancestors were responsible for some of the art in their area. The areas where these two very different click-speaking peoples live are separated by a distance of 150 km.

A fairly clear progression from the earlier to later red art suggests the same or related people were responsible for much of it. Similarities have been noted between the *Fineline Red Paintings* of Tanzania and southern African Bushman Paintings, however, no close relationship between them appears to exist. Some interesting ethnic and cultural similarities also exist between the Sandawe and the San.

Oral history relates that *Twa Paintings* were made by strong, yellow, hairy people who collected wild plants and honey, and hunted with large bows and arrows. A few of these people survived into the 20th Century. They may have been related to ancestors of modern Pygmy peoples.

Pastoralist Paintings were probably the work of peoples speaking ancient Nilo-Saharan languages who trickled up the Nile Valley between 3000 and 4000 years ago to settle the East African plateau. Amongst their descendants may be the Teso who today live in western Kenya and Uganda.

Late White Paintings are known to be the work of Bantu-speaking farmers and were still being made in Malawi and Zambia as recently as the early 1960's.

Fig 16: Paintings of animals and people together with geometrics near Lake Eyasi, Tanzania.



Fig 16

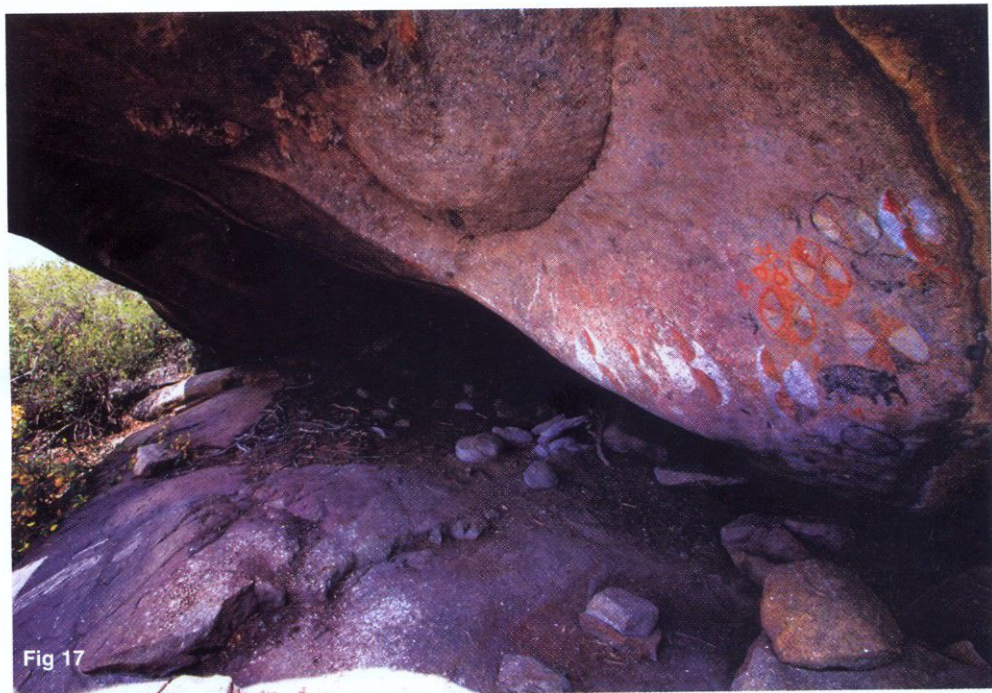


Fig 17

Meat-Feasting Paintings were, and in some cases may still be drawn on the walls and roofs of shallow rock caves and overhangs by Maa-speakers – Maasai, Pokot, Samburu and others.

It is more difficult to determine the makers of the engravings. Almost certainly, ancestral speakers of Nilo-Saharan languages carved the *Lineage Markers* near Lake Turkana and probably similar peoples made the other engravings in the area.

Fig 17: Maasai meat feasting site in northern Tanzania featuring paintings of shields, and a black elephant.

Fig 18: Painting of a woman with a long dress, central Tanzania.

DATING THE ART

It has proved extremely difficult to date either rock paintings or engravings. Reliable dates are only those obtained from actual pigment taken from the paintings on the rock or, and much less reliably so, from desert varnish covering rock engravings. Theoretically, direct dates can be obtained by measuring the remaining quantities of carbon-14 isotopes in organic matter: in the case of paint, the substance used to bond pigment, and for engravings matter captured in the varnish covering them. Scientifically obtained dates for East African paintings have yet to be obtained.



Fig 18

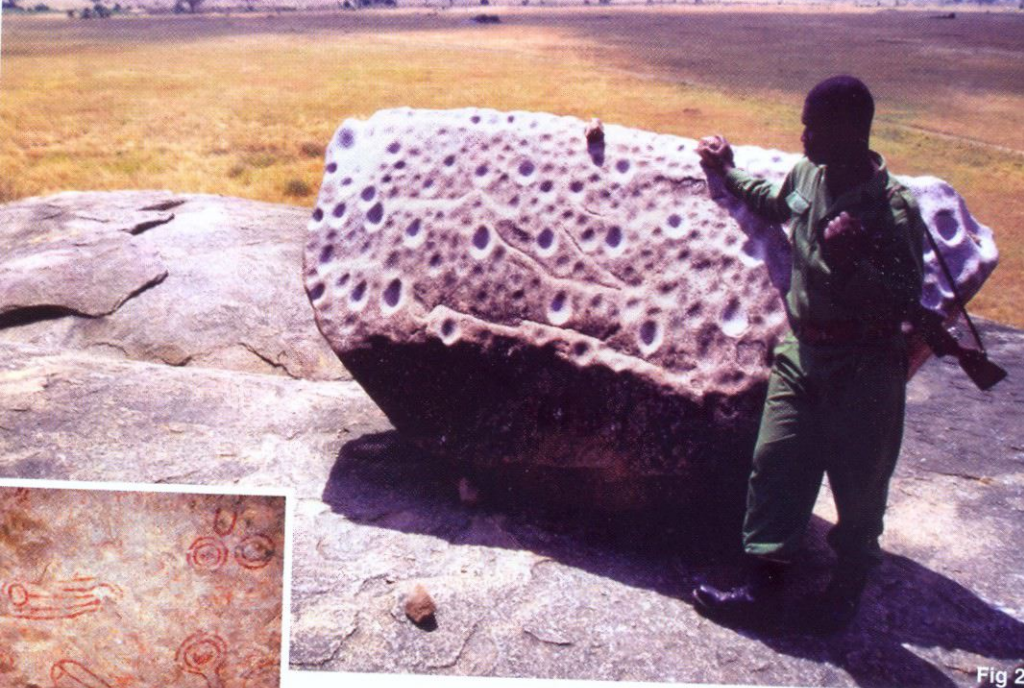


Fig 20

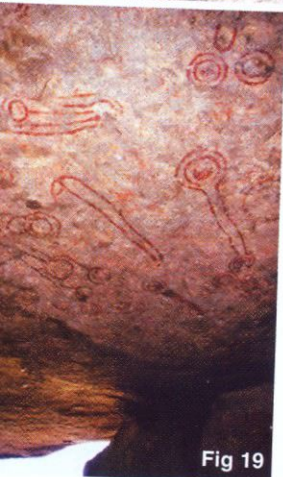


Fig 19

Fig 19: Finger paintings on the roof of cave on a Lake Victoria Island, Uganda.

Fig 20 Rock gong with carved cupules, central Tanzania.

Fig 21: Fineline abstract painting, central Tanzania.

It is possible to devise a rough chronology for the art. The oldest work may have disappeared long ago, destroyed by sun, wind and rain. Almost certainly, the large red and cream-coloured animal paintings found in central Tanzania represent the oldest existing art in East Africa, some of which may be considerably more than 7000 years old. *Twa Paintings* are more recent, although the earliest may also be several thousand years old. *Pastoralist Paintings* are probably less than 3000 years old, and certainly date to after the introduction of cattle to the region about 4000 years ago. The earliest *Late White Paintings* made by ancestral Bantu-speaking farmers are not very old, perhaps only a few hundred years; their ingredients are volatile and could not have survived very long. In the same way *Meat-Feasting Paintings* also date from recent centuries. Both *Late White* and *Meat-Feasting Paintings* were still being made well into the 20th Century.

The date of the human burials in Kenya bearing *Lineage Markers* has been determined by the Carbon-14 dating method as about 2300 years old. Engravings including camels, an animal introduced into East Africa in the First Millennium, are less than 2000 years old and in most cases are probably much younger.

Rock gongs may be very old. *Cupules* are found worldwide and are considered to be one of the world's oldest symbolic images. Their meaning anywhere has yet to be determined.

WHAT DOES THE ART MEAN?

Without being able to talk to the artists, it is difficult to determine why they painted and what was the purpose of their art. In southern Africa, since the late 19th Century, researchers have talked to Bush peoples, a few of them descendants of artists still painting in the 19th Century. This has led researchers to recognize that Bushman (San) art was symbolic and expressed the artists' deepest religious feelings and conceptions of reality, thus it was shamanic in nature involving control of the elements and community healing.

Researchers working in Tanzania during the 20th century have questioned local people and recorded their statements about rock paintings. In 1931 at Bahi, Tanzania, a chief said his people knew of rock paintings, believed that they were created by Wamia, perhaps 12 generations earlier (around AD 1700), and during droughts presented a black cloth, cow and sheep, to the paintings. Beer was brewed and drunk, and fat from the slaughtered animals was rubbed onto the rock and requests made for rain.

Sandawe claim that their ancestors were painters and it is possible that a few may even still paint to this day. One rock art researcher apparently witnessed a man from a hunting party paint a giraffe on the rock before they departed to hunt. Sandawe recognise rock shelters as the "aboriginal womb" where all life was created. The act of painting, not the finished image, may possibly activate the power within the shelter/womb to produce rain (or perhaps success in the hunt).

Modern agricultural Chewa farmers in Zambia and Malawi claim their ancestors made many *Late White Paintings* and, until recent times, used them during secret society rites of passage to teach initiates entering adulthood and explain circumstances of death. Chewa descriptions may also help to interpret *Late White Paintings* occurring elsewhere.

Traditionally, young Maa-speaking men are forbidden to eat the meat of cattle at their homes; rather, men from different homesteads plan a feast, gather in the bush, steal a beast and drive it to a predetermined rock shelter. The beast is ritually slaughtered, medicines prepared and the meat cooked. Over several days, the men eat the medicated meat, wash themselves with strengthening medicines and then paint a symbol, often a shield in Tanzania or southern Kenya (Fig 17), on the shelter wall.

The underlying purposes of other East African rock art are more obscure, but they may well symbolize objects of reverence. The gongs could have been used to summon the spirits that were believed to live in the ground, create rain and, to some extent control human wellbeing.

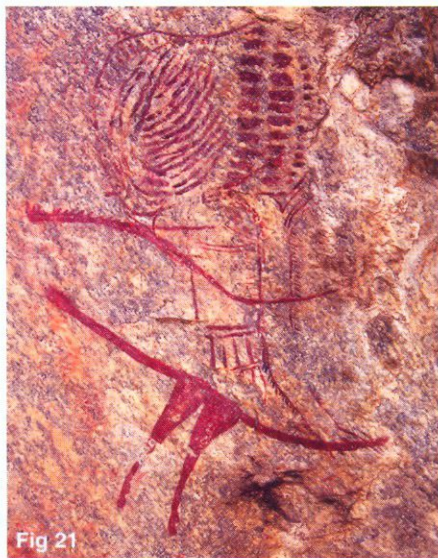


Fig 21



Fig 22

Fig 22: A decorated nest of concentric circles on the roof of a small cave, eastern Uganda.

Fig 23: Village near rock art site, western Kenya.

VALUE AND FUTURE OF ROCK ART

Much of the earlier rock art predates writing and even oral/remembered history, and is now all that is left to tell us of our ancestors' views of their world, their visions of reality, their values and beliefs. The art is, in fact, a form of early visual communication and a vital part of the roots from which we have grown. These paintings and engravings are not merely symbols; many often portray great skill in their form and delineation and demonstrate the artistic goals and talents of our ancestors.

In spite of sun, wind and rain, many of these works have lasted for thousands of years on the exposed rocks of East Africa. How much longer will they last depends very largely on us. Already, many rock paintings have been despoiled by graffiti, people scrawling their names, dates and messages. One very important painting site in Uganda has for example these words written across it in red spray paint: 'TOPAMA MU NYUMBA YA MIS-AMBWA': "*Do not shit in the Devil's house*" on the shelter wall. Other people have tried to chip paintings from the rock or deliberately destroy them. The art will only survive if valued by all who see it.

Rock art is protected under the law and persons caught defacing it may be prosecuted, fined and imprisoned. The costs of looking after rock art can be enormous if custodians must guard every site, a cost that no government can afford. For these reasons, local people must value and protect the art in their areas and visitors must recognize and respect its unique value.

FURTHER READING

- Anati E** (1986) The Rock Art of Tanzania and the East African sequence. *Bolletino del Centro Comune di Studi Preistoriei* 23: 15-68.
- Anati E** (1996) Cultural patterns in the Rock Art of Central Tanzania. *The Prehistory of Africa* 15 (Eds G Aumassip, J D Clark and F Mori).
- Chaplin JH** (1974) The prehistoric rock art of the Lake Victoria region. *Azania* IX:1-50.
- Coulson D** and Campbell A (2001) *African Rock Art: Paintings and Engravings on Stone*. Harry N Abrams, New York.
- Culwick AT** (1931) Ritual use of rock paintings at Bahi. *Man* 31 (41): 33-36.
- Fosbrooke HA**, P Ginner, LSB Leakey and J Fosbrooke (1950) Tanganyika rock paintings: A guide and record. *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 29:1-61.
- Gramely RM** (1975) Meat Feasting Sites and Cattle Brands. *Azania* X.
- Leakey MD** (1983) *Africa's Vanishing Art: The rock paintings of Tanzania*. London, Hamish-Hamilton Limited.
- Lewis-Williams JD** (1986) Beyond style and portrait. A comparison of Tanzanian and southern African rock art. In *Contemporary Studies on Khoisan, Part 2*, (eds) R Vossen and K Keuthmann 95-139. Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag.
- Lim IL** (1992) A site-oriented approach to rock art: a study from Usandawe, Central Tanzania. PhD Dissertation. Brown University, USA.
- Lynch M** and Robbins LH (1977) The First Archaeoastronomical Evidence in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Azania* XII. 766-768.
- Masao FT** (1982) The rock art of Kondoa and Singida. A comparative description. *National Museums of Tanzania Occasional Paper* 5. National Museums of Tanzania, Dar es Salaam.
- Smith B** (1997) *Zambia's Ancient Rock Art: The Paintings of Kasama*. The National Heritage Conservation Commission of Zambia.
- Ten Raa E** (1971) Dead and Living Society: a study of rock paintings in a social context. *Mankind* 8:42-58.
- Wilcox AR** (1984) *The Rock Art of Africa*. Johannesburg, Macmillan South Africa.



Fig 23

AFRICAN ROCK ART VISITORS' CODE OF CONDUCT

Background

Visits to rock art sites in East Africa are becoming popular. Tourist numbers are increasing and will continue to do so. For the art this has both good and bad aspects. On the good side, properly conducted tourism achieves wider public knowledge and appreciation of the art. This is clearly important as the art will then stand a better chance of being valued and protected for the benefit of future generations. On the other hand, poorly conducted tourism can lead to the destruction of paintings and engravings which are part of Africa's unique cultural heritage.

The State of Rock Art Today

During the millennia since the art was originally made, it has survived heat, cold, blown sand, wind and rain, even if some paintings are today faded and pieces of engravings eroded away. The art may look strong, but it isn't; it is fragile and easily damaged.

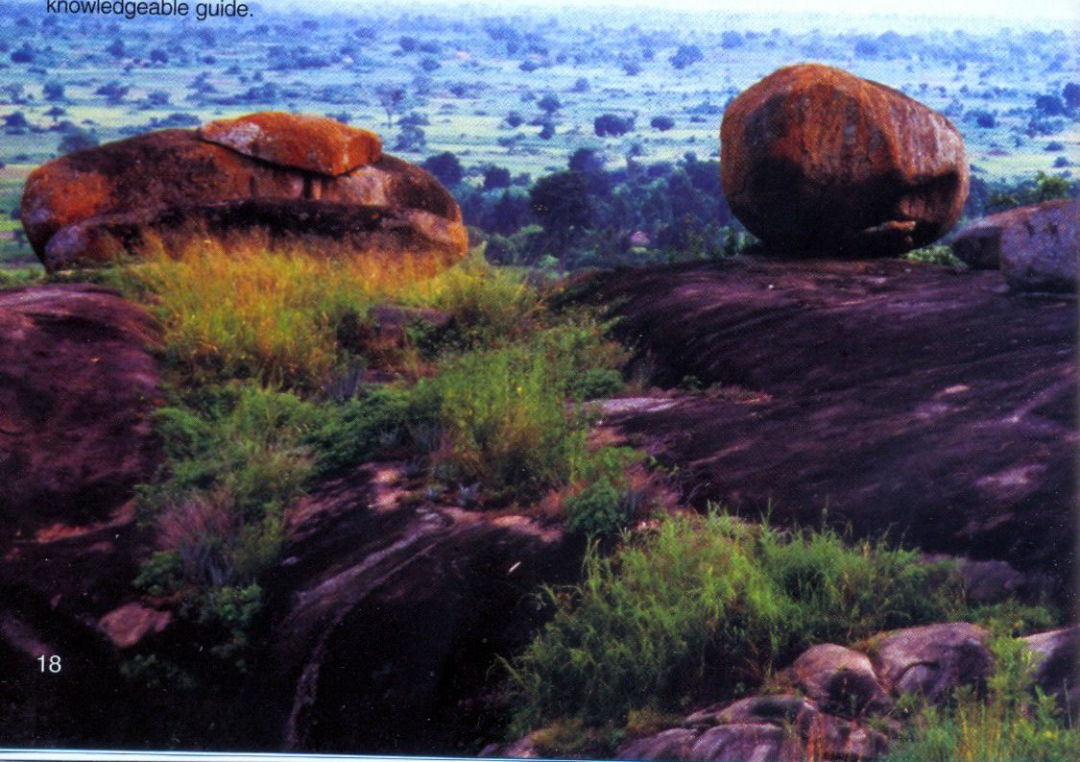
Visiting Rock Art Sites

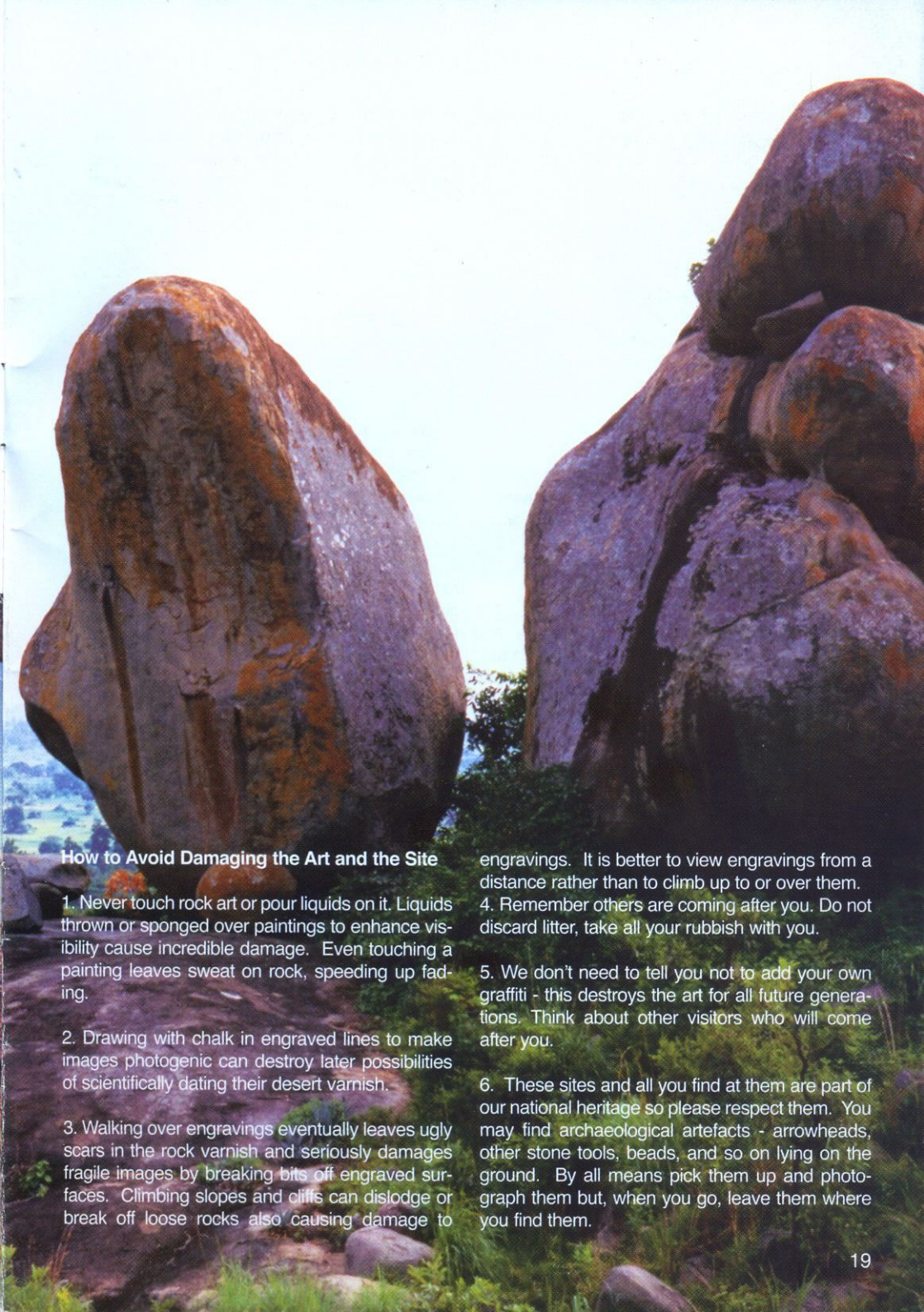
If possible, read about rock art before setting out, this will immeasurably enhance your understanding and, thus, your enjoyment. Take the trouble to make sure you will be travelling with a really knowledgeable guide.

Make certain sufficient time is allowed in your schedule to view the art properly. Once at the site you will want to spend time viewing and photographing as well as finding out more about it. Some sites have thousands of images and cannot be appreciated in a mere half an hour.

Engravings are best viewed in morning or evening light when the sun rakes across them creating shadows in their engraved lines. Paintings are usually best seen when shaded, as bright sunlight can obscure faded colours causing them to almost disappear.

Be aware of details in the art; clothes, jewellery, fingers and hoofs, association between peoples and that between people and animals. Spending a few minutes trying to understand what you are looking at can make a huge difference to your understanding of the art. Finally, don't take things for granted; when you see a giraffe carved into the rock you think 'giraffe'; but did the artist intend a giraffe or is the giraffe a symbol for something else, e.g. is it perhaps a spirit person in giraffe form?





How to Avoid Damaging the Art and the Site

1. Never touch rock art or pour liquids on it. Liquids thrown or sponged over paintings to enhance visibility cause incredible damage. Even touching a painting leaves sweat on rock, speeding up fading.
2. Drawing with chalk in engraved lines to make images photogenic can destroy later possibilities of scientifically dating their desert varnish.
3. Walking over engravings eventually leaves ugly scars in the rock varnish and seriously damages fragile images by breaking bits off engraved surfaces. Climbing slopes and cliffs can dislodge or break off loose rocks also causing damage to

engravings. It is better to view engravings from a distance rather than to climb up to or over them.

4. Remember others are coming after you. Do not discard litter, take all your rubbish with you.

5. We don't need to tell you not to add your own graffiti - this destroys the art for all future generations. Think about other visitors who will come after you.

6. These sites and all you find at them are part of our national heritage so please respect them. You may find archaeological artefacts - arrowheads, other stone tools, beads, and so on lying on the ground. By all means pick them up and photograph them but, when you go, leave them where you find them.



TO VISIT ROCK ART SITES

Kenya: National Museums of Kenya, Department of Sites and Monuments or check their website: www.museums.or.ke

Tanzania: Department of Antiquities, Ministry of Natural Resources and Tourism

Uganda: Department of Antiquities and Museums, Ministry of Tourism, Trade and Industry

TARA: www.africanrockart.org

IF THERE IS ROCK ART IN YOUR AREA

Much of the rock art in East Africa has not yet been surveyed by scientists. If there is rock art in your area, TARA would like to know about it. Please contact us and include maps to the location, sketches or photos of the art itself and any information about local beliefs or customs associated with it.

Trust for African Rock Art
P.O. Box 24122 - 00502, Nairobi, Kenya
Tel: +254-(0)20-884467
tara@africanrockart.org
www.africanrockart.org