

THE DIGGING STICK

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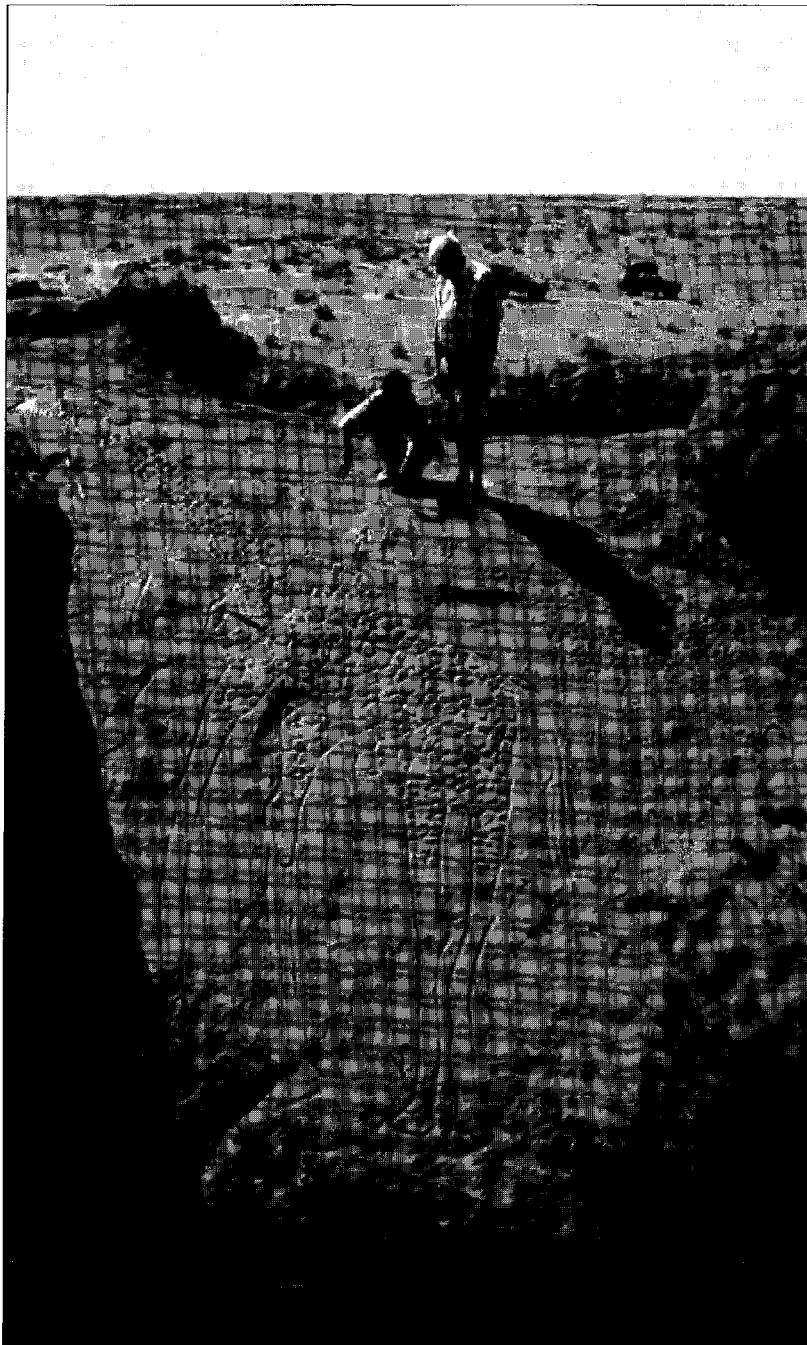
THE DABOUS GIRAFFES PROJECT, NIGER

Alec Campbell & David Coulson

There have been reports in the international press and on radio about the 'discovery' of a huge engraving of giraffes found in the Sahara, and that casts of the engraving are being produced for display in Niger, France and America.

This note, hopefully, provides an intelligible background to the press reports.

In November 1997, together with Jean Clottes, President of the International Committee of Rock Art, we were shown in Niger a magnificent engraving of two giraffes, the taller measuring 5.4 m from horn to hoof (not 20 ft tall and the largest example of African rock art, as some press reports represented; there are giraffe engravings in Algeria of over 8 m). The engraving's style and method of execution suggest it may be be-



tween about 3000 and 6000 years old. Although the outcrop is located only about 6 km from a major road, in 1997 the engraving was little known, but now tourists are beginning to visit it.

Clottes later wrote to David Coulson, who is chairman of the Trust for African Rock Art, TARA, pointing out, "they [the engravings] are just a few kilometres away from the tar road between Agadez and Arlit and easy of access with a 4x4. They are not on a vertical cliff, but on a slab, which means they can be (and are)

Giraffe engraving, Dabous, Niger

trampled by humans and animals, and are exposed to the rare but violent rains and the sunshine. The sandstone rock spalls: already some pieces are missing, and one big piece of the smaller giraffe is loose. Sooner rather than later it will fall off or be stolen by some tourist, and other pieces will follow. These remarkable works of art are thus imperilled". Clottes then proposed that the crumbling surface be consolidated and casts of the engraving be made for posterity.

Recognising the importance of Clottes' proposal TARA contacted the Government of Niger and started looking for sponsorship; meanwhile Clottes discussed the proposal with UNESCO and approached Les Nouveaux Ateliers Mérindol of Avignon, a company which has worked in the Palaeolithic Caves of France. In November 1998 Coulson with Pierre Mérindol, went to Niger and held discussions with the Ministers of Tourism and of the Environment and Hydraulics, and the Préfet of Agadez who is also Governor of Northern Niger. Mérindol made a careful examination of the engravings, stabilised crumbling areas, and tested on bare rock four different moulding techniques.

The Niger Government granted permission to proceed and sponsorship was obtained, mainly through the Bradshaw Foundation. Support was also provided by National Geographic Society, USA for a study of the giraffes and 600-plus lesser engravings, mainly depicting smaller giraffe, antelope and numerous cattle, together with a few images of rhino, predators and humans, all found on the same outcrop.

In January 1999 the authors, with Jean and Renée Clottes, returned to Dabous. The outcrop was mapped, and the giraffe engraving drawn and minutely photographed under a string grid, and then moulded by Mérindol and his assistants. The mould covered about 25 m² and was made in three sections. The moulding product chosen was Silicon RTV 3100 (Room Temperature Vulcanisation), while the demoulding agent was liquid soap and polyvinyl alcohol. The engraving was then gently cleansed with

compressed air and any remaining small marks toned down by dabbing with solvent and rinsing with local water until they disappeared.

To ensure the shape of the rock slab was maintained, the silicon mould was reinforced with a thick plaster-of-paris backing strengthened with fibre-wool, wood struts and building rod. Four approximately 200 cm² rectangles, three covering deeply engraved areas and one beside the engraving, were protected and later moulded in clay over a foil lining in case dating of varnish may one day prove possible. The logistics and bureaucracy involved in transporting several tons of moulding materials from France into the Sahara and shipping the negative casts home are best not described.

A study was made of the other engravings on the outcrop, and of two neighbouring sites both of which include large engravings of giraffe, although these do not exceed 3 m in overall size. Time allowed only for a record on form and film of 430 engravings on the main outcrop. At the same time, a video was made of the moulding process, the recording exercise, numerous of the engravings and the general environment. The recording exercise will be completed in January 2000.

After the mould had been removed, both Niger Ministers, travelling over 1 000 km from Niamey, with the Governor of Northern Niger, visited Dabous. They inspected the mould and engravings, and made short speeches expressing pleasure in the rock art and satisfaction with the moulding. Positive casts will be made in France. One cast is to be erected outside the entrance to Agadez International Airport, Niger; another goes to the United States of America, possibly to be displayed in the National Geographic Society building; while others, hopefully, will be sold to Museums and Art Galleries.

TARA has provided initial funding for two custodians to live at the site and for a well (the water level is at about 15 m depth) to be dug

nearby. One custodian was hired before casting commenced, provided with a record book, and given brief training in the handling of tourists. After two years, the Local Government in Agadez will take over the custodians. During our stay at Dabous two parties of tourists, from Switzerland and Austria, respectively visited the site and were recorded in the book.

This project has several aims. The obvious one is to stabilise and protect a magnificent engraving and to mould it so that whatever

may happen to it in the future, casts will survive. Another intention is to sensitize the Niger Government to this really amazing and vast rock-art heritage, its world value and dire need for protection. Finally, everyone is reminded of the artistic ability, incredible beauty, importance and potential fragility involved in Africa's prehistoric art, much of it many thousands of years old.

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STERKFORTEIN, KROMDRAAI, SWARTKRANS AND ENVIRONS CONSIDERED FOR WORLD HERITAGE STATUS*

Three South African heritage sites were selected last year for submission to the World Heritage Centre in Paris. They are to be considered by the World Heritage Committee when it meets in December 1999. The three sites are Robben Island, St Lucia Wetlands, and Sterkfontein, Kromdraai, Swartkrans and Environs.

A total of 20 natural and cultural sites and landscapes were identified as meeting the criteria by the South African World Heritage Convention Committee. This country, having rejoined Unesco, became a party to the World Heritage Convention in 1997 and is thus entitled - for the first time - to propose sites for listing

The Sterkfontein Valley has been described as "one of South Africa's most internationally valued scientific treasure-houses". Professor Phillip Tobias has noted that "it includes at least 11 fossil-rich cave sites, over a distance of 15 km. No fewer than seven have yielded remains of the human family". Clustered near one another in the south are Sterkfontein, Kromdraai and Swartkrans. Sterkfontein and Swartkrans are "the world's two richest hominid-bearing caves" which together have yielded nearly 1000 catalogued hominid specimens, "the fossil bones belonging to hundreds of individuals who lived between 3,3 million and one million years ago". Swartkrans has provided, in addition, the earliest signs of human control of fire. Kromdraai is where, in 1938, Dr Robert Broom made the first discovery of a robust *Australopithecine*, subsequently found also

at Swartkrans, which, less than two million years ago, was a contemporary of an early form of the genus *Homo*.

From Sterkfontein have come some of the most spectacular finds in the history of palaeoanthropology, including the famous fossil known as "Mrs Ples", found in 1947 - the remains of the small-headed upright-walking *Australopithecus africanus*. Then, at the very time that committees deliberated on a South African World Heritage submission, one of the most astonishing finds was being made. This was the first ever discovery - by Dr Ron Clarke and fossil preparators Nkwane Molefe and Stephen Motsumi - of a well-preserved skull and associated skeleton of *Australopithecus*, from the lowest levels of the site. The skull is the most complete *Australopithecine* skull ever found.

Work at these sites has "brought to light," as Tobias puts it, "a story of human evolution which takes second place to none other". If any site deserves inclusion on the World Heritage List - on which Africa is significantly under-represented - the Sterkfontein, Kromdraai and Swartkrans cluster certainly does.