FERTILITY SYMBOLISM AND BIRTH ROCK-PAINTINGS FROM THE SOUTHERN CAPE PROVINCE*

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The subject of birth and fertility as portrayed in prehistoric art has received much discussion and speculation about the motives underlying its depiction from all periods from the oldest known art of the European Palaeolithic dating back to some 30,000 years ago, and many publications have resulted from the analysis of the symbolism of both parietal and mobile art in Western Europe in particular (for example Leroi-Gourhan 1958, 1968; Ucko & Rosefeldt 1967; Parkington 1969). The very obvious charms of the so-called Venus Figurines, small modelled figures of women carved from stone or mammoth ivory or sometimes moulded in clay and ash, have led to the sort of comment quoted below from Discovering Art (1964): ‘These figures do not conform to our idea of beauty: they stress woman’s sexual and reproductive functions and minimise her head and legs. They show her with heavy breasts, a protruding belly and wide hips.’ The interpretation of these features has most commonly been that they express a symbol of fertility with the image of the woman’s function and importance in fulfilling the magical or religious purpose of encouraging fertility. More than sixty figures of women are represented in the Balzi Rossi collection housed in the Museum of National Antiquities, Saint Germain-en-Laye in France. Of these, only two include facial features. They are typified by the Venus of Willendorf (Fig. 1) and the Venus of Savignano, which is carved in serpentine stone. The lack of similar figurines in southern Africa does not necessarily mean that similar thoughts on the importance of fertility were not held by our own prehistoric artists. It may be useful, therefore, to examine the examples we have in one particular area, the southern Cape, to see to what extent the subject was favoured by the rock-painters here.

**Fertility scenes in southern Cape rock-art**

The southern Cape comprises for the purpose of this study the mountains of the Cape Folded Mountain belt extending from the Atlantic coast in the west to Port Elizabeth in the east, and from Wellington in the south to Vanrhynsdorp in the north. After more than twenty years of exploration, my colleagues Hym Rabinowitz, Percy Sieff and Tim Maggs and I have recorded in excess of six hundred sites with thousands of paintings. From this mass of examples, female figures akin to those portrayed by the Venus Figurines occur (Figs 2, 3) and two paintings may positively be identified as birth scenes. In addition there are numerous scenes of mother-and-child relationships amongst animals and the exaggeration of phallic proportions amongst men.

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**Female figures**

While identifiable birth scenes are rare, there is a significantly high number of female figures showing similarly exaggerated features of the Upper Palaeolithic figurines. The head is characteristically an insignificant blob and often merely a neck can be seen, the arms are unimportant or truncated and by contrast the breasts, belly and hips are exaggerations of the anatomy. Classic examples occur near Kriedouwskrans in the Clanwilliam district, Rietvlei in the Kouebokkeveld, Diepvrivier at Humansdorp, Schildpadberg near Willowmore, Elandsrivier near Citrusdal (Fig. 2) and Rheboksfontein at Wyegang near Clanwilliam (Fig. 3). These features, while they can also result from pregnancy, breast feeding and steatopygia, nevertheless suggest that the paintings represent women as the source of fecundity rather than women as individuals.

To support this theory of propagation of the species as a theme in the art form, it is submitted that the many mother-and-child paintings are corroborative evidence. Numerous examples are located
Fig. 2. Elandsrivier, Citrusdal. Colour: red.

Fig. 3. Rheboksfontein, Wyegang, Clanwilliam. Colour: red.

all over the area, for example, the elephant and calf (Fig. 4), the baboon and young (Fig. 5) and the rhinoceros and calf (Fig. 6). These are not perspective illustrations as they occur on the same landscape plane. In the case of the baboon, they feature the youngster attached to the mother. Examples of buck also occur and a perfect study (although outside the survey area) was recently recorded from one of the Kamberg, Natal, shelters (Fig. 7).

Figs 4-6. Colours: red (4), black (5), red (6).
Birth scenes

The first of the birth scenes in the southern Cape (Fig. 8) was recorded fifty years ago by my father and three school companions and myself when we were benighted during a snowstorm in the Wellington mountains. On the morrow we observed the remarkable painting. We made our initial tracing, using the transparent paper which my parent used as a "kar-dose" (paper cornet) in which he placed his pipe tobacco. The next year we made a better tracing and took photographs. Twenty years later we were dismayed to discover that baboons had assisted deterioration by rubbing themselves against the painting as they squatted on the ledge beneath it. Vandals then visited the shelter and sprayed water which assisted in destruction. Dr J. A. Keen, then Professor of Anatomy at the University of Natal, had accompanied me on a visit in 1951 before total obliteration and after studying the scene for a long time and comparing it with earlier copies and photographs, he expressed the opinion that it was unquestionably a birth portrayal. The attendant figure may have been the grandmother or close relative of the child being born. The height of the mother and recumbent child measures 6 cm.

The second example (Fig. 9) is from the Clanwilliam district. We discovered it in 1962. In both this and the first example, one is impressively aware of the vital umbilical cord which attaches mother to infant. Height from top of head to bottom of right foot of the mother is 26 cm.

It is apparent from evidence elicited from rock-art experts in other southern African countries that no similar paintings of birth scenes have been described or, apparently, recorded. The late Mrs Marion Walsham How, for example, wrote that she '... could recall no similar occurrence in Basutoland' (now Lesotho) (pers. comm. 1966), and the late Mrs Elizabeth Goodall (pers. comm. 1957) '... had no recollection of this feature in Rhodesian rock-paintings'. On enquiry to recorders in South Africa outside the Cape Province, it appeared that no similar occurrences had been seen there either and one may wonder—certainly on the scant evidence of only two instances—if these are possibly unique.

If birth portrayal in rock-art was taboo, one may wonder what motivated even these examples. Were they particularly special or significant in that they represent records of important or impressive confinements? Birth, as an art subject, may have been a sacred or consecrated one in the repertoire of the artist and it is of interest here that well-known sacred subjects also appear to have been excluded from the rock-art. The Mantis, apparently the important and favourite hero of Bushmen folklore, seems to have been ignored in rock-paintings. Only a single, and then a suspect, example has been noted in our southern Cape area. This we recorded in 1961 on an open rock face in the Suurvlikte above Boskloof, Clanwilliam. One wonders also why the basic foods of these hunter-gatherer-artists were not painted in profusion: the tortoise, hare, francolin, rock rabbit,

Fig. 7. Kamberg, Giant's Castle area, Natal. Colour: maroon, white.

Fig. 8. Bains Kloof, Wellington, Cape. Colour: red.
corms and bulbs are all almost totally absent.

An interesting parallel occurs with the art of the American Indians. In southern Alberta enormous herds of buffalo migrated every year but were never recorded in the hunter-artist's portrayals. Campbell Grant (1967) writes that 'Along the Columbia River where the Indian depended on the salmon as the main food supply, the easily procured fish was seldom pictured'. He suggests that 'Hunting magic was apparently not employed unless the quarry was a difficult animal to bag and a little supernatural aid was called for'.

On occasions one records copulation and the Knuffels Shelter, Drakensberg, is an example. The occurrence is as rare as these birth scenes.

Other fertility themes

In a variation on the birth portrayal, Mrs Elizabeth Goodall (1959: 93) draws attention under the heading 'The Primeval Mother' to a mythical being: 'It is a roundish, rather bloated female being drawn in a strict frontal position, sometimes with two large ears, the head showing only animal connection. The legs are always straddled and often two or more streams or bands emanate from the lower part of the body. It is not certain whether the person is meant to be pregnant, though this is probable. Illustrations occur of creations climbing down these streams or bands, as if emanating from the body above. It is possible that these motifs are connected with the belief in a great “first mother” who produced all the people of the world. I have made a line illustration of Mrs Goodall's copy (Fig. 10) and her description of the original plate of the Rhodesian painting is that it ‘... shows a sub-human figure as described above coming from Mtoko cave. Here the “streams” float sideways and two mythical persons are moving near the streams...'. The size of the frieze is 48 × 112 cm. I have seen no similar motifs in the southern Cape, but in 1976 I recorded a similarly bloated figure on the farm Rosstrevor in the Barkley East area of the eastern Cape and in the same overhang next to a stream was a painting of a serpent with a dragon-type head and mane almost 4 m long—possibly of mythological significance.

While the identifiable birth and mythological fertility scenes are rare, there are numerous occurrences of paintings which show enlarged male sex organs. These phallic representations may also have some associations with fertility and propagation of the species and it seems reasonable to suppose that their significance may relate to the symbolism of fertility and not merely a depiction of what is a recognized physical feature of, for example, the Bushmen.
Conclusions

The southern Cape rock-art has been described as '...poor by comparison with that in the north and east and is often unfinished' (Clark 1959: 279). The fine naturalism and virility of the admittedly magnificent murals from the Drakensberg and environs, with their plethora of eland studies, are unsurpassed. It seems apposite, however, to remark on the numerous unusual and exciting graphics one records in the southern areas.

Variety of subject-matter includes rhinoceros, hippopotamus, lion, leopard, wild pig, zebra, many species of buck, jackal, ostrich, water-fowl, human and animal-headed reptiles, with identifiable species such as puff-adder and cobra, baboon and buffalo.

We recorded a shelter with more than seven hundred and fifty hand impressions. Elephants range from 1 m to 15 mm in length. Human studies nearly 2 m tall and miniatures 1 cm high. Wagons and horses with attendant plaid-skirted females wearing bonnets, men wearing hats and top boots while aiming their rifles at lions. A leopard entering a trap; a ship with flags flying at the mast-heads, and smaller craft with human occupants. An intriguing 'dialogue scene' between human beings and animals with the connecting lines extending from the arrowheads in a quiver to two animals. What may be a rare factua study of a tooth being extracted, representation of human beings, somewhat anthropomorphized as they appear with their buck heads but, in two examples, the bodies are those of women.

The fertility paintings are impressive and the two birth scenes are possibly unique. They accompany other absorbing and complex material to complement the general picture of southern Cape rock-art.

References