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THE PROBABLE AGE OF BUSHMAN PAINTINGS
in the Union of S. Africa
BY

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1927 or 1938

In this paper I do not propose to discuss the age of the earliest rock paintings in ^{the Union of} South Africa, for I consider that a point we cannot possibly determine, but to fix the approximate age of the bulk of the paintings, those which we can still see distinctly enough to be sure what they depict.

In recent years books and papers have been published, relegating the rock paintings in South Africa back to a prehistoric age, and raising doubts as to Bushmen having painted any, or at least of the good ones being their work, even if they made some bad imitations of older work. Against this theory we have the evidence of Bushmen themselves, of a general and widespread tradition, of early travellers, likewise the internal evidence of many of the scenes depicted, and of the paint itself, its preservation and deterioration.

Between 1870 and 1880 there were a number of Bushmen as prisoners at the Beakwater in Cape Town. Most of these knew about the rock paintings executed by their tribe in different parts of the country. When shown copies of rock paintings from other districts, they could explain figures and scenes in them without hesitation, just as a European can identify a Madonna, or a Little Red Riding Hood in an unknown picture. Some people may object, that a native will say anything he thinks his master wants him to say, but these same ^{natives} people often answered: "I do not know this", when shown signs in the old Rock engravings.

Stow, who travelled through the eastern province and the Free State between 1860 and 1880 tells of many Bushmen who knew all about the cave paintings in their district, and claimed them as the work of their people, even telling how long an artist's work must be respected, before it may be painted over. He tells how "the last known Bushman artist of the Malutis was shot in the Witteberg Native Reserve, where he had been on a marauding expedition, and had captured some horses. He had ten small horn pots hanging from a belt, each of which contained a different coloured paint." Stow's informant told him "that he saw the belt, that there were no two colours alike, and that each had a marked difference from the rest." I have heard the objection raised, that the man might have carried the colours about for use in painting his person; but I am certain no Bushman would use ten colours for that purpose. Red, black and white are the only colours used by Bushmen as cosmetics.

The old farmers residing along the foothills of the Maluti and Drakensberg ranges call certain ironstone nodules "Bushman Paint Pots". These stones contain different coloured deposits suitable for making paints, and matching the tints of many cave paintings in the neighbourhood.

Earlier authors have ascribed the cave paintings to Bushmen. I will quote two: Barrow and Arbousset. Barrow travelled about in the Cape Colony in 1797 & 98. He tells, how, after leaving Graaff Reynet, "we made an excursion into

an excursion into the mountains on our left in search of Bosjesmans. + + + The kloofs or chasms leave a succession of caverns. + + + In one of these retreats were discovered their recent traces. The fires were scarcely extinguished, and the grass on which they had slept was not yet withered. On the smooth sides of the cavern were drawings of several animals that had been made from time to time by these savages. Many of them were caricatures,; but others were too well executed not to arrest attention. +++ In the course of travelling, I had ~~had~~ frequently heard the peasantry mention the drawings in the mountains behind the Sneeuwberg made by the Bosjesmans; but I took it for granted they were caricatures only, similar to those on the doors and walls of uninhabited buildings, the work of idle boys; and it was no disagreeable disappointment to find them very much the reverse. Some of the drawings were known to be new; but many of them had been remembered from the first settlement of this part of the colony."

Here we have a distinct proof, that all the paintings were ascribed to the Bushmen and that some must have been their work.

The French Missionary, Arbousset, who went to Basutoland in 1833, refers twice to the paintings in his book dated 1842. In chapter 24 he describes the Bushmen as a branch of the Hottentots and says: "We meet with the drawings of the people in all the caves of South Africa and the other aborigenes call the south 'boroang', the same name which they give to the Bushmen." In chapter 23 he writes: "Thus it is the Bushmen are greatly exasperated. It is not rare to find in the cavern which they frequent both on this and the other side of the Orange River, drawings of antelopes painted with ochre and charcoal on the lower walls of the caves, and in the midst of these innocent playthings a great fat Dutch farmer thrashing his Bushman, and also Bushmen surrounding a farmer to kill him."

Here again we have testimony of paintings which may be any age, and of others which must be quite recent, as they depict the relationship of the white man to the Bushman. Neither writer has the least doubt on the rock paintings being the work of Bushmen, nor, as far as I know, has any author up to the beginning of this century expressed any doubts on the subject. As long as the older generation of Bushmen lived the ~~knowledge~~ authorship of the paintings was undisputed. With their death doubts might naturally arise, from people asking the farmbred Bushmen about the pictures and finding complete ignorance of the whole subject.

It may be asked, could such a tradition die out completely in say 30 or 40 years? If we turn to folklore we find a parallel case. Between 1870 & 80 a large amount of lore was collected from the Bushmen and women sent down to Cape Town for various reasons. In 1910 I met the children and nephews of several of these Bushmen in Prieska district and tried to collect more folk tales. In vain--If I started reading a bit of one of the former stories to them, sometimes one or other might just recollect some old customs, but the folklore was gone, it had been completely forgotten. No wonder all knowledge of artistic work has vanished too, among people whose independent existence has ceased.

Besides this historical witness there is the internal evidence of the pictures themselves. The bucks and other animals might have been drawn in any age by any race, ~~but~~ but not all the human figures. Some of these are mere indications of a human being, but a number have marked characteristics in stature, dress, equipment and action. Those acquainted with Bushmen, ^{recognize} well known features, such as steatopygia, and very small feet, both often exaggerated. We also see the bows and arrows they used, the digging stick weighted by a stone carried by the women, a plain stick in the hands of the men, an occasional rounded apron, the skin or kaross suspended ~~from~~ the neck, and other parts of a Bushman's equipment. Numbers of the ~~xxxxxxx~~ hunting scenes show the arrows stuck in a band round the head, just as the Bushmen wore them in action. Others show them stuck in the long bag slung over ~~the~~ the left shoulder, just ^{as it is used} ~~as it is worn~~ to this day by the Kalahari Bushmen.

The dance scenes have features inexplicable to us, but easily identified by Bushmen. One was at once recognized by an old Bushman woman known to Stow as the arrow dance. She started clapping her hands and singing the proper tune for it, until her old husband stuck his arrows round his head and ^{began} ~~started~~ the dance. Another dance shows, among the dancers, typical arrow bags laid on the ground, and one man seated play on a number of bows. I showed a copy of this ^{to} some Bushmen in South West Africa ^a few years ago, among others, ^{represent} pictures of native musical instruments, some of which they knew, while others were unknown to them. When they saw ~~the~~ picture, they at once said, 'that is not an instrument; all the men coming to the dance have put down their bows, and one man is playing on them, we often do so.'

^{Not only do the pictures} ~~Besides illustrating~~ the every day life of the Bushmen, ~~xxxxxxx~~ ^{king}, the women gathering food with digging sticks, the men hunting, ^{and} ~~some times~~ their habit of disguising themselves in the skins of animals in order to approach the game unobserved, ^{but} we also find some Bushman mythological beliefs illustrated. ^{In many of their folk tales, we hear of} The Rain ^{changing} human beings into frogs ^{according} ~~to many of their folk tales~~. There are at least two rock pictures which can be explained in ~~no~~ other way; one was shown to Bushmen, who at once said that ~~they~~ ^{it illustrated} illustrated a ~~c~~ ^{certain tale}. There are also pictures of wonderful animals, which never inhabited this or any other part of the world. These caused no difficulty to the Bushmen, they were identified as Rainbulls, ~~xxxxx~~ mythical creatures whom the Rain sorcerors used to lead over the country, when they wanted rain, and wherever these went, rain fell. Some of these ^{creatures} ~~animals~~ look more like a magic bullbuck, others more like a cloud turned into an animal; they are often accompanied by pictures of frogs, fish, tortoises and snakes, all ~~creatures~~ ^{and} said to be sacred to the Rain. Thus we have folklore and ~~paintings~~ ^{and} agreeing.

^{Many} Another large group of pictures shows figures which are either human beings dressed in animal skins, or are partly human, partly animal. ~~xxxxxx~~ These the Bushmen called sorcerors, ~~they~~ ^{pictures of the} ~~xxxxxxx~~ Some they explained as being ^{the} dresses the sorcerors put on for certain dances or ceremonies; others as sorcerors who turned themselves into wild beasts on occasion. There ^{are} ~~are~~ many tales of sorcerors, men known to them fifty years ago, who used to walk about as lions, etc.

Bushman folklore is full of stories of animals who were once men, indeed, they seem to think that all animals were formally human. One picture of birdlike beings reminds me very much of the fable of the vultures who made their elder sister of a woman, and were evidently women themselves at the beginning of the story. This point I wish to emphasize, as ~~many~~ ^{being} people unacquainted with Bushman lore take these animal-headed ~~persons~~ as proofs that the paintings are Egyptian, whereas they have a very simple explanation as Bushman work, fitting in with the beliefs and traditions of that people during the last hundred years.

Of course there is nothing in these purely Bushman or mythological scenes to show whether they were the work of the very last generations or of their forebears; but in the Eastern Province and particularly in Basutoland we find paintings that bear date, for they show the black and white invaders of the Bushman's territory, generally in the act of fighting with him, with cattle as the object of the fray. The different Bantu tribes, generally Basutos or Zulus, are so well drawn as to be unmistakable. The shields are correct, the Zulu shield long, ~~and generally oval~~, the Basuto shield cut in at the sides. The weapons of the Bantu tribes, spears and knobkerries, ~~are true to life~~, and the kilts and tails that were their former clothing are all there. Moreover the prognathous head, the large stature, the great splay feet, typical of the black man, can be recognized at a glance. ~~Now it seems certain, that~~ ^{These} battle pieces cannot be more than 100 to ¹⁵⁰ 200 years old, as had either Basutos or Zulus been in the ~~xxxxxx~~ parts where the pictures are found at an earlier date, there would have been no Bushmen left by the time the Dutch occupied the country, and the Bantu tribes would have been down at Table Bay.

A few paintings bear even stronger evidence of their late origin, for they depict the white man. In two pictures we see men and women in the characteristic dress of the late 18th and early 19th century, in others we have attempts to paint men on horse back. One of these was found near the Kei River, and was said to represent the first Boer commando that penetrated there. We can well believe it, for in spite of the difficulty the artist has evidently had in drawing that new animal, the horse, the build of the Boer leader is very characteristic. These paintings cannot be much more than 100 years old, and as they are quite evidently in the same style as the rest of the cave paintings, it shows that we must look for the artists in modern, not in ancient days.

Some writers claim, that although a few of these latest pictures may have been painted by the Bushmen, yet that is no proof that the older and better work was theirs, in fact they hold them to be a decadent race, possibly making feeble imitations of former artists either of their own or an earlier race. I do not think that anyone would advance such a theory who had seen a great number of the actual caves, not merely copies of the paintings. I have seen many caves, and many paintings, and the conclusion I have come to is quite the reverse.

One often finds two or three layers of paintings, one ~~one~~ ^{one} imposed on the other; in nearly every case the topmost layer, ~~is at least as good as~~ ^{is at least as good as} the under ones, sometimes better. The ~~paintings~~ ^{pictures} of human ~~figures~~ ^{figures} that have the oldest look, ~~are~~ ^{are} ~~decidedly~~ ^{often} worse ~~drawn~~ ^{drawn} than

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the newer ones, those showing the fights with black and white men. Some of these are very well grouped and have every good quality found in the rock paintings. They are not the work of a decadent race, or poor artists imitating old masters. ‡

I think the best paintings of buck are among the newest, too, for this reason. I have examined a large number of caves and rockshelters with work in every stage of preservation, from quite clear and finished pictures to mere formless blobs of paint, and in every case the dark colours, particularly the dark reds, last the longest, while the light colours fade first. It may be asked, how can one tell what a colour that has faded was? The most typical figure of the rock paintings is the large buck depicted in a stereotyped manner, in two colours, the darker shading of the back, a line along the back of the neck and tail, and part of the legs being given in red or brown or dark orange, while the face, throat, belly, and the rest of the legs is in white or a very light colour. We find these pictures in every stage of preservation, from complete figures with horns, hoofs, and even pale blue eyes, to mere patches just recognizable as buck, and it is always the pale colours that have gone, either in part or altogether. The dark red seems almost indestructable. From this I deduce, that light paints do not last as long as the dark ones, hence any pictures that have much white or light colour are among the more recent ones. Now most of the best reproductions of bucks have white and light paint, so I judge them to be among the more modern ones.

(At this point I may mention that Bushmen do not name colours in the same way we do. They divide them into three categories, dark, light and red. This agrees remarkably with the use of colour in the rock paintings, which do not as a rule attempt to reproduce the real hue of an animal or person, but apply dark and light colours as shading.)

To return to the question of the ~~preservation~~ lasting qualities of the paints, I do not think that in our climate colours in rockshelters exposed to wind and dust, and often to the sun, can have lasted as many hundred years as the paintings in the underground caves of France and Spain. Time will show, but I think the manner, in which the ~~cave~~ rock paintings are fading before our eyes, disproves the possibility of the ~~the~~ work we see being thousands of years old.

If more people were able to view the caves themselves, we should hear less of the Bushmen being a decadent race. I think the two tribes *that* inhabited the Cape Colony and Basutoland and the Free State were in the very height of their literary and artistic powers, when fate in the shape of black and white invaders swept them away.

The inhabitants of the Kalahari are not members of the same tribe, but speak entirely different languages, and have in part other *customs* ~~habits~~ and beliefs. Living on the sand, neither they nor their forebears can have painted for want of rocks to paint on, or ochres to paint with. Their testimony on the subject is of no value.

I do not of course mean to imply that only the later generations of Southern Bushmen painted; probably their ancestors had done so for many hundreds of years dating back to prehistoric times, but I doubt if we can still see the earlier work. The likeness in style ~~xxxx~~ between the Bushman paintings and the cave paintings of Southern Europe may lead us to surmise a common ancestor to both groups of artists. There is likewise a ~~decided~~ touch of Egyptian style about some of the South African figures, which gives rise to queries as to whether Egyptian art is not one development of a prehistoric art, or which we find another ~~xxxx~~ branch out here. But I think no doubt remains, as to the paintings found in our country being the work of the Bushmen found in the same place. I say particularly the paintings; there are also rock engravings found here, of which some were claimed by Bushmen as their work. But that is another matter, into which I will not enter to-day.

Since coming to Rhodesia I have been shown very good copies of the rock paintings found at ^{near Fort Victoria} Ndanga River. They seem to me to be ordinary Bushman work, the figures with head-dresses & some sort of kaross on the shoulders & leg & arm bands being very similar to many southern paintings, depicting either Bushman sorcerers, or Bantu in war dress. The light paint on these figures, cannot be ^{many} centuries old.