
HISTORY IN THE CLASSROOM

AN EXPLORATION OF SAN ROCK ART

*Ms Cecile Ferreira
Rhenish Girls' High School
History Teacher*

School excursions are arguably the most enjoyable and rewarding part of history teaching; the excitement and joy of such an outing engenders bears testimony to this. Living in the Western Cape, one does not have to undertake long and tiresome journeys in order to visit historical sites. From the Strandloper middens around Kommetjie and Fishhoek to vast areas strewn with stone-age artefacts, to our well-known and beloved Castle, there is much from which to choose. What one does require, however, is a competent guide - often a welcome change to the jaded face of the teacher! A competent guide we had in the person of Dr Janette Deacon of the National Monuments Council, who acted as tour guide and mentor, and who made this excursion an outstanding experience.

Unlike our previous trip to the North Western Cape to view San rock engravings (via Brandvlei, Verneukpan, Springbokoog, Van Wyksvlei and Carnarvon), we decided to undertake a less adventurous and more manageable journey to Citrusdal, Clanwilliam, Wupperthal and Gifberg, to view San rock paintings. On Friday 15 September we set off for the farm Grootfontein, near Porterville, in the exquisite Winterhoek Range, which is home to the famous finger painting of the sailing ship with flags (one flag or sail pointing in the opposite direction to the others), stopping on the way at Sonquasdrift, where one of the earliest meetings between the Dutch and San occurred.

How does one teach twenty boisterous pupils about rock art, bearing in mind that most of them have never seen a "real live" San painting before? The answer is that they learn faster than a hunted hare can run and we found that in a matter of days, after watching and listening, pupils could face an unseen painting and interpret or explain what they saw. Certainly the explanations were not comprehensive, but by listening to Dr Deacon and observing keenly, they had learned to understand the context of the art as well as the unique metaphors used. The metaphorical thinking and expression of the San through their folklore, place names, dances, art, was elucidated as we moved from site to site. San rock art is essentially a religious art, the eland, elephants and other animals so often depicted, having a profound meaning to the San themselves.

In the past people have erroneously assumed that the paintings depicted were what the San wanted to hunt and eat. Similarly, one could forgive uninformed travellers for thinking that the pictures of lambs in stained glass windows of medieval churches in Europe were what the congregation wanted to have for dinner. Just as the lamb in the stained glass window is a metaphor, so the animals in the rock paintings are metaphors for something, as are the medicine bags as well as the arrows so often painted. The rock artists would execute the paintings after coming out of a trance, induced by dancing and clapping. The San Shamans used power received during the trance for three main purposes: to heal sick people, to make rain and for out-of-body travel. Thus the paintings will show elongated figures, entoptic patterns (dots, stripes, zig-zags, etc.) which were experienced during the various stages of the trance state.

Talking about rock paintings was not the only thing we did on our trip. Besides taking the waters at Citrusdal and visiting the charming village of Wupperthal, which has historic links with our school via the Rhenish missionaries, we enjoyed many memorable campfires, sing-a-longs and, best of all, the experience of sleeping under the glorious southern skies. This last activity might sound fairly mundane to some, but it was a first for many of our city

slickers who found it an exciting experience especially on "Uitspankraal", Mr Peter Blaine's farm.*

The most exciting paintings viewed were at Boontjieskraal, now called Bushman'skloof. This is where one of our Standard Eight pupils "discovered" a painting no-one had known about, an event which caused tremendous excitement. After Boontjieskraal, we drove to Gifberg, near Van Rhynsdorp, where we enjoyed luxuriously accommodation whilst making occasional sorties out to view the local paintings. By now we had a couple of experts on board and were rather dismayed to find that our 5-day holiday had come to an end. We drove home via the Heerenlogement, the rock shelter where Van der Stel's expedition had camped en route to Namaqualand and which has since become a site of treasured historical graffiti.

A trip of this nature is well worth the effort and organisation involved. With some help as regards transport and personal involvement from the chairman of our management council, Peter Blaine, we managed to cut costs to R220 per pupil. Pupils gained invaluable firsthand knowledge and experience. The memories of the trip might fade as the years roll by, but we part from our pupils knowing that we have informed them of their heritage and, more importantly, have taught them how to conserve their heritage.

*Dr Deacon, together with Mr John Kribble, of the National Monuments Council, showed pupils how to identify early, middle and late stone-age artefacts found in abundance on the farm. Pupils learned that artefacts are to be left where found and that it was an offence to move them.

The following booklet might be useful to anyone planning such a trip:

Deacon, Janette: Some views on Rock paintings in the Cederberg. Published by the Department of Environment Affairs in collaboration with Cape Nature Conservation & Museums and the National Monuments Council. June 1994.