

# New perspectives on rock art from Mt. Elgon, Trans-Nzoia and Kara-Pokot: a preliminary report

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## LES NOUVELLES PERSPECTIVES DE L'ART RUPESTRE CONCERNANT LE MONT ELGON, TRANS-NZOIA ET KARA-POKOT: UN RAPPORT PRÉLIMINAIRE

Plusieurs chercheurs du 20ème siècle ont publié leurs travaux sur les descriptions des peintures rupestres trouvées dans la région du Mont Elgon au Kenya. La plus récente étude, commencée en June 2002, a répertorié de nombreux nouveaux sites qui, pour la plupart, embrassent des peintures de bestiaux. Sur le site de Kiboyi, le bétail est peint avec des cornes modifiées, une caractéristique culturelle toujours pratiquée par les Karamojongs dans le nord est de l' Ouganda. Lors de l'examen des abris rocheux, deux traditions de poterie ont pu être dénombrées mais aucune trace d'une quelconque utilisation du fer.

## ABSTRACT

Several 20th century researchers have published descriptions of rock paintings in the Mt Elgon region of Kenya. The most recent survey, undertaken in June 2003, revealed a number of new sites, most of which include paintings of cattle. At Kiboyi the cattle are depicted with altered horn profiles, a cultural feature still practised by the Karamojong in north-east Uganda. Two pottery traditions were noted in the rock shelters examined, but there was no evidence of iron technology.

## Introduction

A survey of rock art sites took place between 4 and 14 June 2003 in the districts of Mt Elgon, Trans-Nzoia and Kara- Pokot with the following objectives:

- to prospect for new rock art sites; and
- to record new sites.

Because of the large size of the region, the survey focused on sub-regions on the north-west flank of Mt Elgon, and around Koitobos, Kacheliba and Kong'alai.

Notwithstanding the extent of the area, and the limitations of time and funds, the expedition revealed previously unknown rock art and other significant archaeological sites.

## Methodology

In order to achieve the aforementioned objectives, and bearing in mind that few previous

archaeological programmes had been undertaken in the specific environment that prevails in the research area, a pragmatic survey strategy was adopted focusing on rock shelters, caves and cliffs. The knowledge of the local inhabitants was also put to use. Headlamps and flashlights were

used to examine the dark interior of caves. Datable materials were collected and brought back for analysis.

## Sites around Mt Elgon

It is common knowledge that Mt Elgon is riddled with caves, many of which have sheltered humans



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in the past (Weatherby & Wilson 1962). In an effort to find Mrs Tweedie's cave discovered in the 1960s (Cole 1963) within the larger Kimothon forest reserve, a new site with rock art was revealed at Chemarich cave after a long and winding prospecting trip in the contiguous area.

Here, in a cliff of about 50 m in length, were paintings of what looked like a headless humpless bull inscribed at the entrance. The ones higher up done in red

shamba system has resulted in surface run-off down the face of the cliff that is destroying the art in the process. From a cursory examination of the site, the following factors emerged. Being the only site in the locality with paintings of animals, it must have been important to the early inhabitants. There is evidence of fire as seen from the abundant charcoal and ash scattered on the floor. It was also established that present day inhabitants light fires when guarding their crops from wild animals.

In the cave adjacent to the shelter, there was abundant evidence of fire that has unfortunately blackened the walls to the extent that no art is visible. The early occupation of Chemarich cave by what I believe to be a pastoralist group is in evidence everywhere as seen from the deposits of dung, pieces of sewn leather and broken gourds that litter the floor. The floor level is recognizable on examination of the cultural deposits whose stratigraphic arrangement has been damaged at the entrance due to the amount of water flowing in. Other cultural materials on the floor demonstrate that the cave, which is about 20 m long, had early occupants. Among the artefacts recovered were bone pounders, weathered wood and fist-sized perforated stones whose use and significance is not documented in the archaeological and ethno-archaeological literature of the region. Weatherby (1965), Wilson (1972) and Odak (1977) have described similar stones. However, what they are and the purpose they served still remain a mystery. Surface collections yielded a number of undecorated potsherds.

### Kiptogot Cave

This cave is located at 010.07'.37.7" N and 034.45'.15.4" E. Based on my own observations Kiptogot cave seems to be what other scholars

such as Wright (1961) and Odak (1977) have referred to as Mrs Tweedie's cave. The cliff extends for about 50 m in length and is about 10 m high. Though badly damaged by surface run-off down the cliff, traces of rock art done with red paint cannot be mistaken for anything else. Though difficult to zero down to the actual representations, there are depictions of what must be domestic cattle. The remaining mosaic of art cannot be identified due the destruction caused by water, the whole scenario speaking of the need to preserve the site before it is completely destroyed. The adjacent cave extending for 34.5 m gives evidence of early occupation. A section revealed abundant evidence of pastoralist occupation. There are huge deposits of dung. A bamboo and wood enclosure measuring about 8 m in diameter is subdivided and a smaller structure measuring about 3.5 m in diameter is smeared with dung and still stands intact. Weatherby & Wilson (1962) report this tradition of enclosures in caves in Eastern Uganda. The deposits on the surface are fairly deep measuring about 40 cm. Since the enclosure is protected from the surface run-off that has found its way onto the rock art, it is a promising site for excavation that could shed light on the identity of its early inhabitants.

Ten meters north of the enclosure is a pile of lithic artefacts made of obsidian, basalt and chaledony. There was also a red substance that appeared to be like red ochre or haematite. Examination of the floor revealed that the cultural materials are not deep but a number of potsherds were recovered with the twisted cord roulette technique predominating. These potsherds account for 90 per cent of the surface collections with the rest being represented by sherds with plaited or grooved line decorations.



**Fig. 1:** Headless humpless cattle at Chemarich cave, Mt Elgon

are apparently domestic cattle. There are also other naturalistic paintings analogous to those found at a site at Kiboy, reported to the National Museums of Kenya (NMK), and the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA), and recorded by the Trust for African Rock Art (TARA). It is, however, sad to note that the clearing of vegetation brought about by the

Other caves that were surveyed, though no rock art was discovered, were Kashareber, Suam, Tobo and Kologey. However, Kapsetaa (010.03'.50.8"N and 034.48.01.1"E) at the foot of Kaitobos cliff deserves a brief mention. Pottery recovered from this cave exhibited the same twisted-cord roulette technique. Local inhabitants talked of the cave occupants being buried alive inside the cave when the roof caved in.

Human skulls and animal bones recovered from the quarrying activities going on at the site further support this view. There is also a unique variety of tobacco (*NICO-*

not far from other rock shelters which bore no art. Sabaa, which has rock art, measures about 5 m long and 5 m high, and has depictions of badly faded cattle superimposed on concentric circles done in red. At the northern end were depictions of cattle, the profile and style of which is difficult to determine, as the paintings are badly faded. The base of the shelter was apparently occupied as evidenced by the surface occurrence of microlithic artefacts made of obsidian, quartz and chalcedony. A finely retouched obsidian blade measuring 35 mm was also recovered. Pottery decorated with the roulette technique

concentric circles. The diameter of these circles varies from 11.5 to 25 cm.

The intervals between the successive circles are maintained at about 2 cm. Three metres from the main painting are depictions of what looks like a female human figure holding a child. Although faded, they seem to have maintained the same tradition of red paint on a background of yellow/white.

The concentric circle with a central dot motif identifies with those in eastern Uganda at a site known as Lokapeleth (Wilson pers comm.). It is sad to report



Fig. 2

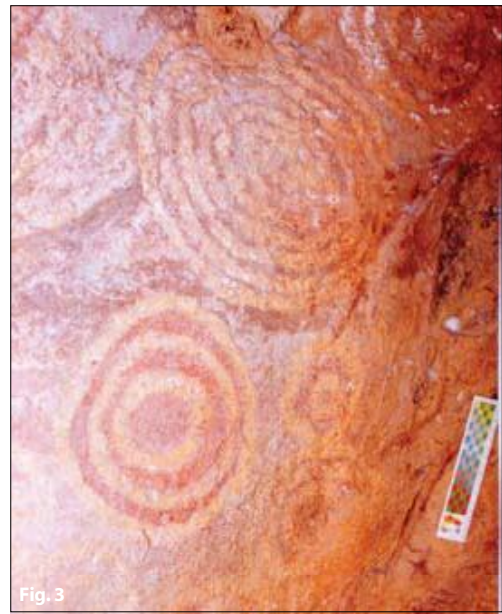


Fig. 3

*tiana tabacum*) growing at the site despite the fact that no cultivation takes place at the locality at present.

Having completed the survey at Mt Elgon, the team now focused on the Kara-Pokot area of Kacheliba and Kong'olai. Here the terrain is dotted with outcrops of granite, sandstone and gneiss. A number of sites were revealed.

### Sites around Kara-Pokot Sabaa

This is a boulder at (010.30'.08.6 N and 035.00'.37.5' E) though

with twisted cord similar to that reported at Mt Elgon was recovered.

### Koding

Further east, about 15 km from the Kacheliba police lines, stands Koding Hill that is basically an outcrop of granite and gneiss with a south-east orientation. On a cliff were concentric circles done in red on a background of white/yellow paint. The art is concentrated over a 3 sq m section. Adjacent to the main painting is a small extension that bites into the main rock to a depth of about 2 m that also has

that the paintings are threatened by flaking and exfoliation of the main rock. Baboons that now nest at the site further worsen the situation. The pottery recovered at the site exhibits the roulette technique mentioned earlier. Fifty metres north-west of the main painting is a concentration of microliths in what would be termed as a "factory site" in some quarters.

The predominant raw materials are quartz, chalcedony and obsidian. There is a burial mound 300 m north of the shelter. A perfunctory examination of the

**Fig. 2:** Cattle paintings superimposed on concentric circles

**Fig. 3:** Concentric circles and a central dot

site convinced me that excavation might yield important results, as the deposits at the shelter appear to be *in situ*.

### **Simatwa**

This granite outcrop contains images that might have been rock paintings but are now badly faded. Surface collection yielded pottery with a riveted rim, decorated with incised lines. It is worth noting that a rim with roulette technique was found next to the site.

What looks like a burial mound is located 60 m away. It is also important to note that 45 m north of the cliff is a half-built "tumulus like" walled structure whose use is difficult to tie in with the rock shelter. There is a need therefore for a systematic study in this area with a view to shedding light on the feature.

### **Discussion**

One of the most striking results of this investigation was that although we did not find a very complex record of rock art and ceramic traditions, the pottery recovered falls into two distinct groups. In one the twisted roulette decoration predominates, and in the other the incised line technique predominates.

The former appears to be indistinguishable from modern luyia pottery. In terms of rock art, two patterns also emerge, one in which livestock predominates and the other in which concentric circles are most common.

Thorough exploration of these sites, including excavation, is strongly recommended to further our knowledge about the geographical extent and cultural identity of the inhabitants. The paintings at Kiboyi are of particular interest to us in that cattle depicted with altered horn profiles is a cultural feature that is still being perpetuated by present day Karamojong in north-east

Uganda as reported by Wilson (1972:65, fig. 2). Koding and Kiptogot cave in particular require further investigation.

The information obtained from this survey is consistent with that from other caves and rock shelters that do not show much variation over time. No evidence of iron technology or Neolithic settlement was noted so one can hypothesise that the area is unlikely to have figured prominently in the early stages of the introduction of food producing economies. It is also doubtful whether the archaeological record of this area can provide a basis for a detailed critique of this hypothesis.

Nevertheless, the sites I have discussed offer numerous inducements for intensive investigation, such as the prospect of shedding light on the Sirikwa phenomenon, and the possibility of documenting changes in settlement patterns in response to population influxes.

The data collected here will have broader implications beyond setting up a base for the study of rock art sites in the area. For one, it will provide information on the spatial distribution and land use and subsistence context of rock art sites.

This survey has therefore shown that the north rift corridor is rich in rock art and other related archaeological sites, some of which still await discovery and study.

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