Report on the Vaalekop rock art site (2929BD 025)

Figure 1. An overview of the southern Thukela Basin and Later Stone Age sites recorded by the Natal Museum. The Vaalekop rock art site is marked in red.

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by

JC Hollmann
Natal Museum
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Summary

- The Vaalekop rock art site (National site number 2929BD 025) is in an overhang on the north bank of the upper Mooi (Mpofana) River, approximately 60 m above the level of the river, in a low overhang.

- Rock paintings are present on three surfaces. The paintings comprise images of several white rhebok, a rear-view perspective of an eland, and four rhebok in red and white. It is not certain whether there is an archaeological deposit.

- The site is part of a nexus of Later Stone Age hunter-gatherer living and painting sites in the southern uplands of the Thukela Basin. Two sites in the area have been excavated. The Vaalekop rock art site has potential to augment our understanding of the history of this area.

- It is recommended that:
  1. the site be photographed in detail using the latest techniques;
  2. a test square of 1 m² be excavated to ascertain the presence and nature of the archaeological deposit;
  3. the rock art be removed to the Natal Museum for safekeeping and further study.
**Locality**

S 29 27 35  
E 29 47 45  

The Vaalekop rock art site (National site number 2929BD 025) is in an overhang on the north bank of the upper Mooi (Mpofana) River about 100 m downstream of the Inchbrakie Falls (Figs 1 & 2). The overhang is approximately 60 m above the level of the river in a low overhang about 15 m long. The height inside the overhang varies from the highest point, about 1,2 m to less than a metre (Figs 3 & 5). The depth of the overhang in the area where the paintings occur is about 1,5 m. The paintings are at the eastern end of the overhang and are spread out over the easternmost 1,5 m of the rock face.

**Archaeological deposit**

The floor of shelter in the proximity of the rock art is sandy and light in colour (Fig. 4). There are no surface artefacts. It is therefore not apparent from a surface inspection whether there is an archaeological deposit.

**Rock art**

Paintings are present on three surfaces (Figs 5–9). Working from right to left (i.e, from the easternmost end to the west) the areas are:

1. Area A is an area about 250 mm long and 200 mm high. It comprises at least three red smudges of paint (at left) and immediately right of these are three images of rhebuck painted in white.

2. Area B is a few centimeters west (i.e. left) and above Area B. It comprises a painting in red and white of an eland viewed from the rear.

3. Area C is in a separate alcove some 500 mm left (i.e. west) of Areas A and B. In an area about 350 mm long and 250 mm high are painted four left-facing rhebuck three of which with their heads hanging down. Two have red paint only but may originally also have had white paint too, while the other two rhebuck paintings still have red and white paint. Each of these rhebuck paintings has an anthropomorph (human-like) figure next to it, painted in red. These anthropomorphs are rather faded. Three of them are red. The fourth one looks very different to the other three anthropomorphs. The figure is larger than the other three, and it is dark brown or black in colour. It appears to be lying on its side. Three of the rhebuck have red lines painted in close proximity.

These paintings can be slotted into an overall painting sequence in the KZN Drakensberg that has been developed by several researchers (Pager 1971; Vinnicombe 1976; Russell 2000; Swart 2004. See Mazel, 2009 for detailed discussion). It seems that paintings of rhebuck and paintings of antelope in front and rear views coincide with the
advent of shaded polychrome paintings in the KZN Drakensberg, an event that Mazel (2009: 87) has argued occurred between 2000 and 1600 BP.

**Larger archaeological context**

Traces of hunter-gatherer occupation in KwaZulu Natal go back to 8000 years BP (Cable 1980), but intensive occupation of the Thukela Basin, the largest river system in KwaZulu-Natal, dates from about 3000 BP (Mazel 2009: 87). The Mooi (Mpofana) River is the southernmost river in the Thukela Basin. Research by Tim Maggs, Aron Mazel and Valerie Ward (Maggs & Ward 1980; Mazel 1984, 1989, 1990, 1992) has shown that for some 1400 years between 3000 and 1600 BP, hunter-gatherer settlement in the Thukela Basin intensified. This intensification is inferred from archaeological excavations that show ‘the increasing number of lived-in rock shelters, and the increasing quantities and variety of food and cultural remains recovered from excavations and the production of rock art’ (Mazel 2009: 87).

From around 1600 years BP to about 600 years BP it appears that some hunter-gatherer groups moved away from the upland areas of the Thukela Basin, probably to live alongside the newly arrived agriculturists who first occupied the lower and central Thukela Basin before extending into the upper parts of the Basin about 600 years BP, accompanied, again, by hunter-gatherers (Mazel 1995:99).

**Local archaeology**

This is the general picture, but within these broad parameters the situation in the southern part of the Thukela Basin—where the Vaalekop site is located—is more complex. Excavations have been carried out at two hunter-gatherer sites: Collingham Shelter (2929BD 013), some 15 km south west of the Vaalekop site, and Gehle Shelter (2929BB 022), about 24 km north.

The excavation at Collingham, carried out in 1988, uncovered an exceptionally well-preserved deposit rich in plant remains as well as items of wood and leather (Mazel 1992). A slab of stone bearing rock art was also recovered and is now in the Natal Museum. Analysis of the macrofaunal component of the deposit revealed the bones of several eland and grey rhebok (Mazel 1992: Table 2). As Plug remarks, ‘the occupants of the shelter...were skilled hunters’ (Plug 1992: 58). Apparently, the hunter-gatherers were also fishers, as several bone fish hooks were found (Mazel 1992: Table 7). Traces of hunter-gatherer social life are hinted at, in the form of samples of human hair, some enmeshed with small balls of ochre (Mazel 1992: 40). In addition, beads manufactured from ostrich eggshell, marine shell, bone, iron and copper were found although there is a possibility that the metal beads may be much more recent (Mazel 1992: 30). Radiocarbon dating shows that Collingham Shelter was occupied for about 150 years shortly after 2000 BP (Mazel 1992: 6).

The Gehle Shelter excavation (carried out in 1981 by Aron Mazel) uncovered pottery, worked bone and stone artefacts, but the deposit was not as well preserved as that of
Collingham Shelter and no wood or leather was recovered. Analysis of the faunal remains shows that the shelter occupants derived most of their meat from hunting or trapping antelope (Mazel 1984:23). Problems with the dating of the deposits mean that detailed discussion of the site’s chronology is not possible (Mazel 1984: 7, 22). However, Mazel (1992: 50) has remarked on the ‘correspondence in post 1500 BP dates…and the again around 700 BP’ between Collingham Shelter and Gehle Shelter. These occupation periods fall within the time span during which hunter-gatherer communities were concentrated down in the central and lower regions of the Thukela basin in order to be close to the farming communities. Therefore, according to Mazel, the hunter-gatherer occupations of Collingham Shelter and Gehle Shelter were small-scale, fleeting and transient (Mazel 1992: 50).

In addition to Collingham Shelter, there are another 7 Later Stone Age sites recorded on the map sheet 2929BD of the Natal Museum¹ (see Appendix 1), excluding the Vaalekop rock art site that is the focus of this report. Little is known of these sites but five of them bear traces of rock art, much of it apparently not well-preserved.

**Statement of Significance**

The Vaalekop rock art site (national site number 2929BD 025) is one of a nexus of settlements in the southern uplands of the Thukela Basin and is therefore part of the history of the hunter-gatherers of this area. The Vaalekop rock art site contains several well-preserved rock paintings that may date back to around 2000 BP, roughly the same time period during which two local Later Stone Age sites (Collingham Shelter and Gehle Shelter) were occupied. The paintings at the Vaalekop rock art site are valuable archaeological artefacts because they embody aspects of the hunter-gatherer belief system in the area. The paintings are especially valuable because they are well-preserved in comparison to the state of the paintings in the other sites in the vicinity. They therefore have research and educational potential.

**Recommendations**

1. The site should be comprehensively photographed by a professional and experienced photographer. The photographs, etc should be lodged with the Natal Museum. The photographic work should include image enhancement to look for ‘hidden’ images and to enhance visibility of images. The site should be photographed in its overall context in the form of 360° panorama. The rock art should be photographed at high resolution. The software needed to view the panorama and the high-resolution images must also be provided. Photo documentation of the site is estimated at 1–2 days in the field.

2. The nature of the deposit in the Vaalekop rock art site should be investigated by excavating a test pit of 1 square metre. The excavation, by an experienced and

¹ Gehle Shelter (2929BB 022) is on map sheet 2929BB
accredited Later Stone Age archaeologist, is estimated to take a minimum of 1 day. If the deposit is extensive, however, then the excavation will take correspondingly longer. At least one day will be required to write up the results of the excavation; if the deposit is extensive, however then laboratory work will take longer.

3. The rock art should be removed from the site, as it will eventually be flooded and therefore destroyed. It is recommended that the rock art be removed to the Natal Museum, where it can be accommodated under suitable conditions.
References


Appendix 1. Photographs

Figure 2. View of the Mooi (Mpofana) River. The Inchbrakie Falls are just visible in the picture, below the thatched roof structure at right.

Figure 3. View of the outside of the shelter facing west.
Figure 4. View of the shelter floor.

Figure 5. View of shelter interior and the three areas that have visible paintings.
Figure 6. The rock face and Areas A and B. There may be more rock art on the surface that is not visible to the naked eye.

Figure 7. Detail of Area B: a painting of eland from the rear.
Figure 8. Area C comprises several paintings.

Figure 9. Detailed view of paintings in Area C.
## Appendix 2. Later Stone Age sites on the 2929BD 1:50 000 map sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National site number</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2929BD 014</td>
<td>Rock art present (remnants). Deposit with bone and charcoal. Pottery on surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2929BD 015</td>
<td>Stone flakes and some formal tools, pottery, bone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2929BD 016</td>
<td>Rock art present (1 clear image, the rest remnants). Stone artefacts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2929BD 017</td>
<td>Rock art present (1 faded image). Stone artefacts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2929BD 018</td>
<td>Open scatter of stone tools, Middle and later Stone Age. Opposite Vaalekop rock art site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2929BD 021</td>
<td>Rock art in small overhang overlooking the Mooi River.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2929BD 022</td>
<td>Rock art present (mostly finger smears). Sandy floor with potential deposit. Stone flakes, pottery and ochre on surface</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>