

# Public rock art sites of southern Africa:

## Farm Aar Geo Park, Namibia

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During the 20th century invaluable palaeontological discoveries were made on the farm Aar in the Karas Region of southern Namibia. The farm is also rich in a variety of rock art traditions, depicted as engravings etched on flat rock surfaces and painted images on the walls of rock shelters.

Aar's extremely isolated and pristine location makes it all the more appealing to the interested visitor. Early in the 20th century German palaeontologists discovered the fossilised impressions of soft-bodied organisms that had become trapped in sandy layers sandwiched between layers of siltstone and shale. These fossils were later classified as species of the genus *Rangia* that lived during the Ediacaran Period 635 to 542 million years ago.

Several geological epochs later, San hunter gatherers created beautiful rock art and manufactured stone tools here up until historical times. Early Khoekhoen and their descendants, the Nama, settled here periodically during the last 2 000 years as nomadic herders of fat-tailed sheep and goats. Ancient pottery found at the farm can be attributed to the Khoekhoen and Nama.



Location of the farm Aar. (Adapted from Google Earth image)

The dominant rock type at Aar is fine-grained black limestone which served as an ideal 'canvas' for the execution of finely detailed rock engravings. German archaeologists working on Aar from the 1960s to the 1980s were struck by the detail and diversity of animal species represented in the imagery. This resulted in them naming the largest of these sites 'Arche Noah', which translates as 'Noah's Ark'. The site contains beautiful engravings of elephant, rhino, lion, giraffe, gemsbok and ostrich.

Elements of San spirituality are evident in depictions of human figures engaged in spiritual activities like trance dances. The rock art site 'Große Herr' (Big Sir) is unusual among San engraving sites as the dancing human figures are extremely large and beautifully detailed, some wearing head-dresses and loincloths. The trance dance was the most important spiritual activity, when the medicinal healer or shaman entered the spirit world that was believed to exist beyond the peripheries of the tangible world. Trance (altered state of consciousness) was induced by continuous rhythmic clapping, dancing, singing and hyperventilation. It was perceived as a journey to the spirit world, where the medicinal healer came into contact with the supernatural elements of their world. Such ceremonies are still practiced among contemporary !Kung



Trance dance: Human figures outlined and the arrow within the encircled area indicates a dense scatter of peck marks.



people of central Botswana and Namibia. During altered states of consciousness, the human body experiences involuntary visual, auditory and physical sensations that are retained in memory. Healers visit the spirit world for guidance on actions that can be beneficial to the community such as healing of the sick, rainmaking, puberty ceremonies and success in hunting. All these elements are captured in the rock art. A dense scatter of tiny specks around the dancing figures at this site is indicative of the physical sensations experienced during trance. Buzzing sounds and tingling sensations are typically described by persons who have undergone an altered state of consciousness.

Engravings of abstract shapes, including circles and tangled lines, are the most prolific type of rock art at Aar. This is typical of Khoekhoen rock art and was related mainly to rites of passage. An anomaly is the depiction of some of these images as animalistic beings, some vaguely recognisable as zebras and other wild animals. The style of depiction differs greatly from the detailed traditional San images. This probably indicates a classic case of acculturation captured within the rock art. Acculturation refers to the transfer of cultural elements between different groups due to prolonged contact. The San obtained beads and skin clothing made from the livestock of the Khoekhoen, while the Khoekhoen employed the San for their rainmaking abilities and hunting skills. Such trade made trans-cultural diffusion inevitable and it influenced the rock art of both groups.

Perhaps the most unique recurring feature of the rock art at Aar is the depiction of human settlements. These images are also part of the rough-pecked Khoekhoen rock art tradition. Rock art imagery of obvious settlements are known among the Bantu-speaking peoples, but are extremely rare in the rock art of the Khoekhoen. The illustration of a Khoekhoen settlement shows a rough-pecked yet detailed map, complete with huts and entrances along the periphery of the kraal. It resembles the Central Cattle Pattern settlements of the Iron Age sites located in the wetter eastern part of southern Africa. Bantu-speaking farmers are not known to have settled in southern Namibia as they generally settled in areas receiving more than 500 mm of rain annually in order to grow their crops and to sustain larger herds of cattle. At Aar rainfall is only about 100 mm per year, which means that in the time before boreholes, human life here could only be sustained periodically after good rains.



Khoekhoen settlement: Note entrance of central circular structure.



Elephant



Gemsbok



Hartman's Mountain Zebra



Ostrich and circular patterns.





Siltstone rock shelter.



Rear section of whale.

In the centre of the settlement depicted here is a large circular structure. The outline of this structure shows a different type of entrance. The one end deviates outwards and spirals around the other, creating a corridor. This is indicative of a special kind of entrance. Identifying the objects depicted inside this structure is the subject of further investigation, but this centre structure probably represents a ritual space where various ceremonies took place. An enclosure with a conventional gap or entrance depicted along the outer periphery of this settlement is probably meant to portray a livestock enclosure (kraal). Various such settlement patterns were recently found at Aar and warrant further research.

At another site on the farm a seasonal stream has cut into layers of siltstone. This erosion created a rock shelter with a jagged rock face, leaving only small sections of smooth vertical 'canvasses' for painting. Nevertheless, the San painted some highly significant images here. Extremely unusual is the depiction of the rear section of a whale. Aar lies at roughly 1 600 metres above sea level and the Atlantic Ocean is 130 km away. This attests to the highly nomadic nature of the San and a sense of the photographic memory of San artists. Other special images include an enigmatic procession of human figures with differing body styles, as well as two rhinos and antelopes measuring no more than two centimetres in length.

Southern Africa is among the world's finest regions for rock art tourism and locations like Aar serve as clear evidence that humanity has long been aware that we are part of a larger universe. Rock art is an artefact representing many ancient cultures' understanding of the universe. Some of their



Presumably white rhinoceroses.



Procession of small human figures.

decendents still practice these beliefs today with or without rock art. In southern Africa, however, the creation of traditional rock art ceased to exist about 150 years ago.

Aar provides comfortable accommodation in the form of a fully furnished farm house and garden flat. It lies roughly 35 km east of the village of Aus. Guided visits to the rock art and fossil sites can be undertaken. For further information, contact Mrs Barbara Boehm at [barbara.boehm@aar-industries.com](mailto:barbara.boehm@aar-industries.com).

According to the National Heritage Resources Act no. 25 of 1999 it is illegal to damage or alter a rock art site in any way without the necessary permit from the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). Only qualified heritage officials with the said permit may develop or alter features of a rock art site. In Namibia the same rules apply under the National Heritage Act (no. 27 of 2004). Visits to these rock art sites can only be made under supervision of trained guides due to the sensitivity of the rock art and the presence of dangerous wildlife.

#### References

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