

Rock engravings by agriculturist communities in savanna areas of the Thukela Basin

by

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has established that rock engravings, made by agriculturist communities, occur commonly in two contrasting environments in the KwaZulu-Natal region. Those from savanna areas, which are the subject of this paper, have as their predominant theme the Zulu homestead plan. The practice is associated with the building of stone walling; it probably started late in precolonial times and continued until a few decades ago. The art has a male emphasis and much of it seems to have been done by boys.

INTRODUCTION

Rock engravings in KwaZulu-Natal were first reported by Malan (1955 1957) from the farm Erskine in the Muden thornveld. From the start they were interpreted as depicting the characteristic plans of Zulu homesteads and were therefore not in any way linked with the well known hunter-gatherer rock paintings of the region. Little further was added to this observation on engravings by agriculturist communities in the region until 1986 when, during a survey of the National Road N3 path just south of the Thukela River, we came across several rock outcrops with depictions of homestead patterns (Maggs 1988). Further neighbouring sites were brought to our attention through the cooperative efforts of D. Green and R. Giani, while yet another group of sites, on the eastern side of the Biggarsberg range, was reported to us by J. Wood and D. Rattray. The Natal Museum now has detailed records from 32 engraved sites in the province with additional information on others. It has become clear that there are many more sites to be found and that the practice of depicting homestead patterns in petroglyphs was a widespread and frequent phenomenon among more recent agriculturist communities of the hinterland.

The engravings occur in two contrasting environments in KwaZulu-Natal, each with its own stylistic variations. The sites close to the N3 freeway are in open grassland with little woody vegetation except on some hills. The predominant theme of this group of sites reflects the pattern of terminal Iron Age settlements peculiar to these interior grasslands, as established by archaeological research (Maggs 1988). These engravings will be examined in a subsequent paper.

The other group of engraved sites, the subject of this paper, occur in savanna areas marginal to the grasslands of the Thukela Basin. This includes Malan's Erskine site together with six sites in the Elandsdraai (Makhonde), Fugitives Drift, Rorkes Drift area (Fig. 1) between the Biggarsberg and the Mzinyathi (Buffalo) River. Here the predominant theme reflects the nineteenth century Zulu homestead pattern so

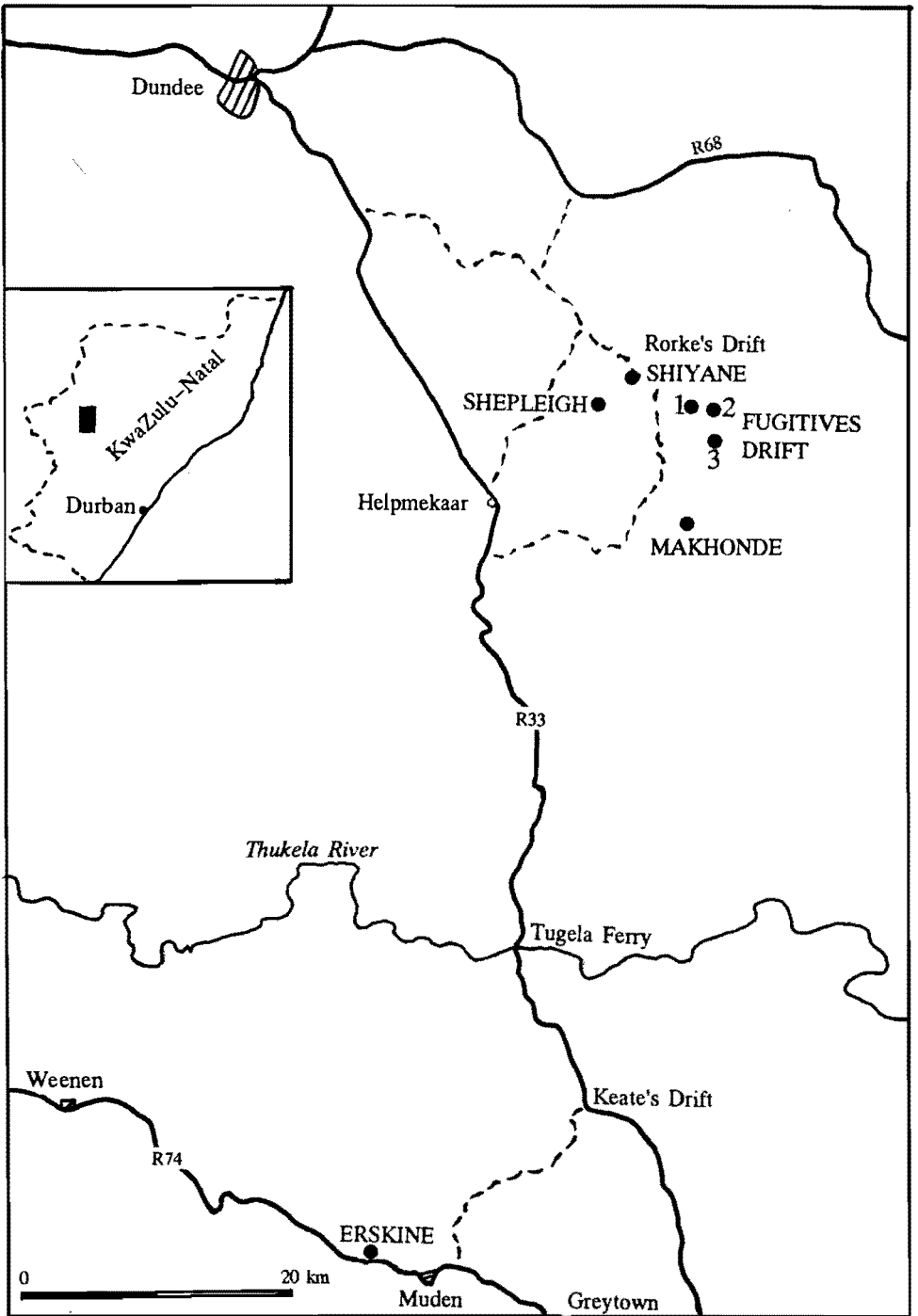


Fig. 1. Location of engraved sites mentioned in text.

frequently described in the historical and anthropological sources (e.g. Berglund 1949, Bryant 1949, Raum 1973 and our Fig. 6).

ENGRAVINGS AND STONE WALLING

It is now well established that, in the five centuries prior to European colonisation, many agriculturist communities made extensive use of stone as a building material in the eastern half of southern Africa. Innumerable remains of these stone structures survive in the grasslands and their fringing savannas in KwaZulu-Natal, as well as further north. Current research is establishing an intimate connection between the practices of building in stone and engraving settlement patterns (Mason 1986, Maggs 1988, Steel 1988). The group of savanna sites described here is no exception. On five of the sites old stone walling occurs within a few paces of the engravings while the other two (Shepleigh and Shiyane (Fig. 1)) are no more than a few hundred metres from stone settlements.

Although the reason for this link is not immediately obvious, the correlation between engraving and stone walling is nevertheless clear. For example, in areas deeper into the savanna zone and closer towards the coast, where there was extensive agriculturist settlement in precolonial times but buildings were of perishable organic materials, we know of no engravings. Not all stone construction was accompanied by engraving but the engravings seem virtually always to have been in the proximity of stone walling.

Did the act of stone construction itself give rise to the practice of engraving? This may well have been the case. For example in KwaZulu-Natal the stone most used for both building and engraving was intrusive lava of the Karroo Supergroup, loosely referred to as dolerite. This is a dark grey rock which commonly weathers to an off-white skin with rust coloured surface patina. Even a slight bruise or scratch on this surface will produce a contrastingly pale abrasion mark. Most other rocks used for engraving have similar contrasting patinas, as is the case with the sandstone outcrops used at some of the sites covered in this paper. The building of a stone wall requires the following steps. First the stone may need to be quarried, then it must be carried from source to building site and dumped there. Construction necessitates that each stone is then picked up from the dump and fitted into place on the wall, a procedure that involves considerable movement of stone against stone. The process inevitably results in numerous highly visible bruise and scratch marks on previously weathered surfaces of the building stones. So much is this the case that, in areas like Lesotho where dry stone walling of Late Iron Age technique is still produced, recently built walls are easily recognised by their pale abrasions.

It would be a relatively small step from these accidental markings to the making of deliberate marks and then deliberate patterns. Although we have no direct evidence that this progression took place, the link between engravings and stone walling does require an explanation. Not only is there the juxtaposition of engraving with stone construction but also the fact that built settlement patterns dominate the engraved subject matter virtually to the exclusion of all other themes. Clearly the built environment, whether it be its physical or symbolic manifestation, was uppermost in the engravers' thoughts at the time the images were created.

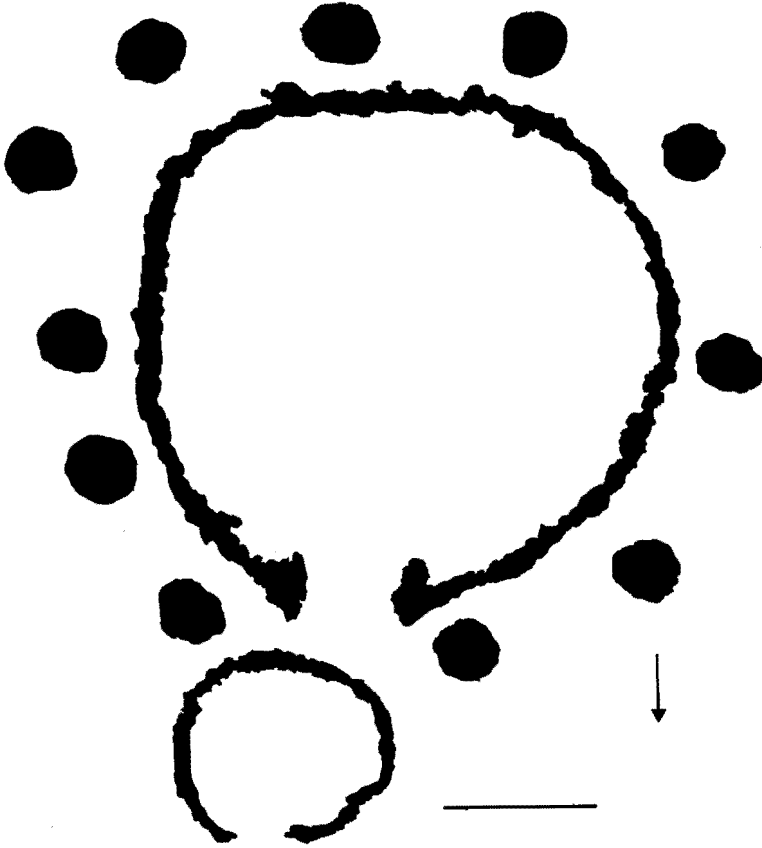


Fig. 2. Erskine engraving of homestead with downhill entrance and detached smaller enclosure. [Here and throughout the illustrations the horizontal bar equals 10 cm and the arrow points down-slope].

The savanna engraving sites, taken as a group, are of interest in several respects. Their association with stone walling in wooded environments calls for comment as do the styles of settlement they represent, their age, who made them and why. Any attempt to address these issues needs to be preceded by an examination of the engravings themselves.

THE ENGRAVINGS

This discussion will be concerned with images from five of the seven sites mentioned (Fig. 1). The other two, Shepleigh and Fugitives Drift 3, contain few examples and these are only of types better represented at the other sites.

With the exception of peck marks and lines which we are unable to interpret, almost all the images that we have been able to record fit into the category of built environment. Even most of those about which we are uncertain seem best interpreted along these lines.

Exceptions to this general pattern include two human figures, two dates, two crosses and some letters at Erskine (Figs 9, 19 & 31) and a plough at Fugitives Drift 2

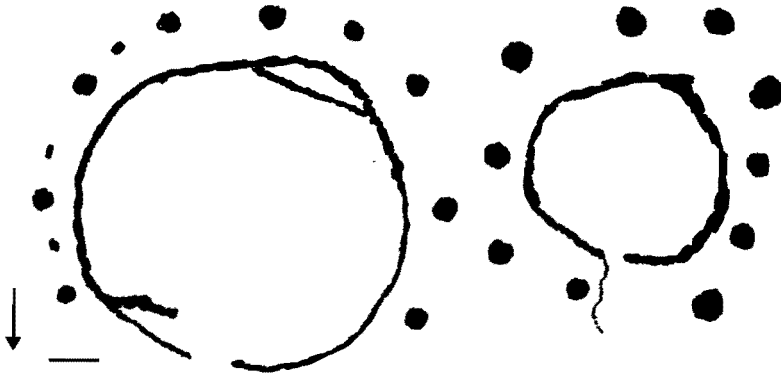


Fig. 3. Pair of homesteads with downhill entrances, one showing a track (Erskine).

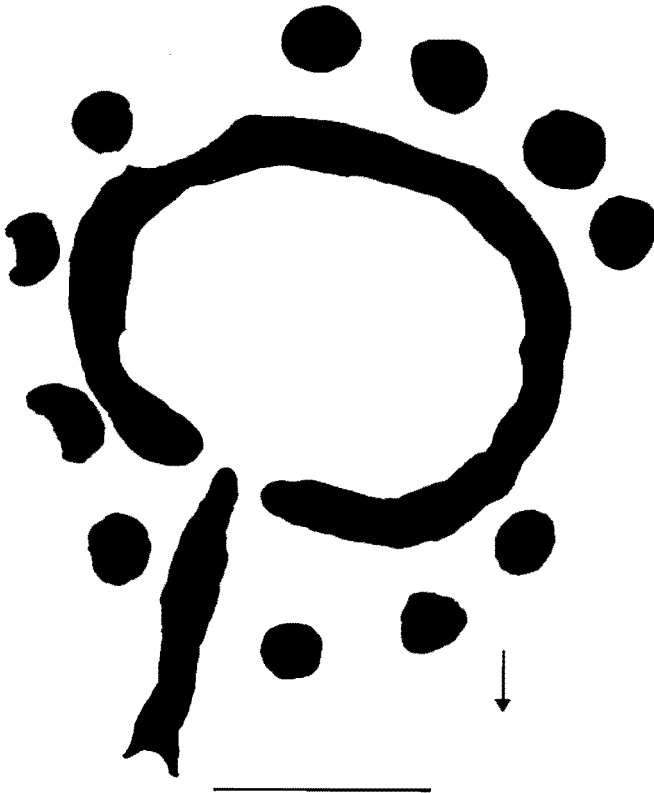


Fig. 4. Makhonde engraving showing homestead with downhill entrance and pathway.

(Fig. 23), all of which can be shown by their content or associations to be relatively recent. The rarity of human or animal figures is again typical of agriculturist engravings in southern Africa, providing a most striking contrast with the better-known engravings done by hunter-gatherers.

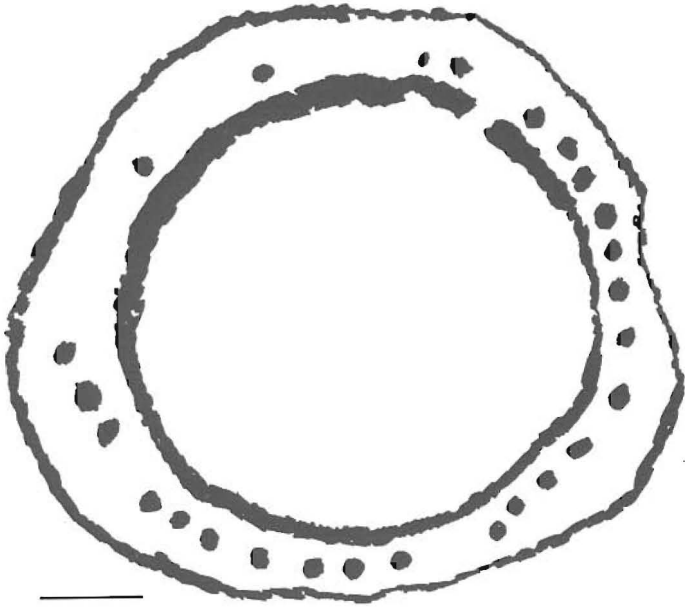


Fig. 5. Engraving showing traditional Zulu pattern with outer fence (Erskine).



Fig. 6. Airphoto showing paths and cleared area in Zulu homesteads of the Thukela Valley (Photo: T. Maggs).

The most common image in this art is roughly circular and represents the *isibaya* (cattle pen) at the centre of the homestead. In more recent examples this may be shown as a square or rectangle. Around this in turn may be a ring or partial ring of engraved dots representing the huts arranged around the pen. Since this form is so basic to agriculturist settlement patterns in southern Africa this image is of little interest in the context of this paper. It is the more complex examples showing elaboration of detail that are of most use to us.

The first level of detail concerns the direction of the cattle pen entrance in relation to the slope of the engraved rock surface. On some of the more horizontal rock surfaces this characteristic cannot be recorded meaningfully but there were sufficient clear examples to show a definite pattern of down-slope entrances (Fig. 2). For example at Erskine, which contained the largest number of images, 10 of the 12 recorded cases opened downhill and only two uphill. The entrances are usually shown just as a gap in the circumference of the enclosure, but in a few cases a line extending from the circumference outwards would seem to represent the path made by cattle as they enter and exit the pen (Figs 3 & 4). Such a line would therefore also be indicative of the entrance position.

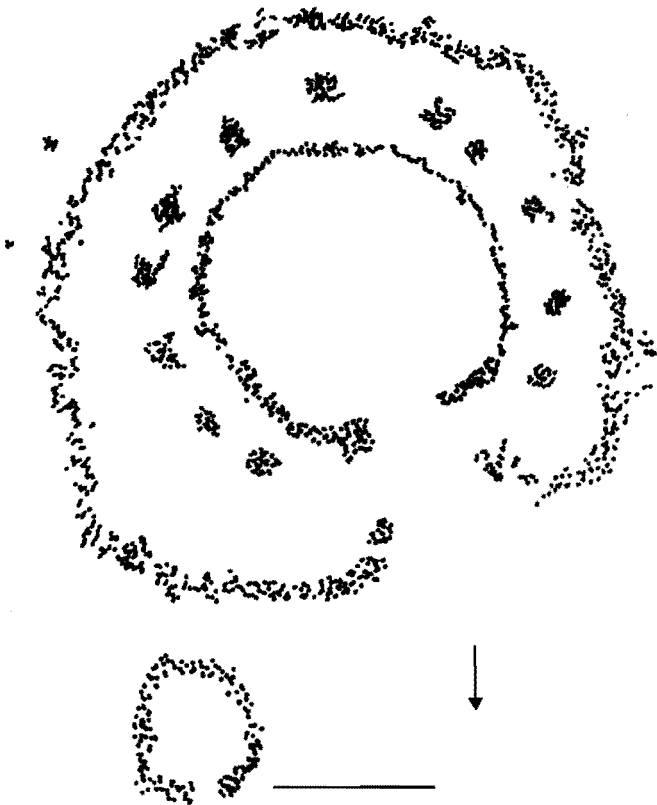


Fig. 7. Fugitives Drift 1 homestead engraving with outer fence curving in towards entrance and with a smaller detached enclosure.

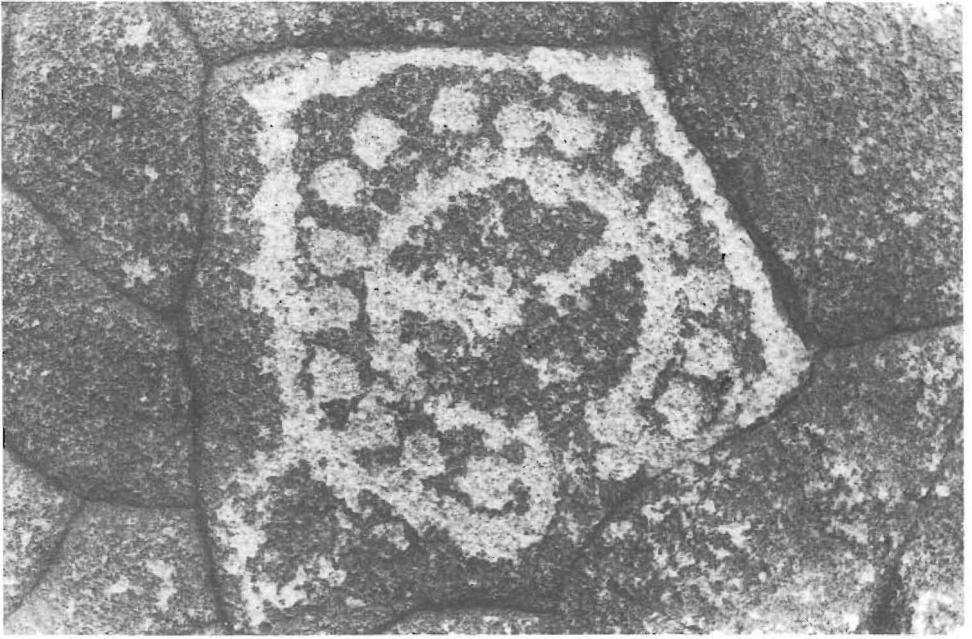


Fig. 8. Erskine engraving showing inward-curving outer fence and smaller enclosure attached to outer wall. Note the use of natural jointing to enclose the whole.

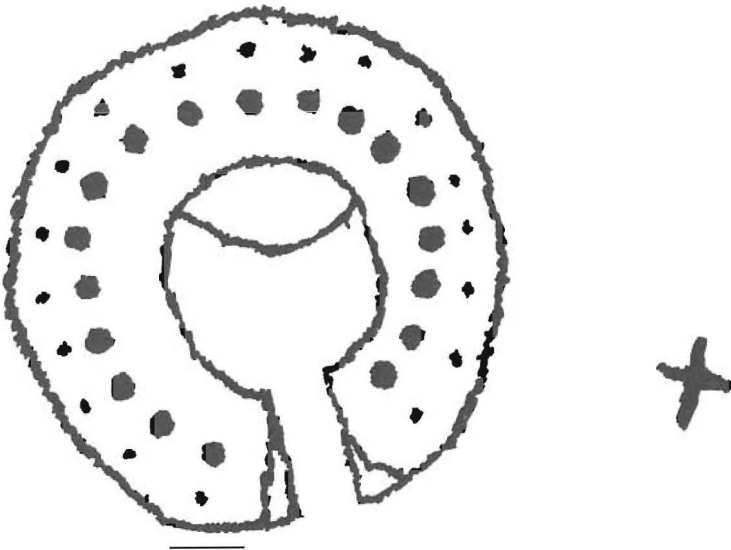


Fig. 9. Erskine engraving showing outer fence curving inwards at entrance.

The downhill entrance position is very much a characteristic of nineteenth century and even contemporary Zulu rural homesteads (Mack *et al.* 1991). Another feature of traditional Zulu homesteads found in these engravings is the *itango* or outer

surrounding fence (Fig. 5). Today this is seldom built but homesteads which conform to the concentric circular pattern still show a surrounding circle of bare earth cleared up to the point where the *itango* would have been (Fig. 6). The engravers evidently intended to show the *itango* itself rather than just the cleared area, because the outer engraved line usually dips inwards on either side of the entrance, sometimes even meeting the inner wall (Figs 7–9), and sometimes additional structural details are shown here. Together the downhill entrance and the *itango* identify these images as depicting the classic Zulu homestead pattern as distinct from the precolonial pattern of the interior grasslands settlements.

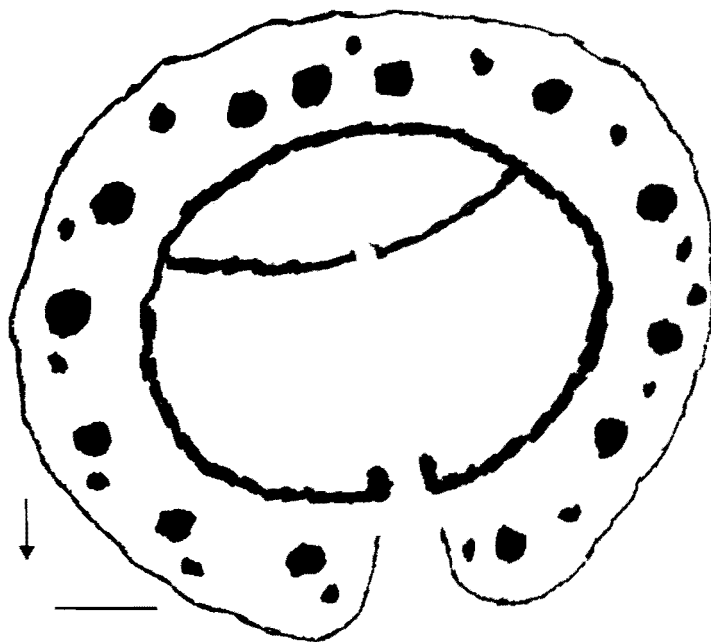


Fig. 10. Traditional Zulu pattern engraving from Erskine. Note the *isingolobane* (grain stores), inward curving *itango* (outer fence), the internal calf pen and the downhill facing entrance.

Another feature of the classic Zulu homestead pattern, shown in a few engravings, is the *nqolobane* or grain store. Under the precolonial economy each married woman would keep her agricultural produce in a *nqolobane* which was a separate structure beside, or more often behind her hut. This feature is shown on several of the engravings from Erskine (Figs 9 & 10) and one from Fugitives Drift 1 (Fig. 11) where in each case a smaller dot, the grain store, is paired with a larger dot, the hut. These examples are some of the finest images from the savanna engravings recorded so far. The two from Erskine show an additional feature, the calf pen, built as a secondary structure within and at the uphill end of the cattle pen.

A number of other examples from Erskine also show the calf pen though this is rare at the other sites, the exception being a pair of homesteads at Makhonde (Fig. 12). Here the central pens have two and three secondary enclosures, making these the most complex examples we have yet recorded in this respect. The larger of the two

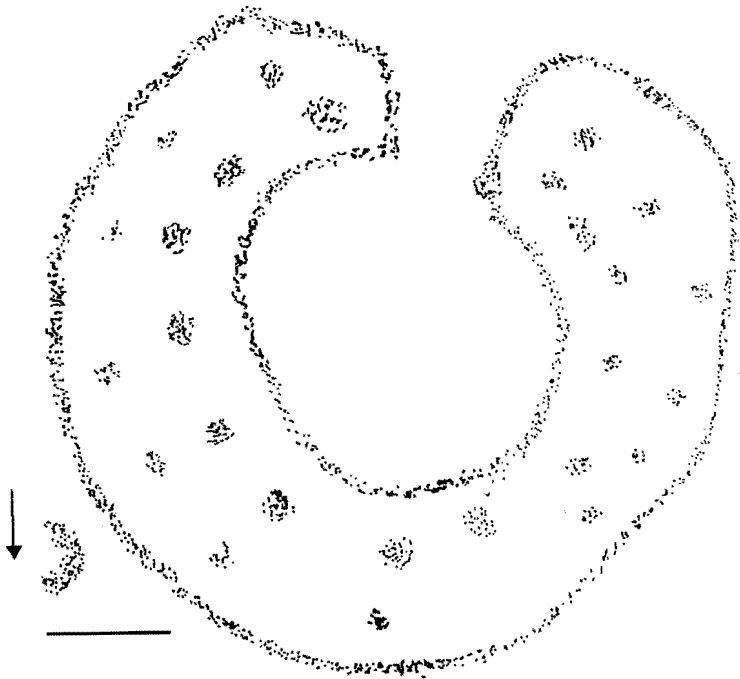


Fig. 11. Engraving from Fugitives Drift 1 showing grain stores and inward curving fence, but the entrance is uphill.

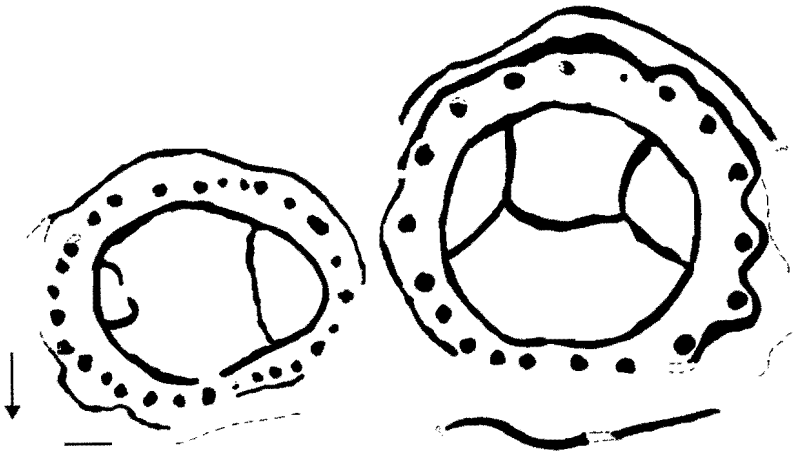


Fig. 12. Pair of engraved homesteads from Makhonde, the calf pens being within the main enclosures.

homesteads in particular seems somewhat fanciful, with its scalloped outer wall and partial third concentric enclosing line. The incorporation of three secondary enclosures within the central pen may therefore have been an imaginative response rather than reflecting an actual built example. However, there are cases where important homesteads in the Zulu ethnography, had more than one subdivision within

the *isibaya*, so the engraving could indeed reflect a situation actually observed by the engraver.

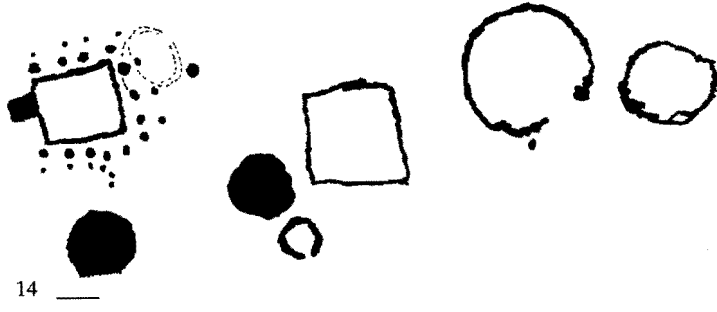
By contrast with cattle enclosures, goat or sheep pens were and still are relatively informal structures placed outside the formal circle of the typical Zulu homestead. There are several engravings where smaller enclosures are placed beside homesteads, sometimes detached from them (Figs 2 & 7) and sometimes attached to the outer wall (Fig. 8). These presumably represent goat pens.



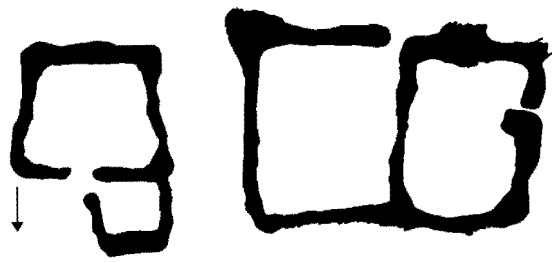
Fig. 13. Atypical image of a homestead with downhill entrance from Shiyane.

Most of the images are readily interpreted along Zulu ethnographic lines as homesteads although, as we have seen, individual examples show a greater or lesser amount of detail. There is however one example which, because of its circular theme, would seem to represent a homestead, yet is not in keeping with the Zulu model (Fig. 13). This probably is due to an idiosyncratic impulse on the part of the engraver rather than an alternative settlement pattern. We have recorded examples of apparently nonconforming homestead images from other engraved areas as well.

There is no doubt that the practice of engraving continued well into colonial times in the savanna area. This point was established by Malan's initial work and is confirmed at several other sites by the presence of rectangular images. The rectangular engravings include single and double examples (Figs 14 & 15) as well as

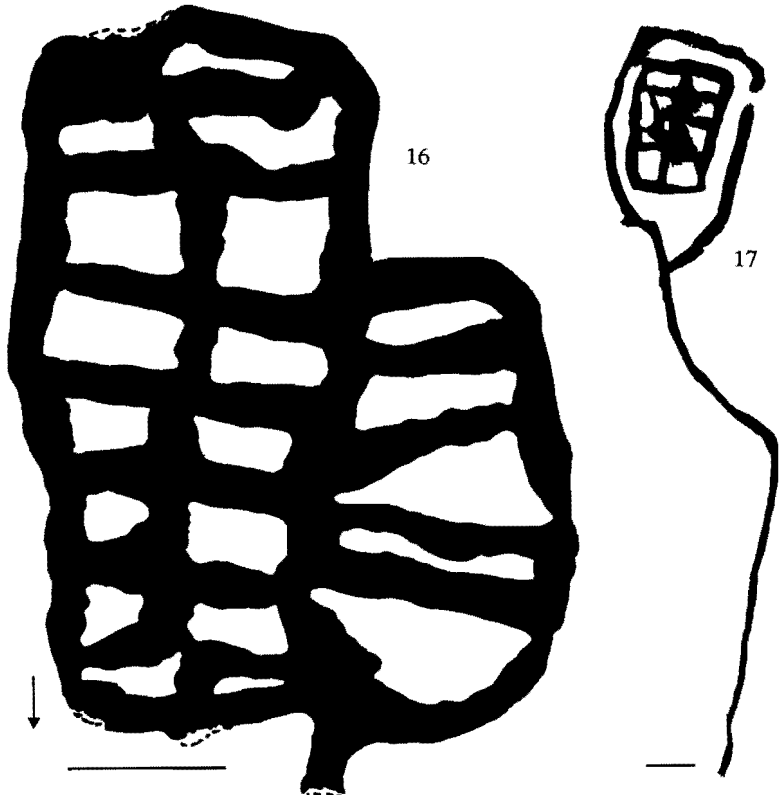


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Figs 14 & 15. Rectangular engravings from Erskine and Makhonde.



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Figs 16 & 17. Engraved multi-cellular grids from Makhonde.

a few multicellular grids (Figs 16 & 17) which seem to be an attempt to represent the multiple rectangular rooms of a European style house.

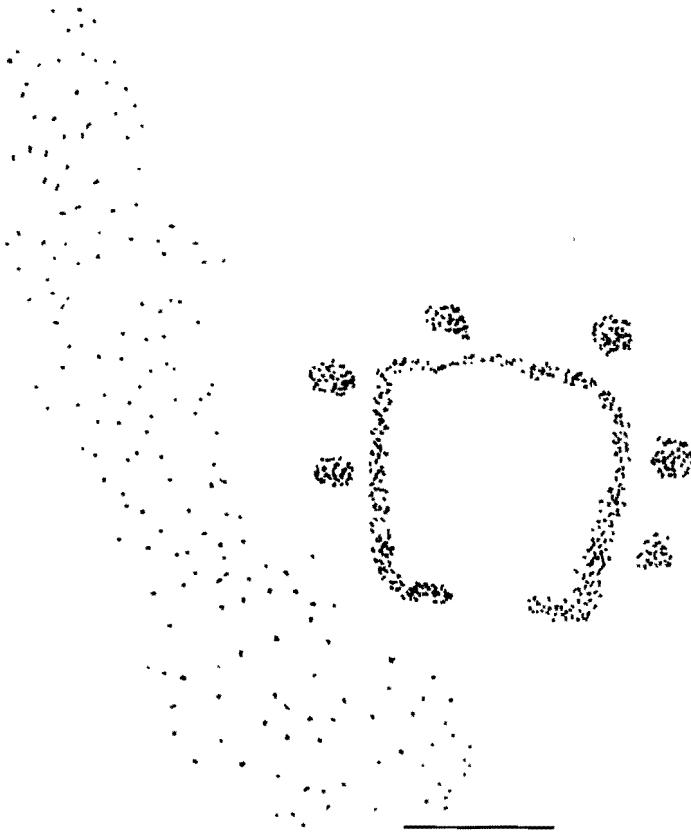


Fig. 18. Fugitives Drift 1 engraved rectangular enclosure which conforms in that there is a surrounding ring of huts. Note the dots outside the homestead.

Clearly the rectangular images are not a separate cultural expression. This we can show by the fact that, but for the rectangularity, most of the more complex examples contain details which conform to the Zulu ethnological model, as we have seen with the circular homesteads. These details include the ring of dots representing the huts (Fig. 18), the outer ring of smaller dots for the grain stores, the surrounding *itango* wall, downhill entrance and calf pen (Figs 19–22). Malan makes the point that, while the rectangles reflect colonial influence, actual homesteads in the area did not take the shape depicted. This is still the case today. The process of change from circular to rectangular does involve the adoption of rectangular cattle pens but in such cases the huts no longer wrap around the pen. Instead the process of *ukuvelwa umuzi* normally takes place where the homestead is ‘opened out’; the huts being positioned in one or more straight rows along the contour above the pen. This process of ‘opening out’ the homestead is still taking place today (Mack *et al.* 1991) but is not accurately depicted in any of the engravings we have recorded.

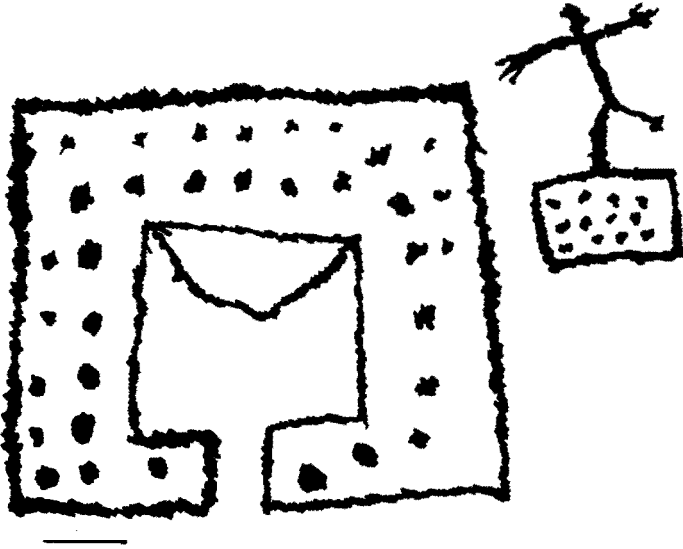


Fig. 19. Rectangular homestead engraving with grain stores, outer fence, calf pen and human figure from Erskine.

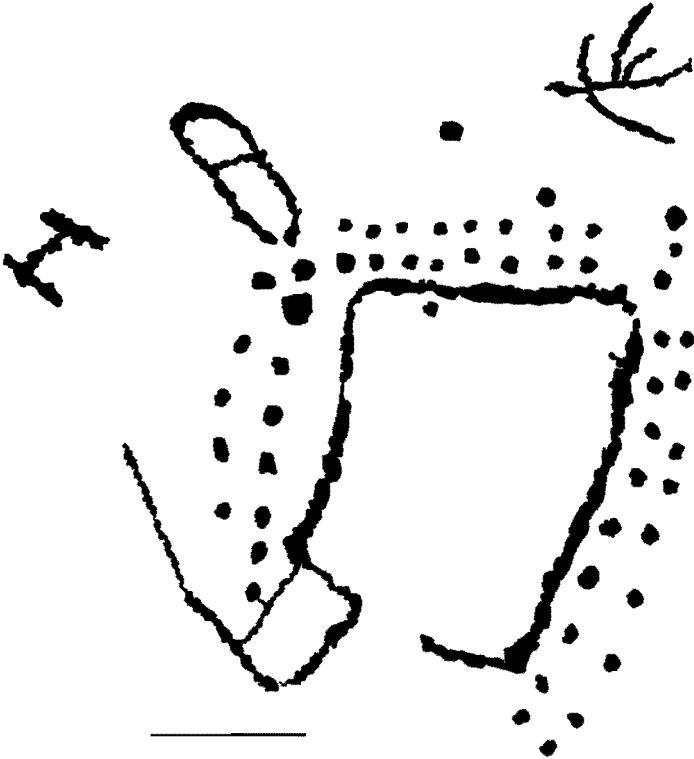
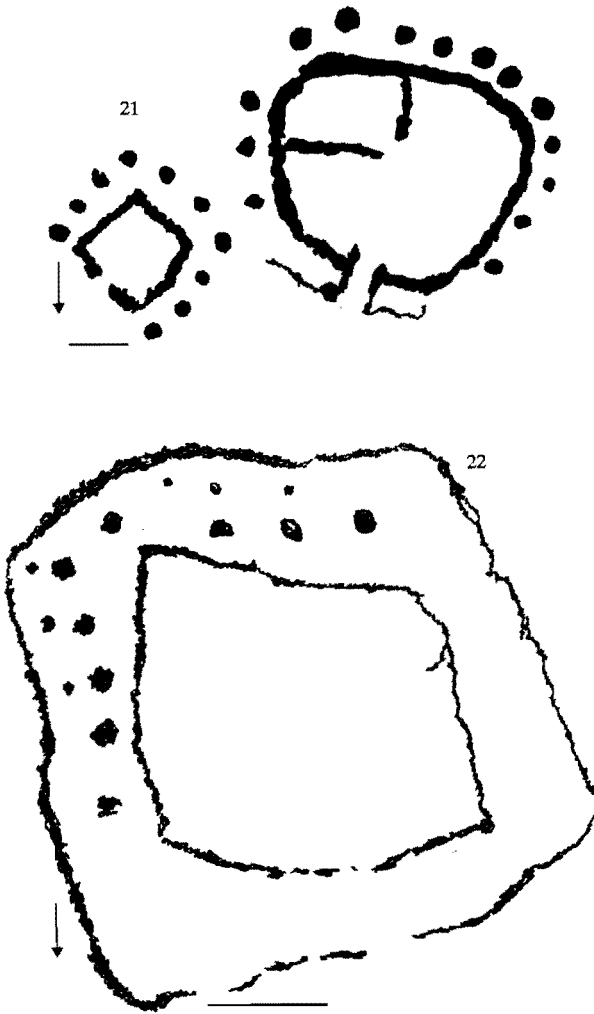


Fig. 20. Rectangular homestead engraving with grain stores and human figure from Erskine.



Figs 21 & 22. Rectangular homestead engravings from Erskine. 21. Without grain stores but with calf pens. 22. With grain stores and an outer fence but no calf pen.

The reason for this discrepancy between the rectangular plans shown in the engravings and the actual homesteads is not clear. We would suggest that, although the engravers were aware of the social change going on around them, which is reflected in the changed homestead layout, their perception of the homestead plan was so firmly based on the earlier pattern that they merely replaced the circular form with the rectangular, rather than depicting accurately the new 'opened out' pattern.

Other images that clearly date to the colonial period include several dates and letters of the alphabet at Erskine as well as an interesting plan view of an animal drawn plough from Fugitives Drift 2 (Fig. 23). Such ploughs have been used in this area since the mid-nineteenth century and are still in use today. The chronological implications of these more recently dateable images will be discussed later.

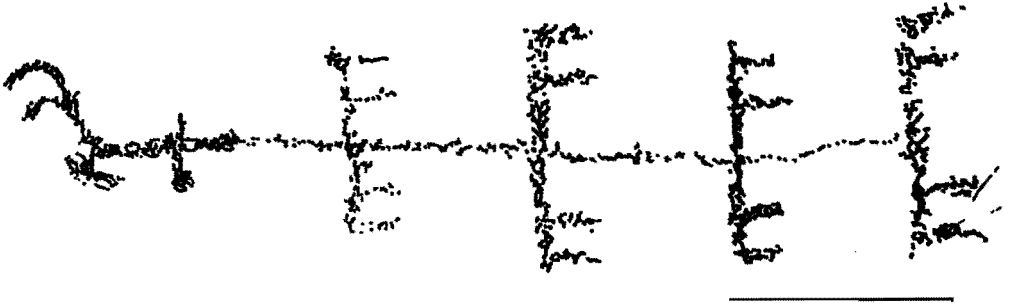
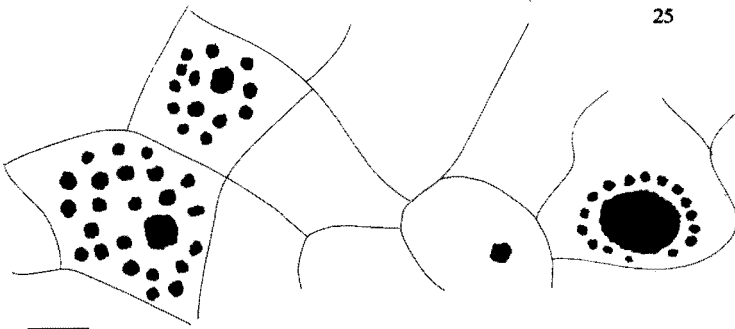
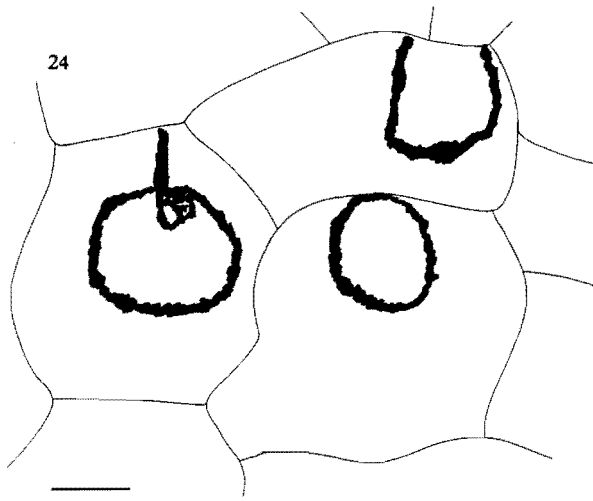


Fig. 23. Fugitives Drift 2 engraving of an animal-drawn plough.



Figs 24 & 25. Engravings from Erskine showing the use of natural jointing.

One category of recent image that sets itself apart from those already mentioned is the *malabalaba* (Nine Men's Morris) game board. These are widespread in rural KwaZulu-Natal, not necessarily linked with other engravings, and they are normally

scratched, not pecked, on the rocks. They are generally recognised as being very recent as children still play the game.



Fig. 26. An example of battering marks on the rocks at Fugitives Drift.

Peculiarities of the rock outcrops have influenced the engravers in a number of instances. The tabular sandstone sheets at Erskine and Makhonde offer less relief than the dolerite outcrops. However, some natural rock features are incorporated into the compositions, for example little weathered steps in the sandstone are sometimes used to indicate the perimeter of a homestead. At Erskine there are also several cases where the prominent natural lines of the rock jointing, which divide the surface up into cells, have been used to define the area of each engraved homestead (Figs 8, 24 & 25). The combination of natural and artificial lines gives the impression that the engraver intended the cells to delimit the territory of each homestead or to indicate the network of paths that surround each homestead in an actual settlement, such as is clear on the air photograph (Fig. 6). The pathway interpretation is strengthened by the fact that several of the engraved homesteads open onto one of the jointing lines and in one case a pecked pathway has been added to connect the cattle pen to the natural line of the jointing (Fig. 24). Engraved pathways from cattle pens do occur on a few of the other engravings, but they are a rarer and less developed feature among these savanna images than in other regions with agriculturist engravings.

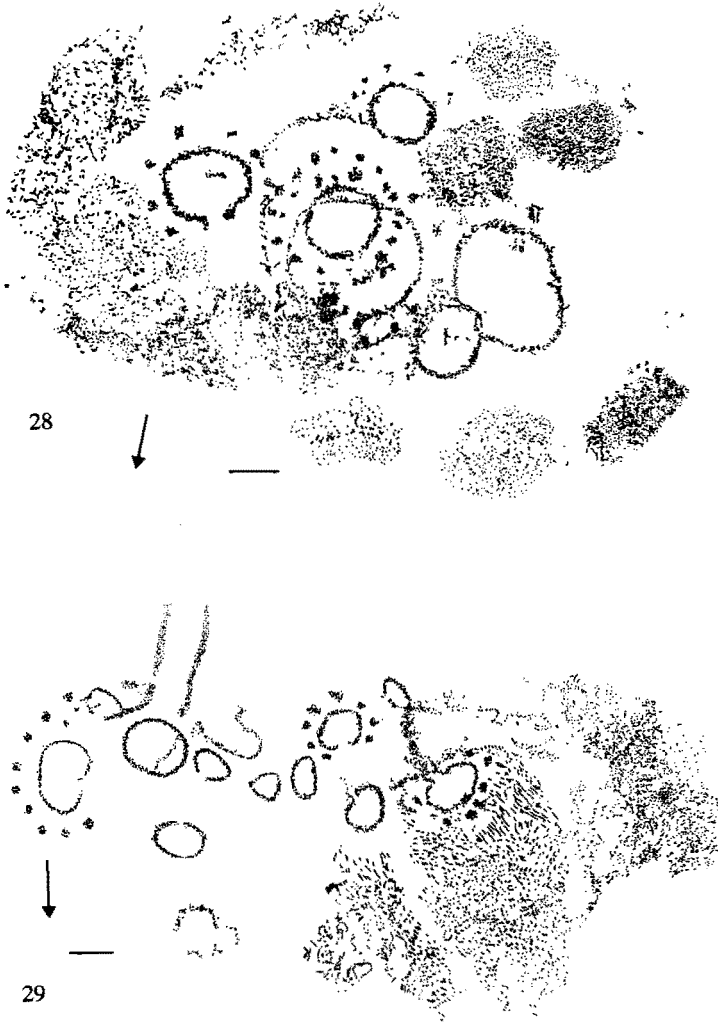
A feature of the Fugitives Drift sites is that the protruding dolerite boulders frequently have their highest points battered (Fig. 26). The reason for this is not clear as no attempt was made to produce an image in such cases, nor do the rocks act as gongs when struck in these positions, although some noise would be produced.



Fig. 27. Engraved 'clouds' associated with homesteads at Fugitives Drift 1.

D. Rattray, who reported these sites to us, pointed out that the battering occurs on sites with other engravings and not on its own, which suggests that the two activities were linked. Of more interest are the amorphous 'clouds' of peck marks which sometimes cover part or the whole of one plane of a rock. At the Fugitives Drift 2 site these clouds are usually the only image on a particular rock but at Fugitives Drift 1 there are several cases where they occur on the same rock as, and apparently associated with, homesteads (Figs 18, 27–29). Members of the South African Archaeological Society, who helped record these engravings, interpreted the 'clouds' as cultivated fields around the homesteads, although local people we questioned did not offer an explanation. If the 'clouds' really do represent fields the Fugitives Drift engravings are the only ones we know of from southern Africa that show any aspect of field systems. An alternate explanation for some 'clouds' could be that they represent herds of livestock. In a few cases there is a 'cloud' of dots within a cattle pen and even a band of dots continuing through the entrance and out into the open space (Fig. 30). More examples of this feature will need to be recorded before we can resolve the issue.

The three panels with multiple 'clouds' and homesteads are some of the most complex compositions among the sample. Whereas most homesteads seem to have been individual depictions, independent in themselves, the three panels, together with a few examples from Erskine (Figs 14, 24 & 25) appear to represent clusters of homesteads. This is particularly the case with Fig. 29 where 10 or 12 circular pens, three with surrounding huts, are juxtaposed together with lines which may represent



Figs 28 & 29. Engravings from Fugitives Drift 1 showing numerous homesteads and many 'clouds'.

pathways. Yet even in this case the engraver has not left us with a clear idea of how the built environment was ordered beyond the level of the individual household. Indeed the savanna engravings tend to give less attention to this level of patterning than is the case in other engraved areas.

DISCUSSION

The group of seven sites covered by this paper contains the only considerable sample of engravings yet recorded where the predominant theme is the ethnographically documented Zulu settlement pattern. A few other engravings of this theme are on record, from as far north as the Itala Game Reserve on the Phongolo River, and it is probable that many more sites await the attention of archaeologists.

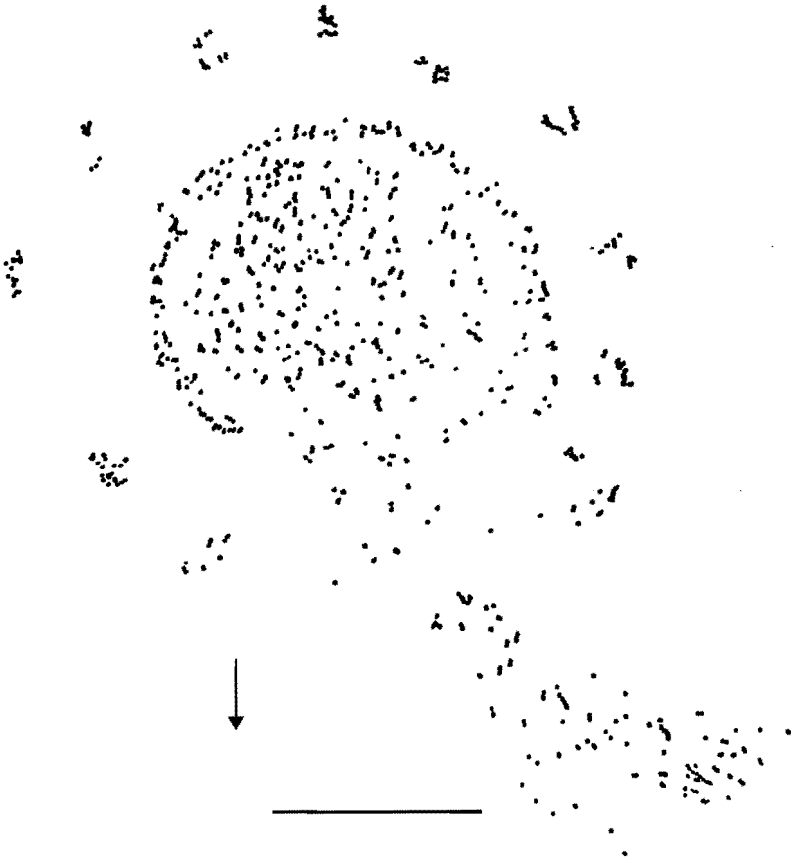


Fig. 30. Fugitives Drift 2 engraving with the 'cloud' extending outwards from the central enclosure.

As a group the savanna engravings also differ from other clusters of agriculturist engravings by having a relatively high proportion of colonial period images. For example we recorded nine rectangular to 46 circular images at Erskine and four rectangular to six circular at Makhonde, although the proportion is only 1:23 at Fugitives Drift 1. There are also the letters of the alphabet, the two crosses and the dates 1938 and 1969 at Erskine and the plough at Fugitives Drift.

In discussing both the chronological implications and the motivation behind the art we need to give considerable attention to Malan's evidence and particularly to the suite of engravings evidently done around the time of his second visit to Erskine in 1956 (Malan 1957). This suite (our Figs 9, 19, 20 & 22) is on one sheet of rock and the individual images are stylistically similar, therefore probably contemporary. In Malan's photographs (1957 PLATE 111 a & b) two of them are freshly pecked, compared with their weathered appearance today, and they are being used by two boys, aged about six and eight years old, to play a game with small stones symbolising cattle and calves. That these engravings really are of this age is confirmed by the fact that today further engravings of the suite occur on parts of the rock still unpecked in Malan's photographs. The newer work includes the human

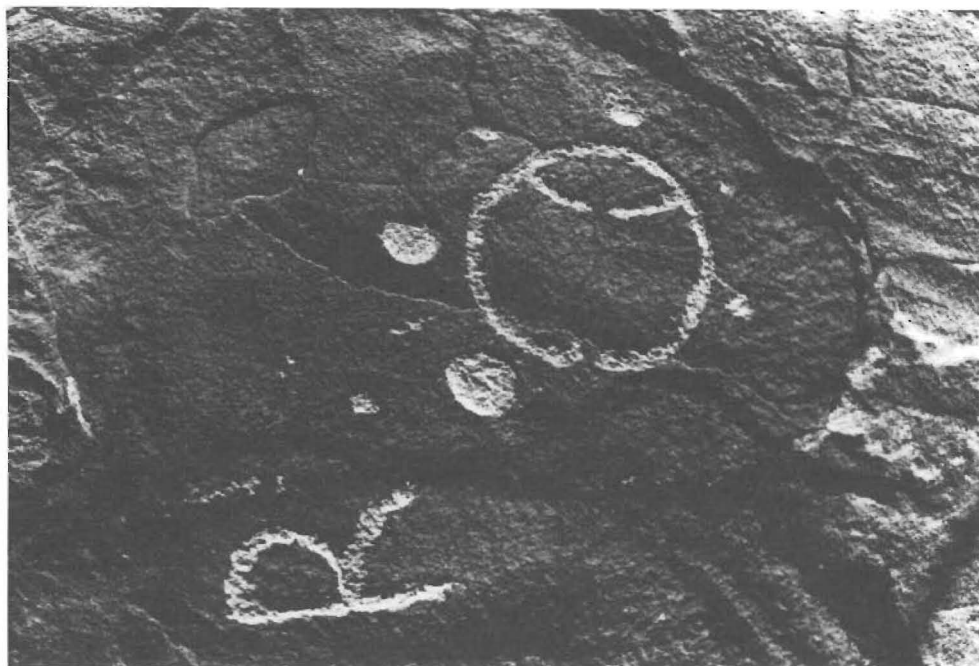


Fig. 31. Fresh-looking engravings from Erskine.

figure and smaller rectangle containing dots (Fig. 19) which now occupies what was bare rock in the bottom right hand corner of Malan's PLATE 111b, while in the foreground of his PLATE 111a are two parallel lines which are now visible as the two side walls of the rectangular cattle pen of the homestead reproduced in our Fig. 20. There can be no doubt that, at Erskine, the practice of engraving homesteads continued down to the middle years of this century.

While we can argue that the rectangular images must date from the colonial period it does not follow that the circular ones are in all cases older. A group of images like that shown in Fig. 14 includes examples of both shapes that appear to be of the same age. Furthermore the suite dated by Malan's evidence to the 1950s includes both shapes, including the circular example (Fig. 9) which is one of the most detailed examples of the ethnographic Zulu pattern. Despite the fact that, among contemporary homesteads, the *itango* (outer wall) has disappeared and the 'opened out' ground plan prevails today in the areas around these engraved sites, the ethnographically attested pattern has lived on in the artistic memory, not only of engravers but of other Zulu artists, for example those of the Rorkes Drift Art School. Circular homesteads appear on tapestries as well as graphic and ceramic pieces made by these artists today. The homestead shape is therefore of limited value as a chronological indicator among these images.

Weathering and patination are likewise of limited help in establishing the chronology. The engravings that were being made at Malan's visit are today patinated to the same colour as their rock background. On the other hand at the northern end of

the Erskine site, engravings which were fresh in Malan's time remain as fresh today (Fig. 31). However, on apparently similar rock nearby is an almost fresh date of 1938 next to a deeply patinated circular homestead (Fig. 10) which therefore seems much older.

In contrast to Malan's evidence of engraving as late as the 1950s, we were unable to find anyone in the neighbourhood of the sites who remembered or had taken part in the activity. One well-informed man we interviewed, G. Sosibo, who was born in 1957 on the Mpathe Mission next to Erskine, did not even know the engravings existed, although he had played other games on the rocks in his youth. Some people from the homesteads closest to Erskine knew of the engravings but even the adults did not know who had done them. Likewise we did not find anybody who knew about the making of the engravings at the other sites. For example, elderly and long-term residents at Fugitives Drift knew nothing of the engravings.

It seems that Malan witnessed a very late stage in the tradition of engraving homesteads. The boys he questioned in 1956 recognised that other engravings at Erskine were far older and done by people who were no longer there. And their father, who had himself engraved in his youth, said that even then there had been similar but earlier examples (Malan 1957). We would agree with Malan that they seem to have been done over a long period of time, stretching back at least to the nineteenth century.

Malan's information is of further importance in providing a social context for at least some of the engravings. He showed that rural Black children used the homestead plans conceptually as game boards, moving toy cattle in and out of the central pen. The herding of the family stock would indeed have been the most responsible duty to fall on the shoulders of boys in these households. It is therefore no surprise that the plan of the homestead, and in particular the cattle pen, forms the dominant theme of the art. Since homestead plan, and the family livestock herd are inextricably interlinked with social structure in rural Zulu communities, such a game would involve far more than the mere movement of animals. Like many other games it would have contributed to the socialisation of growing children by reinforcing their understanding of family social structure and their own position within this cosmos.

Engraving is not the only means by which homestead plans have been depicted. Malan (1957) was given information of a similar game, played in northern Zululand, where clay and cattle dung were modelled to reproduce the buildings and the livestock. In the Erskine area we saw examples of a widespread practice where children play with loose pebbles on a sheet of rock making model buildings. G. Sosibo, who knew nothing of the engravings, had himself played the pebble game and said that children still play this way today.

We might expect the gender of the engravers to be apparent from the predominant subject matter. Indeed G. Sosibo volunteered that, when playing the game with pebbles the boys would build a stock pen and play with toy cattle whereas the girls would play with stones to make a house. The heavy emphasis on the cattle pen, not only in the savanna but among all the agriculturist engravings we have seen, suggests that this was mainly a masculine activity.

While cattle pens and paths would be the concern of boys or men, we would expect the domestic scene, including huts and grain stores, and the fields to be the concern of girls or women. If the 'clouds' at Fugitives Drift really do represent fields

then they may well be a female expression of spatial structure. Another image from this site which stresses the female domain in the household consists of a ring of huts but without the central pen (Fig. 32). But even with these possible exceptions, the great majority of the images would seem to have a male focus.

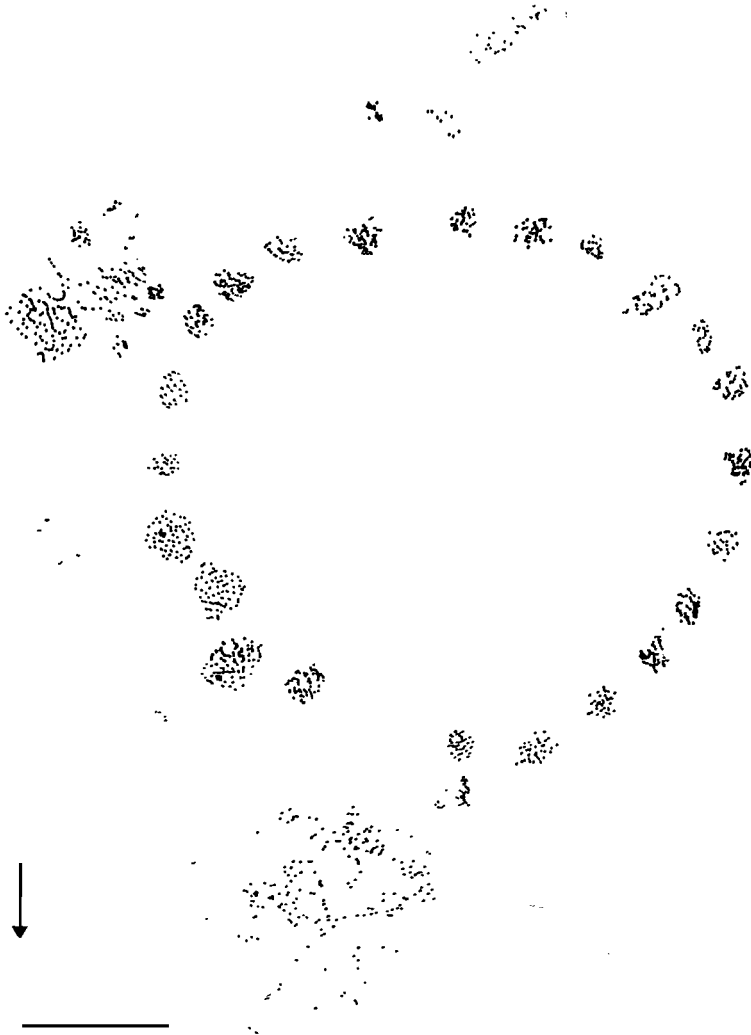


Fig. 32. A circle of huts *without* the central enclosure from Fugitives Drift.

No detailed work has been done on the stone ruins close to any of the savanna sites, so this potential source of information is of little help at present. However those we have looked at, with the exception of Erskine which may have been occupied as late as Malan's visit, appear to be of early colonial or even precolonial date. They have circular cattle pens, are overgrown and seem long abandoned.

Stone building is not a feature of most savanna areas but in these ones, marginal to the interior grasslands, such ruins are quite common. Such areas were far less wooded a century ago. For example photographs taken around Fugitives Drift and Shiyane during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 show open grassland where today there is substantial woody vegetation. Evidently population pressure prior to and during the nineteenth century was sufficient to reduce the vegetation to grassland, forcing people to substitute stone for timber in building, particularly for cattle pens. This practice continued through the colonial period and even survives today though it is now less common than it was 40 years ago. We believe that the practice of engraving accompanied the substitution of stone for wood among communities who built their homes according to the pattern documented from the Zulu of the nineteenth century.

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