

BUSHMAN PAINTINGS

It is well known that the Bushmen, now virtually extinct in Cape Colony, and far from numerous in those northern districts where they still survive, possessed a remarkable artistic gift, shown in their paintings and rock-sculptures or chippings. These, though many of the former have been impaired by lapse of time, or carelessly, if not wantonly destroyed, still exist in large numbers, in the outlying districts of the Colony—also in the Orange River Colony and in Basutoland.

Reproductions of these paintings are to be found in the Grey Library at Cape Town, the museum of the Natal Society at Pietermaritzburg, and the Pitt-Rivers Museum at Oxford: those in the last two collections being copied from the caves in the Drakensberg, Natal. With the exception of some copies published in ethnographical works (*e.g.* Stow's *Native Races of South Africa*, reviewed in the JOURNAL for July, 1906), these have constituted almost, if not quite, the sole facilities for studying these paintings enjoyed by those unable to visit them *in situ*.

An exceptional interest, therefore, attaches to the admirable facsimiles of Bushman pictures and rock-chippings recently exhibited at the rooms of the Royal Anthropological Institute by Miss Helen Tongue and Miss Dorothea Bleek. Of the hundred drawings shown, eighty represented paintings, the remainder chippings. Readers of Stow's work above referred to will scarcely need to be reminded that the latter, from their durability, can be referred back to a higher antiquity than any extant paintings, and are therefore the more important from an anthropological, if not from an artistic point of view. Perhaps none of those copied by Miss Tongue is as old as the eland on the porphyritic rocks of the Vaal, where a chasm has been worn by the river through

the middle of the figure; but some, at least, must be of a great age, "as the scraped part has weathered to almost the same colour as the rest of the rock." The artist, therefore, found it "necessary to make the figures lighter than the stone, so that they should be visible."

The labour and patience expended in making the facsimiles can scarcely be estimated. From the nature of the case, it is obvious that the best specimens of Bushman art are to be found in remote districts, not easily accessible. It would make one blush for our civilisation—were kindred facts not so painfully familiar—to learn what a few of the cave-paintings have suffered at the hands of picnic parties. Most of the farms which Miss Tongue visited are at a considerable distance from the main roads; and the caves or rocks had then to be reached by long drives or rides, or, in some cases, on foot, over the roughest of paths. The tracings often involved peculiarly difficult and harassing work—as, for instance, in one case, where they are placed on the roof of a cave. Where the figures were still visible, but too indistinct to appear clearly through the tracing paper, they had to be freshly outlined with charcoal, a proceeding which would have been somewhat hazardous in the hands of any but a trained artist. The colours were carefully matched with the originals, so as to secure the utmost possible exactitude in the reproductions, which are all of the actual size.

The colours used are chiefly red, yellow, black, and white, obtained from various earths and ochres, and the red oxide of iron so common all over Southern and Central Africa. The nature of the blue and bluish-green pigments employed in a few of the pictures has not been satisfactorily determined. They were not laid on pastel-fashion, or by using the stones as one might do coloured chalks; but were mixed with fat and possibly some sort of gum, and seem to have been applied with something in the nature of a brush. Dr. Pas-sarge's remarks on Bushman paintings may be quoted in this connection, but it must be premised that the arts have never flourished to the same extent in the northern districts. The absence of paintings and carvings in the Kalahari is easily explained by the want of suitable rock-surfaces; but those

found in the Chorilo hills would seem, from Dr. Passarge's description, to be of a very inferior character. The reason may be that the real habitat of the Bushmen, in their most prosperous days, was south of the Zambesi: the Kalahiri was only temporarily occupied by the main body on their southward migration. Some inconsiderable broken clans may have remained behind there, and in later times it became a refuge for survivors of tribes dispossessed from more habitable regions. As a rule, the problem of daily subsistence is such an urgent one with the Kalahari Bushmen as to leave them little energy for the pursuit of art.

"In some cases," says Dr. Passarge, "we find *pictures*, painted on smooth rock-surfaces with red pigment, probably consisting of powdered iron oxide and another ingredient, possibly a mixture of fat and gum. In other cases *bas-reliefs* have been scratched in the crust of hydroxide of iron produced by weathering on the surface of boulders. The diabases of the Karroo formation are peculiarly suited to this form of art, and have, in fact, been extensively used for it. In the Grootfontein District, Otavi Peninsula (German S.W. Africa), Dr. Rohrbach found *bas-reliefs* of human foot-prints and the spoor of antelopes on sandstone, probably belonging to the Lydenburg beds.

"The paintings and chippings represent objects and incidents of daily life, more especially those connected with war and hunting. Animals and battle-scenes are rendered in an extraordinarily graphic and vivid manner; and even, in later times, Europeans, with their foreign weapons, implements, and costumes.

"In the Kalahari, no chippings whatever have as yet, to my knowledge, been discovered, and paintings only in the Chorilo Mountains.¹ They are almost exclusively representations of animals, many of them recognisable without difficulty, others not at all. They are done with red paint on the smooth surface of a somewhat overhanging rock on the south side of the gorge leading from the spring down

¹ These are the hills marked in the recently-published Ordnance Survey Map as "Silola Mts." They are some distance W. of the Okovango swamps, in (approximately) 18°45' S. by 21°45' E.

to the plain on the west. The ²Gokwe Bushmen whom I found there asserted that the pictures could not be the work of men, and that they did not know who had made them. They cannot, however, be very old—certainly not all of them—as the horse, introduced only within the last fifty years, is one of the animals most easy to identify. It seems probable, moreover, that they belong to different periods, as the red colour is quite fresh in some figures, in others washed out and bleached. There is also a difference in the treatment, the older drawings mostly showing the animals in profile with two legs only, the more recent with four.

“Human figures do not occur at all; only once, the artist has amused himself by covering his hand with red paint and slapping it down on the rock. The impression is that of a small, compact hand which might very well belong to a Bushman.

“The rhinoceros, eland, and giraffe are the animals most frequently depicted. The hyena, goat, and dassie (Hyrax) are doubtful. The elephant is, curiously enough, entirely absent.”¹

The drawings reproduced (in black and white only) by Dr. Passarge, are extremely rough in character—more so than any animals in Miss Tongue’s collection, though this represents very various degrees of talent and technique. Nearly every animal copied by her, except the “Birds” in No. 80 (which may, however, be merely symbolical figures), can be identified without difficulty. Some of the chippings—naturally more difficult of execution—show two legs only; but this is not the case with any of the paintings, except No. 8: “Spotted, one-horned buck in water surrounded by fish.” This is a very curious design, and if, as has been supposed, it has some relation to rain-making, or other mystic ceremonies, it falls in with the idea expressed by Goethe:

“*Wundertätige Bilder sind meist nur schlechte Gemälde.*”

Miss Bleek thinks “the buck are probably imaginary animals,” and certainly their colouring has no parallel in

¹ *Buschmänner der Kalahari*, pp. 94-95.

nature; but in shape they are not unlike the water-buck (*Cobus ellipsiprymnus*; *isidumuga* of the Amandebele). The surrounding fish are naively drawn in a kind of halo, their heads pointing inwards, with the same indifference to perspective as the pool in the rain-making scene (No. 71), with the rain falling into it—or, as in No. 78, “Leopard chasing man across circles, possibly pits or pools.” Two of these last have tufts of reeds or grass indicated on their margin, and a series of concentric circles seems intended to convey that a pool is in process of drying up.

We should not, by the way, be disposed to agree with Dr. Passarge about the two figures marked *f* in his plate, which he calls “rhinoceroses.” The upper one is undoubtedly meant for a rhinoceros, as is the very similar figure marked *k*; but the lower is rather some two-horned, maned beast with a tufted or bushy tail—possibly the gnu. The one horn in the picture (which, moreover, is distinctly placed on the forehead, and not on the nose) is evidently due to the difficulty of representing both horns in profile. It may also be pointed out that the chippings are wrongly described as bas-reliefs, being merely incised on the surface of the rock. Where anything more than an outline has been attempted, it is not by modelling in relief, but by hollowing out the spaces within it.

Stow mentions (*Native Races of South Africa*, p. 111) a Bushman with whom he once travelled, “who was able to imitate on the sand the spoor of every animal, from an elephant to a steenbok, with such exactitude that it required a most practised eye to detect the counterfeit.” From this playful exercise of the art-instinct, it would be but a step to the permanent representation of footprints in the sandstone rock as described by Dr. Passarge. Possibly a Bushman origin should be assigned to the prints on a conglomerate rock in the Chipeta country (N.E. Rhodesia), which are connected by the local Bantu with the creation of men and animals, like the mythical *Kapirimtiya* of the Anyanja.¹ The artist of the Chorilo Hills was limited to

¹ See “A Native Legend” in *Life and Work in British Central Africa* (the Blantyre Mission magazine) for December, 1902.

a single colour—either by ignorance, or inability to procure others. The fact that the ³Gokwe Bushmen could give no account of the paintings, shows (unless, indeed, they found it convenient *not* to know), that they were new-comers in that part of the country, and confirms the impression that the conditions of tribal life in the Kalahari are more or less unsettled.

The absence of the human figure and of the elephant is also to be noted. Men, women, and children, in more or less rudimentary stages of delineation, abound in Miss Tongue's collection; and there are several good examples of elephants. The large one, from Dordrecht Commonage, has unfortunately been much injured by wet, but those in No. 19, "Elephants and baboons," are in a good state of preservation and very well drawn. The rhinoceros occurs several times; we also find the hartebeest, gnu (one very spirited representation of a "wildebeest" at full gallop in hot pursuit of a man, woman, and boy), rhebuck and other antelopes, leopard, lion, giraffe, and others. Birds are not numerous, but we find a few ostriches, a beautiful drawing of two white cranes (from Theko's in Basutoland), and several examples of vultures. But the favourite animal is the eland. Dr. Passarge remarks on its comparative frequency; and Miss Tongue's elands are not only numerous, but as skilfully and delicately executed as the Chorilo ones are the reverse. The instinctive anatomical knowledge born of long familiarity with the animal is here seen to the full in the faithfulness with which every detail is represented, and no less striking are the variety and truth of the attitudes. We have elands grazing, drinking, lying down, at full gallop, leaping; one—evidently tormented by flies—has turned its head away from the spectator, and only the tip of the nose appears below, while the lashing tail shows above the line of the back. One, seen from behind, has his head turned sideways—a masterly bit of drawing. In another, where the eland is seen from behind, end on to the spectator, a less skilful artist, anxious to show the forelegs in their proper place, has removed part of the hindquarters in order to leave them visible. Other

examples of foreshortening, more or less successful, might be mentioned.

The prominence given to the eland seems to correspond with the place it occupied in the Bushman imagination. It was to them what the ox is to the pastoral Bantu—not only their principal food-provider, but in some sense also, a sacred animal. One remembers the haunting pathos of the account given by Qing to Mr. Orpen:—“‘Where is Cagn?’ [who “made all things”]. He answered, ‘We don’t know, but the elands do. Have you not hunted and heard his cry, when the elands suddenly start and run to his call? Where he is, elands are in droves like cattle.’”

No paintings now existing in the Eastern Province of Cape Colony can be much less than one hundred years old; in Basutoland they may come down to the third or fourth decade of the last century. Dr. Stow calculated that some might be at least 500 years old. They appear to be very durable when uninjured by extraneous causes—but many caves have been used as shelters by cattle, and in others the paintings have been carelessly or even wantonly defaced by visitors. It is therefore extremely important that copies should be taken if they cannot be permanently preserved, and the service rendered by Miss Tongue to anthropologists is one impossible to overrate.

It would be easy to extend this paper to a much greater length, but enough has been said to show the extreme interest attaching to these drawings. We shall look forward eagerly to the appearance of the volume which Miss Tongue and Miss Bleek have in preparation.

A. WERNER.

NOTE.—In the *Proceedings of the Rhodesia Scientific Association*, Vol. VII, Part I, to hand since the above was written, are some photographs of footprints carved on rocks, taken by J. M. Kearney, at Bunbusi, Rhodesia.