



PUBLIC ROCK ART SITES OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

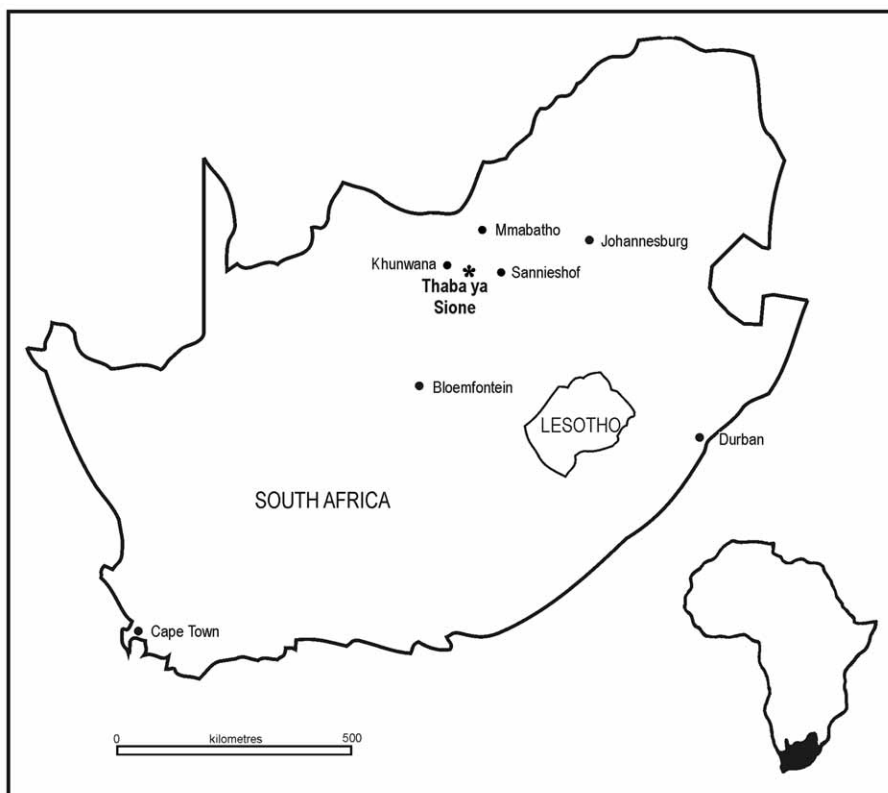
Thaba ya Sione

BY SVEN OUZMAN

It is not often that a town is named after a rock art site, but Bushman rock engravings are quite literally at the heart of *Thaba ya Sione*, a town located between Khunwana and Sannieshof, 60 km south-west of Mmabatho in South Africa's North-West Province. *Thaba ya Sione* is built around a low but impressive hill that rises 30 m above

the surrounding plains. This hill is the town's nucleus and it is famous because of the 586 Bushman rock engravings found on 464 of the hill's shiny black dolerite rocks. /Xam and //Nu Bushmen made these engravings to express their Spirit World experiences. Since the 1980s archaeologists have known that Bushman rock engravings have religious meanings, but the Tswana inhabitants of *Thaba ya Sione* already knew this in 1926 when they moved here from Rustenburg

and named their new home 'Sione'. 'Sione' means 'Zion' and refers to the Kingdom of Heaven, but also captures the spiritual essence of the Bushman rock engraving tradition that pre-dates Christianity. 'Thaba' translates as 'hill' so *Thaba ya Sione* means 'Hill of Zion'. In 1986 the Bophutatswana government formally recognised this very special place by declaring it an open-air



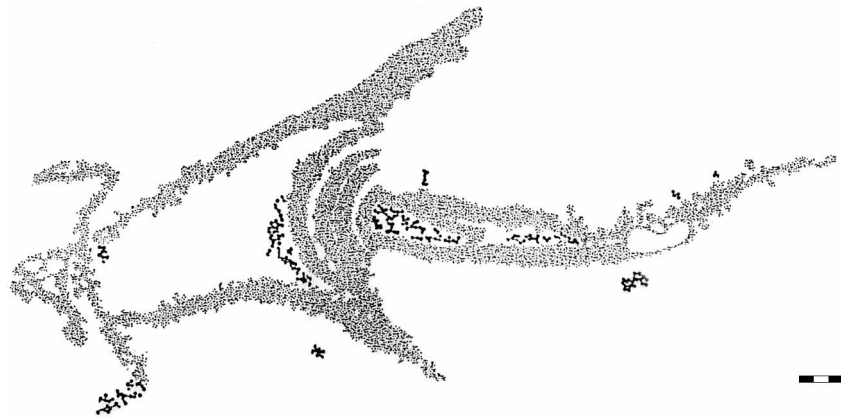
Top: Two rain-shamans herding a black rhino rain-animal.

Left: Location of *Thaba ya Sione*.

rock art museum. It is now a South African Heritage site.

Place of rock art, rhinoceroses and rain-making

The *Thaba ya Sione* engravings are varied and include: baboon, birds, a beautiful buffalo, a dying eland, elephant, gemsbok, geometric forms, giraffe, a human transforming into a bird, lion, a very rare engraving of a Cordylid or rock monitor lizard, ostrich and warthog. Interestingly, there is an engraving of a person and ostrich dancing – just like at Bosworth 100 km to the east (see Culna 56) – suggesting a link between these two sites. But what makes *Thaba ya Sione* really special are the 66 rhinoceroses engraved there. Many Bushmen believed that rhinos were powerful animals with a lot of Spirit World potency. Bushman priests – known as shamans – used this potency to maintain the well-being of the landscape. A favoured way of doing this was to make rain. Bushmen believed that the rain was an animal that lived in deep pools of water – such as are found in the Thlakajeng River 200 m from *Thaba ya Sione* – which were believed to be entrances to the Spirit World. Rain-shamans dived into these pools, found and calmed the rain-animal living there with aromatic herbs known as



Rare engraving of a lizard.

buchu, tied it up with leather thongs and took it to the top of the hill where they slaughtered it. The rain-animal's blood and milk then flowed off the hill as rain that renewed the landscape. Significantly, in the past rhinos wallowed in the Thlakajeng's waterpools and then visited the engraved hill where they got rid of skin parasites by rubbing themselves on rocks. A total of 27 of these rocks have been completely smoothed by this rubbing. In addition the three engravings at the top of *Thaba ya Sione* are all of rhinos. The Bushman believed in two types of rain-animal: an aggressive and destructive male rain (black rhino) and a soft and nurturing female rain (white rhino). One of these rhino engravings has been hammered with a stone. This is not vandalism as the hammer marks are old. In the 1870s the /Xam told anthropologists how rain-shamans



Black rhinos engraved at the top of the hill.


'broke the rain's ribs' to make rain and perhaps they did this by hammering certain rhino engravings. They also hit the rocks to make music and to contact the Spirit World that they believed was behind the rock.

Thaba ya Sione today

This emphasis on rain-making continues today, though Bushmen no longer live at *Thaba ya Sione*. Now the hill is where the *lekgotla* or Tswana men's court holds their *pitso* or meetings to decide important affairs. The *lekgotla* is situated next to an engraving of two rain-shamans capturing a rhino rain-animal. In times of drought, this and other rhino rock engravings are used by the Zi-

The mountain is a sacred place. When there is no rain the chief convenes a pitso there, a meeting to pray to the God of their ancestors to bring rain. No one here would risk violating this place for fear of unleashing the wrath of the ancestors.

onist Christian Church to make rain and to communicate with the *badimo* or ancestors. These are not just Tswana ancestors but include also our First People – the Bushmen who were Masters of the rain, rhinoceroses and rock art. *Thaba ya Sione* was a very important Bushman spiritual centre and a visit there helps us to understand Bushman rock engravings. It also shows us how rock art continues to play an important role in people's lives. But perhaps we should allow Paul Mokone, *Thaba ya Sione's* custodian, to have the last word.

He beautifully captures the essence of this extraordinary place when he says: 

Responsible behaviour at rock art sites

Thaba ya Sione's custodian is Paul Mokone. Ask at any house for him or a guide.

Vandalism carries a R½ million fine or 2 years imprisonment.

For 30 more Public Rock Art Sites visit www.nasmus.co.za/rockart/rockart1.htm

Suggested Reading

Lewis-Williams, J.D. & Blundell, G. 1998. *Fragile heritage: a rock art fieldguide*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

Ouzman, S. 1996. *Thaba Sione: place of rock art, rhinoceroses and rain-making*. *African Studies* 55:31-59.



Rhino-rubbed and smoothed dolerite boulder.