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PG 13 grayscale 4x4
THE SHIP CAVE PAINTING
As seen by a sailor

Nick Leggatt

In the August 2004 issue of The Digging Stick, Hugo Leggatt and Renée Rust described an unusual rock painting of a ship in Attakwaskloof recently discovered on a farm in the Ruitersbos region of the Western Cape, north of Mossel Bay. The article generated quite a bit of interest and Mr Leggatt took various people to see it, among them a group from the Western Cape Branch of the SA Archaeological Society and his son, Nicholas, a professional sailor. The Western Cape Branch group led by Yvonne Viljoen felt that the painting clearly fell into the rock art tradition of the Western Cape. Nick disagreed; however, on the basis that there is detail visible in the artwork that indicates that the artist had experience of sailing and was more than an observant Khoi artist. His reasons are set out below.

The ship cave painting from Attakwaskloof illustrated in Fig 1 appears to be of a Dutch East Indiaman with a rig similar to that illustrated in Fig 2, a contemporary painting from 1762. Though Captain Cook’s 1768 bark, Endeavour, in Fig 3, is rigged somewhat differently, it serves to illustrate some points of comparison, as it is a working replica of a ship of that period.

All three vessels are depicted with their bows on the left and the stern on the right. All three vessels are three-masted. In the cave painting there appears to be one fore and aft rigged sail on the mizzenmast. In Fig 2 this corresponds with the lateen sail. The Dutch East Indiaman also has a mizzen topsail yard, though in the painting the sail is furled. The mizzen topsail was an addition that came late in the period of the development of the East Indiaman. Later still, the lateen sail evolved into the gaff sail as seen aboard Endeavour. The lack of mizzen topsails in the cave painting would suggest that it predates the 1762 painting.

Flying from the peak of the gaff in the cave painting there appears to be a Dutch ensign. In both Figs 2 and 3 the ensign is flying from a staff at the stern. During that period the ensign could

Nick Leggat is a professional sailor. He was a crew member on the Cheyenne during its successful, early 2004 bid for the round-the-world sailing record. hl12@mweb.co.za
either be flown from a staff or from the gaff. In modern times standard practice is to fly the ensign from a staff while at anchor and from the gaff while underway. This is because the mizzen often overhangs the stern and would damage the staff when tacking or gybing. Assuming that the modern practice developed from older traditions, it might indicate that the ship is underway.

It is difficult to make out the details of the mizzen sail in the cave painting, but the fact that the gaff is indicated by two parallel lines could signify that the sail has been furled as shown in the Endeavour picture. On the main mast two sails are clearly shown to be set, the main sail and the main topsail, so the fact that the mizzen is furled does not necessarily imply that the vessel is at anchor. Below the bottom line of the gaff and extending up to the lower corner of the ensign is a curved line which would appear to be the flag lanyard. This is intriguing in that the flag lanyards are invisible in the 1762 painting and aboard Endeavour, implying that the cave artist had been close enough to the ship to observe the lanyard. It also indicates that he saw it as being of sufficient importance to be included in the painting. Bearing in mind that little or none of the vital standing rigging is shown in the cave painting, it at first seems surprising that the artist would have chosen to illustrate one of the least significant pieces of running rigging. On reflection though, it is significant that the line is indicated and also that it is curved.

First, the lanyard for an ensign flown from the gaff would need to have some slack in it to account for movement in the gaff as the sail is furled/unfurled or trimmed. This would account for the curve in the line. Second, to the seaman an ensign flown from the gaff would simply look rather unbelievable in a picture if it did not have a line securing the lower corner to something. Third, an artist familiar with ships would have known that it is standard practice to hoist the ensign in the morning and lower it at sunset and that a lanyard would therefore need to be indicated.

At the head of the mainmast a second Dutch flag is indicated. Interestingly, both flags are indicated as being almost perfect rectangles, while the picture of Endeavour shows the flags folding over as they flap in the breeze. Fig 2 also shows a rectangular Dutch flag. In both the cave painting and the painting of the East Indiaman it would appear that it was significant to the artist that it should be clearly shown that the vessels were Dutch; it was not necessarily important to show the flag in a photo-realistic way. With the second flag no lanyard is shown, simply because it would be parallel to the mast and therefore unnecessary to show.

On the main mast two sails are shown in the cave painting – the mainsail and the main topsail. In the painting of the Dutch East Indiaman topgallant yards are also shown, though once again the sails are furled. Again, the topgallant sail was a late development, a further indication for an earlier date for the cave painting. Fig 3 shows how the size and importance of the topgallant sails increased as the century progressed. In the cave painting it would appear that the sails on the mainmast are set, though with traditional natural-fibre sails they were often left set at anchor so that they could dry in the sun and also so that they could be ready for immediate use if the vessel needed to get underway in a hurry. If it was at all windy in the anchorage it would have been necessary to clew the sails up as is shown in Fig 3. In this picture the sails have not been furled, but instead the clew lines have been pulled in so that the sails are roughly folded and more or less secured against the breeze. To make the sails ready for sea all that would be required now would be to release the clew lines and trim the sails to the wind direction.

Interestingly, in the cave painting it would appear that a clew line is indicated, running from the middle of the main yard, diagonally downwards and aft, to the mainsail clew. Comparing the cave painting with Fig 2, in which the clew lines are all but invisible, it is again intriguing that the artist thought them so significant that it was necessary to indicate them. In Fig 3 the clew lines are invisible as the sails have been clewed up in port. This would seem to indicate that the cave artist was sufficiently familiar with the ship to realise that the lines should be indicated when the sails were set, but that otherwise they would not be seen.

At the top of the mainmast, forward of the flag, there is a pair of diagonal lines which would appear to indicate the main topsail topping lifts. In Fig 2 the topping lifts are difficult to distinguish, but in the picture of Endeavour the main and main topsail lifts can clearly be seen, though the topgallant lifts are difficult to see. The lower topping lifts are easier to see partly because they are closer to the observer, but also because they are significantly thicker to account for the weight
of the much heavier lower yards. The highest
topping lifts, i.e. the topgallant lift in Cook's ship,
or the topsail lift before that time, where much
lighter lines and therefore not so easy to dis-
tinguish from below or even from off the boat.
This again makes it rather curious that the artist
chose to show them at all. A possible explanation
for the inclusion of the topping lift is that to a
seaman it would have looked rather strange to
have the topsail set with no visible means of
support. From an aesthetic point of view the main
yard would appear to be supported by the topsail,
but the topsail yard would need some other
visible source of support. On closer inspection it
does seem possible that there may even be
some indication of a main topping lift too,
between the main yard and the foot of the topsail.

The foremast of the cave ship has faded badly
and it is difficult to distinguish any significant
details. The bow sections are very faded, too, but
curiously there seem to be three protrusions from
the bow. In Figs 2 and 3 it can be seen that most
vessels of that period would have carried a sprit-
sail and a bowsprit topsail. In later times the bow-
sprit topsail was done away with. These protrus-
ions in the bow of the cave painting ship could
indicate the spritsail yards and possibly the
bowsprit. One might also indicate the anchor cat-
heads on the bow, which are quite clearly visible
in Figs 2 and 3. The cave painting seems to show
a ship with a very pronounced sheer line, again
indicating an early design of an East Indianman.
The sheer lines became flatter later on, as can be
seen in Figs 2 and 3.

In conclusion
It is my opinion that the cave painting was done
by a seaman who was intimately familiar with the
ey early Dutch East Indiamen. I believe that the artist
had sufficient mechanical knowledge to rea-
lise that it was important to indicate those items
of running rigging that are significant to the daily
running of the ship, even though they might ap-
pear insignificant when compared with other
items of rigging. It was also important to the artist
that the nationality of the vessel be indicated
clearly, and not simply that a pair of flags be
drawn in.

The location of the painting is below a ridge from
which the anchorage at Mossel Bay is clearly
visible. The painting is apparently done in char-
coal using a technique that could easily have
been employed by a 17th century seaman.

Hugo Leggatt, comments that, personally, he still
leans to the view that the cave painting was prob-
ably drawn by a Khoi, likely of the Attaqua clan.
However, if his son Nicholas' view was proven
correct, there would be an interesting candidate
as the artist, he suggests. This is Hieronymus
Cruse who, during the brief term of Jacob Borg-
horst as Commander at the Cape, was sent by
sea to Mossel Bay to trade for cattle with the Khoi
and return overland. He disembarked with 15
men at Mossel Bay on 22 October 1668 and dis-
appeared northwards, where he made first con-
tact with the Attaquas. After spending some time
with them, during which one of his men was badly
mauled by a lion, he succeeded in obtaining
about 90 oxen and 400 sheep, with which he
returned to the Cape on 23 November.

According to Mr Leggatt, one can imagine cir-
cumstances under which Cruse, or one of his
men, might have drawn an illustration of a ship
for an audience of Attaquas. On the other hand,
he writes, the site appears to have several layers
of paintings and presumably more than mundane
significance, as indicated in Renée's and his
article.

'Mixed' engravings in Portugal

Of related interest, but not exactly comparable
to the Attakwasloot ship issue, is an area of
rock art stretching over 17 km of the Coa river
valley in Portugal. More than 200 panels of
Upper Palaeolithic engravings on schistose
rocks occur in several localities. The tech-
niques are fine incisions or pecking. Engrav-
ings of historic age done in similar ways can be
found in the same localities, in particular at
Ribeira de Piscos. Here a rock carries a human
figure with two swords dated to the 17th or 18th
century. Another pecked engraving is found on
a rock at Canadá do Inferno. These two local-
ities also have lots of Upper Palaeolithic en-
gravings, though not exactly on the same rock
outcrops. At Foz do Coa a locomotive can be
found, while at another spot there is a drawing of
a boat.

References
Nova de Foz Coa.
2. Joao Zilhao, the archaeologist responsible for the
evacuation of occupational sites in the valley dated to
the Gravettian- Solutrean and Magdalenian, has
published several papers on the Coa Valley.