



## NEW PERSPECTIVES IN THE INTERPRETATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN ROCK ENGRAVINGS; THE EMIL HOLUB COLLECTION IN THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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**ABSTRACT:** Dr Emil Holub visited the South African rock art site Gestoptefontein in 1884 and removed several examples of engraved rock art, some of which is in the collection of the Náprstek Museum in Prague. The engravings occur on a local form of pyrophyllite (similar to talc) known as Wonderstone. The motifs and markings are distinctive in appearance. Apart from the usual images of anthropomorphs and zoomorphs, there are items of Khoe-San material culture, especially women's aprons and ornaments. The ease of marking Wonderstone allowed the artists to incise patterns similar to those that Khoe-San have applied to their artefacts for thousands of years. Local traditions about the Wonderstone outcrops as well as Khoe-San ethnography enable researchers to link the rock art to Khoe-San rituals of initiation. These ceremonies involve the presentation of clothing and ornamentation to newly initiated women and the introduction of the neophytes to an entity known as the Water Snake. It is argued that in the past the Khoe-San linked the Wonderstone outcrops in the area to the presence of the Water Snake. Rock art was made on the outcrops in order to associate Khoe-San initiates with the Water Snake. In this way communities ensured good fortune for themselves and their livestock. Holub's removal of rock art from an ancient and important religious centre arouses mixed responses today.

**KEY WORDS:** South Africa, Rock art, Emil Holub, Náprstek Museum, Khoe-San, Gestoptefontein, initiation rites, Wonderstone.

In the 1884 during his second residence in Africa the Czech collector, explorer, and medical doctor Emil Holub stopped at the farm Gestoptefontein in South Africa's North West province, on his way northwards into what is now Botswana, (Fig. 1, Holub 1890). The unusual name of the farm, which means "blocked spring", may refer to an attack made on the farmhouse earlier in the Nineteenth Century during which the raiders threw

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Figure 1  
The Gestoptefonten-Driekuil complex of rock marking sites is located in South Africa's North West Province.

stones into the local spring in order to deprive the farmer of water (De Jager 2001). There is, however, an older name for this place—*Tlogo pitsane*. Recorded by Holub (Želizko 1925), the name hints at the significance of the area for its ancient inhabitants, as we discuss shortly.

Gestoptefontein and the neighbouring farm Driekuil are internationally renowned for a series of curious looking outcrops of “Wonderstone”, a form of pyrophyllite that occurs on these two properties. Pyrophyllite is an aluminasilicate, dense but easily marked (hardness equivalent to talc, i.e. 1.0–1.5 on the Mohs scale of mineral hardness) (Astrup & Horn 1998). Wonderstone is smooth and light grey often mottled with red. The Wonderstone hills on the farm Gestoptefontein have been quarried on a large scale since 1937. Currently, Wonderstone crucibles are used in the manufacture of industrial diamonds, owing to the stone’s ability to resist extreme thermal shock.

### The rock art sites on the farms Gestoptefontein and Driekuil

In pre-colonial times, people exploited the softness of Wonderstone by making rock engravings and other markings. The outcrops were evidently of great significance because there are at least 12 concentrations of rock markings scattered over some 15 kilometres (Fig. 2). The two sites on Gestoptefontein what Holub called the Doppelhugel are the largest and best known of this rock art complex (Anderson 1888; Battiss 1948; Hübner



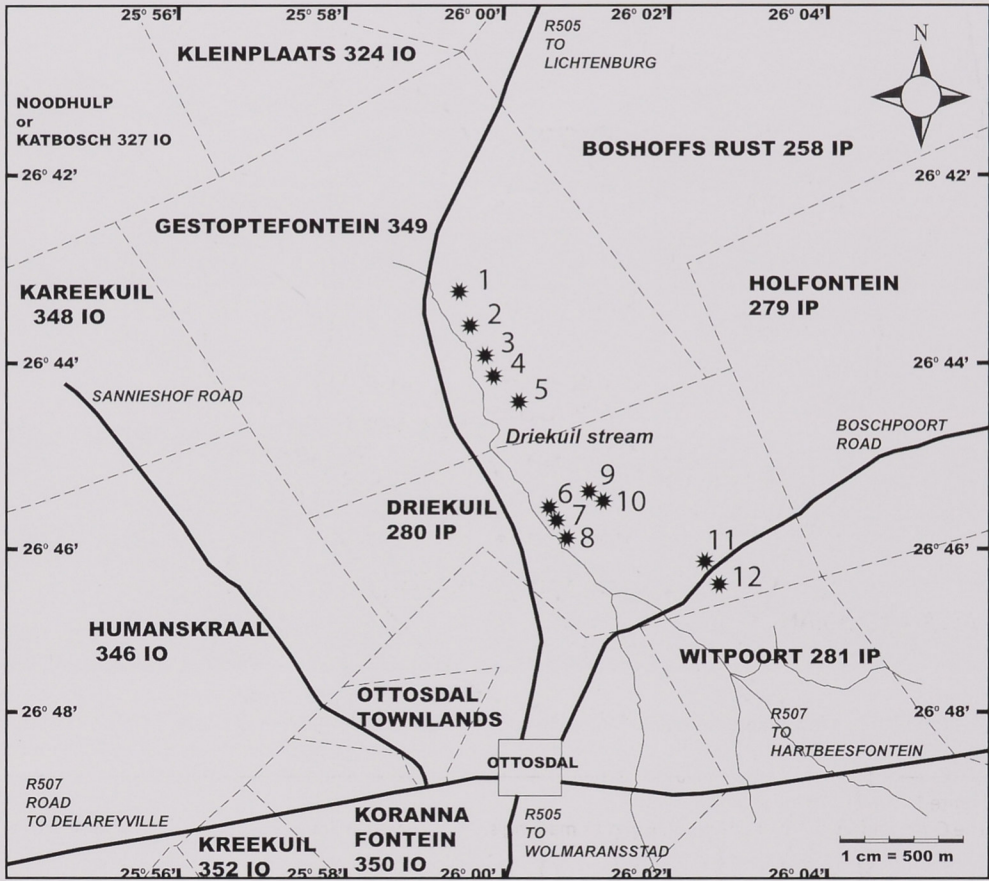


Figure 2

There are at least 12 rock marking sites along the 15 kilometre outcrop of Wonderstone that is largely confined to the farms Gestoptefontein 349 IO and Driekuil 280 IP. This article focuses on the sites marked as 3 and 4 on the map, Gestoptefontein Mountain and Gestoptefontein Hill.

- 1. Vorster's farm (Gestoptefontein 349 IO): motifs and markings reported but not yet investigated.
- 2. Married quarters (Gestoptefontein 349 IO): rough estimate of area =  $\leq .01$  ha.
- 3. Gestoptefontein Mountain (Gestoptefontein 349 IO): rough estimate of area =  $\leq 5$  ha. Completely destroyed by mining.
- 4. Gestoptefontein Hill (Gestoptefontein 349 IO): 1, 19 ha. Currently being surveyed.
- 5. Charlie Badenhorst's farm (Gestoptefontein 349 IO): rough estimate of area =  $\leq .01$  ha (100 m<sup>2</sup>).
- 6. Driekuil Hill (Driekuil 280 IP): estimated area = 0,63 ha. Completely destroyed by mining
- 7. The mound (Driekuil 280 IP): a few, scattered, incised marks. No estimate of area.
- 8. Skeleton Hill: rough estimate of area =  $\leq 0.15$  ha. (Driekuil 280 IP)
- 9. Ridge North (Driekuil 280 IP): rough estimate of area =  $\leq 0.15$  ha..
- 10. Ridge South (Driekuil 280 IP): rough estimate of area =  $\leq 0.1$  ha.
- 11. Boschpoort North (Driekuil 280 IP): rough estimate of area =  $\leq 0.15$  ha.
- 12. Boschpoort South (Driekuil 280 IP): rough estimate of area =  $\leq .02$  ha.

1871; Van Riet Lowe 1937, 1945; Želizko 1925). They were probably the largest and most densely engraved rock art sites in North West province (Fock & Fock 1984). The large hill (Gestoptefontein Mountain) is about five hectares in area and the adjacent hill (Gestoptefontein Hill) is just under a hectare (Fig. 3).



Figure 3

The top picture shows Gestoptefontein Mountain and Gestoptefontein Hill as they looked before 1936 prior to large-scale mining activities (photo from Nel et al. 1936). The photograph below shows that by 2008 much of Gestoptefontein Mountain had been mined and no engravings remained. Many engraved stones have also been removed from the small hill at right.

The rock art of Gestoptefontein looks rather different to that at other sites, although it is clearly linked to a wider tradition associated with the presence of Khoekhoen herders (Eastwood & Eastwood 2006; Eastwood & Smith 2005; Hollmann 2007; Hollmann & Hykkerud 2004; Smith & Ouzman 2004). The substrate itself is very different compared to the doleritic, dioritic and andesitic rocks on which most engravings in the South African interior occur (see Dowson 1992; Fock 1979; Fock & Fock 1984, 1989), examples of which Holub had collected a decade earlier (Holub 1880–1881, 1880). The motifs and markings created on the Gestoptefontein outcrops are also distinctive. There are images of roughly pecked anthropomorphs and zoomorphs – especially ostrich, eland, rhinoceros and elephant. Pecked on the rock amongst and alongside these depictions are various items of Khoe-San material culture (Fig. 4. Hollmann 2007):

- skin aprons of various shapes and designs
- tasselled aprons, beaded or composite sewn skin aprons in particular, as well as grass aprons
- karosses (skin cloaks or blankets) with shaved or beaded patterns some apparently made from several smaller sewn skins
- headbands.

In addition, one finds spontaneous arrangements of intersecting lines, closely pecked circular clusters, rings, tabular arrangements of pecked circular forms, and zigzags (Fig. 5).



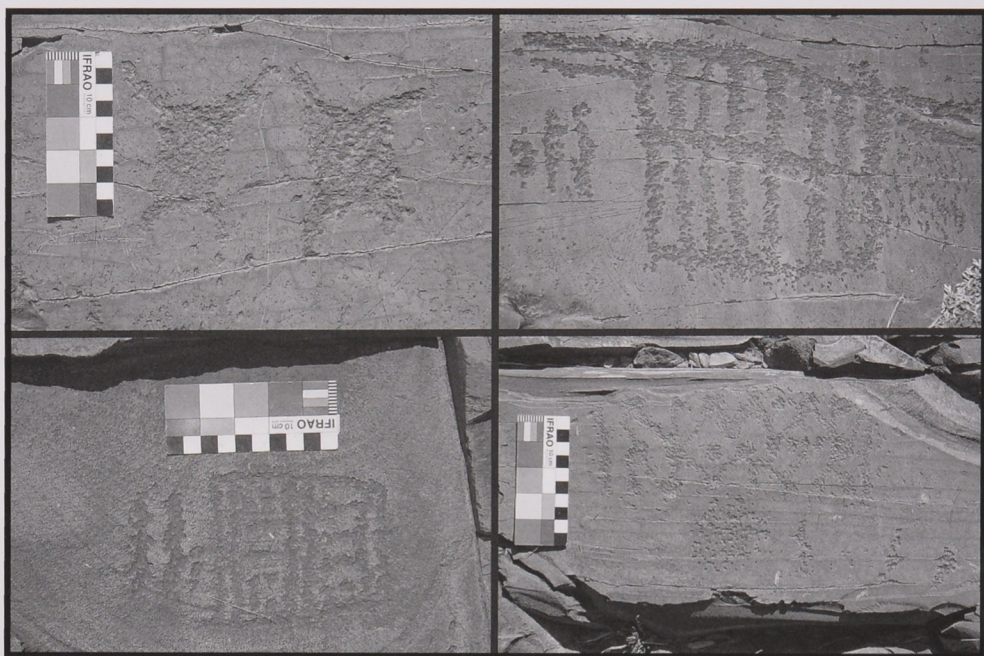


Figure 4  
 Depictions of various items of Khoe-San material culture; clockwise from top left: two back aprons, sewn skin front apron, headband with pendant, skin cloak or blanket with beaded or shaved designs.

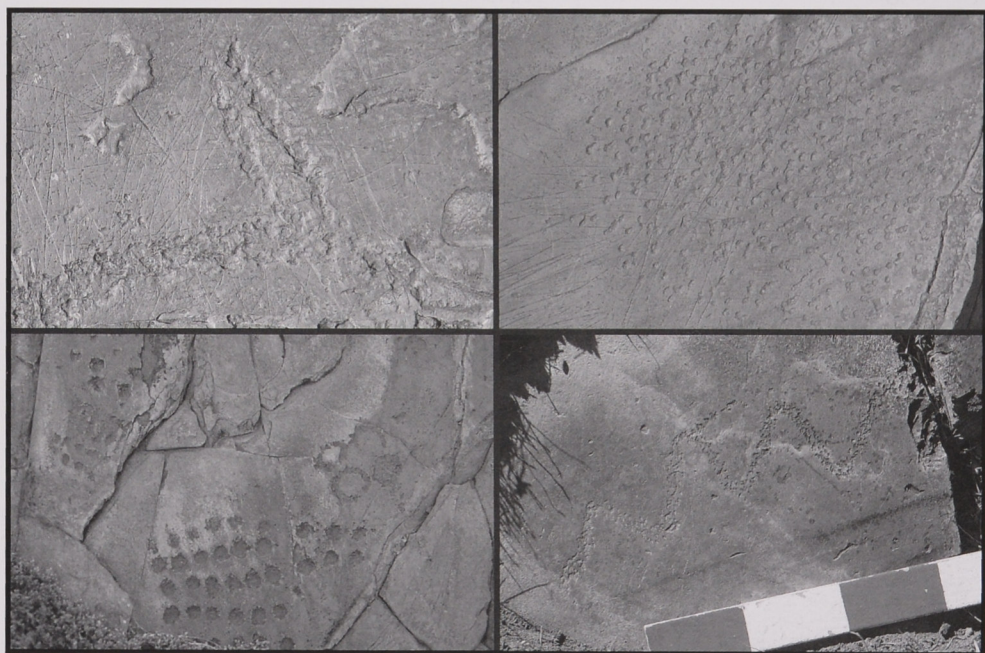
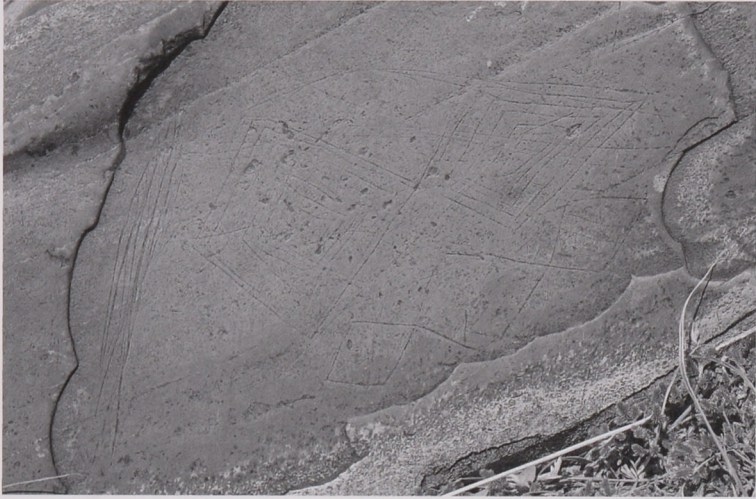


Figure 5  
 There are several distinct forms of rock markings at Gestoptefontein. These are, clockwise, from top left: freely incised surfaces, clusters of peck marks, pecked zigzags, pecked circular forms and tabular arrangements of pecked circular forms.



Figure 6

The softness of Wonderstone enabled people to incise arrangements of fine lines. These motifs are found on other items of Khoe-San material culture such as ostrich eggshell flasks, bags, headbands, pipes and clothing.

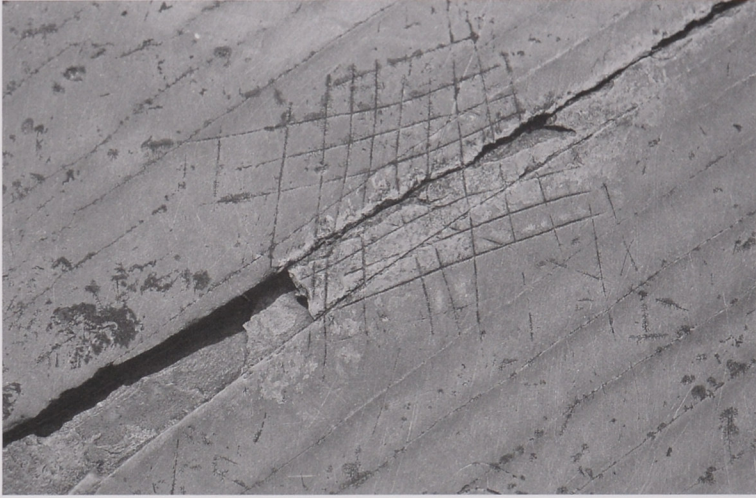


6a. Nested diamond shapes



6b. Crosshatched incisions





6c. Grid-like arrangement of incisions



Figure 7

These grooves were created by abrading the rock surface with unknown implements. They do not appear to be depictions of objects, nor are they likely to be the result of blade-sharpening. The production of a groove results in the creation of a fine powder that may have been mixed with water or fat and used for body decoration.



The ease of marking Wonderstone also enabled the artists to produce an abundance of detailed incised designs that are ornamental in appearance, featuring triangular and diamond-like motifs, as well as crosshatching and finely incised grids (Fig. 6; Hollmann 2007). These patterns closely resemble those that Khoe-San have applied to their artefacts for thousands of years. Underlying and alongside these pecked motifs and incised patterns are hundreds of abraded grooves, up to 1 m in length (Fig. 7). These markings do not resemble any recognisable objects. Rather they appear to be by-products of an activity to produce a residue of fine powder. This substance may have been collected and used in various ways. Sets of incisions and scattered peck marks are the most widespread and common of the rock markings and occur all over the hills.

## Use of Khoe-San ethnography and local traditions

It is possible to understand something of the significance and meaning of these ancient rock art sites using Khoe-San ethnography. The term 'Khoe-San' (originally 'Khoi-San') includes Khoekhoen, Damara, Khoe-speaking Bushmen and non-Khoe speaking Bushmen and was coined by Leonhard Schultze (1928). There are also two local traditions regarding two of the Wonderstone hills that point to the significance of these places. The first of these beliefs concerns the Tswana name for Gestoptefontein: *Tlogo pitsane* (Želizko 1925). This is translated as 'horse's head' (Hollmann 2007) and for many years, employees at the mine wore the logo of a horse's head on their overalls. A local man explained that the name refers to a large snake that basks in the sun on large slabs of Wonderstone (Hollmann 2007); as it lies in the sun, the shadow that it casts is that of a horse. This is another widespread belief about the great snakes: they have horse's heads (Hollmann 2007). The snake is shy and cautious and flees at the approach of humans. The snake has magical qualities—it can glide, fly, or swim and at night, it moves about with a lamp on its forehead. It can also transform itself into a monitor lizard or even a rock. Despite the extensive mining, the snake is still believed to frequent the outcrops, although it is believed that should the mine ever use dynamite (which it does not) the snake would become very angry and displace the hills themselves from their position on the mine's property.

The snake described here is reminiscent of Khoe-San and Tswana beliefs about a great water snake that lives in and has control over the local water source (Schmidt 1998; Hoff 1997). The snake must be appeased and respected for fear that it would leave and take the water with it.

The second local tradition links one of the other Wonderstone outcrops to the presence of Khoe-San people and suggests that the hills were spiritually significant places. In the 1840s, the first colonial farmers to settle in the area found skeletons on one of the hills on Driekuil (De Jager 2001). Locals explained that they were Khoe-San who had taken refuge on the hill in the belief that it would magically protect them but instead they were slaughtered by their unknown pursuers

These narratives suggest that the Wonderstone outcrops were indeed a significant feature of the Khoe-San landscape. It has even been suggested that the outcrops were perceived to be the undulating body of a massive snake physically dominating the actual countryside (Hollmann 2007, see Morris 2002). This may explain why every large mound and outcrop of Wonderstone is marked. It also provides a context in which to interpret the imagery and other markings on the hills.

Given their association with water, great snakes are linked with fertility and fecundity and they are central to female puberty rituals of some Khoe-San, even today (Hoff



1997; Schmidt 1998). Contemporary Khoekhoen ethnographic accounts record that the culmination of a woman's initiation is when her guardian takes her down to the local water source and introduces her to the snake by splashing her with water so that the snake is able to smell her scent (Hoff 1995, 1997; Waldman 1989). If the snake accepts her, then the girl will be fortunate in her life, give birth easily to many children, and bring good fortune to her community (Hoff 1997). The many engravings of aprons and other items may be understood in terms of this link between women and snakes. These items play an important part in puberty rituals; 'new' women receive beautiful aprons, karosses, bags, headbands and ostrich eggshell decorations from their mothers and others. Khoe-San women have described this time in their lives as amongst the happiest (Marshall 1999; Valiente Noailles 1993).

Khoekhoen initiates wear tasselled aprons during the ceremonies (Fig. 8) and their bodies are painted with patterns, often applied with a fingertip (Hoff 1997; Waldman 1989). Some of these, such as patterns of dots and lines are said to represent patterns on the great snake's skin (Hoff 1997). By making the same designs on themselves, the initiates were strengthening their association with the great snake and therefore bolstering their good fortune (Hoff 1997). It seems likely that the fine grey powdered Wonderstone was used to make some of the designs on the people's bodies. Mixed into a paste and applied to the skin it soon turns a brilliant white.

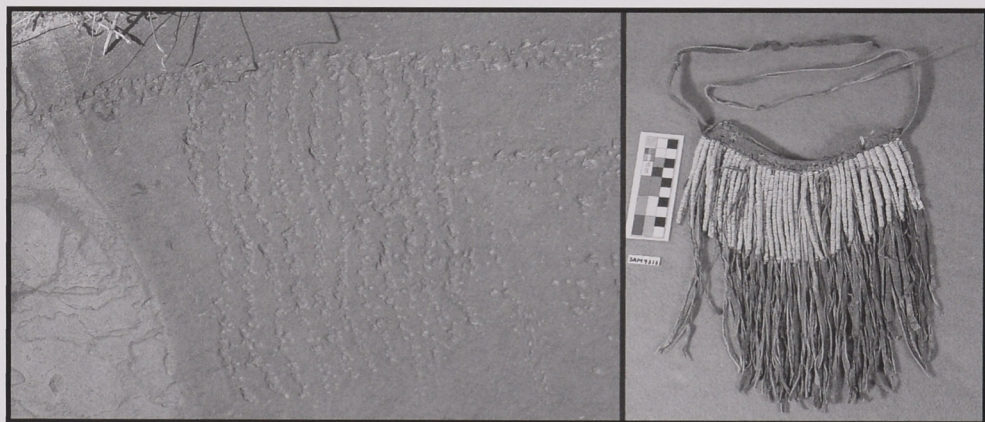


Figure 8

A pecked representation from Gestoptefontein of a tasseled apron worn by girls before or during initiation; compare this with a girl's apron in the collection of the Iziko Museum in Cape Town (SAM 9313).

The engraved grids, triangles, and diamond like shapes mentioned earlier may be additional examples of designs that are linked to the great snakes. While the thousands of cut marks and pecked areas of rock that do not appear to depict actual objects or other recognisable images may be the residues of these ritual activities carried out by the initiates and their teachers.

The depiction of a restricted range of animal species at Gestoptefontein, such as ostrich (Fig. 9), may also relate to women's power. Zoomorphs are often juxtaposed with depictions of aprons, a combination that suggests that the two categories of motif are conceptually related. Eland (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981), rhinoceros (e.g. Ouzman 1995, 1996), elephant (e.g. Garlake 1989, Kinahan 1999; Maggs & Sealy 1983; Parkington





Figure 9

This pecked image of an ostrich was removed from Gestoptefontein by Dr Holub and is now in the Náprstek Museum (NpM4-7.116). Certain animal species are associated by Khoe-San people with transformative powers during rituals. It is possible that ostrich were considered to be powerful creatures linked to girl's initiation ceremonies.

2003) and ostrich (Hollmann 2001) figure prominently in the worldview of Khoe-San as 'transformers' that help humans 'from less desirable conditions to desired ones' (Biesele 1993: 42). This transformation may be so thorough-going that, as in the case of the Eland Dance held by female initiates of certain Bush-groups, the girls *become* eland (Guenther 1999: 176; Eastwood 2006). In this regard it is interesting to note that there are a few images at Gestoptefontein that appear to combine human and ostrich features. These may depict transformed women that incorporate ostrich features.

### Holub's contribution

Holub took a keen interest in the people that he encountered on his travels and their cultural practices (Holub 1880, 1880-1881, 1881, 1890). He recognised that the engravings of animal skins were women's aprons ('*Schürze*', Želizko 1925: Plate 13.1-5) and he correctly identified various images as decorations (Želizko 1925: Plate 17.5) and others as beads and beadwork (Želizko 1925: Plate 19.1, 4), ethnographic examples of which he collected from neighbouring Tswana communities during his two African journeys, and some of which are still housed in the Náprstek Museum in Prague. Unfortunately his Khoe-San collections are limited. This may reflect both a glaring lack of female artefacts collected (cf. Kandert 1998) and the cultural malaise of these communities at the time when economic alienation, military defeat and alcoholism were the destructive results of their inclusion into the colonial process (Holub 1880).





Figure 10

The accession details of this piece, which is held in the collection of the Náprstek Museum (accession number NpM4-7.114) describe the images as made by 'Hottentot people' (i.e. Khoekhoen). Apparently a man (at left) is depicted looking or spitting at the woman's womb. It seems likely that Dr Holub was the source of these comments although this is not certain. This information is especially valuable because it confirms our hypothesis that the rock art site from which the engravings were removed was a ceremonial site for Khoekhoen female initiates.

Unfortunately only a few samples of Holub's original Gestoptefontein engravings collection remain in Prague, most having been donated to museums in Austria, France and Germany (cf. Kandert 1998). However what there is amply illustrates the major themes of the art at the site. They, and with reference to the descriptions of other collections, clearly indicate his understanding of their Khoe-San origin and indicate their possible female initiation significance (although he may not have actually understood this latter association). The large number of aprons is very telling and two examples are still held in the Náprstek Museum (NpM4-7.117 & NpM4-7.118, Fig 8).

Holub's comments on another engraved image now in the Náprstek Museum (Fig. 10) as being made by the "Hottentot people" (i.e. Khoekhoen) and representing a man and his wife is important information. It attributes at least some of the art to this herder community rather than the San hunter-gatherers and it is likely that Holub would have recorded this directly from a Khoe-San informant. Given that the man appears to be looking or "spitting" at the woman's womb (Kandert 1998:17) would fit with the interpretation of these rock art sites as initiation sites, while among some contemporary Khoe-San groups, female puberty rituals also involve marriage (e.g. Silberbauer 1963).

On other occasions, Holub asked the people about their beliefs and customs and in a paper "On the South African Tribes from the south coast to the Zambesi" (Holub 1881) he describes how Koranna men (Khoekhoen) confided in him the significance of





Figure 11  
Illustration from Holub's 1890 book, *Dra. Emila Holuba Druhá cesta po Jižní Africe. Z Kapského Města do země Mašukulumbův. Cesty v Jižní Africe vykonané v letech 1883–1887*. The drawing illustrates different methods of removing engravings. Because of the nature of the rock at Gestoptefontein, however, which occurs in laminae, or tiles, it was relatively easy to pry the rock art loose using a hammer and chisel. It seems unlikely that Dr Holub's team would have needed to use the other techniques illustrated here.

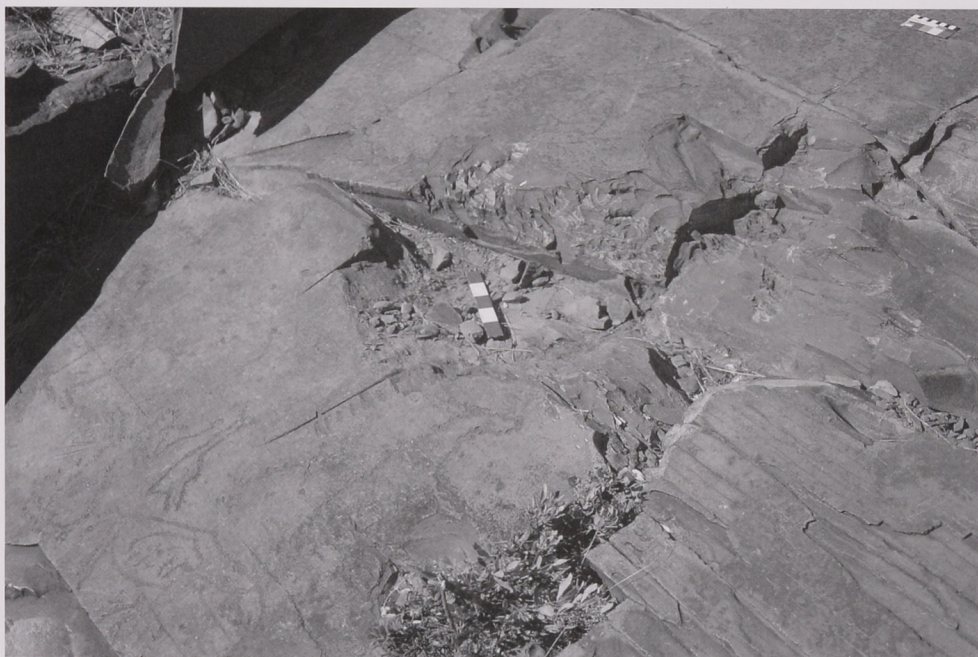


Figure 12  
Emil Holub removed at least 140 engravings from Gestoptefontein. Traces of these removals are still visible today.



scarification marks that they carried on their chests. This information is again informative and may explain some of the small scratches and pecking on the museum examples or at least the cultural practise. These apparently superficial markings should not be ignored and the Holub examples are typical of the site. Furthermore the powder produced may have been used for further ritual activities as already discussed.

In 1884 Holub received permission from the farm owner at the time, a Mr Attwell, to remove samples of rock art from both of the hills on the property (Holub 1890). He reports cutting out 140 rock engravings (Kandert 1998). Because Wonderstone is slate like and occurs in tiles, Holub's party could quite easily pry and chisel the engravings loose and this system of removal is illustrated in the foreground in a figure from his 1890 book, *Dra. Emila Holuba Druhá cesta po Jižní Africe. Z Kapského Města do země Mašukulumbův. Cesty v Jižní Africe vykonané v letech 1883-1887*. (Fig. 11).

Holub's wholesale removal of rock art from Gestoptefontein arouses mixed responses in us today. On the one hand, we are horrified at the removal of such a vast quantity of Khoe-San cultural treasures from an ancient ritual site. Images were torn from their context and cut up into individual tiles thus destroying the rich symbolic and artistic associations that they had with each other. Holub carried off these cultural treasures to Europe leaving behind on the hills the scars of his removals and piles of shattered stones and broken images (Fig. 12). Yet, as Kandert (1998) remarks, Holub's plundering has, ironically, saved some images from oblivion. Any rock art remaining on the large hill at Gestoptefontein after Holub's (and, later, others') removals has since been destroyed by mining activities. The smaller hill at Gestoptefontein still stands, but its future is uncertain; one day the remaining images may be cut up and taken away. Together with a small collection of Gestoptefontein rock art stored at the University of the Witwatersrand and the Klerksdorp Museum, Holub's collections are a precious selection of what was once a widely visited ceremonial centre.

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