

**Review:**

**'The Tsisab Ravine and Other Brandberg Sites'**

**By H. Breuil**

***Prehistoric Paintings in South-West Africa***

by

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**H**UMAN activity may be recorded in writing or in material evidence of the things people made or did. In terms of time, less than one per cent of human life falls within the reach of written history. An outline of the preceding half million or more years may be seen in the durable weapons, tools or bones left by people who lived before writing began. Writing owes its origin to the human use of signs or symbols for communication of ideas, beginning perhaps with body painting, then, tens of thousands of years ago, extending to painted or engraved designs on rock. Today we have expanded the visual basis of historical reconstruction through photographic record of human events as they occur, and we have invented a completely new historical technique, the recording of sound. We are approaching total record of selected human events and have created the conditions for a new kind of historical accuracy.

Backward in time beyond the reach of a century or so, however, the historical record is imperfect and hardly exists at all in many parts of the world. Much of human life in Southern Africa was prehistoric until the nineteenth century and for the most part we depend on archaeology for what we know about people living in the interior of the sub-continent before that time. For perhaps ten thousand years before writing came to South Africa, the last Stone Age people south of the Limpopo covered rocks and cave walls with thousands of paintings and engravings that reflect their way of life with an intimacy we cannot feel in the earlier, major part of the Stone Age when we have to rely on evidence given by weapons, tools and bones. South African prehistoric paintings impress us with the humanity of the painters, for here, perhaps due to the small scale of Stone Age life and low population density, there are no scenes of human sacrifice such as we see in pre-Columbian art in Central America, nor pictures of war and prisoners we find in Assyrian or Egyptian art. For the most part of the southern artists were pre-occupied with the quieter side of animal and human life. Only in the later stages of the art are there signs of conflict with Bantu and European newcomers.

Prehistoric art in caves is by no means confined to Southern Africa, for we have discovered an immense wealth of similar art elsewhere. In Europe, art began millenia before the southern painters and engravers emerged, and on the walls of French caves we see animals and men who lived in a Europe that will not come again, a country of clean, open space unmarked by roads and cities.

The Abbé Henri Breuil, whose new book "The Tsisab Ravine and other Brandberg Sites", has just been published, has played a pioneer part in the discovery and presentation of prehistoric art in both Africa and Europe. Now 86 years of age, the Abbé's scientific vitality is undiminished, and his preface in 'Tsisab Ravine' announces the forthcoming publication of the fourth book in his South West African series, 'Anibib and Omandumba'. His intellectual fertility is almost unrivalled for he has been publishing books and scientific papers since the beginning of the century. It is an immense privilege for me, a newcomer just over a third of the Abbé's age, to review his latest work, 'Tsisab Ravine'.

'Tsisab Ravine' is a beautiful book published by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and printed by the Trianon Press in France. There are 51 pages of text, 76 plates in colour and 89 half-tone figures. The format is large but readable, the binding excellent, and the price, at 11 guineas, puts it beyond the reach of most.

The Tsisab Ravine is the north-western artery of the Brandberg, a massive granite mountain rising six thousand feet above the flat lowlands on the western edge of South-West Africa, midway between the Orange and Kunene Rivers. The dry sands of the Namib Desert surround the mountain but on its eastern edge merge with the scrub grasslands of the interior. Cattle and sheep-owning people are able to graze their animals on these grasslands, near the edge of waterless desert. Here is a country where Stone Age men lived almost continuously for perhaps fifty thousand years or more, undisturbed until the arrival of Iron Age Bantu and Hottentots from about fifteen hundred years ago onwards. At all times, people seeking shade by day and warmth by night have been attracted to the granite shelters hidden among the innumerable boulders lying on the slopes of the Tsisab Ravine and elsewhere in the Brandberg.

At some time before the first known European visitor, Lieutenant von Jochman, arrived in the Tsisab Ravine in 1907, skilled artists left dozens of paintings on the smooth, cool granite walls of the shelters. Like prehistoric artists everywhere south of the Zambezi, the Brandberg painters depicted people, their possessions, wild animals and a small number of curious designs that may or may not have a naturalistic basis.

The dating and identity of the Tsisab painters aroused controversy in 1948 after the Abbé's pronouncement that here, on this remote desert mountain, were paintings showing foreigners from the Mediterranean who arrived in South-West Africa in later prehistoric times. The Abbé attempted to date these paintings in terms of a radiocarbon figure of 1,412 B.C. for a Stone Age level in Philipp Cave, about 70 miles east of the Tsisab. This figure need

have no relation to the age of the paintings however, because the normal stratigraphic dating tests used by archaeologists cannot be applied to a painting on a cave wall well above the level of dateable objects in the floor of a cave. On the other hand, some of the Abbé's critics claimed that rapid weathering of the rock would destroy the paintings in a few centuries, but this argument is quite invalid as there is little or no factual data for rock weathering speed. Pieces of ochre and other materials used for colouring are common in dateable South African Stone Age cave deposits from about 30,000 B.C. onwards, but, on the weight of the evidence, we feel that in general the paintings and engravings are unlikely to be earlier than the local Later Stone Age, which began about 10,000 B.C. but many are not older than a few centuries.

The subject matter of the Tsisab paintings gives one way of identifying the community and the artists. In March, 1954, I spent several weeks in the Brandberg, studied the Tsisab paintings and discovered the first paintings in the highest part of the mountain, those in Viljoensklouf, about 5,000 feet above the level of the Tsisab frescoes. The map on p. 2 of the Abbé's book, showing the basal contour of the Brandberg to be over 6,000 feet above sea level, is incorrect. The figure should read 2,000 feet. Paintings in the Tsisab and also in Viljoensklouf seemed to me to reflect at least two different societies and art styles; a small scale community who painted simple scenes of people and hunting, and a larger scale group who depicted elaborate ceremonies like that in the Maack Shelter, some possible magico-religious scenes like the giraffe standing under a rain-cloud in Tiara Cave, and also did the extraordinary 'abstract' composition I found in Viljoensklouf.<sup>(1)</sup>

In the Abbé's opinion, the people who painted the more complex scenes came from the Mediterranean area. In his 'White Lady of the Brandberg' book published in 1955 he saw a Libyan origin for the art, and repeatedly uses the term 'European' in describing his Tsisab Ravine figures. Since racial identification is a specialist question, I referred the problem to Professor P. V. Tobias, head of the Department of Anatomy at the Medical School, University of the Witwatersrand. Professor Tobias, a well-known authority on this subject, very kindly studied the book and wrote the following report:

"In offering this comment on the Abbé's racial identifications in the Tsisab Ravine paintings, I have of course to confine my remarks to the paintings, *as depicted by the Abbé*. It is not possible for me to indicate whether or not the fine detail conveyed by the Abbé is indeed reliably and validly interpreted from the rough and often weathered surface of the rock. To take one example only, I find it hard to accept some of the Abbé's facial copies on plate 8 on the basis of the photograph of the same in fig. 7.

"With this proviso in mind, let me state at once that, while doubt may exist as to the 'racial' interpretation of one or two faces here and there, the

(1) Mason, R. J.: New prehistoric paintings in the Brandberg, South-West Africa, and the Waterberg, Northern Transvaal: *Lantern* 7(4): 357-368, 1958.

group of Tsisab paintings *as a whole* does indeed show a substantial proportion of features which may be regarded as Caucasoid. Of the faces in which features are detectable, a majority manifest physiognomies which are not typically Negroid or typically Khoisanoid. The Abbé's use of the term 'non-African' is somewhat unfortunate as one-third of Africa's population belongs to the Mediterranean branch of the Caucasoid major race; Mediterranean features are, in fact, common among the Southern Bantu to this day. The mere presence of Mediterranean physical features does not therefore connote 'non-African' influence.

"Of the Caucasoid facial types depicted, the majority are compatible with the features of Mediterranean peoples; a smaller though significant element shows Armenoid features such as were to be found in certain Eastern Mediterranean peoples. The term 'Semitic', as applied by the Abbé to noses and profiles is an unhappy usage — for it is correctly a linguistic term. 'Armenoid' is a more correct term to apply to the large, convex and even beaked nose found in some of these paintings. It is of interest to note that one or two otherwise typical Bushman face masks in the Anatomy Department collection show somewhat Armenoid noses, but, the proportion is tiny in comparison with the number of other types of Bushman features encountered in the collection.

"As far as the bodies are concerned, the great majority do not show the complex of features typically associated with Khoisanoids, namely lumbar lordosis, steatopygia, steatomeria, and a marked contrast between buttock- and thigh-fat, on the one hand, and trunk- and calf-fat on the other. Some, indeed, show two of these elements to a degree, viz. hollowing of the lumbar spine and protuberant buttocks (e.g. Plate 1), but even these do not have a very *fat* buttocks, nor a marked disparity between fat deposits in any two parts of the body; their thighs are slenderly proportioned; and the characteristic disharmony of true steatopygia and true steatomeria is conspicuously absent. This would support the idea that the figures depicted are not members of the Khoisanoid race. They might therefore be Negroid or Mediterranean; of the two, the relatively short extremities and elongate trunk would support rather the Mediterranean than the Negroid; here again, however, it must be remembered that Bantu-speaking Negroids have a considerable Mediterranean genetic element in their make-up, which may express itself in bodily proportions no less than in physiognomy.

"Coupling the evidence of faces and bodies, it does seem that Mediterranean physical influences predominate in these paintings, while convincingly Negroid and Khoisanoid physical types are only slightly in evidence."

Professor Tobias' valuable comments lend some support to the Abbé's claims for a northern origin for the Brandberg art, but it is still necessary to make two assumptions; that the copies are accurate, and that art convention has not interfered with the depiction of the human profiles. Any non-photographic copy of any painting is an interpretation, and we have seen that Professor Tobias finds it hard to accept the fine detail of at least one

of the paintings on the basis of its accompanying photograph. It is clear that the Abbé's frequent use of the term 'European' in description of the Tsisab figures, is incorrect. Following Professor Tobias's opinion, it is clear that a term such as 'North African' may be more appropriate, for the northern third of the African population may well be the source of the physical features apparently reflected in the Tsisab figures. In fact, the Tsisab figures may represent Southern Bantu, who commonly possess the 'Mediterranean' physical characters shown in the Tsisab paintings. It is, indeed, quite incorrect to claim, as the Abbé has done, that the people represented in the Tsisab frescoes "were very unlike the indigenous populations south of the Sahara today".

We must not forget the fact of abstraction in the art. Both South and South-West African prehistoric painters followed schematic convention in their art, especially in regard to the human figure. Nineteenth century A.D. paintings of Bushmen by Bushmen sometimes show accurate physical details, especially when steatopygous women were painted, but commonly are so schematic that no diagnostic physical characters may be seen. Art conventions of this kind are widespread; twentieth century paintings of Europeans by Europeans, for example, vary from the photographic portrait to compositions with the blatant abstract vigour of Picasso's "Night fishing at Antibes". There is no clear indication of the race of the fishermen in this latter, and similar stylised paintings of people, for both colour and form are used in an arbitrary way not necessarily related, in the objective sense, to the racial character of the figures painted. Prehistoric painters sometimes followed exactly the same rule.

We disagree with the Abbé's views on the use of colour. He states that the Tsisab painters used monochrome colours in an arbitrary sense, but applied polychrome colours in a more naturalistic way. Thus, apparently, the Abbé claims that the Tsisab paintings of people with white or pale-coloured faces actually represent fair-skinned people; but his expression and argument on this point (p. 6) are most unclear. In my opinion the Tsisab painters, like others, followed no definite rules in their use of colour, for their palette was determined by the restricted range of materials available to them. We may illustrate this point by referring to an excellent composition copied by Miss P. Vinnicombe at Beersheba in the Zwartberg, East Griqualand. Europeans, painted in two or more colours, are shown mounted on horseback or on foot, carrying muskets and powder-horns, attacking Bushmen cattle thieves. The monochrome Bushmen are painted black, brown or red, while the Europeans have red, black or white faces.

The physical characters shown in the Tsisab paintings, then, appear to give uncertain evidence on racial type. We may, however, deduce a more distinct picture of the culture of these people. There is no doubt at all that the weapons, tools, clothing, ornaments and other possessions shown in the Tsisab paintings were widely distributed among primitive tribes south of the Zambezi, and need have no relationship to the Cretan or Egyptian styles envisaged by the Abbé. To me, the Tsisab paintings suggest a community

living on a scale larger than that usually reflected in South African prehistoric art; capable of elaborate ceremonial of a kind previously widespread among the Bantu, and, while possessing domestic cattle, still having recourse to hunting with bows and arrows, just as the Bantu and Hottentots supplemented their food-producing economy by hunting and food collecting. The Abbé denies domestic cattle to these people; but notes that there is a painting of a domestic sheep near the mouth of the Tsisab. I found an excellent painting of a domestic bull and cow in Viljoenskloof<sup>(2)</sup>; and suggest that these people possessed both cattle and sheep.

The origin of this particular community may well be the southern edge of the Sudan. Henri Lhote's excellent book on the Tassili frescoes of the Sahara shows the immense artistic fertility of cultures in this area.<sup>(3)</sup> Perhaps both the Saharan and Egyptian artists, whose influence reached far south to Meroe and Naga on the Nile, thence radiated south-west deep into the Sudan to Darfur via the 'Forty Day' camel road,<sup>(4)</sup> affected the ancient painting traditions of cattle-owning people living near the zone of contact between the negro West and hamitic East, between the equator and the Sahara. Perhaps, about 2,000 years ago<sup>(5)</sup> these Iron Age people began a slow movement south into a Stone Age sub-continent and centuries later found themselves in the grazing lands east of the Brandberg; leaving only the paintings, now published by the Abbé Breuil, as a sole record of their arrival and settlement.

- (2) Mason, R. J.: New Prehistoric paintings in the Brandberg, South-West Africa, and the Waterberg, Northern Transvaal. *Lantern* 7 (4): 357-368, 1958.  
(3) Lhote, H.: *The Search for the Tassili Frescoes, the rock paintings of the Sahara: London 1959.*  
(4) Davidson, B.: *Old Africa rediscovered: London: 1959.*  
(5) Clark, J. D.: *The Prehistory of South Africa: London: 1959.*