

BUSHMAN ENGRAVINGS ON WALKING STICKS, MAGIC STICKS, A CALABASH AND OSTRICH EGG-SHELLS

by

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(With 14 Figures)

Of all the aboriginal races in Southern Africa the Bushmen are surely the oldest and there seems to be little doubt that they inhabited the sub-continent many centuries before either the black man or the white man set foot in this part of the world.

The question has often been asked — whence came these Bushmen? Many divergent and controversial answers to this question have already appeared in print. Some scientists postulated the idea that the Bushmen were the descendants of Mongoloid Races, hence the minuteness of their bodily structure. Others were of the opinion that the Bushmen and the Hottentots formed one race. A third school of thought compared the Bushmen with the other little people of Africa, the Pygmies. Another misconception which existed, was that the Bushmen became Pygmies as a result of adaptation to desert life.

To us it would appear that the Bushmen lived here for many millennia and that they originated and developed independently on this subcontinent where they occupied the open plains, rockshelters and caves. On the open plains they hunted because wild game occurred in plenty. In the vleis they dug for plant bulbs, and in the bush they collected berries. For purposes of the hunt and food-gathering they manufactured from stone their hammers and scrapers, their assegai points and arrow-heads which still lie on the factory sites all over the country in great abundance.

Yes, these people led an easy and carefree life, because originally they had no human enemies; only against wild animals they had to defend themselves.

Against the walls of their caves and rockshelters they practised their art at great leisure, leaving behind many thousands of rock paintings, and on the open veldt as many rock engravings.

In the past some writers expressed doubts whether the rock art in this country was the work of Bushmen. Impey¹ for instance, writes as follows: "I have always been sceptical about the Bushmen having been able to paint such good works, and now that I have gleaned such valuable information from the reading of many interesting and informative books and because what was lacking in one was found in another, I felt that the information I had obtained, when fitted together, made such a complete whole, that I feel confident that all the best pictures in South Africa were painted by the Grimaldi men who came to this country about 50,000 years ago. A few of the inferior ones may have been done by the Bushmen, but this has not been proved. Many of them were done evidently by the Bantu and other native tribes."

Nineteen years later Meiring² still supported Impey's views: "I personally do not believe that the Bushmen are responsible for all the paintings, at any rate not for the oldest and (perhaps) best, but a race showing more affinity to the Cromagnon than to the Bushmen, Hottentot or Bantu."

Before discussing their rock art, let us have a closer look at these primitive people, and let us not endow them with such developed ways of thinking and reasoning as if they had a University education. A great deal of harm has already been done by observers (or shall we call them amateur archaeologists, or photographers, or just plain tracers) either recording their personal interpretations of cave paintings they have found, or by accepting the stories by native boys who, having no first-hand knowledge of the meanings of these designs, were merely expressing their own opinions.

We can recall no better example than what happened to the so-called „White Lady” of the Brandberg. The late Abbé Breuil³ traced this specimen and managed to produce a picture which the original artist probably never had in mind to produce. Other observers before and after the Abbé, also recorded their personal interpretations which, alas, differed appreciably from that of the Abbé. We have seen at least four such reproductions and they all differ from each other.

Obermaier⁴ recognised the so-called "White Lady" as a man, writing about it as follows on page 21 of his book: "In the centre is the ornamented man with bow and arrow and flower, in front of him two women, and behind him a third". and the Abbé says about it: "The White Lady of the Brandberg is depicted as striding forward, carrying in one hand a bow with one arrow at the ready and three more in reserve, and in the other hand a flower, or maybe an ostrich eggshell cup. There are men of various races before and behind her, which seems to indicate an equality of status with men recognised only by advanced civilisations such as those of Crete and Etruria."

Mountford and Brandl⁵ who describe the Willeroo Cave Art in Australia also warn against false interpretations of designs. They state: "Previous experience has shown that it is impossible to accurately interpret any example of aboriginal art, except the obvious representations of the creatures, without the aid of either the artist who produced them, or an informant fully conversant with the myth associated with the paintings."

Now let us once more look at the Bushman peoples during their early stage of development at the time they alone occupied this part of the world. As was the case with all primitive peoples, three essential necessities must have played a major role in their lives:

- (a) Self preservation;
- (b) Reproduction;
- (c) Race preservation.

For self preservation was necessary the gathering of food whether on the hunt, digging into the ground for bulbs, or whether collecting berries in the bush. For all all of these activities even primitive man had to devise and make the necessary tools. He also had to develop a great deal of cunning and planning.

In all living creatures there is the urge to reproduce. This urge exists in all of mankind also, but with the Bushman it was a natural necessity and there was nothing artificial about it.

For race preservation the Bushmen realized that they had to stay together in groups because jointly they could defend themselves better against the onslaughts of such large animals as the elephant and the lion. Jointly they could plan for the morrow; they could execute their dancing and their singing and they could entertain each other with the most fantastic stories.

It is against the above background that one should try to fathom the meaning of Bushman Art. The man who grew up with the Bushmen, who understood their language, who knew their way of life and who listened on many occasions to the fantastic stories told by the children, and to the more authentic experiences of the older people who could speak to the rocks, to the veldt and to the bush, who understood the language of every wild animal and who had the greatest respect for the weather, the wind, the rain and for the lightning and thunder; this is the only person who has the right to interpret Bushman Art, because he knows that these people only depicted what they have seen, what they have experienced and very often also their own imaginations based on the fantastic stories told round the camp fires.

Bushman Art has been described as naturalistic, realistic, impressionistic, expressionistic, humoristic, symbolic, mythical and even as abstract, but unfortunately the poor yellow people knew absolutely nothing about these beautiful descriptions of their art. Even in their language there are no expressions which could be considered as translations of these learned concepts.

The present paper deals not with rock art, but with Bushman Art executed on a calabash, ostrich egg-shells, magic sticks and on walking sticks. Specimens from the National Museum and the National Cultural History and Open Air Museum in Pretoria are described. We wish to record here our gratitude to the director of the latter museum for the loan of their material.

The question may be asked, why did the Bushman revert from his rock art to the decorating of calabashes, egg-shells and sticks? We maintain that the answer is quite obvious. When both Bantu and Europeans started to occupy this country, the Bushmen were gradually driven from their natural habitats. Many of them just stayed with farmers on their land but the bulk of them fled into the Kalahari desert where, from an artistical point of view, they really deteriorated, probably mainly due to the fact that there were no rocks neither the required paints available for the practising of their art. Carving on household utensils like calabash, egg-shell and wood then became the obvious outcome to depict the more sophisticated conceptions of their art.

DESCRIPTIONS OF THE SPECIMENS

CALABASH (FIG. 1)

A Bushman calabash in the collection of the National Cultural History and Open Air Museum, Pretoria, was collected in Bushman country. It contains four panels of engravings all round its circumference (Fig. 1). Human and animal figures seem to be the main source of interest. The human figures appear in such positions that these scenes may depict fertility rites, but it is not clear what part the animals played if this had been the artist's idea. The cross-hatching is apparently a technique of producing an impression of solidity. The diamond shaped pattern on the second panel may perhaps indicate Bantu influence, but it is possible that this type of pattern could have developed independently also in the mind of the Bushman artist.

EGG-SHELLS (FIG. 2 AND 3)

There are two decorated ostrich egg-shells in the collection of the National Cultural Museum in Pretoria. In 1965 Judson⁶ watched a Masarwa Bushman decorating the first of these (Fig. 2B) with the aid of a knife, scratching out a sort of geometrical figure. In order to show up these scratches, he filled them up with charcoal. Mr. Judson tells us that this individual, Porane was his name, was the only artistically minded individual amongst all the Masarwas visited by him. When asked what the figure represented, the Bushman replied "nothing at all".

The history of the second shell is unknown and the decoration on it (Fig. 2A) also seems to be entirely unrepresentative.

A third egg-shell (Fig. 3) which belongs to the National Museum in Bloemfontein is a much more elaborately decorated specimen. The animal figures on it are reminiscent of Bushman rock art but the figures representing plants are rather well executed.

MAGIC STICKS (FIG. 4)

An interesting string of magic sticks was found in the museum collection. They are all approximately 10 inches long and most of these are decorated with non-figurative designs. A few of them have some sort of a basic pattern executed at random and somewhat unmethodical. We think it would be unwise to attach any specific significance to these designs, because nobody ever read the mind of the witchdoctor when he used these sticks.

WALKING STICKS (FIG. 5-14)

The decorations on the first stick (Fig. 5) are more or less the same as on some of the magic sticks. To us these are just meaningless lines.

The next stick (Fig. 6) is decorated with figures of birds, buck, a tortoise, a fox and a hyena. The decoration is divided into three parts by means of lines and triangles. There is a complete absence of human figures, which applies also to the sticks on figures 7, 8 and 9. Comparing these illustrations with those which are normally found on rock-paintings, a considerable difference becomes evident. As all these sticks are of recent origin (an assumption based on the fact that the wood is very well preserved), one may assume that these have been decorated after the Bushmen had been forced out of their natural environment by the advancing Bantu on the one hand and the Europeans on the other.

Henceforth self-preservation in the sense of hunting and food gathering, ceased to be the dominant urge in the Bushmen. Food was more easily available because they were now living on the farmer's land — therefore their thoughts were no longer centered so much around themselves and they paid more attention to their surroundings and depicted only animals, birds, fish, plants, etc., without the intrusion of human figures. This is in contrast to most of the rock-paintings where human figures formed a dominant feature. Initially rock art used to be purely simplified, free flowing but naturalistic and it developed into a more detailed stylistic art. But although this development led to a greater depiction of detail, the ability to express the more free flowing type of art, which gave a sense of real life and movement to their representations seems to have been lost. This may, to a large extent, have been due to the medium used — it would be difficult to engrave free flowing lines on a cross-grained stick.

The advent of the Europeans begins to be evident on the next stick (Fig. 10) where the stylistic representation is retained but horses and European figures now begin to form part of the design.

In the following two beautifully decorated sticks (Fig. 11 and 12) there appears to have been far more direct contact with Europeans, and these can be dated as fairly recent, because one figure is undoubtedly that of a European jockey with horse and racing saddle. Although the one stick (Fig. 12) which was presented to the National Museum in Bloemfontein, and the other (Fig. 11) purchased by the National Cultural History and Open Air Museum in Pretoria, there are strong indications that both were made by the same artist, because all figures face in the same direction, all are outlined by means of a double line, the shape and positions of the legs of the animals are very similar, so also is the general theme of several of the panels.

The theme of the next stick (Fig. 13), is entirely European, at first glance apparently derived from the Anglo-Boer War, as suggested by the horse-drawn artillery, the figures of Highland Troops, mounted soldiers and a train engine drawing trucks. There are also farm houses, Cape carts, veld scenes, etc. The fact that a motorcar is also depicted, makes the dating perhaps more recent, so that it could in fact represent the Rebellion of 1914.

The crown on the last stick (Fig. 14) certainly indicates European influence and the device with the new moon and star appears to suggest Islamic influence.

TECHNIQUE

Most, if not all, of the rock engravings had undoubtedly been done with the aid of stone chisels. All round the Spitskop engravings we found such stone chisels made of fossilized wood. We experimented with these and found them quite hard enough to chip through the patinated layer of the ironstone.

The articles described in this paper are however, of such recent date that at the time these engravings were made, iron tools in the shape of chisels, needles and knives were readily available. As a matter of fact, Mr. Judson actually watched a Masarwa Bushman scratching out a design on an ostrich egg-shell with the aid of a pocket knife. Such a tool could also have been used on the calabash. We found that a saw-edged flint stone can also serve the purpose. For colour contrast the incisions were probably filled up with charcoal mixed with fat or oil.

The decorations on the sticks were probably also made with a sharp knife, but some of the incisions are so narrow, that we suggest they were made when the sticks were still wet. When the sticks contracted such incisions became extremely narrow and fine. Charcoal or graphite was probably used here also as the colouring matter.

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This paper was read at the S.A. Museum's Conference in Pietermaritzburg, April, 1969.

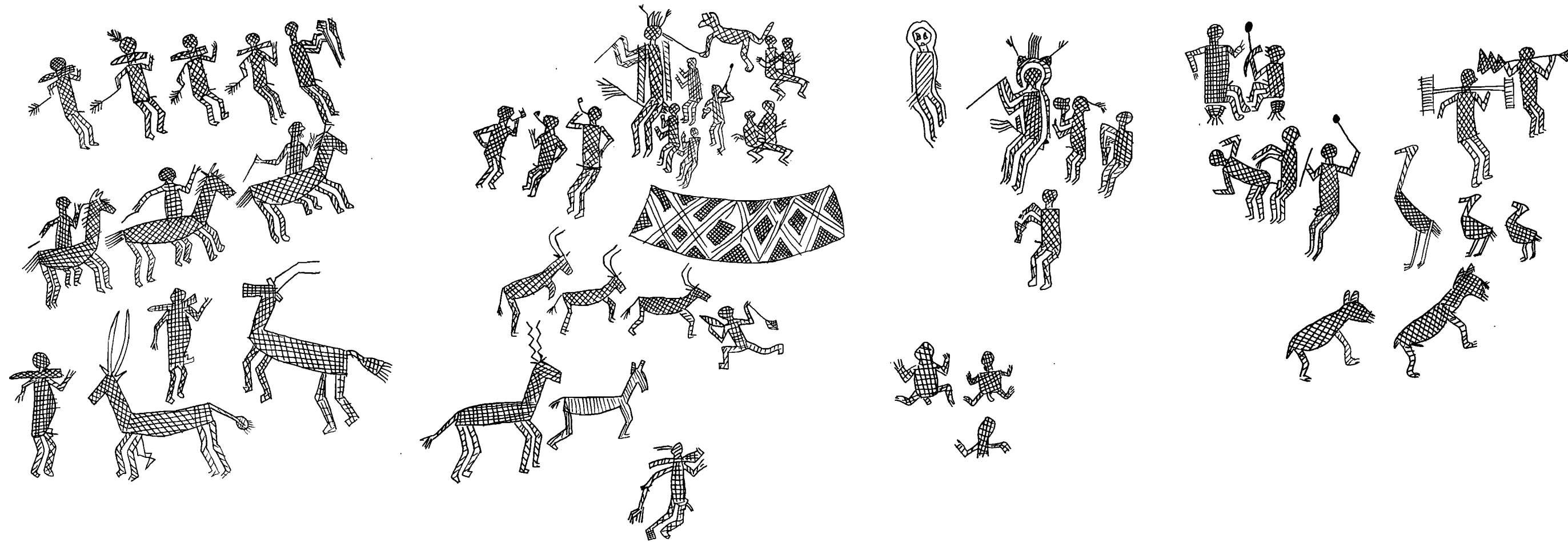


FIGURE 1. Engravings on a calabash in the collection of the National Cultural History and Open Air Museum, Pretoria.

FIGURE 2. Engravings on egg-shells from the Pretoria Museum. A. History unknown. B. Engraved by a Masarwa Bushman.

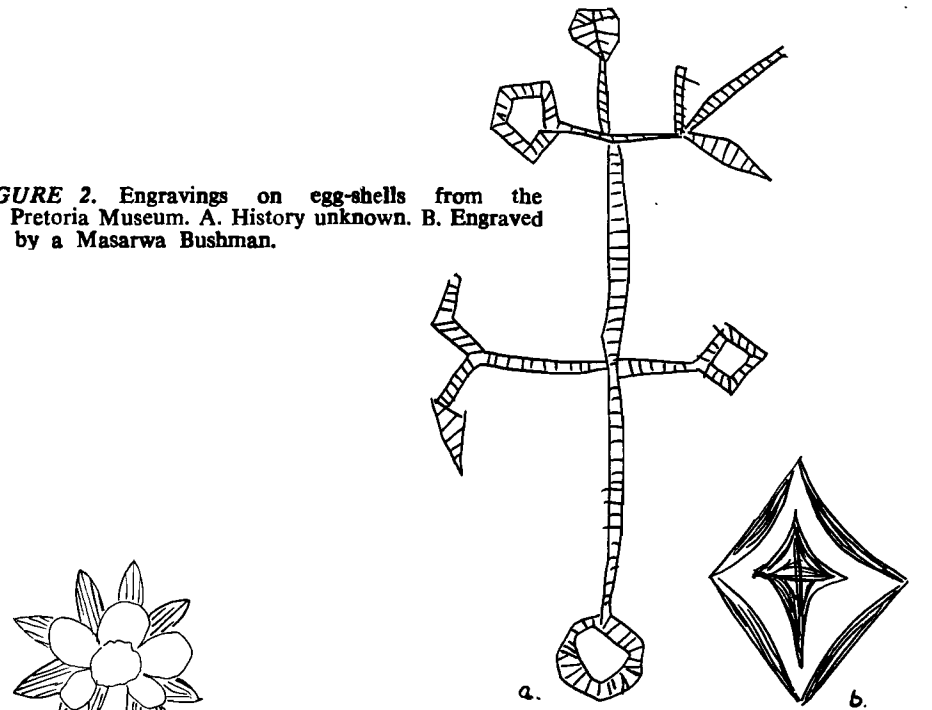


FIGURE 3. Engraved egg-shell in the collection of the National Museum.

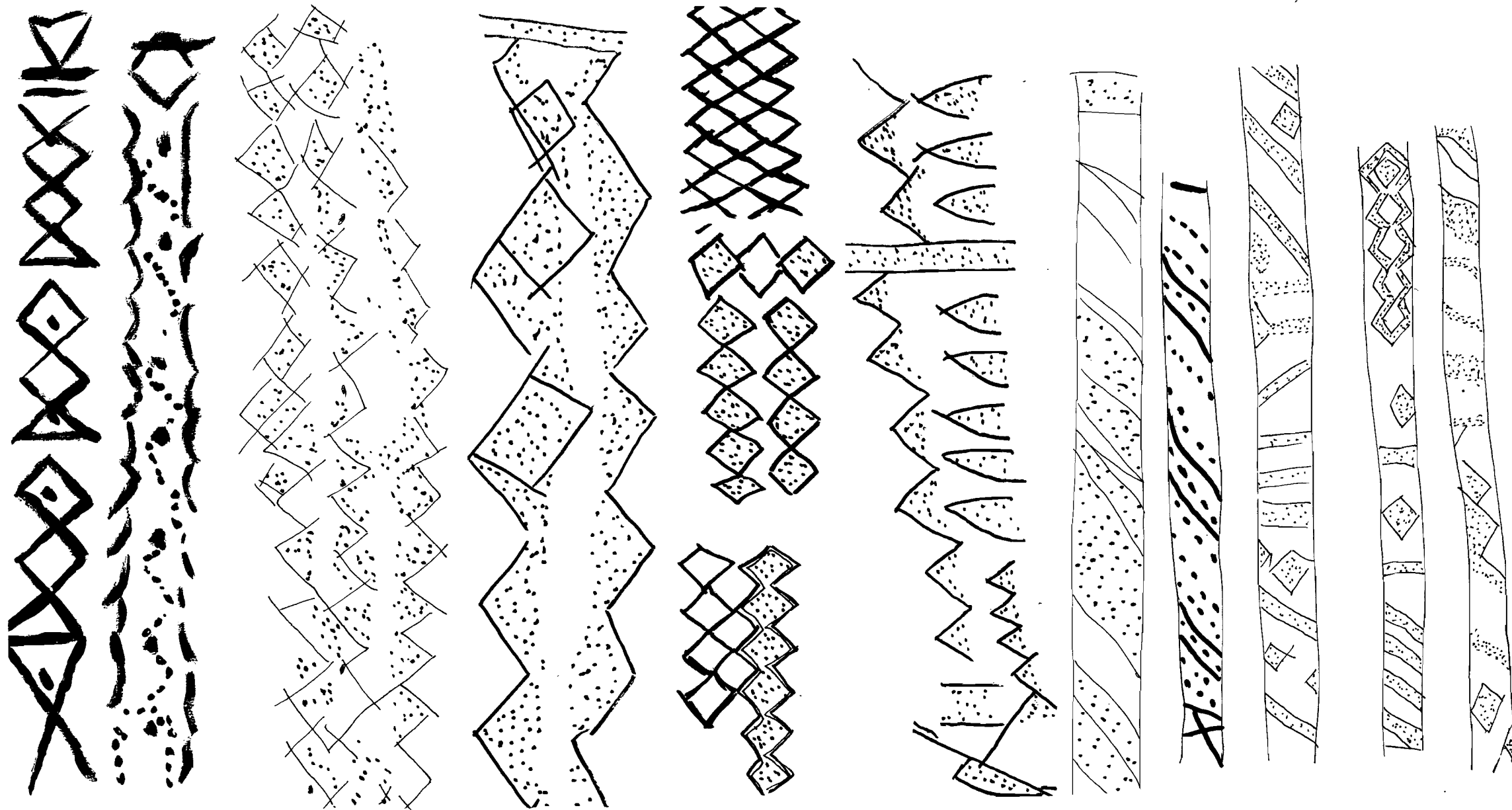


FIGURE 4. Decorations on ten magic sticks in the collection of the National Museum.

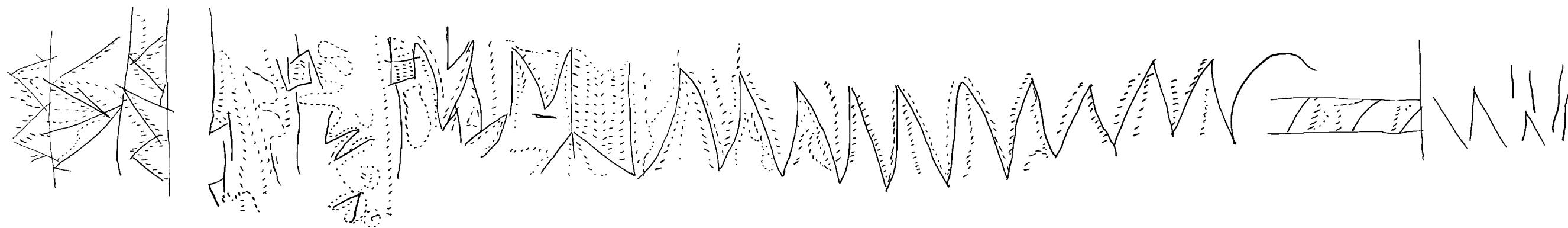


FIGURE 5. Poorly executed decorations on a walking stick from the Pretoria Museum.

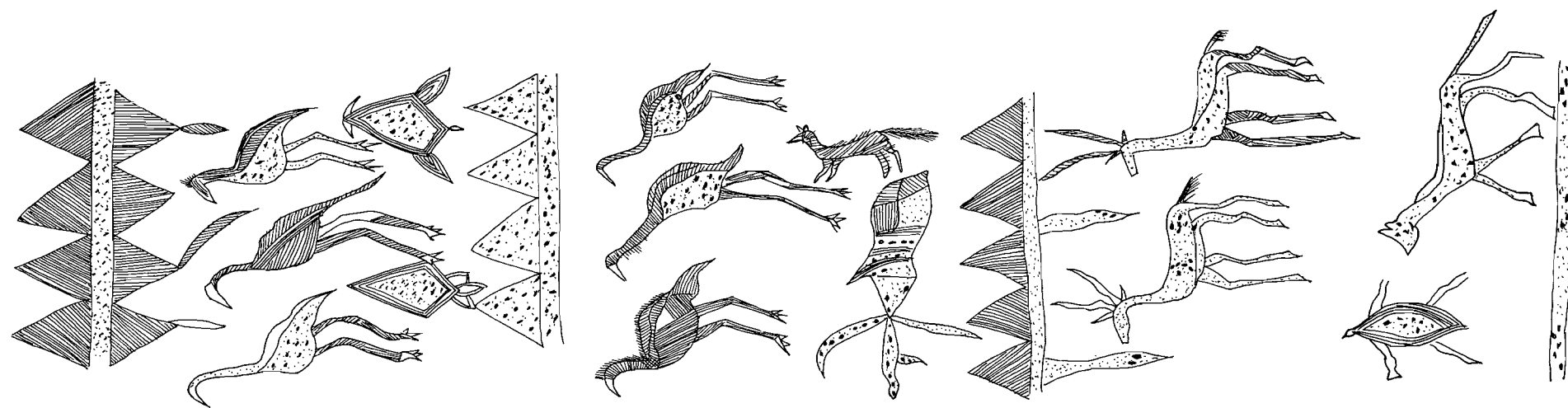


FIGURE 6. Decorations consisting mainly of animal figures on a walking stick. National Museum collection.



FIGURE 13. The most decorative of all the sticks. Probably of recent origin.

National Museum collection.