

New finds of engraved whole ostrich eggs from southern Namibia and the Northern Cape Province of South Africa

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ABSTRACT

We describe two new caches of whole engraved ostrich eggs from southern Namibia and the Northern Cape Province of South Africa.

KEY WORDS: Ostrich eggs, engraved ostrich eggs, decorated ostrich eggs, Later Stone Age.

Engraved or decorated ostrich eggs are rarely discussed in the literature apart from the recording of fragments from excavations. Yet, they form an important sub-set of decorated artefacts now known to date from the Middle Stone Age onwards (Wadley 1993; Texier et al. 2010; Texier et al. 2013), although they are more commonly found in the Later Stone Age (J. Deacon 1984). Here, we report on two new finds from southern Namibia and the Northern Cape, South Africa.

OSTRICH EGGSHELL CONTAINERS

The use of ostrich eggshells as containers for general storage purposes as well as in the practice of caching, principally for storing water against future needs, has been well documented in the ethnographic literature (Schapera 1930; Dunn 1931; Duggan-Cronin & Bleek 1942; Yellen 1977). A number of archaeological caches of whole, pierced containers are also known, particularly from the Northern Cape (Morris 1994; Morris & Von Bezing 1996; Henderson 2002); one cache alone yielded fifteen containers (Morris 1994). Most containers are found either empty or filled with sand, possibly as a result of being buried (I. Rudner 1953), although they could have been sand-filled deliberately to prevent breakage (Morris 1994). Two instances are known of containers filled with specularite (J. Rudner 1971; Humphreys 1974). In the Brandberg, Namibia, an almost complete one containing ostrich eggshell fragments was found hidden amongst stones making up a hut circle (Sandelowsky 1971).

Occasionally holes were plugged, usually with grass, or else had spouts made from resin or mastic (Dunn 1931; Marshall 1976; Henderson 2002). Generally, no other archaeological material was associated with the containers except for the Thomas Farm cache which yielded an upper grindstone that was possibly associated with the shells (Henderson 2002).

Whole, decorated eggs have not been found associated with shelter or cave deposits, or with features such as hearths that could be interpreted as living areas. Rather, all known finds were deliberately cached through burial in apparently unmarked places. They were therefore discovered accidentally as a result of natural soil erosion or animal or human disturbance. By contrast, ostrich eggshell fragments are commonly found on archaeological sites probably as food debris or as material for making beads. Evidence for their use as containers, indicated by ground-edge apertures (Wendt 1972; Noli 1988;

Smith et al. 1991), occurs more rarely on living sites. Kandel (2004), however, cautions that such apertures were possibly made by the teeth of hyenas eating eggs.

ENGRAVED OSTRICH EGGSHELLS AND FRAGMENTS

Engraved fragments of ostrich eggshell are frequently found in excavations of Later Stone Age sites (e.g. Wendt 1972; H.J. Deacon 1976; J. Deacon 1984; Smith 1981; Schweitzer & Wilson 1982; Humphreys & Thackeray 1983). There are rare occurrences known from the Middle Stone Age, with the oldest dated to the Howieson's Poort some 60 000 years ago from Diepkloof in the Western Cape (Texier et al. 2010; Texier et al. 2013). Whilst they occur as a small percentage of the total eggshell fragments in most assemblages, the highest frequency of fragments and variety of designs occur in arid areas such as the Northern Cape (Humphreys & Thackeray 1983) and southern Namibia (Wendt 1972). Only one attempt has been made to re-join shell fragments, that by Wendt for Pockenbank (Wendt 1972: plate 7d).

Only four archaeological caches in South Africa are known with engraved shells. A cache of seven shells excavated by I. Rudner (1953) contained five shells engraved with double rows of dots. J. Rudner (1971) described two engraved eggs from the Gordonia district with lines and cross hatched bands in a grid design. One of them included three flying birds. Morris & Von Bezing (1996) reported a cache of four whole shells and one fragment, with the possibility of another two still buried in the bank of a donga in the Vaalbos National Park near Barkly West. One whole shell and the fragment were engraved with linear ladder motifs. Masson (2004) reported an egg from north of Upington with an engraved image of a female buffalo.

In addition to these archaeological specimens, a number of eggs collected from KhoeSan people during the early colonial period has survived. In the 1770s Sparrman collected several items, including two engraved eggs, one of with two grid motifs, the other with two KhoeSan (?) figures and an elephant (Rudner & Rudner 1957).

Von Luschan (1923) described a fascinating group of engraved eggs from Namibia. It comprised some fourteen engraved eggs donated in 1907 by a Mr Lotz to the Ethnological Museum, Berlin. Von Luschan published drawings of the design motifs, which range from simple cross-hatched grids and triangles to complex triangular and rectangular grid and circle designs. Only four of the eggs still exist; the rest were probably lost during or after the Second World War. For photographs of three of the remaining four eggs, see Jacobson (2006). According to the museum's accession register they were collected in the Lüderitz area from a presumably San group named Sao-Kaosib (Dr P. Junge pers. comm.). Eight other engraved eggs illustrated by Von Luschan (1923) possibly come from the Kalahari.

A further group of four engraved eggs from Namibia are accessioned in the Ethnographic Museum of the University of Zürich. These are illustrated in Szalay (2001). The designs consist of triangles, grids and circles linked in various ways. It appears from the illustrations that the incisions were filled with charcoal and/or ochre. According to the accession cards, these and other 'Bushman' objects were donated to the museum between 1907 and 1910 and were obtained in Lüderitz, Namibia.

During a site-recording project by DN in the Sperrgebiet, Namibia, between 1995 and 2005, some 617 archaeological sites were located. Several comprised caches of whole ostrich eggs that had been drilled and probably used as water containers. Amongst

these were a few whole eggs with engravings. Unfortunately, no further details were recorded (Noli 2007).

Other, more recent examples of eggs with naturalistic engravings are also known. Meiring (1943) recorded one from Botswana in the then F.S. Malan Museum, Fort Hare, engraved with stylised animal and human figures. The incisions were filled with what is described as black 'paint'. Another example, but without any provenance, is accessioned in the National Museum, Bloemfontein (Hoffman & Baard 1969). Engraved eggs also lie in the collections of the KwaZulu-Natal Museum (J. Ireland pers. comm.), but lack any provenance. There are no doubt further examples to be found in museum collections both in South Africa and Europe. We turn now to new finds.

THE PORT NOLLOTH CACHE

Two of the eggshells described here were found in dunes in the vicinity of Port Nolloth, a small seaport approximately 80 km south of the Orange River mouth, but a more specific provenance is not known. Both are pierced on the side. The first shell has incised ladder motifs approximately 75 mm long on either side of the aperture (Fig. 1). The second egg has a set of incised lines forming an L-shape adjacent to the aperture. One branch consists of two sub-parallel incisions, whilst the second branch consists of three sub-parallel incisions, two of which bound shorter incisions at right angles to form a ladder-like motif (Fig. 2). The egg surfaces are scratched and abraded, probably from the action of windblown dune sand. When last seen, they were on display in the Port Nolloth Museum.

THE NAMIBIAN CACHE

A cache of three eggs, two of which are engraved, was found during a survey in the area of the Koichab River in southern Namibia by DN. As no collecting permit was held, the eggs were photographed and left in place. Whether they have since been collected is unknown. The cache was located in the lee of a rock outcrop with a protective wall of smaller stones surrounding the shells. A stone had also been placed on top of the cache (Fig. 3). All three eggs are pierced about one third of the way from the end. One shell is engraved with a rectangular grid pattern (Fig. 4). No ochre was visible. The second shell has a ladder motif around the egg circumference (Fig. 5), the incisions of which were filled with red ochre or paint.

SUMMARY

Engraved ostrich eggs were a definite part of the household inventory of many Later Stone Age communities. Whilst geometric motifs were the most common form of decoration, more naturalistic designs are also found, although these might be of relatively recent date and reflect a colonial or missionary influence. Whether the latter influence was a result of direct requests from missionaries or travellers seeking curios with more naturalistic motifs, or the artists' own decision to change or alter their subject matter after seeing illustrations (possibly in books or newspapers) is unknown. Whilst a conventional interpretation would label the more common motifs 'geometric' and link them to entoptic phenomena (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1988) or rock engravings (Dowson 1992), Hollmann (2014) points out that the term 'geometric' in rock art studies can apply to both abstract designs and motifs and actual tangible objects. This



Fig. 1. The first engraved eggshell from Port Nolloth.

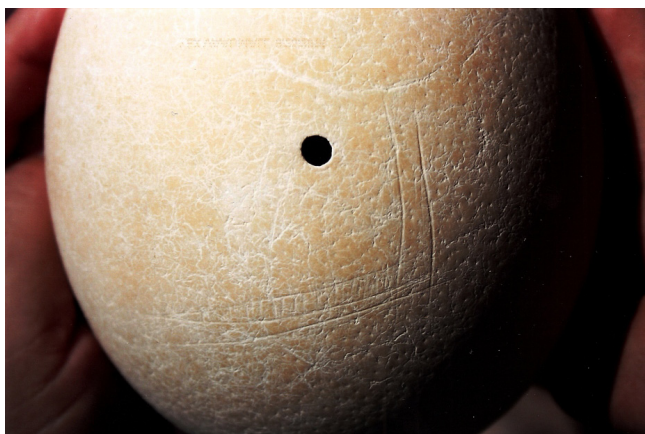


Fig. 2. The second engraved eggshell from Port Nolloth.



Fig. 3. The Koichab River cache as found. A portion of an egg (the light patch) can be seen peeping out just to the right of the patch of shadow below the right hand boulder.

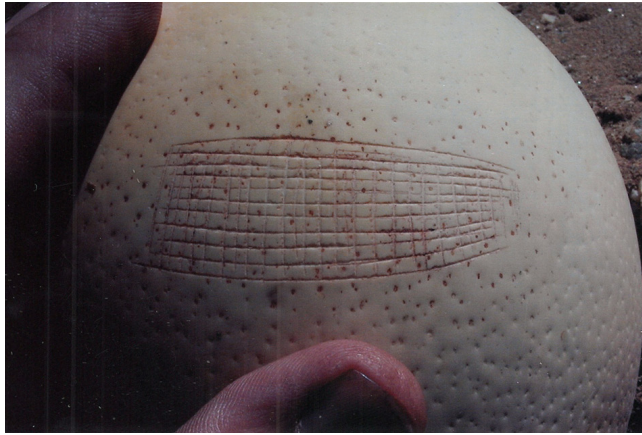


Fig. 4. The Koichab River cache. The egg showing the rectangular grid pattern.



Fig. 5. The Koichab River cache. The egg showing the “ladder” filled with red ochre or paint.

could be true for the decorated eggshells as well. Some of the designs illustrated by Von Luschan (1923) could in fact be stylised headbands or hair attachments or pendants as proposed by Hollmann (2014), or even hut floor plans.

Furthermore, although containers were utilitarian objects it seems likely that the engravings had symbolic value. There could also be a link to other decorated objects such as bone or wooden artifacts (Hoffman & Baard 1969), or decorated KhoeSan pottery (J. Rudner 1968, n.d.), especially from southern Namibia (Sydow 1967; Jacobson 1977). Perhaps they simply represent an individual’s desire to mark an object, especially any that might have been involved in *hxaro* exchange networks. The complex patterns could even result from additional engravings being added by *hxaro* partners as the shells travelled through such an exchange network.

The whole eggs also provide a window onto the complexity of the engraved designs that is not readily appreciated from the fragmentary remains found in archaeological deposits. Orton (2012) attempted a chronological ordering of design features based on decorated fragments, but the admittedly undated evidence from the archaeological

finds of whole eggshells and, more firmly, those collected from surviving San bands show that this effort is premature.

The use of ochre to emphasise the incisions is another new aspect of the Namibian find, although Wendt (1972) raised the possibility that some eggs were painted not simply with a wash but with lines. This suggests the intriguing possibility that rock engravings might also have been painted, or at least had the incisions or peckings filled with ochre that has not survived.

There is still much to do. Shell provenance studies (Jacobson et al. 1996) need to be extended so that eggs can be sourced in order to determine whether they have been exchanged and over what distance. Eggs (and fragments) also need radiocarbon dating, particularly those found in association within the same assemblage. This would provide a rough guide, depending upon the precision of the dates, as to whether eggs were roughly contemporaneous or curated over time. AMS dating would not need a large sample. Combining provenance and age could indicate whether there is any pattern to decorative style over time and space.

Finally, a proper inventory needs to be made of museum collections so that, when combined with dating, a better understanding can be obtained of these fascinating but understudied objects. Ostrich eggs are still today painted and engraved by a variety of artists both modern and traditional and are very popular in the tourism market. A better understanding of their origins can only increase people's fascination for them.

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