



Clues from an enigmatic past: Cyril Hromnik sees evidence in a bored stone found in the cave of a connection to India, where such stones are used for religious purposes

Were Indians the first colonists in SA?

ARCHAEOLOGY

In the week the Indian prime minister visits South Africa, it's time for another look at the controversial theory that Indians mined gold in South Africa a thousand years ago, and intermarried with

FATE has a way of rewarding those who are persistent - or at least providing them with a sign that they are on the right track. About 11 years ago, a Cape Town-based Slovak-American historian called Cyril Hromnik announced a discovery that seemed to confirm his theory that Indian goldseekers were active in Southern Africa long before the first Europeans arrived ... a theory which, when first aired, brought archaeologists and historians at Cape Town's ivy-covered university close to blows and saw Hromnik just about deported from the country.

The reason? Hromnik's choice of words and seemingly dismissive expressions in a 1981 book were clearly ill-suited to the closing years of apartheid. But there are deeper issues at stake. If Hromnik's theory is correct it means that metallurgy

local tribes. Recent clues seem to back the much disputed theory. RUBEN MOWSZOWSKI reports

was not developed in Southern Africa as has recently been thought, but was introduced by Indians during the first millennium AD, a conclusion that is regarded by many as denigratory to Africa and so implicitly racist. But the real hot potato is Hromnik's suggestion that the Indian miners (and their Indonesian employees) cohabitated with the local population and thereby not only fathered the people known variously as Quena, Hottentot and Khoikhoi, but also left genetic traces in much of this country's present population.

The attempts to deport Hromnik from the country failed, but he was excluded from academic institutions, barred from publication in archaeology journals and labelled a kind of crackpot - not to be taken seriously. Hromnik, convinced of the validity of his conclusions, continued his investigations despite personal difficulties. When, in 1985, he came across an engraving of an Indian war chariot at the mouth of an established archaeological cave site, Hromnik believed he finally had the evidence that would convince his detractors.

The reaction of the academic establishment was to either ignore it or pretend it did not exist. A senior archaeologist at the South African Museum assured me that no one other than Hromnik had ever seen the chariot engraving and suggested that it was a fantasy deriving out of Hromnik's "obsession". I decided to take a look for myself.

The cave is situated on a farm just outside of Montagu, a small town best known for its hot springs, about 200km by road from Cape Town. We camped with Hromnik at the entry to a kloof and the following morning crossed a river and climbed up the steep slope on the other side to reach the cave. Not one of us noticed the engraving on the flat face of a rock near the entrance. Neither, in fact, had Hromnik when, in 1985, he sat on the rock one day eating his lunch. Nor had any archaeologist before him. It was his eight-year-old son who saw what none of us had seen.

The rock, Hromnik explained, was probably originally positioned above a then much smaller cave opening. At some time in the more recent past it had fallen down. As a result of its present location under the dripline, it was patterned with a dark moss - yet there was undeniably an image there. Hromnik confesses that his first thought on seeing it was that it must be a fake or a joke perpetrated on the rock by an archaeologist or rock art student familiar with the rock art of the Sahara. On closer examination he satisfied himself that it was genuine. But who had put it there and why?

The image, two wheels, an axle and a yoke, is a depiction of a light spoked-wheel chariot of the type that originated in India and which continued to be used there into the first millennium AD, says Hromnik. In the Sahara, along the ancient caravan routes used by Indian gold traders, there are apparently many such depictions. But what was one doing at a cave in South Africa?



A close look at this rock, found outside a Montagu cave, reveals the outline of two

The Montagu cave (also called the Guano Cave) consists of a large, high chamber at the back of

wheels, an axle and ayoke, a childlike depiction of what Cyril Hromnik says is an Indian religious symbol

which is an opening to a smaller and longer tunnel-like cave once filled with bat guano. In the 1890s the guano was emptied out. Under the guano were found two important items - a bored stone and a stick of olive wood with a rounded head at one end. More about this later.

In 1964 an American archaeologist, Charles Keller, excavated and dynamited a third of the main chamber of the cave and found, buried among ash and red sand, several thousand artefacts shaped like spear-heads. His conclusion: that the cave was a "factory site" in which, some 20 000 to 50 000 years ago, hand-axes and other tools were made.

The problem, says Hromnik, is that none of the so-called hand-axes have been found outside the cave and all those found in the cave still had sharp, unchipped edges, which means they had never been used. "Archaeologists would have us believe," he says, "that this was a factory which for tens of thousands of years made stone tools and then buried them under the floor of the factory!"

I asked the archaeologist from the South African Museum for his explanation. "The cave was very acidic," he said, "perhaps that kept them sharp." Well, I'd heard of keeping razor blades sharp, but stones? Besides, that didn't answer the question of why none were found outside the cave.

The clue to what was going on here, says Hromnik, is the chariot engraving at the entrance to the cave. The chariot is a symbol of Siva, the supreme deity of Hinduism. As a sun god, it is the vessel that carries him across the sky. The spearhead is one of the sacred symbols of Sivaism. All the stones had, he says, once been placed in a bed of ash as offerings to Siva. Where we were standing was not a factory ... but a temple.

There was more to it than that. Keller's excavation revealed that between each layer of stone tools there was a layer of sterile (without artefacts) red sand. The fires that had once burned to ash had, in Hromnik's scheme, been founded on a layer of red sand. Keller, on the other hand, believed that the sand, which was of uncertain origin, had been deposited there over a long period of time. There is, however, a problem with this theory: the rock falls that one would expect to have occurred from the cave roof during such long periods of time were simply not there.

We climbed up a steep ladder left by the guano miners and entered the other cave, walking deeper into the earth until we came to a final cavern above which was a narrow shaft inhabited by bats and swifts. The light from our torches reflected a red glow from the sand onto our faces. If this was a temple then we were now in the sanctum sanctorium, the secret inner chamber. This is where the red sand had come from. And somewhere around here was where the bored stone and the wooden stick rounded at one end were found.

The doughnut-shaped bored stone, called an Ikwe stone by the Kung, is at the centre of another controversy that surrounds Hromnik. In India stones like these are called Yoni stones. They are representations of Siva's feminine energy and found in every Hindu temple.

In South Africa archaeologists have attributed a far more prosaic purpose to the stones. They say they were used by San or Bushmen (Hromnik uses the name that he says the people used for themselves - "Kung") to give extra weight to a traditional digging stick and they have made this uniquely Southern African implement the symbol of their professional society. The

problem, says Hromnik, is that many of the stones have holes so narrow that any stick over which they could fit would break on first use. In other cases the stone is altogether either too small or too large to have been of any practical use at all. Besides, why, he asks, would a small Kung woman, with less than 12kg of possessions, carry a 5kg or 10kg stone in a landscape strewn with stones to pull out uintjes when she could do so easily with the help of a simple pointed stick?

The fact is, says Hromnik, no one had ever seen such an implement in use - until, that is, a well-known archaeologist, replying to an article by the iconoclastic historian, cited his own mother as a witness and invited doubting readers to ask her directly.

Hromnik took up the invitation. He says that he wrote to the archaeologist's mother and received her reply. She had never seen a Bushman, nor a digging stick; moreover, at the time this was meant to have happened, she said, she was not even born. The battle-lines had been drawn, but the game was still being played with the pawns.

Seven years later Hromnik made his play for the king.

The edifice that stands higher than any other in the city of archaeology is the one created and presided over by the august figure of David Lewis-Williams, professor of archaeology and director of the rock art research unit at the University of the Witwatersrand. Lewis-Williams has created a theoretical structure for the understanding of rock art based on information and folklore collected in interviews with southern San during the late 19th century. By this means he appears to have rescued the art from earlier Eurocentric interpretations and allowed the meaning to emerge from the people themselves.

According to Lewis-Williams, most rock art is associated with shamanistic trance states entered into by San medicine men.

Hromnik disagrees. By using the words "shamanistic" and "trance", he says, we attach foreign meanings to events such as the San healing dance which he describes as "ordinary heated dances".

My own opinion, derived from my reading of Richard Katz's definitive book, *Boiling Energy*, is that these dances are nothing if not trance. Not that it matters to this debate since, according to Hromnik, the rock paintings were not even executed by the San. Lewis-Williams, he says, has created a theory that effectively excludes any outside influence and has presented the work as a gift to the San who are credited with being its sole authors - little enough recompense after the genocide they suffered but not, according to Hromnik, historically accurate.

The true authors of most examples of rock art, says Hromnik, were the Quena (called "Hottentot" by the colonists and "misnamed Khoikhoi", he says, by academics). According to Hromnik, the Quena were the descendents of Indian fathers and Kung (San or Bushmen) mothers and the recipients of both cultural traditions. No Kung, he says, has ever claimed knowledge of, nor connection with, those responsible for the rock art.

Until, that is, the unexpected discovery announced by Lewis-Williams (and Pieter Jolly) of a person they described as "probably the last surviving southern San". This 75-year-old woman, who Jolly said "appeared to be the first San informant with authentic knowledge of the art to have been discovered for more than 100 years", said that she was the daughter of a San medicine man who had painted depictions in a rock shelter where he lived.

The discovery of this informant, said Lewis-Williams, promised to fill a gap which had, "for some workers, cast doubt on this interpretation and indeed, the viability of the whole undertaking".

Commenting on this claim in an Australian rock art journal some five years later, Hromnik questioned the validity of the evidence, referring to the woman's San identity as "an abstraction ... created for the sake of a theory". In a heated exchange of papers Lewis-Williams questioned Hromnik's scholarship and the judgement of the editors in allowing publication of the points raised by him.

It was time to take another look at the American archaeologist, Charles Keller's report. His preliminary report clearly stated that there was "no evidence of fire" in the cave, yet Hromnik's cave-as-temple theory had stone artefacts being placed in sacred ash. Both could not be right. Then, to my surprise, I came across this statement buried in a geologist's report tacked on to the end of Keller's document. "Probably a half of the extraneous material ... can be safely assigned to human activities, and at least a good part is fine mineral ash." Had Keller purposefully overlooked this and, if so, why?

Keller, in his report, remarks that the high proportion of unfinished tools "must represent an activity that is not represented by material from any of the other sites". Clearly, he was aware that there was something unexplained about the cave though I doubt whether he could have imagined an explanation that would put it so thoroughly into the realm of the transcendental.

Keller's carbon dates, ranging from 23 000 to 50 000 years, seemed a more formidable obstacle. Not at all, according to Hromnik. Keller's dating method and result is, he said, riddled with inconsistencies and possible misassociations. (Stone artefacts cannot themselves be dated, only once-living matter, like charcoal, buried along with them.) Moreover, he said, the method itself is potentially unreliable - especially where dynamite has been used.

Still, allowing for different rates of radiation decay, allowing for mis-association, why, I asked Hromnik, was there not one single date to support his theory? After all, if the cave was used as a temple 1 000 to 2 000 years ago, one would expect at least a few dates from this period.

His reply was predictable. "They threw them out," he said, explaining that it is a not uncommon practice for archaeologists to abandon aberrant dates. He says that a detailed description of the samples used by Keller and the circumstances in which they were found are missing from the report. Keller, he says, came out of a Marxist-materialist academic environment and saw people as "simple herbivores and carnivores, devoid of an inherent need for religion or ritual". Having transported this belief to a cave in Africa 50 000 years ago, Hromnik says Keller came up with the idea of a factory and ignored evidence to the contrary.

There is a deep malaise affecting those who chart Africa's history. The Eurocentric colonialist habit was to see nothing of value in Africa, save what was imported. Current trends in the opposite direction tend to ascribe everything to Africa, claims Hromnik, yet in the archaeological world, he says, it is the same old story: a desire to keep Africa pure and primitive; to deny it the complex origins and influences that we accept elsewhere and do not experience there as denigratory.

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To Hromnik, an acknowledged expert on Indo-African trade, the evidence for Indian presence in Southern Africa during the first millennium AD is overwhelming. The Nguni and the Quena languages are, he says, peppered with Indian words. The Quena word for priest, for instance, was suri. In Tamil (South Indian) it is s̄uri. Karoo is the Quena word for dry land, just as karu is the Tamil word. Omby is the Nguni word for cattle, and o'mby in Indonesia is the name for the type of introduced cattle one finds in Africa.

The landscape, as Hromnik sees it, is littered with temples - astronomical clocks, he calls them - which can be used to determine the correct times and dates for Sivaite religious ceremonies. These, he says, have been misidentified by archaeologists as cattle kraals. Where the doorway is too narrow for cattle, he adds, they assume it has been tampered with and widen it to conform to their theory.

Many paintings on rock faces, he says, depict events and mythology which are, to him, undeniably Indian in origin. To his critics, this automatically puts Hromnik in the same camp as earlier observers like the Abbé Henri Breuil, who, it has been said, were driven by their prejudices to reach for non-African influences to account for the extraordinary content.

Finally, and perhaps most potently, Hromnik points out that drawings by European colonisers clearly show Indian-style ("triple-curved") bows in the hands of the indigenous people. The explanation usually given is that this is an error of the overseas illustrator but how, asks Hromnik, does one explain the drawings of Colonel Robert J Gordon, himself an experienced military observer, or the many rock paintings which portray such bows? (The only explanation I could get from an archaeologist was that such a depiction in a rock painting must indicate an invented weapon which subsequently passed out of use!)

Either Hromnik has grafted an elaborate personal fantasy on to flaws in the existing theory, motivated, as his critics would have it, by a belief that Africans were incapable of inventing metallurgy, "therefore the Indians must have introduced it", or he is, like many earlier heretics, someone who points out a truth that an orthodoxy, in this case an academic one, cannot bear to see.

Nor write about, it seems. A recently published book, described on the cover as providing "the first comprehensive picture of the Khoikhoi people", in a chapter headed "Where did the Khoikhoi come from?", provides a list of origin theories that one assumes is comprehensive. It includes Jewish origins, shipwrecked children and ancient Cretan and Anatolian sources (for their language), but makes no mention of Indian or of one Cyril Hromnik. Could it be that the authors have taken it on themselves to protect the public from the dangerous ideas of a heretical scholar?

The list of charges is large. Hromnik has been accused by his colleagues of racism, cult writing, defective understanding of archaeology, methodologically questionable linguistics, evolutionarism and "19th-century hyperdiffusionism" (and all within a single academic paper!).

In return Hromnik has charged his critics with attacking a "non-existent racist windmill" while attempting, out of their own barely concealed prejudices, to isolate Africa from history, to deny it its past, to keep it separate from the world as a kind of special case, in itself a legacy of apartheid, of favouring purity over hybridisation.

Like their mediaeval predecessors, Hromnik says the academics now seek to protect themselves from those ideas which "threaten the foundation of the edifice which they have invested in and wish to preserve".

In any event, the citadel will not be surrendered without a fight. What is at stake here is nothing less than the currently accepted version of this country's early history and of the ancestry of its peoples ... and many a battle has been fought over a lot less.

I am back at the start of this article. It was once said that a good story that is not true is more true than a true story that is badly told. One may argue forever about a theory; about whether Indian gold-seekers did or did not, through their efforts, write themselves into a part of this continent's as yet unread history, about whether the bored stone is a religious artefact or a digging-stick weight, about whether rock art was painted by Kung or Quena, but finally there is the engraving.

In today's contractual world the most potent evidence of authorship resides in the name that is written at the end of a document. With the discovery of the chariot engraving, it seems as though our indomitable historian might finally have found that signature. After 11 years of silence on the matter, the time has surely come for archaeologists to speak up and say whether it is genuine or a hoax, to tell us in which of the two camps this story lies.

-- Additional research by Alexia Beckerling -- *Mail&Guardian, October 7, 1997.*

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