

## ROCKS THAT GONG IN THE MIDLANDS OF KWAZULU-NATAL

Annalie Kleinloog



Fig. 1: Pointer stone (G01) with significant landscape, peaks and sites

**My aim with this article** is to create an awareness amongst nature lovers and conservationists about the hidden aspects of rupestral (rock-related) archaeology. With the application of modern technology and advanced dating methods, this is a rapidly expanding field of research worldwide, and timelines and theories shift continuously. However, a neglect of our South African prehistoric sites because of a micro-focus on individual or modern and corporate projects hampers the prospect of South Africa becoming a major role-player in global discoveries and claiming its rightful place in the evolution of theories.

A rocky outcrop caught my attention during my research into ox-wagon trails in the Midlands of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) in 2015. Domineering the small plateau, a pointer stone (Fig. 1) triggered many questions, since this rock –

- a) overlooked an important river and valley;
- b) seemed associated with battlefield and other culturally significant sites;
- c) 'spoke' to historically and spiritually important peaks ('don't point at the sacred mountain');
- d) appeared to be placed so that its axes aligned with the cardinal directions; and

- e) made a hollow or metallic sound when hammered with another rock.

This jolted me into much reading, many fieldtrips, bursts of excitement and numerous assumptions. Since then, not a stone has been left unturned, or rather un-gonged, wherever fellow enthusiasts hiked. The obvious next step was to find out who else in the world knew about these weird, but wonderful rocks. Google overwhelmed our searches. ResearchGate and JSTOR inundated our queries with exaggerated answers. Taylor & Francis (tandfonline.com) and Academia poured obscure and famous authors' names and related titles into our inboxes. The conclusion was eye-opening – these metallic sounding stones were documented on a global scale.

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A combination of sifting through the many publications, selecting the most relevant material and taking up direct communication with willing professors, educators and researchers assured us that gong rocks were, are and will always be acknowledged as geological, cosmological, anthropological, archaeological and historical phenomena. They are *not* figments of any imagination. Here follows a summary of the multidisciplinary research that involved local and international publications and actual finds, mainly across the Midlands.

### What are rock gongs?

Rock gongs have many names and definitions, such as a gong rock, lithophone, idiophone, bell rock, ringing rock, bushman piano and musical stone, as well as many other regional names. The descriptions that follow encapsulate what published articles, books and lecturers have to say about rock gongs.

According to David Morris et al. (2018), the 'term is restricted to only those gongs that demonstrably have been used, deliberately and repeatedly, thereby transforming them into what are, technically in a musical context, idiophones'. This definition is echoed by John Parkington et al. (2008: 103), except for the added explanation that 'although technically these rocks might not fit the acoustic definition of a gong in the sense of vibrating more strongly near the centre than at the edge, the use of rock gong as a generic term seems well entrenched'.

Geoff Blundell et al. (April 2016) mentions the 'appropriateness of the term' when quoting Rifkin (2009): 'The stones tend to be more musically complex than simply a "gong"'. This concept grew stronger the deeper our research went. Robert Bednarik (2008) differentiated between rock gongs and lithophones, the latter being defined as a 'musical instrument consisting of a number of rock pieces that produce musical notes when struck'. Bednarik is a prolific publisher on gong and cupule-related subjects that deserve further in-depth study.

In 2009, SC Lund, a musicologist and archaeologist from Scandinavia, listed the many names for gongs and proudly claimed that the one she found that is situated at Lärbro, Gotland, is named Sangelstainen, directly translatable as 'a singing stone'. She in turn quoted researcher M Catherine Fagg (1997) and added to the descriptions of gongs as natural, of any shape and size, sometimes repositioned and occasionally wedged, and that they 'show evidence of human use as idiophones; a percussion and abraded area may show on the edge of a rock; alternatively, hollow or cup marks are formed'.

Sven Ouzman et al. (2001) insists on using the term 'gong rock', which was the first word that came to my mind and therefore remains the term of choice in our communications. In view of the above, I would like

to suggest the following revised rock gong definition: A rock that gongs must show one or more signs of human interference or involvement *before* it can be called a gong rock, that is –

- if placed in a position of better use and projection;
- if shaped for acoustic or referential purpose;
- if aligned to landmarks and other significant stones;
- if it presents with preferred platforms for percussion; or
- if it displays cupules (weathered, re-patinated or fresh in continued use).

### What came first: gong or glyph?

In most literature it seems that petroglyphs or engravings (of the geometrical type) are typically found near gongs. Bernard Fagg mentioned in his Nigerian (1956) research that the gongs they identified and their nearness to other rock art 'leaves little doubt that they are associated in some way'. Similarly, David Morris et al. (2018) stated that 'in many reported instances in SA there appear to be a nearly consistent association between rock gongs and rock art in the form of engravings'.

But nowhere in the rich narrative of rock art (paintings or folklore) is there any depiction of a gong being used, which must make one wonder whether the gong in antiquity was used before the painters' time and then forgotten? Was part of the picture or story ritual? Was the gong overseen because it was such an everyday item? Was it sacred and not for common use?

Then recently, Neil Rusch's (2016) research answered some of the above questions. His study on gongs in the Karoo proved to be prized by his colleagues and echoed the sentiments of this investigation. He explained that among *!xam* descendants there seemed to be a recognition of rock gongs. They called it a Bushman piano, but there was 'no knowledge of how the gongs were used, or why'.

According to our findings around the KZN farmlands (especially in Weenen), the idea that the sound of a gong did not carry far is debatable. This was supported by anthropologist Frans Prins, who retrieves local folklore. According to him, during the Anglo-Boer War, locals regularly approached San people for their rainmaking skills. In a nearby cave the locals would gong a rock, the sound of which travelled far. San in the high mountains would hear and respond (personal communication, translated and summarised). Frans is currently working on a publication about the last of the San of the northern Drakensberg and added that the local Bhaca and Ntlangwini reckon caves with gongs are haunted by witches and *ithokoloshe*, and have traditionally avoided it. He also mentioned that nobody knew who made or used those gongs.

The suspicion that gongs could be prehistoric was reinforced more than once by Parkington (2008). One quote: 'We have not a single eyewitness account, nor any artist's account, of any act of painting or engraving in southern Africa. All images, with the exception of demonstrable graffiti or recent signatures, predate written records and literate observers.'

An article in *Discover* (25/01/2018: *Oldest human fossils outside Africa push back our timeline ... again*, by Gemma Tarlach) summarised the growing idea of a much-older-than-San South African past: '... 2017 was the year that the conventional timeline for human evolution and migration finally toppled thanks to overwhelming archaeological and paleogenetic evidence ...' There certainly are more questions than time to find answers.

Would this influx of new discoveries owing to advanced technology change present perceptions and interpretations of previously neglected phenomena? In rock art research, was the gong snubbed in the frenzy of finding recognisable depictions more fitting of a modern perspective? Or was it ignored because it did not fit into current and conservative worldview patterns? Must we retrace our steps and re-analyse previously researched and forgotten but significant sites where paintings failed to deliver plausible explanations? Or should we expand current horizons and be open to an added colourful narrative of our ancient forebears? Were the rocks selected because of their sound quality? Or were they accidental discoveries while engraving or grinding for other purposes?

### Art or tool?

In the early cognitive development of humans, art has always been at the forefront of the evolution of culture. Progress in this field still means the involvement of all the senses. Which approach will make research valid, not anti-scientific and plausible? Cornelia Kleinitz's work nurtures thought processes in that direction. While she was desperately recording rock art and gongs in the Merowe Dam area at the Fourth Nile Cataract before it was flooded, Kleinitz (2004) highlighted that which is feared in such exploration: that rock engravings are 'considered primarily a visual phenomenon, the often inconspicuous and usually nonfigurative percussion zones are easily overlooked'.

Cup marks adorn most gongs. Some are badly weathered and hardly visible to the untrained eye, while others still in use today cover stone surfaces in a magnificent decorative display. One can easily draw the conclusion that this was or is art with purpose (Fig. 2 see page 4). A thought-provoking quote by Ouzman (2001), summarised this ongoing quest to research the deeper sense of a rock or a place or the combination of all disciplines: 'Recent work

from southern Africa indicates that certain San rock engravings were hammered, rubbed, cut and flaked in order to produce sound; to touch certain numinous images and rocks; and to possess pieces of potent places. By combining rock art's non-visual appeal with the concepts of questing and desire we may understand how body, landscape and mindscape combine in an aesthetic and sensory articulation.' (Fig. 3.)



Fig. 3: Gong rock with rocks cortex removed by hammering, southern Namibia (Ouzman 2001)

Poets and philosophers express and describe with better-telling words that which scientists fear to feel or even express. There is a Celtic belief that 'landscape is not simply matter but is actually alive'. This is how Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue describes that belief in *Anam Cara* (1997): 'Landscape recalls you into a mindful mode of stillness and solitude where you can perceive time'.

It has been proven that landscape played a role in the reverence of ancestors. Is it possible that they used the tools of landscape to reach an altered state of consciousness? Or did they use the beauty of its sound and appearance to appease their gods? There are numerous publications on the phenomenology of landscape that have been omitted in this article for reasons of space and time. But this one quote from David Lowenthal (2007) encapsulates the idea: 'Landscape is everyone's fundamental heritage. It is all embracing and unavoidable. It inspires and shapes much of what we learn and do. Landscape is where we all make our homes, do our work, live our lives, dream our dreams.'

Is it possible that the San associated drumming with the sound of running animals or the falling rain, as MH Schoeman suggested while researching ritual stories in his 2009 article? Or did the 'gongers' have a deeper understanding of the perception of sound, namely that sound is perceived in two ways, by both hearing and feeling. This dual nature of sound is analysed in detail in Rusch's research (2016). He captured the essence in this quote: 'What you hear in the Karoo



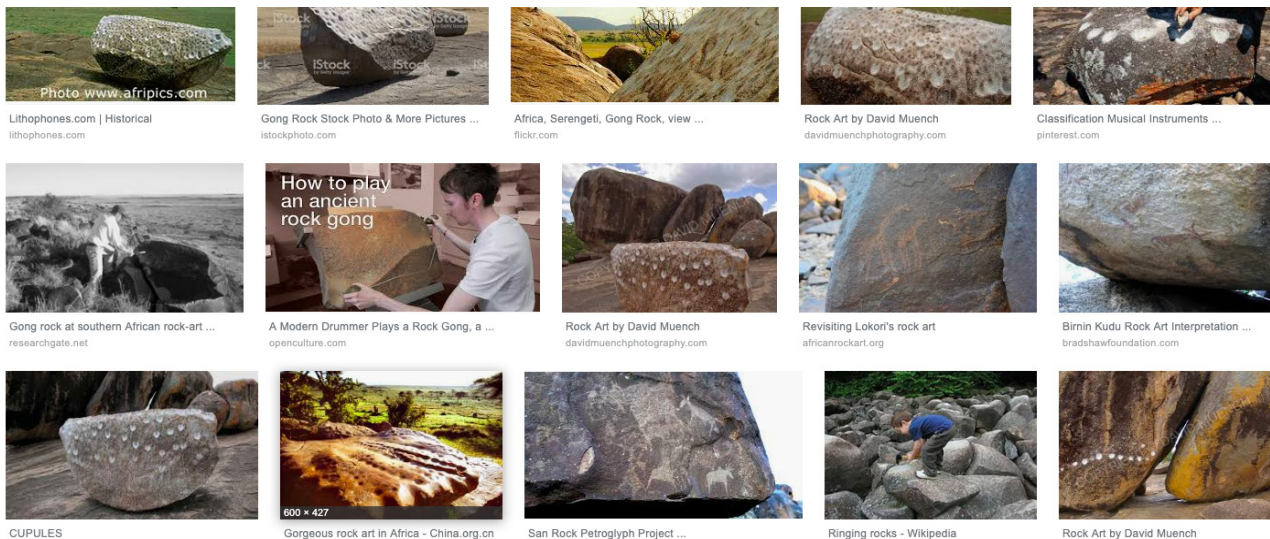


Fig. 2: A plethora of pretty gongs (Google)

and *!xam-ka !au* is stillness, but if you listen, what you hear is not silence'. Rusch referred to rock gongs as tangible artefacts and quoted Mazel (2011), Ouzman (2001) and Rifkin (2009) when he said the gongs '... reflect in turn upon the immateriality of sound and vibration which strictly speaking are not available in the archaeological record, although recuperations are attempted'.

#### Is repetition incidental or intentional?

Many rocks that gong have dolmen or table arrangements (cromlech), although some are boulders of all shapes. The focus in this article is on the dolmen type as they are widespread globally and easily recognisable from afar. The extensive repetition of these formations initially dampened the excitement of my investigation as it seemed to be another trick of Mother Nature. But how easily can forces of nature create the regular and common appearance of rocks that are perfectly flat, roughly triangular and uniform in width, and that seem to be perched on two or more other rocks? So regular as to raise another question – is this incidental or accidental? (Fig. 4.)

#### Assumed uses and location of gongs

Kleinitz (2004) listed the cultural and ritual uses of gongs as described by different authors reporting mostly on gongs found in Africa:

- Signalling devices – Fagg 1956, Davidson 1959, Conant 1960
- Fertility aids – Fagg 1956, Morton-Williams 1957
- Rain-making – Lanning 1958
- Initiation rites – Fagg 1956, Conant 1960, Vaughan 1962
- Marriage rituals – Vaughan 1962
- Entertainment – suggested in all articles

Geologically and geomorphologically there are many stones with acoustic properties, especially those with a high iron content. It is therefore easy to go tapping and finding ringing rocks. But, like the princess and

the frog, one has to gong many rocks before rocking the gong.

Gongs are mostly found in association with other rock art (essentially engravings), often near a water source, in relation to places of worship or ritual (past and present) and in proximity to other gongs or sacred stones. An organised SA Archaeological Society field trip gave me a more discerning perspective under guidance of Prof. David Morris from the McGregor Museum in Kimberley. Exchanged ideas, literature and personal finds mutually broadened horizons. Experiencing the first ringing notes of the rock gong at Ga-Mohana and witnessing the wealth of engravings on the surrounding boulders set the seal on my already time-consuming passion.

My search gained another dimension: the need to locate engravings to support my growing hypothesis



Fig. 4: Dolmens of the more primitive type found in the KZN Midlands



led to long hours of hiking and brushing moss and other debris from possible engraved rocks to discover geoglyphs in remoter locations. Refusing to give up because of the apparent lack or absence of engraved sites triggered a new direction of reading. The possibility that the glyphs may have eroded into unrecognisable forms arose. Bednarik (2012) came to the conclusion that finely scraped images could quickly become covered by re-patination and oxidation. Unused cups would suffer the same lot. Geologist confirmed that onion-peel type weathering brought on by regular and intense temperature changes caused by fires, snow, etc. destroys painted and engraved surface markings.

Technology is now capable of detecting more than that which is found on the surface. Experts and funding are urgently needed to capture, analyse and translate dormant but valuable data. But such funding is only available from reputable institutions, and these all appear to be tied up with their own or corporate work.

### Conjecturing on collected data

Spreadsheet data (Fig. 5) gathered momentum, but only when co-ordinates and distances had been plotted and the information had been transferred to maps did a picture surface. New hypotheses emerge with every outing. Theoretical harbour or port areas, potential mooring places for river craft, formed on our maps, in particular around shallow left-over lakes and major navigable waterways. Using the Younger Dryas impact theory, water levels were inflated to an estimation of after-ice-age levels. The choice of contours and projected levels were also based on the general altitude of the surrounding gongs.

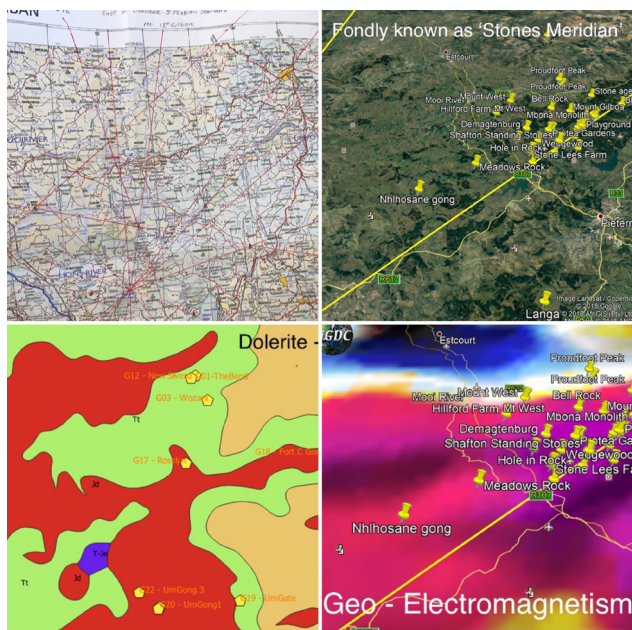


Fig. 5: How mapwork evolved: From 1:50 000 municipal maps with lines to Google Earth searches and finally data capture with advanced technology

These maps, the geomorphology and alignments of conspicuous contours (deductions from inter-site relationships) assist the investigations.

Questions arise from the gathered data, such as are the gongs and standing stones navigational devices? Or are they communication tools to announce the arrival of visitors, enemies or traders. To quote Rusch (2016): 'What is certain, however, and can be inferred from the rock gongs, is that the landscape and its topography are integral to any consideration of soundscape'.

### Conclusion

Although the gong-rock phenomenon proves to be part of the global geological history and a universal



Fig. 6: Gongs of different shapes and sizes found in the Midlands

cosmological worldview since times past, its importance to archaeology in South Africa remains a low priority against the overpowering popularity of cave paintings (Fig. 6).

Astrophysicist, Prof. JC Holbrook from the University of Cape Town, replied as follows to an enquiry by me: 'Determining astronomical significance is nearly impossible in South African ancient rock art. However, the fact that there are ringing stones, with obvious marks of where to strike them, should be sufficient for heritage preservation purposes'.

In Europe, researchers and heritage bodies have opened certain sacred sites during cosmological events (equinox and solstice) to pagan worshippers in order to control preservation. According to Blain and Wallis (2007), 'Increased flexibility and openness of government and heritage management, or the attempts by "alternative" groups to organise an event some distance from Stonehenge at the summer solstice, intended to reduce pressure on the

monument while enabling a “festival” ... There are very different views on “heritage”, site, landscape and the social relations that can inform or be informed by all of these; people’s spirituality embedding in landscape and community is also political on a wider scale, and paganism – the most evident spiritual “movement” associated with heritage sites – is growing fast.’ Their conclusion: ‘... relating to landscapes through narratives in which stones and spirits have agency, and in which humans and spirits exist in a state of mutual dependency ... are hard to convey through the discourse of academic rationality ...’ (Harvey 2001).

The protection of sites where these ‘ringing rocks’ and the significant stones associated with them can be found, in lieu of further studies to prove the role they played in the cosmological worldview of an ancient nation with navigational insight, should be a priority in future investigations.

#### Acknowledgments

Grateful thanks for the support from a group of likeminded hikers, stone-likers, researchers, plotters and planners, readers and hypothesisers, namely Max Ramseier, Donald Davies, Dave Burt and Michelle Moses, and their understanding families, particularly when time on the rocks interfered with real life.

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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN SA

### Hofmeyr Skull gains scientific significance

The East London Museum is internationally known for its remarkable coelacanth and humanoid trace footprints specimens. A third, globally important exhibit, the Hofmeyr Skull, is less well known. However, as scientists are discovering, the skull is hugely significant in understanding human evolution. Such is its tremendous palaeoanthropological importance that a cast of the skull currently enjoys pride of place in one of the most comprehensive human evolution displays in any museum in the world: the Koch Hall of Human Origins at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.

The Hofmeyr Skull was discovered along the banks of the Vlekpoort River near Hofmeyr in the Eastern Cape and was donated to the East London Museum in 1954. It was not until fairly recently, however, that the skull was confirmed to be about 36 000 years old. The skull is considered significant because it carries all the features of an anatomically modern human with some archaic features such as thicker arches above the brow, large molar crowns and a prominent glabella, says the museum’s natural scientist Kevin

Cole. ‘Although the skull was studied by the University of the Witwatersrand in 1964, it was never deemed to be of much significance as a specimen until well into the new millennium, by which time ideas of human origins were well developed. The skull travelled to the Port Elizabeth Museum, the University of Cape Town and Stony Brook University (New York) before returning to East London in 2009.

It had proven impossible to date the Hofmeyr Skull using traditional radiocarbon dating. Thus a combination of optically stimulated luminescence and uranium-series dating was used. Osteological analysis of the cranium by the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology indicates that the specimen is morphologically distinct from recent groups in sub-Equatorial Africa, including the local Khoesan populations. Instead, the fossil has a very close affinity with Upper Palaeolithic skulls from Europe. This consistent with the Out-of-Africa theory, which hypothesises that at least some Upper Palaeolithic human groups in Africa, Europe and Asia should morphologically resemble each other.

*Buffalo City Tourism, 2019*