

Multi-sensory engagements with stone surfaces on the African continent: evidence from landscape and architectural contexts

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Various types of cup marks and grooves are common features of stone surfaces at many rock art sites in the landscape and at monumental stone-built structures in Africa and beyond. Drawing from two case studies from the African continent, one focusing on petroglyphs in Mali, the other on subtractive graffiti in a monumental built context in Sudan, the paper reflects on the materiality of stone as a meaningful substance that is removed from 'potent' places in various landscape and architecturally framed contexts for a range of purposes. Ethnographic and archaeological evidence indicates that some of the activities resulting in cup marks and grooves involve a set of gestures and activities from day-to-day contexts, such as grinding grain or crushing substances, which are transposed into extraordinary contexts and locations. Additionally, close observation of stone surfaces provides plenty of evidence of engagement with these surfaces beyond the removal and consumption of stone 'dust', for example by touching them, sliding over them, or creating sounds by 'playing' them. None of these activities leave visually attractive traces, such as rock art or graffiti imagery. Nevertheless, these traces of various sensory engagements with stone surfaces offer important evidence on a spectrum of symbolic meaning that may have been attributed to stone and 'stone places'.