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# **ROCK ART OF THE NORTHERN AND WESTERN CAPE**

**Duncan Miller**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Miller, D. 2008. Drawn in stone: the rock engravings of Namaqualand. *Village Life* **February/March**:42-47.

Miller, D. 2008. Drawn on stone: the rock paintings of the Cederberg. *Village Life* **April/May**:42-47.

Photographs are all by Duncan Miller except for the following:

Stompiesfontein, page 68 © Simon Hall

Spring wagon, page 69 © Johann Burger.

Few of the interpretive ideas in this book originate with me. Most of them are taken from the various publications listed on page 70. I am entirely responsible for any errors of interpretation.

**FOR PIPPA AND HARRY**

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## INTRODUCTION

No one knows if there was direct contact between the people who made the rock engravings in the Northern Cape and those who painted in rock shelters of the Western Cape. But there are two reasons why it makes sense to include the rock art of both areas in one book. First, there are numbers of similarities in the images, both in their style and their content. Second, there are historical connections between the Northern Cape and the Western Cape that have been used in trying to understand the meaning of some of the rock engravings and paintings. This attempt at discovering their meaning is explained in more detail in the two main sections of the book.

The terms used to describe the historical inhabitants of South Africa are problematic and contentious. The terms “Boer” and “Bushman” are used according to contemporary usage to describe historical groups of people living in the nineteenth century, and are not intended to be derogatory, nor critical of any of their descendants.

The captions to the photographs follow a fairly conservative interpretation. I invite you to enjoy the images for their humour, grace and beauty, in the hopes that this will generate respect for the art and the vanished artists.



In the Karoo, the rounded dolerite boulders with their black rind due to weathering made perfect surfaces for rock engravings.



The perennial spring at Springbokoog near Van Wyksvlei attracted animals that feature in many of the rock engravings on the nearby hills.

## ROCK ENGRAVINGS OF THE NORTHERN CAPE

From Calvinia to Kenhardt, from Kimberley to !Kuboes, the Northern Cape is an open air art gallery and testimony to an all but forgotten genocide. The rock engravings that adorn numerous koppies and boulders are the legacy of the dispossessed original inhabitants of the land, variously known as the San, the /Xam, or the Bushmen. Their history is tragic, and their art is a testimony to their spiritual beliefs, deeply tied into the landscape and its animals.

Pressed into serfdom or killed in the Cape, the Bushmen realised their land was being appropriated by colonial farmers pressing north, and they waged a guerrilla war against the advancing Boers. Place names like Oorlogskloof in the Kobee record the decimation of the Bushmen, as they became restricted to relatively inaccessible gorges and mountains. Eventually even Bushmanland, the ancient plateau that makes up the interior of the Northern Cape, was occupied by Boer stock farmers, who forced the remnants of the local Bushman populations into working for them.





Several of the engravings at Springbokoog look like hunting scenes. Most archaeologists now think these are metaphors for the ritual activities of shamans and cannot be interpreted literally. The two stick figures at top left are more recent than the animals and are a literal depiction of a Boer couple, the woman wearing a wide, triangular skirt.

Those who refused to work on the farms were killed or imprisoned for stock theft. This occurred just beyond living memory. As recently as 1985, Abraham Berend, a so-called Flat Bushman who was then nearly 100, remembered that in the 1800s his father had been captured and 'domesticated' by a farmer near Van Wyksvlei. The story of the Flat and

Grass Bushman of Bushmanland has been told by archaeologist Janette Deacon in the meticulously researched book she co-authored with photographer Craig Forster. It is through her research over the past twenty five years into the lives of the Bushmen incarcerated in Cape Town that we know that their immediate forefathers and ancestors were responsible for some of the rock engravings of Bushmanland, and that their society and lives were destroyed by the advancing colonial farmers. Janette has recorded the last known words spoken in the /Xam language, by Hendrik Goud, who told her all he remembered was "Here come the Boers. We must run away". With this an entire society of Bushmen became extinct. All that remains are their biological genes in their modern descendants of the Northern and Western Cape, and their mute and enigmatic art on the rocks.

Bushmanland is a place of extremes. It can be infernally hot in summer, and bitterly cold in winter. For years rain may be a fond memory, but when it does rain vast sheets of water collect in ancient pans. Brandvlei, Van Wyksvlei, Verneukpan, Bosluispan, Bitterpits, Springbokoog, are all names that speak of water. At first sight the landscape is featureless, with low Karoo scrub and the occasional flat-topped hill, or a chain of koppies littered with rounded black dolerite boulders. It is these boulders that the

Bushman artists ornamented with their engravings. Some of these are very old, the grooves almost invisible except against low angled light, the surfaces weathered a uniform black. Others are far fresher, the lighter, recently exposed rock contrasting clearly with the older weathered black rind.



This elephant "hunt" at Springbokoog is very similar to a rock painting in the Cederberg, also with a calf, and numerous men dancing around the pair of elephants. In this engraving the human figures are very heavily scratched. Is this vandalism, or an attempt by Bushman shamans to extract the supernatural potency associated with the dancing human figures?

Relative age seems to determine the subject matter too. The oldest and most weathered engravings seem to be abstract cross-hatchings and parallel scoring of the rock surface. These occur at a number of different localities, so they are not some idle, individual doodling, although archaeologists have no idea what their original meaning might have been.

Easier to recognise are pictures of people and animals, sometimes together, often apart. The stories told in the 1870s to Wilhelm and Dorothea Bleek and Lucy Lloyd by Bushmen who had been sent to Cape Town to serve prison sentences in the Breakwater Prison for stock theft and murder, make it clear that the rock art is an expression of spiritual belief, and reflects the intimate connections between people, animals and the landscape. Hunting is dancing. People become animals. Animals become people. The rain falls from rain animals; clouds with legs. We view the engravings with an ignorant detachment, dimly aware of their significance, and struggle to make sense of their repetitive themes.

Some of the engravings seem to be very recent. These are often crudely pecked or shallowly scratched into the rock, and appear to be rough copies of the older, more elegant pictures. The most recent attempts are very fresh, startling modern graffiti consisting of

dates, initials, and puritanical attempts to obliterate the genitals of the earlier engravings of human figures. Evidently, some people are offended by the conventions of Bushman rock art. This sort of iconoclasm is not only illegal but also an insult to the memory of a vanished

people and their spiritual beliefs. As a result, archaeologists are wary of publicising the location of rock art sites. Those illustrated here have either been publicised widely already, or are on privately owned and protected land.



This “hunting” scene at Springbokoog looks like two men shooting arrows at a bull eland. Why are the two human figures intensely scratched, the rock around the eland pitted, four vertical lines scored across its body, and what is the meaning of the fine cross-hatching behind its hind legs?

At Springbokoog the perennial spring not only served the Bushman who lived nearby but also attracted animals. The dolerite boulders at one end of a nearby ridge are literally covered in engravings, ranging from the old cross-hatchings, through delicate depictions of animals, including a hippopotamus, and complicated hunting images that seem to depict hunting, to more recent pictures of women in wide skirts, and even script.



This isolated engraving of a hippopotamus at Springbokoog is on a promontory overlooking a broad valley, which in the past must have had permanent pools of water. The engraving is old, very faint and only visible in oblique light, but it is very finely done, down to the water droplets spraying upwards from the nostrils.



More recent engraving at Springbokoog consists of Dutch script.

The “hunting” pictures include one of men dancing around an elephant and calf, in a ritualised image that occurs elsewhere too, including in rock paintings much further south in the Cederberg. These engravings are not straightforward scenes of hunting. The humans are often in impossible juxtaposition with the animals. Many of them have crosscutting score marks and patches of pitting, not all the work of recent vandals. According to some archaeologists they are a kind of scarification to gain access to the supernatural potency of the picture in the rock. Whatever their original meaning, some of the images are inescapably poetic. One of the most evocative is a picture of two antelope drinking at the edge of a stream, marked by an elegant sweep stripped of the black surface patina of the rock.



These are two bags engraved at Springbokoog, very similar to numerous paintings of bags in the rock paintings of the Cederberg further south.

A broad area of this dolerite rock at Springbokoog has had its weathered skin removed to portray a stream, at which two rather skinny antelope are drinking. At first it is easy to see this as a matter-of-fact picture, but why is the area between the animals pecked, and not the rest of the rock?



Are these stylised hippos at Springbokoog with bullrushes between them and the man, or are they lions, or a figment of a shaman's imagination?



Might these be warthogs come to drink at the Springbokoog spring, or as Janette Deacon suggests, elephant shrews? Perhaps they are chameleons.

Further north, the terrible tale of the extermination of the Bushmen took place at a mountain which the Boer farmers called Strondberg (literally Shit Mountain), now meaninglessly sanitised to Strandberg. To the local Bushmen this was */itten/hin* or Lizard Mountain, to which they retreated when chased by the Boers.

It consists of three steep-sided and flat-topped hills. It is a remote, sad, and hauntingly beautiful place, which was actually home to some of the Bushmen the Bleeks interviewed in Cape Town. The hill-tops are littered with dolerite boulders, some of them imposingly large, and over a hundred of them are engraved.



The Strandberg, the broken-backed Lizard Mountain */itten/hin* in central Bushmanland, was the last outpost of the */Xam* Bushmen. Some of the Bushman convicts interviewed in Cape Town by Wilhelm and Dorothea Bleek to record their stories identified this mountain, named Strondberg by the contemporary Boer farmers, as their ancestral home.



The slopes of Strandberg are steep, with numerous quiver trees (*Aloe dichotoma*), whose hollowed-out dried branches are said to have been used by the Bushmen to make their quivers. The top of the hill is littered with rounded dolerite boulders, some of which have rolled to the bottom.



The huge dolerite boulders on the top of the Strandberg making it a powerfully evocative landscape. Many of these boulders are engraved.



Some of the Strandberg engravings are cascades of fine lines. These are weathered and difficult to see except in oblique light. They may be the oldest engravings here.



More recent engravings are less weathered and deeply patinated. Here, the antelope have lines scratched within their bodies, while the bodies of the ostriches were rubbed to remove the rock patina and create a lighter colour.

Many of the engravings at Strandberg are of elephant, which must have been conspicuous in the valley below. Similar styles of engravings, predominantly of animals, occur throughout the Karoo, usually wherever there are suitable dolerite boulders near sources of water.



A scratched elephant engraving at Strandberg

The engravings at Springbokoog and Strandberg are on private land not accessible to the casual visitor, so their engravings are very well preserved. There are more pictures of them in Janette and Craig's book.

There are numerous engraving sites in Bushmanland and the Karoo, literally wherever there are suitable rock surfaces near water.

At nearby Jagpan in Bushmanland the landscape looks very similar to Strandberg. Here the dolerite hills probably also acted as a refuge for the Bushmen.



Jagpan, near Carnarvon, with a fine engraving of an eland and people in two different styles



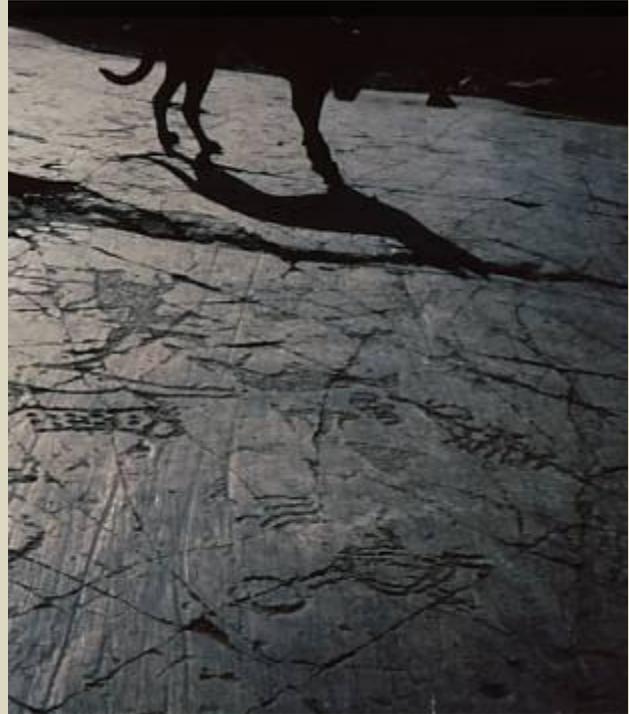
This panel of engravings at Jagpan looks like it may have been vandalised, but look carefully at the scratches. Underneath the central human figures there appears to be a large line engraving of a rhinoceros. There are also at least two stylised human figures with triangular skirts. This layering of images is more common in rock paintings, but reveals several generations and different styles of engraving. Some of the random scratching may indeed be vandalism, but vandalism is usually seen nearer towns.



Further north, around Kimberley there are several engraving sites on glaciated pavements. These are expanses of bedrock, mostly ancient lavas, which were scoured by the glaciers that covered southern Africa around 300 million years ago. On many of these natural pavements one can see the parallel grooving produced by stones trapped at the base of the glaciers. Many of them, particularly those exposed near rivers, were attractive for engravers. There are two famous sites on glaciated pavements near Kimberley, Nooitgedacht and Driekopseiland. At Nooitgedacht the glaciated surface is cracked and spalling, and the engravings are being lost through natural erosion. At Driekopseiland the Riet River washes over the engraved pavement seasonally just downstream of a weir built over part of it, eroding pieces of rock and abrading the engravings. At both these sites engravings of people and animals are

present but rare, and most of the engravings are of abstract patterns. There are meandering lines and regular arrangements of pecked hollows. Many of them are circular, some with inscribed cross-hatching, others with radiating spikes. Some people have made fanciful associations with these geometric patterns and ancient Egyptian symbols, suggesting that they represent some sort of hieroglyphic script. Many modern archaeologists, including Thomas Dowson, who has published a well illustrated book on the rock engravings of southern Africa as a whole, believe these represent the visual disturbances and visions of shamans entering trance. Others, like David Morris of the McGregor Museum in Kimberley, believe they have to do with girls' initiation rituals at special sites near flowing water. Whatever their original meaning, these engravings clearly are different in subject matter from those of interior Bushmanland.

Glaciated pavements exposed near Kimberley by tributaries of the Vaal River often are engraved. The smoothly rounded surfaces were carved about 300 million years ago by glaciers that covered southern Africa. The pavement at Nooitgedacht is famous, and readily accessible off the Kimberley to Danielskuil road.



One can see the deep scratches left by pebbles trapped underneath the glaciers which scoured the glacial pavements at Nooitgedacht. The low angle light of late afternoon also helps one see the engravings, here mostly geometric – circles, ovals, broad cross-hatching, and squiggles – with very few animals. In contrast, the nearby site of Wildebeestkuil is on a koppie overlooking a pan and has more engravings of animals and very few geometric figures.

The geometric engravings in the Kimberley area are very similar in appearance to others further west, at two sites in the Richtersveld, the one in Helskloof just west of Violsdrif and the other still further west at Bloeddrijf, both on the banks of the Gariep (Orange) River. These are pecked engravings, done on a white limestone that weathers to a bluish-black. The older engravings are almost invisible, but the younger ones stand out as a bright white against the dark background.



The Neitnababiep plateau is a limestone massif on the southern side of the Gariep (Orange) River near Violsdrif. Huge blocks of limestone dislodged from the vertical cliffs have tumbled into the Helskloof below. Many of these blocks are engraved.



With very few exceptions the engravings of Helskloof are geometric; nested ovals, curving lines, squiggles, wandering rows of dots, and discreet patches of dense pecking, exposing the white fresh limestone underneath the dark, weathered crust.





Engravings cover the bottom half of this enormous block of limestone in the Helskloof. Here too, the animal and human figures are very scarce, but there are numerous meandering lines, sometimes in multiple rows, and ovoid or circular motifs. Some of the natural grooves have been exaggerated by lines of pecking and in places there are dense patches of peck marks sometimes encircled with lines, and sometimes not. The meanings are obscure, but not only humans found these rocks alluring. High up, the top left-hand corner has been rounded and rubbed smooth, presumably by elephants.



At Bloeddrif in the Richtersveld the rock engravings are also on limestone, light beneath a dark crust.



The older engravings, like this very complicated maze-like pattern, are darker than the fresh, newer ones.



The engravings at Bloeddrif are similar to those at Helskloof, ovals with cross-hatching, wandering lines, and patches of pecking.



No-one knows who did them, or even why; although some archaeologists are convinced they represent the experiences of shamans in trance. Others disagree and think that these, like the geometric engravings at Nooitgedacht and Driekopseiland, may have to do with initiation ceremonies.

Some people might find the diversity of academic explanations for the meaning of the engravings disconcerting, but it would be unrealistic to expect only one explanation to be valid. It is obvious that the style and subject matter of the engravings changed through time. There are also strong regional differences. Away from perennial rivers and in the interior of Bushmanland, images of people and animals predominate, while along the Gariiep River and its tributaries the engravings are mostly geometric designs. We might never know precisely who made them and their real meanings, but the rock engravings are evocative, and form a poignant link between us and the previous inhabitants of the land.

As we move south towards the Western Cape the geology changes. The Karoo rocks with their glaciated pavements and dolerite boulders give way to the sandstones of the Cape Fold Belt mountains. The sandstone is not suitable for engraving and here the Bushmen painted in rock shelters rather than engraving in the open.

## **ROCK PAINTINGS OF THE WESTERN CAPE**

The rock shelters of the Cederberg in the Western Cape contain uncounted numbers of rock paintings, and form one of the largest outdoor art galleries in the world. Some of the

Cederberg paintings are thousands of years old, others only hundreds, but they represent a vanished artistic tradition, extinguished with the extermination of the indigenous Bushman inhabitants of these mountains. Their legacy lives in their drawings on stone, which need to be valued and protected as their memorial.



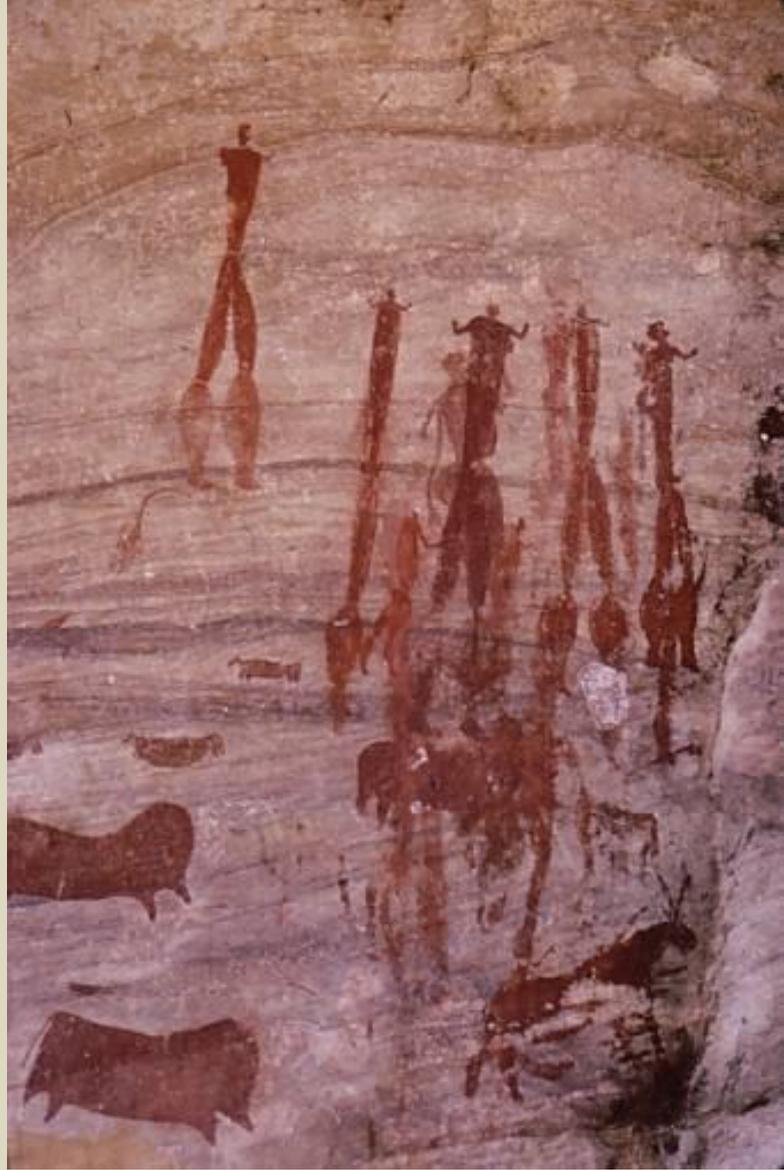
The sandstone of the Cederberg weathers into bizarre shapes, producing rugged rocky mazes, often containing rock shelters with paintings.



The sandstone shelters provide deep shade and protection from the rain, so many of the rock paintings are very well preserved. The smooth white sandstone in this shelter is typical, and makes a perfect canvas for paintings.

The Cederberg is part of the Cape Fold Belt, a rugged range of mountains caused by the collision of continents about 250 million years ago. The layers of sandstone and shale laid down previously on the floor of a shallow sea were compressed and buckled, thrown into successive waves of folds, uplifted and eventually exposed by erosion. Rivers carved their way through these rumped rocks, stripping the softer shales to form long, narrow valleys between more resistant sandstone ridges. Rain and frost chiselled away at the hard white sandstone, cutting niches in the softer bands between harder layers, producing fantastic sculptural shapes and numerous rock shelters. These were the former homes of groups of Bushmen who had been living off the land for unknown millennia. Now the rock shelters and caves harbour hikers and baboons, and the occasional archaeologist.

Many of the painted friezes are complex and layered. In this example at Kriedowkrans there are many over-painted figures. The tall dark red men were painted over a row of older, more faded figures, including one of a woman with long tassels hanging down her back. Men are often painted with exaggerated calves and narrow torsos. Women frequently are portrayed as fat, a highly desirable state in groups of people who depend on hunting and gathering for their food. The rectangular red objects in the lower half of the picture are the bodies of eland. The heads and legs were painted in white, which often weathers away more rapidly than the red pigment.





This is a very unusual painting of an eland, at Kriedowkrans, with a white and red outline only, painted over a faded red human figure.



This conventional painting of an eland, from Stadsaal Rocks, shows how the white pigment tends to fade.

Thousands of the rock shelters of the Cederberg, from small overhangs providing little protection from the sunlight and rain to large caves in which whole bands of people could live, contain paintings. There is no comprehensive catalogue of this art and despite decades of research by archaeologists previously unrecorded painted sites are discovered continually. So it is impossible to say how many individual painted sites there are, let alone how many individual paintings, but they number in the many thousands.

This presents a major challenge for researchers and conservationists. The law in South Africa protects all rock art sites. Vandalism of the paintings is a criminal offense. Unfortunately, identifying and catching the culprits is not easy, and very few prosecutions have ever taken place. A lot of damage is done unintentionally. Wetting the paintings often increases their visibility, but even using clean water damages them. The water dissolves air-borne salts on the surface or leaches salts from the rock, and it percolates into minute cracks or the joints between individual grains in the sandstone. With evaporation of the water the dissolved salt crystallizes and forces the cracks open, popping off the surface grains and with each grain a pixel of paint. This accelerates the natural process of weathering of the exposed rock surfaces.

Human visitors put the paintings at risk, so archaeologists encourage land owners not to reveal the location of painted sites to casual visitors. Natural weathering also damages

paintings, especially where water flows seasonally over the painted surfaces, leaving a white residue, like in the image below.



Eland were symbolically very important to the Bushmen, and far outnumber paintings of other animals in the Cederberg. Eland are the largest of antelopes and often were equated metaphorically with people. Amongst the /Xam, and presumably also the artists of the Cederberg, a youth had to kill an eland to become a man, and be eligible to marry.



This is a very unusual painting of a buffalo entirely in black, at Boontjieskloof, now Bushmans Kloof resort.

How do we know that many of the rock paintings of the Cederberg were done by the Bushmen? The answer is indirect, because the Bushmen of the Western Cape were declared vermin and systematically hunted down and shot by European settlers, in much the same way that many farmers continue to slaughter baboons, who are a perceived threat to their livelihoods. In war the spiritual and artistic lives of the vanquished are of no concern to the victors. It was in the eastern Cape and the Drakensberg, where European settlers were more concerned with subduing black farmers who had already largely displaced the Bushmen, that early colonial travellers recorded small groups of Bushmen living and painting in caves.

How do we know the age of the paintings? Again, the answer must be indirect because most of them are just a stain on the rock, with not enough original pigment left for any kind of direct chemical dating. Some must be very old because they are very faint and over-painted with more recent, clear images. But how old? A few years ago, Cape Town archaeologist Antonieta Jerardino, excavating a cave on the west coast (under permit), discovered a slab of rock containing part of a painted line of human figures. It had fallen off the cave wall, leaving part of the frieze behind, and was buried in a layer of sediment radiocarbon dated to 3 500 years ago. Not only were these paintings in the same style as many in the Cederberg, but the slab neatly fitted back on the cave wall from which it had fallen. The exposed part of the frieze still attached to the wall was somewhat weathered after 3 500 years but still distinct.

Many of the Cederberg paintings that are far more weathered and indistinct therefore must be much older. Some of the youngest ones are easier to date. There are paintings of women in crinolines, ox-wagons, and men with hats and baggy trousers, obviously representing white colonial farmers. It is also possible that some of the most recent Cederberg paintings, including the finger dots and hand prints found on some cave walls, were not done by the hunting and gathering people we term Bushmen, but possibly by Quena sheep herders, historically known as Hottentots.



Elephants often are depicted along with humans, as in this picture of a famous frieze at Stadsaal Rocks. The elephant on the extreme right had been vandalised and subsequently was restored, which is why it is darker red.

Elephants are the second most common animal in the Cederberg paintings. This painting at Bushman's Kloof looks like two men attacking a cow and her calf, which cannot be realistic.



Some of the paintings of elephants are over a metre long. This scene at Zuurvlake is on the overhanging roof of a rock shelter and has been completely protected from both rain and direct sunlight, so is remarkably clear. The elephant and calf are surrounded by stylised human figures, some without legs. It is easy to assume that this is a hunting scene, but the human figures are unarmed. It is very similar in composition to some rock engravings hundreds of kilometres north east in the Karoo. It is a repetitive image portraying a more obscure relationship between men and elephants than mere hunting.



This complicated panel of paintings at Klipfonteinrand includes two elephants surrounded by curved lines joined to the sack-like cloud or river below. These have been dubbed 'elephants in boxes' and are thought to represent rain animals, or at least an association between elephants and water. There are several paintings of 'elephants in boxes' in the Cederberg, so this theme must be meaningful and not just an individual fantasy. As the Bushmen lacked any heavy weaponry, perhaps they posed no threat to elephants, in which case an easy association with these big animals was possible..

The numerous paintings of elephants, often in association with people, show that there was some special relationship between people and elephants. We can only speculate what that might have been, but the paintings do not seem to depict elephant hunts because usually the associated people are unarmed. Perhaps elephants were associated with rain and water, as elephants need to drink and excavate water holes in otherwise dry river beds. It is curious that there are no paintings of other very large animals like hippopotamus and rhinoceros – animals we know lived in the south-western Cape.

Evidently, elephants were special, along with the numerous antelope that are the most usual animals painted. There are very few paintings of lions, leopards and baboons, which we know were also plentiful in the Cape. These must have been very familiar to the Bushmen, who had to avoid them. What all this shows is that the paintings are not simply a decorative record of everyday occurrences. Most, if not all of them, are meaningful in terms of the beliefs held by the Bushmen of their relationship with the animals they did paint. Obviously, they did not hold the same beliefs towards all large or dangerous animals they encountered.



These four strange figures at Sevilla look as if they have conventional eland bodies, but three have long erect tails, and they all have very human legs. Animals with human legs are quite common in the Cederberg paintings. These so-called ‘therianthropes’ are an example of the blurring of the distinction between humans and animals.



Some paintings do appear to show simple narrative scenes from real life. These three figures are all that is painted in a small cave, high up in a cliff at Lorraine. It shows a small antelope calf being pursued by a hunter, followed by the mother. The three panels below show details of these three figures.



These three figures are very unusual in several ways. It is rare, but not unknown, for a painted surface of such quality to have so few paintings. The cave, with a sloping rock floor, is uninhabitable and has to be accessed through a hole in the roof. The paint is dark and thick. The human figure is evidently male, but also has breasts. The head of the human figure is very different in style from those common in the Cederberg. The head of the larger antelope is highly geometric, with several straight edges, which is also very unusual. Could this be a twentieth century fake, painted with deliberate tell-tale clues to tease archaeologists?





The scene above, on the farm Zuurvlakte, has a grid on the left. It is a painting of a hunting net, with an antelope painted in orange running into it from the right.

The white image on the right, in a small, smoke-damaged shelter at Bushmans Kloof, is also of a hunting net, with the curved top held up with red sticks. Both these nets are painted vertically, as reproduced here.





These very elegant grazing antelope are painted in a sheltered recess on an isolated sandstone outcrop on Zuurvlakte. This peaceful scene of two does and a buck appears to be purely aesthetic.



Birds are unusual in rock art, with the exception of ostrich. This delicate white painting of an ostrich, on Zuurvlakte, has a crude 'finger painting' copy in red. Did the original never have a body, or was it painted in some other colour that has disappeared with time?



These little guinea fowl at Bushmans Kloof are very unusual subjects for Cederberg rock art.

What do the paintings of people depict? At first sight some look like domestic scenes, like people huddled in a cave. Others look like hunting scenes, with people crowded around animals. Undoubtedly these subject matters are drawn from real life, but a closer look at these paintings often reveals that not all is as it seems. The people gathered around animals may lack any weapons. People and animals may be connected by lines, indicating something other than everyday relationships between them. Many of the human figures are very distorted. Some archaeologists think these are attempts by artists to record what it feels like to be in a shamanistic trance. There are paintings of group dances. We know from recent ethnographic evidence from the Kalahari Bushmen that trance dances were the way into the spiritual world for shamans.

The figure on the right, from Landskloof in the Kooee north of the Cederberg, has very distorted limbs, an animal head or headdress, and very elongated fingers or is holding fly whisks. Kalahari Bushmen who have experienced trance, report feelings of body distortion. This is very similar to the experiences of people who use psycho-active drugs like mescaline and LSD.





This chap on Sandfontein is having trouble with his legs. This sense of extreme distortion of one's limbs is the sort of thing reported by people who have experienced trance states. With the Bushmen, trance was induced through the trance dance ceremony, perhaps helped along with eating or smoking psycho-active plants.

Elongated male torsos with short arms, like the figure on the right from Grootplaat, may also be an expression of trance experience, but could also be an artistic convention for portraying masculinity. There are numerous figures painted in this style in the Cederberg and Piketberg mountains (compare with page 29).



Many attempts have been made to classify the rock paintings in terms of styles, or traditions. While it is easy to identify recent paintings with colonial subjects, and it is obvious that there is variation in the older ones, no satisfactory scheme has emerged from these exercises. Where thousands of paintings were produced over thousands of years, presumably by thousands of artists, it is not surprising that there is great diversity and variation. This is probably true not only for painting styles but also for the meaning of the art, the subject of vigorous and ongoing debate between archaeologists studying rock art. At present it would be fair to say there is a consensus among academics that most of the art represents the spiritual beliefs of the artists, and is not a literal representation of everyday activities. That much is evident from a close inspection of many of the paintings; some being half animal/half human, others having weird distortions, the prevalence of repetitive themes like people dancing, the frequency of paintings of some animals (like eland and elephant) and not others, and the almost complete absence of paintings of plants, which formed the staple diet of the Bushmen.



This frieze at Suurfontein is of a group of women dancing and clapping. The inset shows the unusually clearly preserved detail of these active figures.





This extraordinary panel in the Landskloof has armed men milling around two weird central figures with animal ears. It has been interpreted variously as a conflict scene, a mystical fight between shamans, and a dance. It contains elements of all three, the conflict not necessarily being literally a physical fight. The shaman figure illustrated on page 41 is in the upper left hand corner. This painting is rich in images relating to metaphors of trance.



This enlargement of the central animal-headed figure on the previous page shows four vertical lines running through it. They emanate from a bag above the figure. Bags feature in a lot of the rock paintings, particularly with groups of people. In a recent publication, David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce (2012) describe leather bags and the 'threads of light' associated with them as depictions of the animal transformations experienced by people in trance. For the Bushmen, trance dancing was an important social activity, aimed at healing the sick, resolving conflict, and negotiating with the spirit world.



This enlargement of the figures on the right of the panel from Landskloof on page 44 shows men holding bows, with cylindrical quivers on their backs. The leading animal-headed figure makes it clear that this is no simple dance or hunting party.



This is part of another 'battle' scene, painted on the roof of a small shelter on Sevilla. A step in the rock has been used to portray a shelter, from which a group of people defend themselves from seated archers and people with sticks. Arrows fly between the groups. But this isn't just a literal fight. White lines join the heads of the 'attackers' and double red lines join their feet. Outside of this illustrated frame, a crouched figure reels in the red lines.



This panel at Rooikrans has a large man on the left, with a double row of dots behind his feet. It is easy to imagine these are footprints, but because of the frequency of double rows of dots or double lines in the rock art, they probably represent something else. Between this figure and the two on the right is a ghostly remnant of another figure, almost completely faded away. The man on the extreme right is striding normally, but the figure behind him is distorted, with dancing rattles around the knees and ankles.



These men, in a painting at Kriedouwkrans, have typically elongated triangular torsos and diminutive arms. The middle one seems incomplete.



At Sandfontein this yellow eland is painted over the feet of the right hand man. His white face has all but disappeared, leaving a characteristic 'hook head'. The figure on the left has more details of the head preserved, and white ornaments, possibly dancing rattles, around his ankles.



This unusually well-preserved painting at Sandfontein of a group of men shows their white faces clearly.



Groups of women were often painted dancing, like those above at Zuurvlaakte, or carrying digging sticks, like those on the right, from Kleinplasië. Digging sticks and collecting bags were associated with women, in the same way as hunting gear like bows and quivers, were associated with men.





Women used sticks, sometimes weighted with a bored stone, for digging up edible bulbs and tubers. The image above, from Bushmans Kloof, shows women with digging sticks. The two central figures are also wearing aprons over their buttocks. The zig-zags, perhaps representing rain clouds, have been painted over the human figures at a later date.

A smaller group of women, from Zuurvlaakte, also carrying digging sticks.





A group of women, from Ribbokfontein, carrying weighted digging sticks. Bored stones, secured with wooden wedges, were attached to digging sticks to aid in extracting starchy tubers from the ground. These probably formed the staple diet of the Bushmen. It was the women's role to gather plant foods so digging sticks and collecting bags were their signature items.

The image to the right, from Sevilla, also shows a group of women, at least one of whom is carrying a digging stick.





This group of women, at Traveller's Rest, may be dancing, their raised hands indicating the rhythmic clapping with which women accompanied the trance dance. They form a group at the extreme right of the photograph on the facing page. Compare the right-hand figure with the very similar central over-painted figure from Kriedouwkrans, on page 29.



The extraordinary painted wall of the main shelter at Traveller's Rest. The three yellow humps are the backs of elephants, each over a metre long, forming part of an even longer line of elephants, some holding the leading elephant's tail with its trunk. Originally they must have looked spectacular.



Paintings of people in a line are common, showing that the Bushmen often travelled around in sizable groups. This photograph covers only a third of this frieze at Grootplaat, of people carrying bags with tassels. Note the red patch on the left.



These yellow-cloaked figures, in a painting at Kleinplasië, carrying bags with tassels. They may be adult men, portrayed with rectangular cloaks reminiscent of upright eland bodies to indicate that they have made their ritual coming-of-age kill. They are carrying bags or quivers on their backs.

These running men with bows, at Stadsaal Rocks, must have had white heads, which have faded away completely. Note the handprint, lower left.



Things are seldom as they seem at first in the paintings. Four of these people running to the left are carrying hunting equipment, quivers and bows, but they have animal heads. This is a good example of the conflation of humans and animals that forms such an important part of Bushman mythology.





The lower frieze of figures in this panel at Zuurvlaakte is the older. It is a long line of people, some dressed in yellow 'eland' cloaks and with bags on their backs. At first sight this looks like a simple narrative picture of people on the move. But note the yellow patch on the right. This is an example of a common feature of many of the Cederberg paintings. There is another example illustrated in the upper frieze on page 56. The rock surface under some of these patches has been rubbed smoother than the surroundings. Some archaeologists think that shamans would rub these patches to transfer power to themselves from the images painted on the rock.

The upper frieze is far more recent. These 'finger paintings' include women in crinoline skirts and a sedan chair.



This photograph is an enlargement of the figures on the extreme right of the lower frieze on the facing page. The cloaked figures carry tasseled bags and have red tassels tied around their knees. These probably are adult men. The upper left hand figure is a woman carrying a stick and wearing a red apron over her buttocks. The naked figures may be young men who have not yet made their ritual coming-of-age kill.



This is a remarkably well preserved group scene, at Kleinplaspie, with people of different ages sitting or lying down, some possibly covered by carosses. These domestic scenes seem to portray a family group in a cave or shelter. The objects above them are men's quivers and women's collecting bags.



A closer view of part of the Kleinplasië group scene shows the remarkable detail of the yellow faces and the hunting and gathering equipment hanging above the people. In a number of rock shelters the remains of wooden pegs from which such equipment was hung can still be found rammed into cracks in the rock.

Some interpretations of rock art draw heavily on the /Xam stories recorded in the late 1800s by Wilhelm and Dorothea Bleek and Lucy Lloyd when they interviewed Bushmen from the Carnarvon district, incarcerated in Cape Town. These stories tell of a transcendental world, in which there was no clear distinction between people and animals, and where even the rain was an animal. These fragmentary stories told by a handful of men have inspired a whole industry of academic interpretations of specific paintings or groups of images, some more plausible than others. To some archaeologists, virtually all the paintings are images representing the trance experiences of shamans. To others, the original stories have been misinterpreted and deal more with the role of ancestors than of shamans. Poetry is open to interpretation, and the /Xam stories are poetic, many just as elusive and enigmatic as the paintings. Nevertheless, there is sufficient correspondence between the /Xam records and the mythology of contemporary jo/'hoansi "Bushman" of the Kalahari to indicate a fairly consistent set of beliefs between the various former Bushman communities in southern Africa, at least in the recent historical past. This allows archaeologists to start identifying conventions in the art, and to test their interpretations of these conventions against what is known about Bushman mythology, despite academic differences in interpretation and the awareness

that one cannot simply project the present into the past in a straightforward way. So three strands of information are woven together to try to understand the meaning of the rock art – the /Xam stories, the jo/'hoansi mythology, and the details of the paintings themselves.



Apparently the Bushmen did not make a distinction between an object and what it was made of, so this tasseled bag painted at Rooikrans may also represent an antelope and the power of the original animal. Such complicated metaphors make it difficult to interpret the rock art with much confidence.

A chronologically recent appearance in the rock art are finger dots and hand prints. Some are full prints, while others were made by painting broad curved lines on the palm before pressing them against the rock. Some shelters have numerous prints, covering whole walls. Others may have only a few. They also seem to be contemporaneous with the rows and patches of finger dots. Both the finger dots and hand prints can be found painted over the classical so-called “fine line” figures, so they are more recent than most of the art.

Who made them, and why? Some archaeologists believe that the appearance of pastoralists about 2 000 years ago caused disruption and change in the Bushman communities,. The patterns of finger dots and the hand prints may have been part of new rituals, perhaps initiation, which aimed at establishing ownership of local resources.



This pattern of finger dots at Klipfonteinrand is typical of numerous other examples in the Cederberg.



These handprints, some faded and other more clear, are in a shelter at Ribboksfontein that also contains numerous other paintings in various styles and presumably of various ages.



This panel in Elands Bay Cave consists of numerous handprints, most of them made by painting curved lines on the palm and then transferring them as painted palm prints to the rock.



Between 2000 and 1800 hundred years ago, domestic fat-tailed sheep were introduced to the Cape from further north. The painting above, at Ribboksfontein, shows two people (one very faded) and a very clear fat-tailed sheep with characteristically floppy ears. Did some of the hunters turn to sheep herding, or did they raid sheep from the Quena herders? Archaeologists don't know, and they are also puzzled by the complete lack of rock paintings of cattle, which the Quena herders also had before European colonisation at the Cape. The rather crude examples of sheep on the right are on Zuurvlakte.



For the Bushmen, worse was to come. From the seventeenth century onwards, European colonial farmers declared war on the Bushmen, killing and subjugating them systematically. This satirical painting on Zuurvlakte is of an European colonial farmer wearing a hat. Someone has added baggy trouser bottoms in the same brown paint used for the finger-painted dead animals beneath his feet. These crude figures represent the final phase of rock painting in the Cederberg, apart from modern graffiti.





The paintings on the facing page are at Stompiefontein, in the mountains overlooking the old diamond rush route from Ceres to Kimberley. These colonial period paintings clearly show women wearing crinoline skirts, men on horseback, pack animals, and wagons. These are Spring Wagons manufactured in Paarl and Wellington in the last third of the nineteenth century. This enabled archaeologists to date these particular paintings with unusual accuracy. (Photograph courtesy of Simon Hall)



A Spring Wagon at De Poort in Paarl, in the style manufactured in Paarl and Wellington in the last third of the nineteenth century. (Photograph courtesy of Johann Burger)

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