

Rock engravings marking the Redan landscape in Gauteng, South Africa

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The ontological¹ and epistemological² foundations of reality, myths, beliefs, and practices in ritual behaviour have long been studied by scholars around the globe. There is no single understanding and representation of reality, as all that is real or existent within the universe is historically shaped by interdependent cultural and social processes and fear factors. Although the study of rock art is primarily a branch of archaeology, cultural history also focuses on a past time and place, to study beliefs and ideas from a bottom-up approach and include the objects and experiences (sometimes unwritten) of the everyday life of the uneducated and less privileged. It is particularly well equipped to offer an understanding of the San myths, beliefs, ritual practices, and modes of representation of reality, as represented in their rock art. The Redan open-air rock engraving site is located on the Kookfontein farm, near the former Klip power station at Redan, close to a wetland that was formerly a rivulet that founded its way to the Klip River, a tributary of the Vaal River. The Klip-Vaal area is situated in the southern part of Gauteng, South Africa. Being part of the Late Stone Age hunting, domestic and ritual sites of the San people and later migrants it contains numerous documented and undocumented rock art sites. In line with interpretivism, the methodology is based on published and unpublished literature, as well as several on-site inspections of the site between 2002 and 2022. Authorship of the engravings at the Redan site is unconfirmed, although two dominant views regarding the cultural origin have emerged, namely a San hunter-gatherer shamanistic approach and the Koranna-Khoekhoen initiation site hypothesis.

Contribution: The article contributes to the neglected historiography of the rock engravings in the Klip-Vaal region, in particular the Redan site, and the need to facilitate a comparison with similar rock engravings in southern Africa.

Keywords: Khoe; Khoekhoe(n); Khoisan; petroglyphs; redan; ritual; rock art; San; Vaal River; / Xam.

Introduction

Human beings are toolmakers and express their beliefs in graphic and other expressive media. Rock art, an artefact that was consciously produced and closely concerned with identity, is one of the most theoretically informed means of reconstructing lifeways past and present.³ Southern Africa is home to many rock art traditions including the San, Khoekhoen herders, Bantu farmers and White colonists.⁴ When early Portuguese seafarers and later the Dutch settlers landed in the Cape, they diarised that they found two types of indigenous groups of people occupying the country, the hunter-gatherers known as Bushmen/San and the cattle owners known as "Hottentots"/Khoi (later Khoekhoen/Khoe). The Dutch settlers called the first inhabitants "Bushman" and the pastoral Khoekhoen called them "San", but both are considered by some to be derogatory. "Hottentot" was a name that lasted well into the 19th century until discarded as being derogatory by the survivors of the group, then named Khoikhoi, and again changed to Khoekhoen. Some writers have lumped the two macro-ethnic categories together as "Khoisan" (later changed to Khoesan).⁵

1.The nature of being.

2.The study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge.

3.Benjamin W. Smith and Sven Ouzman, "Taking Stock: Identifying Khoekhoen Herder Rock Art in Southern Africa," *Current Anthropology* 45, no. 4 (2004): 502.

4.Smith and Ouzman, "Taking Stock," 502.

5.Alan Barnard, *Hunters and herders of southern Africa: a comparative ethnography of the Khoisan peoples*. No. 85 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7–11. The researcher is sensitive to this point of view and in all instances, no derogatory reference is intended. As a result, the use of San and Khoekhoen is preferred.

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There are two rock art techniques in southern Africa: paintings to be found in shallow caves in mountainous areas and engravings (or petroglyphs) on the central plateau.⁶ Lately, reference to either petroglyphs or engravings is accepted. The term 'petroglyph' is derived from the Greek word *petro* meaning rock or stone, and *glyph* meaning an incision. Wilhelm Bleek referred to rock engravings as "chippings" and M.D.W. Jeffreys to the engravings at Redan as "doodling".⁷ We will use both engraving and petroglyph when referring to the engravings marking the Redan landscape. At Redan pecked engravings, making up the largest category, and were produced by percussive 'pecking' with a sharply pointed tool. The peckings vary through a range of sizes from coarse to very fine dots (vertical percussion) or dashes (slanted strokes). Cupules, small semi-hemispherical rock hollowed out by man, is excluded from this discussion as they are a unique form of so-called 'rock art marking'. It is noted that recent work also indicates that certain southern African 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".⁸

Indigenous rock art in southern Africa occupies an important place in post-1994 South Africa, both metaphorically and literally.⁹ The link between rock art and archaeological heritage (in post-apartheid South Africa) also plays a special role in identity formation, in particular to create a history for all.¹⁰ On 27 April 2000, the Republic of South Africa adopted a new national coat of arms and motto, which also appears on every South African coin. The image of the mirrored figures on the Linton Stone, an example of Khoisan¹¹ rock art, was redrawn in the coat of arms, together with the /Xam¹² text, rendering the motto "unity in diversity".¹³ Khoisan people are the original people (aborigines) of the country, "and thus through them a virtual primordial identity for the nation as a whole."¹⁴ Lewis-Williams, like George Stow (the discoverer of the coal deposits that lead to the establishment of Vereeniging), also stated that the San were the owners of the country and the rock art their "title deeds".¹⁵

6.H.C. Woodhouse, *Bushman Art of Southern Africa: 40 Significant Bushman Rock-Art Sites* (Cape Town: Art Publishers, no date), i.

7.A.R. Willcox and H.L. Pager, "The Petroglyphs of Redan, Transvaal," *Suid-Afrikaanse Tydskrif vir Wetenskap* (November 1967): 496.

8.Sven Ouzman, "Seeing is Deceiving: Rock Art and the Non-Visual," *World Archaeology* 33, no. 2 (2001): 237.

9.Jamie Hampson, "Presenting Rock Art and Perceiving Identity in South Africa and Beyond," *Time and Mind* 8, no. 4 (2015): 375.

10.Hampson, "Presenting Rock Art," 374.

11.Alan Barnard, "Coat of Arms and the Body Politic: Khoisan Imagery and South African National Identity," *Journal of Anthropology* 69, no. 1 (2004): 9.

12.The /Xam is the name of a San language group who hunted and gathered in the Karoo for uncounted millennia, Neil Rusch and John Parkington, *San rock engravings marking the Karoo landscape* (Cape Town: Random House Struik, 2010), 8.

13.B. Smith, J.D. Lewis-Williams, G. Blundell, and C. Chippindale, "Archaeology and Symbolism in the New South Africa Coat of Arms," *Antiquity* 74, no. 285 (2000): 467.

14.Barnard, "Coat of Arms," 19.

15.Pippa Skotnes, *Unconquerable Spirit: George Stow's History Paintings of the San* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008), 14.

This article is not a visual descriptive account of the site and petroglyph designs per se (it does not only ask questions about what these engravings depict, who made them, how old they are, how they were made and what they might mean) but rather offers tentative and cautionary observations of the possible role played by the motivations and occasions of these engravings. In this article, we will discuss the Redan engraving site, the only remaining large engraving site¹⁶ in Gauteng, situated between Vereeniging and Meyerton, in the Sedibeng District Municipality, in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

Representations

The Redan rock engravings include a few representations of animals, one human being, one mask and more than 230 geometrical glyphs, including groups of dots and rectilinear and irregularly curvilinear figures, and are for the greater part (about 73.8%) based on a circle with or without "rays".¹⁷ Many engraved images at Redan are neither human nor animal images, and are referred to as schematics, geometrics, or non-representational forms.

The circular motifs with and without radiating lines, are all different in size and design. This may be because different artists did the glyphs over a long period. Circle-motif designs are associated with typical San petroglyphs in South Africa, in particular Klipfontein, and Vaalpan in Griqualand West, Vryburg, in the Northern Cape, Vosburg in the Western Cape, Bosworth and Rhebokfontein in Klerksdorp and Stowlands in North West.¹⁸ They are also found in Namibia, Angola, Zambia and various other parts of Africa south of the equator.¹⁹ The Redan circle-motif designs (see Figure 1), include a circle with and without radiating lines, a circle divided by a cross, a small dot inside a circle, a circle with a vertical line, and a mask. These designs are similar to the range of geometric images in southern African herder (Khoekhoen) rock art.²⁰ Petroglyphs similar to those at Redan in Namibia, Angola, Zambia and the Northern Cape may indicate a cultural connection between them. However, the similarity with circle motives in the petroglyphs which occur in Ireland, Northern Italy, Switzerland, the Indus Valley, Patagonia and California and Nevada correspond with Jung's conclusion on circular designs (mandalas) as something that arise spontaneously in the human consciousness and are not seen to have a cultural connection.²¹ The image of a sphere or a circle has also been used through

16.Jeremy Hollmann, Archaeological Impact Assessment Report on the Redan engraving site: Springfield Coal Mining Project situated between Vereeniging and Meyerton in the Sedibeng District Municipality, Gauteng Province, 9/2020, page 2 https://sahris.sahra.org.za/sites/default/files/heritagereports/Rock%20Art%20Specialist%20Report_Springfield.pdf

17.Willcox and Pager, "The Petroglyphs of Redan," 492.

18.Willcox and Pager, "The Petroglyphs of Redan," 493.

19.Willcox and Pager, "The Petroglyphs of Redan," 497.

20.D.R.N.M. Morris, "Rock art in the Northern Cape: the implications of variability in engravings and paintings relative to issues of social context and change in the precolonial past" (PhD Thesis, University of the Western Cape, 2012), 179-180; Smith and Ouzman, "Taking Stock," 505.

21.Willcox and Pager, "The Petroglyphs of Redan," 496-497.



FIGURE 1: Fine pecked geometric engravings and a coarsely pecked animal engraving at Redan (Photo C. Gouws).

the ages to depict physical, biological and philosophical phenomena. Thus, some of the circular-motif petroglyphs in South Africa, Namibia, Angola and Zambia may not be associated with typical San authorship.

A category identified as “non-entoptic geometric” images are common in the later engraving periods, in particular along the Khoekhoen migration routes, at sites such as Driekops Eiland, at Nooitgedacht some 60 kilometres southwest of Kimberley, where they dominate.²² The Redan geometric images include a circle divided by a cross (similar to that found at Driekops Eiland),²³ a small dot inside a circle, a circle with smaller circles inside, and a circle with a vertical line in the middle. Circle-and-dot motives were also found at several rock art sites in Zimbabwe, concentric circles in Zambia and Malawi, circles with “rays” at the Tsodilo Hills, Botswana, and cross-in-circle designs in Mozambique.²⁴ Prins postulates that the Redan rock engravings are of non-San (Khoekhoen) origin.²⁵ Prins and Ouzman acknowledge the problem of authorship and point out that historical records show a predominantly Koranna-Khoekhoen presence on the southern Highveld during the 1800s.²⁶ The art of people such as the Zulu, Sotho and Tswana, who moved into southern Africa during the last 2000 years, is generally geometric.

In South Africa south of the Gariep and Limpopo rivers, in particular in the Transkei and Oakleigh shelter in Queenstown (present day Komani), Eastern Cape, painted geometric figures, squares, circles, crosses, dots, irregular rectangles and combinations of these on rocks are the work of Khoi (Khoekhoen) artists.²⁷ Similar geometric designs (e.g. the

22. Rusch and Parkington, *San Rock Engravings*, 43; Morris, “Rock art in the Northern Cape,” 178.

23. Willcox and Pager, “The Petroglyphs of Redan,” 496.

24. Willcox and Pager, “The Petroglyphs of Redan,” 498.

25. M. Prins, “The Primordial Circle: The Prehistoric Rock Engravings of Redan, Vereeniging” (PhD Thesis in History, North-West University, 2005): vi, 5.

26. Prins, “The Primordial Circle,” 5; Sven Ouzman, “The Magical Arts of a Raider Nation: Central South Africa’s Korana Rock Art,” *South African Archaeological Society Goodwin Series* 9 (2005): 101; Sven Ouzman, “Public Rock Art Sites of Southern Africa: Merrimetsi: Rock Art of a Raider Nation,” *Culna* 59 (2004): 26; Smith and Ouzman, “Taking stock,” 499.

27. Woodhouse, *Bushman Art*, 34.

circle) were found on rocks in Griquatown hills, Griqualand West, Northern Cape, and on rocks near the Great Bend of the Gy Gariep above the Pniel Mission Station.²⁸ Stow also documented an emblem that resembles the sun with rays on the rocks of the Bushman Koppie on the farm Wildebeest Kuil, Griqualand West, and a circle with a cross inside from the straited rocks near Bloem’s homestead, Riet River.²⁹ He also mentioned art that is mythologically similar to religious symbols used by some of the most ancient nations (e.g. the crossed circle = Celtic cross).³⁰ Furthermore, he stated that the meaning of these symbols was kept secret, and that the presence of the circle, the crescent, the cross and several others appear like mystic emblems.³¹ The above evidence seems to confirm Khoekhoen authorship but need to be integrated with other sources of evidence such as ethnography, genetics, linguistics, and archaeological excavation, to link the engravings at Redan directly to the Khoekhoen.

In southern African rock art, a small number of animal species are engraved regularly, with the most common images of large animals. Most common are the eland and hartebeest, which are almost always depicted from the side with attention to features such as horns, dewlap, back profile and bodily proportions.³² Willcox and Pager identified the Redan animals as an eland, a lion, a hartebeest or blesbok, similar in style to the few animal glyphs on Driekops Eiland.³³ It is speculated that the eland and hartebeest are made by /kaggen, “the /kaggen (or the mantis) that sits on the hunter’s quiver foretells that the owner has successfully shot and killed a hartebeest on the hunting-ground.”³⁴ The San people believed that the lion “made it rain and waited in a cave for the man who sought refuge there.”³⁵ The same source indicates that /kaggen “is angry with the people for killing the eland without telling him, as he is the one who made it.”³⁶ Using these clues, we may postulate that the Redan site was most probably a spiritual or ceremonial site, associated with a specific ritual or a variety of rituals (hunting and rain).

An important metaphor relating to water in /Xam stories explains the origin of rain in terms of a “rain animal”.³⁷ The one Redan animal image (see Figure 1) may be a representation of a rain animal remarkably similar to the one at Springbok Oog associated with hunting and prey.³⁸ It is stated that some individuals, men or women with specific powers and

28. Skotnes, *Unconquerable Spirit*, 26.

29. Skotnes, *Unconquerable Spirit*, 208, 212.

30. Morris, “Rock art in the Northern Cape,” 179.

31. Skotnes, *Unconquerable Spirit*, 48–49, 51.

32. Rusch and Parkington, *San Rock Engravings*, 65.

33. Willcox and Pager, “The Petroglyphs of Redan,” 492.

34. /kaggen, <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/stories/471/index.html>

35. Lion, <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/stories/449/index.html>

36. The mantis makes an eland, <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/stories/624/index.html>

37. Rusch and Parkington, *San Rock Engravings*, 41.

38. Rusch and Parkington, *San Rock Engravings*, 36.

responsibilities (*Igiten*), were able to drag a rain animal from a water source across the sky to release water in a specific location.³⁹ San descriptions of the rain animal often refer to large game or a large bloated animal of indeterminate species. The animal images on the Redan rocks may be linked with the rain-making beliefs of the San of the central interior and those of Tswana-speakers.⁴⁰ Some 'real' animals, at times, functioned as models for the rain animal, notably the eland. In particular, the killing of an eland was considered especially favourable and would result in plentiful rain.⁴¹ We may concur that the images were public and refer to the domestic and personal lives of all people, with specific reference to rainmaking.⁴² Rocky ridges served as viewing platforms and stages for the ceremony of rainmaking (engraved rain animal), a place where men initiated hunters (as implied by the hunting metaphor or engraved eland),⁴³ but also for magical purposes and performing rites and ceremonies.

As already mentioned, there are different perspectives on the authorship of the Redan site. The one perspective favours the shamanistic interpretative framework associated with the San hunter-gatherers, while the other points to the site being part of Khoekhoen initiation rites, more specifically a place of shelter and segregation for young women during their first menstrual cycle.⁴⁴ Chan argues that these two interpretative frameworks – shamanism and initiation rites – might not be mutually exclusive.⁴⁵

When analysing and interpreting rock art, the question of what motivated the artists has aroused the interest of academics and the public. The shaman (so-called medicine man or doctor) is a prominent figure in the San⁴⁶ and other indigenous cultures of Africa's spiritual life. These individuals have access to the spirit world through trance rituals, enabling them to protect, heal and guide their communities.⁴⁷ We may therefore speculate that the lion or rain animal at Redan has a link with the spiritual world, a world that could be reached by shamans. Further to this, the one 'human being' at Redan looks like a therianthrope. Therianthropes are half-human, half-animal figures, a depiction of the hallucinatory visions of shamans in a trance while they transform into antelope or other animals.⁴⁸ They were not hunters wearing animal masks, as some 20th century

39. Rusch and Parkington, *San Rock Engravings*, 41.

40. Sven Ouzman, "Spiritual and Political Uses of a Rock Engraving Site and Its Imagery by San and Tswana-Speakers," *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 50, no. 161 (1995): 60.

41. Ouzman, "Spiritual and Political Uses," 60.

42. Rusch and Parkington, *San Rock Engravings*, 119.

43. Rusch and Parkington, *San Rock Engravings*, 119–120.

44. Prins, "The Primordial Circle"; Chan, "Visualising the Voices of Redan," 42.

45. Jo-Ann Charmaine Chan, "Visualising the Voices of Redan: An Experimental Application of Forensic Anthropology and Narrative Identity to a Disappearing Landscape" (MA diss. in Graphic design North-West University, 2017), 42.

46. Healers, <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/stories/396/index.html>

47. Things girls and youths must avoid, <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/stories/396/index.html>

48. Lion turns into a man, <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/stories/769/index.html>

writers have argued, but shamans (women or men) while in a trance and capable of healing, undertaking extracorporeal journeys, creating rain and controlling animals.⁴⁹

Shamans and/or sorceres and/or healers activated their potency to enter a trance either during large dances or in more solitary circumstances through hyperventilation, rhythmic movement, and music.⁵⁰ In their rock art, they depicted the trance dance, hallucinations experienced, symbols of supernatural potency as well as entoptic phenomena. Entoptics are a variety of "shapes" (grids, dots, zigzags, and crenellations) that are "seen" universally by people as they enter a state of "trance".⁵¹ It is noted that there are numerous entoptic forms visible in southern African rock art (also at Redan) and Lewis-Williams *et al.* mention six types that recur.⁵²

These are:

(1) a basic grid and its development in a lattice and expanding hexagonal pattern, (2) sets of parallel lines, (3) dots and short flecks, (4) zigzag lines crossing the field of vision (reported by some subjects as angular, by others as undulating), (5) nested catenary curves (in a developed form the outer arc comprises flickering zigzags), and (6) filigrees or thin meandering lines.

Historical background and context

There are several archaeological sites in the Middle-Vaal area,⁵³ but none in the Klip-Vaal area or near the Redan site. According to historical and archaeological evidence in South Africa, the San and Khoekhoen groups are descended from Late Stone Age hunter-gatherers and pastoralists (30 000 to 12 000 BP), occupied areas near a water source, and who were present long before 2000 BP when the farming and iron-using peoples came to occupy the land.⁵⁴ By the mid-1800s the San had barely survived the Korannas/Koranas and the European settlers' indiscriminate hunting of both game and the San people.⁵⁵ During the early 19th century a large group of San individuals migrated from the central uKhahlamba-Drakensberg to the Highveld north of the Vaal River (Gauteng),⁵⁶ where the Redan site is situated.

T.N. Leslie (1858–1942), a friend of George Stow (1822–1882), who served as major in the first town council of Vereeniging, located several rock art sites in the Klip-Vaal region, and

49. J. D. Lewis-Williams, *et al.*, "The Signs of All Times: Entoptic Phenomena in Upper Palaeolithic Art," *Current Anthropology* 29, no. 2 (1988): 204, 205.

50. About the 'Toornan' the Bushman witchdoctor, <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/stories/175/index.html>

51. Morris, "Rock art in the Northern Cape," 178.

52. Lewis-Williams *et al.*, "The Signs of All Times," 203, 205.

53. J. H. N. Loubser, "Buffelshoek: an ethnoarchaeological consideration of a Late Iron Age settlement in the southern Transvaal." *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* (1985): 81–82.

54. Hampson, "Presenting Rock Art," 375.

55. Korannas brought guns; Dutch attacks on !xam, <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/stories/467/index.html>

56. C. M. Schlebusch, F. Prins, M. Lombard, *et al.*, "The Disappearing San of South-eastern Africa and their Genetic Affinities," *Human Genetics* 135 (2016): 1366. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00439-016-1729-8>

mentioned the Redan non-representational engravings in his unpublished diary as early as 1939.⁵⁷ He also stated that “prehistoric man lived here in great numbers, probably for thousands of years” and the enormous quantities of stone tools in this area “[point] to a dense population permanently settled for long ages”.⁵⁸ C. van Riet Lowe worked to protect this site during the 1950s, and it was declared a national monument in August 1971. When the Monuments Commission fenced in the site, they accidentally damaged some glyphs and left others outside the fenced area.⁵⁹ It is currently listed as a Category II Provincial Heritage Site by the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA). Its heritage value lies in the more than 200 petroglyphs (engravings) that are located on the outcrops of flat Ecca sandstone, of which the significance and authorship is contested.

It is noted that Redan was documented as the only remaining major rock art site of its kind in the Gauteng province.⁶⁰ There were many engraving sites in the Vereeniging area, but most of them have been destroyed by development, mining activities and the seasonal flooding of the Vaal River. In 2006 the researcher visited a rock art site with engraving and paintings with Prof. Johann Tempelhoff and students on an island in the Vaal River (on the farm Leeukuil) north of the Ascot bridge, up-stream from the North-West University Campus in Vanderbijlpark. There is also a large engraving site on the farm Daskop, a private property near Parys in the Free State province.

Literature

Most early travellers (17th and 18th century Europeans) to the Cape and interior of southern Africa included some account of the local San and Khoisan societies.⁶¹ Primary information on these first inhabitants (San) was documented by the linguists, Wilhelm Bleek and his sister-in-law Lucy Lloyd, and is stored in a digital San archive housed at the University of Cape Town.⁶² They learnt the /Xam San language, studied its grammar and translated about 12000 pages of verbatim /Xam texts into English.⁶³ G.R. von Wielligh, a 19th century land surveyor and contemporary of Bleek and Lloyd, compiled and published in Afrikaans a four-volume San

57.Vaal Teknorama Archives Depot, Vereeniging. Leslie file 03/13558: “The diary of T.N. Leslie,” 1939, 78.

58.“The Diary of T.N. Leslie,” 77–78.

59.Personal observation by the researcher.

60.Margueritha Prins, “The Primordial Circle: The Prehistoric Rock Engravings of Redan, Vereeniging” (PhD Thesis in History, North-West University, 2005): vi; Jo-Ann Charmaine Chan, “Visualising the Voices of Redan: An Experimental Application of Forensic Anthropology and Narrative Identity to a Disappearing Landscape” (MA diss. in Graphic design North-West University, 2017): 34; Jeremy Hollmann, Archaeological Impact Assessment Report on the Redan engraving site: Springfield Coal Mining Project situated between Vereeniging and Meyerton in the Sedibeng District Municipality, Gauteng Province, September 2020, 10.

61.See the published travels, diaries and/or letters of Robert Jacob Gordon, Francois Le Vaillant, Thomas Pringle, Carl Peter Thunberg, Anders Sparrman, François Valentyn, George Thompson, Thomas Baines, Andrew Smith, and Charles Bell.

62.Online at <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/> See also A. Bank, “Evolution and Racial Theory: The Hidden Side of Wilhelm Bleek,” *South African Historical Journal* 43, no. 1 (2000): 163–178.

63.Home page, <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/>

archive as *Boesman-stories* (Bushman Stories) in 1919–1921 about his interaction with the /Xam people in their home territory.⁶⁴ This publication was translated, edited and published in English by Chris Low and Neil Rusch.⁶⁵ The artist and art-historical voice of Pippa Skotnes, absent from the early rock art interpretations, reassessed the creative and imaginative traditions as well as the formal contexts of the San paintings. She presents George W Stow’s notes (he discovered the coal deposits that would lead to the establishment of Vereeniging during the late 19th century and is acknowledged as the father of rock art research in South Africa) and many painted copies of rock art and pencil-drawn copies of engravings in her 2008 publication *Unconquerable Spirit: George Stow’s History Paintings of the San*. Archaeologists and anthropologists in general have focused on the factual content of San rock art, while art historians and artists like Skotnes, Erich Mayer and Walter Battiss appreciated the aesthetic and expressive potential of the art.⁶⁶ However, during the past decades, cognitive archaeologists such as David Lewis-Williams, Patricia Vinnicombe, and Thomas Dowson shifted the emphasis of study to the oral and complex intellectual traditions of the painters.⁶⁷ Patricia Vinnicombe’s *People of the Eland* should be mentioned here, as she stated that the rock art was not simple depictions of everyday life, but instead a reflection of their beliefs and symbols to understanding the world.⁶⁸ After the 1970s, this approach has become the standard for all scholars working on rock art.

In David Lewis-Williams’s work undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s he disputed interpretations that reveal the art as reflecting specific events, hunting practice or domestic life, and located the art as part of ritual, shamanistic practice (trance performance, and resulting hallucinations).⁶⁹ In this article, the researcher acknowledge and add to the research already done on the petroglyphs of Redan by A.R. Willcox and H.L. Pager (1967), Margueritha Prins (2005), Jo-Ann Charmaine Chan (2017), and Jeremy Hollmann (2020).⁷⁰

Dating

There is no generally accepted method for dating rock engravings, although there is consentaneity that the art

64.Helize Van Vuuren, *A Necklace of Springbok Ears: /Xam Orality and South African Literature*, First edition revised (Stellenbosch: Sun Media, 2016), iii.

65.C. Low and N. Rusch, *Bushman Stories. Recorded by G.R. von Wielligh* (Cape Town: !Khwa ttu & Mantis Books, 2017), ii.

66.A. Duffey, “Erich Mayer, Walter Battiss and San Rock Art,” *De Arte* 61, no. 74 (2006): 20.

67.Duffey, “Erich Mayer,” 20.

68.Patricia Vinnicombe, *People of the Eland* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1976).

69.Skotnes, *Unconquerable Spirit*, 14.

70.Willcox and Pager, “The Petroglyphs of Redan,” 492–499; Margueritha Prins, “The Primordial Circle: The Prehistoric Rock Engravings of Redan, Vereeniging” (PhD Thesis in History, North-West University, 2005); Jo-Ann Charmaine Chan, “Visualising the Voices of Redan: An Experimental Application of Forensic Anthropology and Narrative Identity to a Disappearing Landscape” (MA diss. in Graphic design North-West University, 2017); Jeremy Hollmann, Archaeological Impact Assessment Report on the Redan engraving site: Springfield Coal Mining Project situated between Vereeniging and Meyerton in the Sedibeng District Municipality, Gauteng Province, September 2020.

occurred over long periods. The dating of individual rock art sites, particularly rock engravings, in southern Africa presents us with technical difficulties. According to Cooke, paintings and engravings on rock surfaces predated the invention of writing, starting 20000 years ago in Europe coming to an end by 1870 in Australia, while finger paintings in Botswana by so-called “bush people” continued until the 1960s.⁷¹ To date rock art between 20000 BP and the 19th century is usually acceptable. However, there is consensus that a larger part of rock art in southern Africa was produced within the past 2000 years.⁷² Over the past decades, several dating methods have been widely used to provide relative rock art chronologies. These include sequences of stylistic changes; sequences of superimposed art of varying styles or content; visual differences in the state of weathering and deterioration of the rocks; the content of the art itself, for example, ox wagons, women’s fashion, guns and ships; association between the rock art and archaeological material, especially scatters of artefacts at engraved sites; assumptions, for example, early travellers to southern Africa who observed San paintings on the rocks; and determining the number of amino acids in the paint and radiocarbon dating (both not applicable to engravings).⁷³ The same source indicates that the practice of rock painting in southern Africa dates back to at least 26 000 years and rock engraving at least 10 000 years.⁷⁴

The date when the first rock art, in particular the petroglyphs in the Klip-Vaal area, was produced is unknown. Willcox and Pager noted that the condition of the exposed soft rock at Redan is an indication that these petroglyphs are likely to be less than a century or two old.⁷⁵ Chronological evidence may be found if archaeologists excavate the Redan site to search for artefacts found in situ, thus making it possible to reconstruct the environment and date the petroglyphs. It may also help to extend the evidence of ritual from the engravings to the archaeological context and to reflect on the materiality of ritual activity, for example, the types of artefacts and material implicated in ritual, and their manipulation as ritually powerful objects.⁷⁶ Until now, no record of occupation, systematic and well-dated excavations, or documented archaeological evidence has been found at Redan. Possibly, quite likely, there is no archaeological deposit at this site.

Interpretation

There have been many approaches to the interpretation of rock art during the late 19th century and the greater part of

71.C.K. Cooke, *Rock Art of Southern Africa* (Cape Town: Books of Africa, 1969), 1–2.

72.M. Prins, “From Apathy to Oblivion? The Shameful History of Heritage Resource Management in the Vaal Triangle,” *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa* 3, no. 1 (2007): 42.

73.Anne I. Thackeray, “Dating the Rock Art of Southern Africa,” *Goodwin Series* 4 (1983): 21–22. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3858098>.

74.Thackeray, “Dating the Rock Art,” 25.

75.Willcox and Pager, “The Petroglyphs of Redan,” 496.

76.See the article by John Kinahan, “A Ritual Assemblage from the Third Millennium BC in the Namib Desert and its Implications for the Archaeology and Rock Art of Shamanic Performance,” *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 53, no. 1 (2018): 40–62.

the 20th century. Rock art was sometimes seen as records of actual events during a time before writing, or interpreted as being primitive and semi-naturalistic,⁷⁷ idealistic, materialistic and aesthetic.⁷⁸ For the idealistic, rock art is a reflection of human beings’ vision of the world, or the expression of religious feeling and the urge to transcend reality; a materialistic approach sees art as the reflection of the tangible existence of people in a given society, while an aesthetic interpretation regards this art as a desire to create a form of self-expression.⁷⁹

Many San societies in southern Africa see the world as consisting of several connected worlds in which one could experience a range of emotions and events, which had a direct influence on the interpretation of their rock art.⁸⁰ It is believed that ‘the upper and lower worlds constituted the extra-ordinary Spirit World in which God, lesser gods, the spirits of the dead, supernatural people, and potent animals lived, and the middle world approximated the Ordinary World in which “normal” people physically dwelt’.⁸¹ Furthermore, the ‘total interactive field for [indigenous] art and ritual performance is the cosmos as a whole, the earth, the sky, and the underworld, and every performance involves the whole of creation by symbolic and expressive means.’⁸² This corresponds with the view of John Berger who argues that visual arts have always existed within a certain preserve; ‘originally magical or sacred, as well as physical: the place, the cave ... in which, or for which the work was made’.⁸³ He also argues that the experience of art was first an experience of ritual and was set apart from ordinary life to be able to exercise power over it.⁸⁴ As such, the Redan engravings may be interpreted as the subtle and profound ritual or religious images of a complex past society.

A predominant interpretation of all rock art, paintings and engravings, is that rock art was created by the hunter-gatherer San, and a response to ‘sympathetic magic’ to bring luck to the hunt or ensure success in the hunt.⁸⁵ This correlates with the shamanistic interpretative approach which emphasises the experiences, beliefs, rituals and role of the shaman in ensuring a society’s welfare, for example to bring rain. It seems reasonable to concur with the trance hypothesis of Lewis-Williams who stated that rock art is part of the San ritual behaviour; that images were reservoirs of power; and that these people could connect with them and draw power

77.Cooke, *Rock Art*, 2, 15.

78.J. Ki-Zerbo (ed.), “African Prehistoric Art,” in UNESCO. International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa. *General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory*. Abridged ed. Volume 1 (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981), 290–291.

79.Ki-Zerbo, “African Prehistoric Art,” 291.

80.Ouzman, “Seeing is Deceiving”, 238.

81.Ouzman, “Seeing is Deceiving”, 238.

82.Vastokas cited in David M. Witelson. “Performance Theory: A Growing Interest in Rock Art Research,” *Time and Mind* 0, no. 0 (2018): 11.

83.John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (England: Penguin Books, 1977), 32.

84.Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 32.

85.Chan, “Visualising the Voices of Redan,” 41.

from them. Ouzman added that the “percussive sound and rhythm of the medicine dance that reminds the shaman of the ordinary world” may guide him or her back to it.⁸⁶ Thus, “trancing shamans who wished to alert the Spirit World to their impending entry by tapping or hammering on rocks or by people calling the shamans back to the Ordinary World”⁸⁷ may be the creators of the hammer marks at rock-engraving sites, including the Redan site.

Lately, a gendered analytical lens has provided new insights for an understanding of the stereotypes, identities and personhood that the San chose to depict in their rock art.⁸⁸ It is noted that activities and responsibilities are strictly defined by gender: a distinction between men and women, hunters and gatherers, those who hunt and those who do not hunt, and those who do and those who do not give birth.⁸⁹ The life-history dimension, boys to becoming hunters and girls to become mothers, is celebrated to learn about the life that lies ahead.⁹⁰ The unifying aspect of all these rock art approaches is “the immersive, interactive context of performance that social relations are enacted and articulated between the participants, be they human or otherwise”.⁹¹ This interpretation is consistent with new research that employs both performance theory and, more specifically, social theory to study rock art, as it emphasises the role of “social activities, social relations and performance in terms of dichotomised social structure and individual agency”.⁹²

To enable new interpretations of the Redan engravings, the idea of looking beyond the images themselves will add information on the dating and interpretation of this site. The rock art may be interpreted not only as a meaning-making and storytelling practice, but also include the elements beyond the images themselves, in particular the relationship between the rock art and its surrounding physical environment and landscapes.⁹³

Future of the site

The Redan rock engraving site is currently an abandoned heritage site and a damaged landscape on private property.⁹⁴ The fence was removed in 1995 which resulted in uncontrolled access to the engraving site and allowed collectors to remove rocks.⁹⁵ During the past two decades, the researcher has

86.Ouzman, “Seeing is Deceiving,” 244.

87.Ouzman, “Seeing is Deceiving,” 244.

88.Dawn Green, “San Rock Paintings of Women in the Southern Maloti-Drakensberg and Eastern Stormberg, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa: Ritual Specialists, Potency and Social Conditioning,” *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa* 57, no. 4 (2022): 463.

89.Rusch and Parkington, *San rock engravings*, 10; Green, “San rock paintings,” 463.

90.Rusch and Parkington, *San rock engravings*, 10.

91.Witelson, “Performance theory,” 19.

92.Witelson, “Performance theory,” 20.

93.Astrid J. Nyland and Heidrun Stebergjøkken, “Changing Perceptions of Rock Art: Storying Prehistoric Worlds,” *World Archaeology* 52, no. 3 (2020): 512–529.

94.Prins, “From Apathy to Oblivion?”, 40, and own observation.

95.Prins, “The Primordial Circle,” 2. See also L. Henry, “A History of Rock Art Removing in South Africa,” *The South African Archaeological Bulletin* 62 (2007): 44–48.

witnessed the damage and disappearance of some of this rock engravings and has tried to document the few remnants. The landscape, being in the industrial and mining areas of Sasolburg-Vereeniging-Meyerton, is exposed to air pollution, acid rain, and sinkholes that pose a significant threat to the preservation of the open-air rock art. Further to this, the heat of veld fires, vandalism, theft, and normal agencies of weathering have also attacked the exposed surfaces, and since the 1960s the rock has been exfoliating in layers of 10mm which has resulted in ‘scores, if not hundreds’ of petroglyphs being lost.⁹⁶

During the 1920s to 1960s rock art were relocated to museums as the best way to protect it.⁹⁷ Accordingly, in the 1950s Cecil Van Riet Lowe of the Historic Monuments Commission ordered the removal of the largest of the engravings from the Redan site.⁹⁸ The rock was taken to the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg where it is displayed in the climate-controlled environment of the Origins Centre Museum. The option of removal should perhaps only be retained for cases in which particular engravings at Redan are deteriorating and where it is clear that removal would help to preserve the engraving. When working with rock art, light is an essential tool for searching and documenting images. It involves not only one type of light (for example at sunset, mid-day or evening), but also the making of 3D scans to allow for later play with light and for further discoveries.⁹⁹ At present, North-West University researchers are busy with a project using digital archaeological techniques (2D, 2.5D and 3D) to document similar engravings at the Bosworth rock art site near Klerksdorp, and plan to document the Redan engravings in future if funds allow.

The National Monuments Act (Act no. 28 of 1969), which replaced the Bushman Relics Act, made it illegal to ‘destroy, damage, excavate, alter or remove rock art from its original site’ without a permit, declaring certain rock art sites national monuments. *The Environmental Conservation Act (Act no. 73 of 1989)* similarly aimed to prevent heritage sites in the landscape particularly rock art from being destroyed. *The National Heritage Resources Act (Act no. 25 of 1999)* (NHRA) replaced the *National Monuments Act of 1969* and listed general principles for heritage resources management (Section 5) to ensure that heritage resources are effectively managed. In addition, the South African Heritage Resource Agency (SAHRA), which replaced the old National Monuments Council (NMC) in 2000, need to take on the role of maintenance should the owner fail to maintain such heritage sites satisfactorily. In 2005, the farm Kookfontein was sold to Purple Rain Properties and their subsidiary Ocon Bricks to continue mining clay for the manufacture of bricks. They were fully aware the heritage site on their property.¹⁰⁰

96.Willcox and Pager, “The Petroglyphs of Redan,” 492

97.Catherine Namono, “Curation as Engagement: Boulder Exhibits at the Origins Centre, South Africa,” *Critical Arts* 35, no. 4 (2021): 23.

98.Prins, “From Apathy to Oblivion?”, 45.

99.Nyland, and Stebergjøkken, “Changing Perceptions of Rock Art,” 518.

100.Prins, “From Apathy to Oblivion?” 48.

Nevertheless, there is no access control, and there is free access from the Ocon Bricks entrance gate (also used by the recently closed landfill site) through the grounds of the adjacent Springfield School or the neighbouring farm Waldrift. In this case, the responses of the owner of the land and SAHRA had been non-committal.¹⁰¹ This shows how policy in 2023 is still not effective in the conservation or protection of rock art sites.

On a more positive note, in 1999 the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) asked the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) of the University of the Witwatersrand, which has an extremely large collection of donated rock art, to 'design a national strategy to turn South Africa into the world's leading rock art tourism destination.'¹⁰² Additionally, the aim of the 1999 legislation was to shift the focus from European/Western/colonial heritage and interests to African heritage to include local communities in its management.¹⁰³ In 2000 the Vereeniging Teknorama museum attempted to promote Redan as an educational and regional tourist destination, but these did not materialise.

Some rock art sites in southern Africa are still special places and small groups of San descendants who live in the Kalahari, southern Botswana and the uKahlamba Drakensberg still perform many of their ancient rituals there.¹⁰⁴ More specifically, rituals such as the trance dance, girls' puberty observances and boys' first-kill rites depicted on rock art all around southern Africa are still performed today.¹⁰⁵ At Redan we need to embrace a more holistic approach, also respecting the African perspectives and the African way of preserving the site, not only interested in the Western, physical approach of keeping the rock engravings as an original artwork to be admired, but also in the African spiritual management of the site. To protect the Redan site, we concur with a plea from Prins that the 'constructing and reinforcing of group identity ... among a Khoisan interest group in the Klip-Vaal area, should be explored.'¹⁰⁶ The question is whether the Khoisan descendants who have an ancestral spiritual link (and cultural rights) to the Redan sacred site will be interested in the management of the site.¹⁰⁷

101. Prins, "The Primordial Circle," 72; N Ndlovu, "Access to Rock Art Sites: A Right or a Qualification?" *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 64, no. 189 (2009): 61–68.

102. G. Laue, T. Turkington, and B. Smith, "Presenting South African Rock Art to the World," *The Digging Stick* 18, no. 3 (2001): 5–7.

103. Ndlovu, "Access to Rock Art Sites," 61; see also B. Jeursen, "Rock Art as a Bridge Between Past and Future: A Common Cultural Heritage for the New South Africa?" *Critical Arts* 9, no. 2 (1995): 119–129; and S. Klopper, "Whose Heritage? The Politics of Cultural Ownership in Contemporary South Africa," *NKA Journal of Contemporary Art* 5 (1996): 34–37.

104. Hampson, "Presenting Rock Art," 379.

105. J. David Lewis-Williams, *Images of Mystery: Rock Art of the Drakensberg* (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2003), 81.

106. Prins, "From apathy to oblivion?" 50.

107. Ndlovu, "Access to Rock Art Sites," 61, discusses the uKahlamba Drakensberg case study where access to rock art sites is granted depending on paying a fee (i.e. affordability) "rather than on group rights to cultural heritage resources (cultural rights), driven by a management approach that emphasises the physical conservation and financial sustainability of a site, rather than its spiritual management."

Conclusion

While it may be stated that the San were the earliest inhabitants of southern Africa and are traditionally associated with rock art (paintings and engravings), the traditional belief in San hunter-gatherer authorship for the rock paintings and rock engravings is being contested by many scholars, and recent research points to a Khoekhoen herder,¹⁰⁸ and a Tswana origin.¹⁰⁹ Both the San (hunter-gatherers) and Khoekhoen (pastoralists) ceased to exist as communities in the southern Gauteng region towards the end of the 19th century and the Khoisan in the first decades of the 20th century. We may conclude that authorship of the engravings at the Redan site is unconfirmed, although two dominant views regarding the cultural origin of the engravings have emerged – the San and the Khoekhoen. However, a great deal of work must be done to associate the Redan petroglyphs with a particular group of people, hunter-gatherers or pastoralists.

There is a consensus among rock art specialists that it is expected that the engraved images at Redan, which have occurred over long periods, show changes and must have been done by different artists; were not descriptive or made for decorative purposes; that these non-literary marks are evidence of a history of acts and interactions and communicate on a semiotic level; and were created in a past where potent spiritual forces were at work.¹¹⁰ To add to this, the Redan engraving site may be seen as a powerful place where "people explored their identity and spirituality through conventional and unusual applications of their sensory perceptions"¹¹¹ as performed during rituals. The Redan engravings is therefore an important heritage site.

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108. Prins, "The Primordial Circle," vi.

109. Ouzman, "Spiritual and Political Uses," 58.

110. Chan, "Visualising the Voices of Redan," 58.

111. Ouzman, "Seeing is Deceiving," 252.

Data availability

The author confirms that the information supporting the findings of this study are available within the article

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