

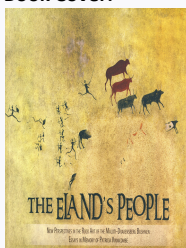


Rock art and archaeology in the Maloti-Drakensberg: Then and now

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Rock art and archaeology in the Maloti-Drakensberg: Then and now

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The eland's people is a series of essays about advances in our knowledge of the Drakensberg-Maloti San people made over the last 35 years. It is a tribute to Patricia Vinnicombe, the pioneering rock art recorder and researcher whose landmark volume *People of the eland*, published in 1976, was the first major published work to argue persuasively that South African rock art can – indeed, must – be understood in terms of the belief systems of the artists.

It may not be apparent to readers unfamiliar with the field just how important a step this was. Many images in rock paintings are immediately recognisable as animals of various species (usually antelope) or human figures. Others, however, are much more enigmatic, e.g. human torsos with animal heads. These were usually considered 'mythological' creatures and, prior to Vinnicombe's work, dismissed as inaccessible to contemporary viewers. Vinnicombe's painstaking recording of thousands of rock paintings, her detailed understanding of the patterning in the imagery, her sympathetic reading of southern African hunter-gatherer ethnography and years of hard intellectual work enabled her to develop a new way of thinking about the art. In *People of the eland* she demonstrated convincingly that many of the paintings are an expression of San ideas about the spiritual world, and connections between this and the material world, providing a wealth of detailed information to substantiate her arguments.

At about the same time, David Lewis-Williams was working on much of the same material; his key volume *Believing and seeing* was published in 1981. In the late 1970s Vinnicombe moved to Australia, where she worked with Aboriginal people on a range of issues to do with art and also pressing social needs such as land claims and welfare. Lewis-Williams continued to research Drakensberg rock art, building on his and Vinnicombe's early insights to produce his magisterial body of work on the interpretation of southern African rock art. Upon her retirement Vinnicombe renewed her ties with South African archaeology, especially the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) at the University of the Witwatersrand, under Lewis-Williams's directorship. Many of her original tracings and associated records were lodged there, and she worked on them in collaboration with RARI staff until her sudden, unexpected death in 2003.

The introduction to *The eland's people* tells us that Vinnicombe herself was keen to see an up-to-date synthesis of archaeological work done in the Maloti-Drakensberg region in the years since the publication of her 1976 book. Sadly, she died too soon to be part of this, but Peter Mitchell and Benjamin Smith have put together a substantial wide-ranging volume covering both rock art studies and the results of archaeological excavations. There has been a great deal of research in this area over the past 35 years with many papers published in a variety of journals, so it is extremely useful to have this compilation, together with new information and analysis. The editors' introduction explains the background and rationale for the volume, and also that it accompanies the reprinting of *People of the eland*, now a rare and highly sought-after item of Africana. Chapter 2 is a delightful personal memoir by David Lewis-Williams, telling of his friendship and collegial relationship with Patricia Vinnicombe. It conveys something of the excitement they both felt at the breakthroughs they were making, and gives a very interesting account of their differences of opinion about the interpretation of the art, and how these changed over the years. Chapter 3, by Lynn Meskell, is entitled 'Contextualising *People of the eland*' and considers the book in the light of wider contemporary thinking in archaeology and anthropology.

In Chapter 4, Nessa Leibhammer examines different rock art recorders' approaches to copying paintings, and the way these influenced subsequent interpretations. Interspersed through the text is a series of boxes on specific subjects, including one by Justine Olofsson on Vinnicombe's tracing and colour rendering technique. Life as a rock art researcher in the 1960s and 1970s was sometimes, by today's standards, shockingly difficult: in the early days, the Vinnicombe farmhouse had no electricity, necessitating visits to the local school to use a light table to redraw field tracings.

David Pearce, Catherine Namono and Lara Mallen survey the study of Drakensberg-Maloti rock art over the last fifty or so years, starting with Vinnicombe's contribution. As they point out, we now



Source: Photo taken by Peter Mitchell as presented in the book entitled 'The eland's people' Sehonghong Shelter, one of the major archaeological sites of the Maloti-Drakensberg.

know a great deal more about San rock art than we did at the time that Vinnicombe wrote *People of the eland*. In their words (p. 75) 'we broadly understand what San rock art is about, both at the level of the art corpus and at the level of many classes of imagery'. They see Vinnicombe's contribution as falling into three main areas: quantification, ethnography and history, of which the second – her contribution to developing the ethnographic approach to interpreting rock art – is certainly the most important. This approach has produced spectacular successes in the hands of at least some researchers, but it has limitations – especially the narrow spatial and temporal range of the very fragmentary ethnography that is preserved – that Pearce et al. appear not to recognise, and certainly do not acknowledge. In the concluding section of this chapter, the authors write that the next focus in rock art research should be 'engagement with the art on a much finer scale' (p. 75), i.e. interpreting the imagery in individual shelters, understanding relationships between images and explaining regional differences in art traditions. A major difficulty with this last endeavour is the paucity of regional ethnographies. 'Finer-scale' work would no doubt be interesting, but is this really the principal goal of current rock art research?

Elsewhere in this volume, several authors mention the need to integrate rock art and excavated archaeological records, a quest that will require better understanding of the age of the art than we have at present. In a very useful chapter, Aron Mazel summarises advances in the dating of the Maloti-Drakensberg rock art. The best evidence derives from radiocarbon dates for stratified archaeological deposits incorporating paintings (or fragments thereof), and accelerator mass spectrometry radiocarbon dating of the images or mineral crusts closely associated with them. This technique enables direct dating of very small quantities of carbon, but in this context it is controversial because of

doubts about the origin and nature of carbon in these crusts, and this approach would certainly benefit from more basic investigative work. Nevertheless, there are now a number of direct dates ranging up to 2000 to 3000 years before present. Of course, older paintings may be less well preserved and therefore more difficult to date. The chapter makes no mention of portable painted stones from elsewhere in southern Africa with substantially earlier dates,^{1,2,3} indicating that painting in the sub-continent is older than has thus far been demonstrated in the Maloti-Drakensberg area.

The following chapter, by Peter Mitchell, summarises the results from archaeological excavations in the Maloti-Drakensberg area, including many by Mitchell himself or his students. There is much to summarise: almost six pages of references are cited. This work has been done over many years, by researchers with very different interests, but he identifies five themes: understanding the cultural or stratigraphic sequence, assessing the degree of continuity or discontinuity in occupation, peoples' use of the landscape or mobility patterns, intra- and inter-regional contacts and the impact of agropastoralism in the last 2000 years. One can quibble with some points but, on the whole, this is a valuable chapter.

It is frustrating that one of Vinnicombe's research goals – bringing together rock art studies and 'dirt' archaeology – continues to elude archaeologists to this day. Research projects to try to remedy this are in progress, but the quest is ambitious. As several contributors to this volume point out, this is partly because of the difficulty of dating the paintings themselves, but also because painted images may be produced over relatively short time spans of days or weeks, while information from archaeological excavations has much lower chronological resolution: only centimetres of deposit



may accumulate (or be preserved) over millennia, and, at best, we can usually distinguish time-slices no narrower than several hundred years. This problem is not unique to rock art studies – I have encountered it in my own work on the bone chemistry of archaeological human skeletons, where there is also a mismatch between the scale of a human lifetime, as recorded in the skeleton, and the long-term averaging found in most archaeological sites. Nevertheless, if one frames the research questions carefully, it is possible to link (or contrast) reconstructions of ancient societies based on studies of skeletons with those derived from the analysis of excavated remains. The same should surely apply to rock art.

Whereas Mazel's and Mitchell's chapters for the most part synthesise published information, the chapter by Gavin Whitelaw comprises new work on the important topic of interaction between the Nguni and the San. If much of the rock art we can see today does in fact date to the last couple of thousand years, then the belief systems it expresses may well be more deeply influenced by farmers than we have previously realised. The point made by Sam Challis (p. 104), that in Vinnicombe's research area, horses are the second most frequently painted animal after eland, may be significant here. Whitelaw examines the archaeological and historical evidence for interaction over the past two millennia, and proposes more nuanced scenarios than the idea that the San were unproblematically employed as ritual specialists and rainmakers.

The volume ends with a conclusion by David Whitley, including some interesting thoughts on Vinnicombe's work in the light of broader trends in Anglophone archaeology and anthropology. Whitley, too, identifies chronology as an important issue, but his discussion of radiocarbon dating is unfortunately marred by several statements that are simply wrong. He ends with a discussion of 'Archaeology as social

practice', mainly to do with relations between archaeologists and indigenous people, and the implementation of heritage legislation.

On the whole, the volume is well produced, though the first few pages, in particular, needed better proofreading – I noticed a number of typographical errors, and it is unfortunate that the table of contents wrongly attributes Chapter 2 to Mitchell and Smith instead of Lewis-Williams. Overall, this book is a valuable contribution to the literature on South African rock art and archaeology, and will be of interest to a wide range of readers. The reprinting of *People of the eland* in tandem with this publication is an especially welcome initiative. Rock art has broad appeal, and one notable feature of this volume is the number and high quality of the illustrations (although I was irritated by the way that many photographs are attributed only to the 'RARI archive' – the point is usually who took the photo, and when). Some chapters contribute new information about the past, others make a valuable contribution to the very poorly documented history of archaeology in South Africa. Meskell and Whitley attempt to situate Vinnicombe's work in relation to the international archaeological world, providing much food for thought – we need more of this type of contextualisation in South African archaeology. Mitchell and Smith are to be congratulated on producing a volume that highlights many of the glories of South African archaeology, while acknowledging some of its shortcomings.

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