

## DEPARTMENT REVIEW

---

### The Rock Art Research Institute

School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies  
University of the Witwatersrand  
<http://www.wits.ac.za/science/archaeology/rari.html>

## The Rock Art Research Institute in the new millennium

### Siyakha Mguni

Research Officer, Rock Art Research Institute  
School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies  
University of the Witwatersrand

### Background

Rock art, both in painted and engraved form, is one of the most vivid and enduring of the tangible manifestations of prehistoric cultures in southern Africa. The breathtaking aesthetic accomplishment exhibited by our ancient artists has captivated public interest for more than a century. Deeper levels of meaning, however, lying beneath its aesthetic veneer, escaped most early writers who, with their western cultural baggage, were enchanted only by the beauty of the art. The art was seen as simple depictions of everyday events in the lives of simple people (the San or Bushmen) living close to nature and with ample leisure at their disposal. San culture was perceived as primitive, and by implication their art was considered to be of no scientific value. Unsurprisingly, the spiritual significance and proper context of the imagery remained elusive for many decades.

Thankfully, these perceptions now belong to another era; today San art is known to be deeply symbolic. It is redolent with metaphors that are rooted in San religious beliefs and cosmological concepts. This new understanding developed from more than two decades of painstaking research and thanks to two major contributions to the study in the mid-1970s: Patricia Vinnicombe's *People of the*

*Eland* (1976), and in 1977, David Lewis-Williams's doctoral thesis that culminated in the publication of *Believing and seeing* (1981). San imagery in different regions, such as the southeastern mountains, where these two studies were conducted, and the Western Cape of South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe exhibits similarities and thus interpretations based on San ethnography subsequently explored and elucidated subtleties in the art of these regions. In this history of research, the Rock Art Research Institute (formerly Rock Art Research Unit), hereafter called RARI, has played a key role.

The origins of RARI go back to 1978 when the University of the Witwatersrand employed David Lewis-Williams. It was at this time that the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) funded a short-term rock art project in Harrismith district, South Africa. Under Professor Lewis-Williams as the founding director, a small research entity was formed. This entity took root and, through a series of successful projects, achieved a unit status in 1988 under the ambit of HSRC. Its running was funded by the Centre for Science Development and Wits University. Today, two years after being awarded Institute status, the National Research Foundation and the University's own Research Foundation fund RARI and some of its activities are also privately resourced.

## Mission

Guided by a number of related objectives in its mission, RARI is dedicated, principally, to the development of an understanding of rock art using authentic indigenous beliefs, customs, rituals and lifeways, for the enjoyment and education of humankind. In this endeavour, RARI has, through publications and other means of dissemination, conveyed the complexity and subtlety of southern African rock art to the public and the academic community. In its twenty-two years of existence, RARI has worked towards the development of one of its key objectives: the formulation of theory, research methods and techniques that are relevant to rock art research worldwide. Today, other researchers around the globe working on various rock art traditions are using approaches developed at RARI.

In view of the inescapable fact that rock art is fragile and that it will not last forever, RARI strives to preserve, through accurate copies and photographs, this finite resource for posterity. To this end, the only 911 Rapid Response rock art team in the world was established in 1999. Comprising two research officers, the team advises and helps landowners in South Africa and neighbouring countries on issues of rock art conservation, presentation and management.

To ensure continuity and growth, RARI is building capacity in southern Africa to record, study and preserve this unique heritage through the training of students. The Institute realises that it cannot achieve these goals working in isolation. It runs undergraduate, honours, masters and doctoral programmes. Collaboration has therefore been key in its activities: currently, RARI has initiated the training of a rock art conservator for southern Africa with the assistance of the South African government. In this spirit, a programme was launched that brings other rock art researchers and senior fellows from various institutions around the world to Wits University on a regular basis in order to enhance its teaching and research capacity.

## Milestones

The year 2000 was particularly significant for RARI. First, it witnessed the celebration of its twenty-first anniversary, with all its research milestones, but this was tinged by regret at Professor Lewis-Williams's retirement. In reality, his retirement heralded his new status as Professor Emeritus and senior mentor, which has ensured his continued luminary services to RARI. The highlight of the anniversary celebrations was a retrospective exhibit titled 'Seeing and knowing' that traced research developments and groundbreaking insights over twenty-one years. Bolstering the year's outreach programmes, two other very successful exhibits materialised: one travelled around southern Africa and another was curated jointly with the new Centre for Expressive Culture at Texas A&M University in the USA. Exhibitions remain one of the main media by which RARI reaches a wide and diverse audience.

Secondly, with RARI's involvement, rock art was, in 2000, included in the new national coat-of-arms for South Africa. Rock art has been placed at the heart of the new South African identity. Today, anyone regardless of cultural background can celebrate this common heritage in rock art. It is indeed a unifying heritage for humankind. Thirdly, capping these developments has been a recent donation to set up a digitising laboratory, which is already functioning thanks to the Ringing Rocks Foundation (USA) and Liberty Life (South Africa). The project will ensure the preservation of more than 300,000 rock art recordings in the RARI archive. In its digital form, this resource will be made available on the Internet to the academic world and the public in general.

With the elevation of rock art to a national symbol in South Africa, new frontiers have opened up. First, the Ministry of Environmental Affairs and Tourism commissioned RARI to implement a R 6,000,000 strategy to expand rock art tourism in South Africa. Two sites, Game Pass Shelter (paintings) in the Drakensberg and Wildebeest Kuil (engravings) in the Northern Cape have now been opened, with interpretative centres complete with state-of-the-

art multi-media interactive facilities. This cultural tourism project has created more than seventy jobs for people previously unemployed within the local communities where these sites are located. The potential spin-off benefits are even greater. Secondly, as one of the immediate offshoots, RARI is building a Rock Art Museum at the University of the Witwatersrand. This facility will double up as a Welcome Centre for visitors preparing to tour rock art sites anywhere in South Africa. It is the first time in southern Africa that not only San but also other rock art traditions are presented in a dedicated rock art facility.

### **New directions**

On the research front, RARI continues to produce a range of new academic and popular publications that reveal results from many new avenues of

research. With ten researchers, the Institute has diversified its research programme. Not only have researchers expanded RARI's regional focus but also studies now encompass other rock arts, principally, the Khoekhoen herder and Bantu-speaking agropastoralist traditions. RARI could not have been better located in the Gauteng Province of South Africa. From this central vantage position it is accessible to southern Africa's greatest rock art concentrations. Outside South Africa, RARI researchers have conducted collaborative projects in Tanzania, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, Swaziland and Lesotho.

Over the last twenty-two years RARI has evolved to become a leading world centre for rock art studies. It is now seeking to use this expertise to build up capacity across Africa, to create jobs, to conserve and record rock art, as well as to expand our knowledge of the African past.

### **References**

- Vinnicombe, P 1976. *People of the Eland*. Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press.  
 Lewis-Williams, J D 1981. *Believing and seeing: symbolic meanings in southern San rock paintings*. New York: Academic Press.

### **Staff of the Rock Art Research Institute**, their designations and research areas

#### **David Lewis-Williams**

Professor Emeritus & Senior mentor

david@rockart.wits.ac.za

Professor Lewis-Williams recently completed a book for Thames and Hudson on the origins of art, but he continues research and writing on San art. As a senior mentor, he teaches and helps with the supervision of graduate students.

#### **Benjamin Smith (Dr)**

Director

107bws@cosmos.wits.ac.za

Dr Smith has worked in Zambia and Malawi on the so-called 'Late White' paintings (they are predominantly done in white and often are more recent than other traditions, with such a brief and contextually specific existence). These comprise geometric motifs and a few animal and human subjects. He has extended this study to encompass similar art traditions in southern Africa, which include the Khoekhoen herder and Bantu-speaking agropastoralist arts, found mainly in South Africa.

### **Geoffrey Blundell**

Deputy Director

geoff@rockart.wits.ac.za

Geoff has worked extensively on the development of public rock art sites in southern Africa; recently he designed the visitor experiences for the world-renowned Game Pass Shelter and Wildebeestkuil engraving site. His primary research, however, concerns the depiction of the body in the San rock art of Nomansland, Eastern Cape. He is completing his PhD on this material at Uppsala University, Sweden.

### **Jeremy C Hollmann**

Research Officer, Acting Deputy Director

Jeremy@rockart.wits.ac.za

Jeremy researches San rock art of the Western Cape region of South Africa. He recently completed a study on struthiform therianthropy: human figures with ostrich-like embellishments to their form. He is currently working on the so-called 'mermaid' paintings in Cape region. He uses San ethnography and ethological studies on animal behaviour to explain these paintings. Jeremy is also working on the unpublished sections of the Bleek & Lloyd manuscripts.

### **Siyakha Mguni (Mr)**

Research Officer

Siyakha@rockart.wits.ac.za

Siyakha has just completed a study of the so-called 'formlings' (motifs based on vertical or horizontal stacks of oblong or tubular cores) and botanical motifs from the Matopo Hills. These motifs have remained stubbornly enigmatic for nearly a century. He is also looking at the Waterberg district of South Africa, which is probably the southernmost limit of the formling distribution in southern Africa. He continues research on the rock art of Zimbabwe.

## **911 Rapid Response Team**

### **David Pearce**

Research Officer

davidp@rockart.wits.ac.za

David is researching painted burial stones from the south-eastern Cape region of South Africa and their contextual association with other archaeological materials in the deposit. He is also working on a rain making painting site in the Free State Province.

### **Thembi Russell (Ms)**

Research Officer

T.M.RUSSELL@soton.ac.uk

Thembi has worked on San art in the Drakensberg, particularly the analysis of 'stylistic' sequences in over-painted panels using Harris matrices. She is completing her PhD at the University of Southampton.

## **Digitising Laboratory**

### **Willem Steyn**

Laboratory coordinator

willem@rockart.wits.ac.za

**Azizo Da Fonseca**

Data Capturer

Azizo@rockart.wits.ac.za

**Bronwyn de Villiers**

Scanner Operator

bon@ftp.cs.wits.ac.za

In addition to the ten members of staff, RARI often has between five and ten students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels from the Departments of Archaeology and Fine Arts working on various activities as assistants.

---