



WORLD ARCHAEOLOGY SEMINARS HUNTER-GATHERER ROCK ART AND COGNITIVE ARCHAEOLOGY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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There are few rock art traditions about which we understand more than the hunter-gatherer rock art of southern Africa. As a case study, it is of global importance for several reasons. Among the most important of them is that the region is internationally unique for its combination of highly detailed and complex painted and engraved rock art sites, and rich ethnographic sources about San (Bushman) groups that help us to understand what the images meant to the older but related societies that made them. In this case, the rock art and the ethnography are mutually illuminating; each one informs our interpretation of the other. Today, we know a great deal about the purpose of these hunter-gatherer images and about what the now-extinct image-making performances had in common with other kinds of San expressive culture that are still observable. But this was not always the case. Until the early 1970s, southern African rock art research was overwhelmed by Western ideas about 'primitive' society and 'art'. Later, even researchers' quantitative inventories of different regions—an attempt to make their archaeological research more 'scientific' and empirical—did not help them understand what the paintings meant to those who made them. Everything began to change when a theoretical turn, rooted in anthropology, provided a way for researchers to interpret the Indigenous idiom in the existing ethnohistorical material, which, in turn, allowed researchers to interpret the art's metaphors and idioms more precisely than ever before. This early 'cognitive archaeology', recently formally recognised as Ideational Cognitive Archaeology (ICA), had a significant impact on Later Stone Age and Iron Age research in southern Africa—a resonance that continues to this day.

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