

Nets or not? Identifying LSA rock paintings of reticulate forms in the Kouga Mountains, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The corpus of southern African Later Stone Age (LSA) rock art (or San/Bushman/hunter-gatherer art) follows broad conventions across the subcontinent. San/Bushman ethnography is used to identify recurrent themes and metaphors, such as hunting, dance, powerful animals, death and transformation. In certain cases, however, painted subjects receive scant mention in the ethnography. Is it possible to identify these without misunderstanding their implicit meanings? Paintings of reticulate forms in the Kouga Mountains of the Eastern Cape reawaken this debate in southern African rock art research. Although it is less secure to infer practices and items of material culture based almost entirely on their depiction in rock art, it is argued here that some inferences are safer than others. The reticulate forms and their overall painted context comprise a narrative based on hunting practices that involve the use of nets in which to capture animals. However, the paintings are not illustrations of hunting techniques: they are informed by the same tropes and concerns that have been detected in southern African LSA rock art more generally. It is to be expected that depictions of other subjects and practices not mentioned in any ethnographic records will embody a wealth of associations.

KEY WORDS: Traps, eland, hartebeest, lions, spider webs, hunting nets, San/Bushman ethnography.

The corpus of southern African Later Stone Age (LSA) rock art (or San/Bushman/hunter-gatherer art) follows broad conventions that are current across wide areas. By and large, the subject matter is restricted and repetitive (e.g. Vinnicombe 1976: 350), though it varies in subject matter in time and across space. This ‘sameness’ makes it possible to recognise and potentially to understand LSA rock art by means of San/Bushman ethnography. Occasionally, however, one encounters rock art that—although still clearly part of the same canon—is scarcely mentioned in the ethnography and arouses curiosity, speculation, as well as scepticism. What is ‘real’ in the art and what is ‘not real’? (Lewis-Williams 1986). Is it possible to identify subject matter depicted in rock art where there is a dearth of ethnographic support? I look at rock paintings at a site in the Kouga Mountains that make this question pertinent and reawaken an old debate in southern African rock art research.



Fig. 1. The rock art site is located in the Kouga Mountains in the southern Cape. The Kouga Mountains are part of the Cape Fold Belt, which includes the Swartberg and Kammanassie mountains. Map: Google Earth.

ROCK ART IN THE KOUGA MOUNTAINS

The Kouga Mountains are part of the Cape Fold Belt. Much of the Kouga is a declared wilderness that conserves a vital water catchment, rare and endemic plants, animals and spectacular mountain scenery; it is equally rich in cultural artefacts from the past (Fig. 1; Binneman 1997, 1998, 1999a, b; Bradfield et al. 2023). The rock paintings, graves and site deposits in this region are the legacy of LSA peoples, the ancestors of the ‘Bushmen’ or ‘San’.

Archaeologist John Goodwin described the southern cape coastal area (the area between the Gourits River in the west and the Fish River in the east [Pearce 2005: 47]) as ‘by far the most important archaeological area in Southern Africa’, one that ‘deserves to become a national reserve for its prehistoric value and importance’ (Goodwin 1946: 105, 106). Notable archaeological discoveries have been made in this region, as well as several kilometres inland. The LSA presence in the Kouga is manifest in an approximately 2 000-year-old burial at Tierkloof, only a few kilometres west of the paintings treated here (Binneman 1999a; Steyn et al. 2007), as well as a medicine container discovered near Misgund (Bradfield et al. 2023). David Pearce (2005) has discussed two painted burial stones that were found in the grave at the Tierkloof site. Rock art research in the region shows that some images are distinctive and particular to the area, for example, ‘swift-people’ (argued by others to be ‘mermaids’ or fish) (Hollmann 2005a, b; Rust 2000, 2008; Rust & Van der Poll 2011; Laue 2021: 270–7).

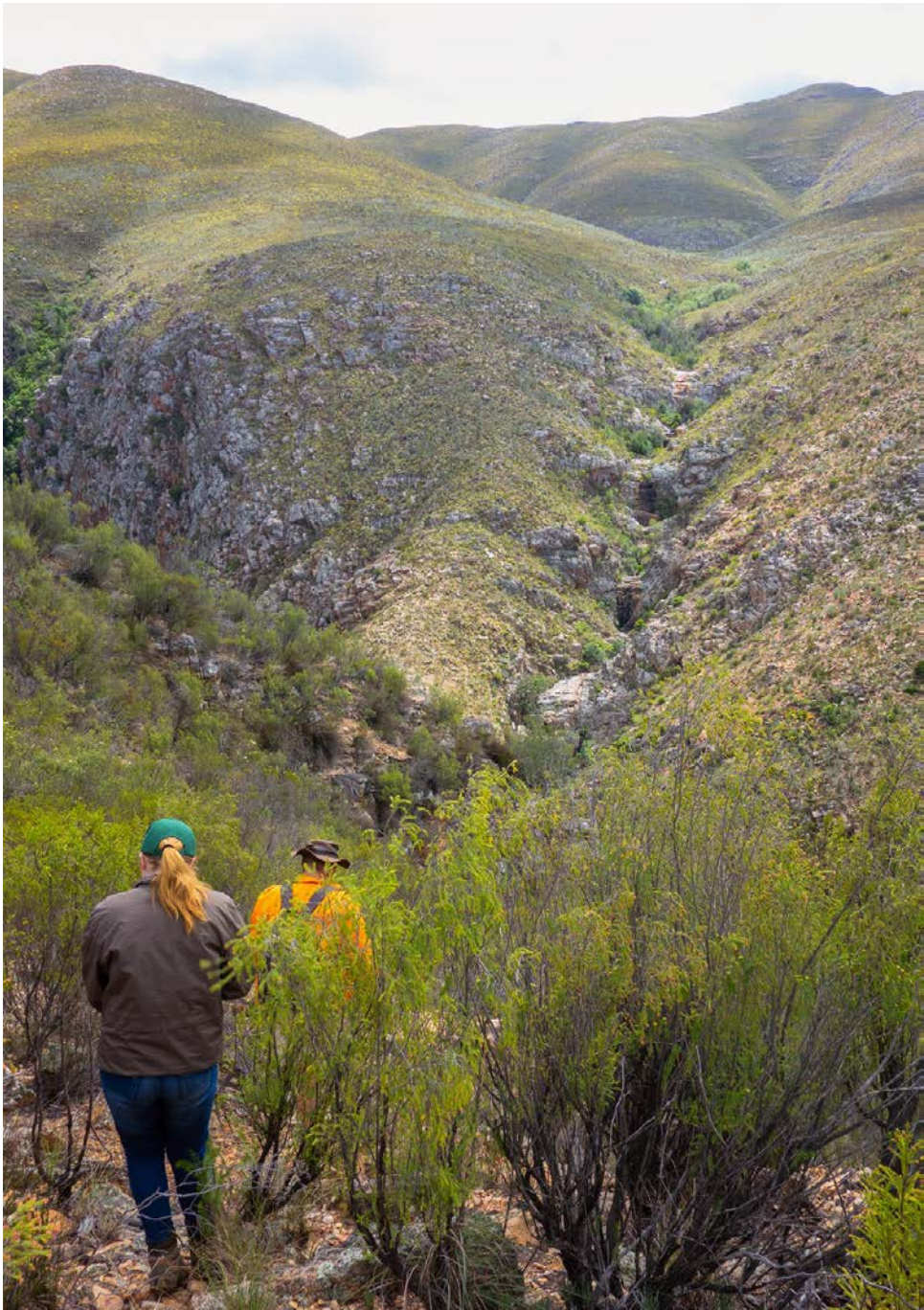


Fig. 2. The rock paintings are located along the Braam River in a steep-sided, forested kloof in the Kouga Mountains. The overhangs are not visible in this photograph. Picture: J.C. Hollmann (2021, personal collection).

Many LSA rock art sites are accumulations of images that were episodically created (Lewis-Williams 1992). At such places, there may be no overall single narrative, but several episodes of image-making that comprise various styles, techniques and palettes. Less often one encounters paintings that focus on a single narrative. Paintings at a site alongside the Braam River in the Kouga Mountains are an example of one of these (Fig. 2).

LOCATION AND DESCRIPTION OF PAINTINGS

The paintings are in one of three painted overhangs along 100 m or so of the kloof. Many of the painted images contained in this cluster of sites are visually striking and of great research interest. Some are well preserved and details in red, white, yellow and black paint are still visible.

The focus of this paper is on the middle site, a 3–4 m high overhang, which is about 5 m wide and 2 m at its deepest (Fig. 3). The rock face to the right of the straight section is interrupted by a shallow fissure, about 15 cm at its widest. At this point, the rock face makes a sharp turn of about 70°. This section is also painted.

The paintings extend across approximately 2.5 m of rock face with a slight overhang (Figs 3–5). The surface is covered by patches of foliose lichens. These grow in between and over paintings and probably pose a threat to the preservation of the art (e.g. Dandridge 2006; Marques et al. 2016), although they may also be useful for relative dating of those paintings that are partially covered by lichen growth. The paintings are divided into two sections by the shallow fissure: there is a longer (c. 2 m) section to the left of the fissure, and a shorter section (c. 75 cm) to its right (Figs 4 & 5). I omit the few images at the extremities of the rock face that I do not consider directly relevant to the focus of my argument (they are illustrated in Supplementary Online Material (SOM): left-hand side Figs S1–S2, right-hand side Figs S14–S21).

Images to the left of the fissure: human, antelope and reticulate forms

At the left-hand end of the overhang (when standing in front of the paintings), a human figure sits with one leg up and bent at the knee and the other also bent at the knee but resting on the ground (Fig. 6; Figs S3 and S4 in SOM show details). This figure and two others described below (Figs 10 & 16) are examples of human images painted in a specific style in the Kouga Mountains and Baviaanskloof that are being studied by Renée Rust, Vibeke Viestad and Jan de Vynck (Renée Rust pers. comm. June 2023). The figure grasps a long, stick-like object that I identify as a spear, which is at least as long as the figure. The sitting figure is looking towards a cluster of three reticulate forms (the largest of which is about 45 cm long and 19 cm high) composed of millimetre-thin red lines of paint (Fig. 7). The three reticulate forms are painted about 30 cm to the right of this sitting figure (Figs 7 & 8).

All of these forms are roughly similar in shape: broad in the middle and tapering towards either end (Figs 8 & 9). They are painted in a slightly recessed area of the rock surface. One of the reticulate forms (a in Fig. 8) spans a crack in the rock. The central form (b in Fig. 8) is painted on a small facet of rock.



Fig. 3. The rock paintings are located in a slight overhang at the base of an approximately 15 m high outcrop. The overhang is approximately 5 m at its widest and 2 m at its deepest. Most of the paintings discussed here are located to the left of the vertical fissure on the right-hand side of the picture. There are a few more paintings along the rock face to the right of the fissure. Picture: J.C. Hollmann (2021, personal collection).



Fig. 4. View of the painted surface from from the left. The painted area has been outlined. The grey line marks a fissure in the rock face that divides the painted surface into two sections. Picture: J.C. Hollmann (2021, personal collection).



Fig. 5. View of the painted surface from the right. The painted area has been outlined. The grey line marks a fissure in the rock face that divides the painted surface into two sections. Picture: J.C. Hollmann (2021, personal collection).



Fig. 6. Seated figure holding a long spear. Delineating the back of the figure's head is a very faded semicircular black form, commonly referred to as a 'hook-head'. There are several kinds of lichen growing on the rock. Picture: J.C. Hollmann (2021, personal collection).

The reticulate forms are bounded by containing lines that converge at either end of each reticulate form (Fig. 9). A short (c. 1–2.5 cm) perpendicular line is painted at this juncture in at least four instances (1–4 in Figs 8 & 9); there might have been other short perpendicular lines but the paintings are obscured in these areas (? in Fig. 8).

A little to the right on a separate facet of rock is another figure, in the same style and colour as the seated figure (Fig. 10; Figs S5–S7 in SOM). It runs with legs stretched out in exaggerated haste. It too holds a spear. Traces of black paint near the neck suggest an outline of the back of the head similar to that of the seated figure just described. A black band—perhaps an ornament—is depicted below the right knee. Again, each ankle has an associated pair of fine lines. The figure is patently naked and male. Immediately above the point where the silhouette of the spear joins the figure's torso are two objects that could depict a slung quiver from which an unstrung bow or perhaps an arrow shaft protrudes.

The paintings to the left and right, as well as the topography of the rock face, provide crucial context for understanding what the image of the running figure shows (Fig. 11). It is moving at speed away from the location of the seated figure that oversees the reticulate forms. It has already skirted the reticulate forms and is passing through another section of the rock face. In view of the significance of features of the rock face and its relation to the images it hosts (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990), we can appreciate that the irregularities of the rock face—such as steps in the rock, facets and cracks—show the figure hurrying across a rugged 'mini-landscape'.

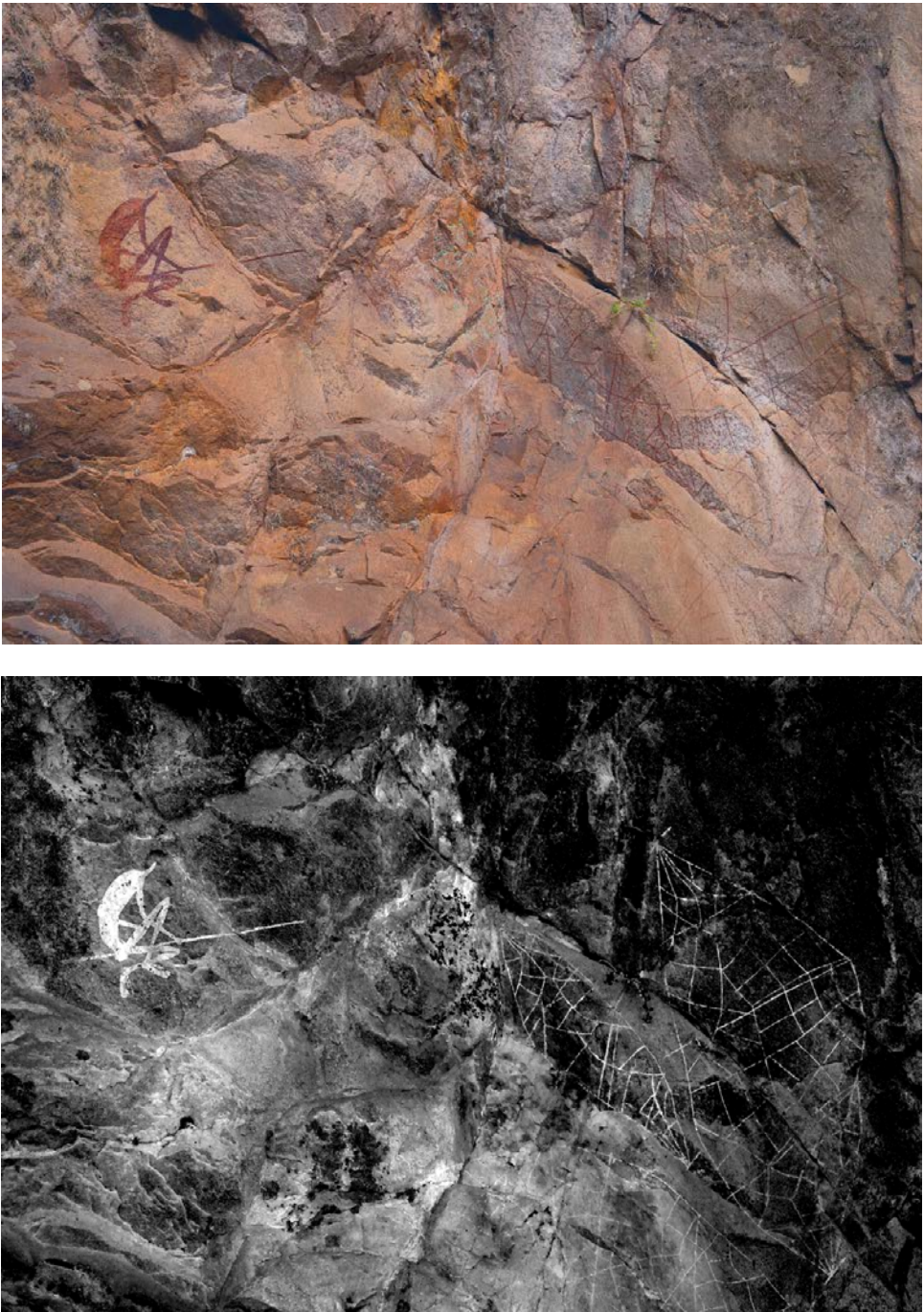


Fig. 7. A figure (at left) with a long spear sits with one leg raised and the other lying flat. The figure faces three reticulate forms about 30 cm to its right. Top: normal exposure. Bottom: grayscale enhancement. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021, personal collection).

Fig. 8. A cluster of three reticulate forms (marked a, b and c) covers an area of about 0.5×0.5 m. Shorter and thicker lines (marked 1, 2, 3 and 4) are depicted at the ends of the reticulate forms. It is no longer possible to see if the points marked ? at the other end of forms b and c might also have had similar shorter and thicker perpendicular lines as form a.

Top: normal exposure.



Bottom: close-up, grayscale enhancement. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021, personal collection).

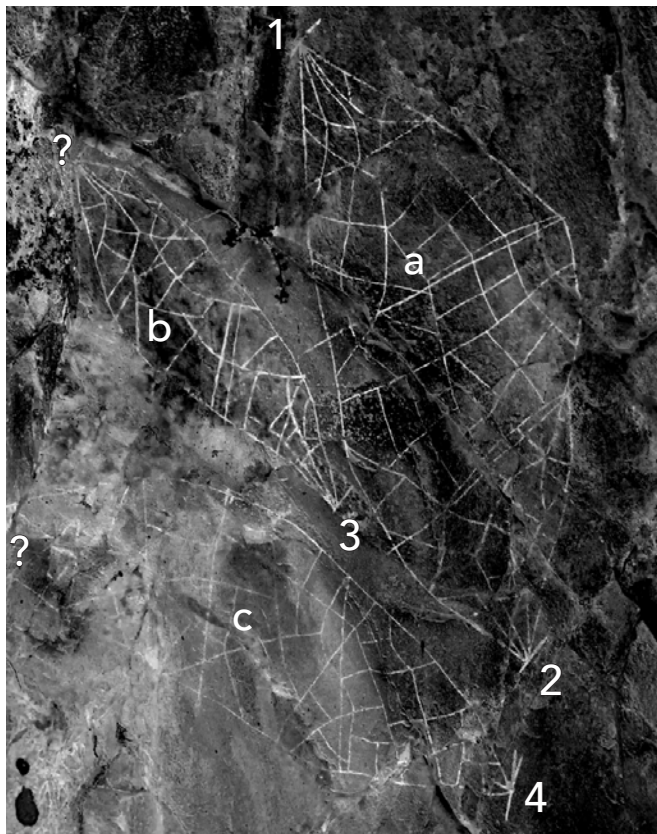




Fig. 9. Detail of the area in which the bounding lines of the reticulate forms meet and join shorter and thicker perpendicular lines. The end of one of the short lines (1) terminates in a natural crack.

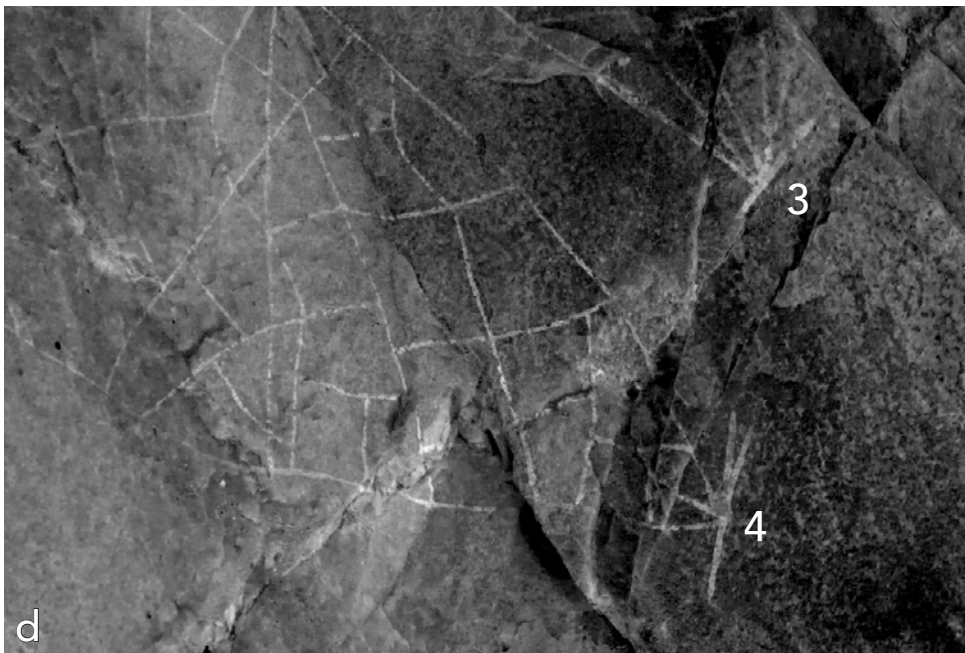


Fig. 9 (cont.) Top images: normal exposure. Bottom images: grayscale enhancements. The numbers (1, 3 and 4) correspond to those in Figure 8. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021, personal collection).



Fig. 10. Figure with long spear running to the right. The spear has a black blade. The figure has a black hook-head that has faded. Picture: J.C. Hollmann (2021).

In the next step in the rock face, about 50 cm to the right, is a group of animals and humans painted mostly in yellow, white and black (Fig. 12). Many of these are less clearly visible than the red figures and the reticulate forms; the paintings are overlain by an opaque, whitish layer. There are three eland paintings in yellow, white and black paint. One of these (the topmost painting) has large shoulders and horns (Fig. 13; Figs S8–S9 in SOM show details). These features suggest that it is a bull eland that is running towards the left, in the direction of the reticulate forms.

Below this eland are two animal forms in yellow paint. Their long, narrow muzzles (lightly concave at the front), high forequarters and sloping back lines are indicative of red hartebeest; hind legs are absent (Fig. 14). Three spear-carrying figures in yellow paint, carrying bows and bags, are painted to the left of the bottommost eland (Fig. 12). One of the spear-carrying figures is depicted in the exaggerated running posture described earlier (Fig. 10).

Images to the right of the fissure: human, lion and 'flying' figure

Immediately to the right of the group of eland and hartebeest there is a fissure in the rock that extends vertically for the entire height of the outcrop and is approximately 25 cm across at its widest extent (Fig. 15). The opening narrows to a thin crack below the paintings.

To the right of the fissure is a cluster of paintings that includes (at top) a figure with widespread arms and one leg bent at the knee, (in the middle) a red pigment patch and two running figures painted black (Fig. 20) and (at the bottom) a figure confronting a lion (Fig. 16).



Fig. 11. Human figure (male) in the distinctive style of the Kouga and adjacent areas. It is sitting and holding a long spear. To its right are three forms that each comprise a complex of lines. To their right is a running figure with a long spear. Top: normal exposure. Bottom: grayscale enhancement. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021).

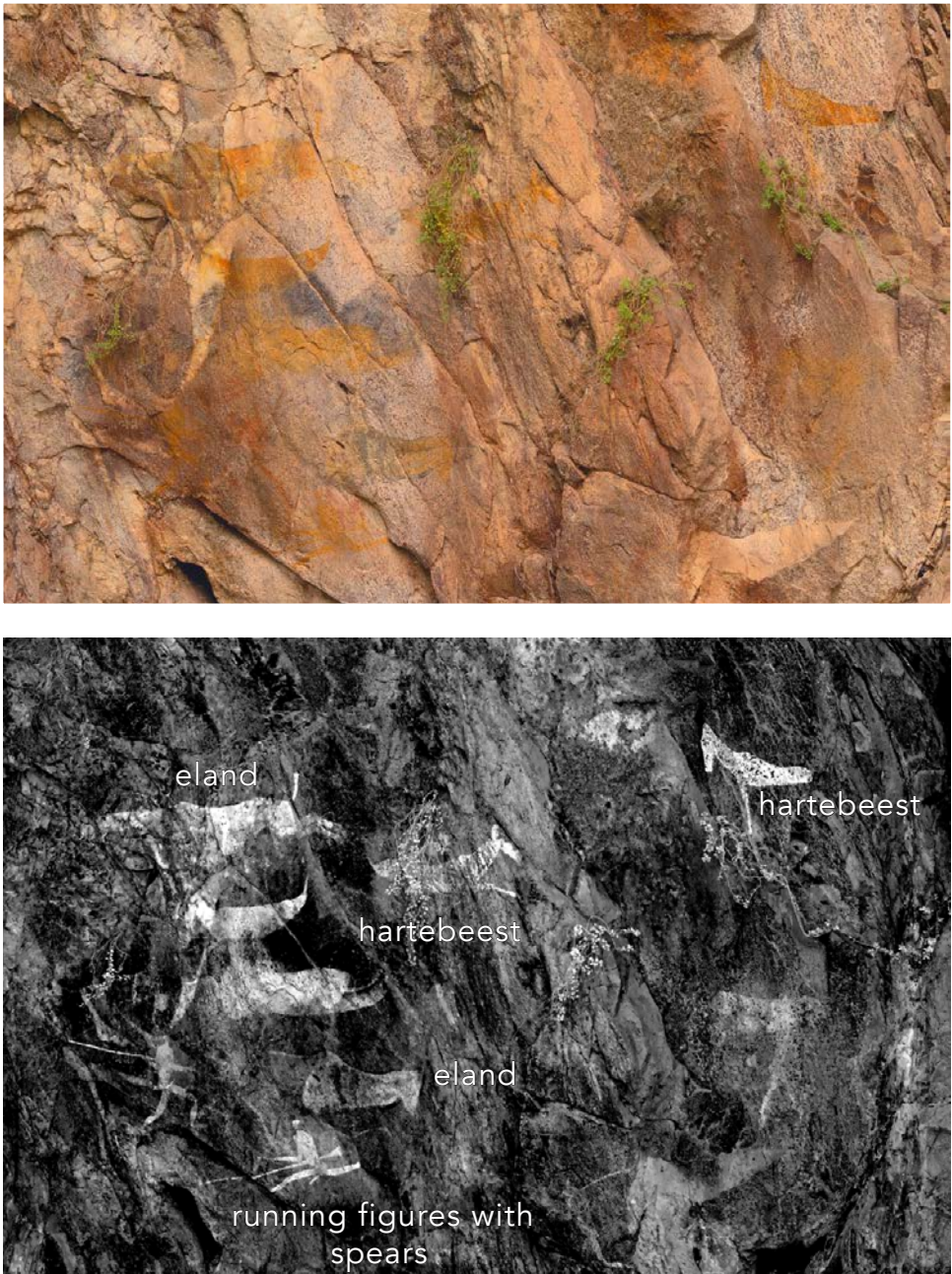


Fig. 12. A grouping of eland and hartebeest painted in yellow, white and black. With a single exception, all the painted animals face to the left. Other, less visible images in the picture have not been labelled. The hartebeest images have no back legs. Two figures with long spears are at bottom left of the picture. Top: normal exposure. Bottom: grayscale enhancement. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021).



Fig. 13. Painting of an eland running from right to left. Note the twisted horns and the raised tail with black tail brush. Judging by the height of the shoulders and the large horns, this painting depicts a bull eland. Below the eland painting is an image of a hartebeest. Top: normal exposure. Bottom: digital tracing. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021).

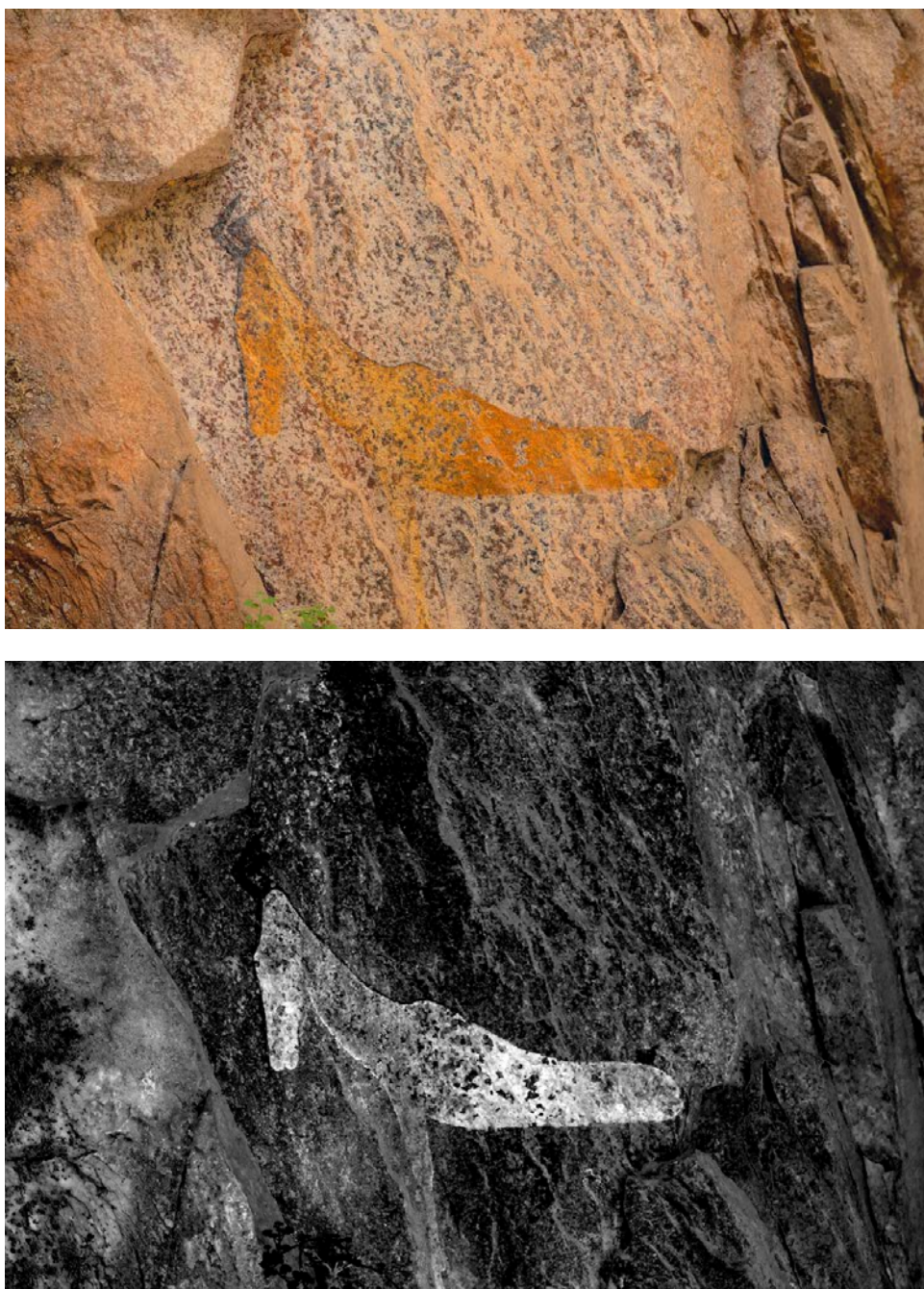


Fig. 14. The recurved horns, elongated forehead, high forequarters and sloping back identify this as a hartebeest, painted in yellow and black. The back legs are absent. Top: normal exposure. Bottom: grayscale enhancement. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021).

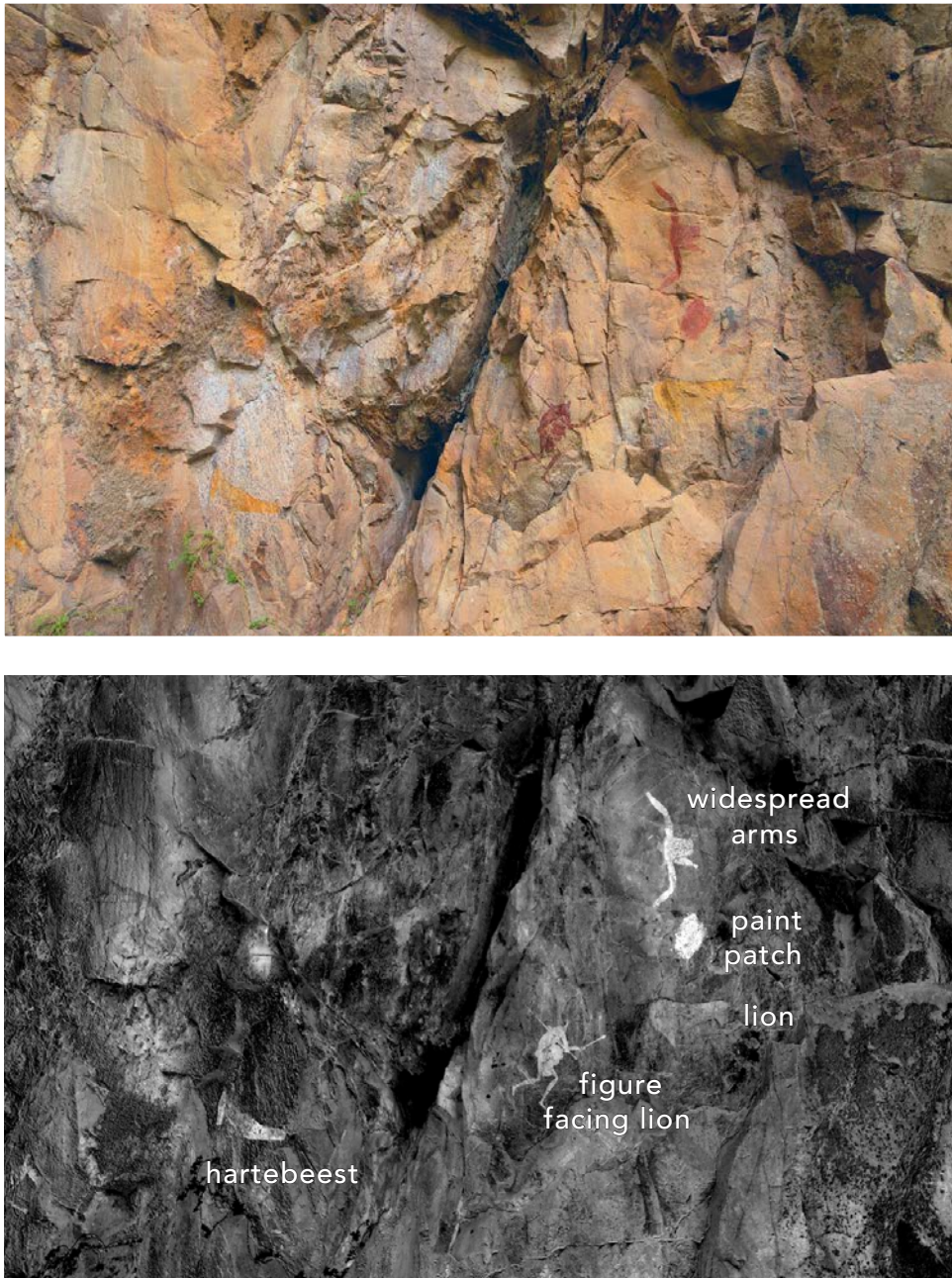


Fig. 15. A vertical fissure in the rock divides the images at left from a grouping on the right that shows a figure with a club confronting a lion. Above these is a patch of red pigment and a running figure in black next to it. At the top is a figure with widespread arms and one leg drawn up. Top: normal exposure. Bottom: grayscale enhancement. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021).

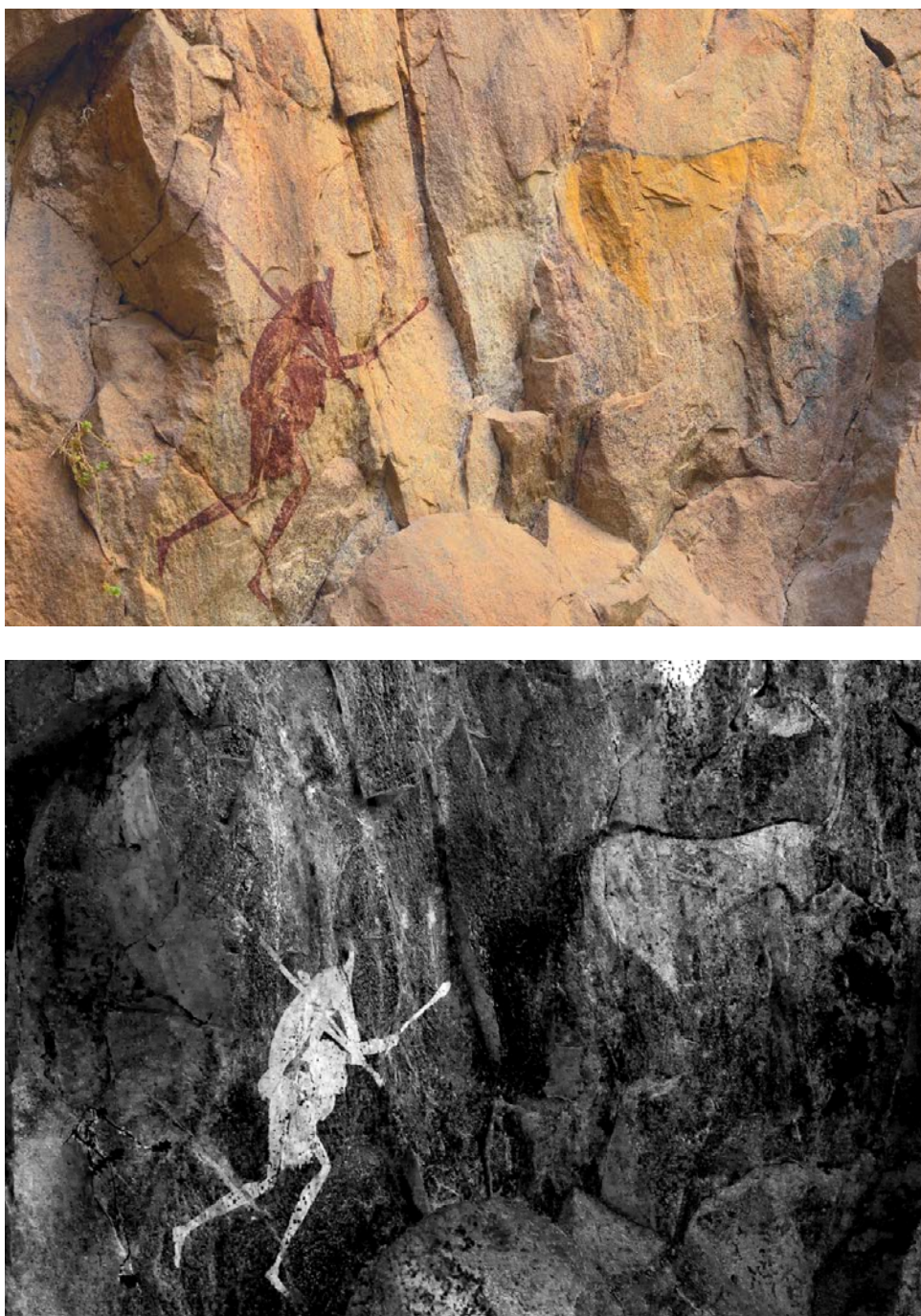


Fig. 16. A red painted figure with long spear and a club in one hand faces a lion with its tail raised. Top: Normal exposure. Bottom: grayscale enhancement. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021).

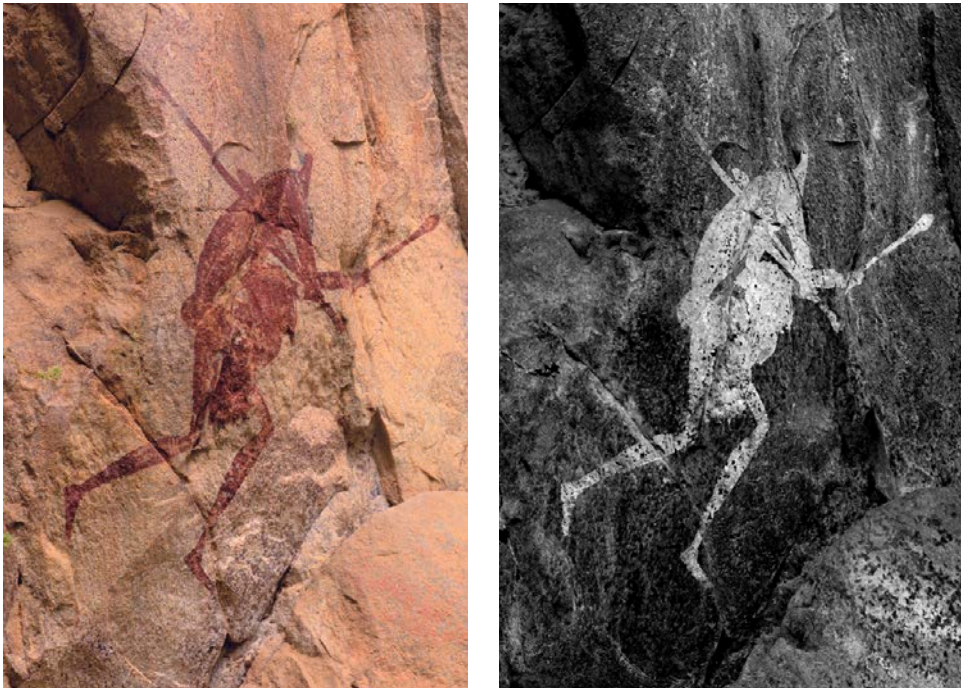


Fig. 17. Figure in red confronting the lion painted to the right (outside of the frame). The figure holds a club-like object in one hand and carries a long spear. The figure had a black hook-head, of which a trace is still visible where it joins the red neck. Left: normal exposure. Right: grayscale enhancement. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021).

The figure confronting a lion (Fig. 17) is depicted in the same manner and painted in a similar dark red paint as the first two figures on the left-hand side of the rock face (Figs 6 & 10). He stands with knees bent and torso bent forward. His right arm is extended and bent at the elbow and he holds an object that resembles a knobbed stick in his right hand. In the other hand, he seems to hold a long spear and, possibly, another object similar to the knobbed stick (Fig. 18).

The figure faces a painting of a lion about 15 cm away (Figs 16 & 19). The lion's head is detailed: it has one rounded ear and a black nose tip; the mouth is open and the lips are black (Fig. S10 in SOM shows digital tracing). The shoulders are large and higher than the hind legs. The creature's back is outlined with black paint. The belly is depicted in white paint while the bulk of the body is in yellow. The long tail is held erect and curves forward over the creature's back. The brush at the tip of the tail is painted in black (Fig. S11 in SOM).

Immediately above the lion is a patch of red pigment with two running figures in black paint (Fig. 20). Above this patch is another human figure, painted in two colours—orange and dark red—and facing left (Fig. 21). It has a crescent-shaped line that outlines the back of its head. The head and shoulders are depicted in orange



Fig. 18. Detail of the figure confronting the lion. The figure holds a knobbed stick (knobkierie or club) in one hand and a long spear and a second club in the other. Picture: J.C. Hollmann (2021).

paint. The arms are extended on either side and are unrealistically long. No hands are visible: the ends of both arms terminate at small natural cracks in the rock face (Fig. S12 in SOM). The red marks just above the figure's body, adjacent to the armpit, may be the remains of artefacts, possibly flywhisks (Fig. S13 in SOM). The figure's lower leg is bent at the knee.

RETICULATE FORMS: PAINTINGS OF NETS?

It has been argued that rock art images are arranged according to semantic and syntactical 'principles' (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009: 41). One of these is the 'scenic relationship'—depictions of dances, processions, hunts and so on (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009: 54). The principle of shared or common action conveys a sense of unity, sequence and interconnectedness that amounts to a narrative or story. The Kouga paintings fit this category. The paintings of the hunters, eland and hartebeest and the lion are common and widespread subjects. The key to the Kouga narrative hinges on an understanding of what the reticulate forms depict. They are the outstanding component needed to make sense of the story.

Other reticulate but not identical forms have been identified elsewhere in southern Africa as hunting nets (Manhire et al. 1985). Not all agree with this interpretation

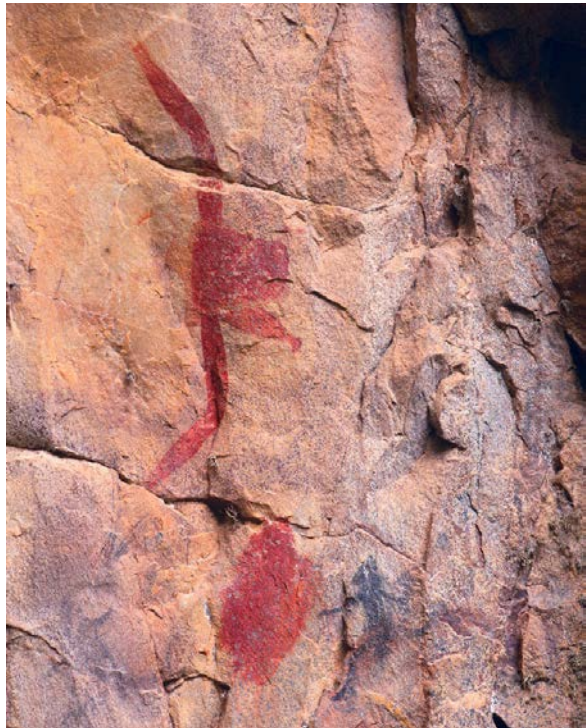


Fig. 19. Painting of a lion. Most of the body is yellow. The belly and legs are outlined in white, and its back is outlined in black. The tail, which has a black tuft, is raised and curled forward, probably in anger. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021).



Fig. 20. Paintings of running figures in black pigment and a patch of red pigment. These are painted above the image of a lion. Top: normal exposure. Bottom: DStretch enhancement. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021).

Fig. 21. Figure with arms extended on either side of the body, with one leg drawn up and bent at the knee, and a hook-head.



Top: normal exposure.



Bottom: grayscale enhancement. Pictures: J.C. Hollmann (2021).

(Lewis-Williams 1984, 1986). Indeed, ‘nets’, as well as paintings of what are arguably recurved bows, are the subjects of a long-dormant debate about the relationship between rock art images and San ethnography (Lewis-Williams 1984, 1986; Manhire et al. 1985).

This debate took shape around rock paintings of what Tony Manhire and colleagues (1985: figs. 2–4) identified as nets in the Cederberg, Western Cape. One of these shows a reticulate form with a regular diamond-shaped weave and what appear to be stakes (presumably to support the reticulate form in its horizontal position) (Fig. 22). One edge of the reticulate form has a wavy outline, a detail that might show how it hangs between the stakes. A small animal/antelope is approaching the shape, while a bending-forward figure stands close to its bottom end.

David Lewis-Williams (1984, 1986) argues that in the absence of ethnography, objects or artefacts in rock art (e.g. nets and recurved bows) cannot be confidently identified as having a ‘real-world’ correlate.

He points to other instances (e.g. the so-called ‘rope bridge’ at Junction Shelter in the Maloti-Drakensberg) in which interpretations of particular rock paintings turn out to be ‘cognitive and optical illusions’: ‘in trying to learn about the San from southern African rock art, they [researchers] reduce strange and otherwise inexplicable depictions to familiar objects’ (Lewis-Williams 1986: 172, my parentheses). Because rock art may combine either ‘real’ or ‘imaginary’ elements, or both (Lewis-Williams 1984: 325), he argues that (1986: 172):

it becomes impossible to infer artefacts and practices not already known from the ethnography, for we have no way of telling, apart from the ethnography, if puzzling paintings relate to the ‘real’ world or to the hallucinatory one. We cannot be sure if the paintings ... are indeed what they appear to be. What we know about San art restricts what we can learn from it.

These points were raised at a time in which researchers were developing understandings of the nature of ‘reality’ in rock art, refuting Eurocentric assumptions and absurd interpretations in the process. Lewis-Williams’s emphatic response is a rebuttal of such casual and ethnographically uninformed interpretations of complex imagery.

These concerns do not preclude the investigation of rock art imagery outside the ethnography, however. Absence of ethnographic ‘evidence’ for hunting with nets is not evidence of the absence of net hunting in LSA societies. Nor can the ontological status of any rock art image—i.e. whether it is ‘real’ or ‘hallucinatory’—be conclusively determined (‘proved’). Lewis-Williams (1991: 160) himself argues that the notion of ‘proof’ in rock art studies (and many other disciplines) is ‘inappropriate’:

At best, we can only say that one reconstruction is better than another, though, notwithstanding criteria for discriminating between hypotheses ... what we mean by ‘better’ is a difficult question, especially when we consider the active life of such reconstructions in the present.



Fig. 22. Painting of a net? Boontjieskloof 4, Cederberg, Western Cape. A small animal/antelope is approaching a white mesh, possibly a net. A bent-over human figure is painted to the left of the lower part of the net. Top: normal exposure. Picture: T. Manhire (1998) © Rock Art Research Institute, SARADA <www.sarada.co.za> (RSA BOO4 24-24). Bottom: DStretch enhancement.

These qualifications apply not just to ‘puzzling paintings’ but to all rock art imagery.

Lewis-Williams’s (1986: 172) observation that ‘What we know about San art restricts what we can learn from it’—if I understand it correctly—is tantamount to saying that the ethnography informs (and thus ‘constrains’ or ‘restricts’) our understanding of LSA rock art. But what of images for which there is no (or very little) ethnography? Lack of ethnographic correlates is not a reason to avoid an engagement with an image.

The archaeology of nets

Archaeological evidence for netting in LSA camps exists in the form of fragments of cordage, knots and netting (dimensions not specified and not necessarily the remnants of a hunting net) made from the sedge *Cyperus textilis*. Such remnants have been recovered from two archaeological sites in the Kouga (Binneman 1997: 99, 1999b: 103). Similar artefacts, probably too delicate for use as hunting nets, are known from elsewhere (e.g. Deacon 1976: 42). Manhire et al. (1985: 168–9, my square brackets) note that:

Despite the lack of direct eye witness evidence for net hunting among southern African San the inferences drawn from the historic and archaeological sources are not only that the technique of net manufacture was available, but also that the concept of funnelling game toward enclosures or obstacles was known and widely used. [...] The employment of nets in a hunting context by relatively small groups would seem to be most applicable in the mountain fringes where narrow stream beds abound: all five of the net paintings found come from such an area [i.e. the Cederberg, Western Cape]. As mountainous regions were not often penetrated by early travellers the lack of mention in their records is not very surprising. Further afield there is information from Lesotho on the use of snares by the San: ‘They secure the grey gazelle by means of nets of cords hung in such a way that the beast gets caught in it’ (Ellenberger 1953: 124).

Concepts and practices related to trapping are thus present in the ethnographic and archaeological records and support the possibility that some LSA people practiced net hunting.

Nets are fragile items not often preserved in an archaeological context (Wadley 2010: 180, 182) but other archaeological findings indirectly support the argument for the use of hunting nets. Manhire et al. (1985: 169) cite Klein’s (1981: 63) hypothesis that the age profile of rhebuck bones found at Nelson Bay Cave (approximately 70 km south-west of the Braam River site) was similar to that of a herd of living rhebuck. This finding, Klein suggests, points to the use of a ‘catastrophic’ and indiscriminate technique such as net hunting in which an entire family group might be captured and killed (see also Dewar et al. 2006). Binneman (1997, 1998) suggests that the presence of small mammals such as moles, dassies and grysbok in deposits at sites in the Kouga and surroundings suggests that people adopted ‘a trapping/snaring rather than a hunting strategy’ (Binneman 1998: 93). It is therefore possible and

plausible that hunter-gatherers in the Kouga used nets to trap some small mammals, as Manhire et al. (1985: 169) have argued was the case in the Cederberg.

Although he does not actually argue the case, Lewis-Williams suggests that the reticulate forms from the Cederberg are ‘more probably [than nets] ... phosphenes [entoptic phenomena], the neurologically formed hallucinations experienced in the early stages of trance and even by migraine sufferers’ (Lewis-Williams 1984: 326, my parentheses). The lattice framework type of phosphene and its manifestation in rock art imagery is illustrated by Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988: fig. 1: 1a–e). Lewis-Williams has tentatively suggested (pers. comm. 27 December 2020) that the reticulate forms at the Kouga site might be patterns of ‘thin red lines’ (Lewis-Williams 1981a; Lewis-Williams et al. 2000) or the ‘cords’ which the Ju’hoansi described to Marshall (1962: 242, my parentheses):

All over the sky fine cords are stretched, like the strands of a spider’s web, invisible to us but strong. The †gauwasi [spirits of the dead] move on these cords and can go anywhere. They descend to earth on one which hangs down from the sky, the one by which the medicine men climb up when they go to see =Gauwa in the western sky.

The suggestion that reticulate forms in rock art might depict certain forms of entoptic phenomena that have been construed as ‘real’ items is one possible avenue of investigation. But as Manhire et al. (1985: 169–70) remark, ‘[t]he argument on phosphenes must be built without recourse to the denial of nets simply because they are not ethnographically recorded’.

At the Braam River site, I think the artists made their meaning very clear. We see a single hunter oriented towards the reticulate forms (Fig. 7). Each of the reticulate forms has the same detail showing how the bounding lines converge at a short thick line. This, to me, is a persuasive depiction of the kind of anchor pegs that would be necessary to span hunting nets. There is none of the ambiguity that is associated with the ‘anchoring pegs’ of the ‘rope bridge’ at Junction Shelter (Lewis-Williams 1986: 172–6, fig. 1), which simultaneously resemble anchoring pegs and the reduced body and head of two figures. At the Braam River site, there is no such cognitive or optical illusion. Three details—the converging lines, the short perpendicular lines on either side of some of the reticulate forms, and the figure close by—support an interpretation of the reticulate forms as hunting nets.

And yet a significant feature—the weave of the nets—shows that these are not ‘ordinary’ nets. A net comprises several lengths of twine (or similar material) that are knotted to each other at regular intervals to form interlinked diamond and triangular forms. Strangely, the weave of the Kouga nets is markedly asymmetrical and irregular. How could these nets possibly entangle and retain any prey? I doubt that this detail is a poor imitation of the weave, or a stylistic flourish. The diamond-shaped weave of a net is probably not a matter of individual preference: no other design would be fit for purpose. Nor do I think it shows a net made on the spot with little concern for making a regular weave. Net-making takes time and skill. Fibres must be collected

and cordage manufactured before the net is knotted together. Net manufacture, like other crafts, would likely have been an in-camp activity.

Considering the allusive nature of rock art (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981b, 1986, 1998, 2019; Hollmann 2001) the strange weave of the Braam River nets is a ‘red flag’ that alerts us to the presence of ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ elements.

A HUNTING NARRATIVE?

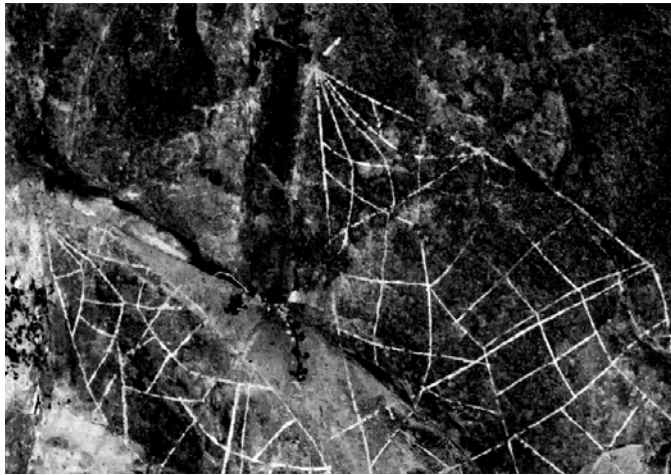
I argued earlier that the paintings (or most of the paintings) in this overhang are a ‘unified conceptual project’ (Parkington & Paterson 2021: 466). The fissure in the rock marks two distinct but interrelated episodes in the narrative. The rounding up and driving of the eland and hartebeest towards the nets takes place to the left of the crack. The hunter on the left (Fig. 6) watches over the traps at one end of the rock face (Fig. 7). He is passing the ‘empty time’ (Gell 1996: 27) of a hunter watching and waiting for prey to enter the nets. The running hunter (Fig. 10) is ‘heading’ or ‘going around’ the grouping of eland and hartebeest painted below him, as the hunters described by the 19th-century |xam narrators do (the |xam word is !*ǀhátten* [Bleek 1956: 494]). I suggest that the hunters are driving the eland and hartebeest towards the nets (Fig. 7).

This is a puzzling scenario. It does not make sense to catch eland and hartebeest with nets. In the ordinary world, hunting nets are used to capture small animals (e.g. duiker, grysbok) in Ungulate Size Class I (<22 kg) (Wadley 2010: 183). A conventional net made from plant cordage could not possibly catch and retain eland and hartebeest, animals in Ungulate Size Class IV (300–1 000 kg).

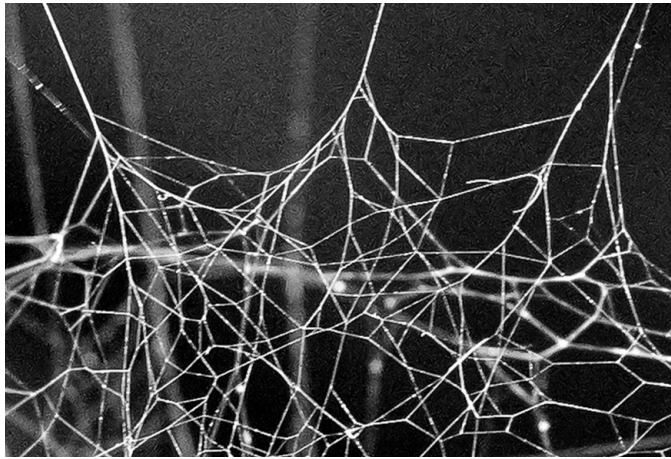
The unconventional weave of the nets is a jolt to assumptions of the purely literal. What kind of fibre would these nets require in order to trap large antelope? I am struck by the resemblance of the fabric of the net to the webs (traps) spun by spiders (Fig. 23). Spiderwebs comprise numerous strands of sticky silk that attach to each other at varying angles and create irregular spaces within the web. The silk used by certain spiders to detain and entangle prey can increase its length by 270%; this elasticity absorbs the impact of the prey hitting and struggling in the web (Wood-Black 2018). If the Kouga nets were made from a ‘strong’ (potent) spider silk-like fibre with similar qualities—tensile strength, elasticity, invisibility—then they could capture and contain these great animals. Beliefs and ideas about the ways of hunting in a parallel world, the rock surface, might provide the context in which such things are possible.

The images to the right of the fissure are associated with ethnography about potency and states of being. The lion with its curved tail and prominent black tuft parallels the eland bull with its equally noticeable tail tuft. Lion, eland and hartebeest are ‘strong things’ with the power to ‘bridge worlds’ in species-specific ways (Biesele 1993: 89). They have the power to trigger events. The confrontation between the human and the lion alludes to ideas about ‘fighting’ in San ethnography (Lewis-Williams 2015: 157–61). The topmost figure with widespread arms and its knee drawn up may express the idea of ‘flight’ in response to the confrontation between lion and hunter below (Lewis-Williams 2015: 128–9).

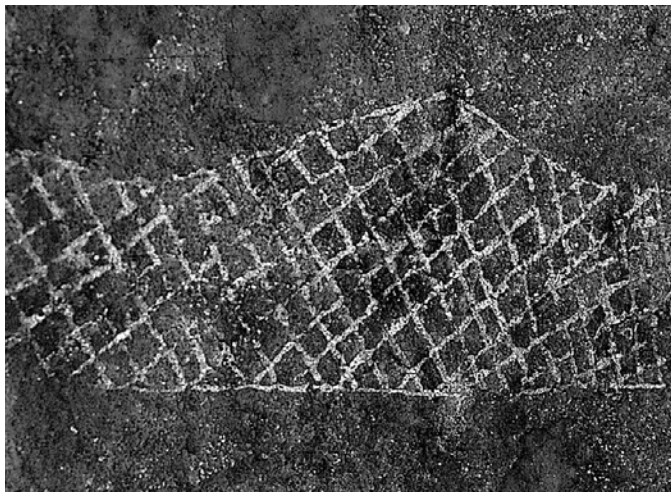
Fig. 23. The Kouga nets have a web-like structure, in contrast to the usual weave of a net.



Top: grayscale enhancement of the Kouga 'nets'. Picture: J.C. Hollmann.



Middle: grayscale image of a portion of a spider web. Picture: J.C. Hollmann.



Bottom: painting of reticulate form (net), Cederberg, Western Cape Province. Detail from Figure 22 with greyscale enhancement.

The paintings therefore allude to metaphors and themes that are part of a widespread repertoire of southern African LSA rock art, but within a specific and uncommon context—net-hunting. To explore the ramifications of the narrative further is beyond the scope of this paper; I intend to publish a deeper discussion of the paintings.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE IDENTIFICATION OF ROCK ART IMAGERY

At the time of the debate about nets and recurved bows, almost 40 years ago, researchers were already aware that the question as to whether rock art images are ‘narrative’ or ‘metaphorical’ was ‘misleading’ (Lewis-Williams 1984: 327). It is less secure to infer practices and items of material culture based entirely on rock art, but some inferences are safer than others. I suggest that the Braam River paintings of web-nets are one of these. We must assume that these LSA people did practice net hunting, just as, perhaps, the notion of a ‘bridge’ is necessary to appreciate the ‘carrying metaphor’ of the ‘rope bridge’ at Junction Shelter.

We may expect that depictions of other subjects and practices not mentioned in any ethnographic records—‘recurved bows’, unusual-looking arrowheads (e.g. Cooke 1969: 122–35; Scherz 1986: fig. 243), ‘flutes’ and ‘trumpets’ (e.g. Scherz 1986: 112; Garlake 1995: fig. 38) and the very long spears of the Kouga figures shown here—will likewise embody webs of meaning. Each of these examples would have to be carefully researched using rock art and ethnography to understand how they play out.

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SUPPLEMENTARY ONLINE MATERIAL

Supplementary Online Material for this article can be found on the *Southern African Humanities* website.

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