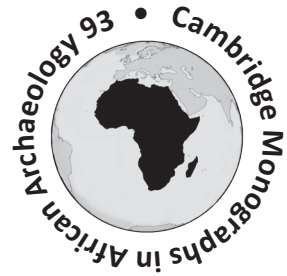


# Archival Theory, Chronology and Interpretation of Rock Art in the Western Cape, South Africa

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*For my parents, Susan and Jacob*



# ABSTRACT

SINCE ABSOLUTE DATING of rock art is limited, relative chronologies remain useful in contextualising interpretations of ancient images. This book advocates the archival capacity of rock art and uses archival perspectives to analyse the chronology of paintings in order to formulate a framework for their historicised interpretations. The Western Cape painting sequence is customarily accepted to include the hunter-gatherer phase from *c.* 10,000 BP, pastoralism from *c.* 2,000 BP and finally the historical-cum-colonial period several centuries ago. Painting traditions with distinct depiction manners and content are conventionally linked to these broad periods. This study evaluates this schema in order to refine the diverse hunter-gatherer, herder and colonial era painting contexts and histories. Using superimpositions as one analytical tool, the notion of *datum* aided the referencing and correlation of layered imagery into a relative sequence. Although broad differences separate painting traditions, and these variations are generally indistinguishable within a single tradition, it is clear that the long-spanning hunter-gatherer segment of painting in this region reflects a hitherto unrecognised sub-tradition. Some painted themes such as elephants, fat-tailed sheep, handprints and possibly finger dots occur within various levels of the sequence, which this study views as shared graphic fragments occurring between and across traditions and sub-traditions. Through the archival concept of *respect des fonds* such observable complexities were clarified as coherent graphic narratives that run through the entire chronological sequence of the Western Cape rock paintings. Probing archaeological, ethnographic and historical sources revealed that while these themes remained fundamentally consistent throughout the stratigraphic sequence as preferred subject matter, their meanings might have transformed subliminally from earlier to later periods, possibly reflecting layered shifts in the socio-economic, cultural and political circumstances of the region. Fundamentally, the framework of image histories shown by the choice and sustenance of specific themes is understood to mean that their significance and specific graphic contexts throughout the chronological sequence are pivoted and mirrored through the long established hunter-gatherer rock paintings which predate periods of contact with other cultures. The resulting sequence and interpretation of these painted themes is a descriptive and organisational template reflecting the original organic character in the creation of the paintings and ordered cultural continuities in the use of animal/human symbolism. This book's agenda in part involves reviewing the Western Cape's changing social and historical landscape to show variation in painting over time and to project possible interpretative transformations. Painting sequences and cultural (dis)continuities are thus intricately entwined and can be disentangled through a recursive analytical relationship between archaeology, ethnography and history. This amalgamated analytical approach produces historicised narratives and contextual meanings for the rock paintings.



**EXPLANATORY NOTES\*****Site names**

Rock art is a fragile heritage. Common wisdom instructs us that the unbridled exposing of sites to humanity places them in great danger of destruction over time. In South Africa, the Heritage Resources Act (No. 25) of 1999 protects all archaeological sites from uninvited attention and vandalism. This study does not provide site names and coordinates in the spirit of protecting them from human threats. Names are used only for those sites that are already known to the public or those sites important only to research communities. With only a few exceptions, these sites are largely on private properties or conservation areas, where even *bona fide* researchers must seek permission to study them. So, they generally enjoy some protection.

**Ethnic names**

Southern African has undergone particular historical circumstances over the past five centuries that have culminated in the adoption of various terminologies used to label diverse regional peoples. Most are fraught with unflatteringly pejorative connotations. None are so bedevilled by deleterious historical legacy than the names often reserved for the people known collectively today as Khoisan. This term was coined in the late 1920s to encompass both the Bushman/San hunter-gatherers and Khoekhoe pastoralists (Schultze 1928). The term refers to the linguistic and biological affinities of click speakers of southern Africa, who are more closely related genetically than they are to other African populations. “Khoisan” is now regularly rendered as “Khoesan” while some prefer “Khoesaan” (Smith *et al.* 2000) or now commonly “KhoeSan” (an appellation used in this study, in line with current developments in this field). Alan Barnard (1992: 7) argues for the use of the original spelling “Khoisan”, since it captures a foreign construct that does not exist in original Nama language.

Although in common usage today, in many ways the appellation “San” (also recently rendered as “Saan”), like the much more conventional “Bushman”, is equally problematic given its history. In one Nama dialect, as in other Khoe languages, “Sa-n” means “forager people” (non-gender pl.). Others suggest that in the Cape the term may also have implied a people with no stock animals and thus of lower standing. They argue that when domestic animals became much easier for the former hunters and gatherers to hunt than wild game, the name “San” became associated with stock thieves (Smith 1998). It also appears that “Bushman” (as an Anglicised form) was from the Dutch literal translation of this “San” moniker with its associated wild connotations. Despite etymological debates around these names, what is incontrovertible is the fact that both have been used pejoratively. But since there is no single self-appellation used among the hunters and gatherers beyond their own group names, such as |Xam, Ju|’hoansi, !Xoǀ, G|wi, Naro and so forth, writers and the public alike follow convention to use one or the other of the former terms. This study is no exception; however, it rejects all earlier derogatory connotations and uses the terms in a positive sense.

**KhoeSan clicks**

KhoeSan languages use clicks, as additional consonants to add meaning to words. Inflections and omissions will inevitably alter the meaning of words.

| (or /) Dental click: produced by placing the tongue behind the front teeth to make the “tut” sound.

≠ (or ≠) Alveolar click: produced by sucking the tongue against the ridge behind the upper front teeth.

l (or //) Lateral click: produced at the side of the mouth.

! Palatal click: produced by clucking the tongue on the roof of the palate.

**Dates and chronology**

Unlike history, archaeology and prehistory deal with long time frames. They render chronologies in two conventional ways. The first is to quote dates by reference to the present era, usually written as **BP** (before present). The reference year is + 1950, an arbitrary cut-off time reference. All dates are negative in relation to + 1950 (e.g. 2,500 BP = – 550). Archaeologists often follow this convention, used with calibrated radiocarbon dates. The second way uses the Christian era as a reference point: this approach prefixes a + or – sign to the quoted date. When quoting chronology in centuries, the upper case letters **BC** and **AD** (“before the Christian era” and “of the Christian era”) are appended to the dates (e.g. 3,000 BC = – 3,000 or AD 1,450 = + 1,450). Historians prefer this format. This book uses the first approach following usage in archaeology and rock art studies.

\* Information contained on this page appears in the book “Termites of the Gods” (Mguni 2015: xvi-xvii)

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	i
Explanatory notes.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Contents.....	iv
<b>CHAPTER ONE: CONCEIVING ROCK ART ARCHIVES.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. PAINTING SEQUENCES AS ARCHIVES.....	1
1.2. ROCK PAINTERS AS “ACTIVE ARCHIVISTS”.....	3
1.3. BREAKDOWN OF CHAPTERS.....	7
<b>CHAPTER TWO: SHIFTING ROCK ART PERSPECTIVES.....</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1. CAPE ROCK PAINTING ASSEMBLAGES.....	9
2.2. ISSUES BEDEVILLING THE CHRONOLOGY OF ROCK ART ASSEMBLAGES.....	13
2.3. ETHNOGRAPHY AND ROCK ART INTERPRETATION.....	15
2.4. OUTLINING THE ARCHIVAL PERSPECTIVE.....	16
2.5. WHY A ROCK ART ARCHIVE?.....	20
2.6. SHORT HISTORY OF SOUTHERN AFRICAN SEQUENCE STUDIES.....	21
2.7. USING SUPERIMPOSITIONS FOR CHRONOLOGY FORMULATION.....	22
2.8. ANALYTICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND IMAGE DELINEATION.....	24
2.9. CATEGORIES OF ROCK ART IMAGES AND DEFINITIONS.....	25
<b>CHAPTER THREE: ECOLOGICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT.....</b>	<b>27</b>
3.1. BIOGEOGRAPHICAL ENVIRONMENT.....	27
3.2. GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING.....	27
3.3. GEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND.....	28
3.4. SOILS AND VEGETATION.....	28
3.5. LOCAL CLIMATE.....	30
3.6. PALAEOENVIRONMENTAL SKETCH OF THE WESTERN CAPE.....	31
3.7. SANDVELD AND INLAND MOUNTAIN ECOLOGIES CONTRASTED.....	32
3.8. PREHISTORIC AND HISTORIC INTERFACE IN THE WESTERN CAPE.....	33
<b>CHAPTER FOUR: CAPE HISTORICAL SETTING.....</b>	<b>37</b>
4.1. SCALE, PATTERN AND PROCESS OF HISTORICAL CHANGE.....	37
4.2. TRANSITORY ARCHIVAL FRAGMENTS FROM COLONIAL SOURCES.....	39
4.3. ANTIPATHY TOWARDS THE CAPE INDIGENES.....	40
4.4. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT OF THE COLONIAL FRONTIER.....	41
4.5. TERMINATION OF “ANCIENT” TRADITIONS.....	43
<b>CHAPTER FIVE: THEORY, METHOD AND METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>45</b>
5.1. RESIDUES OF TEMPORALITY IN ROCK ART.....	45
5.2. AN EXPANDED DISCUSSION OF THE ARCHIVAL FRAMEWORK.....	47
5.3. <i>RESPECT DES FONDS</i> AS A USEFUL ANALYTICAL TOOL.....	50
5.4. SOME ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH USING ROCK ART SUPERIMPOSITIONS.....	55
5.5. CREATING CLASSIFICATIONS FOR ROCK ART SEQUENCING.....	56
5.6. HOW CHRONOLOGY? HARRIS MATRICES IN SEQUENCING IMAGERY.....	60
5.7. SITE AND GRAPHIC TRAITS FOR SEQUENCING ROCK ART.....	62



<b>CHAPTER SIX: KEY SITES AND THEIR CONSTELLATIONS.....</b>	<b>65</b>
6.1. DEMONSTRATING THE WESTERN CAPE CHRONOLOGY.....	65
6.2. ANALYSIS OF PAINTING SEQUENCE IN THE STUDY AREA.....	66
6.3. KEY CHRONOLOGY SITES IN THE AGTER-PAKHUIS AREA.....	67
6.3.1. THE PAINTING SEQUENCE OF FALLEN ROCK SHELTER.....	67
6.3.2. THE PAINTING SEQUENCE OF MAIDENS POOL SHELTER.....	71
6.4. CONSOLIDATED DISCUSSION OF SEQUENCE RESULTS.....	77
<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: WESTERN CAPE CHRONOLOGY.....</b>	<b>82</b>
7.1. INSIDE-OUT PERSPECTIVE OF ROCK PAINTING ARCHIVES.....	82
7.2. VISUALISING CHANGE OVER TIME IN THE SEQUENCE.....	83
7.3. THE MAIN CHRONOLOGY PHASES.....	83
7.4. IMPLICATIONS FOR HISTORY AND ROCK ART INTERPRETATION.....	92
7.5. ASPECTS OF CONTACT IMAGERY IN THE WESTERN CAPE.....	94
<b>CHAPTER EIGHT: ART ON THE FRONTIER.....</b>	<b>96</b>
8.1. CONVERGING ROCK ART ARCHIVES AND HISTORY.....	96
8.2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: PEOPLE, ELEPHANTS AND SHEEP.....	98
8.3. FROM EARLIER TO NEWER SYMBOLIC TROPES.....	104
8.4. SLICE THROUGH THE PAINTING ARCHIVE: DEFINING ELEPHANTS & SHEEP.....	109
<b>CHAPTER NINE: PAST TO PRESENT.....</b>	<b>116</b>
9.1. ENVISAGING ROCK ART ARCHIVES.....	116
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>LIST OF MAPS</b>	
Map 1.1: The study area.....	2
Map 2.1: The distribution of paintings and engravings in South Africa.....	11
Map 3.1: Geological map of the region that encompasses the study area.....	30
Map 4.1: Rock art distribution in southern Africa.....	38
Map 8.1: Regions inhabited by the indigenous polities.....	95
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	
Figure 2.1: Detailed representational images attributed to early hunter-gatherers.....	10
Figure 2.2: Common human head (sickle- or ?-shaped) known as the ‘hook-head’.....	10
Figure 2.3: Various group scenes from the Cederberg.....	11
Figure 2.4: Varieties of red ochre occur in the vicinity of the painting sites.....	13
Figure 2.5: A variety of finger-daubed imagery from Maidens Pool Shelter.....	16
Figure 2.6: Ways and means in the archival analysis of Cape painting sequence.....	18
Figure 3.1: Rugged Cederberg scenery with typical ravines and shelters.....	29
Figure 5.1: Links between organising ideas of archival records and painting images.....	52
Figure 5.2: Key types of superimposition relationships in stratified deposits.....	61
Figure 5.3: Large yellow-to-orange clay-plastered elephants.....	64
Figure 6.1: Fallen Rock Shelter well-preserved main sequence.....	67
Figure 6.2: Summary of the Fallen Rock Shelter painting sequence.....	68
Figure 6.3: Summary of the Fallen Rock sequence.....	69
Figure 6.4: Image J (D-Stretch Plug-in) and CPED toolkit use at Fallen Rock Shelter.....	70
Figure 6.5: Coarse fine-line elephants painted over faint fine fine-line figures.....	71

Figure 6.6: Maidens Pool Shelter viewed from the Boontjies River.....	72
Figure 6.7: Summary of Maidens Pool Shelter sequence of the paintings.....	73
Figure 6.8: Summary of the Maidens Pool Shelter painting sequence.....	74
Figure 6.9: Diepkloof Kraal Shelter topography.....	75
Figure 6.10: Decorated and plain handprints are common feature of the Cape.....	76
Figure 6.11: Various finger dots and finger strokes in the Cape.....	76
Figure 6.12: A summary of the Diepkloof Kraal Shelter painting sequence.....	77
Figure 6.13: Typical finely detailed images at Fallen Rock Shelter.....	78
Figure 6.14: Coarse fine-line elephants and a fat tailed sheep.....	78
Figure 6.15: Replication of imagery from fine fine-lines to coarse fine-lines.....	80
Figure 7.1: Summary of the sequence of rock paintings in the Cape.....	84
Figure 7.2: Pre-contact phase fine fine-lines.....	85
Figure 7.3: Ewe and lamb, elephant and calves.....	87
Figure 7.4: Fat-tailed sheep juxtaposed with a file of elephants.....	87
Figure 7.5: Coarse fine-line images of various colours and types.....	88
Figure 7.6: Animals, digging sticks and pigment patches in coarse fine-line manner.....	89
Figure 7.7: Images in coarse fine-line and fine painting manners.....	89
Figure 7.8: Image overlaps in form between coarse fine-lines and finger painting.....	91
Figure 8.1: A Charles Bell painting titled “A rainy afternoon” dated 1813-1882.....	99
Figure 8.2: Elephants and calves in contrasting association with groups of people.....	107
Figure 8.3: Common theme of elephant cows with calves in the Cederberg.....	108
Figure 8.4: Coarse fine-line elephants.....	109
Figure 8.5: Elephants pursued by men with bows and arrows or some spears.....	110
Figure 8.6: Hunting metaphors featuring two elephants about 55cm apart with human figures.....	111
<b>APPENDIX 1.....</b>	<b>135</b>
Table 1: Fallen Rock Shelter imagery in superimpositions.....	135
Table 2: Maidens Pool Shelter imagery in superimpositions.....	136
Table 3: Fallen Rock Shelter image totals in the analysis and their identifying numbers.....	137
Table 4: Maidens Pool Shelter image totals in the analysis and their identifying numbers.....	138
Table 5: Fallen Rock Shelter list of subject matter.....	139
Table 6: Maidens Pool Shelter list of subject matter.....	151
Figure 1: Fallen Rock Shelter Harris matrix diagram.....	153
Figure 2: Maidens Pool Shelter Harris matrix diagram.....	154
Figure 3: Diepkloof Kraal Shelter Harris matrix diagram.....	155
Figure 4: Archival analysis through Fallen Rock Shelter and Maidens Pool Shelter.....	156
Figure 5: Impressionistic replication of imagery from fine fine-lines to coarse fine-lines.....	157
Figure 6: A redrawing of the Maidens Pool Shelter main panel in the sequence.....	158

# CHAPTER ONE

## CONCEIVING ROCK ART ARCHIVES

*Ephemeral objects are paradoxically things full of thingness but also flimsy, fragile, easily imagined as mere screens for the real. The fragility of the objects in turn made them in some sense more real: we were capturing these items before they disappeared...we were preservers of the past.* (Michie & Warhol 2010: 419–420)

### 1.1. PAINTING SEQUENCES AS ARCHIVES

A persistent problem in southern Africa is that the chronology and interpretation of rock art are approached as though they are separate domains of knowledge about the art, its ancient producers and their social histories. There is a view that the development and proliferation of rock art studies over the past four decades in the region largely overlooked chronology (Mazel 2009: 84–85). In formulating the chronology of various painting traditions in the Western Cape, with a view to aiding rock art interpretation, this book proposes the archival approach as a potential framework for contextualising rock painting sequences, wherever possible, in their historical purview. This proposition does not aim to replace existing approaches to chronology studies, but instead it affirms the archival approach as an augmentation methodology or a supplementary analytical tool to aid wholesome interpretations. As shall be seen later when this approach is discussed in detail, the inbuilt organisational principles of the archival approach based on the *respect des fonds* concept (discussed in chapter five) make it useful for visualising and interpreting rock art subject matter and themes that span different painting traditions and therefore also the stratigraphic levels of the image sequences. To achieve this methodological ideal, rock art as archaeological materiality needs to be conceptualised in a manner that is amenable to archival analysis. This chapter therefore begins by presenting the notion of rock art as archive. Rock art as archive is a central methodological pivot that is unified and used in tandem with several other commonplace approaches in wrestling with the chronological complexities of the painted and engraved records, associated past human experience and history. In this regard, the archival perspective is a suitable platform for promoting interpretations that stimulate historicism in the narratives about the ancient painters and the artistic record which they placed in the rocky landscapes of southern African.

Historicism, as a concept and in practice, has been used, contested and examined over the past few centuries and especially after the mid-1800s in anthropological and

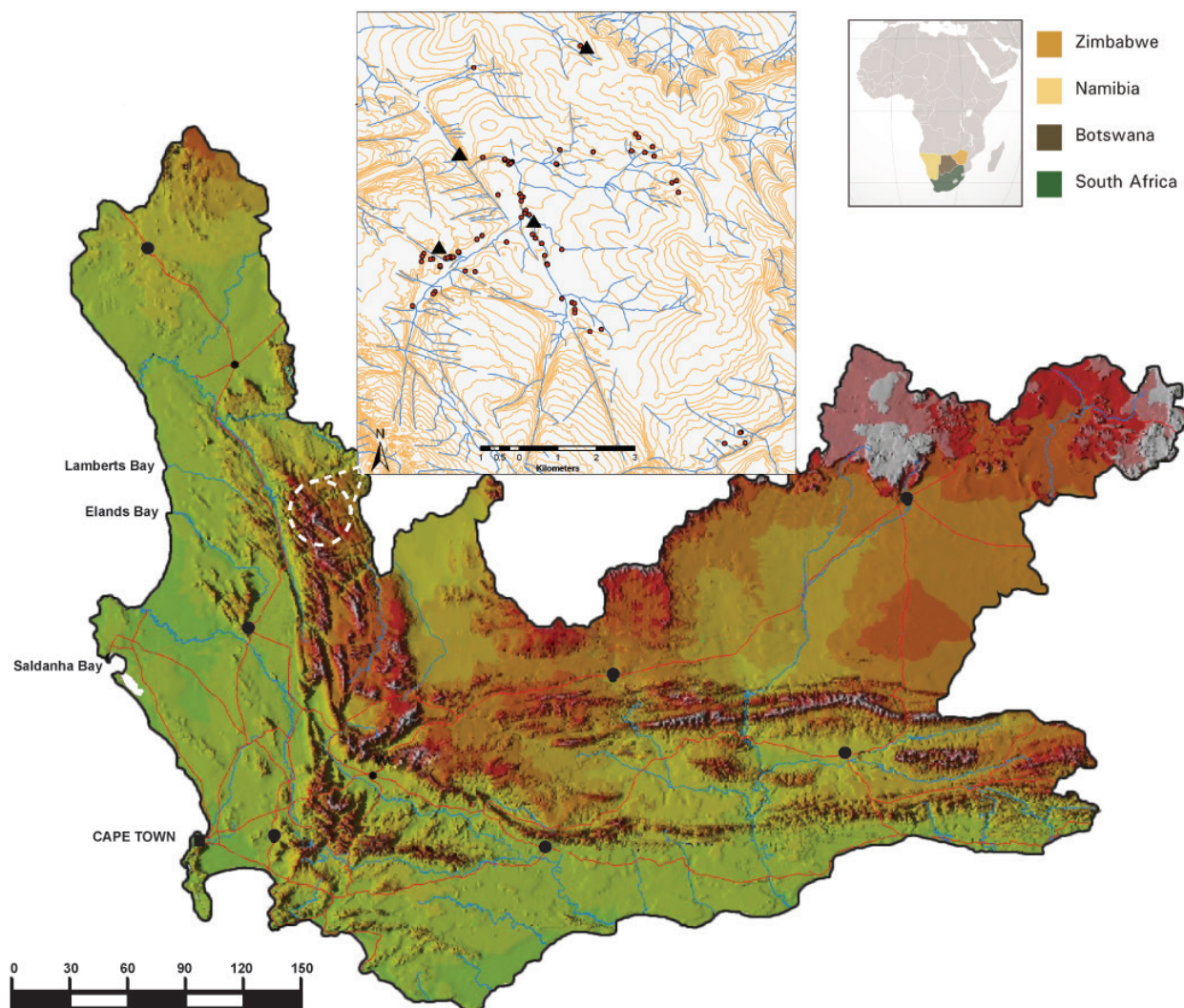
historical disciplines and literary criticism, yet it has not been embraced sufficiently in rock art studies and archaeology in general. The concept is broadly defined in contemporary literal theory as “a critical movement insisting on the prime importance of historical context to the interpretation of texts of all kinds” (Hamilton 1996: 1–2). This contextualisation of interpretations emphasises the foregrounding of specific geographies, periods, histories and cultures in analysing materials from the past. Rock art, as a pictorial record that bears testimony to the social history of its ancient producers requires this kind of treatment in our formulation of interpretations and chronologies. However, since the effectual and widespread application of direct dating of rock art largely remains a remote prospect, it is prudent to continue with efforts on improving relative chronologies as these provide a means to organise the images in basic terms of their sequential ordering. Such chronologies have the potential to place subject matter and themes in their varied moments of production relative to each other within a single tradition or across multiple artistic traditions. Paul Hamilton points out that, “Artworks and historical events, like our reworkings of them, are inseparable from their moment” (1996: 12), but also that, “The particularity of historical event and artwork fixes them in time yet opens them up to a mode of explanation which changes over time” (*ibid.*: 15). In this regard, the archival approach allows the expansive interpretation of particular painted subject matter and themes that occur at various levels of the chronological sequence and even across different traditions, something that has not been attempted in conventional approaches in rock art studies. In the second chapter there is a definition of the central constituents of the rock art as archive formulation, whose philosophical force is partially alluded to in the epigraph. The discussion proceeds to outline the painting assemblage repositories of this analysis and finishes with a statement on the ways and means to this end: that is, the appropriate conceptual and practical strategies for this investigation of painting sequences. Key notional issues from this précis are developed further to lead onto and dovetail with considerations of theory and methodology frameworks in chapter five and ultimately the resulting formulation of the Western Cape regional sequence in later chapters.

Except where such mention is warranted for historical reference or comparative arguments being advanced, this book does not discuss rock art regions outside the Western Cape (Map 1.1). Few associations are made in

later chapters with the rock art regions outside the Cape under the historical-cum-iconographic discussion on the interpretation and meaning of selected subject matter and themes of San or Bushman<sup>1</sup> rock paintings. Issues of meaning and motivation are undoubtedly weighty hermeneutic themes but overall, as many today would agree, they have been better researched and are now largely well understood in other regions (see this view in Lewis-Williams 2006: 344). The central objective is therefore to formulate an exploratory frame for articulating and contextualising rock art chronology and interpretation of a selection of painted themes using archaeological, anthropological and historical sources. This approach relies largely on studying the painting sequences with the prime conception of the former regional inhabitants and artists as active archivists of these artistic and material records. This

<sup>1</sup> In this book San and Bushman (*n*, -man [sg.]; -men [pl.]) are used as both *noun* and *adjective*, without their former negative or pejorative connotations. Where a specific group or linguistic designation is not specified, these names are used interchangeably, although these people had their own names to refer to themselves and their contemporaries.

thread in the study prefigures the archival approach as a potential perspective alongside other analytical approaches in studying chronological sequence and painting history in the Western Cape. As shown in advancing the idea, the paintings are in several respects very much like other kinds of assemblages whose material and informational qualities conjure up the notion and constitution of what is called the “archive” in modern-day semantics. Besides mirroring the archive, painting assemblages have an intrinsic archival value in and of themselves, as one component among several past records of historical significance. Rock art is thus a subject that should not only be dealt with as an intellectual exercise of its decipherment using an assembly of analogies, but also as a body of material that provides complementary support for other information sources such as early travellers’ writings, ethnography, ethno-historical and excavated records. Rather than rock art being a passive recipient of interpretative support from these various sources, it is arguably a powerful source in its own right deserving to be used to inform other records in an expansive and bidirectional manner. This dialectical



Map 1.1: This map shows the study area, circled in red with a line pointing to its close-up, in the broader Western Cape. The black triangular icons are some of the sites analysed in the study.



approach requires scholarly rigour and probity accorded archival bodies of material with the use of appropriate analytical tools. Rock painting assemblages therefore require contextualisation chronologically, historically and culturally if our interpretations of the paintings are to be successful in particularising image change over time and understanding the social histories of the ancient rock painters.

## 1.2. ROCK PAINTERS AS “ACTIVE ARCHIVISTS”

It is hard to imagine that the prehistoric rock artists were unaware that the images they created would endure long after their own lifespans. Likewise, it is implausible that these artists were less self-conscious human beings who did not recognise the patrimonial worth of the previous images made on the same rock faces by their forebears and other earlier generations. Following this logic implies that these artists anticipated the prospect of their own creations of imagery in turn forming a legacy to be passed down to and viewed by future generations long after their own existence. This may seem speculative, but to deny these long gone people this basic human capacity is to deny them a healthy, conscious sense of their own history, their past and future and, by extension, their total humanity. They were as fully human as any other person today. When asked about the engravings at Tsodilo Hills, Xuntae Xhao, a Ju|’hoansi man who lives in a nearby village, answered that these had been “made so that future generations could see what the older people had done” (Walker 2010: 62). Furthermore, it is also revealing that one of the central |Xam informants whose copious dictations in the 1870s are contained in the Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd archive, the old man ||Kabbo, said he “much enjoyed the thought that the Bushman stories [which he narrated] would become known [in the future] by means of books” (Bleek & Lloyd 1911: x, parenthesis added). Even if in this instance ||Kabbo did not mention this with the rock art heritage in mind *per se*, it is evident that he clearly understood the prospect of books propagating the KhoeSan legacy down the generations. Although such propagation would occur in a foreign textual medium, but showing |Xam verbatim dictations alongside English translations, this possibility was not a completely alien notion to his San cultural framework. Although the futuristic propensity of archival materials is generally accorded to Western traditions, it can also be argued that in their cultural practices the pre-industrial and preliterate societies in most parts of Africa do indeed share a strong notion of history, the past and future. Generally, it is in their expressive culture—oral histories, artisanship, folklore in the form of myths, fables and legends—that the past–future dichotomy is eminently reflected.

Regarding the long-gone southern African hunter-gatherer artists, some writers have similarly argued that, “As they worked, they knew that, later, someone would see their images and probably add to the panel” (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009: 42). This view accords with (and indeed seems to be its derivative) David Lewis-Williams’s earlier declaration that, even though the |Xam were not painters

of rock shelters, they nevertheless “recognised the art as products of their own people, and they had the same cognitive system as the last artists” (Lewis-Williams 1981: ix). Moreover, it might be added that given the ubiquity and prolificacy of this enduring artistic tradition across southern Africa, few people today would dispute that its long-term creation probably involved many, rather than isolated artistic individuals, over many successive generations. The making of the art therefore might have been a communal effort (see Lewis-Williams 1992: 20), with most people generally artistically adept. This is in direct contrast to the earlier view that, “[T]hese rock paintings must have been the work of a few individuals while the Bushmen populace as a whole presumably found outlets for their artistic ambitions in quite different fields like dancing, music or ornamentation” (Pager 1971b: 28). In this view, artisanship in rock art production was therefore a higher order pursuit, a preserve of only a few gifted individuals, while other forms of expressive culture were a kind of catchall unoccupied category for all and sundry. This view reflects a mildly patronising perception of San artists that is quite consistent with the earlier crude versions generally entertained about these hunter-gatherer people, even by those who seemed to be sympathetic towards them. In much earlier times, before the 1970s when most writers were generally better informed, those who propagated unpalatable views concerning San hunter-gatherers in travelogues and journals were amateur writers in the mould of traders, explorers and travellers, big game hunters and even missionaries. Although we now know that he was mistaken, missionary Henry Tindall (1856: 26) once wrote of the San: “He has...no patrimony...a soul, debased, it is true, and completely bound down and clogged by his animal nature.” Equally mistaken was German anatomist and ethnologist Gustav Fritsch (1872: 418), who later denigrated the San in similar vein: “The Bushman is the most unfortunate childish creature, capable of living only for the moment.” Quite the reverse, the San were (and still are) as fully human as these two men: they did not live wholly in the present like animals do, without future aspirations or a sense of past and history.

Visceral truisms expressed above concerning the hunter-gatherer sensitivities about history and future may not as yet attract sufficient consideration, for reasons of their seeming subjectivity, as they do not refer to any direct testimony of the artists themselves, people who have long since disappeared. Yet the oral traditions as recorded in the 19th and 20th centuries show that indeed these hunter-gatherer people had a strong sense of history, their past, present and future. In contrast, Lorna Marshall’s (1999) assertion that the Ju|’hoansi, then known as the !Kung of the Kalahari Desert, have no sense of past may have been mild misinterpretation. If the Ju|’hoansi lacked this perspective, they would have no temporal notion of situating their creator deities nor of their ancestors in mythology and folklore, frequently mentioned in their primal time myths, about which Marshall amply wrote. Their reference and use of the time past signals their sense of history even if it is expressed in mythological terms. As gleaned from anthropologist Megan Biesele’s (1993) studies of folklore

and expressive life among the Kalahari's former hunter-gatherers, the Ju|'hoan folktales are called *n=oaḥnsi o n!àusimasi*, 'stories of the old people' set in a long-ago time (Bieseles 1993: 17) passed down by their ancestors to the present generations (*ibid.*: 20). As /Ai!ae N!a'an, one of her informants ended some of his stories: "Hey! The doings of the ancient times were foul [/kau], I tell you" (*ibid.*: 20). It is also of interest in this book that in the early 1970s when Bieseles first went to Botswana she expected to find "only a limited number of competent storytellers ... a special class of raconteurs, and that other people's narrative abilities would be decidedly inferior" (*ibid.*: 18). To her surprise, the number of competent storytellers, both women and men, was large although generally the old people were the main storytellers and among this category she also found that there were several who were 'really excellent ... in verbal and dramatic abilities' (*ibid.*: 20). The principal view in this study is that there is no reason why rock art ought to have been a different order of artisanship to folklore, music, ornamentation and so forth. All were produced within a communally understood and practiced repertoire of artistic skills in a specific hunter-gatherer cultural context. Hence the notion of rock painters as active archivists is communally and community oriented framework of analysis.

Nevertheless, from the foregoing declarations it can be surmised that over several millennia the former indigenous<sup>2</sup> rock artists were purposefully creating archives of images as part of a protracted cultural tradition and sequence. Stated differently, in the prehistoric milieu of the former societies, artistic creativity was thus a robust social phenomenon of active production of rock art and, conceivably, its subsequent "archiving" by generations of people over time. Such archiving processes may have manifested in different forms, but direct and indirect, whereby the artists carefully placed their images in protected spaces and stable surfaces of shelters, and although there is still little that is known about the specific recipes used in the making of paints, it is generally agreed that some of these pigments appear to have been manufactured to ensure the longevity of the paintings. Indirect archiving would have entailed that the artists placed their own images in meaningful juxtapositions and superimpositions with reference to the existing earlier imagery. They may also have used shelters in ways that avoided the defacement of earlier imagery; certainly there are no known veritable signs or evidence of prehistoric defacement or vandalism of rock art in southern Africa. So these varied forms of active engagement with earlier images in the rock shelters by later artists or their deliberate avoidance altogether of

such imagery entailed aspects of recognition, either by appropriation or reverence.

Why would the artists and their societies seek to maintain and pass on to future generations the custom of making paintings with their related practices? First and most concretely, if in some respects and in specific regions the painted panels mounted up as "reservoirs of power" (see Lewis-Williams 1992: 25) or some other kind of symbolic accumulation, which artists and their contemporaries understood to be amenable to a variety of uses or to drawing from some power or inspiration on a continual basis (and therefore art production not being entirely a culmination of a one-off series of actions and events), it was in their interest to sustain these paintings in their original contexts. Furthermore, this intended accumulation or safeguarding what accumulated before can be conceived of as a facet of "storage", an archival conception to which this discussion shall return below and in chapter five. This statement is not arguing for the notion of curatorship as recognised in the profession today, but instead the notion of making images that are long-lasting, either (or both) by using durable materials or by placing them in carefully chosen shielded spaces so that they survive time while adding or deriving meaningful nuances on the existing imagery. For, as Lewis-Williams (1998: 96) has written in respect of the shamanistic explanation of the paintings, "The main focus of San art was the building up, through generations of painters, of cumulative manifestation of the spirit world...In this way, through the construction over time of a complex 'progressive manifestation', San painters played not only a religious but also a social role, establishing...symbols and experiences of a shamanistic cosmos." The long-term symbolic imaging therefore appears not to have been defined by singular truncated events, extemporaneously fixated on the "now" or a one-off creative action, but by mutually threaded and interdigitating incremental additions from earlier to later generational graphic panoplies.

In other publications, Lewis-Williams (1972, 1974b) earlier observed from his quantification studies that in San rock paintings, "[T]he apparent preferences governing the use of superpositioning point to the proposition that some iconic paintings were deliberately related to each other to function as symbols in a system of communication" (Lewis-Williams 1977: 52; see also Vinnicombe 1976: 141) which the "painters...wished to achieve and convey to their viewers and, *importantly, to later participant painters*" (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009: 43, emphasis added). This rationale of deliberately relating iconic images through time is in itself the strongest indicator of the artists' sense of the past and future relevance of their artworks. Further, a revealing insight is provided by the concept of "cultural storage", which Megan Bieseles (1993: 52, 59) invokes in her discourse regarding oral systems of communication and the role of expressive forms in transmitting cultural traditions in preliterate societies, in her case the 1960s–1970s Ju|'hoansi hunter-gatherers. She draws from Eric Havelock, who argued that, "All societies support and strengthen their identity by conserving their

2 The terms "indigenous" and "indigenism" are contested anthropological notions with problematic ambiguities, some of which Mathias Guenther (2006: 18) has contended border on "essentialism and primordialism". Therefore this book uses "indigenous" loosely in the sense of "Indigenous One" expounded by Richard Lee (2006: 6–8) as generally referring to "small peoples facing Euro-colonial invasion and conquest". I have elected to use this definition given the social and political setting of the Cape colonial frontier, with its capitalist and statist expansion resulting in the encapsulation and marginalisation of those dispersed remnants of former hunter-gatherer and herder communities, who eventually became a social and economic underclass (Yates *et al.* 1994: 59).

mores. A social consciousness, formed as a consensus, is as it were continually placed in storage for re-use” (Havelock 1978, cited in Biesele 1993: 51). In the study of ancient painted panels, the locus of “cultural storage” needs to be identified and defined. The discussion will refer to this issue in detail in later chapters.

In this study of rock art, cultural storage is conceptualised phenomenologically as an abstract, mental and corporeal phenomenon (e.g. as in oral history, folklore and related expressive performances, among other ephemeral—only as contrasted with rock art permanence in place—forms) that exists both as an internal entity in the “brain” and also as a real physical one with an external existence (e.g. as in spatial arts of rock engraving or painting, which constitute enduring materialities that have remained static over long periods, fixed in place). Storage, as can be argued further, is predicated on the idea of “archive as accumulation and capitalisation of memory on some substrate” (Derrida & Prenowitz 1995: 15). As Rudolf Arnheim (1969: v) suggested a while ago, artistic activity and visual thinking can be thoroughly rational and so ancient hunter-gatherer painters were conscious carriers of this iconographic archive, in their heads, which they fixed on rock surfaces for durability. Because this symbolic accrual of materiality in the form of images over time was not random, but consciously selective, the view presented here finds solace in some current writers’ formulation that, “Objects from a given historical period activate a metonymic chain by which those looking at, holding...them can feel asymptotically closer to the historical reality from which the objects derive” (Michie & Warhol 2010: 416). How else could the artists and their audiences have engaged meaningfully with the symbolic content and context(s) of former images in their shelters if there was a historical and cultural dislocation?

The artists would have probably formulated their own repertoire of skills and knowledge in relation to the previous cache of graphic and expressive assemblages accumulated through time within their historical and ecological milieu. The aspect of image accumulation in time and the resulting juxtapositions and superimpositions, the notions of cultural storage and re-use (in whichever ways it occurred and that we might not as yet fully understand) are central to the advocated archival perspective for synthesising rock art sequences and interpretation of subject matter and themes that cross-cut traditions in different layers. All material and symbolic phenomena were obtained within the purview of the artists’ social, political, and economic spheres, themselves metaphorically mediated through people’s reference to the spiritual worldviews using rituals and other practices. The nexus of activities and ideologies need contextualisation in various specific ecological settings where the people existed and, crucially, in the Western Cape within their normal domiciles inside (but not always) the caves and shelters where they partially lived their lives and painted their experiences. While these itinerant hunter-gatherers walked and combed the landscape in their daily pursuits, they habitually used shelters as their home bases judging by the archaeological evidence of deep and

extensive occupation deposits in most large shelters in southern Africa.

The physical and abstract connection of the “archive” and “home” is an important one and has been explored by archival scholars (Derrida & Prenowitz 1995). Jacques Derrida (1996: 2) noted that the archive concept originates from the Greek *arkheion* (also rendered as *archeion*; see Sickinger 1999: 6; Steedman 2001), which was “initially a house, a domicile...residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*” or “those who commanded” (Derrida & Prenowitz 1995: 9). It was in the homes of these authorities that official government records were filed; the archons were therefore the “documents’ guardians” (Derrida 1996: 2; Sickinger 1999: 2–6). While this principle of guardianship is essential in the analysis presented in this book, it is important to note that the archive institution itself has thus from its very inception associated the public and private domains in various illuminating ways. This spatial-political dualism, according to Derrida, gave both a hermeneutic and jurisdictional authority to the magistrates, as the guardians of ancient records. The associated state control and monopolisation of power to interpret the records, what he calls the *domiciliation* or “state of house arrest”, is therefore where the archive concept is enmeshed. Although Derrida’s appropriation of the archive/house conception is somewhat unfitting for the modern forms of archives, some scholars still recognise this conceptual correspondence (Steedman 1998: 70, 2001: 72), probably at an affective level. Some scholars even amplify this emotional metaphor into a religious one. An archive, for the researcher or any end-user, is thus like a place of pilgrimage or “the Mecca of historians” (Phelps 2007: 1) where unique, authentic sources are normally believed to reside (Connors 2003: 225). Likewise, for some, “To be in the archive is to accede to one of its dominant fantasies: that we can go beyond words, beyond traces, to things” themselves (Michie & Warhol 2010: 419). However, beyond these archival bodily experiences, a divergent and hitherto significant construal of these metaphors is the view that originally the Greek archives to which Derrida alludes were also largely what the “people as a whole maintained [as] records of the decisions they themselves made as a community” (Sickinger 1999: 6). (These records were sometimes inscribed, but not always, on stone stelai, especially in Athens by the communities.) Even with his *domiciliation* concept granted, true state control of the records in ancient Greece was not as absolute as Derrida would have us believe in his analysis.

The community collectivist position accords with the archival theorist Carolyn Steedman’s (1998: 70, 2001: 72) contention that Derrida’s allegory is not a fitting one for our purposes because “the archon operated a system of law in a slave society...dealt with the majority of local populations, only as aspects of their owners’ property and personality”. This point becomes relevant to this study because, as we all now know from anthropological studies, the KhoeSan<sup>3</sup> artists’ societies with whom this book is concerned maintained a strong “communal ethos” as a central *modus operandi* in their social and cultural



interactions with one another and across to all other aspects of nature around them. The San, for instance, are particularly known to have been largely egalitarian societies (Biesele 1993: 9; Guenther 1999: 14, 41–42; Katz 1982: 26–27), with little or no traditional authority or leadership. Reverting to Steedman's observation, her point of departure draws instead from, and augments, the 19th-century French historian Jules Michelet's (1982) thoughts on archives. Michelet's significant idea for archival studies was that in resurrecting the past from the archive for the community, the actual "Magistracy, is History" (according to Steedman's [2001: 39] translation of the original French text from Michelet 1982: 268). Yet again, the problem with Michelet's central perception is that he draws from an understanding of the magistrate as being one, at least in the context of England and France within the modern era, who was "specifically charged with care and management of the poor, and mediation of social and class relations" (Steedman 2001: 40). This notion remains inappropriate here since the magistrate's elite status and authority, like Derrida's archon metaphor, was steeped in the rule system of law, juridical and state power. It also lacks communal agency, which is relevant for the case of rock paintings as archives, created consciously by rock artists and their communities.

From this foundation, Steedman examines some of the written accounts of self-narratives from the ordinary working class, often the poor people within 18th- and 19th-century England archives made for administrative and judicial purposes. Conceding the problem of involuntary "forced narration" in these accounts, she nevertheless encourages, perhaps for reasons of what she calls greater specificity, an autobiographical standpoint of self-fashioning and self-perception. What the people themselves chose to "tell" for inscription became a significant trope. In consequence, the magistrate was then just one of the sites of storytelling where he essentially became "the necessary and involuntary storyteller" (*ibid.* 55–56). Much as Biesele (1993: 18) was surprised at not finding a select class of hunter-gatherer storytellers in the Kalahari, the production of rock art may not have been a preserve of maestros (as assumed by Pager 1971b: 28), who as a result commanded authority or elevated status in their communities. Instead, in line with the recognised organisation of hunter-gatherer cultural life along "co-operation and harmonious social relations" (*ibid.*: 9), all forms of San expressive culture were not produced as secret, but as public knowledge based on shared social values, histories and experiences. It is thus in the rock paintings and other related sources of information that researchers will uncover what these people chose to "tell" to their contemporaries and future generations. This self-inspired viewpoint is germane to the notion of rock art assemblages as principally and purposefully chosen

creations by the indigenous artists as active archivists. Similarly, the archaeologist or anthropologist, like the metaphoric magistrate, then occupies a secondary level as archivist, scribe and narrator of the past(s) of these hunter-gatherers and other former inhabitants of the Western Cape. Returning to the fundamental analogy, those former rock painters therefore consciously created a through-time repository of images depicting in their residential rock shelters their own individual and their communities' lived-through bodily and social experiences. These ancient rock art repositories reflect characteristics of *accumulation* and *durability* (see the concept of enduring or long-term value of archives in Sickinger 1999: 5), both of which are also truly and entirely consistent with the defining traits of the notion of the archive.

The idea of envisioning the former rock painters, and *not* archaeologists and prehistorians or even historians, as people who actually intentionally made the archive of images is fundamental. In addition, this standpoint is predicated on the acknowledgement of the long-term custodial role of these rock artists (i.e. painters and engravers in various regions) in respect of their creative, dynamic and expressive record. This indigenous custodianship viewpoint recognises the purposeful role of the artists in making important choices regarding the selection of a variety of available painting materials, techniques of painting, subjects to depict, themes and entangled symbolism, purposeful juxtapositioning and superimpositioning, as well as the actual image placement on the protected and stable rock faces in terms of the inter-site and intra-site spatial locations. This study challenges the temptation to regard the survival of the painted record as a pure accident of natural processes; instead, it is accepted that, although we may as yet not know the full range of recipes of paint making, it is observable that the bulk of the art was made from durable materials. It is probable that the earlier detailed rock art was invested with resilient materials because of its long-term significance to its producers in contrast to later colonial-period tradition in the Cape or Bantu-speaker farmer tradition in northern South Africa, whose purpose was probably ephemeral in the particularistic contexts of rites-of-passage (Namono 2004; Namono & Eastwood 2005) and also during the upheavals of colonial encroachment and subjugation (Smith & van Schalkwyk 2002). It should be admitted that the artists of the rock art clearly wished their creative artistry to endure in time from the mere fact that an overwhelming majority of observable rock art sites appear at present to have been chosen for their protective overhangs or sheltering qualities. Pointedly, this approach offers possibilities for locating communal agency in rock art analyses and constructions of frameworks for their chronological and interpretative contextualisation.

Analysing superimpositions is an empirical enterprise, but distinguishing and locating the agency of image creators as implicated in chronology is essentially a hermeneutic venture premised in the ideals of historicism. Ultimately, this process involves careful mediation and interpretation of relationships between individual images and their

3 This term is "a neologism coined in the 20th century and used to describe two related peoples: the pastoral Khoi or 'Hottentots' and the hunting and gathering San or 'Bushmen', both speaking unusual click languages" (Lee 2006: 462). The original appellation "Khoisan" (Schultze 1928) was initially intended as a biological label, but now also encompasses common features of language and culture (Wells 2005).



moments of creation within and across traditions in the stratigraphic sequence. In this interpretative mediation, contrary to the familiar adage, facts alone do not speak for themselves, which is a topic that treads on matters of objectivity and subjectivity. While some writers advocate empirical objectivity in archival studies, others have challenged this aspiration as being naïve and a form of outmoded positivist objectivism (Ridener 2009). To understand the significance(s) of the empirically observed image characteristics, their stratigraphic and juxtaposition relationships and the cultural selections that the artists consciously made in producing the rock art, it is important that the methodological grounds are laid down for probing the varied contexts of analytical assemblages. These contexts are the historical, social, cognitive, ritual, ecological and economic factors within which the rock painters operated to produce the interlaced copious archaeological and artistic records through time. As some argue, “it is not possible to divorce the rock art from the associated archaeological remains that document the history of hunter-gatherers, herders<sup>4</sup> and even European colonists in the [Western Cape] area” (Parkington & Manhire 2003: 31, paranthesis added).

### 1.3. BREAKDOWN OF CHAPTERS

To appreciate the nature and composition of the archival materials that this study explores, chapter one started with an exploration of the notion of artists as active artists consumed in the appropriation of earlier artworks and creating their own forms for contemporary use and passing down to future generations. This articulation provides the thinking behind looking at the rock art as an archival body of materials to be approached in similar ways. In chapter two, a general description of the rock art is explored as a central assemblage of focus in the study area. There is also a review of archaeological information associated with this artistic assemblage. From then onwards, the rock paintings are thought of in their own terms as essentially an archival material of some kind. Chapter three discusses the environmental and landscape context of the Western Cape area. This is a multi-sided context with physical, social and ecological variables, which impacted on the formation and variability of material culture and hence the archival accumulation and storage. In chapter four, this discussion is further threaded and enmeshed with the historical background, charting the documented path of the social and cultural contexts of indigenous populations as reconstructed from the colonial historical records. This section contextualises the cultural and chronological complexities arising from the multilayered archaeology and history of the past two millennia in the region. Further on, chapter five discusses theory and methodology in a dialogue that amplifies the above discussion on the ways and means of the proposed archival approach. It also includes a review and amendments of some methodological issues that bear direct relevance to the key question of the usefulness of relative chronology. Recognising the

complexity of imagery change over time requires the use of an amalgamation of promising methodologies rather than just the familiar dependence on the analysis of superimpositions as the sole basis for relative stratigraphic sequence of imagery.

From theory and methodology, chapter six discusses three key sites that are the central focus of this study. The discussion also refers to relevant evidence from smaller sites that form the constellations of the three major sequence sites. These sites were selected on the basis of their spread in contrasting ecological settings: the sandveld near the coast and the inland mountainous chains. All but one site are in the mountains; the exception is Diepkloof Kraal Shelter, which reflects the main sequence in the coastal area. This is a customary, yet important, ecological division in the determination of temporal and spatial variation of various sites in the region. Chapter seven presents the new formulation of the unified Western Cape rock painting chronology. From here is the description of the levels that are identified in the sequence in terms of image forms and content of the relevant painting assemblages in each stratigraphic level. The final sections of this chapter set the scene for the interpretative trajectory that follows in chapter eight for a selection of subject matter and themes identified as spanning some levels of the sequence and across different traditions. The agenda concerns demonstrating imagery change over time through the traces or clues the chronology, subject matter and associated painting contexts within and beyond traditions of painting.

Chapter eight proceeds from the newly developed painting chronology to demonstrate interpretative possibilities grounded in the analysis of some historical, ethnographic and archaeological sources. A selection of elephant and fat-tailed sheep depictions as prominent subject matter from the newly devised regional chronology schema is used to demonstrate contextual, locality-focused interpretations. It is a demonstration of how sequence may indicate that some aspects of the painting record can be interpreted in terms of historical change through time in particular contexts. Thus, in the final analysis and conclusion in chapter nine, the painting sequence is integrated with some standpoints from the archival perspective, ethnography, history and aspects of the post-colonial notion of entanglement (e.g. see Nuttall 2009), in order to reveal the multifarious social, economic and historical circumstances that led to several image categories continuing through time as favoured themes to the exclusion of others, though their central meaning tropes might have shifted according to particular historical periods. This idea of entanglement is summoned to augment the ideas around acculturation that went with frontier circumstances and how the rock art in certain geographical contexts might well have been a product of people who lived and perceived their worlds as those involving humanity of variously mixed identities. In the Western Cape, this sort of historicist reading of the past is fostered by notions of frontier, borderlands or seam, which relate to colonial encounters as well as those before colonialism, which involved diverse cultures. Fundamentally, therefore, this body of work is a theoretical

4 “Herder” is contentious term; some see it as an economic differentiation category between hunter-gatherers with sheep and Khoekhoen with sheep (see Schrire 1992).

and methodological analysis that advocates a recursive association of temporal sequence with historicised narratives. The syntheses that use rock art as archive have the ability to refine interpretations that are aligned with relative chronologies. The chronology and archival approaches are both a means to an end that seeks a greater understanding of the complexity of the Western Cape's pre-colonial and early colonial life-worlds. This proposition attempts to develop multilayered and secure archaeological-cum-historical narratives and subsequent interpretative approaches for unravelling the meaning of rock art in densely painted localities.

It does not seek to generalise across space and time, but it is general enough for a localised understanding of specific regional circumstances and thus contextual interpretations. The concluding chapter nine deals with the issues of contingency and how the painting records interdigitate with the production of multilayered archives and narratives that can feed multiple functions. This structure allows the use of a tripartite perspective for understanding rock art as archives and the development of holistic and historicised interpretative frameworks that cover pre- and post-colonial painting and archaeology assemblages.