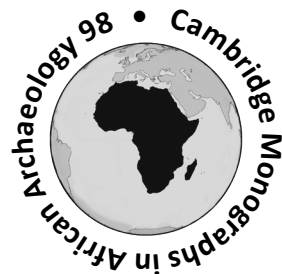


# A Painted Ridge

Rock art and performance  
in the Maclear District,  
Eastern Cape Province,  
South Africa

David Mendel Witelson



**Access Archaeology**





ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD  
Summertown Pavilion  
18-24 Middle Way  
Summertown  
Oxford OX2 7LG

[www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

ISBN 978-1-78969-244-0  
ISBN 978-1-78969-245-7 (e-Pdf)

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Cambridge Monographs in African Archaeology 98  
Series Editors: Laurence Smith, Brian Stewart, Stephanie Wynne-Jones

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For my mother and father



## ABSTRACT

Southern African San (Bushmen) rock art is one of the most well-researched rock arts globally. Still, some aspects of it remain under-researched and under-theorised. While the study of San rock art is informed by ethnographic sources, most are frustratingly mute about the practice itself. This book addresses that gap by investigating the processes that resulted in a pattern of simultaneous differences and similarities at painted sites on the MEL ridge in the foothills of the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg. It acknowledges that rock painting and other forms of San expressive culture—which, in contrast to rock painting, were ethnographically observed and historically documented—are of a kind. It draws on performance studies literature, San rock art research, San ethnography, and the painted imagery on the MEL ridge to show that the production and consumption (following Lewis-Williams) of San rock paintings were performative. By understanding the practice of San rock painting in terms of performance we can understand better the practice itself.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people provided me with assistance or support in the process of writing this book. I hope that I do not forget too many names.

I owe my sincere thanks to Megan Biesele, Connor Boyd, Mathias Guenther, Kiah Johnson, Mark McGranaghan, Lara Pearce, Craig Sephton, Ryan Sephton, Larissa Snow, Dominic Stratford, and Eric Wettengel.

I am especially grateful to Geoff Blundell, Sam Challis, Janette Deacon, Paul den Hoed, Jeremy Hollmann, David Lewis-Williams, David Pearce, and Susan Ward.

Without support and encouragement from Iris Guillemard, Tracy Witelson, Roy Witelson, and Keith Witelson, I would not have enjoyed this as much as I did.

I hereby acknowledge the financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) of South Africa towards this research. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are mine and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.

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## PREFACE

Some current questions in San<sup>1</sup> rock art research will never be fully answered until we understand better the practice of rock painting itself. How, for instance, do we begin to study the layer upon layer of imagery at some sites for which, more often than not, we do not have chronological information? Is it enough to treat each image simply as the result of a separate image-making event, as with the deposition of a layer in an excavated sequence, or must we realize that each image is potentially tied in multiple, socially-significant ways to other images both on the same rock surface and at other painted sites? Similarly, how can we begin to investigate the relationships between painted sites when, currently, stylistic approaches to San rock paintings do not allow for high-resolution, small-scale comparisons for one long-lived painted tradition (e.g. Henry 2010; Solomon 2011; Flett & Letley 2013, see also Hampson *et al.* 2002; Hampson 2015)? Probing further, why do we not have that kind of resolution when in some areas of the world unambiguous stylistic sequences are not particularly difficult to discern (e.g. for examples from Australia, see Chippindale & Taçon 1998; Ross 2013)?

It is important to acknowledge from the start that Western art is not equivalent to San image-making (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1974: 102, 1984, 1988: 2). The current method for studying San rock art has become well-adapted to the nature of that corpus. The processes behind San image-making, such as which kinds of images were painted, where they are painted on the rock face, and what sorts of other images or features of the rock face they interact with, have been important considerations for the study of San rock art since at least the 1980s (Lewis-Williams 1981b; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990). Yet despite this, there is little other information that informs the researcher about the practice of image-making itself. We are left asking, if we dare ask at all, questions to which documentary sources are, in any direct sense, mute in reply.

This book engages with some of these broader concerns. It considers, as a case study, a suite of painted sites clustered together on a ridge. The scale of this study, at which several sites in close proximity are considered together, is uncommon<sup>2</sup> in studies of painted San rock art sites and allows for some of the relationships between sites to be investigated in an unconventional way. When the meanings of San images are investigated, as opposed to chronological, distributional, technical, chemical, or stylistic topics, they are usually formulated in relation to ethnographically-informed themes. This book acknowledges that while the meaning and social significance of images are indeed highly important, they are important not only because of the images' conceptual associations but because of the ways that those significances are enacted.

This acknowledgement has led to an attempt to examine in detail a large number of images in a single body of work, despite the fact that some of those images are not published in this volume. As the work progressed, I found that image-by-image examination and analysis, rather than consideration of the images as they appear in groups—regardless of the images' state of preservation—produced more information that, by taking variety into account, led to richer and more nuanced understandings.

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<sup>1</sup> It is well-known that the term 'San' is one with pejorative connotations, as is the synonym 'Bushmen'. 'San' is generally the preferred term in South Africa. My use of the word rejects all pejorative connotations. Moreover, by using the term, I do not attempt to equate group identities across pre-colonial and colonial boundaries. I use it because I discuss rock art in the broader context of San expressive culture, and because it is common practice to refer to the traditional corpus of fine-line rock art as San rock art because of the demonstrable ethnohistorical ties between that corpus of imagery and San beliefs and practices.

<sup>2</sup> Large-scale studies of dispersed but related sites and single-site or single-image studies are more usual.

With so many images before them, researchers are inclined to gloss over differences, noting similarities in favour of generalisations. Nonetheless, as I aim to show in this book, each image deserves the same degree of attention that the image-makers themselves would have accorded them.

The current dominant approach to San rock art in South Africa, which considers the rock art as produced within a principally and ethnographically demonstrable shamanistic worldview, has been accused of monolithic explanations, unable to deal with a variety of reasons for image-making. Readers may thus be interested to note that this book, though it follows and applies that approach and accepts the association between San rock art and San shamanism, aims ultimately to investigate a mechanism which may influence potential variations.

To facilitate the flow of the theoretical and interpretative discussions contained in the chapters to follow, I have grouped diagrams of all the sites, their dimensions and contexts, as well as numerical surveys, and details of my digital photograph enhancement procedures, in Appendices A–D.



## CHAPTER 1: A PAINTED RIDGE

On a farm in the Maclear magisterial district (hereafter, Maclear District) in South Africa's Eastern Cape Province, on the southern slopes of the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg escarpment, there is a rather remarkable rock painting (Figure 1.1). It is in some ways similar to, in others different from, paintings at seven additional painted sites along the same ridge. At the centre of the painted scene is a large male human figure with red lines on its face. To its left and right are seated clapping figures. Rectangular tasselled bags, weighted digging sticks, and other equipment surround them. Much of the research on which I later draw has shown that paintings like this depict moments or synopses of communal San trance dance performances—a practice no longer found in the south-eastern mountains of South Africa but still performed in the Kalahari where it was also observed first-hand by 20th- and 21st-century ethnographers (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2012a). In Figure 1.1, different groups—some human, some not—are shown together and they interact in important and socially significant ways (more on these groups in Chapter 3). Although no one has made rock paintings in the south-eastern mountains since the beginning of the twentieth century (e.g. How 1970; Prins 1994), San rock art images and ethnohistorical records (e.g. Arbousset & Daumas 1846; Orpen 1874; Stanford 1910) hint at the possibility that the San practice of rock painting was, like narrative folktales or the performance of the trance dance, a form of expressive culture (e.g. Biesele 1983: 54, 83; Guenther 1994: 265).

Figure 1.1, like most of the images I discuss in this book, is to be found on what has come to be known as the MEL ridge (hereafter simply the MR) which lies roughly 25 km south of the border between South Africa and Lesotho (Figure 1.2). The MR is host to a suite of eight sites (Figures 1.2B and 1.3; Appendix B): MEL7, MEL6, MEL5, MEL4, MEL12, MEL3, MEL2 and MEL1<sup>3</sup>.

When walking along the MR, from the southern end, and thus encountering the sites from left to right as in Figure 1.3, it is particularly striking that none of the painted sites along the ridge is, at least in general, quite the same as any of the others, even if isolated images—a human figure here, a rhebok there—resemble closely images at sites nearby or further away. This pattern is particularly obvious on the MR, but it is, in fact, not a unique configuration for rock art sites of the uKhahlamba-Drakensberg area. Importantly, the MR is special, not because it is unusual, but because it is representative: painted sites are often in close proximity to other sites, which may be around the corner or in the next valley, that are quite different yet not *entirely*. On the MR, this pattern is especially visible because the eight sites, which are distributed along just over 500 m at roughly the same contour level, are easy to access and compare.

A few of the MR sites are somewhat habitable rock shelters that provide protection from the elements and have a flat floor, but most of them offer minimal shelter or none at all (Appendices A–B). At MEL2, for example, there is no overhang: the images have been placed in a small recessed part of the cliff or *krantz* that is otherwise flat and above the ground surface (Appendix Image B.2).

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<sup>3</sup> Site codes follow the convention of the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) at the University of the Witwatersrand, which is designed, in part, to protect sites not open to the public from destruction by not revealing the location of those sites. Site names are attributed numerically in the order in which sites are found.



FIGURE 1.1. A redrawing of the trance dance scene at MEL6. Note the three large and clawed non-human figures on the left and one on the right. The lowermost of these on the left also has a tusk. After Blundell 2004: fig. 37. Original tracing and redrawing by T.A. Dowson



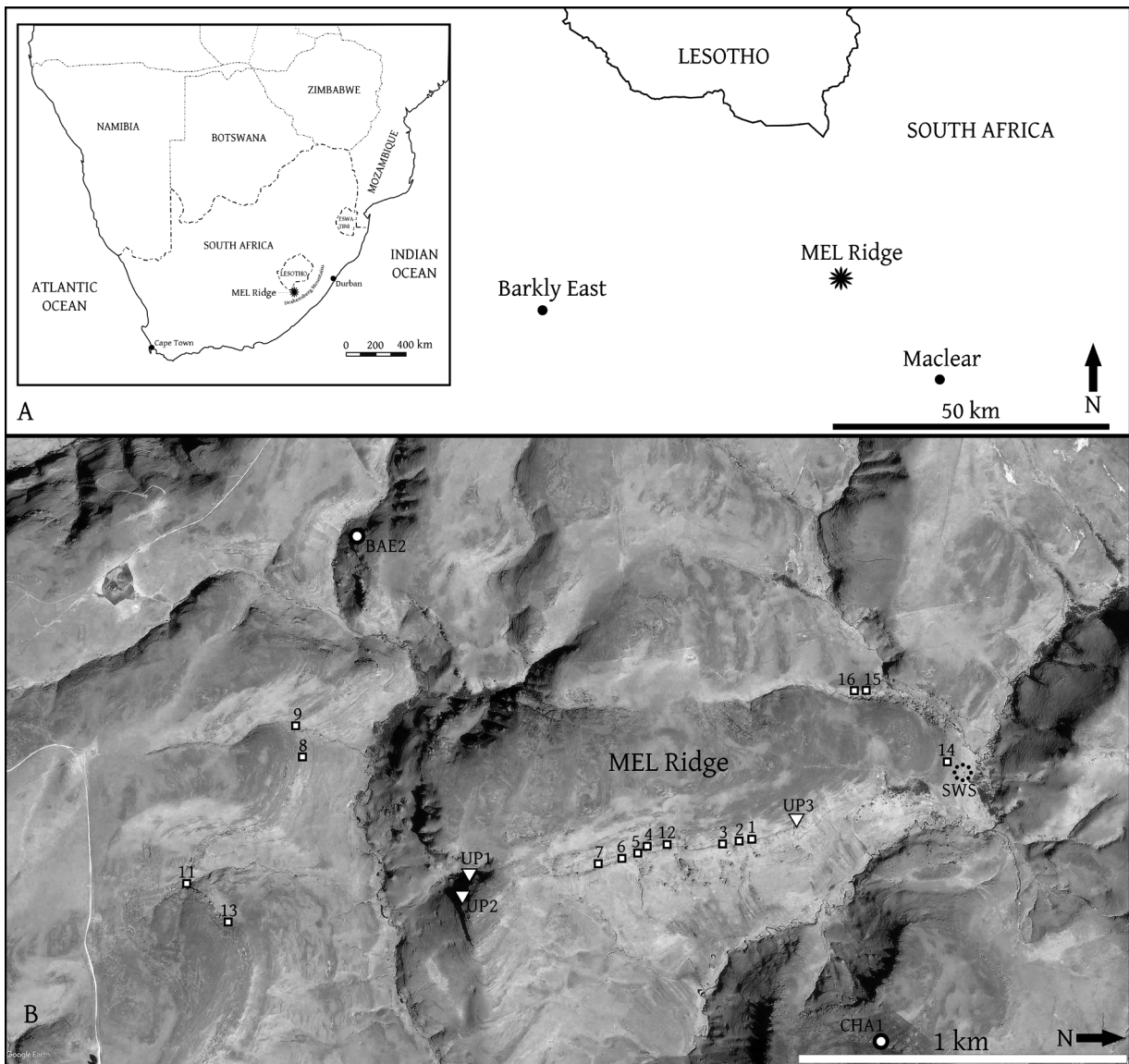


FIGURE 1.2. The MEL Ridge sites and some nearby. (A) Map showing the location of the MEL Ridge. (B) Google Earth Image showing the MEL Ridge and archaeological sites. White squares are rock art sites. White circles are well-known rock art sites on neighbouring properties. White triangles are unpainted (UP) rock shelters. The dotted circle marks an historical-period stone-walled structure (SWS). MEL10 lies to the east outside the area shown.

Even where there is an overhang to provide shelter, there is usually not enough floor space to allow for many people to have inhabited the shelter; they must, therefore, have lived elsewhere<sup>4</sup> and could not have held communal trance dances in these shelters (cf. Stow 1905: 111).

<sup>4</sup>There is archaeological deposit at some of the MR sites, but these deposits are likely only a few centimetres deep. There is a larger, more habitable shelter at MEL8 (Figure 1.2B) which has been partially excavated.

Nevertheless, the images in each site are in some way different from, and yet similar to, the others. While each shelter appears to have, in terms of its imagery, a ‘character’, ‘trend’ or ‘trajectory’,<sup>5</sup> the paintings on the ridge as a whole are part of one distinct painting tradition. The imagery on the ridge is entirely composed of the fine-line, traditional corpus and is devoid of (1) colonial-period subject matter (such as guns, Western clothing, wagons, etc.) (e.g. Willcox 1956: Plates 45–47; Lee & Woodhouse 1970: 149–160; Vinnicombe 1976: 8–103); (2) ‘Late White’ finger-painted images associated with Northern Sotho groups (e.g. Eastwood 2003: 21; Smith & van Schalkwyk 2002); and (3) any images that could be associated with the ‘Khoekhoen tradition’ (e.g. Smith & Ouzman 2004; Eastwood & Smith 2005). The only subject matter on the MR that potentially falls outside of a pre-contact hunter-gatherer context are two therianthropes at MEL6 with horns or heads indicative of domestic cattle (Figures 1.4A and 1.4Y)<sup>6</sup>. It is thus apparent that most of the subject matter of the MR images reflects, in a broad sense, content related to the painting tradition of a chiefly hunting and gathering people.

Trends and idiosyncrasies in particular kinds of imagery are, in general, apparent across the ridge (Appendix C). Similarity and difference is, therefore, a central theme of this book. A purely quantitative investigation of these themes is, however, problematic: we do not know which measurements to make or how to justify the significance of patterns that emerge from those measurements. Our categories—stylistic, typological, numerical or otherwise—remain *etic*, resulting from the analytical constructs of the researcher, rather than *emic* which describe the terms or concepts that human actors use for their own objects or behaviours (Harris 1968: 568–571; Hayden 1984: 80).

Extensive and time-consuming quantitative studies were carried out in the 1960s and 1970s (Maggs 1967; Rudner & Rudner 1970; Pager 1971; Vinnicombe 1976; Derricourt 1977; Lewis-Williams 1981; Mazel 1981; Wright & Mazel 2007). While that research did allow for patterns in the subject matter to be confirmed in numerical terms, it did not explain *why* those patterns existed. Research has shown that focused polysemy is a feature of San images: two otherwise apparently similar motifs may, in the contexts in which they are painted, have different meanings (Lewis-Williams 1998). An image of an animal in one context, contextualised by surrounding imagery and features of the rock face, may have significantly different meanings and associations from another image of the same animal in another context. The quantitative problem is, therefore, whether two images of the same animal should be counted in the same category or not. Because of this problem, I do not give quantitative analysis much weight in this study.

Without some way of informing the criteria which are used to make comparisons, the range of differences and similarities is unconstrained: comparisons of colours, sizes, shapes, forms, distances, postures, species and many other criteria could be selected to describe rock paintings *without* any necessary justification for each criterion. The use of such criteria requires that they answer a strictly quantitative question. However, this book poses different kinds of questions. A highly detailed, descriptive and exegetical approach is, therefore, more suitable than one which focuses only on assumed typological categories.

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<sup>5</sup> The ‘trajectory’ in painted imagery is subtle at some sites but is noticeable at the nearby site of MEL8 where there is a remarkable emphasis on figures with oversized phalluses (George 2011: 1).

<sup>6</sup> There is no indication from the cattle motifs at this site that they derive from a particular point in the timeline of contact between hunting and gathering groups and other groups with domestic animals.

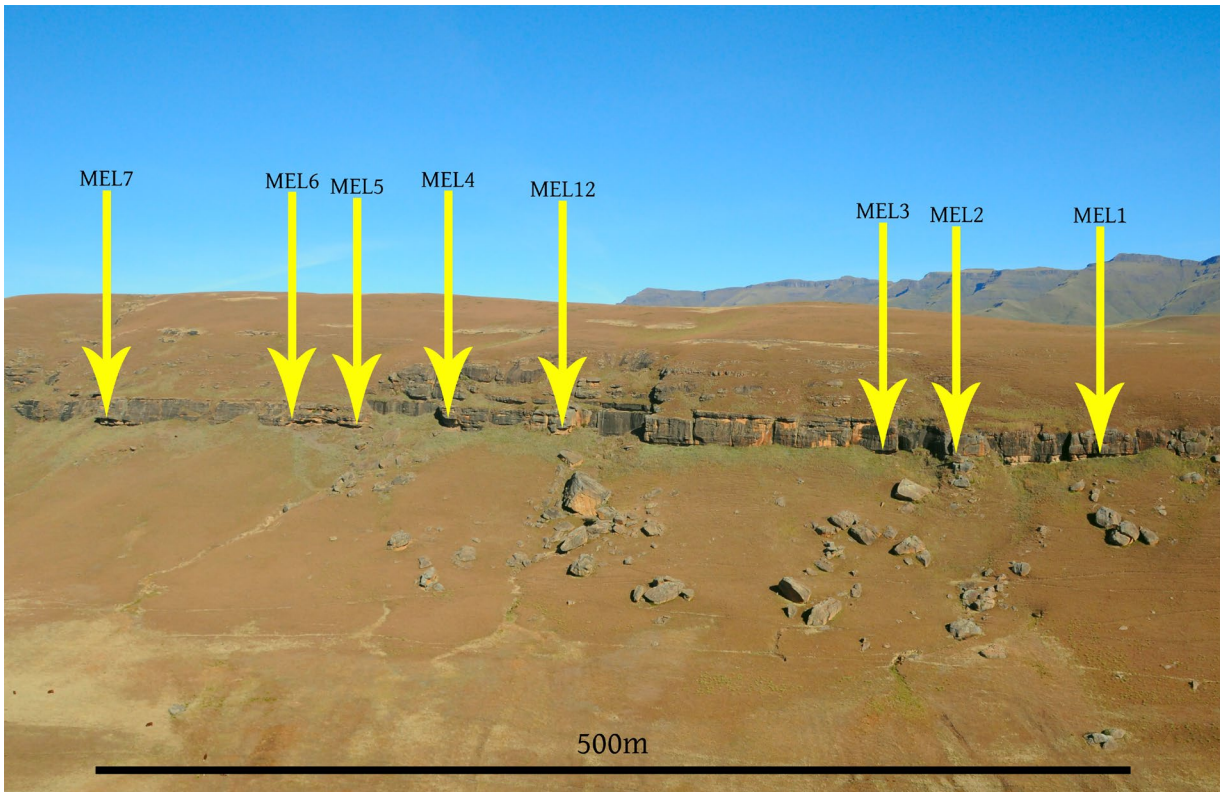


FIGURE 1.3. The locations of the eight MR sites. The arrows point to the overhang of each respective site. Image shows a view to the west. Photograph by the author.

The remainder of this book is an attempt at an approach which seeks to understand differences and similarities in painted rock art sites from an emic perspective, one that attempts to be as close to an insider San perspective as possible, while bearing in mind that, though San images are not akin to Western art, they nevertheless occupied a particular position within San worldview.

### The problem with ‘sites’

A central concern of this book is the type of performances involved in the production and consumption (*sensu* Lewis-Williams 1994, 1995, 2001a) of San imagery. How paintings were made and viewed, as well as used, raises the issue of how we define painted ‘sites’. Although rock art imagery is implicated in a network of resources and social relations that inform how the makers and viewers of images conceptualised painted sites and places (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1994, 2010; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004a), we have little idea of how to go about comparing different painted sites. We face the same problem as we face with typologies of rock art: by which significant criteria should such a comparison of painted sites be made? It is, therefore, crucial that we understand from the start the nature of the spaces at which image-making performances took place and note that the ‘archaeological site’ is not a given, but rather an etic categorisation of where researchers find images.

Tilman Lenssen-Erz (2012), for example, has presented a typology of rock art sites that aims to consider all the contextualising factors of which researchers may think. Typologies of sites stem from a notion of the rock art site as a place where the researcher finds images based on a presence/absence

relationship. If there are no paintings in a shelter, then the researcher must conclude that the barren shelter is not a site. In some ways, typological approaches to the categorisation of painted sites confront the reality that people chose to make images in particular places. The fundamental location for specific MR image-making performances must necessarily be the rock faces onto which those images were made (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1994: 282); it cannot be where the images are not, although we must allow that people may have had beliefs about, and performed rituals in, unpainted localities.

Importantly, the suite of eight MR sites is a real (not an arbitrary) grouping because they are concentrated along a stretch of the MR just over half a kilometre long. Only one overhang on the MR has been left unpainted: it lies at the northern end of the ridge, beyond MEL1 and shortly before the ridge peters out (UP3 in Figure 1.2B). What binds these spatially-close painted sites together, and perhaps eliminates something of a division between them, is that image-makers repeatedly chose the MR sites for the making of images. A person or group in the valley below, whether moving parallel to the ridge or perpendicular to it, encounters the MR with its several painted sites.

To such a person, it is visible upon inspection that the eight closely spaced sites share both differences and similarities in their painted content. As there is currently no reliable or conventional way of expressing this in accepted stylistic terms (e.g. Hampson *et al.* 2002; Solomon 2011; Flett & Letley 2013; Hampson 2015), consider similarities and differences numerically by grouping together what I deem basic motifs (Appendix C). I have already discussed the problems with such etic typological approaches, and have noted that adopting a detailed, descriptive and ethnographically-informed exegetical approach to the study of painted sites is more desirable. An implication of this is that a description of the MR sites as a total of eight is potentially misleading because the distance between panels within each site and between each painted site is not always the same and, in at least one case (MEL1), there are paintings on the cliff face outside of and adjacent to the actual shelter. It is thus possible that the entire ridge was, at least for the people who made images there, one multi-component place where images could be painted rather than a collection of eight separate places.

I have, so far, referred to the painted places on the MR both as ‘painted sites’ and ‘painted shelters’, both individually and as a suite because of the etic and emic ways in which it is possible to classify differences between painted shelters. At least two concepts—derived from both San ethnography and rock art—are evidence for an emic concept of place in relation to rock art sites<sup>7</sup>. The first is an association between ritual potency and place. A |Xam man, |Han≠kass’o (also known as Klein Jantje), expressed an association between ‘strength’ (*!giya*) and place when he related in the context of using snake venom to make arrow poison that, “[a] snake which is powerful (strong), it is the one which we, because we saw it at a place which is strong, it is the one (of) which we put in one poison fang” (L.VIII.26: 8330, emphasis added)<sup>8</sup>. Janette Deacon expressed a similar notion in her discussion of the relationship between landscape features and engraved rain-making images found an area of today’s Northern Cape Province that once comprised the territories of the |Xam San: “[e]ngravings at these places reinforced the power already present there because the animals and other themes depicted carried metaphorical significance that inspired the rainmakers and their assistants” (Deacon 1988:

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<sup>7</sup> Additional features that indicate an emic notion behind places where images could be made are explored in Chapter 5.

<sup>8</sup> The notebooks compiled by Wilhelm H.I. Bleek and Lucy C. Lloyd in the late nineteenth-century total some 12,000 manuscript pages of handwritten |Xam phonetic script with verbatim transcripts in English. They are available online at <http://lloydbleekcollection.cs.uct.ac.za/>. References to pages in the notebooks take the following form: L.VIII.16: 7431. The first letter denotes either Wilhelm Bleek (B) or Lucy Lloyd (L), the Roman numerals denote the informant’s numerical assignation, the first Arabic number the number of the notebook and the second Arabic number the page number(s).

136–137, emphasis added). The second concept concerns territory (*n!oresi* in Ju'hoan) which is shared based on ties to specific people and thus to valuable resources; where one band or camp has access to, for example, abundant water, another group in an area with little water is granted access simply by asking for permission (Marshall 1976; Marshall Thomas 2006). In sum, while 'site' is a readily available concept and term to describe the painted shelters on the MR, an emic notion allows for a better understanding of how the image-makers who once lived in today's north Eastern Cape would have conceptualised the suite of sites on the ridge.

### **An overview of previous Maclear District rock art research**

The MR lies within an area once known as 'Nomansland'. "In the last 150 years, it has been labelled, either in its totality or in its various parts, East Griqualand, Transkei, North Eastern Cape and today north Eastern Cape" (Blundell 2004: 34). It is necessary to bear in mind that area was one with a liminal, ambiguous status: colonial-era politics treated it as a veritable no-man's-land despite the presence of San and many other groups in the region (Blundell 2004: 34–40). Ethnohistorical documents from the Nomansland region are unprecedented in the connections that they enable us to draw between specific people, places and rock art over "some 130 years" (Blundell 2004: 34–45; Smith 2010).

Archaeological evidence indicates that hunter-gatherers had occupied the region as early as 29,000 years ago (Opperman 1992, 1996) with punctuated occupations through into the colonial period (Opperman 1987, 1999; Opperman & Heydenrych 1990). Some rock paintings from the Maclear District have recently been directly dated and evidence that the practice of rock painting was present in the region for at least the last 3,000 years (Bonneau, Pearce *et al.* 2017: 331).

Painted sites in the area of the MR have been known since the first decade of the 20th century (e.g. Moszeik 1910). Two painted panels were removed—the Zamenkomst panel in 1912 and the Linton panel in 1918—and put on display at the South African Museum (now Iziko Museums) in Cape Town (Davison 2012). During the 1940s and 1950s, South African artist Walter Battiss visited and copied images at painted sites in the Maclear District (Mallen 2005: 3). He also visited sites in the broader area and published a book that included descriptions and plates of painted sites in Lady Grey and Barkly East (Battiss 1948). Battiss was followed by Neil Lee and Bert Woodhouse who published photographs of images from, among others, the Maclear District sites of CHA1 (Figure 1.2B), TYN2, WID1, HIL1, PRH1 and FEN3 (Lee & Woodhouse 1970: 10–11).

Scholarly research in the Maclear District by what is today the Rock Art Research Institute (RARI) began several decades prior to the first theses and published research on rock paintings from the area, though not all rock art research on the district has been carried out by RARI (e.g. Green *et al.* 2007). Much of the published or postgraduate research is thematically or theoretically orientated (e.g. Dowson 1994; Pearce 2002, 2010a, 2010b; Blundell 2004; Mallen 2004, 2005, 2008; Turner 2006; Henry 2010; Bonneau *et al.* 2011; George 2011, 2013; Pearce & George 2011; Bonneau *et al.* 2012; Bonneau *et al.* 2014; Bonneau 2016; Bonneau, Pearce *et al.* 2017; Bonneau, Staff *et al.* 2017). Some studies are concerned with specific kinds of images, while others investigate different themes, sequences of images or issues of conservation and preservation (Pearce 2002, 2010a, 2010b; Mallen 2004, 2005; Turner 2006; George 2011, 2013; Pearce & George 2011). The most recent research project in the Maclear District has been concerned with the dating of images that used carbon black as the black pigment (Bonneau *et al.* 2011; Bonneau *et al.* 2012; Bonneau *et al.* 2014; Bonneau 2016; Bonneau, Pearce *et al.* 2017; Bonneau, Staff *et al.* 2017).

The most prominent research projects have focused on the relationship between rock paintings and the history of interactions between different groups in the north Eastern Cape Province, primarily investigating the role of rock paintings in negotiating complex socio-political circumstances (Dowson 1994; Blundell 2004; Mallen 2008; Henry 2010). Following the debate on constructions of San history between Thomas Dowson (1993) and Aron Mazel (1992, 1993), Dowson's (1994) structurationist study radically attempted to use different kinds of depictions of San shamans (as he called them) in rock paintings to construct a history of social processes and changing social circumstances following ever intensifying contact between hunter-gatherers and Bantu-speaking farming communities. Although Dowson's argument has received some criticism, his study provided the basis for further research in the area. Geoffrey Blundell's (2004) published PhD thesis, which built on Dowson's work, critiqued and tried to move beyond previous approaches to San rock art by following postcolonial ideals, using body theory and drawing on ethnohistorical sources.

Dowson (1994) and Blundell (2004), as well as Pieter Jolly (1994), Sam Challis (2008), Lara Mallen (2008) and Leila Henry (2010), contributed constructions of San history from in or adjacent to the north Eastern Cape that implicate rock paintings of various kinds in specific social and historical processes as well as in individual and group identity formation during times of changing social circumstances. Dowson (1994) and Blundell (2004) have nevertheless received criticism because of an absence of reliable chronology in each of their studies (Smith 2010: 351; for a detailed and critical comparative review supported by new research, see Mullen 2018). Furthermore, the recently published direct radiocarbon determinations from rock paintings close to the MR indicate that some of the images are older than previously assumed, and that some of the ideas behind arguments for the social processes linked to the production and consumption of the rock paintings (Lewis-Williams 1994, 1995, 2001a) need to be revised (Bonneau *et al.* 2011: 427; see Mullen 2018)<sup>9</sup>.

The dating of MR images is both a challenging practical problem and an interesting theoretical one. Only a handful of the images have black components that could potentially be dated if found to contain carbon. These would provide direct dates for the making of specific images, but one would still not know the temporal relationship between every image along the ridge or between every painted shelter. What is more, it is well-known that in shamanistic rock arts, of which San rock art is unquestionably one (e.g. Lewis-Williams 2001a, 2002a; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004b; Lewis-Williams & Challis 2011), a sequence or series of paintings superimposed on one another need not be "solely or primarily a function of age" (Whitley 2005: 55). We may speculate that regardless of when the first image on the MR was made, at whichever site, other paintings built up in the same place in relation to the paintings that were already present on the MR and at each site (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1974; Pearce & George 2011).

Some researchers have approached the build-up of a sequence of rock art imagery using the Harris matrix originally designed for excavated sequences (e.g. Chippindale & Taçon 1993; Loubser 1993; Anderson 1996; Mguni 1997; King 1998; Russell 2000, 1997, 2012; Pearce 2002, 2006, 2010a; Swart 2004). Such work, in addition to the identification of a general sequence, has brought to light the likelihood of "regional, and possibly even site and intra-site, sequences within the general scheme" (Mazel 2009: 89). Nevertheless, investigation of the stratigraphic relationships between rock paintings for chronology has been argued to be unreliable for paintings within one tradition (Pearce 2010a, but see Russell 2012). For the purposes of this book, it is necessary to extrapolate the findings of the directly

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<sup>9</sup> One of Blundell's significantly differentiated figures (SDFs), recently reconsidered by Mullen (2018), comes from the painted scene at MEL6 north shown in Figure 1.1. It is adjacent to panel, shown in Figure 1.4, with two images of subject matter falling outside of the pre-contact hunter-gatherer period. How closely the two panels might be related is worth additional dedicated research.

dated sites to the sites on the MR.

### **Ethnographic analogy and San performance**

While conceptualising San image-making using performance studies helps to discern and contextualise relationships, it is San ethnography, and not social theory, that helps us to understand performance from an emic perspective. Ideally, ethnography feeds into and informs social theory. It is, therefore, necessary to draw on relevant ethnohistorical documents that facilitate an informed approach to the relationship between performance and painted rock art images.

Many of the precious few documentary sources that are relevant to San image-making come from the north Eastern Cape or areas close by (e.g. Orpen 1874; Stanford 1910; Ellenberger 1953; How 1970; Jolly 1986, 1997; Lewis-Williams 1980, 1986; Prins & Lewis 1992; Jolly & Prins 1994; Prins 1994, 2009; Butler 2001; Mitchell 2006/7). Those accounts alone are, however, insufficient to investigate the practice that led to the painted MR images. Nonetheless, it seems probable that the last San occupants of what is today the Maclear District would have seen the oldest preserved images, produced new images, and interpreted both in their terms and from their point of view. Though it is conceivable that the last image-makers in the area did not know the meanings of the older, traditional corpus of San painted imagery because of some disconnect<sup>10</sup>, a multiple fit has been demonstrated between the imagery of that corpus and details in several ethnographic sources (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1980, 1981a, 2015a: 57), some of which are comments by San people on panels of images (e.g. Orpen 1874; McGranaghan *et al.* 2013) or copies of images (e.g. Stow & Bleek 1930; De Prada-Samper & Hollmann 2017). It is therefore appropriate to use this San ethnography to interpret the traditional corpus of MR San imagery<sup>11</sup>.

An implication drawn from the documentary sources is that statements on how the painted MR sites were made and viewed require detailed investigations of the following components: (1) San ethnography, (2) the features and morphology of each painted site, and (3) the painted MR imagery. We must also extend our discussion to San expressive culture as a whole. Today, most researchers accept that despite regional differences, there is overwhelming uniformity in non-material aspects of San culture across time and space, especially in expressive culture and religion (Lewis-Williams & Biesele 1978; Lewis-Williams 1981a; Barnard 1992, 2007; Biesele 1993; Guenther 1999; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2012a). The most uniform component of all is the medicine, trance or healing dance which has survived as a central institution of San society for thousands of years (Lewis-Williams 1981a; Barnard 1992; Biesele 1993: 74; Guenther 1999: 181; Low 2004; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2012a). Such uniformity allows for additional documentary sources, such as twentieth-century Kalahari Desert San ethnographies, to be used in tandem with the nineteenth-century ethnohistorical material from

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<sup>10</sup> Some of the imagery in the north Eastern Cape labelled Type 2 and Type 3 imagery is visually distinct from the traditional fine-line corpus (Type 1) (Blundell 2004; Mallen 2008; Henry 2010) and the very last image-makers in the north Eastern Cape may not have known the original meanings of the traditional corpus.

<sup>11</sup> Herein is an important terminological point: though a historicised term, ‘San’ usually (not invariably), “acknowledge[s] the existence of hunter-gatherer behaviours that transcend precolonial/colonial divides, referenced emically and etically in colonial identities” (King & Challis 2017: 214, emphases added). My use of ‘San’ in this book does not refer to a distinct historical identity—colonial or otherwise—but to a temporally and spatially broad hunter-gatherer category. In the context of the MR imagery, I explicitly assume this category to be pre-colonial and hunter-gatherer because of the scarcity of domesticates and the absence of colonial-period subject matter. Therefore, my reference to ‘San rock art, images, or paintings’ in this book does not imply that the identity of the MR image-makers was necessarily continuous or equivalent *in every respect* with other or later San groups.

South Africa “*where commonalities can be demonstrated*” (Lewis-Williams 2013: 243, emphasis in original).

### **Documenting the MR sites**

The documentation of the MR painted sites is a platform from which we can begin to describe and compare sites before discussing the imagery found in them. Apart from MEL12, all of the MR sites (Figure 1.3) had been documented prior to my fieldwork. A systematic survey of every cliff or boulder in the area surrounding the MR to find potentially undocumented sites was simply beyond the scope of this book. Still, two unpainted rock shelters (UP1 and UP2 in Figure 1.2B) were found in a valley at right angles to the southern end of the MR. They are interesting both for their lack of archaeological deposit and because they occur at a higher elevation than the sandstones of the MR where weathered iron-rich shales (a possible source of red pigments) crop out. Five new, previously undocumented painted sites (sites 12–16 in Figure 1.2B) and one historical-period stone-walled structure (SWS in Figure 1.2B) were also found. The field survey highlights that the MR, though notable for its dense concentration of sites, is not isolated or cut-off from other sites, valleys, or ridges. Possible relationships between the MR and nearby sites cannot be ignored: image-making at the MR sites may well have been connected to image-making at adjacent sites (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990; Lewis-Williams 1994, 1995, 2001a).

In this book, I consider the trends and idiosyncrasies in the painted MR sites in terms of difference and simultaneous similarity. The consideration of this pattern began with the recording of the features of each site and its associated imagery. Recording was a three-stage process. First, the basic features of each shelter were noted and the imagery at each site was photographed using a Nikon© D300 DSLR camera. Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates for each site were acquired using a handheld Garmin GPS 60 (Figure 1.2B). In the second stage, measurements of the length, depth and height of each site were obtained using a handheld outdoor Hilti laser meter (Appendix A). These measurements were used to draft scaled schematic diagrams that indicate the overall size and shape of each site (Appendix B: Appendix Images B.1–B.8). In the third stage, selected images from the painted MR sites were photographed in high-resolution using a Nikon© D810 DSLR camera.

The qualitative and quantitative data collected during the documentation phase, specifically that on the shelters alone, do not allow for any direct access to image-making performances that took place on the MR. Access to the performances, however partial, is, as we shall see, provided by the material evidence for those performances: the painted images. In addressing the painted MR imagery, I sought out and photographed every painted image, including fragmentary remnants of pigment, to understand where and what kinds of images were made on the ridge. Completing such an enterprise is naturally limited by issues of preservation and the inability to see very faded images. Nevertheless, the reasons I opted for photographic documentation were three-fold. First, the sheer number of images to be documented favoured an expedient and accurate technique for doing so. Second, to compare the sites, it was necessary to know what kinds of images were present at each MR site (Appendix C). The compilation of a visual record is only possible using photography and is far more useful than a tediously written and necessarily tendentious summary. Third, today’s technology is dramatically different from when researchers first chose tracing and photography as complementary techniques for recording rock paintings in South Africa.

### **Recording MR rock art**

As the technology available for the recording of rock paintings has improved, recording techniques have changed. One early local technique was to trace the painted image onto translucent paper



(Orpen 1874; Tongue 1909; Stow & Bleek 1930; Breuil 1955: 16–18). Tracing paintings and rubbing over engravings have since been criticised for the damage that they may cause as a result of contact with the rock face<sup>12</sup>. The photographic revolution and subsequent digital photography have led to a multitude of non-contact recording techniques that can create realistic, undistorted renderings of painted and engraved images.

In the case of southern African rock art research, the change in techniques and technologies is apparent from a comparison of two key papers published twenty years apart. The older of the two papers stands firmly in defence of the contact tracing technique, while the more recent paper is part of the global digital revolution that recognises the advantages of the digital enhancement of high-resolution photographs of rock paintings.

At a time when the contact tracing of rock paintings was receiving criticism (Bednarik 1990; Genge 1990), Jannie Loubser and Paul den Hoed, two experienced South African fieldworkers, put forward an argument in defence of tracing as it was then (and still is) widely practised in South Africa (Loubser & den Hoed 1991). Their paper provides a detailed written description of an accurate, precise and technical tracing method that minimises damage to rock paintings<sup>13</sup>, and compares the advantages and disadvantages of tracing to two other contemporaneous technologies: photogrammetry and photography. At the time when Loubser and den Hoed were writing, tracing was indeed the cheapest, fastest, most accurate and most accessible way of recording rock paintings. The technique had additional benefits because it forced researchers to spend hours at the rock face and to pay close attention to the details of the images. In addition, once redrawn, the result was a publishable, easy-to-see black-and-white schematic image that had deciphered the original painting. While the tracing of images at the rock face has remained virtually unchanged (with the notable development of digital tracings from digital photographs, e.g. figs. 3a–4b in McGranaghan & Challis 2016) the techniques of photogrammetry (e.g. Chandler & Fryer 2005; Chandler *et al.* 2007; Jalandoni *et al.* 2018) and photography have advanced exponentially.

Some twenty years after Loubser and den Hoed wrote their review, Jeremy Hollmann and Kevin Crause (2011) published remarkable digital enhancements of South African rock paintings that, in some cases, revealed images otherwise invisible to the naked eye. Their work demonstrates a comprehensive means of recording rock paintings and has been recognised internationally (e.g. Le Quellec *et al.* 2015: 55, 65). Crause, who developed the enhancement process, calls his high-resolution custom toolset CPED: Capture, Process, Enhance and Display. While some photographic enhancement techniques aim to (re-)produce digital tracings or attempt to make images more visible at the cost of unrealistic colours, the CPED toolset delivers high-quality, pseudo-realistic, false colour results even if the naked eye could not see the original images at the start. His professional services that make the toolset available are, unfortunately, expensive and beyond the financial reaches of most scholars and students.

### Digital enhancements

Hollmann and Crause (2011) are, of course, not alone in their efforts to enhance rock paintings. Many other workers worldwide have embraced the “digital revolution” (Brady & Gunn 2012: 628), producing digital tracings that seek to emulate manual tracings as well as digital enhancements which make the

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<sup>12</sup> To my knowledge, no damage to South African rock art has been linked to the practice of tracing.

<sup>13</sup> Tracers at that time, as today, avoided tracing where the rock was friable.

images clear and easier to see. As digital tracings are schematic, and so akin to tracing by hand, I do not discuss them any further.

Digital enhancements, in contrast to tracings, can go further because they produce colour images that show the original content of rock paintings in their original context. Image-enhancing software also allows for digital photographs to be enhanced in replicable ways. The software ranges from commercially available programs, like Adobe Photoshop™, to specialist combinations, like Crause's CPED toolset which makes use of Adobe Lightroom™ and Adobe Photoshop™. Nevertheless, some are readily available, easy to use, and produce replicable results. The most significant benefits of digital enhancements for this book are the capacity for digital enhancements to reveal 'invisible details' recorded by the camera but not perceived by the naked human optical system, and to expose errors of omission when compared with manual tracings (Le Quellec *et al.* 2013; Le Quellec *et al.* 2015).

DStretch©, the widely-known plugin for ImageJ© developed by Jon Harman (2005), is one of the more common enhancement programs and was developed exclusively for enhancing images of petroglyphs and pictographs. DStretch© is based on a principle called decorrelation stretch in which the degree of difference between colours is 'stretched' to accentuate them (Gillespie *et al.* 1986; Rothery 1987; Gillespie 1992; Alley 1996; Guo & Moore 1996). With push-button simplicity, DStretch© readily illustrates just how many details of rock paintings the naked eye does not see—no matter how closely observed (Le Quellec *et al.* 2013; Le Quellec *et al.* 2015). Such 'invisible' details remain unseen without modern photographic techniques.

To illustrate the effectiveness of digital enhancements, I return to MEL6—the site we encountered at the beginning of this chapter—and compare two different renderings of a panel of quadrupedal therianthrope figures just to the left of the images shown in Figure 1.1. In 1988, Thomas Dowson, a skilled and accurate rock art researcher, traced and then redrew the panel shown in Figure 1.4B, which was first published in Lewis-Williams & Dowson (1989). A redrawing of the tracing is shown in Figure 1.4A. While Dowson did note on his tracing some features that were too faint to trace and so were excluded from the redrawing (but see Figure 5.18), others are over-simplified in, or missing from, the redrawing (features x, y and z in Figure 1.4).

Given that light and weather conditions and time constraints—variables that affect even the most experienced fieldworkers—are uncontrollable, several painted details are missing from the tracing and also from the final redrawing, suggesting that he was, for whatever reason, unable to see them at the rock face. Some of these omitted features (feature y in Figure 1.4, Figure 5.18) are in fact visible at the rock face, while others become visible only with digital enhancement: the face of one of the quadrupedal therianthropes lacks the facial details of a nose, lips and a tooth revealed by the enhancement (Figure 1.4X); and the head of another quadrupedal therianthrope is missing a set of cattle horns that is clearly visible after enhancement of the photograph (Figure 1.4Z).

### Enhancing the MEL ridge

With the existence of toolsets like CPED, it is worth noting the potential, in some cases, to avoid the undesirably wild colours produced by DStretch© while still obtaining the same desirable results of an enhanced image<sup>14</sup>. Some researchers feel that, just as field tracings should not appear in publications,

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<sup>14</sup> Though one can take the wild colours in an image produced by DStretch© and, with relative ease, convert them back to the natural colours of the rock painting, one of the strengths of DStretch© enhancements is that they are produced by algorithms and so have not been 'fiddled' with.

wildly-coloured digital enhancements should also not be published if, using setups like CPED, we can enhance digital photographs to produce final images that are clearer and have better colour than the original photographs. Realistically, each case will differ depending on the investigation and questions of each study. Sometimes, highly specialized technology is needed (e.g. Kamal *et al.* 1999; Leisen *et al.* 2013).

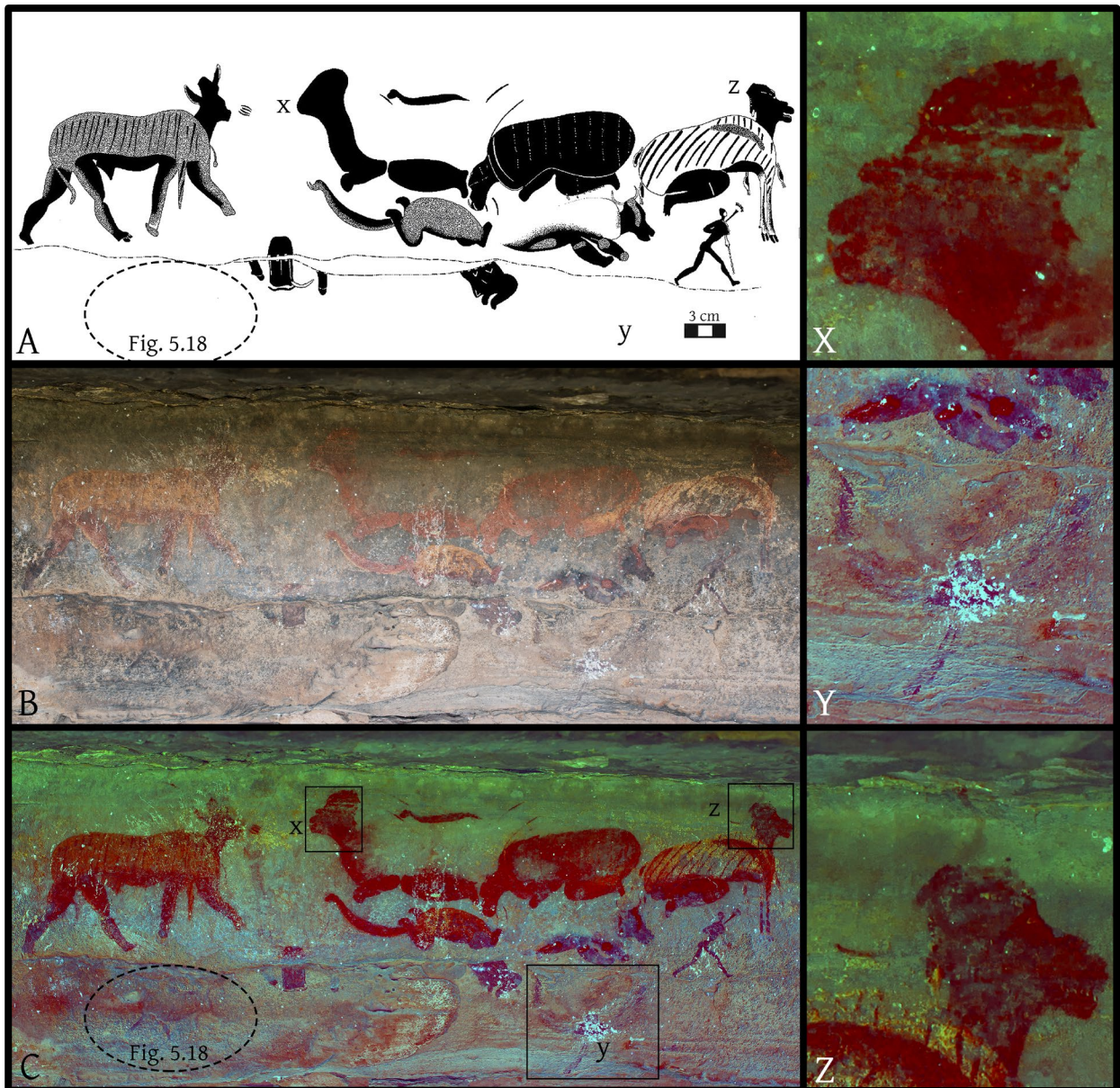


FIGURE 1.4. Comparison of the redrawing of a traced scene from MEL6 with a digital enhancement. (A) Redrawing of the panel from the tracing. (B) Original photograph showing how the panel looks to the naked eye.

(C) Digital enhancement using DStretch© (YRD). Compare features x, y and z in images A and C. The enlargements X, Y and Z show details of these respective features absent on the redrawing. The image shown in Figure 5.18 was noted but not included in the tracing.

Nevertheless, for this book, the speed and efficiency of DStretch© were desirable because of the need to consider, as far as possible, all the MR images. I used DStretch© at two stages of the research for this book. First, the images at each MR site were counted from unenhanced, high-resolution photographs used together with the same photographs enhanced using DStretch©. The counts summarise the number of images per category per site (Appendix C). The second stage at which DStretch© was useful was the illustration of discussion points in the text. Both DStretch© enhancements and enhancements following the two procedures in Appendix D were produced, depending on the detail requiring illustration. The procedure followed is specified in the caption for each image.

### **From observations to theory**

In this chapter, I have introduced some observations about the differences and similarities in the MR sites and images. Despite being spatially close, the sites cannot be said to constitute a stylistic cluster because the concept of 'style' is itself poorly defined for San rock paintings (e.g. Flett & Letley 2013: 3). I suggested that rock painting is far more akin to other forms of San expressive culture than has thus far been recognised, and I introduced the argument, which is cumulatively developed throughout the rest of this book, that image-making was also an expressive and performed activity.

This was the backdrop against which the notion of 'site' was problematized and which structured the documentation of the painted MR sites through quantitative and qualitative means. The MR sites feature in a body of research on the rock art and social processes in the history and prehistory of the north Eastern Cape. Much of this research centres on themes or specific kinds of questions about social processes or chronology. In most cases, the scale of analysis, particularly the geographic range of the analysis, has been larger or smaller than that adopted here. Importantly, though there have been numerous studies of southern African rock art that consider, either explicitly or implicitly, aspects of the production and consumption of imagery (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Challis 2010; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004a, 2009, 2012b), few, if any, deal with a suite, group or cluster of spatially close sites. Nevertheless, ethnohistorical documents from the Maclear District or areas close by (Orpen 1874; Stanford 1910; How 1970; Jolly 1986, 1997; Lewis-Williams 1980, 1986; Prins & Lewis 1992; Jolly & Prins 1994; Prins 1994, 2009), provide crucial information about image-making and image-viewing. In the next chapter, I elaborate on the body of theoretical ideas concerning performance that provides the framework for this book.