

# UNUSUAL PAINTINGS OF WILDEBEEST AND A ZEBRA-LIKE ANIMAL FROM NORTH-WESTERN LESOTHO\*

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## ABSTRACT

Recordings of a painted panel threatened by increased human visitation in the Hololo River valley of north-western Lesotho show depictions of at least seven wildebeest and a zebra-like animal. Rock paintings of these animals are unusual not only due to their scarcity in rock shelters of the Drakensberg-Maluti Mountain region, but also in terms of the painted details associated with them. Considering San attitudes towards wildebeest and trance experience among the San, it is possible to make sense of the unusually low and dark location of the wildebeest paintings.

## INTRODUCTION

As a result of tunnel construction activities across the Hololo River in north-western Lesotho, the northern perimeter road between Butha-Buthe and Moteng Pass has been upgraded and the numerous painted shelters in the formerly isolated Hololo River catchment area have become more accessible to outside visitors. Following the directions of T. Tesele, one of us (J. Loubser) traced and photographed ten threatened shelters in the area. Chance discoveries of unusual paintings often result from exploratory investigations of this nature (e.g. Dowson & Holliday 1989; Loubser *et al.* 1990) and in this report we describe, identify and interpret unusual paintings from a shelter near the Hololo River (Fig. 1).

## DESCRIPTION OF THE SHELTER AND PAINTINGS

The shelter is located at the base of a sandstone cliff on the northern side of the Hololo River. It faces in a south-westerly direction and extends about 16 m into the cliff (Fig. 2). Due to its aspect and depth, the shelter never receives direct sunlight and it is fairly dark inside throughout the year.

All the paintings are on the inner side of a big boulder, most likely the darkest spot in the entire shelter. Two main panels can be distinguished; a relatively crude but fairly visible collection of black paintings on the upper right-hand side and a cluster of faint but extremely detailed paintings in the lower left-hand corner. Being only 500 mm from the ground, the lower panel has unfortunately been damaged by cattle which scrape their legs against the rock. This has left fatty residue and abrasion marks on the painted surface, and it is only

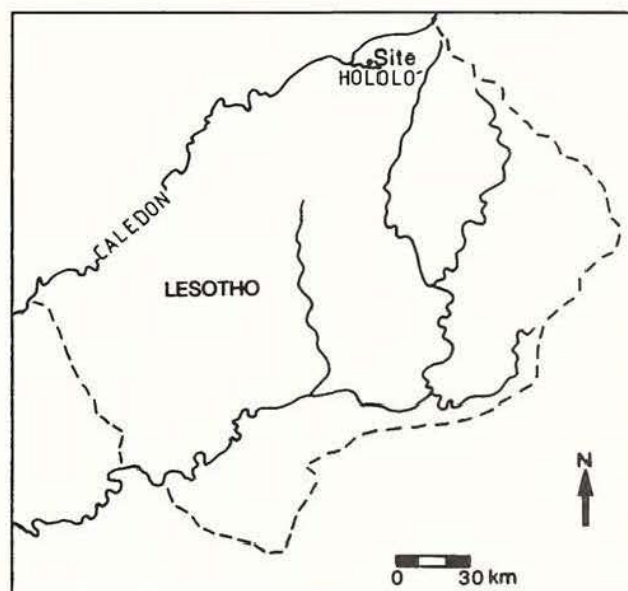


Fig. 1 Location of the site considered in the text.

when tissue paper was applied to the paintings with distilled water that they became more visible.

Recording of the panel was further complicated by bad light and two torch lights had to be directed at the paintings to enhance them for tracing. A day-long session of painstaking tracing in an uncomfortable crouched position yielded depictions of ten animals, three humans and two C-shaped motifs (Fig. 3). A natural crack in the rock separates the animals from two human figures in the upper right-hand corner. The original panel almost certainly contained more detail than is depicted in the tracing, but we feel that the tracing contains sufficient detail to show that the painter took extreme care while

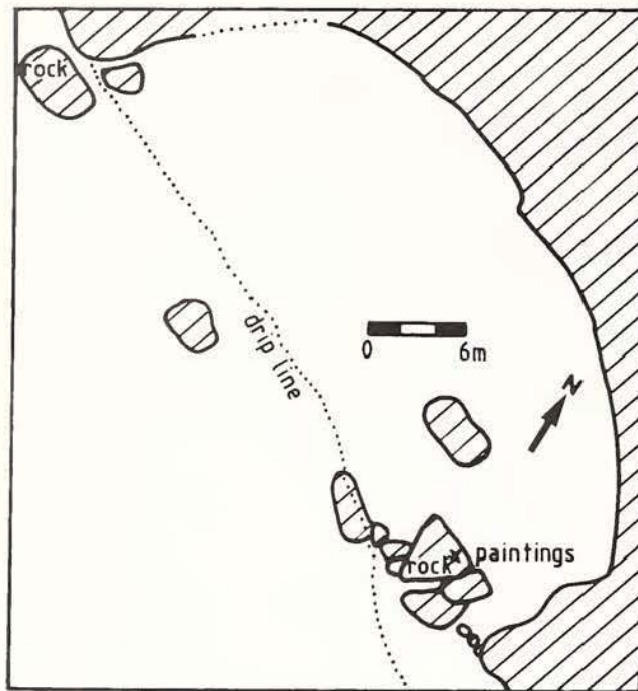


Fig. 2. Map of the shelter showing the location of the paintings behind the boulder.

painting. Because of bad light the painter must have used an artificial light source, most probably a fire, to illuminate the surface. Even the fresh paintings must have been difficult to see without artificial light.

All the paintings are done in black and white pigment, the animals showing traces of an additional red infill. The animals face right and have distinctive zigzag, herringbone, stripe and dot motifs on their bodies. All the human figures face left. The one in the upper right-hand corner of the panel has a row of herringbones along the back of its head and neck, while the other figure directly below has a series of inverted U-shapes on its head. A line of dashes is painted in front of the face of the upper figure which holds what appears to be a stick-like object. On the extreme left-hand side of the panel is an animal holding a stick as well. Its thin red tail is painted on top of the two C-shaped motifs. Slightly below and to the right of this animal is a human figure holding a zigzag line which runs along the back of a zebra-like animal. The belly of human figure is serated.

Due to the weathered condition of the paintings it is difficult to determine the sequence of superpositioning. It is clear, however, that the animal with the stick and the human figure holding the zigzag were painted on top of the same two animals. We maintain that the significance of these and other features can be better understood once the animals are identified.

#### IDENTIFICATION OF THE PAINTED ANIMALS

Most animals painted by the San are sufficiently naturalistic to help researchers identify them with confidence (e.g. Willcox 1963:37; Lee & Woodhouse 1970:21-34; Vinnicombe 1976:151-228; Lewis-Williams 1985:54-56). Researchers can even identify diagnostic

features in "imaginary" animals. For example, serpent-like features are present in some rain-animals while others have clearly identifiable eland or hippo-like features. Even in instances where a single animal represents a conflation of two or more animals it is still possible to identify features of the different animals. At Melikane, for example, there are animals with the heads and necks of eland, but with the genitalia, buttocks and tails of horses (Campbell 1987:86, 90). We are not suggesting here that every single painted animal is identifiable, but merely that San painters tend to faithfully reproduce the outline and diagnostic features of animals (e.g. Loubser *et al.* 1990). Although we propose that at least eight of the ten animals considered in this paper have sufficient detail to assist us in their identification, we submit that the motifs on their bodies are modifications of actual markings.

The animal on which the human figure is superimposed can be identified as equid without much doubt. It has no horns and the general proportions of the body are certainly not typical of bovids. The hind legs are particularly zebra-like, giving the impression of being rather plump and having transverse stripes across the area of the thigh. The zigzag lines on the neck also resemble the markings of a zebra (cf. Smithers 1983). It is, however, not possible to know whether the mountain zebra, *Equus zebra*, or the plains zebra, *E. burchelli*, is depicted. From early records it appears that mountain zebra did not occur in the Lesotho highlands (Smithers 1983), which could mean that the paintings are of plains zebra. However, the weathered traces of horizontal zigzag lines on the body of the animal, the zigzag line along its back and its zigzag tail are clearly not diagnostic features.

To the right and below the zebra-like figure, seven ungulates show varying degrees of resemblance to the black wildebeest, *Connochaetes gnou*. The five with intact horns look particularly like black wildebeest; the horns showing similar forward and upward torsion. The figure furthest to the right shows what could be a prominent mane and shoulder hump, features very typical of the black wildebeest.

The two animals painted above and to the left of the zebra-like animal do not have sufficient diagnostic features for identification. The one holding the stick has a human-like arm and a "hollow" body, partially enclosed by a thick black line.

If the identifiable animals are indeed depictions of plains zebra and black wildebeest their association in the panel could be seen as further support for the identification. It is commonly known that both plains zebra and black wildebeest are shortgrass grazers (Smithers 1983; Von Richter 1971) and that they usually occur in the same kind of habitat, often in the company of each other. However, in the next section we argue that the association between wildebeest and zebra in the painted panel is not necessarily a literal one.

#### SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PAINTINGS

Nineteenth century eye-witness accounts (e.g. Arbousset

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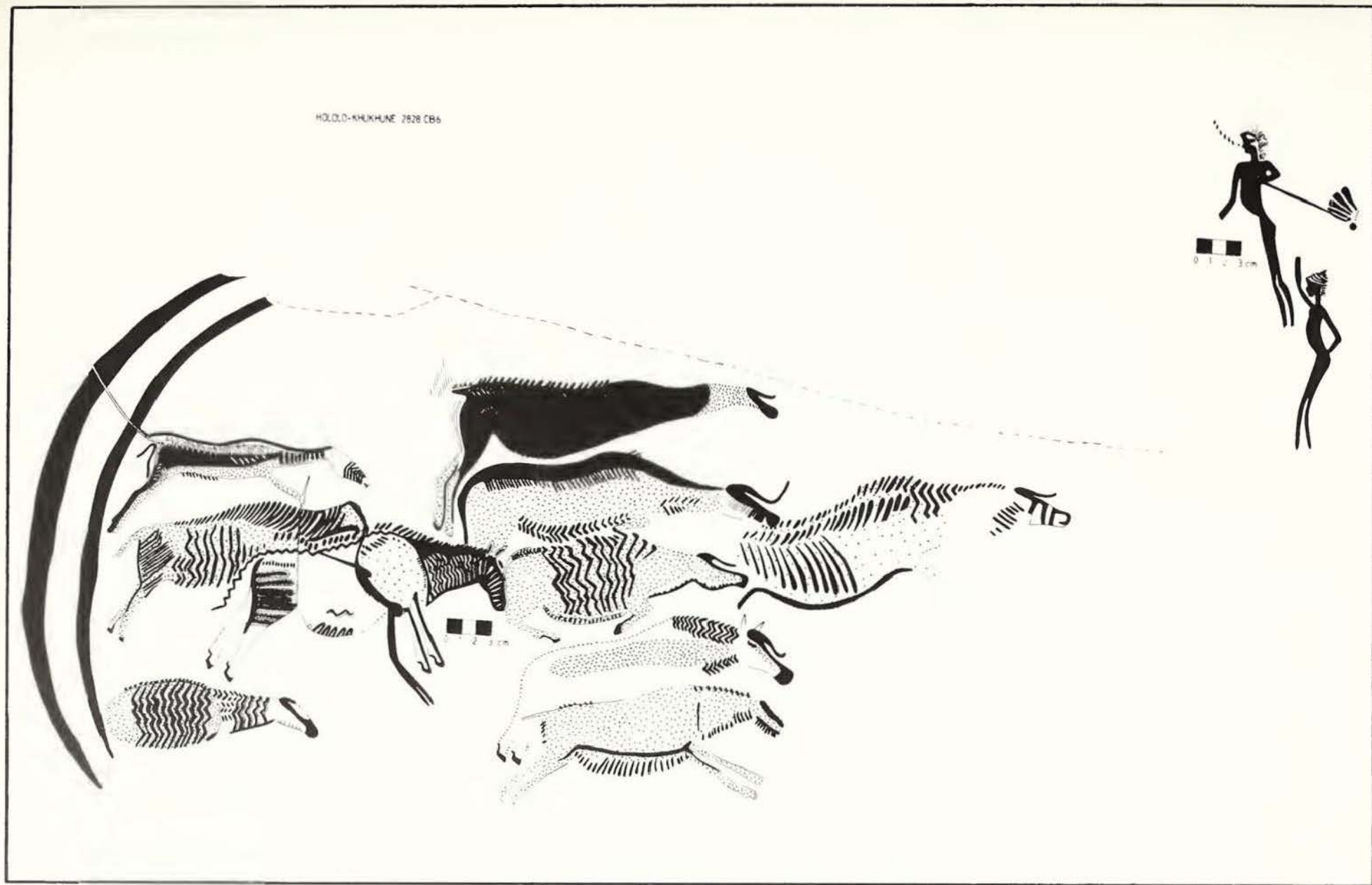


Fig. 3. Tracing of the panel with wildebeest, zebra, therianthrope and human figures. Black is blocked in; red is stippled and white is left blank. The crack in the rock is represented by a broken line.

& Daumas 1846:367) mention that numerous wildebeest and zebra roamed the southern Highveld and it also seems that the Maluti San hunted and consumed the wildebeest on a regular basis (How 1962:11). But wildebeest was not only an important source of meat to the San, San painters also used the hair as brushes (Ellenberger 1953; Stanford 1910). Bearing these observations in mind, it is perhaps not surprising that researchers have commented on the paucity of wildebeest and zebra paintings in the region. Whereas Vinnicombe (1976:364) found only three wildebeest paintings in the southern Natal Drakensberg, Lewis-Williams (1981:20) found none in the north-eastern Cape. So far we have located only three shelters out of 200 shelters in the Caledon River valley region with wildebeest paintings. There are even fewer paintings of zebra in the Drakensberg-Maluti region; Vinnicombe (1976:212) has reported only one in a shelter with wildebeest paintings and we have found none in the Orange Free State yet. It is also interesting that no apparent detail is afforded to wildebeest paintings; they are done either as black or white monochromes.

To our mind Vinnicombe (1976:194) rightly proposes that the paucity of wildebeest paintings shows that the paintings are not a direct reflection of either the faunal population in the area or of San diet. Referring to a story /Xam San told W. Bleek and Lloyd in the previous century (Bleek, D. 1924:12), she suggests that the omission of wildebeest and zebra could be an expression of social avoidance. In the story a wildebeest does its utmost to protect some zebra against a hunter: it first blunts the hunter's arrowheads and finally crushes the hunter and his screen. !Kung San call this 'angry' behaviour (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989:127) and 'angry' people are sometimes referred to as wildebeest. Moreover, Biesele (1975:153-154) recorded !Kung notions that all wildebeest are 'black meat' animals and that such animals have less potency than 'red meat' animals such as eland and hartebeest.

The San believe that eland contain more supernatural potency than any other creature (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Biesele 1978), and Dowson and Holliday (1989) have argued that the rare depiction of zigzag lines attached to eland paintings near Clarens signifies the release of strong potency by the eland. Although the zigzag motifs in the north-western Lesotho panel are generally similar to those from Clarens (the sites are only 25 km apart), they do not surround the animals but, together with the herringbones, are mostly painted on their bodies. Only in the case of the zebra does the zigzag trail off the body in the form of a tail (Fig. 3).

Although the San believed that wildebeest and zebra contained less supernatural potency than eland, they nevertheless had some potency. This is mentioned, for example, in a folktale San told Megan Biesele in Botswana in 1972 (Dowson 1992:99). According to the tale the zebra was the first animal to receive supernatural potency in the form of stripes burnt all over its body. The wildebeest was the next animal to be branded with supernatural potency from the same fire.

Looking at painted details in the Lesotho panel, it is clearly not a straightforward depiction of this or any other recorded San story. We suggest that it is a depiction of trance experience instead. Firstly, the double C-shape, the zigzag lines, herringbones and dots associated with the animal and human figures are not real but are similar to entoptic mental imagery perceived during trance (e.g. Siegel 1977:138). Secondly, the animal holding a stick can best be seen as a therianthrope. Its posture is similar to that taken by the black figure immediately below it; the angle between their respective torsos and legs resembles that of San medicine-people before they enter trance (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989:40). The serrated markings on the stomachs of both figures could indeed signify the boiling sensation experienced by medicine-people when entering trance (Katz 1982). The black figure is apparently holding the zigzag line along the zebra's back, perhaps signifying the harnessing of potency running along the zebra's spine (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989:76-77).

The combination of entoptic and iconic imagery in the panel suggests a later stage of trance (Siegel 1977:134). It could even be that because the entoptics experienced during early stages of trance resembled the zebra's stripes and the wildebeests' hair, the painter was reminded of these animals during the later stage of deeper trance experience (see Dowson 1992:54 suggesting a similar relationship between an entoptically experienced grid and markings on an engraved giraffe).

But the decision to paint wildebeest and zebra, animals without much potency, suggests that something else influenced the painter as well.

## CONCLUSION

The rock paintings of wildebeest and zebra in north-western Lesotho are unusual in terms of subject matter, their detailed execution and their placement in a low and dark location. Judging from the ethnography the San seldom painted wildebeest because they apparently saw it as an 'angry' animal without much potency. But it is clear that wildebeest and zebra did at least have some potency which could be harnessed by medicine-people. The fact that the zigzag motifs are restricted to the bodies of the wildebeest and zebra and are not outside as in the case of eland paintings some 25 km to the north-west, could be indicative of this limited potency. Nevertheless, the detailed execution of the animals and the associated entoptic motifs suggests that their potency was important to the painter. But it seems that by placing his/her paintings in an obscure location the painter was not keen to show them to other San. We suggest two likely reasons for this. Firstly, limited wildebeest potency was probably insufficient to share with the whole community. Secondly, the potency from 'angry' wildebeest may in any case have had anti-social implications. A more thorough ethnographic investigation to verify these conclusions, however, is beyond the scope of this article.

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