

THE CONTEXT OF FOUR PAINTED STONES FROM THE SOUTH-EASTERN AND EASTERN CAPE*

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on three painted stones and one possible charcoal drawing from Later Stone Age sites in the south-eastern and eastern Cape. Another find from Klasies River Cave 5 is described and it is argued that one of the two painted stones found previously at this site is not in primary context. While two painted slabs from Roodekranz Shelter near Grahamstown and a possible charcoal drawing from Groot Kommandokloof Shelter in the Baviaanskloof may be directly associated with burials, it is reaffirmed that painted stones were 'used' in several different contexts and are not exclusive to burials.

INTRODUCTION

Before 1970 a large number of painted stones (approximately 40) were found mainly along the southern Cape coastal belt and the adjacent Cape mountains (Rudner 1971). Apart from a possible painted pebble from near Lüderitz Bay (Rudner 1971:57) and a painted pebble from Abbot's Cave near Middleburg (Cape) (Sampson & Vogel 1989), the only others found outside the Cape ecozone were six painted stones discovered at Apollo 11 in southern Namibia. The date for these stones is in the order of 26 000 BP (Wendt 1976) which makes this art the oldest in southern Africa. The oldest painted stone from the southern and eastern Cape is from an occupation unit at Boomplaas Cave (Fig. 1) dated to 6400 BP (Deacon *et al.* 1976). Other 'art mobilier' in the form of engraved slabs were found at Wonderwerk Cave in the northern Cape with the oldest slab dated to 10 200 BP (Thackeray 1981; Thackeray *et al.* 1981).

The interpretation of the images on painted stones is similar to the interpretation of the wall art which, based on ethnographic and neuropsychological comparison, indicates that the art depicts hallucinations experienced by shamans when in a state of trance (Lewis-Williams 1981, 1983a, 1984, 1990; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989). While many of the images are undoubtedly trance related,

there is little understanding of the specific 'use' context. The ritually loaded nature of painted stones suggests that their specific 'use' contexts was of an equivalent nature. However, the precise contexts from which painted stones have been recovered often remains unclear. Most painted stones recovered before 1970 were removed unsystematically and consequently there is little information available on their precise contexts. The absence of a precise provenance for many painted stones led Rudner (1971) to make a general assumption about their 'use' context. He suggested that the majority of the painted stones were cover stones for burials. However, none of the 12 painted stones found since 1970 (those from Apollo 11, Boomplaas Cave and Klasies River Cave 5) were associated with burials or found close to burials and drawing a consistent link between the two is invalid (Lewis-Williams 1984). While numerous Later Stone Age (LSA) burials in the eastern and southern Cape were found covered by flat stones (also referred to as burial stones) these are only 'painted' in the sense that they are often stained with red ochre as are the skeletons and ornaments associated with them. These 'burial' stones may have been stained indirectly.

Other contexts in which painted stones have been found include storage pits such as at Boomplaas Cave in the Congo valley where four painted stones were found

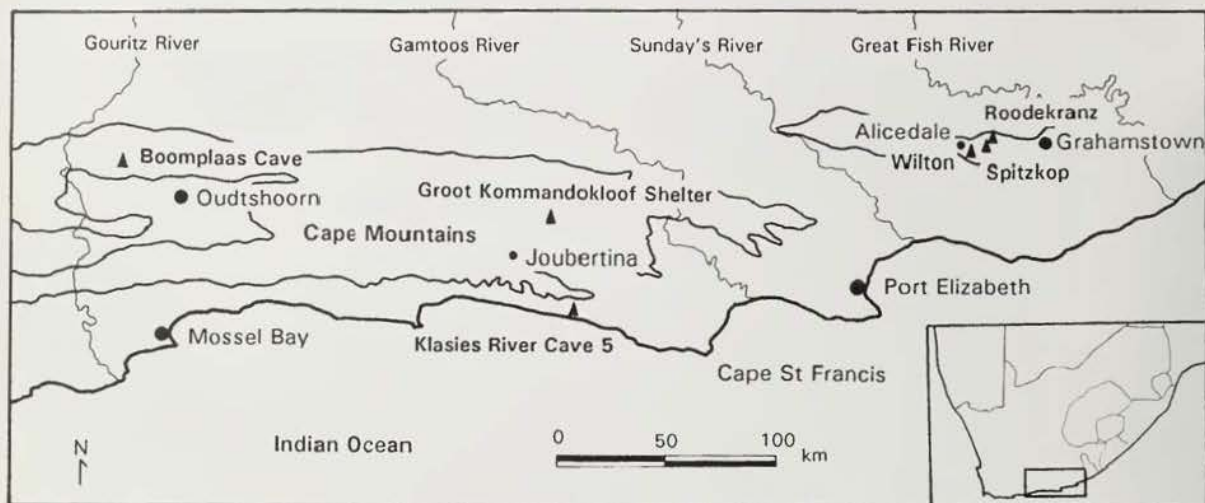


Fig. 1. Map indicating the locations of the painted stones mentioned in the text.

in association with storage pits (Deacon *et al.* 1976; Deacon, J. 1982). In the discussion below we describe the contexts of painted stones from the collection of the Albany Museum, some of which were accessioned in the 1920's.

PAINTED STONES FROM THE EASTERN CAPE

Klasies River Cave 5

The Klasies River complex of caves is situated some 40 km west of Cape St Francis (Fig. 1). Cave 5 (KRM5) is located approximately 2 km to the east of the main site, well-known for the anatomically modern human remains recovered during excavations in the late 1960's by Singer & Wymer (1982). The tunnel-like cave is about 90 m in length from entrance to rear and the two painted stones discussed here were found by the same excavators (Singer & Wymer 1969). The first stone, depicting a painting of a human and four dolphins, came from near the surface (Singer & Wymer 1969, 1982, fig. 47) and shell from the same layer has been dated to 2285 ± 105 (GX-336). It is not known if this is a corrected date. The second stone with red grid patterns on both sides was recovered from lower down in the sequence. A hearth at the bottom of the Later Stone Age sequence which overlies a thick layer of dune sand covering Middle Stone Age occupation deposits (Singer & Wymer 1969, 1982) dates both stones to younger than 4110 ± 105 BP (Geochron GX-1378) (Singer & Wymer 1969). This date is slightly different from that reported by Singer & Wymer (1982). The age of the stone was mistakenly reported as older than 4110 BP (Thakeray 1983:24, table 1).

Klasies River Cave 5 (KRM5) was re-excavated in 1984 by the first author (Binneman 1985; Hall & Binneman 1987). The excavations are located both at the entrance (KRM5A) as well as adjacent (KRM5B) to Singer & Wymer's excavations further back in the cave and in the vicinity of the painted stones (KRM5B) (Fig. 2). Another painted stone was recovered from KRM5B

depicting a small antelope in red (Figs 3 & 4). Charcoal from the same layer is dated to 3900 ± 50 BP (Pta-3906). This stone comes from an undisturbed occupational horizon and is not linked to any other feature.

While the projected position of Singer & Wymer's first painted stone (Singer & Wymer 1982, fig. 10.2) appears also to have been in an *in situ* occupational context, there is reason to believe that Singer & Wymer's second painted stone (with red grid patterns) is in secondary context. The *in situ* Later Stone Age deposit from KRM5B consists of shell lenses in which *Patella longicosta* is the dominating shellfish species. These alternate with lenses of sterile dune sand which are truncated towards the wall of the cave by very loose and well sorted shellfish material dominated by *Oxystele* spp. and with little soil matrix. This loose deposit is clearly visible on the photographs published by Singer and Wymer (1982, figs 46 & 47) as well as the original witness section exposed during the 1984 excavations. A further excavation (KRM5C) half way down the slope, between KRM5A and KRM5B, revealed similar loose deposits. Analysis of the shellfish remains from KRM5C and the loose deposits showed that these have similar species frequencies to those at the entrance excavation. This indicates that a large part of the deposit against the wall is slope fill and that the projected position of the second stone is within it. The association of this painted stone with backed flakes (large segments) (Singer & Wymer 1969) may indicate a rough age for the stone. These large segments appear to be a coastal tool which to date have been recorded from between the Klasies River Caves to the mouth of the Great Fish River and date to the last 3000 years.

The Roodekranz Shelter painted stones

Although the two painted stones in the Albany Museum collection are marked as being from Roodekranz Shelter, the authors believe that this is open to debate. Rudner (1971) reported that Mr W.W. Austin excavated

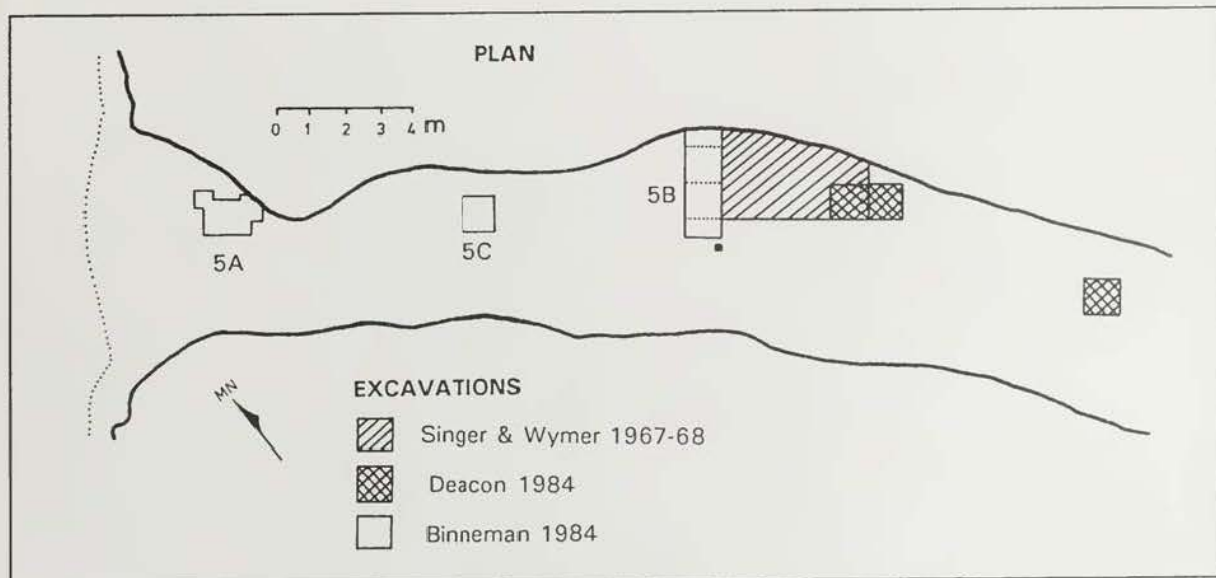


Fig. 2. Cave plan and location of the excavations at Klasies River Cave 5.



Fig. 2. Painting of an antelope on a slab from Klasies River Cave 5.

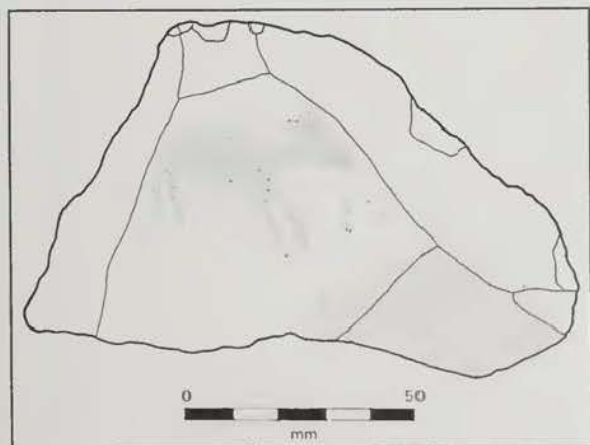


Fig. 3. Drawing of the painted stone from Klasies River Cave 5.

a shelter on his farm near Springvale, Alicedale in 1921. According to Rudner, Austin found "four burials covered by two painted slabs" (accessioned and marked as Roodekranz Shelter 1-2, AM G70) in the shelter. It is not clear where Rudner acquired this information since there are no burials in the Museum accessioned from Roodekranz Shelter. The only group of four burials donated to the Museum in 1921 from the Springvale area came from a cave on Hoffmans River on the farm Wilton (HS 120-125). This is most probably the cave Hewitt (1922:459-60) referred to when he reported on "a certain small cave two miles away from the rock-shelter (presumably Wilton Large Rock Shelter) on the farm Wilton "where four burials were found covered over by flat stones painted red on the under surfaces". It is possible that the four burials referred to by Rudner (1971:57) from 'Roodekranz Shelter', covered by the two painted stones, were actually from the site noted by Hewitt.

Furthermore, according to the Albany Museum records Mr Austin also donated 12 burials from Spitzkop Cave to the museum (HS 128-139). The farm Roodekranz is adjacent to Spitzkop and four and a half miles (7,5 km) north-east of Wilton Large Rock Shelter. This donation also included some unique ivory, bone and marine shell ornaments, shale palettes and a small number of stone implements (Hewitt 1922) (accession number AM 1921/1702, see Clark 1959). Mr Austin, it would appear, completely turned and picked over all the deposit from Spitzkop. A visit to Spitzkop indicated that little LSA material is visible in the site or on the talus. The only material recovered was phalanges missed during the original removal of the burials (Hall 1990).

Hewitt (1922:461) reported that "a coloured funeral slab of stone ... with crude paintings which somewhat resemble the very inferior later paintings - the fat-tailed sheep group - found at the Wilton rock-shelter" covered

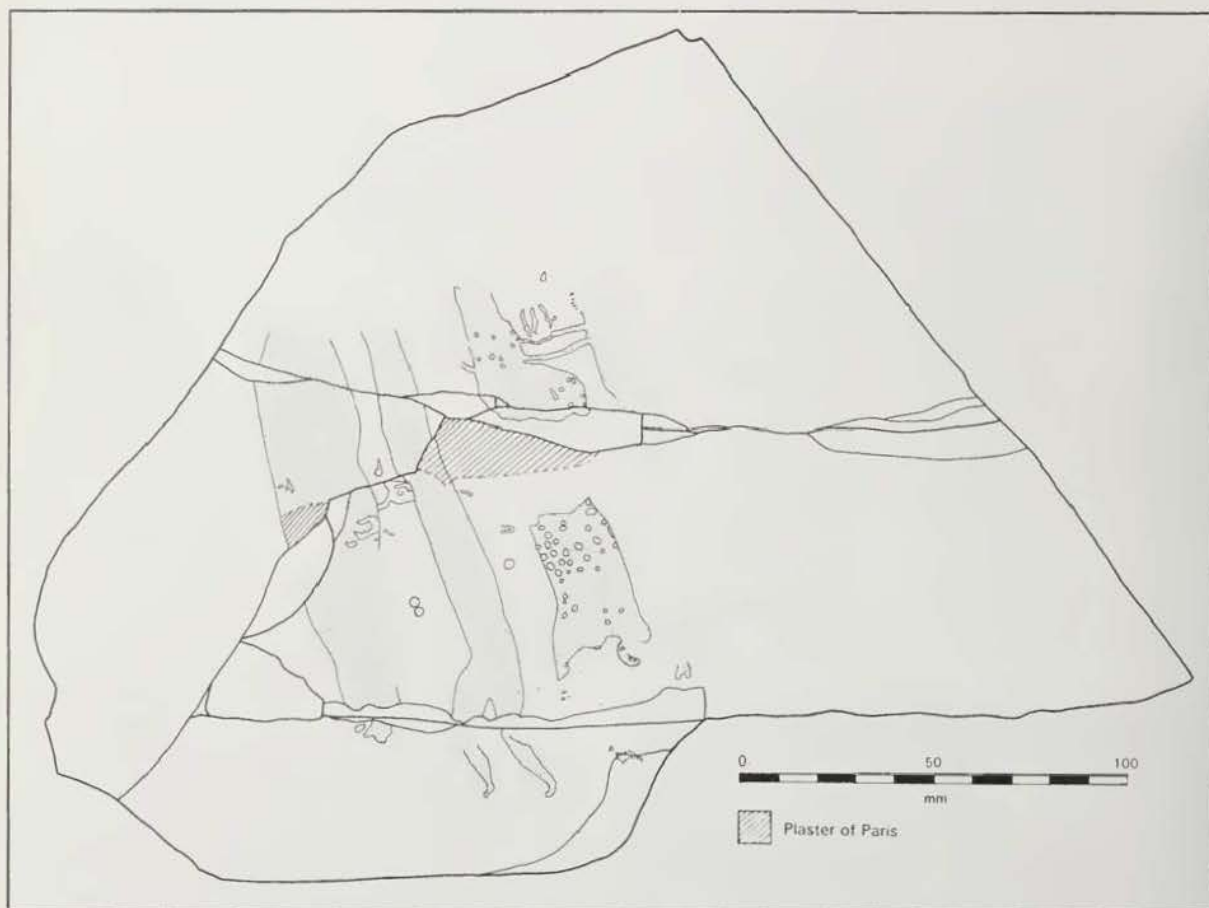


Fig. 5. Painting of elongated human figures from Roodekrans Shelter.

a skeleton in the bottom layer of Spitzkop Cave. Rudner (1971:57) on the other hand, reported that the stone from Spitzkop (S1) was "a painted burial stone ...only white marks on the red-painted slab remained". Although it would appear from Rudner's description that the paintings had faded since discovery, it is quite clear that this is not a painted stone in the true sense of the word. The stone is a typical lower grindstone with a smooth surface covered with red ochre dust which comes off easily when touched. The few isolated, minute white lines and spots can be from any substance and origin.

The only information regarding the painted stones from Roodekranz Shelter is a note accompanying a large piece of skin garment with two rows of stitching, housed at the Museum (accession number E 381). This note appears to have been written by Austin in 1921, and reads "Portion of kaross found in cave at Roode Krantz near Springvale in about 2 ft of ash (Note: painted stones were found in same cave).

On this evidence it appears that the painted stones came from Roodekranz Shelter. However, no shelter on this farm appears to be suitable. In the light of the close proximity of the farms, Roodekranz Shelter and Spitzkop Cave may be one and the same, and the names used interchangeably for the same site. It is telling that Hewitt never mentioned Roodekranz Shelter or painted stones

from the site in any of his publications. While we cannot be certain as to the exact location of the painted stones, it is of interest that in all references to them they appear to be associated with burials.

The larger of the two painted stones is an irregular, thin, flat, somewhat brittle micaceous sandstone slab (Fig. 5). Several breaks run across the slab and small gaps have been filled in with plaster of Paris and painted. There are four human figures painted in red. All the figures lack heads and it is possible that these were painted in white, but faded away over time. At least one of the figures (second from the left) is unmistakably an elongated human figure with slightly bent knees but lacking arms. The other figures may also be elongated and the figure second from left appears to wear a kaross with arms outstretched. Another figure is touching it from behind. A series of white dots are present on the 'kaross'.

Despite the severe damage to the stone and the poor preservation of the pigment in some areas, several possible trance elements are visible in the painting. Following Lewis-Williams (1981, 1983a & b, 1987, 1990) and Lewis-Williams & Dowson (1988, 1989) the most obvious is the elongation. Elongated human figures are a recurring feature of San rock art and 'being tall' is a common hallucination among trancing shamans

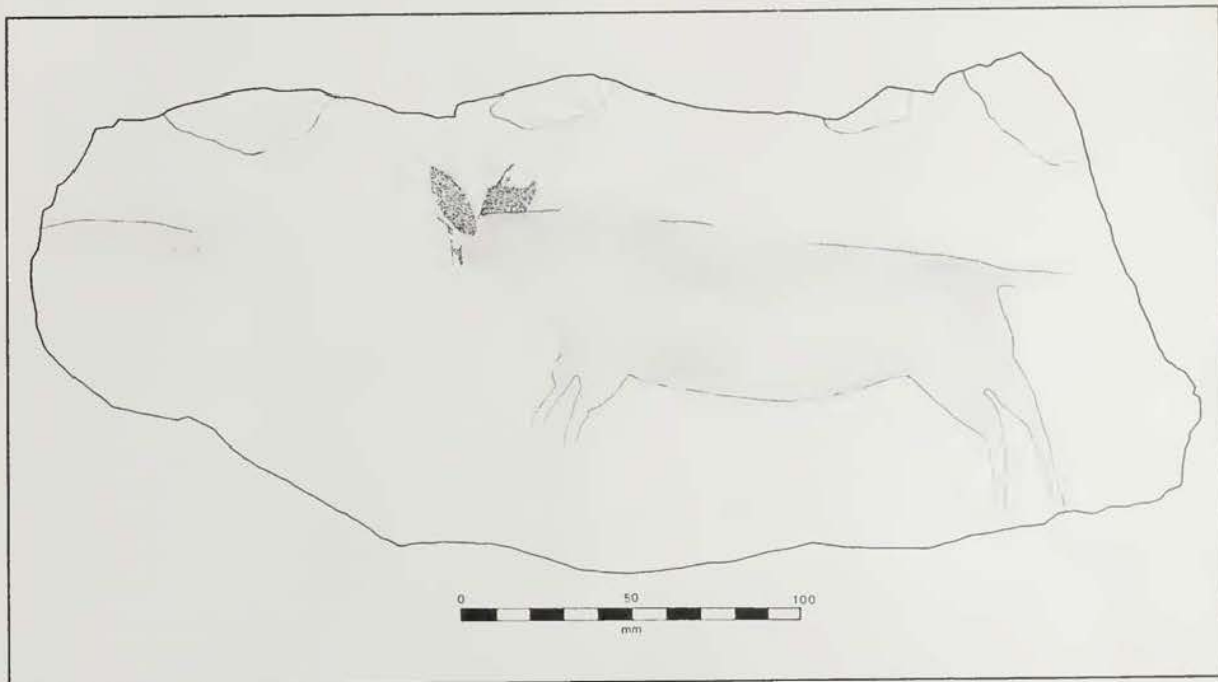


Fig. 6. Painting of two animals from Roodekranz Shelter.

(Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989). A second possible trance element is the white dots on the kaross. Rudner (1971) interpreted these dots literally as white beads, but in view of the elongation they may also be seen as trance related because dots are one of several geometric forms which people experience when in the early stages of trance (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989). The two thin parallel red lines in front of the figure may represent outstretched arms or even clapping. It is not clear whether the faded patches of paint behind the kaross figure represent another human figure in which case it touches the back of the figure in front of it. Thin white lines and small dots of white paint are visible between the two figures but they are too faded for specific comment.

The second painted stone is a thin, long quartzite slab with two animals painted in red (Fig. 6). There is no explicit trance symbolism in this painting. The slab is flaked along most of the perimeter. This modification of the stone presumably took place after the stone had been painted because the head, legs, neck and front legs of the left animal are missing. One of the animals is probably an eland and the head was presumably painted in white but has subsequently faded.

Rudner (1971) speculated that both the stones may have been fragments from the wall of the shelter, but this is clearly not the case.

Groot Kommandokloof Shelter

Groot Kommandokloof Shelter (Fig. 1) is situated in the Kouga Mountains some 30 km north-east of Joubertina and was excavated by the first author. The shelter faces north-east and measures 18 m wide by 8 m deep and the roof is some 8 m high at the dripline. A

testpit excavated against the back wall exposed a 0,50 m deep section with well-preserved plant material in the surface unit.

A burial of a juvenile was recovered and the bottom unit into which the burial hollow had been dug dates to $6430 \pm$ BP (Pta-4612). The skeleton was lying on bedrock, placed on its right side in a northerly direction and in an extended position. The burial was covered by a cairn of fifteen stones (Fig. 7). Two large, flat grindstones, one of which one was stained with red ochre, were placed directly on top of the skeleton. Other stones included ochre stained hammerstones, anvils, flaked cobbles, flakes and roofrock. Among these was a block of roofrock depicting a possible human figure in black (Fig. 7 & 8).



Fig. 6. Burial cairn and the possible charcoal drawing (middle centre) from Groot Kommandokloof Shelter.

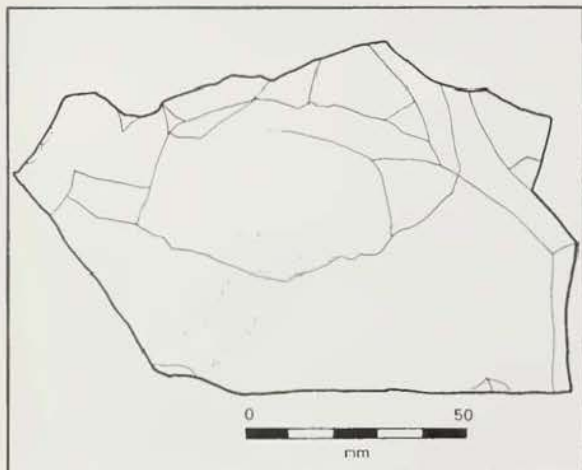


Fig. 7. The possible charcoal drawing from Groot Kommandokloof Shelter.

It is not entirely certain whether the black marking on this small quartzite block is actually a 'painting'. However, there are several indications that the markings may represent a charcoal drawing. Although the block originated from the cave wall it was wedged into the cairn by other stones which indicates that it had been placed deliberately. Although the image was brushed several times there was no visible change. However, the black is not a mineral stain and scrubbing with water would remove it. Furthermore, a dry, sterile yellow ashy soil covered the stones, with no evidence of any roots or signs of other humified or carbonised organic remains, which rules out a natural organic origin for the stain. Overall, the shape of the black marking, in the form of two slightly curved lines running from a larger body of black, is too 'structured' to be a coincidental natural organic stain (Figs 7 & 8). If this is the case then the drawing may possibly depict a human figure bent at the waist in a tranced position.

DISCUSSION

That the majority of the painted stones recovered by controlled excavations during the past two decades have not been directly associated with burials is proof that Rudner's (1971) suggestion is debatable. The specific contexts of the painted stones from KRM5 reaffirms that this association is not axiomatic. Furthermore, if there was a singular association between burials and painted stones in the south-eastern Cape one would have expected to find this link within the elaborate burial complex at the mouth of Klasies 5 (KRM5A) (Binneman 1985, Hall & Binneman 1987), but no such association has been found. In fact it may be significant that there is a distinct spatial separation between the KRM5 burial complex at the front and the painted stones located further back in the more deeply recessed section of the cave. The specific location of two of the KRM5 stones is in occupational deposits and this association provides no further insight into the specific 'use' of these stones. The position of the Groot

Kommandokloof Shelter 'painted' stone as well as those from Roodekranz, however, may suggest 'art mobilier' in some cases directly associated with burials. An explanation for this association has been put forward by Lewis-Williams (1984) who has drawn attention to the possible link between the trance-world of the shaman and the other world of the dead. A further association between painted stones and pits at Boomplaas is also possible, although the excavators see no direct functional link between them (Deacon *et al.* 1976).

From the above it is clear that the LSA painted stones from the eastern and southern Cape cross-cut many different contexts. Searching for explanations for the 'use' of these painted stones which is specific to each of these contexts is perhaps too narrow a perspective. Explaining the specific contexts of this art must surely stem first from theory, which sees the art generally as ritual representations of social and economic relationships (Lewis-Williams 1982, 1984). It is this theory which integrates the art with the wider archaeological sequence and in the case of the painted stones, they are a physical part of this sequence. A starting point would be an assessment of the apparent chronological clustering of most of the painted stones within the last 4000 years and correlating this with changes to other aspects of the sequence over the same period. Such an assessment may go some way towards further integration of the economic and the social, placing belief at the centre of action.

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