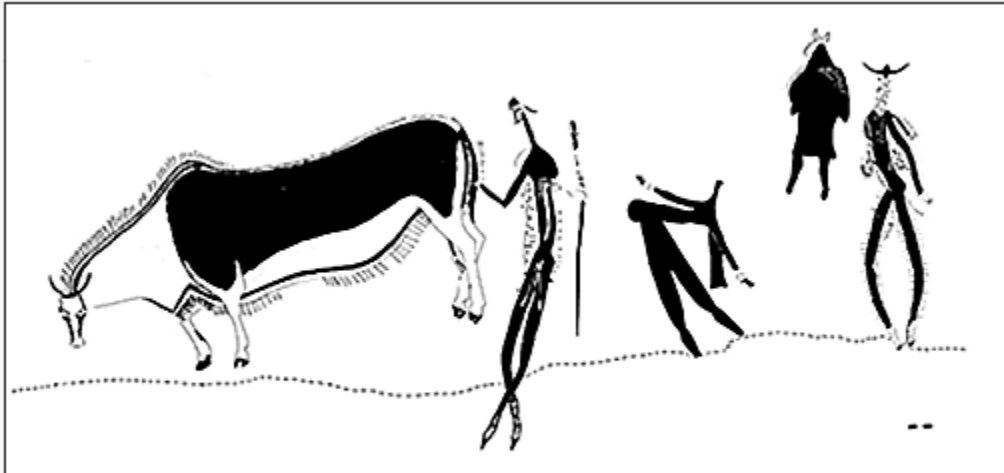


San Rock Painting: A Clue to the Meaning of Paleolithic Cave Art?

High in a secluded valley in the Drakensberg Mountains, on the walls of a narrow sandstone shelter, are painted a great many images of eland (the largest of all antelopes). For a shelter so open to the elements, the paintings are miraculously well preserved and in some places the brush marks can still be seen. Situated among the many images of eland are smaller human figures in running postures. This site, however, is most famous for a cluster of images tucked away on one side of the shelter. It was extensive analysis of these images that first led scholars to the realization that the art was a system of metaphors closely associated with San shamanistic religion.



These three human-animal figures suggest a close association between the dying eland and the ecstatic experience of dancers.

A line drawing illustrating figures as they appear on the so-called Rosetta Stone.

This cluster of images is comprised of an eland with closely associated anthropomorphic figures (made to resemble a human form). The eland's head is lowered, turned toward the viewer with staring hollow eyes. Its one front leg bends under its weight, while its two back legs are crossed over as it stumbles, and the hair on its neck and dewlap is standing on end. This sort of behavior is characteristic of eland when they have been wounded by one of the poisoned arrows that the San use to hunt. They stumble about, their heads sway loosely from side to side, they sweat profusely and even bleed from the mouth and nose, and the hair along their neck and back stands upright. This image, then, is of an eland in its final death throes. Behind the eland, a human figure holds the tail of the animal; this figure's legs are also crossed, mimicking those of the eland's back legs. This human figure's legs continue all the way underneath the rock shelf, and close inspection reveals that the figure does not have feet but antelope hooves. Next to this figure are two more in similar pigment. The first is of a human figure bending forward with one arm stretched out behind its back. It apparently has no head—although the pigment may have worn away—and a short skin-cloak, known as a *kaross*, falls from the chest. Just above and to the right of this figure is one with an animal head, wearing a full *kaross*. To the right, in an orange pigment, is another human figure with an arm behind its back. This figure too, like the one clutching the eland's tail, has antelope hooves instead of feet and its hairs are on end like those on the eland itself. The arms-back posture—adopted by contemporary San at dances in the Kalahari Desert of Namibia and Botswana when they ask God to infuse them with supernatural energy—is frequently depicted in San art. Bending forward is closely related to the arms-back position and is adopted by dancers when the supernatural energy begins to "boil" in their stomachs. These three human-animal figures suggest a

close association between the dying eland and the ecstatic experience of dancers. Indeed, in the Kalahari, the San often like to perform a trance dance around or near the carcass of a freshly killed eland in order to harness supernatural energy from the animal. When they have harnessed this energy, they enter an altered state of consciousness in which they stumble about, sweat profusely, and the hair on their bodies stands on end. So closely are the experiences of trance and the death of eland in their physical manifestation that the San talk about trance as "the death that kills us all." They speak of their experience metaphorically; for them, there is no difference between death and trance. The link between the dying eland and the human figure clutching its tail in this cluster of images is a graphic metaphor—an allusion to the close parallels between death and trance. Once this metaphor was identified at this site, a new vista opened up for scholars, and many other religious metaphors and symbols were identified in San art. It is for this reason that the site is often referred to as the Rosetta Stone of southern African rock art.

Source: African Rock Art: Game Pass | Thematic Essay | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History | The Metropolitan Museum of Art



The so-called Rosetta Stone of southern African rock art depicts a dying eland with its head lowered and erect hairs along its spine. To the right of the dying eland is an anthropomorphic figure with antelope hooves in the place of feet. This figure's legs are crossed as are the eland's legs, and the figure holds the tail of the dying eland, thereby illustrating the close similarity between a dying eland and a shaman in an altered state of consciousness.