



**ROCK ART  
OF HESSEQUA**

**HESSEQUA SOCIETY FOR ARCHAEOLOGY**





**HESSEQUA SOCIETY FOR ARCHAEOLOGY**

**ROCK ART OF HESSEQUA**

Research and documentation by Dr. Renée Rust

Compiled by Brian C Mathiesen

Publisher and distributor: Hessequa Society for Archaeology

Copyright © 2010 Dr Renée Rust (Archaeologist)

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the publisher.

*Photographs by Jan van der Poll*

*Front cover design Brian C Mathiesen*

*In association with members of the Hessequa Society for Archaeology and*

*Hugo Leggatt (B.Sc.Hons Physics)*

*Willem Roodtman (Riversdale Municipal Official)*

*Sarah Wurz (D.Phil Archaeology)*

First edition, first impression 2010

This electronic edition ( June 2011)

Published by Hessequa Society for Archaeology.

Contact details:

<http://www.hesva.co.za>

Publication number: HSA 001E

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Rock art of Hessequa	1
The dancing ladies	3
Animals of the rain	5
Hippopotamus site	7
The cave of hands	9
Indigenous forest above and below	11
The hands of the shamans	13
The transformation	15
The yellow-faced shamans	17
Shaman potency and healing	19
The shamans that walk among the people	21
The kaross people	23

# **ROCK ART OF HESSEQUA**

This book was compiled by Brian C Mathiesen of the Hessequa Society for Archaeology from research and documentation carried out by Dr Renée Rust (archaeologist) and her team of assistants: Rhett Hiseman, Willem Roodtman, Jan van der Poll (professional photographer), Vernon Gibbs-Halls, Barry Joubert, Chris Davies, Hugo Leggatt and Willie Geldenhuys. The research and documentation was financed by the Hessequa Municipality.



**Dr Renée Rust**

The photographs, scans of tracings, cave diagrams and descriptive text in this book are presented by kind permission of Dr Renée Rust.

The San artists deserve gratitude and appreciation for leaving, through their rock art, a legacy of insight into the human spirit.

The */Xam* are an extinct branch of the indigenous peoples of Southern Africa, known as Bosjesmans to the Dutch, Bushmen to the British and San to the Khoekhoe herders. The collective term, Khoisan, comprises the Khoekhoen, the herders, and the San, the hunter-gatherers. *The terms are used here in context with no derogatory connotations.*

The word shaman, used for a Bushman medicine man, is a Tungus word from central Asia. It denotes a member of a hunter-gatherer community who has the ability to enter an altered state of consciousness in order to kindle a potency or power to heal, to foretell the future, to control the weather, ensure the hunt and restore harmony within the group.

The painters of the beautiful images on the rock face in shelters in the Hessequa region used their creative abilities and exceptional visual memory of wildlife to create these rock paintings – at times of diminutive size and at times outsized – with finely executed brush lines on often coarse and grainy quartzite sandstone rock faces.

Depictions of animals in a variety of postures are rendered with skill and accuracy by the San artists in the Hessequa, attesting to their keen observation and knowledge of the animals.

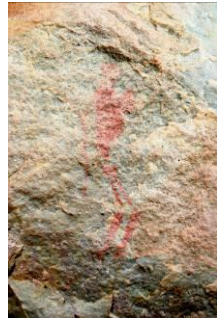
A presentation of the rock art contained in this book can be seen in the Rock Art Gallery of the Blombos Museum for Archaeology, Stilbaai, Southern Cape, South Africa.

## The dancing ladies

Meulrivierkloof, Riversdale, Langeberg



Meulrivierkloof, Riversdale, Langeberg



Male figure with hunting equipment





Five women with their arms held upwards in a distinctive dancing posture are depicted. Although not always present in rock art as frequently as male figures, women of the southern */Xam* were respected as healers in their communities. A collective energy, known by the */Xam* as *!gi:*, was engendered by ritual dancing and the resultant altered states of consciousness. The five women figures are dancing *!gi:*. They hold hands, sharing this potency. The breasts, curvature of the spine, and steatopygia (accumulation of fat on the buttocks) are features of the femininity of the figures in the depiction.

## Animals of the rain

Meulrivierkloof, Riversdale, Langeberg



The biggest elephant



All three elephants



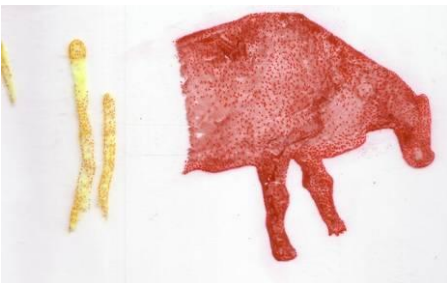
### The smallest elephant

Animals were ‘strong things’ for the southern *Xam*. Since animals featured prominently in their myths, stories and rituals, they also feature prominently in the rock art.

The elephant was perceived as a rain animal, an animal of great significance and strength.

## Hippopotamus site

Garcia Plantation, Riversdale, Langeberg



The depiction of a hippopotamus resembles the rain bull, the rain animal. The /Xam thought of the rain as an animal. The rain shamans went into a trance, 'captured' the rain animal in the waterhole, and thereby initiated the ritual to make rain.



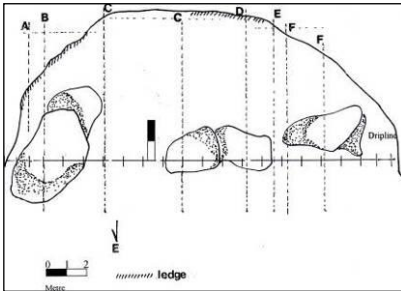
There are a number of sites on this rock slope, the Hippopotamus Site situated uppermost to the left.



At this site there is a composite image of human figures showing ten individual heads, merged torsos, and eight pairs of long thin legs. The image suggests that a figure is being carried. (Shamans sometimes shared the potency with inexperienced dancers by carrying them.)

# The cave of hands

Garcia, Riversdale, Langeberg



The cave layout showing locations of the paintings

Tracings of the paintings being made onto transparent film



A



B



C



D



E



F

The handprints are principally positive i.e. red or yellow ochre powder was mixed with water, plant sap, egg white, fat or blood and applied to the open hand which was then pressed against the rock face. Some are plain and others are decorated. The decorated handprints were made by spreading the paint over the hand and then scraping some off to form curved lines across the palm which was then pressed onto the rock face. Potency was associated with both the paint and the touching of the rock face with the hands.

## Indigenous forest above and below

Garcia, Riversdale, Langeberg



A composite of four human figures is present – three red and one black. These figures, merged in image, ‘touch’ and have their limbs intertwined, forming a grid-like pattern. The potency of *!gi:* is suggested in the depiction of these images.





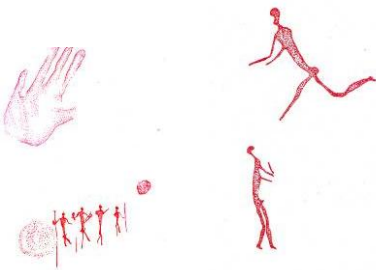
Human figures striding out facing right, are present. The figure on the left is bending forward. The figure in the middle carries arrows while the figure on the right has long, widely-spaced thin legs. Featured immediately below the larger striding figure is an animal-like creature with human-like hind legs, an elongated body and a head which is bending forward. These postures in the rock art suggest trance dancing and altered states of consciousness.



Here is a jackal-like animal with long hind legs and a protuberance from the neck area. There is also a human figure with a tail flap or cloak, which appears to be holding its arm out backwards. These features represent the trance dance and the protuberance, *!gi:*

# The hands of the shamans

Paardenberg, Riversdale, Langeberg





Nine male figures are dancing in a lively group procession. The */Xam* believed that shamans with healing powers had intrinsic potency associated with their hands. The shamans ‘cured’ by the laying on of hands, drawing sickness out of a patient and into their own bodies. The feeling in the hands associated with healing is shown in this depiction by accentuated stick-like fingers, the hands painted large in proportion to the bodies to indicate the potency received during the dance.



# The transformation

Paardenberg, Riversdale, Langeberg





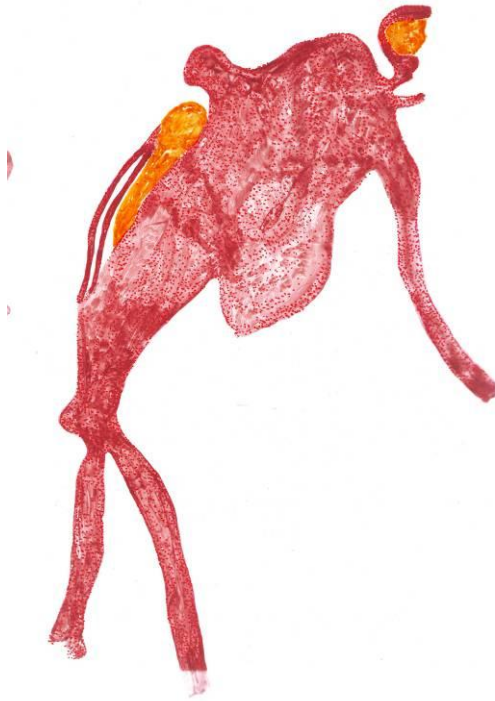
The imagery of human figures often depicts the complexity of the trance experience by also including animal features in the composition. One of the characteristics of altered states of consciousness is the merging of different visual hallucinations. For the shamans these visions were of human and animal (teriomorphic) forms. One specific way in which the shamans interpreted the trance experience was by painting figures with a human torso and limbs and the head of an antelope.



## The yellow-faced shamans

Romanskraal, Riversdale, Langeberg





When the shamans danced they often did so facing the paintings. This was believed to intensify their potency. At a healing dance the shamans could 'see' the potency and the illness. The potency of the large yellow-faced shaman figures flows from one to the other as they 'walk' in procession on the rock face. They carry bags and wear karosses ('cloaks' made of animal skin). The skin bags on their backs were for carrying hunting equipment and food which had been gathered. Medicines such as *fo-/ōä*, were also carried, sometimes in tortoise shells, to strengthen the healing power.

## Shaman potency and healing

Romanskraal, Riversdale, Langeberg







A number of finely drawn lines shape human figures at this site. Short alternating red and yellow lines emphasise the fingers on the hands of the shamans. A particular sensation in the hands was associated with potency and healing.

Short comb-like lines like a headdress radiate from the heads of two shamans suggesting the feelings experienced in trance when the shaman was believed to have gone out-of-body travelling.

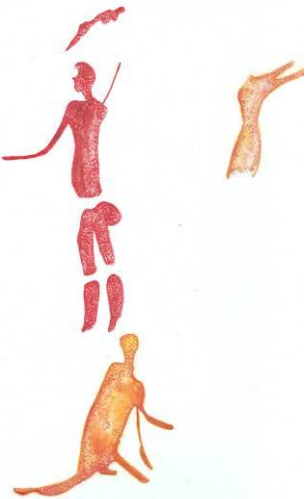
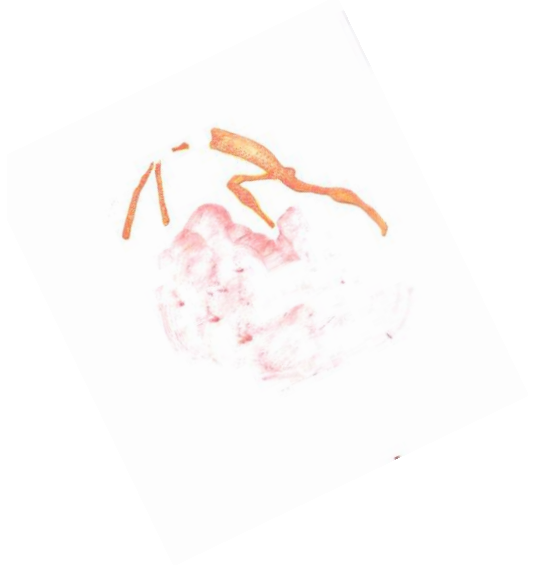
An interesting feature of the human figure on the left is the protuberance from the stomach, denoting potency that entered here during the dance. He is holding a large yellow stick with a knob at each end. The image of a stick implies a dance event as shamans brought their sticks to support them in the trance dance. The stick was also used for digging roots and was an important item of equipment used by the hunter-gatherers.

## The shamans that walk among the people

Romanskraal, Riversdale, Langeberg



The shamans have been painted individually and in striking detail. The body parts appear separated and the paint-free gaps around the waist and knees suggest decorations of bead-, skin- or fibre bands, worn by shamans and associated with the trance dance. These decorations may not have been painted, or were done in white or yellow and have faded on the rock face over time to leave only breaks in the composition.



## The kaross people

Romanskraal, Riversdale, Langeberg





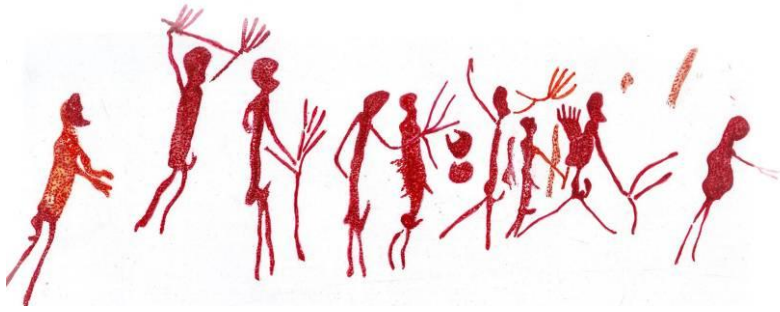
The imagery on the rock face forms a coherent symbolic whole – all the components complement one another and refer in various ways to the San shaman’s spiritual and trance experience.

Skin bags, quivers and sticks were ordinary household items but in the painted image they also harbour ritual significance. Like the karosses worn by the figures, these items – according to beliefs and myth – involve a further set of trance metaphors.

They signify the trance experience.

Since water creatures live in water holes, the image of a snake in proximity to the human and other figures on the rock face is associated with the underwater or underground world – a metaphor inspired by sensations experienced in altered states of consciousness. According to San beliefs, the painted serpents suggest transformation and are at times shamans in the form of snakes utilising the potency of these rain animals.

*An exhibition of copies of the original tracings of the rock art found in this book can be viewed at the Blombos Archaeology Museum in the Stilbaai Tourism Buro in the historical De Jager homestead next to the wellknown 'Palinggat' in Stilbaai.*



This book, presenting the rock art of the Hessequa Region, has been compiled by Brian C Mathiesen of the Hessequa Society for Archaeology from research and documentation carried out by Dr Renée Rust (archaeologist) and her team of assistants.

The painters of the beautiful images on the rock face in shelters in the Hessequa region used their creative abilities and exceptional visual memory of wildlife to create these rock paintings – at times of diminutive size, and at times outsized – with finely executed brush lines on, most often, coarse and grainy quartzite sandstone rock faces.

The imagery on the rock face is often a coherent symbolic whole - all the components complementing one another, and referring in various ways to the shaman's spiritual and trance experience.

***"These images and the research reports are a rich resource worthy of the attention of serious scholars. I intend using the material with my students.***

(Professor Christopher S Henshilwood)