

THE SKELETON OF WEDZA, ZIMBABWE

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Abstract

There are many prone figures in the rock paintings of Zimbabwe but these images have one knee raised to suggest that they are alive and not lifeless. So far nothing like this partially skeletonised human body has ever been recorded. The group of human figures to the right, the trancer, the distended human figure above, and the superimposed ochre human, animal and abstract are probably interconnected.

The site

Situated at about ground level in a shallow granite shelter. The painted panel is approximately 2,50x5,00 meters. The dominant theme consists of humans, animals and a large abstract or honeycomb.

The skeleton

The skeleton, although not a true skeleton, since only some of the bones and skull are fleshless, the overall impression to the viewer is that of a skeleton and it will be referred to as such in this paper. The skeleton is depicted in twisted perspective, shoulders and arms lie flat while the skull buttocks and legs, face downwards, the torso as if it is lying on its right side. Its total length is 115 cm.

The skull is shown in thick brown outline filled with stylized convolutions of the brain in white paint. The facial parts have faded away, the fleshless arms end in long thin fingers. The ribs are painted in small blocks of colour, giving the impression that some muscle tissue is in place. Some shaded areas over the abdomen may indicate internal organs remains. Fleshless legs end in club-like feet. Most of the body is outlined in brown colour with a thin inner white line and brown infill, arms and shoulders are outlined in white and infilled.

Projecting from the skeleton's shoulders are two inverted V shapes, which will be referred to later.

Distended figure

Above the skeleton is one image unique to Zimbabwe. This grossly swollen figure is 18 cm, with masked or animal head, arms bent upwards, knees raised and spread out, it is sexless. Some of these mythical figures are female, unless the swelling below the body is indicative. Often these figures have zig-zag forms or streamers emanating from their groin. Carlake (1995) suggests that these images are not pregnant but rather trancers inflated with potency engendered by dance. This figure, like the skeleton has the same inverted V shapes on its shoulders, suggesting a visual link between the two. A supplicating figure positioned close to the mythical creature as though to identify with it, painted in ochre, elbows thrust backwards sitting on its hunches.

The trancer

On the right side of the panel a group of human figures almost surrounding a larger figure, 57 cm high. Its stylised head “floats” above the shoulders connected only by few thin lines just visible. The floating head is intentional for although lesser men have heads far above their bodies, long necks firmly anchor head to shoulders. The floating head is a common phenomenon and probably is yet another sign of trance. This image with elongated body has a double line on either side of the chest area, like the skeleton. Both hands are holding thin sticks. This is an imposing sitting figure, with one leg folded and the other outstretched. The surrounding wedge torso group, with stylised heads on long necks, elongated bodies, and very short legs. Characteristically, their arms appear to end at the elbow. The scene could be interpreted as ceremonial, they all assume the same posture as if engaged in dancing.



Fig. 81. General view of the skeleton site, Zimbabwe.



Fig. 82. Swollen figure, skeleton site, Zimbabwe.



Fig. 83. The Trancer, skeleton site, Zimbabwe.

In addition, just below the skeleton's feet are two human figures with heads, necks and limbs in proportion with their bodies; both are wearing many-tail skirts. Higher and above the trancer, a group of well proportioned humans are engaged in some kind of activity. At the trancer's shoulder level, there is a hunter's bag with arrows emerging from it, otherwise no hunting equipment is obvious. Also depicted are some large and small animals, some in outline only, others painted solid or infill. A large honeycomb with faded parts. Many superimpositions suggest that this panel is a cumulative result of repeated use over a long period of time.

Tentative explanation

To the western eyes it is logical to suppose that the large man represents the important leader or shaman of his group. However ethnographers working with !KUNG Bushmen of the Kalahari, who are the only remaining link between past and present hunter-gatherers, emphasize total egalitarian composition of Bushmen society, where no one man is allowed to rank higher than another. Beisele (1987) records the enormous importance given to verbal accounts of travel beyond, accessible only through trance and the paintings as valuable documents for all to share. She also states that the paintings can be seen as visual interpretation of trance experience, largely influenced by tradition but continually developing through dreams and trance experience.

R. Lee (1976) inferred that the !KUNG trancer dancer is accorded prestige and glamour without a professional status. His role may symbolize more than just of healer, the trancer embodies his cultural identity, which is based on the religious beliefs and privilege.

The trance dancer's frenzied performance is an intense social event which generates solidarity. It is likely then, that these large men so often occurring in Zimbabwe's paintings, represent not a particular shaman, but rather the importance of trance in the society. They stand as a metaphor rather than an individual important person. This exceptional theme should be viewed as a whole, not solely as the unique portrayal of a skeleton. It is possible that the group of people and some of the animals were painted first, then the skeleton, afterwards the swollen figure above it, lastly the trancer and the superimposed figures in ochre.

It can be perceived that the panel was built up gradually as a visual interpretation of death as recorded by shaman in the trance state. Even the later addition of the antelope may have an added meaning, for each band of !KUNG identified themselves with one or more specific animals.

These later people and their totem animals can be seen as wishing to associate themselves with the teaching of the paintings. And it reflects aspects of the society and interaction between man and the environment.

Conclusion

Hunter-gatherers living entirely by the resources of their environment relied heavily on story telling. Dramatisation of events and the messages brought through dreams and perceptions of the trancers, give identity to their society. Rock painting played an important part by recording visual rules, traditions and teaching, relevant to their way of living such as rituals. The skeleton panel clearly shows the importance of the paintings to record and explore the visions of the shamans.

References

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Riassunto

Fino ad ora niente è stato documentato simile a questo corpo parzialmente scheletrito. Sebbene non sia un vero e proprio scheletro, poiché solo alcune ossa e il cranio sono scarni, l'impressione generale è quella di uno scheletro, ed in tal modo viene definito in questo scritto. Il tema sul pannello include una delle creature mitiche, uniche per lo Zimbabwe, e un uomo in stato di *trance*, oltre a disegni umani, animali ed astratti. Il tema indica l'importanza della tradizione del *trance* nella società dei Boscimani.

Summary

So far nothing has been recorded like this partially skeletonised body. Although not a true skeleton because only some of the bones and skull are fleshless, the overall impression to the viewer is that of a skeleton. It will be referred to as such in this paper. The theme on the panel includes one of the mythical swollen creatures unique to Zimbabwe and a trancer, besides human, animal and abstract designs. The theme indicates the importance of trance tradition in the Bushmen society.

Résumé

Rien de pareil à ce corps partiellement décharné a été archivé jusqu'à présent. Même s'il ne s'agit pas d'un véritable squelette, du moment qu'il présente des ossements et un crâne, il nous offre l'impression générale d'un squelette. C'est sous cet aspect qu'il est décrit dans ce texte. Le sujet du panneau comprend une des créatures mythiques, unique pour le Zimbabwe, aussi qu'un homme en transe et des dessins d'êtres humains, d'animaux ou abstraits. Ce sujet indique l'importance de la tradition de la transe dans la société des Bochimans.