

## MYTH, SHAMANISM AND SAN ROCK ART (SOUTH AFRICA)

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After more than a century of research, the range and subjects of southern African rock art are well documented, although crucial questions of chronology remain poorly understood. Researchers have also attained considerable insight into the "meaning(s) of the art", relative to other prehistoric image-making traditions where no parallel ethnographic commentaries are available. Generally speaking, the affiliation of much of the art to religious belief seems firmly established, via the work of researchers such as Lee and Woodhouse (1970), Pager (e.g. 1971), Vinnicombe (e.g. 1976), Lewis-Williams (e.g. 1980, 1981) and others.

The interpretation which has made the most impact in recent research is the shamanistic model pioneered by Lewis-Williams and his colleagues (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1980, 1981; Lewis-Williams and Loubser 1986, Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988, 1989, to mention some key texts). These writers have argued that the hallucinatory experiences of shamans - observed among Kalahari San in the twentieth century - are fundamental for understanding the themes and forms of the rock art. From this perspective, mythology is seen as secondary to trance experience and ritual activity. However, a reassessment of commentaries on rock paintings made by two nineteenth century San men suggests that mythology is more important for understanding the imagery than has been acknowledged (Solomon 1997). In this paper, I consider the role of mythology further, in conjunction with the proposition that the shamanistic model cannot accommodate the extraordinary diversity within San rock art. Rather than seeing much or all of the rock art as hallucinatory in origin, it may be related to multiple contexts of production, and understood as potentially deriving from multiple sources.

### Mythology and San rock art

Researchers have explored connections between San rock paintings and mythology since the nineteenth century, with limited success. The art clearly does not "illustrate" scenes from the mythology (see Lewis-Williams and Loubser (1986:268) for one way of seeing the relationship between art, ritual and myth). Moreover, paintings of dances, scenes which can confidently be linked to rain-making, as well as panels and sites which are probably best interpreted in relation to female initiation, seem to point rather to the art's affiliation to ritual practices. However it is generally accepted in contemporary anthropology that it is problematic to draw strong dividing lines between ritual and myth, since they are often closely inter-connected. Nevertheless comments on images from painted sites in Lesotho by two nineteenth century San speakers strongly suggest that certain figures in the art are best understood in the first instance in relation to mythology.<sup>1</sup> The implications of this proposition, and the relationship between myth, art and trance, are considered here.

### Indigenous commentaries: Qing and Dia!kwain

J. M. Orpen, a British colonial official travelling in Lesotho, recorded a series of stories, as well as comments on specific paintings, from a San guide named Qing (Orpen 1874). Orpen enquired about the significance of paintings showing therianthrope figures (men with antelope [rhebok] heads; [Figure 1]). Qing replied that they were "men who had died and now lived in rivers, and were spoilt at the same time as the elands and by the dances of which you

<sup>1</sup> This argument is presented in detail in Solomon (1997).



have seen paintings" (Orpen 1874:2; original italics). Copies of the same paintings were forwarded to WHI Bleek in Cape Town, and shown to the /Xam man, Dia!kwain, whose independent testimony convinced Bleek that the connection between art and mythology was confirmed (Bleek, in Orpen 1874).

Qing referred to men "spoilt at the same time as the elands".<sup>2</sup> This apparently refers directly to the first story narrated to Orpen by Qing, namely the story of the "spoiling" of the eland. It relates how Cagn (/Kaggen in the /Xam orthography), the trickster-deity of the mythology, lost the young eland he had been secretly rearing when his sons shot and killed it while hunting. However, Cagn and his wife reconstituted the young eland's remains, and, from drops of its blood and fat, great herds of eland were created. "That day game was given to man to eat, and this way they were spoilt and became wild" (Qing to Orpen 1874:5).

Comparison with the stories and folklore collected from other San groups in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries locates this story firmly in the mythological past. An apparently ubiquitous San belief was that animals and humans were initially barely differentiated. Animals could talk, while the first people were said to be stupid, lacking in culture and manners, and potentially dangerous. Only after a "second creation" (cf. Guenther 1989) were animals and humans separated, and humans acquired "civilised" behaviour. The very lengthy story relating this event in the /Xam texts is called "The ant-eater's laws", and centres on an inappropriate marriage between a lion and a springbok (i.e. between hunter and prey). The consequence was that humans and animals were separated, suitable marriages became the established norm, and the relationship of hunter and prey assumed its proper form.

The "spoiling of the eland" story apparently refers to this mythological past, and to the time when the eland became fully animal ("wild", in Qing's words), and prey for San hunters. The therianthrope figures, according to Qing's comments, therefore relate to the time of the second creation, after which modern, "cultured" San populated the earth. Dia!kwain, a /Xam San man from the northern Cape, rather than the eastern mountains, said of the therianthropes from the site of Melikane: "They are said to belong to the ancient Bushmen, or to the race preceding the present Bushmen, and who it is believed killed people"...[The therianthropes at the site at Kraai River] are believed to belong to these same people" (Bleek in Orpen 1874; my parentheses). In the larger collection of /Xam commentaries collected by the Bleek and Lloyd family, these mythological ancestors are referred to as "the People of the Early Race", or "the First Bushmen".

The Orpen/Qing account is also crucial to the shamanistic model, where it forms the basis of the proposition that the themes and forms of the art arise in trance, and, *inter alia*, that "spoiling", as referred to by Qing, is in fact a coded, metaphorical reference to entering a trance state (Lewis-Williams 1980). However, it is my contention that the therianthrope figures are in fact more appropriately interpreted by reference to mythology and the People of the Early Race. In addition, certain images and accounts in the stories recorded by the Bleek and Lloyd family (e.g. Bleek and Lloyd 1911) which have been interpreted as accounts of trance and shamanic experience, out-of-body travel and the like may be understood differently.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, it appears that some of the beings which have been identified as "shamans" are more aptly interpreted as spirits of the dead, who are believed to live on (so to

<sup>2</sup> The eland, *Taurotragus oryx*, is the largest antelope, and most commonly painted animal in the South African art

<sup>3</sup> See also the series of papers published by Dorothea Bleek in the journal *Bantu Studies* in the 1930s.



speak) in the present, and interact with and influence the living.<sup>4</sup> The details of this argument are presented elsewhere (Solomon 1997).

In the light of these accounts, the role of mythology and the significance of therianthrope figures require further consideration. For the purposes of this study, the sub-class of figures variously called "flying buck" (e.g. Lee and Woodhouse 1964), "alites" (Pager 1971) or "trance buck" (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1981; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1989) are included in the category of therianthrope figures, since they also show both human and animal features (Figure 2).<sup>5</sup> Previous interpretations of therianthropes have included the proposition that they represent disguised hunters or mythological creatures, whereas a more recent suggestion is that some may depict people in ritual attire (Jolly 1996). The flying buck have been interpreted by several writers, including Pager (1971), Vinnicombe (1976) and Lee and Woodhouse (1964), as perhaps relating to beliefs about the spirits of the dead.

In the shamanistic model, both the flying buck and other therianthropes are said to represent the hallucinatory experiences of shamans (e.g. Lewis-Williams 1980,1981; Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1988,1989). Therianthropes in general are said to represent the shaman's hallucinatory experience of fusing with "animals of potency" over which they have power, or which they magically "possess". Flying buck are said to signify similarly. Similar but non-therianthrope figures in a kneeling, forward-bending and/or arms-back posture (Figure 3) are said to refer to the initial stages of the ritual trance dance, whereas flying buck, which appear in comparable postures, are said to represent the final "conceptual stage" of trance performance (Lewis-Williams 1981; figures 32, 33). In other words, the flying buck are said to represent the same dancing figures, but with an hallucinatory "overlay" which accounts for their non-naturalistic and animal features. The earlier interpretations cited above have been rejected by Lewis-Williams (1981:88), mainly on the grounds that they seemed to him to be "insufficiently tied to the ethnography". However, if the alternative reading of the Orpen account which I have summarised above is accepted, then this objection no longer holds. Indeed, Qing and Dia!kwain's comments may be seen as powerful support for the relationship of therianthrope figures to mythology, rather than (or perhaps as well as) to trance and shamanism.

### Diversity

One of the criticisms commonly offered of the shamanistic model is that ultimately it offers a single, if complex and nuanced, explanation for a very diverse body of art: a "singular semantics" (Preziosi 1989:127). This diversity has been given particular emphasis by artists and art historians (e.g. Battiss 1948, Davis 1985, 1986, Skotnes 1994) and relates to differences in disciplinary approaches. Davis (1985:6) has argued that archaeological approaches to rock art focus on invariance, whereas art historical approaches focus on variability and uniqueness, in line with notions of connoisseurship in western art traditions. These different disciplinary foci also include the archaeological tendency to focus on iconography (as subject matter or "content"), as opposed to the art historical emphasis on form and visual devices rather than content alone. San rock art does indeed show remarkable iconographical similarities over large areas and presumably long spans of time; however, as Skotnes and Battiss have stressed, in terms of formal characteristics and visual devices, the art

<sup>4</sup> This situation, where past and present appear to co-exist (Solomon 1997) is echoed in Morphy's analysis of recent Australian Aboriginal bark paintings. Morphy (1991:45) states that "Because of the Yolngu concept of time, mythological events are not simply located in the distant past but are also in some senses seen to be part of a continuous present. They can therefore be used to describe present and future states as well as the past".

<sup>5</sup> The "flying buck" are localised in the Drakensberg mountain range, and are not found in the art of the southern and south western Cape, nor in Zimbabwe and Namibia.



is extraordinarily variable. In practical terms, the archaeological focus on broad similarities and continuities is appropriate to archaeological questions and the kind of analytical resolution that can realistically be expected. Nevertheless, as Skotnes has argued, more attention must be paid to the art as a specifically visual medium - although this presents its own methodological problems - and to the formal and visual as a "site of meaning".

The ongoing research presented here is aimed at mediating archaeological and art historical approaches, and addressing questions of form and content, iconographical and formal studies, variance and invariance and so on. At this point, my research centres partly on questions regarding the relationship of form and content, and is aimed at incorporating the valuable inputs of art historians for understanding the rock art. The notion that the visual constitutes an important "site of meaning" is adapted here for considering questions of iconography, diversity, reference and "meaning". With regard to the therianthrope figures, it may be suggested that the shamanistic explanation offered for these images subordinates visual and formal differences that are potentially "meaningful".<sup>6</sup> As Davis (1984:15) has argued, "We need to be sensitive to the different meanings attached to different ways of handling the same basic form".

### **Therianthrope figures**

Therianthrope figures in San art are astonishingly diverse. The animal features portrayed in conjunction with human characteristics include animal heads, horns, tails, and hooves or paws. Similarly, some paintings depict creatures which are predominantly animal but which have human characteristics, such as fingers or toes. The animals selected are principally antelope, but baboon, lion, ostrich, elephant and other therianthropes are recorded. Some, whilst clearly animal, do not correspond to known species. How significant is this diversity? Is an animal with human feet "the same thing" as a predominantly human figure with animal features? Is an antelope therianthrope the same as a baboon therianthrope? Do male and female therianthropes refer differently? Or are they "variations on a theme" (see below)?

As mentioned above, the variations in species depicted is accommodated in the shamanistic model via the proposition that shamans had a special relationship with particular species of animal, with which they would experience "fusion" in an altered state of consciousness (e.g. the "springbok sorceress", Tano-!khauken, in the /Xam texts). Another possibility is that therianthropes of taxa that are symbolically opposed in San thought, such as carnivores and herbivores (cf Lewis-Williams 1981, Solomon 1989, 1992) may in fact signify different values. Such questions are worthy of further research.

The flying buck which constitute a sub-class of the therianthrope figures are also morphologically and formally diverse, although the majority of figures in this category display antilopine features. This more restricted range, and the absence of carnivore features (for example) on these figures may well have been significant. Pager (1971) compared 45 examples of the "alites", as he called them, in order to draw attention to their marked variability (Figure 2). This variability seems to be considered by Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1989) to be secondary to their similarities. They have stated that the variations derive from the idiosyncratic hallucinatory visions of individual shamans, and that differences may be understood in terms of each being a "variation on a theme" (Lewis-Williams and Dowson

<sup>6</sup> This is apparently in contrast to earlier work, in which Lewis-Williams (1981:128) presented a sophisticated and nuanced semiotic analysis of the "symbolic meanings" of painted eland: "instead of searching for the meaning of the symbol, I look for the motivations or reasons why it was selected by the San to recur in a variety of situations. These motivations or reasons for its occurrence are unlikely to be the same in each situation, as indeed the very diversity of the contexts suggests".



1989:73). Whilst personal idiosyncrasy may indeed be a factor - albeit one which is difficult to address in archaeology - other factors pertaining to variability also need to be considered.

### Factors relating to variability

An obvious factor influencing variability is historical change, but until many more dates are obtained, it is barely possible to approach this question. The problem of lack of dates inevitably impedes any study of variability. More amenable to investigation is the question of regional variations. Mazel (1982) has shown that the flying buck occur in higher frequencies in the more northerly parts of the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg, but at the time it was not possible to offer an explanation for this distribution. Regional differences will be considered in ongoing research, but it is already clear that this alone cannot account for the variability amongst the flying buck. Eland Cave, a densely painted site in the vicinity of the Ndedema Gorge, contains fifteen flying buck, which differ considerably (cf. nos. 13, 14, 16-24, 30, 39, 41, 42 in Pager's graphic [Figure 2]). This suggests that regionality alone does not underpin variability.

On the other hand, aspects of the form of the flying buck at Procession Shelter (Figure 4), in the same general area, are clearly best understood in relation to artistic praxis (cf. Skotnes 1994). The figure appears to hover above the heads of a long line of antelope therianthropes. Pager noted the similarities between them: the head, horns, hirsuteness and so on. These details must surely be understood in terms of the logic of the larger panel, as a visual means of signalling a connection between the flying buck and the striding therianthropes. Yet, in other sites where therianthropes and flying buck are associated, no such visual parallels are drawn. At Hotel View Shelter, a couple of kilometres away, a bizarre bichrome therianthrope figure is associated with four flying buck - this time portrayed beneath and around the therianthrope (Figure 5). (These five figures are the only paintings visible in the site). That they are indeed associated is unequivocal. The flying buck are painted in the same pinkish paint as the therianthrope's legs, and are in an identical state of preservation. Apart from this parallel, no other formal or iconographical links between the figures can be identified. Such compositional variability, even in the face of iconographical parallels (viz. the association of flying buck and therianthropes) is another facet of diversity, but one which is very difficult to explore.

In addition, not all flying buck occur in panels. Two markedly different examples may be seen at a site some distance further south. They are in different colours, and one is markedly angular, while the other is "duck-like" (cf. nos. 22-24 in Figure 2). Understanding isolated figures is a problem which is beyond the scope of the current project, which foregrounds compositional factors; it is sufficient here to note that they do exist.

Returning to the art historical stress on the visual as a site of meaning, another proposition, related to the question of artistic praxis, may be considered. One of the implications of this approach is that visual or formal variations (e.g. colour, line, perspective or view, scale etc.) may signify iconographical and semantic differences. In other words, seeing such differences as idiosyncratic variations on an identical theme may neglect the possibility of deeper or more "meaningful" referential diversity.

This proposition may be brought to bear on the central question with which this paper is concerned, viz. the relation of the art to mythology. Rather than explaining all therianthropes (including the flying buck) as representations of shamanic experience, might their range relate to referential differences? As noted above, therianthropes have been interpreted as shamans, mythological beings and/or the People of the Early Race, spirits of the dead, masked hunters and men in ritual dress. It seems entirely possible that some or all of these may be represented in a rock art as diverse as the San's. Might diversity in subject matter be a factor underlying



the visual/formal range? Or, as Lewis-Williams and his colleagues propose, are we to see them generally as images of shamans and hallucinatory experience?

The paintings at Procession Shelter may be examined again in this light. Whilst the artist has drawn parallels between them, the hovering, bird-like flying buck is simultaneously contrasted morphologically (and spatially) with the therianthropes beneath it. The question raised by my interpretation of the testimony of Qing and Dia!kwain centres on whether some therianthrope figures might, *inter alia*, represent the People of the Early Race and spirits of the dead. Analysis of the paintings at Procession Shelter does not furnish an answer to this question. However, in terms of theory and method, paintings (or compositions) such as those at Procession Shelter suggest that visual and formal contrasts may be linked to such referential diversity. Even if it is accepted that therianthropes and flying buck are both images of shamans, their contrasting morphology, and form (e.g. their placement and juxtapositioning) is not "explained" via the shamanistic model. Examination of a range of sites in which therianthropes and flying buck are juxtaposed may shed further light on the problem at hand. On the other hand, at this point in the research, it seems that diversity may eclipse pattern (and pattern recognition returns the analyst to the "similarity-centred" method, with its attendant problems). Nevertheless, such methodological issues require more attention if the issue of diversity is to be addressed.

#### **Conclusion: myth and shamanism**

If mythology is seen as important for understanding the art, then new questions, especially concerning diversity, can be posed and pursued. Diversity in the art may be tentatively related to the art's origin in a variety of contexts - i.e. mythology as well as hallucinatory experience and ritual practice. If mythology is a source of the imagery, then the implication is that the iconographical range may be greater than is currently recognised in the shamanistic model. It also implies that the identity of the artists may be considered in more wide-ranging terms. In the shamanistic model, it is argued that shamans were the painters, and that they painted in order to communicate their trance visions to the wider community. However, it is clear from ethnographic accounts, such as those in the Bleek and Lloyd Collection, that the mythology was potentially known to individuals in all sectors of the community. In this light, the possibility that not only shamans painted must be entertained. Formal (rather than iconographical) diversity may be addressed on this basis. (For example, if some artists were shamans and others not, then this might be a factor in the visual/formal range. Questions regarding the impact of visual hallucinatory experience on image form have been considered by Lewis-Williams and his colleagues, albeit from a different angle).

However, the proposed relevance of mythology does not mean that the causality of the shamanistic model can merely be inverted (i.e. with mythology seen as primary and ritual or trance secondary). Rather, the possibility of a more complex, multi-directional relationship between myth and ritual needs to be explored. Lewis-Williams (1980) has discussed the similarities between the "dance of blood" described by Qing in the 1870s and the trance dance as observed amongst Kalahari San in the twentieth century, arguing persuasively that the dance of blood may be a southern San version of the same healing ritual. Qing states in his account that it was the mythical being, Cagn, who gave the secrets of the dance to men. This indicates a direct relationship between myth and ritual; however, there are various ways of conceptualising this relationship which require additional research.



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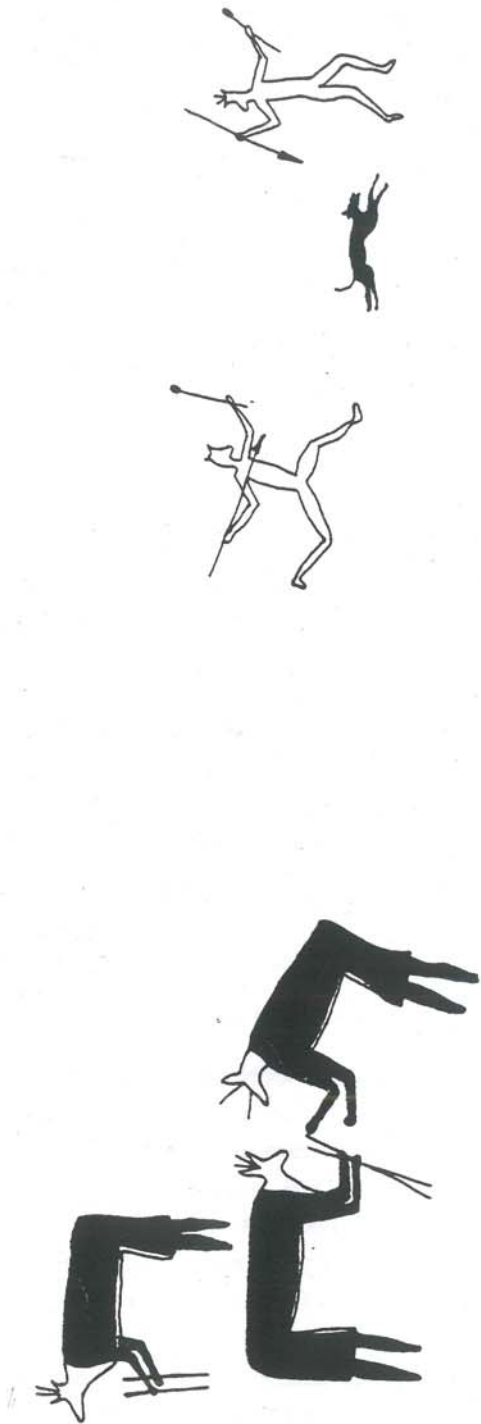


Figure 1  
 Paintings of therianthropes discussed by 19th century San commentators (after Orpen 1874).





Figure 2

The sub-category of therianthrope figures known as "flying buck", "alites" or "trance buck", compiled by Pager (1971, figure 381) to illustrate their variability.

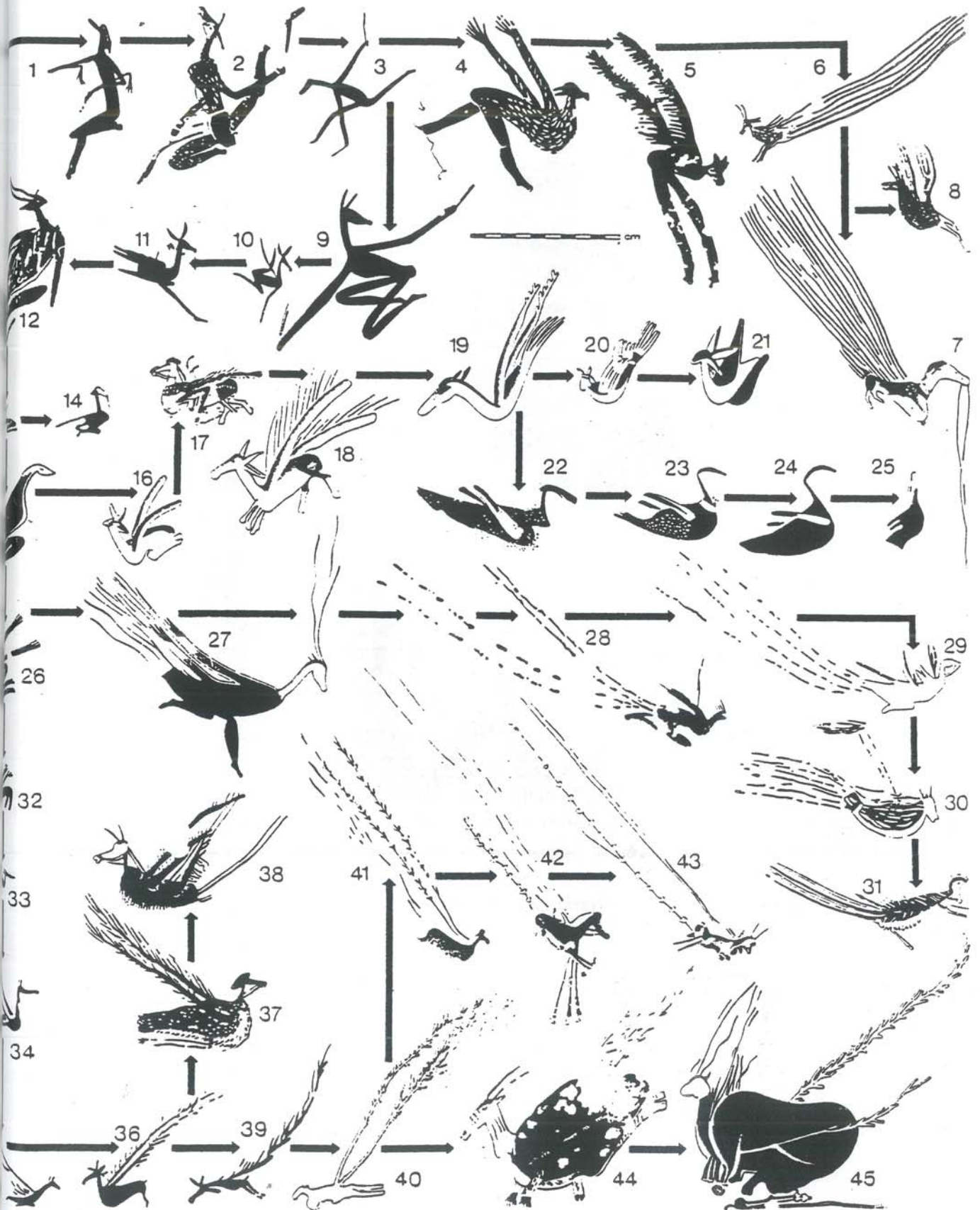






Figure 3

A kneeling figure of a kind which has been linked to the "flying buck". Such figures do not display therianthropic features. The kneeling figure is in a deep red-brown paint, and is the best-preserved figure in a densely painted area of the site. The other figures are included in order to indicate that the kneeling person is not an isolated figure; other marks, lines and images have been omitted. The dotted line represents an area which has exfoliated. Barnes Shelter, Giant's Castle, KwaZulu-Natal Drakesnberg.



Figure 4

A "flying buck" from Procession Shelter, Cathedral Peak, KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg, associated with a long line of striding therianthropes. After Páger (1971, figure 379).







Figure 5

Schematic representation of a bizarre therianthrope from a shelter in the Cathedral Peak area, KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg, associated with four "flying buck". The figure's head, back and parts of the face are outlined in red. Its legs, and the flying buck are pinkish, whilst the remainder of the figure is principally a yellowish colour. Previously recorded yellow details on the flying buck are now barely visible, and are indicated by dashed lines.

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