

Management Plan: Mdoni rock art site  
Lapalala Wilderness  
Limpopo Province  
South Africa

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# Management Plan: Mdoni rock art site

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Location and Description of Site

Mdoni rock art site is in the Lapalala Wilderness, in Limpopo Province, about 390 km north of Johannesburg, Gauteng. It is part of the Waterberg Biosphere Reserve in the Waterberg plateau (Figure 1).

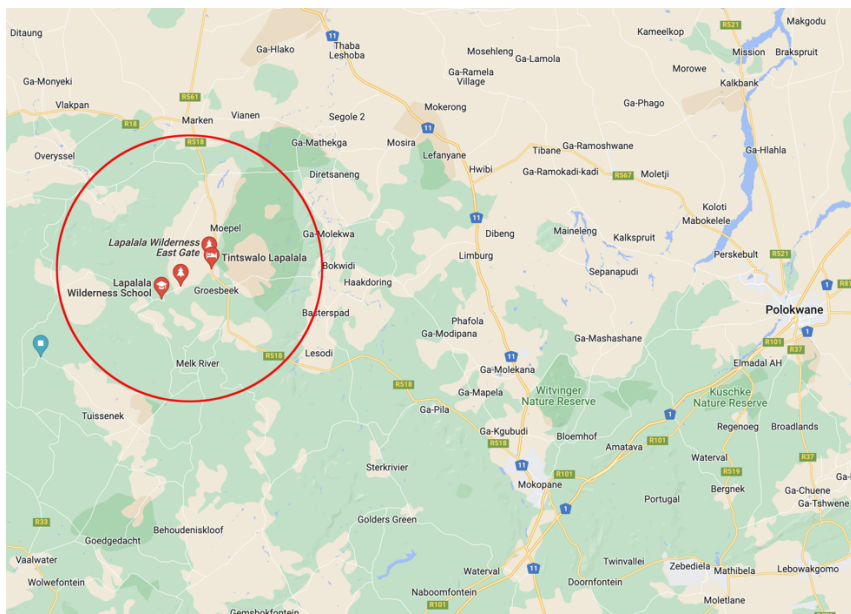


Figure 1. Lapalala Wilderness (circled in red), Limpopo Province

Mdoni rock art site is a Later Stone Age rock painting site on the northern bank of the Kgokong River (Bloklandspruit) (Figure 2, Figure 3). The overhang faces south to south-west and is approximately 16 m wide and 2 to 3 m deep at its deepest.

The paintings seem to be protected from direct sunlight and are protected from rain, although water seeps through the rock itself and is causing weathering in the form of accumulating salt deposits and exfoliation (flaking of rock). The floor of the site is probably washed out by the river after exceptional rains.

Despite the weathering, many of the images are in positions that have preserved them in good condition. Many details of the paintings can be observed.

In order to access the Mdoni rock art site it is necessary to cross the river from the southern to the northern bank.

The paintings can be divided into two main areas (see Addendum B):

#### **Area 1 (western or left-hand side)**

Located at the upstream end of the shelter, this area has suffered chemical weathering in the form of what may be mineral salt-laden water within the rock that has left a white deposit on the rock that obscures the few paintings here. Mdoni Panel A is on the left and part of Panel B is on the right.

#### **Area 2 (eastern or right hand side)**

Panel C is 0,5 m to the right of Panel B and between 1,5 and 2 m above ground level. There are approximately 19 images visible, many of which are well preserved.

The co-ordinates of the site are:

S 23.84364

E 28.26690

Altitude: 1018 m asl

## 1.2 Ownership and responsibility for the site

The site is on the property of the Lapalala Wilderness, which is responsible for the site.

## 1.3 Statement of site significance

The Lapalala Wilderness, located in the Waterberg Biosphere Reserve, is rich in archaeological resources that date back to the past 1000 years (Van der Ryst 1998; Boeyens et al. 2016). Human occupation of the greater Waterberg plateau goes back hundreds of thousands of years (Wadley 2020). The archaeology within the Lapalala Wilderness indicates that the area was occupied by Later Stone Age (LSA) hunter-gatherers (ancestors of the San/Bushmen) and, later, by different groups of Late Iron Age Bantu-speaking farmers who settled on Melora Hill and Melora Saddle early in the nineteenth century (Boeyens et al. 2016: 3-4, 20-21, 22-29).

Mdoni rock art site is an LSA rock art site: the paintings were made by LSA hunter-gatherer people (known historically as 'Bushmen/San'). According to Boeyens et al (2016: 19) the Rock Art Research Institute recorded thirteen rock art sites in the Lapalala Wilderness. Boeyens et al also describe one rock art site that has Later Stone age paintings and Bantu-speaking farmer rock art (Site 10 in Boeyens et al. 2016: 63-64, fig.44).

The rock paintings at Noka rock art site were cultural productions of LSA image-makers. The rock paintings thus have research value, and the archaeological deposit has the potential to provide information about the movements and activities of groups of people who lived in the area before recorded history.

The rock art also has aesthetic value because of the beauty and power of the paintings and the skills and techniques required to create the images on the rock.

The rock art also has educational and touristic value because it is part of southern Africa's past and gives people insight into the long history of the subcontinent.

## 1.4 Objectives for opening site to the public

The opening the rock art site to the public is an opportunity to inform and educate visitors to Mdoni rock art site about the archaeology of the area by exposing them to a good example of the rock art of the Waterberg Area. The targeted categories of visitors to the site are visitors to Lapalala Wilderness: these include paying guests who are staying at one of the lodges in the wilderness as well as other groups who might visit the site from time to time for educational and training purposes under the auspices of the Lapalala Wilderness Foundation.

The number of visitors to the rock art site is expected to be fairly low but at this stage it is not possible to be more precise about the frequency and numbers of visitors as the site is currently closed for visitation and no records of previous visits has been kept.

The number of visitors permitted at the rock art site should be limited to a maximum of five people. Visitors will only be allowed to visit the site when accompanied by a custodian (see Section 3.3: Access arrangements).

## 1.5 Objectives of management plan

The management plan has been developed to enable visitors to Lapalala Wilderness to visit Mdoni rock art site in a controlled manner and to protect the site from damage and consequent loss of its significance, cultural value and research potential.

## 1.6 Revision of Plan

Management at Lapalala Wilderness have committed themselves to employing a suitable specialist to review and revise this management plan at least every five years.

## 1.7 Potential impact on rock art and archaeological resources of opening site to public

The opening of the site to the public brings with it the potential for human damage to the rock paintings. There is the risk of people damaging the rock paintings by touching, wetting or drawing on them. This management plan is intended to set up a structure and establish procedures to prevent any damage to the site by regulating and controlling visitation. More positively, the opening of the site to the public is an opportunity to educate and raise awareness about rock art conservation more generally at other rock art sites that these members of the public might visit, or in any future discussions they might have with other people about rock art.

## 2. Recording & Research

### 2.1 Objectives of recording and research

The aim of recording and researching the Mdoni archaeological site is to establish a baseline of data and information for monitoring the site against changes in future. Recording includes documentation and assessment of the weathering processes (mechanical and chemical) at the site (see Addendum C). This includes the deposit in the ground and the rock paintings on the rocks. The rock art was extensively recorded (Addendum B).

### 2.2 Recording of rock art

The rock art at Mdoni was recorded and researched in November 2018 by Dr Jeremy Hollmann, an accredited rock art specialist. The documentation includes comprehensive and detailed photographs of the rock paintings, including enhancements, as well as a detailed condition assessment (Addenda B & C). The results of the recording are presented in a January 2019 report commissioned by Lapalala Wilderness and entitled *Management plans for two Later Stone Age rock art sites in the Lapalala Wilderness* (Addendum B)

Copies of the images would be lodged with the Rock Art Research Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

### 2.3 Research into the archaeology of the rock art site

Researchers Herbert (Bert) Woodhouse and Neil Lee visited the site in 1982 and wrote a report (Woodhouse & Lee 1982). Woodhouse published on some of the paintings at Mdoni in 1987 (Woodhouse 1987). Thomas Dowson, researcher at the University of the Witwatersrand visited the site in February 1988 and traced image C15 (<http://Kgokong.sarada.co.za/#/library/rsa%20new1/images/RSA-NEW1-5T>). Ghilraen Laue compiled a visitor strategy (1999), a condition assessment of the site (2000a), and a discussion of the paintings at this site (Laue n.d.), which she called Lower Mdoni.

The site is listed in the records of the Rock Art Research Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand as New Belgium I (RSA NEW1). Laue has also discussed the paintings in her Master's Dissertation (Laue 2000b), in particular images of one-legged humans painted in a style that she calls the 'Waterberg Posture'. She has also traced Panels B and C at this site.

### 2.4 Research into history and indigenous knowledge of the site

The Waterberg area has been inhabited over hundreds of thousands of years (Wadley 2020). There are traces of Early stone Age (ESA), Middle Stone Age (MSA) and Later Stone Age (LSA) in the area. There are several other LSA rock art sites in the Lapalala Wilderness.

### 3. Site Management

#### 3.1 Objectives of site management

The prime management objective is to enable site visitation while preserving the rock paintings.

#### 3.2 Site vegetation and firebreak

The painted section of the overhang is clear of any vegetation. At the western end (i.e. left hand, upstream end), about 3 m from Panel A, there are trees and shrubs that are growing inside the overhang as well as above and below it. These pose no threat to the rock art as there is no vegetation between this area and the paintings. Therefore, no action needs to be taken to avoid damage to the site by vegetation and fires.

#### 3.3 Site infrastructure – existing infrastructure and that required for accessing the site:

##### 3.3.1 *Existing infrastructure*

There is no infrastructure at the site.

##### 3.3.2 *Access*

Mdoni rock art site is closed to visitors. If the site is opened to visitation an adequately trained and responsible employee of Lapalala Wilderness would accompany any visitors to the rock art site. Access to the section of the Kgokong River where the paintings are located would only be by vehicle. The location of the site is not publicised and within the Lapalala Wilderness visitors may not leave their vehicles. There is no lodge or other accommodation available for visitors in this part of the Lapalala Wilderness. It is therefore not possible for people to walk to the site or to find it themselves.

##### 3.3.3 *Visitor control infrastructure*

Currently visitors can only gain access to the site by driving to it in a vehicle with high clearance and preferably one with 4 x 4 or a differential lock. Then, to get to the Mdoni rock art site it is necessary to cross the Kgokong River.

The site's location is not publicised. There are no lodges or other accommodation in this part of Lapalala Wilderness. Access to the site is thus restricted. In the absence of a lodge in the area the only visitors to the site would be those taken to the site by staff of Lapalala Wilderness.

Management of Lapalala Wilderness has complete control over visitor access. Only guests and approved visitors would be granted access to the rock art site. It is recommended that a maximum of five visitors and a custodian be permitted inside the rock art site at a time. The limit is to allow the custodian to monitor visitor behaviour and to prevent crowding and the possibility of accidents and accidental damage to the site.

There are no physical barriers to prevent visitors from approaching the rock art. It is only the presence of the custodian that would act as a sort of psychological barrier, first by informing them beforehand of the etiquette to be followed and then by monitoring the behaviour of the visitors to ensure that they do not cause any damage to the rock art.

In keeping with the wilderness ethos of Lapalala Wilderness a low-key approach is favoured so there would be no signage or other infrastructure at the site. Information would be made available in other ways (see Education infrastructure, below).

No formal toilet facilities are available close to the site. The closest facilities at the time of writing this report are at the Lapalala headquarters.

### 3.3.4 *Education infrastructure*

As part of this understated approach no educational material would be displayed in the form of storyboards, etc. at the site. Displays would intrude on visitors' experience of a well-preserved and untouched rock art site. Instead, a detailed analysis of the paintings at the site could be provided in the form of a booklet and display based on the information provided in Addendum B. Lapalala Wilderness could make this available to visitors (Addendum B).

Visitors to the site would be informed verbally of the etiquette to be followed at the site before undertaking the visit.

Lapalala Wilderness management would need to keep a visitors' book that would record the particulars of each visit to the site. This record would comprise the names and addresses of the visitors and the date of their visit. It would also provide visitors with the opportunity to write down their comments about their visit to the site.

### 3.3.5 *Maintenance of site infrastructure*

There is no infrastructure planned for the site itself. However, Lapalala Wilderness management does intend to place a wooden walkway across the Kgekong River, about 75 m downstream of Mdoni rock art site (see Addendum A). The purpose of the walkway is to enable visitors to cross the Kgekong River more easily than wading across it. Lapalala Wilderness management would undertake to maintain the wooden walkway. Lapalala Wilderness management would also need to check that the site remains free of any debris washed into the overhang by the river. There is no vegetation growing at the site but Lapalala Wilderness management would need to check that vegetation alongside the access path is kept trimmed so that visitors can walk easily on the path.

### 3.3.6 *Permit requirements*

The wooden walkway across the Kgekong River does not impinge on the Mdoni rock art site because it is far enough away not to pose a danger to the site and it would not interfere with views out of or into the rock art site.

Management of Lapalala Wilderness would be guided by SAHRA as to whether a permit is required to install the wooden walkway across the Kgekong River.

## 3.4 **Training of staff**

A member of staff from Lapalala Wilderness needs to be trained in custodial duties. Their function is to make sure that people respect the integrity of the rock art site by observing the etiquette to be followed by visitors:

- Do not touch the art with your hands or any object (e.g. a stick). The fats and oils in your hands and other parts of your body hasten the decay of the art and contaminate it for any dating techniques and chemical analysis.
- Never throw water or any other liquid over the images. It rapidly destroys the art and it is illegal.
- Avoid stirring up dust from the shelter floor. This dust settles on the art and bonds with water and other substances to form an opaque crust over the paintings.
- Never remove any stone tools or other artefacts from rock art sites. You may think that no one would miss a single artefact but if many people do the same, the sites would be destroyed.
- Follow the wilderness motto of "Leave nothing but your footsteps behind".
- If you see other people damaging the art, intervene. If they persist then contact management or the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA).

Acknowledgement: Lewis-Williams and Blundell (1998).



Custodians also have an important role to play by pointing out the paintings to visitors. However, the guides are not expected to interpret or explain the rock paintings. Further, detailed information could be made available to staff and visitors in the form of the pamphlet/booklet/display that is based on the information in Addendum B.

### 3.5 Consultation with neighbours

Lapalala Wilderness liaises and consults extensively with neighbouring communities, reserves and other landowners. The opening of Mdoni rock art site to visitors is an internal development that would not have any impact on its neighbours.

### 3.6 Conservation requirements/interventions

Weathering of the rock art by non-human processes such as mechanical and chemical weathering are complex and largely beyond human control. Beyond these processes there are no other, specific problems regarding the rock paintings at Mdoni rock art site. The site is free of graffiti.

## 4. Monitoring

### 4.1 Objectives of monitoring

Monitoring of the condition of the rock paintings needs to be carried out to detect weathering and any human impact such as graffiti.

### 4.2 Monitoring site maintenance

There is no infrastructure at the site. Lapalala Wilderness management would manage and maintain the proposed infrastructure i.e. the wooden walkway across the Kgokong River.

### 4.3 Monitoring visitor experience

Lapalala Wilderness management would be responsible for keeping the sites and adjacent infrastructure safe and clean so that visitors can enjoy the site in an unspoilt condition.

Visitor experiences can also be monitored by reading the visitors book and the comments that visitors have made.

### 4.4 Monitoring impact of visitors on archaeological and rock art resources

The state of conservation of the Mdoni rock art would be monitored. A baseline condition assessment carried out in 2018 by Jeremy Hollmann (Addendum B; Hollmann 2019) could serve as a yardstick against which to evaluate changes in the condition of the rock art site and the paintings.

On the spot monitoring can be carried out on every visit by the custodian that is accompanying visitors to the site.

Specialist monitoring by a rock art specialist would be required to check on weathering and documentation of the paintings every two years and to report their findings on the South African Heritage Resources Authority Information System (SAHRIS).

Should the condition of the site remain stable the specialist monitoring could be extended to one specialist visit every 5 years. However, the management of Lapalala Wilderness should immediately inform the Limpopo Heritage Resources Authority and bring in specialist assistance in the event of any sudden changes to the paintings, the deposit or the rock surfaces.

It would be the responsibility of the management of Lapalala Wilderness to maintain a visitor's book for the rock art site in which the names, addresses and comments of visitors is recorded. This information would then be passed on by Lapalala Wilderness to the Limpopo Heritage Resources Authority.

## 5 Visitor experience & Interpretation

### 5.1 Objectives for visitor experience and interpretation

The primary objective is for visitors to experience, appreciate and understand the rock art at the Mdoni rock art site.

### 5.2 Viewing opportunities

Visitors to Lapalala Wilderness would be offered the opportunity to undertake a supervised visit to the Mdoni rock art site;

Attendees of the Lapalala Wilderness School would also have the opportunity to visit the Mdoni rock art site;

Other groups of interested parties, e.g. archaeology (and other) students as arranged with Lapalala Wilderness could also visit the Mdoni rock art site.

### 5.3 Interpretation and application of rock art and archaeological assessments

An in-depth discussion and interpretation of the Mdoni rock art was compiled by an accredited rock art specialist, Dr Jeremy Hollmann in 2018 (Addenda B & C). This could serve as a foundation for a pamphlet/booklet. The pamphlet/booklet could be produced by Lapalala Wilderness management. There are currently no plans to create an archaeology/rock art interpretation centre at Lapalala Wilderness.

### 5.4 Education and Awareness – interpretive material

Interpretive material could be made available to staff and guests in the form of an illustrated pamphlet/booklet (see 5.3).

### 5.5 Guides

Individual staff of Lapalala Wilderness and/or Noka Camp need training in the custodial responsibilities required to control visitor behaviour and activities at the rock art site and on the walk to and from the site. These individuals would be custodians (not accredited guides). The need for a specialist guide would depend on the depth of discussion and insight appropriate to the interest of the visitors. For many, perhaps most, visitors the prime attraction is to see the paintings and to have interesting details pointed out to them along with a very general account of who the painters were, how we think they made the rock paintings, the age of the rock art and the broad significance of the rock paintings. For this level of interest, the information provided in the pamphlet/booklet mentioned in 5.3 and 5.4. and the help of the staff member in pointing out the paintings should suffice.

For special interest groups a rock art specialist could be engaged for the group's visit to the site.

## 6 Maintenance & Management budget

Lapalala Wilderness management would be responsible for budgeting for monitoring, maintenance and management of the Mdoni rock art site. Lapalala Wilderness would provide and maintain the wooden walkway across the Kgokong River.

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# Addendum A: Report on Access Routes to Mdoni Rock Art Site, Lapalala Wilderness

## Introduction

Jeremy Hollmann: rock art specialist was appointed by Mr Glenn Phillips, Chief Executive Officer of Lapalala Wilderness, to recommend an access route to Mdoni rock art site that would comply with national heritage legislation. Fieldwork was carried out at Mdoni on 23 February 2022 (Hollmann 2022). The recommendations presented in this report follow the precepts of South African heritage legislation, especially those of the National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA) Act 25 of 1999. This legislation lays down general principles for heritage resources management in the country and establishes an integrated system for the management of these resources.

## 1. Scope of the Study

The aim of the study is to identify and access routes for visitors to the Mdoni rock art site in the Lapalala Wilderness, Limpopo Province.

### 1.1 Legislative Context

The identification, evaluation and assessment of any cultural heritage site, artefact or find in the South African context is required and governed by the following legislation:

- i. National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) Act 107 of 1998
- ii. National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA) Act 25 of 1999
- iii. Minerals and Petroleum Resources Development Act (MPRDA) Act 28 of 2002

The following sections in each Act refer directly to the identification, evaluation and assessment of cultural heritage resources.

- i. National Environmental Management Act (NEMA) Act 107 of 1998
  - a. Basic Environmental Assessment (BEA) – Section (23)(2)(d)
  - b. Environmental Scoping Report (ESR) – Section (29)(1)(d)
  - c. Environmental Impacts Assessment (EIA) – Section (32)(2)(d)
  - d. Environmental Management Plan (EMP) – Section (34)(b)
- ii. National Heritage Resources Act (NHRA) Act 25 of 1999
  - a. Protection of Heritage Resources – Sections 34 to 36; and
  - b. Heritage Resources Management – Section 38
- iii. Minerals and Petroleum Resources Development Act (MPRDA) Act 28 of 2002
  - a. Section 39(3)

The NHRA stipulates that cultural heritage resources may not be disturbed without authorization from the relevant heritage authority. Section 34 (1) of the NHRA states that, “no person may alter or demolish any structure or part of a structure which is older than 60 years without a permit issued by the relevant provincial heritage resources authority...”. The NEMA (Act No 107 of 1998) states that an integrated EMP should, (23:2 (b)) “...identify, predict and evaluate the actual and potential impact on the environment, socio-economic conditions and cultural heritage”. In accordance with legislative requirements and EIA rating criteria, the regulations of SAHRA and ASAPA have also been incorporated to ensure that a comprehensive legally compatible HIA report is compiled.

## 1.2 Terminology and Abbreviations

### 1.2.1 Archaeological resources

These include:

- i. material remains resulting from human activity which are in a state of disuse and are in or on land and which are older than 100 years including artefacts, human and hominid remains and artificial features and structures;
- ii. rock art, being any form of painting, engraving or other graphic representation on a fixed rock surface or loose rock or stone, which was executed by human agency and which is older than 100 years, including any area within 10m of such representation;
- iii. wrecks, being any vessel or aircraft, or any part thereof which was wrecked in South Africa, whether on land, in the internal waters, the territorial waters or in the maritime culture zone of the republic as defined in the Maritimes Zones Act, and any cargo, debris or artefacts found or associated therewith, which is older than 60 years or which SAHRA considers to be worthy of conservation;
- iv. features, structures and artefacts associated with military history which are older than 75 years and the site on which they are found.

### 1.2.2 Cultural significance

This means aesthetic, architectural, historical, scientific, social, spiritual, linguistic or technological value or significance

### 1.2.3 Development

This means any physical intervention, excavation, or action, other than those caused by natural forces, which may in the opinion of the heritage authority in any way result in a change to the nature, appearance or physical nature of a place or influence its stability and future well-being, including:

- i. construction, alteration, demolition, removal or change in use of a place or a structure at a place;
- ii. carrying out any works on or over or under a place;
- iii. subdivision or consolidation of land comprising a place, including the structures or airspace of a place;
- iv. constructing or putting up for display signs or boards;
- v. any change to the natural or existing condition or topography of land; and
- vi. any removal or destruction of trees, or removal of vegetation or topsoil

### 1.2.4 Heritage

That which is inherited and forms part of the National Estate (Historical places, objects, fossils as defined by the National Heritage Resources Act 25 of 1999).

## 2. Technical details of the project

### 2.1 Site location

Mdoni rock art site is in the Lapalala Wilderness, part of the Waterberg Biosphere Reserve in Limpopo Province, about 390 km north of Johannesburg, Gauteng.

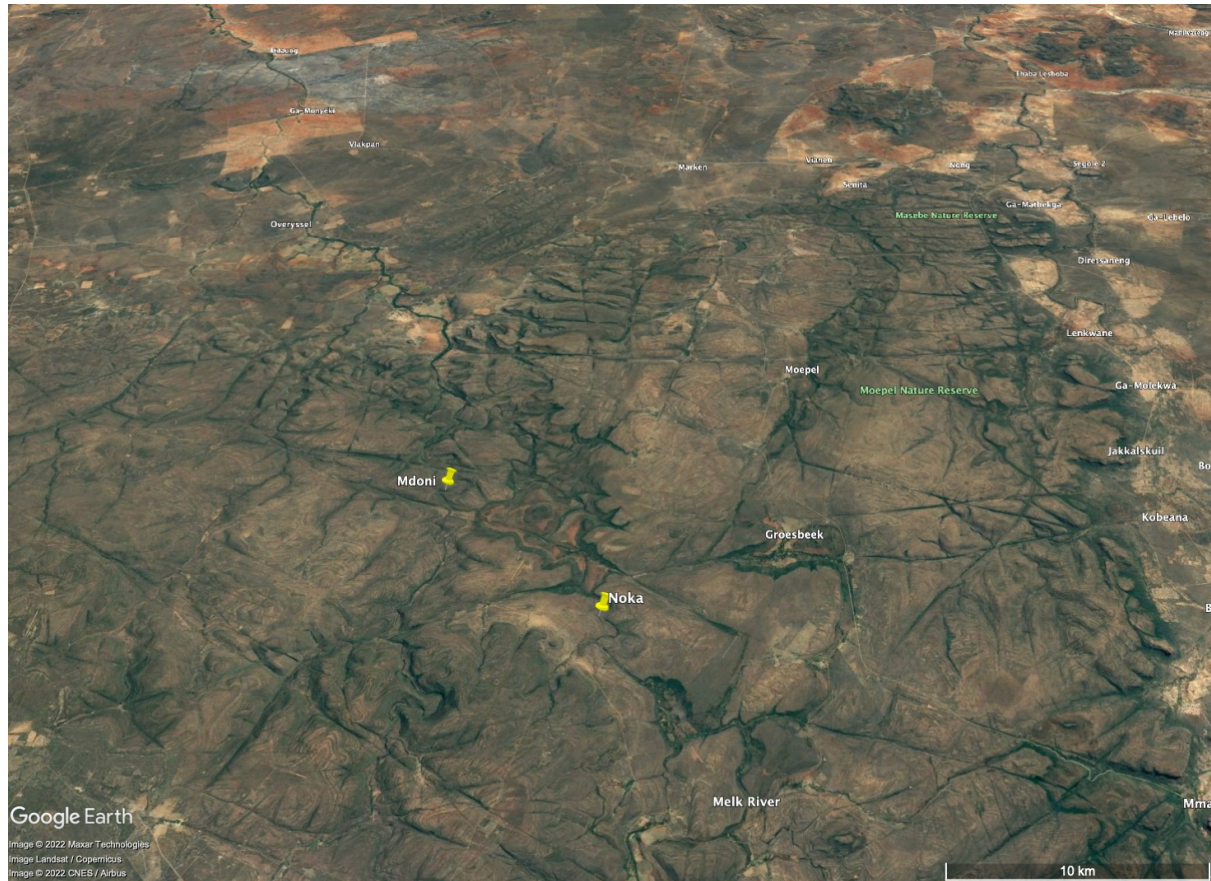


Figure 2. Mdoni and Noka rock art sites in the Lapalala Wilderness, Limpopo Province

### 2.1.1 Mdoni rock art site

S 23.84364

E 28.26690

Altitude: 1018 m asl

Mdoni rock art site is located in an overhang on the northern bank of the Kgekong River, a tributary of the Lephhalala River.



*Figure 3. Mdoni rock art site is an overhang on the northern bank of the Kgekong River*

### 3 Assessment

Dr Hollmann visited Mdoni rock art site on 23 February 2022. He was accompanied by Mr Glenn Philips, CEO of Lapalala Wilderness, and Mr Peter Mashaba, Assistant Operations manager at Lapalala Wilderness.

The task at each site was to identify a route to each of the sites that would take into consideration:

- i. visitor safety
- ii. integrity and preservation of the rock art and environment
- iii. compliance with heritage legislation
- iv. harmony with the values of wilderness

### 4. Suggested access routes

#### 4.1 *Route to Mdoni rock art site*

In order to access the Mdoni rock art site it is necessary to cross the Kgekong River from the southern to the northern bank. It was agreed by Mr Phillips, Mr Mashaba and Dr Hollmann that the most suitable crossing is about 75 m downstream (east) of the rock art site (Figure 4). On the southern side of the Kgekong River the path would join with the already existing vehicular road down towards the Kgekong River (Figure 5). This route across the river has many large flat boulders and can be easily negotiated by a person with reasonable balance if the level of the river is lower than the rocks (Figure 6; Figure 7). In order to make the crossing easier it was suggested that a wooden walkway could be put into place at the crossing. No additional structures or mountings would be built to secure the walkway as these would not be in harmony with wilderness values of minimum disturbance and interference.



*Figure 4. The proposed crossing over the Kgekong River from the southern bank to the northern bank begins from the vehicle access road on the southern side, then goes across a more or less continuous series of flat-topped boulders in the riverbed to the northern bank, about 75 m downstream of the Mdoni rock art site. From this point it is an easy walk along a path to the rock art site.*





*Figure 5. Peter Mashaba and Glenn Phillips pack a cairn on the vehicle route to indicate the beginning of the access route to Mdoni rock art site. The rock art is in the overhang visible at top left*



*Figure 6. The flat-topped boulders in the centre left of the picture have been selected as the proposed way across the Kgokong River to access the Mdoni rock art site. This view faces the northern bank, the side on which the rock art site is. A 30 cm red and white scale bar is visible in the centre of the picture and the person on the northern bank provides scale*



*Figure 7. View of the southern bank of the Kgokong River with 30 cm red and white scalebar in the centre of the picture and human figures for scale*

## 5. Recommendations

1. In order to adhere to comply with heritage legislation and the spirit of the law, and in harmony with the values of wilderness, interventions are to be kept to the minimum.
2. The route to Mdoni rock art site facilitates access to people who have a reasonable sense of balance and who do not fear crossing the river. The proposed routes would not be comfortable or safe for people whose sense of balance is weak or impaired.
3. The planned walkway across the Kgokong River to the Mdoni rock art site is 75 m downstream of the rock art site. It would therefore not pose any threat to the rock art. Our understanding of the heritage legislation is that there is therefore no requirement to apply for a permit to construct the walkway.

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HOLLMANN, J.C. 2022. Access routes to Noka and Mdoni rock art sites, Lapalala Wilderness, Limpopo Province, South Africa. Prepared for Lapalala Wilderness and Lepogo Lodges.

## **Addendum B: Guide to the rock art of Mdoni Rock Art Site, Lapalala Wilderness**

### **Rock art etiquette**

#### **Please read before you enter a rock art site!**

1. Do not touch the art with your hands or any object (e.g. a stick). The fats and oils in your hands and other parts of your body hasten the decay of the art and contaminate it for any dating techniques and chemical analysis.
2. No matter how tempting, never throw water or any other liquid over the images. Not only is this illegal, but the practice rapidly destroys the art.
3. Avoid stirring up dust from the shelter floor. This dust settles on the art and bonds with water and other substances to form an opaque crust over the paintings.
4. Never remove any stone tools or other artefacts from rock art sites. You may think that no one would miss a single artefact but if many people do the same, the sites would be destroyed.
5. Always get permission from the landowner or relevant officials before visiting a rock art site.
6. Follow the wilderness motto of "Leave nothing but your footsteps behind".
7. If you see other people damaging the art, intervene. If they persist then contact management or the South African Heritage Resources Agency (SAHRA).

Lewis-Williams & Blundell 1998

## Introduction

Jeremy Hollmann was appointed by NuLeaf Planning & Environmental to compile a report on the Noka and the Mdoni rock art sites in Lapalala Wilderness (Hollmann 2019). Fieldwork was carried out at the two sites in November 2018.

### A. Understanding hunter-gatherer rock art

The creators of the rock art in the Lapalala Wilderness were Later Stone Age (LSA) hunter-gatherer people, the ancestors of the people that today we call 'San' or 'Bushmen'. The words 'San' and 'Bushman' have negative associations but there are currently no better alternative terms. We intend no disrespect by using these terms.

Our knowledge about San/Bushman beliefs comes from nineteenth and early 20th century San/Bushmen who told European scholars and explorers about their beliefs and way of life (Digital Bleek & Lloyd; Bleek & Lloyd 1911; Hollmann 2022; How 1962; Orpen 1874; Stow 1905; Arbousset & Daumas 1968 and many others). In addition, anthropologists in the 20th century have conducted thousands of interviews with contemporary San/Bushman people who live in the Kalahari and in Namibia (e.g. Bieseke 1993; Katz 1982; Lee 1968, 2013; Marshall 1969, 1999, and many others). These beliefs provide the foundation for rock art interpretation (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004).

Hunter-gatherer rock art differs from Western art in several ways. Hunter-gatherer art is made in a specific place, on a rugged rock surface, not on a smooth, portable canvas. Rock art is not a complete, framed work of art made by one person but rather a kaleidoscope of images created by different painters. This is why rock art may appear to a first-time Western viewer as a jumble of randomly placed images. Although the hunter-gatherers sometimes did paint 'scenes' in which figures take part in a common action, such as a dance, or a herd of animals, often the painters would place images next to each other because they were powerful (or potent) (Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009: 54).

Based on San/Bushman beliefs, researchers think that the hunter-gatherers regarded the paintings as 'strong things' (i.e. potent, or powerful) (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004: 104-105). Even the paint used by the painters was considered to be powerful stuff, as it was made from ingredients such as ochre, blood and fat, which are all 'strong' substances (Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989: 36). The deliberate placing of one image or part of an image on top of another may have been done in the belief that the potency of the top image was reinforcing and strengthening the potency of the image below it (Lewis-Williams 1974; Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2009: 55).

Research carried out at many rock art sites over many years strongly suggests that the rock paintings are not a simple record of everyday life (Vinnicombe 1976: 347-350). Most researchers agree that the making and viewing of rock art was first and foremost a religious or spiritual practice.

In addition to paintings of human figures the larger game animals were painted because of their special, powerful status in the world view of hunter-gatherers (Guenther 1988). Unlike the meat of smaller game and gathered plants, the meat and fat of these large animals is shared amongst the entire group and therefore has a special significance. Dance rhythms used at healing dances are named after these animals (e.g. the Giraffe Dance) (Bieseke 1993: 74). The Kalahari San/Bushmen believe that the strength (potency) of these animals allows shamans to enter the spirit realm (Bieseke 1993: 89). Without this background knowledge a Westerner could mistakenly assume that a realistic-looking painting of an animal or a human figure is only that – a beautiful painting. However, for the hunter-gatherers those images could depict spirit animals and people in the spirit world. The particular significance of the rock paintings at Mdoni are discussed in greater detail below.

## B. Dating rock art

No dating procedures have been carried out any rock art in Limpopo Province. Elsewhere, southern African hunter-gatherer rock art has a very wide age range. The Apollo 11 painted stone from Namibia was dated to around 27 500 years ago (Wendt 1976). In the southern Drakensberg, KwaZulu-Natal paintings of cattle raiders on horseback are as recent as the 1860s (Manhire et al. 1986: 27).

Rock art can be radiocarbon dated but it is difficult to get uncontaminated carbon from paint samples. Indirect dating of rock art that has flaked off and become incorporated into the archaeological deposit can be done by analysing charcoal in the same occupation layer as the rock art fragment (e.g. Wendt 1976). The result would give the age range during which the rock flake dropped onto the floor. The rock art itself can give an indication of age – examples include paintings of horses, soldiers, and domesticated animals.

The hunter-gatherer rock art in the Lapalala was probably made between 1000 and 150 years ago (Laue 2000a: 4, citing Van der Ryst 1998). This time frame is based on dating carried out at archaeological excavations elsewhere on the Waterberg plateau.



*Figure 8. View of Mdoni Rock Shelter from the southern bank of the Kgokong River (Bloklandspruit). The rock art site is in the part of the overhang to the right of the trees that are in the centre of the picture*



*Figure 9. Mdoni rock art site is on the bank of the Kgokong River (Bloklandspruit). This picture shows the view out of Mdoni rock art site looking downstream (eastwards)*



Figure 10. View into Mdoni Shelter. The rock art is in the area to the left, but it is not visible in this picture



Figure 11. Left hand side of Mdoni Shelter. Located at the upstream end of the shelter, this area has suffered chemical weathering in the form of what may be mineral salt-laden water within the rock that has left a white deposit on the rock that obscures the few paintings here. Mdoni Panel A is on the left and part of Panel B is on the right



*Figure 12. Panel A: weathered art. These rock paintings have become obscured, possibly through evapotranspiration of moisture from within the rock*



*Figure 13. A grayscale enhancement of Figure 13 that shows two indistinct figures, both facing left, and a bow and three arrows at bottom left.*





*Figure 14. Mdoni Panel B has just under 40 images (not all of which are easy to see). The left-hand side of this surface is covered with a white substance (probably deposits of insoluble mineral salts)*



*Figure 15. Mdoni Panel B: Overview of rock paintings on the left-hand side*



Figure 16. Mdoni Panel B: Grayscale enhancement of the same area (Figure 15)

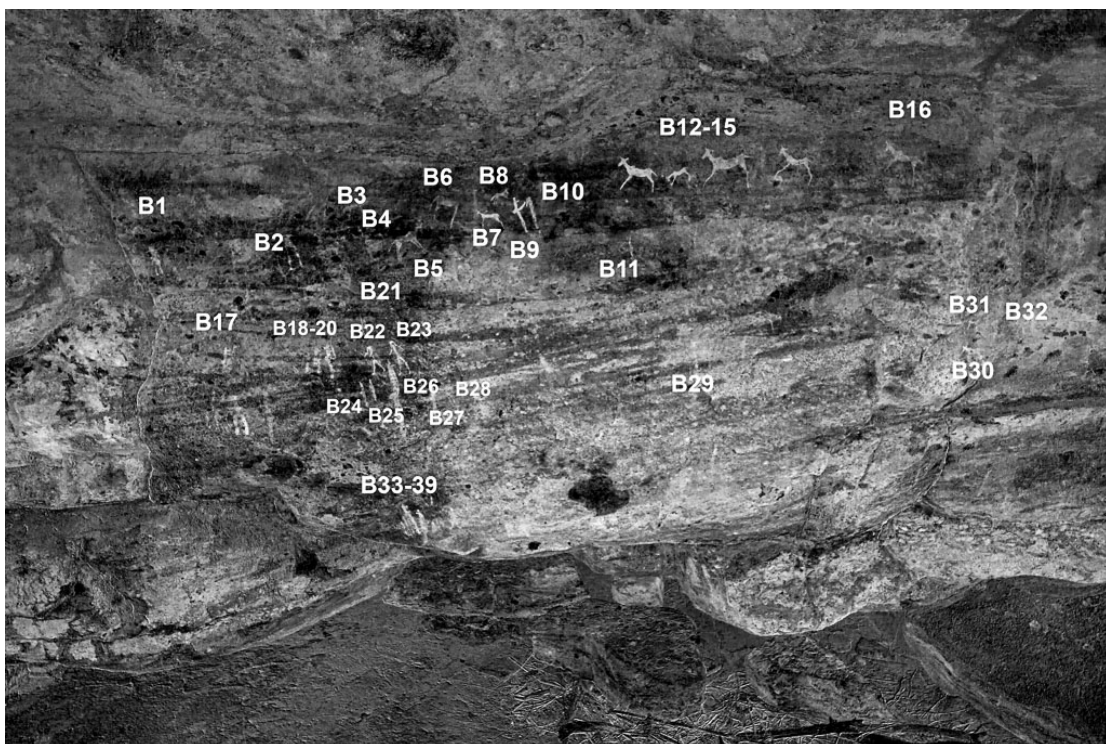


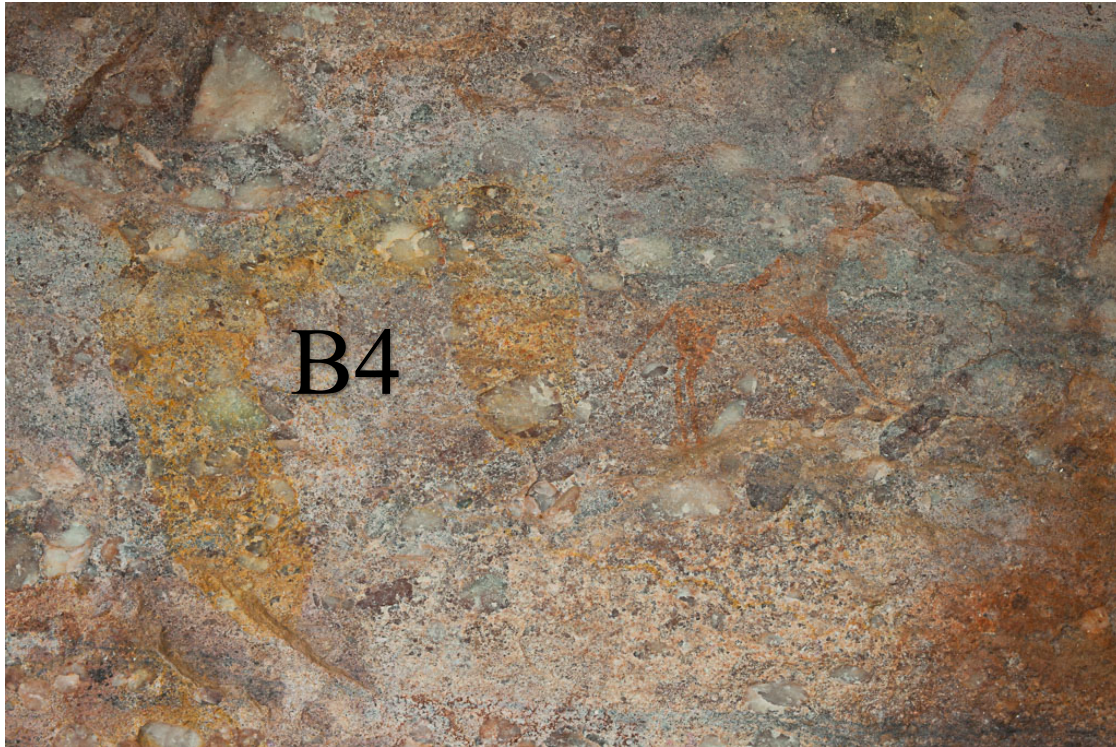
Figure 17. Numbered diagram of Panel B. The images have been numbered for easy reference

1. A 'Formling': Image B4 (pictures on next page)

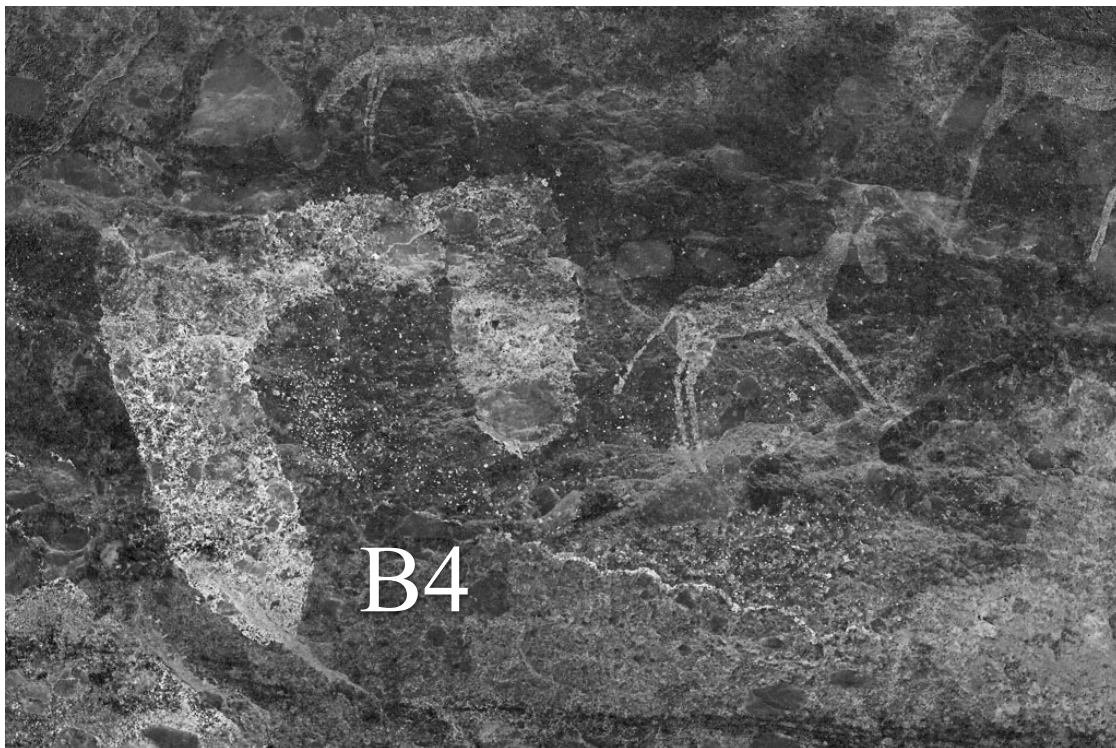
Image B4 is difficult to see with the naked eye but the enhancement shows an inverted roughly horseshoe shape in yellow paint (Figure 18; Figure 19). Around this shape are many tiny flecks of paint. A thin and wiggly yellow line leads from this shape about one metre to the right (Figure 20) at which point it seems to enter the lower back of thin human figure.

Similar-looking large shapes are painted elsewhere in the Waterberg and further afield in Limpopo Province and Zimbabwe (Mguni 2015). Researchers have called them 'formlings'. The presence of these formlings in hunter-gatherer rock paintings implies that the painters were not simply painting pictures of their favourite animals and pastimes.

Research on formlings suggests that their shape is based on the nests of social insects especially termite and bees' nests (Mguni 2015). Formlings are currently interpreted as 'storehouses' of supernatural potency that reside in the spirit world and which the painters depicted (Mguni 2015).



*Figure 18. An inverted roughly horseshoe shape in yellow paint (Image B4) that is surrounded by tiny flecks of paint (not clearly visible in this picture). There is also a thin and wiggly yellow line at bottom right of the picture. This is also not clearly visible. See the grayscale enhancement below in which these details can be seen.*



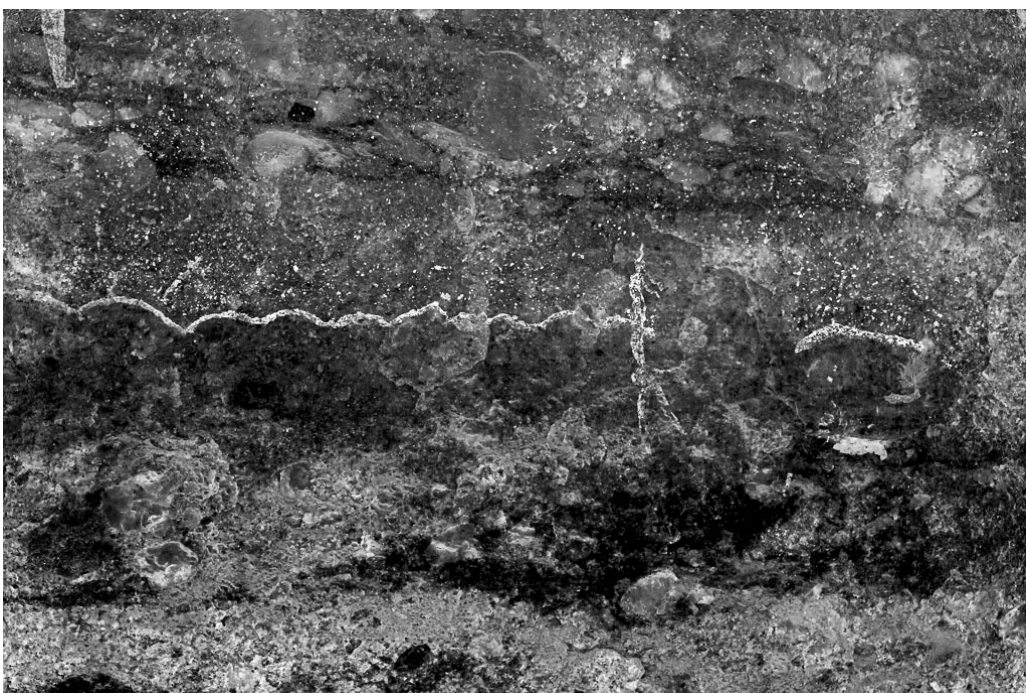
*Figure 19. Grayscale of the previous picture (Figure 18). An inverted roughly horseshoe shape in yellow paint that is surrounded by tiny flecks of paint. Note the thin and wiggly yellow line at bottom right of the picture: this is discussed in Section 2 below*

## 2. Out of body travel?

The yellow wavy line seems to enter the body of a human figure (Figure 20; Figure 21). Similar (but not identical) painted lines occur at many other rock art sites in southern Africa. Some researchers suggest that the lines depict 'threads' described by contemporary hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari (Lewis-Williams et al. 2000). These threads (which are only visible to shamans) criss-cross the sky (Marshall 1962: 242). Shamans leave their bodies and travel along these lines. The figure at the end of the wavy yellow line at Mdoni Shelter (Image B11) may therefore depict a ritual specialist travelling through the cosmos.



*Figure 20. A thin and wiggly line (Figure 18; Figure 19) that seems to enter (or leave) the body of a human figure. See the grayscale enhancement below for clear details*



*Figure 21. A grayscale enhancement of the previous picture (Figure 20)*

### 3. The 'Waterberg posture'

Here are three kudu without horns at the left, and a smaller kudu (calf?) with long spindly legs that faces the kudu, a figure with an enormous penis and outstretched arm and a similar figure immediately to the right (Figure 22; Figure 23). These two figures are examples of what has been called the 'Waterberg Posture' (Laue 2002b: esp. Ch.4) because it is fairly common in the rock art of the Waterberg. The Waterberg Posture depicts a male figure in profile, with only one leg depicted, a relatively shorter outstretched arm, a single, large buttock and an unnaturally large penis. The size of the penis may be an expression of the male figure's power. The Waterberg Posture may depict ritual specialists (i.e. healers/shamans) in a dance posture that is adopted when they perform healing dances (Laue 2000b).

Just above these images is a painting of an animal with relatively short legs, pointed ears, a long muzzle, and a big tail. It is most probably a carnivore, perhaps a jackal. Notice that both the kudu and the human figures are only depicted with a single leg.



Figure 22. Three kudus without horns at the left, and a smaller kudu (calf?) with long spindly legs that faces the kudu. Note the figure at top right, with an enormous penis and outstretched arm and a similar figure immediately to the right. These two figures are examples of what has been called the 'Waterberg Posture'. See grayscale enhancement for details (Figure 23)



Figure 23. Grayscale enhancement of previous figure (Figure 22)

#### 4. Procession of female kudu

The antelope depicted at Mdoni are identified here as kudu (rather than tsessebe) by virtue of their prominent ears, the shape of their muzzles, the shoulder hump and the level back with a slight hump at the back legs. A row of kudus (B12-B16) each with only one front and one back leg depicted, without horns, is moving in procession from right to left, with four of them in a group and a single kudu further to the right (Figure 24; Figure 25). Because the kudus are hornless, they may be intended to depict kudu cows. Each kudu image is slightly different in shape. At left are a large kudu (possibly a female) and a small kudu (calf?) following behind.



Figure 24. A row of kudu (B12-B16) each with only one front and one back leg depicted, without horns, and moving in procession from right to left. See grayscale enhancement below for details (Figure 25)





Figure 25. Grayscale enhancement of previous picture (Figure 24)

#### 5. Healers and hunters

This cluster of 10 images (B17-B28) may not have been painted in one episode but the creators of the images have nonetheless grouped them together (Figure 26; Figure 27). They are also linked in terms of style because many of the images are depicted in the 'Waterberg Posture' (Laue 2000b; The 'Waterberg posture'), which may be linked to the performance of healing dances. The significance of these dancing images in the Waterberg posture is that they are powerful figures with special powers such as the ability to heal the sick (Laue 2000b).



Figure 26. A cluster of 10 images depicted in the 'Waterberg Posture'

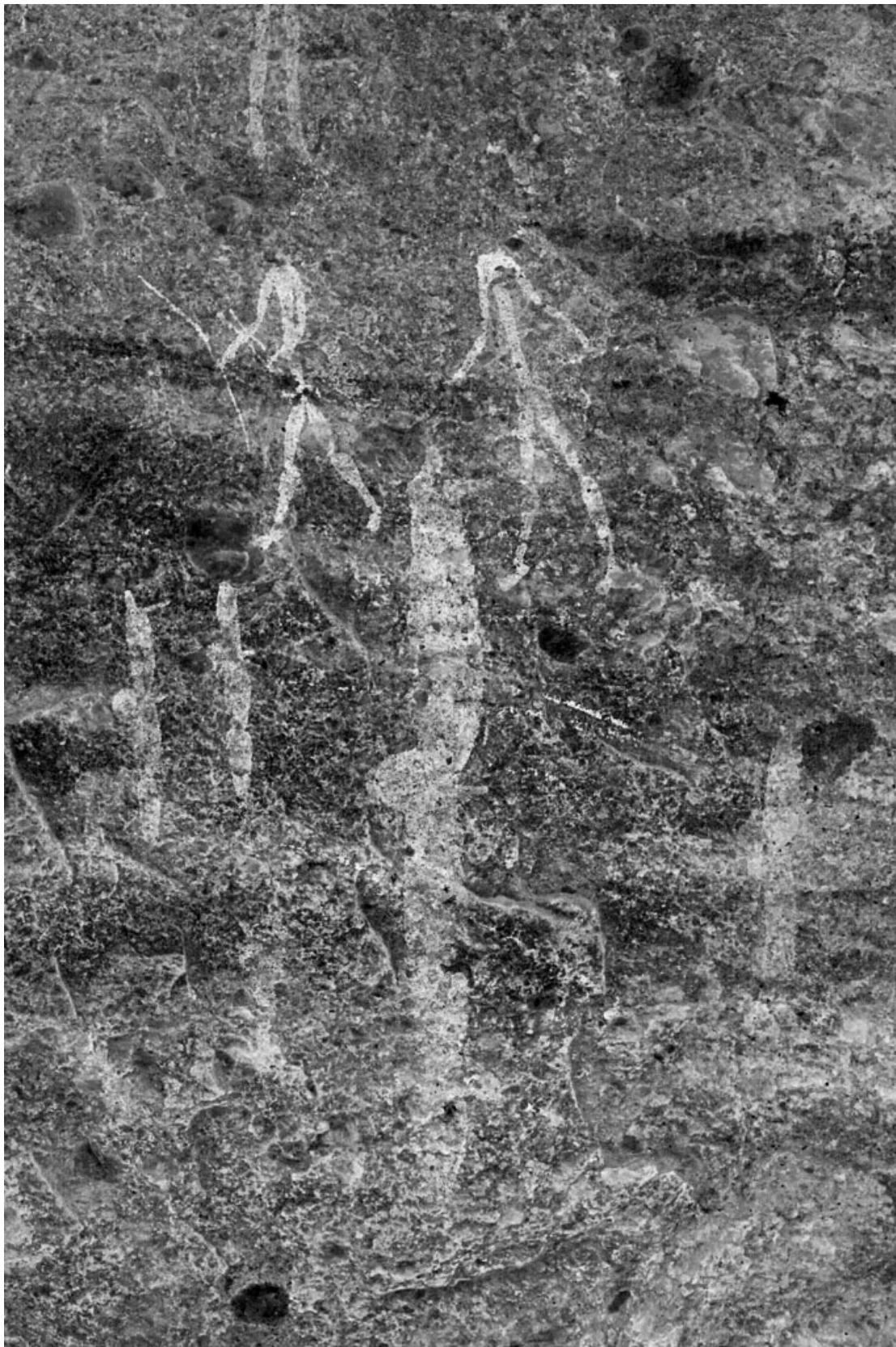


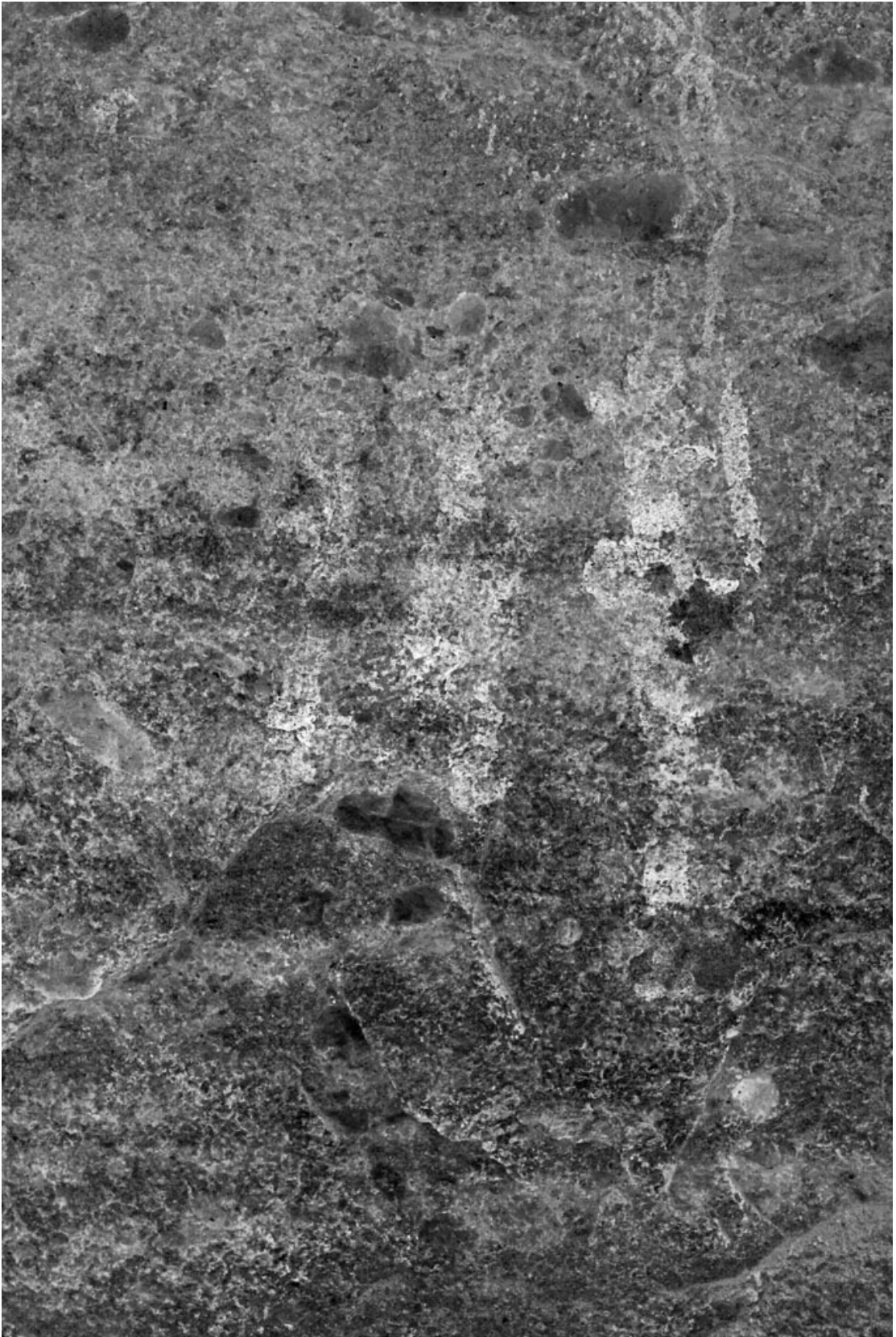
Figure 27. Grayscale enhancement of the previous picture (Figure 26)

6. Dancing figures

Three weathered paintings of people dancing (Figure 28; Figure 29; Images B18-B20). They are facing to the right and the figure on the right is carrying a dancing stick.



*Figure 28. Three weathered paintings of people dancing. See Figure 29.*



*Figure 29. Grayscale enhancement of previous figure (Figure 28)*

## 7. Hunters

Two male figures moving to the left (Figure 30; Figure 31; Images B22-B23). The left-hand figure is carrying what is probably a bow in one hand and two arrows in the other.



*Figure 30. Two male figures moving to the left. The left-hand figure holds a bow in one hand and two arrows in the other*



*Figure 31. Grayscale enhancement of the previous picture (Figure 30)*

## 8. Human-kudu hybrid

This group of three images (Figure 32; Figure 33) is just below and to the right of the procession of kudu without horns, i.e. a female (Figure 24; Figure 25; Images B12–16). The lowest image (B30) is a painting of a kudu (with two front and back legs each). Above it is a curious image (B31) that is like a kudu in some respects, but which has long back legs and short front legs and is slenderer than the kudu images (Figure 34; Figure 35). It may have both human and kudu characteristics. Hybrid, human-animal combinations like this (called therianthropes) are a feature of San cosmology (e.g. Guenther 2020a, b). To the right is another kudu that is much less clearly visible.

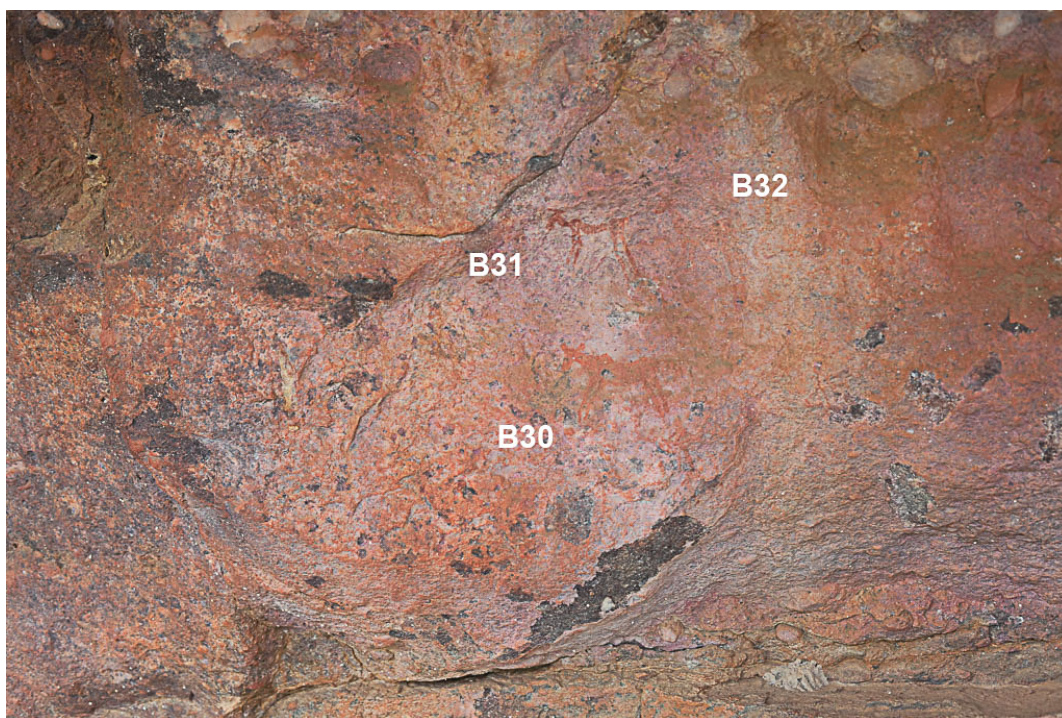
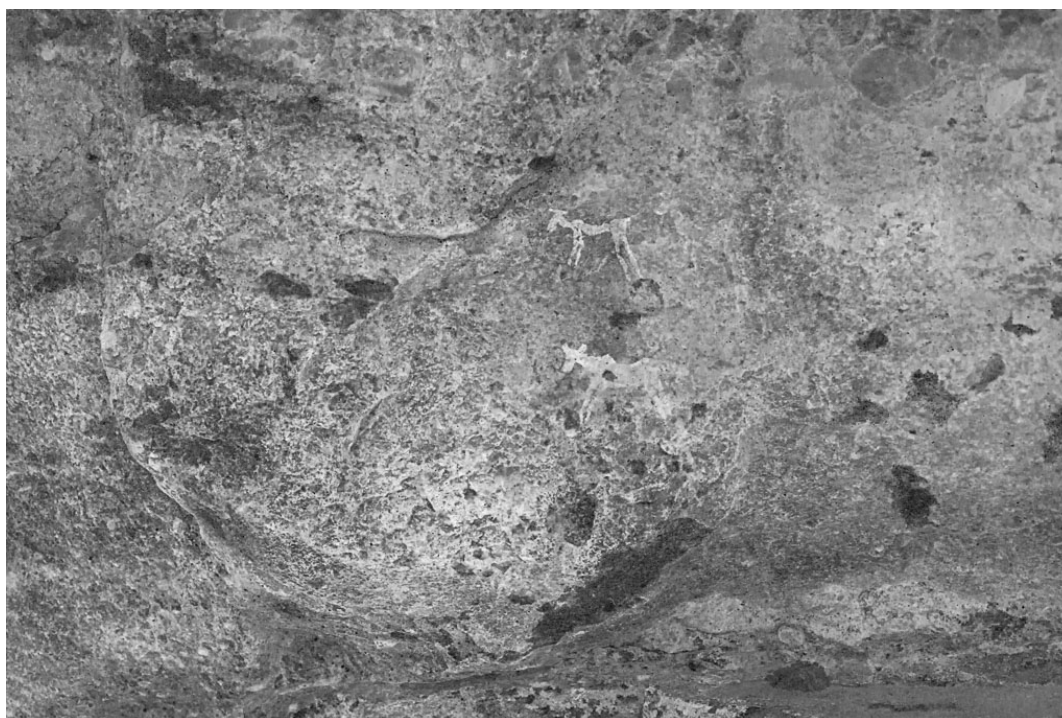


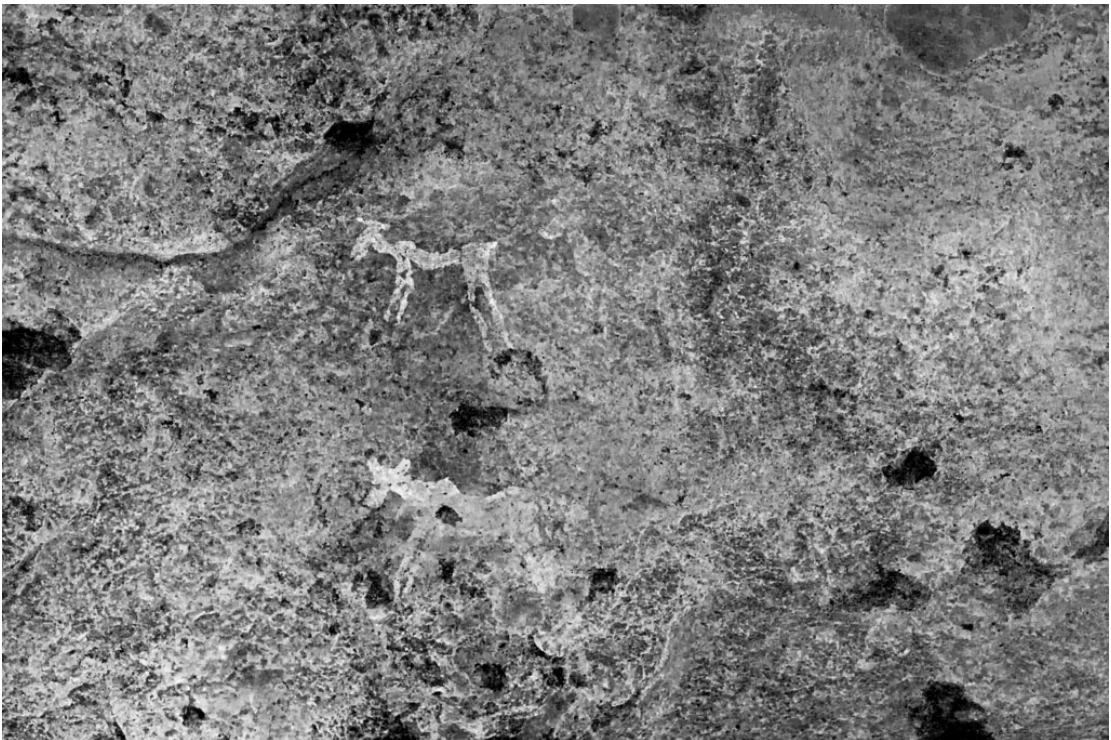
Figure 32. group of three images painted just below and to the right of the procession of kudu



*Figure 33. Grayscale enhancement of previous picture (Figure 32)*



*Figure 34. The topmost image may combine human and kudu characteristics*



*Figure 35. Grayscale enhancement of previous picture (Figure 34)*

9. Group of figures in a hollow

The painters sometimes deliberately positioned images in natural features, such as hollows (Woodhouse 1990; Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1990). These seven images at Mdoni rock art site (Figure 36; Figure 37; Figure 38; B33-B39) are painted in a slight alcove at the bottom of Panel B. The tallest of the figures is in the Waterberg Posture (The 'Waterberg posture').



Figure 36. These seven images (B33-B39) are painted in a slight alcove at the bottom of Panel B



Figure 37. Detail of the images in the previous figure (Figure 36)





*Figure 38. Grayscale enhancement of seven figures painted in a shallow depression in the rock face (see Figure 36 for colour picture).*

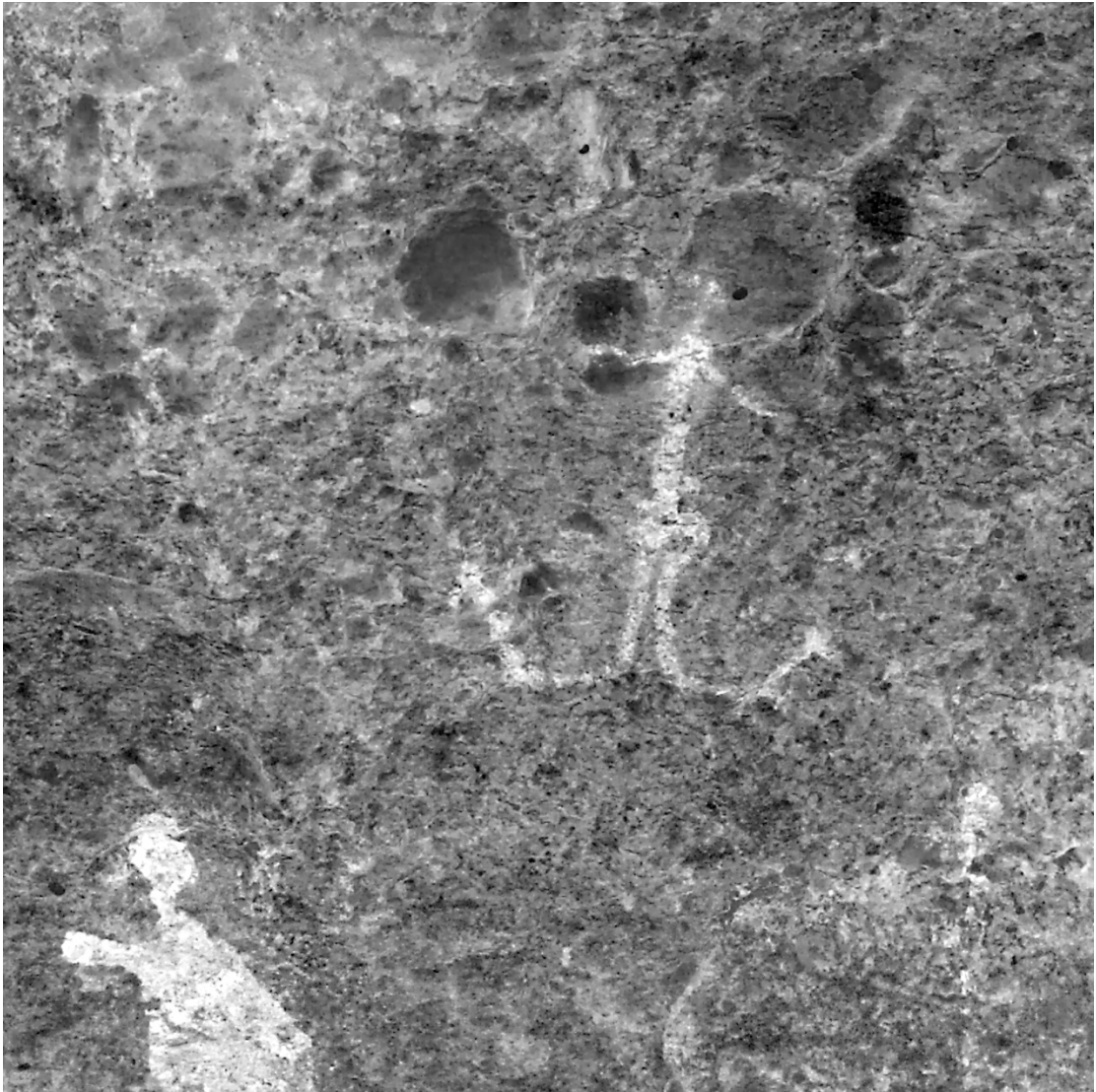
10. **Figure with distorted body**

Just above the group is a rather distorted or transformed human figure (Figure 39; Figure 40; B39). It is very thin, and the legs are spread sideways in an unnatural position. This image may represent the spirit of a shaman that is travelling to the spirit world or it could be a spirit that has been attracted to the ceremony. Contemporary San/Bushman people in the Kalahari have described both of these practices (Marshall 1969: 350; Biesele 1993: 70-72).

In the cosmology of 20<sup>th</sup> century Kalahari San/Bushman beliefs the bodies of who travel to the spirit world, as well as spirit and primal time beings may be distorted or transformed (e.g. Biesele 1993: 71; Marshall 1999: xxxvi, xxxvi, 245-248).



*Figure 39. Very thin figure at top centre of the picture, with its legs spread sideways in an unnatural position*



*Figure 40. Grayscale enhancement of the previous picture (Figure 39)*

### 11. Panel C overview

Panel C is 0,5 m to the right of Panel B and between 1,5 and 2 m above ground level (Figure 41). There are approximately 19 images visible, many of which are well preserved. The focus is on images of kudu and human figures. The human figures are placed around paintings of kudu (all without horns), a single (also hornless) hartebeest/tsesebe, as well as several more unusual images. The absence of horns and the dimensions of the kudu bodies suggest that the painters intended to depict the female of the species.



*Figure 41. Overview of the paintings designated here as Panel C*



Figure 42. Numbered overview of Panel C, paintings C1 to C21 (grayscale enhancement)

12. Dancing figure

At left is a well-preserved figure with an erect penis and both arms held widespread and bent at the elbow (Figure 44; Figure 45; C1, bottom figure). The figure is holding a stick-like object in one hand, and holds both arms widespread in what could be a dance posture. Immediately above is an example of a figure in the Waterberg Posture (C2)



*Figure 43. A well-preserved figure with an erect penis and both arms widespread and bent at the elbow*



*Figure 44. Grayscale enhancement of the previous picture (Figure 43)*

### 13. Shamans in the Waterberg Posture

These figures are painted in the 'Waterberg Posture' (Figure 45; Figure 46; C13 at bottom, C15 above left; see The 'Waterberg posture'), a locally common way of depicting people in the Waterberg. In this case the figure depicted in the Waterberg Posture is a male in profile, with only one leg depicted, a relatively shorter outstretched arm, a single, large buttock and an unnaturally large penis. Research suggests that the Waterberg Posture depicts shamans in a dance posture that they adopt when they perform healing dances (Laue 2000b: Ch. 4).



*Figure 45. Figures painted in the so-called 'Waterberg Posture' (Image C13 at bottom, Image C15 above left), a way depicting human figures that is locally common in the Waterberg*





*Figure 46. Grayscale enhancement of the previous picture (Figure 45)*

#### 14. Kudu cow in mating posture

Researchers have argued that hunter-gatherer rock paintings of kudu elsewhere in Limpopo Province are predominantly of kudu cows and that they are often depicted in postures that are associated with kudu mating (Eastwood & Cnoops 2006: 111). This is significant because there is a depiction of a kudu cow (C21) at the right hand side of Panel C that is shown with neck extended and lowered, the head slightly raised and tail lifted (Figure 47; Figure 48). This stance is typical of female kudu courtship behaviour and indicates that the kudu cow is ready to mate (Eastwood & Cnoops 1999: 114). The presence of this kudu cow in a mating posture is important for our understanding of the possible meanings of the rock art as Eastwood and Cnoops have argued.

Contemporary San/Bushmen in the Kalahari compare women to the antelope that they hunt: they say that women are like prey animals (Bieseke 1993: 2) that men "eat" (i.e. marry and have sex with) women (Bieseke 1993: 152). In the initiation ceremonies of San/Bushman women the initiate is compared to a female antelope (Bieseke 1993). A special dance is held at the conclusion of the initiation in which the women remove their aprons to show their buttocks and dance the Eland Dance, but sometimes the eland in the female dance may be replaced by another animal, such as the gemsbok (Guenther 1999: 172).



*Figure 47. Painting of a kudu cow (C21) shown with neck extended and lowered, the head slightly raised, and tail lifted. This stance is typical of female kudu courtship behaviour*



*Figure 48. Grayscale enhancement of the previous picture (Figure 47)*

15. Dancing kudu'

These kudu images (Figure 49; Figure 50) have unrealistically long back legs and short front legs. These characteristics could suggest that these images are therianthropes: they combine human and kudu features. During women's initiation dances it is said that the initiate actually becomes an antelope (Guenther 1999: 175-176)



Figure 49. Kudu images with unrealistically long back legs and short front legs.



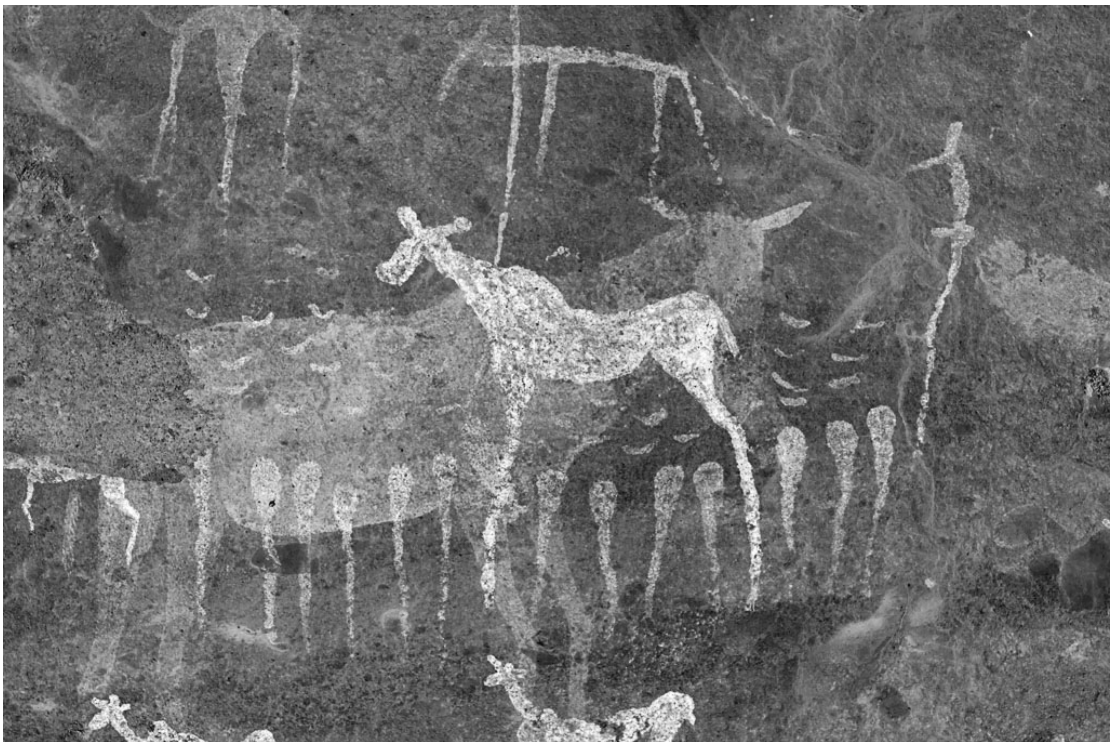
Figure 50. Grayscale enhancement of the previous picture (Figure 49)

16. Kudu painted over a hornless hartebeest

The placing of one image or part of an image on top of another (known as superpositioning) may have been done in the belief that the power of the kudu image reinforced and strengthened the power of the faded red painting hartebeest image below it (Figure 51; Figure 52; see Understanding hunter-gatherer rock art).



*Figure 51. Bright orange kudu painted over a faded red painting of a hornless tsessebe*



*Figure 52. Grayscale enhancement of the previous picture (Figure 51)*

17. Semi-circular, or 'crescent' forms?

Images C6 and C10 depict semi-circular forms (Figure 53; Figure 54). The semi-circular forms labelled C6 (Figure 54) are attached to stick like objects, whilst the similar-looking C10 semi-circular forms (Figure 54) are not. It has been suggested that these images depict arrows and arrowheads respectively (Laue 2002b: 52-55)



Figure 53. Unidentified forms (see C6 and C10 in the enhancement below) (Figure 54)

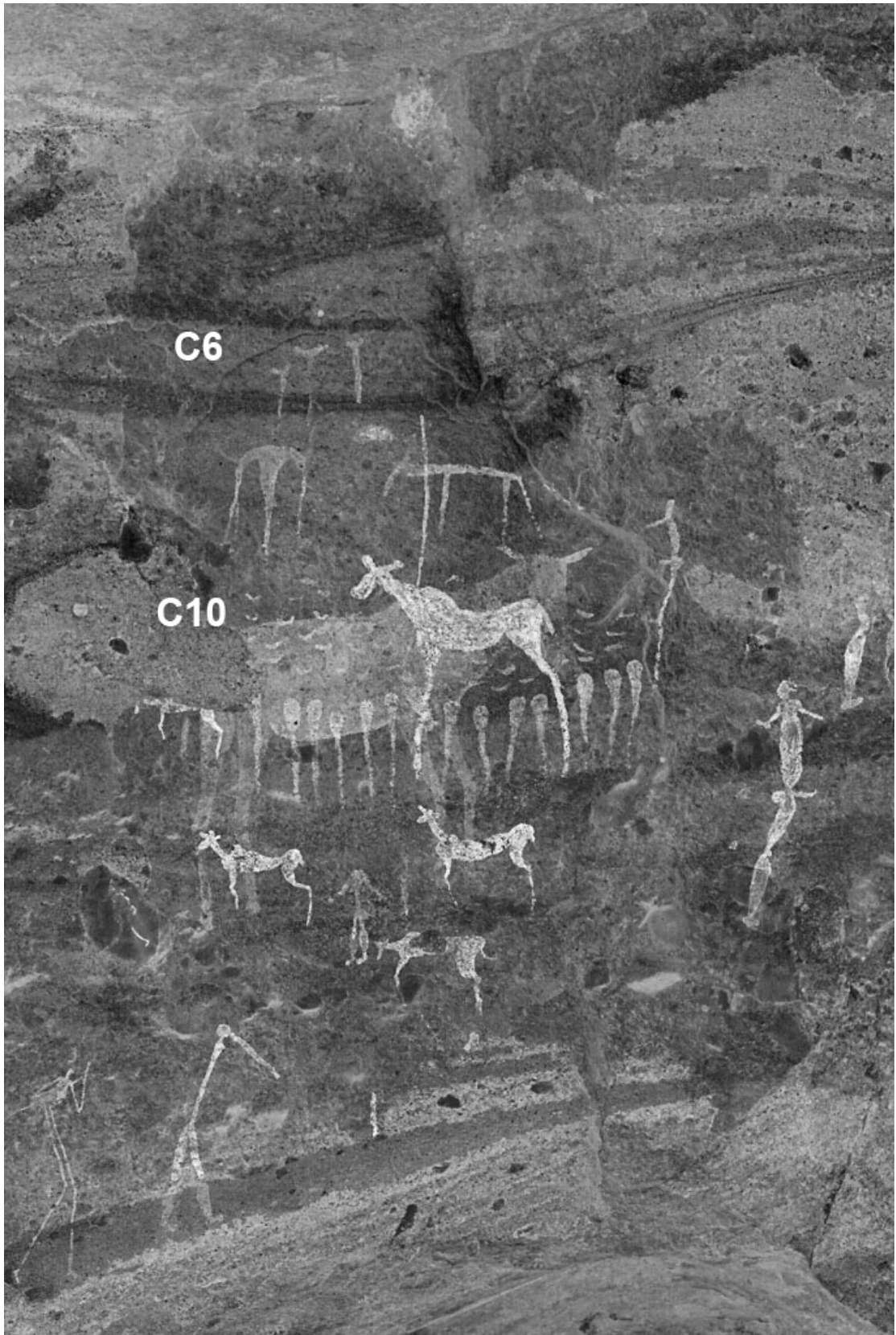
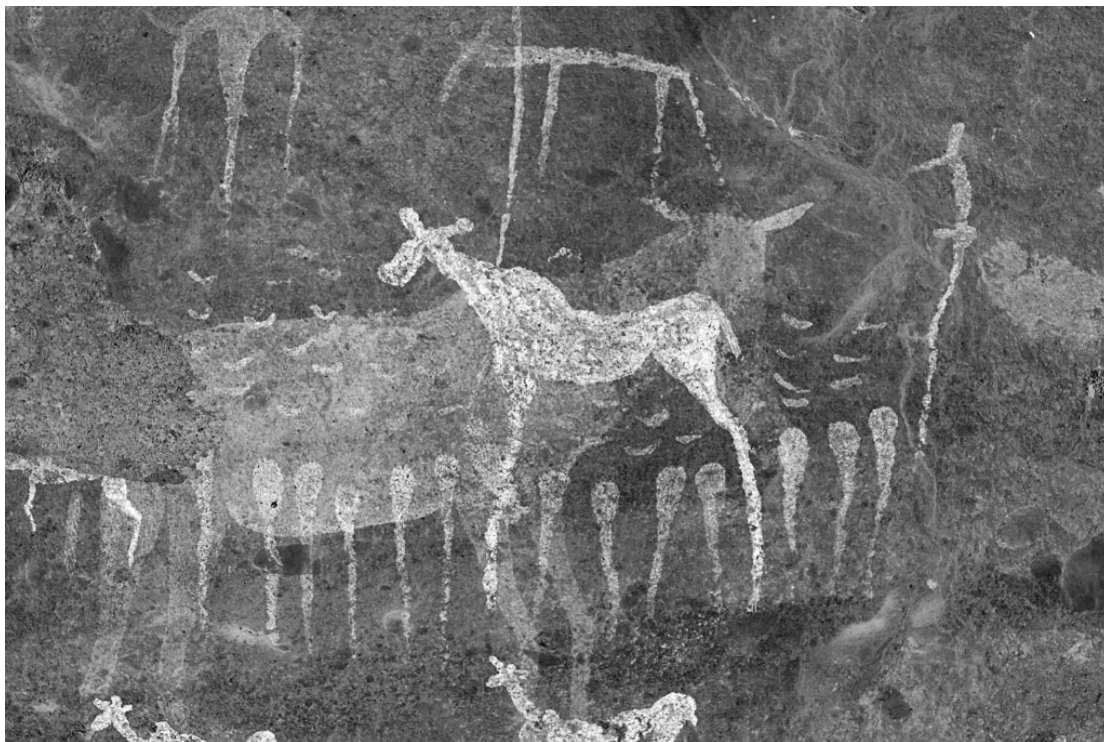


Figure 54. Grayscale enhancement of the previous picture

18. Biltong, eels, Iron Age hoes or animal legs?

The approximately 13 shapes labelled C14 (Figure 55) are a puzzle. It has been suggested that they depict “biltong”, or “eels” (Woodhouse & Lee 1982: 5) or iron hoes for which the Waterberg hunter-gatherers traded with local Bantu-speaking farmers (Woodhouse 1987: 7). More recently another researcher has suggested that these forms look like antelope legs (Laue 2000b: 72).



*Figure 55. A row of stick-like shapes with the top end 'club-shaped' narrowing towards the bottom end*



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## Addendum C: Condition report for Mdoni Rock Art Site

### Condition assessment: Mdoni Shelter

#### Introduction

Jeremy Hollmann was appointed by NuLeaf Planning & Environmental to compile a report on the Noka and the Mdoni rock art sites in Lapalala Wilderness (Hollmann 2019). This condition report is part of that 2019 report.

A condition assessment was carried out at Mdoni Shelter in November 1999 by Ghilraen Laue from the Rock Art Research Institute at the University of the Witwatersrand (Laue 2000a). As far as possible the results of the 1999 assessment have been compared with this, current assessment, carried out 19 years later, on 27 November 2018. A direct comparison is not possible because the researchers used a different scale and format to describe their observations. In addition, there is an element of subjectivity when it comes to identifying various kinds of weathering and estimates of the area of rock affected by weathering. It has not been possible to obtain photographs of the painted images from the 1999 assessment, however, so not all the images can be compared. Nonetheless there is sufficient detail and overlap between the two assessments to draw some conclusions about how the rock surface has weathered in the intervening 19 years. The most important thing is to compare the paintings as they were in 1999 with those taken in 2018 and to see if there has been any deterioration in the paintings during this period. It is concluded that little or no weathering of the images has taken place in the past 19 years.

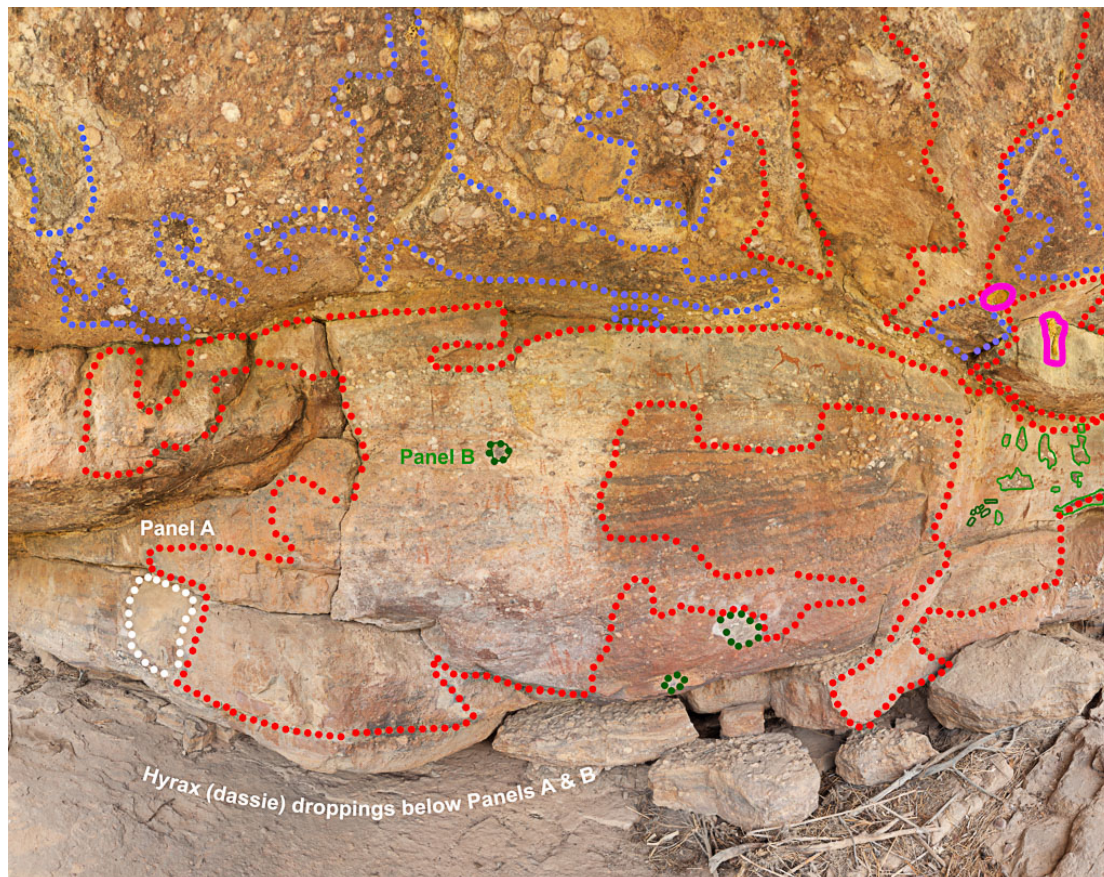


Figure 56. Diagram of physical conditions at Mdoni Shelter. Blue = water seeping; Red = white deposits; Green = rock flaking; White = dust; Purple = Insect nests

## 1. Panels A and B

The painted rock surfaces towards the left-hand side of the overhang (Panels A and B) show chemical weathering in the form of extensive areas of a white deposit (possibly insoluble mineral salts). This white deposit has obscured some of the images, especially those in Panel B, although the rate at which they are being obscured seems to very slow. These images appear 'faded' because of the opaque white layer. In other places at top right (images B7 – 11 and B 12 – 15) it is not readily apparent whether or not some of the images had been made on top of areas of rock that were already covered with this white deposit or, perhaps, these particular images were selected by painters to be refreshed. There is no significant flaking of the rock surface in this part of the overhang.

Comparison of photographs taken in 1999 by RARI members with photographs taken in November 2018 show no discernible difference in terms of preservation of the paintings.

## 2. Panel C

The entire painted surface is covered with a white deposit that may be insoluble salts carried by water from inside the rock. The water in which the salts are dissolved reaches the rock surface and evaporates, leaving the white deposit on the rock surface. This process probably began before the paintings were made because it appears that some of the images were made on top of the deposit while other images seem to be becoming obscured by the white deposit.

In addition to the white deposit, the surface layer of the rock is exfoliating (flaking off) in places. The exfoliation process is occurring quite slowly however because comparison between photographs taken in 1999 by RARI members with photographs taken in November 2018 show no discernible difference in the exfoliated areas.

## 3. Panel D

Much of the surface of Panel D has flaked off (exfoliation) but some of this exfoliation happened before the paintings were made, because the forequarters of a kudu on the right-hand end of the panel have been painted on an exfoliated surface. However, the rear portion of the same kudu image has flaked off the rock, and a second kudu image on the right-hand side has also partially exfoliated. At the left-hand end of the panel a white deposit, possibly mineral salts, is obscuring some of the images. Owing to there not being any photographs of these images from the previous assessment, carried out in 1999, it was not possible to determine if there has been any deterioration in the condition of the rock art.

## 4. Panel E

Much of Panel E and the two images on this surface are covered with a white deposit. The images have been obscured by the deposit. No images from the previous condition assessment in 1999 were available to determine whether the images have deteriorated.

## 5. Water

The position of the overhang on the banks of the Bloklandspruit means that it is potentially vulnerable to occasional flooding, which might damage the rock art when and if it reaches the height of the paintings. It is not possible to predict when this might happen and would probably not be possible to prevent flooding.

To judge by the presence of large areas of a white deposit on the rock (probably mineral salts) it seems that the rock surface contains moisture. This is because salts are water borne and therefore where white deposits are visible on the rock surface there must be moisture present inside the rock.

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