

Atlas of Cultural and Environmental Change in Arid Africa

Reprint from
Bubenzer, O., Bolten, A. & Darius, F. (eds.) (2007): Atlas of Cultural and
Environmental Change in Arid Africa. Africa Praehistorica 21. Cologne.

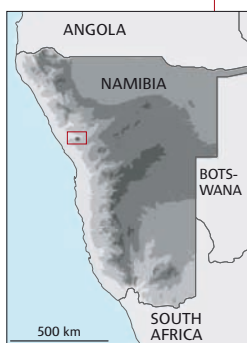
ISBN: 978-3-927688-32-2

Cited literature see original publication

Reference address: Heinrich-Barth-Institut e.V. / Jennerstr. 8 / D-50823 Köln
<http://www.uni-koeln.de/hbi/>



Brandberg/Daureb, Namibia – painters of a prehistoric hunter-gatherer world



The Brandberg mountain is a compact inselberg on the margin of the Namib desert. Even though this highland suffers from very little precipitation (c. 100 mm annually) it is endowed with a richness of vegetation which differs drastically from the wider surroundings and can otherwise only be found further north in more humid climates. This advantageous configuration has been used by the anatomically modern human since his existence. In the last millennia before the Common Era, dwellers of the mountain produced tens of thousands of rock paintings in shelters and on walls next to their camps. Today the mountain is totally uninhabited and since the prehistoric dwellers as well as the climatic development left it virtually unchanged, the highland constitutes an authentic prehistoric landscape.

The Brandberg or Daureb (which is its name in the local Khoekhoe language, meaning 'the burning one') is one of the rock art regions which has received the most intense investigations worldwide, mainly due to the commitment of researchers from the University of Cologne. This circular mountain with a diameter of 30 km rises 2 km above the surrounding areas and harbours about 1,000 rock art sites with approx. 50,000 rock paintings, most of which have been published (PAGER 1989-2006). A comparable density of rock art cannot be found anywhere in the wide surroundings which is owed to the advantageous living conditions for hunter-gatherers in the highlands of the Brandberg/Daureb. Copious natural cisterns and dense vegetation can be encountered even months after the rainy season, yet no big game (LENSEN-ERZ & ERZ 2000). This framework gave reason for the anatomically modern human to settle this

area in varying intensity from the beginning of his existence until the colonial times. The times of the Later Stone Age between 2,000 and 4,000 years ago is among the phases with the most intense activities and it is also this period when most of the rock art was created (RICHTER 1993, BREUNIG 2003). The map shown here (Fig. 2) is the first complete mapping of rock art sites in the Brandberg/Daureb with all sites documented by Harald Pager (891 sites). The void area in the northeast is where Pager could not work due to his untimely death.

Due to the amount of research into the rock art of the Brandberg/Daureb (LENSEN-ERZ 2001) a large number of alternative mappings would be feasible which are reduced here to a rather simple but significant feature: the number of figures per site is mapped here in seven classes. There is an enormous span with sites containing only one single figure and others with more than 1,000. Quite obviously such a divergence must also go together with differences in use and function.

The seven size classes are tailored according to statistic values: the class of the smallest number of figures (class 6) marks all sites with 1-4 figures. Sites containing 4

figures is the most frequent occurrence in the mountain. The second smallest class marks sites with 5-18 figures with 18 as the median. This is to say that half of the sites have 18 or less figures but it also means that in half of the sites there is only 8 % of the entire art. This indicates a very wide scattering of the art across the landscape.

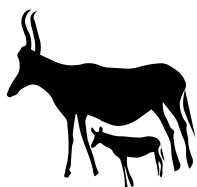
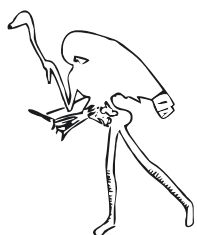
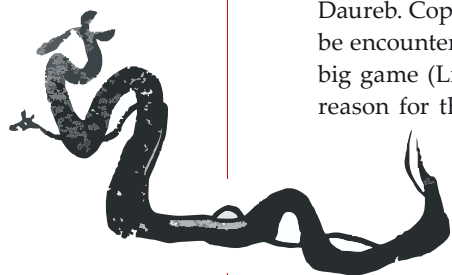
On the other hand the 6 sites of class 0 (each with more than 795 figures) which make up less than 1 % of the sites, contain almost 12 % of the art. Extending these considerations by the inclusion of classes 1 and 2 it turns out that more than 40 % of the art can be found in only 6 % of the sites. These figures clearly show that besides the scattering of the art across the landscape there is another principle of the art being highly concentrated. Since rock art is a phenomenon of ritual and religious significance, such concentrations also mean a concentration of powers, supernatural ones that is. These observations are corroborated by further functional analyses of the sites which include features of the natural surroundings as much as archaeological finds and rock art (LENSEN-ERZ 2004). The patterns of use suggest a reaction of the people to climatic conditions: the many small sites which could have been used only by a small number of people may have provided shelter during dry periods. In these times they had to restrict their group sizes due to scarcity of food and water while keeping up a high mobility since in a small region the limited resources would have been used up within a short time. The constant preparedness of the people to produce rock art at any time during a short stay at small, inconspicuous places indicates, besides the everyday character of the art, that frequently there arose a necessity to become ritually active. Such high activity is typical for times of crises – which in a region like the Brandberg/Daureb are likely to be ecological in character (drought). The problems of an ecological crisis could easily become a social crisis as well (competition for resources) to which people reacted by implementing their metaphysical tools, the most visible of which are rock paintings.

The two somehow contradictory distribution patterns suggest two basic conclusions: On the one hand the scattered rock art was a medium of everyday which one could get into contact with anytime 'in small doses'. The pictures were strewn into the landscape, without a special setting and without much ado thus releasing them from a special weight and including them into the everyday. People left behind their pictures even in places which were only shortly occupied or where they only passed by.

This pattern is in contrast to the concentration of art in a few 'mega-sites', indicating that in some places, which were also suited for large gatherings, art was celebrated for large crowds. Very likely these were the occasions where, together with the ritual of painting, the entire cultural knowledge with all its rules of conduct between all agents



Fig. 1 Typical sites provide rather little shelter but ample open space around.



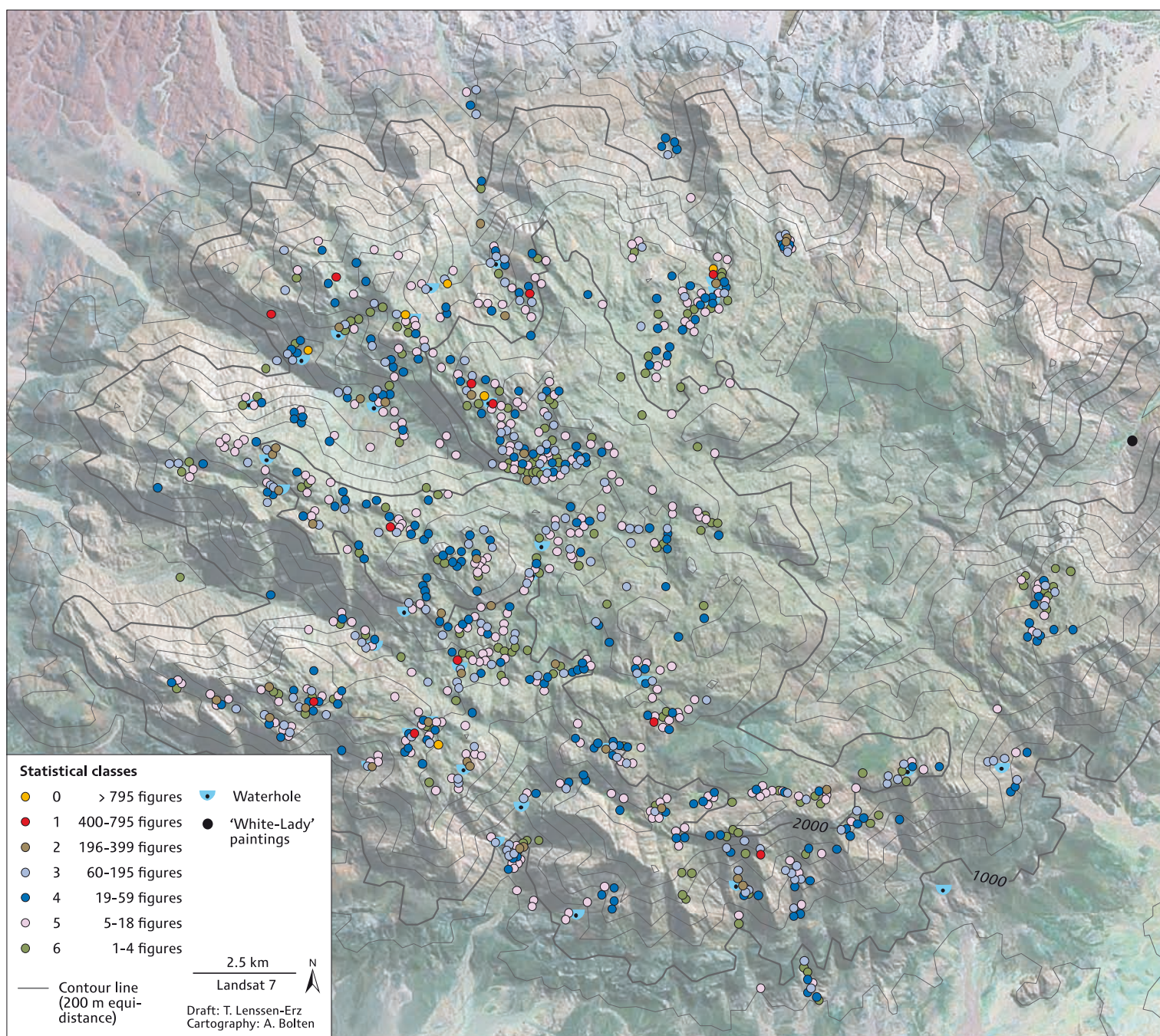


Fig. 2 The wide variety of rock art sites is mainly based on differences in available space, location and number of pictures and not so much on motifs.

of the physical and metaphysical world was activated. Form and content of communication and behaviour would have been strongly regulated through conventions and people would sharpen their awareness that the same kind of art could serve for everyday as well as for the extraordinary, depending on the context.

There may also be an ecological context for the large aggregation sites since they could have been meeting points on special occasions during the rainy season when even with the presence of many people (possibly more than 100) resources would not become scarce. From recent Kalahari hunter-gatherers it is known that a rain dance is performed not because they believe it will bring rain (as the anthropologist Tanaka 1980 wrote 'they conduct this ritual during the rainy season, on a day when it seems as if it might rain. They would never think of wasting their time calling for rain on a cloudless day in the dry season.'). Instead they danced to use the 'strong medicine' of the rain. Such could have been the context of a meeting at one of the 'mega sites'.



Fig. 3 The beautiful sight of the Brandberg/Daureb after a good rainy season must have charmed hunter-gatherers already millennia ago. What we can see today gives us a rather reliable idea of what it looked like in prehistory.

Landscape and land use



Landscapes are complex mosaics of abiotic and biotic elements. Factors such as climate, relief, soils, bedrock, vegetation, animals and human activities are crucial for an understanding of environmental changes and the usability of different landscapes.

However, inappropriate interaction with the dynamics of landscapes, particularly in arid environments, often produces ecological change

and results in environmental destruction and further problems in survival. This chapter highlights some methods of landscape ascertainment and presents case studies of land use, based on interdisciplinary field and archive studies as well as remote sensing techniques. Finally, some contributions show how recent natural and historical landscapes can be managed and treated with respect or protected for future generations.

