

A REHABILITATION OF THE COMMON PEOPLE

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Thomas Dowson (2007) has written a paper which certainly marks an important step in southern African rock art research. As an earlier proponent of the trance-hypothesis, he distances himself from some of his earlier positions, thus perhaps opening channels to give back to rock art some of its multiplicity of voices. Not only does he introduce a new, albeit debatable, sphere of meaning but with his contribution he also opens the way for still other voices to be heard with more attention than before.

An important argument in Dowson's contribution is his consideration as to the Cartesian epistemology of much research into rock art. He challenges the dualistic distinctions based upon Descartes' philosophy of body and mind, nature and culture or 'us' and 'the others'. He is right in alerting us to preconceived views in the humanities but this caveat to be cautious of the Cartesian worldview may relate to many things other than Dowson's position itself: without Cartesian epistemology and based only on indigenous systems of knowledge he would not be able to forward this type of critique. Our western way of understanding the world – as much as Dowson's critique of rock art research – is based on comparisons. But in order to compare things a frame for assessment is needed. Emic knowledge systems are definitely not designed for such a comparison; they follow their own internal meanings and logic and do not put themselves into relation with other such systems. Our way of attaining and communicating (new) knowledge or insights is usually based on analytical techniques and methods, not on dreaming, hallucinating or trancing which are accepted in other societies as means to acquire knowledge or insights. Accordingly I believe we cannot fully escape from a Cartesian worldview. And even that which is put forward as non-Cartesian, emic understanding can at best be a paraphrase of such views in a western idiom. Therefore Dowson's caveat must not exclude his own way of dealing with issues of the world.

One of the salient merits of Dowson's contribution is his rehabilitation of the "common people" in their relation to the spirit world and to religious affairs in general. I believe this rehabilitation of the common can be carried even further. In recent years particularly southern African rock art research with its marked influence on late Palaeolithic art has dominated views of producers of art as being shamans almost exclusively. Now, however, Dowson claims wider ritual agency for all members of prehistoric societies. At this juncture he looks more closely at two issues, among others, which are usually dealt with in a cursory manner: so-called hunting scenes and the gender of figures.

He points out that hunting scenes are far less common than usually invoked. The numbers he cites from the Ndedema paintings (Pager 1971) to support this argument can be corroborated on a broader statistical basis from the Brandberg/Daureb in Namibia: out of a sample of 2113 analysed scenes (involving 8290 figures), only 0.6% showed an interaction between human and animal, most of which would not be acceptable as "hunting scenes" due to their lack of weaponry (Lennsen-Erz

2001: 120, 186). Obviously hunting as an activity was not of much relevance for the meaning that was to be disseminated through rock art. But it is not only the hunting scenes which are usually over-emphasized: 'dancing', 'domestic scenes' and 'fighting' are also favoured as explanations in simplistic discourses on rock art despite their being as infrequent as the hunting scenes. All these preconceptions either tacitly insinuate or (in the case of the trance hypothesis) even explicitly postulate the leading role of men – and in the same vein it is assumed that the art was produced by men. At least for the rock art of the Brandberg/Daureb, of which more than 17 000 figures have been analysed comprehensively (Lennsen-Erz 2001), this is not tenable. Dowson rightly points out that studies which examine gender in rock art in southern Africa end up with an irritatingly high number of indeterminate figures whose role in the art is ignored in interpretations. Besides the numbers he quotes from the Drakensberg calculated by Vinnicombe (1976) and Lewis-Williams (1981), other studies also determined high numbers of figures unspecified as to sex: Pager (1971) for northeastern Drakensberg 68%, Manhire (1981) for southwestern Cape 89%, Scherz (1986) for Namibia 82%, Garlake (1987) for Zimbabwe more than 50 %, Reinecke (1990) for northern Transvaal 75%, Campbell et al. (1994) for Tsodilo 49% and Lennsen-Erz (2001) for the Brandberg/Daureb 74%. Concededly there is equivocal acceptance of "material sexual features", such as bows for men or digging sticks for women in the absence of primary and secondary biological sexual features. However in the Brandberg/Daureb sample the inclusion of bows as a male sexual marker would change 6% of the figures from unspecified to male, and with the inclusion of quivers and typically masculine bags, another 7% would change their category. Yet what remains is a majority of figures which are left expressly without any kind of marking not only as to sex but also to age, status, role and activity (i.e. activity more complex than standing or walking; specialized action or interaction can be found with only 25% of the figures).

At this juncture I would not subscribe to Dowson's assertion that "the historically and politically specific notions of male and female based on primary sex features are at best misleading, but more probably entirely irrelevant" (p. 58). Nevertheless the far reaching absence of sexual markers (only 10.6% human figures are clearly male, 6.7% are female, while 74% are "zero-marked", i.e. without any diagnostic primary or secondary sexual features¹) as well as of scenes deemed typical for hunter-gatherer rock art, suggest an alternative reading (cf. Lennsen-Erz 1998). Dowson rightly points to activity being the key for the understanding of the art. This can be put into concrete numbers from the Brandberg/Daureb: while 54.8 % of women depicted show actions emphasizing pure arm activity this can be found in only 33.5% of the men. However, 57% of men are shown handling some kind of material object as opposed to women of whom only 28.1% display such kind of action. The respective numbers for zero-marked humans are 41.4% displaying arm action and 27.9% handling material objects (for all figures the remaining percentage of 100% are figures doing nothing at all with their arms). These numbers (from Lennsen-Erz 2001) clearly put an emphasis on women using gestures, i.e. practising (non-verbal) communication, whereas men predominantly are occupied with material cultural goods. Further data, such as women clearly displaying more interaction than men (Lennsen-Erz 1998, 2001), are indications of particular gender concepts.

The role model of the hunter is still present in the Brandberg/Daureb pictures by means of his appearing with hunting gear without, however, displaying the designated use of this equipment. On the other hand, the clichéd role of

woman the gatherer and responsible person at the homestead is neglected. Digging sticks are not unequivocally identifiable in the art since in Namibia bored stones fixed to a stick in order to improve impact were not used. Looking at sticks in the art in general, 11.6% of the women have sticks but also 10.9% of the men (4.7% of zero-marked humans). In the main sticks of men or women are proportionally too short for conventional digging sticks and they could well be ritual items. Not surprisingly there is only a single scene which might show a person digging. Sticks are therefore not a helpful indicator of sex or of gender roles. Searching for another item important for the gathering production, i.e. bags or other containers, does not change the picture: 2.7% of the women carry bags as opposed to 4.6% of the men (2.7% of the zero-marked humans). Scenes at whatever homestead or camp one might conceive of are entirely absent – except for obvious ritual scenes (e.g. Pager 1989: 184–185) – and women are shown together with children no more often than men, children in any event occurring in rock art only in a handful of cases. Finally, those scenes which in South Africa seem to show women sitting in a circle and clapping as accompaniment at a dance of men are lacking as well. The only scene which Kinahan (1991: 23–24) uses to exemplify such a context in the Brandberg/Daureb actually shows a file of four standing women, one with raised hands where the fingers are showing while the men are standing apart (cf. Pager 1993, Hungorob 43, plate 2, figures 49–59) – an arrangement entirely different from scenes usually shown from South Africa to sustain the trance dance argument (e.g. Lewis-Williams & Dowson 1989: 39, 47).

Without quoting more statistical data pointing in the same direction (cf. Lenssen-Erz 2001) these facts suggest a reading of the art which concurs with Dowson's scepticism towards a traditional understanding of gender roles. The new understanding is clearly based on patterns of activity, just as Dowson postulates (p. 58), but I maintain that certain gender categories still exist, however different from conventional perception. They are mitigated by a further and (at least statistically) much more dominant neutral gender concept, the zero-marked figures, which we may best conceive of being similar to our concept of a person (Carrithers 1996). A person of the Brandberg/Daureb rock art is chiefly free of working processes, free of attributes, free of signs denoting rank or status, free of generation bounds and also free of determinations of gender roles. Apparently the art did not strive to promote the equality of two genders which were accepted as different, but rather the issue of difference was propagated to be unimportant. Neither physical dimorphism nor heteronormative roles are given pre-eminence, but instead the unifying ideology of a community of equals on the move. This was superimposed on an understanding of the male role that was linked to physical tools and implements associated with relatively high energetic action thus embedding men more in the processes and causalities of everyday than women. Women are entirely withdrawn from everyday production and food processing of the hunter-gatherer society and instead display activities which point at communication and the mastery and command of symbolic codes – which in consequence also includes rituals and rock art (without, however, denying a male component and contribution in these spheres). At this point the reading of the Brandberg/Daureb rock art again concurs with Dowson's rehabilitation of the common people since it is not only a few specialists like shamans who produced rock art but "random" people with a message not about a special field of experience like altered states of consciousness, but about the fundamental ideological understanding that the basic pillars of hunter-gatherer society are community, equality and mobility. Comparable to

the reiteration of ideological truths in other ritual activities (e.g. prayers) these three ideals were repeated through rock art in a liturgical manner again and again for the maintenance of the wellbeing and functioning of the group.

Thomas Dowson's contribution aims at making rock art research move on and he does not fail to point out a direction. However, there I cannot follow him. The frequency with which he uses the term "supernatural forces" or, alternatively, "vital" or "life forces" the circulation, flow or regeneration of which he maintains are the main message of the art, makes me suspect that here a new universal key to the understanding of rock art is presented. But this concept is as blurred as the suggestion to analyse activities of animals within the same frame of reference as rock art. Certainly inclusion of the entire landscape is indispensable for the understanding of rock art (Lenssen-Erz 2004), however, the acceptance of Dowson's statement that "(r)ubbing the rock surface was as intentional for the humans (...) as it was for the non-human animals" (p. 57) would mean the end to rock art research since this refutes consensus on the intentionality of signs. Of course he intends to challenge the conventional views of science. But another assertion of his, that the attention to formal qualities of rock art may allow one "to marvel at the skill of these 'early', 'primitive' artists, to be 'tantalized' and 'fascinated' by these images – to keep them locked in an unrecoverable past" (p. 50) provokes questions as to which kind of science he has in mind? What does one make of his complaint that "(t)he poetics of human existence was, and continues to be, reduced to something altogether more prosaic" (p. 52)? As mentioned above, our western way of describing and explaining the world – unless it is art in itself – cannot dispose of elements of an empirical and even positivist epistemology. Differently from an artist, a researcher describing or explaining a phenomenon distances himself or herself from it and makes reference to broadly comprehensible sets of signs and linkages with which he or she paraphrases contents and meaning. If the paraphrase does not link up to understandable discourses and concepts the understanding of the phenomenon may be void and we end with exactly the position Dowson criticizes, where we can only "marvel" at a phenomenon (or its transcription) – eventually keeping it locked up as the product of a genius whose arguments and thinking are not accessible to common people. This would not make for a truly new approach. Despite such shortcomings, Dowson's paper certainly has the potential for an inspiring further debate with hopefully many other voices.

NOTE

¹The remaining percentage to 100% are human figures of which only the hair dress is preserved and which could be of either sex or zero-marked.

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