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Heritage in art

San Rock art in the Drakensberg – KwaZulu-Natal

KwaZulu Natal's Drakensberg National Park is dominated by the jagged peaks of the mighty Drakensberg mountain range. One of South Africa's 8 World Heritage Sites, the

Drakensberg National Park covers 250 000 hectares, starting in the north of the province at Cathedral Peak and curving southwards, clinging to the Lesotho border, all the way to Bushman's Nek.

Known by the Zulu's as uKhahlamba which means 'Barrier of Spears' in Zulu and as Drakensberg or Dragon Mountain by the Dutch settlers, KwaZulu Natal's Drakensberg mountains are one of South Africa's most dramatic and beautiful natural landscapes.

It is clear by the abundant artefacts found in the park that human beings have been living in the Drakensberg region since the Middle Stone Age, however; it is the ample examples of San rock art that have been best documented.

The San followed the seasons and migrations of game over thousands of years, living in harmony with nature and leaving no trace of their presence other than these remarkable stories on their rock shelters.



The mysterious techniques of how the paintings were created, their symbolism and also interpretation, have been the subject of much debate. What is clear is the deeply spiritual significance these paintings represent for the San. We can get a glimpse of their way of life, the animals they encountered and their shamanic activities. Certain scenes depict what appears to be communion with the spirit world - the transitional experience brought about through trance dance and ceremony. Certain animals were special to the San, in particular the Eland, which is shown as a power figure. Half-human and half-animal figures are also drawn plus a range of shapes common to Palaeolithic art.

Some of the artwork dates back to over 1 500 years ago while other examples are 'newer' depicting ox-wagons and men with rifles and cattle that have been dated back to around 800 years ago. The largest collection of these paintings is in the Ndedema Gorge that has around 4 000 paintings alone.

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The following information has been adapted. Taken: <https://bit.ly/3c59pB4> and <https://bit.ly/2RuxGH4>

The 35 000 to 40 000 examples of bushmen art found in and amongst the caves of the national park tell the story of the San bushmen living peacefully and in harmony with their environment. Sadly the arrival of the Nguni cattle farmers and in later years, the white settlers saw this tranquil co-existence being destroyed as the new white inhabitants hunted the wild game in the area and reduced the San's food resources.

Pre-historic rock art in South Africa has been dated back to thousands of years ago, which means that the San people roamed the land over a great age, their ways relatively unchanged until settlers from faraway places came to stay and farm. Wilderness areas of great significance with regard to San rock art include the Cederberg and the Drakensberg Mountains.

As was to be expected, tension increased when the San people began to use their new neighbour's cattle for food. Angered by the loss of their cattle, the white settlers began to view the San as vermin and shot at them, as they did other hunters in the area such as Baboons and Leopards. The San were thus forced up across the mountains and into Lesotho. Many of the San's escape routes were then blasted with dynamite to prevent them from returning to the area.

Activity 10:

Draw a mind map of the Rock Art in the Drakensberg using the information above. Write the information in point form and include as much relevant and interesting information as possible.

10 marks

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Watch this clip about the Rock Art in the Drakensberg - <https://bit.ly/3kl5xPg>

and <https://bit.ly/3c5dUM8>