



# A Sense of Time and Place: the rock art of Klein Ghausib and Tantus<sup>1</sup> in the Windhoek District of the Khomas Region

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## Abstract

Literature on the rock art of Namibia in general, and the Khomas Region in particular, shows that most paintings fall within the Later Stone Age (LSA), as indeed do these paintings discussed in this article. In the case of Namibia, the LSA covers the period of 20,000 to roughly 300 years BP (before present). The oldest dated rock art in Namibia is from the Apollo 11 rock shelter in southern Namibia. In Khomas, rock art is found in caves, under rock overhangs, on boulders, on an exposed wall or on an isolated rocky outcrop. Of these, the most common occurrence of paintings is under a rock overhang. Some paintings are found on suitable surfaces of granite, composed mainly of quartz and feldspars. Rock art also occurs on surfaces comprising mica schist and gneiss that occurs in central Namibia in an approximate 250km radius of Windhoek and is present in the towering Hakos Mountains (1998m) that form part of the Great Escarpment. Both *Klein Ghausib* (408) and *Tantus* (30) fall within what geologists call the 'Damara Mountain Belt'.

The sites discussed in this contribution have paintings that show social activities and ritual and symbolic engagements between humans and totem animals. They form part of a much wider distribution of such art in southern Africa and beyond. As the rock-face conveys meaning, so too does each image within a panel of paintings.

The documentation and preservation of rock art, irrespective of whether it occurs in primary or secondary sites, pose special challenges to researchers and farmers alike, particularly since many of the sites in the Khomas Region are subjected to environmental stress and vandalism. It is recommended that the documentation of rock art of the Khomas Region be fully integrated into the Namibian Rock Art Atlas and with the National Heritage Council. Moreover, public awareness campaigns are mounted to educate farmers, farm workers, and visitors on the cultural and heritage importance of rock art in the country.

## Background

This article forms part of a larger ongoing research project on the rock art of the Khomas Region that commenced 20 years ago and has covered 70 farms and 360 rock art sites to date. The author is not a professional archaeologist, but an amateur with a passion for art

and rock art. Hence, he does not advance theoretical explanations of rock art, but bases his reading of the paintings on various field visits and a relatively strong familiarisation with the extensive body of published literature on the subject. The primary objectives of the research are to document rock art and to enhance the prospect of preserving the art.

<sup>1</sup> Tantus = name of a place, tantūs, from tan or tâ (i.e. not being excited anymore); tu = rain, s = feminine gender (rain falls under the feminine gender in Khoekhoegowab), place name: the place that no longer rains, literally the place that no longer excited the rain, or the place that the rain shunned.

Natas = name of a fountain, nâtas, from nâ (to get dry, to dry up); ta = re (present tense marker); s = feminine gender (fountains fall under the feminine gender in Khoekhoegowab), place name literally, the one that dries up.



The three rock shelters discussed in this article contain paintings of animals, humans, and possibly of a shaman, or a ‘trancer’ as some archaeologists call shamans. The paintings are in a cave in the case of *Klein Ghausib*, and under a rock overhang in the case of *Tantus*. All three sites are located relatively close to water and food resources, including a variety of game. Weathering has occurred in all cases, mostly on account of wind, dust, and animal and human contact with the painting surfaces. The cave site at *Klein Ghausib* has a polychrome painting of an oryx or gemsbok (*Oryx gazella*) and a baboon (*Papio ursinus*), among others. There is also a painting of an elongated human figure that may depict a shaman in the second site, further south, along the Ghausib River.

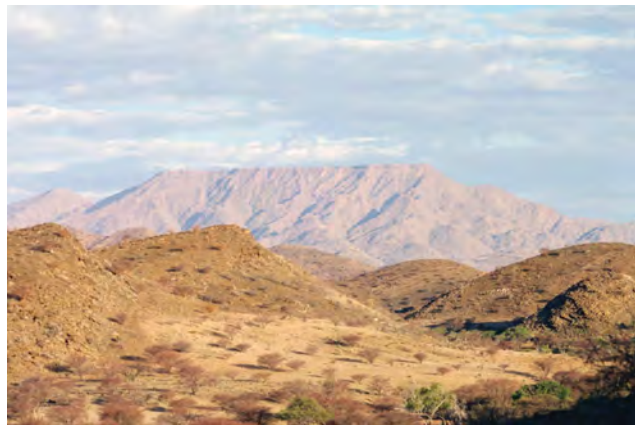
The opening of the cave measures some 35m, and the depth varies between 15 and 50m, culminating in a deep horizontal recess some 2m above the cave floor. The floor of the cave is mostly flat with sand covering mica schist rock. It is more than a rock overhang. It looks habitable and there is a grave of an unknown person in the northern corner of the cave. Part of the cave wall has been blackened by charcoal, indicating that fires were made there. There are Later Stone Age (LSA) quartz microliths in the form of scrapers and segments, a groove stone, and pieces of broken ceramics (pottery) were also observed. While it may not be a primary archaeological site, it may well be a secondary one. There is also evidence of chacma baboon and other animals using the cave for shelter. This researcher photographed a baboon on top of the cave.

The site at *Tantus* is located under a large, boulder-like rock overhang of mica schist, some four metres above a small stream. The site has a commanding view to the east towards the Hakos Mountains and north towards the towering Tantusberg (1928m) with its permanent springs in the Natasspruit that flows through the farm. This site contains a clearly visible painting of a kudu bull (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) and a number of paintings depicting humans engaged in a variety of activities. All the paintings are rendered in ochre. Some are badly faded and difficult to recognise with the naked eye.

## The lay of the Land

The farm *Klein Ghausib* (408) covers an area of 6,988ha ([Boer plaasadresboek 1973:249](#)). The farm can be reached from the C-26 gravel road, approximately 15km west of the well-known lodge on the adjacent farm *Rooisand*, some 175km from Windhoek. The farm borders *Rooisand*, *Kos* (28), *Bonna* (230), and *Niedersachsen* (4) further to the north-west ([Map 2316AA Kos, 1:50 000, Surveyor-General, Windhoek 1991](#)). Among other smaller rivers, the Ghausib River is the most significant. The cave is located to the west of the river and overlooks it, affording the viewer an arresting view towards the Hakos and dominant Gamsberg Mountain (2,347m) further to the east. During the wet season, the Ghausib River brings down significant volumes of water. Today, several strong boreholes are to be found in and near the river. [Figure 1](#) shows the view of the Gamsberg from the rock art site.

Geologically, both *Klein Ghausib* (408) and *Tantus* (30), fall within the Southern Margin Zone (SMZ) of the



**Figure 1:** The view from the rock art site above the Ghausib River looking east towards the Gamsberg. The tree line of the Ghausib River is clearly visible. Photo: André du Pisani



**Figure 2:** Typical Hakos and Kuiseb mica schist formations along the ephemeral Ghausib River in the foreground as seen from the cave looking east. (Photo: André du Pisani)

Damara Sequence, of which the Hakos Group is the most prominent. The Gamsberg forms the western edge of the Great Escarpment ([Schneider 2008:143](#); [Grünert 2009:135-137](#)). What geologists call ‘Damara Mountain Building’ is most evident in respect of the Gamsberg and the Hakos Mountains, both of which are clearly visible from the three sites on the farms. The Gamsberg granite forms the northern edge of the Kalahari Craton. After the end of the Damara mountain building, an extended period of weathering and erosion followed, after which more recent rocks of the Karoo Sequence were formed ([Grünert 2009:137](#)).

The farm *Tantus* (30) (8,394ha) borders the much smaller farm *Otsis* (31), the mineral-rich *Natas* (220) (5,248ha), *Chaibis* (29) (9,245ha), *Djab* (20) (6,207ha), and *Eisgaubib* (31) (9,896ha). The impressive, rugged *Tantusberg* (1,928m), visible from the top of the Gamsberg Pass and the Natasspruit and Kuiseb River that forms the NW boundary of the farm with *Eisgaubib* (31), are the most important water sources and drainage systems. ([Map 2316AA Kos, 1:50 000, Surveyor-General, Windhoek 1991](#); see also [Map 2316 AB, Hakos, 1:50 000, Surveyor-General, Windhoek 1991](#)). There are several natural springs in the vicinity of Tantusberg,

but these are difficult to access even with a 4x4 vehicle on account of the ruggedness of the terrain.

*Tantus* (30) and the surrounding farms, notably *Natas* (220), *Kos* (28) and *Verloren* (32), are renowned for their minerals. Mining at *Natas* (220) started in the 1840s and continued until the late 1950s. These farms boast a variety of minerals (Cairncross, 2004; Niedermayr & Schneider 2001:180-194).

## Animals and People

In many rock shelters in the Khomas Region, different animals are depicted. Some of these animals have a significant relationship to San (Bushman)<sup>2</sup> cosmology. Metaphorically, animals express actions and emotions, such as aggressiveness, protection, femaleness, caring, rain, and perhaps, most importantly, spiritual power and potency (Forssman & Gutteridge 2012: 118; Garlake 1995:114-134).

The cave overlooking the Ghausib River contains various animal paintings, most notably of an oryx and of a chacma baboon. Here, we focus on these two paintings. Figure 3 shows the painting of an oryx.

Making use of a taxonomy to classify human and animal paintings in the Daurès (Brandberg) in north-western Namibia, Lenssen-Erz & Erz (2000:42) listed oryx as one of the species that appears in their sample of 17,284 paintings.

The straight horns of the oryx are clearly shown in this painting. The colouration pattern is relatively unique in rock art: a darker belly, a white face with darker patterns, and patches of white on their flanks. In some cases, these patterns are not painted, and the horns must be used for identification (Forssman & Gutteridge 2012:136).

Anthropologists such as Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, in her classic book *The Harmless People*, originally published in 1959 in London, recounts San folklore of the 'Oryx/Gemsbok People' who had a human body but the head of an oryx. According to legend, these people showed the San/Bushmen how they made ostrich eggshell beads using their sharp horns to drill holes. Like kudu and eland (*Taurotragus oryx*), oryx are linked to the weather and thus have been invested with potency. Being a 'Great Meat Animal', oryx have



**Figure 3:** Painting of an oryx (*Oryx gazella*) in a cave on Klein Ghausib (19cm). Photo: André du Pisani



**Figure 4:** A painting of a chacma baboon (22cm). Photo: André du Pisani

more supernatural potency than many other animals. Because of this, the animal is useful to shamans. In some San communities, there is also an oryx song and dance. Images of oryx often accompany images of other animals. The painting has been pecked, possibly with a hard stone, to enhance its potency.

The other noteworthy animal painting is of a chacma baboon. Figure 4 shows this interesting painting rendered in red ochre and showing the identifiable features of this animal, including their long tails, short hindquarters, and human-like faces.

While there are known paintings of chacma baboon in the ravines of the Daurès/Brandberg, there is no record of such paintings at the Erongo Mountains as evidenced in the recently published comprehensive research of Prof. Peter Breunig (2023) – in collaboration with Gabriela Franke – on the rock art of AiAiba (*Anibib Farm*), in the Erongo Mountains. In the pioneering research of Dr Ernst-Rudolf Scherz, published in 1986, in which he recorded and discussed 2,713 paintings and 311 engravings, he noted that paintings of chacma baboon are very rare (Scherz 1986:31, see also Scherz & Scherz 1974 for a brief synopsis of rock art in Namibia). In the recently published research of the seasoned archaeologist, Dr John Kinahan (2020) on the archaeology of the Namib Desert, there is no mention of paintings of chacma baboon. The painting in the big cave at *Klein Chausib* may indeed be rare in the Khomas Region. Over the past 19 years, this researcher has been unable to locate another painting of a chacma baboon in the region.

In San/Bushman thought, some animals retained their human-like characteristics. Initially, baboons and all other animals were regarded as human. According to one source, baboons have magical powers and are regarded as 'the people who sit upon their heels' (Forssman & Gutteridge 2012:173). Apparently, the Nharo San/Bushmen do not consider the baboon a meat animal or predator – the two categories into which all animals fall according to their beliefs – because they are closely related to humans. As with the lion (*Panthera leo*), baboons may represent shamans on account of their unique powers (du Pisani 2021:65).

<sup>2</sup> The word 'San' refers to hunter-gatherers and foragers. In some Bantu languages the word has a pejorative meaning of 'thieves', hence some researchers prefer the older word 'Bushmen'. Both terms are problematic.



**Figure 5:** A painting that may represent a shaman (35cm). Photo: André du Pisani

This, however, has yet to be proven beyond reasonable doubt.

In the second rock art site along the Ghausib River, some two kilometres south of the cave there are a few paintings under a rock overhang. The most interesting of these is of an elongated human figure that may be a shaman, based on the features found in paintings of shamans elsewhere in the country and southern Africa. [Figure 5](#) shows the elongated human figure.

In southern African rock art, shamans are sometimes central figures. They are painted in many ways and positions. In some cases, they may carry tools, including fly-whisks (as in the case of Zimbabwean rock art), dancing sticks, bags, and hunting gear. They may have an elongated body, as in this painting, feathers, wings, wear a kaross or an animal cap, have rattles on their arms and lower legs, and have prominent hairstyles or a tail. They could be kneeling, pointing in a specific direction, flying, touching another person, bending forwards, running, carrying or shooting arrows, be partially or fully transformed into an animal, or be shown capturing a rain animal. In many paintings of shamans, the facial features are clearly recognisable with features such as cheek stripes, long hair, white necks, a bleeding nose, or white dots behind the neck. Shamans can be recognised by the tools they carry and the activities they are engaged in, such as hunting, healing, or engaging in combat. Each of their various tools and postures carries a meaning ([Forssman & Gutteridge 2012:67](#); [Lenssen-Erz & Erz 2000:70](#); [Lewis-Williams 1981, 1983](#); [Lewis-Williams & Pearce 2004:166-175](#); [du Pisani 2022:46](#)).

It is important to question a shamanic interpretation of all rock art in Namibia. Three of the most significant sources on Namibian rock art, the books by [Peter Breunig \(2014, 2023\)](#) and the work of John Kinahan (2020) question an uncritical acceptance of such an interpretation. Kinahan, for example, has this to say about a shamanic interpretation of, especially Holocene rock art:

‘The existing consensus that the art is essentially shamanic rests on a large body of mainly historical ethnography serving as an almost exegetical framework for the interpretation of the rock art. Although the Namib Desert rock art agrees with this view in broad terms, it departs from

it with new evidence that contradicts the conventional interpretation in several key respects, among others by showing that shamanic practice was specialized rather than communal, and itinerant rather than community-based’. The author then continues in similar vein, when he writes: ‘... The Namib Desert evidence thus introduces individual agency and historicity to a field that is generally marked by an ahistorical reliance on the authority of ethnographic sources’ ([Kinahan 2020:14](#)).

Breunig (in collaboration with Franke) in their comprehensive survey of rock art on the farm *Anibib/AiAiba* writes as follows on a shamanistic reading of rock art: ‘With a handful of exceptions, the AiAiba rock art shows people in every-day poses and a realistic depiction of existing animals, which as a result do not fit the trance hypothesis. Based on my observations, the same is true of most of Namibia’s other rock art. A theory that only explains exceptions is not particularly useful’ ([Breunig & Franke 2023:17](#)).

Paintings of shamans are also linked to therianthropes (animal people). Such images are confluences of human and animal forms and are widespread throughout southern African rock art. If the figure’s limbs, head, or body have any animal-like qualities, it is regarded as a therianthrope. Some therianthropes are almost entirely animal. Such images do not carry tools or implements and do not typically have human postures. The therianthropes are usually human-animal combinations, but humans are not often combined with elephant, felids, and birds ([Jolly 2002:85-103](#)).

Many researchers agree that a therianthrope is a shaman who has partially or almost entirely transformed into an animal during the trance dance. In the spirit world, shamans take on the appearance of various animals and absorb the supernatural power of the specific animal. Some researchers are of the view that therianthropes represent spirits of the dead ([Forssman & Gutteridge 2012: 76-77](#)). Peter Garlake in his important survey of Zimbabwean rock art, opines that: ‘There is extremely little in the Zimbabwean paintings that could be called “therianthrope”’, adding that the best examples in Zimbabwe of conflation of different types of image are those that combine elements of particular animals with key features of the oval designs’ ([Garlake 1995:133](#)). [Jalmar and I. Rudner](#), in their useful survey of rock art in Southern Africa, published in 1970, do not mention the word ‘therianthrope’.

## The rock art of *Tantus*

The rock art of *Tantus* is located under a rock overhang, overlooking a small, mostly dry stream, some 3km along a road from the farmhouse. The rock art site has a commanding view of the Hakos Mountains to the east and of the imposing Tantusberg (1,928m), the highest peak on the farm, to the north. The rock overhang consists of mica and gneiss with quartz veins cutting through it. [Figure 6](#) shows part of the rock art site (frontal view).



**Figure 6:** Part of the rock art site (frontal view) of *Tantus*. Photo: André du Pisani



**Figure 7:** The Tantusberg as seen from the rock overhang. (Photo: André du Pisani)

The rock overhang has a partially broken and tilting floor that would have made habitation for any length of time unlikely. The paintings are rather exposed to wind and dust, while exfoliation is present on the rock surface. Some paintings are badly faded and difficult to see without the aid of a magnifying glass. To bring the detail out in some of the paintings, a software programme such as *DStretch* (<http://www.dstretch.com>) or 'Structure from Motion' software would be advisable, as it will enhance the images and bring out detail in them.

While there is no permanent water source at or near the rock art site, there are permanent water sources in the form of springs close to the imposing Tantusberg that can be reached on foot from the site. The site probably served ritual and symbolic purposes and could have been used as a site from which to hunt game, and served as a secondary, rather than a primary, site.

The rock art site contains a variety of animal images and a few important images of people performing different every-day activities such as running, sitting, and carrying tools and bows. Significantly, some of the paintings show humans connected with lines or 'threads of light' as some researchers call them. Others form a procession of several human figures, both men and women.

Of the animal paintings, an image of a kudu bull (*Tragelaphus strepsiceros*) rendered in ochre and painted with considerable detail, such as the ears, long legs,



**Figure 8:** A painting of a kudu bull with a long neck and horns (32cm x 16cm). Photo: André du Pisani

and horns of the animal, is clearly visible. [Figure 8](#) shows this image.

Paintings of kudu are not common in the rock art of the Khomas Region; however, there are a few excellent examples, for example, on the farm *Rooisand*, some 25km from *Tantus*, at the farm *Dirleen* (271) also in the Khomas Region, and in rock art sites in the Daurès/Brandberg and Erongo Mountains. There is also a fine example of a female kudu painting at IUi-llaes. [Kinahan \(2020:201\)](#) links kudu to women's initiation and has written with insight on the iconic rock engraving at IUi-llaes (Twyfelfontein), known as the 'Dancing kudu'.

Kudu are well represented in the rock art of southern Africa, with numerous examples in the Mapungubwe region of northern South Africa, eastern Botswana, and parts of Zimbabwe. In San/Bushman folklore, kudu are linked to supernatural power, the weather, and childbirth. According to some rock art researchers, the kudu is also linked to the spirit world and to women's fertility on account of their strong maternal instincts, as well as to girls' puberty rites ([Forssman & Gutteridge 2012:128](#); [du Pisani 2022:44](#)).

The images of human figures are particularly interesting. These include an image of a running person, a group of persons connected with a line or string of light, a number of smaller human figures, and a more complex image that shows various activities. These are shown in the following three [Figures 9 to 11](#).

The image in [Figure 9](#) shows a person running, wearing what looks like a kaross and with well-developed



**Figure 9:** A running person, painted with attention to detail (18cm). Photo: André du Pisani



**Figure 10:** Figures connected by lines or 'Threads of light' (largest figure 12cm). Photo: André du Pisani



**Figure 11:** A complex image of several elongated human figures, one of which carries a bow in an unusual way (tallest figure on the left, 19cm). Photo: André du Pisani

calf muscles and a distinctive hairstyle. The figure seems to carry a stick or tool in one hand. It is significantly larger than any of the other human images that appear on the same rock face. None of the other human figures exceeds 18cm, with a few no taller than 10cm. The figure is placed about one metre above the floor of the rock overhang and runs in the opposite direction, away from the other human figures on the panel. The detail and energy invested in the image are striking.

There are also images painted within a circle or line that connects them. [Figure 10](#) shows these images.

According to some researchers of rock art, such as the archaeologist Peter Garlake, who researched and wrote on Zimbabwean rock art, the circle or oval that encompasses the human figures within it may represent 'the abdominal wall, the spikes arrows of potency lodged in it or the picking sensations associated with the activation of potency' ([Garlake 1995:96](#)). The author, however, warns against a simplified interpretation of such designs.

The South African rock art researcher David Lewis-Williams, whose work is widely accredited with advancing the understanding of rock art, uses the phrase 'Threads of Light'. Such threads or lines connect human figures to powerful animals and symbolise the intimate spiritual relationship certain people had with animals ([Lewis-Williams in Bassett 2001:78-79](#)).

In this image, there are human figures that sit, squat, move, and stand. One of these seems to carry a bow. Towards the top of the image, there are what appear to be two bags used for collecting food or carrying items such as ostrich eggs. This image does not seem to be invested with any specific spiritual or supernatural meaning, even if the figures may be witnessing a trance dance.

The final [Figure 11](#) shows what may be the most significant of the entire panel of images.

This badly faded image is difficult to see with the naked eye and to record digitally. It seems to show a number of human figures, all rendered in ochre, interacting in a procession-like formation. Since there is no clear evidence of interaction with specific animals, the image may show coordinated human action and interaction of some sort. In its current, unenhanced form, it is very difficult to suggest what the individual images may mean, or if they may have special significance within the overall panel of images.

Having discussed a few of the paintings in three sites on the farms *Klein Chausib* (408) and *Tantus* (30), and having touched on a wider body of literature on rock art in Namibia and elsewhere, a few tentative conclusions can be arrived at.

## Conclusions

The rock art of the Khomas Region is found at different localities. While the availability of water and food resources certainly does seem to play a significant role in determining the locality of rock art, this is not always the case. Rock art sites are randomly selected. The suitability of the rock surfaces often determines where the paintings may be found, even if these are relatively far removed from water and food resources. It also appears to be arbitrary for researchers to designate specific sites as 'symbolic', 'ritualistic', and so forth, as the artists may well have had a different reading of the value and importance of a particular site. The landscape and the environment, more generally, do seem to play a role in the selection of rock art sites. Following [Kinahan \(2020:107\)](#), some sites may be designated as 'primary' or 'secondary' based on the environment, the availability of perennial springs, and the presence of fauna.

While the absolute number of paintings and engravings/petroglyphs in the Khomas Region has yet to be determined, the field research of this researcher seems to show between ten and 50 paintings per site on average, based on the sites visited. Admittedly, this is a very rough estimate, and it must be said that some sites do contain close to or more than 100 paintings. These, however, seem to be a minority of sites. In the absence of reliable aggregate data, it is difficult to express the number of animal, inanimate, and human images in percentage terms. What one can say is that some of the human paintings are clearly gendered and that these depict humans in a range of social and routine activities. Based on the available data at the disposal of this researcher, shamanic paintings are relatively rare, even if they do occur at all. Perhaps, because shamanic activity was not as widespread and communal as some researchers and anthropologists wish us to believe,

activities such as healing and rain-making were largely confined to individuals.

Most archaeologists and rock art researchers would agree that the paintings are from the Later Stone Age (LSA). This is based on the artefacts such as stone microliths and ceramics that are widely found in or in the vicinity of the rock art sites. Some paintings may not be older than a few hundred years, while others may date from more than 2000 years BP.

The preservation of rock art in Namibia and more specifically in the Khomas Region poses very special challenges, as such art is subjected to weathering, veld fires, dust, rubbing, urine and faeces, structural instability of rock faces, graffiti, vandalism, touching, and theft, among others. Thus, preserving rock art and sites is a serious matter that requires policy and action by a range of agencies. It also calls for deep environmental and cultural ethics and robust management, as well as integrating images and brief descriptions of all rock art sites into the *Rock Art Atlas* of the country and with the National Heritage Council. Public awareness campaigns on the cultural and heritage importance of rock art and its preservation are an urgent necessity for farmers, farm workers, and visitors.

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