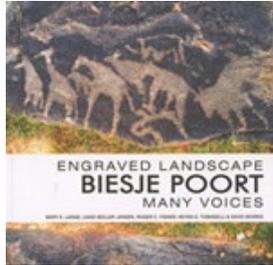


The writing on the landscape

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Engraved landscape Biesje Poort: Many voices

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The language of landscape is our native language. Landscape was the original dwelling; humans evolved among plants and animals, under the sky, upon the earth, near water. Everyone carries that legacy in body and mind. Humans touched, saw, heard, smelled, tasted, lived in and shaped landscapes before the species had words to describe what it did. Landscapes were the first human texts, read before the invention of other signs and symbols. Clouds, wind, and sun were clues to weather; ripples and eddies signs of rocks and life under water; caves and ledges promise of shelter; leaves guides to food; birdcalls warnings of predators.¹

We have to read the scene. Understand the message that it contains, and who it was meant for.²

The relationships among people, their wide natural surroundings, their 'places' of greatest comfort and the immediate landscapes that encompass those places are older than the emergence of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, while maps of local areas, drawn on cave walls, exist from as far back as 18 500 years BP. More recently, in one of the earliest Western texts readily available to us, Homer³ writes of Hermes visit to Calypso:

Around the cave grew a thick copse of alder, poplar and fragrant cypress, where large birds nested, owls, and falcons, and long-necked cormorants whose business is with the sea. And heavy with clustered grapes a mature cultivated vine went trailing across the hollow entrance. And four neighbouring springs, channelled this way and that, flowed with crystal water, and all around in soft meadows iris and wild celery flourished. Even an immortal passing by might pause and marvel, delighted in spirit...

The sense of a place and location, with meaning to the observer, emerges very clearly in this and many other texts of the time and has done ever since. But how best to conceptualise and come to terms with our human encounters with, and our use and interpretation of landscapes, has been of theoretical and analytical interest to geographers, biologists, political scientists, landscape architects and literary critics, amongst others, for decades. We live in landscapes, shape them and then leave them behind as texts, often as complicated as palimpsests – worked, shaped, 'written' and then 'rewritten'. The message left behind is sometimes interpretable, yet still present for latecomers to 'read' as a way of understanding what has gone before and, possibly, what it might have meant to those former dwellers.

The above is the substance of *Engraved Landscape Biesje Poort: Many Voices* – a book oddly dedicated 'to all silent voices of times past and ever present at Biesje Poort' and presumably not, therefore, to the many voices that the text aims to reveal to the reader. This contradiction is, however, just one of many unusual twists to the book, as it is a montage (in this case, a textual collection of both images and analyses) of personal observations, poems, translated poetry and serious scholarly chapters. The chapters cover the project methodology, and also history, rock art, archaeology, conservation, and the nature of indigeneity as they pertain to the landscape of Biesje Poort. An appraisal of the list of references quickly attests to the serious attention that has been afforded the scholarly contributions.

Some readers might find the poetry a little distracting – while the lead chapter, largely a personal physical journey into the southern Kalahari world of Biesje Poort, offers a rather unexpected entrée into what is a serious engagement with the significance of the landscape and the analyses and insights in the chapters that constitute the remainder of the book. The 'conversations', however, deserve careful attention as they are an integral element in the chain of meanings to be disinterred ('engaging the absence of storyline' in the words of Chapter 3) through the scholarly work of the authors.

Some previous reviewers of the book have referred, in various ways, to the 'absences' and 'silences' in the text (what, for example, might be said about the people who left few or no traces behind?) reminiscent of the now rather discredited school of post-modernism, but I believe that that there is much more of value to be offered by the authors. In fact, apart from the new discoveries, information, insights and imaginings presented, one of the most valuable collective contributions that the book offers in the field of landscape analysis is that it is one of very few recent texts that speaks directly to the interpretation and meaning of the messages that *people* leave behind as additions to, and statements about, their places. As long ago as 1993, Susanne Küchler⁴ wrote that landscape is 'the most generally accessible and widely shared *aide-mémoire* of a culture's knowledge and understanding of its past and future' and that the 'conception of landscape as inscribed surface implies a link between mapping and image-making...'. And it is these two ideas that are consistent throughout the book, making it, what I believe to be, amongst the first and, possibly, most comprehensive studies of the many voices that speak to us from the landscapes of South Africa. For it is not just the rock art but also the 'Western' and 'indigenous' mapping of the Biesje Poort landscape and its meanings that receive careful attention.

The scope of the book, coupled with its thorough scholarship, make it a perfect 'multidisciplinary' text, which will make fascinating reading for readers of the *South African Journal of Science* from across a wide range of research areas

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