In this, the fourth Public Rock Art Sites of South Africa article (see Culna 52-54), the important Bushman rock painting site of Schaapplaats is featured. Since they were featured in the Illustrated London News in 1933, the Schaapplaats rock paintings have captured the popular imagination on account of their beauty as well as the information they provide on the religious practices of the Bushman communities who once lived there.

A SPECIAL PLACE
The Schaapplaats farm is located 7.5 km south-east of the historic eastern Free State town of Clarens. Here one follows a crystal clear and secluded tributary of the Little Caledon River for 1.2 km before arriving at the large, 65 m² rock shelter. In this rock shelter there are Later Stone Age artefacts which are between 150 and 25 000 years old. Please leave these artefacts as you find them, it is illegal to remove them. These artefacts provide evidence of the enduring relationship Bushmen had with the surrounding landscape, which is one of the most beautiful in southern Africa. Dramatic sandstone cliffs rise up to form the soaring Maloti Mountains of Lesotho. This landscape not only provided Bushmen with food and shelter; it was also a source of religious inspiration. Schaapplaats contains evidence of this inspiration in the form of over 60 delicate but compelling rock paintings. There are three painted panels at Schaapplaats that are worth a closer look.

Panel 1 The Therianthropes
Roughly in the centre of the shelter are two groups of 'Therianthropes'. Therianthropes are part-human, part-animal creatures. They are not depictions of hunters wearing masks but represent Bushman shamans or priests who have partially transformed into animals. This transformation is part of a belief that certain animals contained a supernatural essence or potency that could be used to heal people, make rain, control the movements of animals and ensure the well-being of Bushman society. In order to use this potency, shamans had to become one with the animal. We do the same type of thing today when we say: "She has the strength of an ox" or "He is as cunning as a fox". It is thus no accident that the Therianthropes are located next to a group of five beautifully painted eland (Taurotragus oryx) the most sacred and potent animal in Bushman religious belief.

Panel 2 The Hunt
Contrary to popular belief, paintings of hunts are very rare because Bushman rock art was not about what people saw and ate, but about what they thought and believed. Hunting was both a physical and a symbolic activity. Bushmen believed that when an animal was killed it released its
supernatural potency, creating a dense spiritual atmosphere. At Schaapplaats Panel 2-The Hunt, which depicts a hunter taking aim at a Grey rhebuck (Pelea capreolus), is painted to the left of Panel 1-The Therianthropes. Significantly, the animal heads of The Therianthropes are also Grey rhebuck, thus establishing that the therianthropes are shamans who have utilised rhebuck potency. Because of this and the fact that Grey rhebuck are notoriously bad-tasting, this painting is more likely to depict a symbolic than a real hunt. Behind the 'hunter' there are two more Grey rhebuck and at least five arrows. The grey paint is extremely rare.

Panel 3 The Enigma
At the southern end of Schaapplaats there are some brightly coloured paintings. There are two bright orange buck, one of which is an eland. Above the other buck there are some bright red smears. What are these? Is the lower smear a supine human figure? Are the smears fakes or do they represent an as yet unidentified theme in Bushman rock art? We do not know the answer to this enigma and it makes us realise that any attempt to understand Bushman rock art takes years of dedication.

South Africa is fortunate to have over 30 000 Bushman rock art sites. Schaapplaats is a special site at which we can catch glimpses of Bushman life and belief. We must remember that it is not only the site and its paintings that are important. The whole landscape with its animals, people, plants, special places and unexpected surprises like Schaapplaats' dinosaur footprints provide for a richer understanding of our past. Look out also for the paintings of baboons, buck spoor, human figures and rain-animals. There is, however, one sad note at Schaapplaats. Many years ago an unthinking person tried to chop out a painted eland. If this is how we treat our past, what hope do we have for the future?

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