

# The COSMO-ART Conference on Rock Art

## Rock Art Site Management in Southern Africa: Towards a Cosmopolitan Approach

International Conference

30 Nov. — 06 Dec. 2025, Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley, South Africa

## CALL FOR ABSTRACTS

Submission deadline: **30 May 2025**

The conference aims to explore the challenges posed by overlapping issues involved in the management of rock art sites. The focus will be on rock art sites in southern Africa, but case studies from other regions are welcome insofar as they are relevant for comparison.

Rock art heritage-making is a particularly complex process, involving multiple stakeholders with sets of values that sometimes overlap, but can also diverge. Managing rock art sites in an inclusive and sustainable manner therefore requires a holistic approach that recognises the diversity of practices and the different ways in which stakeholders define what constitutes heritage. This raises questions such as: Who are the users of the sites and to what extent? What are the values attributed to rock art and by whom? How are these values used, possibly adapted, and communicated (from education to tourism development)? What are the perceived threats to these sites? How can Western-inspired conservation measures and traditional custodianship systems work together?

To answer these questions, an international research project called COSMO-ART (*The Cosmopolitan Approach as a New Paradigm for Rock Art Heritage Management in Southern Africa*) was launched in 2022. It involves around 50 members (academics, heritage practitioners and students) from Australia, France, Namibia, South Africa and Switzerland, as well as local civil society partners (see <https://www.cosmo-art.org>).

The COSMO-ART international conference “Rock Art Site Management in Southern Africa: Towards a Cosmopolitan Approach” will mark the conclusion of this research project. It will both report on the methods developed within COSMO-ART and their results, and open up discussion with international delegates to work together towards the effective implementation of a cosmopolitan approach to managing rock art sites.

### Sessions

To encourage the exchange of ideas, the sessions will be plenary and open to the public.

**Session 1:** “What is a ‘Rock Art Site’?”

Chaired by Mélanie Duval and David Morris

**Session 2:** “Documenting Rock Art”

Chaired by Camille Bourdier, Sam Challis and Julien Monney

**Session 3:** “Conservation & Management of Rock Art Sites”

Chaired by Catherine Cretin, Lenishwa Engelbrecht and Stéphane Hœrlé

**Session 4:** “The Politics of Managing Rock Art Heritage”

Chaired by Hugo Quemin and Ndukuyakhe Ndlovu

**Session 5:** “Tourism and Rock Art in a Postcolonial Context”

Chaired by Mélanie Duval and Ancila Nhamo

**Session 6:** “Redefining Heritage Practices”

Chaired by Leïla Baracchini and Gilbert Pwiti

See below for a detailed description of the sessions.

### Proceedings

The publication of the conference proceedings will follow a peer review process. Depending on feasibility, this will be a special issue of an accredited journal recognised by as many academic institutions as possible.

### Key dates

**30 May 2025:** Due date to submit an abstract.

**30 June 2025:** Feedback on the acceptance of abstracts.

**30 September 2025:** Due date for early bird registration.

**30 October 2025:** Due date for registration.

**20 November 2025:** Due date to receive the written version of your paper (a first draft).

**November 2026:** Estimated date for the publication of the proceedings.

### Provisional Programme

**Sunday 30 November:** Reception and registration

**Monday 01 December:** Keynote speakers and start of the sessions

**Tuesday 02 December:** Continuation of sessions

**Wednesday 03 December:** Excursion to Wonderwerk Cave

**Thursday 04 December:** Continuation of sessions

**Friday 05 December:** Continuation and closing of conference with gala dinner

During the conference, discussions are also planned with the Khwe and !Xun communities of Platfontein, who live near the rock engravings of Wildebeest Kuil.

For those wishing to stay longer in the Northern Cape, we'll post a list of private tourist providers on the conference website: <https://www.cosmo-art.org/conference>



## **Abstract Format and Content**

- ✓ Last and first names of the authors
- ✓ Affiliation of the authors (please avoid acronyms)
- ✓ Presenting author and contact details (email)

### **Only one abstract per presenting author**

- ✓ Desired session (see below)
- ✓ Title of the paper
- ✓ Abstract in English (no more than 400 words, including references)
- ✓ 5 keywords
- ✓ Short biography of the authors (max 70 words, including contact details)

Presenting authors can send their abstracts to: [anr.cosmo.art@gmail.com](mailto:anr.cosmo.art@gmail.com). In the subject line of the email, please indicate session number (e.g., "COSMO-ART Conference - session X").

## **Screening Process**

Once anonymised, the abstracts will be reviewed by the Scientific Committee and assessed according to the following criteria: consistency with the theme of the session and, for case studies not relating to southern Africa, their contribution to a comparative approach.

## **Registration Fees**

Registration fees cover light refreshments and lunches on Monday 01/12, Tuesday 02/12, Thursday 04/12, and Friday 05/12.

**IMPORTANT: They do NOT include accommodation. A list of accommodation options will be provided on the conference website later in the year (July-August).**

A payment is needed to confirm your participation. Only people who have made payment will be considered for the conference programme.

Payment information is provided on the conference webpage.

For students: Applications to apply for sponsorship to cover your registration fees are limited. Please include a letter of motivation, a curriculum vitae, and an estimate of the cost of the least expensive means of transportation to Kimberley.

### **Early bird registration fees (before the 30/09/2025)**

- Students (Masters, PhD, Post-doc fellows): R1000.
- Others: R2000.

### **Standard registration fees (before the 30/10/2025)**

- Students (Masters, PhD, Post-doc fellows): R1500.
- Others: R2500.

### **Costs of optional activities**

- Excursion day at Wonderwerk Cave: R650 per person (including transport and lunch).
- Closing gala dinner: R550 per person.

## **Organising Committee**

- Mélanie Duval (EDYTEM, CNRS, Savoie Mont Blanc University & RARI, University of the Witwatersrand)
- Stéphane Hoërlé (PACEA, University of Bordeaux & RARI, University of the Witwatersrand)
- Lourenço Pinto (Heritage Studies Department, Sol Plaatje University)

## **Scientific Committee**

- Leïla Baracchini (Institut de sciences sociales des religions, University of Lausanne)
- Camille Bourdier (TRACES, Toulouse University)
- Sam Challis (RARI, University of the Witwatersrand)
- Catherine Cretin (National Museum of Prehistory & PACEA, University of Bordeaux)
- Mélanie Duval (EDYTEM, CNRS, Savoie Mont Blanc University & RARI, University of the Witwatersrand)
- Lenishwa Engelbrecht (National Heritage Council of Namibia)
- Stéphane Hoërlé (PACEA, University of Bordeaux & RARI, University of the Witwatersrand)
- Julien Monney (EDYTEM, Savoie Mont Blanc University)
- David Morris (McGregor Museum & Sol Plaatje University)
- Ndukuyakhe Ndlovu (SANParks & University of Pretoria)
- Ancila Nhamo (University of Zimbabwe)
- Gilbert Pwiti (Heritage Studies Department, Sol Plaatje University)
- Hugo Quemin (EDYTEM, Savoie Mont Blanc University)

## Sessions

### **Session 1: “What is a ‘rock art site’?”**

**Chaired by Mélanie Duval (EDYTEM, CNRS, Savoie Mont Blanc University & RARI, University of the Witwatersrand) and David Morris (McGregor Museum & Sol Plaatje University)**

What is a rock art site? As one of the basic units of management and study in rock art research, what one observer refers to as a ‘site’ may vary markedly from another observer. A ‘site’ is not a self-evident thing. A management perspective would usually demand precise legislative definition of ‘site’ as content and spatial extent, while the points of view espoused by different sets of ‘users’ – local people/communities, property owners, tourists, art historians, and more – would be much more various and ambiguous. Academics, from different disciplines or traditions of enquiry, may read ‘site’ in quite diverse ways according to focus or perception, expectations or the questions being addressed. For some a site is wholly material, and in ways not limited to the images that set ‘sites’ apart, while for others there would be intangible elements for which the ‘site’ is a nexus.

The goal of this session is to examine the diverse approaches and perspectives involved in defining a rock art site, recognizing that any definition is never neutral—it directly influences how these sites are considered within broader land-use and activity dynamics. Rather than simply contrasting different perspectives, this session aims to explore their points of intersection and how they can be integrated into a more comprehensive understanding. To achieve this, the session will feature oral presentations in the morning, followed by a roundtable discussion with selected speakers.

### **Session 2: “Current challenges, and perspectives in documenting rock art in Africa”**

**Chaired by Camille Bourdier (TRACES, Toulouse University), Sam Challis (RARI, University of the Witwatersrand) and Julien Monney (EDYTEM, Savoie Mont Blanc University)**

This session will explore the challenges, limitations, and tested solutions in documenting rock art in Africa. The scope ranges from the data to be documented (imagery, other archaeological remains, geological and geomorphological features of the rock, location, surroundings etc.), including the techniques and related logistics to data collection, to data management, archives and sharing. A special focus will be made on the applications of digital technologies, whether 3D models, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), or serious games.

Contributions may address topics such as the need to standardize documentation practices; strategies for systematic surveys of wide/rich rock art regions, including in an inter-team collaboration discussion; or challenges related to managing, sharing, and access to digital data by multiple stakeholders. In order to share on our experiences and practices, concrete case studies showcasing innovative solutions and research perspectives in logistical, legal, and/or technical domains are especially welcome. We also strongly encourage contributions from diverse areal, archaeological, geomorphological, or conservation contexts.

### **Session 3: “Conservation and management of rock art sites”**

**Chaired by Catherine Cretin (National Museum of Prehistory & PACEA, University of Bordeaux), Lenishwa Engelbrecht (National Heritage Council of Namibia) and Stéphane Hoerlé (PACEA, University of Bordeaux - RARI, University of the Witwatersrand)**

The conservation and management of rock art sites is confronted with a number of practical and theoretical issues, such as identifying what needs to be protected, determining why and for whom it needs to be protected, how to deal with the intangible, accommodating the constraints and expectations of different interest groups, or combining modes of action from different cultural backgrounds.

The session *Conservation and management of rock art sites* will explore these critical issues and concerns. Topics of interest include, but are not limited to:

- **Management Practices:** Examining effective site management strategies, including site access, monitoring, and sustainable tourism;
- **Raising Awareness:** Strategies to promote public understanding and appreciation of rock art sites, emphasizing their cultural and historical significance;
- **Intangible Cultural Heritage:** Approaches for integrating the intangible cultural heritage associated with rock art, such as oral traditions, rituals, and community engagement, into management and promotion efforts;
- **Conservation Challenges:** Addressing the degradation and preservation of rock art sites due to environmental, human, and technological factors;
- **Intervention efforts:** Mitigating degradation processes.

We welcome practical and theoretical contributions that highlight innovative solutions, case studies, and interdisciplinary approaches to these critical issues.

### **Session 4: “The politics of managing rock art heritage in southern Africa”**

**Chaired by Hugo Quemin (EDYTEM, Savoie Mont Blanc University) and Ndukuyakhe Ndlovu (SANParks & University of Pretoria)**

This session seeks to explore the political challenges defined by management approaches and accessibility issues with regard to rock art heritage. Rock art, often considered an essential component of cultural heritage, is increasingly embroiled in debates surrounding ownership, how it is managed and presented, and the politics around accessibility, particularly for rituals. Who controls access to these rock art sites, and under what conditions is such access granted, and what management regime is applied, is a fundamentally political matter? Different stakeholders – ranging from interested parties, Indigenous groups, government agencies, tourists, to scholars – often hold divergent views on what constitutes ‘ownership’, what it means to ‘preserve’ and ‘present’ cultural heritage for broader appreciation, and how access to these sites is granted. These divergent views have been elevated following the formal end of colonialism in southern Africa, with calls for decolonisation becoming enhanced in the postcolonial contexts. The purpose of this session is to examine these conflicts through a series of

theoretical discussions and case studies, where rock art is not only a symbol of cultural identity, but also a resource that is defined by much contestation. In particular, we will explore (i) how the commercialisation of rock art sites for tourism can serve to both protect and commodify these cultural resources, often in ways that overlook and marginalise Indigenous perspectives, (ii) establish what the implications are for these communities when their heritage is turned into an asset managed and profited from by others, (iii) assess how management approaches, whether top-down or participatory, impact on the accessibility and sustainability of rock art heritage, and (iv) review the extent to which management strategies can both reinforce and challenge existing power dynamics. Ultimately, the aim of this session is to move beyond simply acknowledging these issues to develop a more nuanced understanding of how they shape rock art heritage management practices in southern Africa.

### **Session 5: “Tourism and rock art in a postcolonial context: By whom? How? For whom? What content? Which issues?”**

**Chaired by Mélanie Duval (EDYTEM, CNRS, Savoie Mont Blanc University & RARI, University of the Witwatersrand) and Andla Nhamo (University of Zimbabwe)**

The objective of this session is to discuss the issues associated with the development of rock art sites for tourism. The focus will be on postcolonial contexts, which raise specific questions concerning the challenges of associating different types of actors, access arrangements and the content of discourses on rock art sites. As cultural sites in southern Africa, rock art sites can be the subject of very different tourism development, ranging from sites with a high level of tourist traffic (the Twyfelfontein site in Namibia, for example) to sites with more limited tourist traffic (the Makgabeng sites in the Limpopo province of South Africa). By putting different case studies into perspective, the objectives of this session are to examine: (i) the different ways of developing tourism at rock art sites, and to question the way in which the link between preservation and development issues is managed; (ii) the different forms of accessibility and what it means to ‘make a rock art site accessible’; (iii) the types of actors involved and the way in which so-called ‘local’ communities are or are not involved, which also means questioning the term ‘local community’ and (iv) the discourse surrounding rock art sites, which also means questioning the issues of guide training and discourse construction. By putting them into perspective, the various selected papers will provide an overview of the issues observed and avenues for action to consider a sustainable and inclusive tourism approach for rock art sites. However, the session remains open to proposals for other case studies, insofar as these will enable a better understanding of what happens in cultural contexts marked by postcolonial issues.

### **Session 6: “Redefining heritage practices: Participatory approaches and community involvement in archaeological heritage – new perspectives and unresolved issues”**

**Chaired by Leïla Baracchini (Institut de sciences sociales des religions, University of Lausanne) and Gilbert Pwiti (Sol Plaatje University)**

Research on archaeological heritage, particularly rock art heritage, has long been characterized by approaches that lacked genuine involvement from local communities. However, recent decades have seen the emergence of participatory and/or collaborative approaches aimed at rethinking the relationships between researchers, heritage institutions, and the communities concerned. These approaches are often seen as a new way to transform conventional practices, redefine heritage management, and empower people, particularly indigenous and local communities who have lost their rights to their heritage through colonialism. Nevertheless, the practical implementation of participatory or collaborative (co-constructive) approaches with “the communities” and their tangible effects have been the subject of debate. Several authors have offered critical perspectives on the current use of the “rhetoric of community”, which is often employed to make us “feel good”, without necessarily leading to profound changes in the relationships between scientists, heritage experts and local communities, nor challenging dominant conceptions of what constitutes heritage and how it should be managed.

Working with “the communities” indeed raises numerous questions, starting with: What do we mean by “community”? How do we determine who to engage with, and what implications does this have for various groups within the community? How do we ensure participatory engagement with stakeholders if we control most or all the decision-making power regarding research priorities? What does it do *to* and *for* those engaging in collaborative or participatory projects? How can we better reconcile the interests/priorities/needs of communities with the requirements of long-term scientific studies?

Drawing from case studies and fieldwork experiences, this panel invites an examination of the practices, challenges, and impacts of participatory and collaborative research in the study and valorization of archaeological heritage in Africa and globally, with a focus on rock art sites. We welcome contributions that explore the following themes: (i) Methodologies and tools employed to integrate local communities into research, knowledge production and heritage conservation projects; (ii) Tensions and negotiations surrounding archaeological knowledge, particularly between scientific and local knowledge systems; (iii) The effects of participatory and collaborative approaches on the perception and ownership of heritage by the communities involved and (iv) The ethical, legal, and political implications of local community participation in research.