

LUCAS SMITS AND THE ARAL PROJECT

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SUMMARY

This text pays tribute the efforts of Lucas Smits and his team in recording thousands of painted rock-shelters in Lesotho during the Analysis Rock Art Lesotho Project (1979-1986). More than fifteen thousand slides made during the ARAL can now be seen at the website of The African Rock Art Digital Archive.

RIASSUNTO

Questo testo rende omaggio agli sforzi di Lucas Smits e del suo Team nel lavoro di rilievo e documentazione di migliaia di ripari sotto roccia dipinti in Lesotho durante il Analysis Rock Art Lesotho Project (1979-1986). Più di quindicimila diapositive che sono scattate nell'ambito del progetto ARAL sono ora visibili sul sito web del "The African Rock Art Digital Archive".

A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION

Thirty years ago, we received a letter from Lucas Smits asking us if we would be willing to help him in the Analysis Rock Art Lesotho (ARAL) project. At the time we were working at the *Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici* (CCSP) in Capo di Ponte, Valcamonica in Brescia, Italy. Among the many projects we participated in at CCSP, one was the World Archive of Rock Art¹ (WARA). This invitation was extremely appealing. Professionally, it gave us the opportunity to see and study wonderful rock-art in southern Africa and endow WARA with photographs of the rock paintings of Lesotho. Personally, it meant returning to the region where we were born and left at an early age.

Lucas Smits's team had, in the months before, suffered a sad loss. The main fieldworker had been murdered for the sake of stealing a few Rand. Finding researchers prepared to go for just a few months and take charge of fieldwork had not been easy. We met Lucas at the 1984 "Valcamonica Symposium" held in Breno. During those days, we talked to him about our desire of returning to South Africa, especially to study rock-art and how that had been impossible. Under the Apartheid regime, it would not have been possible for us to get married. One of us (Ludwig) was classified as "Cape Coloured" and the other (Mila), "White". Even with British and Portuguese passports, our marriage could have been perceived as an offence *vis-à-vis* the laws of South Africa under

1 <http://www.ccsp.it/web/WARA/WARAhOMEENG.html>

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** Project4Dimensions (UK-Portugal-Brasil), Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici, Cooperativa Archeologica "Le Orme dell'Uomo"

the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act. Fortunately, events in 1985 spelt the death knell of Apartheid and circumstances had started to change. The situation in Kingdom of Lesotho was also quite different. We promised our families that we would only cross South Africa to reach Lesotho.

In the spring of 1986 we accepted the invitation of Lucas and flew to Johannesburg. There, we took a train to Bloemfontein. There were still carriages for "Whites", but most of the train was mixed or "Non-white"; when the train pulled into railway stations, many carriages with "Non-white" passengers stopped beyond the platform. Lucas and his wife Paula met us in Bloemfontein and took us to Roma, where the University of Lesotho is based and where ARAL had its office. In the next two months, along with Taole Tesele, who Lucas had trained as a rock art recorder, we travelled the Drakensberg mountain range in Lesotho recording many rock-art shelters. Every fortnight, we returned to the University and enjoyed a good shower and the wonderful cakes and custard of Paula.

After a short two-day rest, Lucas gave us an envelope with the instructions for the next couple of weeks. In a white four-wheel drive pickup packed with camping gear and food, Taole our fellow companion and we two left for the field. Our "mission" was to record the remaining rock-art sites in Lucas's list following the ARAL method (SMITS 1988). Among the sites we recorded some were visited by Lucas during his first years in the country and needed to be recorded using the ARAL approach.

Daily routine started with Taole and the local guide setting out to find rock-shelters. In a traditional African way, we asked the local chief for permission to access an area; the chief also told us where we could put up our tent and leave belongings. By car or sometimes on foot, with equipment, we researched and documented sites. We photographed and measured sites while Taole made wonderful drawings of figures on rock-surfaces and filled-in records. Methodic photography of a single site could take several days. In those times there were no GPS devices or satellite pictures to aide us and much of the time, not even radio reception. Isolation was almost total. Once, at the end of April that year, after getting back to Roma, we jokingly asked if nuclear missiles had wiped out the rest of the world. To our surprise, Lucas and Paulo anxiously told us that our colleagues in Valcamonica, as in most of Europe, were affected by a radioactive cloud from the Chernobyl explosion. Indeed, the world could have "ended" during the days we had been happily recording rock-art in the highlands of Lesotho!

The general difficulties of the project, the local situation and the strong commitment took a toll on the health of Lucas. One day, we came back and heard that Lucas had been taken hospital in Bloemfontein. It became ever more important to do the work as best possible. During the months we took part in the project, we know now, that we had the honour of participating in one of the most important recording efforts in the field of rock-art in the world.

LUCAS G. SMITS

Lucas Gerhardus Alfonsus Smits, son of Johan Gerhard and Maria Hendrika (Kuppens) Smits was born on 2nd of August 1931 in Groningen, in

the Netherlands (Fig.1). He gained a first degree in Human Geography at the State University of Utrecht in 1953 followed by a Master (Arts) in Human Geography at the same university in 1957. At the end of that year he married Pauline Marie Theresia Gerritzen. Paula will be a dedicated companion in his life and research. He starts his career as a geography teacher at St. Norbertus Lyceum, Roosendaal (1957 – 1961) in his home country. In 1962, he accepted the job of lecturer in Human Geography at Pius XII University College, University Botswana-Lesotho-Swaziland, at Roma, Lesotho. He spent the rest of his career in Lesotho. In 1967, he became Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at the same University and later (1978), Associate Professor of Human Geography of what then became the University Lesotho, also in Roma (Maseru). He retired in 1986 and went back to his home country, where he still lives in Ellecom.



Fig. 1 - Lucas Smits at the Pala Pinta painted rock-shelter, Alijó, Portugal (photo MSA)

During his early years in Lesotho, he developed a strong interest in rock-art. This passion made him visit many rock-art sites in many countries around the world such as Botswana (1965, 1972 1982 and 1983), Swaziland (1970), South Africa (1962, 1974, 1981, 1984,1985, 1986, and 1991), Namibia (1976), Zimbabwe (1970), Tassili'N' Ajjer and Hoggar, Algeria, (1968), Valcamonica, Italy, (1980, 1984, 1987 and 1989), Norway, Stjødal (1990), France (1967, 1989, 1992), Spain (1967, 1988 and 1990), Portugal (1998, 2005), South & South Western United States of America (1973, 1989, 1994), Canada, Vancouver Island (1983), Australia, Arnhemland, Western Australia, Kimberleys and Cape York (1976, 1977, 1988 and 1992).

In many of these locations Lucas Smits gave lectures and talks about the rock art of Lesotho and presented papers in many meetings and congresses such as in the International Workshop on the Conservation of Rock Art in Perth, Australia, the Congress on Conservation in Archaeology and the Applied Arts, the Valcamonica Symposia of 1984 (Breno) and 1989 (Lovere), the AURA Congresses of 1988 (Darwin) and 1992 (Cairns), the IFRAO International Rock Art Congresses of 1994 (Flagstaff) and 1998 (Vila Real). In 2005, Lucas Smits was the guest of honour in the "*II Jornadas Transmontanas de Arqueologia*" held in Alijó, Douro in the north of Portugal.

THE ANALYSIS ROCK ART LESOTHO PROJECT (1979-1986)

Lucas Smits created and directed a research project at National University of Lesotho to document the paintings present in numerous rock-shelters of the

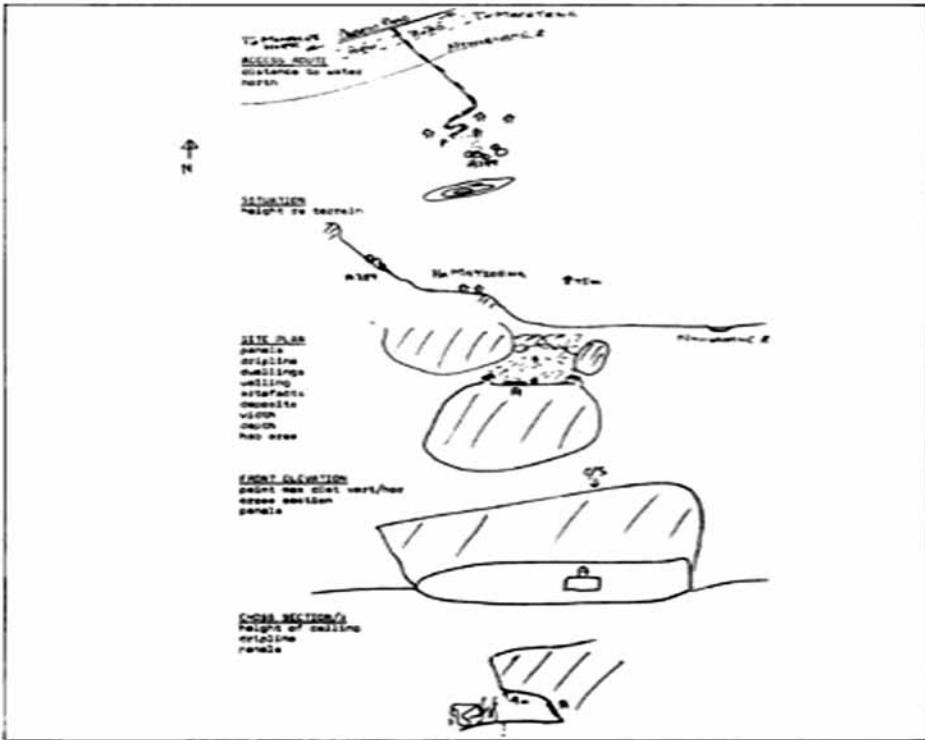


Fig. 2 - Example of ARAL site sketch (Smits 1988, pp. 97)

Kingdom. The work was financed by WOTRO, the Netherlands Foundation for Advancement of Tropical Research and the Directorate of Technical Assistance, Ministry of Development Cooperation of the Netherlands during the first years and from 1982 by the Leverhulme Trust from London, UK. The ARAL project had as its main objective to record as many rock-art sites as possible following a precise methodology that included the compilation of a standard file with information on how to arrive, environmental description of the surrounding terrain and special remarks (Fig. 2). Every site was completely photographed in colour. Painted surfaces were divided in arbitrary panels using four "T" markers. The sides and diagonals of "panels" were measured and noted. Details of the main scenes, overlappings and important features were also photographed. Views from each site were photographed. Finally, each site was photographed from a distance with one of us pointing at the place. Figures were hand sketched (Fig. 3), mostly by the extremely talented Taole Tesele. Smits was always very apprehensive about the preservation and conservation of the imagery, "*our first responsibility towards rock art is to ensure its survival*" he wrote in an article published in the BCSP (SMITS 1988, p. 93). He also affirms in the same text that "[it] must be correctly deciphered before data can be extracted for description, analysis and interpretation" (SMITS 1988, p. 93). The huge amount of material collected by the project created another kind of problem. Lucas took much care in setting rules

on how to preserve the documentation itself. At the time there was no IFRAO scale, but every roll of film included photographs of a standard 18% reflectance grey card (SMITS 1988 p. 94). Slides were stored in plastic sheets held 20 photographs. In turn, these were stored in metal cabinets (SMITS 1998 p. 95). For a brief report on the ARAL framework and a step by step summary of the process, it is very useful to read the text published in 1988.

More than seven hundred sites where recorded following the ARAL method, more than 50000 photographs had been taken and are part of the ARAL Project, over 2000 photographs made by us are deposited in WARA of CCSP in Capo di Ponte.

THE AFRICAN ROCK ART DIGITAL ARCHIVE (SARADA)

In the last decades, the “Rock Art Research Institute”² (RARI) of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa collected a substantial quantity of materials (photographs, drawings, tracings).

In 2002, thanks to financial help of the “Ringing Rocks Foundation”³, Arizona (USA), a digital laboratory was created and the digitisation of the entire archive of RARI started. In the following year, the team at RARI realised that the equipment and know-how of the Ringing Rocks Digital Laboratory could be use to copy and digitise other collections. Here Lucas Smits found an opportunity to make the ARAL archive available. With the support of the Andrew W Mellon Foundation⁴ of New York (USA), the ARAL slides along with other collections such as the Iziko Museums of Cape Town, Natal Museum, National Museum (Bloemfontein), University of Cape Town (UCT), the University of South Africa (UNISA) and Janette Deacon (private collection) were digitised. Between 2005 and 2008 34,850 images of the ARAL project where scanned. A major step came with the creation of the The African Rock Art Digital Archive (SARADA)⁵ website (Fig. 4) where it is possible for anyone with Internet access to see,

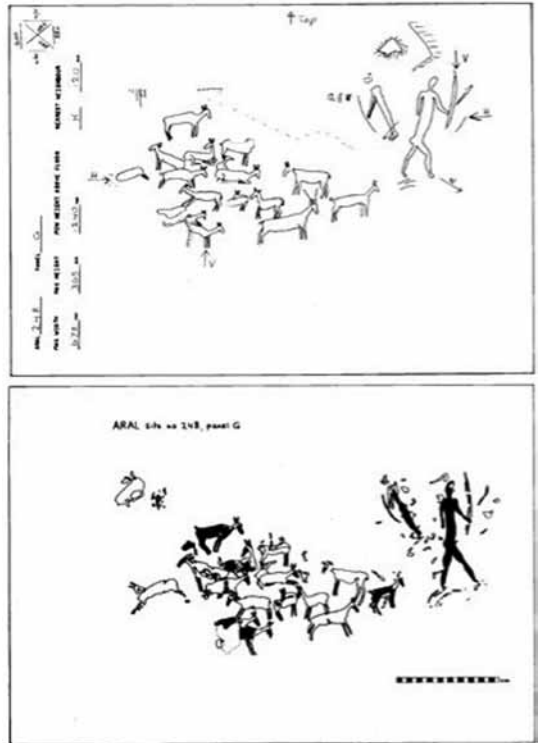


Fig. 3 - Above - example of an arbitrary panel sketched by Taole with recording of measurements in corner; below - ink drawing from photograph of the same the panel (Smits 1988, p. 95)

2 <https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/partner/the-rock-art-research-institute-university-of-the-witwatersrand-johannesburg>

3 <http://www.ringingrocks.org>

4 <https://mellon.org>

5 <http://www.sarada.co.za>

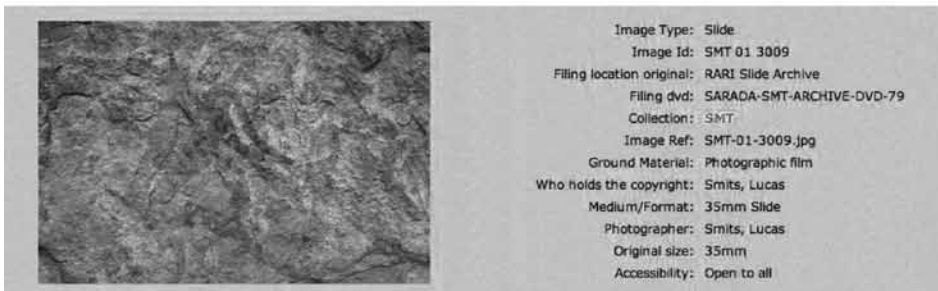
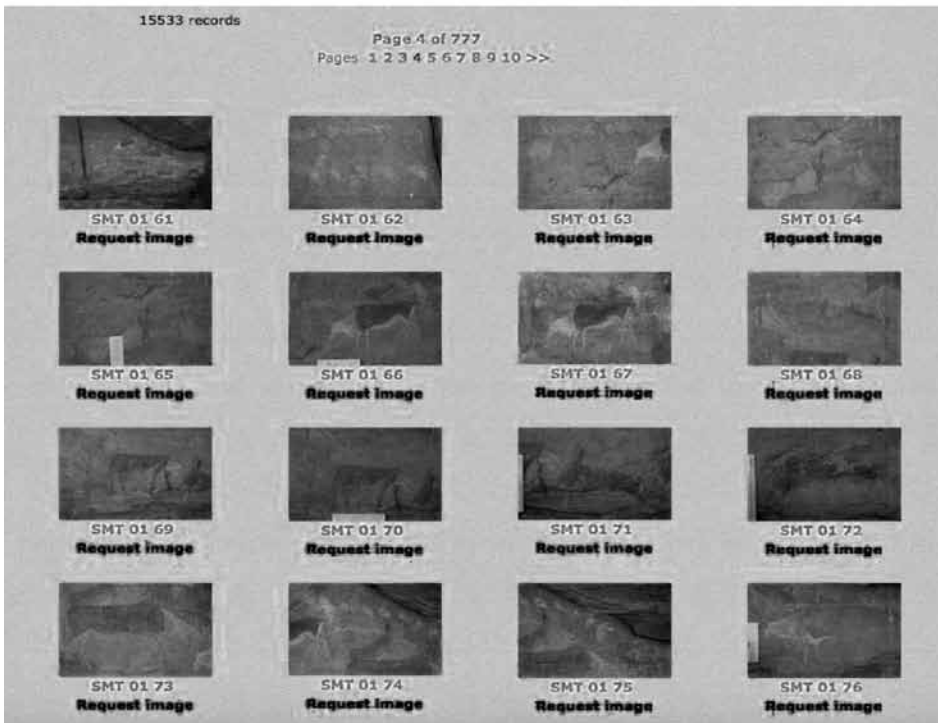


Fig. 4 - Banner of The African Rock Art Digital Archive website (SARARA site)

Fig. 5 - pages 4 of SARARA website with 16 thumbnail images of the ARAL project slides (SARARA site)

Fig. 6 - Details of one of the slides of the ARAL project (SARARA site)

download and order copies of many of the slides taken by the ARAL team and many other researchers and groups such as Henri Breuil (868 records), Harald Pager (1047 records), David Lewis-Williams (768 records) or the Natal Museum (24655 records). At present, it is possible to browse 15533 images from the ARAL project (Fig. 5).

The database of the page can be searched by type of image (all types, slide, artist rendering, etc.), subject (animals, equipment, human figures, trance dance), traditions (African hunter-gatherers, African pastoralists and herders, African farmers), people and institutions and locations (Western Cape, Northern Cape, Eastern Cape, Limpopo, KwaZulu-Natal) (Fig. 6).

THE LEGACY OF THE ARAL PROJECT

The exact number of sites visited by Lucas Smits during the years he lived in Lesotho is probably close to one thousand. The tens of thousands of images and documents are a contribution to the study of the rock art of Lesotho that will be even more important in the future. The project also transformed the lives of some of those that took part of it. Taole Tesele went on to study and graduate with a B.A. (Hons.) in Archaeology at the University of Cape Town in 1994. One of us (Mila) is presently the coordinator of a Master degree on Prehistoric Archeology and Rock-Art (Erasmus-Mundus) and teaches the ARAL method as a way of documenting rock-art in the recoding methods seminar. The other (Ludwig) developed a keen interest in database an information technology. The outstanding work carried out by Lucas Smits was shown in recent years for example during the construction of dam of Metolong, 35km from the capital Maseru and near the villages of Ha Seeiso and Ha Makotoko. Lucas had documented 27 sites in the area of the catchment where the impact will be considerable.

The digital age, with the use of computers, digital cameras, scanners and GPS prove the importance of several of the basic concepts of the ARAL method and how important they are when doing surveying and creating databases.

Acknowledgment

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