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Autores del paper: Neemias Santos da Rosa y Margarita Díaz-Andreu

Paper: Listening to ancient images: the acoustics of San rock art sites

Over the past two decades, scholars have drawn attention to the potential relationship between San rock art and the acoustics of the shelters in which the paintings were produced. However, this hypothesis has never been systematically tested in a study area with a significant sample of decorated sites. Thus, between April and May 2022, the ERC Artsoundscapes project –in collaboration with the KwaZulu-Natal Museum– conducted fieldwork to measure the acoustic properties of 28 rock art shelters located in the Drakensberg Mountains (South Africa). These sites exhibit panels with human and animal figures painted with remarkable anatomical details, in which complex scenes related to different dimensions of the daily and spiritual life of the San people have been represented. Moreover, in some of these places, such as Lonyana and Barnes I, it is possible to observe impressive compositions that seem to represent dances and other ritual activities –apparently related to shamanic practices– that could involve the production of music. The results of this work, obtained through the Impulse Response (IR) methodology, shed light on the human experience with sound in African prehistory and allows us to determine if acoustics could have influenced the production and use of the rock art produced in the study area.



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