

Emerging trends in rock-art research: hunter-gatherer culture, land and landscape

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Where is rock-art study heading? The author analyses the current trends and proposes a landscape-based, gender-sensitive approach for future work.

Key-words: landscape, rock art, shamanism, trends, gender

The archaeological perception of hunter-gatherer peoples who have created a large portion of the world's existing rock art has changed during the last 100 years. Radical shifts in prevailing theories about their rock art have emerged in the last decade (Bahn & Lorblanchet 1993; Clottes & Lewis-Williams 1998; Conkey 1996). Clottes & Lewis-Williams (1998) in their historical summary of rock-art theories remind us that the theories and conventional wisdom accepted in academia 'are not born in a conceptual void. They are influenced by the major trends of thought at any given time'. This paper presents some of the current trends of thought in rock-art research.

Where we have been

Because academic study is a continuum, it is helpful to identify the legacies of thought and theory which have provided some of the foundations for rock-art research, but which are in the process of being superseded by new trends, theories and wisdoms. These legacies include:

- 1 the dualistic concept that mind is opposed and superior to nature;
- 2 a vision of public culture in which women are either absent or in positions of inferior status;
- 3 an assumption that agriculture-based urban civilizations are superior to tribal hunter-gatherer cultures;
- 4 a position of privilege assigned to the White race (Bradley 1997; Classen & Joyce 1997; Ehrenberg 1989; Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1993; Schaafsma 1985).

In rock art's academic heritage, Eurocentric and monolithic theories such as those of Abbé

Breuil and Leroi-Gourhan dominated rock-art study for most of this century. Although based on tremendous field work and brilliant intellectual conceptualizations, strict allegiance to these theories squelched diverse viewpoints.

In addition, the complexities of American and European ideologies of conquest and colonialism affected research of the rock art created by conquered peoples. Such ideologies contributed to the ethnographic judgements which portrayed hunter-gatherer people as 'young children with no ability for conceptual thinking' (Willcox 1956: 85 in Dowson & Lewis-Williams 1994) wandering aimlessly across unknown and unclaimed territory.

New views of hunter-gatherer cultures

However, beginning with the world-wide cultural shifts of the late 1960s and continuing at an accelerated pace in the 1990s, the view of hunter-gatherers by archaeologists and anthropologists changed substantially (Conkey 1996; Ehrenburg 1989). One of the most significant developments was the participation of indigenous peoples in international academic rock art conferences. According to Robert Bednarik, founder of the Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA) in 1983 and co-founder of the International Federation of Rock Art Organizations (IFRAO) in 1988, the first time indigenes addressed a major international academic event on rock art was at the First AURA Congress in Darwin in 1988. At the Second AURA Congress in Cairns (1992), one-third of the Australian delegates were Aborigine and by the Third AURA Congress (Alice Springs 2000) there was a strong indigenous presence

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which included North American First Nations, San/Bushmen, Maoris and others. Bednarik (n.d.) states that 'the times when Eurocentric scholars stumbled blindly into the intricacies of a society whose sophisticated ontologies they did not comprehend are drawing to a close'.

Hunter-gatherers are now more commonly seen as master ecologists, people with sophisticated relational social structures and advanced environmental relationships, and as having extraordinarily stable and successful cultures that have sustained and nurtured people for tens of thousands of years (Bradley 1998; Dowson & Lewis-Williams 1994; Lawlor 1991; Ouzman 1998).

Shamanism, gender and cognitive bias

That previous patterns of thought may subtly persist even in the most advanced research is illustrated in a study of shamanism in French Palaeolithic caves (Clottes & Lewis-Williams 1998). Throughout the study, all of the illustrations and references to shamans assume they are male, except for one brief mention of both men and women practicing shamanism in San culture. Since there is clear evidence that both men and women were, and are, shamans in many hunter-gatherer societies, it is in the interest of theoretical validity that both genders be represented in important studies such as this one.

In fact, the linguistic evidence, ethnographic data and oral traditions of several cultures point to their earliest shamans being women. There is also a belief in some hunter-gatherer cultures that women have a more natural aptitude for the altered states of consciousness of shamans and that the more dramatic and difficult initiation procedures used to prepare men's consciousness are not necessary for women (Czaplicka 1914: 178; Fitzhugh & Crowell 1988: 248; Lawlor 1991). Men, women or both may have created specific instances of shamanic rock art. Because shamanic interpretation is one of the most important current theories concerning rock art, it is critical to future research that gender representations be as accurate as possible (Classen & Joyce 1997; Ehrenberg 1989: 18).

In addition, Glass-Coffin's (1999: 214) recent study of Peruvian female shamans points out that a demonization of female shamans occurred after contact with European culture and notes that 'women [shamans] — but not men [shamans] — were accused of diabolical deeds'. The

demonization of women shamans in relation to rock art should therefore be examined closely to determine if it derives from introduced or indigenous beliefs.

The known gender inversion patterns of some forms of shamanism, where male shamans dress as women and women shamans dress as men, also complicate this question (Czaplicka 1914; Fitzhugh & Crowell 1988: 370; *cf.* Whitley 1998 in regards to symbolic shamanic inversion in rock art). I suggest that the question of shamanic gender and ethnographic bias be specifically addressed by those introducing shamanic theories of rock art and, where no evidence is available (such as the Palaeolithic caves), shamans be presented as gender equal.

When exploring shamanic interpretations, it is also important to remember that shamanism is based on radically different cognitive structures than those of EuroAmericans (Irwin 1994; Lawlor 1991; Ouzman 1998) and that a loss of information and bias during the ethnographic information gathering and cognitive processing is inevitable. Shamanist cultures do not provide deep information even to their own members until certain cognitive thresholds are met by initiatory experiences. It is naïve to expect that the same people would, or even could, provide such information to representatives of an outside culture and cognitive system in powerful opposition to their own (Kehoe 1996; Geertz 1996).

Revising the context of rock art

The emphasis in interpreting rock art has historically been focused on style and motif, studying rock-art symbols as if they were on a page of a book or on an art canvas. These studies produced a large amount of valuable data. However, separating rock-art symbols from the material on which they were created 'breaks up any composition that might be evident on the rockface and divorces the data from all connection with the landscape' (Bradley 1997). Interpretation of rock-art symbols out of context 'has occurred even while our symbolic analyses of the art have become increasingly more detailed, and they have therefore run counter to a basic principle of symbolic analysis: the importance of context in symbolic meanings' (Whitley 1998).

There is a growing body of work, however, that recognizes the importance of interpreting rock art not only within the context of the

rockscape, but within a holistic context that includes a more accurate view of hunter-gatherer culture, landscape, information from contemporary native peoples, style and motif, and historical ethnographic and cultural material (Bradley 1997; Diaz-Granados & Duncan 2000; Clottes & Lewis-Williams 1998; Hartley 1992; Lee & Stasack 1999; Ouzman 1998; Schaafsma 1985; Stoffle *et al.* 1997; 2000; Whitley 1998).

Within this body of work, perceptions and knowledge about women in hunter-gatherer culture have expanded (Classen & Joyce 1997; Ehrenberg 1989). In addition, research into hunter-gatherer religion, especially shamanism, trance states and the ritual use and effect of hallucinogenic plants, has been pursued with greater respect and sensitivity for native cognitive and cultural systems (Boyd & Dering 1996; Conkey 1996; Hedges 1983; Hudson & Lee 1984; Irwin 1994; Lewis-Williams 1994; Ouzman 1998; Whitley 1998).

Current rock-art theories and procedures

These shifts in archaeological and anthropological values, and the new studies reflecting this shift, have opened the door to a wider scope of information, giving us the opportunity to access and process new data about rock art. Schaafsma (1985) notes that 'theory governs the questions we address and the methods and techniques that are useful in finding the answers'. Some of the current leading theories about the function and meaning of rock art now include:

- 1 Trance shamanism and entoptic/phosphene phenomenona (Clottes & Lewis-Williams 1998; Hedges 1983; Hyder & Lee 1994; Whitley 1998);
- 2 Shrines (Grant 1967; Schaafsma 1992: 17);
- 3 Archaeoastronomy (Hudson & Lee 1984);
- 4 Trade markings (Hartley & Vawser 1998);
- 5 Hunter (Taçon & Brockwell 1995);
- 6 Puberty and other communal rites (Grant 1967; Hudson & Lee 1984; Solomon 1998; Whitley 1998);
- 7 Riverine, territory and trail/path markers (Bradley 1997; Hyder 1989; Taçon *et al.* 1997; Tilley 1996);
- 8 Biographical and narrative (Klassen 1998);
- 9 Vision quest/non-shamanic trance (Whitley 1992);
- 10 Event/mythical/historical markers (Hudson & Lee 1984; Ouzman 1998; Schaafsma 1992: 77-85; Stoffle *et al.* 1997).

It is now time to develop standards and procedures that will assist us in discussing and interpreting this influx of new material. In their recent book, *The archaeology of rock-art*, Chippindale & Taçon (1998) state that 'rock art is rather an archaeological subject apart, so will the methods of its study be set rather apart. Since no settled standard has emerged . . . this is the time to explore the diversity of fruitful approaches and to recognize their unities'.

Chippindale & Taçon provide us with a good starting place to look at essential unities and approaches. Their essentials include: a definition of rock art; dating of rock art; and three approaches to interpretation, which are 'formal, informed, and analogy'. 'Formal' is defined as those approaches 'that depend on no inside knowledge. The information is restricted to that which is immanent in the image themselves or which we can discern from their relations to each other and to the landscape, or in relation to other archaeological context'. 'Informed' is defined as those approaches that 'depend on some source of insight passed on directly or indirectly from those who made and used the rock art through ethnography, ethnohistory, and historical record'. 'Analogy' is defined as the approach by which we interpret one thing by finding something else that it is like.

Land and landscape

In order to determine what *else* is essential in the interpretation of hunter-gatherer rock art, I suggest the most important theoretical question we can ask is: What is most fundamental and essential to all hunter-gatherer cultures?

The most obvious fundamental element is that hunter-gatherers have a sophisticated, specific and intimate relationship with the natural land upon which they live. This relationship is based, not on an animal or child-like instinctual/quasi-mystical interaction with their natural surroundings, but on an acute observation and perception of the environment which is part of an integrative cognitive whole (Irwin 1994). In hunter-gatherer cultures information about the environment is transmitted from generation to generation over thousands of years, resulting in a detailed compendium of vital environmental knowledge and extremely successful economies (Bradley 1997; Wright 1994; Conkey 1996; Diaz-Granados & Duncan 2000; Lewis-Williams *et al.* 1993; Smith 1994).

Unfortunately, neither cultural anthropology, from which the ethnographies emerge, nor archaeology (Bradley 1997), has historically had much to say about place, leaving a monumental gap in our understanding of rock art within the context of landscape. How people 'know their country' is, in anthropology and the social sciences, lightly charted territory. There are few intelligent maps for ethnographers to follow (Basso 1996: xvi). This gap, in studying and interpreting rock art, cannot be overstated.

Another essential fact about hunter-gatherer societies is that they are mobile societies and that they use sophisticated cultural navigational strategies to journey across land and along water routes. Instead of the 'aimless wandering' projected upon hunter-gatherers under the influence of old cultural biases, 'prehistoric and historic hunter-gatherer people traveled and transported goods across truly enormous tracts of country, possessed efficient watercraft, and utilized riverine and marine resources' (Wright 1994). Hunter-gatherers used rock art as a navigational device which cognitively represented the environment as a network of places (David *et al.* 1994; Hartley & Vawser 1998).

Understanding hunter-gatherer strategies of navigation can assist us in understanding and interpreting rock art. Knowledge of celestial patterns, as indicated at archaeoastronomy rock-art sites, and rock-art markings along trails, paths, riverine systems, migration routes, and at the borders of sea and land, refer us to the journeying of hunter-gatherer peoples. Bradley (1997) points out that for hunter-gatherers, tenure is based on sites and paths, and that territories are conceived in terms of trails running through landscape and the views across it, and not by enclosed territorial boundaries. In American Indian and Australian Aboriginal tradition, many stories and myths move across a specific landscape which is marked with story or song points. Moving from point to point permits a living person to re-enact physically and experience directly the story or song and to acquire an internal map that can be followed on the ground (Stoffle *et al.* 1997). The context of landscape for hunter-gatherer peoples includes consciously navigated journeys across the land and therefore rock art should always be *questioned* as to whether or not its presence and meaning is related to these journeys (Bradley 1997; Conkey 1996; David *et al.* 1994; Diaz-

Granados & Duncan 2000; Hartley & Vawser 1998; Lee & Stasack 1999; Ouzman 1998; Smith 1994; Sognnes 1998; Taçon *et al.* 1997; Tilley 1996).

The importance of landscape context in the interpretation of hunter-gatherer rock art is also reflected in the location of mythic and historic events, cosmological structures, wisdom teachings and ritual symbolism within the specific landscape. In reference to the rock art at Writing-On-Stone in Canada, Klassen (1998) notes that 'within traditional Plains cultures, the entire landscape is charged with medicine powers, but this spiritual energy is also concentrated in certain sacred areas, generally unusual or outstanding landscape features'. Ouzman (1998) comments that 'southern African rock art sites represented physical and conceptual places at which these [the cosmology of three worlds] connected and interpenetrated'. Hudson & Lee's (1984) study points out that 'the Chumash recognized specific features within their environment as being connected with mythological events and beings of the past. In essence, the rock art at these sites represented human knowledge about the past, and when associated with specific myths the art served to facilitate sacred communication in a ritual context'. Whitley (1998) says 'rock-art sites — their physical location in the landscape, geomorphological attributes (rock outcrop, cliff face, rock-shelter walls and ceilings) and the rock-panel faces themselves — were, in fact, important symbols in their own right; instead of serving as neutral backdrops for rock-art motifs, they were in a real sense as symbolically important as the iconography'. In Australia, the living tradition of rock art and ethnographic studies show that various estates have been assigned cosmological identities corresponding to specific Dreaming beings. The entire landscape gains its identity and is united into a cosmological whole by its participation in a unified system of land and law expressed in the Dreaming (David *et al.* 1994).

Researchers who focus on shamanistic interpretations of rock art note that the rock face itself contributes to meaning and interpretation because the rock is believed to be a portal or permeable membrane separating realities. The cracks and features of the rock are incorporated into the rock art as representations of the spiritual belief system (Clottes & Lewis-Williams

1998; Whitley 1998). The sound and audible properties of the rock may also be significant in its interpretation (Hedges 1993; Ouzman 1998).

Hudson & Lee (1984) identified three categories of power within the Chumash and they all connected with the land. They stated that 'the bond between mythological event and ritual expression indicates that such sacred locations and [landscape] features were recognized by the community as a whole'. Their data led them to conclude that shamanic sites were located in 'natural' situations that provided alignments with the summits of sacred and conspicuous features (i.e. mountain tops or valleys) and that these alignments are related to 'natural' events, especially celestial astronomical events.

It has been thought that Informed approaches are particularly useful for insights into the concepts and spiritual lives of studied people. Based on the above evidence, I suggest that the Formal information of the relationship of rock-art site to landscape provides crucial information that assists us in understanding those concepts and spirituality. Without knowledge of the landscape, and without situating the rock art in relation to the features of the rock and the landscape, we cannot fully understand and interpret Informed sources such as ethnographies and histories. Rock art is fundamentally based in the land.

Whitley (1998) expresses this notion by saying 'the defining characteristic of "rock-art" is its placement on geological substrate, which is to say the natural landscape. With occasional exceptions we have largely ignored this defining contextual attribute of rock-art in our analyses of it'. Schaafsma (1985) concludes that the contextual relationships between figures, panels, rock art, other cultural remains and a site's topographic situation are crucial for understanding meaning and function. More recent studies have elegantly blended in the contexts of native people's oral history and ethnographic material (Stoffle *et al.* 2000).

It is evident that no comprehensive interpretation of hunter-gatherer rock art can be put forth that ignores its location within, and rela-

tionship to, the landscape and therefore I suggest that landscape be considered an essential context for rock-art studies (Conkey 1996; David *et al.* 1994; Diaz-Granados & Duncan 2000; Emerson & Hughes 2000; Grove 1999; Hartley & Vawser 1998; Lee & Stasack 1999; Ouzman 1998; Smith 1994; Stoffle *et al.* 1997; Taçon & Brockwell 1995; Taçon *et al.* 1997; Whitley 1998).

Where we are going

Rock art has been inherited by all of humankind as a message from our ancestors. We will never perhaps be able to decipher the exact meaning of these paintings and markings on stone, nor perfectly recreate the cultures and environments in which they were made, because those times have disappeared. But the places remain. Let us begin there. Let us acknowledge where the rock is located, near what landscape feature, in relationship to what body of water, in what relationship to the sky. Let us inquire if this rock-art place is referenced in the stories and songs of any hunter-gatherer people who recently lived on this land. Let us try to discover if this rock-art place has a relationship to trails and paths and other places.

When we reconstruct and imagine hunter-gatherer rock-art activities which may have occurred at these places, let us beware of our own cultural biases and projections and question those imaginings in which there are no women in positions of power. Let us also acknowledge that there are cognitive and perceptive states and expressions that EuroAmerican trained minds may not be able to comprehend. By contextualizing rock art within the landscape and incorporating the dimensions of movement, sound, touch and other states of consciousness into our interpretations, we move closer and closer to recreating the world of the hunter-gatherers, and thereby closer and closer to understanding the messages they left behind. And perhaps, through the process of understanding these ancestral messages and their context, we may even adopt some of these contexts and dimensions to enliven and enrich our own modern culture.

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