

COMMENT

Ways of Looking at Prehistoric Rock Art

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Introduction

Rock art – paintings, and pecked or engraved images on rocks, whether in caves, shelters, or in the open-air – exists in all but a couple of countries of the world [Bahn, 1998]. It spans a period from at least 35,000 years ago to historic times, comprises many millions of images from hundreds of thousands of sites, and thus constitutes the vast majority of the world's art, and art history. It is a phenomenon that has seen a huge upsurge of interest in the last few decades, with not only numerous publications and conferences, but also a proliferation of calendars, T-shirts, mugs, jewellery, and garments bearing rock art images. Many people who are famous for other things have worked on or published rock art – for example, scholars such as Mary Leakey or authors like Joy Adamson or Erle Stanley Gardner. Rock art studies have always been the domain of the “amateur” as well as the “professional”, and amateurs remain of huge importance in this field. Indeed, most of the principal rock art organisations, along with their journals, were created by, are run by, and consist largely of amateur enthusiasts who include some of the world's foremost specialists. The growing popularity of the art brings an ever-increasing risk of pollution, damage, and vandalism, as well as outright thefts of wall or cave images. The rock art associations are dedicated to the discovery, recording, and conservation of rock art, and play a major role in striving to teach schoolchildren and adults alike about the incalculable importance of this irreplaceable, universal heritage and about the need to respect and protect it.

Early ideas and approaches

Most early “discoveries” of rock art by the world of written scholarship came about accidentally, as missionaries, scholars, or explorers travelled around, reporting on anything of interest which they encountered. It has only been in recent times, especially the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, that systematic searches began. Naturally, the early reports had no conception of the age of the art – indeed, even today, most rock art remains undated – since archaeology had not yet become established, and there was as yet no inkling of the antiquity of humankind or of the very concept of prehistory. The earliest published views about rock images were that they were something diabolical,

made by or linked to the devil, or that they were pictures made by shepherds to avoid boredom, or that they were a form of writing (often runic inscriptions in Eurasia). The often huge painted figures in rock shelters in Baja California were the subject of local legends about giants, because they were sometimes painted at great height. Christians, especially missionaries, were alarmed that the images – for example, in the New World – were often still worshipped by indigenous idolaters; they therefore felt the need to combat native respect or veneration by attempts to exorcize, neutralize, or convert the images: some were Christianized by having crosses superimposed on them, while others were simply destroyed. Where motifs in South America seemed to represent human feet, they were usually interpreted as footprints left by St Thomas who had supposedly preached in this continent.

Approaches to the interpretation of Ice Age cave art, which began to be discovered in the late nineteenth century (the most famous example being the cave of Altamira, whose art was first noticed in 1879), exemplify views of rock art elsewhere [Bahn & Vertut, 1997]. The first and simplest theory put forward to explain its existence was that it had no meaning – it was simply idle doodlings, graffiti, play activity: mindless decoration by hunters with time on their hands. But it soon became clear that something more was involved – the restricted range of animals depicted, their frequent inaccessibility and their association in caves, the palimpsests and undecorated panels, the enigmatic “signs”, the many figures which are purposely incomplete or ambiguous, and the caves which were decorated but apparently never inhabited all combined to suggest that there was complex meaning behind the subject matter and the location of cave art figures.

By the turn of the twentieth century, rock art was being interpreted in fairly simple and literal terms, most notably by the leading French specialist Henri Breuil [1952]. Utilitarian theories took over, largely thanks to the appearance of published accounts of “primitive” peoples around the globe, particularly of Australian Aborigines. These “primitive” makers of stone tools were equated with those of the Ice Age, and so it was assumed that the same motivation lay behind the art of both cultures. In particular, “sympathetic magic” was seen as the explanation for much cave art [Bégouën, 1929] (and indeed rock art in other areas such as parts of North America). This phenomenon comprises hunting magic and fertility magic, and operates on the same basis as pins in a wax doll – i.e. the effect resembles the cause. The depictions of animals were produced in order to control or influence the real animals in some way – any injury to the image would likewise be inflicted on its subject. In short, it was supposed that the art was intended to exert influence at a distance, rather like modern advertisements: it was purely functional, and directly related to the need for food. Unfortunately, the dominance of this theory during the first half of the twentieth century led to evidence for ritual and magic being seen in almost every aspect of Ice Age art. But in fact there are no hunting scenes among the thousands of cave-art images (unlike in the open-air rock art of many regions), and few images of animals which seem to have been struck by missiles [Bahn, 1991]. Similarly, there are virtually no scenes of sexual activity between animals or humans – again, unlike the open-air rock art of many regions, where sex scenes can be graphic and frequent.

The early and mid-twentieth century also saw frequent claims for some kind of “shamanism” being involved in cave and rock art [e.g. Lommel, 1967] – especially the few figures in cave art which seem to be part human and part animal: these were variously called sorcerers, horned gods, or shamans in masks, on the basis of similarities to ethnographic depictions and accounts. One suggestion was that many animal figures in cave

art were “ongones”, spirits which took various animal and human forms, and which were asked to help in hunting, matters of health, and so on [Glory, 1968]. The shamanistic explanations, like similar ones based on totemism, involved ethnographic parallels, but it was a reasonable assumption, from what we know of Ice Age life and culture, that beliefs of this kind existed at that time and played a role in the production of art.

More recent approaches

In the mid-twentieth century, it was realised that explanations which depended on ethnographic parallels had led to an impasse, since they involved an unacceptable amount of subjectivity, wishful thinking, and assumptions, often distorting or selecting the facts to fit a preselected pet theory derived from ethnographic accounts, and uncritically incorporating elements from a wide array of places, periods, and cultures. Attention was now devoted to developing more complex (and probably more accurate) interpretations, and it was decided to focus on the art itself – by quantifying each category of image, and treating cave art not as a random accumulation of individual pictures, but as a carefully laid-out composition with each cave (an idea developed primarily by the french prehistorian André Leroi-Gourhan [1965]). In short, there was a move away from analogy to observation, from naive and particularist explanations to the structures reflected in the subject matter and its associations.

Away from cave art, specialists in other areas – most notably South Africa and Australia – now likewise placed great emphasis on quantification, and urged that the rock art corpus should be recorded as objectively and comprehensively as possible [e.g. Vinnicombe, 1976]. However, counting and listing require enormous amounts of time and labour, and do not reveal much about meaning – they merely provide the raw material on which hypotheses can be based. More recently, therefore, there has been a move towards environmental and spatial studies – examining rock art in its landscape [Bradley, 1997] – and greater efforts have been made to integrate rock art with contemporary archaeological data and cultural contexts. Some researchers have attempted a semiotic approach, treating rock art as complex, symbolic messages [Collot et al., 1982]. Others have focused on archaeoastronomical interpretations – especially in North America, where it seems indisputable that some rock art was closely linked to celestial phenomena, functioning as solar observatories or calendrical markers [Krupp, 1982].

Another new approach is the study of the acoustic properties of decorated caves and rock shelters, an intriguing and long-neglected factor which tries to revive something that one might imagine gone for ever: the sound dimension which accompanied whatever rituals may have been carried out in such sites [Waller, 1993; Dauvois, 1994]. Echoes are common in and around decorated rock shelters all over the world, as is the equally mysterious and impressive phenomenon of cavities which focus and project sound, while many sites have rocks which ring like chimes when struck.

Since the 1960s, as in archaeology itself, there has been a desperate desire to find some new approach, some fresh fashion to adopt. Overall, there has been a splintering of approaches, and a new emphasis on the non-material, the ideological, and the social aspects of prehistoric art. For example, ship images in Scandinavia, originally seen as battles between Viking vessels, are now seen by some as ambiguous symbols of social

interaction and unity, with rock art sites marking social boundaries or ownership of places and resources [Sognnes, 1994].

The past 25 years have also seen a new emergence of the idea of “shamanism” being responsible for some rock art. As shown above, this concept is far from new, yet the current manifestation of the theory is often presented as an intellectual breakthrough. This time, the emphasis has been placed firmly on postulating that rock art all over the world is mostly imagery derived from “trance” and “hallucinations” caused by rhythmic dancing, drugs, or other factors – phenomena which are commonly but erroneously associated with shamanism [Lewis-Williams & Dowson, 1989; Clottes & Lewis-Williams, 1996]. The timing of the theory’s resurrection was no coincidence. As the eminent American rock art specialist Clement Meighan wrote [1982: 226], “It is no accident that recent years have seen a vast increase in the amount of publication relating rock art to various kinds of drug-induced visions. It is our culture that has been intensely interested and preoccupied with the drug culture during the past 20 years, and it is out of our own minds that the thought comes about prehistoric man’s use of drugs and the possible relationship this may have had to rock art.” Unfortunately, the new manifestation of the “shamanic hypothesis” leads one nowhere. It is partly based on a very idiosyncratic and metaphorical reading of a few statements in early South African ethnography. Claimed to be evidence for trance experiences, these statements are in fact much more likely to be straightforward accounts of Bushman mythology [see Solomon, 1997]. The other basis of the “new” theory is a distorted and superficial view of shamanism, together with some neurophysiological data which are rejected by virtually all specialists in that field. Nevertheless, for a while it became fashionable to try applying this theory, usually without any justification, to every corpus of rock art in the world, with a “one-size-fits-all” mentality. The attempt to apply it to Ice Age art has proved particularly unwelcome among specialists in that domain [e.g. Bahn, 1997] – although very popular in the media which love simplistic and all-embracing theories of this kind – and has generally been seen as a leap backwards to the approaches of the early twentieth century.

But alongside those who still attempt to “read” rock art, there are growing numbers of specialists who are now abandoning interpretation, preferring instead to focus on more tangible and attainable aspects such as location, technique, content, chronology, and change through time. Some researchers constantly claim that those who reject attempts to interpret prehistoric rock art are “pessimists”, and that one really needs to rise to the challenge. This is nonsense. “Pessimist” is a word that idealists use to describe a realist, and it is simple common sense to recognize the limits of what one can do with prehistoric data – as André Leroi-Gourhan often said, “il est difficile de converser avec un mort sans apporter soi-même les répliques.” Michel Lorblanchet, who is not only France’s foremost specialist in Ice Age art but also has extensive experience of rock art in Australia and India, and of the people who still create such images in those countries, has expressed his view [in Besse 1999: 59, my emphasis] with impeccable logic: “chercher aujourd’hui la signification d’une peinture est ridicule. . . . Cette peinture a pu être reprise plusieurs fois, être exploitée dans le temps, connaître l’évolution des croyances humaines, comme le montre l’ethnographie. On ne pourra donc jamais approcher de près les idées des auteurs, la signification ne sera jamais connue, et il faut avoir l’honnêteté de le dire.”

On the other hand, although one can certainly learn a great deal from prehistoric rock art without attempting to “read” it in any way, many researchers find it unsatisfying to

shrug one's shoulders and dismiss almost the whole of humankind's past artistic output simply as illegible markings. In societies without written records, the meaning of things is fluid and will certainly have changed through time, so that any attempt to decipher "the" meaning of a prehistoric art motif or panel, to read it like a Roman inscription, is not only impossible but absurd. These are messages from other cultures, other worlds, and we know nothing of the artists' original intentions or the transformations in meanings that the art has undergone, so there is no single correct interpretation. However, since it is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness, what one can certainly do is to put forward observations, interpretations, and hypotheses about the images, which can be evaluated and eventually discarded when something better comes along. And of course, such interpretations are strengthened immeasurably when they are based on the testimony of people who are descended from the original artists. For example, whereas the "new shamanic hypothesis" mentioned above relies heavily on ethnography derived from the modern Kalahari San, people who know nothing of rock art and who are far removed in space and time from the Bushmen who produced the rock paintings in question, it has recently been ascertained that many genuine descendants of the Bushmen artists still exist, and they can provide invaluable testimony about the decorated sites [Prins, 2000]. For them, this art is not linked to hallucinatory imagery, but depicts mythological beings, and rock art, as far as they are concerned, has much to do with marking boundaries. In short, one can learn a certain amount about the beliefs and meanings that lie behind rock art from solid testimony of this kind. Where no such testimony exists, one can certainly produce interpretations and hypotheses – new ideas are always welcome in archaeology – as long as they are clearly presented as speculations rather than truths, whether in academic literature or in the media. Problems only arise when prehistorians ignore this rule, and believe that they hold "the key" to interpreting rock art. There are many keys, and prehistoric art cannot be encompassed by any grand, unifying theory. Sites with rock art were probably of all kinds – the equivalent of dwellings, churches, shrines, playgrounds, schools, libraries, clubs, and meeting places. Rock art is not necessarily all sacred and mysterious. Some of it may be games or a celebration of life, narratives, or territorial boundaries. Even within the realm of the spiritual or religious, the art may have had a wide range of significance including tribal stories, myths of creation and renewal, sacred beings, rites of passage such as puberty, death, and rebirth, tribal secrets, laws, taboos, love, sorcery and transformation, prayers for rain and fertility, astronomical markers, and animal totems. And since "art" as such was probably not seen as a separate component of life, it must always be seen within the ecological and social aspects of each period and culture. Rock art will also have conveyed a variety of messages: children will not have viewed it in the same way as adults, while men and women may well have seen and experienced it in different contexts. Rock art is supremely ambiguous, and can therefore be all things to all people. This is why there have been so many different approaches to it already, and doubtless there will be many more to come for those researchers who are prepared to study it with fresh eyes and open minds.

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