



Book Reviews

A Companion to Rock Art

Edited by Jo McDonald and Peter Veth

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This international volume on rock art provides a complete, comprehensive and up-to-date overview of most of the main research theories and methods used, and the research questions addressed, in current archaeological debates on rock art, be they global or regional.

It was conceived by the editors as a tool “for teaching the next generation of rock art researchers” in a 13-week semester cycle. But this volume is more than a collection of educational materials. It gathers research papers addressing some key topics in rock-art studies, and thus becomes essential reading for anyone interested and/or conducting rock-art research today. The 37 contributions by 57 international scholars from five continents are structured into 11 meaningful sections, with two to four papers per section. While the chapters in each section are intended to address a specific issue, well defined by the section headings (I. Explanatory frameworks; II. Inscribed landscapes; III. Rock art at the regional level; IV. Engendered approaches; V. Form, style and aesthetics; VI. Contextual rock art; VII. The mediating role of rock art; VIII. Rock art, identity and indigeneity; IX. Rock art management and interpretation, X. Dating rock art, XI. Rock art in the digital age), some key questions are explored recursively across the volume. This shows their significance for achieving a more complete understanding of rock art, as a tool for exploring past and present human behaviour and cultural practices. Questions of time (relative or chronometric), place, past and present as well as individual and group identities, function and/or meaning are explored through the systematic deconstruction and analysis of the motifs, themes and panels, their patterns of variation, the context and/or the landscapes, from a variety of international perspectives and backgrounds. Case studies from Australia and the Pacific, Northern and Southern America, Siberia, Europe, Africa and India, and a wide range of periods, from the European Upper Palaeolithic to current Australian rock art, fully illustrate these questions. All these studies remind us once more that rock art is not only about the decoration of passive surfaces with beautiful images, as emphasised by Blinkhorn *et al.* in chapter 11. Rock art is an alternative source of information about human behaviour and practices, and can be used to explore continuities and discontinuities, human interaction, past territoriality, group mobility, symbolic behaviour and so forth.

The large number of chapters prevents us from briefly summarising each of them, but some key issues for current debates are worth mentioning.

Of special interest for interpretative approaches is Lewis-Williams’ reflective contribution (chapter 2) on the misinterpretation and misuse of his concept of shamanism to universally interpret rock art. As he states, “shamanism” is only one of the many potential interpretations of rock art, and thus it cannot be systematically used to interpret past arts.

While past interpretative trends used to emphasise a unique function for Pleistocene art (for a brief summary of past interpretative schools, see Moro and González, chapter 15), current studies recognise the multiple functions of past and present imagery and the variety of social contexts (religious, social and political) in which art operates. Take as an example the multiple functions of Western Desert People’s rock art, summarised by McDonald and Veth (chapter 6: 96), which includes marking place and individual’s affiliation, storytelling or instructive purposes, initiation ceremonies, visual representation of an ancestral being or event, and so forth.

It is fully accepted throughout the volume that only through a thoughtful analysis and understanding of the context of rock art (the walls, the surrounding archaeological site, the geographical context, the acoustic or other sensorial properties, etc.) can we achieve a more comprehensive interpretation of the art and its function. Bégouën, Fritz and Tosello’s study (chapter 21) of the unique Palaeolithic clay bison from Tuc d’Audoubert Cave (Ariège, France) in their archaeological context is one of several examples in this volume showing the value of contextual data to interpret past art.

When analysed in context, rock art can inform on multiple aspects of past behavioural systems, such as the emergence of different ideologies (Davidson, chapter 4); different levels of social identity (Hayward & Chinquino, chapter 7), such as maritime identity (McNiven & Brady, chapter 5); the existence of a common language along different territories (Nash, chapter 8); or the presence of aggregation sites (McDonald, chapter 11) among others. Of special interest is the role of rock art to test previous archaeological assumptions, such as the assumed post-Lapita isolation of Southern Melanesia, which is challenged by Sand (chapter 10), arguing from the presence of similar rock-art motifs in different archipelagos in the region.

Chapters in this volume also demonstrate that despite the controversies on the value of style for rock art research

at the end of the past century (for a short summary, see Domingo, chapter 18), in the twenty-first century, style continues to be a common tool to classify the art into significant assemblages and to discuss issues of time, place and identity (Domingo *et al.* 2008) (see, e.g., McDonald & Veth, chapter 6; Tratebas, chapter 9; Domingo, chapter 18; Sundstrom, chapter 19).

These central research questions, probably the more traditional within the field of archaeological inquiry, are complemented by other more recent or alternative topics, revealing the continuous growth and reinvention of this branch of the archaeological discipline.

While not new, engendered approaches to rock art are unusual, so the chapters in part IV provide new case studies to this debate. Far from being purely feminist approaches to rock art, the chapters in this section aim to explore to what extent rock art can contribute to identifying who made the art, patterns of social organisation and gender relations (McDonald, chapter 13), especially in contexts in which little to no ethnographic or historical information exists (Hays-Gilpin, chapter 12). But to understand gender relations through rock art, it is important also to place it in context, as suggested by Goldhahn and Fuglestedt (254-5). In this chapter, the authors emphasise the need to incorporate other material culture into the analysis (burials, figurines, ritual deposits, costumes and so forth) to explore how power relations “are reflected and expressed in different media and context” to obtain a more complete picture of the past.

Ethnoarchaeological and anthropological approaches to past and recent rock art in this volume also raise compelling questions to reflect on when analysing past rock art.

While chronometric dating of rock art is important to place rock-art creations in time frameworks, Morphy’s contribution to this volume (chapter 17) reminds us that it only refers to the “rock art production” point in time. But to set the span of rock-art “consumption” is far more complex. His analysis of Indigenous rock art reflects on how past rock art is perceived, curated and even retouched by new generations of Indigenous artists, and how they accommodate it within their present-day cosmological and mythological schema (Morphy: 295). This contribution opens questions as to how past rock art was perceived in the past, and reminds us of the need to place rock art not only in context but also “within the framework of pre-dating rock art” (Morphy: 296).

Papers on contact rock art explore the role of rock art in mediating frontiers between Indigenous people and settler societies (Frederick, chapter 23). These papers also reflect on the complexities of contact art and on how different contact situations have different impacts in rock-art production (Taçon *et al.*, chapter 24). They provide interesting food for thought to those concerned with looking into past and present contact rock art.

The section on “Rock art, identity and indigeneity” reminds us that rock art cannot be seen as discarded archaeological evidence worldwide. In some parts of the world, rock art still plays a significant cultural and/or political role for Indigenous people, thus providing a unique context for analysing rock art though informed methods (as defined by Taçon & Chippindale 1998: 6). Furthermore, rock art plays a significant role in claiming Indigenous land rights, as visual evidence of the continuous occupation and use of the land (Layton, chapter 25; Blundell and Woolagoodja, chapter 27).

Finally, the last three sections of this volume show how rock-art studies are in a continuous process of reviewing and updating: first, by continuously adapting to new social, political and cultural demands, which require the development of appropriate strategies for rock-art management and long-term preservation of this fragile cultural heritage (IX. Management and interpretation); and, second, by building on continuous technological advances in dating techniques (part X) and digital documentation (part XI) to promote the advance of knowledge and the use of more accurate and less invasive methods for rock-art recording.

It is worth noting the significant number of Anglo-Saxon contributions included in this volume, despite the leading role of France and Spain in rock-art research in the past century. This is probably due to the editors’ origin and international networks. But most importantly, it also reflects a significant shift in Anglo-Saxon rock-art research towards its full consideration as an archaeological source of data to be scientifically quantified and described to obtain information about past human behaviour and cultural practices.

To summarise, as stated by Conkey in the foreword, this volume is a clear example of how in the twenty-first century rock art is considered a topic of archaeological inquiry, leaving behind the times when it was excluded from the archaeological discussions because of its problematic dating and interpretation (see Whitley 2001 for details about the North American case; or Morwood 2002: 64-88 for the Australian case).

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