Book Review

The Archaeology of Rock Art

Edited by Christopher Chippendale and Paul S. C. Tacon
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This well selected and absorbing series of papers have been put together by Christopher Chippendale and Paul Tacon. Chippendale is curator at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge, and also works with the Australian National University. Tacon is a curator at the Australian Museum. Both authors are well qualified to design and edit this book — both have worked extensively in the field of rock art, and have a joint research project in Kakadu National Park.

Rock art has a propensity to delight, awe and mystify modern observers who always want to know who made it, why, and how long ago?

Credible and comprehensible answers to these questions not only satisfy our intellectual curiosity, but can give us significant insights into important questions relating to the history of humanity and of our environment. However, rock art with its tantalising mixture of apparent strangeness and familiarity, of simple beauty and complex artistry, and of agelessness and antiquity, is not easy to interrogate — and many researchers in the past have been led into speculative and unsubstantiated theorising, in a vain attempt to explain the meaning and nature of the art.

The result has often been, instead, undisciplined and unselfconsciously self-referential speculations which can also be patronising to the artists and their societies. However, in the last three or four decades, pioneers of a more rigorous approach have finally persuaded their anthropological colleagues that formal, well-defined and rigorous studies of rock art can extract important data from apparently intractable, if beguiling, material. Australians, notably John Clegg of the University of Sydney, have played a significant role in this process, as this volume demonstrates.

The editors successfully define and clarify the methodology that their authors will use, in an excellent introduction that defines three paths for rock art research:
- informed methods: based on legitimate and demonstrable insights passed on directly from the creators and users of the rock art;
- formal methods: based on no inside knowledge but on a study of the art as an artefact, in its archaeological context;
- analogy: the cautious inference from an observation in one situation to a likeness in another.

The authors work within these parameters, and usually clearly define the methodology they are using and its implications for inference and conclusion. The twenty papers are the results of research into the rock art of Europe, the Americas, Australia and the Pacific, Africa, and Central Asia. Studies include research into rock-art dating, distribution, relationship to

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landscape and territory, to society and change and to specific cultural practices, and to cognitive development in humans.

The chapters are not ordered by geographic location, but rather by the primary methods researchers employed, moving from informed towards formal and analogical methods. As the editors point out, five out of twenty of the chapters focus on aspects of shamanism for their interpretation of the meaning of the art. Shamanism can perhaps best be defined as the role played by members of society at certain times in crossing and re-crossing the threshold between the everyday and the supernatural. The illustrations and analogies by which the authors support their research into this field clearly demonstrates that this threshold and the shamanistic interpretation of it in rock art was a less strange, more readily accepted aspect of human life in the past than it is now.

Another surprising aspect of the studies relates to the fact that so much rock art is as yet unfound, and certainly unstudied and unappreciated. We know of vast areas of Australia that are uncharted; but it is unexpected to realise three major recent discoveries have immensely enriched our understanding of ancient European rock art, and have overturned some securely held theories, based on a hundred years of work.

Australian contributions are in three excellent varied chapters, which aptly illustrate some of the themes of the book. Chippendale and Taqon give us a clear exposition of the state of knowledge of definitive and relative chronology of Kakadu rock art—a rich synthesis of a range of methodologies and evidence, put together in an elegant weave whose various strands combine to provide what the authors describe as a strong 'cable' of evidence. Josephine McDonald, one of John Clegg's students, discusses change and continuity of the recent rock art of the Sydney Basin—where 4000 engravings and paintings have been recorded—and its implications for changing patterns of Aboriginal society prior to European settlement. John Clegg, surprising and insightful as ever, gives us a deceptively simple discussion of some late 19th-century settler rock art at Callian Park, and in so doing, reminds us again of the pitfalls and uncertainties, insights and exasperations of interpreting any art, let alone that from a different culture!

This collection of papers is very well edited and illustrated. The illustrations are didactic rather than aesthetic; and the papers are not a 'light' read. But they are good and accessible examples of work in this fascinating field, and overall provide an excellent insight into both the methodology of the subject, and the diversity of recent findings.

For many visitors to sites, rock art provides an aesthetic and emotional experience—a contact with the human past, which has the fascination of both strangeness and instant recognition. Most cultural tourists or educators will not read this book, but the approach and the findings will permeate the common understanding of rock art and will enrich and deepen our society's appreciation of other cultures and their creative genius.