

Women Pioneers in Rock Art Research: Mary E. Boyle, Erika Trautmann and Vera C. C. Collum

The early history of the research of cave art, megalithic engravings and parietal art is largely characterized by the well-known publications of Abbé Henri Breuil, Hugo Obermaier, Zacharie Le Rouzic, Herbert Kühn, Franz Altheim and Leo Frobenius. In their works, the women who accompany and influence them only appear as translators, secretaries, drawers, assistants or photographers on the sidelines. The active influence which the »accompanists« had on the discovery, interpretation, drawing or publication of the rock art is regularly negated through such passive descriptions. Three female pioneers who had their own share in the history of parietal art are being introduced here.



Mary Elizabeth Boyle (1881 - 1974)

Born in a wealthy Scottish family, she met Abbé Breuil in 1920 to become his »life-long assistant«. Together, they visited the rich cave art regions of Spain and the Dordogne as well as the parietal art regions of Africa. Mary Boyle didn't just copy the paintings, but was rather elaborately involved in the discovery of new drawings and in their interpretation. The individual drawings of the petro glyphs were not always tagged with signatures. Therefore, the stock of the travels to Africa is stored in a collective »Fonds Breuil-Boyle« of the Bibliothèque centrale du Muséum national d'histoire naturelle in Paris.

Mary Boyle published archaeological books on her own and together with her male colleagues. She even discussed the megalithic engravings of Brittany with Abbé Breuil and Zacharie Le Rouzic in Carnac. Merely the interpretation of the »White Lady of the Brandberg« brought her certain recognition when she compared an anthropomorphic parietal painting

in Namibia with antique frescos from Knossos. Down to the present day, this anecdote is used in order to place Mary Boyle in an esoteric or unscholarly direction – whereas the religious over-interpretations and errors in the interpretation of rock art by the male colleagues are also outdated by the current state of science. At present, the »Lady of the Brandberg« (see drawing on the left) is interpreted as (male) warrior.

By translating some French monographs from Breuil into English, she influenced seriously the correlation of technical and archaeological terms. Today, the technically competent translations, the contemporary elaborate monographs as well as hundreds of coloured petro glyph drawings of Mary Boyle remain and belong to the basics of archaeological petro glyph research. Mary Boyle never married nor had children.



Erika Trautmann-Nehring (1897 - 1968)

Originating from a noble East Prussian family, she was trained in Berlin's Lettehaus and the arts college as an graphic illustrator. In 1925 she married the civil engineer Bernhard Trautmann. As of 1933, she was employed as a graphic designer at the prestigious Institut für Kulturmorphologie of Leo Frobenius in Frankfurt where she copied parietal art during several excursions in Spain, Italy and Southern France. While working in Val Camonica (Italy) in 1936 she befriended Franz Altheim, a professor for classical philology at the University of Frankfurt and close friend of Trautmann's direct supervisor Leo Frobenius, and became his life companion.

Together they published the petro glyphs from Val Camonica as well as studies about the origin of rock art, runes and the migration of Indo-Germanic peoples. Nordic petro glyphs were interpreted as precursors of West and South European rock art following the national socialistic concept. Because of their memberships of Heinrich Himmler's »SS-Ahnenerbe«,

Altheim and Trautmann were financed for more research in Val Camonica. Another expedition took them in 1938 to the Middle East where both scientists also collected information for the Nazi intelligence service. In the summer of 1940 Erika Trautmann tried to get a first project of her own: the exploration of some megalithic monuments in Brittany for the »SS-Ahnenerbe«. But her application got declined in favour of the prehistorian Herbert Jankuhn after Himmler explicitly asked for a male scientist from his personal staff.

Despite her National Socialist interpretations, Erika Trautmann's graphically excellent drawings and illustrations of petro glyphs and rock art are of permanent value. After World War II, she was denied a university career, although the political dubiousness of being member in the »SS-Ahnenerbe« prohibited not a scientific career in the case of her male colleagues Altmann and Jankuhn as professors at the universities of Berlin and Kiel. From what she earned her money from 1940 until her pension in 1962 is left unexplained till now. Erika Trautmann never had biological children.

Vera Christina Chute Collum (1883 - 1957)

Born in India, she came as child to England. At age 21, she appeared as spokesperson for women's rights, female suffrage and equal pay for both sexes. During the World War I, she served as an X-ray assistant in Scottish Women's Hospitals. From 1925 she earned her life by translating books into English. The following year, she met Zacharie Le Rouzic and led him to the stone monuments of England and Ireland. They held a lifelong friendship even though both had different views in matters of excavation and dating of European megaliths.

During a joint excavation of LaTène burials in Brittany, Le Rouzic tried to save quickly the metal grave goods from the curious villagers, but he destroyed parts of the skeletons. Vera Collum primarily intended to preserve the bones. Later, Le Rouzic's excavation report had been published, but Collum's processing of bones was not, although she was Fellow of the Société Polymathique du Morbihan, the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Antiquaries of Scotland.

Vera Collum could only act as a project leader when Sir Robert Mond becomes her patron. In 1931 and 1932, she excavates three megalithic tombs in Brittany and Guernsey which she interpreted as female cult complexes, especially since she had discovered so called »quadruple breasts«-engravings and Gallo-Roman goddess figurines in Tressé (Brittany). This is why her excavations received not a positive reception in the scientific community despite her perfect technique and documentation. In her final research result »Manifold unity« (1940) she postulated a universal language of a »Cosmic Mother-Goddess Cult«.

To what extent her childhood experiences from India and her commitment to the issue of women had influenced her interpretations, has not yet been investigated. No publications of her are known after 1940 and it is unclear how she earned her livelihood up to her death in Surrey. She never married nor had children.

Even if their interpretations of the findings do not meet the standard archaeological opinions of today, their accomplishments alongside those of their colleagues, who were also subjected to contemporary errors, should not be forgotten. In all three life careers is repeated the lack of university education that the women could not acquire for various reasons. Nevertheless, they worked on a par with their peers and clearly expressed their opinions and interpretations. In the respective generation, even some male colleagues such as Zacharie Le Rouzic or Abbé Breuil had not been able to pass archaeological studies at university degree. In the same way as their female associates, Le Rouzic and Abbé Breuil were autodidacts in rock art research, learning about their subject by studying different museums and by effecting their field research. But because of their belonging to formal institutions the publication of their research results was easier so that their names go favoured down in the history of parietal art.

Illustrations:
Breuil 1955; Coyle 2005, 107;
Bildarchiv des Frobenius-Instituts, Frankfurt;
Courtesy of Guernsey Museum
and Art Gallery.

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