

SEMIOTICAL RELATIONSHIPS AND ROCK ART

BJORK A. Carl, Valley Springs, USA

If we are to debate or discuss, or to develop a general theory about the symbols (semiotics) found at rock art sites, we must delineate and set boundaries on the definition or meaning of "rock art." I will use "rock art" to describe what is commonly called petroglyphs and pictographs, carvings and paintings found on rock faces, in grottos and caves, cliffs, or any other geological formation. A rock art site would be any geographical location where one would find a geological formation containing rock art. Within my simplistic definition, rock art site could be a single rock art-covered boulder in a meadow or a narrow sandstone canyon with hundreds of paintings.

Secondly, I feel that the approach to studying rock art symbols and the relationship to a rock art site must be conducted as an unit of consideration, one can not be researched without including the other. No longer can we look at rock art as "art," even though that is probably what brought us to a rock art site in the beginning. What brought me to rock art research in the beginning was the geological formation and its geographical setting and I believe a similar "pull" brought many of the original rock art "artists" to a rock art site. In my personal research into the rock art phenomenon in the western United States, I have found *that* which is at a rock art site is what attracted the first rock art "artist." Many native American friends have told me, "It is the location of the site that is important, the rock art came later." My rock art research started with this question: "Why did they select this site for their rock art?" If we could answer that question, then I believe that we will begin to understand the "meaning" of the symbols. This is where a debate and discussion about semiotics and rock art should begin. Start with the rock art site, studying its relationship to its environment;

including geographical and geological considerations, climatic patterns, acoustical qualities¹, water and food resources, travel and trade route patterns, celestial viewing properties and the many other considerations that would make a site useful to a people who placed the rock art.

What I am suggesting is very controversial with argument and debate coming from both extremes in scientific research circles. One group demands that the study of rock art should be the sole property of the archaeological research community and that rock art should be recorded only, without any attempt at interpretation or "meaning" of the rock art symbols...an "If I don't know what it is, then it doesn't exist" attitude, but this approach is within good scientific methodology. Far to the other side are theories about encounters by UFO's, and early travelers who recorded their visit. Even if those who debate the rock art phenomenon are from extreme opposites in their thinking and view, open debate and discussion is the only method to finding the truth. It will require a multidiscipline scientific effort to resolves controversy.

To understand the message that the rock art symbols are communicating we have to fully understand the *world view* of the "artist" and what motivational pressures and impacts were controlling this person. Let me paint a possible scenario: We have a person who does not understand what a touch of wind is nor does this person know what causes a shadow. The sun is something that brings light but also leaves, sinking behind the western horizon. Everything to this person that is unseen but yet felt is a *spirit*, even the touch of the wind or a temperature change. Imagine the fear that this person feels during the dark of night not knowing if the sun will return or that the sun will return from its annual journey to its winter home. Remember it was not that long

¹ For more information about acoustical qualities at rock art site check the following Internet Web Site: Wallers, Steven J. <http://www.geocities.com/CapeCanaveral/9461>

ago when it was common knowledge that if you sailed west to the horizon you would fall over the edge. Establishing *motive* is the key to unlocking the mystery.

Southwest of Bakersfield, California, there is a unique horseshoe-shaped sandstone monolith, rising from a flat prairie, called Painted Rock by the locals. Within the amphitheater is some of the most beautiful rock paintings found in the world (Chumash and Yukots)² and even though heavily damaged much remains to be analyzed and studied. What motivated the first Chumash to use this site? 1. The geological formation sits alone on a flat plain. 2. The horse-shoe shaped amphitheater has unique acoustical qualities (if you sit at the right location you can hear any whispered conversation within 30 meters) 3. The open end of the horse-shoe faces directly north which gives you an unique view of the stars revolving around the North Star³. 4. Before the arrival of Euro-Americans the land surrounding Painted Rock was rich in food resources. 5. The geographical location of Painted Rock provided for a warm winter living site for the coastal Chumash and a cool summer camp for the Yukots who inhabited the hot interior region. 6. The rock is shaped not unlike a huge vulva. 7. If one stands at the high point of the rock formation you have a commanding view of the plain and surrounding landscape, up to 50 kms. From this site there is direct visual sighting with many other rock art sites within the area, but only from the top of the rock formation. 8. At during certain times of the year wind currents flowing over the site will cause interesting sound effects and echoing, not unlike a crowd of people whispering (spirits?). 9. Inside of the upper end of the amphitheater is a small head-size hole and if you place your head into the hole and hum, there is created a strong resonating sound that will cause a trance-like affect to the person. Directly above this hole is a pictograph

² The Chumash & Yukots are Native American Tribes located in southern California.

³ Consider a culture that does not have a knowledge of North or South. When viewing the movement of the stars from a deep canyon, the stars would appear to be moving from right to left if looking North or left to right if looking South.

(red ocher) of a horned-anthropomorph⁴ (a shaman?). My listing gives ample justification and motivation for selecting this particular site for use by the people but it doesn't explain why the site was chosen for placement of the paintings and petroglyphs. I have found many other sites that have many of the same characteristics of the Painted Rock site which also have many pictographs or petroglyphs, as well as bed-rock mortars and grinding slicks. Surrounding many sites is evidence of a "living site," some with middens up to 2 meters deep.

In Kelso Valley, east of Bakersfield, two faint red pictographs are found on two large boulders sited on a small hill (CA-KER-95)⁵. "Why on this hill?" was my first question but when a survey was conducted part of the answer became clear. On the hill was found a vein of feldspar crystals which are used in "calling down the rain" ceremonies by the local Kawaiisu people. I was told that if you sit in front of the paintings holding the crystals and ask for rain, it will come (The site was to be used only in winter). To the north of Kelso Valley is the South Fork of the Kern River watershed, a major trade route used by the Native Americans. Along this route are many rock art sites that are located at reliable water sources and if one is standing at one of these sites you can see the next site with a water source which is important in this high desert terrain.

In the Owens Valley, a high desert biome, located on the east-side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California, there is a unique basalt rock formation covered with unusual petroglyphs. If one stands at one particular spot it is not hard to understand the glyphs. The top of the rock has been carved and worked so that it is an exact relief map of the mountain range that is behind the rock. Many of the lines on the rock depict canyons and ridges on the face of the mountain. Is this rock art panel a relief map of

⁴ Approximately forty kms southeast of Painted Rock is located a small cave with interesting acoustical qualities and near the cave is a similar horned-anthropomorph pictograph.

⁵ CA-KER-95 is a site designation number (California-Kern County-Site 95)

the mountain range (White Mountains)? Many say, "No." Their rationale is that the native Americans did not have the knowledge or need to create maps.

Is rock art a form of pictorial communication? I personally believe it is at least in North America. At many desert sites in the western States you will find some form of a glyph that many refer to as "the comb." This is a horizontal line with many vertical lines connected to the bottom side of the horizontal line. Many researchers have identified this symbol as representing "rain." I have found that the "horizontal line" means the horizon or the soil that we stand on and the "vertical lines" represent "rain or water" both words being synonymous. Thus we have a meaning for the glyph: Water underground. This glyph is usually found within 100 meters of a seepage or at a location where you can dig down through the sand and find water. I have tested this hypothesis⁶ many times and have found water. Is this translation of the symbol correct, it will have to be tested. Between 1731 and 1733, Father Pierre-Michel, a Jesuit Missionary working in Domaine du Roy Nouvelle France (Quebec), produced a series of maps of the new land based on information given by the Native informants. These maps delineated rock art sites located on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. The Indians called the place "here one can see on the rock painted figures that can not be erased." This suggests painted petroglyphs.

I have just begun to touch on the many reasons and justification for studying rock art sites as part of the total research and our search for the message that is hidden in rock art symbols. The scientific community has refused to accept the study of "rock art" as a viable tool for uncovering the history of mankind for far too long. As one native American told me, "Stop looking at the light, and start looking at the shadows. It is in the play of the shadows on the rocks and nearby terrain that you will begin to understand the message in the symbols."

⁶ Testing was conducted in Death Valley and at McCoy Springs, California.