

European Landscapes of Rock-Art

Edited by
George Nash and
Christopher Chippindale

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Rock-art – the ancient images which still scatter the rocky landscapes of Europe – is a singular kind of archaeological evidence. Fixed in place, it does not move about as artefacts and trade objects do. Enigmatic in its meaning, it uniquely offers a direct record of how prehistoric Europeans saw and envisioned their own worlds.

European Landscapes of Rock-Art provides a number of case studies, covering a range of European locations including Ireland, Italy, Scandinavia, Scotland and Spain, which collectively address the chronology and geography of rock-art as well as providing an essential series of methodologies for future debate. Each author provides a synthesis that focuses on landscape as an essential part of rock-art construction. From the paintings and carved images of prehistoric Scandinavia to Second World War graffiti on the German Reichstag, this volume looks beyond the art to the society that made it.

The papers in this volume also challenge the traditional views as to how rock-art is recorded. Throughout, there is an emphasis on formal and on informed methodologies. The authors skilfully discuss subjectivity and its relationship with landscape since personal experience, from prehistoric times to the present day, plays an essential role in the interpretation of the art itself. The emphasis is on location, on the intentionality of the artist, and on the needs of the audience.

This exciting volume is a crucial addition to rock-art literature and landscape archaeology. It will provide new material for a lively and greatly debated subject and as such will be essential for academics, non-academics and commentators on rock-art in general.

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for Betty, for Helen and Jim



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Note on radiocarbon dating



Dates given as BC, AD, BP ('Before Present') are in calendar years, however they have been arrived at. Dates given as 'b.p.' are uncalibrated radiocarbon determinations, and are measures of 'radiocarbon years' that do not equate exactly with calendar years.

Images of enculturing landscapes

A European perspective

George Nash and Christopher Chippindale



Locales and sites

Within archaeology one tends to look at sites as, well . . . sites. The empirical approaches applied to our central notion of the 'site' indeed reinforce an image very much devoid of human meaning. In particular, the concept of recording rock-art focuses first on subjectivity – what is depicted; then on objectivity – the extrinsic value of the site and stratigraphic deposition which lies in front of and underneath the art. Some attention has been given in the past to the landscape of rock-art, albeit from a traditionally stale account of what can be seen. Recently, rock-art and landscape studies have incorporated a text that relies more on personal experience and the cognitive values of the audience – those who witness the act of application or visit the completed panel. We suppose, therefore, that when rock-art was executed, the artist intended it to remain indefinitely; with this was the intentional location of the panel/rock-art surface to the surrounding landscape. By omitting landscape, and, in particular, rock-art as place, one is only looking at subjectivity and ignoring media.

Arguably, landscape and place are as important as the paint or the stone chisel which made the image. Therefore, within this chapter and this book, we try to readdress the importance of landscape/place, to suggest that both can be considered part of the archaeological assemblage alongside the more obvious items: the lithics, pottery, and so on. We highlight the intentionality of landscape and place, suggesting it was as important to the artist as the images she or he was painting or carving. We also place rock-art into a narrative, setting its historical value into a prehistoric context. An emphasis will be placed on hunter-gatherer rock-art that dates from the Mesolithic and is found in both southern Europe (mainly on the Iberian Peninsula) and northern Scandinavia (coastal Norway and Sweden).

Using a range of methodologies, we will also outline an approach which is primarily concerned with the interaction between people, landscape and rock-art, tracing a history of how rock-art may have been incorporated into a series of diverse European landscapes.

Different images, different locales

The landscapes of Europe are so diverse that one could properly devote an entire chapter simply to describing them. Within those landscapes are a number of rock-art enclaves. These are each confined to one of four major zones: Atlantic Europe; the Mediterranean; the Alpine regions of central and southern Europe; and Scandinavia. Each area has its

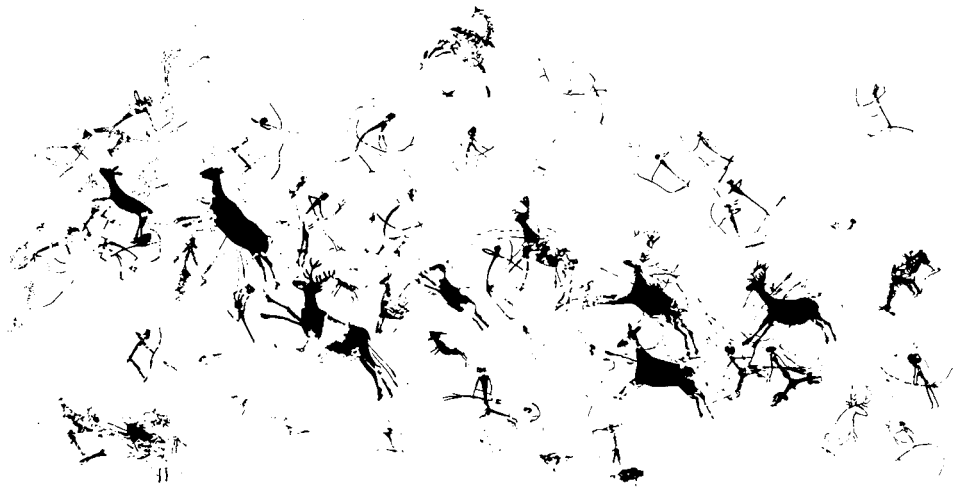


Figure 1.1 Hunting scene from the Ulldecona rock-shelter (Tarragona), Levantine Spain
After Beltrán (1982: 70)

own intrinsic and idiosyncratic topographic features that make it unique, values which in themselves have influenced the rock-art style and subjectivity. The hunter-gather rock-art around coastal Norway, for example, is dominated not only by elk and reindeer but also by marine mammals and fish. Later farming art from the same region incorporates large numbers of boats of various shapes and sizes. Along the southern European Atlantic coast, and including the Iberian Peninsula, farming art consists of mainly stylized warrior figures and red deer, along with 'abstract' designs such as concentric circles and cup-marks. These images supersede the more representational warrior figures, bulls and red-deer images of the Spanish Levant (Figure 1.1). The subjectivity from all four zones therefore undergoes a stylistic change more than it does changes in subject-matter. And there are enclaves where hunter-gatherer art and farming art are completely different – in style, form and media. These changes, however subtle, span a history of maybe up to 8000 years. If one is also to take into consideration the wealth of cave and exposed Upper Palaeolithic art from the central regions of France, northern Portugal and northern Spain, then the span is even greater – up to 35,000 years.

Rock-art (or any other archaeological site) establishes a place from space (Nash 2000). A place requires that basic human response – experience. The act of initially choosing the place, of using the place and then visiting the place (either frequently or periodically) requires a degree of social and political organization. Chapter 8, by Margarita Díaz-Andreu, explores the sacredness of landscape prior to the execution of rock-art, suggesting that rock-art forms only part of a complex mechanism of social being and place. Choosing a space and turning it into a place, positioning certain figures on certain rock surfaces and using a place over generations require and reinforce an affinity with landscape. We see these mechanisms as the underlying forces that control and manipulate symbolic and religious (cosmological) devices, in this case the art and site location (Figure 1.2). The more one visits a place, the more familiar one becomes with the idiosyncratic nature of the place. When frequently revisiting a rock-art site, one comes to recall the visual



Figure 1.2 Rock-art as a symbolic device: carving (restored) on a late Norman stone doorway at Kilpeck Church, Herefordshire, England

Photograph: G.H. Nash

sequence seen in the rock-art itself – which figure goes where or which panel comes before which. One may also recall the landscape position of the site, relating the panel or rock outcropping to localized features such as other rock outcroppings, nearby rivers and streams, escarpments, pathways and so on. On a micro level, one may recall the nature of the surface and the colour changes of the art under different lighting and weather conditions. These observations may change through time and varying experience.

Experience and analysis

We recall our own experiences when visiting rock-art sites in coastal Levantine Spain, coastal Norway, western Sweden and Valcamonica. Personal experience we see as a valid research methodology, as one extends one's personal visual knowledge beyond the flat and inert surfaces of the available catalogues and gazetteers with their black images on white paper. First in South Africa (Lewis-Williams and Dowson 1990) and now also in North America and Europe (Helskog 1999), rock-art researchers have recently become aware of how much the image may take its place and its form from the surface of the rock. A fissure, crack or slope of the surface is not, then, a distraction or inconvenience to the 'real' image, but part of the reason that image is at a certain place and takes a certain form. A century of ever-more meticulous recording, separating the 'artificial' from

the 'natural' and recording the former alone on an ideal plane surface of featureless paper may have been ever-more systematically omitting the key information (Chippindale 2000).

Within the same publications, landscape forms only part of a passive discussion. One tends to ignore (and forget) that our own experiences when visiting sites are just as valid as an archaeological report or narrative text. Experiences differ when the site has been repeatedly visited by the same person, when the site is experienced under different climatic conditions that determine light, temperature and what can be seen, or when sites are interpreted in different ways by different people, be they archaeologists, historians or the modern descendants of indigenous ancestors who carved and used the site many centuries ago (Figure 1.3). These criteria express how one may visualize and experience rock-art and how each group views the art. All this, of course, is rather and rightly subjective; our ideas and experiences may radically differ from those of other archaeologists; they certainly do if we compare them with the experiences of those who visit the sites today with other expectations in mind.

At sites, research methods can include measurements of the angle of slope for each panel, the relationship between the art and the rock surface (horizontal and vertical design fields), the phenomenology of micro landscape (the space immediately around the rock-art) and



Figure 1.3 Ancestral carvings along with modern graffiti at the Buena Vista site in southern Oregon

Photograph: G.H. Nash

of macro landscape (the surrounding landscape) and dominant characters within a rock-art panel design field. These 'objective' measures also rely on subjective experience: judgement and personal perception.

The analytical approach to a site – either through data analysis or assessment of landscape-value and potential – does not convey the experiential awareness that hides oneself as visitor to the site itself. In attempting to understand what might have occurred in the past, a matter of personal interpretation and experience is made by the encoding of the site – what is there, where it is positioned, what is readable, where it is located. Many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiquarians were prepared to speculate and propose interpretations based upon their own perceptions of the world – a phenomenology of then, of their present.

Commonly, rock-art sites possess some degree of folk memory and mysticism that, although confusing the overall narrative as the modern research archaeologist sees that, is none the less valid to the overall assessment of the site. Contrary to this, rock-art studies for the most part remain purely descriptive and concerned mainly with motif typology and chronology (Hood 1988: 65). What has been ignored is the human interaction with the monument.

Human experience and place in prehistoric Europe

Phenomenology, or 'being-in-the-world', sets people apart from objects and establishes a 'gap' or 'space', created through using one's senses – seeing, hearing, touching. The phenomenology of visiting a place – say, a building, landscape vista or, in this case, a rock-art site – involves setting oneself apart from the objectivity – creating experience. Similarly, as Bourdieu (1977: 4) has suggested, on a human level landscape, or the phenomenology of landscape, is created as a lived experience so that the mode of knowledge, through one's senses, is inherent in all acts. This is a precondition to constructing landscape and, in the words of Bourdieu, constitutes 'a social world as a system of objective relations independent of individual consciousness and wills'. The construction of landscape becomes a critique; a collection of chapters is chronologically and geographically ordered. We, as individuals, add more to these chapters, creating this sense of space, belonging, ancestry when visiting a single monument over time. This act above all sets ourselves, the occasional visitor, away from an individual whose ancestors used the site time and time again; or from the artist who may have visited a site seasonally to add, to superimpose or to remove motifs from a panel.

One could regard the reinterpretation of any rock-art site as a simple process – I saw, I recorded, I superficially discussed. If one was to rely on site-recording from the standard sources in the seminal works and the site monographs, ignoring personal experience, the process of recording and writing about rock-art and landscape would be mere description. Beyond description, our own experiences allow us to make a valid attempt to discuss why sites were chosen, why certain motifs and figures were used, and how rock-art may have been witnessed.

Compared with the more 'straightforward' physical objects, the bones and the stones of dirt archaeology, rock-art seems an elusive field within archaeology. One can recognize pictures of boats or of halberds – but how can we know they are pictures of those physical things? And if they are, how are we to know what boats or halberds meant in their own time? Here rock-art takes us to the heart of current research concerns in later prehistoric