Rock art and landscape: Can ethnography and ethnoarchaeology help explain the place of rock art in the life-ways of the prehistoric peoples of the Northern Great Basin? (2004)

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Introduction: It is everywhere and invisible

I argue that the context of rock art, in space and time, constitutes a gestalt from which some parts of meaning can be induced. And though an ethnoarchaeology of rock art may not be possible, ethnoarchaeology may provide clues, by way of analogy, of what to look for in an understanding of rock art and thereby contribute to an understanding of the archaeological record. The following discussion examines the contributions of the ethnographic record to understanding rock art, and therefore the cultures and people that produced it, including acknowledgment of its limitations. Equally important, is a brief review of the role and potential of recent landscape approaches in archaeology to both informing and shaping rock art studies. Then, a specific ethnoarchaeological study is reviewed and some basic implications are suggested for rock art studies.

Prehistoric rock art occurs in abundance and with great variability at certain locations in the Northern Great Basin. Rock art functions as a site-specific feature and as a regionally distributed pattern. Therefore, location, placement, and environmental context are as relevant as is the style or design of a particular image. Rock art, as a symbolic and “in place” phenomena of the material record, provides an opportunity to explore and understand how the original makers perceived, encountered, and engaged the landscape in the region, and may shed light on the social and environmental aspects of cultural change. As David (1992) notes, the symbolic reservoir as a referent of culture can help understand the process of change in space and time of a population on a macroscale. Certainly the rock art of the Northern Great Basin is a delimited symbolic reservoir of great potential.

Referring to his initial investigations into rock art and petroglyphs in Oregon in the mid-1930s, Luther Cressman (1937) stated, “We will never understand this phase of Indian life if we treat it as some unique product of the native mind that can be isolated from the culture of which it is apart. To understand it, we must apply to it the scientific canons and methods of the ethnological study of the art of an area” (p. 11).

Writing nearly fifty years later, in a summary report about the prehistory of the Northern Great Basin, Cressman (1986) makes no mention or reference to petroglyphs or rock art, despite providing an overview on thousands of years of cultural changes. He offers examples of many types of artifacts including lithics with many varieties of flakes and groundstones, noting changes in flaking technologies and hafting, explaining twined basketry and sandals, and mentioning village boulders and house sites. The volume, Man and Environment in the Great Basin (Madsen and O’Connell 1982), is virtually devoid of references to rock art despite including detailed archaeological overviews. This absence of a relevant aspect of the archaeological record is indicative of the marginalization of rock art in most traditional archaeological research in the region. Why is this?
As Schaafsma (1986) notes, in a report about rock art in the Great Basin in the same volume as Cressman noted above, “The complex graphic imagery present in rock art is a manifestation of the ideational dimension of prehistoric cultural groups, ideologies that are often absent or expressed in restricted form in other parts of the archaeological record” (p. 215). Therefore, it is important to ask: Are there examples of ethnoarchaeological approaches used elsewhere that could be applied to the situation in the Northern Great Basin? Can these ethnoarchaeological approaches help us understand the perceptions and intentions of the makers as nomadic people leaving traces in and about the environment. Are there specific ethnographic sources that may help provide a foundation for an approach to rock art in the landscape of the Northern Great Basin? How has ethnography of hunter-gatherers been used to explain rock art in the prehistoric archaeological record?

In his discussion of meaning in art, Davidson (1995) defines the practice of ethnoarchaeology as seeking “to document the formation of modern records of material culture to form models for the interpretation of the material record of past societies” (p. 891). Since people, “through material things, actively construct and constitute things, it is people, not things that produce meaning” (p. 892). Meaning is not inherent in the art, he declares, and therefore no archaeologist “could be optimistic that there could be an ethnoarchaeology of art” (p. 892). While it is true that “original meaning can only by said to exist in the contexts of production and consumption” (p. 891) of the images/art, this should not exclude the ability of researchers to enhance their understandings of prehistoric cultures that produced rock art. If it is meaning we are looking for in the art, we must ask: Does rock art even qualify as “art” in a Western sense. Indeed, regardless of its comparability, many researchers emphasize rock art studies can and should play a role in understanding how prehistoric populations used and viewed the region and assisting with reconstruction of the social contexts of production. (Ricks 1999, Woody 2003)

**Discussion I: Ethnography and interpreting rock art**

Ethnographic sources directly illuminating rock art in the Northern Great Basin are scarce and archaeologists are generally very reluctant to infer much from these sources. It is clear the great bulk of the abundant rock art in the Northern Great Basin is archaic and was produced over a period of several thousand years. Though it is possible that early arriving Paiute, about 1000 B.P., did execute some of the representational forms, the Paiute living in the region in historical times deny making rock art and disclaim knowing its meaning. (Ricks 1999, Woody 2003, Schaafsma 1986, Cressman 1937) Though extensive ethnographic material about culture in the Great Basin does exist, Whitley (1994) argues it has not been used appropriately or effectively. His two recent studies (Whitley 1998, Whitley 2004) demonstrate his approach to rock art interpretation, which is based in part on ethnographic sources. The general stability of archaic desert culture in the Great Basin may yet encourage productive use of historical ethnographic and ethnohistorical sources in understanding locality, use patterns, and responses to ecological changes that can be applied to understanding the role of rock art. (Whitley 1994, O’Connell 1982, C. Beck 1999, C. M. Beck 1999) As David and Kramer (2001) note, “Ethnoarchaeologists are escaping the tyranny of the ethnographic present by...using early ethnographic, ethnohistoric, historical, and even archaeological sources in order to document and explain change over the long-term” (p. 415).
In her brief overview of rock art in the Great Basin, Ricks (1999) refers to two ethnographic studies, though none have direct bearing on the making of the rock art. She indicates (p. 192), as reported by Omer Stewart in 1941, Northern Paiute consultants in the Warner Valley region denied making the petroglyphs, although they know of them, and that Coyote made them. He did report both male and female shamans. Though, as Ricks notes (pp. 192-193), Beatrice Whiting reports in 1950 on power and spirits in her ethnographic data on the Paiutes of southeastern Oregon, there is no mention of rock art. It is possible that further study of myths of hunter-gathers could provide analogies.

Noting that “ethnographic analysis has come to dominate rock art research in many parts of the world” (p. 60), Woody (2003) argues that “an understanding of the polysemous nature of symbols suggests strongly that interpretation and meaning is dependent on context and the social contexts of production” (p. 60) and encourages an analysis of distributions and contexts of rock art with an aim to shape a more detailed and connected analysis than is possible through rock art imagery alone. “While keeping the problems of ethnographic analogy in mind, if we look for analogies on which to base hypothesis that can be tested in the field, we find that in Australia rock art was produced as a part of the activities of ancestral beings as the beginning of the world. That is not so different from ethnographies of Nevada which also attribute rock art production to a time when important beings set rules of culture and behavior of humans into place“ (p. 64).

In a study linking rock art studies, ethnohistory, ethnographic analysis, and contemporary Southern Paiute oral history, Stoffle et al (2000) document a rock art site in Kanab Creek Canyon that was the location of a Ghost Dance ceremony performed by Southern Paiute people in the late 1800s. The study combines “synergistic associations among place, artifact, resources, events, and historic and contemporary Indian people that contribute to the construction of a contextual cultural landscape” (p. 11). They argue that the Kanab Creek Canyon Ghost Dance site, and the white rock paintings found there, is a sacred place to the Paiute people because of ceremonies and the presence of the symbolic rock paintings made by shamans or medicine people. Notably the authors include a Paiute conclusion, a statement that honors the memory and stories of the Ghost dance ceremony and that conclude: “For many contemporary Southern Paiute people the search for a scientifically valid connection between the white paintings and the Ghost Dance is largely irrelevant. They simply know that it is so.” (p24)

In her study of the roadrunner track in rock art, Schaafsma (1989) looks closely at the ethnographic record to elucidate the significance of the designs and their placement. This is not an ethnoarchaeological study, but she does acknowledge that, because of the continuity in style and subject matter between modern Pueblo iconography and rock art styles, current meanings could help explain the past. Though rock art is not being produced today, the symbols of the roadrunner and its track reveal ideas and concepts surrounding the bird. She points out that the ethnographic accounts do not refer to the track or the bird in rock art, but Schaafsma does describes how the image appears in variety of ways including, for example, as a painted element on the wall in the room of the winter chief. The ethnographic accounts enable her to explain past ideological behavior.
Similarly to Schaaftsma, Young (1985, 1988) looks at a contemporary southwest community. After three summers directing the Zuni Rock Art Survey, she conducted research with the Zunis about contemporary perceptions of the rock art. Prior to Young’s work in the 1980s no study of Zuni material culture had examined the rock art surrounding the pueblo, located in western New Mexico, and at what the Zunis had to say about it.

Rock carvings and paintings and other features of the landscape are especially important elements of Zuni cultural symbolism because they are visual records, constant and immediate reminders, of the past. Certain boulders and pinnacles projecting from mesas, for instance, encapsulate beings from the myth time in stone, others reflect actions undertaken by powerful personages such as Old Salt Woman or the Twin war Gods” (1988, pp. 231-232)

Other rock figures “serve to evoke the past so that it becomes, for a brief period at least, cotemporal with the present”(p. 232). These images Young terms “metonyms of narrative” (p. 232). For example “multivalent spiral figures represent not only wind, water, snails…but also ‘the journey in the search of the Center’, a six-dimensional model that acts as a “condensed symbol embodying both time and space”(p. 231). By heightening the sense of place, the rock art in the surrounding landscape confirms Zuni ethnic identity and are integral to the complex system of symbols that constitutes the Zuni worldview.

Two examples of work on other continents suggest the range of ethnographic approaches. In seeking to understand and explain the rock art on panels in the Atacama desert of Northern Chile, Berenguer and Martinez (1989) explore Andean myths, in which the camelid was prominent, in order to interpret the rock art. Not assuming a direct visual representation of mythic events, the authors instead analyzed the underlying structures and categories of the myths, then sought to determine if these categories were present in the rock art. After a detailed reduction implementing an “axis of signification”(p. 406), the researchers arrive at an explanation that encompasses the systematic relations of the environment, the rock art, and the myths. Earlier, literal readings of the rock art panels as illustrations of herding or hunting scenes did not explain the role of rock art in prehistoric societies of the region they conclude. A key achievement in this contextual approach is to demonstrate that the physical features of the location are as an important part of the ‘texts’ as the rock art itself.

San rock art of South Africa lacks dates, similarly to rock art on the Northern Great Basin. Therefore, studies have relied on the abundant ethnographic material, resulting in research, as Soloman (1998) explains, that is weighted toward an anthropological approach rather than archaeological. Again, as in the Northern Great Basin, the traditions of San rock art are long past, leaving almost no insights into direct execution. Rock art research using formal methods, referring meaning from image form as in an art historical approach, and analogy dominate. As Soloman points out, Stone and Bahn "have argued that ethnographies and analogies derived from ethnographic studies represent the best -- and perhaps the only -- way of understanding Paleolithic art " (p. 270). A problem occurs when the explanation based on ethnography is weighted toward the words and not the visual imagery. She notes studies presenting rock art as illustrations of mythology have been criticized on methodological and theoretical grounds, but argues that “It is important that methods of using ethnographies are recognized as fundamentally interpretive, hermeneutical, and open-ended” (p. 282). Achieving an integration with strictly archaeological approaches remains a goal, with questions still to be answered. Soloman
Discussion II: Landscape and the place for rock art

Anschuetz and colleagues (2001) present a thorough discussion of trends in landscape and archaeology and argue (p.158) that archaeologists increasingly are using the term landscape in the forefront of reporting their studies. While aiming to characterize the relationships between people and the spaces they occupy, archaeologists have acknowledged landscape as a complex entity in relation to human behavior (Ucko and Layton 1999, Tilley 2004, Rossignol and Wandsnider 1992). This offers the potential to reposition the role of rock art since landscape is not a passive backdrop, but is viewed as an active and forceful determinant. Anschuetz et al argue that a landscape approach is relevant for archaeology and consistent with its goals and that archaeology’s traditional combination of an anthropological perspective and time-depth analysis make it well positioned to apply a broad landscape paradigm. They make four points about the use of the landscape paradigm in archaeology: First, “landscapes are not synonymous with natural environment; they are cultural products, a construction, a composition of that world.” Second, the landscape is the “arena for all of a community’s activities” (p. 160). Importantly, after Binford (1983 p. 380), they point out “observable patterns of both material traces and empty space come from interactions between culturally organized dimensions and non-culturally organized resources and life-space distributions.” Fourth, this is a dynamic cultural process, emphasizing the landscape as system of symbolic manipulation with material by-products.

Focusing on rock art research and equating it with landscape archaeology, Bradley et al (1994) point out that most studies of rock art emphasize the designs and motifs, seeking to explain style and chronology, thereby missing the opportunity to add to studies of the prehistoric landscape. They argue for reuniting the carvings with the rock itself and linking it to topographic and emphasize studying the rock art in its precise location by reading the art in the reading of the landscape. This offers the potential for interpretation at each different geographical scale. Bradley et al take a functional approach and recognize its limitations but emphasize the value of drawing on traditions of archaeological research, including topographical analysis and distribution of monuments. Ross (2001) notes that Bradley (1997) points out “for hunter-gathers, tenure is based on sites and paths, and that territories are conceived in terms of trails running through landscape and the views across it, and not by enclosed territorial boundaries” (p. 546). The context of landscape for hunter-gatherer peoples includes “consciously navigated journeys across the land and therefore rock art should always be questioned as to whether or not its presence and meaning is related to these journeys” (p. 546). To study the rock art (artifacts) of hunter-gathers as it relates to archaeology, Ross emphasizes that we must recognize that hunter-gathers “have a sophisticated specific and intimate relationship with the natural land upon which they live...based on an acute observation and perception of the environment which is part of an integrative cognitive whole” (p. 545). This attitude is supported by recent trends in cognitive archaeology (Renfrow and Zubrow 1994). Indeed, as noted by David and Kramer (2001 p. 56), Zubrow sees “a critical role for ethnoarchaeology in this
endeavor. One needs to determine commonalities across cultures of the elements, the classifications and the organizing principles that are focused by sensory memory.”

**Discussion III: Landscape and a useful ethnoarchaeological analogy**

The landscape approach is discussed by Rossignol (Rossignol and Wandsnider 1992) and defined as “the archaeological investigation of past land use by means of a landscape perspective”, which, she asserts, includes incorporation of multidisciplinary approaches including ethnoarchaeology (p. 4). This contrasts with landscape archaeology and its historical and contextual emphasis and focus and lack of incorporation of ecological variables. A landscape approach examines and explains change and stability of hunter-gather and agropastoral subsistence strategies as they are engaged landscapes. “Landscape-scale ethnoarchaeological research investigates the organization of subsistence strategies at the regional level, how these strategies shift through time, and how organization impacts the archaeological record” (p. 7). Rossignol introduces Chang’s study and points out that Chang takes an ethnoarchaeological approach to the study of modern Greek pastoralists.

Chang (1992) bases her study on observations of each component of the regional pastoral system in Grevena Province in southern Macedonia. Though herders, their mobility, and the variety of environmental zones accessed and used, suggest possible analogies in a place-based approach to the Northern Great Basin. A key problem identified by Chang is the “failure of archaeology to understand how the pastoral system operates across landscapes” (p.66). “Pastoralism is often seen as a problematic production strategy to recover in the archaeological record because it cannot be seen in isolation or as a pristine system”(p. 67). Her central concern, that pastoralism is often assumed to be invisible in the archaeological record, is both the same and different than rock art studies. The rock art is visible as distributed features and patterns, but absent in archaeological studies.

Chang’s concept of the superartifact, or large-scale artifacts, is especially useful and may help thinking about how rock art appears in the landscape, since the pastoral archaeological features “operate as superartifacts distributed in space and over time and are subject to reuse and remodeling.” (p70) This concept can liberate analysis of rock art distribution from site or random/ isolated designations. It also gives due emphasis to changes in use over time. The distribution of rock art over a landscape differs from smaller scatter of residue and, although they cannot be considered as “bounded wholes”, their presence has behavioral meaning. Chang argues for the importance of environmental zones, the role of places in strategies of land use, and recognition of aggregate patterning, meaning that each is a part of a system that can only be understood as part of the larger system. These may prove to be useful insights generated from an ethnoarchaeological study and suggests the value of looking at other models of thinking about landscape in archaeology. Similarly, time geography (Pred 1981), as a concept, links space and time and seeks to understand behavior by examining how people move through space. Thus, superartifacts become the markers that describe movement as much as they are records or traces of that movement. By approaching rock art as superartifacts, as features of an aggregate pattern, we may better understand the behavior of prehistoric populations and other aspects of the archaeological record. Patterns of distribution of the rocks and rock art accumulations in the landscape and the frequency of images at particular sites
contribute to a “mapping” (Binford 1980) of place, moving from the particular to the whole, where the peck in the rock to the landscape becomes seamless.

**Conclusion: Micro equals Macro**

To address the question posed in the title of this paper, can ethnography and ethnoarchaeology help explain the place of rock art in the life-ways of the prehistoric peoples of the Northern Great Basin?, a sampling of studies drawing from ethnography and landscape studies was presented with a view to their potential for indicating the importance of rock art, as a widely distributed but often ignored aspect of prehistoric cultures., I considered archaeological literature that addresses the interpretation of features in and about landscape and looked for evidence of how ethnographic material may contribute to an understanding of hunter-gatherer behavior, subsistence, life-ways, communication, and culture. Though ethnographic literature about rock art in the Northern Great Basin is limited, studies in other areas indicate the potential for extending understanding of the prehistoric record. To evolve theory about the role of rock art and what it can tell us, it may be most fruitful to access and test analogies from ethnoarchaeological studies such as Chang’s, briefly described above, keeping in mind Binford’s (1967) caution that analogies are useful “as a means for provoking new types of investigation into the order observable in archaeological data” (p. 1) and not as a means of interpretation. At the same time, remembering that Hodder (1982) points out “idea and belief are present, and are reproduced, in all action, however economic or mundane” (p. 213), thereby encouraging archaeologists to use symbolic principles to link parts together to seek for a far-reaching concept of wholeness.

**References**


