

Chapter 2

Ethics and Worldviews

Rock art in the New World is a not-so-ancient phenomenon in terms of human legacy, and the earliest migrants were heir to a long history of image-making. While the earliest dates for rock art in general in the Americas have yet to be agreed upon—and they are not critical to this discussion—we know that they go back many thousands of years (Rowe 2001; Turpin 2010:39, Whitley 2000:38–39). Rock art is, *par excellence*, an artifact of past ideologies and worldviews based in comprehensive ideas of how the cosmos is structured and what comprises the natural and supernatural domains. Many treatises on rock art are based on well-reasoned archaeological approaches, sometimes combined with ethnographic information, offering credible hypotheses or explanations for the rock art in question. Each, however, presents its own set of ethical challenges.

Many factors influence the way rock art is understood by both scholars and indigenous people, so the issue is far from straightforward. This chapter seeks to explore some of the cultural perspectives on both sides of the debate, focusing on fundamental conceptual building blocks such as views of time, space, and landscape. In addition, whether rock art is regarded as “a resource” or “heritage” is a key factor that greatly influences perspectives on rock art (Steinbring 1992). “Heritage” is a dynamic category that involves living people and rock art as legacies that are subject to redefinition in the present. It follows that rock art as “heritage” calls for sensitive Western perceptions that take into consideration both contemporary heirs as well as claims for rock art as a “global heritage.” As an aspect of indigenous cultural heritage, approaches to rock art include humanistic and contemporary social considerations. “Resource” by comparison is a conceptually more limiting term, commonly employed in contemporary Western jargon by archaeologists and rock art site managers, that reduces rock art to its information potential in illuminating the past or even for its various kinds of economic spin-offs. As we approach this discussion, I will begin with some observations from the platform of archaeology.

Certain kinds of data are available for study in the rock art record, and these data heavily structure the kinds of questions we ask. As archaeologists and rock art researchers committed to scientific investigations, we quantify and categorize our findings. We

arrange them in relative linear chronological order, pleased with absolute dates if they are available. We seek patterns in element and style distributions and define traditions of image-making, establishing both boundaries and patterns of interaction. We tabulate nonrandom correlations between rock art and evidence of other past activities—habitation sites, farming, routes of travel, hunting and collecting localities, and so forth. These observations provide an etic, or outside, perspective on patterns and events that went unnoticed or that were taken for granted by the cultures responsible for the rock art. In summary, our observations provide historical, economic, and ideological information (Schaafsma 1997:16). Simultaneously, we are traversing a landscape intricately structured spatially and temporally in very different ways by the people whose artifacts we study and their descendants of today.

Recently, as archaeologists and rock art scholars, we are finding the need for self-reflection (Schaafsma 1997:8). Traditional directions in archaeological thinking in general have been subject to reevaluation, and there has been a demand for a willingness to look at ourselves as we look at the past—an important step in bridging conceptual boundaries and understanding humanity and its many ideologies. What factors or intellectual frameworks are operative that determine our approaches to archaeological data? Michael Graves (1994:5) asks, “To what extent do our ideas about the past reflect the historical and contemporary conditions of Western society? How, then, has this context affected archaeological knowledge?” As Preucel (1991:17) questions whether archaeologists through their examination of artifacts discover an ancient past or do they create alternative pasts, he alerts us to our own latent biases. Our own ideology and the methods we bring to bear on studying others as anthropologists are up for scrutiny. Current paths to knowledge and the cognitive interests of several theoretical postures have been explored to this end (Preucel 1991).

In very general terms, processual archaeology is an analytic science grounded in logical positivism (Preucel 1991). An alternative post-processual archaeology advocated by Hodder (1991) includes references to hermeneutics, the science and methodology of interpretation. Hermeneutic archaeology is concerned with understanding meanings in terms of cultural norms through studies that attempt to “recover intentionality” in terms of empathic projection. In Mark Leone’s terms (1982), it is a phenomenological view that involves something like being a participant-observer—immersing one’s self in another culture in order to understand it from the inside. Critical theory in archaeology, closely associated with Leone’s work, asserts that Western theories and language impede our understanding of other worldviews. Thus, a critical examination of the Western perspective is needed in order to appraise the deeply rooted assumptions that structure the worldview of archaeologists (Schaafsma 1997:8).

Particularly relevant here are some of the ways in which our thinking about how the fundamental dimensions of time and space are structured and how this relates to our ideas of the cosmos and, more immediately, our environment and the landscapes in which rock art is found. Do our preconceived notions of cosmological order impact or even block our access to understanding other cognitive universes and, consequently, the information that rock art encodes? Within the intercultural dialogue presented by rock art, concepts of space and time must be recognized as cultural constructs, not absolutes. How do these differences play out in the arena of ethics and rock art?

Time, Space, and Conflicting Paradigms

While time, space, and landscape are important contexts for rock art, they embody broader considerations when differing or even conflicting views about them are brought to bear in the engagement between indigenous people and Western scholarship. Rock art is inextricably linked to landscape, but landscape itself is layered with numerous cognitive maps regarding space, time, and events by the cultures engaged with it and who left their art on rocks in it over the millennia. Although the uppermost physical “layer” is shared today by archaeologists and the American Indians alike, the ideas about what is going on will differ, and they are often irreconcilable.

The following discussion in large part derives from earlier thoughts on similar issues presented in a keynote address to the International Rock Art Congress in 1994 (Schaafsma 1997). In that paper entitled “Rock Art, World Views, and Contemporary Issues,” I began with the idea of examining the roots of Western perceptions of landscape to see how these values structure our ideas about rock art in ways that contrast with and perhaps blind us to indigenous values and ideologies. The result was a patchwork of ideas assembled from a variety of sources, perspectives, and angles. This subject of land and rock art contexts has also been addressed by American Indians. From the Native American side of the issue, Walter Echo-Hawk (1997:2) underscores the existence of fundamental contrasts in philosophies between American Indian people and the West, the former perceiving a unity of all life, the second splitting it up “taking God out of nature and looking at nature and this planet as if it were not alive,” using it as a resource and commodity. Vine Deloria, Jr. identifies and then grapples with the conflicts inherent in the encounter between Christianity and American Indian religions, and in a final discussion in *God is Red*, he takes on the issue of land, sacred places, and moral responsibility (Deloria 2003:271–296). These topics are fundamental to the conversation about rock art.

Rock art does not float in a vacuum, but the nature of this non-vacuum is viewed very differently by Euro-Americans and American Indians. How landscapes are conceived determines how peoples and cultures relate to them. Based in deep-seated, contrasting ideological perspectives, this is contentious ground. Recreational and Arcadian values aside, in the Western perspective, land itself is seen largely as a material resource that is valued in accordance with its economic potential (Schaafsma 1997:12–13; 1998). In practice, the economic machine that propels Western society demands increasingly destructive exploitation of the landscape, simultaneously providing greater access to rock sites and the potential for vandalism. Such mega-threats, however, have given rise to a mega-conservation/preservation ethic—the other side of the same coin. Rock art recording and “preservation” have become major concerns. In regard to archaeology and rock art ethics, what gets to be preserved, how, and why? Do “records” in the form of notes, drawings, photographs, and digital recordings stashed in archives within buildings take the place of the real thing absent the land? How do archived archaeological data differ from sacred histories or icons infused with spiritual powers?

Images and Power

Rock Art and Ethics

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2013, XII, 104 p. 12 illus. in color., Softcover

ISBN: 978-1-4614-5821-0