

# **Powerful Pictures**

## Rock Art Research Histories Around The World

Edited by

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Cover: Rock art motifs at Meyers Springs in west Texas, adapted from a 1930s' Forrest Kirkland watercolour. Courtesy of Texas Archaeology Research Laboratory.

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## Chapter 1

# Why the history of rock art research matters

Joakim Goldhahn, Jamie Hampson, and Sam Challis

### Why does the history of rock art research matter?

In many regions of the world, we can learn more about past societies from their rock art than from any other archaeological source (e.g. Whitley *et al.* 2020). Rock art research opens up new vistas on Indigenous beliefs about 'being in the world' (e.g. David and McNiven 2018; Goldhahn 2019; Hampson 2021; Lewis-Williams 2006; McDonald and Veth 2012). That said, histories of archaeology and anthropology (e.g. Fagan 1995; Murray and Evans 2008; Willey and Sabloff 1974), often imply that until recently there were no systematic studies of rock art. Some overviews of the history of archaeology devote a page or two to rock art studies (Schnapp 1996, cf. Bahn 1998); others do not mention rock art at all (e.g. Baudou 2004; Rowley-Conwy 2007). Implicit theoretical biases within the disciplines of archaeology and anthropology have led to the privileging of stratigraphic excavation, or in the wording of Thomas Dowson (1993: 642), 'occupational debris'. Ironically, and echoing the famous notion that 'archaeology is anthropology or it is nothing' (Willey and Phillips 1958: 2), the implication in these histories is that archaeology is *digging*, or it is nothing.

In many geographical regions, and for too long, rock art research was considered by many to be a sub-set of so-called amateur, avocational, and/or fringe archaeology. While this might have been true in some contexts, we argue that rock art researchers have successfully married numerous data with cutting-edge theory for more than 300 years. One of the first theses on understanding and interpreting rock art, for example, was defended as long ago as 1780 at the Royal Academy in Lund, Sweden (Goldhahn 2018). The thesis, which for many years had been misunderstood (partly because it was written in Latin), focuses on the interpretation of the engravings from Bredarör on Kivik, a gigantic cairn with approximately 50 rock art images. It included a new and bold comparative dating method and a topographic analysis of the distribution of prehistoric remains and archaeological finds, such as Roman coins; these methodologies and analyses were then used to demonstrate successfully that the rock art under discussion was created in *prehistoric* times (Goldhahn 2020, this volume). Indeed, some rock art researchers were pioneers in defining the intellectual concepts and

frameworks that are still used in cognitive, heuristic, and problem-oriented archaeological research today (see Whitley and Clottes 2005; Whitley *et al.* 2020).

In this anthology we do not suggest that there is a single factor that unites rock art researchers from different parts of the world; nor do we claim that there is a neat evolutionary tale running through the history of rock art research. We aim to present manifold approaches to the history of the archaeological discipline and to embrace these histories of global rock art research to create a better understanding about the significance of this media. Both chronologically and thematically, this book shows that rock art has often been central in shaping, and re-shaping, archaeological discourses around the world. Above all, our goal with this anthology is to demonstrate that rock art research did and does *matter*. This is of course especially true to many Indigenous communities around the world who are certain that rock art motifs are animated beings, or powerful and spiritual things in themselves – a belief which often is essential for fostering a strong sense of cultural identity and well-being (e.g. Brady and Taçon 2016; Keyser *et al.* 2006; Rozwadowski and Hampson 2021; Taçon 2019; Taçon and Baker 2019).

### The structure and content of this anthology

Stemming from the 20th Congress of the International Federation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO), held in Valcamonica (Italy) in 2018, and focusing on the history of research on paintings and engravings from around the world, the fifteen chapters in this book interrogate the driving forces behind rock art research globally. Many of the rock art motifs featured in the following pages were created by Indigenous groups; indeed, these chapters shed new light on non-Western rituals and worldviews, many of which are contested and threatened. The book is divided by continent, although several chapters explain how early research in one country (e.g. the USA) influenced the trajectory of archaeological investigations in others (e.g. Australia, India). Many of the chapters are very different in approach and content. This apparent discord is necessary for the sake of inclusivity, though for some research areas, this is the first historiographical treatment published in English.

In the first section, on North America, Jamie Hampson and then Kelley Hays-Gilpin and Dennis Gilpin demonstrate how rock art research in the USA influenced the development of archaeology in the rest of the world. Hampson focuses on west Texas and the use of ethnographic analogy. He examines key publications from the 1880s on, discussing the utility of terms and approaches including evolutionary ‘picture-writing’ and ‘gesture-language’, empiricism and quantitative methodologies, salvage anthropology, and concepts of rock art as a form of embodiment. Hays-Gilpin and Gilpin show how relationships have changed between researchers who are mostly non-Indigenous, and Native Americans whose ancestors created almost all of what archaeologists call rock art. Some of the changes in the USA have been cyclical rather than linear in that researchers sometimes have listened to what Native American people have to say about rock art, and sometimes they have explicitly excluded those voices – occasionally, in an attempt to make archaeology more ‘scientific’ (e.g. Binford and Binford 1968). Nineteenth century ethnographies show that Native American understandings of rock art are many, varied, and persistent, and that early archaeologists recorded rock art as potential ‘data’ for understanding culture histories and identities. The conclusion from these first two chapters is that we would do well to carefully revisit, re-evaluate and reclaim our nineteenth-century disciplinary history.

Dagmara Zawadska’s chapter addresses landscape studies, rock art, and materiality in the Canadian Shield. She shows that although rock paintings and engravings remain poorly incorporated in many regional archaeological studies, rock art researchers often made major contributions to the advancement of landscape archaeology in North America, as well as to understandings of materiality in relation to Indigenous animic worldviews.

Moving to Central America, Felix Lerma Rodriguez outlines research in Mexico and beyond, pointing out that far more attention has been given to monumental architecture, hieroglyphic writing, codices, and ceramics – mostly because, unlike rock art, these artefacts were seen as Mesoamerican ‘high culture’ and therefore fundamental to the construction of national identities. Rodriguez considers the role that rock art research has played – and what role it might play in the future.

Moving across the Atlantic, Joakim Goldhahn demonstrates some of the many challenges as well as the opportunities we face when attempting to write a history of rock art research. Goldhahn charts the formation of an archaeological science in northern Europe in the light of rock art research. Through

an analysis of Carl Georg Brunius’ novel 1818 thesis – *Rapport Succinct sur les Hieroglyphes trouvés sur les Rochers de la Province de Bohus* – Goldhahn shows that Brunius was one of the first scholars to leave his comfy armchair and conduct goal-oriented archaeological research in northern Europe. Brunius’s fieldwork encompassed both a focused archaeological survey and excavations as well as dedicated documentation of rock art. Starting in 1815, and ending three summers later, Brunius documented 65 engraved panels to scale. He considered the imagery to be crude and raw, and argued that the motifs were made to commemorate ancient warriorhood, raids and feuds, some of which originated from amorous escapades. Influenced by the readings of Egyptian hieroglyphs, as well as some of the early North American researchers, Brunius maintained that the rock engravings he studied were an early form of pictorial writing. He argued that these images must have been created before people in northern Europe learned to master the runic alphabet. In advocating for this interpretation, he became one of the first scholars to actively use material culture to define and investigate an epoch before history, that is, a *prehistory*.

Next, Margarita Diaz-Andreu investigates schematic art in Spain. She considers whether the professional background of rock art researchers working in this rock art tradition was and is different to that of those interested in other fields of archaeological research. Diaz-Andreu also considers the impact of theory on the study of schematic rock art, and assesses whether ideas developed in other areas of archaeology have influenced the way in which research on schematic rock art is undertaken in Spain.

Richard Kuba and Martin Porr then address the contribution of Leo Frobenius, the most famous German anthropologist of the first half of the twentieth century. The authors trace aspects of Frobenius’s intellectual oeuvre, his specific ideas about rock art, and the motivations for his expeditions in Europe, Africa, New Guinea, and Australia. They illuminate the considerable success Frobenius had in exhibiting rock art in the 1930s in Europe and the United States after World War II, and discuss the relevance that Frobenius and his institute have had on contemporary rock art research.

Turning to southern Africa, Sam Challis illustrates the story of making history *from* rock art. Efforts to reinstate San or other Indigenous Africans’ history from the emic perspective, especially towards the ending of *apartheid*, were noble and often political – especially those with historical materialist leanings. They were not unproblematic, however, and often struggled to break free of the constraints imposed by a distinct lack of chronology. Working with contact images more firmly situated in time, however, has since allowed



some researchers to contribute hypotheses that can be tested against the ethnographic and historical record.

David Witelson addresses issues surrounding the 'integration' of rock art and other archaeological sub-disciplines in southern African research. He argues that a distinction between archaeology and rock art research is rooted in historical methodology that continues to burden current analysis. Despite the distinction, it is *integration* (and not any form of separation) that is widely held to be a broad aim of, if not an obstacle for, Later Stone Age research in southern Africa. Integration is, however, more problematic than it first appears: does integration refer to some concise, defined endpoint? Is integration an unrealistic ideal? These are difficult questions to answer, but Witelson makes some useful suggestions as to how we might usefully proceed.

Ghilraen Laue takes us into the history of research into regional difference in southern African rock art, arguing that, until recently, the heuristic value of the 'cognitive' approach to San rock art led to a relegation of previously important issues. Her historical rock art research exposé starts in the late 1920s with the work of Miles Burkitt, and ends with suggested ways to create new paths to help us to understand the regionality of rock art assemblages in southern Africa, and beyond. She identifies several challenges for the future, including the lack of comprehensive and comparable survey data and the need for firm regional rock art chronologies. Laue's chapter clearly shows how contemporary research agendas are related and nested in a nexus of tropes that have often been defined by an earlier research generation, situated in another time and cultural context – nexuses that are a vital part of most, if not all, contemporary and concurrent archaeological practices.

From Africa eastward to the Antipodes, the next two chapters outline historical rock art research in the Kimberley region of northern Australia. Michael Rainsbury starts with a survey of the early explorers and researchers in the Kimberley from 1838 to 1938. The overview is organised chronologically, starting with the first expeditions in the late 1830s, when George Grey documented rock art, and ending with the first fieldwork of trained anthropologists such as A.P. Elkin, who later became one of the first professors of anthropology in Australia at the University of Sydney. Elkin spent a year in the Kimberley, and is often said to be the first Western researcher that started to investigate the rock art from an Indigenous perspective. He also republished the paintings that Grey first documented in 1838, and started to reinterpret them in line with the original artists' world view (e.g. Elkin 1930, 1948). Rainsbury's chapter ends with some notes on the 22nd Frobenius expedition, to the Kimberley, just before

the outbreak of World War II. Several members of the research team, including Helmut Petri and Andreas Lommel, and the artists Gerta Kleist and Agnes Schulz, made lasting contributions to our understanding of Kimberley rock art (e.g. Lommel 1952; Schulz 1956).

Several of the earliest interpretations of Kimberley rock art were made under the strong influence of so-called Victorian Anthropology, a Eurocentric research paradigm that was (unfortunately) embraced by some rock art scholars until well into the 21st century (cf. McNiven and Russell 2005; McNiven 2011). Unsurprisingly, polemical colonial texts and interpretations continue to fuel heated debates on how best to interpret certain rock art traditions and motifs. The intensive surveys and research frameworks which sparked much of these debates in the 1990s and early 2000s are outlined in Joc Schmiechen's chapter on Gwion Gwion art in the Kimberley.

The final chapters in the book are set in Asia. Sujitha Pillai investigates rock art research in India, and in Tamil Nadu in particular. As in many regions of the globe, rock art research in India was forged in a colonial setting, and it was not until after liberation from the British Empire that research about rock art in southern Asia gained momentum. Pillai focuses on the rock art of Madurai, with its unique style of red and white pictographs and petroglyphs connected to Jainism.

In Tseren Byambasuren's chapter we learn that Mongolian rock art was first (re)discovered and published by the Russian researcher Potanin in 1886. Mongolian research then escalated after World War II, in close collaboration with archaeologists from the Soviet Union, including famous scholars such as Okladnikov and Tseveendorj. After the Glasnost era of the 1990s, and especially the fall of the Berlin Wall, cooperation with other international researchers, such as Devlet and Jacobson-Tepfer, increased. Tseren is one of the first researchers to consider the overarching narrative of the history of Mongolian rock art research.

In the final chapter, Irina Ponomareva reviews rock art research in the largest country in the world: Russia. Her overview stretches from Lake Onega and the Kola Peninsula in the west to the Kamchatka Peninsula and the North Pacific Sea in the east; and her research history covers four centuries, from the 1630s when the first explorers started to document rock art and collate ethnographic information about the meaning and significance of the art, to the post-Glasnost Russia of today, when much research is carried out in collaboration with international scholars. Many of the rock art traditions that are situated in today's Russia show close relationships to rock art traditions in other countries, and indeed continents. Ponomareva

concludes by addressing rock art research during the Soviet era, when archaeology was professionalised and considered a priority by the communist state regime (Klejn 2012). Most of the research analysed in this chapter was originally published in Russian, a language that few of today's rock art scholars master, which makes her contribution vital from a global perspective.

### Final remarks

We hope that this book demonstrates that the history of rock art research is not only a key part of any rock art research, but also that it is crucial for our understanding of the history of archaeology and related academic disciplines. Often, the earliest suggested explanations and interpretations of a rock art corpus linger in the collective memory, even when more persuasive and more compelling hypotheses have been proposed. It seems an obvious truism that researchers should be clear about which strands of evidence, which methods of argument, and which theoretical frameworks they are rejecting, and which they are complementing or augmenting. Far too often, however, researchers do not make these decisions explicit.

The history of the philosophy of science shows us that when people 'stand on the shoulders of giants', they do not always fully acknowledge the work of those giants or indeed analyze the assumptions that underpin earlier research frameworks. As the saying goes, history has a tendency to repeat itself (cf. Goldhahn 2021). Careful consideration of the history of rock art research allows us to unfold the cultural histories embedded within specific researchers' endeavours to try to understand this informative and powerful visual culture. Some interpretations tell us more about specific researchers' minds and histories, exposing their preconceptions, in the Gadamerian sense of the word, and less about the rock art itself, or indeed the artists who created these artworks. There are opportunities to use the history of archaeology and rock art study as a nexus for reconsidering cultural histories and de-colonizing research practices – and we hope that this volume serves as a catalyst for such pursuits.

### References

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