

UC Merced

The Journal of California Anthropology

Title

Heizer and Baumhoff: *Prehistoric Rock Art of Nevada and California*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0594f5wt>

Journal

The Journal of California Anthropology, 3(1)

Author

Grant, Campbell

Publication Date

1976-07-01

Peer reviewed

archaeologists, administration of excavation projects, and reports and the like can detract in some measure from academic or "anthropological" archaeology by shifting emphasis from important general problems, investigation of which already suffers from lack of funding. A possible result of this shift may be the creation of an "extramural" job market which ultimately will draw upon academic institutions for personnel, but which does not contribute intellectually to the discipline as a whole.

Probably these thoughts could not be translated to direct action programs without much more discussion and analysis. Nevertheless there are some concrete suggestions here about what could possibly be done to resolve some of the questions raised.



Prehistoric Rock Art of Nevada and Eastern California. Robert F. Heizer and Martin A. Baumhoff. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1976. 412 pp. Illustrations. \$24.95.

Reviewed by CAMPBELL GRANT
Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History

This important book, a milestone in the study of prehistoric aboriginal rock art, was first published as a paperback in 1962 and has been out of print for some time. Its reissue as a hardback edition will be good news for professionals and laymen alike who are interested in these graphic records of vanished peoples and ways of life.

Rock art (paintings and carvings on stone) has long intrigued observers in this country, and as more and more of it was revealed during the nineteenth century push to the west, articles began to appear on the

subject. This interest culminated with Garrick Mallery's huge 1893 work on the picture writing of the American Indian. He listed pictures on a great variety of surfaces—hide, bark, wood, stone, and the like. In 1929, Julian Steward's *Petroglyphs of California and Adjoining States* appeared, the first serious regional study of rock art. This book set a certain standard approach to the subject that would influence others for many years. A similar study, *Picture Writing of Texas Indians* by A. T. Jackson, was published nine years later. The Jackson book followed the Steward pattern in describing sites and mapping design elements, but neither author attempted interpretation except in the most general terms.

Heizer and Baumhoff wrote the next major regional rock art study about an area entirely within the Great Basin, a region where a remarkably homogeneous desert culture had endured for at least 8000 years. The only deviation from this hunting and food gathering pattern was in southeastern Nevada, where there was a strong Puebloan influence in the area drained by the Moapa Wash and the Virgin River.

The authors used a number of disciplines in their study, such as archaeology, ethnology, and linguistics to aid in interpreting the mysterious glyphs and placing them in cultural context. They noted that in most instances the petroglyphs were concentrated along known migration routes and game trails of deer and bighorn. Great numbers of petroglyphs were near water in the form of springs or natural rock basins trapping rainfall runoff. Such spots, as well as entrances to narrow canyons and places where canyons constrict to form gateways, are ideal locations for the ambushing of animals.

This type of hunting had to be a communal affair employing large numbers of men, women, and children. The more skillful marksmen remained hidden behind rock blinds above the trail while the others served as beaters to drive the game past the blinds, where

they were shot by the archers. Still evident at several sites are long rock walls that were used to help contain the animals along the planned route past the hunters. From the abundant petroglyphs at key points along such game trails, Heizer and Baumhoff postulated that the major motivation for the rock art of the region was in connection with hunting magic, with the petroglyphs created periodically by or under the direction of the hunt shamans. These shamans in the Great Basin were the directors of the communal hunts well into historic times, long after the making of petroglyphs had been abandoned.

The authors believe that these Great Basin petroglyphs were made for the same reasons attributed to the creation of the Ice Age mammals in the Palaeolithic caves of Europe—to help bring success in the hunt and to ensure an increase or continuance of the supply of game animals. Unlike European paintings, where nearly all representations are of animals, the bulk of the Nevada petroglyphs are purely abstract patterns with only occasional deer or bighorn.

To account for the cessation of petroglyph-making by the desert hunters, the authors turn to linguistic evidence. There is general agreement that in the not-too-distant past, there were large and continuing migrations of Shoshonean-speaking people from south-eastern California and southern Nevada who fanned out to the north and east until they filled most of the Great Basin and the Colorado Plateau. The recency of these migrations, possibly sometime between A.D. 1200 and A.D. 1800, is demonstrated by the slight changes in language over great distances. The authors argue that the migrants, many of whom had used hunting magic in connection with their communal hunts, took the tradition with them as they moved out seeking greener pastures or more living space. However, entering unfamiliar territory and continually on the move, they were unsuccessful in re-establishing their old hunting patterns, and, as

the petroglyphs did not seem to help any more, they gradually gave up petroglyph making.

Heizer and Baumhoff describe and locate 100 sites scattered through the 16 Nevada counties, with major concentrations in west central Nevada, where remnants of the great Pleistocene lakes endure to the present time. These are illustrated in 124 pages of line drawings and many half-tone photographs. The authors have placed the styles into seven categories—Great Basin Representational, Great Basin Curvilinear Abstract, etc.—terms that have become standard in rock art nomenclature. The Appendix briefly covers 42 sites in eastern California from Modoc County on the Oregon border to Inyo County to the south. This section is heavily illustrated with line drawings and contains design element tables.

Until the publication of this book, writers on the subject had been timid or reticent about speculating on the meaning of the ancient rock pictures, usually pleading lack of evidence. The authors of this book have found and used an abundance of evidence and have not hesitated to propose plausible hypotheses regarding these provocative creations of the early Great Basin dwellers. It is highly recommended to all serious students of rock art and the prehistory of western America.

