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### **Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology**

#### **Title**

Quinlan (ed.): *Great Basin Rock Art: Archaeological Perspectives*

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4j43w983>

#### **Journal**

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 27(1)

#### **ISSN**

0191-3557

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#### **Publication Date**

2007

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## *Great Basin Rock Art: Archaeological Perspectives*

Angus R. Quinlan (ed.)  
Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2007,  
168 pages, \$39.95 (cloth).

**Reviewed by Carolynne Merrell**  
Archaeographics, Moscow, Idaho.

This slim volume presents a refreshing look at a variety of directions now being taken in Great Basin rock art studies. It moves the reader away from the research emphasizing the shamanic or religious ideology in rock art that has dominated the field in past years. Editor Angus Quinlan states that the essays or chapters explore Great Basin rock art from an archaeological perspective.

The ten essays compiled here are diverse in subject matter, varying from ethnographic perspectives to social contexts, and from petroglyph dating to reported results from standard site recording. In Chapter One, “Integrating Rock Art with Archaeology: Symbolic Culture as Archaeology,” Quinlan—seeking a unifying bond connecting the varied subjects—builds a case

for rock art’s integration into broader archaeological research. He further supports the connective tissue of the contents by astutely cross-referencing each essay with others in the book, thus drawing the subject matter into a more cohesive framework.

Chapters 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 10 (by Brown and Woody; Pendergraft; Shock; Boreson; Ritter, Woody, and Watchman; and Quinlan) were originally presented as papers at the 2002 Biennial Great Basin Anthropological Conference, in a session organized by Alanah Woody. The session theme, “Rock Art and Archaeology: An Opportunity for Integration,” explored archaeology’s role in constructing rock art’s contemporary heritage value, as well as the kinds of interpretations popularly presented to the public. The four additional chapters, 1, 3, 4, and 8 (by Valbourg and Cunningham; Cannon and Woody; and Cannon and Ricks), flesh out the contents of the book and contribute significantly to its general theme, which applies an archaeological, ethnographic, and landscape context to Great Basin rock art research.

Chapter Three, “The Mountain Maidu Homeland: Native and Anthropological Interpretations of Cultural Identity,” by Helen Valborg and Farrell Cunningham,

is perhaps the most valuable essay in the book because it highlights the tension between archaeological and indigenous frameworks that every researcher must consider. The authors explore this topic by explaining the Maidu approach to understanding their own culture. This essay is a must-read reference for anyone working in the area occupied by the Maidu people of the northeastern Sierra Nevada. Chapter Two, in contrast, "Stories as Old as the Rocks: Rock Art and Myth," by Melvin Brown and Alanah Woody, is a rather routine attempt to contextualize the interpretation of the Agai-Pah pictograph site by taking into account local oral traditions obtained through a series of field trips conducted with tribal elders. After admitting that the original drawing of the rock art in question is somewhat inaccurate, the authors continue to refer to it, and it is the only representation of the pictograph in the article. In my opinion, the essay would have been improved by including more recent photographs or drawings of the Agai-Pah pictographs. Applying digital enhancement technology to photos of the pictographs in question might have produced more convincing evidence of what was actually being represented at the site.

Chapter Four, "Toward a Gender-Inclusive View of Rock Art in the Northern Great Basin," by William Cannon and Alanah Woody; Chapter Five, "Grinding Stones and Pecking Rock: Rock Art of the High Basins, Spanish Springs, Nevada," by Signa Pendegraft; Chapter Six, "A Regional Settlement System Approach to Petroglyphs: Application to the Owyhee Uplands, Southeastern Oregon," by Myrtle Shock; and Chapter Eight, "Contexts in the Analysis of Rock Art: Settlement and Rock Art in the Warner Valley Area, Oregon," by William Cannon and Mary Ricks, discuss the rock art in the context of the landscape. The various authors effectively accomplish this by exploring the relationships between rock art, landscape features, and settlement archaeology in their respective study areas. Keo Boreson takes a similar approach in Chapter Seven, "The Study of a Rock Art Site in Southeastern Oregon." This study, which was originally designed to record the physical characteristics of over 230 petroglyph boulders, also

provided Boreson with the opportunity to investigate the relationship between rock art and other prehistoric and protohistoric remains by identifying the spatial context of the rock art in the settled landscape and then assessing the stylistic attributes of the petroglyphs.

Research into the direct dating of rock art has been at the forefront of scientific investigation for the past decade or more. The dating of petroglyphs has undoubtedly been more challenging and controversial than the dating of pictograph pigments. Chapter Nine, "Petroglyph Dating on the Massacre Bench," by Eric Ritter, Alanah Woody, and Alan Watchman, provides details of the process used by Watchman to secure dates through the sampling and analysis of varnish coatings on and near the petroglyph panels. Considered preliminary by any estimation, the results nevertheless provide insights into early experimental methods used for dating petroglyphs.

The final chapter in the book, "Rock Art as an Artifact of Religion and Ritual: The Archaeological Construction of Rock Art's Past and Present Social Contexts," is an effort by Quinlan to move rock art studies beyond the religious realm and towards a more balanced interpretation. He sets out to examine why rock art researchers tend to assume that rock art is necessarily in some sense religious or ritual in its original context of use, explores how such an assumption shapes discussion about the public's appropriation of rock art imagery, and ends by stating, "Preserving site integrity is perhaps the most important way that professional researchers can respect and enhance rock art's original cultural significance and the wishes of the traditional custodians of the sites."

In summary, the variety of subject matter explored in the book's essays contributes substantially to a justifiable integration of rock art research into the broader context of North American archaeology. Although attractive in its hardbound format, this book might have wider audience appeal in a more economical softbound form resembling that used by some of the professional journals dedicated to rock art research.

