

UC Merced

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

Ritter, ed.: *Rock Art Studies in the Great Basin*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7kk285hn>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 22(2)

ISSN

0191-3557

Author

Woody, Alanah

Publication Date

2000-07-01

Peer reviewed

Chapters 6 and 7 describe hunting, gathering, and fishing practices, games, and lessons. There is not much new information here, but it is more engaging to read it from a personal perspective than from a normative ethnography. One of the hardest lessons for Euroamerican researchers to accept, but one that is found in many traditional, small-scale societies, is "not to ask too many questions but to listen and follow by example" (p. 107).

Chapter 8 tells of ranchers, lumbermen, miners, and settlers who came to the mountains in the late 1800s and the changes they introduced. Chapter 9 describes the annual acorn harvest, understory burning, and cooking practices. Chapter 10 deals with missionaries, schools, and the Forest Service. Chapter 11 concerns the activities of winter, such as storytelling, games, basketry, and beadwork. The epilogue summarizes the major changes in the homeland and culture of the Nim, but concludes with words that echo a reaffirming Yokuts prayer; "all of my ancestors are always with me" (p. 179; Kroeber 1925:511).

One of the contributions of Lee's book will be the orthography for Nim words that he and Evan Norris devised. Family and group differences in pronunciation and word use continue to challenge attempts to codify California Indian languages, but the message here is that simple phonetic spelling, if that is possible, is preferable to linguistic symbols that are difficult to read and to reproduce.

Gaylen Lee's timely book belongs on every Californianist's reading list, along with classic and contemporary anthropological works on the Nim.

REFERENCES

- Bruhns, Karen Olsen, and Karen E. Stothert
1999 Women in Ancient America. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Dick Bissonnette, Linda E.
n.d. Unpublished Interview Notes from Auberly, California, 1993, in possession of the author.
- 1997 Foothill Yokoch, Mono, and Miwok Women: An Anthropological Perspective. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Santa Barbara.
- Kroeber, A. L.
1925 Handbook of the Indians of California. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 78.



Rock Art Studies in the Great Basin. Eric W. Ritter, ed. Salinas, CA: Coyote Press Archives of Great Basin Prehistory, No. 1, 1998, 124 pp., 50 figs., 11 tables, references, \$15.00 (paper).

Reviewed by:

ALANAH WOODY

Nevada State Museum, 600 N. Carson St., Carson City, NV 89701.

Rock art research is currently enjoying something of a boom, so the publication of six papers (out of 18) presented at the 1990 Great Basin Conference is not surprising. Including more of the rock art papers presented at the same conference, however, would have provided a more balanced view of the current state of Great Basin rock art studies. In addition, it would have fattened up the volume, which at some 74 pages of text (excluding the 50 pages of figures), seems rather thin. That aside, this volume has something to offer rock art specialists and interested archaeologists alike, as it provides an insight into some current developments in this field.

For the nonspecialist, Ritter and Hatoff's chapter will perhaps be of most interest, since their discussion of scratched rock art at Nevada's Pistone site in the Wassuk Range reviews current

approaches to rock art. For the specialist, their chapter addresses the debate concerning the function of scratched rock art as a means used by invading Numic populations to obliterate older rock art created by their presumed predecessors with whom they had no cultural relationship (Bettinger and Baumhoff 1982:485-503). Ritter and Hatoff (p. 18) dispute this contention by concluding that Pistone scratched rock art co-occurs with pecked art and does not deface it, a finding my own research supports (Woody 1997).

Few interpretative rock art papers seem complete today without some discussion of shamanism, and Ritter and Hatoff's contribution is no exception. They find that scratched and pecked rock art at Pistone closely resembles phosphene forms, i.e., mental imagery experienced in altered states of consciousness and therefore associated with shamanic practices (p. 20). However, they seem unaware of methodological debate in rock art circles regarding whether a shamanistic context can be inferred simply from the presence of rock art motifs that resemble phosphene forms. This throws the ability to "test" the shamanistic hypothesis into serious doubt, as there is simply no way currently to differentiate between shamanistic and nonshamanistic arts. In addition, as Ritter and Hatoff point out, the shamanic model does not explain temporal and formal imagery in rock art, suggesting that it needs some reworking to be a useful interpretative tool.

One welcome feature of this paper is its daring consideration of the potential role of women in rock art production. Too frequently, if researchers consider gender at all, it is only to dismiss the possibility that women made or used rock art (e.g., Whitley 1994:356-373). In contrast, Ritter and Hatoff "are tempted to suggest" that scratched rock art may have been made by women, based on "surprising analogs" between scratched motifs and historic and prehistoric basketry designs, including cross-hatching, parallel lines, zigzags, and diamonds (pp. 18-19).

The remaining papers in the volume are prob-

ably of interest to the dedicated rock art researcher. Swartz has two papers, the first of which is a very short (four pages) appeal for "contextual analysis"; that is, that rock art be placed in its broader archaeological and environmental context (p. 48). It may seem surprising that researchers need to be reminded of the significance of context, as it is a basic archaeological concept. But it is quite common for rock art imagery to be examined in isolation, producing interpretations that do not consider environmental and cultural contexts. When these interpretations do not fit with that context, elaborate explanations are produced in order to account for the incongruity, rather than simply acknowledging that one's preferred theory may not fit in every case. Swartz reminds rock art researchers that archaeology is about contexts and relationships, that a rock art site is more than just the sum of its imagery.

Swartz's second paper (again fairly short) compares the pictographs of the Modoc of the Klamath Basin of Oregon, the Chumash in the area around Santa Barbara, and the Yokuts of the southern Sierra Nevada in California, but is marred by editorial problems, including missing figures, unclear tables, and grammatical errors. The thrust of his paper is again a simple, but important one. Superficial similarities in rock art "styles" between distant and distinctive areas do not necessarily indicate a relationship between them. He demonstrates this nonrelationship very clearly with a detailed inventory and comparison of differing motifs (or design elements) from each of the areas under study, also an important practice for any region.

Cupule sites are a rock art phenomenon that seems to enjoy a global distribution, although they are relatively rare in Nevada (only around 3% of the rock art in the state). They are generally shallow, bowl-shaped depressions that are defined as rock art simply because they "represent specific types of manipulation of the rock surface" (Schaafsma 1986:215). Price discusses

two such sites from Elko County (Boulder Creek and Ruby Valley) that are quite different in terms of location, extent, and context. Boulder Creek is comprised of 39 boulders in five clusters along a major tributary of the Humboldt River, while the Ruby Valley site is a single boulder on the edge of a closed basin with external drainage. Additionally, the Ruby Valley boulder was apparently still in use by the local Shoshone people as a medicine rock until historic times and offerings continue to be made to this day.

Price's paper contains some factual errors, such as the suggestion that Casjens included the site in her research (pp. 51, 56), which she did not, and that the Medicine Rock "near Simpson Pass" in Churchill County has cupules, which it does not. This confusion is understandable since Casjens (1972) did survey nearly all of Ruby Valley, but the Medicine Rock was just outside her study area (L. Casjens, personal communication 2000). In the case of the Schurz site (Simpson Pass), the published site description claims that the boulder "has small holes in it, into which Indians (and white men) deposit pennies, buttons, and glass beads" (Heizer and Baumhoff 1962: 48). These "holes" at the Schurz Medicine Rock (there are actually three such rocks at this locality) are natural ones.

These problems are minor and do not detract substantially from the paper, which is an interesting description of another little-understood form of rock art. Price reviews both previous literature and ideas about dating and functions of cupules, and suggests that the lack of knowledge regarding production of the cupules by either the Northern Paiute or Western Shoshone supports the theory of the relatively recent Numic expansion into the Great Basin. He further suggests, quite correctly, that the recent use of Medicine Rock in Ruby Valley by native peoples provides a unique opportunity to engage in ethnographic and ethnohistoric research.

In his paper, Alvin McLane, arguably the most informed researcher of Nevada's rock art,

attempts to develop a chronological ordering of anthropomorph motifs from across the state. His analysis is primarily based on data from the western part of the state where anthropomorphs occur in smaller numbers in site assemblages. Eight basic anthropomorph groups are defined according to visual criteria (e.g., Archer, Stick Figure; p. 68), and these are then subjectively dated based on criteria such as the presence of atlatls in the imagery, associated archaeological materials, and similarities to other, better dated rock art. While McLane's enterprise is speculative, it is a good attempt, and something that should be attempted more often until more sites have been directly dated. However, McLane's proposed chronology for Nevada's anthropomorphic motifs needs support from relative dating techniques, such as superpositioning, to test whether the order is correct. In addition, his analysis could benefit from considering more data from the southern and eastern portions of Nevada (principally Clark and Lincoln counties) where anthropomorphs constitute a much larger percentage of motif assemblages at most rock art sites. But again, despite this minor weakness, McLane's contribution is valuable in that it provides a strong foundation for further testing.

The final paper is by the late John Curtis, in which he attempts to develop statistical methods to determine cultural boundaries and migration routes in southwestern Idaho. Curtis recorded 87 sites containing 1,022 panels with 4,500 individual "glyphs," and tested his subjective hypothesis that there were "stylistic" differences between three regions within the study area. He is able to establish at least one strong boundary in the northern part of his study area, confirming other archaeological research in that area. Like Swartz, Curtis includes a very detailed listing of 83 motif types (elements), although he claims that there are 87. This motif listing is important by itself and allows for comparison between his study area and others, but perhaps illustrations of these motifs would have been helpful. However, he

thoroughly describes his statistical methodology, allowing other researchers to adopt this mode of data analysis.

Overall, this volume is a welcome addition to the growing literature on Great Basin rock art, as rock art papers presented at conferences far too rarely find their way into print. Unfortunately, it is weakened by numerous poorly reproduced figures. Better copy-editing would also have enhanced the book's readability—the large number of typos, spelling errors, misnumbered and missing figures, and grammatical errors become rather tiresome. Regardless of these problems, each paper offers important analysis for specialists and others who are interested in learning more about this interesting and ubiquitous archaeological resource of the desert west.

REFERENCES

- Bettinger, Robert L., and Martin A. Baumhoff
1982 The Numic Spread: Great Basin Cultures in Competition. *American Antiquity* 47(3): 485-503.
- Casjens, Laurel
1972 The Ruby Valley Site Survey Data Summary. Report on file at the Nevada State Museum, Carson City.
- Heizer, Robert F., and Martin A. Baumhoff
1962 Prehistoric Rock Art of Nevada and Eastern California. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Schaafsma, Polly
1986 Rock Art. In: *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 11, Great Basin, Warren L. d'Azevedo, ed., pp. 215-226. Washington: Smithsonian Institution.
- Whitley, David S.
1994 By the Hunter, For the Gatherer: Art, Social Relations and Subsistence Change in the Prehistoric Great Basin. *World Archaeology* 25(3):356-373.
- Woody, Alanah
1997 Layer by Layer: A Multigenerational Analysis of the Massacre Lake Rock Art Site. University of Nevada, Reno, Department of Anthropology Technical Report 97-1.
- Julian Steward and the Great Basin: The Making of an Anthropologist.* Richard O. Clemmer, L. Daniel Myers, and Mary Elizabeth Ruden, eds. University of Utah Press, 1999, 288 pp. bibliography, index, \$45.00 (hard cover), \$19.95 (paper).

Reviewed by:

WARREN L. D'AZEVEDO

Department of Anthropology, University of Nevada, Reno, 89557.

The collection of essays contained in this remarkable book will be read with avid interest by all who seek a fuller understanding of the career of Julian H. Steward, his complex scholarly legacy and, in this instance, his pioneering contributions to the knowledge of the many groups of aboriginal peoples whose descendants continue to inhabit a vast region of the Intermontane West. Moreover, the reader will find in these pages discussions of the major disclaimers provoked by Steward's theoretical constructs, his data and interpretations, and the lingering effect of defining a distinctive sociocultural area containing, in his view, some of the simplest forms of human society on an evolutionary level.

In their carefully considered and balanced introduction to the volume, Richard Clemmer and Daniel Myers affirm the extraordinary productivity of Steward's scholarship, his seminal role as citizen, anthropologist, mentor and, in particular, as *the* "Great Basinist." They conclude their introductory review with the following statement on behalf of the anthropologists, historians, linguists, and political scientists whose papers from the "Steward Retrospective" symposium of the 1996 Great Basin Anthropological Conference provide the chapters of this book:

The history of anthropological theory—and of social-scientific theory in general—is as much a history of how the wind blows at particular times in particular disciplines and how national and global political and economic events condition and contextualize "social science as usual" and paradigm

