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Rock Art Research in the Great Basin: Some Historical Comments

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ONE of the most commonly expressed lamentations of rock art researchers in the United States in recent years is the fact that a majority of professional anthropologists either neglect or ignore the subject when dealing with the anthropology of any given culture area (cf. Clewlow and Wheeling 1978:5-9; Heizer and Clewlow 1973:2; Lee and Clewlow 1979; Clewlow 1978). This leaves the bulk of the rock art research in a region to a corps of avocationalists, many of whom are exceedingly capable, but all of whom acknowledge that the discipline itself would benefit from the input of professional anthropologists. The fact that this problem may soon be resolved is evident in a number of areas.

The American Rock Art Research Association (ARARA), which is a nonprofessional yet highly qualified body of rock art students, constantly appeals to the professional archaeological community for input, support, and guidance of research and investigative efforts. The American Anthropological Association has recently formally established an American Committee to Advance the Study of Petroglyphs and Pictographs for the purpose of encouraging and promoting the study of rock art as a vital component of the archaeological

record. In November, 1980, a 3-day conference entitled "California Prehistoric Art: Issues and Concerns" was sponsored by the California Council for the Humanities at the University of California, Los Angeles, for the purpose of consolidating a broad-based public interest in rock art studies, encouraging implementation of existent laws for its protection and interpretation, and expediting a legitimate scholastic and academic base, with an interdisciplinary focus centering around anthropology for its incorporation into the educational mainstream. The Rock Art Archive at the Institute of Archaeology at UCLA was established in 1977 for the purpose of facilitating legitimate rock art studies under the aegis of archaeology, in response to a need expressed as early as 1973 (cf. Heizer and Clewlow 1973:2; Clewlow and Wheeling 1978:8-9; Lee and Clewlow 1979:2-3). Nevertheless, there is a persistence on the part of anthropological scholars to overlook rock art studies, thereby implicitly denying it the standing of a recognized anthropological sub-discipline in North America.

A recent example of this is an article by Don D. Fowler (1980), appearing in the *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology*. Entitled "History of Great Basin Anthropological Research, 1776-1979", the paper is a veritable *tour de force* from one of the truly pre-eminent Great Basin researchers

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and historians of research. Filled with brilliant synthesis and imaginative historical insight, the Fowler work was a welcome "state-of-the-art" inventory on Great Basin research that provided a timely update to the earlier excellent overviews presented by Jennings and Norbeck (1955); Jennings (1964); and d'Azevedo *et al.* (1966). None of these three earlier overviews referred to rock art studies, and it was with great initial chagrin that this reader noted not one single reference to the study of Great Basin rock art in the Fowler (1980) article. This statement is by no means intended as a criticism of Professor Fowler. Indeed, the fact that a scholar of Fowler's stature would not consider rock art within the purview of his overview is much more a reflection of the failure of rock art research to impact general anthropological efforts than it is an indictment of his historical perspective. This is particularly true in view of the fact that Fowler (with Sharrock 1973) has published at least one professional paper dealing with rock art, and the comprehensive *Great Basin Anthropology: A Bibliography* (C. Fowler 1970) has over 100 entries on the subject. One can only conclude that rock art researchers have failed to couch their work in terms that appear of value to the majority of other anthropologists.

This overall lack of recognition, unfortunately, causes neglect of a valuable *corpus* of data, and in an attempt to seriously plead the case of rock art studies as an integral part of Great Basin anthropological research, I would like to offer a few preliminary, alas, rudimentary, observations.

Rock art, both in the simple sense of its existence as duly noted in descriptive accounts, and as a subject or data base for the serious formulation of substantive theory of overall value in understanding the culture history of the region, has, I believe, played an important part in the history of anthropological research in the Great Basin. The very

earliest written account of a petroglyph site in California, colorfully provided by J. Goldsborough Bruff (1873) during his travels of 1849-1851, described a Great Basin style site in northeastern California (cf. Heizer and Clewlow 1973:3). Interestingly enough, it is from the same general part of the Great Basin (i.e., the northwest corner) that a petroglyph has been reported which, if authentic, holds a graphic record of the earliest subject matter for the region: a mammoth, depicted in a crude incised style with spears protruding from wounds in its side. This site, near High Rock Canyon, has been discussed by Tuohy (1969) and Layton (1976), both of whom feel it to be of more recent manufacture than a date based on its apparent subject matter. Worth noting, however, is the fact that the site is located squarely in the High Rock country which Layton (1979) has described as being a widely utilized habitat for Early Man. Of further interest is the fact that this author has recently identified remains of a Woolly Mammoth from the Black Rock Desert, not more than 150 miles from the questionable petroglyph, in an area that has yielded abundant Early Man material for over 15 years (cf. Clewlow 1968; Tuohy 1968:32; Wallmann 1981). (At this writing I have received preliminary archaeometric dates in the range of 15,000 B.C. on the mammoth bone samples; a further report on the specimen and its associations is in preparation.) Given the strong case made by Davis (1978) for man-mammoth associations in the Great Basin, it would not be altogether surprising if a truly ancient graphic portrayal of the large mammal should eventually be found.

More substantive, if less sensational, is the recent identification of the Stillwater Faceted style (Nissen 1975; Heizer and Nissen 1977) from sites near Fallon, Nevada. This style appears to have great antiquity, perhaps dating older than 7000 B.C. If so, this Great Basin rock art could represent the oldest such

tradition in the New World, a distinction that would confer considerable historical merit.

Aside from the above points of interest, which may actually be considered anecdotal in an historical sense, there is a long tradition of intellectual inquiry into Great Basin rock art that warrants acceptance as a legitimate component of the history of anthropological research in the area. The first serious effort to systematize the study of North American rock art (Mallery 1886) considered a number of Great Basin petroglyph examples. After Mallery, a number of university-based researchers directed occasional attention to Great Basin rock art. These included Kroeber (1925:936-939), von Werlhof (1965), Fenenga (1949), Steward (1937), and Davis (1961). In fact, of all the areas of the United States to be richly endowed with rock art, the Great Basin has probably received a greater proportion of rock art research from professional anthropologists. In other areas with concentrations of rock art, much of the research load has been carried by avocationalists, whereas in the Great Basin it would probably be fair to state that most of the prominent research anthropologists have participated in rock art research either directly, or indirectly through supervision of students or collaboration with colleagues. It is thus no surprise that Julian Steward, whose name is almost synonymous with Great Basin anthropology, used a considerable amount of Great Basin material in his (1929) *opus* on California rock art.

Perhaps the single most important contribution to the study of rock art in North America was the pioneering interpretive study on Great Basin petroglyphs and pictographs by Heizer and Baumhoff (1959 and 1962). This was the first research effort in which archaeological data, ethnographic information, stylistic traits, zoological fact, and locational analysis were combined in a cultural-ecological-theoretical matrix that correlated

rock art sites with large-game trails and tied the sites to subsistence-hunting magic. The book (Heizer and Baumhoff 1962) was widely and favorably received, touched off a series of further inquiries into Great Basin petroglyphs, and firmly established rock art as a valuable component of the archaeological record of the prehistoric Great Basin. It stands as a milestone in rock art research, and certainly could be argued as one of the more significant contributions to Great Basin anthropology of the past quarter-century. It set standards that have facilitated serious anthropological study of rock art in various other parts of the world. A second work of major theoretical importance, again dealing with Great Basin rock art, is by Grant, Baird, and Pringle (1968), consisting of an analysis of the Coso Range petroglyphs that Wellmann (1979:55) has characterized as "one of the finest regional rock art studies ever written." This book chronicles thousands of years of culture change, including stylistic perspectives on game (bighorn sheep) portrayed, dress styles of the hunting cult central figures (shamans?), and hunting technology (phase-out of the spear-thrower and introduction of the bow and arrow). The sheer quantity of rock art that exists in the Coso Range also warrants comment. By a quick guess computation using replicative data from Bard and Busby (1974), and Busby *et al.* (1978), personal field observations, and quantifications from Grant, Baird, and Pringle (1968), this author (with D. S. Whitley) calculated that over 18,000 hours of ritually oriented human labor is represented by the main body of Coso petroglyphs. For a hunting and gathering society in a marginal environment this is highly unusual, and, in fact, could be used to argue in favor of the Coso region representing the apogee of prehistoric Great Basin ceremonial activity. Clearly, further explanation is necessary; the point, however, is that an enormous amount of anthropological data are

contained in the Coso rock art, and its significance, in historical terms, has yet to be fully comprehended.

In addition to major theoretical and baseline data contributions, a number of valuable methodological suggestions, like Pori and Heizer's (1974) computer analysis, or Bard, Asaro, and Heizer's (1976) dating attempts, and technical breakthroughs, like Thomas' (1976) work on directional interpretation, or Thomas and Thomas' (1972) use of stylistic segregation, based in part on the recognition of time-sensitive painted design elements, have come from rock art research in the Great Basin. My intent here is not to belabor the story of Great Basin rock art research. Wellmann (1979:55-56) has provided an excellent and comprehensive summary of the same, and other discussions may be found in Heizer and Baumhoff (1962:1-15), and Heizer and Clewlow (1973:23-25). I simply wish to emphasize that rock art studies have been a valuable part of the history of anthropological research in the Great Basin, and that Great Basin rock art research has contributed to our basic knowledge of that culture area, and other parts of the world as well.

In the Great Basin most rock art sites are located on public land administered by various Federal agencies. As such, they are eligible for protection and development as educational and cultural resources under a variety of environmental regulations. This is not the case in many other states, where rock art sites are often on private property. The great popularity of authors like Barry Fell and Erich von Däniken are tangible proof that the general public has an ever-growing interest in rock art. Surely as a logical part of our currently embattled programs of cultural resource management and heritage values recognition, professional anthropologists must incorporate the use of federally owned rock art sites to accommodate and encourage the public interest in our resources. A first step

toward this end would seem, perforce, that the study of rock art be a recognized subfield of the history of anthropological research by anthropologists themselves.

When Bruff penned the first description of a Great Basin petroglyph in 1850, he did so under harsh circumstances, namely the threat of attack by hostile Indians, and "was compelled to have a friend at my elbow, with ready rifle, to look out for the Phillistines while I sketched" (Bruff 1949:423-424). It seems an unfortunate irony if, today, the lack of recognition by professional anthropologists, coupled with the popularity of crackpot authors, would have the same effect on contemporary rock art studies as hostile arrows did on the good efforts of Mr. Bruff. The number of textbook covers and flyleaves, and the number of consulting company logos that incorporate rock art motifs as decorative themes attest to an awareness by anthropologists of its presence. The lack of substantive chapters in current textbooks or regional summaries serves to signal the non-acceptance of rock art studies into the anthropological mainstream.

To conclude with a positive suggestion: perhaps it is time for rock art researchers to organize a session at a regional meeting and produce a standard textbook chapter for Great Basin rock art that could be used as an adjunct to other texts and reference materials. Such a piece could serve to stimulate acceptance of rock art studies by anthropologists. To not do so will ultimately cause the neglect of rock art as art in and of itself, as anthropological data, and as worthy cultural resources.

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