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PRECURSORS OF FIGURATIVE DEPICTIONS IN THE NONICONIC WESTERN ARCHAIC TRADITION ROCK ART OF THE AMERICAN WEST

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Panglobally, all paleoart traditions, both portable and rupestrian, considered to be the earliest uniformly display a remarkable noniconicity. Believed to be attributable not to cultural diffusion but to an evolved, predisposing neurobiology shared by all human beings, this worldwide similarity of the most basic phosphene-like motif repertoires also holds for the Pleistocene-Holocene Transition period in the American West. The non-figurative, “geocentric” marking systems with which the arriving Paleoamericans and their descendants humanized the land, summarily labeled here Western Archaic Tradition, lasted for thousands of years until in very limited areas full-blown iconicity in the form of distinct “biocentric styles” set in by Mid-Holocene times.

Establishing a solid foundation for the existence of North American paleoart during Pleistocene-Holocene Transition times is difficult without the availability of credible direct dating strategies. As of today, no such chronometric technique has been developed to meet the scientific expectations of contemporary rock art research. Most currently applied dating methods, including the cation-ratio, varnish microlamination and X-ray fluorescence techniques, are still distinguished by large error parameters, and the rock art age determinations obtained by them have generally not been independently replicated by other experts. In the absence of reliable, direct chronometric dating, it therefore becomes necessary to rely on more traditional techniques such as differential repatination, extent of weathering, superimposition and image content. In particular, deeply carved and heavily revarnished designs on extremely weathering-resistant rock turn out to be strong indicators of archaic ages. A substyle based on such grooving depth, dubbed Carved Abstract Style, with its typesite at Long Lake, Oregon, where a petroglyph panel was found to extend below a volcanic ash layer some 7700 years ago, occurs all over the American West and may constitute the oldest surviving rock art stratum in North America.

Rock art scholars convinced of a pre-Clovis colonization of the Americas have always assumed that Paleoamericans made art, both in rupestrian and mobiliary form. Definitive proof was expected to come in the depiction of Pleistocene megafaunal motifs, but until recently all claims for extinct specimens such as horse, camelid, or mastodon were based on fraudulent examples, the result of autosuggestion and mindsight, or subject to question due to poor dating results. The now scientifically verified mammoth engraving on fossil animal bone at Vero Beach, Florida, is indeed an unprecedented find in this respect. Equally notable is the authentic petroglyph portrayal of a Columbian mammoth along the San Juan River near Bluff, Utah. Nevertheless, considering the overwhelming evidence for geometric signature imagery with which Paleoamericans first artified their environment, both the Vero Beach and the San Juan depictions are seen as exceptional in the big picture of Pleistocene-Holocene Transition paleoart. Although at



Typical Western Archaic Tradition geometrics from a site near Kingman (Arizona).

this time there is no evidence that noniconic and iconic motifs were used throughout the entirety of image-making history in the Western US, it is possible, nevertheless, that an early iconic tradition, poorly understood at present, may come to the fore.

The developmental scheme proposed here for Western Archaic Tradition imagery – essentially a long-lasting macrotradition distinguished by predominantly abstract-geometric designs – comes to an end when a “representational revolution” is seen to begin around the Mid-Holocene. Whatever the reasons for this innovation, where before there was panregional homogeneity in the form of a noniconic artistic tradition, there is now heterogeneity manifested in a series of regionally varied styles that share an emphasis on life forms such as anthropomorphs and zoomorphs. Although geometric elements do not disappear, they are now more marginalized and usually integrated into the bodies of the animals and humans.

Leading up to this stage of iconicity a number of simple figurative designs can be observed that gradually occur in the mix of abstract-geometrics and may have functioned as “bridging” elements between noniconic and more fully developed representational art. For this reason, they may be regarded as proto-iconic precursors. Among the elements most frequently observed in this role are animal and bird tracks, and human hand and footprints. While constituting a hitherto unmade observation for the developmental path of Western Archaic Tradition rock art, due to the lack of absolute dating methods this “proto-iconic hypothesis” is currently not scientifically testable. For this reason it is offered here as a predictive model. When looking at the broad spectrum of Western Archaic Tradition rock art sites, a pattern with apparent evolutionary traits emerges: All earliest imagery seems characteristically devoid of iconic markings over a long time period. Within this framework of fundamentally stylistic continuity, a gradual emergence of proto-iconic motifs becomes apparent. This admixture of pre-figurative motifs can thus be regarded as an inceptive or transitory step towards fully developed, two-dimensional iconicity at the end of the Pleistocene-Holocene Tradition. Typically, all subsequent representational art, then, occurs coevally with abstract-geometric forms.

Whether this proto-iconic hypothesis is verifiable or falsifiable and whether it also holds for rock art corpora of Pleistocene-Holocene antiquity in other parts of the world will depend on the amount of attention that rock art researchers start paying to the observed phenomenon. A strong case for the early appearance of “tracks” can surely be made for Panaramitee and Karake Tradition imagery in Australia and the Pleistocene hunter-gatherer iconography found at Piedra Museo in the Patagonian landscape of South America.





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