EARLY ROCK ART OF THE AMERICAS AS REFLECTED IN THE NORTHEAST MEXICAN CORRIDOR

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Although the Asian origin of the first Americans is now well established, the chronology and rapidity of population expansion as well as the routes taken are still uncertain. Likewise, it is a matter of speculation whether the early migrants brought a rock art tradition with them as part of their cultural baggage, or whether all New World rock art traditions are independent inventions or the product of later migrations. Early dates for South American rock art suggest considerable antiquity and the presence of world-wide abstract motifs suggests a possible Old World connection, but the evidence for rock art traditions in the Americas is meager and still does not allow a definitive answer.

However old the earliest rock art may be, the initial migrants most likely had to pass through the Mesoamerican corridor and the Central American isthmus as they moved southward. In particular, the northeastern corridor following the front range of Sierra Madre Oriental and adjoining the Gulf coastal plain is a likely place to find any early rock art because it connects with both the continental interior to the west through the Río Grande/Río Bravo drainage system as well as the Great Plains and eastern North America through the Mississippi river drainage and the natural configuration of the Gulf coastline.

More than 600 rock art sites are now identified in the Northeast Mexican states of Nuevo León and Coahuila which straddle this route, from small isolated figures to very extensive areas with thousands of images and provide a broad sample of rock art from many time periods. Initial human occupation in this region is now radiocarbon dated to at least 12 000 BP and rock art is associated with all of the earliest dated sites.

The largest sites are located at key points in the intermontane drainage system, where superposition of figures, differential rock wear, and stylistic and thematic variations identify multiple traditions of rock art production extending up to protohistoric times. In the absence of direct dating, we use these three features as indicators to identify the relative antiquity of the images.

While both paintings and petroglyphs are present, the earliest rock art is all petroglyphic. These figures are carved mainly on rocky crests at open sites with a panoramic view of the surrounding area, invariably near dependable water sources which were abandoned and reoccupied in different periods in response to climatic variations. Thus, rock art production appears to be episodic. Stylistic and motif similarities and reuse of the same sites do not indicate continuity of populations. Any similarities derive rather from the immediate spatial context and the conditions of the hunter/gatherer adaptation which characterized the region throughout prehistory.
Dot Configuration showing extensive fracturing and repatination (Boca de Potrerillos, Nuevo León, Mexico).
Using the chronological indicators mentioned, at least three broad episodes, or stages, of rock art production can be identified. The earliest consists exclusively of the so-called “universal” abstract motifs: elementary geometrical shapes including spiral and circular forms, curvilinear and rectilinear figures, dot configurations, tally or comb-like sequences of lines, and similar motifs. These often appear on heavily worn or fractured rock surfaces. No technical examination of the rock varnish has been attempted so far but the dark repatination suggests that they were made prior to at least one (or more) earlier humid episode.

At some later time, possibly in the Middle-Late Archaic, a representational hunting tradition appears which features atlatls, projectile points and other lithic tools, animal tracks, sheep horns, and deer antlers, among other motifs. Many are elaborately carved on a very large scale in a distinctive incised relief style at places which offer natural tactical advantages for hunters armed with atlatls.

While some of these representations are detailed and naturalistic, others show variations which transform the real object into an iconic symbol with additional attributes. Atlatls with exaggerated counterweights become symbols of power rather than just weapons, and deer antlers are transformed into the tally markers of a lunar calendar which records the gestation period of this key prey species. These later abstract motifs appear to be the most recent, although their separation in time from the hunting motifs may be minimal.

Configurated dot patterns are present at nearly all sites and appear to be one of the oldest motifs. They occur on both horizontal bedrock surfaces and vertical panels, and their configurations and carving techniques vary considerably, ranging in size from small cupules sculpted in high relief to more lightly pecked sequences ordered in regular patterns. Typically, they are vertical columns or horizontal rows, but long dot lines and other more complex configurations such as fan-shapes, cross-like figures, and concentric circle sequences also appear, varying in complexity from a simple row of a few dots to hundreds of dots arrayed in complex displays (figure).

In Mesoamerican iconography, the dot becomes a unit numerical symbol, and in some cases, the numerical ordering of the Northeast Mexican dot configurations agrees with lunar synodic sequences. However, the diversity of their contexts and configurations and the presence of unstructured dot clusters strongly suggest that no single explanation accounts for all its occurrences. Number is not the only possible meaning for the dot motif, nor is it necessarily its original meaning. Petroglyphic counting may well be the antecedent of Mesoamerican counting, but this may be a specific later development. A more complete view of the conceptual range and antiquity of configurated dots would require a closer look at its variations within a much broader sample.

Dot configurations similar to those of the Northeast Mexican corridor appear prominently at many rock art sites throughout the Americas, including some which appear to be very early; to the north, at sites such as Long Lake, Oregon, in the northern Great Basin; to the south, they are part of early rock art traditions from eastern Brazil to Argentinian Patagonia, with an especially prominent cluster on the coastal islands near Florianopolis, Brazil. A more systematic view of their occurrence and analysis of their cultural context and meaning in each case are beyond the scope of this paper, but as viewed from the northeast Mexican corridor, such a study may hold the key to one of the earliest rock art motifs in the Americas.
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