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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



EARLY ROCK ART IN NORTHERN URUGUAY

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In the past 15 years, several important archaeological sites have been identified in northern Uruguay containing large amounts of previously undocumented rock art. They represent a very rich cultural heritage that includes thousands of petroglyphs composed of geometrical designs that incorporate a variety of different motifs, some of which are particularly recurrent. A long-term project that is currently in the development phase has been established to carry out comprehensive archaeological research and to ensure the subsequent management (conservation, restoration, and promotion) of the sites in question. At present, a systematic study has been carried out across an extensive area of over 14 000 km² in which the greatest number of sites have been reported. Given that the study is in its preliminary phases, available information for the sites remains limited, both in terms of the societies that made the rock art and its chronological framework. Excavations carried out at four sites, selected for their diagnostic interest, indicate that the petroglyphs were made by aceramic hunter-gatherer societies, however site formation processes, together with the characteristics of the physical environment, have made it difficult to establish a precise chronological framework. Sedimentological analyses appear to date them to at least the middle Holocene during which time the landscape was substantially different from the present one, and the environment was predominantly cold and dry.

The landscape in which the petroglyphs are found is one of flat basaltic plains with low hills and outcrops of silicified sandstone and basalt. The petroglyphs are located on these outcrops, particularly the silicified sandstone, and are found in both large groups of over 100 per site, and in smaller, isolated groups, with abstract geometric motifs that have been made by pecking and/or abrasion (scraping and polishing). The grooves and rectilinear designs present “V” and “U” shaped cross-sections. The rocks that they are found on vary significantly in size, ranging from over a meter to just a few centimetres. From a morphological point of view, there are designs that have been made with both simple and more complex motifs, created with a seemingly continuous line where all the lines or surfaces come together into a single motif. There are also simple composite motifs created by the repetition of simple figures or more complicated designs composed of “meandering” or grid motifs often made with little geometric precision. In many cases the designs have been accentuated by thicker or deeper lines, or by hollowing out the figures. Motifs with “bas relief” aspects, made using a range of different techniques, are also present.

At many of the sites, archaeological material was found on the surface and/or in layers. The lithic material includes both tools that appear to have been used to make the petroglyphs and some more general domestic tools, made using both percussion techniques and abrasion (bola stones and lenticular stones). Little evidence of on-site knapping activities was observed. The main raw material used was quartzite and, to a lesser extent, chalcedony, both of which often came from local quarries. Human occupation was principally noted in the areas closest to the outcrops (petroglyphs) and decreased rapidly away from them.



Rock engraving from the Ar17g08 site (San Luis de Arapey).

Despite the fact that local populations are largely unaware of the region's many archaeological sites and despite their isolation, the sites have nonetheless suffered substantial damage in recent years that is seriously affecting the cultural heritage involved. Both vandalism and natural geophysical and geochemical factors, whether intentional or not, have damaged or destroyed some of the panels and even entire sites. Sandstone is also quite intensively mined at a number of quarries in the region, putting the region's archaeological heritage at a significant risk. Although the project is still in its preliminary stages, and given the lack of even the most basic information concerning the sites, the current situation has led us to incorporate actions in the project to promote the sites. This includes designing an archaeological park and the analysis of possible strategies to raise awareness among communities by organizing events and setting up an exhibition which local public and private bodies would be involved in running. The project aims to gain a better understanding of prehistoric populations and their environment and in doing so to promote and preserve this archaeological heritage.





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