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Short articles



HUNTING SCENES AT CUEVA DE LAS MANOS: a Regional Perspective (Santa Cruz, Argentina)

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Archaeological research on the relationship between rock art and human settlements in the area of the Pinturas River and the Andean lakes in the northwest of Santa Cruz, has supported the sequence that Gradin put forward for Cueva de Las Manos in the 1970's. A more detailed definition of the scenes in stylistic groups "A" and "B" needs to be established however, so that clearer comparisons can be made between the sites. For this, we propose five successive styles of hunting scenes – A1 to A5 – in which the latter subsumes stylistic group B.

In terms of the earliest archaeological contexts of these rock art sites, faunal assemblages indicate that the main prey hunted was the guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*), followed by very small numbers of nandus (*Pterocnemia pennata*) and huemul (*Hipocamelus anticensis*), although the latter was only observed in the Andean sites. The marked predominance of the guanaco can be seen in the rock art scenes, however it is interesting to note that from the time of the scenes in black (style A2) some representations of huemules and then nandus were incorporated into the general scenes.

Cueva de las Manos was declared a World Heritage site in 1990 and involves a series of sites with rock art and stratified components – sites I to IV in the original classification by Gradin *et al.* (1976) – that are over 30 linear metres apart. Each hunting scene has been made in monochrome and reads from left to right. The scenes in black, which include a small number of guanacos that have all been painted in the same style but in a dark purple, and some of the other scenes in red and faded red horizontally cover 9 to 12 linear metres of wall, and are 0.80 to 3 metres high, which is above the reach of any person standing on foot. Our study also suggests that the different scenes in the black and dark purple series complement each other over the sites and represent an itinerant viewing space (*sensu* Leroi-Gourhan) in which the different activities of a hunt (herding, ambushing, intercepting the troop of guanacos / huemules and throwing projectiles, and capturing and / or slaughtering the guanacos) are shown using the accidental or natural relief of the rock surface to create a virtual topography. The weapons and projectiles depicted are simple bolas with "manijas", "lasso-bolas" and darts thrown using a propulsion mechanism.

This use of monochrome not only originally served to highlight the relationship between the different elements within a scene, making them easier to view, but was later reused in subsequent styles that did not involve hunting scenes, possibly with the same intention of making it easier to view the representations that were part of the same "composition" (tonal set). The particular tones used in each of these monochrome sets was also a distinguishing element between superimposed scenes on areas of the wall that were repeatedly used. In the different sites at Cueva de las Manos there is a repeated order of superimposition: black on ochre or dark red, faded red or red on black, yellow on reds and blacks, and white on all of the above.

The chronology of the earliest hunting scenes at Cueva de las Manos was obtained using X-ray diffraction in which the composition of paint samples from the ochre series were compared with the mineral pigments and pigment mixtures from a lithic artefact that had been painted ochre, and which were all from the first level of occupation (layer 6), dated by ^{14}C to $9\,320 \pm 90$ BP (CSIC-138) and $9\,300 \pm 90$ BP (CSIC-385). It is worth noting that hemihydrate gypsum had been added to the mineral pigments in the pigment mixtures used in the earliest hunting scenes from the ochre series, the pigment mixtures used for the lithic artefact, and the subsequent tonal series.



External panel at the Cueva de las Manos (site IIA): superimposed scenes in different styles.

In our research we used the tonal sets, superimposition, design patterns for animal and human figures, compositions of scenes, locations of the paintings, and use of the microtopography of the walls on which they were painted to establish different styles within stylistic group “A” and to review the composition of group “B”. Our research, together with the archaeological records, indicate that the earliest hunting scenes at Cueva de las Manos (the ochre / dark red and black / dark purple tonal series from ca. 9300 BP) are exclusive to the site. In contrast, the tonal series that are superimposed on them (red, purple-red, and yellow and white) show greater spatial distribution and have been observed at sites located within a 135 km radius of Cueva de las Manos, allowing clear stylistic similarities to be established between sites situated on River Pinturas itself, in the current Perito Moreno national park on the eastern slopes of the Andes, and in the central highlands of Santa Cruz. The ^{14}C datings of the Andean sites have also provided new data on the chronology of these series (dated between ca. 8000 and 6000 BP) and highlight the continuity of certain themes, motifs, and methods in later styles to those discussed here.





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