



PROCEEDINGS OF THE IFRAO CONGRESS
September 2010

2013 # 5

<http://www.palethnologie.org>

ISSN 2108-6532

directed by
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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



PLEISTOCENE ROCK ART IN SANTA CRUZ (PATAGONIA, ARGENTINA)

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The Meseta Central in Santa Cruz lies between latitude 47° and 49° south and longitude 67° and 70° west and has provided us with important scientific information on the first hunter-gatherers to settle in Patagonia. Systematic excavations at the sites involved (caves and overhangs) have yielded evidence of a cultural sequence with initial radiocarbon and stratigraphic datings that corresponds to the late Pleistocene.

These sites involve the oldest rock art in Patagonia and some of the earliest in America. The collections of paintings identified at La María, El Ceibo, Cerro Tres Tetas, Los Toldos and La Evelina have been made using different techniques and unique designs and involve a wide range of motifs, some of the most prominent of which are hunting scenes, hand stencils, felids, and camelids.

Our research has involved studying superimpositions in each area, analysing techniques and mineral raw materials, and identifying the various designs and establishing their relationship with the different spaces, colours, and techniques used.

In several parts of the region we identified mineral outcrops of iron oxide and crystalline gypsum. As a result, we were able to carry out a pilot study using local materials to create a more accurate reconstruction of the painting process and gain a better understanding of the techniques, superimpositions, gestures, positions of the painters in front of the rocks, compositions, teaching / learning contexts, and movement of raw materials involved.

We have defined three stylistic groups with different characteristics and chronologies according to the way that the rock art was superimposed across the different areas. Group 1 comprises rock art made by the first hunter-gatherers to settle at the sites and dates back to the late Pleistocene–early Holocene. It is mainly characterized by figurative motifs, hand stencils of both adults and children, naturalistic hunting scenes, and groups of running guanacos, sometimes accompanied by dots and lines. The paintings have been made in a range of different shades of red, ochre, yellow, black, and light red. The different forms of group hunting practiced by these first hunter-gatherers have been illustrated in several caves at La María Quebrada and La María Bajo, in which both spears and bows and arrows have been depicted. While the hunting scenes are as dynamic as those found in the Pinturas River area, they have unique stylistic characteristics, and those at La María are comparable to the scenes observed at Cueva 1 in Cerro Tres Tetas at Estancia San Rafael and some of the scenes at Estancia La Evelina. It is important to note that in chronological terms, we have been able to infer the age of the rock art in Cerro Tres Tetas, as first human occupation dates back to the late Pleistocene and there is no evidence of human occupation in the early Holocene.

Rock art has a long tradition of hand stencils, and they are very common in Patagonia, where they have been made throughout the duration of human occupation. Hand stencils were made by blowing paint from the mouth around the hand and by using the hand as a stencil. It is worth noting that this may be the oldest universal form of painting a part of the human body and everyone clearly recognized their hand stencil as their own, even when they had made it a long time before. In rare cases the hand stencils have dots on them, which are always in a different colour. An example of this is at La María, where there are sets of red stencils with numerous black dots on them, which, due to the design and colours, give the paintings a certain feline aspect.



Large polychrome felid. Site Cueva 6B at El Ceibo (dimensions: 75 cm high x 155 cm wide).

The regional rock art includes images of felids that have been painted in distinctive ways. A unique and striking case is the large polychrome felid at Cueva 6B in El Ceibo. It can be seen in the accompanying figure and is red with black spots on its coat and has a bristling spine and its claws drawn out. Cardich has identified this figure as a species of large jaguar that is now extinct, the *Panthera onca mesembrina*, which was found in the region more than 10 000 years ago. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that during recent excavations at Cueva Túnel in La María Quebrada we identified a tooth from this species of felid in conjunction with stratigraphic evidence of the first human groups to settle in the region.

Felids have almost always been present in the mythology of American cultures and have also been depicted in Patagonian rock art. They were a predator that was undoubtedly greatly admired, respected, and feared by the first hunter-gatherers in the region as they kept out of sight but left footprints and parts of their prey behind. For various reasons, we should not dismiss the idea that extinct felids, particularly jaguars, were highly symbolic to hunter-gatherers and were perpetuated in a mythical form in the region's rock art for several millennia.



