



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



ROCK ART IN THE PLEISTOCENE-HOLOCENE TRANSITION: Evidence from the Meseta Central in Santa Cruz (Patagonia, Argentina)

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Our research has involved studying rock art from the Pleistocene-Holocene transition (13 000-8 500 BP) and the early Holocene (8 500-7 500 BP) in the Meseta Central in Santa Cruz, in order to explore the role of rock art in a social context of low population density and high mobility. Social communication was probably of great importance when exploring and colonizing new environments, because of its potential to minimize the risks involved when settling in unknown areas. We have researched this hypothesis at a micro-regional level by examining the role of rock art as a vehicle for information in relation to three archaeological sites where early human occupation has been recorded (Los Toldos, Piedra Museo, and La Primavera).

The sites studied were caves and overhangs with stratigraphic sequences of human occupation spanning from the Pleistocene-Holocene transition to the Middle and Late Holocene. Large amounts of rock art have been found at all of these sites and include superimposed images. The stratigraphic evidence provided by the archaeological material and rock art indicates that these sites were popular focal points that were repeatedly used from the beginning of human occupation in the region. This complex situation, in which paintings and engravings were produced and other activities took place over multiple episodes of occupation, means that it is difficult to establish a chronological framework for the art. Below is a summary (see table) of the context surrounding the early production of rock art.

Site	Production of rock art / painting	Estimated date and arguments	Function of the site
Cuevas 2 and 3 at Los Toldos	Residue of red paint and red negative handprints	At least ca. 8 750 BP • superimposition • signs of paint production and traces of pigments in the layers	Residential base
AEP-1 and AEG 2 at Piedra Museo	Production of red paint (for rock art or other activities)	ca. 12 890 to 10 925 BP • fragment of rock that had been dyed red (at basal levels in Unidad 6 AEP-1)	Place for initially slaughtering and cutting up animals
Cueva Maripe de La Primavera	Production of red paint (for rock art or other activities)	ca. 8 333 BP • traces of red pigment at basal levels (tonality similar to that of older paints)	Processing and discarding prey, a workshop



Panel in Cueva 3 at Los Toldos in which white hand stencils can be seen on a red background. The red paint has been associated with the Pleistocene-Holocene transition.

Discussion

Although there is superimposition at the sites, indicating that the rock art may have been made over several different occasions, only a small number of the paintings can be assigned to the earliest human occupations. Both Cuevas 2 and 3 at Los Toldos and Cueva Maripe de La Primavera have red walls on which other motifs had been made, especially hand stencils. Although the findings at Piedra Museo have been very limited, involving a small piece of rock with red paint at the basal levels at site AEP-1, red paints may also have hypothetically been used at the site during the Pleistocene-Holocene transition. At site AEP-1 and Cueva Maripe, the early production of red paint may have been for the purpose of producing rock art, but other possibilities cannot be ruled out such as its use for painting leather, body parts, and other objects. The repeated use of red paint during the Pleistocene-Holocene transition may have been because this colour was selected for cultural reasons (symbolic, aesthetic, ...) or because it preserved better than others.

So far, the oldest paintings in the study area have been found at sites that show evidence of having been repeatedly used over time, but have not been found in unicomponent sites from the late Pleistocene. In this sense, the location of the rock art from the Pleistocene-Holocene transition appears to have influenced the location of the later motifs or at least did not prevent the successive practice of rock art in the same places. Although greater evidence of a social demarcation of the landscape is found in the rock art and other archaeological findings, such as human burials, from the Middle and Late Holocene, it is possible that this demarcation had its origins in the Pleistocene-Holocene transition, in which red paintings were produced in the places that were most frequently used on a daily basis. The earliest paintings in the study area differ from those that have been assigned to the Pleistocene-Holocene transition in other parts of the province of Santa Cruz, where different styles of animal motifs have been identified as the oldest images. The stylistic diversity and low quantities of the rock art makes sense given that there was high mobility at the time, and social interaction on an inter-regional scale was not yet very intense due to the low population density. In this context, the rock art at the Meseta Central, although limited, differs from the animal motifs as regards what we would expect to find in terms of early symbolic practices.





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