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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



## SOCIAL MEMORY INSCRIBED IN ROCK ART:

### Bear Restoration Complex in Pleistocene-Holocene Transition Siberia and North America

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Using a poststructural practice approach to rock art interpretation, this paper seeks to reconstruct an understanding of the social and cognitive processes involved in the transmission of an ancient Angara rock art style from central Siberia to North America. Tungusic Manchu-speaking Evenki in Siberia produced rock art at ceremonial sites and inscribed images intended to communicate a regional Bear Restoration Complex and bear-human ancestry religious beliefs. The ancestral Evenki clans' shared practical and discursive knowledge was grounded in hunter-gatherer life-ways, bolstered by bear restoration cycle beliefs and ritual practices. A similar style with probable connections to this ideology, appears to have been replicated in North America (Wyoming) during the Pleistocene-Holocene Transition (PHT) or Early Holocene.



Legend Rock site (Wyoming), Panel 48:  
Petroglyphs with "cosmic elk" and other quadrupeds (photo: J.A. McNeil.)

Both Siberian and Wyoming (USA) rock art data sets are based upon a combination of personal observation in the field and published photographs. The Siberian data set for this analysis is based upon personal field observation of rock art on the Middle Yenisey River (Minusinsk Basin) in the Soviet Republic of Khakassia, Siberia (July to August 2002), in addition to over 100 published photographs from the following Middle Yenisey rock art sites: Oglakhty I-II, Tepsej I-II, Ust'-Tuba II-III, and Shalabolino. The Wyoming data set is based upon field observation of the Archaic Hunting style rock art at Legend Rock and of photographs taken by archaeologist Richard Wheeler in 1950 of the relevant rock art panel (48FR99) at the Boysen Reservoir site prior to the panel's inundation.

The paper addresses the following research question: what social and cognitive processes could account for the reproduction of PHT Siberian Angara rock art style and bear restoration themes in North American (Wyoming)? Based upon a theory of structuration and materiality (idea-embodying style), I argue that the rock art's emplacement and inscription both in central Siberian (Middle Yenisey) and in Wyoming (Wind River / Big Horn Basins) functioned to preserve and transmit collective social memories integral to the Bear Restoration Complex (cosmology, beliefs, and ritual practices) and their bear-human ancestry and identity.

To support this claim, the paper first gives an overview of its theoretical assumptions drawn from a poststructural theories of the structuration of meaning, materiality, and the agency of the subject. Secondly, it discusses the issues of probable timing, route, and rapidity of a migration during the PHT from Siberia to North America. Next, it defines Angara style rock art in terms of its physical characteristics and method of production and compares it with Archaic Hunting style rock art at two sites in North America. Finally, it reviews the practical knowledge shared by Siberian emigrants and other hunter-gatherers who lived under similar conditions and engaged in similar habitual activities. In contrast to practical knowledge, discursive knowledge (religious beliefs, ancestry, cultural norms and principles) is built from the situated understandings of people living under a constrained set of conditions and transmitted intergenerationally. Alternative views, such as lost social memories over great expanses of time and space or the independent creation of Wyoming rock art with new meanings are viewed as less plausible.





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