BOOK REVIEW


I enjoyed this book a lot; much more, in fact, than I expected that I would. It does something that certainly has needed doing: it presents a global survey of some ways in which we, as contemporary living people, react to rock art and coordinate its management. The papers in this book touch on a great number of key issues that rock art researchers must address today and it does so in a cogent, if not always completely coherent, fashion. This is an achievement and all of the authors and editors are to be congratulated. There are several papers that I plan on integrating into my rock art research course syllabus and I am tempted to assign the whole book.

The central theoretical point made by this book, and one expressed particularly well in the editors’ introduction, is that rock art is not a static artifact but instead something that people react to continuously over long stretches of time, with reactions that often shift radically from one time, place, and/or cultural context to the next. Papers in this book scratch the surface of a vast and diverse range of subjects. Here are a few of the modern interactions with rock art presented in the book:

- rock paintings in Uganda that serve as a source of heritage and identity for groups who immigrated to the region relatively recently and likely did not make the rock paintings in question (Namono);
- an ongoing tradition of Bedouin rock engraving in the Negev Desert of Israel, where rock engraving has been used as a way of asserting tribal claims to territory over many centuries and where the earlier rock art traditions clearly played a key role in shaping later ones (Eisenberg-Degen, Nash, and Schmidt);
- cave paintings at Buddhist shrines in Thailand that evoke little interest or emotion in spite of their placement at places of religious worship (Tan et al.);
- changing public perceptions about the antiquity and value of early Holocene rock paintings in Spain and Argentina (Domingo and Bea; Fiore, Ocampo, and Acevedo);
- the latent racism and tackiness of modern consumer goods emulating rock art traditions in South Africa, Australia, and beyond (Smith; Tacon; Frederick);
- the roles of various government agencies and indigenous community groups in North America, Asia, and Australia in managing rock art sites and the social, economic, and religious interests associated with them (Norder and Zawadzka; Dongoske and Hays-Gilpin; Tacon; Cole);
- the transference of rock art traditions to new media and the quotation of rock art imagery for various artistic and political purposes (Smith; Tacon; Taylor; Frederick).
This book obviously covers a lot of ground and, for the most part, I found each of the chapters to be thoughtful, well-written, and entertaining – though, as always, some were better than others. The editors have succeeded in assembling this broad body of scholarship and presenting it in a compelling way.

There were, however, a few things that I found lacking in this book; things that are perhaps unreasonable to ask of the poor editors but that should be considered as goals for future work. The first item on my wish list is a more coherent theoretical consideration of the central theme of the book: how modern populations react to and interact with rock art. Readers are presented with a diverse and meritorious group of case studies examining how modern people interact with rock art. What is missing is a deeper consideration of why modern people interact with rock art in the particular ways that they do. Not only is this a practically useful goal in working through management issues facing rock art in the twenty-first century, it also has the potential to help us figure out things about how rock art fit into the lives of the many generations of people who experienced it. In fact, this may be the most important theoretical issue facing rock art research today.

Of the papers included in this volume, the chapter by Brady and Bradley does the best job of this sort of synthetic theory building. These authors are primarily concerned with Yanyuwa rock art in northern Australia, though they bring to bear comparative perspectives from several other contexts around the world. The main issue that Brady and Bradley are concerned with is the way in which the Yanyuwa construct and negotiate the meanings of their interactions with rock art and the ways in which rock art serves as a structural agent in tying together activities of Spirit Ancestors, the roles and duties of the modern inhabitants, and both the spiritual and physical wellbeing of the country. While I squirm at certain aspects of Brady and Bradley’s epistemological approach, I find the results to be extremely compelling. Irrespective of their particular theoretical bent, which often rubs me the wrong way, I strongly believe that the field of rock art research could do with much more of this kind of work. It is a very good step in the right direction.

The other item on my wish list is perhaps a bit trickier but no less important. Another gap in our research, both in this book and beyond, is a thorough ethical consideration of how we interact with and control interactions with rock art heritage. Obviously, this is a profoundly large and complex set of issues and it is perhaps beyond the pale to ask this of the authors and editors of this book. Nonetheless, it is a set of issues that mostly remains lurking in the background.

There has often been a tendency in our field to make arguments about heritage management through emotional appeals to the horrific injustices committed by European colonial societies as they wiped out indigenous peoples across Africa, Asia, Australia, and the New World. Similarly, we often argue by referring to the unethical behavior of (white) governmental overseers (and sometimes their archaeologist allies) in dealing with the cultural patrimony of indigenous peoples, who have had strong claims about the social, spiritual, and moral importance of the archaeological remains left behind by their immediate ancestors. For example, Tacon (p. 268) puts it this way: “Perhaps many politicians do not take pride in Australia’s rock art, because it was made by the ancestors of Indigenous Australians and not European ancestors.”

It could be that the diversity of cases presented in this book might serve as a basis for thinking through the ethical considerations of rock art as a particular kind of human heritage. Or it could be that the diversity of cases in this book only demonstrates that no one single ethical framework is adequate for achieving this purpose. Either way, leaving the issue in the background or treating it as morally self-evident is problematic. Whether discussing governmental duties in protecting archaeological sites or the tackiness of putting rock art on a T-shirt, it is
undeniable that the issues involved are ethical in nature. Argument by emotional appeal alone
is not adequate, especially in our current era in which many are inclined to minimize, justify,
or outright ignore our recent colonial past and the horrors that went along with it. Hopefully,
this book will be received as a stepping stone in building more sophisticated ethical frame-
works in dealing with rock art management issues in the future.

And finally, a criticism that has nothing to do with the editors and authors of this volume:
in my opinion, the quality of the production of this book is frankly poor. This is mostly true of
the illustrations, which we can all agree are pretty damned important for a book about rock art.
It is mostly that the black-and-white printed figures don’t convey the content of photographs
very well and the few color plates don’t seem to help that much. I know that publishers feel
constrained about the cost of printing too many high-quality figures, and especially color
plates. I also know that the modern publishing process makes it easy to print photographs
directly as black-and-white images on matte pages, and that recopying figures as line art illus-
trations is a pain. But the results in this case just aren’t very effective. So, let that be a lesson to
both authors and publishers in putting out books on illustration-intensive topics like rock art
in the future!

In general, however, this is a fine book and I recommend it for those interested in rock art
research and heritage management. It is excellent food for thought and it offers some interesting
theoretical considerations in terms of human responses to rock art imagery across space
and time. In this respect, this book has been a long time coming for our field.

Notes on contributor

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