

## Towards a philosophy of rock art study

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*Many people appreciate rock art for many reasons. The study of rock art has been over the years a battleground between people who come to it from different backgrounds, with different predispositions, skills, attitudes, and judgements about other practises. People from one discipline have sometimes pointlessly misjudged the work of others who have different aims and backgrounds. Different specialist archaeologies, for example, have chosen to develop different theoretical bases. It could be better to accept every contribution as valuable, perhaps because of what is chosen for investigation, rather than for any alleged findings.*

*I have attended many rock art conferences (but I'm not counting). Almost all the sessions were based or focused on exploiting the rock art to learn about its makers. This basis of course also led to theory and methodology, as well as management and conservation; how to study and look after the rock art. A very few sessions fringed on using the rock art to teach with, or for the appreciation or enjoyment of viewers now.*

Sometimes I take people to visit some of my favourite rock art. Their individual interests and needs are very different, and at first seem different from those of professionals or academics. I spent my academic career teaching students archaeology at the university of Sydney, specialising in research into rock art and formal archaeological methods find out about rock art, i.e. theory. In the 1960s and 1970s this was not well received, because at that Binfordian time, typology and other tools of formal archaeology were frowned upon, and dating was all the rage. There was an enormous and stultifying emphasis and insistence on considering only ideas that were testable, rather than seeking to find ways to test interesting ideas, and on directing work towards the solution of particular so-called "problems", forsaking everything else. There was no way to date rock art, and my colleagues could see no point in researching into it. There was no interest in developing hypotheses to test. Other archaeologists were (fortunately) taking an interest in the informed archaeology to which ethnography was directly relevant. They tried to enhance their case by misquoting my efforts, or thinly disguising them as a straw man. (Morwood 2002:157-8, Meehan and Jones (eds)1988:ix). Then, as now, this was a stupid thing to do, because formal and informed methods can and should be used to test each other's results. In Australia, as elsewhere, the formal archaeology of rock art proceeded very slowly. The straw-man technique is often used (q.v. Montelle, 2004:196), but it is difficult to understand why, logically, a good case has to be bolstered by attacking invented opponents.

It was equally difficult and unfashionable to work with teaching. In teaching I always tried to set things up so that the students could find out for themselves not only the course content, but also that they themselves had many competences and capacities. I wanted them to learn about rock art by looking at it and responding to its challenges. By contrast, one of my colleagues on field excursions used to stand on the far side of a flat engraving site, shouting a lecture to the students. They, knowing the importance of examinable knowledge, inched their way close to him, notebooks and recorders in hand. At the end of the discourse they were standing on the engravings. They shut their notebooks, turned off the recorders, and returned to the bus, without ever seeing the engravings.

When I take people to see rock art, I always aim to let the visitors and to see the pictures for themselves, with a minimum of explanation from me, and to enjoy the bush. Few tourist guides can work like that. I hope I allow the visitors to take from the experience according to their capacities and needs. Here are a few stories:

- Chinese status/reciprocation
  - A group of important dignified Chinese managers were comparing heritage management problems and practises in Australia and China. It was really all about the minor indignities of becoming tired, and having to touch the rock. They retaliated later that evening by drinking me under the table.

- Actors breaking jet-lag
- Other actors (who work a lot with light trance) wanting a day out of the city, experiencing a new reality.
- Getting blown away.
  - Interested Americans, ignorant of Australia's deeply racist past, met an Aboriginal ranger from Tasmania. I explained that she (then about 30) had been officially extinct until 5 years ago.
  - I split a group of 30 foreign students into 3 groups, led by me and my sons, then 9 and 11. The nine-year old's guidance was not followed, and the group got lost (for at least 10 minutes); the 11-year-old's group found a previously unknown engraving.
- South African working hard to find his roots, and share them with others in a similar situation
  - Aboriginal man, stimulated by what was there, and having me to discuss with, kept trying to tell me, an old white man, stuff that was secret. I had to keep telling him to keep secret what I should not know.
  - A group of Greenlanders came to realise that the Australian Aboriginal experience could be relevant to their needs and wishes to rebuild their culture.

All these visits gave me new insights and ideas. Each trip with a new visitor re-illuminates the whole, generating new ideas and new appreciation. Many visitors wanted to know more, and I was driven to tell them what is surmised, as well as what is known. Only the requirements of ongoing respect for the past, and the present owners, and an ethical prohibition on deliberately misleading, limit possible interpretations.

As I contrast these insights with those of academic archaeology, it becomes clear that much is to be gained from loosening up attitudes to insights and appreciation. Archaeology does not own rock art. And only in narrow senses (which are nonetheless crucial) do landowners and managers, the requirements to protect the physical rock art itself, descendants of the original makers and users, and other stakeholders' attitudes needs and ideas necessarily have priority.

Two American accounts of court proceedings give very different and puzzling viewpoints about valuation of rock art.

A newspaper reported that on September 8 a Reno federal court convicted John Ligon of stealing three large boulders bearing the rock etchings of an archer and bighorn sheep. The government did not prove the boulders' value exceeded \$1,000. Ligon, (41) has not been employed for more than 11 years, and has a net worth of more than \$6 million.



Ancient rock art panel in Buckhorn Draw, Emery County, was vandalized with chalk drawing in July.

*U.S. Bureau of Land Management*

Emery Craig (22) is to appear on Sept 21 in a Utah court for allegedly vandalising a rock art panel, with a picture of an eye, a heart, a large letter U, ( I love you), and the word Wendy.

For this paper, I asked various contacts and friends (excluding professionals academics and students) about what they get out of rock art.

G'day friends.

I'm trying to write a paper about why people (real people, not those who have a professional need to visit) like to visit rock art sites, and what they get out of it.

I received 17 replies, too many to present in detail.

Many of my personal friends and acquaintances had visited sites with me. Their replies were diverse and personal, but had common themes of *finding out* and *experiencing things outside and beyond their normal world*. The other half of my informants responded to my request to the rock art discussion list run from Arizona state University. They had two overwhelming themes: *art* and *mystery*. Many correspondents found the request interesting and challenging, as though they had not previously tried to put their motives and outcomes of their visits to rock art into words. The whole set of responses is what I would expect from those professionally involved with rock art, who were specifically excluded. Here are a few quotes and examples from the responses, giving the overall flavour.

17. One can appreciate a place as meaningful without understanding the meaning.
16. An overwhelming respect and awe for those artists and their myths and stories
15. The voluntary form of exploration observed in many species for example in rats, ravens, and human beings, commonly called curiosity, (and the fun of questioning experts' pronouncements)
14. So at rock-art sites I quite like the art itself .... But a big pull is the MYSTERY surrounding it.
13. Every engraving is a part of the Soul of our Ancestors, a part of their Writing, Philosophy, Beliefs
12. Shirley certainly found the visit she did with Freda a very interesting experience, notably the suggestion that we should wait for the figures to "emerge". We get out of our visits some idea of another civilisation...
11. I was simply shocked by seeing great paintings out of the normal context of a great painting. "why the hell is this stuff *here*?"
10. Cool question ... ..
9. The spiritual dimension must not be discounted... I suggest an analogy with pilgrimages to religious shrines.
8. Feeling a chasm in time and yet a closeness of human nature
7. It started as an interesting learning about cultures ... ..
6. The awe, the amazement of viewing these "windows into the past" has never left me
5. To have my preconceived notions turned upside down, refuted, confirmed, or to be totally confused, to be delighted depressed, excited or uplifted is a fascinating experience
4. I enjoy the natural setting; I am thrilled to see a new site and "discover" it for myself.

3. Folks visit rock art sites with the same curiosity/interest as any people who share in “art”.
2. For the connection to the past
1. I like to visit a couple of sites I know just to make sure they are still there.

NONE of these people want to be told about rock art. They want to find out for themselves. And they are quite capable of doing so.

I know I love doing archaeology for the processes of finding out. But I am much less interested in being told what others have found.

All who enjoy rock art can learn from each other, and the rigorous strictures considered appropriate for some studies may be counter-productive, and certainly should not be applied to all. Rock art does not belong to archaeology, or to any other discipline. Certainly some people have special relations to rock art, (I am thinking specially of the descendants of those who made it, and those with cultural connections to it). These obligations and needs must be acknowledged and welcomed by the rest of us. Otherwise, so long as we and our actions and attitudes respect the rock art and those who relate to it, and are careful so protect it from harm, we should be free to appreciate rock art as best we may, each to our own needs and capacities. If we are free to follow our own curiosity, we may even find things useful to the academics and experts.

I don't know how I could pass these conclusions on to those who presently insist on being told, or those who feel they must do the telling. I feel that they are disrespectful of the rock art itself, but do not know any better. So long as they do not physically harm the rock art, they perhaps do little direct harm.

Meehan, Betty and Rhys Jones 1988 “Preface” *in* Meehan, Betty and Rhys Jones(eds) 1988 Archaeology with Ethnography: an Australian Perspective Department of Prehistory, Research School of Pacific Studies The Australian National University, Canberra: viii-ix

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