

ROCK ART

Rock art, the most widespread cultural heritage of humanity, is constantly attracting a growing interest from research and management institutions, education and tourism bodies and also from an aware public. Research is steadily expanding within universities and other research institutions. This is above all noticeable from the increasing number of students' papers and doctoral theses dealing with rock art in recent years. This is a greatly encouraging fact for any specialist involved in this complex and delicate subject. However, some fundamental changes that affect the chosen subject of study also seem to have occurred lately. This concerns the funding situation, especially in Europe where the traditional funds from universities and research councils have become considerably smaller affecting the possibilities and choices of the preferred research aim. Most of the main funding is now accumulated within the research and education programs of the European Commission and Union. This change of research funding provider has affected quite considerably not only the possibilities of following a traditional academic career but also the choice of research topics and contexts in rock art.

The latter phenomenon is evident from a growing number of applications and approvals for European Union financed projects in previous years in the Mediterranean and Nordic countries. Sometimes these projects are based on co-operation between these two regions. Hopefully, this widening of the sphere of participants has had a positive influence also on the target topics and scope of studies. It has been further promoted by the fact that prehistoric rock art in Europe and especially that from the Neolithic and the Bronze Age share many features of chronology, context and imagery, such as between Bohuslän and Lombardy and different parts of Spain and Norway.

The most significant outcome of this intensified European co-operation seems to be a shift of focus from traditional university research topics, such as dating and the meaning of rock art to those dealing with the conservation and management of the sites. It is perhaps better described as an enhancement of an already existing research trend where aspects of documentation and management have become increasingly important. In many countries including Norway, Spain, Great Britain and in the USA research on the management of rock art as part of a wider archaeological

arena has become established more or less as a discipline of its own.

It has sometimes been argued that this may not be to the advantage of 'pure' rock art research that should be directed towards the meaning and interpretation of rock art itself. This topic will most probably also be a matter of debate in the future. But it seems obvious that management and research are two sides of one and the same coin. Without public investment in the development of management, including the protection and conservation of rock art sites, there would soon be very few sites left on which to do research. And without research there would soon be very little of interest to tell the educated public about the meaning and further archaeological implications of rock art. It seems that one key factor in further integrating these two fields is documentation itself.

Documentation, whether performed using traditional methods such as rubbing or tracing or with modern high-tech laser-scanning, provides researchers with the possibility to get to know rock art *in situ* with all its detail and additional artistic values. Details are often revealed which are crucial to understanding the meaning and therefore the interpretation of the message conveyed in the rock art. Applied in a conscious and careful way high-tech methods can be a considerable aid to recording and storing this information, as well as in bringing it from its natural location in the landscape into the laboratory where it can be subject of further analysis and study.

It is important to stress that this development of cross-border research is not unique to Europe, however strong it may be there at the moment. In Southern Africa a partially similar situation is taking place with the Southern African Rock Art Project (SARAP) that was initiated in 1995 at a joint ICOMOS/WHC meeting in Harare in Zimbabwe, focusing on the need for a common regional management strategy for rock art. The main aim of SARAP has become that of identifying a rock art site in each Southern African country eligible for a serial nomination to the World Heritage List. After having received funding for this purpose from the Norwegian development aid agency NORAD in 2000/2001, a group of sites for nomination were selected consisting of Kondoa in Tanzania nominated in 2000, Brandenburg and Twyfelfountain in Namibia (being nominated), Drakensberg of South Africa nominated in



Nine Mile Canyon, USA (photo: Jean Clottes)



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Tsodilo Hills World Heritage site, Botswana (photo: M C Truscott)

1999, Tsodoli of Botswana nominated in 2000, Dedza-Chongoi of Malawi nominated in 2001. Nominations are in progress for the rock paintings of Matopos in Zimbabwe, Kasama in Zambia and Manica province in Mozambique (see Deacon 2004).

This important and progressive initiative of the Southern African countries is also an attempt to fill the well-known gap of rock art sites from developing countries on the World Heritage List. There is now a consensus that such a gap exists not only in

Africa but also in certain parts of Asia and the Americas, although the situation is slowly but steadily improving. Other than the above African sites, there are also sites such as Zalavruga of the coastal region in Karelian Russia, Gobustan in Azerbaijan and Seimuly Tash in Kyrgyzstan, the latter probably being the most outstanding site of all. In China there are several rock art sites concerned, one being Helan Shan. In the Americas are also several of which one of the most important is Nine Mile Canyon in the USA.



Tsodilo Hills World Heritage site, Botswana (photo: M C Truscott)

This complex of sites is now being severely threatened by a governmental initiative to exploit the water resources. A similar threat has developed at the impressive site of the Burrup Peninsula, at Dampier in Australia now immediately threatened by mining infrastructure. Further examples from various parts of the world could also be mentioned.

A difficulty often occurring in nominating sites to the World Heritage List and especially in developing countries is the problem of survey and documentation of the rock art panels. This basic information and data needed for the identification, evaluation and verification of the sites and their condition is often completely missing or incomplete. If it exists it has often been collected and recorded a long time ago in the days of colonialism and in a form and in media that are not conducive for a nomination to the World Heritage List today. In this sense, it is correct to say that the concept of 'rock art at risk' does not signify only the immediate threats to sites posed by increased deterioration caused by worsening climatic conditions or human intervention with intensified infrastructural development and planning. At nominated sites, it should also include the situation regarding their survey and documentation, as inadequacies and shortcomings in that respect may

cause problems in the evaluation process and make the establishment of a site's 'outstanding universal value' difficult or impossible. Such a lack of documentation may very well pose as big a threat to the future of a rock art site as the above human factors. Once nominated and inscribed on the World Heritage List a site would have a much brighter future regarding funding for management and research. If the nomination process fails there is a big risk that such a site will lose much of its positive appeal.

Therefore, in order to counteract these problems and to improve the current situation there is an immediate need for some guidelines in this area. A first step could be to define and establish a common documentation standard – a minimum standard – that could be easily applied almost anywhere without high costs and technical problems. Such methods have already been developed in some of the European Union projects based on traditional paper rubbing and plastic tracing records that are scanned and computerised to enable subsequent treatment and use. Similar efficient methods have also been developed in Southern Africa to record rock paintings. This need for simple and reliable recording methods is also matched by an equal need for a general and easily accessible database recording system. Such a system is under development by CAR – ICOMOS in co-operation with the Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici on whose earlier WARA system it is partly based. In contrast to that system, it will however focus more on basic information about the rock art and its documentation than the symbols, and its meaning and interpretation.

The World Heritage site of Valcamonica has been the focus of earlier Rock Art at Risk reports. Also this year it has been the focus of a Reactive Monitoring Mission jointly undertaken by ICOMOS and the World Heritage Centre as a result of several suggestions of site mismanagement. Although the mission report is still in preparation some important observations can already be made. Many panels have been recorded at the site throughout the years, yet there is an obvious lack of a basic reliable and readily accessible documentation system. Such a system should be based on the refined recording methods using plastic tracings that were developed by the CCSP's research institutes in the valley. The system currently in use by the responsible state authority, the Soprintendente in Milan, is based on digital photos and is not well-suited to record images and scenes, although it might be appropriate for recording erosion and other damage. Another observation is that state authorities, such as that in Milan, should put more effort into initiating and co-ordinating research already being undertaken by various players, rather than put too much emphasis on doing such activities themselves. Otherwise they may end up in a situation where they do not contribute to an expansion of areas of research but instead limit them. This would in turn pose new threats to the Valcamonica rock art, which would be unacceptable since this is one of the original centres of such activities.

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