

BOOK REVIEW



Introduction to Rock Art Research, second edition, by David S. Whitley. 256 pages, 43 figures, 2 tables, Index, References Cited. Left Coast Press, 2011. \$29.95 (Paper). ISBN 978-1-59874-611-2.

Reviewed by Aaron Wright, Archaeology Southwest, and Arleyn Simon, Arizona State University



For millennia, native peoples of the American Southwest crafted landscapes full of spectacular forms of rock art. Indeed, the breadth of southwestern rock art (petroglyphs, pictographs, geoglyphs, intaglios, cupules, etc.) attests to the region's cultural depth and diversity. Rock art's significance to contemporary native communities, its allure to researchers and the public, and the importance of conserving it are values long enshrined by the Southwest's many parks, preserves, monuments, and agencies dedicated to rock art's stewardship. Clearly, rock art research has much to offer Southwest archaeology and vice versa, but we have barely tapped rock art's value for understanding the past. This is because we struggle not only with ways to analyze it but also have difficulty thinking about rock art through scientific and anthropological frameworks.

This is where the second edition of David Whitley's *Introduction to Rock Art Research* can set Southwest archaeology on much better footing. Whether or not it is their area of interest, most Southwest archaeologists will engage rock art at some point in their careers. Yet as Whitley points out, methods, theories, and field techniques for rock art research have long been under-emphasized in Americanist academia. To help alleviate this deficiency, Whitley wrote an introductory text for a class at the Universidad de San Carlos in Guatemala in 2004, which became the first well received edition, winning a 2006 Choice Academic Award from the American Library Association and serving as an instrumental reference for fledgling rock art classes at several North American institutions.

Whitley condenses over 30 years of experience in rock art research into an easy-to-read yet soundly scientific and scholarly treatment. What results is something more than a rock art recording manual and less obtuse than a theoretical exegesis; Whitley offers "a guide for the minimum level of field recording, balanced against the numerous other issues of rock art research" (p. 17). These other issues include: chronology development and motif classification, importance

and relevance of ethnography, interplay of scientific and humanistic approaches, semiotic and structural analyses, neuropsychology and shamanistic models, and site management and conservation.

Whitley's primary motivation for a second edition is to bring to light the chronological and conservatorial potential that recent insights from geomorphology have for rock art research. For example, the Rock Art Stability Index (RASI), developed by Niccole Cerveny and Casey Allen, offers a systematic, standardized, and quantifiable method for measuring panel stability and assessing preservational threats to the rock art. The assessment will be of considerable utility for those interested in management and conservation issues. Varnish micro-lamination (VML) stratigraphy, pioneered by Ronald Dorn and Tanzhuo Liu, provides a means of correlating the sequence of rock varnish layers over petroglyphs with datable changes in regional paleoclimates, thus establishing a minimum date range for a petroglyph's origin.

While methodological advances are encouraging, praise for RASI and VML dating seems premature because neither has been widely applied and independently vetted. The appropriateness of VML dating should be carefully weighed. For example, Whitley emphasizes "hands-off" and "nondestructive" methodologies (p. 47), but VML dating, like most other varnish-dating techniques, necessitates removal of the varnish, permanently damaging a portion of the petroglyph. Moreover, while the temporal resolution afforded by VML dating (in the range of 1,000-year intervals) has relevance for some corpora of rock art (i.e., the Western Archaic Tradition), it will be of little use for others. All Mogollon, Hohokam, and Puebloan petroglyphs, for example, fall within just two varnish microstrata, so VML dating offers little advance over other techniques. It is worth noting that recent dissertations on Southwest rock art by Marit Munson (University of New Mexico, 2002) and Aaron Wright (Washington State University, 2011) have shown that traditional, noninvasive relative dating techniques, when systematically and quantitatively applied, can yield surprisingly robust rock art chronologies with century-scale resolution.

Introduction to Rock Art Research is a promising stepping-stone for novices and specialists seeking a comprehensive yet synthetic exordium to this increasingly popular and germane aspect of the past. As an introductory text, however, there are some understandable shortcomings. Missing are discussions on the ethnography of farmers and three-dimensional (3D) site modeling, two areas to which Southwest research is poised to contribute. Whitley remarks on a general lack of ethnography on agriculturalist rock art, so perhaps Southwest scholarship has failed to reach his and others' attention. Southwestern rock art research has long been influenced by the ethnographic works of Jesse Walter Fewkes and Harold Colton, and more recent rock art ethnographies by Jane Young, T. J. Ferguson, Chip-Colwell Chanthophonh, Kurt Anschuetz, and others continue this legacy. Whitley also foresees a future for 3D site mapping, provided improved technolo-

gies will reduce costs and increase access. Several Southwest institutions are going further than mapping by pioneering online 3D models of the ancient past (see *Archaeology Southwest*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2011). Such ventures are positioned to contribute to what may be a twenty-first-century virtual revolution in rock art recording and preservation. Continued advances such as these ensure that there will be ample fodder for a possible third edition of this book in the near future.