

Talking With the Past: The Ethnography of Rock Art

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Publication No. 16, Oregon Archaeological Society, Portland,
OR. 380+ pp., illus., photos. ISBN 978-0-976480-42-6 (paper).
US\$30.00. 2006.

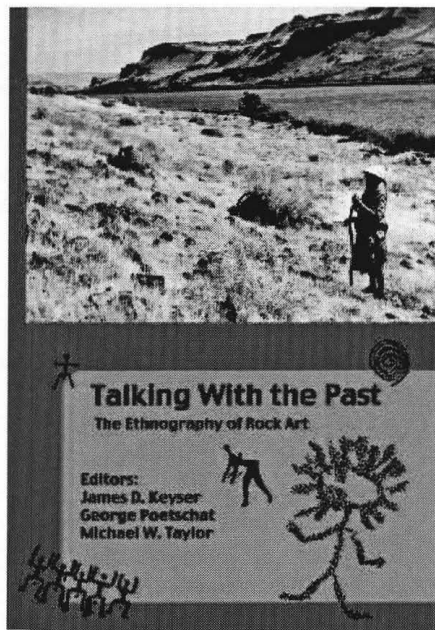
Talking With the Past: The Ethnography of Rock Art provides the reader—whether a professional archaeologist, or rock art enthusiast—with a thoughtful exploration of current approaches to understanding the ancient arts, as well as the very nature of scientific inquiry and the question of “proof” when it comes to complex matters of meaning.

Using a collaborative approach, unique structure in terms of format, and with a global reach, this book examines the use of ethnographic analogy in trying to recover and understand meaning from the world’s rock art.

Put simply, the ethnography of rock art means that ethnographers and/or archaeologists ask Indigenous peoples (or consult ethnographic documentation) about existing knowledge of the pictures on rock: who made it, why, and how it was done. The utility of ethnography in understanding the function and meaning of rock art has been long debated, sometimes heatedly. Historically, petroglyphs and pictographs have been the marginal side interest of the archaeologist, piquing the public interest, and commonly refuting the toolkit of conventional archaeological method and practice. This is because rock art is typically enigmatic, ritualized, and only loosely associated with nearby sites, at best. Can ethnography offer new inroads to understanding the images made thousands of years ago? The book’s authors grapple with this very question and the answers they offer vary.

Talking with the Past is a collection of papers written by rock art researchers and experts. Papers in this volume were originally presented at a symposium held in Portland, Oregon, where respected rock art scholars from around the world who had previously worked with both ethnography and Native traditionalists to better understand their subject had gathered. In addition, scholars and members of the American Indian community visited a group of rock art sites for field discussions about the art. These field trip discussions are included as transcripts in the book.

The book pays heed to both the potential of ethnography and the difficulty it engenders. Authors such as J. David Lewis-Williams and Jean Clottes provide strong case examples from the San context of South Africa on how ethnography does not simply or directly “explain” rock art so much as provide nuance of understanding and different challenges to its inquiry. Author Linea Sundstrom offers the reader a practical how-to for employing the direct ethnographic approach, while Philip Cash Cash uses both his Native language, Sahaptin-Nez Perce, and English to illuminate understanding of a rock art site located in north-central Oregon by reference to unpublished ethnographic literature. Bob Layton critically examines the validity of ethnographic information using numerous case studies, and pays special attention to Annie York’s descriptions of Columbia Plateau tradition pictographs. This chapter would certainly be of special



interest to those doing work in the Pacific Northwest.

Each paper in the book also includes additional “unstructured” discussions at its conclusion. These are free-form morsels of conversation and insight that may either jump to the attention of a rock art researcher, or simply expand the thoughts of the layperson. Take it or leave it, the format is refreshing. Indeed, the structure of the book stays true to an ethnographic method, one that does not presume to quite know what should be edited in or out. It serves as a type of oral archive – an ethnographic recording of rock art specialists sharing their wisdom with each other.

The last quarter of a century has seen a resurgence of rock art scholarship based on the ethnographic record and this book is a valuable testament to that. Any rock art study conducted today would be foolhardy to neglect the benefits of ethnographic inquiry. *Talking With the Past* reminds us that the philosophy of science and its method depends upon metaphorical ropes of substantiated evidence, hypothesis, and inference. The strongest ropes are made of multiple twisted strands, each reinforcing the resiliency of the whole. Akin to that sturdy rope, rock art’s best hypotheses emerge from intertwined theories and points of view.

As Chinook elder and symposium participant Viola Kalam explained, “They painted these [rock paintings] with big hearts... They were earnest in their painting. They didn’t just come up here to scribble or just to pass time. They did it because there was meaning in it.” Deciphering the meaning(s) of rock art will continue to enthrall us, both professionals and public alike. For some, this is a timely book, one to be read with an open heart. It may complicate matters of interpreting rock art and challenge the extent to which we can really understand it, but it nevertheless enriches archaeology as a field of inquiry, and most importantly, it cannot be ignored.

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