



BOOK REVIEWS

Shamanism and the Ancient Mind: A Cognitive Approach to Archaeology

By James L. Pearson

AltaMira Press, 2002. 195 pp., illus., refs., index. Price: \$34.49 (pb) ISBN 0-7591-0156-6; \$87.00 (cl) ISBN 0-7591-0155-8

This book offers a condensed and well-written synthesis of research over the past two decades that has sought to decipher the meaning of ancient rock art through analogy to shamanistic beliefs and the neuropsychology of altered states of consciousness. The research has provided new insight into at least one level of meaning in particular kinds of rock art. It further argues for the widespread existence of ritual specialists among ancient and more recent hunter-gatherers, many of whom likely used various hallucinogens and other means to undertake what were considered to be transcendental journeys to other planes of existence. At various times in different parts of the world, the argument continues, these specialists depicted their experiences and supernatural encounters in rock art.

As a synthesis of research, this book will be especially useful for anyone who has not had the opportunity or inclination to read the extensive original publications, but the polemical style and overall defensive tone of the volume will disappoint some readers. The heroic narrative format of the presentation, describing the struggles and triumphs of individual researchers, may be more entertaining, but is probably also unnecessary. Although a well-worn strategy for engaging general interest in any topic, and a mainstay of current science popularization, this format implicitly suggests readers cannot or will not otherwise see the true significance of research. The further choice to dress this semi-popularized synthesis of interesting rock art studies, primarily in

the southwestern USA and southern Africa, as the herald of a revolutionary paradigm shift in archaeology also misstates the purpose and value of the original research and potentially undermines the appeal of its presentation. The heralding of revolutionary approaches has become so commonplace in archaeology that even introductory students are quickly jaded. Unfortunately, authors and publishers continue to see exaggerated polemic as the best means to create heightened interest in what is often already fascinating research. In the process, the research and its revelations concerning past cultures become overshadowed.

The general thesis of this book, and the research it represents, is that prehistoric rock art, especially that found in the region of the Coso Range of mountains on the western edge of the Great Basin in east-central California, the San region of southern Africa, and the Upper Palaeolithic caves of southwestern Europe, represents the experiences and, by implication, the belief systems of shamans and their adherents. Among the specific arguments is that depictions of abstract forms such as zig-zags, spirals, and cross-hatching represent what are known as entoptic phenomena, which neuropsychological research has identified as common elements of visual hallucinations reported by individuals experiencing altered states of consciousness. Depictions of animals in these contexts are believed to represent spirit helpers or other supernatural beings encountered in the context of transcendental states that may have been induced in many instances through ingestion of various hallucinogenic substances. The conclusion is that these depictions and evidence of hallucinogens in these and other hunter-gatherer archaeological contexts argue for the widespread and enduring

existence of fundamental forms of shamanistic religion.

The volume offers a spirited defense against critics of this view, who argue that attributions of shamanism to such widespread and longstanding practices diminish their cultural specificity and meaning. In other words, it implies, according to some, that early and more recent hunter-gatherer religions are all much the same and never changed appreciably over great lengths of time. In the end, it comes down to a preference for the term shamanism because it implies a common array of elements, though some, such as the existence of ritual specialists charged with supernatural communication, could extend to all religions, or rejection of the term because it diminishes the unique meanings attached to these elements in their particular historical and cultural contexts. The debate in these terms does not warrant the defensive tone of the argument.

The book is primarily a synthesis of work by two researchers, David S. Whitley (who has published extensively on the Coso Range rock art, and who is the general editor of the AltaMira "Archaeology of Religion" series, in which this is the second volume), and David Lewis-Williams (who studies San rock art and applied the concept of entoptic phenomena to their interpretation, and who has published his own volume in the series). James L. Pearson, the author of this book, writes at his best in his clear and concise synthesis of the work of these researchers, and especially in his crafting of a heroic narrative of their struggle against entrenched academic opinion that would either simplistically attribute rock art to "hunting magic" or dismiss all such aspects of culture as epiphenomenal and not worthy of investigation. In the hands of a skillful storyteller, such as Pearson, this makes a good story well told, but it artificially

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elevates the research by means of literary device instead of the merits of the results. It also diminishes the weight of opposition by casting critics as obstacles in the way of knowledge rather than conscientious scholars with genuine and well-founded concerns about what they see as the inappropriate and unnecessary extension of the concept of shamanism

The volume is weakest and least successful in setting this body of research in the context of the history of archaeology and the philosophy of science. Unfortunately this constitutes the largest part of the book. It is another lengthy addition to a very long and seemingly endless series of published discussions concerning whether archaeology is or should be a science, the proper role of analogy, the influence of logical positivism, and the relative characteristics and merits of processual versus post-processual approaches to archaeology. Discussion of these topics in this book is almost entirely derivative, very repetitive, and generally unnecessary. It also rests on caricatures of archaeological theory and practice that would find few adherents at any time in the past or present, and exaggerates the extent to which issues of ideology and spiritual beliefs are ignored in archaeology. Although belief systems have been excluded from consideration by some archaeologists, especially in North America, this was never generally true of archaeology. The full extent of renewed interest in cultural conceptions and of recent cognitive approaches in archaeology, beyond rock art and debates about shamanism, is also never addressed in this book.

In the end, *Shamanism and the Ancient Mind* is not the clear and useful synthesis of innovative rock art research or the balanced evaluation of the shamanism debate it could have been. It is also not the herald of the paradigm shift that the publisher's notes and the preface by Brian Fagan would claim it to be. Its main strengths are its clear presentation and discussion of rock art research that has provided new insight into the existence and role of transcendental states of consciousness, spiritual specialists, often termed shamans, and characteristic

neuropsychological visions, termed enoptic phenomena. Its weaknesses are its semi-popularized and exaggerated polemical style and repetitiousness. I would recommend it to anyone who has never encountered the shamanistic interpretation of rock art in other sources, though readers are likely to find the works of the original researchers just as interesting and more informative. I could also recommend the book to those who may still enjoy the somewhat overused heroic story of the research process. I would not recommend it to anyone interested in understanding the historical development and philosophical implications of cognitive approaches to archaeology.

Aubrey Cannon

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A Cosmos in Stone: Interpreting Religion and Society Through Rock Art

by J. David Lewis-Williams

Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, 2002.
xvii + 309 pp, illus., refs., index. ISBN:
0759101965

David Lewis-Williams' most recent publication is a collection of articles and essays, written over the course of his prolific career, that focus on inquiry into San rock art and its meaning(s). The author calls this work a "personal journey," one charted through his encounters with complex issues pertinent to South African rock art specifically, and the broader historical contexts of rock art research generally. It is a rich and satisfying read.

The book is organized chronologically. Beginning with Lewis-Williams' work as a young student and scholar, he struggles to revitalize a field of rock art research essentially abandoned by fellow archaeologists (not unlike the situation with rock art studies here on the Northwest Coast). Frustrated by the limitations of quantitative approaches and

Beaufort N.C. - Archaeologists are investigating whether a burned shipwreck off the North Carolina coast is the remains of the last ship captured by the pirate Blackbeard. Officials with Surface Interval Diving Company have said the wreckage could also be that of a Civil War-era vessel burned by retreating Confederate officers in 1861. But the location of the wreckage makes the Blackbeard theory plausible. Historical documents show that Blackbeard captured two ships in August 1718 off Bermuda, one carrying sugar and the other nearly empty. Blackbeard allowed the ships' crews to take the empty vessel, but he kept the full one. He brought the vessel back to Ocracoke Island where he stripped it of its valuables. He received permission from North Carolina Governor Charles Eden to burn the ship under the pretense that it was leaky. The diving company has sent wood samples from the wreck for analysis and is continuing to investigate the site.

Baclar, Mexico - Mexican archaeologists have unearthed what may be the resting place of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of victims, including the tiny vertebrae and clavicles of children massacred during North America's last large-scale Indian war. The excavations in this Caribbean coast town have yielded a cautionary tale about the destructive power of rural conflict here. The dig at Bacalar's old San