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Book Review

Talking with the Past: The Ethnography of Rock Art

**James D. Keyser,
George Poetschat and
Michael M. Taylor, eds**

Oregon Archaeological Society, 2006

Pb, 380pp. ISBN: 9780976480426

Reviewed by Paul Taçon

Talking with the Past is a welcome addition to a slowly growing range of books on the ethnography of rock art. Since the late 1980s there have been many papers and a few books on ethnographic aspects of rock art from Australia and occasionally South Africa, but this edition focuses mostly on the western United States of America. It also includes some examples from South Africa and Europe and in one paper there are Australian examples. However, given the extensive ethnographic literature from Australia, and the fact that there are many living Aboriginal elders knowledgeable about the recent rock art of their traditional lands, it is surprising that leading Australians were not included and that reference to Australian literature is so sparse.

The importance of an ethnographic approach to rock art, in combination with archaeological and other insights, was emphasized in a key 1998 publication, *The Archaeology of Rock-Art* (Chippindale and Taçon, eds). In that edited volume, authors were asked to distinguish what they had learned from four separate fields—informed methods, ethnographic analogy, formal methods, and dating. *Talking with the Past* focuses on the first two of these fields. The book resulted from a unique symposium that brought rock-art scholars from throughout the world (except Australia) together with traditional Indigenous North Americans. Importantly, the idea

for the symposium came from Phillip Cash Cash, a Nez Perce-Cayuse tribal traditionalist, linguist, and scholar.

The symposium took place in 2002, with both formal presentations and discussions at rock-art sites. The resulting publication brings together the scholarly papers with the on-site debates and adds some of the discussions that occurred after each paper was presented. First Nations participants played prominent roles and many voices are presented on a level playing field of authority, which is very refreshing. One of the best scholarly papers is actually that of Phillip Cash Cash himself, written in both Nez Perce and English. It is particularly insightful because of the way Cash Cash uses informed methods to provide a logical and detailed inside interpretation of two pictograph panels.

As the introduction states, "the twelve papers ... were selected to emphasise Columbia Plateau rock art (three papers), a broad international view of rock art ethnography (five papers), and theoretical and methodological issues (four papers)." Besides the paper by Cash Cash, I found a paper by Angelo Fossati, using ethnography to interpret the Rupestrian tradition of Valcamonica, extremely persuasive, well-written, and fascinating. Other excellent papers include those by Kelley Hays-Gilpin, on fertility and sexuality in rock art of the American southwest, and a more theoretical paper by Linnea Sundstrom.

I saved a paper by Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams to the end, even though it appears in the middle as chapter 6. This is because it is a response to critics of their work on the rock art of southern Africa and Palaeolithic Europe. Oh no!, I thought,

not another paper full of vitriol, hyperbole, polemics, and rock-art politics. But in the end it turned out to be one of the best papers of all. Among other things, it successfully defends the use of ethnography in many contexts, as well as the nature of archaeology and archaeological interpretation generally. It is one of the best theoretical papers I have read in a long time and it totally dispels the ridiculous rants of a range of rock-art researchers, some of whom suggest we will never reliably be able to obtain any meaning from rock art, that all we do is practice myth-making.

Although the content of the book is excellent, it would have been improved with a key summary paper from Australia, especially if this had been written by Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors. It also is surprising that very important work by some Canadian scholars—Joan Vastokas, Brian Molyneaux and others—is not referred to in the introduction or anywhere else. The book also suffers from some small poor-quality black-and-white photographs. In many cases it is difficult to see important things because the image is too dark and too small. And there are no colour photos, except on the cover, and those are not of the art. Many small typos are also annoying, especially in the chapter by Clottes and Lewis-Williams, and generally the book would have benefited from a smarter appearance. Otherwise, the content and quality of papers is excellent and they all make important contributions to our understanding of specific rock-art sites and provinces, as well as offering theoretical approaches to world rock art more generally.

In summary, I highly recommend the book to anyone interested in world rock art and especially indigenous insight into

the rock art of the Columbia Plateau region and other parts of western North America. The organizers of the symposium and the editors of the publication are congratulated

for highlighting the importance of Indigenous insight into rock art, the fact that it is still available today, and the universal validity of an ethnographic approach to rock art.