PALAEOART
AND
MATERIALITY
THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF ROCK ART

edited by
Robert G. Bednarik, Danae Fiore,
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and Tang Huisheng

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Cover image: Part of the Huashan site in Guangxi Province, southern China, the largest rock painting site in the world. Photograph by R. G. Bednarik.

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# Contents

Relevant Issues for the Design of a Protocol for the Interdisciplinary Study of Rock Art.............................. 1
  Eugenia P. Tomasini, Mara Basile, Marta S. Maier, Norma Ratto

Superimpositions and Attitudes Towards Pre-existing Rock Art: a Case Study in Southern Patagonia ............. 15
  Anaï Re

Pigments Used in Rock Paintings from the East and West of the Iberian Peninsula Analysed by X-ray
  Fluorescence: Analogies and Differences ........................................................................................................ 31

The Material Scientific Investigation of Rock Art: Contributions from non-Invasive X-ray Techniques ........... 41
  Jillian Huntley, Clive Freeman Galamban

Methodological Approach to the Materiality of Rock Paintings Based on Their Physicochemical
  Characterisation. Proposal and Reflections from Their Study in Chile ............................................................ 59
  Marcela Sepúlveda

Step Forwards in the Archaeometric Studies on Rock Paintings in the Bogotá Savannah, Colombia.
  Analysis of Pigments and Alterations ........................................................................................................... 73
  Judith Trujillo T.

What Should We Do or Not Do for the Preservation or Remedial Action in Prehistoric Painted Caves? .......... 85

Forensic Replication Work with Australian Cave Art ........................................................................................ 99
  Robert G. Bednarik, Yann-Pierre Montelle

Experimental Rock Art Studies. Replication of Pictographs from La Primavera Locality (Santa Cruz, Argentina) 113
  Rocío V. Blanco, Natalia G. Barreto

Measurements and Replications of Hand Stencils: a Methodological Approach for the Estimation of the
  Individuals’ Age and Sex ................................................................................................................................. 129
  Natalia Carden, Rocío Blanco

Time and Rock Art Production: Explorations on the Material Side of Petroglyphs in the Semiarid North of Chile ...................................................................................................................................................... 147
  Francisco Vergara, Andrés Troncoso, Francisca Ivanovic

Taphonomy of the Early Petroglyphs at Daraki-Chattan and in the Region Around It in Chambal Basin, India .... 161
  Giriraj Kumar, Ram Krishna, Robert G. Bednarik

The Tribology of Petroglyphs ............................................................................................................................ 171
  Robert G. Bednarik

Understanding the Technology of Very Small Cupules in Daraki-Chattan, India ....................................... 187
  Ram Krishna, Giriraj Kumar
Evidence of Collaboration Among Art-Makers in Twelve Upper Palaeolithic Caves ................................................................. 195
Leslie Van Gelder

A Survey of Developments in Dating Australian Rock-Markings .............................................................................................. 205
Graeme K. Ward

A New Cold Plasma System for Pictogram $^{14}$C Sampling ........................................................................................................ 217
Marvin W. Rowe, Eric Blinman, John C. Martin, J. Royce Cox, Mark MacKenzie, Lukas Wacker

Direct Dating of Bolivian Petroglyphs Using Indirect Microerosion Analysis ........................................................................ 225
Robert G. Bednarik

Use of Theodolite and Photographic Techniques in the Recording and Analysis of the Geographical and Astronomical Entorno (surrounding) ......................................................................................... 235
Patricio Bustamante, Ricardo Moyano, Daniela Bustamante
The methodology of microerosion analysis, which includes a number of existing as well as potential techniques, has been applied to questions of rock art chronology since 1990. One of these methods involves the interpretation of micro-wanes on petroglyph surfaces. It requires calibration curves based on known variables, secured from surfaces of known ages of specific minerals in the region in question. The rationale of microerosion analysis is that, after a new rock surface has been created, by either natural or anthropic agents, it is subjected to chemical weathering processes. This applies especially in unsheltered locations, and it results in cumulative effects that are a function of time, among other factors. While this is a fairly self-evident principle, the difficulty in using the results of such processes in estimating the age of a rock surface is that our understanding of them, of their effectiveness on different rock types, and of their susceptibility to environmental factors remains limited. We know that rock surfaces retreat with time, be it by solution (Acker and Bricker 1992; Busenberg and Clemency 1976; Lin and Clemency 1981; Oxburgh et al. 1994; Rimstidt and Barnes 1980; Williamson and Rimstidt 1994), physical wear (e.g. aeolian or fluvial erosion), or a combination of the two. Empirical engineering data for natural building stone tells us that the amount of retreat differs greatly according to rock type (Schwegler 1995). Macropscopic rock erosion ranges up to 50 mm each 1000 years for poorly cemented sandstone, but can be as little as fifty microns on the non-quartz components of granite, and much less again on quartz. This process of weathering is surface retreat (by granular exfoliation or solution) and has sometimes been called ‘micro erosion’ (two words), although its products are certainly visible at the macroscopic level (Smith 1978).

The principles of microerosion

The term ‘microerosion’ (one word, unhyphenated) refers exclusively to solution processes whose effects can be seen only at the microscopic level. Hence, for the time-spans relevant in dating petroglyphs, only comparatively erosion-resistant rock types are of interest. In most cases this excludes especially sedimentary rocks. It must also be emphasised that microerosion analysis is not one specific method, but a cluster of possible methods around a basic concept. Two have so far been applied practically: the measurement of micro-wanes on fractured crystals (Bednarik 1992, 1993), and the selective, often alveolar retreat in certain rock types of components that weather at vastly different rates (Bednarik 1995). The effectiveness of the second approach has been confirmed by Pope (2000) when he tried to negate it. Pope effectively failed to appreciate the difference between these two approaches, perceiving microerosion analysis as a tangled combination of the...
two. There is no doubt that various alternative indices of microerosion may also prove to be useful, but their potential remains unexplored so far.

Macro-wanes on rock are the results of progressive rounding of freshly broken rock edges. Černohouz and Solč (1966) claimed to be able to estimate the ages of such wanes to within 10–20% accuracy on two rock types. Observation of similar rounding at the microscopic scale, on individual mineral crystals that had been fractured, implied that these phenomena were likely to obey universal physical laws. These fundamental laws were explained geometrically and mathematically (Bednarik 1992, 1993), which made it possible to attempt dating by measuring wane sizes. These laws explain how, under ideal conditions, wane development is related to time. They explain also many other things in nature, for instance the geometry determining the course of temperature transfer within a solid object, the geometry explaining how a solid body melts, or how a liquid penetrates a porous body.

The ‘radius’ of rock wanes (strictly speaking, wanes are not equi-circular in section, but hyperbolic), at whatever magnitude of size, increases as a function of age. In wane formation (Figure 1), the ratio $h : r$ is constant for any angle $\alpha$, irrespective of distance of retreat of the faces and the edge. Ratio $x : z$ is a function of $\alpha$, and at $\alpha = 60^\circ$, $x = 2z$. Dimension $x$ can be expressed in algebraic fashion:

$$x = \left[\left(\frac{z}{\tan 0.5\alpha}\right)^2 + z^2\right]$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

This leads to the prediction of $\beta$, the angle expressing the rate of wane development relative to surface retreat:

$$\beta = 2 \sin^{-1}\left(\frac{r}{x + h + r}\right)$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)

The relationship wane width $A$ with age, irrespective of actual retreat, is ultimately determined by the ratio $\alpha : \beta$, which must be established empirically. It follows that the dimensions $A, r, z$, and angles $\alpha$ and $\beta$ are all related geometrically and algebraically, and that the variables $A, r, x, z$ and $h$ are all proportionally equivalent, and increase linearly with age. Of these, $A$ is most easily measured physically. It is therefore the variable used in micro-wane measurement. The analyst scans the rock surface microscopically to locate crystals that have been truncated (either fractured by impact or truncated by abrasion) by the event to be dated (e.g. the petroglyph production). A statistically significant sample of micro-wane widths along the edges of such truncation surfaces is recorded for a selected fracture angle (preferably $90^\circ$), and placed in a calibration curve. Age estimates are prefixed with a capital E, indicating that the result is erosion derived.

Until we know much more about solution rates of common and suitable component minerals, we need to establish these rates regionally with calibration curves. In microerosion analysis, the use of two (or more) curves for two (or more) different component minerals is recommended. Since it is unlikely that different minerals would all react similarly to past environmental changes, one would expect to detect irregularities because the corresponding values of a sample would appear displaced in the calibration graph’s ordinates. If solution of one component mineral had slowed down or accelerated sufficiently to render the distortion detectable by such a comparatively coarse method, it would be reflected in the misalignment of the corresponding ordinates on the curve. No other dating method currently used in archaeology offers such a self-checking mechanism.

The precision of the method is probably poor at this early stage, because it depends entirely on the number and precision of calibration points. The principal potential variables in microerosion are temperature, pH and moisture availability. The first two are regarded as unimportant: variations in mean temperatures were probably minor, even as far back as glacial peaks of the Pleistocene; they would not have affected solution
rates appreciably. Variations in pH would have applied through time, but in the case of both amorphous silica and quartz, there is almost no change in solubility below pH 9. For alumina it is negligible in the central region of the pH scale, which coincides with most natural conditions. Quartz, then, can serve as a control against which to check the effects of pH changes on other minerals (Rimstidt and Barnes 1980).

There is no doubt that precipitation would have varied at any site in the past, and it varies between different sites today. However, it is expected that significant changes in moisture availability would affect component minerals differently, and should thus be detectable by calibration against another mineral. In this respect, the unknown sample — the surface to be dated — provides one of the points one can use to check reliability of the calibration curves, because its multi-mineral values, too, must lie on the same ordinate in the diagram.

The microerosion method by micro-wane measurement has been used on petroglyphs in six blind tests, in Russia, Portugal, Italy and Bolivia (Bednarik 1992, 1993, 1995, 1997, 2000). Archaeological expectations were matched in all cases except one, where, however, results matched those of other scientific analyses (Bednarik 1995; Watchman 1995, 1996). Calibration curves are now available from Lake Onega (Russia), Vila Real (Portugal), Grosio (Italy), the eastern Pilbara (Australia) and China (Tang and Gao 2004; Tang 2012) and several more have become available from China recently (Tang et al. 2014). The method has a practical time range from the present to perhaps 50,000 years BP, which renders it particularly suitable for rock art. Results ranging from a few centuries to almost thirty millennia have so far been obtained.

While microerosion analysis is not thought to provide great accuracy, it is probably more reliable than most alternative methods of dating petroglyphs, and it requires no laboratory backing; the results can be determined in the field. It provides not a single result, but clusters of age-related values (the micro-wane widths) that can be converted into various statistical expressions — a luxury that nearly all other dating methods have to do without (OSL on individual mineral grains and multiple targeted applications of AMS 14C to the same lamination might be broadly comparable). Importantly, it does not attempt to determine the age of some accretion or other feature somehow relatable to the rock art; it focuses on the age of the actual petroglyph, the ‘target event’ of Dunnell and Redhead (1988). No other method currently available does this. Moreover, it is the only dating method that offers a means of internal checking, that is, of checking the validity of the result without recourse to another method (although luminescence dating has a limited feature of this type, i.e. the possibility of checking whether the uranium and thorium decay chains are in equilibrium). Finally, microerosion analysis involves no removal of samples, or even contact with the rock art, being a purely optical method.

The valid arguments against microerosion analysis are that we have inadequate calibration curves for it, that its accuracy is inherently limited, that it can only be applied to certain rock types (principally those comprising crystalline quartz, until minerals of quartz-free rock types are calibrated, which has so far not been attempted), and that it is unsuitable where the rock surface may not have been continuously exposed to precipitation (i.e. where it may have been concealed in the past by sediment, mineral accretion etc.). An objection raised by (Dorn 2001: 171) is that there are different types of crystalline quartz, and only the weathering of alpha-quartz is well understood. However, beta-quartz, the mineral’s high-temperature polymorph, can only exist at temperatures above 573° at atmospheric pressure, therefore this objection is irrelevant. Dorn also fears that pre-existing weathering might be present in samples, which is a valid objection only where deep fractures truncated crystalline quartz veins and exposed them to water flow. Such an instance from one of the Penascosa panels in Portugal has been identified (Bednarik 1995), which suggests that his fear is unfounded because such prior exposure is readily detectable.

Perhaps the most telling example of the method’s versatility is its recent use to date not petroglyphs, but the tools used in their production. This is an alternative application with indirect implications for rock art dating, but using a ‘direct dating’ method. Quartz was frequently utilised as the material of petroglyph hammers, and in such cases where these tools remained on the surface, exposed to weathering, their fractured edges (or those on tiny spalls detached during their use) certainly lend themselves to microerosion analysis. This method has so far been used only at Bolivian sites, and this work is described here.

Direct dating of Bolivian petroglyphs

As in the rest of South America, reliable information about the antiquity of pre-Historic rock art has remained elusive until recently in Bolivia. We are better informed about recent rock art corpora of Bolivia, i.e. of the Colonial and Republican Periods (Querejazu L. 1992). But for the time before the Spanish conquest, beginning in 1532, clues for the age of all Bolivian rock art have been limited to archaeological speculation, except for the rock art with the trident motif at the end of zoomorphic legs, and in some cases tails, which correspond to the Late Intermediate period (1100–1438 CE), and more concretely to the ‘Mizque regional culture’. In 1987 it was attempted at the then newly discovered site Cabracancha to estimate the age of its petroglyphs using geomorphological criteria, resulting in an age estimate...
Palaeoart and Materiality

of 500–1000 years BP (Bednarik 1988). The petroglyphs at this small site are also dominated by the distinctive ‘trident’ design which is prominently found on ceramic remains in the River Mizque basin. Such remains were subsequently excavated in a stratified context at Camacho Tunal Mayu, where they occurred together with charcoal, which in 1996 provided a radiocarbon date of 560 ± 70 years BP.

The first South American rock art site subjected to direct dating analysis is Inca Huasi, one of the many sites along the river Mizque, which flows along the eastern flanks of the Andes towards the tropical lowlands. The Department of Cochabamba, where the river is located, has several cupule traditions (Querejazu L. 1998). Inca Huasi is located 4 km from the town of Mizque, immediately above the Uyuchama River (Figure 2), and there are several more cupule sites in the region. Dominated by a prominent quartzite dyke, the site features two distinctive petroglyph traditions, both of which have provided no quantifiable microerosion data: no fractured quartz grains could be located. However, immediately upslope from the petroglyphs is a sandstone pavement covered by horizontal polished grinding dishes, each around 50 or 60 cm long. These provided ample potential to apply the method because at the surface, all quartz grains had been truncated horizontally by abrasion (Figure 3). The retreat of the amorphous silica matrix relative to these polished grain surfaces amounts to about 30% (as measured under the microscope) of that found on the more recent of the two petroglyph traditions at the site, suggesting that it is at least three times as old. One of these ground surfaces yielded 35 micro-wane width measurements (Bednarik 2000, 2001a; cf. 1992, 1993), summarised in a histogram that places the abrasion event at E1028 ± 300 years BP if the Grosio calibration curve is applied (Figure 4). Of the six calibration curves currently established (in

Figure 2. Some of the early cupules at Inca Huasi, central Bolivia, on quartzite dyke, seen against the Uyuchama River below.

Figure 3. Schematic section through polished dish surface at Inca Huasi, showing the abrasion-truncated quartz grains, the retreating amorphous silica cement, and the locations (arrows) of micro-wanes measured for analysis.

Figure 4. Histogram of 35 micro-wane widths from the polished surface analysed at Inca Huasi, projected onto the Grosio calibration curve for crystalline quartz.
Karelia, Portugal, Italy, Australia and China), the one from Grosio in the Italian Alps is climatically the most compatible. The difference in matrix retreat, between this polished dish and the younger of the Inca Huasi petroglyphs, suggests an age of about 3000–3500 years for the latter, while the older tradition, on the more weathering-resistant quartzite dyke, is probably of the early Holocene.

At one of the nearby cupule sites, Lakatambo 2, a cupule on a rock stele has provided adequate microerosion data to estimate its age at E700 ± 150 years, again using the climatically comparable Grosio calibration. Another rock art site near Mizque, the small siliceous sandstone cave Toro Muerto, had also been investigated since the 1980s, but because its extensive petroglyphs (Figure 5) are all protected from the weather, microerosion analysis was out of the question. However, in 1997, five hammerstones presumably used in the production of the rock art were recovered immediately outside the cave’s entrance (Figure 6). Since they had been fully exposed to rainwater solution, their microerosion was determined. Three of them date from about the same time, c. 500 years ago; one is almost twice as old; while the fifth has clearly been used on two different occasions, 500 BP and about 3500 years previously. Thus petroglyphs have been produced at the site for about 4000 years, and at least three discrete episodes of use can be recognised from the tools alone (Bednarik 2010). This was confirmed by Alan Watchman (pers. comm. 1997), who on the basis of his examination of the accretionary deposit over some of the petroglyphs at the site estimated that they may be 2000–4000 years old. Obviously it remains unknown which specific petroglyphs were created with the dated hammerstones, and rock art may have been created outside the range these imply.

The same approach, of estimating the time when stone tools were used to create petroglyphs, has been applied to the extensive cupule complex of Kalatrancani, near Cochabamba. Here it was not the sheltered location of the rock art that prevented application of microerosion analysis directly to the petroglyphs, but the nature of
Palaeoart and Materiality

the lithology. All of the approximately twenty-eight sites forming this complex are on schists and phyllites, metamorphic rocks that typically contain neither quartz nor feldspar, the minerals to which calibration has been applied so far. Schists are highly erodible (Bednarik 2012) and any rock art on these facies is unlikely to be of very great age. At Kalatrancani, all petroglyphs occur on rock outcrops or glacial erratics rising 2–5 m above an alluvial fan below the foothills of Mt Tunari, typically separated by a few hundred metres. The rock art comprises predominantly cupules, but a variety of linear designs also occur, and some of the sites feature large numbers of abraded incisions as well.

In order to secure materials susceptible to microerosion analysis, two strategies were employed. The immediate vicinity of the outcrops was searched for hammerstones with distinctive evidence of having been used in the production of percussion petroglyphs (Bednarik 1998, 2001b); and the crevices on the rock platforms, adjacent to the rock art, were carefully searched for tiny spalls of quartz that may have become detached from the tools during impact. The first strategy resulted in finding one white quartz hammerstone at Thojya Rumi (‘Broken-up Stone’) and three specimens at Ph’alta Rumi (‘Flat Stone’). The tool from the first site yielded a tentative age of 700 years BP, but those from the second site offered no suitable fractures. However, one of the Ph’alta Rumi hammerstones, of quartzite, had become so heavily weathered after it had been used that it can safely be assumed to predate any of the present rock art at that site.

The second strategy yielded seven white quartz splinters from cracks on top of the Iscay Rumi (‘Two Stones’) outcrop, found within centimetres of petroglyphs, and four more from Ph’alta Rumi (Figure 7). Because these rock platforms are elevated above the alluvium and the white crystalline quartz chips are clearly the result of kinetic impact, their relationship with petroglyph
production can safely be assumed, even though they cannot be related to any specific motif. Four of the spalls from Iscay Rumi yielded suitable edges for microerosion analysis (Figure 8), which date from approximately E225–338 years (mean values; Table 1); while two of those from Ph’alta Rumi provided mean dates of E198 and E506 years respectively (Table 2).

This confirms that the petroglyphs of this complex are of relatively recent antiquity, and especially in the case of the first site they may all date from the Colonial Period. Even Ph’alta Rumi (Figure 9) has so far presented no evidence of pre-Colonial rock art, although the site appears to have been used much earlier. Its extensive petroglyphs are eroding and in many cases exfoliating relatively rapidly, and it is evident that its use extends beyond the rock art that still survives today. The rock’s history is complex, having been submerged below sediment before it became accessible to anthropic use (Querejazu L. et al. in prep. a). However, the presence of knapped stone tools and a large quartzite core, a c. 35 cm manuport with numerous flake scars, implies much earlier occupation of the site. This is also indicated by a deeply weathered hammerstone, which was used thousands of years ago, certainly beyond the life span of any surviving petroglyph at the site. The sequence evident from the remaining rock art begins with large linear motifs, parallel wave lines and circular shapes, as well as cupules and small to medium abraded grooves. Later additions are dominated by cupules, and in the most recent period, mainly large abraded grooves were added. The earlier petroglyphs are fully patinated by ferromanganese accretion, and weathering has exposed the wafered fabric of the schist and accentuated its laminar structure. This site, therefore, appears to have a long history of human use, the rock art evidence of which is truncated by the relative susceptibility of the schist to deterioration by weathering.

In 2012, preliminary examination of the Santivañez petroglyph complex, also in the Departamento de Cochabamba, has provided the first age estimation

### Table 1. Results of microerosion analysis of four quartz spalls from Iscay Rumi, Kalatrancani petroglyph complex.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grain No.</th>
<th>Size, mm</th>
<th>Wane widths, microns</th>
<th>Mean, microns</th>
<th>Age, years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KA1</td>
<td>8.09</td>
<td>2, 3, 3, 2, 2</td>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>E225 +56/-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KA2</td>
<td>8.18</td>
<td>4, 3, 3, 4, 3, 4, 4, 4</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>E338 +37/-57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KA3</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>3, 4, 2, 4, 3, 3</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>E297 +78/-109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KA4</td>
<td>7.08</td>
<td>3, 2, 2, 3, 3, 3</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>E250 +31/-62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. Results of microerosion analysis of four quartz spalls from Ph’alta Rumi, Kalatrancani petroglyph complex.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grain No.</th>
<th>Size, mm</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Wane widths, microns</th>
<th>Mean, microns</th>
<th>Age, years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RF1</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>Highly corroded, no fracture</td>
<td>None available</td>
<td>RF2</td>
<td>5.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RF3</td>
<td>6.70</td>
<td>Part crystal, edges of different ages; most recent are measured</td>
<td>6, 6, 5, 6, 4, 6, 5, 6, 4, 6</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>E506 +56/-131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RF4</td>
<td>9.31</td>
<td>Complex arrangement of corroded crystals; no kinetic damage</td>
<td>None available</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
of South American rock art is very limited. The archaic petroglyphs in Cueva Epullán Grande, Argentina, appear to be of the final Pleistocene (Crivelli Montero and Fernández 1996). They feature cupules and linear grooves, and some of the latter occur on the site’s bedrock floor, which was concealed by part of a hearth that is carbon-dated to 9970 ± 100 years BP (LP-213). The Epullán Grande petroglyph repertoire resembles Late Pleistocene cave art in Australia very closely, and the combination of cupules and linear grooves is a universal feature of the oldest surviving rock art form in various continents, extending back to the Lower Palaeolithic in at least one (Bednarik et al. 2005), possibly two (Bednarik 2013). Another solid minimum dating of South American rock art refers to numerous red paintings at Perna 1 in southern Piauí, Brazil (Bednarik 1989), excavated by Niède Guidon, Anne-Marie Pessis and their associates. Dense deposits of charcoal dating to about 10,000 years ago concealed the lowest of these faded paintings.

Thus the series of age estimates for Bolivian rock art is the most comprehensive credible dating information currently available from South American rock art (Table 3). The basis and magnitude of these results has been reported here, indicating that petroglyphs at several sites range in antiquity from the Colonial Period through to at least 4000 years BP, with some indications of early Holocene ages. Some of these age estimates were secured directly from petroglyph surfaces; some are direct dates from hammerstones that had been used in creating petroglyphs; and some even are direct dates from tiny spalls of white quartz found lodged in cracks next to petroglyphs, which evidently became detached during petroglyph manufacture. In the latter two cases, these direct dates provide indirect evidence of petroglyph age, and it cannot be known which of the petroglyphs this evidence refers to. Nevertheless, it does provide an indication that during a given time span, petroglyphs were produced at a site. Interestingly this would even apply in cases where the petroglyph itself may no longer exist, having been erased by weathering or exfoliation, because the quartz or quartzite implements used weather at vastly slower rates and can easily survive petroglyphs on such rock types as schists.

It is to be emphasised that this report is only preliminary, that much more work is required to determine the full chronological range of Bolivian petroglyphs, and that more substantial publications are in preparation. Moreover, it is evident from at least one site, Inca Huasi, that significantly older rock art is present in addition to that which has provided age estimation data. This may also apply at Bola Chanka, but much more research is essential. On this basis it is anticipated that early Holocene petroglyphs will eventually be demonstrated to exist in some Bolivian sites, most especially those located on thoroughly metamorphosed quartzites.
Robert G. Bednarik: Direct Dating of Bolivian Petroglyphs

Acknowledgments

None of the work reported here would have been possible without the dedication and steadfast support of Professor Roy Querejazu Lewis. Some of this work has also greatly benefited from the help and co-operation of many other members of the Asociación de Estudios del Arte Rupestre de Cochabamba (AEARC), most especially David Camacho and Favio Vargas Mujica.

References


Table 3. Direct dating results from Bolivian rock art.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Date Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inca Huasi (blind test)</td>
<td>Abraded dish surface: E1028 ± 300 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Geometric petroglyphs: c. 1500 – 4000 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cupules on quartzite: earlier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toro Muerto</td>
<td>Minimum 3 traditions by tools, c. 500 – 4000 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakatambo 2 (blind test)</td>
<td>Cupule: E700 ± 150 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thojya Rumi</td>
<td>Single petroglyph tool: c. E700 years (tentative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iscay Rumi</td>
<td>Four chips from tools: E225 – 338 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph'talla Rumi</td>
<td>Two chips from tools: E198 and 506 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kh'elgata Rumi South</td>
<td>Hammerstone was used E2840 +160/-220 years ago,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>again E2270 +170/-210 years ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bola Chanka</td>
<td>Probably predating 4000 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Palaeoart and Materiality


Querejazu Lewis, R., R. G. Bednarik and D. Camacho in prep. a. The Kalatrancani petroglyph complex, near Cochabamba, Bolivia.

Querejazu Lewis, R., R. G. Bednarik and D. Camacho in prep. b. The Santivanez petroglyph complex, near Cochabamba, Bolivia.


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