

Malotki, Ekkehart, and Ellen Dissanayake. 2018. *Early Rock Art of the American West: The Geometric Enigma*.

Seattle: University of Washington Press. 312 pages, 193 color illustrations, 7 full-page color illustrations.

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A book on the earliest known rock art of North America has long been overdue. The expectation that geometric or noniconic traditions will be shown to be the oldest in that continent has long been around, at least since the early 1960s. The “pit-and-groove” petroglyphs and the “pitted boulders” of the western U.S. states have been recognized as the first rock art by Heizer and Baumhoff (1962) and Grant (1967), and later by Parkman (1992), among others. More complex but always nonfigurative petroglyphs seem to follow these cupule-dominated traditions. The pattern is repeated in South America, as would be expected. But what is particularly perplexing about it is the similarity between these early American conventions and those of the Old World, and particularly Australia, which are far more ancient, especially in Asia and Africa, so there is not likely to be a direct connection. But there are distinct similarities in chronological developments, which to some extent can be explained by taphonomy: simple geometrics and cupules tend to outlast more complex motifs because they tend to be more deeply engraved. However, this alone does not seem to explain the global pattern, which has been misinterpreted through the focus on the southwestern European traditions of final Pleistocene cave art and its overemphasized iconic content. In reality, as Bednarik (1986) has pointed out, an estimated more than three-quarters of the two-dimensional Pleistocene paleoart is nonfigurative, an estimate supported by Bahn (Bahn and Vertut 1988).

Somehow commentators have convinced themselves that this European rock art of animal imagery is easier to relate to than the enigmatic “signs” and finger flutings in the caves—or, for that matter, the early rock art now seen in the United States.

Here, finally, is a book that presents the remarkable first paleoart of North America comprehensively and in all its glory. Malotki’s marvelous ability to capture rock art photographically has been noted before as being without equal, and this book is no exception. Many of its images are without question masterworks in their own right, in addition to being valuable documentation for the book’s topic. But what makes this volume so precious is the most propitious combination of Malotki’s encyclopedic knowledge of the Southwest’s rock art with Dissanayake’s sophisticated understanding of the nature of artlike production. Dissanayake has long espoused the idea that art is “artification,” that is, making something special, a concept she explains in detail here (27–45). In this elegant solution to an old chestnut she has demonstrated that the discussion of the nature of art is superfluous; that there is no evidence that any paleoart, including any rock art, is “art” in the modern, Western sense; or that any of it is necessarily symbolic. Her solution to the issue of what art is, like so many answers to intricate research clichés, is both ingenious and compelling.

The history of paleoart production illustrates amply that Dissanayake is on the right

track, spanning as it does from the first man-ports to the artification of objects by edge notches, by engraved lines responding to their edges or surfaces, eventually becoming ever more intricate. As graphic conventions emerge, so do recognizable motif templates, and this is well expressed in the near-global distribution of the archaic linear traditions. This book documents numerous incredible parallels between the continents. There are the often dense, incredible accumulations of cupules, from the Kalahari to Arizona, and the close resemblances of intricate reticulate patterns to those of the early petroglyphs of Australia. Many of the photographs in this book could have almost been taken at Australian archaic linear petroglyph sites of the final Pleistocene and early Holocene, some of which are likely matched in age by the American traditions. This is suggested by the dated tufa site at Winnemucca Dry Lake, Nevada (138), and by the extensive series of engraved limestone and chert plaques from the Clovis site of Gault in Texas (62). Other portable objects from the United States

are less effective in defining traditions, or lack evidence placing them in the early human history of the continent.

Notwithstanding any of this, it needs to be clarified that this book presents a valuable cross section of early nonfigurative rock art, nearly all of which is undated. Since aniconic (nonfigurative) petroglyphs were also made in the Late Holocene, in North America and elsewhere, there can be no expectation that all of the examples listed here are necessarily “very early” (say, Final Pleistocene to Early Holocene). There can be little doubt that some of the continent’s earliest rock art is included on the pages in this book, but equally, there are many much more recent examples also. Now comes the tricky part: facilitating the establishment of a chronological framework for this incredible wealth of aniconic petroglyphs, and placing individual expressions of the various traditions within it. Malotki and Dissanayake have most competently identified the “geometric enigma.” Let us see if archaeometry can rise to the challenge of undoing this veritable Gordian knot.

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