

COMMENTS

*The eye is not as clever as it thinks it is*⁴

By ROBERT G. BEDNARIK

This useful paper is symptomatic of a current thawing in attitudes to disciplinary self-discipline: as rock art researchers we seem to become more willing to admit that our methods, observations and pronouncements are very often imperfect. It is a sign that our field is maturing, and that the traditional reliance on authority, which has marked rock art research throughout the 20th century, is declining. Sognnes' criticisms may seem muted, but they are very much on target. The topic he addresses is known to all of us, we have all witnessed similar examples where different observers seemed to see quite different evidence on the same rock surface.

A couple of particularly striking examples: when I was taken to one of the most spectacular painting sites in central India, a site that had been visited by countless experts on rock art, my several colleagues stood admiring the brightly painted ceiling of the shelter. I had noticed its petroglyphs as soon as I entered the site, but only spoke when asked what I thought of the paintings overhead. 'Very nice', I said, 'but what about the petroglyphs over here', pointing to the back. Everyone crowded around the petroglyphs, which were clearly visible from several metres away. 'Why, we have been here so often, we never noticed them!', was the response. These were the first petroglyphs discovered in central India.

I have about a dozen similar stories, including three about archaeologists who had excavated sites for many weeks or months without noticing that they contained rock art, but I will relate just one more, because it so beautifully illustrates the phenomenon Sognnes describes. Paroong Cave in South Australia contains two opposing vertical walls crammed full of petroglyphs, up to 40 mm deep and up to a height of 4 m. This stunning cave art was discovered by Geoffrey Aslin in 1984, but the cave had previously been visited by speleologists. Aslin soon learned that some cave divers had taken a photograph of themselves, standing with their backs directly against one of the walls, without noticing the rock art. I saw their snapshot and can only say that a nearly blind person would be able to discern the petroglyphs on the picture. But the cavers only saw it after Aslin reported the discovery. They could only see what they expected to see.

This phenomenon is widespread and even 'trained' observers can experience great difficulties in perceiving rock art, or in perceiving it in the same way as others might. Human perception is a conditioned process which is entirely subjective, and our perception, be it in the individual or collective sense, may well differ from the perception of the people who created the rock art in question. In other words, what we see may not be what they saw—even before the effects of taphonomy are considered. In fact, it is rather unlikely that our experience

would match their's, bearing in mind how much perception is predicated on psychological conditioning.

Sognnes also provides several glimpses of the kinds of evidence used to address the question of rock art dating in Scandinavia. For instance, he mentions a 'black cultural layer, containing large quantities of charcoal but no artefacts' at Vasstrand. If there is no cultural material, what is it that makes the layer 'cultural'? Charcoal occurs profusely in nature and has a complex taphonomy often ignored in archaeology. In this case, could we not account for a high charcoal content over more than 2000 years by a regime of frequent forest-fires? They could be natural fires, or they could be through regular burning of the forest by people. In either case, such a deposit is not a 'cultural layer'. The point may seem pedantic, but then Sognnes goes on to attempt relating three charcoal dates to the rock art, purely based on co-occurrence at the same site. Perhaps he is right in doing so, but no testable evidence for the proposition is offered, hence it is not relevant to estimating the age of the rock art. He then reports that the oldest of three charcoal dates does not match the 'stylistic age' prediction by Gjessing, but it does match his prediction at some other sites. I fail to see the relevance of this. The concept of activity foci in an 'archaeological space' needs to be considered here. The probability that two types of occupation traces (e.g. rock art and stone tools) found at one site are contemporaneous is millions of times greater at some randomly selected site in a featureless landscape, than it is at a site that was an occupation focus, such as a rockshelter. In the present case we even have only one form of cultural evidence, not two. Finally, Sognnes goes on to present an elaborate argument about a possible interpretation of a swimming elk, a lake he thinks came into being 4000 years ago, and his hypothetical date for the first occupation of the rockshelter site. All of this only confirms my long-held view that rock art dating in Scandinavia would benefit greatly from a major injection of scepticism.

Sognnes' comment that central Norwegian rock art was made 'from around 7500 to 1500 BP' needs to be similarly qualified. He offers no evidence for the lower figure and contradicts the upper limit himself, by later stating that '[P]etroglyphs have been made in Norway until recently, most of which should be classified as graffiti'. Unless there are some analytical data it may be judicious to assume that petroglyphs were made in Norway throughout much the Holocene, that none are dated, and that we have no definitive means of distinguishing rock art from 'graffiti'. Graffiti have been made since the Palaeolithic period (e.g. in Cosquer Cave), and the principal differences between rock 'graffiti' and rock art relate to cultural rather than scientific perceptions. 'Graffiti' that manage to survive long enough tend to become valued inscriptions or rock art in due course. Today's lewd inscription will become tomorrow's 'social statement' worthy of scholarly attention.

Robert G. Bednarik
Editor, RAR
RAR 18-573

⁴ With apologies to Alexander Marshack (1986).