



Transforming the Landscape: Rock Art and the Mississippian Cosmos

Diaz-Granados, C., Simek, J., Sabo III, G., and Wagner, M. (eds.), 2018, 1950 Lawrence Rd., Havertown, PA 19083, Oxbow Books, 240 p., 7.1 x 9.7 inches, ISBN 9781785706288, paperback, \$34.95.

Although much of the prehistoric Indian rock art in North America is above ground and is not restricted to caves, symbols found in caves play a significant role. This book is well laid out with colorful graphics and location maps. It includes well reproduced drawings and photographs of the rock art, much of which is no longer available or cannot be seen by the Public. It deals with the general understanding of what the rock art means, especially as it relates to the prehistoric Indian's understanding of the spirit world. It is of interest to a general audience, although it includes detail and some wording best suited to anthropologists. The book can be easily read by the average reader, and the emphasis on spiritual beliefs gleaned from the rock art makes for interesting reading. Because of the growing amount of research on rock art in North America, the book focuses on interpreting rock art created during the Mississippian period of eastern North American prehistory (post-AD 900), emphasizing the connection of rock art with its physical location and with the Indian's concept of the universe. Did rock art have a spiritual meaning, and was its placement of special importance? In order to try to understand

the meaning of the symbols used in the rock art, the authors went to the oral traditions passed down to the descendants of the prehistoric Indians. The concepts are intriguing.

The book has seven chapters. The first is an overview of how Native American peoples tried to connect their world and the spirit world. Examples indicate Native Americans from the Great Plains and Eastern Woodlands to the Maya in Mesoamerica all felt a relationship between the visible and the spirit world. They attached significance to specific places and generally held a belief that the universe has several levels with different occupants and powers. Humans are in a central place and they must keep the order in balance. Portals, or specific places on Earth, could be used to cross between levels to ask for favors, such as a good harvest. These spots could be marked, for example with petroglyphs. Chapter 2 concentrates on the big five petroglyph sites in Missouri and uses interviews with indigenous Osage Indians to interpret the rock art. They feel the north-south orientation of the sites was placed to align with the local Indians symbolism of the cosmos. Chapter 3 discusses the role of Old or First Woman in the Osage spiritual beliefs. Fertility is a common theme with graphic depictions. Chapter 4 is a study of central Arkansas rock art along the Arkansas River. Imagery on the north side of the river reflected the spirit world while on the south the imagery was worldly. This corresponds with the beliefs of living Indians. Chapter 5 describes Mississippian rock art and mounds in Illinois. An important site, Millstone Bluff was a late Mississippian settlement on a natural mound in southeastern Illinois whose shape resembles a burial mound. There are three rock art panels on the site thought to represent the belief in a three-tiered universe commonly held by the Indians of the pre-European Southeast. Chapter 6 deals with rock art on the Cumberland Plateau. This covers Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama. Rock art along the Cumberland Plateau is associated with bedrock mortars, animals and animal tracks. The authors suggest the Kentucky rock art defined borders apparently between different cultures. Tennessee rock art was primarily placed at high points along the Cumberland Escarpment, while rock art in Alabama may have had a spiritual significance with pictographs (symbols) dominant in northern sites (representing the higher Mississippian spirit world) and petroglyphs to the south (human, middle world). Chapter 7 describes petroglyphs in the mountains of northern Georgia and western North Carolina which were selectively placed along trails. They connected inhabited bottom land settlements with sacred mountain tops or mound sites. The petroglyphs pointed the way to the place where the spirit world could be entered.

The book could be used as a road log for anyone interested in exploring rock art sites, although it might be of most interest to someone already interested in rock art. However, anyone who has seen North American rock art would find the interpretations in this book intriguing, with the goal of interpreting what prehistoric people believed about an after life. Utilizing the traditional beliefs of living descendants, the symbols take on new meaning with less speculation involved.

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