



REVIEWS

Talking Stone: Rock Art of the Cosos

Produced, Directed, and Filmed by Paul Goldsmith, ASC

Executive Producer: Alan P. Garfinkel

2014. Available from the Bradshaw Foundation (<http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/ishop/dvd.php>)

A film review by Joan S. Schneider, California State Parks, Colorado Desert District (retired)

Many archaeologists are negatively inclined to the study of rock art motifs because of the necessity of assuming the role of an observer and interpreter of cultural symbols that are beyond the realm of science. This new film embraces that speculative free-for-all, approaching the subject of rock art from many differing points of view. *Talking Stone* also offers the observations of its makers: Alan Garfinkel, archaeologist and executive producer, and Paul Goldsmith, producer-director and cinematographer whose artistry captures the "feeling of place." The film promotes the views that (1) we do not have to "understand" the Coso Rock Art to experience it and appreciate it; (2) there are many ways of understanding, none of which are necessarily complete or correct; and (3) the spiritual must be experienced in its own contexts of time and place to be meaningful. To see the film (especially for those who are distant from this extraordinary place and may never have the chance to visit it) is to be taken on a spiritual journey.

A Kawaiisu elder tells us that shamans warn that we had best "stay away" because rock art is an entrance to the powerful spirit world. A psychologist expresses the view that the petroglyphs of the Cosos may be a way of externalizing the fears and feelings of ancient people. A contemporary artist notes the possibility that the symbols and figures have origins in altered states of consciousness, induced by drugs. A Great Basin elder reveals that Coso Hot Springs, nearby, is an important place in the Creation Story of local native people and that the ties between humans and bighorn sheep are very strong.

The archaeologists in the film see the importance of this special place in the wider Great Basin environment; it is a focal point, where there are water sources, hot springs, an ample source of obsidian (highly prized stone used for making hunting weapons), and, in the past, large and stable populations of bighorn sheep, antelope, and other large game. The archaeologists also look at the huge labor investment made in creating what may be the densest and most elaborate depiction of large-game images in the world. The labor

investment must indicate that this was a very, very important place to the people of 6,000 years ago. Then there are the human figures—the PBAs, as they are called: patterned body anthropomorphs (i.e., people with decorated bodies). Are they supernatural beings? Are they shamans associated with hunting large game animals? Are they supervisors of rites of passage? They are certainly dressed in ceremonial costumes with elaborate headdresses and many hold symbols of power.

We learn that the petroglyph motifs record a progression of hunting weaponry, from the dart and dart-thrower (*atlatl*) of the Archaic period, perhaps 8,000 to 4,000 years ago, to the bow and arrow, introduced sometime around 2,000 to 1,500 years ago. A collection of ancient hunting weapons at the San Bernardino County Museum helps our understanding of the two technologies. Enter the hypothesis that the increased use of the bow and arrow gave a decided advantage to hunters, eventually resulting in overhunting and the disappearance of the bighorn sheep from the Coso Mountain area. How sound is this hypothesis? The archaeological faunal record seems to support this story—but then, it is just a story.

Modern-day hunters tell us of *their* exploits, of *their* weapons, of the behaviors of the animals *they* hunt, and of *their* hunting trophies. Do the Coso petroglyphs represent an ancient version of this type of human behavior? Was Coso an exclusive “men’s club”? The feminist point of view is also explored: were there women around? We learn that women were certainly around. The petroglyphs do not exist by themselves in the middle of “nowhere.” There are village sites, artifacts that are women’s tools, and evidence of women’s ceremonies nearby. Were the petroglyph canyons prehistoric “man caves”?

Practicing functionalists have their say too: the petroglyphs were part of “increase rites” designed to encourage the growth of the bighorn sheep herds; the petroglyphs were “hunting magic” to ensure the success of the hunt; the canyon was used as a trap or drive-line for bighorn sheep hunting and was decorated for that purpose.

The 1.1-million-acre Naval Air Weapons Station (NAWS) is the caretaker of this extraordinary place. Very restricted access, necessitated by the military mission of NAWS, has limited visitor impacts to the rock art and the environment. There is very little modern graffiti. The caretakers take their jobs seriously and no visitors are allowed without escorts who closely monitor visitor activities. That the military takes its guardianship of the petroglyphs seriously and is proud of this role is emphasized in the film. In the final scene, the NAWS Commander says that perhaps the petroglyphs could be used to “pray the bighorn back into the Cosos.”



As an archaeologist steeped in scientific approaches to studying past human behaviors, I would have liked Garfinkel to present some indication of the science of rock art studies and the types of studies and resulting data derived from these studies. I would have liked to know the methods used to attach dates to the petroglyphs and how the dates were derived. I would have liked an explanation of how a ceremonial ritual shown in the film is related to the petroglyphs of Coso as well as the identity of the people in the film. I would have liked to know the percentage of bighorn sheep petroglyphs in relation to all the other motifs.

If you cannot see the Coso petroglyphs in person, *Talking Stone* is the next best thing to being there. While highly enjoyable and instructive to those of the public who are interested in rock art, the film could also be used as an effective teaching tool for introductory classes in anthropology, archaeology, art, and history because it could be used as a vehicle to stimulate interesting conversations about meanings and contexts of symbolic representations through time and space.

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