

State of the art of open-air rock art as World Heritage site: past, present and future

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Abstract

Since the 1970's to the present day, our notions of world heritage and archaeological heritage have changed greatly, a fact that is reflected in the different conventions and charters of ICOMOS and UNESCO. In this research we explore what these changes have been, the state of the art of rock art worldwide, and what are the trends towards the future of heritage declarations, delving into the specific case of outdoor rock art, since its fragile and accessible nature requires specific management plans appropriate to its needs and characteristics, and how the growing trend of naming cultural landscapes as world heritage can be a powerful tool for the conservation, protection and dissemination of these heritage assets and their environments.

The main objective of our research lies on the identification of the main features of open-air rock art on the UNESCO World Heritage List, establishing their current situation as to their preservation and social awareness and the policies developed in each particular case. This will be done through research and bibliographical approximation of various research sources, as well as official resources already mentioned: World Conventions, recommendations and ICOMOS charters as reference instruments in the declarations and management strategies of archaeological heritage and rock art.

Keywords

World heritage, Rock art, Heritage management, Archeological heritage.

Introduction

The main focus of this paper is to make a brief analysis of the situation of open-air World Heritage rock art, understood as graphic and cultural expressions framed within an open-air natural environment from prehistoric times. Rock art represents a fundamental element of any civilisation or people, as it is the first graphic manifestation of a culture with its own iconography and symbolism.

These representations can be either engravings or paintings, and of course, they must have been recognised by UNESCO and the World Heritage Convention as elements of the World Heritage List.

Through the study of various bibliographic resources and official organisations such as UNESCO or ICOMOS, we will be able to see what the trends have been since the 1970s, when the World Heritage Convention was created, to the present day, and comment on some of the prospects for the future.

Continental distribution of WH Open-Air rock art sites

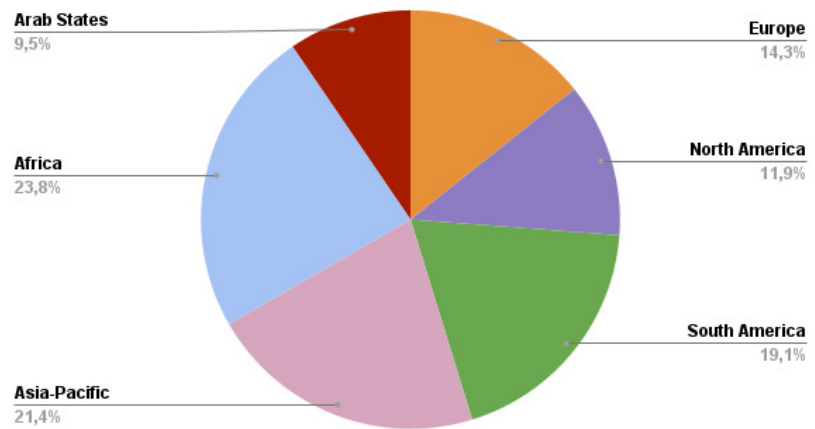


Fig. 1 Graphic representing the distribution of World Heritage open-air rock art sites per continent (By: Estrela C. Garcia Garcia, 2022).

State of the Art: Representative data on open-air rock art World Heritage Sites

Out of a total of 1154 elements on the World Heritage List¹, only 48 are rock art or contain rock art, and of these 42 contain open-air rock art, making up the majority of declarations.

The distribution by continent is as follows:

All of them are located within natural environments or sites that extend over a variable area of territory, and were mostly made by extinct cultures, although some still survive, which is an important factor for the management of this heritage, as we will see further on.

There are no significant differences between these elements on the list, as almost all of them share common characteristics and elements, such as their location or their interrelation with a cultural or sacred element, although of course there are variations in the motifs represented (local fauna, abstract symbols, etc.), their size, their chronology, or their spatial distribution over an area.

These declarations are based on the criteria established by UNESCO for awarding Outstanding Universal Value according to the characteristics of each nomination depending on the elements of which it is composed. In the case of rock art, Criterion III is usually applied, focusing on the uniqueness of the heritage element as a testimony of a living or extinct culture. Of all the World Heritage nominations with open-air rock art, the vast majority adhere to this criterion, approximately 84%.²

The second most common criterion used in this particular case to argue Outstanding Universal Value is criterion I, which applies to cases where the heritage is a representative example of human creative genius, accounting for approximately 24% of the nominations.

The rest of the nominations reflect an enormous variety of criteria based, of course, on the characteristics of the heritage elements that comprise them, which is also an indicator of the enormous variety of contexts in which open-air rock art is present, while also showing its relationship to its setting and the enormous cultural significance it contains.



Fig. 2 Petroglyph panel at the Mesa Verde National Park, USA (Courtesy of: US National Park Service, Mesa Verde National Park).

Of all the elements present on the list, it is usual to support this Outstanding Universal Value with several criteria, at least 2 or more, therefore, of the 10 criteria that UNESCO establishes, all of them are used to present the candidatures, since these graphic representations are hosted within diverse environments and cannot be separated from them³: from habitational sites, to natural parks, rock shelters, or integrated in a landscape that gathers centuries of occupation and human alterations throughout history.

History and trends: from 1970 to the present day

The organisation we know today as the World Heritage Convention was established at UNESCO's 17th session in Paris in November 1972. It lays the foundations of what constitutes heritage, and lists the reasons why this institution should exist as a global safeguard for the world's monuments and sites, as well as setting out the concept of Outstanding Universal Value.⁴

Since the beginning of the World Heritage Convention, and the list of sites declared as World Heritage, there has been a tendency to highlight and safeguard monuments and sites that society had already perceived and assimilated as heritage elements with a high cultural or natural value, i.e. as figures that could be protected and recognised under this category. Hence, the first declarations in which open-air rock art is included are those of the Grand Canyon and Mesa Verde National Parks in the USA, which are home to rock art made by the first indigenous nations of North America.

The first declarations with art itself understood as a core element of the nomination were the Palaeolithic paintings in the caves of the Vézère Valley in France and the Valcamonica engravings in Italy, both in 1979.

This trend continued in the following decades, with declarations of specific monuments or sites, with a determined area that can vary in size: from smaller sites such as the petroglyphs of Tanum in Sweden (1994) or Alta in Norway (1985), to others that extend over enormous areas of territory, such as the Nasca and Palpa Lines and Petroglyphs in Peru (1994) or the Maloti-Drakensberg Transnational Park, whose surface is divided between the territories of South Africa and Lesotho (2000).⁵

In 1994, at the 18th session of the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, a change of strategy was established



Fig. 3 Main panel at Eland Cave, South Africa, in the Maloti-Drakensberg Transnational Park (Courtesy of: Aron Mazel)

when considering sites as potential candidates for World Heritage status, in an attempt to "reduce the imbalances" suffered by the list, which was too focused on monuments and on the western regions of the world, leaving aside other types of candidates; the idea was to achieve a more varied and diverse list.⁶

We can see this change in trend with an example from 2003, with the declaration of the Mapungubwe Cultural Landscape in South Africa, and this term reflects a major shift in the conception and understanding of prehistoric outdoor heritage. This term already appears in the 1992 convention, and is a precursor to this change.

Now the fundamental element, which is the graphic representation of rock art, is understood as a cultural element within an environment, in which many other heritage elements, both tangible and intangible, natural or cultural, can be found, forming a unit as a whole.⁷

This change alters the conception of rock art as an isolated element detached from its context, and considers it as a cultural manifestation of a human territorial occupation, in which various components are interrelated. It is very important to take into account the religious and sacred dimension of these sites, because just as a more recent religious temple, such as a church or a mosque, is framed and linked to a cultural, architectural and social context, the same is true of open-air rock art.

The trend leads to the latest outdoor rock art declaration in 2019, Canada's Áísínai'pi or Stone Writings, made by the Blackfoot culture. This is a landscape along the Milk River, whose use, creation and safeguarding by the Siksikáíítstapi culture extends from 4500 BP to the first contacts beginning in 1534 A.D.⁸

This nomination is based on criteria I, III, IV and VI of the Heritage Convention, and is considered as an Associative Cultural Landscape, a category of Cultural Landscape that UNESCO itself defines as:⁹

« The virtue of the powerful religious, artistic or cultural associations of the natural element rather than material cultural evidence, which may be insignificant or even absent. »

This is an indication of the importance attached to the culture associated with rock art, to the intangible and sacred component represented through the engravings of the deities on the stone, but above all the great cultural and ceremonial weight that these inscriptions represent and which the Siksikáíítstapi culture has been celebrating and protecting for millennia.¹⁰

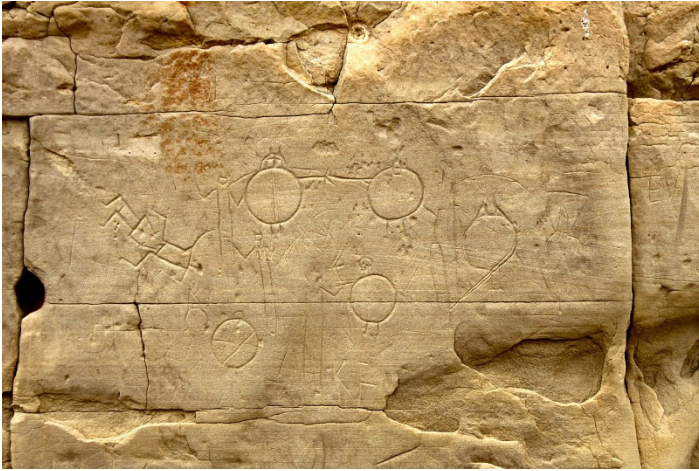


Fig. 4 Panel at the Áísínai'pi National Historic Site, Alberta, Canada (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license; Author: Matthias Süßen)

Here we have to mention the factor of the management of these sites by the native people of the places where the rock art is located: in many of these regions the heritage is managed by official authorities or governments that have a past and a basis dating back to the occupation and colonialism of indigenous territories.

We find cases such as the petroglyphs of Rapa Nui, in which local communities are demanding the management of their own heritage, because not only do the engravings have a sacred and spiritual character, which official institutions do not always respect or take into account. This is why they claim to be able to administer their own territory, including rock art as part of it.¹¹

Like the case of Rapa Nui, there are many others. In recent years, there has been a change in direction, like the example of the aforementioned Nomination of the Áísínai'pi writing-on-stone engravings: the fact that the petroglyphs are referred to as "written language" shows that the candidacy is based on the communicative, sacred and cultural aspects of the art, rather than on the artistry of the engravings themselves. Furthermore, the management of this heritage by the indigenous communities of the province of Alberta has also been a fundamental element in its recovery, conservation and dissemination, as well as a gesture of reparation to the First Nations of Canada.¹²

Future trends

We can notice and say that future nominations will focus on two fundamental points: one of them is to redefine the very concept of rock art, to integrate the element as part of a cultural context and to value the whole that it represents, understanding it as another manifestation of a human cultural legacy, valuing nominations that integrate numerous heritage values.

The other is the focus on places and sites far from the Western gaze, attempting to correct the enormous imbalances and continuing with the task imposed by the 1994 Convention, centring on nominations outside Eurocentrism and Westernism, and valuing the enormous human cultural diversity of our planet.

Likewise, the exercise of returning sacred territory to indigenous communities through the management of

cultural heritage underpins this shift, and promises a future in which the concept of heritage is expanded beyond the current categories, which will require a huge exercise of revision and redefinition of the very concept of heritage, landscape and many other concepts.

Thus, we observe that in these 50 years not only has the concept of rock art changed, adapting to the needs and requests of the communities that live with it, but that the future augurs a much more liquid and fluid conception of archaeological heritage, in which the category of "rock art" will change completely, in favour of a more community-centred management model and human relationships with heritage and the environment.

¹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre ©. *World Heritage List*, <whc.unesco.org/en/list> (2022)

² MINISTERIO DE CULTURA Y DEPORTE - GOBIERNO DE ESPAÑA, Propuesta y Procedimiento de Inscripción, <<https://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/cultura/areas/patrimonio/mc/patrimoniomundial/unesco-patrimoniomundial/propuesta-y-procedimiento-de-inscripcion.html>> (2022)

³ JEAN CLOTTES, Rock Art: An Endangered Heritage Worldwide, *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 64:1, 2008, p. 2

⁴ WORLD HERITAGE CONVENTION, Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage <<https://icomos.es/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/convention-es.pdf>> (01/2020)

⁵ UNESCO-ICOMOS DOCUMENTATION CENTRE, World Heritage rock art sites, <https://www.icomos.org/images/Doc_centre/BIBLIOGRAPHIES/wh_2012_rock_art_sites.pdf> (08/2012)

⁶ WORLD HERITAGE COMITEE, Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and natural Heritage - Eighteenth Session, Pukhet, Thailand, report, 12-17 December, 1994, p.43

⁷ WORLD HERITAGE COMITEE, Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and natural Heritage - Sixteenth Session, Santa Fe, USA, report, 7-14 December, 1992, p.35

⁸ PILAR FATÁS MONFORTE. Rock Art on UNESCO's World Heritage List, <https://www.bradshawfoundation.com/rockartnetwork/unesco_world_heritage_sites_rock_art/index.php> (2020)

⁹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre ©. Cultural Landscapes. <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/culturallandscape/#2>> (2022)

¹⁰ UNESCO World Heritage Centre ©. Executive Summary of Writing-on-Stone / Áísínai'pi, <<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1597/documents/>> (2019)

¹¹ MYRA SHACKLEY, Sacred World Heritage Sites: Balancing Meaning with Management, *Tourism Recreation Research*, 26:1, 5-10, 2001, p.7

¹² DANIEL ARSENAULT AND FERGUS MACLAREN, Reinforcing the authenticity and spirit of place of indigenous peoples to promote cultural tourism at world heritage sites as a development approach: Learning from the Canadian experience. In: ICOMOS 17th General Assembly, 2012, p. 584