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Rock Art Studies  
News of the World IV

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Edited by

Paul Bahn, Natalie Franklin  
and Matthias Strecker

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# Preface

Paul G. Bahn, Natalie Franklin and Matthias Strecker

The present volume is the fourth in the series *Rock Art Studies, News of the World* which began in 1996. Its aims are to present a synthesis of the status of rock art research in different regions of the world, provide information about recent projects, publications, prevailing research objectives and methods, and enable rock art researchers to relate their findings in a specific region to mainstream research results.

Most contributions published in the four volumes of the series consider the distribution of sites, chronology, interpretation, new surveys and publications, management and site conservation.

The list below reveals the worldwide coverage though unfortunately not all rock art areas have been dealt with adequately, and for some regions or countries the editors could not achieve continuous reports in all volumes.

<i>Region</i>	<i>Vol. 1</i>	<i>Vol. 2</i>	<i>Vol. 3</i>	<i>Vol. 4</i>
Pleistocene rock art worldwide	pp. 1–14	pp. 1–11	pp. 1–15	pp. 1–17
Northern Europe	pp. 16–28	pp. 12–24	pp. 16–36	pp. 18–30, 31–44
Iberian Peninsula	pp. 29–34, 35–40	pp. 25–35	pp. 37–51	pp. 45–59
Alps, Italy, Balkans	pp. 41–58	pp. 36–44	–	pp. 60–64
Northern Africa and Sahara	pp. 59–70	pp. 44–58, 59–73	pp. 52–88, 89–96	pp. 65–98
Southern and Tropical Africa	pp. 71–84	pp. 74–81	pp. 97–111	pp. 99–112
Angola	pp. 85–94	–	–	–
Arabian Peninsula, Levant and Anatolia	pp. 95–104	pp. 82–87	pp. 112–119	pp. 113–23
Northern Eurasia	pp. 105–125	pp. 88–118	pp. 120–137	pp. 124–48
Siberia and Central Asia	pp. 105–125	pp. 88–118	pp. 138–178	pp. 149–63
Mongolia	–	–	–	pp. 164–95
Far East	pp. 127–132	pp. 119–122	pp. 179–184	pp. 207–14
India	pp. 133–140	pp. 123–126	–	pp. 196–206
South–East Asia	pp. 141–144	pp. 127–132	–	pp. 207–14
Australia and New Guinea	pp. 145–162	pp. 133–146	pp. 185–212	pp. 215–34
Polynesia	pp. 163–172	pp. 147–164	pp. 213–225	pp. 235–43
North America	pp. 173–184	pp. 165–177	pp. 226–234, 235–240	pp. 244–56, 257–63
Mexico and Central America	pp. 185–202	pp. 178–195, 196–213	pp. 241–255, 256–273	pp. 264–87, 288–309
South America	pp. 203–206	–	–	–
Caribbean islands	pp. 207–214	–	–	pp. 310–18
Colombia	–	pp. 214–220	–	pp. 319–28
Ecuador	–	–	pp. 274–279	–
Venezuela	–	–	–	pp. 329–37
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Peru	–	pp. 221–226	pp. 280–282	pp. 355–63
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Argentina	pp. 225–229	pp. 242–251	pp. 309–319	pp. 364–85
Chile	–	–	–	pp. 386–98

As pointed out in the Prefaces to the preceding volumes, the articles reflect varied approaches to rock art studies, the authors' different experiences and backgrounds, and a certain difference in the way several years of new research is presented. We believe that it is an advantage rather than a shortcoming that a variety of approaches are included in this collection.

In the present volume, there are inevitably a few gaps in coverage, as usual, but a number of earlier gaps have been filled or refilled as some new and reliable contributors have come on board alongside the stalwarts who have contributed to each volume. Readers will note that, while relatively little has happened in some areas over the five years in question, a great deal has occurred in others. One particularly important piece of new research is presented by Katja Devlet in her chapter on Northern Eurasia and

involves her fascinating experiments in developing solid criteria for differentiating the pecking marks made on rock by stone tools and metal tools. Stan Beckensall, in his chapter on Britain and Ireland, highlights the advances owed in this region to new recording techniques, and the presentation of databases on the web. Rock art studies are clearly going through a period of scientific and technological development, which will have an enormous impact on the quality of recording and dissemination such as D-Stretch and other photographic image enhancement techniques. At the same time, many authors are concerned by problems of preservation and vandalism, and underline the crucial importance of educating local people, and the young, about the importance of this fragile and finite heritage. This aspect too will be of increasing importance in years to come.

## 21. ROCK ART RESEARCH IN COLOMBIA

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### Pedro María Argüello García and Diego Martínez Celis

#### Introduction

During the last few years a considerable amount of new information about prehistoric rock art has been collected and published in Colombia (Figs 21.1, 21.2). This information is extremely diverse as a consequence of the different objectives underlying rock art research, as well as the duration of such studies. But perhaps the factor that has generated most variation in the way rock art research has been carried out in Colombia is the wide range of theoretical perspectives, intimately related to the field of inquiry the researchers come from. These include: Anthropology (Pradilla and Ortiz 2002; Romero 2003; Flórez 2009); Archaeology (Hernández 1998; Castano and Van der Hammen 2006; Pino and Forero 2008; Alzate and Osorio 2009; Argüello 2009); Linguistics (Moreno 2009; Delgado and Mercado 2010), Archaeoastronomy (Quijano 2007); Mathematics (Quijano 2010); Mythology (Romero 2003); Iconography (López and Velásquez 2009; Martínez 2006; 2008b); Cultural Heritage (Botiva 2000; Martínez and Botiva 2004; Gómez and Barona 2007; Martínez 2008a; 2010a; 2010b); and Conservation (Bateman and Martínez 2001; Álvarez and Martínez 2004). As a result, it is possible to find a broad variety of literature about rock art sites ranging from casual references to single sites – most of them consisting only of photos in archaeological reports (e.g. Mora 2003, 85) – to the extensive documentation of tens or hundreds of sites (Hernández 1998; Martínez 2005a; Muñoz 2006; Martínez and Hernández 2006; Secretaría de Cultura de Norte de Santander 2007; Navas and Angulo 2010; Pradilla and Villate 2010), either in sporadic newspaper articles or as part of Cultural Research Management (CRM) projects, unpublished theses, and scientific journals and books.

This is not the place to carry out a comprehensive evaluation of the quality or validity of the postulates outlined in the cited studies. We just intend to give a brief

introduction showing the dynamic that rock art research has acquired during the last few years in Colombia

Among the above-mentioned topics that have undergone some development in recent years in Colombia, three deserve closer examination, either because they are at the centre of current worldwide debates or because they are challenging matters that extend beyond the basic postulates of traditional rock art research. These topics are: the archaeological analysis of rock art; concerns relating to education, presentation and protection of rock art sites from a Cultural Heritage perspective; and the meaning of rock art sites.

#### Archaeology of rock art

Chronology is one of the most challenging topics in rock art research around the world (Whitley 2005). Although the dating of rock art is not a goal by itself, it is a fact that chronological accuracy is pivotal in order to understand the social context in which rock art was produced and used (Argüello 2008; 2009). In Colombia, almost all attempts to explain rock art have been made without a solid chronological basis. This lack of dating has not allowed the building of a credible explanation of rock art's context. There is a general tendency to assign rock art to the Indian groups described by Spanish chronicles during the 16th century, without taking into consideration the fact that the places in which rock art exists were populated for at least 10,000 years (Correal and Van der Hammen 1977). Over such a long period of time diverse groups with political, economic and cultural differences settled around rock art sites.

Contrary to the worldwide tendency of a growing number of archaeologists becoming interested in the study of rock art, in Colombia the increasing number of archaeologists is inversely proportional to the number of



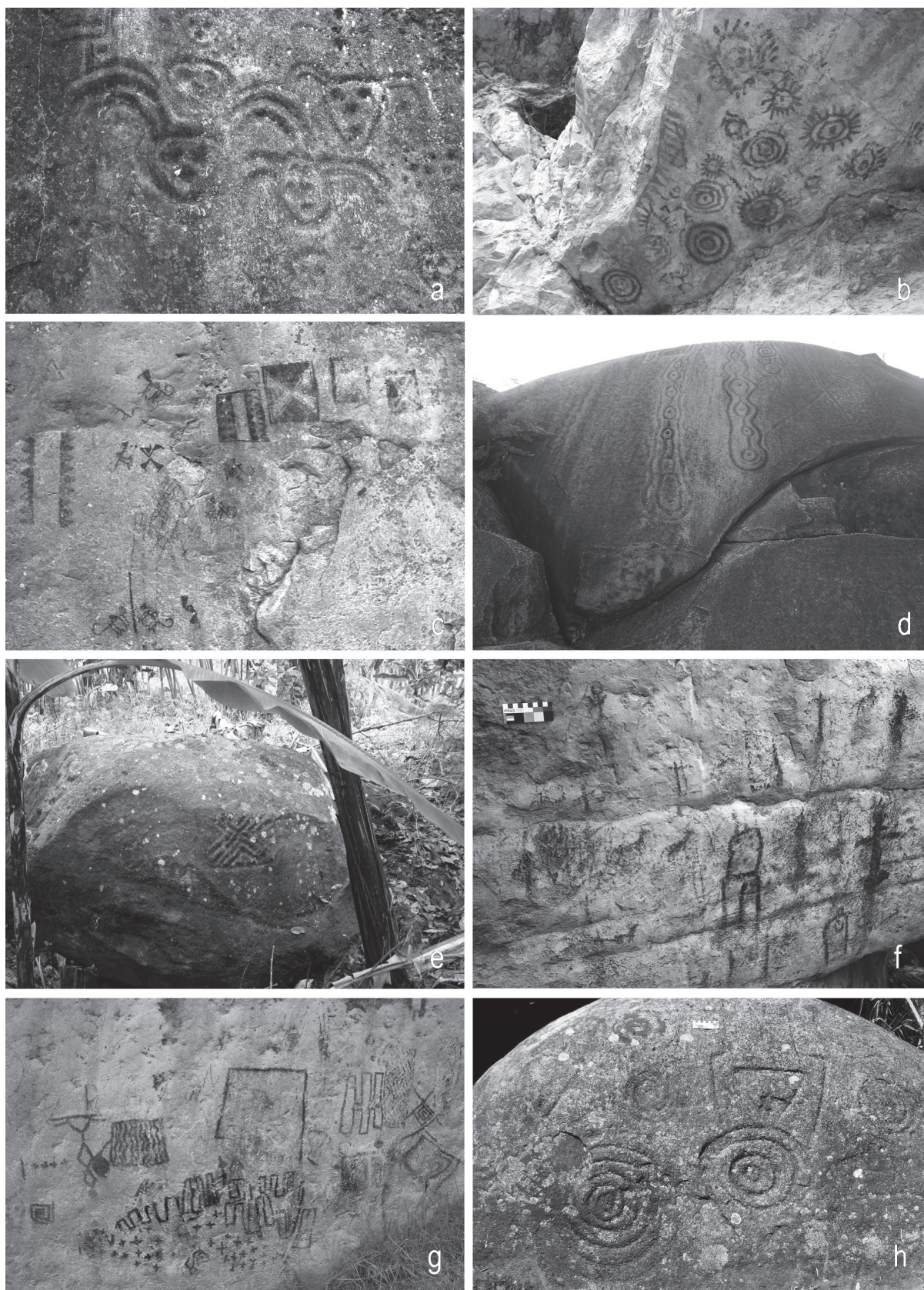


Fig. 21.1. Some of the Colombian rock art sites documented in the last few years: a) San Jacinto, (Bolívar); b) Sáchica (Boyacá); c) Sutatausa (Cundinamarca); d) Floridablanca (Santander), 4; e) Zipacón (Cundinamarca); f) Cucunubá (Cundinamarca); g) Sutatausa (Cundinamarca); h) Chinchina (Caldas) (Diego Martínez C. 2006–2010; Pedro Argüello 2009).



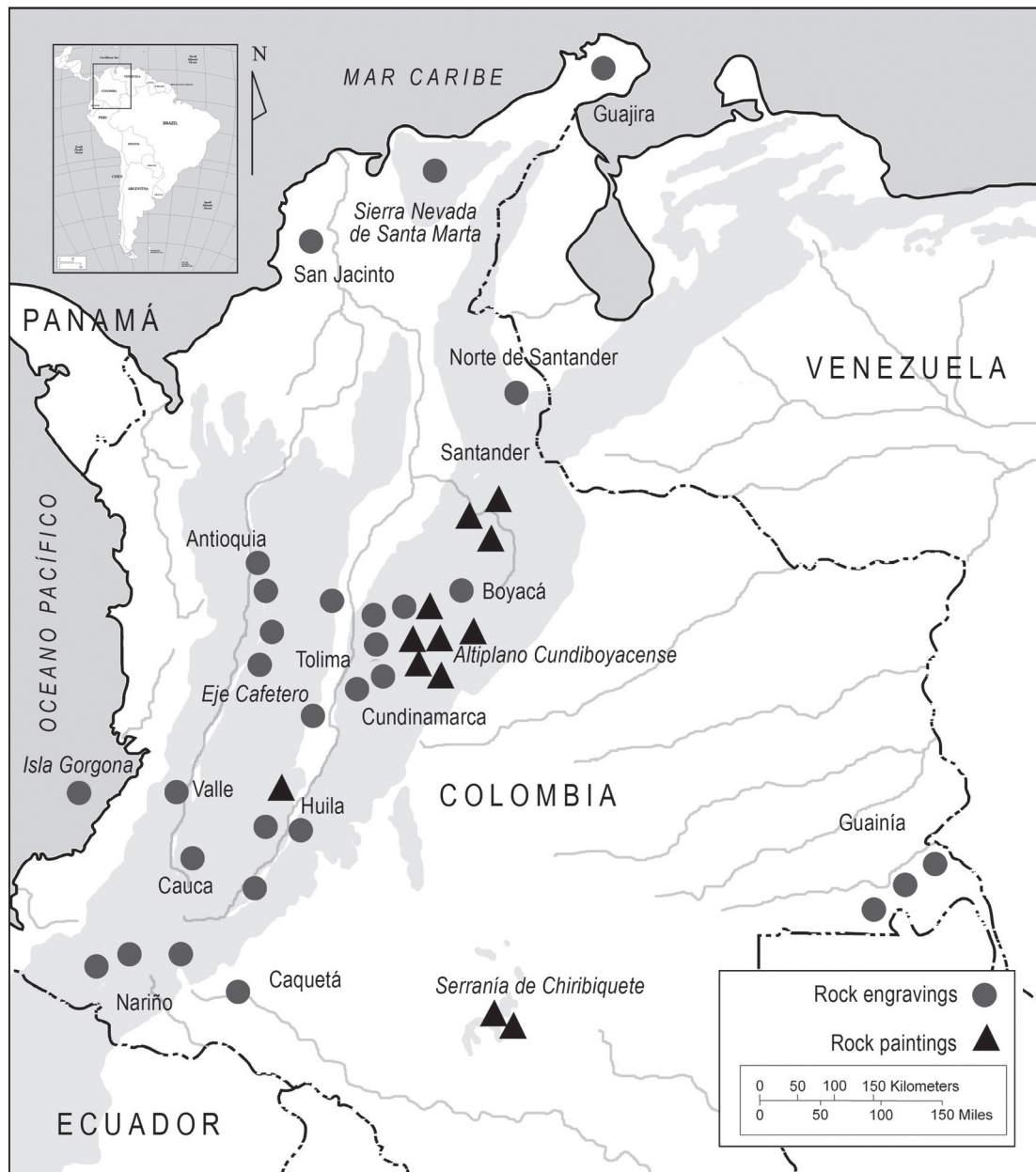


Fig. 21.2. Location of rock art sites documented and published during the last few years.

them studying rock art (Jaramillo and Oyuela-Caycedo 1995). Although several archaeological publications actually contain information about this subject, in most cases rock art is not really integrated with the problems considered by archaeologists in their analyses and it just constitutes an addendum to the archaeological reports (e.g. Langebaek and Piazzini 2003, 70; Mora 2003, 85). Part of this situation has its origins in the incapacity of archaeologists to assign chronology to rock art, which prevents them linking it to other archaeological material. To some extent it is the result of the Colombian academic tradition that has assigned a privileged role to other kinds of archaeological evidence (i.e. ceramics, lithics) as a source

of information about the past.

In recent years, two research projects have been carried out with the explicit aim of understanding rock art in an archaeological context (Castaño and Van der Hammen 2006; Argüello 2009). To determine what an archaeological perspective in rock art research implies is a difficult task because of the plurality and diversity of archaeological approaches (e.g. Chippindale and Taçon 1998). However, these two projects appeal to a traditional archaeological approach consisting of the recovery of archaeological material near rock art sites as a way to contextualise and date related activities. Although their results are preliminary and not necessarily conclusive, these projects have shown



Fig. 21.3. Transcription of a portion of rock paintings from the Abrigo de Los Jaguares (Chiribiquete) (drawing: Diego Martínez based on a photo by Carlos Castaño Uribe, 2005).

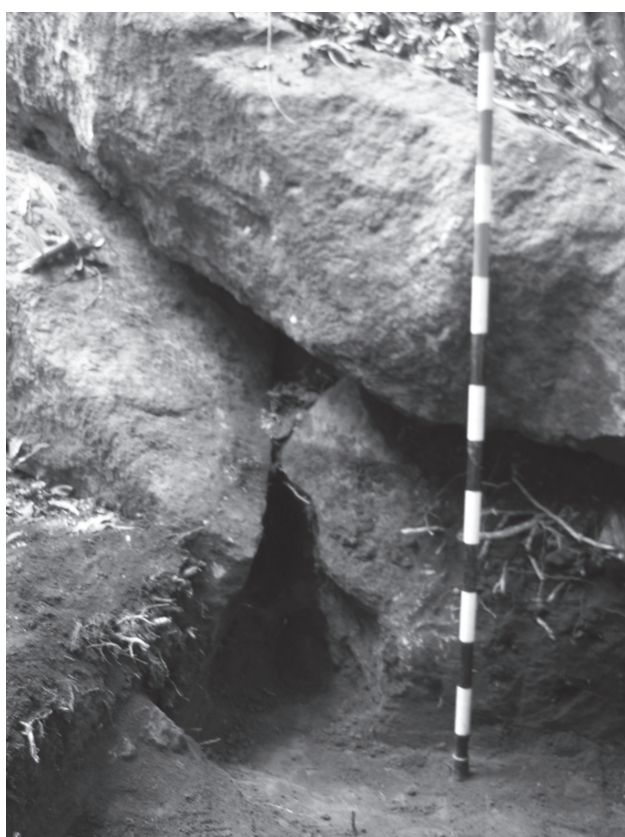


Fig. 21.4. Cavity in a rock with petroglyphs in which some “offerings” were found. El Colegio (Cundinamarca). Pedro Argüello.

that, in fact, it is possible to recover the remains of activities that were possibly related to the production and use of rock art, and they have opened the door to a promising perspective for an archaeological association of rock art.

Although archaeological excavations close to rocks with paintings and petroglyphs are at present limited in number, they have demonstrated the diversity of contexts in

which rock art was involved. Excavations by Castaño and Van der Hammen (2006) of rock-shelters in Chiribiquete (southeastern rainforest region) suggest that such sites were constantly visited – but were not habitation sites – and ritual and ceremonial activities were probably carried out in immediate vicinity of panels with rock paintings. Such activities, according to the authors, would be related to “shamanic” activities. The “shaman”’s presence would be corroborated by the formal characteristics of the paintings – representation of phosphenes, “shamanic” animals, and ritual scenes (Fig. 21.3). On the other hand archaeological excavations in El Colegio (Cundinamarca) (Argüello 2009) seem to have found a different context in which rituals would be associated with domestic activities.

Regarding the dating of rock art, Castaño and Van der Hammen (2006, 41) assert that the rock paintings of Chiribiquete were made between AD 450 and 1450 although some findings apparently suggest the existence of older rock paintings. Dating is based on the presence of remains of pigments and fragments of rocks with paintings detached from rock-shelters and stratigraphically associated with charcoal and other archaeological artifacts. Unfortunately, no analysis of pigments from archaeological deposits and murals has been carried out in order to confirm if the pigments are in fact the remains of paintings. This means that definite confirmation of the age of the Chiribiquete rock paintings has to wait until a specialised pigment analysis has been done.

Archaeological excavations at El Colegio (Fig. 21.4) have made possible the dating of activities associated with rock art use. Two kinds of activities seem to be related to the placing of offerings at the edges of rocks with petroglyphs. In fact, fragments of rocks with petroglyphs and cupules as well as cobbles have been excavated close to the main rocks (Argüello 2009). Other activities such as hearths have also been identified in the immediate vicinity of petroglyphs. Pottery sherds associated with these activities have been dated to around 2100–1100 BP, suggesting the period during which petroglyphs were probably used.

In short, contrary to the belief that a traditional archaeological approach to rock art is futile, both the Chiribiquete and El Colegio cases have demonstrated how the application of archaeological methods is a powerful tool for answering basic questions about one of the most complex problems in contemporary rock art research. Unless we decide to opt for the uncritical application of universal theories, we have to accept the necessity of building a solid basis for the comprehension of rock art, part of which is the chronology.

Beyond academic concerns, perhaps one of the most important results of the above-mentioned archaeological projects is the re-evaluation of the definition of *rock art site* (Martínez 2005b). It has been traditionally considered that the site is just the rock with paintings or petroglyphs; but now it is necessary to accept that the archaeological deposits around these rocks are part of it as well. Such a statement implies new considerations regarding the protection of rock art sites because it is a common practice to loot these sites in search of Indian treasures. Therefore, documentation projects should be accompanied by an educational campaign in order to avoid new sites being vandalised.

### Rock art as cultural heritage: conservation, education and presentation

According to the Colombian Political Constitution (1991), all archaeological objects belong to the State. Rock art is considered a constituent part of the National Archaeological Heritage and then it is protected by the Special Regime of Archaeological Heritage (art. 54 t.IV, Dec.763–2009) whose principal objectives are protection, recovery, conservation and presentation. This legal framework, developed during the last decade, has made possible some progress in the conservation of archaeological material, although a convincing State policy is still necessary. Although the law is mandatory about the obligation to carry out CRM archaeology in almost every civil project involving soil removal, the expansion of the urban frontier is still perilous for both rock art and its surrounding context, mainly because companies working in civil projects do not know the law or arbitrarily violate it. But even worse, many rock art sites are destroyed through lack of knowledge about the correct management of this cultural resource by archaeologists practising CRM.

Concerns about the preservation of rock art have been a growing field of interest in recent years. The broad variety of issues that have been taken into account could be grouped into a number of different topics. The most consistent effort has been focused on the presentation of rock art. Target groups have been diverse, although systematic processes have put an emphasis on local administrative authorities (Botiva 2000), schoolteachers and students (Martínez and Botiva 2004) as well as organised community groups (Fig. 21.5). The scope of these educational projects



Fig. 21.5. Schoolchildren participating in a rock art workshop. Zipacón (Cundinamarca) (Diego Martínez C. 2009).

was initially limited to the centre of the country, and they were directed by the State agency responsible for protecting archaeological heritage (Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia – ICANH) as part of an educational project led by archaeologist Alvaro Botiva. Since then, some similar attempts have slowly been adopted in other regions (Gómez and Barona 2007). Although it is difficult to evaluate the real effect of such educational programmes, it is hopeful that some of the groups involved are using these materials as a “point of departure” for demanding that administrative authorities pay attention to rock art conservation, and as a source of knowledge about the topic. On the other hand, the growing visibility of rock art has led some of these embryonic groups to include it in projects of cultural and ecological tourism. However, this might turn into a double-edged weapon, because it could allow rock art to be protected by an informed community while exposing it to perils related to poorly informed tourists.

An experimental project of conservation was carried out in one of the best known but vandalised rock art sites (Fig. 21.6). The Facatativá Archaeological Park (containing around 77 murals with rock paintings) is perhaps the best example of erroneous heritage management in Colombia, which has led to the significant deterioration and disappearance of rock paintings. In 2004–2006 a group of





Fig. 21.6. Conservation work (graffiti removal) in Parque Arqueológico de Facatativa (Cundinamarca) (María Paula Álvarez, 2005).



Fig. 21.7. A “neo-Muisca” performing an offering with fermented maize beer – *chicha* – on a rock with petroglyphs in Sasaima (Cundinamarca) (Diego Martínez C. 2009).

conservators successfully achieved the removal of graffiti and natural damaging agents which were covering rock paintings (Álvarez and Martínez 2004). This pioneer project demonstrated the potential for rock art conservation – a subject that has always caused controversy – as well as the necessity for integrating specialists from different fields of knowledge into rock art conservation. On the other hand, the experience of the conservation work on the Facatativá rock paintings was an opportunity for us to reconsider the social context in which rock art is involved, since the rock paintings were “re-vandalised” just a few days after the restoration took place (Argüello 2006).

We also have to consider the way people think about – and relate themselves to – objects made by prehispanic communities. Colombia is a country of diverse “ethnic” groups that have been differentially integrated (and sometimes just excluded) in a failed attempt at national construction. Some of these groups, frequently dubbed “ethnic minorities”, have a long history of struggle against central State administration in an effort to maintain their lands, autonomy and identity. An important component of these struggles consists of memory recovery and the construction of historical narratives, most of them strongly related to prehispanic material such as rock art (e.g. Dagua *et al.* 1998, 65–66). In consequence, different and sometimes conflicting “versions” about heritage ownership and management have emerged (Londoño 2003).

### Meaning of rock art sites

In recent decades, an increasing number of groups claiming

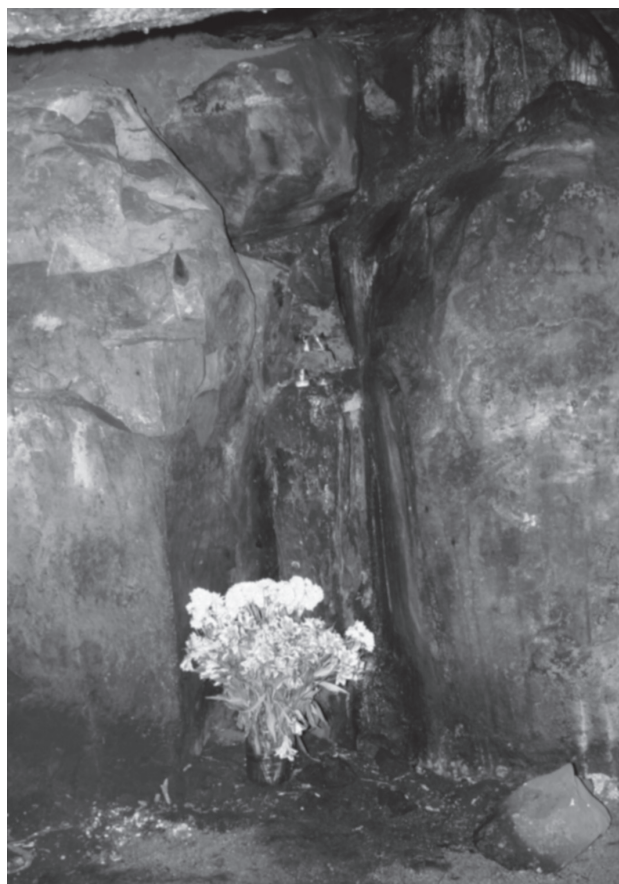
to be direct descendants of prehispanic communities or being part of movements whose aim is to revive ancestral forms of knowledge have proliferated in several regions of Colombia (Fig. 21.7). Some of these movements have made direct or indirect use of rock art. Indirect use refers to simple appropriation of iconography for a diverse set of activities, publications, publicity, and so on (e.g. Gutiérrez 1999). Direct use refers to claims for rock art as a source of knowledge about ancestors or even as a channel of communication with them (Correa 2002; Gómez 2009).

With respect to the way in which rock art is involved in claims made by new social movements, there are three topics that seem to be at the top of the agenda: concerns about the necessity of protecting rock art sites, new attempts to explain rock art meanings, and the use of rock art sites to perform different sorts of activities. The first two topics are very welcome in rock art research, but the third one brings a series of necessary reflections. For example, Gómez (2009) relates the use of the rock paintings in the Archaeological Park of Facatativá by a “neo-Muisca” priest in order to communicate with Muisca deities and to be instructed by them. As a consequence, an increasing number of activities are taking place around rock art murals. Some of them, like offerings and pledges, as far as we know, pose no great threat to rock art, but others like incense burning may cause damage to rock paintings. In fact, recent inspections in the Archaeological Park of Facatativa have verified the existence of debris from ceremonial activities performed by different groups (Fig. 21.8) (Martínez 2010).

Performance of different kinds of activities around rock art sites brings up a diverse set of problems that can be summarised in one question: who has the right to decide about what can, or cannot, be done with rock art? Of course the position of academia is that rock art should not be touched under any circumstances, except when rock art specialists consider it necessary (Martínez and Botiva 2004). On the other hand “neo-Muisca” would state that they are direct descendants of the people who made the rock art. They can also claim that the activities they perform are ordered by the gods to whom the rock art was dedicated. Since “neo-Muisca” state that rock paintings are teachings, new priests might even decide to place their own images on the rock, or retouch prehispanic rock art in an attempt to make it visible, as has been documented in other parts of the world.

## Conclusion

Until recent years it was assumed that Colombian rock art deserved only a marginal place in scholarly works which summarised knowledge about this topic in South America (Dubelaar 1984; Linares 1999; Schobinger 1997). This situation was due to several factors such as the low flow of academic information between South American countries; but even more it was due to the lack of comprehensive



*Fig. 21.8. Offerings (flowers, candles, tobacco, contemporary pottery sherds) in a rock-shelter in the Parque Arqueológico de Facatativa (Cundinamarca) (Diego Martínez C. 2009).*

studies about Colombian rock art that was almost limited to a few site descriptions. Luckily, this situation has changed considerably as a result of considerable efforts by a growing group of researchers interested in rock art studies. The use of new information technology has made the diffusion and circulation of information about rock art easier and cheaper. For instance, internet sites like Rupestreweb ([www.rupestreweb.info](http://www.rupestreweb.info)) have effectively integrated scholars in Latin America and have become a tool for a very diverse audience. In addition, this tool allows some researchers to make their studies known to a wider audience (Fig. 21.9).

The increasing volume of available information about Colombian rock art has raised awareness of its diversity and complexity. More than just “discoveries”, each new site, or group of them, presents researchers with a new set of problems, and makes rock art explanation ever more challenging. Two examples illustrate this point. Recent discoveries of rock paintings in white and black in protected zones of rock-shelters have permitted researchers to postulate that the pre-eminent occurrence of red paintings in the centre of Colombia is a consequence of a taphonomic





Fig. 21.9. Interpretative pathway in the Parque Arqueológico de Facatativa (Cundinamarca) (script and design: Martínez and Botiva, 2008).

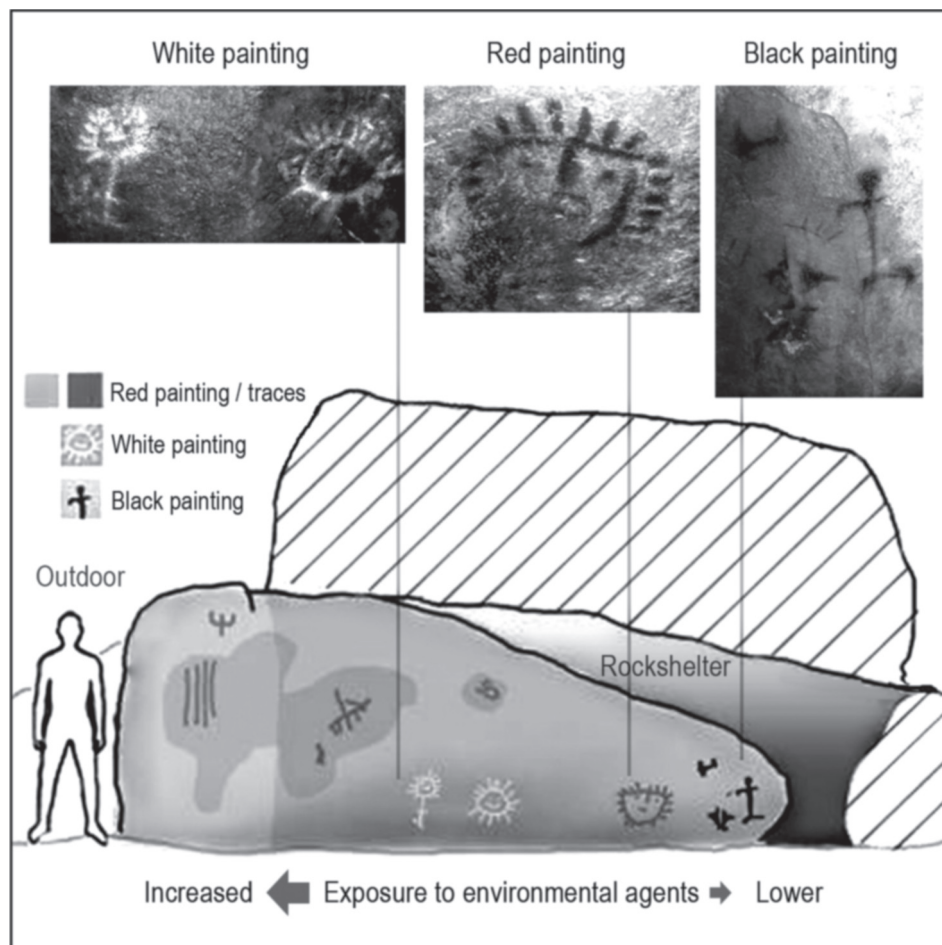


Fig. 21.10. Differential distribution of rock paintings produced by taphonomic processes, Sutatausa (Cundinamarca) (after Argüello and Martínez 2004).

process (Argüello and Martínez 2004; Fig. 21.10) instead of a prehispanic cultural choice as was previously assumed (Cabrera 1969). The finding of rock paintings inside some caverns in western Colombia (Pino and Forero 2008), a region in which only petroglyphs in open-air sites had previously been found, demonstrates that the view of the preferential spatial distribution of different kinds of art is mostly related to the effect of the biased way in which rock art is sought.

While researchers are occupied by their goal of explaining rock art, they are also increasingly concerned with issues related to rock art conservation. Nowadays it is not possible to be involved in rock art research without facing problems associated with the survival of the object of study. But it is not only a question of the survival of the object itself; there are also other complex considerations such as nationalism, heritage, and the economic use of prehispanic material. In short, Colombian rock art research is both a challenging endeavour and a productive field for exploring and confronting current debates about this topic.

### Acknowledgements

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