

Zone 2: Venezuela

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1 Profile of Zone:

While the rock art has been widely documented in North America, Mesoamerica, the Andes, coastal Brazil, and the Antilles, the continental areas of Northern South America have received comparatively little scholarly attention. Paradoxically, this area contains one of the largest concentrations of rock paintings and petroglyphs in the Americas. Unfortunately the significance and distribution of these manifestations in space and time is not well known. This is in part due to the lack of reliable chronological associations between the rock art and particular archaeological contexts.

In Venezuela, the following types of rock art have been defined:

- Petroglyphs
- Geoglyphs
- Grinding basins and cupules
- Rock paintings
- Megalithic monuments

Petroglyphs are present throughout the country, wherever suitable rock formations are found: the Andean Piedmont (Barinas), the Andean Chain (Táchira, Mérida), the Northern Coast, especially from Falcón to Miranda, the Central Coastal Range (Carabobo, Aragua, Vargas, Miranda), and in Bolívar and Amazonas States in the southern part of Venezuela (along the course of the Orinoco, in Guri, Cuchivero and Caura Rivers). Geoglyphs are limited to the Chirgua glyph in Carabobo State. Grinding basins and cupules are often associated with other forms of rock art, including petroglyphs and paintings, especially when found in caves (Bolívar and Amazon State). Grinding basins, and axe sharpening grooves are also found alone, in the vicinity of streams and rivers. Rock paintings have a more limited distribution, with a large concentration in the area of the Middle Orinoco, but also in the Gran Sabana, Monagas, and the Galeras del Sinaruco in Apure State; other paintings have been reported for the Guajira Peninsula, and in Guárico and Lara. Megaliths have been reported for the Vigirima area, while rock alignments have been reported for the Upper and Middle Orinoco.

Three rock art traditions have been defined by de Valencia and Sujo (Valencia and Sujo Volsky 1987), based on the distribution of petroglyph styles. Nonetheless, very few systematic

comparisons have been carried out to this end, and no overall chronological sequence can be inferred. Greer has proposed a chronological sequence for the rock paintings of the Orinoco that he has linked to pre-ceramic and ceramic occupations of the region. His chronology, based on superposition and correlations between the styles of ceramic and rock painting, spans the entire occupational sequence, from the pre-ceramic to post-contact eras (Greer 1995).

2 Links with other zones:

Rock art in Venezuela is clearly linked with that of the Caribbean, with similarities in design and technique, both in petroglyphs and paintings (Dubelaar 1986a; Dubelaar 1986b; Havisser 2000; Rivas 1993). In particular, the Middle Orinoco has been considered the springboard for several cultural and linguistic traditions that reached the Caribbean via the Lesser Antilles, and the islands of Curaçao, Aruba and Bonaire. There is very little doubt that the Caribbean was peopled – at least 500 years before our Era - by different groups carrying various forms of social organization, languages and cultures related to those of their continental ancestors.

Less attention has been paid to the relationships between the Colombian Andes, Llanos, and Amazon, and the manifestations found in the Venezuelan territory. Recent discoveries on Andean rock art point to a relationship between the lowlands of the Orinoco with the western llanos of Colombia and Venezuela, the piedmont and the Andes.

The Guyanas and Venezuela also share traditions of rock art, although few comparative studies have been carried out (Dubelaar 1986a; Dubelaar 1986b).

3 Known sites:

Over 650 rock art sites have been reported for Venezuela (Ruby de Valencia, personal communication). Of these, three have been nominated as candidates for World Heritage Sites on the Tentative List: the Geoglyph of Chirgua, the petroglyphs and megaliths at the site of Vigrima, and the petroglyphs of Caicara del Orinoco.

4 Significant Rock Art Sites:

One of the largest petroglyph sites in Venezuela is found in the Complejo Arqueológico Piedra Pintada, Vigrima, Edo. Carabobo. This site is made up of over 165 petroglyph clusters, distributed over the site, associated with at least two alignments of megaliths. Stylistic resemblance to petroglyphs in the Orinoco, as well as with the Antilles has led to a tentative date for these manifestations between the first and tenth century of this era. The park forms part of the Parque Nacional San Esteban, under the control of the Instituto Nacional de Parques, and is protected by the Ley de Protección y Defensa del Patrimonio Cultural and the Ley Penal del Ambiente (Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural 1997).

The Geoglyph of Chirgua is the only documented geoglyph in Venezuela. It is located in Municipio Bejuma, Estado Carabobo, about 6 km north of the community of Chirgua. It is a large figure (56.7 m long) made up of several concentric circles and 4 rectilinear appendixes that have been interpreted as a highly stylized human figure. The geoglyph was created by excavating furrows between 0.5 and 0.7 m to 1.0 or 1.5 m wide and between 0.2 and 0.4 m deep on a hill

with a 40 degree inclination. Other archaeological remains found in the area of the geoglyph suggest the pre-Hispanic origin of the figure. This is supported by the similarity of the figure to other petroglyphs found in Carabobo, Cogedes, and Yaracuy. This site is protected by the Ley de Protección y Defensa del Patrimonio Cultural (Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural 1999) and was declared “Bien de Interés Cultural de la Nación” according to the Gaceta Oficial No. 5.299 / 29 January 1999 Resolución No. 009-98 / 06 November 1998 by the Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural, Consejo Nacional de la Cultura, Ministerio Secretaria de la Presidencia.

The piedmont of the state of Barinas is the home to many sites with abundant petroglyphs that show a variety of techniques and motifs. Zones such as Capitanejo, Bum-Bum, Yaure, and La Acequia are particularly notable for their deep and well-preserved petroglyphs (Novoa Álvarez 1998; Rafael Gasson, personal communication). The sites are often associated with waterways or terrestrial routes that connect the low Llanos with the highlands to the west.

Located at the geographic core of continental Venezuela, the Middle Orinoco area contains one of the largest number and variety of rock paintings and petroglyphs in Northern South America. A long-term survey of archaeological sites in the NW sector of the Municipio Cedeño, Bolivar State, and the NW corner of the Amazon State, has revealed the presence of several types of rock art including engravings and paintings. These manifestations are found in a variety of contexts ranging from isolated boulders in the water or on the shores of the Orinoco River, on hilltops and large walls, on outcroppings of granite formations, in small rock shelters created by the superposition of large boulders, to sizable shelters formed on the face of granite hillsides. The variety of the cultural manifestations including petroglyphs and pictographs and associated remains, among which are found burials; grinding basins and cupules, pre- and post-contact ceramics, and lithic artifacts, that differ considerably from site to site, suggesting chronological and functional variations. A detailed description of pictographs of the Lower Parguaza River Basin, their associational contexts and symbolic significance can be found in Scaramelli (1992), Scaramelli and Tarble (1996), Greer (1995; Greer 1997); Tarble (1991), and Tarble and Scaramelli (1999). So far five types of context for rock art have been defined in the Middle Orinoco: petroglyphs in open areas, petroglyphs in small caves, pictographs in open areas, pictographs in small caves, and pictographs in large caves. To the south, in the vicinity of Puerto Ayacucho, another context for petroglyphs may be defined: extremely large, highly visible motifs on the face of granite walls, such as those found at Piedra Pintada, Amazon State.

Caicara del Orinoco is one of the best-known petroglyph sites in the area, with several stations in the area of the town and on its outskirts. Rivas (Rivas 1990) documented over 75 different clusters at the site of Cedeño, on the banks of the Orinoco. These petroglyphs are exposed only in the dry season, when the level of the Orinoco is low, suggesting that they may have played a role in the marking of seasons for the indigenous groups who inhabited sites nearby. Other petroglyphs in Caicara are located on boulders and large outcrops. Many of the figures at this site have counterparts in sites in the Antilles; this has led Rivas to propose cultural links between the areas, possibly related to Arawak peoples (Rivas 1993). The sites at Caicara have been inventoried by the Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural and are protected by the *Ley de Protección y Defensa del Patrimonio Cultural* and the *Ley Penal del Ambiente* (Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural 1997).

Another important site for both petroglyphs and paintings is found at the Raudales de Atures, near Puerto Ayacucho in Amazon State. The petroglyphs at this large site are also seasonally flooded, but the paintings are located in rock shelters unaffected by the floodwaters. This site has not been documented systematically.

Several large rock shelters (80-120 m) in the Parguaza basin contain extraordinary collections of rock paintings, elaborated in several different superimposed styles, and associated with varied ceramic styles that suggest an extended period of time for the use of these sites (Greer 1995; Greer 1997; Perera 1983; Perera 1991a; Perera 1991b; Perera and Moreno 1984; Scaramelli 1992; Scaramelli and Tarble 1993a; Scaramelli and Tarble 1993b; Scaramelli and Tarble 1996). The motifs are painted in red, white, cream, orange, brown and black, with differing combinations from monochrome, bichrome to polychrome. A wide range of motifs include zoomorphic (fish, lizards, deer, turtles and others), anthropomorphic, and various geometric elements, some of which are reminiscent of the designs used in basketry and on maracas. Many of these sites are located in indigenous territory, and the Piaroa and Mapoyo Indians currently use these and other sites in the area as cemeteries.

One significant aspect of native religions that can be gleaned from the historic accounts refers to their ties to their ancestral territory, and the ritual and mythical significance of the mountains, rocks, watercourses, and caves (Perera 1988; Tarble 1991; 1993; Tarble and Scaramelli 1999; Scaramelli 1992). Some references clearly illustrate the attachment to a sacred landscape and the use of caves for burial and other ritual practices (Gumilla 1944). In this zone, however, we have also noted an important shift in Native forms of ritual representation following European contact, as noted in the rock paintings found in caves. The appearance of new images, differing in style and thematic symbolism has led some investigators to explain this disjunction in artistic expression as the result of iconoclastic practices led by the missionaries (Greer 1995). Evidence for this is found in the superposition of native paintings with images of buildings with crosses on the roof, and in the intentional destruction of petroglyphs. These iconoclastic practices are obviously associated with the colonial period and could be interpreted as the result of a variety of the prohibitions imposed by the Colonial authorities.

5 Documentation:

The Instituto de Patrimonio Cultural (IPC) is the official government institution charged with the documentation, conservation, and protection of all archaeological sites in Venezuela. The IPC has carried out an extensive survey of archaeological sites with the intention of creating a centralized archive that will serve as the basis for the management of the sites. Among the sites included in the survey are sites with rock art. They do not, however, have a specific form for the registration of rock art.

The Archivo Nacional de Arte Rupestre (ANAR) is a private archive, supported by the Fundación Tamayo, initiated through the efforts of Jeannine Sujo Volsky and Ruby de Valencia (1987). It was created in order to serve as a Reference Center and an Information Service for research and protection of Rock Art in Venezuela. The rock art archive at ANAR contains maps, site descriptions, and an inventory of over 650 sites located in 17 of the 23 states in Venezuela.

ANAR has developed a specialized recording sheet and is currently working on the incorporation of sites into an on-line archive, supported partially by funds from the UNESCO. The recording sheets have been sent to different experts in the country in order that they may supply the pertinent information to ANAR.

The Sociedad Venezolana de Espeleología (SVE) has undertaken documentation of numerous rock art sites associated with caves. The SVE regularly publishes reports and cadastral descriptions of these sites (Perera 1971; Perera 1983).

Several undergraduate theses presented at the Escuela de Antropología, Universidad Central de Venezuela have also dealt with rock art sites (Sujo Volsky (1975), Scaramelli (1992), Galarraga (2004), Álvarez (2003), Brites (1993), and Catalano (2006). These are available for consultation at the Escuela de Antropología, UCV, in Caracas.

Many other sites have been reported and documented by explorers, archaeologists, and others, with varying degrees of detail and accuracy (Acosta Saignes 1980; Chaffanjon 1986; Crevaux 1988; Cruxent 1967; Cruxent 1946-47; Cruxent 1960; García Fernández 1991; Humboldt 1985; Novoa Alvarez 1985; Novoa Álvarez 1998; Padilla 1957; Sanoja and Vargas-Arenas 1970; Tavera Acosta 1956, Weber 1996).

Some sites have been documented on web sites, such as rupestreweb:

Novoa Álvarez, Pablo. Petroglifos de la zona del Yaure, Barinas, Venezuela. En Rupestreweb, <http://rupestreweb.tripod.com/yaure.html>;

Montiel Acosta, Nelson. Inventario de Petroglifos de Barinas: Curbatí y Anime. Municipio Pedraza. Estado Barinas. Venezuela. En Rupestre/web, <http://rupestreweb.tripod.com/barinas.html>;

Novoa Álvarez, Pablo. Petroglifos del área de La Acequia, Barinas, Venezuela. En Rupestreweb, <http://rupestreweb.tripod.com/acequia.html>;

Álvarez, Pedro. Prospección arqueológica de los petroglifos de Bumbún, Barinas, Venezuela. En Rupestre/web, <http://rupestreweb.tripod.com/bumbun2.html>;

6 Research:

In dealing with rock art, particularly in Northern South America, archaeologists have tended to treat it as an isolated cultural phenomenon, a class of its own unrelated to the other archaeological sites in the area. Attempts have been made to describe the motifs (Cruxent 1946-47; Cruxent 1950; Perera 1971; Perera 1983; Perera and Moreno 1984; Perera 1988); to classify them according to broad categories i.e. geometric, anthropomorphic, zoomorphic (Perera 1983; Rivas 1990; Sujo Volsky 1975; Valencia and Sujo Volsky 1987); to speculate as to their possible ethnic origin (Cruxent 1946-47) and technique of manufacture (Cruxent 1946-47; Perera 1983).

Other more recent studies have attempted to ascribe possible meanings to motifs as related to subsistence and ceremonial activities inferred from the iconography (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971;

Williams 1985) and the possible links with myth and ritual (Rivas 1993; Rivas 1998; Scaramelli 1992; Scaramelli and Tarble 1996; Tarble and Scaramelli 1999). Greer (Greer 1995; Greer 1997), in the most comprehensive study to date, has postulated a chronology for the pictographs in the Middle Orinoco region, based on a detailed classification, observation of superposition, and relation to archaeological and ethnographic evidence.

7 Protection:

The Law of Protection and Defense of the Cultural Heritage (Gaceta Oficial #4.623: 1993) is the law that protects archaeological sites, including those with rock art, in Venezuela. The following articles specify the State's obligation in the protection and conservation of these manifestations:

“Artículo 1º Esta Ley tiene por objeto establecer los principios que han de regir la defensa del Patrimonio Cultural de la República, comprendiendo ésta su investigación, rescate, preservación, conservación, restauración, revitalización, custodia, vigilancia, identificación y todo cuanto requiera su protección cultural, material y espiritual.

Artículo 2º La defensa del Patrimonio Cultural de la República es obligación prioritaria del Estado y de la ciudadanía.

Se declara de utilidad pública e interés social la preservación, defensa y salvaguarda de todas las obras, conjuntos y lugares creados por el hombre o de origen natural, que se encuentren en el territorio de la República, y que por su contenido cultural constituyan elementos fundamentales de nuestra identidad nacional.

Artículo 5º Corresponderá oficialmente al Instituto del Patrimonio Cultural todo cuanto atañe a la defensa de Patrimonio Cultural aquí prevista, con las excepciones que la Ley establezca, de los bienes que constituyen el Patrimonio Cultural de la Republica.

Artículo 6º El Patrimonio Cultural de la República a los efectos de esta Ley, está constituido por los bienes de interés cultural así declarados que se encuentren en el territorio nacional o que ingresen a él quien quiera que sea su propietario conforme a lo señalado seguidamente: Los bienes muebles e inmuebles que hayan sido declarados o se declaren monumentos nacionales;

Los bienes inmuebles de cualquier época que sea de interés conservar por su valor histórico, artístico, social o arqueológico que no hayan sido declarados monumentos nacionales.”

8 Conservation:

The state of preservation of rock art sites in Venezuela varies considerably, depending on the location, exposure to natural elements, accessibility, tourism, and current land use. Several cases of deliberate removal of petroglyphs have been documented; glyphs have been salvaged from dam sites (Guri), while others have been relocated to local museums or even public plazas (Los Teques, Vargas, Caicara del Orinoco).

Damage to rock art sites by unscrupulous or ignorant visitors has also occurred, in the form of graffiti, removal of portions of the art, re-carving, etc. (Vigirima, Caicara del Orinoco, Mérida). Most of the sites that are easily accessible have been chalked or even painted repeatedly over the years to facilitate recording.

The caves containing rock art in the Orinoco area have become popular tourist sites, and this has resulted in the illegal removal of burials, burial offerings, and other votive objects from these sites. However, the rock art motifs located in indigenous territories, particularly those that are found in sacred caves used as cemeteries, are relatively well preserved when compared to those manifestations located in areas outside indigenous control.

Deforestation has exposed some of the petroglyphs in the Barinas area to the negative effects of the natural elements. In other cases, such as the sites on the shores of the Orinoco, the annual flooding has eroded many of the figures. While the rock art in caves tends to be better preserved, there have been cases where campfires in the rock shelters have blackened the images. The rock paintings found in open air sites are subject to erosion and deterioration. The geoglyph in Chirgua is on private property, but the owners are conscientious conservers of the site, and allow viewing only from afar (Urbani and Urbani 2001).

9 Management:

In the last 10 years several projects have been proposed for the management of rock art sites but only a very limited number have been implemented. One of these involved the site of Pintado, in the Amazon State, where an interpretive center was established a few years ago. A group of local students were trained for the task and the site is open to the public on weekends.

The site Complejo Arqueológico Piedra Pintada, Vigirima, Edo. Carabobo is protected by the Instituto Nacional de Parques; a visitor center and guides are available for the public. Another project developed in the 90s was created for the protection and managing of the petroglyphs located at Caicara del Orinoco. Although this project involved considerable research, planning and investment, and despite the fact that the managing project would have benefited the entire archaeological site, the proposal has been dropped recurrently by the official government institution. As a result the petroglyphs of Caicara del Orinoco are presently unprotected against unscrupulous visitation and other sources of damage. Other management projects have been proposed by municipal and/or state authorities but all of them have yet to become reality.

10 Main Threats:

The main threats affecting the preservation and protection of Venezuelan rock art include the lack of adequate educational programs concerning the importance of the rock art manifestations, the degradable effects of certain environments, the uncontrolled visitation of rock art sites, the unrestrained growth of adventure tourism in areas that should be under protection, and the macro development plans which in the past have caused the disappearance of important rock art sites (i.e. the petroglyphs located in the Guri dam site). Despite the aforementioned obligations of the State in the protection and conservation of these manifestations, the main threat to the rock art sites in Venezuela lies in the apathy of the official government institutions in charge of the

protection of archaeological sites. As a result of this apparent lack of interest, considerable damage to rock art sites continues to occur in many areas.

Conclusion

The Venezuelan territory contains one of the largest most diverse rock paintings and petroglyphs in the circum-Caribbean area. Recent investigations have contributed to the understanding of the distribution and significance of these sites, both in space and time. Unfortunately, the lack of reliable chronological associations between the rock art and specific archaeological contexts has prevented us to move forward toward a more comprehensive analysis of the roles of these manifestations in native social life. Among other aspects, the location of these sites provides concrete grounds for the understanding of the use and construction of space both prior to and after contact. Variations in the construction of space also offer insights into the role of certain European colonial practices in the struggle for power, within the constraints of pre-existing relationships of authority and cosmological space. Unfortunately, despite the importance of these manifestations, very little has been done for the protection and management of the rock art in Venezuela. Although the legislation is very clear about the duties of the governmental offices in charge of this task, in practice what has reigned is a profound disrespect and lack of interest in the protection and defense of these ancient manifestations.

See illustrations Annexe IV: page 219

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