

# Rock art marks transformations in traditional Peruvian societies

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Peru is one of the Latin American countries, like Argentina and Brazil, where rock art is thought to have developed throughout a period stretching from 10,000 BC to 1500 AD. The wealth and diversity of the series of pictorial representations made during this period are now beginning to be appreciated by archaeologists. Recent investigations by an IRD researcher has given insights into the daily lives of human communities who lived in the coastal and mountainous areas of Peru during that era.

Most rock paintings and rock carvings or petroglyphs were created by ancient and prehistoric societies. Archaeologists have long used them to gain clues to the way of life of such peoples. Certain rock frescos – such as the renowned Lascaux and Chauvet cave paintings or the petroglyphs of Scandinavia and North America – have already yielded substantial information on our ancestors' daily lives.

However, for other regions of the world like Latin America studies are still fragmentary. In Peru, where many sites have already been located, mystery still cloaks the signification and role of these concentrations of cave paintings and petroglyphs. One of these sites, Toro Muerto, in the South of the country, contains over 4000 carved blocks scattered over several dozen hectares.

Discoveries made in different areas of the country over recent years by Peruvian and international researchers are keys to improved understanding of the meaning behind these artistic representations which

were realized over a long period from 10 000 BP to the arrival of the first Spanish Conquistadors in the XVIth Century, or even beyond that time, as in the Cuzco area. Analysis of the distribution and characteristics of these sites brought out a distinction between the art produced in the coastal valleys from that of the Andean Cordillera uplands. The extensive sites with rocks carved in the open air are concentrated mainly on the Pacific facing slopes, whereas the scenes painted in caves or under shelters predominate in the high regions and on the Amazon side.

These preferences as to the supports and techniques used reflect associated ritual practices which are probably rather different. Study of the oldest rock paintings and their dating by indirect methods (carbon 14 dating of remains of in situ burnt charcoal) showed them to be the work of hunter-gatherers who occupied the region between 7000 and 3000 BC. The motifs are small and most often painted in red. They depict hunting scenes involving wild camelid species, such as the guanaco, and also human-like silhouettes. The latter are portrayed with animal-like rather than human faces. Such figures are usually armed with sticks, bows or assegais and sometimes carry nets.

The most ancient sites show a predominance of naturalistic representations of dead or wounded animals. However, a second set dated at 4000 to 5000 years BC eulogizes fertility. This time the images are large, drawn with the abdomen enormously swollen, sometimes containing a foetus. This stylistic development, which seems to coincide with the beginnings of animal husbandry in the high upland regions of Peru, appear to symbolize the emergence of pastoralism and the change in man—animal relationships that came along with this practice.

These research studies also brought into relief periods that were quite distinct in terms of stylistic evolution of carved figures. Whereas the most ancient motifs, associated with the rise of the first great Andean

civilizations (2500-300 BC) essentially reproduced complex figures bearing high symbolic and spiritual content, depicting mythical, often monster-like, animals and supernatural beings, the later carvings characteristically appear in abundance and testify to a simplification of morphological features. The simplicity and relative abundance of these petroglyphs, which depict animals of the local fauna and also scenes from daily life, suggest a degree of generalization of rock carving practices to further sections of the society.

The largest sites dating from this era, which contain several hundred carved rocks with dozens of motifs, probably played a significant role in societies' cultural and social life, both at local and regional level. Their location, and some of the rituals that took place, may have been linked to areas of production and trade routes of prized commodities such as coca or salt. Other, geographical, factors like the confluence of two rivers or the proximity to communication routes also appear to have significantly influenced the context and purpose of these artistic representations.

A more extensive study of these archaeological sites, still strongly subjected to vandalism and erosion, is paramount. These vestiges testify to the ideological and social changes that occurred over a period of almost 8000 years, and can further understanding of the way of life and beliefs of peoples who were among the New World's first settlers.

Source: Institut de Recherche Pour le Développement

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