The Cosmological Connections to Rock Art in the Great Basin and California

By: Samantha Clark, Clara Ennis, Brittany Hormel, and Kaley Kelly
Faculty mentor: Benjamin Steere

Abstract

This project examines the deeper cultural and cosmological meanings of the rock art found in California and the Great Basin Area by analyzing the art of the Chumash tribe, located in Southern coastal California, and the Fremont culture, located in the Great Basin area of central Utah. There is an exploration of rock art symbols with their religious and ecological connections and a comparative examination of motifs and meanings between the two cultures.


**The Cosmological Connections to Rock Art in the Great Basin and California**

**Samantha Clark, Clara Ennis, Brittany Hormel, and Kaley Kelly**

**Abstract**

This project examines the deeper cultural and cosmological meanings of the rock art found in California and the Great Basin Area by analyzing the art of the Chumash tribe, located in Southern coastal California, and the Fremont culture, located in the Great Basin area of central Utah. There is an exploration of rock art symbols with their religious and ecological connections and a comparative examination of motifs and meanings between the two cultures.

**Introduction**

The Chumash and Fremont people are two groups who utilized rock art in their cultures for reasons including religious, territorial, and storytelling purposes. The Chumash rock art is carbon-dated to be from around 500–1700 AD and the Fremont Rock art is carbon-dated to be from around 1100 to 1500 AD (Smith et al. 1975). Both groups used different mediums such as painting, carving, pecking, scratching, or scraping to create rock art (Smith et al. 1975). The rock art seen in this region was predominately done with red, black, white, and yellow colors, however, there were occasionally other colors such as green and blue present within the art. The process of making rock art required dyes and pigments. The specific resources used by the Chumash tribe were ochre and hematite for red pigments (Scott et al. 2001). Black pigments were made using coal, hydrous manganese oxide. Black and blue representations are believed to have come from burnt shells and white kaolin (Scott et al. 2002). The composition of the blue and green pigment has been under debate but is widely thought to be composed of mineral fuchsite (Scott et al. 2002).

**Methods**

This project utilizes the comparative method to draw out similarities of rock art between two different groups who had different environments and religions. Those involved in this project strategically analyzed rock art from the Chumash and Fremont by looking for specific factors found in the art of both groups. Motifs such as agriculture, lifeways, cultural dynamics, and cosmology were researched to find connections between the two groups. The locations of rock art, the materials used to create it, and the patterns and symbols used were analyzed to gain a better understanding of the Chumash and Fremont people's rock art. Data gathered through this research method allowed the conclusions regarding connections between the two parties to be drawn.

**Results**

Chumash rock art was often portrayed in caves. This was used as an entrance into the mythological underworlds. While in the underworlds the Chumash would have rituals including magic and shamanism (Hudson and Conit 1981). The Chumash tribe has multiple rock art aquatic motifs, which are consistent with their cosmology and ecological practices. This is due to the Chumash’s main food resource comes from the ocean. The Chumash people had an abundance of rock art with a focus on the sun and moon. The sun motif comes from their intricate religious beliefs about the powers and personalities of the sun and moon. The Chumash symbolism in rock art related to supernaturalism and executed by ritual officials ethnographically identified as antte (Hudson and Conit 1981). Chumash narratives describe a celestial ocean near the Land-of-the-Dead (Hudson and Conit 1981). It was occupied by two large, undescended monsters who would rise from the water and give out a loud cry when a soul drew near (Hudson and Conit 1981). Souls ignorant of the old religion or who had no helper would fall into the cry and fall into the water (Hudson and Conit 1981). They were then transformed into a water monster, were-frog or were-turtle (Hudson and Conit 1981). This suggests the aquatic motif (Figure 9), is tied into the celestial realm of the supernatural. Chumash shamans and specialists served as the artists painting the walls of the inland caves and rock shelter with abstract representations of the sun, stars, human beings, birds, fish and reptiles (Fagan 2015). Some painted sites may have served as social obsidian sanctuaries, such as the Condor Cave (Fagan 2019). The Condor Cave is in the coastal mountains of California and has rock art possibly dedicated to the Condor bird (Figure 5) (Fagan 2019). The rising sun shines through a hole carved by a shaman in the cave wall, the shaman also painted his spirit helper, a red-eared frog, on the wall (Figure 3) (Fagan 2019).

Fremont rock art is often high on cliff walls and in locations difficult to access. The high settings emphasize the heroic and ceremonial nature of the subject matter (Cole 1990). The Fremont culture is poorly understood as it vanished around 1300 CE, perhaps due to environmental hardships and warfare (Fagan 2019, Spangler 2013). Fremont rock art frequently features militaristic motifs, the shield-bearing warrior being a distinctive motif characteristic of the rock art of the eastern Great Basin and a popular element of Fremont rock art (Loendorf and Conner 1993). Detailed similarities between Plains and Great Basin shield figures suggest cultural relationships between the two areas (Gebhard 1964). It is suggested that the Shoshone borrowed the motif from the Fremont Culture during a period of interaction between the two groups, presumably warfare (Gebhard 1964). Fremont rock art also has other war-related tools such as bows and arrows, and possibly scales or heads, suggesting they were at war consistently (Cole 1990). Rock art in Nine Mile Canyon exhibits shield figures engaged in combat, also, suggestive of warfare are the shield-bearing anthropomorphs (Cole 1990). Hunting themes appear to be the most common Fremont rock art. The “Great Hunt” petroglyph appears to be related to shamantistic activities to bring hunting successes as depicted by anthropomorphs with headresses or horns; some shown holding bows and arrows (Cole 1990). The native bighorn sheep was the most frequently depicted animal indicating high value (Figure 10). The Fremont rock art of corn depicts ownership suggesting not having abundant resources (Figure 12). Fremont rock art motifs depict events in the supernatural or mythological realm. Shamantistic and mythological imagery in Fremont rock art was represented by masked and supernatural anthropomorphs, in addition to bird-like representations (Cole 1990). The ceremonial attire of the anthropomorph, especially their horned and other types of ornate headaddresses, suggests these figures have supernatural power (Figure 14). Fremont anthropomorphic heads are rectangular, helmet-shaped and rounded sitting directly on the shoulders (Cole 1990). Headaddresses may include elk antlers, feet and hands were often elongated, and arms and hands hung down (Figure 17) (Cole 1990).

**Conclusions**

Conclusively, the rock art of both the Chumash and the Fremont cultures represent strong ties to their beliefs and their everyday life. Specifically, the two group’s motifs are often derived from necessity and religious. The Chumash rock art is the most used form of art among their everyday lives. Similarly, the Chumash rock art’s depiction of agrarian motifs like corn and big horned sheep because these were their main food sources. Food sources are not the only depiction of everyday life found within both parties’ rock art, the Chumash rock art shows shaman motifs, depicting individuals highly regarded within the community. The Fremont depiction of warriors similarly represents individuals who were significant within their more militaristic society. Lastly, the Chumash and Fremont both have large amounts of cosmological motifs within their rock art. The Fremont depicts a prolific amount of sun motifs throughout their body of work. The sun is easily found within many different Chumash rock art sights due to its deep cosmological connections. Likewise, the Fremont show their religious beliefs and practices through the depictions of anthropomorphic figures. Although the Chumash are located on the California coast and the Fremont are located inland within the Great Basin, there are a plethora of connections tying these two groups together. One of the biggest connections between the two is their use of rock art and the use of specific motifs.

**References**

[Insert references here]