The fourteen chapters of this well-edited book have as their primary source the contributions to a workshop held at Linnaeus University, Sweden (formerly University of Kalmar) in October 2008. The contributions of the different authors focus on several aspects concerning the study of rock art images from northernmost Europe. One of the most interesting goals of this book is to appraise some of the current research in the field of rock art in Northern Europe and to present it to an international audience, since most of the scientific output in this research field has been published in Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, Finnish or Russian. This anthology’s declared interest is ‘to explore the relevance of older ideas, such as (…) prehistoric religion (…), ritual performance (…), sympathetic magic, animism and totemism (…), [and] the mindscapes of landscapes (…) from the present “state of the art”, and try to develop a broader and “deeper” understanding of the phenomenon’ (p. 2). As the introductory chapter states, the main themes developed throughout the work are animism, the agency of the rock, picturing as performance, and the significance of the narrative.

Various concrete issues are developed by the authors in the different chapters. In ‘Animals, churingas and rock art in Late Mesolithic Northern Scandinavia’ (Fuglestvedt, University of Bergen), the author shows the development from naturalistic to stylized forms as the expression of an emerging totemism from an original animist substratum. In ‘The concepts of rock in Late Mesolithic Western Norway’ (Lødøen, University of Bergen), the nature of the supporting rock is discussed in an effort to improve knowledge of the prehistoric perception of rock. ‘Hearing and touching rock art: Finnish rock paintings and the non-visual’ (Lahelma, University of Helsinki) explores the echoing phenomena produced at several rock art sites, and relates them to the presence of red ochre handprints by means of ethnographic parallels. ‘The known yet unknown ringing stones of Sweden’ (Hultman, University of Uppsala) establishes a relationship between hearing distance and Bronze Age monuments as well as with communication routes. ‘Rock art as social format’ (Cornell and Ling, University of Gothenburg) discusses the different dimensions of rock art as a format (a concept elaborated from Derrida (1967)) of a more general discourse of different social constellations. ‘Rock art and the meaning of place: some phenomenological reflections’
(Ljunge, a freelance researcher) explores the relationship between rock art and its placing by means of phenomenology, investigating the possibilities of using intersubjectivity (human interaction with places, objects, phenomena and other subjects and the meaning created in that process) as an archaeological tool to attempt to explain the meaning of rock art sites. ‘Emplacement and the hau of rock art’ (Goldhahn, Linnaeus University) also discusses the meaning of the placement of rock art in the landscape by considering art to be a part of reciprocal gift exchange systems. ‘Cosmology and performance: narrative perspectives on Scandinavian rock art’ (Skoglund, Sydsvensk Arkeologi AB) deals with contextually-based and comparative analysis of internal elements of rock art as a way of explaining their significance in the context of mythological narratives. ‘“Should I stay or should I go”: on the meaning of variations among mobile and stable elk motifs at Nämftorsen, Sweden’ (Sjöstrand, University of Stockholm) attempts to find meaning in the different carving techniques and leg positions of the elk figures from Nämftorsen rock art site by means of the stable/mobile dichotomy, thus questioning the functional traditional interpretation of the elk motifs. ‘Reused rock art: Iron Age activities at Bronze Age rock art sites’ (Nilsson, Swedish National Heritage Board) discusses the relationship of Iron Age people from Southern Scandinavia to the pre-existing rock art, by means of re-utilizing Bronze Age rock art sites. ‘“Cracking” landscapes: new documentation – new knowledge?’ (Gjerde, Tromsø University Museum) constitutes an important contribution to the volume as it remarks on the close relationship between the documentation and interpretation of rock art, and, thus, the need to understand the aims of previous researchers when their documentation is used for new interpretations. The discussion focuses on the research of micro-landscapes and leads to the recommendation of in situ studies of rock art rather than those just based on published tracings. In ‘Bronze Age rock art and religion in a maritime perspective’ (Wrigglesworth, University of Bergen) reviews the use of religion in interpreting rock art and assessing current interpretations of rock art. It concludes that ritual practices in the West Norway Bronze Age, as recorded in rock art panels, reflect a maritime world which can be considered a local variation of a general Scandinavian religion. Finally, the volume ends with an ‘Epilogue: drawing on stone’ (Bradley, University of Reading) which develops some ideas extracted from the chapters, including the point that the analysis of rock art cannot be reduced to the study of visual images, and ideas relating to the relationship between figure and ground in rock art panels, the importance of the rock itself, the organization of narratives in the
rock art of Northern Europe, and the question of time – the continuous use and/or reuse of the panels and its perception by people over time.

These chapters focus on researching the most intangible aspects of prehistoric cultures, like beliefs, social systems, and symbolism, of which rock art panels constitute important tangible remains. All these essays are firmly based on anthropological comparative studies and concepts, some of them of old origin, some combined with updated versions of postmodern philosophy.

Some of the papers, nevertheless, use elements of study which could hardly be defined as archaeological raw materials in the strictest sense. Thus, approaching the mindset of the people responsible for the different rock art manifestations without the help of informed methods and solely based on subjective perceptions like, for instance, some of the work on the role of the nature of the rocks supporting rock art, or the phenomenological approaches by means of intersubjectivity, leads to hardly falsifiable hypotheses. If we assume that scientific research advances by means of inference to the best hypothesis, and that these hypotheses may be elaborated using multiple kinds of evidence, the problem with these categories of evidence is that there is no way to assess the generated hypotheses, making it impossible to discern which are the best fit and to choose the most parsimonious of the possibilities. Some assertions included in this book need to be assessed in this light. This is, for example, the case with the claim that ‘it is demonstrated that veins, cracks, striations and other features in rock surfaces have been essential and decisive for the type of images that are created’ (p. 35, my emphasis), which implicitly generalizes that the function of rock surface as a communicating membrane to other dimensions – as postulated for San rock paintings by Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1990) and subsequent works by these and other authors – is universal for every culture. Although in some panels the relationship between the natural features of the rock and the pictures might be clear, this kind of statement, while possibly valid for several San rock art sites, and arguably relevant to the reality of other rock art panels, should preferably be avoided. The presence of natural features related to rock art does not scientifically demonstrate anything other than that there is a relationship between some rock features and some figures. If the concept of scientific demonstration finds a limited utility in sciences related to historical processes, such as paleontology, history or archaeology, where contingency plays a role, there is nevertheless a need for formulating hypotheses that can be falsified as a medium to develop these sciences through scientific, rather than literary, discussions.
Rock art is a widespread phenomenon, which appears all over the world in the context of very different societies (or, at least, far away from one and other) and over a very wide chronological range. While the hypothesis of the depiction of entoptic phenomena cannot be systematically denied, it is also clear that the different cultural contexts in which rock art occurs cannot be the same response to analogous conditionings. Thus, as an example, some Iberian schematic art motifs which are very similar to some of the entoptic figures described by Lewis-Williams and Dowson (1988) – i.e. zigzags or ‘sun’ or eyed figures – can also be found in the idol plaques, cylinder idols or even in phalange idols from the Copper Age, and can be also detected in some clearly anthropomorphic figurines. These features have been interpreted as signs of conceptual uniformity (Bécares Pérez 1990). In this example, rather than the depiction of entoptic images obtained through trance, these features resemble a more or less standardized code to denote some kind of mythological personage or a deity.

The question of the organization of the narratives enclosed in rock art is, from my point of view, of special relevance. Researching this issue implies the need for employing an accurate recording methodology for the elaboration of tracings fitted to the reality of the panels, which should also allow establishing the contemporaneity of the different elements involved in the scenes. In this sense, Bradley’s assertion (p. 203) about the obscuring of the relationships between elements due to the recording practice of covering the carvings with paint to enhance them shows us that small changes in the recording protocols can lead to important improvements in our knowledge of the actual composition of the panels.

As I see the question, though these approaches could constitute an excellent explanatory tool, as is demonstrated by this anthology, there is a real need to understand the chronology, still unresolved, as declared in several of the papers, in order to apply the methods described in the work with a minimum guarantee of success. In this sense, Solomon (1998) pointed out the deep implications of dating in the kind of studies undertaken on San art. Despite the important number of theoretical approaches developed in this anthology, it can be argued that, without a clear chronology (which should include a ‘micro-chronology’ in the sense of the relative chronological relationships of the different depictions in a concrete panel) we will find it extremely difficult to explain the panels archaeologically, since elements like synchronicity or, on the contrary, diachrony, of the different motifs are unclear. This relative chronology can be obtained through the study of superimpositions and not merely by typological
differences, and, for a better understanding, it can be clarified through the use of tools such as Harris matrices (Chippindale et al. 2000; Russell 2000). In relation to this task, the use of techniques like digital image analysis, alone (Gunn et al. 2010) or combined with analytical techniques (Rogerio-Candelera et al. 2009) constitute a helpful way of firmly ensuring the basis for an archaeological explanation of the panels.

If we revisit the initial goal of ‘trying to develop a broader and “deeper” understanding of the phenomenon’ (p. 2), it is not easy to assess whether or not it has been reached. Most of the conclusions seem to be legitimate, although the resort to ethnographic parallels could be debatable as the characteristics, in terms of belief systems, of extinct non-literate societies without a nexus with actual societies are hardly comparable with any known society. On the other hand, traditional formal methods have arrived at an impasse and the papers included in this book represent an important effort to overcome it.

This anthology, in sum, constitutes a relevant set of applied methods for approaching the meaning of rock art, and thus approaching the mind of extinct societies, which finds its complete applicability through a careful chronological study at intra-panel level.

REFERENCES


Miguel Ángel Rogerio Candelera

*Istituto de Recursos Naturales y Agrobiologia de Sevilla (IRNAS-CSIC), Spain*