

WEBSITE REVIEW

EuroPreArt. European Prehistoric art: past signs and present memories.

URL: <http://europreart.net>

Web Master: Andrea Arcà

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Ambiguity and ambition for European rock art on-line

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I am, at best, Internet-conversant and no better. It was for this reason that the editors of *Before Farming* approached me to undertake a review of the new web site *EuroPreArt. European Prehistoric Art: past signs and present memories*. As a researcher based in Africa I offer a slightly different set of priorities and perspectives than is usual from researchers based in Europe. For example, in southern Africa on-line resources are being used as a basic delivery device to address historical and racial imbalances in numerous education systems. As a result, most of our web-based resources dealing with archaeology tend to be dual-purpose and serve both professional and popular communities.

EuroPreArt is also aimed at both the archaeological community and the wider public and has been laudably brought into being for the "Documentation and dissemination of European Prehistoric Art". Attempting to serve two often quite different user groups makes for a certain ambiguity when navigating this and similar sites. For example, of what level of textual and visual literacy do you assume the accessing communities capable? With *EuroPreArt* the ambiguity begins with the use of the terms 'prehistoric' and 'art' - neither of which is defined. 'Art' is perhaps the most difficult of terms to define under any circumstances. What is

meant here is 'rock art' and a few examples of mobiliary art (see Chippindale 2001 for a fuller discussion of the problematic but ultimately acceptable term 'rock art' and its variants). The use of the term 'prehistory' is possibly self-limiting and seems here to bracket the periods from the Palaeolithic to the Iron Age - terms not readily understandable to all users - and chronometric dates should be inserted for maximum user comprehension. There seems to be an underlying assumption that older rock art is somehow more valuable than more recent rock art (eg, Lorblanchet 1993). Yet, it is the most recent rock art that is most readily informed by living or ethnographic memory, allowing for finer-grained interpretations. While not necessarily arguing for the inclusion of graffiti as 'rock art', though it is certainly an 'artefact' (see also Phillips 1999), the detailed information to be gained from rock art of recent times counterbalances the prestige of having the older variety. Rock art 'Olympics' can play into the hands of dangerous nationalistic brands of archaeology (cf Trigger 1984). It is a short jump from the site's opening page saying that "Prehistoric art is among one of the most important components of European history" to the claim that "symbolic possession of the landscape...is to be found, first in the world, in Europe". Such a claim would irritate

many an Africanist archaeologist, especially with the excavation of the intentionally decorated ochre pieces from Blombos Cave in South Africa that date to 77,000 years ago (Balter 2002). See how easily the contest begins? And to what purpose? Fortunately, this web site is informed by a welcome theoretical sophistication and is otherwise not at all imperialistic, though it would benefit from including more recent, post-Iron Age rock arts.

I found this site to be big and bold with deep EU blue and yellow the dominant and pleasing colours. The site does, however, need an overall site map as it is busy and sometimes confusing. For example, the site's entrance page instructs you to 'enter' the main site, yet it is on this entrance page that some of the site's most important information is contained under the headings 'Presentation', 'Structure' and 'Guidelines'. These headings are located low down on the page and can easily be overlooked by users keen to 'enter' the main body of the site. 'Presentation' comprises a very sensible introduction by project co-ordinator Luiz Oosterbeek. 'Structure' is an overview of how to navigate this site and is, if anything, perhaps too detailed. In 'Guidelines' we find Mila Simões de Abreu's 'EuroPreArt Contributions for a Guide of Good Conduct to Prehistoric Art'. This rock art etiquette article is an essential part of this and any public domain resources on rock art. If anything, I would make a separate icon for 'Visitor etiquette' on the site's second and contents page. Her list of 'Don'ts' and 'Dos' is given added value as a reason is given for each 'don't' and 'do'. A minor point is that I would put the 'dos' before the 'don'ts' to facilitate a more inclusionary approach to site visitation. The subsection on 'Researcher's Concerns' states that, "It must be outlined the absolute forbidding of any disruptive method and the necessity of a total respect for archaeological sites. It is also to be noticed that no substances shall be applied to rock art for recording purposes." The many photographs of chalked rock art in the main site undermine this statement. Even though each of the 806 rock art site records has a disclaimer stating that certain photographs are historical and may present a

record of bad practice, this small bit of embedded text is no match for the powerful and disturbing images of chalked and painted rock art. These interventionist images may create the wrong impression to a lay audience and even encourage destructive rock art enhancements. In a similar vein, the ethics of mentioning site names in this database is also something that requires attention. By no means all of the sites listed enjoy access control and the threat of vandalism is a very real one, perhaps best avoided by having a 'Public Rock Art Sites' page giving general locational information and a subscriber's page that places the sites more precisely for bona fide researchers and interest groups. In each of these three sections it is possible for users to submit additional rock art data to the database by downloading a standardised form of between 161 Kb and 550 Kb depending on whether you use Netscape or Internet Explorer browsers, filling it in and submitting it online, where it will be evaluated and by the site's steering committee.

To ensure that users do not bypass the important information contained in the opening page, this information would be better situated in the site's second contents page that is the 'meat' of the site. Here, the structure is that of a reasonably straightforward database that comprises five icon-sections on a horizontal task bar. The first 'Map' icon-section shows a map of Europe and you can click on any one of the project's coloured participating countries to access the rock art site records that have been submitted by the 11 partner-contributors, including: Denmark (six sites), France (155 sites), Ireland (50 sites), Italy (127 sites), Portugal (210 sites), Spain (193 sites) and Sweden (65 sites). Clearly, this is a work in progress with important rock art regions in the United Kingdom and Eastern Europe still to be included as competency, capacity and awareness in those regions grows. Interestingly, the number of sites reported per country shows the tremendous upsurge recently in rock art research in the Iberian Peninsula and nearby areas (see Bahn & Vertus 1997: 129, 163).

The 'Map' is perhaps the easiest and quickest way to navigate the site and allows access to

individual site records region by region. These site records are standardised and comprehensive, though I would have wished for a basic set of references accompanying each record rather than having to jump to the 'Bibliography'. The information that is provided is good and includes: a keyword sketch, characteristics of the geology of the area, description of the rock art, available dating and historical and current conservation measures. There is also a hyperlink to the organisation that submitted the site record and a warning to users that copyright lies with that institution and no commercial usage is permitted. The text is supported by a map locating the site on an approximately 1: 500,000 scale and up to half-a-dozen pictures of 200 - 550 pixel resolution of the rock art imagery and sites. The dominant language is English, but there are records also in French, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish, making multilingualism a desirable attribute to get the most out of this web site. This same site information can be accessed by the 'List' or 'Record' sections, which are really shorter versions of the same thing. 'List' would have been better as a straight alphabetical, clickable listing of sites and 'Records' could have been omitted as the site records are contained in 'Map'. Similar duplication is evident in the 'Date' and 'Partners' icons on the top horizontal toolbar as the information these two icons offer is also covered in 'Map'. Removing these duplications will help pare down the site and make space for the information contained on the opening page. I prefer a leaner aesthetic for ease of access and faster download times, especially when using a dial-up connection. I could not, for example, access the 2500 slides that make up the slideshow. Perhaps a frames-only version could be made available, which would also save on colour-ink printing costs.

The fourth icon-section is the 'Search' function, which works well as it is case-insensitive and allows for the use of partial text strings and is therefore kind on users new to European rock art. Terminology can, however, be a cause for miscommunication. For example the word 'carving' is used extensively to mean 'engraving' or 'petroglyph'. Perhaps a glossary of rock art terms would be a

useful addition and a default setting on the search engine to always link synonymous terms. The last icon-section is for the 'Bibliography' that lists 2865 references on European rock art that date back to the 18th century - a database that is sure to grow rapidly in the years to come. The bibliography was difficult to navigate and often 'jumped about' and returned me to the beginning; not liking anything other than the 'Author ascending' sorting category. Fortunately, there is a good feedback section available on-site. Web master Andrea Arcà answered a query I sent in on May 6 at 13:38 on May 8 at 11:36 - an acceptable response time. There is also a very clear 'Help' section suitable to especially novice users. This tells one of links to related rock art and archaeological web sites, but I could not find where or how to make these links. This is important as *EuroPreArt* follows very much in the tradition of European rock art research that tends to shy away from interpretation, preferring to enshrine the imagery in numbers, environmental contexts, management issues and the like. Other, more interpretation-oriented web sites may help users gain a fuller understanding of the meaning of European rock art, as far as it is currently understood. One link that is clear is that to the European Union, ensuring due funder recognition.

In sum, *EuroPreArt* is big, bold and ambitious, suited to well-resourced individuals and institutions with good information technology. The site is more ambiguous for those with smaller machines working on dial-up connections, where patience and off-peak rates will be essential. Hopefully similar excellent initiatives such as this may be set up for other parts of the world to assist both researchers to bridge the divides created by "hyper-specialisation" and for the general user's edification. Southern Africa, through the good offices of the University of the Witwatersrand's Rock Art Research Institute, plans to have a comparable site working by 2005 with a test site up in a year's time. Online, virtual resources like this open worlds to those not able to travel to each site in person. But it remains critical that people visiting this web site are also encouraged to visit the rock art sites closest to

them in order to get some idea of the texture and multiple sources of data that inform the understanding and appreciation of rock art and,

indeed, all archaeological artefacts and sites. Virtual virtues must always be secondary to embedded radiance.

References

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