



NEW ZEALAND  
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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## REVIEWS

**Chippindale, C. and P. Taçon (eds), *The Archaeology of Rock-Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999; A\$53.95; paperback; pp 373+xviii.**

For more than 40,000 years people have marked their landscapes in symbolic and decorative ways. Pictures painted and carved in caves and on open rock surfaces all over the world are among the most fascinating remains from prehistory. This interesting collection of 19 essays edited by two prominent scholars explores some of the images that time and chance have allowed to survive. The book tries to focus on the archaeology of rock-art rather than on the aesthetics. The essays take the form of case studies and the perspectives taken by the various authors are very diverse.

The chapters are not organised by geographic location but rather by the main methods that researchers have used. The editors classify analytical methods into *informed* and *formal* types. Informed methods of study involve ethnography or ethnohistory which offer some direct insight about indigenous meaning. In Arnhem Land in northern Australia, for instance, the recent rock painting continues in paintings on bark and paper. However, for most rock-art there is no basis of informed knowledge. This requires working with formal methods that do not depend on any insider knowledge. The information available is what can be seen in the art itself, from the relations of pictures to one another and to the landscape.

Chippindale and Taçon point out that a special merit of rock-art is its directness. It is an immediate record of behaviour that is easy to see, but hard for outsiders to make sense of -- "interpretations of its nature and meaning have been famously eccentric: some still are".

The original meanings of art, in context, are usually inaccessible and what we find is a set of changing fashions in interpretation. One currently popular view taken by a number of authors in the book is that much prehistoric art was produced by shamans while experiencing chemically-induced "altered states of consciousness" or trances. Shamans somehow provided a liaison between this world and a spirit world. There is also a related idea that there are generally similar cross-cultural responses to psychoactive substances based on the shared human central nervous system. And it follows that cross-cultural interpretations of art are feasible. I find this hard to swallow (or do I mean inhale?). Whitley's paper on Californian rock-art informs us that "... somatic hallucinations include feelings of death, of weightlessness or flight, of drowning or swimming, of aggression and fighting, of bodily transmogrification, and of sexual arousal and release" (p.14). Evidently one way to interpret rock-art is during an altered state of consciousness.

The book's 19 chapters range wide in space and time and include chapters on the European Palaeolithic, nineteenth century Australia, southern Africa, north America, mainland Asia and the Pacific Islands. It is difficult to single out individual papers for special mention, however, there is one by Jean Clottes giving new information about the newly discovered French Palaeolithic caves of Cosquer and Chauvet and the open-air Coa Valley petroglyphs in Portugal. A number of theoretical questions are reviewed such as the extent to which the art accumulated over millennia or over shorter periods with some unity of structure. Some interesting experiments have been done of directly dating pigments by AMS radiocarbon and making comparisons with earlier chronological schemes of relative stylistic dating. Some earlier ideas are demolished and others confirmed.

There is an excellent methodological paper by Chippindale and Taçon comparing the many interesting approaches taken to establish the age of the art of Arnhem Land. A paper by Bradley "Daggers Drawn", looks at connections between drawings of Bronze Age weapons and of metal hoards. Wilson considers general theories of the colonisation of the Pacific in the light of the results of a multivariate study of its art. Clegg describes one rock-art site from modern Sydney and shows how obscure and mysterious it can be even in its own culture.

Writing about art is a bit like writing about music or wine in that it is difficult to represent senses of sight, sound and smell in the medium of the written word. In the translation much gets invented, lost and transformed. Many theories about

art have little more than the validity of contemporaneity and it is down to the individual to decide which interpretations may be tolerably real and what is bullshart.

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**Stephen J. Pyne** *Vestal Fire: An Environmental History, Told through Fire, of Europe and Europe's Encounter with the World.* University of Washington Press 1997. US\$ 34.95; hardback; 680 pp + xvii.

*Vestal Fire* is the fifth volume in the series "Cycle of Fire" which is an ambitious attempt to tell the story of how humans and fire have interacted to create the modern world. The cycle is loosely organised and not having read the other volumes is no great disadvantage. *Vestal Fire* nearly exclusively focusses on agricultural and wild fire, industrial uses of combustion given attention only when they have direct environmental effects such as destruction of forests for charcoal to smelt iron.

The book divides into three unequal sections: a relatively brief "Elements", in which the prehistory of European fire and some theoretical concepts are outlined; "Europe" which traces the history of fire in five broad regions of Europe; and "Earth" in which the complex interaction of European fire with the rest of the world is discussed. The book is well provided with maps, diagrams, occasional but well chosen pictures and extensive footnotes. Obviously it is impossible to discuss fire in isolation, and the volume in many ways is also an environmental history of the European-affected parts of the globe. Such a large topic demands expansive treatment, and it certainly gets it in this sprawling but scholarly volume of over 600 pages. Pyne cannot resist an enticing side issue or anecdote and, as he does not neglect to maintain a forward momentum, the work is the stronger for this. Indeed, many of the insights the reader gets from the book comes from the unusual stories, customs, and facts he relates, and the connections made across cultures and time.

At the heart of the book lies the fundamental concept of ager, saltus and silva - arable farming, pastoralism and forestry - Europe's agricultural fire triangle. Pre industrialisation, fire was the essential transforming agency. In landscapes that encouraged too little or too much fire, agriculture was not possible. It was well-timed and judicious use of fire that turned the agricultural cycle from forest, to arable land, to rough pasture and back to forest. Fire released the

nutrients that could only be built up by long-lived woody growth, and thus permitted planting of crops; agricultural fallow growth, returned by fire to the soil, extended the useful life of cultivated ground; abandonment to rough pasture and grazing eventually resulted in regrowth of forests. At all stages fire freed the ground from pests and weeds, encouraged useful growth and liberated nutrients. Sometimes it was the farm that moved across the landscape as the cycle took its course; in others the extended farm controlled through regular burning the sequence on a fixed area of land. In such a diverse continent as Europe, the fire triangle took many forms. Swidden, slash and burn agriculture, existed in its purest form in the northern boreal forests where, without the short-lived pulse of nutrients from burnt forest, no agriculture was possible. In contrast, in the fire-prone Mediterranean region, constant firing of a fire-adapted biota encouraged pastoralism as the major land use.

Industrialisation changed forever the fire economy of Europe, and ushered in the era of commercial forestry and scientific agriculture, sworn enemies of fire. Much of the book is taken up with the ensuing struggle between the authorities, increasingly convinced that fire was feral, primitive, wasteful, and encouraged dissent, and the obdurate peasant, who could see no alternative. Eventually in Europe artificial fertilisers, improved crops, pesticides, weedicides and transport won, and fire became tamed, domesticated, and relegated to the hearth.

However, the victory of the modern industrial era over fire is confined to Europe and the most highly Europeanised parts of the globe. The huge ENSO generated forest and swidden fires of southeast Asia of recent years, the regular fire outbreaks in densely inhabited coastal Australia and California, let alone the continuation of customary agricultural and feral fire in most of the third world, makes it a moot point whether fire suppression is feasible, let alone desirable. Pyne is equivocal about the ultimate outcome. He acknowledges that global environmental concerns - loss of forests, biodiversity, the greenhouse gas emission question and the damaging smoke palls of southeast Asia - are presently winning the battle and the pyrophobes are dominant at the policy level at least. On the other hand, the multifaceted aspects of fire makes it a complex issue; for instance, biodiversity can be lost as effectively through fire suppression as through uncontrolled fire and naturally fire-prone landscape have to be burnt at regular intervals or they will explode in dangerous major conflagrations. The final words in the book are: "After Europe there would still be fire".

A substantial part of the book is taken up with the issue of fire and the island nations settled or influenced by Europe (the "neo-Europes"), including New Zealand which he covers in detail. It was a pleasant surprise to see how well acquainted Pyne is with the New Zealand literature, and how deftly he manoeuvres through several hundred years of New Zealand history, creating in the process the best brief assessment of the topic I have encountered. One may quibble a little about some of the conclusions - are we really becoming "...Asia's offshore tree farm"? - but others are spot on, and he captures well our current uneasy relationship with fire. Much of New Zealand lies in a fire-prone environmental zone, but the native flora has little fire-resistance or tolerance because the only source of ignition, lightning, is rare. However, since the arrival of Maori fire has been common, and the fire-shy flora has retreated back into the wet, rugged back country. If we ever intend to restore something of what has been lost in the drier lowlands, fire lurks in the background, a largely unexamined issue. On the other, if we want to preserve the original landscapes of the pre-European Maori, fire is essential.

Virtually every page in this book gave me new facts, fresh insights, and concepts. To give just a few examples. I was unaware of how widespread the practice of burning soils was to encourage land reclamation. A child of the era of the safety match and disposable lighter, I had no concept of what a transformation the first lucifers of the industrial era had on the general population. Fire-making, which had demanded a modest level of skill, now was freely available: "...children, idiots, criminals, soldiers, farmers housewives, the rich and the poor could start fire with equal ease and profligacy: the old bonds of firetending and codes of fire behaviour became irrelevant." Likewise, I had never made the connection between fire in forests and fire in wooden cities. Fire in a forest I thought was self-evidently a natural, if often regrettable, occurrence; fire in a city or town an unnatural disaster. However, in his section on Russia, Pyne quotes evidence that in some areas fire in cities and towns approached in frequency that of the surrounding forests: Moscow suffered a district devastating fire two to three times a century, and lesser fires every ten to twenty years. No wonder the Napoleonic fire of 1812 was not, in Russian eyes, a major feature of the campaign. As late as 1902 it was estimated that 10% of Russian houses burnt down every year. New Zealand's current difficulties with the Fire Service perhaps need to be put in the perspective by these stark facts: it could be very much worse.

My only quibble with the book, and it is more a matter of taste than substance, is the writing style. When he has a straightforward technical issue to relate,

Pyne's prose is clear and excellent. But he seems to have swallowed whole the dictum, unfortunately rampant among environmental writers, that rather than trusting the intrinsic merits of a well told story, active verbs, striking adjectives and vivid figures of speech will capture the readers attention. Maybe, when a point needs to be hammered home, or once in a while for variety; used regularly, over the span of a very long book, it becomes fatiguing. Landscapes are "splintered", "wrenched apart", "fluffed with fuels", the "earth's bullion liberated"; Norse fire expires "...leaving the runes of char-inspired stone in mute chronicle. Only the bardic ash remained to sing the deeds of forgotten heroes." Sometimes the effect is poetic verging on comic: "...villagers regularly swiddened the ling swaying over Yorkshire moors." In the words of the *New Yorker*: Block that Metaphor!

It is not often that a book of such scope, readability, authority and erudition comes along and, when it does, it will change forever how its readers view a topic. This is one of those books, and anyone who is interested in how humans interact with their environment should make sure they have access to a copy.

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