BG Pulse Journal USA
ISSN:1947-2536 http://www.bgpulseusa.com/index.php/bg

MAPPING MEANING ONTO STONE: LANDSCAPE, TOPONYMIC, AND STYLISTIC DIVERSITY IN THE ROCK ART OF UZBEKISTAN

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20375759

Abstract. This article examines the rock art of Uzbekistan as a complex semiotic and cultural system, focusing on the interaction between landscape, toponymy, and stylistic representation. Departing from purely descriptive approaches, the study emphasizes theoretical and methodological perspectives derived from cognitive semiotics, linguoculturology, and cultural geography. The research argues that rock art functions as a multimodal communicative system in which meaning is constructed through the integration of visual signs, spatial organization, and linguistic markers. The findings suggest that rock art sites represent not only artistic practices but also cognitive mapping of cultural space and collective memory. The study contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by advancing a theoretically grounded framework for analyzing visual-linguistic interactions in archaeological contexts.

Keywords: rock art, semiotics, cognitive mapping, toponymy, landscape semiotics, stylistics, Uzbekistan, linguoculturology, cultural memory.

Introduction. Rock art has traditionally been studied within archaeological and art-historical frameworks, often focusing on chronology, typology, and iconographic description. However, recent developments in cognitive linguistics, semiotics, and cultural geography have shifted attention toward interpretative models that consider rock art as a system of meaning-making embedded in cultural and environmental contexts. In this perspective, rock art is not merely a collection of images but a structured semiotic field in which visual, spatial, and linguistic elements interact. The concept of "mapping meaning onto stone" reflects the idea that human communities externalize cognitive structures and cultural knowledge through material inscription in the landscape. Such an approach aligns with the broader theoretical shift toward viewing culture as a system of signs and representations (Geertz, 1973)[1].

Uzbekistan, with its rich concentration of petroglyph sites, provides an important case for examining how visual and linguistic systems intersect in the construction of cultural meaning. This study seeks to develop a theoretically informed account of rock art by integrating semiotic, toponymic, and stylistic perspectives.

Rock Art as a Semiotic System. Within semiotic theory, cultural artifacts are understood as sign systems that encode and transmit meaning. Following Peirce's triadic model, signs consist of representamen, object, and interpretant, forming a dynamic process of semiosis (Chandler, 2007)[2]. Rock art can thus be interpreted as a system of signs in which visual forms function as representamina linked to culturally defined objects and meanings.

Importantly, the meaning of rock art is not inherent in the images themselves but emerges through interpretative frameworks shaped by cultural knowledge and spatial context. This perspective shifts the focus from description to interpretation, emphasizing the role of the observer and the cultural code.

Landscape as a Cognitive and Semiotic Space. The concept of landscape has been reconceptualized in cultural geography as a symbolic and cognitive construct rather than a purely physical environment. Tilley (1994)[3] argues that landscapes are experienced and interpreted through cultural practices, becoming "texts" that encode social and symbolic meanings.

In this sense, rock art sites should be understood as part of a broader landscape semiotics, where spatial positioning, visibility, and environmental features contribute to meaning construction. The placement of petroglyphs is thus not arbitrary but reflects intentional engagement with the environment.

Toponymy and Linguistic Encoding of Space. Toponymy provides a linguistic dimension to landscape interpretation, serving as a repository of cultural memory and spatial knowledge. Place names encode information about geography, history, and cultural values, functioning as verbal counterparts to visual representations (Nash, 2013)[4].

The integration of toponymic and visual data allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how meaning is structured across modalities. Toponyms may reinforce, reinterpret, or even transform the meanings associated with rock art sites.

Stylistics and Visual Representation. Stylistic analysis, in this study, is approached not as mere classification but as a reflection of cognitive and cultural patterns. Styles can be seen as conventions of representation that shape how reality is perceived and depicted.

From a semiotic perspective, stylistic variation indicates differences in encoding strategies and communicative intentions. It reflects not only temporal change but also variation in social and cultural contexts.

Methodological Considerations. This research adopts an interdisciplinary methodology that prioritizes theoretical integration over empirical enumeration. The following approaches are employed:

Cognitive-semiotic analysis to interpret visual symbols as conceptual structures
Linguocultural analysis to examine the interaction between language and culture
Toponymic interpretation to analyze the linguistic encoding of landscape
Comparative framework to identify generalizable patterns.

Rather than focusing on extensive empirical cataloging, the study emphasizes conceptual generalization and theoretical coherence.

Multimodality and Meaning Construction. One of the central arguments of this study is that rock art should be understood as a multimodal system in which meaning arises from the interaction of different semiotic resources. Visual images, spatial organization, and linguistic elements (toponyms) collectively contribute to meaning-making.

This multimodal perspective aligns with contemporary theories of communication, which emphasize the integration of multiple modes in the construction of meaning.

Cognitive Mapping and Cultural Memory. Rock art can be interpreted as a form of cognitive mapping, where spatial and symbolic elements are organized to reflect cultural knowledge. These mappings are not purely functional but also symbolic, representing relationships between humans, nature, and the spiritual world.

Furthermore, rock art serves as a medium of cultural memory, preserving knowledge across generations. This function highlights its role as a communicative system rather than a static artifact.

The Interplay of Universality and Specificity. While certain aspects of rock art—such as the use of basic visual forms—may reflect universal cognitive tendencies, the specific meanings attached to these forms are culturally determined. This duality underscores the importance of combining universalist and relativist perspectives in analysis.

The present study has advanced a theoretically grounded interpretation of rock art in Uzbekistan by conceptualizing it as a complex, multimodal semiotic system in which meaning is constructed through the interaction of visual, spatial, and linguistic dimensions. Moving beyond traditional descriptive and typological approaches, the research has demonstrated that rock art should be understood as an active medium of cultural communication and cognitive representation rather than as a static artistic artifact.

One of the key contributions of this study lies in its integration of semiotic theory, cognitive linguistics, and cultural geography into a unified analytical framework. This interdisciplinary perspective has made it possible to reveal how visual signs inscribed on stone surfaces function as carriers of culturally encoded knowledge, which is further contextualized through landscape positioning and reinforced by toponymic structures. In this regard, rock art emerges as a form of "materialized cognition," where abstract conceptualizations are externalized into durable visual forms embedded within meaningful spatial environments.

The analysis has also highlighted the central role of landscape as a semiotic and cognitive domain. Rather than serving merely as a physical backdrop, the landscape operates as an interpretative framework that shapes the perception and meaning of rock art. The spatial distribution of petroglyphs, their orientation, and their relationship to natural features such as mountains, valleys, and water sources collectively contribute to a structured system of meaning that reflects human engagement with the environment. This supports the theoretical assumption that space itself can function as a signifying system within cultural practices.

Furthermore, the incorporation of toponymic analysis has underscored the importance of linguistic elements in the construction of cultural meaning. Place names act as verbal markers that encode historical memory, ecological knowledge, and symbolic associations, thereby complementing and extending the meanings conveyed through visual representation. The interaction between toponymy and rock art demonstrates that meaning is distributed across multiple semiotic layers, forming an integrated network of cultural signification.

Conclusion. From a stylistic perspective, the study has argued that variation in visual representation should not be interpreted solely in terms of chronological development or artistic preference. Instead, stylistic diversity reflects deeper cognitive and cultural patterns, including differences in perception, categorization, and communicative intent. This approach aligns with contemporary semiotic theory, which views style as a meaningful dimension of sign production rather than a purely formal attribute.

Importantly, the findings of this research point to the coexistence of universal and culture-specific elements in rock art. While certain visual motifs and representational strategies may correspond to shared human cognitive tendencies, their interpretation and symbolic significance are shaped by culturally specific frameworks. This duality emphasizes the need for a balanced analytical approach that accounts for both general cognitive principles and localized cultural meanings.

In methodological terms, the study demonstrates the value of shifting from empirically driven cataloging toward theoretically informed interpretation. By prioritizing conceptual coherence and interdisciplinary integration, the research provides a model for future studies seeking to explore the intersection of visual culture, language, and cognition. Such an approach is particularly relevant in the context of increasing interest in multimodality and the role of non-verbal systems in meaning-making.

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