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Toro Muerto, Peru

Possible Prehistoric Deletion of Petroglyph Details

Introduction

Rock art sites frequently feature intriguing, often highly distinctive characteristics, involving unexpected or deviant imagery or properties thereof. To give an example, in certain parts of the Andes it is not unusual to find a rock art site with an image of a "monkey". However, an image of a "monkey playing a trumpet" is highly idiosyncratic and has so far only been reported in one occasion (Van Hoek 2005).

In contrast with the unexpected is the rather common practice of re-pecking or re-scratching petroglyphs. Often, later prehistoric societies or even modern people, often vandals, re-worked altered or even destroyed the images. Alternatively, however, members of the same prehistoric society who created the original images were responsible for this practice. In most cases, the original image remained unchanged. Layout and internal details remained the same, though re-worked.

In rare cases however, the palaeoartist left the original layout unchanged but, for some unknown reason, intentionally obliterated internal details of the original image. In rock art this practice is extremely difficult to prove, as it is almost unfeasible to determine whether indeed the obliterated parts once contained details since, generally, these elements are no longer visible. Moreover, the remainders of the original image and the re-worked parts often show the same degree of patination. Occasionally, there is a difference in execution like finer and coarser pecking, which might indicate that different palaeoartists are responsible for the resulting image. However, dissimilar pecking does not provide conclusive evidence regarding relative chronology or different authorship.

Yet, some instances of allegedly obliterated petroglyphs deserve a closer look. An interesting collection occurs at Toro Muerto, the largest rock art site of Peru and one of the largest sites in the world with an estimated 5000 boulders bearing petroglyphs. Much of its idiosyncratic imagery seems to be an excessive and desperate response of the local Chuquibamba culture to climatic disasters like extreme droughts and destructive El Niño's during the Late Intermediate Period (A.D. 1000 -1500) (Van Hoek 2003). In this article, I focus on a small group of petroglyphs from this huge site for which I tentatively suggest that *prehistoric* people re-worked certain images by *carefully* and *purposefully* obliterating *selected* parts.

Toro Muerto was "discovered" by Dr. Eloy Linares Málaga in 1951 and has since then been studied by several people. Understandably but regrettably there does not exist a complete inventory of this enormous site. One of the most valuable works, offering a wealth of illustrations, is by Núñez Jiménez (1986). Unfortunately, Núñez Jiménez mainly included black-and-white drawings that do not show details or peculiarities. This means for instance that he used the colour black to indicate both pecked and incised parts, superficial and deep parts, light pecking and coarse pecking, certain and doubtful features. Often however, such differences are

Figure 1. "Bird" and other petroglyphs from Toro Muerto, Peru, its interior possibly obliterated on purpose. Photo by M. van Hoek 2004.

essential to recognise idiosyncrasies and to access their possible explanations. Therefore, any future inventory should illustrate and describe these details.

"Birds"

To access the issue of deliberate obliteration, I start with an example. Toro Muerto has a wealth of "bird" petroglyphs, many of which show internal decoration, although occasionally fully pecked "bird" petroglyphs occur as well. Figure 1 shows the image of a "bird" in a remarkable posture. Although it seems fully pecked, a closer look reveals a more deeply executed contour groove and a small circular depression, possibly the remainder of an eye. The rest of the internal pecking looks coarser than the alleged contour groove. Therefore, it is possible that, later, someone-else applied the coarser internal pecking in order to obliterate the (assumed!) interior decoration. Although this instance does not offer conclusive proof for deliberate obliteration, other instances do.

Antropomorphs

A true hallmark of Toro Muerto is the image of the "dancer". Although dancing anthropomorphs occur at many Andean rock art sites, the "dancer" with its specific layout and posture only occurs at Toro Muerto, and, moreover, in enormous numbers. The standard Toro Muerto "dancer" consists of a more or less zigzag-shaped body of usually solidly pecked straight legs, arms and rump crowned by an outlined rectangular "mask" featuring one or two eyes, often with (straight or zigzag) lines that possibly represent "tears", and a "standard" headdress. Thus, most distinctive for the "dancer" is its posture and above all the "mask" with the lines from the eyes. These "tears" probably represent rain,

Figure 2. "Dancer" petroglyphs from Toro Muerto, Peru, possibly partially obliterated on purpose. Photo by M. van Hoek 2004.

or rather, symbolise the wish for rain (Van Hoek 2003). The palaeoartist often executed, even incised, the lines within the "mask" with great care, thus emphasising the great significance of the facial features.

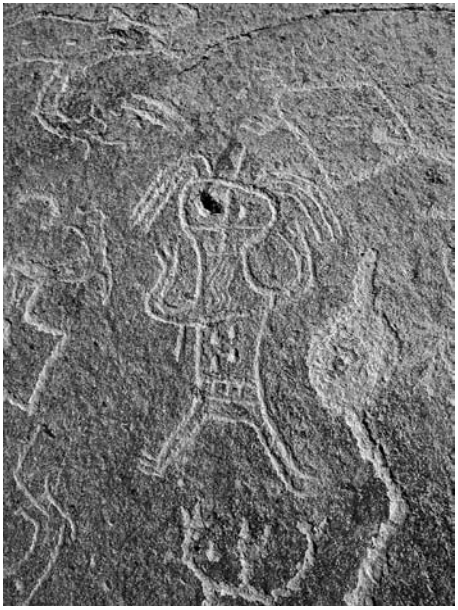
However, in some instances, the "mask" of the "dancer" appears fully pecked and thus does not show the essential facial features (Núñez Jiménez 1986: Figs 2216, 2219, 2224, 2233, 2236, 2241, 2243 and 2539). This may mean that the palaeoartist simply choose not to include any facial detail.

Equally, it may concern images where a subsequent person deliberately obliterated existing details. One rock panel, featuring a row of four "dancers", might demonstrate this practice. Núñez Jiménez (1986: Fig. 2356) illustrates the group as an undifferentiated and rather amorphous black area. Only some parts are vaguely recognisable as "dancers". However, a close-up photograph of the same group reveals that also the "amorphous" parts still show details of the previously executed "dancers" (Figure 2). Remarkably, the pecking in the re-worked parts is slightly coarser than the still visible original parts. In addition, the pecking of the parts between and around the original "dancers", mainly limited to some spaces between the limbs, is also coarser. This may prove that a second layer of pecking, especially focussing on the erasure of all facial features, actually superimposes the scene, which *might* point to different authorship and, more importantly, to changing conceptions. Also significant is that the palaeoartist did not choose to erase the facial details by random and tempestuous destruction of the complete original image, which would not at all have been a problem.

There is another possible instance of enigmatic obliteration of an anthropomorph at Toro Muerto. It concerns a unique skeleton-like figure that possibly symbolises sickness or death (Figure 3). The anthropomorph seems to exhibit internal bones like ribs, depressions on the bony legs suggesting kneecaps, and a grinning face, a characteristic also noted at some images that seem to represent a dead body wrapped in a burial-bundle. Remarkably, the area between the left-hand arm (that is much shorter than the other arm) and the body and the part below the grinning mouth is missing, also taking away an "ear" that is still vaguely visible. Strangely, Núñez Jiménez (1986: Fig. 2158) does not indicate the obliterated parts, while a photograph by

Figure 3. Skeleton-like anthropomorph and other petroglyphs from Toro Muerto, Peru, possibly partially obliterated on purpose. Photo by M. van Hoek 2004.

Figure 4. "Snake" and other petroglyphs from Toro Muerto, Peru, showing possibly obliterated head area. Photo by M. van Hoek 2004.



Linares Málaga (1999) taken in 1965 clearly shows the missing parts. In this case, it seems that the facial details were not the target of the obliteration. But the reason to mutilate this image is obscure.

"Snakes"

Petroglyphs of "snakes" are another distinctive feature of Toro Muerto. Especially the large, fantastic "snakes" often have profusely decorated bodies with characteristic zigzagging or straight appendages emerging from the head and facial features that usually comprise eyes. However, in a few cases, the head area of "snakes" seems to have completely but most carefully been obliterated. This apparently is the case with the head of a "snake" petroglyph where only a central depression and a small surrounding arc of the original stone's surface remains (Figure 4). Unfortunately, some recent scratching partially obliterates the alleged prehistoric obliteration.

Other panels at Toro Muerto also feature large, fantastic "snakes" with their head parts obliterated. Núñez Jiménez (1986: Fig. 2561) interpreted one of these as a "snake merging with the head of a bird". Indeed, with a lot of imagination the head area of the "snake" looks like a bird, but only if one observes his undifferentiated black-and-white drawing. However, the actual petroglyph proves to show much more detail (Figure 5). Several deep grooves and the "eyes" (two cupules) are still visible within the blurred area, which definitely proves that there is no question of a bird's head but that someone intentionally obliterated the facial features. The rest of the "snake's" body, with elaborate internal decoration, remained untouched.

Another "serpent" petroglyph clearly shows the difference between the carefully executed and probably abraded grooves that form the "snake's" outlined body and its internal and external decoration, and the crudely obliterated head area (Figure 6). Again, the erasure clearly occurs only within the original grooves of the "snake's" head. Notice however, that the erased part con-

Figure 5. "Snake" and other petroglyphs from Toro Muerto, Peru, showing possibly obliterated head area. Photo by M. van Hoek 2004.

tinues a short distance, partially destroying the fine zigzag inside the "serpent's" body. Also remarkable is the extended "tongue" with a face-like end.

"Quadrupeds"

There are several panels at Toro Muerto with quadrupeds featuring possible erased faces (Núñez Jiménez 1986: Figs 2475, 2476 and 2677). Although the practice of facial obliteration seems to be completely confined to Toro Muerto, Panel 4 at Pitis, a lesser rock art site near Toro Muerto, might show a quadruped with erased face as well (Núñez Jiménez 1986: Fig. 2072). This instance suggests direct influence from Toro Muerto.

A typical quadruped at Toro Muerto concerns the feline that, together with the llama, the snake and the condor, is one of the most important animals in Andean cosmology. Interestingly, the obliteration noticed at the head areas of "dancers" and "snakes" occurs also at several (often spotted) felines and at fantastic zoomorphs with feline- like characteristics.

One rock panel at Toro Muerto in particular is most fascinating in this respect. It has a dense collection of many profusely and often deeply executed images. Two completely different expressions of potential obliteration are present on this panel. On the left-hand part of the rock are two large zoomorphs both with beautiful interior decoration (Figure 7). However, a substantial part of the interior of the larger zoomorph is missing, including the head area. It is remarkable that the drawing by Núñez Jiménez (1986: Fig. 2526) does not show the obliteration of two external areas (between the head and the foreleg, and between the tail and the body). Either Núñez Jiménez did not carefully record what was present at the panel, or the missing parts flaked off after his survey. Likewise, the internal area of the foreleg of the smaller zoomorph unmistakably has been obliterated, although Núñez Jiménez (1986: Fig. 2526) clearly illustrates the foreleg with internal decoration. Possibly, this part of the foreleg flaked off since his recordings. However, I could not see a noticeable difference in patination between the various

Figure 6. Large "snake" and other petroglyphs from Toro Muerto, Peru, showing possibly obliterated head area. Photo by M. van Hoek 2004.

obliterated parts. In general, it is possible that these parts exfoliated due to natural causes, like a flaw in the rock, combined perhaps with the impact of the tool that was used in the execution of the image. Possibly, the execution of the deep grooves created a weak spot, which *later* caused parts to flake off. However, another panel at Toro Muerto (Núñez Jiménez 1986: Fig. 2305) feature a number of "felines", two of which also show obliterated parts (head, tail and leg areas). On this panel however, the petroglyphs are much more superficially executed, which makes natural flaking afterwards less likely (Figure 8).

On the right-hand side of the panel of Figure 7 is a deeply executed "feline", which, unlike the two previously described zoomorphs, shows its head in twisted perspective (Figure 9). Remarkable is the small band that clearly "damages" part of the neck area. Natural flaking could not have caused this kind of obliteration; it definitely represents anthropic origin and intent. My only guess to explain this band across the neck is that it might symbolise a collar, indicating the probable domesticated nature of the feline. Indeed, there are more petroglyphs of "felines" at Toro Muerto that seem to bear a collar (Núñez Jiménez 1986: Figs 2516, 2524) or a collar with a short leash (Van Hoek 2003: Fig. 3B) suggesting domestication.

Conclusion

Earlier, I suggested that much of the rock art that is exclusive to Toro Muerto, like "dancers" and enormous zigzags, was triggered by dramatic climatic events (Van Hoek 2003). Around AD 1000 a period of some four centuries of serious drought had started. It is logical that, during this extreme drought, water and fertility became paramount, perhaps even

Figure 7. Quadrupeds and other petroglyphs from Toro Muerto, Peru, showing possibly obliterated areas. Photo by M. van Hoek 2004.

obsessive, concerns. Therefore, I would like to suggest that, at Toro Muerto, the culminating distress caused by the drought, instigated an excessive production of "water/fertility-related" imagery. On top of that, a severe El Niño flooding in A.D. 1365 (which nevertheless did not end the period of drought) might have triggered a culmination of rock art symbols. Heavy lightning during that El Niño may have induced the impressive zigzag imagery at Toro Muerto. The important issue is now whether there exists a relationship between these water-related rock art images and the obliteration of certain petroglyph details.

Figure 7a. Detail of the same stone as Figure 7. "Feline" petroglyph from Toro Muerto, Peru, showing possibly obliterated neck area. Photo by M. van Hoek 2004.

Most striking at Toro Muerto is the alleged deletion of especially facial features of selected biomorphs, the focus being on the faces of "dancers", fantastic "snakes" and "felines"; imagery that is often suggested to convey fertility and water concerns. As there is no question of random destruction of the entire image, this "positive" attitude may represent a continuous respect for the symbolic value of the original image. Importantly, the obliteration appears carefully

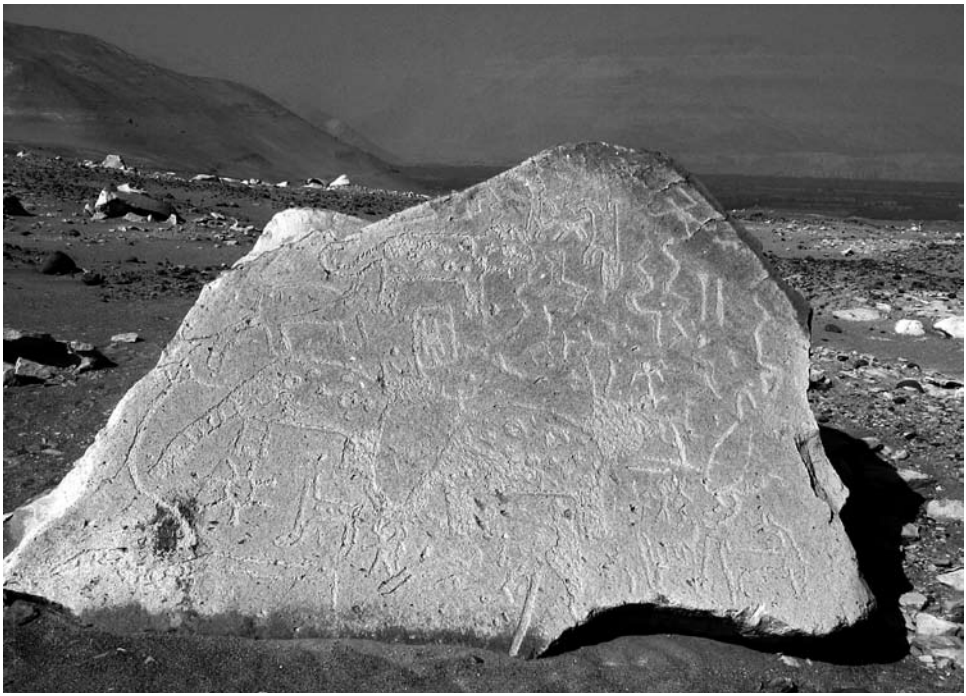


Figure 8. Quadrupeds and other petroglyphs from Toro Muerto, Peru, showing possibly obliterated areas. Photo by M. van Hoek 2004.

executed, and in most cases, only the head area within the outlines of the image was the target of the obliterator. This may point to a rather high degree of intent. Thus, the careful removal of especially the facial details must have been most meaningful and might have conveyed a very specific emotion. This sentiment might be an articulation of discontent about the desired effects of the imagery. The instances of obliteration at Toro Muerto therefore might represent a second layer of symbolism idiosyncratically expressing the disappointment about the results of the imagery that was executed to end the yet ongoing drought. To put it differently, to certain persons the once powerful symbols had "lost their face".

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