



AMERICAN LANDSCAPES

# Transforming the Landscape

*Rock Art and the Mississippian Cosmos*



Edited by Carol Diaz-Granados, Jan Simek, George Sabo III, and Mark Wagner

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This beautifully illustrated volume examines American Indian rock art across an expansive region of eastern North America during the Mississippian Period (post AD 900). Unlike portable cultural material, rock art provides *in situ* evidence of ritual activity that links ideology and place. The focus is on the widespread use of cosmograms depicted in Mississippian rock art imagery. This approach anchors broad distributional patterns of motifs and themes within a powerful framework for cultural interpretation, yielding new insights on ancient concepts of landscape, ceremonialism, and religion. It also provides a unified, comprehensive perspective on Mississippian symbolism. A selection of landscape cosmograms from various parts of North America taken from the ethnographic records are examined and an overview of American Indian cosmographic landscapes provided to illustrate their centrality to indigenous religious traditions across North America. Authors discuss what a cosmogram-based approach can teach us about people, places, and past environments and what it may reveal that more conventional approaches overlook. Geographical variations across the landscape, regional similarities, and derived meaning found in these data are described. The authors also consider the difficult subject of how to develop a more detailed chronology for eastern rock art.

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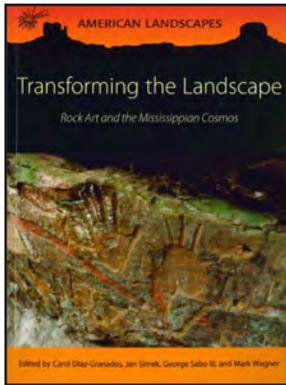
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## Transforming the Landscape: Rock Art and the Mississippian Cosmos

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*Reviewed by Robert "Ernie" Boszhardt, Driftness Pathways LLC, Lodi, Wisconsin.*

This book is about rock art between the Ozarks in the central Mississippi Valley and the Carolina Piedmont along the east flank of the Smoky Mountains. The rock art is viewed from a landscape perspective that incorporates ethnohistoric insights to develop a series of subregional cosmograms, primarily for the Mississippian period (ca. AD 900–1500). The contributors are renowned rock art experts and the book is richly illustrated with color pictures, drawings, and computer enhanced illustrations of pictographs, petroglyphs, and mudglyphs along with various maps and lidar georeferencing figures.

Carol Diaz-Granados' preface explains how the book came about and developed into a joint effort with the landscape emphasis. Although this introduction does not mention Mississippian, it includes a Jan Simek map of the eastern half of the United States that shows the region covered by in the ensuing chapters overlaid on a broader shaded area depicting the "Expanse of Mississippian Culture." Archaeologists from Midwestern states might be surprised to see that the map excludes northern Mississippian manifestations, and this serves to illustrate that the book's content is focused on the Southeast. Nonetheless, it is full of intriguing information and insights on rock art histories, chronologies, settings, and cultural landscape-based interpretations that blend archaeology and both historic and modern ethnography.

The cultural landscape theme is developed in Chapter 2 by George Sabo III and Jan Simek, who present a series of archaeological and ethnohistoric case studies ranging from hunter and gatherer Chumash in California to farming and bison hunting Dhegihan Sioux tribes west of the Mississippi River to classic Maya of Latin America. In these they point out indigenous attribution of sacredness to natural geologic and hydrologic formations and how various societies manifest world views through cultural actions such as public and restricted rock art, village rules that place sky clan people to the north and earth/water clan people south, and temple buildings. It is at the end of this chapter that the reader is first introduced to Mississippian cosmology.

The remaining chapters are subregional syntheses of selected rock art sites that attempt, in various ways, to understand distributions of various styles and symbols to landscape features. Each, to some extent, elicits ethnohistoric sources as a means for better insight, and several interpret rock art and landscape cosmograms. James R. Duncan and Carol Diaz-Granados do this by looking at five petroglyph sites along Missouri's north-south oriented Big River. These sites are attributed to Mississippian people from the Cahokian diaspora (ca. AD 1250) who are thought to be ancestral Dhegihan speaking tribes. Identifying a pattern of upper world symbols (e.g., birds) emphasized at the northern "Big Five"

## *Book Review*

sites juxtaposed to lower world symbols (e.g., vulvas) to the south, they compare this to Dhegihan worldview and interpret Big River as a cosmogram with the Mississippian cross-in-circle motifs representing the middle world.

Mark Wagner and co-authors (p. 124) offer another cross-in-circle based cosmogram by comparing distributions of Upper and Under World petroglyphs at Millstone Bluff in southern Illinois. On page 79, Sabo and colleagues note a similar case for rock art sites along the Central Arkansas River where Spirit world imagery is concentrated on the north side of the river while “this world” figures are cluster to the south. Their focus however is three late prehistoric Greenbrier phase rock art sites in the Eastern Ozark Escarpment, one of which associates concentric circle glyphs with a natural circular chimney thought to represent a portal through the three-tiered Mississippian cosmos. The Simek and colleagues chapter on rock art across the Cumberland Plateau of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia does not fully develop a cosmogram, but provides chronological and distributional insight towards cultural landscape interpretations. For example, their comparison of Mississippian to Fort Ancient village and rock art site distributions across Kentucky reveals a social boundary likely marked by rock art. The final chapter by Johannes Loubser and colleagues describes boulder glyph sites from the ridge and valley terrain of northwest Georgia across the Blue Ridge Mountains and onto the Carolina piedmont. Here they connect ethnographies of Cherokee and nearby (Mississippian-descendant) nations to glyph styles and site locations (towns, streams, and trails) to develop another landscape cosmogram of the sacred seven.

Several chapters employ various helpful analytical methodologies such as Wagner et alia’s GIS-based Viewshed and Hot Spot analyses on shifting rock art site distributions over time at two southern Illinois localities, while Simek and colleagues utilize simple chi-square tables for selected rock art styles at open air and cave sites (including the distinctive mud glyphs) according to county level precision. Pictographs and petroglyphs can be difficult to photograph and, while digital photography and computer enhancement programs such as DStretch have greatly assisted in recordation efforts, the caption-highlighted imagery of a few color figures is difficult to see. Duncan and Diaz-Granados and Sabo and colleagues rely more heavily on line drawings, while Loubser and colleagues include wonderful 3D digital renditions of boulder glyphs that facilitate chronological sequencing at several sites.

The book could have used one more copyedit review as there remain a few glitches (e.g., an abrupt mid-sentence font change on page 40, and an awkward sentences beginning with “Such as dramatic decline dramatic most likely...” on p. 143). Figure 5.33 consists of four flood stage models intended to show increasing inundation of the Jackson Bottoms, but the illustrated scenarios for the 2- and 25-year intervals are identical. Several maps do not have scales, which would help readers not intimately familiar with the depicted localities. Also, the title of the Appendix: “Rock Art Sites to Visit in the Eastern United States” is misleading in that it covers only Central Mississippi Valley and Southeast regions. Some of the sites listed therein also do not have rock art themselves, although they were likely the homes of the peoples who created the rock art at nearby sites, and are therefore relevant.

## *Book Review*

Finally, as several chapters allude, rock art studies have long been neglected in part due to difficulties in understanding the age of the art as well as deciphering meaning. While the worldwide research surge over the past several decades has reduced some of these concerns, including one across the region documented in this book, issues remain. For example, Duncan and Diaz-Granados (p. 38) attribute glyphs of human feet to Mississippian artisans in Missouri, while Wagner and colleagues (pp. 108–109) affiliate comparable glyphs in southern Illinois to the Late Archaic period. In addition, Wagner and colleagues (pp. 140–141) interpret a large petroglyph of an anthropomorph with pronounced head top projections as a possible Middle Woodland mythical Great Hare while later (pp. 147 and 149) illustrating smaller red pictographs of horned humans and suggest association to the Mississippian story of Red Horn. On the other hand, Duncan and Diaz-Granados interpret comparable glyphs as “cleft headed” versions of the spirit being Morningstar (and other names) who is also rendered as the long-nose god in Mississippian maskettes and within Missouri’s famous Picture Cave. To the north of the area considered by this book, similar figures have been interpreted as “horned humans” in Late Woodland effigy mounds (Birmingham and Rosebrough 2017:143–147) and in a pictograph at Wisconsin’s Roche-a-Cri State Park that may represent a Ho-Chunk story of the transformation of the Under World spirit to a walking human (Schrab and Boszhardt 2016:82–83). Which of these interpretations is correct? One, or perhaps all or none?

The point is, this book makes a great stride forward in the study of rock art, which is still in need of more research and preservation.

### **References Cited**

- Birmingham, Robert A. and Amy L. Rosebrough (2017) *Indian Mounds of Wisconsin*, 2nd edition. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.
- Schrab, Geri and Robert F. Boszhardt (2016) *Hidden Thunder: Rock Art of the Upper Midwest*. Wisconsin Historical Society Press, Madison.