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# Memory, Identity, Power

## A Semiotic Approach to the Social Construction of Meaning in Rock Art

**Abstract:** In this paper we propose Peircean semiotics as one of the most useful methodological tools to analyze and elaborate interpretative hypotheses about the social meaning of rock art. Social meaning implies a dialectic interaction among memory, identity, and distribution of power within a social group. These three elements, together with materiality, take part in a dynamic productive process of social discourses. In many archaic cultures, rock art was one of those discourses.

**Keywords:** archaic cultures; Peircean semiotics; rock art; social meaning

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## 1 Introduction

It has been decades since archaeologists, anthropologists and historians began to agree on rock art as a source of information about past cultures, especially when all that is left from them is material remains. In societies with no writing at all, this form of artistic representation constitutes a social discourse that expresses a way of seeing and inhabiting the world. However, its interpretation is a daunting task, particularly when contextual information is scarce or non-existent. How may one approach it? Is it possible, at least hypothetically, to get close to its meanings? It is the purpose of this paper to propose and discuss two possible hypotheses that complement each other and operate in a mutually dependent way:

a) The use of concepts and methodological tools that belong to Peircean semiotics allows us to introduce efficient interpretative hypotheses about rock art and overcome the limitations that previous theoretical schools inevitably encountered.

b) The construction of meaning of social discourses is based on a tripod consisting of memory, identity and power. These three elements, firstly, are at the base of social discourses, but are at the same time constructed by them. Secondly, they are not independent; they function instead as the Peircean triad, where one element leads to the other, generating an unlimited semiotic chain. Since rock art can be understood as one of many possible social discourses, it is also the tripod, defined as *social meaning*, which sustains its interpretation.

We first present a theoretical argument and then analyze and interpret a panel found in northwestern Argentina, dating from the so-called Formative Period (ca. 500 BC to 900 AD).

## 2 Towards an interpretation of rock art

### 2.1 Former attempts

Among the different views about rock art, terms such as pattern representation and cultural rules, expression and/or materialization of ideas and values, manifestation of worldview, among others, recur in many definitions of rock art (Fiore & Podestá, 2006). In other words, there seems to be some sort of academic agreement that these artistic manifestations show us one of the ways in which past civilizations represented the world: how they understood it, how they related to it, and what entities inhabited it, whether human or nonhuman, real or virtual beings. Alternatively, from a functional point of view, rock art was a means to express all of these elements, which highlights the communicative aspects of this artifactual production.

Considering the latest reviews of the different methodological-theoretical tendencies in the study of rock art (Fiore, 2014; Fiore & Hernández Llosas, 2007; Fiore & Podestá, 2006), it can be observed that the first interpretative efforts – late 19<sup>th</sup> century, early 20<sup>th</sup> century – paid attention to the functional aspects of rock art representation, always from a western point of view, where aesthetic pleasure, totemism and magic were the common topics. The advent of the Historical Cultural paradigm showed us a passive vision of rock art, intended mainly to construct stylistic sequences, define chronologies and spatially distribute features so as to determine the scope of archaeological cultures.

Laming-Empeaire's (1962) and Leroi-Gourhan's (1968) structuralist approaches, firmly attached to Saussurean semiotics, focused on the identification of patterns in parietal art and Paleolithic mobiliary art, which

showed the structuralist associations accounting for masculine-feminine, life-death, light-darkness, among other binary oppositions (Fiore, 2014). The path towards the search for the meaning of rock art images thus began through the development of strict and specific methods and techniques that made it possible to accurately record the patterns and associations among motives, positions, production techniques, etc. Nonetheless, the synchronic perspective with which these studies were done, together with the use of a scarcely operative concept of style (Troncoso, 2006), led this type of approach to be gradually abandoned. On the other hand, processual archaeology with its adaptationist vision of culture obstructed, but also contributed, with some advances to interpreting rock art and its meanings.<sup>1</sup> At first, visual creations were assigned to the ideological subsystem field, one that was barely considered by this movement since it viewed ideology as an epiphenomenon and not as a causal variable (Preucel, 2006), underestimating the potential of rock art as a relevant datum. However, within processualism and without leaving aside its adaptationist vision, the meaningful role of information exchange began to be emphasized as one of the strategies for adaptation to the environment (Wobst, 1977).

These lines of study would be followed by neoevolutionist movements, as argued by Fiore and Podestá (2006). In this way, rock art regained importance since it made it possible to address problems related to regional interaction, group movements, aggregation sites, etc. Some progress on one of the significant aspects of rock art was achieved, but none in terms of its meaning because processual archaeology was still attached to the Saussurean concept of sign, the mental phenomenon where the signified-signifier relationship is a mere social convention that disappears with the individuals who carry it, thus leaving significant empty of meaning (Troncoso, 2006).

Fiore (2014) points out that in reacting against processual proposals, materialistic and neo-Marxist approaches emphasized the economic structure as the basis of society, where political and ideological supra-structures were developed to permit the reproduction of such structure, mainly if it involved social inequality and exploitation of labor. From these points of view, rock art was understood as a political strategy to manipulate and control power as well as an ideological discourse that hid and/or justified social inequality.

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<sup>1</sup> Processual archaeology, an Anglo-Saxon archaeological school also known as archaeology of systems, flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. It followed the logical positivistic model of German philosopher Karl Hempel and encouraged the hypothetical-deductive method in research.

The emergence of post-processual archaeologies, as pointed out in many articles (Fiore, 2014; Fiore & Podestá, 2006; Johnson, 2000; Preucel, 2006; among others), is the field of greatest interpretative development for rock art.<sup>2</sup> Their interest in the significant aspects of material culture and in the subject as an active agent in its constitution, as well as their appeal to a textual analogy of archaeological records, facilitates a multiplicity of approaches about previously neglected aspects about past societies. Individuals are no longer subject to the whims of ecosystems; they build the world in which they live, assigning it particular meanings and generating dynamic links between subjects, objects and space. Emphasis is given to the context and it is the context that determines the meanings of the material culture. Syntax and grammar will then appear frequently as operative concepts in the study of rock art to explain the codes enabling access into the corresponding semantic systems.

Within this movement, landscape archaeology has become one of the most fertile lines for investigating rock art, understood as an active element in the significance of spaces, granting identity to landscapes. This element in turn will have an active role in the social reproduction of the community and also at the heart of collective memory (Bradley, Criado Boado, & Fabregas Valcarce, 1994; Criado Boado, 1999; Martel, Rodríguez Curletto, & Del Bel, 2012; Troncoso, 2005a; among others).

We recognize that this is a concise summary that does not include all the lines of thought applied to the studies of rock art – but only the most frequent ones. However, we believe that it allows us to sketch some general aspects of the way in which rock art has been considered and interpreted and to identify three areas for general analysis:

- a) A techno-morphological analysis of the representation itself, description and classification of motives and definitions of styles.
- b) The representation and its associations at panel, spatial context and location levels.
- c) The representation as a product of social practices: ritual, political and economic ones.

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<sup>2</sup> Post-processual archaeologies (including different lines of investigation, such as gender archaeology, landscape archaeology, social archaeology) emerge as a movement reacting against processual archaeology, by objecting to its extreme use of determinism, abuse of the hypothetical-deductive method and claimed impartiality.

## 2.2 Semiotics and rock art

Although semiotics, or some of its methodological basic tools, has been used before in studies of rock art (Bass, 1989; Leroi-Gourhan, 1968, 1976; Llamazares, 1991; Rochietti, 2009; Troncoso, 2005b; among others), the unbridgeable barrier of Saussurean symbolism (which the normative theoretical – evolutionary, processual, structuralist – frames could never get rid of) was an obstacle to any approximation to the meaning of representations.<sup>3</sup> It forced these studies to resort to linguistic methodologies to find patterns that could allow the identification of codes that enable individuals to use semiotic systems. Or under the protection of the concept of *archaeological context*, they attempted to establish all the possible relations between rock representation and the rest of the archaeological record so as to define at least its context of production and use.

In the last decades, the rediscovery of Charles S. Peirce's theory of signs has opened new ways of analysis and interpretation within the social sciences in general and archaeology in particular (Keane, 2003; Knappett, 2005; Preucel, 2006; Preucel & Bauer, 2001). We believe that it is a meaningful path towards reinforcing the studies of rock art: it not only recovers the relationship with the referent and restricts the arbitrary character to a single type of sign, the symbol, but it also allows us to incorporate materiality as a fundamental factor and derive from it such concepts as material agency.<sup>4,5</sup> It also helps tear down false barriers like those splitting object from subject, mind from matter, man from the world that surrounds him. Today it is evident that the insoluble unity and codependency between mind and matter allows us to sustain that the mind is corporized and extended to the material world: human beings learn, act and place themselves in open systems that include corporized brains, nets or social resources and key parts of the natural and the cultural world, which are true social, political, economic, ideological and cultural networks. Thus, the link between the world and people is the objects, defined in this sense by Latour (1993) as quasi-objects. They all constitute the symmetrical nodes of those webs

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<sup>3</sup> Different works have emphasized how the conventional character of the relationship between signifier and signified in the Saussurean linguistic sign has negatively influenced archaeological interpretation (Knappett, 2005; Lele, 2006; Preucel, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> As a matter of fact, within archaeological remains *symbol* is the type of sign that most rarely occurs: the most frequent ones are the *icon* and the *index*, whose relationship with the object is certainly not characterized by arbitrariness.

<sup>5</sup> Following R. Preucel (2006), we understand that “materiality can be defined as the social constitution of self and society by means of the object world” (p. 5).

where agency, understood as the ability to act upon others, lies in their relationship.

The so called Material Engagement Theory drawn up by Colin Renfrew (2001, 2004) meets Peircean semiotics, which understands that the sign differentiates itself by the outlines of its significant effect and semiosis as a relative relational property not only independent from language and conduct but also connected to particular experiential situations.<sup>6</sup> Every existing entity is likely to be read as a sign, every sign displays an agency of various types, and consequently, agency and meaning are equivalent.

As a result, no category, value, condition, hierarchy, meaning, or relationship lacks its material correlation. This is the central argument to support that there is not such a thing as an individual or collective essence of human beings but an identity built up through social practices that share an immediate correspondence in materiality.

The memory, value and belief systems that shape themselves as ideologies are anchored in objects, ritual practices, monuments, garments, landscapes, burials, festivities, which interweave the past and the present creatively and are permanently resignified.

Individual or collective experiences and memories have meaning in materially produced cultural discourses, turned into memory vehicles that represent the past and also incorporate it. In other words, without materiality, there would be no memory. From this point of view, it can be claimed that archaeological remains are materialities in which memory practices are expressed.

Power relationships, as any other relationship, need to be expressed through some material support: “to keep the dominance requires constant efforts of consolidation, perpetuation and adaptation. A good deal of this support consists in symbolizing dominance with manifestations and demonstrations of power” (Scott, 2000, p.70); such manifestations and demonstrations can only be material.

From this point of view, we understand that rock images are visual material images likely to be considered from a plastic, figurative or symbolic visual

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<sup>6</sup> Renfrew’s theory attempts to link physical and conceptual aspects of materiality in contrast to the classical opposition between mind and matter, nature and culture, spirit and body, signified and signifier. To Renfrew, the material culture of any society is a wide constant commitment that defines the life of that society. To this, Malafouris (2008) adds that agency and intention may not be a property of things or of humans: they are the properties of material engagement, that is to say the *grey zone* where brain, body and culture converge.

semiotics (Magariños de Morentín, 2008); therefore, we think that Peircean semiotics is the best tool box to investigate the representation of social meaning in rock art.

### 3 Memory, identity, power: The tripod that supports social meanings

Based on the Peircean concept of *unlimited semiosis*, it can be said that social meaning may well be described as the result of a process of semiosis stemming from the interaction between the ideological intercourse of a group and the materiality that it represents and/or shapes into a two-way process of continuous feedback. This ideological correlation is defined as the dialectic exchange that exists among identity, memory and power. This exchange implies the sometimes conflictive existence of permanent tensions, which become increasingly complex in the course of history as they emerge among other tensions already experienced.

In other words, social meaning can be defined as the result of a process of collective identification whose fundamental mechanisms are the construction of memory, which exists and is generated by power connections expressed in a materiality shaped as discourse. Following Eliseo Verón (2004), we understand that discourse is every spatial-temporal representation of meaning with a complex material manifestation, whose results, in fact, are a significant matter concerning the functioning of a productive system. This materiality is the starting point of every empirical study within the production of meaning. Verón points out that a discourse requires two types of conditions: first, production conditions, which provide an account of its creation and include other discourses (therefore he maintains that a discourse complex can never be analyzed in itself since there are former discourses that mark it off); second, acknowledgement conditions, which determine the restrictions of its reception.

The conditions of discourse production as well as those of discourse recognition build up grammars: rules of generation for the former and rules of reading for the latter; both describe operations susceptible of being rebuilt with marks that are present in the significant matter. Social discourses move between these two groups. This means that as far as social semiosis is concerned, three instances can be mentioned in relation to discourses: production, recognition and circulation. They take part in a limitless mechanism since every process of discourse production implies the acknowledgement of others, and the recognition of a text leads to the

production of a new one. On the other hand, the recognition of a given significant matter entails analyzing the power of that text, and for a text to be powerful, it must be included within an ideological frame. In this sense, Foucault's assertion – that discourse is a privileged arena where power is disputed – comes to mind: “formation of discourses and knowledge genealogy should be analyzed not from types of conscience, from modalities of perception or forms of ideologies, but from power's tactics and strategies”(Foucault, 1980, p. 76).

We agree with Verón (2004) that social reality is shaped by a multiplicity of discourses; in pre-historical groups, one of those discourses was rock art. If we invert the chain we referred to above – defined by Pierce as quasi-infinite – it can be said that rock art is a discourse expressed on a material support that made power relations in a social group visible, supported by and supporting a collective memory that contributes to the construction of its identity.

### 3.1 Identity

In an openly pragmatic and non-essentialist framework, we understand social identity as the majority of a group collectively adhering to shared memories, traditions, spaces, activities and practices, ritual, cultural and ideological experiences that allows the group to recognize itself as different from others. This adherence is neither given by birth nor by incorporation into a group other than the one in which one was born; instead, it is a process of identity building that lasts a lifetime and depends on the practices and decisions taken in order to act upon the world, which in turn, will be conditioned by historical, political, social and environmental contextual circumstances.

Collective identification allows individuals not only to be inserted in the phenomenological world, but also, even more importantly, to make sense of that world, to provide a coherent explanation and an answer to infinite *whys*. In this way, each social group develops a narrative, a particular vision of the world whose match –or not – with empirical reality loses importance: it is about building what Holland, William Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain (1998, p. 52) define as figurative worlds, and Juan Magariños de Morentín calls possible semiotic worlds (2008, p. 187), that is, a comprehensive and understandable version of the surrounding world, where subjects and objects function as a complex network of meanings, assuring roles and relevant agencies to the needs of the group. In order to gain efficiency and adaptability to the changing circumstances of the empirical world, history and tradition as much as meanings and cultural practices are permanently subjected to renegotiations



and reformulations. Nevertheless, this does not entail losing the necessary quality of continuity, sameness or permanence, both in space and time, without which the group would assume an unbearable contingency and would lose social cohesion.

### 3.2 Memory

As stated by Elizabeth Jelin (2003) “Poder recordar y recordar algo del propio pasado es lo que sostiene la identidad. (...) La constitución, la institucionalización, el reconocimiento y la fortaleza de las memorias y de las identidades se alimentan mutuamente” [Being able to remember and re-live something from our own past is what sustains identity (...) The constitution, institutionalization, recognition and strength of memories and identities feed mutually] (p. 25). The relationship between both concepts is directly and reciprocally causal: there is neither identity without memory, nor memory without identity. It is necessary to emphasize that they are not more or less independent entities, but categories with which we think and organize our universe and that they only exist and have meaning in a socio-historical specific context.

This Uruguayan essayist points out three central premises in relation to the concept of memory. First, we need to understand memories as subjective processes attached to experiences and symbolic and material marks. Therefore, it is not possible to construct an objective memory since this is always done inexorably from subjectivity. As a result, oblivion, emotions, feelings, knowledge, beliefs and silence, consciousness and unconsciousness, and even representation of space and time (culturally variable and historically built categories) participate in this process. This is why there are also gaps and ruptures in memory. In the same way, it is not possible to construct a non-objective memory, a memory not supported in materiality. We will reconsider this topic later on.

Second, to recognize memories as an object of disputes, conflicts and fights leads us to focus on the active role and production of the participants in the fights involved in power relationships. The construction of memory is subjective and since the configuration of the present is rooted and acquires significance in the narratives of the past, and as a result social actors struggle to give prominence to certain versions over others.

Third, it is necessary “historizar las memorias, o sea, reconocer que existen cambios históricos en el sentido del pasado, así como en el lugar asignado a las memorias en diferentes sociedades, climas culturales, espacios de luchas

políticas e ideológicas” [to give memories a historic sense, that is to say, recognize that there exist historical changes in the sense of the past as well as in the place given to memories in different societies, cultural climates, areas of political and ideological fights] (Jelin, 2002, p. 2). Each generation, each group within a certain society visits its collective past and re-elaborates its narratives bearing in mind its own emergencies, wishes, fears and needs.

Memory depends directly upon what Maurice Halbwachs (2004, p. 328) called *social memory frames*, understood as *chains of ideas and judgments*. It can be said that these frames shape a general representation within a society, its needs and values, its world view, its ideology and, needless to say, its power relations and the literacy and exemplarity of memories. As long as these frames become modified, memories and oblivion will be modified too. In the same way, political changes, the emergence of new social actors and the changes in the group’s value system will imply transformations in the meanings of the past; therefore these are never established in a definite and fixed manner. It would be more appropriate to speak of *memories* in the plural: in any society, in any time or space, no single memory exists; there is a multiplicity of overlapped memories endeavoring forever to become the official version making sense of a social group’s present.

Therefore, the direct relationship between memory and power is quite clear: to impose a certain version of the past is not a minor factor in the struggle for legitimacy, acknowledgement and access to authority positions within a group. That is why memory construction, understood as one of the essential pillars of identity strengthening the sense of belonging, is not only a goal but also a means in political actions and in silenced or oppressed groups, where memory construction reinforces self-esteem and encourages resistance practices.

### 3.3 Power

Each group or social collective is a network of complex strategic relationships where subjects and objects act as nodes – a *structuring structure*, as Bourdieu would call it – whose generating and ordering principle is given by the distribution of different forms of power based on efficient capital species. This network is not immutable but submitted to tensions and historical, political and cultural fluctuations, permanently recreated and reformulated in social practices.

Inside the network, power, rather than an entity that is taken, transferred or disputed, is an intrinsic condition of society linked to its cultural and ideological logic and it lives in all existing relationships among different nodes:

in this sense, Giraldo Díaz (2006) underlines that this can be understood as *omnipresence of power*.

If the physical principle that, for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction is applied to the social world, it is necessary to remember that power relations inevitably provoke resistance. Resistance is not a substance but a present tension among a group's connections, which is coextensive to, and as creative as, power. However, action and reaction exist exclusively in acts not only as a conflict but also as a process of creation and transformation; action and reaction express themselves through different material supports, where individual and collective identities exist.

Two distinctions must be made. On the one hand, power can be put into practice coercively in a physical or symbolic way. In this sense, power can be put into practice *upon* someone. It suggests the capacity to make someone do something, the ability to impose one's will on someone so as to make him/her do something that he or she is not necessarily willing to do. On the other hand, power can be put into practice *for* someone, thus removing the absolute character from the negative or repressive connotation that exists with power. As a consequence, agency and power are directly connected since power exists only in acting and this is the reason why it is productive.

To do something and even to make someone do something, at least in an effective way, it is necessary to know how to and doing it enhances the knowing. Thus, the connection between power and knowledge is direct and has a creative dimension. It imposes a revision of the meaning of truth, which assumes a political dimension, involved in power relations. Truth, in a Peircean semiotic perspective, is not based on the direct understanding of reality (which would be impossible, because this understanding will always be mediated by signs) but on consensus among members of a social group. Therefore, the very existence of truth depends on two factors: the social agreement and the euphemization of power relations that gave rise to it. Both are equally produced and enforced in different ways in each group, according to its own circumstances and needs, to its own mechanisms and instances.

Consequently, whatever a society accepts as true, the discourses it accepts as true, acquire the character of a symbolic resource whose effective value depends upon the power that has been assigned to it and whose possession becomes an object of dispute among different sectors. Power then is a constructor of reality: it normalizes a way of seeing reality, it produces subjectivities and discourses that tinge every social connection, it discriminates what is true from what is false, what is arbitrary from what is necessary, it prescribes and proscribes according to its intrinsic laws, and it generates what Pierre Bourdieu (1997) calls *symbolic violence*. One of the pillars on which

symbolic violence stands is memory: *it was, it is and it will always be* constitutes a very strong apodictic argument, especially if the direct relationship between memory, the social frames of memory –that is, ideology– and the legitimacy of the existing sociopolitical order are taken into account. If ideology is part of a discourse's production conditions, power is involved in its recognition conditions: power can only be analyzed from its effects. So power and ideology are dimensions – not the only ones – of all social discourses: “todo fenómeno social es susceptible de ser ‘leído’ en relación a lo ideológico y al poder” [every social phenomenon is susceptible of being ‘read’ in connection to what is ideological and to power] (Verón, 1978, p. 9).

## 4 A case study

At the feet of the eastern hillside of the Central Andes mountain range, there is a vast and high plateau distributed among Argentina, Bolivia and Chile. This region, known as Puna, presents the characteristics of a high-altitude desert (3500 to 5000 meters above sea level), with extensive salt lakes and patches of resources associated with a few rivers and springs.

Archaeological investigations in the Argentine Puna show that since 1000 BC groups with an agropastoralist-based economy would have been consolidated, but still with some dependence on hunting and gathering. This way of life, which implied the exploitation of different resources present at different heights (low, medium and high sectors of the main hydrographic river basins) was probably maintained with some temporal variation, up to historical times (Olivera & Vigliani, 2000– 2002).

Different researchers agree on the socio-cultural characteristics of the human groups that inhabited this area during the period mentioned, as well as their livelihood strategies (Escola, 2000; López Campeny, 2009; Olivera, 1991; among others), which can be summarized as follows:

- Groups of mixed, non-centralized economy, mainly pastoral with some dependence on hunting and gathering resources and fledgling agricultural activity, in which the family represented the main unit of work and production, with some autonomy in decision-making.
- Diversification of productive activities, which in turn, involved the exploitation of the complementary resources at different altitudinal levels.
- A settlement pattern comprising residential bases in low areas and basins, and temporary hunting / grazing posts located in the high sectors.

In short we can say that life during this period, in this NW Argentinean region, involved the use and exploitation of different spaces and resources, combining and altering different subsistence practices.

The rock art of that period, called the Formative Period (ca. 500 BC to 900 AC), is distributed in all the sectors mentioned, with a higher density in the middle sectors, constituting another material line of evidence that, together with the information obtained in excavation, supports the synchronic use of these spaces during the period mentioned. Concerning its contents in terms of patterns and themes, it shows a significant variability in design and execution techniques, which is consistent with a social context in which power and production were decentralized. Thus, every community, every group would have managed its own iconographic repertoire and administered its rituals in a more or less independent way, depicting only some patterns or common themes to be represented in those areas, which would have been the scene of diverse social interactions, both peaceful and conflicting ones (Aschero, 2000; Aschero & Martel, 2003–2005; Martel 2009; Podestá, Rolandi, & Sánchez Proaño, 2005; among others).

Among the motifs and common themes, the anthropomorphic figure stands out, as do other representations that allude to humans, such as faces or masks and footprint motifs. If we focus our attention on the human figure and its attributes, as indicators of possible conflicts and/or social differences, we notice that human figure representations acquire different design patterns in this period and also combine – not always in the same way – a reduced number of different elements, like headdresses or head ornaments, portable objects (bows, arrows, propellers, scepters, etc.), pectorals, and to a lesser extent, possible indicators of clothing with internal designs.

The profusion of human representation in the formative rock art of the Argentinean NW would be linked to the pan-Andinian tradition that presents, in the cult of the ancestors, a means for constructing social identity as well as for legitimating the rights of land and resource exploitation. This tradition is well registered at ethnohistorical and ethnographic levels (Duviols, 1976; Göbel, 2000–2002; Guaman Poma, 1980 [1615]; Van Kessel, 2001; among others) and its diverse archaeological practices have been documented from early pre-potter traditions to Inca domination in the region, involving transport and burial of the dead and its representation on rock surfaces (Aschero, 2007; Gil García, 2001). This practice takes on the characteristics of the phenomenon that Duviols (1976) called *litomorphosis of the ancestors*, which implies that the materialization of the ancestors in the world of the living ensures their permanence in the community given the timeless character of rock, thus becoming a medium of social cohesion.

Our study case involves rock art site Cacao 3 (see Figure 1), located at the top of the Cacao Ravine (3810 meters above sea level) and associated with a spring, which favored a moderate expansion of grasslands, where both domesticated camelids (llamas) and wild camelids (vicuñas) were able to graze. The site was described as an ancient hunting/grazing place dating to the Formative Period, according to archaeological excavations and the analysis of rock art (Martel, 2004).

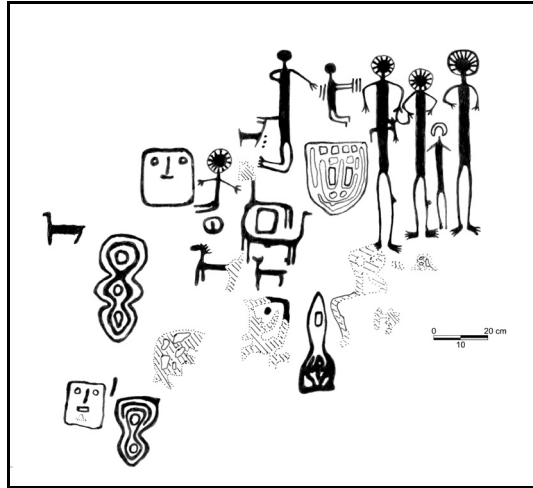


Figure 1: Engraved depictions of Cacao 3 rock art panel (Martel, 2004)

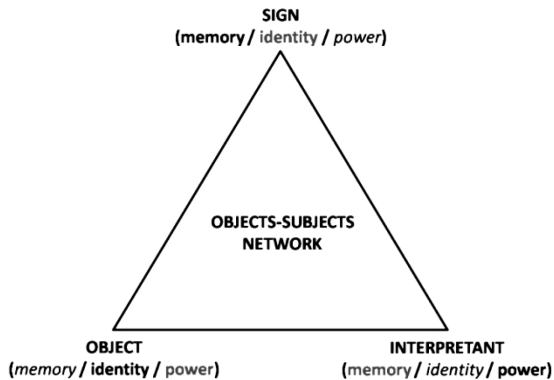
The panel selected for analysis is dominated by anthropomorphic figures, including those equipped with head ornaments, which refers to a certain hierarchy or at least to differentiation of roles, both among the anthropomorphic figures and between them and the rest of the motifs. The presence of these particular head ornaments allows us to establish *paradigmatic* relationships with other types of head ornaments that would have coexisted and which may have been ignored (forgotten or hidden), which leads us to infer an implicit intention to identify particular characters with a specific group. The hierarchies among the anthropomorphic figures operate as an *index* of certain relationships in the social structure of the group or community, acting as a framework of contingent intelligibility that sustains what is accepted and naturalized as true; this leads to the reinforcement of a memory above others, directly affecting the identity that is built for that group from a power position. If we analyze this by considering the environmental characteristics of the site

location (availability of resources) and the socioeconomic practices also associated with it (hunting / grazing), the rock art panel analyzed acquires its most significant dimension.

What is evoked through these depictions imbues the space with specific qualities (a sense of belonging, rights of use) and a precise meaning, which is made visible and tangible to the perception of the other.

## 5 About rock art semiosis

The hypotheses formulated above were meant to account for the social significance of rock art as an unlimited semiotic chain: identity $\leftrightarrow$  memory $\leftrightarrow$  power  $\leftrightarrow$  identity $\leftrightarrow$  and so on. Any analysis that prioritizes some of these semiotic dimensions above the others will lead to biased interpretations of the communicative performance and informative competence of rock art depictions as archeological data, and of its agency as object. Another possible way of describing this relationship is that the link between the three dimensions is unbreakable in the triadic formula described by Peirce in his definition of the sign: depending on the dimension chosen as a *sign* (such as memory or identity or power), the other two will equally occupy the functions of *object* and *interpretant* (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** The significative dimensions of rock art social meaning, shown in a Peircean triadic scheme

Within the triangle, a network of relations spreads out between objects and subjects; hence, as explained above, rock art is a discourse, embodied in a material basis, which makes visible the power relations of the group, sustained by and sustainer of a collective memory that contributes to its social identity.

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