

IASS Congress

International Association for Semiotic Studies  
La Coruña (Spain), September 22-26, 2009

**Round table on “The Archaeology of Semiotic Behaviour”**

Organizer: Paul Bouissac (University of Toronto)

The purpose of this round table is to contribute to the further development of a productive interface between archaeology and semiotics in the context of the Tenth IASS Congress to be held at La Coruña (Spain) from September 22 to 26, 2009. “Archaeology of Semiotic Behaviour” will address issues such as the earliest evidence of conventional sign production in the archaeological record, the origins of the use of symbolic ornaments, the coding of knowledge in artificial memory systems, and the rendering, and modeling of the environment in rock art whose interpretation remains a major challenge for semioticians. It will also focus on issues arising from the recording, conservation, organization, and treatment of these semiotic data. Other topics may emerge as a result of the call for papers. This round table will be supported by a website located at [www.semioticon.com](http://www.semioticon.com) in the section “Virtual Symposia”, on which position papers will be posted in advance so that the discussions can be grounded on precise approaches to the problems covered by the broad theme of reflection that is proposed to both semioticians and archaeologists. Students will be welcome to participate in the discussions.

Abstracts:

Andrea Vianello (Oxford University and University of Sheffield)

**Title: Can archaeology’s “ritualistic and symbolic artefacts” be interpreted semiotically?**

Archaeologists are often content to leave an interpretation of material culture at the point of recognising symbolic behaviours. However, new archaeological researches are expanding our knowledge of the past towards the non-material and what is not immediately visible in the archaeological record. Phenomenological studies in particular are expanding our knowledge to the perceived human environment. Computer reconstructions expand the architectural and artificial environment while archaeobotanical and archaeozoological researches reveal ancient natural environments. The focus of archaeological research is moving from the study of the materials retrieved during excavations to past landscapes that are being filled with plants, animals, objects and ultimately people in addition to the monuments and geographical features. Linking specific objects to particular functions is a way to reconstruct past activities as well as gestures. The final consumption of an object can also reveal quite specific actions. For instance, the deposition of objects in a grave might be better defined than an offering. Artefacts connected to power or religion will embed symbolic meanings that might be revealed by analysing them as part of semiotically interpretable behaviours. I shall present some examples where semiotics can help archaeologists go beyond explanations regarding ritual and symbolic meanings.

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Peter Jackson (University of Stockholm)

**Title: Probing the archeology of religious representations**

As new archeological evidence from the Upper Palaeolithic continuously emerges, theoretical approaches to the origin of behavioral modernity is expected to assume a complexity and sophistication attuned to the new evidence. This is not always the case in so far as specific domains of cultural practice are subjected to archeological and “Pop EP” musings. A telling case is that of religious behavior in the Upper Palaeolithic. Whatever the archaeological record may indicate in terms of cultural variation and contingency is often overshadowed by a search for constants and universals, the ecological and/or psychological constraints of religion. To put it bluntly: the already sparse archaeological record seems to inform theoretical sparsity (or a “theory of religious sparsity”). As a counterpoise to such tendencies, the current paper presents an alternative scenario by exploring the role of logical operators without referential value (especially so called “therianthropes”) in different religious traditions.

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Rob Lee (University of Exeter)

**Title: The comparative use of Shannon entropy to determine the level of communication expressed by prehistoric petroglyphs.**

Prehistoric ‘rock-art’ is found throughout the world, from the Palaeolithic cave art of France and Spain to the rock images of the Western Native Americans of North America. Common to archaeology and semiotics is the problem of whether these prehistoric petroglyphs are early examples of written languages. Unfortunately the petroglyph data sets are often small and this, coupled with the lack of a technique to systematically compare these undersampled datasets with known communication systems, has hampered the ability to determine if specific petroglyphs are forms of writing.

Calculation of the degree of uncertainty in being able to predict the next character in a communication system (2nd order Shannon entropy) gives a measure of the degree of information in the system and can be applied to any type of character within the communication. Plotting the 2nd order Shannon entropy against two undersampling measures for a range of communication systems from heraldry through Egyptian inscription hieroglyphs to modern language texts separates the different communication character types by their relative positions on the graphs. This paper reports on the development of this quantitative, comparative tool and its application to two rock inscribed petroglyph sets from Scotland; the Neolithic ‘Cup and Ring’ carvings and the Late Iron-Age Pictish Symbol stones, to try and determine whether they are forms of writing.

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Paul Bouissac (University of Toronto)

**Title: The prehistoric scriptoids issue: A semiotic viewpoint.**

What prehistorians call signs, as opposed to engraved or painted representations of animals or plants, are geometric (abstract?) designs that are found in abundance on the walls of caves and rock shelters, and on boulders or even pebbles. These clusters of signs remain a challenge for the modern observers who cannot avoid noticing striking similarities with some known, more recent scripts. However, they are usually interpreted not as scripts but as scriptoids (i.e., something resembling writing but that is not writing) under the assumption that the prehistoric populations who have left them could not have invented conventional patterns to represent vocal sounds. Various hypotheses have been proposed to explain them (away). The purpose of this paper is to examine the assumptions which determine the semiotics status of these

patterns. The mainstream approach to scriptoids depends on *a priori* conceptions of language and writings systems. Questioning these assumptions could open the way to seriously testing the morphology of these scriptoids to the extent that they form clusters and strings of signs showing consistency and iteration. A broader semiotic perspective than the current narrower conception regarding the “invention” of writing is needed to devise falsifiable hypotheses which could lead to some interesting discoveries.

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Song, Hyosup (Sogang University)

**Title: Inferring Myths from *Bangudae* Petroglyph**

Aiming to infer myths from *Bangudae* petroglyph located in the South-eastern province of Korea, this paper will show a semiotic process in which some narratives are inferred from plastic figures.

In order to describe the signification of petroglyph, firstly, I will draw some semantic units from figures and show the structural process in which these units are arranged into two terms of binary opposition and a third mediating term.

Secondly, I will describe various actions of figures from a semiotic perspective. Stories can be created by various combinations of their actions which are revealed either explicitly or implicitly.

By way of these procedures, this paper will infer the following three myths from *Bangudae* petroglyph: myth of survival, myth of communication, and myth of directivity. Their structural relationship will be the main focus of this paper, which aims to conjecture primitive thoughts by inferring myths from *Bangudae* petroglyph.

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Anna Cabak Rédei (Lund University)

**Title: Petroglyphs as semiotic objects**

The point of departure for this inquiry is the recognition that the study of petroglyphs is very apt for a visual semiotic scrutiny. The meaning of petroglyphs still largely remains an enigma due to the fact that we do not know in which cultural context they were made. Therefore the notion of “perceptual context” (Sonesson, 1994) has proven to be fruitful for pointing to a methodology which excludes the idea of gaining reliable information about these prehistoric visual displays by means of the cultural context in which they were made, to the benefit of a study of the petroglyphs themselves, i.e., their organization, distribution, and performance at the site in question, in this case: examples of human portrayals found at the Tanum site in Bohuslän. Were these petroglyphs a result of what Peirce would call “instinctif belief” (CP 6.496) and thereby “true – playing a part in the human need to communicate (as part of the human “struggle for life” (CP 6.418)? Or, were they on the contrary a result of human reasoning – and thereby “treacherous” (CP 6.86)? Otherwise put: may there be anthropological constants in the way those human figures are rendered (proportions and shapes) and thereby probably also once perceived? This is the question that will be addressed in the conclusion of this paper.

