

DESCRIPTION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

The aim of the proposed research project is the reconstruction of the origins and later changes and transformations of the pre-Columbian Pueblo culture societies in the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument, in the Mesa Verde region of southwestern part of Colorado, USA. Research will be focused on the analysis of material culture, but mainly on the iconography of the rock art of Pueblo culture in connection with the natural environment and landscape (mountains and rivers) that could have formed a part of sacred landscape in the past and with the settlement structure including an analysis of the visual contact between the settlements. Additionally, the petroglyphs of the historic Navajo and Ute Indians, which are located close to or directly on the ancient Pueblo panels will also be considered and studied.

Previous Polish studies and research in the canyons of the Mesa Verde region (with an NCN grant) have focused on the documentation, geophysics research and limited excavations of more than a dozen Pueblo culture sites with preserved stone architecture and sometimes rock art, dated to the thirteenth century A.D.; those sites were mostly located within alcoves or shelters on the canyons slopes. This research also resulted in discovering spectacular and huge galleries on the canyons cliff walls with petroglyphs dated to different periods and left by various Native American groups and tribes. Depictions of Pueblo culture rock art at these sites have been initially dated from around the third to fifth centuries A.D. to the thirteenth century A.D. and later to the historical period and the appearance of the ancestors of the Ute and Navajo Indians in this area.

The petroglyphs mostly depict single geometric motifs, clan symbols (the bear paw appearing the most frequently), shamans, warriors, and extended scenes that include fighting and also the hunting of large animals, mostly deer and bison. There are also initials and names that were left by early explorers and settlers of the area as well as cowboys passing through the canyon with their cattle at the turn of nineteenth and twentieth century. The biggest such wall is a 126-meter-long canyon wall fully covered with petroglyphs. The states of Colorado and Utah were even named by National Geographic as the “Wild Louvre” for their abundance of rock art dated to different periods.

The research conducted during the project will be realized by fieldwork that includes archaeological surveys, geodetic works, Geographic Information System (GIS) analysis and excavations, supported by earlier geophysics research. Documentation of the architecture and rock art will be conducted using laser or 3D scanning and photogrammetry. All the data will also be used for analyzing rock art iconography and the creation of three dimensional models of the particular buildings, entire settlements along with the ancient and modern landscape. Analysis will also cover detailed laboratory studies and a final description of the pottery, stone, and flint artefacts and those made with organic materials from the sites.

A part of the research project activities will be conducted with modern Pueblo representatives, including Hopi, Zuni, and Jemez (such a collaboration was initiated during the first stage of the project). This will be based on the native oral tradition, passed from generation to generation, and may prove valuable in the interpretation and reconstruction of the various elements of ancient Pueblo culture beliefs as well as the reasons for choosing settlement locations and panels with rock art in the context of the environment and landscape. The findings will then be contrasted with the existing knowledge of the environmental, hydrographic and other factors regarding the ancient landscape and climate.

This interdisciplinary research project, through the detailed analysis of rock art imaginary, its dating and importance in connection with material culture and settlement system created by the ancient Indians from the area should result in detailed documentation and reconstruction of the cultural and socio-religious changes in relation to the settlement model in the area, often interrupted by numerous hiatuses and migration processes. It will also allow new interpretations on differences/similarities in adapting to and using the natural environment by agricultural Pueblo societies, as well as the hunter-gatherer Navajo and Ute tribes. This research is also expected to help in the preservation of the identity of modern Pueblo people and other Native American tribes from the Southwest, as well as enhancing the role of oral tradition in archaeological interpretations.