

The central Mesa Verde region, located on the border of Colorado and Utah in the US Southwest, is a unique and one of the most archaeologically rich places in entire North America, where we can trace the cultural continuity and relationships between different indigenous communities in the past. The evidence of Native American cultures inhabiting it in different periods are, among others, rock art (paintings and petroglyphs) and stone architecture, as well as material culture, e.g. richly decorated (painted) pottery. The wealth of preserved rock art found on rocks, boulders, vertical canyon walls, and rock shelters throughout the Southwest has led National Geographic magazine to call the region the "Wild Louvre."

This region was (and in many cases still is) inhabited by many indigenous cultures and tribes, both farmers (Pueblo, Mimbres, Hohokam, Casas Grandes) and nomadic communities, i.e. hunter-gatherers (Apache, Navaho, Ute). At the same time, the region was relatively late discovered and settled by Europeans, first by sporadic expeditions of Spanish conquistadors and missionaries, and later by Mexicans; it is only from the second half of the 19th century that permanent American settlements have been established there. For this reason, but also thanks to the dry and arid climate and environment of the region, many sites have been well protected and preserved and tell about the splendor of the indigenous communities that once lived there, and also about their material and spiritual culture.

The aim of the proposed project is to use one of the most important carriers of information about the past in this region, i.e. rock art (paintings and petroglyphs) and historical inscriptions, as well as material cultural remains (architecture, artifacts), which will be used to study settlement, migration and transformation and, consequently, to reconstruct and create a specific chronicle of the region and the surrounding landscape in few canyons in the area of southwestern Colorado and adjoining parts of the southeast Utah. These are Yellow Jacket Canyon and Sandstone Canyon, located mainly in the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument. Only a small part of these canyons have previously been subjected to cursory analysis and archaeological recognition, most of the sites are unregistered and unexplored.

The project methodology will include several parts: field and archival research, consultations, data analysis and integration, meetings and workshops/conferences. The research that will be undertaken as part of the fieldwork will mainly include non-invasive archaeological research supported by geophysical research, spatial analysis and possibly (if necessary) subsequent limited excavations. Documentation of rock art, architecture and landscape will be conducted mainly using terrestrial laser scanning (TLS) and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV)/drone/LIDAR, photography (high resolution) and photogrammetry. Various geospatial data will be integrated, analyzed and visualized using Geographic Information Systems (GIS).

The activities of this project will allow to answer such important research questions as: a) chronology and demography of the region in particular periods; b) ways of using the studied canyons by various human societies in prehistory and in the historical period, as well as human-environment relations; c) the timing of the arrival of European and American settlers; and d) the nature of contacts between indigenous communities and new arrivals. In addition, the planned project, by combining modern digitization methodologies and documentation techniques with traditional archaeological methods and native oral traditions, will help develop new methodological tools for digital analysis and data integration for better interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage, which can later be applied to other area in the world.



Fig. 1. Painted Hand Petroglyph Panel, Sandstone Canyon. Historic Ute petroglyphs prevails and they depict anthropomorphic figures, bear paws, and extended scenes that include fighting warriors (sometimes on horses) and hunting mostly deer, bighorn sheep, and bison. There are also some Ancestral Pueblo images, including human figures and abstract and geometric motifs. Historic inscriptions such as initials, names, and dates (including Spanish and American) are

also present; some of these marks were left by early explorers, settlers, cowboys, and Mexican-American shepherds passing through the canyon at the turn of nineteenth and twentieth century (photo by R. Słaboński).