

**PROPOSAL FOR A STUDY OF THE LA RUMOROSA ROCK ART STYLE,  
NORTHERN BAJA CALIFORNIA**

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*The La Rumorosa style is a distinctive pattern of prehistoric rock paintings. It is found in the Sierra de Juárez and nearby areas, and appears to date from the final prehistoric and protohistoric periods. During investigations to be conducted at several of the sites, diverse methods of systematic observation and analysis are proposed with the objective of throwing additional light on the style's chronology, its function within the native cultures, and its relationship to other styles at a wider regional level.*

Two brief visits in 2008 led us to focus on 10 archaeological sites in the Sierra de Juárez. Some of the sites had been recorded before, yet we were able to add new ones to the list, thanks to the assistance of our guide Chepe and our friends Juan Diego and David (rangers at the El Vallecito rock art site). The sites visited are for the most part large camps associated with rock shelters that contain what has come to be known as the “La Rumorosa” rock art style, named after a small town in the northernmost part of the Sierra de Juárez, around 65 km west of Mexicali (Figure 1).

Also known as the Peninsular Range Representational pictograph style or the Diegueño Representational pictograph style, La Rumorosa rock art is documented at sites in the mountainous spine of northern Baja California, as well as in adjacent parts of southern California. The leading investigator of this style, Ken Hedges (1973:11-13), described its range as follows:

Recorded sites of this style...are concentrated almost entirely along the eastern slopes of the Peninsular Range of southern California and northern Baja California. In [Alta] California, sites occur in the desert ranges east of the Laguna Mountains, with the Baja California sites in the Sierra de Juárez. Recorded sites occur from the Vallecito Creek drainage in San Diego County (Hedges 1970:125) south to Arroyo Jaquijel near Santa Catarina, Baja California (Hicks 1959:61).

This distinctive style of painting seems to date back to recent prehistoric periods as well as to the times of encounters between the painters and non-Indians.

The investigation we have initiated hopes to gain a better understanding of this pictograph style using a series of strategies to shed new light on the chronology, meaning, function, and relationship that this style may have with other rock art styles in the region. For the time being, we will briefly show some of the aspects of this rock art and possible inferences.

The Sierra de Juárez is the northernmost part of the physiographic region known as “Sierras of Baja California” according to the National Institute of Geography and Statistics (INEGI) and is formed by a great mass of intrusive igneous rocks. It is characterized by having a rather flat summit and is formed by granite blocks that rise abruptly from the Colorado and San Felipe deserts. Most of the Sierra is around 1,500 m in elevation and extends a little more than 145 km south of the international border.

The dominant climate is Mediterranean and is characterized by winter rains from November until March. During the winter, it is common for snow to fall. The median average temperature is between 10° and 14° centigrade.



Figure 1. Map of the region of La Rumorosa rock art.

The main vegetation is chaparral and coniferous forests. The chaparral can reach 3 m in height and is composed mainly of chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*), red shank (*A. sparsifolium*), oak (*Quercus dumonii*), and juniper (*Juniperus californica*). The pine forest contains *Pinus monophylla*, *P. quadrifolia*, *P. monophylla*, and *P. jeffreyi*.

### DEFINITION OF THE STYLE

Hedges (1973:11) described the style as

characterized by the presence of digitate anthropomorphs (human figures with the fingers and/or toes represented), sauromorphs (lizard forms), sunbursts, circles, and rectangular grids as defining elements. Although both representational and abstract forms are present, it is the occurrence of the representational elements, particularly the digitate anthropomorph, which sets this style apart from others in southwestern California. Designs occur in at least four colors – red, black, white, and yellow – with most sites having at least two colors.

The La Rumorosa rock art style is a distinctive pattern of prehistoric rock paintings (Figures 2 and 3). It is found in the Sierra Juárez and adjacent areas, and it appears to date from the latest prehistoric and protohistoric periods. We proposed to use several methods of systematic observation and analysis to shed additional light on the chronology of the style, its function within native cultures, and its relationship to other styles in the broader region.



*Figure 2. Examples of La Rumorosa rock art: a and b, Los Guerreros site; c and d, Las Pilitas site; e, El Vallecito site. (Photos a and b by Julia Bendímez; photos c, d, and e by Larry Terán.)*

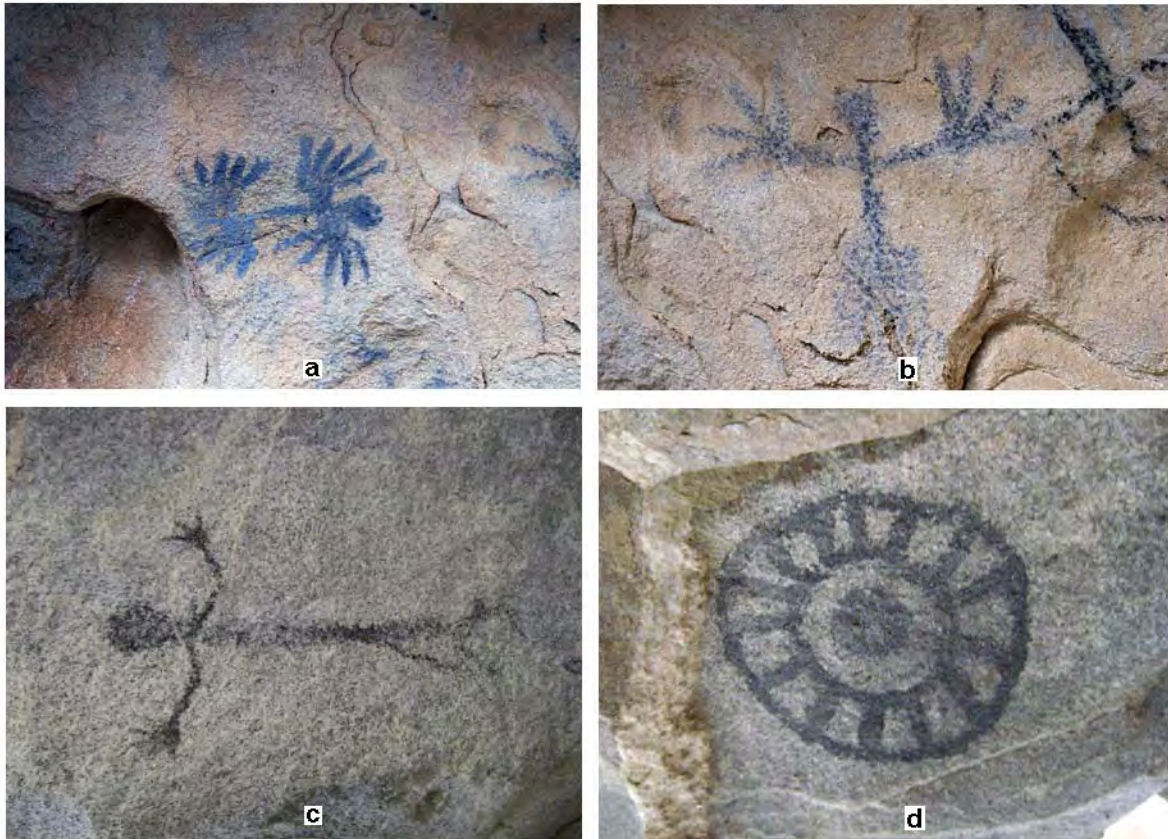


Figure 3. Examples of La Rumorosa rock art: a and b, La Milla site; c and d, Valle Seco site. (Photos a and b by Larry Terán; photos c and d by Julia Bendímez.)

## RESEARCH ISSUES

### Chronology

Hedges (1970:157-158) reported that nearly all of the paintings in this style are directly related to sites containing typical Diegueño artifact assemblages, including pottery, small arrow points, and portable and bedrock milling implements...the presence of designs showing non-Indian influence suggests a terminal date for the style. A horse and rider...and a cross with a halo...are certain indicators that the style persisted into historic times....An initial date is much harder to establish....[Based on cultural associations] a maximum initial date for the Diegueño Representational style may logically be set at A.D. 1000. As a modification of this maximum, it is suggested that the paintings, even protected as they are in rock shelters, would not last this length of time.... On this basis, the pictographs of the Diegueño Representational style may be dated from 1500 to 1900.

Subsequent studies have discussed historic-period elements in the pictographs in greater detail (Hedges 2004; La Fave 2005).

Concerning the possibility of developing a relative chronology for changes occurring within the style, Hedges (1970:158-159) noted that in cases of superposition, red linear designs tend to underlie other elements, but that “the design elements and individual styles are not different.”

## **Relationships**

The relationships of the La Rumorosa style to other styles within the general region may be inferable from specific stylistic similarities, geographical associations, and relationships within individual panels. A relationship between the La Rumorosa pictographs and the petroglyphs in the Colorado Desert immediately to the east is particularly likely. Hedges (1973:18) noted that “Colorado Desert Representational petroglyphs and Peninsular Range Representational pictographs both have digitate anthropomorphs and share other stylistic affinities.”

## **Functions**

Determining the reasons why prehistoric rock art was created is one of the most interesting but difficult of archaeological objectives. The La Rumorosa style appears to date from the final phase of prehistory, which suggests that ethnographic data may be applicable to the problem of inferring its functions. However, as noted by Hedges (1973:13),

Ethnographic data on Kumeyai pictographs is sparse, consisting of a single account which indicates that the paintings were made by shamans preparing themselves for dances (Hedges 1970:78). Each site seems to be the work of a single artist, probably the shaman of the local band. Among southern California Indians, dreams were valued for the knowledge and insight which they provided, and it is possible that the pictographs record the dreamed experiences of the shaman. Mythological events and personages also may form part of the subject matter. Among the neighboring Cocopa, pictographs were made in connection with the nasal septum piercing ceremony, a boys' puberty rite...(Alvarez 1973). The Kumeyai had this ceremony (Cuero 1968:40), and may have made pictographs in connection with it.

The single direct ethnographic account mentioned above was found in the unpublished notes of San Diego archaeologist Malcolm J. Rogers, probably dating from the 1930s:

Owas Hilmawa [a female Kumiai informant] says that the men used the shelter to dress in and paint themselves preparatory to dancing. With what paint they had left over they amused themselves painting the pictographs on the ceiling. Owas Hilmawa said that at other times even girls would sneak into the cave and make some paintings [Hedges 1970:78].

In this quotation from Rogers' account, it may be noted that it is not specifically indicated that the painters were shamans, although Hedges' subsequent paraphrase does so specify (Hedges 1970:150). Nor does the Kumiai informant's account suggest that the paintings were likely to be the work of only a single individual.

Hedges (1970:151-153) continued:

The interpretation of Chumash and Yokuts pictographs as representations of supernatural beings and concepts connected with and marking sites of ritual activity provides the best analogous explanation for Diegueño Representational style paintings. Though it is difficult to picture Diegueño painted rock shelters as shrines, they can be viewed as areas of ritual activity, decorated by the shaman with designs symbolic of the dreamed experiences which provided his power....Some pictographs, particularly the sunburst

design element, might be representations of the sun, moon, or other celestial bodies....It is most likely that the rock paintings in the Diegueño Representational style are the work of local shamans, that they picture supernatural or mythological beings and perhaps the shaman himself, that they illustrate the dream experiences by which the shaman gained some of his powers, and that they mark ritually important but not necessarily sacrosanct locations where religious activities such as the preparation for ceremonies took place.

According to Hedges (1973:11), "the pictographs usually are found in rock shelters associated with Kumeyai (Southern Diegueño) camp sites." He noted that "the paintings could not have been overly esoteric, since they often are in full view of anyone standing at a distance" (Hedges 1970:148-149).

Because they occur in rock shelters associated with camp sites instead of on open boulders away from camp, and because they de-emphasize the abstract symbolism which is so prevalent in the Luiseño Rectilinear Abstract paintings, Diegueño Representational style pictographs do not fit the patterns of puberty rite pictographs [Hedges 1970:149].

At the site of El Vallecito, Hedges (1986) reported that one pictograph, known as El Diablito, had an apparent calendrical function. A dagger of sunlight interacted with the painting at the time of the winter solstice.

## CONCLUSIONS AND INVESTIGATIVE STRATEGIES

A number of different study methods are potentially available to advance the understanding of the La Rumorosa rock art style:

(1) Inventory work to document and describe the sites, panels, and individual elements that constitute the La Rumorosa style remains the foundation for most other studies. While much of this work has now been done, continuing the advance toward a more complete and accurate record is critical. Inventory work on Colorado Desert Representational petroglyph sites in Baja California is also important to provide a context for evaluating relationships between the two styles.

(2) The decorrelation stretch method of digitally enhancing visual records of the pictographs offers an important new tool for more fully distinguishing rock art elements in panels in which fading, staining, or superposition has seriously obscured the evidence (Harman 2006).

(3) Sequencing the elements within rock art panels may provide a basis for developing a relative chronology for such aspects of the La Rumorosa style as the use of various colors, motifs, and techniques. The superposition of elements has been explored to some degree, and the decorrelation stretch method may be able to assist in developing it further. Where superposition is not present, it may be possible to infer priority of creation for elements that have preempted positions within panels that were evidently more desirable than the ones that were used subsequently, such as central positions or surfaces with textures that were more favorable for painting.

(4) The condition of the paintings may also offer clues to their age. The effects of weathering and erosion were probably highly variable on a small geographical scale, due to different degrees of exposure to the natural elements, but at least within individual panels the comparative condition of different images may suggest a relative chronology. Comparisons between the present condition of the rock art panels and their characteristics when they were previously recorded by Malcolm Rogers in the 1930s and by Ken Hedges around 1970 may also suggest at least general conclusions concerning the rate of deterioration and consequently the paintings' likely age.

(5) Direct radiocarbon dating of pictographs is now feasible, thanks to the very small samples that are sufficient with the AMS (accelerator mass spectrometry) method. However, in selecting samples for radiocarbon dating and in analyzing the results obtained, there must be a reasonable assurance that the

organic material being sampled was formed contemporaneously with the painting and that it has not been seriously contaminated subsequently. For the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, radiocarbon dating is not likely to be able to distinguish any finer chronology, because of the DeVries effect (industrial increases in old carbon within the atmosphere).

(6) A basic approach to chronology has been the association of rock art panels with other datable archaeological remains. These have included chronologically diagnostic technologies (such as ceramics and the bow and arrow) and artifact forms (such as styles of pottery or projectile points), as well as radiocarbon and obsidian hydration samples.

(7) Inferences about the functions of the rock art may be based on documenting the settlement contexts of the panels. If the paintings occur within temporary or base camp sites or at work localities such as milling sites or lithic workshops, this may suggest an active role for the community in general, rather than merely for specialists such as shamans, in their creation or at least in their use. On the other hand, if the paintings occur in isolated locations, this may suggest that they had a more esoteric character. Within a site, the placement of the panels either to maximize or to minimize their visibility may similarly suggest something about the meanings and uses they had for the sites' occupants.

(8) Recording the orientations of pictographs may be useful in evaluating the hypothesis that some of the paintings served calendrical functions.

(9) Consultations with surviving Kumiai community members may possibly contribute some additional ethnographic insights concerning the paintings. Although five or more generations probably now separate native consultants from the last painters, it is conceivable that some traditions may have been preserved and that inhibitions about discussing formerly sacred matters may have become more relaxed.

(10) Comparisons of the characteristics of La Rumorosa style paintings may shed light on the question of whether the panels at a given site were the work of a single individual or of a group or succession of painters. Inter-site differences may be evaluated to see if it is possible to distinguish the territories belonging to different communities or patrilineal (*chimules*).

(11) Comparisons between the distributions of representational and non-representational (geometric) motifs at La Rumorosa style sites and more generally within the region may clarify whether these two classes of motifs represent parts of a single style or reflect chronological or functional differences.

(12) Comparisons between the motifs used in the La Rumorosa style and those of the Colorado Desert Representational style may clarify whether these were essentially a single style merely expressed in different media, whether one of them was derived from the other, or whether the producers of the two forms only interacted with and influenced each other to a fairly limited degree.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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