

Maarten van Hoek

Upside-down "bird" petroglyphs near Arica, Chile, imitating earlier rock art symbolism?

Key words: Chile, Atacama Desert, petroglyphs, "bird" imagery, imitation

Abstract:

Symbolic representation of upside-down "bird" imagery at the rock art site of Rosario in the Atacama Desert of South America may relate to ecological disasters caused by one or more severe El Niños. However, two recently surveyed petroglyphs of upside-down "birds" in the same area may represent pre-historic imitations.

Zusammenfassung:

Symbolische, auf dem Kopf stehende Darstellungen von "Vögeln" von der Felskunst-Lokation Rosario (Atacama-Wüste, Chile) könnten mit einer oder mehreren El-Niño-Katastrophen in Zusammenhang stehen. Jedoch könnten zwei kürzlich gefundene Petroglyphen von auf dem Kopf stehenden "Vögeln" im gleichen Gebiet prähistorische Imitationen darstellen.

Resumen:

Representaciones simbólicas de "pájaros" invertidos en la zona de arte rupestre de Rosario (desierto de Atacama, Chile), posiblemente podría relacionarse con las catástrofes ecológicas causadas por una o varias ocurrencias más graves de "El Niño". Sin embargo, dos petroglifos analizados recientemente de dos "pájaros" invertidos en la misma región, podrían representar imitaciones prehistóricas.

In the north of Chile and south of Peru hundreds of rock art sites are found, mainly situated in or near the many east-west running river valleys. One of the most important valleys is the Valle de Lluta in the extreme north of Chile, because in ancient times it provided a relatively easy through route from the Pacific coast towards the important area around Lago Titicaca in Peru and Bolivia. Several rock art sites are found in this valley and one of the most easily accessible site is Rosario, indicated with a modern signpost since 2001 (for location of Rosario, see Van Hoek 2002: Figs. 1, 2 and 3). The improved accessibility, part of a project to create an archaeological tourist route through

the valley, proves not always to be an advantage, because shameful graffiti and other unwanted damages (re-scratching the petroglyphs, for instance) were noticed at our visit in 2002. The most remarkable petroglyphs at Rosario are the depictions of large "birds" that, because of their size, splayed feathers and curved beaks, almost certainly represent birds of prey. Most likely they depict the condor.

In an earlier paper, published in ALMOGAREN XXXII-XXXIII, I argued that possibly the "bird" petroglyphs at the interesting archaeological complex of Rosario (above the petroglyph site there have been found remains of geoglyphs and Inca settlements as well) are in some way related to an ecological disaster caused by an El Niño (Van Hoek 2002). One of the major arguments notably was that *all* the then known "bird" petroglyphs at Rosario are depicted in an upside-down position. This inverted position seems to represent a regional and graphical anomaly, as in other rock art sites of the neighbouring coastal areas of northern Chile and southern Peru, this phenomenon was not yet reported. At least, I do not know of rock art sites in this area where all (or the great majority of the) "bird" petroglyphs have been executed in an upside-down position. We visited quite a few rock art sites in northern Chile and southern Peru, but even at Toro Muerto, one of the most extensive rock art sites of the world, where also many "bird" petroglyphs occur, depicted in several different positions, no upside-down "bird" was noticed. It must be taken into account, however, that it was impossible to check every panel and every decorated rock at Toro Muerto during our visit, so there may be examples of inverted "birds" that escaped us. We did see, however, examples of zoomorphs that were in an upside-down position. Also at Miculla, another very extensive petroglyph site east of Tacna, Peru, no tradition of upside-down imagery could be detected, although "bird" imagery is quite common at Miculla.

When we visited Rosario for the first time in 2000, my wife and I thought that we had recorded all the "bird" petroglyphs at the site. However, when re-visiting Rosario in July 2002, we noticed another rock panel with a "bird" petroglyph. I label this decorated panel "Rock 4", as it is the fourth rock with "bird" imagery at Rosario. It is situated just south of the track that runs immediately north of the site and also some 15 metres to the NE of Rock 2 (see Van Hoek 2002: Fig. 7). The "bird" petroglyph on Rock 4 escaped our attention mainly because of its small size. It is only a little over 10cm in width from wingtip to wingtip (Figure 1A). Added to this is the fact that the petroglyph is very delicately incised, probably with a sharp instrument. It is also difficult to spot the petroglyph because of the rather rough surface of the rock itself and because there are many more petroglyphs consisting of deli-

cate lines that have similarly been incised and/or abraded into its surface. These petroglyphs mainly comprise anthropomorphic figures and "camelids". In 2002 we were at the site in the late morning, a favourable time because the sunlight then creates stark shadows on the west facing vertical panel for only a short time so that all the petroglyphs were clearly visible.

What was most surprising, however, is that also this "bird" petroglyph proved to be depicted upside-down, which is clearly indicated by the position of the feathers. The petroglyphs on Rock 4 are found on a rough panel that faces west (towards the ocean!), but it also faces another decorated rock, labelled Rock 2 by me in the 2002 publication. Rock 2 is situated about 15 metres further WSW and a little higher upon the steep slope, but the decorated panels are visible from each other. Importantly, also Rock 2 features an upside-down "bird", but the visual impact of this "bird" petroglyph is enormous compared to the "bird" on Rock 4. It is no less than half a metre in from wingtip to wingtip, and the "bird" is also easily visible to any observer standing at the foot of the hill because the petroglyph is most conspicuously positioned in an isolated position on the left-hand part of the rock that faces north (towards the sun at midday). Although the inverted position is identical, the differences in size, position and visibility between the two rocks are most striking. The "bird" on Rock 4 notably, is only visible when standing directly in front of the rock, and only when having favourable lighting.

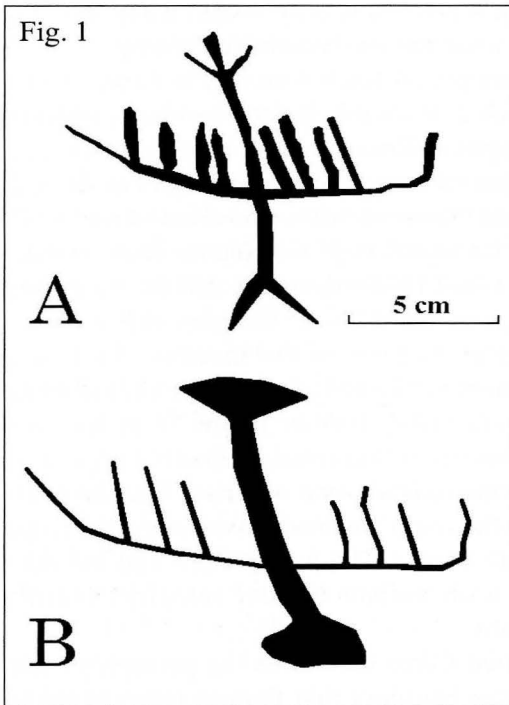
It is therefore possible that the example on Rock 4 merely is a later imitation of the much larger "bird" on Rock 2. It notably lacks the visual impact of all the other inverted "bird" petroglyphs at Rosario and it also lacks the intimate relation with a human figure that seems to be so meaningful at Rock 2. Therefore it seems highly unlikely that the upside-down position of the "bird" at Rock 4 has any direct relation with initial urge to execute large upside-down "birds". Neither will it relate to the El Niño disasters that are suggested by me to possibly explain the general inverted "bird" imagery at Rosario.

I already mentioned the regional exclusivity of the inverted "bird" imagery at Rosario. However, when returning the next day from a visit to some other rock art sites in the scenic Lluta Valley further inland from Rosario, Alvaro Romero Guevara of the University of Tarapacá ultimately guided us to a rock art site situated high above the coastal town of Arica. The site overlooks the Pacific to the west, while to the south and east it overlooks the Azapa Valley, which penetrates the Atacama Desert. The valley floor and hillsides of the Azapa Valley are studded with archaeological remains, mainly petroglyphs and impressive geoglyphs.

Just below the top of the hill, called Cerro Chuño, is the petroglyph site, comprising a large number of angular boulders that feature petroglyphs of

geometric motifs, zoomorphs and anthropomorphs. At least one "bird" petroglyph depicted in a "normal" position was noticed. However, we also spotted a small petroglyph of a "bird" near the top of a large boulder (identified by a number 21 painted in white on its surface) that clearly was executed in an inverted position, again indicated by the upwards pointing feathers (Figure 1B). Strikingly, the style and position much resembled the "bird" petroglyph that we saw on Rock 4 at Rosario the other day. The petroglyph (the only one on boulder 21) faces south onto the valley and is out of reach of human hands (therefore, exact dimensions could not be taken, but it seemed to be only slightly larger than the "bird" petroglyph at Rock 4, Rosario). But considering the pointed shape and the large size of the boulder 21, it is unlikely that it is not *in situ*. The inverted position therefore may be intentional.

If indeed this petroglyph represents an inverted "bird", it may possibly indicate that in this valley as well the supernatural world had once been graphically propitiated in order to restore the equilibrium of the universe after a disaster caused by an El Niño. However, it may equally confirm the intensive contact that existed between the valley of the Lluta (where Rosario is located) and the Azapa Valley (in which Cerro Chuño is situated). As, however,



several ancient routes traverse the hills and plateau between the Lluta Valley and the Azapa Valley, and, moreover, the "bird" petroglyph on boulder 21 seems to represent an isolated example (other animal imagery at Cerro Chuño is found in the "normal" position), it is more likely that, like the "bird" on Rock 4 at Rosario, the inverted position of the "bird" on boulder 21 at Cerro Chuño, represents "borrowed" imagery as well, possibly confirming the intensive contacts between the two valleys.

Literature:

Van Hoek, M. (2002): The Rosario birds – possible indications of El Niño disasters in the Chilean Atacama Desert.- *Almogaren XXXII-XXXIII / 2001-2002*, Vienna, 303-328