

## Seeing through Rocks

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*A Culture of Stone: Inka Perspectives on Rock*, Carolyn Dean, 2010, Duke University Press  
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Having written extensively on Andean colonial art, namely on the celebrations of Corpus Christi in colonial Cuzco (1999), art historian Carolyn Dean has now shifted her attention to the stony traces of a prior chapter in the city's history. The book posits that ancient rocks and pre-Hispanic stone buildings reveal Inka beliefs and practices around and about stones as powerful, transmutable, potentially animate and sentient beings. Dean is critical of art history as a discipline's blind eye when it comes to Inka masonry, arguing that her colleagues had until now favored representational forms, and had, therefore, been reluctant to study Inka architecture as art, having focused rather on technological processes of crafting and moving colossal masses. For the author, scholars separated Inka carved stones from other aspects of Inka culture "in very un-Inka ways" (16). In a move that places this work very much in dialogue with recent studies on material culture, Dean argues that it is precisely because Inka stonework contains meaning in its very materiality—rather than in its form—that it is fertile ground for revealing pre-Hispanic Inka epistemologies and ways of seeing.

*A Culture of Stone* is beautifully written, with four chapters focusing on the various relationships between peoples within the Inka empire and stone objects. The first chapter looks at how rocks became agents of social life as "remembered-rocks" performing memory-work that made specific moments and persons from the past present during Inka times. Using Guaman Poma's writings, as well as the renditions of other colonial chroniclers, Dean reveals these "presentational stones" as wawqi (petrified brothers), wank'a (petrified owners of places), saywa (territorial markers), puruawqa (petrified warriors), sayk'uska (recalcitrant rocks refusing to be moved from specific locations), sukanka (pillars representing time itself), as well as echo stones and apachita (rock piles marking places). Dean shows us tangible ways to recognize these extraordinary rocks through visual cues such as framing, distancing, contouring and carving.

In Chapter 2, she analyzes the reciprocity between rocks and landscape, showing how stone architecture crystallized the Inkas' civilizing mission over nature, especially through terracing and "nibbled masonry." As Dean expresses: "While Inka walls are not texts, they can and do contain philosophical statements about how the Inka made their way—not in or through the world, but of it" (85).

Chapter 3 focuses on rocks as imperialist instruments, as stones established Inka ownership over territory throughout the Inka empire. The author uses examples of sayk'uska or recalcitrant rocks who refused to move to analyze Inka power not as absolute, but rather as a complex system of negotiation and rule: abandoned stones made the Inka's relationship with the numinous quality of their building materials concrete, while also displaying the power of the State over nature. The chapter ends with a discussion on stone seats that are, for Dean, the most immediate examples of how rocks and state power were intricately connected in Inka times.

In the last chapter of the book, "Rock in Ruins," Dean explores the production of Inka ruins over

time, focusing on the colonial project to transform Inka stones into traces imbued with mystery, rather than products of a powerful State. She then borrows anthropologist Quetzil Castañeda's insights on pre-Hispanic ruins in Mexico to discuss how Inka rocks have since been "ventriloquized" by a variety of actors including government authorities, tourists and new-age pilgrims.

Amidst stunning images of Inka sites and monuments, and poetic descriptions of numinous waka, petrified rulers, transubstantiations of stony essences, and stories of lithic personhood, Dean eloquently builds a new approach to ancient stones that pointedly critiques traditional art historical scholarship. Dean cites anthropological studies such as Alfred Gell's work on "anicons" as part of her theoretical framework, but it seems that her questions and arguments are related to a larger body of literature on artifacts as animate within anthropology, from Emile Durkheim to Marcel Mauss' theories of totems and objects in exchange, to scholarship about fetishes, and more recent work by a new wave of material culture studies in both the United States and United Kingdom. In fact, Dean's book is an interesting interlocutor for work like Christopher Tilley's *The Materiality of Stone* (2004) where, given the lack of historical sources like the ones Dean was able to consult on the societies who produced her objects of study, and inspired by Merleau Ponty's phenomenological approach, the author interpellates prehistoric monuments in European landscapes through bodily experience. Anthropological studies on material culture like Tilley's echo Dean's critiques of traditional art history's understandings of objects. As a study of ancient rocks, their material texture, location and relationship to other features in the landscape, as well as their social agency during Inka times, *A Culture of Stone* is a welcome intervention and will be of interest to students of material worlds, anthropologists, archaeologists, as well as scholars of Peru and Latin America.

### References

Dean, C. 1999. *Inka Bodies and the Body of Christ: Corpus Christi in Colonial Cuzco, Peru*. Durham: Duke Univ. Press.

Tilley, C. 2004. *The Materiality of Stone: Explorations in Landscape and Phenomenology*. Oxford: Berg.

Note: This essay is a version of the author's review of Carolyn Dean's *A Culture of Stone: Inka Perspectives on Rock*, in the *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* (forthcoming)