Artifacts of Stone

Most of the places, events, and people read about in historical magazines have to be envisioned in one’s mind through detailed descriptions or through the use of old photographs. Contrary to this, Kirksville has a site that dates back further than most artifacts in the area and is still available to view: the petroglyphs.

Petroglyphs are stone carvings made by pecking, scraping, or grinding the surface with stone or bone instruments. The figures are intaglio, or below the surface. These carvings are found on most continents, but the most numerous are west of the Rocky Mountains because of the numerous cliffs available. Flat surfaces are used, such as stone outcrops, ledges, bluff faces, or cave walls.

The first scientific study of petroglyphs was done in 1886, and in 1942 there were 42 sites recorded in Missouri. People hold many beliefs as to the origin of these artifacts. In more southern areas of the United States, it is said that they were markers for the buried treasures of the early Spanish. Some believe that the Aztecs wandered north and created them. Others believe that the petroglyphs are somehow related to the “lost continents” of Atlantis and Mu. It is also said that the Egyptians, Babylonians, Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, Chinese, and other Old World peoples reached America long ago.

According to the 1936 Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, there could basically be two reasons for petroglyphs being made. One may be “random fancies created in leisurely moments.” Two, some carvings may truly have historic or symbolic significance. If an event is being recorded, the symbols are placed so that they have a definite relation. Some examples are hunting scenes, dances, ceremonies, or records of visits. When it comes to symbolic or religious petroglyphs, there are many symbols in a small area that have no direct relation. These could be offerings to spirits to compensate for the removal of an object or to supply water, food, or tools. The symbolic or religious petroglyphs are also sacrificial, meaning a devotion to a spirit in a sacred place.

Knowing this general information gives one an overview and helps one to possibly understand the artifacts in this area a little better. The site in Northeast Missouri was found in the fall of 1955 by Mr. Arthur Bailey, a Kirksville resident who was also a member of the Missouri Archeological Society. The site is located on the hill northwest of the present-day swimming beach at Thousand Hills State Park. Mr. Bailey sought the society’s president, Jesse Wrench, who came to view the site and authenticate it in March of 1956. Mr. Wrench wrote a letter to Mr. Swain, editor of the Kirksville Daily Express, stating how surprised he was that people’s initials were carved between the symbols and that the area was used by campers to build fires for cooking food. He pleaded with Mr. Swain, the townsmen, and the Thousand Hills Park Board to preserve the site before any more destruction could occur. It is believed to be an ancient ceremonial ground and the first carvings date back to between A.D. 400 and 900, but different styles suggest more than one generation of artists.

Dr. Michael Davis, a professor of anthropology at NMSU, says, “Local oral history around here is that before they put the dam in to make that lake, that there were lots more petroglyphs showing, and they’re now underwater, a majority of them as well as some rather large archeological sites. Probably a living area.”

It seems that these symbols are not written messages or a language, but actually a guide or memory aid for a ceremony. There were supposedly different societies and organizations in the tribe and the men had to correctly perform these ceremonies for membership. The Indians of the area were associated with the Woodland Tradition. They are thought to have been hunter/cultivators because there are many animal representations, tracks, and footprints. It is hard to say exactly what each represented animal is. Miss Maureen McHale, the naturalist at
Thousand Hills, believes, "The problem that we have here is trying to learn not only what kinds of animals were native to the area long ago, but which ones were most likely important to the people who made the carvings. Possibly at that time, before the 1800s, we had more open prairie areas interspersed with forests. Coyotes were really common to the prairies. That carving over there may have been one," as she points to an animal carving that could easily be a dog, coyote, wolf, or any other animal along that line. There could also have been some farming and crop storage done because there are many fertility symbols. That could also explain how the Indians found free time to carve the petroglyphs.

Many symbols are present at this site. According to the manuscript written by a naturalist, Stephen Schneider, the squares could be the floor plan of houses or hunting camps. Fertility of animal, plant, and human life are represented by oval objects. There are also bird tracks, footprints, long snake-like symbols, and animals with different shaped bodies. The arrows could possibly be the directional guides for the ceremonies.

One special symbol, fairly widespread among all Indians, is the thunderbird. This mythical animal symbolizes rain. Its flapping wings represent thunder and its blinking eyes represent lightning. An anthropologist who visited our site believes that the thunderbird stands for masculinity, signifying the site for the men's ceremonies. "Well, we say thunderbirds and that might be right, but it could also indicate an eagle or a hawk. And it could represent a patron, kind of a guardian spirit." Dr. Davis explained that this symbol could deal with the guardian spirit complex. Indians had to find their own guardian spirit. They usually did this by fasting or going without sleep. "It's possible that that's the place where people went to seek their guardian spirit or to seek some kind of insights to their problems," said Dr. Davis.

Shortly before the coming of the white man, the Indians started following a new religious cult that originated in the southeast United States and spread up the Mississippi River.

MACE AND BI-LOBED ARROW  THUNDERBIRDS

Shortly after the coming of white settlers, Indians started following a cult that developed in the southeastern portion of the U.S. These symbols are associated with this southern cult. (Diagrams courtesy of Pickler Memorial Library)

This sketch diagrams the symbols carved at the petroglyph site. Notice the many thunderbirds, oval fertility symbols, and animals with horns or tails. (Diagram courtesy of Pickler Memorial Library)
Letters From the People
Missouri Archaeological Society
15 Switzler Hall
Columbia, Missouri
March 12, 1956
Mr. E. E. Swain, Editor
Daily Express and News
Kirkville, Missouri
Dear Mr. Swain:

Yesterday at the request of Mr. A. T. Bailey, one of your fellow townsmen, I visited the Park of the Thousand Hills. I failed to see more than a dozen of the hills, but I did see something which impressed me very much in more than one way.

On the knoll opposite the new bathing pavilion I was greatly surprised to find an example of those Indian petroglyphs which have up till now made Washington State Park unique. These evidences of one of the later Indian cultures, apparently that which immediately preceded the coming of the white men, are not very frequent in the northern part of the state. Consequently, it is of considerable importance that they be preserved so that our children and their children will have a chance to see them.

Unfortunately, these specimens are due for extinction in a relatively brief time, even though they have already existed probably for several hundred years. Between the fires which have been built in them to cook wiener are marshmallows and the urge of those with an inferiority complex to carve their initials on them, they are already partially destroyed and within a few years will be completely unrecognizable.

Knowing your interest in things historic, I take the liberty to call this to your attention and urge that you and your fellow townsmen earnestly request the Park Board to take steps to preserve these irreplaceable remains.

Sincerely,
JESSE E. WRENCH, President.

Maces and bi-lobed arrows, symbols associated with this southern cult, are present at our site. They represent authority and prestige.

Every petroglyphic symbol has variations of meaning. For example, a simple triangle has been known to represent an arrow point, mountain, or horse. It is impossible to interpret one symbol having the same meaning at more than one place. Only the author himself would truly know.

This site was placed on the National Register of Historic Sites in 1970. Throughout the years, there has been a chain link fence around the site and also a structure with just a roof to try to keep the petroglyphs more intact, but those have recently been replaced by a totally enclosed, gazebo-shaped, cedar building. It is locked when not in use to keep any further vandalism from occurring. This shelter also protects the carvings from the normal weathering of wind and rain. The building is open for programs at scheduled times during the summer months, or by arrangement with the park naturalist during the rest of the year. By preserving the petroglyphs for future generations, maybe someday they can be interpreted correctly and we can learn more about Native Americans and the past.

Arthur Bailey, left, and Don Mulford, right, take a closer look at some of the thunderbirds. The symbols were chalked so they could be seen more clearly. Thunderbirds seem to be the first and most easily noticed symbols by those who view the site.

By Tonja Green