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A Great Basin Pecked Style Petroglyph in the North Coast Ranges

CHARLA M. MEACHAM

In early August, 1979, a petroglyph fragment was discovered adjacent to a hiking trail in the Yolla Bolly - Middle Eel Wilderness of the Mendocino National Forest (Fig. 1) by Ken Jones, a wilderness ranger. The fragment was located at the junction of two hiking trails near the crest of the North Coast Ranges in southeastern Trinity County, California (ca 2103 m. [6900 ft.] elevation). The area is characterized by rugged relief and a high-altitude red fir forest; the discovery location itself is an extremely barren, rocky ridge.

Because the petroglyph, as described by Jones, was of a pecked design thought to be rather unusual for the North Coast Ranges, arrangements were made to recover the fragment. Approximately one month after it was first reported, the petroglyph location was re-visited by Michael Boynton, Mendocino National Forest Archaeologist, the author, and other Forest Service personnel. At that time a second fragment that fit together with the original piece was discovered nearby. The two petroglyph fragments were collected and are currently curated at the Mendocino National Forest Supervisor's Office, Willows, California (Acc. No. 80-11-436).

As it appeared that the petroglyph was not in its original context, an effort was made to locate the parent panel. On two occasions, surveys were made of ridges within a mile of the discovery site. The first was in early September, 1979, when the Forest Service party examined the ridge where the petro-



Fig. 1. Location of petroglyph fragment discussed in text.

glyph was found, as well as Hammerhorn Peak, a south-trending ridge immediately to the west, and other areas north of Hammerhorn on the hiking trail to Kingsley Lake. A month later, the author again returned to the area to search for the parent panel. That search also proved unsuccessful, and the original location of the petroglyph is still unknown.

The rock on which the petroglyph is pecked is tabular in shape and has been identified as a metamorphosed metagraywacke sandstone (J. Tucker, personal communication 1980). The area where it was found is mapped as part of the Hellhole Canyon graywacke unit of the Franciscan assemblage. This unit is composed of thick-bedded graywacke interbedded with thin-bedded mudstone, chert, and sandstone, with few igneous blocks. The geology of the Mendocino National Forest region is very complex and, though it differs in color and texture from rocks in the immediate vicinity

of the discovery site, it is possible that the rock on which the petroglyph was made is from the same general area—perhaps even the same ridge.

The pecked design on the petroglyph (Fig. 2) consists of three different, non-overlapping elements: (1) a row of circles connected by straight lines; (2) a series of apex-connected diamonds; and (3) a more-or-less straight line. These design elements are oriented parallel to one another and with the long axis of the two conjoined fragments. The circles average 3.77 cm. in maximum outside diameter, the diamonds have an average length of 6.90 cm., and the line is approximately 32 cm. long. As reconstructed, the overall length of the petroglyph fragment is 44 cm., with a width of 28 cm., and it varies in thickness from 1.1 to 2.0 cm. at opposite ends of the rock. The combined weight of both fragments is 4.08 kg.

Several questions are raised by the discovery of this petroglyph. First, how and why did it come to be located on the ridge? The petroglyph rock material appears to be different from that on the surrounding ridge. This suggests that the petroglyph may have been removed from a panel elsewhere, perhaps by a person intent on collecting it as a memento but who abandoned the specimen because its weight proved too much to carry any great distance.

The apparent unusual nature of the design for a petroglyph occurring in the North Coast Ranges is also curious. The prevailing perception of the North Coast petroglyph style as one of pit-and-groove led the author to a further examination of the rock art literature. Steward (1929) plotted the distribution of 45 individual design elements in California and the Great Basin. Some of these elements have fairly well-defined areal distributions as well as relatively frequent co-associations. General stylistic characteristics also appear to group spatially. Steward (1929) considered the

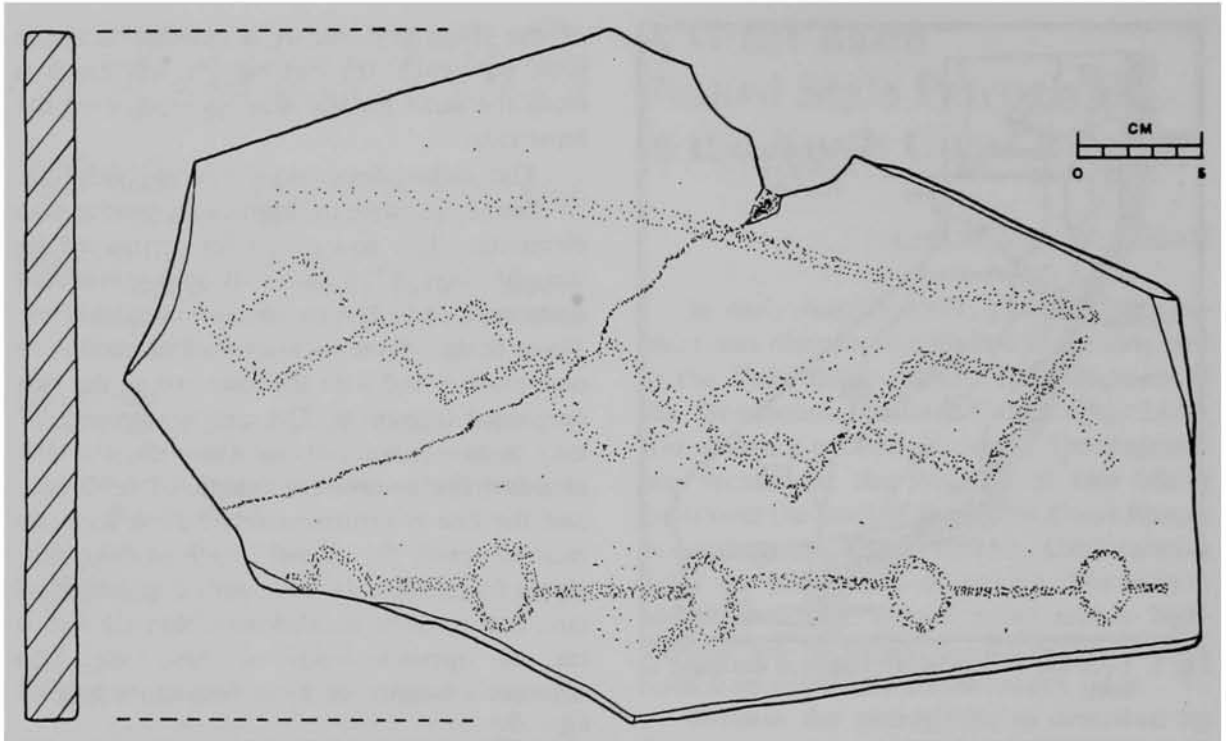


Fig. 2. Pecked design on petroglyph fragment.

North Coast as a style area characterized by rubbed, grooved petroglyphs of extremely simple form, with their most distinctive feature being cupules. He considered "circle chains" part of the eastern California style area, while connected diamonds, arranged vertically, were associated with southwestern California. The diamond element, which Steward (1929: 227) noted was a representation of rattlesnakes, is known to be associated with the Luiseño girls' puberty ceremony (Oxendine 1980). Neither "circle chains" nor "connected diamonds" were reported in the North Coast by Steward (1929).

A review of site records for the Mendocino National Forest revealed that eight other petroglyph sites are known. Of these, seven feature cupule, or pit-and-groove, petroglyphs (cf. Baumhoff, Heizer, and Elsasser 1958; Hedges 1973). The nearest of these sites to the fragments considered here is 16.5 miles to

the south at Telephone Flat on the crest of the North Coast Ranges. A "doll figure" petroglyph comprises the eighth site, located roughly six miles to the south at Buck Rock (also on the crest).

Outside Mendocino National Forest, but still within the North Coast region, many petroglyph locations are known and discussed by Steward (1929), Heizer (1953), Heizer and Clewlow (1973), Clewlow (1978), and Don Martin (personal communication 1980). Most of these locations are in lowland areas west of the timber belt. The design elements include cupules, bear paws, grooves, rakes, stars, zig-zags, wavy lines, concentric circles, and carved figures. These various elements were manufactured primarily by incising on talc, steatite, or other soft rock (Heizer 1953: 35). With the exception of a "doll figure" at Buck Rock and a few cupule sites, no petroglyphs are known along the crest or in the high

mountains in general.

In addition to cupules, North Coast petroglyphs "take the form of angular incisions or random scratches on soft boulders" (Clewlow 1978: 622; Heizer and Clewlow 1973: 29). Clewlow (1978: 622) cited ethnographic evidence that such petroglyphs were created by groups who conducted ceremonies that involved scratching or incising of rock—specifically among the Tolowa, Karok, and Hupa for rain-control purposes, and among the Pomo as part of a fertility ceremony. Both practices had been discussed earlier by Heizer (1953).

The North Coast style is dated by Heizer and Clewlow (1973: 30-31) and Clewlow (1978: 622) to late prehistoric (post-A.D. 1600) and historic times. However, Baumhoff (1980: 179-180) placed the style somewhat earlier in time, based on a cupule boulder recovered at Warm Springs in midden that dated to at least 1000 years ago, and Heizer and Baumhoff (1962: 234) tentatively dated the pit-and-groove style in the Great Basin from 5000 to 3000 B.C.

According to Don Martin (personal communication 1980), both the connected circles and chain of diamonds elements (Fig. 2) are also present at other sites in Mendocino County. Among these are the Bell Springs and Spy Rock (MEN-433) sites on the Eel River, both within 35 mi. of the location of the present discovery. These sites were noted by Heizer (1953) as containing pit-and-groove elements, but he mentioned neither circles nor diamonds as part of the North Coast style. However, the chain of diamonds element is, in fact, present not only at MEN-433 as pointed out by Martin, but also at HUM-173 (Weitchpec), as discussed by Steward (1929: 57) and Heizer and Clewlow (1973: 95).

Three qualities make the petroglyph reported here unusual. First, it is pecked, not incised as is typical of North Coast style

petroglyphs. Second, it is portable, while other known North Coast petroglyphs are all located on large boulders. Third, the design elements it displays are rare in the North Coast region. Consequently, alternative explanations for its occurrence are worthy of consideration.

One possibility is that the petroglyph may have been manufactured by northeast California peoples. This suggestion is based on several observations. First, the petroglyph is predominantly Great Basin in style. Second, northeastern California peoples were removed from their native territories to the Round Valley Indian Reservation, some 15 mi. southwest of the artifact location. Third, and most importantly, the artifact location lies on a ridge that would be the first location from which Mt. Shasta could be viewed if one were traveling northeast from Round Valley. It is conceivable that native northeastern peoples, on a hunting expedition or perhaps even fleeing the reservation, stopped on the ridge or in a nearby area and pecked out the designs while viewing Mt. Shasta.

A second alternative relates to the portability of the slab. Portable petroglyphs are reported in the central Great Basin (McKee and Thomas 1972; Thomas 1983), and Parkman (1981) described an example from the San Francisco Bay area. While simple portability cannot be taken as evidence of a relationship between the North Coast and any other area, and although portable rock art in central Nevada was fashioned using three different incising techniques, with no pecking, it is nevertheless intriguing that portable petroglyphs are widespread in the Great Basin (McKee and Thomas 1972: Fig. 11) and only rarely found in the North Coast Ranges.

The final observation concerns the function of the petroglyph. The intention here is not to review the various hypotheses, briefly reviewed by Thomas (1976: 66), that are often used to interpret rock art. However,

new information is available to add to the existing body of interpretive schemes. Based on locational patterns, Martin (personal communication 1980) suggested the connected circle motif might be a trail sign. The chain of diamonds motif has been linked to the hunting hypothesis (Thomas 1976), and it can be related to local ethnographic groups as well. Goldschmidt (1951) stated that a Nomlaki bow decoration utilized this design. The petroglyph discovery site is on the edge of Nomlaki territory (Kroeber 1925: 351). A Wailaki string figure (Foster 1944: Fig. 13) apparently resembles the string mesh, a series of overlapping chains of diamonds, inserted inside deer snares. Both the bow and snare are obviously connected with hunting activities.

Further work may reveal other similar petroglyphs in the North Coast Ranges and ultimately aid in explaining their distribution and function.

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