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PETROGLYPHS AND DAKOTA RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

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At its most superficial level, this paper may serve to bring to wider notice a remarkable petroglyph site in the upper Mississippi River Valley, in the U.S. state of Minnesota, about 500 km from the Canadian border. This part is quickly dispensed with: in a relatively flat prairie landscape near the farm town of Jeffers lies an outcrop of slightly inclined reddish quartzite, intermittently exposed for more than 400 meters. On the rock surface, to date incompletely excavated, archaeologists have counted nearly 2000 inscribed images or glyphs: it is the largest petroglyph site in the upper midwest. A large proportion of the glyphs are anthropomorphic, some of which feature horned or feathered headdresses. Animals are well represented, especially bison, deer, birds, and supernatural birds (thunderbirds). There are also numerous weapons (atlatls, clubs, spears, axes, and one shield), some of which are impaling animals or humans.

Lothson[1] has suggested that the presence of atlatls and large-point projectiles defines a Late Archaic date (3000 BC-500 BC) for some of the petroglyphs, while other images resemble in style and content the Early Historic-period artifacts (men in feathered headdresses, thunderbirds with so-called powerlines, sacred circle images, etc), and may fall in the period between 900 CE and 1700 CE. Jeffers is the only known site in upper midwest with petroglyphs associated to the archaic period.

The rock forms a portion of the so-called Red Rock Ridge, which cuts through southern Minnesota in an east-west direction for nearly 150 km and contains several other smaller petroglyph sites. First described by Euroamericans in 1885[2], the site has had intermittent notice by regional archaeologists and historians, both professional and amateur. Some of their work has been less than salutary (the images were overpainted in the 1960s with varnish, now removed) and the site continues to be relatively obscure[3]. It is now controlled by the Minnesota Historical Society and public access is permitted during the summer months. Description of the site only generates immediate questions, however, and consideration of these are the real focus of this discussion. What accounts for the longevity of use and the large number of inscriptions at a site so isolated within the prairie (the Minnesota River, a tributary of the Mississipppi, is 40 km away and the Mississippi itself 170 km)? who might have made these? For what purpose? Finally, what interpretations and uses, if any, are made by the nearby contemporary communities of Dakota people?

The particular geography of the site may offer some evidence. The outcropping is very close to the Little Cottonwood River, a tributary of the Minnesota River, which just at Jeffers cuts through the Red Rock Ridge as it flows northward. In the recent historic period (and in the present) the river has been flanked by migratory game trails used by deer, rabbit, and other small mammals, and this was likely true in earlier periods as well.

Because the river acts as a channel through the stone, it likely attracted enough animals to make hunting profitable and thus the nearby rock outcrop a likely site for images associated with the practice.

Such a geographic association certainly accounts for the identifiably archaic images (atlatls and spears) as well as the impaled and nonimpaled quadrupeds, whether archaic or more recent. The early images are presumed to be the work of Late-Archaic seminomadic hunters, who may have visited the game trails at the time of seasonal migration of bison; unfortunately not enough archeological excavation has been done to reveal the presence of butchering camps or other related sites.

The presence of game trails does not explain, however, certain non-hunting-related images: thunderbirds, men in horned or feathered headdresses, and the sacred circle motif. These have been attributed to the early historic period on the basis of their similarity to representations in other early-historic period media: those on men's painted shirts, shields, and robes, for example. In the absence of any documentary evidence of use of the site in the early contact period, it may be useful to consider evidence from a nearby and related petroglyph site, that at Pipestone, on the western border of Minnesota, 80 km to the west within the same Red Rock Ridge.

Known petroglyphs at Pipestone[4] are far fewer in number than those at the Jeffers site, (a number were destroyed at the turn of the century in an ill-advised attempt to preserve them) but they are similar to the historic-period Jeffers group in subject matter (anthropomorphs, quadrupeds, birds, and notably fewer weapons), in style, and in relative scale. More importantly, they are parallel in their occurrence on an outcropping of red stone. Pipestone, moreover, has two things Jeffers lacks.

First, it has a distinctive geological feature close to the petroglyphs: a long partially exposed vein of fine-grained, deep red quartzite known as catlinite, which has been (for half a millennium or more) and in different fashion continues to be a desirable item of trade.

Second, and in consequence of this quarry, it attracted Euro-american adventurers and explorers in the early nineteenth century who produced detailed commentary about indigenous use of the site.

Catlinite deposits are rare in North America, The Minnesota quarry is one of four, and of those is by far the largest and the stone the reddest. In its earliest manifestations in archaeological sites, and well into the nineteenth century, Minnesota catlinite occurs culturally only in the form of smoking pipe bowls (hence its alternative name)[5]. Early and more recent North American pipe bowls occur in other stone, and even in clay and wood, but catlinite is a desirable material both because it is soft and easily worked, and because of its remarkable color. Extant pipes in catlinite probably outnumber by far those in any other material.

Archeological evidence, oral tradition, and travellers' accounts all suggest that by the seventeenth century or earlier most of the territory of Minnesota was occupied by Dakota/Lakota peoples, who still maintain a fragmentary presence on reservations in the southern and western end of the state.[6]

The earliest documentary account of Minnesota extant is that of the Jesuit missionary Marquette from 1669, which locates the "Nadouessi" (="Sioux", a pejorative term for Dakota/Lakota) in the Minnesota region and notes among their "extraordinary customs" the use of the calumet, or smoking pipe.[7]

The practice of tobacco smoking in religious or ceremonial contexts is well documented from the earliest European contacts on the east coast, and was widespread in the eastern and plains regions.

Among Dakota and Lakota people in recent times the pipe is considered a sacred instrument of prayer, a means of making spiritual offerings. The color red, which is used in ceremonial contexts to mark or denote sacredness, is thus highly appropriate for pipes, and given the existence of various narratives about the origin of pipestone, usually involving the spilling of blood, it is not surprising to find the material in early contexts limited only to pipe manufacture.

The first Euro-american account of a visit to the Pipestone site, that of the artist George Catlin in 1832[8], describes in detail the powerful religious significance attached to the region. He notes that while still more than 100 km from the quarry, he was stopped on his voyage and "harangued...by a rascally band of Sioux on the presumption that we had come to trespass on their dearest privilege-their religion." At the site his first observation is a man "propitiating spirits" with prayer and offerings of tobacco for permission to take away a small piece of stone for a pipe, near a rock with "various marks and their sculptured hieroglyphics-their wakons, totems, and medicines."

Every subsequent nineteenth-century account echoes Catlin in suggesting a connection between the petroglyphs and the practice of quarrying: not only that the inscribed rocks were the appropriate place for prayer and offerings before taking pipestone, but also that those who quarried marked the rock as well.

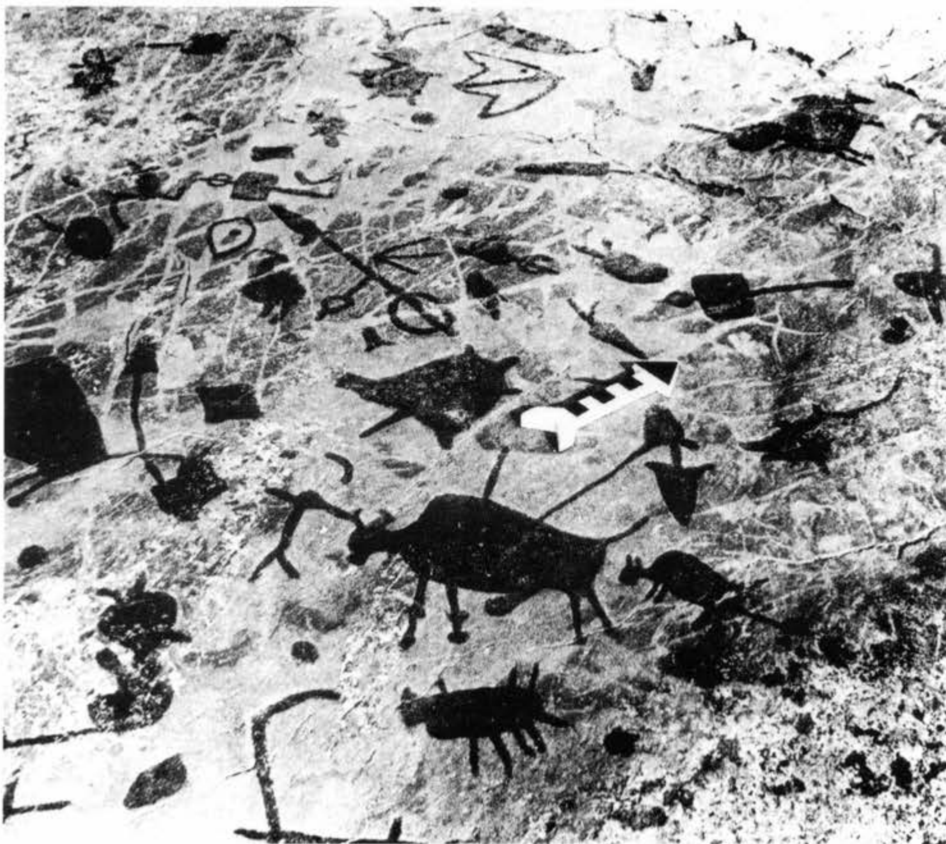

Fig. 131. A group of petroglyphs at Jeffers, Minnesota. Showing impaled quadrupeds and assorted weapons (photo from Lothson, Jeffers Petroglyphs*).*

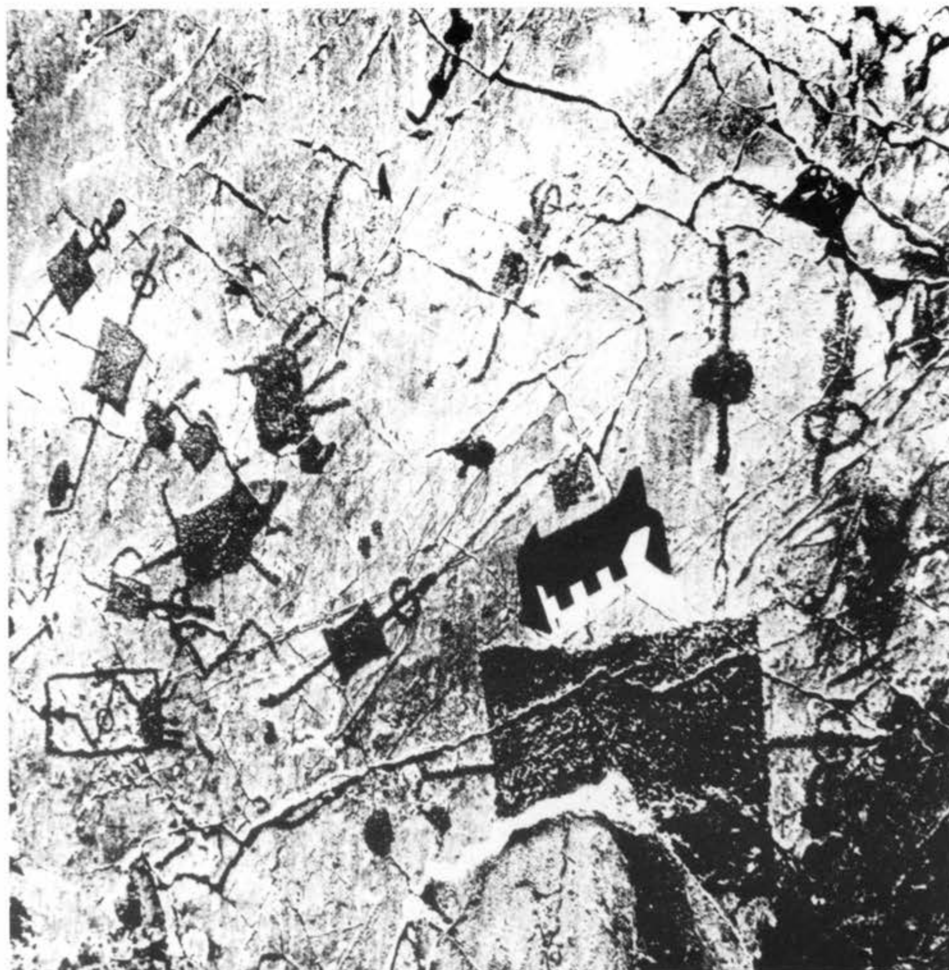

Fig. 132. A petroglyph cluster at Jeffers showing atlatls, prehistoric spearthrowers with.

Catlin also asserts, as do later accounts, that in former times the Pipestone site was considered neutral territory for an Indian nations, and that because the quest for pipestone was sacred, men left their weapons aside and "enemies smoked together" at the quarry[9]; he offers as proof the presence of "the totems and arms of different tribes" inscribed on the rocks.

Now (in 1832), he explains, the Dakota and Lakota have claimed exclusive control of the quarry: "probably by instigation of the whites (likely French fur traders) who have told them that by keeping off other tribes, and manufacturing the pipes themselves, and trading them to other adjoining nations, they can acquire much influence and wealth."

If the story is correct, it is also not surprising. The situation of Dakota people in the early nineteenth century was worsening steadily[10]. Pressed hard for territory by more easterly Indian nations and by the expansion of United States territories, they also foundtheir supply of game drastically depleted by the fur trade and by the slaughter of buffalo herds. The economic opportunity presented by catlinite would be hard to resist.

Six years later, the account by the adventurer Joseph Nicollet[11] suggests that the Dakota have indeed exploited the quarry: "the red stone is exhausted at all the places where it can be extracted without difficulty. To reach it now it is necessary to remove a layer of red sandstone 4 1/2 ft. thick. As their methods of mining are very limited (they are not able to procure the necessary tools without paying a price beyond their means), they are pleased to see us here to reopen the quarry." He offers, too, the first indigenous explanation of the origin of the petroglyphs: "they say, moreover, that three female spirits live in this mysterious place and that it is they who have engraved all of the characters that one sees on the red pavement and that one can hear them work at night."

The essentials of this story: that petroglyphs are carved by spirit beings, unseen by humans, correspond closely with Cheyenne, Gros Ventre, and other Plains peoples' accounts of petroglyphs. In regions further to the west petroglyph sites are still used for prayer, fasting, and vision quests, and are said to be the work of spirits[12]. Although Nicollet's story may seem to contradict the claim of Catlin and others that the rocks were marked by men about to cut pipestone, it is worth noting that women and young boys were excluded from quarrying activities; the existence of multiple narratives, likely for different audiences, serves to further confirm the importance of the petroglyphs at Pipestone in the early nineteenth century as a site for prayer and offerings as well.

Fig. 133. Image of a man wearing a horned headdress, a style well documented in the historic period (photo from Lothson, Jeffers Petroglyphs*).*

Thirty years after Nicollet's visit the traditional restriction of catlinite use to pipebowls had vanished. With better tools, Dakotas as well as whites were mining large quantities of the stone to be made into candlesticks, ashtrays, Christian religious icons, and every imaginable trinket[13]. And in the meantime catastrophic military encounters between the Dakotas and the U.S. Army had driven most Dakotas into hiding or exile. The pipestone quarry remained active, and a small group of Christian Dakota continued to extract stone and make souvenirs, but the site was turned from a putative gathering place for all Indian nations into a National Park administered by whites.

At Jeffers, no trace of use of the petroglyphs for prayers, offerings, or vision quest remains. In the small reestablished Dakota reservations nearby, it is asserted that the petroglyphs "do not belong to us." One may speculate that the increasing availability of metal tools and the economic needs of the Dakota made the Pipestone site more and more important through the 19th century.

This, combined with the rupture of war, effectively separated the Dakota from what was apparently a much larger and older graphic record than Pipestone itself.

Notes

1) Gordon Lothson, *The Jeffers Petroglyphs Site: A survey and analysis of the Carvings*, *Minnesota Prehistoric Archaeology Series*, vol. 12, St. Paul, Minnesota (Historical Society), 1974.

2) In the *New Ulm Review*, a local newspaper, 12 august 1885; see Lothson, *Jeffers Petroglyphs*, p. 4.

3) See, in addition to Lothson, Snow, Dean, Petroglyphs of Southern Minnesota, *Minnesota Archaeologist*, vol. 24, pp. 103-128; Sigstad John, A Report of the Archaeological Investigations, Pipestone National Monument, *Journal of the Iowa Archaeological Society*, vol. 17, pp. 1-5.

4) The most complete description of the site, including a drawing of the now-destroyed glyphs, may be found in N.H. Winchell, *Aborigines in Minnesota*, St. Paul, Minnesota (Historical Society), 1910, pp. 562-66.

5) Catlinite pipes in prehistoric sites are rare but well diffused: well-known examples have come from Washington County, Nebraska (c. 1174-1450 CE) and from the Talking Crow site in South Dakota (1425-1500 CE). See John Ewers, *Plains Indian Sculpture*, Washington D.C.: (Smithsonian Institution Press), 1986, pp. 34-35.

6) Several hundred Dakota live on the Upper Sioux Reservation, near Granite Falls, and the Lower Sious Reservation near Redwood Falls, the two reservations closest to the Jeffers site. Similar numbers inhabit two more easterly reservations, one at Shakopee and one at Prairie Island.

7) Reuben Cold Thwaites, *Documents pertaining to early western travels*, (Cleveland), 1904, p. 429.

8) His principal account of the visit to Pipestone is found in *Illustrations of the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians*, London (Henry Bohn), 1857, pp. 163-177.

9) Catlin's claim that men of many Indian nations approached the quarry unarmed and in a prayerful manner may account for the small number of weapons and armed figures in the Pipestone glyphs compared to those of Jeffers.

10) At present the border between the culturally and linguistically distinct Woodlands and Plains peoples lies laterally across southern Minnesota, but it was not always so. Now the "border" is only a division between the portions of the state where seven Ojibwe (Woodlands) reservations and four Dakota (Plains) reservations are located, but in the early nineteenth century, when the Euroamerican population of the territory was extremely small, it was a hostile border between entrenched Plains peoples and invading Woodlands peoples who were driven westward by rapidly growing white

settlements on the east coast. The oral history of Lakota and Cheyenne peoples, both of the Plains, identify their homeland as central Minnesota.

11) Bray & Bray (eds.), *Joseph Nicollet on the Plains and Prairies*, St Paul, Minnesota (Historical Society), 1984, pp. 83-4.

12) See, inter alia, George Bird Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians*, New Haven (Yale University Press), 1923, pp. 96-7, 148.

13) Euroamerican "ceremonial" uses of catlinite in the nineteenth century frequently encapsulate in shockingly direct for notions of colonial donination and control. In the 1140s during the building of a monument to George Washington in Washington D.C. a stone sample from each state and territory was incorporated into the walls; white Minnesota settlers sent a piece of catlinite. At the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, Minnesota displayed in its pavilion a working model of a steam engine made entirely of catlinite. Since the significance of catlinite to Indian peoples was well known from the beginning, both must be seen as a conscious assertion of technological superiority, well in accord with contemporary white thinking about the eclipse of Indian populations.

Riassunto

I petroglifi sono ampiamente distribuiti nell'America del Nord e quelli della regione sud-occidentale sono ben noti. Nella regione delle pianure del Nord, invece, sono numerosi ma meno studiati. Il più grande sito di petroglifi rimanente nella valle del Mississippi si trova vicino a Jeffers, Minnesota, dove circa 2000 immagini grafiche di umani, animali e altre forme sono intagliati in una sporgenza rocciosa orizzontale di quarzite rossa e di arenaria. Sulla base dei soggetti rappresentati, i glifi sono stati attribuiti a due periodi: un gruppo al Tardo Arcaico (3000-500 a.C.) e l'altro al Tardo Preistorico (d.C. 900-1750). I siti di petroglifi furono scoperti dagli Euro-Americani nel tardo XIX secolo, e vennero spesso descritti come vestigia di civiltà ormai perdute. Allo stesso tempo, gli antropologi raccoglievano tra gli Indiani delle pianure del Nord, dati che indicavano un continuo contatto con questi siti, persino il loro uso per scopi cerimoniali. L'articolo descrive i petroglifi a Jeffers e i siti della regione ad essi associati, nel contesto della pratiche religiose tradizionali Dakota, e riflette sul perché le comunità locali Dakota non abbiano mantenuto legami religiosi con le immagini rappresentate.

Summary

Petroglyphs are widely distributed in North America, and those of the Southwest region are well known. In the Northern Plains region petroglyphs are numerous but rather less studied. The largest remaining petroglyph site in the upper Mississipi Valley is to be found near Jeffers, Minnesota, where nearly 2000 graphic images of humans, animals, and other forms are cut into a horizontal red quartzite and sandstone ledge. On the basis of the subject matter the glyphs have been dated to two periods: one group to the Late Archaic (3000-500 B.C.) and another to the Late Prehistoric (A.D. 900-1750). As petroglyph sites were noted by Euro-Americans in the late 19th century (sometimes recorded, sometimes defaced), they were often described in the popular press as vestiges of lost civilizations. Simultaneously, however, anthropologists were gathering data among Northern Plain Indian peoples indicating a continuing connection to such sites, even the use of them for ceremonial purposes. This paper describes petroglyphs at Jeffers and associated sites in the region in the context of traditional Dakota religious practice, and considers why local communities of Dakota people have not maintained religious ties to the images in the present day.

Résumé

Les pétroglyphs sont amplement présents en Amérique du Nord et ceux de la région sud-occidentale sont bien connus, contrairement à ceux des plaines du nord. Le plus grand site de

pétroglyphes resté, jusqu'à présent, dans la vallée du Mississipi, est situé près de Jeffers, Minnesota, où presque 2.000 images graphiques d'anthropomorphes, zoomorphes et d'autres formes sont gravées sur une roche saillante en quartzite rouge et en grès. Sur la base des sujets représentés, les glyphes ont été attribués à deux périodes: un groupe à l'Archaïque Récent (3000-500 av. J.-C.) et l'autre au Préhistorique Récent (900-1750 apr. J.-C.). Les sites de pétroglyphes ont été découverts par des Euro-Américains à la fin du XIXe siècle et ont été décrits comme vestiges de civilisations perdues. Au même temps, les anthropologues ont trouvé, chez les Indiens des plaines du Nord, des données qui indiquent un contact perpetuel avec ces sites et leur utilisation dans les cérémonies. Ce texte décrit les pétroglyphes de Jeffers et les sites de la région qui leur sont associés, dans le contexte des pratiques religieuses traditionnelles du Dakota, et s'interroge sur les motivations qui n'ont pas poussé les communautés Dakota à garder des liens religieux avec les images représentées.