



Fig. 53. Greaser Petroglyph site. A boulder containing numerous wavy line and lizard figures. (foto A. Melvin; Archivio WARA W02299).

PETROGLYPHS OF THE OREGON HIGH DESERT

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Overview of the High Desert

Most people think of Oregon as a forested, wet state and are surprised to find that over half the state is climatically semi-arid or arid. The Cascade mountain range of volcanic peaks extends roughly down the center of the state forming a rain shadow for the prevailing western winds and storms arriving from the Pacific Ocean. The southeastern quarter of the state is often called a high desert because of the high elevation and aridity, but it is also sometimes called a cold desert. More properly the southeastern quarter of the state should be referred to as a steppe.

The eastern Oregon steppe lies in the extreme northwestern corner of the Basin and Range province of the American West—a province encompassing almost all of Nevada and parts of California, Idaho, Utah, Oregon and Wyoming. The province is distinguished by long, north-south running fault block ranges with internal drainage forming lakes between the fault block ranges. Because there is no drainage to the sea and because of the general drying of the climate since the last ice age in the Pleistocene, the lakes in the Great Basin are very saline or reduced to dry salt flats. The geology of the Great Basin is classic horst and graben topography.

This paper will focus on the Oregon high desert, particularly Lake County because the rock art sites in Lake County are among the richest in the nation if not in the world. Lake County can be described as, "...a faulted, semi-arid region of sage and grassland with few trees except for scattered junipers and pine forests isolated on the tops of north-south ranges overlooking a landscape of ancient lakes and alkali flats." (Adams 2001)

The High Desert Petroglyph Sites

An examination of the classic work documenting petroglyph sites in Oregon and Washington reveals that Lake County contains the largest number and most significant sites in the Pacific Northwest (Loring and Loring 1996). The Lorings did a remarkable job in finding and documenting with drawings the sites of the Pacific Northwest in general and the Oregon desert in particular. Although their work is almost definitive, the author has located a number of undocumented sites and many more no doubt await discovery and documentation in the more inaccessible portions of the high desert. It should be noted, however, that the Lorings' did not attempt an interpretation of the petroglyphs.

Lake County contains approximately 100 petroglyph sites. The sites range from a single boulder covered with hundreds of engraved figures (e.g. the Greaser petroglyph site) to a basalt rim rock 5 miles long covered with many thousands of figures in hundreds of panels (e.g. Little Juniper Mountain site). Most of the figures are inscribed markings on basalt rock—the petroglyphs. However, some painted figures also survive in more protected areas—the pictograms. The pictograms are

usually done in red although white and black colors are also observed. The paint for the pictograms was thought to have been derived from animal fats mixed with natural minerals to make the desired color.

Many of the most significant sites such as Long Lake are located on east facing basalt rim rocks next to dry or ephemeral lake beds trapped between rim rocks. These sites are also often typified by the presence of lithic scatter, rock hunting blinds, stone circles, rock walls, soot marked caves and shelters and artifacts such as spear points, arrowheads, grinding stones, pestles, etc. Petroglyph sites can also be found in passes or canyons that are natural routes for migrating game such as mountain sheep, antelope or deer. These sites are much less diverse and extensive than the lakeside rim rock sites.

In the classic work on Oregon archaeology by Dr. Luther Cressman (Cressman 1987) *The Sandal and the Cave*, sagebrush sandals found in Fort Rock cave were dated to more than 9,000 years. Subsequently, petroglyphs at Long Lake have been dated to 6,600 years because they were buried beneath Mount Mazama ash—the ash formed by the eruption of Mount Mazama in the Cascade Range the remains of which now consist of Crater Lake National Park.

Dr. Cressman concluded that Native Americans were in eastern Oregon at least 12,000 years ago living near pluvial lakes that were much deeper than at present. They lived on now extinct horses, camels, bison and other animals. (Horses were reintroduced into the Oregon desert from stocks brought to North America by the Spanish. The reintroduction of the horses was perhaps as recent as 200-400 years ago in the case of the Northern Paiute tribe). Dr. Cressman also prepared one of the first studies of Oregon petroglyphs although not as comprehensive as the subsequent work by the Lorings (Cressman 1937).

Governmental Administration of the Sites

The Government of the United States is the most prominent land owner in eastern Oregon. Private ownership consists primarily of ranch tracts including the more well watered portions of the desert. Although a few petroglyph sites are on private land, the great majority are located on land administered by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. A few are on U.S. Forest Service Land.

Some of the sites such as the Greaser site are on well maintained, easily accessible roads. The more significant sites are generally located in very remote areas with horrible roads if roads exist at all. The “roads” to many of the remote sites are rock strewn and rough limiting progress to less than one mile per hour. High clearance vehicles with sturdy tires are required.

Vandalism is becoming of increasing concern by the agencies responsible for the sites, but vandalism so far is relatively minor and restricted to sites easily accessible such as the Abert Lake sites near highway 395. So far the government tends to manage these sites by restriction of physical access and by denial of information concerning the sites. The resources devoted to the interpretation and maintenance of the sites for public education and inspiration are totally inadequate at the present time given the cultural significance of the sites.

Tribal History

The inevitable question arises as to what tribe made the petroglyphs of the Oregon desert. The answer to this question is complicated by the ethnographic evidence that the Oregon desert in Lake County was used by various tribes at

various times in history or by different tribes at various times of the year in the same historical period. When Europeans reached the area in the late 1800's, the predominant tribe in the eastern portion of the high desert was the Northern Paiute. Further to the west were the Klamath and Modoc tribes while the Achomawi or Pit River tribe occupied the northern reaches of the Pit River and the southern portions of Goose Lake on the border of what is now Oregon and California. However, the Modoc, Achomawi and Paiute were known to all frequent the margins of the Goose Lake valley at different times of the year. It is thought that the Northern Paiute displaced the Klamath tribe further to the west from most parts of the desert on the order of 2,000 years ago. It is likely that many of the older petroglyphs can be attributed to the Klamath or the Modoc tribe or their ancestors while the more recent petroglyphs may have been the work of the Northern Paiute.

Of all the tribes particularly in more recent times, the Northern Paiute were the most nomadic given the need to cover large distances throughout the year to find plants and animals at the optimum time. The other tribes were more settled to the west of the Great Basin and could rely on more predictable resources such as salmon that migrated up the Klamath and Pit Rivers.

The tribes were much more mobile than we might believe. For instance, the Modoc tribe took Achomawi as slaves trading them to the Klamath who traded them to the Warm Springs tribe who traded them as far north as the Dalles on the Columbia River. From there Achomawi slaves might be traded to coastal Indians ending up perhaps near Puget Sound—about as far climatically from the desert country as it is possible to get. Obsidian from eastern Oregon was also an important trade item ending up at sites throughout the American West. These trade routes also worked to the disadvantage of the tribes because they provided for the spread of European diseases to which the tribes had no resistance. Many of the tribes were decimated by disease before they ever contacted Europeans in person.

Interpretation of the Petroglyphs

I am going to next describe an interpretative theory of the meaning of the petroglyphs before describing the sites themselves even though this appears to be out of logical order. I believe having a framework for understanding what the petroglyphs mean will assist in the later description of the more important sites.

I struggled for many years to understand the meaning of the symbols and iconography of the petroglyphs utilizing the mind set of a scientist from a western culture. This involved seeing the petroglyphs as maps, waterhole markings, historical stories, tribal boundaries, hunting scenes etc. I am reminded of my discussion with Chief Wewa of the Warm Spring Tribe when visiting Long Lake. He scoffed at my scientific approach and set me on the path of looking at the sites through the eye of the artist and the spiritual person. I eventually realized that an understanding of the petroglyphs cannot come from a scientific mind because their meaning lies firmly in the realm of the artist and the spiritual guide. First it is necessary to understand the ancient religion of shamanism—a religion extending back at least some 40,000 years.

Probably the most definitive work on shamanism was done by Mircea Eliade as documented in his classic work *Shamanism* (Eliade 1964). After reading Mircea and others on the subject of shamanism, I summarized the shamanic experience and found all of them depicted on the rocks! Suddenly the petroglyphs were intelligible.

The essential element of shamanism is the trance flight to the heavens under the influence of deprivation (lack of food or sleep), music or chant, native



Fig. 54. Petroglyph Lake site. An abstract shaman with goggle eyes, head plumage and lizard appendages near a crack or portal to the underworld. A spiral portal marks the lower right of the panel. Several other abstracted (stick figure) shamans dance to the left. (foto A. Melvin; Archivio WARA W02296).



Fig. 55. Stone Bridge site. Highly abstracted shamans with arm loops accompanied by highly stylized horned animals. The shaman appears to emerge from a cleft at he left to dance into the air accompanied by animals. (foto A. Melvin; Archivio WARA W02297).

hallucinatory agents such as wild tobaccos or a combination of these. The shamans trance flight typically took three days and involved the following stages:

- preparation by ritual cleansing with water and perhaps ingestion of blood
- the induction of a trance
- the perception of the body being immersed in water followed by the perception of the skin and muscles being stripped, the bones being dismembered and the skeleton being stretched greatly in the vertical dimension
- the appearance of within the eye or entoptic patterns of dots, lines, nets and the like
- the presence of an animal guide or female familiar for assistance
- the entry to the underworld via a crack, cave or portal
- the transformation into an animal or bird form or a part animal/part human form
- the climbing of a ladder or a tree
- the crossing of a dangerous bridge in the sky, often depicted as a rainbow, followed by the flying across space like an arrow
- the ascent to the stars, planets, moon to the realm of the great spirit to seek healing for the shamanic client, to seek the return of lost souls or to seek to fulfill the needs of the tribe for rain or other necessities
- while in the shamanic flight, the perception of a twin back on earth to which the flying shaman was joined by a silver thread—a phenomena also documented in modern accounts of astral projection
- the return to earth and the re-assembly of the dismembered body parts and the re-fleshing of the body
- the making of hand print petroglyphs to reaffirm the existence of the body.

If the shaman were successful in serving the interest of the tribe or client, great rewards could be bestowed making them wealthy, powerful, respected or even feared. If not successful, the shamanic life could be dangerous because they were sometimes stoned by disappointed clients. The male shamans were noteworthy in their sexual prowess, and male shaman figures often display the male organ erected.

I have noted virtually all of the steps of the shamanic flight in the petroglyph depictions on the Oregon desert. Because the shaman lived in the sky, depictions of astronomical phenomena are also found. For instance, I am aware of possibly two depictions of comets. Of course, they do not appear in a left to right or top to bottom order as we are accustomed to reading. It is important to look at them intuitively as organic, whole pieces of art. In this endeavor, a study of modern art has been invaluable.

Significant Sites in the Oregon Desert

Space only permits a very few of the most typical and important sites in the Oregon desert. However, a few are discussed to give the flavor of the sites found in the area.

The Greaser Petroglyph Site

The Greaser Petroglyph is a single large boulder covered with figures. The site is readily accessible from the town of Adel, and it is a National Register site established by the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). The designs are estimated to be between 500 and 6,500 years old.

The Greaser site contains natural cracks with stick figure shaman forms moving to them (the plunge to the underworld), numerous lizard forms (a common animal familiar), shaman twins joined by threads, shaman figure in ascent posture



Fig. 56. Long Lake site. A panel containing ladder figures and a very stacked chevron figure. Ladders and the "tree of life" were used by the shaman in trance to climb to the heavens . This panel also contains a sun figure. (foto A. Melvin; Archivio WARA W02298).



Fig. 57. Hart Lake site. A boulder covered with cup-like engravings. This boulder was found next to a stone habitation circle and fire pit shelter. (foto A. Melvin; Archivio WARA W02300).

(arms to the side like wings), and entoptic figures. The site could be a female shaman site since many of the shaman figures have a clear vulva like manifestation.

The Stone Bridge Site

This site is a boulder field located near the narrows of a large lake where General Crook had his troops build a stone bridge to allow the transfer from Old Fort Warner to New Fort Warner. The forts were used against the Northern Paiutes to settle uprisings in the area. General Crook did not mention the petroglyphs in his journal even though his troops must have camped in the boulder field—the boulders of which are covered with figures.

The Stone Bridge site is remarkable for many horned animal figures appearing to leap into space (some are vertical), a wheel like web or net capturing the sun, stretched shaman figures with horns or bird like head plumage, figures with atlatls, numerous shaman figures in ascent posture and several peculiar shaman figures with skeletal bodies and oversized goggle eyes. Most remarkable is a shaman figure that appears to be leaping through space grabbing star figures with arms and legs.

The Long Lake Site

The Long Lake site is one of the most significant in the nation if not the world in my opinion not only because of its scope but because of the diversity and quality of many of the panels. Numerous smaller sites exist at small lakes in the vicinity of Long Lake. The Long Lake site extends for over two miles along an east facing basalt rim at the edge of an ephemeral lake. About 1300 designs are found at the site as well as rock blinds, habitation circles and an intriguing stone circle. The area around Long Lake is called the High Lakes Potential National Register Site, and it contains one of the largest concentrations of rock art in North America according to the government. The oldest dated rock art in North America is found here, and occupation extends back for more than 10,000 years.

The site contains several probable depictions of the 1054 supernova including possibly the only numerical depiction of the supernova in the West (author's opinion) in that the days of supernova visibility in the daylight sky were indicated by tally marks. The site contains numerous ladder like symbols including one of connecting chevrons similar to a design found in a mound in Alabama, numerous lizard and snake figures, rainbow figures, plant figures including possibly corn (author's opinion), goggle eyed shaman forms (possible depictions of thunder gods), numerous depictions of shamanic ascent including some that show in sequence the elongation and dismemberment of body parts, portals with ascent paths leading to them, winged figures, possible star and constellation patterns, shamans in descent posture, spiral portals, hand figures, sun nets and numerous horned animals to mention a few. The site also contains a number of geometrically precise patterns of some as yet undetermined significance.

A stone circle also exists on the top of the rim. The circle is about 24 feet in diameter and has standing stones with sighting portals and slots in the walls. There is also a petroglyph on the inside wall. When sitting in the center of the circle, the standing stones and some of the slots align perfectly with the faulted lines of Hart Mountain to the north and Little Juniper Mountain to the south. An animal head standing stone with drilled eyes and mouth exists about 100 feet to the north of the circle. It is also in alignment with Hart Mountain and the sighting slot in the circle. It is likely some of the slots in the circle align with astronomical events such as the sun rising at winter solstice. A drilled shell bead was found at the sites as well as a

pile of obsidian and a spear point left on the lake probably from a sinking raft. A drilled raft anchor was also found at a nearby smaller lake.

An even more extensive site than Long Lake, the North of Little Juniper Mountain Site, extends for more than five miles along a basalt rim. The site is about a mile east of Long Lake in very rough landscape.

The Rabbit Creek Site

The Rabbit Creek Site is on an isolated basalt rim rock overlooking an ephemeral stream in a canyon to the east. The site defied location for several days when we were looking for it, but remarkably the rim rock is crossed by a high voltage transmission line and a jeep track. Because the site is very high and east facing, the site could have been a prime take off point for astral journeys. The site is remarkable because of the number and variety of sun net patterns both circular and rectangular including possibly a depiction of the sun caught in the Milky Way—a phenomenon that appears naturally at solstice sunrise (Rafter 1992). Also are found extremely elongated shaman figures in ascent posture with shields, numerous ladder figures, a possible depiction of the sun and hoop game, connected twin shaman figures, animal figures in vertical ascent and an intriguing cat (mountain lion) figure.

The Sheep Creek Spring Site

The Sheep Creek Spring Site is a relatively small but interesting site found where springs emerge from a basalt rim rock overlooking an isolated circular ephemeral lake to the north. The site is unique for depictions of turtles, mounted horses and possible complex star patterns with shamans flying among them. Grinding areas are found on the tops of several low boulders as well as large areas of red mineral paint, mortars and pestles and possibly rock covered gravesites (author's opinion).

Stone Walls

Numerous stone walls exist in the Oregon desert many of which start near lake shores and extend perpendicularly up the side of nearby boulder littered slopes to the foot of vertical fault walls. Some of these walls were no doubt built by early sheep men or cattle men, but some of the low walls are quite old and were no doubt constructed and used for hunting purposes by Native tribes. The walls are often highly lichen encrusted. The walls themselves would make an interesting topic for further study particularly in their possible relation to petroglyph sites.

Petroglyphs and Modern Art

I am often amazed with the similarity between the imagery found on petroglyphs and the imagery found in modern art—imagery I like to call shamanic imagery. This imagery is particularly apparent in the work of Miro, Klee, Kandinsky, Chagall, Calder and Giacometti. There is no doubt in my mind that visual artists often experience a creative trance state that influences their art. A relevant example can be found in a interesting book about Miro (Penrose 1970). Space does not permit an adequate discussion of these similarities, but the subject is worthy of further extensive attention.

I also notice shamanic imagery in certain modern advertising and in modern popular mythology such as superman and more recently, spiderman. Shamanic imagery can also be found in a number of nursery stories such as the Cow Who

Jumped Over the Moon and in such timeless myths as Santa Clause and the flying reindeer.

The similarities between the elements of shamanism and the Christ experience as elaborated in Christianity are also intriguing including the elements of deprivation, baptism, crucifixion and resurrection not to mention the Eucharist.

I have arrived at the conclusion that ancient art, modern art and religious iconography, particularly Christian, have a common source-perhaps something akin to what Jung calls the collective unconscious. Noteworthy examples of paintings with imagery similar to petroglyphs include Miro's, *Woman Surrounded by a Flight of Birds in the Night*, *The Gold of the Azure*, *Painting 1953*, *The Blaze of the Sun Wounds the Lingering Star* to name only a few. The complete exploration of the similarities between modern and ancient rock art must wait for a future time.

Riassunto

L'articolo si focalizza sul deserto dell'Oregon, in particolare su Lake County, zona con un elevato numero di siti di arte rupestre. L'interpretazione dei petroglifi come descrizione dell'esperienza sciamanica è stata possibile solo comprendendo l'antica religione sciamanica con un approccio artistico e spirituale.

Summary

The article focuses on the Oregon high desert, in particular on Lake County, where there is a large number of rock art sites. The interpretation of the petroglyphs as a description of the shamanic experience has been possible only through the understanding of the ancient religion of shamanism with an artistic and spiritual approach.

Resumé

L'article est focalisé sur le désert de l'Oregon, où il y a un grand nombre de sites d'art rupestre. L'interprétation des pétroglyphes comme une description de l'expérience chamannique a été possible seulement à travers la compréhension de l'ancienne religion chamannique avec une approche artistique et spirituelle.

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