

TRADITIONAL DAKOTA RELIGIOUS PRACTICES CONNECTED TO PETROGLYPHS

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Petroglyphs are widely distributed in North America, and those of the Southwest region are well known. In the Northern Plains region petroglyphs are also numerous but rather less studied. The largest remaining petroglyph site in the upper Mississippi 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 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 Plains Indian peoples indicating a continuing connection to such sites, even use of them for ceremonial purposes. Cheyenne and Arapaho men, for example, living further to the west, associated petroglyphs to specific aspects of the spirit world and still use the sites for prayer. 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.