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The South Carolina Petroglyph Survey

By Tommy Charles

The author of the following paragraph is unknown to me but I quote it from "THE WORLD IS YOURS," The Smithsonian Institution Radio Program, Sunday, October 25, 1936. The program was aired over the NBC Blue Network.

"Mysterious Indian Carvings Arouse Riotous Speculations"

"Mysterious carvings made on boulders, cliffs, and cave walls by American Indians attracted the attention and aroused the speculations of white men soon after their arrival on this continent. Since then, speculations have continued to run riot, and the work of scientists has advanced but slowly."

Petroglyph, a Greek word that means rock writing, is often used to denote any carving or inscription on rock. Rock paintings are often called petroglyphs when, in fact they are pictographs, a closely related Greek word meaning picture writing.

Pictographs denote that type of writing in which objects and events are represented pictorially on any kind of surface, including rock. In South Carolina, we need only concern ourselves with petroglyphs, as any paintings made by prehistoric humans, have long since fallen victim to our inhospitable climate. On the other hand, modern-day pictographs, or "graffiti," are abundant and have found their way onto every conceivable surface.

When we think of petroglyphs we most often think of those made by American Indians of our western states, or the natives of Australia or Africa, as those are the places where petroglyphs have been best documented and subsequently the public is more aware of their presence. However impressive the carvings of these areas, petroglyphs are not limited to them: similar carvings are found on all continents except Antarctica, occurring almost everywhere rock is available.

Petroglyphs are found in every region of the United States. In the western states large areas of arid, sparsely vegetated landscape have made the discovery of petroglyphs relatively easy and thousands have been found there. In the wooded eastern states they are more elusive. Dense vegetation may hide an entire rock formation, algae and lichens often obliterate the carvings, hiding them from all but the most intense inspection. There is no way to know how
rock carvings in the eastern states compare numerically with those of the west, but it is safe to say that relatively few of the total number of eastern carvings have been discovered.

What is the meaning of petroglyphs? All sorts of theories have been proposed for the origin and meaning of rock carvings. Some individuals propose that they may prove that Egyptians, Babylonians, Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, Chinese or other Old World peoples migrated into the New World much earlier than we think. Others have speculated that the carvings are associated with those imaginary cradles of civilization, the “lost continents” of Atlantis and Mu. Some have sought to use petroglyphs to prove that the Garden of Eden was in America. An excerpt from “THE WORLD IS YOURS,” states that “An amateur expedition, with more money and enthusiasm than scientific training and caution, once spent thousands of dollars in an attempt to show that all systems of writing and all civilizations of the world had their origins in the sage-covered valleys of western Nevada.” More current and popular myths are that rock carvings represent treasure maps and/or the presence of buried treasure. Surely some of the prehistoric rock carvings were done with a purpose, but certainly they did not indicate the location of buried treasure. In the American West it is known that some were made for religious purposes, others are associated with puberty rites, others represent rain clouds, clan marks, etc., but many are simply abstract figures having no discernible meaning. The creation of petroglyphs is not limited to prehistoric peoples. In South Carolina both ancient and recent examples occur.

Please continue to keep your eye out for any unusual carvings you might encounter on your property. I can be reached at the Institute at (803) 777-8170.

THE PETROGLYPH SURVEY UPDATE
By Tommy Charles

On November 12, I hosted a walking tour to the Gauly Falls Petroglyph site for local Greenville and Upstate residents, which was a great success despite the rainy evening. I spent two days before the tour mapping with a transit over 198 drawings on this one site adjacent to the beautiful Gauly Falls located on the Table Rock Resort property, owned by David and Judy Wilkins. There will be further discussion of this site and other petroglyph sites that have been discovered since February of 1997 in the next issue of Legacy.

Also, I was guest lecturer at the annual conference of the Society for Georgia Archaeology, October 17-18. The topic was “The South Carolina Petroglyph Survey.” The conference was held at the University of Georgia, Athens. While there, I also gave the lecture to a class in the University’s Anthropology Department.

A symposium titled “Story in Stone: Rock Art of the Carolinas Piedmont,” will be held on January 31, 1998 from 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM at the Museum of York County in Rock Hill, South Carolina. The symposium is being sponsored by the Museum of York County, Schiele Museum, the Catawba Indian Nation, and the Archaeological Society of South Carolina. Please contact Cindy Abrams at the Museum of York County (803) 329-2121 for more information.