Petroglyph Survey Rocks On

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Publication Info
Published in Legacy, Volume 5, Issue 1, 2000, pages 18-19.
http://www.cas.sc.edu/sciaa/
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As summer approaches it signals the end of the petroglyph survey until next fall. Not that there is anything wrong with looking for rock art in warm weather, but occasionally there are other duties that must be addressed, such as participating in excavations at Santa Elena and the Allendale Paleoindian sites. As entertaining as these projects are, I look forward to returning to the Piedmont and mountains next fall and winter to continue the search for petroglyphs.

The petroglyph survey continues to be highly successful and several new sites were discovered this season. One site, in Oconee County, is exceptional. The site contains numerous boulders located at the base of a hill and beside a series of shoals on a small stream. Most of these boulders were hidden by soil that had apparently washed down from the adjacent hillside and leaves from the hardwood forest canopy. It was only after we had cleaned a number of the more exposed rocks that we became aware that we were walking on top of completely buried ones. As these buried rocks were discovered they were cleaned using rakes and shovels and then washed with buckets of water which exposed an assortment of carvings. Like most rock carvings in our area, they can best be seen at night by skimming them with a good light but a few are visible by day. Each carving is unique with a single exception. One of the carvings is very similar to three others that are on a large rock in Pickens County, almost fifty miles away. It is the only site, other than the Pickens site, where this particular motif has been found. Another rarity at the Oconee site are numerous cupules. Cupules are indentations in the rock, formed by pecking or grinding. Cupules vary in size but average about the shape and size of half a chicken egg. Some of the cupules are joined together by grooves pecked into the rock to form abstract figures.

There is still considerable work to be done at the Oconee site with mapping and night photography, and...
we will return as time permits later in the year. We will continue to probe for additional buried rock and chances are good that the site’s perimeter will expand beyond the presently defined boundary.

One of the most exciting finds of the season was made by a geology student at Furman University. The student, Andy Carroll, was conducting a geology project in the mountains of northern Pickens County, where he discovered a large rock shelter. Inside the shelter on a wall protected from rain and light was a drawing done in orange ocher. This is the first pictograph discovered in South Carolina that is, perhaps, prehistoric. I say perhaps, because the ocher used in the drawing is a mineral, and a carbon-14 date cannot be obtained from it in order to establish a date. Nevertheless, there are no other markings within the shelter. No names, no initials, no dates, nothing to indicate a historic origin or to disprove the possibility of a prehistoric origin. The drawing consists of a “sun” with seven radiating lines and seven surrounding figures. The drawing is in relatively good condition, but those elements near the bottom are a bit more weathered than those nearer the ceiling of the shelter. A pictograph was also reported in the Table Rock/Ceasars Head area of northern Pickens/Greenville Counties by Mooney and Thomas in 1891. Dennis Chastain, wildlife writer and naturalist, and I have been searching for this pictograph but so far it has eluded us, unless it is the Carroll find.

When it rains, it pours. Shortly after the Carroll discovery, a second possible pictograph was reported in Kershaw County. This one was reported by long-time SCIAA friends, The Steen family and Susan and Catoe Holler, Jr. The pictographs in the Kershaw shelter consist of a series of circles (and in one instance concentric circles), and abstract lines that wind over the shelter roof. Attempts to photograph the faint drawing at this shelter have met with mixed success, but we’ll keep trying until we get it right.

Circle and line carvings continue to be reported—our count for South Carolina now stands at 57, solidifying our hold on number one in the nation (Coach Holtz, eat your heart out). And that’s about it. Again, thanks to the many people who have supported the survey in so many ways. This is really your project, I just record the data. Until next fall. Please call if you want to get involved.

First pictograph discovered in South Carolina, thought to be prehistoric. (Photo by Andy Carroll)

Cupules and abstract carvings in Oconee County. (Photo by Tommy Charles)