

Archaeology Month, 2012

The Missouri Archaeological Society



Missouri Rock Art

Rock Art in Missouri

Missouri is believed to have the largest number of rock art sites of any state in the eastern United States. Rock art is a generic term for “petroglyphs” (rock carvings, peckings, scratchings), “pictographs” (paintings, drawings), and “painted petroglyphs” (petroglyphs filled with pigment). These were made by the American Indians hundreds of years ago. Although there are about 150 known rock art sites in the state, only three occur on state park property and only two of those are open to the public. Both are petroglyph sites.* The remainder of Missouri’s known rock art sites occur on private property.

Rock art sites are unique in that they serve as in situ artifacts. That is, they were created in the very location where they are found (trusting that they have not been removed). Rock art sites are nonportable artifacts as opposed to portable lithics, pottery, bone, and other prehistoric cultural materials. These other materials were often moved, traded, lost, abandoned and so on, either in their original media form (clay, stone, bone) or in their finished forms (pottery, tools). A petroglyph in a cave, on a bluff wall, or on a rock outcrop, is the mark of human activity that occurred in the past at that precise location. The viewer must go to the artifact in order to study it in-depth. This means that as long as a rock art site can survive the elements of weathering and possible vandalism, it can be re-examined for many generations. In the past, North American rock art traditionally attracted amateur archaeologists. Most professionals ignored rock art for many decades. Thus, these in situ artifacts were often not included in the archaeological record. Essentially, rock art is considered “non-stratigraphic,” although some sites have stratigraphy below a wall in which pigment flakes can be found in conjunction with datable charcoal.

A small percentage of rock art sites have been destroyed through construction and other land modifications. Preservation of rock art sites in Missouri is extremely poor and sites are disappearing due to climate changes, biological encroachment, and general neglect, not to mention occasional vandalism. Thus, protection and preservation of the remaining sites is of utmost importance.

Motifs

A motif, as defined for rock art, is a symbol that is complex to a degree. “An element” which is a dot, line, etc., is not complex. An element changes into a motif when it is made more complex by adding another element, or doubling it, or adding appendages. So, a motif can be a square, a concentric circle, a dot-in-circle, a cross-in-circle, or a bird, foot, hand, mace, etc. Common motifs not depicted here include the bilobed arrow, deer, cross-in-circle, and pit-and-groove.

Mace

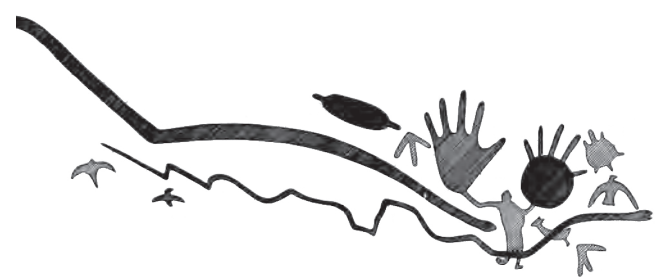
The true function of maces or spuds is unknown, but they are thought by some to have been symbols or emblems of authority. Since they were nonutilitarian, they are considered ceremonial. A mace found at the Lilbourn site in New Madrid County is illustrated to the right. The mace motif is frequently encountered in Missouri rock art. Some scholars consider the mace to be one of the few motifs limited to the late thirteenth century and associated with the South-eastern Ceremonial Complex. Maces are depicted in several variations, sometimes alone and sometimes held in a raised hand.



Hands



The hand motif is limited in quantity and distribution. Hand depictions vary from prints, to skeletal hands, to enlarged or abnormally “fat” hands. Anthropomorphs with arms/hands in raised position are often considered shamanic.



Bird Tracks

These are found in great numbers in Missouri as well as other parts of the world. The motif can be in the form of a simple bisected V, or it can be very detailed. It is unclear whether all



of these are even bird related. They may be encoded abstractions, tridents, vulvas, or a forked wooden stick (important in ritual). Tracks are often found on isolated boulders or in association with larger panels.

Bird

The motif that seems to be most often carved or painted on rocks in Missouri is a bird. The most prominent clan icon of the Osage, Winnebago, and Omaha was avian. Numerous references are made in ethnographic accounts to the importance of birds, including birds of prey, the pileated woodpecker, the heron, and others that may be portrayed in rock art. The bird has also been found engraved on portable artifacts. The main reason for the abundance of bird motifs is the possible connection of birds to the sky, thunder, and rain, as well as to the deities or spirits that dwell in the heavens. The photo to the right and the inspiration for the poster front is a “thunderbird” that occurs at Washington State Park. It is not known if these forms are birds, bird deities, ancestral spirits, or bird-men. These bird depictions could also represent shamans.



Visit a Rock Art Site

*Washington State Park Petroglyphs, Washington County

This is Missouri’s premier public petroglyph site. Once you get to the park, follow the park signs to the petroglyphs. There are two locations. The larger of the two is a line of boulders below a boardwalk (under an overhead shelter). It contains some excellent motifs and figures (birds, serpents, humans, squares, and more). (636) 586-2995

*Thousand Hills State Park Petroglyphs, Adair County

The petroglyphs are located inside a building, so call ahead to make sure it is open. The petroglyphs include two large deer (60 cm). Other boulders are covered with depictions of animals, humans, abstract designs, and more. Unfortunately, there is also some modern graffiti on a few of the boulders. (660) 665-6995

These parks are managed by the Missouri Department of Natural Resources. For more information, call 1-800-334-6946

Missouri Archaeology Month is a statewide celebration to promote the protection, preservation, and documentation of archaeological resources. Archaeology Month 2012 is sponsored by the Missouri Archaeological Society, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, AMEC Earth & Infrastructure, American Resources Group, Ltd., and SCI Engineering, Inc. Over fifty events and activities will be held throughout Missouri. Archaeology Month is made possible by those individuals and local chapters who took the time to organize, promote, and present these activities. The Annual Fall Symposium will be held in DeSoto near Washington State Park on September 15. For details, please visit <http://associations.missouristate.edu/mas/archaeologymonth.html> or contact the Society at 417-836-3773 or lhane@missouristate.edu.

The 2012 Archaeology Month theme is “Missouri Rock Art.” The poster front features an interpretation of a “Thunderbird” glyph from Washington State Park and images of thunderbird glyphs from the state of Missouri. The back of the poster provides a description of some rock art motifs found in Missouri.

Thank you to the following for their contributions to the 2012 poster: Michael Fuller, the Missouri Department of Natural Resources, Neal Lopinot, and Doug Porter. For additional information about rock art, we recommend *The Petroglyphs and Pictographs of Missouri* by Carol Diaz-Granados and James R. Duncan. Photos courtesy of Carol Diaz-Granados, Michael Fuller, and Doug Porter.

Special acknowledgment is extended to Carol Diaz-Granados for her invaluable knowledge of Missouri rock art and Geri Schrab of DeForest, Wisconsin, Rock Art in Watercolors, LLC, for providing the original artwork on the front of this poster.

To record a rock art site, contact Kerry Nichols, Missouri State Historic Preservation Office(573) 751-7858.



The Missouri Archaeological Society (1935-2012) Archaeology Month



The Missouri Archaeological Society
901 S. National Avenue
Springfield, MO 65897

Non-Profit Org.
US Postage Pd.
Permit #120
Springfield, MO.