

# THE SA PETROGLYPHS, HISTORIC PERIOD ROCK ART IN NORTHEASTERN WYOMING

by

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## ABSTRACT

A small petroglyph panel is in the scoria uplands of northeastern Wyoming. A set of vertical parallel lines and individual horse tracks represent two motif classes typical of equestrian period Native American biographic rock art in the Powder River Basin. The lack of associated human (including faces only), horse, and weapon figures seems unusual. Modern inscriptions on an adjacent panel display stylistic trends of Euroamerican rock art and contrast in technology, content, and message from earlier figures.

## INTRODUCTION

The SA Petroglyphs (48CA4121) were recorded as an off-survey site during a nearby cultural survey for a coalbed methane expansion project in late 2001. The site is near SA Creek in the northwestern corner of Campbell County, just east of the Powder River (Figure 1), an area not known for its rock art (Francis 1991:399). Sandstone bluffs and overhangs do occur along this part of the creek and its tributaries. During a check for rock art on these bluffs, several examples of historic names and dates, most presumably representing various kinds of herder or ranch activity, were noted within a relatively small area of about 200 acres. The SA Petroglyphs presently are the only confirmed example of Native American rock art in this immediate vicinity, although there is potential for additional aboriginal rock art sites in the area.

## SITE LOCATION, SETTING, AND DESCRIPTION

The site is in a scoria uplands area northwest of Spotted Horse and near SA Creek, a tributary to the Powder River to the northwest. In this portion of the extended Powder River Breaks, drainages are broad and open and bordered by juniper and pine covered sandstone hills. Many of these hills are capped with prominent scoria deposits. Throughout this parkland zone are exposed sandstone ledges with prominent vertical exposures, overhangs, and shallow rockshelters. Most of the local sandstone is relatively soft and friable, but there are numerous faces of denser, finer, and more solid stone with somewhat darker patinated surfaces ideal for painting or engraving. A few of these faces have been scratched with modern names, dates, and a few brands, all from the twentieth century. Although a few shelters and terrace areas contain cultural deposits, most surface evidence for prehistoric use consists of relatively sparse surface scatters of lithic debitage.

The site is in a protected alcove-like area at the head of a short draw. This alcove is surrounded by steep slopes covered with junipers and pines. The sloping bottom of the alcove supports grass and scattered sage while gently descending into the main tributary drainage and on to SA Creek. Sandstone bluffs line the alcove. The outer point of the upper bluff with the site overlooks lower open country to the north and east, with an excellent extended view from the point and the petroglyph panel. The main occupied shelters here mostly face south and east into various parts of the alcove and are more protected from winds and inclement weather. Petroglyphs and modern inscriptions are on open vertical faces. No wall alterations were noted in shelters or on adjacent protected walls within the alcove.

## PETROGLYPHS

Prehistoric petroglyphs at this site only occur on a single, discrete panel about five feet wide and three feet tall (Figure 2). The figures are at about chest to face height and are easily reachable. There is a series of at least 22 mostly vertical and somewhat parallel, incised lines, ranging about 15-45 cm long. Integrated with these grooves are three horse tracks; the upper two being the clearest (Figure 3). These are vertically elongated ovals with dots at the lower ends representing metal horseshoes or mule shoes with heels (Figures 4 and 5). The lower, and largest, track is a wider, more circular oval, like a horse, without obvious dots at the end, or perhaps the dots have simply worn off (Figure 6). To the right of the lower track are several pecked small dots. Most grooves are fairly rounded at the bottom, and others are more V-shaped in cross section. All appear to have been made with a stick rubbed into the fairly coarse, yellowish to gray sandstone.

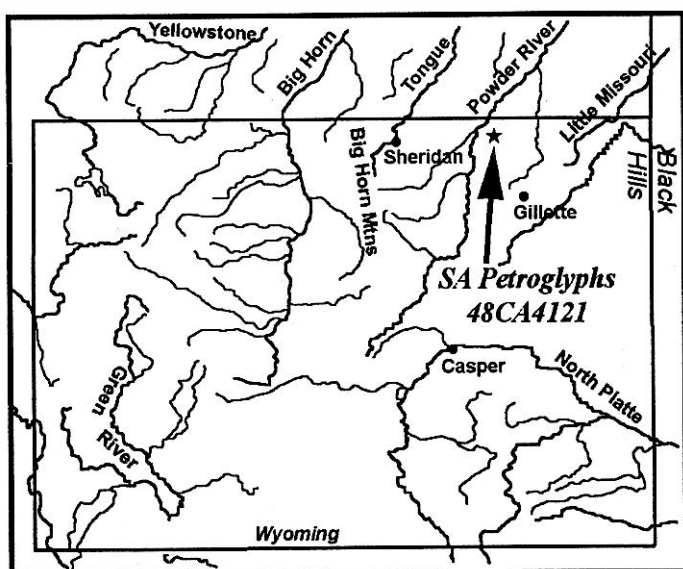


Figure 1. Location of the SA Petroglyphs.

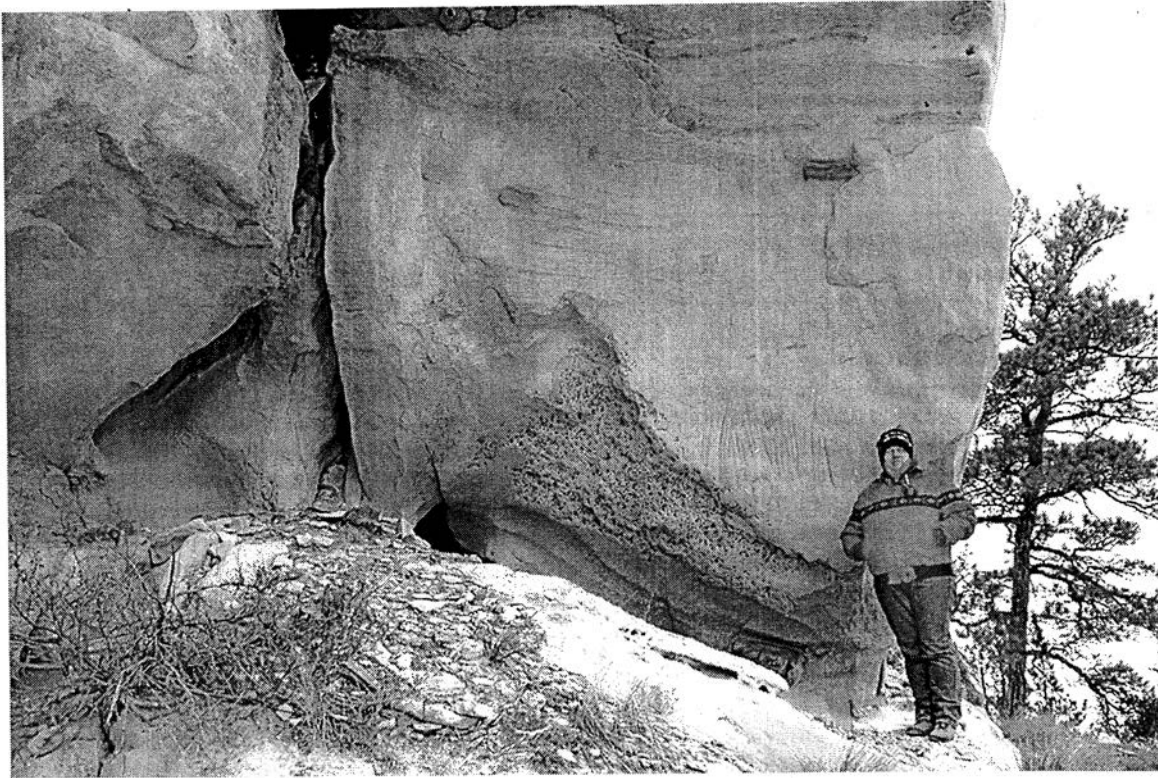


Figure 2. General view of the petroglyph panel.

**MODERN INSCRIPTIONS**

Modern names and dates are on a north-facing panel, with a more extensive view, just around the corner from the prehistoric panel (Figures 7 and 8). Inscriptions were done with a sharp implement, presumably a knife or other metal object. The only dates relate to high school kids from the class of 1980, with inscriptions dated 1979. Also here is the inscription, *Gives Head*, apparently referring to sexual activity. Initials across the rock surface are believed to relate to other students during the same, single visit.



Figure 3. Petroglyph panel.

**DISCUSSION**

The prehistoric inscriptions are tightly clustered into a single panel and are not spread out across the cliff, or in other areas across this much more extensive exposure. Such tight integration of figures is unusual. Their production method resulting in relatively wide, rounded grooves seems fairly common for early historic petroglyphs, while later inscriptions are often done with sharp implements, such as arrow points or knives. The set of elongated vertical parallel lines is a common motif not only in early historic art of the Northwestern Plains (Feyhl 1980), but also of prehistoric painted rock art of central Montana (Greer and Greer 1996). This motif is also sometimes produced as individually painted lines and sometimes as paint-soaked hands dragged down the wall. Although the function of parallel lines is unknown, it seems most likely the related meaning was not the same through time or between regions. Certainly Late Prehistoric painted lines did not likely function the same as Historic Period inscribed lines. Although petroglyphs of this type are often lumped under the explanation of tool grooves, they did not all function in this manner. Those at SA Creek do not appear to have functioned as such at all.

Horse or mule prints are rare, and were reported at only twelve sites on the Northwestern Plains at the time of Keyser and Klassen's research for their recent book (2001: 183). Animal tracks are usually found in clusters of three to twenty-five prints (Keyser and Klassen 2001: 182). Horse tracks are usually depicted as small C-shaped tracks, not as large individual horseshoes with obvious heels as found at the SA Petroglyphs. When horse tracks are shown in rock art, they are usually not individual tracks unless mixed with



Figure 4. Horseshoe print.



Figure 5. Horseshoe print.



Figure 6. Horseshoe print.

other kinds of animals, such as bison (Johnson 1975). More common are “trails” of multiple, much smaller horse tracks often placed sideways, presumably indicating a trip or a route (Keyser and Klassen 2001:251-252, 262). The individual horse tracks at the SA site expand the morphological range of the horse hoofprint motif. The meaning of the panel, or the intent of the drawer, obviously, is not known, but the overall form certainly is within the general pattern of Plains Indian historic period Biographic Tradition. The site also is within the regional distribution, and at the end of the time frame, for the Hoofprint Tradition as defined primarily from animal tracks. Functional explanations, however, for both the Hoofprint Tradition (“symbols of fertility and hunting magic,” Keyser and Klassen 2001:188) and the Biographic Tradition (“a record of a warrior’s personal accomplishments and important life events,” Keyser and Klassen 2001:244) do not appear to be satisfactory explanations for the individual SA horse tracks, although they certainly could be associated with either scenario.

The more recent additions also are noteworthy in their own right. Interestingly, no modern inscriptions were placed on the face with the prehistoric petroglyphs, although those earlier inscriptions were obvious. From this, it would appear (though unusual and seemingly unlikely) the modern visitors recognized the age of the earlier figures and specifically chose not to deface them. Alternatively, the students may simply have chosen a more

suitable surface of darker, harder sandstone without previous markings, and one that faced more outward toward the open country beyond (seemingly the more parsimonious explanation).

These recent inscriptions are typical of types beginning, or becoming more prominent, in the late 1950s of identifying people with high school classes or high school graduation dates. Personal identification is represented by names or initials related to, or regionally identified with, a particular social age set. In some cases, though not at this site, the identification is not just with the high school or the class graduation date, which refers not so much to the date as to the social group it represents, but some sites equate this social reference more closely with the sports team of that institution, such as *Smithville Bears*. Equally common in such context, though not present here, is the recognition of a competing school or team, often with reference to the competition, such as *Beat the Bears*, or the more derogatory *Laurel Sucks* (such as found spray painted over aboriginal figures at the Ryegate Petroglyphs, 24GV406, in Montana). This as an expression of intended personal or group power or superiority over an opposing force or group, a kind of reference, also can be seen, of course, in similar form, in some late period aboriginal biographic art.

Other kinds of name-date inscriptions are present in nearly all areas, as well as the extended SA Creek zone. Most common, of course, are names with associated dates reflecting the time of visitation. Thus, *Bob Smith 1929*, would most likely refer



Figure 7. Recent inscriptions.



Figure 8. Recent inscriptions.

to Bob's 1929 visit to the particular site. Earlier recordings, however, often identify the visitor with his birth date, such as *Suzy Yellow Tail 1842* at site 48CA58 north of Gillette. One should be careful to evaluate which system is represented at a particular site, and how the date may relate to the person identified in the inscription.

The SA panel also displays the increased sexual orientation of the most recent inscriptions, a trend noted across the nation and beyond. This very late introduction presents sexual themes in degree and manner not represented in earlier art in quite the same way, although sexual pictorial representations occur aboriginally throughout the world. While sexual or interpersonal themes occur in some early sheepherder art, especially aspen art or dendroglyphs, where people were sitting around thinking or dreaming about girlfriends and related activities, such herder pictorial inscriptions are distinctively different from the stronger and more derogatory sexual portrayal of cruder "bathroom art" (both verbal and pictorial), which probably became more prevalent in the 1950s and continued through the end of the century. This general trend is represented at this panel with the simple content, *Gives Head*, although art of this general form is often more graphic and detailed.

Although our main interest in the SA Petroglyphs is with the aboriginal petroglyphs rather than the modern written inscriptions, even the limited modern additions display general trends in rock art styles noted at other sites and in other regions. Like the modern inscriptions, with their orientation toward personal or group identification, the Indian petroglyphs probably

represent an earlier form of biographic art with similar intended reference to, or recording of, individual and group identity and actions.

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