



IDAHO STATE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY

IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY REFERENCE SERIES

PETROGLYPHS AND PICTOGRAPHS

Number 250

December 1964

Petroglyphs and pictographs are two kinds of aboriginal rock art found in Idaho. Petroglyphs are cut into a rock surface by hammering and pecking, by chiseling, or rubbing. Pictographs are paintings made on rock surfaces with colors obtained from rock minerals and vegetable dyes mixed with grease and water. Both forms of rock art are sometimes incorrectly referred to as "rock writing." The designs embodied in petroglyphs and pictographs are not standardized and cannot be translated. They do not have a limited unit of sound and meaning attached to a unit of drawing or carving. In every case, the meanings attached to the paintings, or to the rock carvings, were individual and so broad in scope that they could be translated only by the person who put them there. Standard forms found over a geographic area must have a range of meanings. Therefore, the aboriginal rock art of Idaho cannot be compared to an alphabetic writing.

This rock art most of which is prehistoric, is often associated with natural features of the landscape. Rock carvings or rock paintings are found along game trails, near fishing grounds, and in areas where collecting of wild plant foods was an important activity of prehistoric peoples. This suggests that the purpose of some of the paintings was magical. In this case, the painter hoped, by painting the animal he wished to hunt, to increase his chances of success. Sometimes, the rock art seems to be representational, depicting scenes of successful hunts, or of battles between groups of people. Sometimes, the purpose of these art forms cannot be determined and one may guess that they are occasionally ceremonial, having perhaps a religious meaning, and sometimes they may have been done simply for fun.

In Idaho, petroglyphs are found primarily along the Snake River, and to the south and west of that river. Pictographs are found primarily north of the Snake River, but there are some notable exceptions where petroglyphs occur north and pictographs south of the Snake River. At least two localities are known where pictographs and petroglyphs occur together. The age of this work can only rarely be determined with any accuracy. Where paintings or carvings occur on top of one another, it is possible to work out a relative sequence of changing art forms. Occasionally, a carving or a painting is found in a geological or archaeological deposit that can be dated by the radiocarbon method. (As yet, no Idaho pictograph or petroglyph has been dated in this way.) More unusual still is the occasional find of a painting which represents an extinct animal. In other areas it has sometimes been possible to associate art style found on cliff faces with sculpture or paints found in nearby archaeological sites. While a great many localities are known in Idaho, only a few have been studied in any detail, and this is one of the important areas of research which remains to be examined by competent scholars.

Prepared by Dr. Earl H. Swanson, Director, Idaho State University Museum, Pocatello.