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Short articles



THE HENSLER PETROGLYPH SITE (47 DO 461): an Early Engraving Site in the North American Mid-Continent

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The Hensler Petroglyph Site consists of 34 pecked images on a seam of andalusite schist, which lies between two domes of Waterloo Quartzite. The site is located in south-central Wisconsin in the southern part of Dodge County. The surrounding landscape was formed by the Wisconsin glaciations which deposited extensive amounts of workable stone in the immediate vicinity of the site. While initial recording took place in 1986, the archaeological potential was not discovered until 2005 during a clearing effort to remove brush and low growth. Excavations commenced that year and have been continued since that time, on a modest voluntary level. The work has yielded several thousands of artifacts, most of them from the stratified deposits immediately adjacent to the engraved panel.

Two zones are identified in the stratigraphy. An upper zone of dark humic soil has radiocarbon dated contexts in the AD 900-1100 range. This level has yielded a series of stone objects termed “expedient imagery”. They consist of natural stones, some slightly modified, which resemble animals, and possibly, birds. These objects include a bison, a frog, a bird or reptile, and a possible phallus. The objects occur within the accumulations of site materials, mainly projectile point fragments, retouch flakes, burins, gravers, flake scrapers and blades.

The site materials are not ordinary domestic refuse. It appears that the preponderance of material is related to refurbishing lithic artifacts. There is no evidence of ordinary domestic activity such as cooking, butchering, hide preparation, storage, dwellings, and so forth. The excavated materials are viewed as associated with the ritual life of the rock art site.

The lower zone consists of very fine grained, tan aeolian deposits, or loess. This material is the lowest in the soil column and lies directly over the bedrock which contains the remains of deeply weathered peck marks. The diagnostically oldest material occurs in this zone. The large side-notched point tradition is present, as is a used blade of exotic Knife River Flint (from North Dakota). The weathered peck marks on the rock formation, covered with loess containing early lithic artifacts, suggest that this site is at least 10 000 years old. No radiocarbon dates are available for the lower loess zone, but regional geology shows clearly that the activity on the site would date to the close of glacial times – ca. 10 000 BP.

The morphology of the engraved panel supports the hypothesized timing. Two superposed lanceolate projectile point images on the engraved panel approximate the Eastern Clovis variations in both shape and size, especially those found at the Debert Site in Nova Scotia. These superposed images are oriented in opposite directions and are unprecedented in North American rock art



The Hensler Petroglyph Site (47 DO 461) near Waterloo, Wisconsin, USA. Seam of andalusite schist upon which 33 images are engraved is along the fold on the left side of the outcrop. Excavations are immediately behind the quartzite dome (photo: J. Steinbring, 2006).

imagery. Additionally, an exceptionally detailed atl-atl weight of the “butterfly variation” relates the symbolism to the Archaic Tradition, and specifically to the Jeffers Petroglyph Site in Southwestern Minnesota.

While the Hensler Site suggests substantial antiquity for petroglyphs in the deep continental interior, it also offers clues to the order of occupation. Both southern and northern ties are evident, with the older connections pointing to the north and northwest. The southern ties are to the Mississippi Valley, especially in the general direction of Missouri.

Another feature of the site is the presence of “phenomenal attributes”, special conditions which might affect site selection. There are numerous lightning strikes, acoustical properties, prominence with wide vistas, and a magnetic anomaly. The general shape of the formation, as well as the deep trough-like seam and other perceived shapes in the formation would count as attractions for site selection.

All in all, Hensler constitutes a remarkable opportunity to link standard archaeology with a body of rock art in a central continental context. At present, no more than 1% of the site has been excavated.





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