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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



NORTH AMERICAN PETROFORMS:

Questions of the Chronological and Cultural Placement

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The arrangement of stones on a flat surface constitutes one of the most fundamental symbolic acts among rock art traditions. It is worldwide and offers many variations. In North America, the practice is spread from coast to coast, and is expressed as anything from a few boulders laid out in the shape of a turtle to large and complex arrangements of many features linked together by stone lines as at the Tie Creek site. Uses of these features could range from individual acts by vision supplicants to major group activities with ritual stations reflecting institutional life.

Recently, research attention has been directed to boulder piling to form cairns of many variations. These too are found distributed from coast to coast, with remarkable densities in some areas. These cairns have puzzled investigators and many of these features, especially in New England, have been traditionally attributed to early pioneers of European ancestry despite the fact that no



Feature 1 at the Tie Creek Petroform Site in Eastern Manitoba, Canada. View from southwest to northeast. The Tie Creek Site covers 9 acres of a flat granite outcropping. Many of the features are connected by boulder lines (photo: J. Steinbring, 1980).

evidence of such an origin has been established. Instead, it has become clearer that many of these cairns can be attributed to aboriginal populations, mainly as human burial monuments. Hundreds of them are known in British Columbia where Darcy Mathews, a Ph.D. candidate of the University of Victoria, has undertaken years of research in their geographic and ethnological characteristics. Large sites, consisting of hundreds of these cairns in Vermont and Wisconsin have come to light, almost always contradicting the entrenched views that they are products of Euro-American ventures. In Vermont, the Abenaki have asserted their sacred character, stopping proposed government investigations.

Countless petroforms were commonly destroyed by land clearing, most of it for agriculture. Research today centers on areas remote to industrial and agricultural activity, with much of the research in protected lands like National Forests. Nonetheless, oak savannah remnants in the Midwest and in New England also contain these features usually in 100-200 years old oak stands which have escaped lumbering interests. Steep hills may often yield these features too since early farmers avoided the steepest ones.

Research at present shows concentrations in New England (Vermont, Connecticut, Maine, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and so forth), the Northern Plains, the Midwest (Wisconsin, Missouri), the Southeast (Georgia), and an appreciable locus in California, as well as British Columbia. The California features have been known for nearly a century, and have been reported by early archaeologists like Malcolm Rogers who linked them to specific archaeological cultures.

The substantial antiquity of petroforms is evidenced at the L'Anse Amour Site in Labrador, where a boulder cairn contained a human burial dated at 7500 BP. In the Midwest, the erection of cairns on the bare surface of glacial kames dating to at least 14000 years ago suggests the possibility that these simple stone features could have been made by the earliest Americans.





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