

archeologist Madonna Moss terms the earliest epoch, 10,000 – 5000 BP, the Early Period of the Northwest Coast Cultural Sequence. There are now nearly twenty sites dating between 1000 and 10,000 BP in Southeast Alaska where old microblade technologies have been unearthed. The use of microblade tools (small stone blades made by chipping) is diagnostic of this early period and their presence in excavated sites links these early inhabitants with northern Alaskan and Eastern Siberian ancestors. Early Period sites include Ground Hog Bay on the Chilkat Peninsula on Icy Strait and Hidden Falls on Baranof Island. The above-mentioned cave on Prince of Wales Island has produced the oldest human skeletal remains in Alaska or Canada and some of the oldest yet found in North America. These were dated at about 9730 to 9880 BP. The oldest tool found in the cave dates at 10,300 BP. The DNA in the young man's teeth indicates that present-day Alaska Natives are not related, although their ancestors may have been. This individual may have been part of a group that passed through coastal Southeast Alaska relatively quickly. Other early sites have been located on Prince of Wales, Hecata, Kupreanof, Baranof islands and on the mainland.

Microblades found in Southeast Alaska are often made of obsidian. Widespread obsidian artifacts found from the Yukon River south along the length of the North American Pacific Coast are proof of an early marine trade network. The chemical signature of an obsidian artifact can be used to identify its source. Obsidian deposits in Southeast Alaska are found on Mt. Edziza on the Stikine River and on Suemez Island on Alaska's west coast. This distribution, which was in place by about 10,900

Many petroglyphs are only a set of circles or even just a single pit. These are usually assumed to represent eyes. Similar mask-like carvings, with obvious symbolic or religious meaning, are found in Siberia as well as in Kamchatka and Northern China. Russian archeologist A.P. Okladinov has found two main periods of petroglyph creation in the Amur River region of eastern Siberia, the oldest dating from about 10,000 to 12,000 years ago. Later petroglyphs from the region seem to have much in common with those of Southeast Alaska. They are thought to have been carved in the Neolithic era 5000-7000 years ago by a culture of fishermen and hunters. Like the Northwest Coast peoples, salmon was their most important food. The Amur people had a complex clan structure, shamans with their masks, and belief in the spiritual powers of animals. Siberian rock art shares circle faces, paired circles, concentric circles, spirals, circles with a central dot, pits, rayed semi-circles (canoes) and unidentifiable quadrupeds with that of Southeast Alaska. ¹ Their rock art also used curving lines to depict animals with bodies filled with lines and circle joints. They made use of bilateral symmetry and split images, both found later in classic Northwest Coast art.

Petroglyph images have sometimes been compared with dateable artifacts showing similar design elements in order to determine age. Simple faces and other life forms, on these datable artifacts, appeared about 4500 years ago. More elaborate forms appear on dateable artifacts between 2000 and 2500 years ago. A distinctive feature of Northwest Coast art is formline design. Noted wood carver Steve Brown states that northern formline art was not developed at 1000 years ago, but that by the time

Chapter 3 – Giving Perceptible Form to the Imperceptible

“Symbolism arose from the need to give perceptible form to the imperceptible.” (Giedon in Hill p. 31)

It is important to emphasize that petroglyphs and pictographs were not made as art even though such graphics, as anthropologist Aldona Jonitis says, “bristled with life and spiritual powers.”¹ Northwest carver Steve Brown, speaking of the circle and ovoid or flattened oval characteristic of coastal art, remarks on their expression of “cyclical continuity and contained power”.² Some rock art particularly attracts us with its strong charismatic figures, other images are crude, but, as far as we can determine, Southeast Alaskan rock art was not made primarily as a demonstration of creativity. Rather, the act of making the design and its symbolic meaning was the important point for its makers. Brown notes again, referring to Native material culture in general, “a technically less accomplished rattle or amulet, or mask, for example is inherently no less powerful or effective in the hands of an accomplished shaman than one which today would be considered a masterpiece in visual terms.”³ Nevertheless, when looking at some rock art, particularly those of clan symbols, we do find accomplished artists at work.

Rock art figures can be classed into three categories: zoomorphic (animal figures), anthropomorphic (human or human-like) and geometric. Zoomorphic images in Southeast Alaska include bears, sea creatures, birds, frogs, salmon, and mythological creatures such as woodworms, sea monsters, and thunderbird.⁴ Raven and eagle are

Conclusion

Vita brevis est, ars longa. (Life is short, art long). Seneca

Understanding about the history and culture of Southeast Alaska's early peoples is in its infancy but these are exciting times as new scientific techniques open up vistas into the past. There is also a heartening resurgence of Native tradition, culture and language. The remoteness and inaccessibility of many early habitation sites, the dense forest cover that may cloak other sites and the probable inundation of many others combined with the expense of excavation, mean that much remains to be discovered. Also hindering interpretation of the meaning of petroglyphs and pictographs is the loss of many stories that give meaning to the etched grooves and painted symbols on the rock. Imparting meaning to another culture from the outside is always fraught with difficulty. As has been said in relation to petroglyphs from another place, "Their meanings tantalize, and yet we find ourselves being outsiders. We look at the petroglyphs with more wonder than understanding." ¹ Added to this is a warning from another archeologist, "Interpretation is a perilous venture." ²

In spite of or because of this mystery, there is sometimes a desire to possess the inscrutable object. In the case of petroglyphs, it is not only unethical, but also illegal to remove or deface them. Both Alaska and federal law, in the case of carvings on the Tongass National Forest, protect rock art. Additionally, some rock art is on Sealaska Corporation property. The Alaska Historic Preservation Act prohibits:

the appropriation, excavation, removal, injury, or destruction of any historic, prehistoric, or archeological