

Boulder Rock Art of Montana

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Rock art sites of northeastern Montana are characterized by petroglyph boulders. The Montana sites with this distinctive rock art form have been the subject of a few articles since the 1960s (Darroch 1976; Hoy 1969; Johnson 1975; Park 1990; Shumate 1963). These publications have focused on individual motifs and individual sites, and the only published overview is a 1969 article by Hoy, who reported on ten boulder sites in one county. Our interest is to examine the boulders from a regional perspective by comparing kinds of figures that occur on boulders with other figures in surrounding regions.

The distribution of modified boulders coincides with glacial boulder deposition through northeastern Montana. On the map below, red flags indicate the locations of recorded petroglyph boulders, and the blue flag on the left is the location of a painted boulder.



Large continental glaciers did not reach this area until they had grown to their maximum size, and by then the ice sheets were moving slowly and thinning (Alt and Hyndman 1986:387). These glaciers did not cause the extensive landscape erosion in Montana that they rendered further north, but geologists recognize their presence by materials left behind during their retreat, particularly erratic boulders — smooth, nonlocal, transported rocks scattered across the landscape and of different materials from the bedrock and deposits upon which they occur. In northeastern Montana erratics are mostly sandstone from local sources, but there are also granite, quartzite, and other crystalline rocks from at least as far away as northern Manitoba. These rocks stand out on the plains and attracted rock art producers in all states and provinces in which they occur.



Erratic boulders provoked some of the earliest references to rock art in the ethnohistorical literature of Montana. In an ethnography of the Gros Ventres, published in 1908, Kroeber wrote, “A complete buffalo of stone, with hump, horns, ribs, and other parts, half of it underground, has been

seen by the Gros Ventres, and many offerings and prayers have been made to it” (Kroeber 1908:281). In 1892 Grinnell (1908:262-263) mentioned a buffalo boulder in the Milk River area (such as the one in the photo above), and noted that all Plains Indians held it in reverence, and that the Blackfeet left presents around it. Ewers (1952:51) reports on offerings left by the Blackfeet at a boulder along the Marias River. Rock art boulders were (and still are, as shown in the photo to the right) places where offerings were left for a variety of reasons generally associated with ensuring well being, and this undoubtedly accounts for the common term “Medicine Rock,” by which most petroglyph boulders are locally referred throughout the Plains.



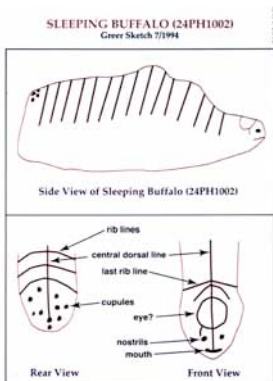
As of 2000 there are about 725 rock art sites recorded in Montana. Of these, only 39 are in the northeastern part of the state, and of those 39 sites, 22 are boulders. Although this indicates that just over 50% of the known rock art in this area is on boulders, this is probably an under-representation of the total percentage. Intensive survey for rock art in this northeastern region will undoubtedly greatly increase the number of boulder sites relative to other kinds of rock art. One reason boulder sites are so under-represented is that the rock art is easily overlooked or not recognized. For example, several site forms note that modification was recognized only after returning to the site many times and seeing the boulder in just the right lighting. This appears to happen most frequently when the boulder is associated with other components that are bigger, more impressive, and draw the attention of the recorder, such as large multi-component bison kills, where rock art boulders are often comparatively overwhelmed by surrounding materials. Boulders are also more portable than panels on cliff faces or caves and are more easily removed from the site and carried away to other locations, particularly with the help of modern equipment. Among the 22 recorded boulder sites, seven have been moved.



The photo on the left shows a boulder now in the yard of the CM Russell Museum in Great Falls. Its original location south of Big Sandy, its context, and its original orientation are now unknown.

The 22 boulder sites recorded in Montana contain a total of 68 boulders. Although the majority of sites have only one rock, four sites have two rocks, and one has over 40 rocks.

Boulder rock art occurs in two basic forms. The most common is when individual figures are placed on the surface of the rock (an example is shown on the photo to the right). These are motifs typically found in



a variety of settings and not unique to boulders. The other form of boulder rock art is when the rock itself is shaped into a figure. When this

occurs in northeastern Montana and across the Northern Plains, the figure generally represented is a buffalo. One is shown in the photo in the center of page 2, and a sketch of that boulder is to the left.

Although other rock art settings may make use of the natural shape of the rock, or irregularities in the surface, and integrate these into the pictograph or petroglyph, no other setting is so completely transformed into the figure itself as are the boulders. However, most presently recorded boulders are not modified into a figure but instead have figures placed on them.



Hoofprints are the most common motif class. Of the 68 total rocks in the inventory, 35 have bison hoofprints (such as those shown in the photo to the left). They occur as the only kind of figure on one boulder, but more frequently they are one kind of many different figures. However, whenever hoofprints are present, bison prints are always among them. Drawings of bison (in contrast to the entire

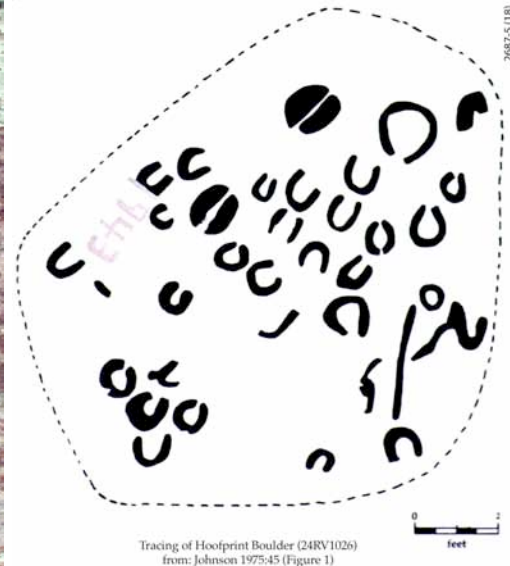
rock being formed into a bison) were noted on only one boulder. Overwhelmingly, people who have written on Montana boulders felt the rocks were associated with bison hunting in some regard. Certainly some of them were, particularly the three associated with bison kill complexes. Bison hoofprints are also common on boulder rock art in Alberta and Saskatchewan and across the Dakotas (Over 1941; Steinbring and Buchner 1997; Sundstrom 1993). Hoofprints occasionally occur in the mostly painted rock art of central Montana and more often in the more petroglyph oriented rock art of southeastern Montana, but they are not the dominant force seen in the northern boulders.



The largest known boulder with rock art in northeastern Montana is Indian Lake Medicine Rock, north of the Missouri River and southeast of the Little Rocky Mountains (shown in the photo to the left). On this rock there appears to be an association between hoofprint and vulva figures (see photo next page). Linea

Sundstrom (1993) has discussed the association of animal tracks and vulvas for eastern South Dakota boulders. She notes that at the same time the vulva motif begins to occur in the

hoofprint-handprint-footprint style at these boulders, the bison track also becomes an important component of the style in her area. The vulva, which has not been frequently reported anywhere in Montana, and among the boulders, only on the Indian Lake Medicine Rock to date, is stylistically similar to the one on the South Dakota boulder. The vulva considered with the nearby hoofprints (and highlighted in yellow in the photo below, left) suggests that portrayal of these figures may have had a widespread function among Plains groups.



In addition to bison, hoofprints of deer, elk, and antelope occur on Montana boulders. However, the only site with horse hoofs noted to date is Hoofprint Boulder published in 1975 by Ann Johnson (1975). The tracing of the petroglyph boulder (shown in the upper right above) also has bison prints, a circle, and some geometrics. Although there are a few figures on Montana boulders that may represent bird tracks, this is not a motif conclusively reported for the area. However, bird tracks and thunderbird representations are noted for boulders to the east. These motifs appear to be of a style more closely related to Midwestern rock art than boulders on the Northwestern Plains.

The geometric category was noted on 30 Montana boulders. Two contain nothing but geometric figures, but available information is sketchy and general, and the data may change with a more intensive reexamination of the sites. Circles, crosses, lines, and dots occur in all rock art media not just boulders, and these figures are widespread geographically and temporally, so

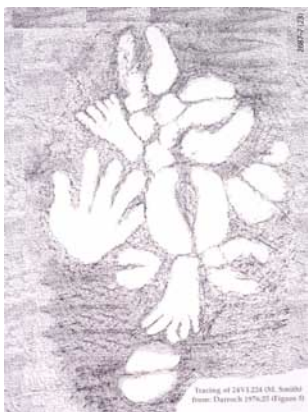


their usefulness in identifying cultural affiliation or age is limited. However, such figures are often combined to make distinctive, more complex geometric designs that are more useful in comparative studies, such as the combination of a circle and line to represent a stylized bison hoofprint.



Human representations are rare. Two human faces have been recorded and both may be masks, as exemplified by a figure in a bison headdress on the CM Russell Boulder (see photo to left). Lines curve out and up from the bottoms of the eyes to form horns, and the stand-up collar around the neck appears to indicate the top of a wrap-around robe, which hides the arms. A full-bodied human has been reported

near the Canadian border (see drawing to right). Although the site form states that this is obviously a female figure, gender is not obvious from the drawing. In addition to these human portrayals, the only others that have been reported on Montana boulders are stick figures and a V-necked figure. Human figures on boulders appear to be much simpler in form than those in other settings. Although shield figures are one of the most common forms of human representation throughout Northwestern Plains rock art, none has been recorded on a Montana boulder, and Linea Sundstrom reports she knows of none on North or South Dakota boulders.



Human hands and feet are also represented, with feet more common in Montana. Only two hands have been recorded, one on each of two boulders. One of these boulders is now in the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman. The figures on that boulder are shown here as traced by Marc Smith (Darroch 1976). Four boulders have feet, and all but one has more than one foot. Feet are more frequently portrayed in Montana in petroglyphs than in pictographs, where they are rare. However, whether a painting or a pecked image, feet and hands sometimes are hard to distinguish from bear paws, and the two feet with toes shown above to the left are



an example of that confusion. Four other boulders have definite bear paws. Hands and feet are reported as frequent motifs on boulders in eastern South Dakota, and the bear paw-human foot uncertainty is mentioned by Sundstrom (1993). However, bear paws by themselves in South Dakota do not appear to be as common as in northeastern Montana (Over 1941; Sundstrom 1993). For the number of bear paws and the quality of their portrayal, the boulder rock art appears to be more similar to central and southern Montana rock art than it is to boulders further east.



The only other animals reported on northeastern Montana boulders are a turtle and two snakes. The snake at the CM Russell Boulder (photo to the left) is distinctive and has a horn or feather protruding from its head (on the right of the photo) and prominent rattles on its tail (on the left of the photo). Other plumed or crested serpents are known in other parts of Montana and areas south. Turtles occur on boulders east-

west across the Plains, and this is a figure that crosses platforms to occur on most kinds of rock art, and in most settings in Montana, and also as geoglyphs across the Plains. Snakes, on the other hand, are not often mentioned in boulder literature, but snake figures in other Montana regions are similar to those on boulders, especially those in central Montana pictograph sites.



To summarize motif information, present data indicate that petroglyph boulders in Montana are characterized by hoofprints, particularly bison. Other animals are rare, but those that occur — the turtle, snake, and bear — are known to be powerful entities on the Plains. Individual geometric figures and combined designs are other prominent motifs. Some are probably stylized representations of various

hoofprints, further strengthening the importance of animals in boulder rock art. Humans, on the other hand, do not appear to have the same level of representation on boulders as they do in other settings, and the few complete bodies are mainly simply stick figures. Most indicators of humans are feet, which can be confused with bear paws. However, many indisputable bear paws also occur on Montana boulders, and apparently these figures are more frequent here than in other parts of the Plains.

The unusual co-occurrence of vulvas with bison hoofprints on a Montana boulder appears to be a more common occurrence on the eastern plains. Vulva portrayals have always been assumed, with no supporting evidence, to be human. Considering the dominance of animals, particularly bison, in the boulder rock art in northeastern Montana and out onto the Dakota plains, where vulvas are common motifs and often portrayed with bison representations, such as hoofprints, it seems much more likely that the vulvas are bison rather than human. Such a portrayal is much more congruent with the overall orientation of the rock art, as well as absolute motif association.

Boulder rock art in Montana, in general, more closely resembles that on boulders of Alberta and Saskatchewan than it does rock art in other regions of Montana. Boulders across the Northwestern Plains appear to have a close cultural and age affiliation. Additionally, boulders appear to have closer stylistic connections to boulder rock art across the Plains to the east, and south into the Central Plains, than they do to the more biographically dominated shield-bearing warrior petroglyphs of southeastern Montana and northeastern Wyoming, or the more abstract fingerline and smear dominated pictographs of Central Montana.

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