



FIGURE 1: PORTION OF FREMONT PETROGLYPHS

PAINTED DREAMS, NATIVE AMERICAN ROCK ART

AN EXAMINATION OF A TRADITION

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In a wonderful pack of stuff from my favorite mail-order bookseller, Edward Hamilton, I found, as ordered, *Painted Dreams, Native American Rock Art* by Thor Conway, a curly headed, blonde fellow, whose daughters are named Amber Wahsayah, Tara Nowahatin and Cedar Geegahkwah – which shows where his heart is.

I decided to read this one first to get it out of the way for the really “good” stuff. As I read along, I found that Conway’s emphasis was on the vision quests of the native people expressed in the paintings and carvings we call rock art, an integral part of the sacred earth. [FIGURE 1] Two general terms are defined: pictograph refers to a painting on rock, while petroglyph refers to a carving into the rock’s surface. Shamans who entered trance states to gain access to the spirit world produced large amounts of North American rock art. Numerous motifs are found on the dreaming rocks: handprints, zigzag lines, sun symbols and cupules.

The narrative grows more interesting as it draws closer to home. Benedict Arnold stopped to view the rock carvings at Embden in central Maine on his march to capture Quebec in 1775. The Algonkian tribes had a marker stone, known today as Dighton Rock, in the area that became the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to see the rock and the museum that houses

it are grateful to Dr. Manuel Da Silva for his successful struggle to preserve, protect, and publicize it.

But now, I really take interest—my favorite Peterborough Petroglyphs take center stage. Conway tells us of the Obijwa of southeastern Ontario and the existence of this now public rock art, secret for several hundred years. The site was known as a teaching rock until its “discovery” by a party of geologists in the 1950s. According to tribal tradition and archaeological evidence, the site of the carvings existed for several thousand years as an active native spiritual center. Between the 1950s and the late 1970s the hard marble bedrock crumbled at an alarming rate. Conservators eventually devised a method to protect the site from further deterioration and enclosed it in a glassed-in building that honors the site and its conservation requirements, yet allows the public to experience the “teaching rock” as a treasure, a gift from Mother Earth. Conway points out that regardless of global origins we all share certain archetypal imagery based on species-wide response of our central nervous system. Many rock art images are highly abstract concepts contained in certain symbols. Here I leave *Painted Dreams* and move on to more specific matters.

Some years ago I was privileged to visit the Peterborough Petroglyphs and was completely overwhelmed by what I saw. The petroglyphs are engraved on an exposure of white crystalline limestone, often called white marble, measuring



FIGURE 2: SUN FIGURE FROM PETERBOROUGH PETROGLYPHS



FIGURE 3: FEMALE FIGURE FROM PETERBOROUGH PETROGLYPHS

about seventy feet long and forty feet wide, that slopes gently toward the southeast. Over three hundred clearly identifiable images, and several hundred more obscure and unidentifiable glyphs, are incised on the single rock surface. Many glyphs bear similarities to those found on other pictograph and petroglyph sites on the Canadian Shield and elsewhere. Some images appear unique to the Peterborough site, and here I turn to a full-of-wonder book called *Sacred Art of the Algonkians* by Joan and Romas Vastokas. The marvel of

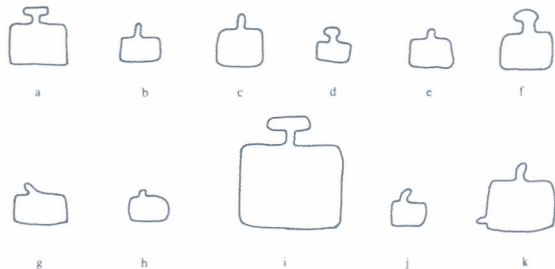


FIGURE 4: PADDLE FIGURES FROM PETERBOROUGH, ONTARIO

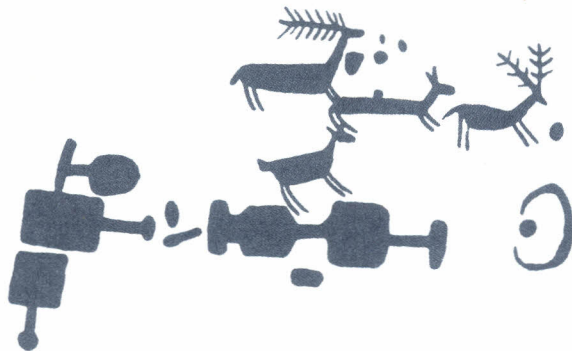


FIGURE 5: RUNNING ANIMALS CONNECTED WITH PADDLES AND A CUP AND RING SOLAR SYMBOL FROM THE CAMONICA VALLEY PETROGLYPHS



FIGURE 6: PETROGLYPHS FROM BOHUSLÄN, SWEDEN

this work is to me the carefully drawn-to-scale rendering of the entire galaxy of petroglyphs on the rock face by Joan Vastokas. An overall view emphasizes certain of the symbols, depending on one's interests. For me, the sun symbols had a Scandinavian look to them. [FIGURE 2] From ancient times, the Scandinavians have been great sailors, and ships appear in their earliest rock art. We find similar renderings in Peterborough and the Great Lakes region in North America.

The large female figure on the left of the carvings strongly suggested an Algonkian fertility goddess to me. The figure is situated on a long fissure in the rock, stained red-brown by the incorporation of some natural imperfection (probably iron) of the rock itself. The stain, emanating from between the legs of the figure, certainly suggests menstrual blood. [FIGURE 3]

The site and its interpretation were bound to excite controversy. In his book *Bronze Age America*, Barry Fell concocted a fable of a Norse king, Wodin-lithi, who made an ordinary trip to northeastern America in 1700 BC to trade for (Michigan) copper with European woolen goods. Fell brings the Norse gods, along with King Wodin-lithi, to Canada. He cavalierly transforms the Algonkian fertility goddess into the Norse god, Tsiw, by removing her breasts and claiming her missing left hand was sacrificed to Fenrir, the giant wolf who bit off the god's hand when he found the gods were cheating him. The goddess's right hand, with fingers outspread, is probably in a customary attitude of prayer.

Fell translates the markings on the rock as Tifinagh, an ancient script with which he seems eminently familiar. In an article in the NEARA publication *Across Before Columbus?*, David H. Kelley presents his theory, supporting Fell, of the use of Proto-Tifinagh script in Ontario, Scandinavia and northern Italy. He follows Barry Fell's lead in his article "The Identification of the Proto-Tifinagh Script at Peterborough, Ontario." For a scholarly and exhaustive criticism of Fell's lack of grammatical expertise in Old Norse, see Sue Carlson's article "Woes for Wodin Lithi" in *NEARA Journal* Vol.26 #1&2 p. 26.

Kelley presents the theory that the recognition of the existence of a Proto-Tifinagh script in inscriptions at Peterborough and in Scandinavia demonstrates that there was a phonetically sophisticated alphabet in Scandinavia during the Bronze Age.

But I have other fish to fry. One of the prominent unexplained symbols at Peterborough is a large, short-handled, paddle-like image. [FIGURE 4] This paddle symbol also occurs in Scandinavian petroglyphs, [FIGURE 6] and is often shown as a sort of weapon, brandished by warriors on horseback. In the Camonica Valley, in the northern Italian

Alps, is a series of nearly six hundred engraved rocks that include over twenty thousand petroglyphs spread over an area fifty miles long. Prominent among these symbols is the paddle. [FIGURE 5] The paddle was pictured with great frequency by the Camonica Valley artists. On the great Naquane rock, the paddle is present sixty times and fourteen hundred examples were found by 1961.

It is easy for me to postulate the route of the paddle symbol up (or down) the ancient Amber Route [FIGURE 7], which ran from Scandinavia through the Camonica Valley southward. There are major sun symbols on the Peterborough Teaching Rock. In Scandinavia, the best known is the large sun disc being drawn on its wagon by a horse. Emmanuel Anati finds evidence of solar religions in many prehistoric civilizations in Europe. He finds the

conjunction of the sun and the stag frequently in the Camonica carvings. Sun symbols abound in Native American rock art, but, other than those at Peterborough, they do not relate strongly to those discussed here.

If the Ontario-Scandinavia-Camonica Valley connection was an actual circumstance, what other evidence might we find? Could the trip from Scandinavia to northern America across the wild Atlantic, so difficult for our 20th century forefathers, have been made in an earlier epoch? During the middle Bronze Age, the climate warmed enough to melt the northern ice cap, and the polar seas supported navigation. We certainly cannot prove such a journey of one ancient symbol, but the hypothesis teases my imagination, and, I hope, yours a little bit, too.

Painted Dreams, Native American Rock Art opened a door to mental adventure for me and is much to be recommended to anyone interested in the subject. It is beautifully illustrated with full-color photographs. Its greatest shortcoming is the lack of an index, but that is overcome by clearly defined chapter headings and the fine graphic quality of the book throughout.

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IMAGE SOURCES

- FIGURE 1: *Painted Dreams – Native America Rock Art*,
 FIGURE 2, 3: *Bronze Age America*
 FIGURE 4: *Sacred Art of the Algonkians*
 FIGURE 5, 7: *Camonica Valley*
 FIGURE 6: *Sveriges Historia*

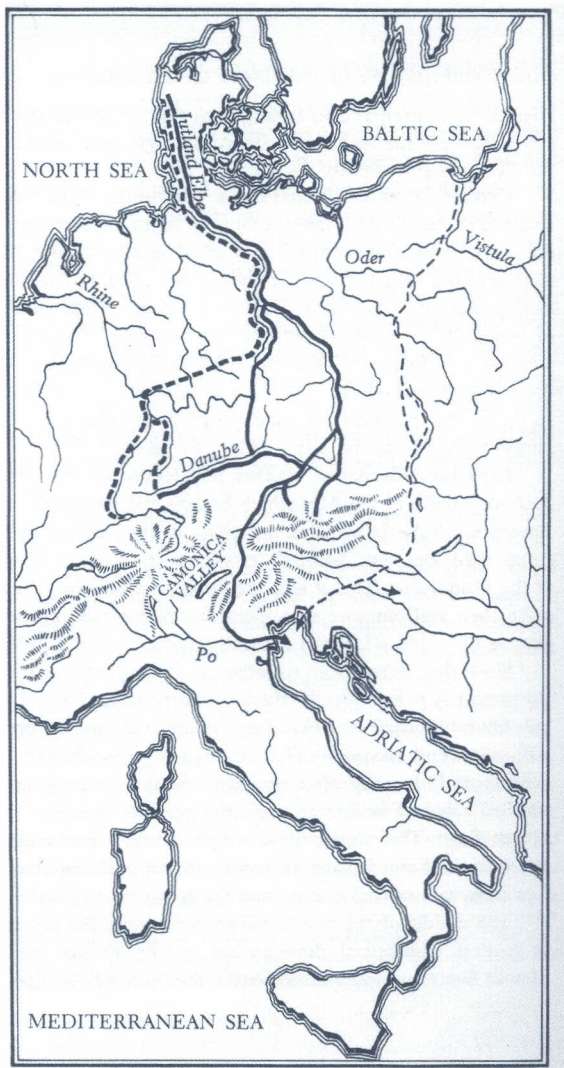


FIGURE 7: PREHISTORIC AMBER ROUTES