

PETROGLYPH INVESTIGATIONS AT THE PILOT ROCK SITE

(13CK101) Cherokee County, Iowa

David Moyer
Office of the State Archaeologist
University of Iowa
Iowa City, IA 52242
david-moyer@uiowa.edu
(319) 335-5702

Pilot Rock is a large Sioux quartzite boulder located on a high bluff overlooking the Little Sioux River valley south of the present town of Cherokee, Iowa. The massive rock measures approximately 61 feet long, 40 feet wide and 20 feet high, and is believed to be the largest glacial erratic in the state. Early explorers used the stone as a meeting place and navigational aid, and it was an important landmark for early travelers heading west into Nebraska and the Dakotas.



Figure 1. View of the Pilot Rock rest area showing sign placed by the local DAR Chapter.



Figure 2. View of Pilot Rock facing south.

Petroglyph boulders such as Pilot Rock were sacred places to Native people who inhabited the region before the arrival of Europeans. The stone was a focal point in the symbolic landscape of the valley, as shown by the traditional loway name of the Little Sioux River, inyan yanka wakpa, which can be translated loosely as "River Where the Rock Is." Pilot Rock is still known to contemporary Native Americans as an important and sacred place.

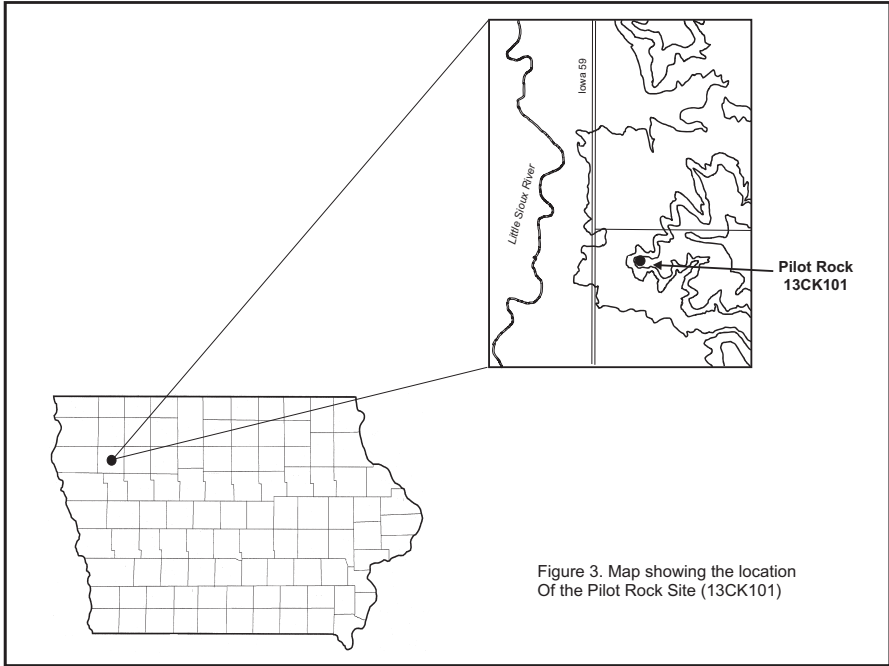


Figure 3. Map showing the location of the Pilot Rock Site (13CK101)

The rock was an important local landmark to early explorers and settlers in the region. Robert Perry, the first settler in the county, remarks on finding the stone while following an Indian trail en route to Sioux City in 1856, but failed to mention any evidence of petroglyphs, painting or offerings. In 1882, A.R. Fulton describes his experiences regarding Pilot Rock and the Little Sioux River:

"The little river called by the French, *Petite des Sioux* (Little Sioux), was called by the Indians of that nation *E-a-ne-ah-wad-e-pon*, or *Stone River*. They applied to it this name from the fact that upon one of the elevations bordering this stream, there lies an immense boulder, from the top of which they could overlook the country for many miles. This boulder, known to the people of Cherokee county as "Pilot Rock," is in the south part of that county and about a quarter of a mile from the Little Sioux River. It was long a noted landmark and guide to travelers across the prairie. Some years ago the author visited "Pilot Rock" as one of the noted objects of interest in that part of the State, and upon ascending it to command a view of twenty-five miles of the grand valley of that little river, could well understand why the Indians should call it "Stone River." This boulder is a reddish granite, and is sixty feet long, forty feet wide, and lies with about twenty feet in height exposed above the surface of the ground. The top is nearly a flat surface, with a small basin near the middle. Near the south end; on the upper surface, are several small indentations, or depressions, evidently worked out by some artificial process by the Indians. It is said that the Sioux have left no monuments, but "Pilot Rock," in Cherokee county, will carry down to coming generations the evidences upon its surface that the Sioux regarded it as an object of interest, if not of veneration." (Fulton 1882:176-177).

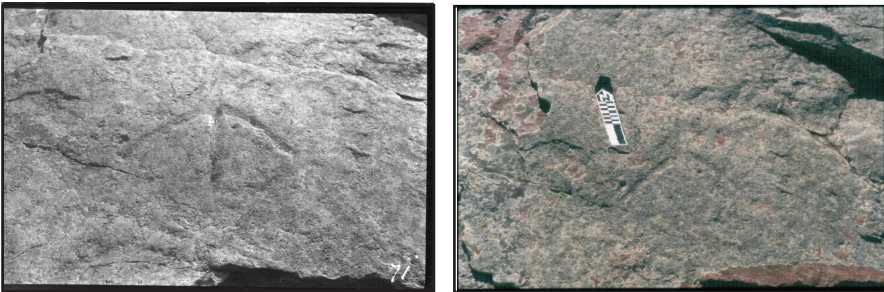


Figure 4. Photograph on the left shows the "turkey track" petroglyph as photographed by Orr in 1934 while the photo on the right is a view of the same glyph taken during a 2001 field survey. Orr photo courtesy Charles R. Keyes Archaeological Collection, Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist and State Historical Society of Iowa.

In 1934, archaeologist Ellison Orr visited the site and took a photograph of a single "turkey track" petroglyph located on the top of the rock. At the time, no further petroglyphs were noted, and no additional research was conducted at the site for some time. In the Spring of 2000, additional field and documentary research began on Pilot Rock. In addition to relocating the original petroglyph photographed in 1934, additional petroglyphs were noted, including two additional "turkey tracks," often interpreted by researchers as depictions of thunderbirds, and a deeply grooved crescent shape which has been partially destroyed. All petroglyphs discovered were deeply grooved into the top of the large boulder. Petroglyphs on the rock were divided into two panels on the basis of their spatial locations: Panel 1, consisting of the turkey track originally described by Orr, and Panel 2, which consists of a small cluster of glyphs found during a recent survey.

Each panel was initially field sketched and photographed using color and black and white 35 mm film. Tracings were also made of the petroglyphs using large sheets of clear vinyl acetate, which were carefully taped to the rock surface away from any petroglyphs to prevent damage. After taping the acetate sheets to the rock surface, the petroglyphs were carefully traced along the edges with permanent markers. Field notes were written directly on the acetate sheets, and a life-size scale was drawn on the acetate surface to aid in reducing the images.

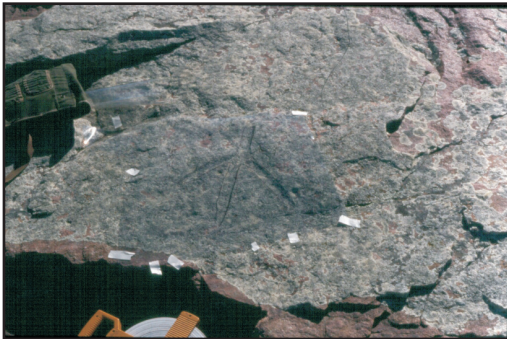


Figure 5. Photograph showing recording technique used in tracing petroglyphs. Note placement of tape well away from the petroglyph surface.

This recording method is much preferred over traditional techniques, such as

charcoal rubbing, both of which have been shown to damage the rock surface and interfere with newly developed petroglyph dating methods (Loendorf 1998:34). The field notes, maps, tracings, photographs and other related material are archived at the Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist, Iowa City.

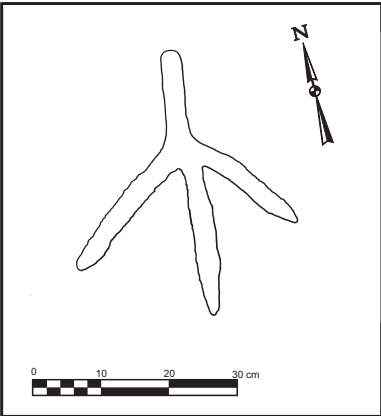


Figure 6. Scanned tracing of "turkey track" petroglyph designated Panel 1.

The largest petroglyph measures approximately 19 centimeters in length, and is a classic representation of a "turkey track" thunderbird. Such turkey track glyphs are commonly found at rock art sites throughout the Midwest from Saskatchewan south into Illinois and Missouri. The second thunderbird petroglyph, which appears as a semi-circle with an intersecting line similar to a lower case "m," appears to have a more northern distribution. Strikingly similar petroglyphs are found at the Jeffers petroglyph site in southwestern Minnesota (Lothson 1976). The third petroglyph, a crescent shape which may be largely destroyed, is more difficult to identify due to its incomplete



Figure 7. Photograph of Panel 2 facing southwest.

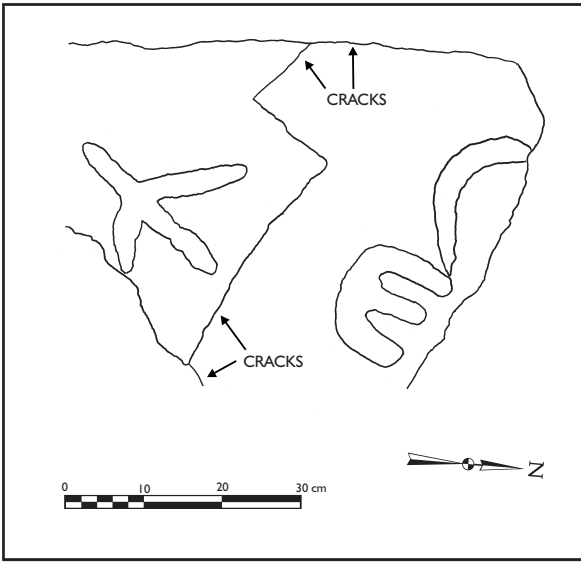


Figure 8. Scanned tracing of Panel 2.

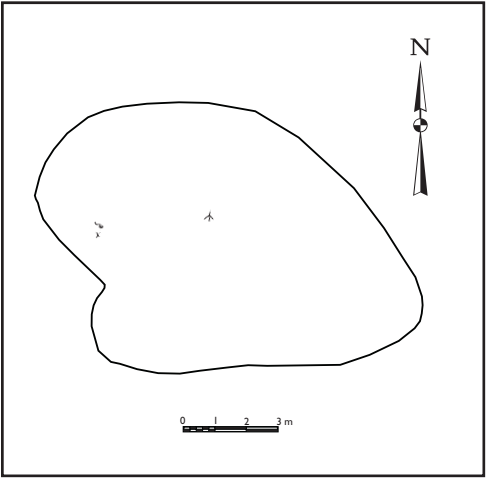


Figure 9. Map showing the location of petroglyphs on the upper rock surface.

Pilot Rock is one of three known petroglyph boulder sites in Iowa, the others being the Newton Stone, located in Jasper County and the Radcliffe Sacred Rock in Allamakee County. High numbers of petroglyph boulders occur along the borders of surrounding states, suggesting that other petroglyph boulders have yet to be found. In addition, cup marked boulders can be found south of Ellicott in Montgomery County and in Blood Run State Park in northwestern Iowa. Examination of geologic maps showing the locations of glacial erratics may be of use in locating other prehistoric boulder sites.



Figure 10. Photograph of vandalism on upper rock surface. The presence of recent graffiti is a good indicator of future site destruction.



Figure 11. Photograph of Pilot Rock taken in 1927. Courtesy Charles R. Keyes Archaeological Collection, Iowa Office of the State Archaeologist and State Historical Society of Iowa.

References Cited

- Fulton, A.R.
1882 Red Men of Iowa. Mills and Company, Publishers, Des Moines.
- Loendorf, Lawrence, Linda A. Olson, Stuart Conner, and J. Claire Dean
1998 A Manual for Rock Art Documentation. Privately printed with support from the National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation.
- Lothson, Gordon A.
1976 The Jeffers Petroglyph Site: A Survey and Analysis of the Carvings. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.
- McCulla, Thomas
1914 History of Cherokee County, Iowa. S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, Chicago.