

Archaic Petroglyphs of Mesa Prieta, Northern New Mexico

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Abstract

Thousands of images on Mesa Prieta in northern New Mexico were made by pre-agricultural Archaic people, possibly for ceremonial purposes. While their meanings are unknown, they can be grouped visually and objectively into a number of geometric and other pattern types, including linear meanders, branched lines and ladders, grids, discs and other patterns.

Mesa Prieta, also known as Black Mesa, is a canoe-shaped, 12 mile long volcanic landform at the confluence of the Rio Grande and the Rio Chama in northern New Mexico. Created by lava emissions to the north about 3.3 million years ago, the cap rock and escarpment of basalt bedrock and fallen boulders feature many grassy benches, eroded arroyos and collapsed lava tubes.



Begun in 1999 with a mission to record everything human made on the mesa, the Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project also presents several educational initiatives in the community: a 4th to 7th grade curriculum celebrating local cultures through the lens of the petroglyphs, a Summer Youth Intern Program that sees local teenagers, including those from the Pueblos, record images that may have been made by their own ancestors, tours of the Wells Petroglyph

Preserve and monthly Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Talks at the Northern Rio Grande National Heritage Center in Alcalde, NM.

The project has recorded some 60,000 images to date. It is conservatively estimated that there may be 100,000 images in total. Cultural Landscape features such as artifacts, trails and structures are also recorded. A cadre of about 35 well trained volunteers record images year-round in difficult terrain, as part of a 20 year-long mission to document all human-made features on the 22,000 acre mesa. Data are entered into a GIS-linked Access database that mirrors the Archaeological Society of New Mexico's Rock Art Council recording protocols. It is envisaged that the objective documentation phase will be followed by academic access to the data and creation of new knowledge about the human use of the mesa over 10,000 years or more.

Date: 6-12-13 Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project Data entry: Date _____ by _____
 Photo Data Sheet Youth Intern Team A Grp: 07 Landowner: Cochran (Richard Cook) Project No.: 014
 LA No.: _____ NMCRIS: _____ Datum: NAD 83 Zone: 13S Prov. No.: 326
 Recorder: DM Photo: DM Mapper: JE CU8 Sheet 12 of 113

Photo No. 010 Locus J1 Facing UP
 H 1.04 W 1.69 AGL 0.94 Position L
 GPS accuracy: 5.0 meters

No.	Description	Repatination	Pecking	Abraded	Incised	Painted	Sub Cat	Multiples	Additional
1	CURL MEANDER	M	M				1 S	2	
2	WAVY LINE	M	M				1 9		
3	ARC	M	S				1 0	2	
5	ASTERISK FORM	T	R				1 7		
6	ZIG ZAG LINE	H	M				1 K	51	
7	SINGLE LINE	M	S				2 a	2	
8	MISC. PECKING	M	S				12 g	9	
9	TAILED DISC	M	M				3 e		
10	STR. LINE	M	S				1 a	2	
11	PARALLEL LINES(3)	H	M				1 b		
12	DISC	M	S				3 b		

Notes: VERY DIFFICULT PANEL TO DRAW. THIS DRAWING DONE FROM PHOTOS (DISTORTED) MPPPP 6.6.13
 (6) TAILED (7) POSS. SEPERENT EMERGING FROM CRACK RARP-Council 06.02.2008
 CONT'D: SHEET 13

Repatination: O = None, L = Light, M = Medium, H = Heavy, T = Total
 Pecking: S = Sparse (dotted line), M = Medium (solid rough), D = Dense (solid, well defined), R = Relief (three dimensional)

A typical Photo Data Sheet recording form describing a number of individual Archaic images comprising a complex panel. Categorization follows the Rock Art Council's Design Element Inventory system.

Mesa Prieta petroglyphs represent at least four cultures: Archaic, Ancestral Pueblo, Historic and Euro-American. Several images may have been made by

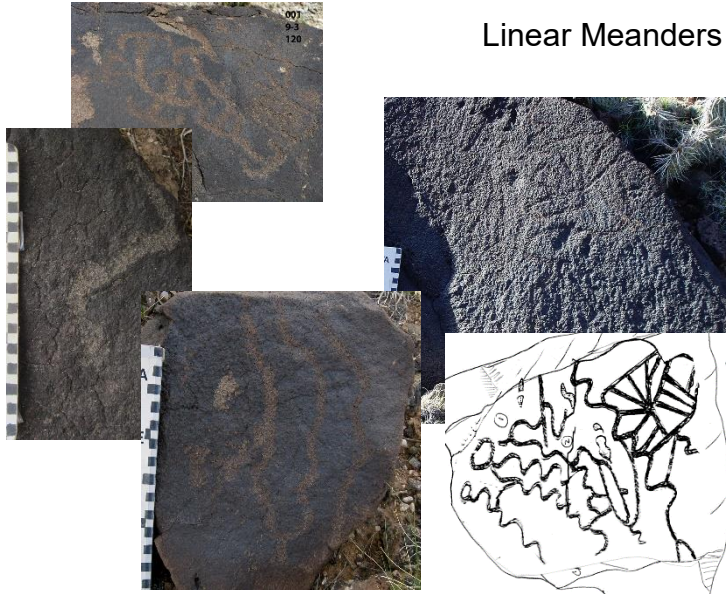
Palaeo-Indians. Folsom and other projectile point fragments confirm human activity on the mesa at this time, about 10,000 years ago.

Early to Late Archaic images may date between 5500 BCE and CE 500. Similarities in patterns have been noted between Mesa Prieta Archaic images and those on flat bedrock overlain by wood remains dating to about 7000 years ago at Rowe Mesa.¹ While the meanings of these heavily repatinated, deeply pecked images are unknown, it is thought that they were left by small groups traveling seasonally in the area to hunt and gather plants and possibly to conduct ceremonies above the Rio Grande. It is believed that Archaic images may comprise about ten per cent of all the glyphs on the mesa. They are in general very darkly repatinated, sometimes only visible in certain light conditions as deeply pecked differences in rock surface texture. Early in the period, image patterns present as non-representational abstracts. Late Archaic glyphs comprise human hand prints and foot prints and track patterns of other animals, their meanings unknown. A number of Archaic projectile points featuring side notches and concave and stemmed bases have been found, some associated with Archaic image panels and trails.

Mesa Prieta Archaic petroglyphs can be grouped into several general pattern types, the meanings of which are obscure to us.

¹ Stephen C. Lentz, A Cultural Resource Inventory of 330.4 Acres near Laguna Ortiz, San Miguel County, New Mexico, for the Valle Grande Grass Bank Collaborative Forest Restoration Project Archaeology Notes 309. Office of Archaeological Studies, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, 2002. Yvonne Oakes and Dorothy A. Zamora, A Heritage Resource Inventory on Rowe Mesa, San Miguel County, New Mexico, for the Valle Grande Grass Bank Collaborative Restoration Program, Project II Archaeology Notes 366, Office of Archaeological Studies. Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe, 2005. "Mesa Prieta - The Place" <https://www.mesaprietapetroglyphs.org/mesa-prieta---the-place.html> Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project, Velarde, NM.

Linear Meanders



Linear Meanders are a common pattern on the mesa. They may be simple single lines or complex multi-line panels.

Branched Lines and Ladders



Branched Lines and Ladders are also a common image, with a great deal of variety in layout, number of rungs and shape of lines.

Grids and Net-like Patterns



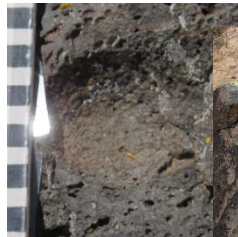
These intriguing patterns, sometimes categorized as joined squares or rectangles, may also form ovoid images. The divisions can be quite irregular.



Discs



Heavily repatinated Discs are usually completely pecked out, sometimes almost approaching proto-cupules.



Cupules



While considered to be artifacts of human activity, totally and heavily repatinated Cupules are numerous. They may have deeply pecked channels connecting them. Rarely, they are ringed. Their purpose(s) are not well understood but may be ceremonial in nature. They are labor-intensive to create.



Grinding Slicks



Also considered to be artifacts are Grinding Slicks which may be well or sparsely developed. These features may be evidence of stone tool sharpening. They sometimes occur under or over petroglyph images, as at bottom left.

Other Early Archaic Patterns



There are a wide variety of patterns that are difficult to group: rayed circles, very thick lines, joined triangles and more.

Other Early Archaic Patterns



Rock edge and crack enhancement is a common feature of Archaic images.

Late Archaic Track Patterns



Human Hand and Foot Prints

While these patterns are categorized as Tracks, their meanings are not clear. Human hand and foot prints may have four, five or six digits. They may be sparsely or densely infilled or outlined.

Late Archaic Track Patterns



Bear Tracks

Possibly a clan identification, “Bear Tracks” exhibit a wide variety of forms including number of digits.

Late Archaic Track Patterns



Deer/Elk Tracks

Elk or deer tracks are plentiful on the mesa. Some have their dew claw marks indicated. Apparent juvenile tracks are also present.

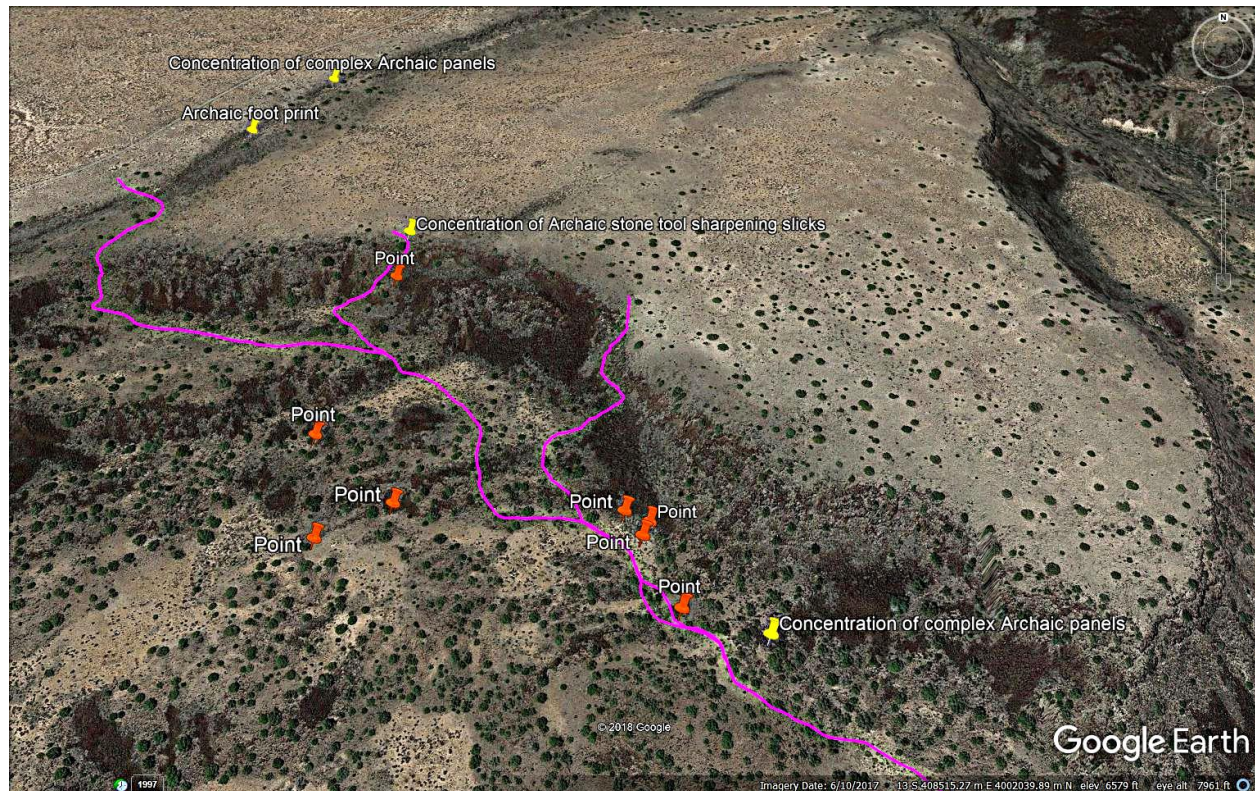
Late Archaic Track Patterns



Bird Tracks

Bird tracks or “turkey tracks” exhibit some variety: no “heels” or long “heels”. These images persist into the Ancestral Pueblo period, when they may be trail markers.

The lifestyle of Archaic peoples is thought to comprise activities such as hunting large and small game with atlatls and darts, seasonal plant gathering in a variety of ecological zones, traveling considerable distances in small family groups, using and creating trails to access these resources. In this remote time period spanning thousands of years, any connection of those peoples to the local cultures we recognize today is obscure: we do not know what language they spoke. We do not know what they called themselves.



A trail on Mesa Prieta demonstrating multiple travel routes between lower and higher elevations.

The map above shows a major trail allowing several routes of access between the mesa top and lower elevations and down to the Rio Grande. The trail was used into historic times. Seven probable Archaic projectile points featuring side notching, sudden side notching, concave base and stemmed base were recorded along the part of the trail just below the top, evidence of hunting activities in this area. There is a concentration of more than a dozen heavily and totally repatinated stone tool sharpening slicks associated with one of the trails. A fragment of metate was also found, time period unknown. While we may have some idea of Archaic subsistence activities on Mesa Prieta, the meanings of the many fascinating individual images and complex multi-element panels close to trails such as these are unknown. At present we are unable to relate the images to the culture in any secure way.