

WELLS PETROGLYPH PRESERVE

The Wells Petroglyph Preserve is located along the eastern slopes of the 12-mile long Mesa Prieta escarpment (also known as Black Mesa) overlooking the Upper Rio Grande Valley in Rio Arriba County, New Mexico. The Preserve includes almost 10,000 petroglyphs carved into the basalt boulders that date from Middle Archaic (ca 3,900 B.C.) to modern times. The form and style of the glyphs vary greatly, with most corresponding to the Classic or Pueblo IV period (A.D.1325-1600), when the area's inhabitants built large villages along the upper Rio Grande and its tributaries, and rock art reached its florescence.

During this period, the Mesa Prieta area is believed to have been a center of ceremonial activity for the Tewa populations of Ohkay Owingeh, located just south of the site, the large prehistoric Pfioge Pueblo across the river, the nearby Tewa pueblos of Santa Clara and San Ildefonso, and smaller neighboring settlements. Many of the motifs recorded within the Preserve are suggestive of Pueblo ritual. Most images were produced by pecking through the dark patina covering the stone by means of one rock used as a hammer and another as a chisel.

The Wells Petroglyph site is known for its number, variety and quality of shield images and its remarkable number of flute-playing animals—more have been documented at this site than at any other in North America. Most of the petroglyphs along the mesa and at the Wells site in particular appear to be a northern Rio Grande (Tewa) variant of what researchers have referred to as the Rio Grande Style. There are many examples of more deeply carved and very heavily repatinated panels consisting of geometric and linear motifs that are typical of Desert Abstract Style rock art produced by archaic hunter-gatherer peoples. The Archaic glyphs can be related to a site on Glorieta Mesa east of Santa Fe which has been studied and dated to as early as 3900 B.C., and to numerous glyphs in the Taos area. Folsom period points found nearby indicate that the area has been occupied for at least 9,000 years.

Historic images and inscriptions, which are rare at other petroglyph sites along the upper Rio Grande, are also present in significant numbers at the Wells site. Spanish settlers, who moved into the region after 1598, created some of the historic rock art along the mesa. In many instances, stylistic variations and motifs suggest Hispanic-Pueblo interactions. Other features identified within the site include lithic artifact scatters, agricultural features such as grid gardens, check dams, a few small structures, water control systems, and a probable campsite. Pottery sherds from various periods have also been found.

Privately-owned lands along the mesa near and adjacent to the Preserve also contain an abundance of petroglyphs. It is estimated that there may be as many as 75,000 petroglyphs on the mesa making it

one of New Mexico's most significant sites. Portions of the mesa are seeing increased commercial land use and development. Concerns about the future of the site prompted Katherine Wells, the landowner, to create a conservation preserve with The Archaeological Conservancy to protect the property from future development, mining and grazing, while still allowing for archaeological research, tours, and public educational programs at the site. In 2007, Katherine Wells gave the land outright to the Conservancy. In 2015, 25 more acres were added to the Preserve bringing the total size to 181 acres.

In the late 18th and 19th centuries, the sides and top of Mesa Prieta were heavily used for sheep grazing until, by the 1920's, plant life became too depleted to sustain large flocks. This overgrazing and subsequent runoff resulted in the growth of an increase in the number of arroyos and unimpeded runoff from heavy storms. The Wells site has been affected by grazing, resulting in the increased fragility of some of the dense petroglyph areas on steep hillsides where soil-binding vegetation is sparse. The Mesa Prieta area is also threatened by gravel and riprap mining operations on lands adjacent to the Wells site and other areas of the mesa where important archaeological resources can be found. In 2014, the Preserve was named one of eleven most endangered landscapes in the United States by The Cultural Landscape Foundation.

In the summers of 1993 and 1994 the Archaeological Society of New Mexico's Rock Art Field School conducted a survey of the entire site with a crew of 30 volunteers. Katherine Wells used this information in 1999 to have the site placed on the National Register of Historic Places. It is also on the State Register of Cultural Properties. In 2005 Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project began rerecording the site using GPS, digital photography, the Rio Grande Categorization System and measurement standards. The information gathered will be part of a data base of rock art on the entire mesa. The rerecording was completed in 2009 and revealed an increase of 30% in the number of images found.

The site's fine examples of Archaic rock art, its extensive variety of images from the Pueblo IV Rio Grande Style period, and a large collection of historic, Spanish-inspired rock drawings concentrated in a relatively small area, make it an ideal site for research and a highly important area for protection.