

SNAKE PETROFORMS IN THE NORTH

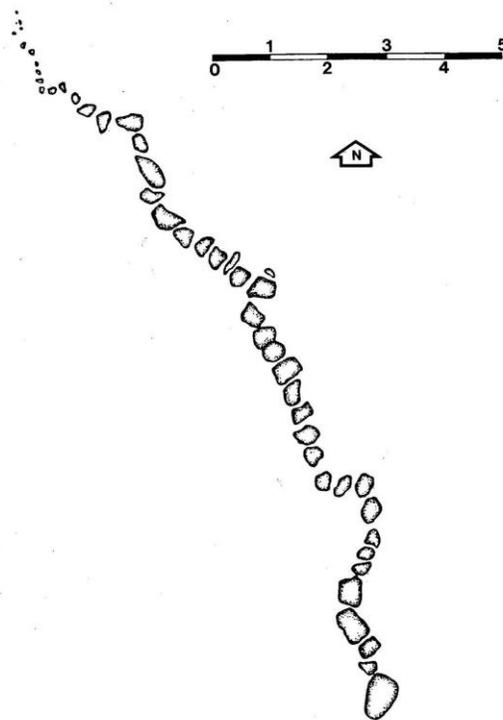
Leo Pettipas

Manitoba Archaeological Society

“Petroforms” are recognizable figures that had been constructed by the orderly, patterned laying of stones on the ground surface. The term “petroform” is a good one because it describes exactly what I’m talking about in this article – shapes (forms) made of stones (petra in Greek). In Western Canada, petroforms are fairly common in the forested Shield country of the Whiteshell area of southeastern Manitoba, and on the open prairies of Saskatchewan and Alberta. They appear in the shapes of humans, animals and geometric figures such as circles, squares and ovals.

Perhaps you’ve heard of the “medicine wheels” of the western grasslands -- circles with lines radiating outwards in various directions from the centre, like the spokes of a wheel. The stones in the Manitoba petroforms weren’t piled on top of one another like you see in rock cairns or in the famous Inuit “inuksuit” found in the Arctic, nor were they clustered closely together as in a mosaic. Rather, they were laid out in sequence, sort of like what you see when someone places a row of stones around the edge of a flower garden in their front yard.

The genuine petroforms found in the Prairie Provinces are most certainly Aboriginal in origin, and for many years anthropologists have been trying to figure out who made them, why they made them, and how old they are. Fortunately, some good information has been obtained from Anishinaabe (Ojibwa) elders who lived on the east side of Lake Winnipeg during the last century. One source holds that the petroforms in southeastern Manitoba were created as part of the Ojibwa Midéwiwin or Grand Medicine Society that had been instituted generations ago to deal with the disease, depopulation and cultural breakdown that came with the arrival of the Europeans. Some of the Whiteshell examples are in the shapes of turtles and snakes, and special healing ceremonies were conducted at the places where these animal-shaped (“zoomorphic”) petroforms were built. A diagram of one of the stone snakes in the Whiteshell is shown here.



***Snake petroform, Whiteshell Provincial Park, Manitoba. Scale is in feet.
Courtesy of Historic Resources Branch, Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism.***

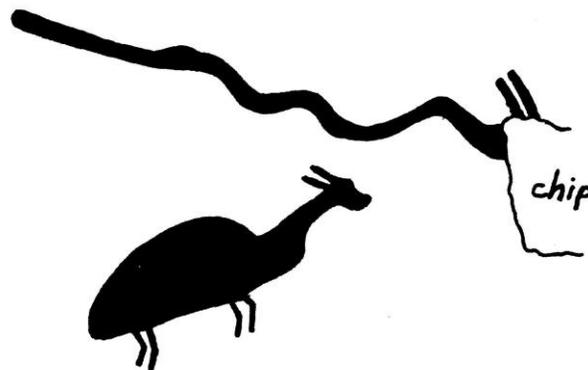
Until recently, anthropologists were unaware of petroforms of any kind in the Churchill River drainage of the North. However, in 2007 Dr Katherine Pettipas of The Manitoba Museum was studying the collections in the Northern Gateway Museum at Denare Beach, SK and she came across some handwritten manuscripts penned in the 1960s by the late Harry Moody, a local heritage aficionado. One of these documents held quite a surprise: an account of petroforms just to the west of the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border. Mr. Moody was keenly interested in Cree history and culture, and he was always on the look-out for information on these subjects. On one occasion he learned from a local resident about a stone snake “several yards long” on an island in the Island Falls area. This description qualifies it as a true petroform. The island was called, interestingly enough, “Snake Island.”

In 1961 a Cree man who also hailed from the Island Falls district was a patient in the Flin Flon Hospital. Mr. Moody took the opportunity to ask him, through an interpreter, about the above-mentioned stone snake that he (Mr Moody) had heard about earlier on. The

patient told of an incident long ago in which snakes in that district ate a small girl. The local Natives memorialized the event by making a stone “model” of a snake that measured about four feet long. It was constructed at a place where an actual snake -- and a large one at that -- was seen coming out of the water. About two and a half miles away the Natives constructed another stone snake, this one about five feet long.

The two northern snake petroforms I’ve described here may not have played a role in healing ceremonies as did those in the Whiteshell. In fact, it’s all but impossible for me to surmise the function of the second snake, that is, the one that didn’t serve as a memorial to what had happened to the young girl. And even this latter story presents a challenge because there are no snakes native to the Churchill drainage today that kill people or feed on human flesh. On the other hand, the account is compatible with certain facets of ancient Cree tradition that cast snakes in a rather unfavourable light.

For example, there is an old story about how, when the World was new, the great snake *Misekenapik* ate people until the culture hero Wesakedjak put matters right, and the story of the young girl may somehow tie in with this ancient teaching. Also, the Thunderbirds - - people-friendly beings that protect humans from dangerous and malevolent underwater creatures -- are forever in mortal combat with the horned snakes of the underworld. Again, there are no true water snakes as such in the Island Falls area, and so the big snake ‘seen’ to be coming out of the water near the site of the petroform as noted above may relate to the traditional beliefs about malevolent underwater beings. I would note that there’s a rock painting of a horned snake on the Manitoba side of a lake that straddles the provincial boundary just to the southeast of Island Falls, and the significance of the serpent-shaped petroforms may be intertwined with this feature as well.



***Horned snake pictograph (top) on the lake southeast of the Island Falls locality.
Courtesy of the Manitoba Archaeological Society.***

Without the assistance of knowledgeable Cree informants, the doorway to a true and full understanding of the stone features is all but closed to outsiders. Nonetheless, it's quite clear that the petroforms and rock paintings, along with the age-old teachings, bear witness to the importance of the snake motif in the indigenous symbolism and traditional world view of the northern Cree.