

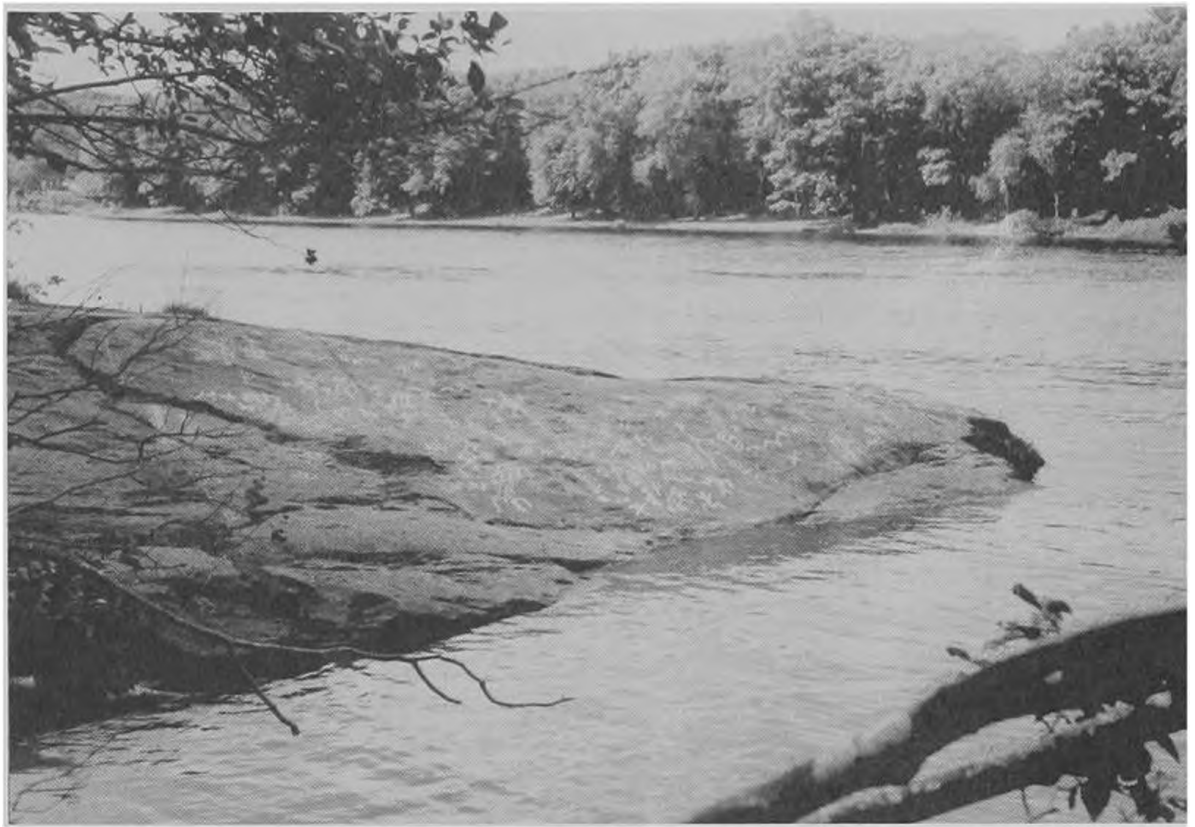
THE EMBDEN, MAINE, PETROGLYPHS

Anthropological reports on North American Indian rock carvings (petroglyphs) are frequently terse and difficult for laypersons to understand. Nevertheless, the study of petroglyphs has much to offer those with a nonprofessional interest in Native American culture. Recently researchers, writing in a style easier to understand, have interpreted selected carvings and have demonstrated ways in which these carvings were intended to convey messages. The problem, as they pose it, is understanding to whom these messages were addressed, and what they say.

In Maine, petroglyphs are found at Machiasport in the eastern part of the state, and at Embden on the Kennebec River. The Embden site is a long, bald ledge of bedrock which juts into the river, just downstream from rapids. In the days before the downriver dams were built, raising the river level, it would have been necessary for canoe travelers to portage around the rapids, and the low bald ledge would have been an excellent canoe ramp. When the Kennebec was a principal artery from the coast to the St. Lawrence River, via Dead River and the Chaudiere, it bore heavy traffic; the Embden site was no doubt an important stopping point in this travel.

Over a hundred petroglyphs are visible on the Embden ledge. They were made by pecking out a design with a sharp hard stone, a method similar to that used by the creators of the Machiasport petroglyphs.¹ In 1977 a team of archaeologists who had been excavating the nearby Hodgdon site examined the petroglyphs. They considered the carvings "doodlings," made by persons with "time on their hands," yet conceded the carvings were intended to convey a message which "in a literate society takes the form of a name, initials and a date."²

The many artifacts retrieved at the Hodgdon site on the southern side of the Embden ledge characterize the location as "an interior, riverine campsite used primarily in the Ceramic period."³ In Maine this period began around 1 A.D. and ended about 1600 A.D.⁴ At the Evergreen site, across the river from the



The Embden petroglyph ledge, looking east across the Kennebec River to the Evergreen Site. (Photo by Maruta L. Ray)

petroglyphs, retrievals are much the same as those recovered from the Hodgdon site, but evidence found here indicates an Indian presence 5,000 years ago.⁵ The amount of artifacts recovered, especially at the Hodgdon site, indicate that this location on the river was a popular place to fish. The fishing here not only served the Indians in the prehistory period, but continued to serve people in historic times. Apparently Father Sebastien Rasles in 1724 intended to draw on the supply of fish here to supplement a skimpy harvest at his mission fourteen miles downstream at Norridgewock.⁶

Dean Snow, who also examined the site in 1977 and whose work in the prehistory period of Maine Indians is well known, thought the images were carved for or by a Shaman. Shamanism was and is found worldwide among the so-called primitive people. As intermediaries with the spirit world, Shamans

were set apart from other men and in some cases enjoyed equal status with tribal chiefs. Snow wrote:

We can only guess at why Shamans sometimes chose to express themselves in rock art. The Maine site suggests that unless destruction of rock art sites has been far more severe than we suspect, this sort of artistic expression of Shamanism was much less widespread than Shamanism itself. Perhaps only a few Shamans felt the need to fix their power in time and space by giving it concrete expression in rock art.⁷

I, too, believe these glyphs were carved for or by a Shaman. Unlike Snow, who feels there is no cause to believe the Ojibwa people came to Maine,⁸ however, I find ample evidence the Embden carver was an Ojibwa. Many of the Embden glyphs look like duplicates of Ojibwa petroglyphs carved on a large crystalline limestone ledge in a field on the southern fringe of the Canadian Shield, near Peterborough, Ontario. Trent university anthropologists Joan M. and Romas K. Vastokas, have interpreted these glyphs.⁹ The similarity in subject matter at the Peterborough and Embden sites point to a common culture, with marked emphasis on a common belief in the nature and power of supernatural forces.

At Embden and at Peterborough several images represent men in canoes. The Vastokas have concluded that the Peterborough canoe representations were "not ordinary canoes but magical vessels that can penetrate the earth, fly across space or ascend up to the sky. They may carry souls, shamans, manitous and even Kitchi-Manitou himself and signify interworld communication" Such boats, the Vastokas felt, implied transcendence, "the notion of flying through space in a boat being an application of the Shamans' essential technique of celestial ascent."¹⁰ The carver at Embden included twenty-seven boats, certainly enough to ensure full appreciation of this point.

Another image at Embden, found also at Peterborough, is a round figure having zigzag lines shooting from it. The Vastokas felt the Peterborough figure represented the sun, which the



Sky boats (upper left) and Thunderbird (center, lower center). The canoe representations were "magical vessels" that could ascend to the sky. (Photo by Benjamin C. Ray)

Indians there believed to be the basic source of a Shaman's power. The Vastokas, in their long discussion of solar sun figures, pointed out that the solar figure is "essentially a Siberian, North Pacific and American Indian motif. It is a motif, moreover, that is supremely shamanistic in character and meaning."¹¹ Elsewhere Dr. John A. Grim has emphasized that the sun was considered by the Ojibways as the basic source of power, the spirits serving as intermediaries between the sun and people.¹² It is possible the Embden carver intended to convey that the Embden Shaman believed his source of power was the sun. Shamans considered their healing power an important part of their community service. They worked themselves into a trance to obtain help from the spirits, and, according to Grim, believed that in a trance their "inner identity" received help, enabling them to heal the sick. The Embden sun figure may have been used as a representation of the local Shaman's healing power.



The Tribal House and Shaman's House, from the Embden ledge. The glyphs convey the equal but separate positions of the Shaman and chief of the tribe. (Photo by Benjamin C. Ray)

The archaeologists who reported on their findings at the Hodgdon site commented that the two house-like buildings in the glyphs could represent European-style houses.¹³ However, I believe these two glyphs were intended to convey the equal but separate positions of the Shaman and the chief of a tribe. The building with an inverted V roof was common to Algonkian villages. Here the local chief and his councilors met to consider matters relating to war parties or hunting parties and the tribe's seasonal migration. The other building was occupied on occasion by the tribal Shaman when he (or she) was preparing to communicate with a spirit. Here, through song and ritual, he (or she) induced a trance-like state and made an out-of-body journey to the spirit world. The Embden house-like images were unlikely to be European-type buildings since the evidence suggests that the petroglyphs were carved centuries before contact with Europe.

Carvings representing the thunderbird are found both at Embden and Peterborough and at other petroglyph sites west



Representation of a human with raised hand and splayed fingers was a widespread design motif, a “basic identifying sign for man.” (Photo by Benjamin C. Ray)

of the Great Lakes. Among some tribes the mythical creature was thought to cause thunder by flapping its wings.¹⁴ At Embden, Snow has suggested the thunderbird images may have been associated with the Pamola myth, about a fierce giant of a bird that lived in a cave near the top of Mount Katahdin.¹⁵ The Vastokas, on the other hand, felt the thunderbird images at Peterborough depicted a Shaman’s power to ascend to the highest level of the multilevel universe. As all the carvings at Embden, in my view, represent sundry powers of Shamans, it seems probable the thunderbirds were carved with that as the intended meaning.

At Embden, one petroglyph represents a human holding his left hand up with the fingers and thumb splayed. In this person’s right hand is a large unidentified object. Campbell Grant, an expert on Indian rock art, has written: “The most widespread design motif in North America, and indeed almost anywhere in the world where rock pictures are found, is the hand.” The hand is a “basic identifying sign for man,” and can be found in such diverse places as Paleolithic cave prints made

30,000 years ago and in Arizona canyon carvings made by the Navaho in historic times.¹⁶ The Vastokas, while writing about hand prints much the same way as Grant, pointed out that this rendering of the raised arm carried a specific meaning in Algonkian pictography: "The gesture is always associated with shamans." The Vastokas feel that such designs denoted "reverence, supplication or communication with the sky and more specifically to the Great Spirit, Kitchi-Manitou."¹⁷ The raised hand at Embden could well be another representation by the local Shaman of the powers he believed he possessed.

One more group of images in the Embden petroglyphs should be noted: those representing male and female genitalia, and two related male figures, one spilling his semen on the ground and the other an eager male running toward a symbol of female genitals. To us today, this all seems pornographic, and by our standards the Shaman loses stature. This exuberance was, in Ojibway belief, a characteristic of their god-hero, Nanbush. The Embden Shaman could have intended to convey the message that he, like Nanbush, possessed a lively sex interest, and possibly that he could pass on to future generations his great powers. Different cultures in different environments had different beliefs in how Shamans acquired their powers.¹⁸ Among some tribes, it was believed Shamans acquired their powers only through a long self-training; in other tribes, it was thought that Shamans had previously suffered mental illness, had cured themselves, and in the process gained insight into the workings of the spirit world. Here at Embden the local Shaman apparently believed his powers could be passed on in his progeny.

I have not listed all the images carved in the ledge at Peterborough which the Vastokas interpreted, nor paired all the images at Embden with duplicates at Peterborough. I have, however, endeavored to emphasize the similiarity of the carvings at the two locations and to apply the Vastokas' interpretations to the Embden petroglyphs. What, then, was the special meaning of the Embden petroglyphs?



Erotica: Top photo, a Shaman spilling semen, suggests abundance, exuberance, and perhaps an ability to convey magical power to future generations; bottom photo shows Shaman eagerly approaching a vagina.



EMBDEN PETROGLYPHS

The many artifacts found at the Hodgdon and Evergreen sites indicate that the Embden petroglyphs were carved where the most people in the area would see them. At Peterborough the images were made by pecking a sharp-pointed hard stone onto the soft limestone ledge, which must have been as tempting as a blank wall is to a graffiti artist. But the carver at Embden must have had a more serious purpose, as he pecked designs on the hard bedrock riverside ledge.

The Vastokas believe the Peterborough glyphs were carved between 900 A.D. and 1400 A.D., during the dynamic Middle Woodland period.¹⁹ In this long period between 1000 B.C. and 900 A.D. the beliefs depicted in the carvings on these ledges had been maintained, and obviously they were still held by the carver at Embden. The Middle Woodland period began in the Northeast about 300A.D.,²⁰ following a change in the climate which affected the economy in Maine. In part, this new economy involved an extension of the areas in which intertribal trading was done. New people with new ideas came in from central and southern New England. The new influences can be detected in the changes in the local manufacture of ceramics.

This new mix of cultures suggests a meaning to the Embden petroglyphs. Perhaps the vigor of the Middle Woodland period disturbed the older people. Younger people were spending too little time worrying about capricious spirits. These new currents in the culture perhaps alarmed the local Shaman. Fearing that his people would neglect the beliefs that had sustained them for generations, he inscribed the petroglyphs to save them from the anger of the spirits. And to preserve his own position, he added this array of images showing the extent of his powers. The message at Embden seems to be: "You cannot do without me."

NOTES

¹Eric Lahti, et al., "Test Excavations at the Hodgdon Site," *Man in the Northeast* 25 (no. 1, 1985): 19-36.

²David Sanger, ed., "The Ceramic Period in Maine," in *Discovering Maine Archaeological Heritage* (Augusta: Maine Historic Preservation Commission, 1979).

³Arthur E. Speiss, James B. Petersen, and Mark H. Hedden, "The Evergreens: 5000 Years in Interior Northwest Maine," *Maine Archaeological Society Bulletin* 23 (Summer 1983): 9-26.

⁴Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, "The Attack on Norridgewock," *New England Quarterly* 7 (1934): 572.

⁵Roger B. Ray, "The Machiasport Petroglyphs," *Maine Historical Society Quarterly* 25 (Summer 1985): 35.

⁶Lahti, *et als.*, "Text Excavations," pp. 19-36.

⁷Dean R. Snow, "Rock Art and the Power of Shamans," *Natural History* 86 (no. 2, 1977): 42-49.

⁸Personal correspondence.

⁹Joan M. Vastokas, and Romas K. Vastokas, *Sacred Art of the Algonkians, A Study of the Peterborough Petroglyphs* (Peterborough, Ontario: Mansard Press, 1973).

¹⁰Vastokas and Vastokas, *Sacred Art*, p. 128.

¹¹*Ibid.*, chapter 4, p. 61, 63.

¹²John A. Grim, *The Shaman: Patterns of Siberian and Ojibway Healing* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), pp. 8, 258.

¹³Lahti, *et als.*, "Text Excavations."

¹⁴Campbell Grant, *Rock Art of the American Indian* (New York: Crowell, 1967).

¹⁵Dean R. Snow, "The Solon Petroglyphs and Eastern Abnaki Shamanism," *Papers of the Seventh Algonquian Conference*, edited by William Cowan (Ottawa, 1975), pp. 281-88.

¹⁶Grant, *Rock Art*, p. 152.

¹⁷Vastokas and Vastokas, *Sacred Art*, p. 70.

¹⁸Joan Halifax, *Shaman, The Wounded Healer* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). As the title implies, the author has dealt at length with the Shamans who cured themselves from mental illness before becoming Shamans. See also Andreas Lommel, *Shamanism: the Beginnings of Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967). Lommel considers Shaman's mental sickness a necessary stage both for his creativity as an artist and for his sensitivity as a tribal healer.

¹⁹James E. Fitting, "Regional Culture Development," 300 B.C. to A.D. 1000," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, vol. 15, *Northeast* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian, 1978), p. 44.

²⁰*Ibid.*

Roger B. Ray, former president of the Maine Historical Society, compiled three editions of the Society's BIBLIOGRAPHICAL GUIDE TO THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANS OF MAINE AND THE ATLANTIC MARITIME PROVINCES. He has also contributed articles to the Society's QUARTERLY, as well as to ARCHAEO-ASTRONOMY, and the NEWFOUNDLAND QUARTERLY.