

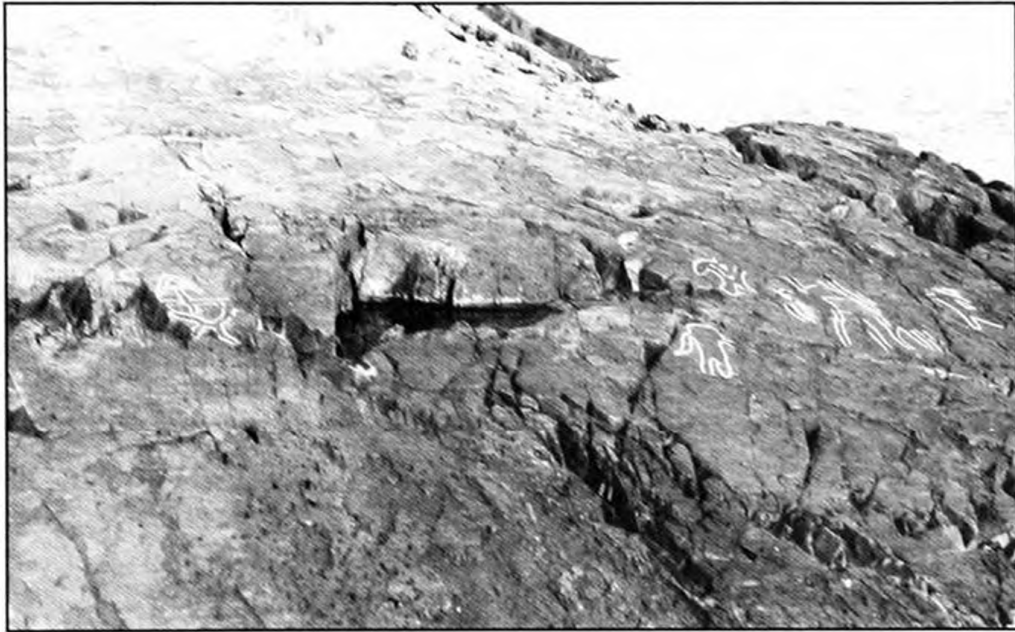
ROGER B. RAY

EVIDENCE OF JESSAKKIDDS AT MACHIASPORT

Jessakkidds are powerful and prestigious members of an Ojibwa religious society. Evidence of their appearance in eastern Maine – signaling anxiety among the Native peoples of the area – can be found in petroglyphs, etched in rock on the shores of Holmes Bay. In this article Roger B. Ray connects the symbols in the Sprague-site petroglyphs with the turmoil at the end of the Laurentian Tradition way of life.

When David Sanger wrote his article, “Who Were the Red Paints?” he estimated the disappearance of this prehistoric culture at about 1500 B.C. He noted that “encroaching groups from Massachusetts” were appearing in Maine by around this time, and that their arrival coincided with the end of the Moorehead burial tradition and the Laurentian Tradition way of life.¹ The Red Paint people, whose graves Warren K. Moorehead first explored, had a burial cult that was characterized by lavish amounts of red ocher (iron pyrites).² According to Sanger, they had moved into Maine and the Atlantic Maritimes from the west – probably the Great Lakes area – around 3000 B.C.³

The disjuncture in cultures in 1500 B.C. in Maine and the Maritimes was undoubtedly accompanied by social tensions. The newcomers, Bruce Bourque’s excavations at the Turner Farm site suggest, were from the Susquehanna Tradition.¹ They were a brash lot and paid no attention to the burial practices of the earlier inhabitants. Another worry was the changing and uncertain food supply. People were hungry: the sea level rise had turned shore-side fresh-water ponds brackish; a worm was killing oysters; and as ocean water temperatures declined, the large warm-water fish shortened their season in the Gulf of Maine.



Evidence from the Sprague site, shown here above and below, suggests the unsettled state of mind of the "Red Paint People," possibly the result of disruptions in cultural tradition and uncertain food supplies.

Photographs in this article courtesy of the author.

According to David and Marv Jo Sanger, the ocean food supply had been over-exploited.⁵

Insights into this period of change and uncertainty may be gleaned from a series of petroglyphs in eastern Maine. Mark H. Hedden's drawings of those at Hog Island in the Machias River

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show that numerous Shamans were active in the Machias area, and the Mallery photographs and drawings of the petroglyphs on the ledge of the west side of the river at Birch Point provide further evidence of skilled carvers, presumably Shamans.⁶ In with the skilled carvings were a number of animal representations made by unskilled hands. Anthropologists understand that the representation of an animal attracted the spirit of the animal. A person's spirit-helper was able to communicate his need for meat to the animal, spirit to spirit. Frank G. Speck wrote, "There is an analogy in Northern Algonkian philosophy between symbol or picture and control power, bringing the objects portrayed under the dominance of the individual spirit for the accomplishment of its needs."⁷ Apparently the efforts of the professionals – the Shamans – had not relieved the food shortage. Individuals had obviously tried their own hand at it, bespeaking urgency.

Through the centuries, the rise in sea level has submerged many petroglyphs. Mallery noted this in his visit to Machiasport in the 1880s.⁸ He also noted that many glyphs on the east side, near Holmes Bay (Sprague Sites One and Two), were so far under water he could scarcely see them. The Machiasport glyphs are also subject to tidal action, resulting in pebble wash. This and storm tides have obliterated many of the carvings. In the Mallery illustration of the carvings at Birch Point, made in the 1880s, there are fifty-seven identifiable representations. In the early 1920s, when Frank Brown of Machiasport photographed the site, there were only eighteen.⁹

The increase in sea level leads to a probable date for the petroglyphs. At nearby Passamaquoddy Bay, Sanger found that the rate of sea level rise now is much faster than it was 1,000 to 500 B.C. Sanger postulates a period of rapid sea-level rise prior to the 1,000-500 B.C. period, followed by a period of limited rise, then another rapid rise.¹⁰ The petroglyphs obviously were carved before the earlier period of rapid rise. The troubles of the Red Paint people were taking place about the time the petroglyphs could have been carved on dry rock.

Returning to the problems plaguing the Red Paint people, it appears from the petroglyphs at the two Sprague sites that a

conference was held to decide what was best to be done to cope with the problems facing the inhabitants in this area. We know from George W. Drisko, the Machias historian, that there was an Indian conference center on the east side, where the two Sprague sites are located, in the eighteenth century. It is interesting to read what Drisko wrote about this place:

The late Charles Gates of Machiasport, who died an octogenarian many years ago, once said to the author, "I have heard my mother say that when a young girl, 1785-'90,' 'I counted over one hundred birch canoes drawn up on the beach and shore opposite Machiasport, while the Indians were in camp fires, phullabaloos and dances, in the forest growth and woodlands on the east side and towards Holmes' Bay."

One historian relates – and stories passed down the line give credence to his statement –that, "Machias River, when first inhabited by white settlers, was and appeared to have been a long time back a place of rendezvous by the various tribes of red men who came in September of every year from the east as far as St. John and from the west as far as Penobscot to associate in war dances and campfires. In corroboration of this, consider the numerous heaps of clam shells at Looks Point in Jonesboro, the Indian implements found there in the last hundred years; the shell heaps on "the shores of main and islands on Machias water," not omitting the greatest heap of all, the head of Western inlet of Holmes' Bay only two miles from the East shore of Machiasport, where on top of the heap is a spruce tree, two feet in diameter, with wide spread branches and roots penetrating and deriving strength of growth from the shells.¹¹

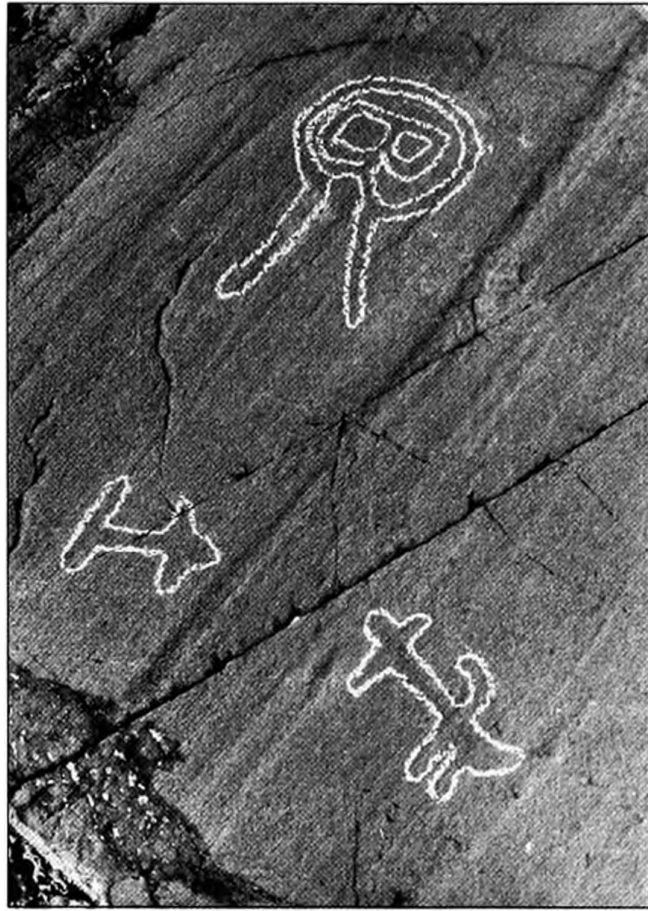
This location had served for a conference center for a very long time, judging from the height and length of the shell



Shaman holding Turtle and Thunderbird helpers (manitos). The figures represent tremendous power.

deposits near the intaglios, or figures. It is also interesting to note that Drisko felt that delegates came to the annual September conference "from the east as far as the St. John, and from the west as far as Penobscot." Much earlier, this had been Red Paint country, but at the peak of power enjoyed by these people, 2000 B.C., the area of influence was greater. In the period Drisko described, the area of influence enjoyed by Machiasport Indians had shrunk materially.¹²

The intaglios carved on the east-side ledges included the symbols of Jessakkids, members of a prestigious Ojibwa religious society. One might surmise that the decision to hire the Ojibwa was made by delegates from a territory ranging at least from the St. John to the Penobscot. From the number of petroglyphs on the two ledges, it looks as if the delegates included many Shamans. This rock is finely grained, but has a semisoft surface and has fractured where carving lines broke the surface. Today there are few intact petroglyphs left at the two Sprague sites. Three glyphs still in clear condition from the east side depict humans. Probably they represent the hired Jessakkids.



The representation above is a human, inside a small, round shelter, communicating with the spirit world. The human depicted below is emerging from a similar shelter.

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The local Indian authorities had hired powerful prophets. Jessakkids were considered second in prestige only to the Mede (members of the Midewiwin Society). They were not in competition with the Mede who, as seen at Grand Lake Stream, were energetic evangelists. Romas K. Vastokas and Joan M. Vastokas, authorities on Algonkian sacred art, wrote that the Jessakkids did not form an organization among themselves but practiced individually for a fee. The Vastokas wrote that this elite group considered themselves "blessed by the sun and were directly assisted by Turtle and Thunderbird manitos (spirit helpers)."¹³

One of the Machiasport glyphs depicts a Shaman holding something in his left hand, possibly a rattle. His head is bird-shaped, and he has both Turtle and Thunderbird representations near his feet. Rare, indeed, was it for a Shaman to claim both a Turtle and a Thunderbird for his manitos. The rattle, if it is a rattle, implied that the subject was capable of going out of body up to the spirit world after due preparation. Parenthetically, an excellent representation of a Shaman, holding a rattle and performing an enabling dance to fly to the spirit world, is etched on a bark box top in the Abbe Museum.

A second carving depicts a human inside a small round shelter; a third represents a human emerging from the roofless top of a small round shelter. Henry R. Schoolcraft's monumental 1853 report on the Indian tribes of the United States comments on the Indians' concept of the shape of the universe as a half circle.¹¹ This third carving then might have represented a Jessakkid in the sky, claiming Thunderbird power.

Illustrated here are three glyphs carved by a skilled person. These glyphs appear to represent the hired Jessakkids and their manitos, one a spirit turtle, the other a mythical bird. In contrast, there are representations of animals drawn by unskilled hands. These glyphs, not illustrated here, were possibly drawn by hungry people before the Jessakkids were hired.

The petroglyphs on both sides of the Machias River well illustrate the point made by the Sangers that the food supply crisis accounted, in large part, for the disappearance of the Red Paint People from coastal Maine.

NOTES

¹David Sanger, "Who Were the Red Paints?" *Maine Archaeological Society Bulletin* 13 (1973): 10-16.

²Warren K. Moorehead, *A Report on the Archaeology of Maine* (Andover, Massachusetts, 1922), pp. 143-45.

³Sanger, "Who Were the Red Paints?" pp. 8-9.

⁴Bruce J. Bourque, "The Turner Farm Site: A Preliminary Report," *Man in the Northeast* 11 (1976): 29.

⁵David Sanger and Mary Jo Sanger, "Boom and Bust on the River: The Story of the Damariscotta Shell Heaps," *Archaeology of Eastern North America* 14 (1986): 65-79; Bruce J. Bourque, "Aboriginal Settlement and Subsistence on the Maine Coast," *Man in the Northeast* 6 (1973): 3-20; David Sanger, "Cultural Ecology in Passamaquoddy Bay, New Brunswick," *Maine Archaeological Society Bulletin* 25 (1985): 10-16.

⁶Mark H. Hedden, "Petroglyphs on Hog Island, Machias Bay," *Maine Archaeological Society Bulletin* 27 (no. 1, 1987): 3-9; Garrick Mallery, "Picture Writing of the American Indians," *Tenth Annual Report of the U.S. Bureau of Ethnology* (1888-1889), p. 82.

⁷Frank G. Speck, *Naskapi: The Savage Hunters of the Labrador Peninsula*, reprint (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), p. 197; Romas K. Vastokas and Joan M. Vastokas, *Sacred Art of the Algonkians* (Peterborough, Ontario: Mansard Press, 1973), p. 36.

⁸Mallery, "Picture Writing of the American Indians," p. 82.

⁹Copies of the Mallery picture and several of the Brown photos are in my article on the Machiasport petroglyphs. See Roger B. Ray, "The Machiasport Petroglyphs," *Maine Historical Society Quarterly* 25 (no. 1, 1985): 25, 26, 29.

¹⁰Sanger, "Cultural Ecology in Passamaquoddy Bay," pp. 10-16.

¹¹George W. Drisko, *Narrative of the Town of Machias, Me.* (Machias: Press of the Republican, 1904), p. 7.

¹²Sanger, "Who were the Red Paints?" p. 10. ¹³Roger B. Ray, "The Petroglyphs at Grand Lake Stream, Maine," *North American Archaeologist* 12 (no. 3, 1991): 257-68; Vastokas and Vastokas, *Sacred Art of the Algonkians*, p. 36.

¹⁴Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Information Respecting the Condition and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States*, part 1 (Philadelphia: U.S. Congress, 1853), p. 390.

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. (A fourth edition is to appear soon.) He has also contributed other articles to the QUARTERLY, to ARCHAEO-ASTRONOMY, and to the NEWFOUNDLAND QUARTERLY.