

# THE HILIGHT PETROGLYPH BOULDER, HISTORIC PERIOD ROCK ART IN NORTHEASTERN WYOMING

by

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## ABSTRACT

A small petroglyph boulder is in the open prairie country of northeastern Wyoming. On the upper flat surface are incised dim lines appearing to interact with an alignment of three animal tracks. The rock is believed to relate to a Late Prehistoric or early Historic Period of Native American rock art in the Powder River Basin.

## INTRODUCTION

The Hilight Petroglyph Boulder (48CA3844) was recorded during a cultural survey for a coalbed methane expansion project in June 2001 (Greer and Greer 2001). The site is in the open rolling grassland plains in southern Campbell County, just east of the Hilight Gas Plant (Figure 1), an area not known for its rock art (Francis 1991:399). Scoria hills, some with a few huge concretions of exposed sandstone in crestral blowouts, form a distinctive zone just south of the boulder location. Tipi rings, lithic scatters, and various kinds of historic sites are common through the scoria hills, but no rock art sites are known anywhere within this extended zone. The nearest recorded rock art sites are the Daly Petroglyphs (48CA58), in a piney area northwest of Gillette, and two petroglyph sites in the pine-covered sandstone exposure zone in the common corner between Campbell and Niobrara counties, about 20-40 miles southeast of the Hilight boulder.

## SITE LOCATION, SETTING, AND DESCRIPTION

The small boulder is in a relatively featureless grassy area at the base of a low scoria hill and overlooks plowed fields and an open wide grassy basin to the north (Figure 2). No major drainages are in the area. Sandy soil has a minimal pebble gravel content of

sandstone and shale gravels, but with very little around the boulder itself. The surrounding area is covered mostly with grass and sod, with some prickly pear but essentially no sage immediately around the rock. The boulder is a large scoria chunk undoubtedly rolled down the hillside from the main scoria deposits to the southeast. It appears the rock was carved in-place at this location.

The small angular boulder is embedded in the sandy soil but appears to be approximately 25 cm thick, with the exposed surface 65 x 45 cm (or about 1-1/2 by 2 feet in surface area and a foot thick; Figure 3). The upper surface is fairly smooth and is mostly covered with a thin lichen layer. Petroglyphs appear on the upper surface only (Figures 4-6).

## PETROGLYPHS

Carved on the upper surface is an alignment of three double indentations appearing to represent three pairs of hoofprints, possibly deer or antelope. The small indentations are evenly paired and are gouged deeply into the scoria surface (Figures 4-6). The prints are evenly spaced across the boulder, and subsequent continued erosion has rounded the edges of the figures.

Several linear grooves are on the same surface and appear to be related to the tracks. The lower ends of the marks seem to converge upward toward a point from a fairly wide base, and additional marks have the same converging pattern toward the left-hand double indentation or track. The middle track also has some very faint converging lines leading up to it, and there is a suggestion the right-hand track also had the same kinds of lines leading up to it, although they are now mostly eroded and difficult to discern.

## DISCUSSION

The alignment of three pairs of animal tracks indicates this is

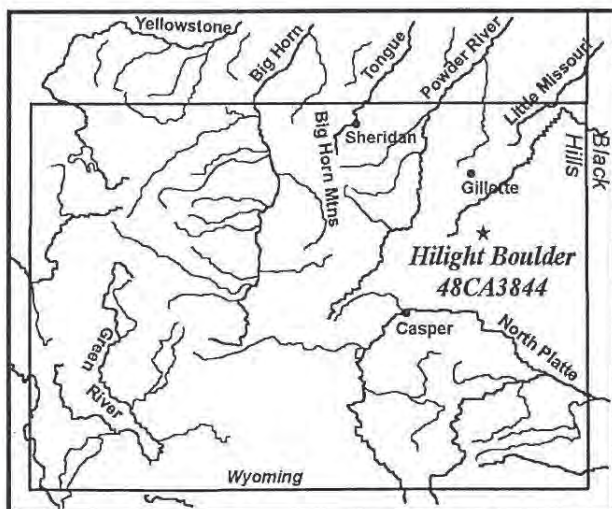


Figure 1. Location of the Hilight Petroglyph Boulder.



Figure 2. Boulder setting, looking northwest.



Figure 3. Boulder, looking northwest.

a prehistoric carved rock probably dating sometime from the Late Prehistoric through the early Historic Period. Alignments of hoofprints, especially in pairs, are common in Northern Plains rock art to portray an animal trail or route, especially in the later Biographic Tradition when story scenes were being portrayed (Keyser and Klassen 2001:251-252). Historic Period animal track alignments are most commonly bison or horse, and since these appear to represent deer or antelope, it is possible they were made somewhat earlier. Their form and location expand the data base for the Hoofprint Tradition of rock art, characterized by animal prints that dominate rock art at many sites from the Eastern Woodlands west through northern Wyoming and north into southern Alberta and Saskatchewan (Keyser and Klassen 2001:177-189). Hoofprint Tradition sites are generally thought to have functioned as fertility

or hunting magic locations, but neither explanation can be attributed definitely to the Hilight Petroglyph Boulder.

It was at first thought the incised lines could be plow marks since the area just north of the rock has been plowed. However, patterns of these lines, and their apparent interaction with the tracks, suggests they are instead intentional additions to the surface. Additionally, there is no evidence the rock was moved



Figure 4. Boulder surface, looking north.



Figure 5. Boulder surface, looking west.

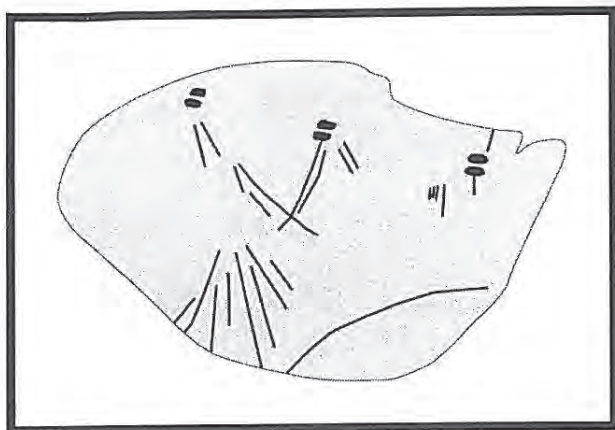


Figure 6. Field sketch of boulder surface.

from the adjacent field, and instead it appears to be in primary position, particularly relative to the petroglyphs on the upper flat surface.

The rock, although small, is unusually large for this area, and it is also relatively soft scoria material, thus facilitating the gouging and linear inscriptions. Scoria is common on hillsides and the hilltop to the south, but rocks of this size are rare here. It is therefore assumed the rock was specifically selected because of its pink color, its large size, and its fairly flat surface. There is no clear evidence the rock was shaped, although it could have been considered the profile of a buffalo head, with the face toward the west. We did not move the rock from its original embedded position to look for additional markings or shaping. Such movement would change its positional context and ruin any chance for research relative to possible shadow or sunlight interaction. Some previously recorded solar interactions, at other sites, are exceedingly minute and impossible to predict, such as tiny surface projections casting long shadows across or through inscribed figures.

Boulder rock art sites are not common in the Powder River Basin, and this site should be analyzed and compared with similar

features in surrounding regions of the Northern Plains including northeastern Montana, North and South Dakota, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. There is a good potential for buried cultural deposits or materials associated with and surrounding the boulder. Rock art boulders are known throughout the Northern Plains to be the locations of offerings by cultures throughout prehistory and history (Steinbring and Buchner 1997). Excavation of the site could perhaps reveal artifacts and features associated with ritual functions.

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