

Mesa Prieta Rock Art

on the
Wells Petroglyph Preserve

Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Books



Katherine Wells (project founder)

From the first electric moment I stood before the giant basalt canvas of the Key Rock, Mesa Prieta took my breath away. To live among these compelling and mysterious petroglyphs of flute players endlessly piping their tunes, fierce shield bearers, birthing women, elegant serpents, and myriad other motifs was beyond any life I could have imagined. Those who left images on the rocks beginning 7,500 years ago mostly did so with an aesthetic sense and often great skill. Many petroglyphs are exquisite and endlessly thrilling to me. The context of the Rio Grande shimmering below and the snow-capped Sangre de Cristo mountains in the distance completed my dream. The petroglyphs would be mine to enjoy, but I knew that they could never really belong to me. They were made to keep the world in balance for the ancestral inhabitants of this sacred place and even for us. Mesa Prieta retains the soul of the old ones who danced, hunted game, grew corn, ground herbs, studied the heavens, and said endless prayers for rain. These images are a gift from the spirits of their ancient creators.

This is an invitation for you to explore the Wells Petroglyph Preserve and experience the astonishing worlds of Mesa Prieta.



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Mesa Prieta

Mesa Prieta is a 12-mile-long landform about 10 miles north of Española and Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo in northern New Mexico. In 1992 Katherine Wells purchased 188 acres on this Mesa. After realizing the uniqueness and cultural significance of the place and the petroglyphs on it, she began efforts to preserve all she could. In 2007 she donated her Mesa Prieta land to The Archaeological Conservancy and it became known as The Wells Petroglyph Preserve.

The Mesa has been known by many names. It is labeled "Mesa Prieta" on many older maps but "Black Mesa" on newer ones. Some in the Rio Grande Valley called it "Mesa Canoa" because of its long boat-like shape. The Tewa name for Mesa Prieta is *Tsikw'aye*, meaning basalt mesa. The Mesa must have gone by many other ancient names that are now lost, as its history extends far into the cultural and geological past.

Around 3.3 million years ago, a fissure near present-day Pilar, NM extruded molten lava that flowed about 25 miles south, covering the river-cobble and sand that forms the Santa Fe Group, a sedimentary deposition made of eroded material from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. When the hot lava cooled, it formed a hardened basalt layer. As the Rio Grande began to flow about 440,000 years ago, it eroded the softer landscape around the basalt layer, eventually leaving the long Mesa cap much as it is today, rising a thousand feet above the river basin. Basalt boulders from the ancient fragmented lava flow now litter the Mesa.

When first formed, basalt is a light color. Over millennia, moisture, dust, and minerals in the rock



interacted with the atmosphere and microbes on the surface to form a dark patina or "desert varnish" on the stone. The aged basalt was the perfect surface for petroglyphs. Early humans on the Mesa created rock art by pecking, carving, or abrading through the darkened surface. The abundance of basalt on the Mesa allowed petroglyph makers to create glyphs for millennia. The bright lines they formed are the glyphs we see today.

The rocks on Mesa Prieta reveal a tumultuous ancient past. For the Tewa People who have lived in the Rio Grande Valley for centuries, the geography of the region is a different one. It is a sacred geography, defined by Creation stories, ceremonial songs, and ancient beliefs. A central





shrine at each Tewa Pueblo relates to other shrines placed in the cardinal directions, on certain mesas, and on four great mountains that define the extent of the sacred Tewa landscape. Mesa Prieta and the Wells Petroglyph Preserve lie near the heart of that spiritually defined geography, and an awareness of that gives us a greater respect and understanding of the petroglyphs and their meanings.

The earliest animals on and around the Mesa included mammals that are now extinct: the Giant Ground Sloth, the North American Horse, the Western Camel, the Giant Beaver, the Giant Bison, and the Woolly Mammoth. Today's animal life on Mesa Prieta includes many varieties of birds, such as sandhill cranes, ravens, eagles, hawks, flickers, scrub jays, magpies, and roadrunners. Rabbits, rodents, and lizards abound. Coyotes and bobcats roam the Mesa. Mule deer and elk live at the top of the Mesa, and the occasional mountain lion and bear can be sighted.



Early written descriptions of the Mesa portray it as being covered largely with tall grasses. That environment was drastically changed in the 1600s and subsequent centuries by the introduction of sheep and cows onto the Mesa.



Continual over-grazing by these domesticated animals decimated the grasses and other natural vegetation. Opportunistic junipers, cholla, prickly pear, and other cacti now dominate the contours of the Mesa.



Archaic Period

Archaic Period petroglyphs are scattered around the Wells site. Though the exact dates are not verifiable at this time, the images are similar to Archaic Era glyphs found near Glorieta, New Mexico that have been dated to about 7,500 years ago. The Archaic Period extended to about A.D. 500.

Some Archaic images are small, but others cover large boulders. Archaic images include meandering lines, asterisk-like forms, one-pole ladders, grids, and other abstract shapes. Later in the period, Archaic craftsmen pecked out stone images of animal forms and human hands and footprints. These ancient images have been so thoroughly discolored (repatinated) over time that visitors easily miss them. Many are barely discernible under the best light conditions, but an attentive hiker will be rewarded by identifying one.

One category of Archaic work seen frequently on the Mesa is cupules, which are cup-shaped

depressions that were pounded and then ground into the boulders. They are thought to have been created for ceremonial purposes. They appear both singly and in groups, sometimes numbering more than a hundred. Visitors marvel at the dedication it would take to make these mysterious forms.

The meaning of Archaic petroglyphs is impossible to know, but scientists who study them offer ideas. One theory is that they may represent images created by the optic nerve. This could happen during a trance state resulting from fasting, thirst, ecstatic dance, or the use of psychotropic plants. Because they are pecked so deeply and require such intense labor, it is clear they had great meaning and importance to their makers.

We see very little evidence on the Mesa left by the people of the Rio Grande Valley in the first centuries following the Archaic Period. Further study is still needed to determine who may have been making marks on the Mesa in the centuries immediately after A.D. 500.





Classic Period

From 1350-1600, following their south-eastward migration from the Mesa Verde area, Pueblo People built numerous villages along the Rio Grande and Chama River Valleys. Archaeologists call this phase of Ancestral Pueblo history the Classic or Pueblo IV Period. It is characterized by towns with large plazas to accommodate the ceremonial life of the various peoples who came together to form the new villages. Architecture in these new pueblos featured multi-level houses and large kivas. The Classic Period brought with it new forms of religious expression, such as katsina (kachina) ceremonialism, and we find clear evidence of intensive gardening and water management.



Of the 11,000 petroglyphs and other cultural landscape items recorded on the Wells Petroglyph Preserve, at least 85% of them date from the Classic Period. The petroglyph imagery on the Preserve reflects the concerns of those Ancestral Pueblo People. What do we know about the people who made these Mesa Prieta petroglyphs? The tradition at Ohkay Owingeh, the closest Pueblo to Mesa Prieta today, is that the people of the ancestral village of Phiogeh were their makers. Phiogeh was situated near the flood plain across the river from the Mesa, as were several other Ancestral Pueblo villages.

Hike the trails through the Preserve and you see images on the rocks invoking rainfall for crops, signs of fertility, and implements of warfare.

Certain petroglyphs tell us something of the religious and ceremonial life of the ancient Pueblo People who lived in the villages near the Rio Grande. Along the paths we encounter images of dancers wearing ceremonial clothing. We find depictions of deities that were the focus of prayers and offerings. Several of the Mesa's petroglyphs served as calendars – solar markers that used sunlight and shadow to reveal to the People the important times of Solstice and Equinox.

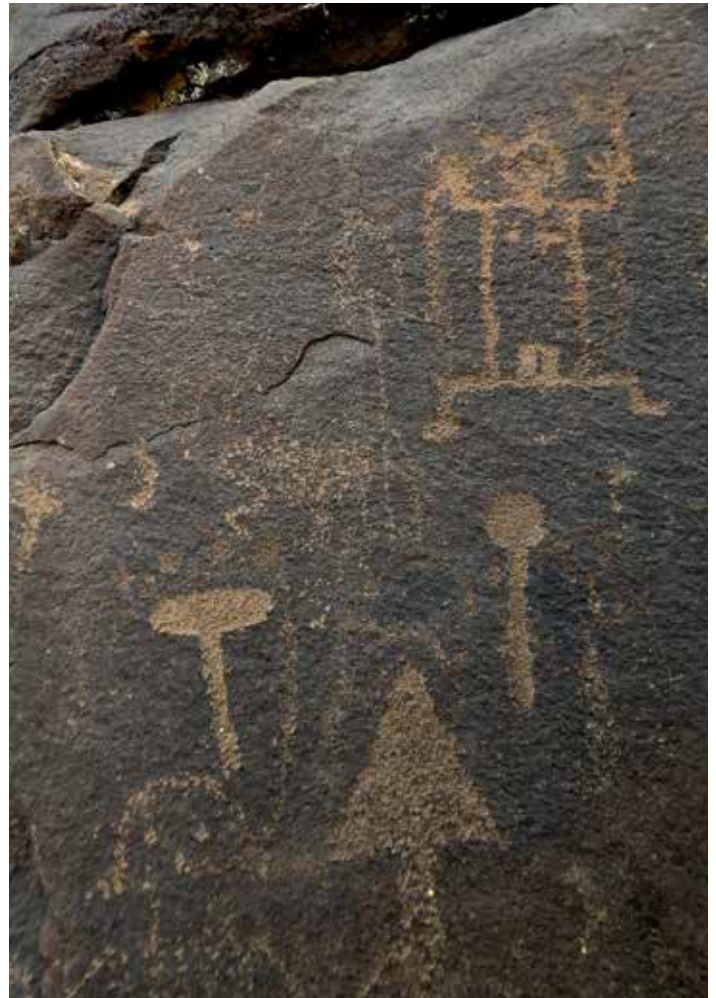


As many as 150 human and animal flute player petroglyphs make their silent music from boulders on the Wells Petroglyph Preserve. Hundreds more are to be found along the length of Mesa Prieta. Their numbers at this particular place make us wonder why flute players were so important to the ancients who made them. Alongside the flute players, and all across the Mesa, we find images of ancient warriors. Wearing the regalia of battle, they brandish war axes and spears. Petroglyphs of the warriors' shields are among the most striking and frequently seen images on the Wells Petroglyph Preserve. We understand that the shields were thought to have more than only a





practical function for the Pueblo warrior. Each shield design held a magico-religious power that delivered protection. Even pecked into basalt, the shields were understood to extend protection to the People in their villages across the river. The great number of warfare-related images tells us of a time of conflict and the great need for protection and defense.



We also find hundreds of petroglyphs on the Mesa depicting women and their lives. Numerous images of women giving birth populate the hills of the Preserve. We understand these images to be expressions of hope for fertility. Beyond that, women as life-givers were understood to give power. Birthing figures are depicted alongside images of weapons to impart power to devices of war. On the Preserve we also find an image of a female in association with a bear paw. This may represent a connection of the female with a particular clan, or possibly it indicates a female connection with the bear as a medicine animal. Petroglyphs are identified as female images by the depictions of their bodies and by cultural characteristics, such as hair whorls and clothing.

Many petroglyphs on the Wells Petroglyph Preserve are renderings of animals from the natural world or the spiritual world. Follow any trail and you are likely to discover images of birds great or small, bison, lizards, mountain lions, elk, and deer. Some

quadruped images we encounter are difficult for us to identify today. Ancestral Pueblo People had understandings of animals and artistic traditions that were very different from our own.

Snake images are among the most frequently pecked petroglyph designs. Though some may depict snakes as encountered in the natural world, most snake glyphs on the Mesa are images of the supernatural being the Tewa People call the Avanyu – an awe-inspiring serpent figure thought to reside in the Below World with the power to control rain, droughts, floods, and earthquakes. On Mesa Prieta this Water Serpent figure is typically depicted as having two horns, and its body is rendered as a zigzag form because of its association with rainstorms and lightning. The frequent appearance of the Avanyu image on the boulders reflects the ongoing Pueblo concern for water in a desert environment. As the Avanyu was regarded as the keeper of springs, we often find its image at the heads of arroyos where rain runoff has carved the landscape.







In addition to rain-related imagery, the Ancestral Pueblo People made many sun-related petroglyphs. These images invoked the sun's warmth and life-giving energy that turned their fields green. The many hundreds of circular petroglyphs tell of the respect the ancient people of the Rio Grande Valley had for the deity known as Sun Old Man. Images of the sun often depict rays of light and energy radiating out from his circular form. Warriors sometimes incorporated the power and authority of the sun motif on their shields. We are just beginning to recognize that many petroglyphs on the Preserve were created by ancient Skywatchers who sought to depict the celestial beings embodied in the sun, moon, constellations, and stars. We know that one ancient Skywatcher pecked a unique animal flute player into the basalt. We have only recently realized that it is an Equinox solar marker. (see *back cover*)

The meanings of many images on the Mesa from the Classic Period remain mysteries to the modern viewer, but ethnographic accounts and the ongoing ceremonial practices at Pueblos today can shed light on their ancient importance.

"These images themselves are perceived as active agents, attracting the pictured forces, sanctifying place, and facilitating communication with resident spirits."

— Polly Schaafsma, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 28:3, 411



Historic Period

In 1598 Juan de Oñate traveled El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro from Zacatecas, Mexico and arrived at the Puebloan town of Ohkay Owingeh on July 11. He was tasked by the Spanish crown to settle Nuevo México. The town was renamed San Juan de los Caballeros.

Oñate was accompanied by 560 settlers, 125 soldiers, Franciscan friars, and more than 1,000 Mexican Indians. They brought with them 70 wagon loads of weapons, tools, supplies, and 7,000 head of European animals including horses, cows, oxen, pigs, sheep, goats, and chickens. One imagines that this assembly made a mighty impression on the residents of the Pueblo who may have numbered around 1,000.

been captured and sold into slavery. Petroglyph recorders have identified twenty-five different styles of Christian crosses among the more than 3000 cross-images that have been documented on Mesa Prieta.



Petroglyphs of horses are also common. Other Spanish Colonial imagery includes churches, priests, soldiers with weapons, men and women in European clothing, and occasional names and initials. It is thought that most petroglyphs created during the early Historic Period were done by Christianized Puebloans. Spaniards had no cultural tradition of creating petroglyphs; however, it was a long-standing cultural practice of the Pueblo people.

Among the most striking Mesa Prieta images that show Spanish influence are the dozen or so petroglyphs of heraldic lions. Unlike Pueblo images of mountain lions, these majestic felines resemble the lions on the flag of the King of Spain. One heraldic lion is two feet in length and wears a crown. A second powerful lion (see front cover) has both European and Pueblo characteristics. It is an astonishing and mysterious image that defies easy interpretation.

Mesa Prieta is the largest known site of petroglyphs representing Spanish history and culture in the United States. Sharing a combined heritage from the Old and New Worlds, these Historic Period petroglyphs are important to New Mexico's Spanish and Pueblo descendants.



The first Mesa Prieta petroglyphs reflecting European culture were probably Christian crosses carved on boulders soon after Oñate's arrival. Over the next three centuries, thousands of cross images were etched into the Mesa's boulders along with numerous other motifs. These crosses may have been created by sheepherders. It is likely that many of the crosses were made by *genízaros*. These were people who originally were from various Plains and Pueblo tribes but had





Preserving the Mesa

Efforts to preserve Mesa Prieta and the amazing petroglyphs found on it began almost as soon as Katherine Wells purchased her land in 1992. Informal discussions evolved into serious meetings. In 1999 she brought together interested petroglyph buffs and experts to discuss the future of the petroglyphs. Among them were archaeologists Dr. Richard Ford, Dr. Kurt Anschuetz, Bureau of Land Management archaeologist Paul Williams, and revered Ohkay Owingeh elder Herman Agoyo. The consensus was that a recording project should be organized.

Initial estimates were that there might be as many as 20,000 images on the Mesa, a number that would make it comparable to other New Mexico sites like Three Rivers and Petroglyph National Monument. Currently, however, the estimate has risen to more than four times that many on Mesa Prieta.

funds are used to support the goals of the organization – preservation, documentation, and education.



Since 2002 MPPP has conducted a STEM-based Summer Youth Intern Program for local teenagers. Special outreach to Pueblo and Hispano youth has been a focus. By 2006, MPPP had created a bi-lingual, STEM-based fourth- to seventh-grade curriculum, *Discovering Mesa Prieta*, that has served more than 1,000 children. Both are award-winning programs. MPPP also offers Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Talks which are open to the public and address topics related to the Mesa and the area.

Efforts to record and protect the petroglyphs are on-going. Descriptive petroglyph data is entered into a complex database which someday will be a virtual archive for all images on the Mesa. We believe Mesa Prieta is the most significant petroglyph site in New Mexico. It has more rock art images than any other site in the state. These images and associated cultural materials represent Native, Spanish, and even Anglo traditions. They date from the Paleolithic Era to the present.

Mesa Prieta, including The Wells Petroglyph Preserve, is a sacred landscape and cultural legacy that merits permanent protection. MPPP volunteers have been exploring options to achieve national recognition for the Mesa. We hope that generations to come will take pride in and learn from this important heritage site that we are working to preserve.



Spearheaded by Katherine, the Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project (MPPP) grew from these beginnings and became a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. The Project relies primarily on the contributions of generous donors. Additional funds come through grants, tours, sales of merchandise, and various creative fundraising efforts. These

"To us, these petroglyphs are not the remnants of some long lost civilization...they are part of our living culture."

– Herman Agoyo, former Governor, Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo







Wells Petroglyph Preserve
P. O. Box 407, Velarde, NM 87582
505-852-1351

Writers:

John Kincheloe, Susan McClintock, Katherine Wells

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Ekkehart Malotki, professor emeritus of languages at Northern Arizona University, contributed the image on p.2 and the top photo on p.4. He is the author of *The Rock Art of Arizona: Art for Life's Sake*, *Stone Chisel and Yucca Brush: Colorado Plateau Rock Art* (with Don Weaver), and *Early Rock Art of the American West: The Geometric Enigma* (with Ellen Dissanayake).

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Mesa Prieta Petroglyph Project

www.mesaprietapetroglyphs.org

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