



Tongass Archaeology Notes

Pictographs In Southeast Alaska

By Martin V. Stanford



Figure 1: The pictograph are of a sun sign top, below a canoe with nine people, a circular face with three eyes and to the right skeletonized human figure.

There are two types of rock art in southeast Alaska's Alexander Archipelago; petroglyphs and pictographs. Petroglyphs were pecked, chiseled or ground into boulders, cobbles or outcrops of bedrock which are usually located in the intertidal areas near salmon streams, fish camps or old villages. Pictographs (Figs. 1-4) on the other hand were painted onto rock walls above the shorelines of the ocean, lakes or rivers and are distributed over a large area, with some painted in very remote locations.

This pattern suggests that most pictographs were painted in the spring, summer, or fall, during gathering and trading seasons, rather than near their winter villages, when weather and sea conditions were at their most challenging.

Some pictographs may have been painted in these remote locations by shamans during their quests to obtain spirit helpers (yeik or yek).



Recent studies show that pictographs are more common than previously thought (Stanford 2011). As of 2016 one hundred and twenty five pictographs have been reported in the state of Alaska with one hundred and eleven of these located in southeast Alaska. Most pictographs were painted on overhanging rock walls or other rock walls that are protected in some way from rain or snow. Even so, over time pictographs become faded due to exposure to water in the form of rain, snow or seeps. However, modern computer graphics software can enhance images of faded pictographs; the results can be dramatic (Figs. 1-4). A few pictographs were painted by someone standing in some kind of watercraft such as a canoe but most pictographs were painted on rock walls that had a rock bench or ledge located below which allowed access to the wall and a place to stand or sit to paint. No pictographs, to date, in southeast Alaska were painted facing north. This may be for ritual reasons or simply because many north facing rock walls tend to contain more moisture and have more lichens or moss making them difficult to apply paint.

Most pictographs, except for those painted inside caves, were created relatively recently compared to other sites in Southeast Alaska which can date back to over 10,000 years ago. Four pictograph sites in southeast Alaska have been indirectly radiocarbon dated from associated wood, charcoal or cedar cordage. Adjusted to calendar years these range from AD 1486 to modern times or as far back in time as Christopher Columbus, a time when many camps and villages were present across the region. Other pictographs were painted with motifs showing ships with sails or of ships anchors indicating they were likely painted near the time of contact with 18th or 19th century explorers or fur traders.



Figure 2. This pictograph is obscured by lichens. Eight dots appear to orbit a circle dot motif. A canoe with four people and a horned or antlered animal motif appear to the lower right of the circle. The motif to the right may be a representation of an 18th or 19th century ship's anchor.

Most of the pictographs in southeast Alaska were painted using a red to reddish-brown pigment. Ethnographic research has provided some information on the composition of red pigments and how they may have been prepared for pictograph painting. The primary mineral pigment used was deep red hematite (Fe_2O_3) or iron oxide. Hematite mixed with clay is called red ochre. A binder was added to hold the pigment particles together and to hold the paint onto the rock surface. Some examples of binder ingredients include blood, fish eggs, seed oils, plant resins and juices. A third ingredient of the paint was a vehicle, or a fluid, that made the paint liquid and suitable for application. Plant juices, water, animal oils, and urine have all been used as vehicles.

Pictographs in southeast Alaska were likely painted by Tlingit, Tsimshian, or Haida people, or possibly even by the Tsetsaut.



Figure 3. The top left figure is thought to be a dragonfly. At center far right and lower left are two very faint canoe motifs. It is not known what the two sets of parallel lines and the two connected circles might represent.

The reasons why pictographs were painted are varied. Ethnographic research shows that some pictographs were painted to impress others; to record legends or important events, such as contact with European explorers, encounters with animals, to mark clan territories or to indicate portage locations; to record periods of time; or to mark or warn of burial locations for important people such as shamans or their paraphernalia.

While many of the pictographs may represent recognizable animals or things such as whales, fish, ravens, human figures, and ships anchors; much of the art is more abstract and consists of dots, circles, ovals, squares, and lines. But what do these pictographs mean? What do you think they suggest? No one can say absolutely what the painter had in mind while creating these images. To attach meaning would be to possibly make wrong inferences or conclusions about the images and about the people who made them.



Therefore, realize that the interpretations we give some of these paintings is likely speculation, and what they actually represent, may in fact be very personal and known only to the person who painted them.



Figure 4. Upper right are two killer whales. To the left is a raven holding a starfish. Below is a difficult to see canoe motif. At bottom may be a composite animal with a beavers tale.

Related Readings

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