

Maryland Petroglyphs

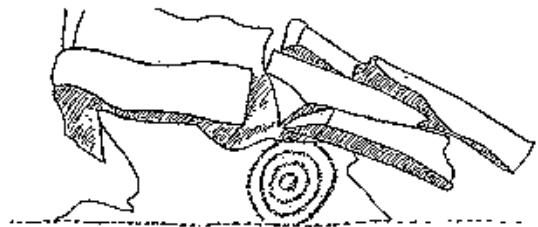
(rock carvings)



Falls in the middle Potomac River. The designs, though sometimes readily recognizable, are often enigmatic. In any case, the meaning behind the petroglyphs, which are thought to be some 500 to 1,000 years old, continues to elude modern researchers.

PETROGLYPHS are prehistoric depictions carved in rock. The designs were pecked or carved into relatively soft rock, and possibly “finished” by polishing the cut grooves with sand and a blunt tool such as a piece of green wood. Many of Maryland's petroglyphs have been destroyed, most of the remaining ones are badly weathered, and only one is still found in its original location.

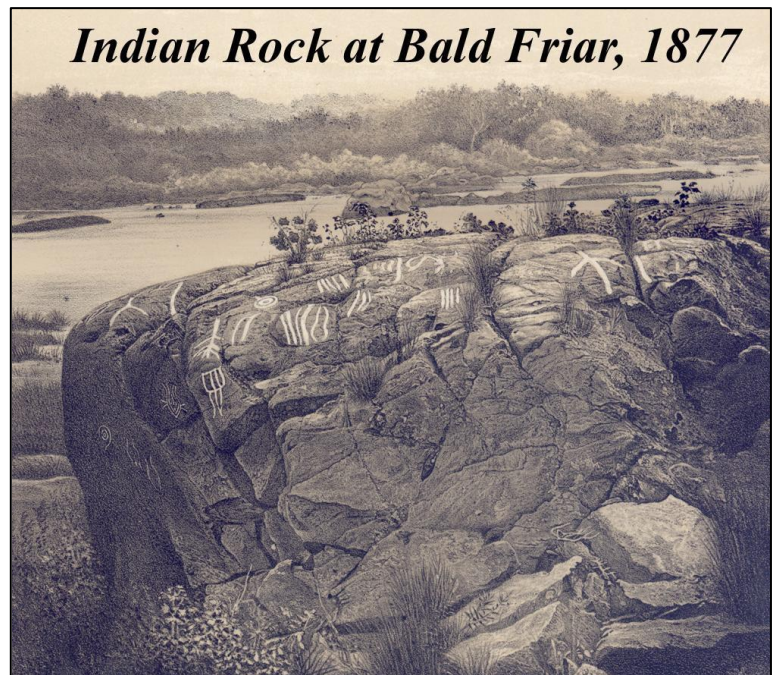
In Maryland, such prehistoric artwork is known from just two sites: (1) at Bald Friar in the lower Susquehanna River, and (2) at Great



Concentric circle glyph, Bald Friar

BALD FRIAR

The Bald Friar site is, or was, surely Maryland's largest and best known petroglyph site. The earliest European accounts of it date to the 1860s, although William Penn reportedly quizzed local Indians as to the age of the rock carvings (they responded that the carvings had been there “since our grandfather's grandfather's time”). The petroglyphs occurred on several islands in the Susquehanna channel below Bald Friar Falls, the largest of which was Indian Rock, also known as Bald Friar Island. After the initial curiosity of the 1860s and 1870s,



the petroglyphs were largely ignored by archeologists until 1916 when William B. Marye and Martin G. Kurtz led a contingent under the direction of Warren King Moorehead to study Bald Friar as part of the Heye Foundation's “Susquehanna River Expedition.” Marye and Kurtz set out to locate, sketch, and photograph as many petroglyphs as possible on the islands and shore-

lines surrounding Indian Rock. Their work would prove essential in the early 1920s when the site was threatened by the construction of Conowingo Dam.

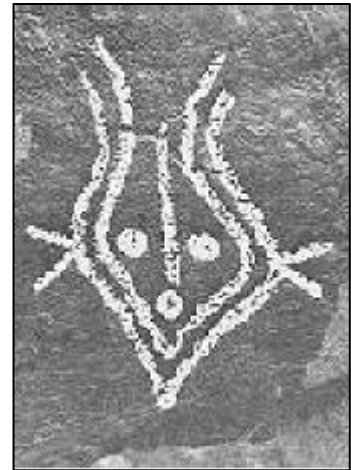


In 1926, facing imminent destruction or inundation of the glyphs, a Maryland Academy of Sciences team led by Francis Nicholas sought to rescue as many of the carvings as possible. Using dynamite, the team concentrated on Indian Rock, and succeeded in recovering a number of the carved designs (or pieces thereof). Today, those pieces are all that remain of the Bald Friar petroglyphs, since the remainder were either destroyed or submerged beneath the waters of the Conowingo reservoir once the dam was completed in 1927. These rescued petroglyphs were placed at three locations: (1) outside the

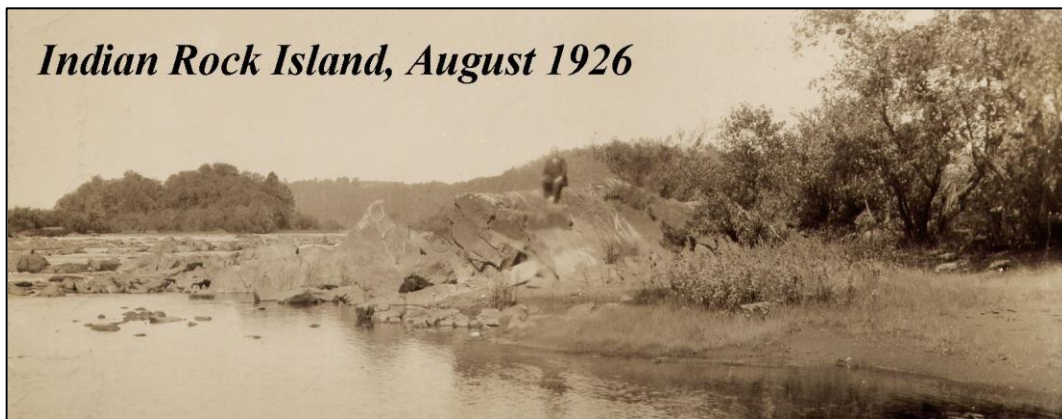
Harford County Courthouse in Bel Air, (2) at the Cecil County Public Library¹ in Elkton, and (3) Druid Hill Park in Baltimore (in 2006, the latter were moved to the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory at Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum in Calvert County).



The designs illustrated at Bald Friar consist of a number of motifs, including concentric circles, parallel lines, simple geometrics, cup marks, and radiant sun depictions. By far, though, the most distinctive (and possibly most common) motif is that of a stylized face or head. This motif has been referred to variously as a serpent's head, a fish head, a human head, a fish head with human characteristics, an Iroquoian "crooked face" or "false face," and even a "bushy-head" (the Delaware Indians'



cornhusk mask). Nonetheless, these interpretations are all merely conjecture put forth by individuals removed by both time and cultural background. In reality, the true meaning of the Bald Friar petroglyphs may be lost forever.

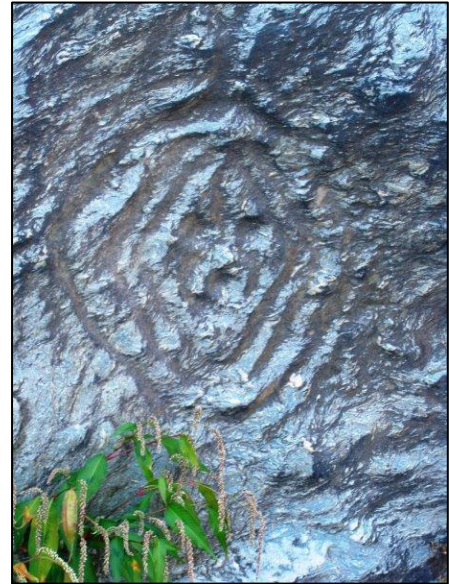


GREAT FALLS

The petroglyph is carved on a rock outcrop located near the Great Falls of the Potomac River. The design consists of three concentric diamonds enclosing three circular depressions, with a tail-like design extending from the top of the outermost diamond. A fish effigy is inferred, and clearly this area would have been a focus for fishing, especially during seasonal fish runs where spawning fish such as shad would have been densely packed in their struggle to surmount the falls during their journey upstream. Also,



Great Falls petroglyph



a number of stone fish weirs have been documented along this stretch of the Potomac. Perhaps the petroglyph marked good fishing grounds, or served as a talisman to ensure a fruitful catch.



Bald Friar, 1916

MARYLAND'S PETROGLYPHS are a unique aspect of the state's cultural heritage. From an archeological perspective, they are puzzling. The two petroglyph sites in the state are situated in similar settings: the Great Falls petroglyph is located at the point where the Potomac begins its descent from the Piedmont into the Coastal Plain, while the Bald Friar glyphs were found at the lowermost ford of the Susquehanna before it empties into Chesapeake Bay. Likewise, both Maryland sites share the "serpent's head" motif, a design that is noticeably absent from other petroglyph sites in the region, including the famous Safe Harbor glyphs just 20 miles upstream from Bald Friar in the Pennsylvania section of the Susquehanna. At Safe Harbor, the more realistic depictions of a variety of animals and humans (including some with bows) stand in stark contrast to the enigmatic "serpent's head" which predominates at Bald Friar. Could this distinct difference between two sites so close represent two different tribal or cultural areas? Or are the differences the result of time, with one site much earlier or later than the other?

When were the petroglyphs carved and by whom? Why were these time-consuming art projects undertaken, and why were such specific locations selected? Why are they not found elsewhere in the state? And what do the symbols mean? Some of these questions may be answered by future research, but most will remain questions.

Notes

1. The old Cecil County Library building now houses multiple organizations (including the Historical Society of Cecil County), but the petroglyphs remain there in a courtyard. The building's address is 135 E. Main St., Elkton, Maryland. (*Thanks to Richard Messick for this updated information.*)

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