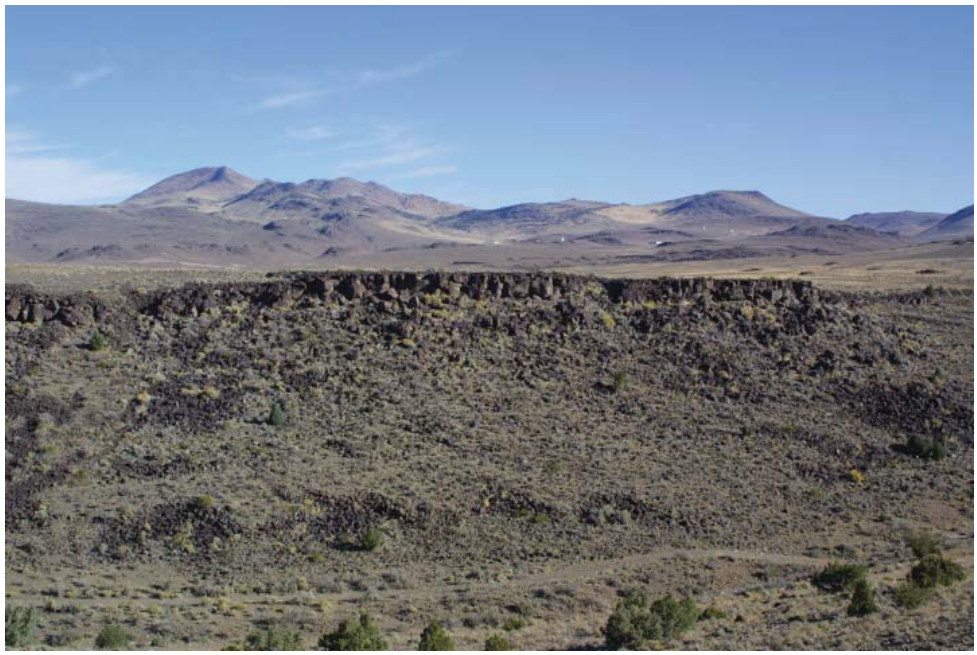
Lagomarsino Canyon Petroglyph Site



Overview of Lagomarsino Canyon Petroglyph Site

The Lagomarsino Canyon Petroglyph Site is one of only eight rock art sites in Nevada to be honored on the National Register of Historic Places. In August 2009 NRAF completed its summary report on its long-term documentation project and a synopsis provided here.

Lagomarsino is a large petroglyph site, a quarter of a mile in length, containing 2229 rock art panels located on an east-west trending, fine-grained basalt cliff and associated talus slope below. The site is located in the hinterland of the Comstock Mining District (Virginia City), and the modern urban centers of Reno, Sparks, and, Carson City are not far away. The site is a popular destination for outdoor enthusiasts of all varieties yet remains relatively intact with graffiti and other vandalism only noticeably increasing in the last 20 years, despite the high level of unsupervised public visitation.

Lagomarsino's Importance In North American Rock Art Studies

The Lagomarsino site has been well known for a very long time; Julian Steward (1929) recorded the site as "208 Pt Virginia City, Nevada" based on a 1904 report from a local Reno resident. The site was later recorded by researchers from the University of California, Berkeley in the 1950s (Baumhoff *et al.* 1958). This archaeological inventory estimated that Lagomarsino comprised 600 rock art panels, of which 439 were photographed, and analyzed; line drawings of 160 panels were made from these photographs (Heizer and Baumhoff 1962:294-303). The work of the University of California, Berkeley, was the only official archaeological recording of this important site until NRAF's documentation project began in June 2003.

Lagomarsino's importance in the history of western Great Basin rock art studies derives, in part, from its role in the development of Heizer and Baumhoff's (1962) classification of the region's rock art styles. More importantly, these researchers established the hunting magic approach as the dominant interpretation of rock art in the region until the 1980s. Their variant of hunting magic was inspired, in part, by their experience and analysis of Lagomarsino (Baumhoff *et al.* 1958; Heizer and Baumhoff 1962). They pointed to the site's favorable hunting environment and motif types (mountain sheep and possible portrayals of piñon cones) that they argued depicted "natural objects, the increase of which would be advantageous to the Indians' economy" (1962:290-291).

The Lagomarsino Canyon Petroglyph Site Documentation Project

Despite Lagomarsino's importance in the history of Great Basin rock art studies, no adequate documentation of the site existed prior to NRAF's work at the site. Alanah Woody's vision to realize an archaeological inventory of the site that would serve the needs of culture resource management, public interpretation, and research was one of the motivations behind the establishment of NRAF. She recognized that the goal of an exhaustive site inventory of such a large site would require an organization that could harness public support from across the state. A particularly offensive act of vandalism that occurred to one of the central panels in April 2001 highlighted the need for action. Until that time, graffiti had generally been done either on separate boulders or away from the main areas where rock art occurs. NRAF, in consultation with the land holder Storey County, concluded that it was important to mitigate

this damage to prevent copycat graffiti superimposed on other rock art images at the site. Accordingly the damage was camouflaged by inpainting, with the work done by a professional conservator (Dean 2003).

This episode raised the issue of how Lagomarsino could be protected in the future. To enable programs of public interpretation and effective site monitoring, a complete archaeological inventory of Lagomarsino was necessary, and in 2003 NRAF in partnership with Storey County, the Nevada State Museum, NRCS, and other agencies, commenced a program of detailed archaeological documentation at the site.

Field Work And Documentation Methods At Lagomarsino

The fieldwork phase of the documentation project began on June 6th, 2003 and finished five years later, after a total of 10 fieldwork sessions, 143 workdays, and 10,908 volunteer hours on October 30th, 2008. The project produced a staggering quantity of data and materials: approximately 2,800 field drawings, 2,800 digitized panel drawings, and 10,3000 photographs (digital, black-and-white, and color slides), in addition to the IMACS rock art attachment records and field logs.

All rock art panels, graffiti, and vandalism were recorded in the field using NRAF's standard noninvasive methods. All panels were assigned a unique alphanumeric identifier tied to the spatial control grid that was established. Originally it was planned to relate identified rock art panels to natural groupings defined by topography and setting. However, the experience of the first fieldwork session in June 2003 demonstrated that this would not be practical for a project envisaged to last several years if total survey coverage was to be achieved.

Although there are areas of the site where rock art is distributed in dense natural groups, the general pattern is of rock art spread throughout the talus slope at the base of the cliff in varying densities, over an area of some 325 acres in Sections 5 – 11; Section 12 covers an area of approximately 220 acres but has just two rock art panels.

Accordingly, after rock art was recorded in Section 8A in June 2003, a baseline grid was imposed on the site. This grid was ideally conceived as composed of rectangular blocks (or sections) of equal size (10 x 25 *m*), oriented north-south (numeric designator) and east-west (alpha designator). This ideal grid could not be realized in practice due to variations in site topography (aspect, elevation, etc.). Therefore, the individual sections vary somewhat in size, but most cover an area of approximately 200 m^2 and offer a useful guide to spatial variation in the density of panel distribution across the site. As the purpose of the grid was for survey planning and ensuring total documentation coverage, the variability in section dimensions is not significant. The corners of the grid sections were marked in the field by placing rebar at their intersection so that the sections could be relocated and re-established each year.

The cliff face and Locus A are the only areas of the site that were defined by distinctive, natural topographic features rather than the arbitrary grid. The cliff face and its immediate vicinity to the intersection of the highest arbitrary grid section were recorded as Rim Rock sections 6 – 12. The vast majority of rock art panels in the Rim Rock sections is located on the cliff face, some on boulders in front of the cliff face, and a few are located on the plateau above the cliff face. They form natural groupings, though the divisions between the Rim Rock sections are arbitrary. Locus A is a small grouping of rock art panels located next to a dirt road that leads into the site.

Petroglyph panels located on the rim rock area at lagomarsino

Site Description

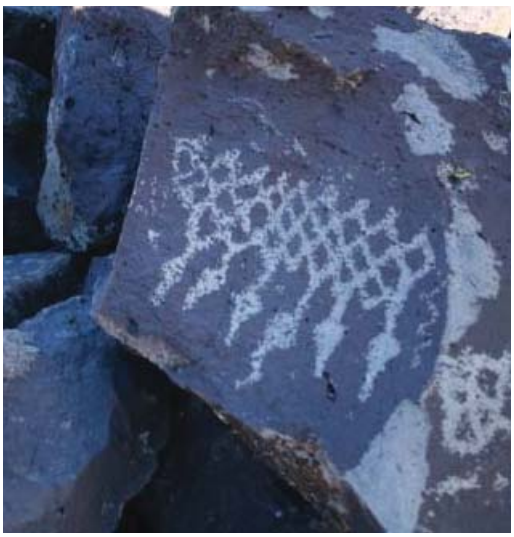
Previous estimates of the quantity of rock art at Lagomarsino ranged from 600 –1,000 panels of prehistoric art (Baumhoff *et al.* 1958; Quinlan and Woody 2001). During NRAF's 5-year recording project at the site, an area of 86,000 m^2 was surveyed and 2,219 prehistoric rock art panels identified, as well as a significant quantity of graffiti and other vandalism. In general rock art is distributed throughout the talus and cliff face, with some prominent high density areas of rock art discernible. Sections 7 (19.6%), 8 (39%), and 9 (23.6%) contain over 80% of the site's rock art. The highest concentrations of rock art are discernible on the cliff-face

(Sections 7RR, 8RR, and 9RR) and at the base of the talus slope (Sections 8A, 8A2, 8B2, 8C2, 9B2, 9C1, 9D2, 7D1, 7D2, 7E1). Mid-slope areas of the site also have significant numbers of rock art panels, but across the site there is a general trend that areas high on the talus slope leading to the intersection of the cliff face area (6RR-12RR) have low numbers of panels.

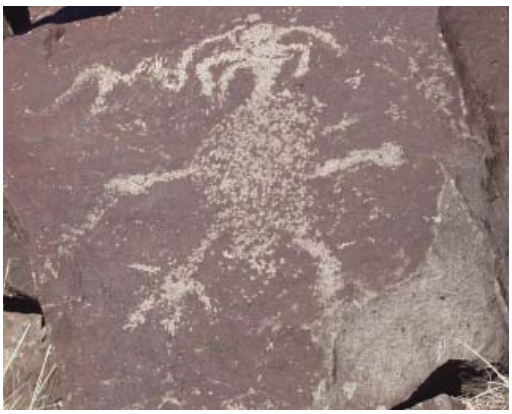
Rock art in the rim rock sections is particularly notable for its prominent landscape position, with commanding views of the canyon and site, size, and quality of execution. The designs in these sections are highly visible from the canyon bottom and appear to have been made in such a way as to enhance their visibility. Their designs are deeply pecked with wide lines and are large in size and the largest panels (in terms of surface area covered) are located in sections high on the talus slope or on the cliff face. *E.g.*, panels in 8RR on average cover a surface area of 1.03 *m*, in 9RR, 0.86 *m*; in 7RR, 0.8 *m*; but in 8A and 8A2 at the bottom of the talus, panels on average cover a surface area 0.24 – 0.27 *m*. Rock art in Sections 8A and 8A2 is prominent by virtue of its abundance and proximity to the base of the talus slope, readily apparent to a casual passerby and near the occupation area of the site (see the *Other Archaeological Features* section on the next page for more information about the occupation area).

All the rock art at Lagomarsino is petroglyphic in method of production, with over half (1,334 panels) containing design elements made by solid pecking as the primary technique, with stipple pecking (703 panels) the second most common technique. Other petroglyph techniques observed include abrasion and scratching. The motifs (n=4,600) present run the full range of Basin and Range Tradition types and are dominated by abstract designs. Representational or naturalistic designs account for only 2.6% of the total motifs present at the site. Zoomorphs (19) are strikingly rare and bighorn sheep motifs, which are often regarded as one of the characteristic motif types of Great Basin rock art, are very rare (just five and only two of these are classic specimens of the stylistic treatment of this animal in Great Basin rock art). No other large or medium-sized mammals are represented in the site's art; the only other animal type portrayed in any frequency is lizards (7).

Portrayals of the human form are largely variants of Basin and Range Tradition stick figures, though naturalistic representations of feet (29) are a significant component of the site's corpus of anthropomorphs.



Representational designs at Lagomarsino



Possible schematic portrayals of objects of everyday life are present at the site. Most significant are geometric and linear designs identified by Washoe elders as traditional basket designs or textiles (55) that include hunting nets. One panel contains naturalistic treatments of Elko series projectile points. There are also schematic designs conventionally regarded by rock art researchers as referring to atlatls.

Abstract imagery includes motifs that are characteristic of Basin and Range Tradition art: circles, dot rows, arcs, rakes, wavy lines, perpendicular linear designs, grids, and a range of geometric forms. Rectilinear and curvilinear forms (2,129) outnumber circular designs (1,206). Many linear forms, particularly simple vertical and horizontal lines that occur singly, appear to be more expedient or performative in the way that they were made; *i.e.*, the act of marking a mark was probably the primary motivation in their production. The site's very well-made, deeply pecked, large, imposing abstract designs, concentrated on the cliff face and high up the talus slope, comprise rakes, schematic representations of textiles, fields of dots, circles with long trailing lines, one anthropomorph with outstretched arms, *etc.*, and were probably made by master artists. The quality of much of the art, its design types, and style of execution make Lagomarsino a particularly good example of Basin and Range Tradition. The site's dominant emphasis on abstract imagery is somewhat unusual for Great Basin rock art sites, and the size of many of the site's designs are among the largest in Nevada.

Some spatial patterning in the relative balance between representational, linear, and circular motif types is discernible. Linear forms predominate in nearly all sections, as would be expected given their abundance at the site. Representational forms are rare but appear to avoid locations high up the talus slope and are never numerically the

most prominent design type in a section (with the exception of Section 6E2). Circular forms occur in conspicuously low percentages in Sections 7RR, 8RR, and 9RR on the cliff face, and tend only to be a significant component of motif assemblages in sections that have less than 40 panels. More detailed analysis of the spatial relationships among the different motif types may be able to identify whether there is any chronological patterning underlying these basic spatial patterns.

Although currently there is no scientific way of dating petroglyphs, a few designs described above give clues to the age of some the site's art. There are a small number of circles bisected by a vertical line that may be schematic treatments of atlatls, as well as a panel with naturalistic portrayals of Elko series points, indicating a Middle Archaic date for some of the rock art at the site. The naturalistic textile designs identified by Washoe elders as traditional basket designs (Quinlan and Woody 2001), indicate that some of the site's rock art may have been made into the late Prehistoric and ethnohistoric times. The sheer quantity of Lagomarsino's rock art indicates that it was probably made over a long period of repeated use. The presence of representations of objects used in everyday life other than just atlatls or bow-and-arrows is distinctive—few rock art sites are known elsewhere in Nevada that contain representations of equipment used for resource processing and storage.

Projectile point design at Lagomarsino

Although the site contains a significant quantity of graffiti and other vandalism, the frequency of vandalism is proportionate to a rock art site of this scale and is generally not visually intrusive to the site's setting. Some vandalism does directly impact prehistoric art, but the most serious case of vandalism (to Panel 7RR-13, described above) was mitigated by NRAF in 2003 (Dean 2003). Most graffiti and other vandalism is only visible when up close to it, and much of this takes the form of lightly scratched initials and other marks, though some attempts at imitating prehistoric design elements are present. Vandalism is generally found in areas of the site that have the most prominent designs (the cliff face and at the base of the talus slope) and natural routes across the site. This suggests that much vandalism can be related to casual site visitation and is directed at those areas of the site that attract the most attention. Natural destructive agents include surface spalling, lichen growth, and exposure to the elements. In addition, some boulders bearing rock art have tumbled down the talus slope from their original position. Despite these impacts the site is in good condition.

Other Archaeological Features

Baumhoff *et al.* (1958) reported a small occupation site associated with Lagomarsino's rock art and a game drive wall. The putative game drive wall is more likely a historic feature based on its extent and substantial character; qualities that do not match historically or archaeologically observed hunting features. Other archaeology reported from the site includes a Stemmed Point that was collected in the late 1980s. The archaeological features that NRAF observed during its recordation of the site's rock art are concentrated in Section 8A and include milling features and two projectile point fragments. It is likely that the site was seasonally occupied for a variety of economic purposes, including seed and plant processing, suggesting the site's rock art was viewed and used by a broader cross-section of the social group than just hunters or ritual specialists. This indicates the site's rock art may have been incorporated in social and ceremonial practices of community-wide significance.

Evaluating Rock Art At Lagomarsino

The archaeological value of places such as Lagomarsino is rooted in rock art being among the oldest and most enduring forms of the ideological presentation of identity and cultural practice, providing information on diachronic variation in past social processes, symbolic behavior, landscape use, and the role of graphic systems of signification in cultural systems (Quinlan and Woody 2009). Its cultural significance potentially extends beyond its original makers, as rock art sites are monuments that were re-used and incorporated in the traditions of subsequent cultures, illustrating the importance of place in the social construction of individual and cultural identities (Bradley 2000; Quinlan and Woody 2003, 2009). Sites able to provide data that address these research themes in archaeology and anthropology are of exceptional significance for understanding developments in human social behavior, particularly the role of monuments in shaping the experience of social and economic routines, and the development of symbolic culture.

Further, the implicit long duration of site-use presented by Lagomarsino's quantity of rock art and the age of its associated archaeology attests to its power as a special place that repeatedly drew prehistoric peoples to it and its continuing cultural significance to Native American peoples.

Conclusion

The Lagomarsino Canyon Petroglyph Site Documentation Project has resulted in one of the most exhaustive records of a large rock art site produced in Nevada. Over 2200 rock art panels were documented through field drawings, photography, geospatial data capture, and field observations, as well as all observed graffiti and other vandalism. These data provide the basis for future culture resource management at the site and programs of public interpretation. The project's findings justify Lagomarsino's reputation as one of the most significant archaeological sites of its type in the Great Basin. Its scale and quality are impressive, and the site conveys a strong sense of place and prehistoric social routines. Lagomarsino derives a broader significance from its role in the development of the archaeological study of Great Basin rock art sites, having shaped explanatory approaches to rock art's prehistoric sociocultural contexts of use and in stylistic analyses of prehistoric art. The site retains considerable research potential and will continue to shape the way archaeologists conceptualize the role of visual symbolism in prehistoric societies.

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