

Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park *Áísinaí pi . . . where the drawings are*

PARK NOTES

# ROCK ART

**A SACRED PLACE** A wide, green valley, steep sandstone cliffs, strange rock formations called hoodoos - all of these things make Writing-on-Stone a special place. For thousands of years, this unique environment has drawn First Nations people to Writing-on-Stone. In the past, nomadic bands often returned to traditional camping spots along the Milk River where they found shelter, water and a great abundance of game and berries.

Writing-on-Stone was, and still is, significant for another reason. Traditional beliefs hold that all things in the world - animals, plants and even rocks - are charged with supernatural powers. In this strange valley, the cliffs and hoodoos are the home of powerful spirits, spirits with the ability to help people who come to pray at this sacred place.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND** From archaeological evidence, we know that some First Nations people camped at Writing-on-Stone as long as 3,500 years ago. Although some rock art may be this old, the date of its first appearance at Writing-on-Stone remains uncertain.

Many archaeological sites dating from the *Late Prehistoric Period* have been found in the Park, and much of the rock art also dates from this time. During this period, which began around 1800 years ago, the First Nations people followed the bison herds on foot. The Shoshone and Blackfoot are two of several groups who are possibly responsible for Late Prehistoric rock art at Writing-on-Stone.

The *Historic Period* began in circa. 1730 A.D. with the return of horses and the arrival of guns and metal on the northern plains.

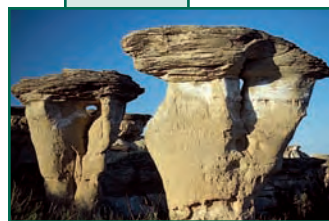
The horses, acquired from Spanish Conquistadors, via other First Nations groups to the south, and the guns and metal, obtained from the first fur traders, revolutionized First Nations culture. Travel and hunting became easier and warfare more common. Rock art continued to be created at Writing-on-Stone throughout this period, well into the first quarter of the twentieth century.

The Blackfoot Nation controlled the Writing-on-Stone area during most of the Historic Period. Hunting and raiding parties from other groups, such as the Cree, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, Crow, Kutenai and Shoshone were also known to pass through this area. Although researchers believe that Blackfoot artists created most Historic rock art, these other groups may have been involved as well.

**THE ROCK ART** Before the introduction of metal tools, most petroglyphs were *incised* or *scratched* onto the sandstone cliffs using antlers or bones. Some pictographs were painted with red *ochre* (crushed iron ore mixed with water or bison fat), while others were drawn with a lump of charcoal. No technique for precisely dating rock art exists. In some cases, approximate dates can be determined by identifying objects depicted in the rock art, or by analyzing changes in rock art styles.



- *Áísinaí pi* means where the drawings are
- Archeological Preserve since 1977
- Designated a Provincial Park in 1957
- Highest density of rock art anywhere in the plains of North America
- Two forms of rock art - pictographs and petroglyphs
- Possibly as much as 3,500 years old
- Blackfoot artists created the majority of the rock art in this area



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*Human figures* were created in several styles. *Shield-bearing warriors*, holding the large *body shields* used before the arrival of horses, date from the Late Prehistoric. Both *V-neck humans*, the most common and elaborate human style and *square-shouldered (or rectangular bodied)* humans, date from prehistoric and historic times. The *triangular body* style usually appears with historic objects. Other *unique figures* are difficult to place within a style or time period.

*Animal figures*, including bison, dogs, deer, bears, mountain sheep and elk have been classified into three styles: *naturalistic*, which may be the oldest style; *boat-form*, which originated in the Late Prehistoric; and *mature style*, which developed during the Historic Period. Horses, the most common animals, are generally mature style, but a few are boat-form. While all horses at Writing-on-Stone were drawn after A.D. 1730, boat-form horses may be the oldest.

Many items of *material culture* are depicted, including shields, bows, spears, hatchets, guns, tipis, headdresses, decorated clothing, travois, and ceremonial objects. Some items, including body shields, can be identified as prehistoric, while others such as guns are historic. The significance of *vertical marks* remains unknown. They may have been used for counting or for sharpening bone tools, or they may have had a ceremonial function. Many other *abstract figures* cannot be identified or interpreted.

The styles and figures just described are repeated at many different sites. While a few of the nearly 50 rock art sites found in Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park consist of only a single petroglyph, other sites contain hundreds of figures.

**WARRIORS, SHAMANS, SPIRITS** Much of the rock art at Writing-on-Stone was probably *ceremonial*, created as part of rituals. In the *vision quest*, young warriors would spend several days fasting and praying at a sacred place, waiting for a vision. Rock art may record the spirit dreams attained during these vision quests.

It is the belief of many First Nations people that the rock art is the work of spirits. *Shamans*, or medicine men and elders in the past and today, interpret these images, often to predict the future. Perhaps more rock art was added, in times past, to communicate with the spirit world. Some of the rock art may have been *biographical*, recording the outcome of actual events, such as hunts or raids.

Through time, the mystery of the rock art has deepened, and the exact meaning of the images may never be known. Today, many different sources are used to interpret the rock art, including legends, archaeology, historical records and First Nations elders.

**PRESERVATION OF A LEGACY** The rock art of Writing-on-Stone records centuries of native culture and history, a unique and irreplaceable legacy. The gradual loss of the rock art from natural weathering can't be stopped, but we can help prevent the greatest threat to rock art - human destruction.

Graffiti and vandalism have taken a heavy toll. To protect the rock art from further damage, the Archaeological Preserve was set aside in 1977, restricting access to most of the sites in the Park. Under the Historical Resources Act of Alberta, fines up to \$50,000.00 and a year in jail can result from altering, marking or damaging rock art.

Please help us protect this invaluable resource by reporting any acts of defacement you witness.



### VIEWING THE ROCK ART

Park visitors can view some rock art along the self-guided, interpretive Hoodoo Trail, but most sites are only accessible by guided tour. Park interpreters lead tours into the Archaeological Preserve daily from mid-May to early September.

Tickets for the rock art tours are available for sale at the Interpreters' Office down in the day use/campground area. These tickets are limited in number and will be available one hour before each tour begins.

Tour schedules and ticket prices and details are posted throughout the Park.

### HELP SAVE A TREE!

If you no longer require this brochure, please return it to park staff so it can be recycled or reused.

For more information, contact: