



Archeology Program

National Park Service
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[HOME](#)

Archeology in the Parks > Research in the Parks > Projects in Parks >

High Alpine Lakeside Villages and Associated Rock Art in the Brooks Range, Alaska

Archeologists from the University of Alaska Museum and the NPS recently conducted work at a unique set of three prehistoric lakeside village sites in northwestern Alaska. The sites are marked by dense concentrations of house and storage features and caribou hunting facilities that are not uncommon in the region and are likely associated with ancestral Inupiat groups. The sites also contain large, rock-lined communal structures (qargit), and dozens of petroglyphs. Taken together, the qargit and petroglyphs are a completely unique habitation site type for Alaska. It is clear that something special occurred at these places many centuries ago and, while known by archeologists for decades, the sites had never been thoroughly investigated or documented.



Figure 1: An Overview of the stone-ringed communal house near Burial Lake. Photograph by Eric Carlson.

In the face of emerging threats from erosion and other natural disturbances and being at risk from vandalism or unauthorized excavation, researchers and park managers set out to document and evaluate the sites, shedding light on their mysteries and at the same time enhancing their preservation. The project focused on three sites located in Noatak National Preserve in northwest Alaska. Field work was conducted in 2011 and 2012.

The lakeside villages have several shared characteristics that set them apart from other sites in interior northern Alaska. Not only are they all habitation sites with house, storage, and hunting-related features, but they each contain a large communal dwelling or qargi. Historic period ethnographic accounts describe qargit as a places for village residents to gather, fix tools and equipment, tell stories, feast, and conduct ceremonies. These structures are known in many Late Prehistoric age sites across northern Alaska, but the three qargit at these lakeside villages are unique because they were each built using substantial circular boulder-lined foundations, some as large as 4-5 feet in diameter and weighing hundred pounds (Figure 1). The construction necessitated a substantial amount of effort and coordination, and these structures come closer to the category of monumental architecture than anything else known from the American Arctic.

Another unique characteristic at each of these sites is the presence of petroglyphs on the surfaces of several of the foundation stones or on other boulders in and around the sites (Figure 2). At one site a total of 18 individual petroglyph panels were documented, 11 of which are incorporated into the qargi. Another site has 21 petroglyph panels, each on a separate stone within the qargi. The third site contained just two petroglyph panels, both of which are situated on stones within the qargi. All of the petroglyphs are abstract, and exhibit a range of designs. They were created using a variety of techniques that include incised or sawed lines, pecked lines, and pecked cupules. Often two or three of these techniques were incorporated into a single design (Figure 3).



Figure 2: One complex petroglyph studied consists of a series of pecked lines and pecked cupules on a large boulder within the footprint of a qargi feature. Photographs and Illustrations by Eric Carlson. [+ Click to enlarge](#).

There are hundreds of examples of rock art known from archeological sites throughout Alaska, with the vast majority found in the southeast and south-central parts of the state (Figure 4). Only a handful of examples, however, are known in Arctic. Rock art is documented at just 5 sites across northern Alaska, and among them are a total of 43 individual panels.

Three of the five sites and 41 of 43 panels are found at the lakeside villages.

The petroglyphs represented in northern Alaska are unique not only because there are few examples, but because they are fundamentally different than most of the rock art seen in other areas of the state. Alaskan rock art, whether petroglyphs or pictographs, generally consists of a realistic pictorial design (e.g. a human face or figure, an animal, etc.). The petroglyphs from northern Alaska, on the other hand, consist of abstract designs with no obvious naturalistic representation. In addition to the petroglyphs from the lakeside villages, two other known cases of a comparable style are present in northern Alaska at two separate sites in the northern foothills of the Brooks Range. Taken together, this group of petroglyphs represents a distinct tradition of rock art locally developed in Arctic Alaska. Analyses are ongoing and the exact meaning and function of these petroglyphs is currently being evaluated, but they clearly had significance to their makers and offer an especially tangible reminder of the rich social, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of life in the past.

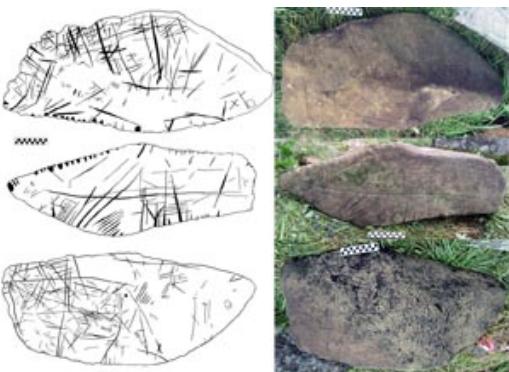


Figure 3: A stone covered in petroglyphs near Feniak Lake, consisting of a complex series of incised and pecked lines and pecked cupules covering three surfaces of the stone. Photographs and Illustrations by Mareca Guthrie. + Click to enlarge.

In addition to recording the petroglyphs, field crews also conducted subsurface testing in a total of 34 house features in the three sites. Data derived from these investigations include stratigraphic descriptions; radiocarbon samples; faunal remains; and lithic, ceramic, and organic artifacts. A key objective was to obtain organic samples to develop a radiocarbon chronology for the sites and address questions about the occupation history of each site as well as the larger lakeside village phenomenon. Little is known about the contemporaneity of the house features within each village and radiocarbon dating will add an additional line of evidence for understanding. Substantial populations are assumed to have resided at the villages given the large number of house and food storage features present, thick midden deposits, and consistency in house form and artifact styles. It is possible that relatively few houses were occupied at any given time and the substantial number of house features accumulated over a long time.

Faunal remains are well-preserved and preliminary results of the faunal analysis show that caribou were the most common subsistence resource. In addition, there is evidence for limited fishing and hunting or trapping of small mammals and birds. Analyses of the collections and samples are ongoing.

These three lakeside villages are an outstanding illustration of human adaptation to and interaction with a harsh Arctic climate where there are a limited number of resources available. The people living at these sites were not simply surviving in this high arctic environment where the resource base is limited in quantity and breadth, but they were apparently flourishing. By coupling the documentation of rock art with archeological excavation, a great deal can be learned about the contexts, functions, and patterning of the petroglyphs. As analyses are completed they will ultimately lead to a better understanding and documentation of a unique time period in the Alaskan Arctic and protection of important sites. These sites are nonrenewable cultural resources protected by law, and they remain important to the heritage of the living Inupiat. It is of the utmost importance to treat these sites with respect and to preserve them for future generations.

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Last updated: 08/11/2020 23:52:59

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