

The Native rock art of Kachemak Bay: A fascinating heritage

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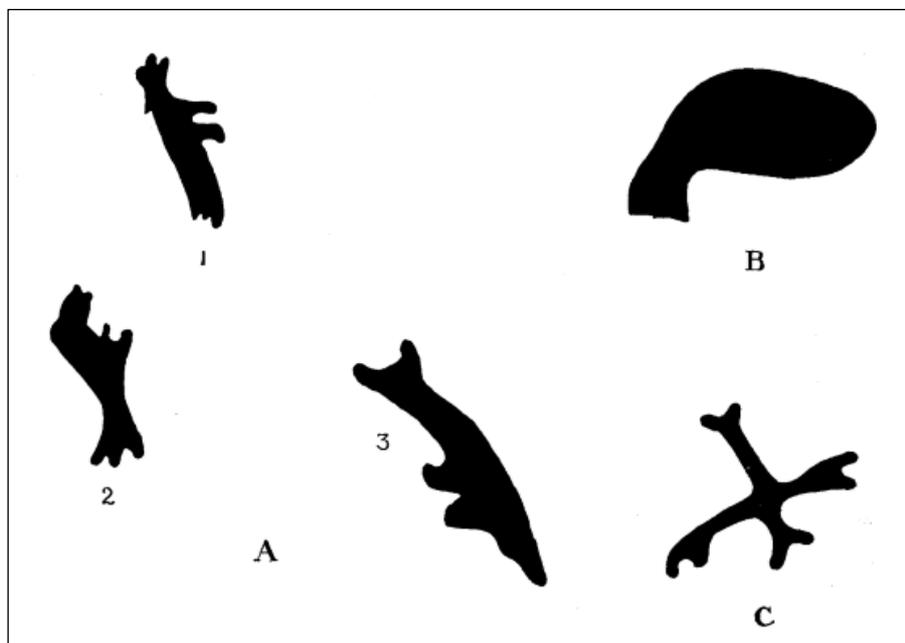
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Man seems so small, in the imposing landscapes of Kachemak Bay, composed by the convulsive nature of Southcentral Alaska. Nevertheless, in this particular area of southern Kenai Peninsula, archaeology has documented a rich material culture telling nearly 10 millennia of human adventure and creativity.

The Kachemak Bay Prehistoric rock art, which appears in the form of pictographs (paintings), has been discovered at four rock shelters located on the shorelines of Chugachik Island (earlier known as “Indian Island”), Bear Island, Peterson Bay and Sadie Cove; a possible fifth site was reported on the northern shore of Bear Cove in the 1970’s, but it has never been subject to a scientific study and cannot now be found. This notable and intriguing heritage has motivated investigations since the 1930’s, starting from the pioneering research of anthropologists and archaeologists Cornelius Osgood and Federica de Laguna. In the past three decades, Janet Klein, a Homer independent archaeologist, has made major contributions to its study.

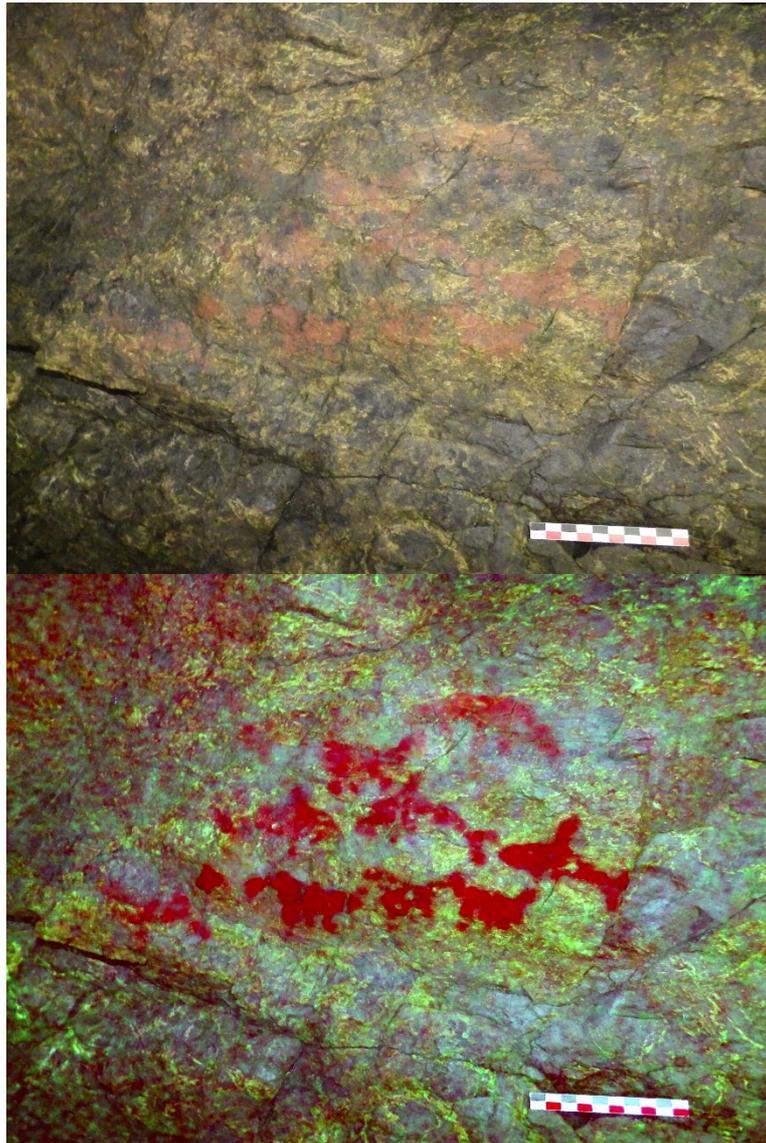


Drawings of selected pictographs of Bear Island, by Federica de Laguna (The Archaeology of Cook Inlet, Alaska, 2nd edition, The Alaska Historical Society, Anchorage).

While I had already worked extensively on the general theme of Prehistoric / pre-Columbian rock art in Central America and the Caribbean, I decided, in 2017, to implement a research program on the Kachemak Bay pictographs, because I considered that the sites concerned could give rise to important reflections about the function and cultural significance of rock art (two usually problematic issues in the Americas). Therefore, in 2017-2018, I conducted an archaeological project focused on the decorated rock shelter of Sadie Cove, and since 2019, I have developed a research on the site of Bear Island, with the invaluable support of Janet Klein, the Alaska Office of History and Archaeology, the Pratt Museum and the United States Geological Survey. The surveys carried out at these two places have revealed new rock art manifestations and characteristics. Moreover, I recently undertook a general inventory of Alaska's Native rock art sites, which enabled me to better understand the Kachemak Bay rock art within its macroregional context.

In Alaska and along the American Northwest Coast, the vast majority of ancient Native pictographs are red or reddish. The same can be said of the Kachemak Bay paintings; however, a singular motif identified last year at Bear Island is red, orange and black, and even blue motifs were reported at the mysterious Bear Cove site (if confirmed, this would be the only known case of blue Native rock paintings in all Alaska). The nature of the pigments employed is being discussed; the use of hematite, ochre or baked shale has been suggested for the red color.

The pictographs documented in the area of Kachemak Bay mainly depict animals: sea and terrestrial mammals, fishes and birds. Some animals are struck by projectile weapons. The iconography also includes anthropomorphic figures, geometric and abstract forms, and simple daubs (especially at Chugachik Island's site, called "Seal Beach"). It is often difficult to establish relations between the motifs, yet an elaborate scene featuring cetacean and terrestrial mammals can be observed at Sadie Cove (De Laguna considered these paintings as "*the most interesting from an artistic point of view*"). At Bear Island, at least 60 pictographs have been identified so far, giving the impression of an open-air book; to date, this Native rock painting site is one of the richest recorded in Alaska. The pictographs of Kachemak Bay show close analogies with those of Tuxedni Bay and Clam Cove, on the west shore of Cook Inlet, and edifying comparisons can also be made with rock art motifs of Kodiak Island and Prince William Sound.



The animal scene painted at Sadie Cove: original photo (above) and its enhancement with the DStretch plugin for ImageJ, by Sébastien Perrot-Minnot.

Middens with Prehistoric and Historic components were unearthed at the foot of the decorated walls of Chugachik Island, Bear Island and Peterson Bay. However, the rock art places are apart from the ancient Native settlements known in the area. Although their archaeological context remains problematical, the archaeological and ethnographic evidence suggests that the Kachemak Bay pictographs (or at least, most of them) are expressions of the Kachemak Tradition (about 1000 BC - 600 to 1000 AD in the Kenai Peninsula), and that they had a ritual function. A shamanistic connection can be reasonably hypothesized for the rock shelter of Sadie Cove, forming a small cave.

The continuation of the Bear Island project, which will include additional surveys and the excavation of a test pit at this key site, will certainly allow us to progress significantly in the interpretation of the Kachemak Bay rock art. On the other hand, I would like to seize the

opportunity provided by this article to invite the readers to share with me any new information on the rock art sites of the area, and any oral tradition referring to the topic.

This precious and fragile legacy, which speaks of essential aspects of the life, the symbolic thinking, and the spirituality of the ancient Native societies of Kachemak Bay, offers fascinating research perspectives. It is worth being culturally enhanced, with respect for its integrity and its natural environment. As Janet Klein wrote, the pictographs "*enrich our lives and encourage us to dream about earlier times*" (*Archaeology of Kachemak Bay*, Kachemak Country Publications, Homer, AK, 1996).

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