



PETROGLYPHS



*Petroglyphs from Cape Alitak,
Kodiak Island.*

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From *The Old People, the Cape Alitak Petroglyphs*, 2003, by Woody Kneebler, Donning Company Publishers, Virginia Beach, VA.

Petroglyphs are designs carved into boulders, cliff faces, and other stationary pieces of stone. This type of artwork is rare in Alaska. The Tlingit of southeast Alaska made many carvings and there are a few pieces of rock art in western Alaska. In the Kodiak Archipelago, there are at least 4 known petroglyph locations that depict human figures, animal forms, and geometric designs. Some of these locations have hundreds of images. People are starting to uncover the meaning of these characters, who are from Alutiiq history, family stories, and myths. Archaeologists do not know the precise age of this art form, but suspect that at least some of the images may be up to 1,500 years old, based on their association with ancient village sites.

How did Alutiiqs create petroglyphs? The clues may be found in other types of stone tools. Archaeologists note that Kodiak's prehistoric residents made many objects out of hard greywacke and granite beach cobbles by pecking the cobble to shape. Craftsmen used stone hammers to shape beach cobbles into lamps, mauls, fishing weights, and even anchors. With similar tools, Alutiiq ancestors probably pecked petroglyph images into Kodiak's coastal granite bedrock.

Why did Alutiiqs make designs on rock? Other Native Alaskans used similar artwork as territorial markers, permanent signs that linked families with particular subsistence harvesting areas. Perhaps Alutiiqs did the same. Petroglyphs commonly occur at the entrances to bays, facing outward toward the open ocean, and would have been easy to see when freshly carved. For example, there are five large clusters of petroglyphs at Cape Alitak, at the entrance to Alitak Bay. It is also possible that the images are part of a hunting ritual. Historic accounts report that whalers carved images into rocks to bring them luck before the hunt. Whatever the answer, petroglyphs are an important source of ancient Alutiiq graphic art.