

Journey of the Seal Stone

By Theresa Bakker

A photograph cannot do it justice, but that is all it took to alert archaeologist Allison McLain that she was on to something big. A forwarded email from the UA Museum of the North asked her what she knew about the petroglyphs carved in the seal stone, a 200-pound boulder in California.

“My first thought was, ‘Wow.’ But I couldn’t place them.”

She started comparing the stone to the archaeological record.

“It looks similar to pieces collected in Attu a hundred years ago. Those images of human figures and eyes and geometric designs are carved onto sea mammal mandibles and jawbones. They are very unusual.”

So was this stone.

In a century of archaeological work and surveys on the Aleutian Islands, only one other example of petroglyphs has been found. In 2002, biologists conducting a sea lion count on Agattu Island, southwest of Shemya, took photos of petroglyphs they came across, but there has been no formal investigation of the site. Then, “ten years later, this petroglyph shows up,” McLain says.

The seal stone was most likely found on Shemya Island during World War II, a time when the area was transformed by a U.S.

military looking to protect its frontier. Roads and landing strips were carved out of the earth, exposing items that were picked up by soldiers and taken home. The stone was discovered when the owners, who had purchased it at an antique store in the 1950s and used it as a lawn ornament, wanted to sell it, preferably to someone in Alaska.

That is when Debbie Corbett got involved. She is the regional



UAF photos by Mareca Guthrie.

archaeologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska. “Artifacts are deeply compelling to almost everyone. An artifact is a tangible link to our past. If you can hold it in your hand, it is a link to a long-dead ancestor. You can feel a connection.”

But objects found on federal land belong to the federal government.

“People seem to think they have no owner, and therefore there is no harm in picking them up. What I tell people is that picking up artifacts is like tearing the pictures out of a book. The picture might look nice on the wall, but you lack the story behind that picture.”

Without context — knowing exactly where the stone was found, on what part of what island, if it was buried or exposed, near other petroglyphs or markers or dwellings — researchers will never know the stone’s full story. The seal stone does offer plenty of its own mysteries to investigate.

When the light shifts across the surface, the images transform, one figure becomes another, and another, and another. Whales, faces, sea lions, sea otters, birds, bird heads, eyes, even a Mona Lisa smile.

“A phallus becomes a sea otter, the classic motifs you see in the art from this region — on their backs with their feet up to their chins and their tails tucked into their back legs,” McLain says. “But in the stone, one line is part of one figure and then in a different light, it’s part of a different figure.”

McLain sees images in the stone that are similar to those found in recorded Unangam folklore, the ethnonym for the people called “Aleut” by the Russians. “There is a transformative relationship between Aleuts and sea mammals. Sea mammals and sea birds give power to Unangam hunters in order to capture certain animals. Individuals have also transformed into certain sea mammals, depending on what they were doing as humans. Many of these images reflect these complex relationships, the complexity of the stone.”

McLain will do a comparative analysis to determine the origin and significance of the stone. She has to start almost from scratch.

“You can date the stone, but that won’t tell you anything except when the stone was created, when it oozed out of the Aleutian Islands,” she says. “We’ve got 9,000 years of evidence of human activity in that area, but we have no way to date when those carvings were made. I am looking at this stone as a piece of spiritual significance.”

In summer 2011, the owner donated the seal stone to the UA Museum of the North, the repository for most USFWS collections in Alaska. Curator of archaeology Jeff Rasic says it is a valuable addition to the collection.

“These things represent tangible pieces of our shared human experience, which pique our curiosity, make us ask questions, and raise awareness and appreciation of other cultures. They make us ponder life from another society’s perspective and from another point in human history.”

The stone makes us wonder how people thousands of years ago got to a place like Shemya Island, on the western edge of the Aleutians, let alone made time to carve designs into boulders. These questions will continue to drive the research.

As an archaeologist, Corbett has handled thousands of artifacts, but the seal stone is one of the most interesting finds of her career.

“For me, there will also be an ongoing personal relationship with that odd stone, to find out what it is and how it fits into what we know about the Aleutians.”

Traces of Art

As part of the USFWS study of the seal stone, the museum’s curator of art, Mareca Guthrie, was commissioned to illustrate the patterns on the rock so they could be more clearly analyzed. She used a six-step process:

“I cut out sheets of paper that matched the multiple flat planes of the rock, drafting a model of the rock out of paper. I used a high-quality pigmented wax crayon to create a rubbing from each face, something that requires great care because it could damage the original material.

“I studied the rock under raking light — lit from the side — to eliminate any elements of the rubbing that were naturally occurring, such as small cracks. Then, I digitized the rubbings, being careful to document scale. The digital images were combined into a single illustration, showing all the rock faces on the same page.

“Finally, I traced the digital composite on the computer screen using a digital pen and tablet to create the final image.”

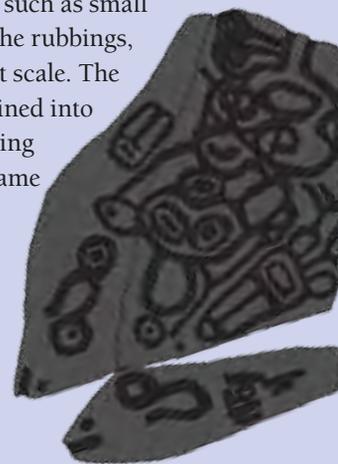


Illustration created by UAMN Fine Arts Curator Mareca Guthrie.



Theresa Bakker has an MFA from the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University. She is the media coordinator at the UA Museum of the North, where she tries to find the right place for all the stories the collections have to tell.

UAF alumnae in this story: Debbie Corbett, '91; Allison McLain, '86