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PETROGLYPH SITES ON THE COROMANDEL PENINSULA

Louise Furey
Auckland

Petroglyph sites are relatively uncommon but also not obvious, and tend to be discovered by accident rather than through systematic searching.

Few North Island petroglyph sites have been reported on in detail which makes it difficult to analyse the contents of the sites collectively. There is however a diversity in subject matter, in technique and also in the rock medium used.

Petroglyphs are reported from a number of places in the North Island (Trotter and McCulloch 1971). However there are several geographic concentrations, for example, Taranaki, the Waikato region and the Coromandel Peninsula. This may however reflect a recording bias rather than any real concentration of the sites in these areas.

This paper describes a petroglyph site near Coromandel (Fig. 1) and outlines a method used in recording.

There are 4 petroglyph sites on the Coromandel Peninsula recorded in the N.Z. Archaeological Association site files and I have been told of 2 other sites but not yet visited them.

Two of the recorded sites, a ritual site at Flaxmill Bay, Mercury Bay (Law 1966) and a cave at Waimama, Whiritoa (Law 1969), have been reported on. A third site, T10/99, north of Coromandel, has few details in the site record. It was apparently visited and recorded by Gilbert Archey in the 1930s. The site record, dated 1976, has no further information as the petroglyphs were obscured by lichen and the rock precariously placed and inaccessible. A figure from the fourth site, T11/152, also near Coromandel, decorated the cover of the New Zealand Forest Service archaeology reports from the Auckland Conservancy for several years. It is this site that I will be describing in more detail.

All of the sites recorded are quite different, both in content and the technique used. T11/109, referred to as a ritual site at Flaxmill Bay, consists of a face in relief on the edge of a small pool within a stream bed. Together with another small pool, these were cut off from the main water flow by a diversion channel. Obsidian flakes were recovered from the lower pool (Law 1966). The method of creating the face would seem to be unusual. Petroglyphs are normally made by pecking or pounding the rock to engrave an outline of the object being depicted. The rock surface on this site has been

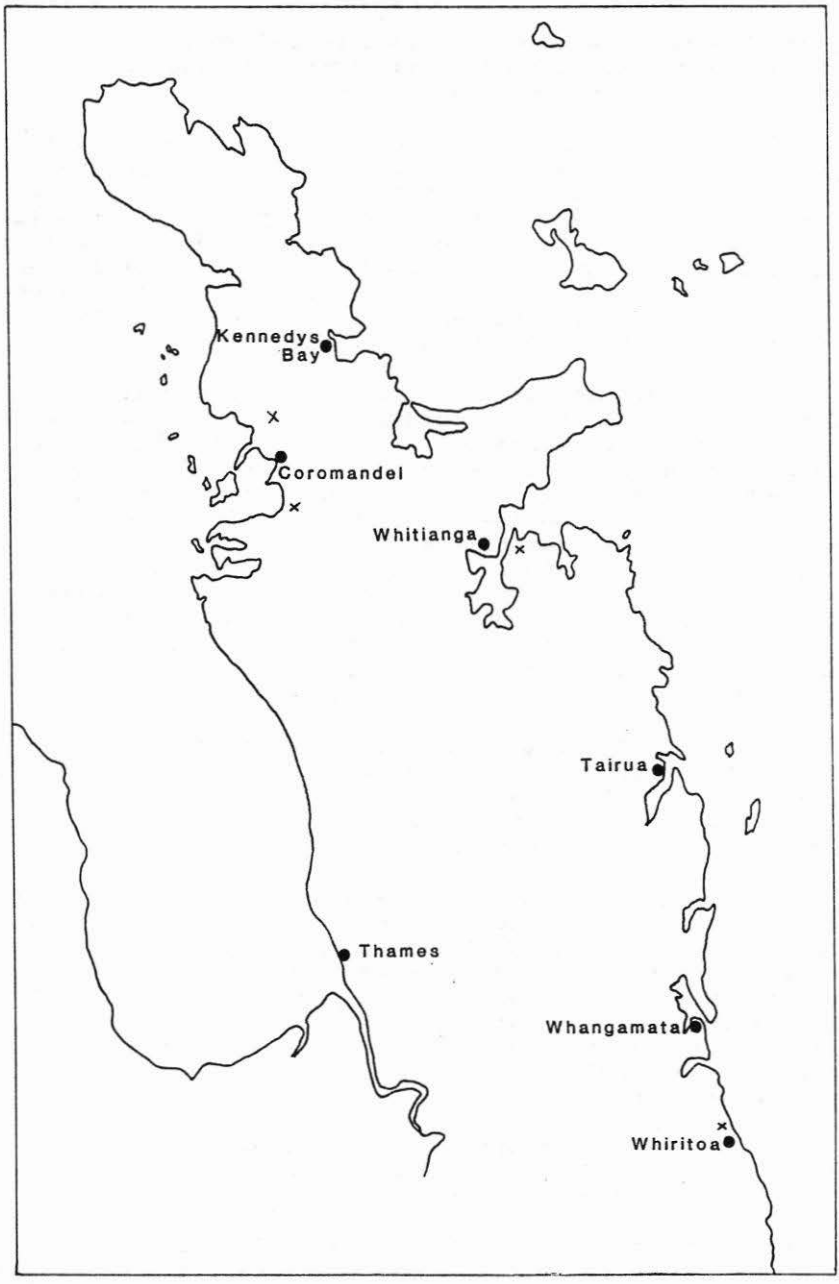

Figure 1. Coromandel Peninsula showing location of known petroglyph sites.

reduced leaving the nose in raised relief while the eye sockets are deeply incised. Law (1966:502) suggested the method used was similar to wood carving.

T12/504 at Waimama, Whiritoa, is a sea cave cut into rhyolite. The petroglyphs occur in several groups and consist of figures with faces, and genitals in some cases, one spiral and many other unidentifiable or uninterpretable marks (Law 1969:191-195). The figures were probably made by a grooving or abrading technique using a sharp stone or stick rather than by pounding or pecking. This is apparent from the sharpness of the lines and the V-shaped grooves. The soft nature of the rock lends itself to this type of technique.

The remaining recorded site for which there is any information is T11/152, a boulder in a tributary of the Waiau River, south of Coromandel. The site was brought to the attention of archaeologists during a survey of part of the Brier Block, a forestry block, in 1977 (Nugent and Nugent 1977). The rounded boulder is approximately 2.0 metres high, over 2.0 metres in diameter, and is in the stream bed. Similar andesitic boulders are to be found outcropping on the western side of the catchment. This boulder was apparently originally on the ridge above the stream but was tipped down the slope by N.Z. Forest Service employees testing the capabilities of a new bulldozer (L. Arthur pers. comm.). The petroglyphs were not noticed until some time later.

As the pine trees grow in the vicinity of the site and undergrowth surrounds the boulder, still moist air conditions are encouraging the growth of lichens and mosses on the rock surface which will eventually lead to the figures being obscured and possibly damaged.

Several versions, or interpretations, of the petroglyphs have been made but as they were either sketches or tracings, each was only the recorder's interpretation. Because the visibility of the figures is deteriorating, a method of recording was required which would provide a copy of the actual marks and indentations in the rock before they were obscured. A casting technique provides the most accurate representation and a technique using aluminium foil was experimented with.

The visible petroglyphs on the boulder consist of 3 spirals, a 'human figure', a 'face' consisting of eyes and mouth, and 2 curved lines (Fig. 2).

While the spirals and 'face' are well defined with wide and deep lines, the 'human figure' is more difficult to see. The uniform dark grey colour of the rock and the poor lighting conditions enhance the problem.

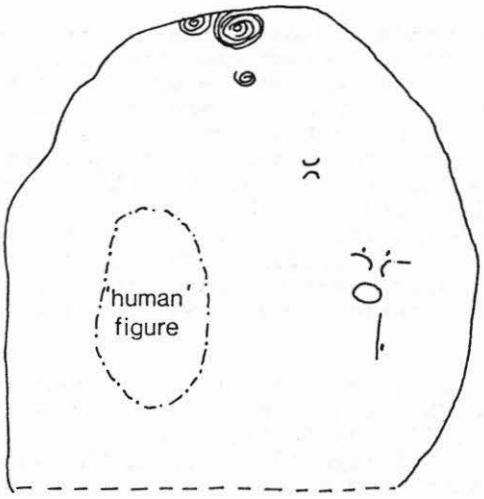

Figure 2. Boulder from the south east, showing location of petroglyphs.

The motifs have been made by repeated pecking at the rock surface, creating indentations. It is likely that an indirect percussion method was used rather than a direct pounding which would leave diffused edges (as defined by Maynard 1977).

Two large double spirals occur together, one radiating clockwise from the centre, the other anti-clockwise (Photo 1a). A third smaller example, slightly separated from the others, is a triple spiral also radiating clockwise. The larger two spirals are unusual in that they have interruptions, with v-shaped symbols, in the outer whorls (Fig. 3). The larger spirals are 470 mm in diameter while the small spiral measures 165 x 180 mm. The width of the lines varies from 130 mm to 350 mm.

The other figures on the rock are a 'face' consisting of an oval outline with two curved lines above it and could represent a mouth and eyebrows. Two curved lines, back to back, occur nearby (Fig. 3).

The largest figure is possibly intended to represent a male human (Fig. 3 and Photo 2). Although the lines are shallow in some places, they do not form a continuous body outline. The facial area is more complex with eyebrows, eyes, nose and protruding tongue. The length of the figure is 880 mm.

The current orientation of the figures in relation to the ground surface was different when the boulder was in its in-situ position. A less weathered, and lighter coloured, surface is present on the northern side which suggests this previously sat in or on the ground surface. If this was the case it would mean the 'human figure' had not always been in an upright position but had been on the upper surface of the rock, while the spirals had been close to ground level. The lines on the 'human figure' are very shallow and faint when compared to the large spirals. The lines on the spirals are however wider, which enhances their visibility. There may possibly be more petroglyphs on what is now the underside of the boulder.

The spiral motif appears to be a common element in North Island petroglyphs, and is found in sites in Taranaki (Day 1980, Harsant 1987, Law 1969, Prickett 1981), in the Waikato area (Law 1970, Phillips 1962), at Mt Maunganui (Law 1969), Waihi (Lake Taupo) and Kaiangaroa (Trotter and McCulloch 1971:44-45). It has been suggested the spirals may identify territorial boundaries although a religious significance is also a possibility (Day 1980, Prickett 1981). Too little is known about these sites to place any interpretation on them.

Recording Petroglyphs

Several techniques, from photographs and simple sketching through to taking latex casts, are available for recording rock art. The degree of accuracy in recording varies depending on the technique used.

On T11/152 tracing of the motifs by placing plastic over the rock was attempted but because of the difficulty of obtaining oblique light which would cast shadows and enhance the lines, I was not satisfied that an accurate representation had been made, especially of the 'human figure'. Stereoscopic photography was attempted but was again not successful because of the poor lighting conditions and the difficulty of obtaining a 60% overlap necessary for good stereoscopic viewing (the 'human figure' on the south east side of the boulder did not get a strong direct light onto the surface).

A method of recording described by Clegg (1983) had possibilities. This method involved making an impression of the lines using aluminium foil in the same way that foil placed over a coin will enhance the design through the foil while at the same time make a negative impression when the foil is removed. Because aluminium foil is reflective it would exaggerate shadows and give lines greater emphasis. This would allow successful photographing of the object outline on the rock surface. In addition the negative foil impression could be later used as a mould to make a more

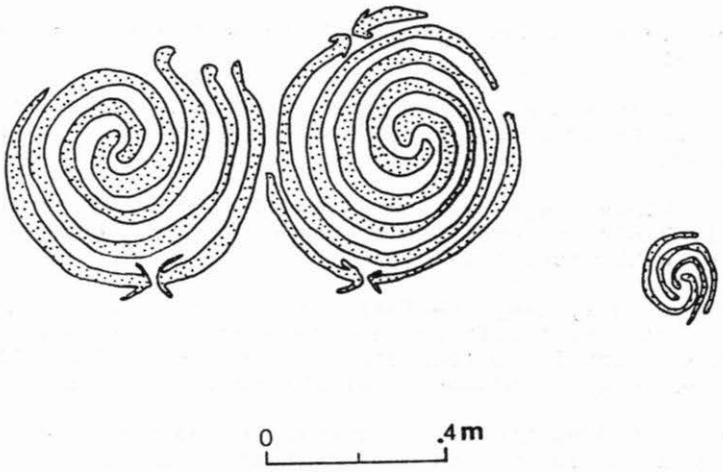

Figure 3. Petroglyphs on T11/152.

permanent cast (Photos 1d and 2b). This method also has advantages in that it requires no special knowledge and is easily carried out by a non-expert (in comparison to latex casting) using readily available materials.

The following description of the method is based on Clegg (1983:107).

Step 1. Remove dust, leaves and twigs from the surface of the rock by light brushing. Do not attempt to remove lichen or moss growth.

Step 2. Place sheets of aluminium kitchen foil over the petroglyph without overlapping the edges. Attach the foil to the rock with masking tape.

Step 3. Lightly tamp the foil into the surface of the rock using fingers or a soft brush depending on the local conditions, until the foil conforms to the surface (Photo 1b). Use vertical movements or the foil will tear.

Step 4. Build up the foil thickness by adding more layers (3 or more) using spray adhesive and tamping in each layer in turn. Joins in the foil can be covered over.

Step 5. Reinforce the deepest grooves, sharp protrusions and the edges of the foil with masking tape.

Step 6. Glue paper or cloth to the foil surface to build up thickness (Photo 1c). This will give the cast stability when it is removed and transported.

Step 7. When a sufficient thickness has been built up and the cast is dry, remove from the rock surface. It should peel away without any difficulty (Photos 1d and 2b). Place the cast on a rigid board, protecting each side with foam padding to minimise damage during transportation.

Step 8. Make a more permanent form of cast as soon as possible using plaster or fibreglass.

The technique was easy to carry out but I did have a few problems which affected the success of the project.

After carrying out Step 6, I reinforced the cast by adding more paper backing, attaching each layer with a commercial water based glue. In hindsight this was a mistake. It is crucial to have all layers quite dry before removing the cast. In this particular case the process was hurried as a typical Coromandel downpour commenced before the paper and glue were completely dry. As a result the free standing cast distorted as it dried. It is likely that the paper saturated

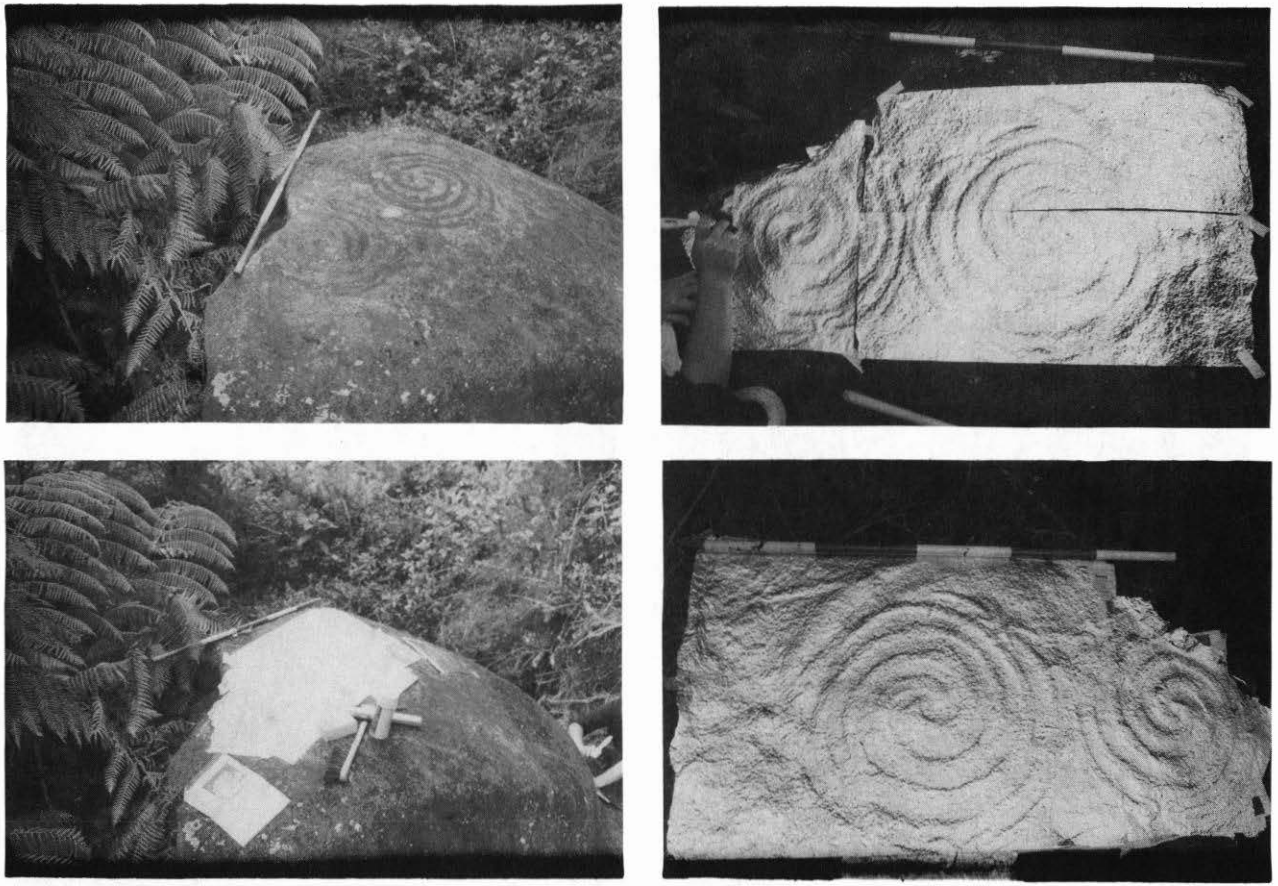

Photo 1 (a) Large spirals (top left); (b) tamping strips of tinfoil into the indentations (top right); (c) Paper glued to the tinfoil (bottom left); (d) The negative impression when the cast is removed (bottom right).

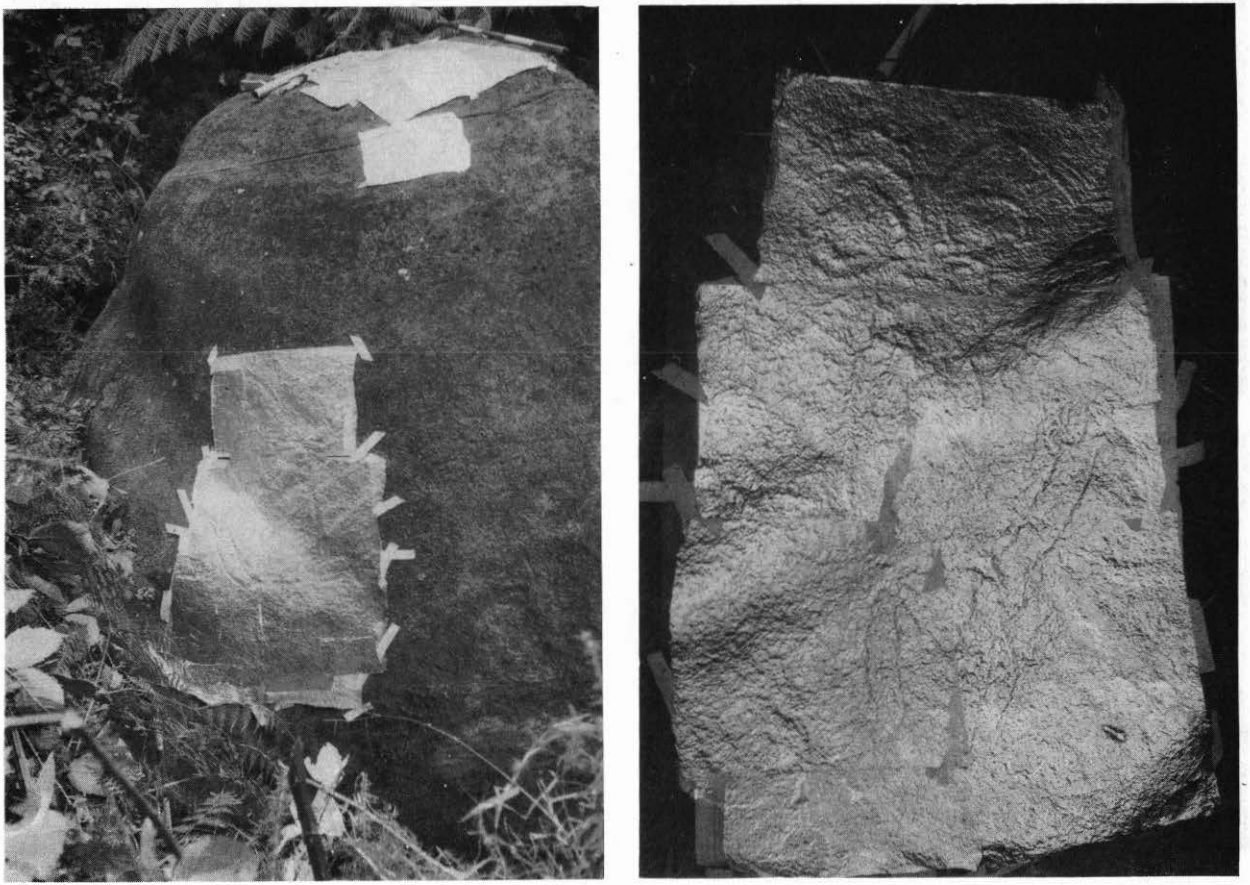

Photo 2 (a) The 'human figure' outlined through tinfoil (left); (b) The 'human figure' in negative impression (right).

with glue was responsible for this event and it probably wouldn't have occurred if I had only used the spray adhesive.

It is also essential that a permanent cast be made as soon as possible. A combination of the still moist paper backing and a week's procrastination in carrying out Step 8 lead to the cast twisting, and where it had followed the rock contours, it collapsed to a flat plane. I also found the maximum size of cast could only be about 1 metre square as anything larger could not be easily carried along a difficult route back to the vehicle.

The illustrations in this paper are accurate representations of the petroglyphs and were obtained by a combination of checking the casts against tracings made previously, and also by enlarging copies of photographs taken of the foil enhanced figures and photographs of the negative foil impressions. Although a permanent cast was not made I am satisfied the recording exercise was successful.

Caution should be exercised when recording petroglyphs by any method which requires contact with the rock surface. Some types of rock can be deeply weathered, and are therefore very fragile. Any pressure may cause damage to the petroglyphs. If there are any doubts about the petroglyphs or the rock surface, consult an archaeologist before proceeding.

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