

A Columbiana County, Ohio, Tar Burner Rock

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Location and Description

The Parsons Petroglyph Site is located on land of Everett Parsons in central section 35, Middleton Twp., Columbiana Co., Ohio. The "circle and line" petroglyph (Swauger 1979: 53) lies on the sloping face of a large (approximately 3 by 5 m) sandstone boulder along the north side of a small, unnamed tributary that enters the North Fork of Little Beaver Creek nearly opposite the mouth of Pine Run. The petroglyph site lies at an elevation of between 980 and 1000 feet above sea level, approximately 100 meters downstream of the Parsons home.

The rock carving consists of three concentric, nearly circular ellipses, the outermost measuring 23 by 24 inches (58 x 61 cm), bisected by a straight groove that continues down the sloping face of the boulder an additional 5 feet (1.5 m) to the edge of the boulder, serving as a drain. A short horizontal line incised perpendicular to the bisecting groove some 6 inches (15 cm) long and the same distance above the outermost circle may or may not be related to the petroglyph, which is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. An irregular area extending as much as 18 inches (.46 m) from the outer circle and surrounding the petroglyph is clearly fire-reddened, although this feature does not show in the accompanying photographs.

The only known previous reference to this petroglyph site is an illustration in Vietzen (1973:122) where it is labelled "Tar burning rock near Lisbon, Ohio." Lisbon is actually some ten miles northwest, and the petroglyph might better be located by reference to the village of Fredricktown, 1½ miles south, at the confluence of the North and Middle Forks of Little Beaver Creek. R. Max Gard, Lisbon, Ohio, provided the precise location of the petroglyph, and I am also grateful to the Parsons family for allowing me to examine and photograph the carving. Mrs. Vivien Marshall, Bradenton, Florida, and I visited the site December 23, 1979.

A number of similar "circle and line" petroglyphs have been described recently in the literature (Swauger 1968, 1974, 1979; Mortine 1969; Rist 1969; Dudley 1979), where they have generally been assigned an aboriginal origin. Murphy (1969) described a similar petroglyph in Columbiana Co. and called attention to the documented use

(Bright 1932) of such "circle and line" petroglyphs for the production of pine tar. A recent "re-creation" of making pine tar in this manner is described in Wigginton (1977). Dudley (1979) describes a "tar kiln rock" in Gallia County, Ohio, and accepts this interpretation of their use. A search of the literature revealed no documented use of such rocks by the North American Indian (Dudley, pers. comm., 1979), although the Indians are known to have used pitch for a variety of purposes.

Swauger (1979) suggests an alternative function, that of leaching wood ashes for lye to make soap, and has kindly provided me (pers. comm., 1979) with a reference to this process (Gould 1942). While such an explanation seems quite likely in the case of the Mulert Petroglyph stone (Swauger 1979), which is portable, it seems less probable in the case of previously described examples, which are not movable and are located some distance from the nearest house site. (Lye barrels, I believe, were generally placed very close to the house or cabin, since the ashes had to be carried from the house to the barrel and since rain water from the roof provided a ready source of water necessary for the leaching process.)

Clearly, functional interpretation of such "circle and line" petroglyph sites must be made on a case-by-case basis. The Parsons Petroglyph does show definite traces of intensive burning, which supports the "tar burner" thesis and would appear to remove Swauger's main objection to such an interpretation. Further substantiation in the case of the Beaver Kettle Farm (Murphy 1969) and Parsons "tar burner rocks" is the oral tradition that this was their function. I still believe that this was the function of the Circle Rock Petroglyph (Swauger 1968), which is located a considerable distance and, be it noted, *uphill* from the nearest house site.

It may be worth noting that the presence of such tarkilns is often documented by place names. Stewart (1970:474) notes the presence of as many as three "Tarkiln Brooks" in New Jersey alone. In this regard one might also call attention to "Tarburners Run" in Saline Twp., Jefferson Co., Ohio, a tributary of Hollow Rock Run, which enters Yellow Creek. According to Hunter (1900), in discussing the history of Saline Township, "On Yellow Creek are remains of white pine forests

destroyed by the Indians, who tapped the trees for rosin which they used for salve and to facilitate the kindling of fire." No "tarburner rock" has yet been located in this vicinity, but this clearly is the origin of the place name and suggests that the aborigines may have used the same extractive process as the pioneers.

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Fig. 1 (Murphy) Side view of tar burner rock.



Fig. 2 (Murphy) Front view of tar burner rock in Columbiana County, Ohio.