

Anasazi Rock Art at the Valley of Fire

by Kimberly Horg

The Anasazi pueblo farmers inhabited the desert region right outside the town that is known today as Las Vegas. There are petroglyphs (rock art) from the Anasazi that are 1000 to 3000 years old visible throughout the Valley of Fire State Park which is located an hour northeast of the well known desert destination. The park got its name from the red sandstone lying on the desert valley floor. It offers a historical view of the land that has been occupied since 300 BC.

Ancient inhabitants of the park left a timeless mark on the land that was not discovered to be linked to the Anasazi until the late 1920s. The first official archeological look at the park was in 1929 when some of the petroglyph panels were recorded (drawn) and the extensive concentrations of them mentioned. Additional studies of the petroglyphs took place while excavations were occurring in the early 1930's. Most of them were conducted to the east in the flood basin of the Hoover Dam then under construction. More work was carried on in the late 1950s and 1961. The last of the major excavations took place around 1978, Jim Hammons, Valley of Fire State Park Supervisor III, said.

Many of the artifacts that were found during this work were moved to the Lost City Museum, in Overton, Nevada, located an hour from Las Vegas. The governor at the time saw the value of it in the early 1920s. He made the Lost City Museum a state reservation, and convinced the federal government to give the state 8,500 acres to Nevada for the Valley of Fire. Even though hundreds of people came to the unofficial dedication on Easter Sunday in 1934, the official dedication occurred in 1935.

The state legislature removed Valley of Fire from state park system in the late 1940s because the park was "... too remote, too inaccessible, and had no recreational value." The park was put back into the state park system around 1955, Hammons said. "Local people in Overton and Logandale knew something about the Anasazi occupation nearby in the 1920s; and the Governor, James Scruggs, sent Mark Raymond Harrington to southern Nevada to look at some of the sites with local people. He did some excavation and survey in the late 1920s, and that led to the excavations of the 1930s. Harrington learned that the people in the Moapa Valley lived a lifestyle similar to that of the better known Anasazi to the east. They built structures with facilities for living and for storage, they made



black-and white pottery with similar designs, and they grew corn and squash."

Dr. Margaret Lynette, Professor of Anthropology at UNLV, said "the Anasazi lived in the east, through northern Arizona and southern Utah, all the way to northern New Mexico. It is not known if the cultural group migrated there, but they are related to the Anasazi who were inhabitants of the Four Corners area. They might have had contact with that

group or had trade negotiations. It is known from the artifacts left in the area that they had contact with different groups of people from far distances away. Turquoise and shells beads were among some of the artifacts found, which tells us that they had contact with a group by the coast."

Eva Jensen, archaeologist at the Lost City Museum, said "the name Anasazi means the 'Ancient Ones.' They



occupied the land there over a thousand years. The cultural group was there from 200 to 300 BC to 1150 AD. There was a combination of many factors for their disappearance. They lived in the area for along time, so the population expanded, and only so much space was available to hunt and grow crops. When the crops failed or there were not enough animals to hunt in their large population, it had an impact on more people. There are multiple reasons that might have caused their disappearance."

Jensen said. "It is amazing that they could have been so in touch with their environment and had survived so long. They had a fascinating ability to adapt to the conditions of a harsh environment and be successful for such a long time."

Winter are mild at the Valley of Fire. Temperatures ranges from 75 degrees to freezing. The best weather conditions are during fall and spring. During the summer it exceeds 100 degrees. Sometimes the temperature reaches up to 120 degrees, and the average annual rainfall is four inches.

"The Anasazi did not really disappear," Lyness said. "The modern Pueblo people, including the Hopi, Zuni, Acoma and the people of the Rio Grande pueblos, are their descendants. Generally, the Anasazi people moved to the south and east in the 1200s and 1300s, no longer living in what was the northern part of their area."

"The reasons for these moves are complex. They moved at a time when crops were un dependable from year to year and the numbers of people to be fed were high. There is some evidence of social disorder and raiding among them at the time they began to move out of the

northern area. People lived in southern Nevada for at least 10,000 years before the Anasazi. Many of the petroglyphs in southern Nevada were probably made by these earlier people."

The symbols found there do not stand for words, but the designs are known to be culturally significant, and they were only made in certain locations. Researchers have given names to categories of petroglyphs that are similar. Each style has its own characteristic of a geographic area or time period, a tribe or culture. The style that is visible at the Valley of Fire is the Anasazi Style. The drawings are of people, hand prints, animals and reptiles. Spirals, which often mean the migration of a tribe, are seen along with paths and stairs that might tell their story of a great hunt or legend.

According to Lyness, "There are some similarities in the petroglyphs across this large region and a lot of differences, too. I don't know why the Anasazi made petroglyphs. They probably had many reasons, just as there are many reasons for art that is made by our society. Petroglyphs may not be telling a story. They may be signs, or symbols."

Petroglyphs are found throughout Nevada. "They may not be in large concentrations, like the Valley of Fire, but they occur in other parts of Clark County, Lincoln County, Lyon County, the Black Rock Desert and probably about anywhere else there was human habitation," Jim Hammons, Valley of Fire Park Supervisor III, said.

"It is a durable form of communication. They have endured far longer than the current painted aluminum travel signs which last only a few years. Some may be doodling. Other pictures may depict directions, ceremonies, theology,

stories, events, or history. They may have been talking about the weather," Hammons said.

Petroglyphs are made by using a tool to remove some of the rock's surface. The tool resembles a chisel. It is positioned against a rock while it is struck with a hammer-stone. This type of pecked petroglyph will have a rough surface with a pit. The rock art was made in a combination of this way and by scratching lines either lightly or deeply incised.

"There are a number of different reasons for Petroglyphs, but it is only speculation. It could be a form of communication, not a written language, but a tribute to animals. It might also be documentation of a clan or certain group. Some researchers think petroglyphs mark travels or trails. There are a number of different purposes," Jensen said.

Researchers do know that the Anasazi lived in pit-houses built in the ground. "The Pueblo units had multiple rooms shaped out of adobe with an outer layer of clay mud. The various rooms gave them the capability to store food, probably up to a couple of years. The floors in the rooms were made of stone-set in adobe mud to keep rodents out. It had a main room with a fire-pit around which they surrounded themselves during extreme weather conditions, but usually spent most of their time outdoors," she said.

"The Anasazi homes near Overton were made of adobe, that is, dried mud. They had adobe walls and roofs made by poles laid across the tops of the adobe walls, covered with smaller poles, and then with adobe. A home usually had one large room per family, with some small store rooms attached to it. You would go outside to get things from the store room, maybe an allotment of corn to

be ground for the day's food. Overton's Lost City Museum has a reconstructed Anasazi home there," Lynette said.

The Anasazi were skilled basket weavers and are known for their exquisite pottery. They used baskets to carry their food and pottery to cook it. They were farmers who harvested squash, beans, corn (also known as maize), and may have grown cotton. Their primary crop was corn, because we still see remains of it here," Jensen said.

Corn was made into cornmeal that was rolled into balls and cooked. They made bread from corn flour, cooked stew, hunted small game, and raised turkeys. The Anasazi used wild berries to color the feathers from the turkeys, and used them to adorn their head pieces that they wore in ceremonies.

"Around their homes, the bones show that they ate a lot of desert tortoise and rabbits. They probably hunted deer and mountain sheep in the nearby mountains, too," Lynette said.

The park offers visitors a chance to imagine how this culture lived and see up-front markings that were made by ancient inhabitants of the land. The petroglyphs are some of the oldest signs of communication in America. It is bounded on the north, south, and west by the Bureau of Land Management. The Lake Mead National Recreation area is on our eastern boundary. The Moapa Valley Reservation is approximately 11 miles from the park.

There are display panels outlining the geologic history of the park. Artifacts are displayed on an artificial rock outcrop. Flora and Fauna of the desert are found on some of the panels, there are a couple of live reptiles on display, and a few mounted specimens. Bighorn Sheep, coyote and kit fox mounts may all be seen in the visitor center.

"What most visitors seem to do most is take in and photograph the picturesque vistas offered by the park since the red, orange and white outcrops. The combinations of these colors are a sharp contrast to the tan and gray of the surrounding limestone hills," Hammons said.

"The park has several large red Aztec Sandstone outcrops, other stark landscapes offering a colorful panoramic view, and there are ancient petroglyphs in the park linking us to a past culture that no longer exists," Hammons said.

The park has one panel over the petroglyphs at Atlatl Rock that is behind a lexan screen, and the other petroglyphs are exactly how the natives left them. Their preservation relies on informational signs and displays stating how fragile the petroglyphs can be. Visitors are asked to follow the park's instructions, so that the rock art can be preserved for future generations. ■

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