

Native American Paleontology: Extinct Animals in Rock Art

A perennial question in rock art is whether any of the animal imagery from North America portrays extinct animals that humans had observed and hunted. A number of examples of rock art illustrating various creatures have been put forth as extinct animals but none have been fully convincing. This question is revisited focusing upon the giant beaver *Castoroides*. Based upon stylistic analysis and ethnology the author suggests that the famous petroglyph Tsagaglallal from The Dalles, Washington, represents *Castoroides*, the Giant Beaver.

GIANT BEAVERS

The Trickster Wisagatcak built a dam of stakes across a creek in order to trap the Giant Beaver when it swam out of its lodge. He waited all day, until in the evening he saw the creature swimming toward him. He was ready to spear it, when Muskrat suddenly bit him from behind and made his spear stroke miss. So he gave up hunting that night. Next morning he decided to break down the dam, so he levered the stakes of the dam out of place. The water flowed out, and kept on flowing. But the level of the creek did not fall Wisagatcak because he had broken the dam. All the land was covered. As the waters rose Wisagatcak pulled up some trees to make a raft and collected many different kinds of animals which were swimming about in the waters. For two weeks the beavers made the waters rise until no land was left. At the end of the two weeks, Muskrat left the raft and dived down but could not find any earth, and stayed below the surface so long that he died. Then Raven left the raft; he flew for a whole day yet saw no land, only water in all the four directions. Then Wisagatcak made his own magic and called Wolf to

help. Wolf ran round and round the raft with a ball of moss in his mouth. As he ran the moss grew and earth formed on it. Then he put it down and they danced around it singing powerful spells. The earth grew. It spread over the raft and went on growing until it made the whole world (Burland 1973:57).

This eastern Cree creation tale is a version of the Earth Diver creation myth. The role played by the giant beavers is a logical analogy of the flooding of a meadow by beavers building their dams; and the description of the broad expanse of water surrounding the newly-created earth on its raft is a metaphor for a beaver's lodge surrounded by the water of the beaver pond.

The Cree were not alone in granting a prominent place in their mythology to the giant beaver. The Chippewa also included giant beavers in their mythology. The Chippewa occupied "a territory that extended from the upper peninsula of Michigan through Wisconsin, northern Minnesota and southern Manitoba into North Dakota" (Terrell 1971:244). A Chippewa legend tells about an island that was really a giant beaver that came to life and saved the people from an enemy attack (Conway 1993: 149).

The Cheyenne also had a myth that involved the Giant Beaver. Leeming and Page (1998:141), in *The Mythology of Native North America*, quote a story that had been related to Richard Erdoes and Alfonso Ortiz (Erdoes, et al. 1984) by Mrs. Medicine Bull.

We do not know where it is anymore, but somewhere in the north there is a great pole, a huge tree trunk, like the Sun Dance pole but bigger. It holds up the world. For a long time, a very long time, the Great White Grandfather Beaver has been gnawing at that pole, and they say he has al-

ready gnawed halfway through it. Whenever Grandfather Beaver gets angry at something, he gnaws faster and faster at the pole.

Well, once he gnaws all the way through it, it will fall over and everything is going to crash into a bottomless nothing. It will be the end of everything, the end of the people, the end of ends. So we take care not to make Grandfather Beaver angry. We never eat beaver or touch beaver skins. That way maybe the world will last longer (Leeming, et al 1998:141).

Mari Sandoz (1964:xiii-xiv) recalled a Sioux friend of her father who wore a giant beaver tooth on a cord that hung on his breast. She related that this tooth was “four, five times as large as those of the beaver skull nailed up outside our house, almost as large as the ones from the fossil beds of the Niobrara country.”

The Ojibwa (self designated Anishinabe) people originated in the Eastern Great Lakes Region (Pritzker 2000:342). An Ojibwa story about their mythical hero Nanabush tells about his feud with Waub-Ameek, the giant beaver. For many months, Nanabush chased Waub-Ameek, accompanied by his grandmother Nokomis (yes, the same Nokomis that Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote about in “Hiawatha”). Waub-Ameek built a huge dam in the narrows between Lake Huron and Lake Superior and created a huge lake to protect himself from Nanabush. While Nanabush was searching the far banks of the lake Nokomis managed to grab onto Waub-Ameek’s tail and during their wrestling, the dam was broken down. The ensuing flood created the land of Thirty Thousand Islands. Nanabush and Waub-Ameek later became friends of Nanabush and old Nokomis. Waub-Ameek creat-

ed the smaller modern beavers and taught them how to make dams like the one he had made in the narrows (from an anonymous internet site). The Ojibwa gave the pigment red ochre great symbolic importance. Their legends describe how the origin of this sacred earth, or “ona-man”, resulted from the spilling of the mythical beaver’s blood after an attack by a Thunderbird. It is often a very important component of medicine bundles (Tacon 1990:26).

Many Ojibwa inhabited the lake-forest territory around the Great Lakes, which was ideal range for the North American beaver (*Castor castor*). Before that, it had been ideal range for the giant beaver *Castoroides*, the predecessor of the modern beaver.

Giant beavers had evolved during the Pleistocene in both North America and Europe (Figure 1). In North America, *Castoroides* ranged from Alaska to Florida, and was particularly abundant around the Great Lakes. It lived in lakes and ponds bordered by swamp, and had short legs with large webbed feet, suggesting that it was a powerful swimmer. Adults were as large as a black bear, probably reaching 200 kilograms in weight and 2.5 meters in length (Savage 1986:120).

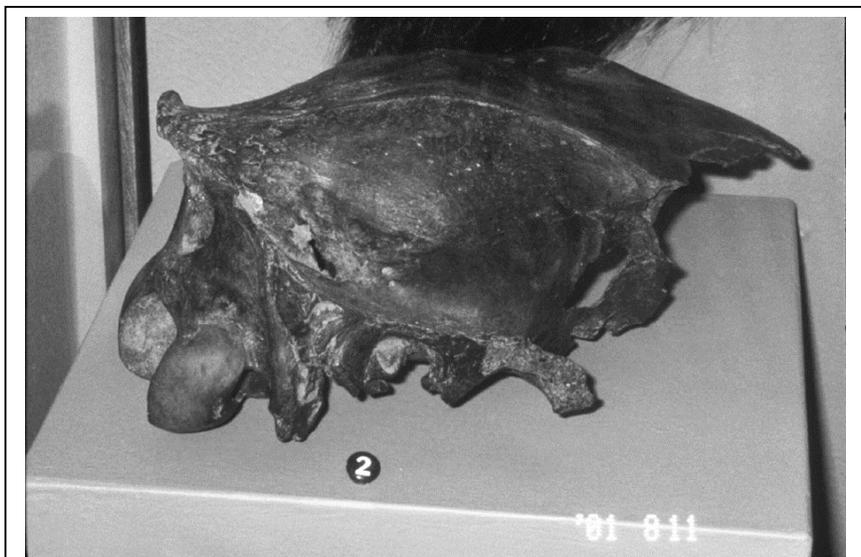


Figure 1. Skull of a giant beaver *Castoroides*, Ketchikan Museum, Ketchikan, Alaska. Peter Faris, 2001.

In north-central Ohio, Sheriden Cave contained the remains of many large Pleistocene animals. Some of the mammals recovered from Sheriden Cave include the reindeer, flat-headed peccary, stag moose and short-faced bear. The deposits at Sheriden Cave included a layer containing human artifacts including stone cutting and scraping tools, bone projectile points, and fluted stone projectile points. The artifact-bearing layer in the deposits at Sheriden Cave dates to between 11,000 BP and 10,500 BP. This layer also contains the remains of the giant beaver, dated to 10,800 BP (Tankersly and Redmond 2000:45-46).

The association of giant beaver remains with human artifacts provides a connection between the creature and early Native American cultures, in the Great Lakes region where the Protohistoric Cree and Chippewa cultures later based portions of their mythology upon what may have been memories of the extinct giant beaver. This association of the remains of giant beavers with human artifacts at Sheriden Cave in Ohio proves that Native Americans of 11,000 BP to 10,500 BP knew the creature.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

The Kiks'adi totem pole in Wrangell, Alaska, was carved about 1895 by William Ukas (Figure 2). It shows the crests of the Kiks'adi clan of the Stikine Tlinget including the crest of the giant beaver Killisnoo. Long ago, a great chief kept a pet Beaver, paying it so much attention that his people felt neglected and were jealous. They taunted and teased the Beaver, named Kilisnoo, who became very angry. He went to his pond, transformed into a giant Beaver and tunneled under all the houses. Kilisnoo gnawed a poplar stick into a salmon spear and later, in a fit of anger used it to kill the chief and the others. Then he slapped his flat tail hard on the ground, the earth shook, and all the houses collapsed into his underground excavations (Stewart 1990:105).



Figure 2. Kiks'adi totem pole. In Tlingit, Wrangell Totem Park, Wrangell, Alaska. The original pole was carved ca. 1890 by William Ukas. This replica was carved by Steve Brown and erected on June, 2 1987. The bottom figure is Killisnoo, the giant beaver. Peter Faris, 2001.

A story told of a gigantic beaver that inhabited the vicinity of Rose Point (on the Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia) was reported by Smyly:

When the animal wished to come to the surface, he was told, it produced a dense fog, the water at the same time becoming very calm. He goes on to say: The fog may, perhaps, clear away enough to allow someone watching in a retired nook to see the great beaver: but should the animal catch sight on any human being it instantly strikes the water with its tail and disap-

pears. To laugh at the beaver, or make light on him in any way is certain to bring bad luck (Smyly 1975:77).

Flathead Lake is the largest natural freshwater lake in northwestern Montana. Flathead Indian tribal traditions attributed the creation of the southern outlet of Flathead Lake to a giant beaver, draining it southward toward present-day Missoula (Deloria 1995:222). This legend also accounted for the creation of the Channeled Scablands of eastern Washington, and scoured out the channel for the Yakima River and the Columbia River. The Yakima Indian legend below is similar.

The scablands flood presumably moved into and scoured out the valley of the Columbia River. - A Yakima story entitled "How the Coyote Made the Indian Tribes" sheds some interesting light on the origin of the river. A giant beaver inhabited Lake CleElum on the eastern side of the Cascades. His name was Wishpoosh and he abused the people so that Coyote decided to help them.

Coyote and Wishpoosh got into a fight in Lake CleElum and caused an earthquake, which made a large hole in the lake, and it began to rain. Wrestling with each other and refusing to give in, Coyote and Wishpoosh rolled down the eastern slope of the Cascades to Kittitas valley, where the waters made a great lake. The combat continued on, Coyote and Wishpoosh, struggling with the waters rushing behind in their wake. They cut the channel for the Yakima River, created a second lake, and tore through Union Gap. The waters overflow this path and form another lake in the Walla Walla country. The fight then takes an abrupt turn to the left and the Oregon-Washington border channel of the Columbia is made to the Pacific Ocean (Clark 1966:301).

The Yakima story is echoed in several other tribal traditions where only part of the sequence

is mentioned; the Colville, Sanpoil, and Okanogan tribes all repeat parts of this story (Deloria, Jr. 1995:223-225).

The tribes of the Pacific Northwest developed a symbolism and system of graphic portrayal of unparalleled sophistication. In 1965 Bill Holm stated:

It is apparent that there was, on the Northwest Coast, a highly developed system for the organization of form and space in a two-dimensional design as an adjunct to the well-known symbolism. Design ranging from nearly realistic representation to abstraction resulted from the application of the principles of this system. Chief among these principles was the concept of a continuous primary form line pattern delineating the main shapes and elaborated with secondary complexes and isolated tertiary elements (Holm 1965:92).

In spite of great apparent detail and complexity, elaboration was carried only to a rather fixed degree, which tended to keep the design open. First, a large, open, and continuous primary form line design delineates the main body parts. Second, a similarly large, compact arrangement of secondary units fills the outstanding spaces remaining, except those, such as sockets which are entirely tertiary. Third, this large primary – secondary design of even weight and distribution is elaborated with isolated subsecondary and tertiary elements, directly related to and similar in form to the large elements (Holm 1965:73).

In Northwest Coast symbolism, Beaver is identified by two main characteristics. "Although Beaver always has ears and rounded nostrils, the two most identifying symbols are the tail and the two large incisor teeth. The incisor teeth are close together and not pointed as are the canines of the bear or wolf" (Stewart 1979:50) (Figure 3).

TSAGAGLALAL

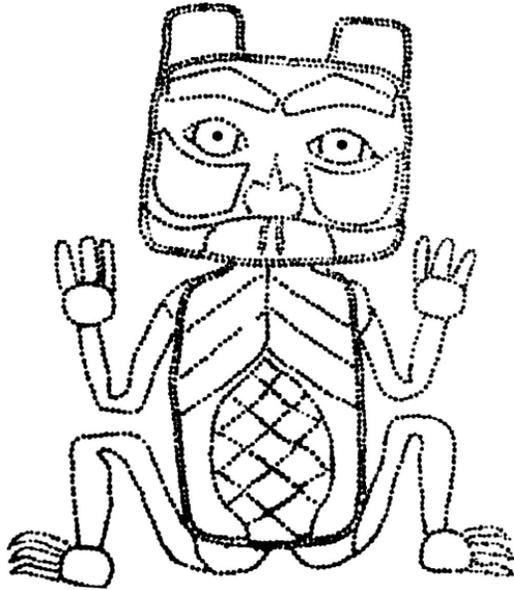


Figure 3. Figure of a beaver from Haida Button Blanket, ca. 1890, wool, flannel, mother-of-pearl buttons. Original in the Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa, Oklahoma. Peter Faris, 2003.

South of Puget Sound there are a few carved sites on the lower Columbia that reflect the classic Northwest Style. A noteworthy example is the carved and painted head of Tsagaglallal (Figure 4), a legendary woman ruler who was turned to stone by Coyote. It is very skillfully pecked into basaltic rock high above the Columbia River at the present site of The Dalles Dam. “Remains of red paint on the rock suggest that the lines of many of the Northwest carvings were originally filled with paint that has eroded away.”(Grant 1967:91).

Tsagaglallal overlooks the cemetery area of the Wishram Indian town of Nixluidix at the Dalles. This was a trading center that had attracted people from throughout the Columbia Plateau, and even farther. “Traders came here in ocean-going canoes from southern Alaska, and northern California, and horse-men came from the Mandan villages in North Dakota. Trade flourished and tons of salmon and other goods changed hands in the trade fairs that attracted thousands of people each year” (Keyser 1990:S-3).



Figure 4. Tsagaglallal, She who watches, Horsethief Lake State Park, near The Dalles of the Columbia River, Klickitat County, Washington.

Nixluidix, meaning “trading place”, was a Wishram village and a primary center of the area’s trade. Lewis and Clark came to Nixluidix in October 1805 and recorded in their journals twenty large wooden plank houses, each home to three families. From April through mid-October the various species of salmon migrated upriver to their spawning grounds, providing the Wishram with large quantities of fish. Clark recorded 107 stacks of dried salmon and estimated their total weight at over 10,000 pounds (DeVoto 1953:265).

Keyser (1990:S-3) wrote on possible interpretations of the Tsagaglalal petroglyph.

The ethnographic approach to interpreting this petroglyph has considerable historical depth. Before 1910 Edward S. Curtis reported the story of the ancient Wishram woman chief which is associated with the petroglyph.

Coyote got to Nixlu’idix, the furthest upriver village and asked the villagers, “Are you living well?” “You must ask our chief,” said the people, “she is living up there in the rocks.” “She sees everything that is going on.” So Coyote climbed up to her and said, “Soon the world is going to change and women will no longer be chiefs. You stay here and watch the people who are coming.” With that, Coyote threw her up onto the rimrock, to watch from there forever (Keyser 1990:S-3).

Keyser relied on this ethnographic data for interpreting Tsagaglalal and, noting the proximity of the petroglyph to the above-mentioned cemetery, assigned a funerary interpretation to the image of Tsagaglalal. They may however be completely unrelated, with the petroglyph predating the cemetery. In such a case, the Wishram may have considered Tsagaglalal to have a funerary significance that had nothing to do with the original intentions of its creators.

I suggest that we need to go back to earlier mythologies and folk-memories to identify Tsagaglalal. In style, the petroglyph is recognized as representing stylistic elements of

Northwest Coast rock art. In Northwest Coast portrayals of Beaver, the ears are rounded and the mouth is shown as slightly open with a square in the middle representing the beaver’s characteristic incisor teeth. Tsagaglalal also has these characteristics. Additionally, we have seen that among the mythologies of the people of that area, Wishpoosh, the Giant Beaver, was instrumental in creating the features of the landscape, particularly the Columbia River and many of its falls, rapids, and other features. I suggest that Tsagaglalal portrays the Giant Beaver looking out over the Dalles which it created, and which proved to be so vital to the fishing economy of the Wishram people who lived there.

CONCLUSIONS

The Giant Beaver is known from paleontological research, and ethnographers have recorded Giant Beavers in Native American mythology and folk legends. It may also now have been found to be recorded in rock art, providing a tangible record of the Native beliefs and their knowledge of the ancient existence of these animals.

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