

# The Watson petroglyph complex as an enduring place in Southeastern Oregon, United States of America



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## ABSTRACT

Five petroglyph traditions identified at the Watson petroglyph complex most likely span a period from at least 2500 BCE to 1850 CE. Excavated exposure of Mount Mazama tephra and recovery of two Middle Archaic point fragments suggest that site complex use extends back to 5000 BCE. Recovery of a Rosegate series point and a brown ware ceramic bowl fragment shows that Native American site use continued into proto-historic times. Flakes and river pebbles that were found wedged within cracks of petroglyph boulders as well as pecking around natural features on the rock together with the repeated rubbing of certain rock surfaces are physical testimonies of ritualized actions at the site complex.

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## 1. Introduction

Sporadic short-term visits to the same locale to produce only a few petroglyphs per visit can culminate in a substantial amount of panels over an extended period. The Watson petroglyph complex in southeastern Oregon is a place of long-term re-visitation, containing a variety of rock art styles, a few diagnostic artifacts, and deposits that span several millennia. Likely reasons for repeated short visits to an apparently isolated location with no signs of associated intensive habitation become apparent once the petroglyph complex is viewed in a wider landscape, archaeological, and ethno-historic setting. Whereas detailed recording and analysis of imagery on the rocks are necessary components for proper research, investigations of what occurs within, between, and beyond the petroglyph boulders are important too.

## 2. Physiographic setting

Named after an abandoned agricultural community called Watson in southeastern Oregon, the Watson petroglyph site complex covers approximately 375 acres (Fig. 1). Strictly speaking, the petroglyph scatter has no definite boundaries and also no clear internal divisions, so it is more realistically termed a site complex. Within this complex, petroglyph boulders are concentrated on a

rocky peninsula that juts into a sharp bend south of the Owyhee River, but extend in an increasingly thinly-scattered fashion southwest of the peninsula.

The site complex, which is sandwiched between two tributary canyons that empty into the Owyhee River, broadens to a series of wide, sloping basalt-covered terraces to the south. Known as the Black Rocks, the north/south oriented tongue-shaped Quaternary-age terraces were formed when mixtures of silt, ash, clay, and sub-angular basalt blocks flowed downward from a rim of basalt rock farther south, being the northern tongue-shaped rim of the Mahogany Mountains (Corcoran, 1965:84). Pockets of naturally-occurring chunks of cryptocrystalline silica/jasper and sandstone occur on the surface. The generally shallow soils in-between comprise clayey hardpan to soft raw sediments.

The Watson site complex falls within the deeply dissected Owyhee Uplands. The Owyhee River flows through this rugged terrain, from the southwest in Nevada towards the Snake River in Idaho to the northeast. The fairly even-sloped river valley bottom provides a convenient corridor for human traffic through a region occasioned by steep topographic obstacles. The Watson complex falls on a fairly open and elevated landform that offers comparatively wide vistas of the surrounding terrain. Prominent landscape features visible on the sky-line directly north of the site complex include, from west to east, Red Butte, South Table Mountain, and Rooster Comb. Southwest of the project area is Diamond Butte and directly south is the tongue of the Mahogany Mountains (Fig. 1).

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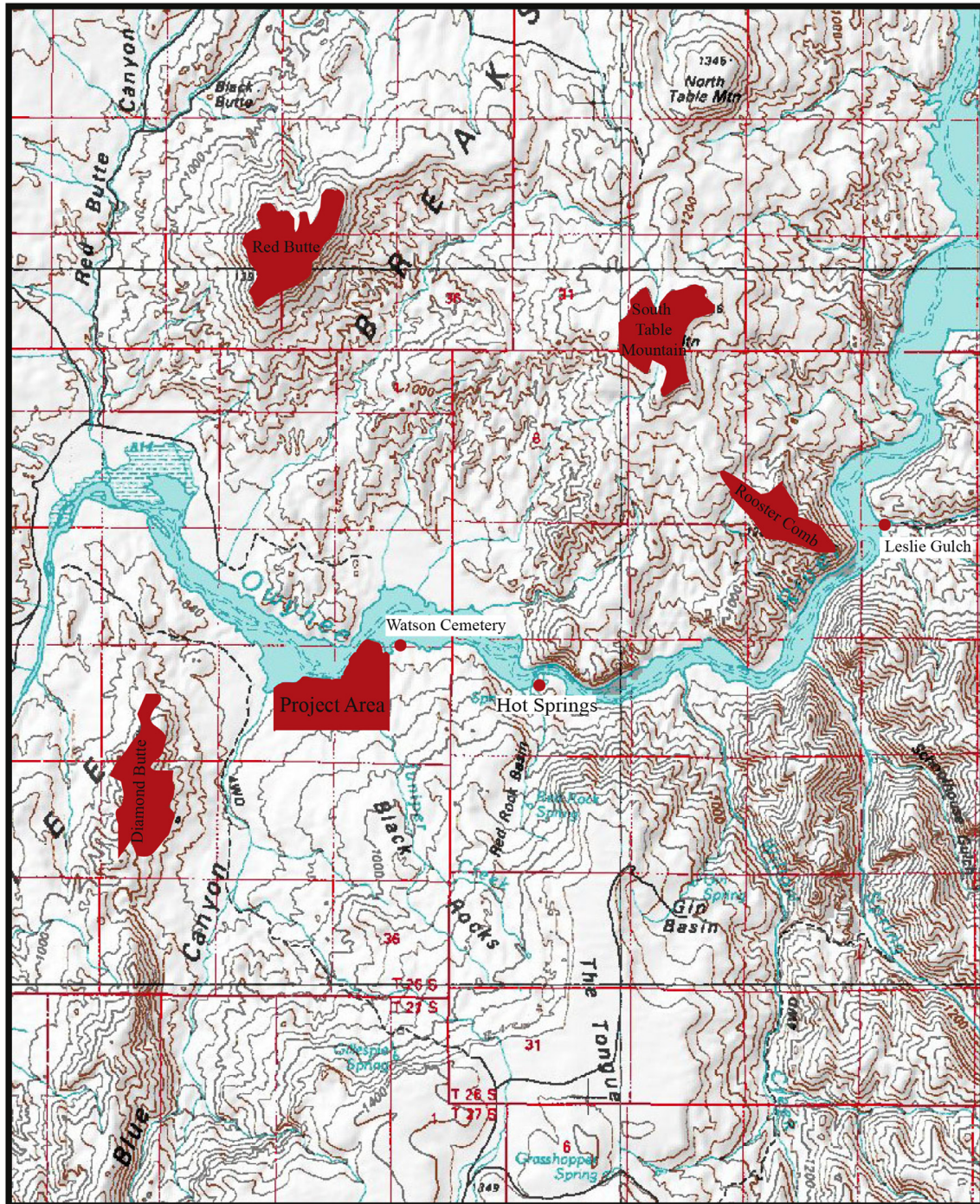


Fig. 1. Watson within its landscape context.

The Owyhee Uplands is part of the Columbia Plateau immediately to the north, but the desert-like setting is characterized by Great Basin sage-steppe vegetation communities (Franklin and Dyrness, 1973). Historically the climate is semi-arid, characterized by hot and dry summers and cold winters, the latter being occasioned by rain and snow. The average annual temperature is around 52° Fahrenheit and the total annual rainfall is typically less than 10 inches. Daily temperatures range widely, mainly due to the desert-like nature of the terrain. Elevations over 5000 feet tend to receive more precipitation than the river course, which is around 2500 feet

above mean sea level. During the dry summer months the Owyhee River becomes shallow, and tributaries are usually dry by late summer and early fall. A variety of birds, mammals, reptiles, and fish are attracted to the riparian and undulating rocky terrain around the complex. Mountain sheep favor the steeper mountain slopes south of the project area, while mule deer and antelope are found in the project area. Carnivores include mountain lion, bobcat, and coyote. Significantly, mountain sheep and elk are the only identifiable animal species represented in the petroglyphs at Watson.

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