

Minnesota's Red Rock and other sacred boulders of the Upper Midwest.

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My name is Kevin Callahan and I am with the Upper Midwest Rock Art Research Association and the University of Minnesota.



The title of this paper is "Minnesota's Red Rock and other sacred boulders of the Upper Midwest." I would like to thank Alan Woolworth of the Minnesota Historical Society for furnishing copies of many of the original ethnohistorical sources upon which this paper is based and Scott Anfinson of the State Historic Preservation office for originally pointing out the existence of the Red Rock during a talk he gave at the SAA meeting in Minneapolis a few years ago.

In the 1840's artist Henry Lewis painted a scene of the Red Rock published in his book *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated*. The boulder in the lower left corner next to the tree is thought to be the Red

Rock at its original location several miles south of St. Paul on the Mississippi river .



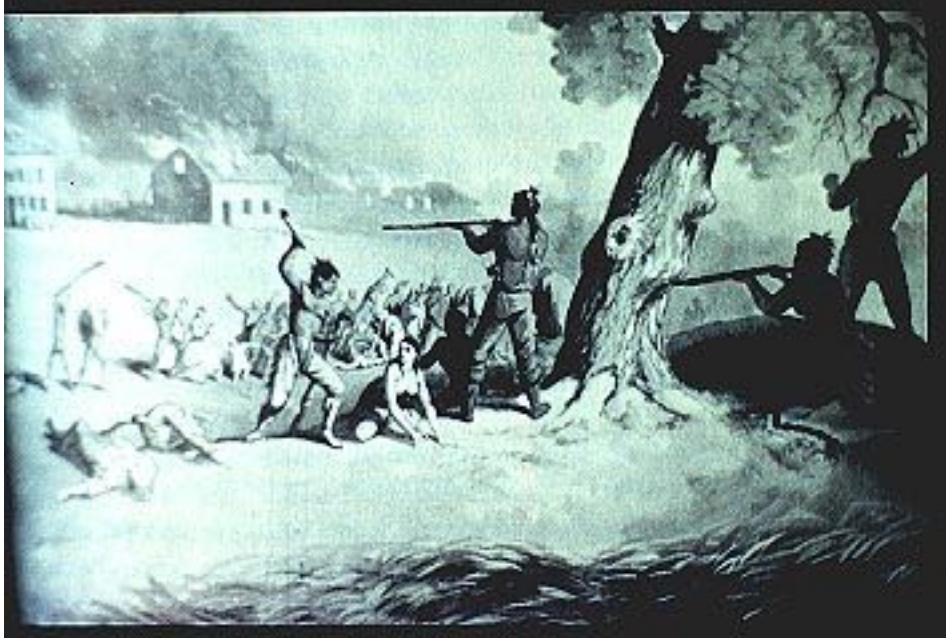
This painted boulder has been moved many times since then to protect it from damage by steamboat passengers and others. One individual apparently even wanted to blow it up with dynamite as a pagan idol. It now resides in front of the United Methodist Church of Newport, Minnesota.



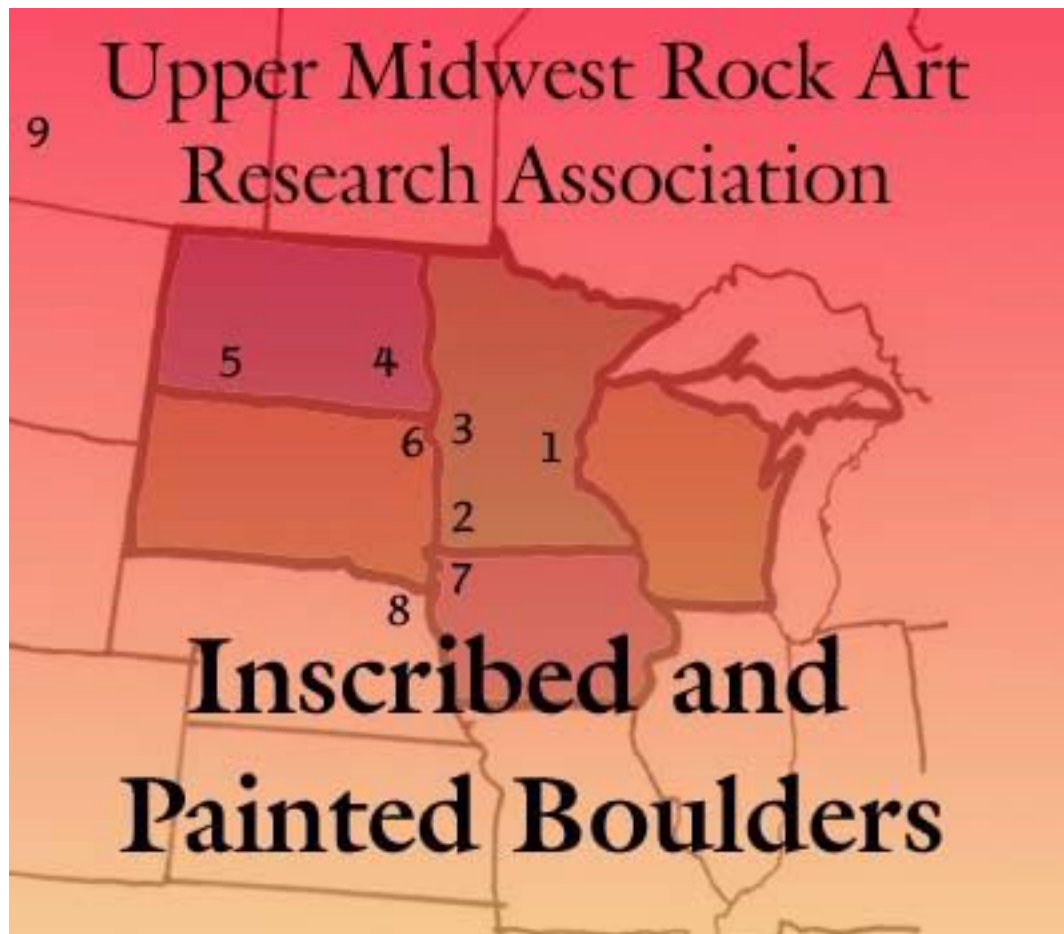
The specific Red Rock I will be referring to is a north/south oriented, oblong shaped, granite boulder that was probably originally painted at least semiannually by the Dakota with twelve, 2 to 6 inch wide red vermilion stripes, running east/west and dots in a design representing the sun surrounded by 15 rays (Hovey 1893). Chemically, vermilion is red iron oxide which may come from hematite or cinnabar. Red ocher as a powder has been known since Paleo-Indian times and mixed with glue and oil makes a durable paint.



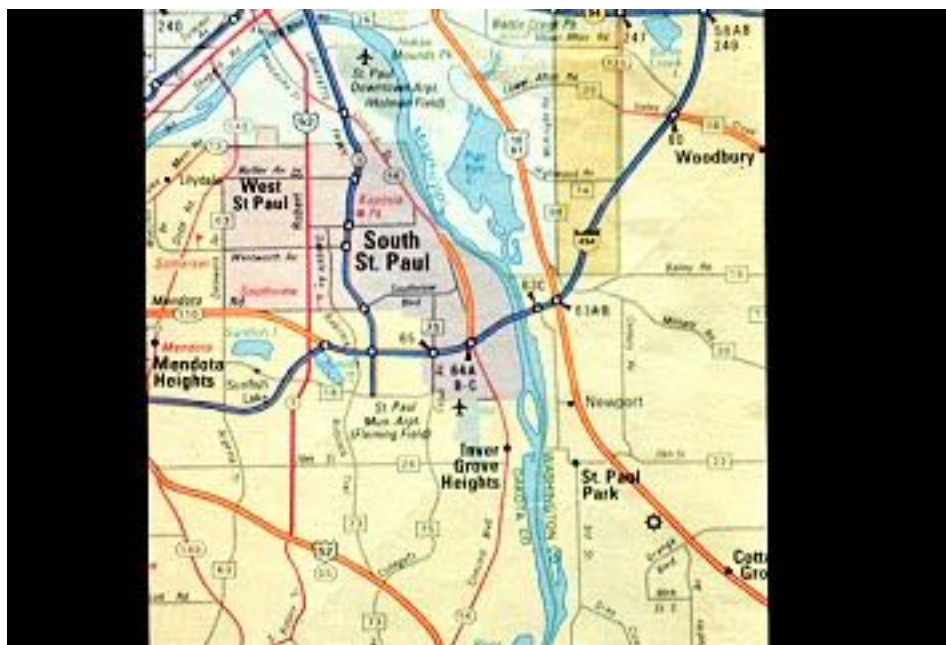
The last time the Red Rock was regularly painted by the local Dakota was just before the 1862 Dakota Conflict in Minnesota (which was the bloodiest Indian conflict in U.S. history after which most of the Dakota fled or were removed to South Dakota by steamboat).



The beliefs and customs surrounding the Red Rock is typical of a wider rock art and religious phenomenon in the Upper Midwest - namely Native American religious customs and beliefs that concerned glacial erratics and other significant stones within the sacred landscape which were often painted and decorated as part of their religion.



The town of Red Rock, was named after this particular painted boulder and depending on how you measure, it was originally located about 8 or 9 miles south of St. Paul along the Mississippi River. In the 1950's the town of Red Rock was renamed to Newport, M innesota.



The reason that I think this individual case study is important to international rock art studies generally is because: 1) there exists an unusual number and depth of ethnohistoric sources explaining the indigenous beliefs and the behavior surrounding this boulder, 2) the boulder is but one of many granite boulders that were revered by the Dakota and other Native Americans in the Upper Midwest, and 3) these sources give direct information about the richness of mental life, and the religious beliefs associated with stone generally and rock art that is rarely glimpsed when interpreting prehistoric rock art sites where such direct sources are unavailable.



To begin then, as many of you might know already, the Minnesota Territory was named after the Minnesota River which flows into the Mississippi. In Ojibway "Mee-zee-see-pee" means "Big River" or "Father of Waters."

Mary Eastman, an early settler and the wife of water colorist Seth Eastman, in her book *Dacotah; or Life and Legends of the Sioux around Fort Snelling*, published in 1849, called the Minnesota River the St. Peter's River and said that "Mine Soto" or "whitish water" was the name the Dakota gave to the river because the mud or clay in the water has a whitish look.



The two rivers meet at Fort Snelling in St. Paul and the word "Minnesota" has been translated from Dakota as "Land of Sky-tinted waters," or more popularly - if you are old enough to remember the Hamm's bear commercials - as the "Land of Sky Blue waters. " To the Dakota the tint or blue of the sky is all that humankind can see of Taku Skan Skan, the spirit that is everywhere that is the god of movement symbolized by stones or granite boulders painted red. This god is too subtle in essence to be perceived by the senses and is, among other things, associated with hunting and battle. He is passionate and capricious (Riggs n.d.).



The Toon-kan or Inyan the stone-god also dwells in stones and rocks and is, according to the Dakotas, the oldest god, and is associated with warfare (Riggs n.d.:64-66).

Decorating a stone with swan's down, or painting it like one would another's face, was a sign of respect. Dakota husbands, for example, painted their wives faces in the morning and painted their own faces before war parties or important religious ceremonies. According to James Walker parallel red stripes on the cheek indicated the herald of a ceremonial camp (Walker 1991: 281). In that case the stripes were first painted on the face by a shaman or one who had been appointed by the council and afterwards it could be renewed by the one wearing it as often as was necessary. Red stripes painted on the body also seem to have been records of different battles (Walker 1991: 270-281).

Red was associated with blood, wounds, life, and shamen (*Id.*). Red also sometimes had symbolic associations with fire and the sun in shamanic dreams and its possible that there could have been some sort of astronomical or sky symbolism for the twelve east/west stripes.

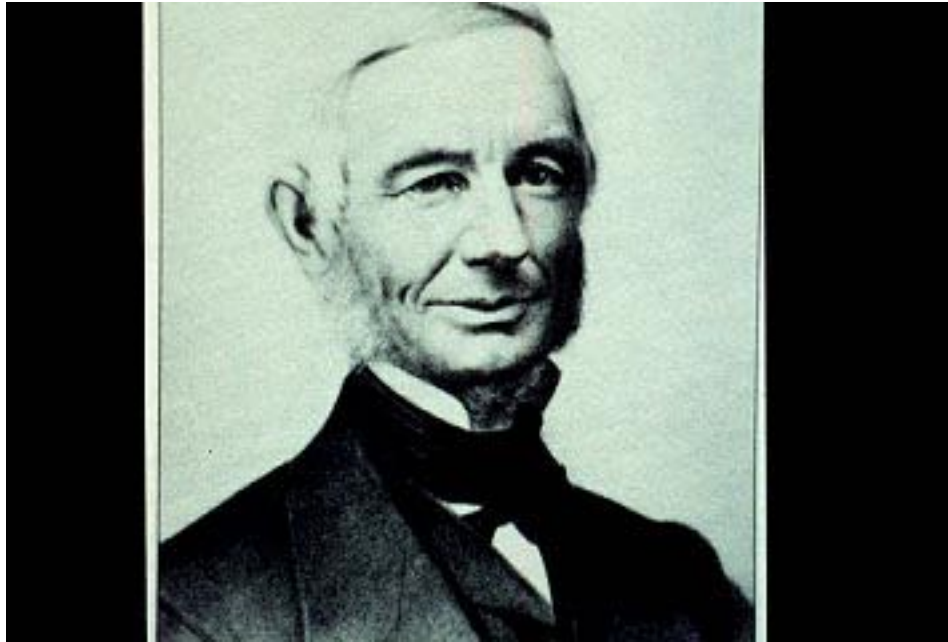
According to one of James Walker's informants "The spirits are pleased with red. Inyan is the spirit of the Earth that dwells in stone. It pleases Inyan to have red placed on stone. When you would please the spirits put red paint on a stone" (Walker 1991:195-98). According to James

Lynd, for the Dakota, red was the religious color for sacrifices. Paint formed an important feature of their religion and the use of paints was supposed to have been taught to them by their gods (Lynd 1889 reprint). The Dakota visited the stone to gain favor and gather power from the indwelling spirit by painting it and leaving offerings to add to their own power and to secure success in their war and hunting expeditions (Hobart). In other words this stone was not considered an inanimate object nor was it a pagan idol. A spiritual essence was represented by the image of the boulder (Lynd 1889:154). Put another way it was a tangible representation of a spiritual essence (*Id.*)

I suspect that it was in part the very act of painting the stone with red paint (which itself had spirit power and was medicine) that gave them the power of the spirit dwelling in the stone. An Ojibway shaman for example, a group from whom the Dakota appear to have culturally borrowed, while painting the face of a patient might sing that "My painting makes me a manitou," referring to their red paint medicine (Rajnovich 1994).



Samuel Pond, a missionary whose first assignment was to try to teach Little Crow's father to use a plow at Kaposia (now called South St. Paul) wrote in his book *The Dakota or Sioux in Minnesota As They Were in 1834* that:



"[An] object of worship was Taku-Shkan-Shkan, or that which moves. Stones were the symbol of this deity, and sometimes at least his dwelling-place. The [Dakota] Indians believed that some stones possessed the power of locomotion or were moved by some invisible, supernatural power; and intelligent men affirmed that they had seen stones which had moved some distance on level ground, leaving a track or furrow behind them. . .



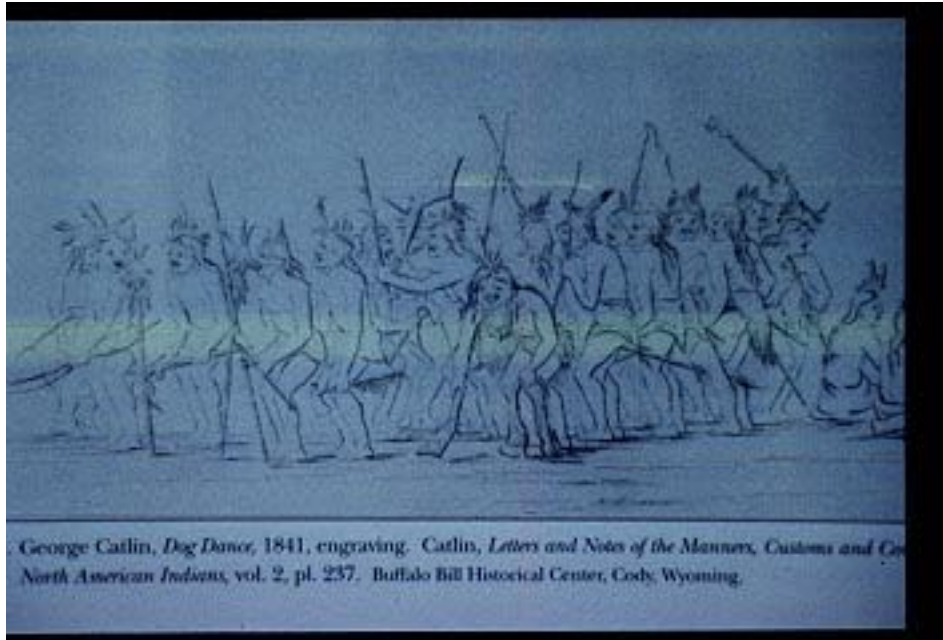
Stones were much worshipped by them, both with prayers and offerings. They chose granite boulders and painted them red. There was a large sacred stone of this sort at Red Rock from which the place takes its name, and another between Kaposia and Mendota. Both were covered with votive offerings, such as tobacco, pieces of cloth, hatchets, knives, arrows and other articles of small value."



Stephen Riggs, another missionary to the Dakotas and author of the Dakota Grammar and Dictionary similarly indicated that to the Dakota: "Boulders are the "solid gods," "hard wakan." These they worship painting them red, decorating them with swan's down, and offering sacrifices. The boulder is toonkan, "grandfather," by preeminence. . . . They believe in the separate existence of the soul, and in a "house of spirits," wanagitipi. Every thing, even the dumb [i.e. mute] boulder, has a spirit. The world is full of spirits, who cause all disease and death.



The conjurer works his cures by, expelling or overcoming one spirit by another. . . . Sacrifice is probably an old form of Dakota worship. Mr. Riggs has observed it offered most frequently to the "painted stone" toonkan. The offering was sometimes a small dog, killed and painted red."



George Catlin, *Dog Dance*, 1841, engraving. Catlin, *Letters and Notes of the Manners, Customs and Conditions of the North American Indians*, vol. 2, pl. 237. Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming.



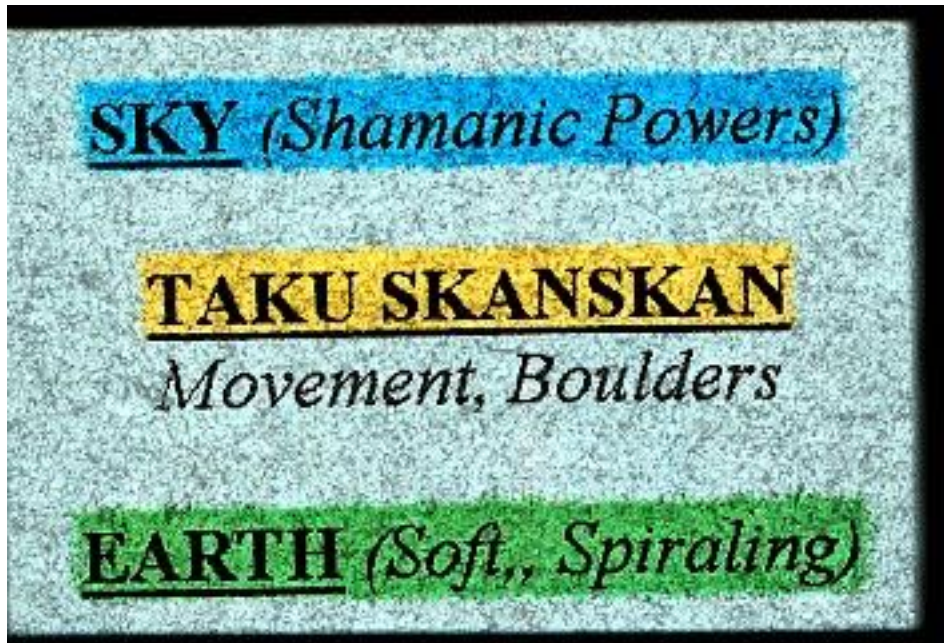
George Catlin and Seth Eastman's portrayals of the Dakota "Dog Dance"

Dogs were a common religious sacrifice and there is one reference to the blood of their enemies being used. According to George Catlin when figures of dogs were carved on rocks that was a sign of fidelity.



More recently in 1988, Coleen Cutschall, describing her painting "Primal Parents" explained that:

". . . Maka and Skan [mean] earth and sky. . . In the Lakota belief system Earth was created first. The sky separated from the earth, forming a vast blue dome. The sky then developed shamanic powers, while the earth remained soft and formlessly spiraling. The two elements remained connected and interdependent, tied together by Taku Skan Skan, the god of movement, at one time a god even more powerful than Wakan Tanka, the Great Spirit or Mystery. . . . [W]ater, plant, and human life result[ed] from the union of sky and earth."



James R. Walker, a reservation physician and ethnographer had the following exchange with a Lakota shaman named Finger about this subject as reported in *The Sun Dance of the Teton Dakota*, *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*:



"Q: What causes the stars to fall?"

A: Taku Skanskan. He causes everything that falls to fall, and he causes everything to move that moves.

Q: When you move, what is that causes you to move?

A: Skan

Q: If an arrow is shot from a bow what causes it to move through the air?

A: Skan. . . Taku Skanskan gives the spirit to the bow, and He causes it to send the arrow from it.

Q: What causes the smoke to go upward?

A: Taku Skanskan.



Q: What causes water to flow in a river?

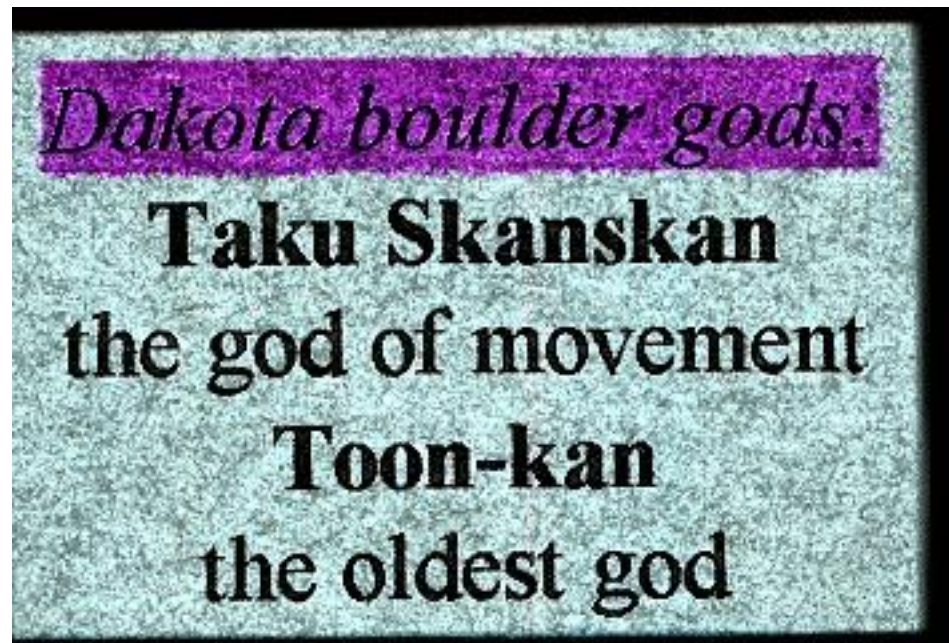
A: Skan.

Q: What causes the clouds to move over the world?

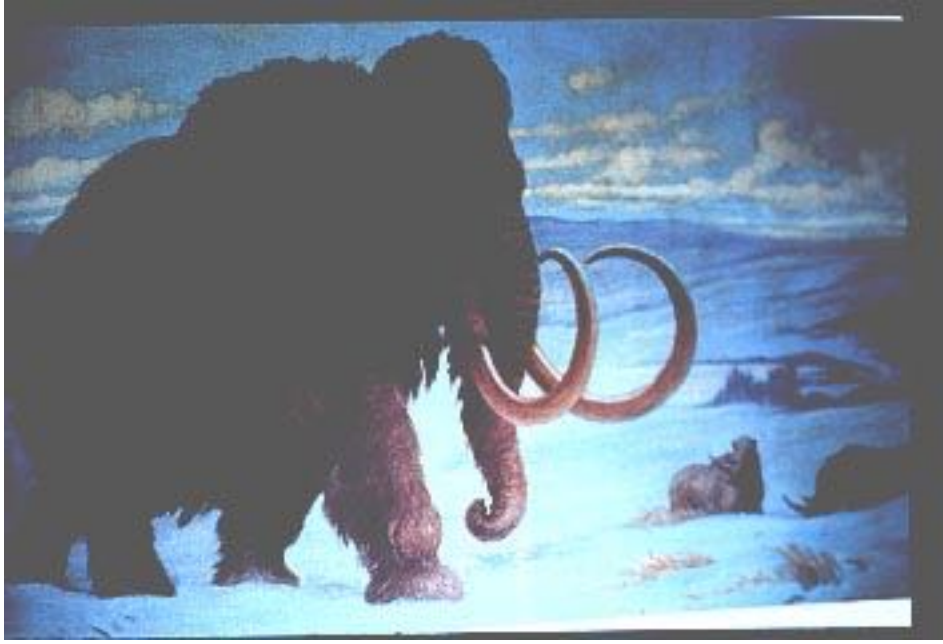
A: Skan.

Q: Lakota have told me that the Skan is the sky. Is that so?

A: Yes. Skan is a Spirit and all that mankind can see of Him is the blue of the sky; but he is everywhere."

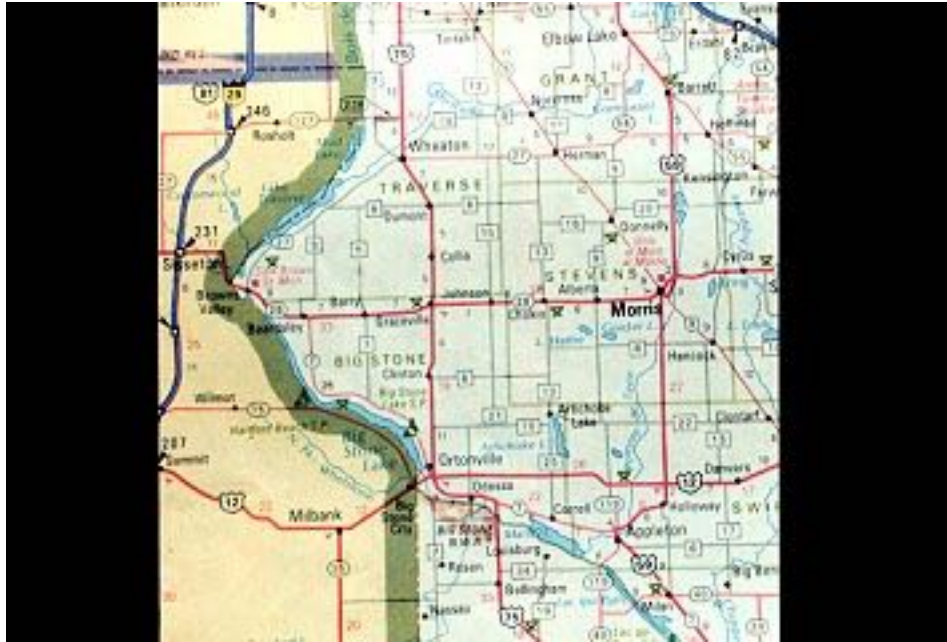


The major Dakota gods were associated with specific geographical localities. Owanktayhee, or the mammoth, and god of the waters, had its home at St. Anthony Falls (now downtown Minneapolis) (Winchell 1911:508). This area has eroded out many unusual and large prehistoric fossils which are on display next to the falls.

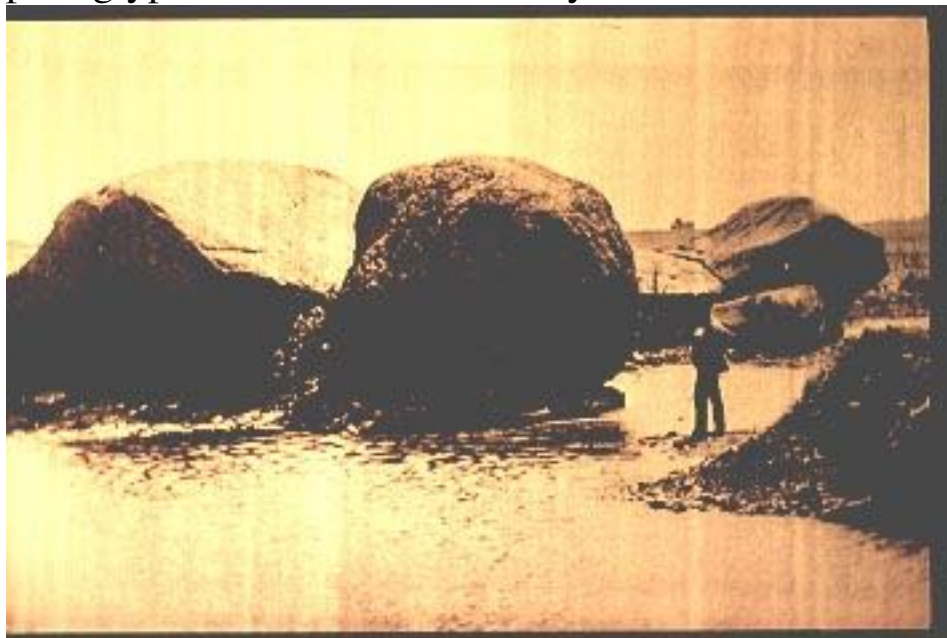


Owanktayhee's other home was Morgans Bluff across from Fort Snelling. (Eastman1849:8,71).

Wakinyan, or the Thunder-bird had its chief dwelling place in Brown's Valley in far western Minnesota. Brown's Valley had several boulders covered with thunderbird symbols - sometimes referred to in rock art literature as "turkey tracks."



Other celebrated spots in the Dakota sacred landscape were the Pipestone Quarry with its enormous granite boulders called "the Three Maidens" which at one time were literally surrounded by a circle of petroglyphs, and Carvers Cave in St. Paul which was covered in petroglyphs that were recorded by Theodore H. Lewis.



The geographical and cultural significance of Red Rock was noted even by the earliest white explorers such as Lt. Zebulon Pike and Stephen H. Long since it was the first granite boulder one came across when

canoeing northward on the Mississippi River after emerging from the "driftless area." The "driftless area" is an area that the last glacial ice sheet did not cover and hence is generally lacking in rounded glacial erratics or boulders.

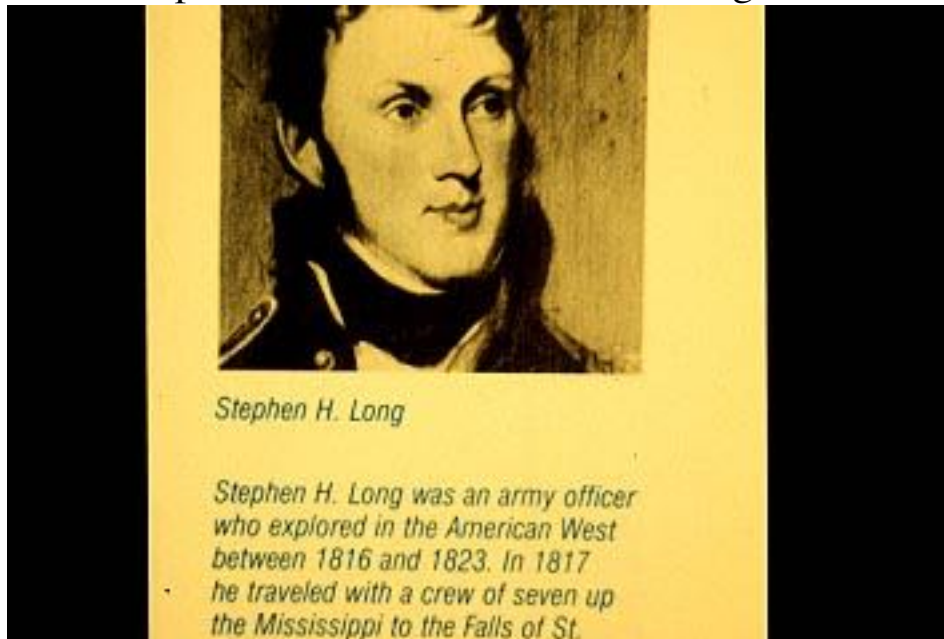


After paddling through mile after mile of limestone and sandstone bluffs the first granite rounded boulder standing next to the water was quite a visual stimulus and it was all rather mysterious how this heavy object got there.



The idea that there were continental ice sheets in North America that smoothed and moved large boulders around the landscape was not an idea that westerners developed until the 1870's. The theory came long after explorers and Native Americans noticed how the boulder marked the passage from one geological region to another.

The Stephen H. Long Expedition in 1823 recorded that in addition to being painted with vermillion that offerings at the rock included an eagle feather, two roots of the "prairie potato," and a willow branch whose stem was painted red and was stuck in the ground next to it.



W. G. LeDuc who published a book in 1851 indicated that:

"Me-ah-du-ta, a great medicine man, had said that he saw the [Red] rock start from the bluff some miles from the river and travel of its own accord down to the bank of the great water." [I assume that this is a description of a shamanic vision regarding the boulder].

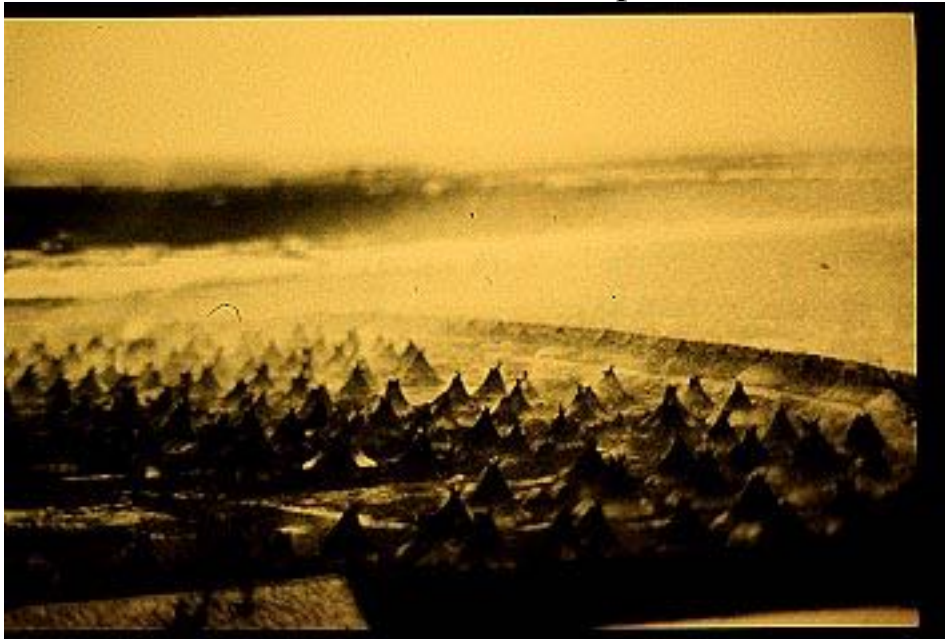
According to LeDuc, the inference for the Indians of this was that the boulder must be "Much Wakon" [sacred or mysterious] and worthy of offerings of tobacco, calico and beads.

During the last hundred years this two ton boulder has been moved several times by whites and has by my calculation moved about 60 miles including at one point a trip to western Hennepin County [west of

Minneapolis]. This would seem appropriate for the Dakota god of movement.

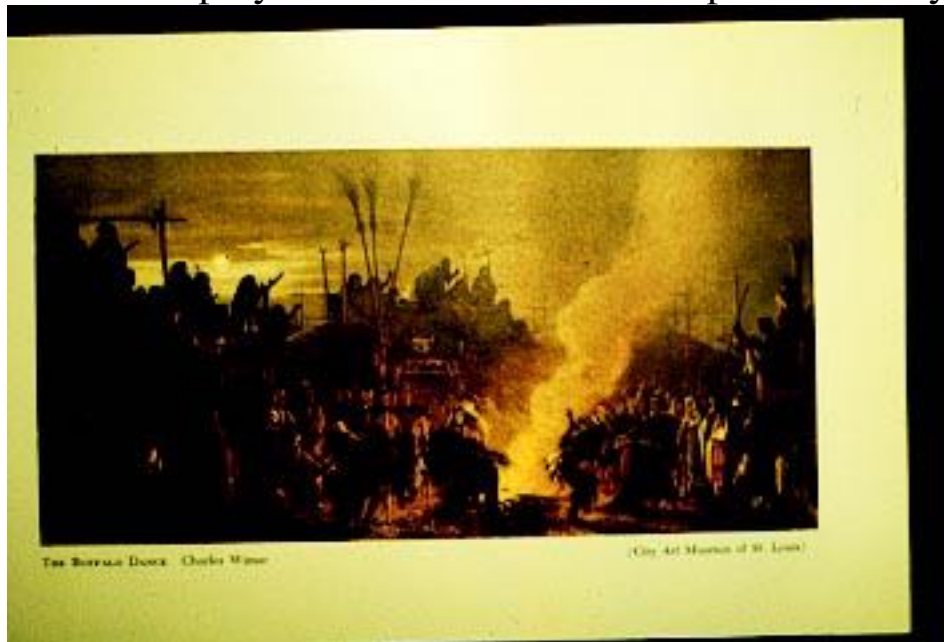


The stone has continued to be painted by local whites who are descendants of the people who were first asked by the Dakota to continue the tradition when the Dakota were forced to leave in 1862. Some Dakota individuals have also painted the stone since 1862.



Originally the stone was used primarily by the Mendewacanton band and sometimes the Kaposia villagers who consulted the stone before

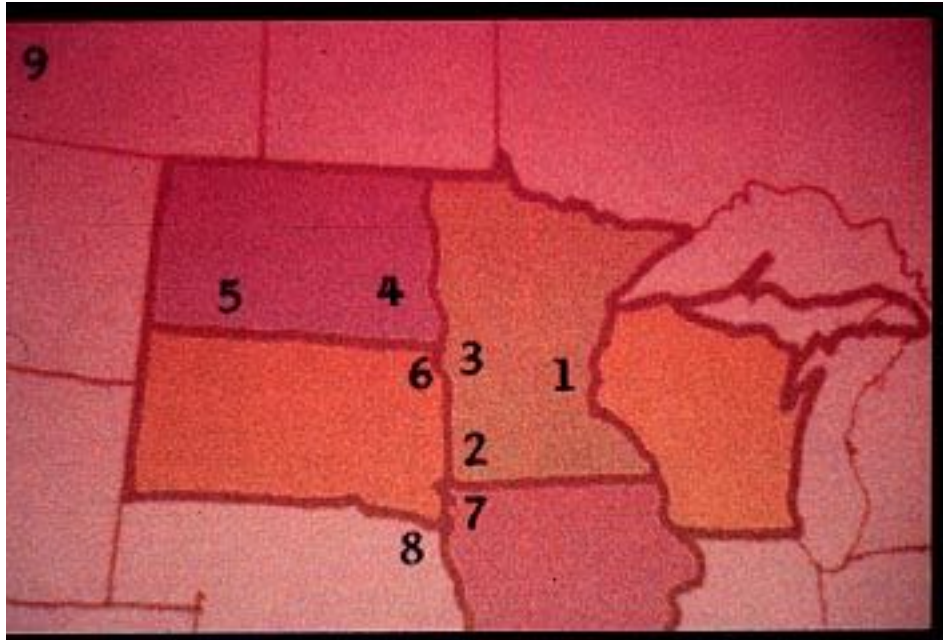
hunting and war expeditions (Hovey 1893). According to H. C. Hovey their offerings included painted feathers, birds, venison, and after painting the boulder it was trimmed with flowers, feathers, and other ornaments and they would dance around it before sunrise with many chants and prayers for success from the spirit in the mysterious rock.



The Buffalo Dance

Similar large sacred boulders that were venerated by the Dakota existed at Eden Prairie, Mille Lacs, Pipestone, and Browns Valley, Minnesota.

Important sacred medicine stones also appear in Lewis and Clark's notes, and there are considerably earlier but obviously important incised boulders from early Native American cultures at Fort Ransom, North Dakota; Robert's County, South Dakota; Blood Run, Iowa; and Cedar County, Nebraska. Considerably older pitted and inscribed boulders from different cultures are also reported in Canada, the Far West, across the eastern U. S. and in Siberia.



In conclusion, boulders appear to have been an important stimulus in the Native American sacred landscape and were considered "Wakan," mysterious and sacred. The act of painting and decorating Red Rock with what we now call "rock art" appears to have sprung directly from religious considerations and the cosmological belief system of the Dakota regarding Taku skan skan - the god of movement and Toonkan or Inyan - the stone god.

