

## PREHISTORIC INDIAN ROCK ART IN CALIFORNIA

Campbell Grant, Carpinteria, California, USA

### I - BACKGROUND

California has an extraordinarily variable climate and topography, with lofty snow-clad mountains, harsh deserts, semi-tropical coasts and rainy coastal forests. The Great Central Valley, (actually two valleys, the Sacramento and the San Joaquin) is bounded on the east by the towering Sierra Nevada, on the north by the Cascade Range, on the west by the Coastal Ranges and on the south by the Tehachapi Mountains. The highest mountain in the United States is in the Sierra Nevada and less than 100 miles from Death Valley, the lowest point in the country, below sea level. Much of the eastern part of California lies in the Great Basin where all streams flow into saline lakes or dissipate into dry lakes.

The aboriginal population of California at the time of first contact with the Spanish missionaries, was as diverse as the land they inhabited with over 60 tribes speaking dialects of seven language families. The Indian population in 1770 has been estimated at 133,000. By 1910 that figure had declined by 90 per cent, due in large part to the contagious diseases introduced by the whites, for which they had no immunity. All of the California Indians can be classified as hunter-gatherers. All made baskets though a few desert tribes such as the Coahuilla and the Mojave also made pottery.

### II - TECHNIQUES

In those parts of California where wind and water have created shallow sandstone caves, the favored technique is painting. This technique is also found on the undersurfaces of large granite rocks where there is some protection from the weather. In the desert regions of eastern California where there is much darkly patinated volcanic rock, the Indians chose the petroglyph technique. The designs were created by pecking, incising, or abrading through the patina to the light rock beneath, thus creating a negative image.

There is a type of petroglyph that occurs almost everywhere in California and indeed is world-wide. This is the cupule, a deeply pecked hemispheric depression an inch or more in diameter and a half inch or more in depth. The cupules, or cup-marks, usually on isolated boulders are arranged in simple patterns or at random. A variant of the cupule is the pit-and-groove where straight lines occur in association with the round depressions.

### III - DISTRIBUTION OF STYLES

In California rock art, there are two basic styles - representational or stylized and nonrepresentational or abstract. Of course much of what we call abstract must have symbolized well-known objects or concepts to the creator and his contemporaries. In North America there are no examples of the superb realistic paintings and petroglyphs of animals that dominate much of the

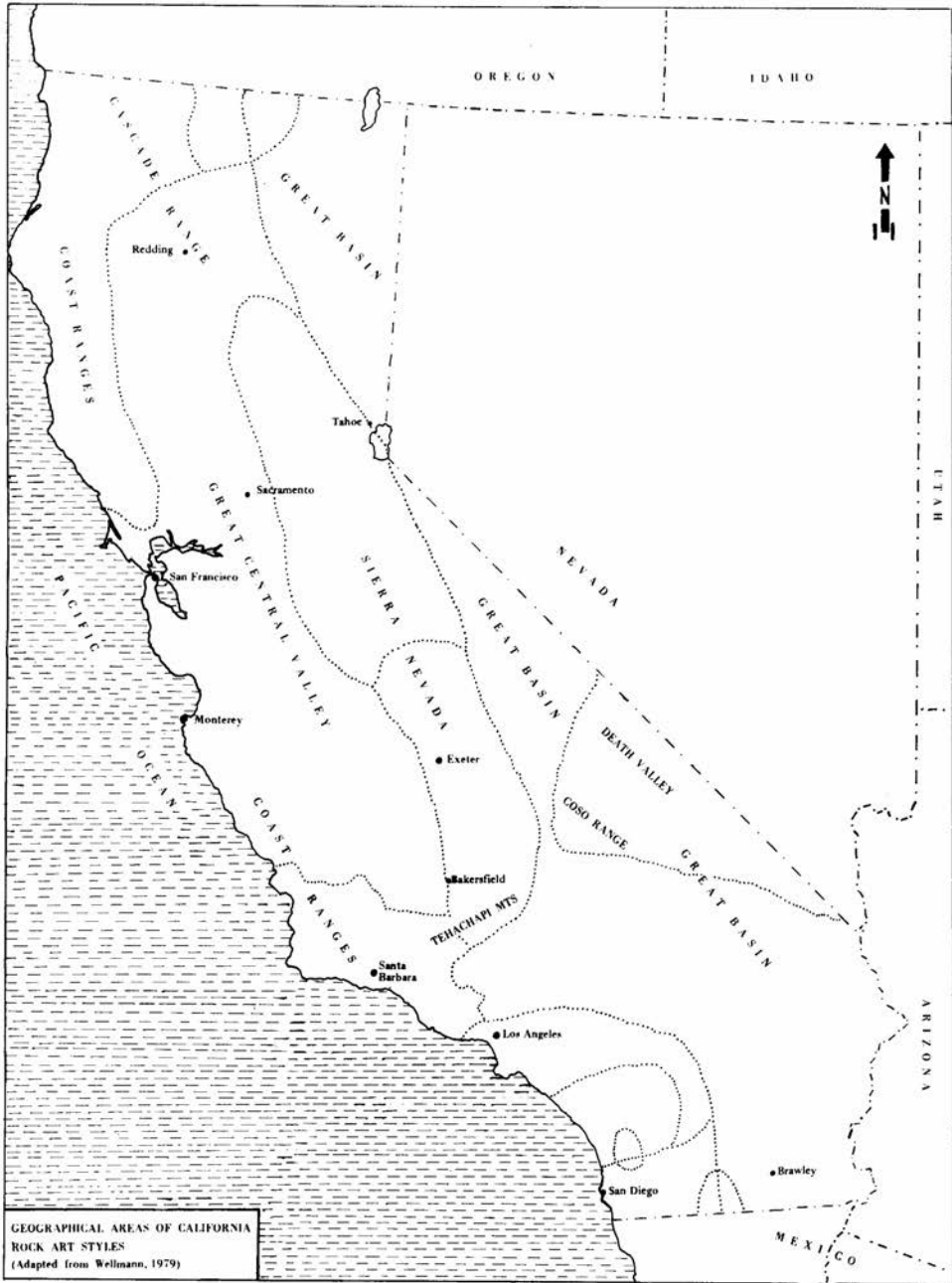


Fig. 107  
Geographical areas of California rock art sites.

rock art of primitive man from southern France to the Cape of Good Hope. The map shows the style regions of rock art in California. Paintings and petroglyphs are abundant in many parts of California where suitable rock formations are found. However in the dense forests and in the grasslands of the Great Central Valley, few sites are known. The various styles will be described from north to south.



Fig. 108  
Lighter portions indicate later additions.  
Great Basin Abstract Petroglyph Style. South-  
eastern California.

### 1. Northeast Painted Style

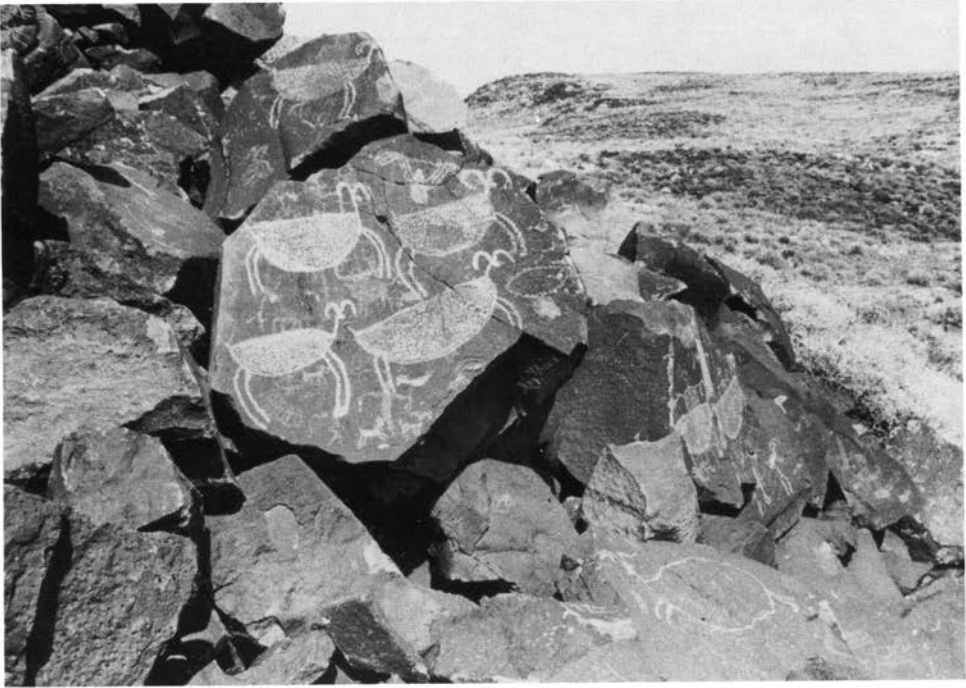
This style occurs in a region of much ancient volcanic action and the paintings are found on basaltic rock. One large site is about ten feet underground and the paintings are on the walls of a tube-like cavern formed by the movement of lava. Some of the paintings are bi-colored and resemble examples from the Santa Barbara and Southern Sierra Painted Styles. The subject matter includes rayed suns, dot patterns, chevrons, zigzags, circles and occasionally human stick-figures.

### 2. Great Basin Abstract Petroglyph Style

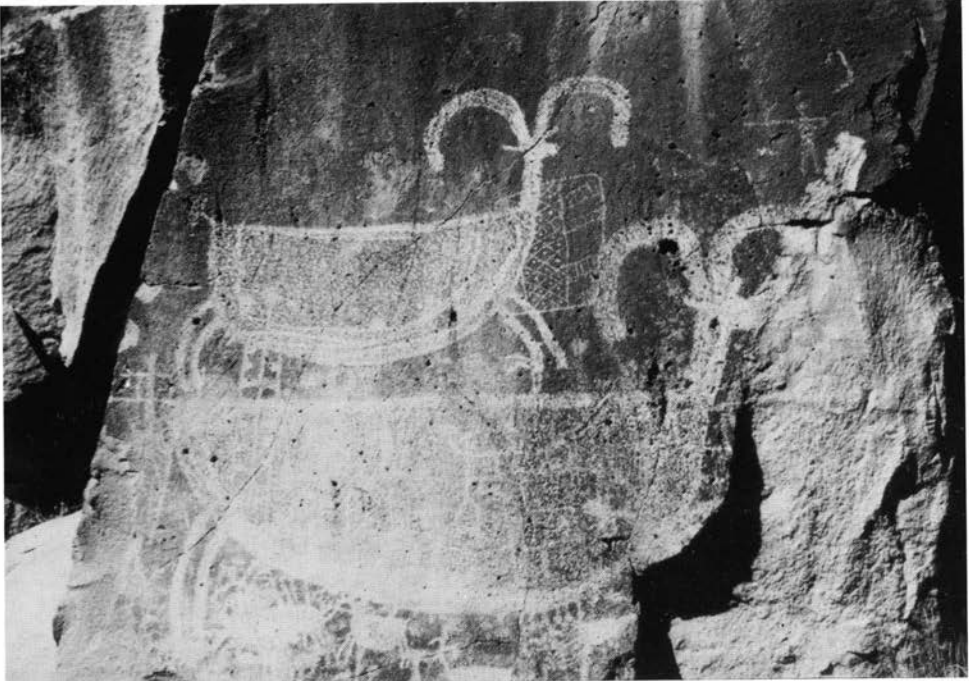
This is the most wide-spread of all North American rock art styles and occurs in many parts of the southwestern United States that are not included in the Great Basin. The motifs associated with this style are rectilinear and curvilinear abstract with very simple patterns such as zigzags, dot arrangements, connected circles, meandering lines, concentric circles, spirals, grids and parallel lines. Most of these elements are found on isolated boulders or on cliff faces. There is rarely any apparent sense of organization and some rock surfaces are completely covered with abstract motifs while adjoining rocks have but a few or none. At some sites human figures and bighorn sheep are added to the abstractions. With rare exceptions rock art of this style is found on dark basaltic rock.

### 2a. Great Basin Representational Style

This petroglyph style dominated the rock art between the southern Sierra



*Fig. 109*  
Large stylized sheep. Great Basin Representational style. Southeastern California (Coso Range).



*Fig. 110*  
Highly stylized bighorn sheep - the larger of the two is over life-size. Smaller sheep and human are superimposed. Great Basin Naturalistic Style. Southeastern California (Coso Range).

Nevada and Death Valley. It is dry rocky country with little water and covered with ancient lava flows and cinder cones. A vast number of petroglyphs are concentrated in shallow canyons cutting through tablelands at about

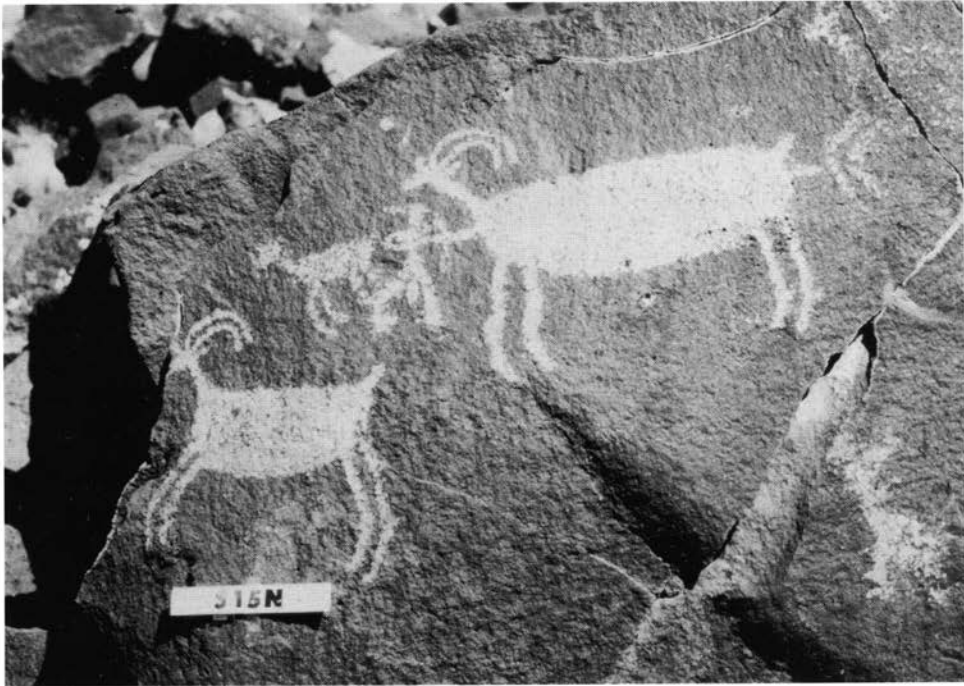


Fig. 111  
 Hunter shooting bighorn with bow and arrow. Great Basin Representative Style. Southeastern California (Coso Range).



Fig. 112  
 Humans with decorated bodies surrounding an impaled bighorn sheep. Great Basin Naturalistic Style. Southeastern California (Coso Range).

5,000 feet elevation. The many sites include both stylized and abstract motifs but most are stylized. In a survey of the Coso Range conducted in the 1960's, 14,084 designs were counted. Of that number 7,192 were of bighorn





shepp, 1784 were of humans, usually depicted bearing atlatls (spear-throwers) or bows and arrows and 3,796 were abstract motif. Other representational pictures (1312) included snakes, lizards, quail, dogs and deer. Two objects appear often, the medicine bag, fringed and with a carrying handle that might have held the paraphernalia of the shamans or medicine men and the atlatl. Abstract subjects include the typical Great Basin designs especially the circles and dot patterns and there are many elaborate arrangements on rectangular shapes that resemble shields. Many of the humans are large and usually occur high on the cliffs. Most of these figures wear horned or feathered headdresses with patterns on their bodies indicating body paint. Many of the petroglyphs depict archers or hunters armed with atlatls attacking bighorn sheep and many of the hunting scenes feature dogs.

### *3. North Coast Petroglyph Styles*

This region is generally well forested with many small streams and a number of large rivers. Cupule rocks dominate the rock art of an area from the Oregon border to the vicinity of San Francisco. Many of the boulders are of steatite or schist, both very soft stones. At some of the sites there are only cupules while at others the petroglyphs are of the pit-and-groove style. Sometimes the pit-and-groove markings are combined with deeply pecked ovals with nucleated centers that appear to be vulvaforms. Some cupule rocks include stylized bear tracks.

At a number of sites petroglyphs have been cut into bedrock along streams. The rocks of this region are lightly patinated and the petroglyphs were usually deeply incised or pecked so the designs would stand out in an oblique light. Motifs include bear tracks, grids, zigzags, and concentric circles.

### *4. Central Sierra Rock Art Styles*

Most of the rock art examples in this region are located on granite boulders

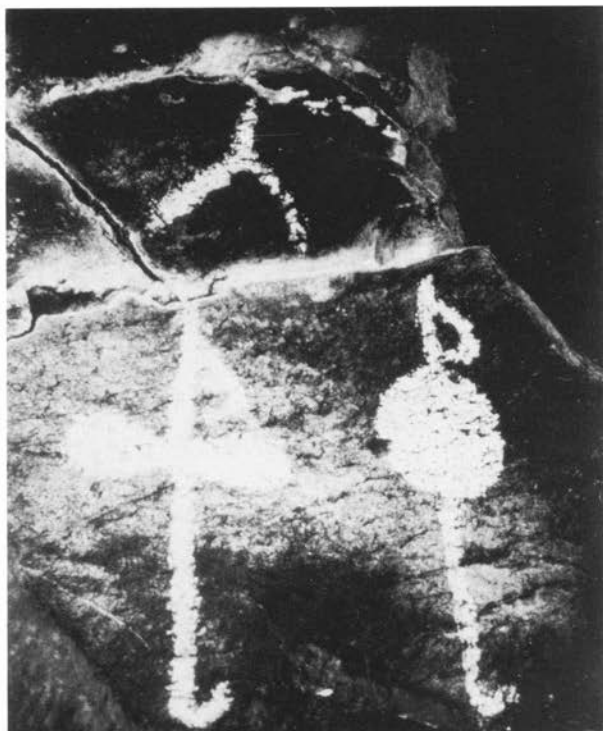


Fig. 113  
Shield-like designs are abundant and no two are alike. Great Basin Naturalistic Style. Southeastern California (Coso Range).

Fig. 114  
Weighted atlatis. Great Basin Representational Style. Southeastern California (Coso Range).

in the foothills and on the wooded slopes of the Sierra Nevada. Predominantly petroglyphs, the styles are linear abstract, cupule and pit-and-groove. The abstractions show a strong affinity with the contiguous Great Basin rock art and includes spirals, concentric circles, rayed circles and vulvaforms. Representational figures are rare consisting of animal tracks and stick figures. One unique human figure from this region displays a conspicuous vulva. Some of the sites are painted in monochrome or bichrome in red, black and white.

##### 5. Southern Sierra Painted Style

This style is found in the territory of the Yokuts Indians the largest ethnic group in prehistoric California who lived on or near a number of large rivers draining the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada. The Sierra foothills are strewn with large granite rock and where protected under-surfaces were available, the Yokuts artists painted their pictures. The paintings are in monochrome, bichrome and polychrome in the usual red, blacks and white. Striking effects were achieved by multiple outlining of basically simple motifs.

The most southerly paintings are almost entirely in red and are mainly non-representational with grids, parallel lines and concentric circles. Occasionally centipedes and highly stylized humans are incorporated that lack necks, feet and hands and resemble animal pelts. Further to the north this same neckless being is encountered outlined in multiple colors.

The main concentrations of this style and the most elaborate examples occur near the town of Exeter where a large granite batholith has pushed through the earth's crust and shattered to form a large hill with many rock grottos. The most interesting motif at this large site is an anthropomorph with a split head. This odd being is found with many variations, some so stylized as to bear little resemblance to a human. At the same site there are many crudely painted examples of horsemen and cattle.



Fig. 115  
Elaborate motif in white and red. Southern  
Sierra Painted Style.



Fig. 116  
Horned figure (shaman?) painted over a man  
with bird wings. Santa Barbara Painted style.

The paintings near the northern limit of the Yokuts territory are quite different - highly stylized animal and human forms with simple abstractions. Cupules are abundant in the Yokuts region but as they only occur on granite rocks, with little or no patination, they are difficult to see or photograph.

### 6. Santa Barbara Painted Style

The most remarkable examples of rock art in California were created by the Chumash Indians who occupied the Coast Ranges between the ocean and the San Joaquin Valley as well as three large islands several miles offshore. The only abstract paintings are rectilinear motifs such as triangles, checkerboard patterns, grids and diamonds, and occur in the extreme northwestern part of the Chumash territory.

Most of the paintings are found in shallow sandstone caves in remote mountainous areas. Many of the Chumash paintings are truly spectacular with imaginative and bizarre creatures that combine parts of birds, insects, fish and humans. The dominant motif is the multi-colored concentric circle that may represent the sun. One extraordinary example resembles a mandala with 26 bands of outlining in red, white, black, green and yellow.

A striking design found throughout the Chumash region is a double-ended creature (split on both ends) that occurs with or without a dorsal fin. This aquatic-looking motif must have had great importance to the prehistoric Chumash and is not found outside their territory.

Certain characteristics demonstrate cultural contacts with the Yokuts to the northeast. The polychrome paintings of the Chumash and the Yokuts are





Fig. 117  
*Striated hand prints. South of Monterey.*

often quite similar in appearance with their multiple outlining and both tribes painted split-head anthropomorphs. Some authorities believe that the Santa Barbara Painted Style derived from the Southern Sierra Painted Style.

It is curious that on the islands with their large Chumash population maintaining contact with the mainland by canoes, there was almost no rock art. Only three small sites are known, two painted and one a petroglyph. The subject matter is a few parallel lines.

Between the Chumash region and Monterey to the northwest, there are a number of sites but they are too few on which to base a style. The most interesting is a smoke-blackened cave on the back wall of which, there are over 200 white hand prints. These hands are not painted but literally "printed" on the rock surface. The hand was first daubed with thick white paint, then the hand was striated with a stick and printed on the wall, giving a weird skeletal effect. Such hand prints are found world-wide and are abundant in the southwestern United States. In California there are only two sites with handprints, the one near Monterey and some dim prints in a Chumash cave. Another site south of the hand cave is a very large rock shelter where the smoke-blackened surfaces are covered with monochrome, bichrome and polychrome figures, mainly abstract. These motifs bear a strong resemblance to the Yokuts and Chumash paintings and could only have been the result of direct contact with those gifted people. A number of California tribes, especially the Chumash often made their paintings on smoke-blackened surfaces. At least one major site is being slowly destroyed by visitors who light fires inside the cave not realizing that carbon deposition is obliterating the painting.



*Fig. 118  
Meandering lines with human figure. Santa  
Barbara Painted Style.*

*Fig. 119  
Highly stylized figures over smoke-blackened  
wall. Santa Barbara Painted Style.*

*Fig. 120  
Detail of fig. 119. Santa Barbara Painted  
Style.*

### *7. Southern California Rectilinear Abstract Style*

The motifs delineating this painted style are diamonds, parallel lines, chevrons, zigzags and rarely hands and rayed suns. These were invariably painted on isolated granite boulders and the color is usually red but occasionally black and white were added to the designs.

### *8. Riverside Maze Style*

This style only appears as a petroglyph on isolated stones or bedrock outcroppings. The patterns are not true mazes as they lack access to their interiors. Sunburst and dot patterns sometimes occur in association.

### *9. Rancho Bernardo Rectilinear Abstract Style*

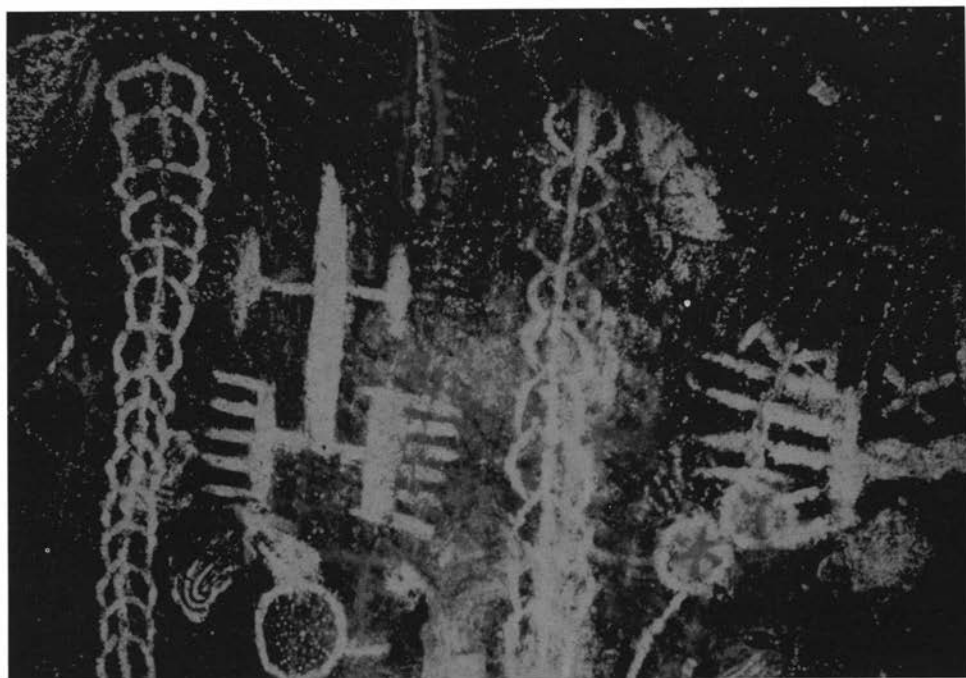
This highly localized style consists of complex rectilinear frets painted in red on large granite boulders. Other motifs are crenulations cross-hatching, diamond chains and triangles. All of the panels are done with great skill and it has been postulated that all were painted by the same artist.

### *10. Peninsular Range Representational Style*

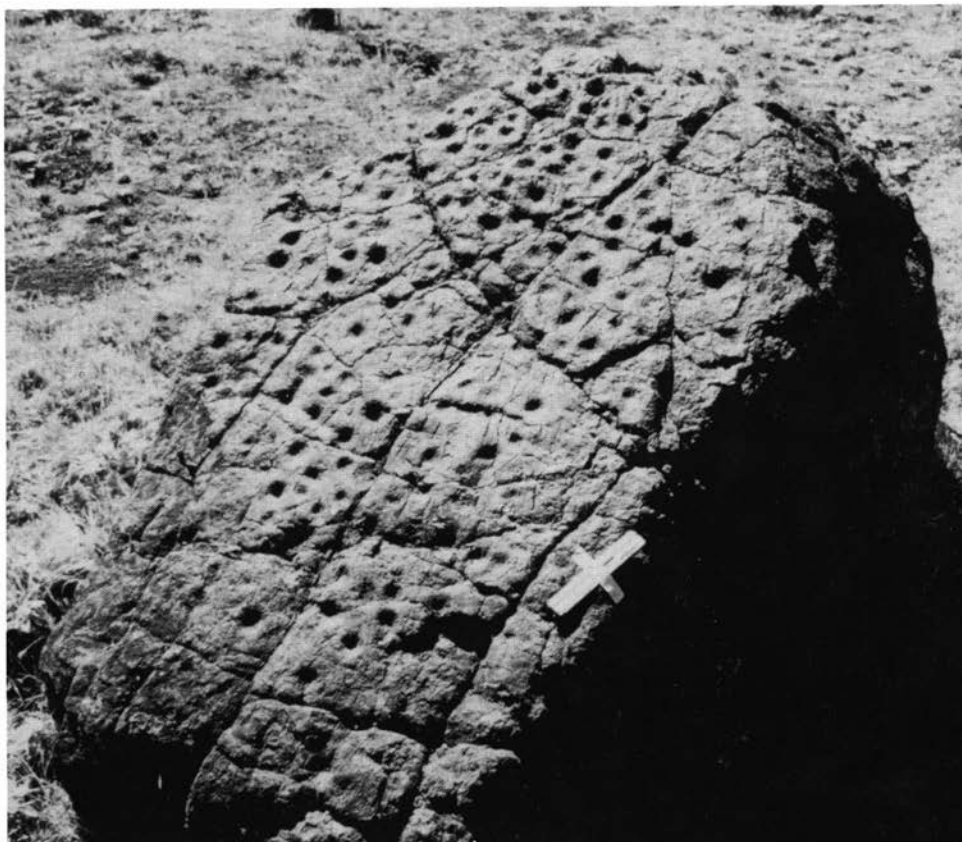
This painted style is in the border region between southwestern California and contiguous Baja California in Mexico. Motifs include digitate humans, lizards, sun bursts, grids, parallel lines and centipedes. Most are found in granite rock shelters associated with camp sites. The colors are red and black.

## IV - CHRONOLOGY

Approximate dating of California rock art is difficult. The best clue is the association of rock art with something that is clearly from the historic period. There are two rock painting sites in southern California that can be



dated almost to the day. In 1775 Juan Bautista de Anza brought the first Spanish settlers from Mexico to California with their horses, cattle and sheep. On two occasions, de Anza camped near Indian settlements, one Coahuilla and the other, Chumash. In both instances the event inspired the Indians to add horsemen to their rock paintings. At the big Yokuts site near Exeter, the horses and cattle paintings could not have been made before the early 1850's when the Anglo-Americans began their occupation of the region.



*Fig. 121*  
*Pit and groove rock near Santa Barbara.*

Details of a Chumash polychrome painting were reproduced in the 10th Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology (1893). Today only the slightest trace of this site remains. Natural erosion has destroyed the site in less than 100 years - certain proof that the painting was not very old, probably it was painted in the late prehistoric or early historic period.

Much rock art in southern California is painted on exposed granite boulders and must be relatively recent in origin. We have ethnological evidence that the Southern California Rectilinear Abstract Style continued to be made into historic times. How old are the earliest figures is a query which still remains to be answered.

#### V - INTERPRETATION

Indian rock art in the western United States and especially in California, is highly stylized or abstract. Their enigmatic quality has tempted many people into guessing at their meaning. Some believe that the pictures are a form of writing, others see them as trail markers or battle scenes or maps to hidden treasures. Such speculation is fun but not very productive. There is a strong tendency to superimpose our western ideas on the beliefs of Stone Age man. For instance, if an Indian needed trail markers to find his way around in the land he knew since birth, he would surely have been rated a complete failure as an Indian by his contemporaries.

We can only know a few of the reasons why the prehistoric California Indians devoted so much time and energy to the creation of their fascinating rock paintings and petroglyphs. Some of the answers have come through ethnological studies involving interviews with Indians who actually took part in ceremonies involving rock art.

The California Indians in common with primitive people the world over, believed in the power of the shaman or medicine man to communicate with supernatural beings in the spirit world in such matters as sickness, weather control, fertility and anything that affected the well-being of the tribe or the individual. The malign spirits must be placated and the aid of the benign beings solicited. Singing, dancing and the making of pictures on the rocks were all tools used by the shamans.

In northwestern California, a region of large rivers and the giant redwood trees, the shamans used the cupule and the pit-and-groove rocks in ceremonies designed to control weather. In one method, the shaman would incise long parallel grooves in the soft steatite boulders to bring snow. To stop the snow, a groove was cut across the parallel cuts at right angles. To bring rain, cupules were made and to stop rain as at a time of flooding, the rain rock was buried.

Further south, a large tribe, the Pomo also made cupule and pit-and-groove rocks. However these Indians used the rocks ceremonially for an entirely different purpose. They were known as "baby" rocks and were used to overcome sterility. A man and a woman desiring children, would pray at one of these rocks. Then some of the soft stone was scraped from a groove or cupule, ground to a powder and mixed with water to form a paste. This was then painted on the abdomen of the woman in two transverse lines. Intercourse following such a ritual supposedly guaranteed fertility.

In southern California the Luiseño and Cupeño Indians made red abstract designs on rocks during the girl's puberty ceremonies. The Luiseño ritual lasted several months and included the making of ground paintings and facial decoration. As a final event, the girls raced to certain rocks where relatives gave them red paint to decorate the rock with diamond-shaped chains representing rattlesnakes.

A few sites indicate the recording of an important event such as the Coahuilla and Chumash paintings of the de Anza horsemen, an event that must have astonished and dismayed the simple Indians.

Ethnological notes collected in the early 20th century by the late John P. Harrington were released recently to scholars by the Smithsonian Institution. This very large collection of new material revealed that these Indians had a wide knowledge of astronomy as well as a rich mythology. The Chumash as well as other tribes in southern California used *Datura*, a powerful hallucinogenic drug during ceremonies as well as casually for pleasure. Many of the paintings in the Chumash territory apparently depict celestial bodies and some sites are believed to be solstice markers. Some of the curious beings painted by the Chumash might be supernatural beings or shamans impersonating such beings. Humans wearing bird costumes might be impersonating eagles or the California Condor in ceremonies honoring these potent birds.



In the desert ranges of southeastern California, many of the canyons are decorated with scenes of men hunting the bighorn sheep. The preoccupation of these hunting-gathering Indians with the creation of thousands of petroglyphs of this prized and wary game animal, suggests hunting magic. Perhaps before the hunt, the hunt shaman directed ceremonies including the creation of petroglyphs as a supernatural aid for success. Another possibility is that rites honoring the sheep might ensure the continued presence of this important food resource.

It is apparent to most students of rock art that many examples demonstrate a high degree of artistic skill while others are mere scrawls. Can some of the rock art be examples of "art for art's sake"? The rock pictures certainly played an important role in keeping the Indians in harmony with nature and the spirit world. However from a ceremonial point of view, a crude but recognizable motif would serve the purpose. Certainly the subject matter and the location of the rock art were of primary importance but the large number of striking and imaginative designs indicates that some gifted people were taking pride in their creations.

*Résumé:* L'art rupestre de Californie est aussi diversifié que sa population autochtone et que ses caractéristiques géographiques qui passent de vastes étendues désertiques aux chaînes de montagnes enneigées. Nos premières connaissances sur la signification de l'art rupestre remontent aux recherches du début du siècle auprès d'Indiens qui produisent certains de ces dessins. La datation relative de ces peintures et gravures a été établie par superposition; la datation absolue a été proposée d'après des représentations de cavaliers en certains sites. Les principales motivations de ces créations d'art rupestre semblent être les rites de la puberté, les cérémonies de fertilité, la magie de la chasse et la domination des conditions atmosphériques.

*Riassunto:* L'arte rupestre della California è diversificata quanto lo è la sua popolazione autoctona e le sue configurazioni geografiche che vanno da vaste distese desertiche a catene di montagne innevate. Le nostre prime cognizioni sui significati di quest'arte rupestre risalgono a delle indagini di inizio secolo presso Indiani che eseguirono alcuni di questi disegni. La datazione relativa di pitture e incisioni è stata stabilita tramite le sovrapposizioni; la datazione assoluta è stata proposta in base a raffigurazioni di cavalieri in certi siti. Le motivazioni principali di queste creazioni di arte rupestre appaiono essere riti di pubertà, cerimonie di fertilità, la magia della caccia e il dominio delle condizioni atmosferiche.

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