

ROCK ART OF NORTH AMERICAN NORTHWESTERN PLAINS: AN OVERVIEW

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Introduction

Despite a long history of research on the numerous rock art sites scattered across the Northwestern Plains region of North America (Renaud, 1936; Over, 1941; Gebhard and Cahn, 1950; Mulloy, 1958; Conner, 1962, 1980, 1984; Dewdney, 1964; Sowers, 1964; Hoy, 1969; Conner and Conner, 1971; Keyser, 1975, 1977a, 1979a, 1984; Sundstrom, 1984a; Loendorf & Porsche, 1985) the subject remains relatively poorly known to most worldwide rock art scholars. This is best evidenced by the limited coverage given the area in recent rock art overviews of North America and the World (Anati, 1984, Grant, 1967, 1983; Wellman, 1979). Thus, this general overview is intended to familiarize scholars with the breadth of rock art in the area and the state of current research on some of the major styles.

The Northwestern Plains of North America is a broad shortgrass steppe interspersed with semi-desert basins and high mountain ranges that rise to heights of more than 3,500 metres. The region, encompassing portion of the state of Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Dakota, and the Canadian prairie provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan, has a harsh climate, cold in the winter and hot in the summer. In prehistoric times however, it provided ideal habitat for the American Bison, and on this rich game resource Plains Indian groups thrived at the tribal level of cultural development for the last 12,000 years (Frisson, 1978). During the last 2000 years the region was also home to village farming cultures of Central Plains, Middle Missouri, and Coalescent Tradition, that penetrated the area along major rivers including the Missouri, Platte, and Yellowstone; but the lifeway of most inhabitants remained one of pedestrian bison hunting nomads. As a result of this long history of intensive occupation, the Northwestern Plains region is also rich in rock art, with at least ten distinct styles, some of which are as much as 5,000 years old. Field work in this area during the last two decades has resulted in the identification and description of seven major rock art styles, each of which has its own characteristic subject matter, expression, and ethnic/temporal association. In the following brief overview I provide a summary discussion of each of these styles, in order to acquaint you with the rock art of this region of North America. For interested researchers, more detailed description, discussion and interpretation is available in the primary documents cited in this article.

Columbia Plateau Painted Style

In the Rocky Mountain front ranges along the western margin of the Northwestern Plains, are scattered the red painted pictographs of the Columbia Plateau Style (Keyser, 1978, 1981; Brink, 1981). Comprising simple red-painted stick-figure designs, these pictographs characteristically show humans, animals, tally marks and a variety of geometric abstracts. Tally marks are by far the most common design element, and seem most likely to represent a mnemonic recording

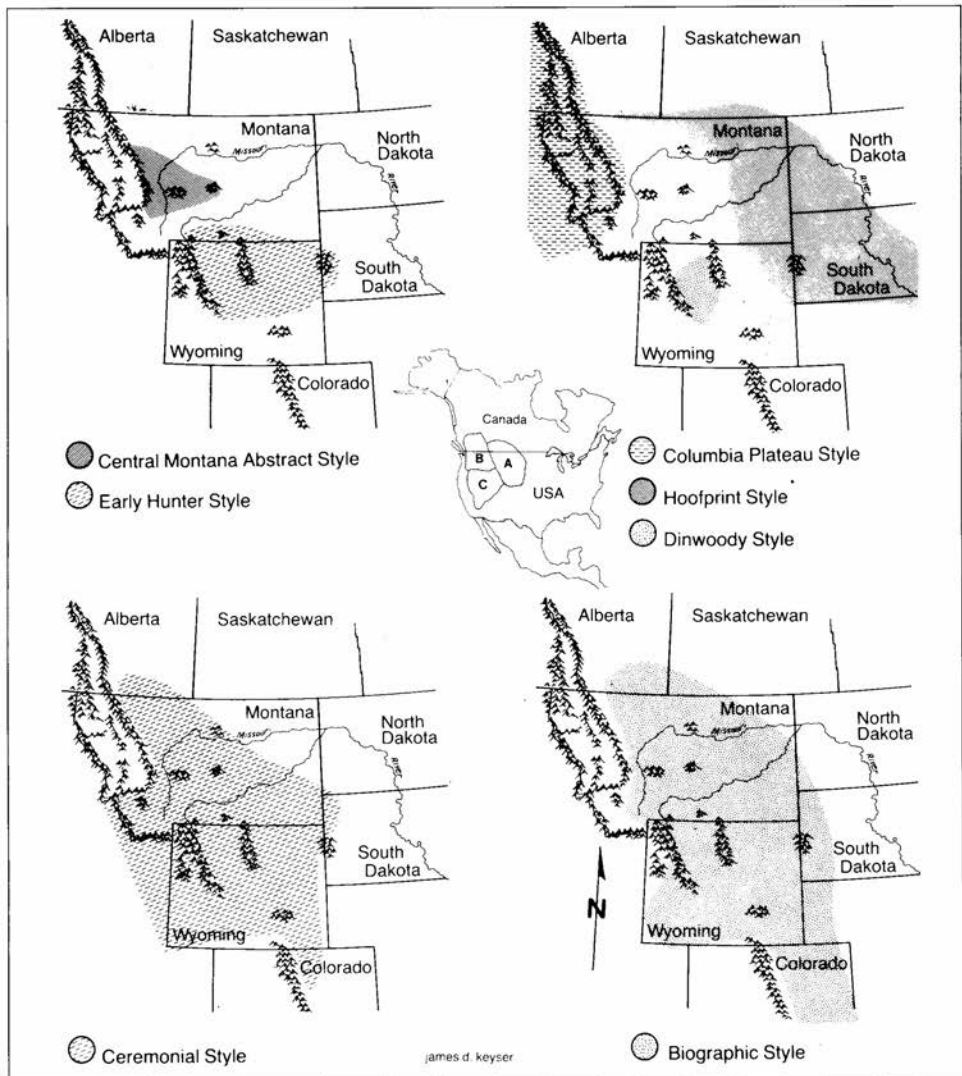


Fig. 80 - Distribution of rock art styles discussed in text. Regions labelled on inset in center are: A, Northwestern Plains; B, Columbia Plateau; C, Great Basin.

device of some sort. Typically, Columbia Plateau Style humans and animals occur in proximity on panel, often with an associated sunburst or other geometric design. One repeated element is a man associated with an animal, often one or both are surrounded by a circle or series of dots. These pictographs are characteristically located in niches or small overhangs along waterways, but in nearly inaccessible settings. Several are lakeside sites on islands or peninsulas approachable only by water. Others require a steep, difficult climb to reach a small rock shelter or overhang, otherwise unsuitable for human use except as a rock art location. The characteristic intimate association among humans, animals, and ancillary geometric elements, dots, or sunbursts, coupled with the difficulty of access to most sites, suggests that these paintings represent records of successful vision quests, a ritual of fasting and self-torture whereby an adolescent sought the intervention of a guardian spirit helper who would provide supernatural assistance

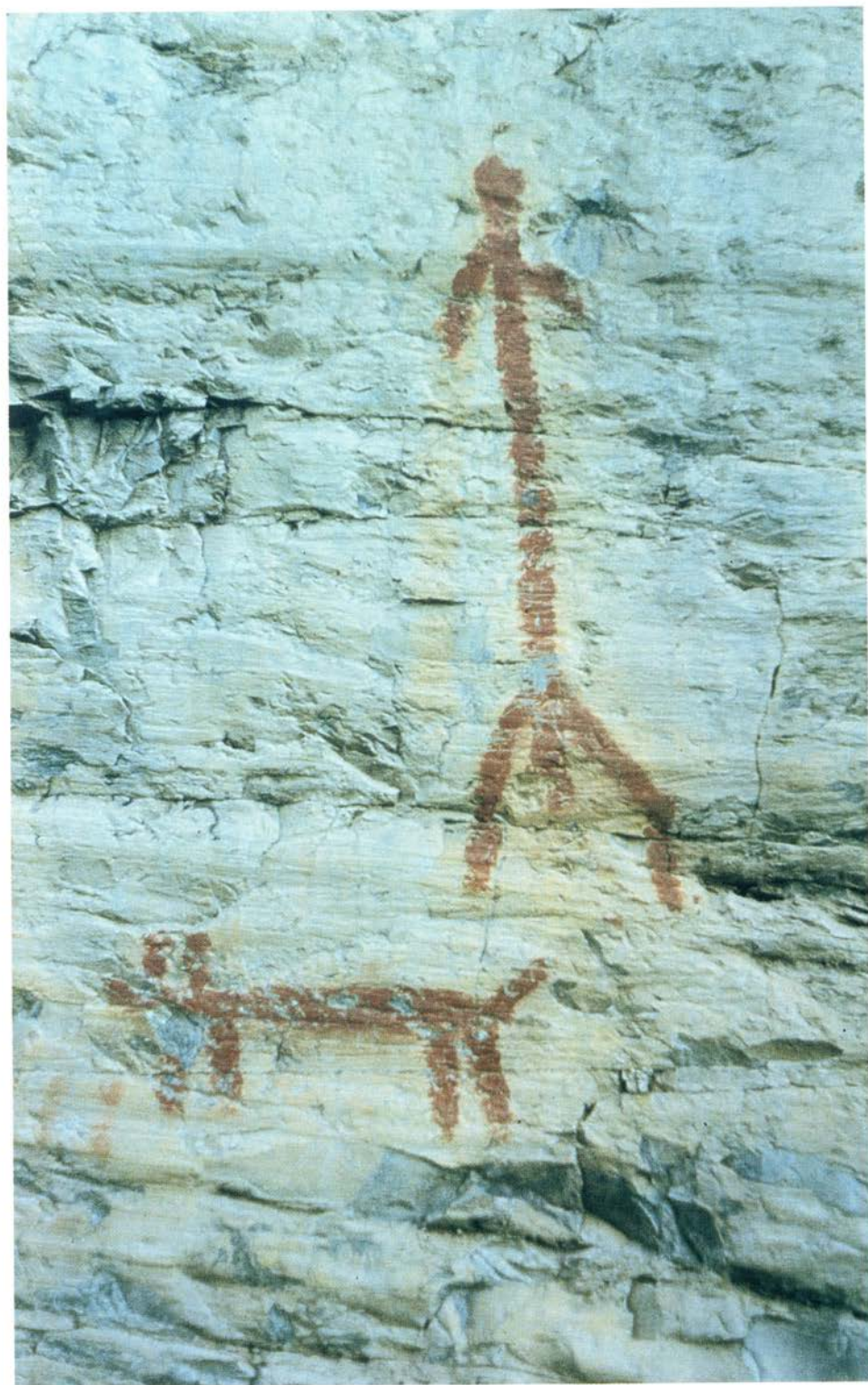


Fig. 81 - Stick uman figure associated with animal, near Kalispell, Montana.

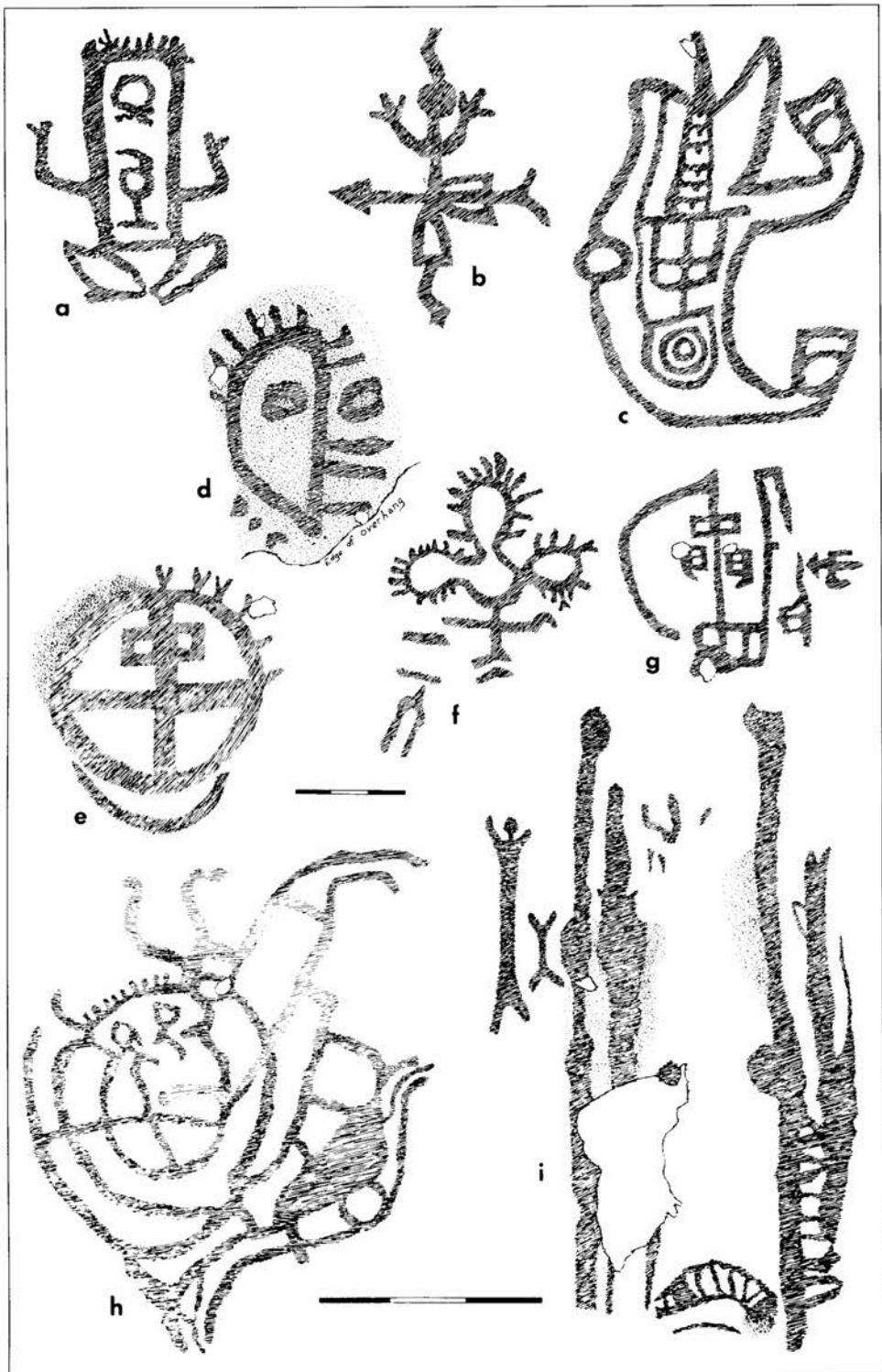


Fig. 82 - Selected examples of Central Montana Abstract Style pictographs showing abstract anthropomorphic figures. Outlined areas without pigment on c-e, and g-i are spalled areas. All examples are painted in red pigment. Scale bars represent 15 cm; larger scale is for b and i, smaller scale is for a-g.



Fig. 83 - Sun symbol associated with tally marks, near Kalispell, Montana.

throughout his life. (Keyser & Knight, 1976; Corner, 1968; Malouf, 1961) Ethnographies of Columbia Plateau Indian tribes indicate that pictographs were painted to commemorate the vision quest ritual (Teit, 1930; Malouf & White, 1953) and also that various animals and celestial objects such as the sun were especially soughtafter guardians. In addition, these same records document that visions were typically sought in out-of-the-way places characterized by difficult access. Although the age of Columbia Plateau rock art cannot be firmly fixed, crudely-drawn horse depictions indicate that it lasted into the Historic Period which began approximately A.D. 1750 (McClure, 1979). This is supported by ethnographic accounts of vision quest pictographs. The relatively good preservation of these sites, and the occurrence of a few pictographs on rock fragments found in dated archaeological deposits indicate that the style began at least 2,000 years ago and may have started much earlier (McClure, 1984; Copp, 1980; Randolph & Dahlstrom, 1977). In the Columbia Plateau the groups responsible for Columbia Plateau style rock art include the Yakima, Pend d'Oreille, Flathead, Spokane, Colville, Sanpoil, Nez Perce, and Kootenai tribes. Of these groups, the Kootenai, Pend d'Oreille, and Flathead inhabited the front range region of the Northwestern Plains from approximately A.D. 1400-1800 (Malouf, 1967; Teit, 1930).

Central Montana Abstract Style

Located in the foothill region of central Montana, along the front ranges of the Rocky Mountains is a second painted rock art style named the Central Montana Abstract Style (Keyser 1977b, 1979a). This area, one of deep canyons cut into an ancient limestone plateau, has numerous sites consisting of red painted hand-prints and abstract human and animal designs. Distinct from the Columbia Pla-

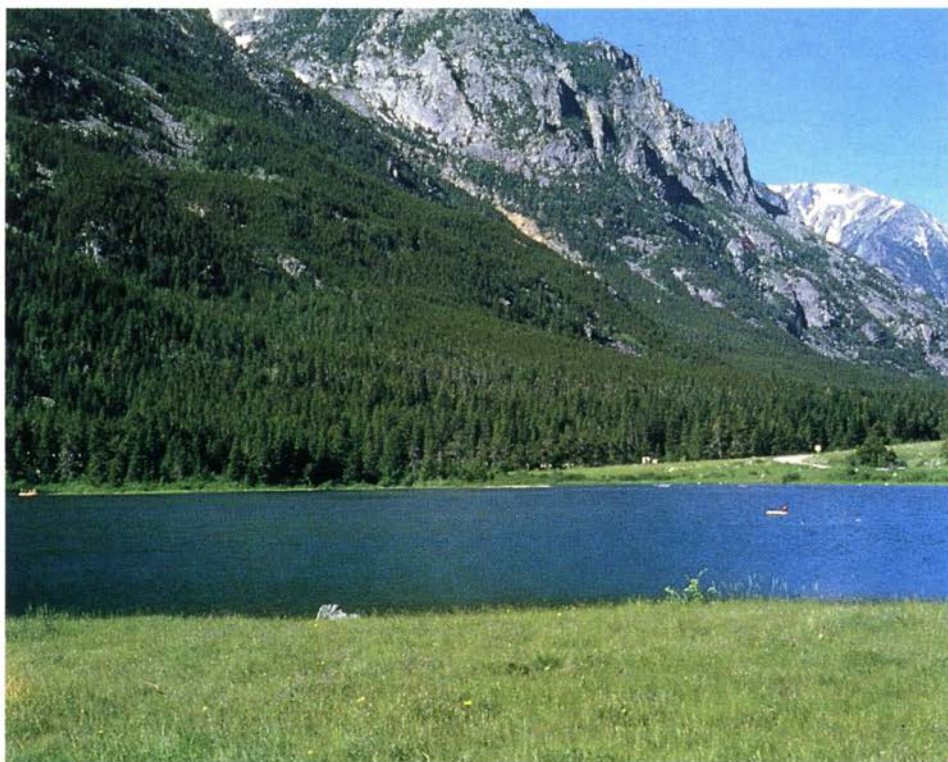


Fig. 84 - View of Northwestern Plains with mountains in background, Montana.

Fig. 85 - View of the Milk River at Writing-On-Stone, Alberta, Canada.



Fig. 86 - View of the Northwestern Plains with mountains in background, Montana.

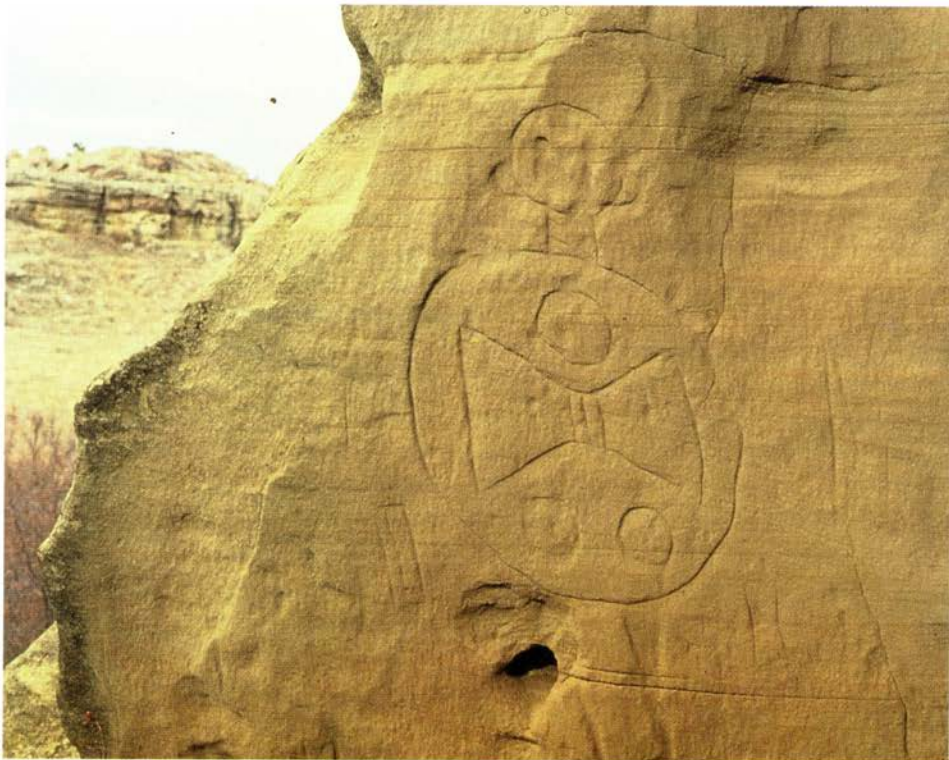


Fig. 87 - Shield Bearing Warrior figure, North Cave Hills, South Dakota.



Fig. 88 - Panel of red-painted actual handprints, near Helena, Montana.

teau Style (with which it co-occurs in some parts of the region) because of the complexity of the abstract elements, the absence of tally marks, and the prevalence of handprints, this art appears to be slightly older and made for a different purpose than Columbia Plateau Style pictographs.

Primary motifs in the Central Montana Abstract Style are handprints and abstract human and animal designs (Shumate, 1960; Keyser, 1977b, 1979a). Handprints occur at nearly every site, often in groups of 5 to 15 examples. Some sites consist of nothing but handprints. Abstract human and animal designs are also frequent. Abstract anthropomorphs range from just slightly elaborated stick figure humans, through very abstract (albeit recognizable) human figures, to elaborate abstractions whose anthropomorphic character is not easily recognizable without comparison to similar though less complex designs that are indeniably anthropomorphic representations. Abstract animal designs are less complex than the anthropomorphs, being primarily recognizable mammalian quadrupeds or reptiles with added elaborations. A few very simple stick figure humans occur in the style, usually in direct association with complex abstracts.

Stylistically the Central Montana Abstract pictographs appear to represent shamanistic activities (Keyser, 1979a). The abstraction of human and animal elements is very similar to the skeletal X-ray style of North American Northwest Coast art and Australian art, both of which are known to have a shamanistic function (Wellman, 1975, 1976, 1979). The use of handprints as a major motif also occurs in rock art identified as having a magico-religious function (Schaafsma, 1979). Finally, the close association of small, simply-drawn stick figure humans with large, elaborate abstract anthropomorphic designs succinctly captures the

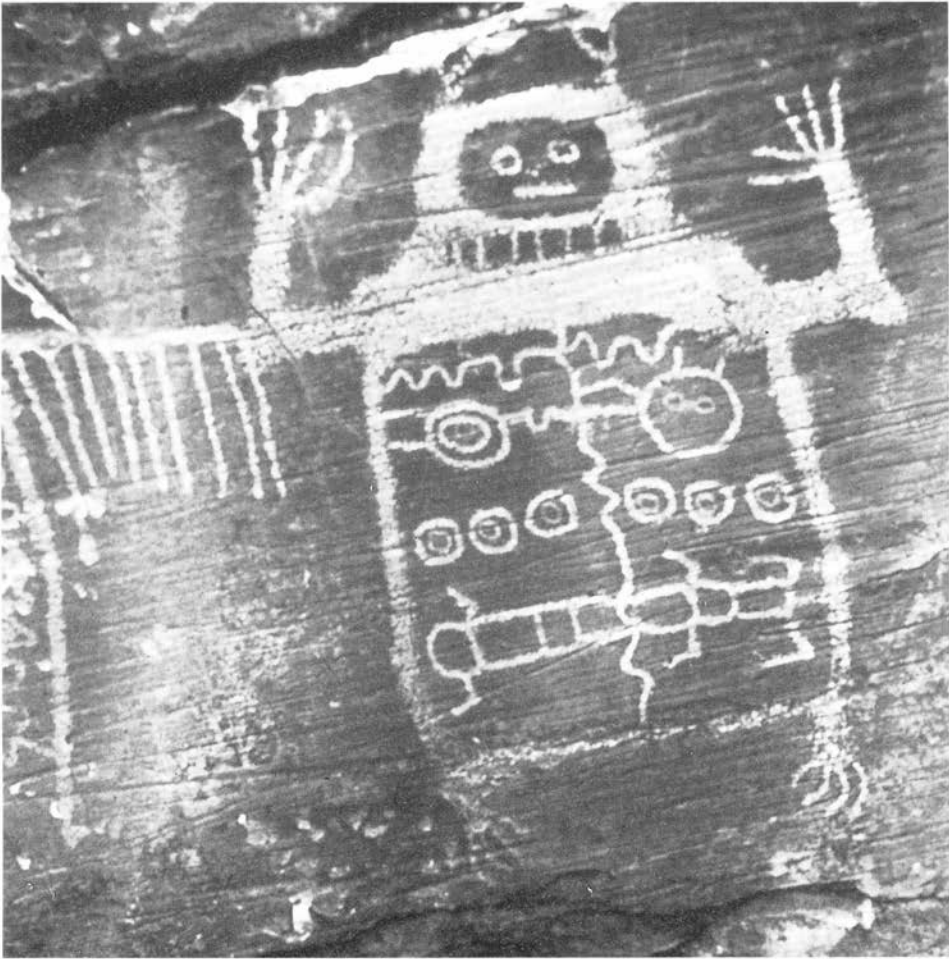


Fig. 89 - *Dinwoody style anthropomorph, Wyoming. General view.*

relationship between humans and the supernatural world that epitomizes shamanistic beliefs of North American Indians.

The age of Central Montana Abstract Style art cannot be conclusively demonstrated, but it appears to be older than Columbia Plateau Style art in this area of the Northwestern Plains. Central Montana Abstract Style pictographs include no historic period motifs, and they are overpainted by Columbia Plateau style motifs at one site along the Smith River (Keyser, 1979a, p. 166). Since groups responsible for Columbia Plateau style pictographs are known to have inhabited this area from approximately A.D. 1400 to 1800, a reasonable estimate places these Central Montana Abstract style pictographs in the Late Prehistoric Period prior to A.D. 1400. The beginning date for this style and ethnic identity of the artists are unknown.

Dinwoody Interior Line Style

In the Wind River and Bighorn Basins of the Rocky Mountain foothills region of west-central Wyoming occurs the Dinwoody Petroglyph Style (Gebhard &



Fig. 90 - Abstract anthropomorphic figure, near Great Falls, Montana.



Fig. 91 - Human in circle with associated animal, near Plains, Montana.



Fig. 92 - Battle scene in red pictographs at Rocky Coulee, Writing-On-Stone, Alberta, Canada.



Fig. 93 - Panel of abstract anthropomorphs at Dinwoody Lake site, Wyoming.



Fig. 94 - Panel of abstract anthropomorphs at Dinwoody Lake, Wyoming (this is a different panel than in photo 10, pick the most appropriate one to use).

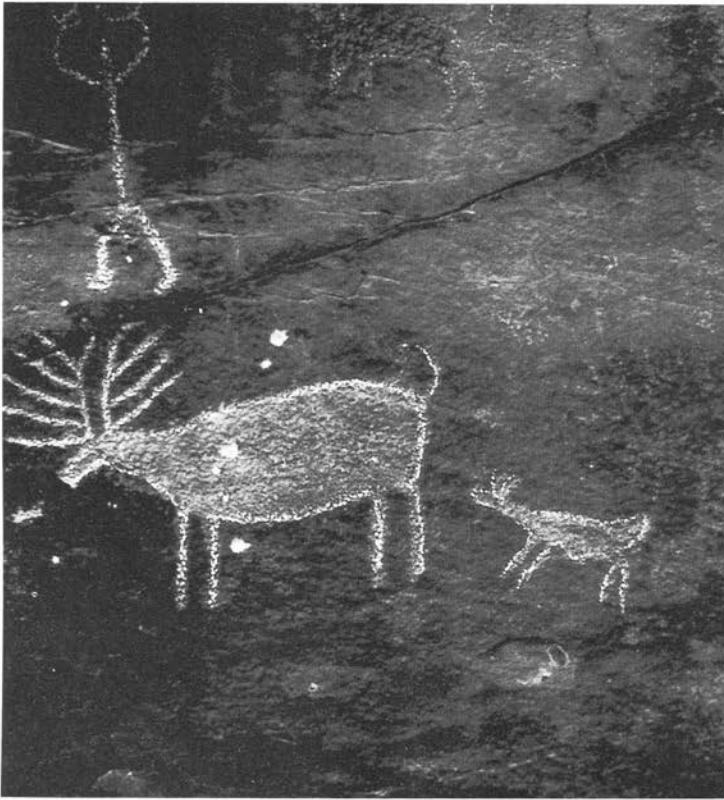


Fig. 95
Panel of Early Hunter
Style petroglyphs at
Whoop-up Canyon,
Wyoming.

Cahn, 1950, 1954; Gebhard, 1969). Pecked onto reddish sandstone cliffs of the Chugwater and Tensleep formations, these petroglyphs are complex panels showing humans, animals, and geomorphic abstracts (Gebhard, 1969). Predominant are the abstract anthropomorphs, some of which have wings, claws, horns, or other zoomorphic features. Usually these petroglyphs are compositionally arranged with lines connecting human figures or occasionally connecting a human with an animal. Animals are invariably drawn as simple, side profile figures without the elaborations of the anthropomorphs (Gebhard, 1969). Anthropomorphs are characterized by elaborate interior body decorations of wavy lines, dots, dashes, and circles. Body interiors are often divided into compartments with different decorative motifs used in each. The result creates a very distinct «texturing» unlike most other Northwestern Plains rock art.

Dinwoody Style petroglyphs can be relatively exactly dated by their superimposition at several sites over panels of Early Hunter Style petroglyphs (Gebhard & Cahn, 1950; Gebhard, 1969). Given the Archaic Period age of Early Hunter Style (Sundstrom, 1984a, also see discussion below), this dates the Dinwoody Style to the Late Archaic or late Prehistoric periods (after approximately 1000 B.C.). Since the style is not known from Historic Period Indian art, and is not represented in Ceremonial style art that occurs throughout much of the Late Prehistoric period (Keyser, 1977a, 1984; Conner & Conner, 1971), it apparently dates prior to A.D. 1000. Thus, a reasonable estimate is that the Dinwoody Style dates between 3000 and 1000 years ago. This estimated age places the art approximately contemporaneous with Coso Style rock art and Fremont rock art in the Great Basin region to the west, both of which show somewhat similar interior

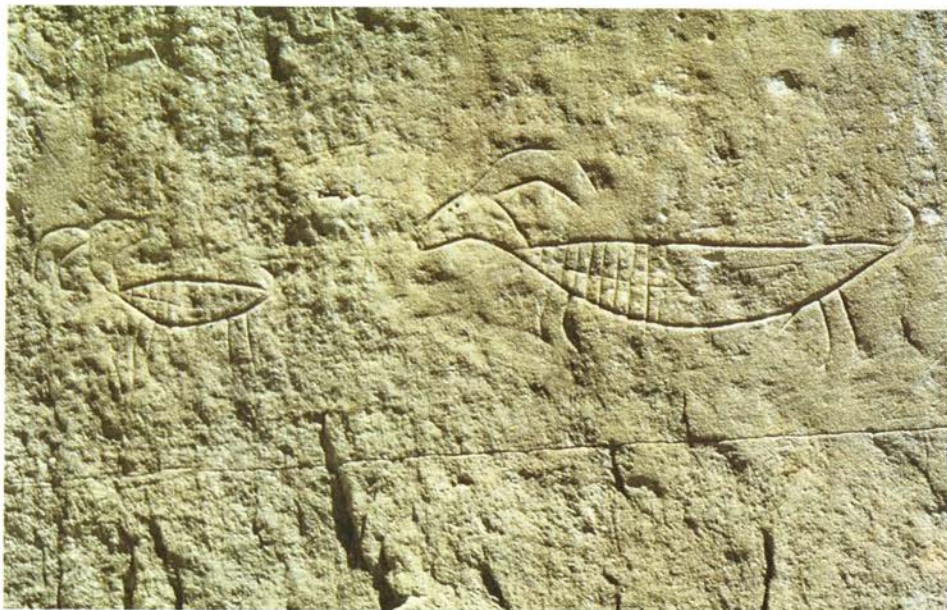


Fig. 96 - Boat form mountain sheep, Writing-On-Stone, Alberta, Canada.

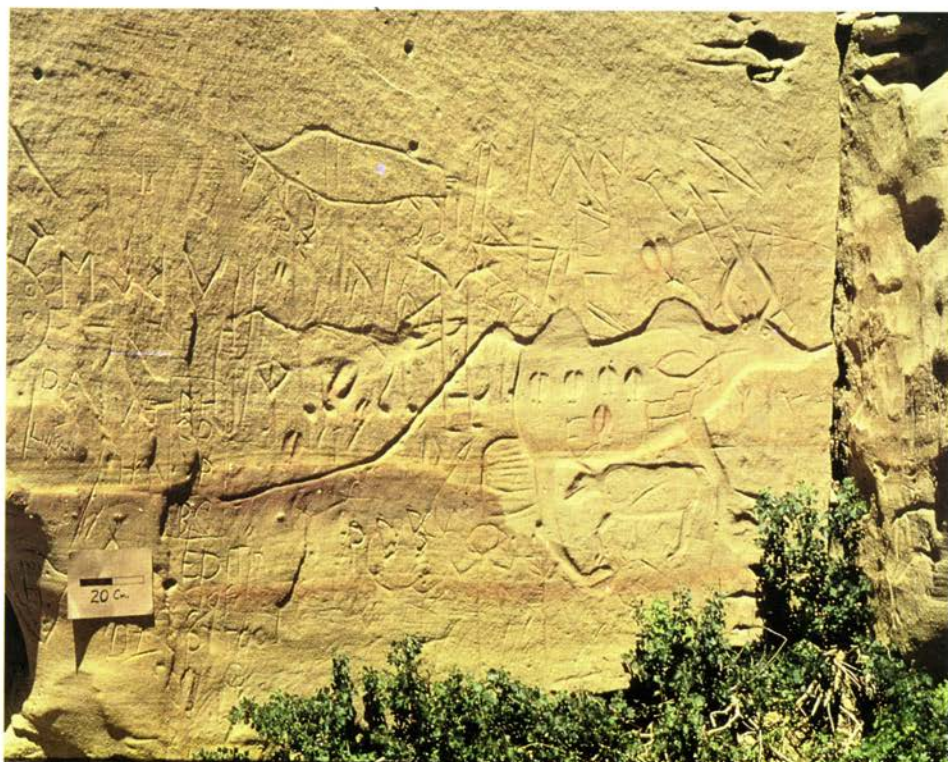


Fig. 97 - Site in North Cave Hills, South Dakota, with Hoofprint style petroglyphs superimposed over Ceremonial style glyphs.



Fig. 98 - Panel of hoofprint motifs, North Cave Hills, South Dakota.



Fig. 99 - Horse and rider from a site at Writing-On-Stone, Alberta, Canada.



Fig. 100 - Panel of deer with human from Whoop-up Canyon, Wyoming.

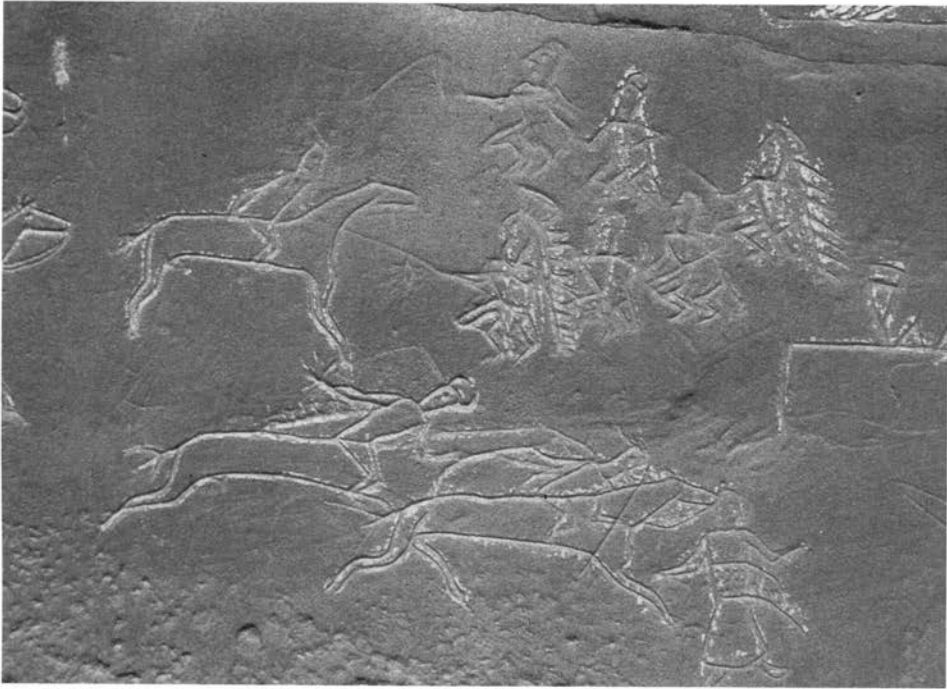


Fig. 101 - Action scene showing horses and riders from a site near Lander, Wyoming.

body decoration of anthropomorphs (Grant et al., 1968; Schaafsma, 1971; Gebhard, 1969). In fact, a few Dinwoody Style petroglyphs are even associated with Fremont sites in northern Colorado, eastern Utah, and southwestern Wyoming (Gebhard, 1969, p. 20). These similarities suggest that during the Late Archaic period there may have been a generalized rock art tradition throughout the Great Basin and peripheral areas (such as the Wind River Basin of central Wyoming) that produced localized styles with general similarities to one another. Ethnic identity of the artists responsible for the Dinwoody style is unknown.

Early Hunter Pecked Style

Across the more open High Plains - broad steppes broken only by rugged buttes and small isolated mountain ranges - are scattered four additional rock art styles. The earliest of these is a group of realistic pecked petroglyphs that I call the Early Hunter Style. Dating between 2,000 and 5,000 or more years ago, this style is most common in the Black Hills region of South Dakota and the mountains of Central Wyoming (Sundstrom, 1984a; Gebhard, 1969; Loendorf, 1984; Loendorf & Porsche, 1985), although examples occur as far north as Writing-On-Stone Alberta, Canada (Keyser, 1977a, p. 21). Typical scenes show men and women in pursuit of various big game animals, most often elk or deer, but occasionally pronghorn antelope, American bison, bear, and other animals. Weapons used by the hunters in these scenes are atlatls, dating them to the Archaic period which ended approximately 2000 years ago. Associated with many of these hunt scenes are characteristic «looped line» designs that apparently represent wooden corrals or nets used to trap the animals in communal kill situations. Some scenes even show animal «entangled» in the «loop line» motif, further supporting this interpretation. Such traps are known archaeologically (Frison, 1978), and the



Fig. 102 - Red pictograph of Bison (upside down on panel), near Kalispell, Montana.

oldest net known to have been used in this area to entrap big game is 8800 years old (Frison et al., 1986).

Although the ethnic affiliation of the artists responsible for this art style is unknown, the depictions illustrate very well the diverse hunting economy that characterized the Early and Middle Archaic period archaeological complexes such as Hawken, McKean, and Pelican Lake that flourished in this area of Northwestern Plains from 5000 B.C. to A.D. 500. The stylization of these sites suggests that they represent sympathetic magic used to insure the success of communal hunting efforts.

Ceremonial Style

Ceremonial Style rock art was made across the Northwestern Plains, from approximately A.D. 1000 to A.D. 1775. Major concentrations of this art are found at Writing-On Stone Alberta (Dewdney, 1964; Keyser, 1977a), Pictograph Cave Montana (Mulloy, 1958), North Cave Hills South Dakota (Over, 1941; Keyser, 1984) and Castle Gardens Wyoming, but individual sites are scattered throughout the region (Secrist, 1960; Conner, 1962; Conner & Conner, 1971). Consisting predominantly of carefully carved petroglyphs or well-made pictographs of shield bearing warriors, V-neck humans, and boat-form animals, Ceremonial art is characterized by rigidly structured composition showing individual figures or small groups of these motifs in stylized associations. Typically, shield bearing warriors are depicted in structured poses apparently designed to advertise the personal power of important men as indicated by the detailed shield designs. Such designs include birds, animals, insects, celestial objects and geometric abstract

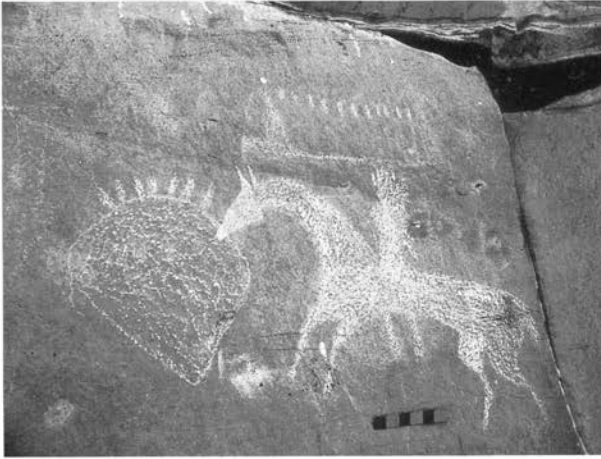
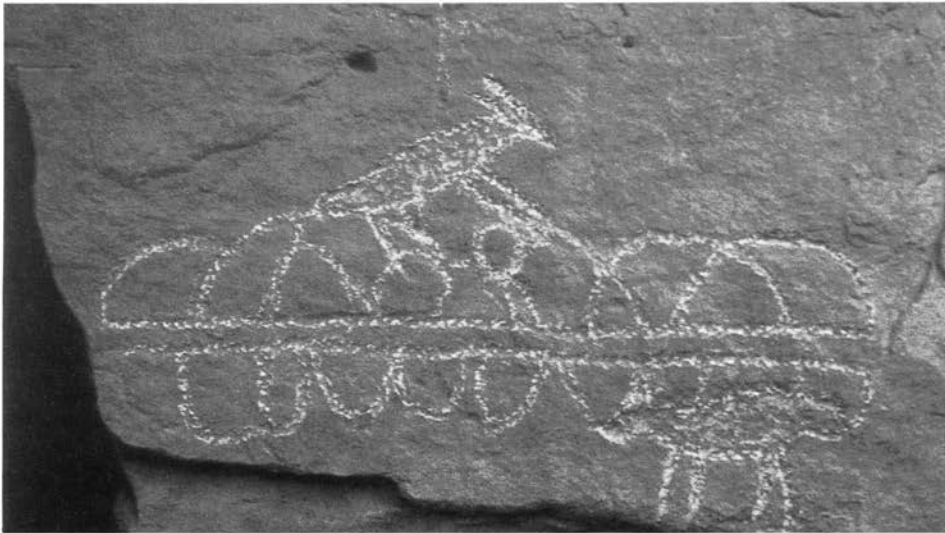


Fig. 103
Horse and rider from a site in
Wyoming.

Fig. 104 - Animal «entangled» in a
loop-line figure, Whoop-up Canyon,
Wyoming.



designs, and apparently represent the guardian spirit helper of the shield owner. V-neck warriors are often depicted in association with birds or animals in such a way that suggests shamanistic control of game much as that described ethnographically for Great Basin Shoshone groups.

Because Ceremonial art is probably the best known style on the Northwestern Plains, more is known about its temporal range and ethnic affiliation than about several other styles. This art style first appeared on the Northwestern Plains during the Late Prehistoric period, approximately A.D. 1000, and lasted until the Protohistoric period, approximately A.D. 1775. Depictions of stylized horses and guns, coupled with the absence of characteristic Ceremonial style motifs in Biographic rock art, indicate that it lasted after the advent of historic trade goods, but was rapidly replaced prior to A.D. 1800. The temporal and spatial distribution of this art style and its association with characteristic Shoshonean artifacts (pottery, stone bowls, tubular pipes) at a few sites originally led me and other authors (Keyser, 1975; Dempsey, 1973; Conner, 1980) to attribute this art to

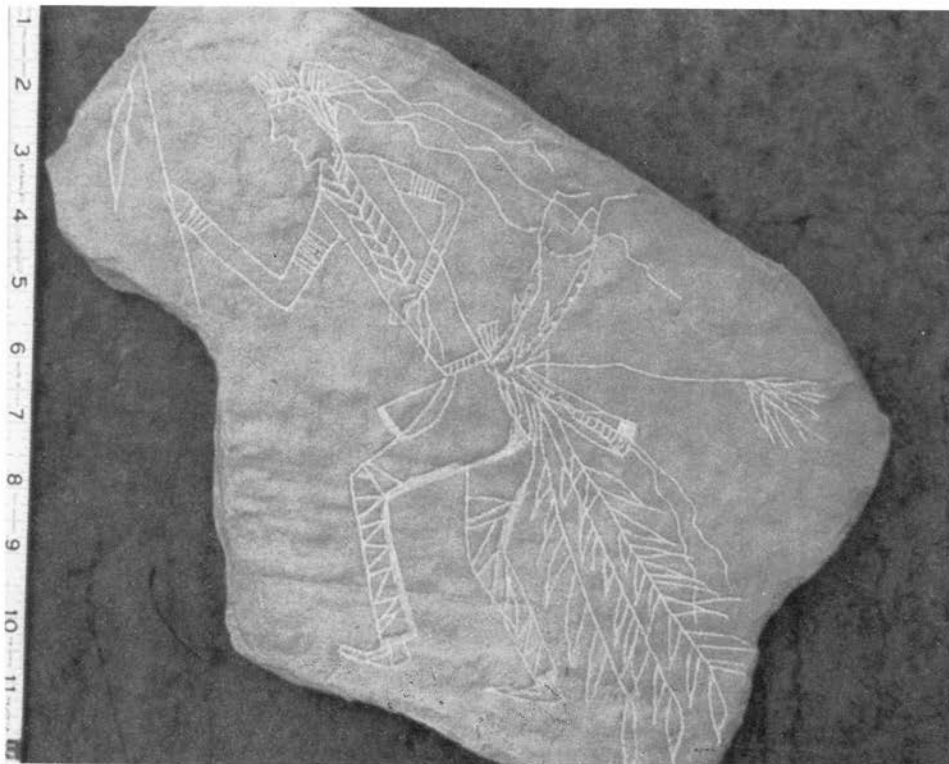


Fig. 105 - Cast of the «Dancing Warrior» at the Joliet site, Montana.

the Plains Shoshones, Late Prehistoric period immigrants to the Northwestern Plains who were noted for their military prowess (Hewes, 1948; Secoy, 1953). Discovery of mounted shield bearing warriors whose horses wear leather armor (Dewdney, 1964; Keyser, 1977a, 1984) further supports this ethnic identification, since such armor is ethnographically known to have been used only by Protohistoric period Shoshonean war parties (Secoy, 1953; Ewers, 1955).

Hoofprint Style

Contemporaneous with Ceremonial rock art, but occurring primarily in the eastern portion of the Northwestern Plains, is the Hoofprint rock art style. These pecked petroglyphs, found on glacial erratic boulders (Hoy 1969; Johnson, 1975), horizontal sandstone outcrops (Jones, 1982), and open sandstone cliffs (Keyser, 1984), consist of clusters of ungulate hoofprints apparently made to petition success in hunting efforts. Hoofprints of deer or elk, bison, pronghorn antelope, horses and mules have been identified (Keyser, 1984). These occur as single tracks or, more frequently, in clusters of as many as 30 to 100 individuals. At several sites these hoofprints are associated with carefully drawn, somewhat stylized bison or elk (Keyser, 1984; Buckles, 1964).

The occurrence of a few horse tracks at widely scattered Hoofprint style sites across the Northwestern Plains indicates that this art style persisted into the Protohistoric and early Historic period (until approximately A.D. 1800), but the fact that the majority of sites have no horse tracks implies that the hoofprint style dates primarily to the Late Prehistoric Period. Where it occurs with

Ceremonial Style motifs, superimpositions indicate that it postdates the earlier examples of the Ceremonial style. One site in the North Cave Hills of South Dakota, 39HN17, shows a clear sequence of superimpositions that provides an indication of the relative ages of Ceremonial, Hoofprint, and Biographic style art (Keyser, 1984, 1986b). Initially the panel was covered with shield bearing warriors, a boat-form bear, and several V-neck humans (probably representing at least three separate individual or small group compositions). Atop these figures four large bisons and associated hoofprints were drawn. Superimpositions show the bison to represent at least two separate episodes of carving. Finally, superimposed over part of the largest bison is a lightly incised human figure characteristic of Biographic art. This superimpositioning of Hoofprint style art over Ceremonial Style motifs, coupled with the occurrence of a few horse hoofprints in the style, suggests that it has a relatively restricted temporal span between approximately A.D. 1500 and 1800. The spatial distribution of hoofprint style sites across the Plains, coupled with their restricted temporal occurrence, strongly suggests that they are product of Siouan-speaking Indian artists from tribes such as the Assiniboine, Mandan, Hidatsa, Crow and Dakota. These groups hunted across the entire eastern portion of Northwestern Plains, but areas with large concentrations of Hoofprint style sites (e.g. Cave Hills, Black Hills) were focal points for long term summer bison hunting expeditions.

Biographic Style

Biographic rock art is a pan-regional style, restricted to the Historic period (between A.D. 1750 and A.D. 1900), but occurring all across the Northwestern Plains at a multitude of sites as both shallowly scratched petroglyphs and finely drawn pictographs. This is the only Northwestern Plains style that also occurs commonly to the south in the Central and Southern Plains regions. Biographic rock art, characterized by action scenes showing mature-style horses (see Dewdney, 1964; Keyser, 1977a for a definition of the mature style), a variety of human representations, weapons, tipis, and other items of material culture (Conner & Conner, 1971; Conner, 1980; Keyser, 1977a), is the product of a rapid shift in warfare and status acquisition systems, that resulted from the introduction of the horse and gun from Euro-American explorers and traders and the consequent rapid acculturation of many groups to the stereotypical Plains Indians (Keyser, 1979b) known from modern literature and film. This art is unlike any other Northwestern Plains style in that it depicts very realistic action scenes that show detail, movement, and the passage of time (Keyser, 1977a, 1984, 1986a). These scenes, representing warfare, horse stealing, coup counting, dancing, and hunting activities, were apparently made as a record of successful accomplishments, in a manner similar to ethnographically collected ledger book drawings and hide paintings (Rodee, 1965; Ewers, 1968; Peterson, 1971; Keyser, 1979b, 1986a).

Biographic art is remarkably similar in style across the northwestern Plains. A very few motifs appear to be restricted to ethnic groups (e.g. hourglass body style humans appear to be almost exclusively the product of Blackfeet and Cree artists) and different motifs are used by all artists to identify members of various ethnic groups (e.g. Crows, Cheyennes, Whitemen). Generally, however, this art resembles much of the material culture of Historic period Plains Indians in that it is so similar across the entire region that it cannot be identified with any specific tribe. Thus we must content ourselves with the knowledge that Biographic art drawn on perishable materials was produced by artists representing the Black-



Fig. 106 - Scene of «Fighting Warriors» at Castle Butte, Montana.

feet, Cree, Assiniboine, Sarcee, Gros Ventres, Dakota, Mandan, Hidatsa, Crow, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, Kiowa, Pawnee, Nez Perce, Shoshone, Arikara and other tribes. Likely all of these groups drew some examples of Biographic style rock art.

The detail in these Biographic drawings, coupled with their action orientation, creates a story line that produces a complex picture-writing which can be deciphered for many of these scenes. Recent work with ledger drawings, made and explained by Plains Indian artists incarcerated as prisoners of war in the late 1800s (Peterson, 1968, 1971), shows that many details of these Biographic scenes have a specific meaning, by which the original artist intended to communicate with members of his own and other groups. Using the «Rosetta Stone» quality of this historic ledger drawings, I recently constructed a lexicon for interpreting Biographic rock art (Keyser, 1986a). Use of this interpretative tool enables a much fuller understanding of these scenes and promises to increase their value for other anthropological study.

Summary: As indicated by the preceding discussion, Northwestern Plains rock art is a complex subject with major styles spanning at least the last 5000 years. Additionally, numerous sites still await discovery and study, and several suggested rock art styles in the region need additional work for substantiation (Buckles, 1964; Sundstrom, 1984a). Clearly this evidence obviates recent statements such as: «Most of the Northern and Central Great Plains rock art is of the historic period and can be placed roughly between 1750... and the end of the nineteenth century» (Grant, 1983, p. 49), that imply relatively recent origins and simple expressions of Northwestern Plains rock art (Gebhard, 1969, p. 22; Grant, 1967, p. 135). Also sites and site complexes such as Castle Gardens, Whoop-up

Canyon, and Dinwoody (Wyoming), Craven Canyon and the North Cave Hills (South Dakota), and upper Yellowstone River and Smith River (Montana) could easily be added to Writing-On-Stone (Alberta) as major rock art areas within this region (Anati, 1984, pp. 14-17).

Finally, many research problems are just beginning to be addressed using rock art data from the Northwestern Plains. Notable among these are recently completed studies or projects currently underway that focus on culture change and continuity (Gebhard, 1974; Conner, 1980; Keyser, 1979b, 1986a) and prehistoric symbolism (Sundstrom, 1984b; Loendorf & Porsche, 1985). This wealth of subject matter combined with active professional interest promises to greatly increase our knowledge and understanding of this topic in the future.

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