

# Thompson Wash: An Analysis of the Rock Art Panel on the South-facing Wall

François Gohier, January 2025

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## Summary:

The site: The panel being described here is on the south wall of the Thompson Wash rock art site, located in the Bookcliffs near the town of Thompson in eastern Utah. High on the wall is a frieze of Barrier Canyon Style (BCS) anthropomorphs in red paint. Below it is a row of Fremont-like anthropomorphs, two of them appearing very recent which seem to partially overlap the BCS images.

## Questions:

- a) Are the Fremont-like petroglyphs ancient, possibly dating from Fremont times?
- b) Why do two of them look very recent?
- c) Are these petroglyphs partially superimposed over the BCS figures?

Conclusions: Yes, the petroglyphs are ancient, but two of them have been re-pecked, most likely by the Utes, the latest culture to inhabit the area. And yes, there is partial superimposition of the Fremont petroglyphs over the Barrier Canyon Style painted images.

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This paper was presented at the 2013 URARA symposium in Moab, Utah. Some background information has been added to this Patina version (particularly concerning Noël Morss), as well as the reason why the author undertook this analysis in the first place. This is followed by a description of the method used to reach the above conclusions, with accompanying photographs.

Photographs Copyright François Gohier except Figure 7, courtesy of Dennis DeVore

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Noël Morss, a young archaeologist working with the Harvard Peabody Museum, defined the Fremont Culture in 1931 on the basis of field work he conducted in Utah in

1928 and 1929. He excavated a site near Boulder, several caves in Pleasant Creek, in Tantalus Creek, sites near Torrey including Fish Creek Cove Cave, and along the Fremont River near Fruita, an area that is now part of Capitol Reef National Park. Morss was familiar with the remains of the Basketmaker II and Puebloan cultures of Southern Utah and Northeast Arizona. He realized that “...*the Fremont drainage proved to be the seat of a distinctive culture, to which nearly all the local remains are to be assigned.*” (Morss 1931:iv). He called this culture “Fremont” (Morss 1931:77).

Morss noticed the numerous petroglyph panels adorning the cliffs in the vicinity of the sites he was excavating and logically attributed them to the “Fremonters”: “*This culture was characterized by (...) abundant pictographs of distinctive types...*” (Morss 1931:iv). During his 1929 field season, Morss travelled to Black Dragon Canyon, Nine Mile Canyon and Thompson Wash, again noticing the rock art. He was told that petroglyphs of a similar style had been observed in the Vernal area (Morss 1931:77).

The site which occupies us here is in Thompson Wash, Grand County, Utah, (Figure 1) often incorrectly named “Sego Canyon” (Sego Canyon is a tributary that joins Thompson Wash about a third of a mile upstream from the pictographs and petroglyphs site.) Today Thompson Wash is justly famous for the extensive Barrier Canyon Style figures painted on the east-facing cliff of a tall bluff. Nearby is also a Ute panel, and on the south-facing portion of the bluff (Figure 2) there is a series of petroglyphs below a line of faded red pictographs, the object of this paper.



Noël Morss' description of this last panel is quoted here:

*"The pictures are some 15 feet from the ground, a circumstance which has not prevented an ambitious gentleman from reaching them, presumably with the aid of a telegraph pole, to add his name."*



*“Series from three distinct periods are present. The first (...) is a line of rectangular-bodied, small-headed, unornamented figures of heroic size in dark paint which is now very dim. Superposed on the first series is a line of anthropomorphs in full pecking. Each consists merely of two inverted trapezoids for the head and body except that one figure has short, straight horns. Superposed on these, in turn, are two anthropomorphs in deep grooved outline of the same shape as the second series, but with typical Fremont treatments of the collar and waist. The second and third series are about life size. Mountain sheep and various peculiar designs which interfere with figures of the second series are as late or later than the third series.*

*“It is believed that we have here stratigraphic evidence of the development of Fremont art from Basket-maker or quasi Basket-maker prototypes.”* (Morss 1931:39; his photograph of the panel appears on Plate 14 of the monograph)

Today the figures in red paint that Morss attributed to “Basket-maker or quasi Basket-maker” are placed in the Barrier Canyon Style (BCS) as defined by Polly Schaafsma (1971), but his description of the panel remains valid.

Over the 90 years or so since the publication of that paper, Morss’ observation of the superposition of Fremont-like images over BCS-style images has been generally accepted, and photographs of the panel have occasionally been used to illustrate it. A recent example can be found in *Traces of Fremont* (Simms and Gohier 2010:91).

At the 2011 symposium of the Utah Rock Art Research Association in Price, Utah, a rock art researcher claimed that the Fremont-like images at Thompson Wash had in fact been made by the Utes, who had imitated Fremont images. People who followed Morss' interpretation had been uncritically accepting and perpetuating his erroneous conclusions. According to this researcher, the caption of the photograph published in *Traces of Fremont* was such an error.

This writer, Francois Gohier, was the author of the photograph and had suggested the caption. I had visited the Thompson Wash site several times and upon carefully looking at the panel had accepted Morss conclusions. Three days after the Price incident I returned to Thompson Wash to take close-up photographs of the panel: *What if indeed Noël Morss had been wrong, and we had also been mistaken?* The photographs were taken with a digital camera equipped with a full-frame 20 megapixel sensor attached to a 500 mm telephoto lens mounted on a tripod. At times a x1.4 teleconverter was added for an effective focal length of 700 mm. Post-processing included enhancement of some images with DStretch software. The results of this work were presented at the 2013 URARA symposium in Moab, Utah, and are developed here.

Several questions had to be addressed: Were the Fremont-like petroglyphs made in ancient time, or much more recently, possibly by the Utes? Why do two of the anthropomorphs look so "fresh"? And, if ancient and likely made by the Fremont, are they superimposed over the faded BCS paintings ?

It takes only a few photos to answer these questions and show that Noël Morss was right. Figure 3 shows the panel as it appears today; Figure 4 is a DStretch enhancement of the same photograph. Figure 5 is a closer look at the central portion of



Figure 3

the panel. On Figures 3 and 4 we see six Fremont-like petroglyphs placed lower on the wall than the dark red BCS pictographs. They are arranged more or less in a row, in Fremont fashion (remember the rows of anthropomorphs at Capitol Reef, McConkie Ranch and elsewhere). The two petroglyphs at the center of this frieze stand out as if made yesterday and are presumably the ones which led the Utah researcher to believe they were made by the Utes.



Figure 4



Figure 5

Focusing one's attention on these two figures and ignoring the four others (much more weathered but of similar shape that we associate with Fremont anthropomorphs)

is to discard important information. A close examination of the recent-looking figures shows that within them are elements of older and weathered pecking that are clearly part of the original image. The conclusion is clear. These figures are ancient and have been repecked. Can we prove it? Figure 6 provides the necessary details. The Fremont petroglyph, done in a manner closely reminiscent of the Classic Vernal Style (Schaafsma 1971) has been repecked but several original elements were omitted.



On this DStretch enhancement, the red BCS paint still appears red, the rock face has a tint of red and brown, the old original pecking appears in yellow, and the recent re-pecking in blue. The face and its details, including the "weeping eye" motif, have been re-pecked. The headdress consists of three "feathers" oriented to the right from the viewer's point of view. The right two have been re-pecked, but the left one has not. The

outlines of the shoulders and torso have been repecked, but two lines inside the torso and parallel to its outline have not. The necklace and pendants have also been repecked.

The DStretch enhancement also shows a fringe of yellow along the repecking which appears in blue. The repecking was done with a sharp instrument, while the original figure was made with a blunter instrument, likely a stone chisel, and the ancient groove is wider and less sharply defined than the recent repecking. All of this indicates that the figure has been “refreshed” in the not-too-distant past with some of the details omitted.

This answers one of the questions: the two central images are fresh-looking because they have been repecked, whether by the Utes or by other persons. There is every reason to believe that the row of six Fremont-like anthropomorphs was made by Fremont people, who lived in the area and traveled through it. On the basis of excavations at the Turner-Look Site, located near the mouth of Diamond Creek in the Book Cliffs, Marie Wormington declared: *“The writer is convinced that a phase of the Fremont Culture is also represented at the Turner-Look Site near Cisco, Utah...”* (Wormington 1955:164). Figure 7, courtesy of Dennis DeVore, shows a Fremont anthropomorph photographed in Diamond Creek. It wears a simple two-strand necklace. As the crow flies the Turner-Look Site is only about 20 miles east of Thompson Wash. Farther away to the northwest, a figure in Range Creek is adorned with a necklace consisting of several strands of material with dangling pendants quite

similar to those of the Thompson Wash anthropomorphs (Figure 8). Necklaces of one style or another were popular among the Fremont and one has only to leaf through books such as Castleton's *Petroglyphs and Pictographs of Utah* (and many others), to appreciate the diversity of this particular item.



Photo Credit: Dennis DeVore

Figure 7



Figure 8

Now to the last question: are these petroglyphs superimposed on the Barrier Canyon Style images? Figure 6, a close-up, again provides the answer but it's useful to take a wider view with Figures 9, 10 and 11. The paint of the BCS figures has run below the figures themselves and stained the rock, either when it was fresh or over time under the action of the rain. But this red stain does not cover the pecked lines of the Fremont anthropomorphs. A particularly telling example is the rightmost anthropomorph on Figures 10 and 11: because it was placed over the BCS figure, the "face" itself appears



red, but the pecked lines forming the contour of the head do not have any red on them. This indicates that the Fremont images were made long after the BCS images, since the red paint had ceased to run and stain the cliff. The Fremont images were indeed pecked over the BCS paintings.



What about the other recent-looking petroglyphs found on this panel, which, as Morss put it, “interfere” with the Fremont images? They may be, for the most part, recent, although the sheep on Figure 12 may also be a repected Fremont petroglyph. As Morss remarked, the panel is high above the present ground. However, on Figure 2 a person stands on a large chunk of rock which at one time formed a shelf just under the petroglyphs, as evidenced by the light-colored scar on the cliff. The shelf was certainly there when the ancient artists created the images, was there when people repected the Fremont petroglyphs, and when visitors carved their names on the cliff. It was still attached by the dates that can be deciphered: either 1884 on the left side (the last digit is poorly made) and or, 1887 (Figures 12 and 13). By the time of Morss’ visit in 1929 the shelf has fallen, perhaps as a consequence of the vibrations induced by a freight train that carried coal from a mine in Seego Canyon to the town of Thompson

Springs a few miles down the valley which operated from 1911 until 1947. Researchers familiar with the rock art of Utah have expressed to this author the opinion that the Utes imitated Fremont petroglyphs. In the present case, they are thought to be the authors of the repecking.



The conclusions of this analysis are summarized at the beginning of this paper. Noël Morss' 1931 publication is a fascinating read. It takes us to a bygone era of exploration and discovery. Morss proved to be a careful observer in identifying the Fremont as distinct from the Basketmakers and Puebloans of southern Utah and northern Arizona, and for the purpose of this paper, was right in his analysis of the images on the south wall of the great Thompson Wash site.



Figure 12

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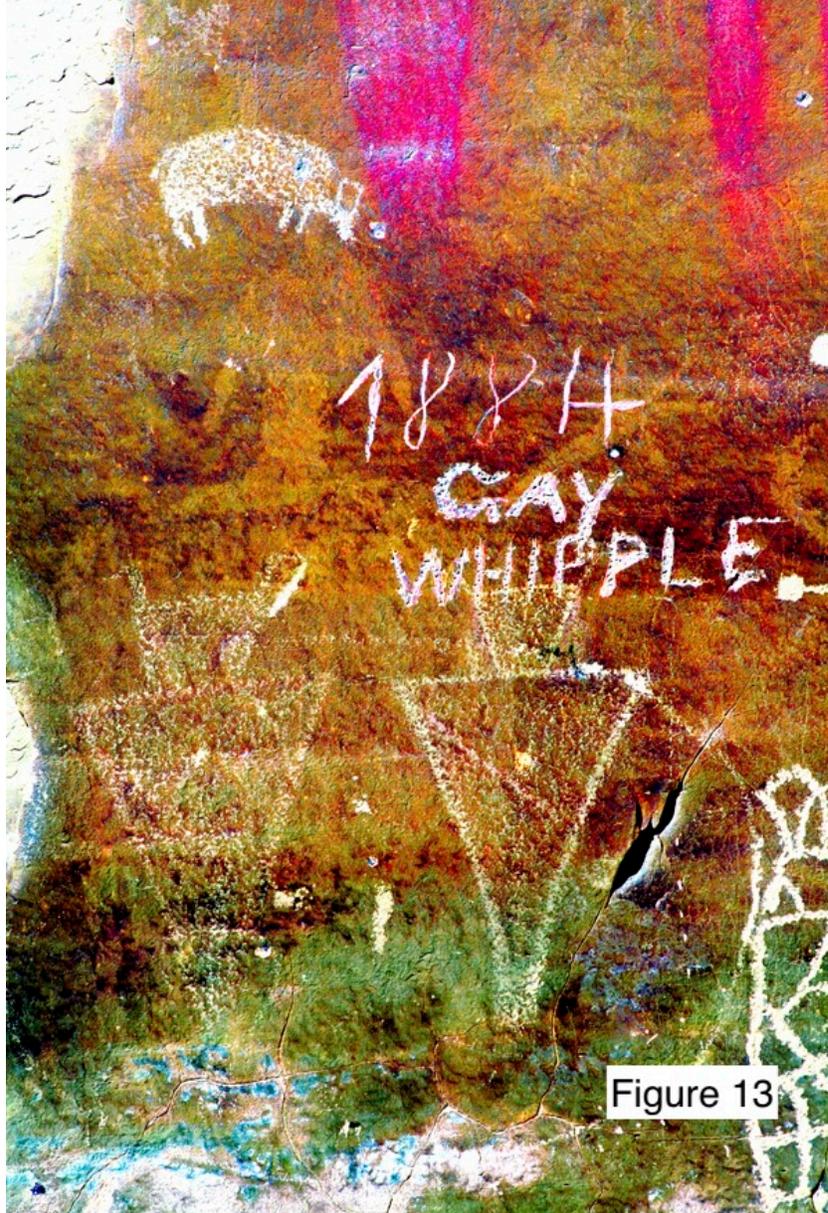


Figure 13