

EXPANDING THE AERIAL DISTRIBUTION OF BARRIER CANYON
STYLE ROCK ART

BY

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In the eastern portion of central Utah, in an area now part of Canyonlands National Park, there is a series of spectacular paintings of prehistoric Indian art thought by many to be the most spectacular in all of North America. These panels painted on the cliff walls have been well-known for many years as the Barrier Canyon rock art panels. But it was not until 1971 that Polly Schaafsma in her book, "The Rock Art of Utah" assigned the specific name "Barrier Canyon" to a particular style of rock art which these are the prime examples. Schaafsma originally located 19 Barrier Canyon Style sites in her study (Schaafsma 1971:68). Since 1970, I have located and photographed over 75 panels of Barrier Canyon Style rock art. Some are previously unreported pictographs that are just as spectacular and impressive as those in Barrier Canyon itself.

Schaafsma, in her study and in her later work, "Rock Art of the Southwest" defined the distribution of the Barrier Canyon Style as a small area in southeastern Utah. The area's boundaries extended from Moab on the east to Salina Canyon on the west, and from Hite on the south to approximately Green River on the north (See Map 1).

The new sites extend the distribution of this style over a far greater range. The northernmost Barrier Canyon sites I have observed are in the vicinity of Dinosaur National Park, near Wyoming. These sites are located near McKee Springs, Cub Creek and Lapoint. The site at McKee Springs is a north-facing, small rock shelter. It consists of at least three anthropomorphs painted with the typical red-violet pigment of the Barrier Canyon Style. Only one of these figures is distinct. A mountain sheep has been scratched over one or more of the figures. The third anthropomorph is so close to the northern edge of the overhang that rain has eroded most of the figure. An outstretched arm and hand, typical of many Barrier Canyon figures is still visible, however (Fig. 1).

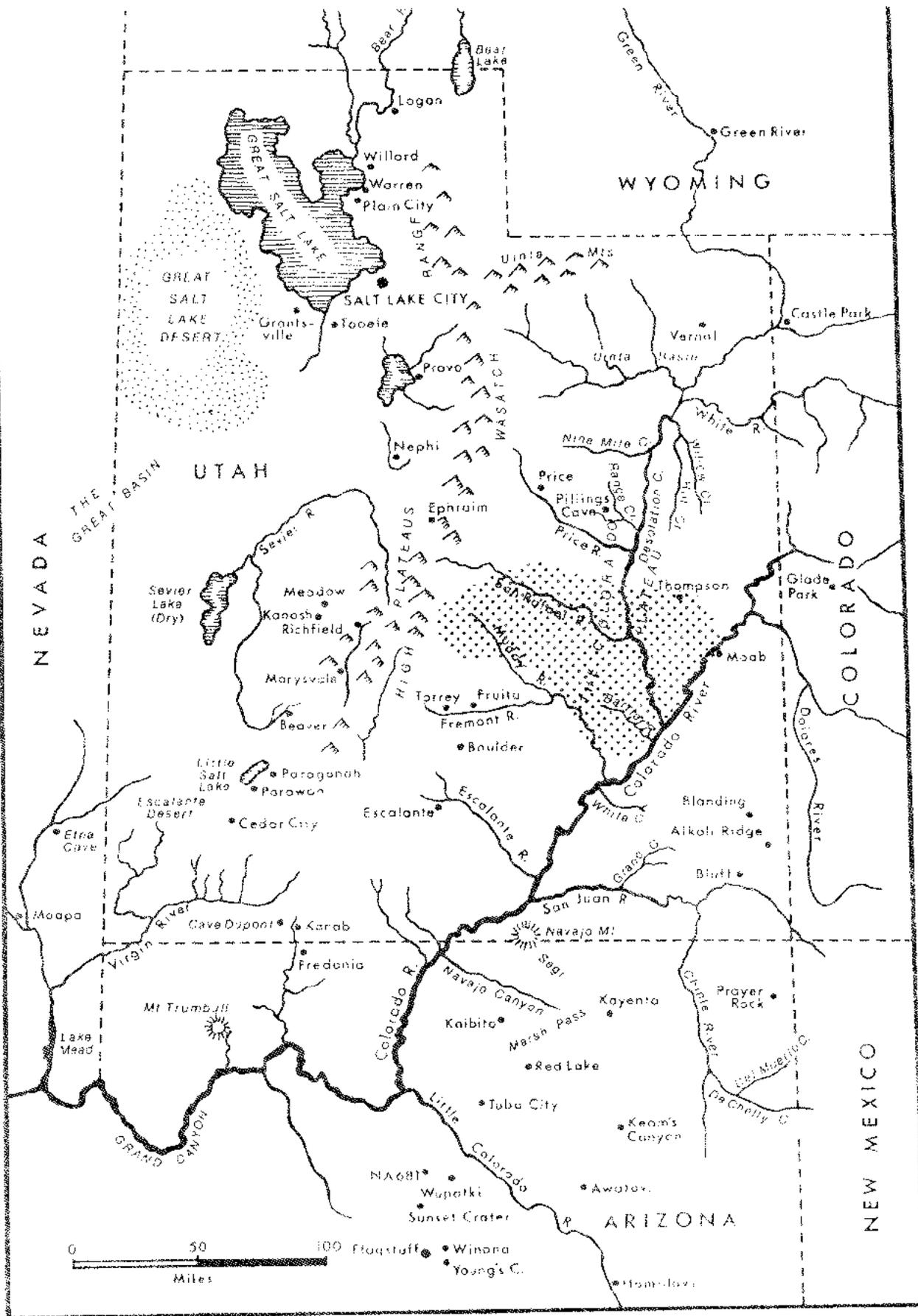
The panel along Cub Creek is very high and totally inaccessible today. It consists of 4 anthropomorphs, each painted in a different color. One figure has 2 outstretched arms similar to one in lower Ferron Canyon in central Utah.

The third site is near Lapoint in a large rock shelter above a seep. Numerous figures are painted here in varying colors, but many have later figures superimposed on the original paintings. The majority of panels appear to be Fremont but there is evidence of Barrier Canyon influence here as well.

The westernmost site is in Salina Canyon, near Sudden Shelter, an archaeological site excavated in 1974 by the University of Utah. The large rock shelter yielded radio carbon dates from approximately 8385 BP to 3055 BP. Schaafsma described the site as follows: "This panel consists primarily of seven anthropomorphic forms painted in a red-brown color, and all are considerably faded. Six of these forms are arranged in groups around a single central large anthropomorph which is quite plain except for the presence of antennae head gear. The head of this figure is also flanked on either side by a circle-dot motif. A large set of concentric circles painted in bright red also occurs below this group. The bright color...and its absence in other Barrier Canyon Style paintings make its contemporaneity with other figures questionable." (Schaafsma, 1971:72).

I closely inspected this panel and found Schaafsma's description incorrect in several respects, as seen from Figure 2 (which is a scale drawing of the panel). I observed, for example, that the "circle-dot motif" actually represents the eyes of the figure and are not drawn on the sides of the head. The head, which has a distinctive shape typical of figures of this style in the San Raphael area, is a faint, light pink color, and was obviously missed by both Schaafsma and Taylor who were not acquainted with this stylistic feature.

This site also represents one of the prime examples of the covering over of Barrier Canyon Style figures with pigment or paint. The original figures were painted with a red-violet-brown paint that appears to have been applied with a brush. The paint used was very fluid as suggested by the pigment which covers completely the sandstone surface. The paint gives the appearance of having flowed over the rough surface filling the depressions between the sand grains and



Map 1. Areal distribution of the Barrier Canyon Style, as shown by Schaafsma, 1971.



Figure 1

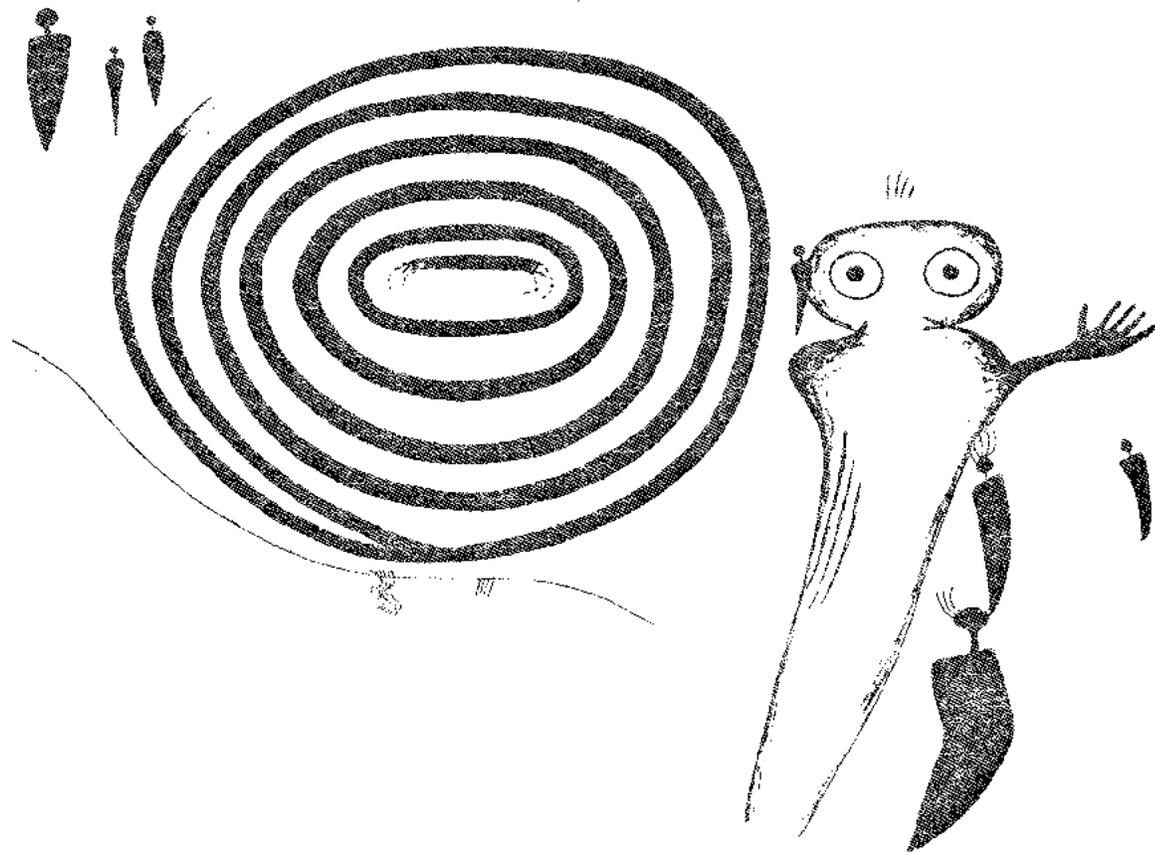


Figure 2

surface bumps. The figures subsequently were covered with a pigment of a brighter red color. This red pigment was applied differently than the original paint. It seems to have been a solid piece of pigment since it did not flow into the surface depressions but rather appears to have been smeared over the sandstone. It may never be known why the earlier figures were covered or by whom, but this same obliteration at other Barrier Canyon sites throughout the area has been observed. The fact that this has been done consistently at many other Barrier Canyon Style sites over the entire range of this style indicates that this was not a local phenomenon.

The easternmost Barrier Canyon Style sites are located in Colorado southeast of Rangely and north of Grand Junction. Probably the best known are in the Douglas Creek Drainage. The most notable of the Barrier Canyon Style sites here is probably the panel in Moon Canyon. This site consists of a series of red-painted anthropomorphs with interior body decoration. There are also several petroglyphs and blue-painted figures. The red figures and the cliff face surrounding these appear to have been defaced either by use of a hammer stone or else stones thrown against the cliff. The surface defacement appears the same as at many other Barrier Canyon Style sites, most notably the Great Gallery in Horseshoe Canyon.

The easternmost site is located in Douglas Creek at a private ranch. The figures are in a high, inaccessible rock shelter above a corral. There are also some figures in the corral that have been mostly destroyed by cattle rubbing against them. The high panel consists of 4 anthropomorphs again painted in red-violet pigment along with other badly eroded figures (Fig. 3). The central figure has painted over it a typical Barrier Canyon Style anthropomorph with large white eyes. It appears that before this figure was painted an attempt was made to obliterate the underlying figure by rubbing a stone across it. The combination of the two figures by approxamite size appears similar to the panel at Temple Mountain Wash near Green River, Utah.

In the southernmost range of the Barrier Canyon Style, some very interesting things appear to have taken place. In Escalante, Utah, and in the Grand Canyon, for example, there are sites where combinations of Barrier Canyon Style and Chihuahuan Polychrome Abstract and Chumash-like Styles of rock art appear.

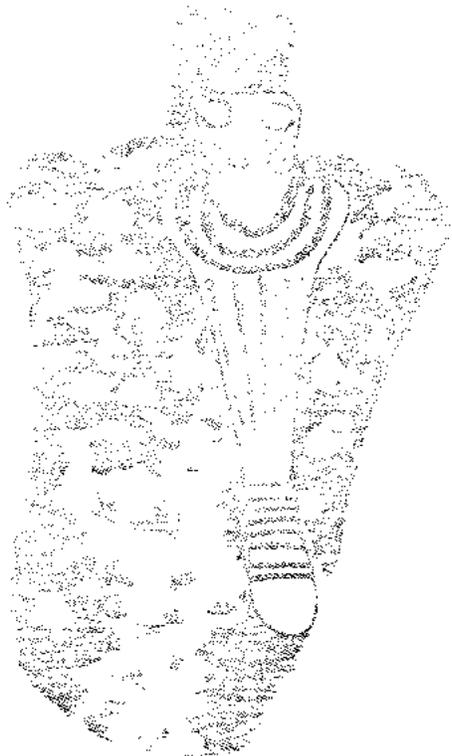


Figure 3

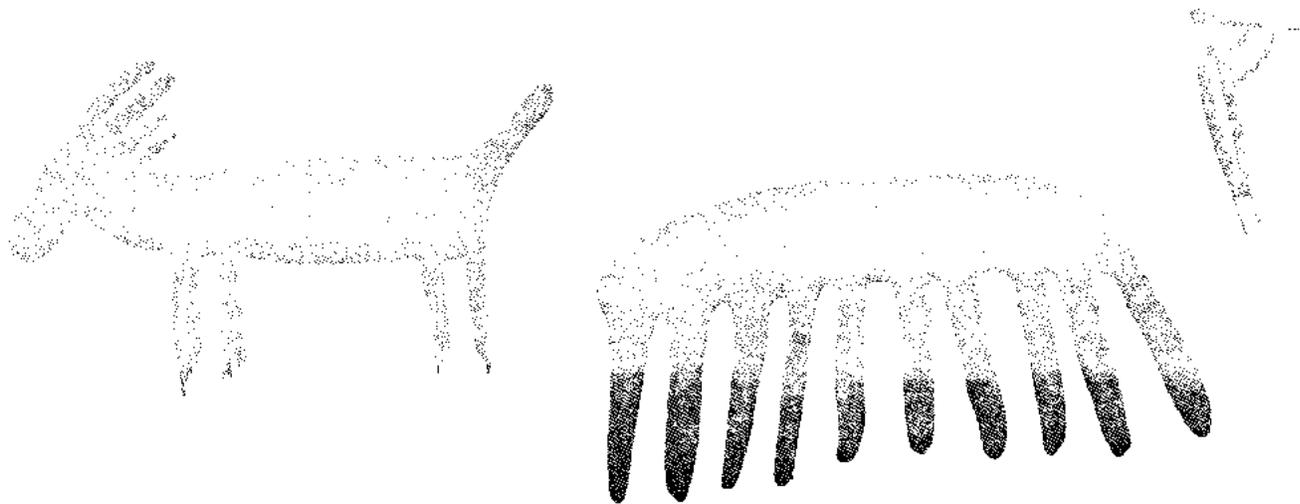


Figure 4

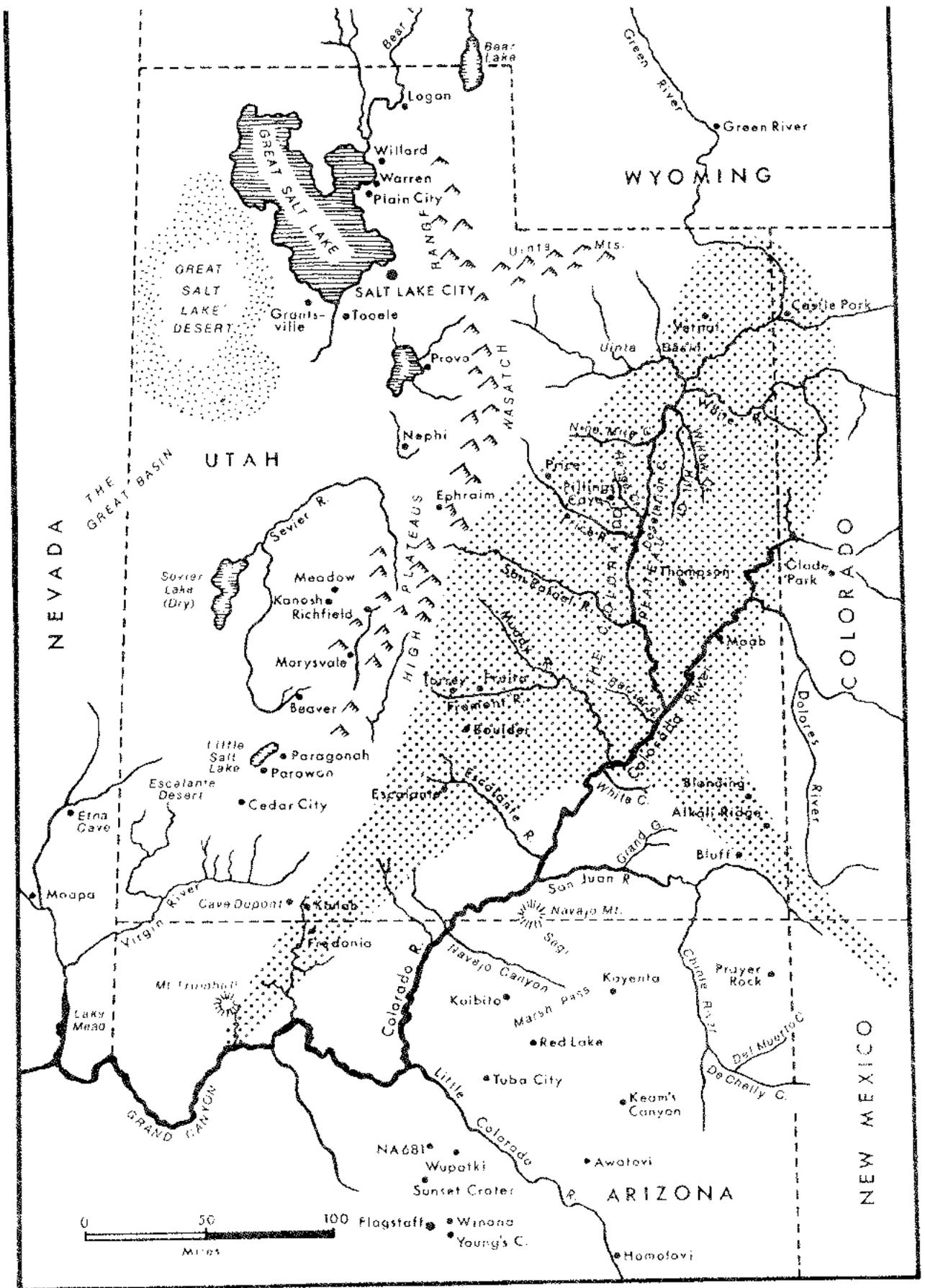
In the Escalante Drainage, the most well-known Barrier Canyon Style site is in The Gulch. This site, however, does not exhibit the well-ordered design that characterizes so much of the Barrier Canyon Style rock art. The figures are crowded closely together, sometimes overlapping. Yet the shape of the figures are unmistakably Barrier Canyon, and yet they were combined with what Schaafsma describes as the Chihuahuan Polychrome Abstract Style.

Three additional sites in the Escalante Drainage, also combine both Chihuahuan Polychrome Abstract and Barrier Canyon Styles on the same panels. These all appear to have been painted by the same people at roughly the same time because the color and context are very similar.

The Barrier Canyon Style site near the Grand Canyon is somewhat similar to The Gulch panel where the figures are crowded and overlapping. The number of Barrier Canyon Style attributes in this panel, however, is even greater than that in The Gulch, despite the fact that it is farther south. The panel contains a row of small animals along the side of one of the figures in the same manner as those in the San Raphael Reef. In contrast, I observed no small animals in the Escalante River panels. There is also a small panel of very articulated figures, another diagnostic trait of the Barrier Canyon Style.

Investigations involving the interrelationships of the Chihuahuan Polychrome Abstract, Chumash-like and Barrier Canyon Styles, especially in terms of providing dates are currently in progress. Perhaps the most exciting discovery is that recently, we found a small panel of rock art in Chaco Canyon that resembles the Barrier Canyon Style. The panel consists of three small red-painted figures (Fig. 4), a mountain sheep, cloud symbol (identical to one located in the High Gallery in Barrier Canyon), and a flute player. It is located above a petroglyph panel and under a small ledge. The flute player is only about 1 1/2 inches tall. The figures are painted in the typical dark violet-red-brown color and as with Barrier Canyon Style rock art in Moon Canyon, Barrier Canyon, Temple Mountain, Douglas Creek and similar sites, there are pecking marks over the painted figures, as if an attempt had been made to obliterate or deface the panel.

This discovery of a possible Barrier Canyon Style painting in Chaco Canyon leads to many questions. The panel's location close to Atlatl Cave, which contains Basketmaker pictographs identical to several found in Utah raises interesting questions about the relationship between Barrier Canyon and Anasazi artists.



Map 2. Areal distribution of the Barrier Canyon Style, as shown by Manning, 1985.

In conclusion the Barrier Canyon Style rock art has a far greater aerial extent than previously known (See Map 2). Undoubtedly additional Barrier Canyon Style sites will yet be located. A detailed analysis is currently under way to determine aerial variation, possible sub-styles, and perhaps a chronology. Also, it may be possible to determine if the Barrier Canyon Style artists had contact with other cultures and incorporated their ideas into the Barrier Canyon Style rock art. From this we may be able more firmly to place the Barrier Canyon Style within a definitive time frame.

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