

CLEFT CAVE:

A UNIQUE PANEL OF PETROGLYPHS IN SOUTHERN UTAH

BY

PHIL G. GARN

In Southern Utah, near the Arizona border, there is a panel of petroglyphs unlike any other I have seen. The overall characteristic of the panel, its organization, and the individual elements it displays are unlike those on eight other panels at three nearby sites. I am aware of twelve additional sites in the area that are within a reasonable distance from this unique panel to be included in the same cultural area. Unfortunately, we cannot date rock art. Therefore, to say all these panels were created at the same time would be spurious. However, it can be stated that anthropomorphs, zoomorphs, and masks are the dominate features of the other panels while none of these appear on this unique panel.

In the immediate area of this panel are found tumbled down rock shelters, hand holes in the cliff, lithic scatter, and potsherds--both corrugated grey and polychrome. Nearby is a large boulder that has been raised, dolmen-like, off the bedrock and supported on a pedestal of smaller boulders. See Figure 1. These features indicate both habitation and extensive human use of the area.

I first discovered this site many years ago. When I checked maps at the BLM District Office responsible for administration of the area, I discovered that this, and other nearby sites were not recorded. The BLM archaeologist was unaware of the site also. The region surrounding this site was designated as a Primitive Area in 1969, and has recently been declared a Wilderness Area. Such designations have focused new attention on the area and caused a steady increase in recreational use by backpackers. As a result of this impaction others have independently discovered the site. Surface artifacts are now rare and one pot hole has been dug, which I filled in so not to attract further attention to the site.

This unique panel of petroglyphs is found in an outcrop of sandstone. A large section of the sandstone has cleaved away from the main mass leaving a narrow cleft between. When seen from a distance this cleft resembles a cave, therefore, I have named the site Cleft Cave. The cleft runs east for 18.3 meters, then makes a right angle turn and runs south for 25 meters. The panel is on the south wall of the east-west cleft. Opposite the panel on the north wall are some petroglyphs that look like bird tracks. The cleft is about 1.2 meters wide and even with a wide angle lens several exposures are necessary to photographically record the panel. The panel is 3.8 meters long, 2.4 meters high, and it begins 46 centimeters off the ground. See Figure 2.

The sandstone panel is quite soft and, consequently, the glyphs are weathered. Stratification of the sandstone is evident with the harder layers, which are more resistant to erosion, forming horizontal lines across the panel.

These horizontal lines appear to serve as baselines for some of the glyphs. This orderly arrangement, as well as the uniqueness of the glyphs, gives me the impression the panel was a deliberate attempt at writing in some unknown alphabet or logogram.

The opening of Cleft Cave faces due west and there is a short inclined gap to the east, so it is possible the glyphs organized along the horizontal strata lines might be illuminated in an orderly sequence at sunrise or sunset, on one of the solstices, or at equinox. There is a similar cave, called Crack Cave, in Southeast Colorado, where equinox sunrise illuminates individual groups of glyphs. William McGlone and Phillip Leonard have extensively studied and reported on that site. (1) Because of many similarities between Crack Cave in Southeastern Colorado and Cleft Cave in Southern Utah, including the presence of a dolmen, I feel a study of Cleft Cave at equinox or on solstice is merited.

The main panel of the south wall of Cleft Cave is divided generally into a right and left portion by a long, broken, vertical line carved into the rock. See "A"-Figure 3. On the upper left side of the panel are three rows of dots separated by strata lines in the sandstone. The first row has four dots, the second row has five dots, and the third row has six dots. Each succeeding row has added to it, one more dot than the preceding row. Just below the three rows of dots is a chain of fifteen links. Fifteen is the sum of the dots in the three rows above the chain. The sandstone has now exfoliated onto the edge of one of the links. This observation is made by comparing the panel as it is today with photographs I took twenty years ago before the exfoliation occurred. Whether the exfoliation is due to vandalism or a result of weathering cannot be determined since, in some spots, the rock is very friable. See "B"-Figure 3. Another unusual glyph is found on the lower left side of the panel. I have named this glyph "cattle brand" for lack of a better descriptive term and call it the "Thorned-Lazy Treble Clef". See "C"-Figure 3. On the right side of the panel are two spirals. From the inside to the outside they progress clockwise. See "D"-Figure 3. Also on the right side is a cupule followed by a row of twenty-three dots. It is located just below some horizontal strata lines. See "E"-Figure 3. Just below the row of dots are some linear glyphs and another spiral which, moving from the center to the perimeter, also rotates clockwise. See "F"-Figure 3. Another staggered vertical glyph further divides the right part of the panel into two portions. See "G"-Figure 3. To the right of this vertical division line is a rectangle divided into twelve sections. See "H"-Figure 3. Another horizontal row of glyphs crosses the entire panel near the bottom, and in places again uses the strata lines in the rock as a base line. The vertical glyph separating the panel into a right and left portion ("A"-Figure 3), has been broken to allow this row of glyphs to continue across the panel from left to the right side without interruption. This set of glyphs is best described as curvilinear and rectilinear elements. See "I"-Figure 3.

There are two glyphs constructed by incising small vertical lines above, below, or through the horizontal strata lines. One of these is on the left side and other is on the right side of the panel. See "J" and "K"-Figure 3.

The orderly arrangement and overall uniqueness of the panel in Cleft Cave, as compared to other panels in the area makes this panel an important candidate for further study, by those interested in both decipherment and archaeoastronomy. Study should be undertaken before further vandalism and/or exfoliation occurs at the site.

REFERENCES

- McGLONE, WILLIAM R. and LEONARD, PHILLIP M.
1986 Ancient Celtic America. Fresno, California: Panorama West Books.

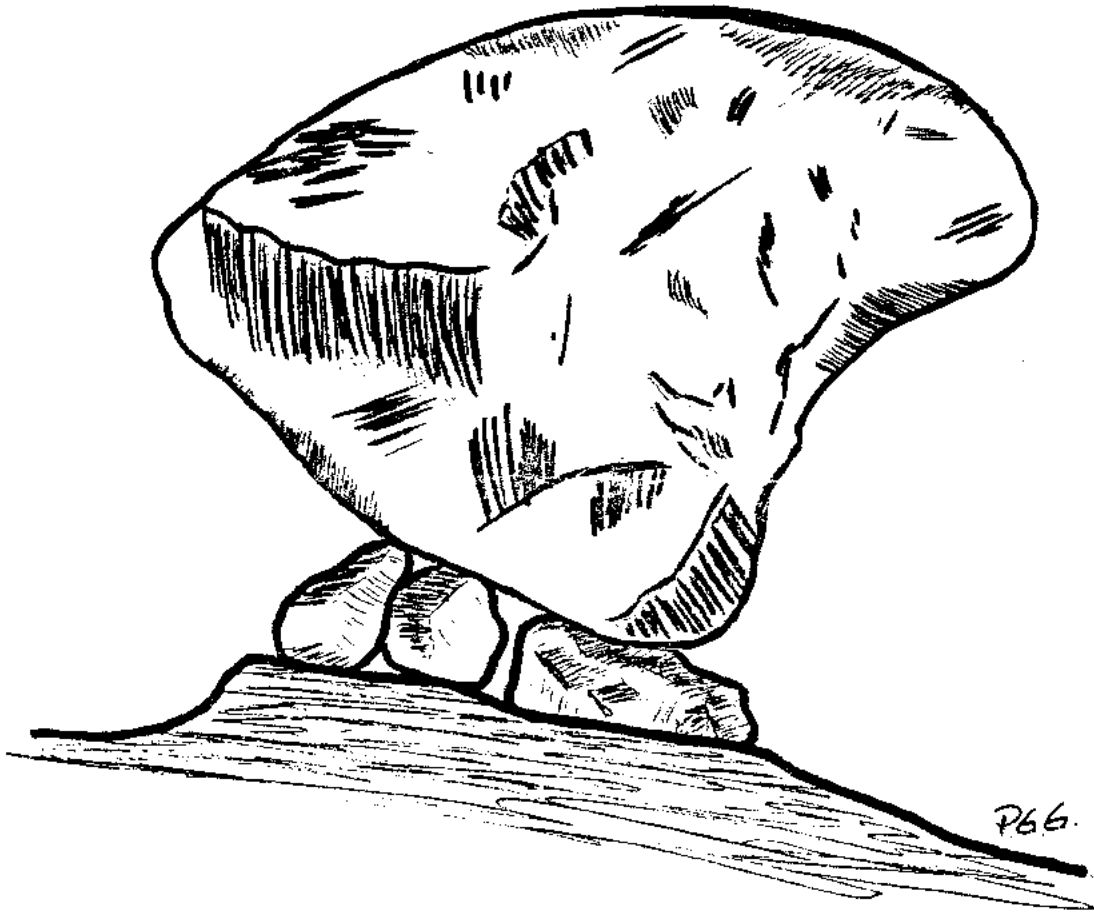


Figure 1

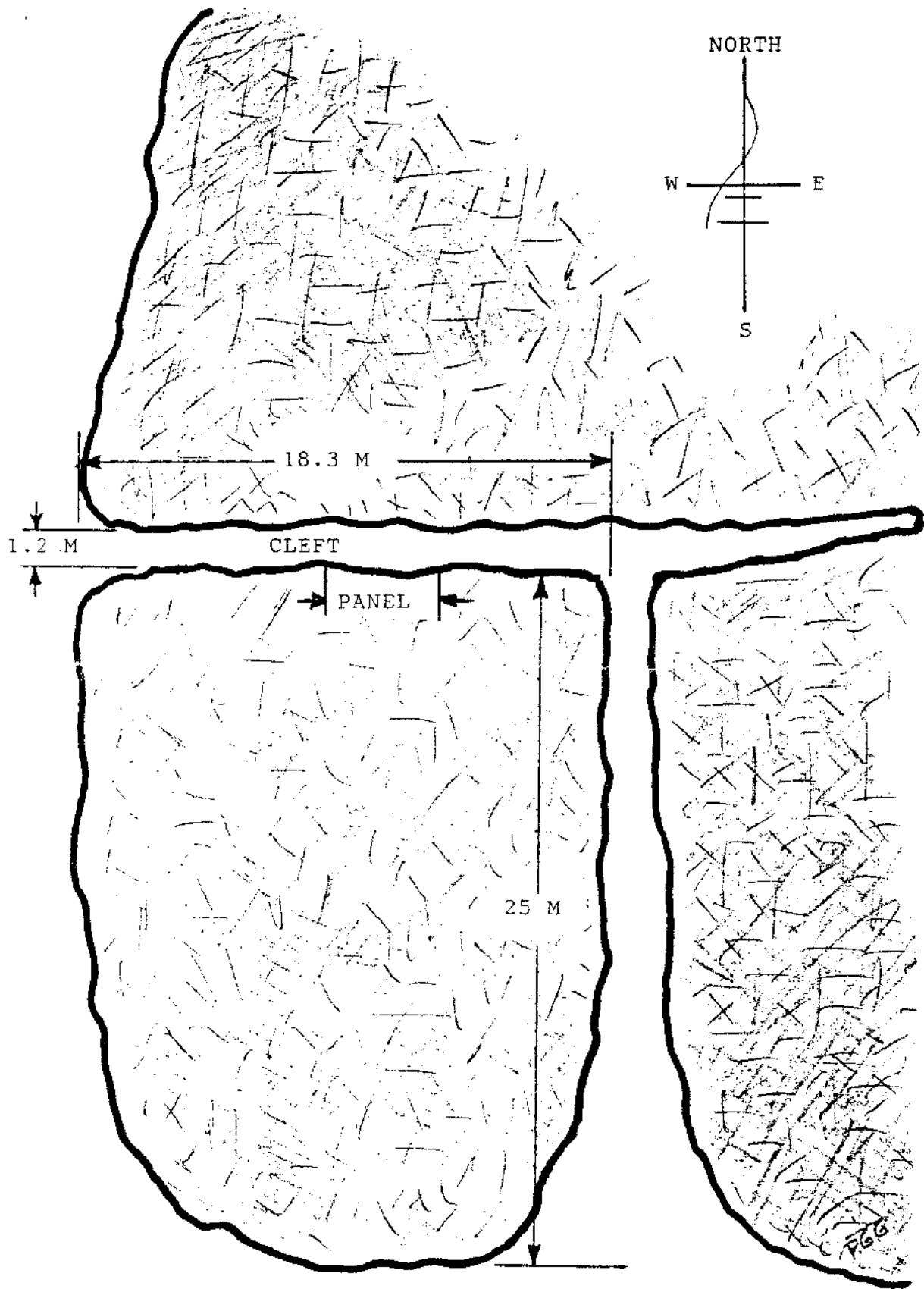
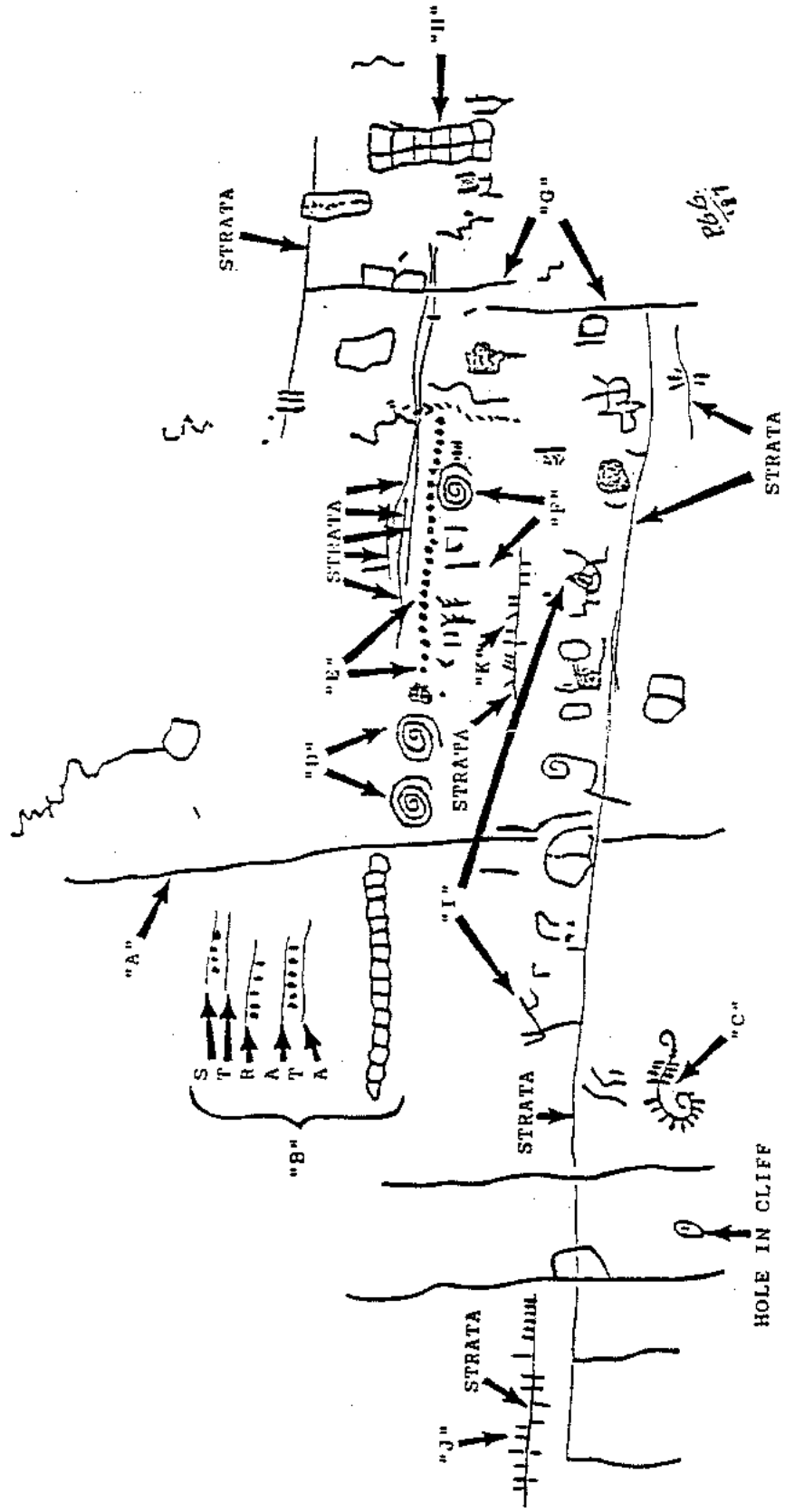


Figure 2



UNIQUE PANEL OF PETROGLYPHS IN CLEFT CAVE
Figure 3