

## **SUNBIRDS:**

### **A POSSIBLE SYMBOL OF TRANSFORMATION**

**BY**

**JESSE E. WARNER**

While looking at examples of birds to get information for the series on "Problems in Concept Identification and Interpretation", several interesting concepts were found to be associated with birds. Many contexts showed concepts that included hunting, subsistence, fertility, and shamanic transformation. Incorporated with some of these bird concepts was another association that stood out. These examples had an extremely wide range of diversity in both form and context. For a general category we have referred to them as "Sunbirds".

The term Sunbird is based on the fact that solar-related symbols were incorporated into the form of the bird, attached to them, or bird-like aspects were used to form part of several solar symbols. The form of these symbols and the way they were incorporated helps to create different categories for consideration. Because of the diversity not all the examples in Figure 1.1 and 1.2 may be solar related. The examples that were included had to meet two criteria: they had to have a solar symbolism and bird-like attributes.

In Figure 1.1, 1.2, some of the solar symbols occur as the head, or a part of it. Other solar symbols occur as the body itself, within the body, or attached to it. Some figures have a solar symbol as the tail. Some of the feathers on some of these birds are very suggestive of sun rays. There are several solar symbols with only a partially rayed circumference. Figure 1.1 N does not have an obvious solar relationship. There is no dot or circle within the circular body or sunray-like feathers, yet it is also felt to be related to a solar philosophy. That possibility was identified by discovering the fact that it interacts with light and shadow on both Summer Solstice and Equinox (Fig. 2).

At Summer Solstice a block of stone creates a shadow that cups the body in a very precise manner. On Equinox, however, a notch below that block creates a notch of light that also cups the body, forming an exact opposite interaction (Fig. 2.1 A,B). This relationship is unique. The interaction here is calendrical, but the glyph itself is not. It is not that of an obvious sun or identifiable solar symbol, but what is felt to be an abstract bird. The identification of Figure 1.1 N as a bird was considered in a previous paper (Warner 1988A). Because of the solar interaction it can probably be considered as a solar related bird. Figure 1.1 O is not far from Figure 1.1 N on Stansbury Island and has a similarly constructed body.

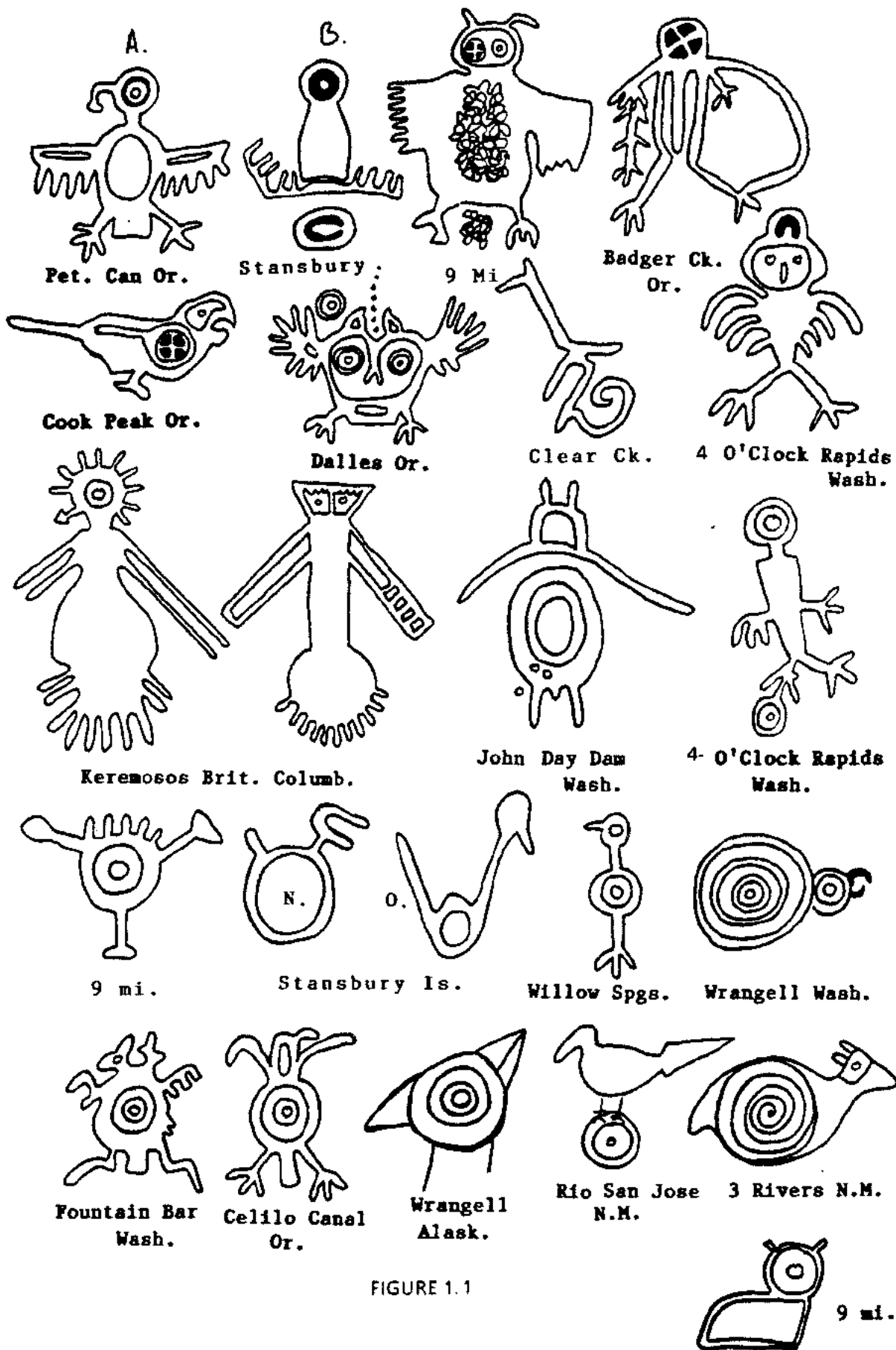


FIGURE 1.1

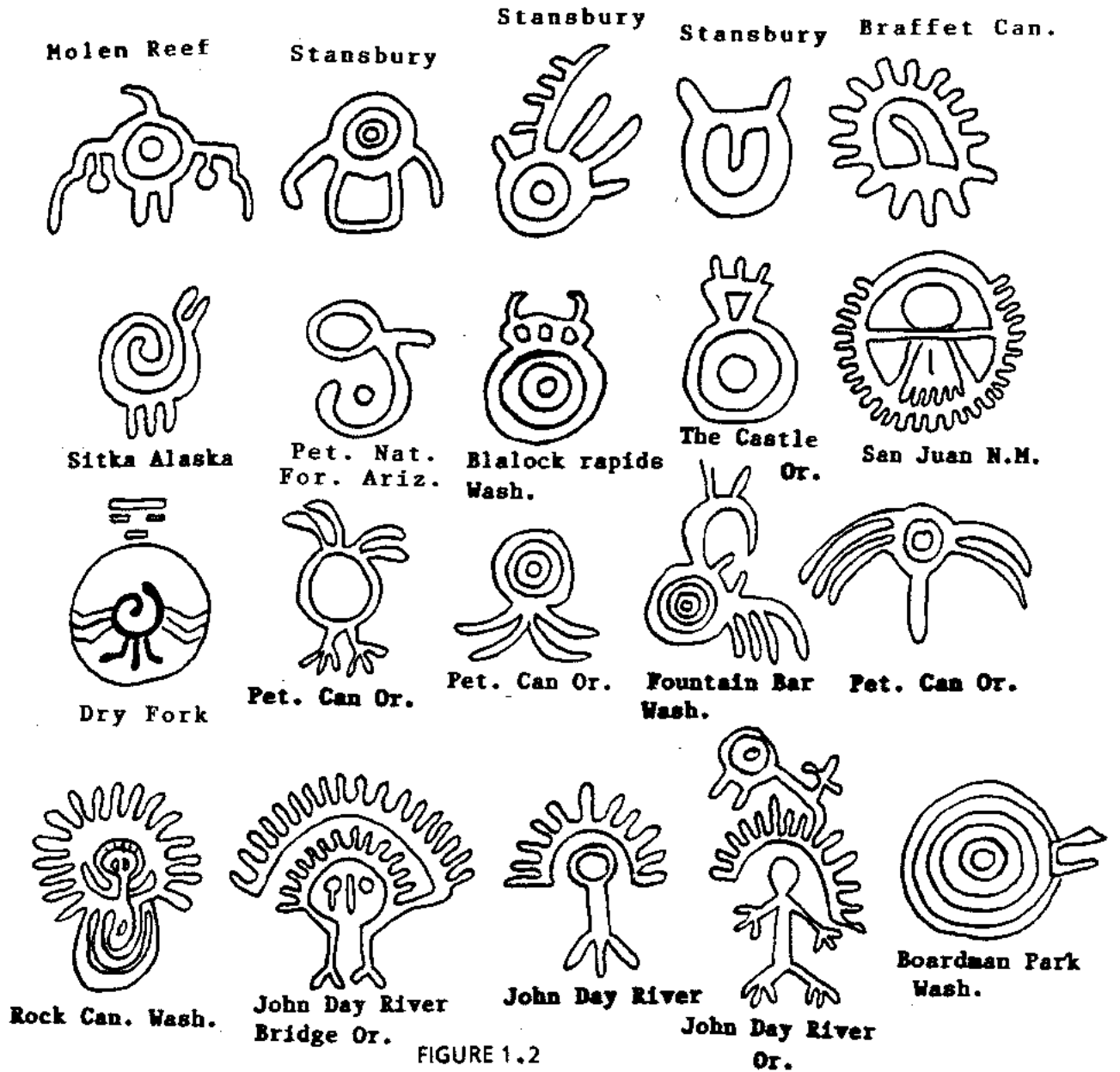


FIGURE 1.2

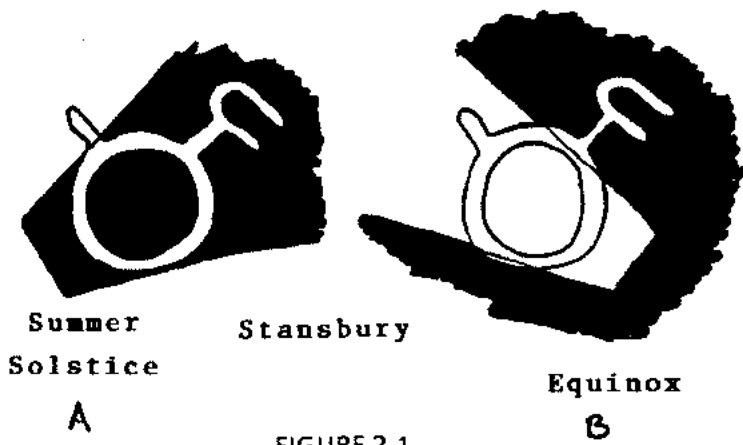
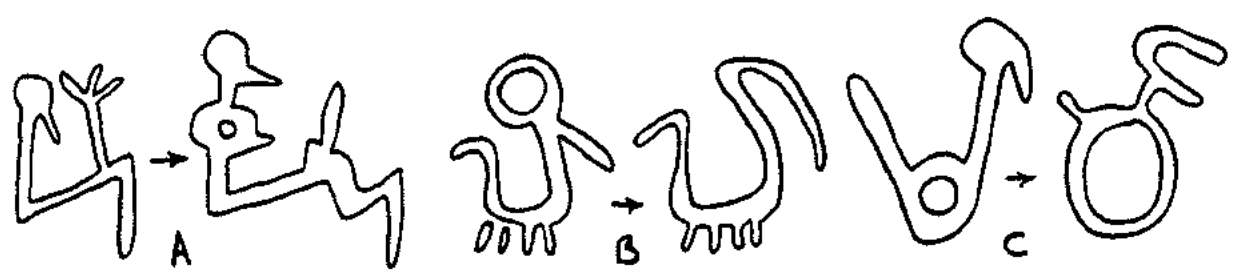


FIGURE 2.1



Stansbury

FIGURE 2.2

Figure 1.1 O provides a more naturalistic form that may help establish the possibility for Figure 1.1 N as a stylized bird. Other more stylized to abstract birds on Stansbury Island also help establish a pattern for this type of stylization (Fig. 2.2 A-C). Because of their similarity and the fact that Figure 1.1 N is an interactor, are we to take it as also representing a similar solar related concept? There are four other birds at that site (totaling five) that have solar associated symbolism.

There are many different symbols that can be used to portray the sun. Some of these include spirals, circles, concentric or dot-centered circles, quartered or rayed circles or spirals. One of the reasons we find some problems with some interpretations and thus try to restrict ourselves to just identifying concepts is that each of these symbols themselves have many different meanings. Each of these elements will change their meaning, function or intent with each different application. In other words, no two examples of the same symbol will always have the exact same meaning, depending on its use.

Thus, some "Sunbirds" may have very different meanings from each other, because they are so different in form, context, time and space. Yet one aspect they all share is a possible solar related philosophy. Let me illustrate a problem with interpretation. As an example, the spiral, a well accepted solar symbol in some instances, with or without being represented in a context depending on the consultant, the researcher's relationship with him, the researcher's need to know and the intent of the artist, the time of the day and year, and where the consultant was asked, each example could mean several different things. Some of these spirals, for instance, may indicate a shrine, represent a pond, spring, whirlpool, dust devil, represent a vulva, male reproduction and virility, fertility in general, a maze, emergence, the number of a specific migration or a migrational sequence, a directional indicator, the sun itself, a sequence of time, cyclical repetitions, infinity, eternity, innumerability, etc. (Warner 1988B). Many of these have a relationship to a solar philosophy. Some also have other, different symbolisms with additional meanings besides. These add to the complexity of the problems of proper specific concept identification. Thus not all bird-like spirals will have a solar symbolism.

Likewise, a circle or a dot-centered circle can have among its many meanings, a solar identity. Thus birds with a dot-centered circle head or body, among the other things they may represent, may be a bird associated with a solar related concept. These "Sunbirds" range from very naturalistic to totally abstract.

The possibility of associated solar symbolism does not end with figures that express an identifiable solar combination, or figures like the interacting Stansbury bird. There is another symbol that has a different relationship to both birds and a solar philosophy. At one point in our research we learned that U-Brackets were used for several different concepts. The most understandable was probably fertility (McGowen 1977, Warner 1984a). The next was probably an extension of the fertility concept with an application to hunting (Thomas 1976, Warner 1982). There was one unique association, however, that did not seem to have either of these concept

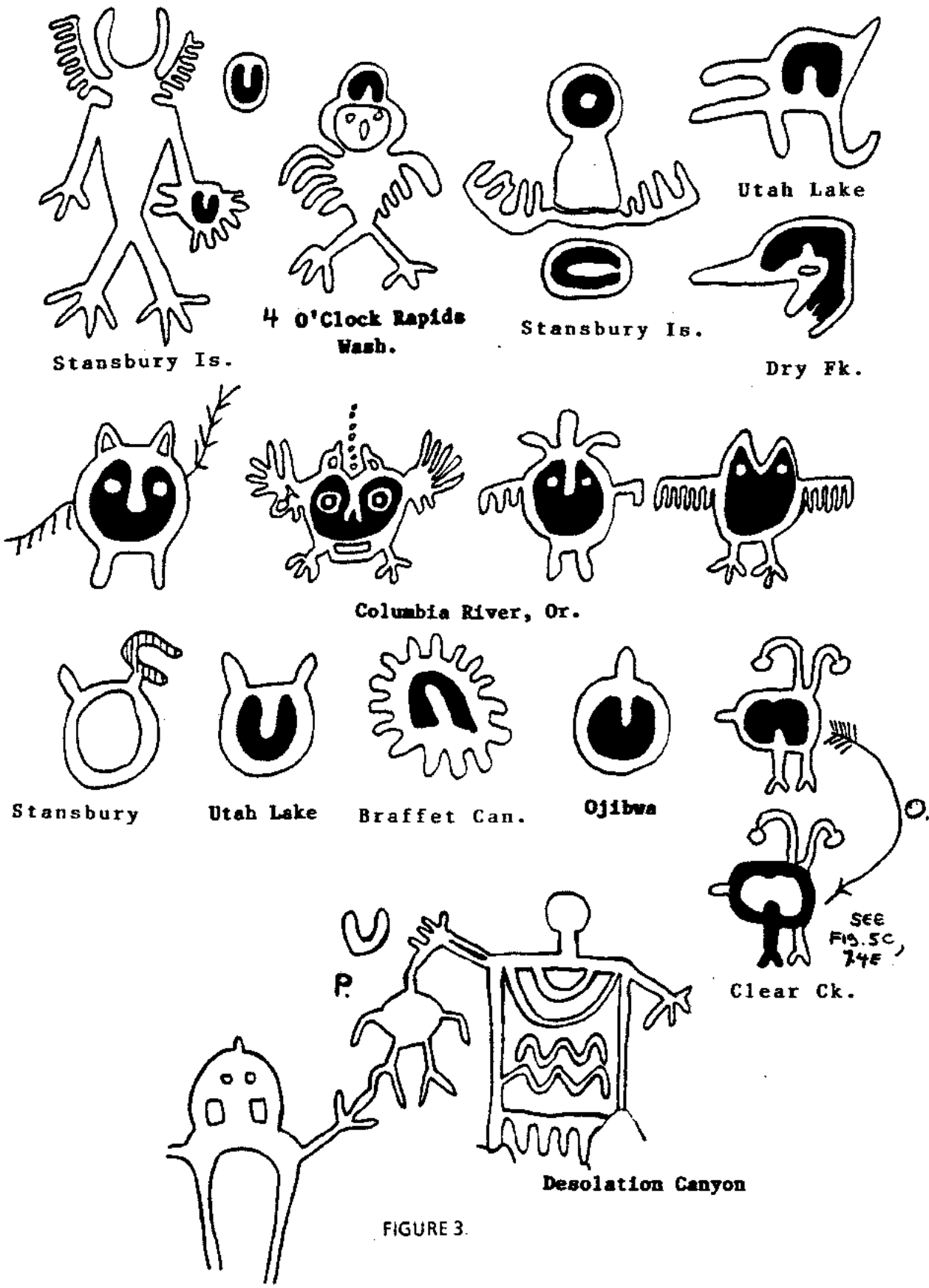


FIGURE 3.

applications (Warner 1984b). Several of these solar birds also have an association with a U-Bracket. The conclusion of the third presentation of the U-Bracketed contexts was based on the fact that U-Brackets occur next to several heads, or as the eyes or face of several anthropomorphs and bird-like figures, on shields, or totally isolated etc. (Warner 1984b). This context seems to establish an association with the concept of "eye" or "head" (Fig. 3). Because associations of the eye context occurred with bird as well as man, there was a dual nature which at that time, we could not determine, except that the U-Bracket feature was shared. This was mainly because of insufficient data. Only a few of these at that time had any obvious solar associations.

There were two different but likely reasons for this association. First, these U-Bracket faced or eyed figures could represent the identity of a specific group of individuals. Secondly, since both humans and birds "saw" with the "bird eye" or what ever that symbol could represent, the concept of the U-Bracket and sight must be related. That is, there must be a tie with both men and birds with U-Bracket eyes or what both saw with what the U-Bracket represented. A fertility or hunting concept just didn't seem to apply to those contexts. Thus there must also be another meaning for the U-Bracket, which may also be a further extension of the original meaning.

The bird like figures with patented U-Bracket bodies seem to encrypt a form shown in black (Fig. 3). This form is being considered as a variant of a Double Entity as well as a variant of U-bracket faced figures associated with the symbolism in Figure 3, 5, 6. After watching two panels in Pleasant Creek several very important facts were noted. This increased the understanding of these problems because of the way certain elements were formed and composed with different symbols that interact with light in a way to portray a similar but more complete context. On a Barrier Canyon Style panel figure A had an angle of light appear on its face, then several diagonally descending figures had an angle of light move from the mouth of one figure to the mouth of another (Fig. 4 B-C). Those figures were subsequently vandalized in what seems to be an attempt to obliterate them and the philosophy of that symbolism. Below these, there is a later Basketmaker panel with what I was first impressed with as a representation of shamanic transformation like Figure 3 P (Fig. 5A,B). This consists of a spread-armed partial human-like figure with a miniature scratched, spread-winged bird under its arm. On the other side are two U-Bracket-faced partial human figures, formerly associated with the concept of bird eye and possibly sight (Fig. 5C,D) (C.F. Fig. 8). The spread, wing-like arms of Figure 5A are similar to the scratched bird, and the fact that without legs it does not seem to be grounded suggests a possible transformation situation. The form of the larger "transforming" figure and the small bird fit the transformation concept but on initial inspection, the form and context of the U-Bracket-faced figures only had vague relationships to that figure. Those relationships were based on form. But how can one tell the exact intent or function of form for certain?

After watching the solar actions over the two Barrier Canyon figures, across the mouth of the "transforming" figure, and then across the face of the left U-Bracket faced figure, one is left with the distinct impression that these later Basketmakers must have had a conflict with the type of

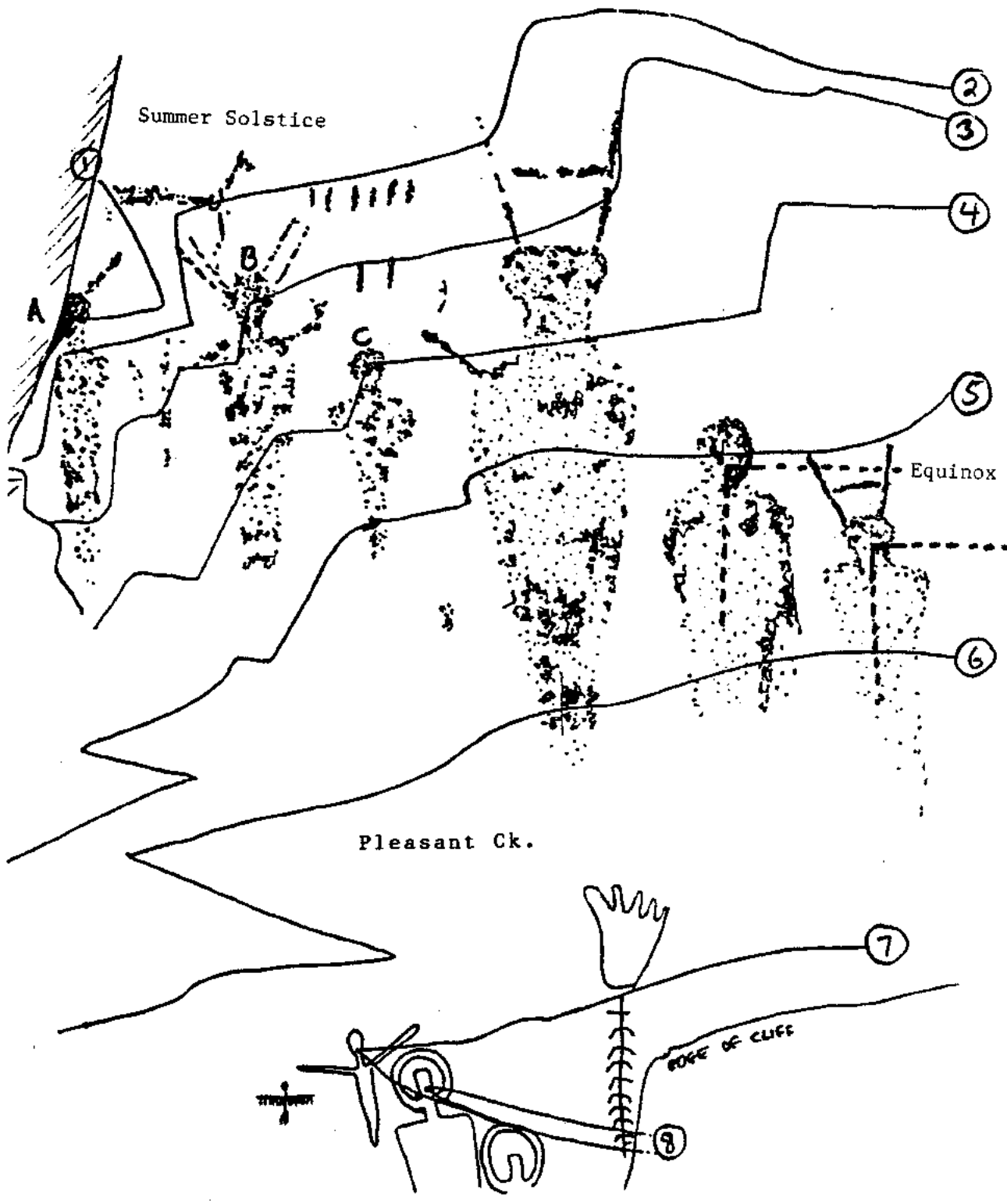


FIGURE 4.



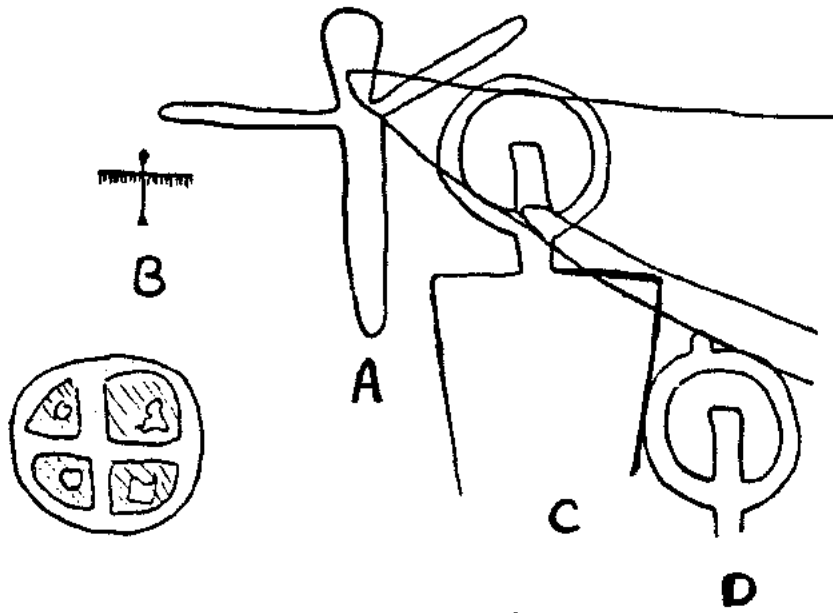
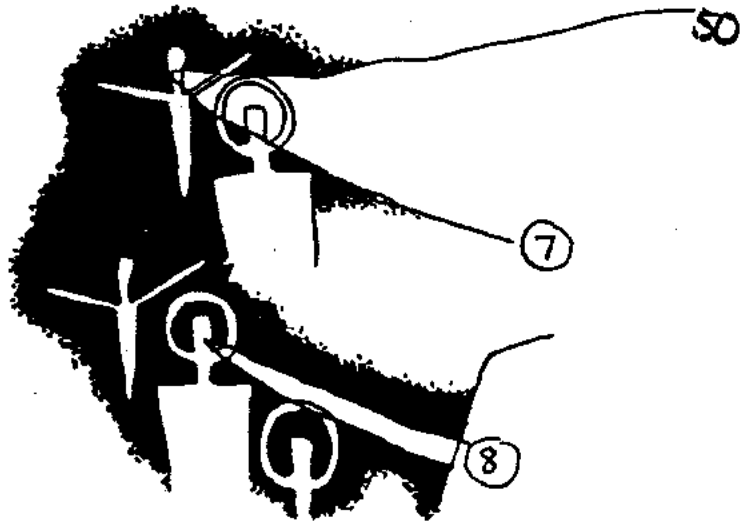
representations or interactions on the Barrier Canyon part of the panel. It was probably these later Basketmakers that attempted to obliterate the Barrier Canyon figures. It seems that because of a different point of view, they attempted to edit the situation to a more acceptable application of their belief.

The situation with the Barrier Canyon figures may simply represent seeing or speaking with light. The Basketmaker portion seems to include the concepts of Shamanistic Transformation into or from the form of a bird and then seeing or speaking with light. We now have a more complete, and understandable context for the U-Bracket-faced figures. The previously established bird related U-Bracket in the eye position of bird or man seems to have a specific concept of some type of gnostic, esoteric sight. This panel may then portray the idea that once the individual is transformed, as suggested by the small bird, the incompleteness and spread arms of the central figure, he may be represented by the reversed U-Bracket figures on the other side. By possibly using Summer Solstice sunrise along with ceremonial preparation to trigger that experience one is then able to see "the light" in his possible "vision quest" with the eye of the bird. The bird-eyed figure would then be able to speak with that light (or the concepts that the light represents) in describing what he experienced or learned.

The context where a shaft of light moves across the mouth of these U-Bracket faced figures and their association with other different symbols of transformation added a great deal to the understanding of the symbolism of why the bird was associated with a solar philosophy. Like I felt when I observed the very first anthropomorph to "speak" with light, if that interaction was important it should repeat again. The repetition of the Pleasant Creek U-Bracket faced figure was found on a U-Bracket-faced figure from Clear Creek Canyon that also speaks with light on Summer Solstice (Fig. 6B).

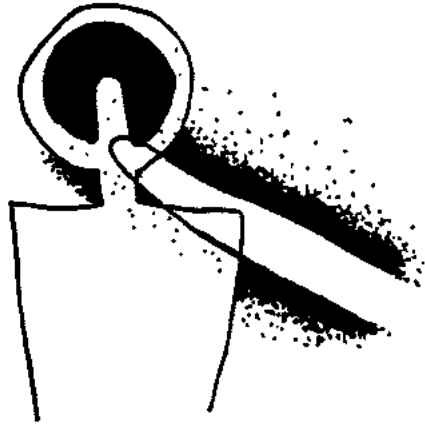
In regressing back to the other examples of U-Brackets previously considered, we can now see a larger perspective for the possible concepts these figures may have. At this point it is felt safe to add the concepts of gnostic or esoteric knowledge or Shamanistic Transformation to the possible concepts to some of the examples in Figures 1-3.

But what is the exact relationship of bird eye, transformation, and speaking with light to the symbol of a "Sunbird"? In Figures 7 and 8 there are examples of what may be described as shamanic transformations. Figure 7-1A-D illustrates a process of stylization among the Ojibwa that evolved into a positive abstract bird (Steinbring 1987). The birds in Figures 7, 2 and 3 also create man and birds, negatively produced patented U-Brackets and bisected circles now suggesting esoteric sight obtained after transformation. Figures 7, 2 and 3 also illustrates the transformation of stylized human faces into a combination of birds with human facial features, and more total bird-like forms from the Colombia River area. Some of these have possible solar symbols for eyes, which in essence illustrates a U-Bracket faced individual like those figures from Pleasant Creek and Clear Creek, with the additional attributes of the bird pecked along of side the figures at Pleasant Creek.

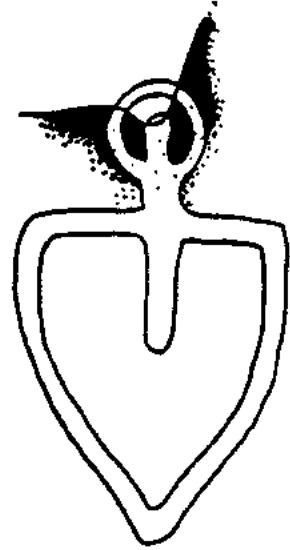


Pleasant Ck.

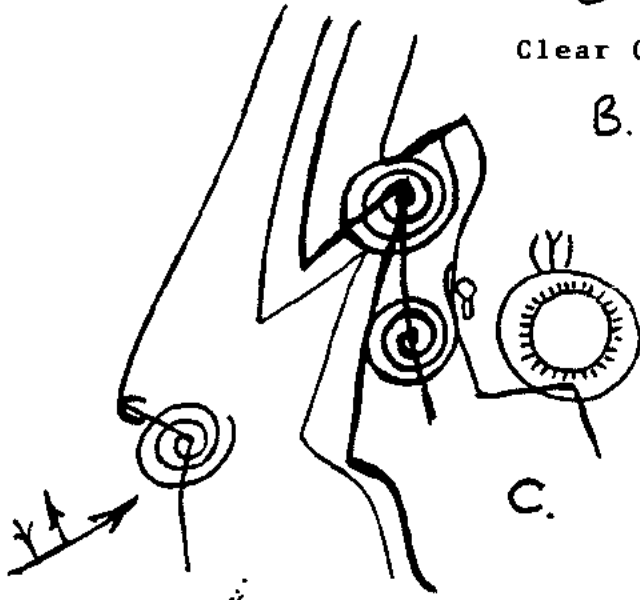
FIGURE 5.



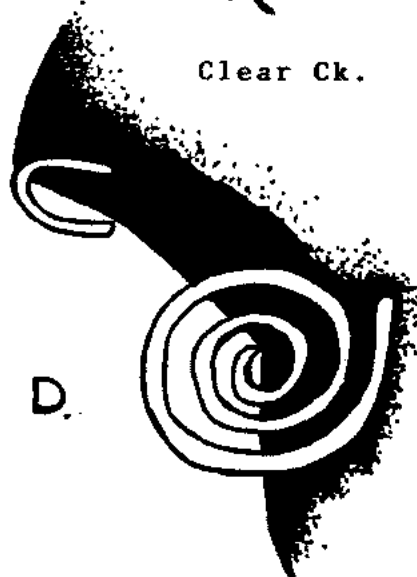
Pleasant  
Ck.  
A.



Clear Ck.  
B.



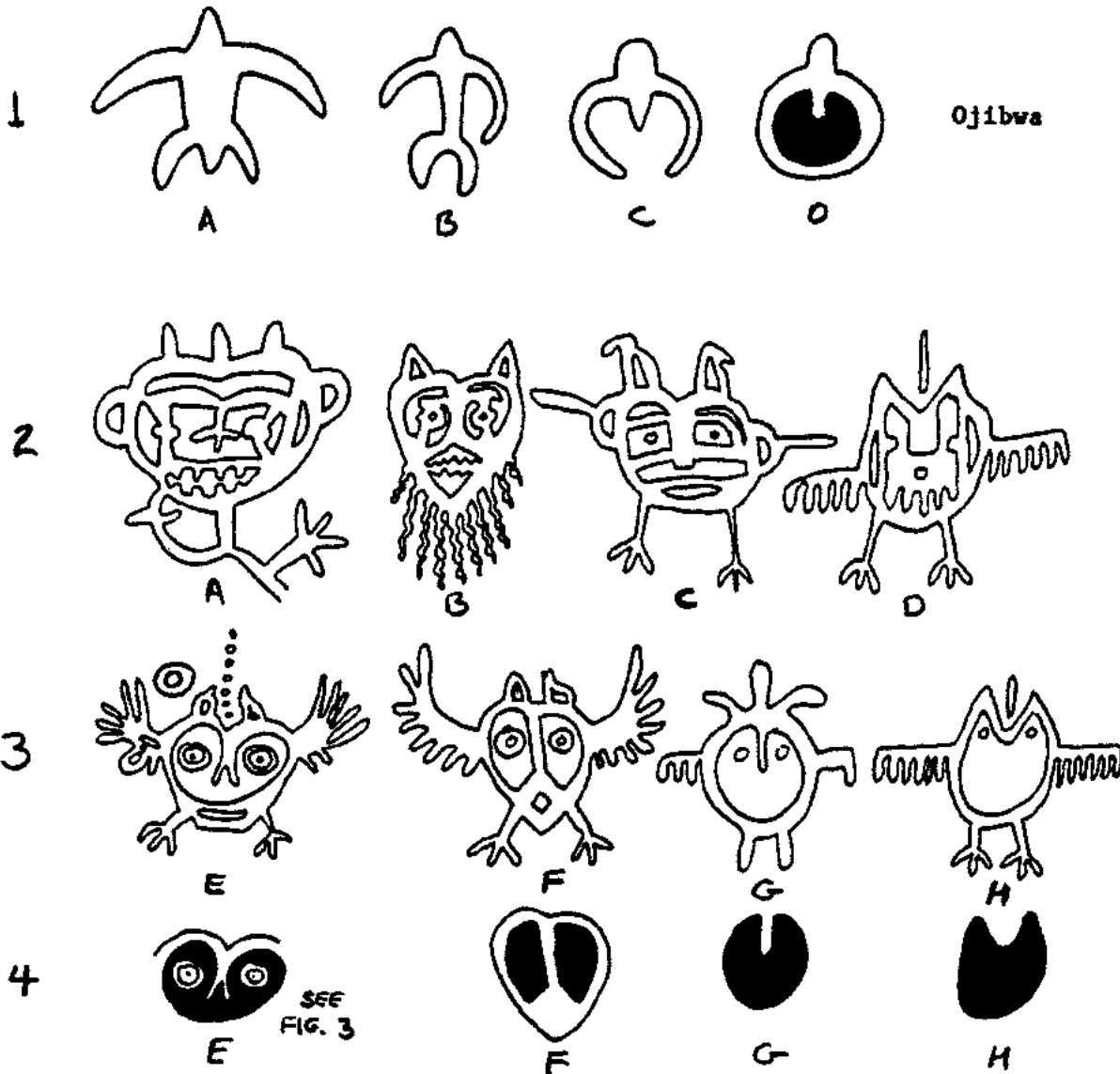
C.  
Clear Ck.



D.

FIGURE 6.

FIGURE 7.

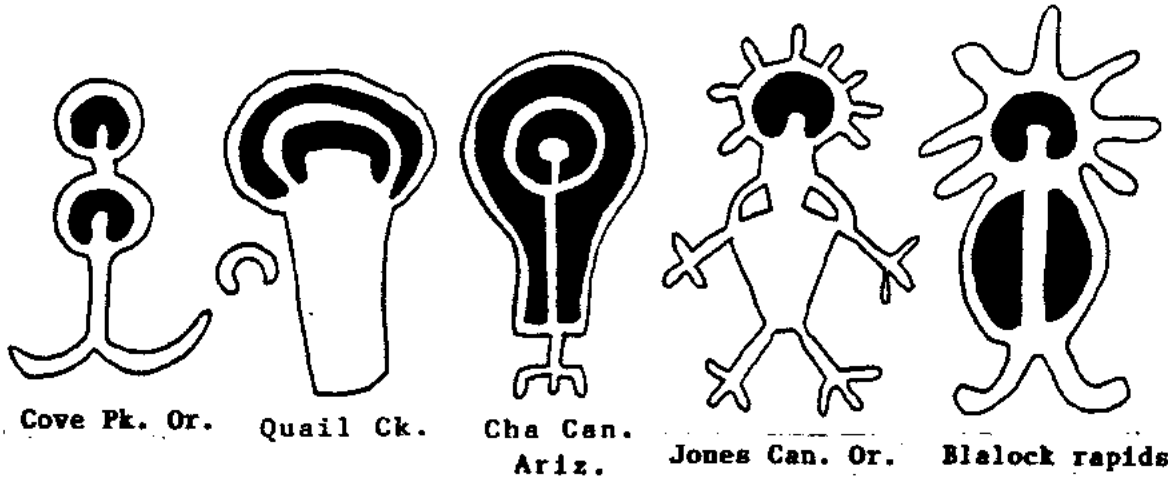


The relationship of bird, U-Bracket, or Sunbird symbolism to solar interaction and transformation seems to illustrate that the sun played a large part in the process of transformation or the obtaining of esoteric knowledge. The fact that solar observation was an extremely important part of that symbolism is based on the fact that two U-Bracket figures occur together in Pleasant Creek, one which speaks with light (when the sun enters a notch as viewed from the panel). This is also supported by a similar interaction in Clear Creek Canyon where the second U-Bracket faced figure also speaks with light and where the edge of the light and shadow (the symbolic world of the shaman) cuts through the center of another U-Bracket and a spiral simultaneously, providing a line of sight or symbolic vision of solar observation just previous to a Double Entity in that panel speaking with a shaft of light (Warner nd) (Fig. 6D).

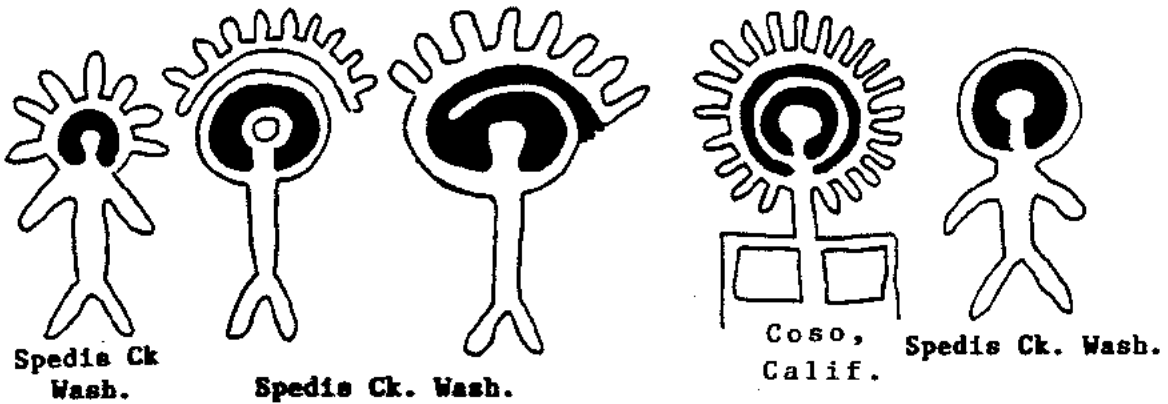
Bird, transformation and solar observation are also closely associated in another panel at Pleasant Creek. While closely watching the sunlight expand and fill the interior space between two red and white painted arched and rayed lines representing what seems to be a feathered headdress (Fig. 9), Alice Knee, long time owner and custodian of the site, suggested that that solar interacting phenomena actually transformed the feathered headdress into a figure to represent the sun with its colored rays. At that point we were so closely scrutinizing the exact points of contact within the headdress that we didn't notice that symbolic possibility. After standing back to see the whole picture, we believe that Mrs. Knee is probably right (Fig. 9A). That would make this another form of a sun-headed figure much like the painted one higher on the cliff (Warner and Rayl 1987). After looking at other sun-headed figures that are solar interacters, it raises the question of whether sun-eyed or sun-headed birds represent similar situations where esoteric knowledge is gained through transformation, an out-of-body experience, or simple solar observation. Figure 9B to the right with an identical headdress has a spiral on its chest. The center of the spiral is touched by a point of shadow and a triangle of light comes from its face after the previous interaction.

What is the source for this type of headdress? Is it antlers, or is it a form of bird wings or feathers? After considering other panels (Fig. 10) it was hypothesized that these could also represent feathers or wings in many other situations as well (Warner 1983). At Cara Pintada, Mexico, the antlers of the hunter are identical to the deer, but the wings of a bird man are also very similar (Fig. 10 lower right). On a panel at Moab there are many winged figures interspersed with figures with what is commonly called a "rake headdress." Some of these figures are expressed with "Double Entities", a concept that has many applications. One of these is shamanic transformation or an out-of-body experience. The more bird-like representations, seem to have combined aspects of birds and the partial emergence of another more human-like entity from their bodies (Fig. 10, figures marked with an asterisk). The context and concepts seem to portray in part, the symbolism at the first site observed at Pleasant Creek. At the Moab site, next to what is assumed to be possible transforming figures, is the same negative U-Bracket "eye form" that occurs in Figures 2, 3. This provides a similar connection of the eye and sight which is associated with a transforming figure partnered with birds like the one at Pleasant Creek.

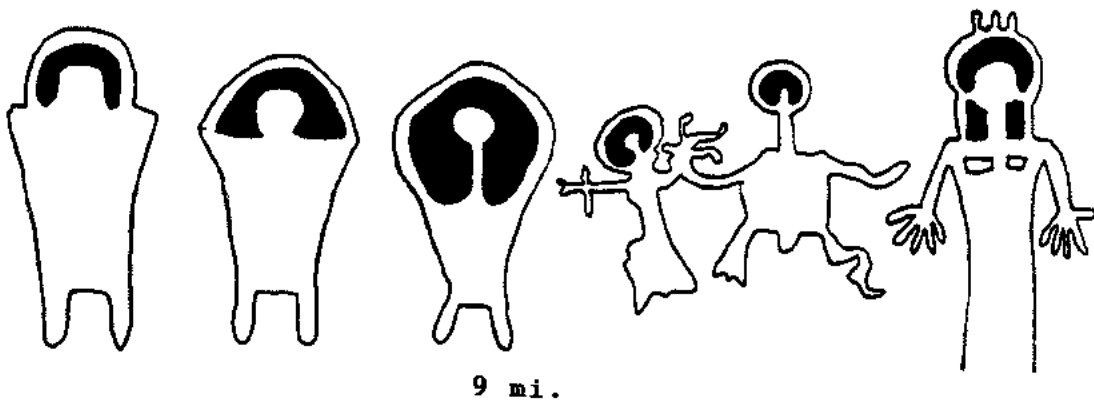
A



B



C



D

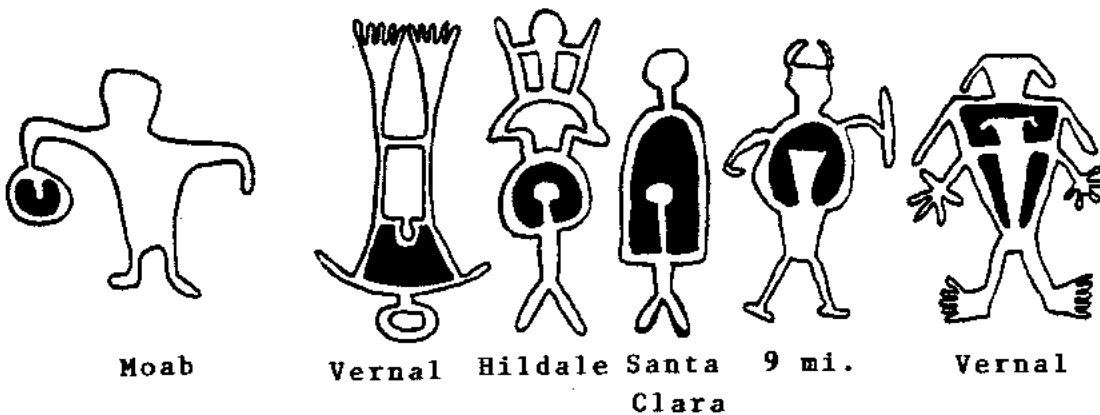
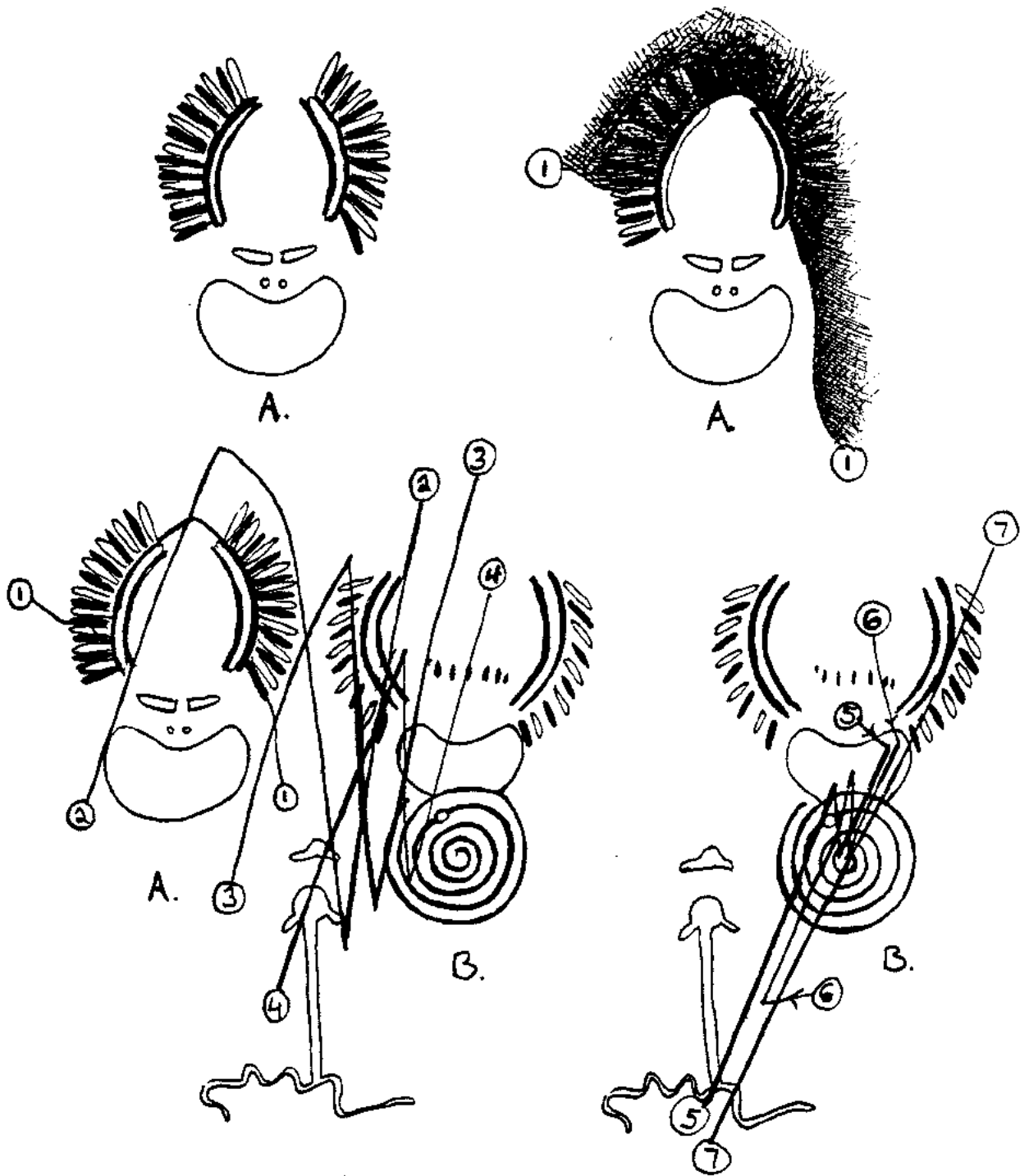


FIGURE 8.



Pleasant Ck.

FIGURE 9.

Near the Moab panels is a figure with a U-Bracket on its shield that may possibly identify him as one of these figures with that ability of sight (Fig. 8D). Several other Double Entities with the head of the main figure on the chest of the emerging figure have a form somewhat similar to a U-Bracket (Fig. 8). Thus the reversed U-Bracket face may also be a symbol of emergence or transformation representing the arms joined over the head like the figure from Nine Mile and others (Figs. 8C,D, 10A-E).

These examples, like the concepts and applications of the spirals previously mentioned, illustrate the tenuous grounds on which some conclusions and interpretations are usually based. By trying to gain an in depth interpretation of what each of these panels may depict we are likely to falter. To play it as safe as possible, we have simply tried to locate more concrete concept associations and identify what those associated concepts relate to. It is then possible to compare those applications to similar situations.

This presentation has considered several different situations including U-Brackets associated with both men and birds, "Sun-Birds", birds associated with transformations and those associated with solar observation, and bird-like transformation figures associated with identical U-Bracket.

This sequence brings one around full circle. The conclusion after considering all of this information is that the evidence points to the fact that these different types of expression all represent similar situations but are different aspects of what "Sunbirds" themselves may represent. Without ethnographic evidence that much isn't verifiable. The solar-tailed, inverted bird with the U-Bracket face (Fig. 1.1B,3C), and the Moab transformation figure with identical U-Bracket (Fig. 10, middle) definitely tie these forms and their associated concepts together.



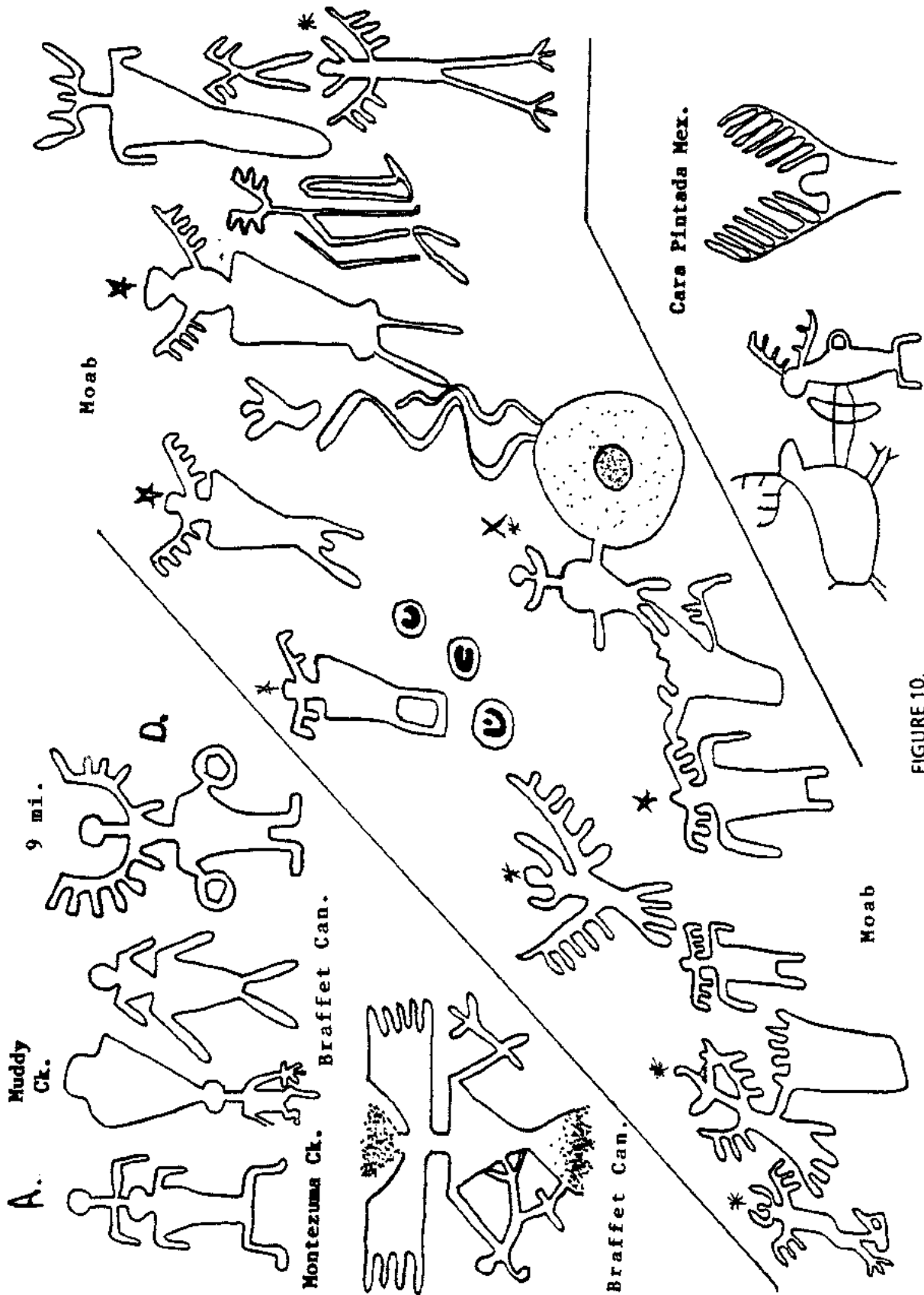


FIGURE 10.

## REFERENCES

- McGOWEN, CHARLOTTE  
1977 Female Fertility In Rock Art. American Indian Rock Art, Vol. VI.
- STEINBURG, JACK  
1987 Shamanistic Manipulations and the Algonkian Idiom in the Archaeology of Rock Art. American Indian Rock Art Vol. VIII. American Indian Rock Art Research Association.
- THOMAS, TRUDY  
1976 Petroglyph Distribution. Tebiwa. Vol. 18, No.1
- WARNER, JESSE E. and CLIFFORD L. RAYL  
1987 Solar Observations At Pleasant Creek, Utah. A paper presented at the 1987 symposium of the Utah Rock Art Research Association. To be published in Vol. VII.
- WARNER, JESSE E.  
N.D. Clear Creek Canyon Report (on file with Utah Rock Art Research Association.
- 1982 The Enclosure Petroglyph Motif: One Possible Interpretation. American Rock Art Research Association, Vol. VII.
- 1983 Concrete Concept Associations. Utah Rock Art, Vol.1. Utah Rock Art Research Association, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- 1984A The Enclosure: Another Concept. Utah Rock Art, Vol. III Utah Rock Art Research Association, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- 1984B The U-Bracket in a Unique Association. Utah Rock Art, Vol.III. Utah Rock Art Research Association, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- 1988A Stylized or Modified Bird Forms: The Second Category in the Series Considering Problems in Element and Concept Identification and Interpretation. Utah Rock Art, Vol. V. Utah Rock Art Research Association, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- 1988B Problems in Element and Concept Identification and Interpretation. Utah Rock Art, Vol.V. Utah Rock Art Research Association, Salt Lake City, Utah.