

GRAND CANYON POLYCHROME PICTOGRAPHS

BY

MARY K. ALLEN

Introduction

In 1984, I gave a slide presentation at a Utah Rock Art Research Association monthly meeting. Highlighting this talk on Arizona Strip rock art were slides of pictographs in western Grand Canyon, a site now known as "Spirit Shelter" or "Shamans' Gallery". The URARA members were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about these unusual pictographs. This encouraged me to pursue rock art research in the Arizona Strip and Grand Canyon, hoping to locate more of these unique paintings.

Since that slide show in 1984, I have documented six rock art sites I feel are related to "Spirit Shelter". All but one of these pictograph panels, "Cottonwood North" are within the boundaries of Grand Canyon National Park. The sites are "Cave of the Birds", "Battion Shelter", "Jackpot Cave", "The Black Deer Site", "Cottonwood North" ¹ and "Cottonwood South". To describe the unique style of these panels I have used the term Grand Canyon Polychrome.

The Grand Canyon Polychrome Style was first proposed in a paper presented at the 1988 American Rock Art Research Symposium (Allen: 1988). One of the sites featured in the report, "Spirit Shelter" or "Shamans' Gallery", was also described by Polly Schaafsma (1988, 1990) in two later publications.

In this paper, I will summarize what I believe are the components of this new Grand Canyon Polychrome Style and describe the rock art sites.

The Study Area

Personal backpacking trips in western Grand Canyon, taken over a period of several years, provided the information for this paper. All sites listed are several miles from the nearest road or trail head. This fact has protected them from vandalism and has hidden them from the public eye.

Most sites are located on what is known as the Esplanade Platform in Grand Canyon. It is a wide plateau composed of Supai sandstone, located mid-way between rim and river in the canyon. Average elevation on the Esplanade is 4,200'. The vegetation, though sparse, includes blackbrush, pinyon pine, juniper, yucca, agave, prickly pear, mormonia and nolina. Springs are not

¹ This pictograph site was first described by Neil M. Judd in 1926 in his publication "Archeological Observations North of the Rio Colorado." It was later described by Polly Schaafsma in her 1971 book "Rock Art of Utah".

abundant and most are heavily-laden with gypsum. However, after a heavy rain when natural waterpockets in the sandstone are full, water is easily found. Perhaps this was an attraction for the early canyon inhabitants, along with the bighorn sheep, wild plant foods and abundant natural shelter in the form of overhangs.

Description of Grand Canyon Polychrome Style

Though closely related to the Barrier Canyon Style rock art of southeastern Utah, and possibly to the Pecos River Rock art of Texas, Grand Canyon Polychrome has its own unique combination of characteristics. These include anthropomorphs with life-like details such as eyelashes (Fig. 6), toes and pupils (Fig. 1); figures portrayed in a whimsical fashion, such as smiling figures (Fig. 1); anthropomorphs whose arms are slender and outstretched (footnote ²) and often originate below the neck/shoulder level. Many figures have narrow shoulders. Arms, legs and feet, as well as torsos, are commonly decorated with stripes, dots, or rectangles. A repeated motif of this type is the "jailbird look" (Fig. 4). Another recurring attribute is a head with cat-like ears (Fig. 2). Frequently anthropomorphic figures are depicted with arms and "horns" but no necks; the bodies of these anthropomorphs are formed by large decorated trapezoids (Fig. 2) or by elongated rectangles (Fig. 3).

In addition to anthropomorphs, Grand Canyon Polychrome art work displays spread-winged birds, bighorn sheep, deer, pelt-like objects (Fig. 8) and abstract symbols. The quadrupeds, like the anthropomorphs, are frequently painted with outlined bodies. A small shrimp-like, crescent-shaped creature appears occasionally, positioned near one or more anthropomorphs.

Unlike Barrier Canyon sites which typically have figures spaced out across a panel in a parade-like manner, the composition of Grand Canyon Polychrome work is more crowded. There seem to be instances of contemporary superimposition (i.e. Grand Canyon Polychrome on top of Grand Canyon Polychrome). However, these Grand Canyon sites were utilized over a long period of time; the crowded appearance and superimposition is partially due to additions of later pictographs on top of older Grand Canyon Polychrome figures. Sorting out older versus younger elements on these complex panels can be a difficult task.

The range of pigments in the Grand Canyon Polychrome panels includes at least nine distinct shades: dark brownish red, light terra cotta red, cream, white, black, lime green, forest green, yellow ochre and light yellow. Dark red and cream are the most commonly used colors.

² Arms stretched outward and upward are characteristics found often in Pecos River rock art.

Examples of the Munsell Color Chart Readings ³ for some of these pigments are as follows: dark red: 5 R 3/3; light red: 7.5 R 3/4; cream color: 5YR 8/3; yellow ochre: 7.5 YR 5/8; light green: Gley chart 5G 6/2 or 5G 5/2.⁴

Like the Barrier Canyon Style, the Grand Canyon Polychrome Style focuses on anthropomorphic characters, though the mummy-like body shape and deathlike aspect common in many Barrier Canyon panels is rarely seen in Grand Canyon. The Grand Canyon figures are almost always carefully rendered. They usually have elongated rectangular or trapezoidal-shaped bodies and round, bulbous, or trapezoidal-shaped heads. Some have one or two horns on top of their heads. A few figures are depicted with "snakes" or wavy lines near them. One key trait that does link the Barrier Canyon and Grand Canyon pictographs is the occasional presence of tiny quadrupeds (and in one case tiny anthropomorphs) flanking larger anthropomorphs.

Another similarity between Grand Canyon Polychrome and Barrier Canyon Styles is the absence of weapons.⁵ There are no depictions of atlatls or bow and arrows as are often seen in later rock art. This, and other factors, would point to an early date, probably Archaic, for these styles. However, it is possible this exclusion of weapons may be attributed to the art work's function. Perhaps the panel's purpose was to illustrate a shaman's vision or a tribal myth, rather than perform hunting magic. This idea conforms with the larger-than-life supernatural aspect of many Grand Canyon Polychrome panels.

Dating these pictographs, as in all rock art, involves speculation more than fact. The Grand Canyon Polychrome Style has been designated Archaic/Early Basketmaker, based on the following criteria:

- 1- Superimposition of many elements on top of these paintings; the superimposing pictographs resemble other categorized as Anasazi Pueblo I-II age.
- 2- The appearance of these panels - generally large, supernatural looking, painted anthropomorphs - is similar to other rock art styles usually associated with Archaic remains. These include the rock art of Baja, California; Pecos River, Texas; and Barrier Canyon, Utah.
- 3- One group of anthropomorphs (at Battion Shelter) display a hairstyle similar to that found on Basketmaker mummies and

³Munsell Soil Color Charts are occasionally used as a standard to compare pictograph pigments from various panels. However, the time of day and quality of light can cause some variation in the readings.

⁴These particular Munsell Chart readings were taken at the Cottonwood South site.

⁵One panel, "Battion Shelter" does show bighorn sheep impaled with "darts".

distinct from hairstyles of later Pueblo Anasazi⁶.

Associations with Ruins and Artifacts

No surface structures are found with any Grand Canyon Polychrome panels. However, several shelters containing rock art were temporary campsites, as witnessed by smoke-blackened ceilings. Some have midden deposits containing pottery shards and lithic scatters. Roasting pits are found near a few of the sites. Two locations, Spirit Shelter and Cottonwood South, have large boulders marked with so-called "arrow-sharpening" grooves and pits. Most sites appear to have been used through Pueblo II times and some show possible signs of Paiute visitation.

Other Archaic Sites in Grand Canyon

North of Grand Canyon National Park, on the east side of Kanab Creek, is a site which may be related to the Grand Canyon Polychrome sites. It has no elaborate anthropomorphs and is almost entirely composed of abstract designs in red and white, mainly series of short parallel lines. The effect is much like rock art called Chihuahuan Polychrome Abstract Style in New Mexico (Schaafsma 1980: 49-55). Similar paintings occur in southeastern Utah. The Chihuahuan Polychrome pictographs are thought to be Archaic. If this Grand Canyon example proves to be Archaic as well, then it may be contemporary with the Grand Canyon Polychrome pictographs.

THE ROCK ART SITES

Spirit Shelter/Shamans' Gallery: This is the most outstanding pictograph site in the area. Large (over 6') anthropomorphs whose torsos and faces are filled with decorative detail cover the wall of a long narrow overhang. One figure has long eyelashes and two "papooses", one on each shoulder (Fig. 6). Another resembles a skeleton, or a figure portrayed in x-ray fashion (Fig. 6). One group of tall anthropomorphs has outlined circles for heads, with no facial features. In addition to the giant anthropomorphs, there are: bighorn sheep; two lime green "panthers" with red claws; two elegant red deer; a red and white shield or mask; armless dark red "ghost" figures; and tiny sienna colored animals flanking larger anthropomorphs. An extensive palette of colors appear in these paintings: dark purplish-red, sienna, terra cotta, yellow, lime green, forest green and white. Several abraded grooves are found on a boulder to the right of the panel.

⁶These rock art figures and the Basketmaker hairstyle are described in detail in the author's "New Frontiers in Rock Art: the Grand Canyon" manuscript.

Battion Shelter: (Fig. 4) This site is very similar to "Spirit Shelter", though unfortunately it is not as well preserved (painted sections of the soft sandstone wall have flaked away). Figures are crowded together on the panel, and some are superimposed by later art work. Anthropomorphs are highly decorated with vertical lines, dots, zigzag lines and rectangles. Almost all figures have long narrow bodies. One group of three anthropomorphs clearly exhibit a hairstyle reminiscent of that found on Basketmaker mummies. There are several birds represented: an owl face, spread-winged birds, swallows or swifts and birds composed of white dots. An intriguing portrait of a quadruped with a cross-hatched body design, 2" wide, resembles a split-twig figurine⁷. Around the corner from the main panel is a second group of pictographs. Here are "balloon-headed" stick figures, large white shields, abstract motifs and a small red quadruped.

The Black Deer: The main focus of this panel is a beautiful 18" long deer painted in black, surrounded by black bighorn sheep, antelope(?) and other deer. The animals are depicted in a naturalistic style (the black deer has its knees or hocks portrayed); a few have outlined bodies. Two red figures also decorate the panel: a round-headed anthropomorph; and a deer, part of which has eroded away. Nearby is another panel, possibly more recent than this one, which has five white painted figures, including concentric circles, a "snake" and a hand print.

Cave of the Birds: This site is unusual as it is painted on the ceiling of a low (4' high) overhang. One must crawl underneath the cliff and lie in a horizontal position to observe the rock art. Motifs include spread-winged birds, bird tracks, anthropomorphs, headless torsos decorated with vertical lines, pelt-like objects (Fig. 8) and a set of miniature hand prints. Natural depressions in the ceiling are used as frames for some art work. Colors utilized are dark red, white, yellow ochre and black.

Cottonwood South: This site is composed of several small separate panels of pictographs done in red, white, green, yellow ochre and cream. These panels include: a complex arrangement of bighorn sheep with a rayed-disk and spread-winged birds; a group of skinny anthropomorphs(?) with vertical red and white stripes (Fig. 5); an unidentified figure made of green dots; more bighorn sheep; and a black vertical "stick" with loops along its length (Fig. 5). The largest figure at the site (approximately 4" tall) is the upper torso of an anthropomorph with broad square shoulders and a round "hooded" head and round eyes, done in cream and dark red paint. Like Spirit Shelter, this site has a large boulder marked with grooves and pits in the overhang with the rock art.

Cottonwood North: (Fig. 7) This site has one set of figures which resemble Grand Canyon Polychrome anthropomorphs. These are the pictographs described by Neil Judd in 1926 and pictured by Schaafsma's (1971: 113) in her account of Utah rock art. They have elongated trapezoidal or rectangular torsos. The largest figure has triangular decorations on its body; it also has two very faint black quadrupeds alongside its torso. Two of the figures have arms

⁷This "split-twig figurine" pictograph is discussed in depth in the author's manuscript "New Frontiers in Rock Art:the Grand Canyon".

originating at the midway point of their torsos. The site also includes pictographs of the type known as Cave Valley Style, found in southwestern Utah and northwestern Arizona. This Cave Valley Style may be associated with Basketmaker Anasazi.

Jackpot Cave: This site is in a large smoke-blackened overhang; the soot may have affected some pictograph colors. There are five groups of paintings. One shows cream-color bighorn sheep, some with outlined bodies. Another group has small (6" - 30") but very detailed anthropomorphs; some of these have pupils, smiling faces and elaborate body decorations (Fig. 1). There are two anthropomorphs with cat-like ears (Fig. 2); these give the impression of a person dressed in a mountain lion costume. One collection of skinny anthropomorphs have red polka-dotted feet with toes (Fig. 3). Interspersed among the figures are abstract motifs such as spoke & wheel designs and wavy line "snakes".

CONCLUSIONS

Breaking away from familiar styles accepted in rock art research is a risky proposition. Given the small sample of known Grand Canyon Polychrome sites - seven total - makes it even more speculative. Still, I feel the pictographs I have documented in Grand Canyon cannot be comfortably classified with any standard pictograph or petroglyph style. The similarities to Barrier Canyon rock art cannot be denied and some researchers may be more comfortable viewing the Grand Canyon panels as a southern variant of this style. However, there are enough differences that, when viewed side-by-side, the Grand Canyon Polychrome work cannot be mistaken for Barrier Canyon and vice versa. It is on this basis I propose the Grand Canyon Polychrome designation for these sites.

Given the relatively small geographical range of the Grand Canyon Polychrome Style (all sites fall within a 75 mile radius), it seems probably that they were created by the same artist or group of artists. Whether this artist(s) was an Archaic Hunter-gatherer or a Basketmaker Anasazi remains undecided. It's quite possible that these pictographs are an expression of a late Archaic/early Basketmaker transition period.

Additional data is needed to clarify the nature of Grand Canyon Polychrome pictographs. Unfortunately, the remote and rugged terrain of Grand Canyon makes research a slow process. Perhaps when and if additional sites are located, the questions of style affiliation and age may be more thoroughly answered.

REFERENCES

ALLEN, MARY

1986 An Unusual Pictograph Site in Grand Canyon (Spirit Shelter).
Paper presented at the 1986 Utah Rock Art Research Association
Symposium.

1988 New Frontiers in Rock Art: the Grand Canyon. Paper presented at
the 1988 ARARA Symposium, Ridgecrest, California.

SCHAAFSMA, POLLY

1988 Shamans' Gallery: A Grand Canyon Rock Art Site. Resource
Management and Planning Division, Final Report for Grand Canyon
National Park.

1990 Shamans' Gallery: A Grand Canyon Rock Art Site. KIVA, Vol. 55,
No. 3.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

- FIGURE 1: Anthropomorph from Jackpot Cave, approximately 24" tall. Painted in dark red and cream-color.
- FIGURE 2: Section of panel from Jackpot Cave. Note the anthropomorph with cat-like ears (done in dark red and cream-color); the partially outlined body of the bighorn sheep (cream-color); and the trapezoidal "anthropomorph" with arms and horns but no separation between head and body (cream-color).
- FIGURE 3: Group of figures from Jackpot Cave, approximately 12" tall. Pictographs are dark red and cream-color. Note the polka-dotted feet and toes.
- FIGURE 4: Section of panel from Battion Shelter. Note the anthropomorph with the "jailbird" costume. Figures are painted in dark red and cream color. (For clarity, superimposed markings have been eliminated from this drawing.)
- FIGURE 5: Section of panel from Cottonwood South site. Slender figures are red and cream; bighorn sheep are terra cotta red; "stick with loops" is black.
- FIGURE 6: Section of panel from spirit Shelter. Pictographs are dark red, cream and yellow ochre. Note the eyelash detail on the smaller anthropomorph.
- FIGURE 7: Cottonwood North panel. From left to right, the colors of the figures are: 1-dark red; 2-white; 3-dark red, black, yellow ochre; 4-white, yellow ochre; 5-dark red; 6-(Large round-headed anthropomorph) white outlined with black, yellow ochre triangles; and 7-dark red. To the left of the large anthropomorph with the triangular designs are two tiny black quadrupeds.
- FIGURE 8: Portion of ceiling from Cave of the Birds. Painted in dark red.

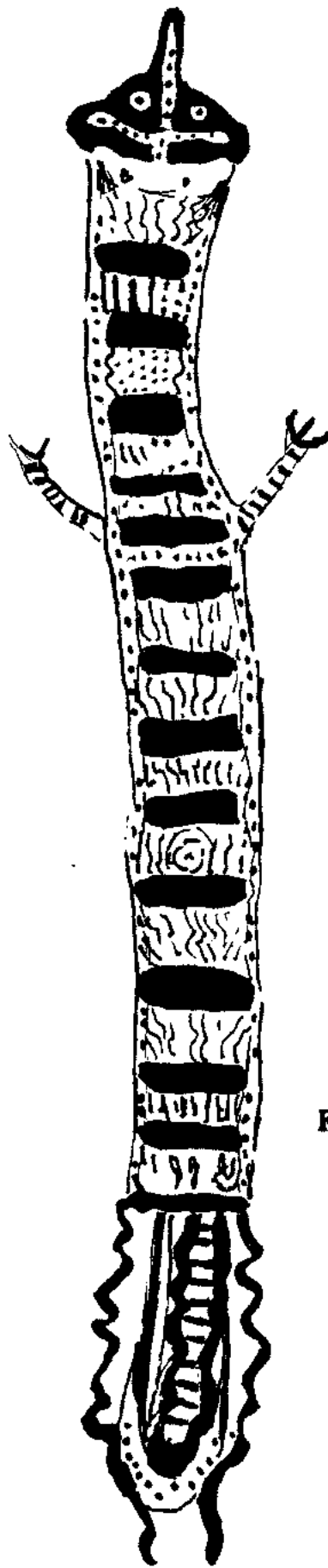


FIGURE 1

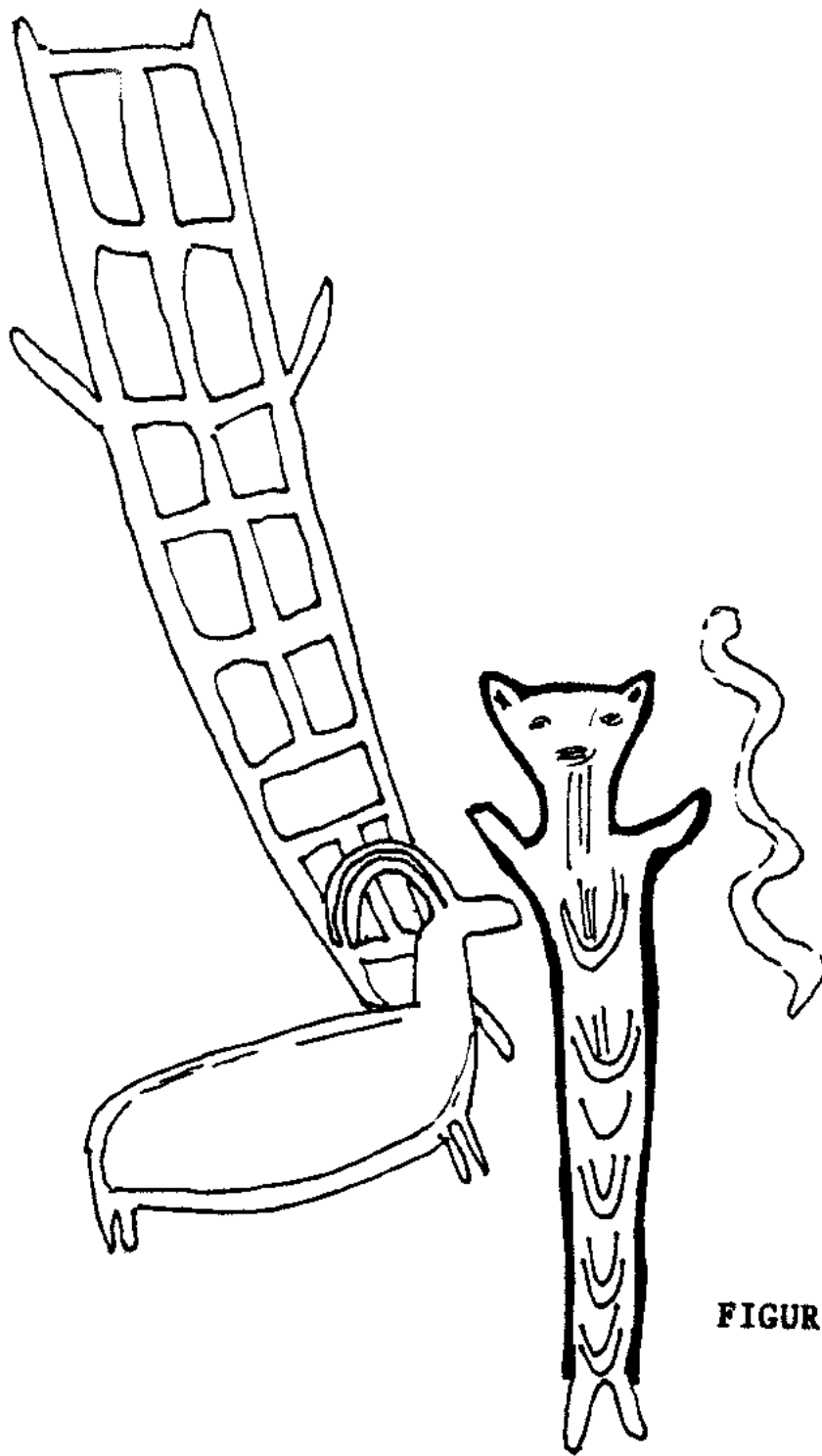


FIGURE 2

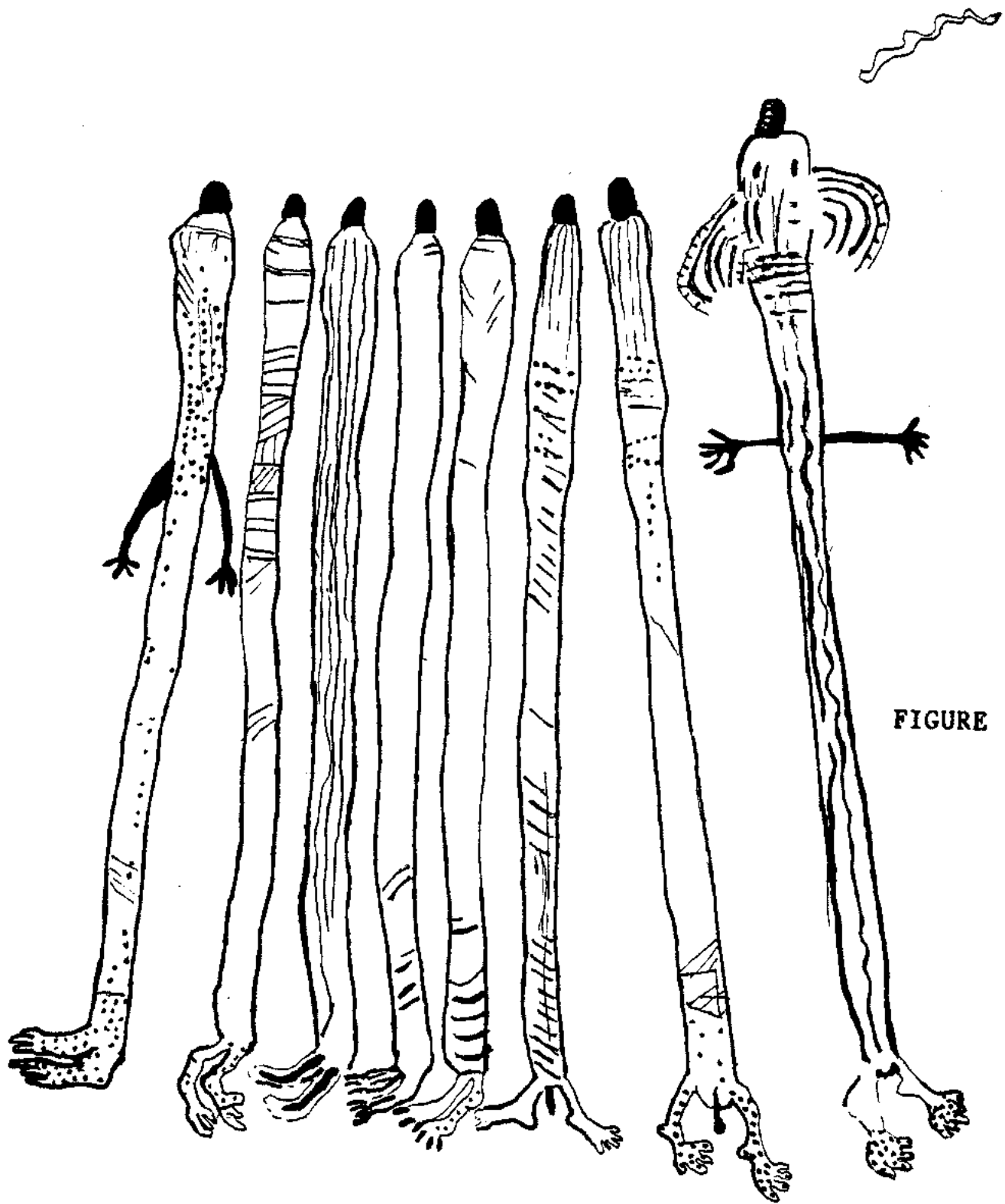


FIGURE 3

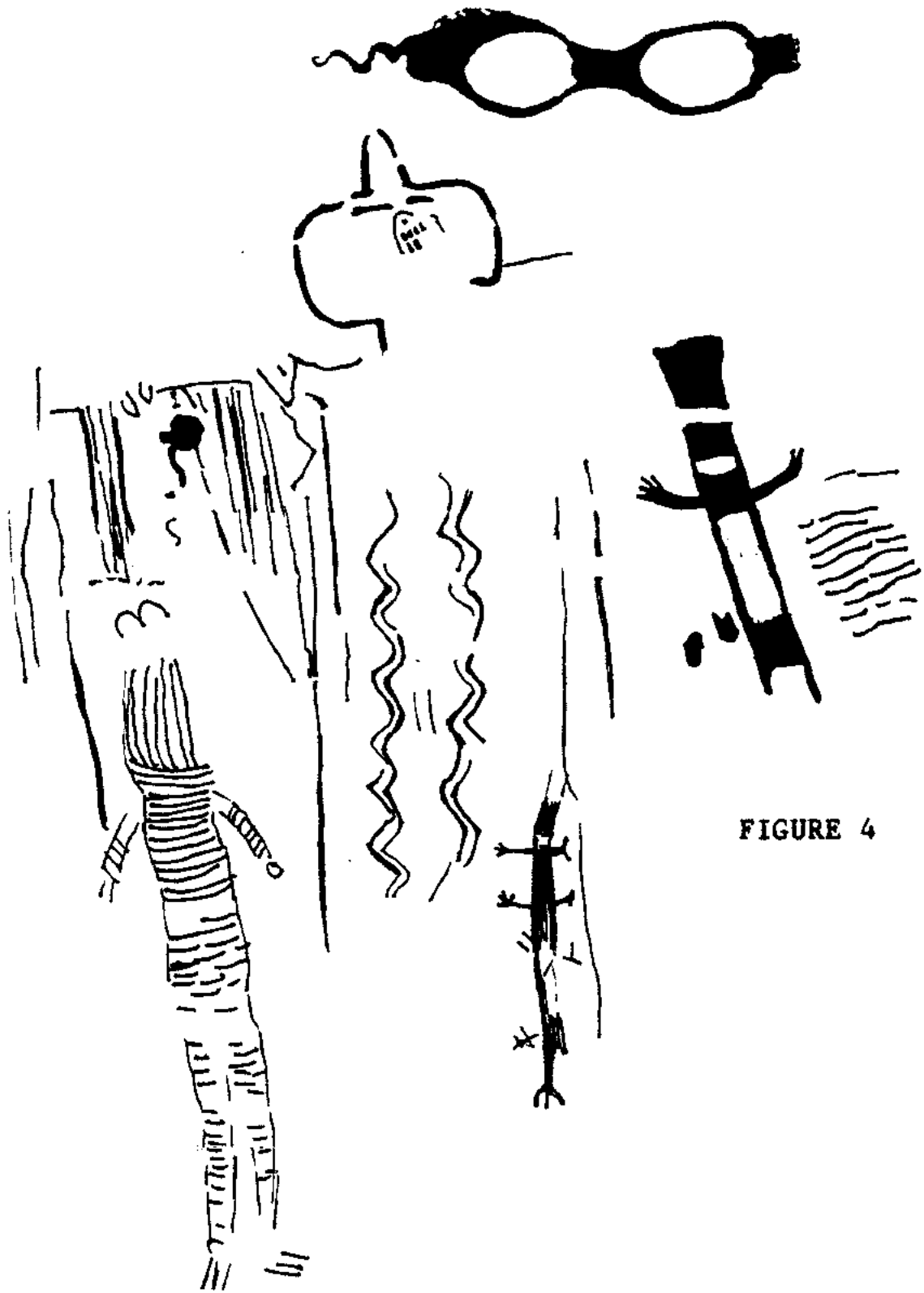


FIGURE 4

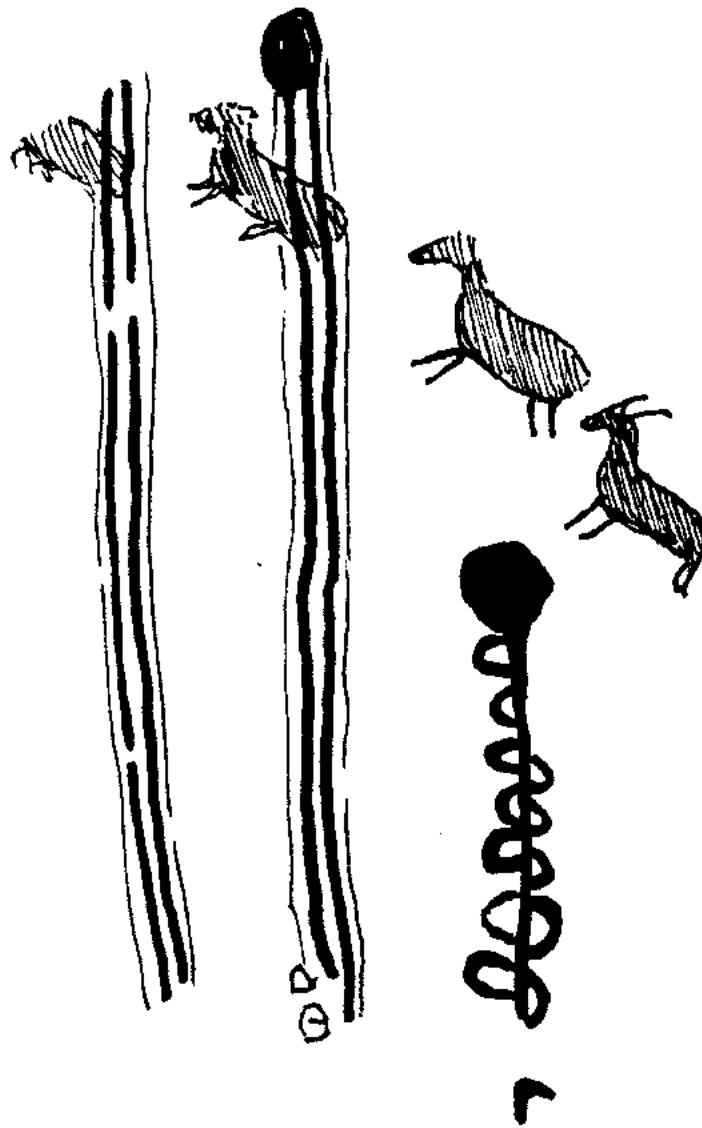


FIGURE 5

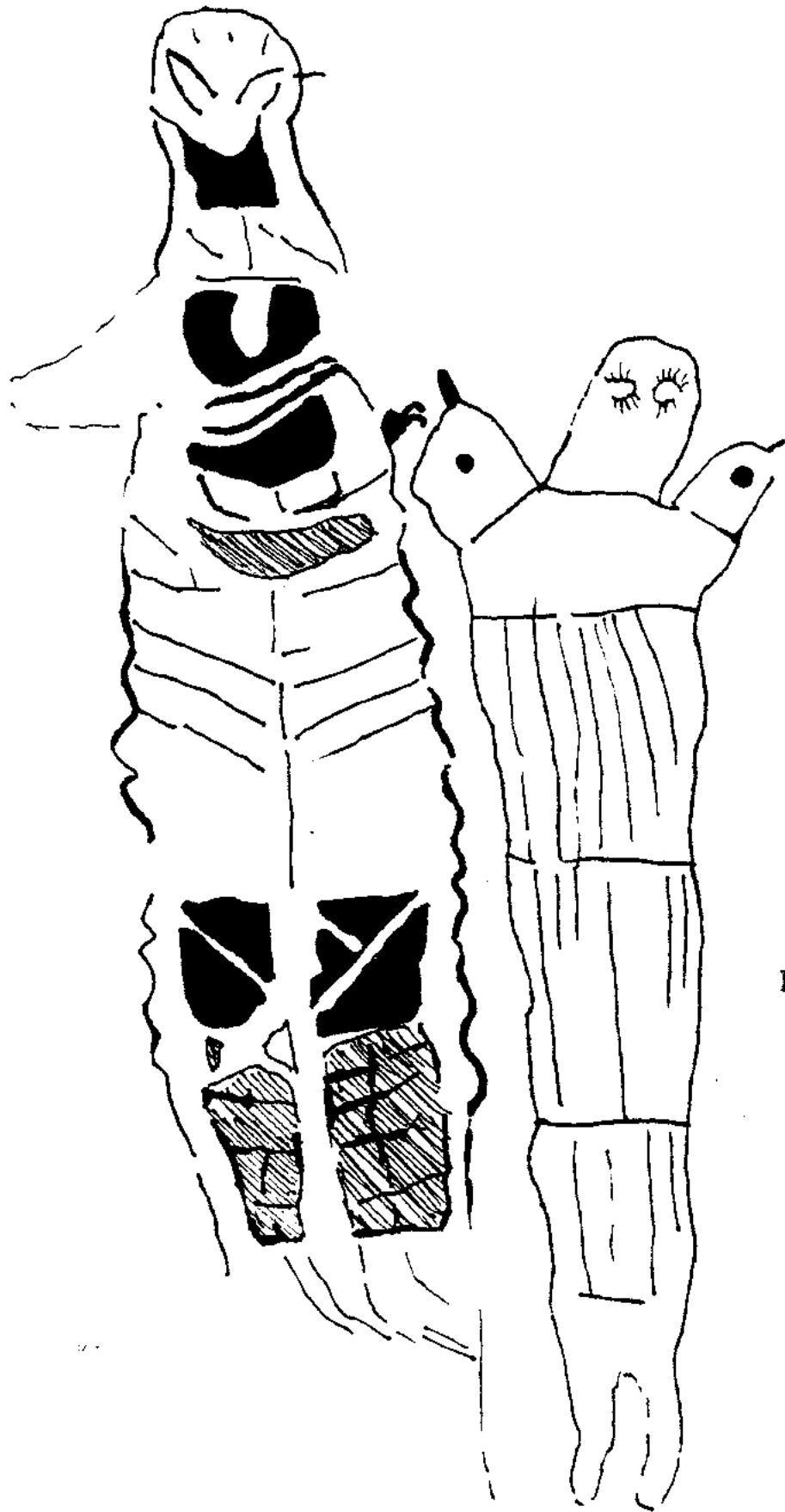


FIGURE 6

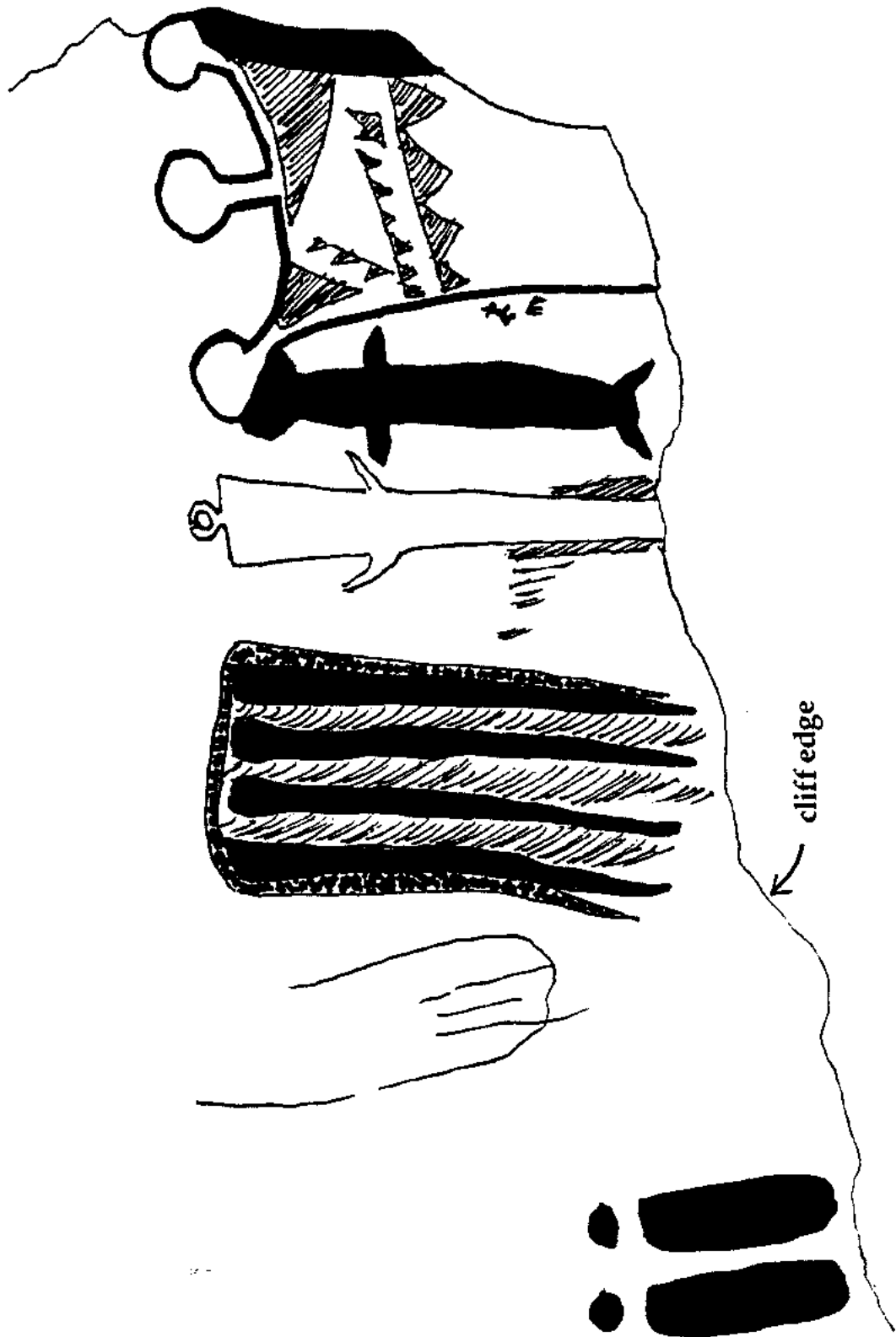


FIGURE 7

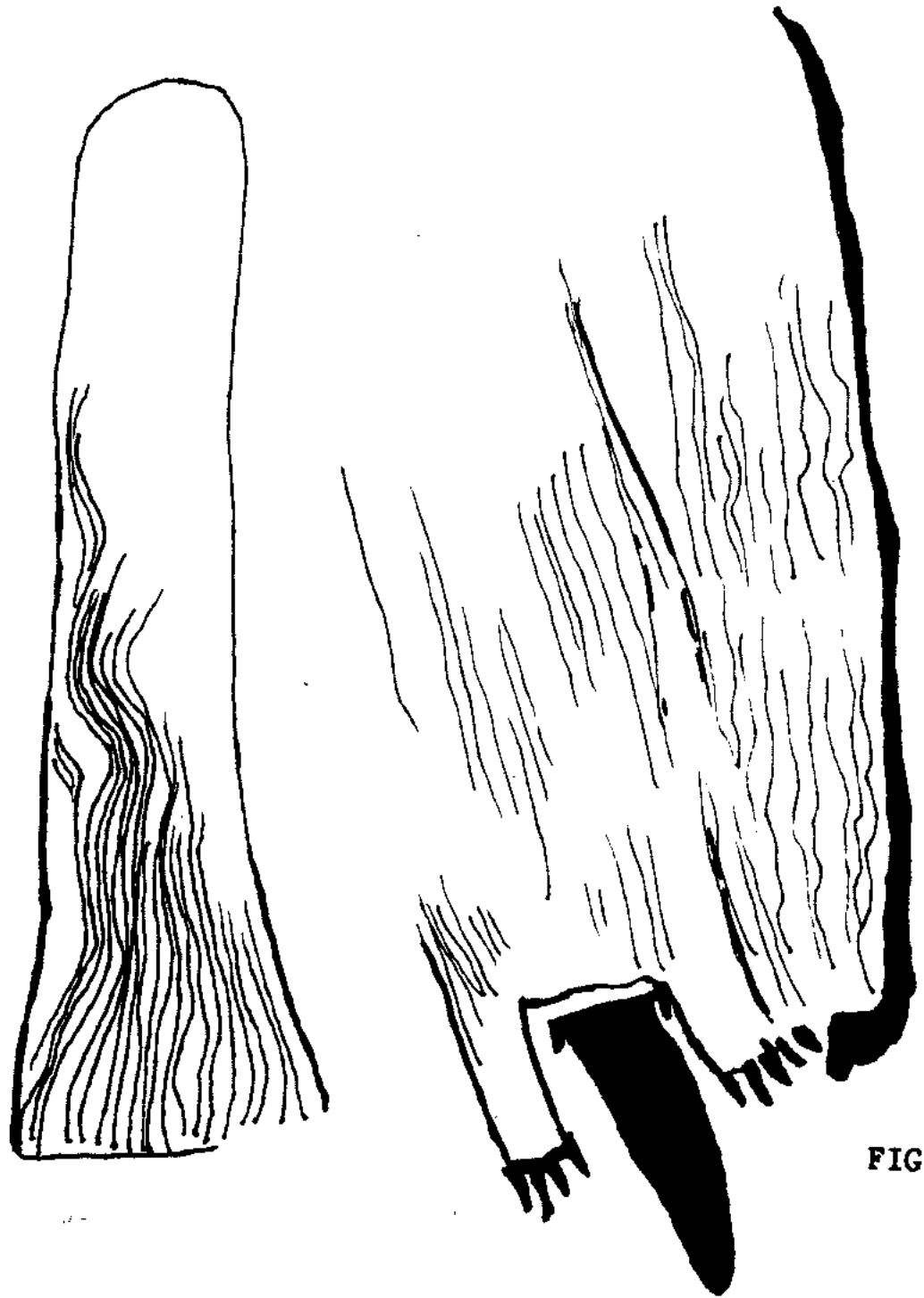


FIGURE 1