

The Shield Figures of Southwestern Idaho

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A shield figure is a representational petroglyph element showing a shield-bearing anthropomorphic figure. The shield is circular and is usually shown being held in front of the anthropomorphic figure and covering the figure from the neck to the thighs. Smaller shields are sometimes seen, particularly on mounted figures. The shield is most often plain and unadorned but in the more recent panels, decorated shields are seen. The anthropomorphic figure can range from a very simple stick figure with barely enough detail to indicate its anthropomorphic character to more elaborate figures with some anatomical detail. Usually the drawing is made in such a manner that the shield appears to be transparent and the entire torso of the anthropomorphic figure can be seen behind the shield. The figure is frequently shown holding a weapon of some sort, usually a lance, and there is little doubt that the shield figure represents a warrior.

The shield bearing warrior motif is one of the most common petroglyph elements in southwestern Idaho. By actual count, there are 214 shield figures in the sites that I have recorded to date. This number is exceeded only by the plain circle, 280 occurrences, and the straight line, 264 occurrences. Thus, the shield bearing warrior motif, or shield figure, comes close to being the most frequently occurring element in southwestern Idaho and is the most frequently appearing representational element. The fact that the shield figures are so numerous in southwestern Idaho is contrary to the information in most of the literature to date. Grant (1967:61) states that the shield figure "occurs occasionally in southern Idaho." Keyser (1975:208) indicates that the shield

figure is rare in Idaho. These discrepancies may be due to the fact that the sites along the Snake River flood plain have very few shield figures while the sites in the surrounding mountains contain many shield figures. Since the principal travel routes lie along the Snake River flood plain in southern Idaho, it is not surprising that few shield figures were encountered by the early investigators. It was not until a concerted effort was made to record all of the sites in southwestern Idaho that the widespread occurrence of the shield figure was discovered.

When recording petroglyphs in southwestern Idaho it was found that many elements existed that resembled shield figures. In fact, a continuum of elements was found which ranged from a fairly elaborate shield figure to a simple sectioned circle (Fig. 1). It was difficult to determine whether all of these figures were meant to be shield figures and if some were not, where the line of demarcation was. The necessity of carefully defining the elements so that consistency could be maintained in the recording process became obvious. It was decided that to be considered a shield figure the figure must consist of the usual circle with the associated anthropomorphic figure and that the anthropomorphic figure must have either arms or legs or both. Lacking both arms and legs the figure would be called a P-shield figure. The "P" is undefined but could stand for pre, proto, post or possible, depending upon the facts that might develop. The P-shield figure could be a shorthand form of the shield figure and this is likely since of the 161 P-shield figures recorded, 158 were at the same site as a shield figure and 64 were on the same panel

as a shield figure. This close association of the P-shields with the shield figures would indicate that a close relationship existed between them. If indeed, the P-shield is an abbreviated version of the shield figure and can be counted with the shield figures, then the shield figure would indeed be the most common element in southwestern Idaho.

Another element that may be closely related to the shield figure is the sectioned circle, where the line sectioning the circle is vertical. Here it is defined as a circle divided into two parts by a vertical diameter. It could easily be expanded to form either a P-shield figure or a shield figure. Of 122 sectioned circles recorded, all appear at the same site as a shield figure and 46 are on the same panel as either a shield figure or a P-shield figure. While the relationship of the sectioned circle to the shield figure is not too obvious, the close association of the sectioned circle with the shield figure indicates that they may be related figures. If we can assume that the sectioned circle, the P-shield figure, and the shield figure all represent the same concept, then this idea is implied in 497 of the elements recorded to date in southwestern Idaho. This represents more than 12 percent of all of the elements recorded. If the shield figure and its related elements represent conflict, then the inhabitants of southwestern Idaho were a very contentious group.

The Fremont Indians have been credited with originating the shield figures that occur in southeastern Utah (Schaafsma 1971:142). The shields of the Fremont figures are usually elaborately decorated and the anthropomorphic figures show considerable anatomical detail. Almost no examples of un-decorated shields are found in the Fremont area.

The Shoshonis who have occupied the Fremont area since about 1300 A.D. apparently co-existed with the Fremont for a number of years, and during that time

adopted the Fremont shield figure (Keyser 1971:211). During their continued expansion into Wyoming, Montana, and Alberta, the Shoshonis apparently carried the shield figure motif with them. Some of the Shoshoni-Fremont shield figures are less elaborate than the Fremont shield figures but with very few exceptions, the shields are always decorated.

In southwest Idaho, the situation with respect to shield figures is quite different than in the Shoshoni-Fremont area. Most of the shield figures in southwest Idaho are completely undecorated. As of this writing (October 1989), 214 shield figures have been recorded in southwestern Idaho of which 22 were decorated in some manner. Most often, the decorated shields were embellished by pecking one half of the shield solidly and leaving the other half untouched. Of the 22 decorated shields recorded, 17 of them appear at the same site as panels containing horses. This would indicate that until the inhabitants of Southwestern Idaho obtained horses, they did not decorate their shields. We know from historic accounts that the mounted Shoshoni of southern Idaho traveled eastward across the mountains to hunt buffalo. In doing so, they undoubtedly encountered the Fremont/Shoshoni and their decorated shields. It is reasonable to assume that they found the decorated shields attractive and brought the tradition of decorating their shields home with them to southwestern Idaho.

An estimate of the temporal distribution of shield figures can be obtained by considering the elements associated with the shield figure at the same site and on the same panel. When we find a shield figure associated with a horse or horses, we can be reasonably certain that the shield figure was made after about 1700, since that is the approximate time when the horse arrived in southern Idaho (Haines 1938). Examples of recent shield figures are shown in Figure 2. While no horses are shown on this panel,

many horses were depicted at this site and horses appeared on panels that were nearby on either side of the one shown. Several features distinguish the recent shield figures from older ones. First, the recent shields are frequently decorated as seen in the figure. Decorations range from the elaborate figures shown on the left of figure 2, to the solidly pecked ones at the lower center, to the ones with one half of the shield pecked (lower right). Second, there seems to be an unusual emphasis on weapons, principally the lance. One of the lances shown is four times as long as the height of the anthropomorphic figure. Also, the size of the point on the weapon is often greatly exaggerated. Third, more anatomical detail is shown on the anthropomorphic figure, with particular emphasis on the feet. The head of the anthropomorph in the recent shield figures is usually clearly distinguishable. The presence of two or more of these characteristics is an indication that the shield figure is recent.

At the other end of the scale, when we find shield figures associated with elements which are very old, and when all the elements on the panel are patinated to the same degree, we can reasonably assume that the shield figures are very old. While in the field recording, our attention was drawn to several elements, which always appeared to be very old. They always appeared heavily patinated or covered with lichens or appeared on rocks that were in an advanced stage of disintegration. One such element is an oval with an internal grid. This element has always appeared to be very old, yet at one site an oval with internal grid was found which appeared to be very recent. Closer examination revealed that it had been re-worked. The heavily patinated old element could be clearly seen between the peck marks of the re-working. This tended to confirm the assumption that this was a very old element. About five different elements have been found, none of which ever appeared to have been made

recently. Later a site was found which contained all of the elements that had been determined to be very old. All of the elements of the site were heavily patinated. It seemed to be a pure site, that is, all of the elements appeared to be of about the same age. It also contained three unmistakable shield figures (10-EL-776 panel 11). The one most clearly visible is shown in Figure 3. The shield figures were very heavily patinated — almost to the point of being unreadable. They were also of a slightly different style than was customary in the region. Subsequently, a very old figure of similar style was found at Flintstone's Retreat (10-GG-30 panel 14).

It is difficult to estimate the age of these oldest shield figures, but we do have some guidelines. Several one hundred-year-old dated petroglyphs have been found. If no discernable patination forms in 100 years, it is not unreasonable to assume that to form heavy patination would take a thousand or more years. In addition, it has been shown that southwestern Idaho has been occupied for at least ten thousand years (Butler 1978:67ff), and since the oldest shield figures are associated with the oldest petroglyph elements occurring in southwestern Idaho, it is not unreasonable to assume an age of several thousand years for these shield figures.

The large number of shield figures which can not be identified as very old or very young fill the time span between these two examples. Earlier in this research project involving petroglyphs, it was felt that it might be possible to trace the route of the Shoshoni migration into southwestern Idaho by following the trail of shield figures. It has been held that the Shoshoni shield figure of the western Great Plains and the Intermountain West was adopted from the Fremont of southeastern Utah. Since the Shoshoni occupied southwestern Idaho at the time of first contact and if the Idaho shield figures derived from the Fre-

mont shield figures, a trail of shield figures extending from the Fremont area into southwestern Idaho should be found. It should be much like the trail of Fremont-style shield figures extending from southeastern Utah northward to Alberta. Such is not the case, however, starting from the Mt. Bennett Hills area of southwestern Idaho and going in any direction, the frequency of occurrence of shield figures diminishes very rapidly. Further, the style of the southwest Idaho shield figures is clearly different from the Fremont shield figures. Central southern Idaho and northwestern Utah are apparently devoid of shield figures, none having been reported there. Taking all of these facts into consideration, it seems likely that the southwestern Idaho shield figure developed independently of the Fremont tradition. In fact, when one considers the possible age of the Idaho shield figures and the age of the Fremont culture, it is likely that the Idaho shield figure tradition pre-dates that of the Fremont.

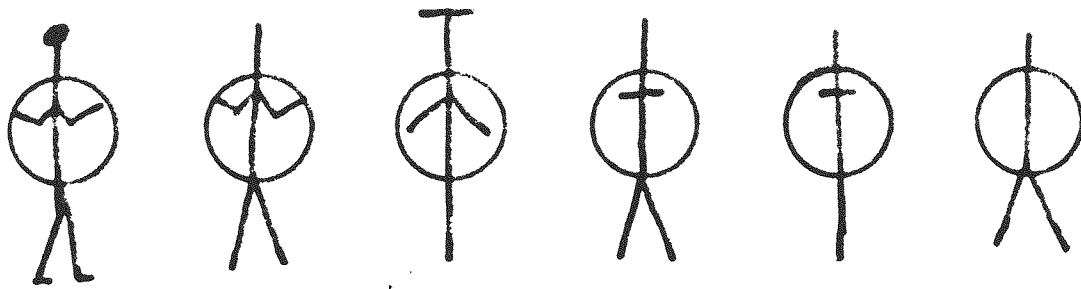
One might conclude that since the style of the Fremont/Shoshoni shield figures was so different from that of the southwestern Idaho Shoshoni that there was minimal contact between the residents of these two areas. This conclusion is supported by the fact that as soon as the southwestern Idaho Shoshoni obtained horses and started to travel to the plains to hunt buffalo, and hence mingle with the Fremont-Shoshoni, they adopted the decorated shield figure style of the Fremont/Shoshoni. Had they seen this style earlier it seems reasonable to assume that they would have adopted it earlier. In addition, the style of the anthropomorphic figures is different in the two areas. The pointed shoulder anthropomorph is ubiquitous in the eastern Idaho and Fremont-Shoshoni areas while it is totally absent in southwestern Idaho.

With all of the difference between the Fremont-Shoshoni petroglyphs and the southwestern Idaho Shoshoni petroglyphs, it is

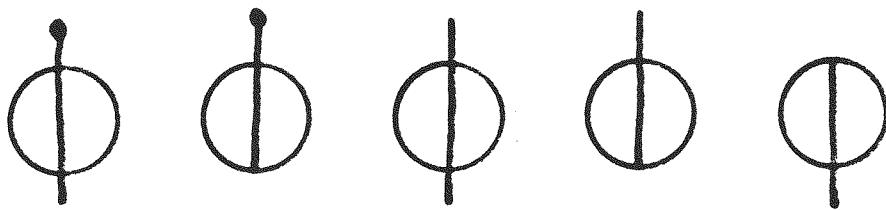
almost certain that no migration of Shoshonis from the east, southeast, or northeast into southwestern Idaho has occurred, at least since the time of the Fremont. The Shoshoni appear to have been a very adaptable people because they adopted much of the culture and traditions of the people they have replaced, but it seems highly unlikely that they would have abandoned their tradition of decorated shields in favor of plain undecorated shields if they had migrated from an easterly direction into southwestern Idaho, only to adopt the decorated shield tradition again upon obtaining the horse.

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Shield figure



P-Shield figure



Sectioned circle

Figure 1. Classification of circular elements that may be shield figures or look like shield figures.

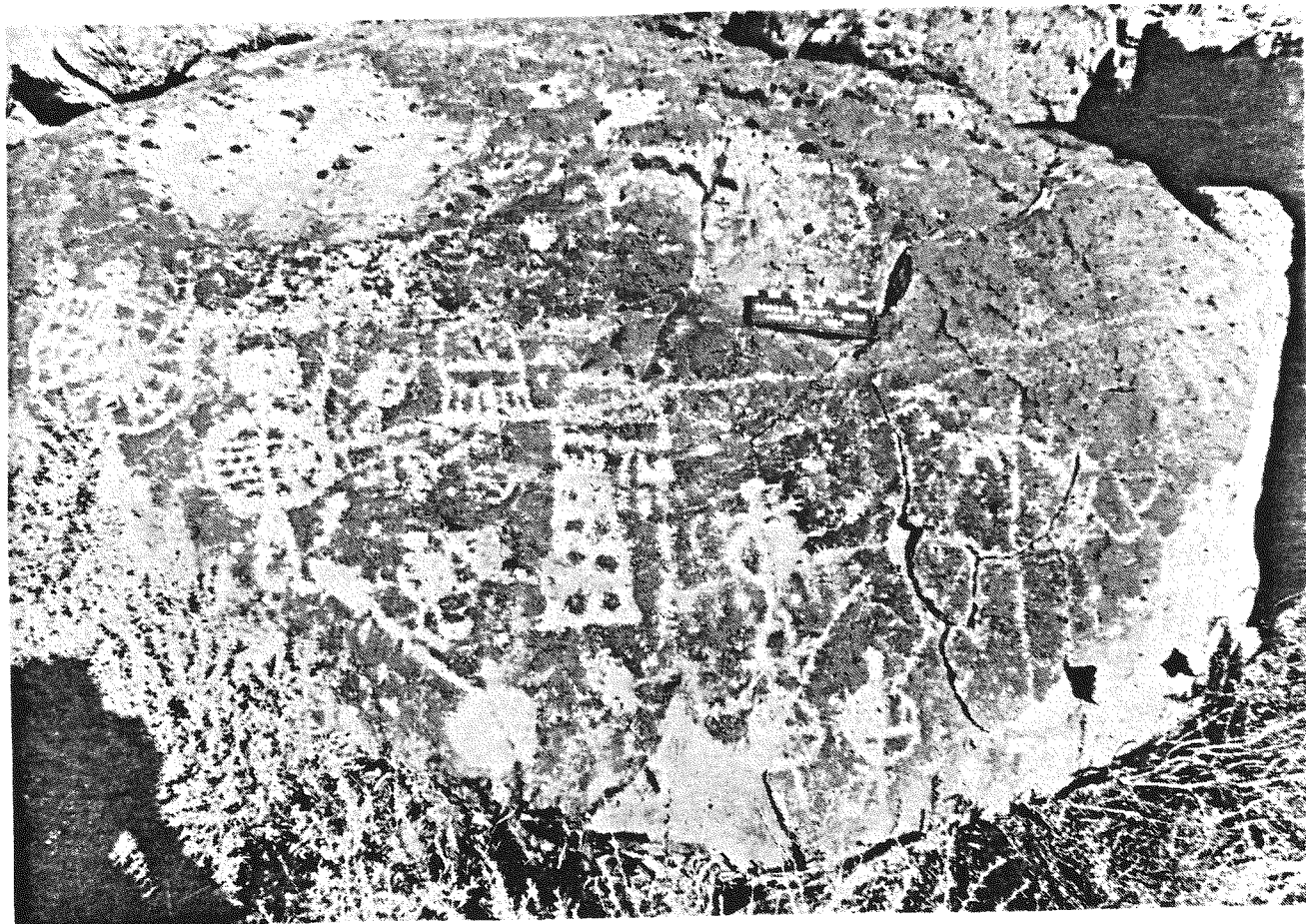


Figure 2. Petroglyph site 10-GG-318 panel 5. Numerous decorated shields can be seen.

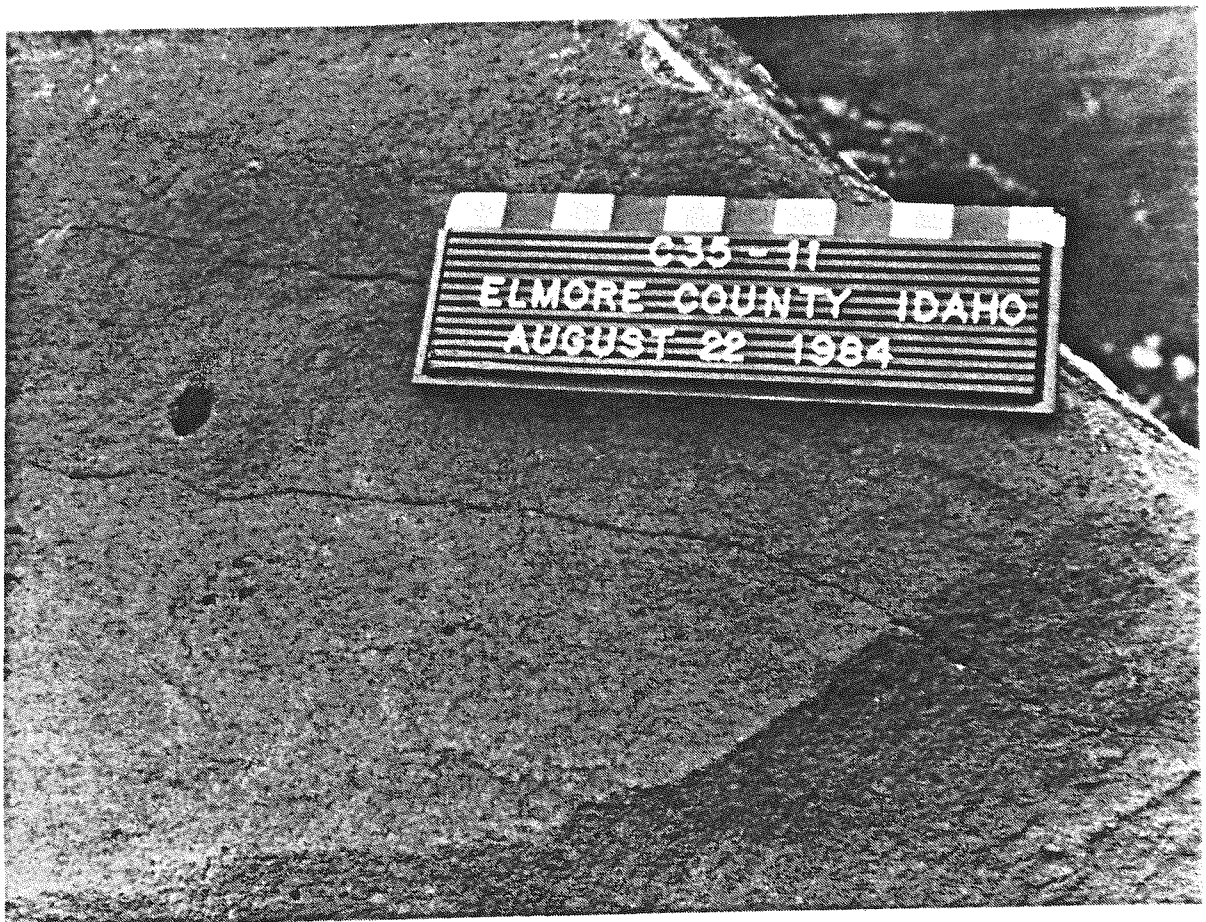


Figure 3. Petroglyph site 10-EL-776 panel 11. Note the barely visible shield figure 1-6 inches below the lower left corner of the title board.