

IF ROCKS COULD TALK

By

B. Jane Bush

Rock surfaces of the deserts and canyons of the Southwest are filled with prehistoric drawings made by Native Americans. Some are painted; pictographs, others are pecked or scratched into rock surfaces. These are called petroglyphs. These images present a visual vocabulary of people perhaps thousands of years old. (European cave art is dated as early as 30,000 years ago; and the oldest American rock art is thought to be 10,000 years old.) So far much of the vocabulary is undeciphered, but experts are learning to read a few of the images. As the meaning of an image emerges we see the possibility that perhaps rocks can talk.

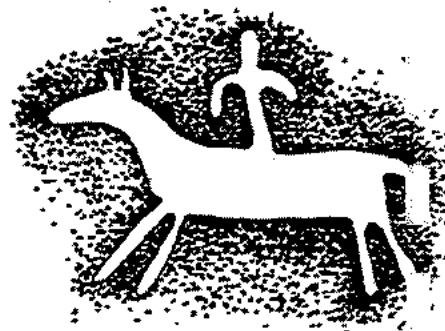
Many images are easily recognized. Bighorn sheep and goats make up the biggest group of images. Deer, bison, antelope, turkeys, cranes, serpents, centipedes, and even a mastodon are among the other animals portrayed. There are dancing humans, warriors with shields and spears, and men on horseback; while nearby a woman gives birth.

Other images are unfamiliar. Part human ghost figures seem to float on air, and some figures with helmets resemble astronauts. Some forms are abstract and meanings remain unknown.

Why did these ancient Americans make rock drawings? What was the relationship between their culture and these images? Were they part of religious ceremonies, or magic evoked by the shamans and medicine men? Are they records of events; or educational iconographs? Were some made because tending flocks allowed time to decorate the surroundings? Were they just part of everyday life? Perhaps a hunter is bragging, "I shot a six point buck, and it only took one arrow." Another story teller gives an account of a bear bigger than six men. Some glyphs may be clan symbols, marking territory of a clan. This is speculation, but any or all of it may be true.



Pictograph



Petroglyph



Fremont Shaman

A considerable amount of research now in progress shows numerous glyphs to be solar indicators. A shaft of light comes out of the mouth of one shaman. A goat calendar has lines along the body where shadows line up on both solstices, both equinoxes, and cross quarters. Other glyphs are highlighted one or two days a year; telling people it was time to plant corn, or squash.

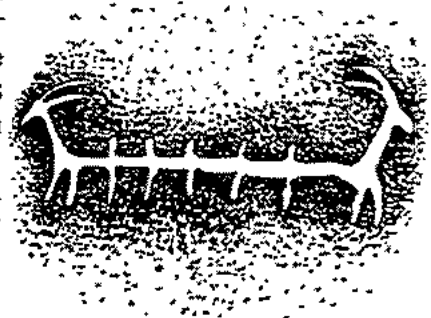
Dating rock art is another area of speculation. If the natural patina or "desert varnish" has overlaid a glyph it suggests the glyph to be relatively old. Often glyphs overlap earlier ones. An idea may have been to capture the power of an older image and add it to the newer image. Style, techniques, and subject matter are probably the most accurate ways to date.

Earliest styles were pecked with fairly round rocks. Designs were simple and generally abstract. Later pointed chisels were fashioned, and used with hammerstones; allowing more control and detail. In the early 1600's Indians were trading with the Spanish at Santa Fe. This began the era of metal tools in rock art. (My time line of styles is a summary of the major styles. I have taken an average of the most conservative scholars opinions for the dates.)

Mastodons became extinct about 10,000 years ago. Yet there are glyphs of mastodons, and a fossil of a mastodon was found with pot shards in it's digestive system. Does this mean glyphs are 10,000 years old?

Horses were reintroduced by the Spanish about 400 years ago. This makes it a fairly safe guess that a glyph with a horse is relatively recent.

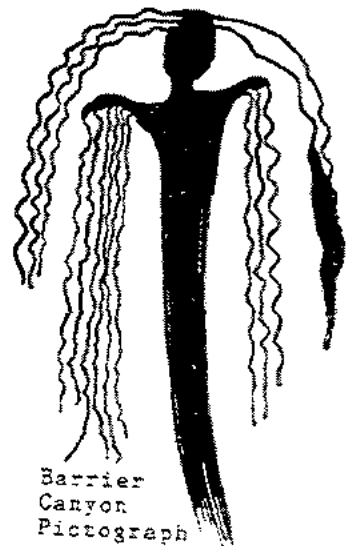
Elegant drawings, with economy of line, integrity of materials and original compositions are important for further study. These components of an art form provide many unanswered questions.



Goat Calendar

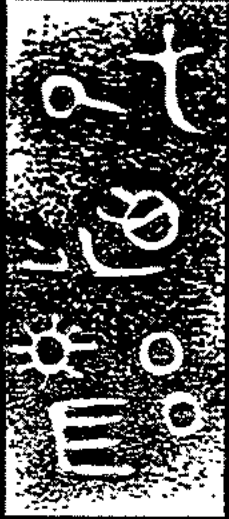
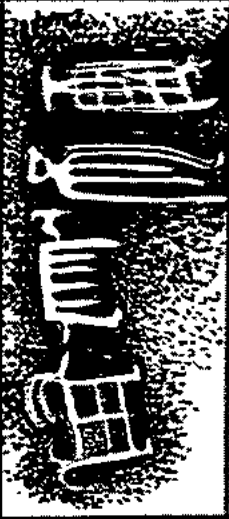
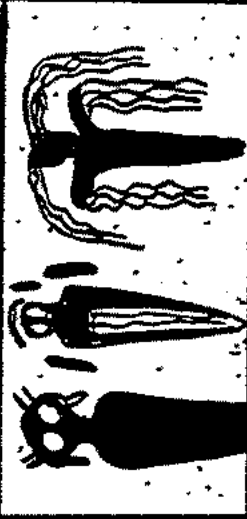




Sun Shaman



Barrier
Canyon
Pictograph

MAJOR ROCK ART STYLES FOUND IN UTAH:

| | | |
|--|--------------------------------|---|
| <p>Desert Archaic (Abstract)</p> | <p>6000 - 3000 B.C. (?)</p> |  |
| <p>Glen Canyon (Linear)</p> | <p>3000 - 0 B.C. (?)</p> |  |
| <p>Barrier Canyon (Painted)</p> | <p>500 B.C. - 500 A.D. (?)</p> |  |
| <p>Fremont and Northern Anasazi (Stylized Anthropomorphic)</p> | <p>300 - 1350 A.D.</p> |  |
| <p>Fremont, Anasazi, Pueblo, and Others (Representational)</p> | <p>900 - 1900 A.D.</p> |  |

Prepared by Jane Bush, 1990

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