

Little Blue Table

By
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Little Blue Table is not, as its name might suggest, a child's plaything. If tea parties were held on this Little Blue Table, they were attended

by Native Americans drinking herbal tea. Instead, this Little Blue Table is a mesa. It is a true mesa of the type illustrated in Figure 1 in that it consists of a large elevated area of

roughly level ground surrounded by a nearly complete line of cliffs. The cliffs are the remnants of a great lava flow which covered the area in ancient times and has since been partially eroded away leaving numerous mesas, or tables as they are called in Owyhee County. The lava of the cliffs has fractured into great blocks leaving many large flat patinated faces which provide ideal surfaces on which to place petroglyphs.

The elevation of Little Blue Table varies from 5700 feet at the southern end to over 6000

feet at the northern end. Many small streams have their origin on Little Blue Table, some of which flow north to the Snake River, some south to the Owyhee

River, and some east to the Bruneau River. Thus, Little Blue Table is a divide which separates several river drainages. Little Blue Creek, from which Little Blue Table got

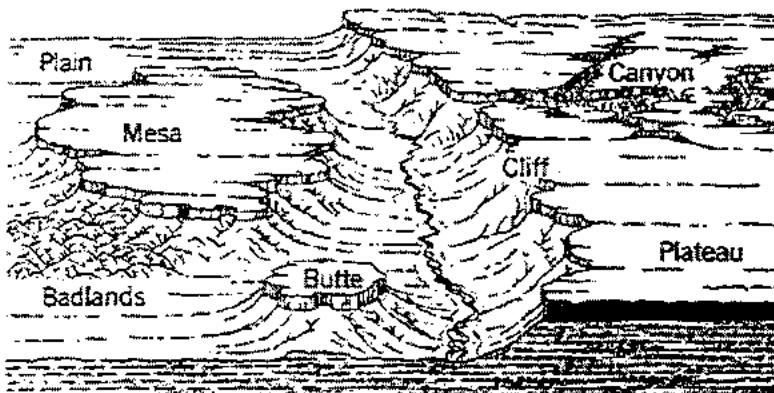


Figure 1. Diagram illustrating the mesa landform.

its name, drains the western side of the mesa and flows southward into Blue Creek and thence into the Owyhee River. Payne Creek drains the southern edge of the mesa and flows into Blue Creek. A series of streams originate on the eastern side of Little Blue Table, all of which flow eastward into the Bruneau River. They are, from south to north, Rattlesnake Creek, Nit Creek, Louse Creek, Crab Creek, and China Creek. The northern edge of Wild Horse Table is drained by Big Jack's Creek, Duncan Creek and Wickahony Creek, all of which flow

northward into the Snake River.

The annual amount of precipitation in Owyhee County varies from less than 10 inches along the Snake River to as much as 20 inches in some areas, usually the higher elevations. Little Blue Table lies in one of the higher precipitation areas, receiving 15 to 20 inches of moisture a year.

The area of Little Blue

Table exceeds 20 square miles, which is sufficient to provide a catchment for the streams which originate on or near the mesa. It is also the source of water for the many springs which are found around the margins of the mesa particularly on the west and south. Due to the low relief of the table,

few springs are found on the top of the mesa. Three or four springs are found at the northern part of the mesa top, however, and may have been important in attracting game to the vicinity of the jump area.

All of the streams which originate on the top of the mesa are intermittent, but many of them have flowed with sufficient vigor to carve substantial notches in the lava layer forming the surface of the mesa. The upstream end of these notches frequently consists of a dry waterfall. At the foot of these dry falls, a basin or tank has eroded which usually contains

water well into the dry summer season.

The cliffs are nearly continuous around the margins of Little Blue Table but there are occasional breaks in the cliffs where they have degenerated to scree. In other places, streams have broken the cliff down to the point that access to the top can be had from below by walking up

the stream bed or scrambling over the talus boulders. In general, the cliffs are much higher on the west and south sides than they are on the east and north sides. Agenbroad (1976) states that the height of

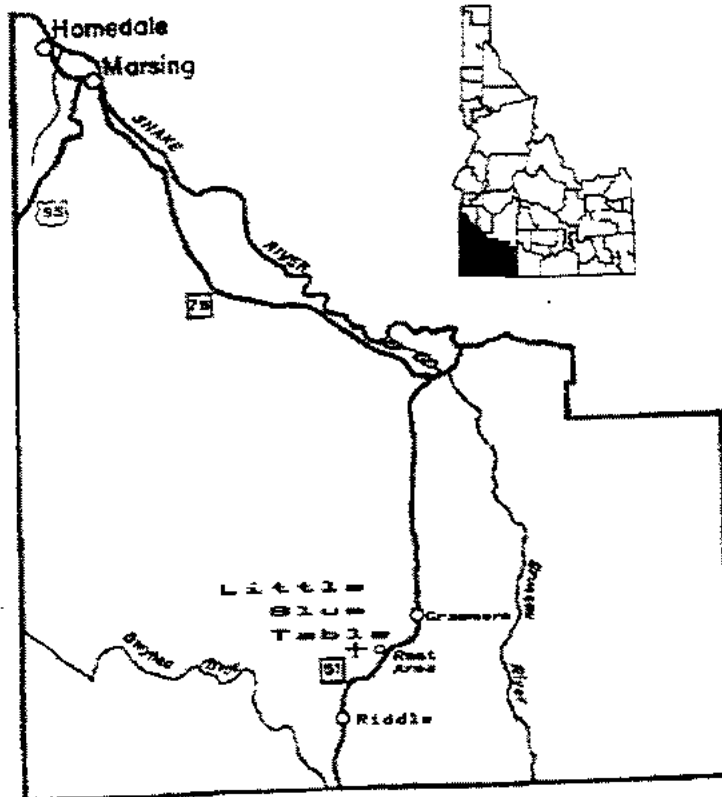


Figure 2. Owyhee County, Idaho, showing the location of Little Blue Table which is marked "+".



Figure 3. Little Blue Table.

the cliffs in the vicinity of the buffalo jumps varies from 0 to 39 feet.

Little Blue Table is located 18 miles north of the Nevada border in southern Owyhee County, Idaho. It's location is shown on the map in Figure 2. Figure 3 shows an outline of the mesa which is very irregular in

shape. The northern end of the mesa is called Wild Horse Table but there is no natural line dividing it from Little Blue Table. They will both be considered together here under the name of Little Blue Table.

The mesa extends about 10 miles in a north-south direction. Its width at the waistline is just one mile. The maximum east-west dimension is about six miles. The large size of the mesa allows for considerable diversity of physical features. Numerous dry lakes are found on top of the mesa and several springs are found on the top of the northern half of the mesa. Vegetation on the mesa consists largely of sagebrush and grass but trees are

found on the slopes at the northern edges of the mesa.

Little Blue Table stands out in the vastness of Owyhee County as the high ground that separates three river drainages. It is also notable because of the large number of archaeological sites located on or near the mesa. Table 1 lists

	Total	Lithic	Artifact	Rock Alignment	Petroglyph
Reported Sites	56	22	25	12	6
Other Sites	16	5	2	2	11
Total	72	27	27	12	19

Table 1. Archaeological sites on Little Blue Table.

the known sites which are on or near the mesa. Most of the reported sites were found during formal surveys by professional archaeologists. These surveys, however, covered only a very small portion of the mesa, mostly along the southern margin.

By far, the most extensive work done on Little Blue Table was done by Agenbroad (1976). He studied the jump site on the northeastern corner of the mesa and declared it to be a buffalo jump though Plew (1987) disagrees. Agenbroad has spent two seasons studying the jumps on Little

Blue Table and on adjacent Turner Table. He reports (Agenbroad 1976) finding 582 stone piles, 392 projectile points, 55 fences, 42 breastworks and 6 stone circles in the "Y" jump complex on Little Blue Table. These are all included as a single site with rock alignments and artifacts in Table 1.

The only other professional investigation, other than surveys, was done in 1989 by the State Archaeologist, Tom Green. The Ripple Rock petroglyph site appeared to be very old and seemed to be a site where most

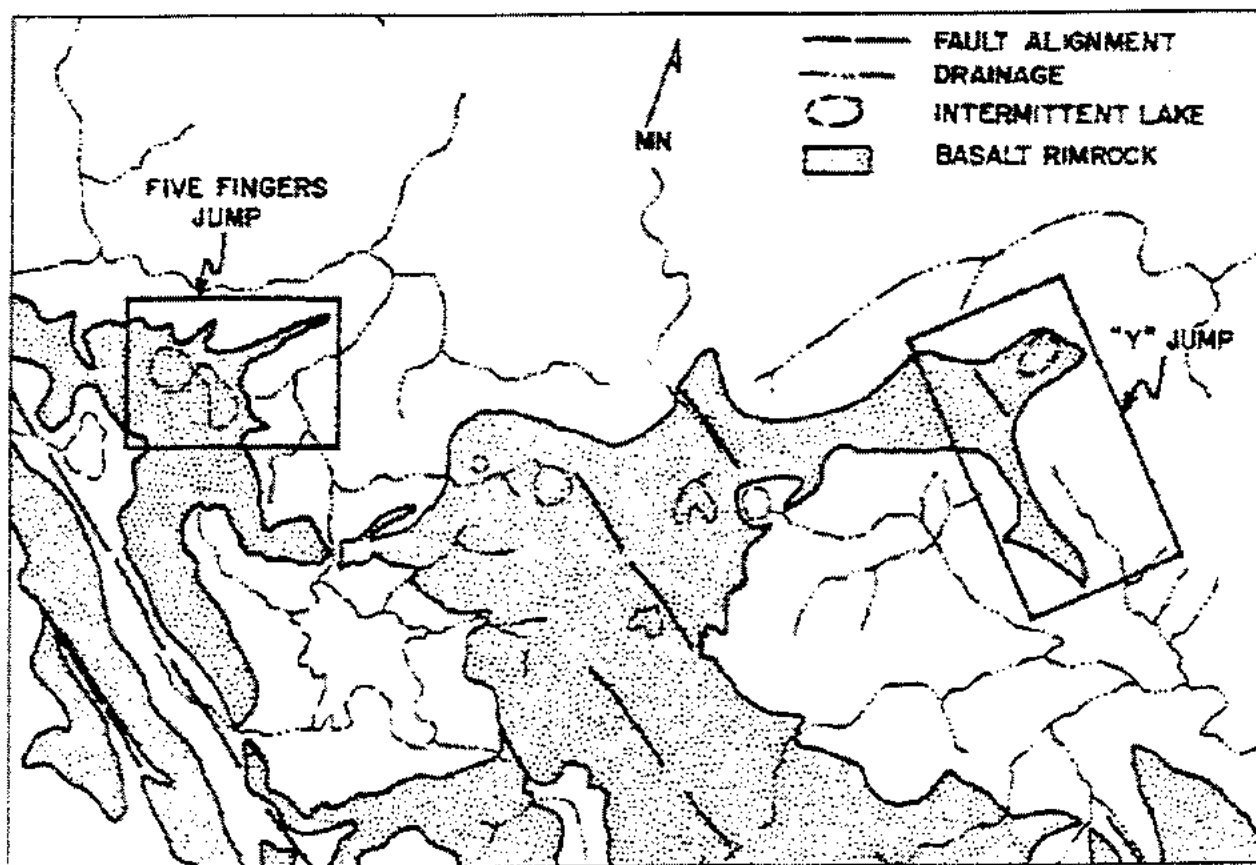


Figure 4. Buffalo jump on Little Blue Table and Turner Table after Agenbroad.

of the petroglyphs appeared to be about the same age. A single test pit was put down in a tiny rock shelter whose walls were covered with very old appearing glyphs. It was felt that, based on the appearance of the glyphs, this site could be as much as five thousand years old. Numerous artifacts were found including two mortars, a drill, several projectile points, and a fire pit with charcoal. Based on the artifacts found, Green feels that the site is probably not more than one thousand years old. Agenbroad felt that some of the artifacts found at the buffalo jump site, which is less than three miles distant, were as much as seven thousand years old but a single charcoal sample analysed by him yielded a date of AD 1700. The charcoal from the rock shelter has not yet been analysed. It is obvious that more work needs to be done to reconcile these age differences.

Although a very small portion of the mesa has been surveyed for archaeological sites, the location of many sites is already known. Lithic scatters are probably the most common manifestation of Native American occupancy. The location of the known lithic scatters is shown in Figure 5. Artifacts are frequently found at lithic scatter sites and such is the case at Little Blue Table although occasional isolated points are found. Petroglyphs are usually found near camp sites. All of the petroglyph sites, which are shown in Figure

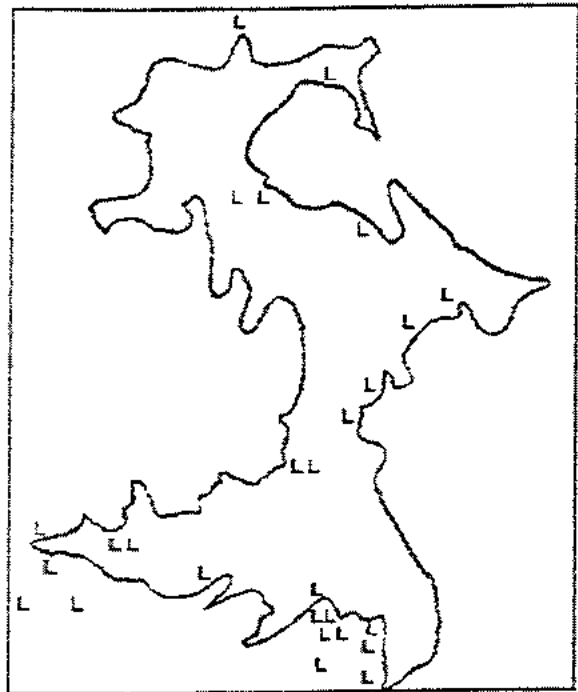


Figure 5. Location of lithic scatters on Little Blue Table.

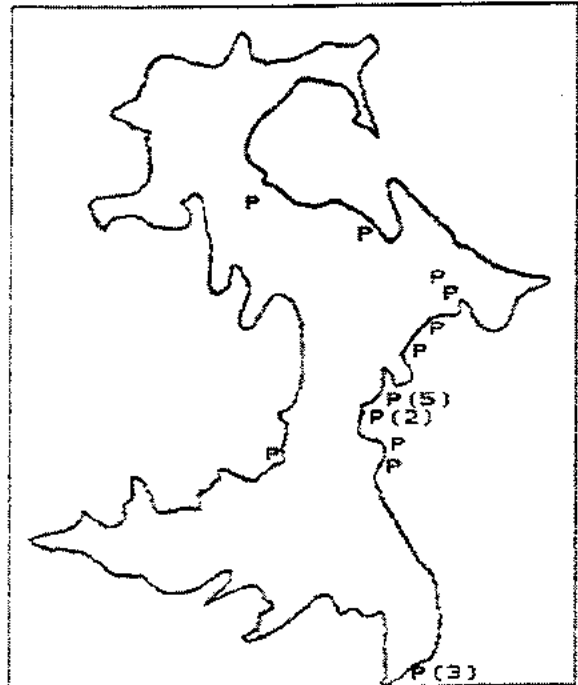


Figure 6. Location of petroglyphs on Little Blue Table.

6, are located near known or suspected camp sites.

The locations of known petroglyph sites are mostly along the eastern border of the mesa. This may be due to the fact that a search for petroglyph sites has not been made over most of the mesa. Except for the southern margin, which has been surveyed, everywhere a search has been made for petroglyphs, they have been found. It is expected that when a search has been made on the unsurveyed portion of the mesa that many more petroglyph sites will be found. During a recent field trip by the Utah Rock Art Research Association to view the petroglyphs of Little Blue Table, the visitors swarmed over the mesa looking at petroglyphs. They reported that between every cluster of petroglyphs which have been reported as sites and shown on Figure 6, they found an almost continuous scatter of petroglyphs. Thus it would seem that for a distance of about three miles on the eastern margin of the mesa there is one large almost continuous petroglyph site.

The petroglyphs on Little Blue Table seem to be different than those in the other parts of Owyhee County and indeed from the rest of southwestern Idaho. Little Blue Table has a surplus of abraded figures and panels which are at least partially unreadable. This may be due to a different age of the figures or to a different method of manufacture. Also, abstract figures are very common on Little Blue Table particularly rectilinear figures and serpentines.

Little Blue Table is deficient, with respect to the

rest of southwestern Idaho, in representational figures, particularly anthropomorphic figures. It is also deficient in circles and incised figures. In another paper it will be shown that Little Blue Table is indeed different from other regions in southwestern Idaho.

Little Blue Table is also the site of two suspected solar observatory sites. One, which was located by Nal Morris of the Utah Rock Art Research Association, is thought to be a possible equinox site. Here it is felt that the shadow of the overhang may fall on the long line of dots (see Figure 7) at the time of the equinoxes. In another location, shown in Figure 8, it is felt that the shadow of the cliff, which has an unusual notch in it, may fall on the circles at the time of the winter solstice. This panel is interesting in that near the concentric circles are two areas where the rock appears to be gouged out as if by a chisel. These pits are completely patinated and it is difficult to tell whether they are natural or man-made. The close juxtaposition just around the corner of the rock of the tree-like petroglyph of the adjacent panel is also interesting. Neither of these sites have been checked at the appropriate time of year, but it is hoped that this year they can be.

The solstice site is of particular interest for if it checks out to indeed be a solstice site it will help settle an argument over the time of occupancy of Little Blue Table. There are those who feel that it is only a summer occupancy site while others feel that it is more nearly a year



Figure 7. A possible solar equinox site. The dots were in deep shadow under the overhang.

round site. If it can be shown that the site was occupied in late December it will help settle the argument. Calendrical sites have not been investigated in Idaho, but if they exist here and if they can be firmly demonstrated to be calendrical, it will be of assistance to the archaeologist. Determining the period of occupancy of these sites by a supposedly nomadic people will greatly aid in the study of their culture. If a winter solstice site can be firmly demonstrated at Little Blue Table, it will establish the presence of the Native Americans here in December and probably through the winter, contrary to the thoughts of some.

Most of the panels



Figure 8. A possible solar winter solstice site on Little Blue Table.



Figure 9. Panel C26-47 which is immediately adjacent to the suspected solar solstice panel which is to the left.

at Little Blue Table contain only simple abstract figures many of which are very faintly inscribed and unreadable. The panel shown in Figure 9 is quite typical of those on Little Blue Table. It contains one representational figure, that of the tree on the left end of the panel, and many other abstract figures. There are many straight lines on the panel and an abstract figure on the right hand side. Many of the lines are so faintly inscribed as to be almost invisible. Figure 9 is a panel which is immediately adjacent to the suspected calendrical panel of Figure 8. Whether there is any significance to the fact that the tree in Figure 9 is immediately adjacent to the concentric circles of Figure 8 is not known.

Figures 10 and 11 are illustrations of some other

typical panels. Both panels are completely abstract with many curvilinear and rectilinear designs. In spite of the fact that curvilinear designs seem to be more numerous, there are actually more rectilinear elements by a small margin. Nearly half of the rectilinear elements are simple short straight lines while most of the curvilinear elements are circles and serpentes. This may make the curvilinear elements appear more numerous. In Figure 11, many of the lines are deeply incised, which is unusual on Little Blue Table but seems to be characteristic of the much older elements.

O c c a s i o n a l l y representational elements are observed and rarely anthropomorphic elements are seen. Figure 13 shows one of the rare anthropomorphic elements as well as several bear



Figure 10. This is a typical Little Blue Table panel showing nothing but abstract elements.



Figure 11. Most of the elements on this panel are deeply incised and consist of lines and dots.

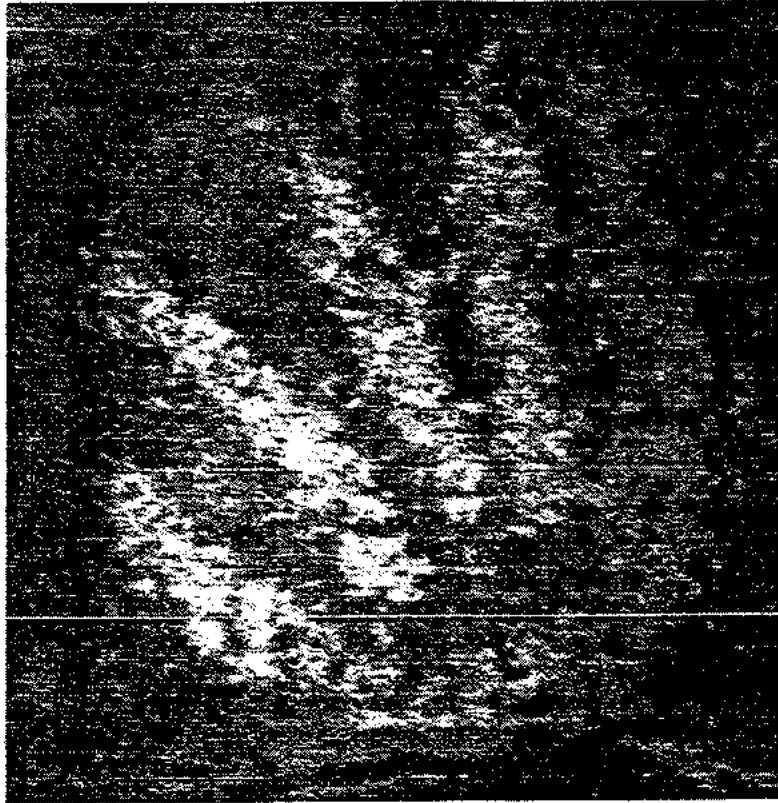


Figure 12. A petroglyphic handprint.

tracks, while Figure 12 shows a handprint done as a petroglyph. Numerous handprints are found at Little Blue Table, both pictographic and petroglyphic. Figure 12 illustrates one of the petroglyphic handprints which are rather numerous. One panel at the Many Hands site contains at least 14 pictographic handprints. The sizes of the handprints seemed small so they were measured and the largest print is the same size as the hand of the smallest girl in a fourth grade class at school. Apparently the Native Americans had been dipping the hands of their children in paint and holding them up to the wall so the kids could put their handprint on the wall. Some of

the prints were eight feet above the ground. In one place there was a smear on the wall where, apparently, a kid had rubbed his hand while being lowered to the ground. The petroglyphic handprints are frequently quite stylized as is the one in Figure 12.

The anthropomorphic figures at Little Blue Table are usually very primitive stick figures sometimes difficult to recognize as being anthropomorphic. One of the more clearly recognized figures is shown in Figure 13. In this distorted figure we can recognize one hand and one foot as well as a body and limbs. Although not visible in this reproduction, there are at least eight animal tracks on this



Figure 13. A largely representational panel containing an anthropomorphic figure.

panel, probably bear. The numbers of toes represented vary from three to six.

Little Blue Table is an important and unique archaeological site in southwestern Idaho. It is a high well watered mesa draining to rivers in three directions. It has a major game jump at one end. At least two camp sites have been located on the mesa and several other suspected camps have been found. Major

petroglyph sites have been located and lithic scatters abound. Only a small portion of the mesa has been surveyed and more major discoveries are expected.

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