

ABRASIONS:  
A RITUAL RELEASE OF POWER OR PREHISTORIC VANDALISM?  
PART ONE  
BY

EVE C. EWING AND JESSE E. WARNER

As we begin to delve a little deeper into the finer points of research several areas are being found that do not fit nicely into older packages of preconceived notions about what the makers of these enigmatic symbols were actually doing. One of the areas that was thought to have a fairly clear definition was the term "Vandalism." That term, however, is no longer considered as a clean cut area of consideration (Hedges 1990). Several different types of what was previously thought to be defacements, are being reconsidered in light of new evidence. Because of other possibilities, previous conclusions now need to be reexamined. One distinctive technique of what was considered as a type of defacement or vandalism is **Abrasion**. By abrasion we mean the rubbing of the surface of a symbol with a rock or a piece of solid pigment. That technique was originally thought of as an attempt to rub the figure off of the cliff. Previously that would have been defined as an act of vandalism. But after closely examining many different rubbed figures, the view of both the act and the resulting abrasion has come to be less definitive in its intent than it was originally thought to be. We are now beginning to find enough questionable situations to make it worth challenging the older definition in many cases.

We must also make it clear that we do not refute the possibility that some abrasions of symbolism were acts of vandalism. What we are suggesting is that the act of abrading a figure is not always an act of "Vandalism." We also suggest that one should look at the possibility that there are other alternatives. That will be the basic conclusion of this presentation. One very poignant possibility is that some, if not many acts of abrasion may actually be a **Ritual Release of Power**. In examining the evidence, the abrasions are questionable enough, but after carefully considering the attitude present in the act or action that produced it (as a relative consideration), there is more doubt as to the intent being negative. Along with that, there are certain pieces of ethnography that will make that possibility a little more feasible and the fact that there are other alternatives that are more likely.

In such diverse places as Baja, California and in the San Rafael in Utah, for instance, there are several incidents of abrasion that may suggest that there is more involved than the simple expression of vandalism. As has been challenged before (Hedges 1990, Warner nd), the word vandalism is really not a very good word to use in trying to describe all of the things that it has been applied to. Part of that is because of these new insights. With the increase of new information the term vandalism is now becoming more ambiguous. One problem is that there is an unawareness by some authors that there are other possibilities rather than a simple negative disregard for the work of another person. Hedges was the first to seriously bring this problem to the public (1990:63).

In approaching the subject of **Ritual Abrasion as a release of power** there are several considerations that need to be reviewed. It may seem more natural or comfortable to consider the evidence first and the idea of intent last, but the **First**, consideration at this point needs to be the idea of the intent of the abrasion because of the notion that if there is no difference in the intent, there is no need for further discussion. Once intent has received a certain amount of validity, the **Second**, thing that should be done is to acknowledge that there are problems with determining what the limits of this type of expression are. When those limits are identified then the **Third** thing to consider is the problems in trying to define what the ramifications of what those limits are.

The following considerations attempt to demonstrate that intent is a valid criteria for consideration. The evidence that is used to provide the answers as to whether or not what is being considered is a "**ritual release of power**" are different in the nature of not only what was done to the figures after they were made, but with the attitude in which that action seems to have taken place. That reflection of a corresponding attitude towards the object that received the action is an important part of this issue.

In the case of what we are referring to as a **ritual release of power**, that subsequent action is simply a passive abrasion of the surface to obliterate the high spots that the figure was placed on, not the figure itself. Another type may be the abrasion of certain parts of a glyph, such as the antlers for instance. This more reverent attempt to release what we have encapsulated in the term power does not include "rub outs" where the total figure has been obliterated by rubbing it off of the cliff, what we are referring

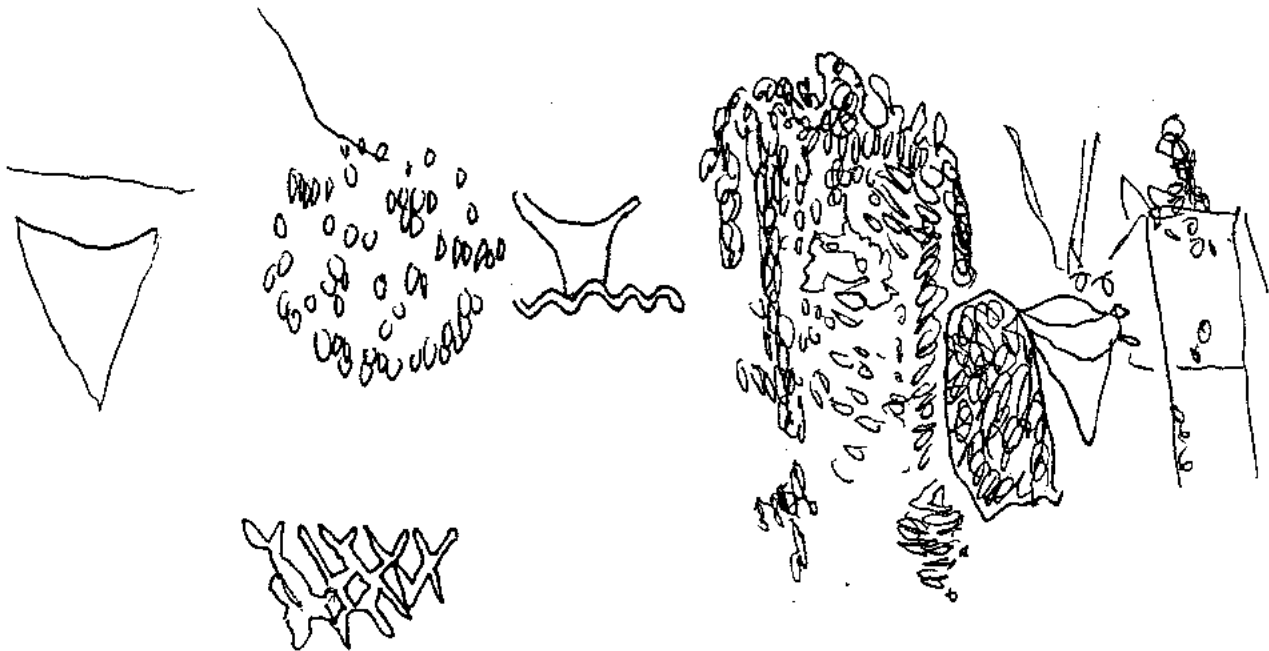
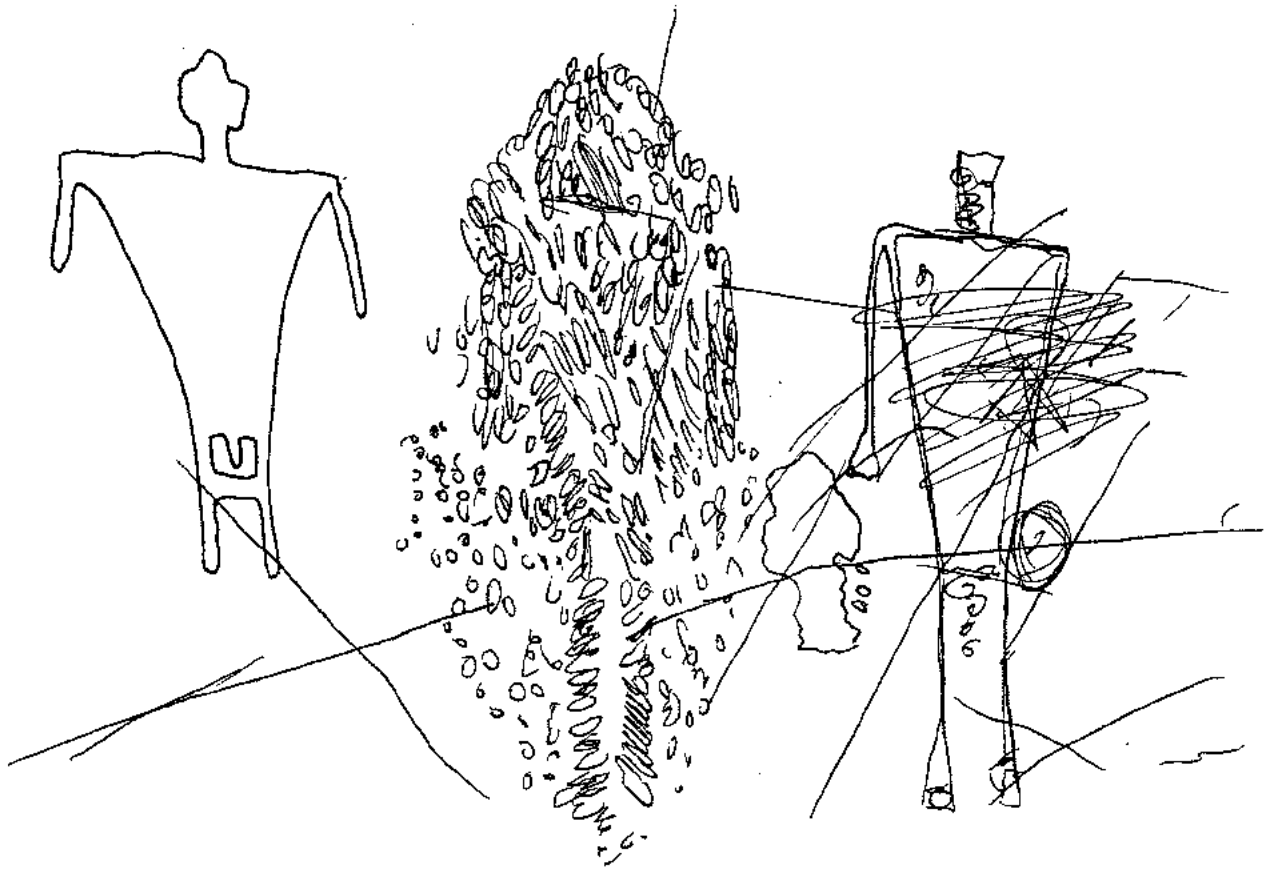


FIGURE 1



FIGURE 3

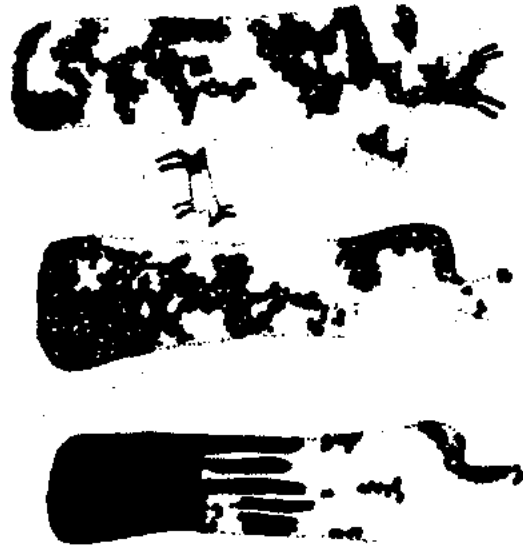


FIGURE 2



to are abrasions that only remove a minute portion, or amount of the symbol, or separates a part of the symbol from the whole. As a principle, that almost becomes diagnostic. In fact it seems that it could be considered a prerequisite of the attitude. The types of surfaces that nearly all of these abraded figures occur on are of stone where the figure could have been totally obliterated if that had been the desire. The action of total obliteration (a rub out) by abrasion we believe may then fall within the definition of what we consider as **Vandalism**, depending on how the word is defined.

Since there was not a total obliteration or a more violent form of defacement such as totally hacking the figure off of the wall as was done along the San Juan (Fig. 1) or wild random hacking that gouges deeply into the cliff as was done in Barrier Canyon (Fig. 2) and Pleasant Creek (Fig.3), simple abrasion seems to be a more reverent attitude. A less aggressive action would seem to equate a more reverent or respectful attitude toward the spirit of the image and the symbolism that it stands for. Less aggressive (or an obvious lack of aggression), may not necessarily be more reverent or respectful, but it expresses a difference in attitude that can easily be taken as such.

Let's consider that for a moment. In the use of sand or dry paintings, both the Navajo and the Hopi have a great reverence for the procedures producing a sacred image and the final result of what is done to that image. The reason for that deep respect is that once created, those images have a power that needs to be respected or there will be serious ramifications that go far beyond the individual who produced it (Warner nd). That is similar to what we believe must have been prescribed for the creation of at least some of the similarly sacred images placed on the cliffs. An example that supports that concept in another area of concern is the story of what happened in the case of the Medicine Wheel on Tom Freestones Ranch (Freestone and Morris 1993). In that situation Tom and Nal Morris collaborated in the creation of a medicine wheel. Once that wheel was constructed, members of the local Ute tribe came to bless and use it. It is kind of like the story, "Make it and they will come." The simple act of making it and the resulting symbol created a power that needed to be blessed, and dedicated for the potential that it could provide for the good of the people.

Those examples illustrate that there is a belief in a power and a reverence toward an image. That is also evidenced by the

attitudes that many express while at a "rock art" site. As witnessed by the authors, many Native Americans usually have a total change in their demeanor. The tone of their voice is often different and they are often more solemn than before. There is essentially no difference in their minds between the powers of an image whether it is pecked on the rocks or painted in sand. There is one irrefutable piece of evidence that they do consider them much alike. That fact, is one term that the Navajo call petroglyphs. That term is "Nasazi bi'iikaah," the sand paintings of the old ones (on the rocks is understood).

They do respect the power that they feel there and in addition to what was just said about the change in their attitudes. That demeanor extends to other areas of their lives even when they are not in the presence of the "rock art" itself. On one occasion a woman at Escrito, New Mexico was afraid to weave a rug with a design copied off of a pictograph painted on a canyon wall. The reason was that it had too much "Bidzeel." It had so much power that she felt it would bring dangerous repercussions back to her family if she wove that figure into a rug. That illustrates the concepts of power that they, as well as ourselves feel while at these kinds of sites. They all support the idea of respect, or fear of the power that they still hold.

After they are through with dry paintings they are ritually cleaned up, taken out into the night and disposed of in a way that it releases their Bidziil, reverently. Their prayers, and all their power are released to the winds to carry the essence of those rituals up to the Holy Ones. It is only in witch craft that the painting is left on the ground, or irreverently destroyed. The act of ritual retirement or release will be a thread that weaves through this analysis over and over again. Hopefully this illustrates that there is within them a reverence for symbolism and a fear of their power to a certain degree.

Similarly the act of **Ritual Abrasion** would consist of the belief that the abrasion that was done, could probably have been done by some of the authors of the symbols themselves or related individuals, sympathetic to its use (or intent), and symbolism (or meaning) in a positive sense, rather than as an act of vandalism. **Vandalism** is defined here as a negative act that was not done by the author of the image and most likely was done by an individual that was not sympathetic to the concepts or individuals involved with the symbols that are being vandalized, desecrated, defaced or altered in a negative sense.

At one site in the Molen Reef there is a very majestic figure that has a very powerful and dominant association with many other little, much less significant players on what seems to be the stage of eternity (Fig. 4). He was seemingly placed there with arms out stretched to reach out to the sun, since a shaft of light very slowly works its way up the cliff till it come out of his mouth. Birds seem to fly out of his hands, animals run up around him at his sides, and etherial attendants full of a tremendous power, animation and emotion stand by. As he speaks one feels humbled and there is an urge to fall on ones knees like Moses may have done before the words and light emanating from the burning bush. After he speaks the shaft of light retreats back down to the right on the exact same angle that it rose on. The total effect of the symbolism that the elements placed on the cliff portray, and the added effects of the theatrical events with the light, make this figure one truly, unbelievably powerful and important image, an oracle, or a theophany.

If a subsequent visitor to this panel just contemplated the graphics alone, that would probably be enough to seriously frighten him. Is that a valid assumption? As was suggested, we believe that there is a good chance that figure could have been abraded by those who made or used that panel. We also believe it is possible that it could also be under those later kinds of circumstances that the figure could also have been abraded. Consider this little ethnographic input. That fear we believe would be much like the fear Mary Dennison and her family experienced when Odie Chapman gave her a fairly simple drawing of a figure and asked her to weave it. One of the authors saw that fear, and eventually became involved with her handling that fear during one event of it's weaving. And add to that the interaction of a shaft of light that would no doubt represent that image speaking out from the dust of the past, and you are the only one there to listen. Would that fear create enough emotion to Kill it, but kill it with more respect than usual, ergo abrasion? Or are there still other possibilities? We believe that there are still other things that must be examined and seriously thought about before the verdict of vandalism can be requested.

Up to the point that we began to seriously consider these other possibilities we always believed that the situation was that some one at a later time rubbed these panels as a clear, cut and dried act of vandalism. But after an examination of all the other more aggressive manners that other panels have been vandalized, and considering the differences in the feelings that they left, this

seems to be a more passive action. But as these different scenarios illustrate, can passive legitimately be equated with respect or reverence? Not in all cases, but it seems to in enough to make it a valid consideration.

If it is a passive attempt to void out it's power in an act of "vandalism," then that would also no doubt visually fall within what would look like an act of Ritually Abrading the figure for reasons other than what would be a negative intention. In other words, to kill a figure for a negative reason with a passive technique like rubbing would seem to produce much the same result as releasing the power of the object by abrasion. Ritual Abrasion is a positive form of "Killing" the physical to let the spiritual essence go free. "Killing in our society today, even to "kill" one on death row who deserves it is often taken as a negative situation by a large percentage of our society. "killing" an object in the minds of Native Americans is generally considered as a positive action to prevent a negative result, or to rectify a negative result. Therefore if one killed a figure with respect to release the overall power inherent within the figure then both sides of the argument seem to be at a stand still.

Just the term "killing" with our english definition alone denotes certain things and connotes others. Denote means to signify or indicate, like a finality of death (of just the physical) to Native Americans and Christians, but a total annihilation to those that believe that there is nothing beyond the grave. Not too long ago it was taught that the term kill was even a sin to say. Slay, slain, and slew were the appropriate words. Kill was only used in a Biblical sense. Today we hear and see it in nearly every popular movie and the news being attempted, done, tried, talked about or being covered up. It is treated so lightly one hardly thinks twice about it. But what the abrader thought is a great difference in their world view, attitude, and definition and that is what is important. We often visualize and describe a kill mark as a pecked hole in the chest of an anthropomorph as though it was the same as, or equivalent to, a bullet hole in the chest of a real person. We define a hole put in the bottom of a pot as "kill" marks, but there is a difference in the attitudes of all these examples, while the results of the action are much the same.

While on the other hand connote means to imply something in addition to that specifically stated in the main concept. Thus "Killing," connotes a few little subliminal pockets of various



nondescript thoughts that turn around and around on a carousel of confusion. They turn without our ever having spent any real time to concentrate on any one aspect. As a result we have never really understood these possibilities before. Kill can imply that the image is not really killed, as in the denotation that he was shot to death, but connotes that he was lovingly transformed from the physical to the spiritual through the opening of the mortal, physical image by means of an alteration to the original form by Abrasion. That may be like "pulling the plug" on a loved one who is terminally ill. And the confusion is that a Dr. has been on trial for murder for aiding some in pulling their plug.

Other thoughts could be that you are performing a right of passage for the figure, so to speak, with either a positive or negative attitude. You are allowing or helping him to pass from the physical form of the pictograph, to the spiritual form of itself. You help him move from the physical realm to the spiritual realm. That really means that you move it out of this sphere of influence where you are afraid of it, into another sphere where it isn't as likely to have any power over you. One Hopi girl explained that these images can be possessed by the spirits of the dead and witches to watch every move we make. By pecking out the face (a kill mark) that possibility is remedied.

Thus, there may be several different types of attitudes, that may result in identical looking remains. Different ideas, one result. We hope this creates enough doubt that it validates the **First** point. We believe there is enough valid evidence to make the previous conclusions about the definition of the term vandalism questionable. Does all Vandalism create a negative result? We believe that it does, and that abrasion is one form of vandalism, but that it can also be a means to other ends. In which case it is not vandalism, nor negative.

If that has been satisfactorily addressed, consider the **Second** point. If we now have a new area to consider, we need to determine the limits of that type of expression. With what was just said about the possibility of the same action and result being caused by various different attitudes, we need to seriously consider what the limits of what the ritual is in the release of power as being different from what the ritual is in the "killing" of a figure to simply destroy it.

To do that let us first consider two different types of figures that were abraded on one panel and then consider them as a

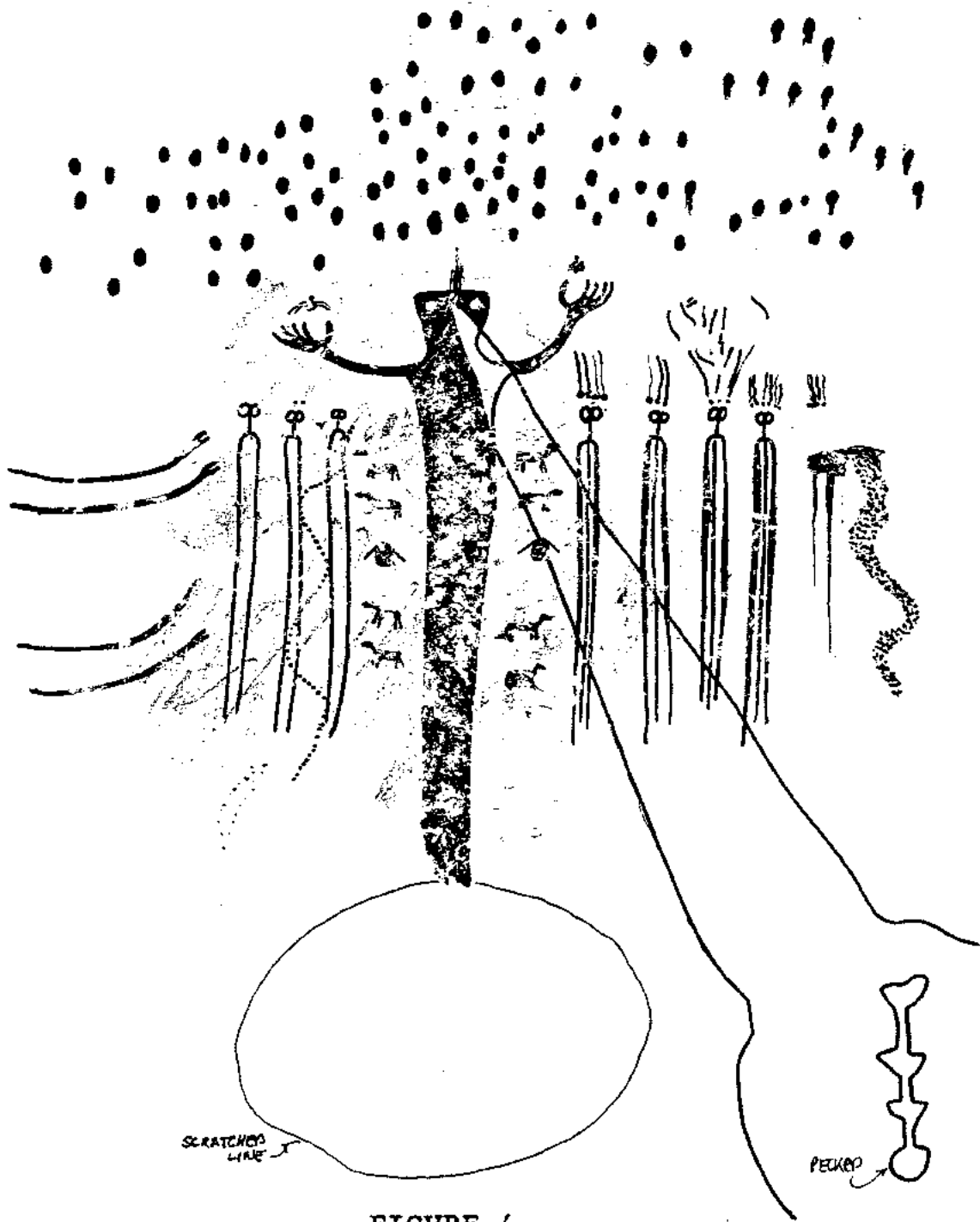


FIGURE 4

MAY-AUG. CROSS QUARTER

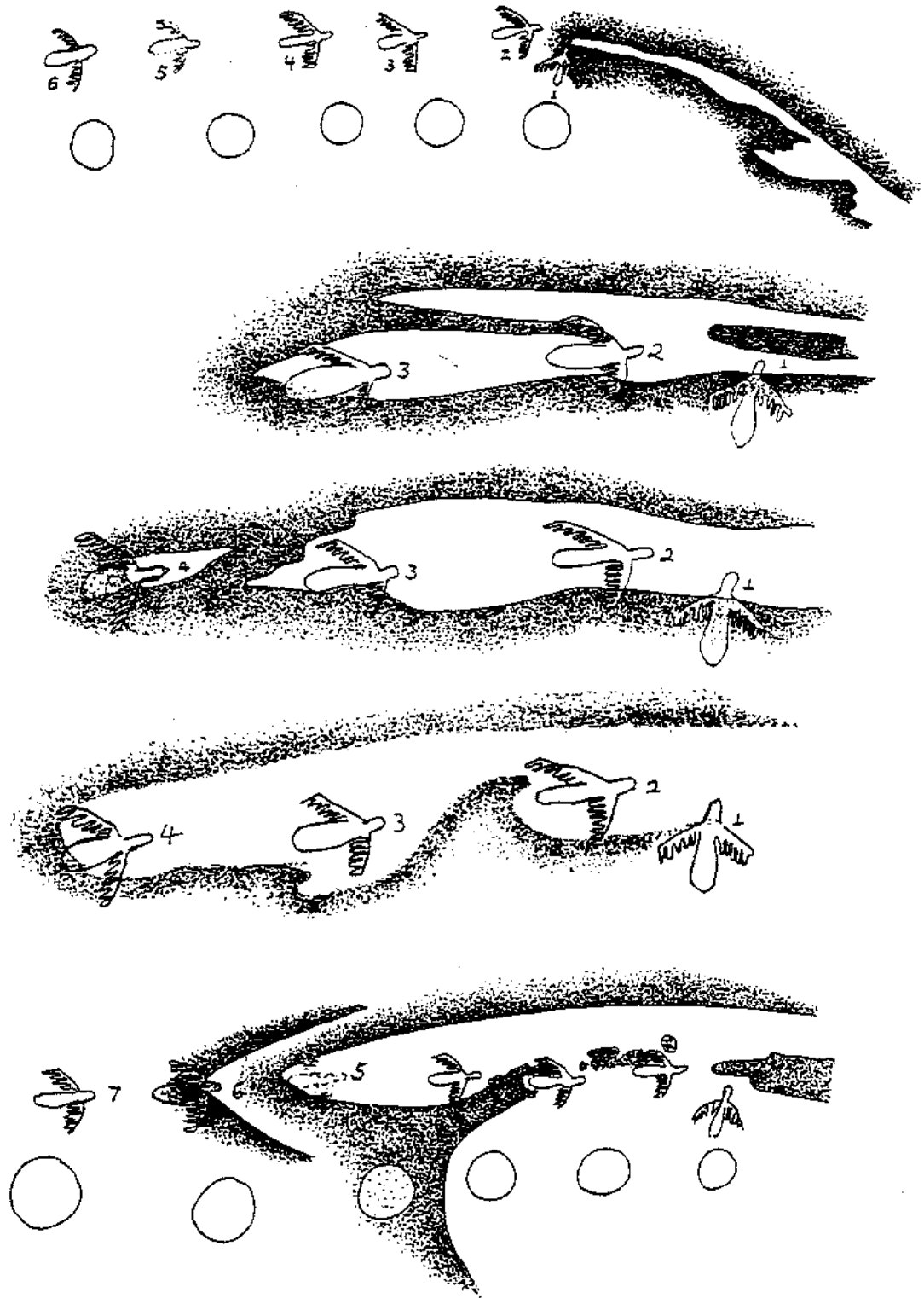


FIGURE 5

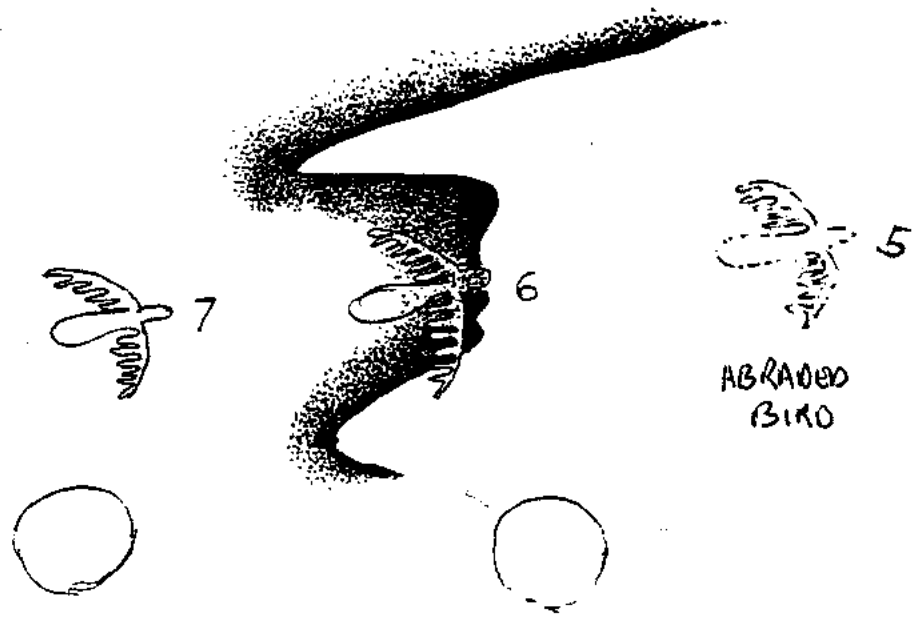


FIGURE 6

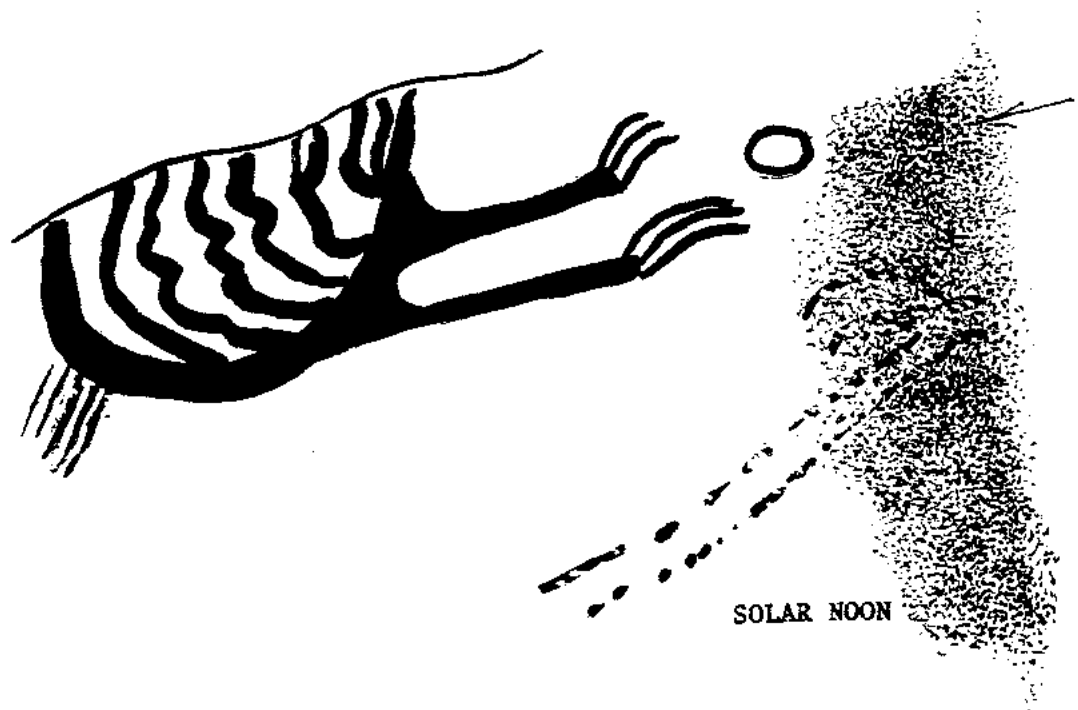


FIGURE 7

contrast to the more undefinable situation of the one that speaks with light in Figure 4.

Notice that the row of seven birds in Figure 5 were seemingly painted to be in the act of flight, single file, almost wedge-like. Observe that only one was abraded. It is the fifth bird from the right. Why only one and why that one? The Symbolic Solar Interactions, the way the light and shadow moved symbolically across that string of birds seem to be an attempt at portraying the act of animation, their movement in the act of flight. If one views the light as a long thin crack in the shadow then the area that the birds are flying out of and or into may be analogous to something real. With that point of view the light would be stationary and the birds would be moving through the thin crack and out into the open freedom of the sandstone sky. Notice how they all fly out into the light one by one as if they were flying in a narrow space like a crack.

There is a noticeable rate in the change in the form of the crack of light, almost seeming to represent the cliffs opening up as one would be approaching the opening if flying down through a crack. The widening of the light is almost analogous to the widening of a crack at the face of the cliff as if it were approaching the opening. It is on that fifth bird that the shadow makes its most drastic change in shape. Does that have anything to do with why that is the only bird to receive an abrasion? After that performance is over, the now almost vertical edge of shadow continues to move to the left (Fig. 6). At about Solar Noon it approached the noses of the first of a row of about five rampant two horned snakes (Figs. 7,8). Each snake is abraded. The place where the nose of the first snake is located is a significant position and place on the cliff. The snake rises to meet the occasion so to speak. Those two interactions illustrate the special power in the production of figures in what we are now defining as the realm of a **Sacred place**, within a **Sacred Space**. That occasion makes the interaction with the first snake a moment of power because when the shadow reaches the nose of the first snake it is about solar noon. Snakes with lines of light on their noses at special times or in special ways have been observed elsewhere. The bird was placed in a special place because that is where the light drastically changed its form. Marking positions where an edge of light or shadow changes shape is also a thing that they marked. But why are all of the horned snakes abraded, especially in light of just one bird? There is a logical answer, if we knew what it was. It is suspected that some will mark other specific periods as the sun moves from

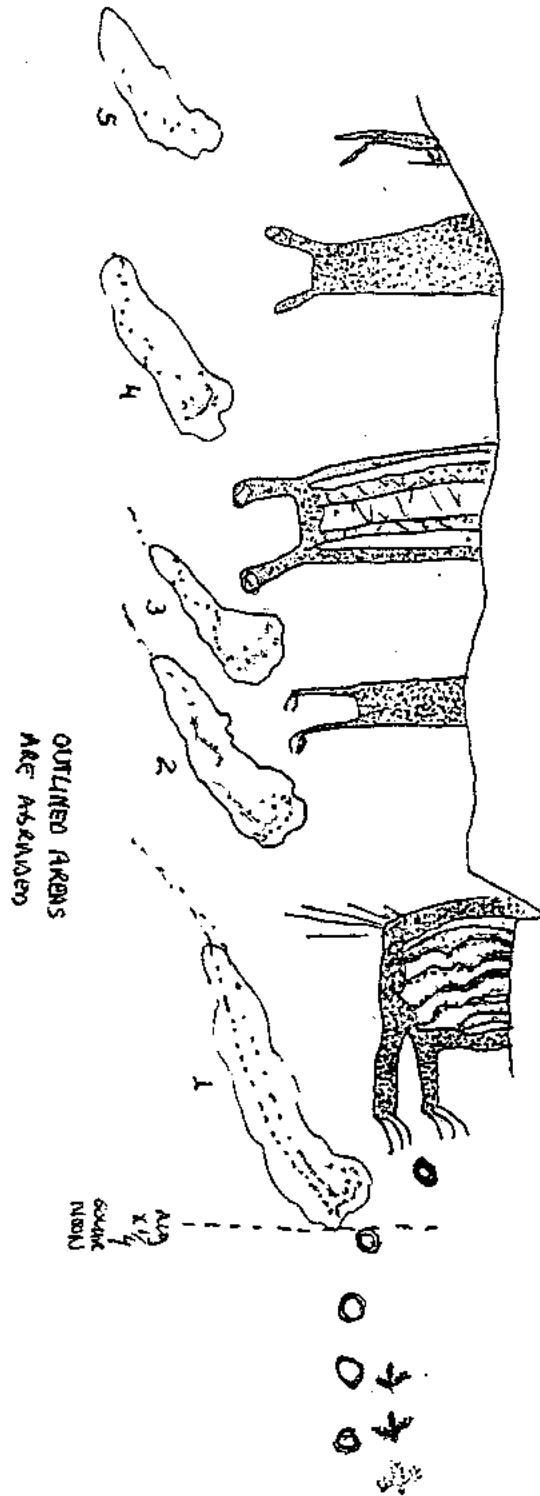


FIGURE 8

Summer Solstice to Winter Solstice.

The question is, are these examples of abrasion, that were previously considered as vandalism, acts of vandalism, or acts of a ritual release of power? The additional power present in the concept of the use of a sacred place with light and shadow seems to add to the reason that they were abraded. Also think of the following possibilities. If while making these images they were having what may constitute a ritual or ceremony analogous to a sing or ceremony for initiation (like the warrior societies) or any other ceremony where a dry painting would be produced, but instead of praying for the healing of the patient, or initiation of the young warrior they were praying for the vision of an apprentice shaman, or even as a simple vision quest. Maybe his first theopathy or ecstatic experience. We have often wondered if they used these panels that have so much shamanic symbolism just once or time after time. In either case maybe, just maybe, after the ritual was complete, in some cases, it was abraded to release the power that was created within those images as part of the total ritual for the same reason that dry paintings are ritually retired. If there is no difference between what would be done for a dry painting, how can we tell that either?

We have even wondered if when a shaman died that maybe his panels may not have been abraded, not in an act of vandalism, but in a reverent moratorium of letting his power places go with him so that he could have the spirits of those figures and places with him in that other spirit realm. That would be no different than the killing of grave goods. All the better to use them that way, with the physical to the physical and the spiritual to the spiritual. Again we have been told that those individuals continue to use the same shrines after death that they did while they were alive, as well as the same times of the year that they were used in mortality. And in one case one of the authors violated a witch craft site during an observation of winter solstice interactions while the supposed spirits of ancient witches were also there performing their rituals as well. And as a result our lives were in danger (that story will appear in a subsequent publication on Rock Art and the Symboling Process).

We have been told that when the ones that worshiped at these rock art sites die their spirits continue to return at those special and powerful solar moments to continue their worship services beyond the grave. If a man's wife, horse and the things that are placed in the grave or coffin are killed in a reverent

manner (a ritual release of their spirits), one that would not constitute an act of vandalism, then why not ritually "Kill" the power places of a deceased shaman?

That is just a thought. There is no way that we can tell for sure. It would not be exactly true to say that we do not have any evidence to prove that it was ever done. We also have no evidence that it is being done today, because of the things that are said, and done and acted out in every day life. Those things breath life into the fading warmth of the dying symbolism and even the figures that have been killed. The distance is too great to fully resuscitate them, but while they revive a little we see a little more that makes us want to question our use of the english language. The penultimate line is that we don't have any evidence that they never either. We also have no evidence that they do the exact same things today that they did back then either.

There has been several publications that have treated what one could call the other extreme, the "Mutilated," the "Desecrated," and "Figures destroyed beyond any recognition." We wont take the time to go into that here.

What is the end result of these examinations? It depends on who is doing the examining and what his back ground and definitions are. It may seem that the horned snakes on the one side, and the pecked birds on the other may portray that both techniques and attitudes equally killed the object. In our way of thinking, dead is dead. It is like being pregnant, a little dead is just as dead as mutilated and dismembered. In actuality both techniques may equally released the power of the object. In both the surface was broken, an avenue of escape was created, the only difference is that one is deeper and more, just more. Both nullified the ability of the figure to exercise any power either in a positive or a negative sense in this sphere. The desired result in essence was the same, it is just the attitude with which it was done that prescribed the technique that it was done with. Attitude is the real bottom line. But the attitude prescribes the effect.

While at Homolovi recently, Peter Pillies, Forest Archaeologist in the Coconino National Forest explained that a lot of the rock art there is just a little older Hopi than what occurs at the Hopi mesas. It is currently being "vandalized," by the Navajo, much of which is by abrasion. The reason is that in the struggles for maintaining the land usage between them and the Hopi, the U.S. Government has prescribed differences in the boundaries of



those two reservations from one time to the next. Many of those examples of vandalism have occurred when the US courts made a discission in the favor of the Hopi. The resulting abraded vandalism by the Navajo on Hopi glyphs, a lot of which include the affiliation of clan symbolism or their deities did not result in a total obliteration, but simply abraded the high spots. One assessed attitude is that the Navajo didn't want to obliterate the identity so that others could see that it was the Hopi that had the "Negative" action taken against them. Another source indicates that many suffer defacements or total erasures for fear that the Hopi could use those symbols as proof of original ownership of the land (Hedges 1990:64). Even though these actions occur in a different realm of thinking than what we have been discussing, they illustrate that we do not fully understand all of the real possibilities and intents.

Nearly all bicameral societies, especially the Navajo who believe in a cause and effect relationship, who explain that the effects of a reverent defacement would be different than those with a more violent action, seem to contradict the situations just described. It is believed that they don't if we understand the nature of their actions. First we must make comparisons between corn and corn, not corn and pineapples. That is if you understand their point of view of what is corn and what is pineapples (something that is sacred vs something that is not of the people - do dine' da. Corn is Native American and pineapple is not. Two different points to consider- object to object, or intent to intent and sacred to secular).

That seems to a certain degree to help us with number **Three** which is to define what the ramifications of those limits are. But those are not always identifiable with what was finally left on the rocks, and that will be the subject of another presentation.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The basic assumption is that there are more reasons for abrading a figure than was previously defined as vandalism or as Killing it. As stated earlier, we do not refute that abrasions could have been used to Kill a figure in the traditional sense. What we wish to stress is that we need to reconsider all of our words, how we use them and their definitions, to make sure that by what we say with a specific definition really fits what is going on since several possibilities are probable. It is also important that we define our terms to our readers so that what we say is not

misunderstood by the reader, and we may see the limitations that we have placed on ourselves.

We would like to have a response from our peers about other examples that provide evidence for other alternatives for a broader definition of what is felt that they were really doing. To identify their intents, one must begin to look beyond the end result, to what the attitudes may have been. More ethnographic evidence is needed to help in understanding these variables, but how that information was gathered also needs to be documented. This paper (Part I), only introduces a few concepts and problems that involve abrasions. The next paper (Part II) will delve deeper into more specifics.

#### REFERENCES

Hedges, Ken

1990      Repainting in Kumeyaay Rock Art: Vandalism, Defacement, or Renewal? American Indian Rock Art. Vol. 16. American Rock Art Research Assoc. A joint publication of ARARA and Texas Research Lab. Univ. of Texas at Austin.

Warner, Jesse E.

ND.      Vandalism, or the Practice of One's Beliefs: Attitudes About Native American Symbols by other Native Americans. An article to be submitted to Patina, an interim publication of the Utah Rock Art Research Association. SLC. UT.