

Horses and Rock Art

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In the fall of 1988, my parents took our family to a symposium of the Utah Rock Art Research Association. In addition to the day of lectures, we were treated to a field trip down Nine Mile Canyon. This trip was my first contact with petroglyphs and pictographs.

I must admit, being only eleven years old, I was a bit bewildered by the people of the organization. I had never been acquainted with anyone quite like them before. For instance, several members were known to arise before the sun to watch shadows move, and sometimes in the dead of winter. As far as I was (and am) concerned, it's not even decent to be up at that hour, and especially not when it is cold outside.

Another thing I considered to be on the eccentric side was the fact they spoke a different language than I had ever heard before. That morning in Nine Mile, I overheard a man turn to another and say, "The anthropomorph entangled around the zoomorphic figure, both incorporate into the curvilinear serpentine, make exquisite combined reactors on the cross quarter equinox in April."

His companion smiled, nodded, and returned with, "true, but the squigglemorph, when penetrated with a shaft, speaks with light on the September solstice."

I turned to my mother and said, "Mom, What language are they speaking? I have never heard anything quite like that before."

"Well," she said, "I believe it to be an exchange of ancient Glyphese, although, I could be wrong."

"Wow!" my sisters and I said in astonished unison. "Do you think," my older sister began, "if we remained with this group for a while, I might learn to speak Glyphese fluently?"

"It is possible," my father said. (For this first trip, my family remained in a tightly huddled mass, frightened to wander far outside of the pack.)

That day we climbed to places higher than I preferred to go, saw things that, until this trip was mentioned, I did not know existed, and fought fiercely to comprehend the Glyphese that was flying from mouths all around me. Needless to say, we survived. We also survived the day of lectures which followed.

I was not certain, however, as to how I felt about returning for more meetings and field trips. The information was interesting and the social aspect had promise, but what exactly were we getting into?

I remained in the organization for several reasons. One: I enjoyed associating with the interesting adults. Two: there was a group of people my own age wherein the boys outnumbered the girls. Three: I learned fascinating information from new exciting people and beautiful places. And, most persuasive of all, I was given absolutely no choice from my parents.

The last reason I remained in this group is the same reason I am writing this essay. At that point in my young life, my one real passion was horses and the tangents thereof. The horse images I saw in Nine Mile that day and since the fall of 1988 have enchanted me. The beautiful forms, the delicate lines, the powerful images of the equestrians and their mounts, all have become my favorite petroglyphs. Even today, though my passion for horses has faded significantly, I am still captivated by the pictographs and petroglyphs of this elegant animal.

But in order to understand the importance of the artifacts, it is important to first explore the impact of the horse on the entire culture of the Native Americans. The petroglyphs portray the animals significance. A basic comprehension of the history of the horse in connection with this culture combined with a careful study of the images from the past is a good start toward understanding the animals contribution in the history of the American West.

The advent of the horse changed the lifestyles of the Native Americans more than any other single event or object. The revolutionary alterations and their effects can be compared to steam and electricity to our society (Edwards 182-183). Before the horse, the Native Americans were hunters and gatherers. The primary object of their daily lives was to find food and secure their survival. Constant travel was necessary to ensure a diet, so one could only have as many belongings as could be carried by his dogs and his family (Capps 65-68).

All of this changed when the Spaniards, becoming the first white men to enter what is now North America, introduced horses to the territory. At once, the Spanish realized the power of their monopoly, and were reluctant to allow the Native Americans to gain possession of horses.

After a few years passed they began to view horses as a profitable industry and set up a trading market in Santa Fe early in the 1600's. Many tribes would travel large distances to buy and trade horses. As a result, their lifestyles dramatically altered. So much more was within a days ride that constant travel was no longer necessary (Edwards 245-258).

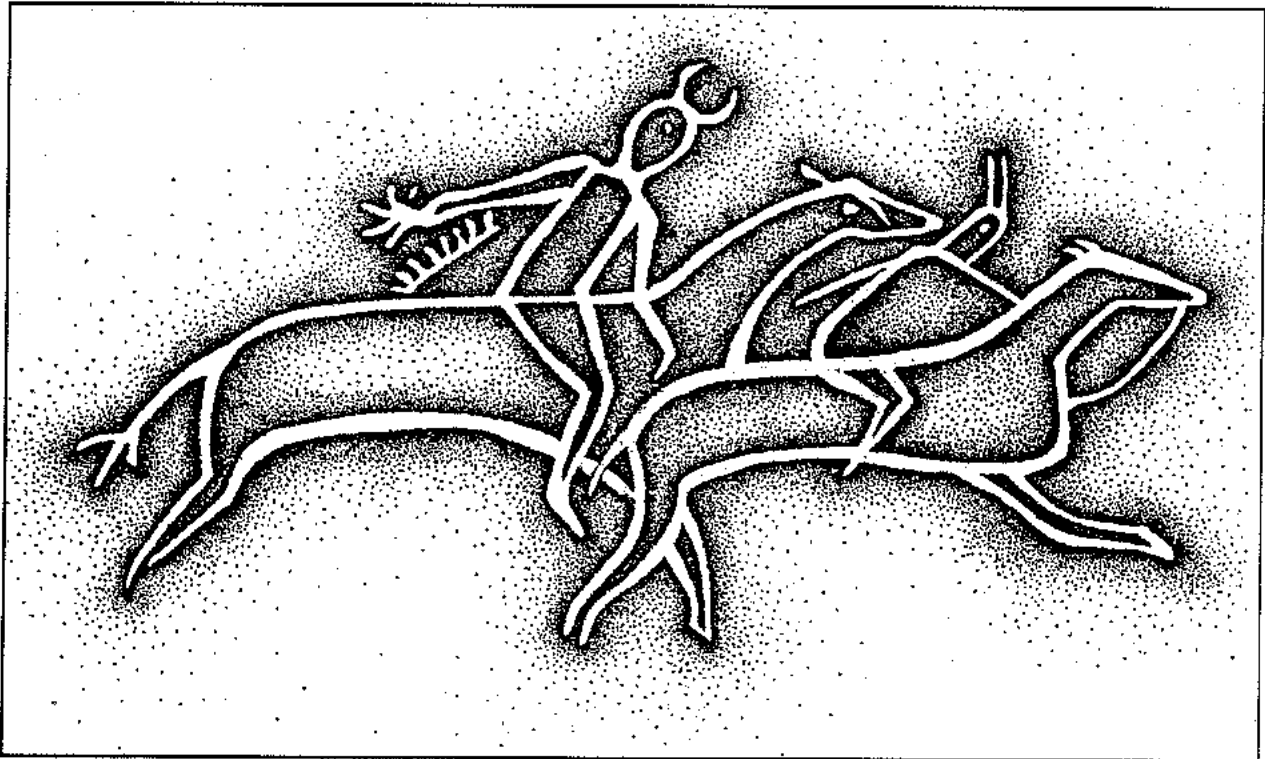


Figure 1, Petroglyph located near LaBarge, Wyoming. The Comanch Indians once inhabited this area. This glyph may be a depiction of their equestrian skills.

The Comanche, a tribe remembered for its outstanding equestrianism, were among the

most skilled horsemen in history (see Figure 1). Controlling the animal with their weight in order to maintain the ability to fight and hunt with their arms, a rider would hang on the horses side while shooting arrows under its neck. This way, they could use the horses body to shield them from an enemy, and still travel at a full gallop (Capps 251).

Before the horse, the only domesticated animal was the dog. A dog, which could carry 50 lbs on its back, could pull 75 lbs with a travois and was able to cover five to six miles a day. The horse, on the other hand, could carry 200 lbs, pull 300 lbs on a travois, and cover between seven and ten miles in one day. As a result, the living quarters on the Native Americans became larger. They could have more possessions. The more horses one had, the larger the home and greater number of possessions one could own. The horse became an instant symbol of wealth and power to the Native Americans (Spencer et al. 32).

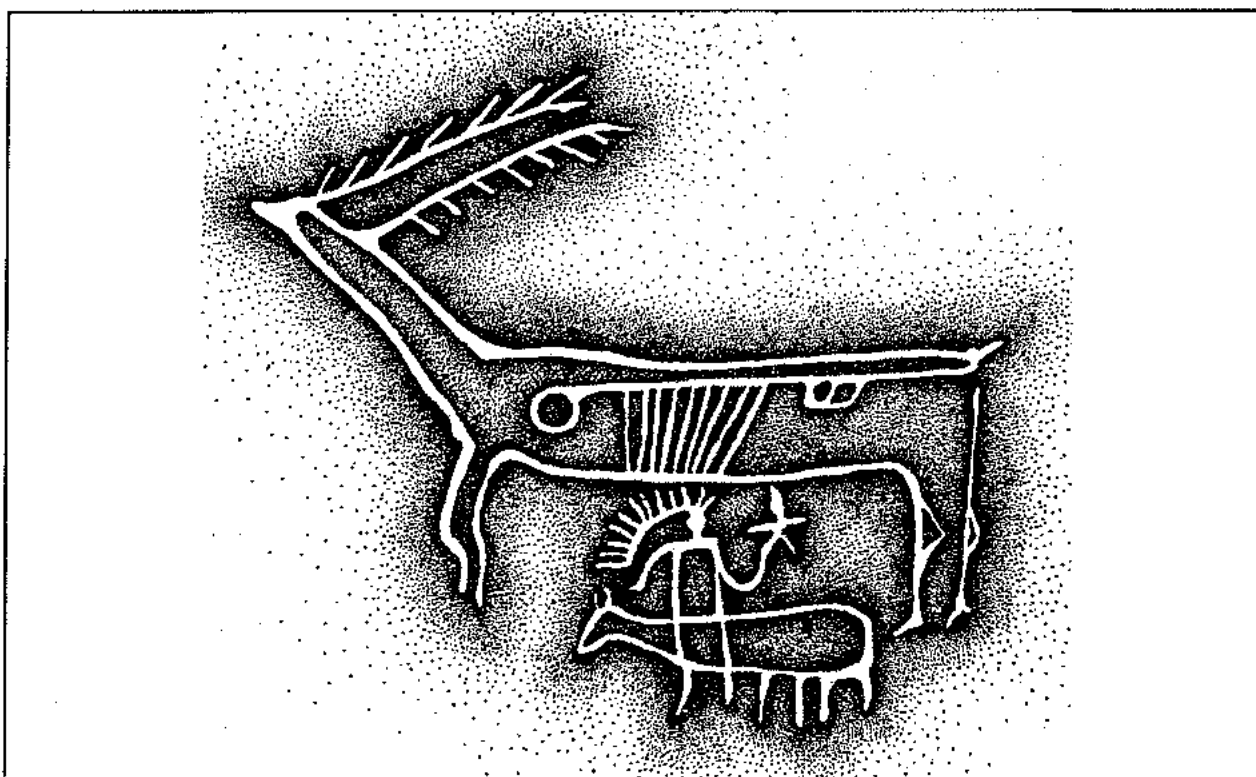


Figure 2, Before the horse, all hunting was done with crude hand weapons; flint knives, stone axes and fire hardened wooden spears. This petroglyph located near LaBarge, Wyoming, illustrates the importance of the horse.

Perhaps the most significant change resulting from the horse's introduction involved hunting (See Figure 2). Once horses were acquired, the tribes could follow the herds of deer or buffalo and always had food. They no longer had to be satisfied with young or sick animals. The horse gave them the power to kill and eat strong and healthy bison, and they could have a surplus of food (Capps 482-306).

The major equestrian tribes were the Blackfoot, Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche, Nez Perce, and the Ute. The Pueblo Indians had contact with the Spanish and were among the first to own horses, but they were farmers with permanent dwellings and little use for

the horse besides trade. The Apache Indians were the first to use horses in raids, but they were pushed into the dry South West by 1750. It was too dry to support horses there, and the animals were used occasionally as a food source. The tribes of the Great Basin had the same problem. These desert Native Americans remained relatively unaffected by the horses influence (Capps 304).

The horse, however, made ill welcomed changes to the Native American culture as well. By trading horses, the Native Americans were introduced to both liquor and the slave trade. The Utes, one of the first tribes to accept the equestrian life, were also one of the most avid in the slave trade. The Goshute and other tribes who did not accept the horse became objects of the Ute's slave raids.

With these few exceptions, The Native American culture was immensely and positively influenced by the introduction of the horse in nearly every detail. Though the equestrian period lasted little over a century, it was the largest period of growth for the majority of the tribes. It is easy to see why the horse was such a coveted possession to the people.

The horse in Native American art continues to effect anthropologists and archaeologists positively. One of the only keys we have to study the American Indian's past are the pictographs and petroglyphs left on the walls of canyons and caves. Pictographs, which are images that are painted on the rock's surface, are made from organic materials and can be carbon dated. Petroglyphs, on the other hand, were carved into the stone. It is next to impossible to date them. Most archaeologists simply try to classify them by what other artifacts have been found in the area, such as shards of pottery. But whereas the other relics could have easily been left at another time, this is an inaccurate practice. (Rayl)

If there is a horse somehow incorporated into the work, however, it is safe to assume it was not made before the Spanish came during the early seventeenth century. Furthermore, if we know what equestrian tribes inhabited that area, we might be able to decipher more about the artifact. There are few other clues in rock art that tell us as much (Schaafsma 15).

By continuing to study the history of the Native American culture, it may become possible to understand the more about meanings of the beautiful images that were left behind. On the other hand, maybe through the study of the pictographs and petroglyphs we can learn more about the history of Native American culture.

*My horse be swift in flight
Even like a little bird;
My horse be swift in flight
Bear me now in safety
Far from the enemy's arrows,
And you shall be rewarded
With Streamers and ribbons red.*

--Sioux warrior's song to his horse