

Evidence from Pictographs that the Prehistoric Fremont Indians Collected Animal Blood in Ceramic Jars

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Introduction

While hiking in Dinosaur National Monument in October of 1989, I discovered an interesting and perhaps unique panel of pictographs. The purpose of this paper is to describe this panel and to discuss a behavioral aspect of the local prehistoric Native Americans that is presumably illustrated in the panel.

Environment

The panel is located in Dinosaur National Monument, which is in Uintah County in northeastern Utah. It is in a pinion-juniper vegetation zone at an elevation of about 5,500 feet. The panel is in a small side canyon of a narrow deep canyon that drains into the Green River. What drew my attention to the area where the panel is located was a section of ash-stained soil along the trail where I was hiking. The ash stain suggested the existence of a past fire or a prehistoric midden. Upon investigating, I found lithics, a few Uintah Grayware ceramics and some similarly sized stones scattered throughout the ashy area. These artifacts indicate evidence of a prehistoric Fremont habitation or campsite. The similarly sized stones suggest that a structure may have been present at the site. The ashy area is cut on the north by a small wash that drains from rock outcrops above. Because of the presence of this archaeological site, I investigated these rock outcrops to see if the people who had lived in this location had placed any images on these rocks. I was rewarded in my efforts by the discovery of a small panel of polychrome pictographs.

The pictographs are at the back of a small north-facing rockshelter that is on a high narrow ledge, see Figure 1. To reach the rockshelter a person must walk on a narrow sloping ledge and step across a gap that is a frightening distance above the ground. The rockshelter is just high enough to stand in comfortably. The panel is on a small vertical surface near the top of the rockshelter, see Figure 2. Beneath the panel the depth of the rockshelter increases to form a small but deep recess. There is also a small opening or tunnel to the right of the rockshelter that provides access to the rest of the ledge beyond.



Figure 1. Location of Panel, looking about East.



Figure 2. Interior of Rockshelter. The Panel is at the top of the Photograph.

Description of Panel

At first, I was uncertain what was portrayed by the images. The effects of weathering made a quick analysis difficult. Water seeping over the panel has resulted in the deterioration of the images. The lower part of the panel has been lost, apparently due to exfoliation caused by internal moisture and softening of the sandstone, see Figure 3. Also, wind-borne sand may have abraded the lower elements of the panel because of their greater degree of exposure.

My initial impression of the images was that they were mostly abstract. There were several black rectangular areas throughout the panel. Several mountain sheep with long arcing horns were unmistakable. These images were also painted with black pigment. There were several crosshatch designs in red (two of these were outlined in black) and there were two lanceolate red streaks. I did not have enough time to study the panel thoroughly because others were waiting for me. I took a few pictures, crawled through the arch to look further along the ledge and finding nothing, I left.

Because I was unable to determine what all the images represented, I decided to return to study the panel and to make a sketch of it. In October of the following year I returned to the site and while I was sketching it, I began to understand what the images portrayed. Thus, as I have said several times, to "see" what is in a panel a person needs to spend more than just a few minutes looking at it. There is no better way to learn what is in a panel than



Figure 3. Detail of Panel.

to make a sketch of it. Sketching forces a person to take the necessary time and effort to see all of the details - and to remain there long enough to remember them!

Interpretation

The black figures along the top of the panel all appear to represent mountain sheep, see Figure 4. (Note: figure 4 is a representation of the central portion of the panel.) Four of the mountain sheep are quite unmistakable; the rest appear only as faint rectangular shadows. Most likely there were once 11 animals (mountain sheep) in the panel. Beneath several of the mountain sheep are streaks painted with red pigment. Positioned below the red marks are four or five black roundish shapes. These black images are similar to the profiles of open mouth ceramic jars found in Utah (Madsen 1977) and appear to illustrate them. What could be represented by the red crosshatching and streaks of red between the mountain sheep and the ceramic jars? The thought occurred to me, while sketching the panel, that these red images represent blood. The image on the far left in Figure 4 appears to represent blood within a container, as does the smaller image near the far right. The large ceramic jar on the left appears to have carrying straps attached to it, or placed around it. I propose then, that this panel illustrates the collection of animal blood, specifically mountain sheep blood, into ceramic jars.

This idea should not be too surprising because aboriginal people all over the world have utilized animal blood in a variety of ways. Not only have just primitive people used animal

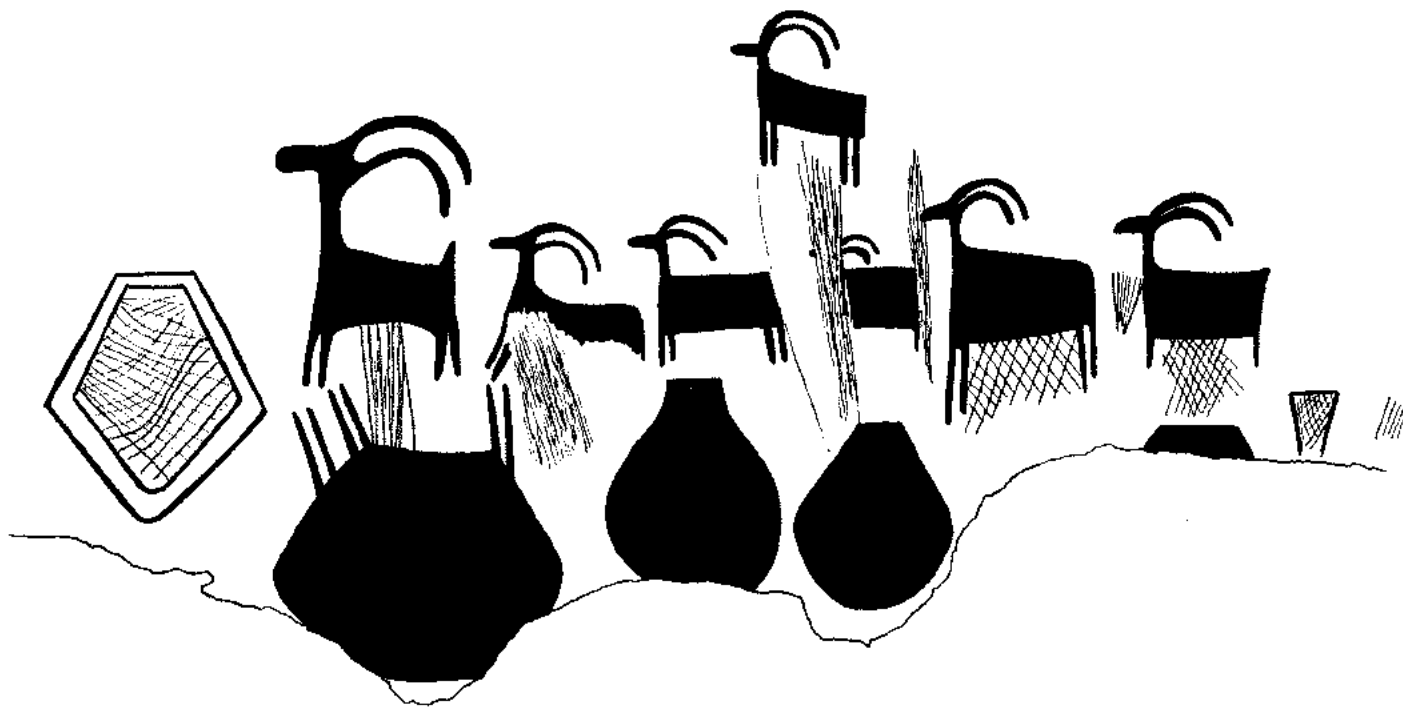


Figure 4. Sketch of the Central Portion of the Panel.

blood, it is used today in a variety of commercial processes. The quantity of blood being collected, as suggested by the number of mountain sheep and the ceramic jars in the panel, and by the location of the panel (see discussion below), suggests that the blood was used for food. However, the possibility that it, or some of it at least, may also have been collected for ritual use should not be discounted.

The creation of this particular panel in this specific location may have been determined by the shape and orientation of the rockshelter. It would have presented a suitable place for the temporary storage of animal blood. The rockshelter faces north and, as previously mentioned, there is a small deep recess at the back of the rockshelter. The interior of the recess is likely the coolest place in the area, especially in the summer, thus increasing the storage life of a perishable commodity. Also, the ledge could easily be blocked to eliminate animal entry. Additionally, the site is just above the bottom of the occasionally cliff-walled canyon, which would force mountain sheep to travel in or near the bottom in these areas, making them relatively easy prey. The rockshelter is located in one of these cliff-walled areas. (The forcing of mountain sheep into the bottom of the canyon in this area was illustrated to us when we suddenly came upon three mountain sheep in the bottom of the canyon a few days later. We walked around a sharp corner and found them standing only about 40 feet away.) Animal blood, then, could be stored in the convenient rockshelter without carrying it a great distance from the kill site. The panel may have been placed on the back wall of the rockshelter to indicate what was stored in the rockshelter or, as has been suggested for other panels, as part of a hunting ritual (Heizer and Baumhoff 1962), in this instance directly associated with animal blood.

Cultural Affiliation and Dating

Information contained within the panel could be used to provide a date for completion of the panel and further information on cultural affiliation. Ceramics of a particular shape, for example, may be associated with a particular culture. Correlating the jar forms illustrated in the panel with actual jars could determine what culture or group of people created the panel, and also determine the time when the panel was created.

Of course, accurately matching the pictographs to existing ceramic jars is dependent upon the skill and accuracy of the artist correctly rendering the profiles of the jars he or she used. Regardless, there are not enough profiles of narrowly dated Fremont ceramics that have been published in the literature to provide a corresponding narrow period for the creation of the panel. Madsen 1977, for example, does not illustrate a single open mouth jar of the Uintah Grayware type. Despite this limitation, the images appear to correlate roughly with Fremont ceramics (for example see: Breternitz 1968, Madsen 1977, Madsen 1986).

There is little question that the panel was constructed when ceramics were being used, and thus dates from that period. The possibility that the ceramics date from the Ute-Shoshone period can probably be eliminated, because the jars illustrated in the panel do not correspond to Ute-Shoshone jar forms. Uintah Grayware ceramics, which were found

below the site, were used in the period from about AD 700 to 1350 (Madsen 1977), so the panel likely dates from this broad period.

It should be noted that the painted images of the ceramic jars are also similar to those found in Anasazi areas to the south (Breternitz, Rohn and Morris 1974, Colton 1952-58, Lister and Lister 1978, Peckham 1990). This is not surprising considering the many similarities in pictographs and petroglyphs between the Southwest and the Uintah Basin that have occurred over a long period of time (Manning 1991, 1992). For example, red handprints, a characteristic feature of the Basketmaker Anasazi are found a short distance from the panel. These parallels suggest that much of the ceramic technology utilized by the Fremont came from the Anasazi.

In the Anasazi area ceramic jar forms developed an ever increasingly everted rim as the culture progressed from the Basketmaker to Pueblo IV period. If that same progression occurred in the Uintah Fremont area, the panel would have been constructed earlier in the Fremont ceramic period rather than later, since the jar forms illustrated in the panel do not have an everted rim. This suggests that the panel was created closer to 900 AD than to 1200 AD.

Repainting

The panel appears to have been repainted in several episodes, as suggested by superimposition and variations in pigment intensity. There are streaks of red that appear to have been placed over the top of other mountain sheep. Above these red streaks there are very faint black rectangular areas, which could only be assumed to be mountain sheep because of the adjacent, similar appearing, newer images. The mountain sheep above the red pigment show variations in color intensity, as if they were painted (or retouched) at different times, yet the red pigment has about the same color intensity. This also suggests that the black pigment may not have been as long lasting as the red pigment, so the panel may have been repainted several times as the black pigment faded. If the black pigment was charcoal, it would not last as long as red mineral paint.

Another possibility to explain the differential intensity of the images is that the fainter images were "erased" to make way for other images, perhaps for a larger, more complex, perhaps more descriptive panel. Perhaps the panel was also modified as part of a hunting ritual. It thus should be noted that Figure 2, which illustrates the images that were visible currently, is not likely an accurate representation of the panel as it existed at any one time.

The forms of the mountain sheep also provide some important information. Over the years I have heard several people state that they believe that rectangular-bodied mountain sheep, with long curving horns that nearly touch the back of the animal, date to the archaic period. This panel clearly disputes that conclusion.

One final comment: the panel is located in a place that is not readily visible from the bottom of the canyon where the trails exist. Thus it seems that the panel was not something that was to be viewed by anyone passing through the canyon.

Conclusion

I believe that this panel represents the first recorded instance of animal blood being collected in ceramic jars. Since techniques are currently available that may determine the presence of blood, and the organism from which it came, archaeologists should consider testing the interior of ceramic jars for blood residue. The presence of mountain sheep blood would provide evidence that the interpretation of this panel is correct, and provide additional information on the distribution over time and space for the collection of blood in ceramic jars in prehistoric times.

When images of red cross hatching or lanceolate red streaks appear in other panels (and perhaps in other contexts), consideration should be given to the idea that they may represent blood.

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