

Early Rock Art on the San Juan River
By Joe Pachak

Along the San Juan River cliffs near Bluff, Utah, there are several very old rock art panels rendered in a style known as "Glen Canyon Style 5" (Turner 1963; Cole 1990:62ff) or "Glen Canyon Linear" (Schaafsma 1980:19). Although this rock art style is poorly dated, most archaeologists and art historians agree that it is the oldest of the common styles in the lower San Juan country, and that it was produced either by the earliest of the Basketmaker Anasazi or their Archaic predecessors (See discussions in Schaafsma 1980 and Cole 1990, but note that the beginning dates for Basketmaker culture have been pushed significantly back in time since these discussions were written). This article discusses the Glen Canyon Linear rock art style and its age, then presents detailed drawings with accompanying discussion of several Glen Canyon Linear Style panels from the Upper Sand Island locality near Bluff (Site 42Sa3589, Cole 1987).

Based on superimposition and relative differences in desert varnish patination, Glen Canyon Linear clearly predates the style known as "San Juan anthropomorphic", which is associated with classic Basketmaker culture (Schaafsma 1980:109-119; Cole 1990:109-130). Since the Basketmaker culture is now known to have appeared at least as early as 1000 B.C. (Smiley 1993) and it persisted in some form until around 750 A.D., we can hazard a guess that the Glen Canyon Linear style was produced sometime before about 0 B.C./A.D. Unfortunately, there is no information yet available on which to base even a guess as to the style's beginning date. It may entirely predate the earliest Basketmaker Anasazi occupation, or it may be an early Basketmaker style which was produced during the first millennium of the Anasazi culture, and out of which the classic Basketmaker art style developed.

Many students of rock art have grown accustomed to uncritically thinking of Glen Canyon Linear style as a late Archaic development. That is probably correct, especially if the early Basketmaker period is viewed, as it is by some, as representing the tail end of the Archaic (Irwin-Williams 1973). In the absence of evidence to the contrary, however, it is possible that this style made its first appearance thousands of years B.C., long before the appearance of the Basketmaker culture (Turner 1963).

Archaic hunter-and-gatherer peoples inhabited the San Juan and Colorado River drainages of Southeast Utah from as early as 6,000 B.C. until approximately 1,000 B.C. Sometime later, the early Basketmaker people started creating San Juan Anthropomorphic style rock art along the San Juan River, sometimes next to and even over the top of the earlier art. By the time the Basketmakers were producing their art, they were viewing Glen Canyon Linear style rock art that was already ancient. Let's look back 6,000 years ago to a time when Archaic people foraged along the river drainage and camped at the heads of canyons on sand dunes and slick rock. They gathered wild foods, ground grass seeds with milling stones, and hunted and defended their small extended family bands with the atlatl. No doubt the early Basketmaker people, who also used the atlatl as the weapon of choice, recognized depictions of this familiar weapon in the Glen Canyon Linear style rock art (Figure 1). Many of the motifs or recurring images in Basketmaker rock art first appear in the Glen Canyon Linear style. If the human depicted in Figure 1 is shown holding actual material objects, then rock art images like this could be the first documentation of traditions that carry over into the Anasazi culture.



Figure 1

We can study additional hand-held objects in these Archaic figures as examples of other motifs representing their material culture. In Figure 2, we see A) bodiless heads, B) two crook-neck staffs, and C) three other enigmatic objects. The dashed line in Figures 2 and 4 indicates broken rock.

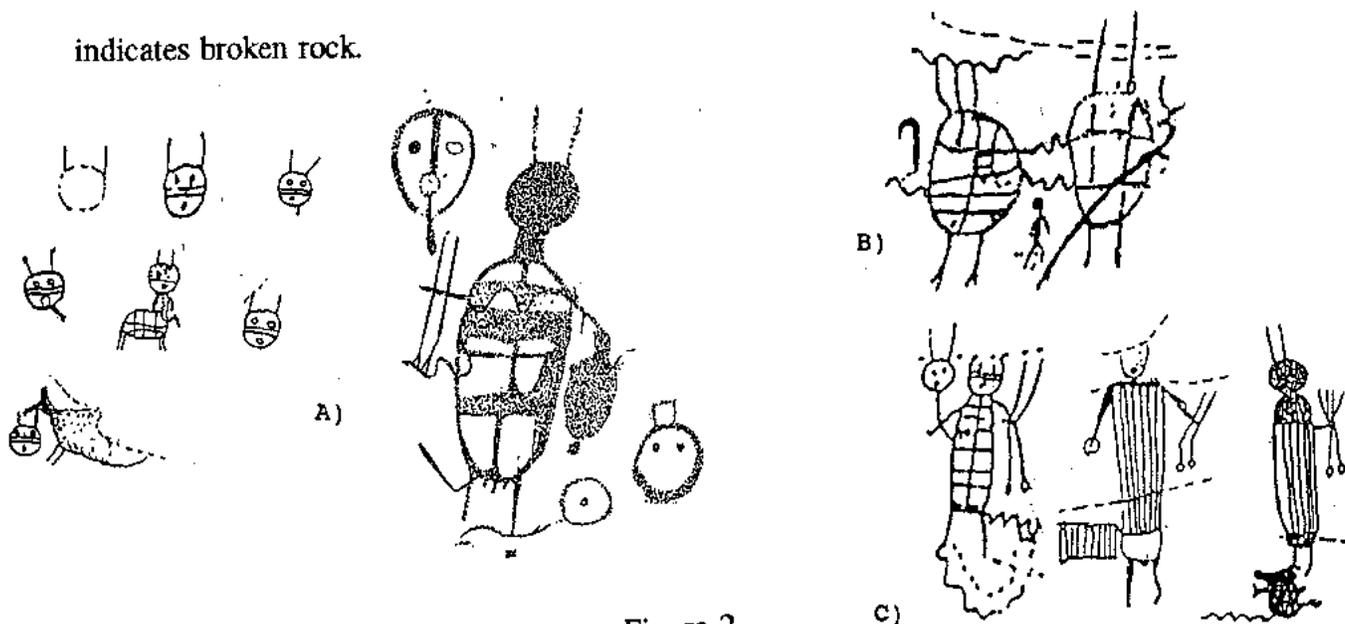


Figure 2

In Figure 3, note the position of the bodiless heads and anthropomorphs in relationship to each other; there is a repetition in the placement of these elements. The round, solidly pecked forms have wavy lines connecting strategic places on the figures. This suggests the representation of skinned human heads or masks, motifs which are common in later basketmaker art (Schaafsma and Young 1983).

The rock art panel depicted in Upper Sand Island Panel 3 (Figure 5) may have been a ritual hunting, harvesting, and fertility narrative. The human figure at the upper left end of the panel is different from the other figures on the panel. It is superimposed by the head of a possible elk, and has the same body form as Upper Sand Island Panel 2 (Figure 4), an older Archaic style. The largest animals have brow-horns and a solid-pecked head indicative of the brow-horns and dark head of an elk. Directly below and centered from the three largest elk are three anthropomorphs suggesting ritual activity.

The abstracted female figure on the right side of Panel 3 (Figure 5) is solidly pecked except for an incised and smoothly abraded vulva. She has two ungulates touching her head (one female (?), lacking antlers, the other with no visible head, perhaps indicating fertility. In Natural Bridges National Monument, at Kachina Bridge (Figure 6) (Castleton's p. 206),

According to Castleton: "There is one small fat figure- an anthropomorph with a globular body and extended arms and legs."

This is another similar female figure and it has an extended vulva. To the right of the figure is a large crack extending to the top of Kachina Bridge. From inside this crack a red hematite line one half inch wide has been painted to the female's vulva. This line comes out the left side (or top) of this female's head and is painted across the alcove wall for about 45 meters. This female is in a dry alcove and therefore has developed no patina. Much of the rock art that is near Kachina Bridge is Glen Canyon style.

In Butler Wash there is a third almost identical female figure and it is associated only with Glen Canyon linear style Archaic rock art. I believe it is safe to say that this reoccurring motif could be the earliest of a long tradition of fertility motifs in the Glen Canyon region. Depicted in the lower left side of the Upper Sand Island panel 4 (Figure 7) are two human copulation scenes.

The two Glen Canyon Linear style petroglyph figures in Panel 4 (Figure 7) are almost mirror images of each other. They may be holding an atlatl in one hand and defensive fending sticks in the other. Fending sticks are S-shaped defensive devices with a handle on one end, often found in association with atlatls, and used to deflect incoming atlatl darts (Figure 6, Morris 1939:14; Geib 1990).

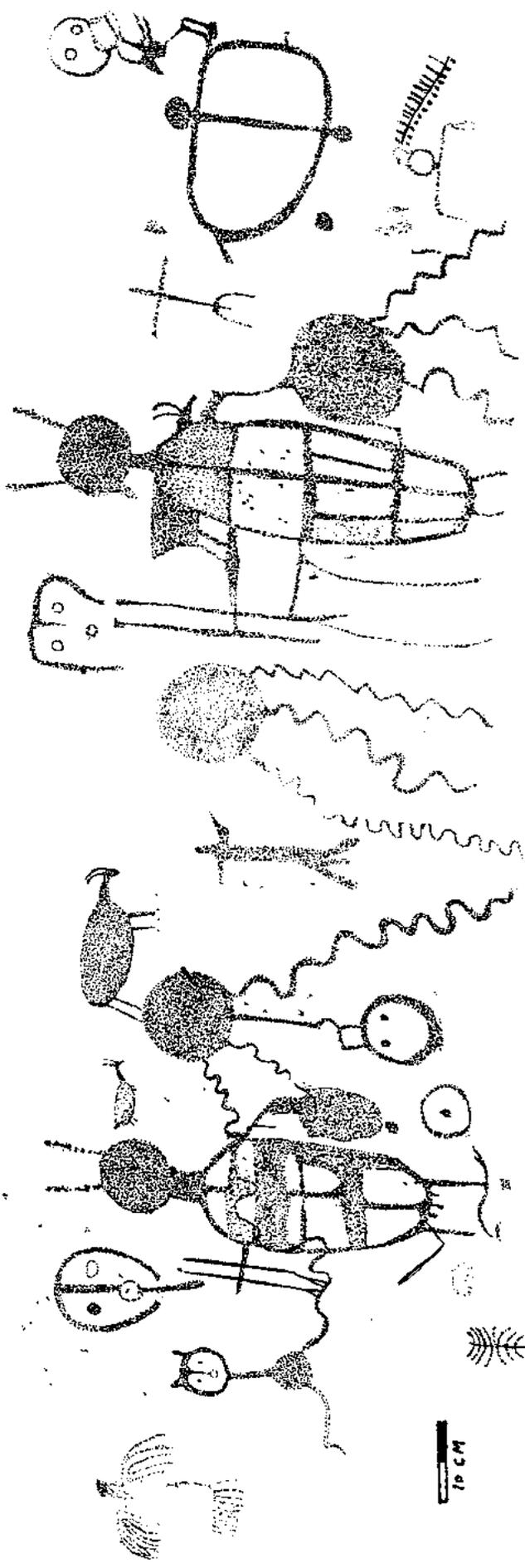


Figure 3: Upper Sand Island, Panel 1
Note Scale

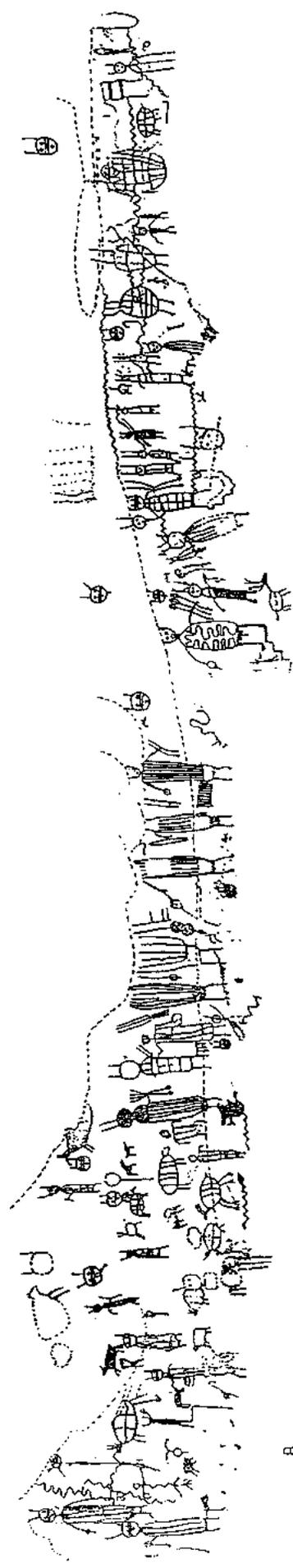


Figure 4: Upper Sand Island, Panel 2
Note Scale

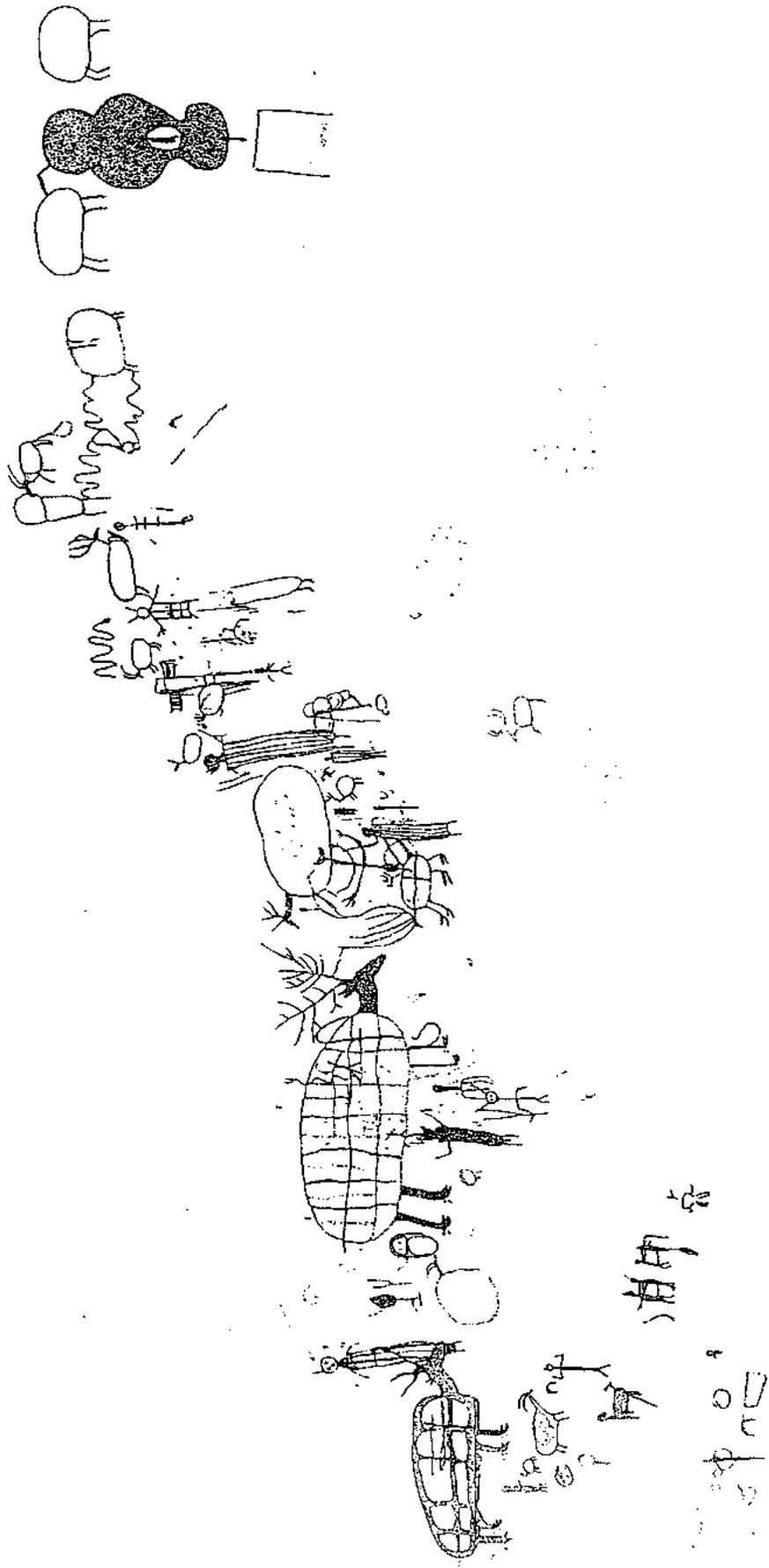


Figure 5: Upper Sand Island, Panel 3
Note Scale

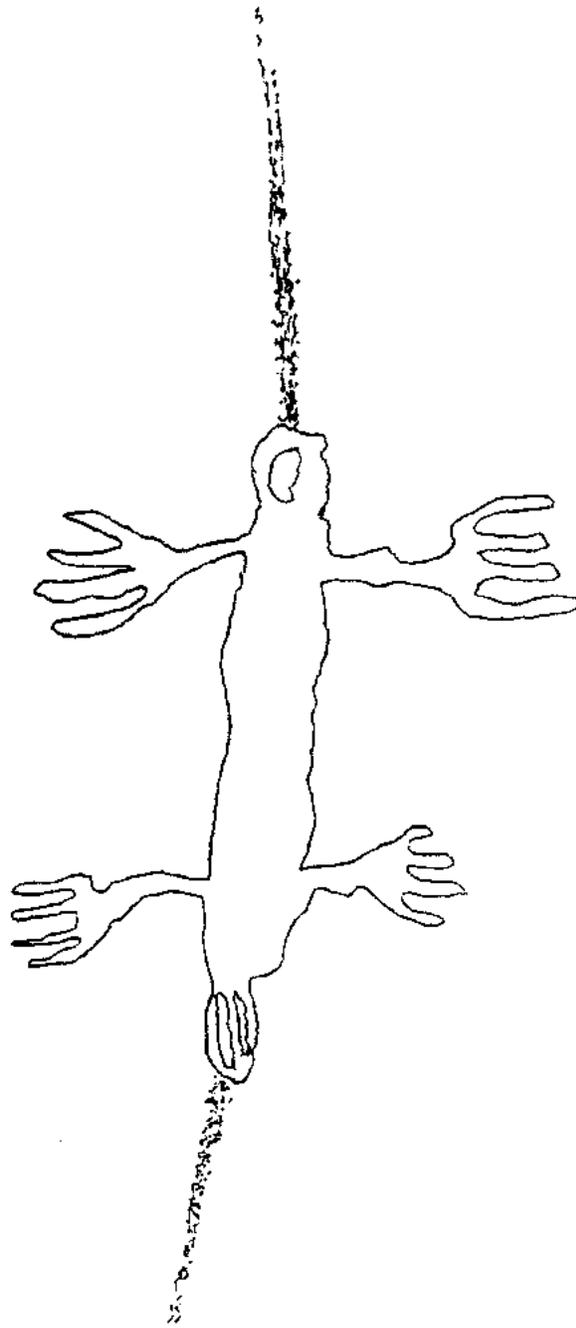


Figure 6
Redrawn from Castleton
Volume 2, page #206

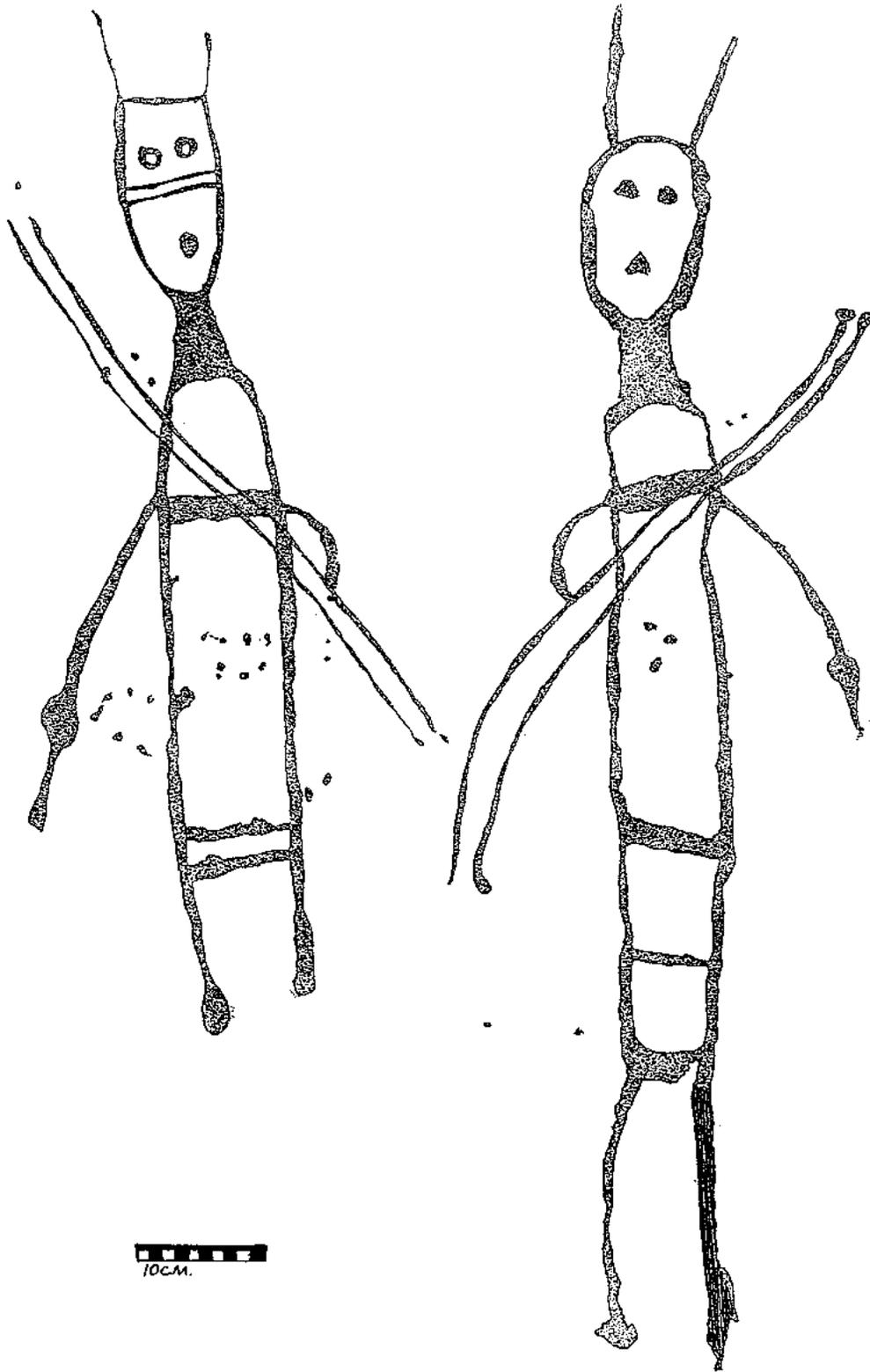


Figure 7: Upper Sand Island, Panel 4
Note Scale

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