

WOMEN IN ROCK ART by Jane and Sarah Bush

When I was a teenager my parents took me to a rock art site in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) called Sigiriya. This large granite loaf, thought by some to be the earth's breast, was a fertility shrine dating back to the Fourth Century A.D. You have to climb 412 steps (improved and made safer for the tourists) to the polychrome mural of female deities. Of the 500 figures only 26 remain clearly visible. All are well endowed; not a mammary-challenged individual among them (Figure 1). Women would climb to the shrine to leave offerings and pray for healthy offspring and abundant resources to provide for them. The idea of fertility magic is universal; this Silhanese fertility shrine is similar to sites the world over.

VENUS FIGURES:

In Paleolithic art we find many examples of male hunters in the cave paintings. Women do not appear in the cave murals but have been found in sculpture form in several of the early caves. Venus of Willendorf, found in a cave in Austria, is a well known example (Figure 2). She has exaggerated breasts, buttocks, and thighs while the other features, hands, head and feet are barely recognizable. A similar figure, the Venus of LeSpunge in France reveals the same extreme features (Figure 3). Many of these early sculptures have traces of red paint remaining on them.

Why exaggerate one body part and not the rest? The exaggerated organs are the sexual organs and would suggest that figures of this type played a role in a fertility rite. The makers only depicted what was important to the ceremonies. The faceless images of these sculptures give them a universal quality, allowing them to represent any female. Perhaps the face details were left out because of a fear of capturing the spirit; much like the idea that the realistic paintings of animals helped the humans to gain control over their environment. Painting the animals helped the clans gain enough power to have a successful hunt. Human images during this time do not reflect the realism of the animals. They are very minimal, showing only the most basic forms of a human figure. The Venus figures are universal images representing women in general, establishing their role in this early society not as the hunters, but physically as the bearer of children--the future of the tribe, and abstractly as a representation of the Great Mother or Mother Earth, the Supreme Being that made the world fertile with plants and animals that allowed the tribe to survive.

We find Venus figures in the rock art of our study area as well. Here are two: one from Angle, Utah (Figure 4) and one from Nine Mile Canyon, Utah (Figure 5).

There were also women figures among Fremont Indian figurines. These show breasts, elaborate necklaces, earplugs, and fringed skirts. The Fremont figurine women have faces, however, and no one knows for sure what the purposes of the figurines were (Figure 6).

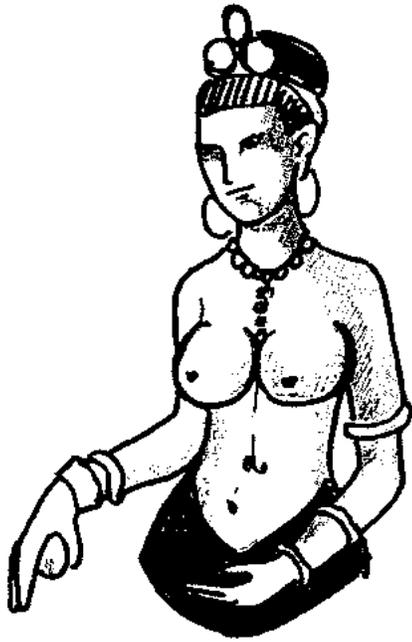


FIGURE 1. SIGIRIYA, SRI LANKA

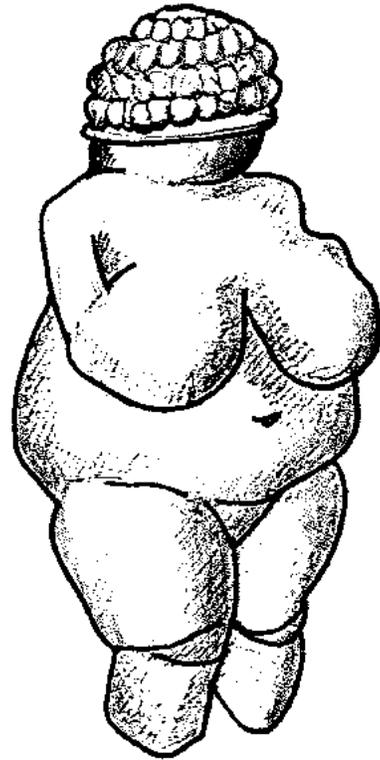


FIGURE 2. VENUS OF WILLENDORF, AUSTRIA

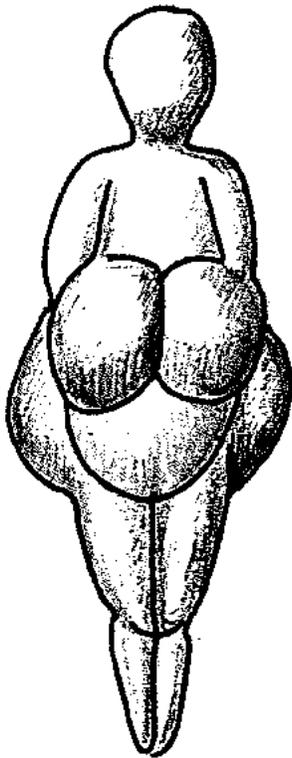


FIGURE 3. VENUS OF LESPUNGE, FRANCE

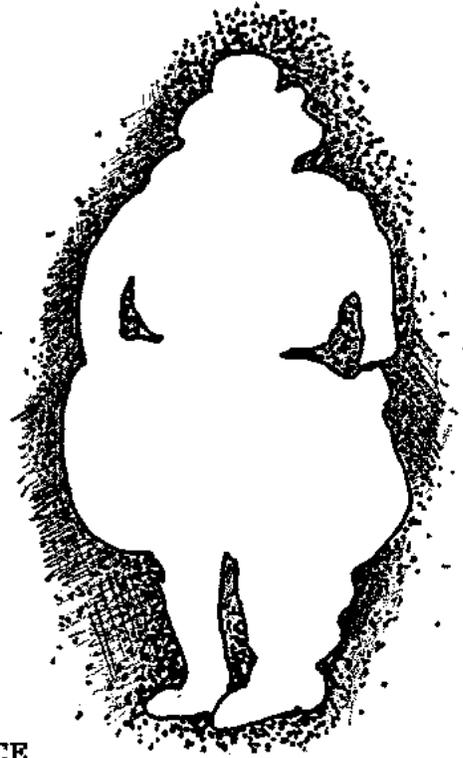


FIGURE 4. VENUS OF ANGLE, UTAH

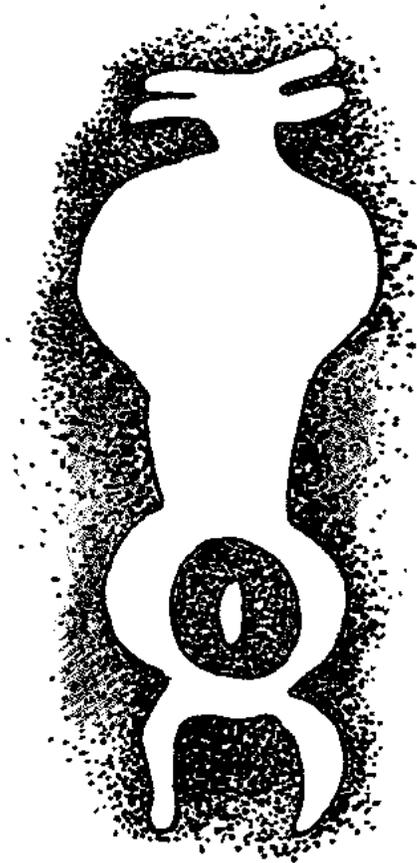


FIGURE 5. VENUS FROM NINE MILE, UTAH

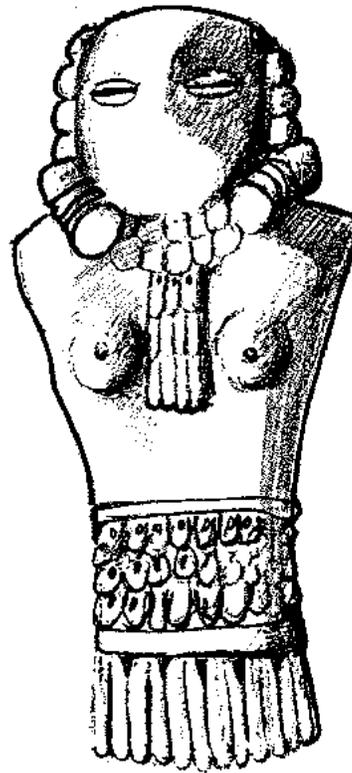


FIGURE 6. FREMONT FIGURINE

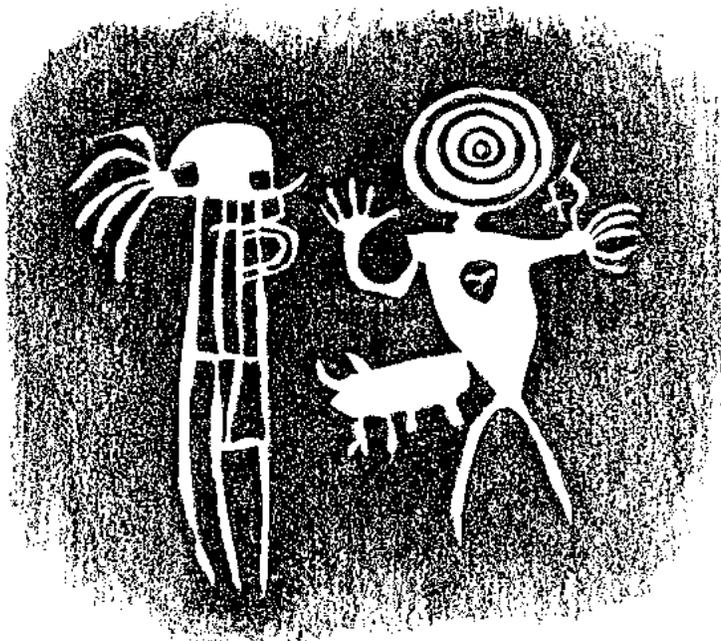


FIGURE 7. QUICHUPA, EMERY COUNTY, UTAH



FIGURE 8. LOWER DECKER, SAN JUAN COUNTY, UTAH

GREAT MOTHER FIGURES:

Closely related to the fertility figures are the "Great Mothers". Rochester Creek has probably the most well known example in rock art. One can find all the elements of the creation of the earth from the oral histories of the Hopi and Zuni at this panel. Spider Woman is in the lower left corner, the Sun God-Father is at the top looking down on their creations of all the animals, including First Woman and Man in the process of multiplying and replenishing the earth.

Earth Mother or Spider Woman and the Sun Father are found together in many places. I especially like this portrayal of them from Quichupa (Figure 7). Other Great Mother images are found at Lower Decker (Figure 8) and behind the dunes at Bluff (Figure 9). The Bluff image shows a woman giving birth to a small ladder figure. Edward Dozier's book on the Pueblos stated that a term literally translated as "ladders" referred to families in the sense of household, often including grandparents and grandchildren. I found this term fascinating. Perhaps this term refers to the ladders one used to enter different levels of the Pueblo, and one family owned one layer. The next family owned another complex. When the younger generation was ready to move out they simply added a ladder and built an addition on the roof.

ROLES OF WOMEN:

All these Venus and Great Mother figures were deities or universal symbols of supermom, but what was going on in the lives of the poor and ordinary? Women's roles depend and depended on whatever the current social order was. We find three different social organizations in our study area.

In the Great Basin the men did most of the hunting, prepared and took care of hides and leather, and made tools. The women did the gathering, preparation and preservation of food. Over 100 wild food plants were utilized by the Great Basin peoples. Women also collected insects. Wandering was not random or aimless. It was a stable and well-known annual round of harvesting, collecting and storing of plants, animals and raw materials. The women also wove baskets and blankets, made clothing, and in some cases made pottery.

There were some duties shared by everyone. Among these were the communal hunts, especially important to the survival of the tribes before horses arrived. One hunting panel from Manila on the Utah and Wyoming border shows people chasing a bison to a jump (Figure 10). The second is from Santa Clara showing people chasing deer (Figure 11). The typical pattern seems to have the people chase herds over the cliffs and then gather at the bottom to butcher the animals. Everyone participated and everyone shared in the harvest.

While large animals were great to have for dinner, the real protein mainstay for the people of the Great Basin was rabbits. These also were taken in communal hunts. Typically the shaman or leader of the tribe would have a vision as to when they should hunt. He would send a runner with a knotted string to other extended families in the area. (The families lived

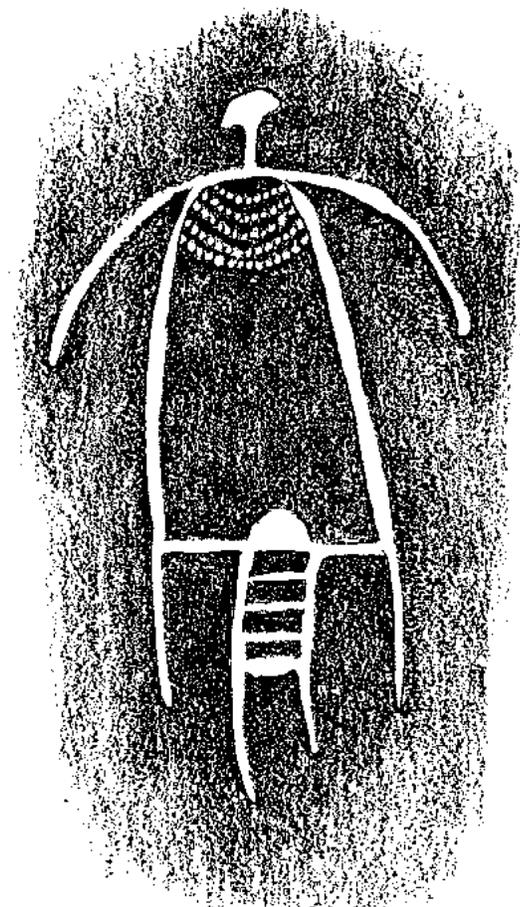


FIGURE 9. BEHIND THE DUNES, BLUFF, UTAH

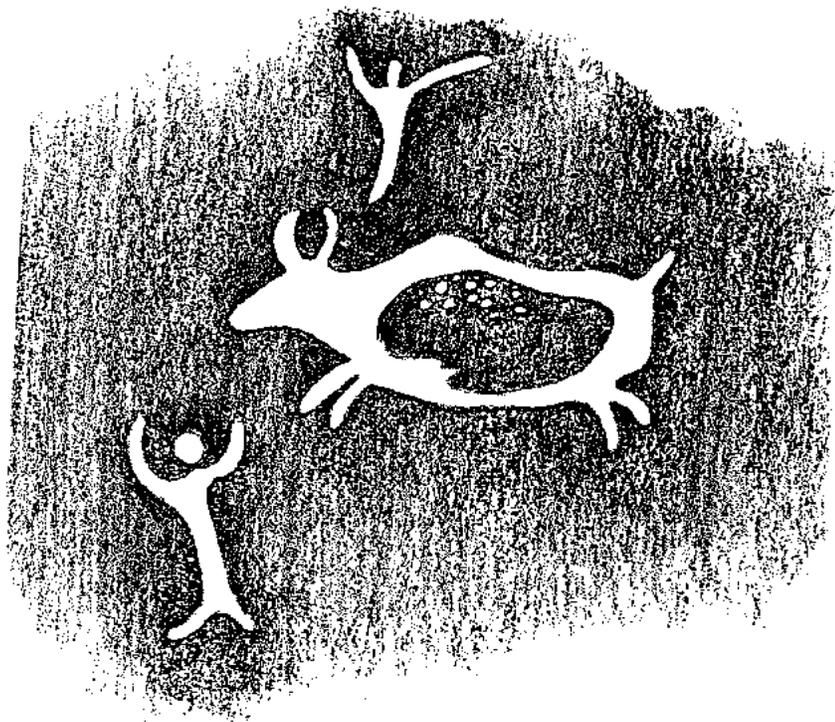


FIGURE 10. MARTIN RANCH, MANILA, UTAH

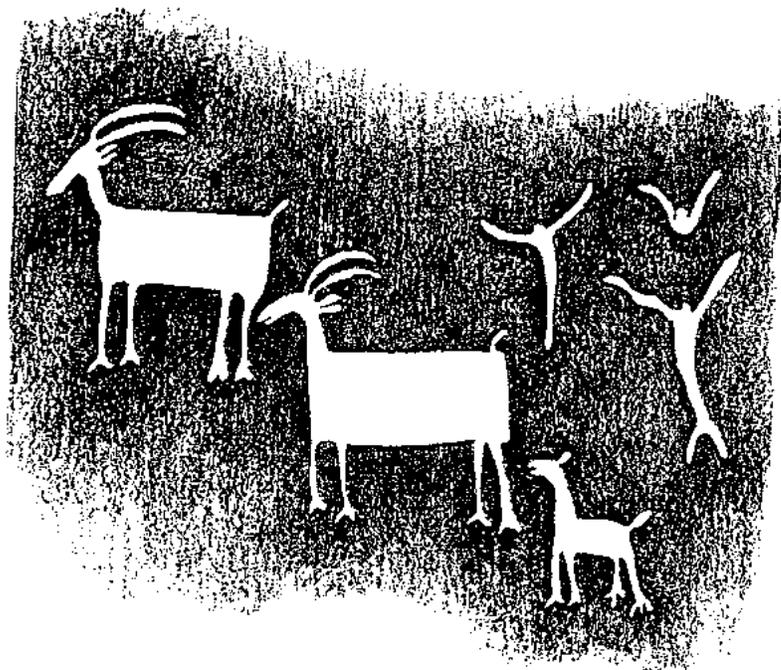


FIGURE 11. SANTA CLARA CANYON,
WASHINGTON COUNTY, UTAH

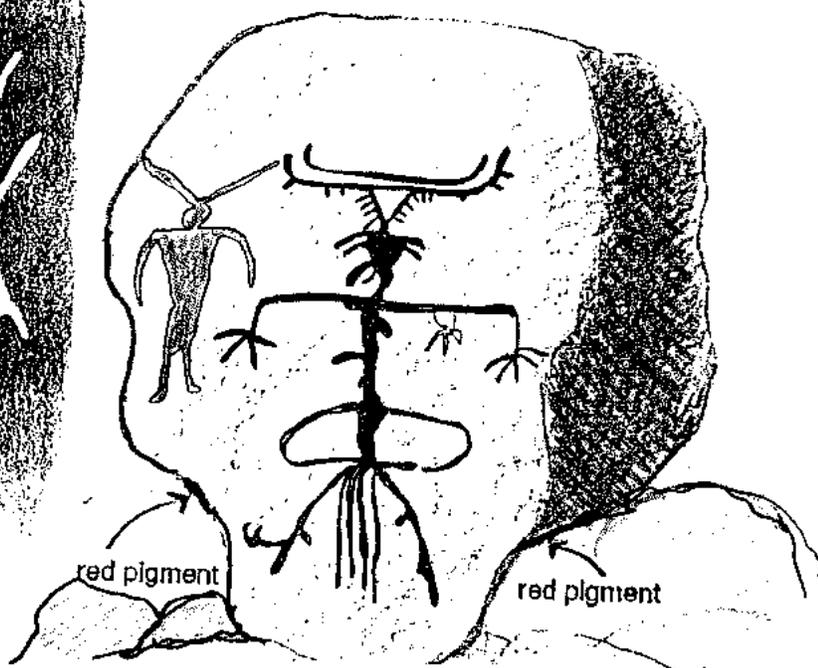


FIGURE 12. UTE RESERVATION,
FORT DUCHESNE, UTAH

in groups of 5-12 members in one dwelling, and there was no set rule as to who lived together.) Each day the recipients would untie one knot and on the day of the last knot all would meet at the appointed spot for the hunt. Catching nets were used. The women were responsible for making the twine. This was done by spinning milkweed fibers along their thighs. Then the men would tie the twine into nets. These were similar to gill nets used for fishing. The mesh was designed so that rabbits could get their heads into the holes in the nets and then get caught behind the ears, the holes being not big enough for the rabbit bodies or for them to back out. Some nets were thought to be as much as one mile long. The nets were stretched across the valley and staked in place. Then the whole tribe would scream and chase the rabbits toward the nets, where the squirming rabbits were clubbed. Not only did the rabbits provide most of the meat for the Great Basin peoples, but the skins also provided most of the clothing. While these people were not big on fashion; men wore breech clouts and women wore aprons; rabbit skin blankets were a must. The skins were cured and then cut in a spiral from the outside edge to the center, producing one continuous furry string. The women then wove these into blankets. It took about 18-20 skins for a man's blanket, 12-15 for a woman's and 8-10 skins for a child's blanket.

WOMEN'S CEREMONIES:

In the Great Basin there were generally rituals for birth, puberty and death. There were also many curing rituals, performed by shamans. Illnesses were thought to be caused by ghosts or sorcerers. The birth celebration did not happen until it appeared the child would live. Typically this happened when the infant developed teeth. It was at this time children were given names. Names often were status terms and as the children grew and developed skills, the names could be changed, perhaps several times in an individual's lifetime.

Certainly the most important ceremony for women happened at the first menses. This marked the coming of age for girls. This idea seems to be common to all the Great Basin cultures. The first timer might have been confined as many as 30 days. She would be instructed by her mother or other relative. Her hair was specially combed, and she was deloused by her attendant. Her diet was restricted; avoiding meat, grease, blood, fish, salt and cold water. She might have been asked to lie in a heated pit or on heated ground. The girl may have been instructed not to talk or laugh, and to use a scratching stick to touch her body. She would avoid hunters, sick people and in some instances all males. In some areas the young women wore a veil of fibers and made a show of doing hard work, such as gathering wood. This would show the girl to be industrious and suited for marriage. After the confinement the girl's family would then give a party to let everyone know she was eligible for marriage.

This drawing may depict a first menses panel (Figure 12). The central figure has a menstrual flow represented and perhaps a special veil over her face. An attendant at her shoulder gives her instruction. The rock art is found on a free-standing boulder, with space along the lower edges where red paint was applied. It is located on the Ute Indian reservation south of Duchesne, Utah.

All menstruating women were thought to contaminate hunting and fishing gear. They spent their flow days away from the family in the women's lodge. This was also the place for child-bearing. In some areas there was one lodge for all the women and they could spend their days together. In others, according to the Ute ethnography (Smith), each woman made a separate shelter every month. Some jobs were considered unsuited for this time, as one Ute informant reported. You could not split the willows with your teeth while you were menstruating, but you could spend your confinement days making baskets, sewing moccasins or doing other handwork. While all the sources reported the girls should spend their confinement days alone, this same informant said some girls would tell their sweethearts when they expected to be in their lodge and the sweetheart would come spend the night.

If a young man and young woman displayed interest in each other the families exchanged gifts and it was considered official. The newlyweds lived with the family who needed gatherers.

Both men and women could become shamans, even if menstrual blood negated shamanistic powers. Older women (post menopause) often became shamans, especially if the individual had curing talents.

This drawing shows the pregnant ladies of Quail Creek (Figure 13). It shows the progress of the pregnancy through the nine months and the final woman holds her baby. There are many interesting events connected with the birth of a baby. The woman goes to the women's lodge for the birth, and is assisted by a relative or any skilled woman. If it is a difficult birth the husband may attend, and he may invite a person with spirit power to call the baby out. After delivery the mother drinks warm water, and is bathed by her attendant. The baby is also bathed and placed in a cradle board. In the Great Basin this was a basket board covered with skins. The baby was wrapped tightly, and taken out from time to time for cleaning (Jenning's papers say in the morning and evening, but I would guess no mother carrying a baby on her back would leave it quite that long.).

There were also some interesting taboos for the father. In the last stages of the pregnancy he would avoid making cordage or straightening arrows, lest the magic be transferred and the child be strangled by the umbilical cord or born too soon. After the birth the father was forbidden to smoke, take sweat baths, or gamble for one month. The function of these taboos was to acknowledge the father's responsibilities and spiritual tie to the child. Following the restriction the man would assume the status of parent.

This drawing shows a panel in Nine Mile Canyon called the Escalante Panel by some (Figure 14). This depicts a praying woman with a baby, a cradle board, and a gathering basket. She stands with the animals next to the river. The glyph is also very close to the part of the canyon where the pinon trees start. The "Fremont Family" in Nine Mile Canyon (Figure 15) shows a woman with her family.

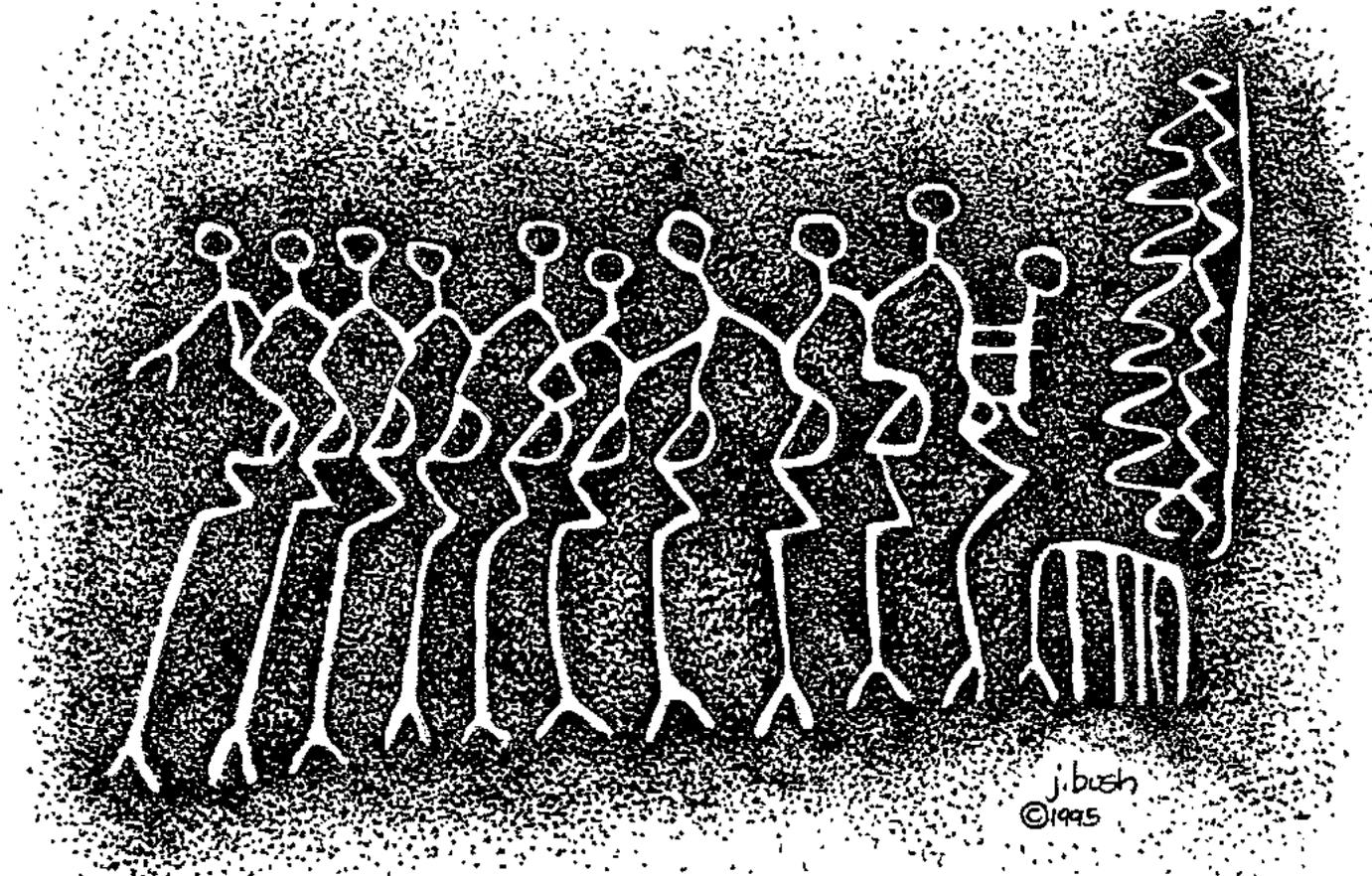


FIGURE 13. QUAIL CREEK, WASHINGTON COUNTY, UTAH



FIGURE 14. NINE MILE CANYON, UTAH



FIGURE 15. NINE MILE CANYON, UTAH

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