

**Two Petroglyph Sites in Mexico's
Bermuda Triangle, Durango, Mexico**
(FOR URARA 1996)

Alex Apostolides

This is a preliminary field report on the petroglyph sites of El Cadillal and San Rafael de los Milagros, in Mexico's state of Durango. This paper is presented to give researchers a partial glimpse of the wealth of rupestrian art in the Durango/Coahuila area. The region has been relatively ignored to date, the sole exception being the indefatigable research of Luis Maeda Villalobos of Torreon, Coahuila, for the past 20 years and more. Dr. Maeda was our guide to these sites in the Bolson de Mapimi.

Special thanks and acknowledgment are due to my old friend, scholar Pablo Bush Romero, whose unbounded vitality and enthusiasm have been responsible for many of our treks into unmapped areas from Mexico's southern tip to her northern border. And a grateful acknowledgment is given to our companions on this trek: Dr. Donald Rathbun of El Paso, Texas, good friend and trailmate; to Brigadier General Dr. Jesus Lozoya-Solis, onetime governor of Chihuahua and now of the Distrito Federal, who shared part of his homeland with us and became a lifelong friend; and to Drs. Maeda and Villareal, of Torreon and Saltillo respectively, whose enthusiasm and knowledge of the countryside made this trek unforgettable.

No "official" research has been done in the area to our knowledge. Dr. Maeda has conducted what has been in effect a one-man expedition in the Zone of Silence of Mapimi for the past two decades. One hopes to read the results of his dedicated labors before much more time has passed. This report is made to make these sites familiar to a wider audience, with the hope that readers who find similarities in their experience will communicate them to the writer and to the Utah Art Research Association.

The Region

Mapimi is "a region as shadowy as it is ignored" (Moller, 1979). According to Moller, Mapimi means "grasping the arrow." He characterizes the area, especially the Zone of Silence, as being the most written about and little known in Mexico. The Zone of Silence lies in the area north and east of our petroglyph sites, where the states of Durango, Coahuila, and Chihuahua touch. This is Mexico's "Bermuda Triangle," a place where meteorites seem to have an affinity for falling; where radio transmission or reception is in spots impossible; where evolution of both flora and fauna has taken strange turns. There is an "other-world" quality to the landscape, and this feeling carries over to the area in which the sites of El Cadillal and San Rafael de los Milagros are found.

Mapimi is a vast field of more than 200,000 acres, sunk in the *altiplano* which surrounds it, forming a semi-arid steppe land. "Its landscape is harsh, unfriendly, intensely hot or cold; in summer there can be as much as 125 degrees F. between the maximum and minimum temperatures. And the general aspect is of a vast unattended land" (Moller, 1979). Moller is a little harsh, we feel, in his description. The area might seem hostile to people not familiar with the desert, but to inveterate desert wanderers, Mapimi is a wondrous place to roam, with discoveries to be made at every turning in the *barranca* and at the lip of every red-stone mesa.

Ancient lake beds form the floor of Mapimi, laced with dust devils twisting in the wind, surrounded by living dunes and hills broken by upthrust. The dry, winding track of eroded arroyos wrinkles the land as though some great hand had lifted and crumpled it and then thrown it back to earth. The local Indian term for dust devils is *cachivipa*, and children are frightened into proper behavior by the threat of the devils' coming to get them if they misbehave.

The view is interesting, compared with the *pingo*, the term used for the same phenomenon in Morelos and points south. Appearance of a *pingo* in the Central Highlands merely means that the gods have come to visit—if "merely" can be applied to such an event. Historically, as now, the landscape was filled with natural phenomena to which explanations, plausible or not, were assigned. This was not unfriendly land, not harsh to the ancient dwellers who traversed the broken canyonlands, made their living ceremonial centers along the edges of vanished lakes, left trace of their passing in designs pecked, carved, and painted on the fossil-laden rocks. And this was the area in which we found ourselves in the month of August, 1979. The first site we visited was the hidden cliff of El Cadillal.

El Cadillal

Going north and west to Torreon, one enters the region of Mapimi. West of the hamlet of Mapimi, on Mexico's Highway 30, one passes through a region of live sand dunes, *barrancas*, sandstone hills, and fossil lake beds. Dirt roads wander off, unmapped, into the outback. The track which threads through the village of 4 de marzo leads one ultimately to the cluster of huts that mark El Cadillal and the beginning of the track to the site in the river bottom below.

The glyphs of Cadillal are carved into an outcrop of uptilted sandstone slabs that lie along the southern bank of a deep, intermittent drainage channel. All faces of this outcrop bear glyphs, and no special orientation of the designs is apparent. It is not our intent to interpret the glyphs of Cadillal but merely to record, until such time as a data base has been built to allow comparison and possible interpretations.

One of the art styles encountered at Cadillal is unique in our experience: a panel of petroglyphs executed in a fashion resembling nothing we have seen to date characterized as "Indian" (see Fig. 1). The panel bears a faint resemblance to rock-art styles recorded in Kansas and Wisconsin (cf. Figs. 667 and 781, Wellman, 1979), but the technique displayed at Cadillal is more akin to a sculptor's treatment of bas-relief than to petroglyphs as we normally encounter them. The main panel (Fig. 1) bears a design executed in this unique "professional" style. The lines of the design are executed in deep V-cuts in the rock, about 4 cm. deep and 6 cm. wide, cut and then abraded for the bas-relief effect. Part of the slab on which this design is found has spalled off at the "foot" of the figure, where a grid-like design extended into the portion now missing.

The grid is an integral part of the total design, which, using the imagination, can be made into a recumbent anthropomorph, or anything else you want to make it. At the "head" is a circle diagonally bisected, with two spiked "rays" issuing from it, together with a zigzag "spirit" line. A tailed circle lies above the head, but this seems to have been pecked at a later time; the technique is a different one, the design being much more lightly pecked and without the finely finished quality of the rest of the design. One circle lies below the grid, separated from the main design; two more circles, one of them bisected, lie above the grid and are connected to it by single vertical lines, and two "arms" extend from the "torso" up to the edge of the slab. The last design element (to the left as you face the rock) is an angular "U" lying on its side.

Another seemingly integrated panel (Fig. 2) is separated from the rest, and dives into the cliff which rises sheer above the river bottom for some 14 m. at this point. This particular panel is covered by at least 12 m. of overburden, and the investigatory excavations by Dr. Macda into the overhanging cliff face revealed the continuance of the glyphs past the present cliff for at least one meter. Whether or not more lie beyond is unknown at this time of writing; and the rate of soil deposition or the susceptibility of this particular site to flash flooding are also unknown.

The glyph of the "main" panel is unique in terms of sheer art style and execution. The "disappearing panel" finds us on slightly more familiar ground, with the exception of the main portion lying exposed to the air, where the same angular rectilinearity of line and style is found as on the main panel, except with far less polish of technique. Less time was spent in carving these glyphs than the "main" panel.

The center portion (Fig. 2) displays a bisected triangle, point down, connected to a zigzag which rises and then falls vertically. Next to this design element are two anthropomorphic figures resembling the Greek letter *lambda*. (This element will be found again at San Rafael de los Milagros and is a fairly common element in Southwestern rock art.) Below is a design which, in Olmec country far to the south, would designate a cave: nested "U's." We make no claim to any connection between Cadillal and Olmec sites; this cave motif element is commonly encountered throughout the world. Further to the right in Fig. 2, in the excavated area which was covered by

overburden, we encounter a series of what appear to be rain-cloud symbols, together with motifs familiar to Southwestern rock-art researchers.

Other design elements at Cadillal include deeply cut spirals, one of which resembles an ammonite with thin tentacles coming out the open end. There are circles and more circles, cruciforms and more of the *lambda* figures, connected in a line. A full description will appear in Dr. Maeda's publication. That this was a site devoted to some special purpose seems evident, given its location at the riverbed. The cliff walls rise sheer all along the drainage, precluding any occupation sites immediately. That the site is exposed to flash flooding is evident by the wrack and flotsam tossed upon every outcrop by water from passing storms.

To conclude: here is a rock art site picked for some special purpose as yet unknown, which includes elements matching no "Indian" art we have yet encountered, executed in a technical sophistication new in our experience for a site of this type.

San Rafael de Los Milagros

San Rafael de los Milagros lies west of the hamlet of Mapimi, on the northern shore of a lake bed. A hogback ridge of iron-red fossil-bearing sandstone parallels the highway. Here we are on more familiar ground. Here definitely are petroglyphs (and pictographs) along a well-defined trail in association with a ceremonial ground. A steep and rocky trail leads up the south face of the ridge. Petroglyphs cover almost every rock face above the trail that leads upward and then dives over the lip of the ridge, ending in a high artificially flattened ceremonial area.

The whole top surface of the ridge, with the exception of the natural rocky "wall" on the south side has been cleared and tamped flat, giving a "ballcourt" effect. The ceremonial ground is open at the east end to a winding canyon whose most immediately observable feature is a conical hill standing in the fork of the arroyo. Local informants state that more petroglyphs are to be found on this hill. At the arroyo end a trail leads down to the drainage from the "ballcourt," and more glyphs are found here along the trail. Whether the trails served in initiatory rites is moot, of course; but that is the impression we get. One feels that these glyphs, in clusters, were stations at which novitiates would pause, learn whatever was to be learned at that particular point in the ceremony, and so progress by stages to the top, where the "ballcourt" area was suddenly revealed. In any event, that this was a major ceremonial center is obvious from the immense labor that must have been required to level the "ballcourt" that measures a quarter-mile from end to end.

The petroglyphs found at San Rafael are for the most part of a type more familiar to students of glyphs of the Southwest: anthropomorphs, zoomorphs, sun, cloud, and rain designs, "blanket" motifs, handprints, and footprints--any of which may be matched with petroglyphs occurring in the Southwest.

The one incidence of pictographs noted at San Rafael has chains of inverted triangles in a dark red pigment, superimposed on petroglyphs that consist of short, vertical lines in rows, an anthropomorph, and a vertical chain of diamond shapes with two small "horns" on top.

Time and space do not allow a full discussion of the petroglyphs of San Rafael. We have picked five examples, as seen in Fig. 3: some for their strangeness, others for their more familiar forms.

Fig. 3a gives the immediate impression of "sun and moon." These designs are 12 cm. in diameter and are pecked on the east face of a boulder in the relative positions shown. The "sun" is a circle with rays directed outward; the "moon," a bisected circle with its "rays" going in toward the center. The juxtaposition and the positive/negative treatment of space in these two designs are striking.

Fig. 3b: This is a "ladder" design, flanked by inverted triangles connected in a vertical chain and with another series of the same inverted triangles running down its center. All these triangle elements have been completely pecked in. To the right is a series of six outlined, upright triangles. The bottom one has a single horizontal line across its interior; the other five contain two horizontal lines. The "ladder" is crossed by a horizontal line at its first full top constriction, and by two horizontal lines at the next constriction below. An inverted triangle is pecked within the second segment, reading from the top; the third segment has a hooked line running from the outside of the "ladder" to the inside. Both these symbols are at the left side of the "ladder" as you look at the glyph. In the series of triangles to the right of the "ladder," a dot has been pecked at the left side of the eighth triangle up the chain. (Note: The boulder on which this glyph appears has been cracked, top and bottom, so this may be an incomplete design.)

Fig. 3c was dubbed the "Argyle" glyph. Here are three rows of connected diamonds, pecked to form three distinct textural impressions, on top of a "rain" symbol consisting of a horizontal line to which are appended three short vertical strokes. At the top right of the "Argyle" design, a single line slants upward, as if another diamond were in the process of being formed. The lowermost right-hand triangle is shaped differently, with slightly curved outlines giving it a more leaf-like form.

Fig. 3d gives us an inverted-triangle motif, with two solidly pecked triangular shapes connected to each other, and two more similar shapes below. The top left element is pecked at the top to form a bird's head, with a small rounded-edge rectangle in front of the beak. The lower-right triangle is curved at the bottom to make a comma-form. Some irreverent observers have noted the resemblance to a jalapeño pepper of the design element immediately to the right of the main design.

Fig. 3e has in its bottom half design elements found all through the Southwest: sun symbols, meandering lines, rain cloud, enclosed cruciform, and others. This petroglyph was done by a different hand than the others in this illustration. In the

enclosed cruciform, note that the inner line does not enclose the cross completely, but begins at one arm, circles the form, and ends tucked into the junction of the vertical and horizontal lines. The upper half of this glyph, were fancy given full rein, could be interpreted as a Tlaloc figure, and the whole panel can be read as a petition for rain or a testimonial of gratitude for the plentiful soaking which followed the petition.

To conclude: San Rafael de los Milagros was a major ceremonial center in which petroglyphs played an integral part. Some design elements at San Rafael resemble those found at El Cadillal: rows of *lambda* figures, anthropomorphized and stalking one another in a row, more deeply cut than the remainder of the glyphs; but none of the glyphs at San Rafael shows the precision and sheer sculpting skill of the glyphs of Cadillal. There are design similarities, and that is all that one can state at present. The remainder of the glyph inventory resembles designs found throughout north-central Mexico and the southwestern United States. The sites described lie in a region rich beyond all measure in rock art. As yet, it is a region little known and less reported.

REFERENCES

- Moller, Harry. "Mapimi: Una Region tan Asombrosa como Ignorada," in *Mexico Desconocido*. Vol. 33, 1978.
- Wellman, Klaus. *North American Indian Rock Art*. Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt, Austria: 1979.

NOTES

Readers may be interested in comparing design elements with some of those appearing in Kenneth Castleton's two excellent volumes, *Petroglyphs and Pictographs of Utah* (Salt Lake City, Utah Museum of Natural History, 1979).

The major glyphs of Cadillal are unique in our experience; however, at the ARARA VII symposium in Albuquerque, Dr. William Breen Murray of Mexico's Universidad de Monterrey, advised that he has seen an art style similar to that of Cadillal in a remote area west of Monterrey.

This article was originally presented at Albuquerque NM, 24-26 May 1980, and was published in *American Indian Rock Art*, Vols. VII and VIII (El Toro: American Rock Art Research Association, 1982).

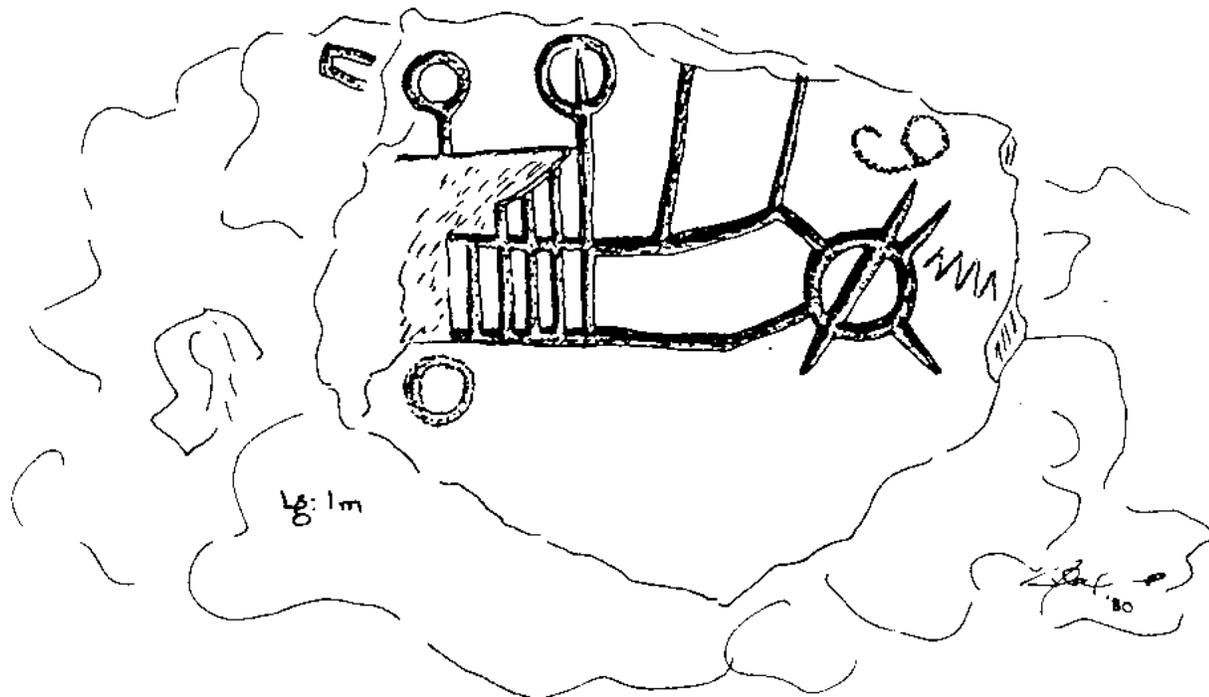
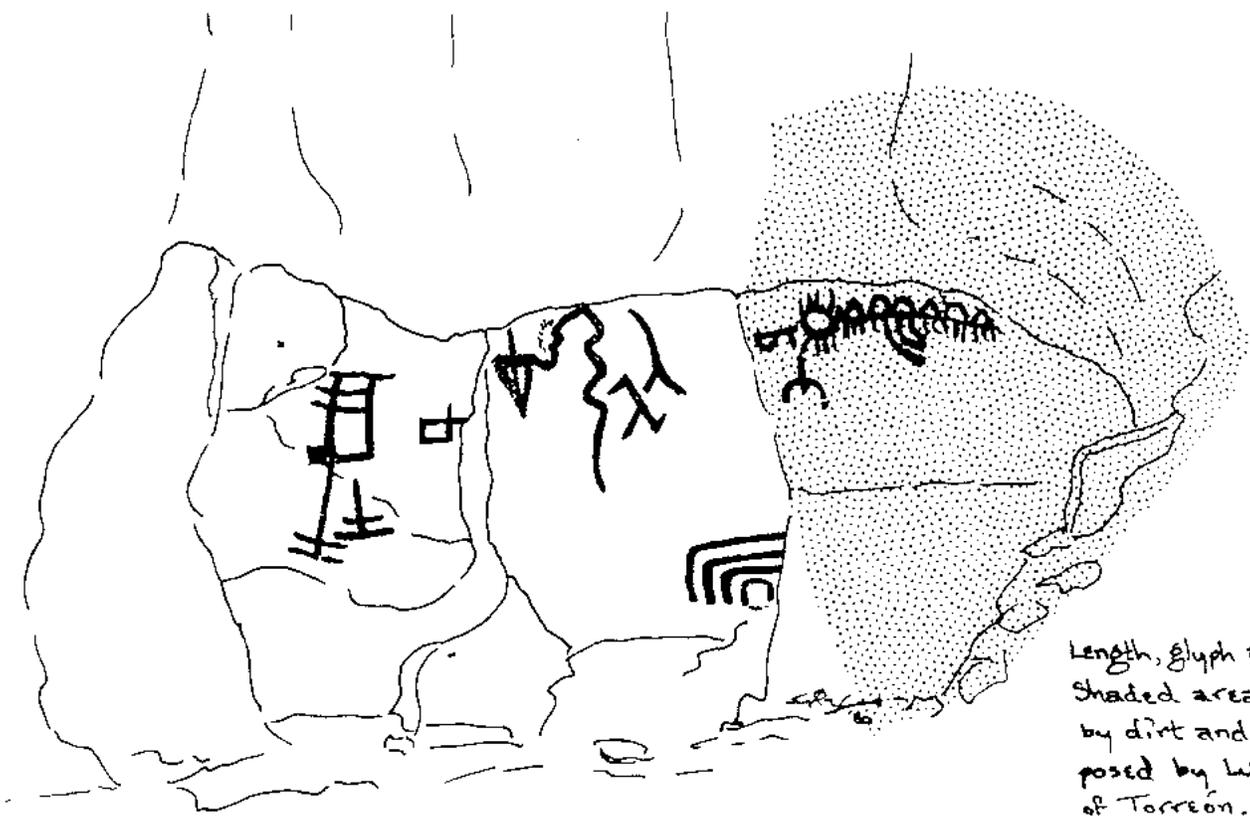
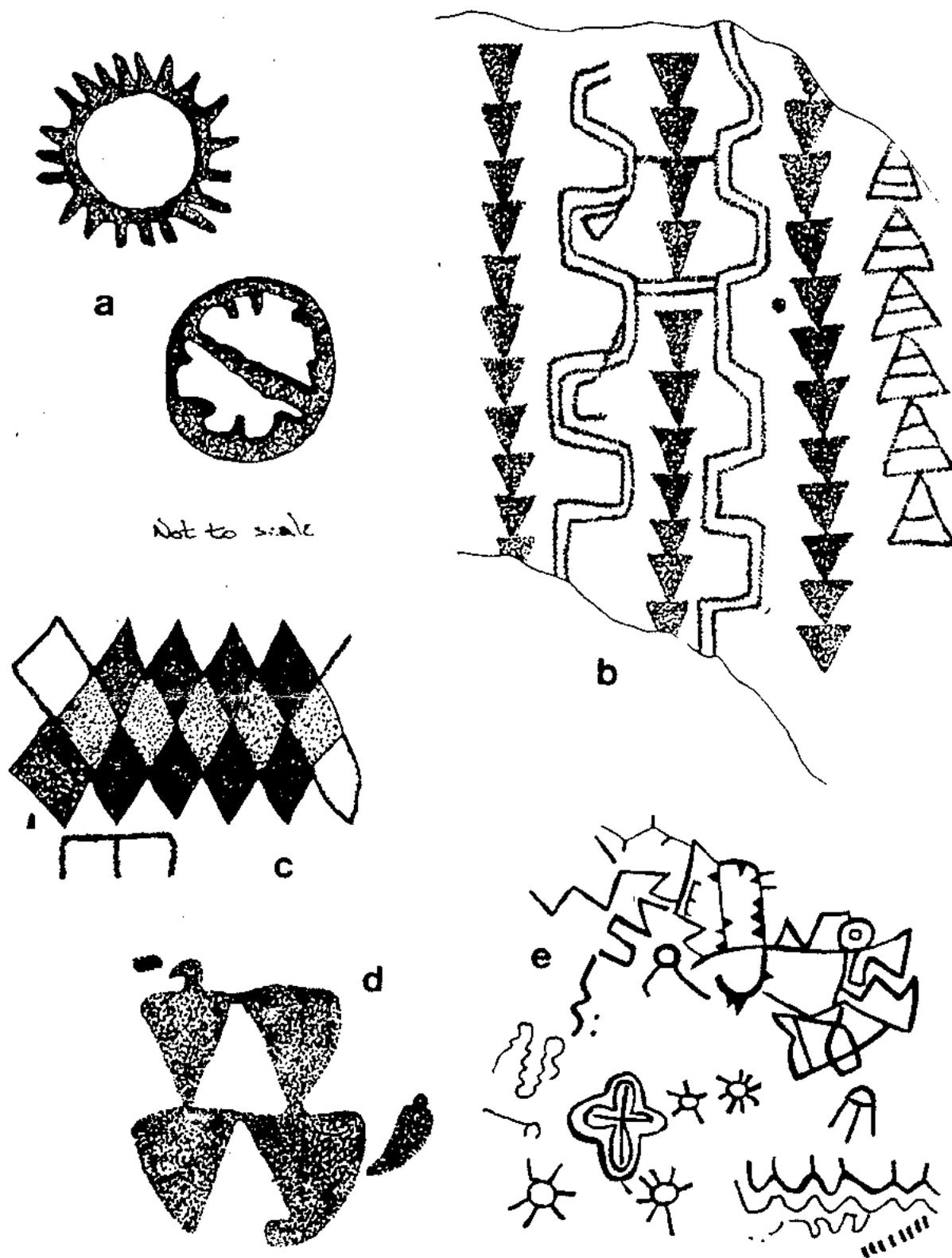


Figure 1. Durango, Mexico: EL CADILLAL



Length, glyph area, 1.5m
Shaded area was covered
by dirt and rock fall, ex-
posed by Luis Maeda, MD,
of Torreón.
Field notebook sketch, page 79

Figure 2. Durango, Mexico: EL CADILLAL



Not to scale

Figure 3. Durango, Mexico: SAN RAFAEL de los MILAGROS