

Rock Art Symbolism* Unique to the Virgin Anasazi Region: A Ritualistic Response to an Arid Environment

Steven J. Manning

Abstract

An explanation is proposed for a type or class of image that is located in the far southwestern corner of Utah and in adjacent areas. The images consist, for the most part, of vertical rows of connected variously shaped, simple abstract features. These are commonly: oval, round, triangular, teardrop, lancolate, amorphous, or combinations of these. The rows are generally connected at one or both ends to a horizontal line. Often these features are part of a more complex image. An interpretation for what these images symbolize is developed, and their possible significance to archaeology is discussed.

Introduction

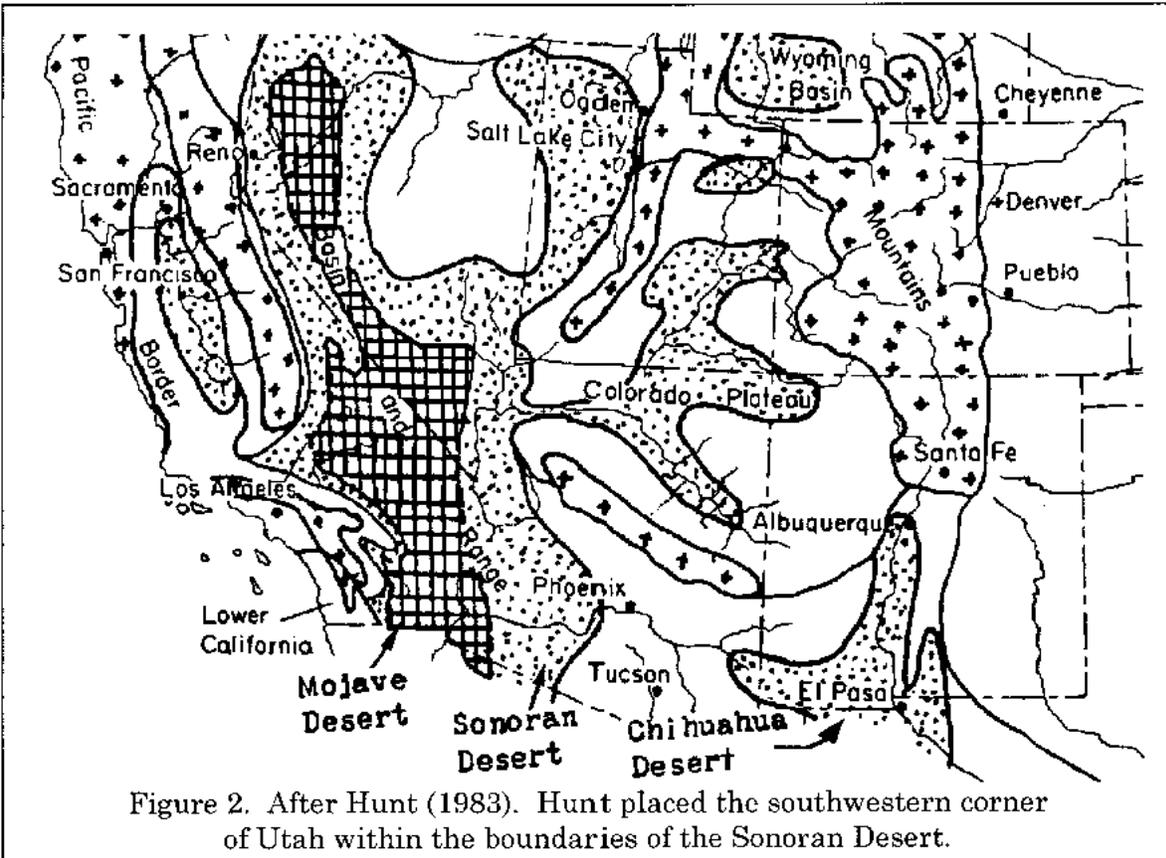
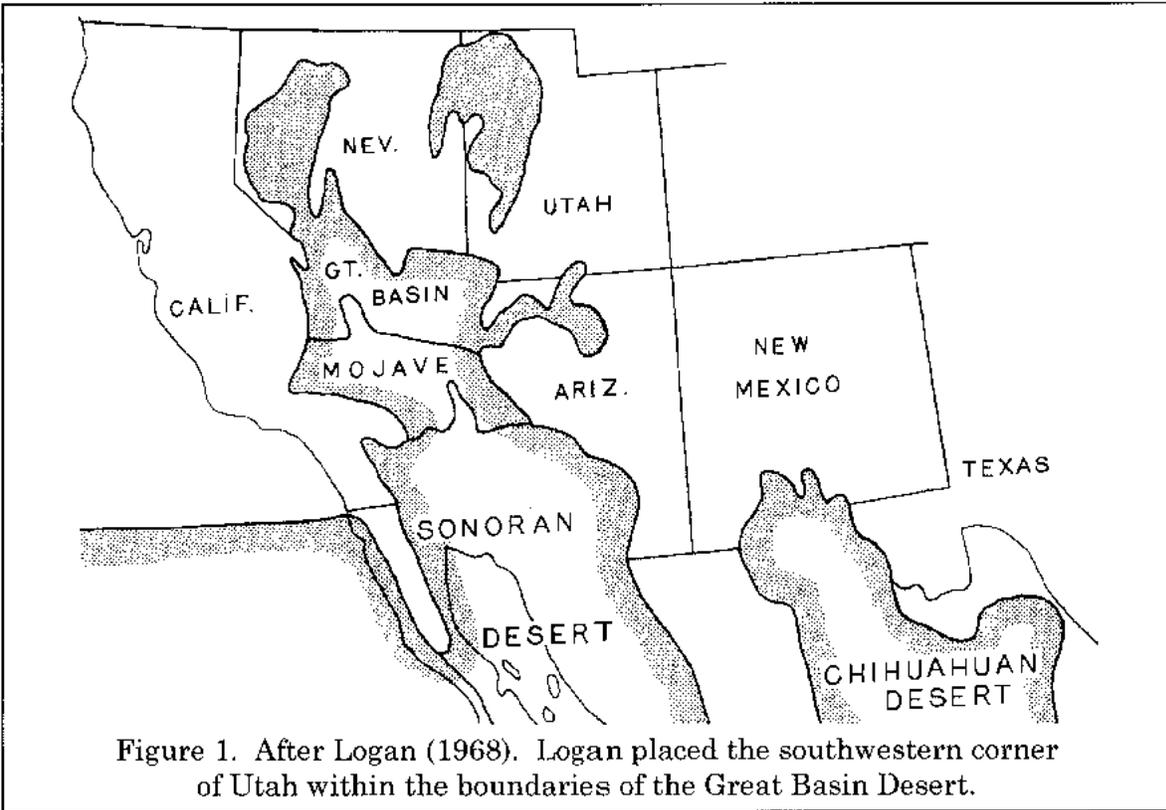
This paper discusses a proposed meaning and purpose for what appears to be a unique class of rock art. The rock art is found in the low-lying, arid desert region of Washington County in the southwestern corner of Utah. This desert area is unique in Utah because it has a low elevation, an extremely arid climate, and types of vegetation found nowhere else in the State. The extreme aridity appears to have been the major causal factor in the creation of the rock art. It is appropriate, therefore, to closely examine this desert environment to better understand the rock art.

Environmental Setting

This desert area has a unique enough assemblage of features that it is differentiated into its own entity. It is generally referred to by naturalists as the Mojave Desert (also Mohave). The Mojave Desert in Utah is considered to be a northward extension of the ecosystem located largely in Arizona and Nevada. Therefore, the Mojave Desert of southwestern Utah, northwestern Arizona, and southern Nevada constitute the study area for this paper.

* Symbolism = A system** of symbols or representations.

**System = A group of interrelated elements forming a complex whole.



This arid region has been classified differently by different scientists. Some researchers have categorized it as part of the Great Basin Desert (Larson and Larson 1977:31; Logan 1968:32), see Figure 1. Others have included it within the Sonoran Desert boundaries (Hunt 1983:8), see Figure 2. Still others have defined it as being part of the Mojave (also Mohave) Desert (Jaeger 1957:124; Rowlands, et al. 1982), see Figure 3. (The Mojave Desert is considered by some biologists to be a transition zone between the Great Basin Desert to the north and the Sonoran Desert to the south.) Lastly, a few researchers have not included the area in any of the great North American deserts (Petrov 1976:100), see Figure 4.

These are but examples that illustrate the principal differences that exist in the categorization of this desert area. There are many variations of these, but they differ only in details (Bender 1982; MacMahon 1985). Certainly Richard F. Logan made an accurate observation when he wrote, "Considerable difference of opinion has developed concerning the demarcation of desert boundaries in the southwestern United States" (Logan 1968:33).

Probably the most accurate classification of this desert region is provided by David E. Brown (1994) in his recent work *Biotic Communities of the Southwest* and in the accompanying detailed map, see Figure 5. (See also Turner in the same volume for a detailed description of the characteristics of the Mojave Desert.) Brown identified the arid region in southwestern Utah as being part of the Mojave Desert environment. He categorized the Southwest into regions based on plant communities, and since vegetation is a principal determinate in the characterization of desert regions — it being determined principally by climate — his classification appears most accurate. I will, therefore, use Brown's determination as the current preeminent definition for the Mojave Desert.

The Mojave Desert of southwestern Utah, northwestern Arizona, and southern Nevada is characterized by an average elevation roughly between 1,000 and 3,000 feet above sea level. The point where the Virgin River crosses the Utah-Arizona boundary is the lowest point in Utah, an elevation of 2,350 feet.

The terrain of the Mojave dessert consists of broad, nearly level expanses of hot, arid lands separated by isolated steep, rocky mountains. Almost consistently the Mojave Desert section in Utah has the highest temperatures in the state. Annual temperature extremes may

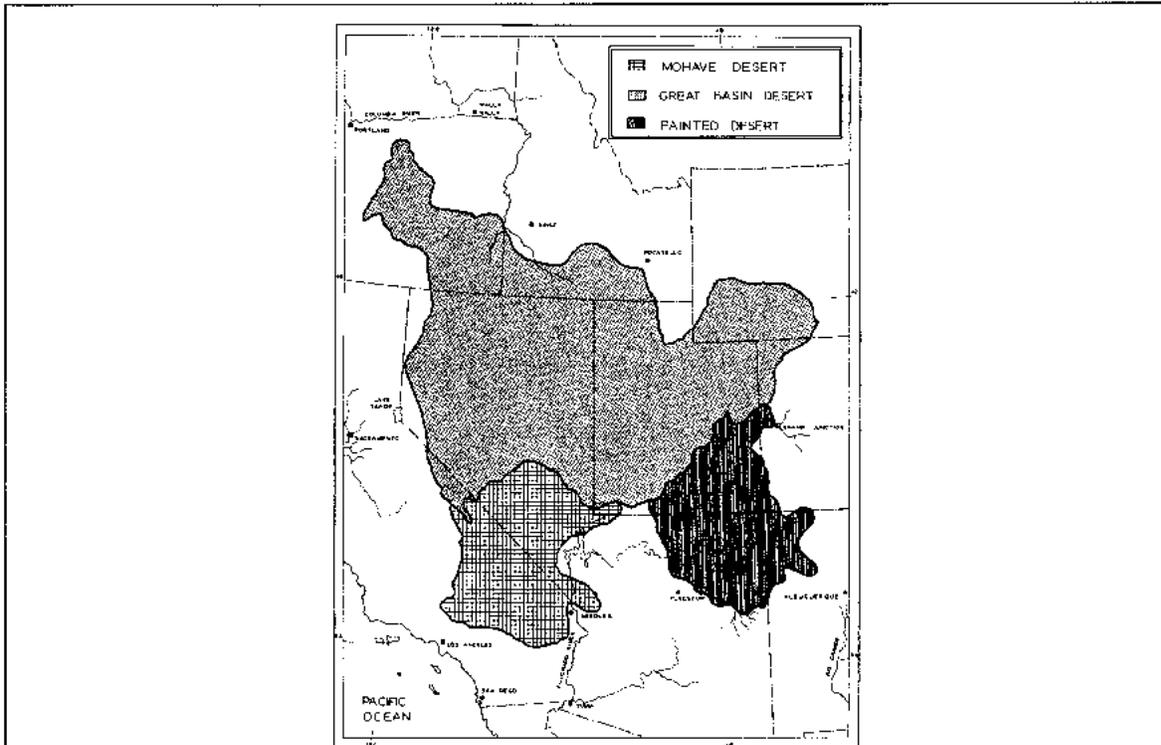


Figure 3. After Jaeger (1957). Jaeger placed the Southwestern corner of Utah within the boundaries of the Mojave Desert.

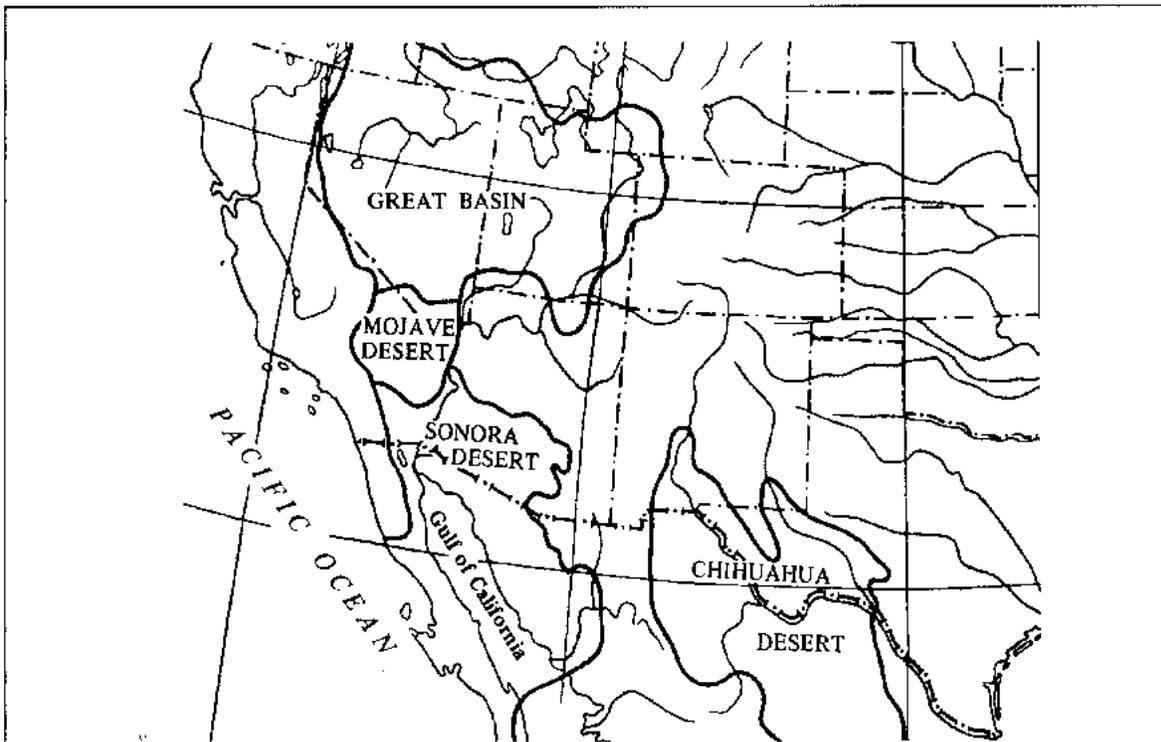


Figure 4. After Petrov (1976). Petrov did not place the Southwestern corner of Utah within any desert region.

range from 48° C (118° F) in the summer to -18°C (0° F) in the winter. The average annual precipitation is less than 6 inches per year. St. George, in the higher elevations, has a mean yearly rainfall of 8.2 inches; this drops to only 3.9 inches at Las Vegas. Even this small amount of precipitation is deceptive because there are years in which rainfall is only 75% of normal and there are often long periods with no rain whatsoever. Furthermore, only about one-third of this precipitation falls during the summer growing season.

The Mojave Desert of southwestern Utah has vegetation that is unique in Utah. The most dominant shrub is the creosote bush. Present also are the impressive Joshua Trees, the Cat's Claw bush and many unusual species of cactus, along with the more familiar saltbush, greasewood, sagebrush and blackbrush.

Archaeological Setting

The Mojave Desert area of southwestern Utah, northwestern Arizona, and southern Nevada is also unique archaeologically. It contains the western-most extent of the Anasazi Culture. Archaeologists have long recognized that the Anasazi who occupied this and nearby areas, were different from those farther east, and they attempted to characterize them in terms of their internal attributes and external relationships.

The cultural affiliations defined for this area are as plentiful and varied as those of the desert demarcations. Initially the area was considered part of a loosely defined "western and southern" division of the Anasazi (Kidder 1917). Kidder subsequently included it in the "Northern Periphery" of the Anasazi (Kidder 1924), see Figure 6. Gladwin and Gladwin (1934) included the area as part of their "Nevada Branch of the Anasazi," which they conceptualized as being a sub-branch of the Kayenta Branch of northeastern Arizona. This division was later modified and designated the "Virgin Branch of the Anasazi" by Colton (1952) and also by Shulter (1961) who revised and added to Colton's work. C. Melvin Aikens in 1966 published an extensive investigation of the "Virgin Branch" and defined the distribution as shown in Figure 7.

The "branch" designation is part of a "family tree" type system (root-stem-branch-phase) developed by Winifred and Harold Gladwin (1934) to classify southwestern cultures. Other archaeologists working in the southwest found problems with the Gladwins' system

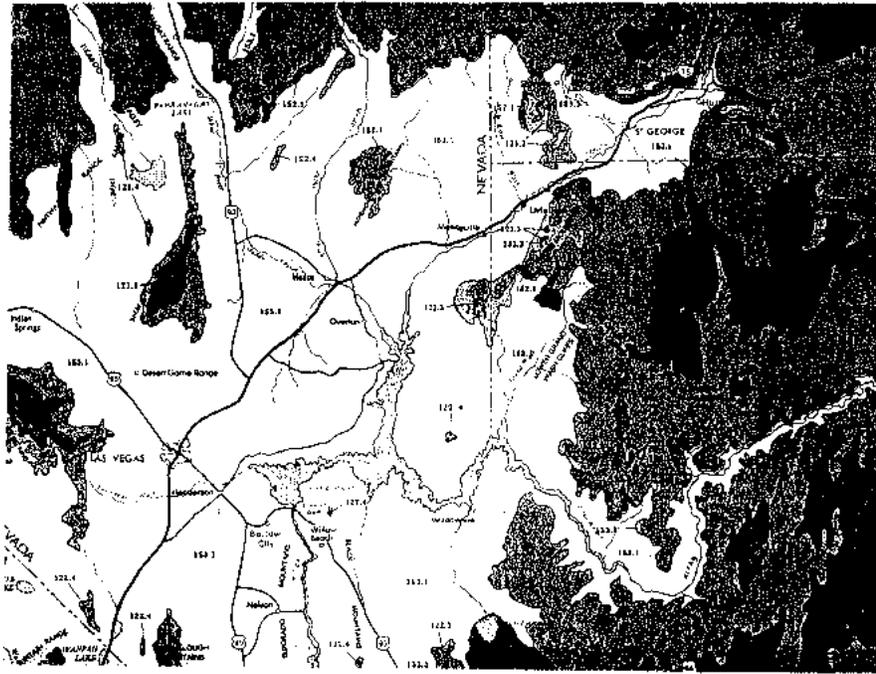


Figure 5. After Brown (1994). The Mojave Desert region is shown in white.

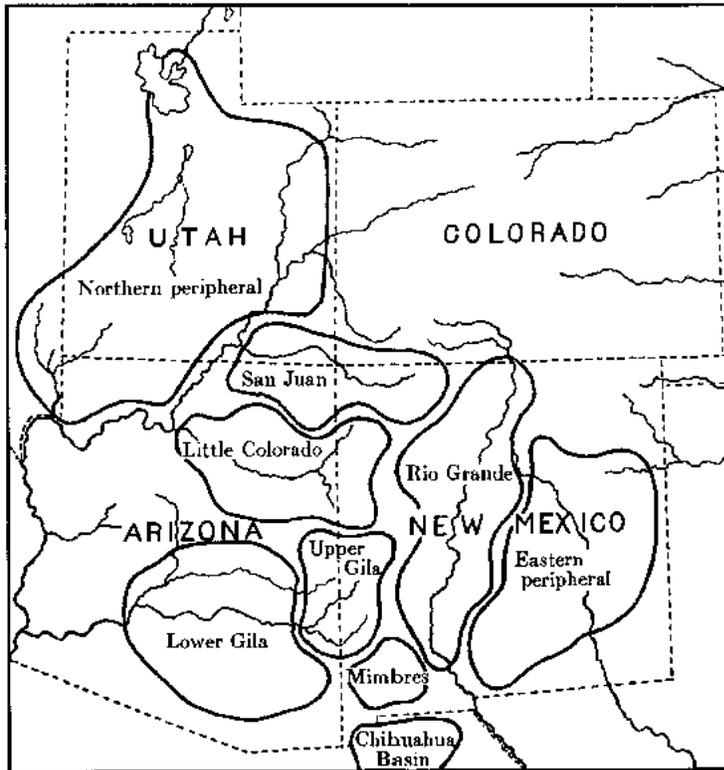


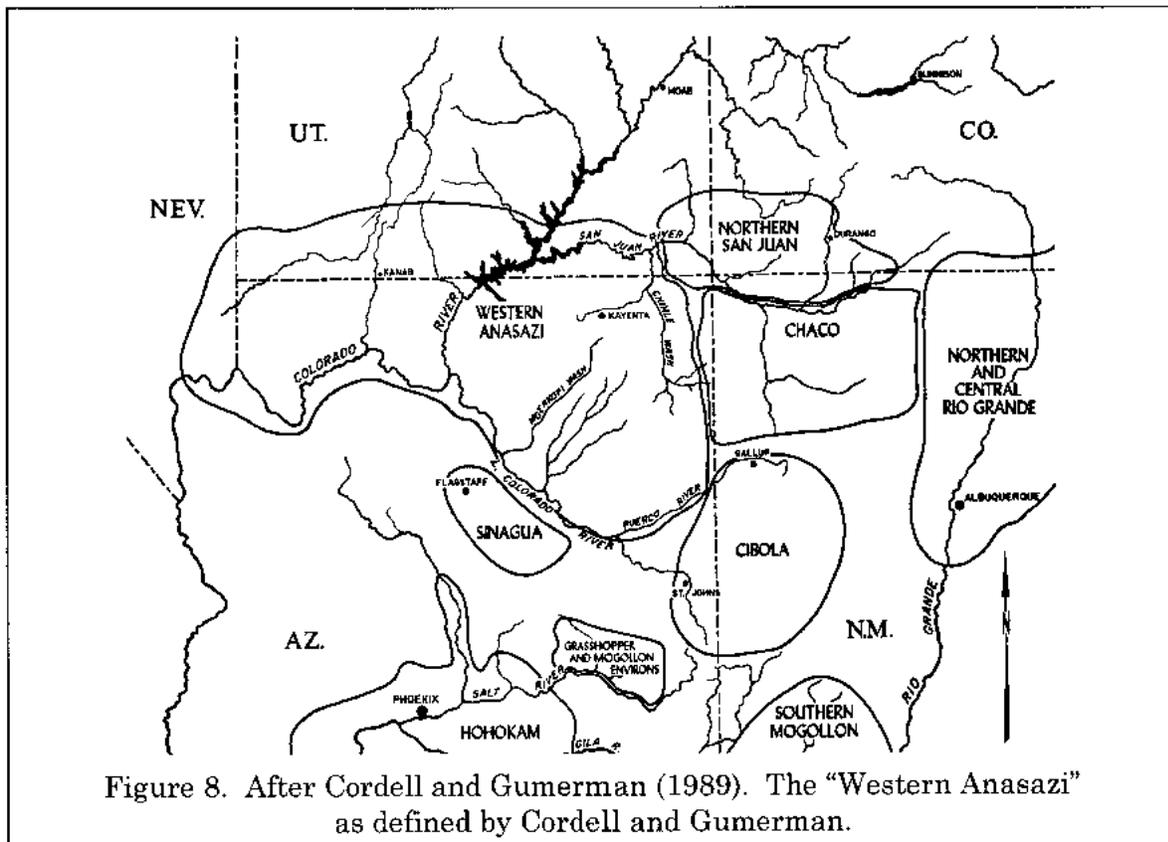
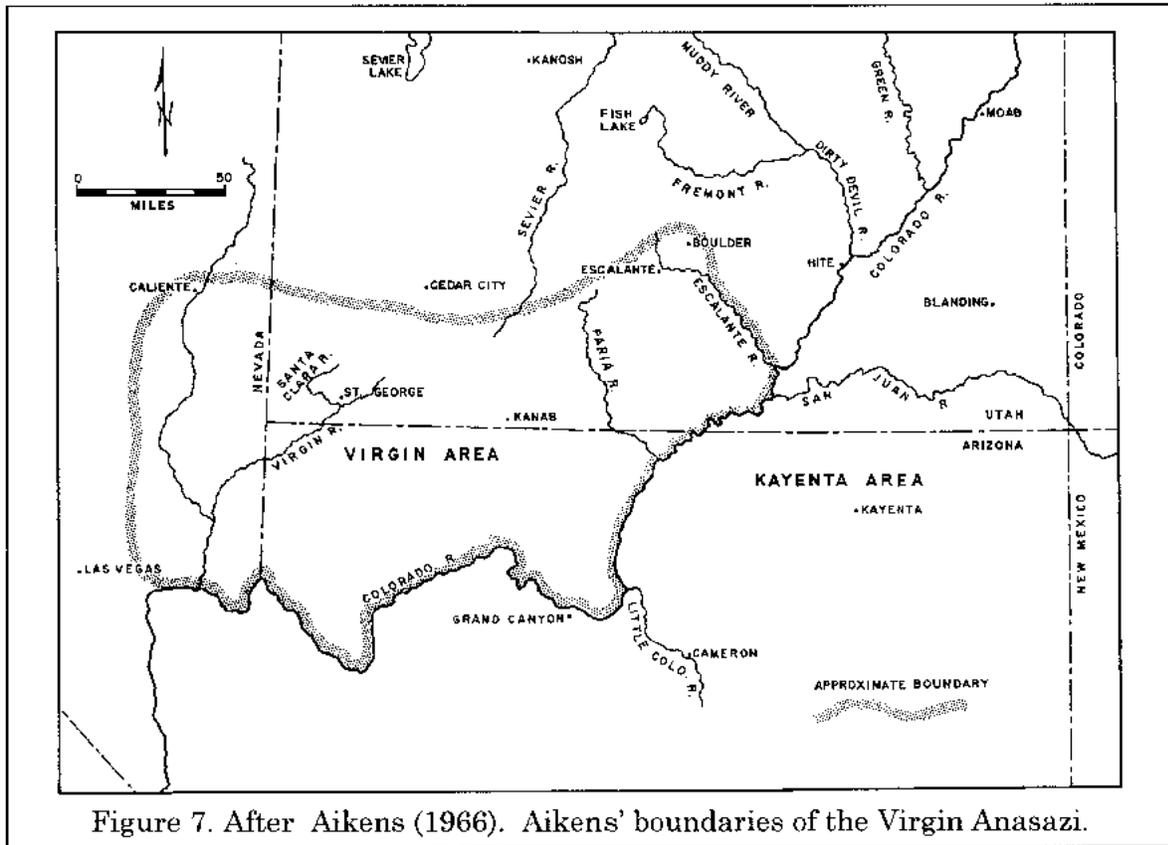
Figure 6. After Kidder (1917). Kidder's Culture Areas of the Southwest.

and developed modifications or other classification systems (Aikens 1965; Colton 1939; Daifuku 1961, 1966; Martin 1979; Martin and Plog 1973, and others). (For a discussion of the limitations and problems with this system see Cordell 1984.)

Following Aikens research and his criticism and discarding of the Gladwins' "branch" system, the term "Virgin Anasazi" became the most widely accepted designation (Ambler 1966a:6; Nickens and Kvamme 1981, and others). However, there are a number of researchers who refer to the Virgin Anasazi as the "Western Anasazi" (Thompson 1978; Walling, et al. 1986:18, and others). Their "Western Anasazi" is not to be confused with the "Western Anasazi" defined by Plog (1979:108-130) who classified all the Anasazi into one of two major groups — a Western and an Eastern. Plog's "Western Anasazi" covers roughly the Anasazi occupied areas of Arizona, Utah and Colorado. It should be noted that Plog does not include all the Virgin Anasazi area in his "Western Anasazi" boundary — his boundary does not extend into Nevada (Plog 1979:108). The large "Western Anasazi" division continues in use today — with some modifications (Cordell and Gumerman 1989), see Figure 8. Fowler and Madsen (1986) consider the Virgin Anasazi to be a term defining a sub-region within Plog's "Western Anasazi", as do others (Gumerman and Dean 1989), see Figure 9.

Some researchers (Ambler 1966b:174; Jennings 1989:305; Lister 1964:66; Schaafsma 1970:111-112, and others) have not recognized the Virgin Anasazi as an entity equivalent to, or significantly different from, the Kayenta Anasazi, which is found to the east, see Figure 9. Thus the term "Virgin Kayenta Anasazi" was created to refer to the Virgin Anasazi as a minor, if not inferior, variant of the Kayenta Anasazi. Lastly, there are those authors who have included very little of the Mojave Desert in the Anasazi area (Cordell 1984:15), see Figure 10.

It should be noted that all of these various classifications are based on variations in material culture, i.e., similarities and differences in ceramics, architecture, horticulture, mortuary practices, etc., (Aikens 1965; 1966; Day 1966; Johnson 1965; Reed 1948, 1950; Shutler 1984, and others) and ethnology (Eggan 1950). The differences also reflect changes in data and perception as archaeology and anthropology have developed over time.



Margaret M. Lyneis (1996) employed somewhat of an unconventional approach in subdividing the area for archaeological investigations. She ". . . subdivided the 'Far Western Region' of the Western Anasazi into districts based on geography, rather than on cultural units," see Figure 11. Lyneis created these divisions or regions because of: the paucity of detailed artifact analysis, the difficulty in determining sharp cultural boundaries from the material record, and because ". . . it is difficult to know how well our cultural concepts relate to any prehistoric sense of ethnicity or boundedness" (Lyneis 1996:12). Her geographically based divisions appear to have merit as will be shown below.

It is obvious that the boundaries of the Virgin Anasazi, and also its possible subdivisions, vary from one scholar to another and depend upon their experience, their viewpoint, and the time period emphasized. The boundaries are, therefore, the subject of much debate. In general, however, the boundaries for the Virgin Anasazi, as used by most scholars, are as follows: on the east it is considered to be roughly the Colorado River, and so it includes the Arizona Strip. The northern boundary includes: the St. George Basin or Virgin River drainage (Aikens 1965, 1966; Day 1966; Gunnerson 1962; Moffitt, et al. 1978; Pendergast 1962; and others), the Kanab Creek and Paria River drainages (Abbott 1979), the Muddy River drainage (Ambler 1981), the Pahranaagat Valley (Crabtree and Ferraro 1980) and the Meadow Valley Wash drainage (Fowler, Madsen and Harrori 1973). The western boundaries are indistinct (Lyneis, et al. 1989). Walling, et al. (1986:18) reports that Anasazi remains have been found many miles west of Las Vegas. Madsen (1986:Fig. 1) places the existence of Anasazi ceramics well into southern California. South of Las Vegas the boundaries soon intersect those of the Patayan (Colton 1945) or Hakataya (Schroeder 1957, 1979). (See Cordell 1984:75-78 for a discussion of the conflicting terminology.)

The characterization of rock art in the area has also been varied. Polly Schaafsma (1970:111) defined both an Eastern Virgin Kayenta Anasazi Style and a Western Virgin Kayenta Anasazi Style. (Note Schaafsma's use of the term "Virgin Kayenta Anasazi") She later changed the name of the Western Virgin Kayenta Style to the Virgin Representational Style (Schaafsma 1980:153). It is not clear if Schaafsma's Virgin Representational Style also includes the Eastern Virgin Kayenta Style since she does not refer to it again.

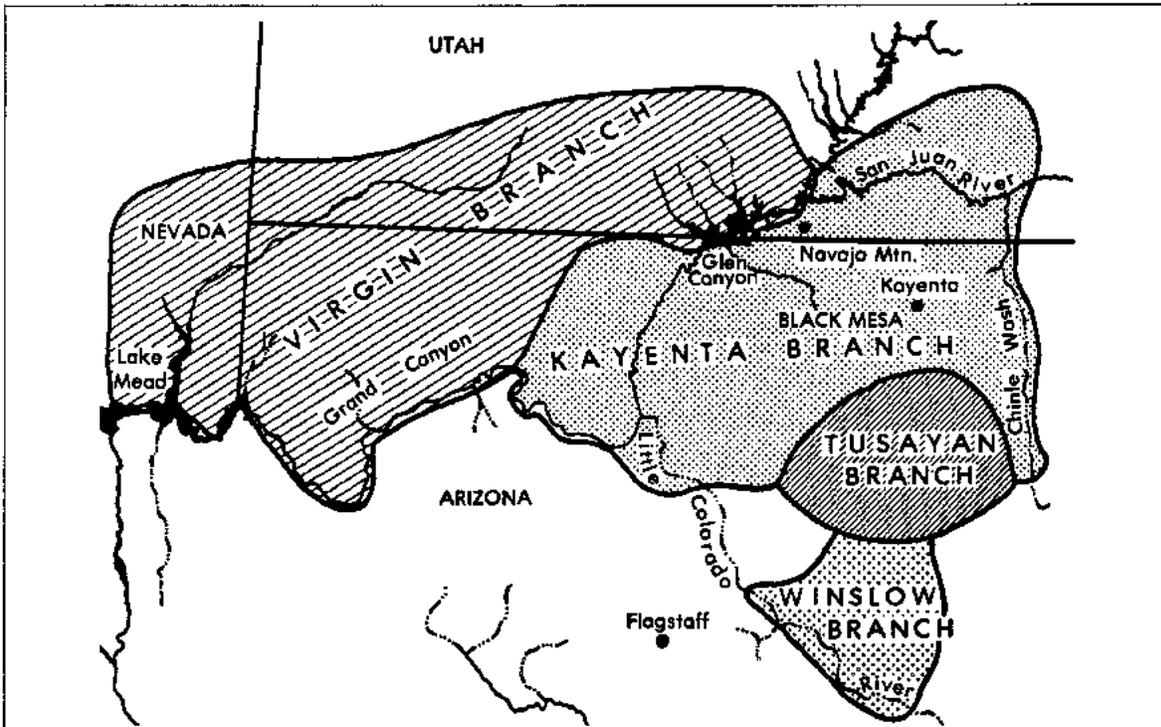


Figure 9. After Gumerman and Dean (1989). Gumerman and Dean's subdivisions of the Western Anasazi.

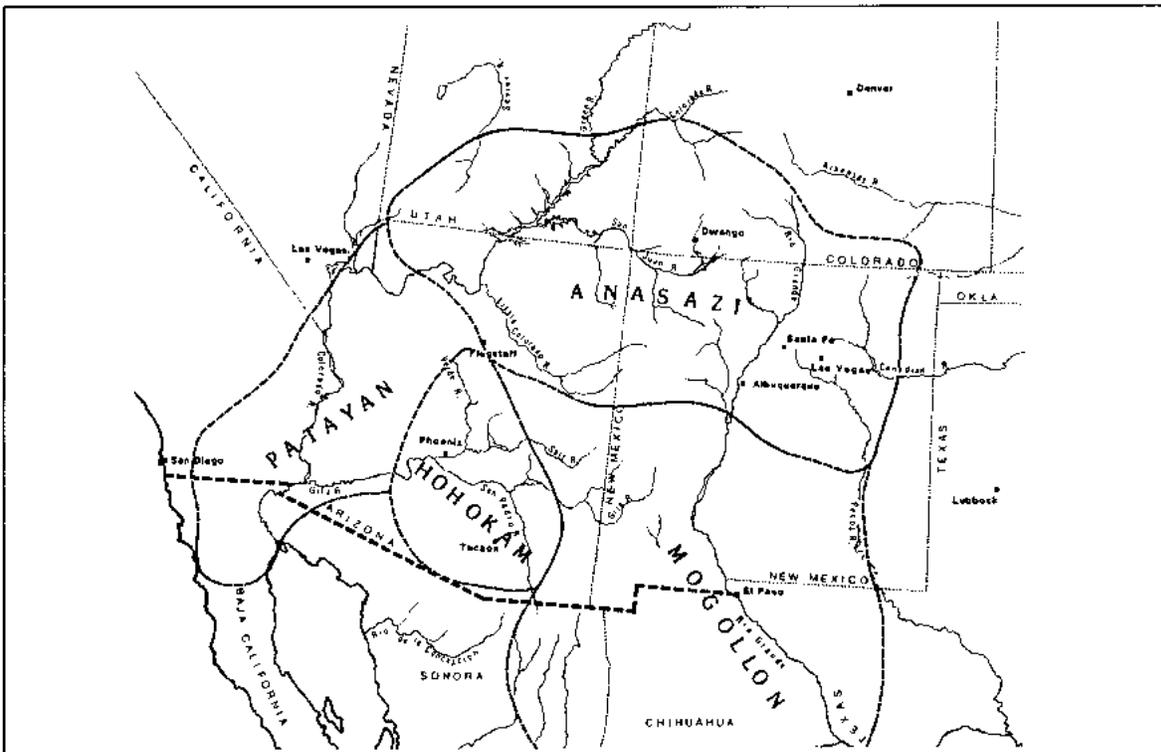


Figure 10. After Cordell (1984). Only part of the Mojave Desert is included in Cordell's Anasazi area.

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