

Nina Bowen

## **BOATS IN THE DESERT — PART I**

---

Each individual, based on exposure to rock art and background and experience, will interpret petroglyphs and pictographs differently. What may appear to be a boat to some people will not seem to be one to me, and vice-versa. For my part of this paper, I will attempt to make here-say and circumstantial evidence make my case for the prehistoric use of boats in Utah and Northern Arizona. I will show you some sites that appear to contain boats and explain to you what it is about each glyph or set of glyphs that makes me feel that way.

Research for this paper was begun several years ago. Petroglyphs and pictographs suggesting the primitive use of boats appeared at some of the sites we visited. Much of the material contained in this paper was obtained through a call for information in the newsletter of the American Rock Art Research Association and Clifford Rayl's many photograph albums. I will show you the results of this research, beginning with sites in the northern part of Utah and working south. Other sites exist that are not included in this paper, both in Utah and around the world.

### **Nine Mile Canyon, Utah (Figure 1)**

Nine Mile Canyon is a drainage that leads into the Green River. The canyon has been used extensively from prehistoric through to the present time, and it contains a significant amount of ruins and rock art. The panel that contains this depiction of a boat is in the lower part of the canyon, upstream from the confluence of the Nine Mile Creek and the Green River.

There are several sites in Nine Mile Canyon containing depictions that could be boats. This particular panel gives me the impression that the

figures could be single persons in the type of boats that would only hold one person at a time on a body of water. When I visited the exhibit of boats at the John Wesley Powell Museum in Green River, Utah, the bowl boat in that exhibit looked very much like the boats depicted in this panel and at other sites.

### **Near East Canyon, Utah (Figure 2)**

This site is not the first one I saw, but it convinced me to publish my findings about boats. The site is on a prominent rock outcrop that overlooks the valley to the South. Behind the panel are the Book Cliffs. This area was used extensively for game hunting and contains many painted sites, most notably the Segoe Canyon and Westwater Canyon sites. This site is further toward Grand Junction, Colorado in that same formation.

It was very hard to photograph this site because of deterioration, lighting, and the colors having faded, but I can distinctly see what I believe to be a raft or boat, with six figures in it, that has run into a boulder in the water. I believe that this part of the panel tells the story of this event.

The artist has used rock incorporation to enhance the "ran into the rock" part of the story. The portion of the rock face that bulges out to play the part of the boulder in the water has been enhanced with pigment. The accompanying photo does not clearly show this rock incorporation, but a better picture or a visit to the site would. The surrounding figures do not give me clues as to the accompanying story. This site is a few miles from the Colorado River.

### **Willow Creek, Utah (Figure 3)**

This canyon is only a few miles from the White River and Green River, on what is now Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation land. It was, and still is, used extensively by Native Americans. Ute Indians have farms in the area and a bird refuge is nearby. Willow Creek might have been navigable in ancient times.

The petroglyph at this site depicts four figures in what I believe to be a boat. The shape of the figures is similar to the shapes of other "boat-ers" at Sevenmile Canyon, near East Canyon and Pinta Road.

### **Rochester Creek, Utah (Figure 4)**

The Rochester Creek site is at the confluence of Rochester Creek and the Muddy River near Emery, Utah. The Muddy River carries a substantial amount of water at times, and drains into the Dirty Devil River.

The petroglyphs at this site have been studied and speculated about probably more than glyphs at any other site in Utah. The heritage of the site has been disputed, as well (Gunnerson 1969 Figure 25b, Schaafsma, 1971:61). I think that the wide-eyed figure at the top of the "rainbow" could be a person in a boat. In close study of this petroglyph, one can see that the top line of the "rainbow" was added later, and I feel that the boat would have been more readily identifiable before the last line was added to the glyph. This picture would fit in with ethnic stories of today that tell of deities in boats or on rafts.

### **Sevenmile Canyon, Utah (Figure 5)**

The Sevenmile site is a few miles from the Colorado River near Moab, Utah. The petroglyph is situated on a large rock face that lies directly between two streambeds. In wetter years or in times of flood, these canyons would carry large amounts of water to the Colorado

River. The sides of the canyons contain numerous petroglyph and pictograph panels. This particular rock face appears to contain petroglyphs from different ages. I do not believe that this glyph is related to the others because of its relative patination and style difference. The panel is also situated apart from the other glyphs at this panel. To me, the glyph depicts five figures in a long boat. The glyph sits directly above, and appears to be headed toward, a big break or crack in the rock face.

### **Cedar Point, Utah (Figure 6)**

This site is on a large boulder at the base of a cliff near the Goosenecks of the San Juan River in Southeastern Utah. Petroglyphs from at least four different ages cover this boulder, and were a feature of Clifford Rayl's paper on dating by rock movement (URARA, 1996). The part of the boulder that contains the glyphs that I am studying appears to be from the Basketmaker II through Pueblo I period, which had religious influences from the South (Wormington 1959:49).

The petroglyph appears to be a person that has been placed on a boat or raft to be floated down a river. The river, in this case, is the crack in the rock. Jesse Warner tells of a Mayan myth in which the Hero Twins send their dead father down the river to the land of the dead on a raft. This could be an early manifestation of this myth, or a related myth that was picked up by the people native to this area.

### **Hildale, Utah (Figure 7)**

Hildale is a small town just north of Colorado City on the Utah/Arizona border. In early Pioneer times, there was a small lake in the valley that is between Hildale, which is at the foot of the Vermillion Cliffs, and Canaan Gap. The water from Canaan Gap drained into the Virgin River. I am told there were marshes around this lake, particularly on the north end. The water in most years was only waist high. Some years

ago, the Jet Stream changed suddenly, having a profound effect on the weather in the region, and the little lake dried up. The climate has been quite dry since. In such an area, where climatic changes have been so drastic just in my lifetime, it would be difficult to speculate about what prehistoric climates would have been like, but the nearby petroglyph panel gives us a clue that at least at one time there was a body of water there, and that boats or rafts of some type may have been used on it.

The petroglyphs at Hildale are on an escarpment at the base of the Vermillion Cliffs. The glyphs, which are only a small part of a bigger panel, show a person in some sort of small watercraft, which appears to be on the water. This is one of the few panels that does not use rock incorporation. There is clearly a crack or break in the rock near the glyph, but it was not used, and appears to have not been there at the time the petroglyphs were made. The style of the petroglyph suggests that it is not very old.

#### **Pinta Road, Petrified Forest, Arizona (Figure 8)**

This old panel appears next to the Puerco River in a wide drainage that has intermittent water. The water drains into the Little Colorado River. The site contains a number of glyphs from an extended period of time.

The shape of the human figures in this glyph look similar to those described above in Seven-mile Canyon and Willow Creek. They appear to be sitting in a vessel that has the V-shaped figure in front of five or six other figures. Below the glyph of the boat are figures of two water birds. Note the shadow on the panel at the time the photo was taken.

#### **Near the Little Colorado River, Arizona (Figure 9)**

This petroglyph is situated on a rock outcrop not far from one of the Little Colorado River

drainages in the area of the Petrified Forest National Park. This depiction does not immediately appear to be a boat, but upon closer inspection, the symbols accompanying it suggest that it could be a boat. First, there is a petroglyph above it to the reader's left. That glyph appears to be a bird with a fish in its beak. Second, the left end of the vessel is lightly pecked, suggesting something wet, or water (Martineau 1973:25). The front of the vessel ends in the crack in the rock, as other boats in this paper do.

#### **Further Studies:**

Patterson 1992 references two sites containing boats. One is from Eagle Cave, Texas (Figure 10). The drawing shows a canoe filled with solid black post-like shapes, "presumably human figures..." (Greider 1966).

Ritter and Ritter (1973:82) refer to a panel that includes a centipede, the symbol of death, the dead ready for burial in striped body coverings, and the "funerary boat transporting the dead to the nearby Channel Islands for burial".

Heizer and Whipple (1951) imply that the distribution of boats was determined more by cultural than by physiographic factors. The tule raft was known to have been used along the Colorado River; its construction making it kind of pointed on the ends.

A number of interior groups ferried goods, children, and perhaps even women across swollen streams in large baskets or (in the south) pots. Swimming men propelled and guarded the little vessels. This custom is established for the Yuki, Yokuts and Mohave, and was no doubt participated in by other tribes (Heizer and Whipple 1951).

The tule balsa canoe or rush raft was used far inland in eastern California, which puts its use not many miles from the Hildale, Utah site.

This canoe or raft was known to have been used by the Paiute Indian tribe and Colorado River tribes. It did not appear to have been used in northern California, but it was known in Mexico, and probably had a distribution into South America.

Those who have knowledge of river navigation today say that the Green River would have been navigable only in sections anciently (such as from present day Green River, Utah to the confluence with the Colorado River) and the Colorado and Green Rivers, as well as others, could have been navigated in places. Many books about present day Indian customs include sections having to do with the construction of boats or rafts. These include how the boats of today are made and how it was done in the past.

The boat motif has been found in petroglyphs and pictographs scattered throughout Utah and Northern Arizona. To my knowledge, the archaeological data contains little to support the idea for the use of boats or rafts anciently. Interpreting a glyph to be a boat or not to be one is up to the reader of the glyph, but more attention by archaeologists to the use of boats in ancient times could be useful in petroglyphic interpretation.

Jesse Warner's part of this paper will follow, and discusses variations of the boat form and the more mythological implications or associations of the boat motif in rock art. I think the reader will be able to put his or her examples to the test using the boats described in this paper and Warner's ideas about the meanings of them and the surrounding glyphs.

#### REFERENCES CITED

Cole, Sally J.

1990 *Legacy on Stone, Rock Art of the Colorado Plateau and Four Corners Region*, Johnson Books, Boulder, Colorado.

Greider, Terence

1966 Periods in Pecos Style Pictographs. In *American Antiquity* 31(5): 710-720.

Gunnerson, James H.

1969 The Fremont Culture: A Study in Culture Dynamics on the Northern Anasazi Frontier. *Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology*, Volume 59, No. 2, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Heizer, R. F. and M. A. Whipple

1951 *The California Indians, a Source Book*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California.

Moss, Joseph Blaine

1994 Personal communication.

Patterson, Alex

1992 *A Field Guide to Rock Art Symbols of the Greater Southwest*, Johnson Printing Co., Boulder, Colorado.

Rayl, Clifford

1996 Dating by Rock Movement. *Utah Rock Art*, Volume 16, Utah Rock Art Research Association, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Ritter, Dale W. and Eric W. Ritter

1970 Sympathetic Magic of the Hunt as Suggested by Petroglyphs of the Western United States. In *Valcamonica Symposium Acts of the International Symposium on Prehistoric Art*. Centro Camuno di Studi Preistorici Capo di Ponte, Italy.

Wormington, H. M.

1959 *Prehistoric Indians of the Southwest*. Denver Museum of Natural History Popular Series No. 7, Denver, Colorado.

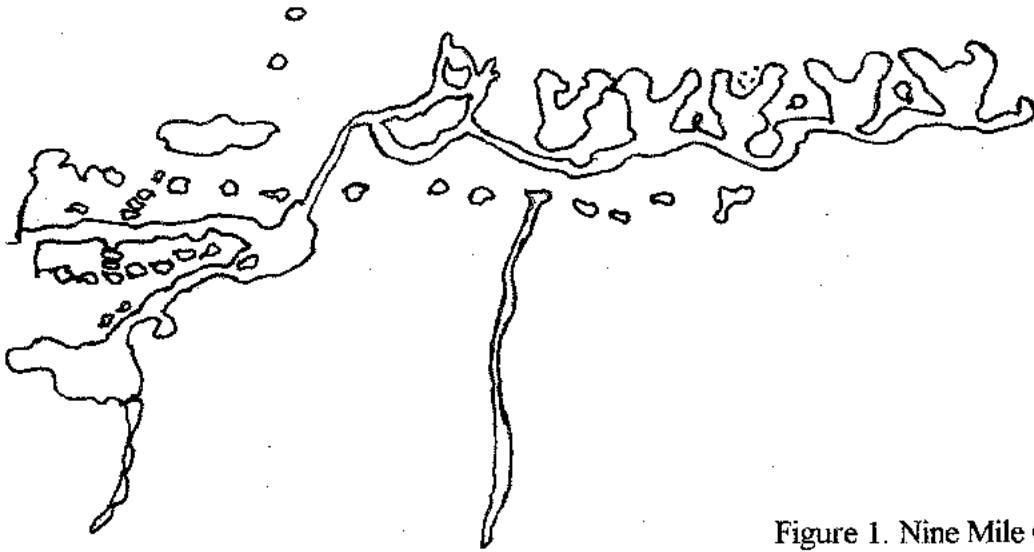


Figure 1. Nine Mile Canyon Utah  
Petroglyph

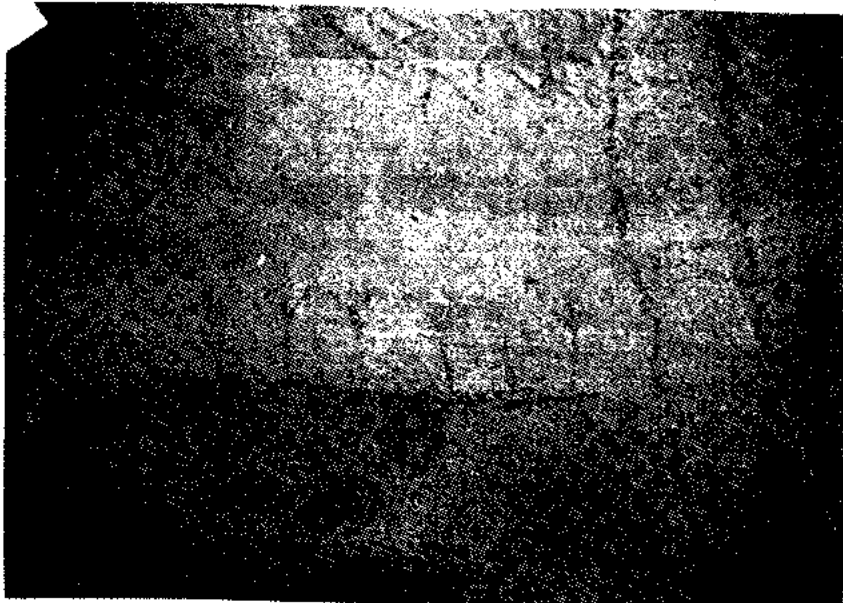


Figure 2. Pictograph near East Canyon, Utah

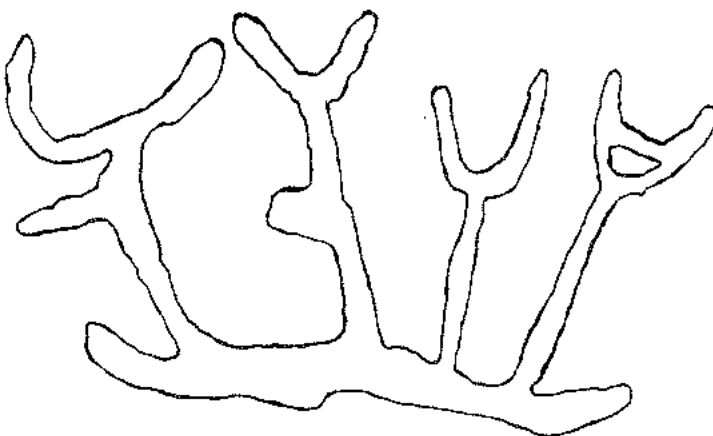


Figure 3. Willow Creek, Utah  
Petroglyph

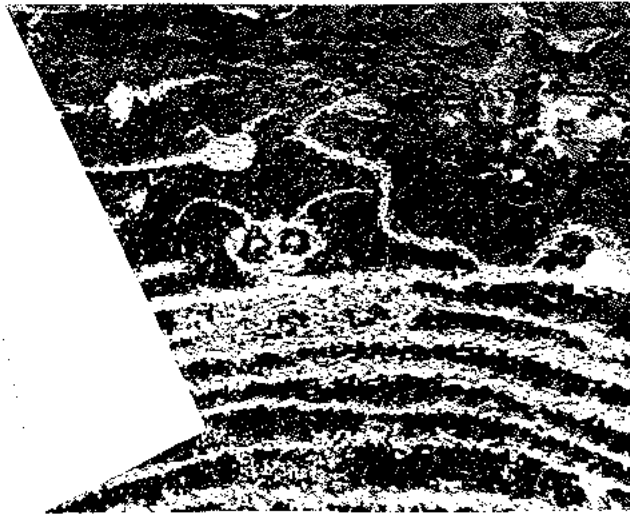


Figure 4. Rochester Creek, Utah  
Petroglyph



Figure 5. Sevenmile Canyon, Utah  
Petroglyph



Figure 6. Cedar Point, Utah  
Petroglyph



Figure 7. Hildale, Utah  
Petroglyph



Figure 8. Pinta Road, Petrified Forest  
National Park, AZ Petroglyph



Figure 9. Near the Little Colorado River,  
Arizona Petroglyph

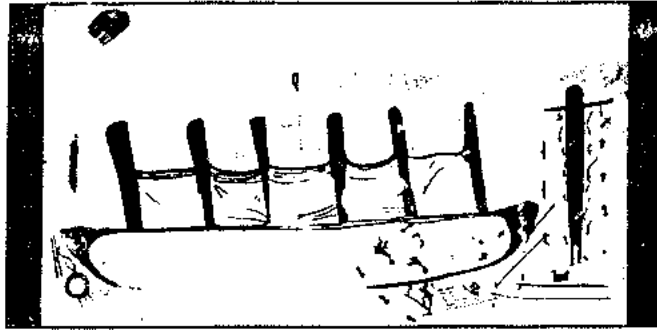
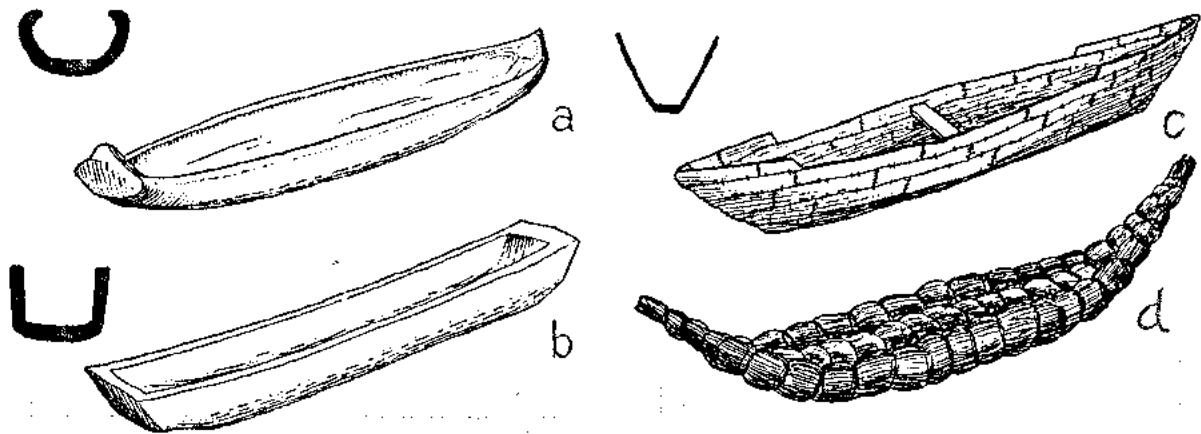


Figure 10. Eagle Cave, Texas Pictograph



Boat Types of Native California (not to scale). *a*, Yurok (northwestern California) river canoe; *b*, Klamath (northeastern California) canoe; *c*, Chumash plank-canoe; *d*, tule balsa.

