

Prehistoric Women and Rock Art

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Certainly the most frequent female images in rock art are Great Mother images and Spider Woman or Spider Grandmother (Morris 1991; Mullet 1989). For this presentation, however, I chose to focus on the images that give us clues about the everyday lives of the prehistoric women.

Roles of women depended on whatever the current social order was. We find three different descent orders controlling social organization in our study area.

Patrilineal: in irrigation societies; these were the Pueblos along the Rio Grande. The water boss was the chief of the tribe.

Matrilineal: in most of the Pueblos and the Navajo. The mother owned all the property, and was responsible for raising the children.

Bilineal descent: this includes almost all the peoples of the Great Basin.

In the Great Basin the men did most of the hunting, prepared and took care of hides and leather, and made tools. The women tended the children, and did the gathering, preparation and preservation of food.

A photo from the Smithsonian collection taken in the early 1900s shows a Paiute woman with a large burden basket held with a tumpline, similar to many of the "backpacker" petroglyphs we find in Utah and surrounding states. Using this and other similar photos in the Smithsonian collection and a photo of a backpacker Clifford Rayl gave me, I made a drawing of backpackers (Figure 1). I'm not saying all the backpackers shown in petroglyphs are women, but given that gathering was their traditional role, certainly many of them were.

The Great Basin peoples utilized over 100 wild food plants. Women also collected insects. Wandering was not random or aimless. It was a stable, well-known, annual round of harvesting, collecting, and storing of plants, animals, and raw materials. The women also wove baskets, made blankets, made clothing, and in some cases made pottery. (In some tribes men made the pottery.) Alex Patterson showed us examples of pottery designs that are found in rock art (see Patterson 1994).

Women wove baskets from any of the grasses available. Some were fine enough to hold water. Hot stones from the fire could be dropped into a basket of water to bring the liquid to a boil. Archeologists think that perhaps a basket was woven and lined with a quarter-inch or thicker layer of clay. This was then put into a fire and as the basket burned away the clay was fired, leaving a cooking pot.

There were other woven items. The exhibit of Anasazi woven sandals toured the country a few years ago; many of you probably saw this exhibit. There were also mats of various sizes, cradleboards, and a few grass skirts. Some rock art shows examples of woven designs.

Everyone's Job

There were some duties shared by everyone. Among these were the communal hunts, especially important to the survival of the tribes before horses arrived. Of two hunting panels, one from Manila on the Utah and Wyoming border shows people chasing a bison to a jump (Figure 2), and the other from Santa Clara, Utah, shows people chasing deer (Figure 3). The typical method seems to have the people chasing herds over the cliffs and then going to 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 in groups of 5-12 members in one dwelling, and there were no set rules 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 twisting the fibers of a kind of milkweed along their thighs. Then the men would tie the twine into nets. These were similar to the gill nets used for fishing. The mesh was designed so that rabbits could get their heads into it and then be caught behind the ears, 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 rabbits provide most of the meat for the Great Basin peoples, but they also provided most of the clothing. While these people were not big on fashion – men wore breechelouts and women wore aprons – rabbit skin blankets were a must. The skins were cured and then cut in a spiral 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 for a child's.

Ceremonies

In the Great Basin there were generally rituals for birth, puberty, and death. There were also many curing rituals, performed by shamans. Ghosts or sorcerers were thought to cause illness. The birth celebration didn't happen until it appeared the child would live. Typically this was when the infant developed teeth. At this time the child was given a name. Names often were status terms, and as the child grew and developed skills the name might be changed, perhaps several times in an individual's lifetime.

Certainly the most important ceremony for women happened at the first menses, marking the coming of age for girls. This idea seems to be common to all the Great Basin cultures. Custom dictated that the mother and the aunts constructed a menstrual hut. It was conical in shape, and called *nakanipi* in the Ute language. Green willows were poked into the ground in a circle, and then the tops were bent over and lashed together.

The first-timer might be confined as much as 30 days. Her mother or other relative would instruct her. Her hair was specially combed, and an attendant deloused her. Her diet was restricted to avoid meat, grease, blood, fish, salt, and cold water. The young woman would drink endless cups of warm water to help the blood flow freely. There were special basket dishes and drinking cups. She might be asked to lie in a heated pit (according to Boma Johnson, BLM archeologist, small

gravel pits are often part of puberty sites) or on heated ground. This primitive heating pad may have helped to relieve cramps. Cotton-like fibers from cottonwood trees, milkweed silk, and mosses when available were all used to absorb menstrual fluids. These materials were also used as diapers in cradle boards. The girl might be instructed not to talk or laugh, and to use a scratching stick to touch her body. She should avoid hunters, sick people, and in some instances all males.

In some areas the young woman wore a veil of fibers, and grass skirts (Figure 4). She sometimes made a show of doing hard work, such as gathering wood. This would display the girl to be industrious and suited for marriage. After the confinement the girl's family might then give a party to let everyone know she was eligible for marriage.

Figure 5 depicts a panel that may show a first menses. 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 freestanding boulder, with space along the lower edges where red paint was applied. It is located on the Ute reservation south of Duchesne.

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 Ute ethnography (Smith 1974), each woman made a separate shelter every month.

Some jobs were considered unsuited for this time, one Ute informant reported. You could not split the willows for baskets with your teeth while you were menstruating, but you could spend your confinement days making baskets, sewing moccasins, or other handwork. While all the sources reported that 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 women displayed interest in each other, their families exchanged gifts and it was considered an official match. The newlyweds lived with whichever family needed gatherers.

Both men and women could become shamans, even if menstrual blood negated shamanistic powers. The average life span of these prehistoric people was only about 35 years. Given the high infant mortality it was unusual for a woman to be postmenopausal. An older woman past menopause often became a shaman, especially if the individual had curing talents.

Figure 6 shows the pregnant ladies of Quail Creek. 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 went to the women's lodge for the birth, and was assisted by a relative or any skilled woman. If it was a difficult birth the husband might attend or have a person with spirit power 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 cradleboard. 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. (Jennings [1986] says in the morning and evening, but I would guess no mother carrying the 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 must 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 assumes the

status of parent.

Figure 7 shows a panel in Nine Mile called the Escalante Panel by some. It depicts a praying woman with a baby, a cradleboard, and a gathering basket. She stands with the animals, next to the river. The glyph is also very close to where the pinyon trees start.

The Fremont Family panel in Nine Mile (Figure 8) shows a woman with her family.

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Figure 1. Drawing of petroglyph of person with a burden basket, and artist's conception of woman using a burden basket.

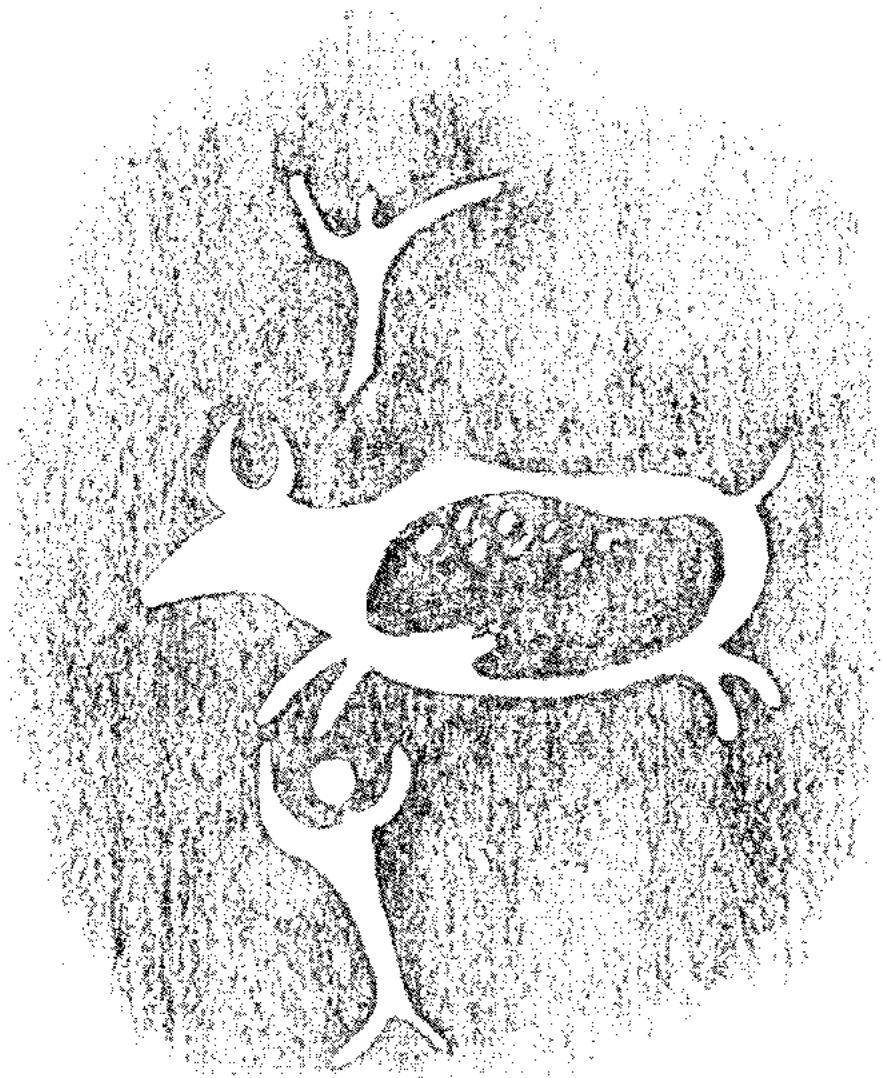


Figure 2. Manila, Utah, jump site

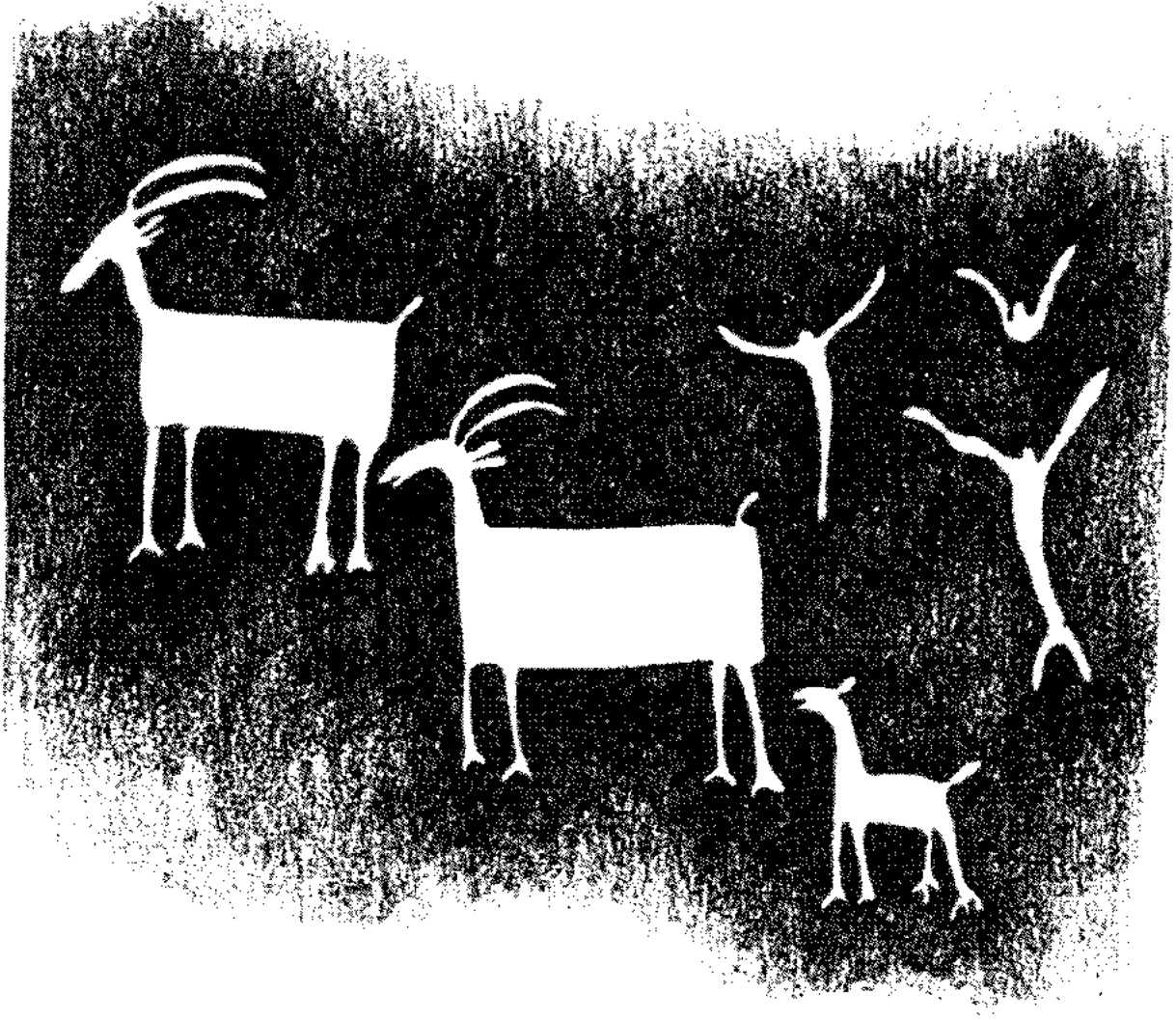


Figure 3. Santa Clara, Utah, jump site.



Figure 4. A possible first menses site at Dirty Devil Canyon, Utah, shows a woman with her veil and grass skirt.

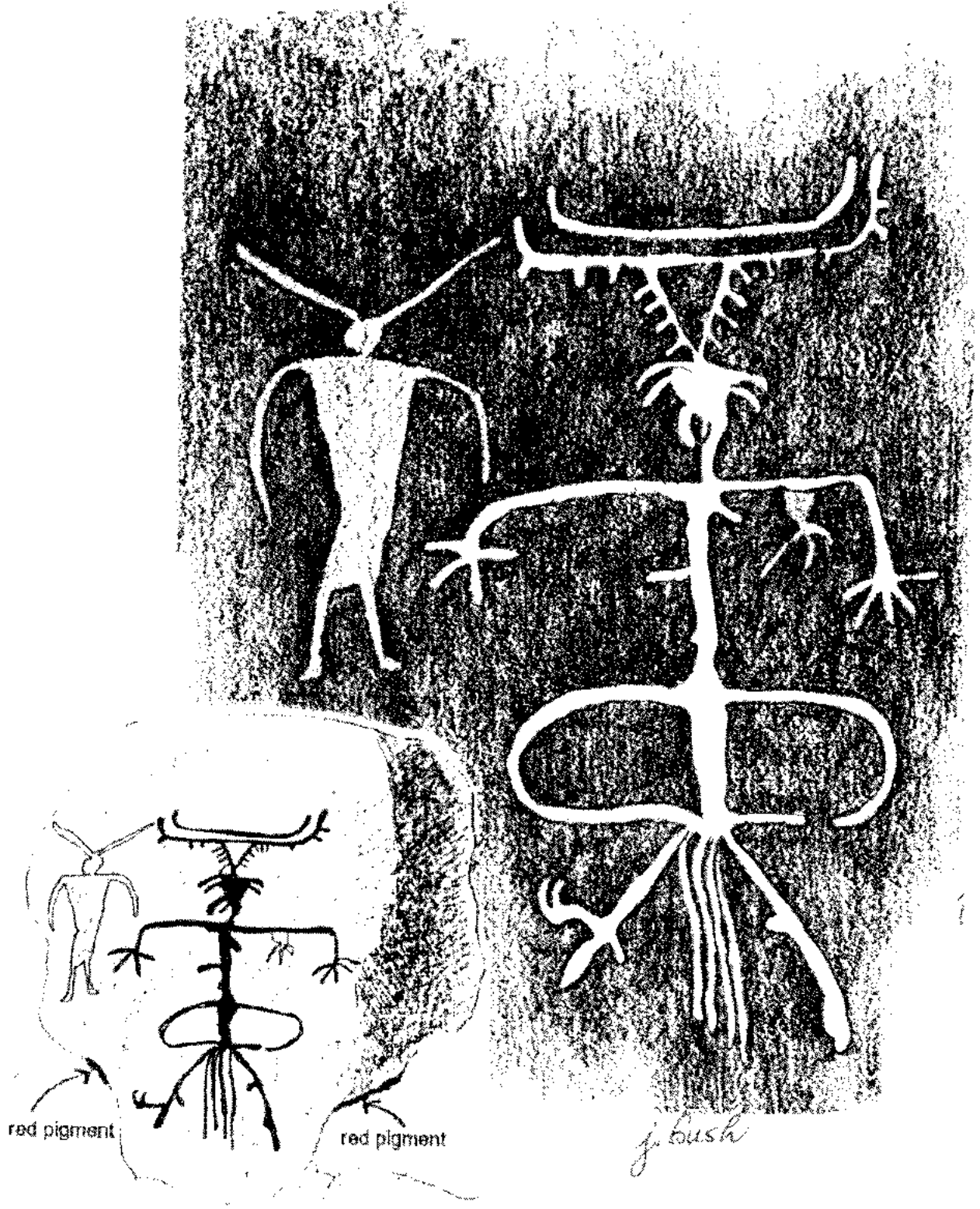


Figure 5. Another possible first menses site from the Ute reservation south of Duchesne.

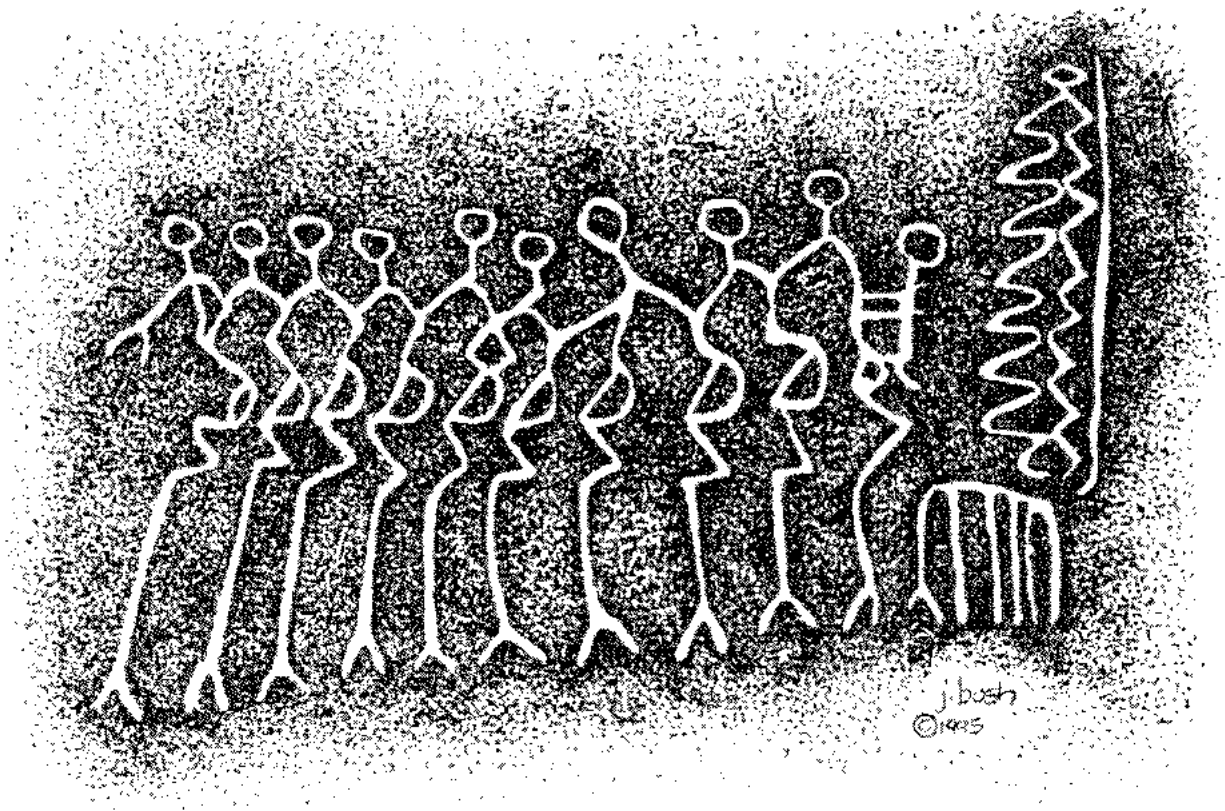


Figure 6. The pregnant lady panel at Quail Creek, Utah.

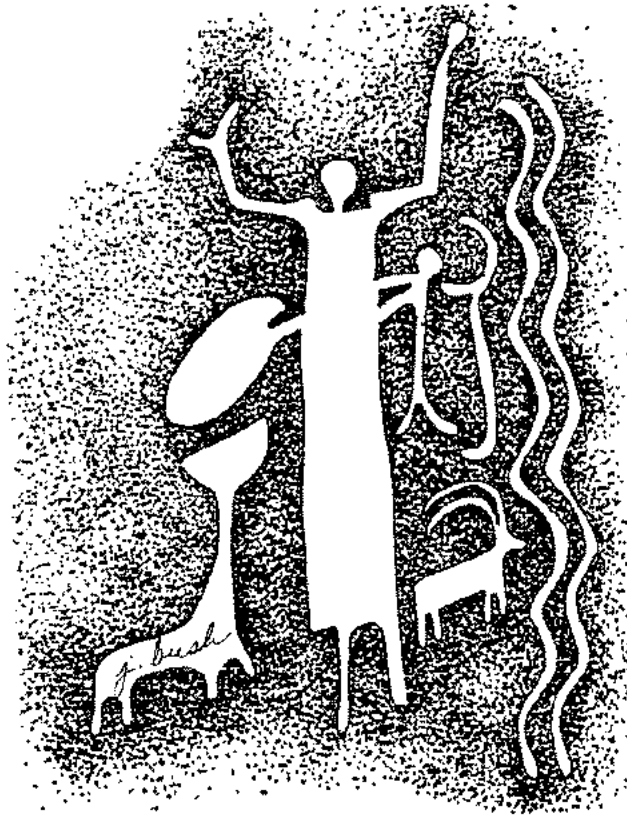


Figure 7, Top. Escalante Panel in Nine Mile Canyon, Utah. Figure 8, Bottom. Fremont Family in Nine Mile Canyon.