

The Dancing Shaman and Dancing Ritual in Native American Rock Art

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In 1996 and 1997 I presented papers on the Shaman's Crook in Native American Rock Art at the annual Utah Rock Art Research Association Symposium. But it was not until 1998 that I visited the Dancing Man site a few miles south and east of Cane Man Hill in Esmeralda County, Nevada. Immediately to the right of the Dancing Man panel, there was a petroglyph depicting a dancing figure with a crook (Figure 1). If indeed the crook "was peculiarly the shaman's badge of office" (Laird 1976:31) and if the shaman is one who "carried the poro" or crook (Laird 1984:273), then the dancing figure with the upraised crook is "The Dancing Shaman."

Dancing figures are depicted in rock art in a number of ways, and the Dancing Shaman petroglyph has the bent knees that signify the act of dancing. Another bent-knee dancing figure with crook is found in the South Mountains in Arizona (Figure 2). These and other examples demonstrate that in Native American rock art:

- 1) Figures with bent knees in petroglyphs and pictographs are meant to portray the act of dancing.

Another classic way of picturing the dancing figure is illustrated in a famous panel near Sleeping Duck Ruin in Canyon De Chelly, where a human figure appearing to hold a snake in one hand and a crook in the other has "rubbery legs" (Figures 3 and 4). Commenting on this figure, located next to flute players, Campbell Grant (1978:203) referring to the site as CDC-34, notes, "The snake and rubbery legs show strong Chaco-Mesa Verde influence." Here again the context, about which more will be written later, suggests another way to depict dancing:

- 2) Rubbery or wavy legs are a familiar and standard means of portraying a dancing figure.

Moving from the individual dancer to groups of people dancing, circle dancers are most dramatically pictured in the pictograph panel in Main Canyon, Escalante, Utah (Figure 5). Carobeth Laird points out the relation of the Circle Dance to natural phenomena, "A ring either around the sun or the moon is designated as *nikatiah*, circle-dance such as is danced as part of a Mourning Ceremony...." (Laird 1976:91). Referring to a funeral ceremony, she commented: "Afterwards the mourners formed a circle and danced the Circle Dance" (Laird 1976:246). Of course, many different ceremonies feature a Circle Dance, so another category for depicting dancing in rock art can be advanced, that:

- 3) Figures arranged in a circle, with varying postures and gestures, can be assumed to be Circle Dancers.

Perhaps the most common means of portraying dancing figures in rock art is through the line dance format. Several examples are found along the Potash Road downriver from Moab, Utah (Figures 6 and 7). Here the figures are holding hands, as is also the case with the line of dancers at Behind the Rocks, also near Moab. Other lines of dancers in Utah are at Montezuma Creek

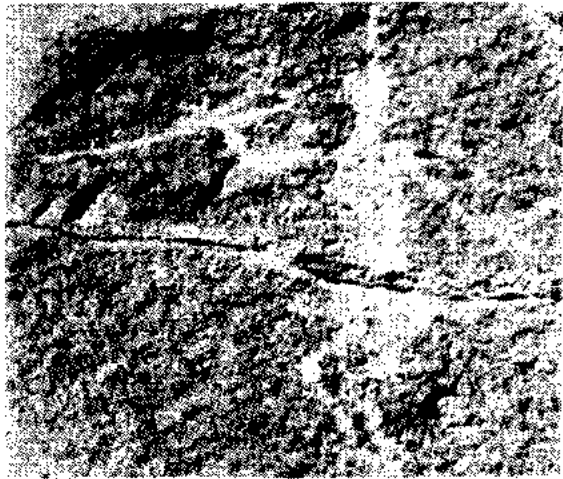


Fig. 1 Dancing Shaman, Nevada



Fig. 2 Dancing Shaman, Arizona



Fig. 3 By Sleeping Duck Ruin

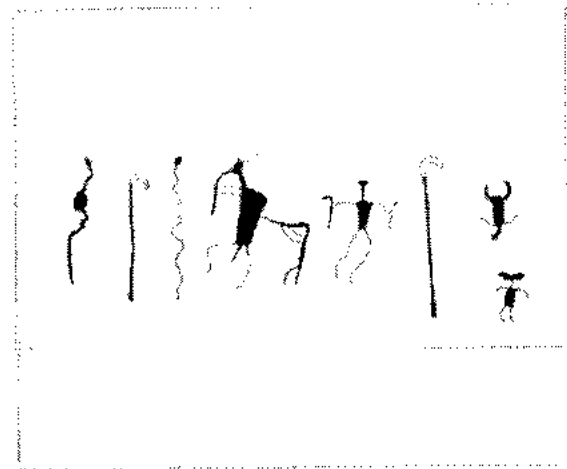


Fig. 4 Canyon de Chelly drawing

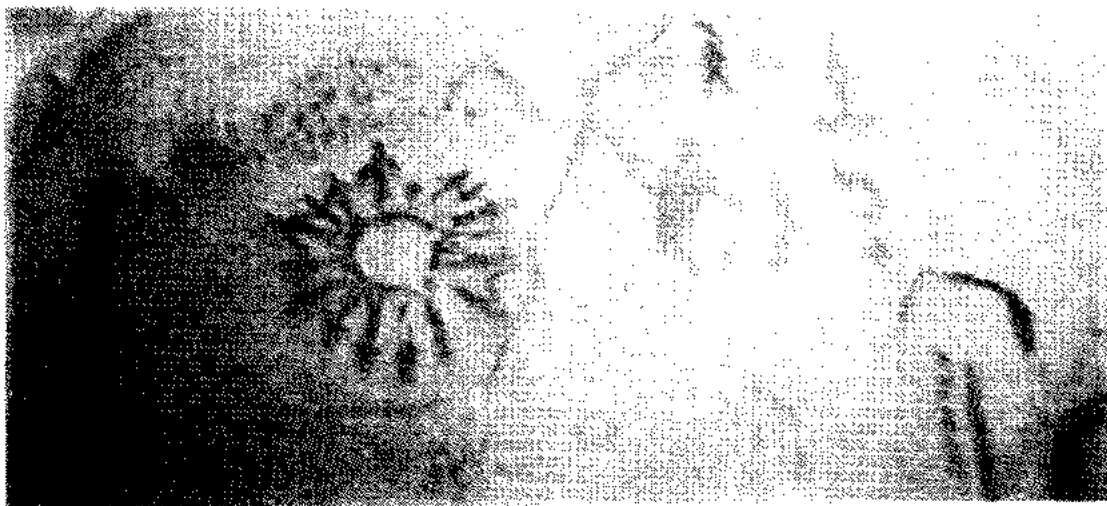


Fig. 5 Dancing Circle in the Main Escalante Canyon, Utah

(Figure 9); Irish Green Spring, Clay Hills (Figure 10); Quitchupah Creek, Emery County (Figure 11); and at Fremont Indian State Park (Figure 12). Among other line dancing sites are petroglyphs at Valley of Fire (Figure 13) and Crystal Wash (Figure 14) in Nevada, and South Mountain in Phoenix (Figure 15) and Picture Rocks near Tucson (Figure 16) in Arizona. So another dancing motif is clear:

4) Lines of figures, usually holding hands, are a common representation of ceremonial dancers.

The Dancing Procession is yet another, though less frequent, style. One of the best examples (Figure 17) is found in the great Ceremonial Cave in Canyon del Muerto, which branches northeast from the main channel of Canyon de Chelly in Arizona. Here the dancing figures in procession seem to be following a drummer, and so:

5) The procession of dancers, at times following drum, flute, or other instrumentalists, is another dancing motif in rock art.

Processionals to a plaza or place of ceremony often involved singing, flute players, rattles, whizzers, and the twirling of bullroarers (Payne 1993:41-42). The flute player by the dancing circle in Main Canyon, Escalante (Figure 18) and the flute player by what appears to be a dancer at Montezuma Creek (Figure 19) are further indications of another way dancing ritual can be assumed in stationary rock art:

6) The presence of flute players, drummers, or other instrumentalists by apparent dancing figures is a further confirmation of dancing ritual in rock art.

Rock art and dancing ritual were important practices of the shaman, who as a priest, healer, visionary, and interpreter of the meaning of life, was called upon to defend and protect the wellbeing of the tribal members. Complex rituals and ceremonial dances emerged to mark the seasons, rain, and the weather, and the rotations of the sun and moon, enabling the people to relate harmoniously to the forces of nature. Likewise, rituals and ceremonial dances were developed to mark the passages of life – birth, puberty, marriage, and death – and to enable the people to deal with illness or danger through healing rituals and priestly ceremonies of protection and fruitfulness.

Flute and Snake ceremonies are involved, I believe, in the panel near Sleeping Duck Ruin in Canyon de Chelly (see Figures 3 and 4). The germinating seed at the left of the panel would relate to the role of both Flute and Snake ceremonies, dedicated to supplication for rain to assure germination of seeds and a bountiful crop. Framed between ceremonial crooks on either side, from left to right, are a snake, two flute players, and a dancing shaman, holding a snake in one hand and what appears to be a crook in the other. Then beyond the crook on the right are two anthropomorphs, one upside down – a symbol of illness or death. While Carobeth Laird records numerous insights into the role of the crook in fertility and healing, regenerating actions (Laird 1976:179, 216), it is Richard W. Payne who describes the role of Flute and Snake ceremonies dedicated to the rains necessary to germinate seeds and raise crops, and to curative ritual and duration of life (Payne 1993: 4 and 24-25 especially).

At South Mountain in Arizona is a row of dancers, four with right hands upraised. A second group of dancers are holding hands, with the leftmost holding a crook. Above, below, and to the right of the dancers are zoomorphs more faintly depicted (see Figure 15). We are indebted to Alex Patterson, who in *A Field Guide to Rock Art Symbols of the Greater Southwest* (Patterson 1992:79), quotes from Cushing (1888:2-3) as regarding the panel to be “a representation of a sort of Pasture(?) dance...a shepherd’s crook...identical...to the elaborate staffs of the ‘Herders’ of the Sacred Drama Dance in Zuni.” I would suggest an alternative interpretation, that the various animals and other zoomorphs are spirit helpers, and the Shaman Dancers are invoking the wisdom and

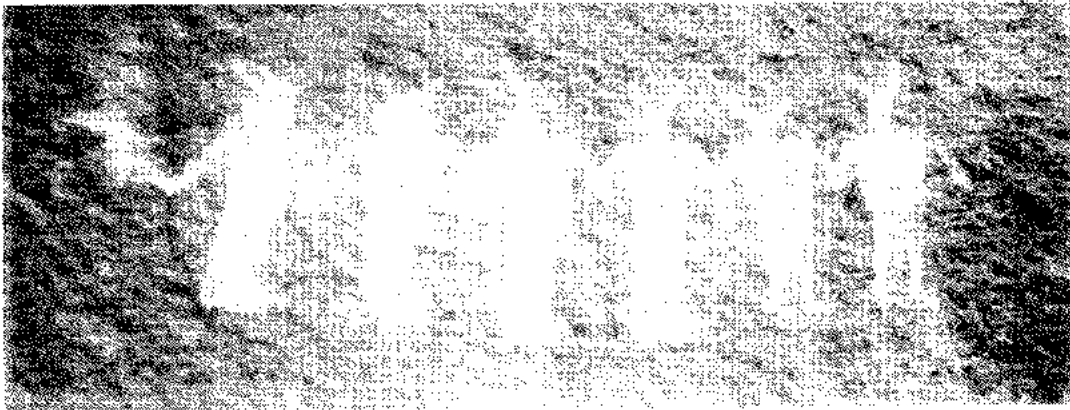


Fig. 6 Dancing Figures along Potash Road near Moab, Utah

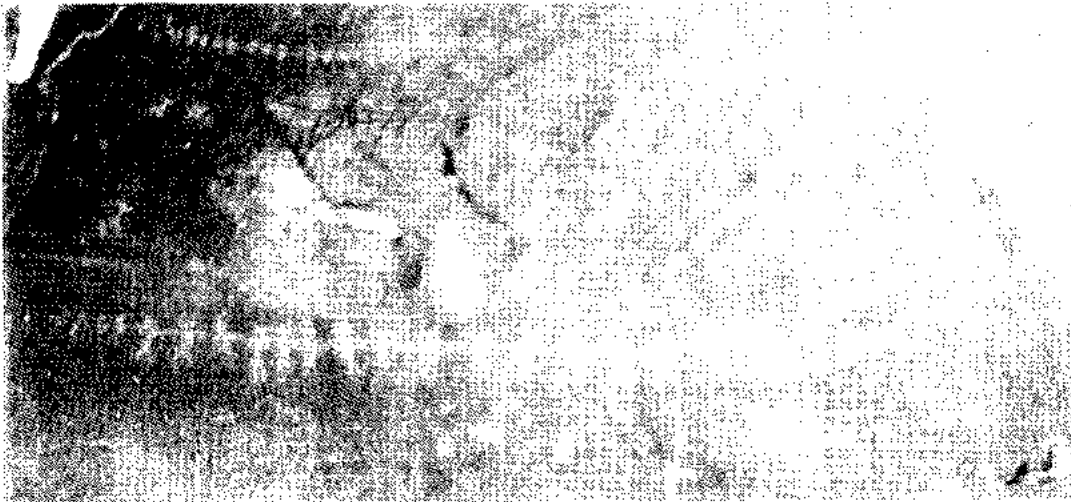


Fig. 7 More Dancing Figures along Potash Road across the River

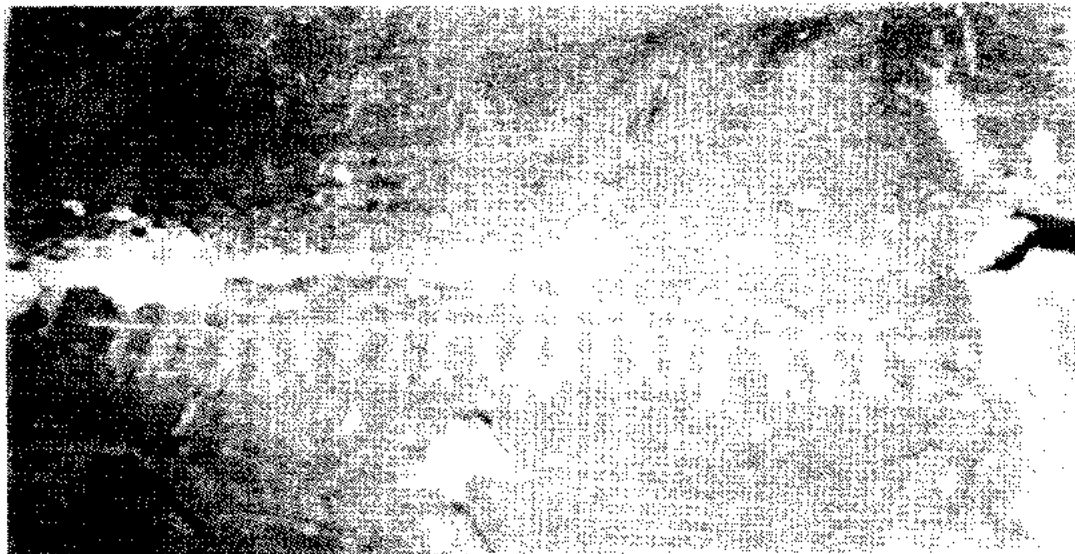


Fig. 8 "Behind the Rocks" Line of Dancers, also Near Moab



Fig. 9 Lines of Dancers at Montezuma Creek in Southeast Utah

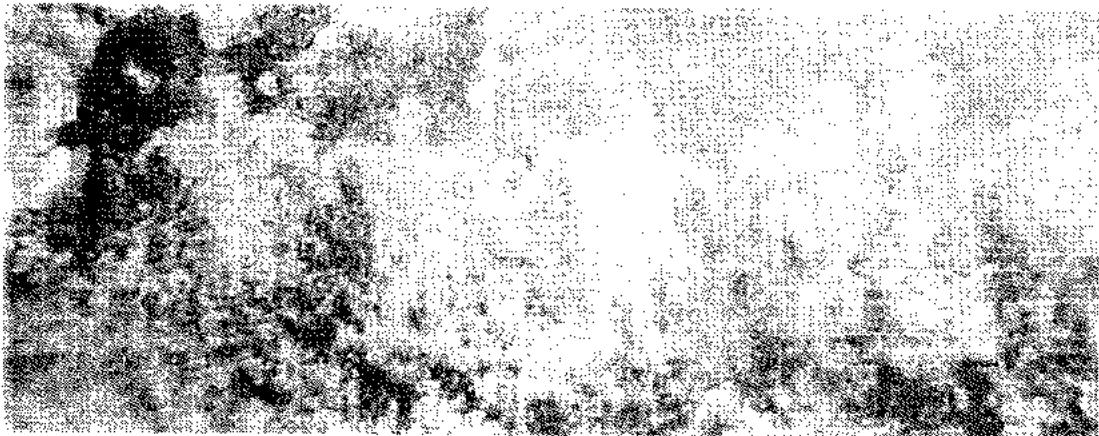


Fig. 10 Dancing Figures at Irish Green Springs, Clay Hills, Utah

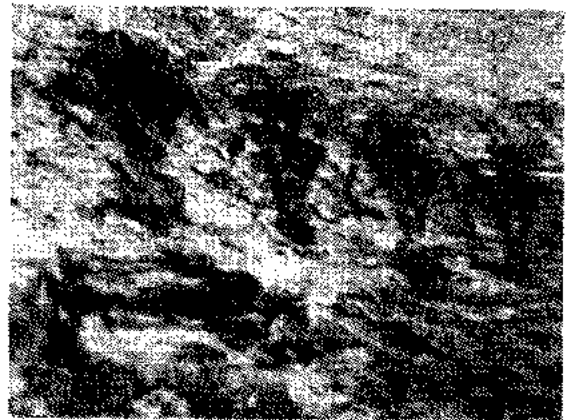


Fig. 11 Quichupah Creek, Emery Co. Fig. 12 Fremont State Park

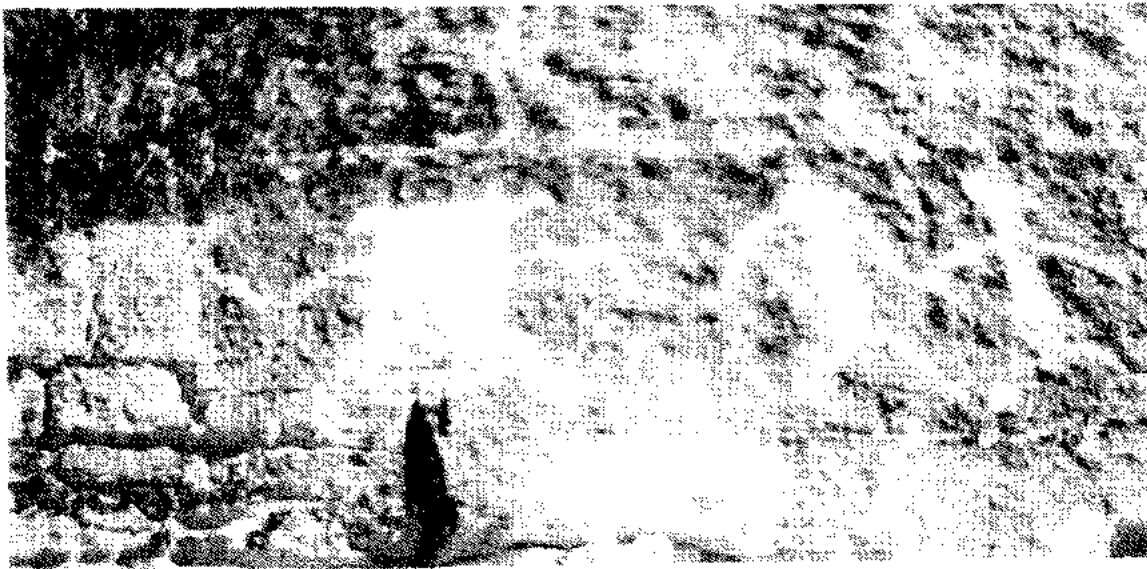


Fig. 13. Decaying Figures in the valley of Piro, Nevada



Fig. 14. Apparent Decaying Figures at Crystal Wash, Nevada



Fig. 13. South Mountain, Phoenix

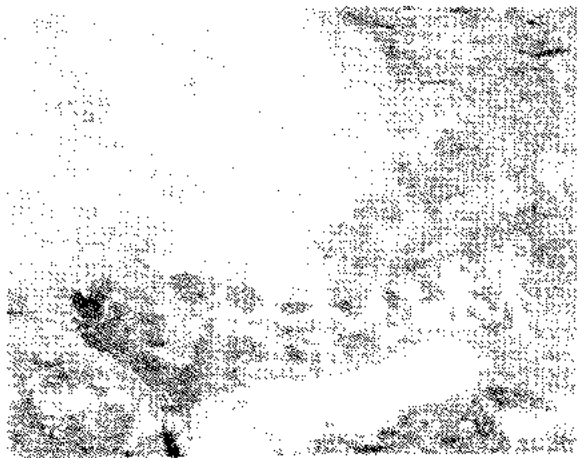


Fig. 15. Picture Rocks, Tucson

assistance of the spirit helpers, which are sources of shamanic power. James R. Cunkle and Markus A. Jacquemain observed regarding a Shaman's Dancing Ritual:

“Dancing in a ritualized manner for hours or days, the shaman could actively hold in mind the image of the animal spirit with which he wished to communicate. He emptied his mind of all but the target spirit until his body became an extension of the animal spirit identity.... From the trance state the shaman could effectively let the spirits fill him, become him, and pass their wisdom on to him” (Cunkle and Jacquemain 1995:20).

Coming back to the crook, my URARA paper on “The Shaman's Poro (Sacred Crook) in Native American Rock Art” (Gough 1996:1-2) provides numerous ethnographic references to the crook as a major instrument of shamanic power. Some have questioned the crook interpretation at the South Mountain site, because of a faint arm and leg they see extending from the crook, as lightly pecked as the animal spirits. For me the possibility of a “Dancing Crook” makes even stronger the possibility of the panel representing a Shaman's Dancing Ritual with Spirit Helpers.

Moving south to the Picture Rocks site northwest of Tucson, on a granite outcrop on a retreat center located in the mountain foothills, there is a group of dancing figures holding hands and wearing tall, impressive headdresses. On the same rock surface and above the dancers is a large spiral petroglyph (see Figure 16). When I went back to Picture Rocks to photograph this panel at new angles, a storm was blowing in, and swirling winds hit me as I was up on the cliff in a precarious position. Soon large drops of rain began to come down. Words quoted by Alex Patterson (1992:185, 211) seemed especially appropriate:

“The historic Puebloan peoples described spirals as representing wind, water, creatures associated with water such as serpents and snails, and the journey of the people in search of the Center” (Young 1988:136).

“The single spiral is the symbol of the Ho-bo-bo, the twister who manifests his power by the whirlwind” (Mallery 1893:604-5).

“Since a whirlwind may precede rain, always sought and prayed for in Hopi ceremonies, the design has a happy and cherished significance” (Viele 1980:6).

The relation of the dancers to the spiral would seem to lead to a conclusion that the dancing ritual involved had to do with the invocation of rain.

Dancing ritual related to puberty and fertility is apparent in the Apache pictographs in Comanche Cave at Hueco Tanks near El Paso (Figure 20). Among the dancers a male figure with a large phallus confronts a woman, and other phallic anthropomorphs provide further evidence of the fertility theme (Sutherland 1976:64). Likewise, the encircled cross with head and legs at Hueco Tanks (Figure 21) is a symbol of fructification in Hopi girl's puberty rites (Gough 1994:46). Taken together, the dancing figures “Most probably...were realistic depictions of actual fertility dances....” (Patterson 1992:79).

Along the Colorado River north of Bullhead City on the Arizona side is a dancing circle on top of a promontory, with many petroglyphs at a site called Inscription Point. When I first saw the dancing circle (Figure 22), the vulvaform outline led me to believe the site was related to a girl's puberty ceremony. Just below the top of the promontory beside the river is a bisected oval petroglyph, a typical vulva symbol. The largest panel, further down, includes a circle with many wavy lines (Figure 23). A local museum interpreted the lines to represent blood, and theorized that the site marked the locale of a bloody battle. While there were certainly conflicts farther south along the river, I am more inclined at this location to assume a symbolism of menstrual flow. When I wrote to Boma Johnson, who was at the time the Cultural Resources Specialist for the Bureau of Land

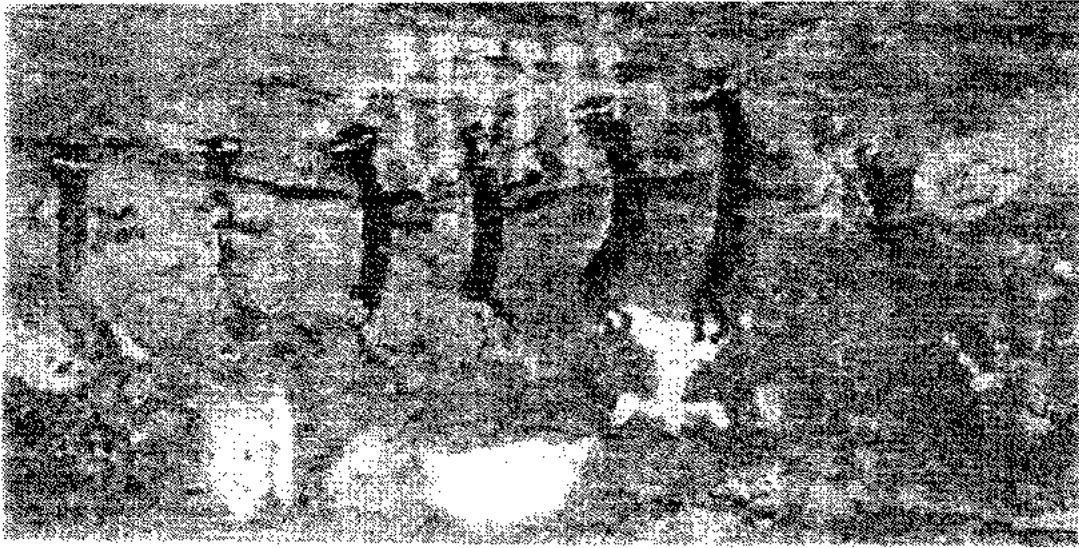


Fig. 17 Procession of Dancers in the Great Ceremonial Cave



Fig. 18 Zacilxoch Plate Flute

Fig. 19 Montezuma Creek Flute



Fig. 20 Museo Ipanka, Yucatec

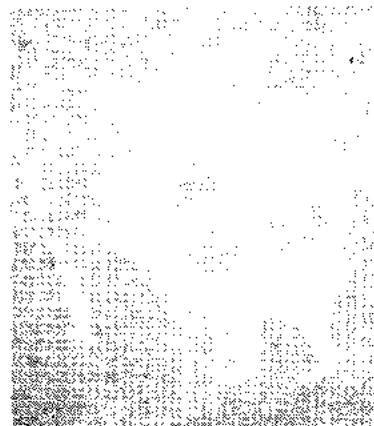


Fig. 21 "Coahuila Cave," Texaco

Management in Yuma, expressing my conviction that the dancing circle was the site for a girl's puberty ceremony, he noted two sand pits within the dance circle and wrote: "You're most likely right about girl's puberty ceremony at this site. A common feature at the girl's coming of age ceremony was a sand pit, where some of the ceremony took place. Two are inside the pathway."

Across the river in California, south of the Von Schmidt monument marking an early calculation of the California-Nevada boundary, is the famous Bourke's Intaglio. In the 1880s Merryman, a Mojave informant, took Captain John Bourke down the river to the site, located on an alluvial fan. Above the river at the eastern tip of the fan, Merryman pointed out a large cairn with rocks large enough to have petroglyphs on them (though Bourke did not mention the petroglyphs in his report). About a hundred yards to the west there is a trail marker or trail shrine on the Xam Kwatcan Trail, at the juncture with a short trail to the northwest that leads to the intaglio. Also called today the Merryman Circular Pathway, this dancing circle (Figure 24), which was about fifty paces in width, top to bottom, was a creation site associated with the boy's puberty ceremony. Spirit Mountain, called Avikwaame by the Mojave and other peoples along the lower Colorado River, and regarded to be where creation took place, is clearly visible to the north from the dancing circle. In his report published in the July-September, 1889, issue of *The Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Bourke describes the site as follows:

This was evidently the site chosen by the Mojaves for the celebration of their Creation Dance, or dramatic representation of their myth of creation. Here was an irregular, elliptical curve, marked with small heaps of rock (see diagram), at distances of from five to twelve paces, each designating the point where, according to Merryman, some animal (or rather a medicine-man dressed up to represent one), had broken down in the course which was run with the sun, from left to right. Where the big medicine-man representing the Judge was to stand was marked thus: D and near this on the ground was traced a heiroglyph, the meaning of which Merryman was unable to give, but which bore some slight resemblance to the figures of a man, a woman and a child, or of three grown persons tied together [Bourke 1889:173-174].

Unfortunately, highway construction destroyed the easternmost portion of the dancing circle, along with the "Judge's place" and the "heiroglyph" Bourke mentioned. To the enlargement of Bourke's drawing of the dancing circle (Figure 25), I have added a broken vertical line showing where Highway 95 construction obliterated everything to the east. But despite the highway construction and also some disturbance by off-road vehicle tracks, the site remains a significant example of a ceremonial dance intaglio, made all the more important because of the ethnographic information Bourke's Mojave informant Merryman provided.

Moving south to the Blythe Intaglios, the most northeasterly anthropomorph has a large dancing circle crossing the knees and encircling the entire upper torso (Figure 26). While the intaglio cluster features Ocean Woman, mountain lion, and spiral, aspects of creation mythology, the more important ceremonial site is at Black Point, a half-mile or so farther south. So the dance circle at the Blythe Intaglios is more likely related to spiritual preparation for the ongoing journey north to Spirit Mountain.

But the dancing circle at Black Point (Figure 27) is the major site near the midway point for peoples from the south on a spiritual journey to Spirit Mountain to the north. The Xam Kwatcan Trail, which leads to Spirit Mountain or Avikwaame where the creator Kumastamho brought the

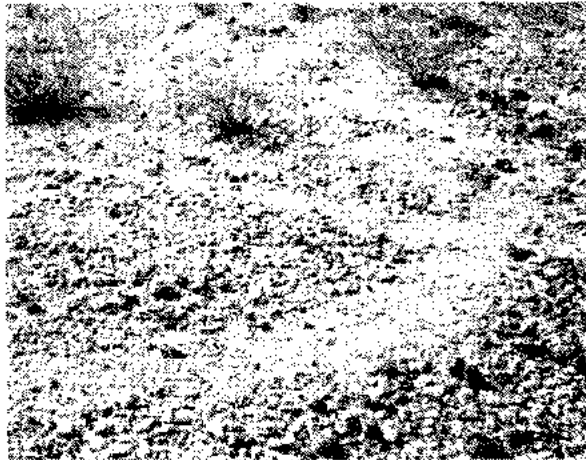


Fig. 22 Inscription Point, AZ



Fig. 23 By Davis Camp, AZ



Fig. 24 Boucher's Intaglio, CA

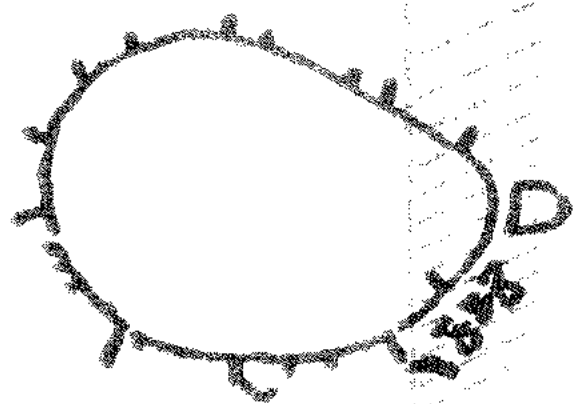


Fig. 25 Boucher's Drawlog



Fig. 26 Boucher's Intaglio

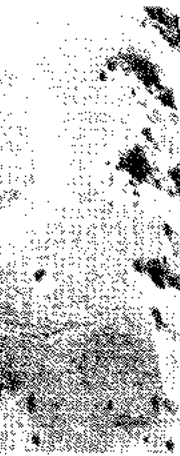


Fig. 27



Black Point Intaglio

world and the first humans into being, passes through the dancing circle. Included in the intaglio are figures of Kumastamho (Figure 28) and the evil twin brother, who represent the duality of goodness and evil. There is a rectangular staging area (Figure 29), where the shaman apparently prepared to lead those on the journey in a ceremony illustrating their worldview and creation stories.

South of present-day Blythe, an east-west trail crosses the Colorado River at the Palo Verde Crossing, and continues west to the northern flank of the Mule Mountains toward the Pacific Coast. The Mule Mountain Intaglios, along what is called the southerly branch of the Coco-Maricopa Trail, feature two sets of parallel rows of ten cleared circles, and eight U-Brackets composed of ten cleared circles each (Figure 30). In my paper on “The Wicket-Shaped or Reversed-U Bracket in Native American Rock Art in Relation to the Naja of the Squash Blossom Necklace” (Gough 1998:12), I suggest the male and female symbolism of these designs. But a large dancing circle is also present (Figure 31), such as is often used for ritual preparation for the next stage in a desert journey going from spring to spring toward a distant goal.

However, returning to the Xam Kwatcan Trail and moving to the southern ending at Pilot Knob, there is situated a significant Intaglio Dancing Circle site (Figure 32). It is located at the south side of Pilot Knob, or Avikwalal, west of the Colorado River. Avikwalal was thought to be a smaller representation of Spirit Mountain. The site provided a ritual beginning for the pilgrimage from Avikwalal north almost two hundred miles to Spirit Mountain, or Avikwaame, where the Native American peoples along the lower stretches of the Colorado River thought creation took place. The site consists of the dancing circle, three cairns of river cobbles, two human figures, a lizard figure, a five-pointed star, and a cleared shaman’s staging area in the circle (Figure 33).

The two human figures, one of sixteen sets of twin figures located along the Xam Kwatcan Trail, represent Kumastamho, the Creator, located north of the dancing circle, and his evil brother, south of the circle, and symbolize the forces of good and evil (Figure 34). The lizard figure to the east is symbolic of birth or emergence (Figure 35), and the five-pointed star is thought to be associated with this current epoch of life (Figure 36). The ceremony at the site was a preparation for the pilgrimage north almost two hundred miles to Spirit Mountain, the place of creation and human origin. Before beginning the journey, the shaman would sing or provide a drum cadence as the people danced around the circle, and an offering would be made at the cobble cairn or shrine (Johnson 1992:4).

The beginning journey, about a quarter of a mile farther north, passes a complex petroglyph panel that seems to interpret the meaning of Pilot Knob, or Avikwalal, for the native peoples of the area. The prone figure to the right, suggesting death, indicates that the mountain was viewed as a temporary spiritual home for the deceased. Several mythic stories of journey into the afterlife are symbolically told through the panel’s glyphs (Figure 37). But the pilgrimage of the living peoples north on the Xam Kwatcan Trail was a spiritual journey, and to return to the place of origins at Spirit Mountain, or Avikwaame, was not only a way of honoring Kumastamho, the Creator, but also a means of renewing their essential harmony with creation. So over the centuries the people journeyed to their Mountain of Creation.



Fig. 28 Black Point Figure



Fig. 29 Black Point Staging Area

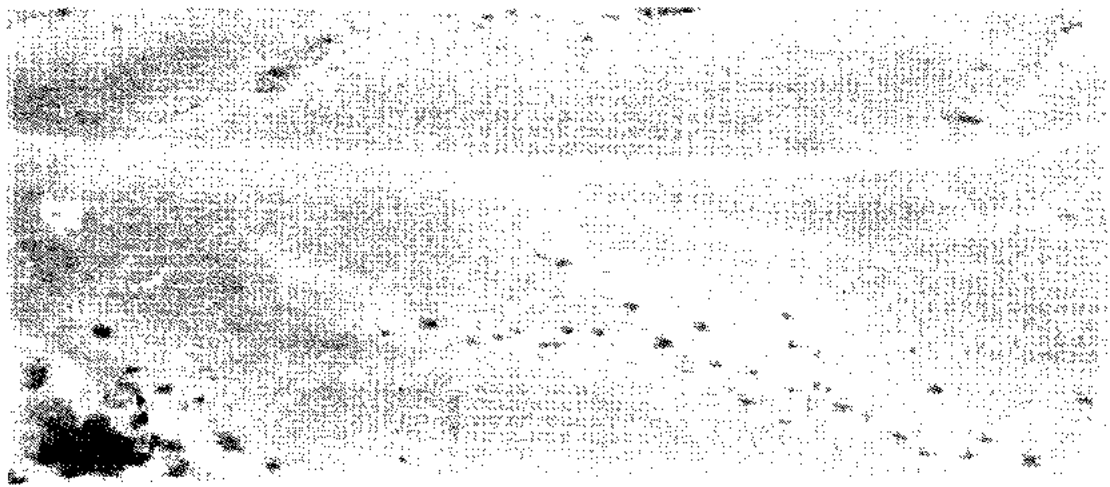


Fig. 30 Aerial Photo of the Mule Mountain Intaglios

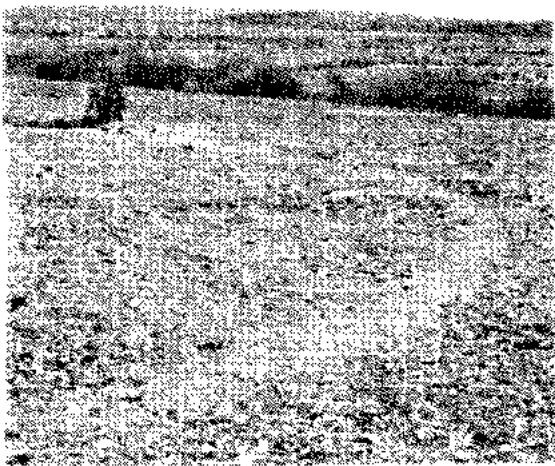


Fig. 31 Mule Mountain Circle

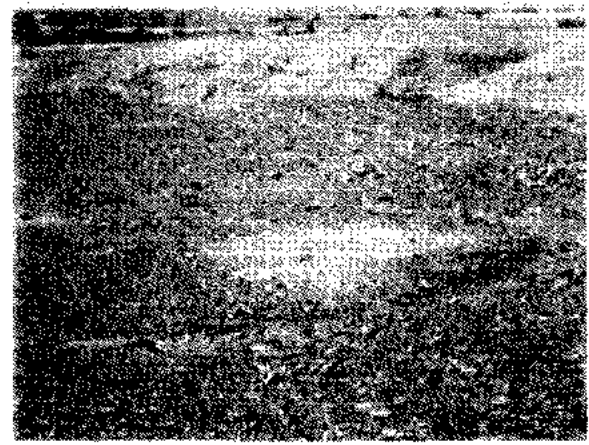


Fig. 32 Pilot Knob Dance Circle

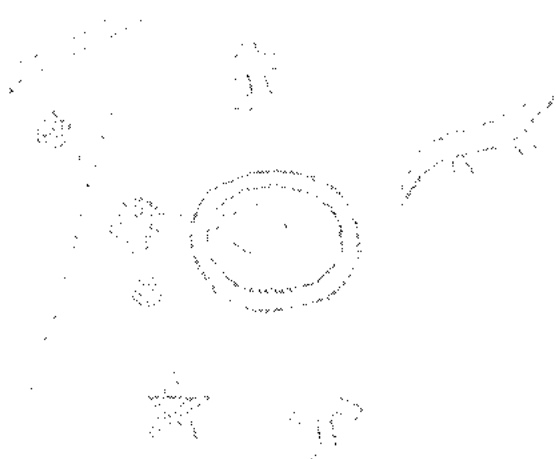


Fig. 33 Pilot Knob Drawing

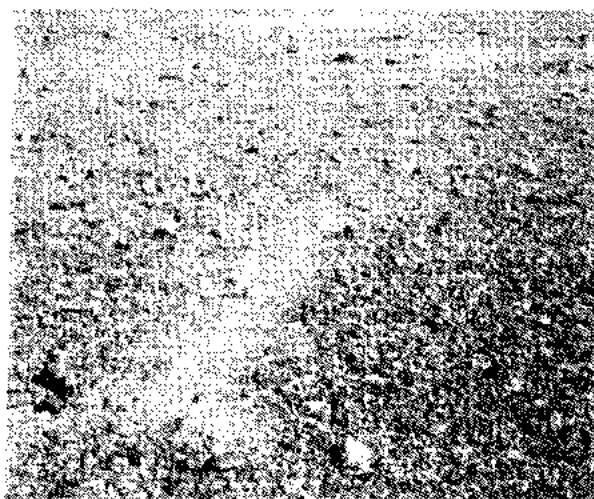


Fig. 34 Pilot Knob Figure

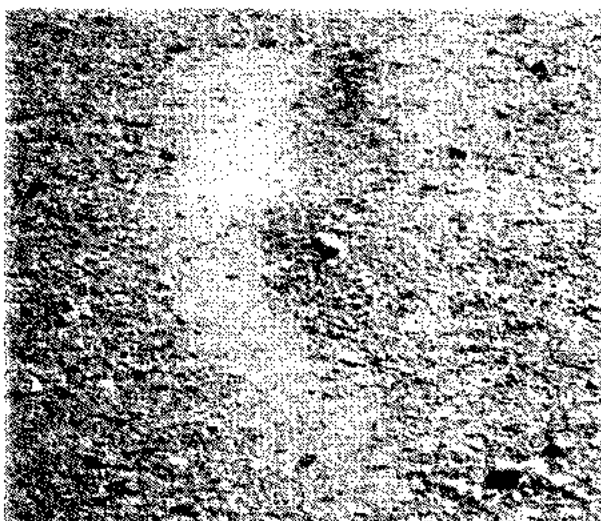


Fig. 35 Pilot Knob Lizard



Fig. 36 Pilot Knob Star



Fig. 37 Petroglyphs at Pilot Knob along the Xam Kwatcan Trail

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