

Enigmatic Crescents in the Rock Art of Desert Mountain, Utah

Alex Patterson

Why should human-like figures be carrying or displaying crescents in the rock art of Desert Mountain, a small site north of Delta, Utah? We visited this site during the URARA symposium of September, 1998, and were intrigued.

Objects carried in the hands of rock art figures often turn up in the archeological record. Here on the edge of the Great Basin was a mystery that may have a logical answer. We will propose one herein.

The main Desert Mountain site is east-facing, with about 50 glyphs scattered over an outcropping of rocks halfway up the slope of the mountain.

Several anthropomorphs have one or two crescents in hand. A bisected ellipse (a vulva sign?) displays a small head with crescents attached left and right (see figures below).

Also found was a being with three-fingered hands and a small crescent head. A coyote and a mountain sheep were among other glyphs (see next page).

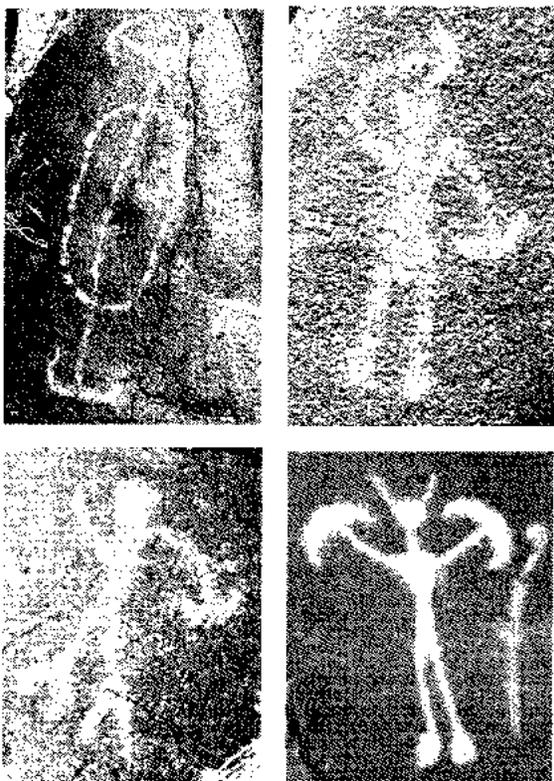
In previous research into Great Basin archeology we had come across the phrase “enigmatic crescents” used to describe crescentic stone artifacts.

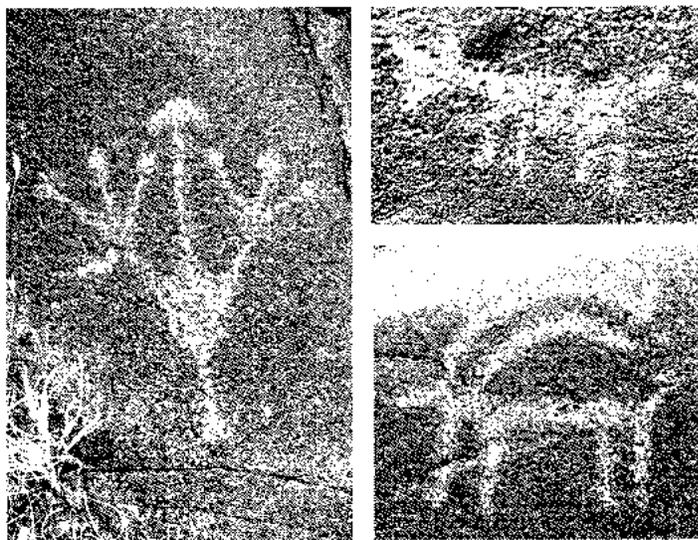
For example, the Fowlers in *A History of Wetlands Anthropology in the Great Basin* stated in 1990:

“Systematic study of Great Basin Pluvial-age sites began in 1920 with Malcom Rogers’ work on the lower Colorado River terraces (of southern California). ...Rogers found ancient appearing lithic assemblages. Among the tool types were...enigmatic crescents.” (Fowler and Fowler 1990:7).

While the above-mentioned sites were in southern California and the Desert Mountain site is in western Utah, they are both in the Great Basin (see map on next page). Researchers seem to agree that a similar lifestyle prevailed throughout the Great Basin in ancient times.

Left: Petroglyphs at Desert Mountain, Utah. Crescents are attached at left and right of head of vulva figure, other anthropomorphs have handheld crescents. Photos by the author.





Left: Figures at Desert Mountain. Three-fingered hands on a being with a crescent head; coyote; mountain sheep. Photos by the author.

These “enigmatic crescents” were small flaked tools, about an inch in length, often composed of obsidian.

Rogers described them as “crescentic stones which have been skillfully pressure-flaked on both faces. In several specimens there are two short, purposefully fashioned projections on the outer arc, spaced so as to break the arc in thirds.” He originally de-

scribed these crescents as “scarifiers.” Later he decided they were representations of animals and were used as hunting amulets. (See opposite page for crescents from Rogers 1939:36.)

Our research turned up an obsidian tool of crescent shape found on Fremont Island in the Great Salt Lake, in Jennings’ 1978 *Prehistory of Utah and the Eastern Great Basin*. Rudy and Stoddard found this obsidian crescent on the island. As there are no known sites of obsidian on Fremont Island this tool was therefore imported. (See illustration opposite.)

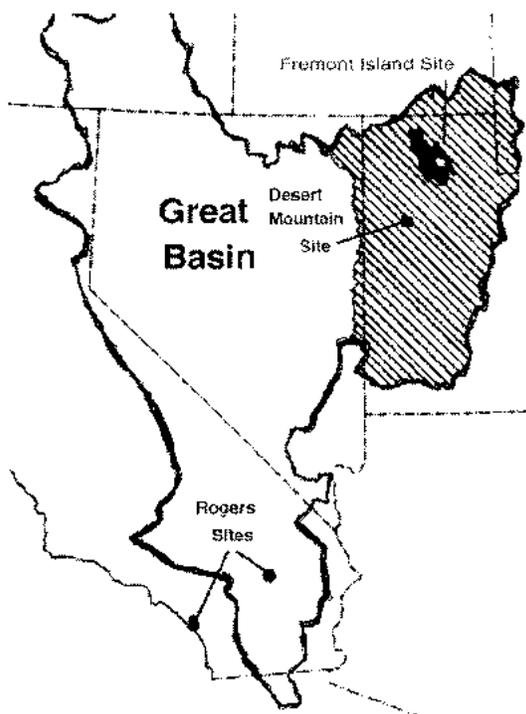
Since there are obsidian quarries south of Delta (Jesse Warner, personal communication), did this object travel north via Desert Mountain to Fremont Island in the Great Salt Lake?

What could this crescent object be used for? Baskets were important to the Great Basin

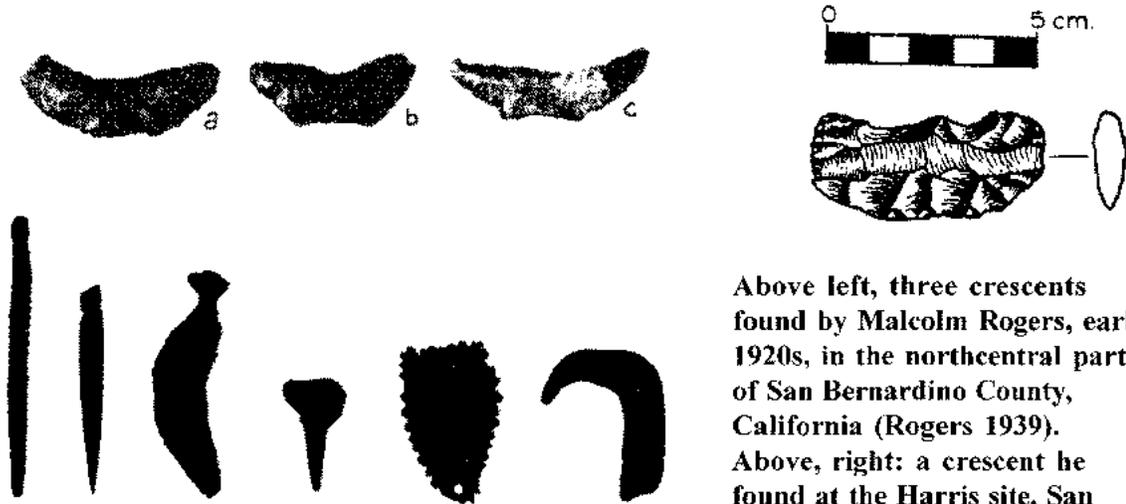
people, especially the Paiutes. The women were great basket weavers. They, not the men, carried the family’s possessions in their baskets, moving from one food resource to another with the change of seasons. The Paiute woman (opposite) in the 1870s, girded with baskets from head to toe, typifies their lifeway (Jennings 1978:236).

We decided to research basket weaving in the Great Basin to see if the crescent might have played some role. (Also see Appendix 1.)

Our research located the book pictured on p. 44, *Survival Arts of the Primitive Paiutes*.



Left, Map of Great Basin. Fremont Island, Desert Mountain, and Rogers’ sites shown. (After Currey 1982:28.) (Shaded area is the Bonneville Basin subdivision of the Great Basin.)



Above left, three crescents found by Malcolm Rogers, early 1920s, in the northcentral part of San Bernardino County, California (Rogers 1939). Above, right: a crescent he found at the Harris site, San Diego County, California (Warren 1966).

Above, flaked tools found on Fremont Island in the Great Salt Lake, Utah. The middle two items are obsidian, not found on the island. Note the crescent shape of tool with knob, for suspension? (After Rudy and Stoddard 1954).

written by anthropologist Margaret Wheat of Fallon, Nevada. Wheat found a Paiute woman, Wuzzie George, shown on the cover of Wheat's book (overleaf). Wuzzie knew the ways of the "Old People", the ancestors of the Paiute, and decided to tell Wheat about these ways before they were forgotten and lost forever.

Wuzzie stressed that the willow basket was the Paiute woman's mainstay. Every woman carried bundles of long, slender willows that had been scraped white, and coils of willow sapwood. The former were the uprights (warp) and the latter were the cross-members (weft) of their baskets.

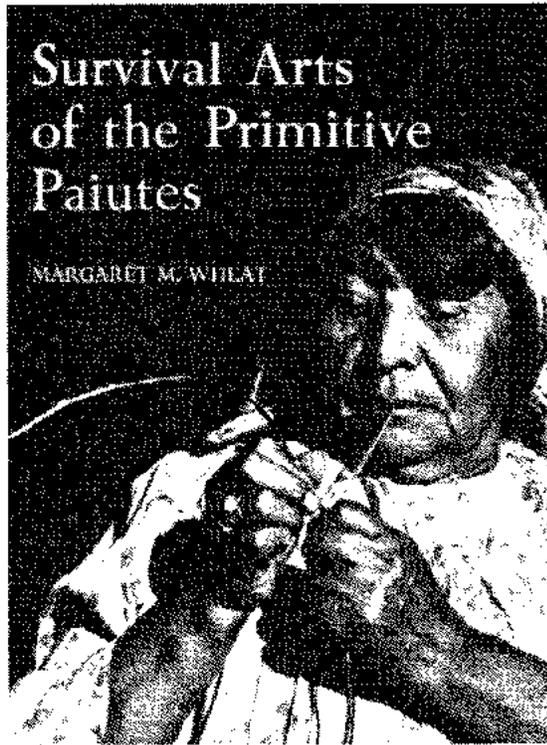
This sapwood had to be split in several strips as Wuzzie is doing (overleaf), so as to remove the useless pith within. Then the sapwood was coiled and dried.

The final step of preparing the weft (sapwood) was the removal of the bark and trimming. In the illustration on the next page Nina Dunn runs her index finger (wrapped in a bit of cloth) down the sapwood, to split away the bark. Then it had to be trimmed and loose fibers cut from its edges. It was in this final step before weaving that the crescents came into use.

"In the Old Days this (final trimming and removal of loose fibers) was done with little crescent-shaped bits of obsidian frequently seen in old campsites," according to Wuzzie George. She continues: "After the coming of the white man, the willows were...drawn through a hole in a tin can (for final trimming and removal of loose fibers)" (Wheat 1967:95).



There are probably several layers of significance to the crescents we see in the Desert Mountain rock art. Crescents as scrapers in weaving, a prime female activity, may be one. The crescent often symbolizes the moon and women in general, due to the similarity of the lunar month and the menstrual cycle. However, one cannot doubt the importance of women's work in the ancient lifeways of the Great Basin.



Above, Nina Dunn, using her finger wrapped in a piece of cloth, splits away the willow bark from the sapwood. Then the Old People of the Paiute used crescent-shaped bits of obsidian to make the weft ready for weaving into baskets. Left, Wuzzie George, Paiute main informant for Margaret Wheat in the Old Ways of her people, splits the willow sapwood into several pieces before coiling and drying.

Appendix 1: Sunshine Well sites, White Pine County, Nevada, 65 miles north of Ely, Nevada

Subsequent research located an archeological area containing 120 crescents out of 1,500 artifacts recovered between 1972 and 1974 from sites near Sunshine Well, Long Valley, Nevada. Sunshine Well is about 150 miles to the west of the rock art site at Desert Mountain, Utah. These sites place artifacts called "crescents" nearer to the Desert Mountain rock art site with its figures holding what we claim are "crescents." The archeologist Hutchinson proposes that the "crescents" at Sunshine Well were part of a "woman's tool kit" used in making baskets.

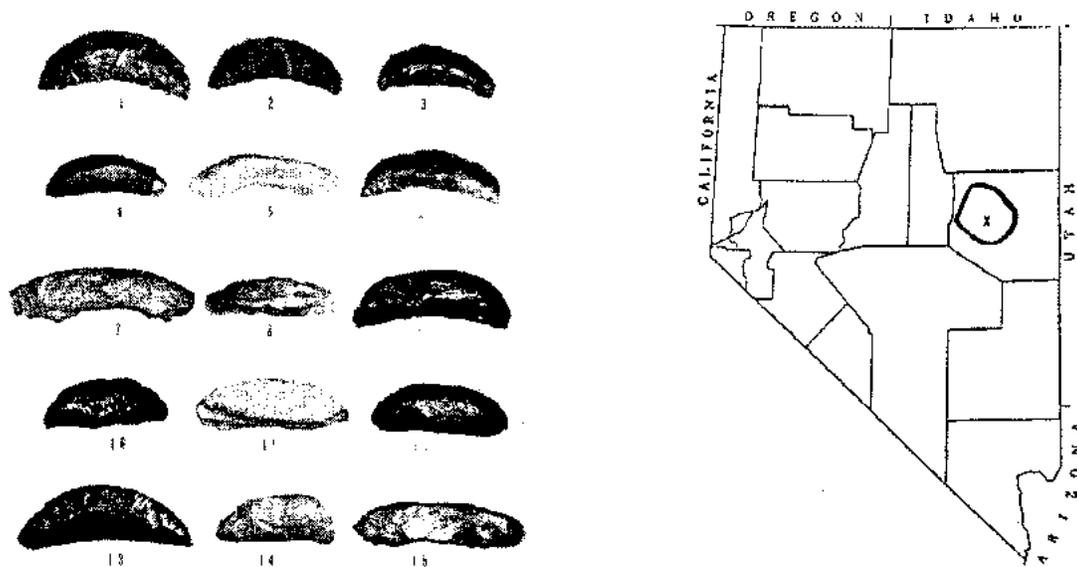
He describes the area:

(The) area is located on the lowest strandline of Pleistocene Lake Hubbs, which was estimated to be 15 miles long and five miles wide to a depth of 30 feet between 5,000-9,000 years ago during its human occupation.

It seems likely that (it) was often swamp-like, with miles of shallow ponds...The entire

valley was probably covered with grass. This would have provided a resource-rich environment which would have attracted early people to make repeated visits to the swamp and lake-like margins to procure mammals, fowl, fish, plant foods and fibers.

The location and concentration of crescents indicate that they were most likely water-connected tools...I believe that spurs, small graters and crescents comprised a woman's tool kit for gathering grass, roots, and willows for twining and basketry... The spurs ...would be ideal tools for stripping bark from willows and other similar woody plants. Some of these tools may have been made by the women to accomplish these tasks [Hutchinson 1988:316].



Above, left, types of 120 crescents recovered at Sunshine Well locality in surface finds, made of (in descending order of abundance) chert, jasper, chalcedony, obsidian, or crystal. Also found were projectile points, graters, and miscellaneous artifacts (Hutchinson 1988: Figure 4).

Above, right, map of location of Sunshine Well in Long Valley, White Pine County, Nevada. It appears to be about 150 miles from the Desert Mountain rock art site in Utah (Hutchinson 1988: Figure 1).

Acknowledgments: Page 47, Paiute woman, H. K. Hillers, U. S. Geological Survey; Rogers photos courtesy of the San Diego Museum of Man. Page 48, permission granted by the University of Nevada Press, from *Survival Arts of the Primitive Paiutes* by Margaret M. Wheat, © 1967 by the University of Nevada Press. Page 49, Hutchinson photo and map courtesy of the Nevada State Museum.

References Cited

- Currey, Donald R. and Steven R. James
 1982 Paleoenvironments of the Northeastern Great Basin and Northeastern Basin Rim, A Review of Geological and Biological Evidence: Figure 1, p. 38. In *Man and Environment in the Great Basin*, edited by David B. Madsen and James F. O'Connell. SAA Papers No.2. Society of American Archaeology, Washington, D.C.
- Fowler, Catherine and D. D. Fowler
 1990 A History of Wetlands Anthropology in the Great Basin. In *Wetlands Adaptations in the Great Basin*, edited by Joel C. Janetski and David B. Madsen. Occasional Papers No. 1, Museum of Peoples and Cultures. Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.
- Hutchinson, Phillip W.
 1988 The prehistoric dwellers at Lake Hubbs. In *Early Human Occupation in Far Western North America: The Clovis-Archaic Interface*, edited by J. A. Willig, C. M. Aikens, and J.L. Fagan, pp. 303-318. Anthropological Papers No.21. Nevada State Museum, Carson City.
- Jennings, Jesse D.
 1978 *The Prehistory of Utah and the Eastern Great Basin*. University of Utah Anthropological Papers No. 98. University of Utah Press. Salt Lake City.
- Rogers, Malcolm
 1939 *Early Lithic Industries in the Lower Basin of the Colorado River and Adjacent Desert Areas*. San Diego Museum Papers No. 3. Museum of Man, San Diego.
- Rudy, Jack R. and Earl Stoddard
 1954 Site on Fremont Island in the Great Salt Lake. *American Antiquity* 19(3):1-35.
- Warren, Claude N., ed.
 1966 *The San Dieguito Type Site: M. J. Rogers' 1938 Excavation on the San Dieguito River*. San Diego Museum Papers No. 5. Museum of Man, San Diego.
- Wheat, Margaret M.
 1967 *Survival Arts of the Primitive Paiutes*. University of Nevada Press, Reno.