

The Shaman's Medicine Bag, Bundle and Pouch in Native American Rock Art

Medicine Bags, Bundles and Pouches are found at rock art sites throughout the Southwest, from the Coso Range and Death Valley in California to Paint Rock and the Lower Pecos River in Texas. Sites with distinctive Medicine Bags and Bundles are also present in Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona and New Mexico. Ethnographic data on the contents and uses of Medicine Bags, Bundles and Pouches, such as in healing ceremonies and to insure safe passage for perilous journeys, help account for the prevalence of these designs at petroglyph and pictograph sites.

Perhaps the most famous petroglyph depictions of Medicine Bags are found in Little Petroglyph Canyon, located in the Coso Range in the North Central Mojave Desert of Southern California (Figure 1). Three panels featuring Medicine Bags have characteristics which Whitley describes as rectangular "medicine bags".

These bags are skin receptacles that were used to hold and carry the shaman's kit of ritual paraphernalia — the various ceremonial objects that he used in his ritual acts. Most commonly, medicine bags were made from badger or weasel skin. Many are shown with a horizontal stick across the top opening that served as a stretcher bar and handle, and some are shown fringed at the bottom" (Whitley 1998:19).

In Marble Canyon, located in Death Valley National Park, there are several sequences of rock art. However, the greatest reward comes to those who continue beyond the spectacular narrow walls, with their high ledge glyphs, into an open valley, and on to another narrow gateway where there are petroglyphs on both sides. To

the left there are two outlined and pecked Medicine Bags with the horizontal stick or tie cord across the top (Figure 2).

Just east of the Dead Mountains, at Granite Springs in the southern tip of Nevada, there are what appear to be two fringed and tied Medicine Bags (Figure 3). Then in the Valley of Fire, at the well-known Atlatl Rock site, there is a Medicine Bag right under the atlatl and dart (Figure 4). Also in Nevada, east of where the Virgin River enters into Lake Mead, what could be Medicine Bags are depicted at Kohta's Circus (Figure 5) and Babe's Butte (Figure 6). At the Whitney-Hartman site, in the same Gold Butte Wilderness area, there are panels with what could be hand-held Medicine Bags (Figures 7 and 8). However, the absence of human figures holding the bags for perspective might mean shoulder bags could be intended (Figure 9).

In Utah, a number of panels provide perspective by featuring figures holding what appear to be Medicine Bags. At John's Canyon, northwest of Bluff, a male figure holds an object similar to those at Babe's Butte and Kohta's Circus in Nevada (Figure 10). The warrior at Red Fleet Reservoir north of Vernal not only holds what appears to be a Medicine Bag, but also wears what could be a Medicine Pouch around his neck (Figure 11). Another figure at Ioka, west of Vernal, also holds what could be a Medicine Bag, and wears a pouch-like object around the neck (Figure 12). Near Moab, at Courthouse Wash, one of the large figures appears to be holding a bag (Figure 13). The famous Moab Man also has an elbow bag or pouch hanging from the left arm (Figure 14). At Sand Island,



Figure 1. Coso Range Medicine Bags.



Figure 4. Valley of Fire Bag.



Figure 2. Two Death Valley Bags.



Figure 5 Kohta's Circus Bags.



Figure 3. Granite Springs Bags.



Figure 6. Babe's Butte Bag.



Figure 7. Whitney-Hartman Bags.



Figure 10. John's Canyon Bag.



Figure 8. Whitney-Hartman Bag.

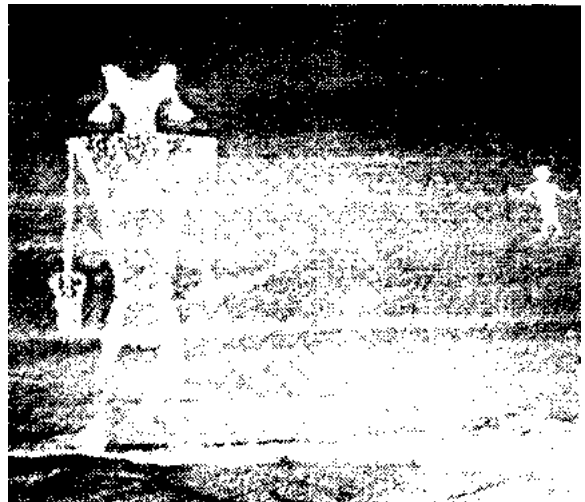


Figure 11. Red Fleet Warrior Bag.



Figure 9. Edward Curtis Photo 1906.



Figure 12. Ioka Medicine Bag.

near Bluff, there is a figure with the pouch-like object around the neck (Figure 15).

However, far more troubling at Sand Island are petroglyphs of what appear to be whole head scalps with handles (Figure 16). Kidder and Guernsey reported finding a skinned head scalp, with the openings sewed shut, which appeared to have been hanging around the neck of a mummified Basketmaker burial (Kidder and Guernsey 1919:Plate 87). It contained herbal or plant material (Joe Pachak, personal communication, September 16, 2002). Kirk Neilson (personal communication March 2, 2001) provided information about a burial where "one of the skeletons had one of those skinned heads on a thong around his neck...when the head was entirely skinned it was all sewn back together with a loop at the top". Both Pachak and Neilson noted Sally Cole's research on the Green Mask image in Grand Gulch, as relating to whole head scalp bags. Several petroglyph panels at McKee Springs also have similar hand-held bags (Figures 17 and 18). Malotki pointed out how his photograph of the Apache County, Arizona, anthropomorph (Figure 19) holds a "mysterious object" like those of the Utah trophy heads, and that such whole head scalps were sought "to obtain the power, strength, and spiritual essence of the slain victim" (Malotki and Weaver: 2002:68).

An exhibit of Medicine Bags in the Edge of Cedars Museum shows how animal skins, including even the tail, were used to create the bags, and some of the contents were displayed as well (Figure 20). Medicine Bags contained objects of power for the ritual acts of the shaman, for example, with the bag being "passed from person to person" with each person offering "a prayer before passing the bag on to the next person". The prayer may ask for a healthy and long life, for prosperity, for abundant crops, rain, healthy children and so on (Beck, Walters and Francisco: 1996:40). Sometimes in healing rituals several shaman would place their Medicine Bags around the person who was ill during the healing ritual.

In the mid-1980's Bryce and Margaret Patterson found a large leather-wrapped bundle underneath a ledge in the Book Cliffs north of Green River, Utah. Merry Lycet Harrison, an herbalist, analyzed the roots and other plant parts in the bundle Vestiges (2001). She indicated that "the roots were from some of the most potent medicinal plants the area had to offer". She had also pointed out that the bundle included "feathers, stones, bones, red ochre, a horn spoon, a bone and seed necklace, roots, and more". The age of the leather wrapping was radiocarbon dated to between 400-600 years old (Harrison 2001:2-4). The bundle was donated to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in Moab for display and safekeeping (Figure 21).

When I drove to Moab to photograph the exhibit, I went convinced that the contents with medicinal herbs, red ochre for pictograph paints (needed for a shaman's ritual art), and other power objects, meant this was a shaman's Medicine Bundle. One of the BLM staff members stated that it was not likely a shaman's bundle because it had "stones and women's things (beads)". But the way, the large number of contents had been so carefully wrapped individually in pieces of skin or fabric, and the way the red ochre was wrapped, convinced me all the more that this was a shaman's bundle, including the beads. Whitley, in commenting on the well-known blanket glyph at Red Spring in Red Rock Canyon, Nevada, describes the types of items in bundles and bags made with skins or blankets: "A series of items were common 'power objects' for shamans, such as rock crystals, feathers and bird claws, crooked staffs, and snake and animal parts such as claws, fangs, beaks and wings." He also listed "feathered headdresses, strings of beads, deer hoof rattles, bows and arrows, stone and wooden knives and daggers, 'scepters' and wands, and a miscellany of other items..." (Whitley: 1996,149).

The petroglyph panel at Gillespie Dam in Arizona (Figure 22) is suggestive of the possible use of blankets in the creation of Medicine



Figure 13. Moab Courthouse Wash.



Figure 16. Sand Island Scalp Bags.



Figure 14. Moab Man Elbow Pouch.



Figure 17. McKee Springs Bag.



Figure 15. Sand Island Neck Pouch.

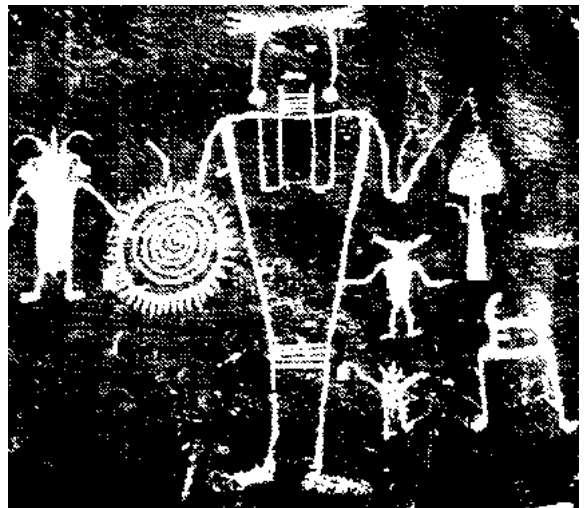


Figure 18. McKee Springs Bags.

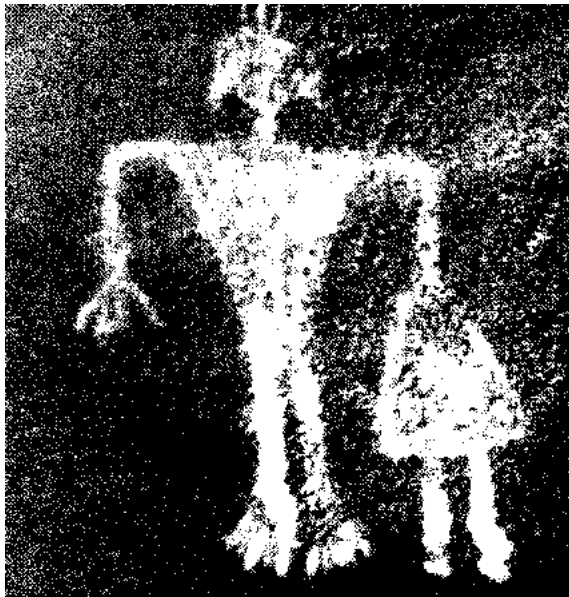


Figure 19. Apache County Arizona.



Figure 20. Edge of Cedars Skin Bags.



Figure 21. Ute and Patterson Bundle, with medicinal herbs and ochre.



Figure 22. Gillespie Dam blanket and possible bundle motifs.



Figure 25. Paint Rock Prickly Pear Cactus Bag.

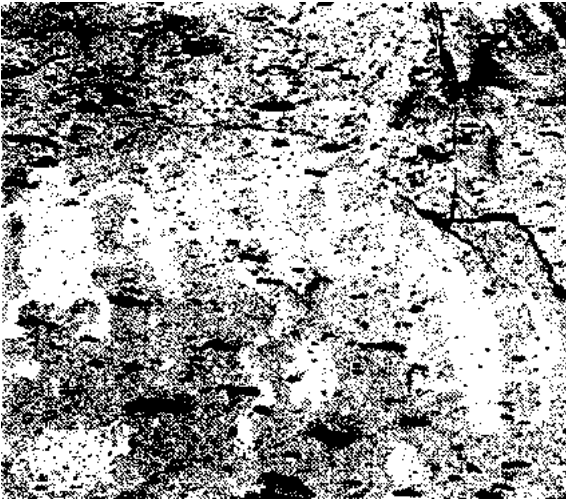


Figure 23. La Cieneguilla Medicine Bag.



Figure 26. Seminole Canyon, with left ascending figure. Bag is hanging from arm.



Figure 24. La Cienega Bag.



Figure 27. White Shaman Bundle.

Bundles. The magnificent La Cieneguilla petroglyph site along the Santa Fe River in New Mexico has an anthropomorph holding what appears to be a medicine bag (Figure 23), and near the La Cienega pueblo ruins is another panel with a similar, apparently dancing figure, holding a bag (Figure 24). In Paint Rock, Texas, along the Concho River on the Campbell Ranch, one of the figures in a pictograph panel is holding what appears to be a prickly pear pouch (Figure 25). Along the Lower Pecos River the prickly pear pouch is repeated many times, with numerous shaman figures drawn with pouches hanging from their arms. One of the themes repeated often in Lower Pecos River rock art is the flight of the spirit on a spiritual journey from the sensate body. Radiocarbon dating would indicate the cave paintings were created 3000 to 4000 years ago. In addition, rockshelter excavations have indicated the presence of mescal beans and peyote as trance inducing drugs, which may have contributed to the sensation of such out-of-body journeys (Zintgraff and Turpin: 1991:8-10).

While from a different place and era, the story of how a Sacred Pawnee Family Medicine Bundle was thought to have enabled a young girl to survive a perilous journey is instructive.

In 1873, about 350 Pawnee men, women and children were processing buffalo meat in a small canyon when they were attacked by over one thousand armed Sioux warriors. The father of the girl, knowing it was his duty to fight to the death to protect his people, tied his daughter to his packhorse. He lashed his medicine bundle to her back, believing the bundle would take care of her, and then whipped the horse. The girl escaped from what is now called Massacre Canyon. The canyon is now a designated National Historical Site. The family kept the Medicine Bundle for over a hundred years, because of the saving power it represented. Finally, it was the dying wish of the matriarch of the family that the bundle be given to the Pawnee Indian Village Museum, because that was a sacred place for her and her family (Gulliford: 2000:56-59).

Could the many pouches and bundles on the arms of the ascending figures in the paintings in the Lower Pecos River area, while having no relation to the Massacre Canyon deliverance, have been safe passage power objects for a perilous journey, whether out-of-body or in a trance? In Seminole Canyon, the ascending figure rising out of the dark shape below has an object like a pouch on the right arm (Figure 26).



Figure 28. White Shaman ascending with bundle from arm.

Then in the White Shaman Rockshelter, with the black mortal body left behind, the White Shaman ascends, with a medicine bundle hanging from the left arm (Figures 27 and 28). Zintgraf and Turpin (1991:28) note that "Feathers fringe his outspread arms, enabling him to fly, and hanging from his arm is a medicine bundle that combines human, bird and animal attributes". Certainly, the impression in every instance is that medicine bags, bundles and pouches had great power for healing, protection and safe journey.

Hammerschlag tells of a last visit with a friend before his death:

Before I left,
he asked me to get him a leather pouch
that was hanging on the door.
It was a medicine bundle,
the kind in which an Indian healer
carries his or her most powerful tools.
He unwrapped a gazing crystal
and held it lovingly
as I said goodbye
(Hammerschlag:1988:54).

Perhaps this is a good way to end a paper on, The Shaman's Medicine Bag, Bundle and Pouch in Native American Rock Art.

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