

## DINÉ' (NAVAJO) CEREMONIAL PAINTINGS IN WESTERN COLORADO

The Uncompahgre Plateau and Gunnison Valley contain Uncompahgre, Fremont, proto-Ute and Historic Ute style petroglyphs. There are older Archaic, and possible Paleo-Indian sites. The Gunnison Basin and the Uncompahgre Plateau are unusual places to find *Dine'* (Navajo) ceremonial paintings and engravings depicting *Ye'i* figures, a class of supernatural beings referred to as "gods".

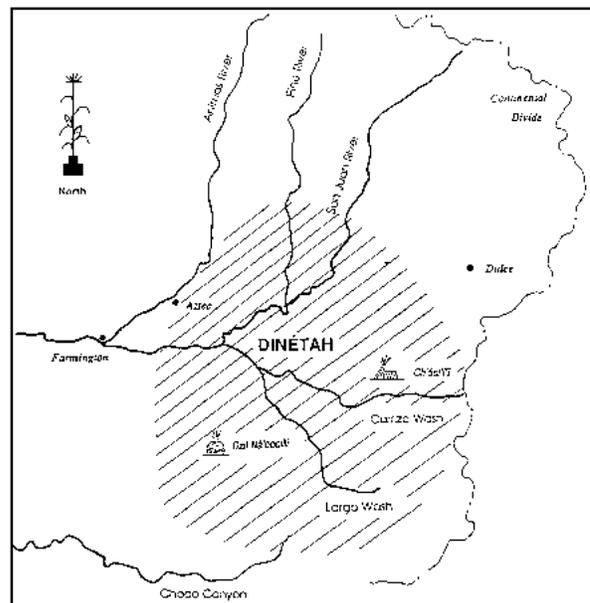
### PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATIONS

#### Navajo Archaeology

Archaeological sites of Navajo occupation are found in north-western New Mexico, as far north as the San Juan River dating between circa A.D.1500 and 1700. They are attributed to proto-historic Navajo, but questions have arisen as to whether they are Ute rather than Apache-Navajo. Early Spanish accounts report these sites to be Ute stating that the Navajo did not live west of the Continental Divide until after A.D. 1669. Husher and Husher (1939) recorded what they claimed to be "hogans" that were circular stone houses at thirty-five locations that amounted to over two hundred buildings. The 'houses' had curved walls of dry-laid masonry and were characteristically found on high elevations, hilltops, mesa rims or the slopes of steep-sided bluffs. Arrowheads found nearby suggested their use as fortification from enemy attacks. The lack of log roof beam remains has cast doubt upon Husher's claim of Navajo origin. Without collaborating evidence of Navajo occupation on the Uncompahgre Plateau or Gunnison Basin, it is unclear if the Navajo occupied regions far north and east of their traditional homeland.

The Navajo call themselves the *Diné* "the People," or "the Earth Surface People," which refers to their god's emergence from the previous world below, to the present world, where they created the Diné people (Crum 1996).

Although the Navajo migrated south from Canada around A.D. 1100 as part of the Athabaskan language group that included Apaches. Their traditional homeland (Dinétah) is roughly defined by the Continental Divide to the east, Chaco Canyon to the south, the Animas River to the west and north to the Colorado, New Mexico border.



**Figure 1.** Location and major drainages of the Dinétah. (from Copeland and Rogers 1996).

The two holy mountains, Ch'ool'i'i' (Governador Knob) and Dzil Ná'oodilli (Huerfano Mesa) are

sacred because of their role in the creation stories involving Changing Woman, Monster Slayer and Born-for-Water.

The Navajos learned to grow corn from the Pueblo neighbors. When the Spanish arrived, the Navajos adopted sheep and goat herding and Spanish clothing. The Navajo became good horsemen and drove their herds to higher altitudes during the summers that included the foothills of the San Juan Mountains. They became wealthy through raids of Pawnees and Utes for women and children traded to the Spanish as slaves. The Utes also raided Navajos for captives to trade for horses and by A.D. 1775 had pushed all the Navajos from southwestern Colorado. It is estimated that there were three to six thousand Indian slaves in Spanish homes in New Mexico in the 1800's and three out of four were Navajos (Crum 1996). They helped with the ranches and built the towns and in turn were educated in Spanish schools.

#### **Almont Site, Gunnison Basin, Colorado**

A site called "Indian Caves" (5GN477), was recorded by O.D. Hand, CDOH in 1990.



*Figure 1. Three Ye'i figures with kilts, holding chokecherry branches.*

The recordings of each rock art panel are drawings without photographs. A re-evaluation of this site was recorded by C. Patterson (Patterson 2004). The panel is a charcoal drawing of what

has been identified as three 'Ye'i gods', (Figure 1).

There are also Navajo engravings at this site characteristic of angular lines. The square faces identifies the rider as a Ye'i figure riding on horseback (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. A square headed 'Ye'i' on horse back.*

Another panel depicting a Ye'i horseman appears under a ledge. The horseman is drawn with charcoal and has three feathers with painted red tips, (Figure 3).



*Figure 3. Square faced Ye'i figure on horseback with red tipped feathers.*

### Horsefly Creek, Uncompahgre Plateau

On a low overhanging rock face above Horsefly Creek is a red painted figure that resembles the Navajo God *Ghaan'ask'idii*. This deity carries a pack of seeds on his back and a feathered staff. He also wears a feathered headdress, (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Red Painted figure at Horsefly Creek (Cole 1987).

Cole (1987) notes that this site is far north of the traditional Navajo homeland and modern reservation, but is within an area where Navajo people have historically worked and traded. She believes if it is not Navajo in origin, but that it may have been made by a Ute Indian living in the area prior to A.D. 1880, who was familiar with the art and myths of the Navajo.

I disagree with Cole with regard to religious iconography. It is far too dangerous (fatal in fact) to paint a picture, wear the mask, or create a sand painting of a religious deity, if one is not an initiated member of that culture.

### Shavano Valley, Uncompahgre Plateau

The north end of the Shavano Valley, 5 miles west of Montrose, Colorado has another group of Navajo paintings. They are under a rock shelter that in previous decades had a circular rock wall surrounding the cave floor. It may also have had juniper logs placed in front of the cave, braced against the rock wall and the back of the cave

(Squint Moore, p.c.). Figure 5 is the paint at the back of the shelter.



**Figure 5.** *Ye'i* from the Mountain Way Ceremony.

This painting is black with blue and white painted motifs. The figure has a white face with a crown of blue feathers. From the upper arms hang white feathers with blue tips. The body is black charcoal with blue feet or 'lightning' coming out of them. Over the head arcs a blue and white rainbow. To my knowledge there are no reports of these paintings in the literature.

### Ethno History

The recorded histories of Colorado and the Spanish journals do not mention Navajos living on the Western Slope, in the Gunnison Valley, or the Uncompahgre Valley. Perhaps a discussion about the Mountain Way Ceremony would shed some light on the origin of these paintings.

### Mountainway Ceremony

The imagery of the square faced deities is represented in sand paintings of the Navajo Mountain Way Ceremony. The characteristic of the

People of Mountain-way are: white painted or masked faces; tall feather headdresses or the bison headdresses worn by dancers and Whirling Rainbow People; an otter or beaver skin collar with attached whistle; beaded and embroidered clothing; red “fire” dance kilts; “wings” or symbolic indications of them (feathers) on the upper arms; charcoal blackened forearms and lower legs with white lightning marks on them; and chokecherries carried in the hands. The Ye’i’ figures in the Mountain-way sand paintings have square heads with black and yellow as male colors and blue and white as female in some designs. In other paintings black and blue are male, while white and yellow are female (Wyman 1975, 120).

A formal study of Navajo rock art began in 1959 as part of the Navajo Reservoir Project by Polly Schaafsma. She published a report in 1963 with revisions in 1975, 1980 and 1992. She established a chronology and stylistic analysis defining the Gobernador Representational Style depicting Navajo ceremonial themes. Studies of these paintings led to the conclusion that:

“The function of the Navajo petroglyphs and pictographs is that of ceremony. They are not simple depictions of Holy People, objects and events, but instead have a deeper theological meaning not yet understood. For that reason we avoid further use of the term “rock art.” (Schaafsma in Copeland and Rogers 1996).

Figure 6 is from her study of the Navajo Reservoir Project in northern New Mexico.



**Figure 6.** Ye’i figure with square white face from New Mexico, Navajo Reservoir Project. (Copeland and Rogers 1996).

Schaafsma observed that many of these sites included the techniques of smoothing the surface before paint was applied and pecking or engraving within the painting.

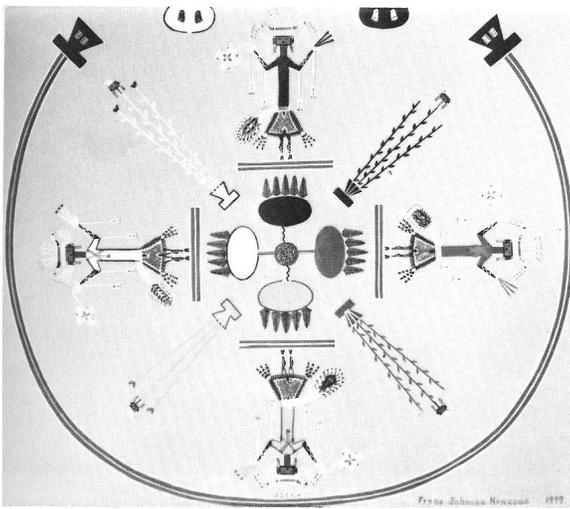


**Figure 7.** Gobernador style Ye’i paintings from Canyon del Muerto, Arizona. thought to represent ‘Black God’ and Mountainway Yei’i.

Figure 7 is a Feathered Ye'i rock painting is located at Blue Bull Cave in Canyon del Muerto, Arizona. It has been suggested that the adjoining solid colored figure is a depiction of "Dark" or "Black God". The square faced figure is one of the Mountainway People.

(<http://my.execpc.com/~jcampbel/sites9.html>).

The square faced Ye'i figures with feathered headdresses and feathers from their upper arms are pictured in the sand painting of the 'People of the Myth' from the Mountainway Ceremony in figure 8.



**Figure 8.** Radial Ye'i figures depicted in the Mountain Way Ceremony It is entitled 'People of the Myth' (from Newcomb, 1929).

### Mythology of the Captive Navajos

The Mountain Way Chants includes extensive narratives about the escape of Navajo captives of the Utes who were active in the slave trade during the late 1600s into the 1800s when slave trade was finally outlawed.

There are five myths in the Mountainway ceremony that tell of the adventures and miraculous escapes of the Navajos. They are listed here:

1. Two brothers were being taught hunting magic by their father and the elder brother was captured by the Utes because of paternal injunctions disobeyed.

2. A grandson of Older Sister was taken while he was guarding his family's hogans.
3. A Young Man's story.
4. A story of Older Sister and her escape.
5. Two Sisters given to the Utes by their father with ulterior motives.

These captivity escape myths are sung and retold as part of the Mountainway Ceremony.

The Mythic Motifs included within these Ute Captivity narrations include: A Hero's life saved by an old man; Old man and woman guards a Navajo captive, tied with a cord to them so he could not escape; Utes were put to sleep by a Whippoorwill, that flew into the tepee through the smoke vent and over the heads of the Utes, putting them to sleep; Captive released by supernatural, Talking God and Calling God released the prisoner and sent him on his way. The captive followed the hoot of an owl, came to a canyon, and was helped down into it by Talking God, who then sheltered him in his home there; Flight from the Utes protected by supernaturals, the Navajo captive was hidden, by various supernaturals, Talking God hid the hero in his home or cave in a cliff; Otter or Beaver hid a Navajo in his home under the water; A Navajo girl was put out of reach of the Utes on a growing rock point like the Sky-reaching-rock of other chant myths, and Talking God used a hill which grew into a mountain to baffle the Utes; Hidden by Wood Rat, a Navajo is invited into Rat's home, the Utes poke around in the nest with a stick but can not find their victim; Hidden under a bush, a Navajo uprooted a greasewood bush, blew on the hole to enlarge it and replaced the bush, thus hiding himself.

After escaping or evading the Utes, the Navajos had to purify themselves and embark on a journey visiting various supernaturals who demonstrated ceremonial procedures and ceremonial protocol. This may be the explanation for the locations of these paintings.

Before the returning hero was allowed to enter his family's hogan he was shampooed and bathed to

remove all the alien substances and influences acquired during his captivity. Then he was allowed to join his people (Wyman 1975,145-148).

### **The Geography of the Mountainway**

The Ute Captivity narratives begin in the Southern Ute country of southwestern Colorado. The action in the Captive myths takes place in the Four Corners region. The Older Sister's Flight from a Bear takes place in the country immediately to the north and south of the San Juan River in Colorado and New Mexico (Wyman 1975, 157).

### **CONCLUSION**

The observations of Navajo paintings and engravings as far north as Almont, in the Gunnison Basin, and the Shavano Valley north of Montrose, raise questions concerning Navajo visitations being either for ceremonial pilgrimages or from forced captivity. One theory is that they were created to call upon the Holy People for deliverance from the Ute captors. A second theory is that some of these painted sites are part of a Navajo sacred geography that extended into the Gunnison Basin and Uncompahgre Plateau. The Navajo traditions include visiting sacred sites that were part of the Holy People's sacred landscape that may have extended beyond the historically recorded boundaries. What ever the reason for creating these paintings, their identification as part of the Mountainway ceremony is certain and it is important that these sites be protected and regarded as sacred to the Diné people.

### **REFERENCES CITED**

- Cole, S.  
1987 *Legacy on Stone. Boulder:* Johnson Books.
- Copeland, J M. and H. C. Rogers.  
1996 In the Shadow of the Holly People, Ceremonial Imagery in Dinétah. In *The Archaeology of Navajo Origins.* (ed) Ronald H. Towner. S.L.C: University of Utah Press.

- Crum, S.  
1996 *People of the Red Earth.* Santa Fe: Ancient City Press.
- Husher, B. and Harold A. Huscher  
1943 *The Hogan Builders of Colorado.* Gunnison: Colorado Archaeological Society.
- Husher, H.A.  
1939 Influence of the Drainage Pattern of the Uncompahgre Plateau on the Movements of Primitive Peoples. *Southwestern Lore* 5(2):22-41
- Moore, S.  
2005 Personal Conversation
- Patterson, C.  
2004 Re-evaluation of (5GN477), a charcoal drawing at Almont, Colorado. Colorado State Historical Society archives.
- Schaafsma, P.  
1963 *Rock Art in the Navajo Reservoir District.* Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Papers in Anthropology no. 7.  
1966 *Early Navaho Rock Paintings and Carvings.* Santa Fe: Museum of Navaho Ceremonial Art.
- Wyman, L.C.  
1975 *The Mountainway of the Navajo.* Tucson: University of Arizona Press.  
2005 Navajo pictograph, Canyon del Muerto. [www.my.execpc.com](http://www.my.execpc.com)