

TWO UTE PORTRAITS: LATE ROCK ART ON THE COLORADO PLATEAU

True portraiture of real people (as opposed to recognizable images of specific deities, spirit figures, or Katchinas, which are relatively common in several areas¹) is rare in North American rock art, except in the latest Biographic rock art that occurs across the Northwestern Plains and in the adjacent Colorado Plateau (Cole 1990:244–251; Keyser and Klassen 2001; Keyser and Poetschat 2005; Schaafsma 1975). In these Biographic compositions specific humans are recognizable by a combination of clothing and facial features drawn with such precision and detail that it is obvious that many if not all members of the subject's group would have readily been able to identify them. Although such recognition is often (but not always²) lost to the modern observer—either native or scholar, due to a combination of factors including relocation of the artist's tribal group to a distant reservation and interruption of cultural histories and traditions during the reservation period—we know that such portraits were originally easily recognizable because similar drawings were used on robes and in ledgers to indicate specific people and these were readily identified by persons (other than the artist) who viewed the art (e.g., Wildschut 1926). Although some of these ledger art identifications were aided by the use of name glyphs, many such portraits were and still are identifiable without these (McCoy 2003:71; Powell 2002).

Rock art portraits have previously been recognized at the Joliet site, 24CB402 (Keyser and Klassen 2001; McCleary 2008), La Barge Bluffs, 48LN1640 (Keyser and Poetschat 2005), Mancos Canyon, Colorado (Cole 1990:246–248), and some Navajo Reservation sites (Schaafsma 1975:51–60). While the earliest of these depictions clearly derive from artistic traditions extending back into the Late Prehistoric and early Historic periods where individuals would have

been identified by the actions they were undertaking or the specific design of their shield in combination with other accoutrements (Keyser 1987; Kaiser and Keyser 2008), they are qualitatively different in that they have been personalized and are often presented such that recognition does not depend solely on these things, but rather on the combination of them with facial features. Thus, the top-hat-wearing man in the dance lineup at La Barge Bluffs or the woman being presented to this group (Keyser and Poetschat 2005)³ or the portraits of several figures at Joliet (Keyser and Klassen 2001:22, 230, 237, 242; McCleary 2008) approach the quality of modern portraiture (Figure 1). Clearly these were influenced by the use of portraiture and photographs by Euro-American artists and historians, who began doing portraits as early as the 1830s–1850s (Catlin 1973; Ewers 1948, 1982; Taylor 1994:54; Thomas and Ronnefeldt 1976) and photographs by the late 1850s (Steward 1939;

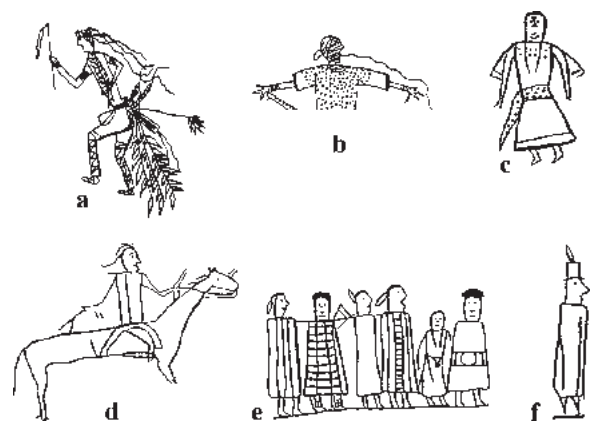


Figure 1. Portraits in late Historic period Northwestern Plains rock art. a b, Joliet; c–f, La Barge Bluffs. Note careful illustration of facial features in combination with characteristic weaponry and dress. Women include b, c, and shortest figure in e.

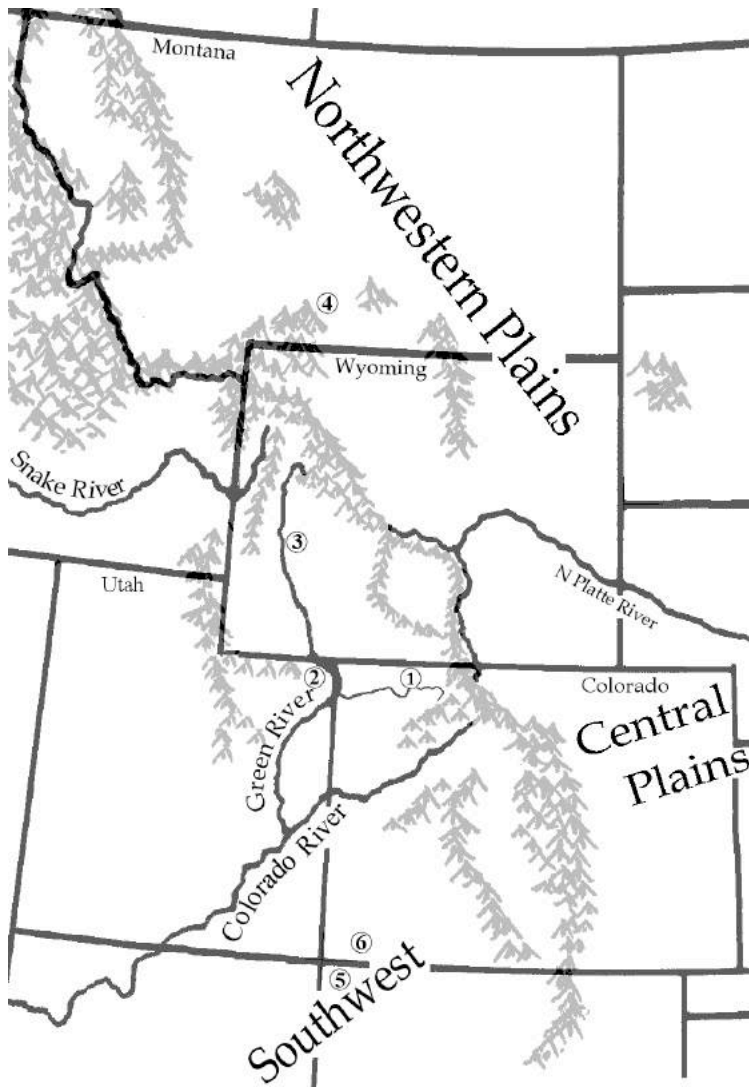


Figure 2. Location of rock art portraits in Northwestern Plains, Colorado Plateau, and Southwest. 1, Craig, Colorado; 2, McKee Spring, Utah; 3, La Barge Bluffs, Wyoming; 4, Joliet, Montana; 5, Navajo Reservation, New Mexico; 6, Mancos Canyon, Colorado.

Taylor 1994:74, 218–225), so it is almost certain that such images are very late in the chronological sequence wherever they occur.

THE PORTRAITS

Two sites on the northern Colorado Plateau contain portraits almost certainly made by Ute (or possibly Shoshone) artists in the last decades of the 1800s. One is a detailed rendering of a warrior posed carrying a tomahawk and a fringed bag at

the McKee Spring site in Dinosaur National Monument, Utah; the other is a woman wearing a decorated dress at the Craig Sandrocks site, 5MF4306, in northwestern Colorado (Figure 2).

McKee Spring

The McKee Spring warrior is a badly defaced, lightly scratched petroglyph drawn low on a south-facing cliff just above the interpretive trail that runs between the several groups of spectacular Fremont style images for which the site is best known. Near, but not obviously associated with this portrait are two simple horses, also drawn as scratched petroglyphs. The warrior was originally very clearly scratched on the dark reddish-brown sandstone cliff to show intricate detail of personal costume and accoutrements. Probably originally scratched with a metal tool (e.g., knife, awl, nail)—or less likely a chert flake—someone later badly defaced the image by abrading across it with a stone (Figure 3, left). It is possible that this was done by a later Indian artist, as a sort of “rubout” done to denote conquest of an enemy (e.g., Keyser and Klassen 2003:12–13), but I think this is unlikely. Instead, it appears that some recent twentieth-century visitor, mistaking this drawing for historic graffiti, attempted to obliterate

it. Although I have been unable to find any published photograph of this image, possibly historic photographic documentation could be found to indicate whether this abrasion predates or postdates modern, twentieth-century development and use of the site.

Using a photograph taken by Bill Lawrence on the 2006 Utah Rock Art Research Association (URARA) field trip to McKee Spring, I digitally removed the abraded marks superimposed on

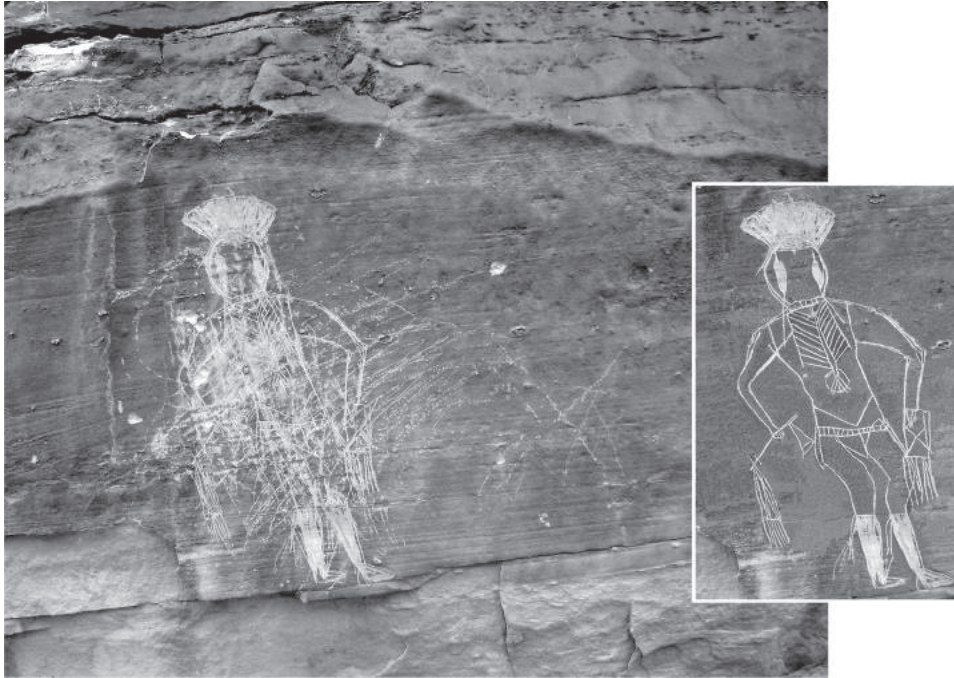


Figure 3. McKee Spring warrior. Large photograph shows position of figure on cliff and damage caused by scratches over the figure. Inset is warrior image with overlying scratches removed.

the warrior's portrait to return it to its original appearance (Figures 3 [inset], 4). I did not lighten any of the original lines, but I did "extrapolate" a short section of the central vertical lines of the warrior's breastplate and the upper left circumference of the suspended circular element (a shell or metal gorget), both of which had been entirely obliterated by the abrading.

Likewise, despite the apparent presence of a "nose" and possibly other crude facial features, close examination in person and using the digital photograph showed these to be abraded damage. It is possible that a few lines removed as abraded marks (e.g., lines associated with the feathers attached to the hightop moccasins and a long scratch to the right of the warrior and above his elbow) were originally part of the figure, but close attention to the digital image suggested that these were, in fact, part of the abraded damage.

The portrait is a front view of a warrior decked out in some sort of vest, hightop moccasins, and a breechclout and belt. He wears a standup forelock pompadour hairdo, commonly worn by Ute and Shoshone warriors as shown in Historic photographs (Steward 1939:14, Plates 26–29;

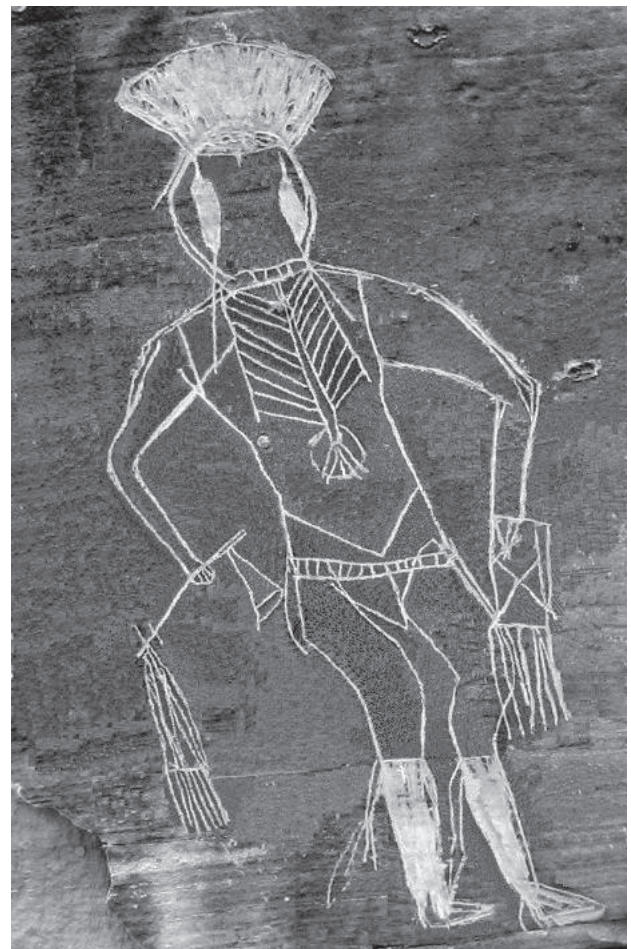


Figure 4. Close up view of McKee Spring warrior showing details of costume and weaponry.

Trenholm and Carley 1964). He has two hairlocks, one each which descend from the right and left sides of the upswept forelock pompadour and fall across his cheeks. The thin line on each one just above the “bloused” central segment indicates that the hairlock was either tightly wrapped or, more likely, run through a bone tube. The thin line pendant below each bloused segment could be another bone tube or some sort of ribbon streamer. Similar hairlocks worn in just this fashion are shown in photographs of Ute men and boys (Steward 1939:14, Plates 26–27, 31). The hightop moccasins, with a trailing feather or ribbon of some sort, are very similar to footwear worn by a mounted Ute boy in the Uintah Basin (Steward 1939:Plate 30). Around his neck the warrior wears a segmented choker, probably of dentalium or short hairpipes, and suspended across his breast is a hairpipe breastplate with a pendant circular gorget, probably of shell or metal. Identical regalia is worn by young Ute warriors in many historic photographs from the late 1800s (Cole 1990:250; Steward 1939:Plates 26–29). He also wears a belt segmented in the same manner as the choker.

The warrior also carries a tomahawk in his right hand and a narrow, rectangular fringed bag in his left. The tomahawk is a “Missouri war hatchet” type (Taylor 2001:24–27) with a large triangular blade and a fringed triangular tab pendant from the bottom of its handle. Vertical lines on the triangular body of the tab suggest that it was beaded or otherwise decorated in some fashion, as such tabs frequently were (Barbeau 1960:148, 170, 171; Taylor 1994:77, 200, 2001:8). The rectangular bag is nearly square and has long fringe hanging from the bottom. Its front is decorated with an X design.

This drawing is typical of such portraits occasionally made by Indian artists in Plains ledger drawings during the period from 1870 to 1890 (Barbeau 1960:148, 150, 164–172; Berlo 1996:76–77, 2000:36, 60–70; Greene 2006; Thompson 2000:75). The structure of these—full

front-view portraits with the person clearly dressed in their finest clothes and usually posed with a weapon or a pipe—suggests that the artists were intimately familiar with photographic portraits, and drew these to serve specifically as native-drawn portraits of important warriors, ceremonial leaders, or band headmen. This image indicates that Ute artists made similar drawings.

Craig Sandrocks

The portrait at Craig Sandrocks (Figure 5) is located near the eastern end of the site, just above and to the east (right) of a trail that accesses the site from a parking lot below. In 2007, while attending the Colorado Rock Art Association



Figure 5. Woman's portrait at Craig Sandrocks site. Note 1935 date that superimposes the figure. Also note numerous bullet scars.

meetings in Craig, I traced this image, along with about a dozen other horses and images associated with them (e.g., Keyser 2008). When I first noted this image I suspected it might possibly be historic graffiti, but Mavis Greer pointed out that the head was superimposed by a date of 1935 associated with the initials J B. This time depth, coupled with the clear “Indian” style of the drawing, is strong evidence that it, too, is a late period native portrait. Unfortunately, the entire figure is badly defaced by a series of seven large bullet scars and four smaller scars (possibly 22 caliber or buckshot) impacted on the upper torso. Two of the large bullet scars have nearly obliterated the face, destroying any facial features that may once have existed.

The figure wears a woman’s dress, belted at the waist, and flaring at the bottom. It cannot be determined if the figure’s short arms (which simply come to a point without hands indicated) are intended to represent sleeves or if these are the person’s arms (as indicated on a portrait at La Barge Bluffs [Figure 1c]) and the dress is thus sleeveless. No selvage line occurs above the hem, so I cannot determine whether this is a cloth or leather garment. The belt has central vertical divider that may indicate some sort of buckle.

Covering the bodice is a cluster of more than 40 small shallowly drilled dots, two of which actually are on the belt. Four small bullet scars may have effaced a few other of these dots. The dots do not occur in a regular pattern, in contrast to the more or less regular patterns of similar dots on portraits at Joliet and La Barge Bluffs (Keyser and Poetschat 2005:45, 109; Keyser et al. 2006:60, 62, see also Figure 1b, c). Such dots are used in other Biographic style portraiture to indicate elk teeth, brass buttons, beads, or shells, all of which were commonly used to decorate women’s dresses (Keyser et al. 2006). In addition to the dots a finely incised line extends obliquely from the figure’s left shoulder to just above the waist on her right side.⁴ This line is considerably narrower than those used to outline the figure, but of the same width

as the vertical line in the belt, and its clear confinement within the bodice area implies that it is part of the original figure. It may represent some sort of sash or other decoration, but no definite identification is possible.

The figure has short triangular legs that extend downward from the hem of the dress and end in solid triangular right pointing feet. Possibly the solid nature of the feet indicates the figure is wearing moccasins, but this cannot be verified. Neither hands nor hair are drawn, and if any facial features once existed they have been destroyed by gunshots and graffiti. There is a crude face drawn near this figure, but the extensive graffiti in this area of the site precluded the possibility of determining whether it was associated.

This dress-wearing figure is almost certainly a woman, though without some sort of identifying hairstyle or associated knife sheath or awl case the possibility that it represents a man or a transvestite cannot be ruled out. In general form it is quite similar to several women’s portraits (Figure 1c, e) drawn between A.D. 1868 and 1877 at La Barge Bluffs, about 300 kilometers (200 miles) northwest in the Green River Basin (Keyser and Poetschat 2005:35). Similarities include shape of the legs, feet, and arms, use of drilled dots for decoration, belt and vertical “buckle” line, and absence of hands—but the figure at Craig Sandrocks is more than twice as tall as the largest at La Barge Bluffs. It is also somewhat similar to a woman’s portrait painted in Mancos Canyon in far southwestern Colorado (Cole 1990:248).

The reason that an Indian artist drew this portrait at Craig Sandrocks cannot be determined. It may have been part of a couple (if the associated face was of Indian origin) or it might have represented a war captive, as do several other women drawn in rock art (Greer and Keyser 2008; Keyser et al. 2006). On the other hand it may simply be portraiture, much like that at McKee Spring, possibly done by a woman artist.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Both of these figures would fit comfortably in Cole's Ute Representational Style, which she dates to the period between 1880 and 1950 (Cole 1990:244–251). She notes that subject matter in this art style is strongly associated with themes of traditional dress and ceremonies. Based on the known ages of other rock art and ledger art figures, the type of portraiture represented by these figures came into vogue about A.D. 1870 and was done for a few decades, possibly as late as the early 1900s.

The McKee Spring warrior figure is almost certainly Ute, since every element of dress and hairstyle can be duplicated in photographs of Ute men in the last decades of the 1800s, and many of these photographs specifically show "Uintah Utes" whose homeland was this very area of Northeastern Utah (Steward 1939). The Craig Sandrocks woman's portrait is another matter. In general, the dress is too simply drawn to be identifiable with any tribal group, although the use of dots to indicate decorative elk teeth, buttons, or shells resembles Plains art. The presence of both Utes and northern Shoshones living in and traveling through this area of northwestern Colorado during the last decades of the 1800s makes it possible that an artist from either tribe was responsible for the figure.

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END NOTES

- ¹ On the lower Columbia River spirit figures including Cannibal Woman, Tsagiglalal, Swallowing Monster, Spedis Owl and others can be readily recognized at multiple sites (Keyser et al. 2008). Across the Southwest numerous Katchinas and various deities such as Tlaloc can be likewise recognized (Schaafsma 1975:32–41, 1980:203–211), and Boyd (2003) has made a strong case for recognizing *Kauyumàri* (or a predecessor) in Pecos rock art.
- ² Crow petroglyph portraits of James Cooper and Clarence Stevens, two World War I doughboys at the Joliet site, can still be identified (McCleary 2008). The same is true of some of Jack House's portraits in the Four Corners region of southern Colorado (Cole 1990:244–248).
- ³ In fact, there are several other drawings at this site that show similar portraiture (Keyser and Poetschat 2005:28, 32–39, 42, 44–46, 51).
- ⁴ This identification of left and right is from the perspective of the front-facing figure, rather than that of the viewer.

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