

THUNDERSTORM ICONOGRAPHY AND SITE LOCATIONS IN THE BARRIER CANYON STYLE

Despite an increasing catalog of Barrier Canyon Style (BCS) sites, and intensified research into the content and subject matter of Archaic rock art imagery in recent years, two fundamental questions regarding the Archaic Barrier Canyon Style persist: how were site locations determined, and what do BCS scenes depict? This paper offers an interpretive approach to BCS iconography that suggests partial answers to both of these questions. Investigation of this topic was fueled by a personal experience at the famous Great Gallery panel in the Horseshoe Canyon Annex of Canyonlands National Park in September, 2005. However, interest in these questions has long driven scholarly research on BCS and other ancient rock art sites throughout the Southwest, primarily because most sites lack clear archaeological context and direct historic cultural affiliations. In this regard, the ideas offered in this paper are presented only as conjectural hypotheses for further consideration, rather than definitive conclusions.

In her 2002 Master's thesis, Kelly Daniels Burrow of Virginia Commonwealth University discussed apparent formal similarities between BCS serpent imagery and historic Puebloan motifs (Burrow 2002). Her observations suggest that some degree of continuity in artistic meaning may have persisted into the historic period from the ancient Archaic past. Indeed, many BCS panels do bear signs, motifs, and related subjects that can easily be interpreted through modern Puebloan eyes. A well-known BCS panel from Seven Mile Canyon near Moab is a prime example of this process (Figure 1). This panel depicts two frontal red anthropomorphs in typical BCS form, the (viewer's) left figure smaller than the right one. The left figure has a serpent floating above its

head, and the larger right figure holds a standing, anthropomorphic bird in its outstretched left hand. The face of this figure stares at the viewer with glaring eyes, and a most distinctive feature of this panel is the green wavy serpent depicted in the open mouth of this figure (Figure 2). Serpents are common in BCS art, but the depiction in the mouth appears to be unique (For a detailed discussion of the BCS style and its associated motifs, see Schaafsma [1980:61–72] and [Farmer 2001]). Three parallel lines separate the two figures, and another vertical wavy serpent ascends the rock wall immediately to the right of the larger figure. Above the two figures floats a large horizontal band with vertical pendant lines.



Figure 1. BCS panel from Seven Mile Canyon near Moab, Utah. (Photo by James Farmer, 2008, all rights reserved)



Figure 2. Detail of Figure 1. (Photo by James Farmer, 2008, all rights reserved)



Figure 3. BCS bar-pendant/dot motif, Range Creek, Glen Canyon Recreation Area, Utah. (Photo by James Farmer, 2008, all rights reserved)

Several years ago, I was struck by how closely the imagery of this panel seemed to reflect certain historic Puebloan rituals, but I initially dismissed this similarity as mere coincidence. If one applies a modern Puebloan interpretation to this scene, then clear similarities are apparent between this scene and the famous Hopi Snake Ceremony, a fertility and initiation ceremony traditionally conducted in August of alternating years on the Hopi mesas. Hopi priests collect quantities of snakes and perform dances in which they often hold the snakes aloft, or carry one in their mouths (Frigout 1979:572). The Snake Dance is in part a seasonal prayer for the impending late-summer thunderstorms required for late season harvest. One of the most ubiquitous

motifs in historic Puebloan iconography throughout the Southwest is a horizontal band with vertical pendant lines or dots, such as occurs in the Seven Mile Canyon panel. This abstracted motif consistently represents falling rain to historic Pueblos, and would therefore be consistent with this reading of the Seven Mile Canyon scene. Variations of this bar-pendant motif, sometimes referred to as a “rake” or “comb,” date well back into ancient Southwestern rock art, and are typically associated with water or water sources. The motif is not frequent in BCS panels, but other similar versions are documented (Figure 3). The idea that BCS panels predating the historic Puebloan images by 5,000 years or more might in fact reflect the artistic roots of that much later tradition seemed at first highly unlikely, yet a reconsideration of many BCS panels suggests that seasonal rainfall may actually have played a role in BCS site location as well as subject matter.

Many BCS panels, including the Seven Mile Canyon panel, include another artistic “element” that is often overlooked or dismissed, because at first glance it would not appear to be part of the original painted image. I refer to the frequent large water streaks, stains, and patinated desert varnish flows that often occur adjacent to or over BCS figures. Two such large white streaks bracket the Seven Mile Canyon scene, and other similar

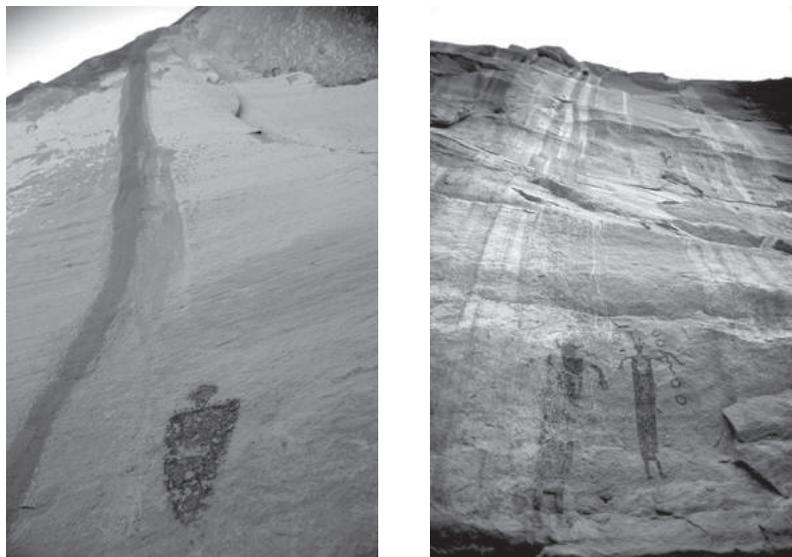


Figure 4. BCS panels with associated water stains. Left, near Arches National Park; right, Head of Sinbad. (Photos by James Farmer, 2008, all rights reserved)

occurrences are illustrated in Figure 4. Of course, one would be hard pressed to find a canyon wall in the Four Corners region that does not bear such stains, so their appearance in rock art panels is not surprising, and we really have no definitive way to determine with any certainty whether BCS artists consciously viewed the stains as compositional or aesthetic elements. Scenes with overlapping stains, such as the Seven Mile Canyon panel, were clearly painted prior to the stain formation, but because these stains occur in unpredictable fashion, it is difficult to believe that BCS artists could anticipate their appearance. On the surface this would all seem coincidental and a natural symptom of the environment which BCS artists had to accept. Yet BCS paintings are some of the most technically sophisticated rock art images ever produced in the Southwest (I would argue in the world), and BCS subject matter, though difficult to interpret with any precision, does reflect an equally sophisticated worldview or belief system, populated by an infinite variety of static and narrative beings, worldly and supernatural, involved in all manner of narrative activities. This sophistication is unparalleled in other rock art traditions from the region, and more to the point, reflects advanced skill and expertise on the part of the painters, who must surely have been highly trained specialists. The idea, then, that such sophisticated artists would either not have noticed or cared about the obvious visual impact of these stains on their panels, or were somehow incapable of making the necessary artistic adjustments to avoid the stains (i.e. a *different* location for the painting!), has never felt right. I now believe that, in many instances, BCS artists intended the water stains to be understood as an integral symbolic element of the associated painted scenes. I would suggest that many BCS sites were selected because they were locations of dramatic and ephemeral natural water events, specifically phenomena such as flash floods, waterfalls, and eroding pour-offs, which were the products of powerful seasonal thunderstorms.

In a previous presentation at the 2003 URARA Symposium, I suggested that two figures that appear frequently in BCS art, anthropomorphs with prominent “goggle-eyes” and horned or crested serpents, are clearly similar to representations of divine spirits or “gods” from both later Puebloan cultures, as well as Mesoamerican cultures from Mexico, which are dated contemporary with BCS rock art and later (Farmer 2001). Similar Mesoamerican Goggle-Eyed figures are typically identified by their sixteenth century Aztec name, “Tlaloc,” a fertility and war god of rain and thunderstorms. Polly Schaafsma has done extensive work documenting and interpreting the appearance of this very same entity in Puebloan culture of the late prehistoric and early historic period (Schaafsma 1980). Likewise, the horned serpent of Mesoamerica is best known as the Aztec god “Quetzalcoatl,” the feathered serpent associated with warfare, human sacrifice, and wind. Similar horned serpents appear in nearly all later Native North American traditions, including the Zuni “Avanyu” and the Hopi “Kolowisi,” and are typically associated with rain, thunder, and (most interestingly) waterways (Schaafsma 2001). Given the broad distribution and popularity of both of these figures in native cultures of the late prehistoric period and historic period, it does not seem too exaggerated to suggest that versions of these figures have been revered by native peoples in the region for a very long time, as far back as the creators of the BCS scenes.

On Saturday, September 3, 2005 (Labor Day weekend), three companions and I, including a National Park Service ranger, hiked down the Deadman’s Trail, the southern access trail into the Horseshoe Canyon Annex. The purpose of my visit was to photograph the famous Great Gallery BCS panels. I arrived at the Great Gallery at about 11a.m. in the morning, on a brilliant, cloudless, sunny day. The creek bed in this section of Horseshoe Canyon, well-known to many, was typically dry and dusty, with virtually no evidence of ground water. Within two hours, however, by



Figure 5. The Great Gallery alcove with thunderstorm waterfall, looking north, September 3, 2005. (Photo by James Farmer, 2008, all rights reserved)



Figure 6. The Great Gallery alcove with thunderstorm waterfall, looking south, September 3, 2005. (Photo by James Farmer, 2008, all rights reserved)



Figure 7. Barrier Creek flash flood, September 3, 2005 (Great Gallery panels are behind trees at far left). (Photo by James Farmer, 2008, all rights reserved)



Figure 8. Author in Barrier Creek, September 3, 2005. (Photo by David Sucec, 2008, all rights reserved)

about 1 p.m., a series of dramatic thunderstorms sprang up in the region, and by 1:30 p.m., a powerful thunderstorm was pelting torrential rain and lightning on the Great Gallery. While this is certainly a most common occurrence in the region, to actually witness this event in person is a most extraordinary experience. By 2 p.m., the effects of the thunderstorm were dramatically apparent in the canyon (Figures 5–9). Looking from the Great Gallery alcove, no less than eight separate waterfalls could be seen cascading down from high canyon pour-offs to the canyon floor, including two such waterfalls directly above the Great Gallery itself. By about 4 p.m., the normally bone-dry creek bed directly in front of the Great



Figure 9. Thunderstorm waterfall directly across Horseshoe Canyon from the Great Gallery, September 3, 2005. (Photo by James Farmer, 2008, all rights reserved)

Gallery was inundated by a flash flood some 30 feet wide and 4 feet deep at its most powerful, which continued unabated until well into the late evening.

The visual impact of this event is easily appreciated, as would be expected, and in itself, my own personal experience would be of little interest or relevance to the topic at hand. Certain unexpected, specific aspects of this experience, however, ultimately motivated me to revisit the two issues under consideration here—BCS site locations and iconography. The corrosive effects of flash floods need little reiteration, but what I also noticed for the first time was the true transformative power of the waterfalls. As agents of erosion, the waterfalls will gradually cut and scour the sandstone cliffs over extended periods of time. This process is generally undetectable to the human eye as it occurs, with only the after-effects of the scouring visible in the sandstone. However, two additional effects of these waterfalls *are* most apparent, and shockingly powerful. The cascading water delivers a constant series of rocks and boulders from the mesa top to the canyon floor. Boulders as large as four feet in diameter were witnessed plummeting hundreds of feet to the enlarging talus slopes at the bottom of the waterfalls. What was most impressive about these boulders was the shocking sound they made when

landing, an incredibly loud, booming thud, as if a large modern-day explosive had been detonated. The sound reverberated up and down the canyon, no doubt audible for hundreds of yards, perhaps miles, in either direction. At the same time, the very same water stains discussed above could be seen forming from lesser pour-offs along the canyon walls, and although the actual staining process is difficult to perceive, the paths and profiles of future stain streaks were clearly evident. My purpose here is not to simply narrate a powerful event of nature which is already well studied and documented. My point is that it seems inconceivable to me that any ancient archaic hunter-gatherers witnessing a similar event would not have been just as astonished as me, and would have naturally invested the location with divine, supernatural powers. Indeed, the unavoidable impression is that one is witnessing (or experiencing!) the most profound act of creation within the canyon environment itself, which technically, is in fact exactly what is transpiring. Creation and transformation of the very earth itself apparently originates from powerful thunderstorms.

Perhaps this then is the genesis of the imagery in the related BCS panels, and the later rituals, such as the Snake Dance. Perhaps the BCS panels and figures were intentionally situated in direct association with streaks of desert varnish and calcified deposits because the subject matter of the panels is the metaphorical perpetuation or reenactment of the very cosmic event that the streaks reflect. Reverence for rain gods among early human societies is commonly associated with the development of intensive agriculture and sedentary communities. Cultivated crops require reliable rain, hence the necessity for divine guidance and associated rituals to insure such rain. Lacking intensive agriculture and permanent communities, what purpose would rain gods have served archaic hunter-gathers? Yet, archaic BCS imagery is replete with numerous motifs that seem to reflect high concern for rain, water, and associated phenomena, including the goggle-eyed figures, the possible early model for

later rain deities. I would suggest that early peoples developed a reverence for the creative and transformative power of thunderstorms and their aftermath long before the adoption of agriculture, based not on the economic benefit of rain, but rather its supernatural, spiritual power.

To this end, one additional motif deserves consideration. Along with the other related iconographic elements, arcs typically described as rainbows occur frequently in BCS panels. Perhaps the best known example is a large petroglyph version at the well-known Rochester Creek panel, but several painted versions occur in other BCS panels as well. Rainbows and serpents are the most immediate and apparent products of rain and thunderstorms, so their appearance in BCS panels might now be understood as parts of a cohesive iconographic program related to thunderstorms and creation. Instead of a collection of diverse motifs appearing independently in BCS art simply for their own sake (serpents, rain clouds, rainbows, goggle-eyed figures, etc.), the motifs are but individual parts of a unified symbolic artistic message and associated belief system. This approach to Barrier Canyon Style images and iconography seems to me to more accurately reflect the technical and formal sophistication apparent in this style.

One of the best BCS panels to see all aspects of this program in place is the great panel at Buckhorn Wash. Prominent desert varnish stains streak the great canyon wall, occasionally directly intermingling with large BCS figures (Figure 10). At least two figures appear beneath rainbow arcs, and several of the anthropomorphs have outstretched arms consisting not of human appendages, but rather the bar-pendant rain motif, as if the figures are to be understood not as mere humans, but as rain or waterfall makers (Figure 11) or waterfall sprits given human form. Wavy serpents appear across the panels, adjacent to or sometimes in the grasp of the "waterfall makers." Buckhorn Wash is over 50 miles from the Great Gallery, and over 100 miles from the Seven Mile



Figure 10. Buckhorn Wash, Utah. (Photo by James Farmer, 2008, all rights reserved)



Figure 11. BCS anthropomorphs (waterfall makers?), Buckhorn Wash, Utah. (Photo by James Farmer, 2008, all rights reserved)

Canyon panel, attesting to the geographic distribution and frequency of this program in BCS art.

BCS panel locations were probably determined by a number of complex, interrelated reasons. At least nine different specific reasons have long been bandied about to explain why BCS artists placed panels where they did, and each reason is probably justified to some extent. I offer herein only a summary of these reasons as an extended analysis of these reasons is not warranted in this presentation, and I wish only to consider the issues in this presentation in relation to site location.

- 1) *Established trails*: Most panels occur along primary trails and access routes (stream

bottoms, etc.), probably serving as archaic “billboards” and traffic controls.

- 2) *Natural Resources*: Many panels probably served to indicate the location of valuable natural resources, be they water sources, game-hunting, or valuable plant life.
- 3) *Meeting or Campsite Locations*: Larger, more complex BCS panels, such as the Great Gallery and Buckhorn Wash, probably indicate repeated use of sites over extended periods of time as preferred campsites or meeting places for seasonal ceremonies.
- 4) *Tradition (prior use)*: The larger, multi-figure panels may also be the result of repeated use simply as a preference for creating new images at sites already established with previous panels. Like modern graffiti, once a canyon wall was initially used as a canvas, the tendency was probably to reuse that same wall for additional imagery, adhering to tradition, rather than seek out an unused surface.
- 5) *Territorial Markers*: Some panels may have designated territorial boundaries of distinct social groups (bands, families, clans, etc.) within the greater archaic cultural matrix.
- 6) *Accessibility*: On a practical note, the accessibility and availability of appropriate walls and surfaces for panel production would have influenced the locations. Boulders or shelves for access, and some minimal degree of protection from the elements would be required.
- 7) *Visual Properties (aesthetics)*: The dramatic visual power of the panels juxtaposed against the large, water streaked canyon walls and deep alcoves no doubt impressed archaic BCS artists just as much as modern viewers, and many panels probably occur where they do simply because they looked “cool.”
- 8) *Sonic Properties*: A substantial amount of recent scholarship has verified the role that acoustics may have played in site locations, particularly the work of Steven Waller on rock art sites world wide (Scarre and Lawson 2006). The alcoves and canyon walls amplify sound and echoes (and

exploding waterfall boulders!) throughout the canyons, investing the panel locations with a heightened spiritual power.

- 9) *Magical or "Sacred" Qualities*: Panels may have been intended to reflect sacred or supernatural properties invested in the specific site location, or sacred events transpiring at the specific sites. This aspect is related to item #8, the sonic properties, and is most relevant to the issues in this presentation.

Each of these reasons has merit, yet ironically, the issue regarding BCS site location becomes most intriguing because each of these qualities can be applied to most of the canyon walls and alcoves in the region. The nagging question most often asked about BCS site location is not "why is the art work here?" but rather "why *isn't* there a BCS panel on *this* wall?" referring to the infinite number of perfectly good and available rock surfaces and alcoves in the region that does not contain imagery. Visitors and specialists alike are often perplexed as to why BCS artists did not exploit seemingly obvious locations for artistic purposes. The sacred properties of certain sites, considered herein, in part addresses this very issue, for the natural phenomena (thunderstorms, waterfalls, flash floods, etc.) that may have inspired the specific imagery are time sensitive; they require the participant/viewer to be in the proverbial "right place at the right time," as I was in 2005. The first eight criteria listed above can be experienced under any circumstances at any time, but not number 9, the sacred event; it is powerful, ephemeral, and supernatural in its effect.

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