

HISTORICAL INDIVIDUALS IN FREMONT ROCK ART

The prehistoric people known as the “Fremont” lived in what is now the State of Utah and in adjacent areas of Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, and Wyoming. Archaeologists assign dates for the Fremont Culture from approximately A.D. 400 to 1300 but in some areas traces of the Fremont Culture disappear as early as A.D. 1000.

The Fremont left one of the most impressive rock art records of the Southwest. Scholars have discerned several regional styles. One unifying element is a conventional representation of the shape of the human body. Over most of the Colorado Plateau the Fremont anthropomorphs are characterized by a trapezoidal, broad-shouldered body with a narrow waist, and a trapezoidal or square head that often rests directly on the shoulders (Figure 1). At some sites the body takes an hourglass shape. The face is either left blank, or the mouth and eyes are indicated. The hands have outspread fingers and the feet are turned sideways even though the figures are almost invariably shown from the front. These anthropomorphs are generally very static, facing the viewer. It’s only in a few hunting scenes that the artists have attempted to depict some action.

Sometimes an anthropomorph is represented alone or sharing a panel with animal figures, but most often the human figures are arranged in a row. Typical examples are found at Capitol Reef National Park, Dinosaur National Monument, and McConkie Ranch.

In general the human figures wear some form of clothing and personal ornamentation (Figure 1). The degree of detail varies. At McConkie Ranch life-size anthropomorphs arranged in distinct groups are richly adorned with jewelry, belts, and headdresses. Some of them carry a shield, a weapon, and what appears to be a severed human head.



Figure 1. Fremont anthropomorph, Range Creek, Utah.

These panels have been illustrated and described in the rock art literature but relatively little attention has been directed to their possible meaning. Noel Morss, who in 1931 defined the Fremont as an original culture, did not see the panels of the Vernal area but heard about them from other people. He was therefore aware of their existence and of their similarities to the rock art found in his study area, the Fremont River drainage. He suggested the figures were “representations of gods or of priests or dancers personifying the gods.” He wrote they vary in



Figure 2. The Sun Carriers panel, McConkie Ranch, Utah.

height “from 8 inches to heroic size” (Morss 1931:34).

In her 1971 paper (republished in 1994) “The Rock Art of Utah,” Schaafsma listed the main attributes of Fremont anthropomorphs of the Dinosaur-Vernal area. She coined the name “Classic Vernal Style” (Schaafsma 1994:6) and declared that “it is impossible to know if the human figures depicted in these panels are supernatural or human beings in ceremonial gear...” (1994:148).

In a later work Schaafsma noted that “in the classic Vernal Style... figures... most commonly carry what may be interpreted as either human heads or masks” (Schaafsma 1980:175). She remarked that “the shields, arrows, and animals in Fremont work suggest warfare or hunting... In the Uinta region, heroic human figures are shown carrying either human heads or masks, depictions that suggest warfare or ritual or both” (1980:179). Schaafsma concluded that the elaborate human

figures suggest “beings of special significance, and the horns on the Barrier Canyon Style and Fremont figure are thought to indicate their shamanic or supernatural powers” (1980:181).

Cole (1990:175) took note of “heroic and supernatural-appearing anthropomorphs.” In her study, warfare is mentioned as one of the possible themes in Fremont rock art: “Warriors are possibly signified by shield-figures and by figures holding shields, large blades, spears, bow and arrow, and possible scalp or head” (1990:186).

McConkie Ranch lies in a flat-bottomed valley limited on the north side by a long, tall cliff. For hundreds of yards west of the ranchhouse, and hundreds more east of it, the clean, hard rock layer that forms the base of the cliff is covered with Fremont rock art. About half a mile east of the house the cliff is interrupted by the mouth of a short canyon. Just beyond the canyon a semidetached pillar juts out from the cliff and here is found the most spectacular of all petroglyph

panels in the region. Originally known as “The Sun Carriers,” it was arbitrarily renamed “The Three Kings” by the editors of a magazine; this name has stuck but is both less accurate (there are seven figures on the panel, not three) and less poetic than the original. I will use the “Sun Carriers” name in this paper (Figure 2).

A large number of life-size anthropomorphs are depicted at McConkie Ranch, but tight groups (such as the “Sun Carriers”) are shown on only four major panels. Elsewhere the figures are either alone or, when sharing a rock face with others, don’t give the same strong impression of being part of a coherent group. The four distinct groups never fail to create a powerful impression on the viewer. That is not a coincidence, it was the intention of the artists.

The Sun Carriers panel is carved almost one hundred feet off the ground on its rock pillar, above a narrow ledge which must have been an uncomfortable and dangerous place for the artist to stand (Figure 3). Yet seven life-size

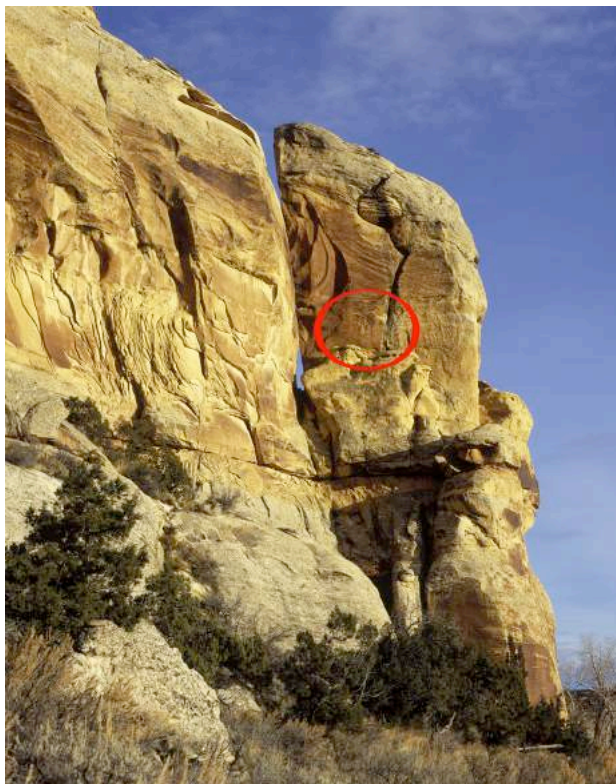


Figure 3. Location of the Sun Carriers panel.



Figure 4. McConkie Ranch, main trail.



Figure 5. McConkie Ranch, main trail.



Figure 6. McConkie Ranch, main trail: Bigfoot panel.

anthropomorphs are carved there, with a level of detail in their ornamentation unmatched in all Fremont rock art. Clearly, this scene is extremely important.

West of the ranch house, along the “main trail,” three elaborate panels are found in close succession along a section of cliff that offered wide, clean and smooth natural canvases (Figures 4, 5, 6). On these panels, as well as on the Sun



Figure 7. Single individual, west of the Bigfoot panel (McConkie Ranch).

Carriers, not two figures are alike (with one interesting exception discussed below). Each anthropomorph differs from the others in its overall appearance and in important details. The headdress, necklace, and other ornaments are unique to each figure and shown with great precision of detail. A figure shown with disproportionately large feet was dubbed “Bigfoot” by the owners of the ranch. Was “Bigfoot” for real? Was there once, in a Fremont village, an individual who needed a moccasin size well above average? Was he the object of friendly jokes; does this representation denote a touch of humor on the part of the artist and (or) the community?

About 100 feet west of the Bigfoot panel a single individual is shown, life-size, on a smooth and narrow surface (Figure 7). Proudly facing the viewer, he wears a headdress, a necklace, and holds what seems to be a long knife. He is nearly identical to an anthropomorph found next to “Bigfoot.” In fact the two figures are so similar



Figure 8. Compare the individual outlined in red with the lone anthropomorph shown in Figure 7.



Figure 9. Selected portraits from panels along the main trail at McConkie Ranch.

that they can only represent the same individual (Figure 8). If he were a real person, he would have been particularly important in the community. His image was recorded twice: once as part of a group, and once alone, in greater detail.

I propose that these panels show historical Fremont individuals (Figures 9, 10). Who were



Figure 10. Selected portraits, McKee Springs Wash, Dinosaur National Monument.

these individuals? The fact that they are represented with so much care suggests that they were the dignitaries of the group. We may also note that on each panel, one individual occupies a dominant position. This is evident in the Sun Carriers panel where one figure is taller than the others and centrally positioned. It holds a beautiful shield and all its personal ornamentation is shown with great precision. This figure commands attention and admiration. There is little doubt that he was the chief of the village, or its most distinguished warrior.

On the panel where he is shown, Bigfoot attracts so much attention that he seems at first to be the dominant individual. In reality, the figure next to him, on the left as we look at the panel, is taller and placed slightly higher on the rock face. He is the most important figure here, and this is consistent with the fact that he was also portrayed separately, as noted above.

The idea that historical individuals are represented on some Fremont rock art panels has been offered by other authors. In a paper presented at the 2007 URARA Symposium in Moab, Utah, Jamie Palmer said: “At McConkie Ranch, the petroglyphs depict very specific individuals...” (Palmer 2009:XXVII-51).



Figure 11. Trophy head with dripping blood.

But is there more information in these panels than the image of the most important people of the time? We need to look again at the details. Among the most interesting ones are the representations of severed heads that have been called “scalps” or “masks,” and that I’ll call here “trophy heads.”

The evidence that these objects are severed heads was once clearly present on a panel along the main trail at McConkie Ranch. One of the heads was shown with blood dripping from the neck and forming a pool below (Figure 11). To erase any doubt about the accuracy of the representation, the artist had not only pecked the head and neck into the rock, he had added red paint to the blood. There was nothing symbolic here; on the contrary, it was a realistic depiction of what you would

expect to happen when, for whatever reason, you cut someone's head.

The lower part of the neck and the pool of blood are no longer visible. A piece of rock has broken off and fallen sometime during the past 80 years. But the evidence had been recorded: a photo taken around 1920, and now in the Donald Scott Collection of rock art images at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, shows the panel when it was intact. In those days the photographers delineated the petroglyphs with white chalk to make them more visible. And while this practice is no longer condoned, in this particular case it helped to record important information (this photo is reproduced in Schaafsma's 1994 edition of *The Rock Art of Utah*, page 11, Plate 1).

Individuals holding a trophy head are shown on the major Fremont panels at McConkie Ranch, and at several panels at the McKee Spring Wash site in Dinosaur National Monument. The representation of the head itself varies from naturalistic—as in the case of the one with dripping blood and facial features—to more stylized shapes (Figure 12). I believe this to be the result of a stylistic evolution, the desire of the artists to show the same object in different ways. (The Fremont artists followed a number of conventions in their creations, especially and primarily the shape of the human body. But they showed their creative personality and technical mastery in the manner in which they used many different techniques. With few tools at their disposal, they pecked, abraded, drilled, polished, painted their rocky canvas, often mixing all these techniques on one figure).

The true nature of the trophy head representations was not immediately accepted by the early students of rock art. Both Schaafsma (1971, republished in 1994) and Cole (1990) cautioned against interpreting these objects as actual trophy heads and suggested they may be symbolic objects. By 1994 however, in her preface to the new edition of *The Rock Art of Utah*, Schaafsma,



Figure 12. *Stylistic evolution of trophy heads. Top row: McConkie Ranch, main trail. Bottom left: Sun Carriers panel. Bottom right and center, McKee Springs Wash.*

prompted by “substantial evidence from the San Juan Basketmaker region,” recognized that “the fetish heads in the hands of the imposing Classic Vernal style figures are in fact just that—scalps that include the face (1994:xii, xiii).”

Let's now turn our attention once again to the “Sun Carriers” panel. As noted, it was carved in a nearly inaccessible location, high above a Fremont village that occupied the valley floor. There is no doubt that the panel was intended to be seen from near and far. What message did it convey?

All the figures are perfectly executed (although one of them was added over a preexisting one, introducing some confusion in that area). The artist used incised lines, lines of pecked and drilled dots, abrasion and polishing of the rock surface. Red paint was added to some areas. The panel is a beautiful example of the ability and creativity of an artist who knew how to use the various techniques at his disposal to achieve a stunning effect.



Figure 13. Sun Carriers panel: dominant anthropomorph and possible captive.

What does this panel represent? All except one of these figures are classic Fremont anthropomorphs with broad shoulders, narrow waist, and feet turned sideways when they are represented (only on two figures). In the Fremont manner, the arms hang alongside the body, slightly bent at the elbows which, like the knees, are indicated by small knobs. They all wear typical Fremont jewelry and waistband and a headdress of a type that can be found on other Fremont panels.

One figure is, in all aspects, strikingly different. As we face the panel, it is on the right of the dominant anthropomorph (Figure 13). It was made by pecking out the rock around it, and so has the color of the surface patina, which happens to be black in that area, whereas it is brown-yellow over the rest of the cliff. The body is rectangular instead

of trapezoidal and wears a minimum of decoration: three vertical lines on the chest, and a belt. No headdress, mask, or jewelry. The head is round, the eyes and mouth are indicated. The shape of the head is made complete by a line pecked in the patina to visually separate the chin from the neck. The legs hang straight down, as do the well-defined feet. The most bizarre elements associated with this figure are the two black rectangles under the armpits. The upper arms of the figure seem to rest on these rectangles; at the elbows, the lower arms and hands hang limp, straight down.

This figure is totally different from the Fremont anthropomorphs that surround it. If anything, it is reminiscent of the Basketmaker figures of the San Juan region—at least in its general body shape—but there is no evidence that it would actually be a Basketmaker individual. Given the ability of the Fremont artists to show clearly and convincingly what they set out to represent, there is no doubt that this figure shows a different type of individual—different in its origin, and in its status among the group.

What comes to mind is that this figure represents a captive, suspended above the ground over two poles (which are correctly seen in cross-section from the front). The feet are hanging down because they don't touch the ground. The arms and legs are limp. The head is upright and the eyes open: the captive is alive. He does not have any of the attributes dear to the Fremont, such as headdress or jewelry. He is placed near the "chief," who holds a trophy head in his right hand.

Could this scene represent victory of the local Fremont group over outsiders—whether they were Fremont people from a nearby village, or non-Fremont invaders? Such an interpretation seems coherent with what has been carefully illustrated on the panel. We may be looking at the chief and main warriors of the village, shown with their best jewelry and headdresses, trophy heads, and a captive. The panel was located well above the valley floor in order to be seen. It is the



Figure 14. *Fremont anthropomorphs, Ivie Creek, Utah.*

group photo of the victorious party, a monument in the best tradition of warriors around the world.

What about the other group panels of McConkie Ranch? Aside from the lack of a “captive” figure, their content seems identical to that of the Sun Carriers. These remarkable panels are a very careful representation of dignitaries of the time.

The fact that there are only four such panels at McConkie Ranch raises interesting problems. These scenes probably represent different generations, rather than the same persons in various disguises. So in addition to showing specific individuals, the panels may also show a succession of important people of Dry Fork Valley: the historical record gets bigger.

Not too far away, at McKee Springs Wash in Dinosaur National Monument, we find panels sharing strong similarities with those at Dry Fork. Here, too, the figures shown in small groups are clearly distinct from one another and several of them carry a trophy head. The McKee Springs Wash scenes do not reach the complexity and richness of detail of those at McConkie Ranch, but they come close.

Panels showing groups of people arranged in a row are present at Fremont sites outside the Uinta region (for example, at Capitol Reef



Figure 15. *Fremont anthropomorphs, Capitol Reef National Park, Utah.*

National Park and in the San Rafael area). A variety of headdresses, jewelry, and other personal ornamentation is represented. In some instances even the facial features clearly differ from one figure to the next, again suggesting that we are looking at specific individuals. But there is a big difference with the Uinta region: there are no trophy heads (Figures 14, 15). The McConkie Ranch panels and those at McKee Springs Wash therefore stand out in at least two important aspects from the rest of the Fremont rock art of the Colorado Plateau: a high level of detail, and the presence of trophy heads, which indicates a preoccupation with warfare and power.

CONCLUSION

As amateurs or students of rock art we have been cautioned not to take rock art “at face value.” I certainly agree with that; the world rock art record is extremely diverse and was made by people we’ll never know or be able to understand, and trying to find meaning can easily lead to misinterpretations. But after spending several years photographing the rock art of the Fremont, I have come to the conclusion that it sometimes contains factual information.

In particular a strong case can be made that the great panels at McConkie Ranch represent historical individuals.

The panels commemorate historical events and are a display of power. They were made to be plainly visible and convey a clear message.

The panels discussed here seem to have been created over only a few generations. At that time some form of conflict was taking place in the area and became an important theme in the rock art. The artists did not depict the action of battle; they could not escape the conventions of their culture which favored a very static style and they only showed the ensuing formal celebrations. The most important people were immortalized on the cliffs and a sense of material power emanates from the panels.

Has anything changed? Think of a meeting of world leaders: when today's dignitaries pose for a group photo, they are lined up in one or two rows, facing the camera. The ancient Fremont artists used the same timeless concept which, it turns out, was well suited to represent the warriors of the Uinta region in all their magnificence.

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