

THE DYNAMIC DUO: Superheroes of Pahrnagat Rock Art

People are familiar with the dynamic duo of Batman and Robin from comics, movies and television. Pahrnagat rock art in southern Nevada provides its own dynamic duo in the forms of the Pahrnagat Man and the Pahrnagat Patterned Body Anthropomorph (PBA). It is easy to distinguish which hero is Batman and which is Robin, but establishing which is the hero and which the minion is not as simple for the 294 figures represented in the rock art. Perhaps because the Pahrnagat Man is such an arresting, eye-catching motif, other researchers (Green 1985, Stoney 1991, and White 2008) have emphasized him and mentioned only in passing his sidekick, the Pahrnagat PBA. We thought perhaps the emphasis may have been misplaced and set out to determine which figure might actually be the more important of the two.



Figure 1. Two styles of Pahrnagat Men. Photo by Anne Carter.

The Pahrnagat Man shows little variation in body decoration or style and is easily recognizable (Figure 1). Usually he has a trapezoidal, solidly pecked body; a square or round head; a headdress resembling a feather; two round, unmodified eyes; two arms with hands; and two legs. The arms may be straight, angled or sloping and usually end in hands with digitate fingers. At a couple of sites he has a male appendage, at least one of which may have been added at a later time.

The Pahrnagat PBA, while just as recognizable, has an infinite number of variations (Figure 2). This representation never has a head, often has an arm or two and has legs approximately 77 percent of the time. Sixty-six percent of these PBAs have two of what we are calling “extensions” of the vertical upper body line (150 have two extensions, 28 have one and 44 have no extensions). Occasionally these extensions end in a knob (Figure 3). The PBA bodies bear embellishments 97 percent of the time and fringe at the bottom complements this decoration 42 percent of the time. Twenty-two percent of the



Figure 2. Pahrnagat Patterned Body Anthropomorph. Photo by Anne Carter.

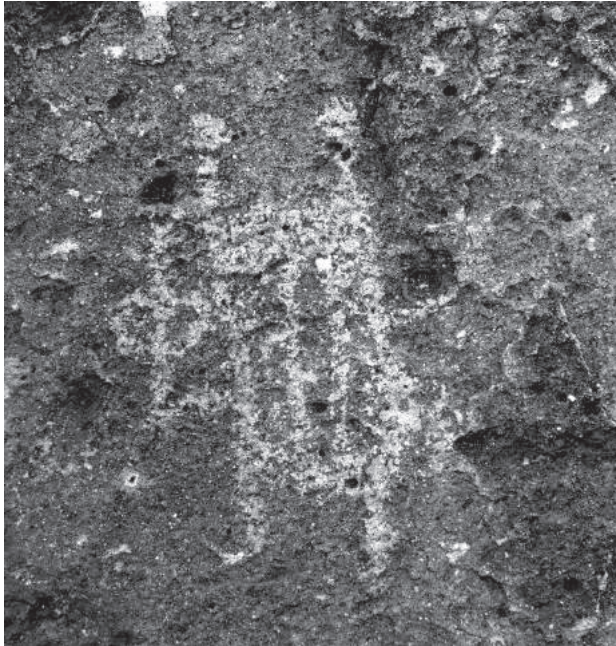


Figure 3. Pahrnagat PBA with "extensions." Photo by Anne Carter.

time the PBA appears to carry an object in its hand. The right hand was favored for carrying 67 percent of the time. (All numbers quoted should be regarded as minimums as there are probably yet undiscovered sites and extensive spalling at some sites has precluded our ascertaining precise data.)

A deviation from the classic Pahrnagat Man form occurs at the Red Hands site, where the bodies were only partially pecked and the arms and feet are different than the prototype. This led us to the idea of a combination Pahrnagat Man/Pahrnagat PBA. Other possible combination figures occur at the Spaceman site, the Gathering site, the Kyle site, the Mt. Irish complex and the Shooting Gallery complex (Figure 4). In our research, we found only two percent of the total figures (294) could be considered combinations.



Figure 4. Possible combination figure. Photo by Anne Carter.

In the media Batman wears a form-fitting uniform, a black mask and a long, dark cloak, often with bat-like wings. Robin is more colorful with a red and yellow outfit and black half-mask. In the search for “importance,” color was not a distinguishing feature for the rock art figures. Both glyphs appear in a range from deeply repatinated black to a lighter brown to gray, depending upon the surface into which they are etched.

We needed a method to categorize and quantify importance of a figure as it appears in rock art, and we relied heavily on Perlmutter’s *Visions of War* (1999), parts of which deal with Stone Age depictions of warfare. Perlmutter’s attributes fit into our search for importance. “Bigness,” he says, has long been recognized as a sign of power (1999:3). So we tried to determine which of the two Pahranaġat figures is “bigger.” With these glyphs, size seems random—both the Pahranaġat Man and the PBA range in size from slightly less than a foot to six feet tall. Perlmutter (1999:57) also says the “leader” will be first in line, or of different headdress or raiment. This was of no help either because these are frontal, static figures, one with a different headdress, while the other has different raiment. Perlmutter (1999:66) states that the figure covering more surface area would denote the leader. Since there are relatively few instances of togetherness and surface area of both varies, we discounted this as a measure of leadership. He also states, “In art, the leader needs to dominate the symbolic landscape” (1999:73). Does one of the two rock art figures seem subservient to the other? Is one higher than the other on the panel? Although there are few instances of the glyphs portrayed together, there seems to be no preference for one, literally, over the other. The two seem to have equal billing on positioning.

Finally, two qualifications surfaced to help us decide the leader/follower issue. Perlmutter (1999:72) states that dress often distinguished ancient war commanders—the greater the warrior,

the more elaborate the adornment. Such adornment was probably meant to confer fear, reward, and awe. Most of the Pahranaġat PBAs have very intricate patterning, the construction of which would have been more time consuming and required more skill than the pecking on the Pahranaġat Man. However, the Mt. Irish complex is an exception to this as the PBAs there simply do not display the elegance of those at Black Canyon or the Gathering. Although there are 51 PBAs at Mt. Irish and only 12 Pahranaġat Men, the PBAs are not on prominent panels and do not have distinguishing characteristics or embellishments. Mt. Irish notwithstanding, if we use intricacy of production to judge importance, there is no doubt that the much and variously decorated Pahranaġat PBA is the more important.

And lastly, as Perlmutter (1999:33) states, ancient people put on their walls what was important to them. If sheer numbers are any indication of importance, then the answer to the leader/follower question is clear-cut—the PBAs win, hands down. The number of Pahranaġat PBAs compared to Pahranaġat Men in the area is 227 to 67. This is a ratio of nearly 3.5 to 1.

One of the most interesting things about the Pahranaġat PBAs is their interior design. In fact, of the 227 PBAs, only six did not have interior markings. Geib (1998:62), attempting to identify geographical boundaries of past societies says, “...there is hardly a more significant means for differentiating people than appearance, both physical traits and cultural trappings.” Dress and adornment may encode cultural clues to people living in a specific area and probably specified an in-group.

The PBA has been called “blanket man” and we would like to discourage use of that term. Although finger weaving was practiced before loom weaving was introduced, circa 700–900 A.D. (Teague 1998:116, 117), the limitation was size. Consequently, we do not think the apparent size and variety of designs shown on the

Pahranagat PBAs could have represented finger weaving. Even after looms came into use, fringe was not a normal part of a blanket. One explanation for the fringe may be a garment made from hide and fringed at the bottom. Such a garment could not only have been fringed but may also have been decorated with quills or paint.

Another more probable option, is that such rich, riparian areas as the Pahranagat Valley with numerous lakes fed by springs from the underground White River and the now dry Delamar Valley provided reeds and marsh plants necessary for textiles. Textile expert Kate Peck Kent (1957:617) says, “Breech coverings of string—worn either as clouts or with free-hanging fringe—had a wide distribution in the prehistoric Southwest. They were apparently a standard article of dress from very early until historic times....most were made of coarse apocynum or yucca fiber, and...they have no relationship to loom weaving.” In northern Nevada fiber aprons were discovered in Lovelock Cave and were believed to have been worn in the Late Lovelock Phase—1 B.C. to 900 A.D. (Grosscup 1960:64, 66), which would be a time period consistent with the petroglyphs in the Pahranagat area. The long, pendant fringes may also have represented rain as does the fringe on a modern Hopi ceremonial sash (Webster 2007:172).

Body painting, tattooing and piercing may be other methods of adding body decoration. Early explorers in Texas mentioned “ritual painting [by the Indians] for ceremonies and raids, or tattooing to denote group affiliation” ([http://](http://www.texasbeyondhistory.net/.../index.html)

www.texasbeyondhistory.net/.../index.html). We propose that the Pahranagat PBAs’ body decorations, whether paint or tattoo, did serve as group affiliation or clan identifiers. With that in mind, we classified the motifs into nine categories:

- just vertical lines comprise 14% of the total
- just horizontal lines 14%
- just dots 11%
- lines with dots 7%
- line combinations 33%
- “rain pattern” 6%
- checkerboard or net 4%
- other 6%
- nothing 3%.

The category of line combinations seems to be the unifying interior motif since all the larger sites reflected this in high percentages.

Our study area extends from White River Narrows in the north to Bomber Wash in the south and from the Mt. Irish complex and the Shooting Gallery complex in the west to the Gathering in the east—approximately 1100 square miles. Using the motif clusters, we then matched the top two design percentages to the five largest sites: Mt. Irish complex, Petroglyph Village complex, the Gathering, Black Canyon, and the Shooting Gallery complex. As seen in Table 1, the line combination category unifies all sites. Although the Mt. Irish complex line combination pattern was secondary, it also showed a preference for 35 percent of just horizontal lines. The Petroglyph Village complex split their secondary preference with 18 percent in both categories of just horizontal lines and lines with dots. The Shooting

Table 1. Percent of interior designs by major sites.

	Mt. Irish	Petroglyph Village	Shooting Gallery	The Gathering	Black Canyon
Line combinations	31%	35%	46%	32%	30%
Just vertical lines				19%	
Just horizontal lines	35%	18%			
Just dots					24%
Lines with dots		18%			
Rain pattern			38%		
Checkerboard				17%	

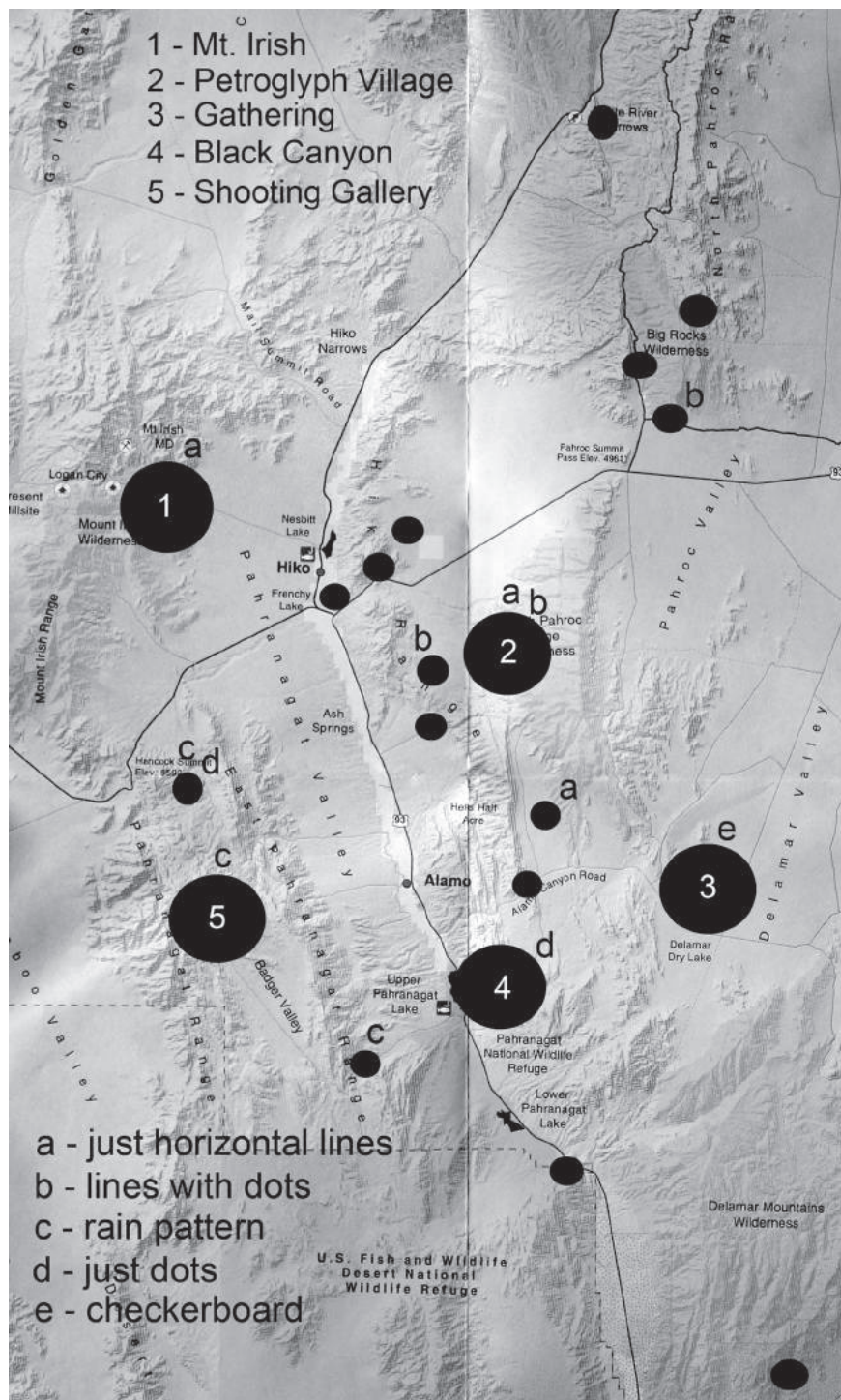


Figure 5. Sites affiliated by patterns. Big circles represent large site complexes, small circles represent smaller sites.

Gallery complex showed a 38 percent secondary preference for the rain pattern; the Gathering split secondary preferences—19 percent for just vertical lines and a 17 percent preference for checkerboard; finally, Black Canyon showed a secondary preference for just dots with 24 percent.

Some interesting patterns emerged when mapping this information (Figure 5). Since the unifying motif for all Pahranaगत PBA sites was the line combination pattern, we did not put this on our map. Instead, we noted the five main sites with large black circles and the peripheral sites with small black circles and associated the two by

secondary motif clusters. Secondary motifs are represented by an “a” for just horizontal lines, a “b” for lines with dots, a “c” for rain pattern, a “d” for just dots and an “e” for checkerboard. If these are indeed *clan markings*, then Red Hands and Starvation Rock are affiliated with the Petroglyph Village complex, which may in turn be affiliated with Joshua 1 and the Mt. Irish complex. The Shooting Gallery complex is affiliated with two others in this theory, the Kyle Site in the west and Spaceman in the south. The Kyle Site also has ties to Black Canyon whereas Spaceman does not. The Gathering has no affiliates.

Twenty-two percent of the Pahranaagat PBAs hold an object in their hand, 80 percent of which appear to be atlatls. Atlatl usage in the area is usually dated up to approximately A.D. 500 when the bow presumably took over. However, Grosscup (1960: 32, 64) pushes the date of the introduction of the bow back to about 1 B.C. (There are few bows represented in the rock art of the area, <10, but these petroglyphs are of a different style and not associated with either of our study figures.) No matter which date is used, the Pahranaagat boys appear to be pre-“Numic spread.”

Another held object is what appears to be netting, which would be a logical tool to use in the riparian areas for fish, birds, or other small game. So it would appear that the PBA represents a hunter utilizing atlatls and nets.

Atlatls may also serve another purpose, that of warfare. We think the inhabitants of the Pahranaagat area would have been very protective of their choice hunting and fishing locations. In fact, most of the Pahranaagat Men and PBAs overlook trails or are on high vantage points where distant intruders could be easily spotted.

There is another accoutrement grasped by the PBA occasionally, only four percent of the time, which looks like a stick. White (2008) has suggested

these are darts for atlatls, but we think these may be fending sticks. Fending sticks are indisputably weapons of war used to repel darts thrown by opponents’ atlatls. LeBlanc (1999:95, 106) describes fending sticks as short, often slightly curved having a thong to hold as a wrist strap. An artifact found by Alvin McLane at the Shooting Gallery resembles a fending stick. Not only does it appear to be the proper length but has a hole drilled in it, possibly for a thong. It is now in the Nevada State Museum and it would be interesting to get some dating on this. In addition, a repeated motif at the Gathering is that of opposing triangles, which, in the Puebloan world, represent warfare (Slifer 1998:97). So, with what appears to be a symbol of war, along with the atlatls and fending sticks, we can add warrior as well as hunter to the PBA’s role.

Using the atlatl and fending stick statistics, we superimposed the distribution of these by sites on our map, an “X” shape representing approximately 15 percent of atlatls in a zone (Figure 6). Mt. Irish complex is unique—of its 51 PBAs, only one holds an atlatl and there are no fending sticks. Eighteen percent of the PBAs in the Petroglyph Village zone hold atlatls and one fending stick, 19 percent at the Gathering hold atlatls with one fending stick. The results at the Shooting Gallery complex and Black Canyon were surprising and unexpected. Sixty-two percent of the PBAs at the Shooting Gallery complex grip atlatls and 15 percent of them bear fending sticks. Twenty-nine percent of the PBAs in Black Canyon grasp atlatls and eight percent also hold fending sticks. Why the disparity of atlatls and fending sticks in the south and west? Were the inhabitants of these areas in frequent conflict with outsiders attempting to move into a rich resource area? Or, could this be a tally of internecine contests to exploit nearby resource areas?

In conclusion, it can be seen from the evidence we have collected from the rock art that the Pahranaagat PBAs were more important than the

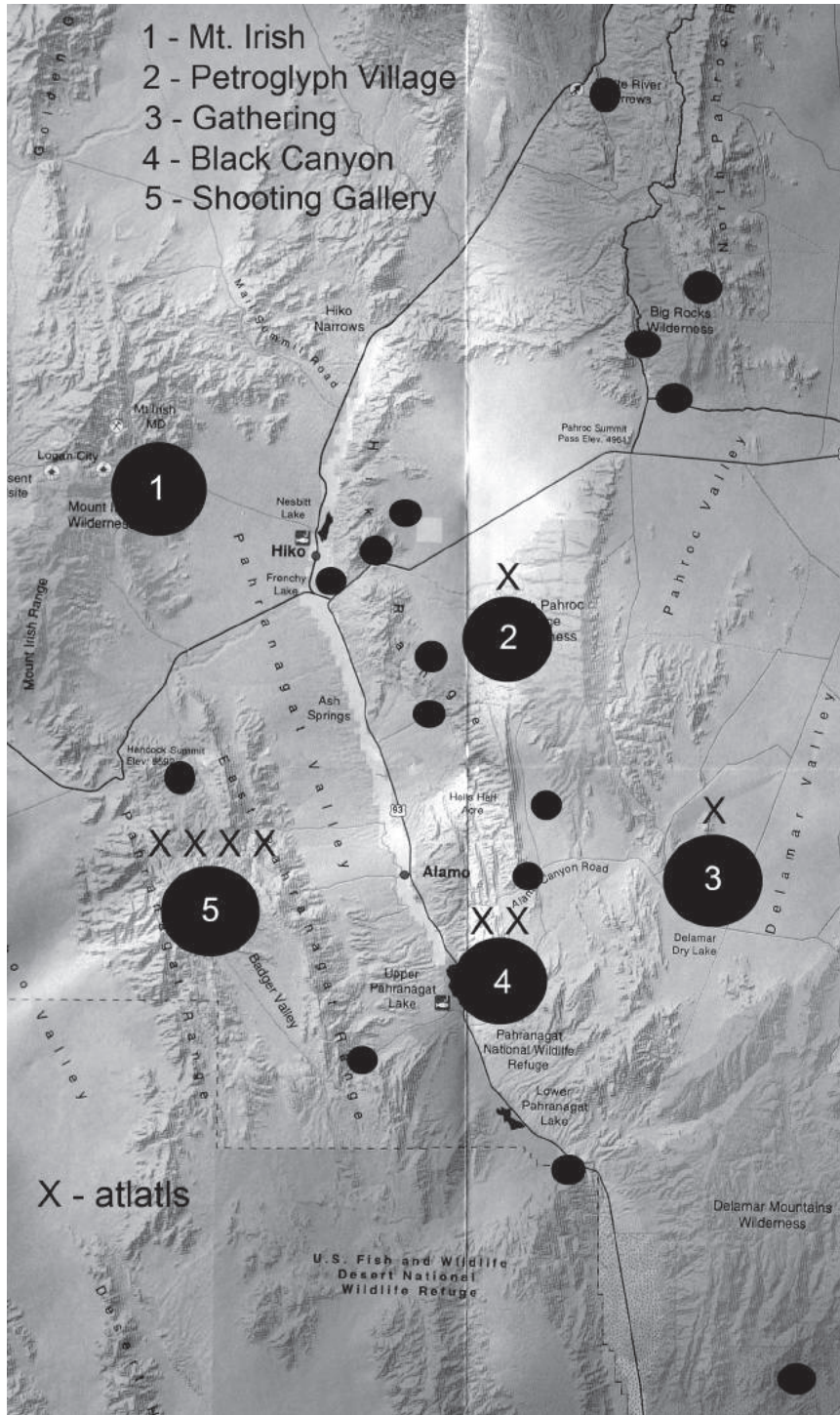


Figure 6. *Atlatl/fending stick distribution by large site complexes.*

Pahrnagat Men. Our theories regarding clan identity and warfare were also derived from analyses of the rock art, and we would like to challenge the archaeological community to prove or disprove them. Moreover, because of the web of interconnected data and the questions raised by it, we would like to recommend that the whole

Pahrnagat area be given greater state and federal protection. Pahrnagat rock art is unique not only in Nevada. Nowhere else in the United States can one find a pair of anthropomorphs replicated repeatedly in such a large area. These are truly—heroes of the Pahrnagat.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Invaluable help was provided by Bob Clabaugh, Penny Clabaugh, Angela Cole, Scott Holmes, David Lee, Anne McConnell, LeRoy Unglaub, and William White.

REFERENCES CITED

Geib, Phil R.

1998 *Glen Canyon Revisited*. Anthropological Papers, No. 119, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City.

Green, Eileen

1985 The Pahrnagat Anthropomorphs, Lincoln County, Nevada. Paper presented at the twelfth annual meeting of the American Rock Art Research Association, Santa Barbara, California.

Grosscup, Gordon L.

1960 *Archaeological Survey No. 52 The Culture History of Lovelock Cave, Nevada*. Reports of the University of California The University of California Archaeological Survey, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, California.

Kent, Kate Peck

1957 The Cultivation and Weaving of Cotton in the Prehistoric Southwestern United States. *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol 47.

LeBlanc, Steven

1998 *Prehistoric Warfare in the American Southwest*. University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Perlmutter, David D.

1999 *Visions of War: Picturing Warfare from the Stone Age to the Cyber Age*. St. Martin's Griffin, New York, New York.

Slifer, Dennis

1998 *Signs of Life: Rock Art of the Upper Rio Grande*. Ancient City Press. Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Stoney, Steve

1991 Has the Pahrnagat Man Passed Your Way? In *Utah Rock Art*, Vol. 11, edited by B. Jane Bush and Sarah Bush, Section 12, pp. 1–8. Utah Rock Art Research Association, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Teague, Lynn S.

1998 *Textiles in Southwestern Prehistory*. University of New Mexico Press. Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Webster, Laurie D.

2007 Ritual Costuming at Pottery Mound. In *New Perspective on Pottery Mound Pueblo*, edited by Polly Schaafsma, pp. 167–205. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

White, William

2008 Pahrnagat Representational Rock Art Style. Paper Presented at the thirty-seventh annual conference, Nevada Archaeological Association, Minden, Nevada.