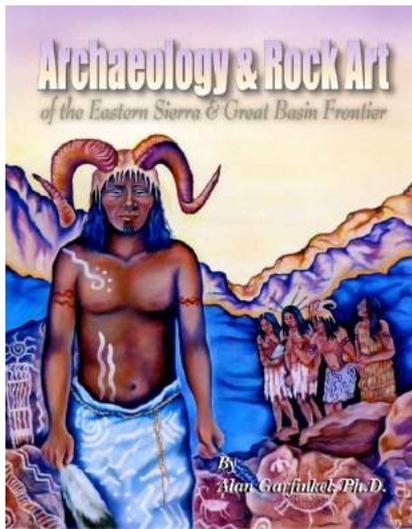


# Myth, Ritual, and Rock Art: Decorated Animal-People and the Coso Animal Master

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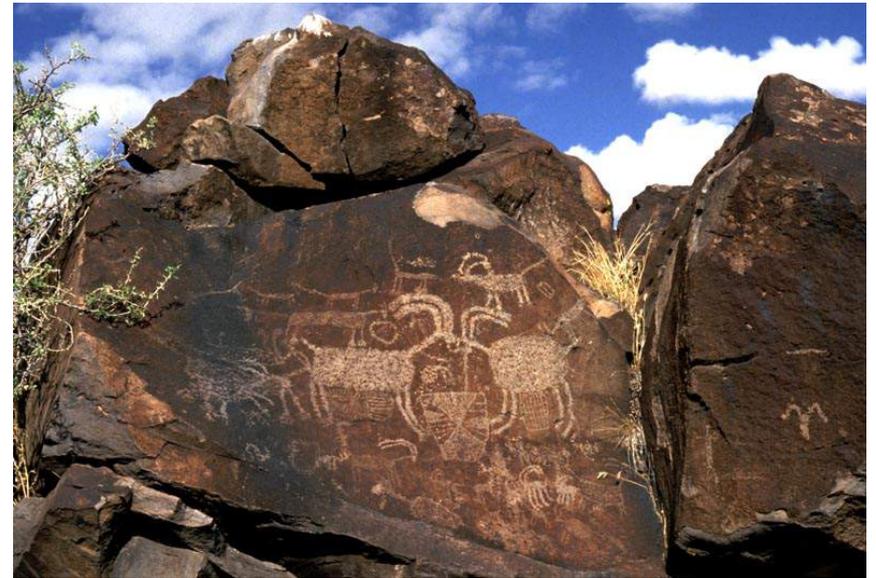


# Presentation Organization

- Interpreting Rock Art
- Major Schools of Rock Art Interpretation
- Focus on Two Themes: Shamanism and Vision Questing versus Oral Tradition and Cosmology
- Nature of the Criticism and the Response to these Critiques
- Coso as a Case Study: Decorated Animal Persons
- Kawaiisu Oral Traditions and The Yahwera Stories
- Use Animal Master as Possible Metaphor
- Close With Possible Resolution of Contrasting Models

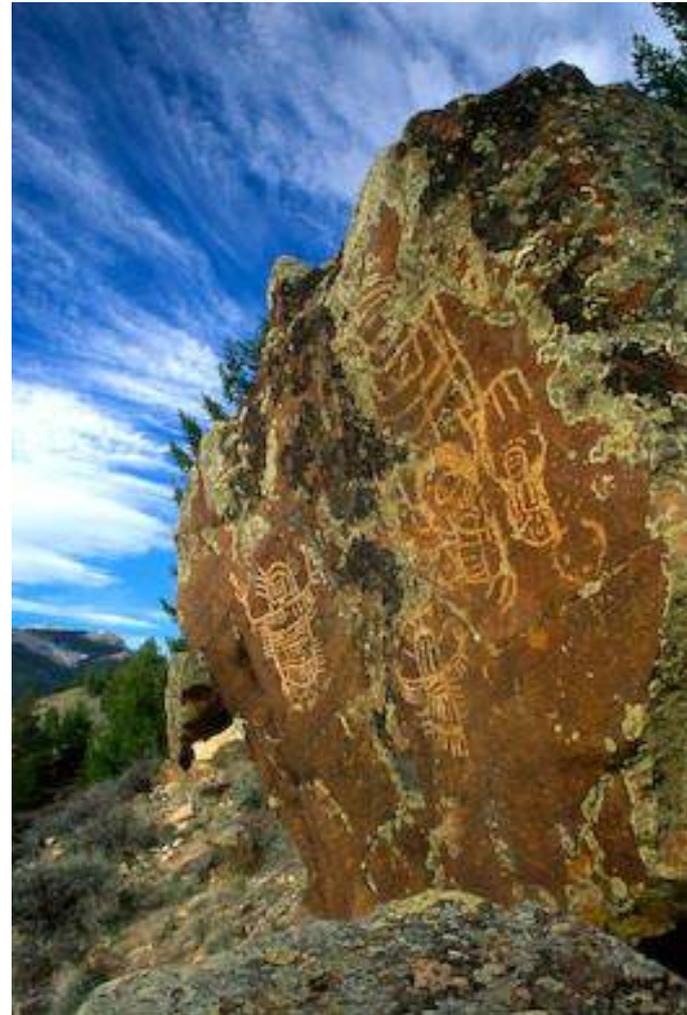
# Interpreting Rock Art

- Interpretations are only as good as the evidence they are based on...
- What's the message?
- Who made it?
- When did they make it?
- Why did they fashion it?
- What does it mean?
- How did it function in the context of the culture that produced it?

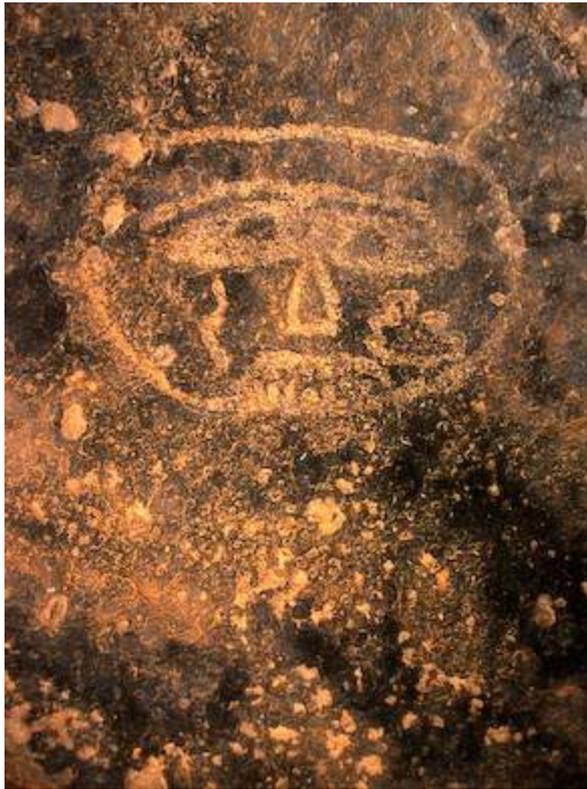


# Interpreting Rock Art

- Must be evidence based...
- Evidence must be thoroughly studied
- Some theories have been poorly developed.
- Based on little to no evidence.
- Or evidence appears to have been selectively culled for support – without consideration of alternative working hypotheses.



# Interpreting Rock Art



- Difficult to imply meaning to imagery
- Images mean different things to different people within a culture
- May mean one thing to the person that made the image, another to a person who views it
- May imply many meanings simultaneously – multivalent, polysemic

# Interpreting Rock Art

- Meanings can change over time
- Same image might mean very different things during its evolution over time or to different cultures viewing that image
- Images could be developed to depict oral traditions or myths or Native explanations might be created to explain the images within rock art...



# Interpreting Rock Art



- Rock art is often misinterpreted due to isolation from its archaeological and landscape context
- Rock art often (but not always) is part of a religious context
- Can be best interpreted by understanding the ideology, cosmology and culture of those who manufactured the imagery
- Basic question: Who were they?

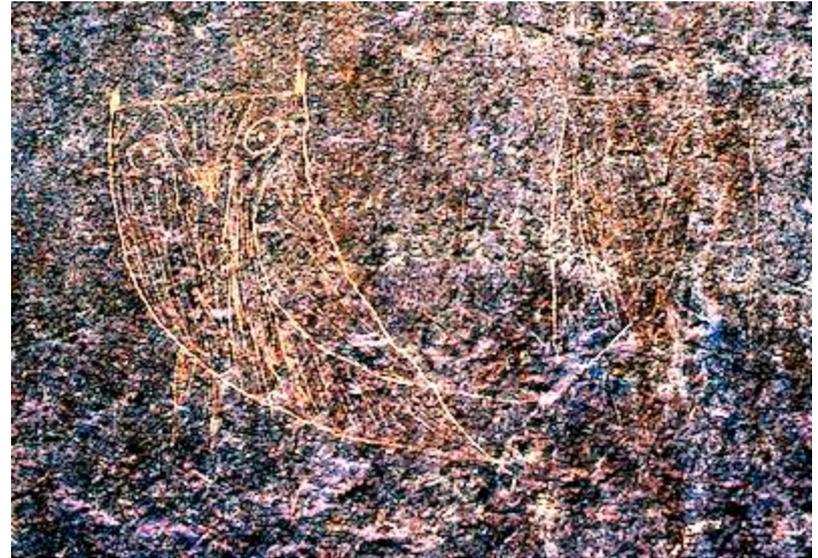
# Interpreting Rock Art

- Why were they here?
- What were their main preoccupations?
- What were their beliefs?
- What were their oral traditions, mythology?
- What rituals, ceremonies did they have?
- How did they reckon time?
- What were the most important rites of passage?



# Major Interpretive Models for Meaning and Function in Rock Art

- Hunting magic, animal ceremonialism, and increase rites
- Shamanism, vision quests
- Oral traditions / mythology
- Archaeoacoustics
- Archaeoastronomy
- Rites of passage
- Rain and human fertility
- Clan symbols
- Historical events



# Hunting Magic



- Oldest interpretive platform and one of the most popular during earliest attempts to understand rock art
- Based (in part) on the distribution of rock art along game migration trails
- Purportedly the most discredited and I believe the most misunderstood
- Major central postulate: game animals were immortal (often ignored in discussions on this explanation)

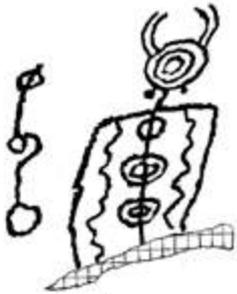
# Hunting Magic



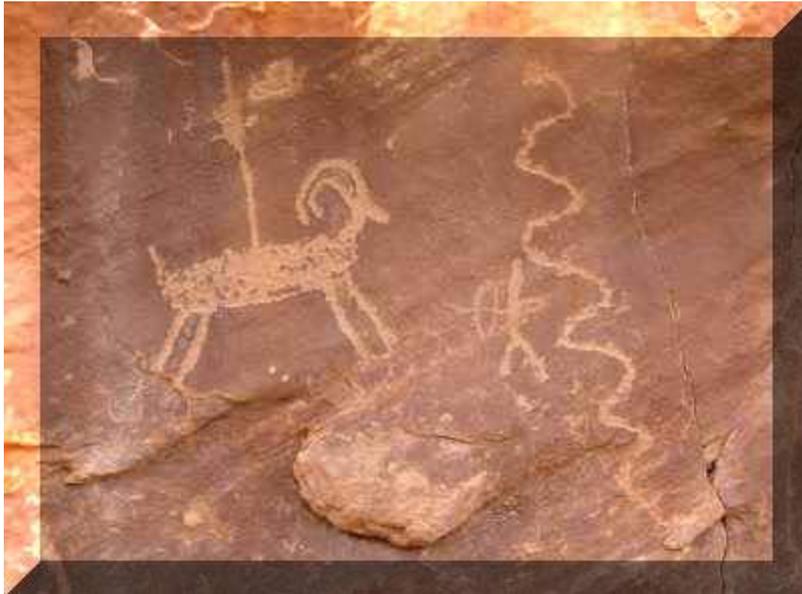
- Foragers conduct ceremonies in association with the hunt.
- These activities share elements of animal ceremonialism and the journey of ascent and descent typical of forager cosmology worldwide.
- The first half of that cycle emphasized death and post-mortem rites.
- It began with a fall festival, communal feast, pantomime dance and sing, ancestor worship, and animal funeral.



# Hunting Magic

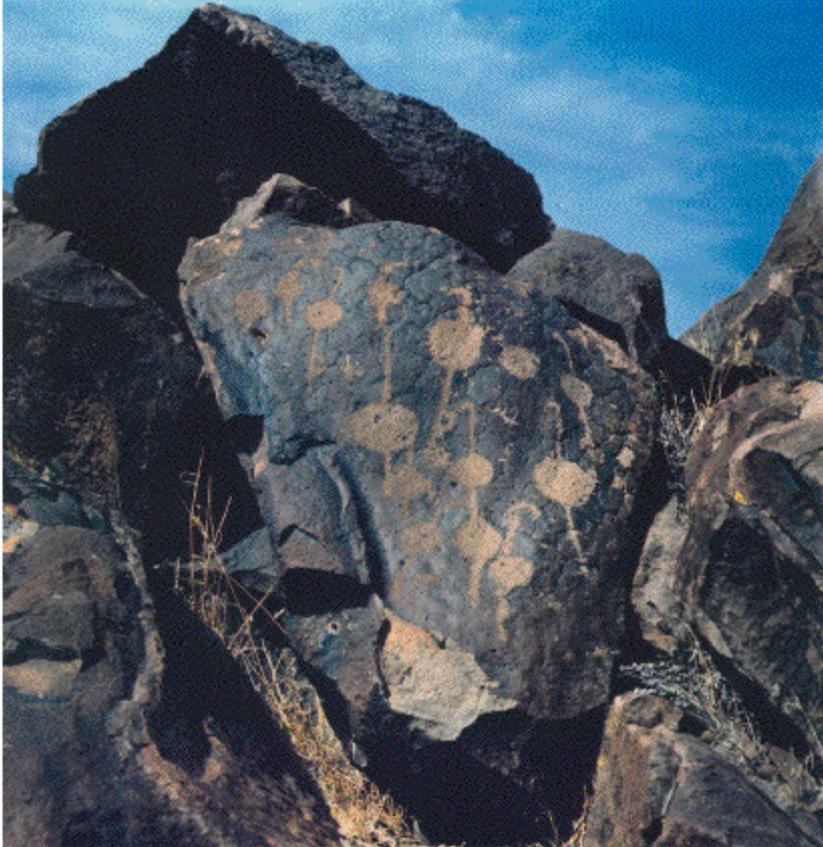


8a



- An annual ceremony of rejuvenation was timed to the new season of vegetation, normally in the spring, intended to bring humans back into harmony with the universe.
- This was the occasion to affirm the common origin of the tribe and emphasized rebirth, magnification of game animals, and a reassurance of success in the coming years.

# Hunting Magic



- Those rites would complete the journey with the re-emergence of animals into the human world.
- The cosmic journey would finish as the game animals were led back into the world through emergence sites typically associated with underworld portals (springs, seeps, fumaroles, cracks in rocks, lakes, rivers, caves, rockshelters, etc.).

# Hunting Magic

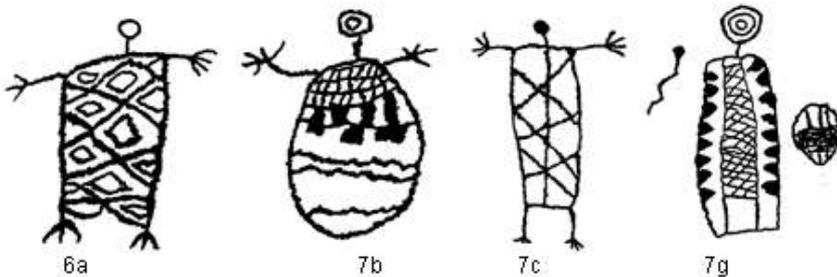
- Many traditional hunting cultures represent an immortal Master (or Mistress) of the Animals as a central religious figure.
- Rock art may invoke the aid of this supernatural being and promote the deity's fertilizing power.
- Hence, hunting magic may concern more than simply hunting and be about “increase rites” and the cosmic regeneration of the universe.



# Critiques



- The *ethnographic record* failed to support analogs for “*hunting magic*” among foraging cultures worldwide.
- *The subject matter* portrayed few animals as “wounded”.
- Animals were shown escaping hunters.
- Dance scenes, rituals, ceremonial artifacts, and patterned-bodied “shamans” had little to do with hunting success per se.
- Most locations did not provide evidence for *communal kills of game*.
- Rock art sites lacked associated hunting blinds, butchery sites, and other hunting features.
- The animals depicted played only a small part in the *diet of the artisans*.



# Responses to Critiques

- Ethnographic record does show an extensive emphasis on animal ceremonialism and hunting rituals.
- Animal depictions might equate with increase rather than depicting their death.
- Evidence for communal kills in some cases does exist.
- Some evidence, in certain cases, does show associations with hunting blinds, dummy hunters, and drive features.
- In some instances animals portrayed are a major meat source and prey focus.
- Animals depicted are good to think and not necessarily just good to eat!

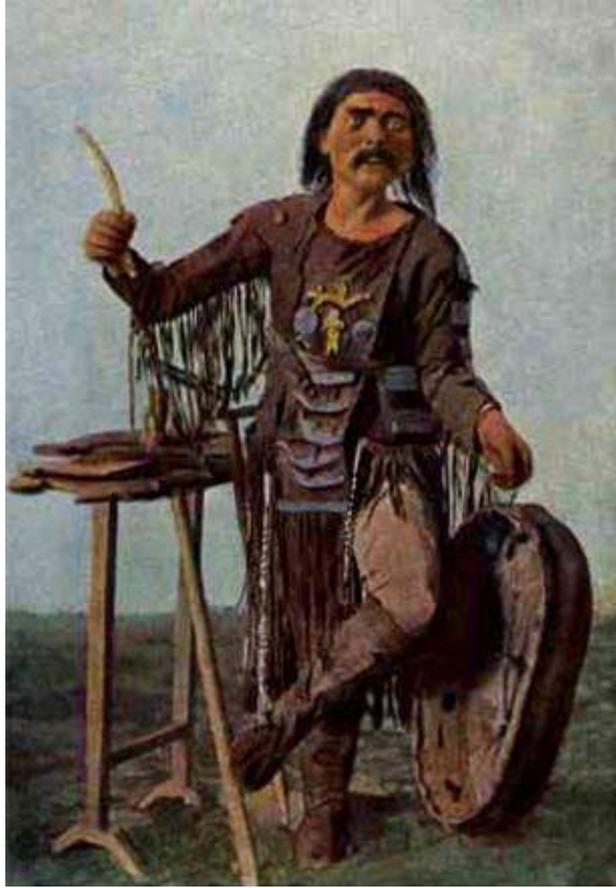


# Shamanism and Vision Quests

- Many anthropologists assume that the oldest religions center on individual shamanic rituals.
- Shamans are part-time religious practitioners who perform rituals on behalf of individual clients when called on to do so.
- These ritual adepts are accepted as specialists because of their personal charisma and established reputation as successful practitioners.



# Shamanism and Vision Quests



- They often enter trance states during their ritual performances and may alter established rituals, as they feel inspired; to accommodate the particular needs of specific clients.
- Some rock art researchers argue that rock art images were made by shamans recording their visions or dreams experience under an altered state of consciousness.

# Shamanism and Vision Quests



- Debate rages over a proposition that all (or most all) paintings and petroglyphs (pecked or incised into the rock) attributable to ancient and to contemporary hunter-gatherers are attempts by shamans to depict what they see in trance.

# Shamanism and Vision Quests



- Proponents assert that images were made by individual shamans recording the visions they experienced during altered states of consciousness.
- Geometric motifs are asserted as entoptic phenomena—the product of our optical system.
- The more naturalistic or traditional images are culturally determined symbols that were seen during vision quests.
- Animals depicted were central motifs identified as a shaman's spirit helper (or animal guardians).

# Shamanism and Vision Quests

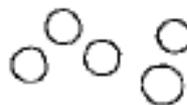


- Direct contact with spirits and access to the spirit world.
- Acquisition of power through dreams in which the shaman receives spirit helpers, songs, ritual paraphernalia, and instructions on the application of power.
- Use of power in ways that concern others, usually for desirable purposes such as curing and game charming.

# Critiques

- Proponents of visionary/shamanic origins of rock art tend to interpret many instances as visions or hallucinations of ritual adepts.
- Opponents point out that acquisition of power comes in vivid dreams, as the term is understood in modern usage.
- Ethnography does not explicitly support notions that trance-related acquisition of power produces visions reproduced in rock art.
- Some evidence supports the depiction of guardian spirits.
- Some scientists assert that the three-stage neuropsychological model is not supported by neuropsychology, ethnography, or the rock art itself.
- It is much more narrowly developed for only certain classes of psychotropic plants.

Entoptic Phosphemes



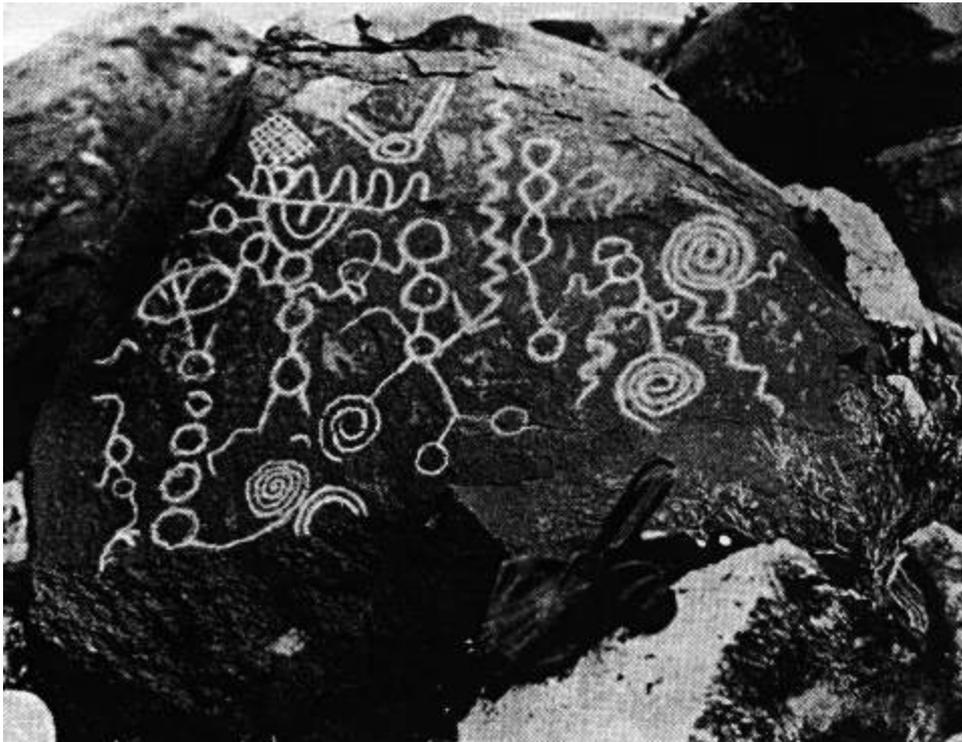
Equivalent Coso Rock Art Motifs



# Critiques

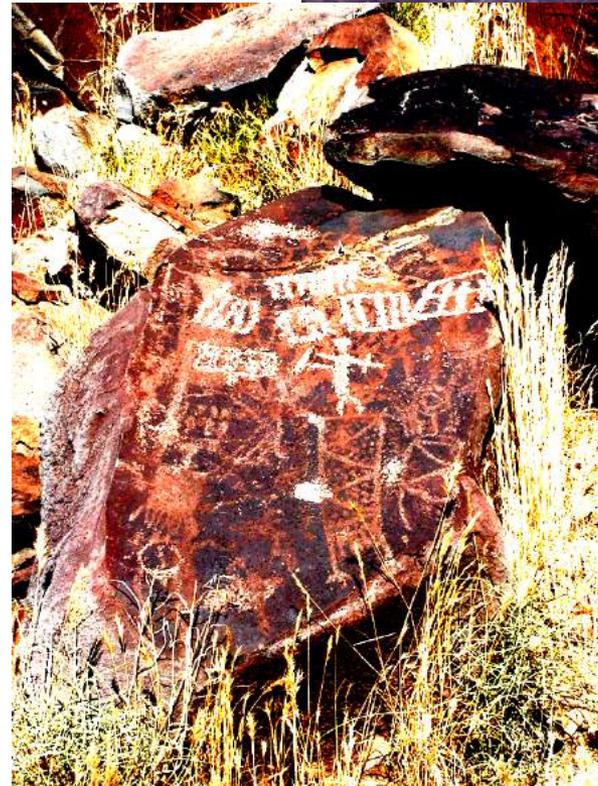
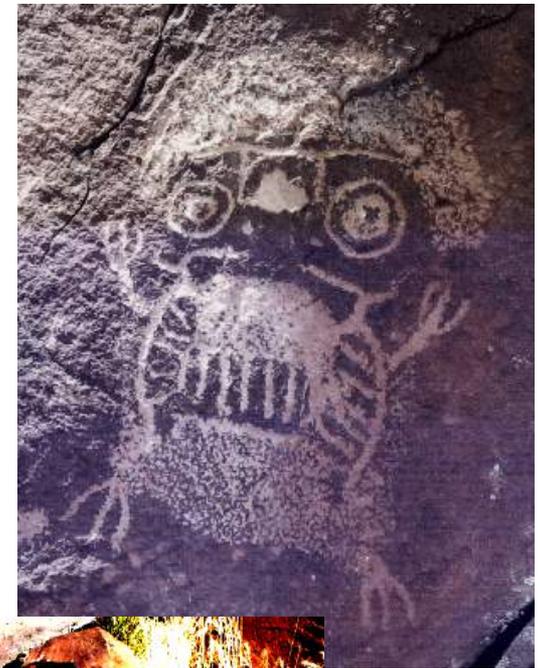


- Ethnographic record often does not clearly support shamanic origins of rock art.
- Cognitive neuroscience and three stage trance model developed from the use of mescaline does not apply to other forms of altered states.
- Some ethnographic references indicate commoners also depict their dreams in rock paintings – not just ritual adepts (aka shamans).



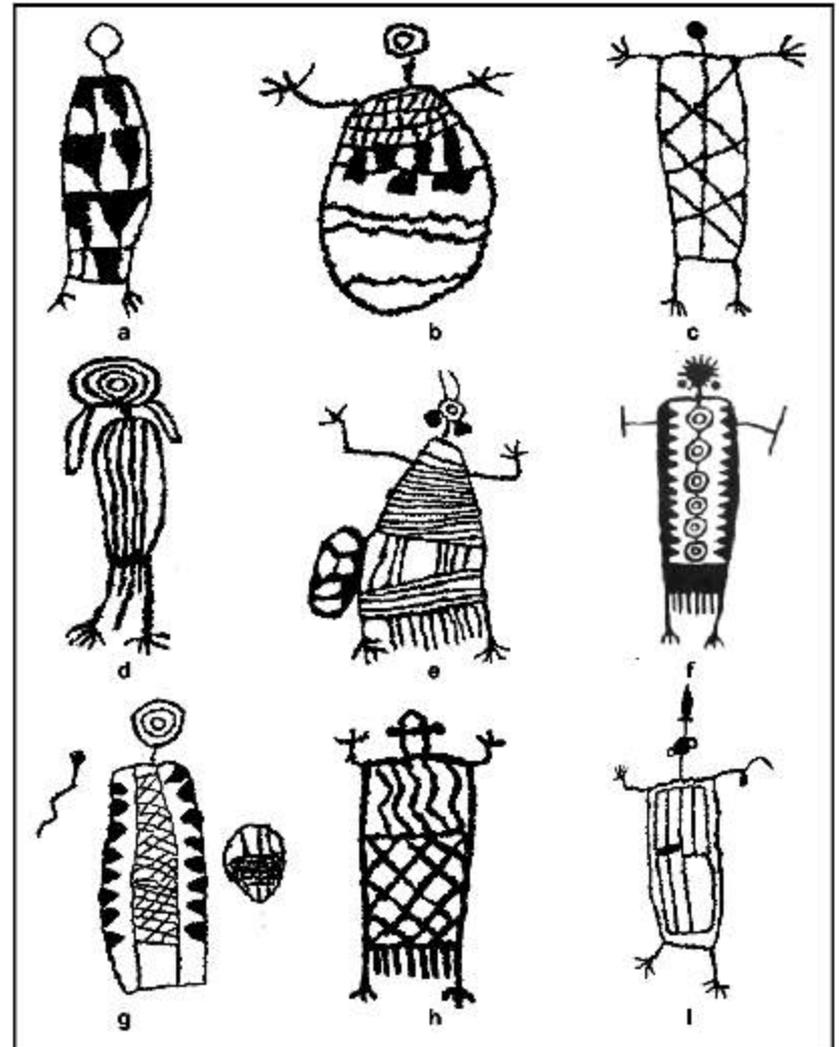
# Critiques

- Abstract, universalistic trance model does not allow for the necessary variability among diverse cultures and groups.
- Some researchers have offered that it is the local mythologies (oral traditions) that most prominently influenced the dreams or visions of native peoples in altered states of consciousness – hence the primary driver of rock art content is oral traditions.

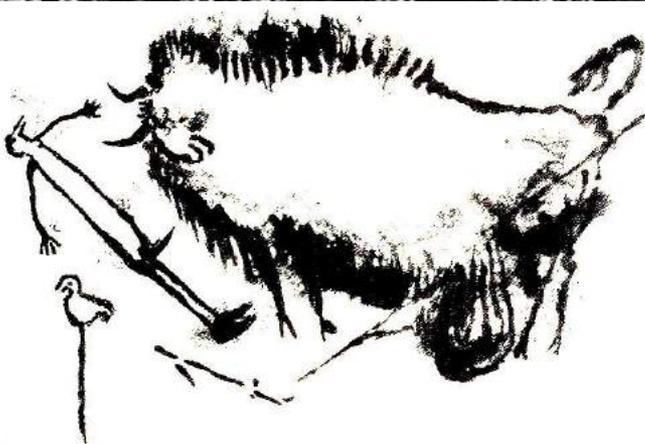


# Critiques

- Ethnographic data supports the notion that some rock art is ceremonial and a function of rituals (rites of passage) specifically puberty.
- Some evidence supports the position that rock art was associated with the acquisition of power, but that power could certainly have been acquired or manifested by common individuals instead of exclusively shamans.
- They didn't necessarily need to be associated with a trance or an element of non-ordinary reality but simply from ordinary dreams.



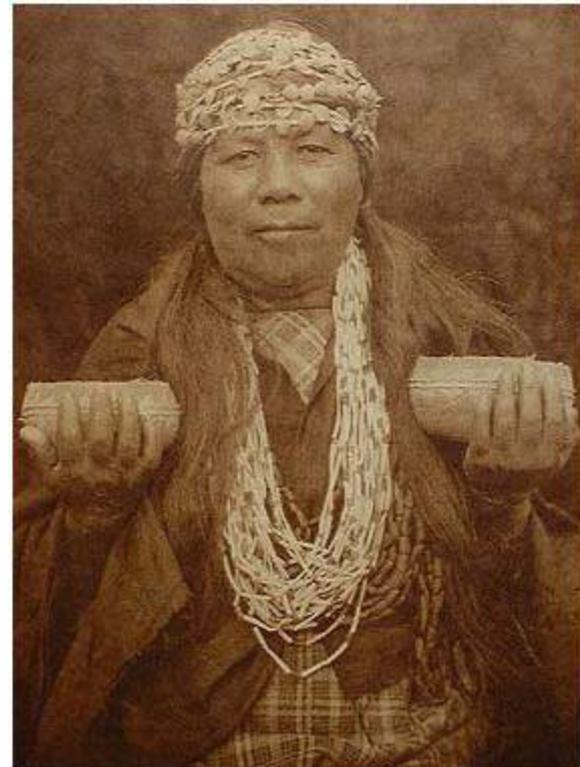
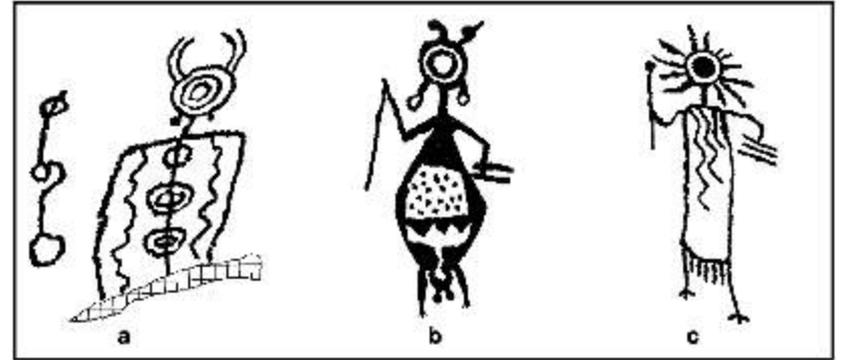
# Critiques



- Religious ecstasy is most commonly experienced during an altered state of consciousness and is a nearly universal phenomena, but shamanism is not.
- Mythology needs to be given particularly serious consideration where animal-humans are depicted in art.

# Responses to Critiques

- Definition of shamanism can be applied more generally and does fit nicely with actions of ritualists in many parts of the world – including much of North American (especially California and the Great Basin)
- Some ethnographic data broadly seems to support the notion of the general association in some cases with the production and use of rock art.

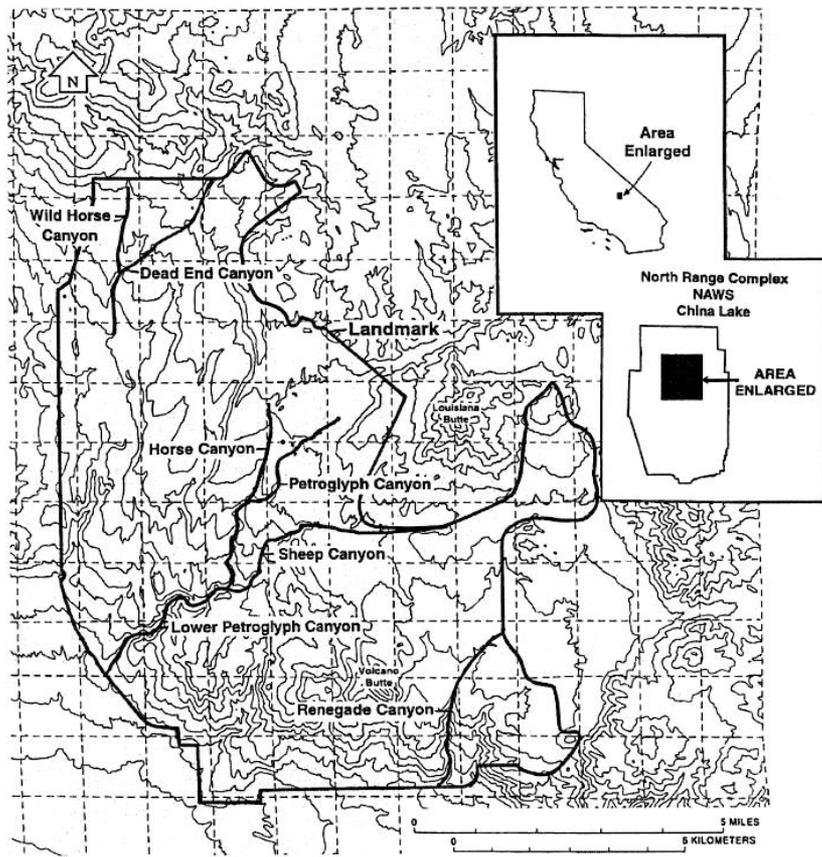


# False Dichotomy – Potential Resolution

- False dichotomy where it is more likely that both sides of the argument are partly correct and neither side is completely right (cf. Meighan 1998).
- Close the gap and at the same time clarify the interpretive framework and ideological context for animal ceremonialism and symbolism.
- Use foraging cultures and the iconography from the Coso Range as a central talking point.

# Coso Range, Eastern California





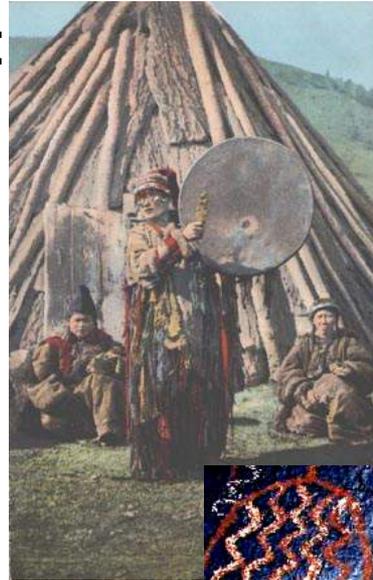
# Coso Rock Drawings

- 100,000 + pictures
- Restricted 90 sq. mi. area
- Mostly sheep (20-40%), startling in realism
- Distinctive in rendition, 700+ decorated animal humans
- Drawings in open-air “galleries” along canyon rims and faces



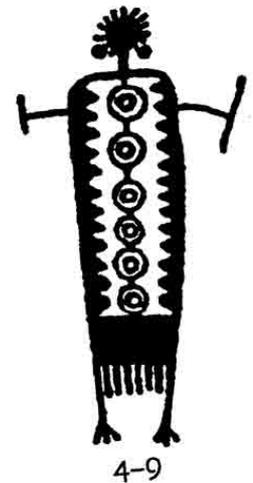
# The Function of Indian Rock Drawings and Paintings

- Two predominant models: shamanism or hunting magic / cosmology.
- Although really many reasons: environmental, religious, artistic, social.
- All influenced rock art – not a singular explanation, likely changed over time and was “polysemous” – having multiple meanings simultaneously



# Decorated Animal Humans: Shamans or the Animal Master Immortal?

- Shamanism
- Individual vision questing
- Use of jimsonweed or other means to enter the world of the supernatural
- Bird is metaphor to flight
- Fringe on garment for ritualist – shaman's "coat"



# Journey of Ascent-Descent

- Animal ceremonialism and hunting religions – animals are immortal – do not die but are reborn!
- First half: Descent, death and post-mortem rites
  - Animal funeral – provides proper reverence to deceased, skull showcased on a tree or pole
  - Autumnal festival and communal feast
  - Group pantomime dances and sings
  - Ancestor worship



# Journey of Ascent



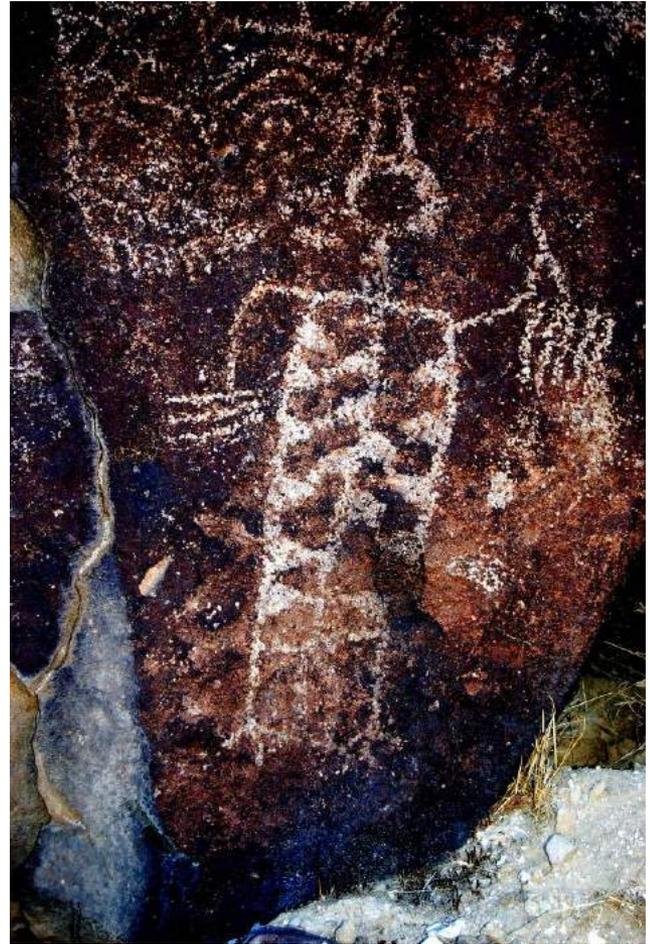
- Second half: Spring season – time of world renewal and revival ceremonies / rejuvenation theme:
- Affirms common origin of the tribe
  - Brings humans back into harmony with the world
  - Emphasis on rebirth, multiplication of game/resources, and continued success of tribe's way of life
  - Re-emergence, where animals ascend from underworld by portals (springs, seeps, rivers, streams, caves, cracks in the rock, etc.)

# Rosetta Stone: Animal Ceremonialism



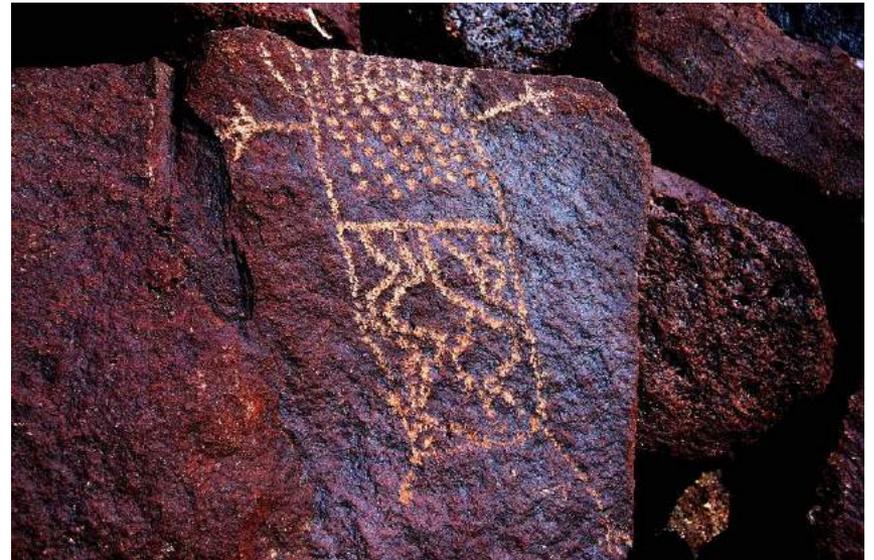
# Decorated Animal Humans: Shamans or the Animal Master Immortal?

- Animal Master is the dominant figure of hunting societies worldwide
- A supernatural animal-human deity
- Deity figures prominently in oral history

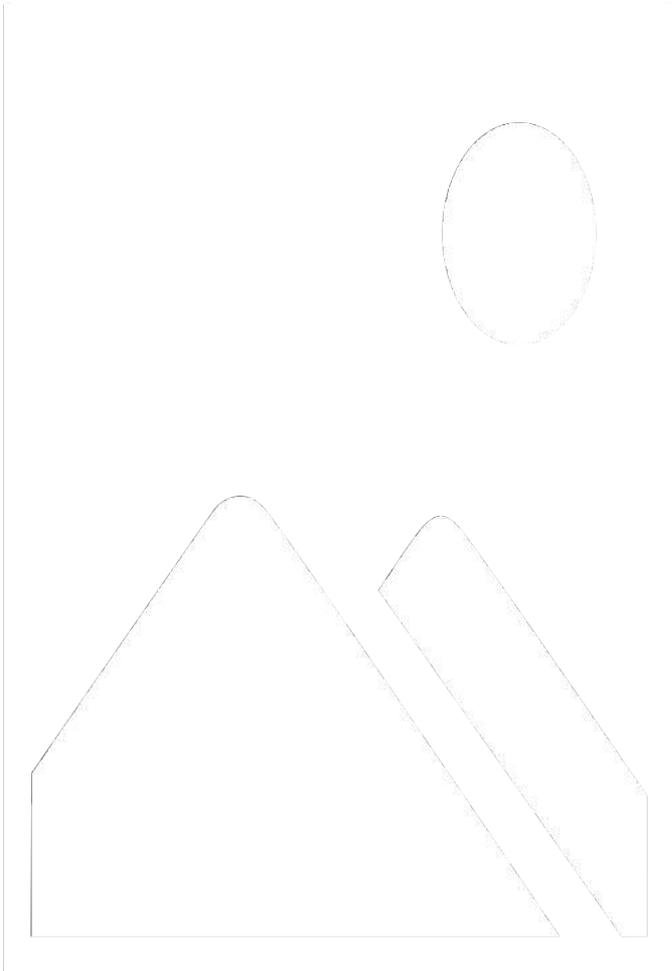


# Decorated Animal Humans: Shamans or the Animal Master Immortal?

- A guardian that protects, controls & regenerates all the game animals
- Can offer or withhold game from humans
- Has the form of a bird-human in N. Uto-aztecan (Numic [Kawaiisu, Ute] and Tubatulabal) oral history.



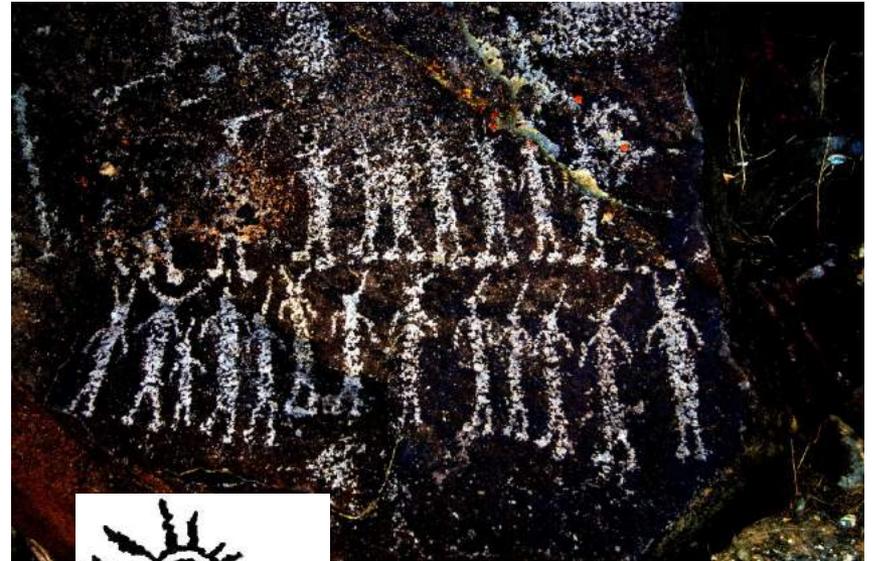
# *Yahwera*



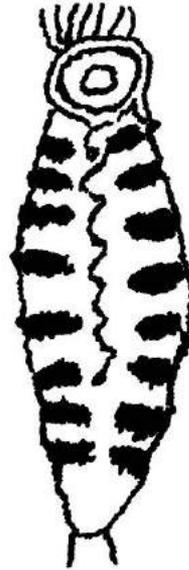
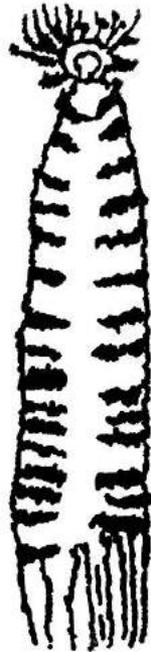
- Lord of the Underworld in Kawaiisu oral narratives – Zigmund and Barras
- Responsible for the regeneration of deceased game animals
- Many voices – can sound like many animals, often comes as a quail and associated with quail
- Feather blanket, quail feather robe, quail feather skirt
- Fathers many quail children

# Yahwera

- Also Identified as a yellow bird – small hawk
- Lives in the underworld, in a deep hole
- Guarded by a giant snake, grizzly and brown bear
- Provides medicine power for ailing humans – songs or dances
- Provides human visitors with inexhaustible food supply – acorn, pinyon, or deer meat



Comes as quail, may have a quail  
blanket or robe

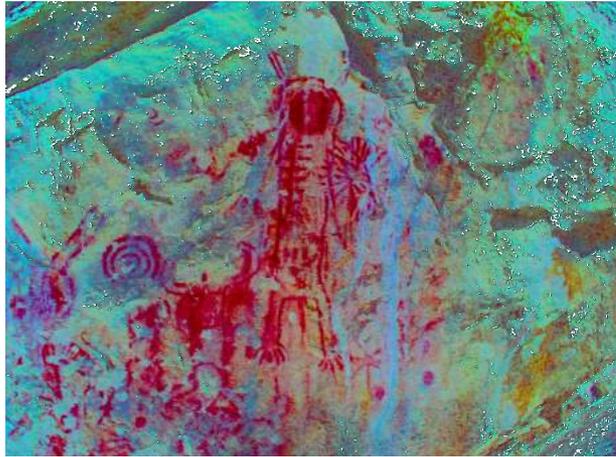


# *Yahwera*



- Can provide good luck for hunters
- Displays successful hunting weaponry on the walls of his home
- Indeterminate sex

# *Yahwe'era Kahniina* (*Yahwera's House*)



- Located in Back Canyon, Walker Basin
- Portal to power
- Limestone pillar and spring
- Echophonic qualities and sounds
- Lunar calendrics
- Traditional story told of *Yahwera*, Master of the Animals

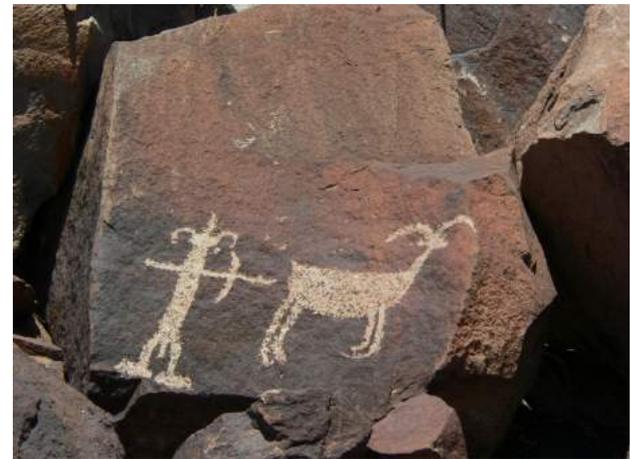
# *Yahwera*'s House

- One entrance is there in Back Canyon – home is a hole in that rock.
- Another entrance is a cave on Indian Creek. (Marie Girado, Lida, and Dorothy at the cave.)
- When you visit you see many different animals – deer, bear, etc.
- These were animal people who spoke just like the Kawaiisu.
- Near the mouth of the tunnel the man saw bows and arrows. These were the weapons by which deer were killed. The deer leave them when they go inside *Yahwera*'s house.
- The man also saw the horns of all the deer that have been killed. *Yahwera* said that the deer were not really dead.



# *Yahwera*'s House

- There were many different kinds of luck on the cave walls.
- The man saw a bow and arrow of a good hunter in a prominent place and the bows and arrows of inferior hunters in subordinate positions.



# *Yahwera*'s House

- The man took something for his luck. The man began to walk through the tunnel.
- He stumbled and climbed over a large gopher snake (*kogo*).



# Yahwera's House



4-14

- Farther along he came to a rattlesnake, as big as a log (*tugubaziiti-bi*) and he climbed over it.



# *Yahwera*'s House



- Then there was a brown bear (*mo'orii-zhi*) that he passed by and then he came to a grizzly bear (*pogwiti*) and went past it.
- Then he didn't see any other animals.

# Yahwera's House



- He kept walking and he saw *Yahwera*.
- *Yahwera* wore a **mountain quail** feather blanket. He looked like a **hawk**.
- The man said he was sick and wanted to get well. *Yahwera* knew all about his illness without being told.
- *Yahwera* gave him some acorn mush, pinyon, or deer meat, and every time he ate some the same amount reappeared. He couldn't eat it all! He gave it back to *Yahwera*.

# *Yahwera*'s House



- *Yahwera* took him into a room where he kept the medicine.
- *Yahwera* asked him which of the songs he wanted and named all the songs. The man took a song.
- The man was ready to return home, so he kept going to the other end of the tunnel.

# Exiting *Yahwera*'s House



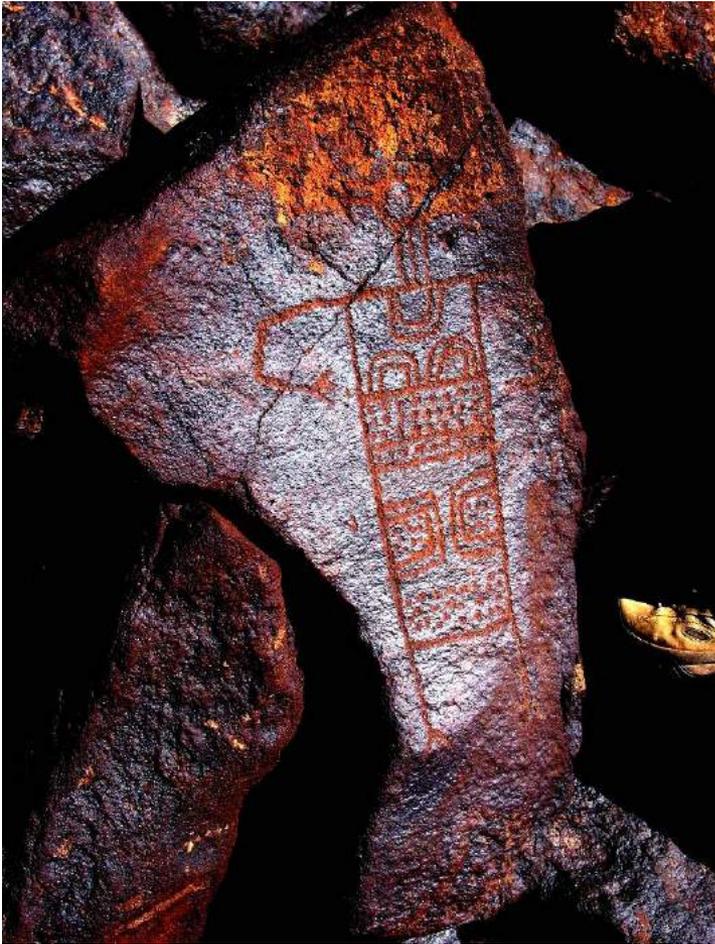
- He saw water that was like a window but it wasn't water, he passed through and didn't get wet.
- He came out and found he had exited far away from the entrance *in the desert* somewhere (**Redrock Canyon or Little Lake**) and wasn't sick anymore.
- He had been gone for a long time and his relatives didn't know where he had been.

# Coso Decorated Animal–Persons

- Decorated animal humans – 700+
- Many appear to be bird-humans.
- Most have avian legs and over 70% are depicted with avian feet
- Some hold hunting gear – spears, atlatls, staff, or bolo stones
- In some the right arm is bent upwards
- Some the left arm holds foreshafts or rabbit sticks
- When headdressed frequently have feathers or quail plumes



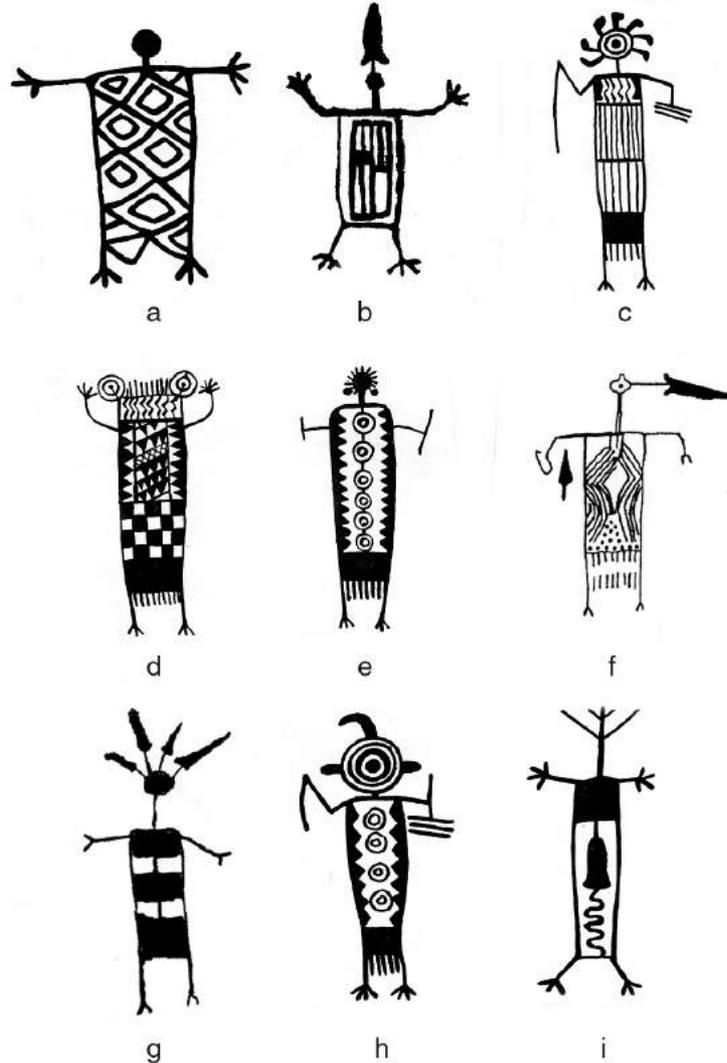
# Characteristic Coso Images



- Hunting Equipment
- Association with snakes
- Depiction with blankets
- Association with bowls of seeds, mist, or water
- Image both male and female  
(androgynous?)

# Coso Yahwera Images

- Bird legs
- and feet



# Coso Decorated Animal Humans with Quail Feathers



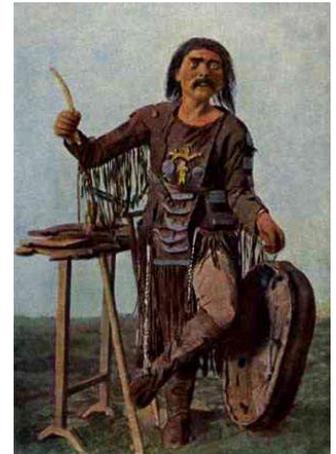
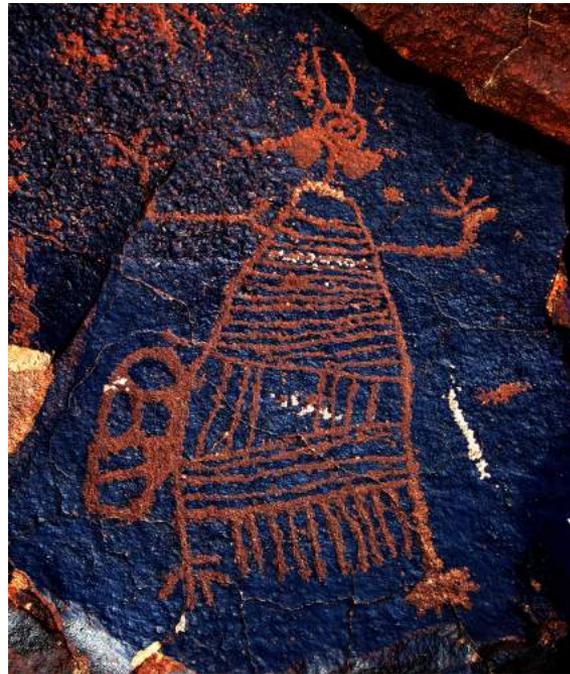
# Coso Decorated Animal Humans with Quail Feathers



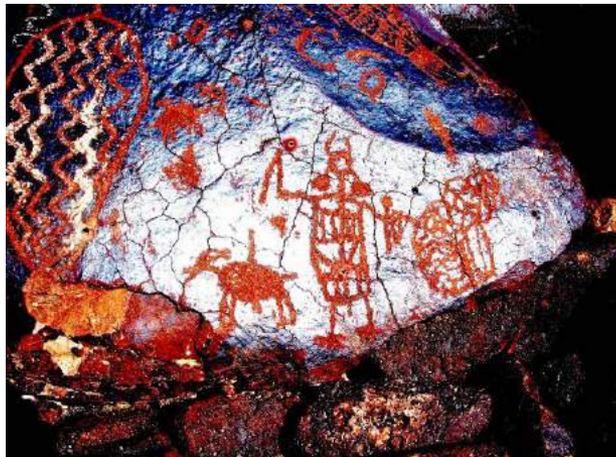
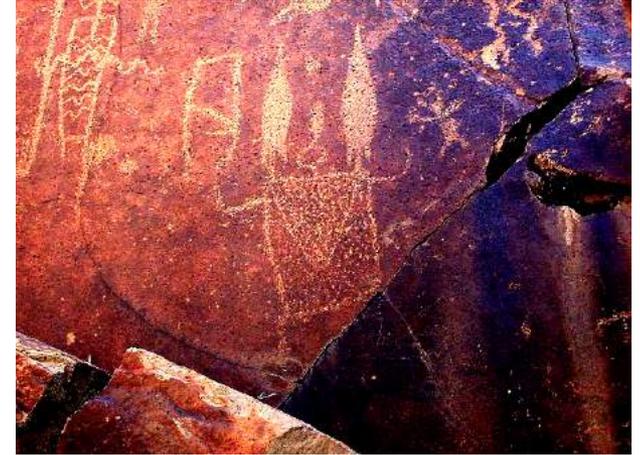
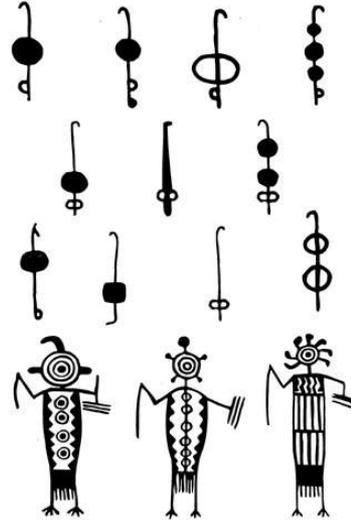


# Coso Images

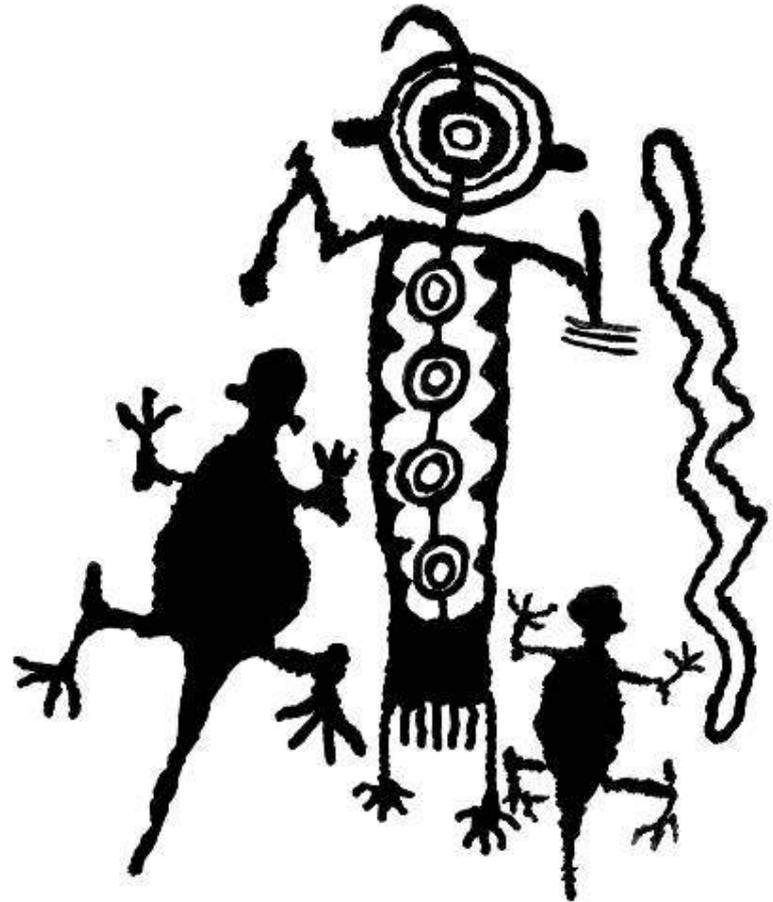
- Wears fringed garment, rain curtain symbol, or pubic fringe (or vagina dentata)?



# Associated With Hunting Weaponry



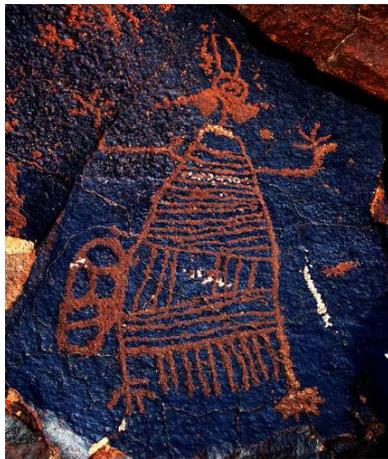
# Yahwera and Coso Animal Persons



# Yahwera and Coso Animal Persons

- Concentric circles faces and elements – hole or tunnel?
- With feathers (103) and quail plumes (n=23)
- Associated with animals (guardians of the underworld) – quail, turtles, snakes, chuckwallas
- Many have bird-like legs, 192 (72.1%) have avian feet with talons
- Hunting weaponry common – poro (shamans and wand of revivification), bull-roarer or sling, atlatl, dart points and foreshafts.
- Food, seeds, bowls, rain and baskets
- Rake or fringe? Shamanism
- Large iconic images with claws or talons

# Conclusions



- Iconic image is ancient (5000 BC, lowermost in this slide) but most date from Newberry Period ca. 2000 BC to AD 500. Precisely dated by associated projectile points and XRF.
- Quantity, subject matter, thematic consistency, exposed (public rather than private) character, locations within sheep trap complexes (hunting behavior, hunting features)
- Oral tradition and rock art images suggests animal ceremonialism, group increase rites, and a complementary meaning relating to religious hunting magic for older Northern Utoaztecan (pre-Numic) population.

# Conclusions

- Can we suggest then that Coso PBAs are best interpreted not as trance metaphors, but in relation to Numic mythology and religious beliefs? No, not really.
- The question then arises: if the therianthrope (animals and humans) Coso figures are indeed mythological beings how can they also be Coso shamans portraying themselves in altered states of consciousness?
- The solution lies in understanding the significance of Numic and Pre-Numic (Northern Utoaztecan) mythology and cosmology.

# Conclusions

- As David Whitley has so eloquently merged these various levels of meaning, the symbolism of Great Basin rock art drawings may simultaneously represent both the **source** of supernatural power and the dream and trance world that gave access to it: perhaps the Master of the Game Animals or another supramundane animal-human (Whitley 1988a:36-40).
- In other words what we have attempted to develop here is a multilayered structure of interpretation tailored to the *representations of **what a trancer experiences and describes and what he or she has been socialised to expect, in terms of cosmography and models; mythology providing the material for understanding the trance experience.***

# References

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