

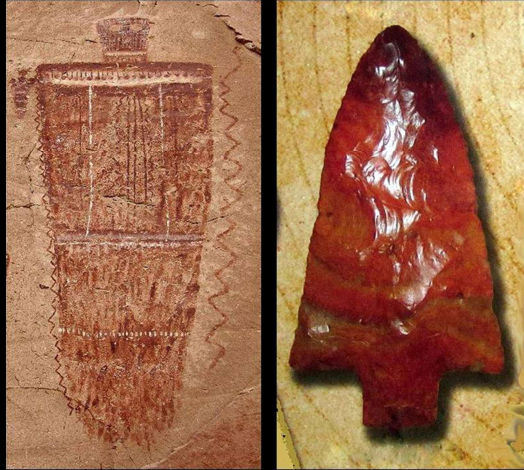
Transcript of presentation to the  
Utah Rock Art Research Association  
Annual Symposium  
Kanab, Utah , October 9-13, 2025

“Why Do Arrowheads Point Up?”  
James Farmer, Faculty Emeritus  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
2025

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Utah Rock Art Research Association,  
***Why Do Arrowheads Point Up?***  
Thunderstorms, Spear Points, and Divine  
Iconography in Barrier Canyon Rock Art



James Farmer, Emeritus Faculty, Virginia Commonwealth University

Good morning, everyone.

A quick shout-out to everyone involved with URARA for putting this all together again this year; GOOD JOB!

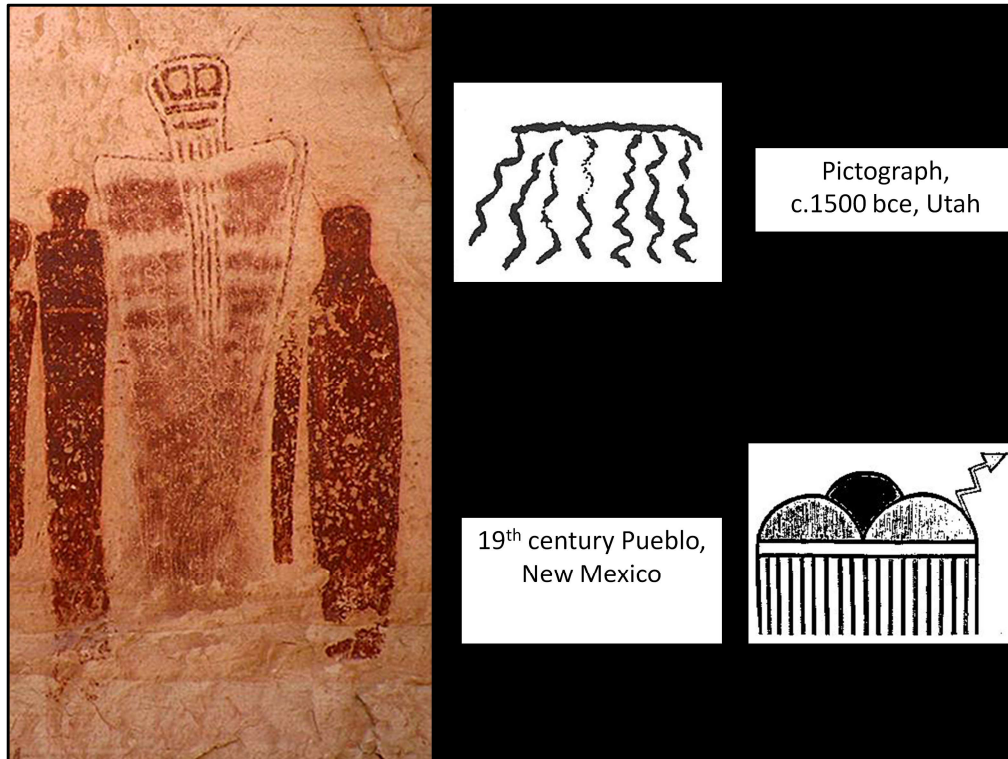
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### BCS “Thunderstorm God” Iconographic Complex:

- BCS “goggle-eyed” anthropomorphs
- Falling water: raincloud/rain/waterfall
- Serpents:
  - **vertical:** lightning, darts
  - **horizontal:** flowing water, flashfloods  
 (“proto-Palölökong”, Hopi horned serpent?)  
 (“proto-Avanyu”, Tewa horned serpent?)
- **Celestial Arc** (Rainbow, Milky Way)

For several years I’ve been arguing that a unified, consistent iconographic program can be identified throughout much of Barrier Canyon Style art, which I’ve called the BCS “Thunderstorm God” Complex (Farmer, 2017), and as I stand before you today, I’m more convinced than ever that this was a legitimate symbolic statement on the part of these Archaic artists. I know many of you may already be familiar with this, and I have published this in a couple of publications, so I’m just going to highlight the features of it for the benefit of those who may not have already been exposed. This complex consists of 4 (or 5 depending on how you count them) specific motifs that appear regularly across much of the BCS imagery, and typically in specifically defined relationships to each other, and the natural environment. The most recognizable is the ubiquitous, so-called “goggle-eyed” figure so diagnostic of the style, along with abstract, geometric rake or parallel lines motifs, signifying falling water (rain, waterfalls); vertical, ziggy-zag serpents, signifying lightning and/or arrows or darts; horizontal serpents, signifying fast-flowing water (rivers, creeks, flashfloods), and celestial arcs (rainbows, milky way). My interpretation of these elements is based in large part on interpretations of similar imagery drawn from historic Pueblo art as well as related imagery from neighboring Mesoamerican cultures, contemporaries or later of the BCS artists.

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The rake motif, as I call it, is perhaps the single most important of these elements, in part because it appears to be one of the oldest enduring symbolic motifs in the Southwest. It appears in some of the earliest archaic rock art in the region, and is still revered today in late prehistoric, historic, and contemporary Pueblo iconography

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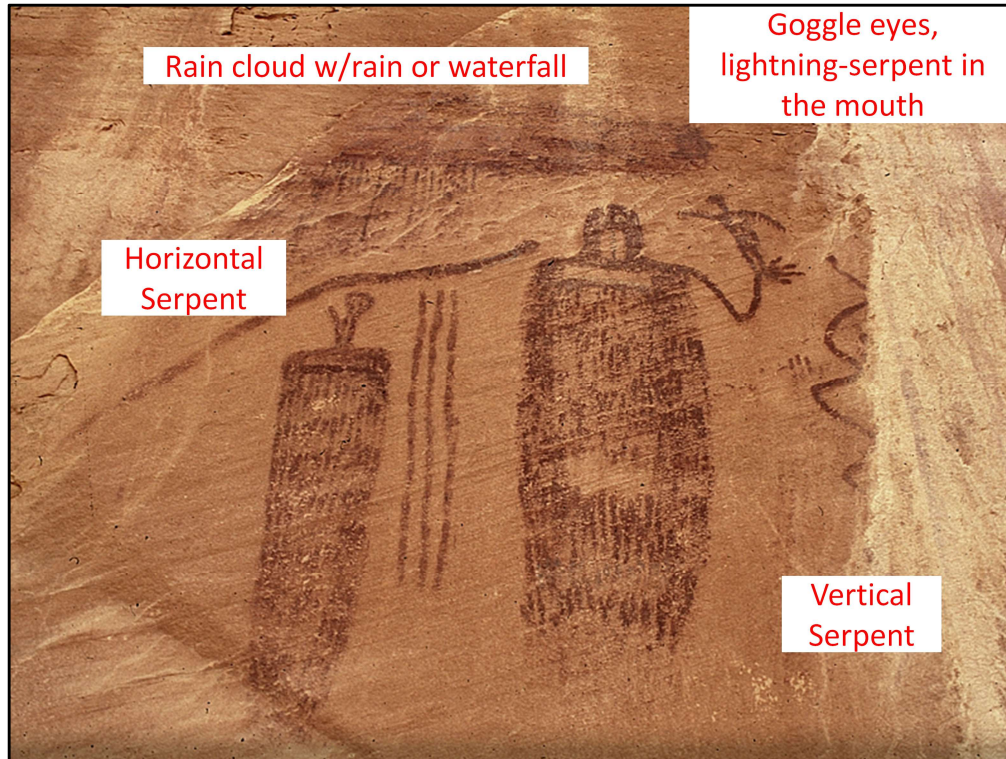
However, specifically in the BCS style, the motif appears predominantly NOT as a free standing or solo motif, but most often as the central decorative element on the large so-called spirit figures. Close visual scrutiny of many of these BCS figures reveals the rake motif as a central defining element of the image, in many cases elaborated or repeated across the entire figure. David Sucec actually noted this aspect of the motif in a URARA presentation some years ago (Sucec, 1996).

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On the left, examples of vertical serpents from the Great Gallery, which may also reference lightning or darts, typically depicted in a direct relationship with a large figure, either floating to the side or occasionally actually held or displayed by the figure. In the center, a well-known horizontal serpent from Rochester Creek, which in addition to its association with fast flowing water, also displays similarities to the famous Feathered Serpent Quetzalcoatl, so ubiquitous in Mesoamerican art and religion. On the right from Salt Creek in Canyonlands, an example of a celestial arc above a rake-figure. These are but singular examples of dozens or even hundreds of similar representations in BCS style panels, clearly indicating a consistent and comprehensive understanding of any associated symbolic meanings amongst BCS artists.

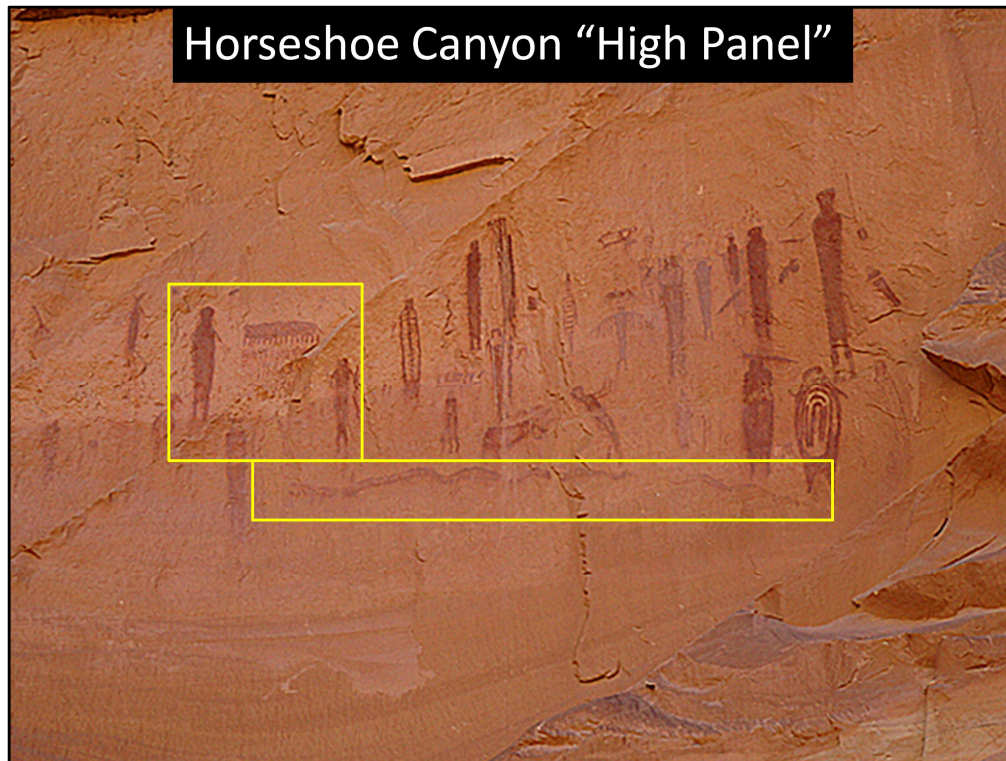
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This assemblage of elements occasionally appears as a near complete assemblage. This a BCS panel outside of Moab which displays an almost complete composition of the BCS Thunder Storm God Complex; a raincloud with rain and falling water, both horizontal and vertical serpents, and two rake-figures. I've documented at 6 other panels across the range of BCS imagery that seem to present a similar more-or-less comprehensive expression of this complex.

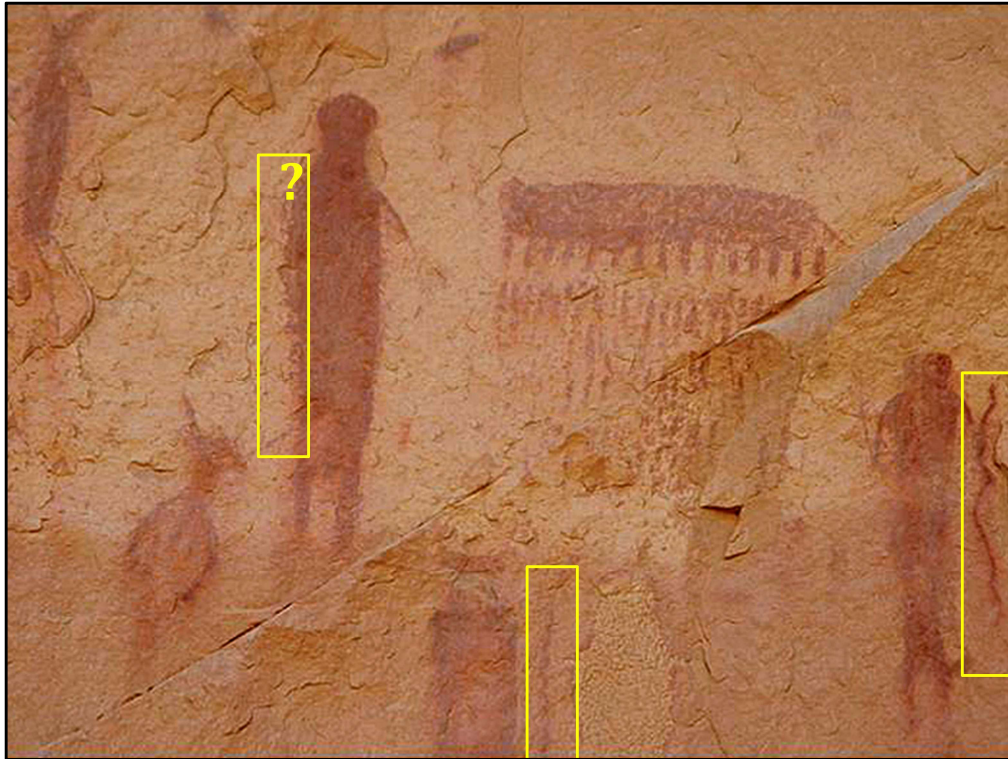
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This is the "High Panel" from Horseshoe Canyon, a complex scene with about two dozen figures involved in various activities, but note a large horizontal serpent framing the bottom of the scene, and in the upper left.....

(NEXT)



A rain cloud with attached falling water and a second rake of falling water below that, perhaps indicating a waterfall, and two or possibly three figures with vertical serpents.  
(NEXT)

## **BCS “Thunderstorm God” Iconographic Complex:**



It's my contention that this iconographic complex is the product of direct observation and experience by the original artists of the highly dramatic, visually stunning effects of thunderstorms in the Canyonlands region, not to mention the audible and visceral effects. While such events may seem somewhat rare, extraordinary and rather exotic (not to mention dangerous) to historic peoples in the region, they are and probably were much more common occurrences as, understandably, accurate data on the frequency of such events in modern times is difficult to compile, and BCS societies were probably very familiar with them and in fact probably revered the canyonlands for this very reason. It has long been noted that a large majority of the large, red anthropomorphs with rake adornments occur on walls that display clear evidence of flowing water and waterfall, in the form of desert varnish streaking or calcification, as well as actual waterfalls.

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## **BCS “Thunderstorm God” Iconographic Complex:**



Photo credit, David Sucec, 2005

Perhaps the most striking effect of such a thunderstorm is the actual physical reforming and altering of the very landscape itself; both erosion and accumulation of soil, rocks, and other debris occur simultaneously in typically abrupt, violent and substantial fashion, as if the very earth itself is undergoing both destruction and reformation. Extremely dramatic, and I submit that BCS artists witnessing such an event would have been overwhelmingly and indelibly impressed.

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***Sotuknangu***

**Hopi God of:  
Lightning and Thunder,  
Thunderstorms,  
Fast Running/Falling water**

**Nephew of the Sun,  
Creator of the (first) Nine Worlds,  
Creator of Spiderwoman**

I've furthered argued that this iconographic complex is in some way the ancestral version of modern Hopi iconography associated with the god *Sotuknangu* (*Sotuknang*), one of the most important Hopi deities who happens to share many of the same features and aspects (Nair, 2025).

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***Tlaloc***  
**Aztec God of:**  
**Lightning and Thunder,**  
**Rain, Thunderstorms,**  
**and Serpents**

**Iconography:**  
**Goggle Eyes,**  
**Lightning Bolts,**  
**Dart Points**



***Tlaloc Priest,***  
***Codex Ixtlilxochitl,***  
**Aztec, 16<sup>th</sup> century**

And, by extension, the Mesoamerican god *Tlaloc*, who also shares iconographic features with both Sotuknango and the BCS figures; note specifically that dart points were commonly symbolically linked to *Tlaloc* iconography. In a 1994 essay, M. Jane Young, charted the numerous similarities between late-prehistoric Aztec gods and their contemporary Puebloan counterparts, noting numerous parallels suggesting strong iconographic and possible cultural ties (Young, 1994:109).

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I first visited the Great Gallery in 1989. I approached it as most visitors still do, descending into Horseshoe Canyon from the official trailhead, then hiking about two miles up the canyon bottom. Upon making an abrupt turn around a bend in the canyon, the Great Gallery appears about a ¼ mile up canyon, a series of red figures seemingly hovering above the canyon along an extended alcove wall. At that time, all I knew about the BCS style was what I had read in Polly Schaafsma's early publications, in which she had noted the distinctive features of the style, and officially dubbed it the Barrier Canyon Anthropomorphic Style; so I was looking for anthropomorphs. This anthropomorphic designation is the subsequent basis for more recent interpretations of the large dominant red figures, such as "spirit" figures, with implied shamanic meanings. However, it struck me at the time that these large dominant figures were not really intended to be seen as "anthropomorphic". In fact, even from the first distant view from down canyon, my first thought was that I was seeing projectile points (spear, arrow or dart, whatever), but I just dismissed it as a mere general similarity, and accepted the basic anthropomorphic identification. However, since identifying the Thunderstorm God Complex, I've begun to rethink the possibility that these actually might represent projectile points, rather than abstract anthropomorphs or spirits.

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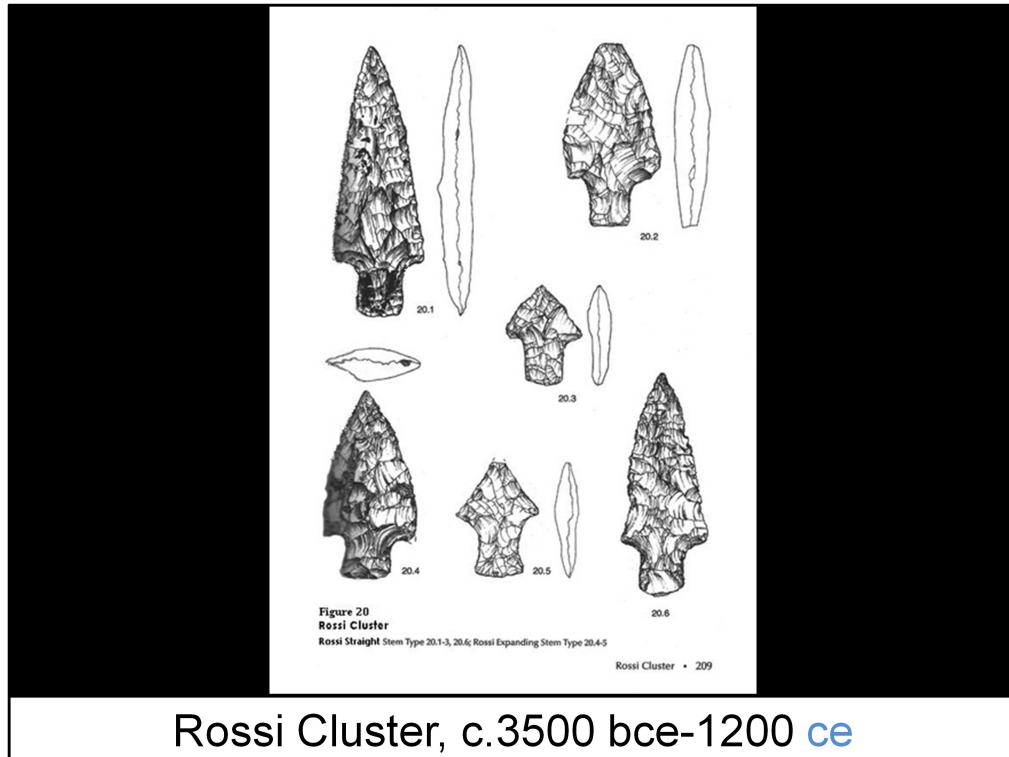
Mid-Late Archaic or Early Developmental  
Spear Points,  
Greater Southwest, c.6000 bce-500 ce:

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Borax Lake Cluster,	c.6000-3000 bce	
Humboldt Cluster,	c.6000 bce	-600 ce
Pandale Cluster,	c.4000-2500 bce	
Rossi Cluster,	c.3500 bce	-1200 ce
McGillivray Cluster,	c.2500 bce	-500 ce
Gypsum Cluster,	c.2000-800 bce	
Elko Cluster,	c.2000 bce	-500 ce
Datil Cluster,	c.1600 bce	-300 ce

So, a couple of years ago I decided to look into what type of lithic points the BCS artists might actually have been familiar with, thus providing formal and visual models for the so-called spirit figures. I have perused a number of catalogs and archaeological reports for illustrated examples of point types which fall within the generally accepted chronological range of the BCS Style, c.5500bce-500ce, the mid-late Archaic, Formative, and Early Developmental Periods, and the Greater Southwest region extending from California to the Rocky Mountains, and northern Mesoamerica to the upper plains region, all centering on the canyonlands region of southern Utah. Indeed, I've accumulated a list of at least eight "clusters" or types that contain clear examples of points that are strikingly similar in overall shape and proportion to the large BCS figures.

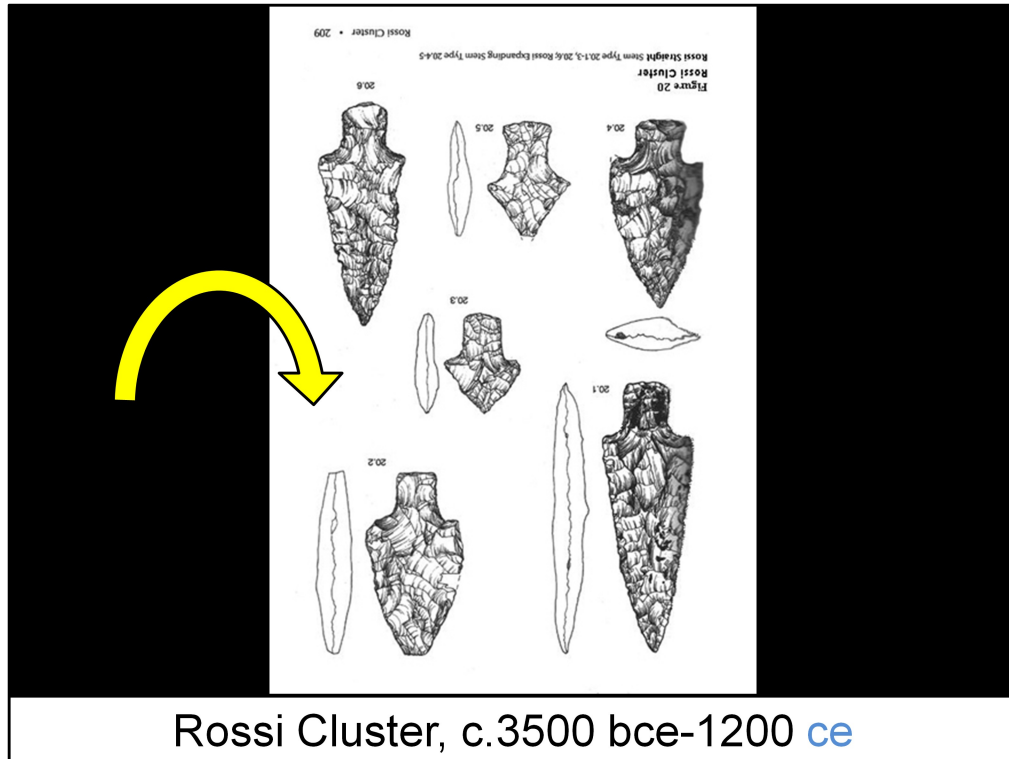
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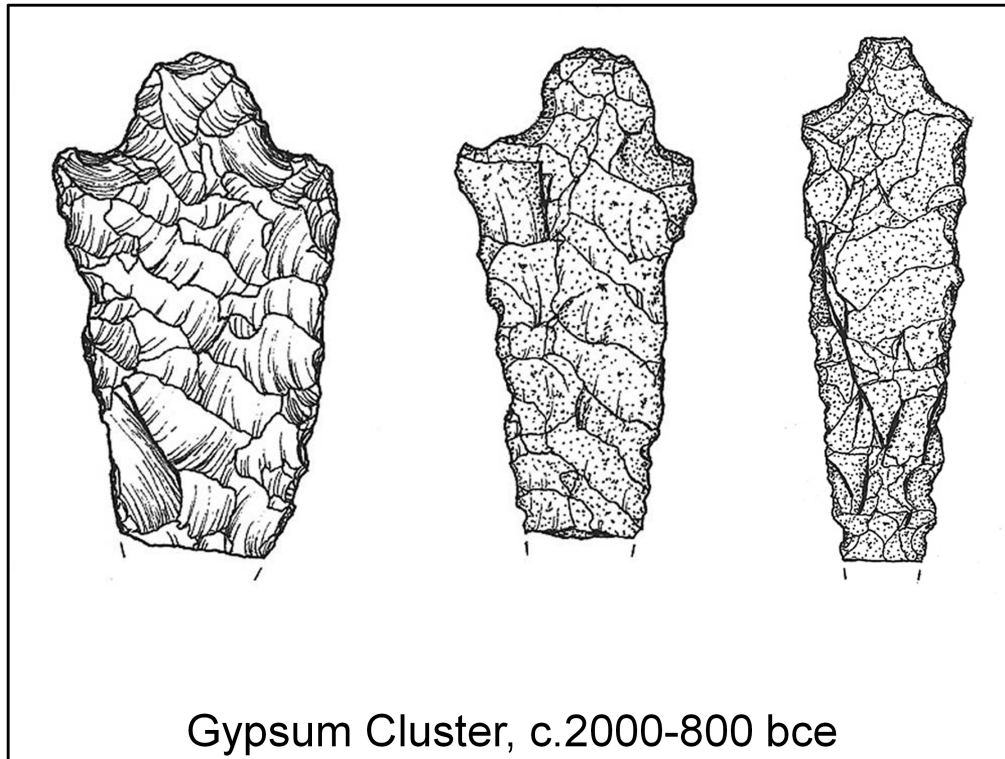
## Rossi Cluster, c.3500 bce-1200 ce

In the interest of time I can only show just a few notable examples, but I have documented over 100 close similarities. These are Rossi Cluster points, primarily from California, as illustrated in the original publication by Noel D. Justice (2002a). If we rotate the illustration 180 degrees, ...

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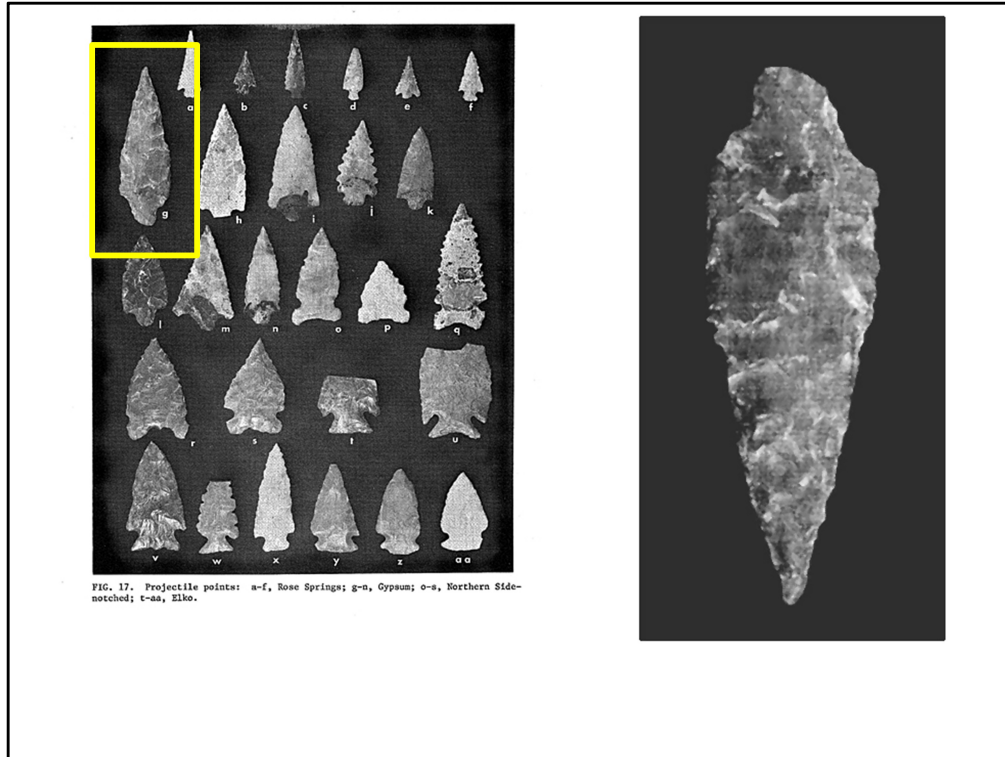
I think the similarity in form becomes more obvious.  
(Next)



These are Gypsum Cluster points, also rotated from the original publication(Justice, 2002(b). Gypsum points are especially interesting for a number of reasons. The assigned time range coincides with what was probably a most productive period for BCS imagery, Gypsum Cluster style points have been recovered from throughout the entire Greater Southwest region, including northern Mesoamerica, and with notable concentrations in the Canyonlands region.

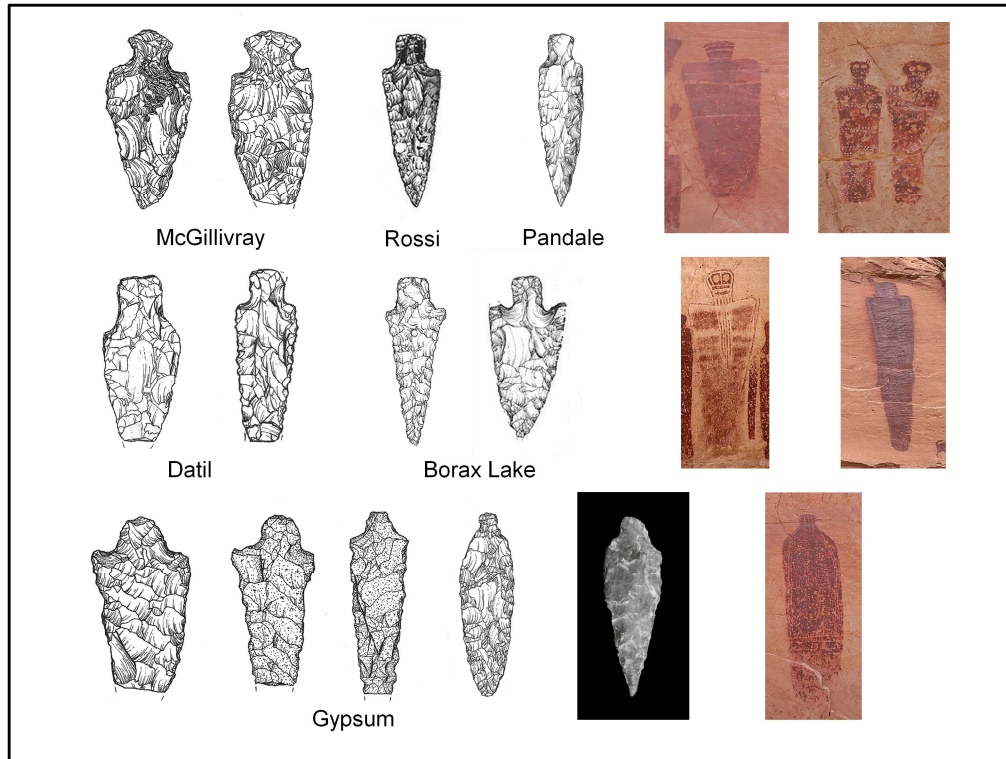
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These are a variety of point types excavated from Cowboy Cave, near Horseshoe Canyon, by Jesse Jennings (1980: Fig. 17), including several examples of the Gypsum type point. Again, when rotated (yellow highlighted, at right), the shape is remarkably similar to several BCS figures.

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If you group these together with BCS figures, I don't think it takes too much stretch of the imagination to see the similarity. More importantly, I don't believe for an instance that the similarity would have been missed or ignored by Barrier Canyon artists, regardless of intention.

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Projectile Points (spear, dart, arrow, whatever...):

- utilitarian

At this point, I think it's worth reconsidering the different roles that projectile points have traditionally played in indigenous societies, ancient and historic, in the Southwest and beyond. We are of course accustomed to thinking of points from a primarily utilitarian perspective, as sharpened tips typically attached to a delivery or handling object (spear shaft, etc.) for hunting or combat purposes. The generally accepted term for these objects, "points", underscores this bias, though generically more accurate terminology, such as "lithics", would seem to be more appropriate. I say this because....

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### Projectile Points (spear, dart, arrow, whatever...):

- utilitarian

-----

- economic (trade)
- elite status (social, divine)
- magic power (shamanistic practice)
- rituals (sacrificial)
- collectables, heirlooms, and burial offerings
- trans-“america” medium
- divine origin (products of lightning)

modern, ethnographic, and archeological data clearly and overwhelmingly document specific production and usage of such objects for a vast number reasons beyond and often exclusive of purely utilitarian purposes. The list is extensive, and there are probably other similar functions that could be added to this list. Points were highly valuable trade items, displayed or worn to indicate social status and power, often used as part of shamanic practices, frequently revered as objects reserved for specific sacrificial rituals, respected as heirlooms and burial offerings, and widely understood as a sort of trans-“America” medium; *everyone* produced and used points, and shared in a vast collective awareness of their value. Perhaps most relevant to my presentation here, natural sources and outcrops of the most prized materials for points, being chert, flint, and obsidian, were widely believed to have been created at locations where lightning had struck the ground, investing such points with a “divine” origin. It should not be surprising, then, that BCS artists would also have thought of point production and usage in such similar, complex fashion; images of points would thus tap into a commonly visual form of communication, a visual “language” if you will.

(NEXT)

**Clifford Lamont Rayl.** "Fremont Arrowheads", (1996),  
*Utah Rock Art Volume XVII: Papers Presented at Seventeenth  
Annual Symposium of the Utah Rock Art Research Association,  
Price, Utah September, 1997.*  
Steven J. Manning, ed., Salt Lake City: Utah Rock Art Research  
Association, 1997.

So I'm actually not the first person to observe this similarity. Back in 1996, a gentleman by name of Clifford Rayl presented a paper at this very symposium apparently discussing similarities between projectile point forms and mainly Fremont points (anyone here see that presentation?). I say apparently because no original version of his presentation seems to exist, including any illustrations of his specific comparisons. A transcript of his presentation was prepared and published by Steve Manning, actually available on the URARA website. Rayl argues that the Fremont rock art images relate to shamanistic hunting practices and related rituals, though he does mention a few Barrier Canyon figures, but without his imagery it's difficult to analyze his presentation much deeper. The fact however that someone thirty years ago recognized the similarity of the rock art images to actually points only supports my contention here.

(NEXT)

*Projectile Point Petroglyphs of the Coso Range: Chronology and Function*, 2015,

**Alan P. Garfinkel and J. Kenneth Pringle.**

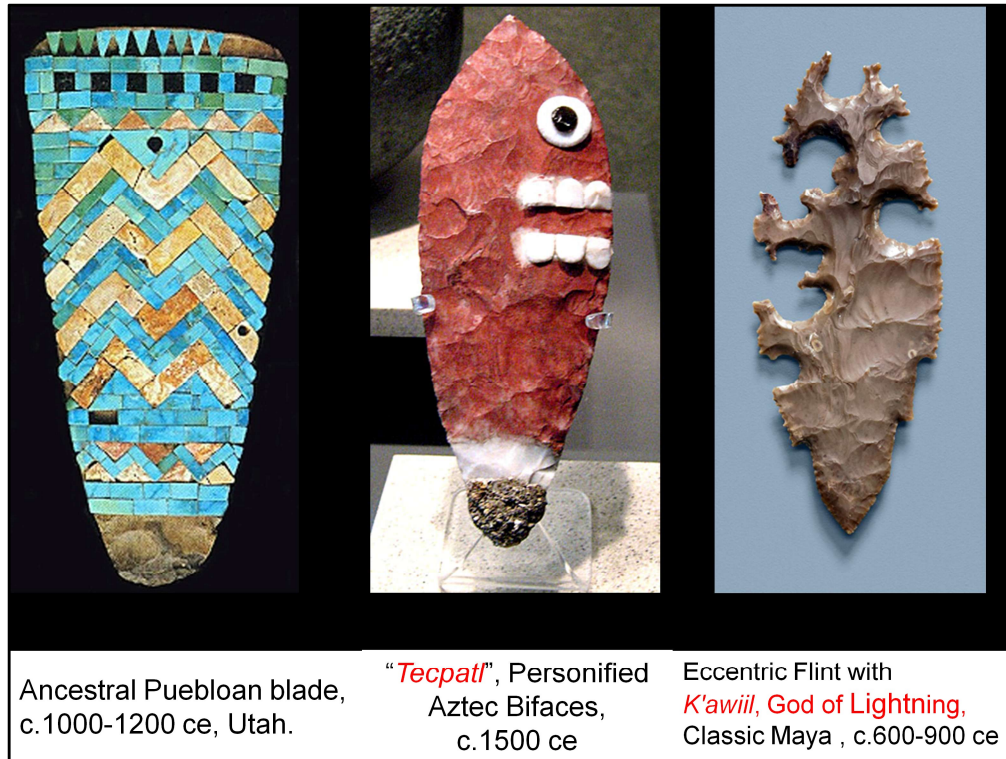
<https://www.academia.edu>, 2017.

Images Redacted

**Figure 2.** Projectile point petroglyphs from Grant et al. 1968:37. (a), (g), and (h) Little Petroglyph (Renegade) Canyon; (b) Darwin Wash; (c) Parish Gorge; (d) and (e) Sunrise Cliffs; (f) Sheep Canyon

More recently, in a related vein, Alan Garfinkel, an anthropologist at Cal State University, has done considerable work on the Coso Range Style of eastern California, and has done several presentations and published work on the depiction of spear points as body adornment on many of the Coso Range Style figures. He associates these images with ceremonies dedicated to hunting magic and animal fertility, devoted to the Uto-Aztec god or goddess, *Yahigal* (or *Yahwera*), the Master of the Animals (Garfinkel, 2015). Projectile points are easily recognizable in the Coso Range Style as objects of apparent body adornment, or simply as individual points.

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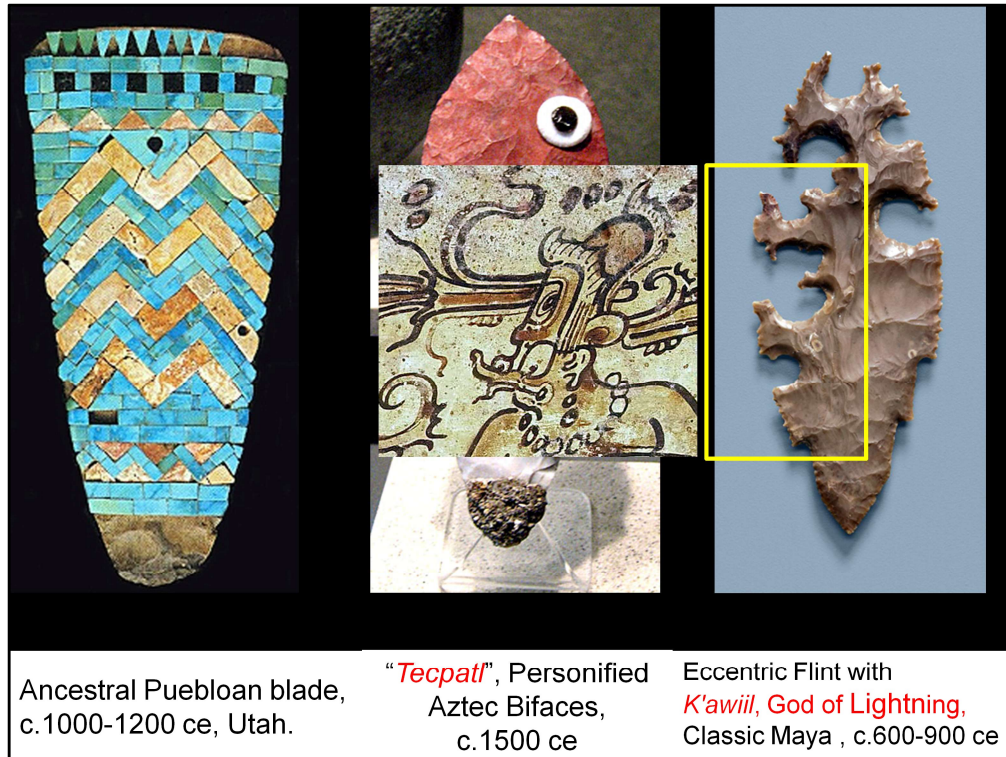
However, besides similar forms of actual projectile points, I was also looking for examples of decorated or enhanced points, similar to the decorative elements on the BCS figures. Indeed there appears to have been a widespread tradition of added embellishments to points across much of the Southwest and Mesoamerica. At left is an Ancestral Puebloan obsidian blade from Utah dating to the Pueblo II-III period, adorned with a mosaic of turquoise, shell and black jet in a pattern loosely resembling abstract geometric designs on many BCS figures. At center is an Aztec "*Tecpatl*", a personified biface chert point. The point is adorned with white shell eyes and teeth symbolizing the god *Tlaloc* and dates to the late pre-Classic 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Left: <https://www.beyondbuckskin.com/2011/09/some-history-ancient-southwest-jewelry.html>

Center: <https://www.mexicolore.co.uk/aztecs/artefacts/spotlight/personified-flint-knife>

Right: <https://ancientmayalife.blogspot.com/2012/09/chert-and-flint-two-commonly-used-stones.html>

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At right is a Classic Maya "Eccentric Flint" point, also adorned with round holes symbolizing the Maya god *Chaak*, the Maya version of *Tlaloc*, as well as a profile of the Maya god *Kawil*, God of Lightning, an aspect of *Chaak*.

Note, however, that each of these examples date much later than the generally accepted date range for the BCS figures, so no DIRECT connection or influence is or can be asserted. I would suggest that the BCS figures are best thought of as ancestral forms to what later evolves into much more complex and sophisticated divine iconography.

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Unfortunately, I don't have a "smoking gun"; that is, a projectile point from the Archaic Southwest in the form of the previously shown BCS figures, that bears similar decoration or enhancements, symbolizing its relationship to a specific deity or spiritual entity, aka. the proposed "Thunderstorm God". If anyone knows of one, please let me know.

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## Teotihuacan, Mexico, c.500 ce



But, I do have Teotihuacan in central Mexico, arguably the single most powerful and influential ancient American urban center ever, which flourished between c.500 bce and 750 ce.

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## Teotihuacan, Mexico, c.500 ce



By c.500ce, Teotihuacan had an estimated population of c.150000-250000 people, one of the largest cities on earth at the time and its influence extended not only throughout Mesoamerica, south into the Maya region, and west to the Pacific Coast, but well north into the American Southwest and the Eastern Woodlands. It's public and private, residential structures were originally covered floor to ceiling with plastered walls, painted in vivid polychrome, buon fresco imagery.

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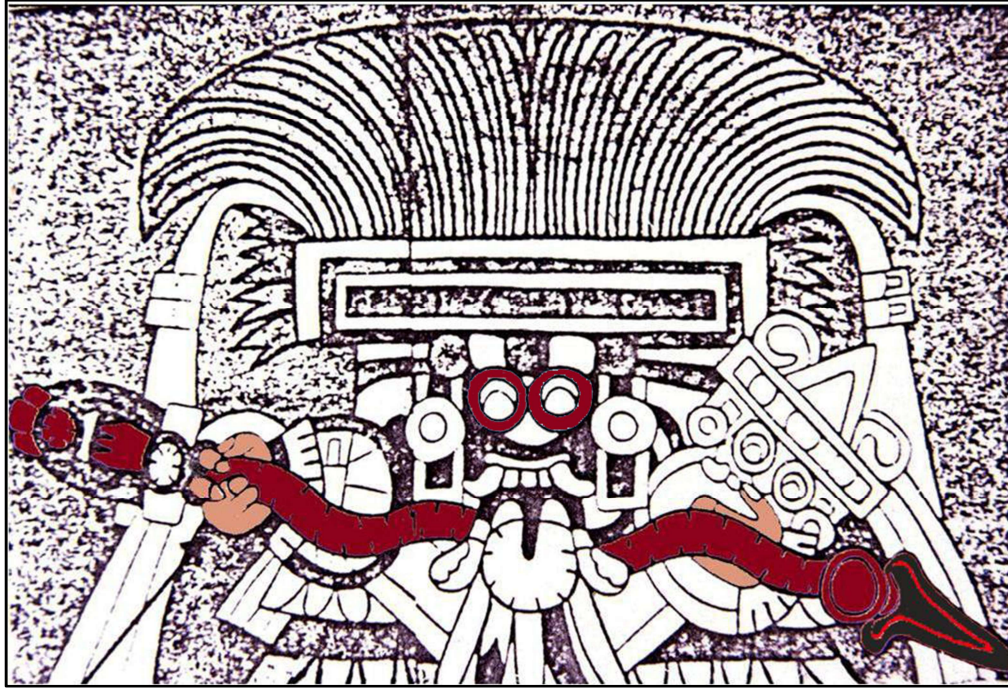
## Teotihuacan, Mexico, c.500 ce



This is a surviving portion of one such wall....  
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## Teotihuacan “*Tlaloc*” Priest, c.500 ce



and this is a drawing of that same image (adapted from Couvreur, 2017: Fig. 2). It depicts a figure identifiable as a priest dressed as the god “*Tlaloc*”, displaying a loaded dart-thrower or atlatl. Images of *Tlaloc* and the feathered serpent god Quetzalcoatl were both widely revered and depicted at Teotihuacan, in a time probably contemporary with the late BCS style. You see the highlighted atlatl dart/lightning bolt/serpent extending downward from left to right, and note the prominent dark obsidian point in the lower right hand corner, a prominent iconographic reference to *Tlaloc* as a god of lightning.

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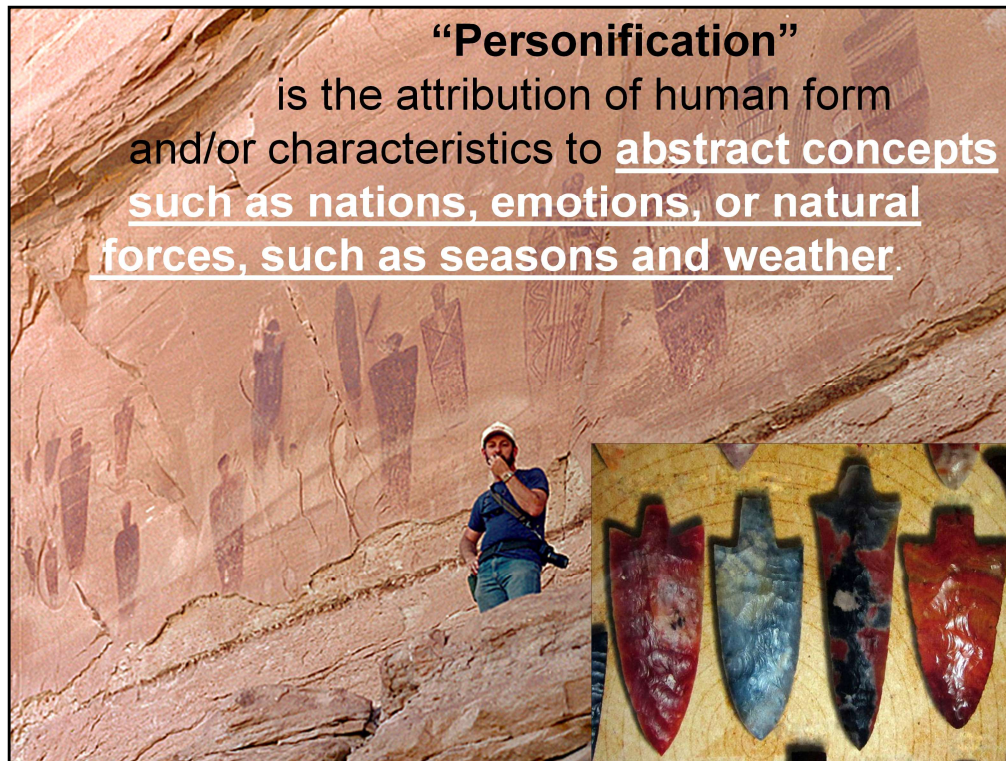


Teotihuacan Obsidian Spearpoints,

Teotihuacan rose to prominence in part because it was a major source throughout Mesoamerica for obsidian and related trade (Berrin and Pasztory, 1993). And we actually have recovered numerous examples of obsidian points from Teotihuacan, most often found as ceremonial offerings in burials or building dedications (while obsidian was prized for its beauty and sharpness, it's not really a very practical material for everyday point use; too fragile). Note however, the distinct similarity to the Southwestern points we've seen from the Southwest.

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So, now I'm thinking that what we are meant to behold in these large BCS figures is exactly what my initial gut response was to these images, way back in 1989; "personified" projectile points, as opposed to rather general "anthropomorphs". "Personification" is the attribution of human form and/or characteristics to abstract concepts such as nations, emotions, or natural forces, such as seasons and weather. Prevalent descriptions of these figures as anthropomorphic "spirit" figures in recent scholarship stems from Polly Schaafma's original interpretations (Schaafsma, 1980: 61, 71). But in fact there is little clear evidence to substantiate such a designation by the original Archaic artists, beyond vague and rather tenuous comparisons to more loosely related, similar hunter-gatherer cultures, both geographically and temporally distant to the BCS Style. Historic Pueblo societies (and presumably their prehistoric ancestors) believed that stars carried the soul of their ancestors, a belief shared with both other indigenous American groups as well as other ancient societies world wide. Modern students of ancient American peoples such as ourselves, really have no idea what BCS artists 3000+ years ago thought about an afterlife or what, if anything, happens to the human soul, if it exists at all, after death. While a number of burials dating to the Archaic Period have been uncovered in the Southwest, none have been definitively tied to the BCS imagery. That some of these BCS figures represent some form of supernatural human spirit is probably driven more by deeply ingrained Western, primarily Judeo-Christian, biases regarding what human spirits in the afterlife should look like.

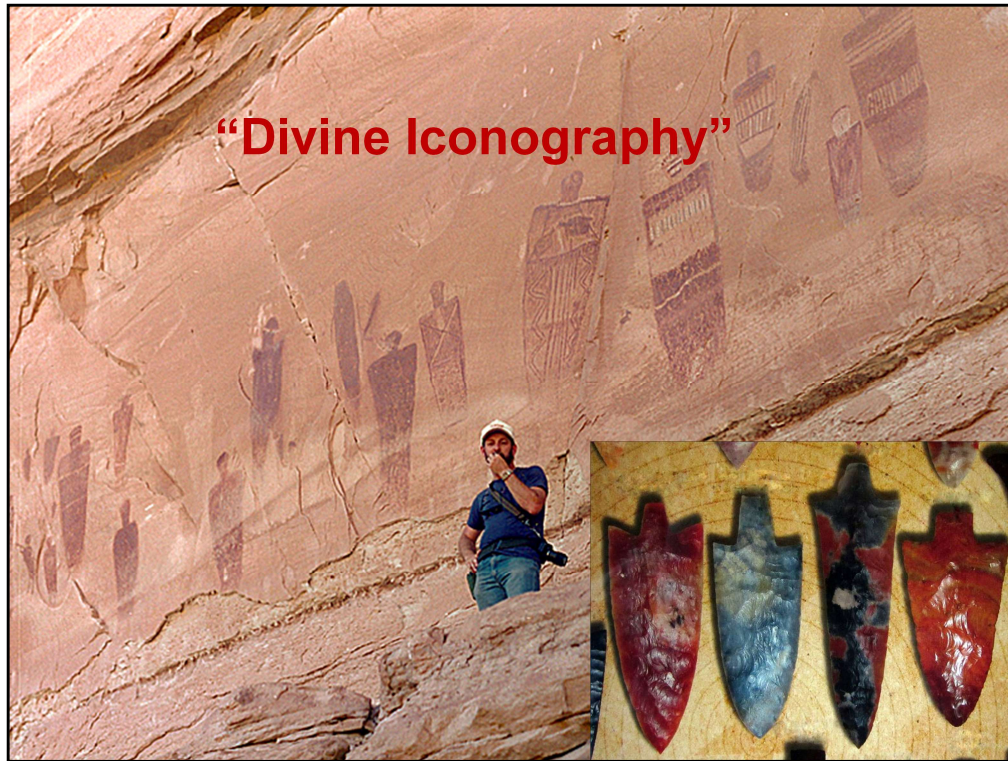
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I suggest that while many of these may indeed represent “Spirit” figures, they are the spirits of the “Thunderstorm God”, placed at the locations where the god has physically manifested its power, and in fact, probably in celebration of, or prayer for just such manifestations. Ideologically speaking, such personification is more closely reflective of the concept of “animism”, the broadly shared belief that all physical and material forms in the natural realm are invested with a living spiritual essence (i.e. a “soul” or life force), which is a much broader concept than “anthropomorphism” or “shamanism”.

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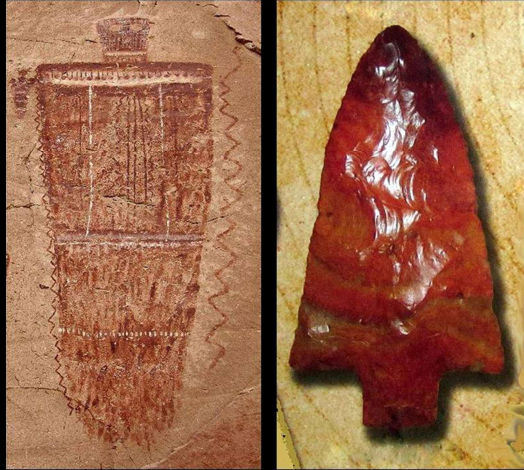




By no means do I assert that ALL BCS figures throughout the style reflect this same iconography; there are multitudes of images of clearly anthropomorphic BCS figures engaged in clearly human-like activities, and many scenes of figures involved in what clearly seem to be shamanistic-activities. One of the most compelling features of the BCS Style is its great diversity of subject matter and themes. But I would argue that the array of large BCS figures that dominate the Great Gallery, and also appear in lesser numbers at hundreds of other sites throughout the region, have little to do with "anthropomorphism" or "shamanism", but in fact present a program of "Divine Iconography". In this sense, beholding the Great Gallery in its present form would have had the same impact on, and invoke the same response from its original audience as the response of modern viewers to Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, or Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, or any number of other sacred, religious sites from around the world.

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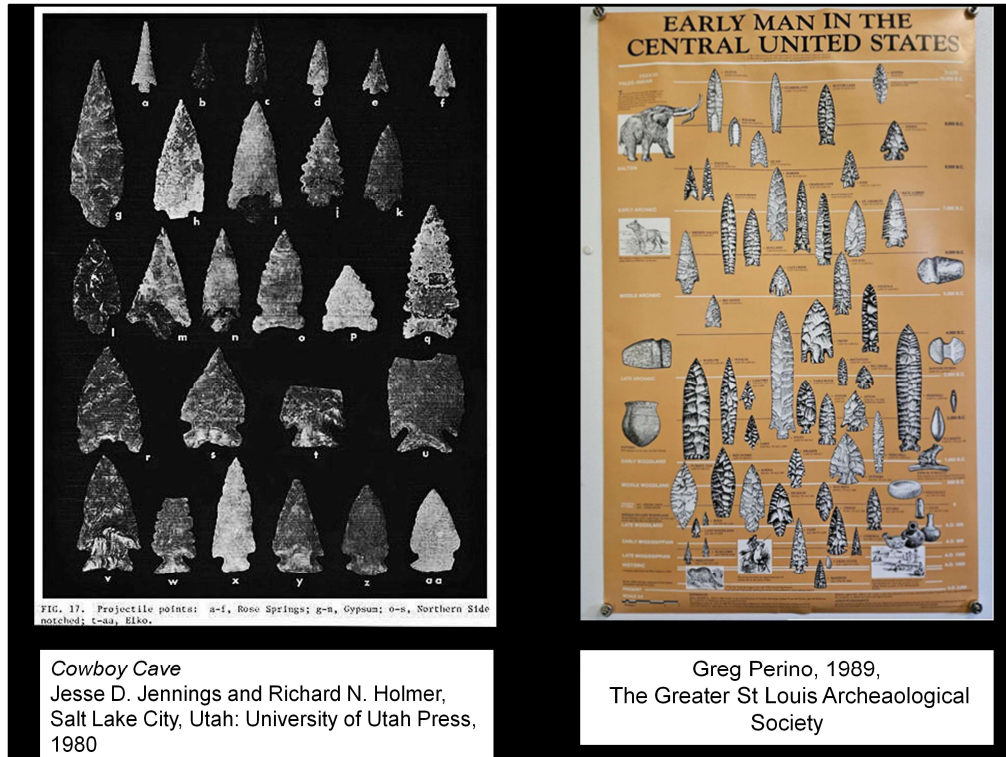
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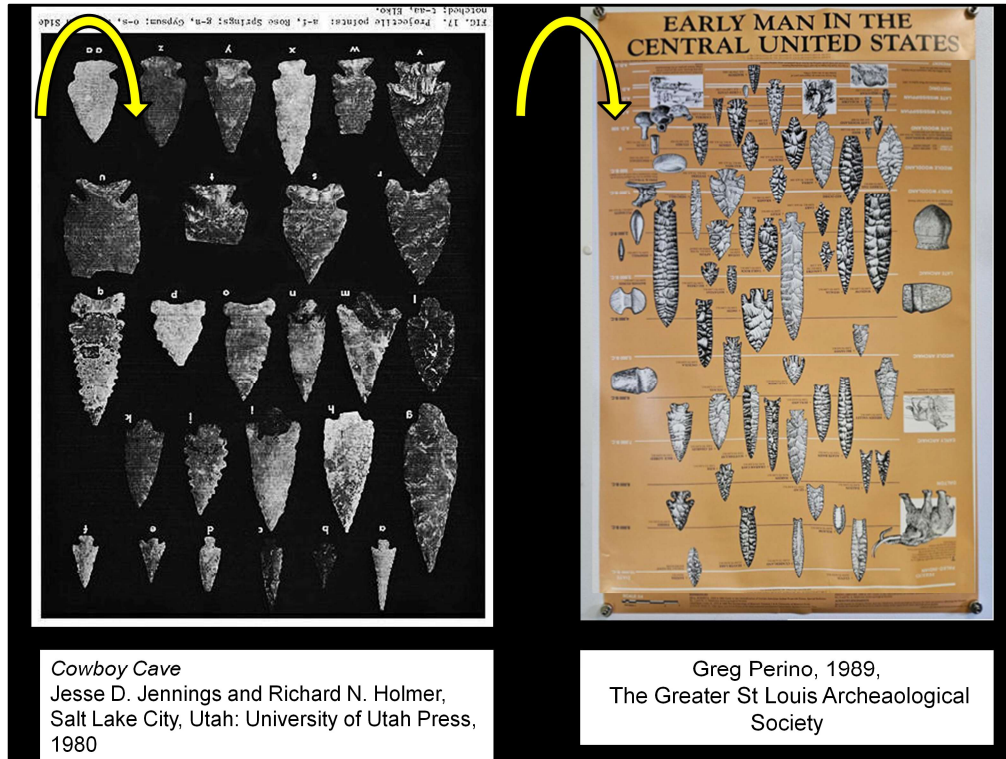
So, Why Do Arrowheads Point Up?  
(NEXT)





Well, in combing through a multitude of scholarly and popular publications and illustrations of ancient American projectile points, looking for similarities to the BCS figures as discussed, I realized at some point that the vast majority of illustrated points in so-called “serious” published form always present the points laid out in nice, formal arrangements, *pointing up!* I don’t know if there is some unwritten publishing protocol that I’m unaware of the mandates this orientation, but my suspicion is that is primarily an aesthetic decision to emphasize the utilitarian function of these object, the pointed tip, and the edges. As this practice goes back to some of the earliest imagery from the 19<sup>th</sup> and earliest 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is understandable why current students of projectile points might automatically expect them to be presented as such. At left is Jesse Jennings’ illustration of points recovered from Cowboy Cave, and at right a commercial poster produced for the Greater St Louis Archaeological Society in 1989.

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But suppose that wasn't always the case; suppose that graphic illustrations of points were inverted, and had been for the last 100 years in professional literature. I think that most certainly more rock art specialists would have noticed the similarity to rock art imagery a long time ago, and I wouldn't be standing here discussing this issue now. More to the point (no pun intended), I reject any suggestion that the original BCS artists would not have assigned great symbolic value and meaning to the similarity.

(NEXT)



So, in the spirit (again, no pun intended) of complete disclosure, this nice color image of four points I've used for comparison, is actually a detail taken from another similar large commercial poster displaying a wide variety of North American Indian projectile points, (NEXT)





but the original poster displays the points pointing upwards; I inverted the detail for comparative purposes.

(NEXT)



I have the original poster hanging in my living room, but it is hung upside down, in its CORRECT orientation! You're welcome to come see it anytime.

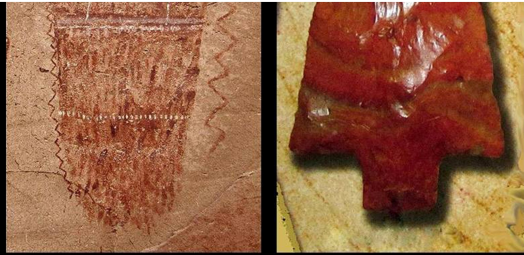
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**Thank you!**

[jdfarmer99@gmail.com](mailto:jdfarmer99@gmail.com)



James Farmer, Emeritus Faculty, Virginia Commonwealth University

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