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ROCK ART IN THE GUNNISON VALLEY

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ABSTRACT

The third known rock art site in the Upper Gunnison Valley is reported. The site (5GN1275) is a late prehistoric petroglyph site in the classic Uncompahgre Plateau style.

INTRODUCTION

Rock art is a relatively common cultural resource in the Four Corners area and on the Colorado Plateau. However, it is not a common occurrence in the high mountain valleys of central western Colorado. This is especially true of the upper Gunnison Valley where until recently only one petroglyph site and one pictograph site had ever been recorded or reported. The petroglyph site, 5GN7, was located in the 1940s by C. T. Hurst, one of the founders of the Colorado Archaeological Society, and was reported by Hendricks after Hurst's death (Hurst and Hendricks 1952).

The pictograph site 5GN928 was located in 1979 and is composed of two white, painted figures. One of the figures is geometric in design and the other is a broad shouldered, triangular bodied human with stick appendages (Lennon et al. 1980). Schaafsma (1971:139-141) considers this style to be eastern Fremont with connections to a Basketmaker style. She considers the style to be one generally found on the Colorado Plateau dating between the first century A.D. and the 12th century A.D. Marwitt (1970:151) and Madsen (1979:720) date the Fremont and associated rock art from about A.D. 450 to A.D. 1250.

During the summer of 1980 a third rock art site was located during a routine inventory for cultural resources in association with a spring inventory for the Montrose District, Bureau of Land Management. The presence of a rock art site in a high mountain valley of southwestern Colorado makes this site a unique and significant cultural resource.



FIGURE 1. The Sheep Spring site, 5GN1275.

THE SITE

The Sheep Spring Petroglyph is one feature of the Sheep Spring site designated 5GN1275 (Figure 1) in the files of the Office of the State Archeologist. The site consists of a 1920s-1930s poorly preserved homestead probably built by John Berryhill. Laura Berryhill, widow of John, received a patent for the land adjacent to the site on February 14, 1927. Apparently the homestead house and trash dump were improperly noted on the legal documents and the site remains on BLM administered lands.

The second feature of the site is a moderately dense lithic scatter (Figure 2). The lithic scatter contains no diagnostic artifacts and very few utilized or modified flakes. The flakes are all locally occurring red, gray, and white quartzites. They are scattered around the homestead and boulder that contains the petroglyph panel.

The petroglyph panel (Figure 3) is located on the southeast face of a sandstone boulder outcrop. The boulder is situated in a sagebrush flat and above Sheep Gulch. Sheep Spring, which is dry, is 10 meters west/northwest of the panel. Sheep Gulch is a tributary of Lost Canyon, which in turn is a tributary to the Gunnison River. The site is located about six miles (10 kilometers) northeast of the town of Gunnison.

The petroglyph panel is relatively small, containing 14 distinct elements in a 1.6 square meter area on the face of the boulder. The panel contains eight zoomorphic related elements, five linear elements, and one possible anthropomorphic related element. Specifically, the depictions appear to be one elk with an exaggerated rack, one deer, two mountain sheep, three



FIGURE 2. The lithic scatter component and boulder containing the rock art at Sheep Spring.



FIGURE 3. The petroglyph panel at Sheep Spring. The central animal glyph is approximately 15 cm. long.

ungulate hoof prints, one possible paw print, five vertical lines some with possible crosshatches, and one possible hand print.

All of the elements are pecked or incised into the surface of the sandstone. Some, primarily the animals, are lightly pecked and are the most distinct. The ungulate hoof prints are deeply incised and some of these are partially covered by lichen growth. The vertical lines appear to be pecked, but they are very indistinct and difficult to trace. None of the elements appears to be superimposed over one another, but there is some crowding of elements on the panel. This might lead to the speculation that all elements were not created at the same time; however, the similarity in style of incising and pecking would tend to suggest that the same culture group probably did form the elements.

STYLISTIC COMPARISONS AND DATING THE PANEL

Since no diagnostic artifacts or datable material were found in association with the panel, dating must rely on comparisons with other similar rock art. As there are no other comparable rock art sites in the upper Gunnison Valley, comparisons must be made on a regional basis. The closest petroglyph site is 5GN7, located in what is now Blue Mesa Reservoir. This site consists of several loose blocks of stone partially covered by linear and rectilinear elements (Hurst and Hendricks 1952). These elements are not directly comparable to the Sheep Spring elements. Nor does 5GN928, the pictograph site located about six miles or 10 kilometers north of Sheep Spring, contain similar comparative elements; 5GN928 appears to have a different cultural origin than the Sheep Spring petroglyph. The probable cultural association for 5GN7 is undetermined.

The most directly comparable rock art motifs are those found along the Uncompahgre Plateau near Montrose and Delta. The elements found on the Uncompahgre Plateau include depictions of mountain sheep, deer, conventionalized bear paws, artiodactyl tracks, anthropomorphs, horse-mounted riders, hand prints, and a large array of unidentified linear designs (Huscher and Huscher 1940; Buckles 1971; McKern 1978; Reed and Scott 1980). Except for conventionalized bear paws, anthropomorphs, and horse-mounted riders, all other elements are present at the Sheep Spring site. Stylistically the elements at Sheep Spring can be almost literally duplicated at Picture Rock in Shavano Valley (5MN27) and at the Musser Petroglyph site (5DT4) on the lower Gunnison River.

McKern (1978:51-53) in his 1972 study of the Shavano Valley petroglyphs, divided the Uncompahgre rock art elements into two styles, old and new. The old style was based on heavy patination, deep pecking, and crude but simple clean-lined figures. The new style showed less patination, and included curvilinear figures, portrayals of deer, bear, and horse-mounted figures. Using the illustrations and description in McKern (1978) the Sheep Spring petroglyph appears to most closely resemble the old style petroglyph. McKern (1978:86-87) interprets the old style as being produced by "foot-traveling more isolated culture"; essentially a hunting-gathering group probably dating to the protohistoric or prehistoric period of western Colorado.

Buckles (1971) has made the most in-depth study of petroglyphs in the Uncompahgre Plateau. He has divided the rock art into five distinct classes based on stylistic variation. He presents a chronologic order including late and early historic and three styles of nonhistoric. Style 1 of the nonhistoric group is thought to be the most recent, as its lifeforms are linear abstracts very much like those of the early historic style and are often found in association with historic styles. Style 2 is less linear than the later styles, resulting in more full-bodied figures which are more realistic (Buckles 1971:1,087). The lifeforms in style 3 are more realistic than style 2 and are frequently animated, often with legs indicating motion (Buckles 1971: 1,085-1,086).

The Sheep Spring elements appear to correlate very well with the description of styles 2 and 3 of the nonhistoric period. The individual elements are full-bodied, not animated, and are stiff in their posture. These are the criteria for style 2 of Buckles' (1971:1,106) typology. There are minor differences in the Sheep Spring elements that also demonstrate an affinity to style 3. The Sheep Spring panel does not contain a large enough sample of elements to definitively place it in either style. The panel does, however, contain enough elements to place it in either style 2 or 3 of the nonhistoric period.

Buckles (1971:1,118-1,119) suggests that the nonhistoric styles date within the Christian era based on his comparisons with other rock art in the Four Corners, Great Basin, and plains areas. Since the Sheep Spring petroglyphs appear to correlate with the nonhistoric Uncompahgre Plateau style, they are tentatively dated to the Christian era, probably predating A.D. 1650 (the time when the horse could have first appeared in the rock art of the area).

Both Buckles (1971) and McKern (1978) ascribe the rock art style of the Uncompahgre Plateau to the local hunter-gatherers who inhabited the area prehistorically. Buckles (1971:1,123; 1,128) particularly sees the style as related to the Colorado Plateau and Great Basin hunter-gatherers. He sees very little influence from the Anasazi area to the south or the plains to the east. Reed and Scott (1980) have postulated that the cultural tradition of west-central Colorado that produced the rock art may be a technocomplex with regional diversity but with an overall relationship to the desert culture.

The Sheep Spring site appears to fit into the overall pattern of the Uncompahgre Plateau style rock art. Other than its high mountain valley location, the glyphs do not differ from those in sites found in the lower valleys and on the Uncompahgre Plateau.

SUMMARY

Stylistically, the Sheep Spring petroglyph site is a part of the Uncompahgre Plateau rock art style. The site is tentatively dated to the late prehistoric period based on comparisons with other rock art studies in the region. Sheep Spring appears to be another manifestation of the hunter-gatherer cultural tradition as expressed by the Uncompahgre Complex and as defined by Wormington and Lister (1956) and Buckles (1971). The petroglyph panel expresses a hunting theme perhaps of a magic or religious nature.

The site is typical of the Uncompahgre Plateau style except that it is located in a high mountain valley. The site becomes significant in legal and professional terms because of its location and uniqueness: the third rock art site and first of its style known in the Gunnison area. The Sheep Spring site thus adds another dimension to our expanding knowledge of human use of the mountains of west-central Colorado. Undoubtedly, as cultural resource inventories continue to locate and record sites in the area, more rock art will be found. As the rock art sample grows more definitive, statements on cultural affiliation, range of styles, temporal association, and significance may be made.

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