

SOUTHWESTERN MONTANA ROCK ART

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ABSTRACT

In the 35 years since Jasmann published on seven pictograph sites in southwestern Montana, the data base has expanded to 50 recorded rock art sites in the Jefferson and Madison drainages. Distinctive motifs, such as various kinds of arched geometrics and line-and-dot patterns, distinguish southwestern Montana pictographs from those of central and western Montana. Pictographs in the northern part of the region occur on slightly protected faces of large granite boulders and pinnacles, while those in the south occur in shelters and cave rooms in areas dominated by limestone exposures.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most frequently used approaches to a rock art overview is a regional perspective, and for such studies, regions are most often defined either geographically, based on a drainage, basin, or mountain range, or politically, based on a state or a cluster of counties. The first overview of southwestern Montana rock art was published in 1962 by Alice Jasmann, who had only seven pictograph sites in two counties to report, but she chose to define the southwestern Montana region as the Madison and Jefferson

river drainages, a more encompassing view of the area. We continue her definition for the southwestern part of the state. The Jefferson and Madison drainages are bordered on the northwest, west, and south by the Continental Divide, on the east by the Madison Range, and on the northeast by the three forks of the Missouri (Fig. 1). This paper presents some of the regional characteristics we have observed for southwestern Montana rock art during our on-going state-wide study (see references in Greer and Greer 1996).

PREVIOUS ROCK ART STUDIES IN SOUTHWESTERN MONTANA

A review of the literature on southwestern Montana shows that one site, Point-of-Rocks Cave (24MA305), has received the most attention in the area, though the pictographs have never been the focus of either the recordings or the publications. The site has a long history of archaeological and paleontological attention (Davis and Johnson 1988). The summary by Davis and Johnson of cave activities indicates that by the 1930s local people were digging in the cave. Major excavations were conducted in 1939 by the Carnegie Museum for the rich paleontological remains,

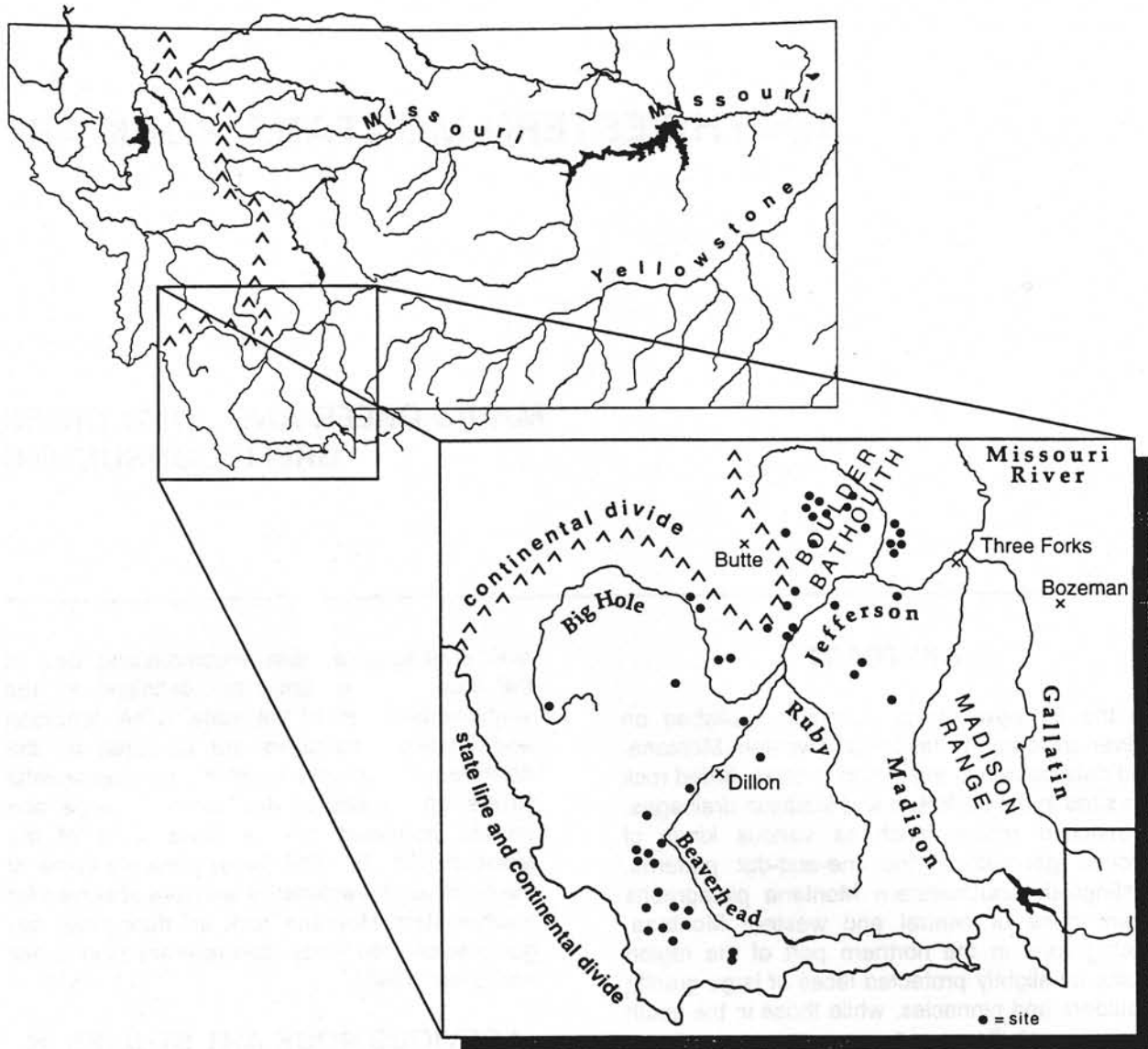


Figure 1. Map of the southwestern Montana study area and distribution of sites within that area.

mostly at the expense of the rich archaeological deposits, with dry zones of perishable cultural materials. The archaeological notes by Roy Austin, at that time a local teacher in Whitehall, were never published and presumably are now lost at the Museum (Malouf 1984:55-56; Napton 1966:164). In 1947 Jack Hughes and Wesley Bliss visited the site and filed the first site form as part of their widespread, hugely mobile River Basin Surveys across Wyoming, Montana, and adjacent parts of the Plains. None of the early

amateurs or professionals, however, showed much interest in the paintings. Jasmann does not mention Point-of-Rocks Cave in her 1962 overview, but Lewis Napton briefly discusses the pictographs and the history of the site in his M.A. thesis (Napton 1966:163-169, 174). In 1971, Stuart and Betty Lu Conner published a book on rock art of the high plains of Montana, and although they did not include southwestern Montana, they did mention Point-of-Rocks Cave (Conner and Conner 1971:9, 33). The only other

discussion of the paintings here was by Jewell Werner (1981:75-76), a local rancher and conscientious archaeological participant, in his article on pictographs of the Jefferson River Headwaters.

The main panel near the rear of the cave is the only one discussed in all publications of the pictographs, and only Davis and Johnson (1988) mention the paintings inside the entrance area. Pictographs at the front and rear of the cave do not appear to have been made by the same people or at the same time. Paints and styles, particularly of the anthropomorphs, are different, with red human figures and small red crosses dominating the rear of the cave. The rear paintings are more abundant than those in the entrance, and the dark red humans are more detailed than the orange simple stick figures in the entrance area (Fig. 2).

Publications on southwestern Montana rock art are limited, and the short articles by Jasmann (1962) and Werner (1981) are the only ones dealing exclusively with the subject. Several people, however, have devoted considerable time to recording rock art sites in this area for the

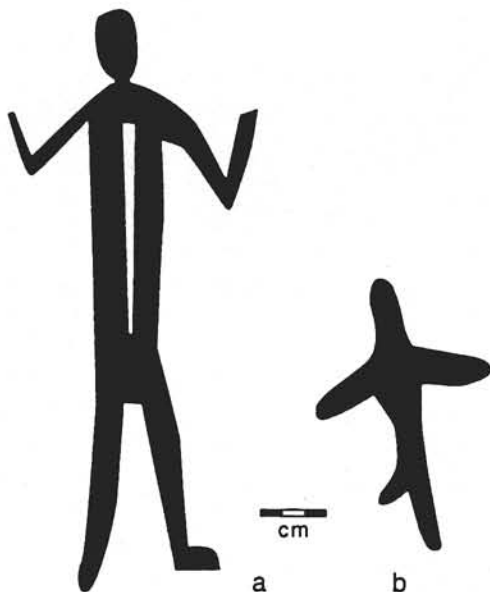


Figure 2. Anthropomorphs at Point-of-Rocks Cave (24MA305). (a) Figures in rear of cave. (b) Figures in entrance area.

state files and reporting them in archaeological reports. All of these works during the past 35 years have resulted in substantially increased knowledge about the rock art of the area.

NUMBER AND DISTRIBUTION OF SITES

As of August 1998 there were just over 700 rock art sites recorded in the SHPO files for the whole state. Of these, 50 sites have been recorded in southwestern Montana, and their general distribution is shown in Figure 1. Eighteen of the sites are in Beaverhead County, 17 in Jefferson, 10 in Madison¹, and 5 in Silverbow. All 50 sites are pictographs; there are no petroglyphs. Rock art sites continue to be known best in the Jefferson River drainage, and only one of the 50 sites is in the Madison River drainage.

The Jefferson River drainage includes the major tributary rivers of the Big Hole River to the north and west, the Beaverhead River to the south, and the Ruby River² to the east. The Jefferson drainage supports a diverse landscape ranging from the wide valley bottom, to boulder-covered foothills, to high mountain ranges. Pictographs occur from low to high elevations. The Beaverhead River generally occupies a wide valley, with occasional rock outcroppings, such as Beaverhead Rock, a Lewis and Clark expedition landmark, and the location of rock art site 24MA259. Upstream the valley becomes narrower, and at a prominent gates area where the massive limestone cliffs converge to constrict the river is another well-known and protected rock art site, Rattlesnake Cliffs (24BE1005).

The Big Hole River dominates the northwestern part of the region. Sites recorded on Big Hole tributaries occur where canyons begin to contract

¹ Portions of Madison County lie outside the Madison River drainage and thus are outside the defined southwestern Montana region. Therefore this number does not represent all recorded rock art sites in Madison County.

² To date, no rock art sites have been recorded in the Ruby River drainage, although we have been told of unrecorded sites not far east of Ruby Reservoir.

and outcroppings begin, as exemplified by Entrance Pictographs (24SB500) south of Butte and the Jackson Pictographs (24BE1030) west of Dillon. Although few sites have yet been recorded along the rocky hillsides in the narrower upper tributary drainages, the potential for such sites is demonstrated by sites such as the Camp Creek Pictographs (24SB449) in the foothills east of the Highland Mountains.

In the far southwestern part of the region, sites occur in a variety of locations in the high-elevation mountainous area. Pictographs are on exposed outcroppings along drainages and in small rockshelters and caves in the limestone formations, which can be found from the valley floor to near the high crests. These landforms served as places for rock art regardless of their vegetation. Sites have been recorded in open areas dominated by short grasses and sage and on densely forested hillsides.

Southwestern Montana rock art sites occur in the same physical locations as in other parts of the state — cave rooms, rockshelters, and exposed bluffs (Greer 1995; Greer and Greer 1996:43-44).

However, southwestern Montana rock art sites also occur in another physical site context — the faces of large granite boulders. The northern part of the region is dominated by the Boulder batholith (Alt and Hyndman 1986:172), which is characterized by mountains of large granite boulders. Paintings were placed on the wide flat faces of the boulders, which are minimally overhanging or have slightly sloping walls that provide protection for the pictographs (Fig. 3). The boulders are mainly in a mountain setting with stands of conifer trees and a ground cover of short grasses and sage. Of the 50 sites in the region, 20 (40%) are in boulder settings, 11 (22%) on open bluffs, 11 (22%) in rockshelters, and six (12%) in caves. Two other sites, which we have not visited, do not have information on the site forms regarding their physical location.

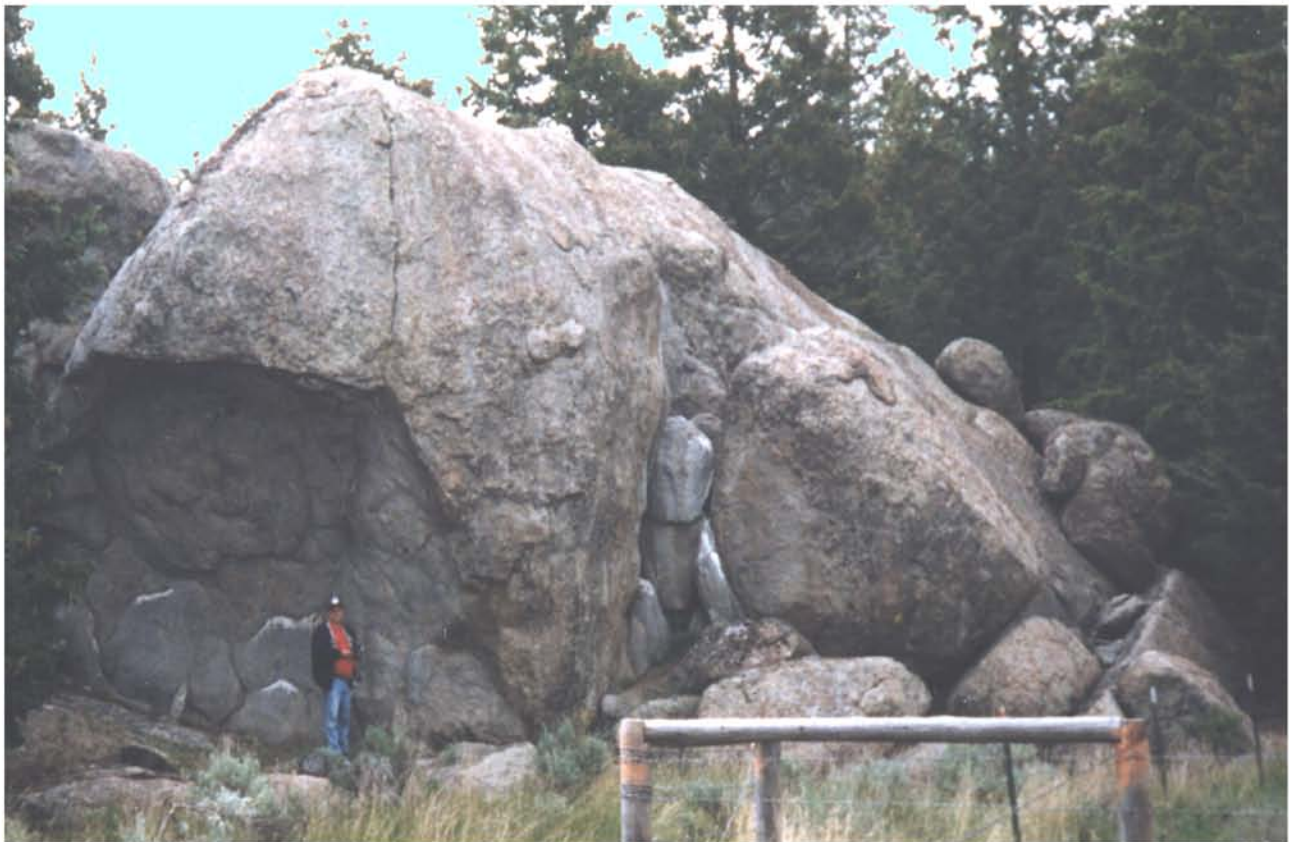


Figure 3. Caldwell Pictograph Site (24JF604) in the Boulder batholith area.

SITE CONTENTS

Although no figure inventory information exists for five of the 50 recorded sites in southwestern Montana, and four sites have only minimal information on the figures, information from the other 41 recorded pictograph sites suggests they are most readily distinguished from those of central and western Montana by the presence of arched geometrics and line-and-dot patterns. Geometric figures, including simple circles and lines and complex designs, occur much more frequently than representational figures, such as humans and animals, which are not prominent or even common at most southwestern Montana sites. The distinctive long-streak fingerlines (which occur either individually or in groups of two, three, or four) and smears (which may be small and round or cover an entire wall or cave interior) of central Montana (Greer and Greer 1996:46-47) are seldom found among the southwestern Montana pictographs; the large solid wall paintings have not yet been observed in this region.

Arched geometric figures are a trademark of the southwestern region. This motif class is generally made with one continuous line that curves up and back down, and the large arches at the Silver Star Pictographs (24MA119) south of Whitehall are typical examples (Fig. 4a). However, a variation on the arched geometric is an h-like figure (Fig. 4b). The arched geometric is particularly frequent in the southwestern part of this region.

Combinations or patterns of lines and dots are another prominent southwestern Montana motif. The lines are frequently crossed in the form of a plus symbol (+), and the dots occur as either closed or small open circles. Different kinds of line-and-dot or cross-and-circle patterns have long been explained as star representations in rock art throughout the world (Conner and Conner 1971: 31, 33; Patterson 1992:191), and a panel at the Ironrod Bridge Pictographs (24MA1070) north of Twin Bridges appears to be a good candidate for such an explanation (Fig. 5).

Geometric figures also occur as single dots, circles, and lines. As mentioned above, lines seldom are in a form similar to central Montana fingerlines, and additionally, they do not often

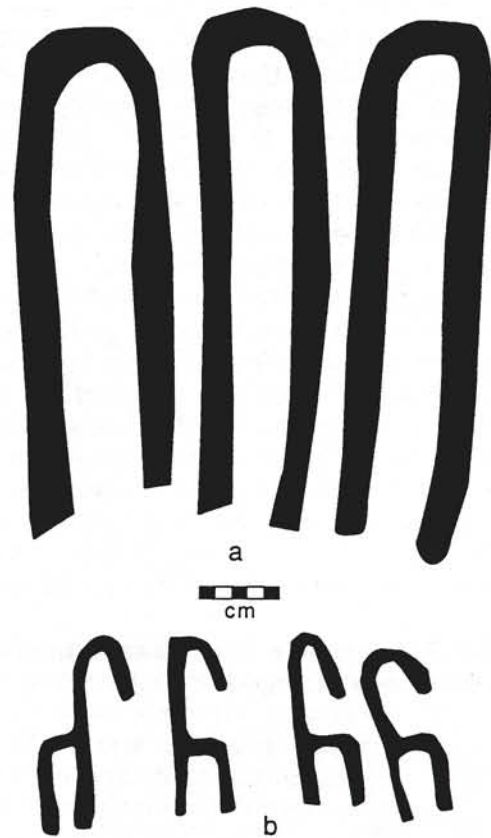


Figure 4. Examples of the Arched Geometric Motif. (a) Typical example at Silver Star Pictographs (24MA119). (b) h-like variation at Rattlesnake Cliff (24BE1005).

resemble the rows of tally marks that frequent western Montana rock art. Simple geometric designs that have been recorded include a comb figure (Fig. 6a) and a tree figure (Fig. 6b).

Southwestern Montana rock art also includes some large complex composite designs with several separate but related parts (Fig. 7). All complex composite design figures recorded to date are at sites in the Boulder batholith area.

Impressed and stylized handprints most frequently occur in central Montana (Greer and Greer 1996:50) but occasionally occur here also. Only two sites have been recorded so far in Montana with negative handprints, or hand stencils — one site northeast of Helena and the Cabin Creek Rockshelters (24BE1766) south of Dillon. The three hand stencils in southwestern Montana are complete with all digits (Fig. 8) and

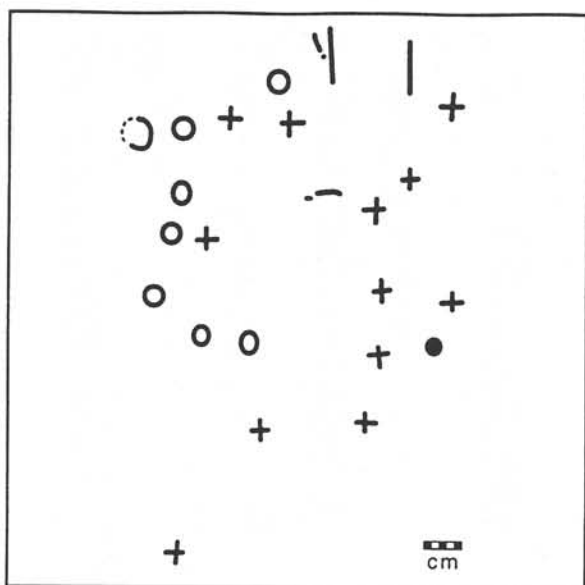


Figure 5. Possible star pattern panel at Ironrod Bridge Pictographs (24MA1070).

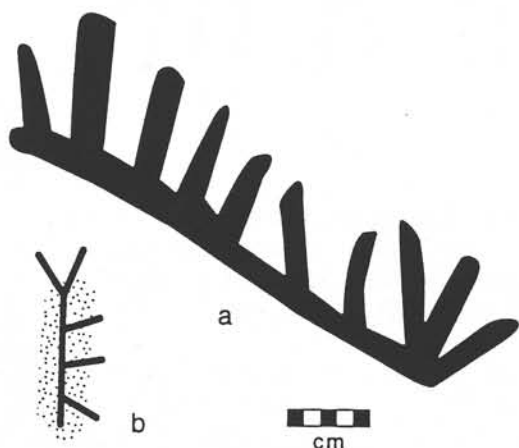


Figure 6. Geometric figures: (a) Comb-like figure at Entrance Pictographs (24SB500). (b) Tree-like figure at Armstead Pictographs 3 (24BE1731).

appear to have been made with liquid paint evenly spattered around a hand and forearm, both placed flat against the rock, presumably with the palm downward against the rock face. All three hands are adult, and ring fingers extend longer than the index fingers, suggesting they may be males (Greer and Greer 1996:50).

Hand impressions have been inventoried at five sites and include 31 hands, 20 of which are at

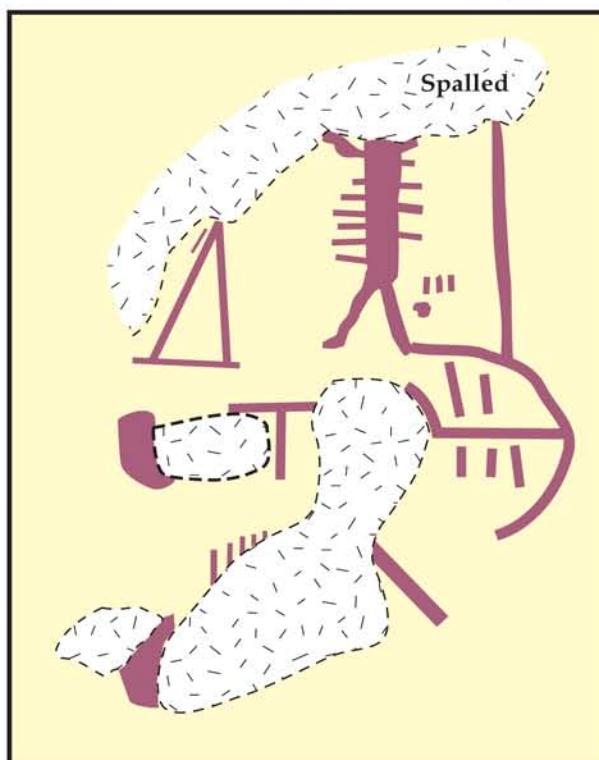


Figure 7. Large composite design at Double Boulder Pictographs (24JF1319).

the Whitetail Bear site (24JF605) east of Butte. Of the remaining impressions seven are in the northern part of the region, and four are at Cobble Cave (24BE1860) in the southern part of the region. Cobble Cave, south of Dillon, also has the only stylized hand print recorded to date in this region.

Only 58 anthropomorphs have been counted, 36 of which are stick figures. Although information on human representations is sketchy, only one V-necked figure has been noted, and four anthropomorphs were adorned with headdresses. Nine shield-anthropomorphs are recorded, and most are small simple stick figures with a plain circle shield (Fig. 9a). Four of the nine shield figures are at Jackson Pictographs (24BE1030) in the western part of the region. These shield figures are additionally interesting in that two hold spears and one has a bow and arrow. Not all shield figures in southwestern Montana are simple as exemplified by the large elaborate, warrior-like figure at Stone Creek Pictographs (24MA34) east of Dillon. This figure is about 38 cm tall and was painted in liquid red paint (Fig. 9b).



Figure 8. Negative hand at Cabin Creek Rockshelters (24BE1766).

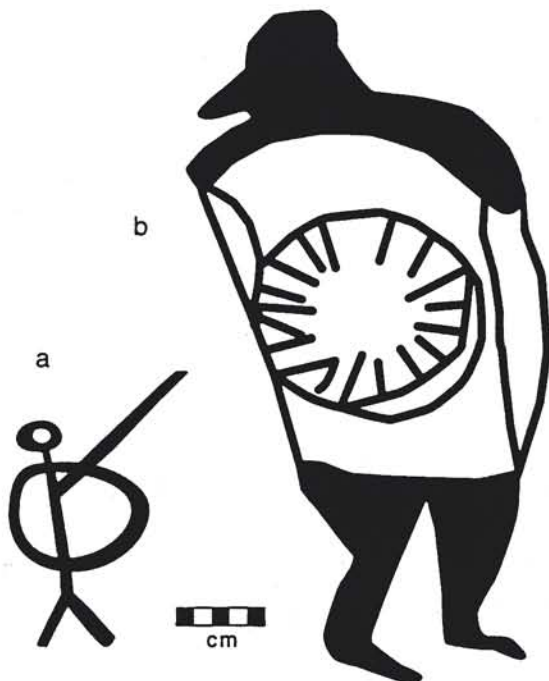


Figure 9. Anthropomorphs. (a) Small simple stick shield figure at Jackson Pictographs (24BE1030). (b) Large elaborate shield figure at the Stone Creek Pictographs (24MA34).

Even fewer zoomorphs have been reported. Among the 22 identifiable animals, bison are the most numerous with seven, all in Sourdough Cave (24BE19) south of Dillon. These were made with a black hard-stick applicator (commonly referred to as a crayon), which was in common use in Montana rock art near the end of the Late Prehistoric and during the Protohistoric periods (Greer 1995:293). Probably in the early 1900s the original black figures at Sourdough were over-painted with a runny paint that, according to the site's recording history (which dates back to the River Basin Surveys), apparently has changed from brick red to orange in color during the ensuing years. Because the later painters did not completely cover the black figures, it is still possible to determine the original forms of most of the earlier animals.

Other identifiable animals in southwestern Montana include snakes (2), bears (4), deer (2), and mountain sheep (2). Two horses have been recorded, one at Stone Creek Pictographs (24MA34) and one at Sourdough Cave (24BE19). Five animals are four-legged generic descriptions that cannot be identified at this time due to lack of information on the site forms.

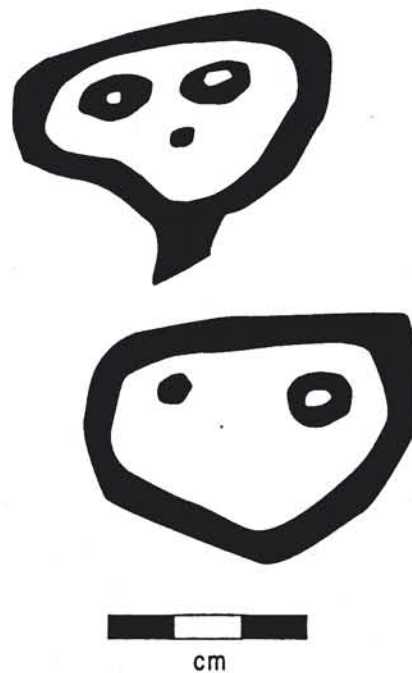


Figure 10. Faces or masks at Twin Bridges Boulder (24MA1391). Scale approximate.

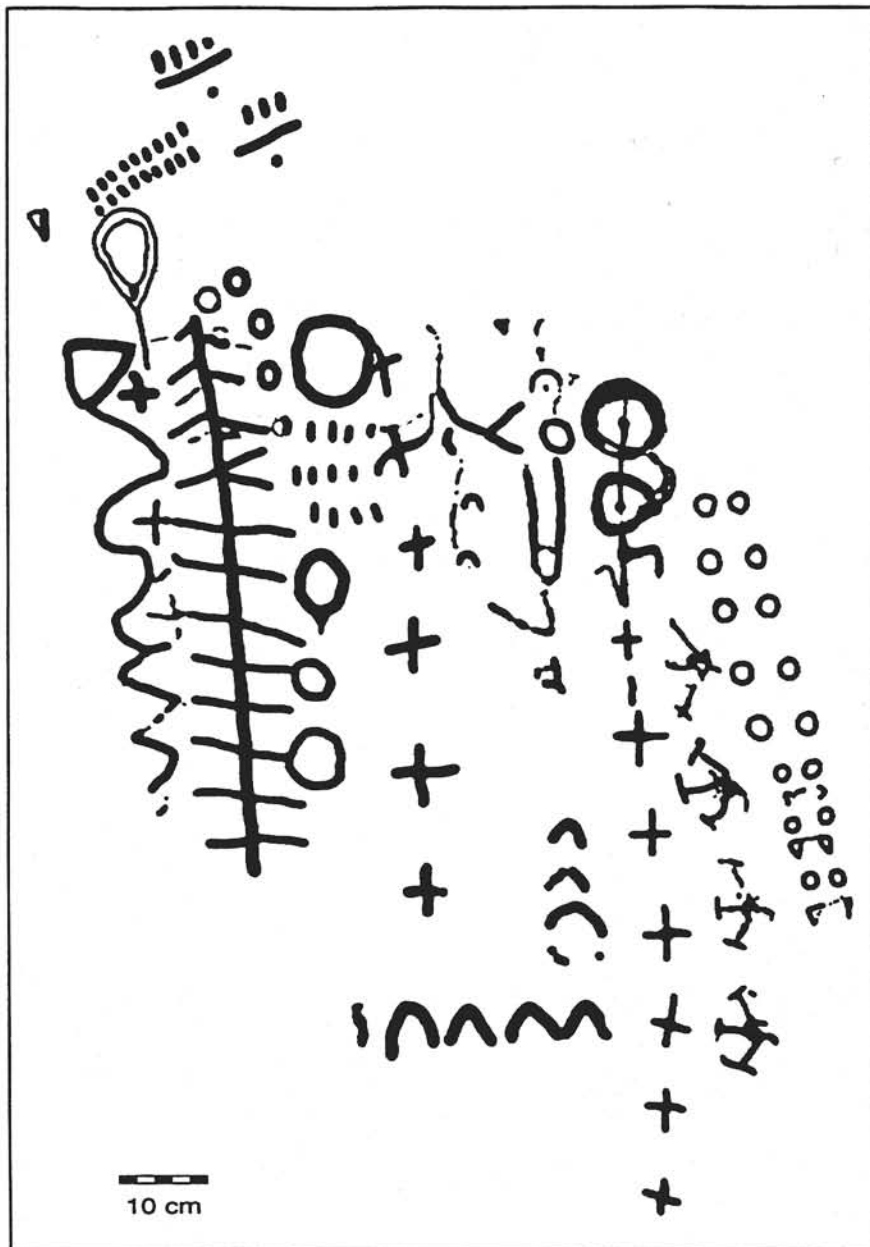


Figure 11. Example of Vertical Series at Little Sheep Creek Pictographs (24BE1013), showing upper part of main panel. Traced from enhanced scan of composite photos at BLM Dillon Resource Area. Scale approximate.

Representations of animal feet or tracks include bear paws (12), bird tracks (1), and hoof prints (6 pairs).

Twin Bridges Boulder (24MA1391) has two mask figures (Fig. 10), an uncommon motif in southwestern Montana. Both have simple single-line faces with narrower chins than head tops, circle eyes, and one has an almost circular nose.

They are high on a boulder face and cannot be reached from present ground level.

VERTICAL SERIES

Examining distinctive arrangements of motifs is one means of rock art analysis and comparison, and in southwestern Montana there are several examples of an arrangement known as Vertical

Series, originally defined as painted or incised columns of identical or nearly identical designs that sometimes bend to the right near the top (Conner and Conner 1971:27). Stuart Conner first recognized the importance of this vertical arrangement of figures in eastern Montana and extending somewhat into the fringes of the central part of the state. Later Linea Sundstrom (1987) examined Vertical Series in some depth and included examples from northern Wyoming and the Black Hills of South Dakota. Sundstrom also considered Vertical Series to be composed only of specific kinds of geometric figures. The Vertical Series format has been recognized in a limited fashion in the Smith River drainage of central Montana (Greer 1995:203-204), and although only four sites presently have good examples in southwestern Montana, we expect it to become more prevalent here as inventory increases the sample of known sites.

Sites with Vertical Series occur from the northern portion of the region at Entrance Pictographs (24SB500), through the central part of the region at Silver Star Pictographs (24MA119), to the southern part of the region at Rattlesnake Cliff (24BE1005) and Little Sheep Creek Pictographs (24BE1013). Vertical Series figures at Little Sheep Creek Pictographs include columns of the plus symbol (+) and small open circles (Fig. 11). Silver Star Pictograph columns consist of short vertical lines and dots (Figure 12a), the Rattlesnake Cliff column has small open circles (very similar to those at Little Sheep Creek Pictographs), and Entrance Pictographs has a column of short horizontal lines.

HORIZONTAL SERIES

In southwestern Montana, in addition to the Vertical Series, is an arrangement we call the Horizontal Series, which is a pattern that consists of rows of identical or nearly identical figures, and rows are often multiple and nearly always close to parallel. Columns of figures at Silver Star Pictographs appear to have elements of both Vertical and Horizontal series (Fig. 12a). A more typical example from Steel's Pass Pictographs, with two rows of several dots in each row (Fig. 12b), is a pattern that occurs throughout the region and also is present west of the Continental Divide.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

Sites recorded to date in southwestern Montana are almost exclusively in the Jefferson River drainage, and all are pictographs. Prominent motifs in this southwestern region include arched geometrics and line-and-dot patterns with + symbols). One of only two known negative handprint sites in Montana has been recorded in this region. Geometric figures are much more common than representational figures, which are dominated by simple stick anthropomorphs. Vertical Series and Horizontal Series arrangements both characterize the area, with small open circles, plus symbols, dots, and short lines dominating the motifs in these columns and rows. The current data base indicates that pictographs here occur most frequently on boulder surfaces, with rockshelters and open bluff faces used about half as frequently, and small cave rooms only occasionally painted. This may be a reflection of the relative occurrence of boulders, rockshelters and open

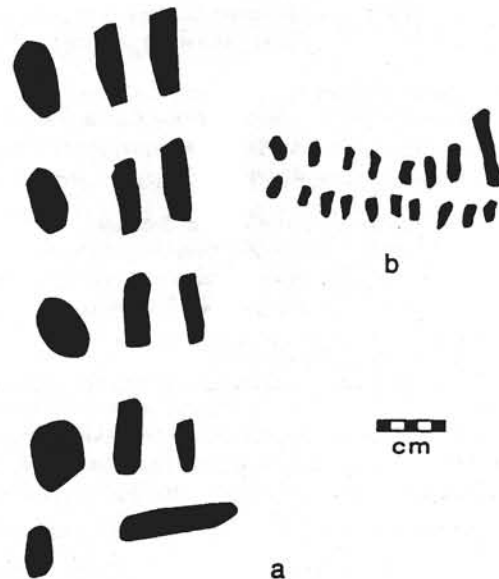


Figure 12. Examples of Vertical Series and Horizontal Series configurations. (a) Combined vertical-horizontal (grid) arrangement at Silver Star Pictographs (24MA119). (b) Horizontal arrangement at Steel's Pass Pictographs (24MA333).

bluffs, and cave rooms; or it may simply be a bias in past recording strategies, a problem that deserves further consideration.

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