

Paper Presented at the
Annual Meeting of the Wyoming Archaeological Society
Riverton, Wyoming
April 2002

Rock art sites occur infrequently in the Powder River Basin of Wyoming and Montana compared with surrounding mountainous areas and other Basin areas. This may be a reflection of site density, but more likely it's a sampling problem as there are many appropriate settings within the Basin that have yet to be checked for rock art. The Powder River Basin is defined here as that area bordered on the south by the east-west portion of the North Platte River, on the north by the Yellowstone River, on the west by the foothills of the Bighorn Mountains, and on the east by the foothills of the Black Hills, but specifically excluding those foothill areas.





It contains not only the Big and Little Powder Rivers, but also the headwaters and upper portions of the Belle Fourche and Cheyenne rivers, and the lower reaches of the Tongue and Bighorn Rivers. Rock art settings within the Powder River Basin are characterized primarily as sandstone cliffs or faces within a ridge system, or as free-standing sandstone

formations. To date, only one petroglyph has been recorded on a small boulder similar to the boulder rock art of Northeastern Montana, Saskatchewan, and the Dakotas.

Almost all recorded rock art sites within the Basin are petroglyphs, but some of these engravings were subsequently painted. Today we want to give you an overview of the kinds of rock art known in this area by focusing not only on some of the most impressive sites in the region but also showing you some of the smaller ones, including two new sites we recorded during the past year.



We'll begin with one of the more impressive sites, Recognition Rock. It's near Colstrip, Montana, and is now protected by the mine and local residents, although it's been subjected to major vandalism in the past. Animal tracks were one of the most popular motifs to place on this rock, and bear paws are

especially prevalent. In fact, this site has the most bear paws of any we have observed within the Basin. Most of the paws are similar in design to those carved on the glacial boulders of Northeastern Montana, an area where bear paws are often portrayed in the rock art. This prevalent



stylistic similarity in the Powder River Basin is marked by large paws either completely pecked smooth or extensively decorated with line designs rather than just the one or two lines demarking front or rear paws. Additionally, these paws most frequently have long curved claws rather than short straight claws.



One of the most carefully executed and detailed figures at Recognition Rock is a human with a horned headdress and a well made bear paw foot. It has a powerline extending from the hand above the scale and an arrow extending from the other hand. This combination of power symbols suggests a figure of strength or one seeking strength. The deliberate mixture of human and bear characteristics in rock art

figures is explicit in Powder River Basin rock art. Another example of this kind of figure is at the Daly Petroglyphs northeast of Gillette.



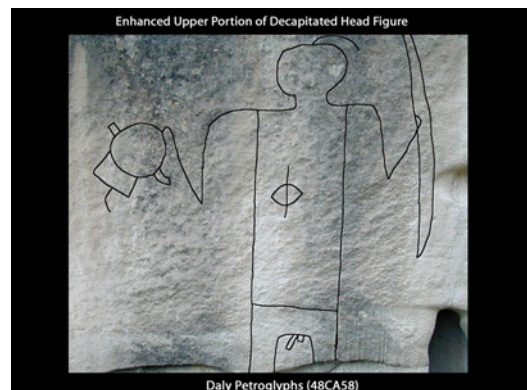
The Daly site includes several separate panels, but the site is dominated by one with three life-size men standing side by side overlooking the drainage.

All three are about 5 feet tall and are clearly portrayed as males. The left figure is a human in all aspects except for his bear-claw feet. He has a small round shield with a geometric design covering his upper body and a tied sash around his hips. An arrow emerges from the top of his head, and another penetrates his lower legs. This human with bear characteristics appears to be associated with warfare. Whether this portrayal is possibly a preventive scene in which protection is being sought to avert arrow penetration, or is possibly a biographic representation telling of a conflict already completed, is not known.



The figure in the center of this trio wears a rectangular breast plate with three columns of V-shaped designs topped by circles. A quiver of arrows rests on his back. All three of these figures have arrows which date them no earlier than the Late Prehistoric Period, but the small shield suggest they were made after 1700 and the coming of the horse, when shields became smaller to accommodate riding.

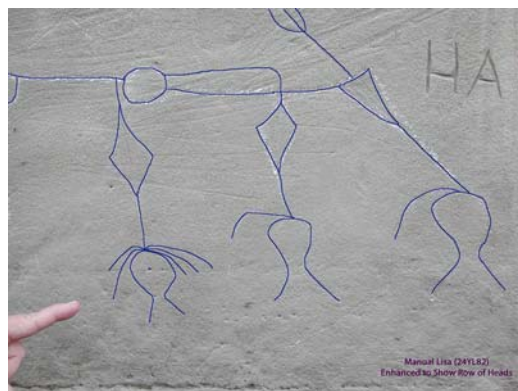
The third large figure on the panel has a different hair style from the other two, though his general appearance gives the impression that these three life-size figures are not only contemporary but also represent a single tribe. The third warrior's hair is gathered at the top with a pony tail to the right. His torso is shown with a heart in the center rather than a shield or breast plate. However, his feet have bear claw-like toes, and at least one arrow enters his lower leg, similar to the person on the far left. The arm on the right bends up at the elbow and holds a bow, while the arm on the left bends up at the elbow and holds a decapitated head. This head is held at the neck, with the top of the head hanging down. The head style is different from those of the three large figures, and probably indicates a member of a different group. We



have been researching decapitation in Plains rock art and have yet to find a similar head held in the same manner, but we have been directed to several interesting heads in the process, including a row of heads that appears to be hanging from a stick at the Manual Lisa site near the mouth of the Bighorn River.



Here a row of heads is at the bottom of the site's main panel and below a large horse with a shield-bearing rider. At least five heads are dangling from a horizontal line with loops, which was partially written over in 1905 by G.W. Sinclair. There appear to be arrows or lances coming down toward the heads. Like the heads at the Daly Petroglyphs, these have distinctive hair dos. Three have a single tassel coming out of the top of the head, while two have several tassels coming out of the head. Like the Daly Petroglyphs, these multiple heads appear to be a trophy situation, but instead of literal decapitation they may represent coup counts.





The Manual Lisa site contains several horses and riders dating it after 1700, and most of these appear to be in a biographic story telling scene. This site has been impacted by vandalism, most of which is in the form of chalking the petroglyphs for photographs. Although this was an accepted practice in the past,

we now know it is detrimental to direct dating techniques and furthermore, it detracts from viewing and photography by later people. Sites are especially compromised when chalking was done incorrectly as is the case for several of the smaller figures at the Manual Lisa site.



As we've shown so far, much of Powder River Basin rock art is late in time, with many sites dating after the arrival of the horse. This undoubtedly tells us more about the soft eroding nature of the available sandstone in this region than it does about the history of rock art production. In the Basin rock art is preserved best on the hard-packed orangish-colored sandstone, which provides a more stable surface, although it was probably harder to work originally than the softer tan faces. When figures are found on the softer tan sandstone, they are usually late in time.



An example of rock art on a more friable face is the SA Creek Petroglyphs, which we found and recorded this past winter after getting snowed out of a pipeline survey.



The SA Petroglyphs are in the northwestern corner of Campbell County. The site is in a protected alcove-like area, and the figures include three horse tracks among a series of at least 22 incised lines that range from 15 to 45 cm long.

Three of the tracks have dots at the lower ends representing metal horseshoes or mule shoes with heels. Horse or mule prints are rare and were reported at only twelve sites on the Northwestern Plains at the time of Keyser and Klassen's research for their 2001 book on Plains rock art. This site expands that data base.



Shield bearing figures are common human portrayals in the rock art of the Powder River Basin. Shield figures occur at all the sites we've talked about so far except the SA Creek Petroglyphs. At the Daly Petroglyphs, in addition to the life-size figure that supports a shield, there are also some small figures with shields. The figure shown here is small but with a big shield covering the body from the neck to the knees. Like many Plains shields, this one is decorated differently on each half, with the left half plain and the right half covered with vertical parallel lines. The ends of four arrows protrude from the lower left of the shield presumably showing this warrior has been hit. This large body-covering shield may indicate that he predates the horse and is older than the larger figures, but as Stu Conner has noted, the drawing of large shields on people may have been a tradition that lasted in rock art even when they were no longer in every day use.

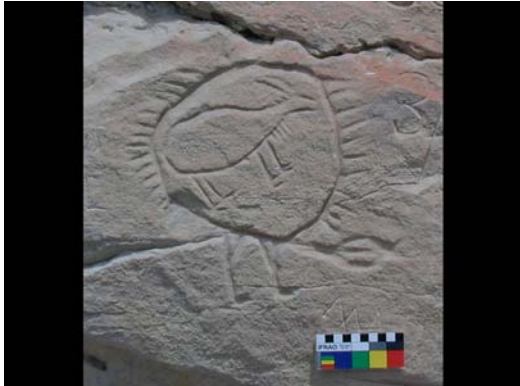


One of the most prolific displays of shield-bearing warriors in the Powder River Basin is the site of Pinnacle Rocks northeast of Douglas. Ten shield figures are on the main panel.

Of those, seven are simple circular bodies. These have small round heads and simple straight legs, with bent lines representing feet. All these small figures have large shields relative to their body size. None of them has an attached weapon, though three have adjacent lances or spears that they appear to be walking toward.

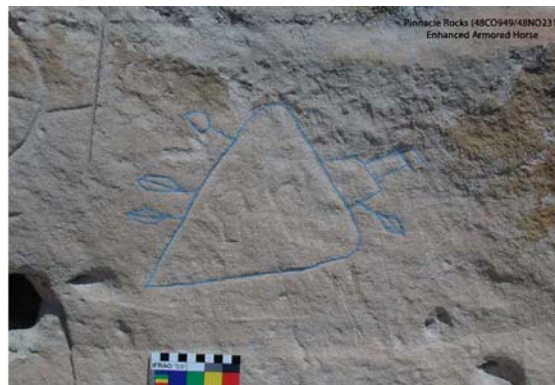


Two others appear to have large clubs in those same positions. The two figures with the clubs also have distinctive lines coming from their heads, presumably their mouths. The lines from both shield figures circle around to enter the mouth of a bison or bear, one of the few animals represented on this panel. Lines such as these are commonly referred to as speech scrolls and are explained as portrayals of communication. These are not common representations in Montana and Wyoming rock art and not typically associated with shield-bearing figures, but they are deliberate on this panel and found on a total of four figures. Although associated with weapons, these small figures are also associated with an animal suggesting these shields functioned as hunting protection rather than warfare protection.



Two larger figures have decorated shields. One of these has lines surrounding the edge of the shield indicating feathers or fringe, and an animal, possible mountain goat, completely fills the interior. An arrow protrudes from the base of the shield presumably indicating this warrior has been hit, like several other portrayals in the Powder River Basin. His legs are shown in some detail so we can see the shield is above his knees, but this figure has no head.

A triangular shaped figure appears to be an armored horse. Because of the eroded nature of the upper adjacent area, it's not possible to tell if it was drawn with a rider. However, the head and neck of the horse are clearly shown, and the armor has a distinctive neck sheath, like two armored horses in the North Cave Hills of South Dakota. Arrows penetrate the armor from the front and rear. This is only the second site with armored horses so far recorded in Wyoming.





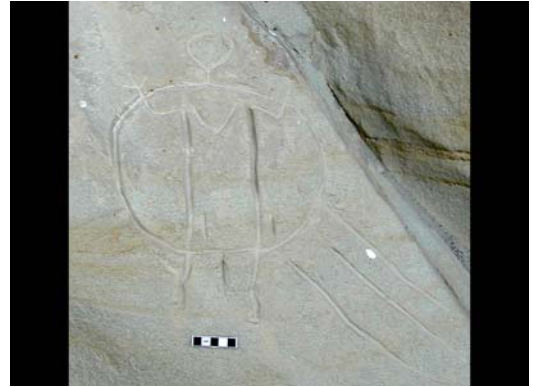
On a separate pillar to the west at Pinnacle Rocks are four shield figures different from those on the main panel. The western shield people are drawn in more detail and on a larger scale. The shields are smaller relative to body size than those of the main panel, but they are not the small upper body-only shield as portrayed on the large figure at the Daly site.

The two best preserved of the four figures have half-moon heads at the top of the shields indicating that their necks were covered, which is further supported by a straight line mouth just above the shield. The headdress of closely spaced radiating lines on the left shield warrior is a common style on the Northwestern Plains. The arms of both figures are hidden behind the shields, but both have anatomically detailed legs with pointing feet, a characteristic also found on one shield figure at the Daly site. The figures were formed first as petroglyphs, and remnant red indicates the shields were subsequently painted, much like some at the Castle Garden site west of Casper and at Valley of the Shields in the Bighorn Basin of southern Montana. Both shields have identical pie-like designs, and both have been damaged, apparently from casting projects, another recording method that was accepted in the past and is considered harmful to rock art today.



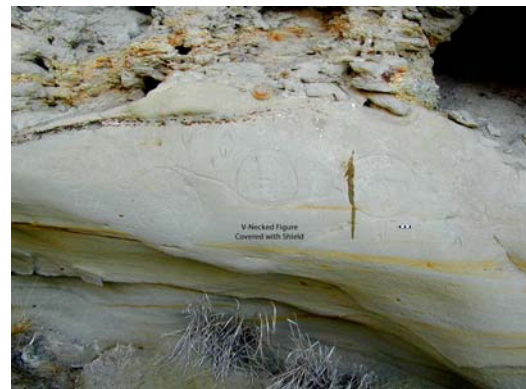
Moving to the southwestern side of the Powder River Basin a site on the old Naval Reserve has several shield figures that provide more comparative information on this motif in the region.

Among these shield figures is a V-necked warrior shown with a relatively large open shield that ends above the knees. Lines extending from both sides of the shield are assumed to be arrows or spears, although they are not as distinctively portrayed on this figure as they are everywhere else in the Powder River Basin and elsewhere at this site, which suggests they may have an alternative explanation.



Also here is a small shield figure that appears to be shooting a bow and arrow just outside his tipi. This figure resembles the small undecorated shield people at Pinnacle Rocks not only in looks but also in the fact that this simple figure appears to be part of a more complex scene.

Three shield figures in a row seem to form an interactive panel. Two round-headed solid-shield figures are flanking another V-necked figure with a see-through shield. All appear to be engaged in warfare activities, which is more typical than the hunting function seen at Pinnacle Rocks.



Designs on shields have been used to determine cultural affiliation of sites. Because some shields date to the time of horses, researchers, such as Linea Sundstrom and Jim Keyser working in South Dakota, have successfully applied the Direct Historical Approach and suggested tribal affiliation for some

shields. However, shield figures occur early in Wyoming and Montana rock art. Larry Loendorf has dated them as early as 1000 AD in Valley of the Shields. Therefore, detailed analysis must be conducted before assigning or even suggesting possible cultural affiliation for shield figures.

In June 2001 during a cultural survey for a coalbed methane expansion project we found a rock art site in an unusual setting for the Powder River Basin. In the open rolling grassland plains in southern Campbell County southeast of Wright is a small petroglyph boulder. The boulder is a large scoria chunk that undoubtedly rolled down the hillside from the main scoria



deposits on the ridgecrest centuries ago, as it appears that the rock was carved in-place at this location. On the rock is an alignment of three evenly spaced double indentations that appear to represent three pairs of hoofprints, possibly deer or antelope. Alignments of hoofprints, especially in pairs, are common in Northern Plains rock art to portray an animal trail or route,



especially at the end of the Late Prehistoric through the early Historic Period when stories were being told in this medium. Because Historic Period animal track alignments are most commonly bison or horse, and since these appear to represent deer or antelope, it's possible they were made during the early part of this Biographic Tradition.

In conclusion, the Powder River Basin petroglyph sites when compared one-on-one indicate enough diversity to provide information on such topics as changes through time in content and function on a local scale. They also have enough figure element differences to provide data for studies on differentiating site creation by different groups utilizing the area at any given time and possible associated group movements. However, when viewed as a whole and compared with surrounding regions, these sites are unmistakably Northern Plains rock art and would not be confused with that of the Great Lakes or Great Basin. As a whole the subject matter of the

Powder River Basin sites appears more heavily weighed toward warfare than sites of immediately surrounding areas, such as the nearby Whoopup Canyon site on the edge of the Black Hills. Of course, as a whole, the Powder River Basin sites are later in time than sites in surrounding areas. We hope this quick overview of the rock art of the Powder River Basin has shown that these sites, although not as world class spectacular as the sites around the Riverton area, have as much to offer regarding the research and analysis of the people living and using the coal lands of northeastern Wyoming and southeastern Montana.

