

Variations Of Human Figures Through Time And Space At Baird's Chevelon Steps

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The petroglyphs of the 150 meters long bend in Chevelon Creek, Arizona, USA, known as The Steps constitute one of the most impressive and dynamic rock art sites in the American Southwest. Thousands of carvings exist in multilayered superimposition. The most numerous image portrayed here is the anthropomorphic figure. Stylistic variations exist from simple stick or blob figures to complex patterned bodies with elaborate headdresses. The categorization, examination and analysis and the possible time frames and significance of these figures are the subjects of this paper.

Carved representations of human figures of many varieties are found in the 150 meters long bend of Chevelon Creek in North Central Arizona known as The Steps (Figure 1). Documenting them brought out the intricacies of these images and posed questions about their chronological placement and purposes. Records gained greater appreciation, but deeper comprehension remains to be realized. Why were so many humans portrayed in such diversity in such a limited amount of space?



Figure 1. Scratchboard drawing by Scott Seibel of Gallery One.

The Chevelon Steps petroglyph site is located between Holbrook and Winslow in a region of arid high desert land where permanent water is rare. This area near the junction of Chevelon Creek and the Little Colorado River is rich in archaeological remains. Chevelon Ruin, which was four stories high, and now part of Homolovi Ruins State Park, dominates the area to the north (Lange 1989:195). It was inhabited from about A. D. 1050 to 1450, but since no excavation has been done there, little is known about the inhabitants and their life style. North of the river are the ruins of Homolovi where much work has been undertaken including an in depth study of the rock art. The focus of the Homolovi study is on the Katsina iconography which is prevalent there (Cole 1992). The Little Colorado River and its tributaries are known for a profusion of complex rock art sites and as the habitation of archaic peoples, Pueblo ancestors or Anasazi, Sinagua and their later day descendants. Malotki refers to the region including Chevelon and Gear Creek as the Palavayu which was first inhabited during PaleoIndian times around 9500 B.C. and subsequently occupied by Archaic, Basketmaker and Pueblo groups until at least A. D. 1450. (McCreery and Malotki, 1994:3-5).

THE STEPS PROJECT

In depth study and documentation of The Steps site began in 1996 as a collaborative effort with the Arizona Archeological Society under the direction of Donald E. Weaver, Jr. and Jane Kolber. We have gained the consent and support of the land owner, Mr. Brantley Baird, who is currently conducting tours of the site and area. Advertisements can be seen on the Internet for Rock Art Canyon Ranch. Mr. Baird is devoted to the protection of the site from future vandalism. He has constructed locked gates and posted signs. However, there are rumors of the possible damming of Chevelon Creek by various government agencies. Natural deterioration is occurring as is evidenced by the flaking, cracking, wind and water erosion and the invasion of lichen. Some graffiti already exists in the form of spray painted and carved names and dates.

The permanent water at The Steps undoubtedly drew people into the area. Scattered small pit house villages were identified in

the vicinity by Kelley Hays-Gilpin while conducting an archaeological survey of the surface surrounding the site above the canyon. This survey was carried out in 1997 and 1998 in conjunction with The Steps Project. However, she and her crew found few artifact remains which probably indicates that the manufacturers of the rock art did not live in the nearby vicinity.

Documentation of the site and nomination to the National Register of Historic Places may help to prevent destructive action by vandals and the forces of nature. Recording sessions of from three days to a week-long are held during the summer and fall each year. During this time a group of well trained volunteers work on photographing and drawing all the elements visibly present at the site. The site has been carefully mapped and divided up into 40 galleries, each with several levels and panels according to natural breaks, features and groupings of figures. The images show a great range of size, style, position, detail and arrangement. Since it is felt that the human-like and animal-like figures dominate the site and therefore are significant, each one is drawn separately in detail with notations describing it. The completion of the field work is projected for late 2001 or 2002.

THE HUMAN FIGURES

Thousands of individual petroglyphs are crowded into this short length of magnificent canyon. Human figures predominate, followed by animals and then by abstract geometrics. As of the fall of 1998, more than half of the human figures have been recorded.

The most numerous and most complex figures at The Steps are patterned body, broad shouldered anthropomorphs (Figure 2). Mostly tall and slender, each displays a unique body pattern showing the presence of creative individuality. Some are largely pecked, leaving room for zigzag or squiggly lines in negative form. Other figures occur with positive internal body designs. Some are cross hatched, while others have only horizontal stripes, eliminating the ubiquitous outline. Usually the legs are straight sticks with either circular or three to five pronged feet attached. Often they are adorned with ornate head dresses or hair styles (Figure 10). Horns and antennae appear frequently.

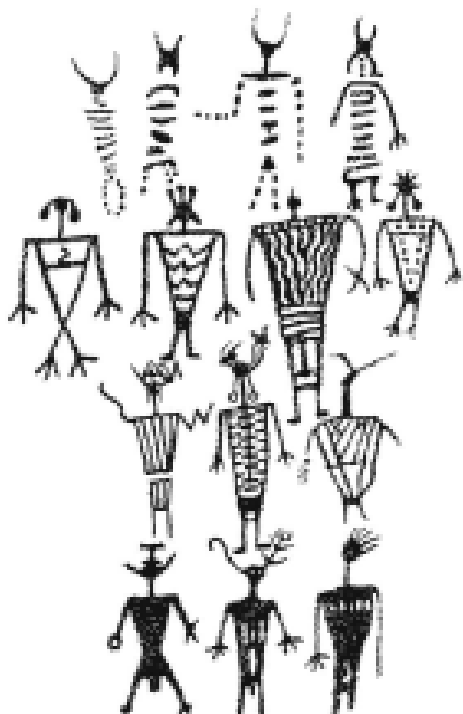


Figure 2. Broad shouldered anthropomorphic figures began with simple linear forms which were followed by complex body patterning and then by almost complete to fully pecked figures.



Figure 3. Figures with arm extensions could be holding throwing sticks for hunting.

Extending from the hands of some human-like figures are curved or S-shaped lines which could represent throwing sticks (Figure 3) that were used to hunt small animals such as rabbits and rodents from early prehistoric through historic times.

Examples of these curved wooden sticks that were used like a non-returning boomerang, were found alongside atlatls and burials in storage places in the Basketmaker II White Dog Cave in Northeastern Arizona (Amsden 1949:73). Other figures hold objects similar to prayer sticks (Figure 4) which have also been found at sites in the Little Colorado River drainage (McCreery and Malotki 1994: 68-83). Some hold round, square or rectangular objects (Figure 5) that could possibly represent carrying bags or heads. Further downstream, a rock art panel was located with some singular (triangular bodied) broad shoulder figures with apparently disembodied heads. Many of these downstream figures are carrying the throwing sticks and some are carrying what appear to be bull-roarers and/or cords with projectile points tied to the ends.. These bear

a similarity to some Fremont figures found to the north in Utah (Castleton 1978:21).

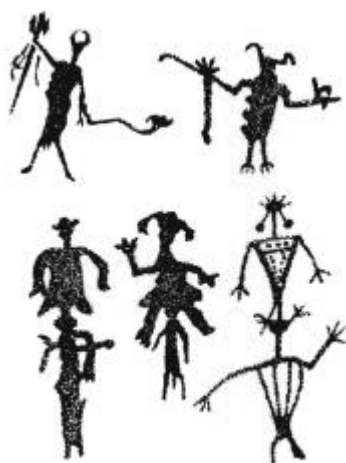


Figure 4. The upper figures appear to be holding vertical poles which could represent prayer sticks, staffs, or spears. The lower ones appear to be standing one on top of another.



Figure 5. Many human figure representations are depicted carrying objects which could be bows and arrows, bags, prayer sticks, weapons, baskets, heads, flutes, walking sticks or staffs.

Earlier Styles

The broad shouldered anthropomorphs may be the earliest human representations at the site. This idea is based on observations that they bear resemblance to figures often found in association with atlatls and in conjunction with basketmaker era sites. Donald E. Weaver, Jr. (personal communication, 1999) found large, almost life size completely repatinated images of this style high up on the cliff faces in other locations along Chevelon Creek. He believes that these larger images precede those at The Steps. Numerous sites in the region display similar figures with more or less complexity. When looking at other Little Colorado River drainage sites, Don Christensen reported that, based on superimpositioning, the linear striped figures with horn-like protuberances were the oldest in Petrified Forest National Park (Christensen 1992:36). He pointed out the possibility that "the Linear Style rock art is late archaic in age and predates the development of a definable Basketmaker culture in the region?" (Christensen 1992:41). Sally Cole describes what she classifies as Glen Canyon Linear Style number five as having two-homed or two-antennaed headdresses, varied shaped small heads on long necks and containing facial features (1996:113). In her study of the rock art at Homolovi, (the large complex of ruins to the northwest of The Steps) Cole (1992) focuses on the katsina iconography where faces and masks dominate. Peter Pilles noted the lack of facial features in the Little Colorado River rock art human figures (Pilles 1975:6). Therefore, it may be assumed that the lack of facial features are a distinctive characteristic of The Steps. Christensen goes on to state that he thinks that the trapezoidal and triangular bodied figures with interior linear designs found in Chevelon Canyon may represent a transitional style leading to later Basketmaker (Christensen 1992:37).

Malotki concurs by claiming, that "The outlined trapezoidal and elongated oval figures with interior vertical or horizontal lines or dots may represent the earliest types, perhaps originating in the Archaic period" (McCreery and Malotki 1994:18). McCreery and Malotki make further comparison with the Glen Canyon Linear Style which is characterized by human figures with horns, some with minuscule heads and holding S-curved objects. Depictions of atlatls, unmistakable snakes, carrying what looks like a bouquet of flowers (McCreery and Malotki 1994:18) are traits absent at The Steps. In contrast to the Glen Canyon Style (Turner 1963:7) are the frequent instances of fully pecked bodies. Malotki indicates that a Chevelon Creek site where there are solidly pecked broad shouldered images with earrings or hairbobs, featureless faces and many phallic figures could represent an evolutionary sequence (McCreery and Malotki 1994:22).

Intermediary Styles

Broad shouldered figures were probably followed by the less detailed stick figures and more free formed images (Figure 6). Some are just single lines, others have ovoid, amorphous, or rectangular bodies. Round bellied figures, which can be found throughout central Arizona, are present. These are commonly found at Sinagua rock art locations (Schoonover and Kolber, 1994:9) and their presence at The Steps may be indicative of that connection. Most of the human figures which are suspected to be of later manufacture were created with less care and show no adornments or accouterments. Flutes, staffs

and walking sticks are attached to some figures. Many of these are believed to belong to the early Pueblo periods and may have been created by those living in some of the nearby villages (Cole, 1992:138-140). In contrast to the broad shouldered figures, these less detailed forms are often shown in poses other than forward facing, with arms at sides. Some of the portrayed postures are profiles, one armed raised, in motion or with bent knees.



Figure 6. Many styles are present at the Steps including stick figures, hourglass, outlined bodied, oval, amorphic, rectangular bodied, ball bellied figures. Some are in profile and various positions are shown.



Figure 7. Rows of human figures holding hands and one row of tiny figures with feet attached are among the features at the Steps.

Many rows of human figures holding hands are present (Figure 7). One row of tiny armless figures, about 12 centimeters in height, show feet touching the feet of the adjoining figures. Some of the elements are broad shouldered and some have only one leg. The one legged figure is another character found scattered along the Little Colorado River and its tributaries (McCreery and Malotki 1994:154-155) (Figure 8). The omission of one leg appears to have been done on purpose. The images do not appear to be merely unfinished. Sometimes the whole leg is missing, while in others just the lower leg below the knee is absent.



Figure 8. Figures emphasizing or eliminating legs are found throughout the Little Colorado River drainage such as the mysterious one-legged person or those with leg extensions in various

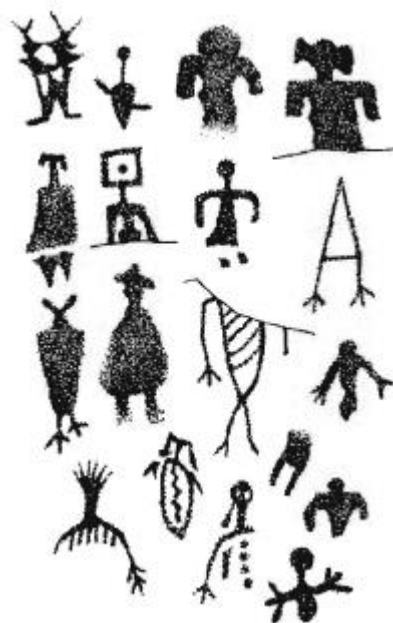


Figure 9. Partial human-like figures exist on the cliff walls at The Steps, some of which may have broken off, such as those shown with solid lines indicating cracks. Some may have eroded. Some may have been interrupted during manufacture. Some may be purposefully incomplete. Those with only one leg are dealt with elsewhere.

Other anthropomorphic figures appear in various stages of completion (Figure 9). Some of the incomplete figures appear to have been damaged by the process of erosion, especially those near the base of the cliffs where frequent water and debris erosion occurs. Some figures seem to emerge out of cracks or from around corners. Partial bodied anthropomorphs are sometimes attached to abstract shapes. In many situations it is not possible to determine whether or not the fragmented images were intentional or not.

Gender is frequently indicated (Figure 10). Phalluses vary in size, shape and complexity. At least one depiction appears to show an emission. Female genitalia are illustrated with birthing represented in at least two instances. One of those depictions is amongst the most prominent figures at the site and wears typical Puebloan hair whorls. Polly Schaafsma (1980:155), when referring to the Little Colorado, wrote that "Sexual symbolism is more common here than in other Anasazi rock art."



Figure 10. An indication of gender with genitalia is often depicted. Hair styles vary amongst the sexes. The lower and upper portions of the bodies have been eliminated in this drawing to save space.

Animals are the next most numerous subject at The Steps. Quite a few depictions of anthropomorphs appear to be partially bird-like in form. No examples of animal and human combinations have been identified to date except for the fanciful interpretation that one looks like a centaur because a quadruped or four legged animal was superimposed over a human. Some human bodies have bird-like heads (Figure 11), similar to images found in the heart of the Anasazi country, below the Four Corners, with a major concentration around Canyon de Chelly representing all other periods of occupation (Grant, 1978:210) (Bock and Bock, 1992:14). Grant (1978:210) suggested that the bird headed anthropomorphic images originated there and spread to the more northern San Juan River drainage. He indicated their probable early date since many have been found associated with depictions of atlatls (1978:210). Frank and A. J. Bock (1992) presented an elaborate interpretation of the possible religious association of bird-headed humans. They suggested that these figures are comparatively rare in the southwest (Bock, 1992:14).



Figure 11. Head adornments are many and varied. The ubiquitous bird headed human figure is found along with anthropomorphic figures which are also bird-like in appearance.

Later Styles

The latest human figures at the site probably include the possible birthing scene (Figure 12) which contains recognizable traits of late Pueblo rock art such as prominent hair whorls commonly worn by historic and modern day traditional maidens. Figures produced during this period are rare at The Steps. By studying the rock art of the area, the project recorders have concluded that the depiction of the human figure in rock art appears to have died out among the Pueblos after Pueblo IV times and the arrival of the Spanish.



Figure 12. This prominent figure may represent a female giving birth. It is portrayed in a late Pueblo style.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

It may be significant to note that several frequently found characteristics of Anasazi or Puebloan Ancestral sites are missing at the Chevelon Steps. Hand prints are not evident, nor are masks or detailed facial features. One large face or mask is located in a nearby side canyon, but it is associated with other petroglyphs of dissimilar styles. Feet are rare. The broad shoulder patterned body figures do not exhibit ear appendages (Grant. 1978:211). They carry neither prayer sticks nor circular shield-like objects, nor do they wear necklaces (all common traits in other similar sites). The project recorders believe that these observations and absences may prove important in understanding the site.

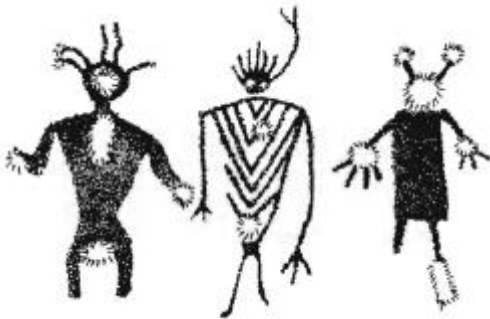


Figure 13. Most of the human figures have depressions pounded into them at vital life parts. These intrusions are shown (IS radiating lines).

The great majority of both human and animal figures have re-pecked depressions on them (Figure 13). Cup like cavities have been pecked most frequently into the center of the upper torsos. Other instances occur within the heads, the lower torso and the hands and feet. This re-pecking was purposefully executed sometime between the original creation of the image and recent times as they all contain a moderate degree of patination somewhere between that of the first image and that of the modern graffiti. Observations, by visitors to the site during the project sessions, suggested that these intrusions were made to either gain power from the image by taking from it, or power over it by harming the image.

Supportive evidence for likely interpretations of the usages and meanings of this site has not yet emerged. When hypotheses arise, they are often refuted by conflicting information. Donna Yoder (personal communication, 1998), a project participant, pointed out that none of the human-like figures bear a close resemblance to realistically representational human beings. Weaver (personal communication, 1998) added that none of the images appear to be

portraits or representations of actual personages.

This site contains one of the greatest concentration of human figure petroglyphs known to exist in the southwestern United States. Other locations with large concentrations of human figures such as in Baja California, southern Utah or the Pecos River region rarely have so many human figures in one locale. The Chevelon Steps human images reason for being is unknown, nor is there certainty about the progression or the dates of origin. However, The Steps is a showcase for almost the full range of ancestral Puebloan human figure portrayal, providing a splendid gallery of the impressive quality and variance of the creative prehistoric artist.

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