

# Turtles in Montana Rock Art

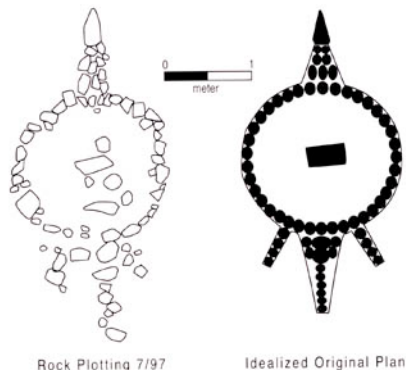
Mavis Greer, Ph.D., and John Greer, Ph.D.

Paper Presented at the  
San Diego Museum of Man Rock Art '99  
San Diego, California  
November 1999



The turtle is portrayed in different media on the plains, and in Montana the turtle motif occurs as pictographs, petroglyphs, and in one case as a geoglyph. Our focus is on how the turtles compare with one another and on some attitudes about the turtle in Plains cultures.

The turtle geoglyph (24ME15) is made of locally available limestone rocks. It measures 3.6 meters long from the top of its head (a single rock), on the right in the 1997 photo to the right, to the end of its tail, which extends out beyond two back legs. There are no front legs, as can be seen in the drawings of the turtle below. The widest point is the circular body, which is 1.7 meters across. The wide neck and wide pointed tail suggests this may represent a snapping turtle.

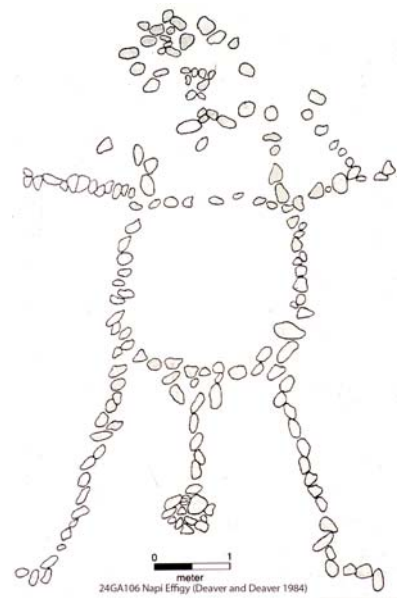


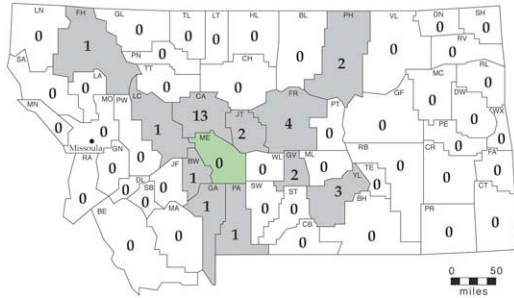
The turtle geoglyph is in the Castle Mountains of central Montana. The site is on a flat grassy area in a slight saddle on the edge of a high mountain meadow. The Castle Mountains are dominated by limestone with many caves and rockshelters, several of which contain rock art.



Pictograph sites close to the geoglyph include Circle Cave (shown in the left photo above), which contains a single red circle, and a more extensive pictograph site (24ME408) at the base of the steep mountain slope below both Circle Cave and the turtle effigy. This site is on a large limestone block that lies in the creek bed. Although in an area of several pictograph sites, there have been no turtles recorded in the paintings of the Castle Mountains to date.

The turtle alignment is one of only two geoglyphs currently recorded in the Montana state files. The other is a human representation, which has been the subject of publications since 1959 when Tom and Alice Kehoe suggested it was associated with the Blackfeet and represents Napi, a supernatural figure, who played an important role in the creation of the world. This figure is located about a hundred miles south of the turtle effigy. Two other human geoglyphs, said to be other Napi figures, are reported in the state but are not yet recorded. The association between the human geoglyphs and the turtle is unknown at this time.





Currently in the over 700 rock art sites recorded in Montana, only 15 have turtle representations reported on the site forms, and the counties with these sites are marked in gray on this map. The turtle geoglyph is in the green county. The 15 sites contain a total of 31 turtles, and this map shows the distribution of the total number of turtles within those sites. Most sites have

only one turtle each, while the county with the most turtles, 13, has 12 in one cave. All of the 31 turtles except three are painted. One petroglyph turtle is on a boulder in the northeastern part of the state, and the other two petroglyph turtles are on a sandstone cliff east of the geoglyph. The distribution of the pictograph and petroglyph turtles relative to the geoglyph, indicates that the effigy lies in the center of the rock art turtle area of Montana, although it is in a county with no pictograph or petroglyph turtles.

An examination of the rock art turtles indicates that most in the state are small, and the painted forms are of three general kinds. There are solid painted turtles, outlined-bodied turtles, and outlined-bodies with interior lines or dots. The solid turtle, in the photo to the right, is west of the effigy in the Big Belt Mountains. It is in a small rockshelter overlooking the Missouri River valley.



Another solid red turtle (in photo to the left) is in a cave along the Middle Fork Judith River. It appears to be upside down, with long legs.

Another solid red turtle (in photo to the right) is at the Boulder River Indian Cave, which is south of the effigy in a limestone cavern high on the mountain side. This turtle is on a panel with an unusual human holding a circular net-shield and a bison with spears.





Northwest of the geoglyph are the 12 turtles in Dillinger Cave (shown above), which is high on the mountainside above the Smith River. These turtles are all alike (on right above) with small oval outlined bodies divided into four generally equal parts by two crossing lines, four short legs, and a short tail.

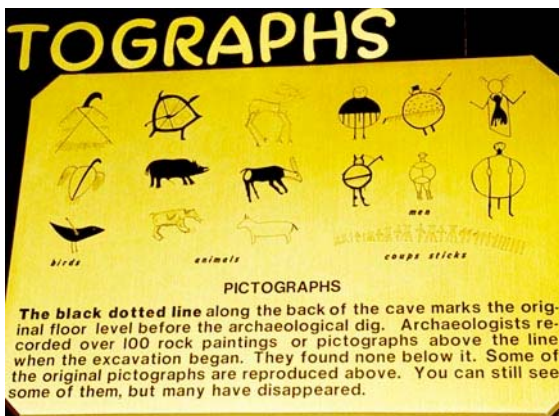


Twin Caves  
24CA101

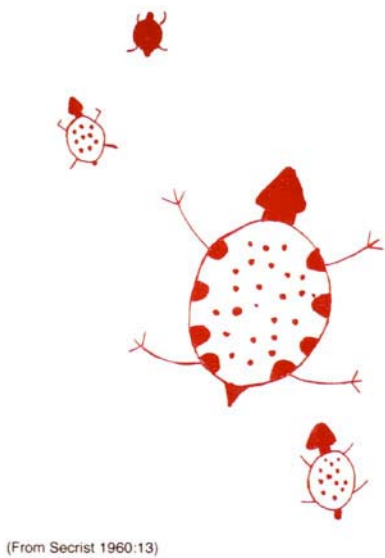


Dillinger Cave  
24CA346

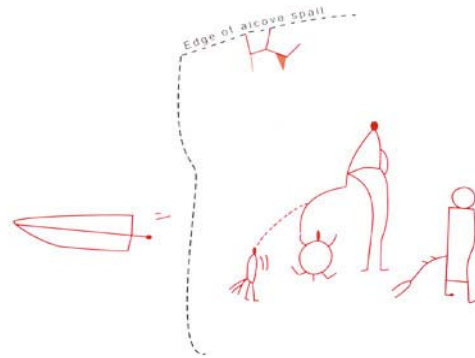
The single turtle in Twin Caves (in photo above), along the same drainage, is much larger and made of orange paint with two lines dividing the oval body, giving it a three part division. However, its legs and tail are nothing like the turtles in Dillinger Cave, as can be seen in the drawings of them. The Twin Caves turtle has a forked head and pronged feet.



Pictograph Cave south of Billings has a black outlined turtle with a pie-like design. No other site in the state, to date, has reported a black turtle.



Four turtles at one site northeast of the geoglyph, are all slightly different from one another. One turtle at this site is solid red while the other three have oval-shaped bodies filled with dots. The large turtle has three pronged toes, much like the Twin Caves turtle.



Two turtles are attached to other figures by lines. Both are in sites in central Montana. Along the Middle Fork of the Judith River, at Big Cave (24JT244) shown above to the right, a turtle has an open oval body with no interior design, single line legs, one of which is connected by a line to a tall anthropomorph on the right.



The turtle at North Stickney Painted Rock (24LC1147) is a similar open oval turtle with single line legs and a tail connected to another figure. However, in this case, the attached figure is pregnant. The association of turtles with fertility is not uncommon among Plains groups, but this panel is the only one in the state where this connection is clearly portrayed.

Because other ground-level rock alignments are associated with the solstice, the orientation of the turtle geoglyph was measured. The head points toward the mountain across the canyon and is oriented 75 degrees true north or 89 degrees magnetic. The photo on the right below shows that view. The tail points directly in the opposite direction toward the adjacent grassy mountain parkland, as shown in the photo the left below. However, in both directions rising mountains prevent direct views of the rising or setting sun suggesting this geoglyph was not constructed for solstice purposes. The tail points directly in the opposite direction toward the adjacent grassy mountain parkland, as shown here. The turtle is not oriented properly for marking summer or winter solstice and is in a setting where tree-covered mountains prevent



direct views of the rising or setting sun suggesting this geoglyph was not constructed for solstice purposes.

In the early 1990s, Sherri Deaver discussed the turtle geoglyph with a Blackfoot cultural representative during an ethnographic overview of the Castle Mountains. She was told the

Blackfeet felt it represented a burial or ceremonial area, and the site was considered sacred by the tribe. There was no mention as to whether or not the Blackfoot cultural representative believed the geoglyph represented a turtle, which would have been interesting considering the turtle is portrayed as a murderer in some Blackfoot stories, and Grinnell reported the Blackfeet considered the turtle generally to be bad.

The turtle was instrumental in the creation of the world according to several Northern Plains tribes including the Gros Ventres, Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Lakota. The Arapaho were also known to seek the turtle as a guardian spirit or supernatural helper during visions, and the Hidatsa considered it sacred and associated it with the buffalo.



However, we know of no reports of historically known tribes in Montana constructing turtle geoglyphs. Although turtle geoglyphs occur in the eastern part of the Northern Plains, particularly Saskatchewan, this appears to be the westernmost expression of this site type reported to date.

Based on our previous seriation studies of paint kinds and colors and on recent direct dating projects by Larry Loendorf, we suggest the earliest rock art turtle in Montana is the light orange painted turtle at Twin Caves, which probably dates to the Late Archaic Period or over 2000 years ago. Turtles appear to continue in Montana rock art through the Late Prehistoric, but evidence for them after the horse arrives has not yet been recorded.

The turtle geoglyph form does not compare closely enough with any of the other Montana turtles for any direct relation to be assumed between any of the sites. However, considering the durability of the feature during the past 25 years when it has been in an active cattle pasture, there is no reason to think it could not have endured for hundreds of years. Therefore, there is no justification for assuming it was constructed by a historically known tribe in the area, and the geoglyph could date to the prehistoric past, a time to which the painted turtles in the state appear to have been made.