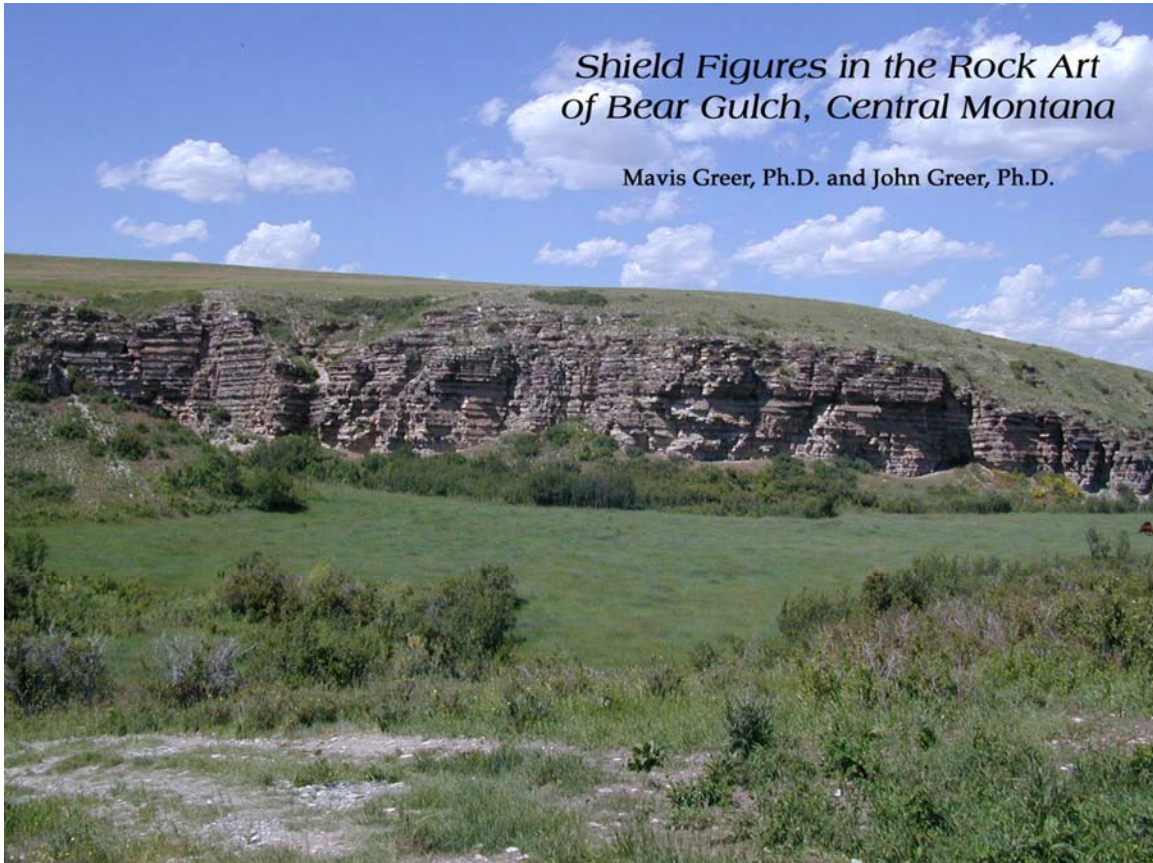


Shield Figures in the Rock Art of Bear Gulch, Central Montana

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East of Great Falls and only minutes south of Lewistown is the premier shield figure site in central Montana, Bear Gulch. This site has long been known to the archeological community, with the earliest photo on file of the rock art dating to 1938 and housed at



the Montana Historical Society (a copy of which was provided to us by Stu Conner). This 1999 photo is of the panel shown in the 1938 black and white print. In 1960 Kenneth Secrist brought the site to a much larger audience when he published a short note on it and several drawings of individual figures in the University of Montana, Anthropology and

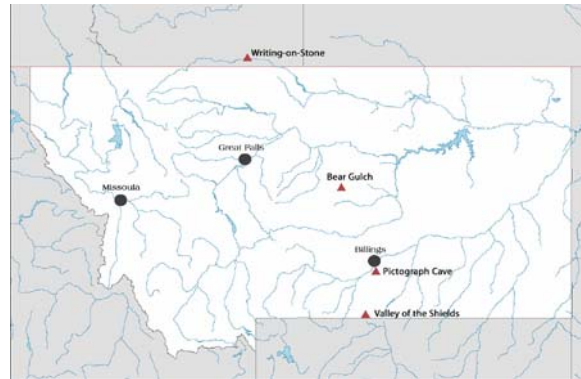
Sociology papers. Also in 1960 Stu Conner filled out the first form on the site. Since that time Bear Gulch has been visited by many people from many places, and the Lundin family, who owns the ranch, has kept a list of visitors that chronicles the widespread

interest in the site for several decades. A year ago the family, under the direction of Macie Lundin, who grew up on the ranch, opened the site to the public, so you can visit the site for yourself and see this extensive and complex array of pictographs and petroglyphs. Today we want to introduce you to the Bear Gulch site.

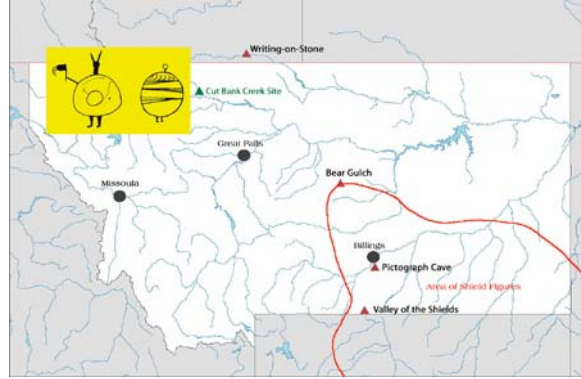


Located in the foothills north of the Snowy Mountains, the sandstone cliffs with the rock art are characteristic of a plains environment rather than a mountainous area, such as those that surround the valley and the site. Likewise, the rock art at this site is more characteristic of that found in plains areas than that in the limestone caves

of the Central Montana mountain ranges. The shield-bearing warrior motif dominates this site in which humans outnumber all other figures, and the shields are portrayed as both pictographs and petroglyphs. This site lies along a north-south corridor that supports some of the most elaborate and extensive shield sites on the Northwestern Plains. To the northwest in southern Alberta is Writing-on-Stone; and to the south, in and around the Billings area, is the locus of such Montana shield sites as Pictograph Cave and the impressive Valley of the Shields near the Montana-Wyoming state line. Between Bear Gulch and Writing-on-Stone there are very few known shield figures. Shield figures occur occasionally in the rock art on the limestone of central Montana west of Bear Gulch but are not known among the boulders that dominate northeastern Montana rock art. In the extensive area of north-central Montana, the only other recorded shield site is the Cut Bank Creek site,



which supports four large shield figures, two of which are shown on the map and are styles that resemble Bear Gulch and Pictograph Cave warriors more closely than shield figures in the adjacent mountainous areas. However, between Bear Gulch and Pictograph Cave, there are several shield figures displaying several different styles, particularly along the Musselshell River. Thus, this site is a necessary focus of study for those interested in the distribution of the shield-bearing warrior motif on the Northwestern Plains from Alberta to Wyoming.

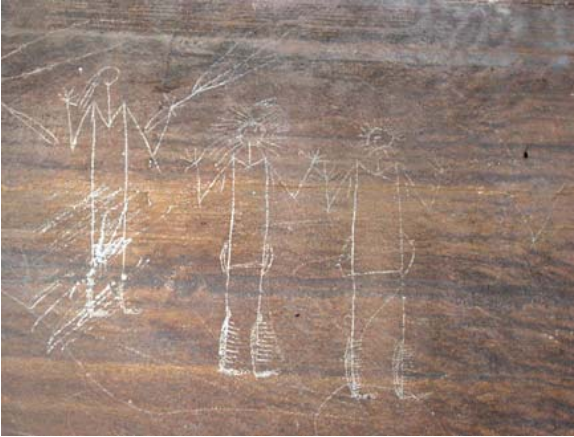


The site consists of a series of sandstone cliffs bordering the grassy-bottomed creek. The majority of the rock art is west of the drainage on east-facing cliffs, along the area being examined in this photo by Macie Lundin and Jim Keyser. Rock art also occurs on adjacent south-facing cliffs of a small tributary within the site area. The placement

of rock art does not appear to have been influenced by absolute direction since figures occur on small ledges that face all directions and on the walls of small overhangs within the overall cliff formation. The quality of the sandstone appears to have been more important in selection of a canvas than direction.



Before focusing on the shields, we want to give you a brief overview of the other kinds of figures at the site. Other humans include stick figures and V-necked styles.



V-necked people occur as both paintings and engravings and some have bows and arrows. A few are shown in great detail and include carefully made fringed leggings. These figures appear to be part of a biographic story scene. Arrows have been shot into some of the V-necked people with upraised arms.

Biographic rock art scenes at Bear Gulch are limited to the petroglyphs. Such scenes are finely done and small in size, sometimes only a few millimeters tall. To view them it's necessary to get down and look at them straight-on as they are not meant to be seen from a distance.



Several human figures have indications of gender, and most are male. These two figures in side view look like possible women in skirts (all scratching around these figures is modern). Although this style of human is known in other areas to represent Europeans with long coats, it's doubtful that explanation holds here.

A small panel contains what appears to be a birth scene, which is another rare depiction in Montana rock art. This seems to be an integrated panel, and identification of these figures as a fertility related portrayal is reinforced with the inclusion of a turtle to the right. The only other recorded pictograph of a pregnant woman in central Montana is also associated with a turtle.





The turtle is one of only a handful of animals at Bear Gulch. Others include four-legged figures with no distinguishing characteristics to determine species, but they appear to be generic deer or elk representations and not bison or bear. Two of the animals are shown walking up the cliff face. Recently

Macie reports that she found a bear on one of the southern walls. Because of the extensiveness of this site and the numerous obscure small areas ideal for placing paintings, it's possible to visit this site hundreds of times, as Macie has, and still find new figures.



Two handprints, both realistic impressions, seem to be out-of-place here. This is one of the few motifs at Bear Gulch characteristic of Central Montana rock art, where most of the handprints in the state occur.

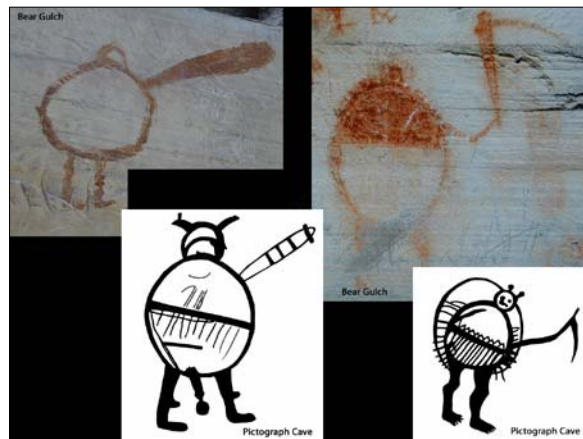
Turning now to the shield figures. These range from small engravings only a few millimeters tall to medium-sized painted figures nearly a half meter tall, but there are no large to life-sized shield figures, such as occur farther south within the Northwestern Plains.





Warriors at Bear Gulch represent a variety of poses with various weapons and shield designs that can be compared with each other and with other sites within and between regions.

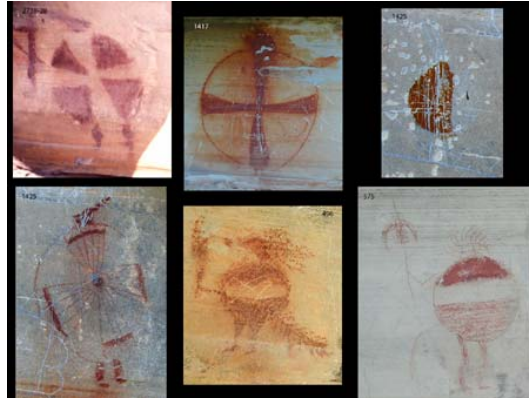
One of the most striking of the shield figures is a warrior holding a club and portrayed in both engraved and painted forms. This figure also occurs at Pictograph Cave, but otherwise club warriors do not have a wide distribution within the region. Here you can see some comparisons between this kind of figure as depicted at Pictograph Cave and as painted at Bear Gulch.



Warriors with a lance or other kind of spear-type weapon protruding from behind the shield are not as common at Bear Gulch as they are in surrounding areas, but shield warriors with bows and arrows occur frequently here, and some arrows are very elaborate.



Shields contain a variety of decorations. Central crosses often occur at Bear Gulch. Most of the crosses are red, but black is also used. Most are placed on circle outline shields, but there are also solid shields with negative crosses. A dark red cross also occurs on a lighter red shield.



Half-painted shields are another frequent design. Some of these have the top painted, others the bottom, and some either the right or left half. In some cases, half circles were probably originally complete circles, but the paint on the now nonpainted side, may have been a different color and composition, which did not preserve. There are a few pie designs, and some shields in which the circle is divided into three parts, with two segments painted and a blank segment in the middle.



Solid circles and open circles with no interior decorations are not common. Some open shields probably were originally painted inside. Among the open-circle engravings there are cases in which the body can be seen through the shield. Such shields are often decorated along the edge with a fringe or feathers.

Concentric circle designs are mostly quite simple, often with only a single interior circle. Another simple design is one of interior vertical lines.

Some shield figures have headdresses. The Bear Gulch shield shown on the left is especially interesting as the round head with eyes and mouth and radiating-line headdress are rare, but are distributed throughout the Northwestern Plains. A similar one is several hundred miles



away at the Pinnacle Rocks site in the southern part of the Powder River Basin of northeastern Wyoming. The Bear Gulch figure has been subjected to extensive scratching and writing. The scratching appears to be a mixture of aboriginal and modern. The small incised shield figure with an arrow in its right hand is on top of the red painted shield. The incised shield is under modern pencil, and the pencil is under scratches apparently made within the last few decades with a sharp piece of sandstone



probably picked up just below the panel. Other warriors have what appear to be animal headdresses with long snouts. These are not common portrayals, and although at first glance these seem similar to those Larry Loendorf has reported from the Pryor Mountain area and at Frozen Leg Cave, when examined more closely, they clearly are a different style.

The Bear Gulch long snout headdresses replace the entire head and are not placed on top of the head, as the headdresses are in the southern Montana examples as seen in the Frozen Leg figure in the top center of this photo.



The Bear Gulch pictographs and petroglyphs were made over many years by different cultural groups. The mixture of manufacturing techniques — both painting and incising — and the use of liquid and hard crayon paints, which has

been shown to separate into different times based on Central Montana seriation studies, as well as superpositioning of paint and incisions indicates a long history of rock art creation at Bear Gulch. The many large shields relative to body size and the complete lack of horses and guns at this site indicates that much of the site predates the coming of the horse, which arrived in this area about 1730. However, the dominance of the bow and arrow associated with a high percentage of figures indicates that most of the shield figures post-date the 500 A.D. introduction of the bow. By the early 1900s the site was being visited regularly by Euroamericans, who were leaving names and dates, often on top of the aboriginal rock art. Thus, the site has had a long and continuous use dating at least to the Late Prehistoric Period.

Designs on shields have been used to determine cultural affiliation of sites. Linea Sundstrom and Jim Keyser have had some success with the Direct Historical Approach working with shields in South Dakota. However, the Bear Gulch shields mostly appear to predate the horse, and they occur in an area occupied by several different tribes during the Late Prehistoric and Protohistoric periods. Therefore, detailed analysis must be conducted before suggesting possible cultural affiliation for these shields. However, the great diversity of designs found at this site indicates there may be a better than average chance of associating individual shield designs with different cultures, although it may never be possible to link these cultural divisions to modern tribes.



The function of most Bear Gulch shield figures is not clear. Only a few of the warriors appear to have been actively engaged in conflict activity, and those are the small incised figures. However, the majority of the shields are directly associated with weapons. Since there are almost no animals, and the animals are not part of hunting scenes or even associated with shield people, it seems unlikely the shields were drawn as representations of hunting protection, as they appear to be at some Powder River Basin sites. Additionally, the shield figures are not directly associated with depictions that are considered part of shamanistic trance items, as they are in Dillinger Cave along the Smith River in central Montana. Therefore, it



appears that these armed shield figures were probably drawn to represent the typical Plains shield-bearing warrior.

As we mentioned at the beginning of this paper, today this site is open to the public. Although opening any archeological site to visitation is controversial, we believe in this case the site will be better protected. Since Macie has begun taking formal tours to the site, it has come under daily monitoring, which will undoubtedly result in a decrease in vandalism. No one is allowed access to the site without a guide. She has developed a new trail system to keep people from walking immediately next to the rock art as they did with the old natural trail shown in this photo. The new trail also aids in keeping people from climbing on the fragile cliff and touching the paintings. As this brief introduction has shown, the site has much to offer for many kinds of studies, from figure distribution to cultural interaction and migration investigations. It provides visitors with an excellent example of Northwestern Plains rock art and has many opportunities for teaching people, especially school children, acceptable behavior at a rock art site. This is a case where site preservation depends upon activism and not passiveness.

