

8. A DISTINCTIVE PICTOGRAPH FROM CARRIZO PLAINS, SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

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Pictographs, or paintings on rocks, have been recorded in the majority of the areas of California in which suitable rock surfaces are available. They are most numerous¹ and complex in that region encompassing the counties of Monterey, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Kern, and the mountainous portions of Tulare and Fresno. This region has been designated by Steward as Petroglyph Area D², and by Fenenga as Area IV³. A fairly uniform style of rock painting prevails over this entire area. Among the numerous pictographs within it, none is more extensive or elaborate than the justifiably famous Painted Rock on the Carrizo Plains of San Luis Obispo County. Steward has described and illustrated these pictographs⁴, and they have been discussed in several articles of a semi-popular nature. Nearby is a group, the Agua Caliente pictographs (UCAS site SLO-100), which has, until now, escaped scientific attention.

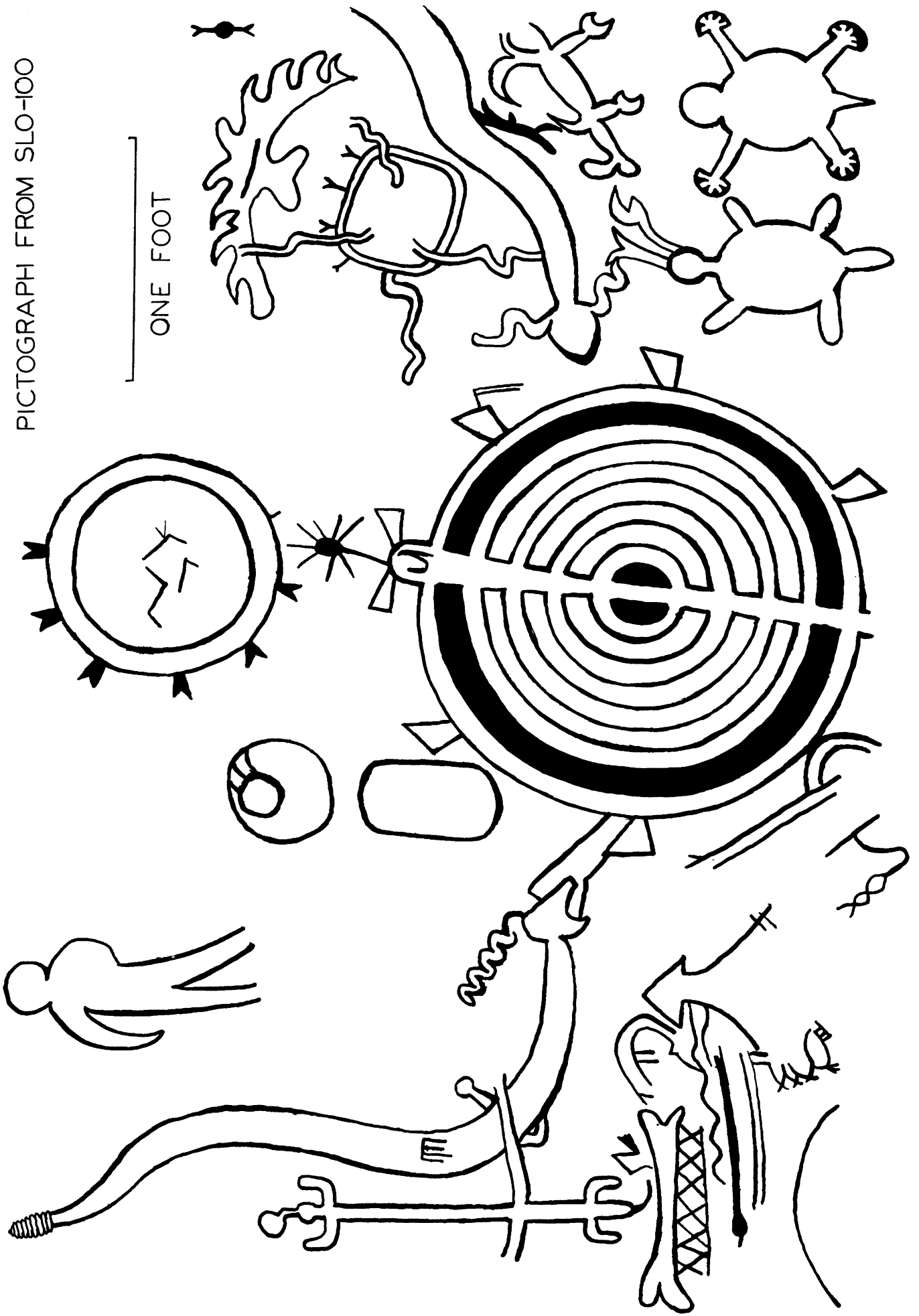
The Agua Caliente pictographs are on the northern slope of Agua Caliente Mountain about 200 or 300 feet above the floor of the Carrizo Plains. Nearby is a spring, around which is evidence of an Indian campsite. The paintings were applied to an inner wall of an inconspicuous cleft in an outcropping of the yellow-buff, friable sandstone (Vaqueros formation), the most common surface for pictographs in this area. The cavity, which is only about 2 feet wide and 6 feet high, has a length (east to west) of 20 feet, with its opening to the east. The north and south sidewalls of the cave are not perpendicular; the north wall, which overhangs markedly, being about 35° off the perpendicular, approximates a plane. The south wall is roughly parallel to it. The paintings at one time covered the entire north wall, an area of 20 feet by 6 feet, but unfortunately, nearly a third of the wall has since fallen forward in one large piece, carrying with it some of the pictographs. There remains now a decorated area measuring roughly 6 feet by 12 feet toward the west end of the cave, and a fragment about 2 feet wide at the entrance.

The pictographs are by no means as extensive as those at Painted Rock, but are quite complex and nicely drawn. Moreover, due to the care with which Mr. and Mrs. Washburn, owners of the property, have protected them, they have completely escaped the vandalism perpetrated on Painted Rock. The design elements are in three colors: red ochre, black, and white; and the extent of their use decreases in that order. The reproduction of the pictographs (Plate 3) does not include the full extent of the decorated area. The area represented in the Plate is 7 feet by 4 feet. Only the areas and lines of red ochre are shown. As all of the important figures are outlined in red ochre, this treatment makes but slight change in the over-all design. Only a small human figure painted entirely in white, and a smaller black animal are lost. Spatial relationships and relative sizes have been retained.

The design elements of the Agua Caliente pictograph face present several points of interest. The bat-like figure in the upper right hand corner has not been reported from elsewhere in California. The

PLATE 3

PICTOGRAPH FROM SLO-100



elaborate "bull's eye" with six legs and a head with antennae, which occurs twice on this particular face (an almost identical figure is found at the west end of the face, to the left of the part shown here), is also represented once at Painted Rock⁵, but not elsewhere in the State. More unique are the two snake-like figures which seem to be attacking the central "bull's eye". The left hand snake is drawn in profile and is rather unusual among California pictographs in being a relatively realistic representation. Snakes depicted in other California pictographs and petroglyphs⁶ are not life-like. In general the figures in California pictographs and petroglyphs are not realistic, but there are certain notable exceptions. For example, a remarkable swordfish figure on Honda Creek, in Santa Barbara County⁷, and the centipede on the Tule River Indian Reservation, in Tulare County⁸, are exceedingly life-like, but the majority of the elaborate figures in Area D resemble more closely the inhabitants of hallucinations than the inhabitants of the world of reality.

The tail of this snake is delineated with great care, making it obvious that the drawing represents not snakes in general, but a definite type of snake, a rattlesnake (Crotalus). No recognizable rattlesnakes have been observed previously in other California pictographs and petroglyphs⁹.

The right-hand snake is shown in top view. Unfortunately, its tail was drawn on that part of the cave wall which has collapsed, but the broad heart-shaped head, narrow neck, and thick body leave little doubt that it is an attempt to depict some species of the genus Crotalus. Attached to the head of both of the serpents are wavy projections, giving them a plumed appearance.

Apparently these designs are without parallel in California, but elsewhere in the United States similar figures do exist. In the Rio Grande area of New Mexico, a like design element is found both as a petroglyph and portrayed in other media. Among the Tewa, this element is identified as Awanyu, the plumed serpent, and it has respectable antiquity among the ruins of the Pajarito Plateau. If the California designs are compared with one from the Tsirege Ruin, it is noted that in the New Mexican example, the largest plume is also a wavy element attached to the head near its junction with the neck¹⁰. In the pictographs of Texas comparable elements are not uncommon¹¹. In the southeastern United States the feathered rattlesnake again appears as a decorative element. An incised bottle from Arkansas is adorned with rattlesnakes sporting both head plumes and wings¹², whereas an incised cup from Georgia is entwined with rattlesnakes bearing head plumes¹³. The foregoing is not intended to give the complete distribution of plumed serpents in the United States but merely to hint at its extent.

More spatially removed are the feathered serpents of the Mexican Plateau and Yucatan Peninsula. The magnificent architectural expressions of this motif at Chichen-Itza are well known. In addition, a wall painting from the Temple of the Warriors at Chichen-Itza shows a feathered rattlesnake much more similar to the California snakes than are the carved examples.¹⁴ The feathered serpents of this area are always rattlesnakes.

The concept of a feathered serpent, thus, is widely spread in North America, but its authenticated occurrences seem to fall mostly within those areas¹⁵ which, at one time or another, have received cultural influences from Middle America, and indeed this region appears to have been the point of origin of the concept. When it is suggested that the California pictographs are feathered serpents and share a common origin with other similar figures in North America, it is not implied that these pictographs were drawn by a band of fugitives from the Mexican Plateau or Yucatan, though this explanation has been advanced for nearby Painted Rock.¹⁶ It is much more likely that the concept of the plumed serpent as a god passed from Mexico to the Southwest, and later was diffused to the area of South-central California in question.

A full discussion of the derivation of the Southwestern and Southeastern examples of the plumed serpent from a Mexican deity is beyond the scope of this paper. Those interested in pursuing the question further are referred to the discussion in Spinden's "Maya Art"¹⁷. It seems highly unlikely however, that any element as specific as the idea of a rattlesnake with feathers was independently invented in these two areas, both of which are known to have been strongly influenced by Middle American culture. Once the spread of this trait from the Plateau of Mexico to the Southwest is admitted, diffusion from the Southwest to California does not appear so remarkable, especially since California seems to have received other traits from the Southwest. Corn agriculture crossed the Colorado; pottery of definite Southwestern derivation spread into California to within 200 miles of the area in question¹⁸; sand painting, a definitely Southwestern trait, was practiced by the Gaglielifo within 100 miles of this area¹⁹. The clay female figurines which were manufactured in California as far north as Trinidad Bay²⁰, are strikingly similar to those made in the Southwest in the Basket Maker III period^{21,22}.

There is of course no absolute or even conclusive proof that this diffusion did take place; further, there is the difficulty of the large intervening space in which representations of feathered rattlesnakes have not been recorded. However pictographs do not necessarily last long. The passage of such an element as a verbal tradition is a possibility and would have left no trace among the material remains of a people. There are hints of such a tradition in Southern Diegueño mythology. Mattiawi't, a mythical snake, flew to the people, was burned, and then flew home leaving fragments of himself as songs²³. In a similar Mohave tale, Kammay-aveta (otherwise known as Kumaiaveta or Mayavete [compare with the Diegueño name]) the great sky rattlesnake from the southern sea, came amid rain and thunder, was decapitated and rolled back into the sea leaving behind its blood which became rattlesnakes and noxious insects²⁴. Both Kamia²⁵ and Yuma²⁶ have similar myths. Furthermore, the Gaglielifo are known to have held rattlesnakes in veneration²⁷. There is less likelihood that such a tradition reached Carrizo Plains from the north, for although the rattlesnake did occur in the mythology of Central and Northern California Indians groups, it played a relatively minor role²⁸. The well developed rattlesnake ceremonialism of the Yokuts also does not appear to be a likely source, for the ceremonies were more in the realm of preventive medicine than in that of religion²⁹.

There is the further possibility that the element spread through Southern California in the medium of sand painting which again would have left no trace for the archaeologist. Both Diegueno³⁰ and Luiseno³¹ include the rattlesnake as an important element in their sand paintings.

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NOTES

1. Steward, 1929, Map A.
2. Ibid., Map D.
3. Fenenga, 1949, fig. 1.
4. Steward, 1929, pp. 100-104, plates 53 & 54.
5. Ibid., plate 53B
6. Ibid., p. 191
7. Ruth, ms., p. 47
8. Steward, 1929, plate 55F.
9. Ibid., p. 191. J. P. Harrington does mention one in Southern California but does not give its exact location or illustrate it (Harrington, 1933, p. 84). A single example has been recorded in Oregon, (L.S. Cressman, 1937, fig. 22).
10. Hewett, 1938, pp. 50, 92, 101-102, 109-110, 125, figs. 17 & 18. For other New Mexican examples see E. B. Renaud, 1932, plates 8, 16, 17, & 18.
11. Jackson, 1938, figs. 17 & 119, plate CCXXIII.
12. Holmes, 1903, p. 91, fig. 49.
13. Ibid., p. 138, plate CXIX.
14. Morley, 1946, plate 90.
15. A rather strikingly similar figure is recorded from Bellingham, Washington (Reagan, 1932, p. 45). A brief search through material on Northwest Coast art and mythology failed to reveal further examples or mention of feathered or horned serpents. MacLeod, in his list of Central American traits on the West Coast, mentions the double-headed serpent (MacLeod, 1929, p. 421) but not a plumed or horned one.
16. Morrison, 1926, pp. 6-8.
17. Spinden, 1913, pp. 141-146.
18. Yokuts type pottery was manufactured much nearer to this area (Gayton, 1929), but it is questionable whether this type of pottery is of Southwestern origin. It may have an ultimate Woodland derivation. (Baldwin, 1950, p. 55).
19. Kroeber, 1925, p. 626.
20. Heizer and Beardsley, 1943, pp. 199-207, also undescribed pieces in various private collections in Eureka.
21. Morris, 1927, figs. 8 & 9.
22. For a more complete discussion of diffusion from the Southwest to California see Heizer, 1946.
23. Spier, 1923, p. 331.
24. Kroeber, 1925, p. 771; 1945, p. 4.
25. Gifford, 1931, p. 78.
26. Forde, 1931, p. 176.
27. Kroeber, 1925, p. 622.

28. Gayton & Newman, 1940, pp. 19, 37, 41. Barrett, 1933, pp. 68, 76, 85, 91, 94, 214, 332, & 373. Du Bois and Demetrapoulou, 1931, p. 297. Goddard, 1904, p. 196. Harrington, 1932, p. 7.
29. Gayton, 1948, pp. 39, 152, & 247-248.
30. Kroeber, 1925, p. 664.
31. Du Bois, 1903, p. 90.

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