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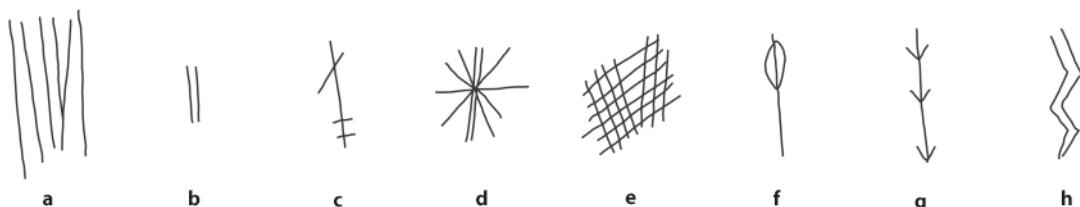
OLD PETROGLYPHS ON THE NORTH AMERICAN HIGH PLAINS

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Research on North America's High Plains has been directed toward establishing the age of petroglyphs through relative methods. At several sites it has been possible to ^{14}C date soil deposits that formerly buried petroglyph panels so it is possible to establish an age of Early Archaic petroglyphs at 4500 BP. These old Archaic petroglyphs are pecked abstracts with distinctive forms. Fortunately they are so distinct that they can be recognized at other localities.

Using the age and form of the Early Archaic petroglyphs as a guide, we started a search for examples superimposed on other petroglyphs. We have located four sites where these Early Archaic pecked figures were superimposed on older petroglyphs. In all instances the older figures are abstract incised patterns rather than pecked figures. These incised figures are unquestionably the oldest petroglyphs at sites in northeastern New Mexico and southeastern Colorado.

Enough of these old incised figures have been found that it is possible to start to classify them into the following types.



Old incised motifs identified on the four known sites.

Multiple parallel lines – these are the most common of the old incised forms (figure a). They are incised lines with their long axis parallel to each other. Groups with three or four to ten or twelve are found in the parallel sets. They measure about ten centimeters in length with each group about two to three centimeters wide.

Parallel double lines – the lines are distinctive because they appear to have been carefully made as a pair (figure b). Usually shorter than the multiple parallel lines, they measure 3 to 5 mm between the lines. Parallel double lines are often straight but they can be found in zigzags and cross hatch patterns, and they can also connect or intersect with other lines.

Intersecting lines – these lines are a simple example of two lines that cross one another at different angles (figure c). In some examples short lines cross a longer line at right angles while in others the lines intersect at odd angles. The intersections appear to be purposeful and not the result of an error in the stroke as seems to be the case with multiple parallel lines when they occasionally run into one another.

Asterisks – a series of incised lines that meet at a central point to form a starburst or asterisk form (figure d). The lines are usually single but the best known example also has a set of parallel double lines in it. The recorded examples are small covering about five centimeters across their maximum dimension.

Cross hatch or grid patterns – the figures are intersecting lines that meet at right angles to form a grid pattern of squares or rectangles between the lines (figure e). In some examples the lines meet at 45° angles to form open spaces of diamond shaped patterns. The diamond patterns might be called cross-hatch while rectangular patterns are referred to as grids. I have classed them together because the two types tend to blend into one another in some examples. The figures are variable in size with small ones less than 5 cm across and others nearly 1 m across.

Bisected ovals – the figures are oval forms with a straight line bisecting them (figure f). One end of the line is longer and extends beyond the oval for a greater distance than the other end. The figures resemble feathered arrows or an atlatl form. Some examples are small measuring 4 or Rcm across their maximum dimension while others can be as long as 50 or 60 cm.

Points on lines – these figures are lines that exhibit points at the ends of lines and angular lines attached on each side of the line so as to form triangular points (figure g). The points can be at the ends of the main line or along the sides. The only recorded examples are small with measurements of 5 to 10 cm.

Zigzag patterns – the two known examples of the motif are sets of parallel lines that are set with angles rather than rounded corners (figure h). They resemble a lightning motif. The examples are small with lengths of about 5 cm.

The question, of course, is how old are these incised motifs? They are clearly older than 4500 years and possibly much older. It is important to recognize that the oldest art in North America includes incised limestone tablets at Paleo-Indian sites on the High Plains. Excavations begun in 1998 in Clovis-age deposits at the Gault site in Williamson County, Texas have resulted in the discovery of several dozen stones and pebbles that exhibit incised abstract motifs. Although I have not analyzed the Gault site stones or other engraved stones from Clovis age sites, many of the designs appear to be similar to the old incised line motifs presented in this discussion. There are multiple parallel lines, double parallel motifs, bisected oval forms, and cross hatch and grid designs. A similar stone with incised patterns was recovered from the Folsom layer at the Blackwater Draw site in southeastern New Mexico. The inventory of stone artifacts incised with abstract figures also includes those from the 9 400 old Paleo-Archaic site at Barton Gulch, Montana, whose incised lines of differing depths formed cross-hatched designs.



