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Introduction to the Rock Art of Bear Gulch Montana

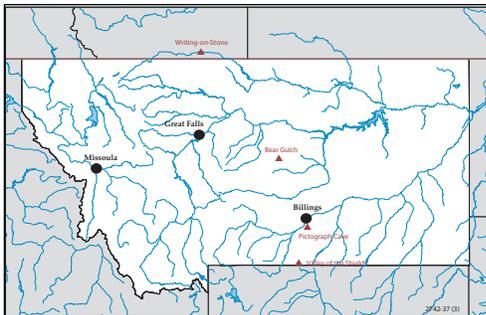
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Bear Gulch is the premier shield site in central Montana. The shield-bearing warrior motif dominates this site in which humans outnumber all other figures, and figures are portrayed as both pictographs and petroglyphs. Today we want to give a brief introduction to the Bear Gulch site.

Located in the foothills north of the Snowy Mountains, the sandstone cliffs with the rock art are more characteristic of the plains environment than mountainous areas that surround the valley and the site. However, 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 southeast, in and around the Billings area, is the locus of such Montana shield sites as Pictograph Cave (which you may have just read about in the last issue of La Pintura) and the impressive Valley of the Shields near the Montana-Wyoming state line.

Shield figures occur occasionally in the rock art of central Montana west of Bear Gulch but are not known among the boulders that dominate northeastern Montana rock art, making this site a necessary focus of study for those interested in the distribution of the shield-bearing warrior motif on the Northwestern Plains.



The site consists of a series of sandstone cliffs bordering a fairly narrow, but shallow canyon. The majority of the rock art is west of the drainage on east-facing cliffs as well as 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.



The shield-bearing warrior figures range from small finely done 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.

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



One of the most noteworthy of the shield figures is a warrior holding a club and occurring as both engraved and painted forms. This figure is also common at Pictograph Cave, but otherwise club warriors do not have a wide distribution within the region. At Bear Gulch club warriors have large

shields relative to body size, suggesting they predate the horse since shields were known to decrease in size from near full-body armor in pre-horse days to smaller shields for use on horses.



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 (another time marker) 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, **such as the half circle on the left**, it appears the other half was also originally painted, but that

paint did not preserve. There are a few pie designs, and some of these are quite complex, **such as the one on the right.**



Another shield design is one in which the shield 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 designs, such as the brownish-yellow figure, **in the lower left of this photo,** 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.



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. This shield is especially interesting as the round head with eyes and mouth and radiating-line headdress are rare, but one like it is several hundred miles away in the southern part of the Powder River Basin of northeastern Wyoming. Notice that this figure has a

small engraved shield warrior with a three-part design on the shield placed over the upper part of the painted red shield.

Other warriors have what appear to be animal heads. These kinds of headdresses are similar to some at Pictograph Cave.

Besides shield warrior figures, other humans include stick figures and V-necked styles. V-necked people occur as both paintings and engravings and some have bows and arrows.



Some are dressed in detail, such as with carefully placed fringed leggings, and these often appear to be part of a biographic story scene. Arrows have been shot into the legs of some of these V-necked people with upraised arms. Biographic rock art scenes at Bear Gulch are mostly limited to the petroglyphs. Such scenes are finely done, well executed, and

small in size, sometimes only a few millimeters tall. To view them it is 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. Two figures in side view, *like the one on the left here*, look like possible women in skirts, but this style of human is known in other areas to represent Europeans with long coats.

Another figure appears to be a female giving birth, which is another rare depiction in Montana rock art. Identification of this rather complex panel as a fertility related scene is reinforced with the inclusion of a turtle *to the right of the female*. The only 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 a generic deer or elk type representation and not bison or bear. Two of the animals are portrayed walking up the cliff face.

One large bison hoofprint (on the left here) is apparently one of the latest additions to the site. It appears out-of-place with other themes at the site, but the hoofprint is the dominate motif on boulder rock art to the northeast.



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

Another Central Montana motif nearly absent at Bear Gulch is the abstract. A row of crossed lines on a lower ledge does not appear to be a typical abstract design or geometric horizontal series, such as occur in other parts of the state. Instead these crosses suggest a line of people portrayed in an abbreviated form, which fits with the human orientation of figures at this site.



To summarize, this is the westernmost example of what is typically classified as a plains rock art expression — a site dominated by shield-bearing warriors. Cultural affiliation appears to be more closely tied to southeastern Montana than it does to the island mountains of the central part of the state, but

the site was used by many people over a long period of time. The many large shields relative to body size and the lack of associated horses and guns indicate 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 warriors post-date introduction of the bow, which arrived here about 500 A.D. The function of most shield figures is not clear. Only a few of the warriors appear to have been actively engaged in conflict activity, and those appear in small engraved biographic scenes. There are almost no animals, and none appear to be part of hunting scenes or even associated with shield warriors.



Although the site has received sporadic attention for over 40 years from archeologists and other rock art researchers, the site has yet to be recorded in a useable form for research or preservation. 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.

The landowner (shown here on the right) is currently working to preserve the site by developing it for eventual commercial visitation. Pre-development plans include full site recording, which will be an important addition to the rock art data base of the Northwestern Plains. We have a few brochures on this site for anyone interested.

