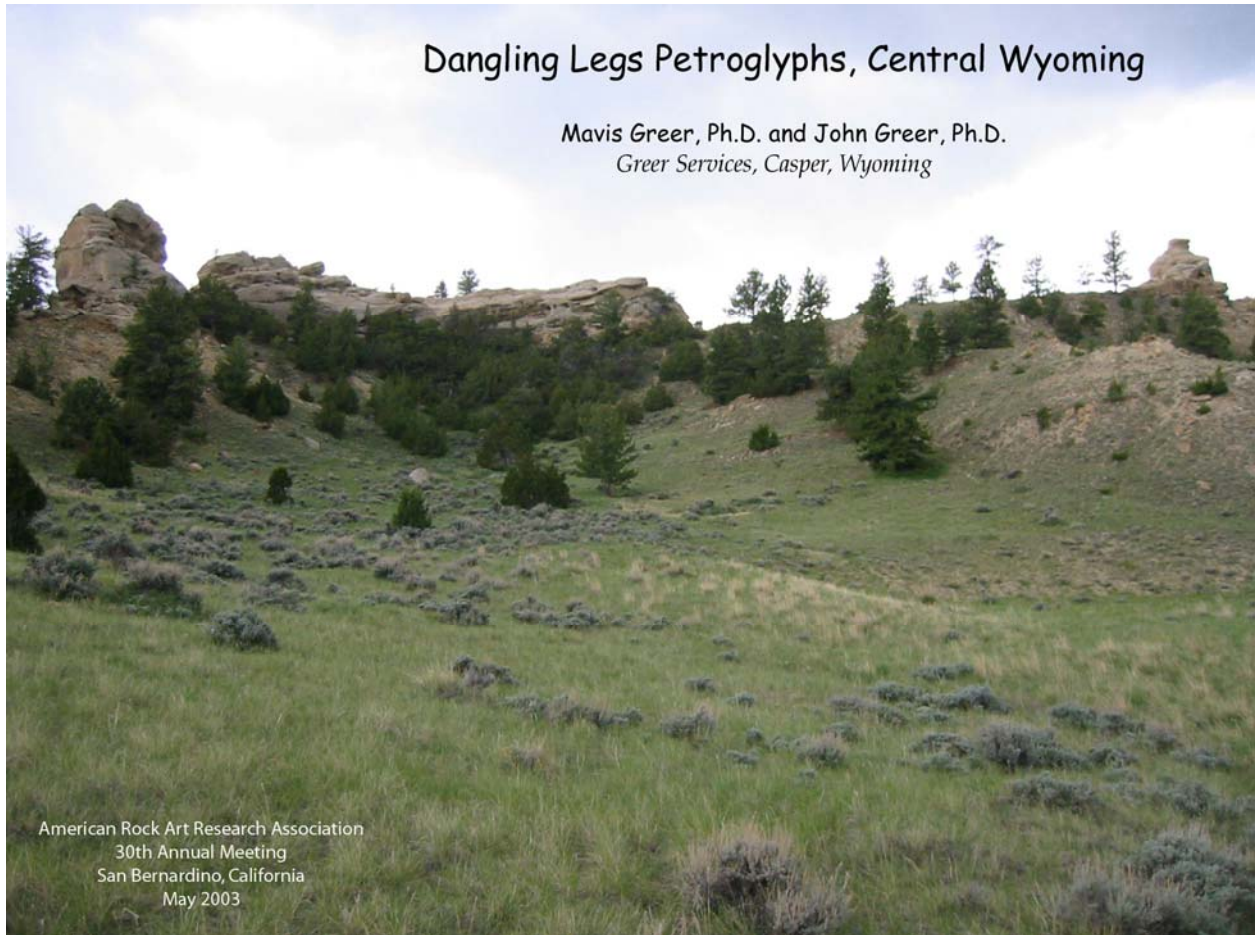


Dangling Legs Petroglyphs, Central Wyoming

Mavis Greer, Ph.D. and John Greer, Ph.D.
Greer Services, Casper, Wyoming



The rock art of the Powder River Basin of northeastern Wyoming and southeastern Montana does not have the notoriety of the Dinwoody rock art of western Wyoming. However, this is an area where we do most of our archeological work, and where we are actively searching for and recording rock art sites. During this quest, we recently came upon a rockshelter north of Casper, in the southwestern part of the Powder River Basin, with several late period petroglyphs. As this photo shows, this is an area of numerous sandstone outcroppings with many surfaces suitable for rock art. Today we want to introduce you to Dangling Legs Petroglyphs, which has many characteristics typical of the rock art sites of this region.

The site is located in an upland area of high ridges bordered by sandstone escarpments. These have eroded into sculpted formations in some areas and into sheer cliffs and overhangs in others. The pine-parkland setting extends several miles in a generally east-west band and contains rockshelters and small protected niches that serve as excellent locations for rock art. This band of sandstone has received relatively little archeological study because it is mostly outside energy development zones where surveys would be done, but the few inventories here do indicate a high site potential.



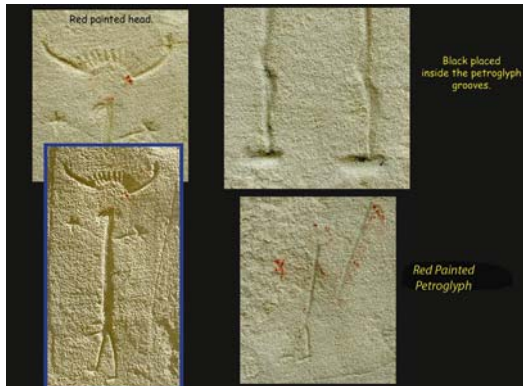
The Dangling Legs Petroglyph site is in a prominent rockshelter overlooking a tributary drainage to the southwest. The shelter is about 100 feet long, and most of the back wall is exposed directly to the western sun. The northern three-fourths of the amphitheater-like overhang has a well-defined floor with a potential for cultural deposits in the soft sand. It is on the walls of this portion of the shelter where the petroglyphs are preserved. The southern third of the shelter has been severely eroded, and there are no signs of rock art or deposits in that area. In the area of the petroglyphs the sandstone wall has a variable texture with rock art only on the harder surfaces, but even that part of the wall is fracturing, and several large blocks have fallen taking portions of figures with them. The site derives its name from the detached feet of one figure, which had fallen to the shelter floor.





Here John holds the fallen block up to the wall showing where it originally fit. The breakdown in front of the wall undoubtedly contains the fallen remains of other figures, and tree roots growing through the back wall will eventually demolish the rest of the shelter.

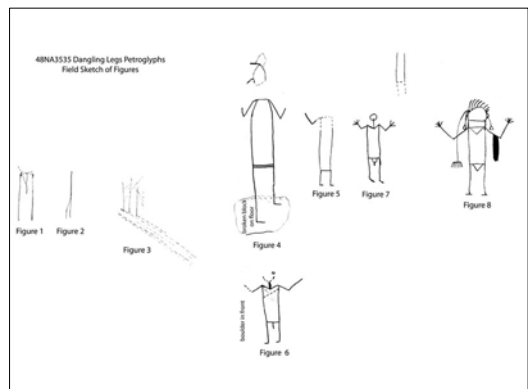
The most easily recognized rock art figures are incised and abraded into the sandstone, but there are also remnants of red and black paint. In most cases paint is integral to the incised figures, several of which were covered or filled in with red or black. In the complex figure shown here, the non-incised face was filled in with red paint to connect the body and necklace with the complex horned headdress.

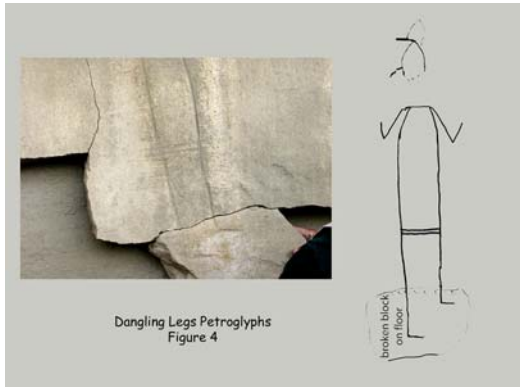


The body, shown here on the left, also has remnant specks of red paint, especially in the legs. On another small human petroglyph (in the lower right), red paint once covered the entire figure, not just neatly placed in the grooves, and again forms the non-incised face. In other cases (like shown here on the upper right) black was placed inside the grooves, and in one case the body once was covered with black

paint. All paint appears to be locally available materials and application was done contemporary with the petroglyph formation.

The site is dominated by human figures. Twelve are readily identifiable while some, as can be seen in this sketch of the northern images, are heavily eroded. Of the identifiable humans, five are unquestionably male, while the gender of the others is not depicted.

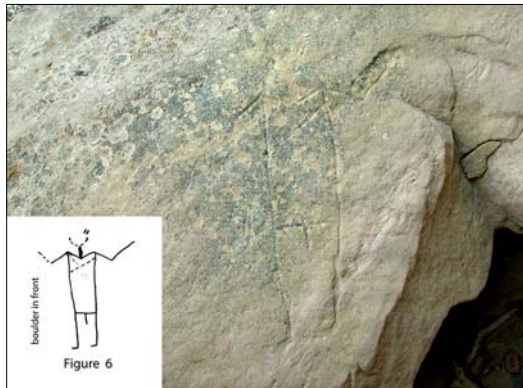
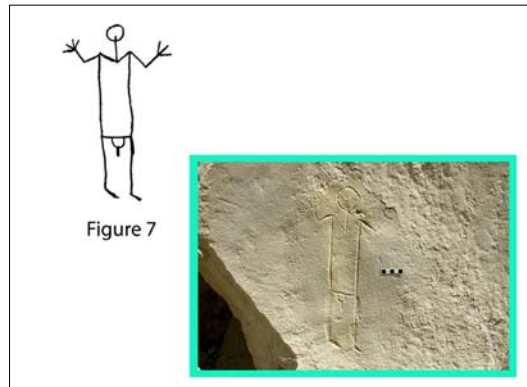




The large anthropomorph whose legs have fallen is genderless and is carved into an unprepared wall surface.

The head is not discernible, although an elaborate series of lines above the body could be a headdress. Like most other humans here the arms are bent up at the elbow, but unlike the others, the unusually long feet are vertically uneven.

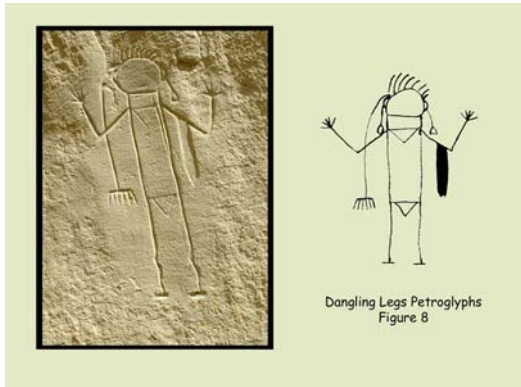
Another male with a V-neck body, arms bent up at the elbows, and distinctive fingers, is carved on a prepared surface. A small portion of wall around the figure was ground smooth before carving. Several other areas of wall were similarly ground in preparation for figure carving and painting, but not all. This may indicate production by different people or simply reflect the differing conditions of the sandstone surface.



On a fallen boulder in front of the shelter, and apparently drawn after the boulder fell, is another V-necked male with arms bent up at the elbow. He has a diagonal line across the chest, which does not seem to be connected to anything such as a quiver as seen at other Powder River Basin sites.

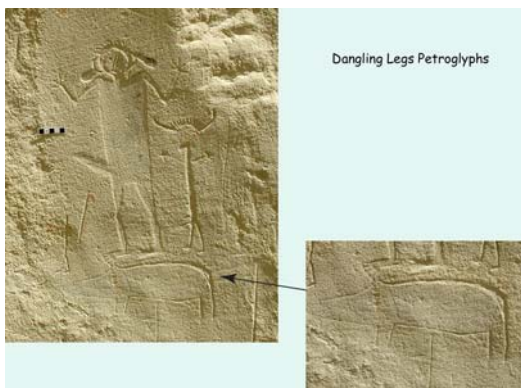
He is similar in design to a V-necked male on the southern end of the panel, who also has upraised arms bent at the elbow but also two clear eyes and ears.





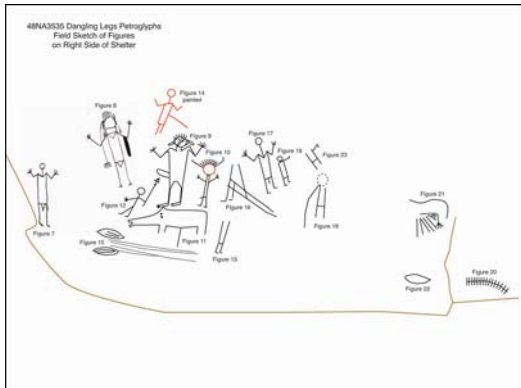
One of the most elaborate humans is also on a portion of wall prepared by grinding. Gender is ambiguous as small triangles at the neck and waist appear to represent clothes rather than a V-neck and genitals. Hair on the round head stands up between two round ears, both of which support long dangling earrings. Coming out of the left side of the head (as one is facing the figure) is a rake on a long leash, and extending off the right arm is a large hollowed out area of unknown function. The person has upraised arms bent at the elbows, clear hands and fingers, knees, and feet.

Moving to the right is another elaborate human. This one is also placed on a finely ground surface. A wide diagonal line entering at about the waist may be a large spear or other attachment rather than an indicator of gender, but it is ambiguous. The person has an elaborate upright to curved hairdo, like the previous figure. On either side of the head are large elongated hollowed-out extensions that appear to be connected to rounded bulbs, possibly ear ornaments and ear lobes. The face has a slanted double-slash or long nose between the eyes, giving him a scarred-face appearance. His body is completely ground-out as are the legs, which have triangular thighs, large calves, and feet with prominent toes that appear bear-claw like. He also has upraised arms bent at the elbows and distinctive fingers. At least the torso and ear attachments, and probably all the grooves, were once completely filled with black paint.



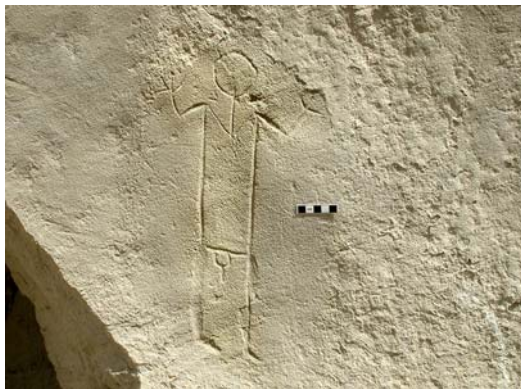
The scarred-face human is part of what appears to be an integrated panel that includes the smaller human to the right with the painted face, and an even smaller human to the left with paint highlighting. All three figures are standing on top of a large left-facing bear. His short ears are immediately below the toes or claws of the large person above him. The two eye dots

are not uncommon in bear portrayals, where the overall figure is drawn in profile but both eyes are facing the viewer. He has an open mouth and a large spear sticking upward into his stomach.



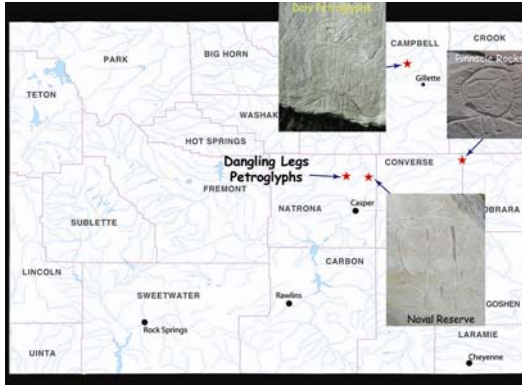
At first glance these figures appear to be typical of Biographic Rock Art, which dominates drawings on the Northwestern Plains from the end of the Late Prehistoric through the early Historic Period. However, upon closer inspection Dangling Legs Petroglyphs lack some of the essential characteristics of biographic portrayals — mainly the interaction between figures to comprise a coherent scene showing

an event in the life of a person or tribe. Instead, the figures appear to be static individual depictions with the exception of the three people above the bear, but even that scene is more a portrait than an interactive story. Additionally, the figures lack associated historic items such as horses or guns. Based on these observations, the petroglyphs appear to have been made before A.D. 1700, thus dating them no later than the end of the Late Prehistoric Period. However, based on details of their styles, their conditions, and the condition of the sandstone shelter, we would not expect them to date before the 1500s.



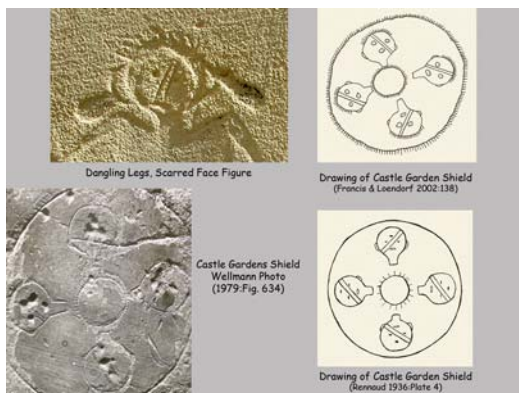
Figures at Dangling Legs are dominated by V-necked and rectangular bodied humans. Over a decade ago, Marty Magne and Michael Klassen examined the place of V-necked and rectangular bodied figures in the rock art at Writing-on-Stone in southern Alberta. Those anthropomorphs are very similar to the humans at Dangling Legs. The result of their cluster analysis indicates that V-necked and

rectangular figures were related and in prehistoric times were more detailed and carefully executed than they were after the coming of the horse. After that time more emphasis was placed on portraying actions and events, and less attention was given to drawing precise humans. Dangling Legs appears to fit within this evolutionary trend whereby figure detail, along with the lack of historic items, lends support for a date toward the end of the Late Prehistoric Period.



There are no shield-bearing warriors at Dangling Legs as there are at other large late period petroglyph sites in the Powder River Basin, such as the Naval Reserve site only a few miles to the east, Pinnacle Rocks northeast of Douglas, and the Daly Petroglyphs northwest of Gillette, to name the more prominent examples on the Wyoming side of the Basin. The absence of shields is noteworthy not only from the

standpoint that they commonly occur in the region at sites of this time period but also that they are considered to be closely associated with V-neck figures throughout the Northwestern Plains. Thus the lack of shield figures here sets the site apart from others in the region of the same age and displaying similar motifs.



The human with earrings and the ear attachments on the scarred face person next to him are not common accessories in Powder River Basin rock art. An examination of figures recorded so far within the Basin found no comparable depictions. Outside the Basin, however, a decorated shield at Castle Gardens shows four humans with diagonal facial scars similar to the person at Dangling Legs.

Although earrings are often portrayed on humans in the Great Basin and the Southwest, they are not common in the Powder River Basin. The rake-like dangle from the earring human's head also has not been reported from other northeastern Wyoming sites. Although rake-like designs do occur in Northwestern Plains rock art, none looks enough like the one here to suggest that they served the same function. This rake design off the head, if found at other sites, might be identifiable and serve as a motif to help identify cultural affiliation.





It is not surprising for the only animal here to be a bear. Loendorf and Porche have pointed out that it is the most common animal in the region to be associated with V-necked figures and shield-bearing warriors. Although the bear and possibly the human above him are pierced with spears, the sources of these weapons are not indicated. However, this scene does not appear to be depicting a battle or a hunt, but its intention is

not readily apparent.

The Dangling Legs site has experienced considerable natural deterioration. Erosion has probably removed several figures, and spalling of large pieces of the wall has impacted others. Once portions of the wall fall, such as has happened with one human's feet, the blocks quickly disintegrate to form the sandy accumulation of the shelter floor. Because the fallen feet are still present, we expect that that particular block fell within the past year or so since animal trampling has not yet moved the block far or broken it into small pieces.



This is a prime example of a significant rock art site being lost to nature, but it is also a good example of the amount of data these impacted sites still have to offer. Therefore, we want to conclude with what we believe to be the best way to conserve deteriorating sites when, like Dangling Legs, they are not in a position to become a protected park. We strongly support accumulation and placement of site information, on all kinds and levels of recording and on all



site visits, into a permanent central repository, which in Wyoming, like many states, is the SHPO records office. This does not always mean a complete rock art recording, as time and money are seldom available, but it does mean copies of photographs and notes on all visits should be recorded in the SHPO files, including large group visits, like this one to the Trapper Creek site last summer. This kind of

information allows future researchers at least to know that such sites exist and something about what was there at a given time. With information from each visit, and for multiple visits, there accumulates a record of changes through time to the site. These changes, plus the variety of observations made during the various visits, provide essential information for research, interpretation, and comparisons. In the long run it preserves the information not only for rock art researchers interested in such things as the distribution of motifs and regional variations but also for agencies concerned with site management. Furthermore, it conserves rock art for people interested in it because it's part of their history, whether made by their genetic or cultural ancestors or by their regional forebears, that is, the people who made the history of the place in which they now reside.