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Petroglyphs of the Sierra Blanca

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PETROGLYPHS OF THE SIERRA BLANCA

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INTRODUCTION

The distribution of petroglyphs in the foothills of the Sierra Blanca indicates widespread usage of the region by prehistoric Indian cultures that are as yet only poorly known. The natural advantages offered by streams in the mountain canyons, numerous springs scattered across the surrounding slopes, an abundance of game animals and birds, a wide variety of wild plant foods, fibers, and timber, useful rocks and minerals for the manufacture of implements, and arable land along floodplains and alluvial terraces must have proved highly attractive to both nomadic and sedentary groups.

Many of the topographic promontories of the area are capped by Tertiary dikes and sills, and by resistant Cretaceous sandstones. The dark gray to black or brown weathered surfaces of these rocks, beneath which a contrastingly paler-hued layer was exposed readily by pecking, incising, and grinding, provided an enduring medium for recording figures of geometric and animalistic forms. Some of these figures must be products of artistic impulses inherent in man, as indicated by similarities with designs on pottery, basketry, and textiles. Others appear related to religious and secular symbolism, the principal lifeways of the people, and perhaps charms connected with hunting. Some are as informal and abstract as modern doodling.

Although several of the more conspicuous sites show some use as workshops for the chipping of implements and preparation of food, many bear little evidence of use aside from that of the inscription of petroglyphs. Locations near springs, passes, and probable game trails were obviously favored, but some sites appear to have been attractive because of their location as convenient lookouts, providing unimpeded views of the surrounding area.

Only a few of the sites west of the Sierra Blanca between Three Rivers and Carrizozo are described here. There are undoubtedly other noteworthy ones within this same area, and many more along the ridges and canyons east of the Sierra Blanca. Gebhard (1957) described and illustrated pictographs from the eastern slope of the range, suggesting that they are the work of the Mesquero Apache. Only the square-shouldered figure in the lower left corner of figure 3 was chalked for greater clarity; all of the other figures and designs shown in the photographs accompanying this paper are not chalked.

THE THREE RIVERS PETROGLYPHS

The most impressive display of petroglyphs is 4 miles northeast of Three Rivers, in secs. 16 and 21, T. 11 S., R. 9½ E. An Official Historic Marker on U.S. Highway 54 at Three Rivers carries the following information: "THREE RIVERS PETROGLYPHS. A mile-

long array of pictures pecked into the solid rock walls of a volcanic ridge. They include both geometric and animal forms. Most were made by prehistoric Indians. May be contemporary with a nearby Mimbres site, dating from 900-1000 A.D. Follow road three miles east." The distance is actually 5.1 miles but, by following signs placed along the route, little difficulty will be had in finding the locality.

The "volcanic ridge" trends northerly for a distance of a little over one mile, and consists of a thin eastward-dipping hornblende-biotite lamprophyre sill intrusive into sandstones of the Mesaverde Group. The rock tends to weather to smooth, rounded surfaces coated with a dark gray to lustrous black desert varnish. Petroglyphs are distributed throughout the length of the sill on both outcrop and talus boulders, with noteworthy concentrations at the southern and northern ends. The figures are highly varied and may be of more than one age (figures 1 and 2. Among the forms noted are realistic, stylized and surrealistic animal figures; various representations of human figures, heads, handprints, footprints, and possible mythical beings; corn plants; curvilinear and rectilinear geometric patterns that include various embellishments of circles, spirals, dots, triangles, rectangles, stepped terraces, parallel zigzag and wavy lines, and aimless(?) meandering and looping lines. Among the animal figures are birds in flight and at rest (a highly realistic quail, roadrunners, turkeys, possible macaws, and others), lizards, frogs, turtles, snakes, beetles, butterflies, worms, fish, deer (a spotted fawn is especially noteworthy), rabbits, chipmunk, skunk, mountain lions, and mountain sheep. Tracks of birds are common; some are aligned in trails that trip lightly across the tops of boulders. The X-shaped track of the roadrunner is faithfully portrayed. Tracks of bear and wolf are also clearly delineated. Human figures are largely stylized stick and solid forms of considerable variety. Goggle-eyed faces are repeated at several places, as is the ingenious use of corners of rocks to provide depth in portrayals of human heads as shown in the lower left photograph in figure 2. Some of these faces are enhanced by pecked shading of features on one side. Masks and headdresses are indicated on several figures.

Cultural affiliations of the Three Rivers petroglyphs have not been established, but Puebloan styles are strongly indicated. The exuberant depiction of animals and frequency of geometric patterning of animal bodies are highly suggestive of Mimbres pottery designs. The site is within the area occupied by the Jornada Branch of the Mogollon, of which one of the northern variants, the Three Rivers Phase (circa 1100-1200 A.D.), was defined from sites in this vicinity (Lehmer, 1948). The results of excavations in 1925 of 10 rooms of a nearby pueblo unfortunately have not been published. Some



Figure 1. — Petroglyphs at the Three Rivers site.

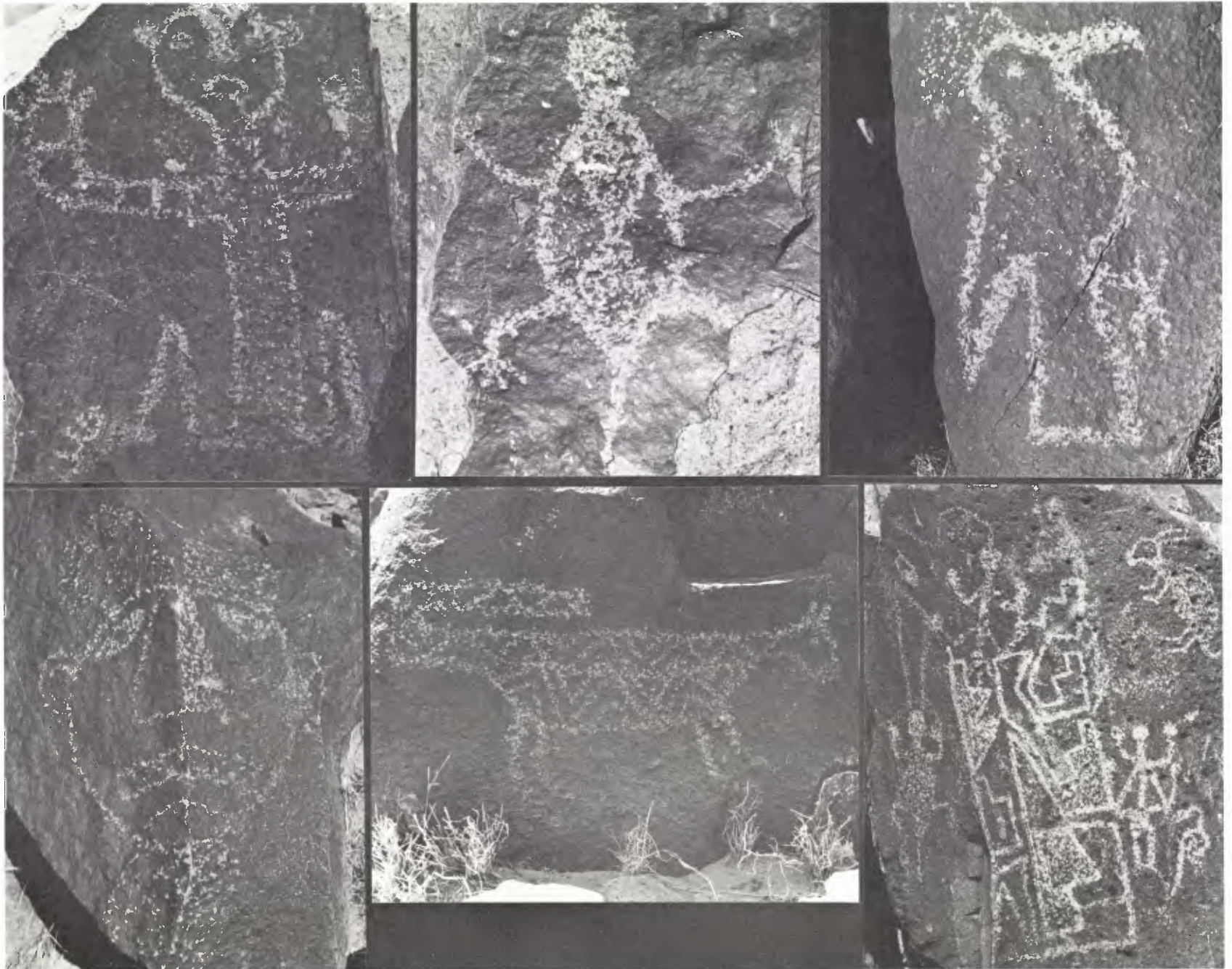


Figure 2. — Petroglyphs at the Three Rivers site.



Figure 3. — Petroglyphs at the Willow Hill site; geology pick indicates scale.

of the fresher-appearing figures may be attributable to the modern Apache, who now occupy the adjacent Mes-calero Apache Indian Reservation.

North of the Three Rivers site, a series of sill-capped hills extends northeastward along a structural trend dominated on the south by Malagro Hill. Petroglyphs were noted locally on black patinated sill outcrops in the vicinity of Malagro Springs, above which there are indications of a fairly extensive village site. Both sills and adjacent sandstones of the Mesaverde Group in smaller hills in secs. 1, 2, and 3, T. 9 S., R. 9 E. bear isolated clusters of petroglyphs.

THE WILLOW HILL PETROGLYPHS

Turning eastward through the canyon between Cub Mountain and Willow Hill, past Willow Springs, a basaltic dike of west-northwesterly trend rises as a conspicuous wall above a spring near the southern edge of the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ sec. 35, T. 8 S., R. 10 E. The jointed, weathered surfaces of the dike are decorated for a distance of several hundred feet with large panels of petroglyphs. Looping, meandering lines, tally marks, and rows of human

figures holding hands are conspicuous design elements, accompanied by various animal motifs (fig. 3). This site is in all probability on an old trail connecting the Tularosa Valley on the west with the Sierra Blanca on the east, where wild game, pinyon, and other food resources were exploited. It would have served admirably as an ambush for game watering at the springs. Minor lithic sites, possibly representative of the Hueco Phase of the Jornada Branch, are scattered along terraces in this area. Sparse shards of brownware indicate continued occupation in later pottery-bearing phases.

Small groups of petroglyphs are present at scattered localities along the western slope of Willow Hill and the eastern edge of the Carrizozo Malpais, but none of these are as impressive as those described above.

REFERENCES CITED

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