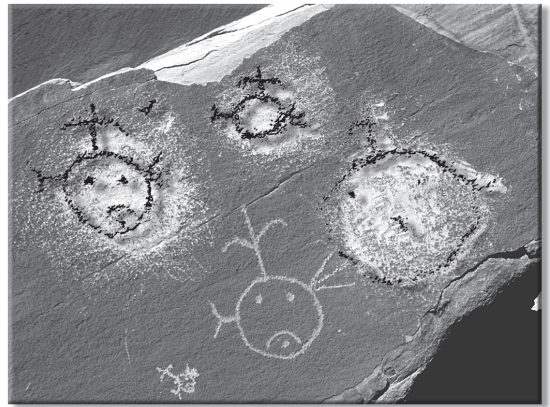


# Inscription Point: Too Little Too Late?



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*The Inscription Point site, located just outside of Wupatki National Monument in northeastern Arizona, has long been recognized as an important example of Anasazi rock art. Indeed, the site and its imagery have played a major role in the early interpretation of Anasazi rock art in spite of the fact that, until recently, the site had not been recorded in detail. Finally recorded in 1993, the iconography and some of the implications of this impressive site are summarized. In addition, the natural deterioration and human destruction that have occurred at the site in the last seven decades are discussed.*

The primary rationale for detailed recording of rock art sites has always been an attempt to preserve the anthropological information contained in the images. This objective has become even more important as the pace of vandalism and the destruction of rock art sites throughout the United States has accelerated. In the Southwest that destruction is primarily the result of the growing number of individuals with intolerant and destructive tendencies, and the urban sprawl into and development of once remote areas, both direct consequences of rapidly increasing regional populations.

While preserving information is a laudable endeavor, it is not the only valid reason for detailed site recording. The growth of interest in rock art research since the 1930s has resulted in numerous interpretive studies appearing in both the professional and general literature. Unfortunately, because the study of rock art is relatively new and generally unrecognized as an independent discipline, the principles of rigorous scientific investigation have not been emphasized until very recently. Many of the previously completed interpretive studies were not based on a solid body of detailed and objectively collected data, and thus lack documented support for the suggested interpretations. Therefore, it seems clear that there is a critical need for the detailed recording of rock art

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sites which have played an important role in the development of rock art studies, and which have not been recorded previously.

Inscription Point met the imperatives for the two recording objectives outlined above. It was both severely endangered and an important site that has played a major role in the early development of interpretive strategies for Anasazi rock art.

## PREVIOUS STUDIES

The earliest documented investigation of the rock art at Inscription Point was carried out by Harold S. and Mary R. F. Colton in the late 1920s. Their work at this location and at the supposedly similar Willow Springs site 67.5 km (42 miles) to the north resulted in several short published papers (Colton 1946, 1960; Colton and Colton 1931). One of those papers identified a total of "26 boulders covered with drawings" (Colton 1946:5) at Inscription Point. Essentially, Colton (1946:5–6, 1960:83) concluded that Inscription Point was similar to the Willow Springs site in that many of the rock art elements were believed to be the signatures (or signs) of travelers. However, he also recognized other possible interpretations including "doodling," fetish depiction, hunting magic (derived primarily from the presence of numerous game animal images), and vague ceremonial and religious purposes. From all indications the site was never recorded in detail, nor have actual records of such an undertaking been located.

In the early 1970s, a further study of Inscription Point was conducted and briefly reported. Davin and Dolphin (1973), on the basis of comparisons with Turner's (1963:6–7, 12) Style 4, placed most, if not all, of the Inscription Point petroglyphs in the A.D. 1050–1250 time period. In addition, they suggested, somewhat tentatively, that some of the motifs at the site may be fertility symbols. Further, the origins of some of the motifs were traced to Mesoamerica, supposedly brought to the Wupatki region by Hohokam immigrants. Again, proof that the site was recorded in detail has not been found.

In a recently published general description of Wupatki rock art, Schaafsma (1987:22, 24) includes photographs of two panels and a drawing of a third panel from Inscription Point without specifically identifying the site. As a result of an intensive survey of Wupatki National Monument in the 1980s and early 1990s, Inscription Point was again briefly studied. Anderson (1990) summarizes the Wupatki rock art findings, stating that the interpretations and conclusions reached also apply to Inscription Point. He also presents a wide range of interpretations for the Wupatki region rock art and dismisses some of the earlier inferences presented by Colton and by Davin and Dolphin.

Thus, although the Inscription Point site is a well-known concentration of Anasazi rock art and has been visited by hundreds of rock art researchers and aficionados, it had never been recorded in detail prior to 1993. For the most part pre-1993 visitors took only selective photographs. Fortunately, a few visitors compiled a fairly complete photographic record of the site, and some of those photographs have been retrieved and utilized for historical comparisons for this paper.

## SITE SETTING

Inscription Point, site NA2562 in the Museum of Northern Arizona records and site AZ I:7:7 (ASM) in the Arizona State Museum site files, is located within the boundaries of the Navajo Nation (The Navajo Indian Reservation) along the Little Colorado River just northeast of Wupatki National Monument, about 59.5 km (37 miles) north-northeast of Flagstaff, Coconino County, Arizona (Figure 1). At an elevation of 1,341 m (4,400 ft), the site is only 1.45 km (0.9 miles) east of the Little Colorado River channel. The site itself stretches for approximately 350 m along and around a prominent point formed by an escarpment cut into Moenkopi Formation sandstone rock. The actual rock art is primarily on large sandstone boulders located on the steep talus slope and the level river terrace below. The site area today is characterized by a cold desert shrub

vegetation community, part of the Upper Sonoran Life-zone. Devoid of trees, the locality is dominated by saltbush or shadscale, with sparse grasses.

### RECORDING METHODS

The Inscription Point site was recorded in the summer of 1993 by a group of volunteers under the direction of Jane Kolber and Donald E. Weaver, Jr. The recording methods were based on the procedures and forms developed for the Arizona Archaeological Society by Jane Kolber. All of the panels and many smaller clusters and individual motifs were photographed with color slide and black-and-white film and most of the panels were drawn to scale. Descriptive forms were completed in the field for all of the boulders and the few cliff faces containing rock art. A total of 754.5 person hours or 94.3 person days were expended during the field recording. The site recording was done under the provisions of a Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department permit, and all of the original records were submitted to that agency for curation.

### DATING

Although scientific dating of petroglyphs is not possible at the present time, an attempt was made to establish a general chronological placement for Inscription Point. Previous investigators had used comparisons with dated regional styles, specifically Turner's (1963:12) Style 4. This led to the conclusion that the inhabitants of numerous nearby sites in Wupatki National Monument and along the Little Colorado River were the rock art creators implying that most of the Inscription Point rock art was made between A.D. 1050 and 1250 (Anderson 1990:9-10 to 9-13, Colton 1946:5-6, Davin and Dolphin 1973:2-4). While this general conclusion still holds, especially in light of the overall similarities between the rock art recorded in Wupatki National Monument (Anderson 1990:9-1 to 9-33) and the rock art at Inscription Point, the detailed study carried out in 1993 has resulted in significant modifications and additions to that chronological interpretation.

Because reliable techniques for the dating of petroglyphs are currently not available, rock art researchers are forced to rely on stylistic comparisons with established rock art styles directly associated with scientifically datable archaeological remains. This methodology was employed at Inscription Point, resulting in the identification of motifs and specific elements which apparently predate and postdate the A.D. 1050-1250 period. The relative chronological placements derived from stylistic comparisons were verified and reinforced by reference to the numerous examples of superimposition at the site, as well as by the diverse levels of repatination and natural deterioration evident on many panels. Specifically, a number of motifs, including the huge serpent images, some large geometrics such as spirals and enclosed crosses, as well as large anthropomorphs with greatly exaggerated feet and hands were probably made during the Basketmaker to early Pueblo periods between approximately A.D. 100 and 1050. Similarly, a number of motifs, including detailed masks and tabletas, were probably

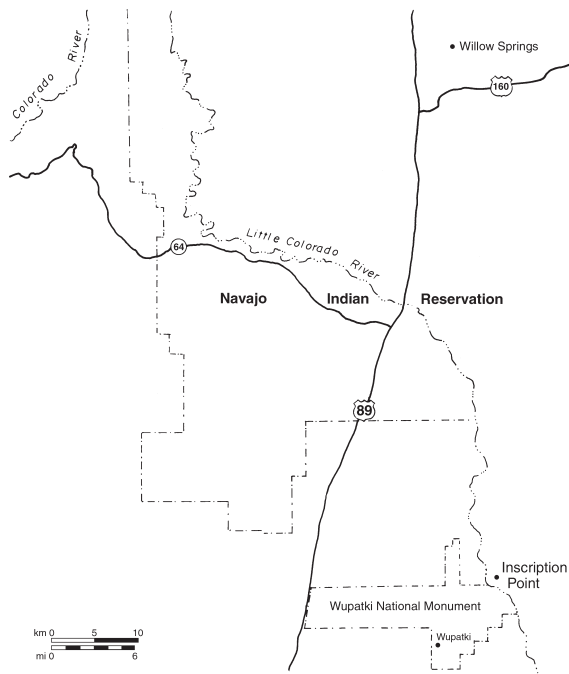


Figure 1. Map showing location of Inscription Point.

Table 1. Rock art elements recorded at Inscription Point.

No.	Element	Element Count	No.	Element	Element Count	No.	Element	Element Count
1.		182	18.		10	35.		44
2.		51	19.		37	36.		7
3.		8	20.		27	37.		2
4.		14	21.		12	38.		3
5.		8	22.		28	39.		6
6.		11	23.		70	40.		85
7.		6	24.		5	41.		4
8.		45	25.		4	42.		16
9.		45	26.		78	43.		39
10.		6	27.		9	44.		19
11.		27	28.		42	45.		123
12.		9	29.		10	46.		83
13.		3	30.		25	47.		27
14.		18	31.		7	48.		8
15.		118	32.		4	49.		35
16.		18	33.		3	50.		5
17.		20	34.		8	51.		2
						52.		2

### GEOMETRIC

- Dot, row of dots, dotted pattern, rayed dot
- Circle, bisected circle, rayed circle, tailed circle, appendaged circle, dotted circle
- Connected circles, chain of circles
- Disk, tailed disk, rayed disk
- Concentric circles, concentric arcs
- Semi-circle, bisected semi-circle, appendaged semi-circle
- Oval, solid oval, tailed solid oval
- Spiral, appendaged spiral, dotted spiral, scroll, attached spiral
- Curvilinear abstract, curvilinear meander
- Square, appendaged square, bisected square
- Rectangle, solid rectangle, open-ended rectangle, rectilinear gridiron, connected squares, U-shape, H-shape
- Triangle, solid triangle, diamond, solid diamond, appendaged triangle
- Attached squared spirals, squared spiral
- Rectilinear abstract, rectilinear meander, complex abstract design

### 15. Straight line

- Curved line, curved dotted line
- Angle, diagonal line, nested chevrons
- S curve, S curve with angles
- Zig zag, dotted zig zag, fret, stepped design
- Parallel lines
- Cross, outlined cross, curved cross, crossed barbells
- T shape, X shape, bird track
- Squiggle, squiggle with circle, squiggle with disk
- Rake, one-pole ladder
- Crosshatching

### REPRESENTATIONAL

- Human-like anthro, male, female
- Attached human-like anthros, row of anthros
- Incomplete anthro
- Anthro with big hands and feet, round bellied anthro
- Flute player, humpbacked flute player
- Anthro with headdress
- Archers

### 33. 4-armed anthro, 4-footed anthro, anthro with staff

- Copulating humans, copulating deer
- Foot, hand prints
- Mask
- Birthing scene
- Shield, staff
- Phytomorph (plant-like)
- Animal-like tailed, horned, quadruped, biped
- Insect-like
- Bird-like
- Reptile-like, snake-like
- Biomorph, splayed-leg biomorph

### INDISCERNIBLE

- Amorphous shape, pecking
- Unidentified pecking, scratching, rubbing

### MODERN

- Names, initials, words
- Dates, numbers
- Modern symbols, modern scratches
- Rain cloud, tableta
- Modern anthro
- Vehicle



produced during the late prehistoric through the early historic periods, approximately A.D. 1250 to 1900. In addition, a large number of pecked and scratched figures appear to be of historic period Pueblo (probably Hopi) or Navajo origin. Unquestionably, the abundant graffiti is recent, mostly post 1930, and of Anglo-American and Native American origins. Thus, although it can still be said that most of the Inscription Point rock art probably dates to the A.D. 1050–1250 period, the site was the locale of rock art production from at least as early as A.D. 100 to modern times, a span of almost 2000 years.

### THE ROCK ART

At Inscription Point, 102 individual boulders and cliff faces with 207 panels containing more than 1,478 individual rock art elements were documented. Although every attempt was made to obtain a complete inventory, a few additional elements may occur in the area.

Virtually all of the prehistoric petroglyphs were pecked. Many of the later protohistoric and historic period motifs were incised, scratched and/or abraded. For the purposes of general description and analysis, the individual elements were divided into 52

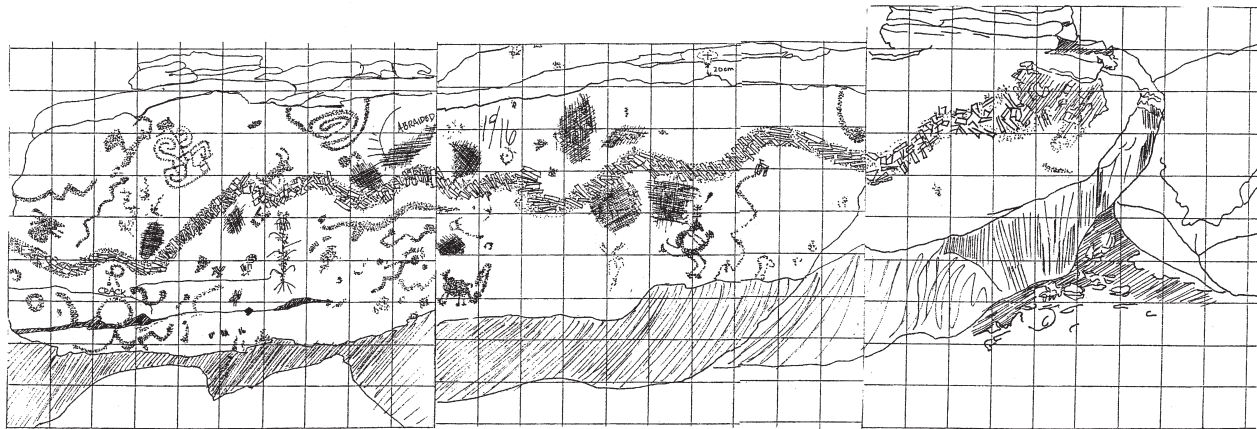
subjective categories (Table 1). The illustrations of typical elements in Table 1 are based on actual designs recorded at the site.

After eliminating the indiscernible (#45 and 46) and the modern elements (#47 through 52) from consideration, the remaining 1,193 elements are predominately geometrics (782 or 66 percent), with a much smaller number of representational designs, 411 or 34 percent, a comparative ratio of almost two to one. By far the most common geometrics were dots and dot patterns (182), with straight lines (118), squiggles (70), circles (51), spirals (45), curvilinear meanders (45), and zigzags (37) comprising 70 percent (548 of 782) of the recorded geometric designs. In the case of representational elements, the most common images were simple and incomplete anthropomorphs (120), with zoomorphs—primarily quadrupeds (85), footprints and handprints—virtually all human (44), reptile and snake-like motifs (39), and flute players (25) comprising 76 percent (313 of 411) of the total.

Serpent-like motifs (37 of 39 instances in element category #43) are the most visually dominant images at Inscription Point. This motif category includes some of the largest images at the site. On Boulders 30, 37, 46, 50, 57, 63, 64 and 74, snake-like figures with thick



*Figure 2. Boulder 37, Panel B, panel 2.7 m wide.*



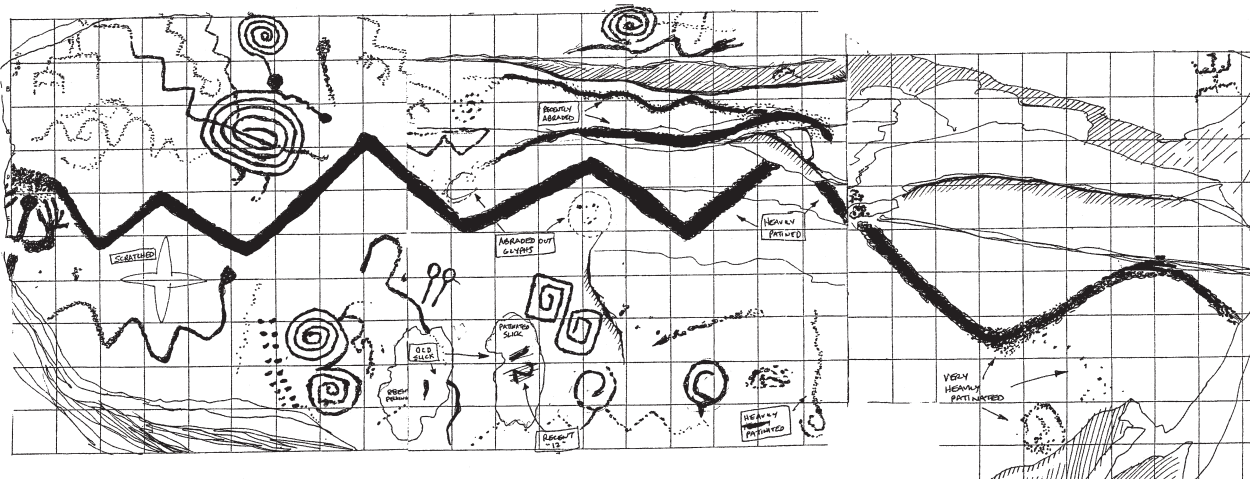
**Figure 3.** Boulder 46, Panel A. The large figure running across the panel has been destroyed with a steel chisel. Scale is 1 sq = 20 cm.



**Figure 4.** Boulder 46, Panel A, upper right; Boulder 48, Panel A, right center; Boulder 49, Panel A, lower center, panel 1.6 m wide; Boulder 50, Panel A, upper left.

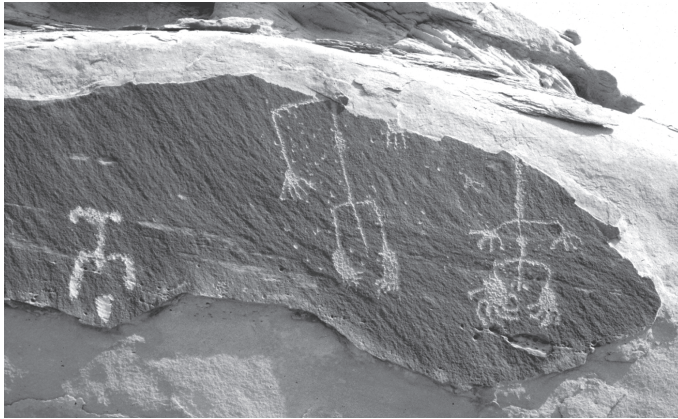
bodies measuring between 1.0 and 5.5 m in length (usually with circular or triangular heads), stretch completely across the rock faces (Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5). Numerous smaller similar designs are scattered on boulders throughout the site (see Figures 3, 4, and 5). It is interesting to note that if elements such as zigzags and squiggles, elements which may be abstract serpent images, are added to the more realistic snake-like images, potential snakes total 144 or 12 percent of the 1,193 identifiable non-modern elements.

Anthropomorphs, in all their variations (elements #26–34, 37, 44), comprise by far the largest representational motif category, totaling 207 occurrences, or 50 percent. While

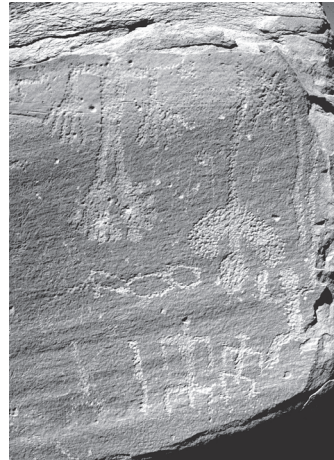


**Figure 5.** Boulder 57, Panel A. Scale is 1 sq = 20 cm.





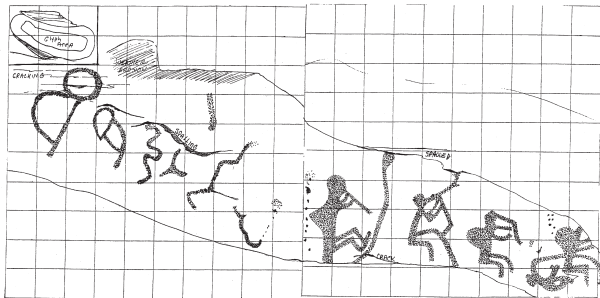
**Figure 6.** Boulder 20, Panel A, center figure 65 cm high.



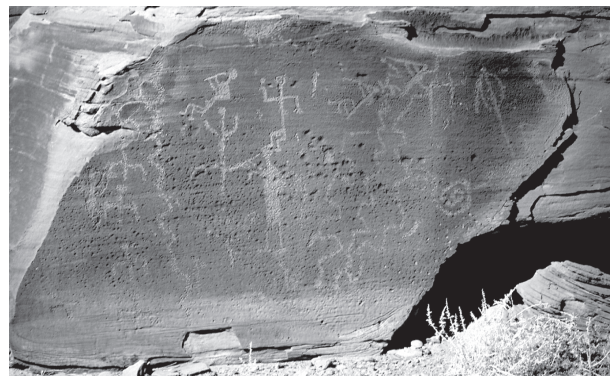
**Figure 7.** Boulder 92, Panel B, upper left figure 40 cm high.

human and human-like images are numerous, most of them are quite small simple stick figures, many incomplete. The exceptions to this characterization include four relatively large anthropomorphs with big feet and hands (Figures 6 and 7), six round bellied figures, 25 flute players, including six with humpbacks (Figures 8, 9 and 10), seven anthropomorphs with headdresses, four archers (Figure 11),

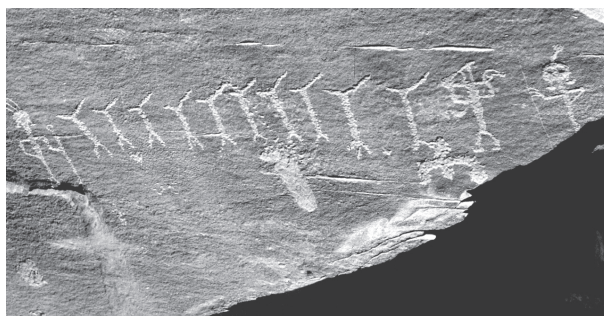
seven sets of copulating humans (Figures 12 and 13), two birthing scenes, five figures holding crooked staffs or wands (see Figure 4), and two unusual human-like figures, one with four arms and one with four legs.



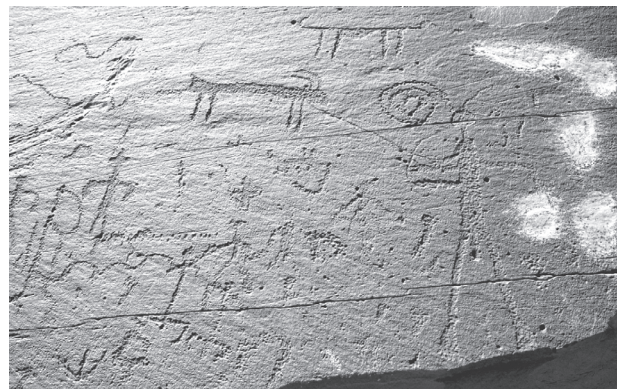
**Figure 8.** Boulder 51, Panel A. Scale is 1 sq = 10 cm.



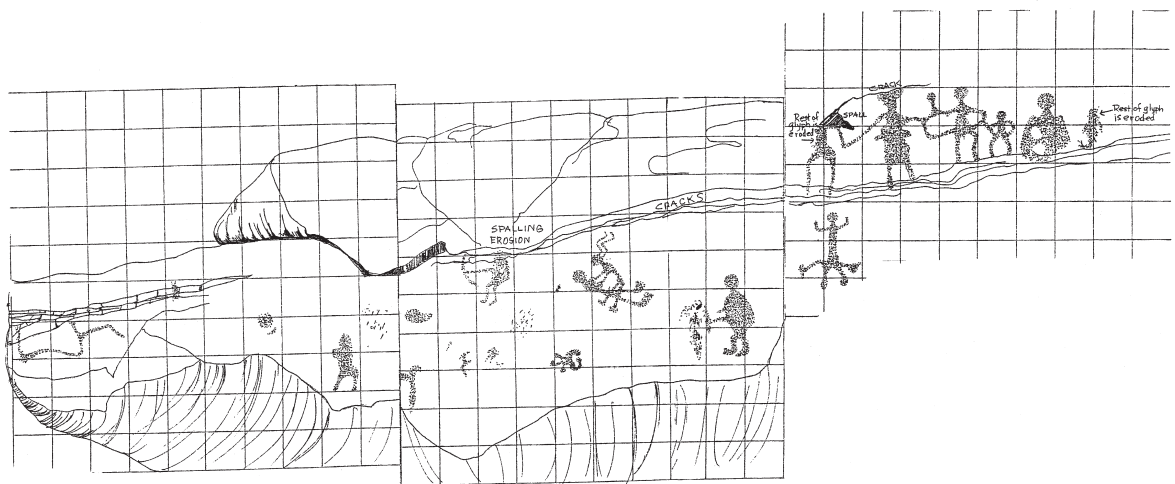
**Figure 10.** Boulder 72, Panel E, central flute player 30 cm high.



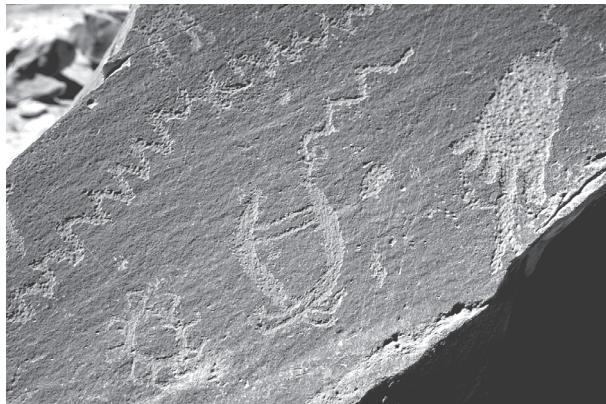
**Figure 9.** Boulder 76, Panel F, extreme right figure 12 cm high.



**Figure 11.** Boulder 76, partial Panel A, right anthropomorph 55 cm high.



**Figure 12.** Boulder 58, Panel B. Scale is 1 sq = 10 cm.



**Figure 13.** Boulder 64, Panel B, footprint 50 cm long.

Four-legged animal motifs, excluding lizard-like designs, total 85 examples or 21 percent, the second most numerous representational category. Virtually all of the designs are small and rather crudely made. However, 27 (or 32 percent) of the images have diagnostic features, such as horns or antlers, which suggest that specific species of animals including deer, elk, desert bighorn sheep and pronghorn antelope were being depicted. A few of the figures are dog-like, but full-bodied feline depictions are conspicuously absent, with only one possible example noted.

The most visually dominant geometric motifs at Inscription Point are lines (136), circles and discs (79), spirals (44), squiggles (70), zigzags (85), outlined crosses (4), and

nested chevrons (8). Many of the largest individual images at the site fall within these seven general motif categories (see Figures 4 and 5). In all, these categories include 431 occurrences, or 55 percent of the geometrics identified at the site. It should be noted here that the so-called textile and ceramic motifs so common at rock art sites in Wupatki National Monument (Anderson 1990:9–26) are completely absent at Inscription Point.

The mere enumeration of the individual motifs present at a complex rock art site such as Inscription Point does not provide the broad perspective necessary to gain a general understanding of its iconographic content. Like all rock art assemblages, the imagery at Inscription Point contains important associations, scenes, and compositions that must be identified and considered in order to derive reasonable functional interpretations. Although many of the panels at Inscription Point appear to be complex random juxtapositions of seemingly unrelated motifs (Figures 14, 15, and 16), that appearance is deceptive. In several cases, specific compositions have been identified. For example, perhaps the most famous panel at Inscription Point (Figure 9) shows a complex scene with one anthropomorph, at the head of a line of 11 abstract human-like figures, carrying a flute player over his head. The line is flanked front and back by two elaborate figures wearing



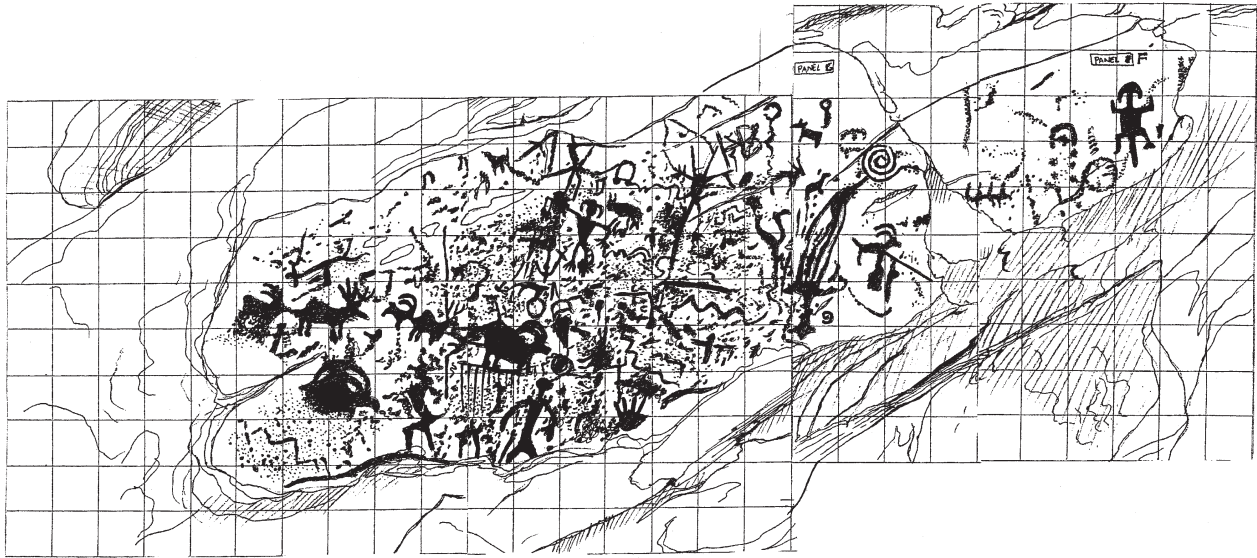


Figure 14. Boulder 55, Panel 6. Scale is 1 sq = 20 cm.



Figure 15.  
Boulder 57,  
Panel C, tall  
anthropomorph  
55 cm high.

headdresses and earbobs and carrying staffs. This scene has been interpreted as a depiction of a ceremony, probably a dance, with two religious leaders conducting the activities.

### INTERPRETATION

Interpretation of the petroglyphs at Inscription Point is difficult. It has become even more difficult as a result of the detailed

recording and the fact that a much expanded time period has now been suggested for the creation of the numerous images. This in itself implies that the site fulfilled a number of different functions which can only be tentatively identified by considering the time period in which specific images were created, the cultural tradition responsible, and the morphological and potential ideological configuration of the motifs themselves.



*Figure 16. Boulder 63, Panel A, panel 5.0 m wide.*

One thing is already clear. The idea of a single explanation for all Inscription Point rock art is no longer reasonable and must be discarded. That is, the claim that the rock art images were clan symbols left by passing travelers, first presented by Colton (1946:5–6, 1960:83), is incorrect, or at best only partially correct. The element inventory for Inscription Point shows virtually no correlations with the clan symbol elements reported at Willow Springs (Michaelis 1981), the prime and perhaps only example of a rock art site dominated by traveler's marks. Schaafsma (1987:21) mentions three possible clan symbol correlations for Inscription Point, including the crane, corn, and kachina clans, but close inspection of the individual motifs does not support those inferences. Rows of similar elements at Inscription Point are few in number, and when they do occur, consist of rows of simple stick figure anthropomorphs (see Figure 9). These scenes, unlike anything thus far identified at Willow Springs, probably depict group dances or

ceremonies, not individual travelers' marks in a row.

Although it is not possible to suggest a single all-encompassing interpretive explanation for Inscription Point rock art, it may be possible to suggest partial explanations which apply to smaller subsets of the imagery. For example, Inscription Point contains a number of explicit copulation scenes (8) which strongly suggest the themes of human, animal and perhaps supernatural fecundity (see Figures 3, 12 and 13). While this particular subset seems quite small, if the flute player images (25), birthing scenes (2), pregnant or obviously gender specific animals and anthropomorphs (30 plus) are added to the subset, it becomes much larger (65+) and probably more significant. All of these motifs at one time or another have been associated by rock art researchers with the concept of fertility.

Several other iconographic subsets suggest additional possible general interpretations. The large number of snake and serpent-like



motifs, some extremely large, strongly indicates a ritualistic motive for the creation of much of the imagery. Snakes and serpentine images have a long record of associations with water and rain, and the rituals conducted by ancient and modern Native Americans to ensure an adequate supply of moisture (McCreery and Malotki 1994:81–82). The presence of numerous flute players, a number of anthropomorphs with staffs, wands, and elaborate headdresses; what appear to be kachina masks; and depictions of groups of people or human-like images, perhaps dancers, further support this general inference. Whether specific motifs were created to commemorate completed rituals or as integral parts of the rituals themselves could not be determined.

Perhaps typical of most large complex sites, virtually every previously proposed interpretation for rock art can be inferred based on one or more specific elements present at the site. For Inscription Point the possibilities include, in addition to those interpretations already discussed, hunting magic (based on numerous large game animals and archers), shamanistic activities including altered states of consciousness or trance (based on anthropomorphs with unusual features such as very large hands and/or feet and numerous geometric forms viewed as entoptics), ritualistic requests for abundant crops (based on corn plant depictions), and others too numerous to list.

The prehistoric archaeological remains of the Wupatki region, including the Inscription Point rock art, have often been described as a mixture derived from the Cohonina, Sinagua, and Anasazi (Kayenta and Little Colorado) cultural traditions. Colton (1960:81–83), the earliest researcher, felt that he could distinguish the rock art of each of those traditions. Rock art recording conducted since 1975 has documented a wider range of detailed iconographic information for all three. In comparing recorded Sinagua imagery (D'Amico 1977, 1978; Weaver 1994) to the rock art documented at Inscription Point, a striking similarity was noted. Virtually all of the motifs

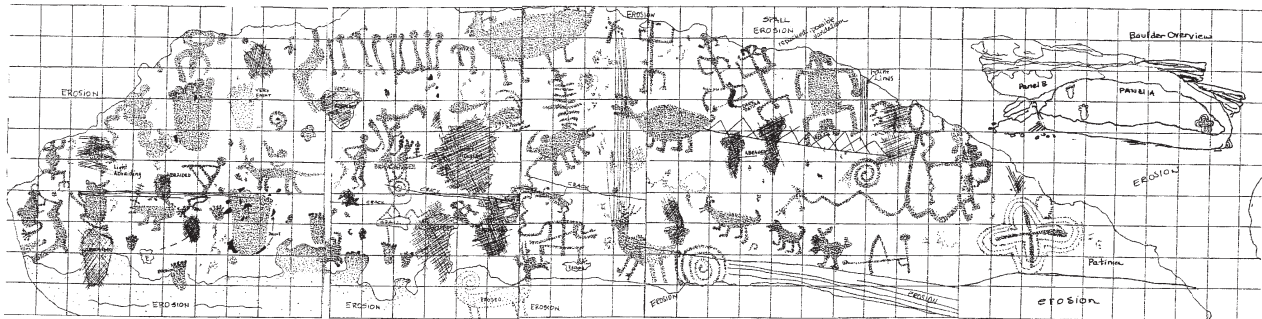
described as typical of Northern Sinagua rock art, except for complex open-ended geometric designs, occur at Inscription Point. However, these Sinagua motifs constitute only a very small portion of the total iconography at the site. Many of the design elements typical of Little Colorado Anasazi (McCreery and Malotki 1994, Pilles 1975) and some of the typical motifs of Kayenta Anasazi rock art (Cole 1990:109–172; Schaafsma 1980:105–162; Turner 1963) also occur at Inscription Point. Furthermore, these motifs constitute a sizeable portion of the total imagery. Only the typical iconography of the Cohonina tradition appears to be largely absent at Inscription Point. Because of these circumstances, it was concluded that the rock art is primarily related to the Anasazi cultural tradition, with indications of strong Northern Sinagua connections, but virtually no Cohonina tradition associations. This conclusion is contrary to previously expressed opinions about the cultural affiliation of the Inscription Point site (Schaafsma 1987:23–24), but seems justified on the basis of the data resulting from the detailed recording.

#### **SITE DETERIORATION, NATURAL AND HUMAN CAUSES**

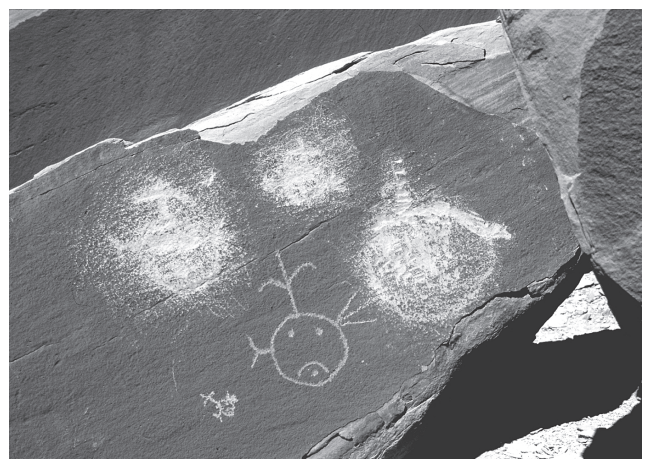
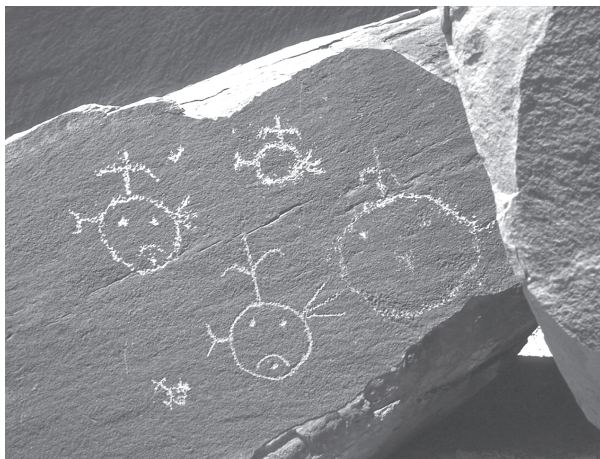
Since it was first studied in the 1930s, the Inscription Point site has suffered severe deterioration due to natural processes and as a result of damage inflicted by humans. Because the sandstone on which the petroglyphs were made is very soft and friable, the scouring effect of windblown sand and the cracking and exfoliation due to the percolation of water and repeated freezing and thawing cycles has had a dramatic effect on the rock art even in the geologically short period of 70 years. Comparisons between early photographs and the photographs and drawings produced during the recent detailed recording have shown that parts of elements and occasionally entire figures have disappeared (see Figure 17). The rate of natural deterioration of any given panel appears to be significantly hastened once a portion of the hard surface layer exfoliates



*Figure 17a. Boulder 72, Panel A, before recent vandalism.*



*Figure 17b. Boulder 72, Panel A, after recent vandalism. Scale of drawing is 1 sq = 10 cm.*



*Figure 18. Boulder 43, Panel A, before (left) and after (right) recent vandalism, lower central motif 40 cm high.*



away from the rock core. Exfoliation occurs primarily where a rock art panel surface contacts the ground, a possible result of moisture wicking and salt deposition resulting from water evaporation.

The heavy damage inflicted on the Inscription Point rock art by humans has taken the form of pecking, incising or scratching names, dates, symbols and messages over and around existing designs; repecking or scratching existing elements; shooting at depicted figures as targets; and scratching, abrading or chiseling out specific motifs in an attempt to completely destroy the images. The most disturbing example of such actions is visible on Boulder 46 where a huge serpent-like image some 5.1 m long has been chiseled out of the rock (see Figure 3). This destruction has been vividly documented in photographs in a previous publication (Mark and Billo 1999:163–167). Two other examples of purposeful destruction are illustrated here with before and after views. In the second case, three of four masks have been rubbed out by abrading away the soft sandstone rock (Figure 18). In the third case, 11 selected motifs of more than 45 individual elements in a very complex panel have been completely destroyed by abrading (Figure 17).

The overall amount of damage inflicted ranges from very minimal impacts on some panels to complete destruction of motifs and whole panels. Based on the records produced in 1993, it is estimated that more than 35 percent of all panels (72 of 207) have been partially to almost completely destroyed as a result of vandalism since 1930. In fact, the photographic record indicates that the majority of the destruction has occurred since 1975.

The recent vandalism and destruction of rock art so evident throughout the Inscription Point site area is highly patterned and appears to have been perpetrated by at least three different groups of people. Motifs such as flute players and kachina masks which were probably created by ancestral Pueblos seem to have been targeted for destruction. It has been suggested that these destructive occurrences were the work of local Native Americans.

A second pattern is evident in which sexually explicit images and serpent figures have been singled out for partial obliteration or complete removal. Here the actions of Christian zealots, possibly both Native American and Anglo-American, are believed to be responsible. Finally, the randomly placed names, initials and dates, sometimes adjacent to and sometimes over existing rock art images, seem typical of thoughtless one-time Anglo American visitors.

All of the evidence suggests that the rate of vandalism has been increasing since 1975. If that trend continues, the Inscription Point site will be virtually destroyed in the next 50 years unless an active program of protection is instituted soon. Since the site is located on Navajo Nation lands, only that entity can legitimately launch a preservation program that might save what is left of this spectacular rock art site for future generations.

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