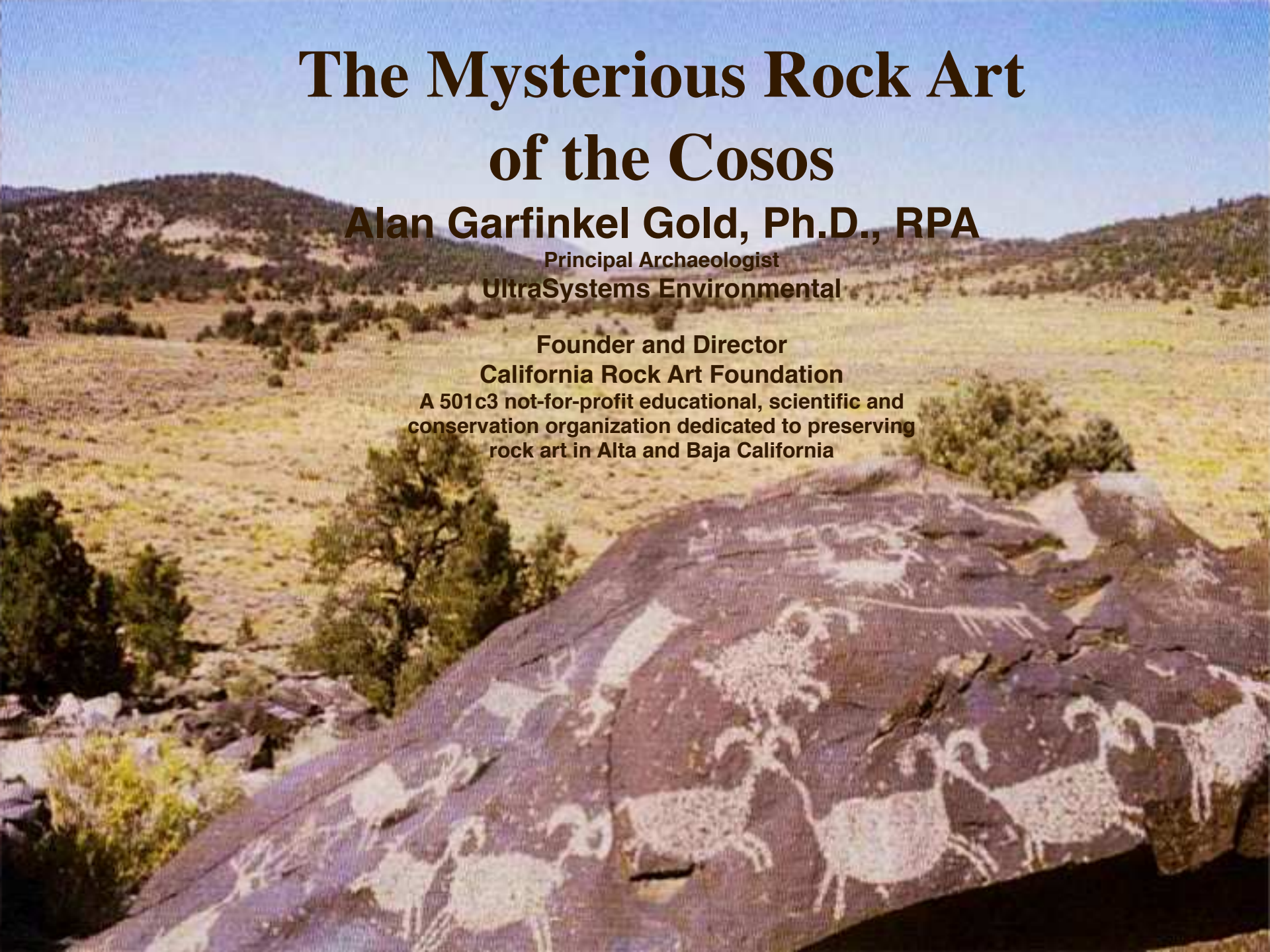


The Mysterious Rock Art of the Cosos

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**Principal Archaeologist
UltraSystems Environmental**

**Founder and Director
California Rock Art Foundation**
A 501c3 not-for-profit educational, scientific and
conservation organization dedicated to preserving
rock art in Alta and Baja California

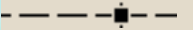




“Hidden away in the canyons of a top-secret military base on the edge of the Mojave Desert is the largest concentration of rock art in North America.

Created over thousands of years by a now-vanished culture, it represents the oldest art in California.”

From the promotional materials for the documentary film
TALKING STONE



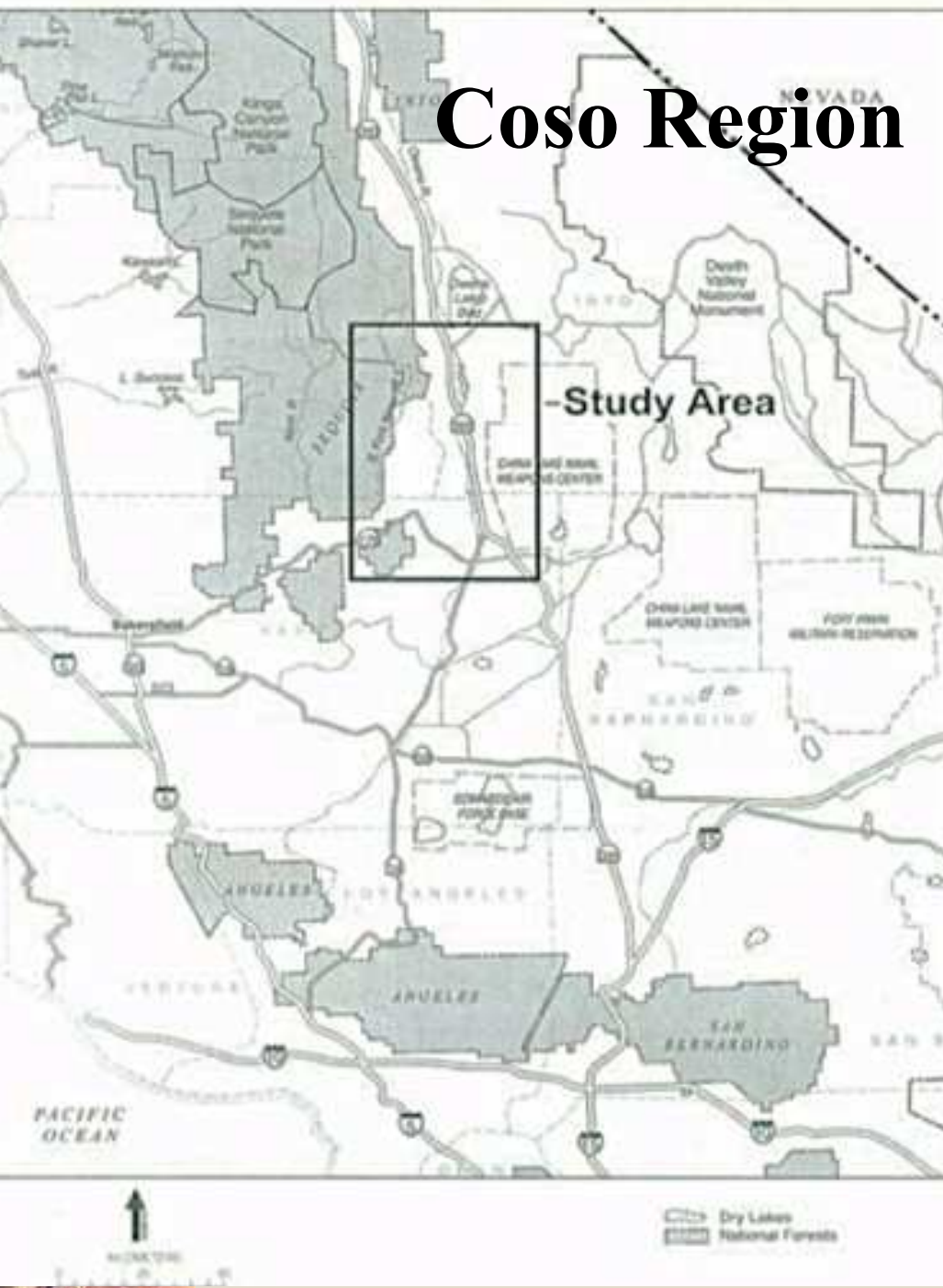


Coso Region

- ✦ **You may be surprised to learn** that the California Desert and eastern California in particular are home to thousands of prehistoric archaeological sites.
- ✦ **California deserts have preserved a remarkable record of Native occupation.**
- ✦ **As a professional archaeologist, I have been doing work in the Coso Region since 1977.**



Coso Region





395

5447 ft

© 2006 Navteq
Image © 2006 DigitalGlobe

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Coso Range – Centerpiece of the Coso Region



- ✦ **In eastern California** - southern Inyo and eastern Kern County
- ✦ Small dry **desert** mountain range
- ✦ **Less than three inches of rain**
- ✦ **Volcanic mountains** of basalt, large lava flows - most active hundreds of thousands of years before human occupation.
- ✦ Most recent is a single **cinder cone at Red Hill** - the only massive volcanic event that would date to any time near the age of aboriginal occupation.





The Coso Region

- ✦ **Elevation** from 3,000 to 6,500 feet
- ✦ Almost totally enclosed by **China Lake Naval Ordnance Testing Station**, just north of Ridgecrest.
- ✦ **Coso Hot Springs** is a 200-degree fahrenheit boiling lake of super heated mud and water.





Coso Range

- ✦ **Has no resources of significance** - no substantial lakes, rivers, or major streams.
- ✦ **No abundance of game or plant resources.**
- ✦ **No native bighorn sheep today!**
- ✦ One of the **poorest environments** for bighorn sheep, not conducive to a large population - in pre-contact time no more than 200 in this small mountain range.
- ✦ The area's environment has not changed dramatically for the last six or seven thousand years.



- ✦ One of the largest **volcanic glass** outcroppings in California.
- ✦ High quality black glass (obsidian) was quarried and traded by Native people from about 10,000 to 1,000 years ago – **preferred material for flaked stone tools**.
- ✦ **Native peoples – the Great Basin Paiute-Shoshone** - who lived there were few in number.
- ✦ Also known as the **Coso people** - means “steam” in their native language.



Coso Range Rock Drawings

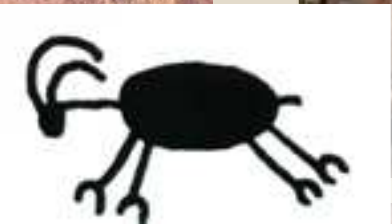
- ✦ **Largest concentration of prehistoric rock drawings in the Western hemisphere!**
- ✦ **Over 100,000 images** in an area of 90 square miles
- ✦ **Densest concentration - Little Petroglyph Canyon - 20,000 images in a one mile canyon**
- ✦ **Representational / naturalistic and abstract**





25% - over 20,000
images - are
depictions of
bighorn sheep

Bighorn Sheep



Other images include:

✦ Dart-throwing boards, armed hunters, animals, dancers, shamans, animal-human deities, bighorn sheep skulls, bighorn sheep headressed hunters, hands, feet, animal footprints, dart points and “monsters”

✦ **Also a wealth of abstract imagery**

✦ **Cultural link evident from more recent images**

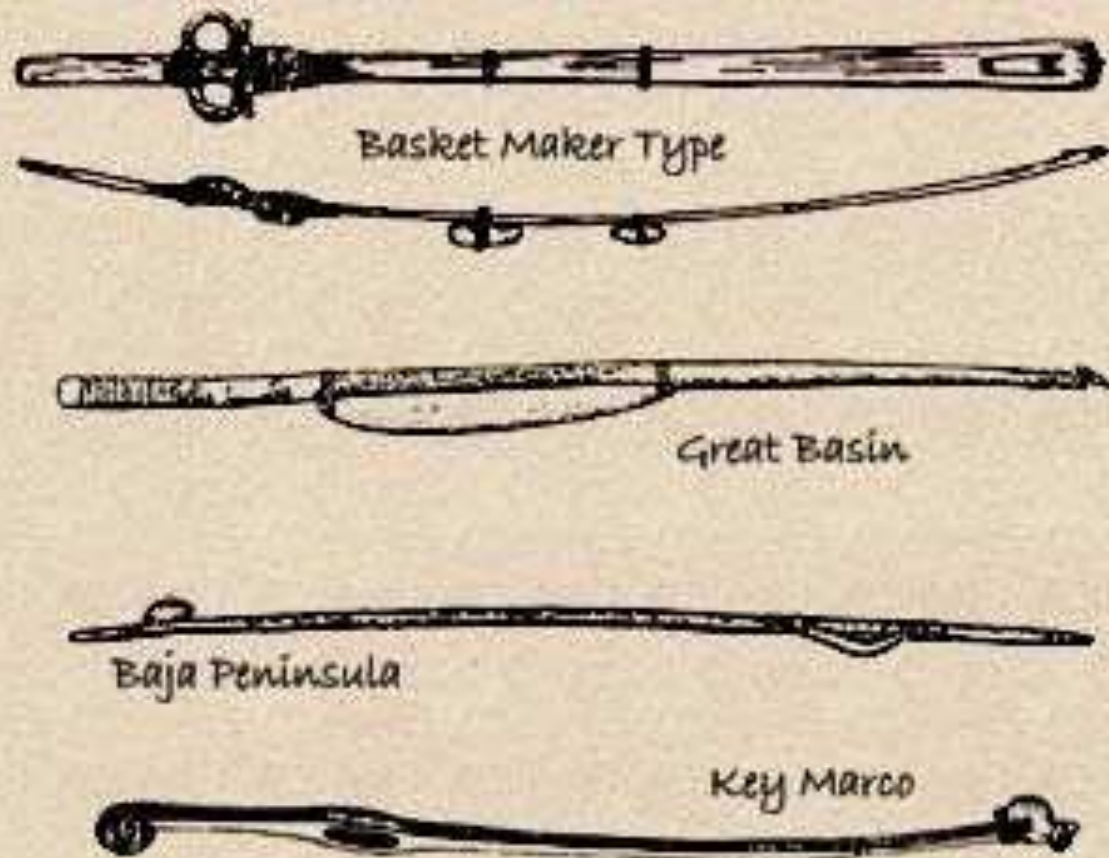


Dart Throwing Boards (Atlatl)



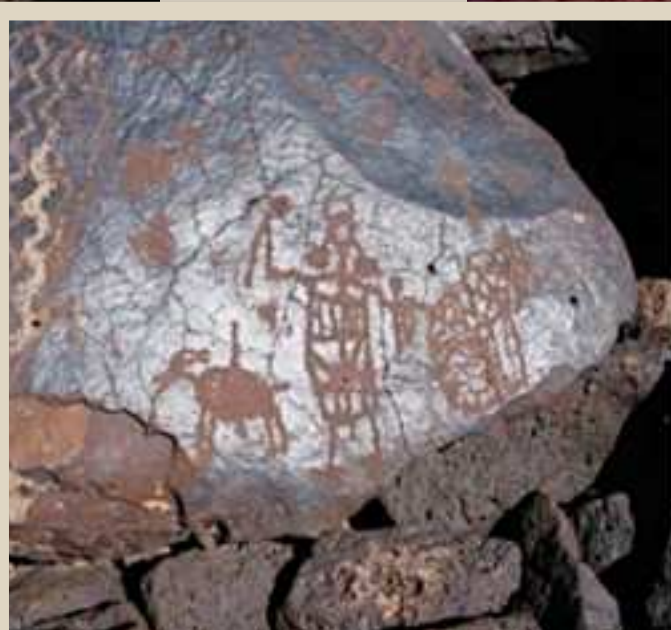


Atlatl Types





Armed
Hunters





Animals (other than sheep)

Mountain Lion



Dogs





Deer



Snakes



Chuckwalla



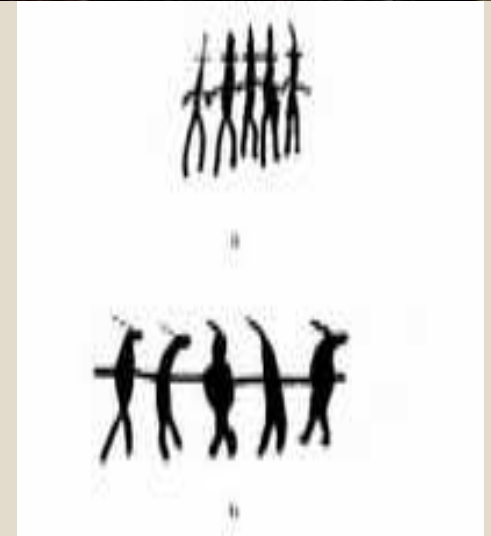
Thunderbird



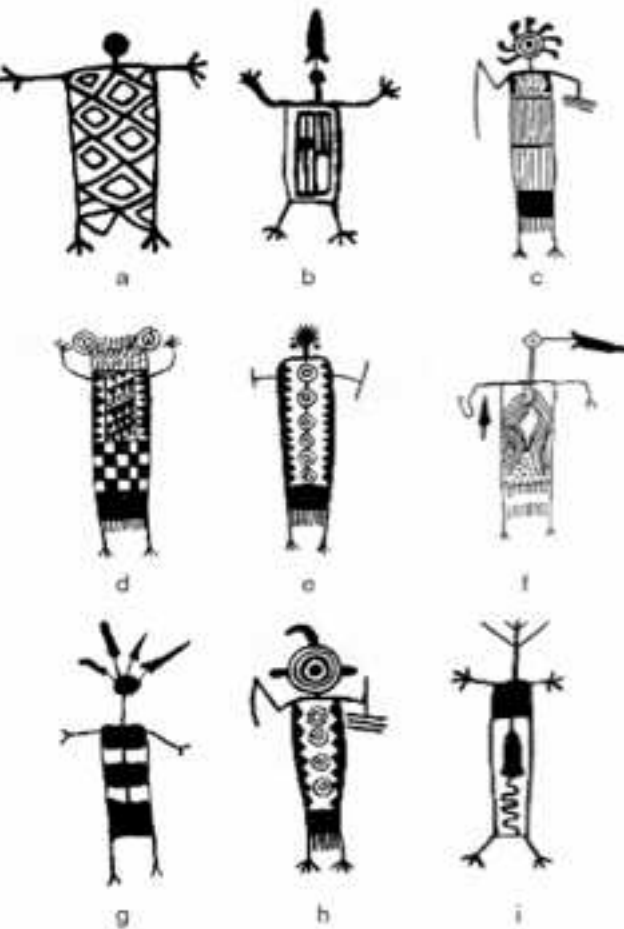
Quail



Dancers



Decorated Animal-Humans





Abstract





Dart Points



Monsters





Interpretive Cautions

- ✦ We shouldn't **project our values** onto the rock art.
- ✦ The **Coso artisans' world was very different** from ours.
.. They were **hunter-gatherers**
- ✦ No evidence that **human artistic capability** has changed
- ✦ **Style** more likely reflects what the artist or social group thought was important
- ✦ Representations may reflect a "**canon**" of style

Coso Style - Highly Representational



The Problem with Dating

✦ Assigning dates to petroglyphs would help us understand them, but...

✦ **Petroglyphs are very difficult to date!**

- ◆ Radiocarbon works for some rock paintings, but not for petroglyphs
- ◆ Both qualitative and technical methods have been tried



Relative Dating Methods

✦ Style sequences

✦ Superimposition

- ◆ Later images overlie earlier images

✦ Relative Contrast

- ◆ High-contrast images should be younger than repatinated ones

✦ Content

- ◆ Image portrayed may provide a clue





Clues from content can suggest date

- ✦ Any image of a **bow and arrow armed hunter (archer)** post-dates ~2000 BP
- ✦ Images of **horses and cowboy hats** post-date ~AD 1850
- ✦ Some ancient dart point images are recognizable, estimated to be **3000 years** or older in Cosos

A Tentative Chronology

- ◆ Abstract and “Early Simple Sheep” - **10,000 BP, Paleoindian period**
- ◆ Spear Thrower and Decorated Animal Humans - 6000 BP, **Little Lake period**
- ◆ Coso Sheep - 4000 BP, **Newberry Period** (2000 BC - AD 1)
- ◆ Archers < 2000 BP, **Haiwee Period** (AD 1 - 1300)
- ◆ None of the ancient motifs is **Late Prehistoric** (< 600 BP)
- ◆ Recognizable historic-period images are present (ca. AD 1850)
- ◆ Above is consistent with the **archaeology**



Cultural Scenario: Middle Archaic ca 6,000 BP

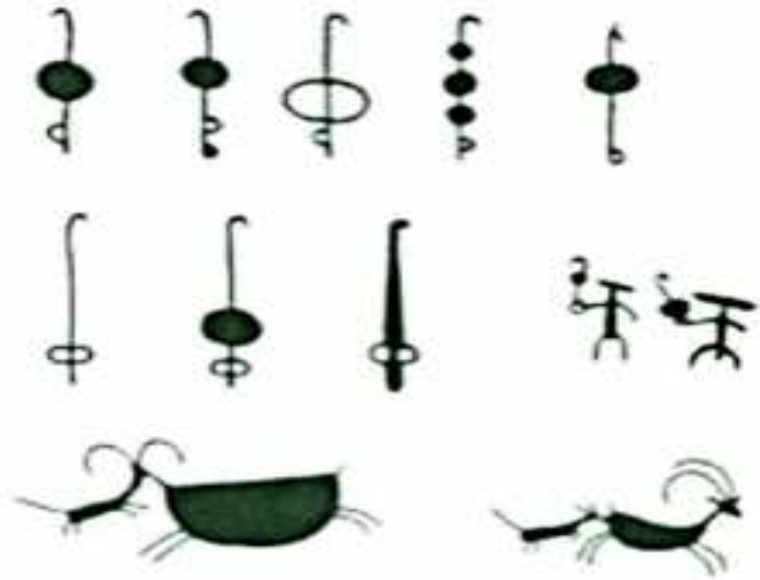


✦ Some of the **earliest people** hunted with spear throwers, Pinto/Little Lake projectile points

✦ **Their Rock art**

◆ **Depicts Spear Throwers**

◆ **Decorated Animal Person:**
possible indicators of medicine men/ritualist/shaman and also likely a key supernatural deity (the mistress or master of the animals)



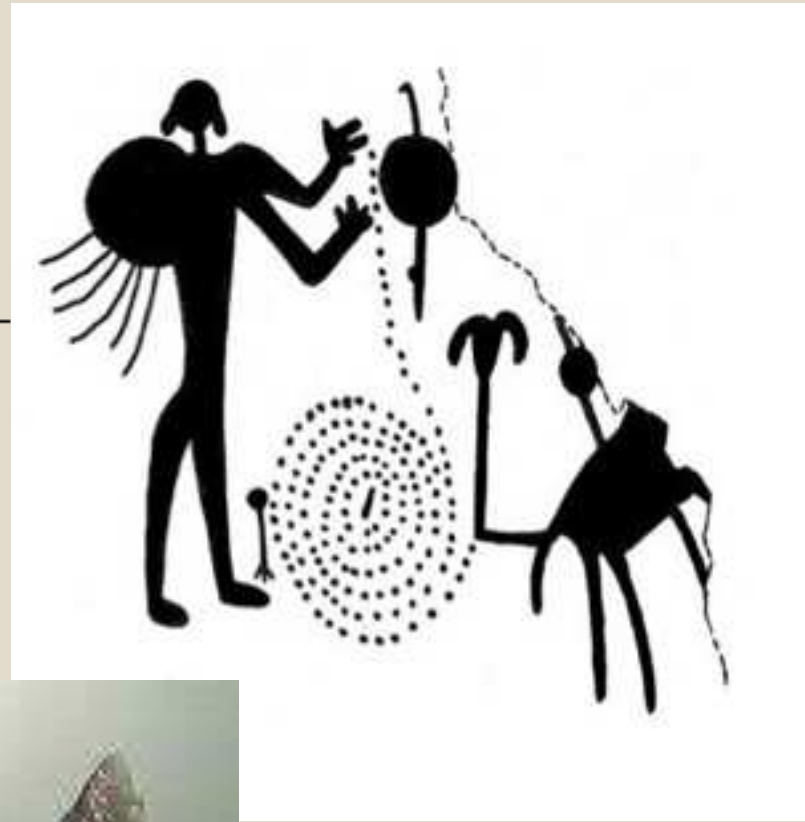
Cultural Scenario: Newberry Period, ca 4,000 BP

✦ **Intensive hunting** of bighorn sheep by dart and spear throwers atlatl, with Elko and Humboldt projectile points

✦ **Population** increase puts pressure on resources

✦ **Rock art** shows **Classic Coso sheep** images

◆ Increase rites, hunting magic



**Cultural Scenario:
Haiwee Period,
ca 1,600 BP**



- ✦ **Bow and arrow introduced ca 2000 BP**
- ✦ **Bow-hunting with dogs** depleted sheep herds
- ✦ Intensified production of **Coso Sheep images** to revive the herds
- ✦ **Period of Classic Coso rock art ends at a time of epic drought** - Medieval Climatic Anomaly ca.1000 to 600 BP

Cultural Scenario: Late Prehistoric, <600 BP

✦ **Climate again wetter**
and generally similar to
today

✦ **Decrease in number of
sites**, Black glass trading
stops, obsidian quarrying
ceases,

◆ Introduction of “green-
cone” pinyon processing

✦ **Rock art** production
confined to scratching,
and later historic pecked
and painted images



Varied Interpretations of the Coso Petroglyphs

✦ A number of major theories:

- ◆ Picture writing
- ◆ Hunting magic
- ◆ Shamanic vision quests
- ◆ Social identity and bound
- ◆ Increase rites
- ◆ Part of “show-off hunting
- ◆ Storyboard



✦ No theory accounts for all images - **humans have varied motives.**

✦ **All symbols have multiple meanings.**



What *is* Rock Art?

✦ To ancient peoples, **art was integral with life***

- ◆ Deep roots

- ◆ Expressed group identity and solidarity, created meaning and security in a hostile world

✦ Rock art is “art” in this anthropological sense

* Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus*

Preserving the Coso Rock Art: Why Should We Care?

- ✦ Greatly **important to Native people** - legacy of the past.
- ✦ Prehistoric sites are fragile, **irreplaceable** resources
- ✦ They are **scientific treasures** and **time capsules** into the lives of those who came before us.
- ✦ They tell a story of **sustainable lifeways in a hostile environment.**



Why should we care?



- ✦ They tell of **culture crisis** - demise of a vibrant culture that existed for thousands of years.
- ✦ *Perhaps there are lessons here?*
- ✦ We find the images **haunting, mysterious, delightful and inspiring.**
- ✦ Coso is the 5th most popular place to visit in all of California, and -
- ✦ **This is the oldest art in California.**

This presentation has been
sponsored by the California
Rock Art Foundation



discover
document
honor
protect





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The Problem

- Most of the general public has no idea of the existence, value, and importance of California's rich record of prehistoric art and religion.
- Because of this lack of knowledge and understanding, many see rock art as simply old graffiti and feel it is completely acceptable to paint over, engrave their names, post pornographic pictures, vandalize and even steal these images.



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The Opportunity



- California (both alta and baja) has one of the world's richest rock art records. . .
- Also exhibits one of most diverse and abundant records of prehistoric rock art in the world.



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What we can do



- Through the California Rock Art Foundation, we are raising public awareness of this irreplaceable record of our prehistory . . .
- . . . and hope that through inspiring films such as Talking Stone, organized trips to rock art sites, education, research, outreach, and fundraising support we can protect and preserve California's oldest art.

Questions?

