

# Religious Symbolism in Eastern California Ghost Dance Rock Paintings



Alan Garfinkel, Ph.D., RPA, AGG Associates, California Rock Art Foundation, Rock Art 101

Geron Marcom, Independent Rock Art Researcher

Donald Austin, Sand Carved Designs, Rock Art 101



# Eastern California Ghost Dance Paintings

- ♦ In eastern California, there exists a number of multicolored (black, red, white, yellow, orange, and pink), historic Native American rock paintings that have been documented (20+ individual sites).
- ♦ Some of these sites are extraordinarily rich in imagery (including an extensive array of naturalistic or representational elements).
- ♦ These paintings are different than most other Numic paintings.
- ♦ Numic rock paintings are predominantly monochromatic, red, abstract imagery (as has been pointed out in the oft cited, landmark article on Numic population movements in American Antiquity by Bettinger and Baumhoff 1982).



# Eastern California Ghost Dance Paintings

- ◆ The Ghost Dance paintings often have a large number of individual elements (20 to 100+ individual images) (Garfinkel et al. 2006).
- ◆ Recent work by Stoffle and his students has continued to illuminate this subject.
- ◆ Ghost Dance Paintings occur most frequently in rock shelters and small caves.
- ◆ These sites date to a relatively recent historic Native-Euroamerican contacts - ca. AD 1870 to 1900.



# Eastern California Ghost Dance Paintings



- ◆ These rock art sites contain generally similar classes of images.
- ◆ The paintings are geographically confined within Great Basin Paiute Shoshone territory, known as the Numa.
- ◆ We favor hypotheses that these pictures refer to and symbolize key elements of Numa cosmology and central themes of Ghost Dance religion (Hittman 1990, 2014; Vander 1997).

# 1870 and 1890 Ghost Dance Religion: the Essentials



- ◆ The Ghost Dance movements were revitalistic or millennial expressions (crisis rites).
- ◆ Central theme was that if Natives danced (the round or circle dance) the world would return to its natural unharmed state.
- ◆ The vast majority of anthropologists believe that the purpose of the dancing was to bring back the dead (Native people and animals).
- ◆ The world would then return to the way it was before Euro-americans introduced their devastating diseases and destructive habits that almost destroyed the Native Great Basin people.
- ◆ A new heaven on earth.
- ◆ There were strong elements of rain shamanism, a theme of resurrection, eagle feather metaphor, and white horse oral tradition inter-fingered into Ghost Dance lore.

# Eastern California Ghost Dance Paintings



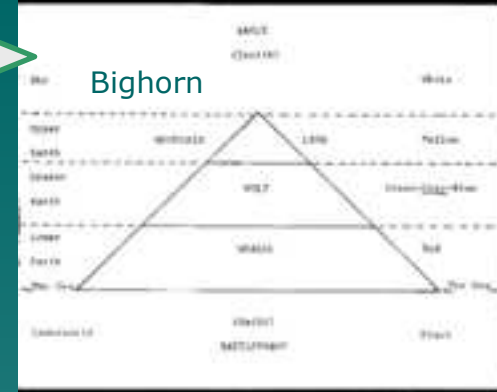
- ◆ These rock paintings have kept our attention for some 30 years.
- ◆ Given new technology (d-stretch, computer aided color enhancements, deconstruction of superimposition, and color sequencing), some of the deeper meanings might be revealed.
- ◆ The illumination has come from intense literature study and improved physical documentation.

# Ghost Dance Paintings and Numic Cosmology

## Brief Overview



# Numic Cosmology: Brief Overview - The Zenith

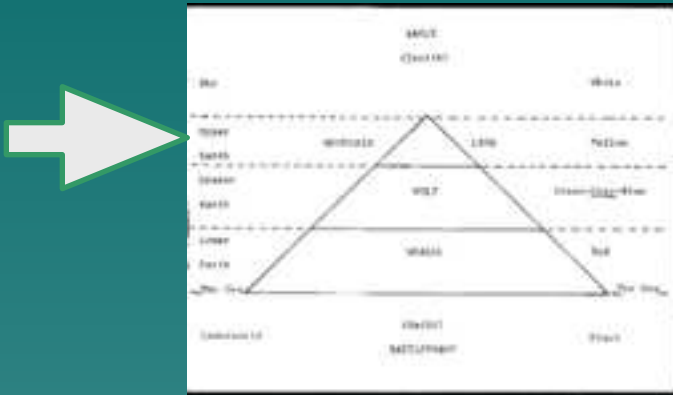


- ◆ Numic cosmology relates to a tiered cosmos.
- ◆ There are five major strata linked with animal-person shamanic supernaturals (Goss 1972; Vander 1997).
- ◆ The mountain tops and highest heights relate to a stratum up in the sky domain that is home for the eagle, thunderbird and bighorn sheep.
- ◆ It is metaphorically associated with the eagle animal person - shamanistic master of this domain - of mountain tops and sky.
- ◆ Also the bighorn - the animal person shaman master of all big game animals.
- ◆ This strata is represented and associated with the color white and with sky elements that are white including snow, fog, smoke, clouds, eagle feathers, the white rumps of bighorn, and the white horse.
- ◆ This is the zenith of the Numa cosmology and considered the most sacred of all of these domains.
- ◆ This is also the celestial kingdom where rain, thunder and lightning originates.





# Numic Cosmology: Upper Earth

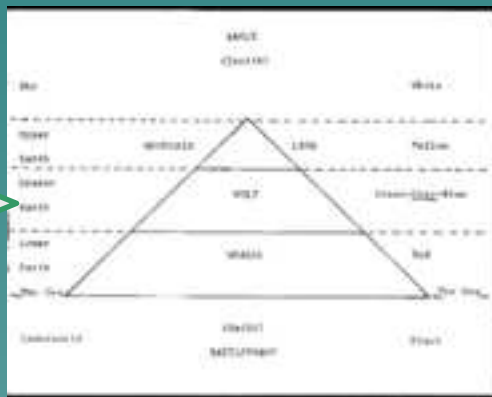


- ◆ The second stratum is upper earth.
- ◆ It is associated with the color yellow.
- ◆ It is represented by the animal-person shamanic personage and master of the upper earth domain - the mountain lion.

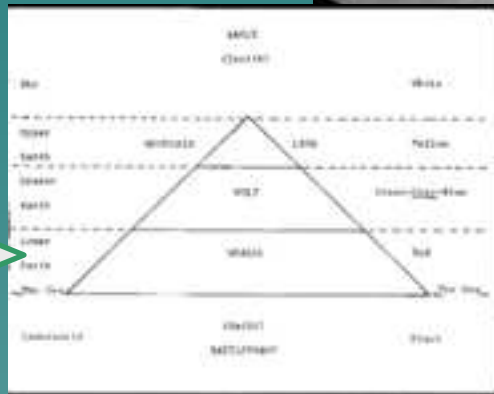
# Numic Cosmology: Center Earth



- ◆ The third stratum is center earth.
- ◆ It is associated with the colors green-gray-blue.
- ◆ It is ruled by the animal-person, shamanic supernatural and master of this domain group - the coyote.



# Numic Cosmology: Lower Earth

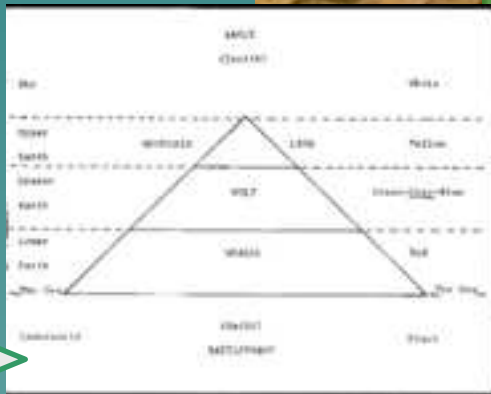


- ◆ The fourth stratum is lower earth.
- ◆ It is associated with the animal-person shamanic supernatural and master of this domain - the weasel and the color red.
- ◆ Importantly, this is the home of the Native Great Basin people on the land's surface - the terrestrial world.
- ◆ The color red represents life and joy to the Numa.
- ◆ It also is a metaphor for the soil of the earth and the good and joyous elements of Great Basin Paiute-Shoshone life. Red is recognized as a powerful color useful in healing.

# Numic Cosmology: The Underworld



- ◆ The fifth and final stratum is the underworld.
- ◆ It is associated with the animal-person shaman supernatural and master of the underworld - the rattlesnake.
- ◆ This is the bottom or nadir and black is the color metaphor here.
- ◆ Black is representative of death, darkness, and war.
- ◆ The animals associated with this domain act as guardians (quail, chuckwalla, desert tortoise and water turtle) for the portals to the supernatural world that can be accessed from this domain.
- ◆ These are all “liminal” animals that live in and occupy two domains.



# Eastern California Ghost Dance Paintings

Cowboy hat

Gun?

Cowboy hat



- ◆ The Numic Ghost Dance rock paintings contain a recurrent image inventory that includes:
  - ◆ Men on horseback, some with western style "cowboy" hats and other figures with guns. They are almost always rendered in white or black.
  - ◆ Guns are important because of the Ghost Dance belief of invulnerability from bullets - also the sound of rifle fire was metaphorically equivalent to thunderclaps.
  - ◆ We think these represent the dead or the resurrected spirits.
  - ◆ The central figure at the Panamint City painting which contains over 100 elements is a person holding the reins of a white horse. The reins were only recently identified with d-stretch.



# Eastern California Ghost Dance Paintings

- ♦ White horses are prominent in Ghost Dance lore and are a key element in the 1890 Ghost Dance, Wovoka vision and related oral traditions (Hittman 1990)
- ♦ Bighorn sheep, deer, and other animals appear to us to be depicted because of the expectation to bring back the animals through sympathetic magic and resurrection.



# Eastern California Ghost Paintings



Thunderbird

Bow and arrow persons, dart and atlatl impaled animals.

- ◆ Thunderbirds represent sky, weather, (rain, thunder, lightning) and power (*puha* or *buha*).
- ◆ They are a metaphor for abundance, fertility, strength and fecundity - earth renewal.
- ◆ Hunting scenes - note the atlatl like spears... (the latter we conclude are an evident copying of earlier iconography and a hearkening back to earlier renditions of atlatls).
- ◆ This relates to reaching back for a return to earlier periods and ancient ways.



Thunderbird

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# Eastern California Ghost Dance Paintings



- ◆ Collections of Natives holding hands and wearing feathers in their hair and connecting in a linear or a ring-like fashion. Always rendered in black or white.
- ◆ We suggest these are Ghost Dancers (evolution of the Round or Circle Dance). Resurrected from the Underworld (Black = death and underworld) and sacred and religiously powerful spirits (White = sacred, holy, powerful, strong).
- ◆ These are Natives sometimes with eagle feathers in their hair (compare the drawing during the early expression of the dance ca. 1890 with the Native rock painting).





# Sexual and Reproductive Symbolism

- ◆ Foragers link human and animal sexuality and further associate human reproduction and hunting success with game animal fertility.
- ◆ Men's large game hunting in the Great Basin was frequently understood as equivalent to a woman's giving birth (Hays-Gilpin 2000; Potter 2004)
- ◆ Bows, arrows and spears are included in a class of "**male-gendered tools of fertility**" and closely connected to the male role – successful hunter and key subsistence provider.



# Sexual and Reproductive Symbolism

- ◆ Testifying to this metaphoric conflation is the near **synonymy of the Great Basin terms for arrow and penis** (Crapo 1976; Lowie 1909)
- ◆ Numic creation stories have women associated with meat – to reach sexual maturity a boy needed to kill big game (Myers 1997).
- ◆ Western Shoshone myths indicate Coyote achieves manhood and marries by slaying a mountain sheep (Garfinkel and Austin 2011).





# Tale of the Tails



- ◆ One of the least impressive bighorn elements is their tails
- ◆ Eastern California Coso rock art has greatest abundance of bighorn sheep images in the Great Basin.
- ◆ About 74% of these images have tails – why?
- ◆ Most researchers agree that this conventionalized tail posture is a significant stylistic attribute.
- ◆ Coso research indicates that bighorn rock drawings have tails raised up parallel to the ground or rached towards the sky and are very, very rarely directed down towards the ground (less than one-tenth of one percent)...

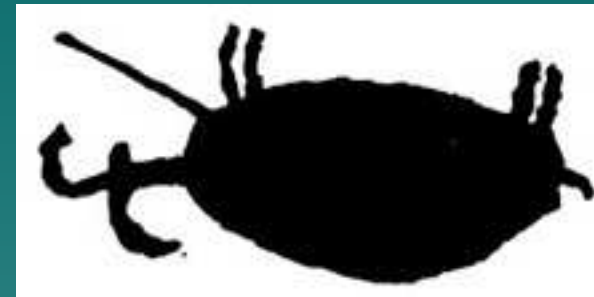
# Van Slyke and White Experiment

- ♦ Van Slyke and White (Van Tilberg et al. 2012) reviewed 1000 pictures of living bighorn and found that none had elevated tails.
- ♦ Wildlife biologists study the behavior of contemporary bighorn sheep bands and large animal veterinarians know habits of domestic sheep that parallel wild sheep etiology.
- ♦ They confirm sheep tail up posture is a biological symbol of ewes during estrus communicating to rams that they are open and willing to procreate. It is called "flagging".
- ♦ This estrus sign includes:
  - ♦ Seeking out the ram and standing to be mounted
  - ♦ Rapid tail movement
  - ♦ Raised tail in the presence of the ram
  - ♦ Standing still when being mounted
- ♦ Anthropologists argue that upraised tails in rock pictures are metaphors and signals for sexual receptivity....

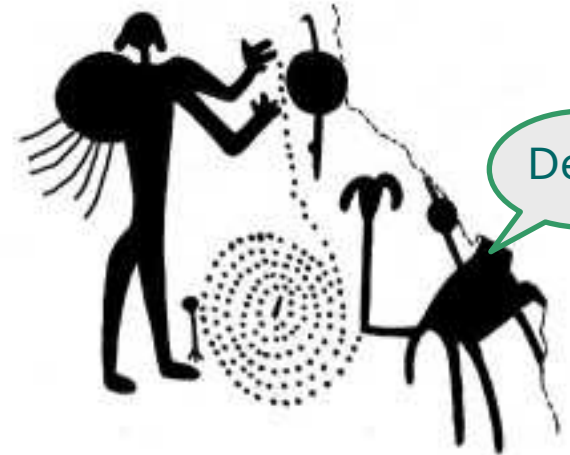


# Tails Down Sheep in the Cosos

- ◆ When we identify tails down sheep in the Coso Range locality we find only three instances ( $n = 3$ ) of this tail down posture.
- ◆ In each instance the sheep are always portrayed as dead or dying.
- ◆ Only three images (that we are aware of) in the thousands of sheep images in the Coso Range display tails down.



Dead



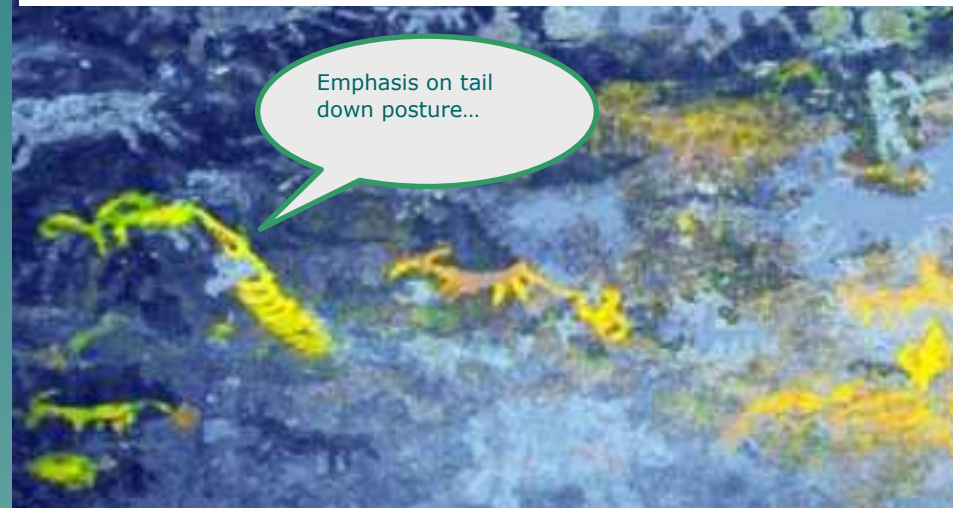
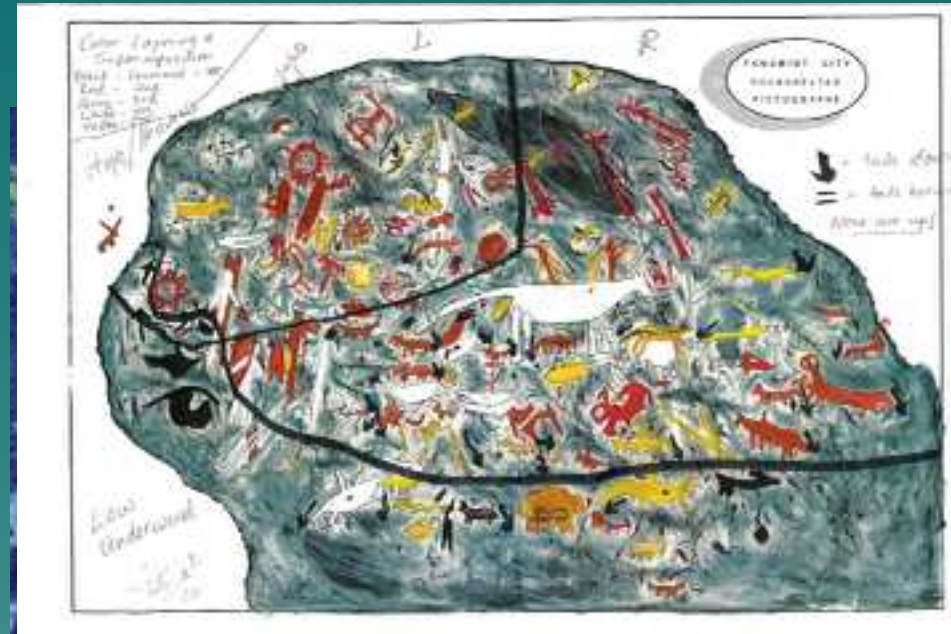
Dead



Dying

# Tails Down Sheep and Other Animals in Ghost Dance Rock Paintings

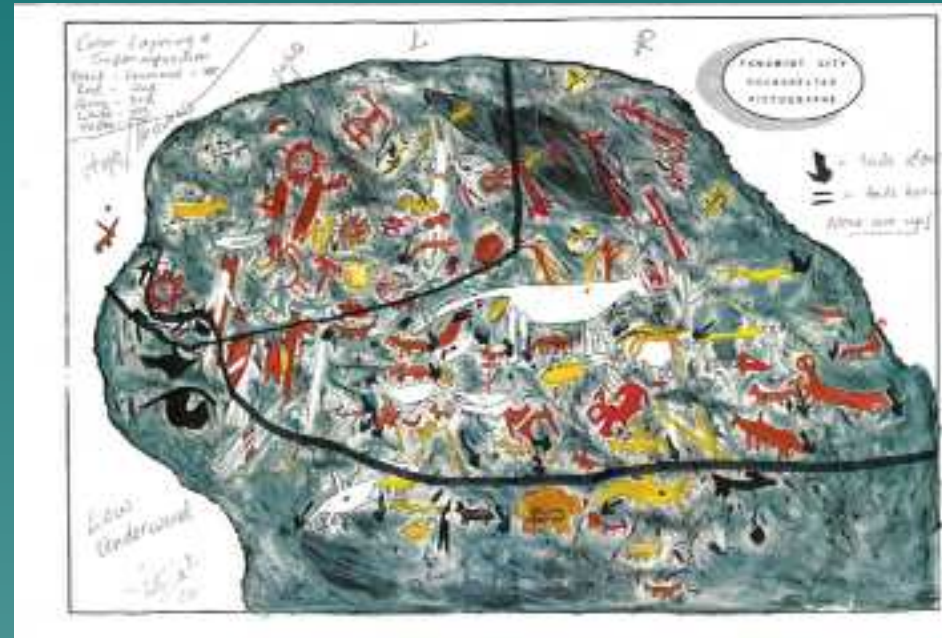
- ◆ Please excuse the rough and ready analysis of the Panamint City painting.
- ◆ One of the remarkable revelations that we recognized is that almost every animal having a tail is in a downwards posture. Some even emphatically so!
- ◆ Those little black arrows are my attempt to show you the direction of tails.
- ◆ We think this represents animals that are recently dead, have come from the underworld and as such relate to the concept of resurrection and rebirth that was so important to the Numic - both for the Ghost Dance but also Numa religion.



Emphasis on tail down posture...

# Ghost Dance Rock Paintings

- ◆ Additionally, if you will look closely you will see some interesting spatial structuring overall (top to bottom).
- ◆ But also perhaps as a function of the sequence of how the colors were laid down.
- ◆ The topmost portion of the picture includes the Thunderbird, and the red and yellow sun symbols. Elements of the Sky world and uppermost domain.
- ◆ Hultkrantz, Fowler and Liljeblad tell us that Thunder was considered the younger brother of the Sun deity of the Numic (Hittman 1997:179).
- ◆ The lowermost realm has a concentration of dark black elements around the periphery or outermost ring of the picture.
- ◆ The middle of the picture is a mix of red, yellow and white.
- ◆ Significantly the layering of the imagery appears to emphasize that the topmost and latest additions to the painted images are a plethora of both yellow and white elements. The mid range appears to be dominated by red and the lowermost - underlying the other layers may have been black.
- ◆ The latter spatial and superimpositioning mimics in a general and in a very specific manner the Numic color cosmological domain model.



# Ghost Dance Rock Paintings

- ♦ In summary we would suggest that:
- ♦ Ghost Dance Paintings in eastern California depict elements of Numic cosmology and Ghost Dance religion.
- ♦ They do this through subject matter.
- ♦ The use of color.
- ♦ Through certain animal attributes (direction of their tails).
- ♦ Also by spatial ordering and through the sequence of color superimposition.
- ♦ It is worth revisiting these remarkable paintings as they are not finished sharing the key tenants of Native thought and have a special blessing to bestow on those who have the patience and perseverance to continue to probe their mysteries.





# Credits and Acknowledgments

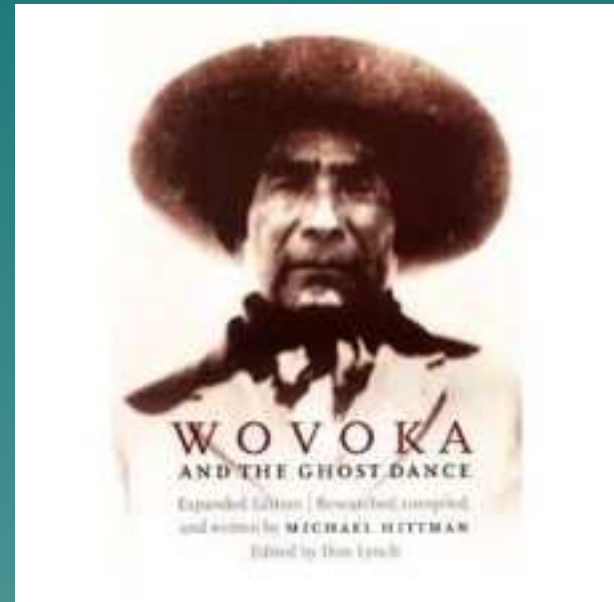
The photographs included in this presentation were captured by several gifted photographers:

The majority are the works of Guy Starbuck, Geron Marcom, and Donald V. Austin.

D-stretch Imaging was accomplished through the use of Jon Harmon's remarkable custom program. We are very grateful for his ingenuity and imaging talents. Other images were located throughout my research on many unnamed, on-line and archival sources.

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Also let me acknowledge my new found friendship with a dean of Ghost Dance Religious Studies, Michael Hittman, who added a whole new layer and perspective on my research.



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