

A Case of Mistaken Identity: Shield Bearing Warriors On the Northwestern Plains

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ABSTRACT

Archaeologists have debated the ethnic or tribal affiliation of the shield bearing warrior rock art motif since the 1950s. Much of the discussion has occurred independently of the development of anthropological ethnicity theory. This paper reviews the approaches employed by various scholars in assigning affiliations to these figures and examines the content of rock art through generally held anthropological views regarding the nature of ethnic identity.

Shield bearing warriors are a distinctive rock art motif which depict an individual carrying or hiding behind a large circular shield which obscures the majority of their body. Often the head and feet are exposed and hands and weapons are occasionally depicted. In many cases the figures wear horned headdresses, probably representative of bison hunting. Another possibly related rock art motif include circular designs thought to represent shields but which do not show an individual. These designs are thought to be much more common in Wyoming rather than in Alberta or Montana. Occasionally, these shields are later retouched and a figure is depicted behind the shield to create a shield bearing warrior.

Shield bearing warriors demonstrate a variety of techniques in their manufacture, including pecked, incised and painted forms. Occasionally, combinations of techniques are used. These figures are widely distributed throughout Western North America and extend from Alberta south into New Mexico and Texas and from western Nevada to central Kansas (Figure 1). Within this large distribution, several areas are known for comparatively high concentrations of shield figures, including the Fremont area of Eastern Utah, ventral Montana, and eastern and central Wyoming. While not the most common motif at these locations, there are also high concentrations of shield bearers along the Northern Rio Grande in New Mexico and along the Milk River in southern Alberta.

With new advances in the dating of rock art (Francis, et. al. 1993) and the development of Plains chronological sequences, questions regarding the origin and diffusion of these figures may soon be resolved. However, discussions regarding the cultural affiliation of these figures will likely still remain. This question of affiliation is an important one, as it has far reaching ramifications about the way we as archaeologists view past societies.

Much of the early discussion regarding these figures involved data from the Northern Plains and Great basin. H.M. Wormington (1955) was the first to acknowledge the similarity between shield figures found

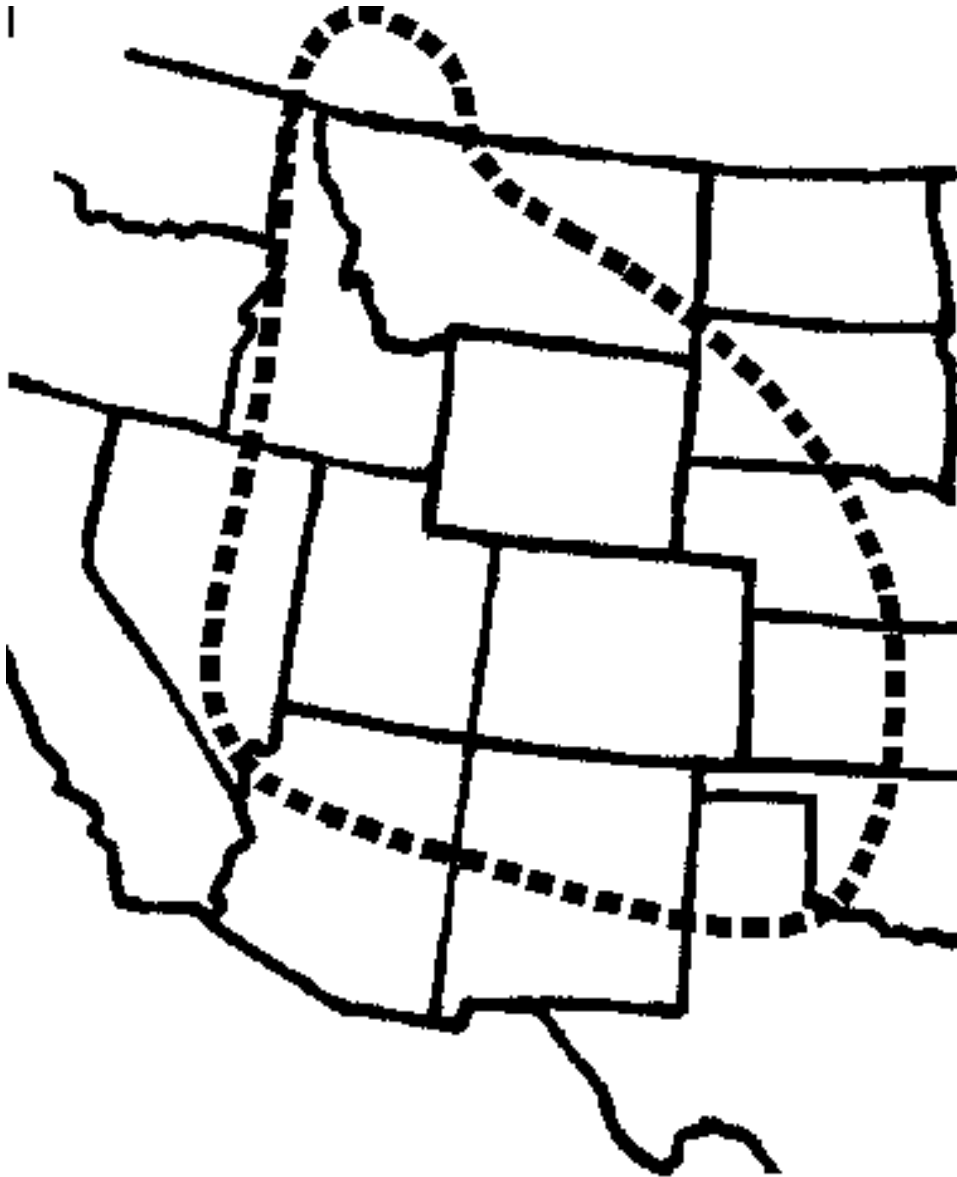


Figure 1. Map showing the distribution of the Shield Bearing Warrior Motif.

in the Fremont area and similar anthropomorphs found on the Northern Plains (Figure 2). These similarities were also discussed in William Mulloy's (1958) influential monograph on Pictograph Cave, Montana, which also included illustrations of several shield figures. However, it was always assumed that this similarity represented some kind of interaction, possibly related to trade, and did not suggest that they were made by individuals of the same generalized group. Instead, the Fremont were commonly assumed to be closely related to southwestern Anasazi groups.

One of the most popular theories about the cultural origins of shield bearing warriors involves the Shoshone. Gunnerson (1962) originally argued that the Fremont and the Virgin Anasazi were both Uto-Aztecan speakers possibly related to the later Shoshone. While he does not specifically mention shield figures in his argument, Fremont rock art including shield bearers would likely have been attributed to Uto-Aztecan speakers. Keyser (1975, 1977, 1979) has argued that shield bearing warriors were made by the Shoshone, and that the distribution of shield bearers coincides with the Numic expansion out of the

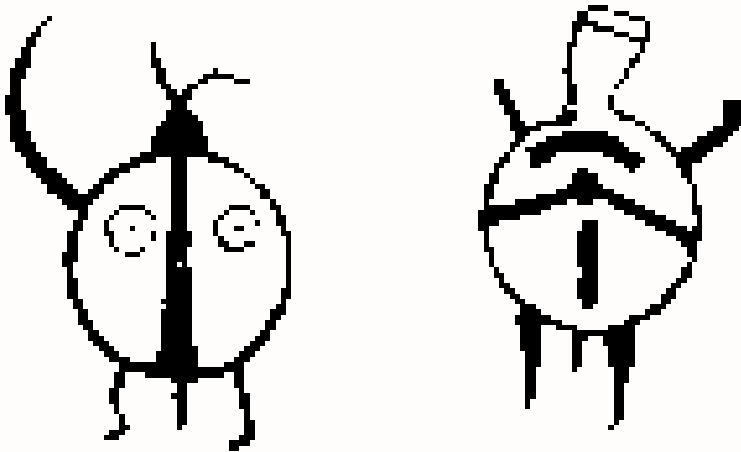


Figure 2. Shield bearing figures from Wormington (1955).

Great Basin. However, he departs from Gunnerson in his belief that the Fremont were not Uto-Aztecan speakers. Instead, he suggests that the Shoshone might have obtained the motif through interaction, presumably warfare, with the Fremont on the way to the Northern Plains. Furthermore, he argues that this borrowing represents a modification of preexisting Shoshone circular rock art forms, not an adoption of an entirely new motif (Keyser 1975:211). Shield figures from the Southern Plains are explained as the work of the Comanche, who split from the Northern Shoshone in southern Wyoming during the Protohistoric Period and migrated to the Southern Plains (Bamforth 1989:91). Shield bearing warrior figures found on rock art panels in western and central Colorado have been attributed to historic Utes (Cole 1990:241).

Several lines of evidence have been put forth which clearly suggest Shoshone use of the motif. Not only is the distribution of shield bearing warriors thought to coincide exactly with historic accounts of Shoshone territory but also with the distribution of steatite vessels, flat bottomed pots and tubular pipes, all of which are material traits associated with the Shoshone historically. The high density of shield bearing warrior pictographs in Northeastern Utah and south central Montana were long occupied Shoshone territories (Keyser 1975:213). Additionally, three sites in the Northwestern Plains recovered material thought to be Shoshone in origin in the vicinity of shield bearing warrior rock art: Horned Owl Cave, Pictograph Cave, and the Kobold Site (Keyser 1975:210-211). While problems exist in correlating stratified deposits with rock art panels, these sites clearly suggest a possible association.

Additionally, other researchers (Gebhart 1966, Schuster 1987) have demonstrated that shield figures are depicted on historic painted buffalo hides associated with the historic Shoshone and Comanche, leaving little doubt that they made use of the motif historically. One such mounted shield bearer, found on a hide painting ascribed to the Comanche, bears a striking resemblance to an incised petroglyph found in Southern Wyoming (Figure 4). This evidence, in addition to the distribution and archaeological data, strongly suggests a relationship between Uto-Aztecan speakers and the shield bearing warrior motif.

Other researchers have also adopted the Shoshone hypothesis. Sundstrom (1990) has argued that the reason why so few shield figures are found in the Black Hills is because the Shoshone spent very little

time there. Schuster (1987) claims to recognize problems with correlating rock art with ethnic groups, but then suggests that only the older looking pecked shield bearing warrior figures should be considered Shoshone/Comanche in origin (Schuster 1987:35). The enormous popularity of the Uto-Aztecan hypothesis can also be seen on numerous site forms that cite Keyser's (1975) influential article in their interpretations.

There are also numerous lines of evidence suggesting an Athabaskan origin and use of the motif. Aikens (1966) originally argued that the proto-Fremont people were bison hunters who migrated from the Northwestern Plains, probably Athabaskans. They expanded westward and southward into Utah at approximately A.D. 500. Aikens used the shield bearing warrior as well as the presence of tipi rings as part of his evidence to suggest that the Promontory Culture as defined by Steward (1937) was actually an invading group from the Plains which adopted certain aspects of southwestern culture, including pottery, architecture and horticulture, through interaction with Anasazi groups (Aikens 1966:207).

Additionally, other researchers have also suggested an Athabaskan origin of the motif. Loendorf (1990) obtained two AMS dates of 950 ± 80 b.p. and 870 ± 80 b.p. from pigments found on an abrader which was excavated below a panel of shield bearing warriors at the Valley of the Shields Site in central Montana. If Madsen's (1975) date of AD 1500 for a Numic expansion into southern Montana is correct, this date would precede Shoshone occupation of the area by 200-400 years (Loendorf 1990:46). However, while this fact might discredit the Shoshone hypothesis, it does not imply that their makers were Athabaskan speakers. Schlesier (1994) has argued that the Promontory Culture was related to the Beehive Complex, which occurs along the border of Montana and Wyoming. Common artifacts associated with the Beehive Complex include a specific variant of Avonlea projectile points, which Greiser (1994) has argued as representative of the Athabaskan migration. An Avonlea point was recovered beneath a shield bearing warrior petroglyph in Chindi Rockshelter in Golden Valley County, Montana, thus providing some archaeological evidence to support this hypothesis (Conner and Conner 1971:15-16).

The Beehive Complex has been attributed to ancestral Kiowa Apaches or possibly ancestral Kiowas. While the Kiowa are best known from the Southern Plains, oral tradition states that their people originally lived near the headwaters of the Yellowstone River in the vicinity of Virginia City, Montana (Mooney 1898). This tradition holds that they were later driven out of the area and migrated to the Black Hills, from which they subsequently migrated south after being driven out of the area by the Sioux. The presence of shield bearing warriors in both central Montana and the Black Hills has been used to support a Kiowan hypothesis (Loendorf 1990:51).

Despite the fact that a date of AD 1100 corresponds closely with the presumed dates of the Athabaskan migration, there are several problems with this model as well. While an Avonlea projectile point was recovered in the immediate vicinity of a shield-bearing warrior, there are few shield bearer rock art sites north of the Missouri River and few Avonlea points found south of the river (Greiser 1994:41). Another problem is that the earliest absolute date for a shield-bearing warrior is approximately AD 1100, which is around the presumed terminal date for the manufacture of Avonlea points.

One of the greatest problems concerning this hypothesis is the lack of delineation between the Kiowa and the Kiowa Apache. I feel that this is in part due to the close alliance of these two groups originating sometime in the Protohistoric Period. While these models do narrow the possible candidates for the manufactures of shield bearers, they fall short of explaining their ultimate origins. The Kiowa Apache are Athabaskan speakers, while the Kiowa speak a form of Tewa. It is interesting to note that the Kiowa represent the only Tewan speaking group not found along the Northern Rio Grande of New Mexico at the time of contact and that this region contains numerous examples of shield bearing figures in the Galisteo and Pecos basins. It has also been suggested that the Kiowa developed from ethnohistorically defined Jumanos in Western Texas and Oklahoma who migrated to the Northern Plains and then later returned

south (Hickerson 1996).

It is difficult to explain how the Kiowa might have originated in Montana if their language is clearly rooted in the Southwest. One possibility is that small bands of Tewan speakers migrated to the Northern Plains sometime before European contact and underwent some process(es) of social and political reorganization which ultimately resulted in the Kiowa Nation. Thus, Kiowa oral traditions regarding their origins may refer to a past social and political transformation. Numerous Kiowa place names exist in northern and central Montana, and Blackfeet oral tradition also places them on the Northern Plains. Kiowa presence in the Black Hills has also been well documented through ethnographic sources.

Other researchers have focused on a possible Southwestern origin of the motif. Gebhart (1966) argued that the motif originated in the Pecos Region of New Mexico between AD 1-1000 and then later spread to Utah and eventually to the Northern Plains. After reaching the Northern Plains, the motif diffused southward into the Southern Plains and Southwest (Gebhart 1966:730). Much of Gebhart's theory regarding the motif came from the comparative dating of artifacts found in association with rock art panels as well as the argument that the shield diffused into the United States from Mesoamerica, inferring that Southwestern groups were the first to own shields. Schaafsma (1971) has stated that "the problem of the earliest appearance of the shield motif in the rock art of the Fremont is still open to speculation in the absence of sound dating for its prehistoric occurrence on the Northern Plains. As the situation now stands, however, there is nothing to indicate an earlier Plains occurrence, and a Fremont source for the diffusion of the motif to the Northern Plains seems more likely". (Schaafsma 1971:143).

Later, she suggested that certain shield figures found in the Southwestern United States are a variant of Huizilopochtli, the Aztec god of war. The influence of this symbolism is thought not to have impacted the Southwest until around 1428 (Schaafsma 1980:298). However, she adds that shield bearers and war symbolism might have occurred prior to this date in the Jordana region, which is commonly associated archaeologically with the Mogollon Culture. If this is true, it suggests that the motif moved north through the rest of the Southwest. Grant (1978) has concluded that the shield motif entered the Kayenta Anasazi region from the east, possibly through Tsegi Canyon, at the end of the Great Pueblo Period (Grant 1978:213). While the motif was clearly used throughout the Anasazi region, as evidenced by figures found at such diverse sites as Canyon de Chelly and Mesa Verde (Figure 6), it was used only occasionally, and dates for these occurrences tend to be much later than those suggested for shield bearing warriors found in Utah and the Northern Plains. Shield figures from the Hopi mesas may have been manufactured by Tewan speaking refugees who were displaced by the Pueblo Revolt of 1680.

There have also been those who have argued that some shield bearing warriors, specifically those found at Writing-On-Stone in Southern Alberta, were made by the Blackfoot Indians who occupied the area historically. Barry (1991) has argued that the Blackfeet were their makers largely because the area is of sacred significance to them, and the results of Magne and Klaussen's (1991) quantitative study concluded that there is no reason to assume that the makers of the Milk River rock art were not Blackfeet (Magne and Klaussen 1991: 415). Much of the discussion regarding Blackfeet use of the motif does not necessarily imply that they were the originators of the motif, but rather that they borrowed it from other groups. Also, while the Blackfeet proper were Algonquian speakers, the Sarsi, a component of the Blackfoot Confederacy, were Athabaskans, who may have acquired the shield bearer motif from other Athabaskan speakers.

While each of these hypotheses make a strong case for their respective positions, there are numerous problems associated with assigning prehistoric phenomena to historically defined groups. These problems can be summarized into three distinct categories: those which question the bounded reality of archaeologically defined groups, those which question the bounded reality of tribal (ethnic) units, and those which question the correlating of archaeologically defined cultures with existing tribal and ethnic

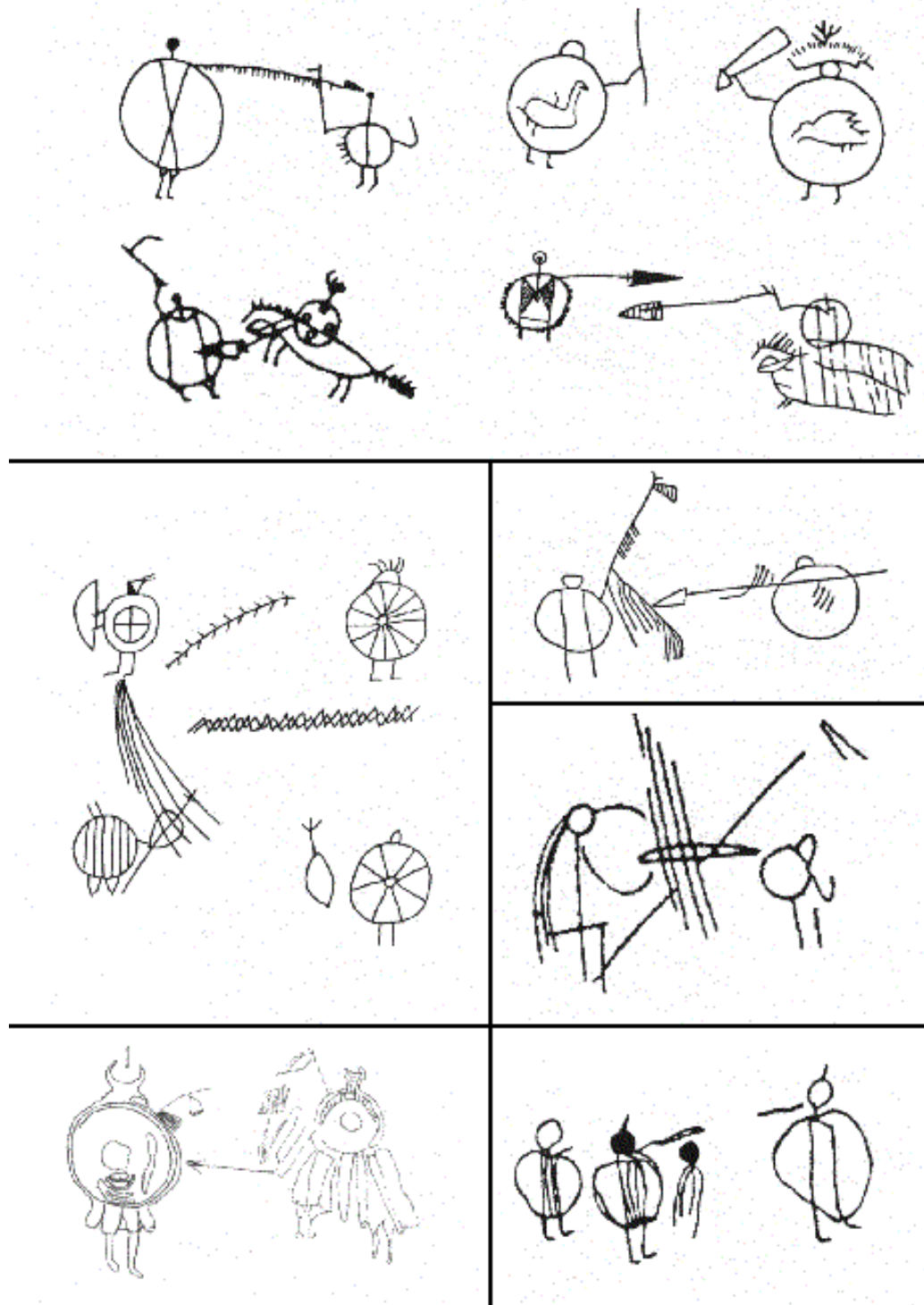


Figure 3. Depictions of shield bearing warriors apparently engaged in combat with other shield bearing warriors. Top row: Writing on Stone., After Keyser (1979); Center Left: 24FR2. After Secrist (1960). Center, Upper Right: Nordstrom-Bowen Site. After Lewis (1985); Center Lower Right: Wind River Drainage. After Stewart (1995). Bottom Left: Geoffena Rockshelter. After Lewis (1992). Bottom Right: Grinvoll Rockshelter. After Conner and Conner (1971). Not to scale.

groups. Archaeologically defined cultures consist of a generalized material assemblage and locational patterning within a given range of variation. Examples of archaeologically defined cultures include the Mogollon Culture of the Southwest and the Hopewell Culture of the Eastern United States. The bounded reality of archaeological types has been discussed in detail (Spaulding 1953, 1954, Ford 1954a, 1954b), and much of the same conclusions are evident in the reality of archaeologically defined groups: that either archaeologically defined cultures existed and had meaning to prehistoric people or else they are arbitrary distinctions imposed on the data by the archaeologist.

There is a general tendency for archaeologists to use the discussions about origins to make claims about the ethnic identity of shield makers. Thus, anyone finding a shield bearing warrior figure can then classify that area as having at one time been occupied by members of a specific group. This assumes that shield figures were made by the same cultural group over the course of 1,000 years of popularity. Even if it were possible to state with certainty which cultural group first made shield bearing warriors, there would be no reason to assume that they were the sole users of the motif. Keyser (1975) has consistently argued that shield bearers represent Uto-Aztecan groups on the Plains, even though they did not develop the motif themselves but rather borrowed it from the Fremont (Keyser 1975:214). If the Shoshone borrowed the motif from the Fremont through warfare, it should be equally plausible that other groups might have borrowed it under similar kinds of conditions.

Another serious problem with identifying ethnicity through the use of archaeology is that ethnic groups do not easily lend themselves to bounded classification. Rather, many anthropologists have recognized that ethnicity contains both a self image and a public image which are both directly related to how people classify themselves and how they are classified by others (Jenkins 1997:59). Additionally, many individuals have more than one group to which they are affiliated. As well as being flexible, ethnicity is situational in that ethnic meaning is conveyed only when it is a useful way of classifying groups, either self or group identification (Jenkins 1997:14).

One of the greatest problems with assigning prehistoric phenomena to historically defined groups is that groups are constantly undergoing processes of demographic and political reorganization. John Moore's (1987) discussion of the formation of the Cheyenne Nation gives an excellent example of the process of continual reorganization which occurs in what are often perceived as distinct cultural groups. Other researchers, such as Sharrock (1974), have also demonstrated that what might superficially appear as bounded groups such as tribes or nations are in actuality composed of ethnically and socially distinct units within a larger whole. Through the processes of ethnogenesis, old groups reorganize to form new groups and that occasionally small groups with very different histories and languages are reformed into a single, larger group. Thus, it is unlikely that historically known groups existed a thousand years ago in the capacity that we know them today. This has serious repercussions for archaeologists in the development of models to reconstruct prehistoric group identities.

Thus, the model of ethnicity or identity used in this discussion is one which assumes that 1) ethnic meaning is communicated through symbolism in the material record, 2) that ethnic groups are open classes which are situational and not innate, and 3) that ethnic groups constantly undergo processes of reorganization. Beginning with these assumptions it is possible to examine rock art as a form of ethnic phenomena.

If we assume that the shield bearing warrior was inclusive to a single group, it must have differentiated their makers from other tribal groups. As an ethnic marker, the figures would have to express an explicit ethnic meaning to those inside as well as outside the group (Jones 1997:210-212). Under such a premise I would argue that shield figures could not have represented ethnic markers for three specific reasons: the lack of ethnic content in shield bearing warrior panels, the wide spatial and temporal distribution of the motif, and the varied archaeological and ethnographic evidence associated with shields and shield bearers.

One argument against the use of shield bearing warriors as ethnic markers comes from the content of the rock art itself. Some panels at Writing-On-Stone in Southern Alberta as well as other sites show pedestrian shield bearing warriors fighting with one another (Figure 3). Much of this evidence was used by Keyser (1979) to make inferences about the Plains warfare complex. If shield bearing warriors represent an ethnic marker, why are warriors and their enemies both displayed as shield bearing warriors? This contradicts much of what is currently thought about ethnic markers as a means of separating us versus them. If the presence of shield bearers holds ethnic meaning, whoever made them did not appear to have used them as a means to distinguish themselves from one another.

Some researchers might argue that this line of reasoning confuses content with style. Hypothetically, group A might always portray warriors as shield bearers while group B would portray warriors a different way. It could be argued that Group A would portray all individuals, regardless of affiliation, as shield bearers because such a style is symbolic of an ethnic identity. Thus, the style itself could be representative of the specific ethnic group regardless of who was being portrayed.

As tempting as this argument might sound, it contains several unsettling premises. If one group always portrayed warriors in the same manner they would have no means of differentiating between themselves and others in rock art depictions. If ethnic markers are by definition recognized both internally and externally, and all individuals were familiar with the ideological symbolism of other groups, it is interesting that they did not choose to differentiate between one another. I would argue that warfare complexes such as that proposed for the Plains tend to delineate a sharp contrast between individuals and their enemies and that the ideological reinforcement of violence toward another group involves the dehumanization of the enemy into the category of "other." Such an ideology places great emphasis on group difference as opposed to the commonality depicted on these panels

Additionally, cross-examination of content as a means of distinguishing specific groups is commonly applied in the examination of robes, hides and ledger art. The examination of how individuals view themselves and others has been applied by Gebhart (1966) and Schuster (1987) in establishing group identity in historic Plains art. While the subject matter in this paper is largely prehistoric, it is possible to use the same type of analysis to examine how their maker viewed themselves and others.

Another strategy to address this problem would be to argue that these depictions represent internal group conflict. However, numerous Plains researchers (Brooks 1993, Bettinger 1991) have shown that internal competition among hunter gathers is more likely to result in group fissioning or dispersal rather than the widespread warfare pattern seen on the Plains. It seems far more likely that many of these figures represent violence between individuals of two different groups and not internal conflict.

If one accepts that these figures represent conflict between groups and that they do possess ethnic symbolism, then it suggests that large shields were used by more than one group. The use of comparatively large shields among the Shoshone has been suggested by Malouf (1968) and used by various researchers to support the theory of Uto-Aztecans makers of the shield bearer motif (Schuster 1987:35). The presence of the motif on historic hides also suggests its use among Numic peoples. While Heitzer and Baumhoff (1962) report that Shoshone informants have claimed that they were not responsible for the motif, much of the archaeological and ethnographic records disputes this assertion. Merriwether Lewis provides an account of a Shoshone shield making ceremony in which the maker gave a feast for all adult males in the group. A pit was dug the size of the proposed shield and hot stones were placed inside. A circle was cut from the hide of a two year old bison male and stretched by hand over the stones. After removing the hair, the hide is passed among those in attendance who take turns trampling the hide with bare feet. After several days, the hide is returned to the owner and declared arrow proof by all of those who participated. It is suggested that this was the primary means by which shields developed

their spiritual powers (Lowie 1909:193).

Likewise, the significance of shield ceremonialism has been argued for the Kiowa and Kiowa Apache (Mooney 1898) and used in support of a Kiowa/Kiowa Apache origin of the shield bearer motif. The Kiowa were the only Plains group to incorporate shields as a central part of their version of the Sun Dance (Schlesier 1994:330). Loendorf and Conner (1993) have reinvestigated the Pectoral Shields, large round hides found in a dry cave in central Utah with hopes of assigning them to the Fremont, but with little success. However, they do provide evidence which suggests that large shields were a common Plains attribute, citing several ethnohistoric accounts to their use among numerous groups including the Blackfeet, Hidatsa and Crow (Loendorf and Conner 1993:222). This suggests that numerous Plains groups adopted the use of large, circular shields before the arrival of the horse. Rather than a specific trait possessed by a single group, large circular shields were commonly used by numerous Plains groups.

Furthermore, I would argue that the shield bearing warrior motif also represents a common Plains phenomena not limited to a single ethnic or cultural group. The problems associated with assigning a single cultural affiliation to this motif include the vast body of archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence suggesting that these figures were made by more than one group. Material thought to be representative of both Uto-Aztecs and Athabaskans has been found in stratified deposits adjacent to shield bearing warrior figures and both theories possess ethnographic and historical evidence to support them. Evidence that supports the theory of one ethnic group have generally been used as a means of discrediting competing hypotheses. The inclusive nature of previous studies surrounding the motif has created a barrier to a wider understanding of Plains social systems.

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