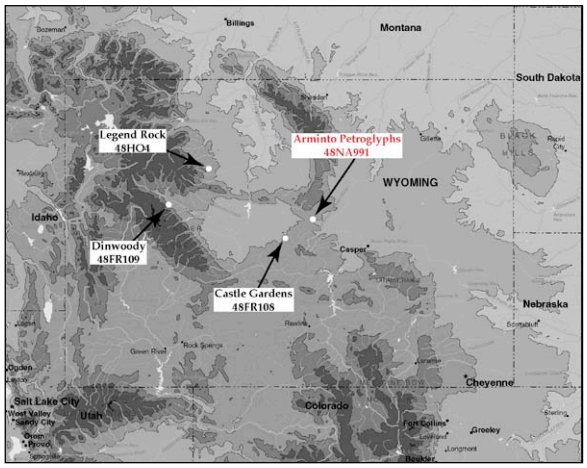
Armored Horses in Northwestern Plains Rock Art

Mavis Greer, Ph.D., and John Greer, Ph.D.

Paper Presented at the
67th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology
Denver, Colorado
March 2002

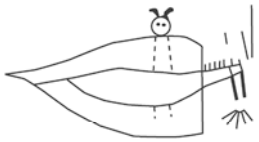
Armored horses are rarely recorded in Northwestern Plains rock art, and to date the literature contains only six sites with a total of eight of these figures in the region. Of these figures, two are in Wyoming at one site, two sites in Montana have one each, two sites in South Dakota have one each, and two are in Alberta at one site. Although few in absolute number, this distribution indicates that these figures are widespread and represented in all sections of the Northwestern Plains. In addition to this region, armored horses have been reported in the rock art of Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas suggesting that horse armor distribution probably corresponded to horse use on the Plains.

The Arminto Petroglyph site (photo to left) is the only one in Wyoming known to portray armored horses, although we have had a report of a site in the Big Horn Basin of Northwestern Wyoming that may have an armored horse, but we have not been able to confirm this to date.

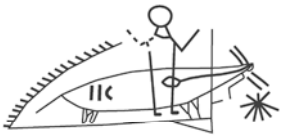


The map to the upper right shows the Arminto Petroglyphs relative to the well known Dinwoody, Legend Rock, and Castle Garden sites. The site is on one of several sandstone outcroppings in a valley setting (see photos above), which is highly dissected with ridges, eroded slopes, and benches. The sandstone outcroppings range from ground level exposures to a variety of shaped pinnacles, some of which form small

shelters. The site is not a prominent or unique location within this environmental setting, and it does not stand out. In fact, the site is noteworthy in that it blends in with the surrounding environment as one of many small pillars on the landscape, which is in contrast with many rock art sites that can be spotted from a distance because they are eye catching and distinct from the surrounding formations. In fact, the setting strongly suggests that these horses and riders were not placed at this location to announce any message to a large audience, but instead served a personal function possibly marking a camp location for the riders or simply illustrating their story for themselves or their immediate group. Although in an active gas field, the site has received minimal impact over the past few decades, which is probably due in large part to the obscureness of the site within the setting.



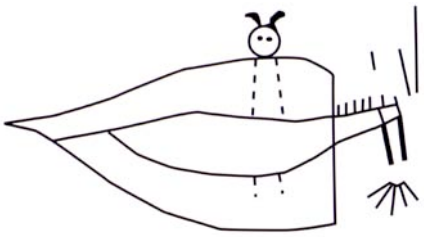
48NA991 Figure 2 Field Sketch



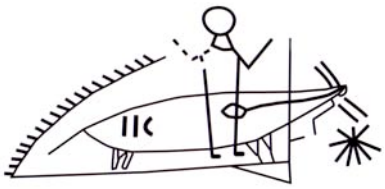
48NA991 Figure 3 Field Sketch

The armored horses are two of only five figures widely scattered at the Arminto site. The horses, however, are located side by side, both are facing east as if one is following the other, and there are a few faint lines below these two figures that we think were probably a third horse and rider that has eroded to such a degree it cannot be confirmed today.

Figure 2 is the least detailed of the two horses and riders but is still readily recognizable. The rider is depicted by a round head with round eyes situated above the armor. This rider wears a horned headdress, which is often portrayed on riders in biographic warfare scenes in Northwestern Plains rock art. The rider's body is simply displayed by two lines which indicate a rectangular form with two legs hanging below the horse to show he is riding. The horse is also a simple portrayal but is also readily recognizable by his body shape, tail, and mane. Additionally, the partial star-like pattern below the horse's mouth is drawn in enough detail to convey that this denotes the same thing shown below the mouth of the Figure 3 horse. And finally, the horse and rider are both protected by a large armor that covers their entire bodies and leaves only their heads exposed. This armor is depicted by a single outline with no interior decoration.

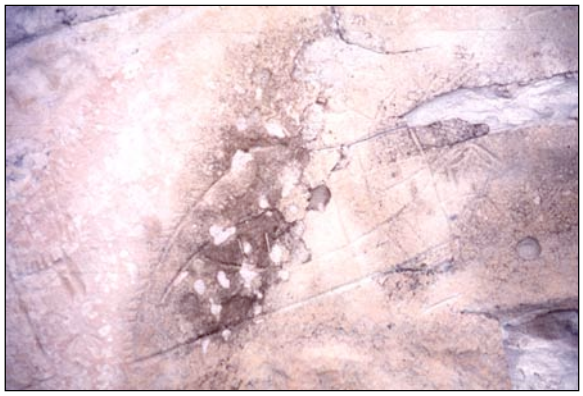


48NA991 Figure 2 Field Sketch



48NA991 Figure 3 Field Sketch

Figure 3 shows a rather simply depicted rider but a more complete horse. The rider has a rectangular body with a round head free of detail and no headdress. His arms are upraised, and he has something at the base of his neck, which could be either indicating clothing or a necklace. His legs are an extension of his body and end in right pointing feet showing he is sitting forward on his horse. The horse is again recognizable by his body shape and tail, but the mane did not receive as much attention as the Figure 2 horse. However, this horse has all four legs and a heart line. On the rear flank of the horse are what appear to be symbols. The horse head is somewhat obscured by what may be a depiction of a decorated bridle. His head has a complete star-like pattern below it. Again both the horse and rider are covered with armor that is shown in outline form, although this armor is somewhat more detailed with fringe, feathers, or possibly even projecting menacing horns attached to the back.

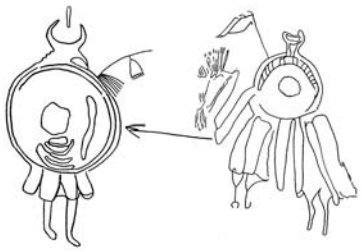


In the 1970s Jim Keyser published on two armored horses from Writing-on-Stone in southern Alberta. These are also mentioned in Keyser and Klassen's recent Plains Indian rock art book. One of these is similar to those at Arminto as it has full armor, covering the bodies of both the horse and rider. In contrast to the Arminto figures, both Writing-on-Stone riders have shield bodies, and both are shooting arrows. The horse armor is shown as full of hatched lines rather than in outline form, and the horses' feet extend below the armor.

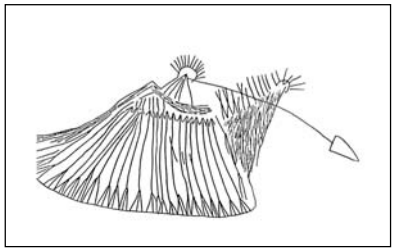
In the 1980s Keyser published on two more armored horses, these from the North Cave Hills in northwestern South Dakota. The photo on the left shows the armor, the rider on the horse, and the bridle extension. Like the Writing-on-Stone horses, these riders also have shields, and the horses' feet also protrude below the armored bodies. Like the Arminto figures, the riders have horned headdresses, and the horses have things tied on

their bridles. The photo on the right shows another example from the North Cave Hills. The armor on this one is fringed along the back like Figure 3 at Arminto.

Tom Lewis expanded the armored horse data base in the 1980s by reporting on a painted one in a rockshelter along the Musselshell River northwest of Billings. Like the Writing-on-Stone and Cave Hills armored horses, the one on the Musselshell has a rider with a shield body, and the legs of the horse drawn below the armor. His sketch of the armored horse is on the left.



The Nordstrom-Bowen site in the Bull Mountains north of Billings is the location of the other known armored horse in Montana. This figure was originally identified as a tipi on the site form rather than as an armored horse and rider. However, the record has been set straight, first in a paper presented by David Moyer in 2000 at the Plains Conference and then in print by Keyser and Klassen in their Plains Indian rock art book. The armor in this case, like those on Writing-on-Stone figures, is decorated. The Nordstrom Bowen armor consists of radiating lines that originate at the rider and fan out toward the bottom of the armor, so the interior of the horse and rider are hidden from the viewer. The Nordstrom-Bowen rider has a round head with radiating lines coming out of it similar to the round-headed Arminto figures, and the lines appear to be a headdress. The horse has lines coming up from his neck to form a mane in the same manner as the Figure 2 horse at Arminto.

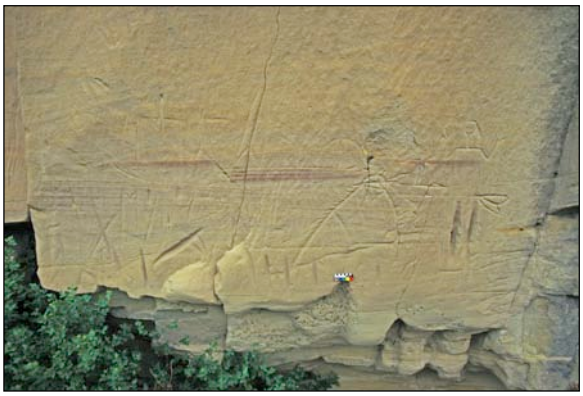


Horse armor does not appear to have been limited to any particular culture, and it appears to have been an integral part of horse use from the time horses were obtained by a tribe. The presence of the horse dates these figures to about 1700, with the horse reaching southwestern Wyoming by about 1690. Although armor and other accessories are generally assumed to have been based on Spanish design, personal armor was common on the Northern Plains prior to arrival of the horse, and horse protection may have been an outgrowth of that practice and may be a logical progression from the large personal body-covering shields of the pre-horse Northwestern Plains to the larger horse and rider body-covering armor of the post-horse era. However, because the styles of horse armor are so similar everywhere in North America, the Spanish design influence cannot be overlooked. In addition, other Spanish associations can be seen in possible brands. The symbols on the back of the Figure 3 Arminto horse could be a painted design as horses were decorated with paint by most of the tribes on the Northwestern

Plains. Alternatively, as pointed out to us by Larry Loendorf, these symbols instead may be a Spanish brand. According to Texas Parks and Wildlife information, branding became especially important after 1776 when the Spanish government proclaimed that all unbranded cattle would be considered property of the Crown. Positive identification for horses was considered a necessity because of their high desirability to thieves.

The photo on the right shows two armored horses on a hide painting. The photo was provided to us by David Moyer, who we thank for providing us with much literature on the topic of horse armor. Information on the painting has been published by Loendorf, who reports that although the exact date of the painting is not known, the hide was shipped by a Jesuit priest from North America to his family in Switzerland in 1761. The hide painting is known as the Segesser I and shows a battle between a group of horse-mounted warriors and a group of pedestrian warriors in the southern Plains. The similarities between the hide painting and the rock art figures are great and argue that horse armor did not differ much between cultures and across a large geographical area during the 1700s.

The horse armor reported by Lewis and Clark in 1805 was used by the Shoshone in southwestern Montana. It was described to be a coat formed by many folded dressed antelope skins held together with a mixture of glue and sand. They noted that the armor was used to cover the people's bodies and those of their horses because it was impervious to arrows. It has been suggested by Moyer and by Keyser in several sources, including his latest book with Klassen, that the demise of horse armor in the early 1800s is directly attributable to the widespread use of the gun as leather armor was of no use against bullets. They also note that it was too heavy and cumbersome to use with opposing swift cavalry. Therefore, they see horse armor as being very short lived on the Northwestern Plains from the introduction of the horse around 1700 to the beginning of the 1800s, about 100 years.



The horse period on the Northwestern Plains is dominated by the Biographic Rock Art Tradition, whereby rock art depicts real events that happened to a group or an individual. Common scenes in Biographic rock art center on horse raiding or warfare, as shown on the right in this South Dakota scene where the rider on the

armored horse has shot the person to the right. Because of the overwhelming presence of this warfare theme in horse-era rock art and the prevalence of historical documentation that armor functioned as protection in battle, other functions are often not considered for sites containing horses. The armored horses at the sites in Alberta, South Dakota, and Montana do fit this biographic pattern of depicting battle scenes, but this scenario does not fit for the Arminto Petroglyphs.

The Arminto horses appear to have armor for use as protection from environmental elements, particularly the harsh cold of Wyoming winters. We discussed this idea briefly but could find no independent support for this function until Leniegh Schrinar, a second grade teacher, pointed out to us that the star pattern below the horses' mouths looked like breathe in cold weather. Until she suggested this our only thought for the star pattern was that it was possibly a variation on the thing-to-tie on a halter previously discussed by Keyser for Blackfoot horses (and found on one of the South Dakota armored horses). However, this explanation was not very satisfactory as the star was not the distinctive rake pattern of the thing-to-tie on a halter, and the breathe explanation seems much more plausible. After David Moyer heard our cold weather explanation, he directed us to a reference regarding the use of armor on horses in the southwest to protect them not only from enemies but also the thick underbrush and cactus.

Thus, although possessing the historic characteristics of biographic rock art, the Arminto horses and riders are not portrayed as part of an active story like those at sites in Alberta, Montana, and South Dakota. Additionally, unlike the other Northern Plains examples, they are not carrying any discernible weapons. Although the armor suggests that these horses and riders were expecting to encounter hostile situations, and it was originally assumed that this would be people ready for battle and not hostile environmental conditions, their lack of weapons makes the warfare scenario questionable for the Arminto site and instead supports the environmental explanation. Thus, Northwestern Plains armor appears to have functioned to protect from environmental conditions as well as warfare, and if the horses of the region were outfitted against the cold, it seems likely that armor continued to be used on a seasonal basis after the coming of the gun.