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Horses in Northern Plains Rock Art in a Global Perspective

by

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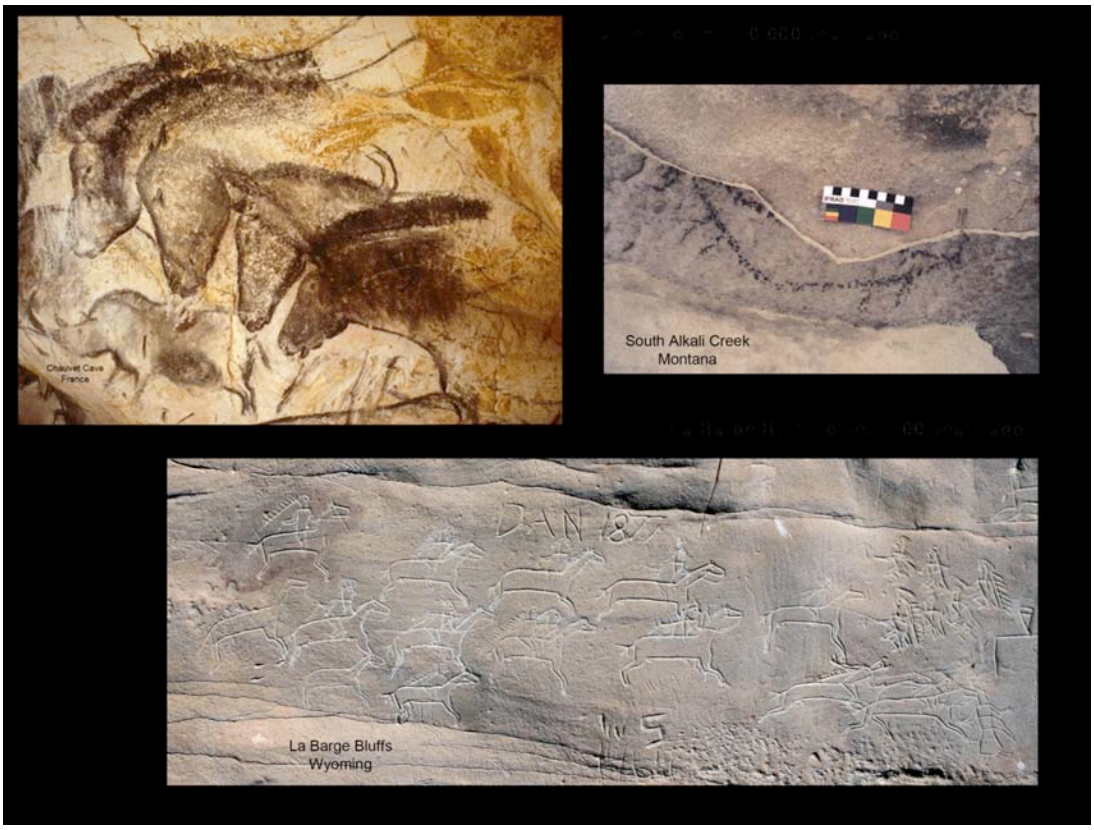


Horses are such familiar animals that when we see them in rock art, regardless of how poorly executed the image, we recognize it as a horse. Realistic drawings, such as the herd of horses in Chauvet Cave in southeastern France from about 30,000 years ago, or the horse herd at the La Barge Petroglyphs in southwestern Wyoming made less than 300 years ago, have such detail that anyone who has ever seen a horse can identify it immediately. Interestingly, even quickly sketched abbreviated forms of horses are recognized by most of us as such, as shown by this example from Alkali Creek in southeastern Montana, which is reminiscent of the abbreviated forms of mammoths in the caves of southern France and northern Spain where a single humped line can enhance a natural feature, and the human eye perceives the image. Based on these perspectives, as archeologists, we often feel that everyone sees these images, and that it is a human perception, not a cultural perception. We forget that along the way we learned how to view rock art, just as we learned how to recognize a tipi ring or lithic

debitage. This knowledge, or training, allows us not just to see the classic forms but also those that only partially remain or were never made in a realistic manner. Through this learning process we see subtle differences that seem obvious to us, but not to everyone, as is demonstrated with the Wyoming bucking horse symbol.

This well-known icon is constantly portrayed in a variety of media and is in daily view of the state's population. The patented shape is distinctive, so no matter what color it is, or whether it is on a license plate or a quarter, everyone recognizes it. And for this distinctive privilege, a fee must be paid to reproduce it. To us, as rock art researchers, we would not confuse this symbol with any rock art portrayal, no matter how similar. However, to others of our culture this is not so. When Judy Wolf of the Wyoming SHPO used this charcoal drawn horse and rider from a rock art site in southern Wyoming on Archeology Week T-shirts, the printing house doing the work requested that she pay the patent fee because the person there did not see the differences between the modern symbol and the unrelated rock art image until those differences were pointed out. This illustrates that members of society not trained to look at details of an image will not see them. In rock art we can go even further and say that those not trained to see images, especially fine-lined petroglyphs, will not see them at all. This has been demonstrated especially by Loendorf in a survey he reported for Colorado where a team trained to recognize rock art found sites in an area already surveyed by archeologists not experienced in this site type.

Did this also happen among contemporary people of pre-modern rock art? Did all people within a given society that produced rock art recognize the nuances in style from one artist to the next, or did only a particular portion of that society see the differences and understand that they were made by a member of a particular culture at a particular time? Certainly there were some distinctive images, such as the large Dinwoody Tradition figures of western Wyoming, that everyone noticed. Francis and Loendorf have proposed that these figures were recognizable to the people of the region as being made by a particular group and some were placed in specific locations on the landscape to inform foreigners that they were in someone's territory, but would that be the case for a figure as common as a horse? Keyser has written extensively about horses of the northwestern Plains and has explored how accoutrements drawn with the horse impart specific information. However, these are subtle differences in horse portrayals and not the in-your-face domineering Dinwoody figures, whose small details do not need to be noticed for the message to be received and understood. Furthermore, panels that contain detailed horses often have several other small figures, so the viewer would need to study the panel to absorb the entire story. Maybe everyone within a tribe could do that, in terms of no restrictions placed on them from a cultural standpoint, but it is unlikely that all paid that much attention to each rock art horse. An argument in favor of only certain people within northwestern Plains tribes being able to understand rock art can be

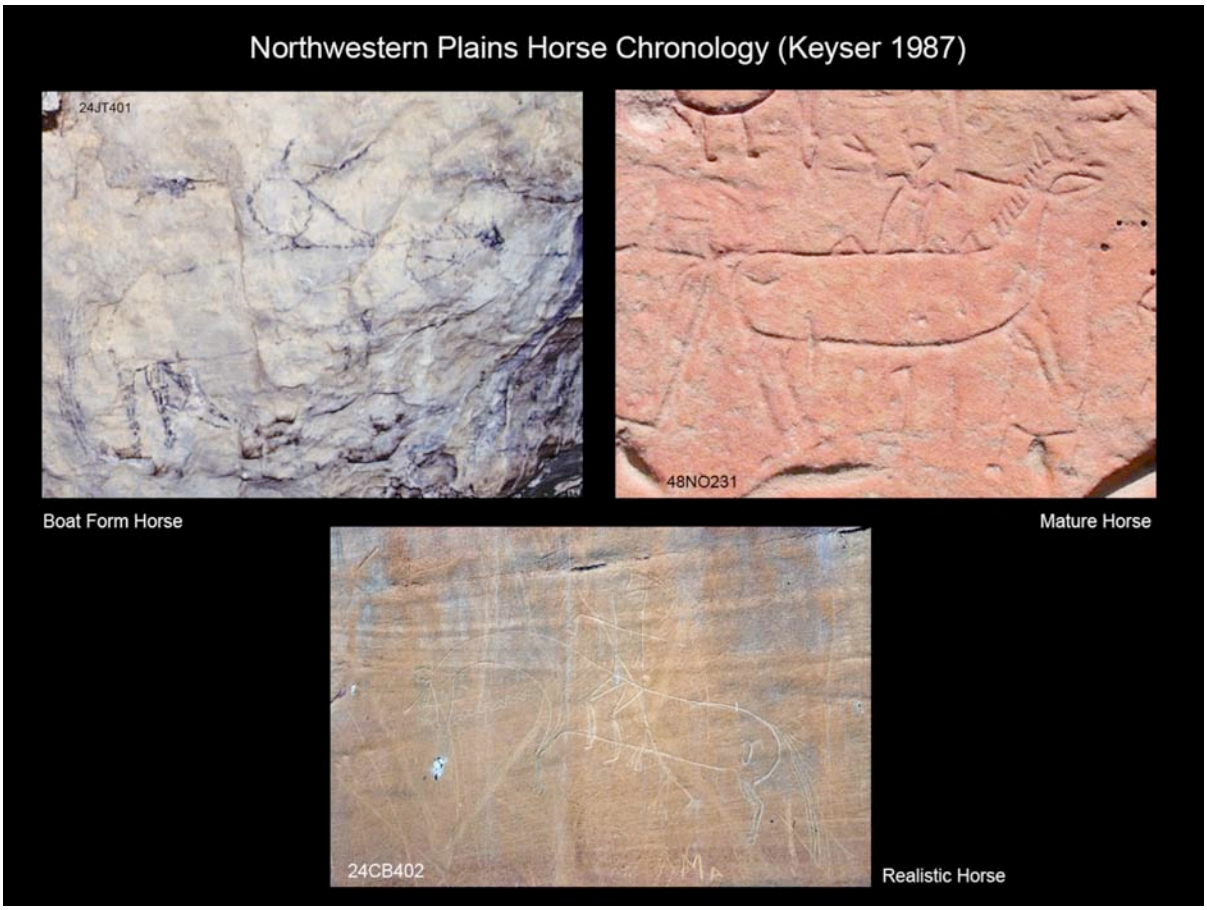
made based on ethnographic and ethnohistoric records, where people of the region attributed rock art to "the little people." It does not appear that the little people were leprechauns or trolls or other fanciful beings, but instead it was a term applied to that segment of society that dealt with rock art. Other groups in the Americas assign authorship to various kinds of unknown beings, forces, unknown tribes, or unidentified people from the distant past — all of which generally mean, "we don't know who did it so long ago before our collective memory, but it wasn't us." Thus, one would not expect that everyone within a tribe would approach a rock art panel with the same knowledge of its meaning anymore than one would expect everyone within a tribe to do the painting or engraving. As rock art researchers, we often argue for specialization relative to making petroglyphs and pictographs, but we then assume that they are completely understood by all tribal members through time, even until today. Instead, it seems more likely that only a small segment of each society actually dealt with rock art on a level in which they paid enough attention to the details of an image, such as a horse, that they would likely go beyond a general idea that it was part of a battle scene or a hunting party, which is again pan-human recognition, and identify elements to such a degree that they could know it was made by a particular group for a particular purpose. The details of who was in the composition and what it represented may not have been common knowledge even in biographic scenes, such as this one shown here, and so we should not expect that all tribal members can act as interpreters of all scenes within their landscape today.

Looking at individual figures is something we do frequently in our rock art research, and we have studied such motif classes as hands, bears, mountain sheep, and weapons. We have always felt that close examination of individual figure types was a good way to learn the rock art of a region. These kinds of studies focus on the distribution of figure types and individual attributes across the landscape, and variations in size, shape, and image associations. The scene in which a figure type occurs is examined to determine the reason for its use in the panel. Horses are found in scenes of hunting or battles, but they also are found in herds, or even more frequently alone or with a single rider, like the one in the upper left of this slide. Although we would not go so far as Livio Dobrez to argue that a single image constitutes a scene, a horse and rider can come very close. Some horse portraits are of such detail that information can be determined about their ethnicity and social status. For example, Loendorf has suggested Comanche affiliation for the Tolar Petroglyph horse and rider in southwestern Wyoming (see photo to left). At several other northern Plains sites, especially figures at Writing-on-Stone in Alberta, Keyser has suggested a Blackfeet affiliation based on halter accoutrements. Development of a detailed database with all horse variations in each region would serve to increase our abilities to assign cultural affiliation.

The frequency of occurrence for any figure type is considered a prime indicator of its importance within a culture at any given time. When looking at frequencies, comparative data for the same image in other regions both near and far help us see how that figure was perceived on a wider, even global level. The horse is always prominent in rock art of areas where it was utilized,

and it did not take long for the horse to reach that status when it arrived on the northern Plains.

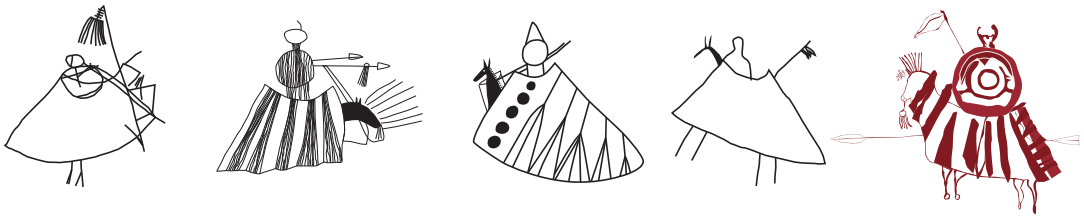
Horses are ideal to examine from an evolutionary image perspective because they have a unique position in the New World relative to other animals in rock art since we know when people first saw them. With other animals in the New World, and for all animals in European rock art, people of all generations who made or viewed pictographs and petroglyphs had grown up seeing and interacting with all native fauna. Thus, rock art does not reflect the evolution of most animal imagery, from a culture's first encounter, like the horse does in America. The horse was acquired by tribes of the northwestern Plains in Montana and Wyoming mostly during the early 1700s, and these nomadic cultures quickly made it a focus of their lives. It not only changed their mode of transportation but ways to hunt, their approach to battle, purpose for conflict (which started to center on horse stealing), and method of obtaining individual social status both in terms of acquiring wealth through acquisition of horses, and honor in battles to obtain horses. So, it is no surprise horses became an instant rock art topic.



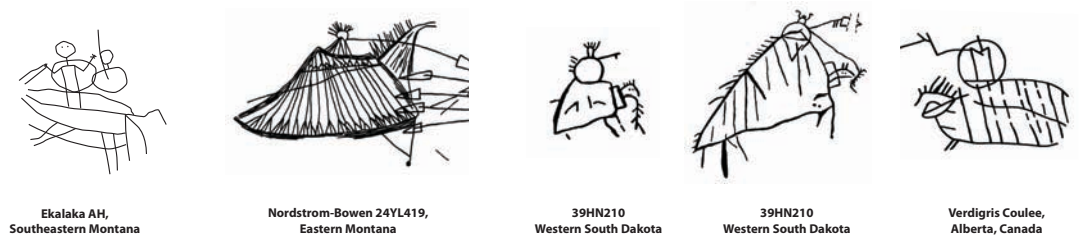
Horses probably were portrayed in rock art from the time of their first contact. There is a noticeable, at least to rock art researchers, evolution in the style of horse portrayal, and in 1987 Keyser first outlined the kinds of changes noticed on the Plains. This chronology has held up through the years, with the earliest horses characterized by boat-forms, such as this one at the Grinnvoll site in central Montana. Notice the rider is depicted as standing on the back of the horse, rather than sitting, which is an early stylistic indicator, with later artists drawing the person sitting on the horse's back. Details of the horse's feet, legs, and head are not so well defined as with later horses. By

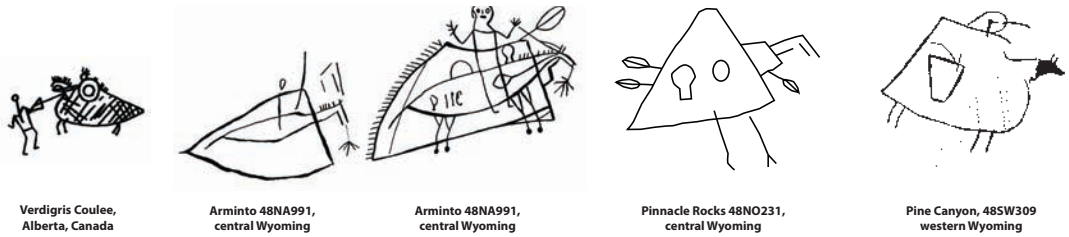
the late 1700s, horse portrayal changed to what Keyser called the mature style, where the body and neck are elongated, and with developed legs, manes, and tails. A good example is seen with this horse at Pinnacle Rocks in eastern Wyoming. Keyser suggests realistic horse drawings were being done by about 1835, and horses at the Joliet site in southern Montana are classic examples of this time period. The earliest horses also are not associated with developed biographic scenes, and decorative or functional accoutrements are relatively rare, but all are seen within a couple of generations.

When Keyser first developed his chronology of horses, he placed armored horses in the earliest category because armor was known to have come to the New World with the first horses, and the last known recorded use in region was noted in the 1805 journals of Lewis and Clark, with an observation in western Montana. At the time of Keyser's 1987 chronology, only four armored horses were known on the Northern Plains, and these included the two at Writing-on-Stone in Alberta and two in the North Cave Hills of western South Dakota. Today, we know of 16 in Montana, Wyoming, South Dakota, and Alberta, and more to the south. Looking at horse armor imagery in this northern region, we see an implied development from simple to elaborate in the same pattern reflected on other horses. So, the horse armor shown at its most simple is like the petroglyph at the Ekalaka Site in far southeastern Montana, probably drawn in the early 1700s, while some of those at Bruner and Goffena were later, probably made during the Realistic era of the early 1800s. Newly recorded sites during the past two decades have allowed us to refine and expand where armored horses fit into the overall horse chronology.



Musselshell River Armored Horses, central Montana





Horse petroglyphs were made not just by Native tribes but by early whites as well. The Target Horse site in western Wyoming is a good example (see photo to left). We know this horse was engraved by an early white settler, and although we don't know who shot it, it was used for target practice. This kind of rock art function, making animals on the wall specifically to be used for target practice, is not considered for American Indian sites, although it has been suggested that spears or arrows were shot at European rock art figures as part of a hunting magic ritual. It seems equally plausible that animals were drawn on the wall, or on open cliff faces, for children to learn how and where to shoot them. It seems equally unlikely, however, that horse figures were used like this by Northwestern Plains tribes since horses were not primarily a food source, and were instead a highly prized asset and symbol of social status. But other animals, especially those drawn life-size, should be considered for this function.

In summary, within a hundred years and three generations, horse imagery in northwestern Plains rock art went from simple to detailed as if it had always been known to cultures of the region. And drawings of the introduced horse became as sophisticated as were images of bison, deer, big horn sheep, or elk, which had always been known to the people of the area. The horse resulted in a new Plains culture integrating tribes in an unprecedented manner, and it became a central character of many biographic stories. Horses, apart from figures like the earlier Dinwoody Tradition, were cross-cultural, and early horse portrayal in rock art began generically and evolved to incorporate stylistic details sometimes identifiable to an individual tribe through comparison with ethnographic records, including hide and ledger art. Contemporary identifications of image details probably were limited to select members of the individual tribes and were not recognized by all people, just as they are not today.

The study of a single motif, such as the horse, means one's research attention is focused, you see details rather than just the big picture, and those details tell us about an aspect of culture that was important to a local group. Comparisons of the same individual motifs on a global level cannot be accomplished at a detailed level until recording has been done with those kind of analyses in mind. Research designs need to recognize that individual figures are important comparative images even when they occur alone, and then it will become easier to accomplish this task.