

STUDIES OF ROCK ART AND EARTHEN ART
IN RED ROCK CANYON STATE PARK,
KERN COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT

Red Rock Canyon State Park, located within the western Mojave Desert north of Lancaster, was the subject of survey work in December 1987 and February 1989. Two of 13 prehistoric sites which were examined and recorded at this time show rock art or earthen art. Pictographs of abstract design were documented at CA-KER-147, a camp site with a rich cultural deposit. An intaglio or ground figure, designated CA-KER-244, was rerecorded in detail. This latter cultural feature represents the only known example of aboriginal earthen art in Kern County.

Red Rock Canyon State Park is situated in eastern Kern County approximately 25 miles north of the town of Mojave (Figure 1). This places the park at the western end of the Mojave Desert. State Park lands total 8,000 acres, in addition to 2,164 acres of adjoining Bureau of Land Management property, which is actively patrolled by State Park Rangers under an agreement with the Ridgecrest BLM Office.

Red Rock Canyon State Park is best known for its spectacular scenic values, significant fossil-bearing deposits, and as a habitat for many species of raptors and rare plants. The stately, colorful geologic formations here have drawn the attention of park visitors and movie-production companies for decades.

The cultural values of Red Rock Canyon State Park, however, remain ill-defined. Currently, only 13 prehistoric sites have been formally recorded, though many more prehistoric and historic sites are known to exist within the park. Park Ranger Mark Faull has found several previously unknown prehistoric sites, as well as a considerable presence of late 19th Century - early 20th Century mining localities. These sites are being recorded during intermittent visits to Red Rock Canyon State Park. The prehistoric sites recorded to date consist primarily of: (1) localized knapping stations situated around outcrops of chert, quartzite, rhyolite, and chalcedony, and (2) bedrock milling features.

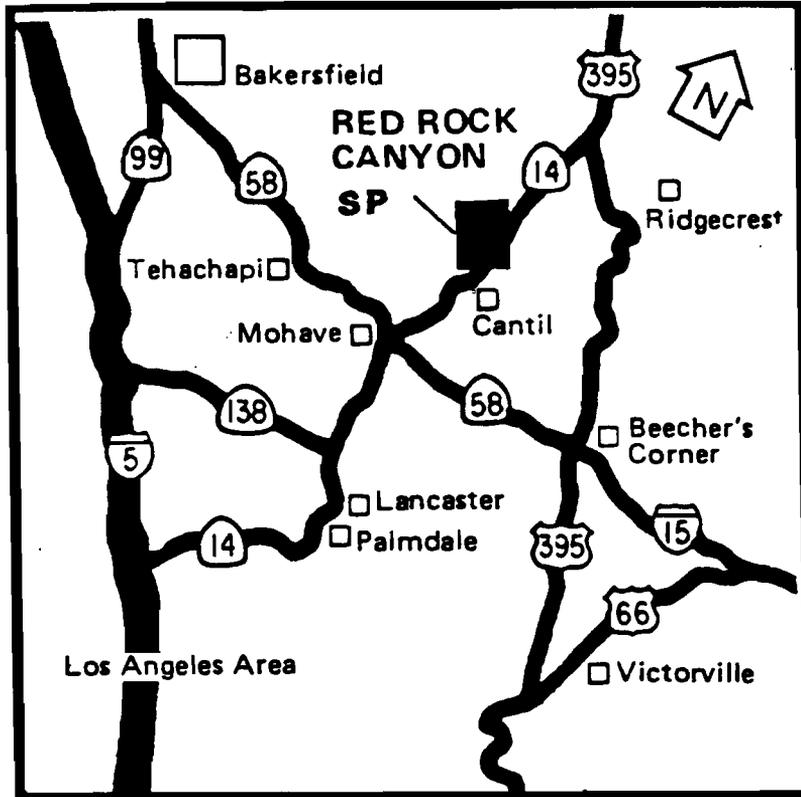


Figure 1. Location Map

One known prehistoric camp site within Red Rock Canyon State Park is CA-KER-147, which consists of three adjoining rockshelters showing rich cultural deposits (Figure 2). The entire site covers an area measuring ca. 78 meters by 65 meters. The shallow sandstone rockshelters were apparently formed by wind erosion and natural exfoliation.

Limited-scope excavations were conducted in 1973 at CA-KER-147 by students from Antelope Valley College under the direction of Roger Robinson. The excavation yielded abundant and diverse materials, which underscored the regional significance of the site (Robinson n.d.). In 1986 and 1987, analyses of key artifact classes, radiocarbon dating of one sample, and studies of obsidian source and obsidian hydration were performed on the 1973 collections from CA-KER-147. The reports are on file at the California Department of Parks and Recreation, San Diego.

The collective studies indicate that CA-KER-147 was intensively occupied in late prehistoric times, i.e., the last thousand years B.P. The bead data alone suggest that the site was primarily occupied after A.D. 1500 and up to as late as the 1840s (King 1987:12).

A project to re-record CA-KER-147 was commenced in December 1987 by Michael Sampson and Phil Hines. The pictographs within the "Area A" rockshelter, designated "Pictograph Panel 1" and "Pictograph Panel 2," were sketched and photographed by the present author. The pictographs of Panel 1, positioned on the ceiling of "Area A," are complete though very faded. The pictographs of Panel 2 are incomplete and faint; the losses apparently are due to natural exfoliation.

Natural erosion is pronounced on the rockshelter walls and ceiling; thin, tabular sheets of sandstone are exfoliating off. It is a good possibility that additional pictographs have been lost to exfoliation. Park staff have heard reports that pictographs were possibly removed from the rockshelter by visitors years ago (before this area became a State Park).

Three separate painted elements were identified at Panel 1. The designs are abstract in form and partially indistinct due to fading pigment. A reddish-brown pigment was used in one element (Figure 3), while the other two pictograph elements were drawn in orange pigment (Figures 4, 5).

Pictograph Panel 2 consists of multiple faint painted elements located on the rockshelter ceiling, which are mostly lost to exfoliation. Evidence of paint occurs at four adjoining, though separate places within Panel 2; one additional spot has possible evidence of pigment (very faded). Elements painted in reddish-brown, black, and pink colored pigments are present at Panel 2; some of the individual

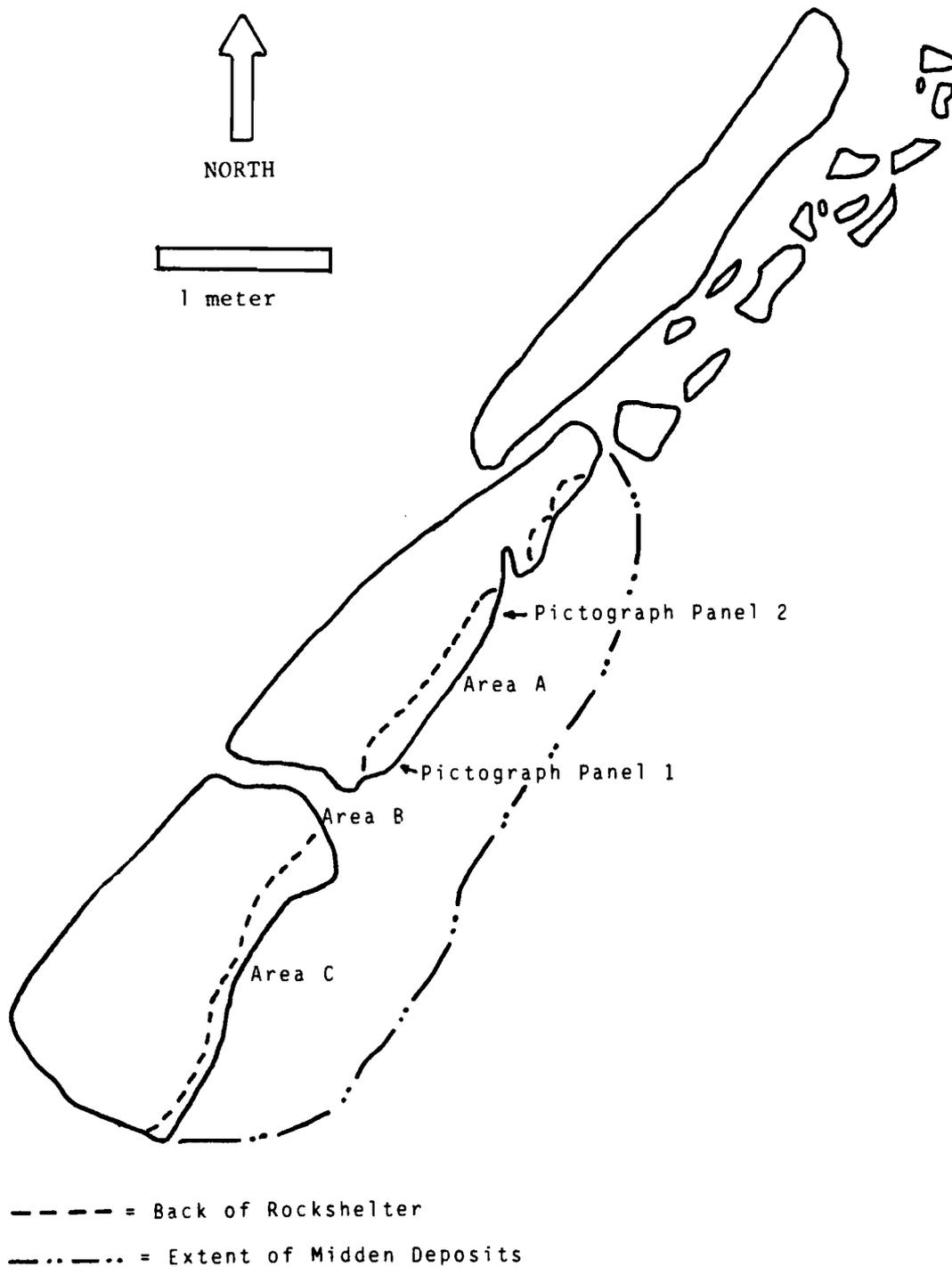
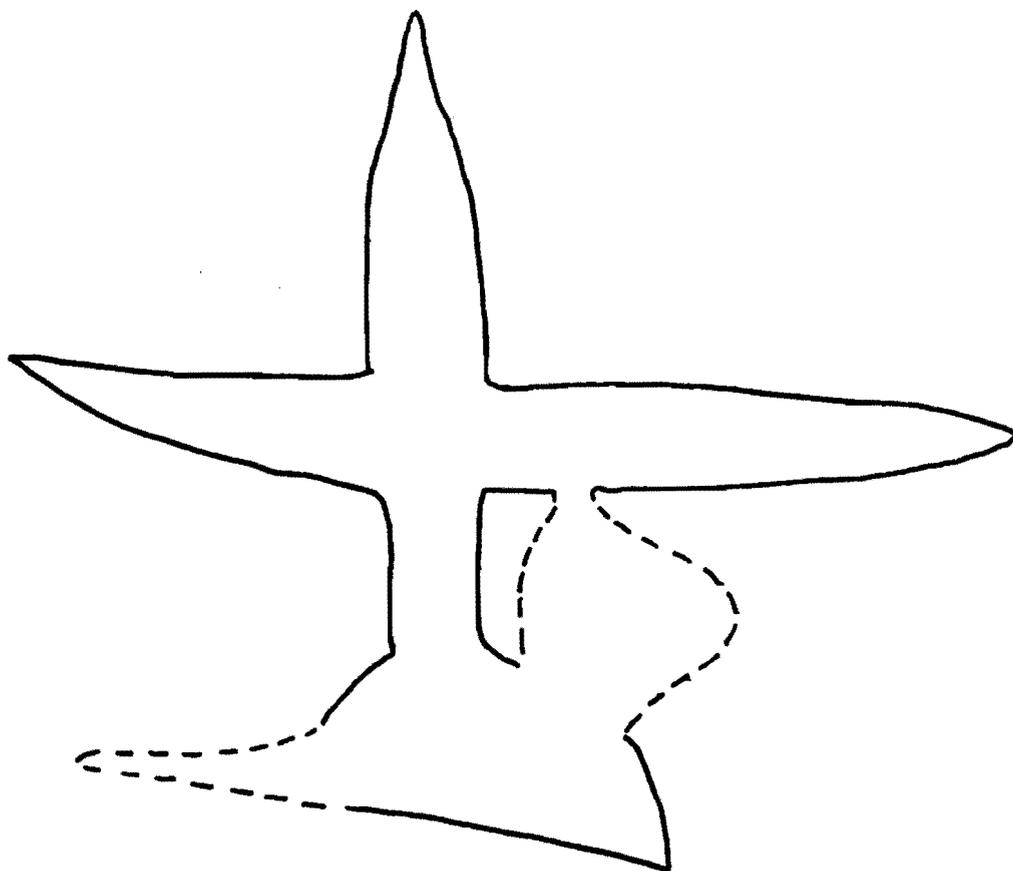


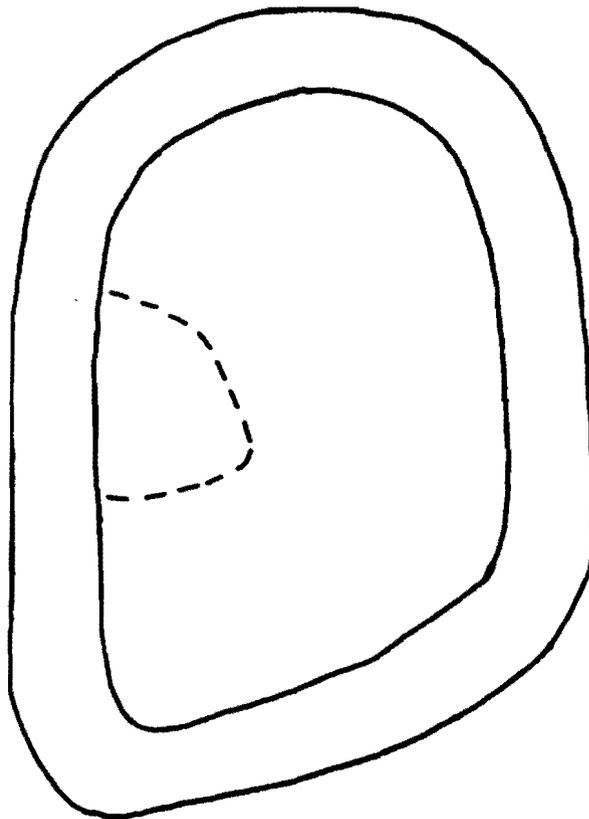
Figure 2. Plan View Map of Rockshelters, CA-KER-147.



actual size

--- = faint pigment

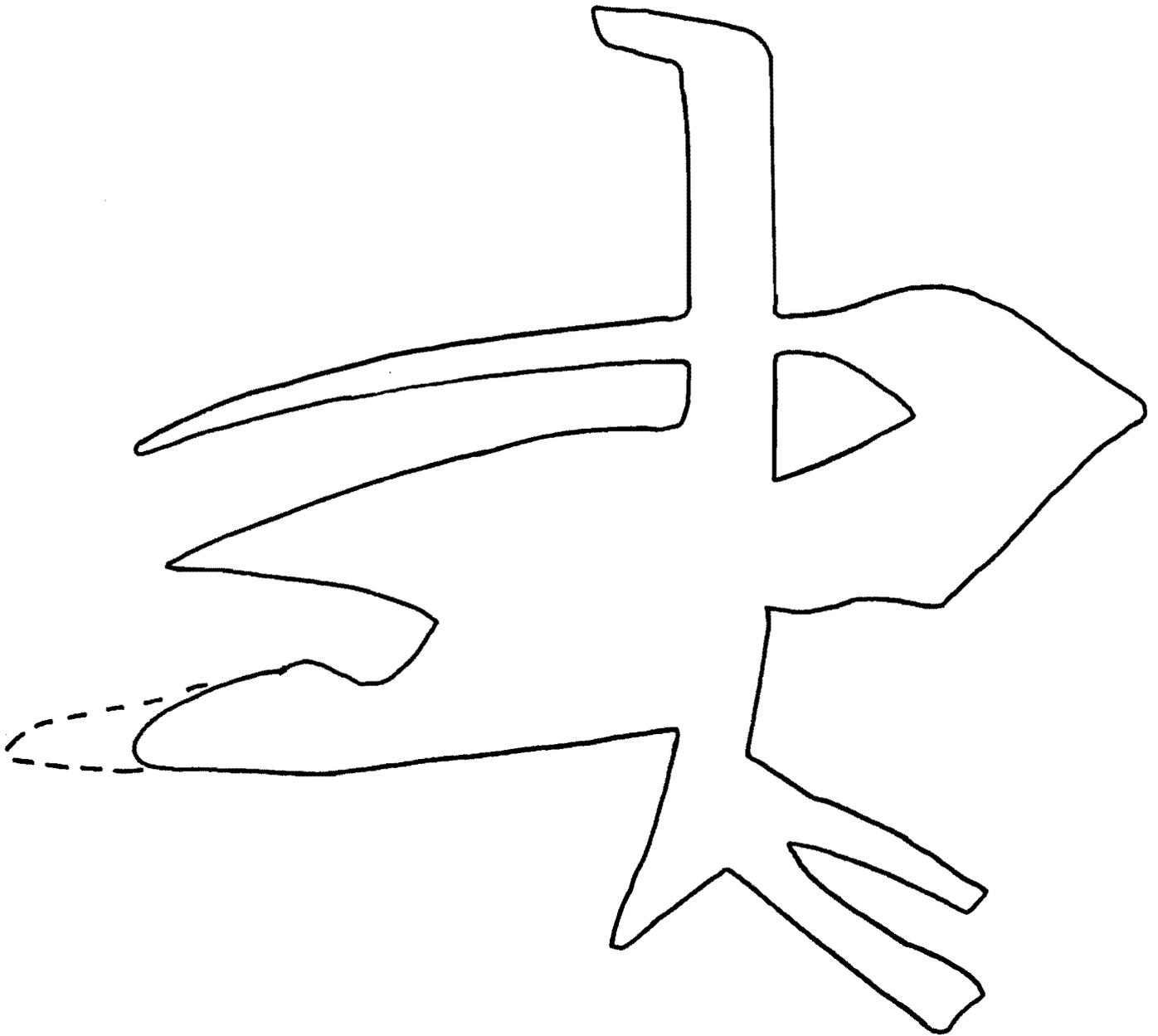
Figure 3. Painted Element at Pictograph Panel 1.



actual size

--- = faint pigment

Figure 4. Painted Element at Pictograph Panel 1.



actual size

----- = faint pigment

Figure 5. Painted Element at Pictograph Panel 1.

elements or figures show use of multiple colors. No designs can be precisely defined due to the incomplete nature of the existing pictographs.

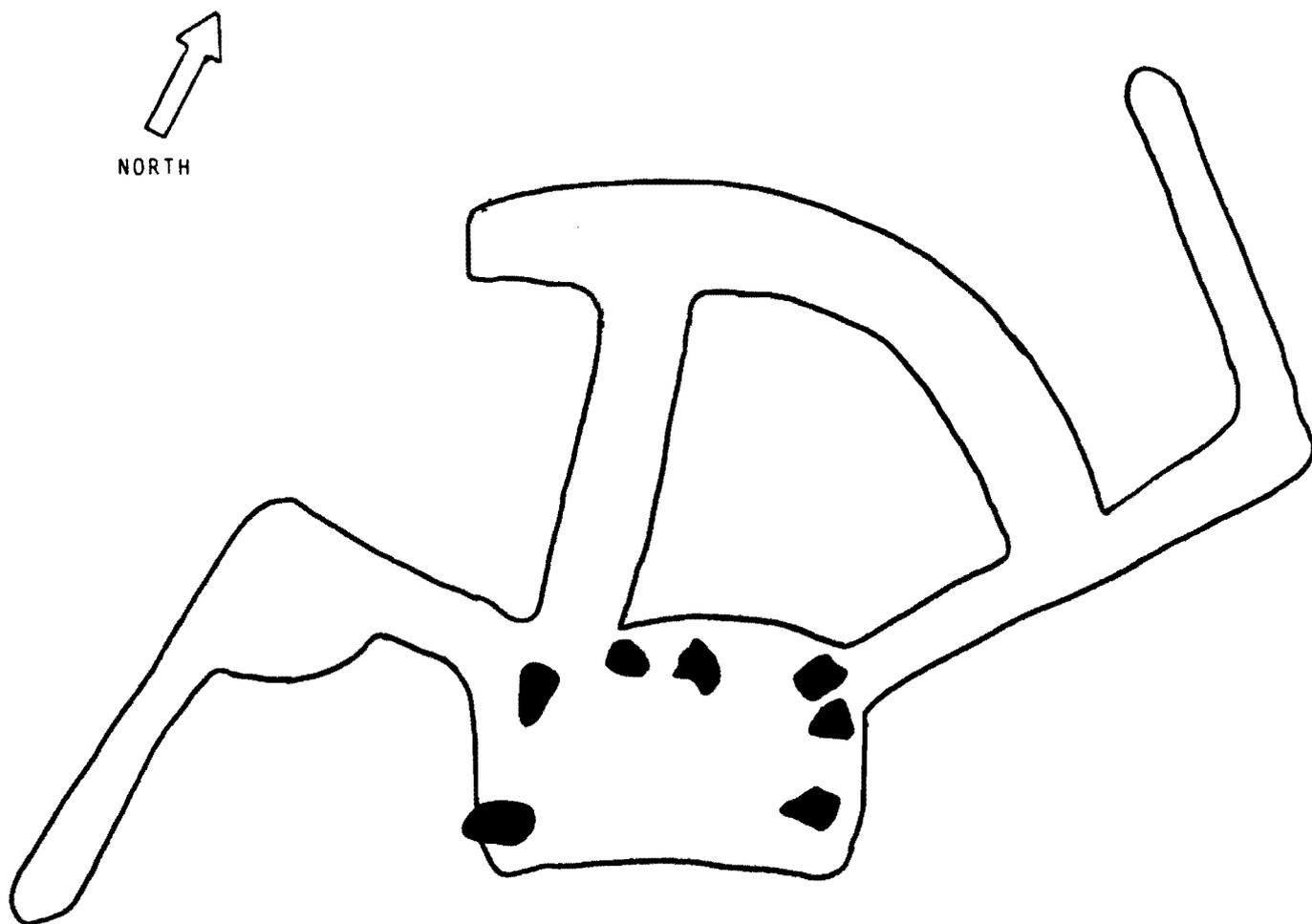
The pictographs of Panel 1 show a degree of similarity to certain rock art elements from San Bernardino County sites and Tulare County sites, as depicted in Heizer and Clewlow (1973:Figures 214h, 217p, 217s, 220d-g, 221i-j, 228h-m, 231e, 340, 341b, 355b&h, 367a). There is no apparent similarity to Chumash pictographs depicted in Campbell Grant's definitive study (Grant 1966).

An intaglio or aboriginal ground figure of abstract design (Figure 6) was re-recorded during the 1987 fieldwork. The intaglio, designated as site CA-KER-244, was originally recorded by Emma Lou Davis in 1962. The intaglio was briefly described in a 1965 article by Davis and Sylvia Winslow, who in the article called it "The Red Rock Canyon Gravel Effigy" (Davis and Winslow 1965:18). The intaglio, measuring 7.7 meters northeast-southwest and 4.2 meters northwest-southeast, was scratched out of a desert pavement surface composed of andesite breccia. The site is situated upon a Late Pleistocene erosional surface high above Nightmare Gulch. Grey chalcedony flakes are scattered about within the desert pavement surface around the intaglio. Seven andesite breccia boulders are arranged in a semicircle upon a broad cleared spot within the intaglio. Correspondence on file at Park Headquarters suggests that the seven boulders have been moved around in the past. This idea has not been confirmed, though only six boulders clearly show on a 1972 slide of the intaglio.

An alignment of rocks measuring 6 meters in length lies 13.65 meters northeast of the intaglio. Von Werlhof (1987:10-13) argues that intaglios or "geoglyphs" and rock alignments originate out of the same cultural processes and purpose. Thus, an association of these two types of prehistoric earthen art at a site should be anticipated.

A theodolite was employed to map the intaglio and rock alignment. The instrument was set up over an arbitrary location to the west of both features. All measurements were taken with a 30-meter tape measure. The intaglio was defined by shooting distinct points, such as sharp bends and the intersection of two lines. Arbitrary points were shot in to delineate long spans of straight or slightly curved lines.

Jay Von Werlhof (personal communication, 1987) has pointed out that the intaglio at CA-KER-244 may be the only ground figure in Kern County. Thus, site CA-KER-244 is rather unique, for Von Werlhof (1987:1) argues that intaglios or "geoglyphs" and rock alignments rarely occur as isolated finds.



NORTH

● = Andesite Breccia Boulders

0 1 2 meters

Figure 6. Aboriginal Ground Figure at CA-KER-244.

As archaeological studies continue in the park, albeit intermittently, it is anticipated that new examples of aboriginal rock art and earthen art will be found. One can hope they are found and documented before natural forces (or vandalism) erase these singular records of human activity.

NOTES

Mark Faull, a Ranger at Red Rock Canyon State Park, has provided the author with much valuable assistance in documenting the sites of the park. Phil Hines and Mark Faull helped the author in conducting the fieldwork. Patricia A. Fleming typed the manuscript.

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