

Evidence of historic contact in the rock art of La Frontera

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Rock paintings in the desert regions of the Laguna Mountains and Sierra Juarez on both sides of the international boundary belong to the La Rumorosa style, named after the type site recorded in the 1920s by Malcolm Rogers of the San Diego Museum of Man. Rogers named the site after the nearby village of La Rumorosa, but today the La Rumorosa pictographs are known by the name El Vallecito and the site is now maintained by INAH as an outdoor archaeological museum, the first archaeological site in the state of Baja California to be opened to the public.

Rock paintings in the La Rumorosa style are characterized by the presence of anthropomorphic figures, lizards, sunburst designs, grid patterns, circular motifs, and a variety of geometric and occasional zoomorphic forms, painted in shades of red, yellow, black, and white. Digitate anthropomorphs, drawn with the fingers and toes represented, are common defining elements. The paintings are typically found in rock shelters in the granite boulders of the region. The style is contained within the territory of the Kumeyaay Indians and is consistently associated with late prehistoric and historic archaeological sites. The maximum age of the style is unknown, but the presence of historic elements in some sites shows that the style continued into historic times. These historic elements are the subject of this article.

In 1942, Adan Treganza published a description of a Kumeyaay rock painting showing “a human figure seated in what appears to be a chair and near the figure a ‘Christian Cross’ is presented.” Although the site is not identified, this description almost certainly refers to a site in Carrizo Canyon, today a part of Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in San Diego County. As you can see (Figure 1), the design does not particularly resemble a man sitting in a chair, and the cross is a small element that appears as a minor part of the panel. Further, the two elements are not situated close enough to each other to be considered a single scene. This panel was repainted at an unknown date early in the twentieth century, so we are forced today to rely on an anonymous interpretation of the original art.

The Treganza description of a chair and a Christian cross has also been associated with the nearby site at Piedras Grandes, which features a clear portrayal of a man on horseback (Figure 2), but the panel (Figure 3) includes nothing that can be reliably interpreted as a chair or a Christian cross. The Carrizo Canyon and Piedras Grandes sites are of interest because they are reasonably close to the route of the de Anza expedition of 1775, a route later followed by numerous Spanish and American travelers, including the Butterfield Stage. Equestrian figures clearly indicate historic contact, but the figures themselves cannot be precisely dated.

Our best example of an equestrian figure in Kumeyaay rock art appears at Valle Seco in northern Baja California, where the rock art depicts what appears to be a man riding a mule (Figure 4). A second element has been interpreted as a man riding a deer (Figure 5), but close examination of the design shows that the “antlers” are remnants of an earlier element over which the equestrian figure has been superimposed. Farther back in the shelter, an interesting miniature scene depicts two mounted figures that appear to be riding animals other than horses or mules

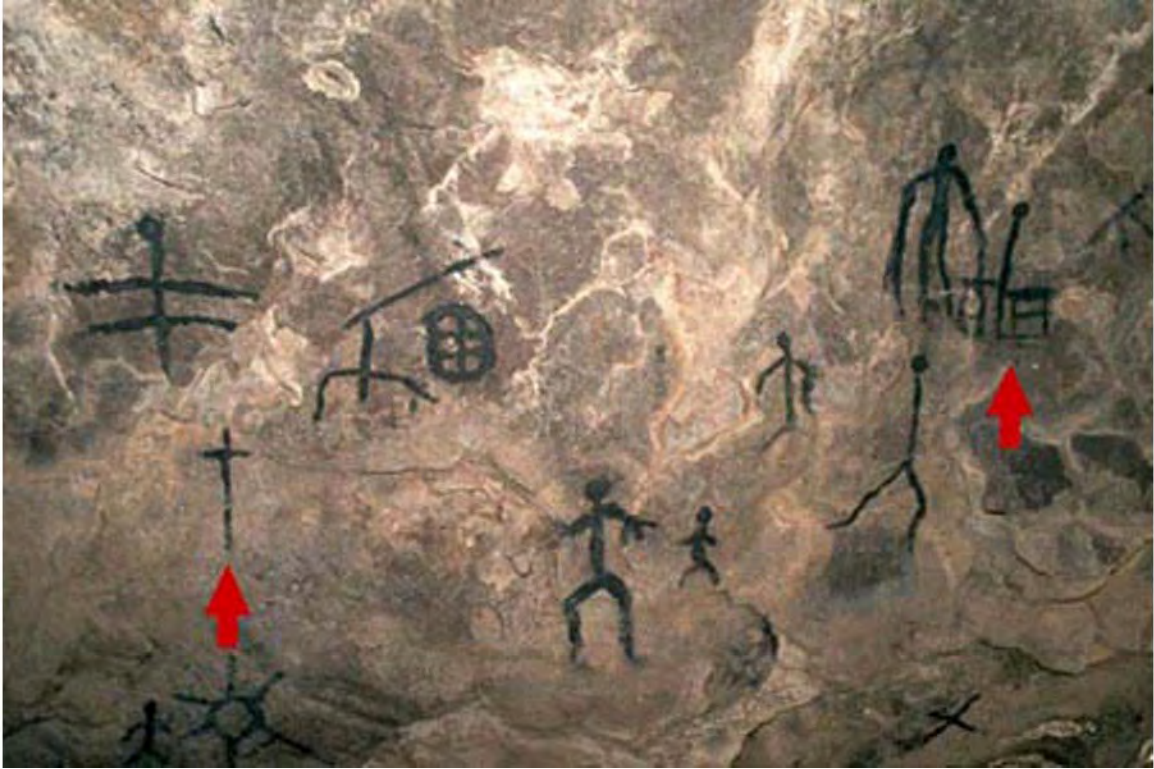


Figure 1. Carrizo Canyon paintings showing “cross” and “chair.”



Figure 2. Man on horseback at Piedras Grandes site.

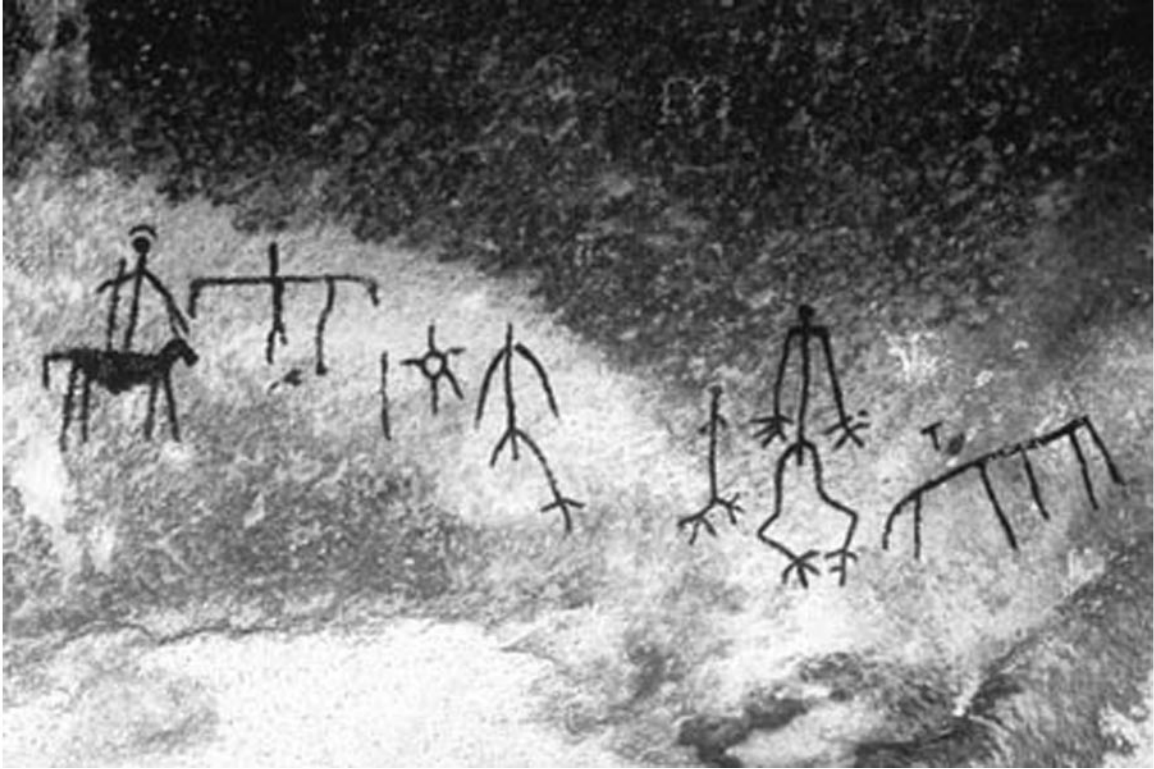


Figure 3. General view of Piedras Grandes panel.



Figure 4. Man riding a mule at Valle Seco.



Figure 5. Second equestrian figure at Valle Seco.

(Figure 6). One, with rounded head, pointed ears and a short tail, appears to be a bobcat. The notion of riding an animal like a horse is an introduced concept that here may have been adapted to some ritual context. The same panel has a figure pointing a straight stick-like object that appears to represent a man shooting or threatening a second individual with a rifle (Figure 7). This Valle Seco panel is an intriguing collection of elements that appear to represent some sort of scene, but the exact meaning remains unknown.

Two figures at the Valle Seco site exhibit another characteristic that is associated with historic contact: the use of L-shaped feet in place of plain stick-figure legs or the representation of individual digits that are typical of Kumeyaay rock art. One of these figures is associated with another small equestrian element (Figure 8). Throughout the far west, panels with such obvious historic elements as horses and riders or men wearing cowboy hats frequently show figures with L-shaped feet, interpreted as portrayals of men wearing boots. The L-shaped feet show up again at a Kumeyaay site near Agua Aguilar, a few kilometers northeast of the Valle Seco region, and at the well-known Vallecito Potrero site in San Diego County.

The second major category of historic contact elements is the portrayal of possible non-Indian religious elements in the rock art. The rock painting site at San José on the eastern outskirts of Tecate, notable for its unique life-size figure, includes two figures that appear to be wearing robes or long dresses, and a third holding an “orb” and a possible cross (Figure 9). These all suggest Roman Catholic influence, perhaps portrayals of priests. The life-size anthropomorph, one of the “robed” figures, the figure holding the “cross” and one additional figure have antenna-like horns, which symbolize supernatural power in many examples of Native American art. In 1975, a resident of Tecate told of an account from María Paipa, a Kumeyaay from the community of San José, that the paintings represented a ceremony, and that the animal



Figure 6. Two figures mounted on animals at Valle Seco.



Figure 7. Apparent scene of a man with a rifle at Valle Seco.



Figure 8. Figure with L-shaped feet at Valle Seco.



Figure 9. Possible Catholic elements at San José, near Tecate.



Figure 10. Former rock art panel in the village of Guadalupe.

portrayed with the figures is a coyote.

In the village of Guadalupe between Ensenada and Tecate, a rock painting site destroyed in flood control projects of the 1970s included the most obvious portrayal of a Christian element in Kumeyaay rock art. Before its destruction, the panel had many elements and had been damaged by graffiti that had accumulated in recent times (Figure 10). The panel included a large Roman Catholic cross painted in black and red with a halo of yellow rays (Figures 11-12). This site overlooked Mission Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe in the village below, and it seems safe to assume that it was painted after the mission was established in 1834.

The incorporation of a Christian element into traditional rock art is not necessarily an indicator of religious conversion. Unlike European conventions in which religions are exclusive -- you are Catholic or Protestant, Lutheran or Methodist or Baptist, but only one at a time -- traditional Native American religion is syncretistic, and elements of foreign religion that are perceived as having ritual power are readily incorporated. Even today, Kumeyaay religion is a blend of traditional and Roman Catholic practices. Alternatively, symbols of foreign religion can be included in rock art produced to combat the influence of the invading culture.

This summary includes the known examples of historic contact elements in the La Rumorosa style of rock art. Two additional sites in western Kumeyaay territory within the modern limits of the city of San Diego also show possible evidence of Spanish contact. In Mission Trails Park, not far from Mission San Diego de Alcalá and downstream from the Old Mission Dam on the San Diego River, a rock painting in red on a white granite boulder is done in traditional pigment and technique, but exhibits elements of layout and design unlike any other Kumeyaay site (Figure 13). The small panel is bordered by a semicircular line of triangular points, and within this field is a collection of elements in two horizontal rows. Among the



Figure 11. Large cross in the Guadalupe panel.



Figure 12. Another view of the Guadalupe cross.



Figure 13. Boulder with historic elements at Mission Trails Park, San Diego.

elements is one design resembling a schematic cow's head (somewhat like a cattle brand) and the possible representation of a bishop's miter. Given the close proximity of the mission, it is tempting to associate this painting with the Spanish occupation of San Diego beginning in 1769, or with the Indian uprising that destroyed the mission in 1776.

North of San Diego, in the Del Mar Heights district, a now-destroyed petroglyph panel incised on an indurated sandstone surface in a small canyon included two unusual animal figures along with miscellaneous linear elements (Figure 14). After its discovery, it was first assumed that this panel was the work of local children, or perhaps undocumented workers who camped here while they worked in nearby fields. However, close examination of the grooves showed that they were not fresh, and the site was fully recorded before its destruction in an industrial park development project. The animals are not easily identified, but I suggest that they may portray mules, with their thick necks and long, upright ears. The site directly overlooks El Camino Real, the road connecting the missions that Father Serra established in 1769. It is impossible to say for sure, but someone at the site could easily have observed the passing Spanish as they moved along El Camino Real during San Diego's colonial era.

This material has been gathered over the course of several decades of work on the rock art of this area. I would like to acknowledge here the recent efforts of a colleague, Jeff La Fave, who has incorporated this material into his greater study of historic contact rock art of southern California and northern Baja California, currently in press at the San Diego Museum of Man in a forthcoming volume of *Rock Art Papers*.



Figure 14. Panel with unusual animal elements at Del Mar Heights, San Diego County.