

Shield motifs in Yuman rock art

Ken Hedges
San Diego Museum of Man

In the rock art styles of the Yuman cultures and their late prehistoric Patayan ancestors of southwestern Arizona, southern California, and northern Baja California, there are few motifs that can be identified as actual material culture objects. Representational motifs are confined to anthropomorphic forms, occasional animals, and, in the prolific Sears Point style of the lower Gila River, a wide assortment of birds, reptiles, and mammals. Aside from occasional bows and arrows held by human figures, representational depictions of cultural objects are rare in art styles, which, aside from the humans and animals, consist mostly of "abstract" or non-figurative motifs.

There is one motif found in Yuman and Patayan rock art from Gila Bend in Arizona to the Kumeyaay country in northern Baja California that can be reasonably identified as a specific object: a shield.

Shields are known from the ethnographic record for the Akimel O'odham (Pima) peoples of southern Arizona, and for the River Yumans who moved through and occupied the lower Gila area in late prehistoric and early historic times before settling into the combined culture we know today as the Maricopa. The "Maricopa" of Spier's (1933) study consist of ancestral Maricopa and Kaveltcadom peoples of the lower Gila River combined with Halyikwami, Kohuana, and Halchidhoma peoples of the lower Colorado River driven from their ancestral homelands by the dominant Quechan and Mojave. The Kaveltcadom were a branch of the Halchidhoma who left the Colorado at an earlier period and appear to have occupied the Gila River below Gila Bend.

O'odham and Yuman shields are very similar. Ethnographic examples provide excellent comparative information for interpretation of the rock art.

Akimel O'odham shields (Russell 1908:120-122) were made of rawhide, about 50 cm in diameter, with handles attached to the back (Figure 1). Known from two actual shields and two smaller models made by Pimas in the 1800s, these shields all bear painted designs that divide the surface into four sections. This characteristic of quadripartite designs is an important factor in identifying shields in the rock art.

Leslie Spier, working with River Yumans in Maricopa country in 1929-1932, collected a shield made under the direction of a man of Halchidhoma ancestry (Spier 1933:136, Plate 13). Like Pima shields, it is made of rawhide with an attached handle and painted with a quadripartite design (Figure 2). This shield is of particular interest with regard to the rock art.

Rock art motifs from the lower Gila River from just above Gila Bend almost to the Colorado River include representations of humans either holding or standing adjacent to shield-like designs. The motif occurs again on the lower Colorado River, and in northern Baja California.

In Redrock Canyon, a short distance north of Gila Bend on the west side of the river, a historic panel on the red sandstone includes an equestrian figure and a digitate anthropomorph holding a shield-like object in his left hand (Figure 3 left). Like the ethnographic shields, this one is decorated with a quartered design.

At Quail Point, a major Sears Point style petroglyph site on the south side of the river



Figure 1. Akimel O'odham (Pima) shields (Russell 1908).



Figure 2. Yuman shield (Spier 1933).



Figure 3. Redrock Canyon, Arizona (left) and Quail Point, Arizona (right).

about 50 km downstream from the town of Gila Bend, the rock art includes a digitate anthropomorph adjacent to a shield-like design (Figure 3 right).

This motif has the same design as the shield made for Spier by a Halchidhoma man. This is particularly significant because the Kaveltcadom, a branch of the Halchidhoma, are the most likely inhabitants of the Quail Point area in early historic times. This panel provides us with a rare example of a petroglyph exactly matching the design on a documented shield.

The next example comes from Antelope Hill, on the south side of the Gila River about 60 km upstream from Yuma, Arizona. This example has less detail, but a digitate anthropomorph holds a circular object in its right hand (Figure 4 left).

For the next example, we go to the ancient homeland of the Halchidhoma people on the Colorado River. The Palo Verde petroglyph site, located on the west side of the river about 70 km north of Yuma, is perhaps the largest petroglyph site in southern California, with four major loci of rock art on cliff faces, boulders, and bedrock associated with a major trail system. One panel here is unique for the region with its anthropomorphic figure having facial features. The figure holds in its right hand a circular shield, again divided into quadrants (Figure 4 right).

Across the river from Palo Verde is the Ripley geoglyph site. The main figure here is a standing anthropomorph holding a shield in its right hand. Like all of the examples except Antelope Hill, the shield-like motif is divided into quarters (Figure 5).

The motif of the quartered circle design appears again far to the west, in the northern Baja California territory of the Kumeyaay people. At the site of Los Guerreros, the quartered circle motif holds a prominent place in the upper portion of the panel (Figure 6). A second large “shield” at the lower left has two vertical lines added to the basis quadripartite design.

The large designs are surrounded by small anthropomorphs, and one of them holds a smaller example of the quartered circle element in its left hand (Figure 6 right). This distinctive arrangement with a figure holding a quadripartite shield is specific to Yuman culture sites from Gila Bend to northern Baja California, and, according to our present knowledge, it is not known to extend north into the Shoshonean regions of southern California or east into the Hohokam area of Arizona. The presence of ethnographic examples from the same territory lends strength to the interpretation of these motifs as shields, which in turn has important implications for the



Figure 4. Antelope Hill, Arizona (left) and Palo Verde, California (right).



Figure 5. Ripley geoglyph, Arizona.



Figure 6. Los Guerreros, Baja California.

interpretation of another class of elements in Kumeyaay rock art.

The site of Conjunto del Indio in El Vallecito has the largest single panel of rock paintings in all of Kumeyaay rock art, and some of the largest individual elements, including three large anthropomorphs and a series of spectacular circular designs (Figure 7). The identity of these circular elements has been something of a mystery, but in the light of the information presented in this paper, I believe it is reasonable to interpret them as shields. Several of the images have the quartered circle motif that distinguishes the shields elsewhere in Yuman rock art. The large polychrome shield in particular, with its yellow border and interior paint in red, black, and white, must have been a spectacular design when freshly painted.

The prominence of the shields at El Vallecito suggests significance beyond mere depictions of a defensive weapon. Among the Pima, preparation for war was an invocation to the gods, and the shield, “with its magic symbols in brilliant colors” (Russell 1908:120), was an instrument and symbol of supernatural power. Among the Mojave, the shield is identified with the culture hero Mastamho (von Werlhof 2007).

As unique examples of identifiable cultural motifs in the rock art of the Kumeyaay, they undoubtedly served as important symbols of power.

References cited

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Figure 7. Conjunto del Indio, El Vallecito, Baja California.