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Newsletter of

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PAIRED MORPHS AT CUTTLE LAKE.

IN NORTHWESTERN ONTARIO

by Grace Rajnovich
Field Archaeologist
Kenora

ABSTRACT

The Cuttle Lake Large Site (DfKg-2) near Rainy Lake in Northwestern Ontario, a spectacular pictograph site on a cliff seven metres above the water, contains at least six pairs of identical morphs and may tell a story of a mythical hunt. There is a remote chance that the site is Blackduck.

INTRODUCTION

The Ontario Ministry of Culture and Recreation last summer recorded the most spectacular and intriguing pictograph site in the Rainy Lake region of Northwestern Ontario. The Cuttle Lake Large Site, studied in a preliminary manner in 1967 by Dewdney (Dewdney and Kidd 1967: 72), contains at least six distinctive, matched pairs of morphs, and this large number of twin morphs makes the site unique among all the Shield rock art.

Designated DfKg-2 under the Borden system of site enumeration, these pictographs are on the west side of the channel between Obikoba and Cuttle Lakes within the Rainy Lake water system. As Dewdney described it, this is a "beautiful site" (ibid: 72) located as much as five metres up a cliff face from the water line on two concave rock faces. Rock ledges jut out below the paintings to form "viewing platforms" but the morph panels are at least two metres higher up the cliff and are unreachable without the aid of a ladder, a device possibly used by the artists themselves. The site's two faces contain five panels and generally face east; only one panel (Figure 1) is still totally intact, the others are now obliterated by lichen growth.

THE MORPHS

The middle panel of the south face (Figure 1) is a spectacular stratified series of morphs, several of them "twins". Morphs 1 and 2 are identical open circles with seven lines projecting toward, but not reaching, the centre in each. The same morph appears at DeKg-1 (Dewdney and Kidd 1967: 107) a few kilometres away but there are no reported parallels anywhere else on the Shield. Morphs 3 and 4, side by side at the top of the panel, form a pair of hand prints. Morphs 5 and 6 are nearly identical male animals with upright ears and tails, probably deer or caribou, they have a parallel at DeKg-1 (Dewdney and Kidd 1967:107). Morphs 7 and 8 are almost identical short-legged male animals with upright ears, possibly dogs. Morphs 9 and 10 are identical, back-to-back bears. Morphs 11 and 12, both square-backed animals, possibly moose, may also form a pair although they are painted in different colours (see below). In addition there are smudges (13 and 14) at the top and bottom of the panel, and two sets of dots, 15 and 16, running vertically up the left and right sides of

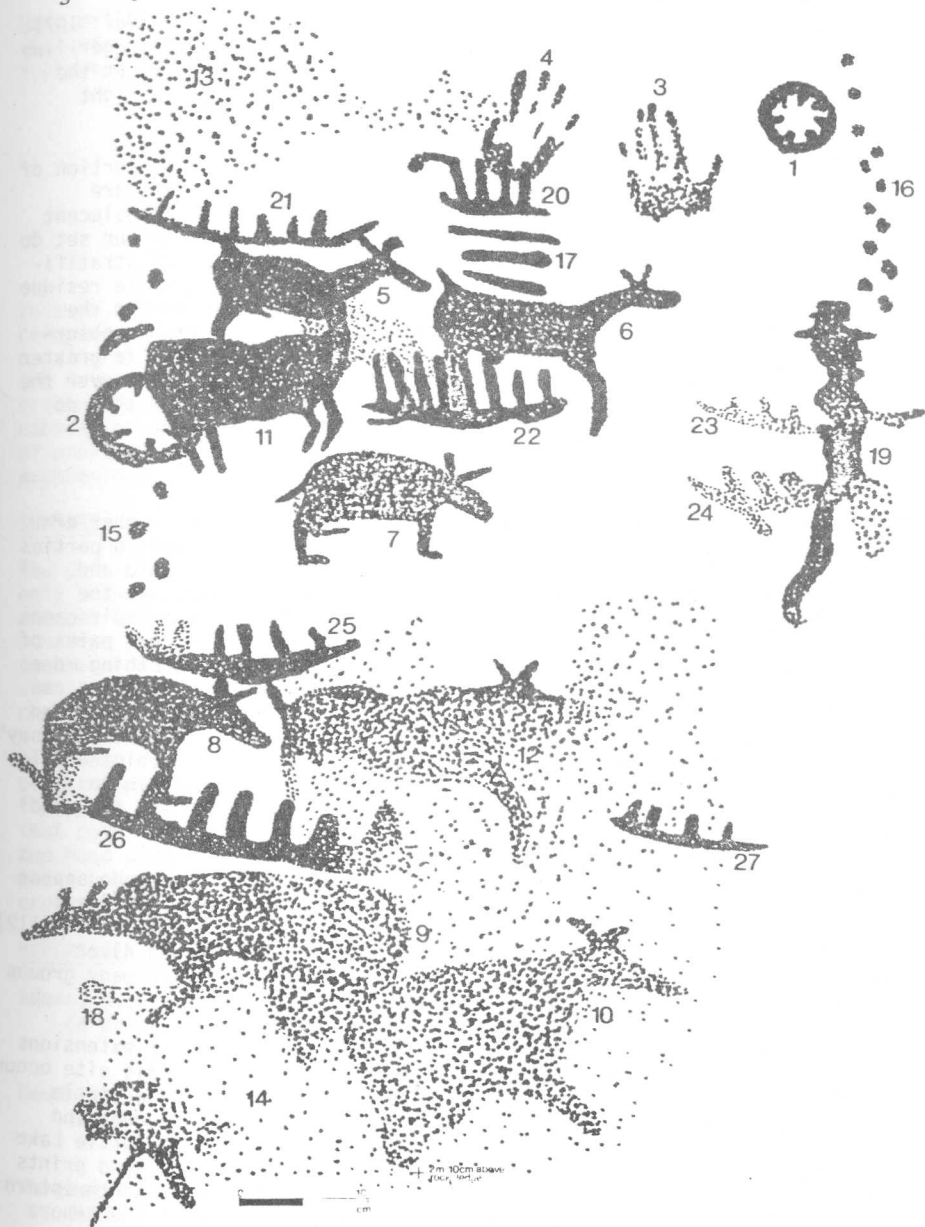


FIGURE 1: The Cuttle Lake Large Site (Dfkg-2); this is the middle panel of the south face.

the panel; these dots occur also on DeKg-1 (Dewdney and Kidd 1967: 107). Three horizontal lines, 17 in the top portion of the panel, a larger line in the bottom portion, 18, and an indistinguishable figure, 19, at the right half-covered in green and black lichen have no "twins". Eight manned canoes, 20 to 27, complete the panel.

Four canoes, 20, 21, 22 and 26, the upper "moose", 11, and the portion of the lower smudge, 14, between the lower "moose" and lower bear, are executed in a translucent wine-red distinguishable from the translucent orange-red of the other figures. While the figures in each colour set do not overlap each other, the two sets do, a clear indication of stratification. Dewdney (Dewdney and Kidd 1967: 10) suggested that white residue exists between Canoe 26 and Animal 8 indicating a greater age for the wine-red canoe. However, our investigations did not confirm his observation; the white seepage has uniformly covered the panel but to greater and lesser degrees in different areas. Lichen has also begun to cover the morphs. We were unable to judge which colour set came first; they do not differ in style and theme and may actually be close in age.

DISCUSSION

The panel is intriguing as a problem of interpretation: the number of manned canoes associated with large game animals suggests hunting parties are the subject of the work. The site is located between Cuttle and Obikoba Lakes, neither of which contain archaeological sites, so the artists of this panel must have travelled to Cuttle Lake from their camps some distance away perhaps to hunt. But the emphasis on matched pairs of morphs suggests something more than a mere hunting story, something more in the realm of myth. As Marshack pointed out (1972: 117), rock art can have many simultaneous meanings: for instance, a ritual and its related material culture intended to enhance hunting skill will also have a "story" behind them identifying the mythical characters and actions depicted. To suggest that a site is somehow related to hunting does not begin to explain it, and it is likely that the Cuttle Lake Site with its "twinned" and stratified morphs has stratified meaning as well.

While multiple renderings of the same figure are uncommon, they do appear on sites across the Shield - at Pukamo island on Rainy Lake, the Agawa Pictographs (Dewdney and Kidd 1967: 83), the Sachigo River Site (ibid: 112), Pine Needle Lake (ibid: 122), and Kennedy Island on the French River (Adams, in press). However none of the above sites contain as many groups of recurrent morphs as the Cuttle Lake Large Site.

The lines of dots (morphs 15 and 16) and circles with interior extensions (morphs 1 and 2) which are placed adjacent to each other on this site occur together again at the nearby Crowrock Inlet Site (DeKg-1); the circle - dots group on that site is beside a deer or caribou morph (Dewdney and Kidd 1967: 107) so it may be that the circle - dots groups at Cuttle Lake are associated with the deer and caribou morphs 5 and 6. The hand prints at the top of the panel have parallels on many other sites in northwestern Ontario. Maria Seymour of the Native Curriculum Programme of the Kenora Board of Education, who is conducting interviews with her fellow native informants in order to collect Ojibway interpretations of the pictographs and petroglyphs of Northwestern Ontario, reports that hand-prints mean the death of a warrior near the site. These morphs may have had the same meaning for the prehistoric or historic artists themselves.

Hand prints are on at least 14 other sites in Northwestern Ontario including the nearby Crowrock Inlet Site DeKg-1. Dewdney noted the following about the spatial distribution of this morph type:

Regarding handprints, I might note that I know of only one occurrence farther west (than the Larus-Bloodvein Site), on a site near Snow Lake, northeast of The Pas, Manitoba. Southward they abound to the Shield's edge, but to the east they extend only a site or two past Lake Nipigon.

(Dewdney and Kidd 1967: 119)

This is almost precisely the distribution of prehistoric Blackduck ceramics as well, so, if the hand prints are prehistoric, they may have a cultural connection with the Blackduck people. The 1979 recording of the Rainy Lake pictographs was undertaken as part of a multi-year archaeological inventory of the area. While our survey did not uncover habitation sites near the Cuttle Lake Large Site, we did find evidence of prehistoric occupation near the Crowduck Inlet Site - the closest archaeological site to DeKg-1 is a Blackduck campsite.

SUMMARY

The Cuttle Lake Large Site is of major importance to Shield rock art not only because of its spectacular location and vivid morphs, but also because it may provide part of the key to pictograph interpretation. Its numerous pairs of identical morphs, its groups of possibly related figures such as the groups of dots, circles and deer or caribou, its obvious similarities to the nearby Crowrock Inlet Site, and its possible connection with Blackduck give the site a pattern and a context. We must work further with these clues to reach an understanding of the "story" in Shield rock art. Mrs. Seymour, while noting the numerous canoes and pointing out that all the animals are land creatures, concurred with the idea that this pictograph depicts a hunting party. However her suggestion that dots like morphs 15 and 16 have a Midewiwin origin, the presence of two hand prints of death, and the fact of the obvious pairing of symbols point beyond a simple hunting story toward a mythical hunt for spirit creatures. It is likely that this panel has multiple levels of meaning.

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