

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPT-LIKE PETROGLYPHS OF SOUTHEAST COLORADO

by

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### Summary

The petroglyphs of Southeast Colorado, that are found amongst the division described as Pecked Abstract Style, contain a strong resemblance to alphabetic characters once used in the Middle East, and have a particularly strong correspondence to the characters of the ancient Safaitic and Thamudic alphabets. Semiticists are mostly in agreement regarding the apparent correspondence, but have been unable to translate any of the glyphic sentences using Semitic dialects. Therefore they have concluded that there is not a direct connection between the Colorado glyphs and the Safaitic and Thamudic alphabets. Despite this, those who have pioneered the research point to the fact that not all Semitic dialects and languages have been tested, and also to the fact that there are many other similarities of style and execution that would appear to provide grounds for further study and investigation into the possibility of an early Semitic influence upon the petroglyphs of Colorado.

### Introduction

DURING THE summer of 1998 I travelled to Colorado to meet William McGlone, one of the authors of a book entitled "*Ancient American Inscriptions: Plow Marks or History?*"[1] (hereafter referred to as *AAI*). I had purchased and read the book a couple of years previously, and I was intrigued by one particular chapter in the book that described script-like petroglyphs that had been discovered in the canyons of Southeast Colorado. It had been suggested that these particular script-like petroglyphs contained a high degree of correspondence with letters employed in the early North Arabian

alphabets, and that they were apparently much older than the regional Plains Indian petroglyphs. Although I am far from being an expert in ancient North Arabian alphabets, I was keen to see the petroglyphs for myself.

The authors of *AAI* had made it perfectly clear that, despite the fact that they had been engaged in over seven years research in the field, in libraries, and in consultation with scholars world-wide, they were not at the point in their work where any firm conclusions could be drawn. They recognized the highly controversial nature of their interpretations, and were proceeding with caution. Likewise, this article does not

attempt to draw any firm conclusions. It is intended primarily to introduce readers, who may not be aware of the existence of the Colorado petroglyphs, to the subject. It is by no means exhaustive, and will only address particular glyphs. Readers who are seriously interested in studying the subject in greater depth, and who wish to become familiar with the hundreds of examples that appear to show letter-like signs, are strongly advised to consult both *AAI*, and, in particular, a more recent study by William R. McGlone and Phillip M. Leonard.[2]

### Location

IN THEIR PUBLICATIONS, Leonard and McGlone describe Southeast Colorado as being part of the High Plains of the western United States, and the region of Southeast Colorado in which the petroglyphs are located as being approximately defined by the Arkansas River in the north, the Cimarron River in the south, the foothills of the Rocky Mountains in the west, and the Kansas border in the east. This area is cut by a series of rugged canyons that contain thousands of petroglyphs and archaeological remains that have received little attention from archaeologists and epigraphers. The canyons where the vast majority of the petroglyphs are found are located along a series of streams flowing north-eastward to the Arkansas and south-eastward to the Cimarron, with the greatest concentration being in a small 80 by 100 mile region from the Apishipa River (west) to Two Buttes Creek (east). The region is very isolated, and the glyphs are sometimes found on the face or top of caprock high on canyon rims, but more frequently on boulders on lower benches along streams, side canyons, rock shelters, and other natural formations that would have provided a possible habitat for humans in ancient times. In these areas, arable land, water and game are also available, which is in contrast to the arid grassland terrain of the region in general. Many people, from the Paleo and Archaic

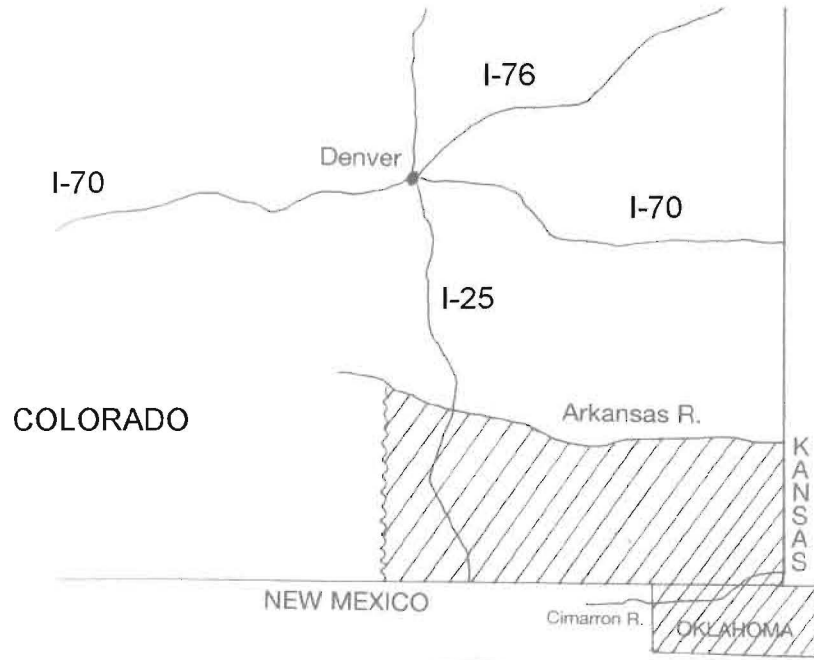
periods to the time of the Plains Indians and historic European settlers, have lived in these canyons.

**Figure 1A** is a map in which the region discussed in this report is shown as a shaded area. **Figure 1B** is a photograph showing typical terrain.

### Southeast Colorado petroglyphs

The petroglyphs of the area contain different styles and characteristics that seem to relate to different periods. Coupled with this is the fact that the various groups each contain different amounts of patination. A patina is a desert varnish that forms over time on the rocks of the region by the deposit of aeolian particles rich in manganese and iron. The particles are fixed by bacteria and thus give the sandstone a characteristic hard surface. The resulting colour is that of dark brown or black, but which intensifies with age. The varnish formation can be radiocarbon dated based on the organic components of the varnish. However, the process of radiocarbon dating the varnish has been found not to be as conclusive as it was originally thought to have been. This is due to more recent organic matter entering the layers of varnish and thus violating its homogeneity. Nevertheless, it is a fact that different groups of petroglyphs that can be isolated and defined according to their particular art style, will be found to contain a different degree of patination to other groups containing a different type of artistic content. Therefore the degree of patination is still somewhat relevant in broadly determining age when attempting to classify the petroglyphs according to their respective styles.

VARIOUS ATTEMPTS have been made to classify the south-eastern Colorado petroglyphs but, basically, four main divisions can be discerned, although more detailed study needs to be undertaken in order to further classify each group into substyles, etc., These will now be described,



**Fig.1A: The region discussed in this report is shown by a shaded area.**



**Fig.1B: Photograph of a typical area in which the script-like petroglyphs are located.**

and the four main categories of Southeast Colorado petroglyphs will be listed, according to the observable amount of patination, beginning with the most recent.

**1. Historic European Style.** This group consists of cowboy art, graffiti, and Santa Fe Trail autographs that have been inscribed upon rock surfaces by European settlers, cowboys, and soldiers. They date from approximately 1541 A.D. to the present and are virtually without patination.

**2. Plains Biographic Style.** This group consists of pictures of humans, animals, and birds and are characterized by an abraded outline. They are believed to have been made by Comanche, Cheyenne, Kiowa, Ute, and Arapahoe Indians who occupied the region in historic times. The art forms that are represented are often similar to those found on the tappees and costumes of the Indians, and the style is found throughout the Great Plains into Canada. This group of petroglyphs date from approximately the same period as the first group above, and are also virtually without patination.

**3. Pecked Pictorial Styles.** This group of glyphs have been executed by a process of *pecking* at the rock with some form of tool. They invariably depict representations of animals and people. Included are the Pecked Representational, Pecked Purgatoire, and Rio Grande styles. Some, such as the pecked quadrupeds, parallel those found over much of the Southwest. The glyphs are moderately or heavily patinated. The oldest and most heavily patinated glyphs, where the bodies of the humans and animals have been fully pecked out, date from 3000 years ago, whilst others, possibly Apache in origin, are only pecked in outline and date from about 600 years ago.

**4. Pecked Abstract.** These are characterized by an almost complete lack of any representation of animals or humans, and consist of pecked geometric styles, meanders

and grids. The petroglyph groves are always found to be extremely heavily patinated and date from perhaps 1000 years ago to over 2000 years ago. They have no known connection to historic Indian tribes, and appear to be completely different in artistic content to the glyphs and designs inscribed by those peoples. Also, the Pecked Abstract glyphs are the most frequently occurring and most widely distributed in the region. There are thousands of individual glyphs in hundreds of panels. It is within this group that the script-like petroglyphs have been discovered and where our prime focus of interest lies.

BEFORE PASSING on, it should also be mentioned that there is another grouping of glyphs in the region that consists of parallel lines intersected by small vertical lines. These contain varying degrees of patination and seem largely to have been executed during a period beginning approximately 1000 years ago. Many of them appear to be nothing more than stone-tool-fabrication marks, whilst others are possible "counts" or "tallies". However, controversy has surrounded a portion of these particular glyphs in as much as some of them resemble a variety of Ogam writing that was in use during the first millennium A.D. in the British Isles. These have an average date of approximately 1800 - 2000 years before the present. Because they predate much of the Ogam in the British Isles, and because they usually lack vowels, this particular group is sometimes referred to as proto-Ogam. It is hoped to discuss the "proto-Ogam" glyphs in more detail in a future article, but we must now concentrate on the Pecked Abstract Style glyphs with which we are primarily concerned in this paper.

#### **A closer look at the Pecked Abstract Style petroglyphs**

In their publications, Leonard and McGlone describe how, in the fall of 1981, they visited

a petroglyph site in Southeast Colorado where there were hundreds of glyphs in an assortment of styles on the base of sandstone cliff faces 80 feet high. One particular set of glyphs appeared to contain a script-like appearance. (**Figure 2A** - photograph, and **Figure 2B** - drawing). Subsequent study of the glyphs led to the suggestion that they appeared to correspond with certain alphabetic characters of a South Arabian script known as Sabeen. This was due the observation that the glyphs appeared to contain two different pitch-fork-shaped characters that had existed in this particular South Arabian script.

ANCIENT SEMITIC scripts are divided by specialists into North Semitic and South Semitic. The South Semitic scripts include both North Arabian and South Arabian, with Sabeen belonging to the South Arabian subset. A tentative translation of the glyphs was subsequently made, but was later found to be faulty in a number of aspects because it was later realized that only a portion of the characters had been included in the original transcription. Study of the complete sequence of glyphs revealed that they corresponded more closely to North Arabian scripts than to South Arabian scripts. Further attempts at a translation using the Safaitic (North Arabian) script also proved to be faulty, although this was largely due to the fact that it omitted two signs and erroneously included natural rock markings as letters. Nevertheless, it was apparent that the North Arabic scripts, especially Safaitic and Thamudic, were the alphabets in which the greatest degree of correspondence with the Colorado signs was to be found. **Figure 3** is a chart in which the corpus of the Colorado letter-like signs are compared with the North Arabian alphabets that predate present Arabic and which were used in the Middle East from a few centuries before the time of Christ to a few centuries thereafter.

Rather than attempting further translations, the approach of Leonard and McGlone and

their associates has been to collect as many groups of signs as possible and to simply record the various characters. An extremely large number of script-like petroglyphs were eventually categorized. **Figure 4** shows a typical panel of Pecked Abstract petroglyphs in the region in which are to be found many that contain a correspondence to the aforementioned Arabic scripts. Certain glyphs on the panel can be seen in greater detail in **Figures 5A** and **8A**. For instance, **Figure 5A** (photograph) and **Figure 5B** (drawing) show a sequence of Pecked Abstract letter-like signs located on the panel, whilst **Figure 6A** (photograph) and **Figure 6B** (drawing) show more letter-like glyphs from another panel.

The collection of recorded glyphs was subsequently sent in the form of a monograph to thirty four professional scholars. Interestingly, nine of the ten responding Semitists discerned a close correspondence between the Colorado signs and the South Semitic letter forms, especially the North Arabian scripts. Despite this, none of the experts in Semitic scripts, including those who subsequently travelled to Colorado to view the glyphs for themselves, have been able to translate the Colorado signs using Semitic dialects.

ALTHOUGH not all Semitic languages were tested, the apparent failure to translate the glyphs has led to the general consensus of opinion amongst scholars that, despite the admittedly disturbing and puzzling similarity between the Colorado glyphs and the characters of the Thamudic and Safaitic alphabets, there is not a direct connection between them. Many have concluded that there can be no question of an Arabian prehistoric influence or presence in the New World, and that the Colorado inscriptions demonstrate an entirely indigenous process of evolution that has to be determined from a purely isolationist standpoint.

However, Leonard and McGlone, as they





**Fig.2A: LOWER LEFT: First Pecked Abstract petroglyphs discovered displaying letter-like signs.**  
**UPPER RIGHT: Part of the continuation of the sequence that was later discovered.**



**Fig.2B: ABOVE; Drawing (for clarification) corresponding to lower left sequence in Figure 2A. (Traced from a photograph).**  
**BELOW: Drawing (for clarification) showing complete sequence of letter-like signs. (Traced from a photograph).**

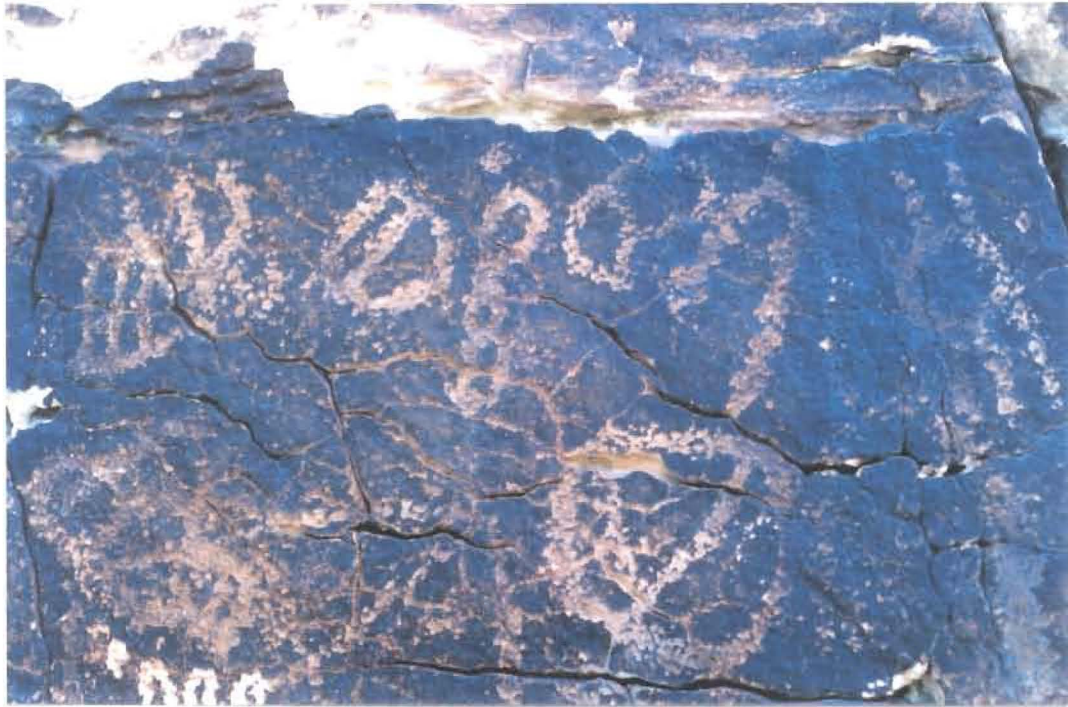
	Old World	Colorado		Old World	Colorado		Old World	Colorado
1	Y Y K	Y Y K	11	++	++	21	3 3 3	3 3 3
2	J n H	J n H	12	—	—	22	9 9 9	9 9 9
3	□	□	13	9	9 9	23	X	X
4	□ φ	±	14	π π	π π	24	φ φ φ	φ φ φ
5	ψ ψ	ψ ψ	15	7	7	25	⊂	⊂
6	Y Y	Y Y	16	⌒ ⌒	⌒ ⌒	26	≡ 3	≡ 3
7	⊙ ⊙ ⊙	⊙ ⊙ ⊙	17	∖ ~	∖ 3	27	+	+
8	T 8	T 8	18	√ <	√ √	28	9 9	9 9
9	ψ ψ ψ	ψ ψ ψ	19	0 ∴ 0	∴ 0 0	29	0 0 0	0 0 0
10	X	X	20	≡	≡ ≡			

**Fig.3: Chart showing comparison of Old World North Arabian letters with the letter-like signs of Southeast Colorado. The same groups of 29 repeated signs are found from site to site in different combinations. The Colorado signs and the Arabian letters are paired here by visual similarity, not by corresponding sound values. The Arabian letters, of course, had sound values, but because it has not been possible to make translations of the glyphic phrases from Colorado using these sound values, the possibility exists that the sound values of the Colorado signs were different to those used in the Old World, and are therefore unknown.**



**Fig.4: Photograph of a Pecked Abstract panel from Colorado.**





**Fig.5A: Close-up photograph of a sequence of letter-like signs located on the panel shown in Figure 4.**

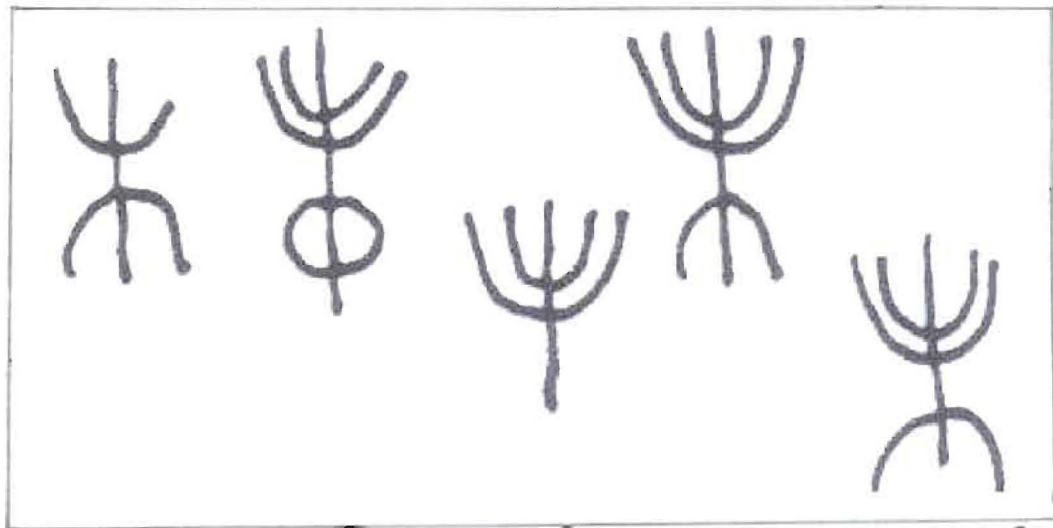


**Fig.5B: Drawing (for clarification) of the signs shown in Figure 5A. (Traced from photograph).**





**Fig.6A: Photograph of another group of letter-like signs from Southeast Colorado.**



**Fig.6B: Drawing (for clarification) of the signs shown in Fig.6A.  
(Traced from photograph).**

state in their publication *A Study of Script-Like Petroglyphs in Southeast Colorado*, feel that some very good reasons nevertheless exist for advancing a hypothesis of an influence of a North Arabian script on the Colorado signs. Indeed, one of their principal reasons is the occurrence of the same sequence of up to five signs at more than one site, and the fact that these sequences have also been identified in North Arabian inscriptions. Such recurring sequences would also seem to strongly support the hypothesis that some form of writing is present. Besides this, Leonard and McGlone also point to other parallels between the North Arabian scripts and the signs found in Colorado. The most important of these can be summarized as follows:

1. In both scripts, signs often appear rotated.
2. Stylization is often involved.
3. Certain Colorado signs claimed by some correspondents not to be present in the Middle East have subsequently been found in published illustrations of North Arabian inscriptions.
4. Peculiar (stylized) letter shapes are sometimes employed and are consistent in both central and western Arabia north of modern Yemen and in Syria, the Sinai, and Jordan where North Arabian script was used, and in Colorado.
5. Both scripts occur in relatively short rows, columns or arcs of signs.
6. Both scripts also occur in jumbled patterns of groups of signs running at different angles on the rocks and with superimposition of the groups.
7. Other simple shapes that are not found in North Arabian scripts, but which might be expected to occur in the Colorado signs if they were independently invented, are indeed absent in the Colorado glyphs.
8. A number of complex, symbol-like combinations of the repeated signs that can be broken into the simpler repeated signs have been found in Colorado. A number of these compounds also existed in the Middle

East. (Figures 7A and 8A are photographs of glyphs from Colorado that appear to be compounds. Figures 7B and 8B are the respective drawings of these compounds, and are accompanied by diagrams showing how the compounds can be broken into component letter-like signs).

9. Some of the Colorado petroglyphs have been interpreted as atlatls (spear throwers). These shapes, consisting of a circle at the end or in the middle of a vertical stem, are often shown protruding from the back of an animal. Such representations are also found in Arabia. (See Figure 9)

10. The circular motif arranged on a vertical straight line (described above) is also used as a letter in North Arabian alphabets. The central motif also appears in a number of variations in the Colorado script that have counterparts in the Middle East.

11. If the radiocarbon dating of the Colorado glyphs eventually proves to be correct, then both scripts were used during a period of a few hundred years centering on the time of Christ.

#### Major objections to the hypothesis, and possible explanations

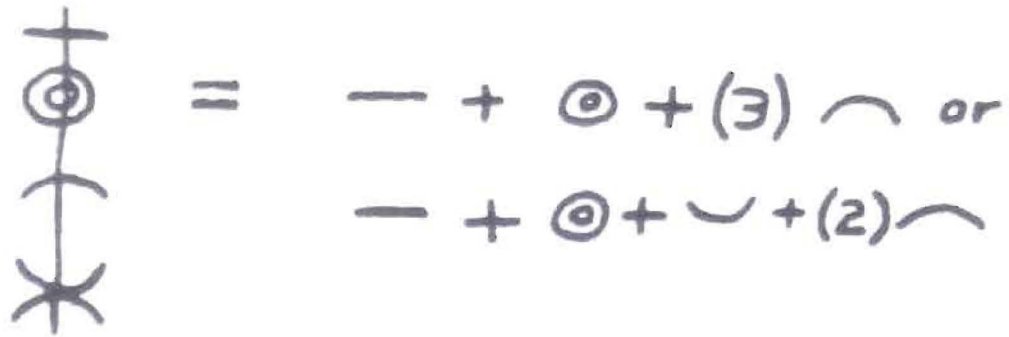
APART FROM; as yet, being unable to supply coherent and acceptable translation of the Colorado glyphs using Semitic dialects, other objections have been made regarding the possibility of a North Arabian influence upon the Colorado signs. Primarily, mere similarity between the two groups of signs is considered to be insufficient by some scholars for the acceptance of influence or connection, unless the Colorado signs can be successfully translated. Furthermore, many critics also contend that great cautions should be taken in making comparisons between the Colorado signs and North Arabian letter forms using published tables, especially when depending upon pooled use of the North Arabian signs from several authors who may have worked in different geographical areas. Some scholars have also



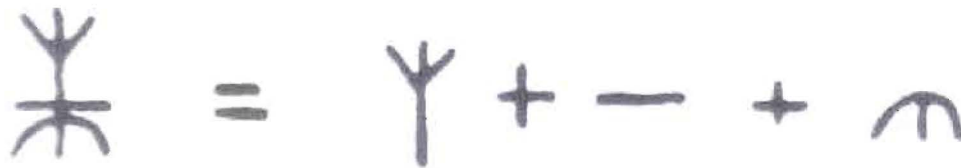
**Fig.7A: Photograph of a compound glyph from Southeast Colorado.**



**Fig.8A: Photograph of a compound glyph from Southeast Colorado.**

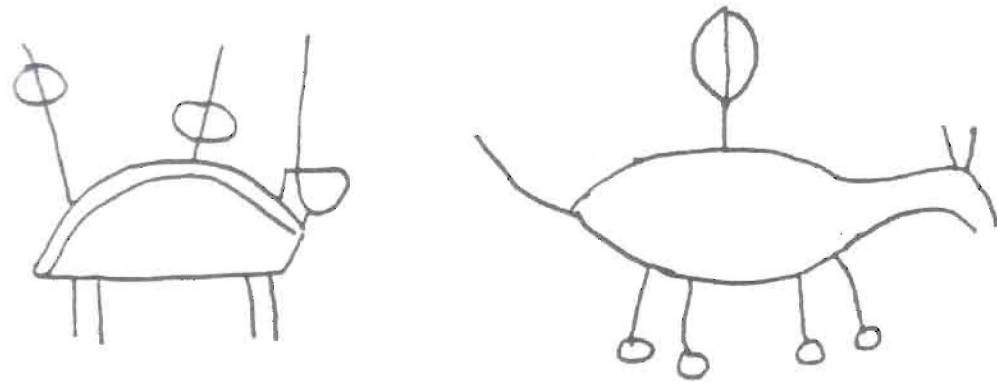


**Fig.7B: Drawing, traced from photograph, of the compound glyph shown in Fig.7A together with a diagram showing how the compound can be broken into component letter-like signs.**



**Fig.8B: Drawing, traced from photograph, of the compound glyph shown in Fig.8A together with a diagram showing how the compound can be broken into component letter-like signs.**





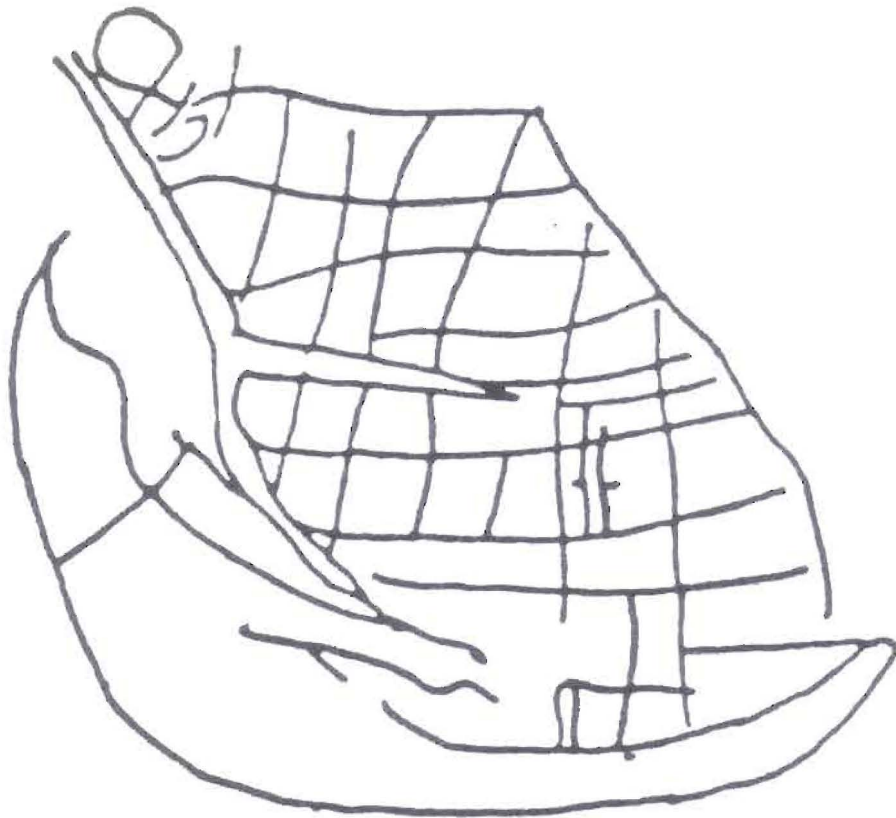
**Fig.9: Drawings (traced from photographs) of animal petroglyphs from Arabia (left), and Southeast Colorado (right). Both show fletched missiles protruding from the back of the animals.**

objected to a comparison on the grounds that no known single Old World alphabet *exactly* matches the signs found in the Colorado corpus.

WITH THESE objections in mind, Leonard and McGlone have suggested that we may be seeing a composite alphabet not previously identified, which may show local changes to a previously imported script that may even have utilized North Arabian subtypes in varying degrees. There is also the possibility that the original Old World script was imported in various stages by scribes originating from different calligraphic backgrounds. Indeed such mixtures are to be found in the Old World, especially where Safaitic and Tabuki ( a possible Thamudic subtype) meet.

One of the most persistent objections, however, is the fact that to suggest that an

Old World script, or a variant of one, was present in pre-conquest America, contravenes conventional dogma regarding contact between the Old and New Worlds prior to the time of Columbus. The reader will be aware that many counter objections have been made to the conventional doctrine that the peoples of the New World existed and evolved in a hermetically sealed hemisphere without any contact or influence from the Old World. It is not within the scope of this short essay to elaborate on the evidence that points to the possibility that some form of contact did occur. Such evidence is abundant and some of it has already been discussed in this journal, but it is worth noting that there is one particular petroglyph amongst the Colorado signs that may be pertinent to the question of early contact. This particular glyph, (**Figure 10**) which could be particularly relevant to the North Arabian epigraphic hypothesis, lies at the right end of a 60-foot long panel of



**Fig.10: Drawing (traced from a photograph) of the Southeast Colorado petroglyph  
That shows a ship-like figure.**

ed Abstract petroglyphs, and is now eighteen feet above present ground level due to erosion over time by a stream at the cliff base. The glyph was first recorded in the late 1940s by Professor Wiesendanger, and depicts a ship-like figure that has the same dark patina of age consistent with the letter-like signs in the main panel that also include several repeated signs. Whilst it cannot be said that the petroglyph definitely depicts an Arabian sea-going vessel, its ship-like appearance is unique in the region, and certainly unexpected when considering that nearest coastline is approximately 600 miles away. Some would even argue that the petroglyph does not depict a ship at all, but the fact that Arabia had an ancient seafaring tradition must be considered. The Arabs had plied the same sea routes as the Romans for millennia, sailing beyond the Persian Gulf to the open waters of the ocean to the west of India. They had also traded by sea with China. A trans-Atlantic, or trans-Pacific crossing was not beyond their technical capabilities, though we cannot say for certain that they actually undertook such a crossing.

With regard to the difficulties of translation, Leonard and McGlone have suggested that the Colorado signs may reflect the use of an Old World alphabet or language that is unknown to present scholars, or the use of an obscure Old World alphabet that is only familiar to certain specialists. There is also the possibility that a change of language or sound value took place in the Colorado glyphs, and that the scribes were using Old World letter forms to write a New World language. Another possibility is that the Colorado symbols do not reflect a language at all, and may show a degeneration from

actual writing to some form of mere symbol.

### Conclusion

WE MAY NEVER know the truth of the matter, but it is necessary that the Colorado glyphs in question be recorded in a detailed and scholarly manner. It is for this reason that Leonard and McGlone felt it important that as many forms of the Colorado signs as possible be included in their studies, not only for the sake of posterity, but in order that all facets of similarity to the inscriptions and the rock art of the Middle East can be studied by those who are interested, and especially those who are in a position to make informed judgements. Since the sad and untimely death of William McGlone in 1998, Phillip Leonard and others have continued with the research. Semitic languages, and idioms of such languages peculiar to a particular province, that were not originally tried with regard to translation are now in the process being tested. Certain advances have been achieved and initial results are encouraging, although it is not possible, nor would it be appropriate, to supply further comment upon the current situation at the time of writing.

ONCE AGAIN, it must be stressed that this particular article does not, in any way, attempt to provide a definitive and detailed analysis. It has only been possible to show but a few of the hundreds of glyphs that comprise the entire Colorado corpus, but those who may have been stimulated by its content, and those who are in a position to offer informed and scholarly opinions, are strongly urged to consult the aforementioned publications.

## REFERENCES

- 1 McGlone, W. Leonard, P. Guthrie, J. Gillespie, R. Whittall, J. *Ancient American Inscriptions: Plow Marks or History?*  
Sutton, MA: Early Sites research Society, 1993.
- 2 Leonard, P. McGlone R. *A Study of Script-Like Petroglyphs in Southeast Colorado.*  
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