# SHAMANS, SPIRALS, AND WARRIORS - ROCK ART IN CASTLE ROCK PUEBLO COMMUNITY, COLORADO, USA THROUGH NATIVE AMERICAN ORAL TRADITIONS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATIONS

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**Abstract**
For the archaeologist, every additional bit of information about the culture studied is like striking gold, and can contribute to a more complete and credible reconstruction of prehistoric reality. The ability to read and decode the information and content of Pueblo rock art from the canyons of the central Mesa Verde region, located on the border between present-day Utah and Colorado, is precisely this type of valuable information source. However, interpreting the information contained in the paintings and petroglyphs left on the walls of Colorado and Utah canyons hundreds or thousands of years ago is as fascinating as it is difficult.
This paper presents the initial results from the research on one of the settlement clusters that consists of around 40 small sites and the community center that were built by ancient Pueblo people in the Sand Canyon area of the southwestern part of Colorado in the 13th century AD. The scientific investigations encompass the documentation of the architecture and settlement structure, as well as petroglyphs and paintings from selected sites.
The rock art and murals from the area include humans and animals, spirals, concentric circles, as well as other geometric images. The interpretation is based on archaeological studies and the oral tradition of contemporary Pueblo people.

**Introduction – Rock art of Pueblo culture in the Mesa Verde region**
The genesis of rock art in the Southwest and the Mesa Verde region is much older and predates the arrival of Pueblo culture, and was no longer relevant in later periods only of their culture. However, the Pueblo managed to take over the cultural scene for over 1,000 years, including the iconography of rock art in this area. We owe our understanding of many elements of this iconography to the ethnographic and anthropological studies conducted among the Pueblo Indians from the 19th and 20th centuries up to the present day. In ethnographic sources, as well as the rich sphere of oral tradition, which today also provides enormous help in the analysis of rock art iconography, we find a number of helpful tips for reconstructing the function and significance of rock art in various cultures of the Southwest. It should be clearly acknowledged that the analysis of rock art iconography in this region is also extremely helpful to archaeologists and anthropologists interpreting and reconstructing various phases of Pueblo culture development, including pre-Columbian, as well as other cultures of the region; this applies equally to other parts of the world (Bernardini 2005; Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2006; Rozwadowski 2009).
Rock art in the Mesa Verde region can be found in human settlements, as well as far away from human communities, and in terms of the landscape in niches and rock shelters, on canyon walls, rocks and individual boulders. It seems that especially rock art from the archaic

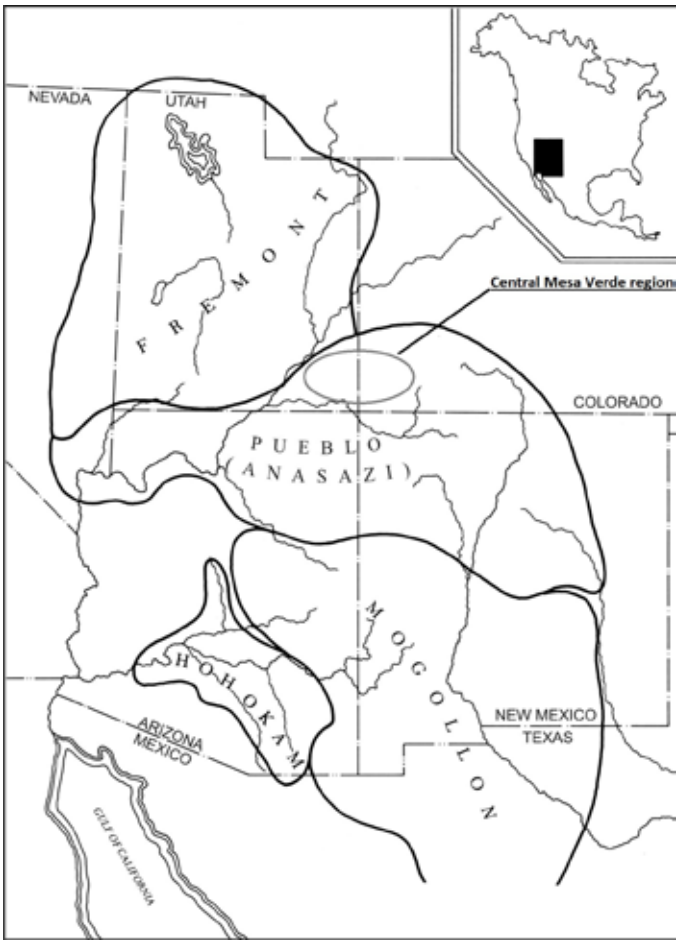



Fig. 1. The location of the North American Southwest and the Central Mesa Verde re¬gion (after Cordell 1997: Figure 1.1. modified by M. and M. Przybyła and the author).

period and the beginning of the development of Pueblo culture in this area (the Basketmaker II period, around 500 BC–500 AD) was often placed some distance from settlements, for example, near water sources (Cole 2009: 119). It also seems that the rock art of the Pueblo I–III periods (700–1300 AD) and later was undoubtedly rooted in earlier periods (Cole 2009; Schaafsma 1980), but was most often placed in the settlements themselves, or in their immediate vicinity.

The two main periods of Pueblo culture are as follows: Basketmaker II–III (1000/500 BC.–750 A.D.), and Pueblo I–V (700/750 AD–present) (Lipe et al. 1999), and in the past, the widest territory inhabited by Pueblo Indians (Fig. 1) was the vast area that today encompasses the southern parts of Utah and Colorado, and the northern and middle parts of Arizona and New Mexico (Cordell 1997; Plog 1997).

Today, there are 20 contemporary Pueblo communities on reservations in Arizona and New Mexico. Consequently, Pueblo culture exemplifies cultural continuity from ancient times to the present day.

In the 12th and 13th centuries AD, this may be due to conflicts of greater intensity and frequency than those of earlier periods, possibly between various settlements and settlement clusters, as well as strangers from outside the Pueblo world (Cordell 1997; Lipe et at. 1999). In this case, life, including spiritual life and religious practice, was centered within the settlements themselves, or very close to them. In addition, unfavorable tendencies, both environmental and climatic, and also connected with social pressure and intensified conflicts and wars, were not a one-time or short-lived phenomenon, but rather extended over time (probably throughout most of the 13th century AD), and were reflected in the rock art of the region. This is seen primarily in more numerous depictions of battle scenes. Figures of armed warriors, often with huge shields covering most of the body, and portrayals of battle scenes appear much more often in rock art (and also in the iconography of pottery and wall murals) of the Pueblo culture in periods of intense conflicts and struggles than in the 13th century AD.

Sand Canyon-Castle Rock Community Archaeological Project focuses on analysis and reconstruction of the settlement structure and sociocultural changes that took place in the

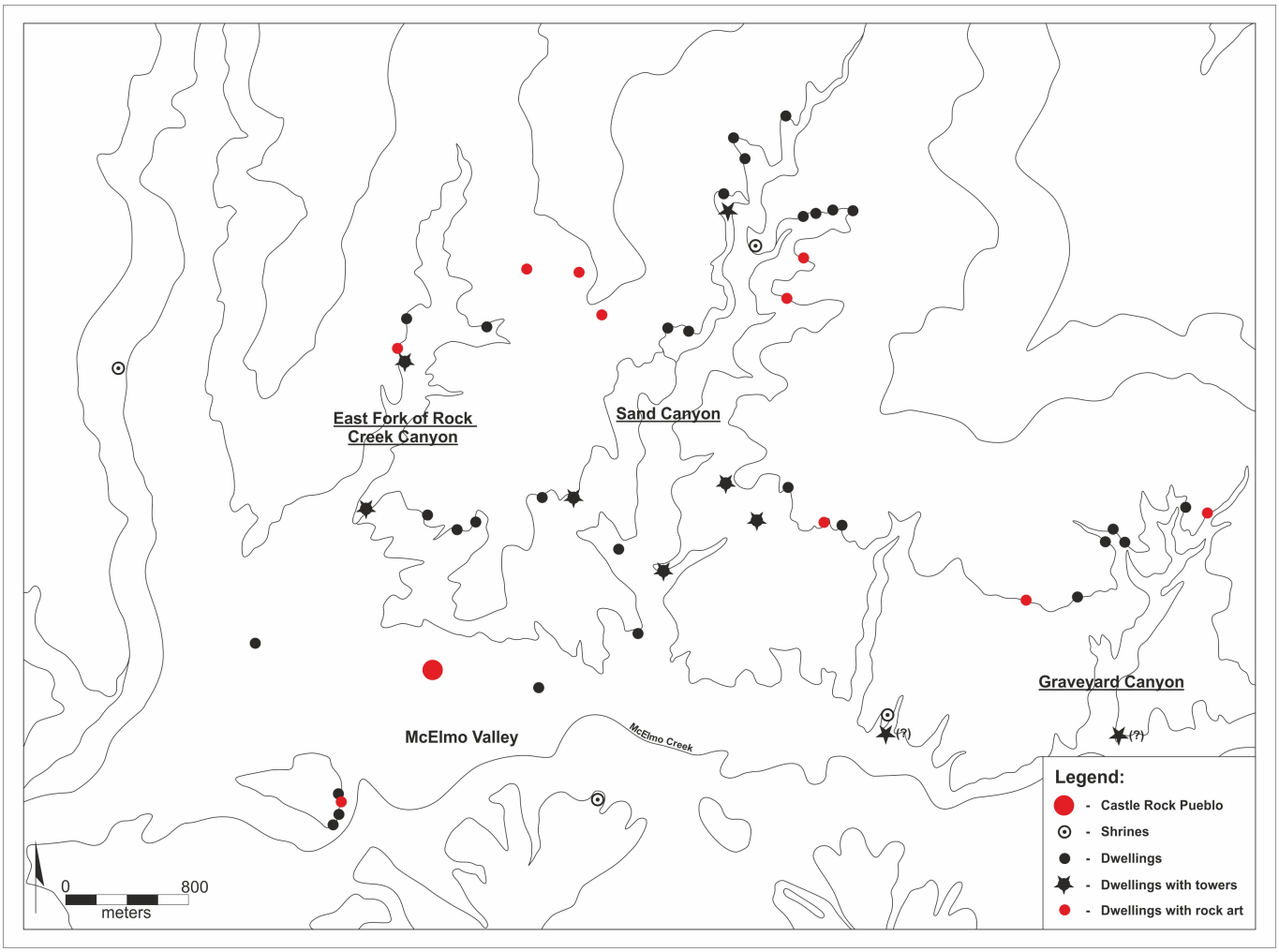



Fig. 2. Location of sites in Castle Rock Pueblo community from the thirteenth century A.D. (sites with question mark are with not certain chronology), by Sand Canyon-Castle Rock Community Archaeological Project.

Pueblo culture during the 13th century AD in the Mesa Verde region (Palonka 2016; Palonka et al. 2015).

The project is carried out by the Institute of Archaeology at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland and the project director is Dr Radosław Palonka. The research project is conducted mainly in three canyons (Sand Canyon, East Rock Creek Canyon and Graveyard Canyon) that are part of Canyons of the Ancients National Monument, a legally protected area (Figs. 2, 3). These canyons contain the remains of around 40 small sites and one large community center, Castle Rock Pueblo, which probably functioned as a community of allied sites all dated to the 13th century AD. This paper presents some results of the project work between 2011 and 2017, with a focus on the documentation of the rock art from the area. Rock art in the Castle Rock Community is represented both by Native American petroglyphs and paintings and also by modern graffiti (initials,

Fig. 3. Site 5MT135 (Sunny Alcove), cliff dwelling located on west side of Sand Canyon documented by Polish Project in 2011-2014. Photo by R. Palonka.

names and dates).

Ancient petroglyphs and paintings in different sites in the community include mostly geometric designs, like lines, bird tracks, zigzags, concentric circles and spirals. It also encompasses fighting and hunting scenes, anthropomorphic figures (possibly shamans), hand prints and clan symbols. Most of the rock art is placed within a dwelling site's boundaries, but we have to remember that some paintings and petroglyphs are not contemporaneous with the 13th century AD settlements.

**Fighting warriors in Castle Rock Pueblo**

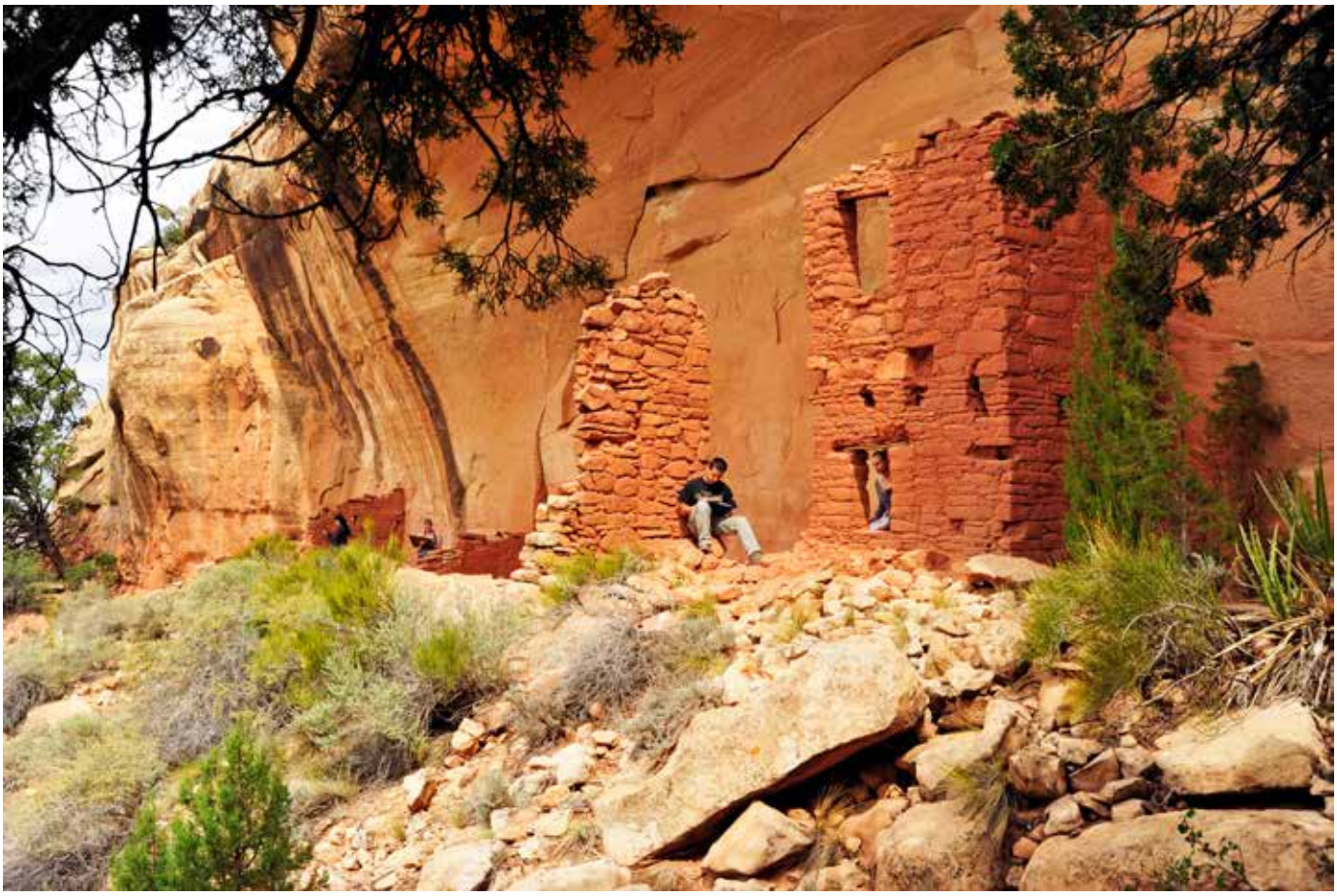
At the largest site of the group, Castle Rock Pueblo, at least four places have been confirmed to have various examples of rock art (only petroglyphs). The most famous scene at this site is a panel of three warriors fighting each other (Fig. 4). Two figures are armed with bows and arrows, and stand with their backs to each other (which might suggest mutual defense or a joint attack), while a third figure, holding an object (probably a shield), is falling or sitting down while facing one of the bow-bearing figures.

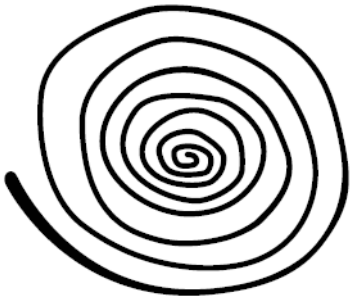
Fig. 4. Petroglyph panel depicting three fighting warriors from Castle Rock Pueblo, the community center located in Sand Canyon. Photo by M. Znamirowski.

The portrayal of fighting figures in profile with a sort of hump on the back is not very common in the rock art of the region, and it evokes an analogy to similar portrayals in the southeastern part of Utah; likewise for the so-called antennae (probably a type of feather ornament) visible on the heads of the two warriors standing with their backs to one another (Cole 1990: Plate 60; Kuckelman 2000, ed.; Schaafsma 1980: Figure 126).

Castle Rock Pueblo was a community center in the Mesa Verde region in the 13th century AD. The village was probably founded in the 1250s, as indicated by tree-ring dates.

The latest tree-ring date is AD 1274 and the total number of residents has been estimated at about 75–150 (Kuckelman 2000, ed.). Excavations conducted in the 1990s revealed that the settlement was attacked, as indicated by human remains representing at least 41 unburied





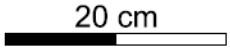



Fig. 5a. Two Story House in Graveyard Canyon during the documentation and the examples of the petroglyphs from the site. Fig. 5b) geometric designs with frog-man in the center as interpreted by Hopi consultants. Fig. 5c) spiral that might have been connected with the astronomical observations of possible winter solstice. Photo by R. Słaboński, drawing by M. Znamirowski.

Fig. 6a. Laser scanning the Site 5MT129 in Sand Canyon with preserved architecture in the alcove and petroglyphs outside it. Photo by M. Znamirowski. Fig. 6b. The rock art panel from the Site 5MT129 showing spiral (connected probably with the astronomical observations), concentric circles, lines, drilled hole and other designs. Photo by M. Znamirowski.

individuals, some showing signs of violent death, as well as burned structures.

These data correspond with the oral tradition of Hopi people that was recorded in the 1870s about the three-day battle that presumably took place at Castle Rock between ancestors of the Hopi people and possibly Ute ancestors before the final migration of Pueblo people from the Mesa Verde region. According to the information from the Hopi oral tradition, Ute invaders attacked them for food. Kuckelman infers that the petroglyph panel was created during the occupation of the settlement, or it was made by the survivors before or after the battle at Castle Rock Pueblo that forced the surviving residents to migrate (Kuckelman 2000, ed.). This could be one of the possible explanations of the final days of Castle Rock Pueblo.

In addition to the panel of warriors, the northern part of the site has a flattened rock in a rather inaccessible place, with several petroglyphs that, according to some researchers (also based on interpretations of the oral tradition), are related to water symbols (Kuckelman 2000, ed.; Cole 1990).

The water symbol, in the form of a spiral and meanders, is also depicted in the form of petroglyphs on two large stone blocks located in the northwestern part of the site. On the south side, in the narrow passage between two rocks, which was once bounded by architecture, are depictions of two curved lines about 45 cm long and 5 cm wide. Most often, such portrayals are interpreted as specially shaped sticks (a type of boomerang) for hunting rabbits.

Yet here oral tradition provides other possible explanations: one of the Hopi elders visiting this site in the early 1990s claimed that it was a symbol of one of the Hopi clans, the Water Snake clan (Kuckelman 2000, ed.).

Right next to the last of these petroglyphs is a small panel with geometric representations, including rectangles, incisions and small, hollow recesses arranged in lines, the whole of which is quite difficult to interpret.

Our visit with three Hopi men at this site in 2016 revealed one more petroglyph panel that our Hopi consultants interpret as a map showing particular parts of the canyon with the locations of different sites and water sources. It shows wavy lines with dots on both sides of the lines.

**Shamans and spirals**

An interesting and very difficult matter to interpret are the images of trapezoidal or triangular anthropomorphic forms. These figures are in several sites of the studied settlement cluster, but only at two are they quite large (40–60 cm) and located in fairly exposed areas in the middle of each settlement. At the Vision House site, located in the eastern part of Sand Canyon, this trapezoidal figure carved on the rock is located above the main complex of buildings, on the ceiling of a rock shelter. The painted panel in the Gallery, a settlement in East Rock Creek Canyon, features at least three trapezoidal or triangular figures, two painted white, and one painted red (this one is the best preserved) with arms down along the torso, or raised up (Fig. 7). One of the figures has a poorly preserved feather headdress, which was only visible after analyzing images using graphic programs and filters (Fig. 8). The middle figure on this panel holds an undefined object in the left hand; analogies to similar representations from the southeastern part of Utah show figures holding large containers (perhaps baskets) woven plant shoots and fibers, or also decapitated human heads. At this point, due to the degree of preservation of the painting, it is difficult to clearly define its character, although triangular and trapezoidal figures are characteristic of earlier periods and are most often interpreted

Fig. 7. Room B at the Site 5MT264 (The Gallery) with preserved plasters and paintings on interior walls of the second story and rock art (paintings) located in the center of the site. Photo by R. Słaboński

as shamans (Schaafsma 1980: 109; Slifer 2000: 27), while figures with feather headdresses can symbolize chiefs or warriors.

Representations of such anthropomorphic forms (both petroglyphs and paintings) are most characteristic of this region for the period of the third to fifth centuries AD. Often, such representations belong to the eastern variants of the so-called San Juan Basketmaker anthropomorphic style (Cole 2009: 117–143; Rozwadowski 2009: 228; Schaafsma 1980: Map 3, 73, 109–121; Slifer 2000: 26–34), where San Juan mainly refers to the location of this style's occurrence in the San Juan River basin of southwestern Colorado, northwestern New Mexico, southeastern Utah and northeastern Arizona. The most intriguing thing is therefore the relation of these representations made in the middle of the first millennium AD, or at least several centuries earlier than the first settlements with stone architecture. Undoubtedly, the stone builders had to see these images, and a very intriguing question remains: what significance did the images have for them, since they were found precisely in the middle of their settlements? A fairly numerous group of rock art representations in the settlement cluster our group has studied are geometric

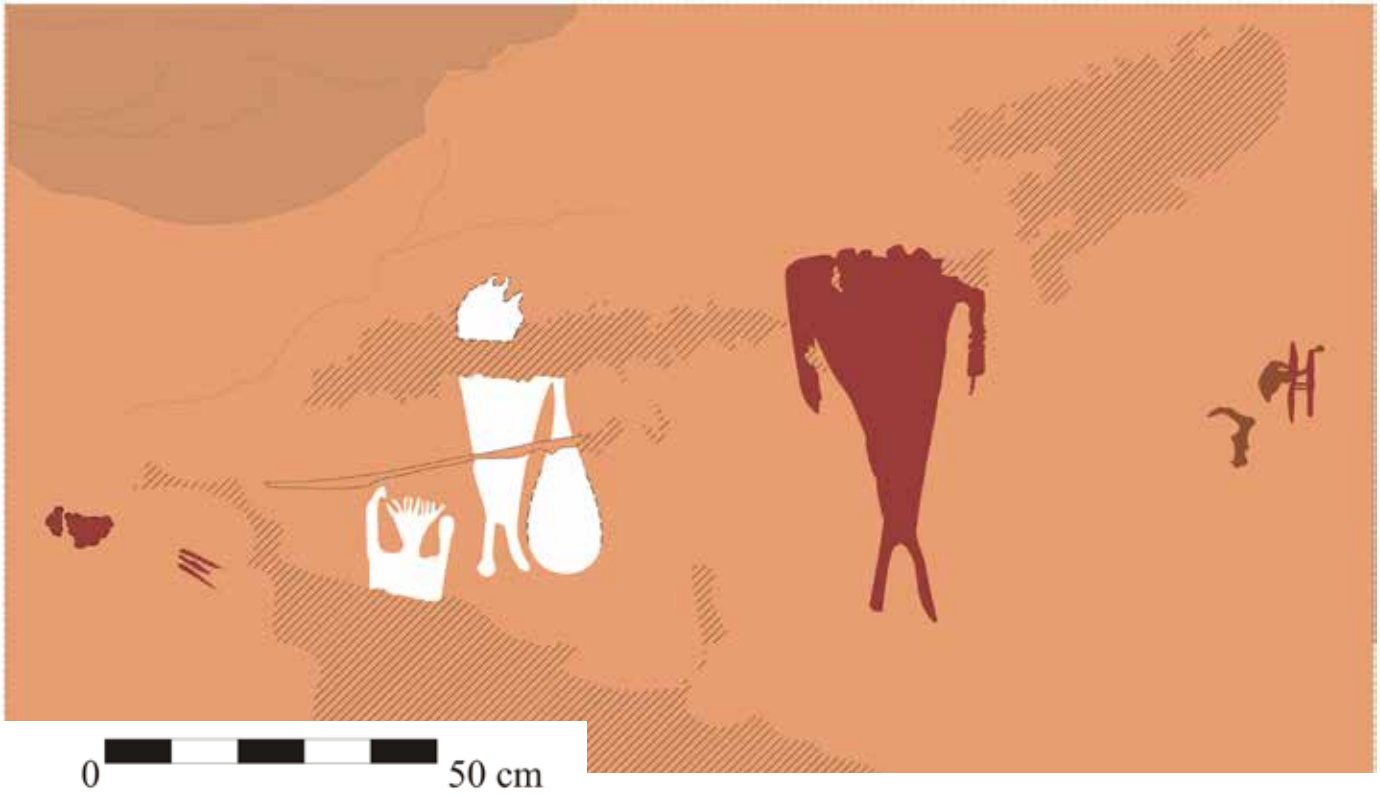


Fig. 8. Drawing of the rock art panel from The Gallery site showing shamans and/or warriors or chiefs. Drawing by A. Kucia.

motifs, such as spirals, concentric circles, zigzags, lines and abstract motifs. For example, at the site 5MT129 in Sand Canyon, there is a panel of petroglyphs on the western side of a rock niche in which the main part of the settlement was located (the rest of the settlement was located on the slope below this rock shelter). Most typical for this panel are spiral representations and concentric circle, along with other geometric motifs (Figs. 6a, 6b). The spiral motif can have a variety of meanings, but for the Pueblo Indians it most often symbolizes water, including a water source, but a spiral is also often interpreted as a motif related to walking or migration (Cole 2009: 192–193; Patterson 1992: 185–186). Some of the spirals or concentric circles were carved in specific places and have astronomical relationships, insofar as the sunrise on the days of the summer and winter solstices, as well as the spring and fall equinoxes, falls on specific parts of the spiral, marking those days of the year. A spiral carved on a rock niche above the main complex of buildings is also found at the Two Story House site in Graveyard Canyon. This spiral could have been visible from a path that runs below this site, around 25–30 m to the south, and might have had informational implications for people passing by.

Colored plaster and murals were also found on the rocks and walls of buildings at several sites of the surveyed settlement cluster. At The Gallery site, they were done in reddish brown, white and yellow, and placed on two opposite walls of the second floor of the Room B, from the floor of the first story to about halfway up

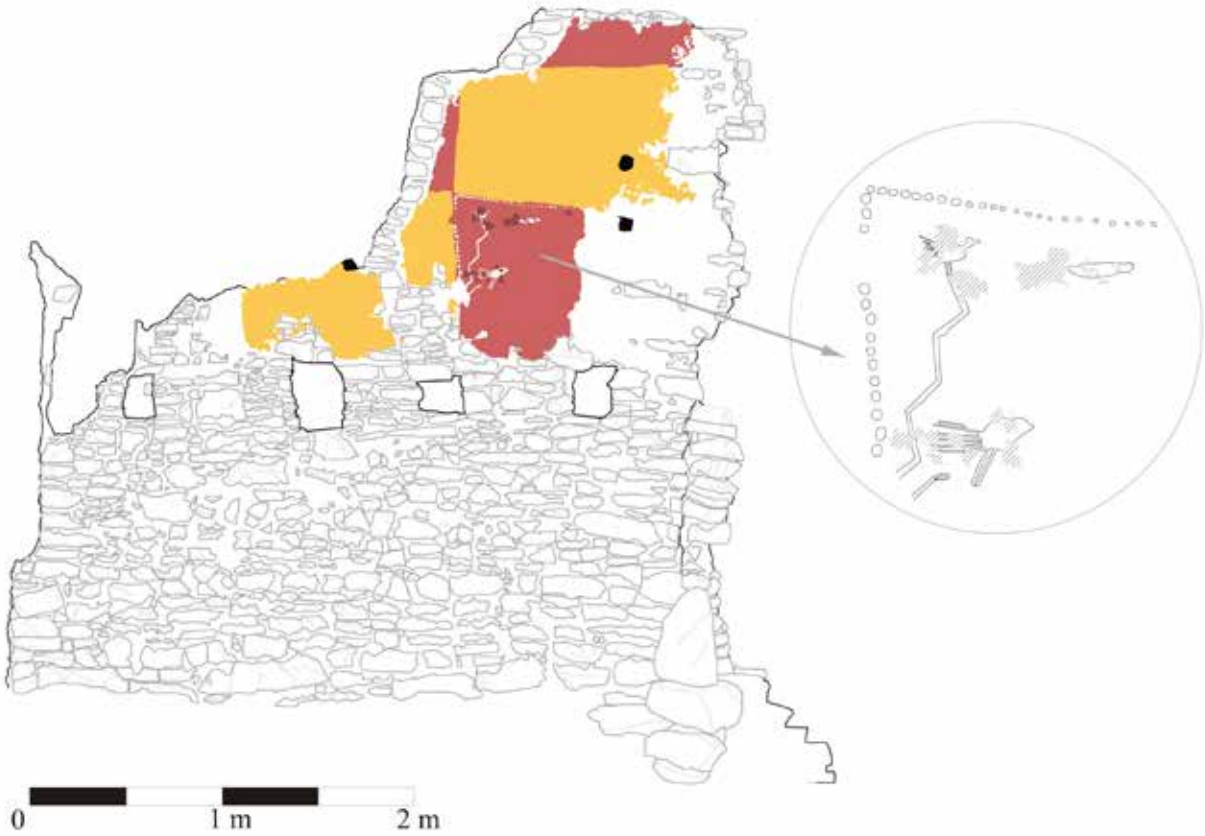



Fig. 9. Mural in Room B at The Gallery in the context of the preserved part of the architecture. Drawing by A. Kucia.

the walls (the ground floor was often used for storage, while the upper floors were for residential rooms) (Figs. 7, 9). Several layers of multicolored plaster have been preserved. In addition to the plaster on one (northern) wall, geometric images have been preserved: dots (about 50), a symbolic depiction of a snake (a symbol of fertility and harvest in the Pueblo culture) and three birds, probably turkeys; some of these images are now destroyed.

At the Two Story House site in Graveyard Canyon, colored plaster and paintings on plaster have also been preserved on the rock that served as the rear wall of the building. The murals are similar to those used at The Gallery site: reddish brown and white are the dominant colors. Along with the plaster there are geometric motifs, probably in the form of several triangles that might symbolize mountains. The rock shelter where the Two Story House site is located faces directly south to the highest summit in the area (Sleeping Ute Mountain), which rises to a height of 2996 m above sea level, and is 3–4 km away from the site. It is a sacred mountain for the contemporary Ute Indians, who have a reservation there today, and it almost certainly

Fig. 10. Consultations with Hopi representatives in 2017 at the Two Story House one of the sites in Graveyard Canyon with preserved rock art (petroglyphs), probably connected with astronomical observations and religious practices. Photo by M. Znamirowski.

had special significance for the ancient Pueblo Indians (modern Pueblo groups, like the Hopi, claim that this mountain certainly had a sacred meaning for their ancestors, who built stone settlements in rock niches). This is just one example of the relationship of architecture, settlement location and rock art iconography to the surrounding landscape and probably religious practices associated with it.

At the Two Story House site, there are also numerous examples of petroglyphs that can be grouped into at least several panels (at least four). One of the most visible panels is located in the western part of the site at the edge of a rock niche, just off the path leading to that niche. It contains abstract and complex geometric motifs that are very difficult to interpret (Figs. 5a-5c). Other panels contain small (about 10–12 cm) anthropomorphic figures, symbolic depictions of bird tracks (probably of the turkeys raised by Pueblo Indians), lines and zigzags. These symbols occupy almost the entire length of the central part of the stone wall that forms the back of the building. Above the highest preserved building, on the ceiling of the rock shelter, there is also a petroglyph in the form of a well-preserved spiral which, as previously described, could be associated with a water

symbol or astronomical observations.

**Conclusions**

The Sand Canyon-Castle Rock Community Archaeological Project focuses on analysis and reconstruction of the settlement structure and sociocultural changes that took place in Pueblo culture during the 13th century AD in the central Mesa Verde region, southwestern Colorado. It includes the detailed documentation, analysis and interpretation of the architecture, and also murals and rock art from the area, including paintings and petroglyphs. The archaeological interpretations are supplemented by ethnographic analogies and analysis of the oral traditions of modern Pueblo people.

Ancient rock art in the Castle Rock community is represented both by petroglyphs and paintings (usually in white, red or brown colors). The petroglyphs include mostly geometric designs like lines, zigzags, dots and spirals. Concentric circles and spirals can be appropriately interpreted as a water source (and thus purely informational), or as a symbol of migration to other world or traveling (symbolic meaning). Some spirals or concentric circles served for astronomical observations, especially as solar calendars or markers of the summer and winter solstices and the autumn and spring equinoxes, when the rising sun shines to cast patterns of light on the middle or different part of the spiral. Such observations were still conducted in the early 20th century AD in different Pueblo groups, including Hopi and Zuni.

Interesting human images are depictions of warriors fighting with bows and arrows (the best known rock art panel from the community, located at the Castle Rock Pueblo that may correspond with the oral tradition of Hopi that was recorded in the 19th century about the three-day battle that presumably took place at this site between ancestors of the Hopi people and possibly Ute ancestors) and anthropomorphic figures with triangular bodies interpreted mostly as shamans or warriors. The latter are dated with analogies to similar images in Utah and Arizona to the third–fifth centuries AD (the Basketmaker period) and are in the middle of the settlements dated to the 13th century AD. A question thus remains: What did these symbols say to the people who built settlements there, seeing earlier paintings and petroglyphs that might have been religious in nature? What was so attractive about them, that they brought people hundreds years later? Or why didn't the presence of such old paintings and engravings disturb them from choosing these places for their settlement locations? Or perhaps they regarded them as something particularly protective in these times of social and environmental unrest, perhaps appealing to old cults and beliefs to protect themselves.

The murals documented by the project team are preserved in two sites and represent mostly on walls on the second levels of the buildings and covered with white, yellow or brown plaster. In The Gallery site in Room B there are also dots painted in white (around 50 dots in total), a white zigzag line (most likely this symbolically represented the serpent, a symbol of fertility of the land and the underground world), and three birds, probably parrots or turkeys, which were raised at this time by the Pueblo society and in the 13th century AD. In the Two Story House site that faces directly south to the highest mountain in the area (Sleeping Ute Mountain according to Ute Indians and sometimes called Bear Mountain by Hopi) there is also a mural on the cliff face with roughly preserved triangular shapes that may represent the mountains that have been, and still are, important landscape and religious symbols for the Pueblo societies.

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