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Polly Schaafsma

Imagery and Anthropology



R. GWINN VIVIAN

I met Polly Schaafsma on her first trip to New Mexico in 1957. She had enrolled as a student in the University of New Mexico Archaeological Field School at Pottery Mound, a mid-fourteenth-to mid-fifteenth-century adobe pueblo on the Rio Puerco approximately twenty-five miles southwest of Albuquerque. Frank C. Hibben directed the field school and I served that summer as the student dig foreman. Summer field school work began at the site in 1954 at which time four kivas, below ground square ritual structures, were discovered. The field school opened Kiva 1 that year, which revealed multiple layers of relatively well-preserved murals featuring human, animal, and plant forms as well as a wide variety of decorative motifs. Testing in Kiva 2 suggested similar complex murals. The participants outlined Kivas 3 and 4 on the surface but did not open them. The following summer, the field school completed recording the murals in Kiva 1, exposed all four walls of Kiva 2, and initiated mural recording in Kiva 2. But work was not completed in Kiva 2 in 1955 because the walls contained multiple mural layers, and scraping off each thin layer to an earlier mural below after recording it proved a slow process. Thus, in 1957, as the third season at Pottery Mound began, many students spent time in Kiva 2 assisting with the mural work. Kivas 3 and 4 did not have painted walls.

The field school opened two additional kivas, 5 and 6, in 1957. Kiva 5, the largest at the site to that date, had murals, although the walls were low and not richly painted. However, Kiva 6, primarily the west wall, revealed elaborate

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Top, Polly Schaafsma in Kiva 5 at Pottery Mound, 1957.

Bottom, Polly Schaafsma at archaeological site below dam, 1961. Photographs courtesy Polly Schaafsma.

murals. Given the need to record exposed murals as quickly as possible because colors faded in the summer light, a number of students, particularly those with a background in art, were “drafted” into mural work. Polly, with a degree in art history from Mount Holyoke College, assumed responsibility for the Kiva 5 murals and also assisted with exposing and recording several layers of Kiva 6.

A few years later, Polly joined another project in the Southwest. A number of events involving Polly, me, and my future wife Pat (whom Polly had met at Mesa Verde) might have contributed to Polly's employment in 1961 by the Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe for summer work on the Navajo Reservoir Project. This government-sponsored "salvage archaeology" program was designed to find, record, and study all archaeological remains in an area along the San Juan River and several tributaries that would be flooded by construction of the Navajo Dam. Polly's assignment was to locate, record, and evaluate the rock art in the flood zone. This included sites dating from the late Archaic period through the historic Navajo and Anglo occupations of the area. In a sense this launched Polly on a long-term professional odyssey involving major contributions to and valuable insights into the imagery of Native peoples of the Southwest. Pat and I have been fortunate in sharing a small part of that adventure through many rock art excursions with Polly and her husband Curt, helping to record a historic Apachean pictograph site in southern Arizona, and contributing chapters to Polly's edited books.

I was thus pleased when asked to write an article for this volume of the *New Mexico Historical Review* honoring Polly. But then I realized that I was not really sure how to define Polly and, more importantly, evaluate her many contributions. She has a graduate degree from the University of Colorado in anthropology with a major in archaeology, and she often identifies herself with archaeologists in her writing. A brief bio in one of her books describes her as a "leading rock art scholar and author."¹ Authors of a recent article noted, "Most rock art studies have been conducted under the guise of archaeology, but accomplished by a number of people in different fields with different interests, orientations, experience, knowledge, abilities, resources, and agendas."² Can Polly be labeled therefore as an archaeologist who specializes in rock art studies?

I would argue instead that she is an anthropologist with a long career observing, recording, and describing pictorial images created by past and present Native peoples of the greater Southwest. In this process she consistently has moved beyond cataloguing and describing rock art and has used it as a means for defining, investigating, and interpreting a range of phenomena characterizing cultural systems in multiple worldwide locales. Three examples of her analysis of iconography in the Southwest provide support for this argument. They include cults (specifically the kachina cult), emblems of power, and shamanism.

Cults

The term *cult* often refers to the veneration of or devotion to a person, ideal, or thing by a group. Ethnographically, cults often appear as a stabilizing force

during periods of cultural disequilibrium and are linked with a society or segment of a society sharing a sacred ideology with associated rites and symbols. Members of the Cargo Cult of the late 1940s in the southwestern Pacific islands, for example, were bound by the belief that spirits would bring “cargoes” of goods, often in large transport planes, for their use. Archaeologically, the emergence of a cult is generally predicated on the appearance of a new symbology in one or more aspects of the cultural system. Patricia Crown’s Southwest Regional Cult, for instance, was based on the appearance of images and symbols on a series of decorated ceramics identified as Salado Polychromes.³

The Pueblo Kachina (also referred to as katchina or katsina) Cult has great time depth in the Southwest and is characterized by a complex ideology, highly evolved ritual calendar, and rich iconography. Although at times references are made to the kachina “religion,” kachina ceremonies are more properly defined as a cult given that kachinas are not gods but spirits of ancestors. They serve as messengers between Pueblo peoples and their gods, and also are rainmakers who come as clouds to Pueblo villages when called. Ceremonies are best known at the Hopi villages but are also carried out by all Pueblo peoples with the probable exception of the Tiwas in the Rio Grande valley.⁴

Polly became aware of kachinas within the first weeks of her work at Pottery Mound from their depiction in the murals in Kiva 2 and then in Kiva 6. She subsequently began a detailed analysis of rock art in the northern Rio Grande valley that led to defining the post-1300 AD Rio Grande style.⁵ This rock art is commonly, though not exclusively, found in open locations displayed on isolated boulders and cliffs often of volcanic origin that may extend in some cases for several miles. Subject matter is varied but large anthropomorphs are so common that they tend to draw the greatest attention. Generally, they are large and highly stylized with “boxlike” bodies and large feet. Details may be added within the figure’s outline. Humpback flute players occur, as do figures bearing decorated shields and carrying war clubs. Masks are depicted as independent elements, but in addition, “specific kachinas and other personages with analogues in ongoing Pueblo ceremonialism often can be identified.” These figures as well as cloud terraces and four-pointed stars or crosses all reflect “elements from the sacred domain—supernaturals, kachinas, and ceremonial participants.”⁶ For Polly the analysis of rock art reinforced the iconographic similarities with Pottery Mound. This work led to a critically important journal article co-authored with Curt titled, “Evidence for the Origins of the Pueblo Kachina Cult as Suggested by Southwestern Rock Art.”⁷ In this article and in multiple later publications, Polly built a solid anthropological argument for the early development of the Kachina Cult in the Rio Grande drainage basin.

In essence she noted that the appearance of masks early in Rio Grande rock art (ca. 1325 AD) and subsequently in murals at Pottery Mound coincided with archaeologically documented demographic shifts, relatively radical changes in communal architecture, and new agricultural strategies in the Rio Grande drainage basin. These came about as a result of significant environmental changes beginning in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Decreases in annual precipitation in the greater San Juan Basin in northwestern New Mexico and southwestern Colorado were particularly severe. Over time, negative impacts on farming led to the abandonment first of the Chaco region and then the Mesa Verde area with subsequent migrations east into the Rio Grande Valley and several of its major tributaries. In many instances, these migrants relocated to areas with resident populations. New arrivals often appeared to have been incorporated into existing communities, although social, political, religious, and even language differences are believed to have characterized this transition.

Communal architecture changed not only in size, with many pueblos having between four hundred to two thousand ground-floor rooms, but also in layout as well, becoming multistoried with terraced rooms surrounding one or more large plazas. Farming strategies became more diversified including some evidence for ditch irrigation. Architectural and agricultural changes, apparent in the archaeological record, were on a scale that called for some mechanism capable of integrating a recent significantly increased communal population on multiple levels—economic, social, political, and religious. Inasmuch as cult membership cross-cut kin units, it provided a means for greater individual participation in public ritual conducted in well-defined plaza settings. Moreover, it produced related cooperative behavior through redistribution of goods, including food, among all members of the society, and it increased the ability to incorporate all viable members of the village in communal agricultural projects and ritual observances. Identification with the cult in those observances could have been achieved through related iconography displayed on ritually associated ceramics, masks, and other paraphernalia.

Ironically, or perhaps not, some Kachina Cult iconography, particularly rock art but also including kiva murals, is war related and often depicts warriors bearing shields and war clubs. Polly observed that whereas the Kachina Cult served to more strongly integrate individual villages, war societies within the village functioned to protect community resources and occupants from predation by neighboring villages. Of equal importance was the link between the Kachina Cult's emphasis on bringing rain and obtaining scalps for increasing rainfall.⁸

Polly was aware that these social changes were complex and long-term and that cult iconography would not necessarily occur in multiple mediums simultaneously. Moreover, dating of rock art and even kiva murals was not absolute.

Nonetheless, she built a solid case for what she termed the “Rio Grande hypothesis”—an alternative to the “Little Colorado hypothesis” proposed by Charles Adams.⁹ Her conclusions are germane to the investigation of critical questions in southwestern prehistory, including the timing of Mesoamerican influence on southwestern cultures. In a forthcoming paper in *Boletín del Seminario de Tlaloc* (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) she draws attention to many iconographic expressions shared by the Mesoamerican Tlaloc-related rain complex and the Pueblo Kachina Cult. Because the Rio Grande rock art style, with multiple depictions of kachinas, did not appear in the northern Pueblo world until the fourteenth century, thereby replacing older cosmologies that had been developing regionally for centuries, arguments for much earlier Mesoamerican influence may be in question.

Emblems of Power

Archaeologists use changes in architecture, settlement size, technology, and burial practices as clues to increasing complexities in cultural systems. To facilitate comparative analysis, archaeologists define levels of cultural complexity. For example, in one procedure societal “types” range from bands to empires. When this process has been used to classify prehistoric cultural systems in the Southwest, generally the most complex level defined is that of the chiefdom. In broad terms chiefdoms are organized regionally with centralized decision-making, hereditary inequality, and noble families. They may be characterized by the creation of sacred places, and “chiefs” often create symbols of individual power. Within the past decade, several archaeologists have proposed that the Chacoan cultural system, located in the San Juan Basin in northwestern New Mexico, developed to a level consistent with that of a chiefdom or possibly a state, although they have not always employed these classificatory terms.

One activity of the Pottery Mound Archaeological Field School in 1957 was field trips to other archaeological sites, including those in Chaco Canyon to explore Pueblo Bonito, Chetro Ketl, and other great houses, as well as several “small house sites.” The trip ended with a Saturday evening discussion in the great kiva, Casa Rinconada, which at that time was open to the public. Polly must have seen rock art in the many panels in Chaco, but it was not a primary focus of the trip. This was Polly’s introduction to Chaco, and I am pleased to think that the trip may have kindled her interest in Chacoan prehistory. One result of that interest has been her investigation of rock art as a source of data for identifying symbols of social status, or in her terminology, “emblems of power.”¹⁰

Although the attributes of the Chacoan cultural system appear in archaeological sites throughout the San Juan Basin and in bordering areas, those attributes

originated in Chaco Canyon, first appearing in the last half of the ninth century AD when migrants from southwestern Colorado shifted south into the Basin. The cultural juices of this system simmered for almost a hundred years but then came to a significant boil in the first quarter of the eleventh century, producing what a primary Chacoan archaeologist, Cynthia Irwin-Williams, called the “Chaco Phenomenon.”¹¹ That phenomenon lasted for almost another hundred years, culminating in the mid-twelfth century with an exodus of Chacoans from Chaco Canyon and the San Juan Basin.

The National Park Service and, to a large extent, the archaeological profession have linked the Chaco Phenomenon with Chacoan great houses such as Pueblo Bonito. The nine “classic” great houses in the canyon are visually striking, large, usually multistoried, planned core-and-veneer masonry structures that generally have more than one hundred rooms. Almost all are associated with one or more great kivas, elaborate water control systems for farming, and wide (approximately thirty feet) engineered roads that often link a great house to “outlier” communities in the San Juan Basin. These outliers include more great houses that are often smaller than those in Chaco Canyon. The material goods found in great houses are finely made and, in the case of ceramic containers, include rare forms such as cylindrical jars and human effigy vessels. Elaborate burials also have been found in Pueblo Bonito, including one with more than fifty thousand pieces of turquoise, mostly beads and pendants. Two major questions relating to great houses remain archaeologically unresolved: their function and the size of the resident population.

Chaco, however, was more than just great houses. Long before groups migrated south in the ninth century and established the early great houses, another Pueblo group had settled in the canyon. These original “Chacoans” built small single-story residential buildings of seldom more than thirty rooms. Whereas there were nine great houses in the canyon, there were hundreds of “small house sites.” Their occupants did not build great kivas or roads, and their cultural inventory of material goods, while archaeologically notable, was not extravagant. Their dwellings were clearly those of resident small farming communities more typical of early Pueblo peoples. Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of this “dual occupation” of Chaco Canyon was the apparent three centuries of mutual cooperation and peaceful relations.

The mechanics and dynamics of this long-term relationship, however, have not been a major focus of Chacoan archaeology. More than 90 percent of the interpretive materials provided by the National Park Service involve the great houses. And professional Chacoan research for almost a century has been centered on explanatory “models” for the emergence, evolution, and decline of Chacoan great houses and the agents involved in that process. Since the 1960s, many

of these models identify, implicitly or explicitly, Mesoamerican cultural systems as sources of inspiration or actual contact in the origination, development, and functioning of Chacoan great houses in the San Juan Basin. Archaeologist Charles Di Peso, among others, identified great houses as the headquarters of Toltec traders, *pochteca*, who established a mercantile operation in the canyon for production and transport of goods south into the Gran Chichimeca.¹² In the 1970s, the National Park Service and University of New Mexico cosponsored the Chaco Project. It produced several similar models culminating in James Judge's explanatory scenario in which great houses served as pilgrimage centers administered by small groups of ritual specialists for much of the population in the central San Juan Basin.¹³ More recently Stephen Lekson has proposed an *atepetl* model. Atepetl, a Nahuatl word, refers to a city-state within both the Toltec and Aztec empires. When applied to the Chaco region, great houses were identified as residences of hierarchically organized noble families headed by a king. Lesser royal families occupied smaller great houses, essentially Chacoan outlier sites, and common farmers resided in clusters of farmsteads—Chacoan small house sites—linked to individual royal families.¹⁴ Overall, these and other models have tended to be long on theorizing and short on supportive data.

In two recent papers, Polly has employed rock art to evaluate the archaeological evidence for a strong centralized polity under the control of a hierarchical and hereditary elite in Chaco Canyon.¹⁵ She notes well-established anthropological data regarding the social and political use of visual symbols to establish and strengthen group identities as well as to define group boundaries and territorial control. Within the Pueblo world, particularly the western Pueblo peoples, clan symbols may be drawn on stones to mark field boundaries. At times they have been used in place of signatures on craft arts. However, the western Pueblos do not use them as symbols of power.

Still, Polly points out that in Mesoamerican polities there are “standardized images representing the names or titles of rulers or other nobility.” In addition, use of emblematic glyphs and symbolic links with deities are common in these polities. She argues that if Chacoan great houses served as headquarters or residences of ritual specialists, administrators, *pochteca* mercantile directors, or noble rulers, one would expect some iconography denoting their presence given the common co-occurrence of visual symbols and a specialized class of individuals. These symbols would be relatively standardized, situated to enhance their visibility. Given the territorial range of power held by these rulers, their symbols would be found well outside the confines of Chaco Canyon.¹⁶

Were emblems of power present in some of the rock art in Chaco Canyon? Polly recognized the need to research this question more than a decade ago, and since that time she has definitively established that Chacoan rock art does not

meet anthropological expectations regarding symbolism and power. She clearly has determined that rock art in Chaco from the ninth to the twelfth centuries AD was typical of Pueblo rock art throughout the Colorado Plateau. Humans appeared as stick figures or occasionally as humpbacked flute players, a common Pueblo motif. At times the figures were also associated with birthing or other fertility themes. Animals including big horned sheep and long-tailed carnivores as well as the tracks of bears and badgers were frequently depicted. Similarly, birds and insects were often subjects of rock art. Geometric designs, especially spirals, were ubiquitous. Given this evidence, Polly concluded, “distinctive graphic messaging from the great house residents is absent.” Moreover, “The kinds of symbols that elsewhere designate power and centralization backed with supernatural sanction are lacking in Chaco.”¹⁷ And most importantly, as noted, earlier rock art that can be linked iconographically to Mesoamerican “influence” cannot be documented in the Pueblo world until the fourteenth century, almost two hundred years after the abandonment of Chaco Canyon.

Polly’s study does not necessarily discredit current models for explaining the Chaco Phenomenon. However, it does signal potential problems with those models. More importantly it underscores the absolute need to test problematic models with data that is independent from that which is used to develop the models. This is an expected step in conducting scientific research but unfortunately many of Polly’s colleagues have failed to go beyond presenting testable but untested models. Hopefully, her argument that Chacoan rock art does matter with respect to understanding the Chacoan Phenomenon will stimulate new research leading to tested explanatory models.

Shamanism

While cults involve group dynamics designed to promote equilibrium within the unit as a whole, shamans act as sole practitioners for individuals and groups serving as intermediaries between them and spiritual forces in worlds of the dead. Shamans’ tasks vary and may include curing illness, divining the future, restoring balance within the community, and ensuring success in hunting and rainmaking. They may enter and communicate within the spirit world through visions, dreams, or trances, and in this process they are often assisted by spirit helpers, commonly birds and often snakes. Although best-known ethnographically from northern Asia, shamanism is common worldwide particularly among more nomadic groups including, for example, the Shoshones in Wyoming and Montana.¹⁸

Unlike the Kachina Cult that emerged in the fourteenth century AD in response to significant environmental changes and large-scale population shifts

of agriculturists in the southern Colorado Plateau, shamanism was an ancient and long-term cultural constant of Archaic and later hunter-gatherer bands on the northern Colorado Plateau. This critical value within each cultural sphere is obvious as manifested in their associated striking imagery.

As so commonly happens with Polly, not long after her work on the Navajo Reservoir Project she was offered the opportunity to examine and organize the extensive field records of Utah rock art curated as the Donald Scott Rock Art Files in the Peabody Museum at Harvard. The project, which resulted in the publication of *The Rock Art of Utah* in 1971, also led Polly to field check many of the sites documented in the curated records, a process that stimulated her deep interest in Barrier Canyon style rock art dated at 5000 BC–500 AD.¹⁹ This early date allowed Polly to distinguish the style from the later Fremont style, though she included both in her more inclusive Northern Colorado Plateau Tradition. Moreover, she soon recognized the multiple iconographic parallels between this hunter-gatherer rock art of the northern Colorado Plateau and more universal emblems of shamanic and supernatural power.

This art differed considerably from the Rio Grande style, though both emphasized anthropomorphs. The Barrier Canyon figures were commonly hidden in alcoves of deep sandstone canyons reinforcing the impact of their dramatic forms in enclosed spaces. This was in stark contrast to the long open panels of the Rio Grande style. Whereas multiple versions of the human figure were present in the Rio Grande style, the predominant Barrier Canyon anthropomorph is an elongated, tapering figure often without arms or legs and enclosed in a shroud, producing a “mummy-like” or “ghostly” shape. Heads are usually rounded and have large eyes. Bodies are painted with fringed or textile-like designs suggesting robes wrapped around the body. Multiple figures may appear together, such as at the Great Gallery in Barrier Canyon. In addition, “Isolated compositional groupings, centered on one or two large human forms, flanked by smaller ones or by tiny birds and quadrupeds . . . sometimes occur.”²⁰

Unlike the more regionally restricted rock art of the Kachina Cult, shamanistic rock art has been identified in numerous locales in the American West including the northern Colorado Plateau. As Polly has noted, both abstract and representational rock art styles have been identified as shamanic.²¹ However, representational styles, as in the Barrier Canyon style, include elements more easily identified as shamanic, such as depictions of animal spirit helpers and horned headdresses. As an anthropologist, Polly has proposed that the rock art of the Northern Colorado Plateau Tradition reflects the importance of shamanism in ancient and long-term social systems. Shamans, through their links to unseen spirit worlds, provided some assurance of control over the natural

world, thereby increasing group well-being, especially in times of environmental or social stress. To validate this power, shamans themselves almost certainly produced the pictographic record of their spiritual journeys, underscoring the power of this imagery and further enhancing their vital role within the group.

Polly's research and publications have had enduring value. Virtually all of the regional rock art styles in Utah that she defined, named, and described more than forty years ago, including the Barrier Canyon style, are still in use and cited within the profession. Not unexpectedly, several researchers including Sally Cole have questioned Polly's "shamanistic" explanation for Barrier Canyon style iconography and have proposed alternative hypotheses. Cole argues that the physical settings and relatively widespread similar imagery suggest group activities rather than secluded, more individualized rites. No doubt, other explanations will surface in the coming decades, but they will all build on the detailed knowledge we possess of the imagery as defined and described by Polly.

Polly's significant contributions to rock art analysis provide a better understanding of the lifeways of Native peoples of the Southwest and confirm her anthropological status. And, she continues to move in new directions. In a recent book, *Images and Power: Rock Art and Ethics* (2013), she has shifted from more topic-specific issues to a consideration of "the ethical obligations that anthropologists have toward their colleagues, the discipline, and their study population."²² Her book is the first publication in a new, prestigious series, *Springerbriefs in Anthropology and Ethics*. Everyone with an interest in rock art should read this book.

Professionally, I have profited immensely from my long discussions with Polly regarding "things Chacoan" and other aspects of and issues in southwestern prehistory and history. Personally, Pat and I have benefitted for decades from Polly and Curt's friendship grounded in mutual respect for our lifeways and a shared love of the Colorado Plateau. We look forward to more discussions and good experiences.

Notes

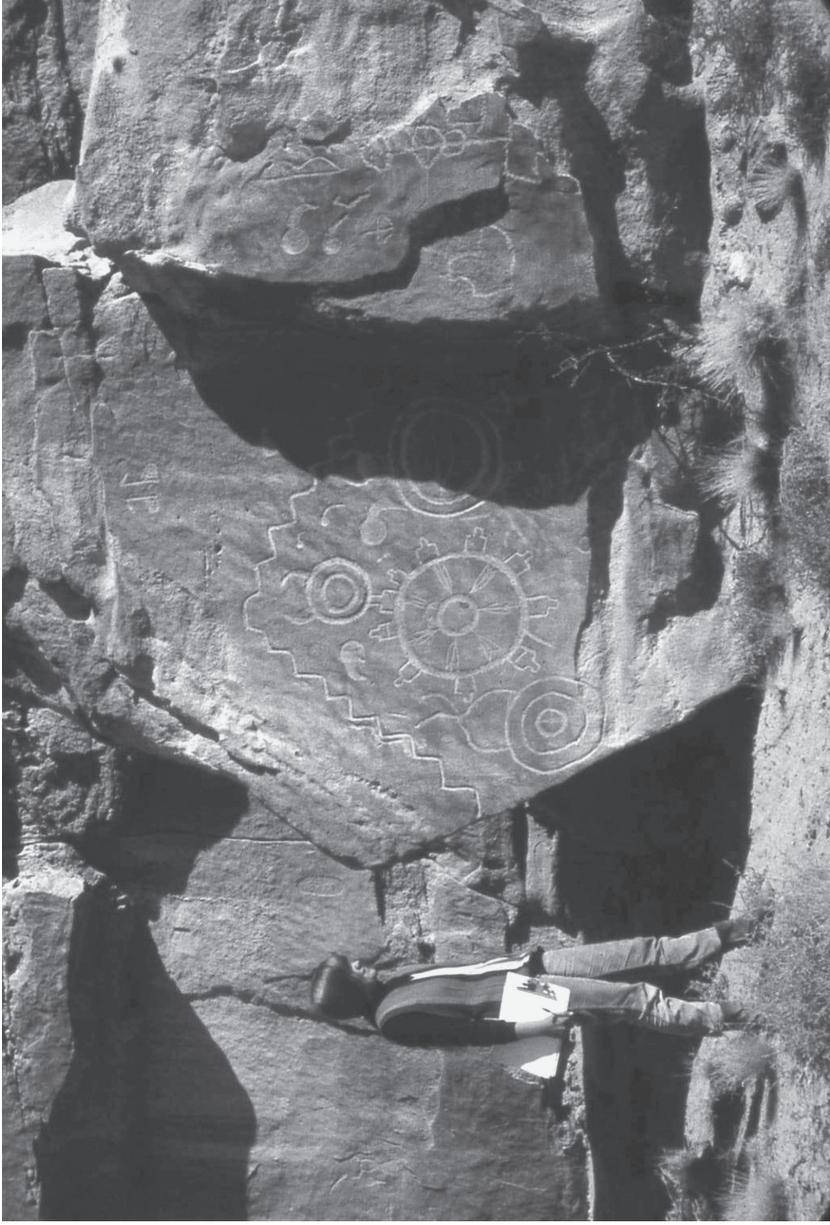
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Polly Schaafsma
conducting research
at LA 114,522 in
Blanco Canyon, 1965.
Photograph courtesy
Polly Schaafsma.

