



NEW ZEALAND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



This document is made available by The New Zealand Archaeological Association under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

THE PETROGLYPHS OF NUUANU VALLEY, OAHU, HAWAII

Michael A. Lipparelli

Abstract

The location and description of four petroglyph sites in Nuuanu Valley, Oahu, Hawaii, is presented along with detailed illustrations of the contents of each site. The cultural and historical background available on these petroglyphs is examined in discussions of their age, subject matter, and significance.

General Science Department,
University of Hawaii.

Located within a mile of the heart of Honolulu behind the Memorial Park on Nuuanu Avenue are some of the most accessible petroglyph sites in Hawaii. The existence of these rock carvings was first noted by McAllister (1933). Subsequently, the Territory of Hawaii undertook a programme in 1956 to protect them for future generations by placing metal grates over the exposed cliff faces. Since that time these protective coverings have fallen into disrepair, allowing vandals to deface the carvings at will. An investigation of Hawaiian petroglyph literature has indicated a need for a permanent record of the contents of these sites and has thereby prompted this study.

SITE 1

The first of the four sites in this area is located on the west side of Nuuanu Stream near the south-east corner of Nuuanu Memorial Park. Here an outcropping of boulders juts out to form a cliff which overlooks the stream. Figure 1 illustrates the boulder arrangement as seen from above. The dashed portions of the boulder outlines serve to indicate the presence of additional overhanging rocks which form a cave-like structure. The letters show the relative position of the petroglyph groupings illustrated in Figures 2, 3 and 4. The black dots represent the location of the protective grates.

This first site like the others is presently heavily wooded with koa trees. A lava rock trail about ten meters away winds along the

western bank of the stream. It leads northward about a quarter of a kilometre past the other petroglyph sites, ending near a favourite swimming hole of Hawaiian royalty known as Alapena Pool.

The largest of the rock carvings in the Nuuanu area is located in Site 1 at point A (Figure 2 A). It is the outline figure of a dog, measuring approximately 70 cm from the tip of its nose to the posterior portion of its torso. This figure, like the majority, has been pecked out of the boulder face to a depth of about 2 mm, leaving the edges distinct. It is unique in that the interior of the figure is intact, whereas those of the other dog figures have been completely removed.

Group B of Site 1 (Fig. 3) consists of 11 dog figures and 10 men figures. The dogs display long uplifted tails. Their backs and necks are arched and their ears are cocked forward, indicating them to be alert and aggressive. The large-headed dog in the lower left portion of this group lacks a tail and appears to be incomplete. In general, the men appear in a frontal stance with arms extended down. Some arm and leg muscles are evident, which is a feature found exclusively in Hawaiian petroglyphs. Two men figures with clubs brandished over their heads display the arms uplifted.

Below the lower right grouping of dogs at B is an indentation in the rock face which forms a sheltered ledge upon which are inscribed the figures of Group C of Site 1 (Fig. 2C). This group consists of three dogs and is visible only by bending down along the bottom of the rock face. Two of the dogs oppose each other with tails crossed. The third dog faces south as do most dogs at this site.

To the right of this trio of figures a narrow cove is formed at the junction of two boulders. The southern wall of this cove houses the dog and man figures of Group D (Fig. 2D).

Immediately adjacent to Group D is a narrow entrance to a cave-like crevice formed by a pile of large stones. Group E (Fig. 2E) can be found along the western face of this crevice and is visible without artificial lighting only during the early morning. The two figures on the right in Fig. 2E are similar in form to those mentioned at other points within the site. The man figure is fairly typical, whereas the dog lacks the characteristic pointed ears being, perhaps, the figure of a rat. The two figures on the left in Fig. 2E are, however, distinctively unique. Both are fine line drawings etched in the rock by the use of a sharp instrument. They appear to be of a more recent origin than the other petroglyphs found at this site both in their style of execution and their subject matter. The ship is finely

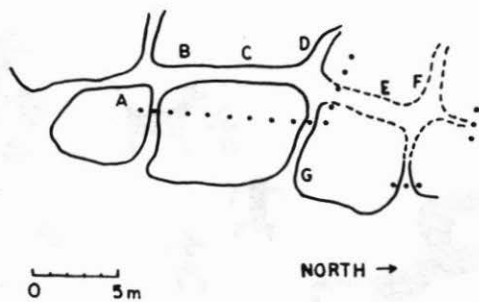


Fig. 1

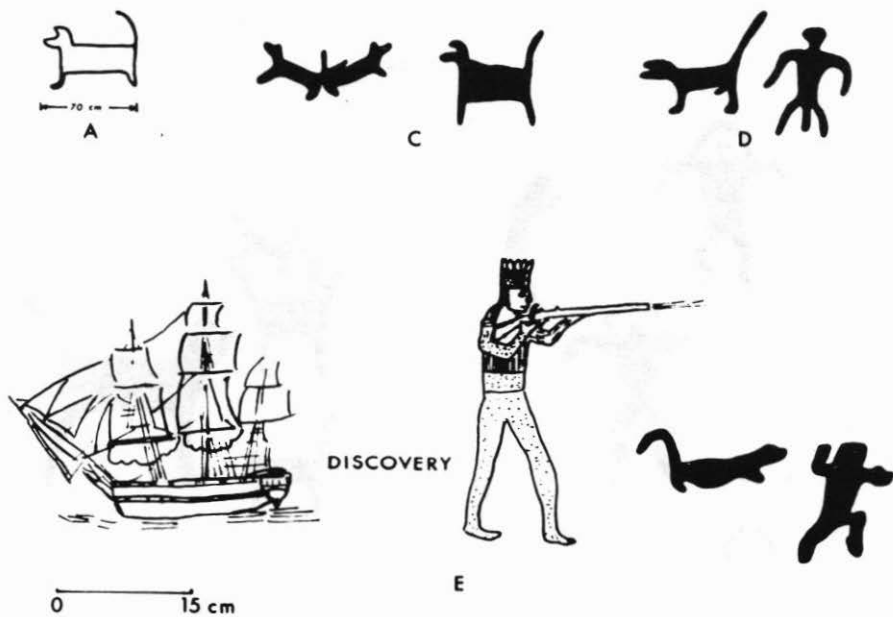


Fig. 2

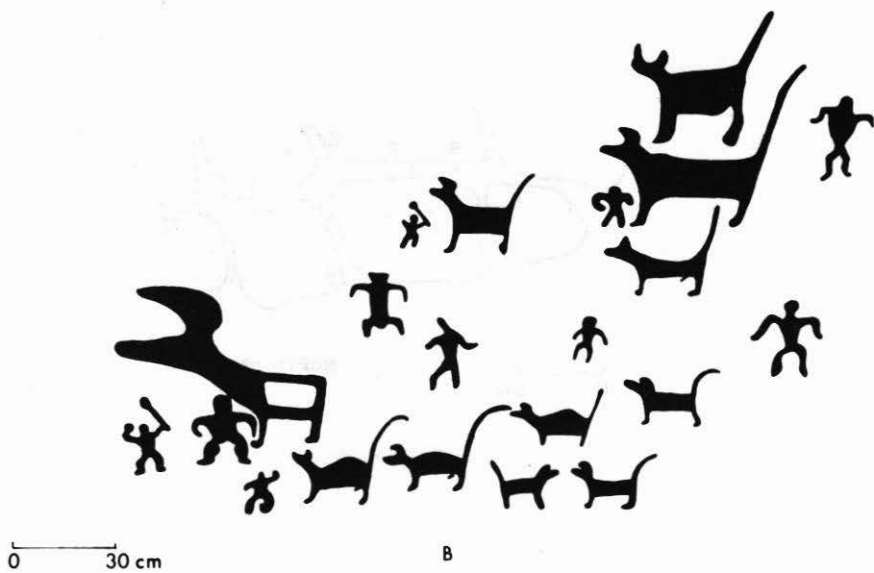


Fig. 3

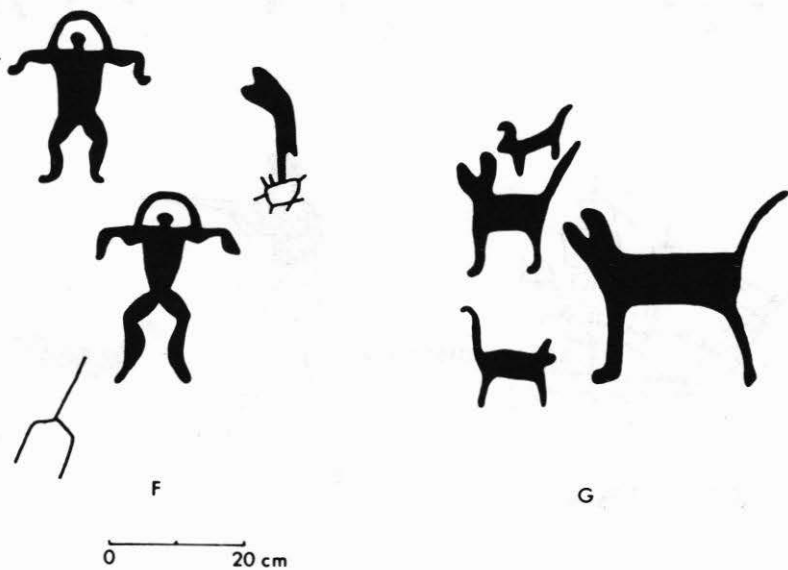


Fig. 4

detailed showing the portholes, sails and rigging. To its immediate right is the word "DISCOVERY" and the figure of a man shooting a flintlock firearm. The clothing suggests the figure to be an 18th century Englishman, whereas the head-dress is of Polynesian design. Charlot (1956) suggests that the ship represents Captain Vancouver's vessel, the Discovery, which landed on Oahu in March 1792. At that time an altercation between the Hawaiians and the visiting English developed, causing the English to use their muskets. Thus, it is felt that the artist, being impressed by the event, decided to record it. The obvious familiarity of the petroglyph maker with the fine details of the ship's rigging leads Charlot (1956) to conclude that he was probably of European descent.

Around the corner from Group E (Fig. 1) are the four figures of Group F (Fig. 4F). Two of these figures are incomplete. The two completed figures stand with arms outstretched and feet apart. They are enhanced with arm and leg muscles. Rainbow-like arches extend overhead from shoulder to shoulder. A rainbow symbolized the presence of royalty to the ancient Hawaiian, suggesting that these figures represent Hawaiian kings. These rainbow-arched men are the only ones of their kind known to exist in the Hawaiian Islands.

Outside the grated enclosures in a cleft at point G (Fig. 1) is located a group of four dogs (Fig. 4G). They are similar in form to those found in other groups. Emory (1955) states that the petroglyph dogs in Nuuanu Valley are representations of the legendary ghost dog Kaupe. It was believed that Kaupe inhabited Nuuanu Valley and that misfortune would befall a traveller should he encounter him along the trail.

SITE 2

Approximately 200 m north of Site 1 on the western edge of Nuuanu Stream is a large mound of boulders forming the western edge of the main trail. A short climb up into these rocks leads to a cave-like formation housing the petroglyphs of Site 2. Figure 5 is the plan view of this site. The dotted lines indicate existing grates, whereas the letters denote the relative position of various figure groupings. The dashed portion of the figure representing the rear of the cave is meant to indicate that a second level exists below the main cave floor.

At the cave entrance at point A (Fig. 5) is located a one metre diameter black lava rock with a solitary figure chipped into its western face (Fig. 6A). Just inside the grate are additional solitary figures at points B and C (Fig. 5). The petroglyphs near the entrance

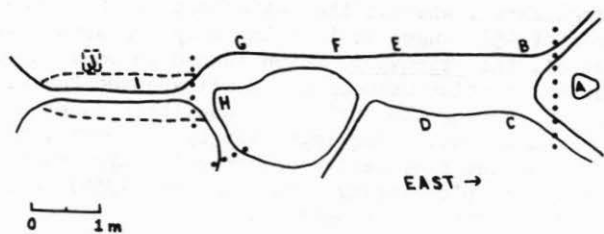


Fig. 5

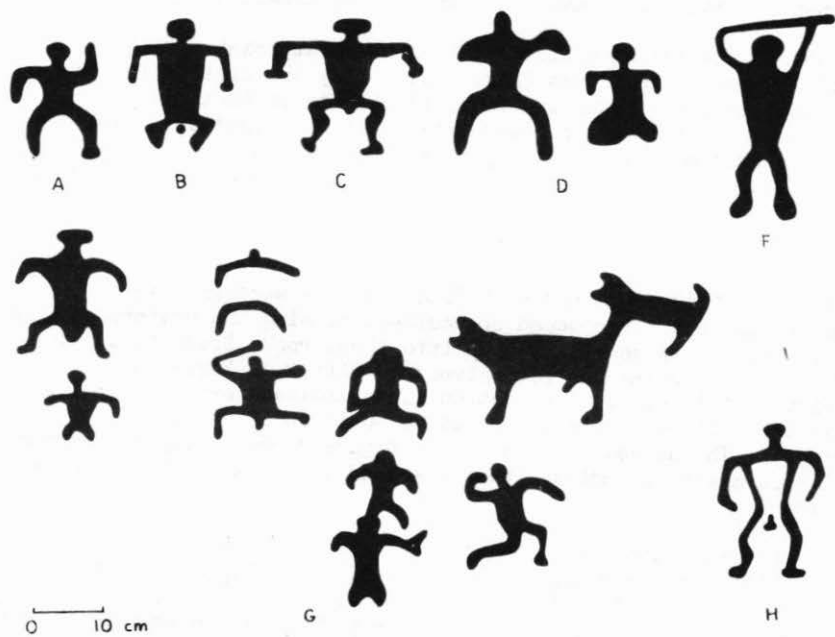


Fig. 6

grate have sharp edges and vary in depth from 1 mm to 3 mm.

At point D a group of two figures (Fig. 6D) is lightly chipped into the outer patina of the rock. Water seepage nearby has promoted moss growth which is encroaching upon these carvings, making their lower extremities indistinct.

Directly opposite to Group D on the north wall of the cave can be found the largest single grouping of petroglyph figures at this site (Fig. 7E). The carvings have been chipped out evenly to a depth of approximately 1 mm. The tendency of the patina on this wall to flake has left many of the petroglyphs with indistinct edges. Several individual specimens in this group deserve special notice. In the centre of the group a woman of triangular body design is giving birth to a male of columnar design. Immediately below this is a second birth sequence with a dog figure running into it. In the upper right portion of the group stands a man wearing a head-dress. He appears to be holding a cane. Directly below is the line drawing of a man riding a horse. This figure is not only more recent in appearance in its style of execution but also contains subject matter common to the Hawaiian Islands only since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Several scratchings of modern design appear on this wall but are omitted here. Vandals have attempted to remove large sections of the patina with a chisel and in so doing have obliterated the lower extremities of the lower birth sequence.

To the west of Group E near the cave floor stands a solitary figure of a man carrying a club over his head (Fig. 7F). Like the other solitary figures at this site, the petroglyph edges are sharp and well defined.

Beyond point F through a narrow vent lies Group G (Fig. 7G). Seven human and two animal figures make up this petroglyph arrangement. The two dog carvings seem to have been superimposed one upon the other. Below the dogs is a human figure which appears to be engaged in a throwing action. A club-swinging male figure can also be seen in this group.

Opposite Group G on the western face of a large rock is a single figure of a man (Fig. 7H). This form is unique in that the interior has not been removed. Its musculature, gender and body pose are exceptionally well defined for an outline carving.

To the left of point H on the northern face of a narrow passage lies the figures of Group I (Fig. 8I). This group is exposed to the elements and exhibits advanced signs of erosion. The arrangement

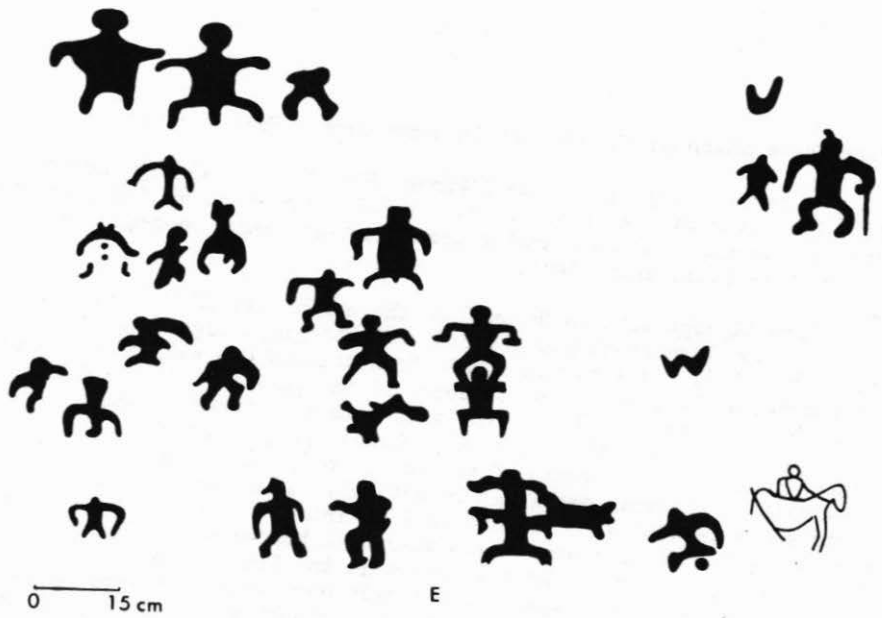


Fig. 7

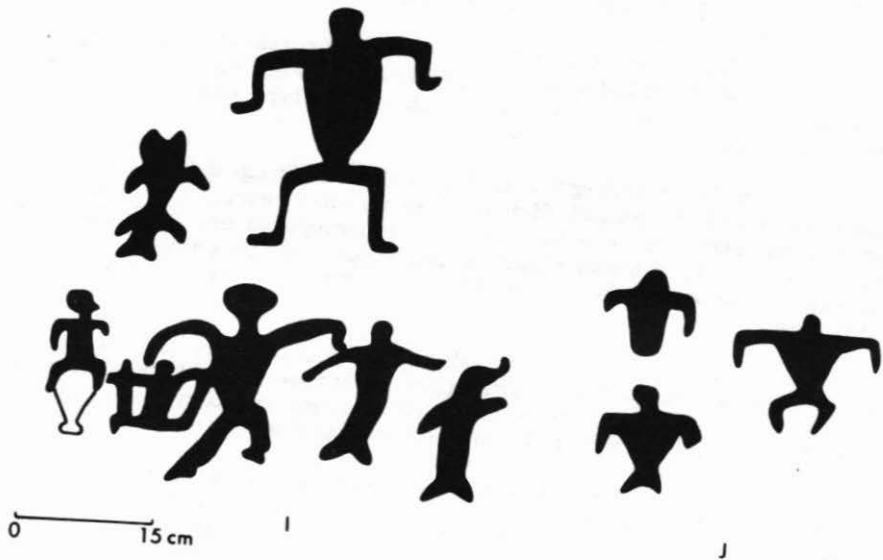


Fig. 8

consists of a family group linked arm and leg surrounded by four other figures. The mother of the family appears to be giving birth to an incomplete outline figure, whereas three of the surrounding figures take on fish-like characteristics. The largest figure of the group is a sharp-featured human of triangular body style with distinct hands and feet.

Below Group I in a narrow shelter beneath the level of the main cave floor are the three triangular figures of Group J (Fig. 8J). Like Group I, these figures are indistinct and only lightly bruised on the shelter wall.

SITE 3

Approximately 20 m to the north of Site 2 on the western edge of the trail are four petroglyph figures in a low-lying shelter along the cliff face. A protective grate which is readily visible from the trail encloses the entire site. The figure arrangement consists of a dog, two human forms, and a birth scene (Fig. 9b). All of the figures have been faintly abraded on to the rock surface which faces south. Numerous initials and modern scratchings are intermingled among the figures but are not shown here.

SITE 4

The last of the four petroglyph sites in Nuuanu Valley lies 3 m off the western edge of the trail approximately 45 m north of Site 3. The rectangular rock upon which the three figures have been inscribed is situated immediately behind a large boulder and is not visible from the trail. The petroglyphs lie on the north-eastern face of the stone (Fig. 9a). The scene includes a dog and two humans. One human holds a club raised overhead and the other stands with its legs curled under its torso. These figures have all been pecked out with a sharp instrument which has left the figure surfaces pockmarked and uneven. Recent attempts have been made by vandals to move the stone and it now lies at a 90° angle from its rest position with the dog toward the ground.

ANALYSIS

Like the petroglyphs and pictographs in other parts of the world, the Hawaiian rock carvings are difficult to interpret. The reason for their creation may have been highly purposeful, being an attempt to communicate information or commemorate certain events. On the other hand, they may be the result of idle doodling by passersby who wished to leave a visual reminder of their existence and their visit. The careful detail of the Hawaiian petroglyphs, however, favours the more

deliberate recording effort. In Nuuanu Valley, at least, the Kaupe legend suggests that the abundant dog figures are not merely representations of pets but are probably visual warnings to travellers to beware.

The presence of human figures in petroglyphs is not uncommon wherever they are found. Their relative abundance in Hawaiian petroglyphs, however, could possibly be explained by the suggestion of Cox and Stasack (1970) that perhaps some of the human petroglyphs are representations of the major Hawaiian gods, the akua. Wood carvings of the akua show them to be of human form with elaborate head-dresses. A second suggestion is that perhaps some of the petroglyphs represent personal guardians, the aumakua. Each Hawaiian family group and each individual had an ancestral aumakua to which ritual offerings were made in consultation prior to any significant undertaking. If indeed these are spirit figures, this would explain the symbolism behind the various incomplete and unnatural human forms found at each site.

Similarly, some of the animal figures may represent another class of protective spirit, the unihipili, who often took animal form. These personal, protective spirits were created by the transferral of a deceased ancestor's spirit into the body of a bird, fish or other animal. Variations in human and animal petroglyphs which exhibit the characteristics of both, such as the fish-man of Group I of Site 2, may be representations of an unihipili.

The dating of Hawaiian petroglyphs is as indeterminate as it is for petroglyphs found elsewhere. Some estimates can be made as to their maximum age by referral to the approximate arrival time of the first Polynesians to Hawaii. More accurate determinations are impossible unless an accompanying legend pertaining to the petroglyphs mentions specific rulers connected with their creation. Certain individual drawings can be dated by their subject matter as is the case of the horse outline of Group E of Site 2. For the majority, however, dating is approximate at best.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to thank Carl and Dora Wood for their assistance while completing this paper.

REFERENCES

- Charlot, J. 1956 "Post Cook Discoveries in Petroglyphs".
Paradise of the Pacific 68 (11): 26-29.
- Cox, J. H. 1970 Hawaiian Petroglyphs. Honolulu,
B. P. Bishop Museum.
- Emory, K. P. 1955 "Oahu's Fascinating Petroglyphs".
Paradise of the Pacific 67 (5): 9-11, 26.
- Johnson, W. R. 1952 "Stone Age Art in Hawaii". Paradise of
the Pacific 64 (11): 30-31.
- McAllister, J. G. 1933 "Archaeology of Oahu". B. P. Bishop Museum
Bulletin 104, Honolulu.
- Pukui, M. K. 1942 "Hawaiian Beliefs and Customs During Birth,
Infancy and Childhood". B. P. Bishop
Museum Occasional Papers 16 (17):
356-381.
- Pukui, M. K. 1957 Hawaiian-English Dictionary. Honolulu,
University of Hawaii Press.

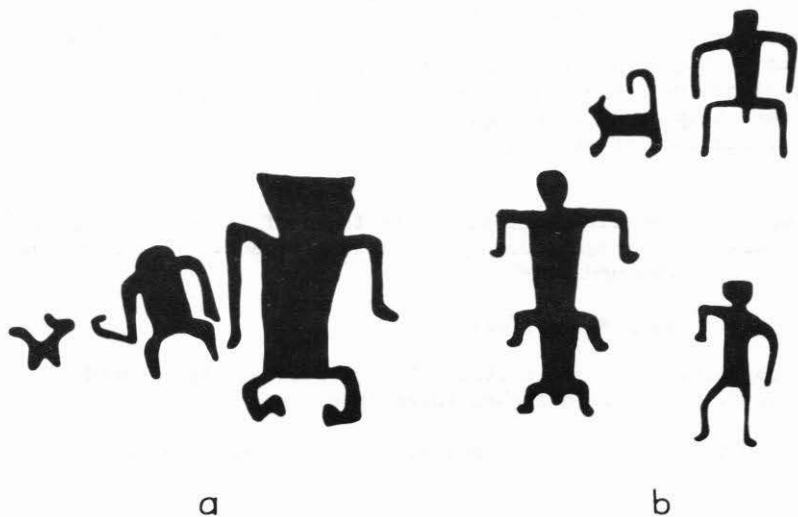


Fig. 9