

THE JUMP-ACROSS CREEK PETROGLYPH SITE IN BELLA COOLA INDIAN TERRITORY, BRITISH COLUMBIA, CANADA

The Jump-Across Creek petroglyph site is located in Bella Coola Indian territory, on the southeastern shore of Dean Channel on the northern coast of British Columbia. It is accessible only by boat or from the air. My wife and I visited the site on June 26, 1976, with a hydroplane rented in the village of Bella Coola.

Geophysical Features

An inspection of the site revealed that the stream had forced its way directly through the body of the rock in the back of the narrow beach. Later, the top of the tunnel had collapsed, but the gap remains so narrow that one can “jump across” from one side to the other; hence the creek’s name. Another unusual geophysical feature there is the presence of a deep bowl, measuring about fifty feet across, that has been formed by the stream after it emerges from the collapsed tunnel and just before it empties into the channel.

Rock Face 1.

The petroglyphs at the mouth of Jump-Across Creek have been the subject of four previous reports. They were first briefly mentioned by Smith (1927a) and by Gjessing (1952) both of which referred to the site as “Swallow Creek”; the latter included line drawings of the three most elaborate anthropomorphs depicted at the site (in his figure 3). Much later, Hill and Hill (1974, p. 175–177, 279) published a short text and reproduced rubbings of the same three figures, together with illustrations of the smaller designs (faces and a boat) from the same rock. Lastly, Lundy (1974, p. 23) included the site (under the designation, FcSr 1) in her listing of rock art localities on the coast. She illustrates (in form of drawings) one of the three major anthropomorphs, in figure 30-d on page 168, and one of the face designs, in figure 30-i on page 172 of her unpublished thesis, and also the boat (in figure 39, on page 215).

All of the petroglyphs described in these reports are located on a sloping ledge near the mouth of the creek, on its northern shore. Present are, as already mentioned, three large anthropomorphs, each measuring between 3 foot 2 inches and 4 foot 3 inches in length and displaying unusual head and body decorations. Two of them show what appear to be stylized ribs (Figs. 1 & 2) while the torso of the third figure is subdivided into rectangular spaces four of which contain short projecting strokes (Fig. 3). One of these humans wears double ear pendants, and another one carries an object resembling a handbag. These major figures are supplemented by a cast of smaller representations which consist of outlined and non-outlined faces, with or without rudimentary torsos attached (Figs. 4 & 5). The canoe illustrated by

Hill and Hill (1974, p. 177) deviates in appearance from the one we identified on this rock: the boat we found appears to contain a rounded, man-like figure with raised arm (Fig. 6), a feature not evident in Hill and Hill's rubbing reproduction.

Rock Face 2.

While I photographed these rock drawings, my wife discovered a second rock art panel that none of the previous investigators had mentioned or illustrated in their reports. The newly identified carvings are present on a sloping, more nearly vertical rock surface set back from the shore area where the other designs are located. There is very little contrast between these petroglyphs and the surrounding rock, a fact that may help explain why these depictions have thus far escaped notice.

Since the increasingly strong wind blowing up the channel on the morning of our visit induced the pilot to opt for a rather hasty and premature departure from the site, little time remained for a thorough study. Nevertheless, the major figures could be photographed. Because of the low contrast, they were later transformed into line drawings. As the pictures had to be taken at an angle, from below, some distortion in perspective is, unavoidably, present.

In both size and general typology, the newly discovered petroglyphs—anthropomorphs and human faces—correspond to those from the other rock at this locality, although decorative elaboration is not as striking as in the latter. Nevertheless, all the larger human figures display many ribs on their torsos (Figs. 7–9). Also present is another boat in form of a gently curving arc surmounted by short, perpendicular strokes (Fig. 9). The question arises whether this is the second canoe mentioned (but not illustrated) by Hill and Hill (1974, p. 177); but if so, these authors undoubtedly would have seen the immediately adjacent designs also and would certainly have alluded to them in their account.

The Stirrup Nose

A pervasive artistic trait characterizing most of the human faces at the Jump-Across Creek site is the so-called “stirrup nose” (Figs. 1–5, 8, 9), a nose also somewhat resembling the form of a bird in flight. The stirrup nose is found only here and at one other petroglyph site in the Pacific Northwest, the one on Ringbolt Island in the Skeena River near Terrace, B.C., in Tsimshian Indian territory (Hill & Hill, 1974, p. 205–206, 279). However, it is also prominently displayed on a pictograph face on the Skeena River near Tyee, B.C. (Smith, 1927b; Grant, 1967, p. 85), where it is associated with a group of painted “coppers” (symbols of wealth and status among Northwest Coast Indians, especially those of the northern parts of the region) (Fig. 10). The stirrup nose finds its counterpart on many face designs derived from classical Northwest Coast art, such as wooden boxes, coppers, blankets (Fig. 11), robes, and shirts (Emmons & Boas, 1907; Inverarity, 1971, figs. 6, 9, 16, 22, 23, 78, 151; Kew & Goddard, 1974, p. 8, 75, 80, 92).

In her stylistic analysis of Northwest Coast rock drawings, Lundy (1974, p. 256–294) distinguished between five different styles. Only two of these are pertinent in the present context, namely, the Basic Coast Conventionalized style and

the Classic Conventionalized style. The former is the principal rock art style on the coast. The Classic Conventionalized style, encountered at only a handful of localities, differs from it by the addition of some traits that characterize classical Northwest Coast art in general. These include a continuous “formline” (which delineates the main shapes and frequently changes in width and direction; see Holm, 1965, p. 35), the ovoid, the typical eye form, and the “hocker device” (circles for joints; see Hill & Hill, 1974, p. 277). It should perhaps be emphasized that in the vast majority of the rock drawings of this style merely one of these four traits is present, rarely more, and then often in a rather attenuated form at that. Northwest Coast art, it would seem, is primarily and essentially a wooden and textile art while its rock art manifestations hardly begin to reflect the full range of stylistic elaboration for which it is justly renowned and appreciated. Although Lundy (1974, p. 23, 271) assigned the petroglyphs at the Jump-Across Creek site to the Basic Coast Conventionalized style, they should, in my opinion, be rather listed with the Classic Conventionalized style, since the stirrup nose, so prevalent in these figures, represents another, and very characteristic, trait of classical Northwest Coast art, as discussed above.

Facial Painting?

The face of one of the three most elaborate human figures at the Jump-Across Creek site (Fig. 1) is decorated with two curving rake-like designs, one on each side of the nose, that suggested facial painting to Hill and Hill (1974, p. 279). While this supposition may be correct, it remains hard to prove; it is possible, after all, as Gjessing (1952) surmised, that the faces at this rock art site were meant to represent masks.

In his monograph on facial painting among the natives of the region, Boas (1898a, p. 13–14) stated that “the Indians of northern British Columbia use for decorative purposes almost exclusively animal motives.” These animal forms commonly represented the crests of the various families. While they were often highly conventionalized (geometrized), Boas added the observation that “the decorations differ according to the rank and wealth of the wearer. The full and rather realistic representations of animals are considered of greater value, and as indicating higher rank, than conventional representations which consist of symbols of the animals.” The highly conventionalized design on the face of the petroglyph figure would, therefore, indicate that its bearer was of comparatively low hierarchical status. However, such a supposition appears rather implausible in view of the otherwise unusually elaborate decorative detail lavished on this and the associated human figures at the site. This degree of ornamentation suggests, rather, that the persons portrayed here were invested with considerable influence and rank. Boas (1898a, plates V and VI) illustrates several geometric forms used in facial painting, among them linear patterns, broad colored areas, rows of rings, and dots; but none of these designs resemble the curved rakes displayed on the rock carving. It should be remembered, though, that Boas obtained his examples from the Haida region, and it is quite possible that the Bella Coola Indians employed different symbols with differing iconographic connotations.

Boas also published six plates with mask designs, some of them displaying geometric patterns, from the Bella Coola region (Boas, 1898 b), but, again, there are none with stirrup noses or with rake designs as seen on the petroglyph face.

Dating

How old are the petroglyphs at the Jump-Across Creek site? Because of the high degree of stylistic elaboration, which sets them apart from the bulk of the petroglyphic art on the Northwest Coast, and because of “the fresh sharp edges of the pecked lines”, Hill and Hill (1974, p. 177) surmised that these rock drawings are of comparatively recent vintage. According to Lundy (1974, p. 335–338, 341), the Classic Conventionalized rock art style, to which—as suggested here—these designs belong, appears to be a late elaboration of the Basic Coast Conventionalized style. The latter, according to this author, may go back as much as two thousand years since its inception but, at the other end of its floruit, extends into the ethnographic present.

Another clue to the presumed recency of the described petroglyphs may be the stirrup nose which is so prevalent among these figures (Figs. 1–5, 8, 9). It is known that the painted face near Tyee referred to above (Fig. 10), with its prominent stirrup nose, was commissioned by Tsimshian Chief Legaik about the year 1833 in order to indicate his trade monopoly on the lower Skeena River (Robinson, 1973, p. 64; Lundy, 1974, p. 297, 329, 334).

Faces with stirrup noses are also standard design motifs on the renowned Chilkat blanket (Fig. 11) (see Emmons & Boas, 1907); the Chilkat are a division of the Tlingit family living about the head of Lynn Canal, in southeastern Alaska. However, as Emmons (in Emmons & Boas, 1907, p. 331) put it, “our knowledge of the earliest products of the loom is very vague.” He goes on to relate that the Spanish explorer Maurelle, who visited the west coast of Prince of Wales Island in 1779, makes mention of “a woven scarf with fringe” that was most probably the Chilkat blanket, and that La Perouse, a few years later, speaks of a native manufacture resembling a tapestry. He adds: “The only old specimen of woven fabric that I have ever found in the possession of the Chilkat I procured from the chief’s family in 1888. They assured me that it had been in their possession for many generations, and that it represented the type of ceremonial blanket used in the earliest days.” In referring to a specific blanket, Boas (in Emmons & Boas, 1907, p. 390–391) states that “this was the first blanket ever woven by the Chilkat people, and that it was copied from the Tsimshian more than a century and a half ago.” The blanket in question already shows face designs with characteristic stirrup noses; thus, this convention can be traced back, among the Tsimshian, to at least the middle of the 18th century. “To the Tsimshian is attributed the first knowledge of this particular type of weaving in wool; and from them the Tongass, the Stikine, and later on the Chilkat, learned the art” (Emmons, in Emmons & Boas, 1907, p. 329). A Tsimshian Chilkat blanket, labeled as “old”, is on display in the Portland, Oregon, Art Museum; its design motifs include faces with the stirrup nose (Fig. 11).

Since the most prominent feature in the petroglyphs at Jump-Across Creek, the

stirrup nose, has been employed as an artistic trait in the northern portion of the coast for more than two hundred years, the rock drawings are conceivably as old as that, or even older. Nevertheless, the sum of the evidence contained in the stylistic and technological data reviewed above suggests that these carvings are more likely to have originated less than two centuries ago.

Shamanistic Traits

Little can be said about the specific significance of the individual figures depicted on these rocks. Obviously, the major anthropologic images represent important personages, either from this world or from the realm of mythology. On the Chilkat blanket, the central design is nearly always a face with a stirrup nose, but its iconographic identification varies with the context in which it finds itself (Boas, in Emmons & Boas, 1907, p. 365–398). Thus, the face on one blanket may belong to a killer whale, that on a second one to a brown bear, and the same face on a third blanket may be associated with anatomical parts representing an eagle.

There is, however, strong circumstantial evidence that the Jump-Across Creek petroglyph site may have served as a shamanic retreat. This supposition derives both from the specific geophysical features characterizing this locality and from internal evidence contained in the designs themselves. The spot is remote, is situated away from habitation areas, is accessible only from the water, and is associated with a nearby high point of land affording a good view of the surroundings. Geophysical features of this nature greatly enhance the possibility that this was, indeed, a location preferred by shamans, as has been suggested for other, similarly endowed petroglyph sites along the coast (Meade, 1971, p. 11, 50, 68, 71, 76; Wellmann, 1976, p. 19; 1978). In addition, the stream here appears to emerge directly from the rock, and it forms a small pool just before it enters the channel. Points of emergence from, or access to, the interior of the earth, such as this, play important roles in shamanic ideology (Vastokas & Vastokas, 1973, p. 89); and the pool-like deepening and widening of the creek recall a petroglyph site at Kulleet Bay near Ladysmith on Vancouver Island, B.C., in Coast Salishan territory, which to this day has been known as “Shamans’ Pool”, a spot where initiates for the secret winter societies still undergo their ritual cleansing (Hill & Hill, 1974, p. 93–94; Hill, 1975, p. 36–37).

In addition to the geophysical features just described, two traits contained in the carvings support the supposition of shamanic connotations for this site. These are the rib designs visible on many of the figures (Figs. 1, 2, 7–9), as well as the two drawings of boats (Figs. 6 & 9). The image of the skeleton is deeply anchored in ancient shamanic beliefs and practices (Eliade, 1972, p. 158–165); the bones symbolize the shaman’s rebirth and reactualize the drama of his initiation. In the Pacific Northwest, figures with ribs (“x-ray pictures”) are not confined to rock art but have also been documented in stone and wood carvings along the coast (Smith, 1907, p. 421–432; Inverarity, 1971, figs. 40, 42, 104, 108, 118, 225, 240).

Boat images, too, are firmly rooted in both North American and Eurasian shamanism (Vastokas, 1971; 1973/74). The boats at the Peterborough, Ontario, petroglyph site were seen as charged with sacred and cosmological significance; they

are magical vessels, capable of penetrating the earth and flying across the sky, which carry souls, shamans, and manitous into the various zones of the Algonkian universe (Vastokas & Vastokas, 1973, p. 59–61, 126–129). Snow (1976) ascribed a similar meaning to the canoe petroglyphs near Solon, Maine. While boat images are extremely rare motifs in Northwest Coast rock art (Lundy, 1974, p. 213; Hill & Hill, 1974, p. 177; Wellmann, 1978), those described here fit well into the postulated shamanic context.

Each of the geophysical and artistic traits enumerated may also, of course, occur in a non-shamanic setting, but their combined presence at the Jump-Across Creek site does create a pervasively shamanic ambience. Furthermore, the shamanic roots of Northwest Coast art in general have recently been reaffirmed by Furst (1973/74). Therefore, it would seem appropriate to view this Bella Coola Indian petroglyph site in a similar light: it may very well have served as a shamanic retreat.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Unter den Gravierungen auf einem Felsen an der Mündung des Jump-Across Creek am Dean Channel, im Bereich der Bella Coola-Indianer an der nördlichen Küste von British Columbia gelegen, finden sich einige typologisch ungewöhnliche anthropomorphe Gestalten wie auch Kanu-Darstellungen. Bei einem Besuch der Stätte im Sommer 1976 wurde eine zweite Felswand mit weiteren, bisher nicht beschriebenen

Petroglyphen (menschliche Figuren und ein Boot) entdeckt. Ein bei diesen Darstellungen häufig vorkommendes, in der Felskunst der Nordwestküstenstämme sonst sehr seltenes typologisches Merkmal, die sogenannte „Steigbügel Nase“, findet sich auch bei einer datierbaren Piktographie der Tsimshian-Indianer wie auf zahlreichen beweglichen Kunstwerken des pazifischen Nordwestens, zum Beispiel Chilkat-Decken, so daß sich von hier aus gewisse ikonographische und chronologische Aussagen machen lassen. Die Felsgravierungen am Jump-Across Creek gehören dem Classic Conventionalized Style (nach Lundy) an und sind vermutlich weniger als zweihundert Jahre alt. Die Abgelegenheit der Stätte, ihre geophysikalischen Gegebenheiten und gewisse, den Darstellungen selbst zu entnehmende Merkmale (wie das Rippenmotiv und die Kanuabbildungen) sprechen dafür, daß es sich hier um einen Ort handelt, der schamanistischer Meditation gedient haben könnte.

SUMMARY

Several typologically unusual anthropomorphs as well as canoes occur among the designs at the Bella Coola Indian petroglyph site at the mouth of Jump-Across Creek on Dean Channel in British Columbia. Additional human figures and another boat image have been discovered during a recent visit to this locality. One of the characteristic stylistic traits at the site, the “stirrup nose”, is shared by a datable Tsimshian pictograph and by face designs on movable objects of Northwest Coast art including Chilkat blankets, an observation permitting certain iconographic and chronological deductions. These petroglyphs are classified with Lundy’s Classic Conventionalized rock art style and presumed to be less than two hundred years old. The remoteness of the site, its geophysical features, and internal evidence derived from the designs (rib patterns and boat images) all suggest that this place may have served as a shamanic retreat.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My wife, Margot Wellmann-Scharpenberg, deserves credit for having discovered the petroglyphs shown in Figs. 7–9. The photographs were printed by Herbert A. Fischler, and the line drawings were made by Ursula Arndt. I am also indebted to Doris M. Lundy for having made available to me her own unpublished master’s thesis as well as that of Michael Robinson, and to the Portland, Oregon, Art Museum for permission to publish Fig. 11.



Fig. 1: Line drawing of human figure. Note stirrup nose, rake-like facial designs, stylized rib pattern on torso, and “handbag”. A non-outlined face is also present. Rock Face 1, Jump-Across Creek.

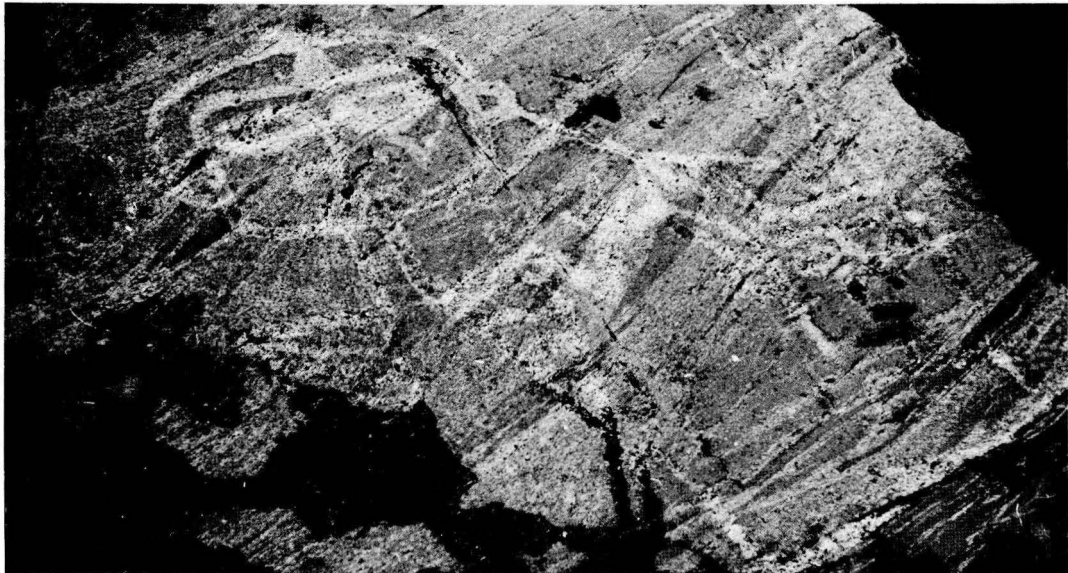


Fig. 2: Human figure with headdress, stirrup nose, and stylized ribs. Note outlined face and abbreviated torso on right. Rock Face 1, Jump-Across Creek.



Fig. 3: Squatting human figure with stirrup nose, double ear pendants, and rectilinear geometric body decorations. Rock Face 1, Jump-Across Creek.



Fig. 4: Stylized human figure with non-outlined face and large mouth; also, non-outlined face with stirrup nose. Rock Face 1, Jump-Across Creek.



Fig. 5: Non-outlined face with stirrup nose and large mouth. Rock Face 1, Jump-Across Creek.

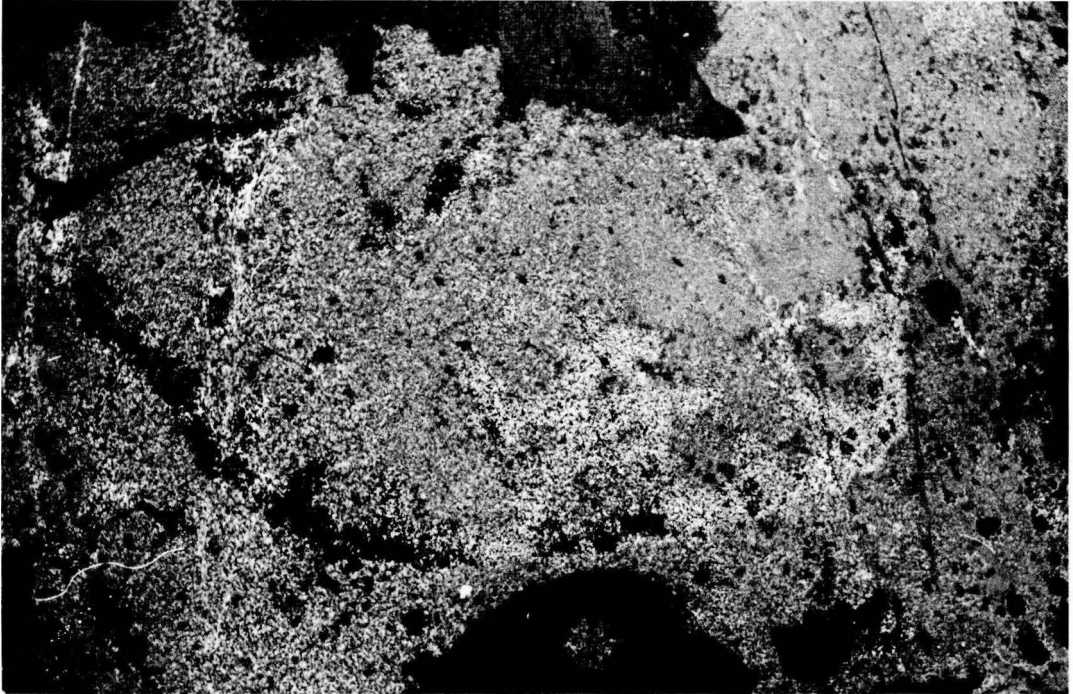


Fig. 6: Canoe, apparently with human figure inside; the left half of the boat is overgrown by (dark appearing) lichen. Rock Face 1, Jump-Across Creek.

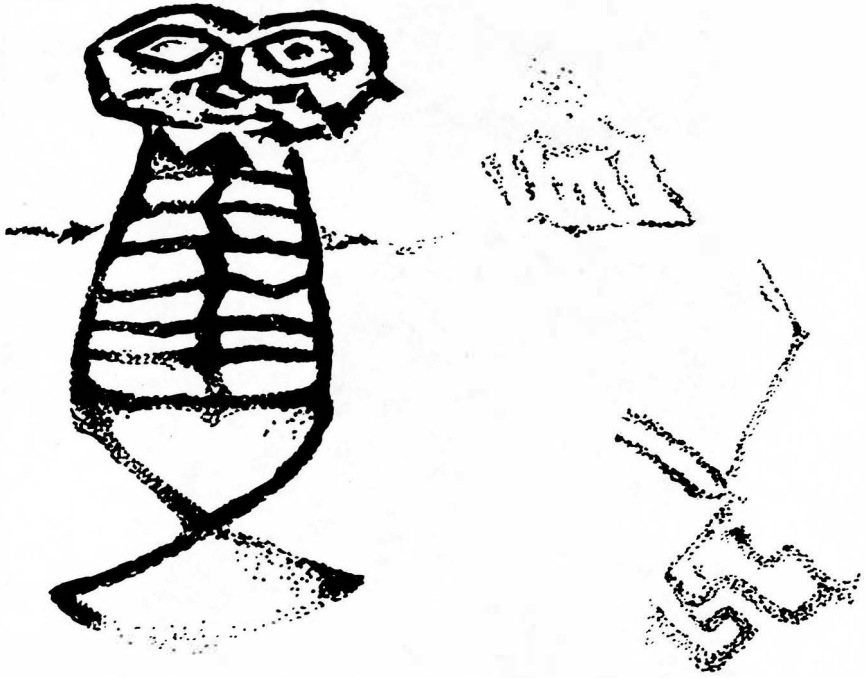


Fig. 7: Line drawing of human figure with stylized rib pattern. Rock Face 2, Jump-Across Creek.

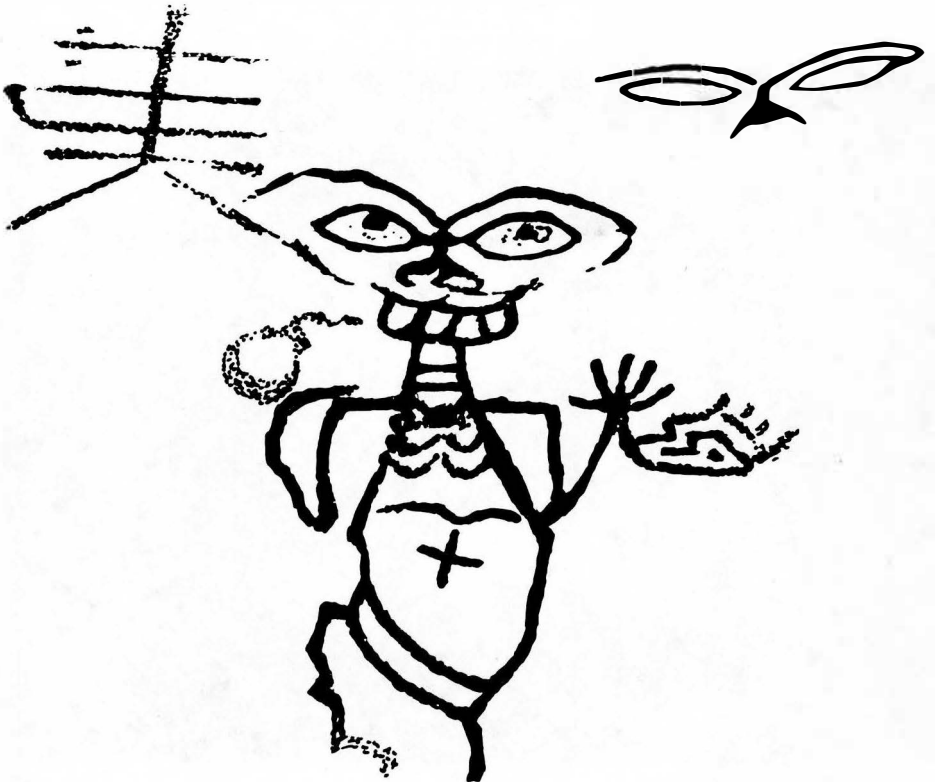


Fig. 8: Line drawing of non-outlined face and human figure with stirrup nose, rib design, and cross on torso. Rock Face 2, Jump-Across Creek.

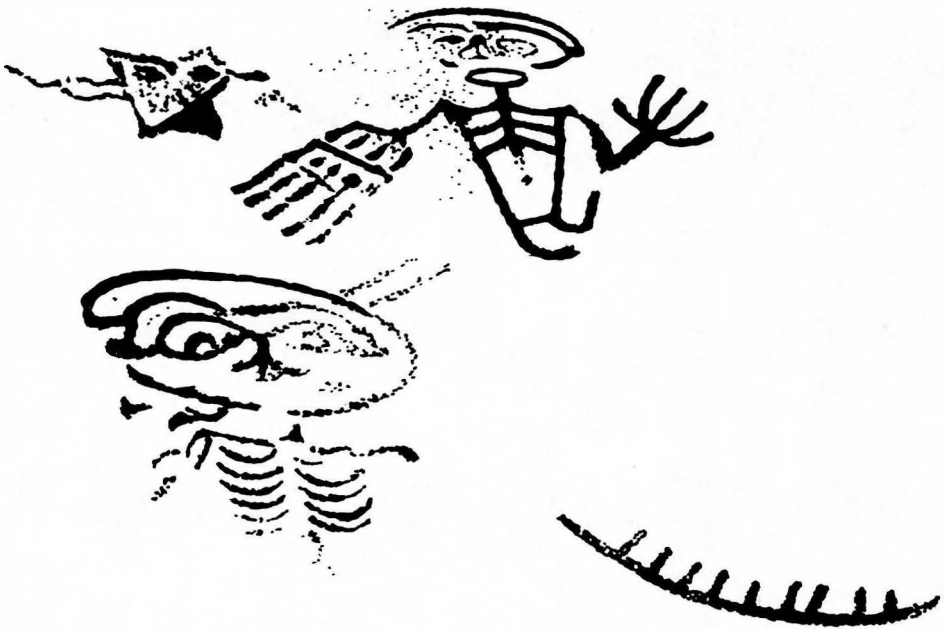


Fig. 9: Two humans with stirrup noses and rib designs; also note canoe. Rock Face 2, Jump-Across Creek.

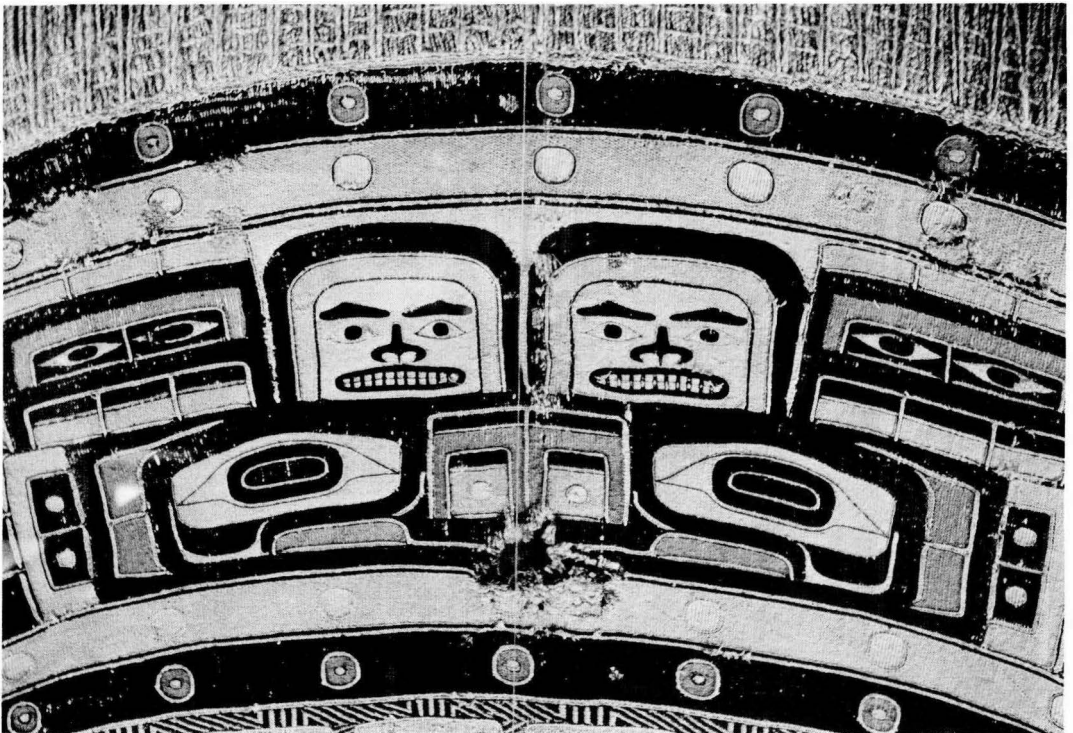


Fig. 11: Portion of "old" Tsimshian Chilkat blanket (depicted upside down); note faces with stirrup noses. Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon.

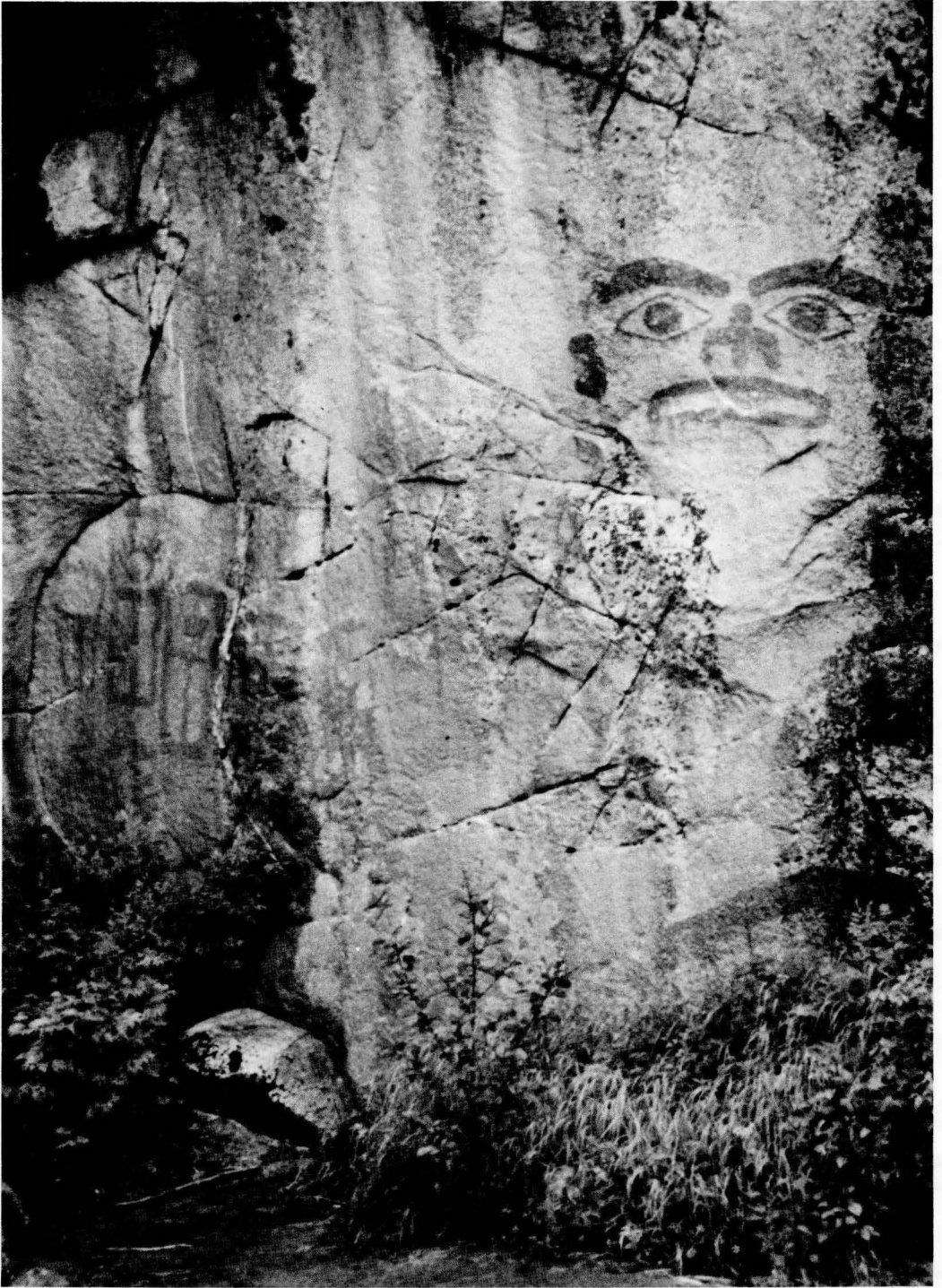


Fig. 10: Group of coppers and non-outlined human face with stirrup nose, painted in red. Sekenna River, Tye, B. C.