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PRESENTS

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BLYTHE INTAGLIOS

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VICE - HUMBUG • X-HEAD ABBOT - S. V .M.

The Blythe Intaglios

A Natural History by Gary L. Bancroft VNGH

The highlight of the seventeenth H.E.M.O.R.R.H.O.I.D Trek is the Blythe Intaglios or giant earth figures located 15 miles north of Blythe on U. S. Highway 95. This set of intaglios, consisting of three human figures, a mountain lion, and a spiral, are also known as the Giant Desert Figures and are a California Registered Historical Landmark # 101. This paper serves as a brief introduction to these intaglios and other giant earth figures located near the Colorado River. The paper will address what is known about the intaglios: Who made them? How old are they? What are their purposes? How were they made? How many of them are there? What is or isn't known about these giant figures?

The primary source of information for this paper was *Earth Figures of the Lower Colorado and Gila River Deserts: A Functional Analysis* by Boma Johnson, a now retired BLM archeologist. Mr. Johnson is clearly the preeminent authority on the giant earth figures located along the Colorado and Gila Rivers. Unfortunately, his book is not in print at this time.

Two other investigators of intaglios deserve mention. They are Harry Casey, a farmer and airplane pilot who has spent many hours searching the desert for additional geoglyphs and taking aerial photos of the known figures. The other noted researcher is Jay von Werlhof, a Clamper and retired college instructor who is an expert on the location, form, style, and content of geoglyphs.

The first recorded mention of giant earth figures was by Captain Lorenzo Sitgreaves in his journal written during his exploratory expedition during November, 1851. They were next mentioned by the S. A. Bishop party travels during 1859. Modern rediscovery can be attributed to George Palmer, a pilot who, during 1932, observed a huge humanoid figure on the desert floor during a flight from Las Vegas to Blythe.

First, what is an intaglio? The word intaglio can be defined as an engraving process that creates a depressed or bas-relief image. The word also applies to the finished product of the intaglio engraving process. The term has been applied to all giant earth figures that can best be viewed from low altitudes of about five hundred feet or less. The terms intaglios, geoglyphs and giant earth figures are all used interchangeably for these giant earth figures.

Rock art is an universal form of human expression. Rock art is found throughout the world and in all but eight states in the United States. More than 330 geoglyphs have been identified between Parker and Yuma, Arizona, on both sides of the Colorado River and on both sides of the Gila River. Geoglyphs are specific type of rock art, which also include petroglyphs and pictographs.

As previously mentioned, intaglios are figures that are created by altering the desert pavement surfaces. Desert pavement consists of pebbles covered with a dark colored desert varnish or patina set like natural cobblestones in the surface soil. Desert varnish is manganese coating that

is fixed on the pebble by bacteria and then baked by the hot desert sun, causing the pebble to appear much darker than its original color. The giant figures include anthropomorphic humanoids, zoological shapes, geometric shapes, dance and ceremonial circles or paths, markers, power circles, footpaths, or mounds. Intaglios images are created by selectively removing the darker, desert-varnished pebbles to expose lighter soils underneath, by tamping the pebbles into the subsurface soil, or by repeated foot traffic to create paths and circles. Some geoglyphs also include non-intaglio processes such as rock alignment, rock mounds, and crushed quartz.

Petroglyphs are the second type of rock art that also utilizes desert varnish to create images. These images are created on larger rocks surfaces or cliffs that have been covered with desert varnish to create dark "canvases" of several square feet or more. The image is pecked into the rock canvas by selectively removing the varnish or patina to expose the lighter colored rock beneath the varnish. These images are thought to be religious icons, maps, or even narrative stories. There are also petroglyphs in the Blythe area.

The final category of rock art is that of pictographs or the use of pigments on rock surfaces to create images. Again, these images are thought to be religious icons, maps, or historic narratives. The sources used for this paper did not mention any pictographs in the Blythe area.

The answers as to who made these figures and why they were made seem to be inextricably interrelated. For example, Eric von Danikan suggested in the *Chariots of the Gods* that the figures were created by extraterrestrial beings as interstellar navigation aids. There seems to be little likelihood that extraterrestrial beings that are capable of traveling the immense interstellar distances would suddenly need navigational aids after reaching this little marble that is planet Earth. Additionally, the giant earth figures are reported to be difficult to see at altitudes greater than 500 feet. A more plausible explanation could be that the giant earth figures are an invitation or pleading by the geoglyph makers for the extraterrestrial beings to return for another visit.

A more probable explanation is that indigenous people made these figures and that their meanings are most likely related to tribal religious rites and ceremonies. Many of the purposes and meanings for the geoglyphs have been lost due to the lack of recognizable written records. Some of these meanings and purposes may have been lost to posterity since the knowledge may have been closely held by shamans and shaman trainees and not known by the general population. Another possibility is that modern day practitioners may know the meanings and purposes of the figures but are reluctant to discuss these meanings with outsiders, including academic researchers.

Most modern explanations for the giant earth figures are related to various tribal dances and ceremonies. These ceremonies probably included vision quests, healing rites, coming of age celebrations, and just plain social events. Repeating these rites over many years caused the foot-traffic tamping of intricate dance paths or trails. Healing ceremonies often involved healing circle and power circles consisting of broken or crushed quartz.

Another probable explanation of some of the intaglios, including the Blythe Intaglios, has to do with creation myths. These giant figures are thought to represent the creation god Kumustamho or Mustamho and the supplicants attempt to enlist his help in getting rid of Kaatar, his evil twin

god. The animal figure at this site is thought to be a mountain lion, Kumustamho's spirit helper. Kaatar, the evil twin god, is generally depicted as missing body parts such as his head or one or more limbs. There are at least 16 paired humanoid figures along the Colorado River, most notably the Fort Mohave Twins geoglyph located near the site of Fort Mohave.

The Kumustamho creation story or a variation is common to many native peoples of the Americas. Kumustamho is described as a light-skinned god who journeyed across the great sea to teach the indigenous people agricultural skills and peaceful living before traveling to the eastern sky, promising to return in the future. The Aztecs referred to this creator god as Quetzlcoatl and other tribes use different names including Kukulcan, Con Tiki, and Tacoma, to list a few variations. This creation story also dovetails with Christian crucifixion scriptures, as other scholars have suggested that Jesus Christ spent the time between his crucifixion and resurrection teaching the North American Indians.

Another of the specialized intaglios, the horse figure near Yuma, helps to determine the age range of the figures. While other geoglyphs in the southwest might be as old as 10,000 years, the horse figure could not have predated the arrival of the Spaniards with their horses in the early 16th century. One of the Ripley figures resembles a Maltese Cross, another potential indicator of contact with the Spaniards. Boma Johnson, retired BLM archeologist and author of *Earth Figures of the Lower Colorado and Gila River Deserts: A Functional Analysis*, believes that most of the figures were made during the past 500 years.

There are many other specialized intaglios in the area. The Parker Rattlesnake consists of 50-meter long rattlesnake and 9 baby snakes 1- 2 meters long.

Another giant earth figure is the Sears Point Racetrack along the Gila River. This figure consist of a 131 meter long thin oval that could easily have been used for footraces.

The Shaman geoglyph is located in the Big Maria Area north of Blythe. This humanoid figure appears to be holding a round object and about 12 meter long.

The previously mentioned Fort Mohave Twins are located on Fort Mohave north of Needles. This geoglyph is thought to be the figures that Sitgreaves saw in 1851.

The Bouse Fisherman, whose crushed quartz spear point is aimed at the sacred mountain northwest of Laughlin, is located at the second scenic turnout on Plomosa Road as you travel from Quartzsite to Bouse, Arizona. The overall size of the fisherman is about 11 meters wide and 20 meters long.

There is also the Topock or Mystic Maze, windrows of gravel south of Needles near Interstate 40 and Bat Cave Wash. Arda Haenszel, another San Bernardino County historian of considerable note (and recently departed to the Great Archive) concluded that the gravel windrows predated the construction of the railroad tracks and bridge during 1889 and were used for ceremonies by the native people.

The second set of intaglios that we will visit is the Mule Canyon Intaglios about 5 miles southwest of Blythe. These figures include an aboriginal path that begins at the Colorado River and continues westward to Corn Springs, a dance circle, and many cleared circles, some in a horseshoe shapes, a series of 10 side by side cleared circles and still others along the edge of the bank of the Mule Canyon Wash. There are also several rock mounds in the area. These circles are of unknown origin, possibly aboriginal and ceremonial, but also possibly artifacts from World War II training exercises.

There remains much that is not known about the intaglios or giant earth figures; much research remains to be done to interpret the known figures. However, we do know that they are considered to be sacred sites by the descendants of the aboriginal creators and should be treated as such. Every effort should be made to minimize your impact on the figures and their surroundings, as if you were in your own house of worship. Remember the admonition: Take only photographs and leave only footprints, if that!

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