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Shamanism among the indigenous cultures of North America: Selected aspects of archaeological traces

Introduction

Archaeological (i.e., pertaining mainly to material culture) evidence and information regarding obscure issues related to the spiritual life and beliefs of ancient and historical societies is provided by burial sites, pottery ornamentation and other artefacts, as well as, to a great extent, rock art (paintings and petroglyphs covering stone walls and rocks), wherever it occurs. This often contains rich iconography, the interpretation of which – sometimes enhanced by the surviving oral tradition of indigenous communities, as is the case, for example, in the Southwestern Unites States (e.g. Cordell 1997; Dongoske et al. 1997; Mason 2000; Palonka 2022: 19–23) – offers an opportunity to explore certain issues related to ancient religious practices and beliefs, including shamanism.

Shamanistic practices are generally associated with hunter-gatherers, although they are also known among more "complex," hierarchical prehistoric and historical agricultural and pastoral communities, sometimes organised into involved sociocultural systems. Material archaeological traces related to shamanism have been discovered among communities and peoples from various parts of the world,

including selected areas in both Americas, which differed in terms of economic and social organisation, as well as population size and technological development; sometimes such practices could be observed until the recent ethnographic past (Rozwadowski 2009; 2017; Solomon 2017; Whitley 1994: 1–2).

In North America, we can find manifestations of shamanism representing various indigenous cultures and economic systems (hunter-gatherers/nomads vs. farmers) inhabiting diverse environmental ecumenes, such as the Arctic and Subarctic regions, semi-desert and desert areas of the Southwest and California, steppe areas of the Great Plains, as well as areas rich in water and forest resources in the eastern part of the North American continent. Selected examples of material culture presented in this article support the conclusion that shamanistic beliefs and practices used to exist in North America at least since the Archaic period several thousand years ago. Their traces are visible, for example, in the rock art of the hunter-gatherer Barrier Canyon societies in present Utah, and later in the agricultural Ancestral Pueblo culture (San Juan Basketmaker/San Juan Anthropomorphic style during the Basketmaker period of this culture), the specific pottery iconography of the Casas Grandes tradition in New Mexico and north Mexican Chihuahua, along with shamanic burial sites, rich iconography and assemblages of related artefacts from the Adena, Hopewell, and Mississippian cultures of Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, and other areas of eastern North America (**Figure 1**).

As for the rock art itself, considered globally, one theory developed in order to interpret the iconography of paintings and petroglyphs, including the ones created by the San people from the Kalahari Desert in South Africa, assumes that iconographic similarities in many places and across different periods are due to experiences related to the so-called altered states of consciousness, in which a person, or more precisely a shaman, enters a trance (e.g. Lewis-Williams, Dowson 1989; 1990; Solomon 2017: 566; Turpin 1990; Whitley 1994). Accordingly, some rock art (or pottery ornaments) could have been created by the shamans themselves or people associated with this type of practices, and the symbols left by them should be interpreted in the context of shamanistic rituals. The neuropsychological model has also been supported by ethnographic research conducted initially in southern Africa, as mentioned above, and later in Australia and North America and other parts of the world. The findings and subsequent analysis have made a significant contribution to understanding the symbolism of rock art thanks to the participation and involvement in the interpretive process of indigenous communities in these areas (Turpin 1990: 263; Whitley 1998: 22–23; 2023: 276–277).

Depictions on rock surfaces showing the shamans themselves or a representation of their visions may have constituted a mnemonic record of trance experiences, at risk of fading rapidly due to the inefficiency of short-term memory following a vision (e.g. Keyser, Whitley 2006; Whitley 1998: 31–32). In addition to recalling memories, sites featuring rock art could be visited many times in order to renew contact with supernatural beings, and at the same time they materially manifested the experienced state, and the abilities acquired as a result. Therefore, they offered a means of communication with other members of the community or observers,

Figure 1. Map of the areas and cultures mentioned in the text

Source: Prepared by Radosław Palonka and Michał Znamirowski based on various sources; drawing by Michał Znamirowski.

who in this way gained the opportunity to take part in shamanistic visions indirectly (Schaafsma 2013: 39–40; Solomon 2017: 574). The meaning and function of rock art might vary depending on the observers' involvement, interest, or need, as well as the level of cultural knowledge or religious/ritual initiation. Therefore, it might have acted as a form of identification for individuals and entire groups, had educational value or designated places of religious nature where sacrifices and prayers were performed – for example, in order to obtain spiritual healing (Cole 1990: 79; Whitley 2023: 280).

In this text, we use the term "shaman" and "shamanism" in its classic meaning (Eliade 1964), including the understanding of a shaman as a healer or performer of other duties and tasks for the society; perception (and sometimes depiction) of a shaman through an altered state of consciousness and out-of-body experiences (soul journeys and trance), within alternative realities and worlds; and finally, recognition that a shaman's tasks may also include mediation and contact with the supernatural world, predicting the future, forecasting (and "steering") the weather, planning hunts and wars, explaining past events, and more.

Shamanism among Moundbuilders from the Eastern Woodlands

One cultural-geographical region in North America where numerous traces of shamanism have been registered is the eastern part of today's United States, archaeologically and anthropologically referred to as the Eastern Woodlands, stretching from the Gulf of Mexico in the south to the Great Lakes region in the north, and from the Appalachian Mountains in the east to the Great Plains in the west (e.g. Fagan 2002; Milner 2005). Complex and hierarchical societies developed in this region, including the Adena and Hopewell cultures (during the Early and Middle Woodland Period, ca. 1000 BC–400 AD), and later the Mississippian tradition (ca. 700 AD–first half of the 18th century). These communities would build earthen mounds with various functions – burial (conical in shape) and flat-levelled platform mounds (sometimes with several terraces or platforms) built as bases for wooden temples or houses for the chiefs and elites. It is worth to note that in the pre-Columbian period, the entire area of this part of the North American continent, despite occasional cultural fragmentation, was marked by related rhythms of cultural and social changes (Fiedel 1992; Milner 2005).

There are several works in the American literature that deal with archaeological aspects of shamanism in the cultures of eastern North America (e.g. Carr, Case 2006a; Gibson, Carr 2004; Lepper 2004; Romain 2009). However, this topic is largely absent from Polish, and in general, European literature, apart from a few general studies (e.g. Gąssowski 1996; Palonka 2019a; Rozwadowski 2009; 2017; Szyjewski 2016). A glimmer of hope emerges with a growing interest of undergraduate and postgraduate students in this topic, for example at the Institute of Archaeology of the Jagiellonian University, where courses in the archaeology of North America (including its eastern region) have been conducted for almost twenty years, and led to several published and unpublished articles, as well as unpublished BA and MA theses (e.g. Firek 2024; Jagoda 2016; Jurkiewicz 2019; Markiewicz 2015; Nawrot 2013; 2014, Palonka 2004), whose authors largely focused on issues related to shamanism among the communities of the Adena, Hopewell, and Mississippian Moundbuilders cultures. This may, in the future, constitute a kind of outsider's or European look at topics related to indigenous research in North America.

Here we offer but a brief overview of issues that can most likely be associated with shamanism in the cultures of the Eastern Woodlands of North

America. We should immediately point out that this topic is far more complex, and the examples cited are only small parts of a bigger picture. Nevertheless, when it comes to material remains that can tell us about the existence of certain forms of shamanism in this vast area – including in the Adena and Hopewell cultures – there is a specific group of burial sites that are interpreted as shamanic based on the evidence of specific grave goods, as well as methods of modifying the body (especially the head) of the buried individuals.

Examples of grave goods found in burial sites interpreted as shamanic include fragments of musical instruments, arrowheads, blades, and other artefacts made of metals, minerals and stones rarely found in other burials (mica, quartz, meteoritic iron, silver, copper, gold and others) or the remains of animals and birds, not often encountered in other graves.[1] Another group of artefacts are those that may have been used by shamans, or their iconography contains shamanic symbolism, such as clay and stone pipes (the latter often made in the shape of different animals, including birds, as well as humans or human-animal hybrids), or stone tablets and copper items with engraved or cut-out representations of animals or people, or human-animal hybrids (Carr, Case 2006a; Lepper 2004; Milner 2005; Romain 2009). Some depict human countenances *en face* and with long hair, but when turned ninety degrees, they resemble stylised heads of birds of prey in profile; perhaps this represented the transformation of a human (shaman) into an animal.

Undoubtedly the most specific group of burials from the Adena cultures and others from the same period are those known from the sites at Ayeres Mound in Kentucky or Glacial Kame in Ohio (two examples from a slightly larger group), where men were found buried with skulls (probably masks) of wolves and bears, and occasionally deer antlers or jaw fragments (e.g. lower jaw) of wolves or predatory cats such as cougars (pumas); in some of these, teeth or fragments of wolf or deer jaws substitute extracted human teeth (e.g. Carr, Case 2006a; Lepper 2004).

At least several artefacts attributed to the Adena and Hopewell cultures (**Figures 2a–b**) refer to a "classical" understanding of a shaman as the one who enters the supernatural realm with the help of an animal spirit or by transforming into an animal (e.g. Eliade 1964; Harner 1980) – for example, the famous "bird-man" pipe (resembling the silhouette of a flying man), excavated in the 19th century from a mound at the Mound City site in Ohio (Carr, Case 2006b: 192–193; Squire, Davis 1998). This is one example of several other similar artefacts, including a pipe from Moundsville, West Virginia. Another, excavated in Ross County, Ohio, is an anthropomorphic stone pipe depicting a standing figure, possibly dwarfish (as suggested by the body proportions) and interpreted to be a shaman (the upright posture with slightly bent knees is slightly bizarre but perhaps it indicates dancing or a state of trance) (Carr, Case 2006b: 196–197). This person is dressed in an apparent loincloth, perhaps made of feathers, and wears characteristic hairstyle and ear decorations.

[1] For a more complete overview of elements of Adena/Hopewell shaman's "regalia," see: (Carr, Case 2006b: Table 5.4).

Another artefact is a figurine of a seated man with bent knees and wearing a bear skin, from the Newark site, also in Ohio (Carr, Case 2006b: Figure 5.2). His arms and legs resemble bear paws, which, together with the closed eyes and pursed lips, may indicate that he is in a trance or is transforming into an animal – in this case a bear – that would assist him on his way to another world (**Figure 2c**). An outline of a human head can be seen on his lap (perhaps a mirror image of a man dressed in a bear costume), with the same ear decorations, further suggesting a possible shamanistic connection (although it could also be interpreted as a severed human head that the "shaman" is preparing for burial).

There are many more such representations of human-animal hybrids (bird-man, serpent-man, or hybrids created from two animal species) in the Mississippian cultural tradition, and the available European written sources from

Figure 2. Drawings of effigy stone pipes in the form of a bird-man (a–b) and figurine of a bear-man or shaman from the Adena culture (c)

Source: Drawings by Katarzyna Ciomek based on: Carr, Case 2006a: Figure 5.2, and other sources.

the last centuries of its existence paint a more reliable picture of the beliefs held by these communities. For example, a famous sandstone slab (**Figure 3**) was discovered on the eastern slope of the Monks Mound, the largest Mississippian structure of this type to survive – a thirty-meter-high earthen pyramid with four

Figure 3. Monks Mound, 30-meter-high platform mound from the Cahokia Mounds in Illinois (a) and two sides of the sandstone tablet found on the slope of Monks Mound

Source: Photographs by Radosław Palonka.

terraces (e.g. Fowler 1997; Pauketat 2004). On the obverse, the plate shows a man wearing what appears to be a mask and costume of a bird (beak and feathers), while the reverse is covered with a rhomboid pattern associated with rattlesnake skin. The man represented the earthly world, the bird symbolised the extra-terrestrial world (associated with heaven), while the snake symbolised the underworld and, at the same time, the fertility of the earth (e.g. Milner 2005; Pauketat 2004). This vision of dividing the cosmos into three worlds is quite widespread in the beliefs of many Native American tribes and cultures, including in the Southwest, and it is also a characteristic feature of shamanism in a global context (Eliade 1964: 259; Lepper 2004; Milner 2005).

One of the graves discovered at the Cahokia Mounds site in Mound 72 is probably the burial site of one of the first rulers of this ancient city, laid to rest on a platform of over 20,000 sea shells arranged in the shape of a bird, sometimes argued to be the shape of a falcon (e.g. Fowler 1991: 11; 1997). The grave was also filled with numerous grave goods as well as the remains of several people, most likely sacrificed. The symbolism of the bird-man (sometimes also snake-man or rattlesnake-tailed man) appears on many other Mississippian artefacts, from decorated shell pendants, to pins and other hair ornaments, to copper jewellery. These representations form a set of a larger group of symbols characteristic of some Mississippian sites, a phenomenon dating from around 1000 AD, called the Southern Cult or Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (e.g. King 2007; Pauketat 2004). The symbolism of the bird-man could have been also closely linked to war symbolism in Mississippian communities, but it should be remembered that it tended to be related to the upper echelons of this culture's social hierarchy.

Rock art and pottery from the Southwest

Specific burials that could contain shamans' graves can also be found in the North American Southwest, for example, in the agricultural Hohokam culture, which developed in central and southern Arizona and in northern Sonora in Mexico (ca. 450–1450 AD) (e.g. Fish, Fish 2007). A few of such burials (Crown, Fish 1996; Mitchell 2003: 117–121; Palonka 2022: 191–192), found at the Pueblo Grande in the present city of Phoenix, contained an unprecedented quantity and variety of grave goods, including stone pallets, arrowheads, obsidian cores, quartz and hematite crystals, other minerals and stones, lizard-shaped shell pendants, bird-shaped stone figurines, turtle-shell rattles, bird feathers, bones, and wood scored with specific motifs, and unique items such as a hawk bone necklace. Bird motifs also often appear in the iconography of Hohokam pottery and are found on pendants and other items of jewellery made of shells.

More evidence that speaks quite convincingly of shamanism in certain cultures in the North American Southwest is provided by pottery, both in terms of its specific forms (e.g. anthropomorphic and zoomorphic effigy pottery) and especially iconography. The most characteristic polychrome pottery, so-called Ramos

Polychrome style (ca. 1200–1450 AD) from Casas Grandes cultural tradition of northern Mexico and southern New Mexico and Arizona, contains many ornaments that may be associated shaman imagery (humans, animals, birds – mostly parrots, a bird-man motif that can be identified with a flying shaman or a shaman in a trance) and with a belief system related to shamanism (e.g. Palonka 2022: 256–260; Powell 2006; VanPool 2003: 697–99). Ramos Polychrome pottery also includes painted depictions of dancing or flying humans and bird-man figures (perhaps in a trance), often wearing distinctive headgear in the shape of a bird (most often a parrot) or a rattlesnake with horns or feathers. Effigy pottery in the form of both men and women, sometimes kneeling and smoking short pipes, may also represent shamans or ritual leaders.

When it comes to Ramos Polychrome pottery, the particular phases of shamanistic transformation and journey to the spirit world in the iconography of pottery may include (**Figures 4a–d**): (a) the beginning of the trance depicted, for example, as a seated shaman smoking tobacco, datura, or peyote in the earthly world; (b) the second stage shows the shaman's slow "exit" from the earthly world represented by shedding elements of clothes and face decorations and sometimes with arms/wings prepared to flap; (c) the "flying" shaman or the shaman slowly transforms into a supernatural form, a bird, or horned figure; (d) and finally the shaman as a man with a bird's head, in this case a parrot, completing the transformation such that he completely loses his human form and turns into a supernatural being (Palonka 2022: 259).

VanPool (2003) also suggests that the shamanistic system was so developed in the Casas Grandes community that shamans were priests in an anthropological sense, exercising actual power over society, along with secular leaders. The manifestation of the dominant influence of such ritual leaders on the functioning and perhaps the emergence of this culture is visible in the rich iconography of pottery.

However, it seems that rock art has the most to say about shamanism in the Southwest, because it was used in various cultures from New Mexico and Texas, as well as Arizona, Utah, Colorado, to Nevada and California, and in various eras – from the Archaic period to much later societies of the pre-Hispanic and protohistoric periods, i.e., the last centuries before the arrival of Europeans (first Spaniards in this area), as well as later. In many cases, the rock art of the Southwest reveals examples of iconography that seem to reflect the individual stages of a shamanic trance – geometric patterns, scenes of transformations into hybrid beings (with human and animal features), as well as images of certain animal species, most likely spiritual guides assisting the shaman on their journey, most often placed near anthropomorphic figures with specific features (e.g. Schaafsma 2013: 38). Many of these elements in the American Southwest can be found in the rock art of the Archaic Barrier Canyon style (ca. 2000 BC–1000 AD) and the later San Juan Anthropomorphic/San Juan Basketmaker style (ca. 500 BC–700/750 AD) of the Ancestral Pueblo culture. Both styles developed in adjacent, or partly the same, areas – mainly in today's Utah and partly in Colorado (Barrier Canyon

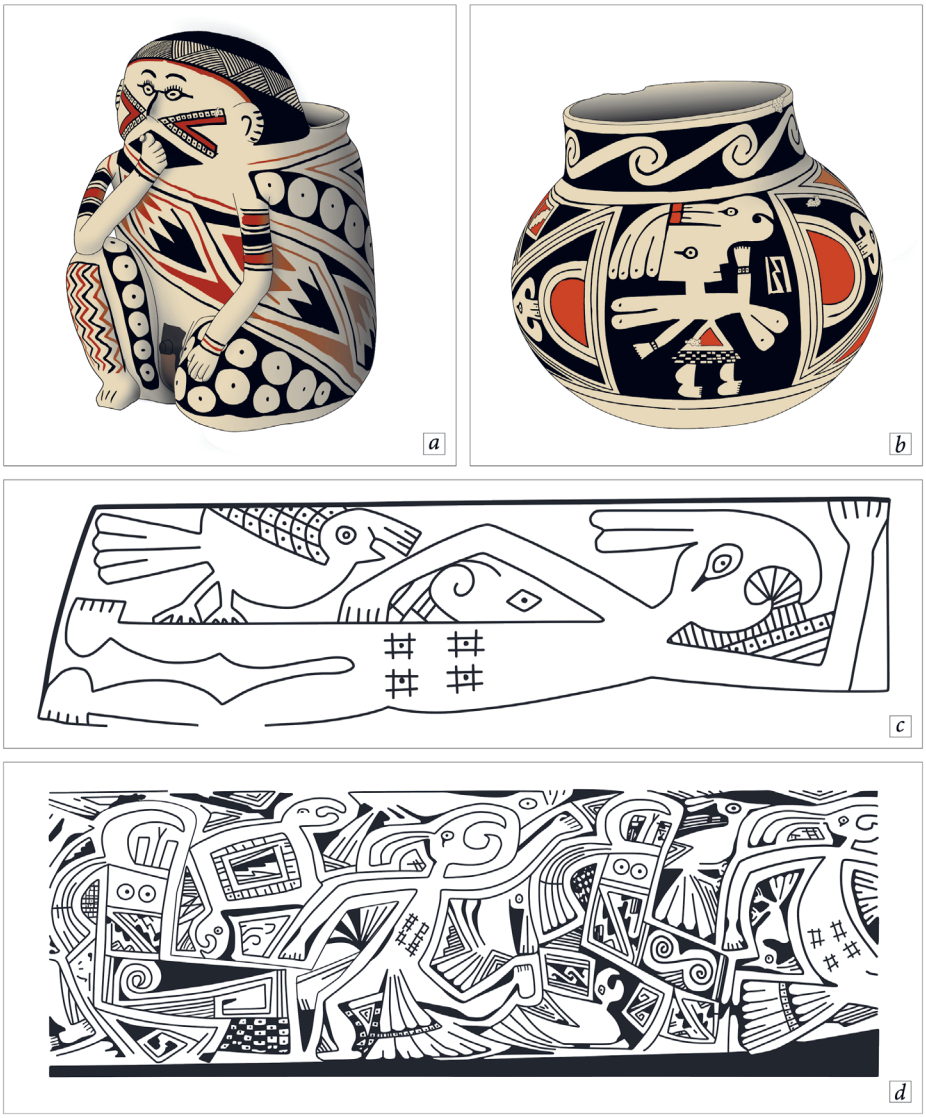


Figure 4. Ramos Polychrome effigy pottery with anthropomorphic and geometric iconography possibly representing shamans (a–b) and motifs of a bird/parrot-man from Casas Grandes pottery

Source: Drawings by Katarzyna Ciomek and Magdalena Lewandowska.

style), and at the border of Utah, Arizona, Colorado and New Mexico (San Juan Basketmaker style) – albeit in slightly different chronological periods. Based on certain stylistic features, it appears that the San Juan Basketmaker style marks a kind of evolution and continuation of the Barrier Canyon style (Palonka 2022: 107; Schaafsma 1994: 57).

The Barrier Canyon style is most characteristic of the areas of the central Colorado River basin and the Green River basin in Utah. It is characterised by paintings, most often made with dark red dye, on vertical, exposed canyon walls, shallow rock shelters and under rock overhangs. The most important features of the Barrier Canyon style are undoubtedly the predominant, usually static and frontal anthropomorphic figures of various sizes (ranging in height from several centimetres to sizes exceeding the height of an adult human) (Palonka 2019a: 131, 173–180, Figures 4.14–4.18; Schaafsma 1971: 67–69; 1980: 71; 1990: 213). The panels and compositions of these rock representations measure from a few or more than ten (for example at Sego Canyon/Thompson Wash in western Colorado) up to one hundred metres in length, as in the case of the so-called Great Gallery in Horseshoe Canyon (**Figures 5–7**) in southeastern Utah (part of the Canyonlands National Park). The number of individual figures here is quite large, and the whole section is divided into at least sixteen panels – although this is, of course, only one of the possible divisions (Jenkinson 2019).

The arrangement and organisation of individual representations within the rock art panels seems not to have been accidental, with anthropomorphic figures appearing in a strip, forming rows, and giving the impression of regular compositions,

Figure 5. The Great Gallery in Horseshoe Canyon (Canyonlands National Park, Utah) as an example of monumental Barrier Canyon style rock art (paintings)

Source: Wikimedia Commons; photographs enhanced by Michał Znamirowski.

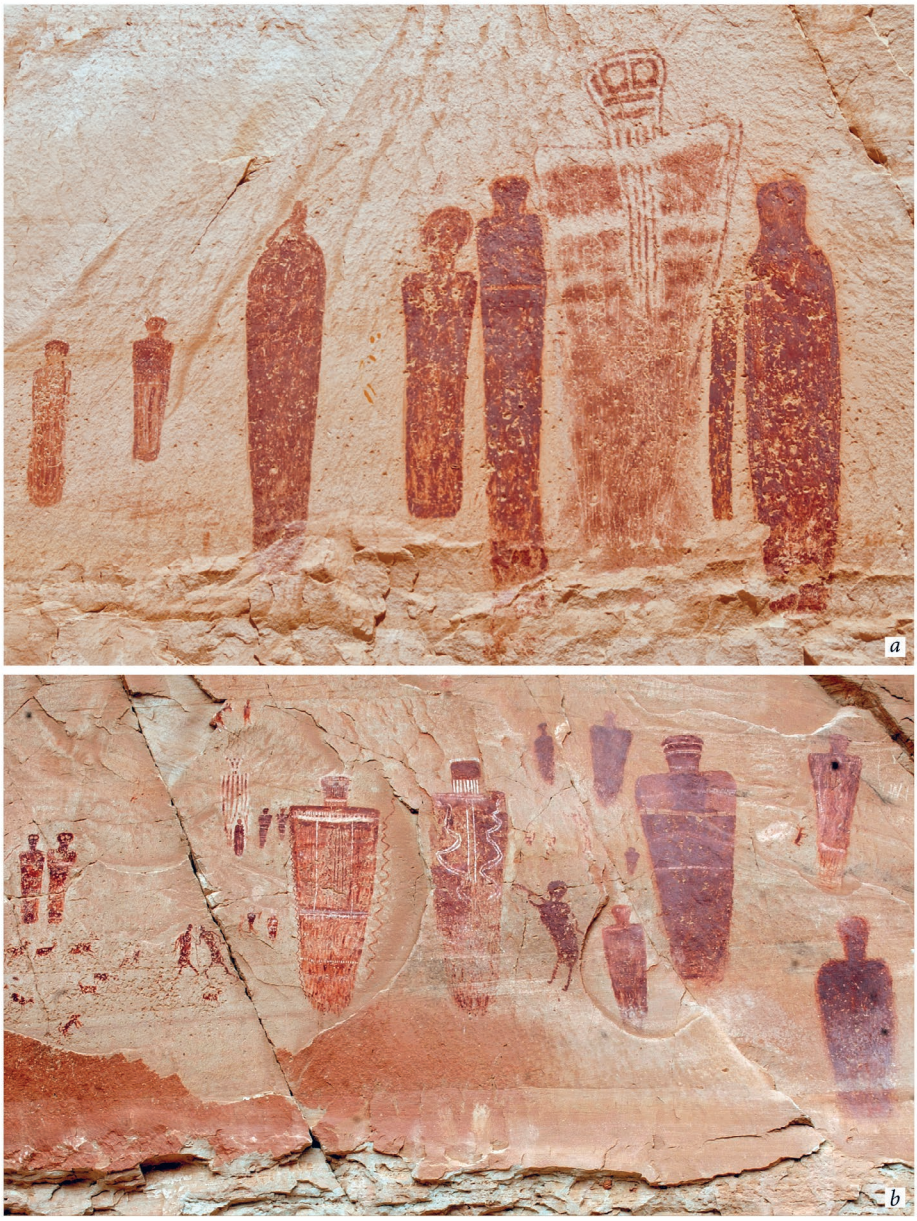


Figure 6. Parts of the Great Gallery in Horseshoe Canyon showing details of anthropomorphic depictions, possibly shamans

Source: Wikimedia Commons; photographs enhanced by Radosław Palonka and Michał Znamirowski.

Figure 7. Part of the rock "gallery" from the Sego Canyon/Thompson Wash with at least nineteen anthropomorphs painted mostly in red, representing the Barrier Canyon style

Source: Photographs by Radosław Palonka.

which is different from the later style of rock art in this region. The repetition of these features and their styles suggests that individual panels may have been made by a single person, or possibly a selected, small group, probably with access to a specific type of knowledge (Schaafsma 1971: 149; 1980: 72). The human figures tend to be unnaturally elongated and in many cases devoid of limbs (or if there are any, they are usually incongruously small in relation to the entire figure), while the torsos are decorated with complex geometric patterns in the form of linear motifs and dots (Schaafsma 1990: 225). Nevertheless, across this extensive area, the eastern and western parts differ somewhat stylistically – in the former, the elongation of the figures is to some extent compensated by the wide spacing of the arms. The heads of anthropomorphic figures are decorated with hats or elements resembling antennas or horns, and in some cases additional features, such as large, round eyes, are clearly marked (**Figures 6a, 7**). Shapes of people are also shown in the company of four-legged animals (e.g. mountain sheep), snakes, and birds of various sizes (Palonka 2022: 76–79; Schaafsma 1980: 61, 64; 1990: 213).

There have been many attempts to associate individual elements of this concisely described style with shamanistic symbolism. The torsos of the figures, usually richly decorated with geometric designs, evoke associations with

the entoptic phenomena (phosphenes), seen by the shaman during the initial stages of a trance (Lewis-Williams, Dowson 1988: 202; Whitley 2023: 279–280). The unnatural elongation of the figure or the unusual elements around the head area refer to experiences typical of states achieved after taking hallucinogenic drugs. Horn-like headgear is also a characteristic feature indicating supernatural abilities and is inherent to shamanic symbolism in various parts of the world (Schaafsma 1980: 71). Unnaturally large, emphasised eyes may refer to "mystical visions" experienced by the shaman, as we know from ethnographic records, connected with a supernatural ability to see sources of diseases, locate lost objects, or perceive the presence of evil spirits. Additionally, eyes depicted in this way evoke the image of a skull, which could be another reference to the death and subsequent rebirth of the shaman, as experienced in a trance state (Schaafsma 1994: 52).

In this context, hybrid figures are also worth examining. In the Barrier Canyon iconography, they combine anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features and probably depict scenes of shamanic transformations into animal shapes. Incarnating as an animal is one of the experiences that happen during visions and it symbolises the ability to die in order to travel to the spirit world and gain supernatural powers and influence over the extra-terrestrial world (Schaafsma 1994: 54; Whitley 1998: 25; 2023: 283). Scenes of transformation are most often illustrated in a specific way – the arms of an anthropomorphic figure are stretched out to the side with added vertical lines giving the impression of spread wings (**Figure 8**). The feet are also depicted in an unusual way, resembling the shape of a bird as seen from the side; there are also some known examples of an opposite arrangement which is ascribed with a similar meaning: birds with unnaturally long legs ending in human feet (Schaafsma 1971: 71; 1994: 54; Cole 1990: 72).

The depicted animals are also interesting – snakes, often located inside or on either side of the anthropomorphic figures, or held by them, and birds, typically shown flying near the head or sitting on the shoulders. Both species have strong shamanistic associations and can be interpreted as guides on the journey to the other world or worlds (Schaafsma 1980: 71; 1994: 53). Snakes are most often linked with the underworld (a possible destination of the journey taken during a vision) and shed their skin, which might symbolise the death and rebirth of the shaman, while birds, due to their ability to fly, may have symbolised guidance or flight itself, or the transformed soul of the shaman during his journey to the spirit world. A similar meaning is assigned to four-legged animals, often shown on a larger scale near the lower parts of anthropomorphic figures and interpreted as dogs, which act as guardians and guides on extra-terrestrial journeys (Schaafsma 1994: 54); however, they could also be jaguars, since shamans are believed to take their form in many regions of the New World (Schaafsma 1980: 71). Some similarities between these animal and shamanistic representations can also be found in the Lower Pecos style contemporaneous to Barrier Canyon, mainly in the southwestern part of Texas and adjacent parts of Mexico (Boyd 2013; Cole 2004: 41–42; Palonka 2022: Figure 3.8; Schaafsma 1980).

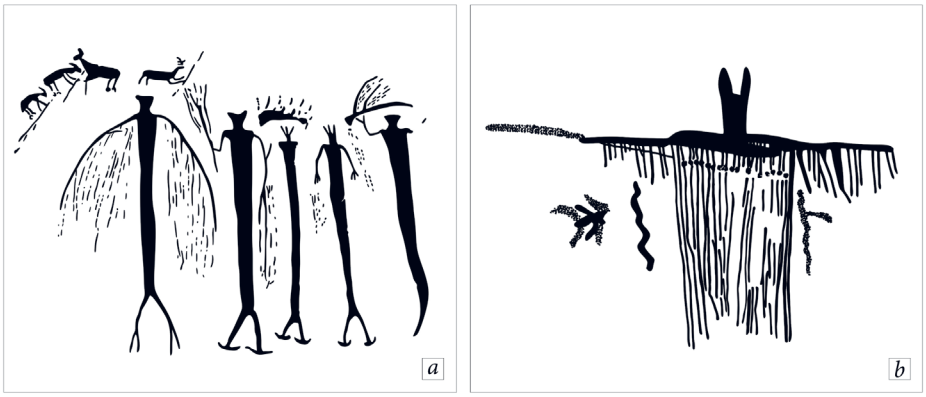


Figure 8. Possible depictions of shamanic transformations from the Barrier Canyon style: the arms of anthropomorphic figures evoke associations with spread wings, and the wavy lines probably represent snakes

Source: Tracings by Katarzyna Ciomek based on: Schaafsma 1994: 54; Cole 1990: 72.

An often recurring figure in the Great Gallery and other Barrier Canyon style sites is the bighorn sheep (*Ovis canadensis*). According to David Whitley (1994), the depiction of this animal in California is not directly associated with hunting magic but might be a metaphor for shamanic power, and a spirit that helps the shaman to summon rain (**Figure 9**); appearance of bighorn sheep herds may also be associated with rain, as observed in nature.[2] Even if the sheep is accompanied by a hunting weapon (spear-thrower *atlatl* or bow and arrows), it is not necessarily associated with the physical hunting of the animal, but perhaps with a shaman "killing himself" or entering a trance; in other words, "killing a bighorn" was a metaphor for making rain (Whitley 2023: 291, Figure 13). Moreover, depictions of sheep, sometimes with human body parts (e.g. legs), suggest the transformation of a shaman into an animal. Perhaps they symbolise the transition between the world of spirits and contact with them in order to be able to control the rain. Sometimes entering a trance was presented as death, which would explain the presence of deadly objects. If this happened, the slaughtered sheep would become a guardian spirit, and the shaman would gain the ability to control and manipulate the weather – in this case, life-giving rain (Whitley 1994: 13–14).

Trance experiences are not only manifested as visual, but also as auditory hallucinations. The cave paintings from the Great Gallery also illustrate other attributes of the shaman, including specific objects. One of the anthropomorphic figures is holding an object resembling a flute. Regarding western North America, Whitley mentions at least two instruments associated with the beginning

[2] For further literature, see: (Whitley 2023: 290).

of shamanic rituals: bullroarers and flutes (1994: 12). Some of the anthropomorphic figures in the Great Gallery also feature lines running through or above their heads, which might be associated with a certain emanating power, or represent auditory experiences suggestive of a trance, another state of spiritual awareness (Schaafsma 1994: 59). In the context of the recent publication by Andrzej Rozwadowski and Janusz Wołoszyn (2024), based on their research on anthropomorphic and geometric petroglyphs from Toro Muerto in southern Peru, one may hypothesise that the wavy or zigzag lines (sometimes accompanied by dots and repeated straight lines) could be an iconographical representation of songs; however, this interpretation requires additional, more thorough analyses, taking into account the different context of the rock art in question and specific cultural background. Taking these considerations further, linear geometric motifs could also have been graphic metaphors of a (shamanic) transfer to the other world (Rozwadowski, Wołoszyn 2024: 671). This understanding of some geometric representations might also offer an interesting and alternative explanation of the symbolism behind a certain group of geometric symbols in the Barrier Canyon style, and particularly in the later San Juan Basketmaker style, where there is no shortage of such representations, especially in the context of upper body parts – especially the head. This needs further research but may be one of the paths towards the possible meaning of some of the rock art in this area.

The San Juan Basketmaker style, centred primarily around the San Juan Basin, shares some symbolism with the chronologically earlier Barrier Canyon, primarily the characteristic anthropomorphic figures shown frontally on the panels (Cole 1990: 111; Palonka 2022: 107–112; Schaafsma 1980: 110). This could be a piece of material evidence of the continuation of shamanistic practices rooted in older, Archaic cultural traditions within the Colorado Plateau (Schaafsma 1994: 57), demonstrating the similarity and continuation (in time) of rituals among hunter-gatherers and later farmers. Usually, rock art panels featuring paintings and petroglyphs were located in rock shelters, but also outside alcoves (Palonka 2022: 107). Trapezoidal anthropomorphic figures (**Figure 10**) with broad shoulders are shown statically, featuring long hanging upper and lower limbs, small heads, occasionally with clearly marked large eyes, with characteristic headgear and geometric decorations running along the torso towards the neck, forming elaborate and detailed necklaces (Cole 1990: 113; Palonka 2022: 107–108; Schaafsma 1980: 111). Hands and feet are also clearly marked, generally large, and sometimes depicted holding objects (Cole 1990: 111, 113; 1994: 296). In some cases, they also feature decorative elements such as earrings or series of geometric shapes around the head and ears (patterns of straight lines, arcs or dots) that are difficult to interpret. The degree of complexity and detail of these decorations suggests that the symbolism associated with them exceeds a simple attempt to represent everyday life and perhaps refers to ceremonial aspects, including shamanistic practices. In many cases, anthropomorphic images are accompanied by numerous human handprints around and inside the torsos, which may constitute additional proof of the ceremonial significance of the rock art. In this context, rock

Figure 9. "Hunting" on bighorn sheep, a panel from Coso Range, eastern California, possibly a metaphor for making rain (a), and panels with various petroglyphs possibly from the Basketmaker period from Canyon de Chelly, northeastern Arizona, also showing, among other motifs, "hunters" with atl-atl spear throwers and bighorn sheep

Source: Tracings by Katarzyna Ciomek based on: Whitley 2023: Figure 13, and a photograph by Radosław Palonka.

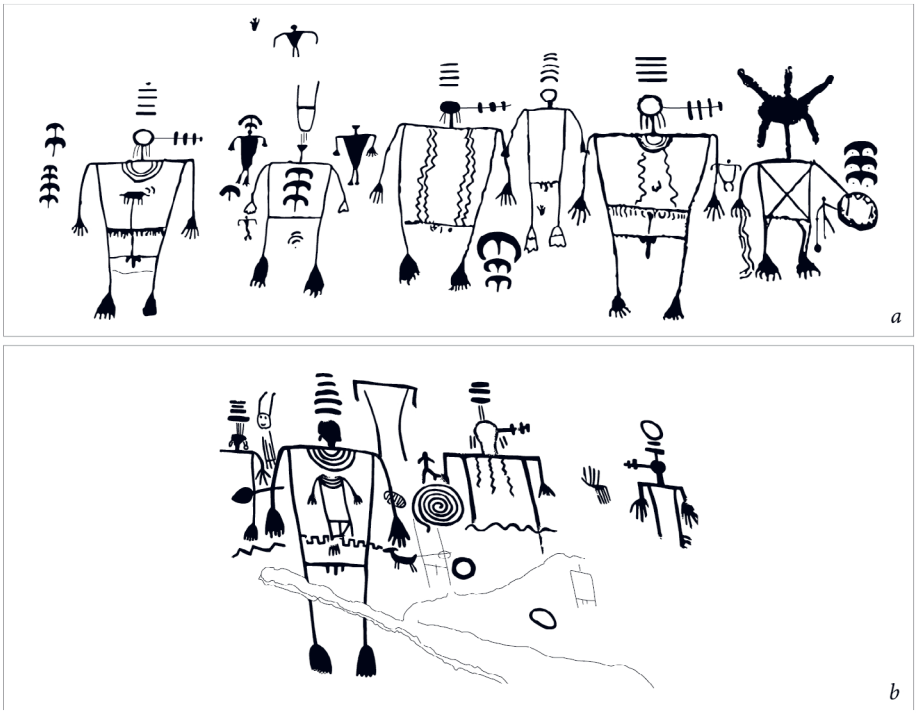


Figure 10. San Juan Basketmaker petroglyphs from the Butler Wash site in Utah

Source: Tracings by Magdalena Lewandowska.

art panels could be used as places for gatherings or individual visits to carry out religious rituals and communicate with supernatural beings. The prints could be a form of signature or a way of identifying certain individuals who participated in the ceremonies or submitted individual requests on the panels. Of course, other explanations are possible, especially if we treat the stone wall as a kind of "portal" to the other world or worlds (e.g. Rozwadowski 2017).

The style of execution and arrangement of the figures, as well as the specifics of legs and arms with the palms and feet always pointing down, give the impression of stillness and inertia, which again evokes associations with death or flight, and thus with shamanic practices (Schaafsma 1994: 57). Elaborate headdresses, especially complex and tall in structure, graphically imply metaphorical communication with the spiritual world. However, sometimes they are also represented alone, which suggest that they may be objects of special significance or power. Similar elements located or emerging from around one of the ears (usually the left one) may suggest auditory hallucinations, which often accompany trance states. Additionally, ethnographic research suggests that the shaman's hearing can also be unique skill that predisposes them to receiving knowledge through verbal communication using a secret language with spiritual beings or animals and plants (Eliade 1964: 96–97). In a comparable way, elaborate necklaces can also be interpreted, through ethnographic analogies from different parts of the world, as shamanic attributes of certain groups, and provide information about their position or the process of preparing for their role (Schaafsma 1994: 58–59).

Animals or related motifs such as tracks of bears or carnivorous animals are also a consistent feature in San Juan Basketmaker rock art. However, the most interesting examples are birds, which appear in a slightly different context than the Barrier Canyon style. Here, birds, generally identified as ducks (or other waterfowl) or turkeys, are depicted in profile on or in place of the heads of anthropomorphic figures (Schaafsma 1994: 61; Palonka 2022: 176, Figure 4.15; Cole 1990: 113). In many cases, the hands and feet of the figures also resemble bird claws, which again – having in mind the classical "definition" of shamanism – could signify transformation and refer to shamanic flight and the spiritual guidance of birds, which the shaman could use during his journeys (Schaafsma 1994: 61).

The rather peculiar lifestyle of waterfowl, whose images are associated with the San Juan Basketmaker style, is also worthy of note. Ducks lead a migratory, amphibian lifestyle and can fly. This ability to cross environmental boundaries could be associated with shamanic trance, during which the shaman also crosses the boundary between life and symbolic death, and between reality and the supernatural world (e.g. Schaafsma 1994: 61). Images of birds and feathers present in rock art, as well as in the iconography of pottery and murals, seem to be deeply rooted in tradition and constitute an important element of ceremonialism and oral history in the traditions of the Pueblo people and other southwestern communities in past and present. Their depictions and other evidence of ritual use can be traced in archaeological material and ethnographic sources from the first agricultural communities until the present day (Bishop, Schwartz 2024;

Cole 1994: 305; Schwartz et al. 2022). However, one should note that the actual meaning of the bird images may have changed over the course of the many hundreds of years that separate the rock art of the San Juan Basketmaker style from the historical Pueblo communities – particularly when one takes into account the numerous religious and ceremonial changes associated with the migration of the Ancestral Pueblo people from the Mesa Verde region at the end of the 13th century AD to the areas of today's Arizona and New Mexico and later with the influence of Europeans (mostly Spaniards) and Americans in the Southwest starting from the 16th century (Kitchell 2010: 820; Schaafsma 1994: 49).

Research conducted by the Sand Canyon – Castle Rock Archaeological Project, a Polish archaeological project in the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument in the southwestern part of Colorado, uncovered previously unknown or only partially documented triangular and trapezoidal anthropomorphic figures (Palonka 2019b; 2021; 2022: 110–111, Figure 4.4) from site 5MT264 (The Gallery) in the East Fork of Rock Creek Canyon (**Figures 11a–b**) and site 5MT127 (Vision House) in Sand Canyon. Especially interesting is the red anthropomorph from the larger panel from The Gallery site, equipped with elements resembling antennas stretching from their head. The head and antennas are carved and the body of the figure is painted in red in a way suggesting that the painting overlaps with an earlier petroglyph; also, there are at least two different tones of red, which together with the painting overlapping the carving strongly suggest remodelling (including repainting) of this specific figure which cannot be observed in the case of the other six figures from the panel.

Both of the above-described panels from the Basketmaker period are located in the middle of much younger settlements, approximately 800–1000 years old, featuring stone architecture from the Pueblo III period (the same cultural tradition, but separated by almost a millennium). The reason why the sites from the 13th century were located in places with paintings and petroglyphs from earlier periods remains unclear. Since these representations are still visible today (although some were revealed only after in-depth digital documentation and analyses), they must have been even more legible 800 years ago, when the Ancestral Puebloans founded these settlements. Polish archaeologists also recorded other examples of the San Juan anthropomorphic style in the Sandstone Canyon (**Figures 11c, 12b**), located 16 kilometres from the above-mentioned sites, also within the Canyons of the Ancients National Monument. All of them may be classified as eastern variants of the San Juan Basketmaker style, and, based on analogies to other representations of this type, tentatively dated to the Basketmaker II or the beginning of the Basketmaker III period (ca. 3rd–5th century AD) (Cole 1990: 109–130; Palonka 2019a; 2019b; Schaafsma 1980: Map 3, 73, 109–121). Along with depictions from this period grouped near present-day Durango, also located in southwestern Colorado, these are some of the most southeastern variants of this style.

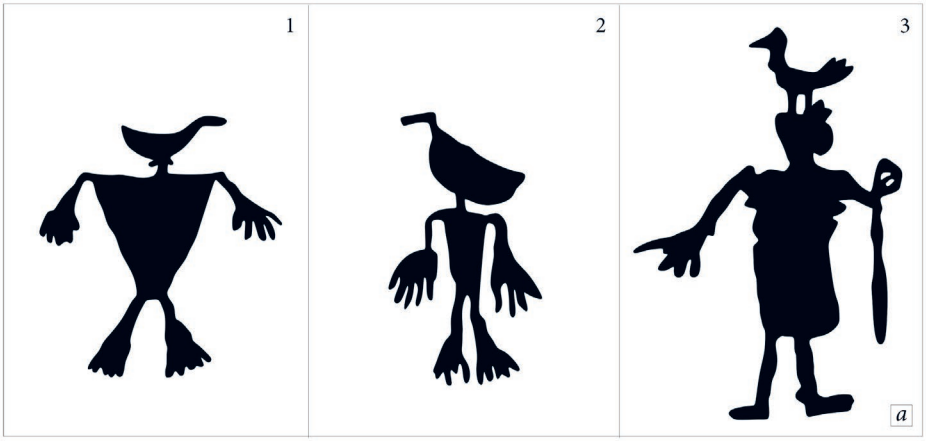
Other depictions that may be connected with the shamanic journeys and practices (or be evidence of such) are spirals and concentric circles recorded in numerous sites throughout the Southwest (and worldwide), including several sites inventoried

Figure 11. Rock art from the Basketmaker II/III period at site 5MT264 (The Gallery), southwestern Colorado (a–b) in the context of the Ancestral Pueblo sandstone architecture (13th century AD) and examples of Basketmaker anthropomorphic images from two sites in Sandstone Canyon (c), investigated by the Polish project

Source: Photographs by Radosław Palonka, tracings by Katarzyna Ciomek and Radosław Palonka.

→ Figure 12. Examples of anthropomorphic figures with a specific head display: in the central and left figure it is replaced by the image of a bird shown in profile and in the figure on the right a standing bird is shown on the head of the anthropomorphic figure, San Juan Basketmaker style (a), and examples of bird images from the Sandstone Canyon (southwestern Colorado): the birds are shown alone, sometimes with additional characteristic head decorations, San Juan Basketmaker style (b).

Source: Tracings by Katarzyna Ciomek based on: Kitchell 2010: 828(a), photographs by Jakub Śliwa, and tracings by Katarzyna Ciomek.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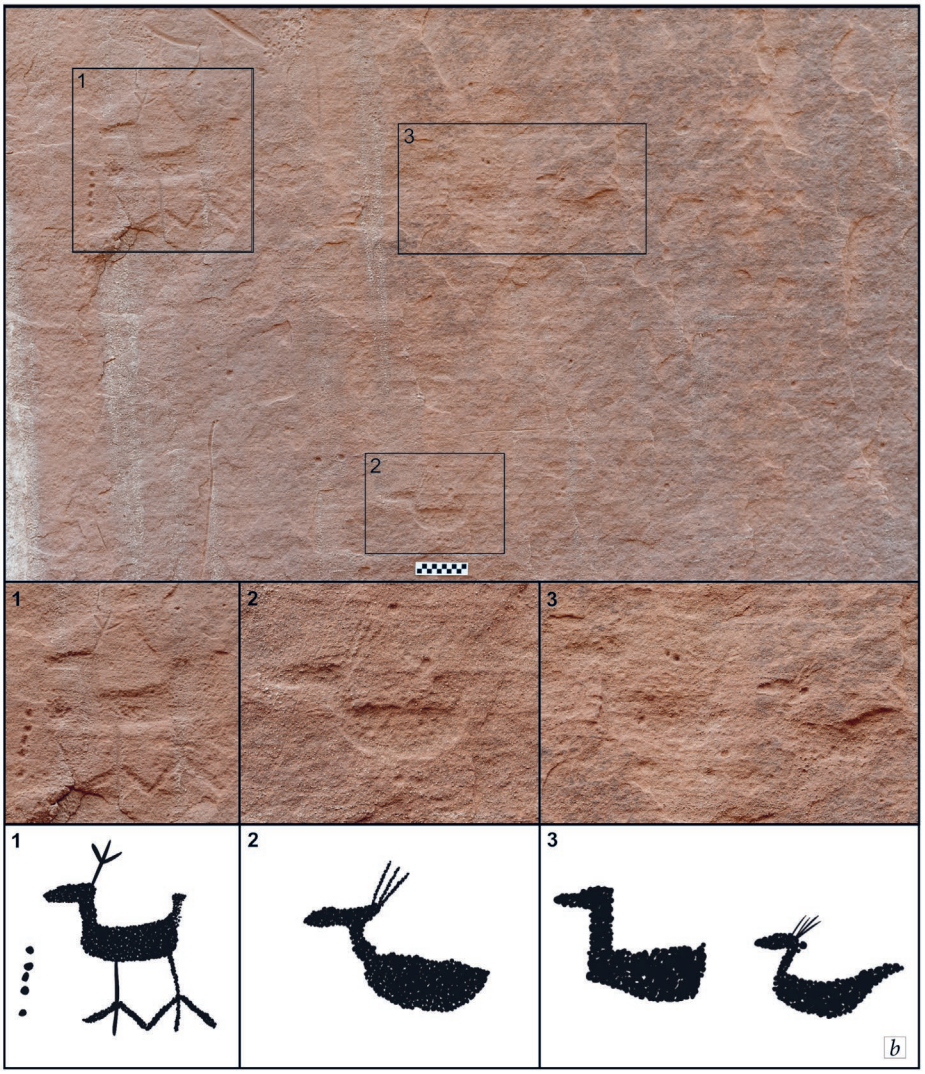
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Figure 13. Panel with spirals and concentric circles documented in the field season of 2023 by the Polish project

Source: Photograph by Radosław Palonka.

by the Polish team in Sand Canyon and Sandstone Canyon, southwestern Colorado. Especially important in this project are recordings of previously unknown or poorly known sites located in the upper parts of Sand Canyon: one panel consisted of twenty or more spirals and concentric circles, some of them interconnected.[3] Those spirals – the largest measures 95 cm in diameter (**Figure 13**) – dominate the almost eleven-meter panel and face directly south; we suspect that at least some large spirals could have served as "sun calendars" or sun markers – something we had previously confirmed for two cliff dwellings located in the same canyon (Palonka 2019b; 2021).

[3] A short summary can be found in: (Palonka 2024; Malakoff 2024; Palonka et al. 2025; Palonka, Ciomek 2024).

Conclusions

The above-mentioned examples of burial goods, figurines, ceramic vessels (and their decorations), as well as rock art iconography seem to offer convincing evidence of the presence and long history of shamanistic practices in North America. They lead to the conclusion that these practices in all likelihood began in (at least) the Archaic period, when most communities practised a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, and were then continued by some groups of prehistoric farmers until the historical times. In some cases, this continuity is confirmed by oral histories and traditions recorded in writing when European, and later American, settlers arrived in the American continent, as well as by ethnographic literature. In addition to economic and chronological differences, individual areas bearing traces of shamanistic practices can be identified on the basis of material culture, and these areas are also extremely diverse in terms of environment and natural landscapes.

The examples cited in this article refer to Native American communities and cultures in only two regions of North America: the Eastern Woodland (Adena, Hopewell, Mississippian cultures/cultural traditions) and the Southwest (Barrier Canyon, Basketmaker/Ancestral Pueblo, Hohokam, Casas Grandes cultural traditions). Elements of shamanism in these societies can be found and interpreted archaeologically through various categories of sources: grave goods and treatment of bodies, ceramics and other artefacts featuring specific iconography (e.g. human-animal hybrids, including bird-man and bear-man motifs) as well as rock paintings and petroglyphs, which have also indicated the possible existence of shamanistic practices in other parts of the world.

What these artefacts presenting shamanism across such a diverse area tend to have in common are primarily elements related to phenomena such as shamanic trance, metaphorical death, shamanic flight and transformations. The latter includes widespread imagery of figures shown in specific poses (with arms lowered or spread to the sides) as well as hybrid images and figures in masks, combining human and animal forms (most often birds, snakes, mountain sheep or bears and wolves), which symbolises the shaman's transformation during a trance state, under the guidance of certain animals. Complex geometric patterns, including dots, waves and zigzags are also a common feature (present in particular in the iconography of ceramics and rock art) that may refer to visual or auditory experiences experienced by the shaman, constituting evidence of their contact with supernatural beings and confirming their ability to pronounce judgement in various aspects of social life.

Reflecting on the shamanistic meaning of iconography (both rock art and selected movable artefacts) may provide a context for speculation on the meaning and function of material remains left by the pre-Columbian communities that inhabited the North American continent. It seems that the iconography contains many symbols and metaphors that indirectly reflect the patterns of action and thought followed by prehistoric people. In this respect, analysis from the shamanistic perspective may be the next interpretative step, having initially determined the chronological

and geographical boundaries of specific styles of rock art or ceramic iconography. In many cases, the exact meaning remains difficult to interpret, and in such cases, analysis may draw on ethnographic and ethnohistorical sources based on the oral tradition, large quantities of which are available for selected areas of North America due to the long-term cultural continuity, dating back in some cases (e.g. the Southwest) to a chronologically distant time when these areas were still largely inhabited by hunter-gatherer societies of the Archaic period.

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SUMMARY

Shamanism among the indigenous cultures of North America: Selected aspects of archaeological traces

Certain forms of shamanism existed in many communities worldwide, including some of the indigenous cultures and tribes of North America, from the Arctic to the Gulf of Mexico and the desert areas of the Southwest, California, and northern Mexico. At least several American Indian and Inuit societies are known to have practised shamanism in both pre-Columbian and other historical periods (even until very recent times). We can conclude this on the basis of various archaeological and ethnographic sources, including specific burials, interpreted as shamanic, as well as iconography of pottery and rock art imagery (paintings and petroglyphs) placed on rocks, boulders, and canyon walls, which offer a profound insight into the beliefs of ancient societies. This article presents selected examples

of archaeological evidence of shamanism in several cultures of the Eastern Woodlands and the Southwest of the pre-Columbian North America, with an emphasis on rock art depictions, and to some extent burials, the iconography of pottery, and other artefacts.

Keywords: Adena, Hopewell, Mississippian tradition, Barrier Canyon style, San Juan Basketmaker, Casas Grandes, Pueblo, shamanic burials, rock art, pottery iconography