

At first glance, the cliff appears much like many others in the Big Horn Basin—a dark, reddish-brown face, smooth in places, bedded and layered in others, and punctuated by rock falls which reveal a much lighter sandstone on more recently exposed surfaces. Though graced by permanent water in Cottonwood Creek, the valley appears unremarkable. The slow-moving water is occasionally brackish, and trees are in short supply. The only shade must await the late afternoon when the sun dips behind the southeast facing cliff. But a casual walk along the cliff reveals ghostly and frightening figures which speak to the power of the place.

Legend Rock—over one-half mile of sunbaked sandstone containing hundreds of petroglyphs—is one of many sites with similar imagery in the Wind River valley and the western Big Horn Basin. With the near life-sized, human-like images, nearly always with elaborate headdresses, bizarre orientations of arms and legs, and complex patterns of interior lines in the torsos, the shared cultural heritage of these sites is clear. These sites form what is now known as the Dinwoody Tradition, named after the well-known site on the Wind River Indian Reservation. Legend Rock stands out among these sites for its sheer size, along with number, diversity, and complexity of the imagery.

SCIENTIFIC POWER

When listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973, Legend Rock's significance was attributed to its potential to yield important scientific information about “the perceptions, experiences, values, and beliefs” of past cultures (Junge 1973).

Figure 1. Overview of Legend Rock State Petroglyph Site.

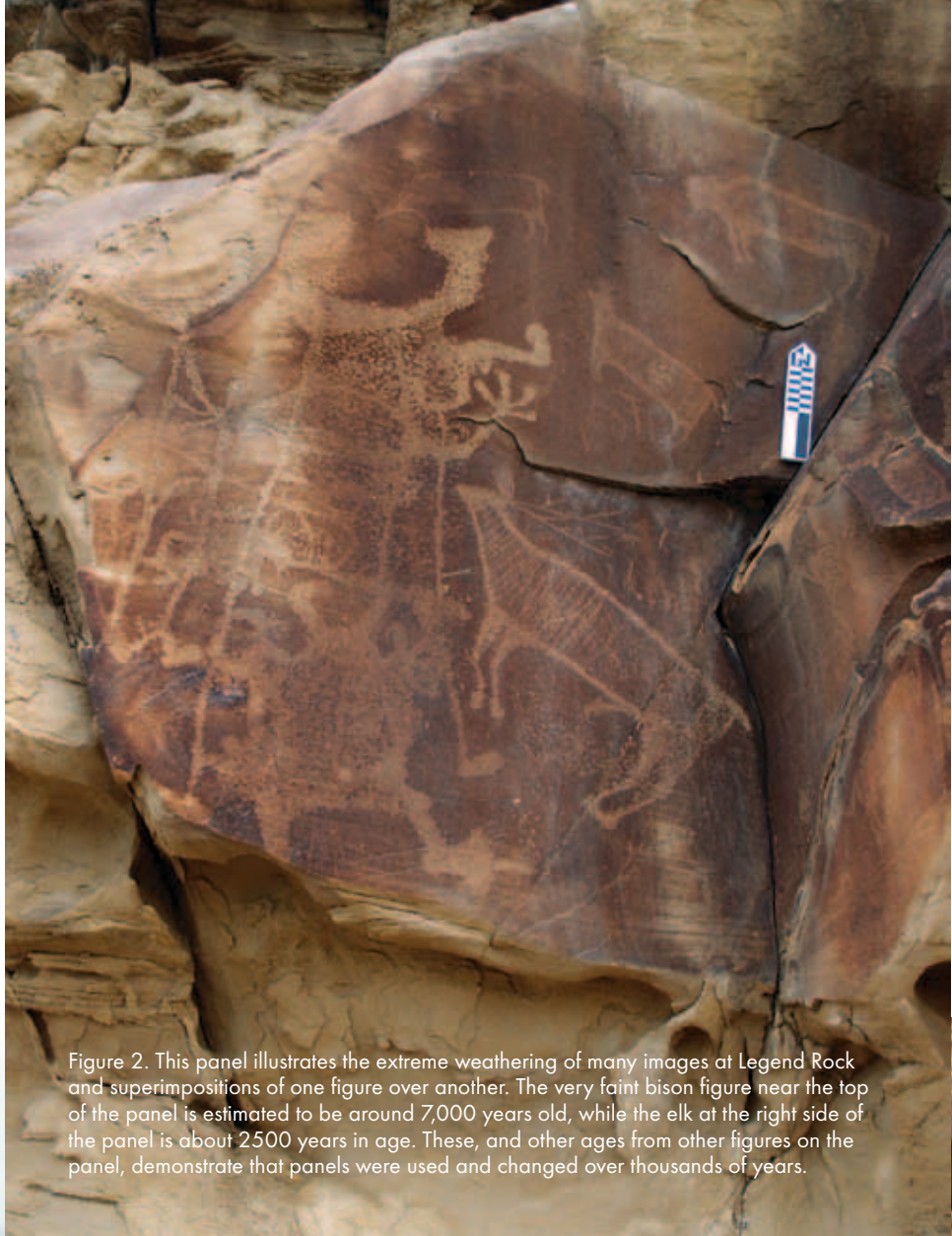


Figure 2. This panel illustrates the extreme weathering of many images at Legend Rock and superimpositions of one figure over another. The very faint bison figure near the top of the panel is estimated to be around 7,000 years old, while the elk at the right side of the panel is about 2,500 years in age. These, and other ages from other figures on the panel, demonstrate that panels were used and changed over thousands of years.

This foreshadowed future research at the site. The State of Wyoming acquired the site in 1977 for development as a park. In 1988, the Office of the Wyoming State Archaeologist test excavated the terraces of Cottonwood Creek to determine if archaeological materials were present. Though work focused on the terraces, the crew was inevitably drawn to enigmatic images on the cliff face. They observed heavy weathering of many figures and complex superimpositions of images, suggesting an age older than the 200 or 300 years presumed by other

researchers. They also discovered a partially buried human petroglyph and recovered charcoal from test excavation at its base. The team recognized that more complete documentation of the rock art would be necessary prior to any development, and later that year, researchers returned to Legend Rock to photograph, map, and document the panels. At that time, they also recorded the more recent Euroamerican initials, dates and inscriptions, at least one of one which bore an 1834 date.

Much to everyone's shock, radiocarbon dating of the charcoal suggested that the buried petroglyph was created around 2,000 years ago. This spurred archaeological researchers to initiate a rock art dating study across the Big Horn Basin. Much of this program centered on Legend Rock. With funding from state and federal agencies samples the dark brown varnish overlying the petroglyphs and organic materials entombed by that varnish were processed to yield a series of numerical and relative ages. This revealed a long time frame for petroglyph manufacture at Legend Rock. At least one panel may date to the Paleoindian period, around 10,000 to 11,000 years ago. Other figures date to the Early Archaic, at least 7,000 years ago, and many other images were made just a few hundred years ago. Some panels were repeatedly embellished over the course of thousands of years. The ages reflect continuous usage of the site since the Early Archaic and the development of the internally cohesive Dinwoody Tradition. The

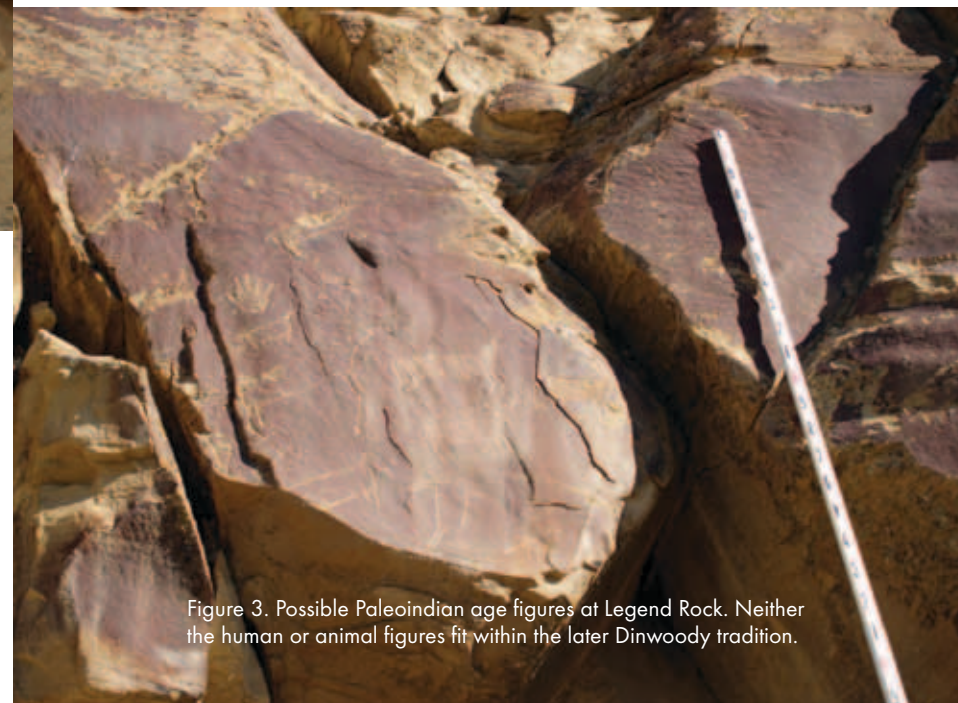


Figure 3. Possible Paleoindian age figures at Legend Rock. Neither the human or animal figures fit within the later Dinwoody tradition.



Figure 4. Note the bird wings in place of arms on this human-like figure, as well as what could be an aura surrounding the head. A secondary figure with a bison headdress for a head and a single line for the body and torso is also apparent. Such images may represent supernatural beings.

archaeological investigations show that the site was not used as a campsite, contains very few artifacts, and was only used by a few individuals who made the rock art at any one point in time. Legend Rock continues to hold great power for further research and has only begun to reveal its secrets.

SPIRITUAL POWER

Also in 1988, South African researchers published a seminal article on the social context of rock art among the San in southern Africa. They found that most of the southern African paintings were executed by the healers and spiritual leaders of the San based in their visionary experiences through which their powers were acquired. Clearly, with their other-worldly appearance, many of the figures at Legend Rock, as well as at other Dinwoody tradition sites, appeared to fit this model. Exploration of the ethnographic literature, along with discussion and visits to several sites with tribal elders led to a much deeper understanding of the cultural and spiritual significance to Legend Rock.

Legend Rock, and other special places, hold stronger supernatural power than many other places on the landscape. Locations such as mountain tops or other high points, springs, lakes, caves, and many rock art sites, can provide access to the supernatural world and other realms which exist in the religious beliefs of nearly all cultures. For thousands of years, individuals journeyed to Legend Rock for fasting, meditation, and prayer to seek spiritual strength, guidance, and knowledge from higher powers. Seekers were escorted by powerful animals on a journey where they encountered supernatural beings whose images we see on the rocks today. These beings bestowed the songs, prayers, ritual objects, and cures for various illnesses or wounds upon the seekers. Indeed, Legend Rock is a holy place.

Though the imagery of Legend Rock and other Dinwoody Tradition sites is unique within Wyoming and the Plains, similar figures can be found in Colorado and Utah, and especially in the Coso Range of the California Mojave Desert. This geographic spread corresponds to that of Numic speakers—the Shoshone, Paiute, and Ute of the Intermountain West. The Eastern Shoshone are the descendants of the makers of these images. But anyone who happened into the Cottonwood Creek valley and Legend Rock site would have recognized the spiritual significance of the images and the power of the place.

THE POWER GROWS

Today, as one walks along the interpretive path opened in 2011, the names, initials, and dates of other visitors to Legend Rock cannot be ignored. The same is true for a few places where fresh sandstone

Figure 5. A short, dwarf-like human figure at Legend Rock.



Figure 6. Pre-1988 vandalism at Legend Rock. Note the chisel marks left from the theft of at least one figure and the initials in the upper left of the photo on top of and between very heavily weathered Dinwoody figures.

and chisel marks testify to the theft of images from the site. Some names and initials memorialize more recent aspects of Big Horn Basin history—the name of a trapper or initials of soldiers who served in World War I. Most of these were done in ignorance of the cultural significance of the site, but the malicious intent of other markings and scratches is unmistakable. Though planned development which provoked the 1988 investigations did not fully materialize, the site was promoted locally, and the entire cliff face could be accessed by simply climbing a fence. With notably increased vandalism observed during the



Figure 7. Legend Rock Visitor Center at the grand opening in 2011.

2000s, an advisory group was formed in 2006 to develop a management plan for the site. This group included representatives from the Eastern Shoshone and several state and federal agencies.

Among the first recommendations of the advisory group was removal of graffiti post-dating the 1988 rock art recording. Redocumentation of the petroglyphs was accomplished with modern technology. Protection and preservation of the site, in conjunction with public accessibility became the guiding principle for site development. A pathway was constructed which restricted direct access to the petroglyphs but also provided viewing opportunities and photo stations. On-site interpretation has been kept as unintrusive as possible. A visitor and interpretive center has been constructed, and a steward resides at the site full-time during the summer and early fall to guide visitors and safeguard the site and its facilities. Personnel from Hot Springs State Park also lead guided tours for school groups, tourists, civic groups, and others. The interpretive materials offer insights into other times and other cultures, and emphasize preservation and respect. With the lessons learned from Legend Rock, the importance of protecting other archaeological sites becomes clear, and the power of Legend Rock, as place of mystery and wonder, a place which opens minds to new ways of thinking continues to grow.

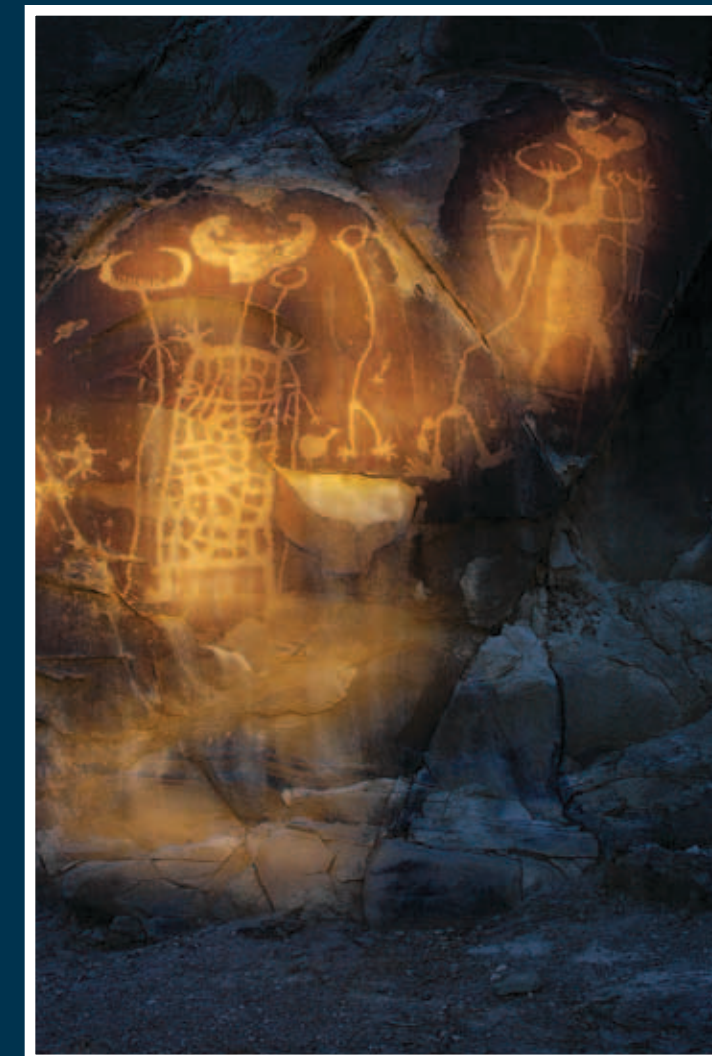


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THE POWER OF PLACE

Legend Rock

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