

# Birds on the Rocks

*America's earliest birdwatchers left  
a record of their interest*

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**O**F ALL ANIMATE FORMS employed as decorative motifs in primitive art, the bird has had the most widespread use." These words were written, in 1916, by Kenneth M. Chapman, in his day a leading authority on aboriginal American art. They certainly apply to the numerous paintings (pictographs) and carvings (petroglyphs) left on rock surfaces and in shelters, at approximately fifteen thousand sites in virtually all parts of this continent, by ancient tribesmen hundreds or thousands of years ago. Among these rock drawings, not a few portray birds.

## *Some Identifiable Species*

**T**HERE ARE TWO PRINCIPAL types of such avian figures: profiled birds, and birds shown with spread wings as if seen in flight from below. Among the latter, many are birds of prey, and most of these probably represent eagles (Fig. 1). Such depictions have also been equated with the mythological thunderbird, the ubiquitous venerated creator of thunder, lightning and rain. At sites in Missouri, speech symbols issue from the bird's beak (Fig. 2), possibly signifying the roar of thunder. And in Minnesota, some thunderbirds are shown with "heart-lines" (Fig. 3); the Ojibwa Indians, and other groups around the Great Lakes, attribute supernatural power to all creatures so endowed.

Tufted birds portrayed in the Galisteo Basin of New Mexico, not far from Santa Fe, may represent Gambel's Quail (Fig. 4). An unmistakable Roadrunner that has just caught a small snake can be seen on a rock near Three Rivers, New Mexico (Fig. 5). Long-legged birds, as they are present in Nine Mile Canyon, Utah, are likely to be Sandhill Cranes (Fig. 6). A similar species is represented near Peterborough, Ontario (Fig. 7). And at a site in Wyoming, one of a group of shields, each decorated with the insignia of their owners, displays what appears to be a pair of Sage Hens (Fig. 8).

Other birds on the rocks cannot so easily be identified. Since the readers of this journal can lay claim to much more expertise in this field than I would ever hope to muster, I will leave it to them to determine what species is or are represented in the two beautifully stylized birds of Fig. 9, located high on a sandstone ledge in the Galisteo Basin of New Mexico.

Incised in the soot-blackened pumice wall of a ceremonial cave in Sandia Canyon near Los Alamos, New Mexico, is the figure of a bowman hidden under a deer head camouflage and hunting a large bird (Fig. 10). Although the species of the latter is in doubt, similar bird hunting scenes have been recorded in the same region (Sims, 1950, Plate III) in which the birds can be identified as Turkeys. In view of such depictions it is pertinent to note that wild Turkey was eaten in the pueblos of Isleta, Laguna and Santa Ana, and domesticated turkey in Taos (Parsons, 1939:22). Turkey meat was already used as food before A.D. 1300 by the Anasazi (Pueblo) inhabitants of the Mesa Verde cliff dwellings in Colorado (Hargrave, 1965). In most pueblos, however, the bird was never eaten but was kept for its bones which were made into tools or jewelry (Hargrave, 1965), and for its feathers which were used as ornaments (Lange, 1950). Except for the dog, the turkey was the only domesticated animal in ancient North America. Two carved birds surrounded by dots (Fig. 11), as they can be viewed on a rock in the West Mesa near Albuquerque, New Mexico, may well represent domesticated turkeys in an enclosure.

**O**F PARTICULAR INTEREST is Fig. 12 for it appears to be the rendition of a parrot or macaw. Parrots figure prominently in the murals of Pueblo IV kivas (ceremonial rooms) (Smith, 1952:127, 183; Hibben, 1975:60-64); in one of them, that of Kuaua in New Mexico, the face masks of both the Universal Deity (Sun

or Sky Father) and of a Shumaikoli (patron of a fraternity) carry macaw beaks (Dutton, 1963:116, 175). Live parrots were encountered in the Pueblo region of the Southwest by early Spanish explorers (Smith, 1952:180), and several parrot or macaw burials have been unearthed in Pueblo III ruins (Hargrave, 1933b; Colton, 1941). Present-day Pueblo Indians still use parrot feathers on masks, headdresses, costumes and prayer sticks, and — as the Pueblo IV murals document — have done so centuries ago (Smith, 1952:180; Dutton, 1963:117, 138; Hibben, 1975:93-94). As with feathers in general, such parrot feathers were probably thought to carry prayers to the supernaturals, but they also represented the nadir, the region of all color, or the South (Parsons, 1939:365, 410). That parrots, and their images on rocks and other media, should occur at all in the northern parts of New Mexico and Arizona is remarkable for the fact that these birds are not (and probably were not) indigenous to the American Southwest, one small species near the Mexican border excepted (Hargrave, 1933a). They can only have been imported via ancient trade routes which must have covered great distances (Colton, 1941). The present range of *Ara macao*, for instance, extends only as far north as Tampico, more than one thousand miles to the south of the Galisteo Basin where it may be this very species that is represented in form of a petroglyph (Fig. 12).

## *Birds and Shamanism*

**I**N MANY NATIVE American tribes, shamanism was the prevailing form of religious expression, and birds play important roles in the extensive field of shamanistic beliefs and practices. According to the classic definition of Mircea Eliade (1964), shamanism is an "ecstatic technique at the disposal of a particular elite." By ecstasy, or trance, we mean the mental transport, induced by a contemplation of things divine, from one level of awareness to another. During ecstasy, the shaman's soul is capable of journeying through the three cosmic regions — this world, the realm beneath, and the sky above. Among many peoples, including those of Asia and North America, disease is often explained by a straying away of the soul, and only the shaman, with the ecstatic techniques at his com-



**Fig. 1.** Two spread-winged birds of prey, probably eagles. Rock carving, made by Pueblo Indians (after A.D. 1350) in the Galisteo Basin, New Mexico.



**Fig. 2.** Thunderbird with speech symbol, and other elements. Rock carving, made by Woodland Indians (between A.D. 900 and 1600) in Washington State Park near De Soto, Missouri.



**Fig. 3.** Stylized thunderbird with heartline. Rock carving, made by Siouan-speaking Indians (between A.D. 900 and 1700) near Jeffers, Minnesota.



**Fig. 4.** Tufted bird, probably a quail. Rock carving, made by Pueblo Indians (after A.D. 1350) in the Galisteo Basin, New Mexico.



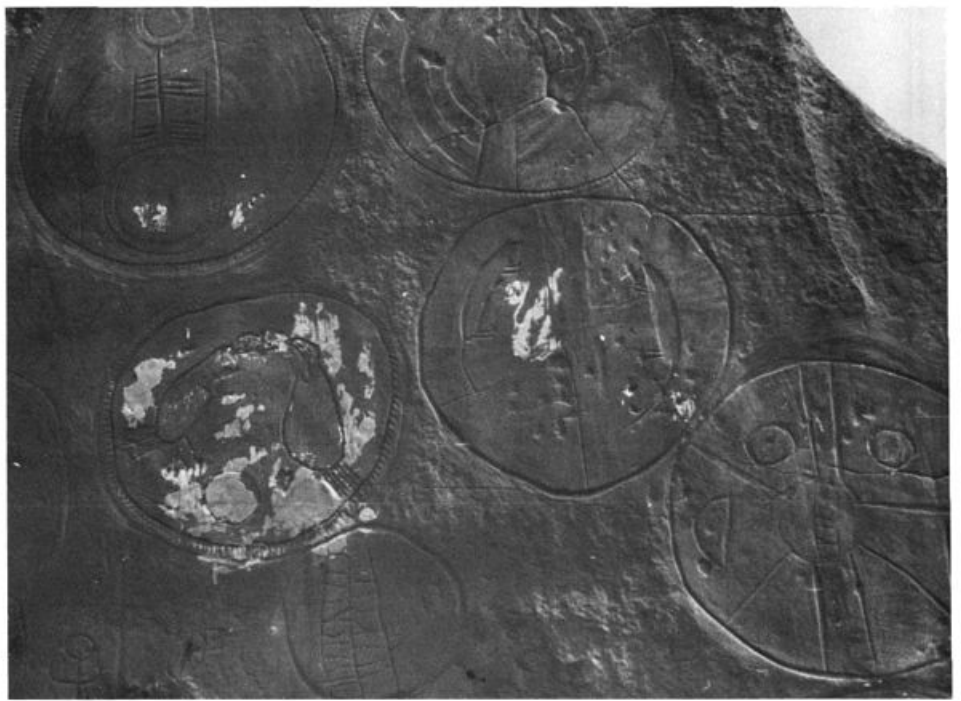
**Fig. 5.** Roadrunner with small snake in beak. Rock carving, made by Mogollon Indians (between A.D. 1000 and 1400) near Three Rivers, New Mexico.



**Fig. 6.** Long-legged birds, possibly Sandhill Cranes. Rock carving, made by Fremont Indians (between A.D. 950 and 1200) in Nine Mile Canyon near Price, Utah.



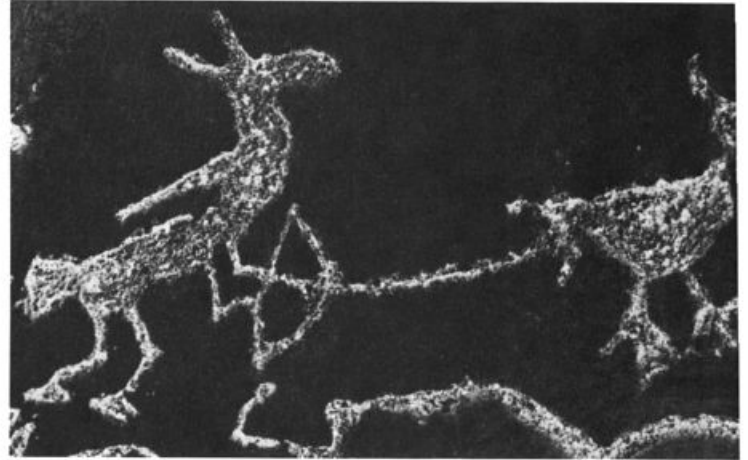
**Fig. 7.** Long-legged wading bird, probably a heron or crane. Rock carving, made by Algonkian Indians (between A.D. 900 and 1400) near Peterborough, Ontario.



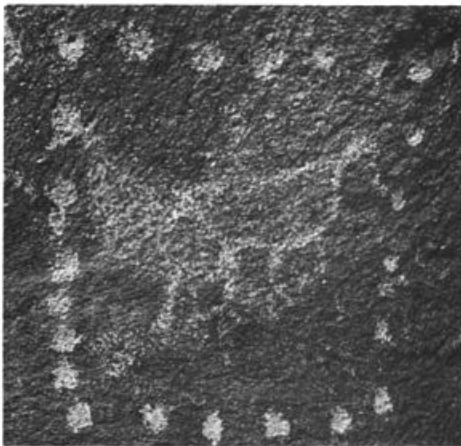
**Fig. 8.** Group of shields with heraldic designs; one shows a pair of birds resembling Sage Grouse. The white spots are remnants of material used to copy the designs by "rubbing." Rock carving, made by Plains Indians (between A.D. 1600 and 1800) at Castle Gardens, Wyoming.



**Fig. 9.** Two stylized birds of uncertain species. Rock carving, made by Pueblo Indians (after A.D. 1350) in the Galisteo Basin, New Mexico.



**Fig. 10.** Bowman with deer head camouflage, hunting bird. Panel incised in soot-blackened pumice wall of cave in Sandia Canyon near Los Alamos, New Mexico; made by Pueblo Indians after A.D. 1350.



**Fig. 11.** Two birds surrounded by dots, possibly representing domesticated turkeys in an enclosure. Rock carving, made by Pueblo Indians (after A.D. 1350) in the West Mesa near Albuquerque, New Mexico.



**Fig. 12.** Macaw or parrot. Rock carving, made by Pueblo Indians (after A.D. 1350) near San Cristobal, New Mexico.

mand, can find and retrieve it and oblige it to resume its place in the patient's body.

It is here, in connection with the shaman's power of magic flight, that the bird image takes its place. The bird symbolizes the shaman's flight. It may either lead his soul, acting as psychopomp, or the shaman's soul may itself change into a bird. The shaman's practices and beliefs, his tutelary spirits, his costume and his other paraphernalia are replete with bird symbolism. These connections are amply documented in Eliade's (1964) comprehensive treatment of this topic and cannot be detailed here (see also Wellmann, 1976). Suffice it to say that there is no other symbol of the shaman's power of flight, his most essential magic capability, as logical and as powerful, as that of the bird.

Thus, when we observe bird images in very close and meaningful association with human figures displaying signs of special power, such as horns or other head ornaments, we can safely assume that these humans are shamans. Several particularly telling depictions of this type are present in the colorful if inaccessible canyons of southeastern Utah. Among them are the stylized, horned anthropomorphs of Fig. 13. They are only a few inches tall, but note that their heads and shoulders are intimately associated with even smaller, meticulously drawn birds. Shamans are not confined to birds as far as their animal associations are concerned, but the fact that birds are represented among them here is highly significant and strengthens the conclusion that we are dealing with shamanistic figures. Another human image (Fig. 14) displays a sack mask, horns, bear tracks, and plant-like paraphernalia. From the left, a small bird approaches. Probably this is a shaman in the fullest sense of this term and, again, the bird image supplies the finishing touch to this supposition. In a third and very unusual panel from the same region (Fig. 15), a wild plant grows from the middle finger of a tall, horned shaman; two bent-over figures (not shown in this illustration) with harvest implements are present underneath, and a bird as well as two rabbit-like quadrupeds move along the outstretched arm. This whole composition appears to relate to a rite or myth concerned with harvesting practices.

Another class of images features birds and humans, not only in close interaction with each other, but actually fused into one figure. If we remember that the

shaman's soul can turn into a bird during its ecstatic flight through the three cosmic zones, such a transfiguration from man to bird should come as no surprise. Perhaps the bird-headed men found painted at sites in northeastern Arizona and southeastern Utah can be seen in this light (Fig. 15); the birds may replace their heads or perch upon them. Many of these birds appear to lack heads themselves because these were painted in other, evanescent colors that have not stood the test of time and have faded. Grant (1978:186) proposed an alternative explanation for such images as he interpreted the birds as Turkeys and suggested that the anthropomorphs are participants in a religious cult centered around this species. He may be right, for the bird motif is not, of course, the exclusive prerogative of the shaman.

**A** STRONGLY SHAMANIC flavor also attaches to the mysterious, partially human, partially bird-like figures at the Dinwoody sites in western Wyoming (Fig. 17). Some wear horns, and most have interior patterns that, on occasion, suggest a skeletal configuration. Did the creators of these renditions attempt to show real or imagined internal structures, hidden from the eye of the casual observer? If so, they acted very much in the shamanic tradition. For the mystical rebirth of the aspiring shaman during his initiatory ordeal begins with the bones, and the "ability to see himself as a skeleton", as Eliade (1964:62) expressed it, is a necessary prerequisite to being a shaman. Skeletonized figures, in general, spring from the core of shamanic ideology, and rock drawings of birds with skeletal designs (Fig. 18) may thus belong in that class.

#### Summary

Birds of various species are common motifs of design among the numerous pre-Columbian rock drawings of the North American Indian. Of them, the Turkey (as the only domesticated avian species) and the parrot (which was imported into the Southwest via ancient trade routes) played special roles. Birds serve a variety of functions in ancient North American symbolism and ideology. The bird image discloses a particularly tight linkage with shamanism, a system of practices and beliefs that dominated the religious expression in many indigenous American groups.

#### Acknowledgments

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**Fig. 13.** Horned humans associated with birds and quadrupeds. Painting in red, made before A.D. 1200; Barrier Canyon, Utah.



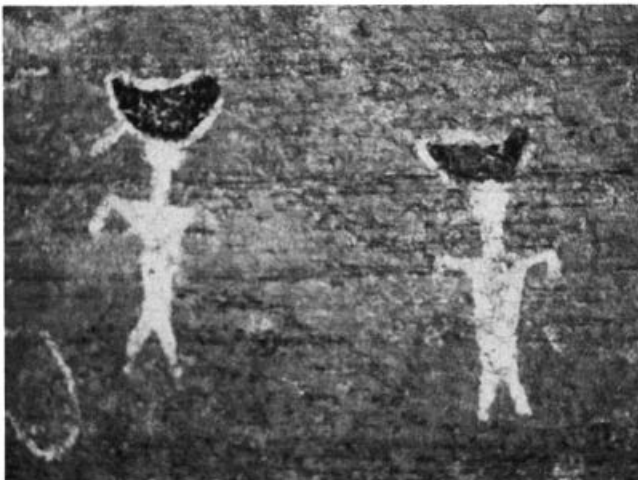
**Fig. 14.** Shaman with sac mask, headdress and cultic regalia; note small bird approaching from left. Painting in red and white, made before A.D. 1200; The Maze, Utah.



**Fig. 15.** Part of a horned human associated with bird and quadrupeds; note wild plant growing from middle finger of oversized, outstretched hand. Painting in red, made before A.D. 1200; The Maze, Utah.



**Fig. 17.** Birdlike creature with skeletal design on torso. Rock carving, probably made by Shoshoneans between A.D. 1500 and 1800. Upper Dinwoody Lake, Wind River Indian Reservation, Wyoming.



**Fig. 16.** Humans carrying seemingly headless birds on their heads. Painting in red and white, made by Pueblo Indians (between A.D. 450 and 1100) in Canyon del Muerto, Arizona.



**Fig. 18.** Spread-winged thunderbird with simple skeletal design on torso. Rock carving, probably made by Algonkians before A.D. 1800, near New Lisbon, Wisconsin.