

# *Human Figures in the Cave Paintings of Southern Venezuela*

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*Five technological styles defined for prehistoric painted rock art are temporally sensitive and have been arranged into a chronological ordering. Examination of anthropomorphs suggests that, (1) depiction of humans apparently follows the same general rules as for other kinds of figures, (2) various social and historical themes are identifiable, and (3) temporal changes between styles may be due mostly to changes between populations, such as inter-ethnic pressure or replacement.*

**I**t has long been known that rock art sites are numerous in southern Venezuela (Cruxent 1946, 1960; Perera 1986; Perera and Moreno 1984; Tavera Acosta 1956), but it has only been in the last few years that more intensive recording and study have begun (Sujo Volsky 1975; de Valencia and Sujo Volsky 1987; Scaramelli 1992; Colantoni and Delgado 1992). Only recently the quantity and complexity of the painted art have begun to be understood, and initial attempts to organize the art and study its variation have been pursued (Novoa Alvarez 1985; Tarble 1991; Tarble and Scaramelli 1993; Greer 1994).

As with several people working on rock art in the area, we are concentrating on general inventory and site location, with the initial goal of defining a chronology of styles, and trying to recognize geographic differences within those periods. Various students under the guidance of Kay Tarble-Scaramelli, in Caracas, continue to work on related aspects of archeology and ethnography (Fernández and Gassón 1993; Tarble 1990), and Franz Scaramelli is pursuing intensive study of two important sites near the lower Parguaza, following his interpretive work on the Middle Orinoco just to the north (Scaramelli and Tarble 1993).

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The purpose of this paper is to consider some aspects of human forms shown in painted rock art in a portion of southwestern Venezuela by looking at some of the variation in form relative to a proposed chronology of styles and to suggest some generalized observations relative to their archeological implications.

## THE AREA

The project area is in southwestern Venezuela, at the great bend of the Orinoco, centered on Puerto Ayacucho (Figure 1). The Orinoco descends from its headwaters above the tropical forests of Amazonas and at Puerto Ayacucho turns northeast and crosses the relatively open plains in the central part of the country on its way to the Caribbean.

The project area covers a narrow strip approximately 250 kilometers long within a combined savanna-tropical forest setting, with savannas and broken country to the north and northwest, and to the south the dense forests of Amazonas. The area is dissected by numerous rivers, most of which have petroglyphs on boulders and bedrock exposures beside or within the river channel (Delgado 1976). Tributary rivers vary in size at their headwaters in the highlands, while the Orinoco typically is wide and gentle, but occasionally interrupted by rapids. Petroglyphs also occur on the sides of some of the

exposed massive granite mountains (Vicariato 1988). This study presently deals only with the painted art and not with the petroglyphs.

The area today is occupied by several indigenous groups who still maintain various levels of their traditional culture (Wilbert 1966). Most groups practice hunting, fishing, and collecting in concert with slash-and-burn agriculture based mostly on manioc cultivation (Zent 1992). Shamanism is still important, especially in the more remote villages (Overing 1975). None of the people, however, still paint in caves, and most interpretative information from modern groups seems to be highly questionable (Greer 1991).

## SITES

Pictograph sites are located in all topographic zones, from areas next to the Orinoco and tributary rivers to areas in the highlands. Site types include boulders, rock faces, and small to very large rock-shelters. About 45 sites have been visited, and more than a hundred others are known to exist. Many of the caves are still used as burial sites, although there is no obvious relation between burials and paintings.

## CHRONOLOGY

From superpositioning of the art in numerous sites, we have proposed (Greer 1993, 1994) a sequence of five tentative prehistoric styles (Figure 2). Geographic disparities within periods appear to occur mainly north to south along the Orinoco, presumably due to the range of settlements, activities, or influence of different cultures along different parts of the river. There appear to be no patterned inconsistencies in kinds of paintings between low areas next to the rivers and upland sites in the highlands.

Style definition is based mainly on technology or application of the paint. No absolute dating or formal pigment analyses have yet been done. Prehistoric periods have been named Early, Middle, and Late, with the Middle Period divided in half by the Bichrome Horizon. For convenience, the periods are also referenced chronologically as Periods 1 through 5.



Figure 1. Venezuela, showing shaded project area.

	PERIOD	COLOR	PIGMENTS	PAINTED FIGURES
5	Late Period	Monochrome = White, Yellow, Pink, Black, Dark Brown Resin	Colors = Clays Black-Gray = Charcoal Brown = <i>Caraña</i>	Generally Sloppy Mostly Finger Paint (Black-Brown Very Late)
?	Late Period Transition	Polychrome R-B-W Negative Red W/R, R/W	Red = Vegetal White = Clay Black = Unknown	Complex Geometrics
4	Late Middle Period	Monochrome = Medium to Deep Red	Medium = <i>Onoto</i> Dark = <i>Onoto-Chica-Caraña</i> mixture	Individual Figures Extreme Fig. Variability
3	Bichrome Horizon	Bichrome = Red-White Red-Light Yellow	Red = Vegetal? White = Clay	Red-White Figures Complex Panels Fish, Animals, Humans in Costumes Variable Human Forms
2	Early Middle Period	Monochrome = Medium Red Purplish	Vegetal = Red = <i>Onoto</i> Purple = Unknown	Fine-Line Figures Common Interior-Lined Fish, Birds, Lizards, Elongated Humans
1	Early Period	Monochrome = Medium Red, Light Orange	Mineral (hematite)	Geometrics Predominant Camelids, Elongated Humans

Figure 2. Proposed period characteristics.

Humans are variously represented in all periods, and there is moderate diversity in body shape, body decoration, and other attributes (Figures 3 and 4). Each period contains forms more or less distinctive to that particular period, such as the elongated bodies of Period 1. Some simple forms seem to occur all through the sequence. In all periods, anthropomorphs are far outnumbered by animals and geometric symbols. Even so, it is the total assemblage of figures that gives a style its character and shows its range of variation in manner of expression and subject matter.

### Period 1: Early Period

Period 1 is characterized by monochrome medium red and light orange designs and simple figures in what appears to be a mineral paint. Geometric figures seem to predominate, most conspicuously designs similar to modern Piaroa body stamps (Vicariato 1988; Overing and Kaplan 1988; Hernández Rosas 1992). A few animal figures and elongated humans are also present. Light orange elongated humans also occasionally have the angular parallel lines of body stamps across the torso.

Period 1 paintings could represent local indigenous groups resident in the area. Some of the morphological diversity, either absolutely (as the case with camelids) or geographically (as with complex

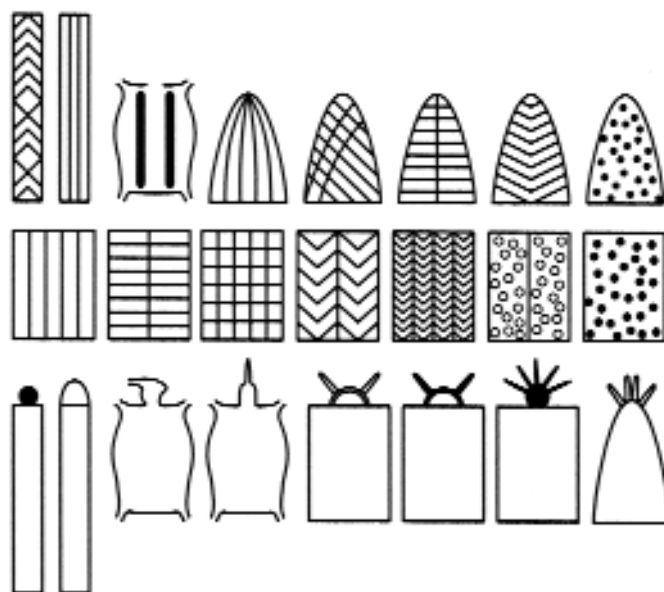


Figure 3. Examples of body decoration and headdress styles.

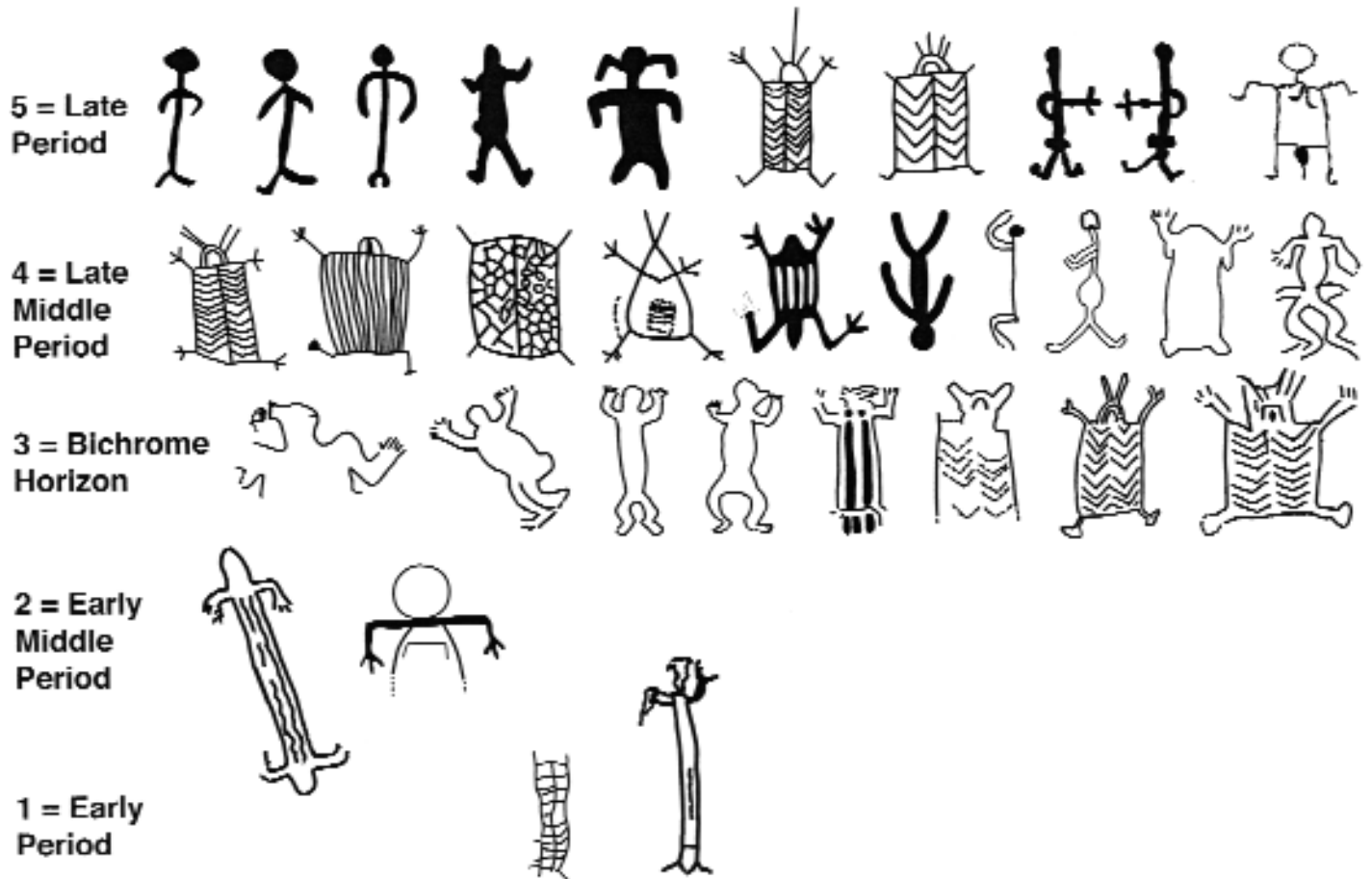


Figure 4. Human forms by chronological period.

geometric designs more common in the south), might be related to cultural diversity reflecting an unknown temporal range as much as cultural boundaries within the study area.

### Period 2: Early Middle Period

Period 2 figures are monochrome medium red to deep purple. The pigment appears to be vegetal paint, and most conspicuously a very dark red liquid paint applied with a fine brush. Animal forms predominate, such as interior-lined fish, lizards, and birds with outstretched wings. Most humans continue the earlier characteristic of static elongated bodies, some with interior torso decoration.

Viewing content of the art, especially human forms, it appears that whatever was happening in Period 1 mostly continued into Period 2, with the

introduction of a new technology of painting and a few new elements. We view this as representing a fairly stable local population, but with a rather sudden introduction of new ideas, presumably the result of influence from new people.

Changes into Period 2 could indicate locally expanding groups, such as observable today in this same area with the Piaroa (Mansutti-Rodríguez 1990) and Yanomamĩ (Chagnon 1992). Of course, ethnohistoric information for the last 350 years indicates that historically the area has been home constantly to a wide variety of ethnic groups representing several language families (Rojas 1989), and that not only did the groups cohabit the region, but they constantly moved around within it (Vicariato 1988; Mansutti Rodríguez 1986). Changes from Period 1 to Period 2, with their superficial continuity of similar forms, could represent changes in political

power and ideological influence of such shifting local groups, such that control or influence regionally shifts from one dominant group to another, but without drastic population or personnel changes on a regional level.

### Period 3: Bichrome Horizon

Period 3 suddenly introduces elaborate panels of red-white figures of fish, animals, humans, and geometric forms with more elaboration and complexity than seen previously. Figures are larger, more closely clustered, and cover more of the wall than previous work. Human forms are variable and are often clothed in ritual dance costume. For the first time, figures are often complex and occasionally dynamic.

With the interruptive introduction of the bichrome there is a sudden change in subject matter, painting technology, general approach to art, and use of artistic space. This almost certainly is evidence of an influx of new people in a position to influence, control, displace, or otherwise change

much of the indigenous culture. This could be a major incoming population invasion, with its ideological influence continuing into succeeding periods (cf. Tarble 1985).

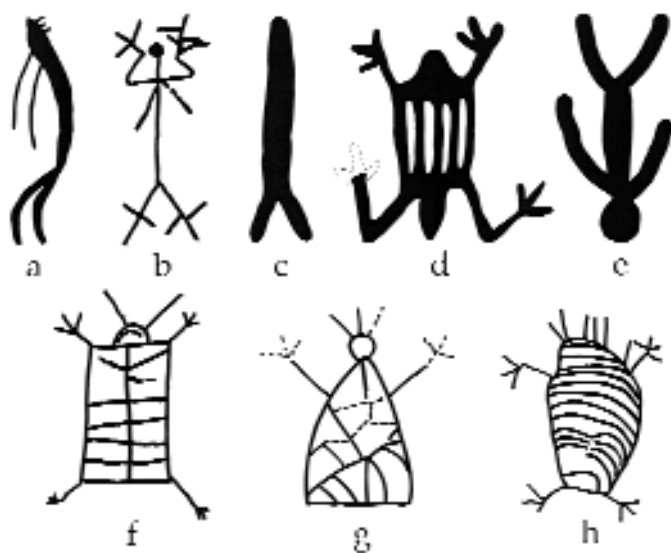
### Period 4: Late Middle Period

Period 4 returns to monochrome medium to dark red, but possibly with different vegetal paints. It appears that a persistence of medium red onoto (achiote) is supplemented by the deeper and brighter red chica mixtures and probably mixtures of onoto, chica, and caraña (a resin) for the deepest, richest tones. There is increased diversity of shapes and subjects within the art (Figure 5). Figures mostly seem to be painted as individuals, although there also are some small integrated panels of multiple figures. Human figures may be static in appearance or they may show action, such as hunting (Figure 7, s) or dancing. Condition is also portrayed, such as a pregnant woman (Figure 7, r).

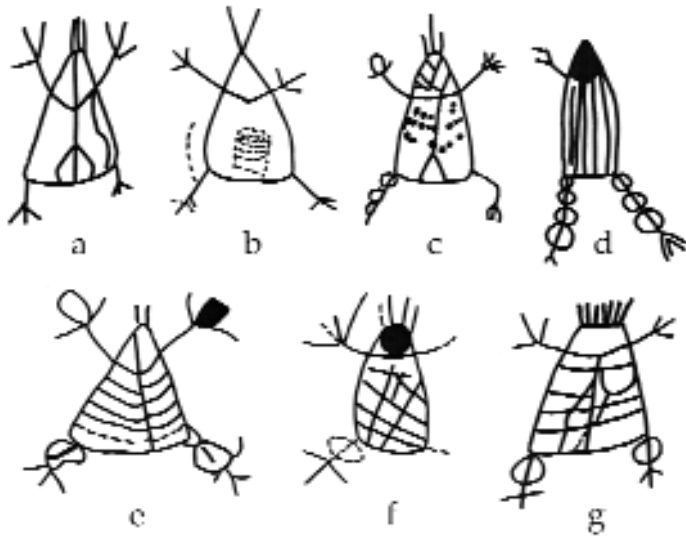
Ghost-like figures and the bow-legged man, forms which are characteristic of the previous Period 3 bichrome, continue into Period 4 (Figure 7, a-e). This is also the case with many of the complex clothed dancing shaman forms (Figure 8), which persist through Period 4 and beyond (Figure 4).

After a seemingly short time of red-white bichrome domination, the art appears to revert partially to previous technological aspects of the painting. This could indicate that the main power of the "Bichrome Horizon" intrusion fairly quickly dissipated, and that the art then became reassociated with the previously displaced or disempowered resident group. In this case, the original residents either were displaced and forced to leave, or they lost control of artistic (ideological) expression, and presumably also political power and regional social status, while still maintaining residence in the area. Either way, in Period 4 it would seem that people in the area during Period 2, or people of similar technological orientation, regained control of the artistic expression.

It is noteworthy, however, that into Period 4 and beyond there was a continuation of much of the introduced Period 3 bichrome iconography — that is, what was portrayed and how. Thus, while there mostly was a reversion to previous technological



**Figure 5.** Period 4 human forms. *a*, solid, open-bodied, or stick figures, often with arms to one side or something in hands. *b*, complex stick figures, usually with long digits. *c*, lines of dancing figures, usually with very little detail. *d*, highly stylized figures, often with animal features. *e*, upside down or falling figures. Bottom row, clothed or decorated dancing or ritual figures with square (*f*), triangular (*g*), or subrectangular to globular (*h*) bodies.



*Figure 6. Period 4 ritual figures with triangular bodies. a-c, possible portrayal of female genitalia. c-g, possible representation of leg rattles or bands.*

aspects of the painting, perhaps indicating an economic change, there was retention of some of the recently introduced artistic content and some degree of manner, perhaps representing a residual social influence. It appears that the people responsible for the Period 3 bichrome, even after they had left the area or had lost political control, had a lingering influence on ideological expression or belief systems associated with specific social activities and expressed as rupestrian painting. This suggests that either the “bichrome” groups were unusually influential, and significantly affected local art styles, or individual remnants of these groups continued to reside in the area, but with decreased continuing influence over the manner of artistic expression. This mirrors the process by which Caribe ethnic groups operated in the area during early historic times. They entered the region, with small groups of people moving into local villages and assuming political and social control. The resident population, however, continued to operate much as it had previously, and intermarriage and social integration became firmly established. It takes little imagination to suppose that the less numerous Caribe visitors became integrated into the communities, and that the communities rather quickly began to revert to

their old ways and technologies. The social processes represented by Period 4 could have been similar.

#### Period 4-5 Transition

Seemingly at the beginning of Period 5 there is a transition, or what appears to be a short temporal phase, of complex geometrics. These include red-black-white polychrome figures, negative red designs, and monochrome designs painted over a solid background (white-on-red and red-on-white). No anthropomorphic forms presently are known (or have been recognized) for this phase.

For the most part, paints appear to be prepared and mixed more like previous periods (especially periods 2, 3, and 4) than the following Period 5 (Late Period). The use of two or three colors in combination — in some cases true bichrome and polychrome figures — is also unusual and seemingly short-lived. Figures are distinct from the Bichrome Horizon style of red-outlining of white or yellowish bodies.

Although these figures appear to forecast the generally strong geometric content of Period 5, it is uncertain how they fit into the sequence. Although they are distinct and different enough from other temporal phases to suggest some kind of short-lived influence from an immigrating group who appear to have passed quickly through the area, the phase is presently so poorly represented and understood that, for now, it is not given full period status.

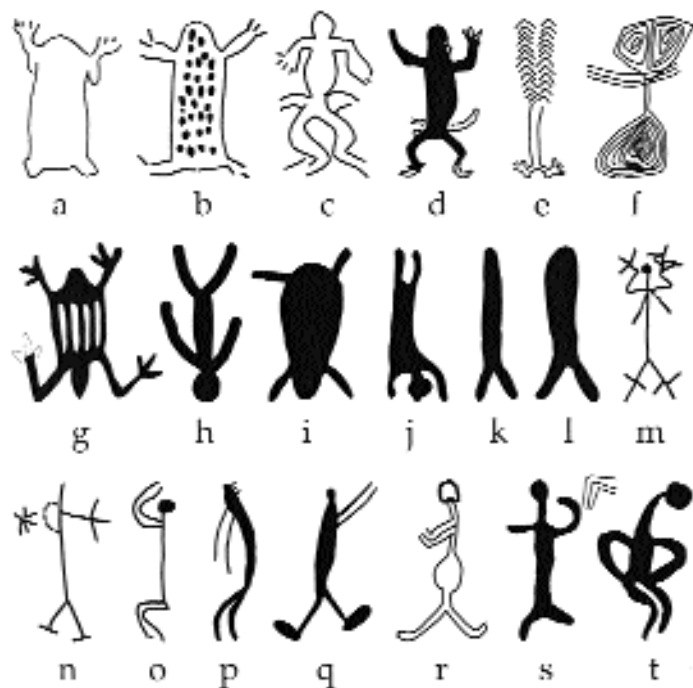
#### Period 5: Late Period

In Period 5 the technology suddenly changes again. Nearly all paintings now are done in colored clays, and white is predominant. Small dark figures at a few sites are drawn in black charcoal and dark brown resin (presumably *caraña*). Anthropomorphs are relatively rare but seem to continue the previous portrayals, apparently introduced first at the end of Period 2 or with the Period 3 bichrome, of mostly static clothed ritual dancers and crude linear and full-bodied figures. While the content of human figures is similar to previous periods, their manner of execution is distinct and much sloppier.

With this period there is an abrupt change away from the use of Period 4 red paint and well drawn

figures, and toward a new domination of monochrome figures usually fairly sloppily painted in white paint and other secondary materials. This could indicate the introduction of yet another group of people, perhaps a new invasion into the area. Alternatively, the change in technology and manner of painting could be the result of a decimated population, with painting now being done by untrained, perhaps overworked people who were trying to carry out activities previously done by specialists. This would be consistent with the kinds of social changes taking place during the early historic period, with massive cultural changes caused by decimated populations caused by intensive slavery and epidemic diseases.

Most of the art is devoid of obvious reference to the historic period, and it seems that the Late Period may have begun prior to European contact, or at least before recognizable European influence. A Catholic mission, drawn in a light yellowish clay-like paint at one of the northern sites, indicates that the style continued in use into historic times.



**Figure 7.** Period 4 miscellaneous figures. *a-e*, hold-over forms from Period 3 (*a-b*, ghost figures; *c-d*, bowed-leg figures). *f*, highly stylized (may be earlier period). *r*, pregnant woman. *s*, hunter with clubs or throwing sticks.

## Period Discussion

Periods vary in several technological components, content, and manner of expression. Pigments follow a progressive change by period (P.x), from iron oxide (P.1), to simple vegetal paint (P.2), to highly processed vegetable paint (late P.4, and perhaps P.3), and finally use of colored clays (P.5). Colors also vary by periods, which begin with orange (P.1), then dark red (late P.1 and early P.2), medium red (late P.2), bichrome red-white (P.3), a return to medium and bright red (P.4), then several new colors and combinations (P.5), and finally mostly monochrome white (P.5). Forms of the figures themselves also vary between periods, as evidenced by an early stress on geometrics (P.1); then a predominance of animals and interior-lined forms, especially fish (P.2); then large animals and open-bodied fish in large panels (P.3); then small individual animals, stick figures, and elaborate humans (P.4); and finally a return to geometrics and highly stylized figures and symbols (P.5).

In reference to anthropomorphs, two main periods are suggested by variation in human form — the time before the introduction of the red-white Bichrome Horizon (Period 3) and the time after. There appears to be considerable continuity between Periods 1 and 2, with some new introduced aspects of painting and some new motifs. With the bichrome Period 3 there is a sudden change in subject matter, painting technology, general approach to art, and use of artistic space. After this time, there were temporally distinct styles, but much of the iconography continued throughout the rest of the sequence, especially evident with complex human forms, or ritually dressed dancers.

In summary, we see a similarity of paintings throughout the region during or within each period. As such, we view individual periods as representing somewhat culturally stable times, but with considerable and widespread geographic contact between groups up and down the Orinoco and from the river back into the highlands (cf. Mansutti Rodríguez 1986). Geographic north-south differences in art styles along the river appear to indicate distinctions between local groups.

The change from one period to the next may represent a presumed change in ideology (or at least

the way it is portrayed) resulting from some kind of population change over the entire area. This presumably would be associated, at least most of the time, with a new group of people whose beliefs influenced any still resident groups. Several other possible interpretive frameworks are being considered, but comparing such a general model based on rock art with other similar models based on other archeological or ethnographic data should be possible, especially after the art is dated.

**PERIOD 4 ANTHROPOMORPHS**

A sample of human forms from Period 4 is presented here as an indication of morphological similarities and variety within a single period (Figure 5). There appears not to be such variety in the earlier

periods, especially Periods 1 and 2, in which most of the humans seem to be elongated and narrow and to belong to a somewhat different tradition. While some of the later influences began in Period 3, it is in Period 4 that forms reach their greatest number and diversity.

The period does not stand in isolation or suddenly spring from nowhere. Ghost-like figures and the bow-legged man (Figure 7, a-d), forms which are almost exclusively associated with the previous Period 3 bichrome, continue into this period. This is also the case with dancers in costume (Figure 8), which continue throughout the later phases of the sequence.

The activity with the most attention appears to be dancing. Triangular and rectangular figures with body coverings of woven palm leaves (Figure 8)

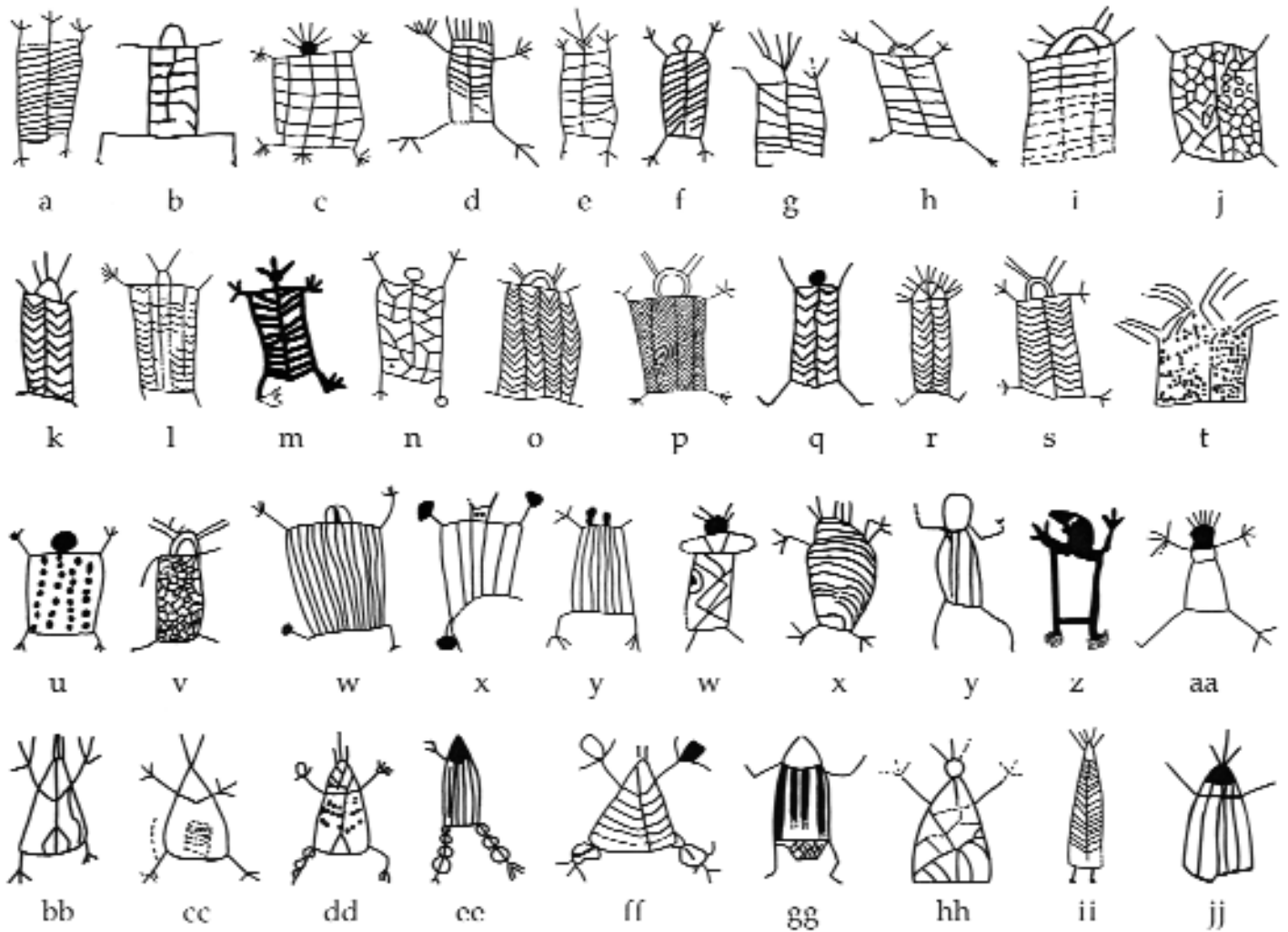


Figure 8. Period 4 decorated ritual dancers.



undoubtedly represent ritual dancers with various kinds of body covering and head ornamentation, common today in much of lowland South America (Vicariato 1988; Overing and Kaplan 1988:348). Only the triangular forms have distinctive markings on the lower-central torso which may indicate them as females (Figure 6, a-c). Other portrayals of females also occur, such as a pregnant woman (Figure 7, r).

Besides the triangular and rectangular forms with their distinctive body coverings, other indications of dancing include bands, believed to be rattles, on the legs of several figures (Figure 6, c-g). These are usually pictured as open circles, and all are on figures with triangular bodies. An alternate interpretation is that these may simply be leg bands, as worn by Panare women today within our project area (Christhian Valles 1993) and by both Piaroa men and women (Vicariato 1988:54; Chaffanjon 1986:95; Crevaux 1988:261; Overing and Kaplan 1988:371).

Line dancing or group dancing seems to be fairly well represented with several examples of lines of various human forms (Figure 5, c). Lines occur both singly and paired, and they vary in length and in number of individual components.

Another activity is group hunting. A Period 4 panel shows hunters, one with clubs (Figure 7, s), facing or surrounding some deer, one of which has a spear or arrow in its neck. Period 3 hunting scenes also show multiple individuals, occasional spirit beings, the use of dogs, clubs, traps, spears or arrows, and perhaps drums.

Mythology or history is represented by groups of upside-down humans or falling figures in several sites (Figure 5, e). Some of these may represent a myth or story of people committing communal suicide by jumping off a mountain. The story is widespread, and there are at least two mountains, one in the study area and one just to the north, where this is reported to have occurred.

## FINAL REMARKS

Even though the five-period chronological system seems oversimplified, it appears to be holding up well. Reanalysis of the few possible exceptions to the chronology shows that they were initially misidentified and instead fit perfectly within the system. Such reanalysis has also cleared up some

context questions with panel identification. For example, two sites (Cueva Iglesias and Cueva Gavilán) have solid yellow clay figures clearly beneath monochrome red figures initially thought to be from Period 2 (Early Middle Period). Such yellow clay figures would not be expected in this context and instead should have been from Period 5, overlying Period 4 monochrome red. It was not until data analysis that the medium to bright red figures were recognized as more finely drawn than most Period 2 — more like Period 4. Computer examination (with enhancement of scanned color slides) of these yellow figures further showed that they are outlined with a thin red line. It was then obvious that the yellow figures are typical Period 3 (Bichrome Horizon) full-bodied figures, except that they have a yellowish interior (which simply expands the accepted technological variation of the style), and the red figures indeed fall into place into Period 4, exactly as their general appearance (or manner) suggests.

## Acknowledgments

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who has accompanied us to the Parguaza, Sipapo, and other rivers and villages, still questions the sanity of our perseverance with rain, unfriendly animals, insects, slippery mountain sides, hot weather, slow boats, broken jeeps, and bureaucracy.

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## POSTSCRIPT 2005

This paper was originally prepared early in 1994 for presentation at the ARARA international rock art conference in Flagstaff, Arizona. Its purpose was to present new information not previously published or described, and to discuss the current state of research regarding the complex chronology of southern Venezuela that is representative of a huge part of lowland South America and parts of the Caribbean. This was a time of intensive analysis and attempted ordering of rock art information immediately following several fieldwork sessions. The orientation was explicitly chronological, with primary emphasis on technological detail in an attempt to preclude as much as possible classification and interpretation based purely on subjective observation. Intensive analysis continued for several more months, and in the end it was probably subjective reasoning as much as anything that led to the breakthrough realization that there were multiple systems of chronology reflecting moving cultures, various cultural influences, and social processes. While later papers (Greer 1995a, 1995b, 1997, 2001) added more detail and enhanced the chronological scheme somewhat, the present Flagstaff paper describes better than any other document the reasoning at that time and the process for sorting out various aspects of organization of the rock art. The basic tenets of the chronology also remain unchanged, and therefore the paper is useful from historical perspective and is still timely in its explanatory and interpretive content.

Many changes have occurred since initial writing of the paper eleven years ago, and although we have attempted to retain the original 1994 content and presentation, we have made a few adjustments, corrections, and additions. A few changes are noted for the acknowledgements. Long-time prominent researcher Jeannine Sujo, who suffered her whole life with severe debilitating physical problems that did not keep her from making some of the most significant contributions in Venezuelan rock art, finally died of cancer. Her work is being continued by colleagues in Caracas. Jorge Contreras, tour guide, explorer, good friend, and most influential person in this study, burned to death in a jeep roll-over near Puerto Ayacucho after narrowly saving his wife and

two young daughters from the burning vehicle. On a more positive note, Kay Tarble and Franz Scaramelli, faculty members at the Universidad Central de Venezuela and long-time collaborators on rock art and other Orinoco research finally married, with the traditional name change, and have completed their doctorate degrees. Other people listed through the text have moved around, some have taken positions of considerable influence and responsibility, some have retired or are no longer affiliated with their stated institutions, and many others not listed here have come to help tremendously in our continued field and research efforts. Still others have moved on and are no longer with us, although their memories and continued influence are inescapable.

We have left the text as near the 1994 version as possible. Additional later bibliographic references have been added where useful, and substantive additions to the text have been added when necessary to clarify concepts or reference subsequent published work. The use of present tense in the text refers to 1994 unless otherwise noted.

## PERSONAL BIOGRAPHIES

**John Greer** (BA 1965, MA 1968 University of Texas–Austin; Ph.D. 1995 University of Missouri–Columbia). Archeological and ethnographic experience has been mainly New World, with additional work in other areas. Present interests include rock art in several areas, rock art chronology, South America and Caribbean, dark zone art in deep caves, and computer applications to rock art research. We maintain an archeological consulting company in Wyoming, with most commercial work in the northwestern Plains.

**Mavis Greer** (B.A. 1974, M.A. 1978 University of Montana; Ph.D. 1995 University of Missouri–Columbia). Archeological work in recent years has been mostly in North America, with additional travels and studies elsewhere. Rock art interest and other consulting activities currently are centered mostly on Montana and Wyoming.