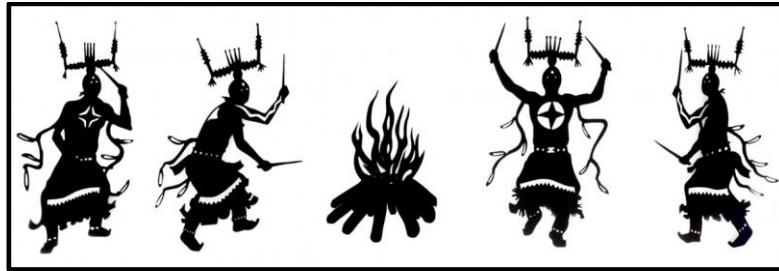


The Meyers Spring Apache Crown Dancer Pictograph

West Texas Archeological Society

September 2024

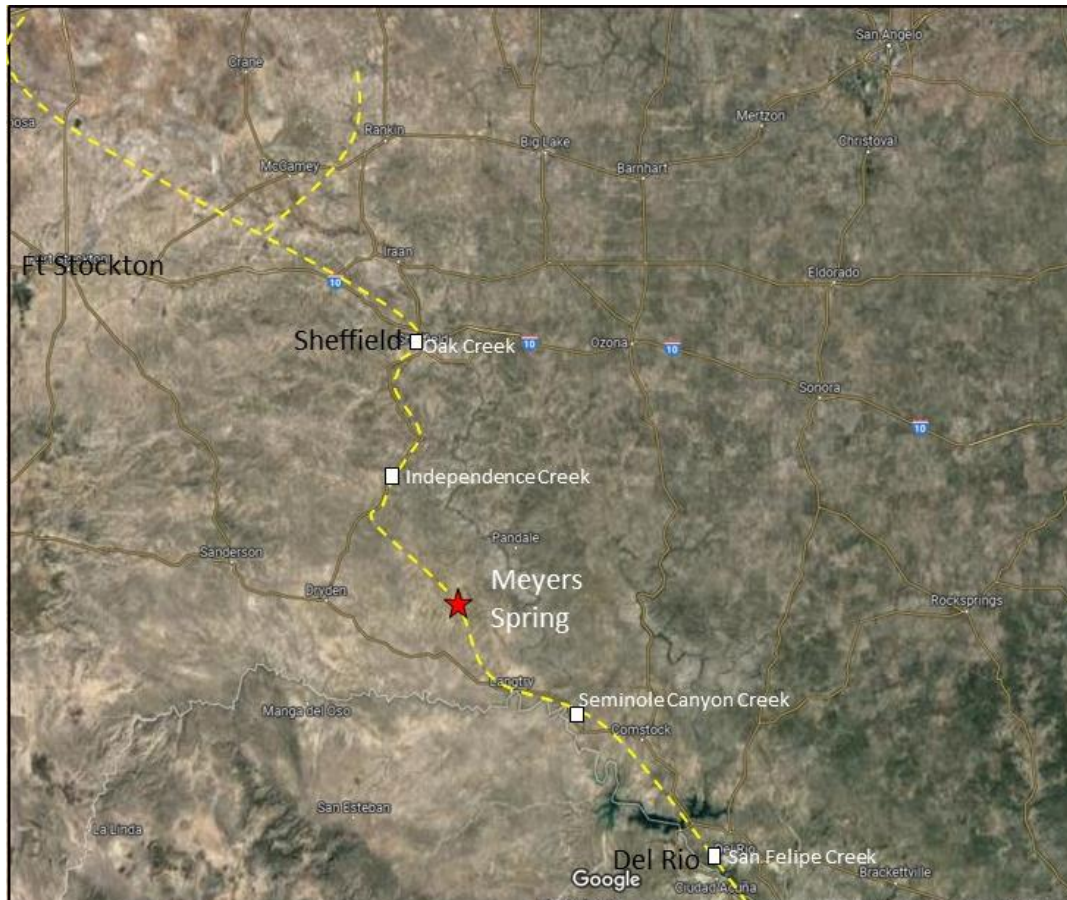


One of the largest collections of historic rock art in Texas is located on the privately-owned Meyers Spring Ranch in the Lower Pecos region of West Texas, near Dryden. Groups can view the 100-foot pictograph wall several times yearly through tour groups sponsored by the Shumla Archeological Research and Education Center or the Witte Museum's Rock Art Foundation.

<https://shumla.org/>

<https://www.witemuseum.org/>

Various renderings on the pictograph wall, as well as artifacts found in nearby middens and ancient campsites, indicate the wall art goes back as far as the Late Archaic period but mostly includes historic times of the Spanish Conquistador, Spanish missionary, and early Texas European settler periods. Most are picture stories of hunting or new experiences by the various bands that passed through the spring on their migration route between northern Mexico and the Texas bison hunting grounds, or up into the New Mexico region.



Migration route through Meyers Spring

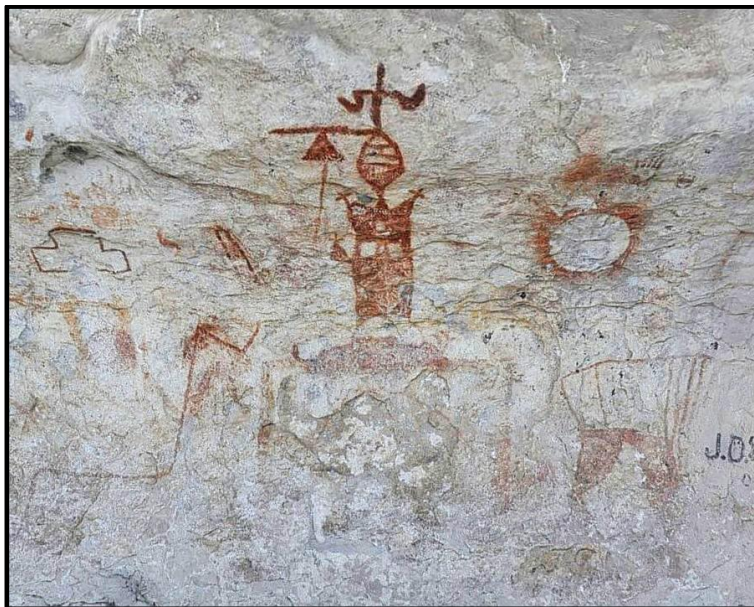
This particular pictograph sits in the right half of the 100-foot wall. The pigment's clarity indicates it is one of the more recent images on the wall. Although there is no sure way of dating the image, it was likely created before the Spanish came into the Northern Mexico or New Mexico and when Apache had free reign for family migrations between northern Mexico and the bison hunting grounds in the Trans-Pecos plains of Texas.



Pictograph wall image from 3D rendering (Sketchfab)

<https://sketchfab.com/3d-models/meyers-spring-shelter-5ccbe09f379a4c03977944fdf01a0f3b>

This image appears to represent an Apache Crown (also known as the Mountain Spirit or Gaan) dancer.



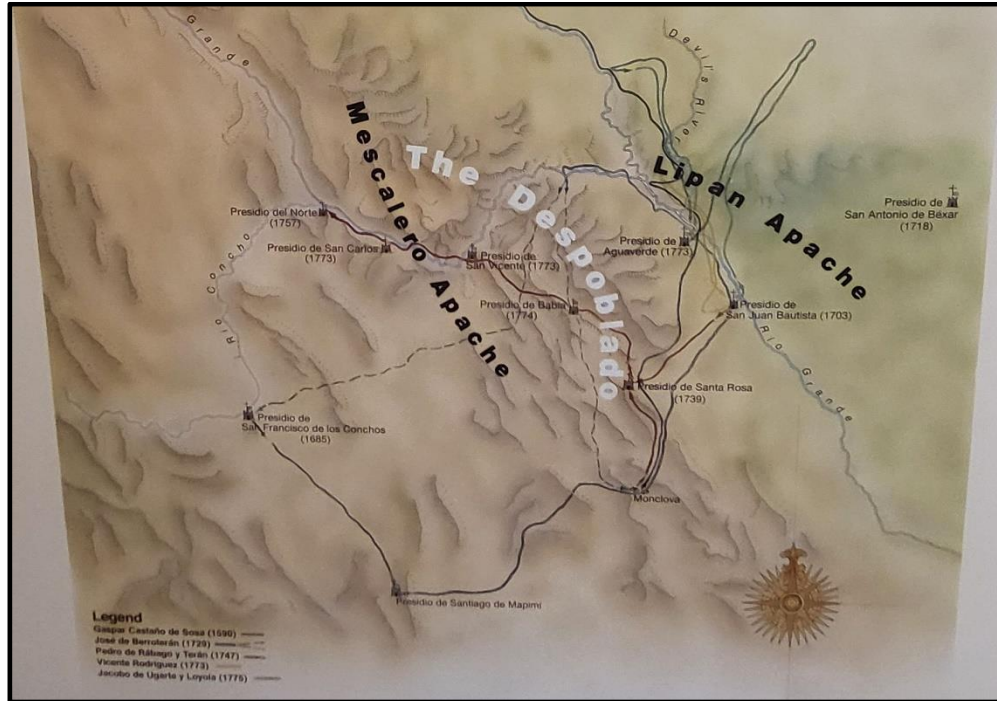
Crown Dancer Pictograph (image from 3D rendering in Sketchfab)

The unique nature of the head ornamentation in this image indicates that this is Mescalero-influenced. Although all Apache tribes perform this ceremony, the Mescalero ornamentation differs slightly from the others.



Apache Crown Dance (probable Mescalero) 1889

The Mescalero Apache were originally from northern Mexico. They are most well known for their occupation of northern Chihuahua, Mexico. However, they were also in northern Coahuila, Mexico. This area is also adjacent to the Lipan Apache region, and both were located just below the north-south migration route that passes through Meyers Spring. The original occupation and migration period goes back centuries, possibly as far back as the 1300s A.D. Through constant warring with the Spaniards, the Mescalero chose to migrate out of the area and move north permanently. This time may have been in the late 1500s when the governor of Nuevo León, near current Laredo, began conducting regular slave raids to capture Indians along the Rio Grande. Conflicts between the indigenous peoples and the Spaniards continued throughout the 17th century. (Weddle)



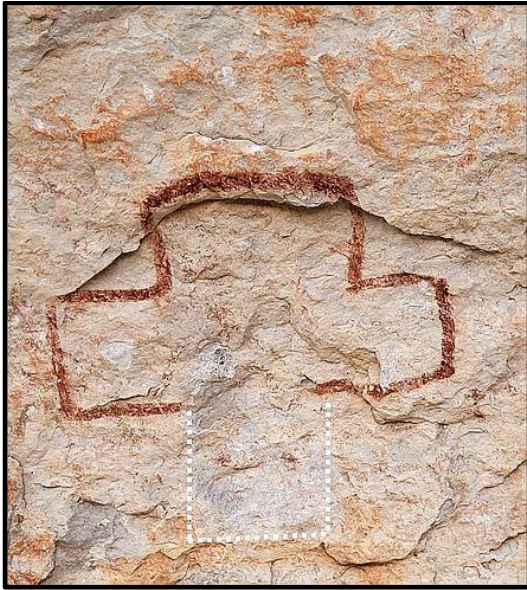
Map of original areas of occupation (Texas State Parks, Seminole Canyon State Park Museum)

From an ongoing project of Indigenous Y-DNA (male-specific) or MT-DNA (Mitochondrial) whose family has an oral tradition of being descended from Apache lineage and originates from the area of West Texas or Northwest Chihuahua, Mexico:

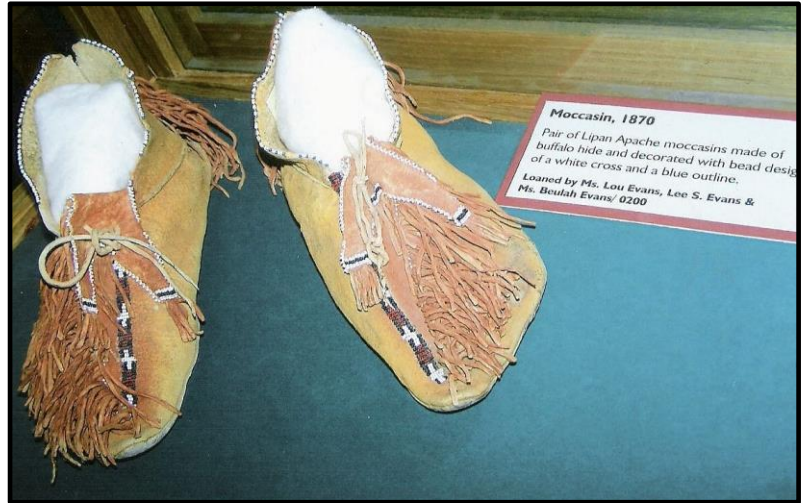
“Nakai'ye-N'de (Nakai'ye means Mexican, in a general sense, but in this context, by adding N'de as a suffix, refers to the Mexican Clan of Lipan/Mescalero that stayed in Northern Chihuahua after the relocation of the Mescalero to the Bosque Redondo, New Mexico).”
(FamilyTreeDNA)

Notice they refer to the “Mexican Clan of Lipan/Mescalero.” Although this study refers to the Chihuahua area, the same early relationship was ongoing in the northern Coahuila region.

Returning to the pictograph wall, five feet to the left of the Crown Dancer is a ‘Paths Crossing’ symbol, the identifying symbol of the Lipan Apache Band of Texas. The bottom part of the cross was shot off, but the spalled rock from bullet impacts is clearly defined. Historical evidence of this symbol being tied to the Lipan Apache Band of Texas can be found in the Texas Ranger Museum, Waco, Texas, which displays an 1870s-era pair of Lipan Apache moccasins lined with this same cross. The current Lipan Apache Band of Texas maintains this symbol today on their teepee.



Lipan Apache Band of Texas symbol



Lipan Apache Moccasins in Waco Texas Ranger Museum



Richard Gonzales (Lipan Apache Chief) & Anita Tahityé

The Crown (Spirit) Dance

The Crown Dance is a two-fold ceremony. On the one hand, it is to bring the Mountain Spirits to heal and protect the tribe from disease and their enemies. It is also a ceremony to help transform young tribal girls into their life of womanhood. The Crown Dance is very much a family-tribal ceremony. This is the reasoning for the theory that this pictograph was probably made before Mescalero and Lipan were under Spanish threat and regularly migrating back and forth from northern Mexico to the West Texas-New Mexico area.

The Crown Dance is a four-day ceremony. Although the heart of these ceremonies takes four days, the events span 12 days, much of it for preparations. A medicine woman coaches the young woman as the ceremony begins and guides her throughout, offering instructions for each element of the ritual and life going forward. Each of the four days the young woman is put through various physical tests and each night consists of ceremonial dancing with a large central fire. She is adorned with elaborate beaded buckskins with jingles to help evoke the protecting spirits to come. The masked and body-painted Crown Dancers, representing the Mountain Spirits, dance around a huge bonfire, ringed by a crowd of people who have come to watch. A group of men sing and drum behind the dancers. The four main dancers, and a fifth 'clown' dance to bless the maiden, the fire, and keep disease and the bad spirits away. (Benaney)

Embodying the Mountain Spirits, they dance at night, bringing the spiritual world into physical manifestation. Their heads, crowned with wooden slat headdresses, wield their wooden wands as they dance around the fire.

To the Apache, the Clown is a sacred being with great Power given to him by Thunder. He represents just what the power of thunder exacerbates, fear from a tremendous power in the sky, greater than anything we see on the Earth. In this way, the manner of the Clown "fooling around" is a serious spiritual element to the ceremony reflecting the randomness of catastrophe in his seemingly mad behavior, just as nature reminds us of our own mortality from time to time. So, the latter part of his message is to always take the time to enjoy life and its' rewards by constantly reminding us about the ever-present potential of experiencing sorrow through separation or even death. The meaning and importance behind love, friendship, family, and community are highlighted in this context. (Spirit Dance)



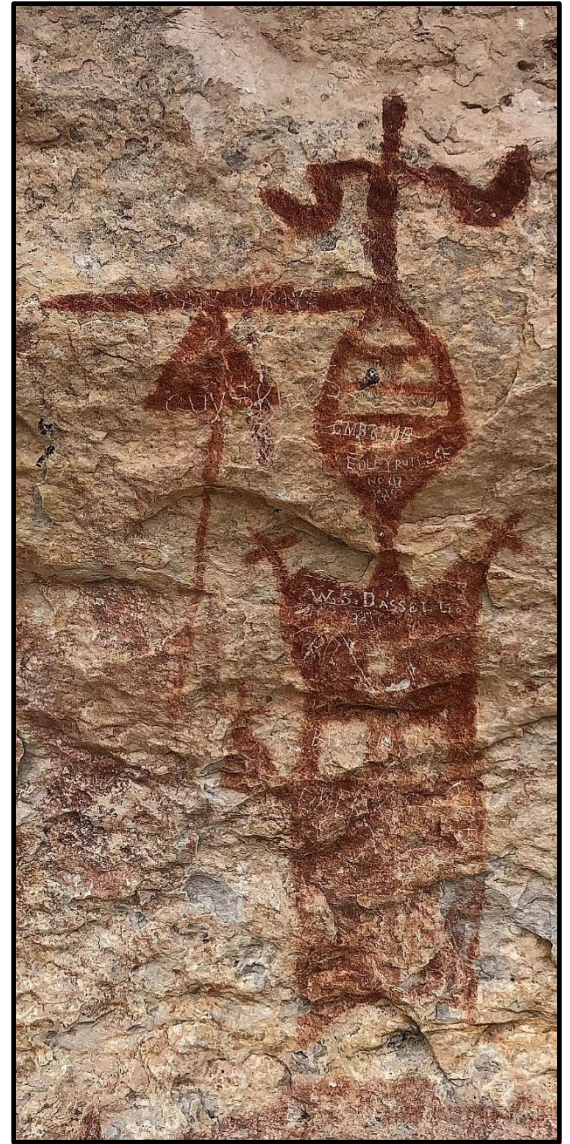
"The mountain spirits have taught the Apaches to perform the Apache Crown Dance as a means of curing. The crown headdress is be-decked with eagle feathers; the teacher that flew the highest in the Heavens. The signs of lightning are sacred symbols of the Apaches which are placed on the bodies of the Apache Crown Dancers who are instructed by the mysterious mountain spirits to perform healing rituals for the Apaches."

-Tribal Chairman Ronnie Lupe Fort Apache Scout newspaper 10/05/79

The Pictograph

The Crown Dancer Pictograph's prominent feature is the headdress. The design appears to be more in the style of the Mescalero. Rather than analysis by this author, this analysis comes from members of the Lipan Apache Band of Texas and the White Mountain Mescalero tribe. The crowns are not just ornamental; they serve as a conduit for spiritual energy, allowing the dancers to channel the power of the Gaan during their performances and elevate the dancer's spirit, bringing them closer to the divine.

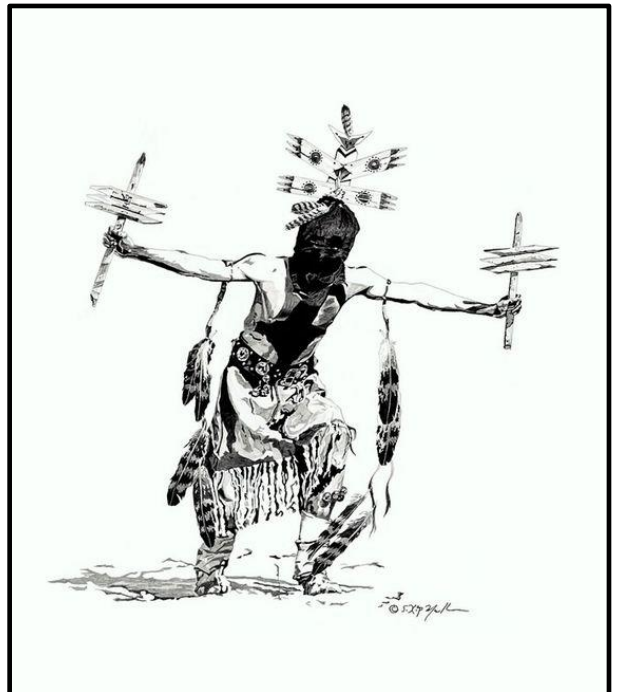
The second prominent feature is the mask. The mask is intended to represent the non-facial features of the spirits.



The crosses in the pictograph represent the wooden wands carried by the dancers, which represent the power of the Gaan and the magic they possess.

Not quite as easy to see is the pictograph depiction of the cross or star in the middle of the chest of the dancer in the pictograph. Although many images can be painted on the dancers, the star or cross shape, indicating the four cardinal directions, is a very common one.

Below the dancer in the pictograph is also the depiction of a desert big horn sheep on a roasting pit. Although a threatened species today, the desert big horn sheep were prevalent hundreds of years ago throughout the southwest, including Texas and the Chihuahua region. "Historically, native desert bighorn sheep occupied 15-16 mountain ranges in the Trans-Pecos Region. In the 1880s, an estimated 1,500 big horns inhabited these mountain ranges and possibly as many as 2,500 before that." (Hernandez)



Southern desert bighorn sheep are adapted to a desert mountain environment with little or no permanent water. Some may go without visiting water for weeks or months, sustaining their body moisture from food and from rainwater collected in temporary rock pools.



Desert bighorn sheep once occurred in many of the desert mountain ranges of west Texas as demonstrated by this pictograph. (Hernandez)

The pictograph depiction of the cooking a big horn sheep is significant. The Crown Dance ceremony is not only a spiritual and coming-of-age puberty ceremony for young women, but it is also considered a ceremony of feasting. A modern ceremony description highlights this fact.

“Usually, the coming-of-age ceremony is simply referred to as “the feast,” and for good reason. There is a lot of food, with breakfast, lunch and dinner served every day to the many people who come to watch and support the maiden. The main arbor, built from oak branches and covered with tarps, serves as a kitchen and dining hall, though most people eat outside. There are two big cookfires — one for making copious amounts of fry bread, the other for cooking meats, potatoes, chile, posole, stews and more. It’s customary for attendees to contribute something — perhaps a bag of flour, a tub of lard or even an entire brisket.” (Benanev)

The Coming Of Age Ceremony



Medicine woman Uretta Platta coaches Seaven Martinez as the ceremony begins

(Michael Benanav / Searchlight New Mexico)

At sunrise on the first day of ceremony the young woman, surrounded by family and friends, begins her tests. Adorned with a fringed and beaded buckskin dress with metal “jingles,” she runs four times a 100-yard course from a central teepee, around a basket filled with ritual items of eagle feathers, cattail pollen, tobacco, and other ritual items. The runs represent the four stages of life, from baby to girl to adult to elder. She then attempts to make fire with a hand drill.

Each night inside the big teepee the young woman performs traditional steps by the edge of fire, accompanied by a group of four chanters, led by a medicine man. For the first three nights, she dances for several hours, practicing for the fourth night, when she will dance until dawn with the masked and body-painted Crown Dancers, who represent the Mountain Spirits. On the third night, she leaves the big teepee to join other women in dancing around the bonfire, as Crown Dancers offer their blessings. At the close of the ceremony, on the fifth morning, the young woman repeats the basket runs she made on the first morning, only in reverse. The ceremony aims to teach Apache girls how to tap their reserves of inner strength, which are far deeper than they ever imagined. (Benanav)

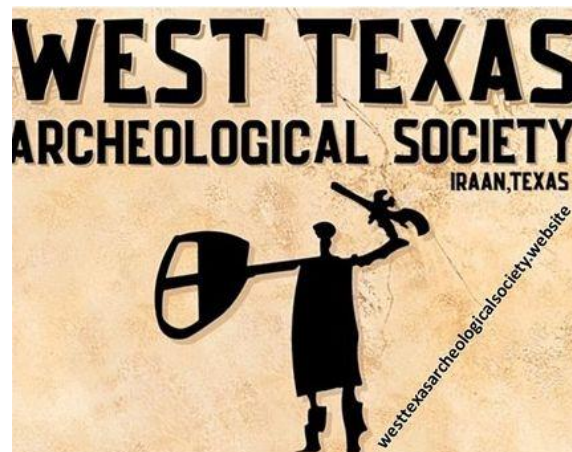


(courtesy Michael Benanav / Searchlight New Mexico)



West Texas Archeological Society collaboration with cowboy artist Mike Capron of Meyers Spring pictograph

<https://mwcapron.com/>



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