

Learning about Ancient Art: Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon

Dear Students,

Thank you for your interest in learning more about Montana American Indian tribes. In this lesson, you will learn about Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon. Together, these sites make up one of Montana's many treasures. They hold one of the largest concentrations of pictograph and petroglyph images in North America, all right here in the middle of our state! There are approximately 3,200 rock art images at these two sites. Many of these images are at least 1,000 years old and some are perhaps even older. Most of these rock art images show shield-bearing warriors with different types of designs on the shields. Other rock art images show animals such as bears, birds, bighorn sheep, deer, elk, and moose. In addition to people and animals, there are rock images of clothing, headdresses, tipis, and various geometric shapes. You could say that this place literally rocks!

People often ask how long Native Americans—also known as Indigenous Peoples—have been in Montana. The answer can often be found by using archaeology and genetic analysis, usually in that order. Archaeology is a science that helps us discover and protect ancient artifacts, whether they be above ground, in the water, beneath the surface of the Earth, or stuck in ancient ice.

One recent archaeological effort at Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon was a seven-year project that involved more than 50 people. The result of this effort was a 2012 publication entitled *Fraternity of War: Plains Indian Rock Art at Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon, Montana*. This detailed and extensive publication provided the information contained within this lesson.

This recent [article from the Billings Gazette](#) provides some general background information about this important archaeological site.

As an introductory exercise, check out these definitions of a Petroglyph and Pictograph. A [pictograph](#) is an ancient drawing or painting on a rock wall. A [petroglyph](#) is an ancient carving on a rock. Atherton Canyon and Bear Gulch have both types of these images.

Now let us take a look at some of these amazing images.



To see the site for yourself watch this brief [video clip](#) that provides a virtual tour of the area.

Bear Gulch, located in the Little Snowy Mountain foothills southwest of Lewistown, Montana.



Indian Education for All Unit

opi.mt.gov Montana Office of Public Instruction

Consider using these three questions for analyzing the images:

- What's going on in this image?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find?

Image # 1 (Pictograph)



Image # 1 (Close Up)



Image # 1 (Close Up)



Image # 2 (Pictograph)



Image # 3 (Pictograph)



Stop and reflect. What do you see? How do you know? Imagine what the life was like for the person making the image. Maybe that person knew the pictures would live on to teach future generations about the cultures, traditions, and deep spiritual connections to place and ways of living.

Image # 4 (Petroglyph)



Image # 4 (Close Up)



Image # 5 (Pictograph)



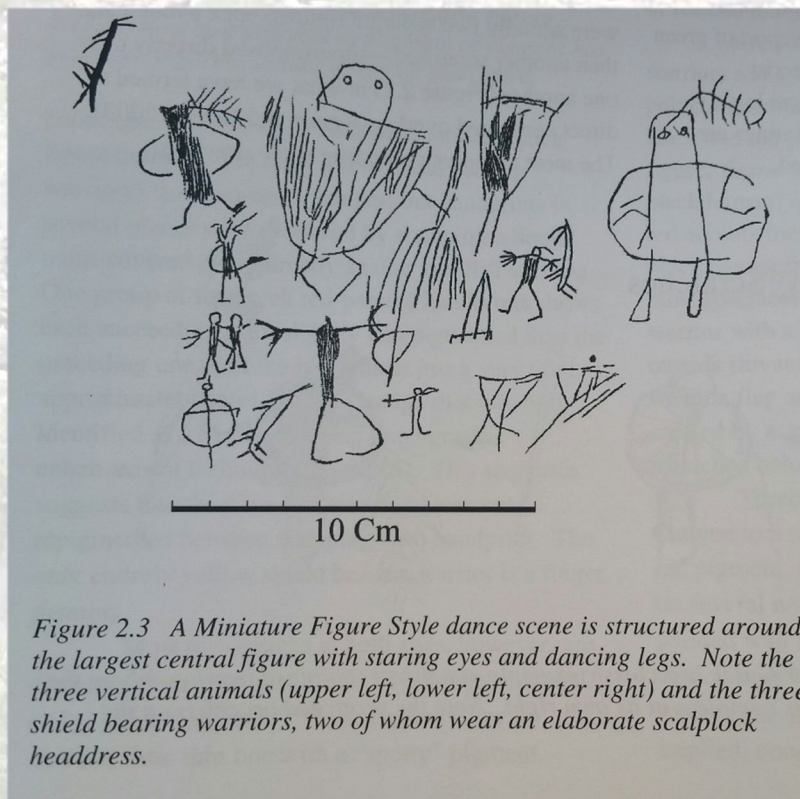
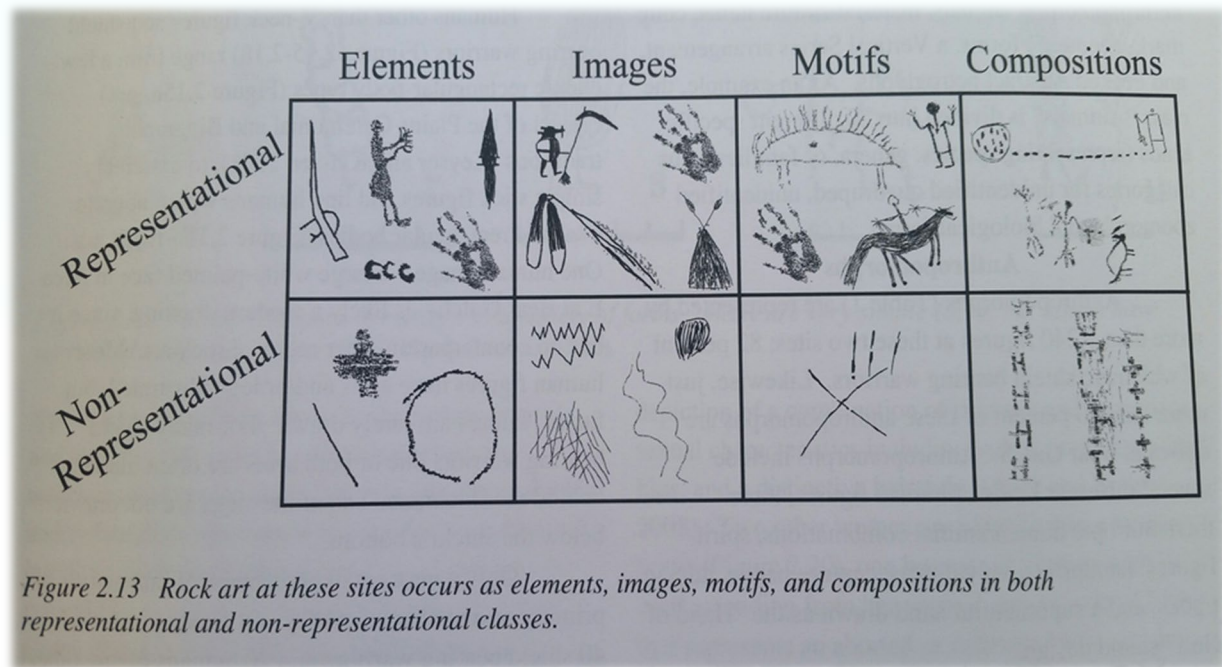
Image # 6 (Pictograph)



Stop and reflect. What do you see? How do you know? Now go back and take a closer look and see what more you can find in the images.

Various Types of Rock Art Imagery

(Images from: *Fraternity of War: Plains Indian Rock Art at Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon, Montana*)



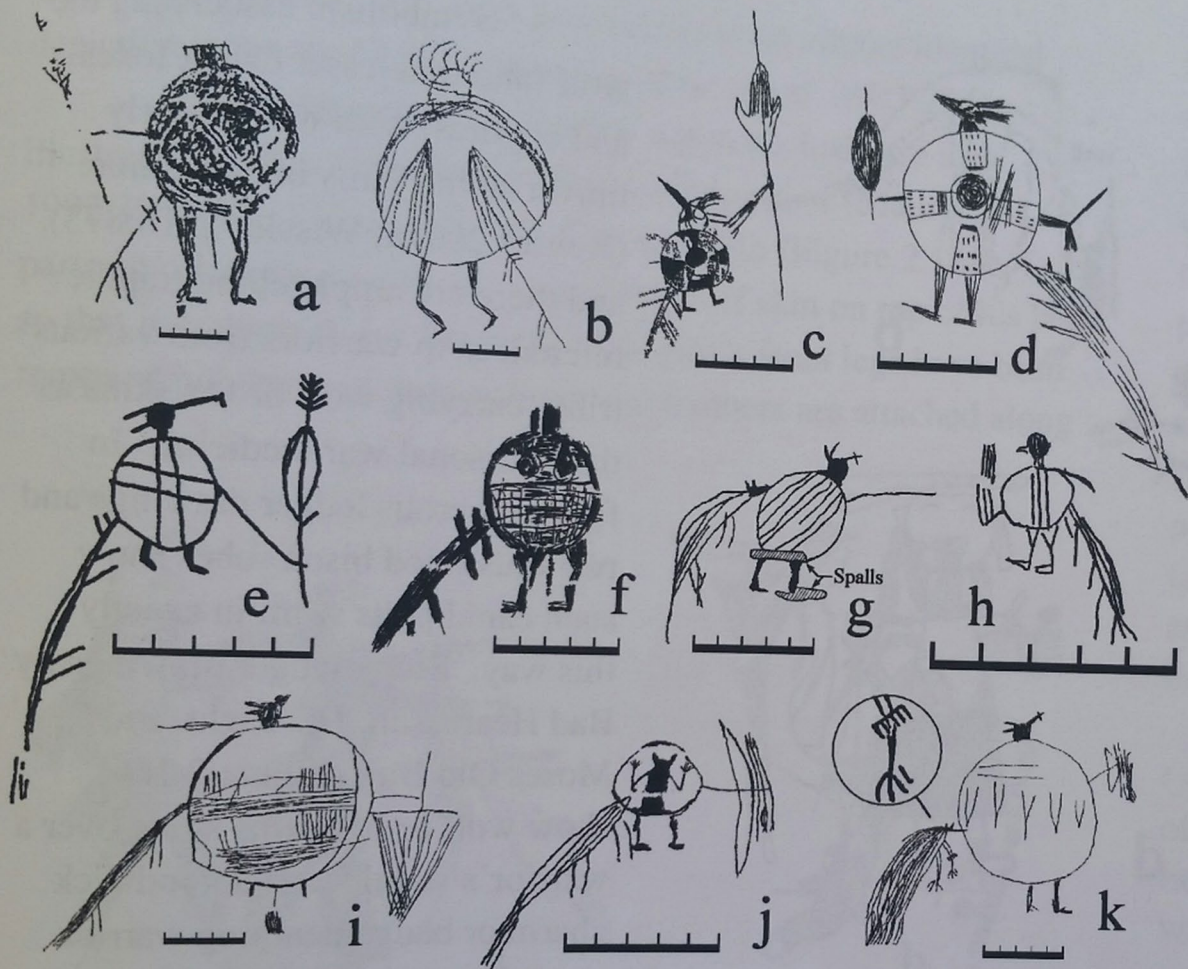


Figure 2.161 Bear Gulch shield bearing warriors with animal medicine bundles attached to their shield. Enlargement on k shows anklet on bundle. Note that i is wounded in neck. Scale bars are 5 cm.

As you view these images think about what it must have been like for the person that made them. How did that person choose the shield design? What cultural traditions were associated with the process before, during, and after the creation of the images? By what names did early peoples who visited and used this site call it? We may never know the answers to these questions, but we can look to contemporary American Indian cultural traditions as one way to provide some relevant context. There are unique ceremonies and traditions that are thousands of years old that are still be practiced by American Indian people today, and they are examples of the deep and profound spiritual connections with place. Sites like Bear Gulch remind us we are just visitors passing through leaving our mark. They help us reflect upon our legacy and think about what future generations thousands of years from now will learn from the symbolic images we leave behind that might provide a glimpse into our unique ways of life.

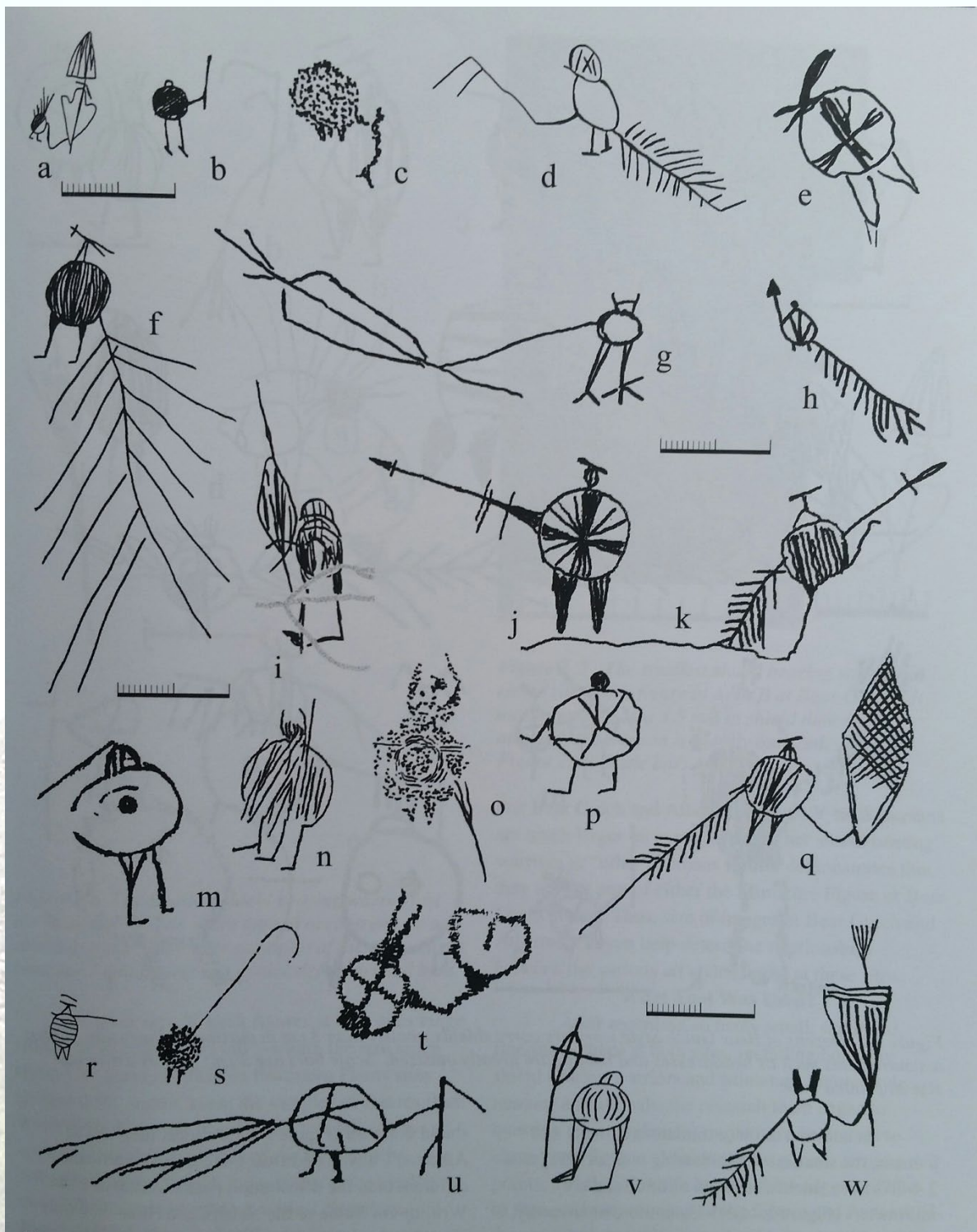
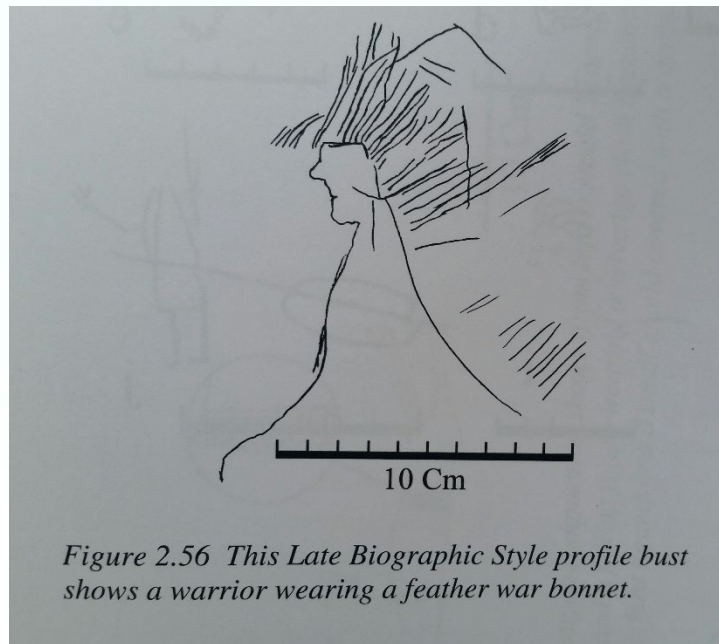
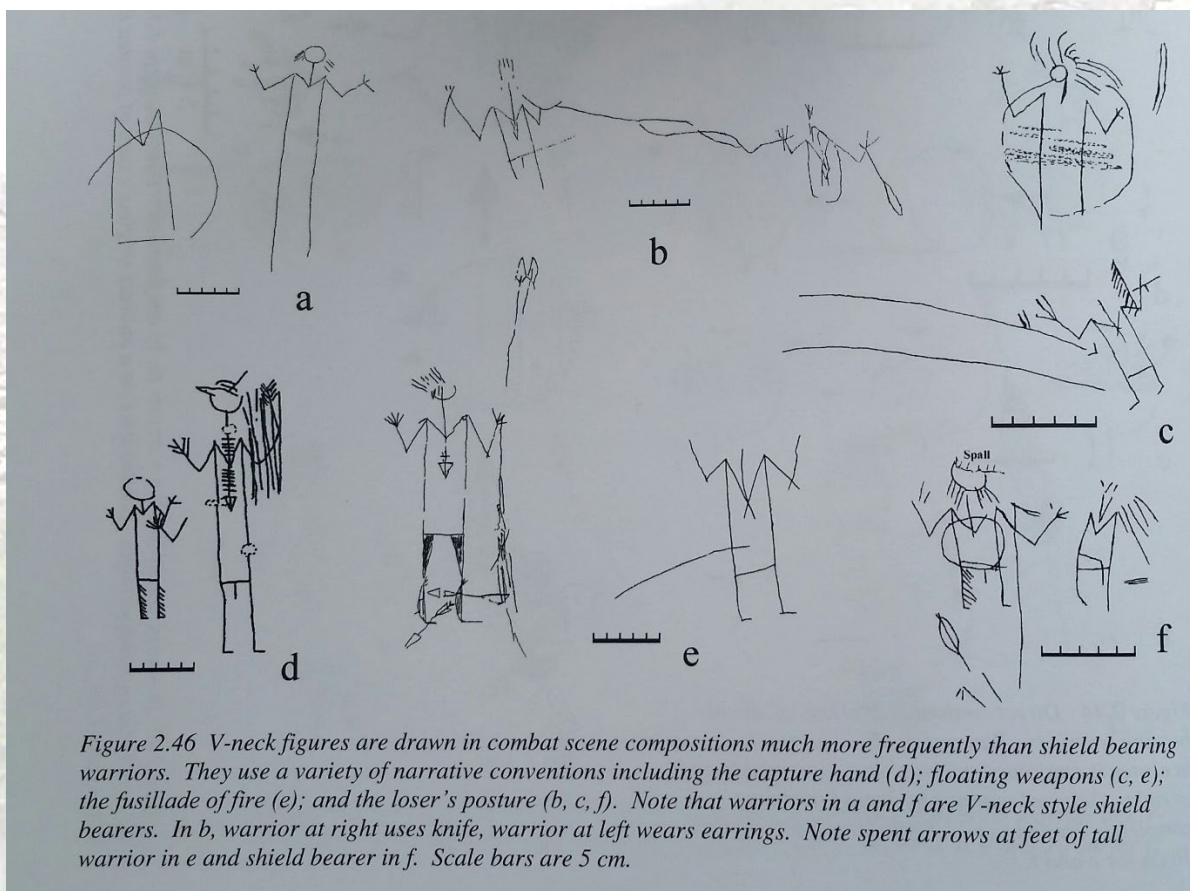


Figure 2.4 The Bear Gulch Style contains the smallest known shield bearing warriors. Despite their small size, note detailed shield designs, headdresses, and accoutrements. Lightly stippled part of i shows superimposed arrow. Scale bars are 2 cm; figures are actual size as printed here.

Crow Tribal Design



Blackfoot Tribal Designs



Key Concepts

- There are approximately 3,200 rock art images at Atherton Canyon and Bear Gulch.
- They hold one of the largest concentrations of shield bearing warriors pictograph and petroglyph images in North America.
- More than 2,300 of these images are petroglyphs.
- More than 800 images are pictographs, both drawn and painted.
- A distinguishing feature at both sites is their small size.
- Blackfeet and Crow designs are both present at the site.
- Most of the earliest images have no known tribal connections.
- The artists that created these images had powerful cultural and spiritual connections with the two sites.
- These images provide us with an increased awareness and understanding of Indigenous peoples and their profound connections to place.

Important archaeological sites like Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon can provide us a glimpse into the historic cultural traditions of the Indigenous peoples that live in Montana. These historic designs, symbols, and stylistic expressions reflect the identity and tradition of one's tribe, culture, family, and self. Still looking for relevant connections, then check out this article from the Billings Gazette: [Deciphering rock art sites provides window into olden times](#).

If possible, [schedule a visit to Bear Gulch](#) and see the site for yourself!

To see more pictographs visit [Pictograph Cave State Park](#) just a few miles from Billings, Montana.

Consider designing your own "pictograph" that you could share with your teacher, friends, and family. If you are part of the picture, what images would you show to go along with you? What would you want people thousands years from now to learn about you just by looking at the image you created? Why? Be creative and give it a try.

We hope these images provided you with a better awareness of the [Essential Understandings Regarding Montana Indians](#), in particular Essential Understandings 3 and 6.

The ideologies of Native traditional beliefs and spirituality persist into modern day life as tribal cultures, traditions, and languages are still practiced by many American Indian people...Additionally, each tribe has its own oral histories, which are as valid as written histories. These histories predate the "discovery" of North America (EU3).

History is a story most often related through the subjective experience of the teller. With the inclusion of more and varied voices, histories are being rediscovered and revised. (EU 6).

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Vicki Eades, Traci Manseau, Susan Seastrand, and Kendra Smith (photos) for providing the initial idea and concepts for this lesson. Special thanks to James D. Keyser and the Oregon Archaeology Society for permission to use images and excerpts from *Fraternity of War: Plains Indian Rock Art at Bear Gulch and Atherton Canyon, Montana* (Oregon Archaeology Society, 2012).