

Rock Art

NRAAF

BLM

Crystal Wash





Crystal Wash Introduction

Pahranagat Valley, with its springs and marshes, is an oasis in southeastern Nevada's otherwise arid landscape. Dependable water promoted favorable habitats for plants and animals, making the valley a rich environment for prehistoric hunter-gatherers. Hunter-gatherers relied on their deep knowledge of the environment to schedule seasonal movements to places where the plants and animals they depended upon would be abundant.

Throughout Pahranagat Valley, evidence of the ingenious ways that hunter-gatherers thrived in this landscape abounds. Projectile points, small chert chips, pottery sherds, ground stone tools, and rock art mark the places prehistoric Native American cultures found most favorable. These artifacts provide important clues about ancient cultures and their ways of life.

Prehistoric hunter-gatherers camped, gathered plants, and hunted game at Crystal Wash from 6,000 years ago to the mid-nineteenth century when Euro-American settlers entered Pahranagat Valley.

Two rock art sites (Crystal Wash I and II), approximately a quarter of a mile apart, illustrate that everyday hunter-gatherer life was carried out in conjunction with cultural activities. Rock art is a type of imagery that was used to convey ideas and beliefs that expressed important cultural knowledge.

Both Crystal Wash I and II were likely used around the same time. The rock art at both sites can be difficult to see because it was made on friable tuff boulders that are slowly eroding from weathering. You can help preserve these ancient images by avoiding contact with them.

Key rock art and archaeological features are marked by numbered signs along the trail. To ensure that Crystal Wash's cultural heritage continues to tell its story to visitors and archaeologists, please leave in place any artifacts you may encounter. If artifacts are removed without proper study, they no longer communicate important archaeological information. §





Rock Art Styles

The most common rock art style that can be seen at Crystal Wash is known as Basin and Range tradition. This style is dominated by enigmatic abstract designs that do not reveal their subjects or meanings by simple perusal alone. Curvilinear



designs, such as dots, circles, and wavy lines, are common at Crystal Wash I and II. Rectilinear figures, such as grids and rakes, occur in smaller numbers than curvilinear designs.

In Basin and Range tradition, anthropomorphic imagery (people-like) includes stick-figures, hand- and footprints; these can all be seen at Crystal Wash. Animals, such as deer, elk, coyotes, lizards, snakes, and birds, were portrayed naturalistically. Bighorn sheep are the most commonly depicted animal at Crystal Wash, a preference widely repeated throughout the Great Basin.

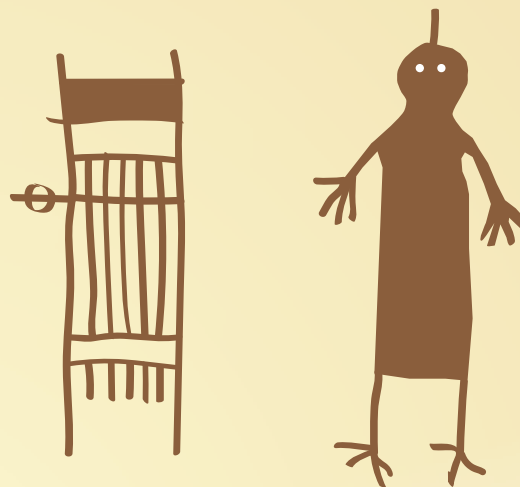
Much rarer is the Pahrnagat Anthropomorph Style, known in large numbers at only three places in the Pahrnagat Valley area. Figures in this style generally are found in numbers of five or fewer at a single site, such as here at Crystal Wash.

This style comprises two ways of portraying people. The most common has a rectangular body that is decorated (suggestive of clothing) and usually lacks a head. Called a pattern-bodied

Rock Art Styles



anthropomorph (PBA), it often holds an ancient dart thrower (or atlatl), which was replaced by the bow and arrow about 1,500 years ago. The second anthropomorph in this style has a solid-pecked oval or rectangular body, a line rising from the top of the



head, and eyes and mouth formed by negative space. This type is called the solid-body type or Pahrnagat Man.

The Pahrnagat Style may be as much as 6,000 years old. It seems to have been made mostly in the period 2,000-700 years ago, based on the age of associated artifacts at places where the style is found. This corresponds to a regional trend of the evolution of complex anthropomorphs in the eastern Great Basin and the Southwest accompanying the adoption of horticulture and permanent villages.

Pahrnagat Valley bordered these cultural developments and traded with their Fremont and Ancestral Puebloan neighbors to the east and the south. Pahrnagat Style anthropomorphs possibly reflect differing social statuses or new cultural roles that may have emerged through this trade and exchange. Or, they could represent a localized version of the cultural practices and beliefs represented by Fremont and Ancestral Puebloan anthropomorph styles. §





Crystal Wash I

Crystal Wash I comprises 70 rock art panels and the remains of a winter campsite. The site is thought to have been used by the Pahrnagat Paiute people, a regional group of the Southern Paiute. During the spring and summer, the Pahrnagat



Paiute people lived in small camps of 2-3 family households, moving across their lands to gather seeds, fruits, berries, nuts, and roots. They also hunted large and small game, as well as fished.

In the winter, several family households congregated in large campsites or villages, living on stored foodstuffs (particularly piñon nuts). Winter villages provided opportunities to socialize and conduct important cultural activities. This way of life was probably also practiced by prehistoric hunter-gatherers living in the area.

At Crystal Wash I, projectile points, small chert chips, pottery sherds, hearths, and grinding tools may be encountered. These artifacts indicate that plant processing, cooking, tool making, and tool maintenance all took place here. This range of activities is indicative of a large campsite or village where family groupings overwintered. The routines of daily life were accompanied by important cultural activities, evidenced by rock art.



Crystal Wash I

At the eastern edge of the site is a small work area and rock art (Marker 1). The grinding slicks here were used to process hard seeds, nuts, and other plants by grinding or pounding, before being taken to the heart of the campsite a third of a mile to the



west. Other plant processing stations at the main campsite can be identified by grinding slicks, slab millings, and mortars (particularly Markers 2, 3, 6, and 10).

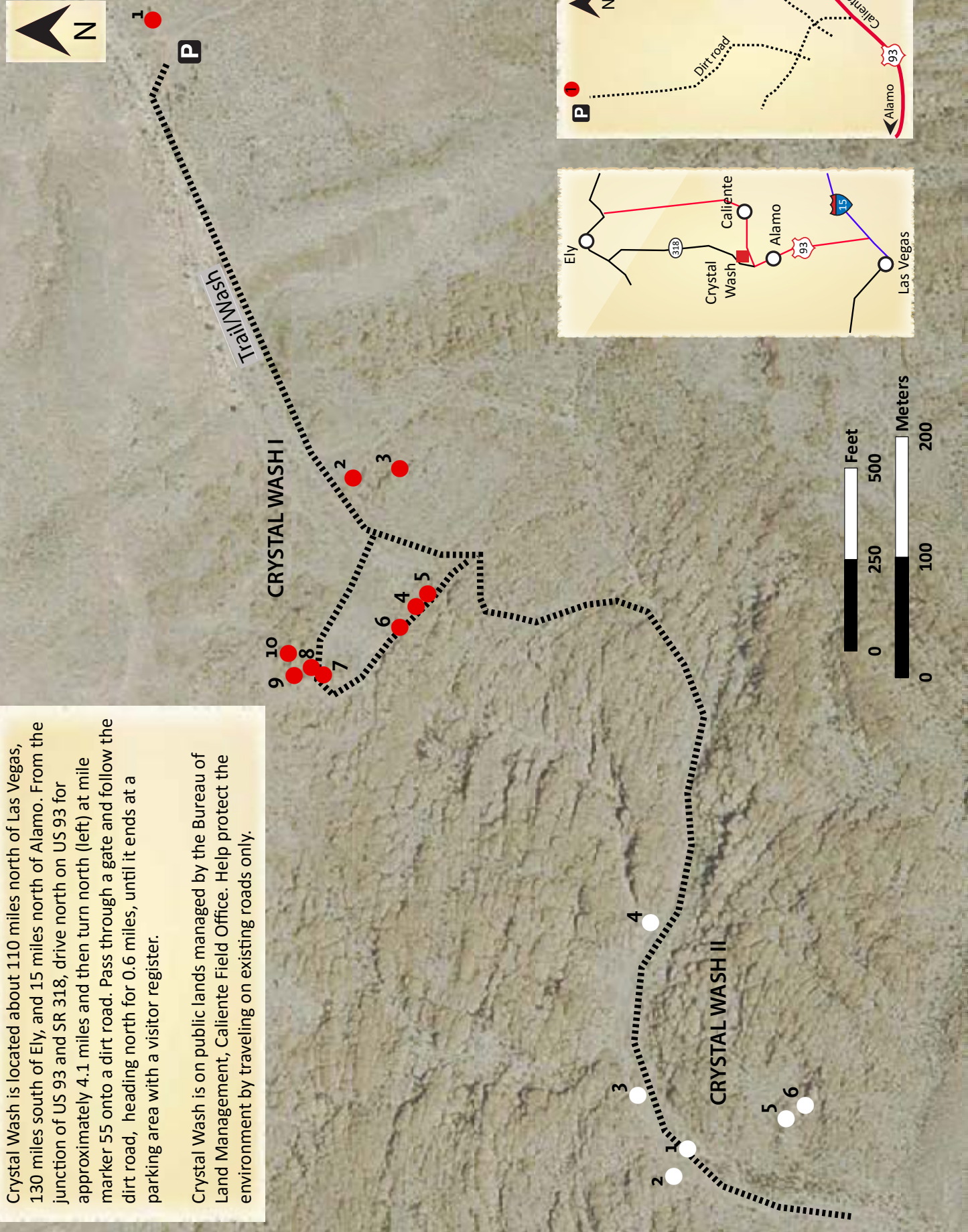
Work stations at Markers 6, 9 and 10 provided sheltered spots where family households gathered, worked, and socialized. Remains of hearths (surviving as dark stains on the ground) and occasional potsherds show that fires were made for cooking. Small chipped stone flakes, the byproduct of tool use and maintenance, indicate that a wide range of domestic activities took place at Crystal Wash I.

The most likely places where traditional dwellings or wickiups were erected can be found by Markers 6 and 7. Wickiups are conical, brush-covered shelters that typically had a central smoke hole. Fires were made inside the wickiup for warmth and outside it for cooking. Rock art runs the width of the rockshelter by Marker 7, showing that domestic routines took place against a backdrop of symbolic culture.



Crystal Wash is located about 110 miles north of Las Vegas, 130 miles south of Ely, and 15 miles north of Alamo. From the junction of US 93 and SR 318, drive north on US 93 for approximately 4.1 miles and then turn north (left) at mile marker 55 onto a dirt road. Pass through a gate and follow the dirt road, heading north for 0.6 miles, until it ends at a parking area with a visitor register.

Crystal Wash is on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management, Caliente Field Office. Help protect the environment by traveling on existing roads only.





Crystal Wash I

Rock art at Crystal Wash I comprises a wide range of images that are typical of Basin and Range tradition. Dots, circles, meanders, spirals, grids, stick-figure anthropomorphs, and bighorn sheep figures are prominent.



The site also contains a small number of Pahrnagat Style anthropomorphs. Two PBAs can be found by two large, complex abstract panels (Marker 4). One is small and faint, making it difficult to see, but the other can easily be made out. Examples of the solid-body type can be seen in a long row of anthropomorphs by Marker 8.

The site's rock art does not seem to depict everyday life as there are no scenes of plant harvesting or hunting and important economic resources, such as plants and small mammals, are not portrayed. This suggests that the rock art here was probably a form of symbolism that communicated important cultural knowledge.

Unlike writing, rock art imagery expressed cultural ideas and beliefs that people interpreted according to their age, social position, and gender. An individual's understanding of the same image likely changed as he or she progressed through life. This inherent ambiguity contributes to rock art's enduring appeal. §



Crystal Wash II



Crystal Wash II is smaller in scale than neighboring Crystal Wash I to the northeast. It comprises 30 rock art panels and a small number of grinding slicks. Basin and Range tradition designs predominate, with one or two Pahrnagat Style PBAs.



Curvilinear design types are most common, with circles, wavy lines, and complex and unique meanders abounding on the tuff rocks. Simple lines are also common, including some that wrap around the faces of large boulders. Portrayals of animals are limited to two bighorn sheep figures and a single coyote (Marker 6).

Stick-figure anthropomorphs are distinguished by a number that have unusually elongated torsos (Marker 6). Instead of being spread throughout the site, stick-figure anthropomorphs are found at the northern and southern ends of the site (near Markers 4 and 6). The best example of a Pahrnagat Style PBA at the site can be found by Marker 4.

The clustering of rock art at Crystal Wash II illustrates that specific places were selected for bearing rock art imagery. Most of the site's stick-figure anthropomorphs and bighorn sheep are found together (Marker 6), showing that images were made at carefully selected places in the landscape. §





Culture and Place

Crystal Wash I and II illustrate that where rock art was made was culturally meaningful. Only certain areas of this expansive tuff landscape were selected for embellishment by symbolic images. The importance of specific places is highlighted



by younger designs that were made directly over (superimposed) older ones. Why ancient artists chose to mark over existing images is unclear. This may have been a way of refreshing the cultural significance of older rock art, by making new designs on and around it.

People returned to specific locations at Crystal Wash over millennia to create rock art imagery. This is shown by differences in the hue of designs, which reflect their relative age. Images that appear darker in hue are older than lighter ones. By returning to make rock art imagery here, people continued a tradition of making images that may have been as important to them as the symbolism of the art they created.

Distinctive landforms attracted cultural interest. At Crystal Wash II, a large boulder hollowed out by wind has red pigment covering its ceiling (Marker 5). Here, the red pigment forms no discernible design, suggesting that aesthetic considerations were not always primary when making rock art.



Culture and Place



At Crystal Wash I, a boulder that forms a natural chair (Marker 2) is covered with petroglyphs, including worn ones on the 'seat' and a lattice-like design that wraps around three faces of the boulder.



Like other hunter-gatherer cultures, the Native American peoples that visited Crystal Wash viewed certain places in the landscape as especially significant. The cultural resonance of specific places may have been derived from their association with myths, historic events, or cosmological beliefs. This meant that the cultural practices and beliefs of the prehistoric artists identified certain boulders and locations as more appropriate for rock art imagery than others.

Prehistoric rock art is an enduring landmark of the complex cultural lives led by the region's ancient hunter-gatherer peoples. Despite living in a challenging environment, they also devoted time and labor to making and visiting these enigmatic monuments. Crystal Wash illustrates the importance of symbolism (the use of imagery to convey ideas and beliefs) in the cultural lives of its Native American artists. §





Preserving the Past

Crystal Wash is on public lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, Caliente Field Office. The Caliente Field Office's mission is, in partnership with the public, to provide stewardship of the lands and resources entrusted to it for present and future generations.



Despite its antiquity, Crystal Wash is a fragile part of Nevada's cultural heritage. Natural erosional processes, such as weathering from rain and wind, are slowly wearing away these ancient markings. Other threats include intentional defacement, like graffiti or other vandalism, that cannot be removed or even camouflaged easily and are expensive to treat.

Federal and state laws protect archaeological sites from vandalism and theft, and many sites are monitored by concerned local citizens volunteering in the State of Nevada's site stewardship program. Because the past deserves a future, visitors at archaeological sites can help by following a few simple guidelines.

- Take only pictures, leave only footprints
- Be a steward—volunteer to monitor the condition of archaeological sites

For more information on how you can help preserve Nevada's past, visit these websites

www.blm.gov/nv
www.shpo.nv.gov/stewards
www.nvrockart.org



LINCOLN COUNTY ARCHAEOLOGICAL INITIATIVE PROJECT

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