New Interpretations of Rock Art from the Nordstrom-Bowen Site (24YL419), Yellowstone County, Montana

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ABSTRACT

The Nordstrom-Bowen site represents a pictorial record of prehistoric and protohistoric life on the Northwestern Plains. The site contains numerous examples of ceremonial and biographical style rock art including zoomorphs, v-necked and shield bearing anthropomorphs, as well as abstract and geometric images. This study focuses on certain triangular and trapezoidal images commonly interpreted as tipis, structures or bundles. Comparison of these images with similar depictions found at other locations throughout the Plains suggests that they may actually represent early depictions of armored horses. If so, these images hold the potential to increase our understanding about a dynamic and temporally sensitive period of cultural change.

The Nordstrom-Bowen site is located in the Bull Mountains approximately 40 miles north of Billings, Montana. The site was initially documented by Harold Hagan (1963), who published a brief description of his findings in the Trowel and Screen, the publication of the Billings Archaeological Society. Numerous figures were documented, including zoomorphs, v-necked and shield bearing anthropomorphs and abstract and geometric designs. Figures from the site were also recorded by Thomas Lewis and reported in the *Wyoming Archaeologist* (1986) and in his book *Forgotten Battles along the Yellowstone* (1985). The site is well known among rock art researchers for its depiction of bears, of which at least three have been documented. The site is also well known for its depiction of biographical style battle and hunting scenes. Comparison of

certain figures from these scenes with others from throughout western North America suggest that they may actually represent armored horses.

The depiction of armored horses in rock art was first publicized by James Keyser at Writing-on-Stone Provincial Park along the Milk River in Southern Alberta. Two armored horses were identified (Figure 1). These figures consist of a "shell" or tent-like structure containing diagonal lines and cross-hatching from which the feet, head and rider are exposed. These figures represent some of the most well known examples of biographical style rock art from the Northwestern Plains.

Two additional examples of horse armor were later identified by Keyser from the North Cave Hills in western South Dakota (Figure 2). These figures appear very similar to those from Writing-on-Stone, with a central "shell" or tent-like structure covering all but the feet and head. A high degree of detail is present around the neck or collar of these figures, potentially providing useful information about the techniques associated with its construction.

Thomas Lewis (1983) reported an additional example of horse armor from the Goffena Rock Shelter located along the Musselshell River in Yellowstone County, Montana (Figure 3). The figure depicted at this site possesses highly defined armor, with long, vertical lines composing the body of the armor. This figure represents the only reported pictograph representing an armored horse, the remainder being composed of incised petroglyphs. This site also has the only depiction of which I am aware of a pedestrian anthromorph wearing leather armor.

One figure from the Nordstrom-Bowen Site shares many attributes with some of the established examples of horse armor discussed above (Figure 4 A). The strong

diagonal lines are reminiscent of those found at Writing–on-Stone, while the jagged skirt along the bottom of the figure is suggestive of the example from Goeffena Rockshelter. This figure is described by Lewis as a tipi. A sun appears directly overhead the tipi, from which emanates a spear or other object. While it is possible that this figures does in fact represent a tipi or lodge, it seems unlikely for several reasons. Figures of tipis occasionally depict smoke flaps extending from near the top of the structure. While this may be the case with this example, the extreme length and angle of the flap extension is not consistent with established portrayals of tipis or conical lodges (Figures 4 B and C).

The main battle panel from Nordstrom-Bowen also contains figures that I suspect may represent armored horses (Figure 5). These figures appear as crude rectangular and trapezoidal shapes with spears or lances and have traditionally been interpreted by both Hagan and Lewis as tipis, lodges or other structures or possibly as bundles. However, the large battle scene from Nordstrom-Bowen site already contains a figure that looks in my opinion more like a tipi (Figure 5, upper right corner). If this is the case, it would seem logical to me that if the artist wished to portray tipis that they need only replicate the example shown here.

It is also interesting to note that this panel doesn't display clear evidence of historic period indicators such as horses or guns. While the absence of horses or guns does not necessarily infer that the panels are early, it does further support the inference that this panel is from a period when they were not heavily in use. Further, Keyser (1987) has detailed the evolution of the depiction of the horse from early boat shaped horses to later, more realistic depictions. The abstract nature of these figures may be representative

of an early period when horses were not commonly depicted. Deterioration due to time and weathering may also have helped to further obscure these images.

There are two other rock art panels from the Western United States that I suspect may also represent horse armor. One potential candidate is located at Island Park in Dinosaur National Monument, near the northern border of Utah and Colorado (Figure 6). This figure, reported by Castleton (1984), may also represent an armored horse. If so, it represents a strong departure from some of the conventions used in Northern Plains rock art. In this example, vertical and horizontal cross-hatching is located within the central outline of the horse. While this example may represent a horse blanket, the fact that the hatching covers the entire horse with the exception of the head and neck suggests that this may represent a form of horse armor.

Another potential example of horse armor comes from the Rio Grande Region of Northern New Mexico (Figure 7). This figure, reported by Schaafsma (1992), displays a series of thin parallel lines extending across the length of the figure. It is interesting to note that this rider is holding a bow, a sign that this figure may predate the widespread use of the gun on the Southern Plains. This figure shares much in common with the figure from Utah, with lines and hatching used within the interior of the horse outline. These two figures stand in marked contrast with the "shell" technique found in Alberta and the North Cave Hills.

Native use of specially processed hides as a protective covering for horses is well documented throughout the Plains, originating in the south with the Spanish introduction of the horse. The earliest written account of horse armor comes from the 1691 diary of Father Massanet regarding its use among the Southern Apache. Secoy (1953) details the

role of the Apache as carriers of what he called the "Post-Horse Pre-Gun Complex", which included the use of horse armor modeled largely after Spanish colonial armor. The latest recorded use of horse armor comes from the journals of Lewis and Clark, who noted its use on the Northern Plains as late as 1805. Native use of horse armor ended with the widespread occurrence of the gun, which rendered both horse and personal body armor ineffective.

In the summary of his monograph *Riding Gear of the North American Indians* (1915), Clark Wissler makes the following statements regarding native incorporation of horse related material culture: " The Indian has shown no originality. He devised no important appliances for using horses. He manufactured his own saddles, bridles, etc., but followed precisely a few definite patterns." Wissler goes on to state that " In general, the complete data will show that the greater part of the horse complex of the North American Indian was borrowed first by the tribes in contact with the Spanish settlements and the diffused as far as the Plains of Canada without loss or essential modification of detail." (Wissler 1915:37-38). However, I believe it is more likely that the use of horse armor among native populations represents a merger of the preexisting native armor tradition described by Hough and Secoy and the newly introduced Spanish armor tradition. Ethnohistoric evidence from throughout North America suggests that native use of personal body armor made from specially prepared animal skins was widespread prior to the arrival of Europeans. Spanish use of protective horse armor was copied soon after horses were acquired by native groups. While the shape and design of the armor itself was strongly influenced by Spanish examples, native construction techniques were incorporated in its manufacture (Secoy 1953:17). Conversely, the native technology

affected the Spanish armored tradition, with a gradual shift from full metal armor to leather jackets.

The use of native horse armor has been attributed to several tribal and cultural groups. There are numerous historic references to the use of horse armor among the Southern and Western Apache and Comanche (Secoy 1953:13-18; Hough 1896:646). Other groups on the Southern Plains known to have used horse armor include the Caddo, Pawnee, Wichita, Tewans and Tanos (Secoy 1953:13, 19). The only ethnohistoric account of horse armor on the Northern Plains comes from the Journal of Lewis and Clark, who in 1805 encountered a group of Lemhi Shoshone who "have a kind of armor like a coat of mail, which is formed of a great many folds of dressed antelope skins, united by means of a mixture of glue and sand. With this they cover their own bodies and those of their horses, and find it impervious to arrows." (Cous 1987, Vol. 2:561). While the only ethnohistoric account of horse armor from the Northern Plains refers to the Northern Shoshone, it is equally plausible that any number of groups could be responsible for its introduction and use on the Northern Plains.

Oral tradition and ethnohistoric accounts document numerous construction techniques, ranging from simple coverings to ornate and complicated configurations. The use of glue and rawhide strips is well documented on both the Northern and Southern Plains, as is the use of sand as a protective outer covering. One of the most elaborate descriptions of horse armor comes from a Ponca tradition, which states that the Comanche wore horse armor "of thick rawhide cut in round pieces and made to overlap like the scales of a fish. Over the surface was sand held on by glue. This covering made the Ponca arrows glance off and do no damage." (Fletcher and La Flesche 1970:79). It is

unclear whether horse armor was occasionally painted, although a further account states that among the Apache "horses were usually protected from the arrows of the enemy by buffalo skins, and the Apache themselves used skin armor, painted variously blue, red, green or white" (Secoy 1953:13). Upon examination of the evidence, it appears that the construction and maintenance of horse armor likely represented a major investment of time, energy and resources.

The use of horse armor changed the Plains Indian war complex and contributed to the development of a fully nomadic Plains Indian culture. One of the most intriguing ethnohistoric passages about the use of horse armor comes from the 1691 Diary of Father Massanet, who made the following statement regarding the Southern Apache: "In the end they conquer all the tribes. Yet it is said they are not brave because they fight with armored horses." (Secoy 1953:13). In my opinion, the use of horse armor represents less of a measure of bravery and more of an issue of status and economic security. Secoy notes that during the early contact period, when horses were particularly scarce on the Northern Plains, Shoshone raiders would often dismount to engage in combat lest their horses be injured or killed in battle (Secoy 1953:35-36). The use of protective equipment provided a relatively higher degree of both personal safety and economic security during a period when well-trained horses were difficult to replace. This higher mobility and increased security helped to perpetuate raiding as an economically viable activity, which in turn placed less reliance on sedentism and ultimately contributed the development of a fully nomadic Plains Indian lifestyle.

Analysis of armored horse depictions at rock art sites can make an important contribution to our understanding of some of the changes that took place during this

period of rapid culture change. Only a small number of examples of pedestrian body armor exist in museums around the country, and no examples of native horse armor remain. Ethnohistoric evidence for the use of horse armor is limited to a scant dozen references, with each usually consisting of a brief passage that merely confirms that it was used at a specific time and place, or that provide vague details about its construction. These rock art panels are one of the only bodies of information concerning the initial arrival of the horse on the Plains, and may eventually help in addressing not only issues in the dating of biographical style rock art, but in increasing our understanding of Plains social dynamics.

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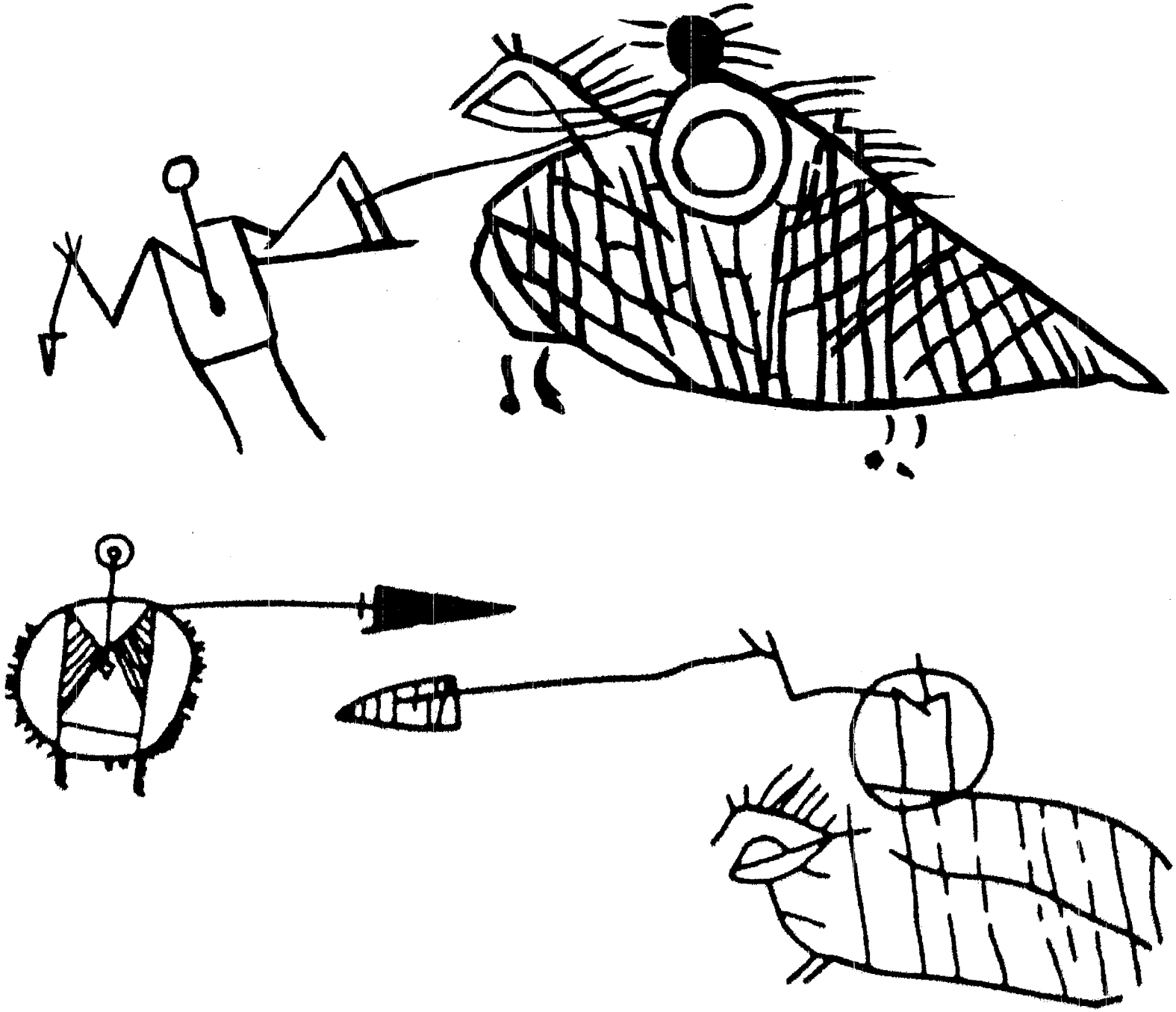

Figure 1.
Armored Horses from Writing on Stone Provincial Park, Southern Alberta. After Keyser (1979).

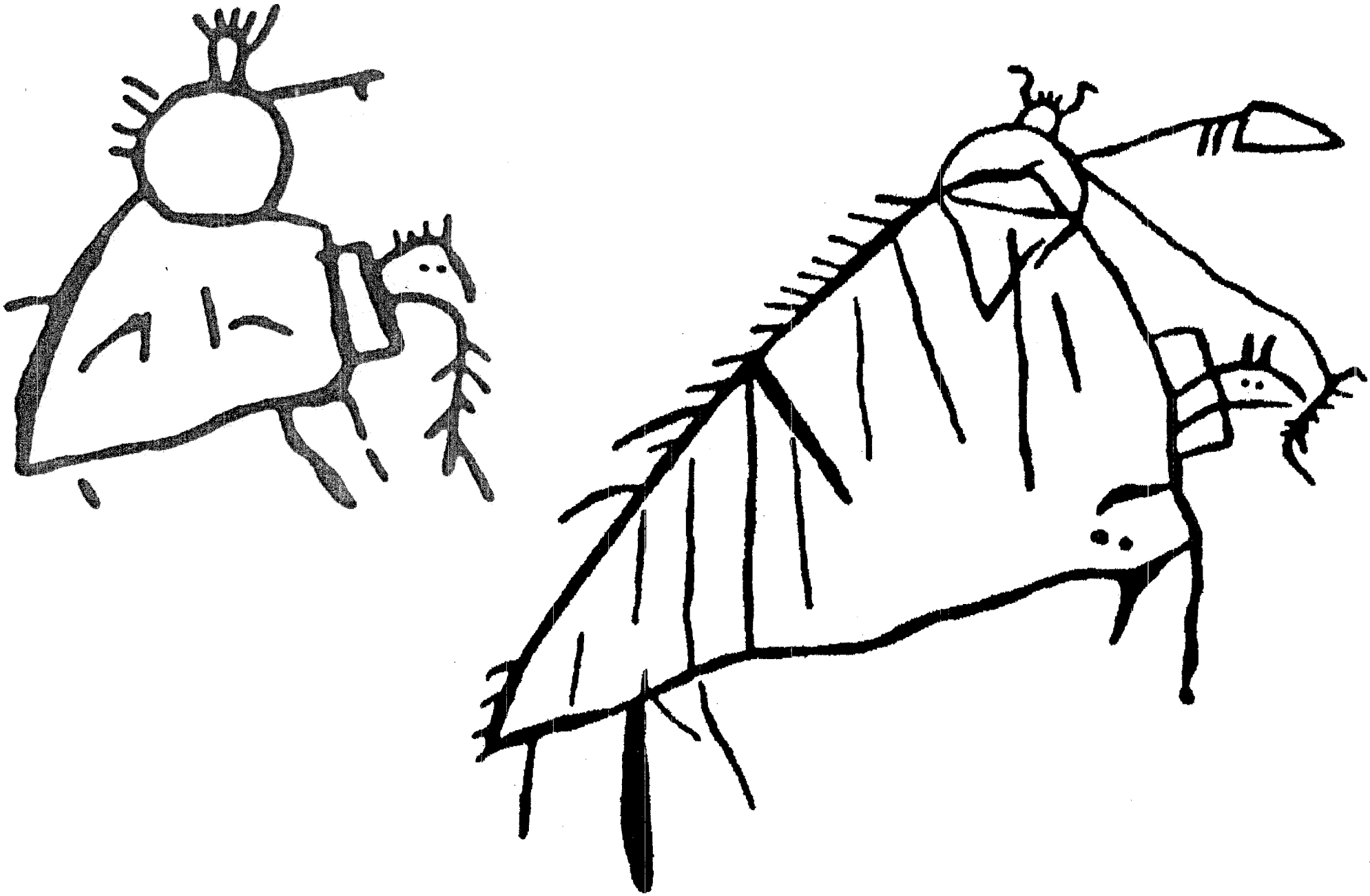

Figure 2.
Armored horses from the North Cave Hills, Western South Dakota. After Keyser (1984).

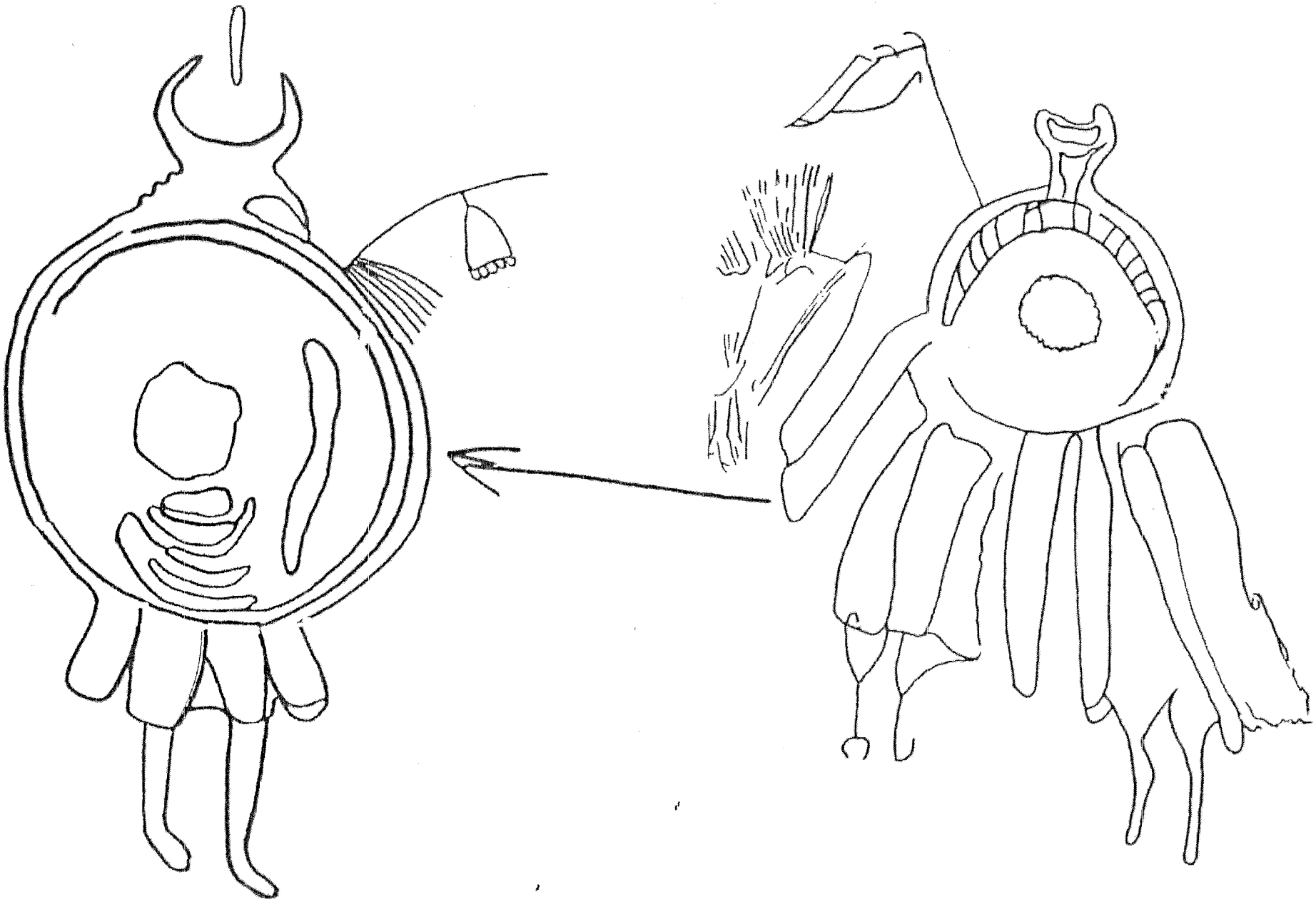

Figure 3.
Armored horse and pedestrian figure from Goeffena Rockshelter, Musselshell Valley, Montana.
After Lewis (1983).

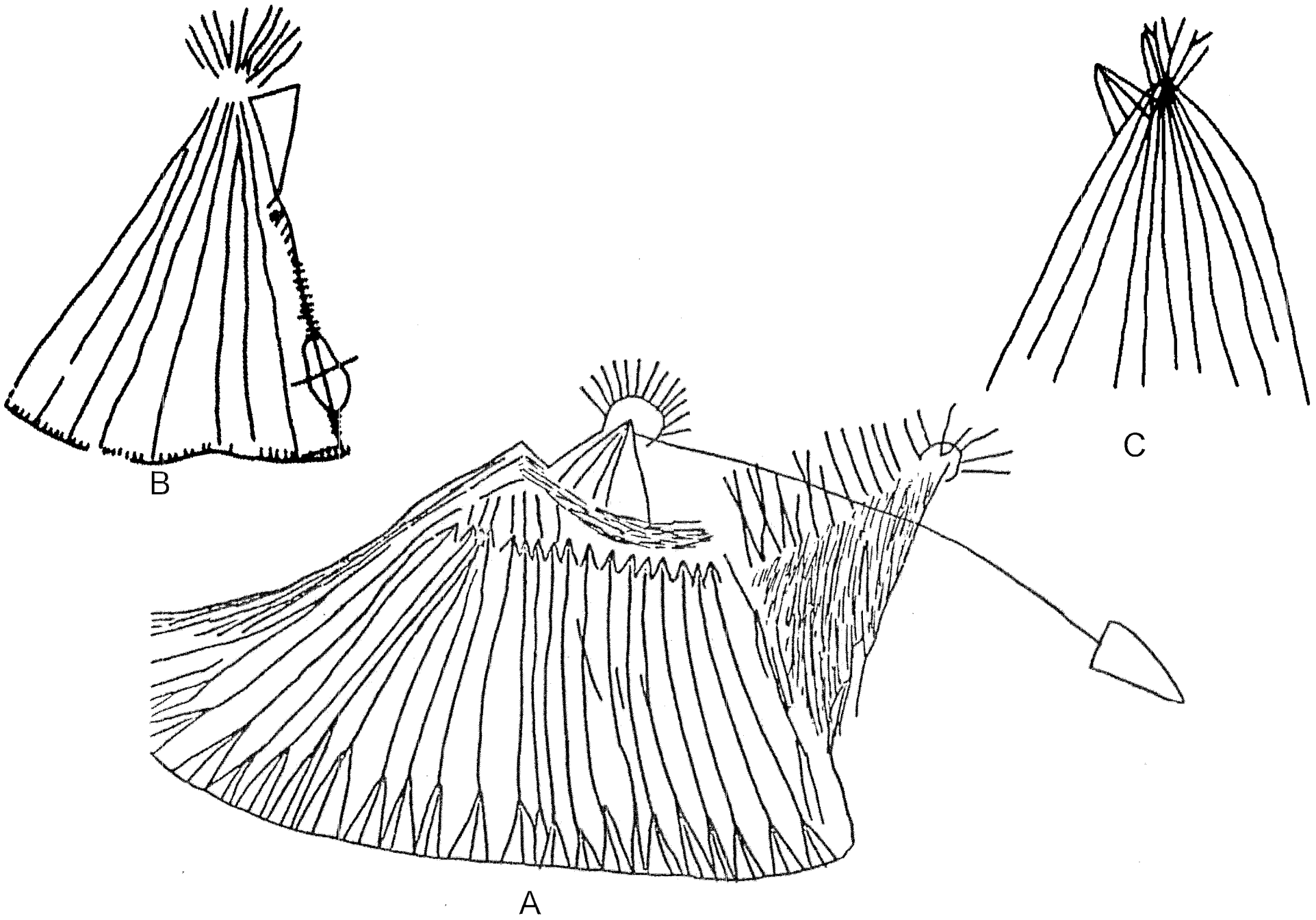

Figure 4.
Comparison of figure from Nordrstrom Bowen site with tipis from other Northern Plains rock art sites. Figure A is a possible armored horse from the Nordstrom Bowen Site. After Lewis (1986). Figure B is a tipi from Castle Butte. After Conner and Conner (1971). Figure C is a tipi from Writing on Stone. After Keyser (1987).

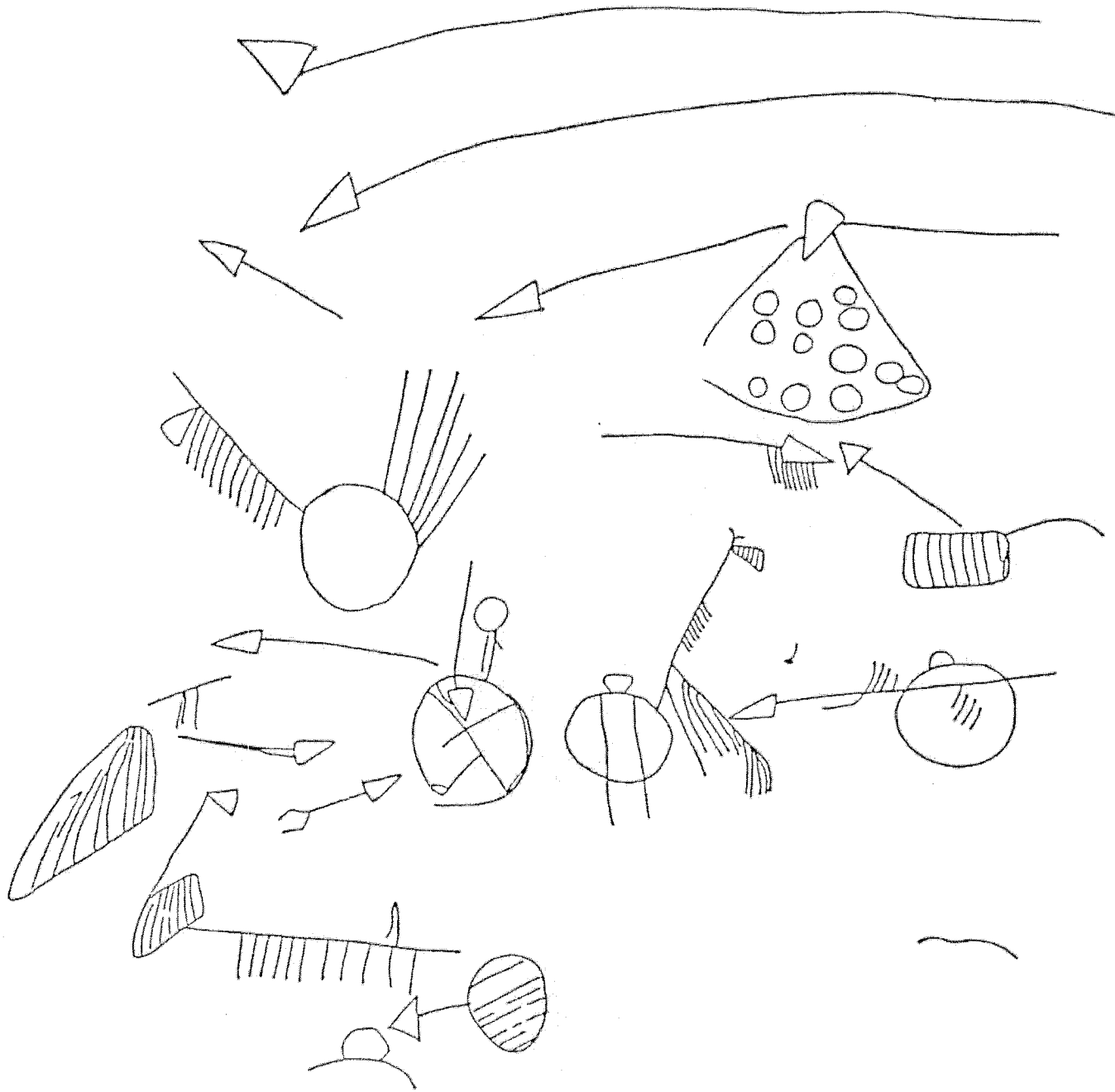

Figure 5.
Main battle panel from the Nordstrom-Bowen Site. After Lewis (1985; 1986).

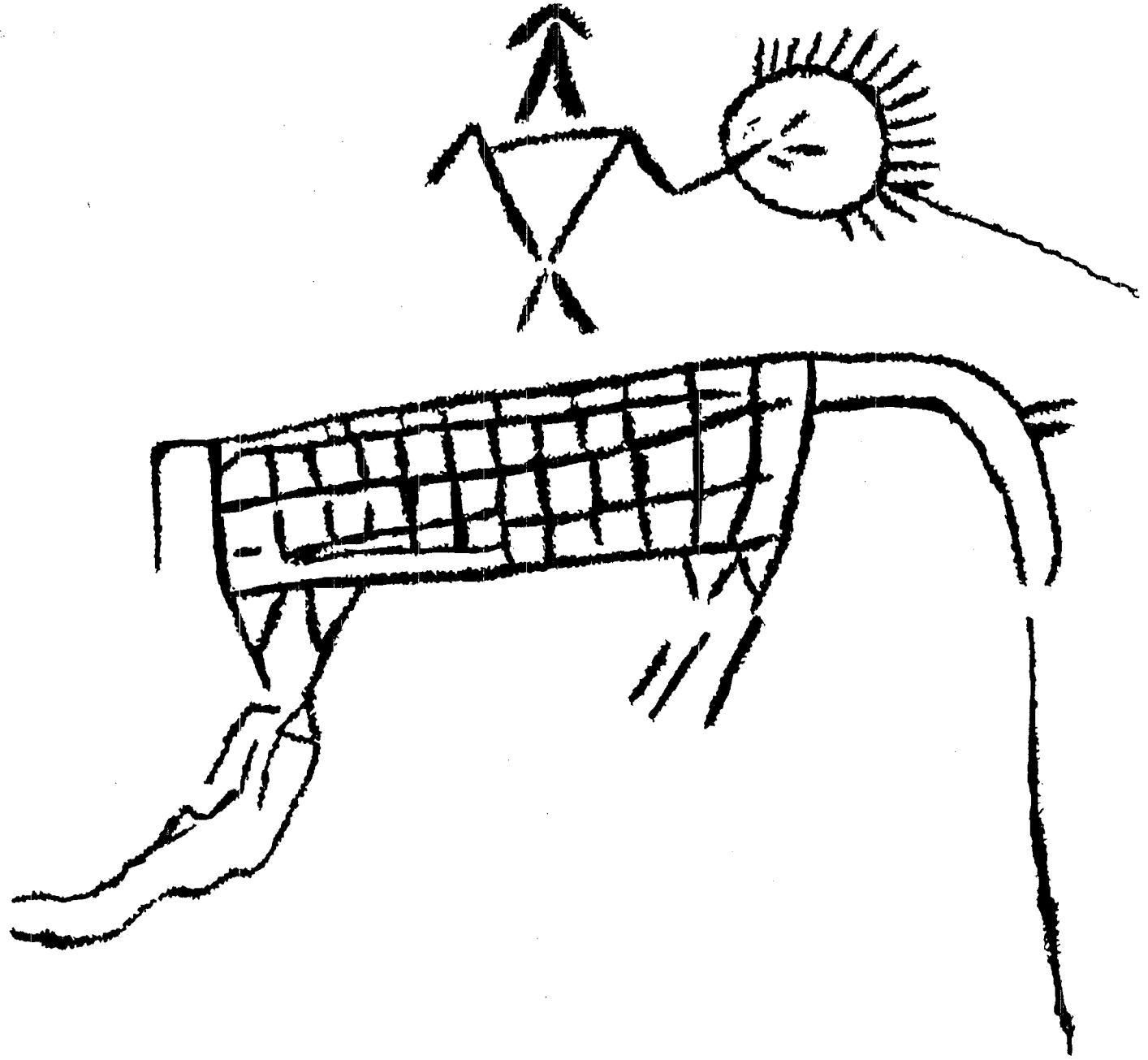

Figure 6.
Possible armored horse from Island Park, Dinosaur National Monument, Utah.
After Castleton (1984).

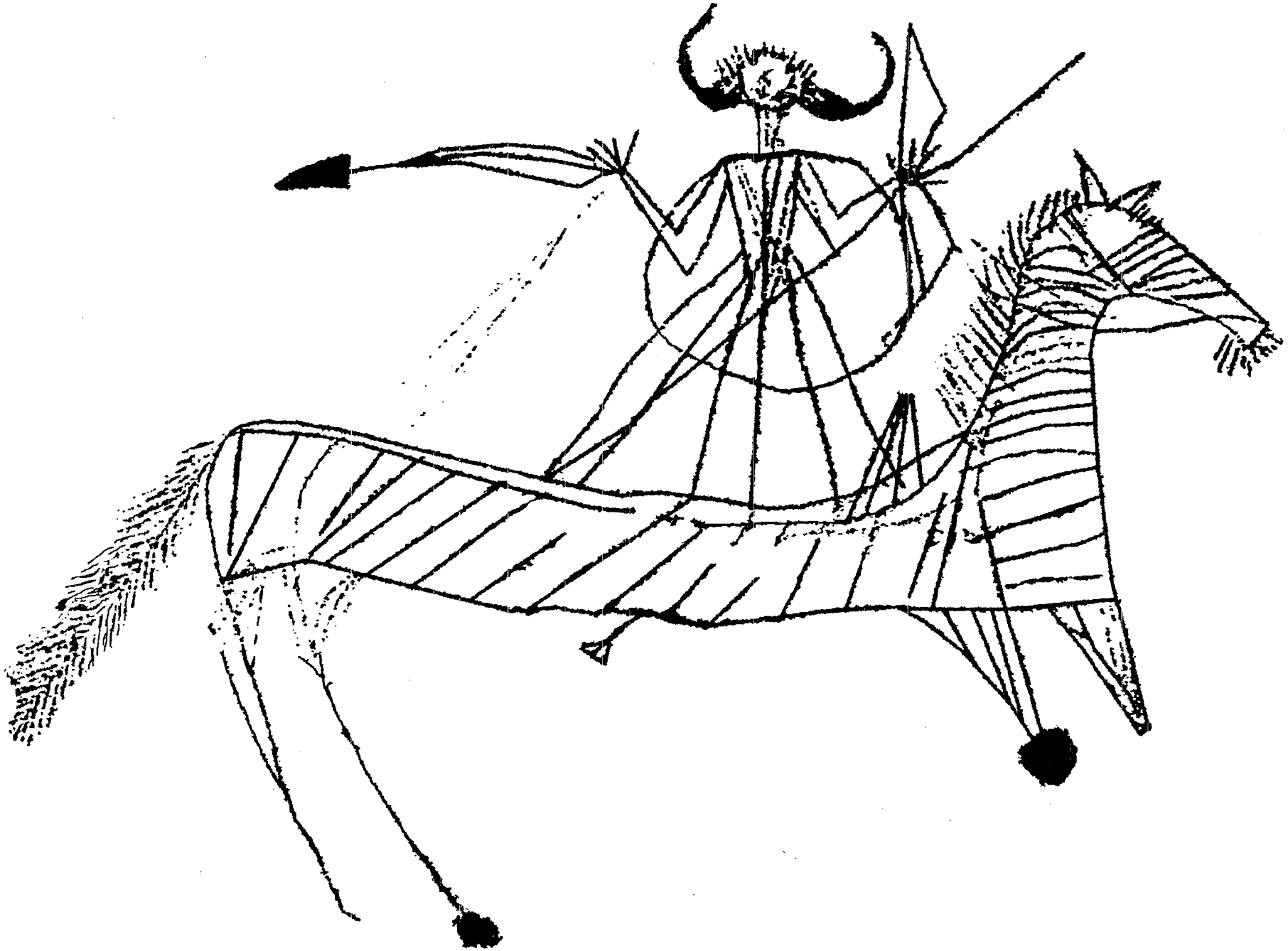

Figure 7.
Possible armored horse from the Rio Grande region of northern New Mexico.
After Schaafsma (1992).