

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Traces of Fremont: Society and Rock Art in Ancient Utah. By Steven R. Simms.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6fh4p9g6>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 36(1)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Minor, Rick

**Publication Date**

2012

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

with the acquisition of the right man, they believe that they can “become rich and full” (172, 183). The Indians? The Indians are dead. At one point, when Steve is drunk and vomiting, in perhaps another instance of garnering sympathy for this character, O’Brien describes the pain he feels at the loss of his dad’s ranch: “It was the feeling the Lakota must have had as they felt the burn of the bullets in their flesh and slipped from their horses” (101). Walking with blank faces or slipping from those horses in the distant past, they are dead but, at least in Steve’s visions, not forgotten.

*Lee Schweninger*

University of North Carolina–Wilmington

**Traces of Fremont: Society and Rock Art in Ancient Utah.** By Steven R. Simms. Photographs by François Gohier. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, and Price: College of Eastern Utah Prehistoric Museum. 144 pages. \$24.95 paper.

*Traces of Fremont*, collaboration between a professional photographer and a leading archaeologist, is a significant contribution to the study of the prehistoric Fremont culture that was centered in the state of Utah. Archaeologists often neglect the aesthetic aspects of prehistoric cultures, because we are most often focused on the scientific recovery of cultural information. The outstanding photographs of professional photographer François Gohier presented in this volume remind us of what is missed when accounts of prehistoric peoples are limited to words, line drawings, and black-and-white snapshots. A world of difference exists between the simple recording or documentation of prehistoric cultures undertaken by archaeologists and the work of a professional photographer like Gohier whose photographs of landscapes, artifacts, and rock art convey a sense of place and time that brings the reader immeasurably closer to the essence of Fremont culture.

The book’s preface notes that Gohier came to Utah in 1991 to photograph dinosaur bones but, inspired by Fremont figurines at the Prehistoric Museum in Price, switched subjects to focus on the everyday material culture that represents “traces” of the prehistoric Fremont. This book thus originated with Gohier’s photographs, and it is the photographs, especially those of Fremont rock art, that form the centerpiece of the volume. Gohier’s photography is of the highest caliber, and his images have great clarity, conveying texture and color in impressive detail. Although Gohier’s photographs are two dimensional, viewing rock art approaches being a tactile experience, with the viewer almost feeling the grit of the sandstone rock face and the depth and smoothness of

the grooves in the petroglyphs. The photographer clearly has worked hard in balancing light, shadow, color, and composition in an effort to ensure that each photograph conveys a story.

Accompanying Gohier's photographs is an essay by archaeologist Steven R. Simms that grounds the photographs in the archaeological interpretation of Fremont culture. Essayists are usually given latitude in how they address their subject, and Simms takes this opportunity to range widely, including brief discussions on various topics in twenty-one separate chapters, the first sixteen of which address the cultural context of Fremont rock art. Simms begins by writing about his personal experience in excavating a Fremont granary as a young archaeologist and then transitions to a review of what has been learned about the Fremont culture from archaeological investigations.

In 1931, Noel Morss named the Fremont culture for archaeological remains found along the Fremont River in central Utah. Initially thought of as a peripheral northern extension of the Anasazi of the Southwest, Fremont culture is now understood to encompass groups of highly adaptable peoples spread across the western Colorado Plateau and eastern Great Basin. The relative importance of foraging versus farming among these peoples varied from place to place and over time. According to Simms, the transformation of Archaic foragers into farmers of maize, beans, and squash took place in a number of farming outposts inhabited by a combination of indigenous peoples and immigrants in the early centuries AD.

Fremont material culture reflects continuities from indigenous Archaic foragers, most notably in basketry and rock art, while immigrants, most likely individuals and small bands of basket-maker peoples from south of the Colorado River, introduced farming. From this combination of indigenous and immigrant elements, Fremont emerged as a "novel culture" that became recognizable after AD 500, and reached its height in the AD 1000s, before disappearing after AD 1300.

*Traces of Fremont* builds on earlier studies of Utah rock art, particularly P. Schaafsma's *The Rock Art of Utah* (1971) and K. B. Castleton's two-volume *Petroglyphs and Pictographs of Utah* (1978–79), which named and defined the geographic extent of most of the major rock art styles. *Traces of Fremont* differs from earlier studies in its more specific focus on Fremont rock art and in an emphasis on examining rock art within its cultural context. These earlier rock art studies relied on black-and-white line drawings of rock art elements, and these drawings were sufficient for their descriptive purpose. The difference between this earlier mode of presentation and Gohier's photographs is akin to the contrast between a 1950s black-and-white television set and today's high-definition television.

Fremont rock art is characterized by a distinctive anthropomorphic figure with a large head and a broad-shouldered, trapezoidal torso. Other prominent elements are circular designs usually described as shields, concentric circles and spirals, and a variety of other abstract elements. Mountain sheep are the most commonly depicted animals, with bison and deer represented at many sites (*The Rock Art of Utah*, 6). Fremont rock art is perhaps represented in its purest form in the Classic Vernal style concentrated in the Uinta Basin in northeastern Utah. In the most famous examples, anthropomorphs are portrayed in themes of conflict and bloodshed, including the taking of trophy heads and scalps.

A close tie can be seen between rock art and Fremont figurines. Unbaked clay figurines in the Pilling collection were painted in red, buff, blue, and black paint; were detailed with appliqué; and were pendant necklaces of teardrop-shaped stones. Similar decorations are apparent in petroglyphs of Fremont anthropomorphs in the Southern San Rafael style in central and eastern Utah. Another connection between Fremont rock art and material culture can be seen in a petroglyph panel at Nine Mile Canyon depicting a hunting scene in which the dominant figure appears to wear a mask reminiscent of a deer-scalp headdress like one found in a nearby Fremont archaeological site. The Sevier style in western Utah contrasts markedly with Fremont rock art elsewhere. Trapezoidal anthropomorphs are less frequent, but the continued occurrence of horns, helmets, ear bobs, and other ornaments show linkages with the way humans typically are represented in Fremont rock art.

Simms concludes that Fremont rock art reflects two important aspects of Fremont society. On the one hand, Fremont society was small in scale in that it involved dispersed communities in which the practice of rituals and expressions of religion would have included individuals, local groups, and local places. On the other hand, although religious specialists or shamans probably produced some Fremont rock art, ritual and religion superseded individuals and local groups and were expressed in rock art across widely dispersed communities and regions. Simms points to the depictions in the Classic Vernal style of heroic individuals, sometimes with symbols of violence, interpreted as attempts to link ancestors with people of the present, as examples of Fremont rock art operating at a higher level than that of individual shamans.

*Traces of Fremont* contains the single best collection of images of Fremont rock art available. By its nature, this is not a tightly focused volume. Gohier's photographs and Simms's essay do not always fit neatly together, but they do complement one another. Their joint presentation succeeds in enhancing the photographs and the essay. With the basic work of description and mapping of rock art styles largely completed in earlier studies, Simms poses larger