

'Intaglios' represent rare form of ancient rock art

By Margo Bartlett Pesek

Mute evidence that we are not the first to people this land, the enigmatic designs left upon the desert's surface by ancient men remain unsolved mysteries. Two of these rare sites are located within view of the Colorado River near the towns of Blythe and Needles in Southern California.

The mysterious giant figures of the Blythe Intaglios and the mystic parallel furrows of the Topock Maze near Needles are among the rarest art forms in the world. They exist in the New World only in Peru's Nazca Desert and in the Mojave Desert at several sites in Arizona and California not far from the Colorado.

Since they were created by ancient Indians scraping away the desert's surface to expose the lighter colored earth below, archaeologists term them "intaglios," originally an Italian form of engraving with a sunken design. They represent the rarest form of rock art left us by cultures long vanished. Ancient Indians also left behind petroglyphs, symbols scratched into flat stone surfaces, and pictographs, symbols painted on stone.

To reach the Topock Maze, drive south from Las Vegas on U.S. 95 toward Needles. Take Interstate 40 through Needles toward Topock. Turn off on the Park Moabi exit. Turn right on a gravel road when you leave the freeway. Follow this road for half a mile to another road where you turn left. Keep bearing left, following a large gas pipeline. There is a small parking area and a sign designating the spot as an archaeological site.

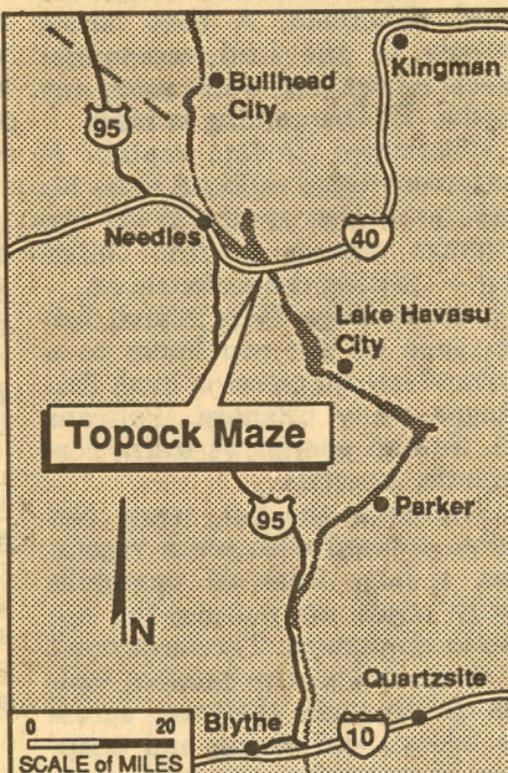
The "maze" is several acres of barren plateau scarred with parallel furrows, so precisely placed that a modern farm harrow or plow could hardly do a better job. The furrows of the Topock Maze, however, were created centuries before the first plow cut into the sod of this continent.

The result looks like modern contour plowing, though no farmer in his right mind would ever have tried to farm there. Indian farmers worked little irrigated patches close to the river in the valley below the maze. It is more likely that the windrows were part of some religious rite, but the best of the theories put forward by experts are only guesswork. The intaglios were already ancient when early explorers and settlers first saw them. Area Indians then denied knowledge of their significance, some saying they were made by people long before the time of their own ancestors.

To reach the intaglios near Blythe, return to U.S. 95. Follow it past the Needles airport toward Blythe. About 80 miles south of Needles, watch for a sign indicating the giant desert figures. Turn right, following a dirt road about half a mile to the fenced sites — two north of the road and one south of it.

The Blythe Intaglios were discovered in 1931 by a pilot crossing above the area. Aerial

Trip of the week



viewing is the best way to see and photograph them. They can be seen plainly on the ground, but are difficult to photograph as there is no high ground and the figures are large and long.

Rocks pulled out from the centers of the figures were heaped at the outer edges, plainly outlining them. They form huge representations of human figures with thick bodies and spindly arms and legs. Nearby are fearsome four-legged beasts with long, skinny tails and claws. There are also strange spirals.

Although modern Indians shed little light on the origins of the figures, there are some similarities to known religious figures in area Indian cultures. In the creation myth there is a powerful being which had at least two forms — human and cougar. Some of the figures on the ground near Blythe are unmistakably human, while two animal shapes could be big cats, including the claws.

The Blythe Intaglios are located near an ancient Indian trail running from the desert to the Pacific coast. From the intaglios, you may spot several small stone cairns. It is thought that Indians passing by on the trail paid homage there by adding stones to the cairns. The same runners may have used the Topock Maze for purification rites when they returned.

Unfortunately, modern visitors have not treated the intaglios with as much reverence as those ancient Indian passers-by. Both the Topock Maze and the Blythe Intaglios have had to be fenced to protect the sites from further damage, primarily by off-road enthusiasts. These motorized marauders have marred the big figures and have destroyed about half of the original Topock Maze, leaving about half, some 10 acres.

Now fenced and protected, the strange designs and figures will remain for future visitors to speculate upon the past. Perhaps someday more will be discovered about the intaglios, unraveling a tantalizing mystery.