

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN THE TAKLA LAKE REGION

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INTRODUCTION

In early spring, 1971, the Pacific Great Eastern Railway was approached by the Archaeology Department of Simon Fraser University, as construction had begun on a new railway linking Fort St. James and Dease Lake. The company was presented with plans for an extensive archaeological survey of the proposed route. It was explained that our purpose was to salvage any archaeological information that might be destroyed in the process of construction. While a grant from the Opportunities for Youth Programme would form part of the budget for this survey, the co-operation of P.G.E. was necessary, particularly in the field of transportation and room and board, if the survey was to be successful. By May 15, 1971, P.G.E. had not only granted permission for the survey but had committed itself to providing transportation in the survey area and room and board for a crew of six. By June 15 however, the company had limited the crew size to two, and on the arrival of David Butlin and myself in the field on June 17, it was discovered that transportation and other facilities were limited to the area of Takla Lake. Although this area was found to have been extensively disturbed through clearing and bulldozing, a survey was initiated. The results of that survey form the basis of this report. An appendix has also been added which includes the results of discussions with some native residents of Takla Lake.

THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Takla Lake is approximately 50 miles long and two miles wide at its widest point. It lies within a geographical area

whose boundaries are 55° 3' - 55° 42' north, and 125° 30' - 126° 15' west. To the north, Takla Lake is accessible from the Skeena River through a system of lakes and rivers which include; the Sustut River, the Bear River, Bear Lake, and the Driftwood River. To the south, Fort St. James is accessible from Takla Lake by way of the Middle River, Trembleur Lake, Tachie River, and Stuart Lake. To the west of Takla Lake lie the Takla and Bait Mountain Ranges, the land sloping gradually to the latter and abruptly to the former. The east side of the lake is formed in part by steep granite cliffs and in other areas by gently rolling hills. Numerous small rivers and creeks flow into the lake but most of these are impassable by boat. The countryside, which is heavily wooded in both coniferous and deciduous vegetation, supports a large animal population. In the lake itself, several species of trout, whitefish, land-locked salmon, carp, and sturgeon abound. Waterfowl are also common.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

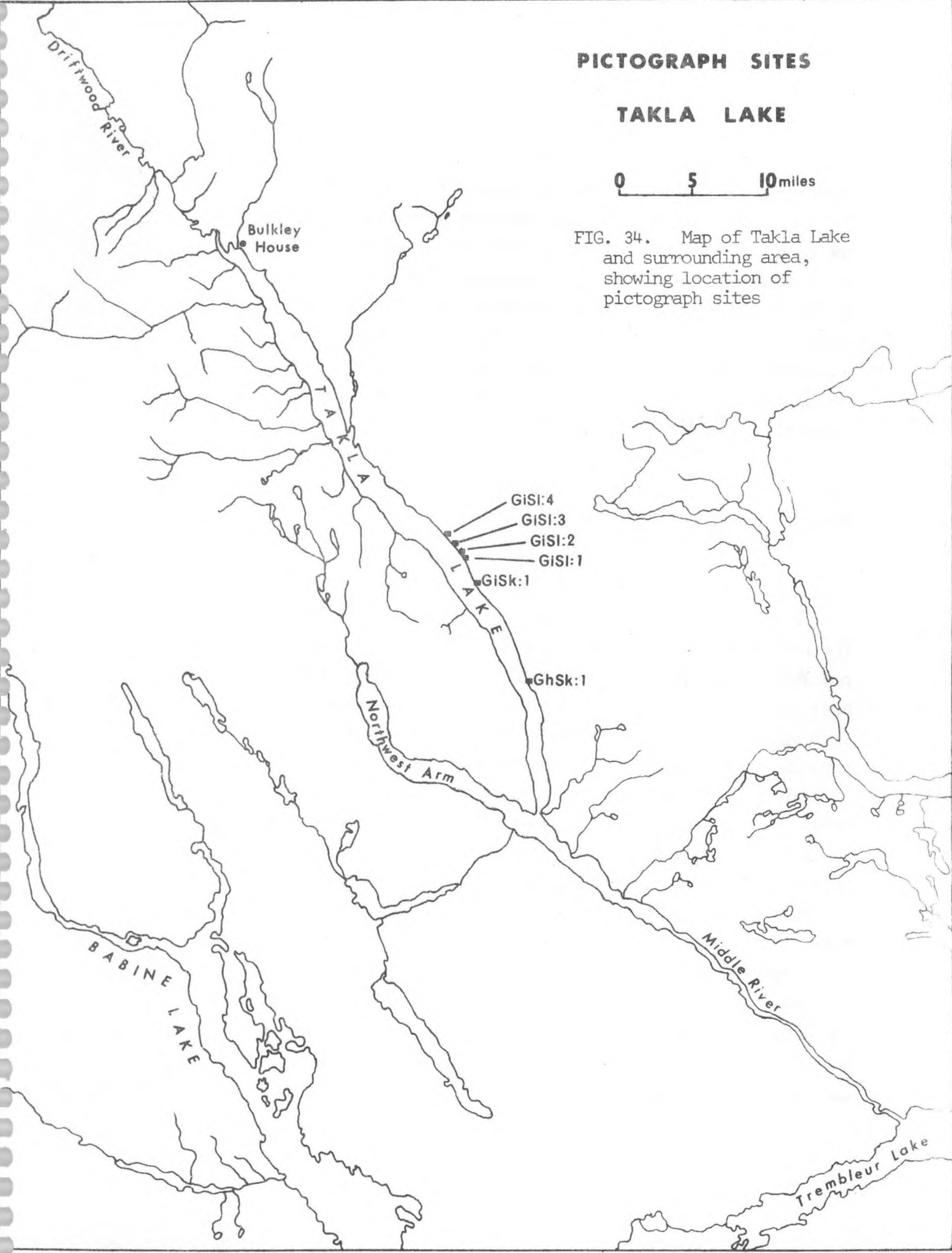
If traditional boundaries are applied, the greater part of Takla Lake lies within the territory of the Carrier Indians while its northernmost tip is occupied by the Sasuchan division of the Sekani tribe (Jenness 1937: Fig. 34). An examination of the annual round of both the Sekani and Carrier indicates that territorial boundaries were probably more dynamic than suggested above, particularly in the exploitation of lake resources. From November to approximately mid-summer, both groups were involved in hunting. For this purpose, smaller groups within both the Sekani and Carrier tribes possessed separate hunting territories. Among the Sekani this group was the band and among the Carrier the phraternity of a subtribe (Jenness 1943:481). It is probable that

PICTOGRAPH SITES

TAKLA LAKE



FIG. 34. Map of Takla Lake and surrounding area, showing location of pictograph sites



this type of organisation would tend to suppress movement outside of these boundaries. In the summer months, however, when the chief occupation was fishing, group organisation for the purpose of monopolising specific territories was not the case. It is highly probable that the Sekani and Carrier who have a history of friendly relations (Jenness 1937:11), shared the resources of Takla and other lakes during the summer. One would expect that with increased inter-areal mobility during the summer months, archaeological sites on the lake would have the potential of being either Sekani or Carrier in origin.

Other important ethnic divisions in the region include the Gitskan to the north and west of the Sekani and Carrier, and the Beaver to the east of the Sekani.

METHOD OF APPROACH

For the most part the survey was confined to scouting the lakeshore by boat and checking all areas that seemed probable archaeological sites. While a foot survey of the area would have been more desirable from the standpoint of thoroughness, necessary tactical support in the form of periodic food supplies was not available.

At the time of the survey, the water level of Takla Lake was approximately five to seven feet higher than normal, resulting from a spring run-off to greater than normal volume. For example, Indian Reserve No. 11, situated at the juncture of the Driftwood River and Takla Lake was under three to five feet of water. The fact that no archaeological sites were recorded other than pictographs may be explained to some extent by this flooding. Lakeshore habitation sites could quite easily have been inundated at this time. The task of locating sites was not made easier by the fact that our survey was confined to the P.G.E. right of way on the

already cleared and bulldozed north lake shore.

Survey forms were completed for six pictograph sites on Takla Lake. All were photographed in black and white, and in colour. Five of the six were drawn to scale. Due to the unavailability of boats it was impossible to return to GhSk 1 for scale drawings.

Mr. and Mrs. Johny French, residents of Bulkley House, Takla Lake, offered valuable information regarding the pictographs. The cultural derivation of the French family appears to be Sekani. Mr. French, who is 71 years old, has no memory of his family having lived anywhere but at Takla Lake. Mrs. French, who is approximately the same age, stated that her grandfather moved to this region from the vicinity of Fort Grahame. Fort Grahame is about 100 miles northeast of Bulkley House on the Finlay River and also lies within the territory of the Sasuchan division of the Sekani tribe. According to Mrs. French, her grandfather was the artist responsible for the Takla Lake rock paintings. She remembered journeys south with her father to trap and fish, and his explanation for the existence of the paintings and also their various interpretations. The rapidity with which she recognised and interpreted the paintings convinced me of the verity of these statements, while later examination of the paintings and interpretations indicates that she definitely had some knowledge of the pictographs and their meanings. The body of my paper demonstrates that I do not agree entirely with her ideas regarding the pictographs, but I do feel that any lack of precision regarding her interpretation is understandable, considering the distorting effects of the passage of time.

THE PICTOGRAPHS

Site GiSl 1

Fig. 35a. According to Mrs. French this figure represents a caribou. A similar figure at Stuart Lake has been variously interpreted as a moose by John Corner (1968:117) and as a caribou by A. G. Mbrace (1893:207). It seems most likely that both figures represent caribou, a number of sources indicating that moose did not frequent this area until quite recently. Simon Fraser, in a letter from Stuart Lake in August, 1806, states that here, "there are no large animals except Carruban (caribou) which is too sly for us." (Lamb 1960:236). In addition, Diamond Jenness, in speaking of the Takla Lake region, states: "the moose that are now becoming common reached the district, apparently, not more than half a century ago." (1937:2).

Fig. 35c. This figure was described as a "moon in circle". The two solid colour spheres (Fig. 35b), one on either side of the figure, were described as stars. No further explanation was offered. A figure represented in the Stuart Lake pictographs is strikingly similar to the above with the exception that the quarter moon has been inverted within the circle, and three "stars" are represented on either side rather than one. To date the crescent moon symbol has been most often found standing alone, the enclosure of the crescent within a circle being less common. A site on the Stein River in the Interior Salish culture area exhibits the only other example (Corner 1968:43). Two other sites, one on the Lower Arrow Lake and one at the Kohlar Ranch site exhibit possible representations of the full moon enclosed in a circle (Corner 1968:73, 83).

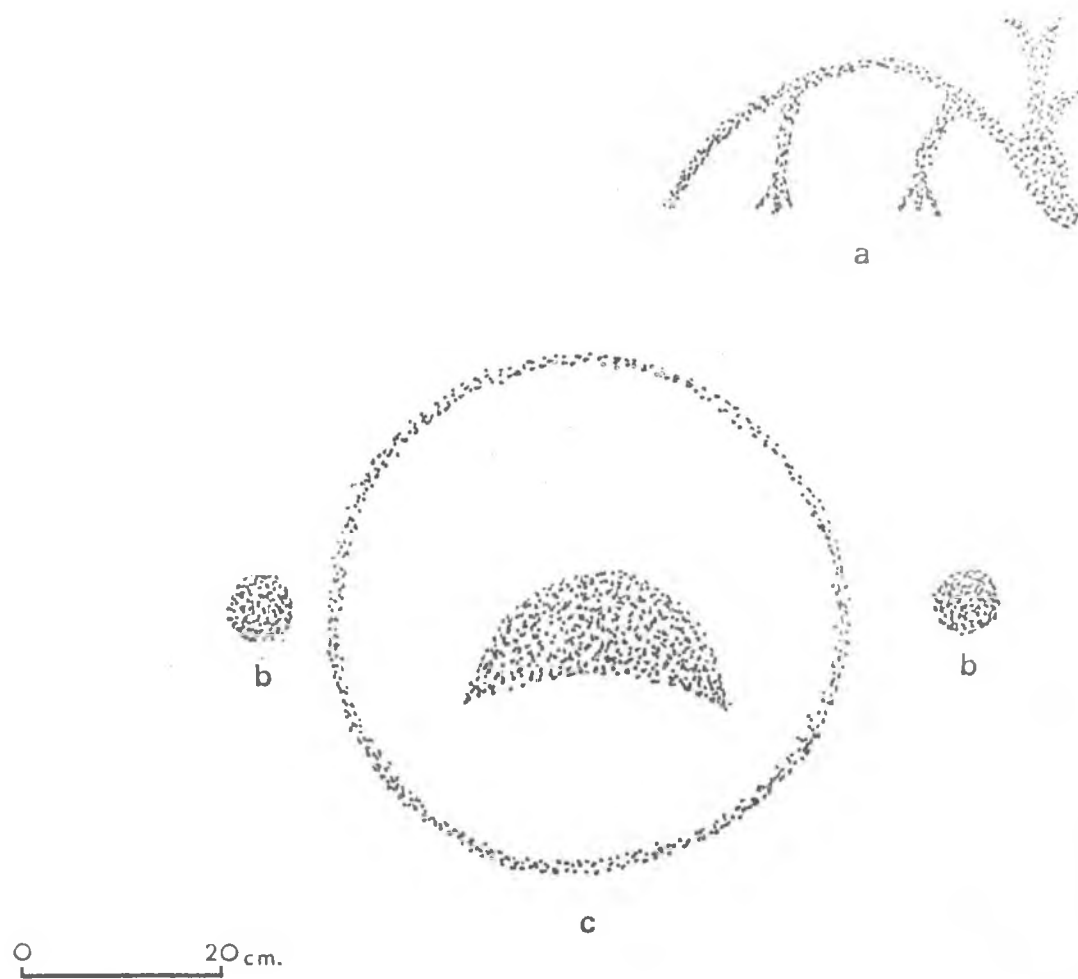


FIG. 35. Pictographs at Gisl 1. a, caribou. b, stars.
c, moon in circle.

Site GiSl 2

The two figures represented in this pictograph were the most faded and poorly preserved of all those recorded.

Fig. 36a. This is a reasonably definite representation of a bird, probably a crane, heron, or pelican. Comparison with other sites indicates that it is most similar to a pelican represented in pictographs at Seton Creek (Corner 1968:38).

Fig. 36b. While very poorly defined, this also appears to be a bird, judging from the faint outline that still remains.

Site GiSl 3

These pictographs are situated on a large curved rock face. The curvature of the rock results in two of the figures facing the northwest, while the remaining five face the southeast. The former two figures compose Panel A and are given a single interpretation, while the latter figures compose Panel B, each figure of which is interpreted separately.

Panel A (Fig. 37). The interpretation of Panel A offered by Mrs. French was "an otter by the bank of the lake". A. G. Morice examined similar figures on Stuart Lake in 1893 with the aid of native informants, and concluded that such figures represented fish (1893:207). In addition Morice illustrates what he considers to be the symbol for otter. The similarity between the otter and fish symbols is close enough that a mistaken identification could be very easily made (see Fig. 38d, e). If the Stuart Lake pictographs are examined more closely, further support is given to the idea that figure 37a represents a fish rather than an otter. Symbols g and b in figure 38 are closely associated figures in one of the Stuart

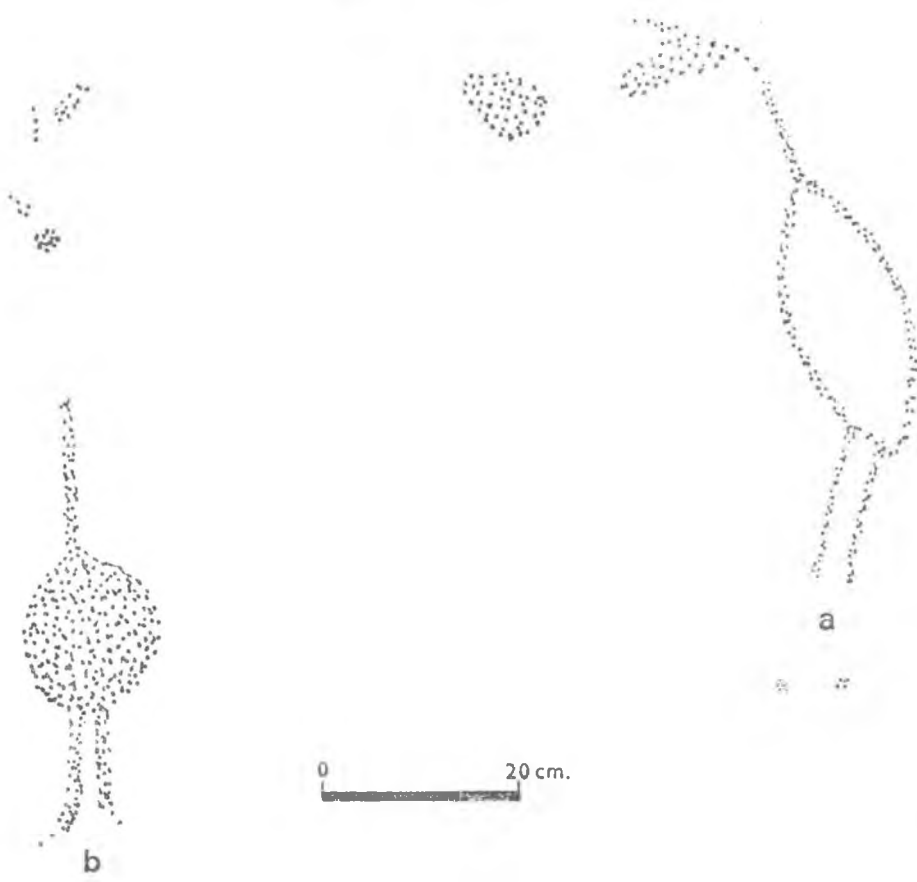


FIG. 36. Pictographs at GiSl 2. a. bird, possibly a pelican. b. bird

Lake pictograph panels (Corner 1968:115). If the physical structure of a, which almost certainly portrays a fish eating a man, is carefully compared to the structure of b, we can see that b which is identical to figure 37a is in all likelihood a fish as well.

Panel B (Fig. 39). Figures represented in Panel B appear to have been painted at different times and probably represent different periods, if colour variation is a valid indicator. Figures b, c, e and f, are all similar with regard to shade of colour and degree of shading present. Figures a and d, exhibit thicker paint and much greater depth in the reddish colour characteristic of these paintings. The Panel A pictographs can be assigned tentatively to the same period as the latter.

Fig. 39 c, d and e. These were interpreted by Mrs. French in the following manner: c, "a canoe", d, "a sail", and e, "an otter". While e almost certainly depicts an otter or fish, it is doubtful that c and d were originally intended to represent a canoe with sail. If c and e of Panel B, GiSl 3 are compared with d and e of GiSl 4 and with a and b of Panel A, GiSl 3 it seems more likely that the "canoe" and "otter", represent an otter or fish by the bank of a lake.

D, as previously mentioned, appears to have been added at a later date. If this figure does represent a sail, it is undoubtedly post contact, and was probably added by someone who did not grasp the meaning of c and d.

Fig. 39f. Mrs. French indicated that this figure represented the moon. Circles are present in pictographs in all culture areas of British Columbia and rarely are found in the same pictographic contexts. Because interpretation of these circles varies as much as does the context in which they are found, it is impossible to evaluate or question any given

panel A



FIG. 37. Pictographs at G1S1 3, panel A.
a, otter or fish. b, "bank of lake".

interpretation.

Fig. 39a. This figure, one of the pictographs assigned to the tentative later period was interpreted as a caribou. While the shape of the head is more like that of a moose than a caribou, it is naturally a question of the value placed on realism by the painter.

Fig. 39b. This figure was interpreted as being a mountain goat. If such is the case, the tail seems inordinately long and the butt end protrudes to an extreme degree from the hind legs. The lengthy tail and protruding butt seem more likely to be an extra head with horns - the whole figure representing two mountain goats joined at the mid-section and facing opposite directions. Because absolute realism is not a feature of pictographic art however, both interpretations are equally valid.

Site GiSl 4

Fig. 40e and f. These two figures appear once more, and are again given the interpretation "otter" and "bank of lake" by Mrs. French. The outline of the otter figure is very indistinct, but it appears to be quite similar to GiSl 3 a which was interpreted as a fish.

Fig. 40d. While also very indistinct, this figure exhibits the tail-fin characteristic of the fish symbol illustrated by a, b, and c of figure 38. GiSl 4 a and b appear to follow the "moon and stars" pattern of GiSl 1, and were interpreted as such by Mrs. French. The diamond shaped figure c, which at first glance appears to be related to the circle above it, probably represents a frog. GiSl 4, c, d, e and the circle, a, are of a much deeper and thicker red pigment than the frog-like figure, and are possibly more recent.

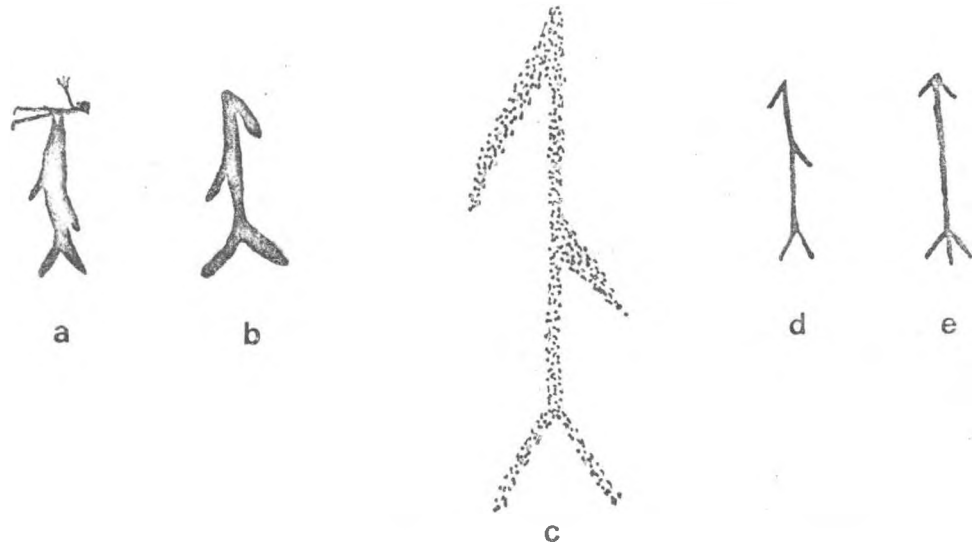


FIG. 38. a, b, closely associated figures in pictograph panels at Stuart Lake, (Corner 1968:115). c, pictograph at GiSl 3 (a). d, e, fish and otter symbols, according to Morice (1893:207).

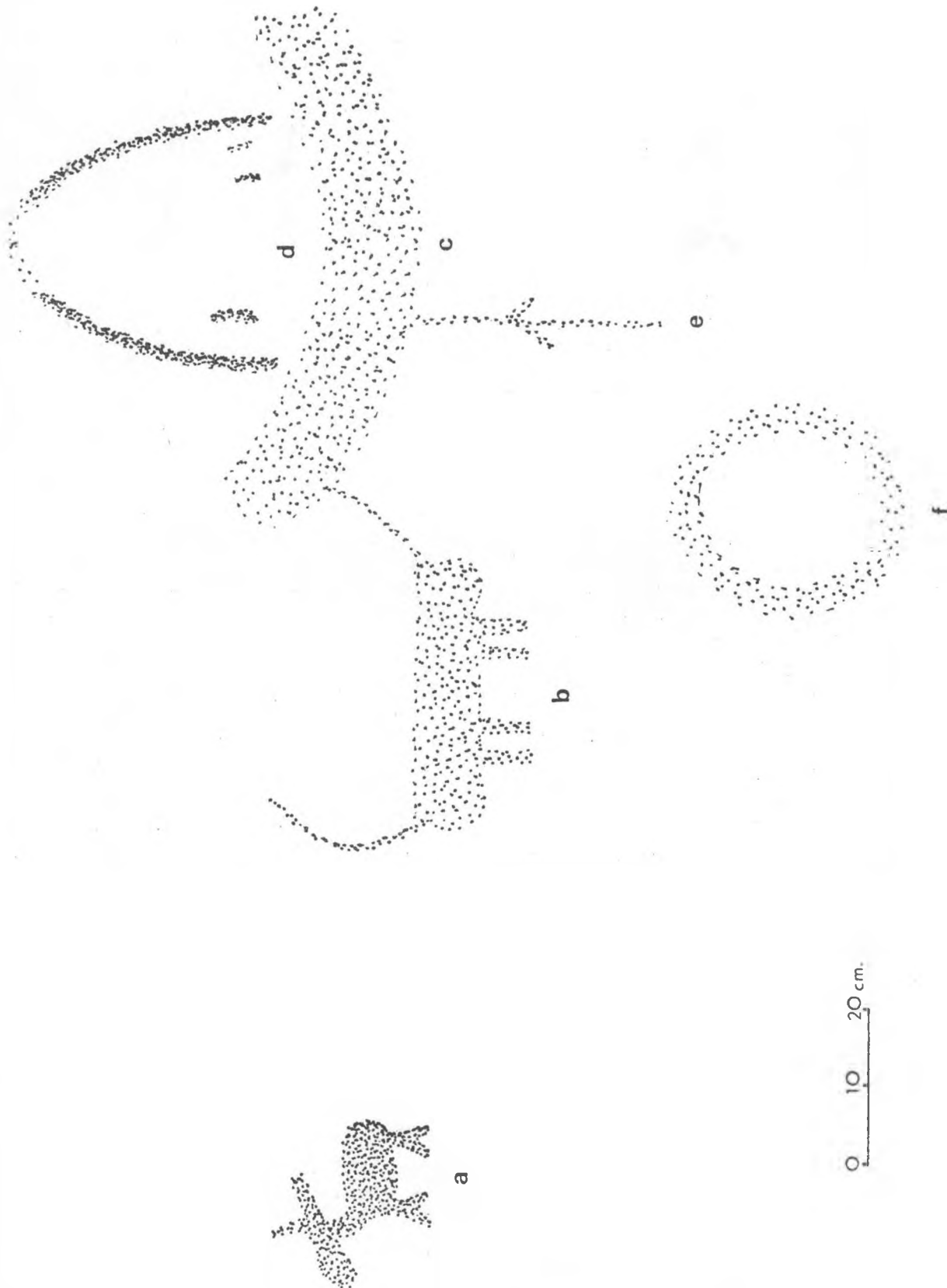


FIG. 39. Pictographs at GiSl 3, panel B. a, caribou. b, mountain goat(s)? c, canoe or bank of lake. d?, e, otter or fish. f, moon

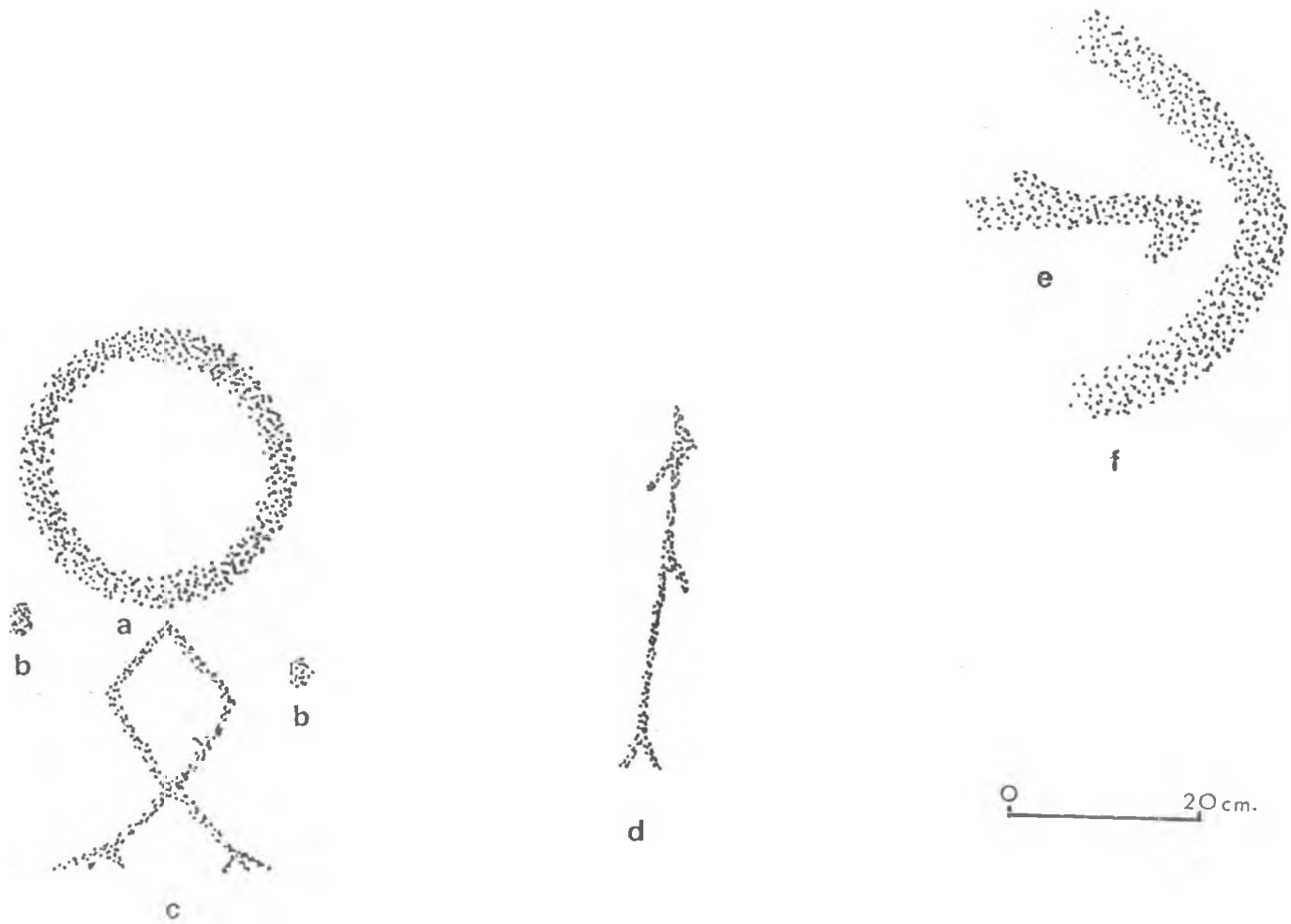


FIG. 40. Pictographs at Gisl 4. a, moon. b, stars. c, frog. d, fish. e, fish or otter. f, "bank of lake".

Site GiSk 1

With the GiSk 1 pictographs we once again concern ourselves with the enigmatic circle. The figure represented in figure 41a was interpreted as a "beaver on a stretcher - or drying rack". The fact that the animal within the circle is headless, lends a degree of credibility to the interpretation.

Consisting of a circle of solid colour, figure 41b was interpreted as being either the sun or the moon.

Site GhSk 1

Fig. 42a is best interpreted as some species of animal near a trail. As previously mentioned, this is a fairly common representation in pictographs of the interior of British Columbia (Corner 1968:29). The animal depicted may have possessed a head of some sort at one time, but it is difficult to distinguish between what might be the remnants of a head and the pattern of lichen which has overgrown this figure.

Fig. 42b. This is a commonly used design, particularly in the interior of British Columbia, and represents a grizzly bear track (Corner 1968: 35 and 61).

Fig. 42c. While quite indistinct, this figure may be related to the otter or fish symbols mentioned frequently in regard to other sites on Takla Lake.

TIME PERSPECTIVE

The exact age of the paintings is difficult to determine. A headline in the Sunday Province of March 3, 1925 states, in regard to the closely related Stuart Lake pictographs, "Rock-Written Indian Story - There When Mackenzie Passed". While



a



b

0 20 cm.

FIG. 41. Pictographs at GiSk 1. a, beaver on a stretching rack. b, sun or moon

Mackenzie did pass through this area, his journal was carefully examined in this regard and no mention of these pictographs could be found.

Simon Fraser has also been given credit for the discovery of these pictographs (Corner 1968:115). While he was responsible for the construction of Fort St. James on Stuart Lake in 1806, no verification could be found of this discovery in his journals.

If the pictographs had been painted in the early part of the nineteenth century, it is unusual that Daniel Harmon or John Maclean make no mention of them in their journals. Maclean, who spent 25 years in the service of the Hudson Bay Company, kept a detailed journal in regard to the Indians of Stuart Lake and vicinity. The lives and material culture of the Sekani and Carrier are also vividly recounted by Harmon, who was in charge of Fort St. James from 1811-1817 (Voorhis 1930:154).

The first mention and description of the Stuart Lake pictographs is made in Morice's "Notes on the Western Denes", published in 1893. The absence of their mention in earlier journals, combined with their relatively good state of preservation at this time, indicates that neither the Stuart Lake nor the Takla Lake pictographs are probably older than 100 to 150 years.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The meaning of these pictographs is something that will probably never be known for certain. Mr. and Mrs. French suggested that these paintings were used to indicate game trails or hunting territories in the form of trap lines. While they may be associated somehow with the quest for game, it is unlikely that the Takla Lake pictographs demark individual hunting or fishing territories if their close

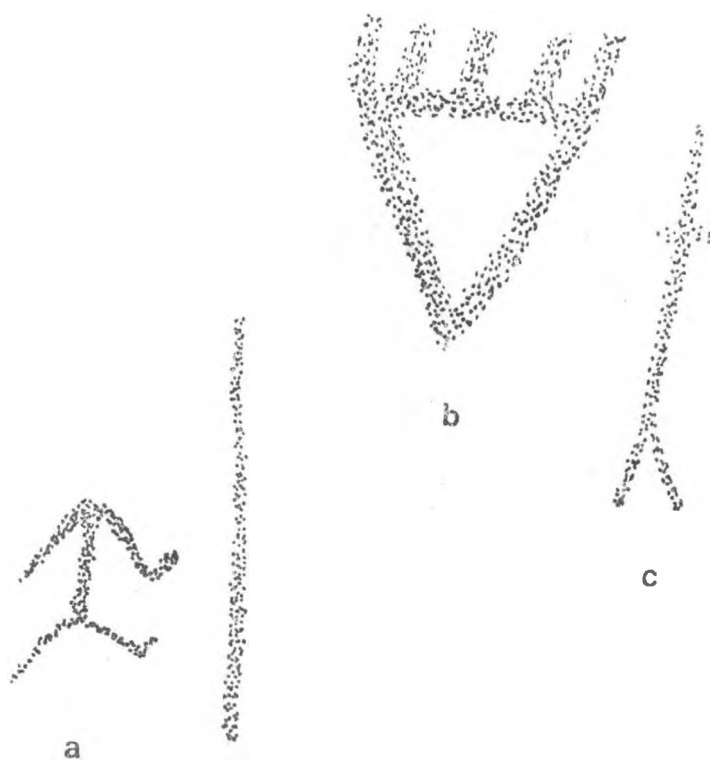


FIG. 42. Pictographs at GhSk 1. a, animal near trail. b, grizzly bear track. c, otter or fish

proximity is taken into consideration.

Morice suggests that a number of these paintings represent personal totems. He relates the following in regard to one of the Stuart Lake pictographs:

"The inscription...is to be seen about half-way between this place, Stuart's Lake or Na'kraztli and Pintoe, the nearest village by water. By painting in such a conspicuous place the totem which had been the object of his dream, the Pintoe Indian meant to protect himself against any inhabitant of Na'kraztli, as the intimate connection between himself and his totem could not fail he believed by an infallible presentment the coming of any person, who had passed along the rock adorned with the image of his totem." (Morice 1893:206)

While the pictographs at Takla Lake may have some religious or mystical significance, it is unlikely that their geographical situation is related in any way to their meaning as Morice suggests for the latter. The location of pictographs at Takla Lake appears to be directly related to that of rock faces which, owing to their physical nature, lend themselves to painting. These faces are generally flat and easily accessible by land or by boat.

The key to these paintings is probably found in the intense involvement with the physical environment which characterises all aboriginal societies. Such involvement is expressed in some form in any human society, either by a group or by an individual. The Takla Lake pictographs are in all probability representative of the latter form of expression.

Appendix

While Mrs. French offered valuable information regarding the Takla Lake pictographs, Mr. French was equally helpful in the description of subsistence techniques employed by his

grandfather, and presumably by the contact period Sekani.

According to Johnny French, the three major methods employed in fishing made use of the hook and line, the fish net, and the fish spear. The hooks used were apparently the very old and widespread type consisting of a stick or piece of bone sharpened at both ends and tied in the middle. While I could find no evidence of the use of this particular type of hook in any source consulted, Alexander Mackenzie, in his journal, mentions the use of hooks which "are small bones, fixed in pieces of wood split for that purpose, and tied with fine watape" (1931:119). These are of course, the equally widespread composite fish hooks. It is probable that the structurally less complex type mentioned by Johnny French was utilised in addition to the latter.

The manufacture of fish line was apparently accomplished in the following manner: willows were cut down in the spring and the fibres removed; a number of these fibres would then be taken, and together, rubbed and rolled on the craftsman's leg creating a braided effect, and thus a stronger line. Several strands of this braided willow would then be joined together to form the final product. Fish nets, which were commonly employed, were manufactured by the same method and of the same material as fish line. Verification of the method outlined above comes from two major sources. Regarding the Sekani, D. W. Harmon states, "the women make excellent nets, of the inner bark of the willow tree, and of nettles..." (1904:248). Further support is added by an entry in Mackenzie's journal for June 10th, 1793 which states that "their nets and fishing lines (those of the Sekani) are made of willow bark and nettles; those made of the latter are finer and smoother than if made with hemp and thread".

Johnny French also mentioned the use of the three pronged fish spear. Diamond Jenness has recorded the use of this

device among the Sekani. According to him the three-pronged leister, armed with bone points, was used in spearing fish at night from canoes by the light of jack pine torches (1937:38).

In the field of hunting, snares, also made from the fibres of spring willow, were apparently the most popular method of trapping small animals. Deadfalls were also used for this purpose. The bow and arrow was employed, the projectile being made of "very sharp stone". Mackenzie describes the bow of the Sekani as "made of cedar about six feet in length and the arrows, barbed, feathered, and pointed with iron, flint, stone or bone" (1931:118).

Incidental information offered by Johny French included mention of his grandfather making soles for moccasins out of spring salmon skins which had been dried and cured. Harmon, in regard to uses of the salmon among the Sekani, states that "of the skin of this fish, they sometimes make leggins, shoes, bags etc., but they are not durable" (1904:244).

Canoes, according to Mr. French, were made from birch bark, while Mackenzie writes "they had spruce bark in plenty, with which they make their canoes..." (1931:121). However, Mackenzie mentions the use of birch bark in canoe construction among the Beaver Indians, whose territory borders directly on that of the Sekani. It is likely that birch bark was used in place of spruce by the Sekani when available as this material is far more durable.

The general outline of subsistence techniques offered by Johny French and their verification through consultation of published sources, would tend to indicate that statements regarding the Takla Lake pictographs also have a relatively high degree of validity. While the value of the native informant in recent cultural studies has often been challenged, investigations in the Takla Lake region would tend to negate

the beliefs of those who underestimate the importance of such information.

Acknowledgements

The co-operation and general assistance of the following persons was gratefully received: David Butlin, a student at Simon Fraser University, Mr. and Mrs. J. French of Bulkley House, and William Charlie of Takla Landing.

