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THE IMPORTANCE OF DETERMINING THE SIGNIFICANCE AND RELATIONSHIPS OF ROCK ART, RATHER THAN INTERPRETATION

In our effort to record rock art, we are sometimes incomplete in noting what really exists, particularly the relationships of various elements that compose an entire panel, and the context surrounding the panel's situation. In our work to carefully photograph, sketch and trace elements it is possible that our efforts may be counterproductive, since the iconographer probably viewed his accumulation of elements and the setting as a whole.

The sum of the different parts, when placed in their proper relationship to each other, constitutes a scheme that may be more closely related to the whole concept. This not only involves linear placement, but process of line accumulation as well. It is often impossible to reconstruct the whole when each part is not shown in its original relationship. This is also true when superimpositions are drawn as one unit (Turner 1982). Individual elements, as well as the groupings in which they are expressed, have significance. Even though interpretations are often inaccurate, it would be worthwhile to gain an insight into the intent of the artist without being burdened with the problems of interpretation.

There are basically three groups of people that have worked with rock art. The first views petroglyphs as thoughtless expressions with no particular value or meaning except those which the panels may evoke. Second, are those at the other extreme who try to translate every panel into a precise statement. The third are those that believe that "images and compositions need not be

translated or fully understood to be studied and compared" (Marshack 1979:290, Footnote 2).

In the past, many scholars have left petroglyphs to art historians to be viewed as examples of "primitive art" instead of, what is more likely, that these are important expressions of a particular time, place and culture. By obtaining a basic understanding of the symbols of the cultures with which we are concerned, we begin to see repetitions of the context in which these occur. With a fair percentage of these occurrences determined, we may have identified a cultural tradition (Steinbring 1979:155).

Because of cultural conditioning, one has a tendency to read into these glyphs the subconscious, culturally oriented ideas acquired from our Anglo background, rather than those derived from Indian thought and environment.

The more traditional, often inaccurate modes of visualizing primitive or aboriginal symbolism by many professionals and amateurs are often naive surface level interpretations. We need to reorient ourselves—abandon our subjective concepts, and place ourselves in a more compatible position with the individual who created the inscriptions.

For now, we can study various styles of rock art and learn the significance of composition, location, size, relationships, repetition, etc. We should learn about the context, role and importance of aboriginal inscriptions. We can then modify our recording process to

broaden our important role as rock art researchers. It will be our efforts that clarify these prehistoric art canons and modes of expression.

When we take into account the many facets that may be of significance and their relationships, as shown in aboriginal compositions, we may still lack the ability to interpret the contents, and still lack an understanding of the artist's intent. However, we will have a better understanding of compositions with contexts and repetitions. We will thus be better able to preserve for posterity the panels that we are recording.

The purpose of this paper is to present a procedure that will follow a simple avenue of investigation. This procedure determines glyph significance and relationships rather than glyph interpretation. In the context in which we wish to apply it, establishing the glyph's importance or its significance, does not define, translate or affix meaning, but carries the facts that are necessary to consider when trying to determine concepts. This procedure will consider any theory if it shows credibility. Sufficient conclusive evidence needs to be produced before any credibility can be ascertained.

This avenue of investigation will analyze any plausible concept using the scientific process. At this point, it is important to remember that one of the shortcomings of this process is that it cannot prove any one concept to be the right one, the one the artist intended to imply. All it can do is eliminate or discredit others that are not as logical and therefore, are less likely to be correct.

It is also clear that we are outsiders looking in. We lack the cultural ties to the people that produced most of these inscriptions. We also lack the ability to determine many of the contexts in which they were produced. Because of this, it is important to derive their significance from an internal source, and

then support it with any secondary or external sources.

From November 1965 to November 1966, I lived next to Harold Tuchins, a Navajo *Hataal'ii* (singer) at Coppermine, Arizona. During that year I gained insight into Navajo life, values and the standards he felt important. I also learned a lot about Navajo philosophy. While questioning him about Navajo religion, he would only discuss questions—never answering them, until I considered certain blocks of information. After learning the proper times, places and procedures of requesting information, I took him to several petroglyph sites at Coppermine. Some of these were associated with Pueblo II surface structures. After following his rules and establishing a need to know, I inquired about what could be told about them. To verify Tuchins' statements, I asked William Dalton, a Hopi friend from Tuba City, to tell me what he could of these panels. He added to the procedures of Tuchins, and shed a different light on the idea of establishing a glyph's significance and relationships.

Both Tuchins and Dalton acknowledged that the meaning was lost; and to understand them one would need to spend the time to find the **significance** of one glyph to another, and what these **relationships** are. These are the two key words Dalton used. Tuchins described these elements as one being more important than another. He proceeded to say that even though he did not know the meaning of the artist, he was often able to tell a difference in the significance and relationships of many elements. This was mainly accomplished by considering how the different elements were interrelated within a composition.

Tuchins defined a composition as either a conscious or subconscious action. A subconscious composition would be predicated by, and reflect his moral or ethical standards,

if he had any. This he did by assessing the ways that elements were intentionally placed or composed next to one another, thus establishing a symbolic context or relationship. Even in situations where individuals had made additions or alterations to earlier compositions, such additions by their size, location and other significant facts continue or disrupt the compositional aspects of the original. This is even the case when no significant meaning was intended by the placement or element that was added. By the size and the context that they chose to place their additions, one can tell a reverence or disregard. This will also reveal insights into their system of symbolism about themselves, and the group to which they added their glyphs.

The facts that both Tuchins and Dalton considered important include the following:

Comparative Element Placement: It is important to consider the context and the make-up of the composition, the placing of various elements in relationship to one another. This placement is usually intentional and frequently establishes a symbolic context. It is important to visualize: vertical and horizontal placement, above, below, to the right or left, at an angle to, within, adjacent to, superimposed, facing, following or peripheral.

Comparative Element Size: It is important to consider both general and relative size—such as larger, smaller, equal or normal (in terms of natural size relationships or in relationship to the size of other elements shown). Exaggerations are also important—such as too large or too small. The size of various parts of an element, in relation to the rest of that element, also possesses significance. This is exemplified by an enlarged hand, foot, phallus, etc. A small figure has an absence of a large factor—and those implications. Large figures not only have the absence of a small factor—each figure

that increases in size has a relative factor that its increased size implies. These generally have a relative or corresponding amount of detail that allow compositions to be harmonious in all their relationships. The combination of these two facts of relating concepts, represent the significance and show the relationships that the iconographer desired to imply within the composition.

Repetition This is the number of times and the context in which an element repeats in a panel or at a site, as well as the commonness or rarity in which a given element is repeated within a cultural area. The repetition of these elements and the contexts in which they occur provide the key to establishing their significance and relationships within the style or cultural area. A large percentage of similar representations may indicate a conventionalization. The widespread acceptance of the convention is directly proportional to the amount of repetition and the area over which it occurs.

The number of repetitions, the identity or similarity and dissimilarity of each element, as it is repeated is significant. Tuchins indicated that similarities and differences in repetition are probably the most important aspect relating the information these elements contain. He indicated that viewing many panels, with and without the variation in repetition, is necessary to determine the significance of any specific repeated element to the context in which it occurs. The type of variation will be relative to the way the element was used.

Any dissimilarities may include more important facts to carry the concept the artist intended. The degree of divergence stresses the specific meanings and the relative significance of the element. The differences in repetition allow one to establish an order. This permits an understanding of the element's relationships, in different panels, from more complete (complex) to its most simple

form. Sometimes this will be an isolated occurrence. The more representations of a particular glyph, with its variations, are located, the more our understanding of that glyph increases.

Hopefully, elements will be found in a composition that will allow the identification of a *concept association*. This is the placement of a more abstract concept into a concrete (easily identifiable) relationship with a more realistic natural element. This will allow an association that will suggest the concept of the abstract part. When several different but related examples are found that contain the repeated context or concept association, the identity of the abstract element can be alluded to.

Details The degree of details, or lack of, indicates the importance of a figure or element in the composition, and frequently help dichotomize the context. Plain figures have an absence of detail and of those implications. Detailed figures have the added presence of additional elements, and the things they imply. Each type of detail can imply different things. Exaggerated details in particular (those too large or too small for the element as a whole, or which differ from the usual relationship found in nature) are significant. These represent efforts on the part of the iconographer to specifically evoke a response. What needs to be noted is what is detailed, when, where it occurs, and how it is placed.

Angle This is defined as the state of being above, below, or parallel to associated glyphs. Note the actual or apparent angle or slope of the element depicted, as well as its relative angle to other figures. Angle frequently indicated differing relationships to other less closely associated figures. Angle also plays an important role in solar and astronomically related compositions.

Direction This is defined as the direction in which the element faces. The directional face, the way the element is oriented is important. Consider: Frontal, profile, plane view, up, down, vertical, horizontal, facing or following, multiplicity of direction in element combinations, and the other elements to which it may be related. Note also the direction the panel faces, or the time and type of light under which it is best viewed.

Attitude This is the state or activity—the pose—in which the element is depicted. An anthropomorph may be standing with its appendages in different positions. The ways of manipulating body appendages relate to the concepts the artist intended. Determine if the element is isolated or involved with other elements. When elements are combined by lines, they may express extended concepts. Types of detail add to the attitude. Exaggerated, hollow-looking eyes and the erratic manipulation of media, create an ethereal effect in Barrier Canyon art.

Subsequent Activity Has there been any intervention, addition, reinforcement, defacement, modification, etc., to the figures or to the panel? Some additions seem to reinforce, modify or demean the original concept. The over-pecking of a panel with a new composition may indicate the need to restructure a relationship or illustrate a new one. This may also intend to denigrate the status or concept behind the element. To determine all the possibilities, all the information will need to be considered, even when it is obscure, faint or so defaced that only a small remnant remains. Face, chest, hand or feet peck-outs, slash-outs and mud-overs, by the way they were done, imply disregard or reverential concealment.

Location This is defined as the environment in which a panel is located. Analyze the setting and panel direction to physical features. Note whether the glyphs are on ground level, ceiling, nook or any physical

features of the surface that may have been important in the selection of that location. Note if any surface formations, irregularities or modifications of natural features were incorporated within or near the design. Note whether the composition is visible from a distance or only a selected point. Does it have a hidden or open quality? These determine private and public sites. Establish the location of other compositions, archaeological sites and how they are clustered. If possible, determine the types of activities and resources in the area.

Record and consider the regional geographical features in the local area. These will play an important part in directional or cartographic considerations. Take a compass direction, and check for possible association with solar, lunar, stellar and planetary risings. Consider all the environmental factors that might provide a context for the creation of the panel, and a pretext for its content.

This information, used along with the information from an internal analysis, will help establish the type of site being considered. All this information will be useful (whether we think so at the time or not) to those who will undertake an analytical and comparative study of the symbols. Thus the recorded information must be sufficiently comprehensive to help other researchers see and understand the representations—as if at the site itself. Since aboriginal iconography is the preeminent surviving form of expression for prehistory, we must preserve the knowledge it contains if we are ever to clarify what was the past.

None of the above points occur isolated at sites or in compositions. They are combined and used together. Each echo and reinforce the composer's intentions. By applying a new understanding of these important ideas, our recording process will preserve a more complete picture of what was originally

intended. It will then enable future scholars to determine, at least to a degree, the significance and relationships of the images, and possibly imply the concept intended by the long-forgotten member of a yet not-too-well-understood culture.

Now that the potential of relative size and spatial relationships has been considered, it is important to realize that even though we see the importance and relationships, we do not understand what they may mean. What has been learned from these items just considered, are facts that were either consciously or subconsciously important to the culture, and the one who created the panels. In many cases, specific meanings will be impossible to obtain, since much of what is seen is symbolic, schematic, stylized, abstracted, conventionalized and finally personalized. Yet, when a certain element is constantly repeated under selected circumstances, and if we are sensitive and careful in recording, the context will indicate certain intentional variations. By studying these repetitions and possible concept associations, patterns will emerge that can provide information about the culture that created the symbols.

Given enough sites in a given time for a culture, a statistical and analytical analysis can often determine the general concepts; indicate variations, combinations and extensions in the use of the concept (meaning still not determined). When elements are repeated in association with other elements, they often provide a concept association. Thus, it is important not only to consider the elements by themselves, but to record as well the overall panel, and to carefully indicate spatial relationships and sizes, so that more detailed element records can be reassembled for later analysis.

While all art, and more specifically rock art, need not contain a message, it is certainly true that many societies utilize such symbols

in different ways. Art occurs as icons (religious symbols), mnemonic devices (memory aids), ritualistic elements, vision and dream records, memorials to preserve important people, thoughts, actions, events, and as registers, markers, directional indicators, message boards, solar observatories and calendars. As societies developed, we find that symbolism became increasingly stylized and complex. These follow particular conventions in shape, composition, color, technique and embellishment. Similarities and differences can be seen in their depiction's. These details often become more important than the elements themselves. With time, some elements take on allegorical meanings (meanings quite different from what the elements appear to be). Glyphs and signs become symbols where elements stand for particular concepts (Marshack 1979:301, 303, 304).

In most types of cultures, signs often belong to a highly sophisticated, complex stage of development that include many forms of symbolism, icons and non-iconic abstraction, and allegorism. The nature of this symbolism is better understood when we consider the existence of many secret organizations. Within these, initiates were responsible for the propagation of their complex, sacred traditions. At the same time, they kept their knowledge away from those who did not have a need or a right to know.

Many levels of iconographic representation as well as non-iconic objects played important roles in the maintenance of these traditions. The decoding of these depictions is no easy matter. All that we have is the repetition of a structural form—knowing that more was involved. Marshack (1979:304) noted, "Our difficulty in interpreting them...is due not to the fact that they are symbols...but to the fact that we lack contextual reference and relevant productions in any other mode".

In addition to all the aspects considered, there exists in every culture various modes of communicating these symbols that are frequently referred to as levels of communication or planes of symboling (Eliada 1959b:3). These range from the most simple to the most complex. These levels require different levels of understanding, and each usually has its own progressive stylization, from the most naturalistic and simple to the most abstracted, stylized, conventionalized and complex.

As one moves from the profane, there is an assumption of a more learned knowledge on the part of both the artist and viewer. This is a common body of knowledge that is shared often to the exclusion of others. This, and the previously described important aspects, can be illustrated by considering a petroglyph from Venice, Utah (see Figure 1).

This simple composition includes most of the principles discussed. Balance, direction and size were ingeniously relied upon to construct the desired concept. To see the application of these principles consider the row of three sheep centered within this composition. Those outside are rams and face in opposite directions. B is the largest and most powerful looking. It faces left toward A, the smallest single element in the composition. A is also front-facing and is a bird-like stick figure. D is the smallest ram and faces right, toward E—another abstract front-facing outlined figure. This is the largest element in the composition. Between rams B and D is element C—the only ewe. She follows and faces in the direction of B.

By her placement in the middle, she could be a fulcrum. As a point of balance the whole composition revolves and repeats around her like ripples around a pebble dropped in a pool. In the first ring of association are rams B and D. Notice the similarities in balance; both are sheep—specifically rams. They are represented in full profile, solidly pecked

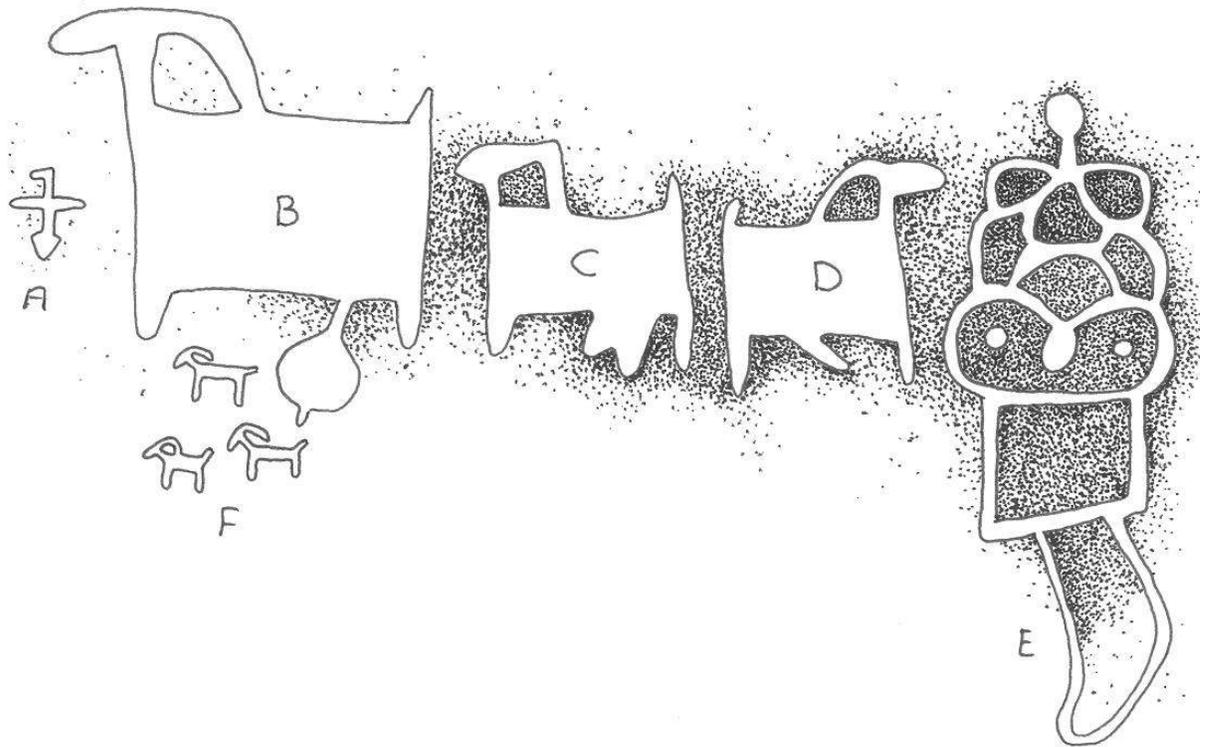


Figure 1

and facing in opposite directions. In the second ripple of association are A and E. Again, notice the balanced similarities; both are front-facing, abstract, outlined or stick figure, and the largest and smallest in the composition.

In this scale, situation E carries the most weight. Because of element placement, we have a unique situation between B, C and D. Both B and C follow in the same direction, while D is going in the opposite direction. Also, notice the size relationships: C and D are equal, while B is larger; A is small and E is larger, and F are the smallest sheep. All the main figures are on one plane. The subordinate figures F are below and placed nearest the figure that they are evidently related to. They were probably placed in a way to clue their relationship.

Sex is a significant part of the concepts. The three largest sheep have been given sexual identification, one of which is extremely

exaggerated. By sex, the composition is also balanced.

Following the formula to find the importance of each element to the context, they need to be placed in an ordered line by the criteria listed earlier. The importance would seem to be E, then B; C and D would be equal. Group F may be next, and A may be last. Dalton suggested that within some panels, there may be a possible "direction of readability." This is generally not right to left, left to right, top to bottom, or from center outwards. Most often, as exemplified by this composition, elements should be viewed from the most prominent, largest or significant figure to each succeeding smaller and less significant element.

There may be a division of interest or direction represented here. Imagine a vertical line between C and D. All the sheep to the left are represented in profile and facing A. The importance of composing these elements in this manner is reinforced by the fact that

the sheep to the right of the line is also in profile, and faces in the opposite direction toward E. As mentioned, this in a sense acts as a means to balance the concepts, by naturally pairing them in a context with what they relate to or are associated with.

A and E are on the same symbolic level—but by no means equal. Both may represent concepts or actual objects, and are dissimilar in that one was given much more space and detail. These two, both abstract and stylized—assumed to be front-facing, are similar in that respect, and are dissimilar in that they are the smallest and the largest in the composition.

B and D would then also be opposed poles on another symbolic level. B and D would be balanced in that they are both sheep, male, solidly pecked and both facing in different directions. They would be opposed in size, detail and direction.

As Dalton stated, opposition or variation in size often has meaning. What these may be will relate to the degree of their size and placement. Without the cultural context, the meaning is lost, and only their significance and possibly a concept of what they may mean can be recovered. If their size is important to meaning, A and E, and B and D do not seem to be valued equally by the artist.

To show an example of what happens when interpretation is attempted without the cultural context, visualize this somewhat traditional, rationally objective interpretation of Figure 1. Consider that on the lowest level this scene may represent two rams that have rutted for a female. The young male D has lost to the more experienced, bigger ram B. This has an obvious superficial meaning because of our background. It is doubtful that this is the exact intent of the artist.

On a higher level, we begin to enter an increasingly symbolic sphere that has been defined by Eliada (1959a) as more sacred—a level beyond the profane. Even here, on this more emotionally subjective and symbolic level, there are various degrees of meaning. An interesting story could be created for each level. One of these could be that these sheep do not represent sheep, but being symbolic may represent people. This idea is not too far removed, noting that the Hopi often represented themselves on cliffs and government pay vouchers by sign-signatures of clans represented by animals and plants (Fewkes 1897).

C and D being equal in size may express some equality in power, influence or social status. Since these are clearly and equally given sexual identification as male and female, they may indicate friends, siblings or a spousal relationship. On this more symbolic level, it may have represented the circumstances when someone representing the larger ram came and took C, and whatever F represents. Some may argue that this is probably closer to the artist's intent than the first one. It is still doubtful that this is the story the artist intended, or the way he implied it to be read.

If it is true that these sheep, acting out various roles of some forgotten play, do represent individuals, then by the second interpretation, it could have been either B or D who drew the panel. If it was B, then he would be egotistically expressing his masculinity at the expense of D. If it was D, we would have to advance to a higher level of symbolism. Here a more complex level of deduction for analysis is needed.

On this level with D as probable artist, B was undoubtedly drawn larger because he was probably more powerful—although not more important. Exerting influence on C and F, and persuading them with possibly A to follow him would not necessarily need to

be a sexual connotation. In many ethnic societies, sexual prowess and intellectual superiority, or at least shrewdness, were often synonymous (Reichard 1963:139).

A may represent a concept or philosophy that B in following subscribes to, as opposed to D, who possibly believes in a different philosophy that may be represented by E. In other words, C may not have been taken for sexual use, but intellectual pursuit. B was unable to persuade D to follow him, as he did C and F.

If D was the artist, he represented himself smaller than B and equal to C, which would seem to evoke more sympathy from observers. One point that would show some credence for D as the artist, is that if B had drawn it, A may have been the largest figure in the panel and E the smallest. One usually represents his side of the story as the most important, which, in this case, is equal to the largest. Since D is going toward the largest figure, even though he may have lost or is going away from C, he must have taken comfort in the fact that he is heading toward something that is "bigger and thus better."

Notice how on each increasingly symbolic level, the "interpretation" was, in certain respects, no more logical, but it became much more involved. This could be added to and enlarged upon, but it already contains way too much speculation, and suffices to put the point across. The purpose for these few interpretations, is to illustrate that *any interpretation is possible*, and to show that these artists sometimes had a *particular biased point of view that might be obviously discernible*. All that we can really say about this, are the facts described prior to the interpretations.

A and E can possibly be equated. E may possibly be the most powerful, important, good or whatever else its value expresses. A, being opposite in size, may possibly

represent an opposition in meaning or value in the mind of the artist. It may also imply something totally unrelated to E. It is only important to note that the artist depicted a difference in size and detail to communicate facts in addition to those carried by the element form. The variable degree to which A and E may be positive or negative would depend on the point of view of both the artist and observers. Each may argue the theoretical points, if not the selection of the size depicted. Based on the fact that size, detail and relative element placement are important, then these contexts would carry these significances. Because of his size, B would be more influential or powerful than C and D, who being equal, are in turn more significant or important to the story than F, which by size and location show their subordination.

Direction and sex seem to be of considerable importance. A and E probably face to the front, and may act as a polar influence on all the other elements represented by drawing their attention and opposition in their direction of movement. It is very seldom that sex is depicted in other animal representations. When it has been depicted to such a prominent degree and exaggerated to this extent, it holds pertinent meanings. C and D are equal in every respect except the difference of sexual identification. When a figure has some derivation from what may be considered the norm, or may have points that have been stressed, concepts (not meanings) are generally implied. Remember that differences of such stressed points in many respects contain more information than do the similarities. Thus, the genitalia of C and D—exaggerated equally—do not carry the same weight or impact of significance as does the degree to which the phallus of B has been exaggerated.

Here I have established a few important facts, and placed the elements in various levels of significance without placing a

meaning (i.e., translation) on them. From this point I allow individuals to draw their own conclusions. What is most important in this type of presentation, is to make cognizant as many facts as possible so a reader can, with a greater degree of education, choose for himself if he feels a need to find a meaning.

Meaning is not the major importance that can be derived from a study of these glyphs. When meaning is considered along with all the other pertinent and valuable information that can be gathered from their study, meaning is only one small aspect of a whole picture. Understanding that petroglyphs may hold many facts and concepts of value, their worth and potential value for future research increases. Thus it falls to us to properly record all the conceivable facts that may or may not seem pertinent now. Later, these seemingly less significant facts may show some pattern that will allow us to gain new insights.

The process of recording rock art and establishing proper relationships is similar to carpentry. A foundation has to be laid before the floor, and a floor has to be laid before a wall is raised. Without a wall, a window or roof cannot be installed. Each step in construction, as well as analytical interpretation and interpretive analysis, has to wait until all the previous steps are complete before any further progress can be made. Analytical interpretation is like rough carpentry, where each step ties in and makes possible the next step. Interpretive analysis is like finish carpentry—all it does is try to recreate the structure that was in the mind of the artist who created the rock art. With enough facts, and their proper handling, hopefully, this will be the way that the artist intended it to look.

Too many are impatient and hurry over the less exciting analytical procedures to get a finished product—"a fully translated glyph".

These individuals have a faulty structure, because they skipped or hurried over important construction steps. By using these new recording techniques, we can make rock art research more definitive now and more profitable in the future.

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