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CONCRETE CONCEPT ASSOCIATIONS

When working with rock art we are constantly faced with many situations such as classification, description, or expanding on intent where someone has made an interpretation. Some of these we may not object to, some we may. There are also those that we are perplexed by.

Interpretations have different levels depending on the depth or complexity that the interpreter is trying to reach. Most often when thinking of interpretation, we think of deriving a translation describing the artist's intent. However, interpretation can also be a simple statement of what the observer feels the glyphs represent. Because of different backgrounds, how one interpreter visualizes an element may not be how another would.

On its lowest level, interpretation simply involves identifying what the glyph represents. This level is element identification. Proper identification is the basis for not only working with rock art terminology, but nearly every other facet of research. Identifying correct concepts is dependent on proper glyph identification. Without proper identification (a misinterpretation) identifying the object that the glyph represents and its subsequent intention is speculation. Obvious examples of mis-identification are the many generic names given to some glyphs (Warner 1982a).

Even when identification can be made, intent, function, meaning or significance is not always obvious. An example is an element like the Anasazi bird-headed figure. Even after identification, the element's exact

function and the artist's intent still remains unknown.

When we see an atlatl in the hand of a Coso "hunter" we do not doubt that identification. When identical repetitions of the atlatl occur by themselves (Figure 1), we recognize the identification and often assume its interpretation as simply an atlatl if it occurs with a form and a context that is harmonious or characteristic with isolated atlatls for that area (Grant et al. 1969, Schiffman and Andrews 1981:143). However, the artist's intent may not be atlatl, but a concept associated with or extended from atlatls.

The foregoing discussion shows that two important points need stressing: one, when does an element with basic similarities cease being an atlatl and start becoming something else? Do all intersected or bisected circles represent atlatls? It is doubtful. If not, glyphs that are not obvious atlatls should not be called atlatls, which is an interpretive term (Warner 1982a:104).

Two, glyphs that can be properly identified by form may not mean that object itself, but refer to ideas with which the object is associated. Identification of the elements and their meaning can be different. Elements in Figure 2 are referred to by different names on different element lists. Figure 2A shows a very naturalistic centipede. Many element lists refer to more abstract forms as one-pole ladders. Whether or not these abstract forms are actually centipedes is uncertain. It is questionable that any of them represent one-pole ladders. If we are not certain of the identification we should not use terms that imply interpretation.

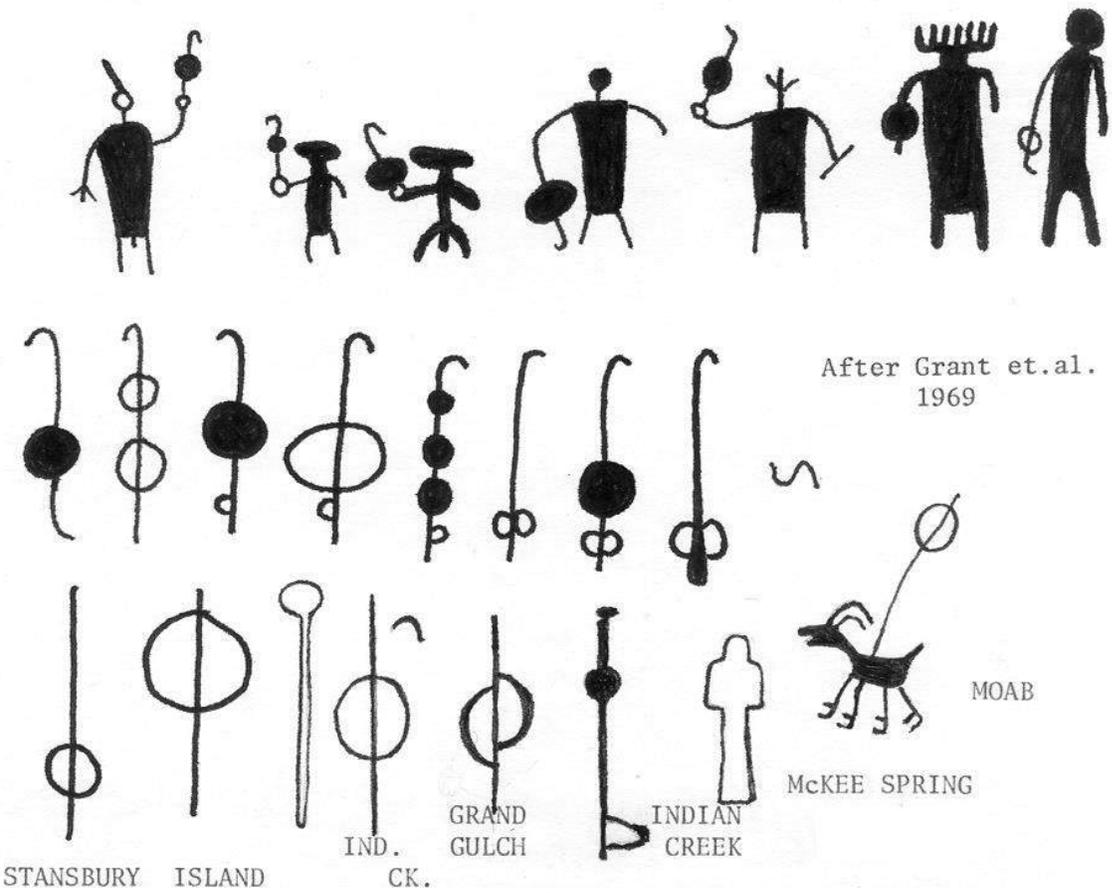


Figure 1

context, or unless we have successively stylized representations going from the natural to the stylized form.

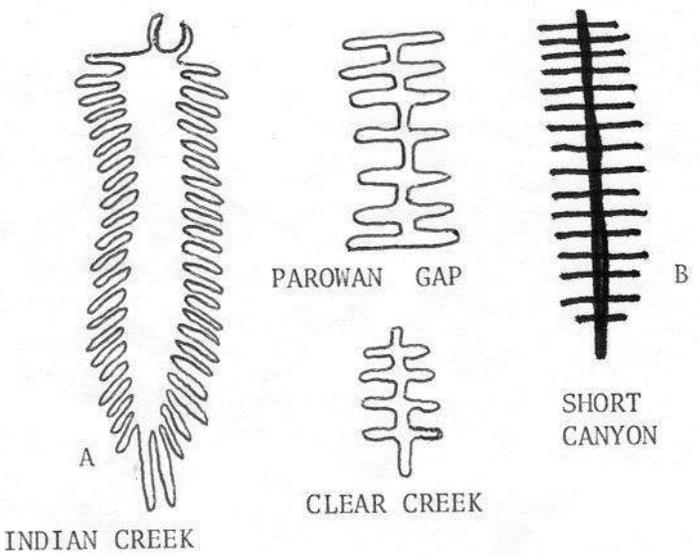


Figure 2

When an element is drawn naturalistically, it is easy to identify. When more abstracted it is more difficult to identify without a

The next level concerning interpretation involves examining degrees of abstraction and the possibility that concepts may have been extended. If we are fortunate we may find panels that show associations, contexts and variations. Careful examination of these panels may reveal similar elements representing different objects or concepts. Elements may also be consistent and represent various degrees of stylization. Elements may also have occurred in an evolutionary chain if they represent similar concepts (Steinbring 1978:18, 1982b:216). Elements may also change abruptly if differences in meaning were intended. One thing that makes this level more complex is that as an element becomes more stylized,

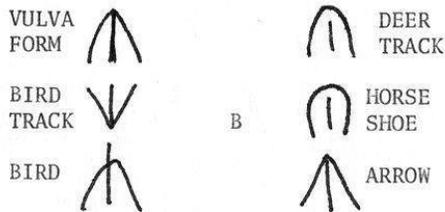
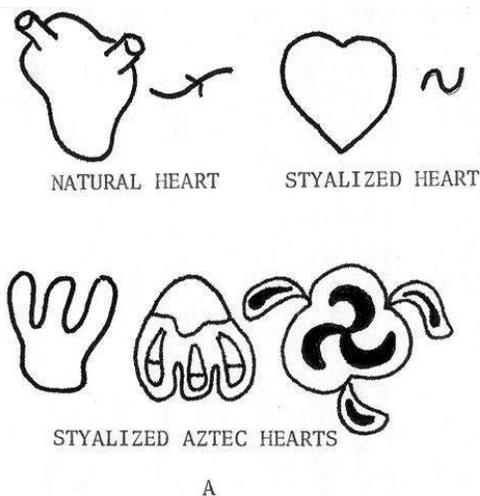


Figure 3

the chances for it to represent something else *may* increase. These stylized glyphs can be shown to represent different extended concepts. Naturalistic elements most often seem to represent the object itself. However, this does not always have to be the case when the situation is allegorical or mnemonic. Stylized extensions often no longer represent that object, but concepts associated with that object (see Figure 3A).

Contexts and associations are the crux for positive identification of any abstract representation. Associated elements can also be used to clarify another glyph's intent. In rock art elements are represented both

naturally and abstractly, with and without an association. The shields in Figure 4A have an association. The same or similar shield-like representations without an anthropomorph would be difficult to positively identify as a shield (Figure 4B). Take away the outline, and it would be impossible to identify the design as a shield. The only part of the glyph that represents a shield is the outline, or its association with an anthropomorph. The interior design could represent anything and be used for many purposes.

An abstract element such as a  would be easy to identify. Yet, based on an association, it could represent several different similarly shaped objects or concepts and thus mean different things (Figure 3B). This is the main concern on the second level of interpretation.

Problems on the third level of interpretation involve detailed narratives. This is where

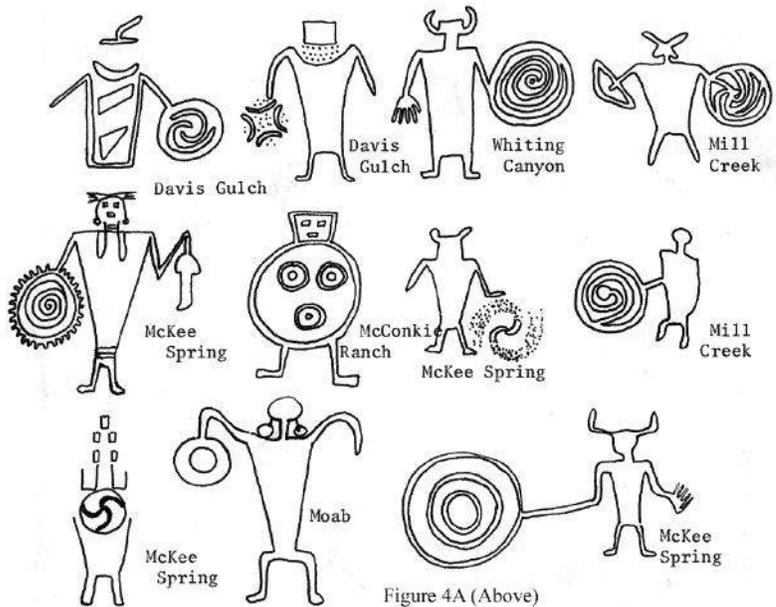


Figure 4A (Above)

Figure 4B (Below)

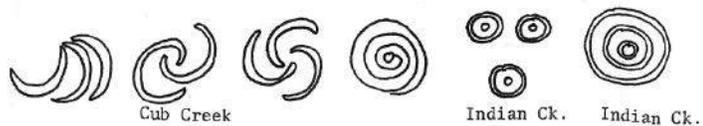


Figure 4

most inaccurate interpretations are being done. With ethnology that is available to us, it is difficult to derive this type of in-depth information. Without ethnology, it is impossible. Narratives involve detailed stories of what elements mean. It is possible to take the same composition and from it fabricate several interesting and equally logical interpretations (Warner 1982b:38).

The criteria for determining the concept of an element must flow in the same direction as the process for element identification. This runs from generalities to specifics. First, the element must be correctly identified. Second, if contexts and associations allow, a concept can be assumed. Complete or accurate interpretations are seldom, if ever, possible. For concept identification a glyph has to first have sufficient characteristics to identify it before it can be considered. Third, it has to have occurred in an association that is concrete enough to leave no doubt as to its identity and what it represents (Warner n.d.).

Many elements in particular contexts have their own sets of peculiarities. It is the combinations of these peculiarities that need to be considered. The fewer the peculiarities, the less positive the identification. With more well defined contexts, identification becomes easier and more accurate.

To exemplify these three levels consider the elements in Figure 5A. Without ever seeing a roadrunner track one would have no idea what this glyph's simple identity was. With

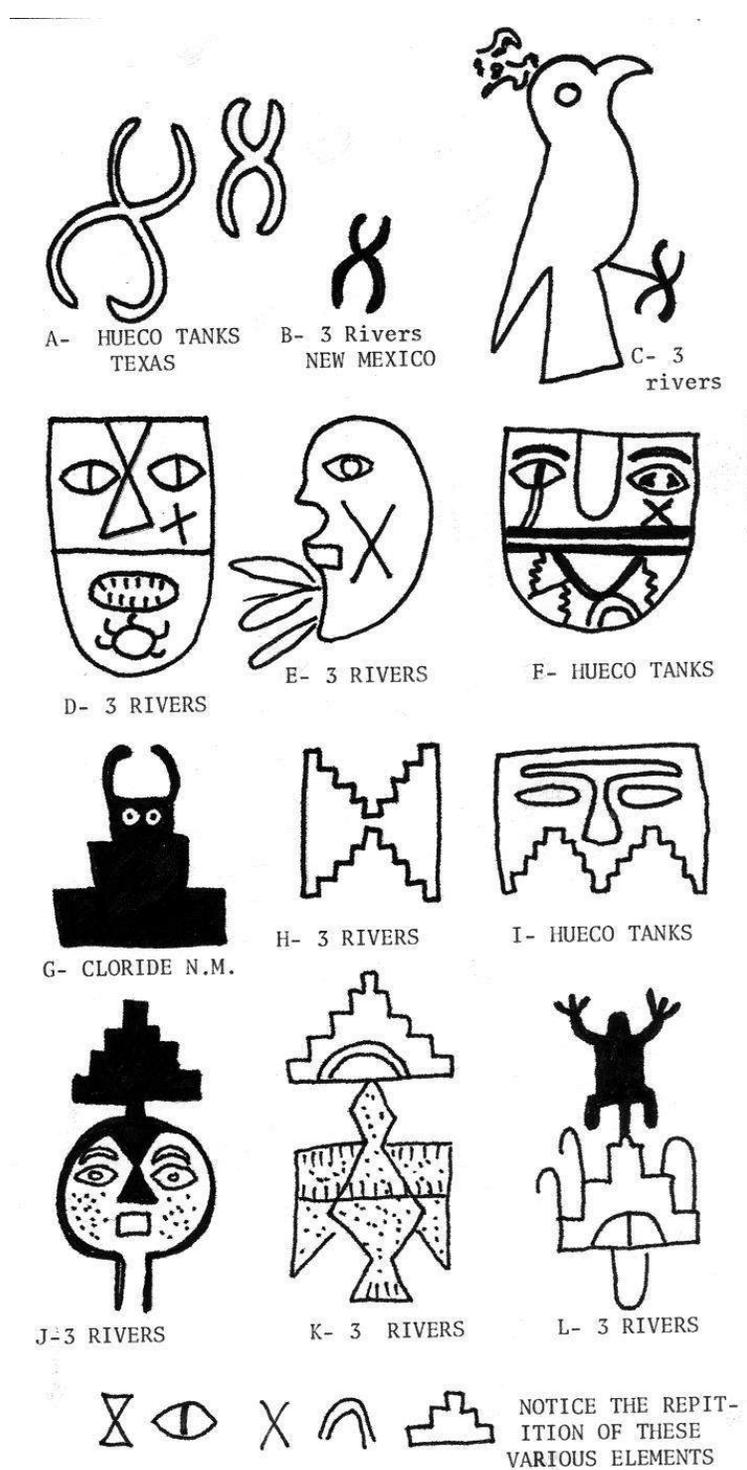


Figure 5

many occurrences of this glyph one realizes its convention and looks for contexts. Those familiar with roadrunner tracks identify this glyph as that imprint because of its similarity to actual roadrunner tracks.

Figure 5C provides a concrete concept association. This is definite because the association is positive. It leaves no doubt as to its identity. Artists often place glyphs into a definite concept association to provide a key to the glyph's concept.

When an X-form is seen on a face, or mask, the concept association is not concrete (Figure 5D). This is a distinctly different but similar form, with a different context. The repeated occurrence of this glyph in this context establishes it as a definite motif, but as discussed in levels two and three, what was intended by placing this form on the face is not immediately obvious. It could represent something physical like the track or something abstract (level one). If the glyph did represent something like the roadrunner track, it could represent a characteristic attributed to the roadrunner, similar to the curative power symbol attached to tracks on certain kachina masks (level two).

The X-form that occurs on the face may also be a planetary sign similar to those which occur on the face of Ahola, a Hopi deity. Without being able to find an actual roadrunner track on a face I feel it is best to reserve identification as possible stylized roadrunner track and simply describe it as an X-form.

Many believe that the bird track symbol illustrated in Figure 5A & B represents water instead of the bird or its track, since this bird is often associated with the location of water. From this association the bird track symbol could possibly be taken as a directional indicator or water identification symbol.

The moral of the story is that care must be taken in identifying the object the glyph was intended to represent and the concepts to which it may have been extended. To be positive in what the association is there must be a concept association that is concrete. Anything less would remain speculation.

Another example is a full stepped fret or tableta (Figure 5G-L), often represented with an enclosed arc attached to the baseline. This is generally taken to represent a rock or mesa with hollow caverns containing water holes, like Hueco Tanks, Texas. There is no reason why this symbol could not, depending on its concept association, represent rain clouds or mesas, due to the basic similarity between cloud and mesa symbols. This

again stresses that glyphs can, and often do, represent more than one (but often related)

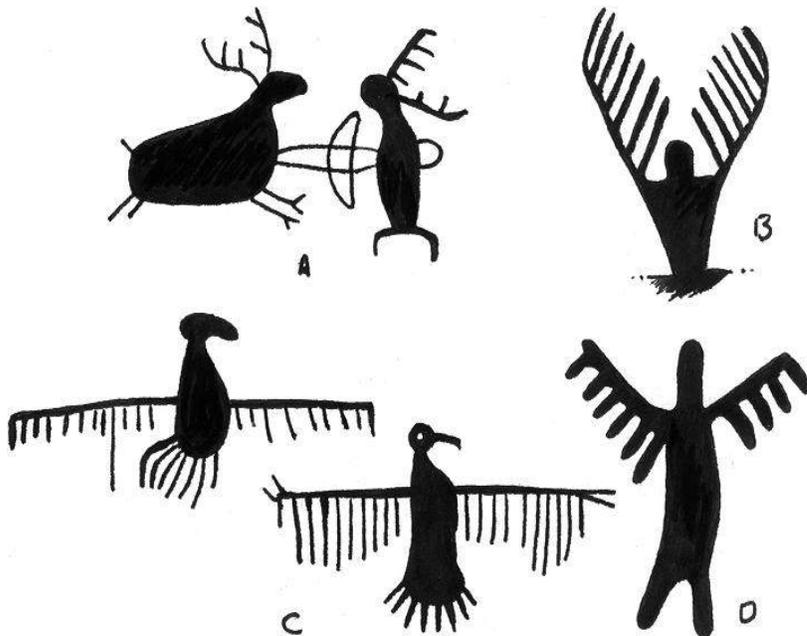


Figure 6

concepts. The variations, associations and contexts provide the clues to their specific applications.

At Cara Pintada and Teta, Mexico (Grant 1976:47) examples show two contexts for concept association. This shows the interchangeable nature of similar types of representations. Notice the similarity of the antlers of the hunter and quadruped in Figure 6A. In Figure 6B the same general pattern and form are more wing-like on an anthropomorphic figure. If one had seen only the antler form he or she would have only the antler association. This would draw the partial incomplete conclusion that Figure 6A would always represent antlers. Because of Figure 6B-D, it is possible that they may represent wing-like elements. Due to this association, and since other similar birds do occur at the site, the wing concept cannot be ignored.

There exists a similar situation with a Fremont-type headdress (Figure 7). Because representations of the "rake headdress" at Mill Creek, Utah occur with figures with similar wings, we can again assume the possibility of this representing a wing-like headdress, instead of antlers.

An example of an element with different contexts and associations that can be demonstrated to mean different but possibly related and extended ideas is the inverted U-bracket or "vulva form". This form in many studies has fertility association. McGowan (1977:26-40) has shown how this sign was formed and is associated with the idea of conception and reproductivity. In her case the contexts and associations were well docu-

mented with ethnographic evidence that gave her sufficient evidence for her well-formed conclusions (Figure 8A).

In central Nevada, Thomas (1976) found the same basic element in association with hunting blinds (Figure 8B). There, we can assume, the concept is not specifically conception or fertility. On the basis of the contexts and associations, the intent seems to be game acquisition. Thomas notes that the horse-shoe motif (her descriptive term) outnumbers all other motifs. She logically theorizes that with the significant profusion: "Is it possible that the horse-shoe is strictly a hunt-related motif?" She acknowledges the vulva and fertility forms and mentions that:

If the horse-shoe's intimate association with hunting as well as its genital symbolism can be established, then it is extremely plausible that the horse-shoe motif actually carries with it a broader concept of "plenty" relating not only to fertility and increase, but also the mechanics of a complex and highly pro-

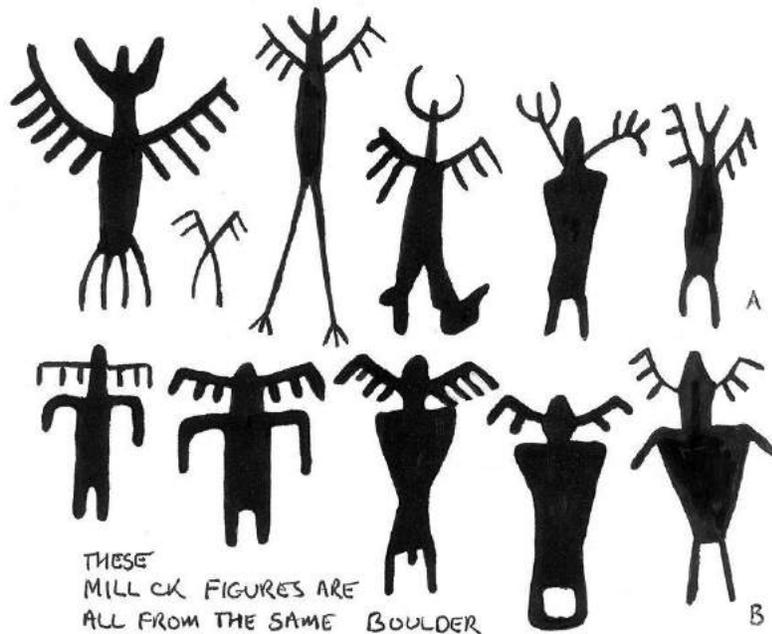
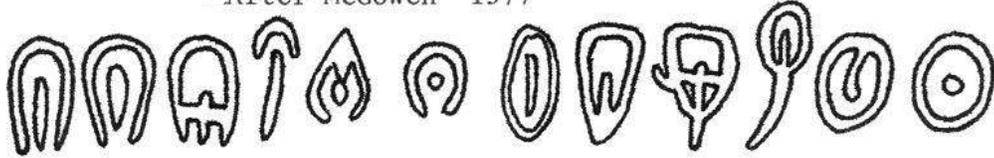


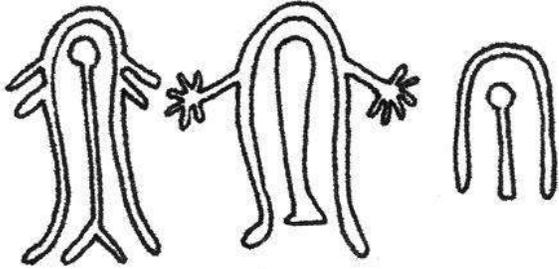
Figure 7



After McGowen 1977



After Thomas 1976



After Voegelin 1938

Figure 8

ductive hunting system (Thomas 1976:71).

Because of the contexts and situations represented at the sites Thomas has studied, she has provided substantial evidence to back up her well-founded conclusions. She has done this equally as well as McGowan. Each has gathered enough evidence to support the conclusions they feel the artists intended to imply. Voegelin (1938) shows similar representations. He explains (with ethnographic evidence) that the Tubatulabal attribute this form as representing water spirits (Figure 8C). For other examples which illustrate that a similar element can mean different things by their contexts, see *The Enclosure, Another Concept* (Warner n.d.).

Even though the identification of the concepts has been made, like the roadrunner track, etc., interpretations on the highest level that would draw out deeper meanings cannot be made because this may not only represent the object itself, but activities or attributes associated with that object.

These points should provide sufficient insight into the facts that: (1) Interpretations can be complex and difficult if not impossible to obtain. (2) There can be no universal meaning for any one glyph wherever it appears. (3) A glyph's contexts and associations need to be considered to gain a better understanding of its concept. The greater the number of representations, the better our understanding. (4) It is important to be careful of the types of terms we use to describe these glyphs. (5) It is safe to use glyph identity, (the name of the object) only where content and context indicate or imply concepts. (6) It is important that before identity can be positively established one needs to have several definite or concrete concept associations.

Repetitions, variation and context are the keys to establishing the significance of a glyph. Being unable to find the one conclusive example for concept association an intended concept cannot be positive. The examples in Figure 4B could represent several different concepts. To get these points across the artist placed these elements in more natural, complete or positive compositions. When more associations can

be found the conclusions then have more credibility. The most important thing to remember is that these glyphs can and often do represent something else.

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