

AN INTRODUCTION TO PROBLEMS IN ELEMENT AND CONCEPT IDENTIFICATION AND INTERPRETATION

BY

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There is a need to consider some of the different possibilities of specific element and concept identification. Even when many professional researchers try to avoid specific interpretations they find that it's an intrinsic part of rock art research.

First, several different levels of identification and interpretation are possible. These range from simple naming of elements or concepts to the implication, intent, meaning, or significance they may have. Identifying natural looking or realistic elements, the lowest level of interpretation, assigns a label from the corresponding object in the natural world. A few examples are: shields, atlats, corrals, sheep, snakes, deer, and lizards.

At lower levels, identification and interpretation are often synonymous, even though meanings may be different. As one gets more involved in rock art research, the two become less synonymous. However, even naturalistic labels are often superficial, because the elements often have other, deeper meanings of greater significance. As an example, anthropomorphs usually carry meanings beyond the concept of the figure as a member of the human race. The human form can also carry meanings of non-mortals such as deities or intermediaries. Position, status, or various actions or activities can also be implied. Anthropomorphs may represent such things as holy men, chiefs, warriors, captives, brides, representations of death, birth or conception.

The intent, identification, or interpretation of even a simple isolated element is not always clear. What is identified as a lizard may in reality be a salamander, with supernatural overtones of spirituality and purification, or may be the mark or signature of a member of the snake clan (Wright 1972:85). Also please remember that very few humpbacked, phallic, flute players are Kokopelli. If it is possible to retrieve intent or meaning it will be by context and detail.

Other problems occur when elements and motifs become more stylized. The more abstracted elements become, without ethnographic input, the greater the inability to derive a meaning, since those elements often represent non-tangible or abstract ideas, or the supernatural side of mortal forms.

Though death is a tangible concept, it can be represented in different ways. Not all horizontal or inverted depictions of bodies represent death itself, but can represent other concepts that relate to but are not actually representations of death. Many of those are concerned with the shamanic ecstatic experience.

The Aztec represent the idea of joy by depicting a man splashing around in a tub of

water, as in the name glyph of a town "the place of joy." But that could also be interpreted as a place of happiness. The exact interpretation may not be as important as the general concept behind the idea. (It is the degree of standardization that creates specific interpretations.)

Identification is only a small part of interpretation. It is a simple process, but whether the professional likes it or not, it is often a necessary one to complete any other phase of graphic research. For the professional to do stylistic comparisons and statistical analyses, an element must be given a name. Thus he enters the world of interpretation. Often on the more stylized elements, labels express inaccurate or inappropriate interpretations of the element's real identity. Some of these are wheels, horseshoes, candlesticks, or even rainbows or ladders, or the more abstract representations of such things as atlatis, vulvas, or corrals. Nomenclature has been a great hinderance in allowing the professional to work with rock art. (Warner 1982b:158, 1982c:114).

Interpretation or more detailed and specific identification, on the other hand, are not always necessary in rock art research. Because of its questionable reliability, this is the last area professionals explore, if they explore it at all. But it is the first area amateurs usually pursue. Interpretation is a complex process and if it is to be done properly, it involves many procedures.

To be considered along with identification and interpretation are associations, context, glyph construction, combinations, variations, incorporations, stylizations, or types of abstractions, and meanings extended from these which are more obvious. It is also necessary to make comparisons of similar glyphs on other panels to determine if there is a repeated pattern in form (structure), content, conventionalization, and differences in the concepts being represented. In doing that one must concentrate on the differences in their representations. Remember that it is the differences that will illuminate the broader picture of meaning and intent. In other words, a more holistic study of the whole symbol package. Simply identifying the *object* that an element is thought to represent, or be a part of, is only the first step in a long process. Identifying the *associated concept* is another more complicated part of the process. When assigning a label (e.g. anthropomorph) or a conceptual semantic category, (e.g. deity or katsina) it should not, but often does suggest meaning.

Interpreting detailed concepts is speculative, difficult, and risky at best. I do not feel more detailed interpretation beyond concept identification is justified at this time. Native Americans, themselves, disagree on detailed interpretations, admitting their inability to derive finer details (Bill Dalton, ex-Hopi priest, personal communication 1966, Harold Tuchins, Navajo Singer, personal communication 1966).

It is the intent of my research to explore and test the limits and feasibility of simple element and concept identifications and interpretation. To do so, three areas need to be considered: 1) What is the possible degree of accuracy of element identity and interpretation in a given case? 2) How far can identity and interpretation be taken, or in other words, what is the limit of variation? 3) What is the potential for identifying the more abstract concepts?

As mentioned, it is necessary for us to accurately identify what an element is, in order

to accurately interpret it. But the term assigned may not represent what an element meant to its maker. Elements representing identifiable objects from nature can be properly identified by the most general, all-inclusive terms possible. If it is not obvious, non-generic terms are the only acceptable forms of identification (see Warner 1982b for a discussion of non-generic terms).

Names should only be used as tools to communicate. What that element really means is a different matter. A simple example would be the name of a set of two opposed, connected triangles, simple-looking but actually complex. What should it be called? It really doesn't matter, as long as it doesn't assign an improper meaning. And what does it mean? Martineau (1973:106,134) states that this symbol is opposed arrowheads, representing war or conflict. To the Navajo it could represent a hair bun called bitsiyel. It could also represent a Navajo deity, one of the hero (or war) twins. To the Hopi it is one variation of the Butterfly Clan signatures. There is also sufficient concept association to establish that in some areas or styles it has been used to represent an abstract human form, or the act of conception.

In many cases specific meanings may never be understood, especially when concepts are complex, symbolic, or highly abstracted, occur with little or no repetition, or with no ethnographic information. In some cases, given sufficient material, an understanding of the source of, or inspiration for, the form, or of the intent of the symbol can be inferred. Since it is easy to read more into symbols than is really there when looking for concepts (an eisegesis), it is well to look for repetitions of an element to see what is revealed.

To analyze the material and answer these questions, progression needs to go from whole, natural forms to the more abstract or partial ones, or from the known to the unknown. Comparisons also need to be made between local representations and those at greater distances. When similar glyphs occur, they do not always follow style boundaries as may be expected. Similarities often occur whenever there was communication, or in corridors where people passed in seasonal movement.

After considering some of the general problems in identification, four papers were written to treat specific problems by addressing: 1) full, natural bird forms; 2) stylized bird forms; 3) bird-like anthropomorphs; and 4) abstract birds. These also illustrate additional problems in element and concept identification. *Because the illustrations were lost in the process of editing and must be redrawn, they have been omitted from this publication, but will appear in Volume One of Rock Art And The Symboling Process.*

The probability of identifying specific elements or concepts depends on the forms of the graphics and also the types of concepts being represented. Abstract elements, or philosophical or emotional concepts, are naturally harder to identify than those which are more organic, physical, and concrete. When a society's graphic system becomes more sophisticated, its symbolism usually becomes equally complicated. This does not imply that only the more recent styles are sophisticated. On the contrary, many older styles are far more complicated than those from the protohistoric periods. Styles have gone through both evolution and what has been referred to as devolution.

One serious problem in the communication process is that if the researcher doesn't get enough of the facts comprising the "message", if there was one, the intent of the glyph maker will be misunderstood. If your concern is interpretation, consider then some ramifications of communication. To properly communicate an idea or a concept there needs to be a SENDER, a RECEIVER, and a MESSAGE. Most important, there needs to be a shared basis for comprehension. Without any one of these, there is a lack of communication. Strange (1986) aptly illustrates this with elements that could not be fully understood without current ethnographic input.

In communication the message may be in the form of speech or writing, or more abstract and symbolic, in the form of either iconic or non-iconic art. To prevent misunderstandings and ambiguities, the signs and symbols that compose the message must be comprehensible to both parties. Because of this, isolated single cases in the field or in a researcher's text are not sufficient to support a supposed meaning. The more examples of a specific type of element the better (Warner 1984a:21). But as Strange (1986) points out, without ethnographic evidence even repetition may leave us without the real meaning, as it initially did in the study of U-brackets (Warner 1984b:21).

The SENDER, or glyph maker, on the one hand must carefully consider the intended RECEIVER, if there is one (mortal or not), plus the process of giving and getting meaning. The SENDER, if he in actuality really intended to transmit a message, must consider and select the images to best portray the concept he wishes to represent. This is usually done in a culturally preferred manner. These cultural preferences can be used in part to define a distinctive style, any other examples can thus be used as a comparison. Cultural preferences can also be used to establish the significance of a symbol to the author or the group to which he belonged.

Sometimes we feel the SENDER didn't carefully consider these aspects, and needed to depict more or different information to get his idea across. To the author of the panel, it was probably sufficient for him and any intended recipient of his message. But all too often, what we say does not always convey exactly what we intend it to imply. If an idea or a concept was important to a people as a collective social body, it will repeat again and again. This is why repetition and variations degrees of conventionalization are so necessary to help extract more specific meanings. In some, if not many cases, glyphs were not meant to be "read" as such, but to be felt or experienced. There may not have been a specific message that was intended by its author - thus no SENDER existed. "The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance; for this, and not the external mannerisms and detail, is true reality" (Aristotle, author's class notes). Even though "rock art" may be more properly defined as writing, and not art as we understand it, the value of rock "art" still applies.

Sometimes the purpose of these inscriptions was more emotional than intellectual, or more personal and private than public. Some symbols may be representations of dreams and visions rather than documentations of historical events. Sometimes the important thing was perhaps the act of making the glyph, or the process of line accumulation. In these situations communication between beings was not intended and thus no overt message was sent and an in-depth "translation" as such is impossible. Even though no (obvious) message was sent, subliminal

messages may be obvious on a psychological level (C.F. Fromm 1951). However, what needs stressing is that the context in which a glyph was produced and its concepts and connections with other facts can still be established (Marshack 1979).

The RECEIVER, the glyph observer, on the other hand, needs to consider the SENDER, the situation, and the kinds of messages that can, and can not be sent. Ethnographic information about glyph makers, as far as it is known, needs to be studied before one can fully grasp the complexity of this process (also it is necessary to know the ethnographer, when and how and from whom he collected his information). It is easy to say "This locates water", "That means to go over a hill", or "That depicts a specific ceremony", which can be the case. But until one has learned the types of information important to a certain group, one will never realize how complicated this process can be. Many symbols are like dreams - the makers are the dreamers - the messages are only vaguely seen, coming from beyond their misty worlds.

Mallory (1881), Kirkland (1938), Malouf (1958), and Kroeber (1958:1-19) all discovered these principles when they tried to find meanings in various signs. Each was led to examine sign language, in an attempt to shed light on the subject. But each author failed to find much similarity between rock art and sign language. Kroeber states "specific resemblances between sign language and pictographs are very few, and similarities are only generic, both methods appeal...only to sight. The positive conventions which are so strong in sign language are lacking in pictographs."

Now consider regional variations in signing. Variation in manual signs representing abstract concepts will be found, especially while certain bodily needs, actions, and activities have the least amount of variation. In using graphic symbols as a medium to express ideas, there are likewise several different ways to illustrate the same idea.

The hearing-impaired, though more homogenous than aboriginal societies, have considerable regional variation in signing. With a need for speed and informality, the deaf know many more signs than the alphabet. Such signs are analogous to native sign language. No matter how distasteful Martineau's work may be to some professionals, someone needs to examine his system (which is to a large extent based on signing) to verify the validity of his interpretations. We have found cases that support several of his beliefs, as well as others that we think questionable. The fact that earlier researchers couldn't find similarities between rock art and hand signs is probably because they were looking for the wrong thing: physical similarities. That is, they were not looking at the right thing: abstract similarities. Martineau may have found what the others missed - representations and abstract similarities rather than hand-like symbols, but he may have taken some of those concepts beyond acceptable limits.

However, there are several reasons why it is impractical to consider universal meanings for either manual or graphic signs. Symbols and meanings change over time (compare De Santillana and Von Dechend 1992:131,376, Freud 1967:89, Fromm 1951:196,107,213,248). A prime example of how a symbol does not have a universal meaning, even within one society, is the spiral (Fig. 1). Among the Hopi and Navajo there are many meanings for the spiral (see below). The symbol is identified as a spiral, but what does that tell us? What physical or

conceptual object or entity or concept does it represent? This illustrates problems of element and concept identification. Giving an element a label does not necessarily define what that object represents in the mind of the glyph maker. Some natural objects present no problem in decipherment, while others do. Concepts and more complex objects represented by non-specific natural forms are more difficult to identify.

Examples represent different levels of symbolism. The application of the symbol will determine its specific concept and its various levels of meaning. When inquiring of a Native American what a spiral may represent, one may not get the "truth" as we understand it. If you have your consultant's confidence and persist in questioning, you still may get various answers. It depends on the type of question, the way the question was posed, who was asked, the place the query was made, the time of year and the day the question was asked, other aspects of the situation, mood, sincerity or degree of knowledge of the informant, and mainly, his assessment of your need to know.

Thus even from informants it may be difficult to derive one specific or universal meaning. From past experience, and according to different consultants, the spiral with or without a context, may represent such things as springs, ponds, waterholes, windmills, whirlpools, whirlwinds, shrines, mazes, concepts of fertility, virility, testicles, vulvas, sipaapuni, concepts of emergence, numerical sequences, migration series, directional indicators, concepts of cyclical repetition, repeated time, seasonal and solar implications, the sun itself, the center of creation, the beginning and passage of time, numbers of years, infinity, eternity, or innumerability. These are all different but somewhat related concepts (Fig. 1). But none of these statements define the meaning for such things as the spiral as a foot or on a foot, or as an eye, or as a head. That is an extension of the meaning of a spiral associated with the symbol used as the vehicle transmitting its own meaning. In each different case, the element's label was "a spiral." But identification of the meaning may be impossible without the original author's input. If one studies Martineau's interpretive work on Clear Creek Canyon the reader will find many inconsistencies in the use of the spiral as a directional indicator.

Other non-native interpretations have been proposed but, according to logic, for the most part are unreasonable. One poignant example being, if a spiral turns to the right "things are going right" (meaning all right, in the sense of good). And when it turns to the left "things are not going right" (sinister or not good).

Specific associations may give clues, but without a definitive context the associations often remain a mystery. We can often see a glyph and identify it as a sheep, deer, man, etc. Sometimes along with this is a more complex association of hunting which could be represented in many different ways. Often, examples show anthropomorphs in attitudes representing the hunter, some kind of weapon or trap representing the concept of death or capture, and an animal representing the quarry. Attitude of the objects, incorporations, and the rest of the context help define the maker's intent.

In-depth statements beyond the identification of this concept as a hunting scene may not

really be made with any confidence because of the following considerations. Various problems exist in identifying time, type of action, or such things as motive or intent, not to mention literal vs. figurative implications. A figurative or metaphorical intent of hunting (Fig. 1) could be the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. For sympathetic magic, the artist in his present time draws a past-tense, imaginary, desired action for a future realization. The scene could also have been drawn prior to the action without implying sympathetic magic. If drawn after, it could be historical documentation. It may be part of his placation to the game stewards for permission, protection, or success in hunting. It could be a request that the hunt not endanger the preservation of the species. Or it could simply be acknowledging gratitude either before or after the fact. It may also be an identification marker for tribal, clan, or group hunting grounds, or simply imply a good place to hunt. It could mark an intrusion into others' territories, a type of coup. It may be a part of a ritual to dedicate that area for specific types of hunting or hunting in general. No one knows the exact mental processes which produce these scenes. Because of this, a limit must be placed on the degree to which interpretations can be made. A simple hunting scene (or any other composition) can be very complex, symbolic, or allegorical.

How do we know if these symbols, obviously representing economic subsistence and survival to us, do not represent the search for spiritual enlightenment to ancient symbols? The stag may represent a deity, the giver of light and knowledge. The bow and arrow may represent spiritual preparation, and the act of submission to obtain his goal. The hunter may represent one on his vision quest; Boma Johnson (personal communications) also discovered this possibility.

Even in the case of sheep and sheep symbolism, other implications would need to be present for its identification as anything besides or beyond a sheep (c.f. Martineau 1973:48-52, and Warner 1982a:117). There are several researchers besides myself who believe that sheep may also represent, or be associated with, concepts of time: specific times, or beings associated with time. But in these unusual situations they are never "normal" representations of sheep.

In various situations sheep have been identified as representatives of the One- and Two-Horned Societies among the Hopi. In some situations One-Horned archers were added later to a panel and depicted as shooting two-horned sheep. In light of other modifications, sometimes in the same panel, two-horned sheep have later been turned into one-horned, two-legged sheep, indicating concepts too involved to interpret, beyond speculation. In some scenes of pregnancy and birthing where the conceived is a sheep, the identity of a mythical being may be involved. And there is an ever-growing category of what we are beginning to call Sun Rams, sheep incorporating solar symbols. However, with repetitions, varied forms, or context, sometimes more evidence is present, but still the problem remains to properly interpret it (Warner 1983:3).

When does a snake represent just a snake, or a clan signature, a directional device, a god, trail, boundary, cartographical feature, a solar shrine, lightning, transformation, movement in general, water or any combination of these? Do all undulating lines represent snakes? Probably not. Without ethnographic evidence or the author's input we can not always tell which alternative to choose. That is why repetitions of more complete and definitive context were usually made by the glyph makers, to provide more concrete concept associations. Sometimes it is possible to tell that something is going on without being able to tell what it is. On the other

hand, some very interesting breakthroughs are being made in some unexpected areas. I hope that for those who can see, this series will help them see more patterning and possibilities than before.

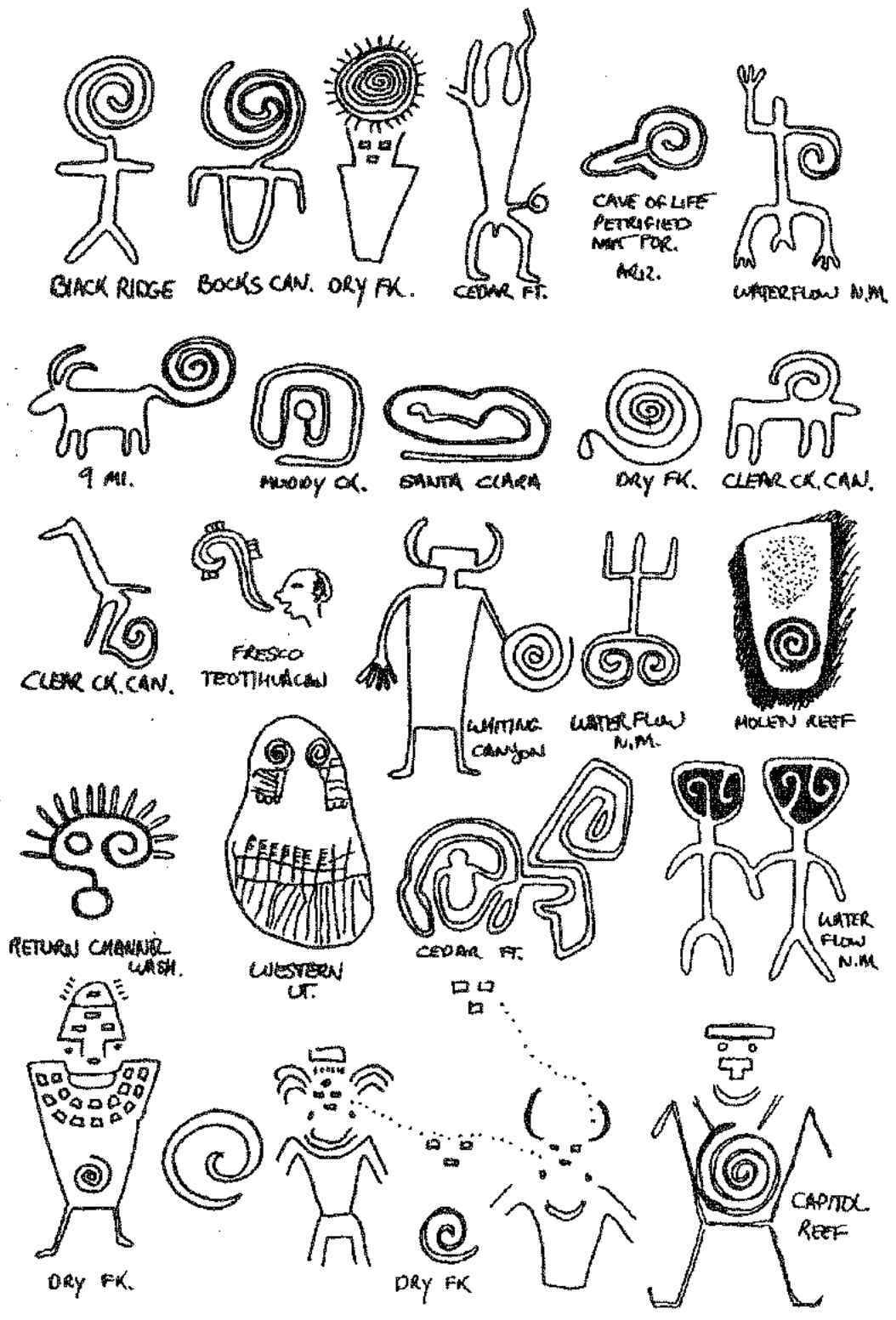


Figure 1

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