

## THE UNOBTVIOUS SYMBOLISM AT COPPERMINE SPRINGS, ARIZONA

BY  
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The dirt road that leaves East then turns North of Gap, Arizona, follows a sandy incline as it approaches the Coppermine Trading Post. Below the crest of the ridge at the Trading Post is a large, bald dome of slick rock just to the west of the road. Within this massive outcrop is an alcove that shelters a simple hand pump called Coppermine Springs. Exploring the spring reveals ancient remains of hand and toe holes in the alcove that aids in the ascent to the top. This only provides a panoramic view of the surrounding country. If one moves around the base, he will encounter a few scattered chips of an ancient PII encampment, identifiable by the sherds that occasionally glisten in the sand. With the sporadic remains, one would hopefully find some petroglyphs, but would be disappointed by only finding a few simple scratches and vague figures pecked in the outcrop. After that brief exploration and possible disappointment, but being refreshed, one would continue on without knowing the message that exists in the stone or its significance.

This message is not hidden, and depending on the circumstances, is not difficult to find. It, however, only exists in the minds of one group of people who still live there. Without having a trace of it written on the rocks it would be impossible for the casual observer to discover or retrieve such significance. How many similar stories will never be known because the ones who created stories that were used in an era have gone, and the dust that remains is silent?

While living north of the spring for a year, it was the closest water source. During that year we used the spring until it dried up. Many times when we stopped there for a drink to cool us from the hot sun or to fill our cans, we would find young Navajo kids there playing as they worked their way up the hill to the Trading post or older folks resting in the shade waiting for someone to give them a ride.

It was at times like these that gave me the nickname "Na'adaXkidgii", which loosely means one who asks a lot of questions. It was the children who I loved to talk and play with the most because they were much less reserved than the older ones. They are the ones who showed me the Ute boy and Navajo girl in the rocks. Their story of these figures told of what anthropology refers to as institutional reinforcement.

The symbolism that these two natural features contain, in the older days, was a powerful force in maintaining the preferred and acceptable social morals. The attitude that the children so unreservedly expressed reflected the concept that the story was intended to promote.

Long ago there was a beautiful girl that lived over the hill. She so impressed the young men that they said she had no problem finding suitors. Her father, a Hataaʻii, (singer) was very protective, and selective in who was allowed to court her.

During those years she began to meet with a handsome Ute boy. Because her father would not accept that relationship, he refused to let them meet any longer, but by then it was too late, the two had fallen in love. During the appropriate times she would be coy with the suitors her parents allowed to court, but late at night she would sneak out to meet the young Ute down at the spring.

This went on long enough that with her refusal of perfectly good suitors, her parents became suspicious that something inappropriate was going on. Late one night, aware of her disappearance, they followed her. To their great disappointment and consternation they found them. After severely chastising her, they drove him away threatening him with his life. Because of their love they didn't stop their secret visits. Early one morning the father again caught them at the spring where she leaned back against the cliff, holding her hands behind her. He was sitting on a rock wooing her when all the anger and power of her father broke loose.

It is said that, if that's what she wanted, that's what she would get. So today she still stands with her hands behind her back leaning against the cliff looking to the north. He still sits near by, looking to the south (Figures 1,2). The children believe that they will always be together there. Their punishment of having been turned to stone will always keep them apart. They are so close, yet so far apart. That's why tears come from his eyes, he will never be able to speak to or touch her, yet he is so close to her.

The impact that story had on the hearts and minds of the children was enough to reinforce the appropriate marriage morals of the society. There is more that could be said about the social function of this symbolism, but the important fact that needs to be considered here is that there is such a tremendous amount of symbolism incorporated with in the natural features that is not visible or retrievable to the casual visitor. This stresses two important facts. The first is that without ethnographic contacts and information we lose so much that otherwise would be virtually impossible to retrieve on our own; even if there had been any inscriptions that related to the story. The second fact is that retrieving ethnographic information isn't easy. When asking the older ones of the story, they would usually laugh it off, saying that it was a children's story.

The most important fact is that form, once given meaning, has function. And that the finding of forms is far more important than having to create them (i.e. making rock art) (Hedges

1985: 25,27). Simply pecking the symbols relating this story onto a cliff at the spring wouldn't have had the impact that being able to show the children the couple there would have. Even with the 'writing' of such stories on the rocks, the social, moral and emotional impact the image of the natural features imparts is far more than I believe we realize.

There are several other stories I know of, each with their counterparts in natural features in stone. Even though not all have socially reinforcing morals, they all entertain and enlighten the children as they pass the time during the long ride to and from the Trading post.

This is a situation that proves that we are limited in what we as rock art researchers can retrieve in our efforts to find the limits of symbolic extraction. Interpretation, although being relative, does play an important part in our work, from simply naming an element to determining the concept of what a figure might mean. In succeeding papers, I will present a few situations that will illustrate other challenges to the process of extracting symbolism.

#### REFERENCES

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