

Parowan Gap
II

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Figure 1

We have explored in depth the "Philosophy of Ernst Cassirer: Mythical Thought". In this work he recognized and elucidated the function of light, space, time, and number in the consciousness of early man. Parowan Gap, Utah is a rock art site where the petroglyphic writings illustrate the use and interaction of these concepts precisely as Ernst Cassirer has related.

Heading west of Parowan, Utah, a gravel road crosses the valley floor, enters a desert range of mountains and winds through a small canyon until the canyon widens into a little valley. The valley is surrounded by rolling hills or mountains on all sides with the exception of a very narrow and precipitous gap to the west-northwest. The mountain divides here as though it has been split with an ax. The road cuts through the gap coming dangerously close to thousands of Indian petroglyphic inscriptions. The gap is only about two hundred yards long and not much wider than the graveled road.

This petroglyphic site is interesting in that it consists almost entirely of lines and dots, making it slightly enigmatic and displaying an overwhelming fascination with number. Number is one of Cassirer's elements of the mythical religious consciousness. Can we therefore assume that the other three elements of light, space and time also function at this site?

The most conspicuous glyph here is a large "V" shaped figure inscribed on an east-facing surface such that the observer is facing west (Fig. 1). But where a normal "V" converges at the vertex, here the lines narrow and then broaden again into a large bulbous sack. The two arms of the "V" have been inscribed with many, many tick marks. There are 151 of these tick marks along the line to be more precise. I count 34 marks on the right arm and 115 on the left arm of the "V".

Before we can answer the mystery of this glyph we must return now to Ernst Cassirer's explanation of the effect of light on the mythical, religious consciousness. Could his statement pertaining to light bursting forth out of darkness apply here? The gap itself becomes operative in our explanation. On what date does the sun set in the gap as seen by an observer standing in the small valley and looking through the portal to the west? It is important to note here that the observer will also be facing the "V" glyph. If one sets a transit very near the county road and sights through the gap the azimuth and altitude of the horizon at the center of the gap, it is Az: 295.33, Alt: 0.5 degrees. When this azimuth and altitude are entered into "SHAMOS", the computer program for archaeoastronomy, it returns two dates in the year for a sunset in the approximate center of the gap: May 18th and July 24th for 1992. An observer standing in the small valley east of the Gap or even looking down on the valley from one of the two mountains on either side of the Gap would now experience what Cassirer termed "the bursting forth of light out of darkness". At the moment of sunset a shaft of light cuts across the valley (See Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

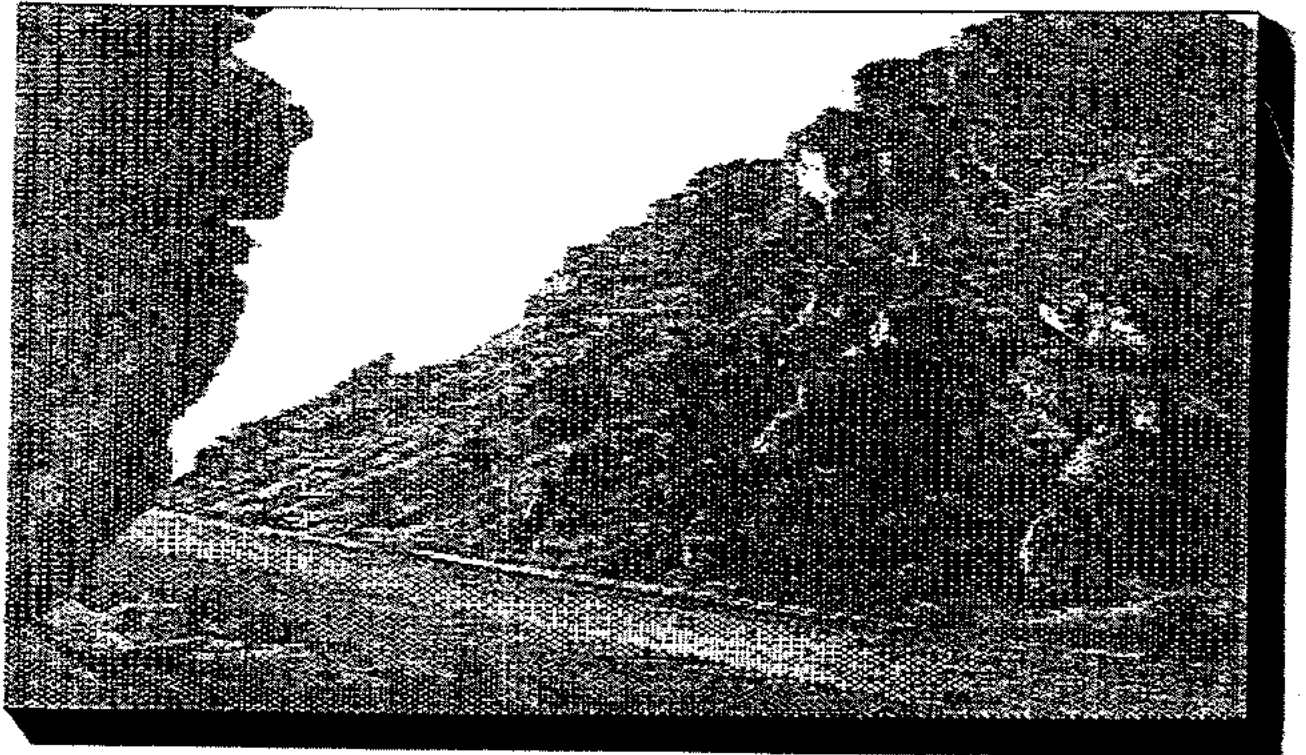


Figure 2

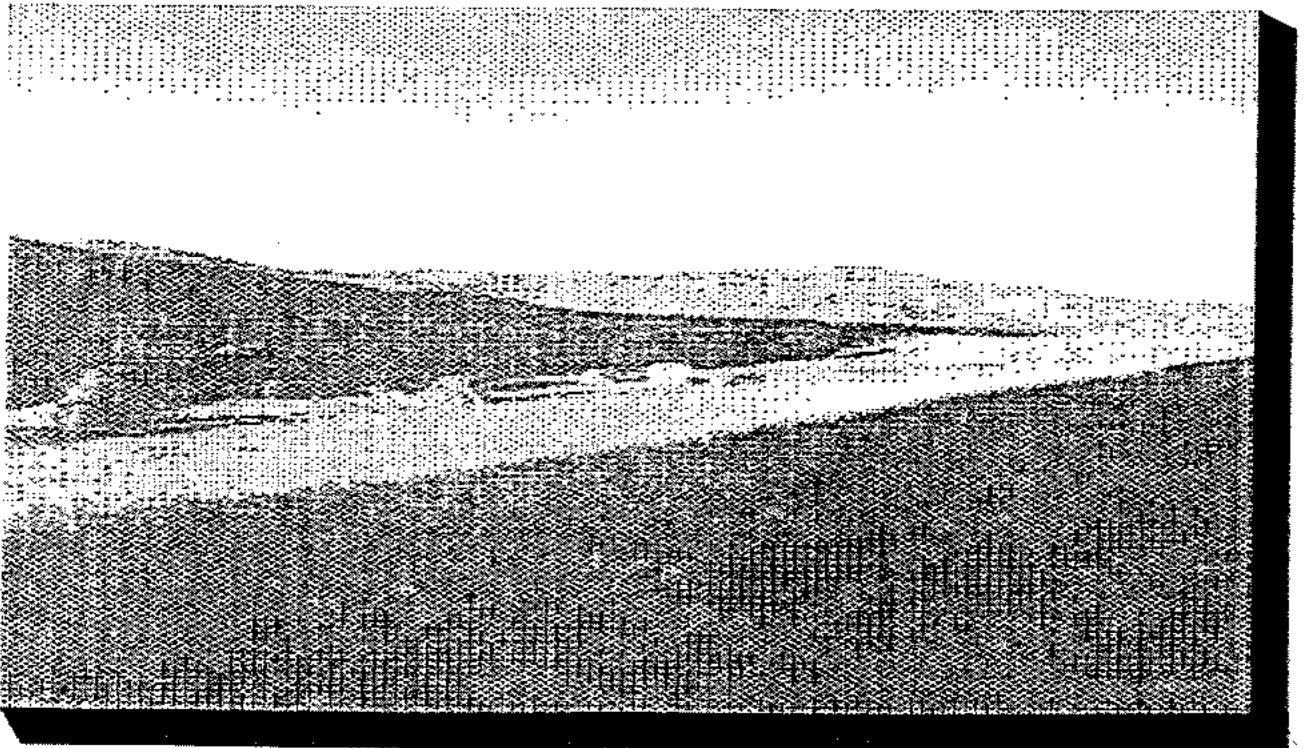


Figure 3

This phenomenon only occurs a few days each year. There is good evidence that it was observed by the creators of these glyphs with great awe. The phenomena was also used as a natural observatory or calendrical event. How many days is it from May 18th, the 139th day of the year, when the light shines through the gap until the summer solstice, 173rd day of the year? This gives a difference of 34 days. After the sun shines through the Gap on May 18th it continues north, to the observer's right, until the summer solstice where it stops and starts back to the south. It will take the same 34 days for the sun to return to the gap on or about July 24th. For someone observing the sunset through the Gap this is to the right. How many tick marks are there on the right-hand side of the strange "V" glyph? I count 34. Now the mysterious glyph is becoming much less mysterious. Following this line of reasoning, let's count the tick marks on the left-hand side of the "V" glyph. I count, including the tick marks on both sides of the left arm plus the 23 on the arc-shaped appendage, 149. How many days from the 24th of July, the 208th day of the year, to the winter solstice, the 356th day of the year? The difference is 150 days. From the date, July 24th, when the sun sets in the gap, it takes 150 days for the sun to work its way south (that is to the observer's left) where on the winter solstice (Dec. 21st), it reverses and starts back to the north. It takes the same 150 days for the sun to work its way back to the north where it sets in the gap again on May 18th of the succeeding year. This little calendar, based on the motion of the setting sun and using the gap as an index point, reflects the half year. For most years this is not a whole number and the odd day must work its way into the system. This is self correcting as in all solar calendars that work by observation. I have rounded off the numbers for simplicity. The counts of the tick marks are somewhat arbitrary and may vary a bit depending on the person making the count. There are a number of dates that qualify for sunsets in the gap. Some of this ambiguity may not have existed anciently because the observer could have observed through the gap at or over posts, stones, or cairns. If the "V" shaped glyph is overlaid on the topographic map of the gap, we then discover that the glyph is a fairly good representation of the gap in relationship to the solstice sunsets and the local topography with the bulbous loop representing the small valley (See Fig. 4).



Figure 4

Conclusion

Where has this taken us with respect to Cassirer's philosophy on light, space, time and number? We have in the this one glyph all four elements inter-related and inter-dependent. Light is the basic origin of the glyph's meaning and function. The narrow passage through Parowan Gap was represented as the glyph's narrow neck. The mystic space (its topography) of the site was then established in relationship to light, time and number. Number was incorporated into the glyph as a necessary component of time, time that extended into the past and the future through the medium of number. Not only was the motion of the sun now predictable, but the seasons could now be reckoned, and times of harvest and migration could be foretold. The motion of the sun, the flooding of light through the gap, the changing of the seasons and the yearly routine of the people now played together in a full participation mystique with the surrounding universe.

There are many such sites where naturally occurring calendars were observed and designated with glyphic writings. These sites, being natural phenomena and not contrived or constructed, had that added quality of earth-sun union. As the people observed the event, they participated with the earth and sun in the ebb and flow of time. Previously in this paper I have mentioned the archetypes of Carl Jung. An archetype now comes into play that will become the subject of my next paper, the "Great Mother". These openings in the earth (the gap in this case) become the openings through which the sun is born and consumed by the earth, a universal symbol of the Great Mother.