

A BUDGET OF IGNORANCE, YOURS AND MINE; PROFESSIONALS AND AMATEURS IN ROCK ART

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When a professional offers to talk about ignorance to a mixed gathering, you can be fairly certain that the ignorance he addresses will be theirs and the wisdom dispensed his own. I am a professional of sorts. And the title of this address certainly promises a consideration of ignorance, but in this case the stereotype does not hold. For one thing, I do not consider myself very much of a professional in rock art studies. For another, I want to talk about what amateurs in rock art and professionals have to learn from each other, and what I want to say can fit in a single sentence that Oliver Cromwell once offered the Scottish parliament: "By the bowels of Christ, gentlemen, think it possible you may be mistaken!" Let me elaborate.

Few amateurs realize how much they count for in the life of the mind. You can sense this fact in the sad fate of the word amateur and its derivatives. No one likes to hear his or her work called amateurish. Yet amateur comes into our language meaning "one who loves..." long before it slumps to mean "one who dabbles." And there are intellectual pursuits that exist today primarily because they have been nurtured by amateurs, that is, by good men and women who pursued them lovingly. When fields of study are for some reason unpopular, as rock art was for much of this century because it resisted the techniques employed by scientific archaeology, such fields must be maintained and advanced by amateurs. Why? An amateur can risk being attracted by an interesting question. Few professionals have that luxury; they tend to develop noses not for questions but for opportunities for funding and personal advancement. If that claim seems cynical, just look around you at all that amateurs have had to do.

I first saw the work of William Blake in an undergraduate textbook in abnormal psychology. The page was labelled "An example of schizophrenic drawing." I figured out very soon after I would rather be mad with Blake than sane with my psychology professors, but that was pure luck. Today, all of us can know Blake because the Blake Trust has labored so hard to produce careful editions of the works that professionals in art and poetry had ignored for so long. The person most responsible for the Blake Trust and its fine editions is Geoffrey Keynes, surgeon and amateur Blake scholar. The resemblance of this literary situation to rock art hardly needs pointing. For most of our century archaeologists have had more important things to do than trifle with these preposterous designs, so amateurs have had to save them for us. Just look at the informants Garrick Mallery

depended upon.

The role of the necessary amateur is by no means limited to clerk-work in the humanities. Much of what we can do with computers these days, particularly in the way of time sharing systems, we owe to the fact that the creator of the world's first laboratory devoted to artificial intelligence, Professor Marvin Minsky of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, had the good sense to throw his lab and its machines open every night to members of the Tech Model Railroad Club, a gaggle of teenage amateurs horny for systems to play with and able to make things happen that Minsky's professional consultants couldn't even dream of. Similarly, a tool we all depend upon, color transparency film, originated in 1917 with two teenage musicians, Leopold Godowsky and Leopold Mannes, working in the Godowsky family bathroom. Godowsky and Mannes did not join the physicists and chemists at Kodak until 1930 but when they did they became known by the professionals at Kodak not as Godowsky and Mannes but as "God and Man." Again and again, when a subject is new or marginal or for some reason suspect, professionals, the hired guns of the intellectual world look elsewhere, and we depend upon amateurs to ride into town and save our asses. That is precisely why organizations such as the Utah Rock Art Research Association are so very important, and why amateurs must be very careful not to fail their considerable responsibilities.

How do amateurs fail? By learning the wrong thing from professionals, arrogance and intellectual narrowness. How might they succeed? By learning from professionals the most valuable thing they have to offer which is not certainty or even competence but openness. Working without licenses, degrees, ranks, titles, institutions or funding, amateur scholarship is a lonely business, and the amateur emerges from his or her isolation with a quite understandable edginess, a reluctance that is sometimes a refusal to accept criticism and to grow from it. But if the amateur declines to enter, indeed to seek out, that rowdy give and take so necessary to the life of the mind, then his or her endeavors are wasted and we are all much the poorer for it. "By the bowels of Christ, gentlemen [and ladies], think it possible you may be mistaken!"

I will never drive this point home if I remain so general and so distant from the push and sway of current rock art studies, so let me turn to two reigning orthodoxies that threaten to infect amateur and professional alike with arrogance and rigidity. I have in mind epigraphy and archaeoastronomy. I choose these two because they are current and because they permit me to play both sides of the street. I can consider epigraphy as a professional because I have spent most of forty years working with the problems that come with establishing the meaning of texts. Archaeoastronomy I approach with the innocent ignorance of a baby who scarcely knows which end of the telescope to look

through-unless it's pointed at my neighbor's bedroom window. With these two and their attendant problems I hope to demonstrate a necessary relationship between amateur and professional without embarrassing or indicting any one but myself and one or two others who offer themselves as targets in print.

I. Epigraphy

Epigraphy is an ancient and honorable academic specialty with a long tradition of competence and achievement particularly in the languages of classical Greece and Rome. It has been most successful in working with cultures that have left behind great monuments precisely because epigraphy is the study of monumental writing, public writing displayed in public fashion in stone or metal that it may blare and last, and not the other looser, quieter texts one finds on paper. Because the epigrapher deals in monumental writing, he or she recognizes a rather narrow range of subjects and styles in the texts he or she studies, a range that falls across the grain of much of what we know about the North American past and forces a decided squint in this way of looking at rock art. Epigraphy assumes that anything worth saying must be a public matter to be recorded with dignity and purpose. When an inscription is religious, it concerns priests and rituals to be observed. When it is secular, it concerns political power exercised not in the abstract but by this person over this place at this time. But the religious experience of Native America is often private, intensely personal and quite fluid in its doctrines as opposed to the rigidities inscribed lastingly by a state orthodoxy. For most of the continent religion is a matter of shamans not of priests, of individual vision quests not of prescribed rituals; and when these lonely epiphanies produce the stuff of rock art, as many have argued they do, they result in enshrinements rather than announcements, things done for that present moment without regard for the future rather than set down to be understood by someone else later on.

Similarly, the political life of North America seems to have little need for the cartouche that has provided so handy a key to the working epigrapher. The cartouche is a neatly framed inscription containing a name and some fact about that name's rule. The same cartouche often appears in many places and once recognized can provide a first step in reading an unknown language. But dusky kings and Queens who rule a forest empire and are proud enough in their rule to produce cartouches are, for the most part, a European invention. Rule in North America was more often an ad hoc arrangement for specific and quite transitory purposes than it was a reign to be inscribed in lasting monuments. Of course, some North Americans did keep historical records; the winter counts painted on buffalo hides by the Kiowa are famous. But in the 59 years of winter counts that James Mooney studied, running from 1833 to 1892, not one entry memorializes and individual's rule in epigraphic fashion. (Mooney 1898)

Epigraphy and North America don't seem to mesh. South America, perhaps. The monumental centers of Central America, most certainly. But the rock art of North America seems to be a different business. It even looks different from the epigraphies we can recognize. Lasting public inscriptions are necessarily well-mannered and regular. The inscription on Trajan's monument is so firmly styled that to this day it provides inspiration for most of what our eyes recognize when we read. Times Roman, Caslon, Janson, many of our most familiar font families derive directly from that one inscription. But rock art tends to be blowsy. One can hardly imagine a type designer basing a font on Great Basin Abstract Rectilinear, and yet the possibilities of easily distinguished geometries are decidedly finite. If there are epigraphs in the desert, more of them should be recognizably regular in the manner of a font or hand that expects to be read.

What do epigraphers do with North American rock art when the scholarly tradition they invoke doesn't seem to apply? One of European epigraphy's greatest triumphs occurred when the finding of the Rosetta stone in 1799 permitted the first firm decipherments of Egyptian hieroglyphs. That stone was inscribed with three obviously parallel texts: one in Greek script, one in hieroglyphics, and one in Egyptian demotic writing. The Greek we knew gave us our introduction to the hieroglyphic writing we were trying to learn. Obviously, North American epigraphy could use with a Rosetta stone of its own to validate its endeavors, so LaVan Martineau invents one in his chapter "America's Rosetta Stones" in *THE ROCKS BEGIN TO SPEAK*. (Martineau 1973:69-83) He takes a panel from one place, in this case a painting from Hueco Tanks, and a story James Mooney was told when he was preparing his report to the Smithsonian on the calendar history of the Kiowa. Actually, his, may we call them inscriptions, are more distant from each other and from any actual rock art than that, for he bases most of his interpretation not on the painting in Figure 1 as it exists badly faded outside of El Paso but on his own modification of Forrest Kirkland's water-color reconstruction of it published in *THE ROCK ART OF TEXAS INDIANS*. (Kirkland and Newcomb 1967:176) Never mind that the Rosetta stone was valuable because three texts in three languages were found together on it necessarily related before any acts of interpretation, Martineau pastes together what he needs and then reads accordingly. The results are as arbitrary as one might expect them to be, and this from one of the most generous of America's epigraphers.

The story he chooses as his test to go with Kirkland's painting tells of a Kiowa raiding party trapped in a cave by armed Mexicans and desperate to reach water. European costumes in the painting give him the Mexicans his text requires, but he needs water. So the large snake, near the left-center of the panel, with pointed and segmented tail that a skirted figure seems about to touch, becomes not a rattlesnake but a stream and the apparent rattles, a series of dots indicating that something



Figure 1. America's Rosetta Stone [?] at Hueco Tanks outside of El Paso.

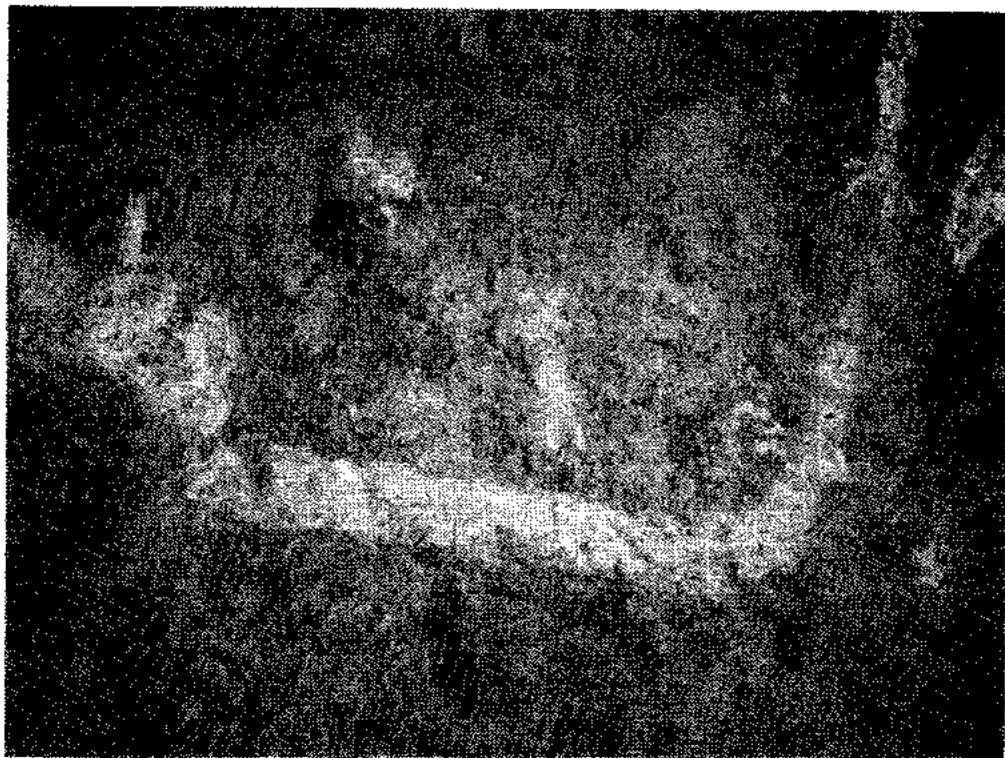


Figure 2. Dots or rattles--and don't get bit.

is being repeated. (Martineau 1973:75) Look closely at Figure 2 and you can see that they are not even dots but lozenges and triangles. Or if it is a rattlesnake, then it is a stream made to look like a rattlesnake to indicate how dangerous it is to try to touch it.



Figure 3. Another snake at Hueco Tanks.

Of course, you can read anything this way as long as you ignore those elements that actually do come together at a site before any act of interpretation. Painting after painting at Hueco Tanks is centered upon or dominated by a great rattlesnake. Limiting ourselves just to those panels Forrest Kirkland painted and published, there are seven panels: Kirkland's Plate 124 that becomes Martineau's Rosetta Stone plus Kirkland's Plates 127,



Figure 4. And still another snake at Hueco Tanks.



Figure 5. What snakes might mean when they are not being snakes.

135, 137, 140, 141 and 144. (Kirkland 1967:176,186,187,190,191) Are all of these serpents really water? Is this one in Figure 3, uncoiling six feet or more through a scum of graffiti? That looks like the baleful glare of snakesness itself to me. Is this one in Figure 4? Interestingly, this great snake glides back along the wall of a cave that seems much more like the setting of the encounter between the Kiowa and the Mexicans Mooney describes than the open waterless area where Martineau's panel is located. And this particular snake in context does seem intended as literal serpent and something more. However, Figure 5 suggests it's not water this painter has in mind. I'm afraid our Rosetta stone has just cracked beyond repair. Have you ever heard of the polite and politic art of epigraphy making anyone blush?

However, if the techniques of conventional epigraphy do not seem applicable to North American rock art, that does not mean that amateurs must give up any quest for meaning in rock art while professionals sit around counting things and twiddling their meaningless thumbs. Rather, it should suggest that amateurs concerned with meaning should shift from the doubtfully relevant professionalism of epigraphy to the immediately relevant professionalism of semiotics. And semiotic analysis has a virtue for the amateur beyond its obvious relevance to rock art studies. It does not require you to learn the semiotician's jargon in order to conduct responsible semiotic analysis. Semiotics says in effect if you can't crack a code then at least try to describe it. Martineau would I think approve of this advice, for he claims some of the impetus of his own work in rock art stems from sharing a quonset in Korea with seven airmen from a cryptography department. If you are looking at something that you think has meaning beyond what it obviously is but you can't seem to get at this meaning, then begin to isolate those elements in it that are capable of carrying a meaning, and the results will sometimes surprise you. Semiotics is as simple as that. Let me show you how it works.

Fern Cave in the lavalands of northern California is a surprising place to come upon. Dark, humid and constantly warm, it is nothing like the bright extremes of hot and cold in the desert above it. Its one connection with that harsh world, and your entry, is a hole at one end where the roof has fallen in leaving a mound and just enough windowed light that the mound in this sheltered place is always covered with ferns. However, to really come to know Fern Cave, you must turn your flashlights off and sit there humbled yet fascinated by the glowing presence of that lush green pyramid of life while your eyes become accustomed to the dark and you begin to see the paintings on the walls on either side of you. Most of the wall to your left is covered with a natural white ground, and the paintings on it are black and sparse and easily recognized. Some of them have interpreted. Figure 6) is claimed to depict the supernova that exploded in the



Figure 6. The supernova in Fern Cave, Northern California.



Figure 7. Creatures bearing light in Fern Cave.

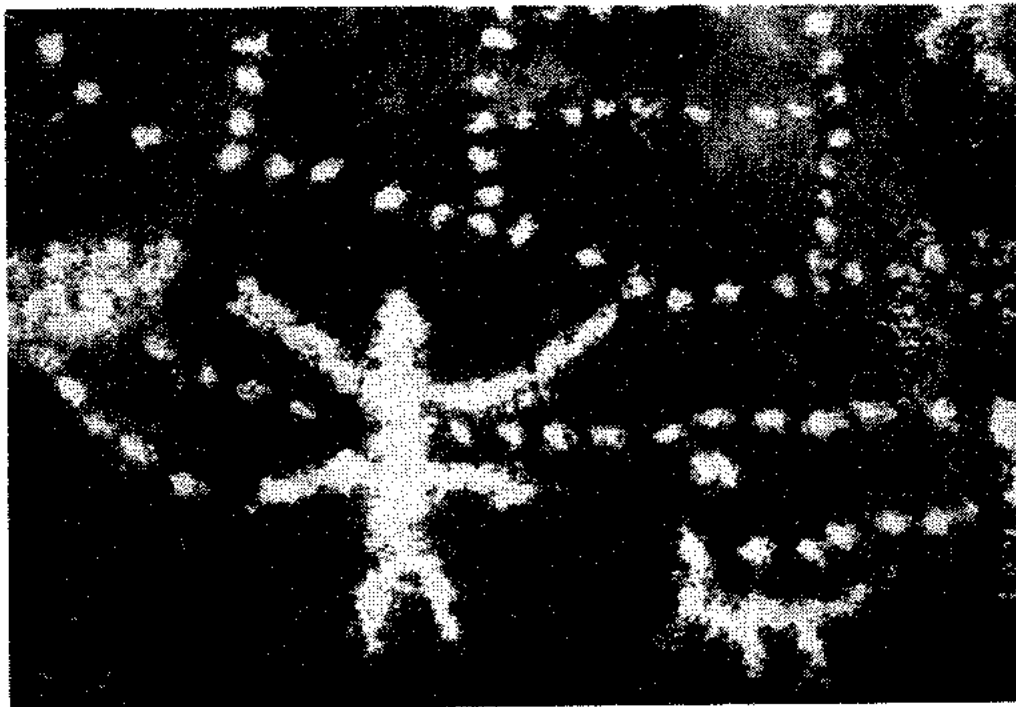


Figure 8. Kiuks and his dog spirit in Fern Cave.



Figure 9. Dots filling a cleft in the stone at Fern Cave.

Crab Nebula in 1054 with morning star, moon and burst of light, and what has not been noticed by astronomers, a spare figure fleeing from what he has seen. (Brandt et al. 1975) Others such as Figure 7 need no interpretation. They are, movingly, exactly what they are: dim forms haloed in white with a small figure—a child?—between them. Interestingly, the child had not been seen until twenty odd years ago when an archaeologist removing growth from this panel uncovered it. The wall to your right offers a varied ground and a rush of black and white painting. No Libyan phrase book or cram course in Ogam or Runes is going to help you read that. Its grammar is too complicated, its lexicon of forms too extensive, too shaded, too bold yet subtle for such quick fixes. I fear the amateur in search of meaning is very much on his or her own here. Figure 8 may be a kiuks or shaman, his supernatural strength marked by his four arms and the familiar dog spirit at his side, but ethnography does not hint at more than this. If you want to understand, you must do so with your own eyes, so you look hard and, as semiotics promises, you begin to grasp something. What seems at first an aimless splatter of design begins to have rules in it, nothing you could put in a dictionary perhaps but clear reasons for at least some of these designs being what they are. White dots run every which way, but not all these lines are random. In Figure 9 the dots on the left obviously follow and fill a vertical crack in the stone. Beneath the kiuks in Figure 10 two flat arcs of dots proceed carefully along the upper edge of a swelling in the stone while other forms such as the spoked and rayed wheels in the lower right, are tucked just as carefully into those areas that variation in the rock surface defines. I owe to the artist Elanie Moore (personal communication, 1991) my most remarkable examples of apparently random patterns that in fact follow the natural dictates of the stone, for she taught me to see them with her fine eye and her flashlight held to one side shadowing irregularities in the surface that I had ignored. Flash in Figure 11 flattens these features out again, but they are here none-the-less. Just left of center, the line and two concentric horse-shoes that look so arbitrary in fact are painted painstakingly around and over four vertical ridges in the stone face. Similarly, the row of eight black circles that runs horizontally just above center looks wavy and uncontrolled, yet each of these circles is centered upon a slight knob in the stone. Nothing in their conception or placement is casual.

I could go on adding to these examples, but one countering example from the opposite wall where things are more simple and more easily seen will have to suffice. In Figure 12 one sees an obvious feature in the stone, a discolored vertical crack, and an equally obvious painting, a seam-like form, laced across the crack as if it weren't there. This would seem to be a very different kind of painting from work on the wall behind us that takes its direction from the surface rather than disregarding it.

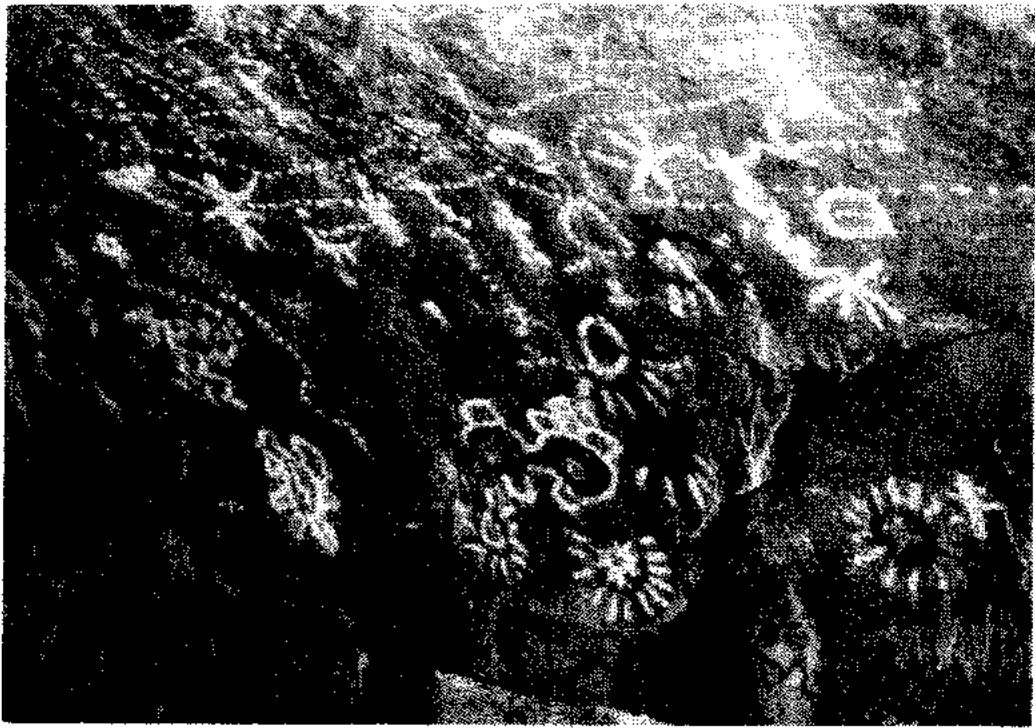


Figure 10. Other lines that obviously follow the stone.



Figure 11. U-forms and circles that mirror the surface of the stone in Fern Cave.

[Space 23] But look above this boldly stitched scar. There, in direct contrast with it is a figure made of lines as loose and free as the stitching is fixed and angular. Further, these wavy strands are conventionally both power lines and, in Central and Northern California, a way of representing the wings of a great bird in flight. At the very beginnings of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure announced that language was always difference, that meanings are built out of perceivable contrast. (Saussure 1916) What a contrast we have here! Above: a depression in the stone surface defined by shadow and by a painted power line that gives it a floor and carefully contained within this depression, the free lines of a bird in flight. To the left, a figure connects with or touches the hollow and the wing's power as if by choice. Below: straight lines and hard angles deny the shape of the stone where they can by laying across it like a scar. Isn't that the choice that's muttered everywhere in Fern Cave?

Whatever specific meanings the old ones may have had in mind when they came to paint this wondrous place, whatever unknown languages they may have spoken, approach Fern Cave lovingly, as the amateur does, and you can begin to hear. These people had their visions with the earth not against it. Their paintings were prompted by the irregular surfaces they painted upon and colored by the black and white pigments the earth provides in the cave. They brought little here but themselves and left so much behind them. I will never know the words they sang, but their paintings tell me they sang in harmony with each other and with this place. That is not translation, but it may be enough.

II. Archeoastronomy

In archeoastronomy the need for professionalism is so clear and the presence or absence of professional competence so unmistakable one can not blink it away. Either you know what science has to tell us about the sky or you don't, and there is no finessing ignorance. But a certain amount of baggage comes with the acquired competence of the professional astronomer--baggage that is, itself, not science. Consequently, if I want to learn what a solstice observatory is and how to recognize one, I go to the professionals, but if I want to learn how to live the solstice, I will seek out someone who has not perfected his or her knowledge of the sky in a library or an observatory armored by his colleagues' competence and by the instruments that surround her. Let me illustrate.

In 1947 William R. Palmer published a small book, PAHUTE INDIAN LEGENDS. (Palmer 1947) An essay he had written some thirteen years before is still cited in the synonymy of the Southern Paiute by the Smithsonian's HANDBOOK, but his book has no scholarly standing these days because Palmer wrote it very much as an amateur:

These legends and stories that you used to recite so effectively in costume and pantomime in sign language are

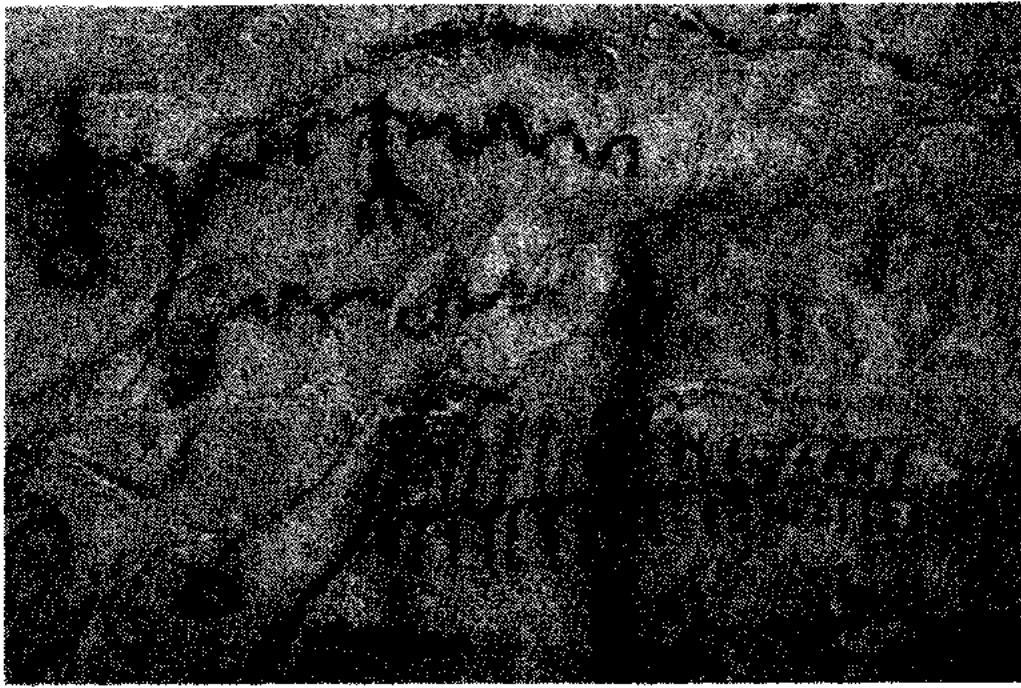


Figure 12. Scar, great bird and power lines in Fern Cave.



Figure 13. Intaglio lizard on the Krumbo Boulder near Malheur Lake in Oregon.

now gathered together in a collection as you urged so long they should be...The Indians learned to love you and they mourn your passing as sincerely as your white friends have. Like the bouquet of wild flowers they gathered and laid upon your grave, these Indian legends you loved are now gathered together and laid with tender affection upon the altar of your sainted memory. FATHER. (Palmer 1947:v)

He acquired this garland of stories in a manner that was just as unprofessional, going into the field not as a trained ethnologist but as a good man trying to help someone.

Many years ago I had an active part to secure for the Pahute Indians at Cedar City, Utah through the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, some better homes and a little good farming land. This secured to me the lasting friendship of the Indians who manifested their good will by adopting me into their tribe. (Palmer 1947:vii)

Despite his amateur status, you can learn things about sun, moon and stars from William Palmer that Carl Sagan cannot teach you.

Let me read from just one of his stories that bares directly upon the solstices.

The weather was hot and there was no coolness in the winds. ...Twice the cottontail had been deceived by the vision of water and cool trees and had worn himself out in his efforts to reach them. Tired, dusty, hot, and hungry he sat down under a sage bush to reason out the cause of his discomfort. "It is tab-e, the sun, that makes living so miserable. It is tab-e that makes things so hot," he said, and in this his thinking was clear.

"Now," said the cottontail, "tab-e, the sun, has gone bad. Last winter he was very good but now he has gone bad. I must see what is the matter with him. I must go out and fight with him. To make me brave and strong I will fight everyone I see until I get to him. I will whip him. Maybe I will kill him."

So the rabbit ran eastward to the land of the rising sun and as he ran he fought every living thing that he met [including Jimmy Carter]. He grew strong and very ferocious.

After a long time the cottontail came to the edge of the world where the sun came up and he carefully planned his attack. Noting the spot where the sun arose he hid himself behind a hill to wait the coming of another day.

But tab-e, the sun, was wise. He had seen the cottontail, had followed him in his warpath and had heard his begging threats and knew of his intent. So just to play with the angry rabbit the sun moved south a little and came up in a new place. All day long he laughed at cottontail and poured his heat down until the rabbit was almost dead.

Cottontail was angry. He was very angry. He sat unmoved through another day of sweltering heat but he said, "Tomorrow I will kill him."

Again the sun moved south and cheated the angry cottontail. Day after day through the long summer the sun evaded the rabbit and just when cottontail had learned that each day the sun came up a little farther south, and he had jumped a day to be in proper position for attack, the sun started back to the north and left him two days behind. The mad fellow was tricked again but he said, "I will not give up. I am very mad. I will kill tab-e, the sun."

After many long and vexing days of disappointment, cottontail found himself one morning in the very proper place to shoot the sun. As it peeked over the horizon, the rabbit crouched low behind a bank he had scratched up. He picked his best arrow and put it to his bow. Just when the sun had come up so far that his whole body was exposed, cottontail pulled his string far back and let it go. With unswerving flight the arrow struck its mark and buried itself in the side of the sun.

Cottontail saw it strike and he went wild with joy. He turned somersaults and leaped and rolled on the ground. What a big story he would have to tell all the suffering people. Tab-e was dead. Everybody would be glad and cottontail would never fight anyone again.

Then he took another look at the sun and his heart nearly stopped. He saw a stream of fire pouring from the wound his arrow had made and the world was on fire all around him.

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All the other animals were angry at the rabbit for being such a vain and foolish fellow. Now they laugh and make fun of him. The Indians, too, laughed at his vanity in thinking that he could kill the sun and they gave him in derision the name tab-oots.

The murderous assault of tab-oots, however, still continues to be a serious matter for the sun has never recovered from its fright. Tab-e remains to this day nervous about coming up. He never rises twice in the same place and he always peeks cautiously over the hills before he brings his full body into view. He makes himself so bright, too, that no one could look at him long enough to sight and arrow. (Palmer 19477:3-6)

Wonderful! Bob Dylan once sang "The sun's not yellow it's chicken," (Dylan 1973:185) but who ever went out to observe the solstice humming the "Tombstone Blues"?

Professional astronomers can help us get the mechanics of the solstice right, but they cannot help us to feel the event or to recognize the possibilities of different ways of feeling it. Neither can science rescue us from the sodden cliches of popular culture when we are trying to feel something important but are not sure how. Consequently, most of us respond to a solstice as

if the event had been staged by Lucas Films with Alec Guinness as a kindly old Druid and Madonna wearing mistletoe on her nipples. Such a bankrupt attitude is more likely to be corrected by the uncertain amateur than it is by the company of professional archaeoastronomers who do not trade in alternative emotions. And if it is not corrected, if we go on leaving our definitions of seriousness to a disinterested science and interested-for-profit artist such as those Hollywood and Wyndham Hill promote, our unexamined pomposity will seriously limit what we can learn from rock art.

One more example and I am through. Doctor of Astronomy, sometime teacher, important member of the Federal research bureaucracy, Ray A. Williamson is every inch the professional, and in *LIVING THE SKY*; (1948) he wears his learning well. Still, even in that strong book, there are places where the habits of heart and mind of the conventional scientific researcher get in his way. His chapter on archaeoastronomy and the Navajo, for example, is both responsibly worked yet unsatisfying because of one or two crucial assumptions that slip into his description of the Navajo cosmos. Particularly troubling is the assumption that what the modern scientist means by order-Einstein's famous assertion that God doesn't play dice-and what the Navajo means by hozho are the same. "Those who discover the means of establishing and maintaining order hold the key to life's problems." (Williamson 1948:156) Who in the Office of Technology Assessment could possibly object to that? Of course, there are differences in the way this reasonable cosmos manifests itself to different peoples.

By learning the positions of the stars throughout the seasons and the times of reappearance or disappearance of certain stars, the Navajo calendar maker could carry his calendar with him, whereas the Pueblo sun chief relied on a horizon calendar related to the geographical position of his pueblo. (Williamson 1984:166)

And the astronomer bureaucrat can look serenely down on star calendar maker and sun chief alike certain that they are his brothers and that he understands them both.

This assumption that the behavior of sun, moon and stars is, for the Navajo as for the modern astronomer, evidence of the essential order of things determines what from all the richness of Navajo cosmology Williamson will include in his description, so the first half of his chapter lingers in loving detail over the ritual construction of the hogan aligned with the cardinal directions and with the sun's course to make it into a model of an orderly cosmos. But too much emphasis on the hogan as microcosmos risks turning the ambulatory Navajo into the sedentary Pueblo, so Williamson changes the emphasis of the second half of his chapter from hogan to the stars while still maintaining his stress on the Navajo's sense of order.

This strategy works for awhile. Stars provide the wandering Navajo the calendar that the sun gives to the Pueblo dweller, and, conveniently for the technocrat, stars are a means of navigating for NASA and for Navajo alike. But then Williamson runs into trouble, for not all the stars in the Navajo's sky are as well-behaved as those that Williamson knows. In Navajo myth some stars were fixed carefully in their allotted traces either by Black God or First Man and First Woman, but others were scattered haphazardly across the heavens by meddling Coyote.

...First Man continued his work as carefully as before. One by one he positioned each star according to his original plan. And Ma'ii the Coyote watched him, observing the results of First Man's slow progress.

Until at last he grew impatient and cried out, having this to say. "Never mind doing it that way!" He said. "Why must I wait this long for your work to be done?" "Let the stars sit wherever they will."

So saying, he gathered all of...First Man's pieces of rock-star mica in his paw. Then he threw them up into the air, blowing a strong breath at them as they flew. Instantly they stuck to the sky helter-skelter in random bunches. (Zolbrod 1984:93-4)

Williamson seems not to know what to do with Coyote's stars. An honest man, he mentions this disruption of the night but then tries to neutralize its jarring content: "This intriguing story illustrates the considerable attention the Navajo pay to the stars and to naming many of the patterns. In addition, the patterns of the stars contain rules for living." (Williamson 1984:165)

Well, this unruly story speaks as much of a necessary disorder in the stars and in our lives as it does of pattern and of rule, so, having moralized it as best he can, Williamson drops it as if it were a blip in the Navajo account of creation or Coyote but a minor figure in their pantheon to be forgotten when it's convenient to do so. Neither of these assumptions holds. Coyote plays a major and continually reoccurring role in the creation of the fifth world, our world, in the DINE BAHANE. The Dine emerge from mud to solid ground, permanence. Coyote counters by introducing a radical impermanence into their lives, death. The Dine and the people who will be the Pueblo engage in negotiations to see who gets which part of a single ear of seed corn brought up from the fourth world. While they talk, Coyote runs off with the tip leaving the Pueblos with the fattest corn and the social world of the Southwest rent by dissension between Pueblo and Navajo to this day. First Man and First Woman bring order to the Navajo's new homeland by establishing four sacred mountains in east, south, west and north and by association appropriate ritual objects, plants, kinds of rain, etc. with them. Coyote breaks in to disrupt the stars. This is very much creation with a Coyote refrain as though the verses of Genesis were alternated with clips from the Three Stooges.

And Coyote's flavoring of Navajo astronomy extends beyond the stars. Listen to Gladys Reichard describe his relationship with the sun:

Coyote, exponent of irresponsibility and lack of direction, seems to be an uncontrolled aspect of either Sun himself or his child. Coyote, as a child of Sky, represents lust on earth, matching Sun's promiscuity as a celestial being;.... Coyote does all the daring things Sun would like to do-in fact, once did; Sun secretly gloats over them, but of necessity appears to disapprove. (Reichard 1950:79)

A lustful and promiscuous sun? Worse than that, a sun that gloats in private over smartiness? What ever happened to mom and dad and the good old Navajo trail?

Williamson brings the emotional and ethical baggage of his own culture with him. When he looks at the stars, he sees what he has been taught to see, order and an adjunct to navigation, but the Navajo know a sky that is chancy as well as orderly and see in it justification for their own wandering. Proof of Williamson's squint lies in the way he fumbles the Navajo star ceilings or planetaria at the end of his chapter. He knows these pictographs are important to any discussion of Navajo astronomy, but he doesn't know what to do with them.

Perhaps as many as 100 caves or shelters in Dine land have scores of stars painted on their ceilings, sometimes as high as fifty or seventy-five feet above their floors. The best known are in Canyon de Chelly, but the question about them everywhere is how were these ceilings painted? With scaffolding? With extremely long handled brushes? Perhaps with bows and arrows suitably headed that were dipped in paint and shot against them? Coming as we do fresh from the DINE BAHANE's account of Coyote hurling stars up into the night sky, we can't help but notice that the painters who threw those stars up there were imitating Coyote and that they had to know what they were doing. If that's the case, the star ceilings are the after-effects of a ritual, its leavings as it were, but it is the making of the gesture not its product that counts. The Dine cannot risk too much order, even when nature offers it to them, or they will no longer be the Dine, hunters and lonely herdsman, the wandering ones from the far north. You can hear this in the stories they tell. Can you also see this in their planetaria where, like Coyote, they stretch up to plant freedom in the sky? At least, that speculation makes more sense than the lame conclusion that ends Williamson's chapter: "Just as each symbol of the dry painting has a common meaning to the maker, so the stars of these stat ceilings also must have had a meaning to the painters." (Williamson 1984:176) How close can you come and still miss the point? The dry paintings, too, are not meaningful when they're finished but only in the making of them.

III. Some Conclusions

But if rock art is so uncertain, so full of argument, so difficult to study, why bother trying? That is a good question to end with because it is the purposes that bring us to rock art, amateur and professional alike, that finally validate and justify our studies. When you meet someone in rock art, the first question to ask is why are you here, and don't accept any crap about the pure and disinterested pursuit of truth as an answer. Truth is never disinterested. It is always my truth for reasons that benefit me though these reasons may not be obvious even to the person who is moved by them.

Is there a hidden, selfish agenda in archeoastronomy? I rather suspect there is one and that it has something to do with the way we bring numbers into rock art study whether we need them or not: scales in illustrations, tables of counting arbitrarily defined elements, you know what I mean. Sometimes this appetite for numbers leads us to do the damndest things. With its degrees and hours archeoastronomy provides endless opportunities for numbering. These numbers may share something of what I have described elsewhere as "the same hidden purposes as those tiny dots of white paint with numbers punctiliously inscribed on them that curators use to deface artifacts in museums across this land." (Strange 1990:95) In that essay, I went on to speculate "Surely, there are other, less obtrusive ways of identifying objects, but these seem to be a necessary graffiti. Why? Is it because they are a talisman, a countering magic against this threatening alien stuff with which we work?" (Strange 1990:95) The same speculations may be in order with archeoastronomy.

One need not guess at the agendas tucked away in epigraphy; they can be clear and vicious. I tried to make this point at the Ridgcrest symposium on Problems of Methodology in Linguistic Interpretation of Rock Art but failed apparently, for Donald L. Cyr muddles it badly in his reporting of my paper in EXPLORING ROCK ART, (Cyr 1989:14) and the rest of his authors simply ignore my point in their rejoinders. So let me repeat here what I said then. It was near the end of my paper, and I was trying to establish what I think is an important contrast between Barry Fell's agenda in AMERICA B.C. (Fell 1976) and LaVan Martineau's in SPIRIT MOUNTAIN. (Martineau 1984)

Martineau translates to give something back; Fell translates to take something away and to appropriate it for his own. In a craft like translation, where purpose and adequacy to purpose are among the firmest standards we have for judging, this is no trivial difference. In fact, the translator who most resembles Fell is Erich von Daniken though von Daniken is modest compared to Fell. Both see an America of ruined monuments inexplicably surrounded by simple savages, but where von Daniken claims these savages couldn't have made that great thing so superior intelligences from another planet must have helped them with it, Fell

says "savages couldn't have made that great thing, so I must have made it." (Strange 1988)

I stand by what I said then. Reliability in rock art studies hinges not on a distinction between amateur and professional but between motives that are just and humane and those that must be spit out. And having been so nosey about other peoples motives, I had better close by confessing my own.

I am as I have said very much an amateur in rock art studies, but there is a certain smugness in this admission, an unseemly pleasure taken in setting myself apart from the hoi poloi who have to do this stuff for a living. When I am more honest with myself, I recognize that I am interested in rock art for the same reasons that make me an English professor. I believe in a liberal education, ie., and education for freedom. How might an education centered on the liberal arts, and for the past millennium that has meant centered on literature, make on free? Well, you can't be free unless you are able to choose. And you can't choose unless you have alternatives to choose between. And alternatives, real alternatives to what you are, are the most precious commodity in the universe. What more effective method do we have of putting on for a while a radically different way of being in the world than reading stories, poems or plays from another time or place? English Departments, when they are true to themselves, should be called Departments of Serious Human Difference. That's why I am an English professor and a student of rock art. While others reach for a compass to establish the alignment of the Krumbo boulder with some possible solstice marker, I am admiring the fine surface on the body of the intaglio lizard in Figure 13 and wondering who would work so hard to make that carving. There are easier ways to conjure up lizard. While others are recording facts about the boulder or making sketches of its grammar, I jot in my notebook things like this:

How do you paint when the river's dry?

With air.

What is Lizard when he's not there?

The hollow of our wanting him back.

Where do you go when you can't go far?

Home.

How deep is hunger?

How deep can you chip it?

How many set dreams here?

How many have mouths?

How do you paint when the river's dry?

With air.

What is Lizard when he's not there?

The hollow of our wanting him back.

Where did you go when you couldn't go far?

Home. . .

Home.

A poem is my way of acknowledging and applauding difference when I meet it, something out there is not me. I would like to claim that it is my way of sharing the experience, to, but I know that is seldom true. I write poems for myself and almost never try to publish them. I am just too private, too possessive, too bourgeois in short, to be easy about sharing something really important with the rest of my tribe. And that should make you very suspicious of my kind when we open our mouths to talk about rock art.

Thank You

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