

NAVAHO MYTH AS IT RELATES TO THE COAL CANYON PANEL

By Lyle Tompsen

It has often been suspected that some rock art panels illustrate mythological motifs. In Coal Creek, outside of Green River, there is one such panel. This panel lies in the Book Cliffs, between two large boulders. It appears to represent part of the Creation Myth.

It can be fairly assumed that the origin of the Creation Myth lies with the ancestors of the Hopi and was held in common with the Four Corners people. The most complete documentation of the Creation Myth however, is Navaho in origin. As such, the focus of this paper has been narrowed to the Navaho version of this myth. Two caveats must be added: First, the very nature of recording myths among the Navaho points to an insurmountable clash between cultures. The scientific method dictates taking individual elements of a myth and analyzing them. To the Navaho this type of dissection smacks of witchcraft. In light of this argument, keeping both with native tradition as well as the presumed manner in which this panel was used, we will examine the entire Monster-slayer story, albeit briefly. The second caveat is stylistic in nature. There are many elements of these myths that can never be transmitted by the written word. The most basic is that when these myths are spoken (usually as part of larger ceremonies) they are also acted out. Moreover, the next problem is much deeper and in fact may be ultimately incomprehensible to an English speaker. The Navaho language (as with other Four Corners languages) acts not so much to describe reality, as to shape it. This mystical approach to language makes telling the story of creation ultimately more important. It also ensures that the dynamic elements of the story cannot be fully conveyed either in an alien language (English), or in the unchanging (and therefore creatively barren) medium of writing.

To understand this story we must transport ourselves to a time before the Earth was ready for human habitation. The world was ruled by fierce, cannibalistic monsters. The people longed for deliverance from these beasts who had chased and slaughtered them for so long: It would fall to Monster-slayer to provide it.

Of a time long ago, these things are said:

Monster-slayer was born of a liaison between Changing Woman and the Sun.¹⁸¹ His father's identity was however kept a secret.¹⁸⁸ Eventually Monster-slayer and his brother, being young meat, attracted the attentions of the monsters.¹⁹³

Monster-slayer and his brother decided to run away to prevent their village from being attacked.¹⁹⁵ They took the Holy Trail (the rainbow path that leads to the Sun), figuring the monsters wouldn't follow them. On the way up the trail they met Spider Woman.¹⁹⁶ She told Monster-slayer who his father was and gave him a talisman that granted him protection from the monsters.¹⁹⁸ The talisman (Diagram 1, A) is described as a hoop (small enough to be carried in his hands) made of special feathers. With the hoop in hand he set off for his father's house, the sun's abode at the end of the trail. After many trials he ultimately met his father and step family.²⁰⁵ Monster-slayer then asked for his father's advice and help on slaying the monsters. His father, after assuring himself that this child was in fact his son, gave him some powerful weapons and armor that he could use to destroy the monsters.²¹²

One of the monsters that Monster-slayer destroyed was called the Eye Killer (Diagram 1). Eye Killer was conceived when a maiden masturbated with a piece of cactus.⁹⁶ Described as cactus shaped with two deep eye sockets, it killed by staring.

Monster-slayer entered the dwelling of the Eye Killer. An immediate and potentially fatal contest began. The staredown lasted for so long and with such intensity that Eye Killer's eyes protruded out onto a stalk (B). The contest finally ended when Monster-slayer threw salt into the fire.²⁴⁶ The explosion blinded the beast. Monster-slayer then slew Eye Killer. This is reenacted every spring equinox on the Coal Creek panel. A shaft of light forms in the Monster-slayer's heart area (being of one heart, i.e., good) and then comes out of him and arcs over going directly into the tip of Eye Killer's stalk.

After Monster-slayer had destroyed most of the monsters he realized that he could not kill them all, and, most of them had children that would eventually replenish this deadly race. Taking his brother with him, he decided to go to his father's house both for rest and advice.²⁵² His father agreed to help him, and gave him some magic gifts to give to Changing Woman. He also asked them to help him convince Changing Woman to come live with him.²⁵⁵ A few days later they returned home. Monster-slayer gave the magic gifts to Changing Woman. Using her magic she threw the gifts into the sky.²⁶⁰ Shortly thereafter, they noticed a terrible storm brewing. It was of such ferocity that they worried that their house would be blown down. Monster-slayer went outside. Using the magic knife that his father gave him, he cut out a square piece of the sky (C). He placed this over the house and pegged the ends into the ground (D). In this way his house and family were protected from the maelstrom.²⁶¹ Notice in the glyph how the ends of the "rainbow" are tapered as if pegged into the ground. In this way he and Changing Woman were saved. Notice the character on the left (Diagram 2,f). This figure (not quite as recognizable as a figure as it is drawn here) may be Monster-slayer's brother, or possibly White Shell Woman. Both are associated with water and would be depicted as flowing.

The storm destroyed most of the monsters, and although our panel ends here, the story is not quite over. One would speculate that there is another panel after this one, and possibly two to four panels before this sequence of the story.

In conclusion, it may be helpful in examining rock art to have a working knowledge of the myths of the Four Corners region. Some of the rock art panels appear to have mythological motifs common to these myths. It should also be noted that these rock art panels significantly predate the present myths. Perhaps someday we will use these panels to recover the myths lost to time.

Notes:

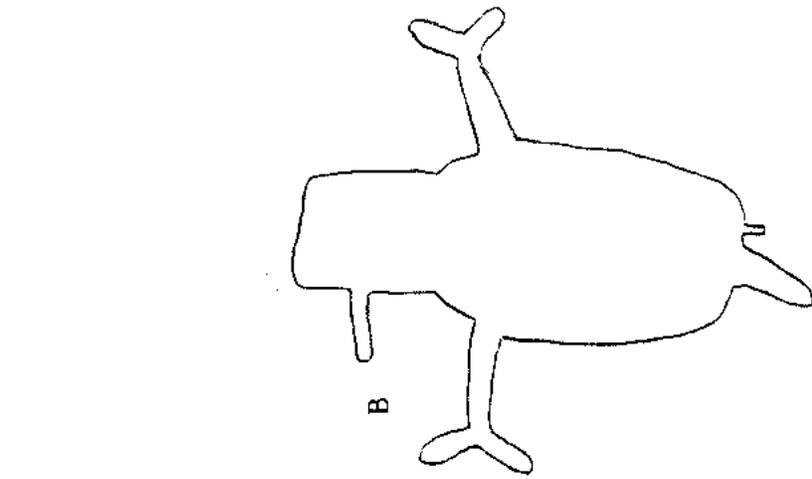
Superscript numbers refer to page numbers in Zolbrod, Paul, *Diné Bahane'* New Mexico 1984, University of New Mexico Press. This classic work presents the most complete and accessible presentation of the Navaho Creation Story.

Monster-slayer figure: On the head of the Monster-slayer figure there are fine hairs, also, the horns have what appear to be deeply incised lines in them. These lines may have been made by a steel blade. If this is the case, the panel may be younger than generally assumed, or continuously repecked over time.

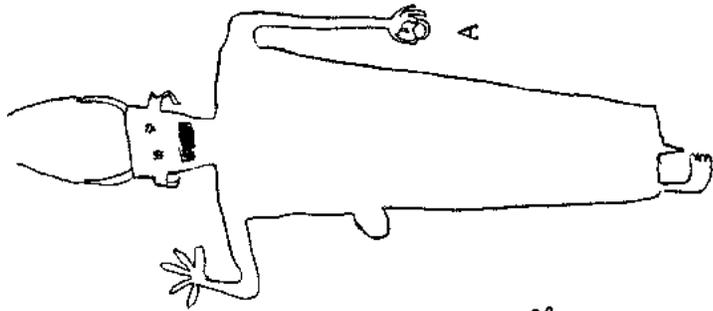
Monster-slayer has a twin brother called "Water Child" or "Enemy Killer", however this panel does not show the second brother and this part of the legend does not involve him. It may also be possible that both he and White Shell Woman are latter additions in the myth. The hero twins as recorded are not in fact twins in that they were born of different parents.

Eye Killer figure: The Eye Killer glyph appears to be pecked over another glyph. The arms on this figure are possibly part of the older glyph; there were also apparently legs on the original glyph although this is barely visible today.

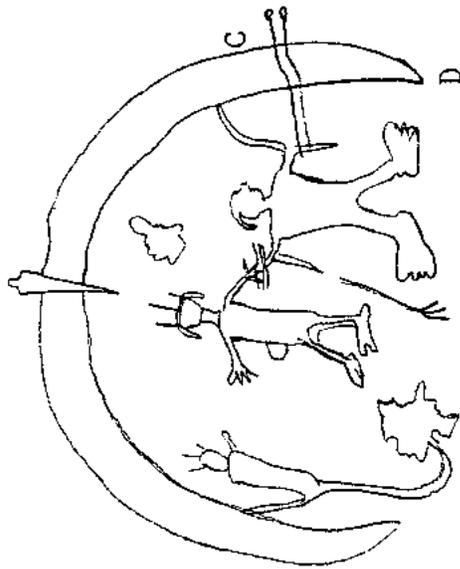
Bird figure: The bird placed to the left of the curved sky glyph may in fact be "Killing Bird" another of Monster-slayer's victims. The unusual placement of the glyph may make it susceptible to a light interaction. This requires further research. There are also additional glyphs that may represent a some of the other monsters slain; however, the ones mentioned in the paper are the clearest and have the best documentation.



Eye Killer



Monster-slayer



Storm Scene



Bird Figure

Diagram 1

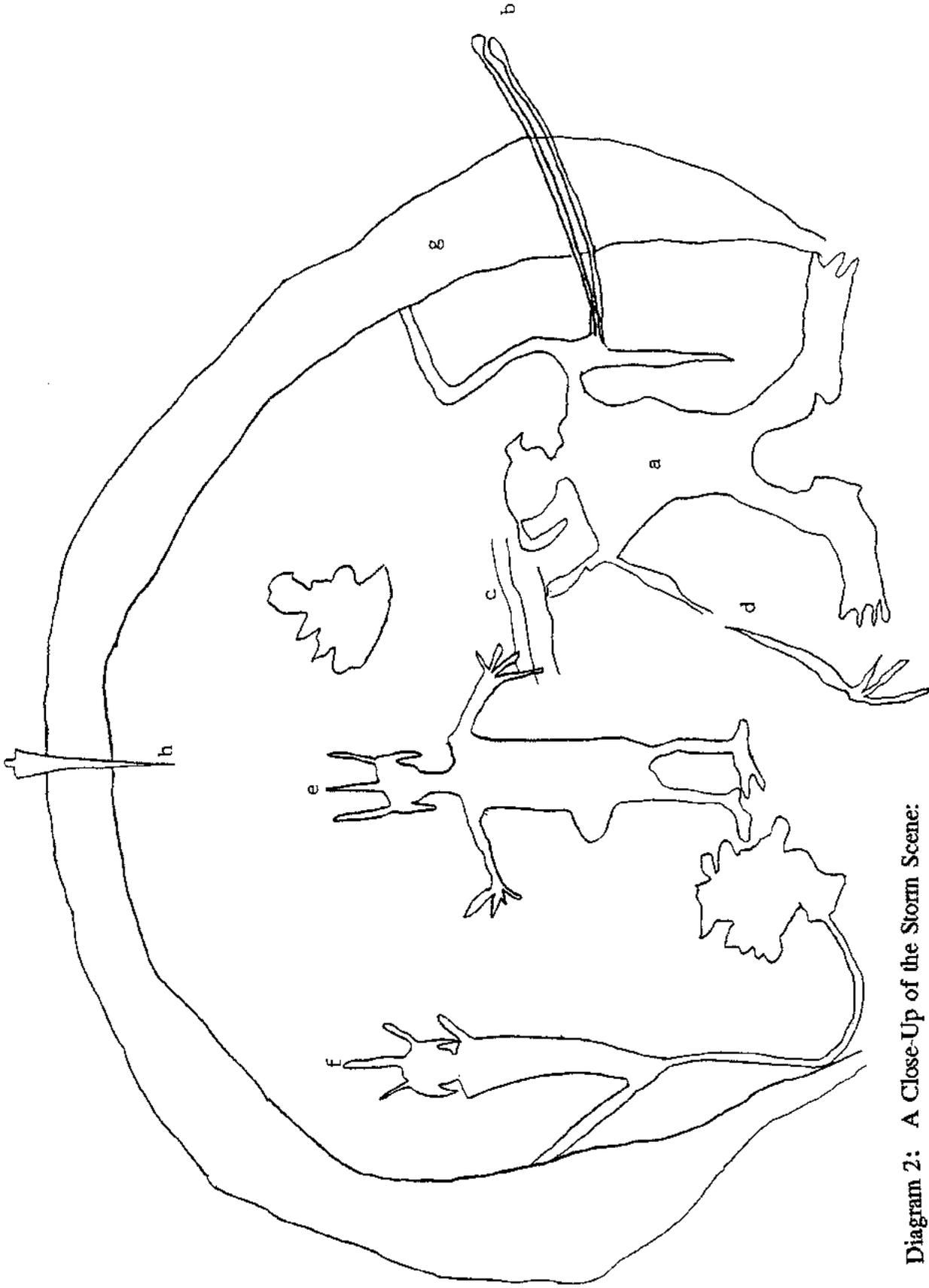


Diagram 2: A Close-Up of the Storm Scene:

Monster-slayer (a) and his weapons: chain lightning arrows (b), sheet lightning arrows (c), sunbeam arrows (d) and fatal rainbow arrows. Changing Woman (e) and perhaps either White Shell Woman or Monster-slayer's brother (f). Their protective storm cover (g). A symbol that I believe means either "Holy" or "Afterlife" (h).

