

LIGHTNING AND NATIVE AMERICAN ROCK ART

Lightning is a powerful symbol in Native American Rock Art, associated with clouds and rain. It is also related to powerful beings and with creation stories, rituals, and songs of lightning and thunder (Patterson-Rudolph 1997:73, 86, 99). Carobeth Laird, in her landmark book on the Chemehuevis, gives a dynamic description of storm and lightning (Figure 1):

When there is a storm in the desert, thunder rumbles and crashes; beneath dark clouds the rain thrusts forward like an advancing army, accompanied by the glare and crackle of lightning; while away from the immediate center of the storm, rainbows arch over valleys or hang their transparent arcs of glory across rugged cliffs. This is the tremendous spectacle dramatized by the Chemehuevis in the great...tale of 'How Wolf and Coyote went Away,' which is replete with glorious weather symbolism.... [Laird 1976:98, 99].

In *Where the Lightning Strikes*, Peter Nabokov writes:

Also in the landscape lay powers for the mind and spirit, especially on nights slashed by lightning, when medicine makers sought it face-to-face....For the Cherokee, lightning was a positive power. Trees struck by it (Figure 2) were sought after so that shamans could bury their blackened splinters in the

cornfields to assure healthy crops. Warriors and ballplayers rubbed the charred wood on their biceps and calves for strength. Everyone knew they were charged with 'You, Ancient Ones,' bolts of sacred fire from the sky [Nabokov 2006:55–56].

In 1992, Ken Hedges, then Curator at the San Diego Museum of Man, took a group of us to Sears Point along the Gila River in Arizona. At the western edge of the main Sears Point mesa, he pointed out the lightning strike petroglyph and the lightning caused scar. My wife held a compass by the cliff face (Figure 3), and the magnetic alteration made by the lightning caused the compass to react. Farther up river, at the Painted Rocks petroglyph site, the split boulder on top (Figure 4), according to the campground host,



Figure 3. Sears Point lightning strike.



Figure 1. Desert lightning storm.



Figure 2. Lightning struck tree.



Figure 4. Painted Rocks strike.



Figure 5. Rain fringe lightning.



Figure 7. Yoyleki and "Maize."



Figure 6. Willow Springs motif.

had been struck by lightning. Here again the compass, held by the boulder, reacted to the magnetic alteration.

At the Hummingbird site, located between Sears Point and Painted Rocks, there are rain fringe and possible lightning symbols, but at the Garn site, which is located about a half-mile upstream from the Hummingbird site, there is a convincing lightning stroke coming down to the rain fringe (Figure 5). But the strongest case for lightning glyphs is found at Willow Springs, (located between Flagstaff and Page, Arizona), where ethnographic confirmation exists. The often repeated motif there (Figure 6), according to Ekkehart Malotki, "is called *yoyleki* in Hopi and is their traditional rain/cloud/lightning symbol"



Figure 8. Lightning to "Terrace."

(personal communication 2009). Other versions are in relation to possible maize stalk (Figure 7) and to a lightning design reaching from the rain clouds to a cloud terrace design (Figure 8).

In southwest Utah there are two known lightning strike sites. Kirk Neilson wrote to me about a lightning feature in Warner Valley, west of St. George, which he called the Gargoyle site. Unable to find the location in maps I had, I wrote to Boma Johnson. He and his wife found the site, and because of the many bear paw symbols on surfaces



Figure 9. Upper Big Bear panel.



Figure 10. Lower lightning panel.

around the site, they called this the Big Bear Site. The lightning strike scar goes through both an upper and lower panel. The upper panel has a lightning scar coming down from the right side, and bending to the left toward a bear paw (Figure 9). In the lower panel the lightning strike scar goes down to the left of the bear paw (Figure 10).

Boma Johnson also pointed out the Snow Valley Pyramid Rock site, located to the north of St. George. The lightning strike descends straight down through a complex panel with many petroglyph layers and ages (Figure 11). While



Figure 11. Pyramid lightning panel.

much of the panel is heavily eroded, the enclosed cross is a Venus morning star symbol, and the reclining flute player may have “to do with laying down to play for ancestor spirits associated with stars in the night sky” (Boma Johnson, personal communication 2009). There appears also to be a glyph of a gourd rattle, such as would be used to accompany flute playing.

Jesse Warner led a field trip during the URARA Symposium at Delta, and in the Black Rock area, he held a compass over a lightning strike boulder. The compass reacted to the strong magnetic alteration caused by the lightning strike.

A dramatic instance of lightning symbolism is found in the Four Faces pictograph panel at Salt Creek, Canyonlands National Park, in Utah (Figure 12). As described by Carol Patterson-



Figure 12. Utah's Salt Creek faces.



Figure 13. Tuba site by Cedar City.



Figure 14. Three Rivers petroglyphs.

Rudolph in *On the Trail of Spider Woman*, “These figures have very short torsos of striped lines, rain and lightning symbols, and two figures have patterned belts, one with lightning descending from it” (Patterson-Rudolph 1997:30). Also in Utah, in the Cedar City area, there is a rain-cloud-lightning petroglyph at the Tuba site (Figure 13), in a picture sent to me by Alva Matheson, who chaired local arrangements for the 2009 URARA Symposium. It is similar to the Hopi *Yoyleki* rain, cloud, lightning symbols at Willow Creek, Arizona, but has double lightning strokes.

The terraced cloud symbol, previously pictured at the Willow Springs site in Arizona, is repeated several places in New Mexico. Most memorable is the cloud terrace with rain, rainbow, and lightning, with a bird on top, Jornada Style, at the Three Rivers petroglyph site (Figure 14). The bird in this petroglyph may have functioned as



Figure 15. Velarde lightning bolts.



Figure 16. Petroglyph National Monument glyph.

a messenger to the rain deities. When I inquired about a lightning panel in the Velarde area of New Mexico in a letter to James E. Duffield of Santa Fe, he sent a picture of lightning arrows with projectile points (Figure 15), and noted that flint and obsidian were thought by some native peoples to have been created when lightning struck the earth, hence the projectile points on the lightning. Duffield also sent a picture of a lightning bolt with projectile point connected to a bird’s beak (Figure 16), located in the Petroglyph National Monument at Albuquerque (James E. Duffield, personal communication 2009).

Lyman Lake in east-central Arizona was created in 1912, when the Little Colorado River was

dammed. Across the lake on the east side, the “Ultimate Petroglyph Trail” leads up the ridge with geometrical, bird, and animal figures along the way. The trail ends up on top at “Ultimate Rock.” A picture I had seen of this rock showed what appeared to be, among other glyphs, several lightning depictions (Farnsworth 2006:32–33). I was able to visit Lyman Lake with friends, and the ranger agreed to take us to the Ultimate Petroglyph Trail and Ultimate Rock, though a storm was approaching from the southwest. But rain began to fall when we were half-way up the trail, and because our boat was metal, the ranger insisted we return and hurry across the lake because of lightning danger. We were not able to stay until the bad weather passed, so I wrote the ranger later, expressing interest in having a picture of the lightning glyphs on Ultimate Rock. Soon I received a letter from Michael A. Freisinger, Museum Curator for Arizona State Parks, from his office in Phoenix. His letter included three pictures, one showing the glyphs on Ultimate Rock (Figure 17). He had written in his letter:

I received your letter to Lyman Lake State Park concerning our petroglyph site at Ultimate Rock. As you found out there is a lot of lightning there, especially during the summer monsoon season. Arizona has the second most lightning strikes in the nation after Florida.



Figure 17. Ultimate Rock glyphs. Photo courtesy of Arizona State Parks.

Fortunately I have a collection of digital images of the petroglyphs at the park. I looked through them and am sending some very interesting ones depicting possible lightning glyphs [Michael A. Freisinger, personal communication 2009].

A second picture was of a rock with a damaged edge and two possible lightning zigzag designs descending (Figure 18). A third picture shows possible rain/storm/lightning lines and an upside down anthropomorph (Figure 19). While the boulder may have been displaced, sliding down and around from the escarpment above, an upside down figure at times may represent death, which is what the ranger felt might happen to us if our metal boat was hit by lightning as we crossed the lake during the storm.



Figure 18. Two zigzag designs. Photo courtesy of Arizona State Parks.



Figure 19. Lyman upside down figure. Photo courtesy of Arizona State Parks.



Figure 20. Zigzag lightning glyph, Hieroglyphic Canyon, South Mountain.



Figure 21. Man with lightning legs, South Mountain.



Figure 22. Mountain lion panel, Black Canyon.

The most prominent lightning petroglyph at South Mountain, Phoenix, is in Hieroglyphic Canyon, and is described by Todd W. Bostwick in his *Landscape of the Spirits: Hohokam Rock Art at South Mountain Park*. Central in the panel

is a powerful zigzag lightning design, with a fainter large waterbird on the right and two anthropomorphs (Figure 20). Bostwick notes how “meandering lines connect the large bird to the smaller humans and the lightning, giving the scene a sense of extreme power” (Bostwick 2002:92). Also at South Mountain, on the upper Mormon Trail, there is an anthropomorph with lightning legs (Figure 21). In the Mojave Desert, at Black Canyon northwest of Barstow, California, there is a lightning panel which includes a mountain lion with lightning tail (Figure 22).

CONCLUSION

The lightning motif has been related to petroglyph depictions of Tlaloc, the Mesoamerican rain deity. Polly Schaafsma declares that Tlaloc “controlled the rain necessary for raising crops in the high central plateaus and was in charge of floods, hail, frost and lightning” (Schaafsma 1980:237). Representations of the rain deity, Tlaloc, are found virtually everywhere Jornada Style rock art is found in the Rio Grande Valley and surrounding areas. Particularly elaborate depictions of Tlaloc are present at the Three Rivers petroglyph site (Figure 23) and at Alamo



Figure 23. Three Rivers Tlaloc.

Mountain (Figure 24), located east of the Rio Grande River, just above the border with West Texas. The torso of both Tlaloc figures have patterned lightning zigzags illustrating the association of lightning with powerful beings and the prominent role of lightning symbolism in Native American rock art, in relation to clouds and rain.

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Figure 24. Alamo Mountain Tlaloc.

Alamo Mountain Tlaloc picture. I am also indebted to the pictures and response of Michael A. Freisinger, Museum Curator for Arizona State Parks. My daughter, Merrie L. Gough, gave me the book, *Where the Lightning Strikes*, by Peter Nabokov. Finally, I am grateful to the editors for working with my paper, and giving me the hard task of reducing the number of pictures from 48 to 24.

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