



The Western Message Petroglyphs: Do They Have a Message?

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The Western Message Petroglyphs are a collection of carvings in the West, including Utah. Their shared characteristics classify them as a unique subclass of historic petroglyphs. But, their name points to a major problem. To call them "message" sites implies that there is a message to convey. This paper lays the ground work for finding the message by looking at the nature of language then giving an example translation. A language needs a common cultural basis between the creator and the recipient of the message. A cultural basis of the Western Message Petroglyphs is established through oral history, site locations, and most importantly, the sources for the glyphs consistent with the dates established by oral history. Finally, the arrangement and organization of the large panels give clues on how to "read" them. From the above considerations, it is likely that the Western Message Petroglyphs do represent a language, although one limited to icons, that may be translated even if in crude terms, i.e. transliteration. An example of a "reading" uses the Western Message Petroglyph at Fillmore, UT, which correlates with Utah history of the 1800s.

The Western Message Petroglyphs (WMP) are a group of twenty-five panels and many clusters of rock carvings that are spread across eight western states of the US. They share distinct characteristics such as style of arrangement, size, carved manufacture, the type of sites where they occur, and the cultural mix of symbols as well as unique symbols that occur frequently. The number of sites is still a matter of discussion since a precise definition is under refinement. Many other historic sites use similar symbols, as can be found in Tomkin's books, but lack the cultural diversity of the symbols and the size, or the execution, of the symbols may be different.

In order to determine if there are messages in the Western Message Petroglyphs, the nature of language is considered and applied to the Western Message Petroglyphs. As Michael Coe stated in the third edition of *Breaking the Maya Code*, there are no scripts made purely of icons except a few systems developed as mnemonic aids, such as the “picture-writing” of the American Indian. Writing relies on cultural conventions for understanding. While there are several representational symbols in the Western Message Petroglyphs, it is necessary to be careful when interpreting them, as shown in a recent paper on Research Gate. H. Cho & T. Ishida, submitted a series of emoticons to students in the US and in Japan then compared their interpretations. Most were similar as would be expected with the age of the internet as a great leveler of cultures. But one picture produced vastly different results between the students.



Figure 1. Author's rendition of the emoticons used in Cho and Ishida's paper *Exploring Cultural Differences in Pictogram Interpretations*.

The Americans saw the cluster of laughing emoticons as happy, having a party, a fun time, etc. but the Japanese students had negative reactions, interpreting the emoticons as representing liars, deceit, double-dealers, boasting. So it is imperative we establish a cultural basis for understanding the Western Message Petroglyphs.

Many of the symbols can be attributed to specific cultures, Figure 2. The greatest number of glyphs have American Indian origins. There are several Egyptian hieroglyphs, a few Maya/Aztec hieroglyphs, and some symbols that may have European or alchemy origins. There is one Chinese symbol. But, many are representational, therefore found in many cultures. Then several are unique to this series of carvings, Figure 3.

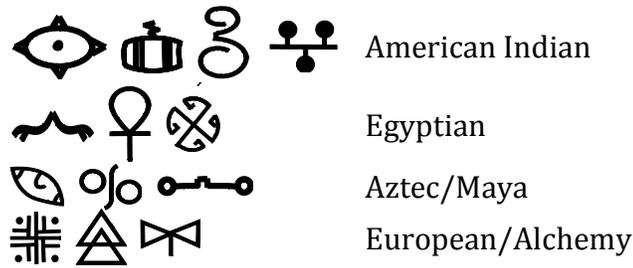


Figure 2. Representative sample of cultural diversity of the Western Message Petroglyphs



Figure 3. A sample of unique symbols found in the Western Message Petroglyphs as is the "M and Eye" shown at the top of this article.

Placing the Western Message Petroglyphs into a timeframe to aid the establishment of a cultural basis for communication is done in part by the founding dates of the towns where these petroglyphs are located, by oral history, and by the dates when the symbols are found in the literature. The sites of the Western Message Petroglyphs are close to towns predominately settled in the mid- to late 1800s (Figure 4). The towns were involved first with mineral exploration then with mining or providing supplies for other mining towns. The exceptions might be those sites around the Bay Area on the West Coast, however they were ultimately involved with the Gold Rush of 1848 and continued as financial centers for mining in other states even into the 1900s.

The dates of the establishment of the towns close to the WMP around the time of the Gold Rush is no coincidence but correlates well with the limited oral history of the sites and the appearance of many of the symbols in the literature of the times. Odgen has been placed at 1880 by an interview taken by Mark Stuart of Uintah. The history of the carved panel near Lordsburg, NM, has been placed also at 1880 and possibly earlier in a newspaper article from the 1840s. Although the gentleman at Rockville, CA, was vague, he knew of the panel as a young child in early 1900s and his father knew of it before the gentleman was born, placing the panel in the late 1800s.



Figure 4. Map of Western Message Petroglyphs sites according to the closest towns. The dates are either the time prospecting started or the establishment of the town.

Before dating some of the symbols, a few examples of the WMP will show some of the diversity of cultures represented as well as the characteristics of the Western Message Petroglyphs such as the linear arrangement of the panels, ancillary symbols, and the unique symbols.

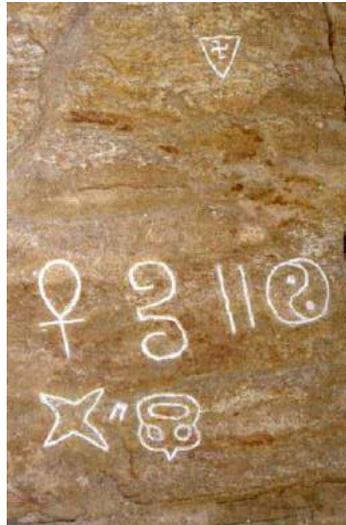


Figure 5. Nephi, UT. Note the “title” glyph (an ancillary symbol) and linear arrangement as well as the Egyptian ankh, and Chinese yin yang.



Figure 6. Ogden, UT. Note the ancillary glyph, "M & Eye", at the left lower corner and the linear arrangement of symbol again. The middle symbol of the third line will be discussed later.



Figure 7. Pioche, NV. Note the almost linear arrangement. Most of the irregularity of the lines of symbols may be due to the irregularities of the rock surface.



Figure 8. Alabama Hills, CA. This panel has been re-carved. The re-carver was stopped before she was done. There are 3 more glyphs on the right as will be seen later. A second panel to the north has not been re-carved. Its patina matches the rock face.

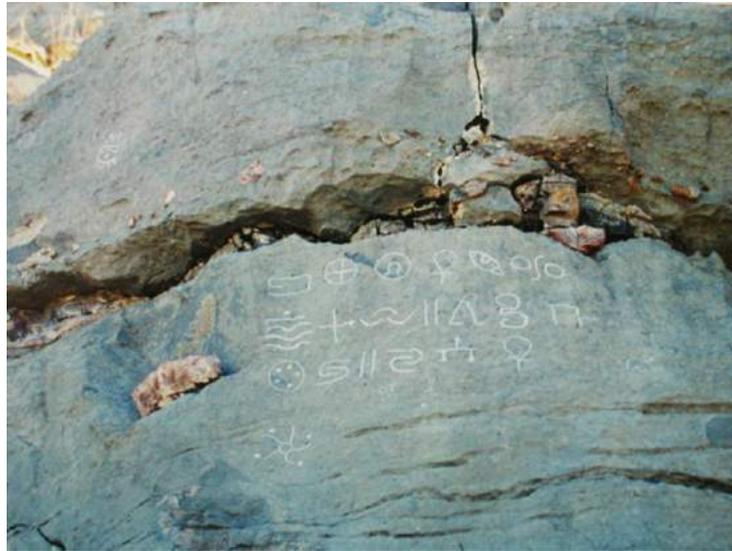


Figure 9. Silver City, NM. Notice the ancillary symbols at the upper right, the "M and Eye," and at the bottom, the "starfish" like symbol, a symbol unique to the Western Message Petroglyphs.

To narrow the timeframe further interpreting the WMP, the dates certain symbols occur in the literature are necessary, Figure10. The popularity of these publications is exemplified by John Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* where Pio Perez's appendix on the "Ancient Chronology Yucatan" occurs. At first, Stephens' exploits in Central America appeared as a serial in *North American Review* then his first work of 2 volumes was printed in May, 1841. Within three months, nine editions were printed and by 1842 the twelfth edition was printed.

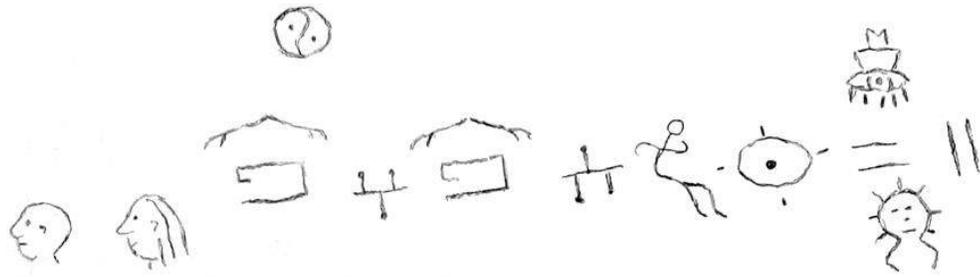
American Indian	Alchemy and Miscellaneous Symbols
J. Heckewelder, 1818	Chemical symbols in <i>Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire</i> , Diderot, 1763
J. Tanner, 1830	
C. Rafinesque, 1830s	Aztec/Maya
G. Copway, 1850	A. von Humboldt, 1810-1813
H. Schoolcraft, 1851-1857	C. Rafinesque, 1832
G. Mallery, 1886	Lord Kingsborough, 1831-1848.
Egyptian	J. Perez, 1843 (J. Stephens).
<i>Encyclopaedia Britannica</i> , 5 th ed, 1817, and 9 th ed, 1888	C. Brasseur de Bourbourg, 1863
<i>Grammaire Egyptienne</i> , J. F. Champollion, Paris 1836	R. Pim & B. Seeman, 1869
<i>Egypt's Place in Universal History</i> , S. Birch (contributor), London, vols 1 & 5, 1848	<i>The American Cyclopaedia</i> , 1871. de Landa alphabet
	L. de Rosny, 1876
	E. Holden, 1881
	C. Thomas, 1880-1890
	D. Brinton, 1895
	E. Förstemann, 1880s-1900s

Figure 10. A list of some of the literary resources for the Western Message Petroglyph symbols.

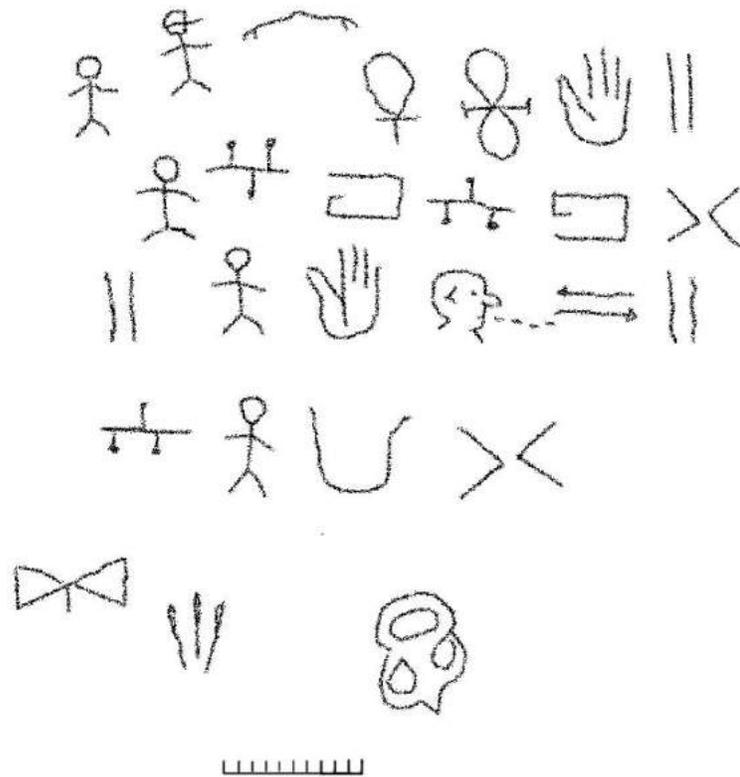
The dates for prospecting and establishing towns for the WMP sites 1790-1901, the oral history and the plentiful literary sources for symbols suggest the era of the 1800s as the cultural basis for interpreting the WMP. The world in the mid to late 1800s saw the beginnings of archaeology with the exploration of ancient civilizations and decipherment of their languages. The improvement of the printing press and rapid news dissemination, each facilitated by improvement in transportation, introduced the populace to the world of the archaeologist and the fledgling field of linguistics, the study of language. The kick starter: Napoleon Bonaparte 1798 and the Rosetta Stone.

There is no lack of sources for the glyphs used in the WMPs. The main question is: Can the WMP be read? With M. Coe's statement that the American Indian had about the only writing system that existed as a purely pictographic script, it is that system that should guide the interpretation of the WMP. This is supported by the fact that the preponderance of abstract symbols of the WMP come from the American Indian, especially the Ojibwa and Sioux. For example, consider the most common symbol in the WMP, a set of vertical parallel bars. The parallel bars suggest a number system using bars, but there is no other instance of using vertical bars for numbers in the WMP. There are no three bars, no four bars, etc. Since the Indian writing system yields the greatest number of glyphs and the parallel bars

are the most common glyph in this series, it is reasonable to look to the Ojibwa for the meaning of the bars. The Ojibwa use the parallel bars as a "rest" or "pause" in the mnemonic for a song or ritual. It may be used similarly in the WMP to indicate a period. This determination also helps establish the starting point for reading as how to continue to read a panel, left to right, right to left, or boustrophedon, "as the ox turns." Examples of its use can be seen in Figure 11.



Alabama Hills, CA, southern panel



Austin, NV, main panel

Figure 11. Drawings of Alabama Hills, CA (top), showing the last three symbols that were not re-carved, and Austin, NV (bottom), illustrating the placement of the Ojibwa symbol ||.

needed, i.e. “zero,” the ellipse is used. It had many forms and may have different forms in the same codex.

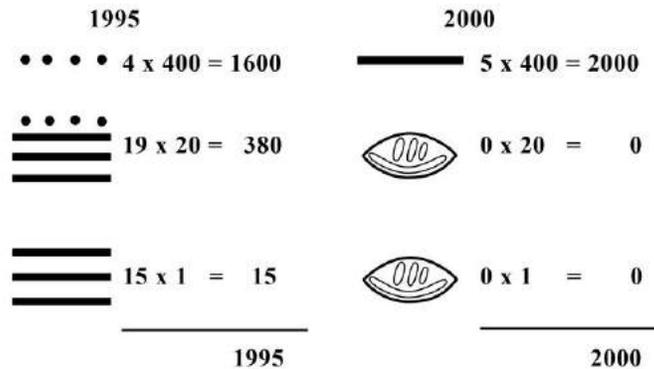


Fig 13. Example of counting with the vigesimal system of Central America.

Do the WMP use the vigesimal system? A form of the ellipse is seen in six of the WMP (Figure 14). If the ellipse is used as zero, the number at Virginia City and Ogden would be 2020 and at Mission San Jose it would be 500. At the two lower sites, could the ellipse stand for “zero” or “naught”/nothing since there are no bars or dots associated with the ellipses? A second ellipse is on the last line of the Ogden panel between two symbols of ambiguous meanings. At Silver City, the ellipse is between the Egyptian symbol for life and the Maya symbol for death. At Pioche, it is between the Ojibwa symbols for great and mountain. So “naught” or zero is an unlikely interpretation.



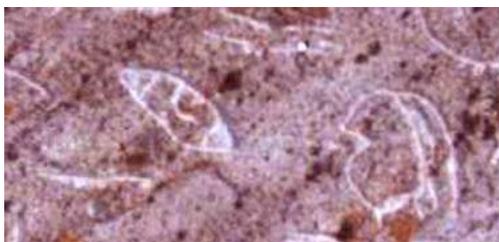


Figure 14. The ellipse in Western Message Petroglyphs. Starting at the top left, Virginia City, NV, Ogden, UT, Mission San Jose, CA, Pioche, NV, Silver City, NM, and Tonopah, NV.

The Tonopah site gives the vital clue on how to interpret the ellipse. The bar and dot precede the ellipse which is inconsistent with the numerical system but is consistent with the Ojibwa symbols for above and below. The ellipse is found in a number of Aztec codices that were published by Lord Kingsborough in 1832. This is very convenient for setting the cultural context for the WMP since the vigesimal counting system of Aztec/Maya was not deciphered until 1886 by Förstemann. He shared this information on a limited basis with friends and colleagues. His decipherment was not formally published until 1904, after the establishment of the latest town where the WMP are found, 1901, and well after the date of 1880 for the Ogden site established by oral history.

To decipher the ellipse, consider the Selden Codex that was published in 1832 in volume one of Lord Kingsborough's nine volume set titled: *Antiquities of Mexico: Facsimilies of Ancient Mexican Paintings and Hieroglyphics, Preserved in the Royal Libraries of Paris, Berlin, and Dresden, in the Imperial Library of Vienna, in the Vatican Library, in the Borgian Museum at Rome, in the Library of the Institute at Bologna and in the Bodleian Library at Oxford, Together with the Monuments of New Spain by M. Dupaix, with their Respective Scales of Measurement and Accompanying Descriptions/the Whole Illustrated by Many Valuable Inedited Manuscripts by Lord Kingsborough; the Drawings, on Stone, by A. Aglio*. The seventh leaf of the codex, the second line, the third and fourth figures have an ellipse at the end of the speech scrolls (Figure 15). It is the Aztec glyph for flint, "tecpatl," and stands for "sharp", "cutting", "harsh." The ellipse with the red tip found with the speech scroll, similar placement to the one found at Tonopah, indicates harsh speech. The ellipse has many forms and may even vary in the same codex and the WMP ellipse is one form, without the red coloration.



Figure 15. Author's rendition of the figure in the Selden codex, leaf seven, line three, demonstrating "tecpatl".

BUT . . . there is a problem: there were less than 100 copies printed of Lord Kingsborough's nine volume series and these were distributed to notable persons in Europe. Recall the 1880s and the Bay Area after the Gold Rush. The entrepreneurs from the East Coast brought with them their culture. Libraries were in demand. Copies of L. Kingsborough's works were not left out. The California State Library obtained a complete set of "Antiquities" in 1863 for \$1600 (Gary Kurutz, electronic communication, 2010). Another set was purchased by the San Francisco Merchant Library prior to 1870 as indicated in their second catalog now published on the web. This confirms the cultural setting of the mid-to late 1880s as the appropriate basis for interpreting the WMP.

The issue at hand is whether the WMP have a message or not. Consider the panel at Fillmore, UT (Figure 16). A transliteration assigns individual words to each symbol in the panel (Figure 17). Three Maya/Aztec symbols are found in this panel. "Cimi" meaning death was designated by the last symbol on the first line: the two circles with a curved line between them, and by the skull. The skull may be found in other cultures besides those of the Central Americas but this rendition is peculiar to the Aztec. Both of these are described in Lord Kingsborough's works and later by other authors. The "grasping hand" on the last line of the panel is also unique to the Maya and is found in Brasseur de Bourbourg's publication of de Landa's works in 1863. These dates are consistent with the events the panel may allude to.



Figure 17. Fillmore, UT, Western Message Petroglyph site. Photo by S. Davies.

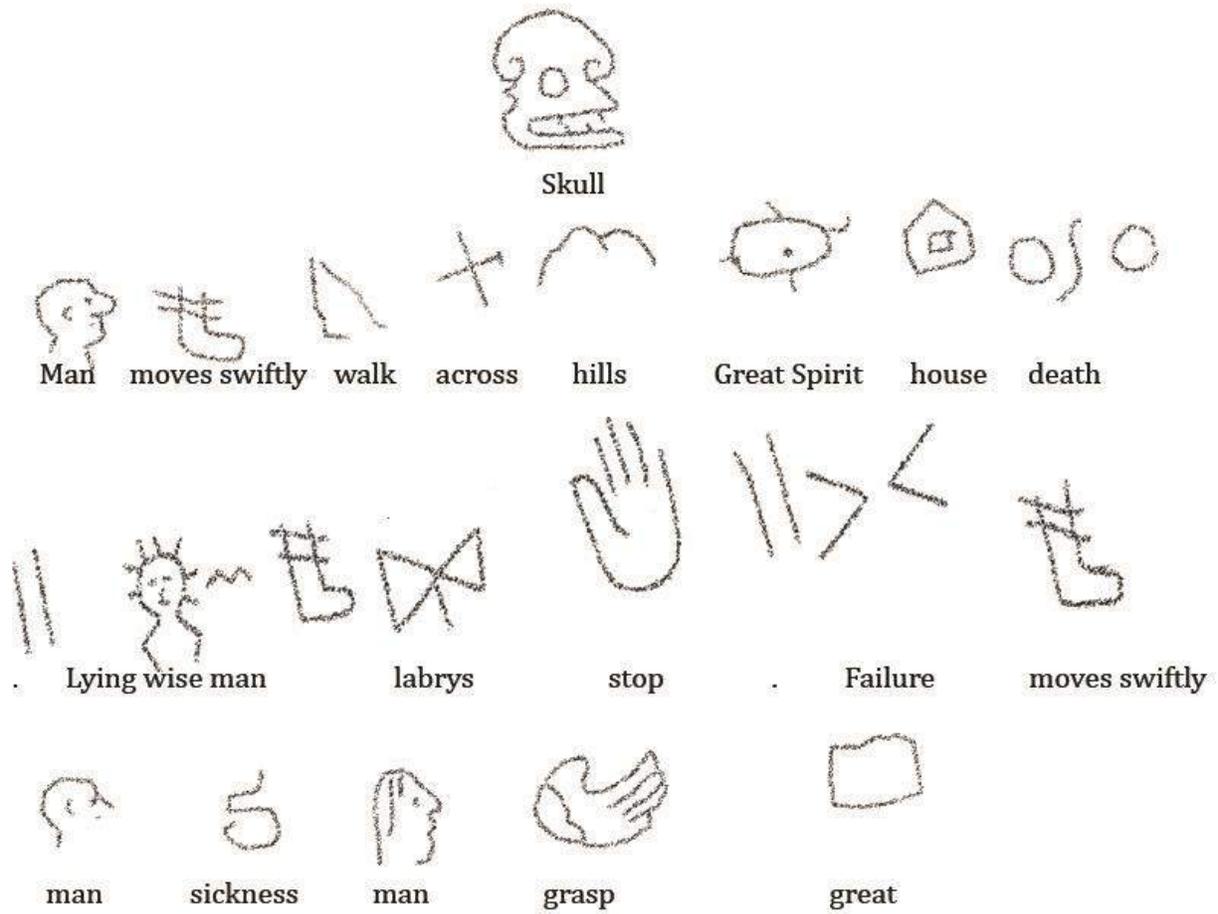


Figure 16. Transliteration of Fillmore WMP

The title glyph of a skull may refer to Skull Valley, just to the north of Delta, or the deaths that occurred there in the latter 1800s. According to Stegner in his book "Mormon Country," about 100 Hawaiians were brought to Utah as converts to Mormonism in the 1860s. They stayed on a plantation at the southern end of Skull Valley and worked for \$30/mo in goods. The mortality rate was high and leprosy broke out in 1896. The lepers were kept at a "pest house" just south of Iosepa. Many of the Hawaiians returned to Hawaii but three remained and died in Utah. The different head types in this panel may refer to the different hairs styles of the Hawaiian men, short (Alexander 1891), and the longer hair styles of the Mormon men. An Americanized translation could be:

Death.

The Hawaiian man travels swiftly on foot across hills to the church of death.
A wise man's lies travel quickly which is a double-edged sword and it must stop.
Failure moves quickly to the Hawaiian man who is sick while another man grasps for greatness.

In conclusion, the panels of the WMP do contain a message. While the exact nature of those messages may be refined in the future as more literary sources for the symbols are found and the details of the local history of the sites of the WMP are examined, there is no doubt that a message does exist. The system of writing is symptomatic of the times, that is, the exploration of ancient cultures and the burgeoning of linguistics in the 1800s. The WMP may be the product of a single person, or a very small group, and expresses a view of historical events and secret opinions the creator(s).

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