

Western Message Petroglyphs: The Native American Connection

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Figure 1. title slide, Squaw Park UT.

Western Message sites are scattered across the western U.S. and have a long history of interest. Judy Hilbish and Leigh and Amy Marymor continue their studies, with assistance from Terry Carter (of Provo) and others, while we look at historic Native American belief and communication systems for likely association and possible authorship.

At least 30 Western Message sites are known, and many more are reported but unrecorded. Most sites have one panel, but some have more, and are characterized by non-prehistoric symbols, usually arranged in rows and with signature glyphs set apart from the main message lines (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Examples of WMP panels. Cameo CO and Lordsburg NM.

Authorship draws endless opinions, but we believe we can now rule out previous suggestions of Egyptians, Mayas, Aztecs, Iranian Princes, Vikings, Ogam, Mormon gold, Spanish gold, secret Merman script, Chinese railroad workers, Micronesian sailors, Laos refugees, Freemasons, Knights of Templar, Boy Scouts, modern graffiti, shepherders, cowboys drawing animal brands, and extraterrestrials. Association with mining is still a possibility, but it is unknown if such possible association might be with Whites, Indians, or early Spanish. Some, and perhaps all, nearby mining activity was done because of the presence of the glyphs and not the other way around. Other researchers are considering association with mining and Mormon trail use. Expeditions followed established Indian trails, but some sites are along old trails not used by the expeditions. Most expeditions, beginning with the early Spanish, also included Indian guides and helpers who may have contributed to the Western panels.

In a more general sense, Western Message panels have essentially nothing in common with inscriptions done by Europeans, or Whites. There are no names, dates, or initials — items always included in non-native inscriptions, whether by Whites, Spanish, Mexicans, or Basques.

Instead, Western Message panels fit well within the general historic stylistic trend of Indian art and writing systems.

Figure 3. Historic petroglyphs with new motifs and changing style. Wooden Shoe Site WY and Pleasant Creek UT.

Throughout the Plains and westward, early Indian art gradually changed from prehistoric styles and approaches to biographic art on rock faces, hides, and ledger books, with new figures and ways of telling stories and delivering

messages. Personal and tribal totems took on new forms, and more non-traditional motifs began to appear, such as an Indian in profile — an intrusive symbol and manner of portrayal occurring occasionally and very late over much of western North America. The glyph may have spread along trade networks from west-central New Mexico, but it also could have derived from White influence.

Figure 4. Common Indian-drawn figures in WMP panels.

Western Message symbols fit stylistically into the latter part of this sequence and contain some of the same Indian-produced figures and general manner of expression, like men with hats, sometimes with guns, buffalo heads, distinctive horse heads, tipis, meat-drying racks, moccasins, and western style houses (Figure 4).

Panels typically are composed of glyphs about the same size, usually aligned in text rows, something different from early Indian rock art but inherent in other later Indian writing systems. These are clearly messages, with formal glyph order and repeating glyph combinations.

Figure 5. Ojibwa-Sioux lexicon of common WMP symbols (sickness after Mallory 1893; individual symbols mostly from Tomkins 1926).

Most of the Western Message corpus derives directly from the Algonquian writing system of the upper Midwest used at least since early historic times by the Ojibwa, or Chippewa-Cree, and their neighbors the Sioux. When the Ojibwa moved west into Montana they successfully communicated with local resident tribes through their established pictographic writing system, the same as the Western glyphs.

At least by the late 1800s the Ojibwa and other Indians traveled around the western United States looking for work, and early Indian prospectors with knowledge of the writing system may have been associated with some Western panels.

Indians also routinely accompanied expeditions across the West and served as guides and helpers. Fremont, for instance, employed Indian guides on his mapping expeditions following 1842, and his routes were along known Indian trails and passed near many of the Western Message sites. Although it is not clear how much free time they would have had, the guides likely continued their traditional vision quest practices along the way.

Likewise, the Métis (French for *mestizo*) were dual heritage offspring of mostly French fur traders with Native American mothers, particularly Ojibwa, Chippewa, and related tribes, the same responsible for the written sign language. The children were well educated and accompanied their fathers across the West, and they respected their Indian heritage, including the writing system. They continued to practice their native customs, which probably included vision quests and related beliefs. So far we have no direct reference that the Metis actually did writing in the West, but they certainly had the necessary credentials for Western Message sites.

Figure 6. Chippewa (MT) letters to Tomkins, 1910s or early 1920s (Tomkins 1926).

Other similar writing systems existed with other tribes, particularly the Delaware to the east (who were with Fremont in 1842), and with other examples all the way to the West Coast. This suggests wide use of written language.

Form and perhaps function of the written language evolved through time. Early hide paintings and subsequent ledger art recorded tribal history, most often as winter counts that recorded memorable events for each year. Such running story panels are common in late Plains biographic art and into the historic period.

For Ojibwa-Sioux and probably other tribes, written messages were songs and stories, close to prayers and often regarded as sacred and completely private. Other messages (as in Figure 6) were for personal information, such as an invitation to other tribes or persons. Western Message panels seem to be the same as the private messages or prayers and not mundane descriptions or simple diary entries.

Figure 7. Examples of Sioux-type winter count story (Tomkins 1926).

Early hide and ledger paintings were usually done in a spiral fashion, read from the center out in a counter-clockwise direction. Most early historic Indian incised panels have a right-to-left horizontal linear action between figures and describe trips and historic events with motion, such as conflict scenes. Later Indian writing, including winter counts, switched to a horizontal arrangement of rows, perhaps influenced by European writing but previously present on the Northwestern Plains. Ojibwa-Sioux documents are read left-to-right, as in English, and Western Message panels appear to do the same. The customary offset signature glyphs were originally covered with red handprints, typical of Native American signature symbols across the West.

Ojibwa-Sioux writing developed out of sign language known to all tribes, but systems were based on the thought process of spoken language, which controls word order and syntax and what words or symbols are important for the abbreviated symbolic language. Symbols must be regular, repeatable, and recognizable, and the ones used here include action verbs, nouns, material things, and places together with such basic conditioners as the question symbol for What-Why-Where; reversible symbols for good-bad, quick-slow, long-short; and various modifiers. Individual signs can be a whole symbol (such as a place or an action), or pieces or combinations — or both — to stand for different meanings or concepts, perhaps a more abstract feeling or condition. Combinations were used for additional meanings (sometimes with a connecting line), such as HILL would be drawn as MOUNTAIN plus LITTLE; or CATTLE would be drawn as BUFFALO plus SPOTTED. The Chippewa chief Morning Child (Tomkins 1926) had as his name glyph MORNING plus CHILD drawn above his head. Western Message panels utilize this system and can convey almost any message that more complex writing systems can do.

For the Ojibwa-Sioux, over 200 individual glyphs were in common use, and others were added as needed. Relatively few are published, but they include most Western Message symbols, and nearly all other Western glyphs fit well within that pattern.

Figure 8. Typical vision quest setting, Del Norte CO.

Vision quests were common for all tribes and were accompanied by fasting and other forms of sensory deprivation. Caves, high places, distant overlooks, cliffs, and other isolated locations were favored places discussed ethnographically and well known archeologically. Western Message locations fit this model, with sites out of the way, difficult to access, and difficult to find. Locations are selected from dozens of similar nearby places but are most typically not places next to a road or immigrant trail where people could conveniently leave names and dates. More importantly, most Western sites are isolated at high elevations relative to surrounding country, and from there it is possible to see great distances, usually across a wide valley and toward distant mountains. The setting is classic Native American vision quest and is unlike anything done by White explorers, settlers, or prospectors. Sites are private, not public, with a message seemingly related to personal or group condition and possibly directed to a supreme being.

Figure 9. Panel with WMP and local symbols, probably done by local Utes; Squaw Park UT, main alcove (unmarked panel).

AGE

As for age, the Ojibwa-Sioux system was published at least by the middle 1800s. Earliest records mentioning the existence of glyph panels are also approximately this age, with estimated dates between about 1845 and 1880, and possibly older.

Figure 10. Squaw Park UT, main alcove, local WMP figures (figures marked).

Panels are usually similar, with repeated glyphs oriented as a storyline and with distinctive characteristics. This initial uniformity suggests a restricted age span, but observed east-west variation and differences in panel organization suggest more complexity. Some were drawn as very short and concise statements; others are longer and more complex. There is considerable diversity in composition, appearance, and arrangement between panels, indicating multiple authors and different approaches, perhaps over a longer period of time. Some are done by local resident tribes and contain direct or modified Western Message symbolism and thus indicate interaction with local Indian picture-writing.

ESOTERIC SYMBOLS

But occurring with the Ojibwa-Sioux glyphs are other symbols that at least seem out-of-place and are similar to isolated glyphs occurring in Egyptian, Chinese, Hindu, and Maya. Some people think the forms may indicate use by an educated person or persons knowledgeable of published symbolism of other cultures, generally published in North America after about 1835-1845.

Figure 11. Weeping eye and mountain motifs. Upper-right mountain symbol after Tomkins 1926; Ojibwa-Sioux symbol after Copway 1850.

One is the so-called yin-yang circular symbol of opposition, the older version with the dots. It has been used in North America at least since the late 1800s, and likely at least 100 years earlier, and represents the basic principle of dichotomy or opposition in North and South American native belief systems, as well as simply night and day. Another is a weeping eye with an M-shaped figure above. The eye symbol occurs all through historic Native American symbolism (and also on one of the Western Message panels), and in the Sioux system refers to a spring or water (the same as in Spanish). Most sites look toward distant mountains, and two panels additionally have mountain symbols.

Nearly all seemingly out-of-place symbols can be traced to other Native American historic writing systems, including the Shoshonean Comanche, village tribes of western North Dakota, and tribes further east such as the Delaware (who served as expedition guides). Some of these symbols and their attributes are repeated on hide paintings and ledger books. Unfortunately, only a small sample of these figures was recorded, and possibly all Western Message symbols were used by one or more local tribes, and probably known or at least understood by all. The panels obviously were concisely made by individuals proficient in the writing system and most likely raised using that system.

Figure 12. Summary points.

To summarize, Western Message glyphs lack normal White elements and fit well into the stylistic progression in the Plains and Great Basin from Protohistoric and early Historic Indian rock art through robe art to ledger art. During this time a universal system of sign language was used by everyone in the western United States, including both Indians and Whites. Native American writing systems across much of North America developed out of the sign language and included the Ojibwa-Sioux system, published since 1850 and probably hundreds of years older. The system was widespread across the west and was used in formal Western Message panels by specialists fluent in that writing system, almost certainly Indians. It is assumed that they accompanied expeditions, or traveled on their own through the western states, but other panels almost certainly done by local Indian groups also have the same glyphs and word order. This indicates widespread acceptance and intimate knowledge of the system by local Native Americans. With increased emphasis on English as the official language, as well as forced displacement of local tribes, these early systems were gradually abandoned, although still used by old-timers until at least 1920. Anyone fluent in the writing system could probably read Western Message panels as well as messages inscribed by local individuals, although there could be problems with the context of personal medicine songs relating to individual visions. The annotated Ojibwa-Sioux lexicon, plus published examples of messages and how to read them, probably will help us understand what Western panels are all about. Various people are working on that now.

As a final comment, many more sites are probably well known and repeatedly visited. Every site is different and helps us understand the overall system, which is based on the repeated occurrence of the unusual or unique individual glyphs more than on the careful arrangement into layers of text. New sites are needed for a larger database, better inter-site comparison, and more support for interpretations — and this means more help from both enthusiasts and the public who know of these sites. We need more help to see these sites, and we always need more photos. Some sites, or portions of panels, for instance, no longer exist.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks for contributions to this portion of the study are extended to Leigh and Amy Marymor, Judy Hilbish, and Terry Carter for their input and massive help. Field support, additional information, and photos have been openly extended from George Decker (Grand Junction CO), Glenn and Margaret Stone (Grand Junction CO), Ed Horton (Delta CO), Alex and Louise Colville (Del Norte CO), Dave Manley (Durango CO), Leigh Grench (Moab UT), Shem and Utahna Jessup (Mona UT), Margaret Berrier (Las Cruces NM), LeRoy Unglaub (Las Cruces NM), Michael Bies (Worland WY), Jim Wear (Laramie WY), and many more.

Biographic Statement

John and Mavis, both with PhD's in anthropology, are archeological consultants based in Casper, Wyoming. Early interests include morphological studies of artifact shapes, their geographic distributions, and chronological changes through time, closely integrated with ethnographic research and historic details. This has carried over to long-term work with rock art, still with the stress on shape or style, distributions across the landscape, topographic context, and pattern changes through time, especially (though not exclusively) across the Northwestern Plains. As part of these studies, they have been looking most recently at Western Message sites relative to late-period Native American stylistic change, site distribution, and motif variation, together with ethnography and historical details.

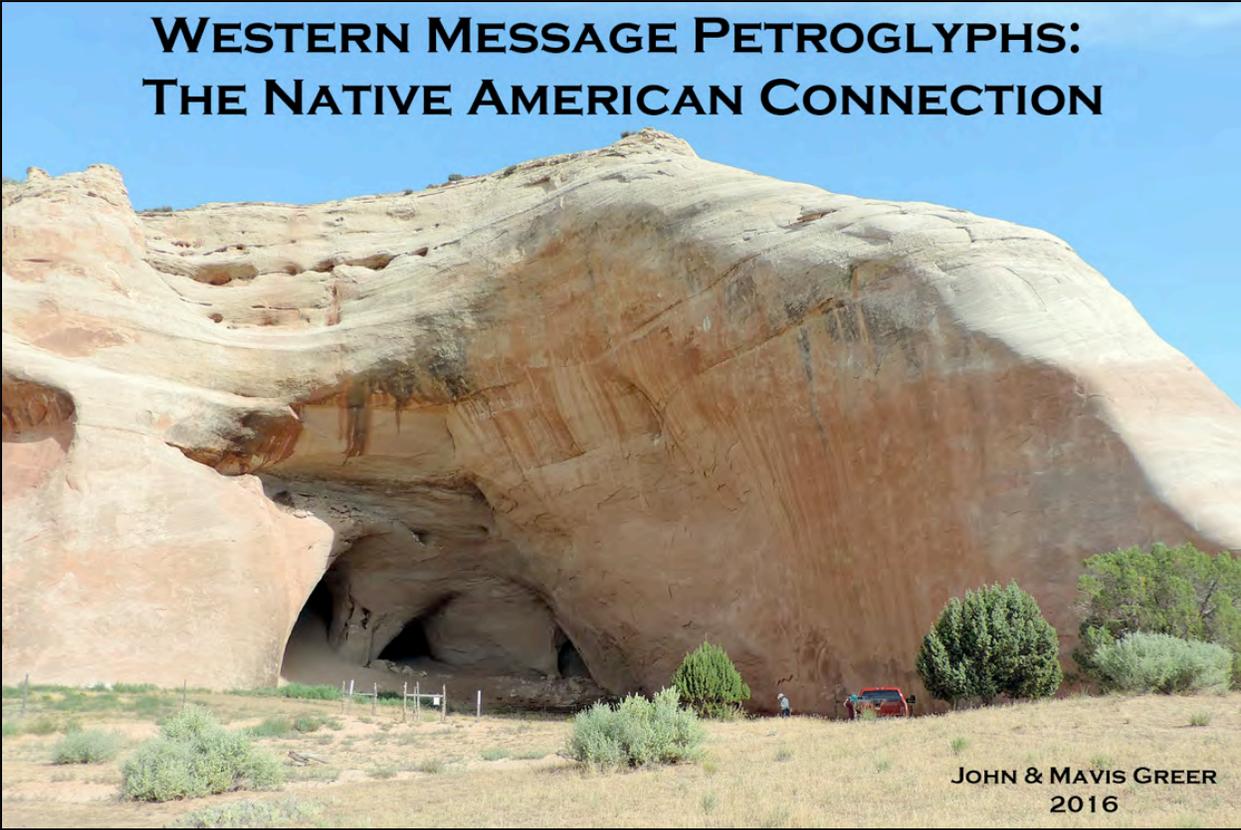


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Figure 2. Examples of WMP panels. Cameo CO and Lordsburg NM.

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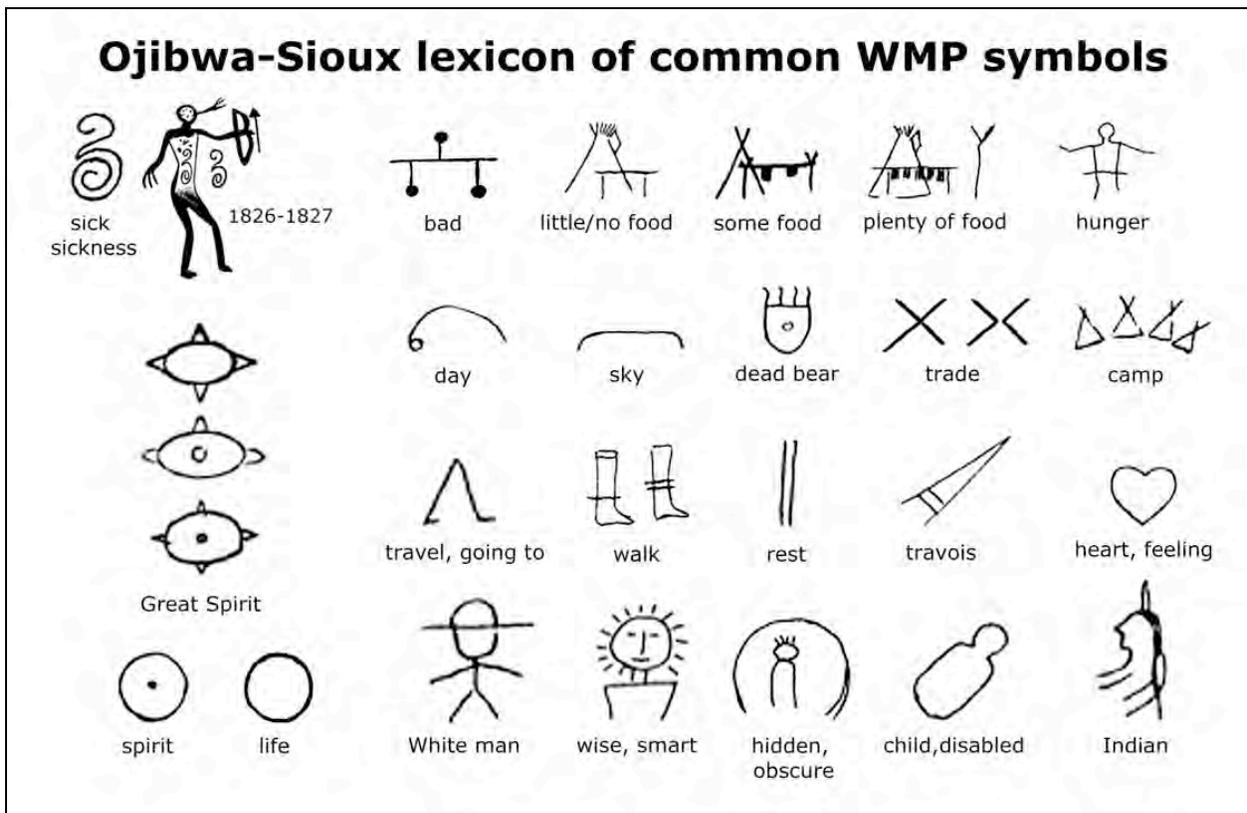


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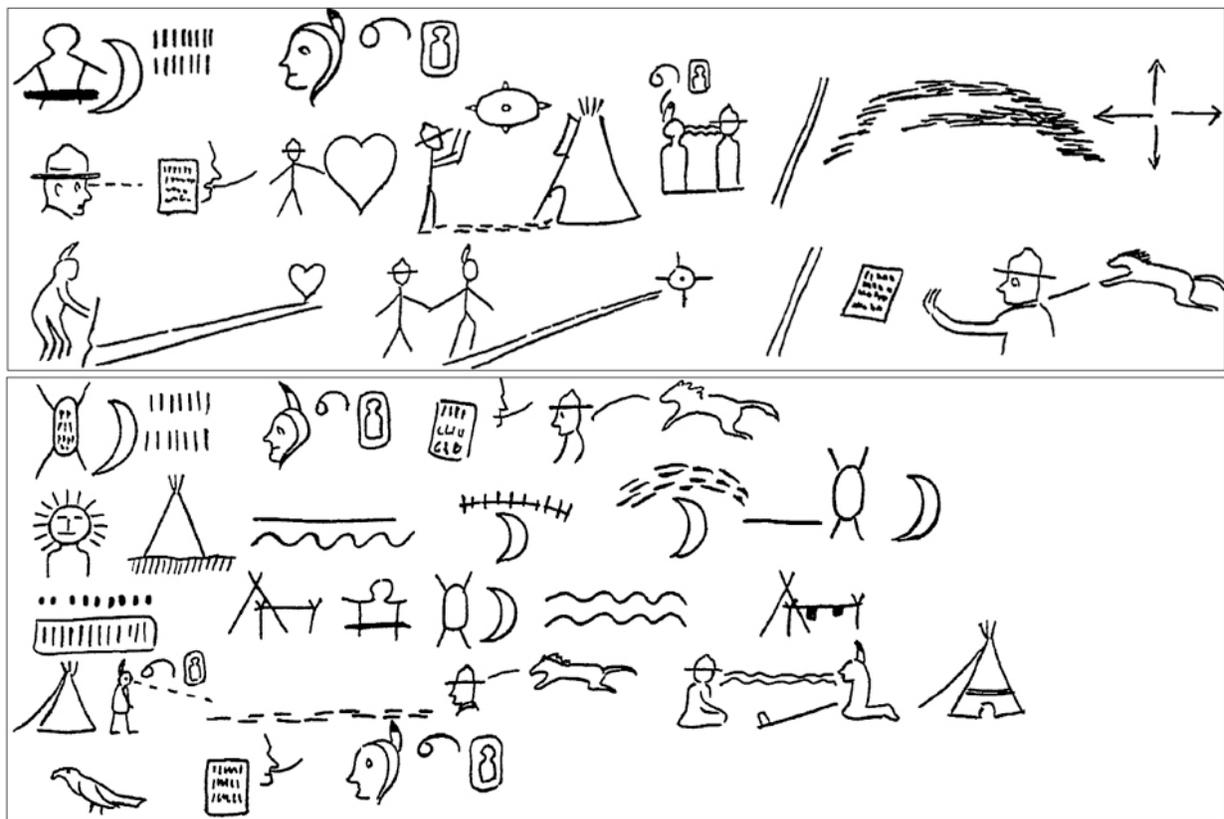


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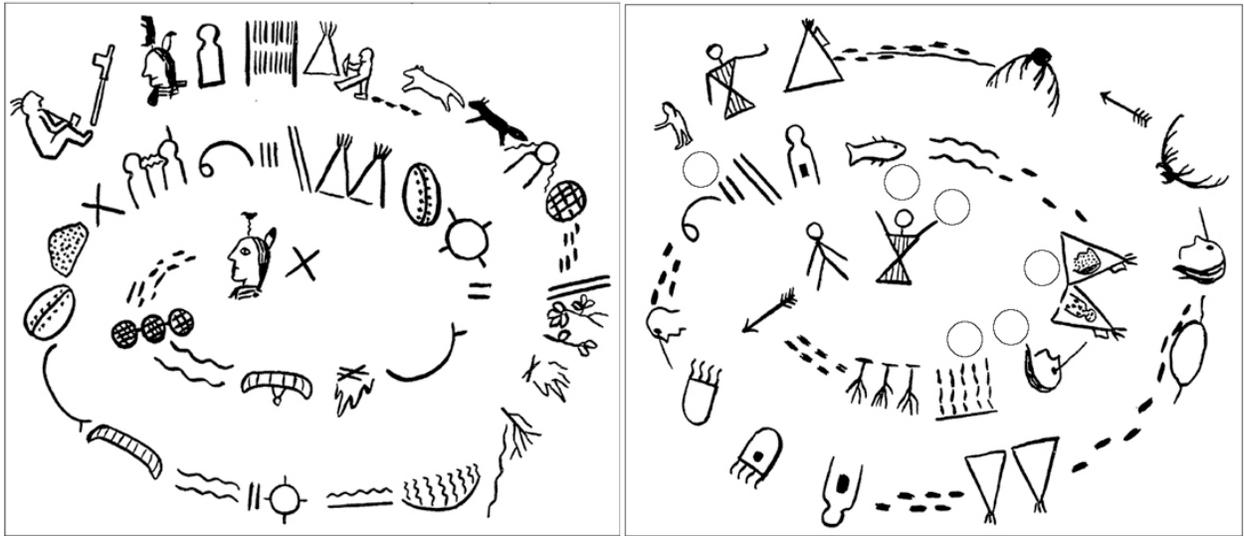


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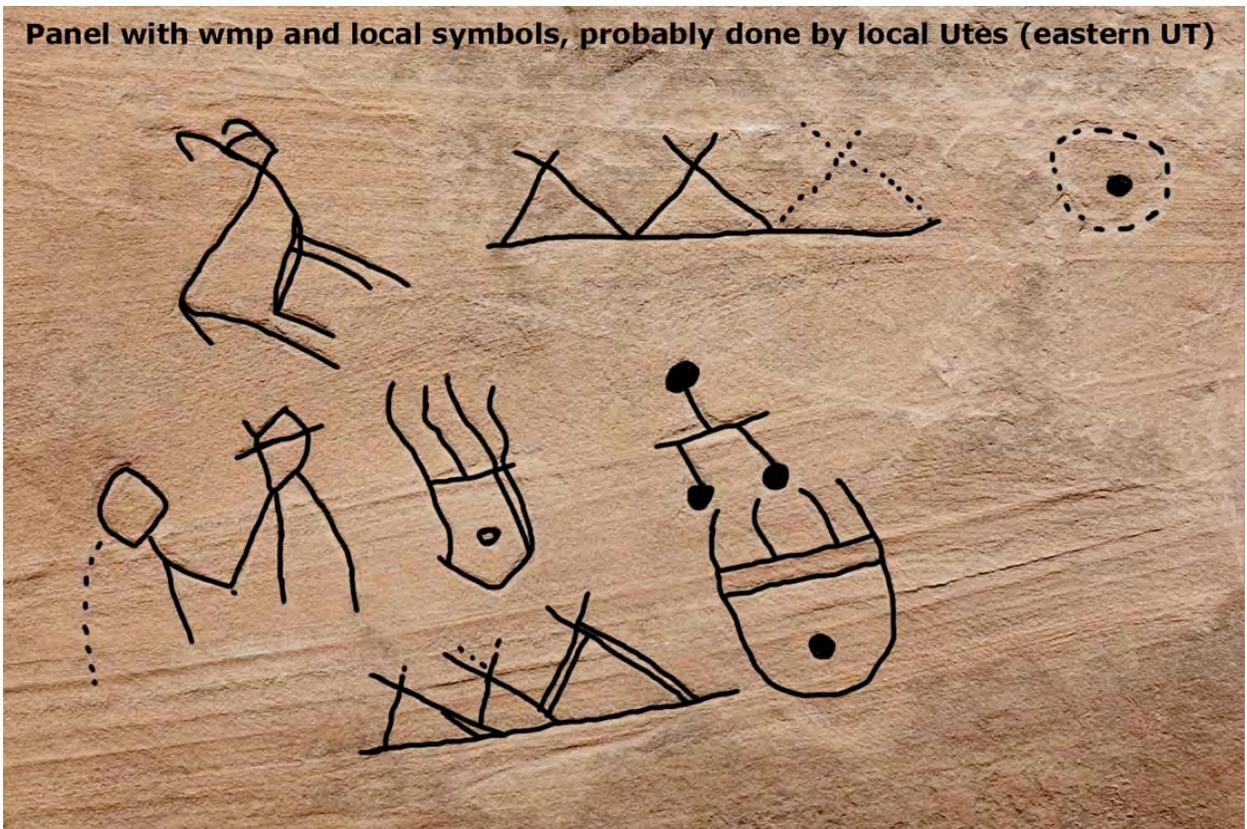


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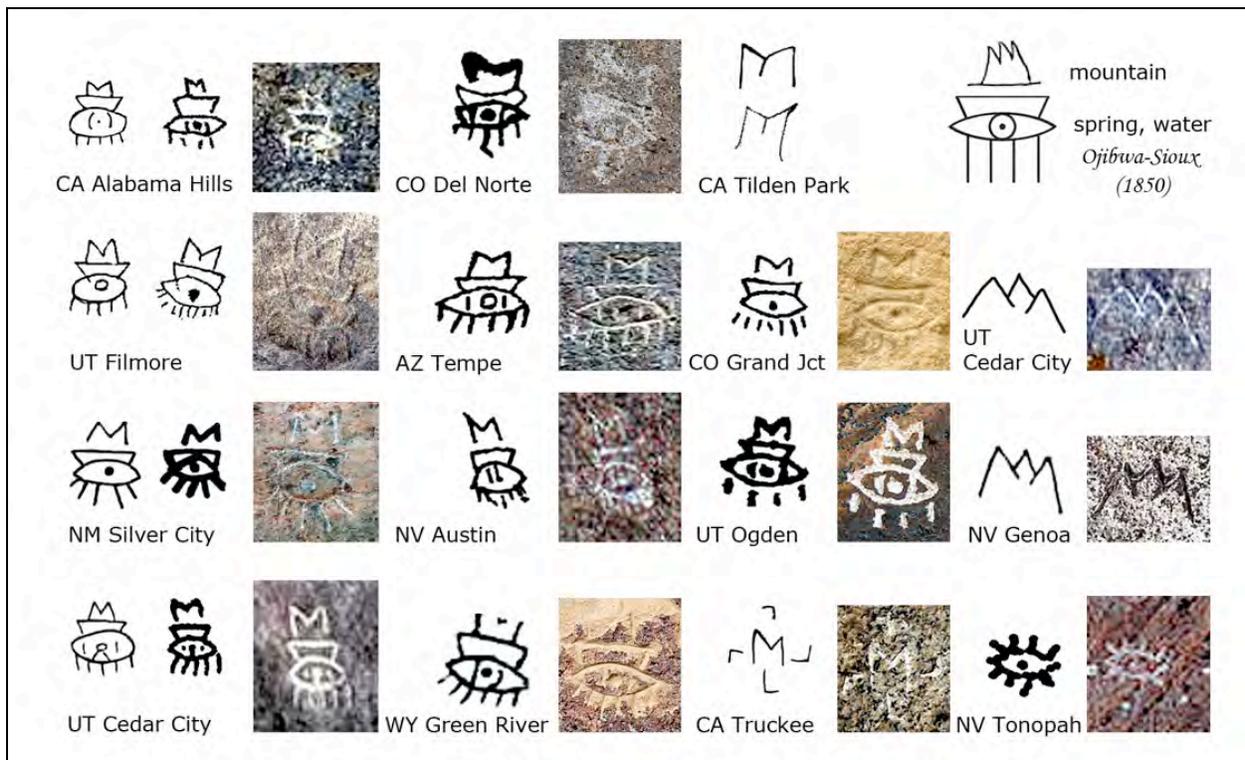


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- **WMPs lack characteristics of inscriptions done by Whites.**
- **Most WMPs fit well within the chronological trend of historic period Indian art.**
- **WMPs are based on the Ojibwa-Sioux writing system and were done by someone proficient in the system.**
- **Symbolism thought to be from other cultures is integrated into Ojibwa-Sioux panels, presumably by Indians.**
- **Site setting is consistent with Native American vision quest locations.**
- **We need help to learn of more sites, probably well known and repeatedly visited. And we always need more photos.**

Figure 12. Summary points.