

The gestures in rock art

Using sign language to interpret symbols

BY JOSH MCDANIEL

Archaeologist Carol Patterson focuses on the gestures in rock art symbols. Such gestures can be straightforward and easily interpreted — human figures in hunting or battle postures, for example. On other occasions, the figures' body positions can mimic the movements of American Indian sign language. Sometimes, more abstract incorporations of lines, shapes and symbols represent movements and meanings found in sign language.

For example, lines in the shape of an arc are important basic symbols on many panels and are also used in sign language. In order to show a completed movement in sign language, the hand is pushed out away from the body in a sweeping arc (Chart 1, a). The sign for cover or hide is shown by a cupped hand with the palm turned down and held still (Chart 2). Both of these meanings, movement and cover/hide, are conveyed in pictography by one symbol, the arc. Their associations distinguish the two meanings. To explain the idea of hidden, an arc is simply placed over an object (Chart 2), and to show movement, the arc is attached as a horn to a head (Chart 2, b), which shows direction, and thus movement.

This can be expanded further. Open doubled lines indicate empty or nothing there — mimicking the sign language movement for empty or wiped clean, in which one hand is swept across the other. Thick solid lines indicate something there or blocked. When the arc-shaped horns are doubled and empty, as in symbol c on Chart 1, the combination indicates that there was nothing there to hinder movement. Symbol d on Chart 1 represents blocked movement, depicted by the widened lines. Symbols such as this are often placed on trail depictions to indicate either easy passage or rough going.

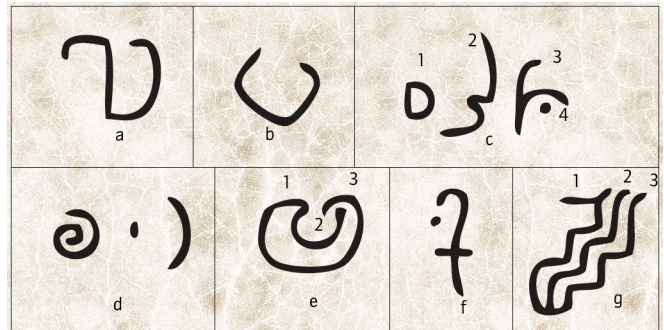
Horns are not just placed on animals. They also appear on human figures, deities and even inanimate objects, and their configuration can communicate many details. Horns that curve inward in a quarter-moon shape represent strength or power (Chart 2). If the same horns curve outward, it signifies weakness. In sign language, strength and weakness are depicted in the same way by curving the index fingers inward or outward and placing them on the head or chest.

Patterson says that these same symbols are found at rock art sites from the Columbia Plateau in the Pacific Northwest to California, and over into the Great Basin and Southwest. "Most people look at these panels and see mountain goats and other horned animals, but I see words," says Patterson. "The consistency from site to site is unmistakable."

Large, complicated panels that tell interesting stories can be harder to figure out. Accurate interpretation requires understanding of the basic symbols and symbol combinations that make up much of the grammar of the picture-writing system. Martineau found his first keys to breaking the code by using locator panels. Locators are smaller panels that either direct passersby to a hidden or out-of-the-way panel, or else identify the location of a hidden waterhole, underground cavern or other important place or object. The first locator symbols deciphered by Martineau are shown below. (The following two charts were adapted from Levan Martineau (1973) *The Rocks Begin to Speak*, KC Publications).

- (b) is a straight line pointing at something hidden. Research revealed that this was often like a pointing finger or arrow indicating direction.
- (c) Going up: was first identified as a locator for hidden panels above this symbol. In sign language, making a spiral with the hands is used to represent the same idea.
- (d) Going down: an opposite movement and symbol as (c).
- (e) Crossing over: symbol used to identify something that had to be crossed over to find something else. In sign language, the idea is expressed by crossing one hand over the other.
- (f) Writings or talk: as a locator this was used to identify a hidden panel, but in other uses it meant actual conversations.
- (g) Go around: meaning one has to veer around something to find something else
- (h) Near: This symbol is identical to the sign language movement in which the arm is extended and the hand is bent back toward the person.
- (i) Looking: similar to (a), but means the person may have to look harder.
- (j) Missed: used as a locator in terms of "you missed something this way."

Ever since Martineau did the original translation, Patterson has found similar symbols all over the West, used to indicate the same ideas -- from the Columbia Plateau in the Pacific Northwest to California, and over into the Great Basin and Southwest. These known symbols have become the key to unlocking other still-unknown symbols. It has also become clear that the symbols were combined to create symbol "phrases."



Symbol (a) was located on one side of a boulder; on the other side, there was a large panel that was not readily visible. The right side — a D with the top missing — represents a half circle, a symbol meaning side. The writer is saying, "Go around this side of the rock." Symbol (b) is similar in that it directs the viewer to another panel on the other side of a boulder, which can be reached by going around either side. Panel (c) uses the symbol for side, (1); an outline of a cluster of boulders with a small cove (2); the symbol for missed (3); and a dot covered by an arc, meaning hidden (4). The translation would be: "On the side by the little cove, there is something hidden." This panel pointed to a large panel that no one could have seen without following these directions. Panel (d) described a hidden passage up a steep cliff face. Loosely translated, it means, "Ascend to the top, ahead, by going around to the right." Panel (e) represents a rock (1) with a waterhole (2). The symbol for hidden is incorporated to indicate to the viewer that the waterhole is not visible from that point. Panel (f) simply says, "Cross over, turn around, and you will find something hidden." This gave the pre-



(a) represents two eyes and is directing the viewer to look in a certain direction.

cise position of an almost inaccessible panel-- . To reach it, you had to cross over a large rock and then go down the other side. Panel (g) locates the entrance to an underground cave. Symbol (1) represents the surface and (2) indicates movement – going under or passing down through a stepped entrance into a cave (3).” The middle line (2) reaches down to the bottom, indicating that it is a dead-end.

Patterson says that the meaning of these symbols has been confirmed by their consistency from site to site — not just the symbols themselves, but how they were used, along with the geographic conditions that they describe. Patterson says that her research has confirmed Martineau’s original translation of the rock art symbols; their use and meaning has remained consistent from site to site across the West.