

# “Petroglyphs & Pictographs – Signs or Symbols”

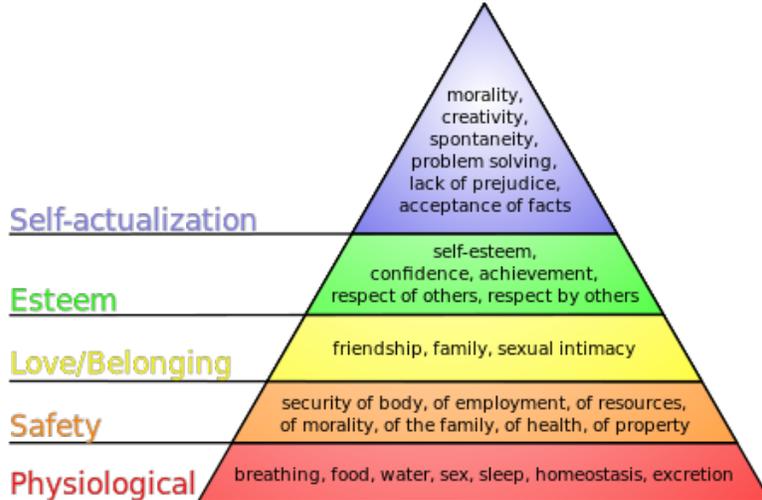
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Presented to  
Dixie Archaeology Society  
October 8, 2014

Dennis presented this work as a site steward and an amateur archaeologist with an interest in rock art. He uses his background in communication to help interpret rock art.

Dennis started his lecture by saying that he does not agree with the term rock art or rock writing, but feels that the term “idea graph” is more appropriate.

He sites Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs” theory to make some basic points.



Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

When viewed by a Native American at least 1500 years ago, he would have been most concerned about his Physiological needs. In the desert regions, this would have been water, then food and shelter, etc.

The creation of pictographs or petroglyphs requires expending of energy needed for survival. Dennis argues that the glyphs must have been related to survival not the creation of “art” which is at the height of Maslow’s needs pyramid.

Dennis then discusses the differences between “signs” and “symbols”.

## Signs

Integral to referent  
Singular Meaning  
Meaning Constantly Stable

## Symbols

Represents something else  
Arbitrary Meaning  
Meaning Changes Over Time

Non Cultural Specific  
Examples: a Rash => Disease

Meaning Changes Contextually  
Language

He cites LeVan Martineau's book "The Rocks Begin to Speak" as a good reference.

He then discussed specific petroglyphs & pictographs to determine if they are signs or symbols.

The Bear Shaman on Anasazi Ridge has "blank eyes", turned in feet and his body is pierced – therefore this means death.

The counterclockwise spiral symbol means go up.

To create a map one would try to find a rock with the same general appearance as the geography of the area and then place a glyph on the rock in the approximate area of the location that was important.

Dennis then talked a great deal about Snake Gulch and showed photos of the glyphs in the area.

Dennis stressed that it was critical to visit a site and to view its location in context with the overall geography of the area. This is necessary to help give context to the glyphs. It is also necessary to view the glyphs in context with other glyphs on the same panel or nearby panels. He also commented that it often requires numerous visits to a site at different times of the day to see all that is present at that site. Quiet time at the site is also necessary to take in all that the site may have to offer.

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John Mangels