

“Cup and Channel Petroglyphs”

By
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This presentation was a summary of Michael’s Master Thesis from Northern Arizona University.

Michael began his presentation by defining what makes cup and channel petroglyph. It is generally a glyph on a horizontal rock face consisting of a circle with a line (channel) through it with one or more cups either inside the circle or outside the circle. Often called “water glyphs”, Michael felt the name “Cups and Channel” was more fitting.

Michael documented 56 separate glyphs at 40 sites. He said that there are an estimated 300 “cup and channel” glyphs known.

He said that there were a number of variations in the motif. The variations included

- the number of circle elements
- the use of natural pits for the cups
- the length of the line (channel)
- the number of cups

The glyphs were usually pecked to a constant depth and were relatively deeply grooved. There was variation in line width. He said that the majority of the sites were near a ledge, crevice or basin.

The glyphs with a couple of exceptions are on the Arizona Strip, primarily in the Kanab, Colorado City, Little Creek Mesa vicinity.

Michael then reviewed the prior literature relative to these types of petroglyphs including:

- Use as mine markers
- Solstice markers
- Navigation aids to water
- Tar Burners
- Boundary Markers
- Ceremonial water channels

He used a number of methods to debunk these various theories.

He attempted to come up with a date for the generation of these types of glyphs. His methods included:

- Experimental replication
- Analysis of Pottery from the sites
- Analysis of nearby archaeological sites

No method was helpful.

He then attempted to look at the dating problem from an anthropological view point. He observed that the glyphs were generally

- on prominent points of land
- near streams
- near land that was suitable for farming

He felt the glyphs were for “family usage” or as a community gathering place.

He said that the area between Johnson Canyon and Little Creek Mesa was populated from the basket maker period through the pueblo 2 periods (1000 BC to 1000 AD).

He stated that the population was rather sedentary until about 950 AD (P2 period) when there was an influx of people from the Kayenta area into the Arizona Strip and an increase in exchange between areas. He reasoned that if the glyphs were being made or being used during the P2 period, their popularity would have spread and they would be seen in other areas of the southwest.

Since this is generally not the case, he concluded that the glyphs were made by the Virgin Anasazi during the Basket Maker II period, prior to 950 AD.

He said that there were some isolated glyphs that were similar in motif. One is located in a Mesa Verde structure (Long House – which is dated to the P3 period) and one at Homolovi which is dated to the P4 period (14-15th century AD).

He points to some work done in the 1990’s by a researcher, Sally Cole, who determined that the glyph at Homolovi was used as a ceremonial water channel as part of the Hopi Kachina Rain Ceremony. He felt that this may be the function of the cup and channel glyphs.

He said that some of the glyphs do orient with a solstice event and can be used as solstice markers.

John Mangels