

"Pathfinder"

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Ancient petroglyphs decorate a basalt boulder at the Deer Valley Rock Art Center in Phoenix, Arizona

Please take a look at the boulder in the picture accompanying this article. You will notice that it is literally covered with markings and drawings. We call these "petroglyphs", and they were created by pecking through the layer of *desert varnish*, that coats many rocks in arid climates (as opposed to pictographs, which are painted onto rocks). Research has shown that petroglyphs in central Arizona were created between about 10,000 and 700 years ago, by peoples we now refer to as Paleo-Indian, Archaic, and Hohokam.

But, as those of you who regularly read this column know by now, there is more than that about them that would interest me. What really arouses my curiosity is *why* they are there. They are found in various places around the Valley of the Sun. But *why in one place and not another?* There are plenty of rock faces and walls scattered around our area. Some have no markings, and others, like the boulders at the Deer Valley Rock Art Center, just off I-17, north of Phoenix, have hundreds or more. Operated by Arizona State University's Department of Anthropology, this place alone preserves over 1500 such works of art.

Here, a trail approximately .25 mile long, leads along the base of outcrops of Tertiary age basalt on the edge of the Hedgpeth Hills. This is some of the youngest rock in our area -- only about 15 million years old. (My readers may also remember that basalt is one of my favorite rocks -- see "Touchstone", November 2003).

I first visited this place on a beautiful, warm, autumn day, and it seemed that I had it all to myself. The sweet, dry smell of the desert surrounded me with comfort. I was walking along this peaceful trail, looking up at the cascade of dark rocks from above, when I was startled by an abrupt, booming voice from the chaparral around.

"Hello, sir! May I be of help to you?"

Totally surprised, I quickly turned around, and saw a man wearing a ranger's uniform coming towards me from out of the bushes. He was Native American, or Indian (which is the designation he later told me he preferred), stocky, strong looking, with graying hair and chiseled features, and somehow he just "beamed".

He introduced himself, and I could see he was "official" by the badge on his uniform.

In a very amiable manner, he immediately started dispensing information about the Rock Art Center, its history, and of course, the petroglyphs. But I was still trying to figure out why I had not seen him at first, how I had missed noticing him as I walked along that trail. After all, the chaparral there is not that thick or tall. And it seemed that he just "didn't fit"; as if he had just materialized on the spot. I even had the thought that he was just posing as a ranger! I liked him at once.

We stood in or near that same place for quite some time, talking about all sorts of things -- his background, American Indians, history, artwork on stone that he produces on the side -- it was fascinating. I never even made it to the end of the trail! I had to leave, as it was getting late, and I had another appointment. I apologized for having to end our enlightening conversation.

Then one thing occurred to me strongly. I felt that I had finally met someone who really knew what the petroglyphs there, and elsewhere, were really about. I mean, what were those Indians really up to with all these drawings? I know, I've read all the ideas posited by present-day researchers about the markings being religious art, communication symbols, or maybe just plain graffiti.

But why, in places like this? Why, in some places and not others? What was it about this rubbly, remote (in ancient times), harsh location that inspired people for *thousands of years* to spend a huge amount of energy creating all these drawings?

Finally, here was someone who *knew*.

So, before turning back along the trail, I explained to my guide my quandary. Those of you familiar with my other writings know where I am going with this: what is it about the rocks that energized the ancients here?

"I am searching for that answer," I pleaded, "and maybe you, being a knowledgeable Indian, and an artist, can tell me."

His answer was, to say the least, totally unexpected, and it came without hesitation: "Perhaps, sir, what you are really searching for is *your own spirituality*."

If you want to do some "searching" along your own path, here is one place to begin. Go out there, and see what you *feel* in this special place. Take the Deer Valley Road Exit off I-17, and follow the signs, going west for several miles. The Center is closed on Mondays, and hours during the rest of the week vary with the season and day. You can get more information by calling 623-582-8007.

You can see scenes of more petroglyphs and other rock art by logging on to **www.gemland.com**. Go to the "GeoArt" section, and on the map called "Rock Art in the Valley of the Sun", click on "Deer Valley Rock Art Center", or any of the other names in green, to begin a series of pictures.

--- Richard Allen

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