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MONDAY WITNESS:

Prejudice, Prehistory and the Puzzle of Pictographs

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The following piece was written in northeastern Arizona during a recent hiking and camping trip



The southwestern landscape hosts a variety of signature geologic forms, some of which have become iconic as the backdrops for countless western movies. If you should find yourself channel surfing late tonight, a single frame of a mesa, butte, spire or hoodoo will instantly lock you on to the genre, even before the dusty characters ride into view.

The desert rock garden is a less well known type, but it will be familiar to anyone who has spent any time knocking about the southwest, and around Arizona in particular. Unlike the angular, striated spires and hoodoos that erode out of sedimentary formations, rock gardens are more often volcanic in origin than not, usually granitic, and rounded in form, characteristically resembling enormous blowups of the sand dribbles that a child makes at the beach by allowing a slurry of water and sand to slip through her fingers.

While you might not recognize them as easily, rock gardens have as authentic a place in western history as do the Painted Desert landscapes so beloved by Hollywood directors: when Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid led their Hole in the Wall gang through the hole in the wall, the passageway they took led into a rock garden. You can find it in Joshua Tree National Park. It's a beautiful labyrinth, and well worth a visit.

Today my Jeep track took me by just such a rock garden quite a long way from anywhere, and a few hundred acres in size. It was mid-morning, the sun was shining, and ravens circled the eroding granite plutons that rose from the desert floor to form globular eminences riven with fissures, and pocked with erosional cavities. It seemed like a good time and place to use a hunt for rock art as an excuse to take a walk.

[Rock art](#) can be found throughout the southwest, and less commonly in other parts of the United States as well. Unlike the breathtakingly lifelike cave paintings of [aurochs and horses](#) in the [Cro-Magnon](#) caves of France and Spain, the rock art of the southwest is figurative rather than literal. Devoid of the cultural context in which these paintings (pictographs) and pecked out images (petroglyphs) were created, the rock art of the southwest teases more than it tells, leading those that would attempt to interpret it to refer to enigmatic figures as "wizards," "monsters" and the like. Here in the clear bright light of the desert, surrounded by panoramic views of the world in which the long-gone artists lived, these shapes are compelling, because they so clearly tell stories that we cannot understand.

Therein lies the great and largely hopeless challenge of archaeology – an inherently limited and imperfect effort, part craft and part science, that attempts the impossible task of resurrecting the reality of extinct societies from the random artifacts related to their lives that have managed to survive. In this context, rock art is especially fascinating and frustrating.



Fascinating, because we can so much more clearly glimpse the creative and spiritual consciousness of those that lived long ago from a painting than we can from a bone awl. But also frustrating, because our vision is so inadequate to interpret what we see. We simply can't, at this long remove and without the world view that informed the artist, truly know what to make of what has been left behind.

Without the back-story to petroglyphs and pictographs, archaeologists are left to work with more empirical material: stones and bones, seeds and pollen, pottery shards both painted and plain, and datable charcoal. But looking only to such remnants makes it too easy to consign those that left such limited clues behind to a state of primitive social and mental development. Until the last century, this practice made it easy to deny recognizing archaic peoples as the complex, creative, ingenious human beings they in fact were, notwithstanding the fact that they were anatomically identical – and therefore of equal intellectual potential – to ourselves. Sadly, the same attitude was applied throughout the so-called Age of Discovery (surely an interesting turn of phrase to those often sophisticated and ancient cultures that were "discovered") to all of those living in less developed parts of the world. Worse, it was used by colonialists as an excuse to exploit those that they conveniently concluded were members of inferior races.

Have we truly advanced beyond this prejudice today? To answer that question, it is useful to examine not only what we do, but also what we say. When we do, we find that there are clues to be found in the words we use that reflect ongoing prejudices of which we may be less than aware. Consider, for example, the curious and condescending term, "prehistory."

As used by archaeologists and academics, prehistory encapsulates the entire period of human existence that predates the invention of writing. Taken literally,

“prehistory” implies that “history” simply did not exist before it could be recorded, notwithstanding the fact that our “historical” era constitutes the very thinnest veneer on the surface of human temporal existence.

What a judgmental word to use, given that *homo sapiens* has been expanding its dominance of the earth for at least 100,000 years (plus or minus a few score millennia, depending on who you talk to), and besting woolly mammoths and mastodons with stone and wooden weapons much of the time along the way. No mean feat, especially when compared to the heavy weaponry a modern hunter would never dream of entering the African savannah without today. And our more distant tool and fire making ancestors first made their way out of Africa hundreds of thousands of years before that.

The written record of a society’s accomplishments and culture, after all, help earn it a measure of legitimacy and equality in the competitive world we live in. In the absence of such an acknowledged record, it is easier for those bent on exploitation to relegate a culture to second class status, or dismiss its people as outright savages whose right to exist can be effectively ignored. The lot of illiterate aboriginal peoples at the hands of western civilization (another curious word, in this context) has therefore not been a happy one, despite the fact that most of the Europeans and Americans that first crossed the Atlantic could themselves neither read nor write.

The problem is this: without a written record, how are a society’s accomplishments to be recorded and preserved in a way that makes them accessible, understandable and worthy of current respect? Sadly, we have no idea what great advances may have been made in the more distant past, because not all great civilizations leave ruins of great temples. And yet, archaeologists are finding tantalizing examples of what has come before. Only now, for example, has the existence of vanished cities in the Amazon been confirmed, because the civilizations that built them had no usable building stone with which to build.

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But those cities are long gone. In a horrific pattern that repeated itself throughout the Americas, European-borne diseases rapidly destroyed the social structure of virtually every sophisticated society that existed at the time of Columbus. Sometimes, the collapse occurred even before Europeans arrived on the scene, as diseases like smallpox and measles worked their way inland via native trade contacts.

By the time widespread European settlement began, the descendants many of these complex societies had reverted to a hunter-gatherer existence, as was the case with the ostensibly vanished (but in fact still nearby) inhabitants of the fabled “lost cities” of the Amazon basin. Long before the Spanish moved upriver, these great centers of indigenous society had decayed and fallen, and the jungle had

reclaimed the roads that connected and the plantations that surrounded them. And yet now we learn that 1500 years ago the same societies that built these cities developed a way to fertilize their fields by working charcoal, pottery shards and fish bones into the soil, creating a rich mixture capable of maintaining fertility for many years. Scientists now refer to the results as [terra preta](#)

In the aggregate, the *terra preta* fields discovered to date comprise an area as large as France – and the potential of this ancient technique is [now being explored](#) not only for its potential to revitalize Third World agricultural, but as an environmentally sound and inexpensive method to sequester carbon dioxide in order to alleviate global warming. In contrast, modern agricultural science is incapable of sustaining agriculture in the Amazon for more than a few years after virgin jungle is cleared. Whose technology, then, is more advanced? Our modern, energy intensive, polluting, petrochemical-based agricultural methods of transient efficacy, or the more creative and sustainable techniques developed by these long forgotten, supposedly primitive, prehistorians?



Or consider the achievement of the aboriginal people of Australia, who arrived in the antipodes more than 40,000 years ago. The date is remarkable, because at that time Australia was more than 200 miles from the nearest land (which was itself an archipelago of often widely separated islands). In order to reach their destination, the first Australians needed to develop and build seaworthy boats of significant size, and develop impressive navigational skills as well. Moreover, their voyages of discovery demanded a degree of daring and determination equal to that of Columbus, as they sailed over the horizon and into the unknown to reach their new home. Many years later, the Polynesians colonized the entire Pacific, crossing incomparably more vast and unknown distances of open ocean.

Who knows what other great but forgotten accomplishments humanity attained before western society invented "history?"

While we will doubtless never discover a fraction of these deeds, I expect that we will learn enough over time for thoughtful people to conclude that the accomplishments of the artists of [Lascaux](#) and the mariners of Australia were not aberrations, but representative of the attainments of many of the waves of advancement that washed up, albeit only for a time, upon the shores of human development, only to recede into the unremembered depths of what moderns regard as prehistory.

One of the waves we are aware of washed up on the shores of the American southwest, only to be pulled back by an as-yet poorly understood confluence of forces that at minimum included a devastating drought. But before the abandonment of the Four Corners area of the Southwest, those that lived in the early centuries of the last millennium built impressive, communal stone buildings as many as five stories in height, laid out roads connecting their outlying communities

with their cultural centers, and established trade networks that extended into Mezzo America. The traces of their existence can be found everywhere in the southwest, in scatters of stone flakes left behind by tool makers, in pottery shards marking places of habitation, in granaries perched high on cliff walls, in the remnants of complex irrigation systems – and in the enigmatic rock art of countless artists that will ever remain to us unknown.

The lot of Native North Americans, of course, was no happier than that of their Amazonian kindred. As elsewhere in the western hemisphere, indigenous peoples

were almost invariably regarded as being less than the equals of their conquerors, and even less than human. This, notwithstanding the fact that the great cities and earthworks of the [Adena](#) and [Hopewell](#) cultures in the Mississippi river valley were the equal in size to the largest contemporary cities and defenses

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in Europe. But like the Amazonians, the societies that built great cities like [Cahokia](#) – which includes what may be the largest pyramid in the world - soon collapsed after first contact. Those that rediscovered the remains of these complex and successful societies insisted that they must have been built by “lost civilizations,” even the Lost Tribes of Israel, rather than the ancestors of living Native Americans. When I was in school, the existence of these highly developed civilizations was never even mentioned.

How different might things have been if these cultures had developed writing, or if the [Codices of the Maya](#) had been translated and widely read, rather than burned by Spanish priests as heretical writings? Would they have earned greater respect and better treatment for indigenous peoples?

Perhaps not after all. But what richness of understanding about our common history as human beings was lost when these largely unrecorded societies collapsed under the onslaught of western guns, germs and steel. Instead, we are left only with the durable detritus that archaeologists pore over, and the rock art that hikers stumble upon as they range across the vast and empty expanses of the southwest.





I wasn't surprised that my time spent roaming through this particular rock garden today yielded little. As it happened, most of the granite was disintegrating rather than firm in the protected places where rock art might often be found. But at last, I found a single panel on a wall of competent granite, hidden under an overhang and shielded from the weather. The panel had but two elements, one in grey-green pigment and the other in white, the latter making opportunistic use of a

cluster of quartz crystals to capture and reflect more light. The first, low down, was a many rayed sun, while the second floated higher and to its right - a small, solitary, serene moon.

That was all that this artist had to share on whatever long ago day she was moved to take up her brush and pot of paint. Perhaps she may have been one of those last Anasazi, the ones who abandoned this region to migrate to locations still largely unknown. If so, these images at least serve to recall her existence, and that of all those other ones who had made these harshly beautiful lands their home. Perhaps the message of the departing artist was simply to proclaim, "Once we lived here. Know this, now that we are gone."

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