

The Shaman's Crossing

A Transpacific Exploration of Pictographic Flight Metaphors by Mark Watts

Overview

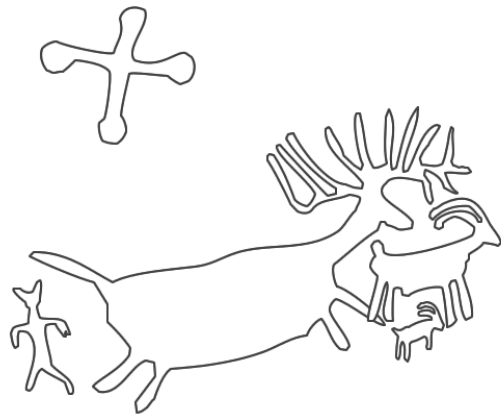
A proposed link between the distinctive features of shamanic flight imagery and a series of early Chinese characters is explored, and points toward a possible common ancestor. This brief article outlines a comparative study of the context in which 'rock art' may have begun to function as a pictographic writing system.

Introduction

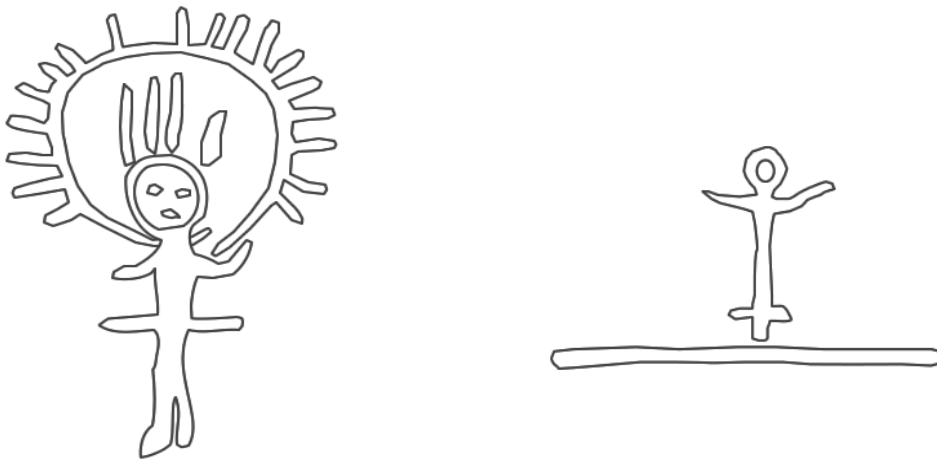
The interpretation of Native American 'rock art' imagery remains a challenging area of study, and despite a significant body of works suggesting that petroglyphs may be read in context as a pictography, many in the field maintain that such an approach is misguided. Simply put, the consensus among contemporary scholars seems to be that "You can't read rock art that way". Early investigations of the potential validity of a rock writing system were undertaken by both Mallory and Schoolcraft, and Mallory's *Picture Writing of the American Indians* explored a comprehensive spectrum of pictographic images, including examples found in contemporary census records and ledger books. Both Mallory and Schoolcraft noted similarities between Native American sign language and 'rock art'. Another source of images for comparative study comes from sacred and 'decorative' arts, including sand paintings, basket, blanket, and other fabric designs documented in the Southwest, and quill work, beading, and hide paintings found to the north and across the Great Plains. In particular, extensive studies of decorative motifs were undertaken among the Arapaho and in California by Alfred Kroeber.

In his 1972 work *The Rocks Begin to Speak* Lavan Martineau published pictographic vocabularies of his rock writing translations, and numerous examples of the practical application of his translations in the field. Despite Martineau's extensive fieldwork and research on the relationship between hand signs and rock symbols, his work was not well received, which is to some degree was not surprising since his studies suggested affinities between Old World and New World sources. Others, including Boma Johnson, have made similar observations regarding the inter-tribal use of symbols, noting that they were "interpreted in similar ways among people who were widely separated, often with different languages and substantially different cultures". **(1)**

Without going into various theories of 'rock art' symbolism, the arguments most relevant to shamanic motifs appear to be based on the theory that rock panel recordings were related to unique vision or shamanic experiences, and that because they depicted essentially internal episodes, the visual cortex was a more likely source of imagery than the cultural context from which came. The question that arises from this line reasoning is that even if certain types of forms did originate from neurological sources, it seems likely that their external manifestation on the rock panels would soon become a source of knowledge. Distinctive glyphs might come to represent specific ideas, perhaps including flight, death, and the spirits of totemic animals in the context of shamanic visions, and these associations could have become the basis for other adaptive uses.



Great Basin image of a probable shaman and spirit animal beneath an elevated cross with four nodes suggestive of shamanic flight.



Siberian petroglyph of a shaman with power lines emanating (left), and figure from a shaman's drum hovering above a horizon line between middle and upper worlds. (right)

One of the most interesting aspects of the translations published by Martineau was that the symbols functioned as adaptive visual metaphors. In his experience symbols might be shared if the user recognized similarities between what they represented and the idea intended. For example an image of a bird or bird tracks might be used to represent the flight of a shaman. In woven arts, a thunderhead motif might appear on a horse blanket because horses also rise-up and thunder. Since each 'thing' has numerous qualities, the resulting system may associate numerous symbols with a single object or being, which may lead to some confusion among those attempting to decipher the code. In addition to the actual symbols, their placement on the rock surface and their incorporation of certain surface features was significant. In his studies Martineau also observed that rock surfaces were often selected for their topographic relationship to nearby features in the landscape, Examples included springs or other water sources, trails, vista points, and other nearby panels.

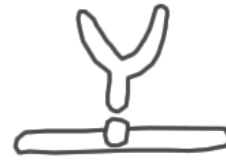
The Shaman's Cross

In private conversation in the early nineties, Martineau's mentioned that the early Chinese symbol for the shaman was the same as the symbol used in the west, a cross, usually with equal-length arms and attachments to the ends of the arms, particularly dots or linear extensions. The core meaning given by Martineau for an unembellished cross was to 'cross over', with the vertical line meaning to 'go ahead', and the horizontal designating a threshold or any feature to be crossed. In practice the cross could mean to cross a path, stream, etc., and by extension to change, or to change one's ways. The embellished version had the meaning of 'to transform altogether', or to cross over from one form to another, a characteristic associated with the shamanic ability to 'become' or inhabit the spirit of an animal. In the example seen top left, the cross with dots rises above a scene with a probable spirit animal (suggested by its prolific horns). According to Martineau the dots or marks at the extremities of the arms of the cross represent the shaman's ability to connect with the energies of the Four Directions. The scene included here also contains the probable likeness of the shaman, behind the primary quadruped, and several smaller quadrupeds.

Numerous Neolithic examples of the Chinese version of the embellished cross appear in *The Origins of Chinese Characters*, (p, 172) and an earlier version with the symbol rotated 45 degrees appears in the mouth of a fish shaman from Banpo province dated around 5000 BC. The fish appears near the figures ears, and may be a sound element associated with shamanic experience.

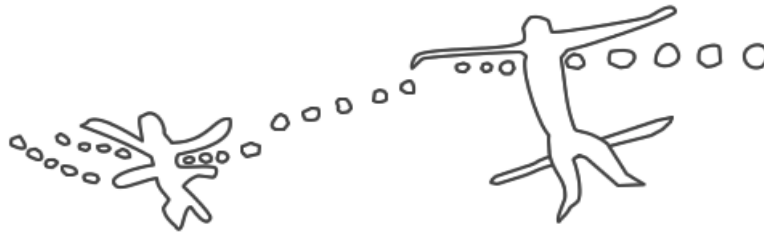


The horizontal line also appears in many other Chinese characters, and some seem to have originated with the use of the horizontal as an elevation of position marker. In plants it is seen first as the roots, then the trunk, and finally to mark the branches. This line also was used in a similar context to describe the rapid growth of a seedling, and also appears at the top of figures for clouds, and as part of a tall cross as a sundial, and at the base of crosses related to the earth, scholar or officials, and marks on sundials.

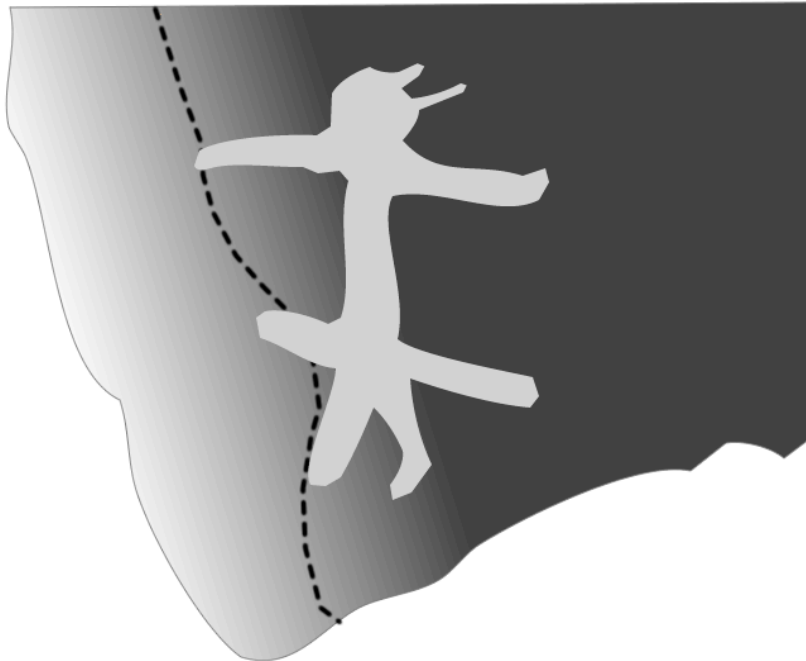


Early Chinese characters for roots, trunk, branches.

Great Basin shaman flight.



Juxtaposed flight figures with dropping horizon lines from Fern Cave, Lava Beds National Monument, in Northern California. Dots may represent the shaman's 'tracks'.



Drawing of a Great Basin flight figure with horizon line at the edge of a rock surface.

To investigate a possible connection between the parallel shaman symbols, two lines of inquiry were pursued. The first was to search for a pictographic lineage for the shaman's cross in the archeological record in northern Asia and North America. The second was to attempt to independently verify related uses of the cross motif from North American sources.

The 'Horizon Line'

A visual comparison of apparent shaman images from Siberia, Northern California, and Nevada produced promising results. In addition to the primary cross bar formed by the arms, many images contained a secondary line, which appeared initially to correspond to the mid-section of the figures. However as more examples were located it became apparent that the elevation of the line changed in relationship to the 'phase of flight' exhibited by the figure, and given the appearance of a horizon against which the figure was ascending, the term 'horizon line' was adopted to describe the secondary line. Figures with arms raised (like the wings of a bird about to beat down to create lift) generally seemed to have the horizon higher on the body than those 'locked' in flight, (extended to form a cross versus raised 'angel arms'). In addition figures with the lines located lower on the body often appeared to be floating, with limp or curved legs, as if they had already lifted off of the ground.

The possibility of a correspondence between the horizon line and the line in the Chinese characters for earth appeared promising. If one considered that the earth sign might designate an object rising above the earth's horizon, a scholar or official might by extension be someone who knew when an object would rise above the horizon (a court astronomer who kept track of helical rise dates, for example). An internal consistency is indicated, however for the use of this line to designate the earth's horizon or other boundary to be considered a common use of the symbol, parallel interpretations would have to be found in a North American context.



An apparent use of the horizon line found in Chinese is the cross sitting on a base line, with two forms, one meaning scholar or official, and one earth.

The Arapaho Threshold

The resource that proved invaluable in testing the cross and cross-and-line symbolism was Kroeber's work on the decorative arts and symbolism of the Arapaho. Fifteen examples of the cross were found in the symbol index, and three were combinations of the cross and base line. Crosses appeared as symbols for the Morning Star, and including two of the examples with 'horizon lines'. One ornate version, much like a Maltese cross, sat on a line with upturned ends and was labeled "Morning Star with rays". A dark cross with a light center square sat on a thin line and was labeled "Morning Star on the horizon". And two examples of the cross were labeled 'Crossing Paths'.

Overall, of 458 symbols documented in the index, the 15 were crosses designated as follows (preceded with Kroeber's catalog number):

2- Person
22- Eagle

143- Crossing Paths
330- Crossing Paths

168- Morning Star
169- Morning Star
170- Morning Star
171- Morning Star
172- Morning Star
173- Morning Star

178- Morning Star on the horizon
180- Morning Star with rays

197-Tent

The person designated in example #2 was not described, and could presumably have been a shaman. Another similarity between early Chinese was noted in that the cross for the eagle had a high bar with the top a different color than the vertical. In Chinese a similar image represented the high bar on a sundial. Since the eagle is a creature that 'crosses high overhead' as the sun crosses high overhead, the uses, although obvious, are parallel. The other 'eagle' symbols shed some light on the use of multiple symbols. One was the form of a large chevron, possibly associated with open wings, and another a short triangle, also seen on the hem of dance dresses and associated with the idea of 'to beat' (it is also used to represent a human heart and lungs and the feet of a frog in the Arapaho index). The final eagle symbol also incorporated a cross, but with mountain images on both ends of the vertical bar, and proposed 'open wing' symbols on either end of the crossbar, suggesting a creature that 'crossed over the mountain on open wings'.

(2)



Arapaho 'eagle' symbol.

The final example, #197, pictured a teepee with a cross on the base line in the position of the door, leaving little doubt that it symbolized the crossing of the threshold, in the same way the Morning Star rises across the horizon before dawn (and the shaman ascends in flight).

Notes:

1. From a private conversation between Boma Johnson and David Kelly in 1996.
2. Other examples of animal symbols after Krober are animated online at:
<http://www.neticons.net/explore/index.html>

Sources:

Hongyuan, Wang, *The Origin of Chinese Characters*, Sinolingua, 1993

Kelly, David H. et al, *Exploring Ancient Skies*, Springer, New York, 2004

Kroeber, Alfred, *The Arapaho*, University of Nebraska Press, 1983

