

Bug, Fish Bait or Spirit

Several years ago I happened on some rock art, one painting of which appeared to be an insect.



Asking around, there was a consensus that it was the painting of a hellgrammite, commonly used for fish bait.

Hellgrammites (*Corydalis cornutus*) — sometimes called “toe-biters” or “kill devils,” top invertebrate predators in their ecosystems. The first recorded use of its common name was in 1866. It’s a large aquatic insect, larva of the Dobsonfly that only live 4 days for males, eight to ten for females. Eggs are typically laid in groups of 1000 on the underside of leaves, branches or other objects overhanging water. After a week or two the larva hatch from their eggs at night, fall into streams with rocky bottoms where they feed on larva of other aquatic insects. They remain 2 to 3 years under water where they grow to 2 or 3 inches long leaving the water with only about a week to mate.

Several years later I happened on an elder of the Chine Apache tribe and showed him this picture, asking him why his people might have found this insect special. He said it wasn't a hellgrammite, rather it was a mountain spirit. Native American rock art often reflects their belief system or the world view of its makers, many of whom have faith in a three-tier cosmological system of sky, earth and water. Creatures that dwell in all three realms are thought special. Countering Christian doctrine that teach in a god and afterlife above, Indigenous People understand their lives in terms of emergence from mother earth. Springs and ciénagas are considered sacred, where water materializes and life is revealed, as are other, sacred life forms.

A far more familiar image seen in the Southwest comes from the cosmology of Tohono O'odham people, the mischievous creator god, I'itoi, who emerged from and resides in the Baboquivari Mountain in southern Arizona. I'otoi is often depicted as the Man in the Maze. Interpretations vary, some see the image as I'itoi himself, others believe it represents all of human kind or the O'odham people. Others say the human figure stands for the individual and their life pilgrimage. The maze represents the difficult journey toward finding deeper meaning in life. The twists and turns refer to struggles and lessons learned along the way, but always growing stronger and wiser. At the center of the maze is a circle, which stands for death, and for becoming one with Elder Brother I'itoi, the Creator.



These images preceded the written word, their meanings handed down orally from generation to generation. Whether painted on a rock by an Apache or carved in stone by a member of the Tohono O'odham tribe, context means everything. As for the hellgrammite: bate to a fisherman, remarkable creature to an entomologist and a mountain spirit to the Apache.