

Arizona Rock Art: Solstice Marker?

The sun's travel across the sky was a source of great interest to many ancient people. Some believed it controlled such critical functions as the "mating of animals and the sowing of seeds". The Southern solstice, the southernmost point that the sun reaches, was celebrated in ancient Greece with the "Festival of the Wild Women". In Roman times the "Festival of Kalends", marking the Southern Solstice, celebrated "the banishment of toil and the arrival of undisturbed enjoyment". The Inca celebrated by symbolically tying the sun to a stone to prevent its going too far South in its travels.

Figure 1



Morning Skyline, Central Arizona

Perhaps the best-known ancient technology for measuring the extent of the sun's movement across the sky is Stonehenge in England. Here a square hole, cut in one of the monoliths that make up the circumference, frames the rising sun on the winter solstice. In the prehistoric Southwest an eastern skyline may have served the same purpose.

A prehistoric resident of the Arizona desert, looking out at a morning mountain skyline, could have measured the movement of the sun. He would first have found a spot from which he could view the skyline. Then he could have pecked an outline of it on a nearby rock. From this spot, over the course of a year, he plotted on his pecked outline the extent of the sun's movement along the skyline.

Present day rock art critics believe that the spiral figure in the petroglyph below marked the southern most point in the sun's movement, the Winter Solstice. They

suspected that on the morning of 22 December 2012 the sun would rise, as indicated by the spiral figure, on the right side of the lower saddle in the skyline of Figure 1.

Figure 2



Petroglyph in pecked Basalt, TNF 2012

Unfortunately, as seen in Figure 3, the sun rose high up on the right side of the lower saddle during the 2012 Winter Solstice. This is much further south than the point marked by the spiral figure in Figure 2, suggesting that the rock art may depict an Equinox. Critics plan further testing of the site in March of 2013.

Figure 3



Sun Rise, Central Arizona

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Imagery courtesy of the Tonto National Forest