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On “Seeing” Chumash Rock Art: A Response to Lee and Hyder

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Lee and Hyder have called attention to an error in our interpretation of a pictograph element at the site we called “Carrizo Foothills” (CA-SLO-104). Saint-Onge’s reconstruction in Figure 5B was based upon a snapshot provided to us, which admittedly was not of sufficient clarity to be sure of all details. Lee and Hyder’s comments about the importance of direct observation and careful drawings made in the field are well taken. The site in question was the only one reported in our article that neither of us had actually visited in person. We had contacted the owner of the property but unfortunately he had to postpone the date on which a visit was planned, and we were unable to reschedule the trip prior to our article going to press.

The only previously published drawings of the pictograph in question were those by Steward (1929: Fig. 34) and Grant (1965: Plate 8). Differences of interpretation existed between these, so we relied instead upon the imperfect photograph at our disposal. Although the drawing published in our paper was incorrect in some details, we take comfort in the fact that our mistake drew a comment from Lee and Hyder that has set the record straight and resulted in the publication of Lee’s more accurate representation along with Hyder’s photograph of the same pictograph. It seems obvious to us now that our error could have been avoided had we contacted Lee prior to publication of our paper, because certainly we were aware of her extensive and meticulous efforts to document rock art in the Carrizo Plain.

There are three principal differences between Saint-Onge’s representation of the pictograph and Lee’s. Our Figure 5B shows the presence of a circle divided into

four quadrants over the zoomorphic figure’s face and misses most of the radiating red lines emanating from the hook-like projection that extends upward from the figure’s head. In addition, the surviving black pigment within the hook was shown as a rayed disk when in fact none exists. Although we accept Lee’s drawing as being a truer representation of the pictograph, we point out that the corrections she has made do not conflict with one of the principal observations of our article; i.e., that there appear to be a number of pictograph sites that exhibit a prominent zoomorphic figure with a star-like element above and slightly to the upper right of the head. We hypothesized that these two symbols in combination could be a hierophony that represented the Chumash mythological conception of *ilithiy*, the ‘guardian’ of the Coyote of the Sky, being seen in the heavens as Ursa Major and the North Star (Saint-Onge, Johnson, and Talaugon 2009).

Following the publication of our article, we found that we had overlooked an important piece of ethnographic evidence regarding the importance of the North Star to groups living just south of the Chumash region. We will use the opportunity presented by this brief reply to report these additional data. In 1852 Hugo Reid published his famous series of letters regarding indigenous cultural traditions of the Los Angeles region, many of which were obtained from his Gabrielino wife, Victoria Bartolomea, and her relatives (Dakin 1939; Heizer 1968; Hoffman 1885). In the Gabrielino version of the pervasive “Orpheus” myth known to many American Indian societies, a man followed his wife to “the land of spirits,” which he was permitted to visit only after passing a series of trials. In one of these tests:

He was told to make a map on the ground of the constellation of the Ursus [*sic*] Major¹ and show the position of the North Star. He felt great fear to attempt this as he had seen the Seers do this but had never learned it himself [Hoffman 1885:24–25].

Aided by his wife, the man succeeded in passing the test. This legend suggests that the Gabrielino considered there to be an esoteric meaning regarding the relationship of the Ursa Major constellation to the North Star. This fits with ethnographic evidence regarding the ceremonial importance of these celestial bodies to neighboring Chumash and Luiseño peoples (Saint-Onge, Johnson, and Talaugon 2009:33–35).

We hope that our article continues to stimulate others to look for symbolic meanings that underlie commonly recurring rock art motifs. Lee and Hyder raise an important point when they document the fact that different viewers “see” different things when they make observations at rock art sites (cf. Lee 1994). Extending this idea further, we believe that continued close attention to the ethnographic record will hone our ability to discern the meanings that the pictographs may once have held for California’s indigenous societies.

NOTE

¹Hoffman’s transcription of this portion of the Gabrielino oral tradition, as published in the *Bulletin of the Essex Institute* in 1885, differs from the text published by Heizer (1968) and Dakin (1939) in that it was based on Hugo Reid’s original handwritten manuscript, rather than the version published in the *Los Angeles Star*. The version published by Hoffman specifies that it was Ursa Major that was drawn by the husband seeking to follow his wife to the spirit world, whereas the 1852 newspaper article changes the constellation to “the Little Bear.” The original manuscript for this portion of Reid’s “letters” is now lost. Hoffman’s account, being demonstrably more carefully transcribed than Reid’s letters published in the *Los Angeles Star*, is presumed by us to be closer to Reid’s original text.

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