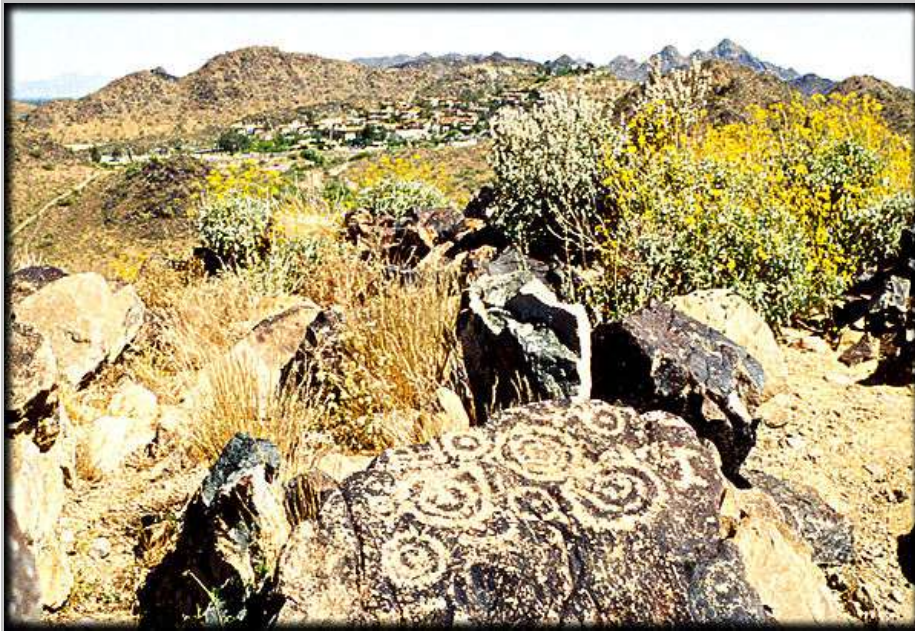


# “ Rooms With a View ”

## (aka “On Cloud Nine”)



Ancient petroglyphs on a basalt boulder in Phoenix, Arizona.

The first time I walked up the trail on Shaw Butte, I didn't even notice them. It took another trip, and a little exploring, and then I found what I had been looking for: a set of ancient ruins, and some people think, a prehistoric solar observatory. Actually, there is a sign there, posted by the City of Phoenix, asking visitors to respect these antiquities. Just behind a bush, it's not easily noticeable from the trail, almost as if it had been planned that way. Like, "now that you've found this secret spot, please don't damage it!"

Just having read my opening lines here, you might already think you know where I am going with this article—another description of some of the Hohokam ruins for which the Phoenix area is famous.

There is more than that, however, to this saga. These ruins are just part of a bigger picture that I want to present to you. Geology is not just something we study. *Geology is something we are.* By that, I mean that humans are inextricably connected to planet Earth and are *part of* its organic evolution. Those who think that nature is here for us to *use*, that it is at our disposal, have it all wrong. *We are part of it. We are one thing.*

For those of you not familiar with which of the peaks around Phoenix is Shaw Butte, you do know it. When traveling down I-17 from the north, it is the mountain on your left as you drive into the Valley of the Sun, just before you get to what we call Central Phoenix. The butte has a grove of tall metallic towers on its summit, and sort of a looming shape that to me has always suggested, "Welcome to Phoenix." If you drive north on Fifteenth Avenue from, let's say, Northern Avenue, you will run right into it.

If you go around to the north side of the mountain, which some would call the "back" side, and look up, you will see a lot of black, rubbly-looking rock.. Much of the north side of Shaw Butte is covered with this rock, known as *basalt*, or here, officially, the "Moon Hill Basalt". It flowed up and out of volcanic vents around 20 to 15 million years ago. That sounds like a long time

back, but actually these are some of the youngest rocks around the Phoenix area. You can see other areas of basalt around the Valley, too, and along the freeway to Flagstaff. When you look up at the Moon, the dark areas you see that form the "Man in the Moon" are basalt. Maybe that's where the name of nearby "Moon Hill" came from.

Those of you that have studied geology—even just the basics—know the three types of rocks: Igneous, Sedimentary, and Metamorphic. The above-mentioned basalt is an igneous rock, once molten. "New thinking" scientists now name a fourth rock-type—"Anthropic" rocks—rocks made, modified, or moved by humans. This new classificatory scheme now takes into account what should have been obvious all along.

Think about how much of the Earth is covered with asphalt, concrete, bricks, shaped stones, and stones transported long distances (like maybe the counter tops in your kitchen). Even little gemstones are rocks which have been cut and modified by humans. We are transforming the surface of our planet in ways that other natural processes have never done, and in record speed! Like coral colonies in the sea which build colossal reefs, humans on their own scale add their signature to the world.

I sat down in the musty dirt, in the middle of what is left of an 800 or 900 year old Hohokam room to ponder this concept, snacking from a bag of "Corn Nuts", one of my favorite hiking foods. (Not that I'm really into "going native", but these are very similar to what the Hohokam actually ate back then—roasted corn. How appropriate.) It had rained a few days before, and the desert still had that pungent, "wet-bushes" smell to it. The brittlebush all around glowed yellow in the low sunlight. I was all alone, and it was quiet except for the very dull roar of

the suburban city stretching off below—traffic noise, occasional dogs barking, a yelled voice here or there, telling the dogs to shut up. I could see far into the distance, miles of human construction laid out everywhere.

Black boulders surrounded me. They had been piled up to form walls, and pathways, and some sort of arrangement to guide the learned as to when to plant crops, when to get ready for the colder days of the year, when to celebrate whatever. Spiral petroglyphs had been etched into some surfaces. We will never know the exact purposes of this structure.

*Anthropic rocks. Shapes amidst geology, caused and formed by humans.* Unfortunately, I didn't have a lot of time to linger there. It was an afternoon hike, just a break from work, and I had much more to do that day. I picked up my pack and walked on, past the summit, through who-knows-what-kind-of-radiation blasting out from the gigantic antennas above me. Then I found some more ruins, and an even better view.

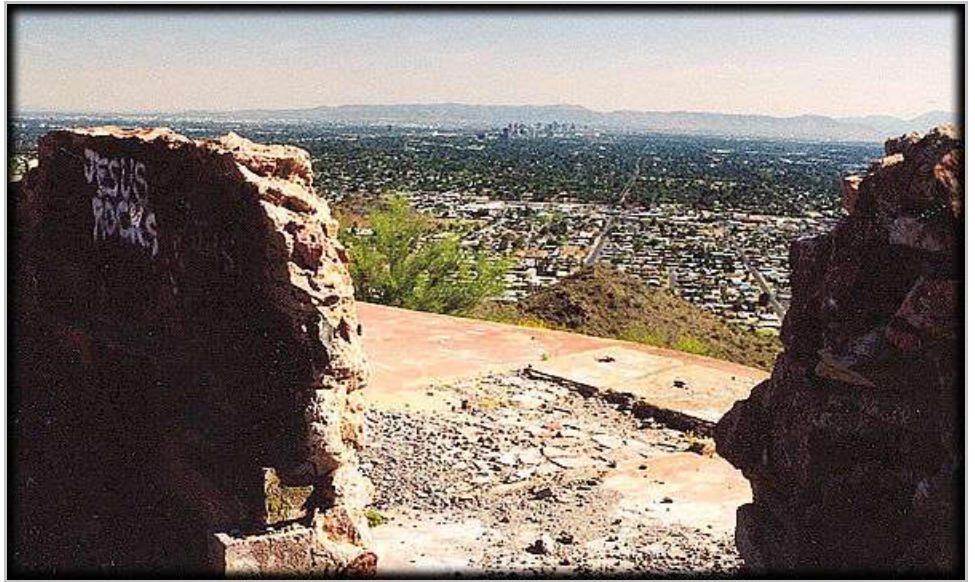
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It was when I walked up into another set of crumbling walls, down through an old staircase, and out onto a weathered concrete floor that the concept of *Anthropic rocks—rocks made, modified, or moved by humans*—really sank in.

The view of Phoenix was grand. I was standing on a semi-circular deck, looking out onto a valley below, filled with roadways and houses, and tall buildings in the distance. It was like an immense green carpet laid out there, the look of a garden amongst the barren rocky peaks. I had come across the ridge from the Hohokam ruins I had found earlier, and discovered this.

I tried for a moment to put myself into the mind-set of some Hohokam hiker, out for a day's stroll from the solar observatory I had just visited. You know, like one of those old "Twilight Zone" episodes, where some lonely traveler rounds a bend in a remote road, only to find himself in some future setting, filled with strange structures, the purposes of which are unknown. As such, I tried to let my mind just view the scene, without judging it. In the distance, long silvery objects with wings were lifting up, out, and away from near the middle of the sprawl, while others glided down into it.

My "Hohokam mind" wondered what had happened to the valley I knew, with its low adobe buildings, vast green fields, and long sinuous



Downtown Phoenix, Arizona, from the ruins of Cloud Nine.

canals, rippling with life-giving water. My memories recalled how small columns of smoke rose here and there from the flats—signs of cooking, and warmth. There was no roar.

It had been replaced by this! So similar, yet, so different in its look. There were long straight streets, the patches of greenery laid out in neat square blocks, and I could still see a canal or two. The fields? They were mostly gone, and gleaming buildings of all kinds were everywhere. There were what seemed like thousands and thousands of metallic objects rolling along on the roadways. I could hear distant sounds from them like I had never heard before, like the buzz of insects, but stronger and lower in tone.

I snapped back to reality. I had once heard of this site where I stood—it was called Cloud Nine. I was standing on the floor of a classy old restaurant which had been named "Cloud Nine", and it must have been quite a place before it burned down in 1964. A narrow, difficult road had once brought its guests up to this point high on Shaw Butte, where they could gaze out over Phoenix in style. You can see this spot today from I-17, as you drive by the mountain.

Standing between what are left of its walls, I tried to imagine being there in days gone by, with maybe Sinatra or Sarah Vaughn on the jukebox, the lights of the city just coming on. At one table sat two businessmen talking up a deal; at another, in a dimly lit corner, a couple plotting infidelity over a couple of drinks.

I could almost hear the plates rattling, the clink of glasses, and the sizzle of grilling steaks. They smelled delicious.

Now, all that is left are these decrepit walls and flooring. If it weren't for the City of Phoenix Park System, these would be gone, too. But here they have been preserved, not out of choice I presume, but because they are too difficult (i.e., expensive) to get at and remove, the land not being open for commercial development. What a great set of ruins! I hope the City leaves them alone forever. They have as much character as the older Hohokam ones, with every bit as much right to stay on the mountain. You just need to look at them with new eyes, that's all. Though not with the original artwork, of course, the remaining walls are intricately decorated—some actually completely covered—with all colors of spray-painted symbols, slogans, and initials left by those intent on leaving their mark in the world. In their own way, those would-be artists came here on pilgrimages, whether to celebrate some event in their lives, to make some statement, or just to take in the magnificent view. I thought again about the petroglyphs I had just seen, on the boulders, over on the other side of the mountain.

And here is where it all "clicked" for me—the subject of Anthropoc rocks, I mean. I have always been very wary of "development". I have always looked at the continual encroachment of human structures onto the natural world as a negative thing. And many times it is, to be sure. But here I realized that it is also *a natural thing—a part of nature*. As I said above, *we are part of geology*.

Humans are modifying the surface of the Earth in drastic ways, and in big fashion. Cities, dams, highway systems, and canals are just a few examples. We are changing the nature of planet Earth faster than any other force. Whether in the form of Hohokam observatories or Cloud Nine ruins; whether in the form of ancient Hohokam cities or our modern-day metropolis, *we are geology*.

What the Hohokam called their "city" we will never know. It was a human-made work of geology, situated in the Salt River Valley—a patch of structure on Earth's surface. We call its new incarnation (appropriately) Phoenix—it too, a work of geological change, much more massive. What further will grow here in the future we can only guess about, and I have a feeling our vision will be way off.

It's hard to imagine 80 years into the future, let alone another 800.

*Author's note: If you manage to find these ruins on your own, please take care to preserve their nature, and don't take anything but pictures!*

For more on this subject, go to [www.gemland.com](http://www.gemland.com), click on "GeoScenery", and visit the series of pages beginning with "Shaw Butte", "Moon Valley", or "North Mountain" on the map. There are multiple views in those sequences.

Click on the "GeoArt" button for more unusual rock art. Or click on the button labeled "GeoHistory" to discover the entire geologic story of the scenic Valley of the Sun.

--- *Richard Allen*

*June 2003*

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