

Hohokam Rock Art at South Mountain Park

South Mountain Park is home to thousands of petroglyphs that were left behind primarily by the Hohokam prehistoric culture. Petroglyphs are a type of “rock art” that was formed by pecking away the outer weathered layer of stone to expose the lighter stone beneath, thereby creating images. The petroglyphs consist of representations of life forms such as animals, birds, or people; geometric designs; and shapes or lines that may have had symbolic purposes. They do not include written words or numbers.

The Hohokam, roughly translated as “those who have gone,” dwelled in central and southern Arizona from approximately AD 450 to 1450. They probably did not reside in the South Mountains, but evidence suggests they hunted, gathered plants and other resources, tended gardens or fields, conducted ceremonies, and made journeys here. The South Mountains were probably sacred to the ancient Hohokam as they are to local tribal communities today. Rock art patterns may symbolize Hohokam activities or mark places that were important to them.

Rock art can be found along pathways such as Judith Tunnel accessible Trail, Telegraph Pass Trail, Kiwanis Trail, Mormon Loop Trail, Desert Classic, Mormon Trail and Holbert Trail. If you see them, the best thing to do is take a picture from the trail. The oils on our hands can damage the rock art. Staying on the trail is important for the wildlife habitat as well as for preserving the petroglyphs.

The Hohokam also left behind artifacts such as stone tools and pottery in various canyons within South Mountain Park. Some of these artifacts are now on display at Pueblo Grande Museum. If you see pottery pieces or sharpened rock tools, they are the remnants of ancient Hohokam activities, and should remain where you find them. Follow the “leave no trace” philosophy, taking only photographs and leaving only footprints.

Because the Hohokam did not leave behind a written language and we may never know what languages or language they spoke, we are not certain of the meaning of the petroglyph symbols found on the rocks. That is the fun part – pondering what they may have meant to the Hohokam or what a panel of symbols might mean to you!

For more information on the rock art of the South Mountains, the following reference is available through local libraries or can be purchased through Pueblo Grande Museum:

Bostwick, T. and Krocek P., (2002). Landscape of the Spirits: Hohokam Rock Art at South Mountain Park. The University of Arizona Press, Tucson.