

## FIRST DRAFT

## Kokopelli

The ancient flute player is icon in modern world



**A**s I write this column, my coffee cup sits on a woven fabric coaster displaying the images of two hunch-backed flute players known as Kokopelli.

Most people in Grand Junction are familiar with Kokopelli's Trail, the 140-mile path that runs from Loma to Moab, Utah, and is used mostly by mountain bikers.

Additionally, they may have seen Kokopelli's image or name attached to restaurants and motels in Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and southern Nevada. A quick internet search shows businesses as distant as Illinois and Connecticut also use the name and variations of the image.

Kokopelli images appear on t-shirts, jewelry, posters, paintings and ceramics. He's been depicted as a golfer, skier, scuba diver and, of course, mountain biker.

But it's the historic character behind the 21st century images that intrigues me. How did Kokopelli originate and what is the symbolism behind the drawings?

There is plenty of Kokopelli information on the internet, although like so much online, it's difficult to determine what is accurate. Books and academic papers provide more detailed and consistent information.

Images of the hunch-backed flute player first appeared around 800 A.D. in the Four Corners region, during what's known as the Basketmaker Era of the Ancestral Puebloan culture, sometimes called the Anasazi.

Some sources say Kokopelli images first appeared 3,000 years ago. But it's not clear whether those images are of Kokopelli or different musicians with no connection to him.

In any event, the images proliferated from 800 A.D. onward, primarily in rock art, but also appearing on ancient pottery. However, new images began to taper off around 1400 A.D., and the last images were probably created around 1600 A.D. Still, hunch-backed flute players appeared in Southwestern rock art for approximately 800 years.

Their geographic range is nearly as impressive. Author Dennis Slifer said variations of the flute player appear in rock art from northern Mexico to southern Alberta, Canada, and from southern Nevada to southeastern Colorado and Texas.

But most of the images are concentrated in the Four Corners region: in northern Arizona and New Mexico, a few places in Colorado and much of Utah, especially the southeastern corner.

There are many variations in these representations of Kokopelli. Some are hunch-backed, some straight. Some have what appear to be headdresses, some have bird heads. Others look like insects. Some stand upright, some appear to be lying down.

According to a Bureau of Land Management's website, Kokopelli's Trail "is named for Kokopelli, the hunchbacked flute player and fertility symbol in the Native American cultures of the Colorado Plateau."

However, most of the modern commercial representations of the flute player are missing one thing that is common in the rock art: an erect penis, believed to be a sign of fertility.

One intriguing alternate theory suggests that Kokopelli art depicted ancient merchants from Mexico or South America who traveled on foot, carrying

a backpack and using a walking staff. In this narrative, Kokopelli came north into the American Southwest, hauling maize seeds in a backpack and announcing his arrival in each village by trilling his flute.

Other stories suggest Kokopelli was more about human fertility than plants.

"Kokopelli's flute is said to be heard in the spring's breeze, while bringing warmth," according to one website. "Legend has it, everyone in the village would sing and dance throughout the night when they heard Kokopelli

play his flute. The next morning, every maiden in the village would be with child."

In a similar story, Kokopelli carries unborn babies on his back and distributes them to young women. For this reason, young girls often fear him.

Another narrative suggests Kokopelli images were based on actual humans who suffered some form of injury or disease — perhaps spinal tuberculosis — that caused them to be hunch-backed.

He also has been described as an ancient Casanova, a trickster and a joyous figure.

In the end, trying to determine how Kokopelli originated and what images of him are supposed to represent may be a fool's errand.

Cultural meanings evolved over 800 years, and the origin story is likely different from location to location, according to rock-art scholar Charlotte Vendome-Gardner.

"The flute player could have represented many ideas over its vast time period."

She suggested it is more important to evaluate the landscape in which rock art is found and its context with other rock art and landscape features, than attempt to ascribe symbolic meaning to such art.

In some instances, the direction a flute player is facing may have pointed to other landscape features or human edifices. In other places or times, the images may have provided different information, such as noting that an area was restricted to a select few.

Voluntarily obtaining oral histories from modern Native American groups — as has been done for more than 100 years with the Hopis, Zunis and Pueblo Indians of New Mexico, the descendants of the Ancestral Puebloans — can help provide meaning and background to ancient figures such as the flute player.

But even their stories may differ from tribe to tribe or clan to clan.

Moreover, linguistic mistakes often occur frequently when Europeans and Americans attempt to translate native stories.

For example, the name Kokopelli



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In this closeup of a large rock-art panel near Blanding, Utah, there are several images of flute players. Some are straight-backed. One appears to have a slight hump on his back.

apparently is a misspelling and mispronunciation of the historic Hopi kachina (spirit deity) known as Kookopolo, wrote Ekkehart Malotki, a Hopi researcher and language professor emeritus at Northern Arizona University. Kookopolo is a fertility spirit for both humans and plants and is based on an insect called a robber fly.

But Kookopolo is not a flute player, Malotki said. Instead, a different kachina — called "maahu" or "the cicada," is the flute-playing spirit for Hopis.

Male cicadas make a noise that the Hopis associate with flute playing, Malotki wrote. And their rounded bodies have a hunch-backed appearance.

Malotki blames 19th century archaeologists for misidentifying the hunch-backed flute player with Kookopolo and mistakenly translating that name as Kokopelli.

However, Kokopelli is the name attached to the flute player today, even among many Native American groups. And, while some people criticize the modern depictions of Kokopelli as a form of cultural appropriation, others have noted that modern Native American craftsmen often include stylized versions of Kokopelli in arts and crafts they sell.

Why has this strangely shaped ancient musician struck such a chord in the 21st century?

Malotki suggested Kokopelli fulfills a modern need "for mystery and wildness in what many see as an increasingly sterile and impersonal world."

Slifer's said, "No matter what his form or how complete our understanding of his history, Kokopelli still brings wonder to our lives."

Perhaps Kokopelli attracts modern followers because we are free to attach whatever meaning we want to him.

If he can be a skier, mountain biker or golfer, I guess the twin Kokopellis on my coaster can be my morning coffee companions.

**Sources:** "Kokopelli: The Making of an Icon," by Ekkehart Malotki; "Kokopelli: The Magic, Mirth and Mischief of an Ancient Symbol," by Dennis Slifer; "The Importance of Landscape-Based Approaches in Rock Art Research," by Charlotte Vendome-Gardner, via <https://www.academia.edu>; "Kokopelli Legends and Lore," at <https://www.indigenous-people.net/kokopelli>; "Kokopelli's Trail," at <https://www.blm.gov/visit/kokopellis-trail>.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF TERRY CHRISTENSEN

Images from a rock-art panel near Blanding, Utah, show several flute players are seen among other images. Images of the hunch-backed flute player first appeared around 800 A.D. in the Four Corners region.



CHRISTOPHER TOMLINSON/The Daily Sentinel

The modified Kokopelli symbol marks the trail head of the Kokopelli trails outside Loma.