



# Kokopelli

Rio Nuevo Publishers 2004

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ON A BASALT ESCARPMENT in the high desert of northern New Mexico, a prehistoric procession of five hunchbacked flute players dances across a rock. It is an orchestra frozen in time, and modern wanderers who stumble across it may feel more than one shiver navigating through their spines. First comes the delight of recognition: the flute player parades across thousands of petroglyph sites scattered across the American Southwest. But at this unusual site there also arises a feeling backstage in the mind, something faintly unsettling, even eerie.

The ancient flute player usually appears as a soloist, a single figure in an apparent clutter of humans, animals, and abstract figures scratched and pecked into rock. But this panel has the air of a sacred ceremony, perhaps one inaccessible to ordinary mortals. It may be a landscape of spirits. But who or what are they? What does the ceremony mean, and why was it recorded on this particular stone, perhaps uniquely? Was the flute player something more than the cheerful fertility figure or good-luck charm that we so casually assume today?

“Casual” isn’t quite the right word. The figure we commonly call “Kokopelli” re-emerged in the late twentieth century as a modern icon of the American Southwest, and more. One hardly has to prowl the canyons of New Mexico, Utah or Arizona to stumble onto him today. Kokopelli cookie cutters stamp out gingerbread flutists, and tattoo artists adorn arms and legs with contemporary variations on the prehistoric image. A Google search heaves up 206,000 hits, hundreds of them commercial enterprises, which literally span the globe. Kokopelli Native American Cedar Flutes. Kokopelli Rafting Adventures. Kokopelli’s Cave Bed & Breakfast. Kokopelli Winery. A Kokopelli Golf Course in Arizona, and another in Illinois. KoKoPelli’s Mexican Grill (currently offering franchises). Kokopelli Arts Webdesign ...

There has never been anything quite like this contemporary Kokopelli craze – except the Kokopelli phenomenon of a millennium past. The prehistoric flutist’s wanderings and possible iconic meanings were also incredibly fluid. He danced across cultural and linguistic boundaries with apparent ease, appeared in countless bodily forms and symbolic roles, persisted for about 800 years, and wandered at least once as far north as the Canadian Rockies of Alberta, east to the Oklahoma panhandle, and into Mexico to the present-day Sonoran town of Caborca. Whatever the figure’s meaning, it wasn’t “casual” in prehistoric times, either.