Rainbow Bridge
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That a particular piece of geography can have spiritual significance should come as no surprise to anyone even loosely acquainted with the great world religions. For Jews the huge bulk of Mount Sinai is held in great reverence as the place the Law was given to Moses. Islam reveres a small hill in Jerusalem called Dome of the Rock where the Prophet ascended into heaven. Christians revere numerous sites in Palestine, none with more fervor than Golgotha, the spot where Christ was crucified. So it is with the American Indian. Throughout North America native tribes, whether agricultural or nomadic, developed a powerful and mystic tie to the forces of nature, whose whims and inconsistencies could spell prosperity or disaster. This spiritual bond to the natural world became closely bound up with many Native American belief systems, and these beliefs encompassed geographic locations which seemed to be the source of those things which by their presence brought life or by their absence brought death. Hence, springs, mountains, and even a rainbow frozen in stone were seen to have strong spiritual power that individuals could obtain through such means as ceremonies, fasts, and dreams. These places became not merely doors to the spirit world, but the spiritual world itself, which manifested more power in certain places. These locations took on an additionally sacred character as the focus of ancient stories of creation, redemption, and retribution.

The earliest Indian people who left any recognizable trace in the Glen Canyon country were the Anasazi. What these people called themselves we shall never know, for they left behind no written record. We are aware of their presence only through the great stone cities they constructed at places like Chaco Canyon, Betatakín, and Keet Seel, and by the pictures they carefully painted or chipped into the canyon walls. When the Navajos ventured into the Four Corners country centuries later, they encountered the long-silent structures whose now-lifeless windows stared out from the dark alcoves, and they gave their builders this modern name meaning “Ancient Ones.” When exactly they arrived in this area we shall probably never know, but their great pueblos were starting to rise on the mesas and in the canyons about A.D. 700. By A.D. 1300, they were gone. Though never populous in Glen Canyon or its tributaries, their presence is attested by their small granaries, great pictograph panels, and mysterious trails cut into the steep ramparts of stone.

That these people knew of Rainbow Bridge is undoubted—their presence is marked by an ancient trail which leads to the top of the bridge. What they thought about it would be a matter of pure conjecture except for one small hint they left behind. When the Cummings-Douglass Expedition reached Rainbow Bridge in August, 1909, they discovered in the very shadow of the bridge itself the remains of what appeared to them to be an ancient stone altar. William B. Douglass described it as follows:

Almost under the arch, on the north side of the gulch, is a pile of rocks which formed the wall of some prehistoric structure in front of which slabs of
sandstone set on edge outline an oval 3 x 5 feet—an altar, perhaps erected by the cliff dweller who no doubt viewed the great bridge with superstitious awe.\footnote{There is at least some Navajo corroboration of this story. The legend of the Navajo Windway, as told to Father Bernard Haile in 1929 by Black Mustache of Chinle, Arizona, relates that the protagonist visited the Snake People (Hopi Snake Clan) at their Navajo Mountain home. The Snake People said, “Navajo Mountain is our mountain. On the east side a rock is bridged across, that is our trail.” Leland C. Wyman equates this trail with Rainbow Bridge.}

Later visitors to the bridge remembered seeing this structure and reported it. On a 1913 visit to the bridge, Theodore Roosevelt wrote, “... almost under [the bridge] there is what appears to be the ruin of a very ancient shrine.”\footnote{Neil M. Judd, a member of the discovery party, noted,}

In 1909 a small slab-sided altar stood close against the east base of Rainbow Bridge, evidence that some primitive had tarried there to offer his prayer to the Masterbuilder. That simple little altar was still present in 1923, when I passed a second time, but it has since succumbed to careless feet.\footnote{In fact, by 1930 it was gone—whether as a result of “careless feet” or deliberate destruction there is no way of telling. It is indeed a pity that no modern archaeologist was able to analyze this structure. Perhaps it could have provided useful information about these people and the place of Rainbow Bridge in their spiritual world view. As it is, we can only conjecture that they held the site in some sort of reverence, but no other conclusions are possible.}

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The next tribal group in the Four Corners country were the Hopi. They were already firmly established on the mesas of northern Arizona in 1540 when they were visited by the Spanish explorers then moving north from Mexico, but there is considerable evidence that they were in the area much earlier. Tree ring data has placed the origin of their village at Oraibi as early as A.D. 1125, and the tribe itself claims direct descent from the Anasazi.\footnote{Like the Hopis, the Southern Paiutes were living in the area of Navajo Mountain and the surrounding country long before the existence of any historical record. Ethnographers surmise that their ancestral homeland extended east-west from Monument Valley to the Little Colorado and north-south from the San Juan River to the foot of Black Mesa and the Moenkopi Plateau. The first white party to encounter them was the Dominguez-Escalante Expedition in 1776, who described the Paiutes living in the vicinity of Navajo Mountain as a separate local entity. The existence of constructed trails which the Fathers used to cross the canyons of the Rainbow Plateau indicate their presence as permanent residents. It is likely that the earliest sighting of Rainbow Bridge in historical times was made by these people, although they seem to have attached no spiritual or mythic significance to the bridge.}

The existence of constructed trails which the Fathers used to cross the canyons of the Rainbow Plateau indicate their presence as permanent residents. It is likely that the earliest sighting of Rainbow Bridge in historical times was made by these people, although they seem to have attached no spiritual or mythic significance to the bridge.\footnote{The last tribe of significance to migrate into the Colorado Plateau country were the Navajos (Diné). When they arrived in the area is not known, estimates ranging from A.D. 1000 to 1525, but they were resident in the mountains and high plains along the Arizona-New Mexico border when Coronado made his historic expedition into the Southwest in 1540. The first recorded official contact of Navajos with the Spaniards was made by Antonio de Espejo in 1583 near Mount Taylor in New Mexico. The territory they occupied in present-day Arizona remained relatively stable until the late 1700s when they began}

Christian Lingaard Christensen, a missionary who ministered to the Hopis and other Arizona Indian tribes for forty years, relates that in Hopi legend Rainbow Bridge constituted the last Hopi retreat as they were being driven from their ancestral lands by the invading Navajo. He further states that the Hopis worship this bridge and that their name for it is Shu-he-moe (The Beautiful).\footnote{Christian Lingaard Christensen, a missionary who ministered to the Hopis and other Arizona Indian tribes for forty years, relates that in Hopi legend Rainbow Bridge constituted the last Hopi retreat as they were being driven from their ancestral lands by the invading Navajo. He further states that the Hopis worship this bridge and that their name for it is Shu-he-moe (The Beautiful).}

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to migrate west. By 1800 the pattern of Navajo settlement extended to the rim of Marble Gorge along the Colorado River and as far south as the Little Colorado. The early Spanish accounts describe a people who combined farming with herding, and they were even then aggressive, adaptable, and highly successful. Coronado described their hunting skills as "the best . . . of any I have seen in the Indies." However, their aggressive territorial expansion plus their propensity for increasing the size of their herds by raiding those of the Spanish, Pueblos, and, later, the Americans quickly brought them into long and bloody conflict with governmental authority. Finally, in 1863 the United States determined to put an end to this ceaseless warfare once and for all. Under the efficient but merciless pursuit of the U.S. Cavalry under Colonel Kit Carson, the Navajos were cowed into submission by a combination of butchery, starvation, terror, and brute force, and, in 1864, marched east across New Mexico to a dreary encampment at Fort Sumner on the banks of the Pecos. This sad chapter in Indian-white relations is enshrined in Navajo history as the "Long Walk," and it is a tale every Navajo has engraved on his heart to this day.

Those Navajos who could fled the armed might of Carson's cavalry and hid out in isolated canyons in small bands. The government was perfectly capable of searching them out and forcing them east, but by March, 1865, there were 9,022 Navajos at Fort Sumner occupying a camp which had been prepared for only 5,000. Federal resources were overwhelmed and so the cavalry was ordered to halt operations. It is estimated that several thousand Navajos escaped the Long Walk, remained in their homeland, and were on hand to welcome their brothers when the tribe was allowed to return in July, 1868. According to tribal legend, nearly a thousand of the Diné, under the thirty-five-year-old Hashkénání (or Hoskininni), fled north and west to the foot of Navajo Mountain. Although the actual number of refugees who found their sanctuary among the canyons and buttes of the Rainbow Plateau was probably much smaller than this, it is nonetheless certain that this was the first substantial Navajo settlement of the area. It had never been looked upon as a particularly desirable territory. In fact, in early Navajo ceremonial, this far western country was the place to which Monster Slayer (Naayéé Neizgháni) had banished the Paiutes. Now, however, this place of protection was seen in a whole new light. The Navajo term for this sacred mountain is Naatsíí, which literally means "Head of Earth Woman." Here Monster Slayer was born in a flint hogan and raised in a single day, placing himself as a protector between the Diné and its enemies. Hoskininni, whose only initial claim to leadership was his public defiance of the U.S. Cavalry, became, in time, a religious leader and paramount singer of the Protectionway Ceremony.

The new Navajo settlers encountered small bands of Paiutes living and farming in the canyon bottoms east of Navajo Mountain, and the two tribal groups managed to live peacefully together for decades. It is certain that by the late 1800s both tribal groups knew of the existence of Rainbow Bridge and a few scattered individuals knew how to get to it from Navajo Mountain. It is equally certain that the Navajos regarded the bridge as a sacred site and performed ceremonies there. Alone among tribes of the Colorado Plateau, the Paiutes seemed to have no religious or ceremonial attachment to Rainbow Bridge.

The Navajo language contains no word for religion as that term is usually understood in Western culture. To the Navajo the world of the supernatural and the balance of harmony which must be maintained are so much a part of everyday existence that life and religion are inseparable. In the Navajo spirit-world there are no sacred buildings, no holy times or seasons, no dogma. Of supreme importance, however, is the maintenance of good relations with the spirit world and a personal balance of life, a balance which requires constant attention and effort. Two personal forces require the attention of every Navajo. First are the Earth Surface People. These are ordinary people alive at the moment together with the ghosts of the dead. The second are the Holy People, "powerful, mysterious, legendary, traveling on sunbeams, rainbows, or lightning." Navajos believe that every aspect of nature has its own Holy People. Hence, there are Holy People for rocks, springs, clouds, and mountains, as well as iron and crystal.

Both the Earth Surface People and the Holy People can be sources of discord and disharmony, and when these intrude into the life of a Navajo, harmony must be restored. This may require a "sing," or ceremony conducted by an individual who has been taught the ceremony and authorized to perform it. While the Navajo dislike the term "medicine man," it is perhaps as close as the English language allows us to come to that person's function. Sings may be curative or preventative, and are used to restore balance
or to maintain it. To the Navajo, "Ceremony and song bring safety." Most ceremonies and sings need not be performed at any specific site, but there are some ceremonies which are related to a holy site and must be performed there or not at all.

An understanding of the phrase "The earth is our mother" is the key to unlocking the reason for the regard shown Rainbow Bridge by the Navajo. By this phrase is meant that the ties of the Diné to the earth are so basic that the earth itself is the source of life and death. Certain geographical locations, usually involved with a sacred story, are, therefore, involved in tribal ceremonies and are held in special regard. Their sacred character is often related to the presence of one or more of the Holy People in the rocks, water, or plants at that location.

The main ceremonies used around Navajo Mountain are the Protectionway and the Blessingway. These are used to restore harmony to the Head of the Earth, with Monster Slayer and Born-for-Water (Tó Bá Jishchiní) at its top, together with the Holy Water People. These people include clouds, lightning, and rainbows. Clearly, harmony with these Navajo Mountain deities will bring the blessings of rain to the desert plateau, and the connection to the storm-spawning peak of Navajo Mountain was an obvious one. Couple this with a petrified rainbow sitting at its base and the confluence of two mighty rivers only a few miles to the northeast and you find here a triad of holy sites, all connected to water, and all important in the life of the Navajo on the Rainbow Plateau.

One Navajo tale of the origin of Rainbow Bridge invokes the twin themes of rescue and divine protection reminiscent of the Old Testament story of Noah, the flood, and the rainbow. It seems that long ago one of the Holy People, a hero god, was hunting in Bridge Canyon. A storm struck on Navajo Mountain and a torrential flash flood tore down the canyon, trapping the hunter. Just as death seemed near the Great Sky Father cast a rainbow across the flood and the holy one walked across it to safety. The rainbow turned to stone and remains today as evidence of the care he continues to show for his children.

Another tale relates that the Rainbow-Turned-to-Stone was brought to Navajo Mountain from the midst of the Great Ocean on the back of Sunlight.

Nakai Ditl'oi, a singer on the Utah portion of the Navajo Reservation, relates a different story about the origin of the bridge.

When the Diné were emerging from the east, they stopped on a large mesa near Navajo Mountain to make a home on the mountain for Lageinayai. He is the god who was given lightning to create rain. His name means "came into being in one day." In gratitude for his home on Navajo Mountain, Lageinayai promised to protect the Diné and look after their well-being. Sometime later, a group of the Diné left this home with a god named Danaize. He has the power to create and to travel on the rainbow. The Diné reached a canyon which they could not cross. The Diné did not know what to do. Danaize told them he would create a rock rainbow which would be a bridge for the Diné. It was in this way that the Diné were able to cross the Canyon of the Rainbow Bridge.

In several Navajo tales, the bridge is actually two rainbows, a male and a female, arching together in perfect marital union. From this union, young rainbows and clouds are born and float together toward the mesas, bringing the blessings of moisture and life to the people, plants, and animals of Navajoland. In this story the east end of the arch is male, the west end female.

This male-female duality among sites occupied by the Holy People is common in Navajo spirit stories and finds further expression in their view of the junction of the San Juan and Colorado Rivers just a few miles to the northeast of Rainbow Bridge. This second location of holy marriage is called Water-Come-Together (Tó ahídidíliní), the other home of the Water People. The female Colorado River and the male San Juan River join to produce an infinite number of Water Children, clouds and rain, which would then drift southeastward. The correct offering at this spot was yellow corn pollen and jewel offerings to accompany prayer.

The first non-Indian visitors to the bridge noted with interest the lengths to which their Navajo companions would go just to avoid walking under the span of the arch. This teaching derives directly from the impossibility of walking under an actual rainbow; as one approaches it the rainbow appears to back away. This, then, is the rainbow's preference, so for a pious and sensitive Navajo one may go near a rainbow but one should never attempt to walk under it.

Not only is the bridge itself the home of the Holy People, but several of the nearby springs are also considered holy. Chief among these is the spring...
Figure II: Rainbow Bridge and Navajo Mountain. The juxtaposition of the moisture-laden mountain with the Rainbow-Turned-To-Stone is powerfully symbolic to the Navajos of the region.
Figure 12: A Navajo view of Rainbow Bridge. In one Navajo story the bridge is actually a double rainbow formed by a male and female arching together in perfect marital union.

at Echo Camp within the great alcove. Navajos link this spring with War God Spring high up on Navajo Mountain, and if prayers for rain are being offered it is not necessary to go any further down the canyon than this spring. Several locations both upstream and downstream from the bridge are also rendered sacred by the presence of the Holy People in the sandstone pillars serving as sentinels for the Great Rock-Arch. It would seem that the large spring a half-mile below the bridge also had sacred associations.

Navajos come to Rainbow Bridge to make prayers and offerings for a number of reasons. Certainly the need for moisture is a paramount reason, and both the summit of Navajo Mountain and Rainbow Bridge are used for this purpose. In fact, twice a year an offering is made on Navajo Mountain and at Rainbow Bridge for growth and increase in crops and the rain necessary to make this happen. In this offering it is considered essential that the prayers be made at both sacred locations.

However, it is not only for rain that the Holy People in the bridge are invoked. Offerings are made here as well to plead for relief from epidemics. It is also proper to pray here to ask individual protection and also to make offerings for the welfare of the Navajo Tribe itself. For most such prayers the proper offering is corn pollen, but one singer reports the necessity of offering twelve cm of turquoise loops.

Buster Hastin Nez, a Navajo living near Inscription House, describes making a pilgrimage to Rainbow Bridge about 1935 for the purpose of holding a major ceremonial requesting rain. There were five people in all, including some women. Each had his or her opportunity to sing and to make a precious
offering at the spring and the bridge. Navajos believe that the prayers and offerings at the Rainbow form a mist which comes up in spurts as the Rain Prayer is made. Mr. Nez states quite unequivocally that the prayed-for rain actually started as the party was returning from the ceremony. Ernest Nelson, a prominent singer in the Shonto region, says that to have a proper major ceremonial at the bridge requires the presence of two singers plus the one requesting the ceremony.36

It is also worth noting that while many ceremonies and sacred sites are of concern to and used only by Navajos in a particular community or a limited area of the reservation, such is not the case with Rainbow Bridge. Ernest Nelson states that people travel from all over Navajoland to use the Rock-Arch for ceremonial purposes, one person from a community often standing in for his friends and neighbors at the sing.37

From all of this it is clear that the massive presence of this Rainbow-Turned-to-Stone has had a profound spiritual effect on almost all the native peoples who have come in contact with it. Whether as an object of worship itself or as the place of residence for supernatural beings whose aid must be invoked, Rainbow Bridge has had a huge presence in the spiritual lives of American Indians from prehistory down to our own time. While non-Indians might scoff at the idea of worshipping a piece of the landscape, the depth of feeling it has evoked among the first of its visitors and the anger and bitterness expressed as the unimpeded waters of Lake Powell crept under its span reveal that perhaps for Western man as well, Rainbow Bridge has cast a spiritual spell. Certainly one cannot ignore the wellspring of emotion many have felt at standing alone deep in the midst of a trackless wilderness under a soaring buttress of rock set against a deep blue sky. Many have gone away from such an experience utterly changed. As Wallace Stegner so beautifully put it, “In the decades to come, it will not be only the buffalo and the trumpeter swan who need sanctuaries. Our own species is going to need them, too. It needs them now.”38