

Cosmogony, Religion and Daily Life Chihuahua's Cave Art

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At the end of the pre-Hispanic period in the vast area that is now Chihuahua lived numerous nomadic and semi-nomadic indigenous groups with very similar habits, beliefs and tools, which makes it difficult to distinguish the vestiges of one group from another. The only thing known about many of these groups is their name.

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The indigenous were able to adapt to very diverse environments; some used the resources of the territory's western mountains, like the little-known Tubar; others moved along the great plains of the central area, such as the Concho, one of the largest groups. The more arid, hostile regions of the North and East were occupied by many groups, among them the Chizo, the Suma, the Jano and the Patarabuey.

Although they had a broad range of resources, these groups' existence was unstable and could

be disrupted simply by an early frost or a strong, persistent wind. Many dangers were surely faced with magic. Rocks picked as sanctuaries still present us today with paintings of shamans, normally praying or dancing, wearing large animal horns during ceremonies. Some groups particularly feared winds and whirlwinds, and the beautiful spiral lines that embellish these rocks probably represent these or similar phenomena.

AN ENDURING RECORD OF CULTURE

Because cave art has been practiced since time immemorial, dating it is difficult, although it should be pointed out that perhaps a good part of the work we have seen in Chihuahua dates from the end of the pre-Hispanic period and the early colonial period (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) when human groups proliferated.

The beliefs of ancient Chihuahua inhabitants were represented with abstract designs whose meanings are still unknown to us. Nevertheless, on some rocks in central Chihuahua, we can observe a cross-shaped design, the result of influence from Mesoamerican groups, that represents things very highly valued by society. Another interesting design

is a figure in the shape of an X inscribed in a square, which many researchers think signifies the concept of territory, the area delimited by the position of the Sun on the horizon during the equinox and solstice.

Indigenous artists put the objects and ideas they considered important in their paintings and etchings: in the rock paintings it is possible to recognize some stylized plants, probably the ones collected in their search for food; small groups of deer, animals prized in hunting-gathering societies, running in formation, including females and young. Also depicted are a circular figure with parallel lines extending downward, considered a representation of the cloud-rain binomial, and peyote (*Lophophora*), that was and continues to be of primary importance in the religion of Mexican indigenous.

After the arrival of the Spanish, religious sincretism resulted in the painted or etched rocks from the colonial period often having a greater variety of symbolism: ancestral figures (suns, clouds and deer) associated with designs taken from Christian iconography (crosses, doves, musical instruments and European dress), which enriches the series of ideas represented, although unfortunately, we still cannot decipher them completely.



Cave of the Figures. Figure praying.



Cave of the Figures. The paintings are attributed to the Concho.

In Chihuahua, decorated caves and rocky places abound and are, for the most part, simple: a hunter who decided to etch a figure because the gods asked him to, or an indigenous group that left a lasting testimony of their petitions to the gods. However, there are complex works, such as at the Piedra de las Monas (the Stone of the Figures) in central Chihuahua, which includes the aforementioned abstract figures and a group of dancers wearing large hats. It probably represents a dance of the Concho group (that the Europeans called *Mitotes*), petitioning the gods, celebrating a victory or preparing for a dangerous undertaking. The ritual usually included the consumption of peyote. The hats are an indication of European influence.

Unfortunately, some treasure seekers assume that these sites were inhabited by indigenous groups who possessed great riches and that the paintings or etchings indicated their location, hidden under the rocks or the soil of the caves. This unfounded assumption has caused the destruction of many archaeological sites, as happened in a good part of the Piedra de las Monas, damaged beyond repair.

THE CAVE OF THE LUISES

In the Cave of the Luises, near the city of Chihuahua, we can see some aspects of daily life, like the small group of running deer associated with abstract

figures. This small site also boasts an image of the large tip of a projectile, similar to the M-shaped Shumla type, that was used in hunting. The site's large blocks show the symbol of what was highly valued associated with a figure wearing a set of animal horns, almost surely a praying shaman. Here, I would point out that for now I have limited myself to mentioning certain figures depicted without pondering over the position they are in.

THE REMEDIOS CAVE

In the area inhabited by the Toboso, a group of hunter-gatherers who lived in Chihuahua's Southeast, very well known in the colonial period for their rebelliousness and skill in combat and survival in the region's most inhospitable areas, several examples of rock art are extant. Undoubtedly the most beautiful of these is the one in a natural hollow known as the Remedios Cave, located atop a hill in the municipality of Jiménez, very close to the Coahuila border.

The floor of the cave is slightly inclined and must have been rather uncomfortable as a dwelling. This, and the presence of numerous paintings allows us to suppose that it was an indigenous sanctuary, unknown to us until recently. Here, we find some aligned triangles, considered to be the representation of the mountain ranges of the area. Also pre-

sent among the sea of abstract forms, is the fine line drawing of an indigenous man in half profile, carrying a bow. The figure's most outstanding feature is his headdress of long feathers, in the style many Toboso wore. The figure seems to indicate that the hunter had bagged a prey, perhaps a small mammal, or that he specialized in that species. Despite the stylization, the figure is imposing, as he must have been for the Toboso who saw it.

The sites we consider sanctuaries are near natural bodies of water where game and plant life were more abundant. Very near the Remedios Cave is a beautiful spring, frequently visited by Chihuahua residents and people from other states, since the waters are said to have healing properties.

SAMALAYUCA

Another site with rock art, Samalayuca, is in the north, very close to the U.S. border. In this vast region, remains like a fish-shaped Folsom projectile tip, used by the oldest groups in the hemisphere, have been discovered. Much more recent remains have also been found, like semi-underground rooms, similar to those used by groups from the U.S. Southwest and Paquimé, even though we know that the area was inhabited by the Suma, a group that died out during the colonial period.

Samalayuca is also known for having large sand deposits, the vestiges of an ancient lake.

Although there is no way to know for sure, the difference in styles in the region's rock etchings leads us to suppose that every culture in the area had a hand in making them. The large figures have been carved deeply into the rock; the small figures are stupendously delicate, speaking to a domination of techniques. Despite its importance, this site has not been studied very much.

As in other cases, the area is also close to a perennial spring known as the Ojo de la Casa, which until recently was used as a bathing resort by local inhabitants. It is most certainly a remnant of the great lake that caused the formation of the Samalayuca sand deposits. Groups of hunters must have visited it to stock up on water and may have hunted aquatic birds, which still flock to the small lagoon. In Colonial times the Camino Real (Royal Road) used to pass nearby, flanked by sand.

LA ANGOSTURA

Toward the west, in an open area, is La Angostura, relatively close to Casas Grandes, from which the Paquimé style must have influenced its rock paintings. The rocks engraved at this site are on the side of a small rise. They sport abstract fig-



Cave of the Figures. The cross shows the influence of Catholicism in the indigenous world view.



La Angostura. Abstract design that shows the influence of the Paquimé culture.



Doves are associated with Christian iconography.



La Angostura. The drawing seems to be the image of a comet.

ures, squares, triangles and a kind of horizontal S that seems to represent a column of smoke or steam. Also present are sunrises, stylized serpents and other religious representations like the effigy of a deer that seems to be drinking water and has a flower between its horns. This is a deer sacred in the North of Mexico, still worshipped among the Huichol. Among the figures associated with ideology are the dancers wearing animal horns, one of which is adorned in the style of the cultures of the U.S. Southwest.

At the foot of the rise is a beautiful river that must have supplied the groups that camped in the area. It would seem that they picked important times of year to come to the site, since some rocks are lined up with others with etchings on a neighboring hill. The trajectory toward the horizon of these alignments single out noteworthy points of the course of the Sun during the year.

LA CUEVA DE LAS MONAS

Lastly, it should be mentioned that in central Chihuahua, very near the capital city, there is a small group of caves whose walls are covered with paintings with clear colonial influence. The excellently fashioned, richly colored figures show influences of both the pre-Hispanic and colonial periods, in some cases superimposed on one another. This is the Cueva de las Monas (the Cave of the

Figures), a name often given to the largest cave in the group, where a good number of abstract paintings can be found, the meaning of which, unfortunately, is unknown to us. Approximately in the center is the figure of a shaman painted white, wearing a cape and holding a processional cross and what appears to be a rosary. The shape of his feet makes it obvious that he is wearing shoes.

A running figure is also surrounded by a kind of aureole. Given the fact that the indigenous groups of Chihuahua have always practiced long, exhausting races, we suppose this is a deity associated with these events, confirmed by the beautiful aureole. The cave also contains effigies of horses, a violin, a dove with open wings representing the Holy Ghost, and numerous human figures.

The Cueva de las Monas is located on a small hill from whose base flows intermittently a stream that, we suppose, must have flowed continuously in the colonial period. In any case, the proximity of the water makes it possible for a substantial amount of vegetation to live there still, and fauna is more abundant than in surrounding areas.

One interesting aspect of these sites as a whole is the fact that indigenous thinking transformed over time, with the acceptance of new religious concepts. The ideas and objects represented on the rocks in these archaeological sites allow us access to the cultures of the ancient inhabitants of Chihuahua who, using etching and painting, left us a legacy that we continue to study and preserve. **NMM**