

CUEVA PILOTE

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Cueva Pilote is a small cave well hidden in a steep canyon that cuts the eastern rim of the Sierra de la Encantada, an outlier of the Sierra Madre Oriental so rugged that even hardened Spanish and Mexican soldiers commented on its inaccessibility. The cave first came to our attention when a local rancher brought out some painted deer scapulae that he had been given by a vaquero back in the 1960s. He gave us some names of other people that might have other examples and eventually we were able to find one specimen in Colorado, one in San Antonio, and a replica of one that had been turned over to the National Park Service at Amistad Reservoir but the original was lost somewhere in transit.

Directions to the cave were less than precise – we were told it was east of Cerro Pilote, the highest peak in the Encantada Valley, below a burned yucca. Although we never found that specific burned yucca, we did finally find the entrance which is only visible from the other side of the canyon. Knowing that our presence in the valley would incite curiosity, we applied and were given a permit to excavate the cave. Excavations began during one of the worst winter storms in living memory and consisted of two 10-day sessions. The cave is relatively small – only 22 square meters in area - and the deposits ranged from 10 to 180 cm deep. All of the fill was high-graded through 1/2 to 1/16th inch screen. The relic hunter pits created an uneven surface and cast some doubt on the reality of provenience. Distributional maps were generated but the contents of the cave are most informative when treated as a unitary phenomenon.

In addition to the painted scapulae, the artifact assemblage included post-cranial elements from two black bears, stone tools, marine and freshwater shell beads, decorative snail shells, bits of twine, a small assortment of human bones and teeth, fragments of domesticated gourd, fiber pads from desert palms used as afiliteros or

pincushions, and over 200 agave spines. Radiocarbon assays of charcoal, fiber and gourd fragments ranged from 1000 to 1400 A.D. but a cache of stone tools contained projectile point types that are at least 2000 years older than the C14 dates. The cache illustrated a reduction sequence that produced Langtry and Jora dart points, both of which are well-dated in Texas to the period from 3200 to 4100 years ago. Presumably, the cache is a votive offering since no other artifact remotely approached that age. The mussel and marine shell, some of the lithic material, and the gourd are exotic and probably brought in from the Rio Grande Valley, the Gulf of Mexico, the Edwards Plateau and one of the horticultural areas far outside the Encantada Valley. Thus, as isolated as Cueva Pilote may seem today, the imported materials imply wide-ranging contacts with neighboring people.

The painted deer scapulae are by far the most curious artifacts in the cave. Although only two complete and three partial specimens were recovered by excavation, twelve painted, two unpainted, and one badly burned scapulae were traced to private collections before and after the field work. Only two bore designs painted in black pigment and one of those is missing from the private collection where it

was originally housed. One deer and one bear scapulae were blank. The rest are covered with broad red lines that criss cross the blade in similar but not identical patterns.

Scapulae have a long history of ritual use, ranging from prognostication to percussion. The strongest case for the role of scapula as musical instruments is provided by historic and modern kachina dancers who carry them as rattles or use them as scrapers with the rasp. Deer hoof and scapula rattles provided percussive sound that was one of the pathways to an altered state of consciousness, an integral part of earlier religious systems along the Rio Grande. Archeological evidence of their antiquity is a rattle made of four or five unpainted scapulae, bound together at the neck that was excavated from a dry cave on the north bank of the Rio Grande in the 1930s and is on display at the Witte Museum in San Antonio. The sacred nature of deer is amply demonstrated in the rock art of Coahuila where disembodied antlers and hoof prints abound. Antler headdresses like those shown in the famous shamanic art along the Rio Grande have been found in mortuary contexts on both sides of the river.

The second most curious artifact was a pad of desert palm fiber with spines still embedded, much like a modern

pincushion. The first example was in one of the private collections in the United States. Two others were exhumed during excavation and a fourth resided in a collection in Colorado. One of the pads was sacrificed for radiocarbon assay and produced an age of 555 BP or AD 1395. During excavation we became aware that the number of agave spines far exceeded normal expectations with an especially large concentration around the two desiccated fiber pads. A sample of the spines from that area tested positive for human protein residues, consistent with the interpretation of the cave as the scene of ritual self-mutilation and blood letting. Pictorial accounts from the Valley of Mexico demonstrate how the pads or pincushions were used in rituals that included self-mutilation and bloodletting. In a fresco at Teotihuacan entitled Blood Offering with Maguey Spines the central figure is framed by a border of bundles holding disproportionately large maguey spines upright. An illustration of blood letting in the Duran codex shows the used spines placed in a ball of straw to insure that they were not reused. Finally, a monumental stone carving unearthed in downtown Mexico City shows two deities puncturing their ears with bone awls but at their feet are maguey spines stuck in a maguey leaf. The latter was

dated to about A.D. 1473, within a few hundred years of Pilote.

Closer to home, archeological materials and ethnographic accounts confirm that the people of the Laguna District, south of the Encantadas, practiced ritual blood letting. The famous mortuary cave, Candelaria, produced a series of wooden tubes with shell or stone bases and agave spine inserts, called guarapúas or spine cases. One pair was positioned next to a cadaver in a manner that suggested they were worn as ear ornaments. Three accounts of a ritual performed in 1607 to avert the dire effects of a comet that appeared in the sky describe how the elders punctured themselves with thorns, gathered the blood in a gourd, then dipped the newly cut hair of a young maiden and flailed the air, casting blood about while crying out loudly. This account aligns thorns, blood and gourds, three elements found together in Pilote.

The artifact assemblage is not the only characteristic that sets Pilote apart from the norm of occupied shelters. The juxtaposition of mountains and caves is a persistent element in Mesoamerican religion and a theme in many of the creation or origin myths. Set in the midst of a dramatic landscape, Cueva Pilote is transitional between the bulk of

the mountain looming in the west and the narrow cleft of the canyon descending to the east, into the rising sun. Descent is precipitous and the last few meters negotiable solely via hand and toe holds in the rock; the ledge in front of the cave is only a meter wide above a sheer 20-meter drop to the canyon floor. Thus, the descent and ascent are perilous and contribute to the aura of secrecy, privacy, and isolation.

Size and shape, as well as setting, contribute to the transformation of the cave into sacred space. The entrance is virtually invisible except from a vantage point on the lowest rimrock ledge directly across the narrow, steep canyon. The opening is less than a meter high and further obscured by trees that grow directly in front of it. Once through the shallow opening, however, the cave opens into an oval room 6 meters long and 4 meters wide, its domed ceiling peaking at a height of 4 meters above a floor pocked with relic hunter pits. A short, steeply inclined gallery extends upward from the upstream wall near the rear of the cave; its exposed bedrock floor is littered with roof fall but any other material deposited there has long since worked its way down slope to the main cavern floor.

The process of entering the cave physically expresses the stages through which the initiate proceeds in any rite of passage. The almost inaccessible low entrance and narrow confining passage lead from the ordinary world, the great outdoors and open sunlight, into the sharply contrastive shadowed interior with its encircling walls and darkened field of vision.

The symbolism of the dangerous descent; the passage through the low entryway into the interior cavity, the womb of the living rock; and the contrast between light and dark set the stage for ritual events as the participants leave the limitless open air, squeeze through the hole in the supernatural fabric, and enter a conceptually different space. Re-emerging, transformed by the ceremonies performed, is analogous to rebirth, reentering the natural world renewed and transfigured. Thus, Pilote is one of the rarest sites - a place dedicated to the performance of arcane rituals by people who pursued a hunting and gathering lifeway, armed with a limited technology and an ancient belief system that included a concept of the religious asceticism that permeated Mesoamerican culture and paralleled that of the Christianity that was yet to come.

On a larger scale, Cueva Pilote belongs to a time in prehistory when change rippled through the arid lands of northern Mexico and the American Southwest. People were evidently on the move, as were the exotic goods imported into the Encantada Valley and deposited in this small site. In this sense, Cueva Pilote adds another dimension to the already dynamic reconstruction of life in the arid lands prior to the coming of the Europeans.