

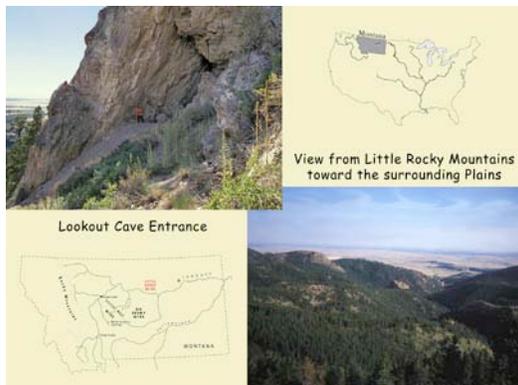
Lookout Cave, An Example of Ritual Cave Use in Montana

Mavis Greer, Ph.D., and John Greer, Ph.D.

Paper Presented at the
72nd Annual Meeting of the
Society for American Archaeology
April 2007



Lookout Cave is one of several caves and rockshelters at the southern end of the Little Rocky Mountains in northeastern Montana. The Little Rockies are a mountain island just under 60 miles in diameter located about 200 miles east of the Rocky Mountain Front. Openings in this limestone environment range from deep caverns with beautiful formations to small rockshelters. Lookout Cave falls between the two extremes with a large entrance room and a small interior room, which is mostly in total darkness. Pictographs are found in both the entrance and interior rooms.



The cave opens high on the mountainside and provides a commanding view of the lower pine-covered foothills and open plains. Work by archeologists began at the site in 1963, but the first site forms were not filed until 1969. In that same year, the University of Montana conducted a test excavation of the site and Cecil Barnier published on the site's surface materials after viewing several

private collections. In the early 1970s Burt Williams presented a paper on the excavation

results at a local meeting, and that paper has been the main source of information on those materials for nearly 30 years. Currently, John Brumley, an archeological consultant, has been hired to complete the report on the 1969 University excavations, and we thank him for providing the artifact photographs for this presentation. We started visiting the cave in the mid 1990s and have concentrated on recording information on the pictographs and providing a condition assessment of the site.



The site's general physical condition is still good today. The rear of the entrance room is shown in the photo on the left. The pictographs have minimal vandalism, and there are remaining intact cultural deposits despite years of collection from both the surface and subsurface.

The University test trench ran the length of the left entrance room wall and was about a meter wide. It was bordered on the right by large boulders that dominate the center of the cave entrance as can be seen in this photo. This rock fall has help protect deposits in the eastern two-thirds of the room. Rock art occurs on all walls of the entrance room and is dominated by humans, fingerlines, and smears.



Humans are mainly shown as M-shaped figures made by the top of the M forming the V-neck, and the sides of the M forming the body and legs. Most have arms, which extended from the top of the M, such as this one does, and they are primarily portrayed as upraised. M-shaped figures are distinguished from more traditional V-necked people by having no marks delineating the bottom of the body. At Lookout, M-shaped figures occur in red, orangish red, and yellow liquid

paint, as well as black and red aboriginal crayon (a term for hard stick pigments) indicating more than one time period of production based on other studies we have conducted on the Northwestern Plains regarding changes through time in use of liquid paint colors and the subsequent adoption of crayons.



This M-shaped human is positioned at an angle in what appears to be a flight pose. It has a line extending from the V-neck into the torso and another extending outside the body. The outside line does not appear to be an arm, and it has no weapon characteristics. It most likely is a heart line, although this is an unusual presentation.

Shown in the photo on the right is a V-necked human figure with no arms. Typical of V-necked figures, a line marks the bottom of the torso, and a line extending from the bottom of the body may be a phallus, although it is not common to see one quite so long when indicating the figure's sex in this geographic area. There are no other indicators of male or female in this cave, which is typical of ceremonially oriented rock art in Montana. The line to the right is not connected to the figure, but it appears to be a large pipe associated with the person. Pipes are not common, but the presence of one in this site context is not surprising.



Other anthropomorphs in this room are yellow, such as this figure within a complex area of paint. Again, both arms are bent up at the elbows typical of shaman depictions in the island mountain rock art to the west where shaman portraits are designated as such because of characteristics that include an asexual appearance, robed clothing, raised arms, lack of weapons, and frequent headdress attire.

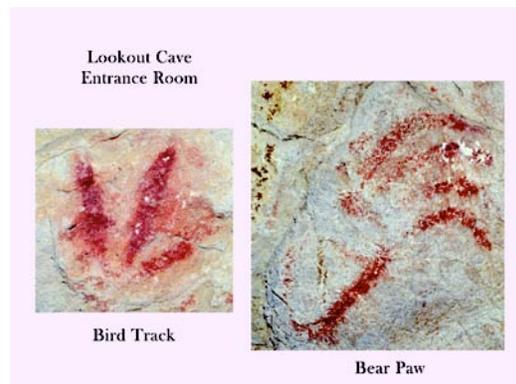


Crayon anthropomorphs are also present. This black charcoal person supports both upraised arms and a headdress that appears to have rays or antlers protruding from both sides. Although of a later painting episode than the liquid, the upraised arm style continues the portrayal of people in a worshipful position, which suggests a continued ceremonial function for these figures and no change to a hunting or warfare function since no weapons are present.

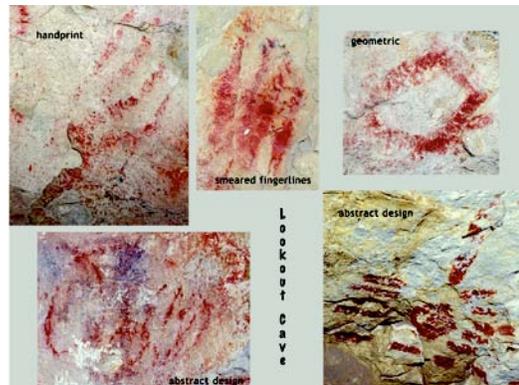


The lizard and turtle in the photo on the left are painted in the entrance room and are examples of the animals in this cave. No animal is shown in a hunting or death situation.

Animal tracks are common in the surrounding plains boulder rock art, but there are few tracks at this site. However, those present are animals important to plains belief systems. A three-toed bird track dominates the back of the entrance room, The presence of talon pendants found in the excavations and the size and location of this single track suggest this may be a pictographic representation of a bird with power, such as an eagle. Another power animal, the bear, is represented by a paw print.

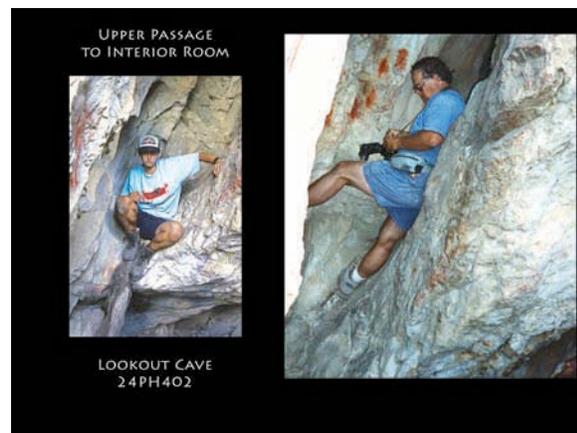


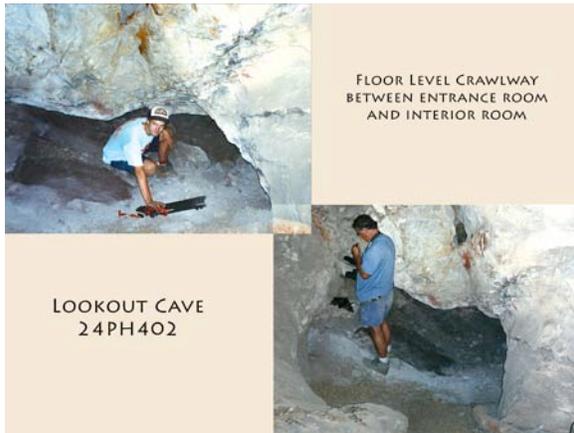
Fingerlines, partial handprints, lines, and circles, some combined into designs, are also present as are varying sized smears of red paint. In the entrance room there are several areas with considerable overpainting, which complicates the effort to decipher what figures are present and their sequence of placement. However, not all large-scale wall covering is a mixture of individual figures.



A portion of the entrance room back wall was completely painted red. This is a distinctive red paint style found from the Little Rockies west to the Rocky Mountain Front. It usually occurs in smaller cave rooms, where the entire room is covered in red by a hand smearing technique. This labor intensive effort was probably done for ritualistic purposes. For example, a high, fully, painted cave room about 200 miles west of the Little Rockies had two Mississippian shell masks buried in the floor next to the wall.

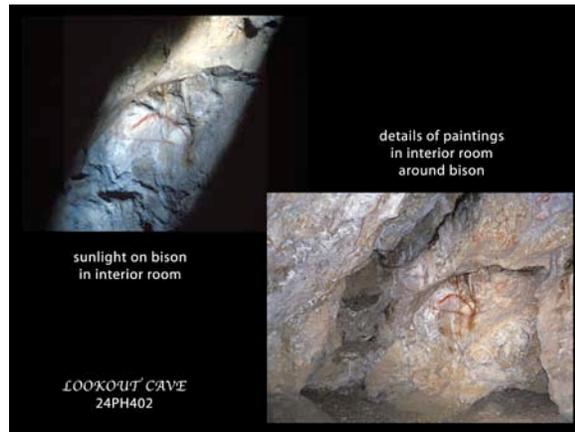
On the left side of the back wall is a high, narrow passage connecting the entrance room with the interior room. Before excavations, the upper passage was more easily accessible, but today it is about nine feet above the present floor of both rooms. There are paintings on both walls of the high passage.





The interior room can be reached not only by the upper passage but also by a floor-level crawlway 10 feet long, which had filled-in prior to excavation. This room is completely dark except for the small band of light that shines on the back wall through the upper passage for a limited time during the day.

This light illuminates an outlined red bison. Several other red figures are painted above the bison, and there are also paintings on the other interior walls, which can be seen only with artificial light.

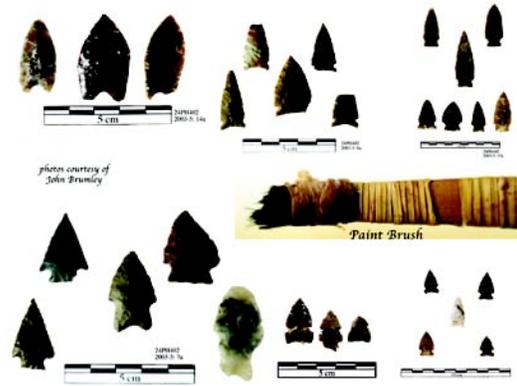


The cave contained many surface artifacts, and when Barnier wrote his article, the assemblage he reported consisted of 46 arrowpoints, 45 of which were late Plains side-notched. Most were of chert or chalcedony, but the one obsidian point was found to be from Yellowstone Park, about 280 miles to the southwest. The point was dated by obsidian hydration to A.D. 1700.

Worked bone made into beads, an incised shell, an incised belemnite fossil fashioned into a necklace pendant, and a wooden flute incised with a possible animal figure, and shown in the above artifact photo in the bottom left, were reported from collections. There were sixty-five arrow shafts collected, most fragmentary, and all had remains of red or black pigment and some had incised lines.

There were also shafts with sinew and feathers still attached. Because the arrow shafts had been collected by the time Barnier saw them, he had no information about their provenience, but it seems likely that they were part of an arrow shrine, such as those recorded in southwestern ritual caves.

The trench dug by the university in the entrance room was taken to a depth of three meters, but cultural materials were found concentrated only in the upper 45 cm. Items recovered from the excavation were more of the same general types found on the surface, but in greater quantities. Points were more numerous and provided evidence for a much longer time depth indicating use, probably as



an area of offerings, back at least to the beginning of the Archaic Period. Hundreds of arrow shafts were added to the assemblage. One of the most interesting artifacts recovered from the deposits relative to the pictographs is a paint bush. Burt Williams describes this item as “a length of split wood with porcupine quill decoration, sinew to bind on bristles which were made of human hair colored with red ochre.”

The kinds of artifacts found and the lack of hearths and lithic manufacturing debris lead Williams to conclude that this was a ceremonial cave and not used for habitation. He thought it might have been used by shaman or as a place for leaving offerings.

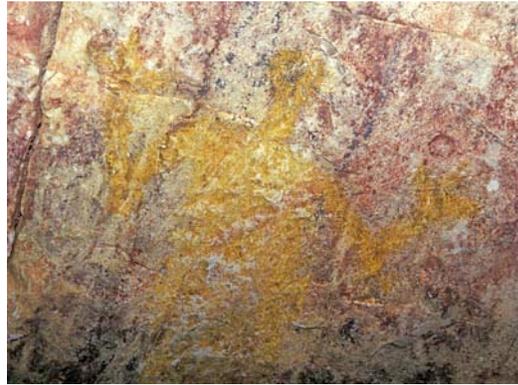


Although pictographs were mentioned by Williams as support for the ceremonial function, their presence alone is not evidence since rock art was made for several different functions. In previous works we have examined criteria to be met for a Ceremonial Function Model, which includes all sites used for any kind of activity associated with the supernatural. These sites may have been the

location for shaman activities, vision quests, fertility rituals, hunting magic, or burial ceremonies. Paintings may have been mnemonic devises for rituals or songs, or depictions of visions experienced during a trance whether for a shamanistic or a coming-of-age vision quest. Figures associated with shamanism include headdresses adorning anthropomorphs, upraised arms on humans, flying humans, skeleton figures, heart lines, bears and bear paws, bow-shaped animals, and snakes. Figures denoting vision

quests include associated stick humans and animals, which may represent totems. Animal herds or animals in the act of being slain are indications of hunting magic, and fertility is often associated with turtles and figures giving birth or engaging in sexual activities. Geometric and abstract designs are also associated with a ceremonial function, and these can include fingerlines and amorphous smears. Settings in which ceremonial activities are most likely to occur include caves with east-facing views, sites with an impressive visual effect from a distance, and an unrestricted view of the surrounding countryside from the entrance. Access is often difficult, and the sites are usually high on mountain sides or in hard-to-climb cliff areas.

When Lookout Cave was reviewed relative to these criteria, we found anthropomorphs are often shown with upraised arms and some have heart lines while others are in a flying position. Additionally, and probably even more importantly, they are not pictured with weapons, in conflict situations, in fertility related scenes, or in family groups. They



appear to be individual figures resembling shaman self portraits more than they do any other kinds of human posturing. People are not shown with animals, which argues against vision quests for initiations in search of totems or hunting magic. There are also no animals in the act of being slain. Geometric and abstract designs are present, and the cave setting has a southeast-facing view with an impressive visual effect from a distance. The site is high on a steep mountain side, and once in the cave there is an unrestricted view of the expansive plains. Furthermore, Lookout Cave does not have pictographs that are representative of other functions. For example, in the Marker Function Model rock art acts as a sign or billboard announcing a message such as designating a territorial boundary. Content for this site function is dominated by individual indicators such as human handprints or repetitive animal tracks, neither of which dominate at Lookout. These sites are usually in areas where they can be seen along trails or natural passes because they are made for public viewing. Lookout Cave is also not representative of an Event Record Function Model. These paintings record the events of a tribe or accounts of personal exploits, which are often associated with battles and hunting. Site contents of event record sites include shield figures with weaponry, hunted animals, repeated hoof prints, tipis, and trails. These sites are often in or near areas of habitation such as rockshelters and have associated lithic utilitarian artifacts. Event

record sites are made to be seen and are not generally in secluded areas such as those associated with ceremonies.

In conclusion, the rock art at Lookout Cave is most parsimonious with the ceremonial function model based on the content of the figures. The superpositioning of some panels and the variety of paint kinds and colors indicates that the site was used for this function for thousands of years, and the points present suggest this time period of use extended back at least to the beginning of the Archaic Period. Thus, the pictographic content supports William's suggestion of a ceremonial use rather than habitation, and it suggests that the cave was used for private rituals conducted by a shaman rather than an initiate. The lack of warfare and hunting portrayed in the rock art indicates these were not the focus of the rituals conducted in this cave, and the points and arrow shafts in the deposits were more likely left as offerings or as parts of shrines for safe passage to or for use in the next world rather than as requests for conquests in war or success in hunting in this world.