

Figure 1, Surratt Cave (New Mexico). One of several small rooms filled with paintings on all walls, ceiling, and protruding ledges — hand stencils, grooved club stencil, stencil dots, a pyramid or cloud symbol, groups of finger lines, masks, geometrics, and many other figures. A large snake comes out of the ceiling and descends into a deep, narrow crack continuing downward. Most figures are black, but orange is also present. The room is small and very narrow and is situated about 125 feet below the surface.

This paper briefly considers a few caves with rock art either in the dark zone or associated with dark zone components. The discussion to *public* versus *private* viewing areas and personnel participation. *Public* locations, presumably for use by groups of people, have an outward orientation; while *private* locations, presumably for use by only one or two people, have restricted viewing within a very small area. The distinction seems basic to any attempted understanding of ritual events and is probably highly flawed. individual caves will not be discussed in detail, but we will mention some aspects of rock art setting. Cave use is at various times during the last 3000 years or so.



Figure 2, Feather Cave (New Mexico). Entrance sink. *Inset:* Small mask on the ceiling just inside the duck-under entrance (dark zone).

**Feather Cave**, in southeastern New Mexico, contains rock art in both public and private settings. Inside the duck-under, somewhat restricted cave entrance is a painted mask that marks the primary entryway into the main chamber. Both the restricted entry and the painted marker are typical of several caves.

The entry passage is very long, broad, open, and with a high ceiling, and at the end of that room is a panel of pictographs, mostly negative handprints as is common at nearby sites. This open area, far into the dark zone, would have allowed unrestricted congregation of participants and observers and afforded public participation and viewing.



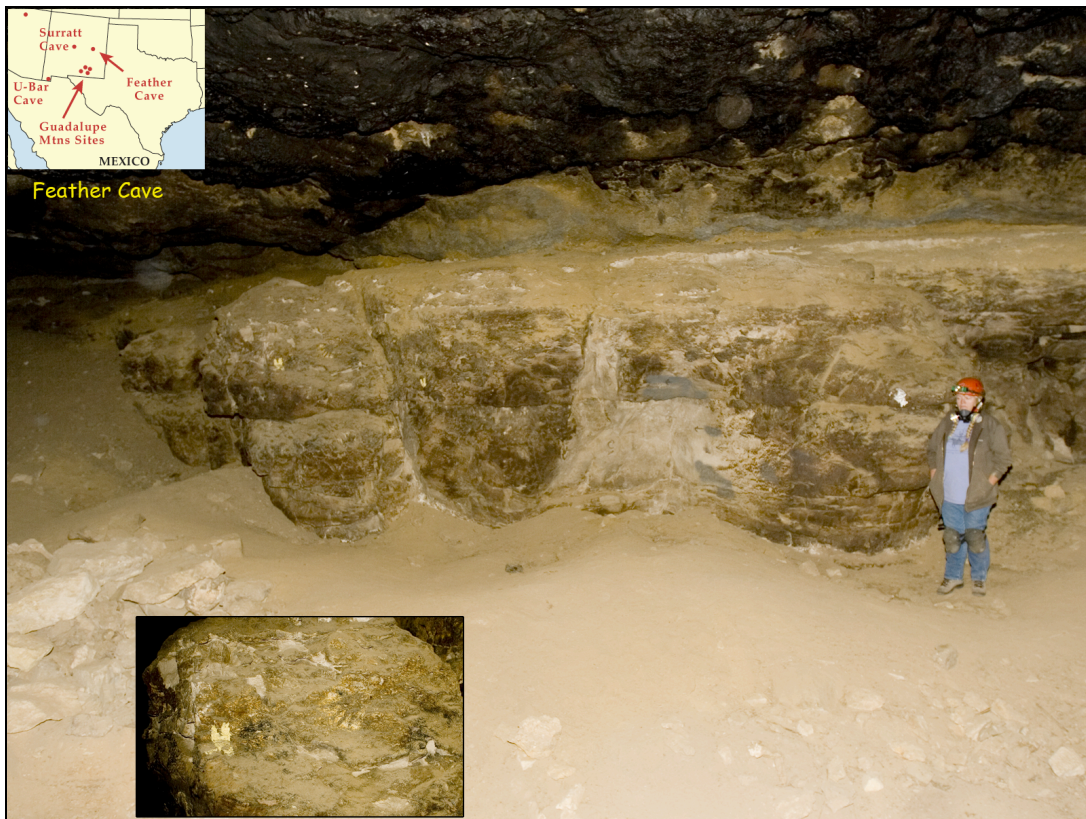


Figure 3, Feather Cave (New Mexico). Main panel near the back of the main room. Most of the figures are to the left of Mavis. *Inset*: Several handprints are on this section of wall.



Figure 4, Feather Cave (New Mexico). Susan Herpin at the main painted area of the interior of Arrow Grotto. Note the modified speleothem altar in the foreground (behind Brunton compass). *Inset* (right): Joe (Buzz) Hummel beside negative handprint (1977 photo by Stephen Fleming).



Past this open area is the very restricted, low, narrow crawlway entrance into **Arrow Grotto**, an area of breakdown openings with many paintings of handprints, masks, and other figures and full of ritual items. Difficulty of access appears to have been paramount in selection of the location, which is clearly private in nature, and probably entered by very few people at a time. The similarity with deep rooms in Surratt Cave is obvious.



Figure 5, Surratt Cave (New Mexico). Entrance sink, with Mavis standing beside the large Tlaloc mask and other petroglyphs. A footprint panel is to the left; pictograph panels to the right (just out of photo). *Inset* (left): Tlaloc mask petroglyph. *Inset* (right): Mavis at entrance (the tiny notch is about 10 feet below this).

**Surratt Cave** is located in the Salinas District, not all that far from Feather Cave, and the two are similar in use and completely different in the art. The deep sink with vertical walls contains several rock art panels, one of which is a Tlaloc-like face that has been beaten in the mouth area to produce a percussion roar that fills the sink and reverberates from wall to wall – he speaks. This use of wall percussion is repeated in a small chamber deep underground. The setting in the sink is open and public and could be witnessed by an unlimited number of people before they entered the tiny restricted entrance into the main cave.



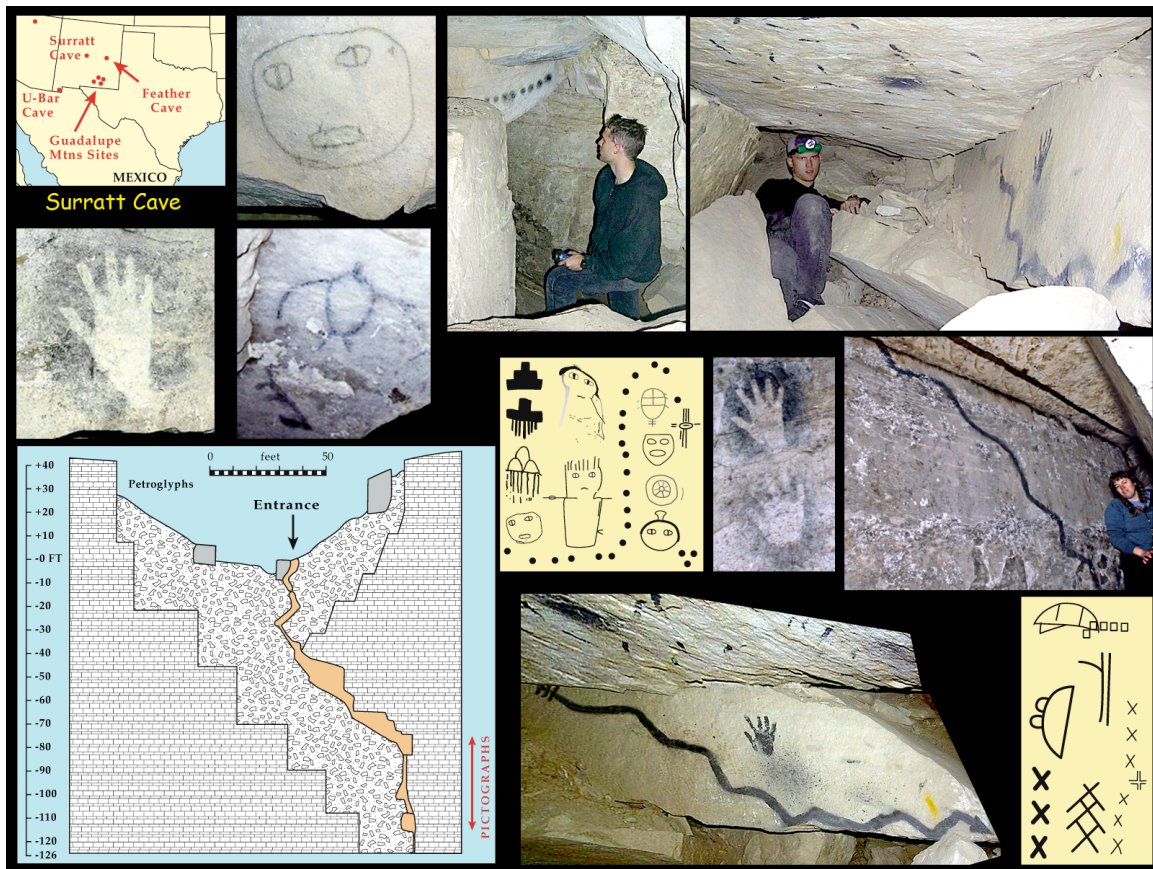


Figure 6, Surratt Cave (New Mexico). Examples of painted figures deep in the cave.  
*Lower left:* Profile of overall cave, with pictographs all the way to the bottom.

Entry into Surratt is through a tiny notch and down eventually into a broad room. Here an open alcove contains numerous handprints and other figures, and stands above the restricted climb-downs to lower use areas of the cave. This upper alcove is similar to the open panel in the main room of Feather Cave and affords public view and participation. Lower, very small enclosed rooms, painted with handprints, pyramids or cloud symbolism, serpents coming out of the ceiling, and other figures, were private areas of limited access. Passages, some with typical keyhole notches to pass through, were painted both to mark the way and as markings at ritual locations. The enclosed rooms have limited space and are considered mostly private.

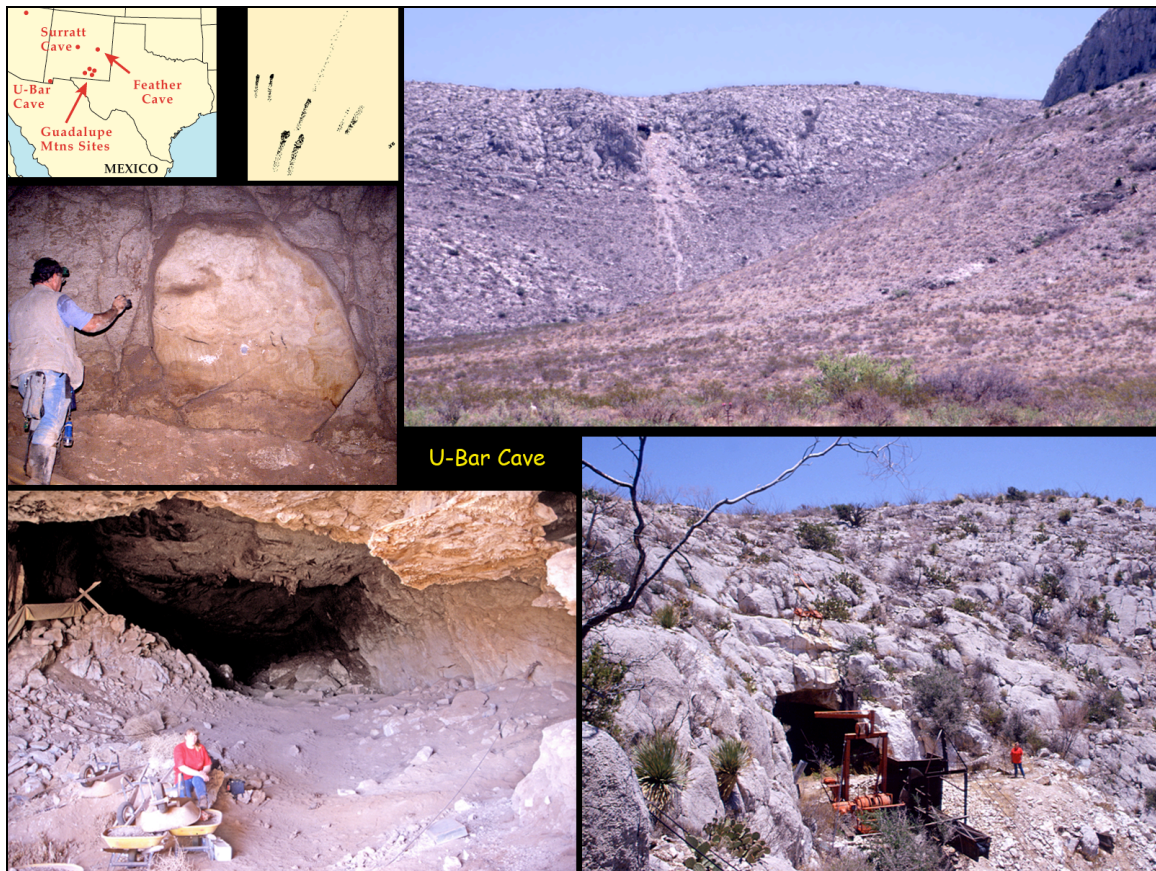


Figure 7, U-Bar Cave (New Mexico). [Clockwise from upper right] Entrance from distance, with visible mining tailings below entrance. Enlarged entrance, with mining equipment. Front part of main room interior (originally dark zone). Dark zone panel of hand print and torch marks. Drawing of fingerline geometric figure (possibly stylized bird).

**U-Bar Cave**, in southwestern New Mexico, is within the Casas Grandes cultural region. Excavated materials represent both residential activities and ritual. The original somewhat restricted duck-under entrance, possibly with an entry petroglyph face, opens immediately into a huge elongated room with high, relatively smooth walls. At least some of the excavated materials, such as an arrow shrine, were apparently in the front open portion of the massive room. Other materials were in low areas near the rear of the cave. Rock art is sparse and occurs only in dark areas of the main room, with presumed group participation and clear ritual activity.



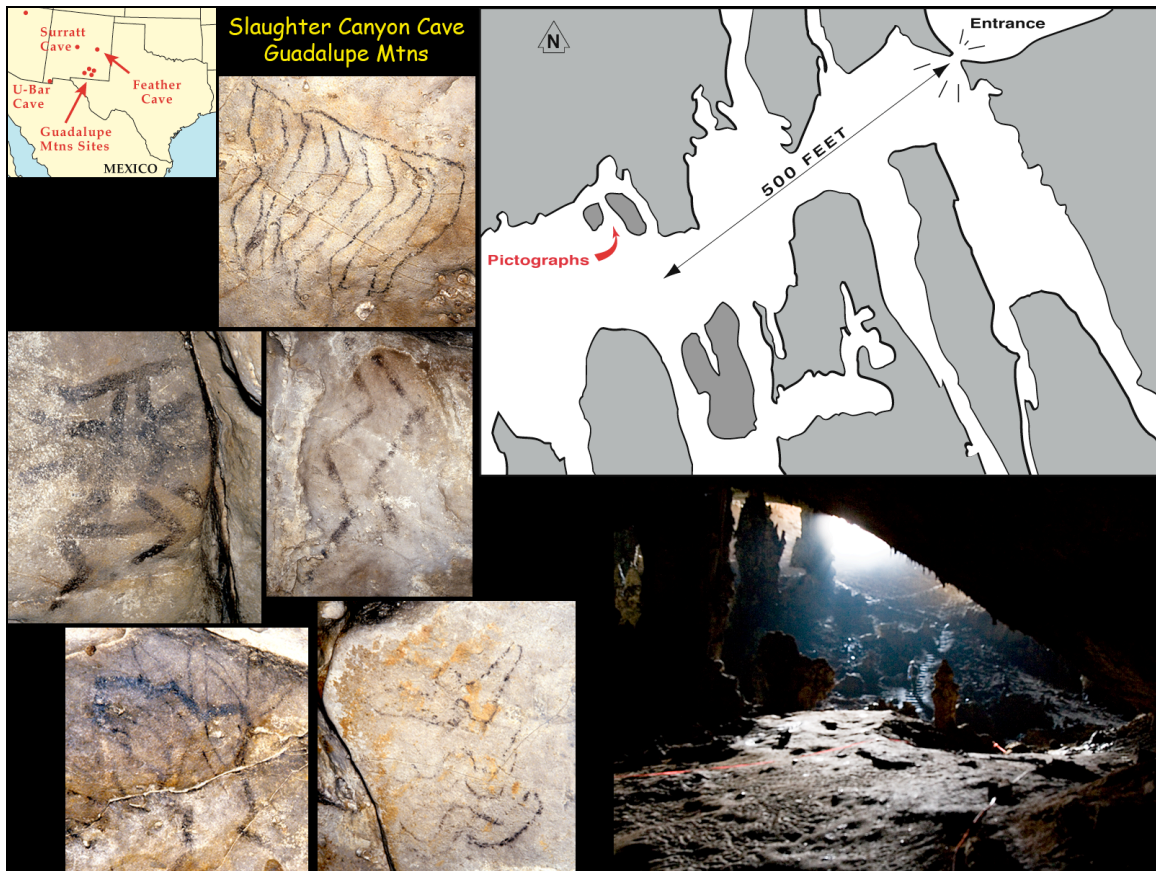


Figure 8, Slaughter Canyon Cave (New Mexico). [Clockwise from upper right] Map of front part of cave from entrance to the pictograph area (dark zone). Front part of entrance room, looking out toward enlarged entrance (originally very small). Examples of painted figures.

The Guadalupe Mountains of southeastern New Mexico contain pictographs in several twilight and dark zone settings. As an example, deep within **Slaughter Canyon Cave** is a lateral passage containing a small lake, beside which are black and yellow pictographs from at least three periods. It has been pointed out that paintings in this and other local caves appear to represent public ritual associated with in-cave water sources for daily existence within an otherwise dry region.



Figure 9, Cueva Pinta (San Luís Potosí, Mexico). Examples of painted figures (black near travertine pools in left-hand room; red across large portion of wall in right-hand room).  
Upper right: Allen Cobb beside arranged stone structure on floor. Lower left

Next we can look at several caves in the El Abra Range of northeastern Mexico, in the northern and western part of the Huasteca, west of Pánuco and Tamiún. The first cave is Cueva Pinta, where wet travertine pools in a huge room are surrounded by **black** pictographs, mainly handprints, many of which are deformed, in what appears to have been public participation in curing ritual.

In the adjacent room a large wall is painted with **red** geometrics, humans, handprints, and spirit beings facing the large, public chamber. Small areas of the cave with restricted access were not painted and contain no evidence of use, contrary to the New Mexico examples.



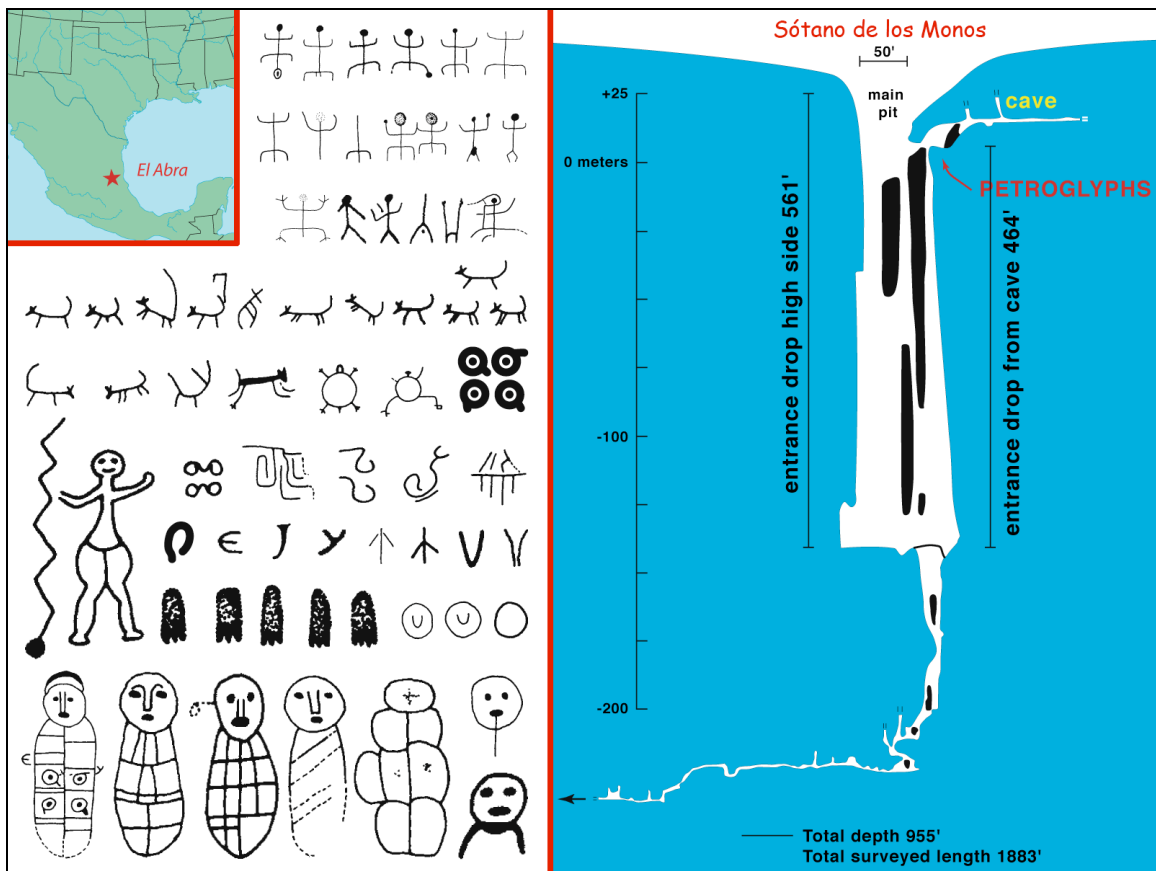


Figure 10, Sótano de los Monos (San Luís Potosí, Mexico).

At the deep vertical pit of Sótano de los Monos on the crest of the range, an open side room is covered with petroglyphs, some probably representing bundle burials. A small hole in the floor in front of the figures drops 464 feet down a parallel shaft and may have been used for disposal of the dead. Ritual participation was almost certainly public.

(Middle Formative, ca. 3000 BP).

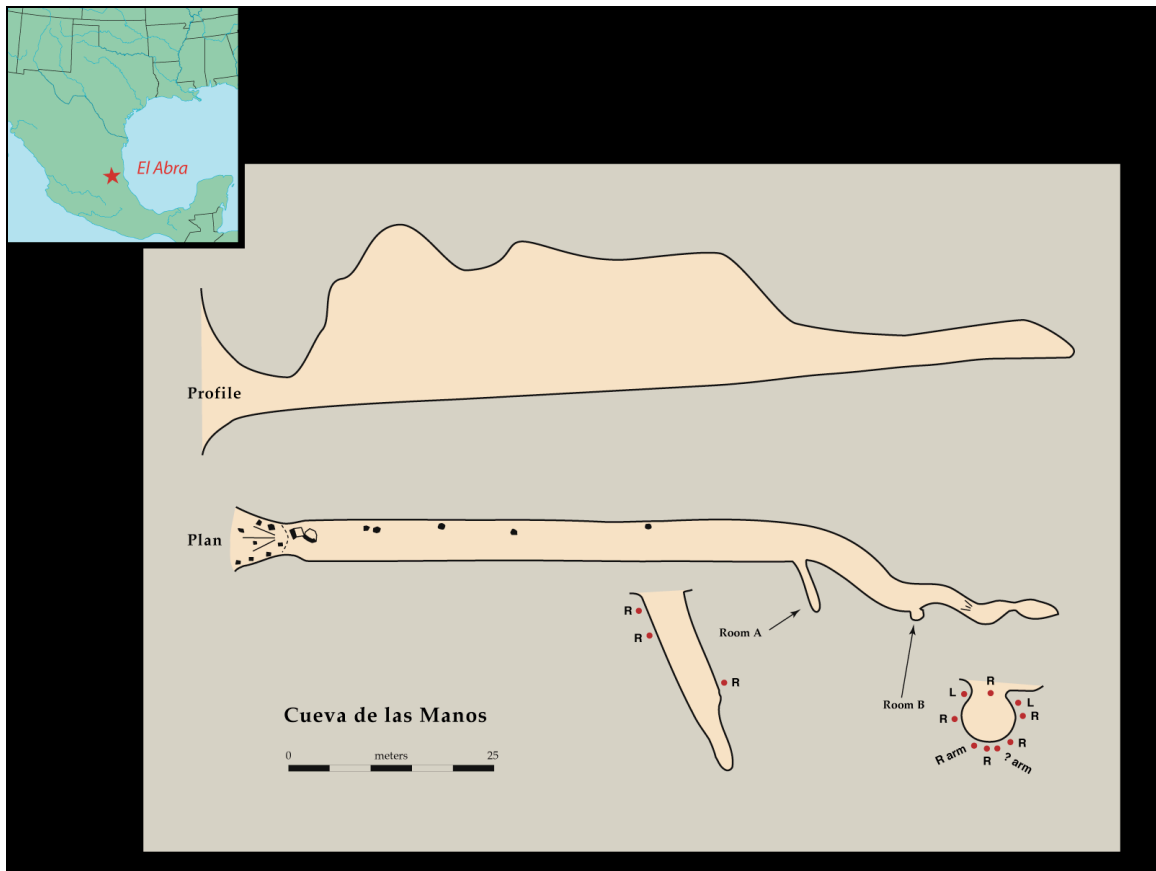


Figure 11, Cueva de las Manos (San Luís Potosí, Mexico).

In nearby Cueva de las Manos handprints are in small side rooms near the rear of the dark main passage. The restricted location is seemingly private, but with adequate room for a small group of people.



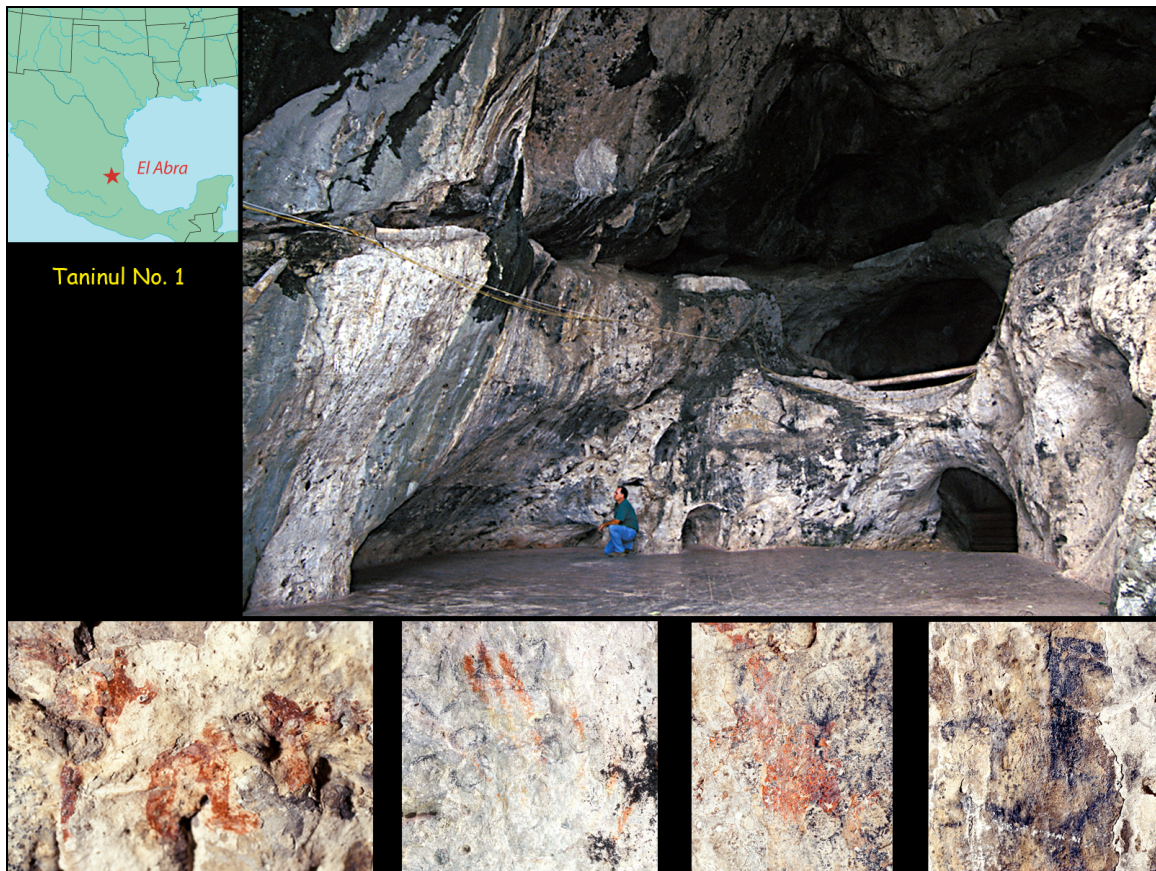


Figure 12, Taninul Cave No. 1 (San Luís Potosí, Mexico). John at main pictograph area.  
Paintings continue all the way around to the right, past hole.

At the Taninul Caves a series of deep passages emanate from large entrances near a major spring. Walls are heavily impacted, but one entrance still has several painted figures, including Huastecan warriors, in a public setting, with public view, and probably depicting actual or mythical events — somewhat more biographic than ritual.

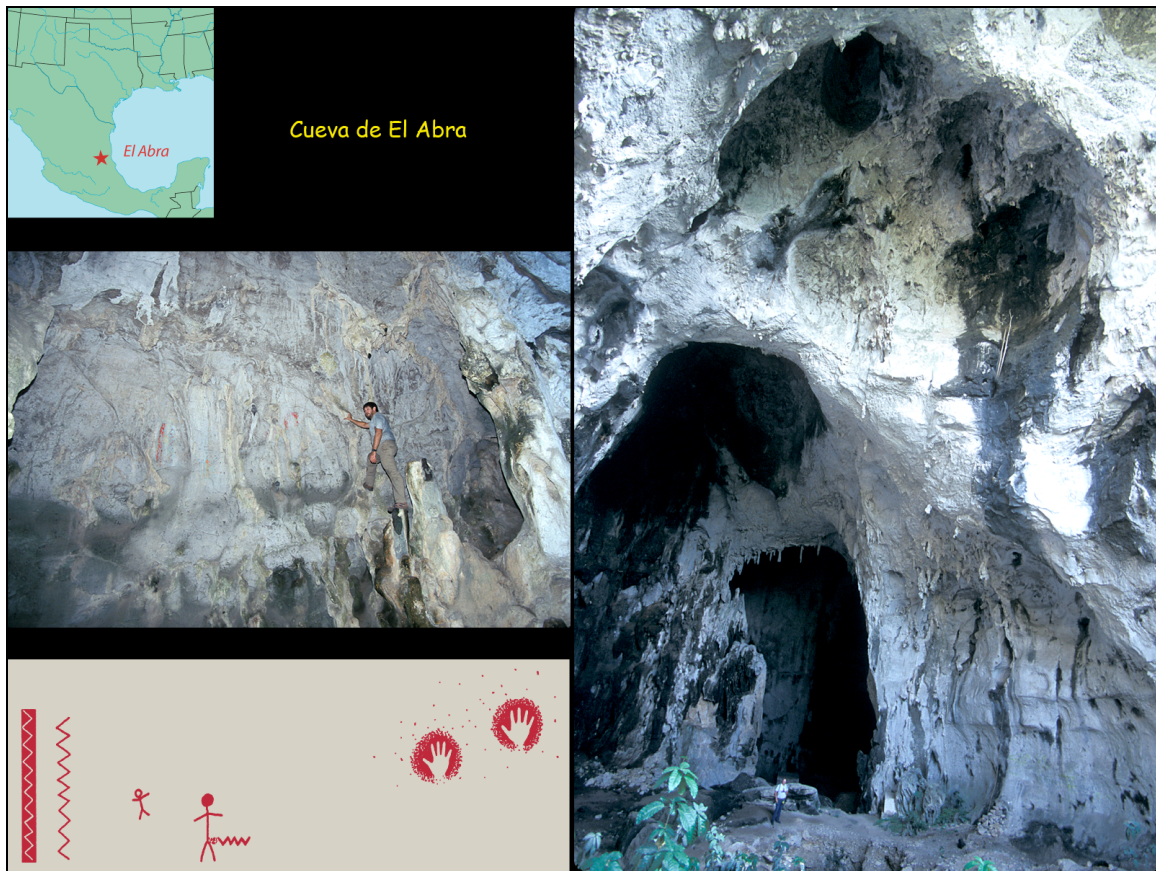


Figure 13, Cueva de El Abra (Tamaulipas, Mexico). Allen Cobb at pictographs (left). Entrance area (right), with honey-climber sticks all the way into the upper domes.

### Summary

Looking at these few examples, two things are obvious. First, people in all areas were attracted to caves as important locations, and either individually or collectively used caves for ritual purposes, with at least some activities accompanied by rock art. Both the rock art and ritual use are representative of the local culture and interpretable within that system, but rock art and cave use vary by region, culture, or individual group and are not consistent.

Secondly, there are general patterns of public and private use, or at Feather and Surratt combinations of those uses, but the definitions themselves may be misleading. In general, we speak of a *public* place as one with a wall or altar facing a large, open area of ample space to hold a great number of people and easily viewed by the group. A *private* place would be one probably occupied or utilized by only one person at a time, such as a small nook in the edge of a room, or a small isolated cavity.

What we have noticed, however, is that even the most private places still could accommodate a second or third viewer or participant, even if standing or lying a few feet away. Thus, the private location may not have been strictly private in the individual



sense, and the private party may have consisted of a few, or even several, people. Equally important, however, there is no way to judge how many people may have participated in an activity in an open area that we class as *public*. Quite likely, the number was very limited.



Figure 14, Cueva del Aire (San Luís Potosí, Mexico). Figuring offering (upper left). Stalactite ritual location marker. Stalagmite ritual location marker in form of a caiman. Ritual location next to wall. Small entrance (upper right).

In rituals that we have observed in Huastecan caves in northeastern Mexico, there are generally two kinds of activities, or patterns. In the first, two or three people cooperatively or communally arrange and prepare the specific, small location, even if in a huge room, and then give offerings, recite prayers, ask for assistance, bless children, and perform other actions at that specific location. When they are finished, they may or may not clean up or remove objects before they leave. Most often the coins, flowers, plants, leaves, tobacco, figurines, pendants, and candles are left at the location, along with incense, *incensarios*, alcohol, other offerings, and great amounts of trash.

The second pattern is for a small group of people, often about 4 to 10, to accompany a religious specialist, usually a shaman, to a small specific location within the cave.

Again, the area of primary concern may be no more than a few feet across and usually associated with a small alcove or a particular cave feature or unique formation. Even when the group is large, the focus location within the cave is usually small and specific.



Figure 15, Cueva del Aire (San Luís Potosí, Mexico). Ritual locations far inside the cave.

In one such ritual that we observed, the activity was done in front of a small formation clearly in the form of a caiman (or alligator). The formation was decorated with flowers and plants and was sprinkled with alcohol before, during, and after the main ceremony. A small altar of leaves was laid in front of the formation, and during the ceremony food was placed on the leaves. At the conclusion of a rather lengthy series of chants and oratory, with varying degrees of occasional audience participation, the food was eaten — somewhat as communion but with much less formality. Although the shaman was serious and focused during his work, the audience was mostly serious only in reference to their occasional verbal group responses while they stood around the shaman. Kids were allowed to run around, talk, and play without reprimand.

The point is that — even though the cave was large — the group was small, the area of participation was very small, the focus location was less than one square meter, ritual activity was essentially by only one person, and group participation was limited verbal



response (except for the kids, and until it was time to eat). We have observed the same situation as common in more open-air rituals in Mayan Yucatan. Of course, occasionally those groups consist of an entire village, as well as people from other regions who come to witness a ceremony or participate. But we would not be able to detect group size archeologically, either from the context of the in-cave location, from available space, from the specifics of the location, or from the amount of rock art or other left-over remains. Participating group size is usually small and is somewhat uniform. While the *public-private* distinction still appears to be useful, or even necessary, we should recognize the pitfalls of being too dogmatic in our definitions, and the weaknesses inherent in our imaginative interpretation of biased observations.