

Paper Presented at the 2008 Wyoming Archaeological Society Annual Meeting,  
Rock Springs, Wyoming  
April 26, 2008

#### **Abstract**

Ritual cave use on the Northwestern Plains is evidenced by distinctive rock art and artifacts, micro-botanical remains, complete painting of caves, use of special settings, and cave modification. Ritual use consists of shaman activity, personal or group ceremony, and vision questing and is distinct from daily subsistence use or biographic recording. Prehistoric activity in the central and western mountains concentrated especially on rockshelters and enclosed caves, while eastern areas more commonly utilized open bluffs and rockshelters within a general plains environment. All kinds of sites were used for ritual activity, from daylight settings in front of slight overhangs to dark zone settings deep within cavern systems.

This is a very general, short summary of a class of sites in a fairly large area of the Northwestern Plains. As many of the readers know, we have been studying rock art and looking at archeological cave use, especially dark zone materials far into cavern systems, and with an interest in combining the two — that is, rock art associated with caves and

how it relates to cave use in general. Here we present some of our ideas and a few pictures.

Caves and rockshelters occur in a variety of forms and sizes and were used in many ways for thousands of years throughout the region. They range from simple overhangs to deep cavern systems, and each progressive form has unique characteristics that are viewed differently by people utilizing those features for different cultural purposes. Rock art, at least, occurs in all settings.

**Frozen Leg Cave, Montana** Archeologists in the past generally viewed rockshelters and open cave rooms primarily as occupation or habitation areas. Deeper twilight zone and dark zone locations were thought to be more associated with ritual, or at least not daily habitation activities. Archeologists recently have begun to question this simplistic division of light and darkness relative to function and use.



**Hazlett Shelter, Montana** Overhangs and cavities occur in various forms that range from cliff faces to deep rooms and extensive cavern systems, with various cultural uses and associated archeological materials. Huge boulders often contain at least some of the same attributes, from overhanging walls to enclosed dark rooms.

#### **Boulder River Indian Cave, Montana**

In considering site character relative to available natural light,

- The **Daylight Zone** has direct sunlight on a daily basis, and sites include open cliffs to gentle overhangs, shallow and deep





rockshelters, and enclosed cave rooms opening to the outside world. Deeper shelters at night begin to take on dark zone characteristics of enclosed space, and cave rooms have added attributes of echo and greater perceived isolation. There is a great difference in these Daylight settings between actual daylight and the extreme darkness of night.



**Juniper Cave, Wyoming** Cultural remains in the Daylight Zone include houses, hearths, discarded occupational debris, cultural deposits, rock art, and sometimes items not obviously related to habitation activity — that is, probably ritual debris.

#### **Triangle Cave, Montana**

- The **Twilight Zone** is in permanent shadow past direct sunlight, but with visibility during most daylight hours. It is usually within an extended entrance room or the beginning of a large passage.



**Two-Hands Cave, Montana** In twilight areas, there is light during the day, but no direct sunlight, and torches may be necessary to view painted walls or ceiling. There is increased echo and some feeling of enclosure.

In Montana and Wyoming, this eternal shadow zone is usually cold and not ideal for simple habitation. Structures and other features in the Twilight Zone are unusual and appear mostly to be associated with processing, storage, mineral extraction, or ritual, sometimes with associated rock art.

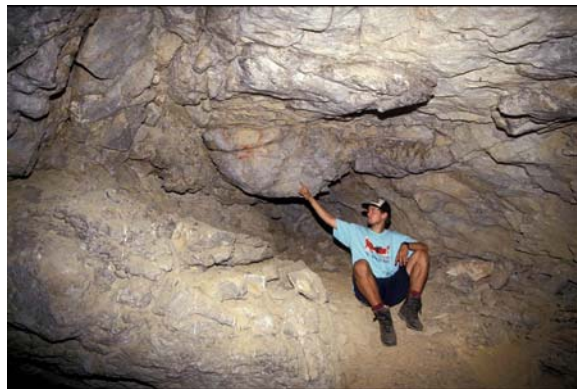


Blasted Rock Cave, Montana



Pass Creek Shelter, Wyoming

- The **Dark Zone** is simply the eternally dark area further into the cave with no natural light, and thus necessitating artificial light for any visibility at all.



Two Hands Cave, Montana



**Blacktail Cave, Montana** Technically the setting is divided into the Transitional Dark Zone and the Interior Dark Zone, depending on distance and travel complexity from the entrance.





**Triangle Cave, Montana** Constructions and cultural materials are rare in Dark Zone areas, although rock art occurs at several sites. Again, there is ample echo, depending on passage characteristics, and varying sensation of isolation.

### **Upper and Lower Blacktail Caves, Montana**

Most utilized caves have fairly large, somewhat open entrance rooms of daylight or twilight. Some entrances are small, difficult to negotiate, and lead quickly into twilight or total darkness.



### **Heart Cave, Montana**



Size, shape, extensiveness, and complexity are highly variable, with caves ranging from simple rooms to expedition quality complex systems. Some caves are very large; others barely hold one person. Archeological materials are represented in nearly all areas.

### **Rainbow Bear Cave, Montana**



**Frozen Leg Cave, Montana** It is traditional to consider *public* versus *private* use of space, and the distinction seems useful in considering social context or use. Unfortunately, the difference usually is impossible to discern archeologically and otherwise may be culturally irrelevant.

### **Crystal Cave, Montana**

*Public* locations are considered to be those presumably for use by groups of people and have an outward orientation. There is usually a wall or altar facing a large, open area of ample space to hold a number of people and easily viewed by the group.



### **Crawl Cave, Montana**

*Private* locations are those presumably used by only one or two people, with restricted viewing in a very small area. The location may be a small nook in the edge of a room, or a small isolated cavity.

We have previously shown that it is not possible to demonstrate public versus private context, and any number of people could have participated in or witnessed an activity within, in front of, or near almost any location.



### Deep Creek Cave, Montana

The size or position of a location of presumed ritual activity usually will not confirm that activity. The actual ritual location is usually small and associated with a particular cave feature, although the viewing or participant location may be much larger. These are from our direct ethnographic observations.



### Lookout Cave, Montana

Likewise, we have previously shown that great amounts of trash and debris are often discarded at ritual locations. Such material may seem indistinguishable from occupational by-products, and the occurrence of thick deposits of what appears to be occupational trash does not necessarily indicate discard of economic habitation debris. The presence of items believed to be used in ritual might distinguish ritual from habitation deposits, but an assumption that ritual objects would never occur in non-ritual context is probably erroneous. We thus rely on both content and context to identify locations of presumed ritual behavior.



### Frozen Leg Cave, Montana

Several kinds of sites or remains appear not to be associated with ritual, or at least the association cannot be proved. Non-ritual activity is evidenced by ochre mining, cold storage such as for meat, ice and water sources, interior walls constructed of stones and poles, defensive blinds, constructed terraces and raised floors in front of prominent rockshelters, and small entrances closed with poles. Any of these remains could have been accompanied by ritual activity although ritual use does not appear to have been the primary reason for construction.



Devils Canyon Rockshelter, Wyoming

Almost any other kinds of remains could be the result of ritual, or could have been fashioned, used, and deposited primarily in ritual context.



Two Hands Cave, Montana

Twilight and dark zone settings are still believed to be locations mostly of ritual behavior, evidenced mostly by pictographs, which can occur anywhere. Most interior cave areas have no occupational debris, although a few sites have localized areas of ash, burned soil, butchered bones, and flakes, probably the result of discard at localized ritual locations.





**Devils Canyon Rockshelter, Wyoming** • A few pole wickiups occur in Daylight and Twilight Zone areas, and some sites contain possible stone houses, small depressed house floors, and remains of pole and log structures that probably represent specialized use. This leaves attempts to recognize ritual activity in open Daylight areas.



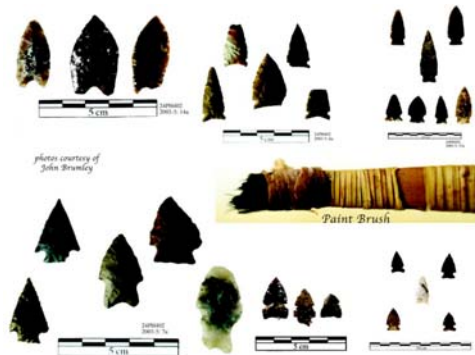
**Lookout Cave, Montana** For most sites, only parts of the cave, shelter, or rock face were used, especially for rock art, which is almost always limited in extent and location. Occupational debris, when present, also is usually limited in extent, perhaps the result of ritual activity at specific locations within the site.



### **Lookout Cave, Montana**

Ritual objects of bone, shell, stone, and perishable materials have been identified at a few sites in quantities or contexts that indicate ritual activity, but the few excavations provide only a glimpse into the potential for such interpretation.

- Excavations in one cave covered with pictographs produced bone beads, incised shell, a fossil pendant, wooden flute with a carved animal figure, large numbers of projectile points, pieces of arrow shafts from a cache or shrine, and other items.



#### Lookout Cave, Montana

- In another cave containing numerous pictographs along the back wall, excavations recovered such offerings as cut-shell pendants and blanks, strings of bone and shell beads, unusually numerous projectile points, and other remains.
- Polished tubular bone beads and other items likely the result of ritual activity have been found in several caves, and large numbers of projectile points removed from the shafts, plus intentionally broken and chopped up arrows, are likely the remains of arrow shrines, with this formalized discard system perhaps going back into the Archaic.



- #### Frozen Leg Cave, Montana
- Soil samples in one cave (analyzed by Loendorf) showed high concentrations of tobacco pollen and other ritual plants in front of this elaborate pictograph panel in an enclosed room of very difficult access, thus combining evidence for ritual.

Cultural deposits are usually absent or very limited in sites with complex rock art, thus suggesting non-utilitarian use of the overall site. There is considerable variation in kinds, complexity, and extensiveness of rock art, and it appears that various kinds of activity are represented. For the most part, we are unable to distinguish between shamanism, individual or group ritual, and individual or group vision quest based on the art.





### Yogo Cave, Montana

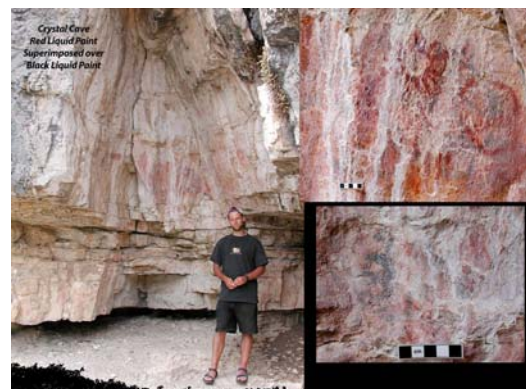
Rock art is most often in entrance areas. In some cases, figures are placed in such a way as to mark the entrance for recognition, or more likely to consecrate the site or entry into the site. This is especially true for paintings above or beside small duck-under entrances.

**Handprint Cave, Montana** Openings into sloping sinkholes descend into huge rooms suitable for complex rituals, and some continue back into cavern systems. Paintings, however, are mostly just outside the entrance.



### Crystal Cave, Montana

In other sites the entire restricted entrance area, or the narrow entry passage, is decorated with rock art, and some small window-like entrances into enclosed rooms are uniquely decorated.





#### Mask Cave, Montana

A few caves, especially in central Montana, have large sections of wall or the entire small cave completely painted by hand-smearing with liquid red paint. The overall appearance of the caves, rooms, and broad walls is almost always one of a bloody opening rather than simple wall preparation.

- At one small tunnel-like cave, the walls and ceiling are completely painted red, and two conch shell human mask gorgets were found in the deposits.
- At another cave, a wall is intensively painted above and around a tiny crawl-under entrance into a small dark interior room containing pictographs.



#### Lookout Cave, Montana

Sun interaction is rare. At one cave sunlight enters a small room through a tiny hole and momentarily lights up a red bison, while other figures remain in darkness. At other sites, a few isolated figures seem to interact with the sun, but there are no instances of solstice or equinox interaction or obvious tracking of seasons.



#### Dillinger Cave, Montana

There is difficulty trying to distinguish evidence of shamanism from group ritual, if such a distinction is actually real. This is particularly true for Archaic rock art. Some sites with geometric drawings in remote areas seem likely the result of shaman activity, while more open areas with painted animals, humans, and integrated scenes seem more



likely associated with individual or small group ritual. Rock art in areas of difficult access or difficult viewing often seem to relate to shaman activity more than simple beliefs, myths, history, or narrative.

#### Frozen Leg Cave, Montana

Later vision questing generally is not recognizable in twilight or dark zone caves. Some later art, particularly biographic scenes, seems more associated with story telling and recording of actual or imagined events, although — again — ritual could have been associated with recording those events.



#### Indian Cave, Montana

Use of caves and rock art in central and western Montana conforms with present cultural practices of the Salish or Flathead, from central Montana to western Canada. Their homeland was this same part of Montana and probably down into Wyoming, possibly from Late Prehistoric times onward, and thus their cultural attitudes and practices are relevant to considerations of cave use. Individual spirit quest sites – such as painted bluffs, rockshelters, and caves – are utilized on a strictly individual basis for spirit or vision questing, often during multi-day or extended use. The locations have special significance and are repeatedly used for particular rituals or rites. With long-term and repeated use comes repeated action, which results in accumulated debris and constantly added rock art, when part of the action. This is exactly what we observe in Wyoming and Montana caves, in this area of Salish-Flathead occupation. While we cannot assign specific activities at any site to identifiable ethnic groups, certainly the Salish model is applicable to this area and helps explain our field observations. This provides a degree of continuity, at least in western Montana, between the observed archeological record and the ethnographic present — that is,

between mountain rock art and the use of caves, with existing traditions representative of Plains cultures in general.

We thus see that there is ample evidence for ritual not only in interior cave locations, but also in more open entrance areas and in open rockshelters. Ritual took many forms, with various numbers and kinds, of practitioners and observers, leaving many kinds of evidence, in any number of locations and settings. We are now trying to sort through and organize available data from open daylight contexts to areas in dark cavern systems.