

The Painted Rock Site (SBa-502 and SBa-526): *Sapaksi*, the House of the Sun

GEORGIA LEE
STEPHEN HORNE

THE rock paintings of the Chumash Indians have been a focus of interest for many years. However, the vanished behavioral context of these paintings is poorly understood. In this paper we attempt to establish a linkage between a rock art site described in historic ethnography and a known rock art site in the Sierra Madre Mountains.

The high *potrero* lands of the Sierra Madre Mountains in eastern Santa Barbara County, California, are situated on the divide between the Sisquoc and the Cuyama Rivers about ten miles south of New Cuyama (Fig. 1). One of these grasslands, Montgomery Potrero, is the location of the Painted Rock site (Fig. 2). These grassland *potreros*, which are within the Los Padres National Forest, had a number of food resources of importance to the Chumash Indians and to their unnamed predecessors. On the basis of archaeological evidence, it appears that the *potreros* were being used by the Indians by the early Middle Horizon (1200 B.C.). During the winter, the *potreros* are cold and snowbound and as the Chumash did not have an adaptation to extremely cold weather, use was probably seasonal from the Middle Horizon to the time of contact with Europeans. But from late spring to late fall the

potreros would have been accessible; plant and animal foods would have been available and even abundant in some years. These food resources are probably the principal reason for a high density of archaeological sites in the area. Many of these sites are middens and many of these are in association with rock-shelters displaying examples of Chumash rock art.

Some of the rock art of the Sierra Madre Mountains was recorded in the late 1920's by W. D. Strong, and in 1929 these data appeared in Steward's synthesis, *Petroglyphs of California and Adjoining States*. At a later date, Strong revisited the Sierra Madre country and the Sisquoc River under the guidance of J. G. James, a local rancher and artifact enthusiast. The major purpose of this work was exploratory. The object of the exploration was to determine whether the area had been occupied by the Chumash or the Yokuts in historic times and to ascertain whether or not there was a prehistoric Basketmaker Culture. Incidental to this work, notes and drawings were made of some rock art panels but not of the Painted Rock site. In the winter of 1950, Lathrap and others visited rock art sites at the *potreros* and in the adjacent canyons. Although

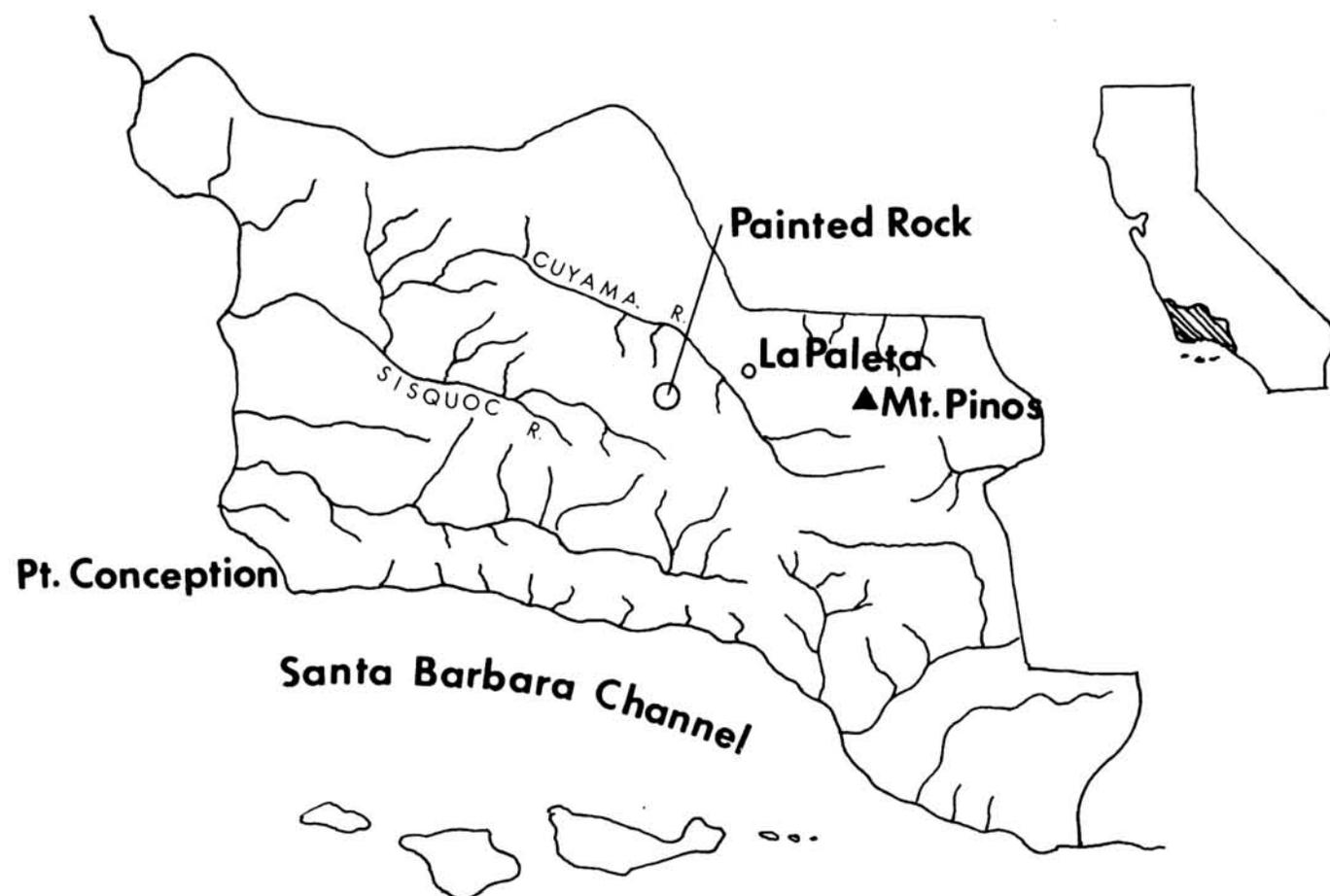


Fig. 1. Location Map (After Grant 1965:4).

this work was done in the context of a pleasure trip, they recorded ten sites and seriously but unsuccessfully tried to locate the sites worked by Strong sixteen years earlier. They made detailed drawings of the design elements at Painted Rock and their work is the first attempt to systematically record these paintings. Their renderings are thus an important control over loss of detail from weathering and vandalism. The accuracy of their drawings is surprising, considering the adverse conditions under which they were made. In October 1978 a drawing was made of a portion of the large panel at SBa-502; upon comparison with one made with Lathrap, it was discovered to be a virtual replica. We can thus state that the rock art has remained unchanged for 29 years.

Additional work was done at Painted

Rock by the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Barbara, during the 1973 field season (Horne and Glassow 1974). However, documentation of the rock art was peripheral to the major focus of the research; therefore, insufficient attention was paid to complete recording. The common thread uniting the previous work is descriptive recording. Like much rock art research in California and, indeed, as with much California archaeology, the focus of research has been idiographic and nonanalytic. Scholarly analysis and interpretation of rock art in terms of historic ethnography is a recent development in California. We have chosen a cautiously interpretive perspective in this study of the rock art at Painted Rock.

The possibilities of text-aided interpreta-



Fig. 2. Photograph of site; arrow points to upper cave shelter, SBa-526.

tion and analysis of rock art are considerable, although largely unexplored. However, interpretive reassessment of some Chumash rock art and decorated artifacts has recently been undertaken by Hudson and Underhay (1978). Their work is made possible largely through the historic ethnography of John P. Harrington. Hudson and Underhay propose that many of the paintings were done in crisis situations, particularly those which involved major cosmological events such as the winter solstice. We are proposing two hypotheses based on our analysis of Chumash rock art in relation to some of Harrington's ethnographic notes: (1) that Painted Rock was an important element in a Chumash sacred place, and (2) that the Painted Rock site was the place called "House of the Sun" by the Chumash.

A CHUMASH SACRED PLACE

Information given by María Solares, an Ineseño consultant, to John P. Harrington indicates that the Sierra Madre Mountains in the vicinity of the House of the Sun were associated with sacred rituals of the Chumash. María Solares describes shrines which are almost certainly located along these mountains in the vicinity of the potreros:

. . . there is a place this side [west, or the Santa Inéz side] of La Paleta [hills southeast of New Cuyama near Ballinger Canyon] with many *shawil* [shrines] in a row [Harrington n.d.:3:20].

This note refers to a trip that Ms. Solares took to Tejón as a child around 1860. She went up the Sisquoc River and over the Sierra Madre

Mountains at a point southwest of Pine Corral Potrero. All along the pass over the Sierra Madre Ridge she noted shrines placed at right angles to the road. They still had feathers on them and she remembered them as being pretty. Harrington (n.d.:3:97) wrote:

From the top of the pass they saw La Paleta as a big rinconada below them [*Sqenen*] and farther off to the left hand the plain of Cuyama.

The shrines which María Solares described are associated with the renewal ceremonies of the winter solstice. The sacred importance of the solstice ceremony, the poles themselves, and the shrine locations have been described by Hudson and Underhay (1978). Each village had a solstice shrine and there were other shrines which served particular purposes, such as the "Place of the Dead" north of Ventura. Regardless of the purpose, shrine sites were "*tierra delicada*" to the Chumash. The potrero country of the Sierra Madre Mountains was such a *tierra delicada*.

The evidence supports the idea that Sierra Madre Ridge was an area of supernatural importance to the Chumash. An important component of the ritual significance was the rock art, in particular the place called *Sapaksi*, the House of the Sun, "a big cave at the Cuyama River" (Harrington n.d.:3:20). There are no caves at the Cuyama River itself but there are caves in the adjacent Sierra Madre Mountains, especially in the vicinity of the potreros. Hudson and Underhay (1978:59) report that the Painted Rock site has been tentatively linked with *Sapaksi* by Campbell Grant and Robert Easton. Prior to discussing the plausibility of this linkage it is necessary to describe how the Chumash envisioned the House of the Sun.

SUN AND HIS CRYSTAL HOUSE IN THE UPPERWORLD

Sun, *Kakunupmawa*, was an anthropomorphic male being who was the principal

member of the Chumash world of supernatural beings. Sun lived in a quartz-crystal house in the Upper World. This house was ". . . filled with tame animals of every kind . . ." (Blackburn 1975:36), which included bears, mountain lions, rattlesnakes, and birds (Hudson and Underhay 1978:52). Each night Sun and Golden Eagle (*Slo'w*) played against Sky Coyote (*Shnilemun*) and Morning Star (*'Alnahyit' i 'akiwi*) in the gambling game of *peon*. The outcome of a year's gambling determined the welfare of the Chumash for the following year—if Sun were to win, things would go badly for the people; if Sky Coyote won, things would fare well (Blackburn 1975:91). Sun's house, as well as the rest of the Upper World, was supported by Golden Eagle, who never moved except to stretch his wings. This movement obscured the moon and caused its phases. We would assume that a symbolic representation of the House of the Sun would possess depictions of some or all of the attributes noted in this myth of the Sun.

The historic ethnography notes of J. P. Harrington provide a partial description of the House of the Sun. There are problems with the use of historic ethnography because it is based on the memory of informants which may be affected by faulty understanding of events, personal bias, and other factors which introduce error. When ethnography is used to aid the interpretation of Chumash rock art there is an added hazard because the paintings tend to be abstract. The symbols which probably were understood over a wide area by those who were contemporaries of the shaman who painted them are obscure to us; we can only guess at their meaning. Although María Solares was a principal consultant, her description of the House of the Sun was based upon second-hand information and, therefore, may be inaccurate. She gave Harrington the following information about the animals represented at the House of the Sun:

S'ap'aksi [Ineseño Chumash] is the name

of a place over in the Cuyama. [Consultant] has never seen it but Benvenuto saw it. It was somewhere in the lower course of the Cuyama as near as I [Harrington] can understand. At that place there were the following animals turned to stone: *Slo'w* [Golden Eagle], *Xelex* [Falcon], *'Anits'a-papa* [Sharp-Shinned Hawk], *Xus* [Bear], *Xuxa'w* [unidentified], *Kilik* [Sparrow Hawk?], *Qaq* [Raven]. It is like a big cave. How did it happen? How did these animals get there and turn into stone? *Xus* is there sitting, *Slo'w* the same, he is there but of stone. They're all painted there on the rock, all the animals are there [Harrington n.d.:1:63].

This note does not link a sun image with the animal depictions. However, another note obtained by Harrington from María Solares firmly links the sun image with the animal representations at the House of the Sun and also provides additional physical description of the cave.

S'apaksi is way down Cuyama Canyon toward the San Joaquin Valley. The trail they took did not go as far down the Cuyama as that. It is a big cave. Horses enter it to drink. Bear, Eagle, *Xelex*, [illegible], and perhaps other animals are there. These animals were people and it was their house there before the flood, and they turned into stone—no one did it. After the flood people found them there already made into stones. Nobody did it. One looks like a bear. There was a big painting of the sun in the cave and at a short distance the Coyote turned into stone and is still to be seen . . . [Harrington in Hudson and Underhay 1978:59].

Based on the myth of the House of the Sun and on María Solares' second-hand description, we expect *Sapaksi* to: (1) be located near the Cuyama Valley watershed, probably near Cuyama; (2) have a spring or pond of water in or adjacent to the rockshelter; and (3) have painted depictions of a variety of mythic

animals including, but not limited to, those cited above. Based on the general cosmological associations of the House of the Sun, we might also expect to find representations of celestial phenomena.

THE PAINTED ROCK SITE

The location of the Painted Rock site fits with the ethnographic description as it is situated overlooking the Cuyama Valley. There is a seasonal pond in front of the cave shelter; being fed from a large spring, it has a heavy flow well into the summer. This pond would have been easily accessible to horses.

The site consists of a series of shelters in a mass of sandstone rocks which rise thirty to forty feet from the potrero. The House of the Sun is at the top of the cliff above a shelter which also contains pictographs. The upper cave, which is approximately three meters in diameter, can only be reached by a circuitous route. Access is gained by squeezing through a small hole in the rock or by a hazardous crossing at the top of the cliff.

Pictographs are located in the lower cave shelter, scattered on various faces of the rock outcropping (SBa-502), and in the upper cave (SBa-526). Their condition varies from good to awful; the problem is one of surface exfoliation in the lower cave and fading in the upper one.

A prominent disc shape is painted on the ceiling of the upper cave (Fig. 3) and undoubtedly gave the name to the entire site. Nearby is a smaller black circle with a red rim which may be an eclipse symbol (Fig. 4). Other small circular designs are found in the cave as well as on other rock faces. Disc shapes are generally considered to represent sun, moon, or other celestial bodies. In the Harrington notes, consultants refer to such motifs as a "sun"; Fernando Librado for example, remembered a painted sun symbol which consisted of a circle and rays (Hudson *et al.* 1977:50). The circular shape of the sanddollar was linked to the sun

by the Chumash: “[the sanddollar is] . . . a shell that resembles the shape of the sun and has a heart and from there the rays ran” (Harrington in Hudson and Underhay 1978:51). A circle is used by the Luiseño and Diegueño in their sandpaintings to symbolize the sun (Kroeber 1925:662-663).

Other designs may have had astronomical referents but are obscured by symbolism. According to Hudson and Underhay (1978:98), Mars was probably represented as *Holhol*,

or Condor/Condor Impersonator. Supernatural power was believed to be invested in *Holhol*'s clothing and sticks, and when used by a shaman they provided the ability to travel rapidly over great distances in the Upper World in order to search out missing persons or objects. A powerful figure which stretches 1.8 m. across the west wall of the cave may represent Condor, Condor Impersonator, or *Slo'w*, the Giant Eagle (Fig. 5).

Aside from the circular elements and the bird or bird impersonator, there are other mythic figures depicted in this complex of rock shelters. A bear-like creature appears to be *Xus*. Bear claws are suggested by the lines at the ends of the spread-out limbs (Fig. 6). His supernatural power may have been symbolized by the “power lines” which radiate from the

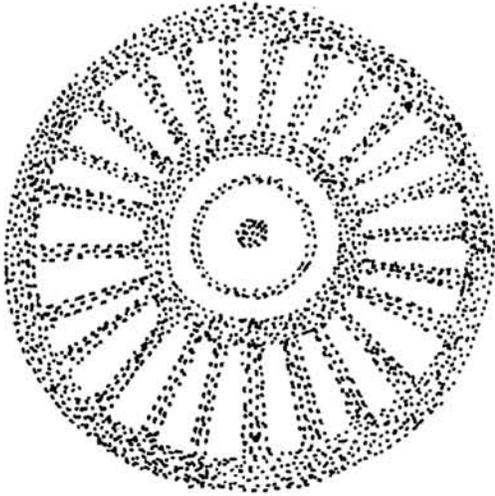


Fig. 3. Large pictograph in red of a “sun” disc. This design dominates the ceiling of the upper cave.

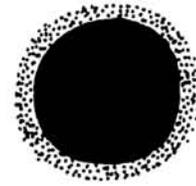


Fig. 4. Black circular design with red outline. This may refer to an eclipse.

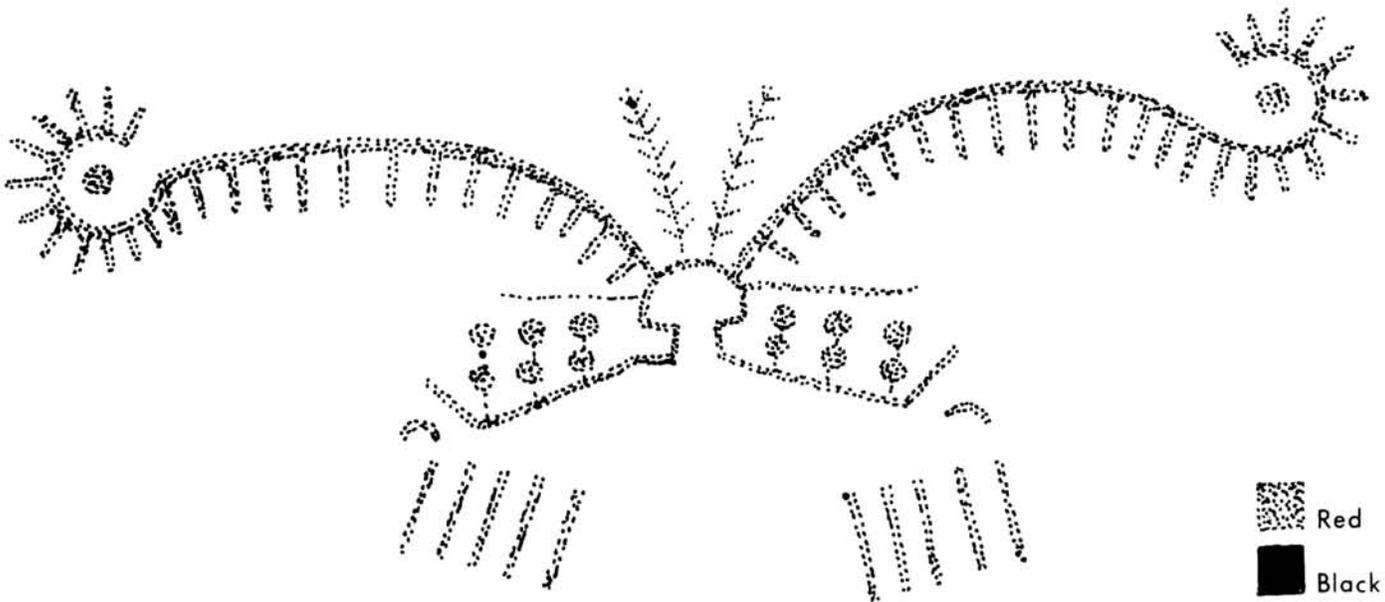


Fig. 5. This may be condor or condor impersonator.

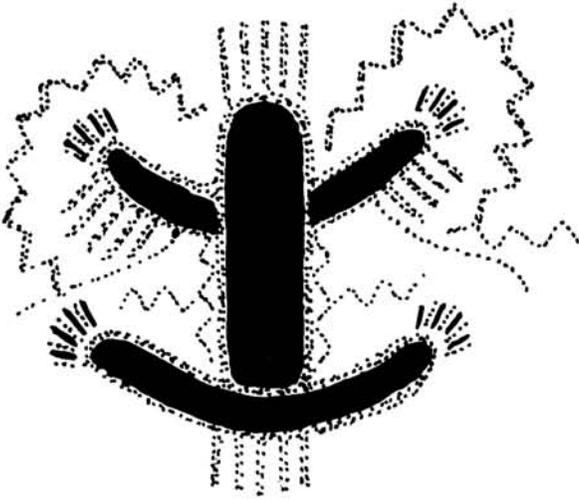


Fig. 6. A large and elaborate bear figure is the central design in a panel on the west face of the lower cave (SBa-502). Drawing is a partial reconstruction.



Fig. 7. The east wall of the upper cave displays a possible depiction of Coyote.



Fig. 8. Fish-like design from the upper cave.

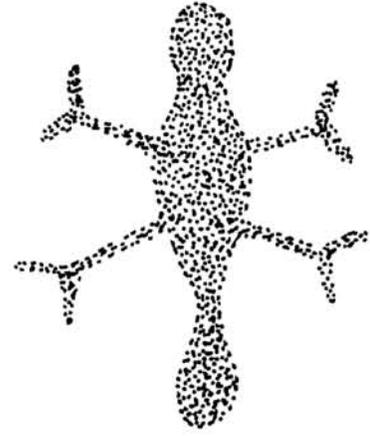


Fig. 9. This creature may represent a beaver.

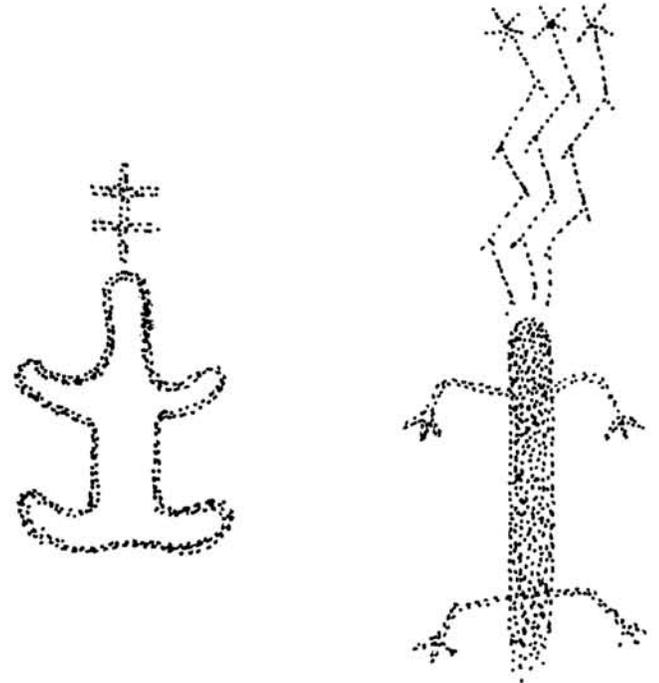


Fig. 10. These may be two other examples of the "animals of every kind."

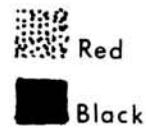


figure. An ithyphallic pictograph may represent Coyote; noted for his sexual prowess, an appendage might depict his genitalia (Fig. 7). Fish forms are found on several panels; they may be the swordfish who were held in reverence by the Chumash (Fig. 8; cf. Grant 1965: 80). Another figure appears to be a beaver (Fig. 9); these creatures were once common in the area. A snake-like shape appears on the ceiling of the cave near the central sun motif and is similar to the snake symbols at the Carrizo Plains (Grant 1965:Pl. 7). Other designs seem to be zoomorphic but are too abstract to be identified (Fig. 10).

Cupules have been abraded into the floor of the cave, as well as a few larger shallow depressions which were also formed by abrasion. One other feature is a pecked hole in the center front of the cave floor. This five-sided depression, which is 7.5 cm. deep, may have held a gnomon or sunstick in an upright position. After a preliminary check of the cupule arrangement, Ernest Underhay (personal communication), astronomer for the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, stated that these may match an astronomical configuration. Some of the paintings at this site may represent celestial phenomena also. There are, besides the numerous disc shapes, one crescent and the aforementioned possible depiction of an eclipse.

CONCLUSION

Evidence which we have reported tends to confirm the identification of the Painted Rock site with *Sapaksi*, the House of the Sun. Correctly located overlooking the Cuyama Valley, the Painted Rock site would have been near the trail taken by María Solares on her trip to Tejón; it has a pond which could have been used for watering stock. The pictographs appear to represent Sun, Moon, Bear, Eagle, Coyote, and other "animals of every kind" such as those who lived in Sun's quartz crystal house. Additional evidence is provided by the

depiction of various apparent celestial motifs. So far as we know, this is the only rock art site which had been named and described in ethnographic notes.

The Sierra Madre Ridge was one of several sacred places for the Chumash. It was equal in importance to the Place of the Dead at Ventura; to Mount Pinos, the center of the world; to the entrance to the Upper World at Huasna; and to the entrance to *Shimilaqsha*, the afterworld, at Point Conception.

Further careful research is needed on the glyphs which may represent a star map and on possible solstice usage of the cave as an observatory. Regardless of these other potential aspects, the House of the Sun surely possessed mythic and ritual significance and was a sacred place in an area heavily weighted with spiritual power.

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University of California, Los Angeles
Los Padres National Forest
Santa Barbara

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