

LEWIS CANYON EXPLAINED:
The Ritual Implications of Water in the Desert
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SLIDE 1 TITLE - The Lewis Canyon petroglyphs are an anomaly in the Lower Pecos region which is more famous for its long series of elaborate polychrome and monochrome pictographs. **SLIDE 2 - HELICOPTER VIEW** Thousands of glyphs cut into flat limestone bedrock at the confluence of Lewis Canyon and the Pecos River are a unique reminder of the role that ritual played in the lives of the hunters and gatherers of the Lower Pecos over millennia. In addition, the site now provides an intriguing perspective on the natural and supernatural significance of water in this arid semi-desert.

Over the past decade, hundreds of petroglyphs have been unearthed from under a covering mantle of soil washed in from the surrounding hills. The expanse of lighter bedrock in this slide is the area uncovered in 1991. When the site was described by Kirkland and Jackson in the 1930s, they saw over 900 geometric glyphs executed in what appears to be a haphazard manner. **SLIDE 3 - DISCRETE GEOMETRIC GLYPHS** Clusters of glyphs were spaced along the gentle slope of a shallow bedrock bowl – the most common designs were circles and lines, stick figures, and other abstracts that were eventually designated as the Discrete Geometric Style. Note the

lizard-like human figure in the upper right corner – we will return to him shortly. **SLIDE 4 - SERPENTINE GLYPHS** The glyphs uncovered in the last 10 years are completely different – sinuous nested lines, atlatls, animal tracks, and human figures cover smooth islands of bedrock defined by erosional channels. **SLIDE 5 – CONCENTRATED SERPENTINE LINES OF ANY KIND** In the last decade, we have expanded the inventory of glyphs to over 1000 and finally, this year, arrived at some understanding of the rationale for the labor-intensive production of this elaborate and complex display of ritual art.

SLIDE 6 - SHADOWS SERPENTINE LINES The new glyphs were named the Serpentine Style for the redundancy of nested sinuous lines traditionally interpreted as snakes, ergo symbolizing water. Atlatls are the second most common motif but these are not accurate depictions of working implements. **SLIDE 7 - SWIRLING ATLATLS WITH EXAGGERATED WEIGHTS** The over-sized weights or bannerstones emphasize the ritual aspect of the spear throwers but what importance was attached to them remains uncertain. The deer tracks and human foot prints associated with this style are more realistic.

Throughout the years, attempts have been made to link the iconography of the glyphs to one of the four prehistoric pictograph styles in hopes some estimate of age and origin would ensue. **SLIDE 8 - ANOTHER LIZARD MAN** The lizard man you saw in the earlier slide is pecked in the midst of a cluster of geometric glyphs. He is very like similar figures painted in the Late Prehistoric Red Monochrome style but a smaller version of the same figure was uncovered this year in the area dominated by the Serpentine Style which is clearly Archaic in age. **SLIDE 9 – LEWIS WARRIOR ONE** This year also brought to light another important group of figures – five male warriors and a possible female – that bear a strong resemblance to one of the minor pictograph styles of the Lower Pecos. The Red Linear paintings express a limited scope of major themes – processions, human reproduction, and warfare. **SLIDE 10 – LEWIS FEMALE FIGURE** This female figure is essentially a vulva with arms and legs, consistent with the Red Linear preoccupation with sexual congress but unlike their normal manner of differentiating women from men. In the paintings, the women are either hugely pregnant or indicated by a circle drawn in the pubic area. **SLIDE 11 – LEWIS WARRIOR PAIR**

The five male warriors at Lewis Canyon bear weapons that are identical to some shown in the Red Linear style including an unusual hand-held series of nested sinuous lines ending in balls – possibly an attempt to illustrate a bolo, club or sling? **SLIDE 12 – RED LINEAR BALLS** The miniature hunter in this scene faces small deer that leap from the breast of a much larger Pecos River style deer, following the Red Linear practice of incorporating older paintings into their compositions. The two figures at lower right are from a badly deteriorated site and are part of a processional scene with sexual overtones. The important characteristics here are the nested curves and the unusual ball-headed implements. **SLIDE 13 - FIGHT CLUB WARRIOR**

There are other male figures at Lewis Canyon that do not resemble the Red Linear warriors and the fascination with animal tracks and human prints seen in the glyphs is not evident in the Red Linear style. The depictions of bison in the Red Linear style suggest a Late Archaic date, ca. 2600-3000 years ago. A single radiocarbon assay came in at 1280 plus or minus 45 before present, placing the style during late Late Archaic or the transitional period between Archaic and Late Prehistoric periods. We are not proponents of the “looks like – therefore must be” school of rock art interpretation. **SLIDE 14 - SINUOUS LINES WITH DOTS ON THE END** Otherwise, we might link these black dots to the black dots on deer antlers to the use of peyote to a relationship with the Huichol – a flimsy logical construct at best. We only point out this resemblance to provide more of a possible context for the Lewis Canyon petroglyphs. If the similarities are more than coincidental, then it is possible that the two art forms are the same age and were made by the same people for different reasons using two mediums. But we are not ready to bet the farm on what may be simply similar attempts to portray a common weapon, much like the ubiquitous atlatls that appear in every Archaic style in West Texas.

SLIDE 15 – GROUP AT WORK The years of hard work by a cadre of dedicated volunteers and professional archeologists paid off last winter when we finally came to the core of the site. After advancing through a dense swirl of Serpentine glyphs, the volunteers were disappointed to encounter a drop off that seemed to signal the end of the site. **SLIDE 16 – BEGINNINGS OF TINAJA** We on the other hand were ecstatic because the drop off was the rim of a large tinaja, filled to the brim with sediments from

the hills and then buried under another foot of dirt. **SLIDE 17 – EMPTYING THE TINAJA OF SEDIMENT** By the end of that session, we had outlined the depression and put a trench through the middle to get an idea of its depth. The next time out, the synchronized shovelers emptied the hole and tried to clear the underground chute that once fed it. **SLIDE 18 – CLEANED TINAJA WITH GLYPHS** The empty depression was mapped in detail while a larger area around it was cleaned, exposing more glyphs encircling both ends. The depression is a solution cavity that was fed by subterranean chute that follows a fault line visible on the surface. **SLIDE 19 – FOOTPRINTS** The upper end is deeper and pocked with smaller cavities. Had we known, we could have just followed the footprints that lead to the deeper end where the volunteers speculated the diving board was mounted.

Once emptied, the depression was measured and the volume calculated **SLIDE 20 – SURFER REPRESENTATION** As it stands today, the tinaja is capable of holding 800 gallons of water. If the outlet at the lower end was plugged by any sort of rudimentary dam that capacity rises to 1250 gallons. Let us consider that in terms of prehistoric needs instead of ours. Bobbie McGregor of the Witte Museum recently set out to replicate the prickly pear canteens mentioned by the Spanish chronicler Alonso de Leon in his description of the natives of south Texas and northern Mexico. All she had to go on was de León's comment: *Cargan las indias doce ó catorce nopales huecos, llenos de agua, en unos cacaxtles de red.* The Indian women carry 12 or 15 hollow *nopales*, full of water, in a net. **SLIDE 21 - PRICKLY PEARS** After roasting, hammering, hollowing – her exact recipe will be published in the next Lewis Canyon report - she found that a prickly pear pad 8.5 inches long and 5.25 inches wide held one pint of water. Considered in terms of prehistoric prickly pear pad units (**PPPPUs**), the tinaja was capable of filling between 6,400 and 10,000 such cac-teens. From a prehistoric perspective, the tinaja constituted a giant reservoir and one that tapped subterranean, thus possibly supernatural, sources. However, functionality was not the motivation for the labor-intensive production of thousands of petroglyphs.

Perhaps the most telling factor is that the people who produced the prodigious art at Lewis Canyon were not short on water. **SLIDE 22 – PECOS RIVER** The Pecos River flows at the bottom of the bluff although its saline water is not as tasty as spring water.

A plunge pool at the head of the short canyon immediately adjacent to the site provides another source of pooled water – and above the pool are the deteriorated remains of Red Monochrome pictographs.

Thus, it is clear that the importance of this tinaja far exceeds its ability to provide itinerant hunters and gatherers with a drink or water for cooking. Rather, it was the focus of ritual activity consistent with the persistent reverence held for water that gushes forth from subterranean sources, the underworld of the shamanic universe. These beliefs are well-documented throughout pre-Hispanic Mexico and the American Southwest where the religious connotations of water are embedded in the art **SLIDE 23 - RAIN IMAGES** A series of images from West Texas and New Mexico illustrate how water was incorporated into rock art. Kay Sutherland and others interpreted the round staring eyes of the goggle-eyed figures as derivations of *Tlaloc*, the Mexican god of rain, lightning, thunder, and fertility. More subtly, the interior body decorations are stepped frets recognized as rain or cloud altars. Polly Schaafsma used the illustrations at far right to show the relationship between water, ritual, and images of pots. **SLIDE 24 - TLALOC**

The relationship between rock art and pooled water has been amply demonstrated in Texas – one of the best examples is Hueco Tanks where pictographs of several eras are painted near the pooled water. In the Lower Pecos, **SLIDE 25 - NORTHERN MEXICO RAIN IMAGES** Forrest Kirkland first called the Red Monochrome pictographs the Flooded Shelter style because the panels he copied overlooked pools in the canyon floor. Reeda Peel's poster show at this conference illustrates another case in point – Meyers Springs where extensive Plains and older pictographs are mirrored in the pond. And why does a statue of *Tlaloc*, the Mexican rain god, mark the boundary between two countries on Amistad Dam?

SLIDE 26 – TINAJA NORTH OF LEWIS CANYON - Lesser known sites on the Eldorado Divide north of Lewis Canyon provide an even stronger analogy. There, petroglyphs pecked into bedrock around upland *tinajas* mirror the layout of Lewis Canyon on a lesser scale. **SLIDE 27 – MAP OF ELDORADO DIVIDE** All of these sites share two characteristics: ponded water and petroglyphs although the iconography is not always the same **SLIDE 28 - - LEWIS HORNED SERPENT** The one site with motifs

like Lewis Canyon is the Horned Serpent site at Flat Rock near Rankin – 100 miles north of Lewis Canyon. The site was recorded decades ago and the glyphs recovered to protect them. **SLIDE 29 – RANKIN HORNED SERPENT SITE** These photographs, loaned by Teddy Stickney, show the similarities to Lewis Canyon – in the bedrock setting, the sinuous glyphs and human foot prints, and the association with water – Flat Rock was a well-known stop on the westward trail because of its seep spring and ponded water. **SLIDE 30 – HORNED SERPENT CLOSE UP** Nearby, another site hints at the ritual importance of water through a medium other than rock art. Two *tinajas* – one shallow and one deep – have been linked by an artificial channel so that overflow from the shallow one feeds into the deeper hole. **SLIDE 31 – CROCKETT TINAJAS** The entire complex is surrounded by a rock wall that is too small to have kept any animal in or out. It is lower in elevation so it was not intended to divert water into the *tinajas*. In other words, it has no function other than that of marking space.

SLIDE 32 – TINAJA WITH WATER REFLECTING OCOTILLO It may seem the most elementary of facts – human beings need air, water and food to survive. One can live a few minutes without air, a few days without water, and a few weeks without food. Yet the argument has been put forth that food is the controlling element in the distribution of people in the Lower Pecos during the Archaic period. Archeologists persist in assuming that hunter-gatherer lifeways were dominated by practical functional concerns – and we all know that human beings are always rationale and do what is best for them? Lewis Canyon and its sister sites demonstrate the powerful influence of thoughts and beliefs – the energy expended to create a thousand glyphs is like the energy expended by the volunteers who shovel, clean, paint, stack rocks, sweep and replant today. Their reward is intangible but a powerful incentive drives them to return year after year to Lewis Canyon.

The Lewis Canyon Project is not just a treasure hunt where dirt is thrown aside in search of glyphs although that is the aspect that draws the most attention. **SLIDE 33 - PROJOS** We have been criticized for not screening all of the dirt to recover artifacts – we did screen a selected trench and found projectile points ranging from 8000 to 500 years old in less than 30 cm of dirt. The dart points on the upper row are Early Archaic, ca 8000 to 5000 years old while the arrow points on the bottom row were probably

discarded around 600 years ago. **SLIDE 34 – BURNED HOLE WITH GLYPHS** Three separate areas of burned earth, rock and charcoal have been radiocarbon dated – the dates range from 108 to 240 years old. These dates show clearly that the sediments that blanketed the site and are now being removed are recent and probably a product of the introduction of domestic animals. Therefore, the effort involved in screening several tons of modern soil in search of answers to ancient questions is wasted energy. **SLIDE 35 - ROCK WALL**

One group of volunteers has devoted their time to building a low rock wall along the break between the ridge and the exposed bedrock. The single cable that rings the road side of the site is becoming a living fence as plants are transplanted from the excavation area. **SLIDE 36 - GARDEN** The wall and the plants serve as sediment traps and keep larger rocks from being transported onto the glyphs. Rocks outline the preferred paths in an attempt to influence people to avoid walking on the glyphs. Signs have been erected on the trails that lead from the river and the road, asking visitors to help protect Lewis Canyon. **SLIDE 37 - COVERED GLYPHS**

The volunteers will be back – looking for what lies beneath the sediment blanket – and who knows what they may find? **SLIDE 38 – The END**