

XXVI VALCAMONICA SYMPOSIUM 2015

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PROSPECTS FOR THE PREHISTORIC ART RESEARCH
50 years since the founding of Centro Camuno

PROSPETTIVE SULLA RICERCA DELL'ARTE PREISTORICA
a 50 anni dalla fondazione del Centro Camuno



*Centro Camuno
di Studi Preistorici*

Proceedings

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ARCHAEOLOGY AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE AT CANYON DE CHELLEY, ARIZONA, UNITED STATES: THE PERSPECTIVE OF ROCK ART

Jessica Joyce Christie *

SUMMARY

The purpose of this essay is to reconstruct the cultural landscapes of the canyons now included in Canyon de Chelly National Monument in the state of Arizona, United States, through their successive occupation phases by means of archaeological materials and the abundant pictographs and petroglyphs. The canyons were settled by Basketmaker peoples (c. 0 - A.D. 700), Ancestral Pueblos (c.A.D. 700 - 1300), and the Navajo who first came to Canyon de Chelly in the late 18c. The discussion links archaeological and iconographic reconstructions of ancient landscapes with the political challenges of contemporary constructions of tangible/physical and intangible/spiritual heritage by the Navajo.

RIASSUNTO:

Lo scopo di questo saggio è quello di ricostruire i paesaggi culturali dei canyon ora inclusi nel Canyon de Chelly, nello stato dell'Arizona, Stati Uniti, attraverso le successive fasi di frequentazione alla luce dei materiali archeologici, dei pittogrammi abbondanti e dei petroglifi. I canyon sono stati occupati dal popolo Basketmaker (c.a 0-700 d.C.), Ancestral Pueblos (c.a 700-1300) e Navajo che hanno occupato il Canyon de Chelly alla fine del 18 sec. La discussione collega la necessità di creare ricostruzioni archeologiche e iconografiche di antichi paesaggi alla sfida politica dell'identità Navajo ricostruita attraverso sia i resti materiali/fisici che culturali/spirituali di questo popolo.

This essay aims to reconstruct the cultural landscapes and worldviews of the ancient and contemporary inhabitants of Canyon de Chelly located in northeastern Arizona, United States. This reconstruction is based upon available archaeological information, the iconography of rock art, as well as ethnography. A cultural landscape has been defined as the natural setting combined with the physical and mental constructions human beings have added to a space (see STOFFLE 2009, pp. 38-40; ASMORE, KNAPP 1999; DAVID, THOMAS 2008, pp. 245-344, 617-659). The challenges such a study encounters is to navigate cautiously between Western science-based approaches and indigenous heritage perspectives. Western science believes in objective reconstructions of the past from material data. Heritage is grounded in the physical tangible presence of objects and archaeological sites and connects them with oral narratives and spiritual practices, claimed as intangible heritage. In this essay, the rock art unfolding in rich pictograph and petroglyph scenes is the primary source of information and the primary question is in which ways it projects changing or stable relations between the people who created it and the natural setting of the canyon. In the Southwest, rock art is generally dated by either direct association with datable cultural material or by comparison with similar styles that have been dated through associated material remains.

Canyon de Chelly (36 degrees 08'01.00", N 109 degrees 28'10.00"W, Fig. 1), Canyon del Muerto, and several

smaller tributary canyons are the result of a spectacular geological formation created by sedimentary deposits which became the Supai red beds of shale and sandstone more than 200 million years ago. Northeastern Arizona was part of the Defiance Uplift forming the Colorado Plateau and the canyons and cliffs were slowly carved by water erosion. In 1931, Canyon de Chelly National Monument was created which is administered jointly by the National Park Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Navajo Tribal Council in Window Rock, AZ. Since then, Canyon de Chelly and Canyon del Muerto have been managed under National Monument regulations.

THE CANYONPEOPLE AND THEIR CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

The earliest inhabitants of Canyon de Chelly were Basketmaker people before A.D. 450 (GRANT 1978, pp. 24-25). Basketmakers in the Southwest are known as hunters, semi-nomadic foragers, and primitive farmers. Early Basketmakers were attracted to the canyon because it offered rock shelters which they used as living spaces. Excavations by Earl Morris (MORRIS 1938) at Mummy Cave and Big Cave documented storage cists containing corn, gourds, and seeds as well as burial cists, including one of an elite male. These first canyon residents painted rock walls with large polychrome human figures in frontal view, symmetrically balanced, and frequently accompanied by positive handprints (Fig. 2). This type of subject matter suggests concerns for authority figures in worldly and/

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or spiritual realms. Surviving data are too vague to provide a solid reconstruction but the tall anthropomorphs may have been the products of shamanism. They may have depicted the shamans themselves who interceded with supernaturals on behalf of their people, the spirit-beings they encountered or a merging of the two with the shamans turned into supernaturals. The male elite burial was probably of a shaman who held a leadership role. I argue that early Basketmakers would have viewed the canyon as an economic resource and personified higher powers in rock art. Similar pictographs of elongated polychrome anthropomorphs have been documented at numerous other Basketmaker sites in the Southwest¹ suggesting a regionally shared worldview.

These early Basketmakers were followed by the Modified Basketmakers (A.D. 450-700) and the Ancestral Pueblos (Developmental Pueblo A.D. 700-1100 and the Great Pueblo Periods A.D. 1100-1300, GRANT 1978, pp. 37-69). Cultural novelties during Modified Basketmaker times were the pit house, fired pottery, and the bow and arrow. Pit-houses are defined as semi-subterranean structures supported by a wooden framework and accessed through an opening in the roof. The Pueblo Periods marked times of increasing cultural complexities and population movements throughout the Southwest; Canyon de Chelly has to be understood as one distinct place integrated into these large-scale processes. Ancestral Pueblo people were fully sedentary and accomplished farmers. They also chose the alcoves in the canyon walls as housing spaces but built surface dwellings, some rising to multiple stories resembling fortresses in the later occupation phases. Circular semi-subterranean kivas were constructed for ritual practices. Structural reinforcements were often needed to stabilize the sloping floors of rock shelters so that they would hold the housing units integrated with kivas. Stone masonries very similar to Chaco Canyon and Mesa Verde styles have been registered². Rock art during the Modified Basketmaker/Developmental Pueblo periods differed greatly from early Basketmaker styles. Iconography and techniques were highly diversified displaying various species of birds, the bighorn sheep, and numerous small human figures in mono- and polychrome designs as well as petroglyphs. Human figures decreased in size and were simplified but were shown in active profile poses and various groupings (Fig. 3); strikingly realistic animal representations, especially of birds, became popular (Fig. 4). In Great Pueblo rock paintings, colors were restricted to white or buff and most images were situated in the higher sections of rock walls. Human figures continued to be small, undecorated, and more stylized than their Basketmaker counterparts but were shown in livelier, more animated positions and activities.

Thus visual culture reflects new architectural skills in stone masonry, outside influences, and aspects of daily life in rock art. Pueblo building complexes further suggest spatial separation of activities: religious ritual life began to be performed in kivas structurally distinct from dwellings. Such changes may indicate a degree of separation between worldly and spiritual realms which is consistent with the fact that the Pueblo people, as sedentary agriculturalists, exerted more control over the natural forces of the canyon than did their predecessors. They appear to have left Canyon de Chelly after about A.D. 1300.

Ancestral Pueblo settlements throughout the Southwest underwent profound changes between the late 12th century and 1300 and several hundred years of migrations and important regroupings followed. A Hopi occupation of Canyon de Chelly has been recorded based upon potsherds and potential Hopi mask designs in rock art. The canyon features in the migration stories of the Hopi clans the Snake, the Horn, the Beat, and the Asa (MINDELEFF 1891). These accounts emphasize incessant movement of social groups, speaking against long term settlements in the canyon. On the other hand, present day consultants in Chinle remember Hopi families (Mrs. Teller, interview 2015) and that the Hopi planted peach trees which still bear fruit. I suggest that the Hopi cultural landscape of Canyon de Chelly was not a permanent home but a way station on their migrations to their final homes on the Hopi mesas further west.

The Navajo came to Canyon de Chelly in the late 1770s from their first home base in the Southwest in northwestern New Mexico (Dinetah). According to Western science, the Navajo are members of the Athapaskan speaking groups in Alaska and northwestern Canada, who sustained themselves from a hunting and gathering economy. They migrated into the Southwest probably by the late 1400s and adopted the sedentary lifestyle and agricultural practices from the Ancestral Pueblos. Thus from a historical perspective, they are linguistically and culturally distinct from the Pueblos. According to the Navajo people themselves, their original homeland has always been the Dinetah territory in northwestern New Mexico, and from there they moved west and southwest. From the 1750s on, Canyon de Chelly became the heartland of Navajo culture and a long-held stronghold in the wars against the Spanish and the US army. Navajo people sought refuge in the abandoned Pueblo houses in the rock overhangs when under military threat and warriors staged counter-ambushes. Unlike the Basketmaker and Pueblo, they settled the canyon bottom to plant crops. Navajo rock art in the canyon falls into three categories. A small number of supernatural *ye'i*³ figures have been documented. This figure type establishes

1 For example, the lower Pecos region of Texas (KIRKLAND, NEWCOMB 1967; CHRISTIE, SHULTS 1985); the Cochimi of Baja California (GRANT 1974); the Fremont Culture of eastern Utah (SCHAAFMA 1971).

2 Chaco Canyon in northwestern New Mexico and Mesa Verde in southern Colorado were two large primary centers of Ancestral Pueblo culture prospering roughly from A.D. 800 until about 1300.

3 *Ye'i* are masked supernatural beings specific to the Navajo. The mask aspect is probably an adaptation of Pueblo kachina masks. *Ye'i* feature in oral narratives, sandpaintings, and rituals

a link with the dominant ye'i pictographs and petroglyphs in the Dinetah. The second category of paintings features life-like images of animals, horsemen, and cowboys and is commonly found on public, well visible rock walls. These pictographs abruptly differ from the earlier supernatural figures concentrated in the Dinetah region. Examples can be found on a cliff just west of Antelope House in Canyon del Muerto (CDM-10) (Fig. 5). A row of realistic polychrome antelopes were painted in between stylized white animals of Great Pueblo style. Another example at Blue Bull Cave (CDM-263) depicts horses and riders executed in paint and charcoal. Grant (GRANT 1978, p. 261) dates them to the mid-19th; additional ethnographic interviews suggest that most realistic Navajo figures date to the 19th c. The third type of Navajo rock art in Canyon de Chelly are the star panels or planetaria (DE HARPORT 1953; for preliminary interpretations see HAILE 1947). Grant (GRANT 1978, p. 219) recorded eight planetarium sites during his 1969-70 rock art surveys. Blue Bull Cave (CDM-263) displays a spectacular star panel in a section of the cave devoid of earlier Basketmaker and Ancestral Pueblo images (Fig. 6). The contexts of these unique rock art places continue to be treated as traditional and private knowledge by some Navajo elders. Today's young generation does not show any interest nor great respect for these sites (BRANDON TELLER 2013; DENNISON JOHN JR. 2015).

ANALYSIS

What kind of information does the rock art provide about relationships between people and the canyon through the successive occupation phases?

In this analysis, we will first look at basic statistics comparing numbers of occupied sites to numbers of painted and petroglyph sites and secondly use the rock art in combination with archaeological data and ethnographic information to reconstruct cultural landscapes of the canyon through time. First, it is important to realize that the canyons were not evenly settled and that not all occupation sites included rock art. In the late 1940s/early 1950s, David de Harport surveyed and recorded sites of human occupation in Canyon de Chelly, leading to his doctoral dissertation at Harvard University (DE HARPORT 1959). He extrapolated population estimates based on the encountered cultural materials. De Harport's work only covered the main canyon; here I adopt Grant's assumption (GRANT 1978, p. 37) that we can double his numbers and include Canyon del Muerto. Grant's surveys in the early 1970s looked for sites with rock art in Canyon de Chelly, Canyon del Muerto, and in some side canyons. He lists totals of recorded painted and petroglyph sites for each period.

The following numbers are based on Canyon de Chelly plus Canyon del Muerto:

Basketmaker (B) (c.0 - A.D. 450)

Population estimate: slightly under 200

Surveyed sites: 81 in Canyon de Chelly/162 in both canyons

Painted sites: 14

Modified Basketmaker (MB)/Developmental Pueblo (DP) (c.A.D. 450 - 1100)

Population estimate: 140 for Modified Basketmaker/1000 for Developmental Pueblo

Surveyed sites: 66 for Modified Basketmaker/602 for Developmental Pueblo

Painted and petroglyph sites: 44

Great Pueblo (GP) (c.A.D. 1100 - 1300)

Population estimate: above 1600

Surveyed sites: 134 (masonry sites)

Painted and petroglyph sites: 53

Navajo (after A.D. 1750)

Painted and petroglyph sites: 36

It has to be cautioned that these numbers are not accurate enough for scholarly statistics because many are based on rough estimates and few variables have been considered. However, they do provide vital insights about the cultural landscape of Canyon de Chelly and Canyon del Muerto through time:

1. Ratio of occupation sites to sites with rock art:

B 8.64% of sites display rock art;

DP 7.3% of sites display rock art;

GP 39.55% of masonry sites display rock art.

These figures demonstrate that only selected places of human occupancy were painted and/or incised throughout canyon history before the arrival of the Navajo. Thus rock art sites must have drawn people to visit or live for certain purposes and/or at specific times.

2. Number of individuals per rock art site:

B 14.28 persons per rock art site;

DP 22.72 persons per rock art site;

GP 30.18 persons per rock art site.

I am not implying that somehow these numbers of individuals had to physically fit into each rock art site; what matters here are broader comparisons over time. The survey numbers above immediately show that populations as well as occupation and painted and petroglyph sites rose from Basketmaker to Great Pueblo times. Nevertheless, only the calculations under 2. reveal that the rise of rock art sites did not keep up with population growth. This means that during GP, there were twice as many individuals per rock art site than in B times. These results are consistent with the diversification in economy, regional contacts, interests in exploring the natural world for the Pueblo outlined above. They further indicate that rock art was no longer the cultural bond it provided for the Basketmakers. Regarding the latter, fewer people per rock art site implies closer social interaction and cohesion resulting in shared knowledge and social memory of the rock art.

The rudimentary statistics above provide a starting point for the second part of this analysis focusing on the reconstruction of successive cultural landscapes. As we endeavor to grasp the fullness of a cultural landscape, we must consider the social organization, political and religious power structures, and economy of a people and how these shape and are shaped by

the natural setting of and peoples' beliefs about the land. Basketmaker people seem to have struggled economically with the uncertainties of natural forces in the canyon. Their population numbers were low and they probably lived in small family groups. They performed their fears in shamanistic rituals directed toward spirit helpers painted on the shelter walls. The organizers and performers of such ritual events were likely shamans who distinguished themselves from other group members through their ability to contact the supernatural world and intercede for the benefit of the group. Shamans would have acquired some form of leadership position with the power to periodically assemble people at a small number of painted rock shelters centering the Basketmaker cultural landscape of the canyons.

The Ancestral Pueblos encountered the cultural remains of people who had occupied the canyons before them and had to enter into some type of relation with them. At first, such relations may largely have been practical since they built their surface units over the Basketmaker pit-houses in many of the same alcoves which offered the most protected dwelling places. As Ancestral Pueblo people gradually familiarized themselves with Basketmaker cultural remnants including the many pictographs, it likely turned into a more spiritual and ideological discourse clearly demonstrated by the act of painting and incising over older Basketmaker images. Pueblo material culture projects greater confidence and control linked to a more secure economy based on improved agricultural techniques and to a worldview more inquisitive about the natural setting of the canyon. The pictographs of small humans pursuing many activities and identifiable turkeys, ducks, and bighorn sheep clearly demonstrate this. A spiritual connection was never lost, though, as many figures combine human and animal features. We can only glimpse at these processes of Ancestral Pueblo heritage construction of the Basketmaker sites through the archaeological record. Through the lens of rock art, it was an anti-statement although many other cultural patterns were maintained.

Pueblo social organization and political structure in Canyon de Chelly are poorly understood. We are left to speculate how the social groups living in the 134 or so Great Pueblo masonry sites interacted with each other. I suggest that there would have been some local gathering, feasting, bonding, and ritual centering in the 53 painted and petroglyph sites. But the Chaco and Mesa Verde masonry styles in some of the canyon Pueblo units provide direct evidence for outside regional contacts. Therefore Pueblo cultural landscapes were less centered in the canyon, less local and leadership and authority may have come from outside. De Harport and Grant (GRANT 1978, p. 61) note the high defensive locations as well as defensive walls of many Great Pueblo sites, further emphasizing that the later Ancestral Pueblo cultural landscape of Canyon de Chelly and Canyon del Muerto was not stable. We can solely pose but not answer the question whether some Pueblo individuals might have viewed the desert set-

ting of the canyons as an alternate Chaco and/or constructed the housing complexes in the rock shelters as a replacement Mesa Verde?

The Navajo brought a fundamentally different view of land as transitory and exchangeable grounded in their Athapaskan roots as nomadic, hunting-and-gathering people. After their arrival in the Southwest sometime after A.D. 1300, their view of land slowly changed and adapted to a more Puebloan notion of land. I argue that the cultural materials in Canyon de Chelly and Canyon del Muerto reflect Navajo visions of homeland and territory: Navajo people took up residence in traditional hogans [octagonal structures made of stacked wooden logs] on the canyon bottom lands which they cultivate. The canyon bottom offers open space through which people move in contrast to the small and protected rock shelters harboring the personalized living places of the Basketmaker and Ancestral Pueblos. In Navajo rock art, many recent drawings and paintings are placed on cliff walls so that they are well visible to passers-by and were perhaps intended as information, social memory, or even entertainment. The few *ye'i* figures are painted over Basketmaker and Pueblo designs, likely as a statement of dominance. The star panels were executed in separate sections of larger shelters or in their own alcoves, which could be understood as more deliberate acts of Navajo placemaking in the canyons. Today most Navajo live and spend their daily lives outside the canyon in the nearby town of Chinle.

Navajo economy is changing to one based upon tourism with opportunities for local tour businesses and wage labor positions at hotels and restaurants. Parallel to the economic transitions, Navajo power structures have changed from earlier fleeting leadership positions based upon personal charisma to an institutionalized form of government. The government of the Navajo Nation is seated in Window Rock, AZ and the reservation is administered through chapters. The Historic Preservation Department and the Navajo Parks and Recreation Department are constructing new visions of a Canyon de Chelly cultural landscape which have to be reconciled with that of the National Park Service. Navajo spokesmen have appropriated the Basketmaker and Pueblo ruins as intangible heritage of their ancestors and claim the two main canyons and side canyons which form part of the National Park as Navajo cultural landscape. In this context, Canyon de Chelly has entered the political battlefield of heritage construction and management. Unlike in the past, the Navajo Nation now speaks from an institutionalized consolidated powerbase.

Ethnographic consultations with individual Navajo add living voices of ongoing heritage construction of the Basketmaker, Ancestral Pueblo, and early Navajo sites and rock art. The consensus gained from individual interviews I conducted in 2013 and 2015 and read (SILENTMAN 2014) is that these places occupied by the ancients are spiritually charged and contain powers which can be manipulated for good or evil fortunes of the living. They are potentially dangerous. The

rock art inspires stories in the minds of Navajo consultants which are shaped by their age, education, and socio-economic position. Thus the setting of Canyon de Chelly with associated cultural materials and most

notably its rock art remains a magnet for people constructing complex relational networks with the canyon of the past, of the present, and of the future.

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Fig. 1 - Canyon landscape in Canyon de Chelly National Monument (Photograph by Brian Garrett)



Fig. 2 - Large Basketmaker anthropomorphs in Ear Cave CDM-123 (in Grant's 1978 designation) (Photograph by Brian Garrett)

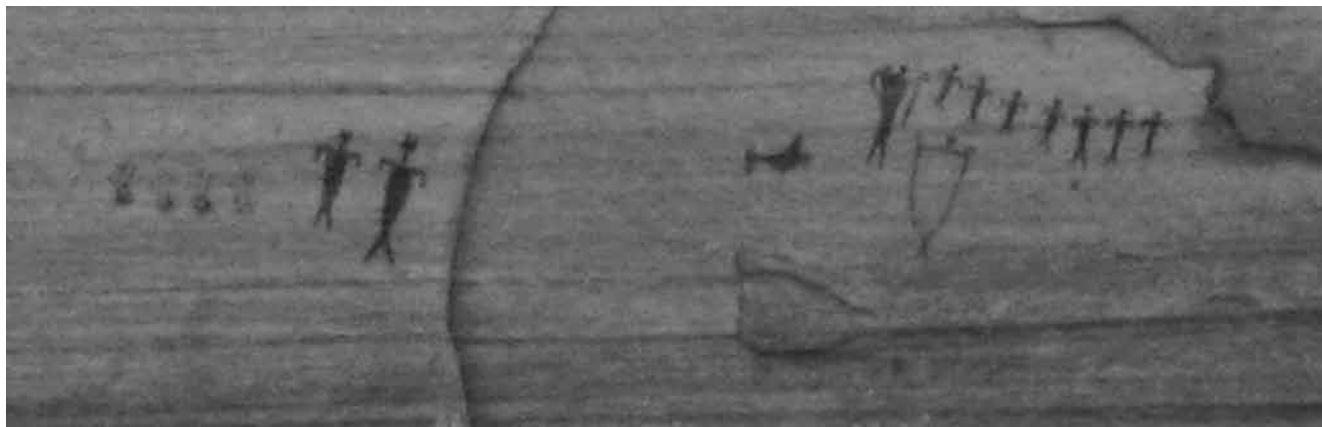


Fig. 3 - Small human figures in group activity from the Modified Basketmaker period in Ear Cave CDM-123 (Photo by Brian Garrett)



Fig. 4 - Turkeys and birds from Many Turkey Cave CDM-67, Developmental Pueblo (Photo by Brian Garrett)

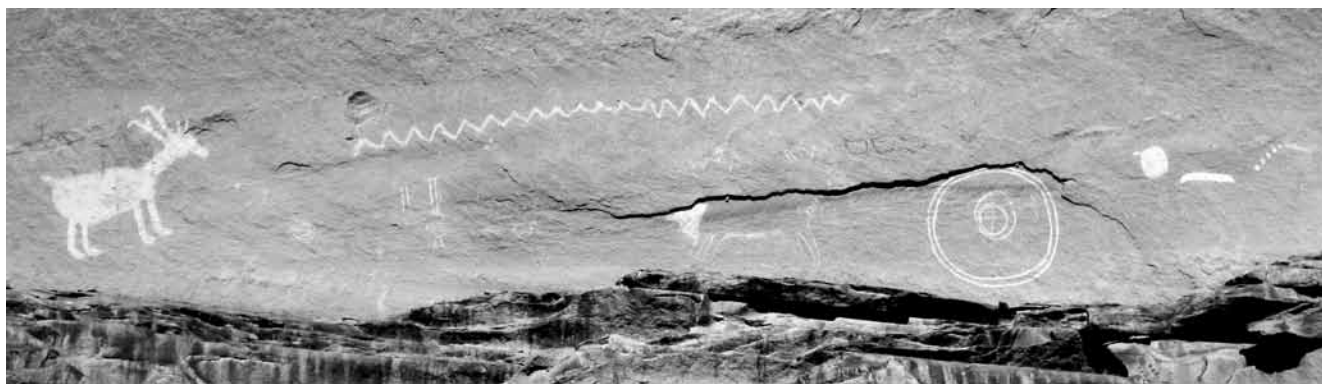


Fig. 5 - Navajo realistic polychrome antelopes and Great Pueblo stylized white quadruped, just west of Antelope House CDM-10 (Photograph by Brian Garrett)

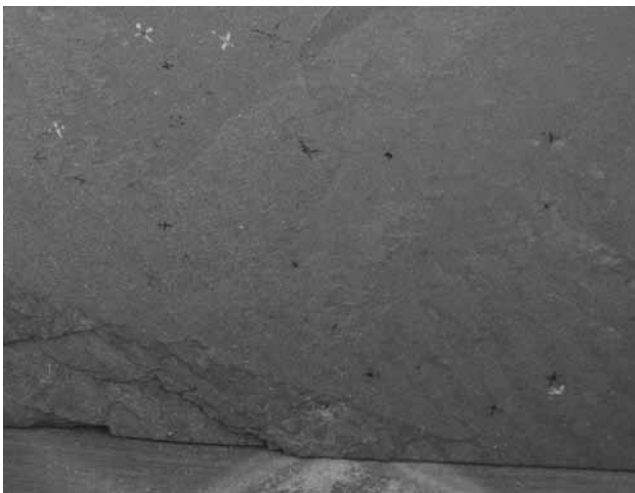


Fig. 6 - Navajo star panel in Blue Bull Cave CDM-263 (Photograph by Brian Garrett)