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# ARTICLES

## ABORIGINALLY OCCUPIED CAVES IN THE SIERRA DE EL ABRA, SAN LUIS POTOSI AND TAMAULIPAS, MEXICO

by John W. Greer

The following list briefly describes caves in the El Abra range which were checked for archaeological materials in the summer of 1972. Detailed descriptions of the caves, their locations, and their archeological components will be given in other reports and are also on file with the AMCS in Austin. In most cases, areas near or even adjacent to the caves were not checked for archeological materials. All referenced sherds in these descriptions are aboriginal, that is, old, presumably pre-Hispanic and of native origin. Recent pottery in most cases was not present.

**Cueva del Abra.** A large impressive entrance 21 m wide and 18 m high is above the highway in the upper El Abra pass. The spacious cave runs back 183 m to a 26 m drop in a large dome pit leading to lower levels. Red aboriginal pictographs occur in a small alcove within the cave on the south side of the entrance. One aboriginal sherd was found at the base of the entrance slope.

**Cueva Tanchipa.** The entrance is a large, overhanging circular shelter, with a breakdown slope extending downward to the back of the shelter, from which point vertical drops requiring equipment begin. The entrance room is 45 x 90 m and 9-23 m high. Beside several small phosphate test pits near the back of the entrance room are human bones of at least seven individuals—14 femurs and many miscellaneous bones and skull fragments. Apparently the entire bodies were there, but cavers are uncertain whether the bones were dug from the test pits (presumably) or were originally on the surface in that portion of the cave. Cueva Tanchipa was entered in December 1971 by UT/AMCS cavers and was reported by Abrey Washington (pers. comm.).

**Cueva de Los Sabinos.** The 15 m wide x 30 m high entrance opens into a room 30 x 60 m. Numerous aboriginal sherds were observed by John Fish and Don Broussard in July 1972.

**Cueva Pinta.** A sheltered breakdown slope descends to two large rooms with flat dirt floors 22 x 44 m and 30 x 36 m. An additional small passage leads to a small pit. Sherds and other artifacts occur in all parts of the cave, including a small alcove in the entrance overhang, the breakdown slope, both rooms, and the back passageway. Limestone pebble and cobble accumulations occur along the walls in both rooms, and many are associated with pictographs. Pictographs include over 135 handprints—mainly negative red, black, or gray, and a few positive orange prints—and miscellaneous positive red figures—men, geometric designs, dragon-like figure, box figures, etc. Most black prints, including a child's deformed hand and deformed foot, occur alone in the left-hand room near a series of small flowstone dams—possibly an area chosen for its presumed curing powers.

**Sótano de los Monos.** A small room in the upper cave overlooks the large entrance of the main deep vertical shaft. A hole in the floor opens into a parallel shaft joining the main shaft

at the bottom of the drop. Petroglyphs cover nearly all the available rock surfaces. The main panel is covered with animal figures (coati-mundi? ), stick men, a turtle, a bundle-burial figure (? ), a female human fertility figure holding a lightning bolt (? ), and miscellaneous figures. The panel above the secondary shaft opening consists primarily of bundle figures with a few geometric designs. Other panels contain mainly human stick figures (primarily male), footprints, and unidentifiable figures. No sherds were observed. The name is a local one referring to the *monos* (*dibujos*, drawings, figures) in the cave. Human male stick figures showing the usual pendulous penis previously have been presumably erroneously referred to as monkeys by various cavers misinterpreting the name of the cave as translating "monkeys."

**Hoya de Higuero.** A large oval sink 45 m across and only 365 m from Cueva de los Monos opens down a steep breakdown slope through an entrance 9 x 9 m into a large room 153 m x 40 m. Sherds and other artifacts occur at the bottom of the entrance slope and on old soil surfaces and dry flowstone areas within the cave. Low stalactites are broken and possibly were aboriginally collected as a source of calcite temper for pottery.

**Cueva de las Manos.** A small oval passage 95 m long and 4.5 m wide is about 230 m south of Ventana Jabalí on the east face of the range. Two small side rooms near the back of the cave contain painted negative red handprints. Sherds are abundant at the entrance and into the passage-way.

**Cueva Cerámica.** A small passage 23 m long and 1.5 m wide is between Ventana Jabalí and Cueva de las Manos. Sherds are abundant throughout the cave.

**Cueva de los Indios.** Genaro Cruz, a local guide, reported on July 2, 1972, this cave toward the top of the east face south of Ventana Jabalí and just south of Ladera Blanca. A white scar on the hillside marks the location of the cave. Although the cave was not visited, it is presumed from its name that archeological materials at least at one time may have been present.

**Cave.** Genaro Cruz also reported a cave north of Ventana Jabalí which was entered by a friend from an adjacent ranch at the base of the east face. The cave is toward the top of the escarpment and contains whole ceramic jars, metates, mocajetes, etc. Genaro also described additional small caves south of Ventana Jabalí, many hard to get to and requiring vertical climbs on cliff faces.

**Cueva del Nacimiento del Río Choy.** The large room inside the lower river entrance contains sherds on the dirt floor, but none definitely of aboriginal origin. The upper cave, entered above the railroad bridge, contains two modern shrines in constant use for the curing of personal and family ailments and the general pursuit of well being. Cavers in 1970 observed the pit at the back of the upper cave being used during related activities. Aboriginal sherds were observed just inside the entrance of the upper cave.

**Nacimiento del Río Mante.** In the picnic area on the northeast side of the cave is an aboriginal occupation area containing numerous sherds and other artifacts. No other adjacent areas were checked.

**Cave.** A small cave containing numerous aboriginal sherds just north of the Valles-Tamuín pass was visited several years ago by Don Broussard (pers. comm.).

**Cueva Grande.** Sherds have been observed in the cave mouth by AMCS cavers.

No archeological materials were observed in the following caves:

**Sótano de Japonés.**

**Sótano de Soyate.**

**Sótano del Arroyo.**

**Sótano de Yerbaniz.** Sherds observed in a nearby arroyo are not thought to be related to the cave.

**Cueva de Taninul n. 4.** Phosphate mining activities have completely removed all the original

floor level and thereby any cultural material which likely was present.

**Ventana Jabalf** (presently known locally as **Mina San Luis**). The high oval entrance (12 m wide and 18 m high) on the east face overlooks the coastal plain toward Tamuñ. The upper several meters of floor have been removed by phosphate mining activities, thereby destroying all possibility of finding cultural debris. Probably, however, the 365 m long cave was well used aboriginally, as is suggested by the use of such adjacent caves as Cueva de las Manos and Cueva de la Cerámica.

Presumably caves were used for several purposes. Honey probably was collected in nearly all areas as it has been recently in such caves as Cueva del Abra, Cueva Pinta, Cueva del Nacimiento del Río Choy, and Ventana Jabalf. Parrot feathers were available from such entrance areas as the nacimientos Choy and Río Mante. Caves serving as water sources have not yet been observed in the El Abra. Ground calcite temper in local pottery presumably was obtained from stalactites in such caves as Hoya de Higuierón and perhaps the upper cave at Monos. Caves undoubtedly were used at least in part ceremonially, as suggested by pictographs in Cueva Pinta, Cueva de las Manos, and Cueva del Abra, and the petroglyphs in the upper cave at Monos. Pits, such as the impressive vertical freefall shaft at Cueva de los Monos, may have been used for disposal localities for bundle burials, as is suggested by the Monos petroglyphs. Probably, however, bodies were simply buried in caves, such as the case at Cueva Tanchipa. The numerous sherds indicate caves also were used as habitation sites, either simply for temporary occupation, such as Cueva de la Cerámica and probably Cueva Tanchipa and Ventana Jabalf, or while the cave was being used ceremonially, such as Cueva Pinta and Cueva de las Manos. Cueva de los Monos does not appear to have been occupied additional to the presumed religious activities.

The efficiency of early people moving through the El Abra jungle is noteworthy. The abundance, variety, and complexity of the materials at Cueva Pinta, for example, suggest that at least some caves were visited repeatedly. Such may also be the case for such caves along the crest as Cueva de los Monos and Hoya de Higuierón. Repeated visits to such isolated, nearly inaccessible caves indicate continual travel through the jungle, necessitating not only an exceptional sense of direction and fortitude, but probably also at least partially developed trail systems, competent familiarity with the geography of the range, and a large and stable enough local population to necessitate such trails, shrines, etc. The thick jungle region along the crest of the range is dotted with both old abandoned, partially overgrown milpas as well as the few modern ones still in use. Presumably parts of the jungle region were occupied and farmed as they are today. Such a life, including just passing through the jungle, without a machete, however, seems practically impossible, although wooden clubs certainly could have been used to chop through such relatively small jungle plants as the abundant and exceedingly wicked malamujer—e.g., the Cueva Pinta area now is nearly a solid malamujer jungle. The degree of influence from the large Tamuñ area site complexes and religious centers is uncertain but certainly must have existed.