

SOME UNIQUE HORIZONTAL SUNRISE AND SUNSET MARKERS
IN BLACK DRAGON CANYON

BY

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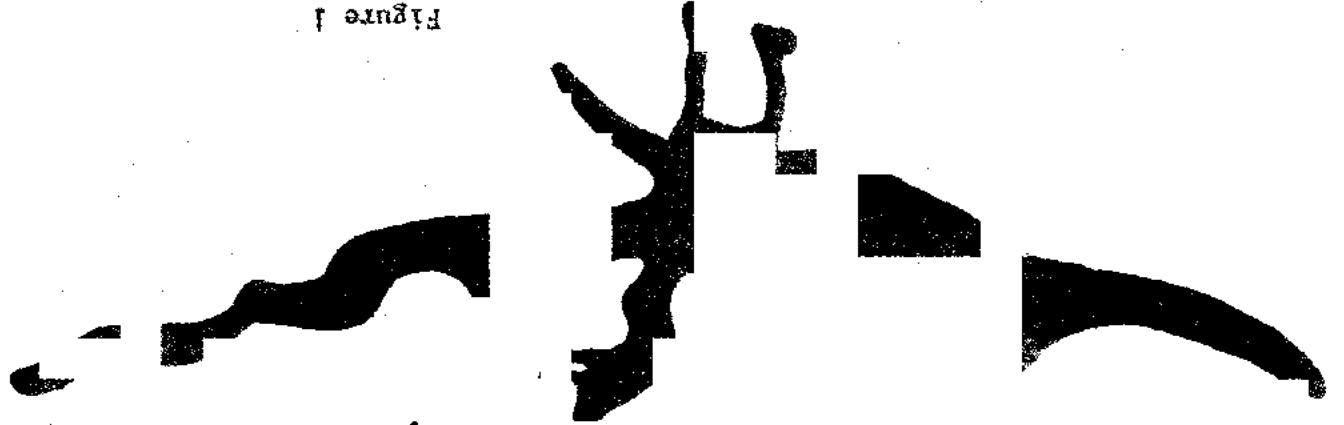
Ancient sun-watchers used the sun to determine and mark the passage of time in two different ways. One was horizontal observations of the sun's progressive movement from farthest north to farthest south. Another way of marking time was to observe active involvement of light and shadow interactions with rock art. Both types of observations occur in Black Dragon Canyon. This paper will describe the rock art panels used in the process of observing the sun at different seasonal positions on the skyline.

Because of the difficulty in identifying horizontal observation stations, there is little publication of these types of "observatories". Also, because simple "traditional" sunrise observations over a monotonous horizon with simple points of definition is not dramatic, it seems some observers selected locations which would provide the most definitive or dramatic types of performances possible (Warner 1983, Norman 1982). In Black Dragon Canyon, a deep cut in the San Raphael Reef, there is no horizon. The skyline is at the top of an impressive 400-500 foot cliff. Because of this, from the panels of rock art on top of the tallus slope, no one would suspect that location as a place for solar observation.

Discovering this site as having solar orientation was the result of a long chain of fortuitous events. During Equinox, on March 22, 1983, we observed the polychrome panel for possible solar interactions. While waiting for the sun to rise, we intensely scrutinized the illusive "dragon" (Fig. 1). Having visited this panel many times before, we had never taken the time to study it properly. After about an hour and a half of observation in both shadow and sunlight, we were able to identify several different figures that were combined by an early rock art recorder to create this aberration (Simonson 1947) (Fig. 2). Two of these figures are anthropomorphs posed in an attitude identical to the Barrier Canyon motif we have named "supplicators". Down the cliff a few feet is a panel with a figure which the locals often call "The Praying Dog". This is another figures which conforms to the definition of

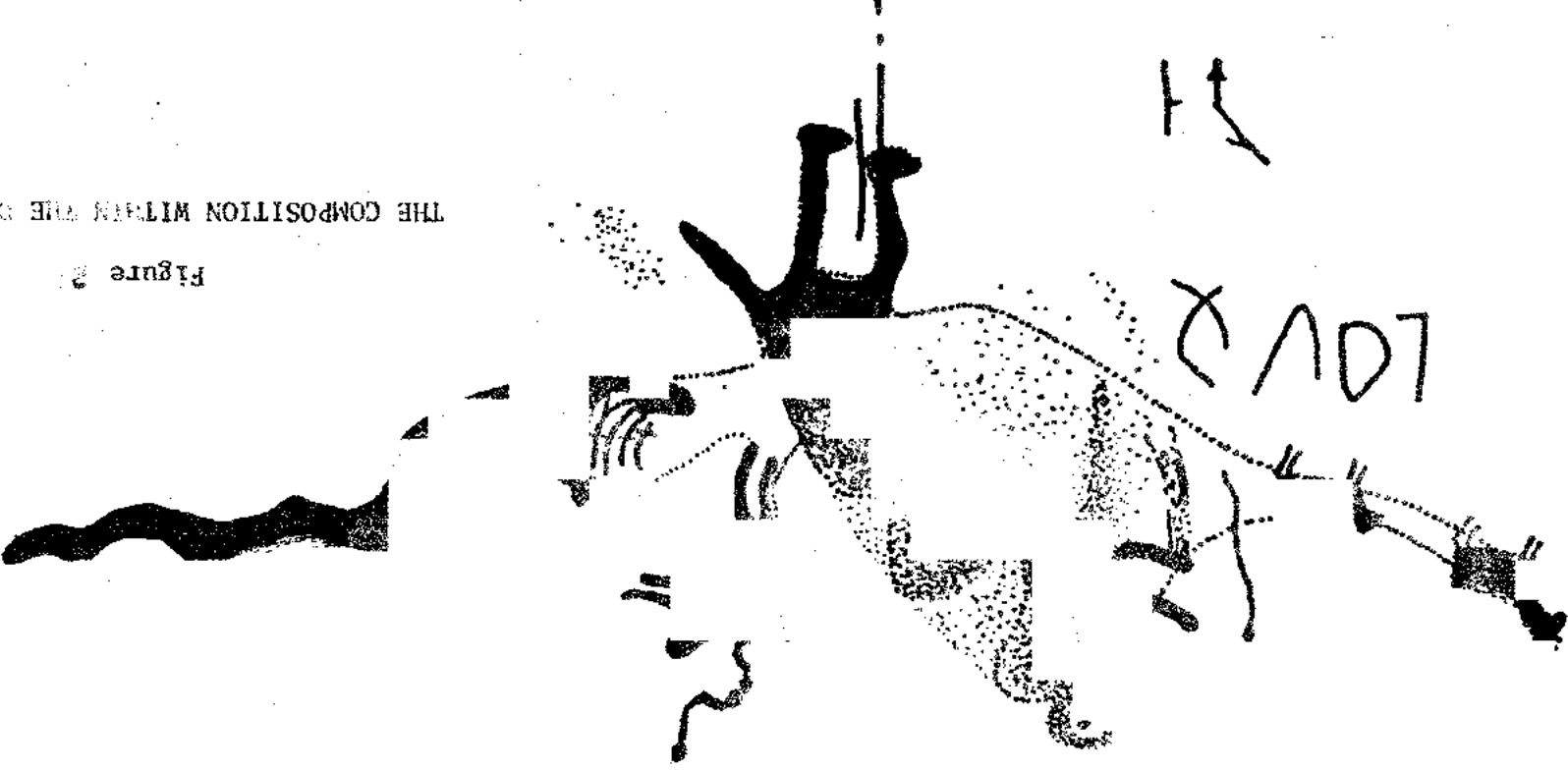
THE DRAGON

Figure 1



THE COMPOSITION WITHIN THE DRAGON

Figure 2



"supplicator", except like the two within the dragon it has no object of devotion (Fig. 3). While sitting below these panels, we pondered the reason why these "supplicators" do not occur in a more complete supplicating context.

Supplicators are figures that we have identified as a diagnostic motif in the Barrier Canyon Style art form. Nearly all other occurrences of supplicators appear in a conventionalized context which suggests the term supplicator (Fig. 4). This context often consists of a dominant figure with the more diminutive supplicating figure, either man, animal or snake with arms facing toward it, bent at the waist, with outstretched arms as if in an attitude of devotion. Some figures offer devotion to a smaller abstract design. In Black Dragon Canyon, however, there are three figures without objects of devotion. These include the Praying Dog, the figure comprising the head of the dragon and a figure which comprises part of the wing on our left. They all have their arms outstretched toward an empty expanse of sandstone cliff. It would seem that three such impressive supplicators occurring at the same site should have something to offer to help reveal their intent. Supplicators without objects of devotion do occur in other Barrier Canyon panels, but they do not provide any help in answering the questions we have about the purpose of these figures.

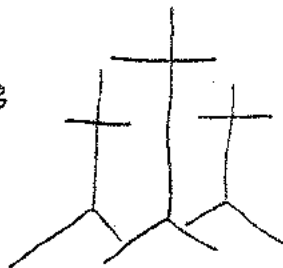
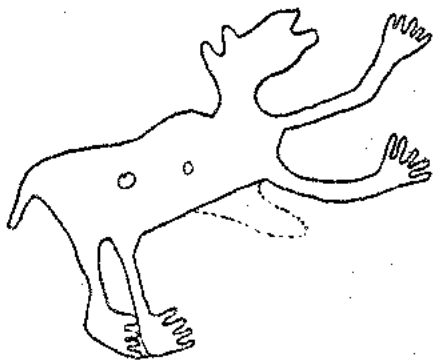
Other than the fact that one figure was called the "Praying Dog" and it conformed to part of the definition of supplicators we had no clue as to its purpose. This figure has a modern addition which strengthens the idea of the supplicating concept (Fig. 3b). Recently, a vandal scratched three Christian crosses on three hills in front of this supplicator. The concept and intention behind this vandalism is obvious--The vandal, by placing the three crosses undoubtedly intended to imply the concept of the Crucifixion. By placing them before the outstretched hands of what he probably viewed as a pagan idolator, he created a context that the supplicator now with his outstretched arms embraced the symbolism of the Cross and thus the Crucifixion. Since this vandal without formal training in iconography could identify and take advantage of this symbolism to continue the original concept, suggests that the intent of certain signs and their symbolism can cross both time and culture.

If the vandal and the artist intended the attitude and pose of the supplicator to imply the concept of supplication or devotion, then why do three such figures occur reaching out into open space? To what are they expressing "devotion"? What was the object of their supplication, or are they really supplicators?

Figure 3. THE PRAYING DOG



A



B

Since we were in Black Dragon Canyon for solar observations and those thoughts were on our minds, Judith suggested that it would really be something if the sun rose in a position so that the Praying Dog would be reaching out to the sun as it rose, in an attitude of devotion to the sun when its rays first appeared.

About noon, the sun's rays first became visible on the skyline above. The position of sunrise at Equinox on top of the cliff is in a unique position from the Praying Dog. The orientation of this creature was such that the angle of its back, curve of its neck, direction of its face with open mouth and outstretched arms were directed toward that precise spot. This figure could have been placed anywhere along the cliff and drawn to be oriented toward the position of sunrise, but a precise location was selected that enabled the viewer to see the sun rise on a small nipple of rock extending above the skyline while in front of the Praying Dog (Fig. 5). This is now the second Barrier Canyon site known to have human figures painted onto the cliffs in a way to express devotion to the sun at specific times of the year. The first panel discovered to do this was The Ambassador panel in Indian Creek (Warner 1983, 1984).

Now, since this figure has a solar orientation which is also its object of devotion, could it be possible that the other two also share these same features? During Summer Solstice on June 22, 1983, we returned to observe the sunrise. At that time, the sun rose directly above the smallest supplicator whose arms reach out horizontally to the south (Fig. 6). Behind this anthropomorph, however, is an upward-rising snake pecked into the cliff, which seems significant since its head turns directly toward where the sun appears at its most northern rising on Summer Solstice. The presence of upward-rising snakes at many other Solstice sites seems in some situations to provide an indicator of solar activity (Warner 1985).

The fact that there is no figure reaching out toward Summer Solstice sunrise was disappointing. At first we wondered if the pose of the supplicators would create a problem but several supplicators have their backs arched backwards while reaching in an upward direction. The left figure, however, reaches out in a westerly direction. On the afternoon of June 22 the sun curved around the sky and descended into the upper portion of the canyon wall. From these supplicators the sun sets into the edge of the cliff at the highest spot it would ever reach on the north side of the canyon (Fig. 7). From here the large supplicator within the left wing reaches out toward the sun at that position, like the Praying Dog does at sunrise on Equinox.

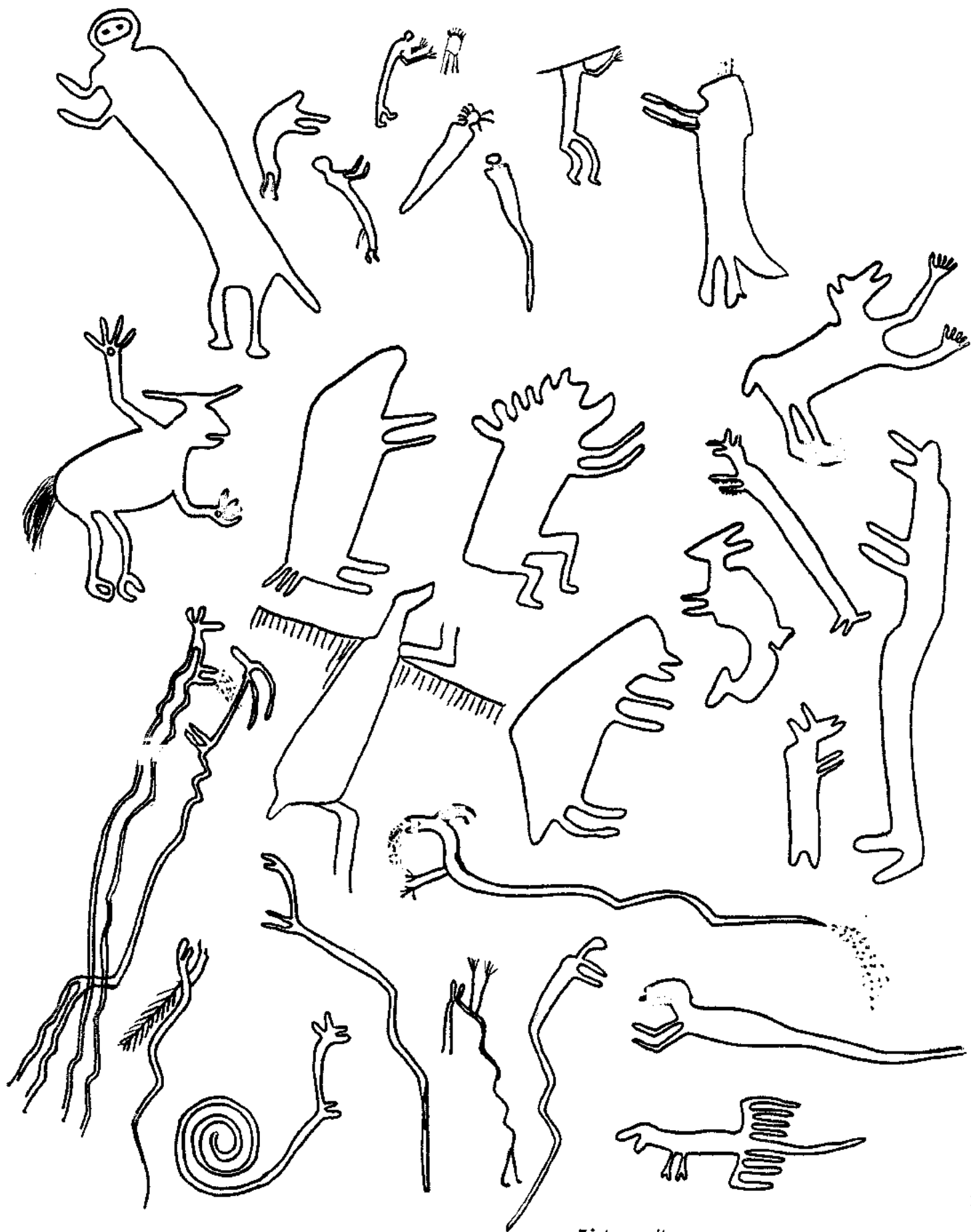


Figure 4

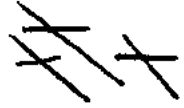
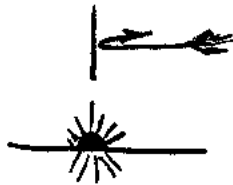
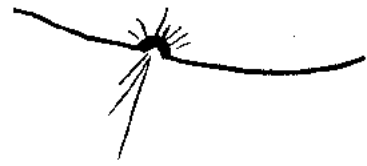


Figure 5

EQUINOX SUN RISE

Figure 6



SUMMER SOLSTICE
SUN RISE

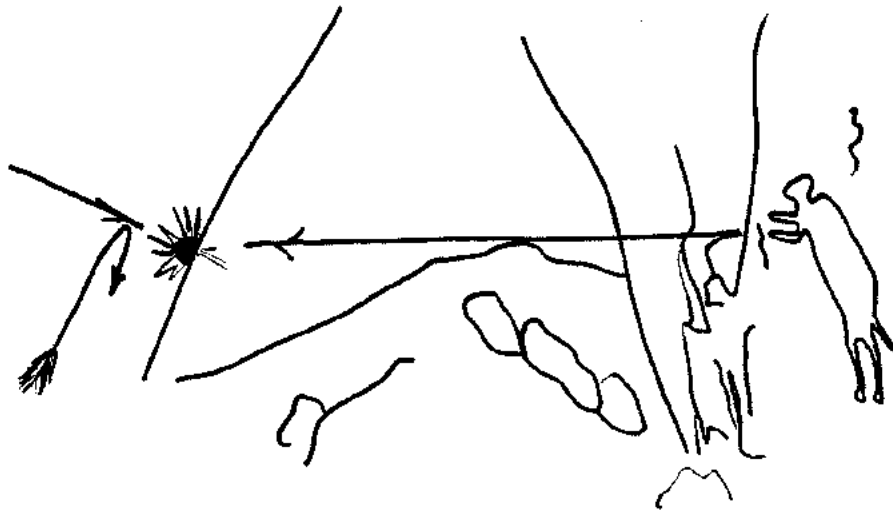


Figure 7

SUMMER SOLSTICE SUN SET

The fact that the larger anthropomorph marks sunset instead of sunrise may give more credence to the fact that the snake may have intentionally marked the position of Summer Solstice sunrise.

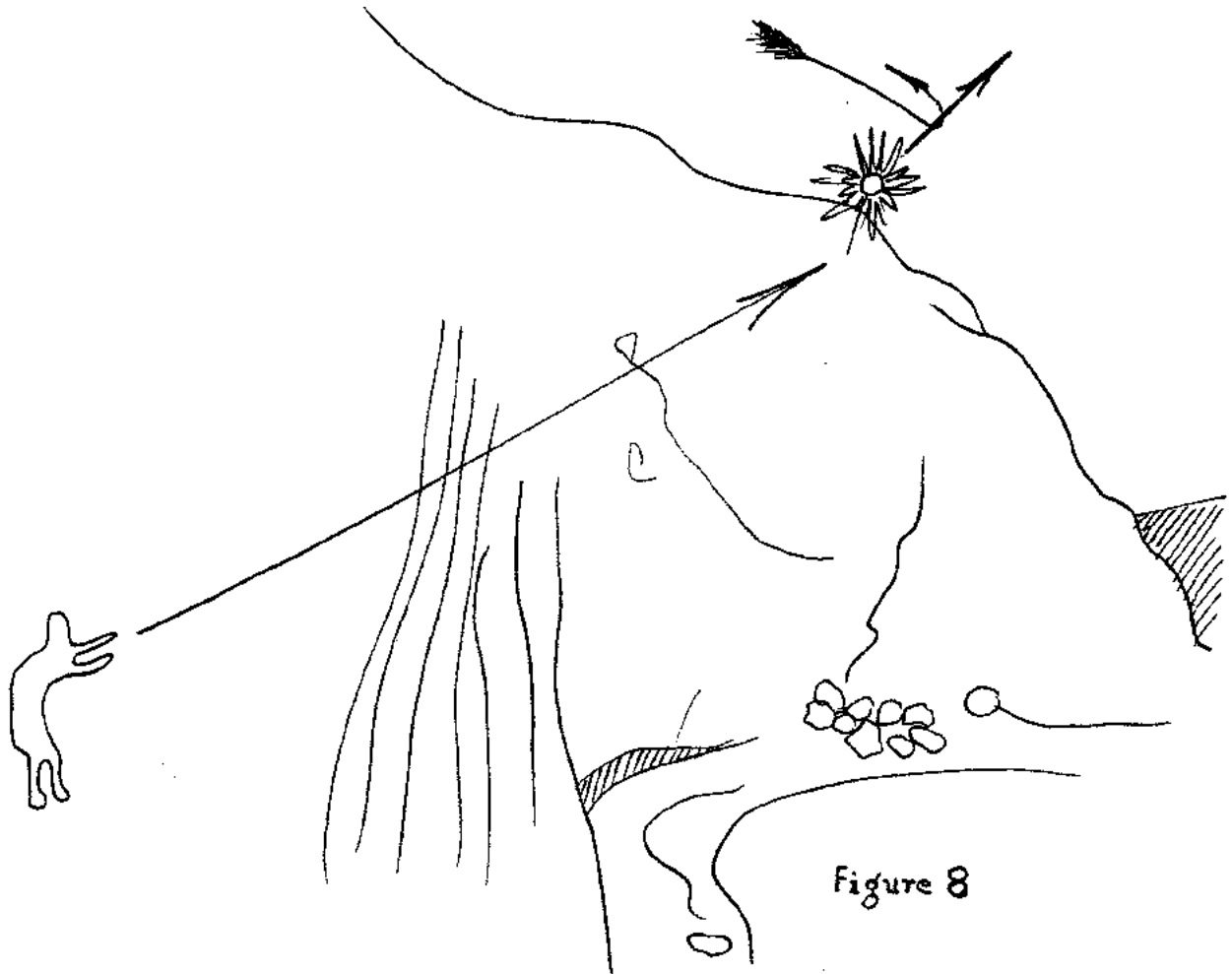
To see if the smaller supplicator within the dragon's head would be reaching in an area fairly close to Winter Solstice sunrise the distance between sunrise at Summer Solstice and Equinox was doubled to give an approximation of the position of sunrise at Winter Solstice. On Winter Solstice the sun rose in a position well within an area that would be acceptable for the sun to be the object of devotion for the smallest supplicator (Fig. 8). This establishes the fact that this site was an important solar shrine if not for expressing devotion, then at least for observing solar movement.

The designation of these sites as "observatories" in a strict astronomical sense is misleading. Acting like sun-dials, the different types of observations witnessed at both active and passive sites effectively mark the position of the sun during various times of the year. We personally feel the types of observations made at panels, such as the "Dragon" and the "Praying Dog", were not designed to determine the exact time of the year. Instead we feel these may have involved ceremonial participation in commemorating those particular events. Other panels, like the Polychrome Panel down the cliff, could identify these exact dates much more precisely. Since the points of definition on the skyline above the canyon are not nearly as precise. After having experienced the interactions at this site and the Barrier Canyon site in Indian Creek, we feel there must have been a great deal of ceremony that went hand in hand with such solar observation. It seems more logical after knowing the date of a solar event, those related to the Black Dragon or Indian Creek panels could have returned to witness the "theophany" that would be expected.

This in no way lessens the significance of this site as part of their cosmological scheme. In light of the supplicating concept and the fact that we have several supplicating human figures reaching out in the direction of the sun on such important occasions establishes one more step in breaking through the barrier that separates us from those who made such ingenious pictographs. How sad it is when the window through which we look to find the answers is so narrow. And what could be worse than to have that window closed by those trying to illuminate us concerning these fragile remains? This was the case when these supplicators were entrapped within the form of the dragon. This makes the job of the serious researcher all the more difficult.

Three things had to happen to unravel this puzzle, and find the truth. First, the dragon had to be slain (Warner and Warner n.d.). Second, once the figures were placed in proper perspective with the other supplicators, their unusual situation could be considered. And last, the idea of solar alignment had to have occurred before we could observe it.

The moral of the story is: If a panel is not recorded properly, it cannot be studied properly. If its label and identification are not accurate, it becomes fictitious, and the resulting interpretations of its intent and the concepts behind it are also fictitious. This is a serious problem that has been brought to our attention more than once. The dragon has not brought us any closer in the understanding of what we are searching for, but we think our efforts and thoughts here are helping to reach that goal.



WINTER SOLSTICE SUN RISE

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