

BARRIER CANYON STYLE SOLAR SHRINES: AN ARGUMENT FOR ROCK ART AND CEREMONY

BY

JESSE E. WARNER

Along a small tributary in the western part of the San Rafael Swell in Utah there is an amphitheater-like alcove with a series of Barrier Canyon style panels. Even though these panels are spectacular, at first they are no more important-looking than many other Barrier Canyon style panels in the Swell. However, because of observations made there, this site has been identified as an extraordinary place to those who made their signs and symbols there in ancient times. The solar interactions of light and shadow with the glyphs suggest much more than simple calendrical observations and interactions to mark a specific period of time. Because of the differences in how they interact, and the types of symbols involved, they are exemplary of another category of interactions that I am beginning to call Symbolic Solar Interactions (here after SSI). Instead of being simply calendrical (not or not obviously symbolic), or what is usually called archaeoastronomy, they are full of what seems to be many different types of symbolism.

The mystical manner in which the light and shadow plays on these panels suggests that a shamanic or ceremonial narration may have accompanied the interplay of light and shadows, with possible ritual observation during these special times. These types of interactions are not the simple or typical types of solar interactions depicted at what has previously been assumed to be an average solar shrine (i.e. calendrical). In fact the belief is now that these particular panels may not have been used to predict various specific dates of the year. They could have been, but I believe that there were other means used to assess those dates. In other words the people would not have to watch these particular panels to tell dates. These SSI are more complex than calendrical interactions and the associated concepts are probably also a lot more complicated. Instead of presenting all of the SSI on each panel as one moves through the site, I will more or less present the information that was gained in the process of each visit to the site, so that the reader might see the way the site revealed itself over time.

There are several different styles at this site. This presentation will only consider the Barrier Canyon style figures observed there. The observations on the other panels will be presented elsewhere.

At the western end of the site there is a magnificent panel with a large figure placed below a notch in the upper section of the cliff (Fig. 1). Because of previous experience with similar cracks in the upper section of the cliff, it was obvious that this figure would have a shaft of light coming out of its mouth.

On Summer Solstice, with the sun at the top of the notch above the face of the figure, a shaft of light was observed to move across the bottom of the panel (Fig. 2 a,d). On

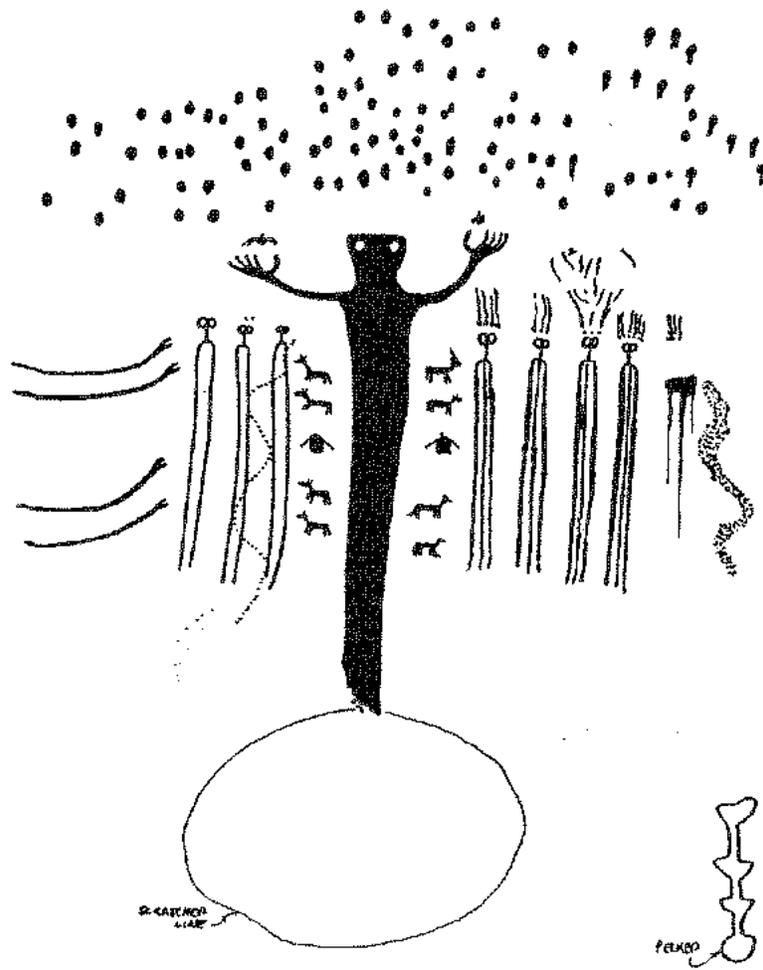


Figure 1

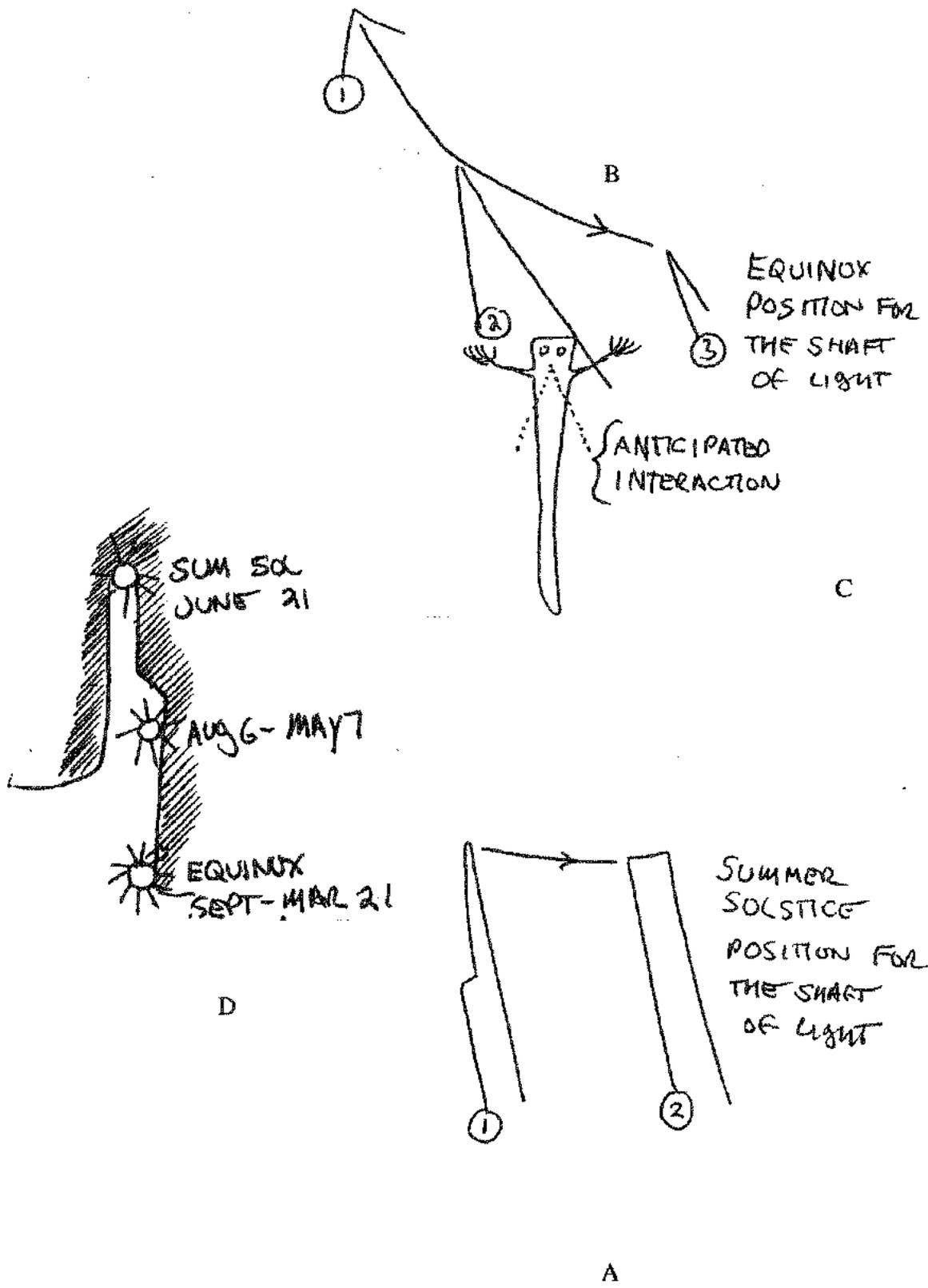


Figure 2

Equinox, with the sun at the bottom of the notch, the shaft of light moved across the panel above the figure's head (Fig. 2b, d). Calculations from those two points on the panel as well as those positions of the sun in the notch provided the dates for the expected interaction. Those dates were most logically assessed to be about August 6 or May 7, the Summer Cross Quarters. These are halfway between the Equinoxes and Summer Solstice (Fig. 2 c, d). During our first observations at this site only three other interactions were anticipated on the Barrier Canyon style figures, but throughout the year eight other interactions exhibiting a similar type of performance were observed.

Meanwhile, on Equinox another panel close to Figure 1 also had an out of mouth or speaking-with-light interaction (Fig. 3). On this panel three anthropomorphs are placed in a line side by side (and numbered one to three). Above them a snake rises on a slight incline to the right. At 4:05 p.m. a triangular shaft of light centers on the face of the left figure (Fig. 3 a). As the shaft of light moves to the right, it rises on about a 45 degree angle. This creates a relationship with the second, middle figure: the triangle of light moves above its head, bracketing the face and falling down across its shoulders. The light continues up to slightly above the snake's head and floods down across the last figure (Fig. 3 b).

A short period after spring Equinox and before fall Equinox, the position of the sun would lower the light just enough so it would be on the face of the second figure and possibly come out of the mouth of the snake. It is also expected that within another short period of time the shaft of light will rise across the panel to align with the third figure's mouth. Those possibilities still need to be observed.

While observing these panels I was impressed with the idea that to make these interactions more comprehensible, a "spiritual leader" could have stood in front of these panels and narrated or chanted some esoteric knowledge, myth, or epic tradition, to a group in an initiation rite or rite of passage.

All these figures would then be like the larger "Ambassador" in Indian Creek who speaks with an awesome power when he has a shaft of light come out of his mouth like this more simple figure does (Fig. 4 a, b). At those moments, the symbolism on the cliff literally comes to life. The figures become animated participants almost like oracles who either literally or figuratively speak to the observers. Their voices split the shadow and pierce the darkness on the rock with the power of the light that comes from their lips. That would probably be no less impressive than what Moses saw as God spoke with light from a burning bush. This symbolism is an impressive way of using light to represent power, authority, strength, wisdom, truth, knowledge, or whatever power these personages possessed. And it was, no doubt, the best way to impress on the minds the words of the traditions that the participants needed to know.

We hear no words; all we can do is see "the action of speaking." But with the guidance of one who knows, what better way to impress, with awe and fear, the importance and power of those words upon the hearts and minds of those to whom the narrator had a

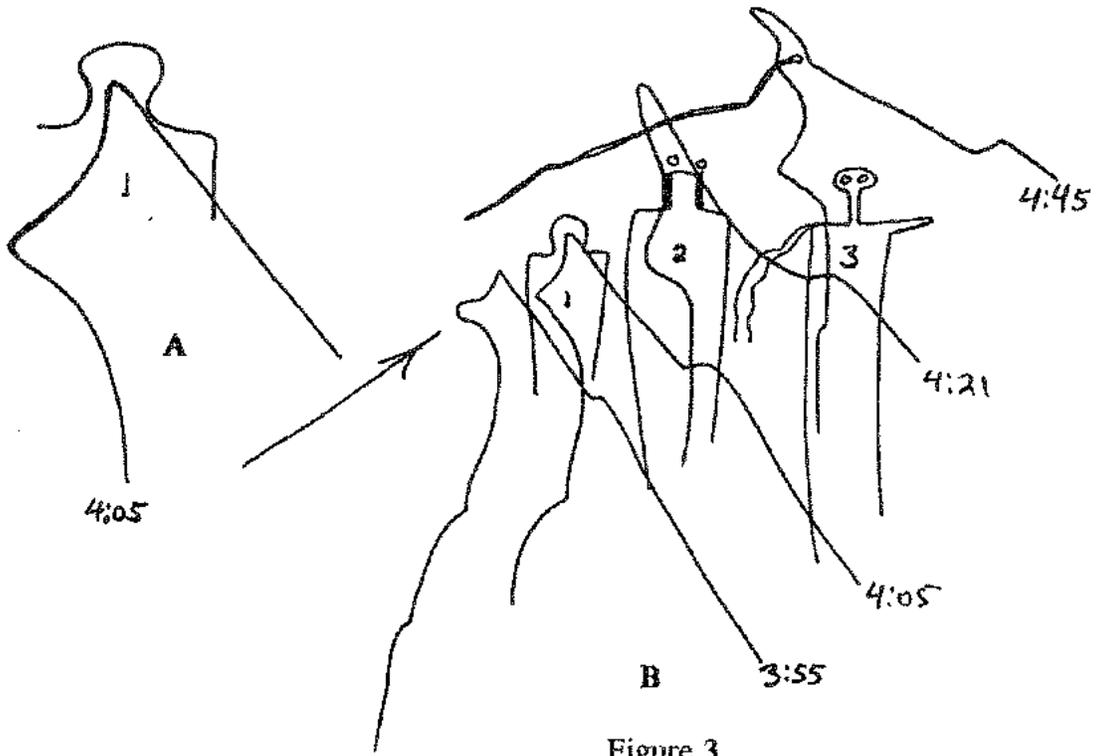


Figure 3

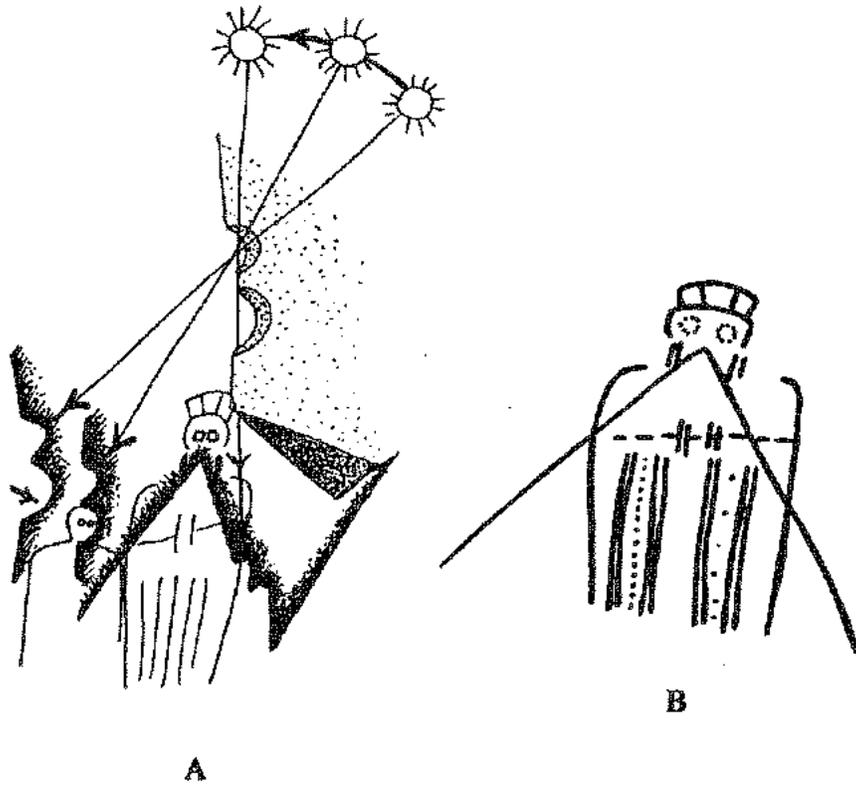


Figure 4

stewardship than by the power of such visual images when combined with sacred words or songs in some ancient ritual or ceremony?

Along with the Indian Creek example, the evidence seems to suggest the idea of a ceremonial context involving more than just one individual. In Indian Creek one figure sees through a notch of shadow made by a man-made notch in the cliff above. As the shadow moves and changes its shape it allows the second, bigger figure to then speak with light. If it had been produced as part of an individual experience or ritual it would seem that both figures would represent the same person, which in this case doesn't seem likely; because of the differences they seem to be different people, but that may be my biased opinion.

More time is needed to unravel all the possibilities of the symbolism used in these SSI. The three human forms in the Swell may represent different characters of a play in which each in their own turn speak the words that will be explained and expounded upon by the narrator.

The Equinox interactions with these three anthropomorphs ended at 4:45 p.m. At that very moment, the panel immediately to the right of this began an interaction that may support the idea of a interrelated ritual, in that it could have continued the ceremonial progression from one panel to the next, onto another level or into another realm.

This next panel was placed on a large surface (Fig. 5). Five anthropomorphs are painted in two different sections. A group of three figures is isolated high to the upper left. Lower and toward the center of the cliff face are two smaller, isolated figurine forms. The position of the Equinox shadow at 4:48 p.m. (Fig. 5 a, dotted line) occurs as a somewhat horizontal line that lies across the indistinct bottoms of the three upper left figures and above the heads of the two lower right figures. The shadow in a way frames two sides of the two smaller figures as it bends down at the right.

This is an odd composition, atypical even at this site. Most lines of Barrier Canyon style anthropomorphs are usually placed on roughly the same level across the panel, or else on several levels with a close association. Here there are two distinct groups with a large amount of unused space in and around them. Even though there is a fairly good feeling that these are Barrier Canyon in style, it is possible that they may represent a later addition, it is difficult to say. Even though the Equinox interaction on these figures was not terribly impressive, in hindsight it seems significant. The panel may have been composed to take advantage of this precise positioning, since the shadow rose until it separated the two groups before it framed the two right figures. The downward bend in the shadow at the right side of the last figure seems to prescribe the location for the placement of the two lower figures.

This composition may have stressed opposition between the two groups. Perhaps it marked a distinction between those who stood behind the light from those who stood within the light, supernaturals from mortals, shaman from apprentices, or those who knew from those who didn't. Whatever its concepts could have been it seems to me the scales balance in



Anticipated Interactions

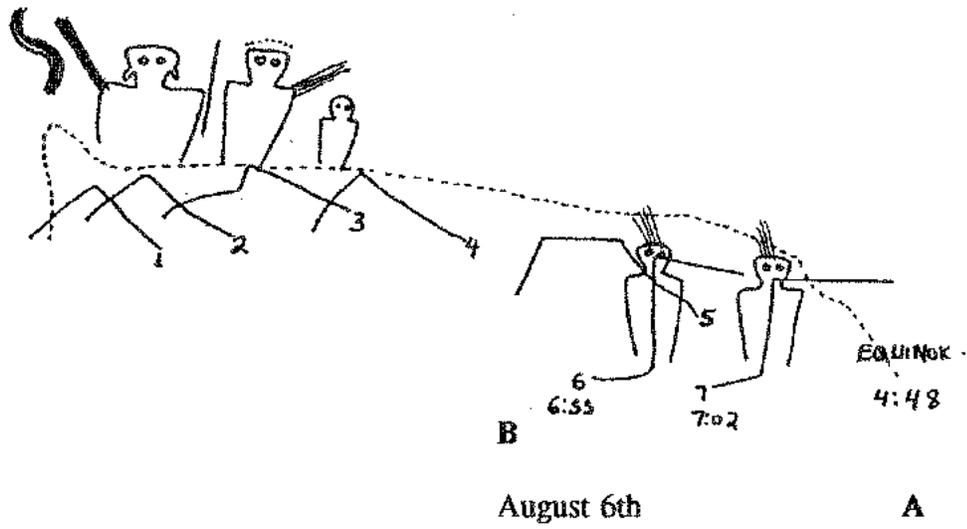


Figure 5

favor of an intentional placement. But does that interaction reveal the intention? Not without further information.

On the Summer Cross Quarter date of August 6, a triangle of light moves across the lower part of the three larger beings in the upper left part of the panel at about 5:16 p.m. (Fig. 5 line 1). By 6:30 p.m. it had moved across the bottom edge of these upper three figures and began to move down toward the lower two anthropomorphs. At 6:55 p.m., with the sun beginning to set to the left, the light has changed its shape and a triangle of light that was open to the right came out of the mouth of the first, left figure of the lower two at line 6. At 7:02 the triangle of light moved to the right and down slightly to the mouth of the second, right figure at line 7, allowing both of them to have that "speaking" context.

These two identical, twin-like forms were placed in such a position that it is felt they were intended to be dual performers, on Equinox and on the Summer Cross Quarters. The fact that the right one is lower than the left one, which duplicates the angle of descent of the shadow from the face of the left figure to that of the right also implies that they were intended to interact with the light so it could come out of each of their mouths on the same day. Why do these both do that? On the panel next to it with the three anthropomorphs only one speaks on one date and the others no doubt will each speak on a different day. It must be in the realm of the intended narration. It is expected that at a later date the upper three individuals will also speak as well.

The interaction on the far left panel on August 6 was incredible (Fig. 6a, b). At 2:44 p.m., a shaft of light appeared on the lower left section of the panel. It moved up to the right until it came into perfect alignment with the figure's face. It reached this position at 3:55 p.m. where it ceased its upward movement. From that position, centered in the area of the mouth, it began to descend on about the same angle down to the right and away from the mouth. This makes this interaction unique in comparison to the others where the shaft of light simply moves across their faces. In this unusual situation the shaft has a triangular pattern in its movement marking the point in the change in the movement of the point of light at the position of the mouth. It moves from the left, up to the mouth and then down to the right. Thus, the face of the figure is centered at the apex of the shadow's path of movement marking a place of power where the light changes its direction. Thus he speaks not only with power, but at the most powerful moment during the performance. This is an exact, uncoincidental, and unquestionable relationship, far more than just an "interesting coincidence" (Fig. 6a, b). It also created another file for another category of SSI, marking the position for the change of a shadow's direction of movement. Since this observation many other examples have been found that mark that powerful location, establishing that as a significant use of light and shadow.

Visually, this kind of action creates an intense emotional response, increasing the effect of an already impressive panel. We have been taught that when video stimuli occurs with an audio experience the learning process is greatly enhanced. If there is an intense concentration there is an energy that effects much more than one's mind and body (Samuels and Samuels 1982:13,66). The "Ambassadors" in Indian Creek are also very impressive

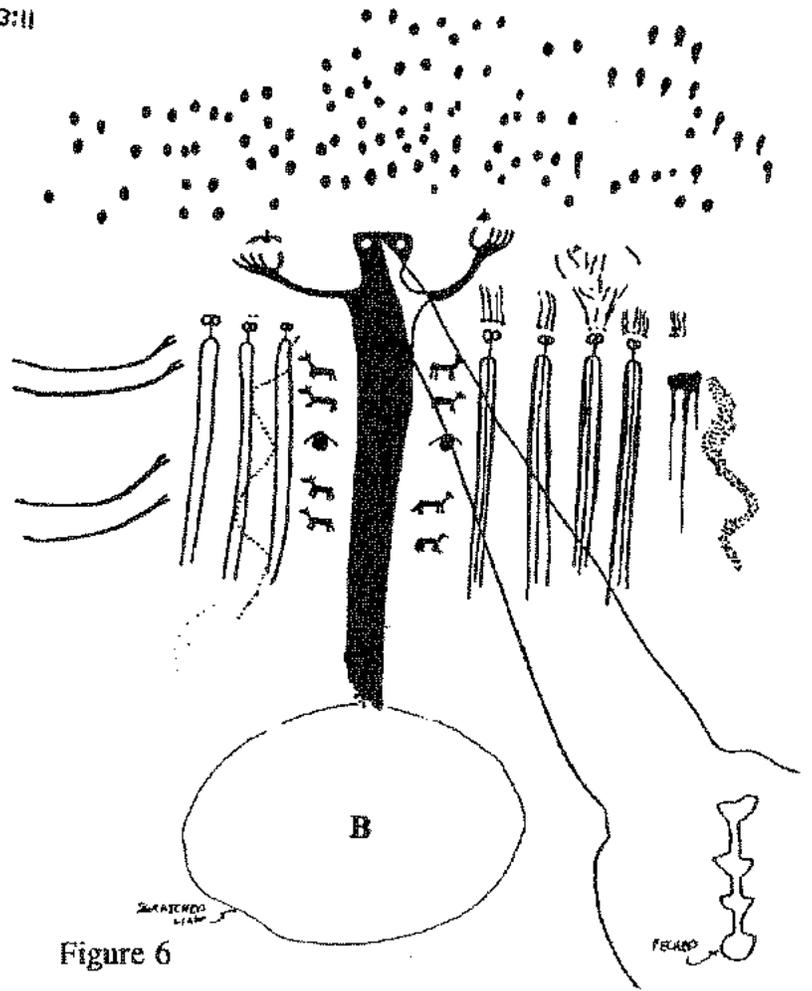
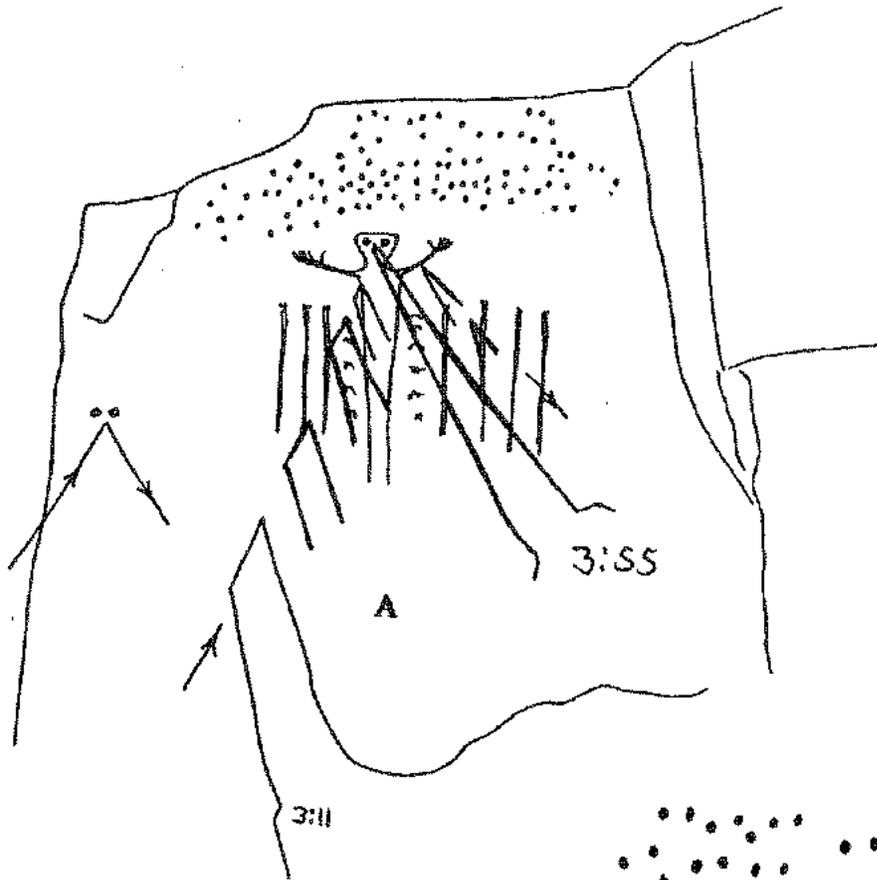


Figure 6

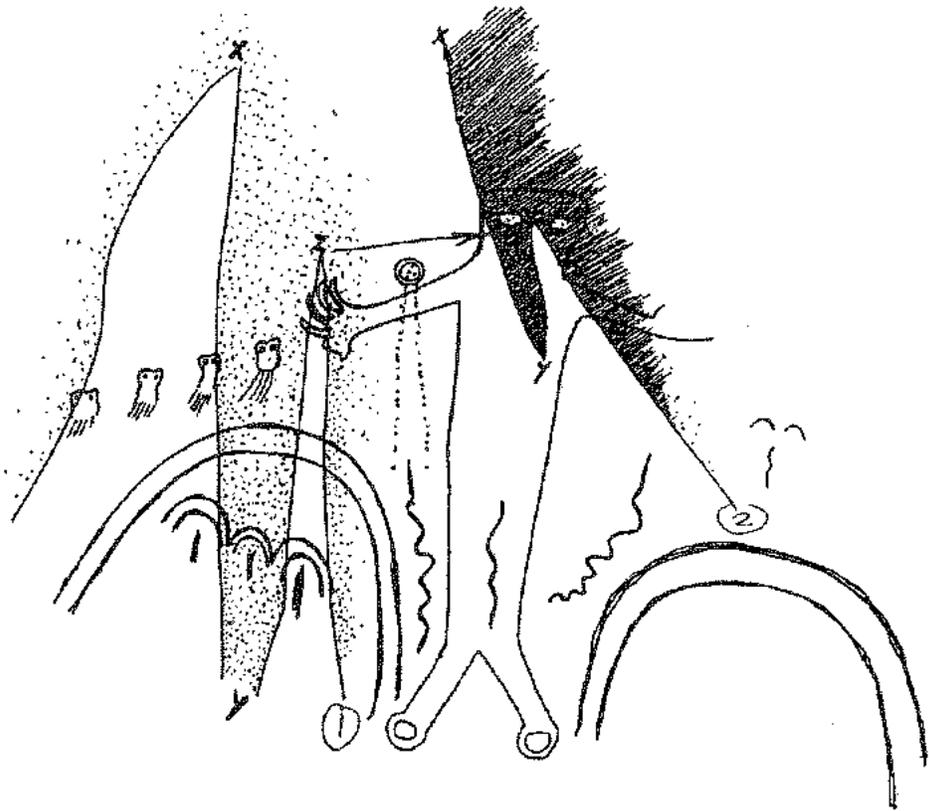
because one face is cupped by a notch in the shadow just before the other figure speaks (Fig. 4). Being able to view the triangle of light come out of the larger Ambassador's mouth was just as awesome and convincingly determinant.

It may be that the pecked element in the bulbular section of the shaft of light of the figure that speaks in the Swell may relate to what is being spoken (Fig. 6a). This is similar to the ticked line in the shaft of light coming from the mouth of a figure at Pleasant Creek, and other objects with the "spoken light" seen elsewhere.

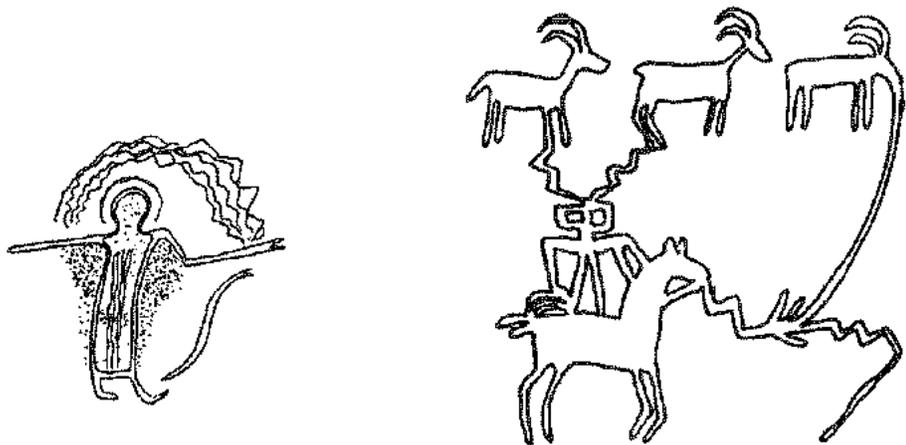
The panel immediately to the right of the panel shown in Figure 6 has a figure posed between two double lined arcs, often mislabeled rainbows (Fig. 7). At 2:36 p.m., on August 6 a thin sliver of light appeared to its left. By 3:40 p.m. it had moved up across its hand, reminiscent of power lines associated with the hands of some shaman like figures (Fig. 7b, another category of SSI). From the hand it moved across a small circle, then to where it came out of his mouth (Fig. 7a, line 2). This now made the fifth figure observed at this site to speak with light. The time of this observation may have been off just a little from the date when the panel was created. Notice the movement between the position of the light at point Z and when that same point reaches the face of the figure in Figure 7 A, lines 1 and 2. With just one or two days difference on this acute angle, the light would be slightly lower and may have moved across the faces of the four ascending ghostly figures before the interaction with the hand and mouth, which would have been more precise. It would have also moved across the small circle above the arm so that it would have come out of the circle instead of falling across it, and would flood down across the rising snake (dotted lines). This raises several questions; First, did all of the ancient authors of these panels observe them on the exact date? Because of panels that are slightly off it seems that they didn't. Second, was that an important factor to them? These questions are beyond the scope of this paper, but need to be investigated as more evidence is gathered.

On the panel to the right of this one, is a row of anthropomorphs that are also suspected to have several speaking alignments (Fig. 8). In April when the site was first visited, a triangle of light was above the larger figure (dotted line). On Equinox, it was farther to the left and lower. On August 6/May 7, it was to the right and below the larger figure, which demonstrates that it was probably not a Cross Quarter, or an eighth solar date interaction. These may occur on a sixteenth date which would split the year into 16 periods instead of eighths with the Cross Quarters. I have been observing Cross Quarter dates now for some time, but we are just beginning to consider evidence suggesting the use of sixteenths. That would explain many of the figures that occur between the other interactions and increase the total number of interacting figures per panel. When time allows I intend to determine the times and interactions for the figures in this panel.

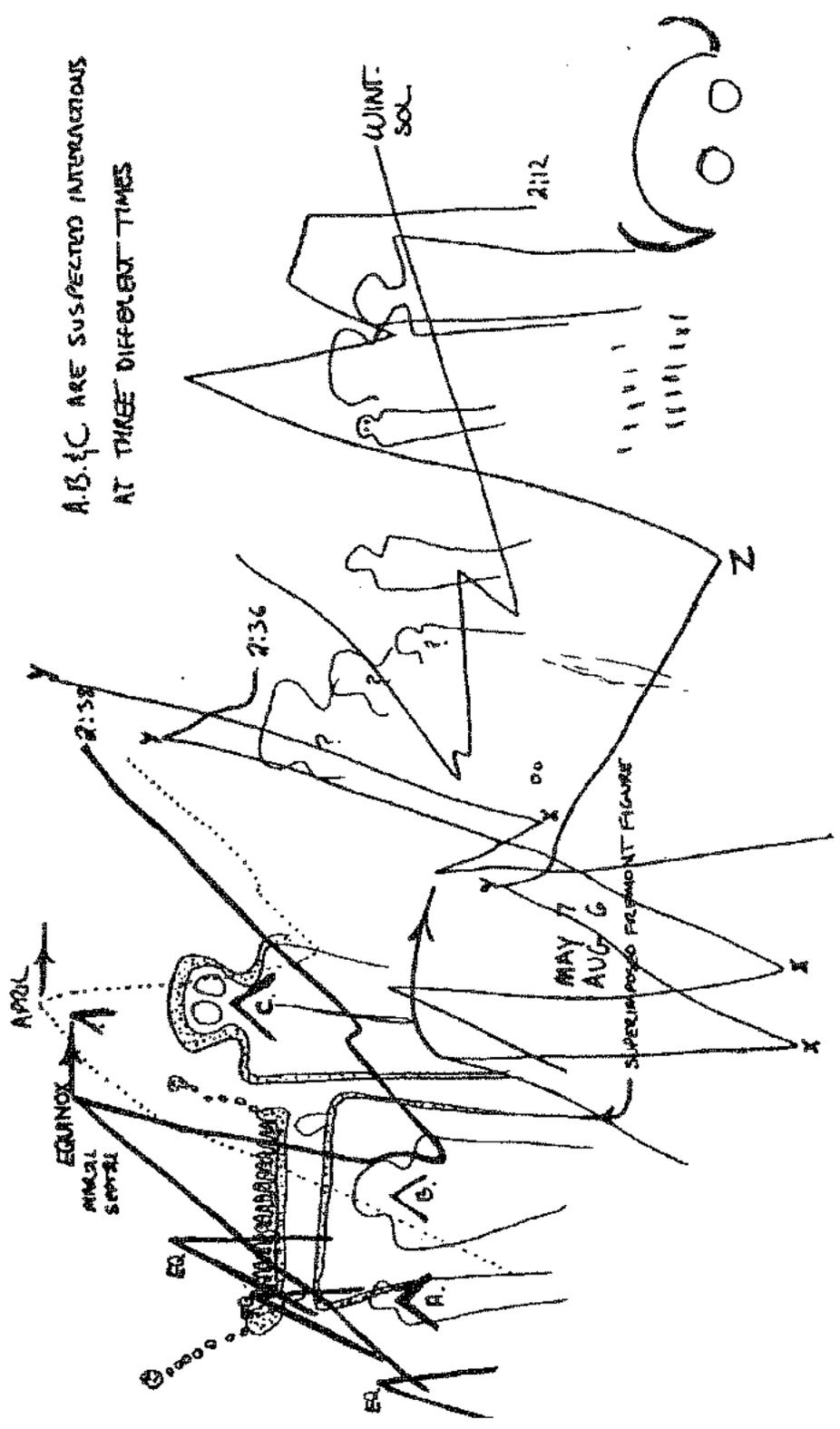
On February 6 there was another unexpected surprise. At 9:43 a.m. a differently-shaped triangle of light that opened out to the left came out of the mouths of the two isolated figures in Figure 5a (Fig. 9b).



A



B
Figure 7



A, B, & C ARE SUSPECTED INTERACTIONS
AT THREE DIFFERENT TIMES

Figure 8

The second speaking interaction with these figures (the first interaction was on Equinox, the second interaction was the first actual speaking interaction) was at 6:55 p.m. in the evening on the Summer Cross Quarter. This SSI was at 9:43 a.m. in the morning on the Winter Cross Quarter about November 6-7 and February 6-7. Again, the interaction was only with those two twin-like, centrally placed individuals and not with any of the upper three figures. Is it coincidental that they speak almost the same way twice? It may seem to be. But looking at the movements of the points of light at both times of the year that they speak illustrates that they were placed at the place where the two ever-so slightly different speaking trajectories crossed, yet produced an identical repeated performance.

The first interacted in the evening, the other in the morning. The first angle was open to the right, the second was open to the left. This is a phenomenal construction. Each time the angle touched the mouth of the left figure first and then lowered to touch the mouth of the right figure. Again they could have been placed anywhere along the combinations of the first two interactions. But, after considerable contemplation, I believe that they were aware of the total pattern of the shadow movements across this panel throughout the year and placed them where they did to take advantage of all three interactions. In other words I do not feel that one of the speaking events was coincidental. The multiplicity of interactions would be a remarkable feat. The degree of probability against it being accidental is too high. If they had only observed one of the speaking episodes and not the other, they could have taken advantage of that first interaction, by placing them anywhere along that line without them being in a position to interact with the second speaking episode. But they did, and they do speak twice. These were sophisticated symbolists. They were not just marking periods of time, they were marking very Sacred Places of Power at very sacred and powerful times of the year. Where the trajectory of those two lines cross is the most sacred and powerful place on the very large and mostly unused space of that cliff. They were using some powerful symbolism that must have had an associated ceremony that if not communal was a very powerful personal ritual.

This makes three figures at this site to have a form of light come out of their mouths at two different times of the year. This creates an extremely complex situation in not only ceremonial implications but the logistics of creating the panel.

On the morning of the Winter Cross Quarter, a more impressive SSI took place on the panel in Figure 3. Again the smaller figure to the left speaks with light (Fig. 10b). Compare that with the form of the light with which it previously spoke (Figure 10a). Another interaction on this panel is unusual. The third character to the right conforms somewhat to the shape of a long, thin sliver of shadow created by a bulge in the cliff face immediately to the right (c.f. cliff profile Fig. 11c). This performance began at 9:43 a.m. when the left figure had a shaft of light cross its face. As that point of light moved to the right, the other edge of light on the right forming this sliver of shadow moved to the left to form a more diffused but still distinct angle of light on the face of the abnormally long, exaggerated figure (Fig. 11b). After that the figure was left, almost as if hiding in this thin body of shadow (Fig. 11c). This is a decidedly impressive interaction and one that seems

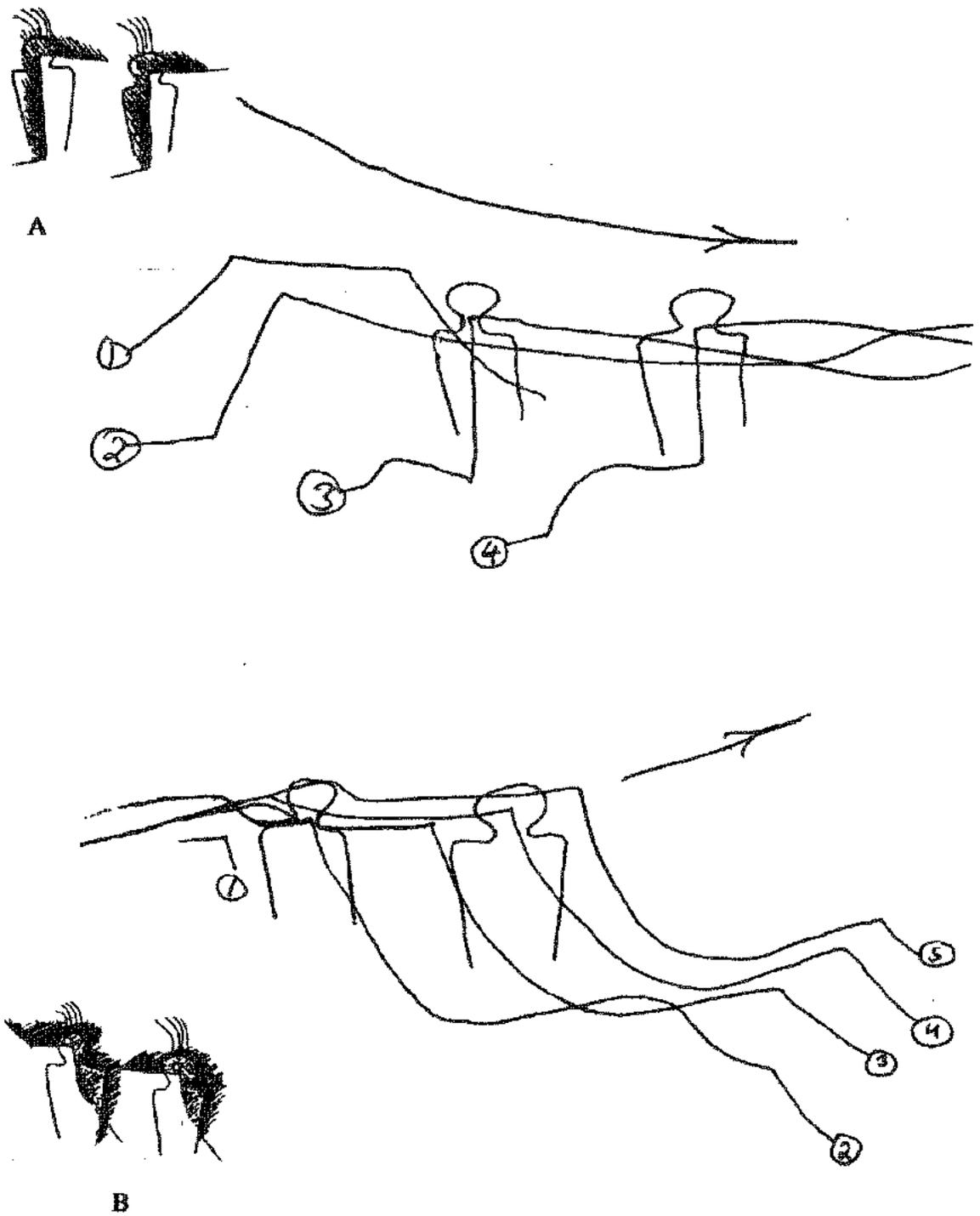
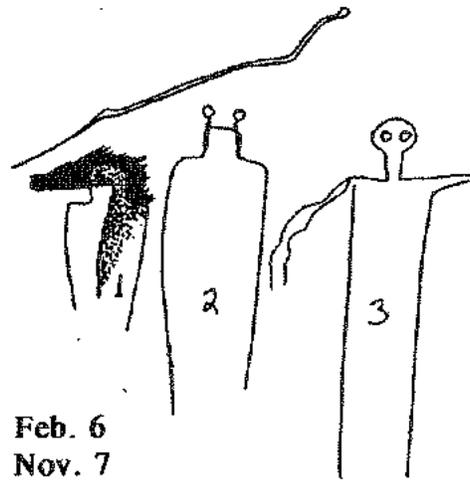
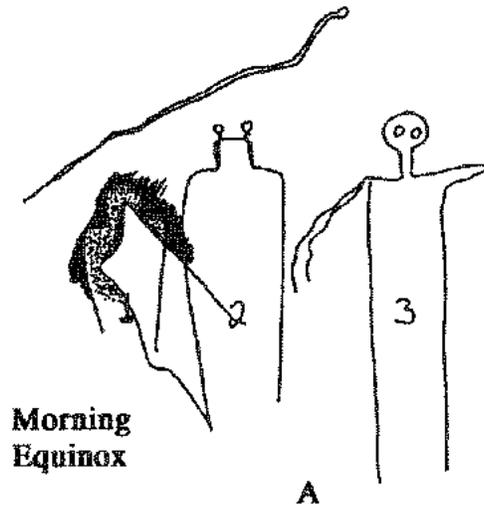
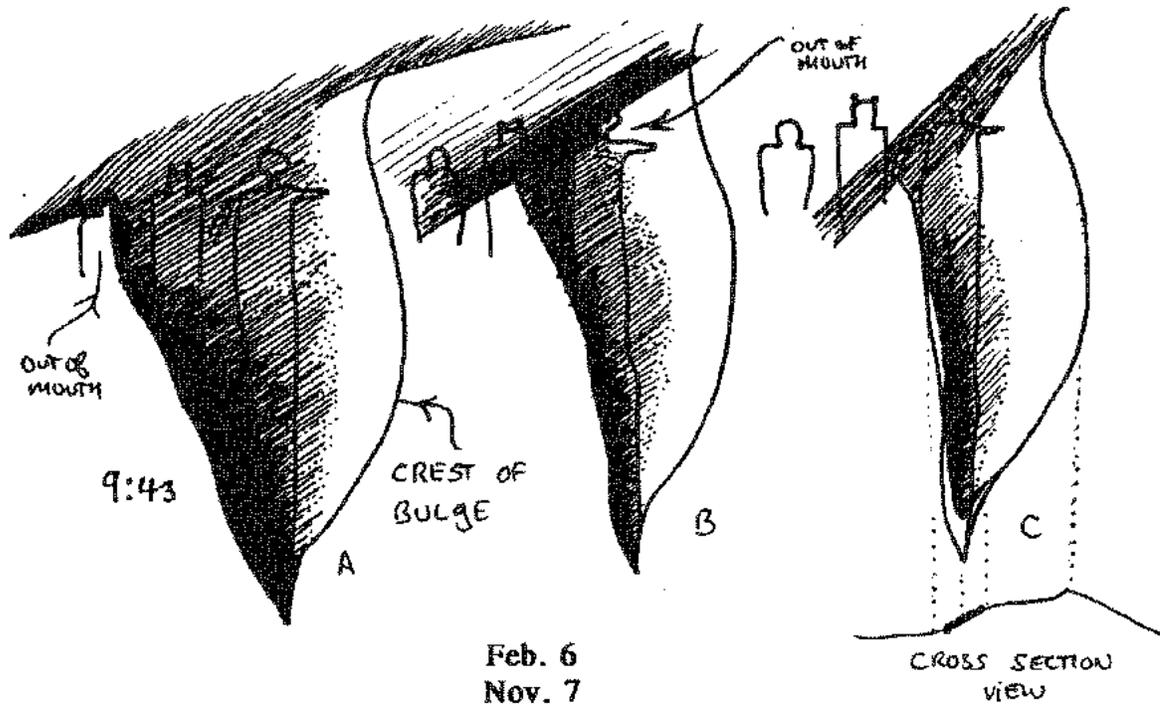


Figure 9

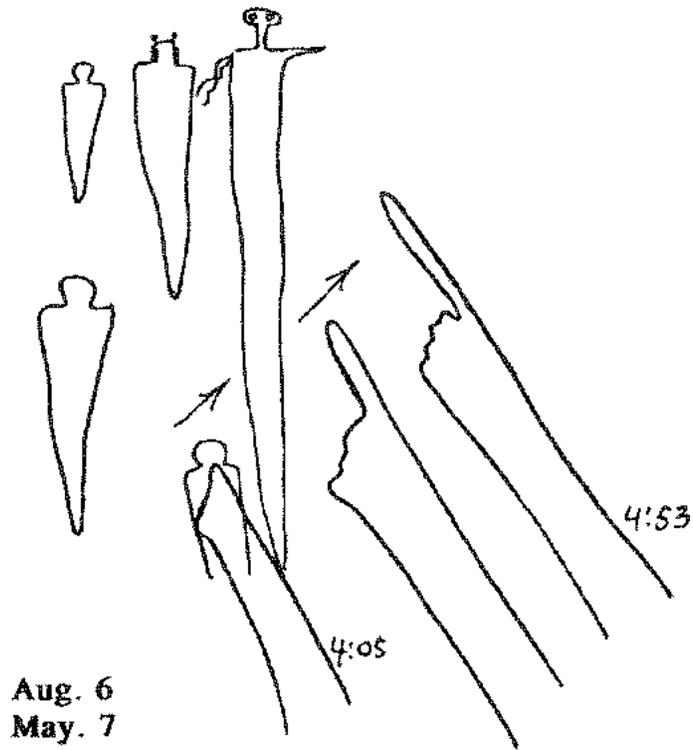


B
Figure 10



Feb. 6
Nov. 7

Figure 11



Aug. 6
May. 7

Figure 12

very symbolic of a personage represented within the world of darkness, yet speaking with light.

One last SSI takes place on this panel on August 6, at 4:05 p.m.. A point of light moves across a faint figure's face below and to the left of the third figure. From there the light transforms into a perfect hand with outstretched index finger, ominously pointing to the third figure (Fig. 12). This is the ninth incident of a shaft of light on a figure's face at this site so far. There is a good potential for at least 10 or 11 more occurrences of this type of SSI all together.

This one site has provided considerable information in the on going analysis of Barrier Canyon style solar observations. At this point so far I have documented many complex sites that have used an extensive amount of symbolism to function in the process of not only solar observations, but what appears to be ceremonial observances as well. At these sites so far without exception nearly every panel interacts. The first site was the Barrier Canyon site in Indian Creek (Fig. 4, Warner 1983:60, 1984a:43, 1984b:50). The second site involved the panels in Black Dragon Canyon (Fig. 13, Warner and Warner 1985a, 1985b). At both these last sites there has been sufficient discussion that a detailed review here is not necessary. I would however, like to note a few important points.

At these sites it was discovered that the Barrier Canyon culture was seemingly very intent in marking seasonal change, with not only calendrical but ceremonial activity when most professionals didn't feel it was necessary for hunters and gathers to do so. What they were actually marking, it seems, was not just times, but the events that took place at those times, a part of their cosmology that is reflected in the activities of the SSI. One of the things that they seem to have observed was the opening of those cosmic portals of power and esoteric knowledge. Each of these sites also have in a different way provided insight into the attitudes held toward these events. Each shows a deep and hallowed respect and reverence by the manner in which they were observed. This also reflects the general attitude so characteristic of the Barrier Canyon Style itself wherever it occurs. The aspects they imply and the associated ceremonial observances believed to be associated there are very strong. Even though they are not completely understood, they are identifiable to various degrees.

The aspect from Black Dragon that implies ceremonial interaction is the fact that the definitive motif of supplicators has been brought into play with their special attitudes and poses in a way to demonstrate a submissive and worshipful attitude to the sun on Summer and Winter Solstice and Equinox (Fig. 13). These supplicators break away from the normal diminutive category who often reach out toward another figure on the cliff. In these situations they become the dominant figures. The functions of these figures are a prominent part of the site. Even though the polychrome panel in Black Dragon Canyon was very precise and obviously calendrical, two of the three supplicators are not exactly precise in identifying dates, but they still seem to indicate the reverent or supplicating aspect more than simple solar observations in a calendrical sense (Warner and Warner 1985a, 1985b).



THE COMPOSITION WITHIN THE DRAGON

Figure 13

From the Barrier Canyon Style site in Indian Creek there are no supplicators as such. Yet two human figures are placed on the cliff to observe the sun as actual solar interacting elements that look out to the sun in a sense much like the living counter parts of these supplicators would, or as if they were the sun watchers themselves at those moments of power and devotion to and bequest of the sun. One of these was the first figure ever observed to have a form of light come directly out of its mouth. It was felt that if that was as important and significant a concept to Barrier Canyon cosmology as it was impressive, it should reoccur elsewhere again and again. After four years of searching, many others have been found and the multiplicity of that concept at this one site in the San Rafael Swell makes it that much more impressive. It seems that almost every panel at this site has at least one figure who speaks with light and three which do at different times of the day and the year. These factors are why this site is such a vitally important discovery.

At the Barrier Canyon style site in Indian Creek there are other implications of ceremonial observance (Fig. 14). The main aspects are the concepts of the sun himself looking at two sun watchers through the notches in the shadow and then actually becoming what they saw and what the sun itself would see when placing their head on the far right circle at Winter Solstice to see the sun rise on the far horizon at sunrise. The large figure in Indian Creek also speaks again on Winter Solstice (Fig. 15). This provides some very complex concepts.

It is anticipated that many more examples will be discovered. These will be added to the information gained from these sites until there is as complete a file of information as possible. Only at that point, and after an exhaustive analysis, will any definitive or more interpretive statements be able to be made. Each panel is another piece of the puzzle, each site another view into how their world view functioned.

There is another anthropomorph that expresses a possible speaking concept, but in a different manner. At a panel near Moab, there is an impressive figure that has a large oval mouth with a bluish-green snake rising upward within it. Since the rising snake occurs at so many solar interacting sites, it has become synonymous with solar observance. If that is the case, then we may have another figure speaking concepts of a solar phenomenon (Fig. 16). If there is any interest observe it, it is way down on my list of impressive interactions. This paper was presented at the 1985 URARA Symposium. At that time there were probably about 25 figures recorded at that time to "Speak with light." At this volume's date of publication, eleven years later, we have over 550 figures that "speak with light." That has become the first of 30 major categories of different ways that symbolism (SSI) in the form of light and shadows were used to portray a more esoteric form of symbolism that can be seen in the exoteric forms of the graphic symbols themselves. There are also 26 different subcategories or things that they did with figures that spoke with light. Speaking once is one of them. Speaking more than once is another. Speaking at the position where the point of light changes direction is yet another.

REFERENCES

- Samuels, Mike and Nancy Samuels
1982 Seeing With The Mind's Eye. *Bookworks Book*, Random House, New York.
- Warner, Jesse E.
1983 Summer Solstice Sites in Indian Creek. *Utah Rock Art Vol 2*. URARA, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- 1984a Equinox Observations in Indian Creek, Utah during 1981-1982 *Utah Rock Art Vol 3*. URARA, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- 1984b Winter Solstice Observations in Indian Creek, 1981-1982. *Utah Rock Art Vol. 3*. URARA, Salt Lake City, Utah.
- Warner, Jesse E. and Judith S.
1985a *To Slay a Dragon*. Castleton Award Paper presented at the 12th Annual Symposium of the American Rock Art Research Association Santa Barbara, Cal.
- 1985b Some Unique Horizontal Sunrise and Sunset Markers in Black Dragon Canyon. *Utah Rock Art Vol. 4*. URARA, Salt Lake City, Utah.