

ANOTHER LOOK AT 29SJ1156, ATLATL CAVE, IN CHACO CULTURE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK, NEW MEXICO

Chaco Culture National Historical Park lies in the northwestern portion of New Mexico. Within the park, the drainage of Chaco Wash trends southeast to northwest. Atlatl Cave is located north of Chaco Wash at the head of a rincon in the western end of the park. The site, not a cave but rather an alcove at the base of the cliff, features four rock art panels placed at the back of the overhang (Figure 1). The National Park Service restricts access to the area due to the fragile nature of the midden traversed when approaching the panels.

HISTORY OF RESEARCH AT ATLATL CAVE (29SJ1156)

Atlatl Cave was excavated in 1975–1976 by Mathews and Neller. Unfortunately, their only report about that excavation appeared as one page from the First Conference on Scientific Research in the National Parks in 1979. In that report they mentioned the pictographs. “Atlatl Cave (29SJ1156) is a small sandstone rockshelter with characteristic Basketmaker II paintings on the



Figure 1. Overview of Atlatl Cave, 29SJ1156. Photo by Quentin Baker. (Enhanced)



Figure 2. The “broad-shouldered man.” Photo by Quentin Baker. (Enhanced)

back wall including a triangular, broad-shouldered man” (Mathews and Neller 1979:873) (Figure 2). The midden they excavated in the shelter contained “...characteristic Basketmaker II remains including corn, beans, squash, a broken atlatl, a yucca fiber sandal, several kinds of small seed beads made from juniper, *Ephedra* and Gromwell seeds, hematite pigment, fragments of rabbit fur fabric, coiled basketry, and no pottery, no turquoise, and no Pueblo projectile point types” (Mathews and Neller 1979:873). One of two ¹⁴C dates obtained from the site came from charcoal in this midden and was 950–910 B.C. ±82 years. The only other date reported came from charcoal in an Archaic midden and this earlier date was 2900 B.C. ±136 years. The Archaic midden also contained San Jose type projectile points made from obsidian from the Jemez Mountains in New Mexico, as well as Alibates chert from Texas.

The first published drawings of the site appear in Steed’s summary of the work done by the New

Mexico Archaeological Society Field School (Steed 1980:5–6). He summarizes the situation thus:

The rock art literature seems to agree that the broad-shouldered figures are Basketmaker in origin. As there are many Basketmaker ruins in Chaco Canyon, I expected to find many of these broad shouldered figures. In reality there were very few, and these the only definite ones. This is in contrast to the more numerous examples we found in the earlier survey in Carrizo and Delgadito Canyons in the Four Corners area, not far away [Steed 1980:4].

Judge cited Atlatl Cave as Basketmaker II in a 1984 publication stating “The Basketmaker II people were semisedentary hunters/gatherers who may have begun to cultivate squash and particularly corn as early as 1000 B.C.” (Judge 1984:3). In the same publication Schaafsma concurs saying “The first Chacoan art we can date with any certainty consists of Basketmaker II paintings from Atlatl Cave. These plain, triangular-bodied people and myriad handprints are similar to Basketmaker figures found elsewhere in the east San Juan region” (Schaafsma 1984:59).

However, Vivian, in 1990 raised the possibility that Atlatl Cave could be at least in part more a Late Archaic site based on the early radiocarbon dates and lack of any structural features other than one hearth in the rockshelter. He pointed out that Mathews and Neller considered the site Basketmaker II based on the material artifacts they excavated (Vivian 1990; Vivian and Hilpert 2002).

In 1992 Schaafsma suggested that the paintings could be Basketmaker III, although she acknowledged the presence of the Basketmaker II artifacts (Schaafsma 1992).

Mathien in 1997 pointed out the fundamental difficulty of making an association between the pictographs and the pigment found in the midden:



Figure 3. Location of pictograph panels in Atlatl Cave. Photo by Quentin Baker. (Enhanced)

Pictographs at 29SJ1156 include a limonitic yellow animal, hematitic red hands, and dark red human figures as well as some white figures. The lack of evidence of later occupation at this site may indicate that these figures could be associated with the 950 to 910 B.C. midden, but there are difficulties with this assumption. Although the presence of pigments that match colors in the rock shelter is suggestive, the human figures are similar to those attributed to Basketmaker people (Guernsey and Kidder 1921:34). At present, however, there is no way to date with certainty any of the rock art at 29SJ1156 [Mathien 1997:1138].

In 2004 the rock art reassessment team headed by Jane Kolber and Donna Yoder visited Atlatl Cave to re-record the pictographs. At that time, they were accompanied by Marvin Rowe, a

chemist at Texas A&M University and expert at AMS radiocarbon dating of pictographs. Dr. Rowe took samples of the rock surfaces surrounding the pictographs in an attempt to assess whether direct dating of the rock art would be possible. The background rock contained too high a carbon content to assure an accurate date for the paintings so the attempt was discontinued (Kolber and Yoder 2004).

THE IMAGERY

Four panels of pictographs appear on the back wall of the shelter (Figure 3). Each panel will be discussed below in more detail going from left to right (west to east) across the wall.

1. The realistic elements on the most western panel consist of two groupings of



Figure 4. Overview of western panel showing two groups of anthropomorphs. Photo by Quentin Baker. (Enhanced)



Figure 6. Right side of western panel showing close-up of one group of anthropomorphs. Photo by Quentin Baker. (Enhanced)



Figure 5. Left side of western panel showing close-up of one group of anthropomorphs. Photo by Quentin Baker. (Enhanced)



Figure 7. West-central panel showing one anthropomorph, one stick figure, and one paint splotch. Photo by Quentin Baker. (Enhanced)

anthropomorphs and a quadruped (Figure 4). The left side of this panel (Figure 5) has three anthropomorphs—one with only one leg, one with hair whorls, and one partial figure. On the right are four more anthropomorphs (Figure 6)—one with hair whorls. There are also one quadruped and several paint smears. Due to the heavy, solid appearance of the paint, the pigment was probably applied to this panel in liquid form.

2. The next panel, west of center, has one anthropomorph, one stick figure anthropomorph, and a paint splotch (Figure 7). The first anthropomorph appears to have been applied with the same pigment and

technique as the anthropomorphs on the previous panel. The stick figure, however, appears to have been drawn with dry pigment because only the high areas of the rock surface have color as would happen with something more like a crayon. The splotch looks like pigment that was thrown on the wall and ran down. Whether this was intentionally done prehistorically or occurred with subsequent weathering is impossible to determine.

3. The next panel, east of center, has the “broad-shouldered” man mentioned by Mathews and Neller (Figure 8). There are also two red hands, and many areas of



Figure 8. East-central panel showing the “broad-shouldered man,” two drawn hands, and surrounding elements. Photo by Quentin Baker. (Enhanced)

paint which cannot be identified as specific elements. Much of the pigment on the panel also appears to have been applied dry because only the high areas of the rock surface have pigment.

4. The fourth and most eastern panel has a spiral, a quadruped, a red zig-zag, and more unidentified pigment areas (Figure 9). Spirals, the most common petroglyph element at Chaco according to Kolber and Yoder (Kolber and Yoder 2008) are rare as painted elements. This is one of only three painted examples that have been recorded to date.

DISCUSSION

Basketmaker II under the original Pecos Classification has been considered to include the presence of corn, atlatls, and basketry with an absence of pottery (Matson 2006). This is certainly the suite of traits found at Atlatl Cave, although to my knowledge the basketry has never been analyzed to determine construction techniques. That information would provide clues to possible affiliations with Eastern or Western Basketmaker II populations. However, the ¹⁴C date reported by Mathews and Neller is earlier than most Basketmaker II chronologies suggest. This raises

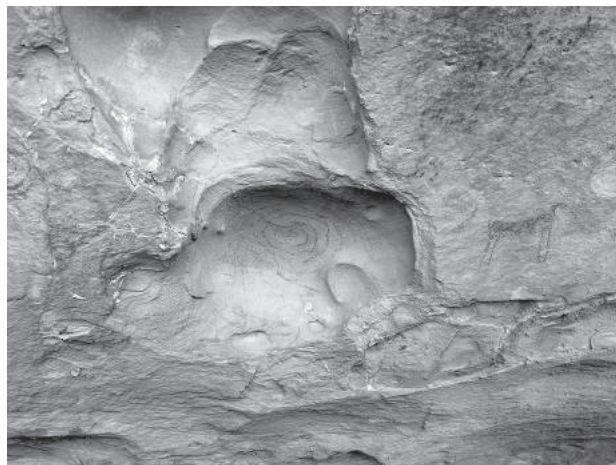


Figure 9. Eastern panel showing the painted spiral and a quadruped. Photo by Quentin Baker. (Enhanced)

important questions as to whether Basketmaker II should be extended farther back, whether there were problems with the dating, or whether the rock art is associated with the charcoal in the midden or not.

Matson (2006) suggests that Basketmaker data in the northern southwest has now sufficiently pushed back the timeframe so that it is reasonable to discuss a “Preformative” stage such as that originally defined by Willey and Phillips in 1958 as “...the stage of emerging agriculture prior to its successful integration into well-established sedentary village life” (Willey and Phillips 1958:145). Matson further says that the Basketmaker I or Early Basketmaker category established with the original Pecos Classification would “...include those Basketmaker II-like manifestations in the northern Southwest that date circa 2500–3800 RCYBP” (Matson 2006:159). This fits the Mathews and Neller date of 950–910 B.C. obtained from charcoal in the Atlatl Cave midden.

Returning to the rock art, the “triangular, broad-shouldered man” on which Mathews and Neller (1979:873) originally based their Basketmaker II attribution, appears surrounded by handprints, parallel lines, and pigment swipes. Body form does suggest affinity to other Basketmaker sites.



Figure 10. Close-up of drawn hands on east-central panel. Photo by Quentin Baker. (Enhanced)



Figure 11. Detail of panel in Canyon de Chelly showing an anthropomorph with hair whorls superimposed by mud containing datable organic material. Photo by Robert Mark. (Enhanced)

Imagery from a Basketmaker II site reported by Kidder and Guernsey near Marsh Pass (Charles and Cole 2006:187), a Basketmaker II site near Bloomfield, New Mexico (Schaafsma 1980:120), and from Broken Flute Cave, a Basketmaker II site in northeastern Arizona (Morris 1980:14) shows a similar body shape with more elaborate interior body decoration as well as a greater variety and number of surrounding elements. The literature agrees that handprints are a common element found in association with other Basketmaker iconography (Cole 1990, Schaafsma 1992). In Atlatl Cave there are only two clear handprints, although others could have originally been present where only smears of color remain today (Figure 10). The handprints at Atlatl Cave are also drawn rather than stamped with direct application of the pigment to the hand. The differences between the Marsh Pass, Bloomfield, and Broken Flute Cave sites and the Atlatl Cave site lie in the greater elaboration of the former anthropomorphs and the presence of greater numbers of elements on the panels at the three example sites.

Turning to the first panel with multiple anthropomorphs, clearly the grouping of anthropomorphs on this first panel is distinct both stylistically and in technique from the “broad-

shouldered man” panel. Of the seven figures, two have possible hair whorls. Kelley Hays-Gilpin states that the hair whorls appear in rock art images at least by A.D. 200 (Hays-Gilpin 2004). These are found in Canyon de Chelly. The photo by Bob Mark (Figure 11) shows the anthropomorph with hair whorls at de Chelly which was dated to no later than A.D. 200 on the basis of a radiocarbon date on organic material in the mud which superimposed it. Fingers, toes, and multiple handprints are also visible on this panel. Once again, the images in Atlatl Cave are less elaborate than Basketmaker II images from the surrounding area.

CONCLUSION

Atlatl Cave has the full array of Basketmaker II traits—corn, atlatl, basketry, and no pottery—however the early ¹⁴C date is problematic. Although the rock art in Atlatl Cave is clearly related stylistically to Basketmaker II sites found elsewhere in the northern southwest, based on the early date, lack of habitation structures, and simplification of the pictographs, I would suggest that it would be appropriate to consider the Atlatl Cave pictographs part of a Preformative or Basketmaker I stage argued by Matson as being placed “...before Formative and after Archaic, but

without any change to either of these more established stages” (Matson 2006:159).

Clearly distinct areas of the alcove were painted in discrete episodes based on their stylistic and technical differences. It is not possible at this time to say anything definitive about their relationship to each other. No similar pictograph sites have been found at Chaco Culture National Historic Park. To my knowledge, rockshelters with datable cultural material in association with similar pictographs have also yet to be located in the surrounding area. Are the pictographs and the ¹⁴C date from the midden contemporaneous? Is Chaco Canyon a unique area with its own variation of early Basketmaker art? Does this imply a limited Preformative use of the area? Due the small sample size, the origins of Basketmaker rock art await future research.

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