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## ROCK FEATURES OF WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

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### Abstract

Caves and rock shelters are typically treated as habitation spaces. In this paper we survey the potential for both to have been used in several ritualized ways. One use appears to have been for menstrual and birthing retreats, which were abandoned when a death occurred. Another use is the burial cave. Fauna, burial position, and rock art are some of the clues to ritual use. We will highlight several other landscape features that may have been revered as well. An inventory of recorded caves and shelters is provided.

Rock shelters, caves, sinkholes, knobs, bluffs, pools, waterfalls, springs, hot springs, rocks resembling humans, cliff faces, projecting rock, and other rocky or watery forms have been viewed with respect for thousands of years, and people traversing western North Carolina were no exception. Numerous authors and dozens of creation stories have documented Native American concepts of stone people as the earliest inhabitants of this world (Irwin 1994) and as the ultimate form taken by some fleshy humans. They also have documented the living attributes of stone: riverbed rocks sing (Milne 1995), sweat lodge rocks hear (Irwin 1994:175), mountains move (Iroquois origin of false face), crystals contain the soul of priests or can absorb sickness from a patient (Furst 1995:55), and sacred bundle rocks reproduce (Irwin 1994: 224). Bluffs and mountains hide the houses, lodges, and caves of spirits (Irwin 1994), and are the sources of animals, plants, rain, thunder, lightning (Bassie-Sweet 1996, Irwin 1994), and humans themselves, said the Alabamu, the Caddo, the Muskogee, the Choctaw, and the Iroquois (Gatschet 1884:187, 218, 230). Children were referred to as “the chips”, “the flakes” by the Aztecs (Miller and Taube 1993). Historic accounts tell us that rock shelters and caves were good places for seeking visions, birthing and sweating (Moyes 2005), training as a weather shaman (Hayden 2005:23-25) or curer (Hayden 2005:26) or for diagnosing ills (Hayden 2005:26), and for burial (e.g., Hayden 2005:31), including the bodies of illegitimate children (Denig 1930). Rituals known to have occurred in caves are those for renewal of life forms, of communities, and for rain (Claassen 2011). Arrow offerings were common at caves on the Plains (Sundstrom 2000), and miniature weavings and weaving equipment are still important offerings in caves in northern Mexico (Claassen 2011; Schaefer 2002). Hunting shrines are typically situated in rock shelters in the Maya area (Brown 2005). Oracles were consulted in several caves (Teotihuacan, Wixarika [Schaefer 2002]), probably including one in North Carolina. Here in western North Carolina we have an entire culture group whose name derives from our region of caves—the Cherokee (James 2006; [answers.com/topic/choerokee](http://answers.com/topic/choerokee)).

## PROBABLE RITUAL PLACES AND FUNCTION IN WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

Grandfather Mountain was surely a stone person and the caves near its top important destinations for sacred acts. The Blowing Rock retains an Indian affiliation today which emphasizes the powerful winds to be felt there, winds that can carry both human and prayer upward. Throughout western North Carolina we have other obvious candidates for sacred places: Stone Mountain, Linville Falls, Linville Cavern, Chimney Rock, Opera Box, Hickory Nut Falls, and Bat Cave. A mythscape important to the Cherokee (Ashcraft and Hansen 2009) involved Looking Glass Rock, Devil's Courthouse Rock, and Judaculla Rock. There are hundreds more such rocky or watery features.

There is a minimum of 123 rock shelters on record as sites in western North Carolina (Appendix 14-A). Fifteen have had testing. While archaeologists are quick to interpret rock shelters as habitation sites with the implications of short-term occupation by family units, few rock shelters are large enough or the debris extensive enough to support such an interpretation. If we think instead of rock shelters as retreat places where only one person at a time might be present, or a group for fewer than 48 hours, then both the size of geological feature and amount of debris often provide a better fit. Individuals in seclusion or taking medicine, or seeking a vision, may well have been the occupants. In larger shelters group initiations may have occurred.

### *Women's Seclusion Loci*

Woman removed from their communities during their menses and after birthing in numerous native cultures (Galloway 1997). While Europeans recorded menstrual huts at some Southeastern towns, it is quite possible that rock shelters were used for both types of seclusion when they were available. The tiny Charles Church shelter in Watauga County is a possible example of the women's seclusion shelter. Here the skeleton of a 20 year old woman and bones of a peri-natal infant were encountered. Whyte (2004) suggested that this rock shelter had been a birthing shelter. This is one of hundreds of shelters in the eastern United States where the body of a single woman has been found, suggesting that a birthing/seclusion/medicine shelter was abandoned after the death of a user.

Artifacts from Church rockshelter included a clay pipe, several thousand animal bones, and mussel shells. While mussel shells may be food debris, some valves may also be the special utensil that menstruating women reportedly used, the "shell spoons" of numerous reports (e.g. Webb and Funkhouser 1936), shells being a symbol of rebirth and fertility (Claassen 2008b). Activities that a woman may have engaged in while in seclusion are fiber processing, braiding, weaving, nut oil rendering, bathing, and pecking "hominy holes" (Claassen 2007).

In Kentucky there is a high correlation between rock shelters with so called hominy holes and rock art, forcing an acknowledgement that rock art at shelters may have been produced by women (Isom 2004). In North Carolina there is a similar situation found at 31Tv732, Parker Creek (Scott Ashcraft field report) in Transylvania County. The rock art here consists of a pecked cupule and crescent. This place too might have been a "women's shelter".

### *Dog Ritual Place*

A rock shelter with this possible ritual function may be Hidden Valley Rock Shelter in Bath County, Virginia. Here, two dog skulls were buried after the deposition of an infant (3–9 months old), and a 12–14 year old adolescent whose bones, when excavated, were mingled with numerous bones from a male. While the infant appears to have been a primary burial, the adolescent and male could have been secondary burials.

Claassen (2008a) has recently argued that dog burials are indicative of a rebalancing ritual performed most often at Archaic shell mounds and secondarily at caves, places appropriate for renewal. The Cherokee exemplify this belief about dogs (James 2006). Dog skulls, as well as entire carcasses, appear to have been used for rituals beginning in the Archaic (e.g., at the Kirkland site [Webb and Haag 1947]).

### *Hunting Shrines*

In addition to the possible retreat function for Charles Church rockshelter in Watauga County, we propose that this “shelter” was also a hunting shrine at some time. Hunting shrines at rock shelters are still in use today among the Maya where literally thousands of bones from each animal killed have been returned to the Guardian of the Animals (Brown 2005). Tom Whyte has inventoried 7,506 bone fragments of at least 32 taxa from the seven square meters excavated at Charles Church shelter, including no more than one individual of several species. Thousands of bones were encountered in Parker Creek, another possible seclusion place, in the homeland of Judaculla the hunter (Rodney Snedeker, personal communication, October 2009).

### *Initiation Places/Training Places/Oracle Places*

Among the caves where training and privation could have occurred are Bat Cave and Linville Caverns. Rock shelters that possibly could have served these functions would be larger than usual or darker than usual. Raven Rock in Cherokee County is a good candidate for an initiation location, judging from its large interior space; but until the roof fall is removed it will remain unexplored. Ashe County’s Ah45 is another large shelter, adjacent to a smaller shelter with a spring at the back.

### *Arrow Places*

By this label is meant a place where points and chipped items in general were appropriately left as offerings or as bait to call out a deity or spirit that was particularly attracted to stone. Boone Fork Rockshelter and Ward Rockshelter, tested by Burt Purrington, are candidates for this type of place given the metric of one point every 1.47sq ft and one point every 0.9 sq ft.

### *Healing Places*

Boone Fork Rockshelter is a candidate for a place where either healing occurred or a healer’s equipment was stored. Several quartz crystals were recovered.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

There is much to be done in the form of survey, testing, and excavation, including:

- Excavate larger areas of these sites—the majority of the 16 rock shelters that have been tested in western NC have exposures of fewer than 5 sq meters!
- Analyze ceramics, lithics, and fauna, and produce a report.
- Collect different faunal data than usual. There is reason to think that for offerings of fauna specific parts of the animal may have been used—particularly heads, wings, left sides—and that small animals were appropriate offerings. Faunal reports should strive to record parts and sides of all species and eliminate assumptions about accidental species.
- The presence of water is very important in some rituals and rock features with streams or springs were quite important ritually. We need to record the presence of water, distance to water, and the distance to any springs and waterfalls if known.
- Collaborate with cavers and hikers to record caves and shelters with artifacts. We also need to collaborate with geomorphologists and each other.

Reading ethnographies from Mexico and the United States, it is clear that many caves and rock shelters were frequently ritual loci. They were destinations for pilgrimages (e.g., Gatschet 1884), settings for specific rituals, and figured in annual rounds of ritual performance (see various articles in Brady and Prufer 2005; Prufer and Brady 2005).

Some ritually important rock shelters were “owned” by communities and the more scarce caves were often shared by several communities and distant pilgrims. Another suggestion is that we should be situating rock shelters and caves in a social environment, not only recording their geological and physical settings. Where would women seeking seclusion or individuals being initiated most likely have come from?

A quantification of the economic endeavor represented by stone, clay, bone, and shell items left at one ritual cave in Mexico (Dos Pilas) and its corresponding community found that 50% of the items recovered were found in the cave—representing a tremendous expenditure of human labor and resources for an Underworld ritual context (Brady 2005). We suggest that such an undertaking be performed for a cave or shelter and the corresponding habitation site.

Finally, we should stop assuming that rock shelters and caves were places for family campouts and begin to test alternative hypotheses for their uses. These and other landscape features were key elements in cosmology and ritual that we archaeologists have yet to appreciate.

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## APPENDIX 14-A

### CAVE AND ROCKSHELTER SITES OF WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

Ashe County	31AV90		31WT121
31AH7		Polk County	31WT126
31AH14	Alexander County	31PL4	31WT127
31AH43	31AX1	31PL5	31WT135
31AH45			31WT136
31AH46	Burke County	Swain County	31WT137
31AH52	31BK14	31SW144	31WT151
31AH53	31BK42	31SW145	31WT153
31AH54	31BK43	31SW148	31WT154
31AH76	31BK77	31SW493	31WT155
31AH77	31BK387		31WT157
31AH90	31BK469	Stokes County	31WT188
31AH91		31SK128	31WT205
31AH107	Buncombe County		31WT212
31AH108	31BN201	Transylvania County	31WT215
31AH109	31BN202	31TV589	31WT216
31AH110	31BN203	31TV590	31WT217
31AH112	31BN410	31TV726	31WT224
31AH113	31BN464		31WT225
31AH114		31TV732	31WT226
31AH118	Caldwell County	31TV740	31WT228
31AH119	31CW036	31TV742	31WT229
		31TV911	31WT230
Alleghany County	Graham County	(Petroglyphs)	31WT231
31AL1	31GH299	31TV958	31WT232
31AL9		(Petroglyphs)	31WT233
31AL12	Haywood County		31WT234
31AL14	31HW149	Watauga County	31WT236
31AL15	31HW231	31WT19	31WT243
31AL54		31WT 39	31WT244
31AL55	Jackson County	31WT 40	31WT245
31AL56	31JK210	31WT 48	31WT246
31AL67		31WT51	31WT252
31AL68	Macon County	31WT59	31WT310
31AL88	31MA135	31WT63	
31AL90	31MA427	31WT79	Yancey County
		31WT80	31YC11
Avery County	McDowell County	31WT81	31YC163
31AV29	31MC127	31WT82	
31AV60	31MC128	31WT83	
31AV89	31MC195	31WT105	

These site numbers were generated by searching the NC site file data base using keyword “cave”, “rock shelter”, bluff in site function and site type fields. Site numbers for Ashe Co were also augmented by reading the New River survey report. Beth Compton generated the list.