



Archaeologists brave the Rio Grande Gorge's steep rim to survey the area for signs of prehistoric Native American occupation.

# Surveying a Sacred Landscape

Archaeologists take on the cliffs and caves of the Rio Grande Gorge.

*text and photographs by* JULIAN SMITH

**I**T'S HARD TO HOLD your breath while squirming through a cave, especially one that's barely big enough to fit inside. But in this part of the Southwest, rodent droppings have been known to harbor hantavirus, a potentially deadly disease you can catch by inhaling the dust that surrounds the waste. I see a few piles in dark corners as I follow archaeology grad student Henry Pedersen through a two-story jumble of boulders above the Rio Grande River near Taos, New Mexico.

At the deepest part of the cave complex, Pedersen points out an area of flat soil. "We don't know for sure, but it might be a burial," he says

through the handkerchief over his mouth. Nearby reminders suggest Pueblo Indians may have used the site for ritual purposes: a bird bone that looks like it could be part of an ancient flute and a mammalian long bone shaft shattered, possibly from a rock fall.

We clamber over, under, and around black boulders the size of small cars, our way lighted by pencil-thin shafts of sunlight. It's half spelunking and half rock climbing—strenuous and a little creepy. I try not to reach for holds until I see Henry grab them first.

At the top of the pile of boulders we emerge, dirty and blinking, into full

June sunlight. Below us, Barnard College anthropologist Severin Fowles is cataloging and photographing petroglyphs. Fowles describes lines of dots, zigzags, abstract figures, and animal tracks while grad student Christina Perry takes notes and photographs them. Fellow students Jeff Spear and Kaet Heupe record stone chips and flakes, and potsherds among the juniper bushes that fill a small natural plaza in front of the boulder pile. Faint traces of rock walls honeycomb the dirt.

This team from Columbia University is one week into an ambitious survey of the Rio Grande Gorge, a steep-walled canyon that runs through

northern New Mexico. Home to the Chaco culture, the Jicarilla Apache, 19 Pueblo tribes, and a large chunk of the Navajo reservation, this part of the state has seen plenty of anthropologists and archaeologists over the years. But surprisingly, archaeologists have never formally surveyed the Rio Grande Gorge, Fowles says. Local amateurs located and sketched some sites during the twentieth century, but this is the first in-depth study of its kind. The project's main goal is to examine how the prehistoric Native Americans used this territory in their daily and spiritual lives.

"The canyon's ruggedness kept it [relatively] inaccessible," says Fowles. It's one of the few areas near Taos that remains almost undisturbed by development and outdoor enthusiasts. Still, every year, more and more sites are being discovered—and in some cases, disturbed—by boaters, rock climbers, and locals out for a walk. The natural hot springs that draw tourists to the edge of the river were long thought to have curative powers for conditions such as rheumatism. (Springs are considered sacred throughout the Pueblo world.)

Another goal of the project is to help reconnect the Native Americans of nearby Taos and Picuris pueblos with their heritage. Because of what they perceive as insensitive treatment by social scientists in the past, the tribes are often hesitant to cooperate today. But Fowles hopes that will change as his team continues to identify petroglyphs and other components of the sacred landscape that play a potentially significant role in their spiritual lives.

The team has begun a multiyear study of about 35 miles of the gorge through Taos County, as well as major side canyons, portions of the rim, and other places with good visibility or signs of previous occupants. "The gorge was a kind of oddity that archaeologists once saw primarily as a barrier to pre-Columbian people's movement," says Fowles. "Now we're thinking about it as a world unto

itself—a highly meaningful and elaborately marked world."

This particular pile of boulders across the river from the village of Pilar is called Houses of the Holy. The local nickname (from a Led Zeppelin album) describes the natural architecture and sacred significance so well that it was officially adopted by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), which manages the area. Chips and projectile points of rhyolite, quartzite, and obsid-



ian from as far away as the Great Plains show that people once gathered here and made hunting tools. Fragments of pottery with a high mica content, a type made by the Rio Grande Pueblos for centuries, show that Pueblo or Apache Indians stopped by more recently, Fowles says.

A set of deer antlers lying on a flat stone just inside one cave reveals more recent visitors. "New Agers have been coming pretty regularly," says Fowles, who found out about the site from locals. "This was an ancient sacred site, and now it's a contemporary sacred site."

**T**HE RIO GRANDE near Taos is a far cry from the wide, shallow waterway that forms the border between Texas and Mexico. Here the river has carved through hundreds of feet of basalt in the heart of the Rio Grande Rift, a split in the earth's crust stretching from central

Colorado to El Paso. Millions of years of eruptions in the Taos Plateau Volcanic Field buried the area in lava. Flowing water did the rest, leaving a deep canyon stretching from the Colorado state line to below Pilar.

The gorge is at its most dramatic just outside of Taos, 15 miles upriver from Houses of the Holy. West of the town, the flat, sage-dotted landscape plunges into an 800-foot-deep abyss. Drivers along Route 64 park and walk out onto the Rio Grande Gorge Bridge, a slender span that vibrates with every passing truck. In the summer, brightly colored rafts drift by below on their way to world-famous rapids downstream. Between the steep Sangre de Cristo Mountains east of Taos and the wind whipping up the boulder-strewn canyon walls, it's one of New Mexico's most spectacular spots. (The bridge has appeared in road-trip movies from *Easy Rider* to *Natural Born Killers*.)

People have been drawn here for millennia. Countless petroglyphs, stone ruins, spearpoints, and other evidence trace human occupation back to the Archaic period (ca. 8000 B.C.—A.D. 400). When refugees from the Anasazi culture arrived around the thirteenth century, fleeing the drought-stricken Four Corners region, they naturally settled near the biggest water source. (Their descendants became the Rio Grande Pueblos.) The gorge falls within the traditional territory of Taos and Picuris, New Mexico's two northernmost pueblos, whose inhabitants share the Tiwa language. Later, trade routes along the river and its tributaries brought other indigenous groups, such as the Apache and Ute.

While most of the canyon's terrain is too rugged to have been used for farming, its topography may have made it a good place for trapping antelope and deer, Fowles says. It surely played a major spiritual role in the lives of early inhabitants as well. "We can safely assume that the striking landscape would have always drawn commentary and reflection," Fowles says. The canyon appears in the oral histories of Pueblo Indians who live today along the river

to the south near Santa Fe. According to Fowles, the Rio Grande served as a major ceremonial "road" along which winter and summer kinship groups made stops as they traveled north to the major Pueblo town of Posi. He believes the petroglyphs may have marked "potentially charged cosmological locations" on the way.

The canyon's geology makes it an outstanding archaeological research site. The dark basalt is perfect for petroglyphs; caves and overhangs are everywhere; and the dry weather preserves artifacts wonderfully. "What archaeologists forget is that our perspective of landscape isn't the same as that of indigenous peoples," says James Snead of George Mason University. "Places that we find marginal or hard to get to didn't necessarily look the same to an ancestral Puebloan. We make the mistake of saying, 'It's hard for us to get to, so it must have been hard for them.'" Quite the contrary, he says. "They knew it intimately."

"The landscape for Pueblo people is full of meaning," Snead says. "Places like canyons, lakes, streams, and mountains can be landmarks that represent places they passed in their wanderings [both literal ones through the Four Corners

**Petroglyphs on south-facing rocks at the site of "Kissing Fish" show an abstract figure, right, and rows of lines, below.**

and symbolic journeys taken over time] to their current locations, or ceremonial locales." As an example, Taos Pueblo oral tradition held that the tribe came from the sacred waters of Blue Lake, high in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. It took 64 years of lobbying, protests, and appeals before the Pueblo won back title to the lake from the U.S. government in 1970.

**T**HE DAY AFTER we visit the ritual cave, I accompany Fowles's team on a hike farther upriver into wild scenery of cacti, sagebrush,



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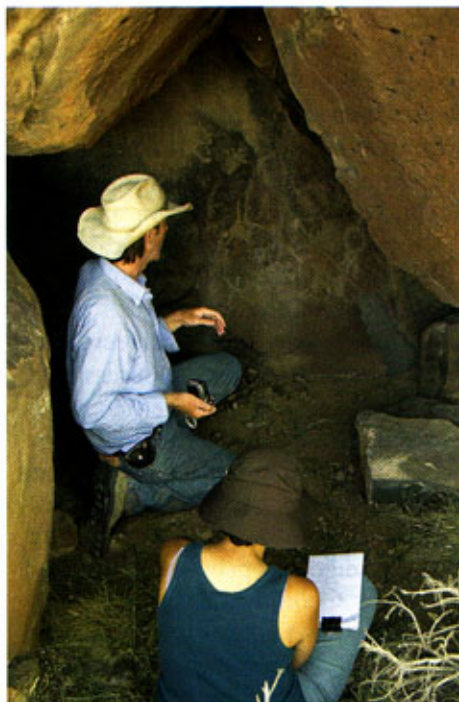
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and stone. We reach a lower cave, which turns out to be only a few feet high. Steel bolts in the rock face show that climbers have been here. Swallows swoop like fighter planes as the group spreads out to look for artifacts. After a one-hour survey, all we've found are a few pieces of carbonized wood under the overhang and two small, round depressions on a fallen boulder the size of a refrigerator. Fowles says they are probably cupules, where women ground out parts of the rock and consumed the powder to enhance their fertility.

On the climb up to the next cave the going gets harder; the path is steep and crumbling. Access is the major concern during the survey. Only a fraction of the survey area is near a road or trail. The same rough terrain that has kept visitors out makes it dangerous just to get there. We have to work our way out along a narrow shelf between cliff bands 200 feet above the first cave. Boulders and sharp-edged yuccas slow our progress. This cave turns out to be just a dark overhang too shallow to provide any shelter.

A short rock scramble brings us to a gently undulating sagebrush plain. Everyone forms a loosely spaced line and begins walking slowly south, eyes to the ground. Each piece of worked material gets a shout: "Flake!" "Obsidian flake!" Fowles identifies a two-inch-long point as probably late Archaic, made around 1000 B.C. The sun is out in full blast and blue-bellied clouds are massing over the mountains.

Another site, named "Kissing Fish," after its most distinctive petroglyph, occupies the mouth of a short stone canyon that runs perpendicular to the rim. It ends abruptly in a notch the size of a small house, opening onto the sweeping space of the gorge. "This is where we'd look for signs of hunting," Fowles says. "People would chase animals here, drive them over the edge." Dozens of petroglyphs dot the south-facing rocks. The team marks each with a yellow flag stuck in a crack. Historic names and dates—one reads 1912—have been carved next to images so old they've started to darken again with



Anthropologist Severin Fowles and graduate student Christina Perry catalogue petroglyphs at the site called Houses of the Holy.

natural patination. An eight-inch-tall figure with horns holds what appears to be a spear in each hand. The icon that gives the site its name looks like either a pair of eyes or fat smooching guppies.

"This was an exciting summer," Fowles says later. "It really opened our eyes to the density of materials in the gorge." In one month of surveying, the team covered about two square miles of the lower gorge. They mapped and recorded lithic scatters dating to the late Archaic (1800 B.C.—A.D. 400) and scatters of both prehistoric Pueblo ceramics and micaceous pottery that likely indicate Apache camps. A handful of rock shrines were probably Puebloan and pre-Columbian.

Another exciting discovery was a Puebloan eagle trap consisting of a masonry-lined hole in the ground just large enough to hide a man. "We knew the Hopi and the southern Rio Grande Pueblos used them, but it's not the sort of thing you typically encounter on a survey," says Fowles. "It really blew me out of the water." Using a dead rabbit for bait, the hunter would wait beneath

a roof with a hole large enough for his hand. When an eagle landed, he would grab it by the foot, pull it down into the hole with him, and subdue it by hand. The bird would be kept alive and used in ceremonies.

The team located and photographed close to 2,000 petroglyphs, mostly Archaic, Puebloan, and early Spanish. Rock-art sites are typically clustered along travel routes and near river confluences and prominent geographical features. Complex and overlapping images are common; one rock near Pilar bore Archaic, Pueblo, Spanish Christian, and modern images. At the largest petroglyph site, the team found an average of two glyphs per square meter over an area of 450 square meters. "The gorge appears to have one of the largest concentrations of Archaic petroglyphs in the northern Rio Grande," Fowles says.

Fowles plans on at least four more years of surveying farther up the gorge with larger crews. It won't be easy. The

upper canyon has steep walls and few trails. Even though the initial 2007 survey focused on the more easily accessible lower canyon, the crew still had to swim across the river with their gear in plastic bags more than once to reach sites.

Locals provided lots of useful information during the first season—river rafters in particular knew about many sites—and Fowles plans to involve them even more in the future. The project is being coordinated with the BLM, the primary landholder in the study area, as well as the Fort Burgwin Research Center of Southern Methodist University. "The BLM is very much in support of the project," Fowles says, since the agency lacks the manpower to survey the resources they're supposed to protect.

The team will also consult with local Hispanic leaders, whose body of knowledge often reaches back centuries, and will also try to involve the traditionally reticent Taos and Picuris

Pueblos. (Although one Taos tribe member who prefers not to be named helped interpret some of the team's findings, neither tribe responded to requests for comments.)

Fowles plans to investigate more caves, using painters' breathing masks to filter out any stray viruses. They'll also take a closer look at contemporary graffiti as the most recent example of human use of this special place. In one cave, whose entrance was spray-painted "Cave of No Return," the team descended 55 feet into a large open space that was covered with graffiti by local gangs.

New Mexico may be one of the most archaeologically surveyed places in the world, Fowles says, but there are still many parts left to explore. "Really, it is the case that the more we know about an area, the more we realize how much there is still to learn." ■

*Julian Smith is a travel and science writer and photographer.*



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