Carolyn Boyd guides her pickup down a cliffside trail overlooking Dead Mans Pass, a limestone canyon cut deep into the backcountry of southwest Texas. A ring of black vultures circles overhead. Boyd slows the truck and scans the canyon for what has drawn their interest. On top of a boulder, splayed out like a ritual sacrifice, is a half-eaten goat carcass. "Mountain lion," she says.

The region known as the Lower Pecos is an arid 21,000-square-mile expanse of southwest Texas and northern Mexico surrounding the confluence of the Pecos River and the Rio Grande. The land is barbed with cacti, teeming with rattlesnakes, and riven with impassable canyons. But more than 4,000 years ago, these barrens were home to a flourishing culture of hunter-gatherers, creators of some of the world’s most complex and beautiful prehistoric rock art. The literal meaning of those paintings had been dismissed as an unsolvable mystery—until recently.

Boyd parks at the bottom of the canyon. In her early fifties, with high cheekbones and dark hair pulled back under a hat, she is both elegant and hardy, like a pioneer woman from a classic Western. She sets a brisk pace up the side of the canyon. Her destination is Delicado Shelter, one of some 300 shallow caves in the region known for paintings of human figures, deer, canines, felines, birds, rabbits, snakes, and other desert animals. Boyd, an archaeologist and director of SHUMLA (Studying Human Use of Materials, Land, and Art), an education and research center in Comstock, Texas, will spend the
OF THE WHITE SHAMAN

Ancient rock paintings near the Rio Grande contain hidden messages about a mysterious 4,000-year-old religion. Now one archaeologist has learned to read them. by WILL HUNT

afternoon scouring the shelter for insight into the ancient residents and their spiritual world.

Through decades of dogged work, Boyd has also developed a system to understand this enigmatic art. Working like a detective, she discovered a symbolic code that reveals narratives in the paintings, which she believes can be read, almost like an ancient language. Just as finding the Rosetta stone in Egypt enabled linguists to decipher ancient hieroglyphs, these paintings help unlock the secrets of a majestic religious system that blanketed Mesoamerica nearly four millennia before the arrival of Columbus. Boyd has discovered that myths and rituals similar to those written in the rocks have survived in the Huichol, a modern tribe now living in the mountains of western Mexico, and in other cultures throughout Mexico and the American Southwest.

GENIES ON THE WALL
When Boyd first visited the Lower Pecos more than 20 years ago, she had no intention of becoming an archaeologist. At the time, she was an artist living in Old Town Spring, Texas, with her four-year-old son, Jeff, making a small living selling watercolors out of a local gallery. But when she gazed up at the paintings on the shelter walls, she was stunned. The largest of the 4,000-year-old murals stretched over 200 feet, containing hundreds of red, yellow, black, and white images. Gigantic human figures swooped on the walls overhead like genies escaping from magic lamps. Some wore fabulous headdresses or gripped scepterlike objects; others appeared
to be half animal, with wings or antlers. There were felines with bristling fur, deer with delicate antlers, canines with tiny teeth. The largest figures reached up 30 feet; creating them would have required enormous scaffoldings and incalculable hours with crude brushes and mineral paints.

in the region. The shaman was a tribe’s liaison with the spirit world. During rituals, he would fast, dance, or eat hallucinogenic plants to induce an out-of-body trance in which he would travel into the otherworld. There, he fought off demons or consulted the spirits of the ancestors before regaining consciousness and relating his experiences to the rest of the tribe.

Researchers suspected that the paintings conveyed some aspect of the shamanic ritual, but most thought the rock art would never be truly understood. Archaeologists usually learn about prehistoric art from the ancient artists’ descendants, who continue the traditions of their ancestors. But in the Lower Pecos, those who created the paintings had vanished. No one knew why they left or where they went, making it impossible to identify their descendants. “Any attempt at interpretation can only be speculative,” Boyd read in Texas A&M archaeologist Harry Shafer’s book Ancient Texans. “The meanings are lost when a culture comes to an end.”

**ORDER OUT OF CHAOS**

For Boyd, the prospect of an unsolvable mystery made the paintings only more compelling. A few months later, she returned to a rock shelter called White Shaman (shown in the photo above and in an illustration by Boyd at right). Carved into a limestone bluff near the confluence of the Pecos River and the Rio Grande, the shelter marked the geographic center of the region. Boyd was deeply impressed by the frieze of crimson, black, and yellow human figures covering the back wall, especially the shimmering white figure that gave the shelter its name.

Boyd began sketching the paintings, studying them carefully. Archaeologists believed that the images at White Sham...
man were essentially unrelated, each depicting an individual ritual, and at first glance, the mural did seem chaotic: Swarms of indecipherable markings surrounded figures painted one on top of the other.

But looking at the mural with an artist’s eye, Boyd saw something different. She noticed a row of five identical human figures spaced evenly across the length of the mural. The design had to be deliberate. “I saw a carefully planned composition, governed by patterns,” she says. If these patterns could be broken down and identified, she thought, perhaps the ancient artists’ lost messages could be retrieved.

Boyd knew she would need more than a few sketches to do that. She had to rely not on the instinct of the artist but the hard science of the archaeologist. So in 1991, at the age of 33, Boyd enrolled as an anthropology major at Texas A&M and told Harry Shafer, founder of the department’s archaeology program, that she wanted to do an interpretive study on Lower Pecos rock art. Although Shafer had dismissed the possibility of interpreting the paintings in his book, he signed off on her proposal.

Boyd froze. She had seen these images before. Back at College Station, she tracked down a 1930s book of rock art drawings and turned to a rendering of Rattlesnake Canyon. Near the center of the panel was a winged human figure escaping from magic lamps. Some wore fabulous headdresses or gripped scepters.

Boyd began with a comparative study of two painted rock shelters called Rattlesnake Canyon and Panther Cave. During long weekends, she would drop Jeff off at his dad’s, load her camping gear into her Toyota, and make the seven-hour drive to the Lower Pecos.

One afternoon that fall, Boyd stood beneath the tawny overhang of Panther Cave, where ancient artists had painted hundreds of black-, red-, and saffron-colored human and animal figures in what looked like a jumbled fray. Sketch pad in hand, she studied a human figure about two feet tall on the panel’s right side. The figure (see page 54) had wings coming down from its arms; it hovered beneath a circle with a long, wavy line attached to it, nearly identical to what she had seen at Panther Cave. A survey of drawings from other shelters revealed dozens more of this pattern. Like the figure at Panther Cave, the human figures all displayed animal attributes, such as wings, deer antlers,
rabbit ears, or fur. “If they were painting these images over and over, they had to have been significant,” she thought. But what did they mean?

Boyd found answers in studies of tribes throughout Mexico and the American Southwest, where shamans consistently described their cosmos as vertically tiered: Spirits were said to live in heaven, on Earth, or in the underworld. She then reexamined the humans in the paintings. They were placed above, below, and on top of the wavy lines. Could she be looking at 4,000-year-old depictions of shamans journeying into the underworld?

Boyd hunted for clues. One came from Ralph Beals, a UCLA anthropologist who studied the Yaqui, a tribe in northwestern Mexico and southern Arizona. In Beals’s work, a Yaqui shaman said that when he journeyed to the underworld, he “passed through the body of a snake.”

This was a pattern: Nearly every tribe in the region envisioned a serpent as the divider between the earthly and the spiritual realms, explaining the wavy lines on the Lower Pecos rocks. The same kinds of stories explained the animal adornments; when shamans traveled to the underworld, each had a “spirit animal” for protector and guide.

**PORTAL TO THE UNDERWORLD**

On Easter weekend in 1992, Boyd visited Mystic Shelter, about 30 miles east of White Shaman. At the foot of the shelter, her eyes opened wide. Two horizontal stone ledges, space beneath the line was a row of human figures in black. Here was the whole pattern—the human figure covered in fur, probably the shaman; the arched, wavy line, the serpent dividing earthly and spirit realms; and, at the line’s center, the portal through which the shaman could descend. As

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spring, Boyd rolled up her pants and waded across the Devils River to Cedar Springs, a horseshoe-shaped site a few miles north of Mystic Shelter (see photo above). Cedar Springs had a cascade of human figures holding spear-throwers and long staffs adorned with feathers. As Boyd scrutinized the paintings, three images, one beside the other, caught her eye. She had seen the same group of images at White Shaman.

Again Boyd dove into the ethnographic texts. This time her first clue came from a photograph of a yarn painting by a modern Huichol artist. It depicted a deer with dots on its body and attached to its antlers, just like the curious black-tipped antlers she had seen in the rock art.

The Huichol people are almost unique in the Americas. Protected by the fortresslike Sierra Madre mountains, the group had escaped notice by Europeans when they arrived in the 16th century. Huichol culture remained virtually unchanged, providing a rare 21st-century window into pre-Columbian times.

In the literature, Boyd read of a peculiar Huichol pilgrimage during the rainy season to Wirikuta, a desert plateau they considered their sacred homeland in the northeast. There they collected peyote, a hallucinogenic cactus that helps them contact ancestral spirits in the otherworld.

Boyd was intrigued by the way the Huichol gathered peyote. They stayed low and moved across the plateau holding bows and arrows. It was the same way they hunted deer. To the Huichol, deer and peyote were a single sacred symbol. When one of the pilgrims found a peyote cactus peering aboveground in the desert, he pulled his bowstring taut and shot an arrow through its center. He was “slaying” the peyote, but he was also slaying a deer. Boyd recalled the speared dots and deer in the ancient paintings. She wondered: Could she find a connection to peyote there as well?

For most of the year, peyote stays hidden below ground; only when it rains does it become visible on the surface. Deer follow the same pattern. During drought in arid environments, deer are absent, but as soon as it rains, they travel...
great distances to eat sprouting vegetation. Deer, peyote, and rain: The three are all linked.

In an old excavation report Boyd read that archaeologists had discovered remnants of peyote cacti from a site near White Shaman. The peyote, which had been flattened into button shapes and mixed with other plant materials, dated to about a thousand years before the paintings. The molded buttons were proof that the ancient inhabitants of the Lower Pecos had used peyote in rituals.

When Boyd returned to White Shaman, she studied a human figure with deer antlers tipped with black dots. Surrounding him were fringed dots and deer, both with spears sticking out of them.

What had once seemed like an incoherent scramble now appeared obvious. The fringed dots on the wall were buttons of peyote stuck with spears, much like the Huichol peyote hunt in Wirikuta. The deer figure with dotted antlers corresponded to the deer with peyote on his antlers in the modern Huichol yarn paint-
ings. The deeper Boyd delved, the more the mural seemed like a kind of handbook, “a 4,000-year-old instruction manual for how to properly conduct a religious ritual.”

THE STORY OF CREATION

It wasn’t until 2007, when Boyd was studying the Huichol myth of creation, that it all made total sense. In the beginning, the story goes, the first humans ventured through the watery underworld in the West. Led by a sacred deer, they lit their way with torches, heading east until they emerged at Dawn Mountain. There the deer sacrificed himself, allowing the humans to kill him. After he died, peyote sprouted from his body and the tips of his antlers. When the humans ate the deer they were transformed into deities, and the cosmos began.

The next time Boyd examined the mural at White Shaman (see close-up at right), she took a deep breath. Every detail seemed to match. The five human figures were the original humans, making the journey eastward. Painted above each was a different otherworldly figure, including the White Shaman. These represented the deities into which the humans transformed.

Below the human figure farthest right was a large, horizontal band of faded black-and-red lines. Knowing that the Huichol associated black and red with the underworld, Boyd believed this pictograph represented the watery underworld in the West, from which the first humans emerged. Next to the underworld was an isolated red deer; this had to be the sacred deer that led the humans on the journey east. (Note: The red deer on the opposite page may seem to be facing west, but the ancient rock artists always depicted west on the right of a pictogram.)

On the mural’s left-hand side, meanwhile, she found a wavy brown line shaped like an arch. This was Dawn Mountain, the final destination and the place where the sun rose for the first time. However, of California State University at Chico thinks Boyd’s links make sense. “On a basic level, hunting and gathering people all had similar relationships to the environment. So there are archetypes that we should expect to see in the paintings,” she says.

Boyd herself takes great care to qualify her theory. She says it wasn’t actually the Huichol who made the 4,000-year-old paintings—it was their distant ancestors or relations. minutes he studied the mural. He pointed to the watery, black-and-red underworld in the West, to the antler-headed human, to the humans marching across the rock face, then to the deities rising above each of the humans.

Then the shaman started weeping. “These are my grandparents’ grandfathers’ grandfathers’ grandfathers,“ he said through his tears.

Will Hunt is a writer in New York.