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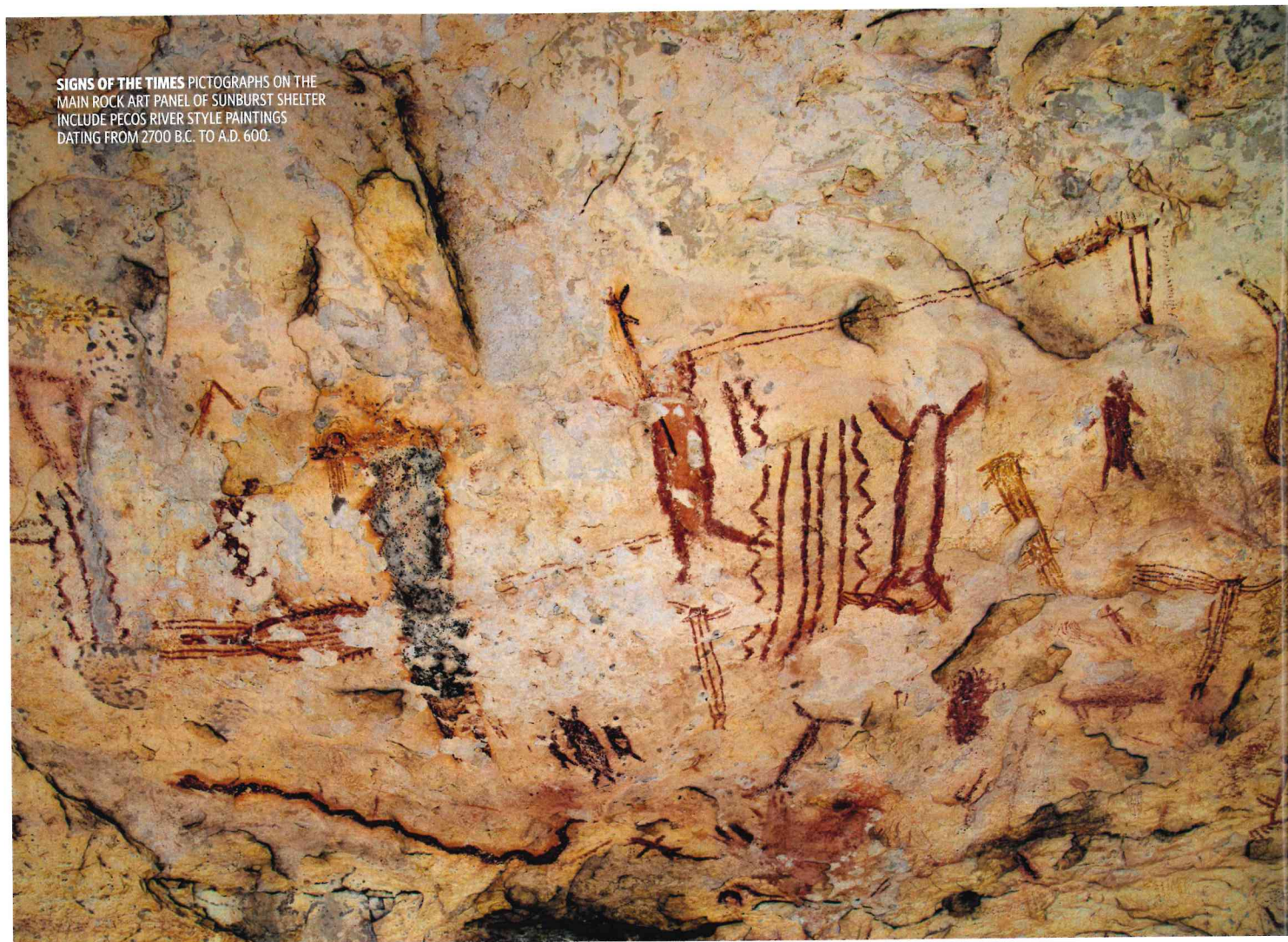
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SIGNS OF THE TIMES PICTOGRAPHS ON THE MAIN ROCK ART PANEL OF SUNBURST SHELTER INCLUDE PECOS RIVER STYLE PAINTINGS DATING FROM 2700 B.C. TO A.D. 600.

ARCHAIC ROCK ART

Saving America's Oldest Chronicles

Paintings from 2700 B.C. to the A.D. 1500s adorn the canyonlands of Texas. A new project is preserving them in high-tech images, so if they ever disappear, their thrilling story can still be told.

They saw the Europeans arriving and drew them: men on horseback and figures in Spanish dress. Long before then—as early as 4,700 years ago—the hunter-gatherers of the Southwest had been painting scenes from their lives on the canyons where the Pecos River meets the

Rio Grande. Filling the walls with pictures of people and animals, these ancient inhabitants of southwestern Texas inscribed the stories of early America.

Dammed and Saved

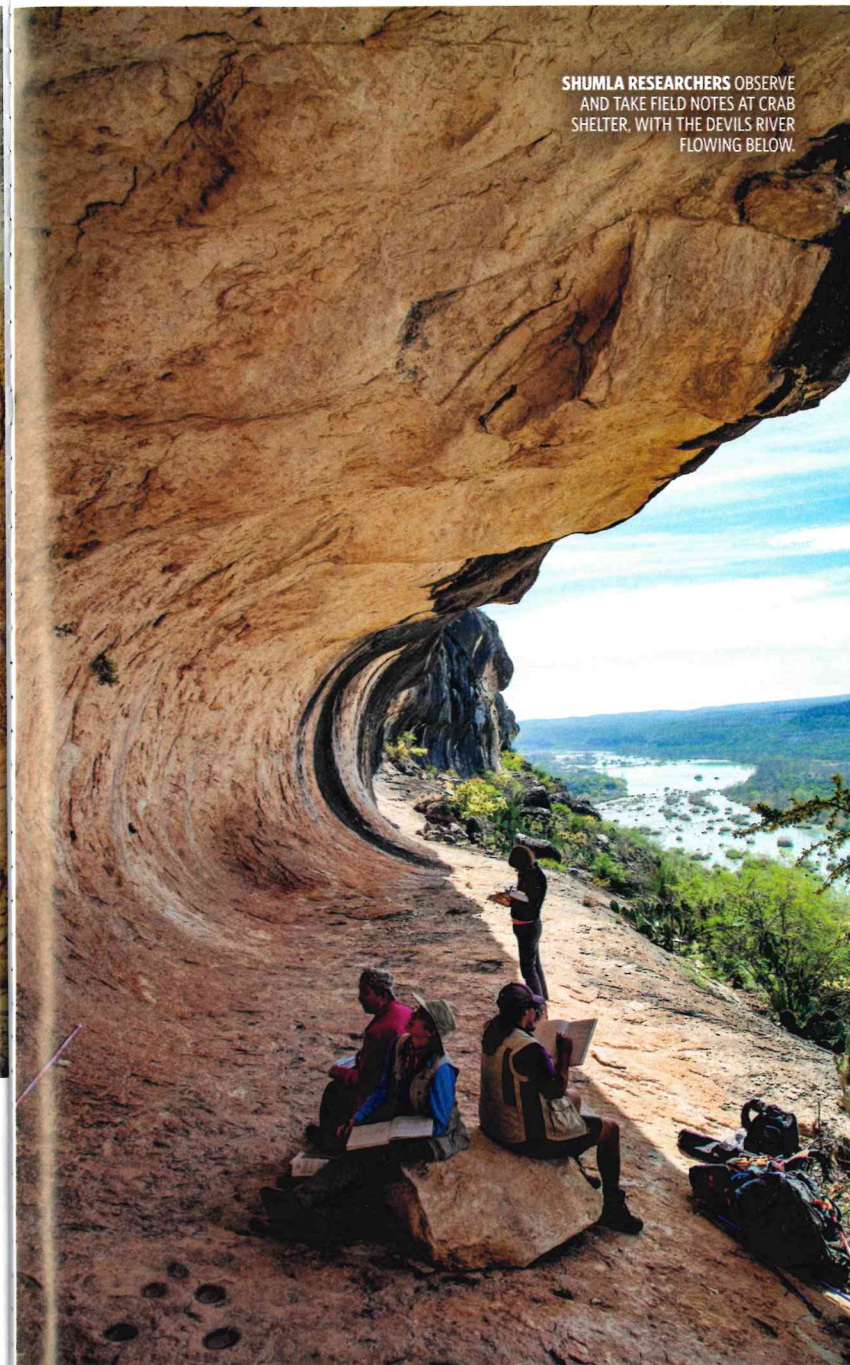
Since the 1930s, when documentation of these mysterious sites was first made,

there have been huge strides in deciphering the vivid narratives within the murals. But this unique chronicle of thousands of years of human history, which holds the key to the worldview of ancient American societies, is increasingly under threat. Many sites were lost when the Rio Grande was dammed in 1969, and those

that remain are under threat from further flooding.

But there is hope. Based in Comstock, at the heart of the lower Pecos region, the Shumla Archaeological Research & Education Center has hit on a way of preserving the murals for posterity.

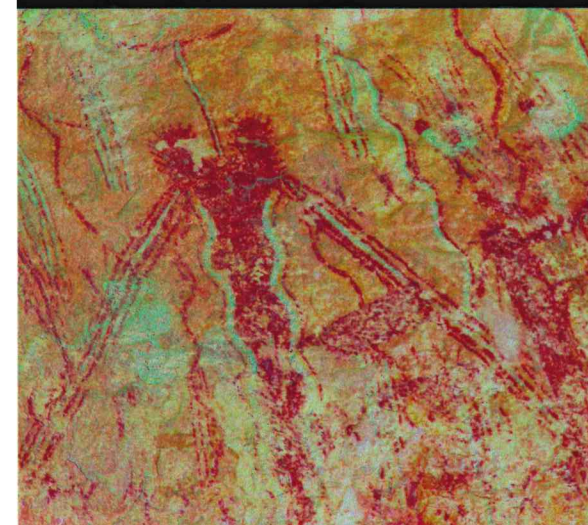
Founded in 1998 by archaeologist Carolyn Boyd,



SHUMLA RESEARCHERS OBSERVE AND TAKE FIELD NOTES AT CRAB SHELTER, WITH THE DEVILS RIVER FLOWING BELOW.



A POLYCHROMATIC PAINTING at Crab Shelter, carbon-dated to 1200 B.C., is faded and blurry (above). Scholars used Decorrelation Stretch software to enhance it, revealing a much sharper image (below) of an elaborate anthropomorphic figure. To study these artworks, Shumla researchers often work in close quarters (bottom).



PHOTOS: JEROD ROBERTS, SHUMLA ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH & EDUCATION CENTER

Shumla has begun a three-year project to carry out a comprehensive documentation of rock art sites across Val Verde County.

Named for the Library of Alexandria in Egypt, an ancient repository of all the learning in the world, Shumla's Alexandria Project will use the latest in imaging

technology to create a massive digital archive of America's oldest visual texts. Even if the artwork disappears, this library of images will preserve their glory, down to the very faintest brushstroke.

Far-Flung

The Alexandria Project is ambitious in scope. Shumla



JEROD ROBERTS, SHUMLA ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH & EDUCATION CENTER

CONNECTING THE DOTS

ARTIST, ARCHAEOLOGIST, and Shumla founder, Carolyn Boyd (right) first encountered the rock art of the lower Pecos in the late 1980s. She was particularly struck by a mural known as the White Shaman, a white figure surrounded by multicolored forms, which she is observing in the image. When a civilization disappears, the meaning behind its art is lost, and scholars must piece the meanings together. Some archaeologists theorize that the array of images are unrelated, but Boyd was convinced they all played a role in a unified story—if only she could crack the code. She started spotting patterns at other sites in the lower Pecos region, including

antlered humanlike figures. Boyd later studied a modern painting of antlered figures and deer antlers decorated with mysterious dots, the work of an artist of the Huichol people of western Mexico. The Huichol associate deer with peyote, a hallucinogenic cactus that they believe can foster a bond between the living and the dead. Boyd knew that similar deer and dot motifs also appear in the ancient Pecos works. Once Boyd connected these with the elements at other sites, a complex narrative started to take shape: A creation myth, in which deer, peyote, and antlered humanlike figures, all play a powerful mystical role in the process of life, death, and rebirth.

founder Boyd—an award-winning co-author of *The White Shaman Mural: An Enduring Creation Narrative in the Rock Art of the Lower Pecos*—has already dedicated years to in-depth examinations of key Pecos sites. Her database shows there are many more sites to document,

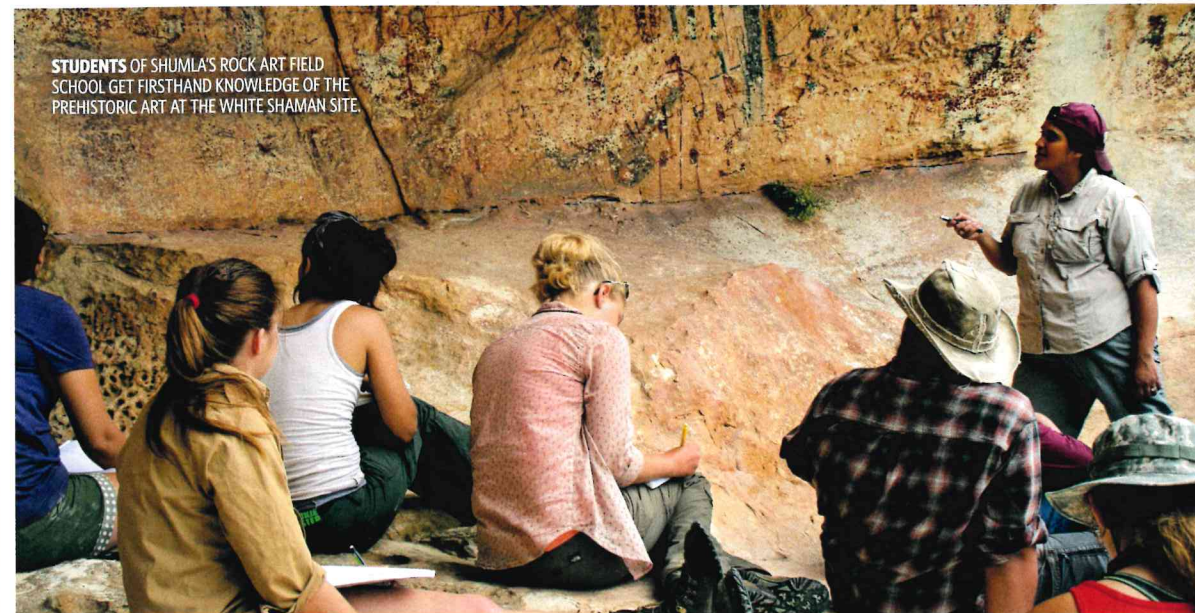
scattered across 8,000 square miles of rugged canyonlands. As part of a National Geographic Society-funded pilot, Shumla staff began the first phase of the Alexandria Project last year, to test research methods. “Let’s just say it was fun, but incredibly tiring,” said Shumla

archaeologist Jerod Roberts, part of the team that studied 10 sites for the pilot. Scrambling onto hollowed ledges where much of the art nestles, the team collected data on mural sizes, the number of identified figures, techniques, and the condition of a site. The mural

panels were imaged using a Gigapan system, which takes hundreds of overlapping photos from one viewpoint to create a single, highly detailed image for future study.

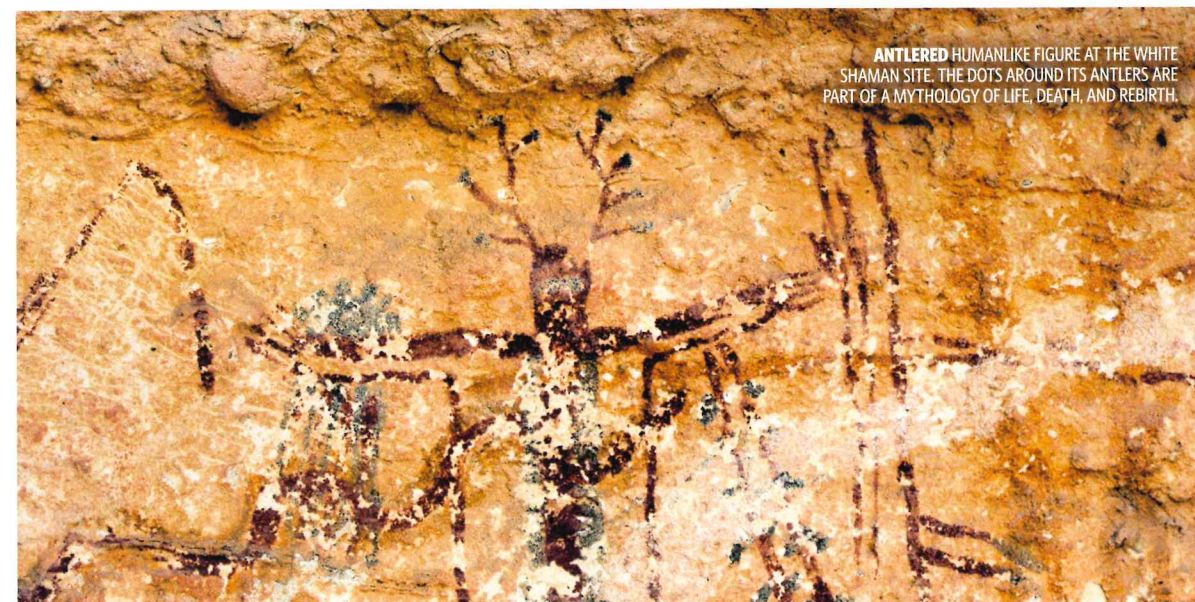
High Art

Inhabited for more than 10,000 years, the cavities in the canyons of the lower Pecos were formed when soft limestone, sandwiched between harder layers, was gradually eroded by natural forces.



STUDENTS OF SHUMLA'S ROCK ART FIELD SCHOOL GET FIRSTHAND KNOWLEDGE OF THE PREHISTORIC ART AT THE WHITE SHAMAN SITE.

AMANDA CASTANEDA, SHUMLA ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH & EDUCATION CENTER



ANTLERED HUMANLIKE FIGURE AT THE WHITE SHAMAN SITE. THE DOTS AROUND ITS ANTLERS ARE PART OF A MYTHOLOGY OF LIFE, DEATH, AND REBIRTH.

SHUMLA ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH & EDUCATION CENTER

These “rock shelters” were a boon for early societies seeking refuge from the elements. Some were also used for burial, and others for cooking. Around 2700 B.C., some of these lofty shelters started to serve as art galleries when

their long, curved walls were covered with images. These drawings may appear cryptic to modern eyes, but they were full of meaning for their creators. For many years, Boyd’s research has centered on decoding the complex rituals they depict, a story

closely tied to the plants and animals of the region. Research has identified several stages in the development of the Pecos murals. The earliest forms are characterized by stick figures of humans and animals engaging in group activities. Later, the figures evolved into distinctive multicolored designs, known as Pecos River Style, which featured striking humanlike figures. Around A.D. 1000, abstract motifs—zigzags,

herringbones, and lattices—began to appear, along with realistically portrayed animals. As central to American heritage as the Lascaux or Altamira caves are to Europe, the age of the sites belies their vulnerability. “When we visit and document any given site, we treat it as if it may be lost tomorrow,” explains Roberts. In the face of flood or other events, he says, the Alexandria Project “may be our only shot.” ■

This art may appear cryptic to modern eyes. But it was suffused with meaning for its creators.