In 2007, a group of avocational cavers saw engravings on the walls of a cave in the eastern Florida Panhandle. They contacted the Cave Archaeology Research Team from the University of Tennessee, who visited the site and documented eight petroglyphs on the walls of the cave. Given the subject matter of the petroglyphs, artifacts found on the floor, and the extent of weathering of the petroglyphs, it is likely that these images are prehistoric, perhaps Late Woodland, in age. This is the first instance of cave art south of the Fall Line and only the second example of prehistoric rock art in Florida.

Introduction

Prehistoric use of caves in the karst lands of southeastern North America has been a topic of great interest to science in general, and to archaeologists in particular, since the early nineteenth century, when Pleistocene megafauna and mummified human burials were discovered in deep Kentucky and Tennessee caves (Meloy 1984; Mercer 1897; Miller 1812). Over the nearly two centuries since those discoveries, much exploration and analysis has been done, notably by Watson and her colleagues in the 1960s in the Mammoth Cave region, where, we would argue, modern American cave archaeology was born (Watson 1969, 1974). We now know of thousands of cave sites in the Southeast, some witnessing prehistoric human activity many miles into the dark zone recesses of great karst systems (Simek 2008). Prehistoric people explored caves, used caves for human burial and deposition into vertical shafts, mined minerals, chert, and clay from deposits deep underground, and undertook ceremonies of profound sacred character in the darkness (Simek 1998; Watson 1986). Into the ceremonial category of cave use we place the now numerous examples (more than 60) of prehistoric cave art sites that have been documented in the Southeast over the past two decades (Simek and Cressler 2005). Until recently, nearly all of the known cave art sites were located in the limestone tablelands of the Appalachian Plateaus physiographic province (Figure 1), comprising the Cumberland Plateau, the Ridge and Valley Province, and the Highland Rim, and their equivalents from Alabama and Georgia to Kentucky (Simek and Cressler 2001). A few sites are known on the western side of the Mississippi Valley (Boszhhardt 2003; Diaz-Granados and Duncan 2000) and three in Virginia and West Virginia (Simek et al. 2000). No cave art sites were known below the Fall Line on the Coastal Plain of the Gulf of Mexico.

In 2007, a group of avocational cavers exploring a small cave on private land near Florida Caverns State Park in Jackson County, Florida, saw fine engravings on the walls and ceiling of the cave. They contacted Alan Cressler, who visited the site and, based on what he saw there, arranged for Jan Simek to come to Florida from Tennessee to see the engravings. In September 2007, we visited the cave and documented the petroglyphs. We also saw artifacts from the cave, which we were allowed to show to Jason O'Donoughue (then at the University of Tennessee), who is familiar with the prehistoric archaeology of northern Florida, before returning the artifacts to the owners. Based on the nature of the petroglyphs and their artifact associations, we believe that the engravings represent prehistoric art, the first cave art documented in Florida and only the second rock-art site of any kind discovered in the state. We designated this site 59th Unnamed Cave, according to a naming convention that we have used for many years (Simek et al. 1997).

Prehistoric cave use in Florida has been known for some time. Clarence Simpson and Charles Fairbanks surveyed and excavated at various localities in Florida Caverns State Park near Marianna in northern Florida as the Park was being developed in the 1940s (Fairbanks 1941; Simpson 1941). Ripley Bullen also undertook archaeological work in several caves around the same time (Bullen 1949). Florida caves, especially the deep karst springs related to the Florida Aquifer, have yielded a rich archaeological record extending back into the Paleoindian period (Clausen et al. 1979). Archaic and later peoples also used Florida's caves wherever they were available (Bullen and Benson 1964). As in the north, Florida caves were used for habitation (in the entrance chambers), were explored to depth, may have been mined for clay and other minerals, and were places for human burial. The one aspect of Southeast cave use that was not known in Florida until now is cave art production. Indeed, prehistoric rock art generally is very rare in Florida, in contrast to states farther to the north. The only known example is a human face effigy on Stele 1 from the Crystal River Mound Site, which may be Woodland in age (Bullen 1966). Thus the discovery of engravings in 59th Unnamed Cave is important from a variety of perspectives.
Figure 1. Map showing the distribution of known prehistoric cave art sites in the Southeast before the discovery of 59th Unnamed Cave in Florida.

The Geologic and Archaeological Context of the Petroglyphs

59th Unnamed Cave is a small solution karst feature formed in Marianna limestone. This sedimentary rock, laterally equivalent to the Lower Suwannee limestone in north-central Florida, is of Lower Oligocene age (ca 32–33 Mya). It is a light-colored, argillaceous marine deposit that is quite fossiliferous, containing rich foraminifera, mollusks, and rare vertebrates (Huddleston 1993). This character will be seen easily in some of the figures that accompany this article. Inside 59th Unnamed Cave, the walls formed by karst processes have loose and friable surfaces, and preservation of engravings is, we believe, problematic.

A number of artifacts were recovered from the surface of sediments in 59th Unnamed Cave, including marine mollusk shells, a few lithics, and twenty-two prehistoric ceramic sherds. The lithics are nondiagnostic debitage, but the ceramics do contain some chronological information, and they merit a brief description. All specimens have a compact paste with moderate to abundant amounts of very fine sand. Coarse sand and larger subangular quartz inclusions are present in most sherds, generally ranging from 0.5 to 3.0 mm. One sherd, specimen 59-001, is unique in having abundant subangular and angular quartz inclusions as large as 5 mm. Sherd thickness measures between 5 and 10 mm; for rim sherds, the thickness measurements were taken 1 cm below the lip, and for all other sherds we calculated an average of the maximum and minimum values.

Surface treatment can be categorized generally as check stamped (n = 10), plain (n = 4), or indeterminate/weathered (n = 8). Of the eight sherds categorized as indeterminate/weathered, three are possibly check stamped. All of the decorated sherds exhibit relatively fine check stamping (2–5 mm), which ranges from square to rectangular in shape (Figure 2). On at least two sherds the checks are oriented at a diagonal to the orifice. One specimen, 59-009, exhibits check stamping that has been smoothed over.

The sample includes five rim sherds, most of which are direct or slightly inverted, folded, and thinned. Lip morphology varies from flattened to rounded or pointed. Four of the five rim sherds are check stamped, while the surface treatment of the fifth is indeterminate but possibly check stamped. One body sherd and one rim sherd were tentatively cross-mended (59-014 and 59-015), and several other sherds are similar enough in paste characteristics and surface treatment to suggest that they originate from the same vessel.

The plain and weathered specimens exhibit greater paste variation than the check stamped sherds and cannot be assigned confidently to a specific ceramic series or type. However, the decorated sherds show strong affinity to the type Wakulla Check Stamped, which dates to the Late Woodland Weeden Island period in northwest Florida, ca. A.D. 750–1000. Willey and Woodbury (Willey and Woodbury 1942:243–44; also Willey 1945, 1949:437–38) defined this type, which...
Deep Passage

Entrance

Figure 3. Schematic plan map of 59th Unnamed Cave showing locations within the first interior chamber of the petroglyphs discussed in the text. A schematic map is used to conceal the identity of the cave from those who might recognize a detailed plan.

The Petroglyphs

A total of eight individual petroglyphs were recorded in 59th Unnamed Cave. All are in the twilight zone of the entrance chamber either on the ceiling or on vertical wall segments along a "curtain" where the cave narrows toward its deeper recesses (Figure 3). All glyphs are composed of fine lines incised into the relatively friable surface of the limestone; some are quite eroded, and it is possible that other petroglyphs were present in the cave but no longer visible today. All but one glyph are geometric figures; the one representational image appears to us to be a serpent. In the passages beyond the deepest glyphs, contemporary conditions are much wetter than at the front of the cave near the entrance, and wet conditions have probably characterized the cave interior for a very long time, given the erosion of surface sediments and speleothem formation in the deeper passages. In general, the glyphs are scattered around the first chamber of the cave with no evident clustering of the petroglyph distribution. We will consider the glyphs in terms of the numbering system plotted within Figure 3. There is, however, no real order to the glyph numbers except our recording sequence.

Glyph 1 (Figure 4) is a trapezoidal figure about 20 cm in its longest dimension with a number of interior lines. It is positioned on the cave ceiling, and of all the petroglyphs, it is closest to the cave opening. Along one long side, a series of four line segments extend outward from the figure's edge.

Glyph 2 (Figure 5) is also a rectilinear figure about the same size as Glyph 1 and also on the cave ceiling. It has two constricting curved lines inside an outer box,
with a trapezoid shape crossing the interior curves. A subrectangular piece is positioned at one end. Three line segments, not attached to the rectangle in this case, are positioned as a parallel series alongside the long side of the image. As for Glyph 1, this form, while not representational to our eyes, is very similar to a number of forms seen in the corpus of Southeastern cave art. Rectilinear shapes, including filled rectangles and trapezoids of various configurations, are a common element in southeastern North American prehistoric cave art as we have documented it north of the Fall Line in the Appalachian Plateau. Glyphs 1 and 2 from 59th Unnamed Cave in Florida would not be out of place in a number of Appalachian caves.

Glyph 3 (Figure 6) consists of a series of 18 lines incised in groups of either two or four parallel segments over an area on the cave wall approximately 70 × 35 cm in size. There are three groups of two and three groups of four. The lines are short but relatively pronounced. In fact, they resemble so-called tally marks, often seen in Southeastern caves associated with historic saltpeter mining operations (Figure 7). However, these lines differ significantly from "tally marks" in several important ways. First, there is no evidence for saltpeter mining in 59th Unnamed Cave. Indeed, the cave today is certainly too wet to have served usefully for that purpose and was probably in a similar state in historical times. Only two saltpeter mines are known from historic records in Florida (Smith 1995), and while neither has been relocated today, as far as can be determined they were not near to this cave or region of the state. Second, in her work at Cagle Saltpetre Cave in Tennessee, Sarah Blankenship (Blankenship 2008) has shown that tally marks were used to count units of niter earth removed from the mining areas for transport to leeching vats. As counting symbols, they frequently comprise groups of five, not the twos and fours illustrated here. In short, the 59th Unnamed Cave lines are unlikely to be related to historic niter mining in the cave.

Glyph 4 (Figure 8) is the only representational image from 59th Unnamed Cave, at least the only one recognizable from our point of view, a figure we interpret as a serpent. The serpent is described by a tear-drop-shaped oval with a central depression, perhaps indicating an eye, connected to a long single incised line defining the sinuous body; this line curves acutely three times over an area of about 40 cm². This image is, admittedly, very simple in style and execution, but it is quite in line with many such images documented in Southeastern caves. Figure 9a shows one of a number of serpent images from Mud Glyph Cave (Faulkner 1986) (this one has horns); and Figure 9b is a simple example from 1st Unnamed Cave in Tennessee, where the snake images can be small (around 20 cm in length) or quite large (over 5 m in length). Serpents appear in caves as mud glyphs, petroglyphs, and pictographs. We have argued elsewhere (Simek et al. in press), that serpent depictions appear rarely in open-air rock art in the Appalachian region but are common in dark zone cave art contexts. It is interesting that the only representation in this Florida cave is of a subject associated specifically with caves farther to the north.
Glyph 5 (Figure 10) is an area on the cave’s eastern wall that contains numerous faint lines, perhaps geometric shapes, and groups of lines, over an area nearly 1.0 m in width and 30 cm high. Low down on the wall, this area is heavily eroded and difficult to interpret. It may have at one time contained a number of petroglyphs, but we could not distinguish any one image from within the mass of shallow lines visible in the area. We therefore assigned the area a single number.

Glyphs 6, 7, and 8 are all positioned on vertical rock faces along the curtain at the back of the vestibule chamber. Glyph 6 (Figure 11) is a diamond-shaped image produced by four concentric pairs of lines. There are several more lines outside the diamond, including three to its upper right that may have comprised or were intended to form more elements in the image. This cannot be verified today. This glyph is about 22 cm wide.

Glyph 7 (Figure 12), located about 1.0 m from Glyph 6, is an almost identical image. A diamond is described by concentric sets of paired lines. In this case, there are no exterior lines associated with the image. Glyph 7 is slightly larger than Glyph 6.

Diamonds are not common in Southeastern cave art, although this form is known in rock art from Wisconsin (Lowe 1996) and Illinois (Wagner 1996), nor is the diamond characteristic of cave or rock art in the Caribbean region, so it is curious that this is the most common and well-defined element in 59th Unnamed Cave. There is a grouping of diamonds painted on a rock cliff along the Tennessee River in northern Alabama, where they occur in an assemblage of nearly 100 pictographs. There are also concentric diamond petroglyphs very similar to those from 59th Unnamed Cave, in 14th Unnamed Cave, West Virginia (Figure 13). In our experience, the 14th Unnamed Cave petroglyphs, at the extreme northern edge of the Southeastern cave art distribution, are themselves distinctive when compared to the images found in the Appalachian Plateau region. In fact, the 14th Unnamed Cave assemblage is dominated by geometric shapes, groups of lines, and abstract forms, none of them representational to our eyes but in many ways similar to those we see in the Florida cave. Why these
two sites, so dispersed in space, should be so similar is not clear to us, and we will not speculate now as to an explanation.

Glyph 8 (Figure 14) is a single deeply incised vertical line, about 20 cm in length, with a loop at the upper end. It is positioned on the vertical curtain at the back of the entrance chamber. The engraving process comprised several overlapping grooves to define and deepen the line. This glyph is clearly of human origin and weathered to the same extent as the other petroglyphs, suggesting a similar age. It may represent a second serpent effigy, although a rather simplified version when compared to Glyph 4.

The petroglyph assemblage inside 59th Unnamed Cave is, admittedly, rather simple and obscure. However, the weathered condition of the images especially compared to the freshness of nineteenth-century graffiti on the same walls (Figure 15), and similarity to images present in prehistoric cave art found farther north, all indicate considerable antiquity. The archaeological record in the cave indicates cave use during the Late Woodland period, an era that saw increasing cave art production in Tennessee that culminated in numerous and diverse Mississippian period ritual cave art sites.

Figure 11. Glyph 6 from 59th Unnamed Cave, Florida. This petroglyph is composed of concentric diamond forms and a few lateral line segments: (a) raw photograph; (b) engraved lines indicated in white.

Summary and Conclusions

59th Unnamed Cave represents the first probable prehistoric cave art site identified in Florida, indeed
south of the Fall Line. It immediately doubles the number of known rock-art localities in Florida and provides encouragement that other similar sites remain to be discovered in the limestone karst features of the state. While it is nearly impossible to confirm a prehistoric attribution, it seems most likely to us that the art is prehistoric given the assemblage’s nature, context and condition.

This is an exciting development in the ongoing discovery of American cave art. The location of 59th Unnamed Cave extends the known geographical range of cave art sites into the karst regions of the Florida Panhandle, far south of the Appalachian Plateau, where the majority of known sites are located. We suspect that this find indicates (as we have argued elsewhere) that prehistoric peoples in the Southeast made cave art wherever caves were available to do so (Simek 2008; Simek and Cressler 2005). It is true that a geographic gap is evident between cave art in the upper South and this new find in Florida, but we suggest that the gap is more apparent than real. That cave art was previously unknown south of the Appalachian region is probably due to several causes. First, the absolute number of caves south of the Plateau, Ridge and Valley, and Highland Rim provinces is much smaller when compared to the Appalachian Plateau itself. Thus there are fewer caves in which to make cave art. This is true in Florida, but even more so in south Georgia and south Alabama. Second, archaeologists have examined very few of those caves that do exist between the Plateau and the Gulf of Mexico for the presence of ancient rock art. This is likely because the potential for cave art has not been recognized or appreciated by regional scholars. Third, the limestones that characterize karst formation south of the Appalachian Plateau are often quite poorly cemented and friable, providing poor preservation context for ancient petroglyphs. The Marianna limestone in 59th Unnamed Cave is a good example of this, and, as we have noted, even in this cave art site preservation of engravings may not be all that good. Thus there may have been
Figure 14. Glyph 8 from 59th Unnamed Cave, Florida. This petroglyph comprises a vertically oriented line segment with a loop at the upper end. It may represent a second serpent effigy: (a) raw photograph; (b) engraved lines indicated in white.

more cave art sites in the lower South that are no longer visible today. Still, we suspect that more cave art sites will be discovered as the region’s caves are surveyed with this possibility in mind.

We are convinced that cave art production was a central component of very widespread prehistoric cultural traditions in southeastern North America and that prehistoric ceremonial landscapes in the Gulf Coastal Plain, including Florida, as elsewhere in the Southeast, integrated the world underground (Simek 2008). The cave art in 59th Unnamed Cave supports that conviction. We encourage archaeologists in the region to examine caves for these remarkable prehistoric resources.

Note

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