

# Cave Paintings

of the Baja California Peninsula

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ONLINE FEATURES

December 30, 1998

## CAVE PAINTINGS OF BAJA CALIFORNIA

COMPILED BY MARK ROSE



*Over-life-size animals on the wall of Cueva Pintada are typical of the ancient paintings of the Sierra de San Francisco in central Baja California. (Photograph by Harry W. Crosby, courtesy Sunbelt Publications) [\[LARGER IMAGE\]](#)*

In March and April 1962, archaeologist Clement Meighan accompanied an expedition, funded by mystery writer Erle Stanley Gardner, the creator of Perry Mason, to record "newly discovered" painted rock shelters in central Baja California. The group visited four rock-shelters on foot and photographed an additional five from a helicopter. Color photographs of the paintings appeared in an article by Gardner in *Life* and in his book, *The Hidden Heart of Mexico*, both of which were published that year. In 1966, Meighan published a scholarly account of the paintings and a small assemblage of artifacts collected at the sites in *American Antiquity*.

In the 1970s, photographer Howard Crosby surveyed the ancient art, criss-crossing Baja on mule back with the guidance of Enrique Hambleton, leading to the publication of his book *The Cave Paintings of Baja California: Discovering the Great Murals of an Unknown People*, which has just been reprinted. (The new edition is updated through 1994 in an afterword by Hambleton.) Crosby was captivated by the paintings which he described enthusiastically:

*Over the slit-like opening of a long shallow cave was a vast expanse of fairly smooth rock surface. On that was painted a tumultuous cavalcade of human and animal figures far greater than life size. All the beasts seemed to press forward in movement from right to left; huge red and black deer and equally immense red mountain sheep dominated the surge.*



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*Publicized by Erle Stanley Gardner in 1962, Cueva de Pintada has 500 feet of walls, most of which are painted. Figures in the foreground, photographer Harry W. Crosby and Tacho Arce, provide scale for the images on the rock-shelter's south panel. (Photograph by Enrique Hambleton, courtesy Sunbelt Publications)*



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Meighan's synopsis of his own article is a bit drier: "The shelters contain an extensive series of elaborate paintings, and this report summarizes the findings and attempts to place the paintings in a chronological and cultural framework."

Today, more and more tourists are coming to Baja, many for whale watching or sea kayaking, but also to see the painted rock-shelters, which were added to UNESCO's list of [World Heritage Sites](#) in 1993. When Meighan visited the region the sites were relatively unspoiled, "It is noteworthy that, with one exception (Palmarito), the sites visited showed no vandalism, pothunting, or marking of the paintings with initials." From 1994 to 1996, the [Getty Conservation Insitute](#) and Mexico's National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) studied one rock-shelter, El Raton, and installed signs and walkways at some of the others. Study of El Raton is being continued today by conservator Valerie Magar, of the Dirección de Restauración in Mexico City. [INAH](#), meanwhile, has established regulations for visiting the sites.



*Images of wildlife are the most common paintings on Baja rock-shelters. Land animals depicted include rabbits, mountain sheep, and deer, such as these from El Parral XIV. (Photograph by Enrique Hambleton, courtesy Sunbelt Publications)*[\[LARGER IMAGE\]](#) *Sea creatures such as manta rays, from Cuesta de San Pablo II, as well as marine mammals, fish, and shorebirds were also painted. (Photograph by Harry W. Crosby, courtesy Sunbelt Publications)*[\[LARGER IMAGE\]](#)



The painted rock-shelters were known to Spanish missionaries; those recorded by Meighan are between San Ignacio mission, founded in 1728, and Mission Santa Gertrudis, founded to north in 1751. Francisco Javier Clavigero, in his 1789 *Historia de la Antigua o Baja California*, was the first to describe the painted rock-shelters, noting pictures of

*men and women, and the different species of animals. These paintings, although crude, show the objects distinctly. The colors that served for them are clearly seen to have been made from the mineral earths which are found in the region of the volcano of Las Virgenes. The missionaries most admired the fact that those colors should have remained permanent in the stone through many centuries wirthout being damaged by either air or water. Not feeling those pictures and dress to belong to the savage and brutalized nations which inhabited California when the Spanish arrived there, they doubtless belong to another ancient nation, although we cannot say which it was. The Californians unanimously affirm that it was a nation of giants who came from the north.*

*Although the California Indians have been asked the meanings of the paintings, rays, and characters they could not attain any satisfactory reason. The most that has been found out is that [the paintings] are of their ancestors and that those of today are completely ignorant of the meaning. (trans. by C. Meighan in American Antiquity)*

As Meighan observed, the comments of the missionaries to which Clavigero refers must predate 1768, the year the Jesuits were expelled when Spanish lands were closed to the order.



*A 40-foot-long painted area at Cueva del Ratón includes a human figure with a black face patch, deer, and a mountain lion. (Photograph by Enrique Hambleton, courtesy Sunbelt Publications) [\[LARGER IMAGE\]](#)*

French explorer Leon Diguët mentioned eight painted sites in his articles about Baja in *L'Anthropologie* (1895) and *Nouvelles Archives des Missions Scientifiques* (1899), but only one, San Borjita, whose 70 figures were described in the 1950s by Dahlgren and Romero and by Dahlgren de Jordan, had really been studied before Meighan's report. The four rock-shelters seen by Meighan on foot are Flechas Cave (so-named by Meighan for a group of three human figures with arrows painted across their bodies), Palmarito (near the village of San Francisco), Pajaro Negro (named by Meighan for black paintings of birds, though its local name is Cueva de la Soledad), and Gardner (named after the expedition's sponsor, but already known as Cueva Pintada). Of these, only Palmarito was also seen by Diguët.

*Only four human figures with black face patches are known. This one, from El Cajón del Valle, has exceptionally well preserved colors. (Photograph by Harry W. Crosby, courtesy Sunbelt Publications)*

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In these four rock-shelters Meighan recorded a total of 250 figures--humans, deer, mountain sheep, rabbits, birds, and fish--most life size or larger. The basic colors used included black (charcoal), white (a solidified volcanic ash), brick red (crushed lava), and orange red (ocher), with yellow (ocher?) considerably less frequent. Unlike the other colors, which required a binder, the white could be applied directly to the rock-shelter walls. The paintings were begun by outlining the figure, usually in white but sometimes in black, after which it was filled in with red, black, or both. Human figures could be split vertically, one side being painted red, the other black. Deer and mountain sheep could be divided horizontally into red and black halves.



*Animals with arrows are common, but human figures with arrows like these at Las Flechas are rare at sites in the Sierra de San Francisco. Elsewhere, in the sierras of Guadalupe and San Borja, both are common. (Photograph by Harry W. Crosby, courtesy Sunbelt Publications) [\[LARGER IMAGE\]](#)*

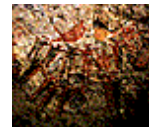
Many of the animal figures had an arrow depicted either across them or stuck in them (generally in the back). The arrows were often done in white, at the same time the figure was outlined. Some 25% of the animals Meighan saw had such arrows. But the white color, applied directly to the stone, was susceptible to weathering and obliteration by overpainting so that in many cases such arrows have not survived. In fact, Meighan suggested, most originally had arrows. In the case of human figures with arrows, which are far fewer, there are as many as ten arrows on a single figure.

Animals were depicted life size or over, but human figures could be few inches to more than ten feet. The bodies of animals were shown in profile, with the heads in three-quarter or front view to accentuate horns of mountain sheep, antler of deer, and ears of rabbits. Humans are shown frontally, but lack facial features or distinguishing sexual characteristics. The style, Meighan concluded, was essentially static, with action implied

but not indicated, e.g. arrows are shown stuck in animals but there is no depiction of a hunter shooting an arrow. Consistency of this style indicates that the paintings were executed over a relatively short period, which Meighan estimated to have been a few generations to at most two centuries. He did note some evidence of change in the paintings over this time. The few birds, depicted with outspread wings, seem to postdate most of the other paintings, and the smaller human figures also appear to be late, since they are seldom overpainted. This, Meighan suggested, may indicate some sort of "decline" or "cultural disruption."



*Two deer-headed serpents give Cueva de la Serpiente its name. The right-hand one is complete, with deer-like ears and antlers, long banded body, bifurcated tail. Only the head of the left one is preserved; the body was painted on a section of rock that fell away. The 26-foot-long mural also has more than 50 doll-like human and animal figures. (Photograph by Harry W. Crosby, courtesy Sunbelt Publications)* [\[LARGER IMAGE \(left\)\]](#) [\[LARGER IMAGE \(right\)\]](#)

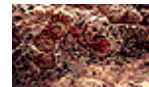


As with most rock art, the meaning of the Baja paintings remains obscure, though some of Meighan's observations may be on the right track. The animals, for example, he said are not simply creatures depicted in nature but have been struck by a hunter's arrow, and this implies a "cultural meaning associated with hunting magic." Less clear is his preference for "witchcraft or black magic" rather than warfare as an explanation of the multiple arrows in human figures. Significantly, Meighan calculated that human figures are painted overtop animals at least three times more frequently than would be expected by chance. He interpreted this as an expression of human dominance. Placement of some of the paintings is curious. While most were on easily accessible walls and ceilings, some would have required a ladder or scaffolding, and others were executed in dangerous locations, e.g. on projecting roof over drop of several hundred feet. Such locations indicated to Meighan that the act of painting was more important than the painting itself.

Although none of the rock-shelters had deep deposits, Meighan collected a small assemblage (139 catalog entries, almost all from Cueva Pintada) from crevices where debris had accumulated, including flaked slate and basalt choppers and scrapers, obsidian projectile points, and sandstone manos and metates; bone awls and deer scapula "saws"; wood fire drill components, arrow foreshafts, pegs or stakes, a hook for harvesting cactus fruits, cut segments of cane and palm, and viznaga spines; basketry and net fragments, yucca fiber quids, cordage of yucca fiber, and a palm frond braid; marine shells and fragments; and an iron knife blade (a relic of a later visit to the site). Bedrock mortars were ground into the rock-shelter floors, and there were abundant chipping debris and coarse stone tools on the slope at their mouths. No artifacts that would indicate how the paintings were made, such as brushes, were recovered. Meighan found that the artifacts from Cueva Pintada were similar to those from a rock-shelter at Bahia de Los Angeles, to the north, which belongs to the archaeological complex (a set of distinctive artifacts and other cultural features) known as Comondú. The Comondú painters were probably the ancestors of the historic Cochimi inhabitants of the area whose language is called Peninsular Yuman. A wooden peg from a crevice in Cueva Pintada yielded a date of  $530 \pm 80$  years, or sometime between A.D. 1352 and 1512. This date, says Meighan, agrees both with Clavigero's report of 1760s observation that Indians said the paintings were by an earlier people and with the late prehistoric and historic Comondú assemblage.



*If the identification of this image from El Parral XIV as a depiction of the pre-dawn supernova of July 1054, supernova birth of the Crab Nebula is correct, it would provide a valuable date for the age of the Baja paintings. The supernova was recorded in China. Possible parallels for El Parral occur at White Mesa, Arizona; Navaho Canyon, Arizona; and Chaco Canyon, New Mexico (left to right in illustration). (Photograph by Enrique Hambleton, courtesy Sunbelt Publications)* [\[LARGER IMAGE \(left\)\]](#) [\[LARGER IMAGE \(right\)\]](#)



Stitching the slim evidence available to him into a narrative, Meighan devised the following tale: several hundred years ago, Peninsular Yumans in Baja were successful hunter-gatherers, subsisting on fish and shellfish, pitahaya cactus, rabbit, deer, and mountain sheep. As time passed, life became more difficult through the general desiccation of the Desert West, overhunting, or some other reason. Whatever prompted it, beginning perhaps 600 years ago, efforts to improve the supply of game supply were made through hunting magic involving the paintings. They failed, and the rock-shelters and painting were abandoned 200 years before the arrival of the Spanish. By time of the Jesuit missionaries, the population was probably smaller and the culture poorer than it had been for centuries. Meighan, offered an intriguing alternative cause for this decline--epidemic diseases--though he said it was "a wholly unprovable speculation." The first Spanish in Baja were Ulloa in 1539, Cabrillo in 1542, and Vizcaino in 1602. Though the area was not missionized until 1700s, diseases may have outpaced the permanent Spanish settlement.

For now, the origins, purpose, and demise of Baja's magnificent paintings remain unknown.

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MARK ROSE *is managing editor of* ARCHAEOLOGY.

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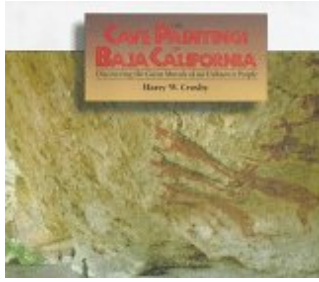
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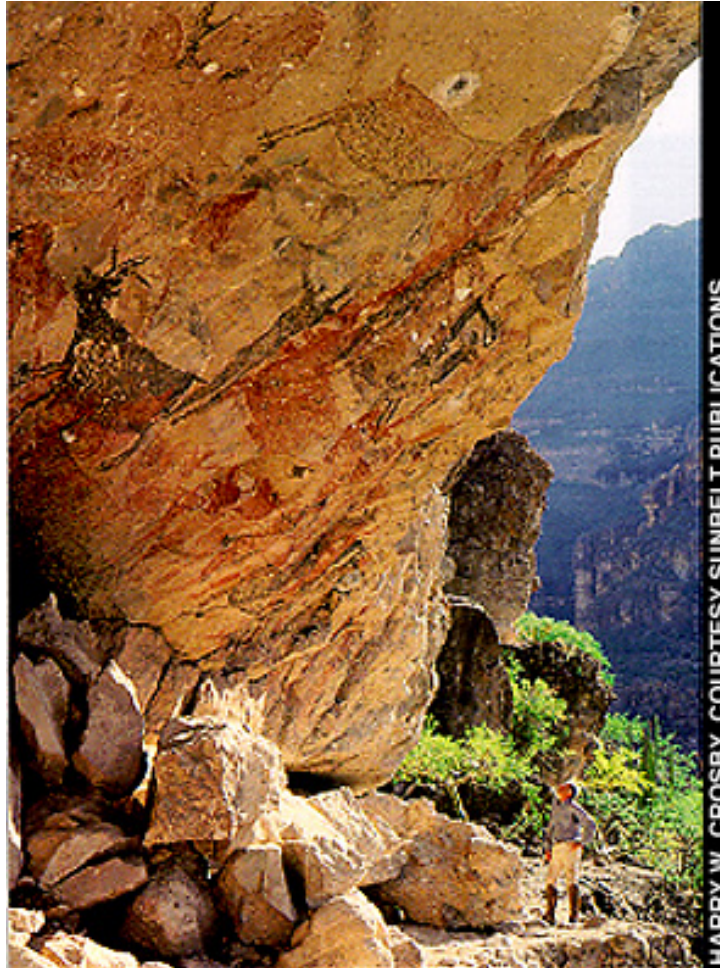
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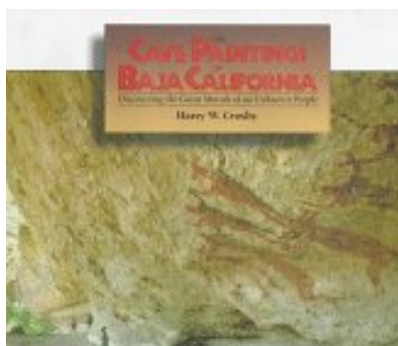
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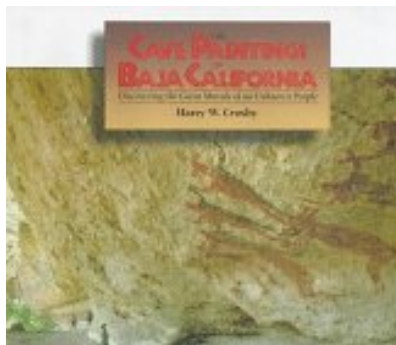


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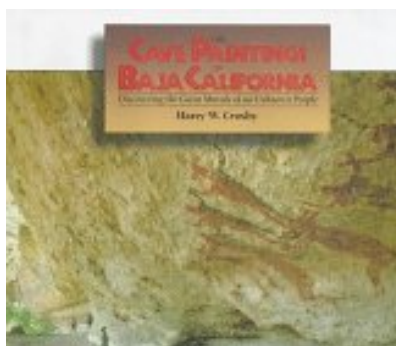
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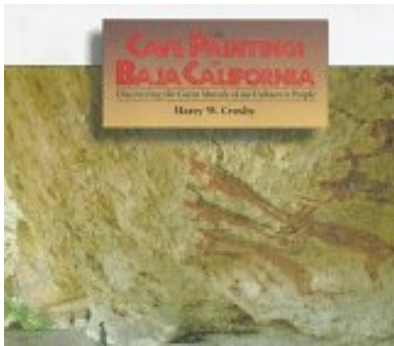


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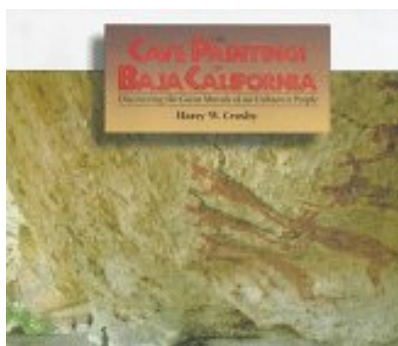


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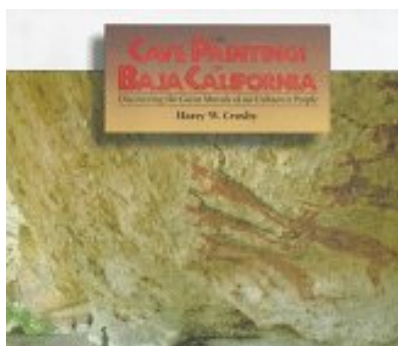
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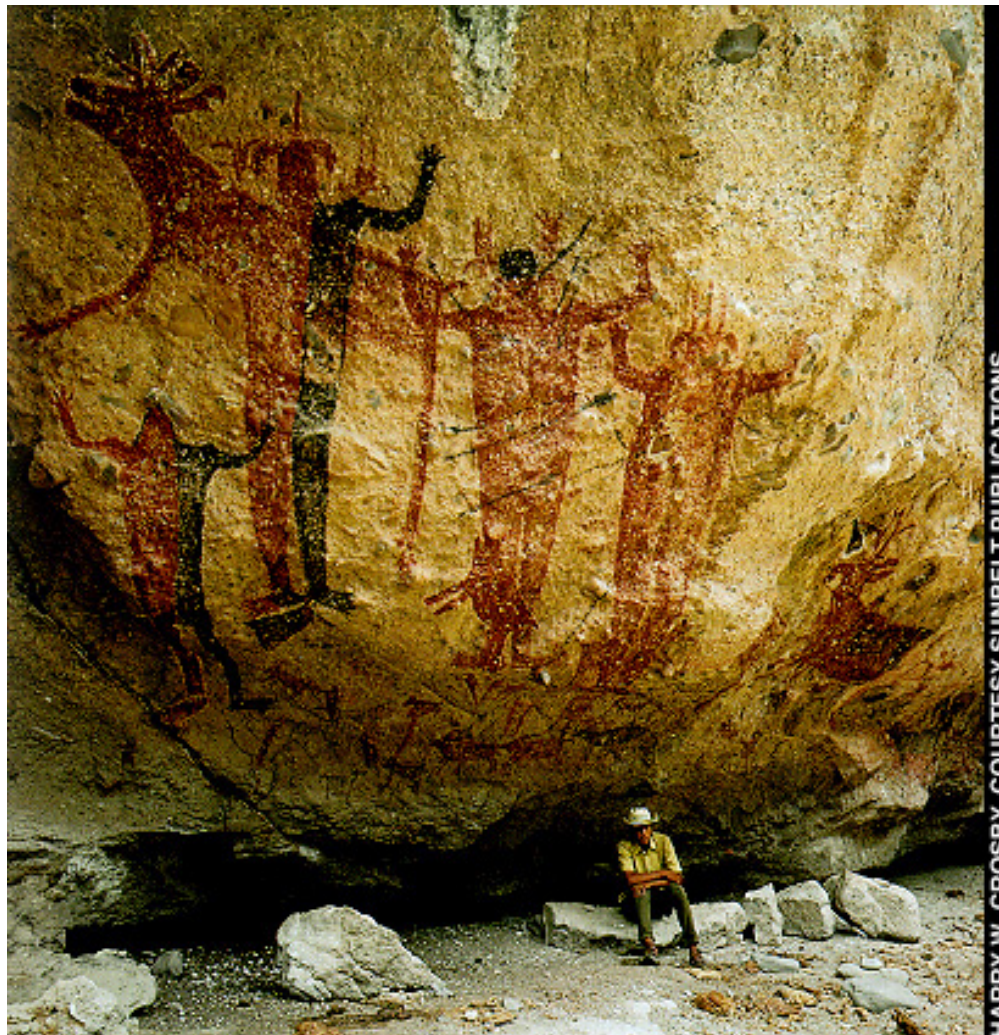
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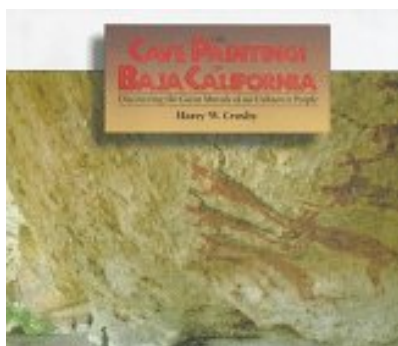


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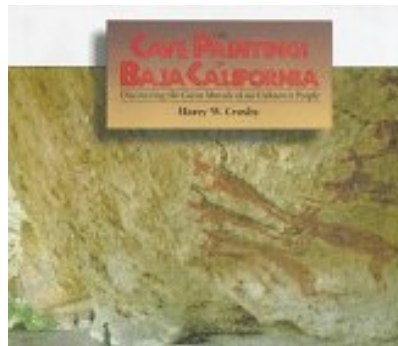
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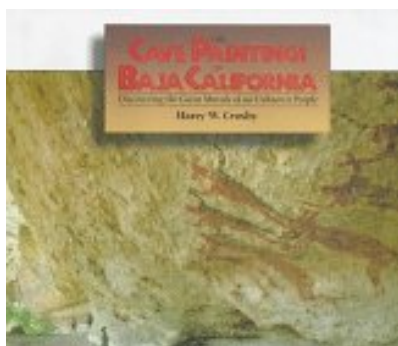
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El Panto, Baja California



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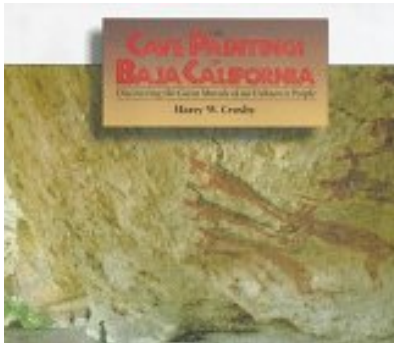
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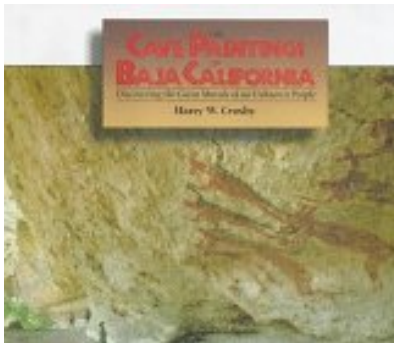


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