Chapter 12
Deer: Sacred and Profane

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Deer ritualism is an important feature of many traditional North Mexican indigenous religious practices, some of which continue to the present day. The Yaqui Deer Dancer (Spicer 1994:125–30), for example, is now emblematic of the state of Sonora, and the annual Huichol pilgrimage to Wirakuta, near Real de Catorce, S.L.P., in which deer and the peyote plant merge into a single identity, is still a defining feature of their ethnic/cultural identity. Among other indigenous groups, deer-related traditions are known mainly from ethnohistoric sources. Their prehistoric roots can be inferred from various archaeological finds (Guevara 2005), while various rock art motifs at sites throughout northern Mexico provide a parallel line of graphic evidence.

Although the Yaqui Deer Dance now takes place in a completely Christianized setting, its roots in earlier native traditions are evident. The dancer's deer headdress and ankle bracelets made of deer hooves as well as his mock imitation of the posture and movements of the deer all hark back to earlier times when deer hunting was an everyday occupation. The accompanying songs are in an archaic language now barely understood. They identify the deer with fertility and the coming of the rains. "Little flower deer, far away in the place of the animals, you are playing in the flower garden to the east, you will soon be coming out to play in flower water." (Spicer 1994:127 [author's translation]).

In spite of the associations generated by Carlos Castañeda's invented shaman Don Juan, the Yaqui Deer Dance as practiced today is not associated with either ecstatic trance or the use of peyote or any other mind-altering substances. This may be due to its incorporation into the Catholic Church calendar, but it also reflects a

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rather different social context. As described by modern ethnographers, the Deer dance is a solo male performance with a limited musical accompaniment—drum, gourd, and violin—which is enacted before the entire community. Although the sacrality of the dancer's role is heightened by personal commitment, it is transitory and carries no special status other than its own successful fulfillment.

In contrast, the Huichol deer hunt/peyote pilgrimage shows less Christian influence. It is a collective ritual involving the entire community led by an experienced leader (*mara'akáme*). The pilgrimage reenacts the mythic history of Creation and includes both a peyote hunt and real deer hunting. The hunters follow in the steps of their ancestors. Deer hoofprints mark the places where peyote grows, and the plant itself is considered the manifestation of a divinity dwelling within it who communes with those who eat it. In Huichol culture, deer, peyote, and maize are merged into a single symbol, which communicates renewed fertility and coincides with the onset of the rainy season. The sacrality of peyote and its ritual ingestion continue to be key features of modern Huichol cultural identity and are tacitly accepted by Mexican drug authorities under the curious heading of "*usos y costumbres*" (uses and customs).

Until recently, when the scarcity of deer and protests from their mestizo neighbors have made its fulfillment impossible, the peyote pilgrimage was regularly preceded by a real deer hunt (Lemaistre 1996). This hunt is itself a 5-day ritual led by a community member with a special ritual role. The objective of the search is for the deer with the largest antlers: "Paritsika, the great Deer, the wisest one, the one who gave peyote to human beings" (LeMaistre 1996:320). The individual leading the hunt (*mara'akáme*) consumes powdered deer antler and converts his feather wand (*muviéri*) into deer antlers by singing special songs to attract the deer: "Yes, indeed, the song of flowers, the song of the deer approaches, transmitted in the *muviéri*" (LeMaistre 1996:319). His dreams guide the pursuit by associating the real places visited with a mythic landscape and by identifying the real deer which fulfills his dreams. Although the leader is central and crucial, each hunter brings his own offerings and plays a role in the ritual. The hunt also provides real deer meat for each family which is later processed and dried and hung on strings just like peyote for future consumption.

At present, rock art production is not associated with any phase of this ritual deer hunt or the peyote pilgrimage, but some Huichol sacred places are associated with rock art. Mountjoy (2001) has also identified sites in the Cañon de Ocotillo (Jalisco) near Huichol territory marked by petroglyphs which depict deer and hunting scenes. They are located at places suitable for real hunting and might indicate that in an earlier phase, rock art production was indeed part of the hunting ritual.

Likewise, no depictions of deer dancers are known so far in the rock art of Sonora, but at least one petroglyph at La Angostura, near Casas Grandes, Chihuahua (Mendiola 2002:122), bears a striking resemblance to a deer dancer. It in turn points toward a long line of antlered personages depicted in rock art stretching back to the Middle–Late Archaic period. They appear in the Candelaria-style rock art of Chihuahua (Mendiola 2006), the Pecos River rock art of south Texas and northern

Coahuila (Turpin 2010), as well as the Great Murals of Baja California. Finds of antler headdresses as well as other ritual accoutrements in various archaeological contexts (Guevara 2005) confirm the considerable antiquity of deer ritualism over a much broader area of northern Mexico and the adjacent USA.

What do these antler headdresses mean? What powers did they confer on those who wore them? How was a deer antler transformed from a simple raw material into a symbolic attribute? What do antler representations in rock art intend to convey? Answers to these questions require a broader view which considers rock art manifestations as part of the archaeological picture and traces the conceptual transformation of natural observation into a new sacred context.

Quite apart from their symbolic meanings, deer were obviously a welcome feast for all who practiced deer hunting not for sport, but as a real subsistence activity. On the profane level, deer provided food and skins for clothing and leather artifacts. Deerskins also acquired exchange value in trade between individuals and groups, partly because deer hunting success demanded effort and cunning and even a bit of good fortune. It also depended on an intimate knowledge of deer behavior which, at some point, transformed deer hunting from mere subsistence into a ritual pursuit and became linked to graphic symbolism in rock art. Although the overall direction of the process seems clear, the links in the chain are sometimes difficult to define and indeed some may never be known.

Deer representations in rock art are a logical starting point to search for these missing links. In north Mexico, deer are one of the most frequently represented animals, a testimony to its importance among the prey species of early hunters. These depictions frequently show the animal in full figure, sometimes in very dramatic and characteristic poses, and often in sufficiently naturalistic detail to permit species identification. The vast majority depict the beam-and-tine architecture of the Virginia whitetail deer [*O. virginianus*], but the simple bifurcated antlers of the desert mule deer [*O. hemionis*] are also shown occasionally.

Particularly in northeast Mexico (Nuevo León and Coahuila states), full-figure representations are less common, but the deer's presence is indicated by its petroglyphic hoofprints and especially its antlers (Murray 1992). These disembodied signs do not occur in hunting scenes and indeed the men hunting the deer are rarely shown. Both the hoofprints and the antlers are often depicted with great realism and detail, even showing specific anomalies in antler growth, such as descending tines, but they are not merely drawings from nature. They record antlers as found objects, symbols of the deer's presence, rather than the animal itself as a product of the hunt (Fig. 12.1).

Likewise, the presence of the hunters is not explicit, but rather implied by very elaborate and oversized representations of the hunter's arsenal in a distinctive incised relief style. These include projectile points and atlatls (spear throwers) as well as knives and other lithic tools. The motifs in the La Presa style (Turpin 2010) (from its type site, Presa de La Mula, Nuevo León) are often shown in sufficient detail to compare them with real artifacts and identify their lithic typology. The point types generally correspond to those used in atlatl hunting during the Middle–Late Archaic period (6,000–1,500 BP).

Fig. 12.1 Deer antler petroglyph, Boca de Potrerillos, Mina, Nuevo León, Mexico (author's photo)

Like the Huichol site in Jalisco described by Mountjoy (2001), these hunting motifs are most often clustered at locations which offer strategic advantages for the hunter, such as springs where animals come to drink, or natural passes in the landscape. Experimental throws with replicated atlatls showed that nearly all of the atlatl petroglyphs marked places which could have been used as real hunting sites. They indicated a strategy of collective hunting in groups—a pattern of deployment which aimed to provide the maximum opportunity for success by using the landscape as a natural trap and enhance effectiveness of their weapon (Murray and Lazcano 2000) (Fig. 12.2).

Deer antler petroglyphs point to the antler itself as the initial link in the transformation from hunting to ritual. For early hunters, antler was definitely a sought-after raw material. Artifacts from south Texas (Shafer 1986:102) confirm its use in the manufacture of atlatl hooks, and at Shumla cave, an atlatl was carved from an antler tine. In rock art, the percussion marks of pecked petroglyphs suggest that antler picks might have been the tool used to produce some of them.

As with other species of ungulates, antlers are the distinctive biological feature of the male deer, and the antler cycle provides important clues for understanding the cultural meaning behind its representations in rock art. Antler growth is an annual cycle triggered by the increasing hours of sunlight in the spring. All the hormonal processes involved in the antler cycle are biologically controlled by the annual cycle of the Sun. In effect, at whatever geographical latitude the species occurs, each deer

Fig. 12.2 Atlatl throw at Icamole canyon, García, Nuevo León, Mexico. The stream pool below is an easy target and an atlatl petroglyph is right behind the thrower. (Author's photo)

antler is a natural record representing one solar year. This suggests immediately that the wearers of antler headdresses were symbolically linked to sun time and it also implies that they must have known how to use solar observation as a way of marking the seasons.

The hormonal changes associated with antler growth are also manifested by dramatic changes in the deer's behavior (Marchinton and Hirth 1984; Leopold 1977:168 ff.), a fact which could hardly have escaped the attention of assiduous prehistoric hunters. These behavioral concomitants transform the antlers into a peculiarly male gender marker in nearly all deer species. The antlers reach their full growth in the early winter (November/December) when the ritualized combat of the stags accompanies the mating season. These combats convert the deer antlers into weapons not unlike the hunter's weapons whose power is demonstrated in a dramatic struggle. Today, this is the deer hunting season, the time when the stags possess their most impressive antler racks and are easiest to track. Since only the does will give birth to the next generation, the number of stags taken at this time has little or no effect on the total deer population, a natural relation still reflected in modern hunting laws. Stags wounded in combat are also common and much easier prey.

Once the mating season ends, however, the male hormonal level drops sharply, and the stags move into all-male groups. Lacking their antlers, the stag's appearance

Fig. 12.3 Deer antler petroglyph with 29–30 tines, equivalent to a lunar synodic month, at Presa de La Mula, Nuevo León, Mexico. (Author's photo)

becomes physically less distinguishable from the does, and a hunter could more easily mistake one for the other. When antler growth reinitiates in late spring/early summer, these all-male groups break up and aggressive displays begin anew. The cycle reinitiates with the birth of the new fawns approximately 7 months later which, at the latitude of northeast Mexico, occurs in midsummer (July/August). Thus, antler growth is a visible affirmation of a key stage within the annual reproductive cycle, just as the gestation period represents continued female fertility and survival of the species.

The conceptual links between antler growth and the timing of the deer reproductive cycle may have been expressed explicitly in the associated rock art (Murray 1992). As already noted, some of the antler representations are eminently naturalistic, but others are much more stylized and schematic. They involve distortions in perspective and representational conventions which deviate from the natural object (Fig. 12.3).

In particular, the number of tines shown sometimes far exceeds the limits of even the largest buck. In these examples, the antler becomes a symbol of the broader concept of size, and graphically adds a numerical dimension to its measurement. In one key example at Presa de La Mula, the tines are reduced to simple tally marks and divided at the antler base into two halves whose sum (29–30) is equivalent to a lunar synodic month. It suggests that lunar timekeeping was also part of the deer hunter's view. Antler growth was governed by sun time, but the reproductive cycle of the doe may have been measured in moon time (Fig. 12.4).

A link between lunar timekeeping and deer reproduction is most clearly identifiable in the tally petroglyph at Presa de La Mula, only a short distance from the

Fig. 12.4 Tally count of 7 lunar synodic months (207 days) at Presa de La Mula, Nuevo León, Mexico, equivalent to the gestation period of the female whitetail deer. (Author's photo)

antler just mentioned. This tally systematically records seven synodic months (207 days) within a complex matrix of six horizontal lines and four vertical sections. The tally includes special notations for the lunar eclipse cycles at the end of the fifth and sixth months (148, 177 days), cycles which are also recorded in the Dresden codex, but unlike the Dresden, the La Mula count then continues. The total number of days recorded (207) is unrelated to lunar eclipse intervals. Rather, it is a fairly close approximation of the gestation period of the female whitetail deer (195–212 days). We suggest that the final count was made by hunters who were using lunar timekeeping to keep track of the deer reproductive cycle. This could also derive from naturally observed behavior during the mating season. During the nights of full moon, the females are more receptive and the stags more active, and of course if a lunar eclipse occurred at this time, it might be noted as an omen of special significance.

Our own culture keeps time in terms of much longer periods (decades, centuries, and even millennia), but early hunters were probably more concerned with its shorter seasonal components within the annual year which directly influenced their subsistence. For marking any time period less than a year long, such as the deer gestation period, counting the lunar phases can be more useful than a horizon calendar marking the solar year.

The pairing of male deer with sun and female deer with the moon is a common theme in many later Mesoamerican traditions. Our hypothesis suggests that this

Table 12.1 A transformational model of deer symbolism

From profane		To sacred
Stage	Activity	Manifestation
1. Subsistence	Hunting	Ritualization
2. Natural raw material	Manufacture	Artifacts (useful or magical)
3. Antler	Location/search	Petroglyph marker
4. Reproductive cycle	Antler cycle	Gender/fertility symbol
5. Sun/moon observation	Counting/stylized representation	Synodic timekeeping

symbolic association may have derived originally from the hunter's observation of real deer reproductive behavior. Antlers are exclusively male and grow larger with the waxing summer sun. The females are impregnated under the light of the moon and 7 months later give birth to the new generation. It is difficult to imagine that astute and successful hunters would not have observed these events in minute detail, including especially their most dramatic moments, the clash of antlers.

Today, the deer's transformation from prey to sacred animal seems a remote and alien cultural process. The deer hunting season is of interest only to a small coterie of sport hunters and our perception of deer is more influenced by Bambi than real meat for dinner. Their sacral status in earlier traditions becomes more comprehensible only when we include rock art manifestations in the picture.

The transformational model proposed here identifies five stages, each corresponding to a profane activity which generates a cultural activity manifesting its transformation into sacralized symbolic context (Table 12.1).

The process begins with the food quest and the value of deer as a subsistence item. Since deer hunting requires both skill and good fortune, the hunt must be guided by special strategies and knowledge of the right locations. Deer by-products that are not consumed as food, such as antler, hide, and bone, become raw materials but maintain their deer identity and so can be transformed into artifacts of sympathetic "hunting magic." Deer antler is best obtained at preferred hunting sites which may be marked by antler petroglyphs and other hunting motifs. The transformation of the real antler into a broader time marker is indicated by the graphic shift from naturalistic representations to stylized ones, a process which culminates in the La Mula tally count. It specifically marks the deer gestation period by means of lunar synodic timekeeping and uses a number icon which is later incorporated into Mesoamerican bar-and-dot counting.

The transformation of dots into days may be a development particular to the northeast Mexican tradition, but to the extent that this model is based on universal attributes of deer biology, the same symbolic association between sun time = antler growth = male and moon time = birth = female could underlie hunter's rock art in other contexts where deer occurred albeit under many different guises (Comuri et al. 1993).

Rock Art, Ritual and Sacred Landscapes

From the foregoing exposition, one might conclude that the northern Mexican evidence fully confirms the ritual use of a sacred landscape. The peyote plant is native to the region, and its use in sacred ritual among Mexican Native American groups (particularly the Huichol and Rarámuri) is well documented and continues today. Its consciousness-altering effects (similar to mescaline) are also well known and have been suggested as the inspiration for the many "entoptic" geometrical motifs found at the region's rock art sites (González Arratia 1999; Turpin 2010). At some sites, peyote even grows in close proximity to the rock art. Its presence may mark an area like Wirakuta (San Luís Potosí) as a sacred landscape in which ritual consumption produced an altered state of consciousness (ASC) experience expressed in the rock art imagery. Some authors (Mendiola 2002) have inferred that certain circular motifs could be representations of peyote. Deer hoof petroglyphs might be another direct graphic conceptual link (Fig. 12.5).

Nevertheless, a closer look at the earliest ethnohistoric accounts of peyote use in northeast Mexico reveals several elements that don't fit. Admittedly, none of the local Native American groups survive today, and our eyewitness description comes from a seventeenth-century Spanish colonial source with a very limited appreciation of native beliefs and an open hostility to peyote use. Even so, the *mitote* which Alonso de León (1649) describes is quite different from either the modern Huichol pilgrimage or the Yaqui deer dance, and rock art apparently played no role at all in its realization. His account provides no specific evidence linking rock art to sacred ritual and supplies only an indirect connection to deer ritualism. Key elements of his description suggest that *mitotes* were not held at sacred places, nor was rock art production a regular feature of these gatherings.

Alonso de León (1649) states that *mitotes* were held frequently throughout the year, but especially during the summer when food was abundant. They involved food sharing, socializing, and alliance formation and evidently had more to do with the seasonal cycle of nature than a ritual calendar per se. The event was an all-night dance at which peyote was prepared and consumed by all members of the neighboring groups who were invited. The dancers formed two circles around a bonfire—one male and one female—so tight that "the belly of one touched the butt of the other." They circled in opposite directions singing in unison chant for 4–6 h, after which each participant drank peyote crushed in water and fell "like dead men." In this state, they then used a scarifier to provoke abundant superficial bleeding and smeared the blood over their bodies. The next morning when they recovered, food was distributed to the participants as well as "deer skins, which are the most esteemed thing by them." Thus, deer enter only indirectly through the exchange value of deerskins rather than as a magical symbolic object endowed with special powers.

The *mitote* evidently did not emphasize the visionary aspects of peyote sought by modern consumers, but rather another property of the plant often deemed less relevant, but perhaps much more important to earlier peoples. When eaten in

Fig. 12.5 Deer hoofprint petroglyph. Puerto del Indio, Nuevo León, Mexico. (Author's photo)

appropriate doses, peyote suppresses fatigue and pain. Scratches and bleeding wounds are a constant feature of life in the desert. Peyote has both antiseptic properties in its root and the ability to reduce sensations of fatigue and pain. The bloodletting ritual in northeast Mexico did not involve a personal vision quest or a private or a collective experience of God or gods, but rather a public exercise in peyote use in order to confront the harsh desert and the prolonged pursuit of wounded animals.

This use of peyote is well identified among the Huichol and Rarámuri by Carl Lumholtz and other early ethnographers. An archaeological example of these scarifiers with blood stains still adhered was found in northern Coahuila (Turpin and Eling 1999) and they are also represented occasionally in the region's rock art. Alonso de Leon's (1649) account suggests that the mitotes were big public events held at open places chosen for convenience rather than their sacrality. In this ritual scenario, rock art is neither present nor necessary; indeed, it seems unlikely that the participants would be in any condition to have made it anyway. Any association with rock art sites or places where peyote grew would be more a circumstantial rather than a necessary condition.

How then can we account for the process by which deer become transformed from profane to sacred? The first step is to remove peyote use totally from its modern context. The *mitote* was not a "vision quest" as practiced by some of the Native

American groups, nor was it like the ritual use later adopted by the followers of the "peyote cult" in the nineteenth century. Imposing this ethnographic analogy on the rock art evidence leads us further away from its earlier context as a collective practice.

The second step is to realize that the secluded locations sought by modern users seeking communion with the spirit world are not the likely locations for *mitotes*. The *mitote* may not have been the only native ritual in which peyote was consumed; one can never rule out other contexts, but our sources make clear that it was certainly the most common. The landscape surrounding rock art is always relevant, but by looking for the wrong thing, we can be easily led to the wrong places and miss the real links which can tie ritual activity in prehistoric contexts to sacred places.

Instead of following the trail of peyote, it is the trail of the deer which leads into the ritual world so richly documented in Mesoamerican native traditions. Peyote and deer are linked for practical as well as symbolic reasons, but deer are the guide and center of the so-called peyote religion (Stewart 1987), which in prehistoric contexts I think should be more aptly called a "deer religion" centered on the miraculous transformations which this animal undergoes each year. Deer representations in rock art appear to be a regular feature of this cult and are found at numerous places which became sites for ritual activity dedicated to its deeper symbolic attributes: time, gender, and the cosmic order of nature. The rock art evidence suggests that deer ritualism was an integral part of an ancient and widespread antecedent of the later Mesoamerican cosmovision.

A review of deer-related symbolism and ritual in Mesoamerican religious practice is beyond the scope of this chapter, but these ties are evident at various rock art sites along the Mesoamerican frontier which are linked to different ethnic groups. El Zape, Durango, is a rock art site in the Tepehuan area of the Western Sierra Madre (Peschard et al. 1991; Lazalde 1987). The site features numerous representations of stylized shields, many decorated with the quadripartite geometrical motifs replicating Mesoamerican cardinal directional iconography. Behind these shields, the hunters lie unseen, but in a few examples, the shields are crowned by schematic deer antlers, and nearby sites feature actual deer hunting scenes. At nearby La Cantera, Durango, deer representations are more explicit and Herrera (2012) has analyzed their links to the Mesoamerican cosmovision in greater detail. He identifies these petroglyphs with the Chalchihuites cultural phase and links them to the iconography and cosmovision of the modern Hopi, thus bridging the gap between prehistoric deer hunters and later agriculturalists on both sides of the modern international border.

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