



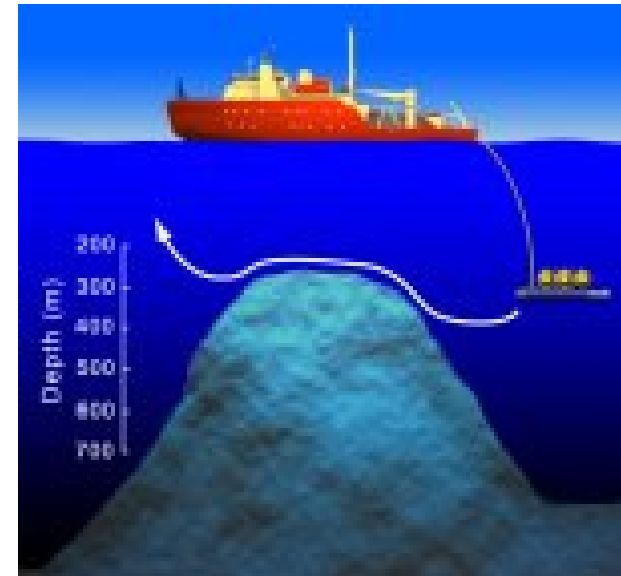
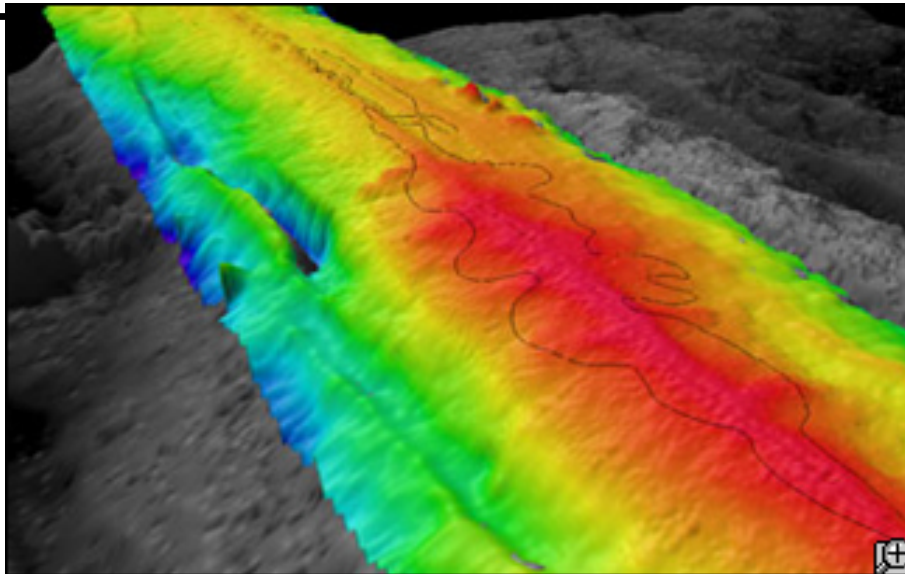
TAINOS & CAVES, FOCUSING ON HISPANIOLA

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First Things First: How the Island of Hispaniola Was Formed

Step one: "Hot spots" (which no longer exist) formed 65 to 145 million years ago. They spewed hot magma out into what became the Caribbean Sea.

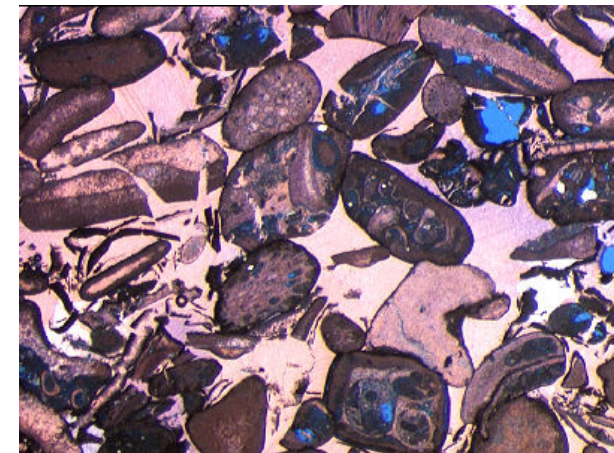
Step two: In some places, volcanic rock (igneous rock) built up higher & higher from the bottom of the ocean floor.



Step three: Finally, the igneous rock reached so high that sunlight filtered down to it and corals began to grow.

Step four: As old coral died and new coral grew on top of it, the old coral formed limestone, and the living coral reefs, on their igneous rock and limestone foundations, reached higher and higher toward the sun.

Step five: Over time, some rose to the surface--islands.

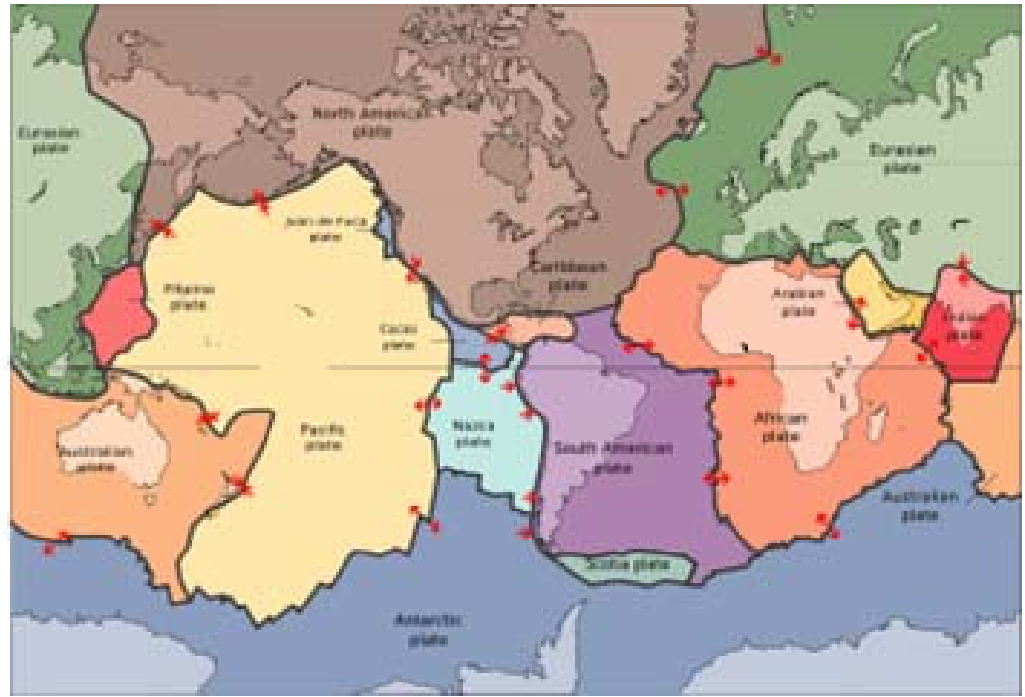


Above, a magnified view of limestone, a composite sedimentary stone.

Tectonic Plates

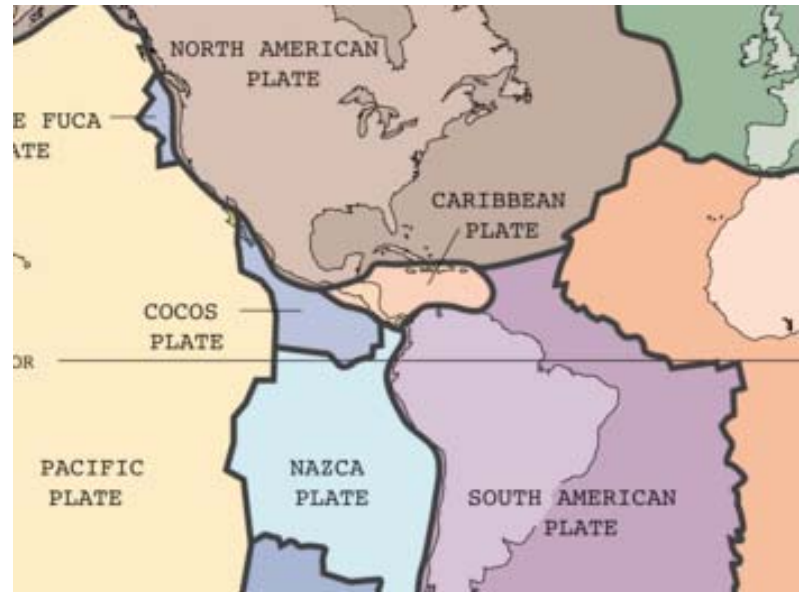
(you´ll soon see how this part fits into the story)

- The surface of the Earth is made up of two layers: above is the **lithosphere**, which contains the earth´s crust and upper mantle (where all our beautiful oceans, rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys, forests, deserts, cities, and towns are). Below the lithosphere is the **asthenosphere**, which is not as solid as the crust—it can “flow” like a thick liquid, across geological time scales, that is.
- The upper or lithosphere layer is broken up into what are called *tectonic plates*. Our Earth has seven major and many minor tectonic plates that “ride” or “float” on the asthenosphere. The flowing movement of the asthenosphere causes these plates to move in relation to one another, creating spreading boundaries (where hot spots occur) as well as boundaries where plates move closer together and sometimes collide with each other.



The Caribbean Plate

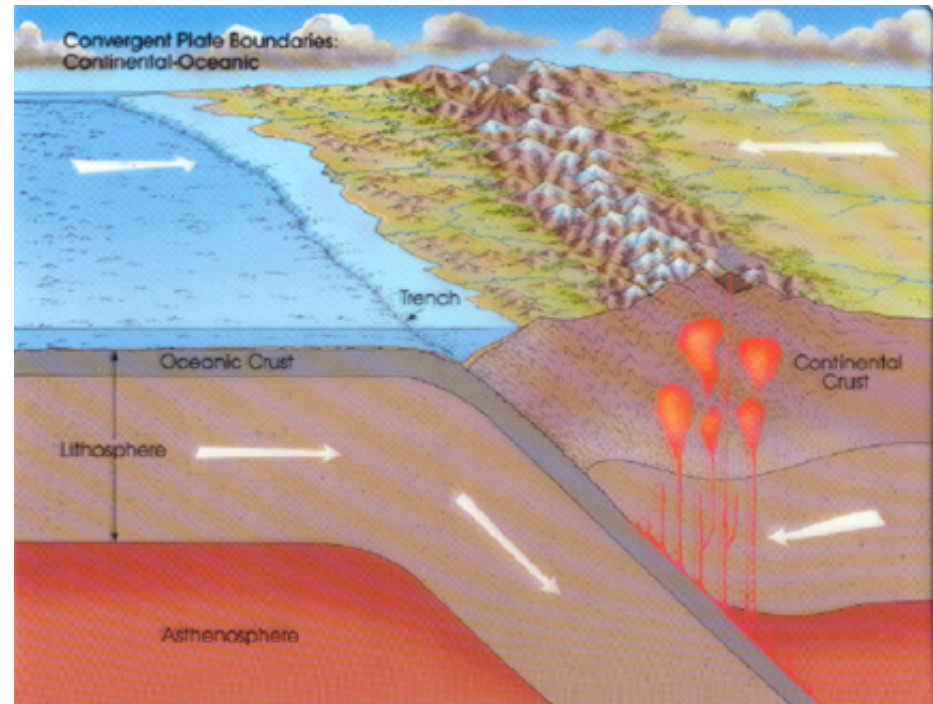
- The latest geological research indicates that ancient hot spots created the Caribbean Plate, upon which “floats” the island of Hispaniola, the other Caribbean islands, and the Caribbean Sea itself.
- About 65 million years ago, the newly formed Caribbean Plate (carrying the foundations of our island with it) began to collide with the North American Plate....
CRASH! BANG!



The effects of that long ago crash are still being felt on Hispaniola today!

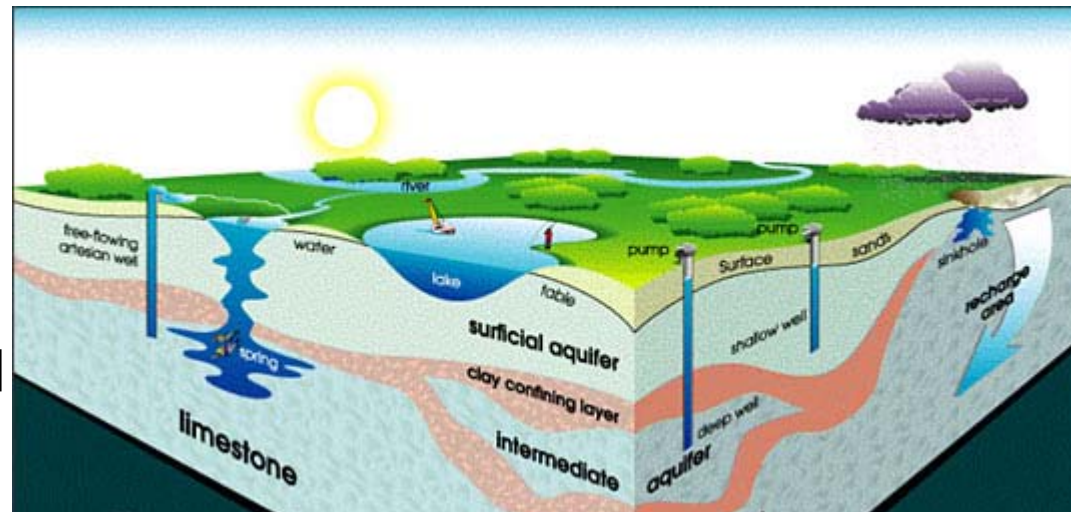
- The denser plate sank beneath the Caribbean Plate (subduction) as they crashed together, which pushed the lighter one up from below, pushing up the coral reefs on their igneous rock and limestone bases so that they formed our island, along with broken-off pieces of what used to be dense rock from the North American plate. Three times the island got pushed up!
(Fossil clams in Cacique/Monción, 2000 feet above sea level.)
- The pressures caused by the collision formed mountains.
- The pressures also caused fault lines, volcanic eruptions, the formation of new volcanoes, earthquakes, and tsunamis, both here and elsewhere throughout the Caribbean.

WE STILL HAVE EARTHQUAKES TODAY AND VOLCANIC ERUPTIONS IN THE LESSER ANTILLES.



Now we have an island—let's move on to cave formation

- Remember all that limestone that formed the upper base of our island, Hispaniola?
- Limestone, a sedimentary rock, is very peculiar—pure water cannot harm it, but **rain** water picks up carbon dioxide from the air and soil and turns into calcium bicarbonate (a mild acid), which dissolves limestone along cracks caused by earthquakes and other pressures under the earth's surface, at joints, as well as in the limestone's softer parts. The acidic solution drips and trickles through all the cracks in the limestone, making them larger and larger, forming caves and sink holes, manantials (cenotes), and underground rivers.

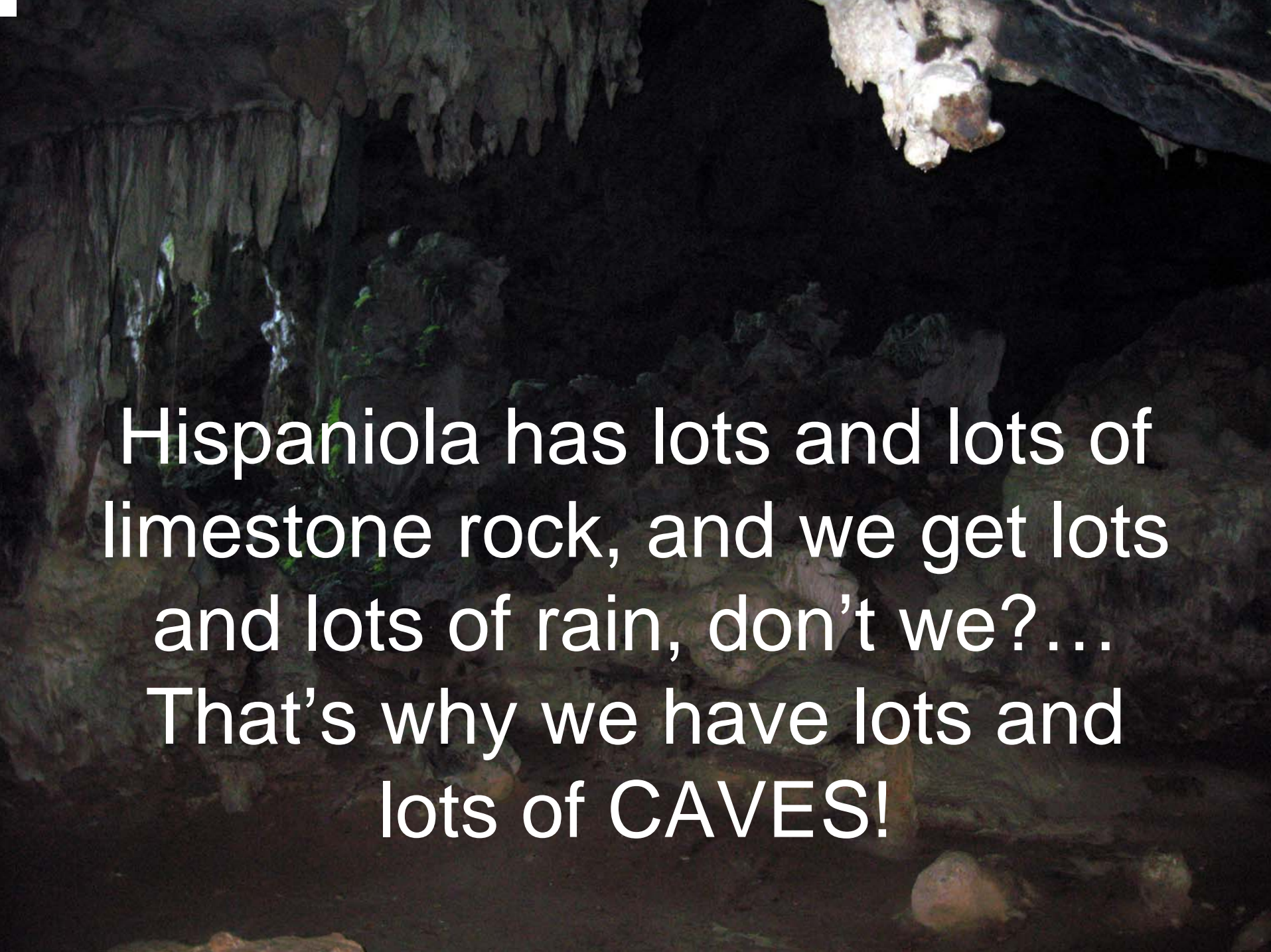


As the calcium bicarbonate drips down through the earth, deeper and deeper, the water begins to evaporate. It slowly turns into calcium carbonate, a new kind of rock, which hardens to form stalactites, stalagmites, columns, and "folds" on the ceilings, floors, and walls of the "living" caves.

Other minerals that were dissolved into the calcium carbonate solution cause the formations to have different colors—usually shades of yellow and gold, but sometimes blue, green, or other colors. Sometimes the minerals cause crystals to form.



Left, Crystal Cave, southern Mexico. Middle and right, cascades of crystals and fantastic columns in Cueva Guácara de Sanabe, Cotui, Dominica Rep.

A photograph of a cave interior. The scene is dimly lit, showing dark, jagged rock formations. On the left, a small waterfall flows down a rock face. Above, several stalactites hang from the ceiling. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and ancient.

Hispaniola has lots and lots of limestone rock, and we get lots and lots of rain, don't we?...
That's why we have lots and lots of CAVES!

The Taíno people were obviously very impressed by all the caves



The Taínos' origin myth is centered around a cave right here on the island of Hispaniola. They say that the ancestor spirits—represented by owls and bats—lived in this cave, coming out only at night to eat *jobos*, a small plum-like fruit. One night the *jobos* must have tasted especially good, for some pre-human ancestor spirits were still outside the cave eating them when the sun came up... and turned them into human beings.

Entrance to Cueva del Puente, part of the Pomier complex, San Cristóbal, D.R.—there are more than 54 caves there!

Did the Taíno really believe that there were no people on earth until this happened? I don't think so. Myths like these are teaching stories. This one appears to have been told in order to keep the people safely in their homes at night, except for special nights when their *kacike* (chief) said it was OK to go out and hunt *hutías*, a small nocturnal mammal. The Taíno weren't really afraid of the dark, but they taught their children that the nights belonged to the *opias* (ancestor spirits), who walked about trying to charm any young women who were outside instead of safe at home with their families. (Pictograph from Cueva de las Maravillas)



Another Taíno myth involving a cave is about the sun, which was said to “live” inside a cave on Hispaniola. Many cave paintings (called pictographs—from the base word for “picture”) depict the sun, like these in Cueva José María, in the East National Park. Domingo Abreu, the Dominican ecologist who has worked so hard to save Cueva de Las Maravillas and the caves of the Pomiers group near San Cristobal from destruction, believes that the Cueva del Puente may be the sun cave. An optical illusion makes it appear, exactly at noon, that a very bright light is shining UP from the depths of the almost bottomless shaft of this vertical cave!



The Taíno also believed that the island of Hispaniola embodied a female spirit that lived and breathed, ate, digested food, and also expelled excrement, “by which it is freed from its impurities.” They believed that two water-filled caves--called *manantiales* or *cenotes* in Spanish --were her eyes and that another cave was her...ummm, *guacayarima* (Taíno for “anus”). They said this last cave was totally dark “because the rays of the sun never, not even occasionally, shake the fear from its guts.” Spaniards who entered the cave told the chronicler Peter Martyr that “water rains noisily down from its height to the furthest corner of the cavern.”





CORRECTING A COMMON ERROR BEFORE WE MOVE ON— TAINOS NEVER LIVED IN CAVES



Although the Taíno were a Stone-Age people, even their earliest ancestors were already advanced to the stage that they did not live in caves. They lived in well made homes in population centers that were often very large—as many as 5,000-10,000 people. They are called Stone-Age because they did not know how to smelt metal of any kind, so all their tools were made of stone, bone, shell, and wood.

The Taíno only used caves as shelters in times of emergency, like during hurricanes, or to escape from Spanish military patrols after Columbus's 2nd voyage in 1493--but mostly they used caves for religious or spiritual purposes.



Guardian petroglyphs just inside old entrance to the sacred healing cave called Guácara Sanabe, near Cotui.

Behikes & Caves

The Taíno had two kinds of leaders, a *kacike* (chief) and *behike*—behikes were a combination doctor and spiritual leader. He (or she) was responsible for healing the ill and for acting as “referee” during the game of batey so that the ancestral spirits would ensure that the best team won. Most importantly, the behike was responsible for everything that had to do with funerals and with worship of the spirits of the dead ancestors.

The behike’s powerful ally was Maquetaurie Guayaba, the lord of the dead, Kacike of Coaybay (the Taíno land of the spirits), whose symbol was the owl.

Owl pictograph from Cueva Pomier no. 1, San Cristobal; owl petroglyph (fungus has turned it green) from Chicho Springs Cave, Bayahibe.



It is believed that behikes used caves as “classrooms” for the young kacikes of the future, or perhaps where the final lessons just before graduation were given and/or where the graduation ceremony was conducted. Some of the Spanish chroniclers mentioned this, and cave drawings of kacikes in full ceremonial dress and of the *cohoba* ceremony (an induced hallucinogenic trance to speak to the spirit guides) appear to confirm this, although the trainings and ceremonies were conducted in secrecy, so we don’t really know much about them.



Upper right and lefthand pictographs of the cohoba ceremony are from Cueva Pomiers no. 1; kacike pictographs from Cueva de las Maravillas.

The behikes conducted most of their religious rituals deep inside sacred caves, but not all caves on the island were sacred. The sacred ones were protected by guardian petroglyphs carved onto stalactites or stalagmites facing the cave opening. They acted like signs, announcing that only behikes and those whom they brought inside with them were allowed to pass beyond the cave's portal.

The guardian figure is said to be **Macocael**. In the days before there were humans, the pre-human spirits came out of their cave at night to eat jobos (a kind of plum). Macocael was the guardian of the door. One night, however, he left his post to go fishing with some friends and didn't notice when the sun came up. The door to the cave closed and he was turned to stone.... Some of Macocael's representations are very finely sculpted and complex, others are crude and simplistic.

To make a petroglyph, the sculptor "pecked" little dots out of the rock with a hard, pointed rock tool that he hit with a rock hammer--like a connect-the-dots drawing. The more dots he pecked out in a line, the finer the etching. ...It took a long, long time and a lot of skill to make a finely sculpted petroglyph.

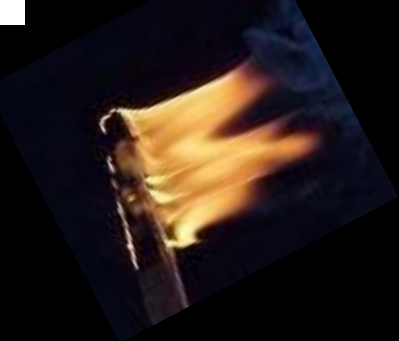


The simplistic petroglyph is from Cueva Pomiers; the more complex one is from Sand Cave, Los Haitises National Park.



It's rare, but this Macocael guardian figure in the cave called Peñón Gordo in the East National Park near La Romana and Bayahibe, was painted on a wall instead of sculpted (although, like other guardians, it faces the entrance). A painted Macocael guardian, however, appears to have needed something special to help him protect the cave—this one has eyes in his hands as well as in his head, and has a helper on either side of him.

What's that in the middle of Macocael's stomach? Is it yet another eye, or is it his belly button, indicating that he was not an opia (spirit) but a human?



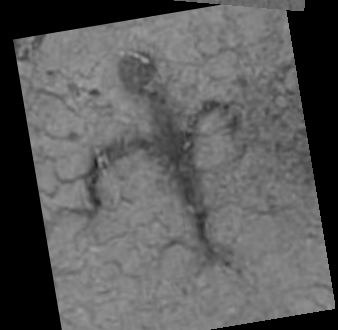
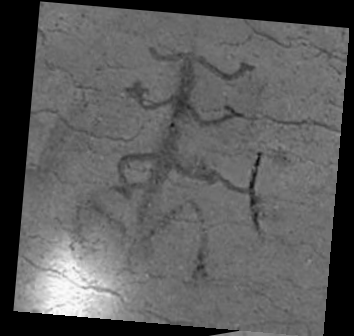
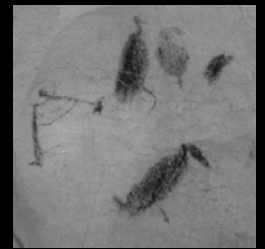
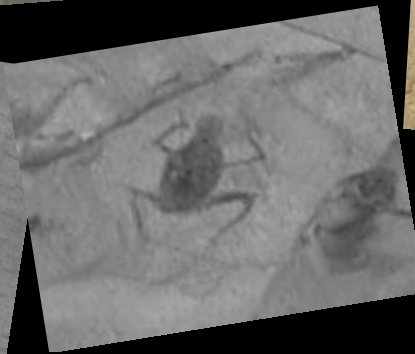
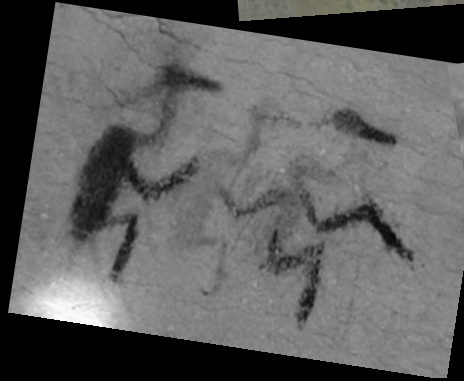
Deep within a sacred cave, the darkness alleviated only by a flickering torch that would have made the pictographs inside move as if alive, the behike—after fasting

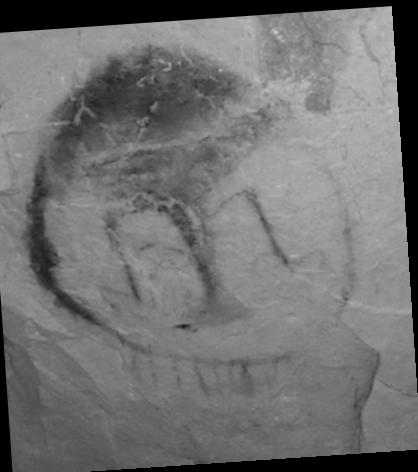
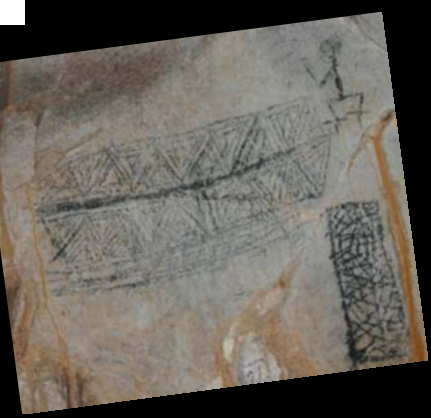
for many weeks, and after vomiting to remove any impurities that might still remain within his physical body--inhaled *cohoba* (an halucinogenic powder) in order to go into a trance and communicate more easily with his *zemis*, his personal spiritual guides as well as the extremely powerful *zemis* who were the Taínos' founding ancestors and mythical heroes. Many sacred caves have piles of shells lying around. It is believed that the behike ground the shells into a powder that he mixed with cohoba, for the calcium acted as a catalyst to put him into a trance state more quickly.



With the aid of the visions during his cohoba-induced communication with his zemis, the behike painted prayers on the cave walls, stalactites and stalagmites. His prayers were pictographs, most of which were painted on the cave walls with sticks (their ends shredded) dipped into powdered charcoal mixed with animal fat, though in some caves they used natural white chalk or red clay. The artist drew the foods that sustained the Taíno population. There are drawings of yucca graters, maize, birds, fish, frogs, turtles, insects, iguanas, and sea creatures, as well as of dogs, which were the Taínos' pets as well as companions for hunting hutías at night.

(Pictograph of an hutía from Cueva Guácara Sanabe, upper left.)





There are drawings of the *cibucán*, the woven tube the women used to extract the poisonous liquid from bitter yucca to make the bread called *casabe*. They drew hunting and fishing scenes, pictures related to childbirth and reproduction, pictures of their *kacikes*, of the *behikes*' fierce ritual masks, of dancers at *areitos*, of babies, and of their creator spirits as well as the spirits of the sun, wind, rain, and hurricanes. No doubt these drawings were painted while the *behique* sang, praying that the harvest would be good, rain would fall at the right time, the schools of fish would increase, babies would be born without problems, the cool breeze wouldn't turn into a hurricane...

They drew and sculpted many images of just heads because the Taíno appear to have believed that a person's soul or essence was inside the head. In fact, many important Taínos were buried headless, for their heads were kept in a basket or other decorated container in the family home.



Left to right, above images are from near Los Quemados (Bonaó), Cueva Peñón Gordo, and Cueva de las Maravillas.

Ready for another surprise? The Taíno appear to be the inventors of the “happy face”!—you can see pictographs and petroglyphs of these smiling heads, many hundreds of years old, in caves and other rock surfaces all over the island, like these called Las Caritas that overlook Lago Enriquillo, in the Southwestern part of the country.



Above is Lago Enriquillo, as seen from Las Caritas, high on a cliff on the lake's northern boundary. It is a salt lake much larger than the U.S.'s Great Salt Lake, home to crocodiles, two kinds of iguanas, flamingos, and other tropical birds.

The Taíno cave artists drew many pictures whose meanings we can only guess at. For example, several pictographs in the cave called Guácara de Sanabé, near Cotui, clearly indicate two men carrying another who is tied up and trussed to a pole—but the Taíno were said to be peaceful! And we know they were not cannibals; in fact, although they said their enemies, the Caribs, were cannibals, we know today that was not true. So what do these scenes represent? Domingo Abreu believes the cave was especially sacred as a healing cave and that these drawings depict the ill, brought to the cave to be made well again. But no one knows for sure.



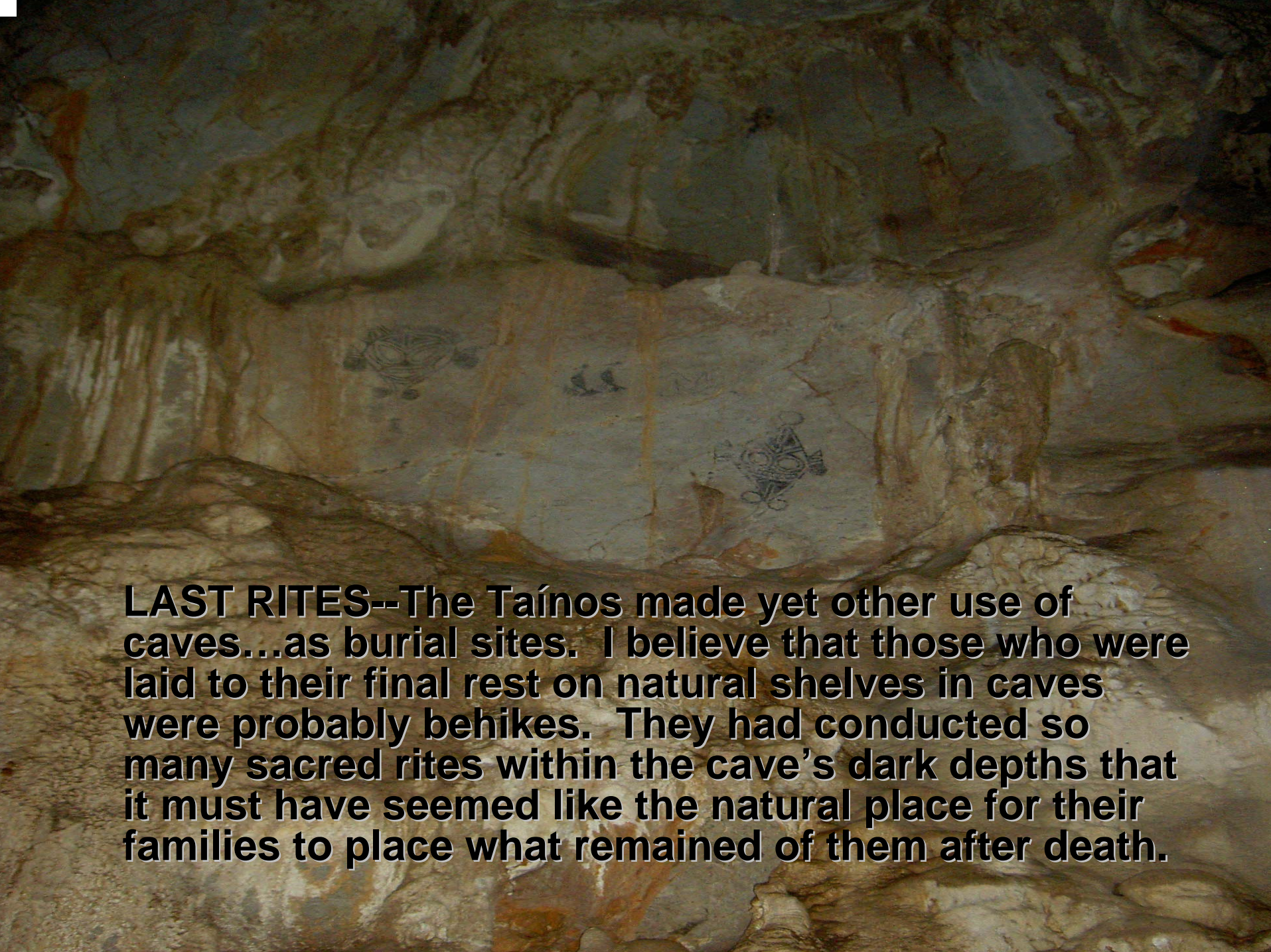


Other drawings we think we have figured out, and they give us a glimpse into the complexity of meaning that was probably embedded into all of them. For example, it appears that birds represented man in many of the pictographs—painted on a wall at the dark entrance to a tunnel might be a drawing of several birds, with the first bent low, a second twisting to the left, a third standing tall but bending to the right, etc.—the birds indicate the height and direction for a man to traverse the tunnel.



Some experts believe that a pictograph of five birds sitting on a branch in the Cueva Pomier no. 1 near San Cristobal (photo, above left) represents the five principal *kacikes* who ruled the island, which was divided into five *kacikazgoes* (chiefdoms) when Spaniards arrived in 1492. Not all birds represented man in the pictographs, however; and we know that owls and bats, the night “birds,” appear to have represented the ancestor spirits and/or death.

Domingo Abreu pointed out a panel in Cueva Pomier (above right) that appears to illustrate the Taíno myth of woodpeckers carving genitals into some sexless creatures, thus recreating women, who had all been stolen. Look at the men to the left, jumping for joy because they’ll no longer be alone!



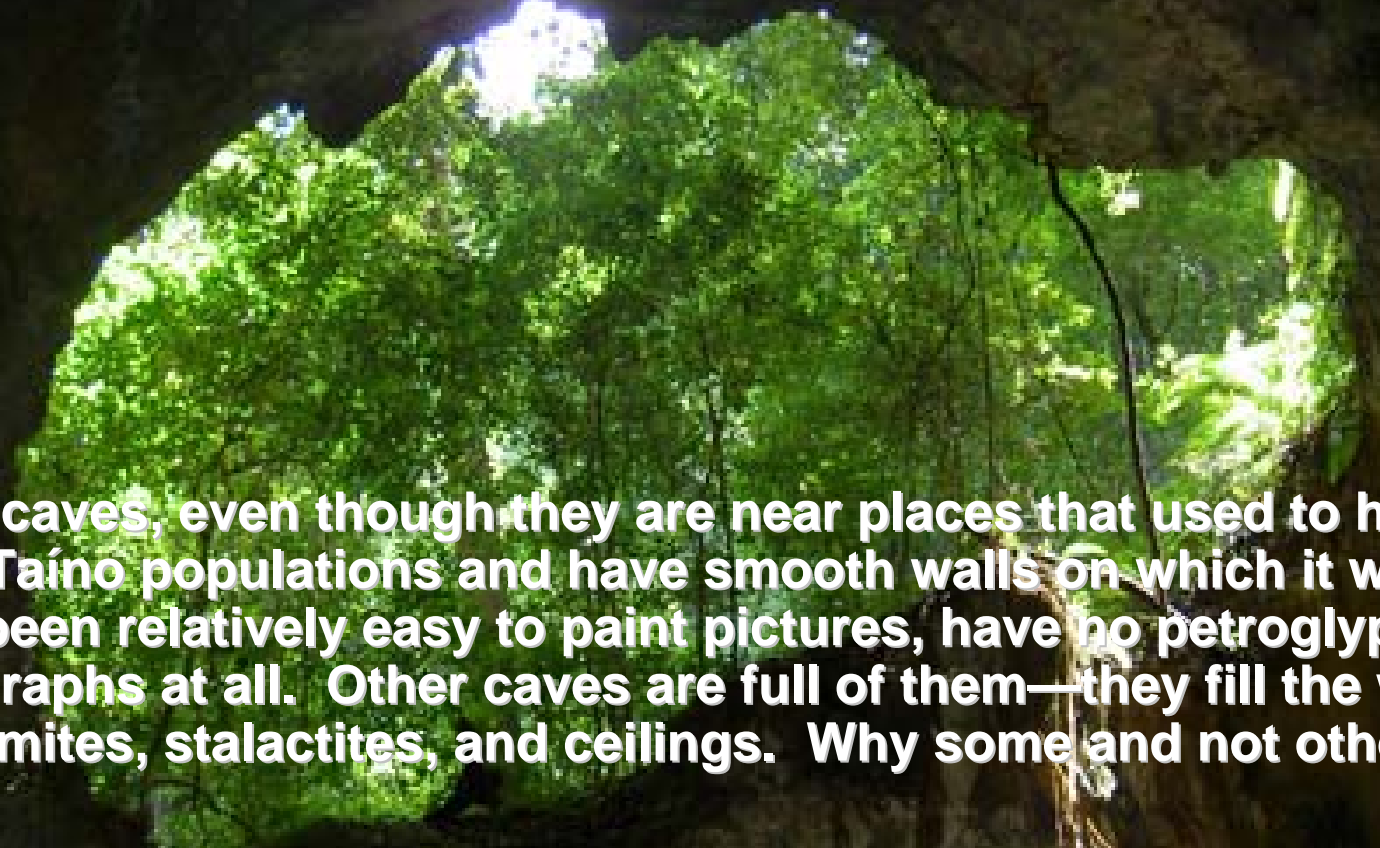
LAST RITES--The Taínos made yet other use of caves...as burial sites. I believe that those who were laid to their final rest on natural shelves in caves were probably behikes. They had conducted so many sacred rites within the cave's dark depths that it must have seemed like the natural place for their families to place what remained of them after death.



“Wombs of Introspection”

Artist Helena Tiainen (Berkeley, CA) says caves fascinate us because... “subconsciously they remind all humans of the experience of entering our own inner selves.... Caves naturally call for contemplation and offer sort of a womb of introspection.” She thinks the artists who drew on the walls of the caves “spoke their sacred without words.”

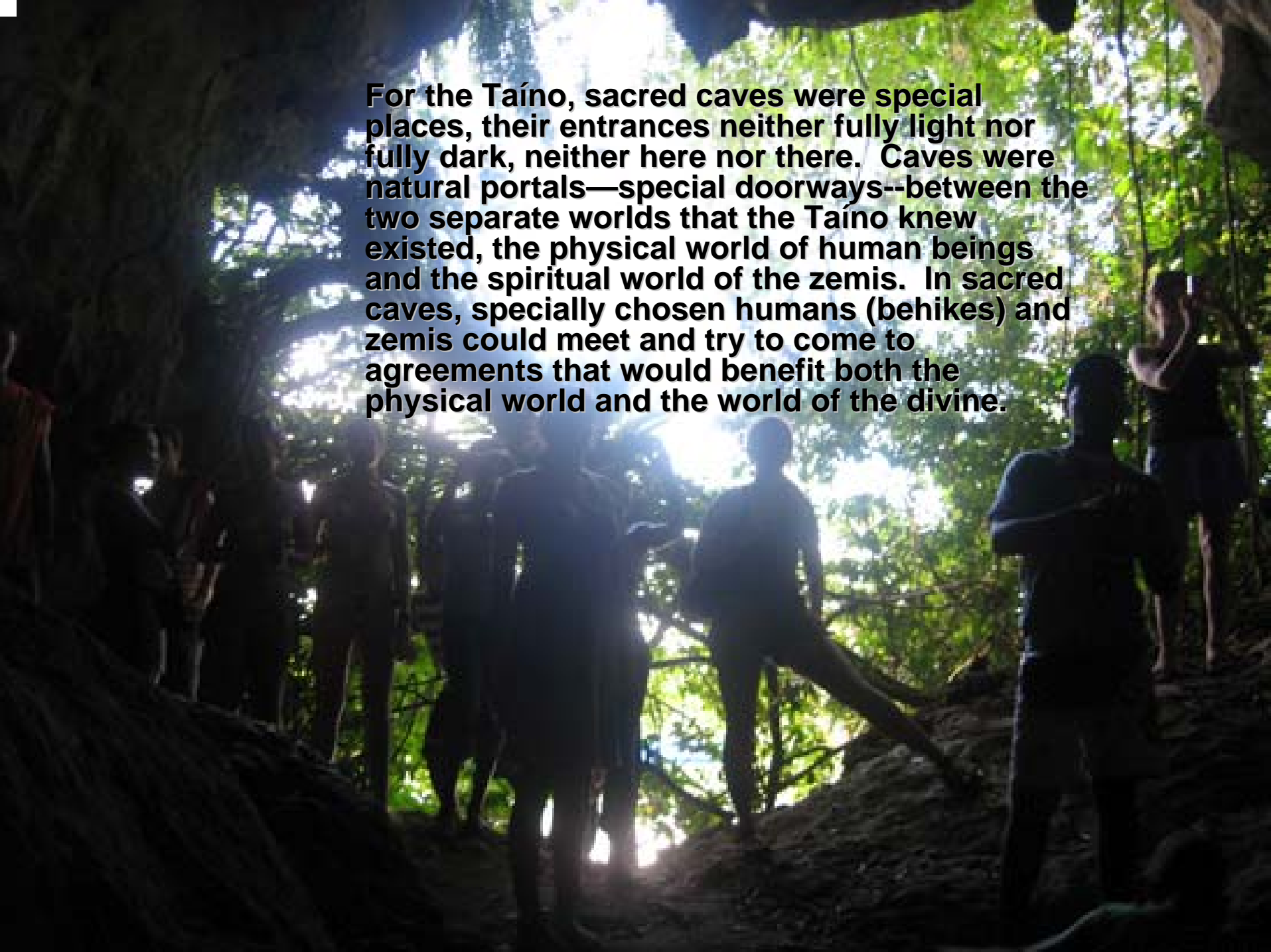
A “sense of caveness”

A photograph showing the interior of a cave looking out through a large, irregular opening. The cave walls are dark and textured. Outside, a dense, vibrant green forest is visible, with sunlight filtering through the trees. The scene is framed by the dark, shadowed edges of the cave entrance.

Some caves, even though they are near places that used to have large Taíno populations and have smooth walls on which it would have been relatively easy to paint pictures, have no petroglyphs or pictographs at all. Other caves are full of them—they fill the walls, stalagmites, stalactites, and ceilings. Why some and not others?

Dr. Nick Higgins, a friend of mine who is a psychiatrist and is fascinated by the Taínos' use of caves, believes that some caves gave the Taíno a special spiritual feeling and others did not. He calls it their “sense of caveness.”

For the Taíno, sacred caves were special places, their entrances neither fully light nor fully dark, neither here nor there. Caves were natural portals—special doorways--between the two separate worlds that the Taíno knew existed, the physical world of human beings and the spiritual world of the zemis. In sacred caves, specially chosen humans (behikes) and zemis could meet and try to come to agreements that would benefit both the physical world and the world of the divine.

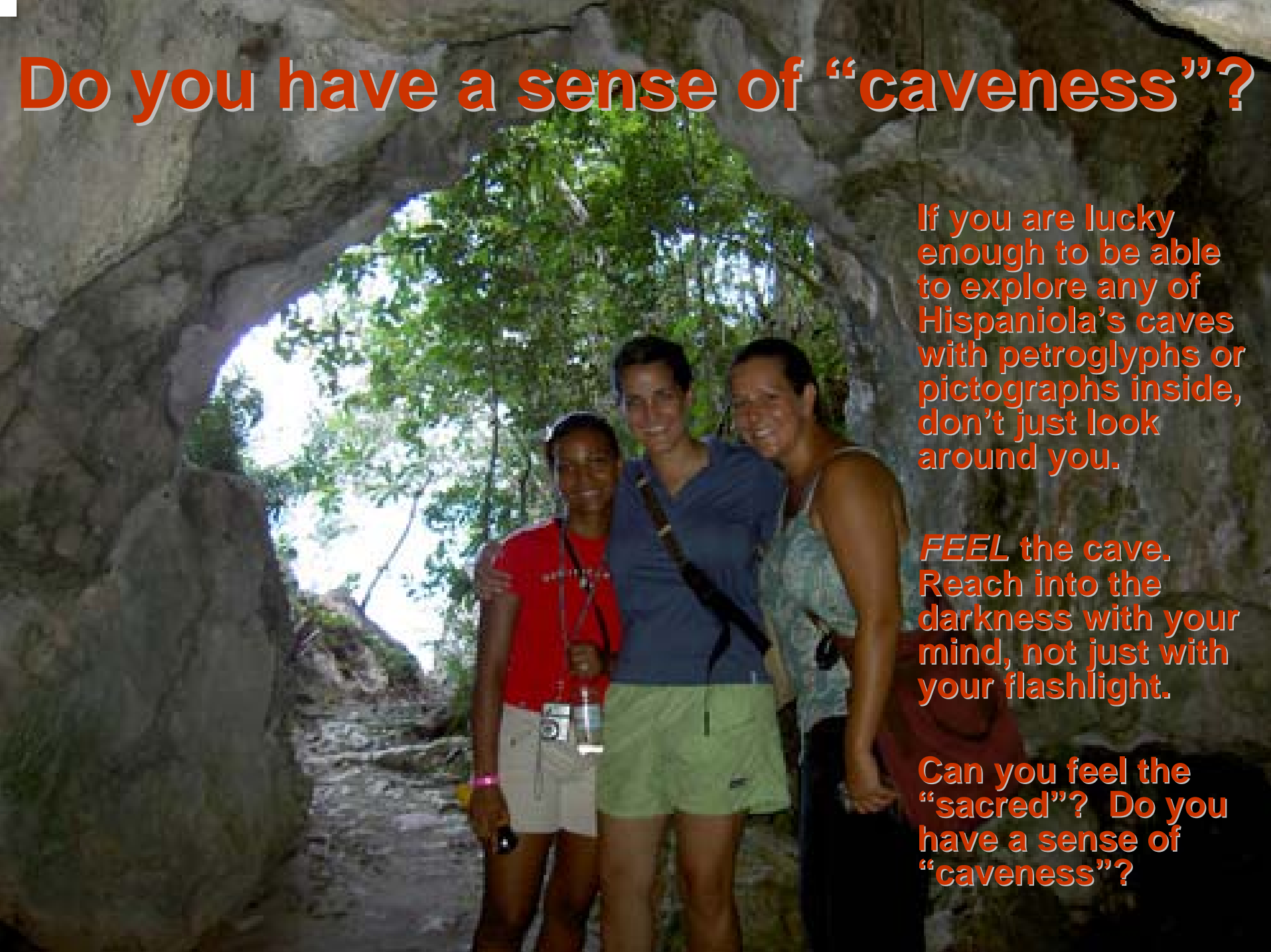


Do you have a sense of “caveness”?

If you are lucky enough to be able to explore any of Hispaniola’s caves with petroglyphs or pictographs inside, don’t just look around you.

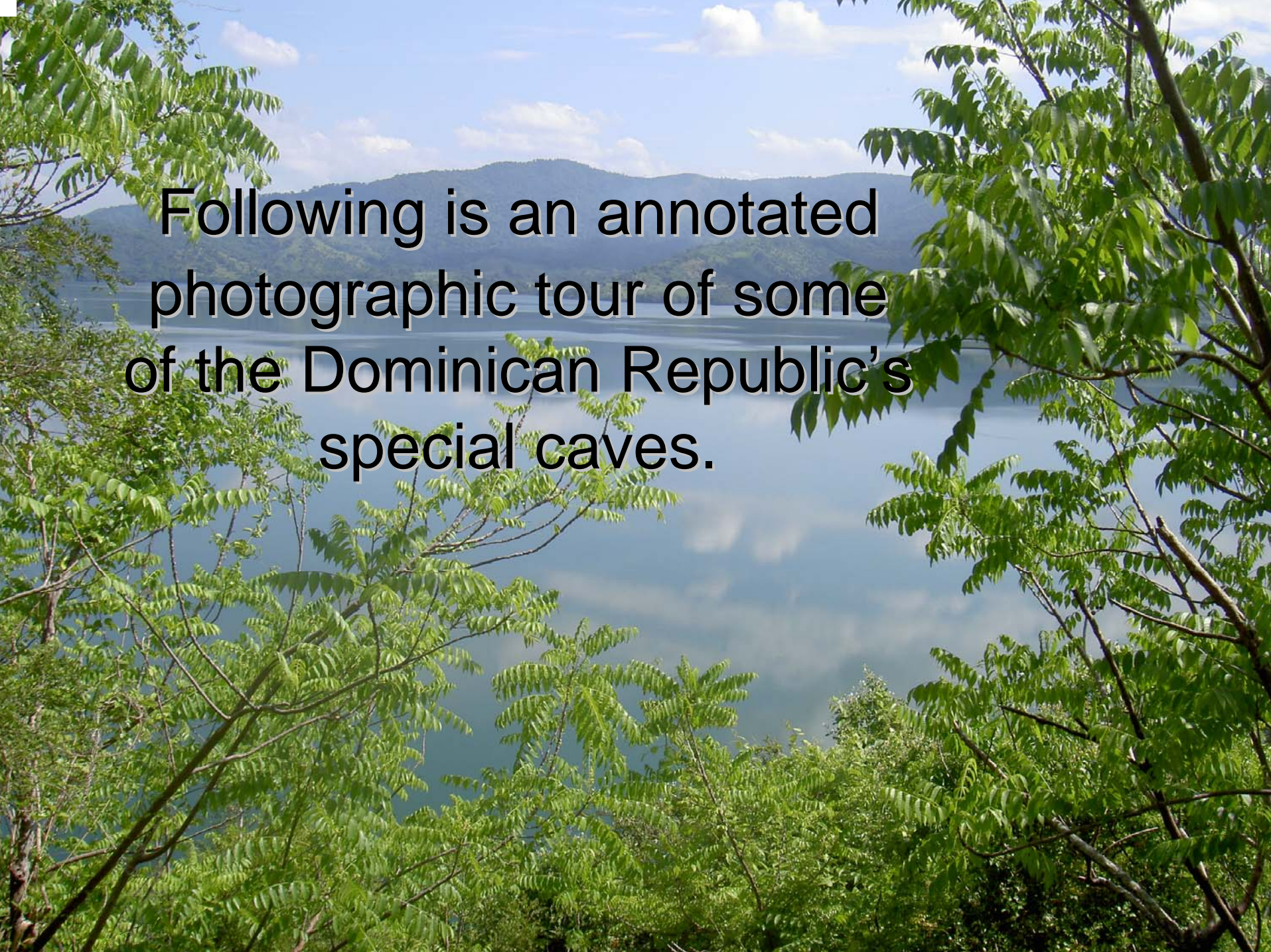
FEEL the cave. Reach into the darkness with your mind, not just with your flashlight.

Can you feel the “sacred”? Do you have a sense of “caveness”?



In closing, think carefully. What would your “sacred without words” be?

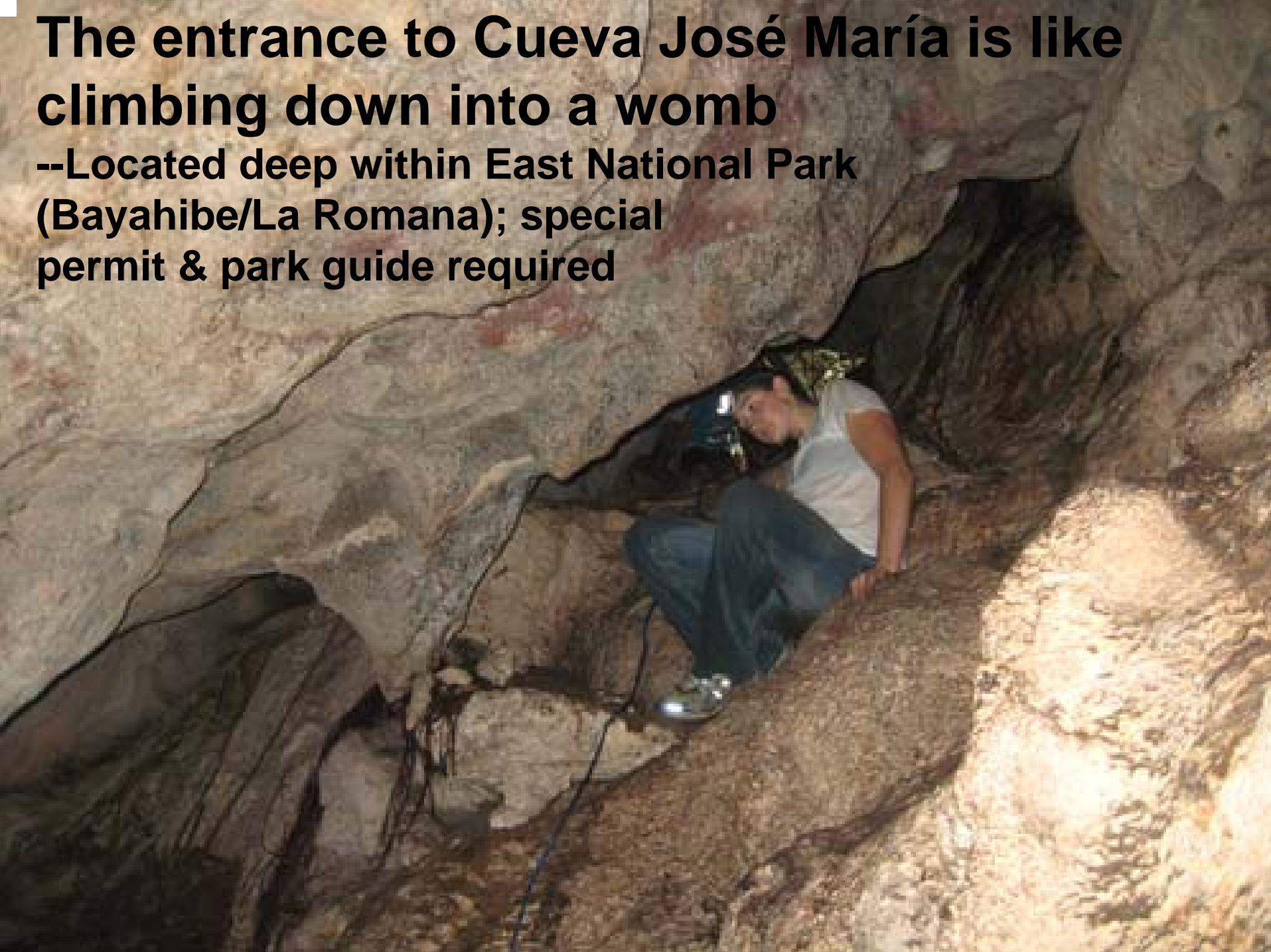
Imagine how you would feel if you were a Taíno behike inside a sacred cave right now, all alone, with just the feeble light of a flickering torch, a gourd full of black “paint” that you had made, and a “brush” made out of a stick with a shredded tip. What would you draw on the wall that would represent your most important prayer for your people’s welfare?



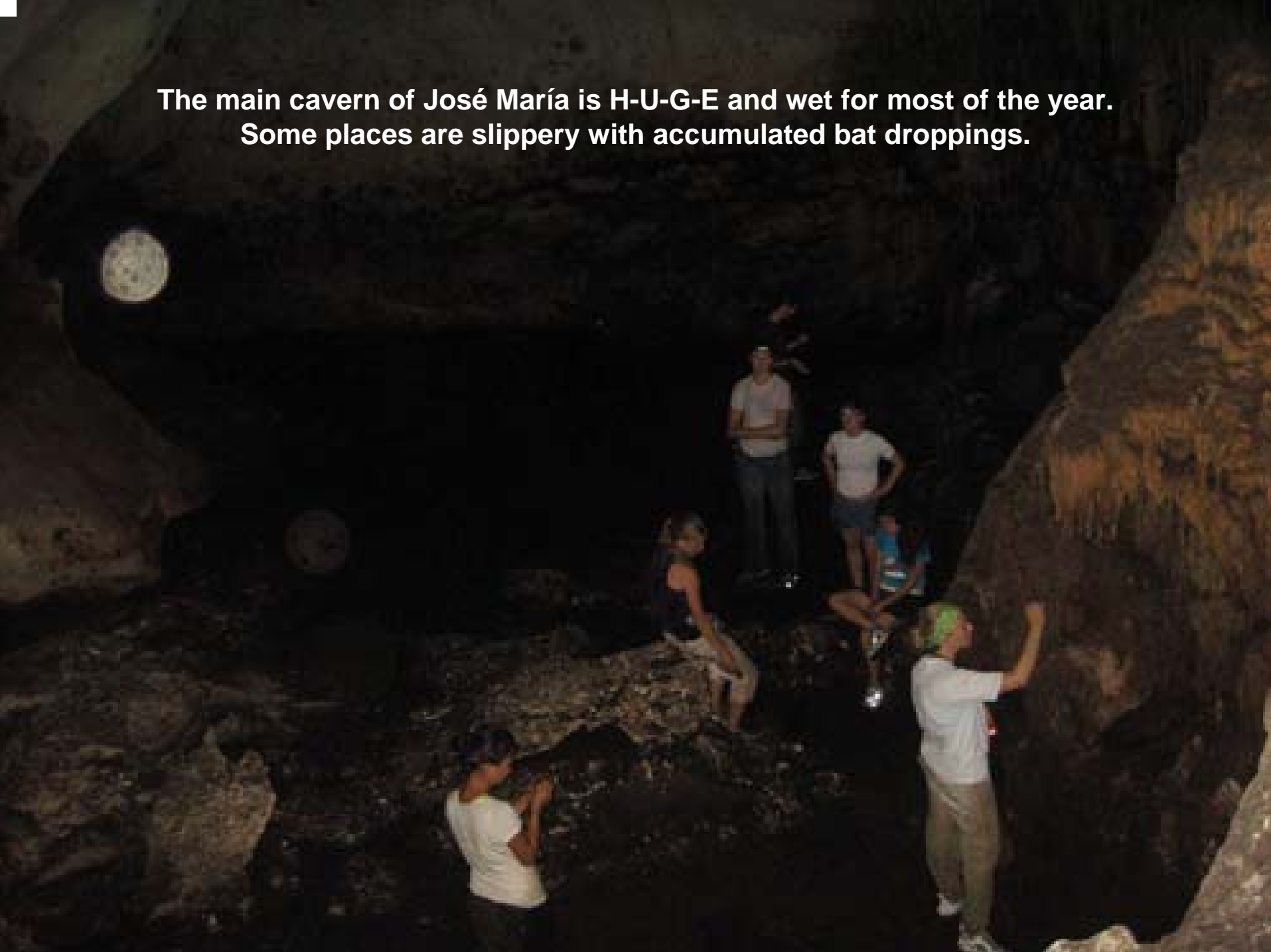
Following is an annotated
photographic tour of some
of the Dominican Republic's
special caves.

The entrance to Cueva José María is like climbing down into a womb

--Located deep within East National Park (Bayahibe/La Romana); special permit & park guide required



**The main cavern of José María is H-U-G-E and wet for most of the year.
Some places are slippery with accumulated bat droppings.**

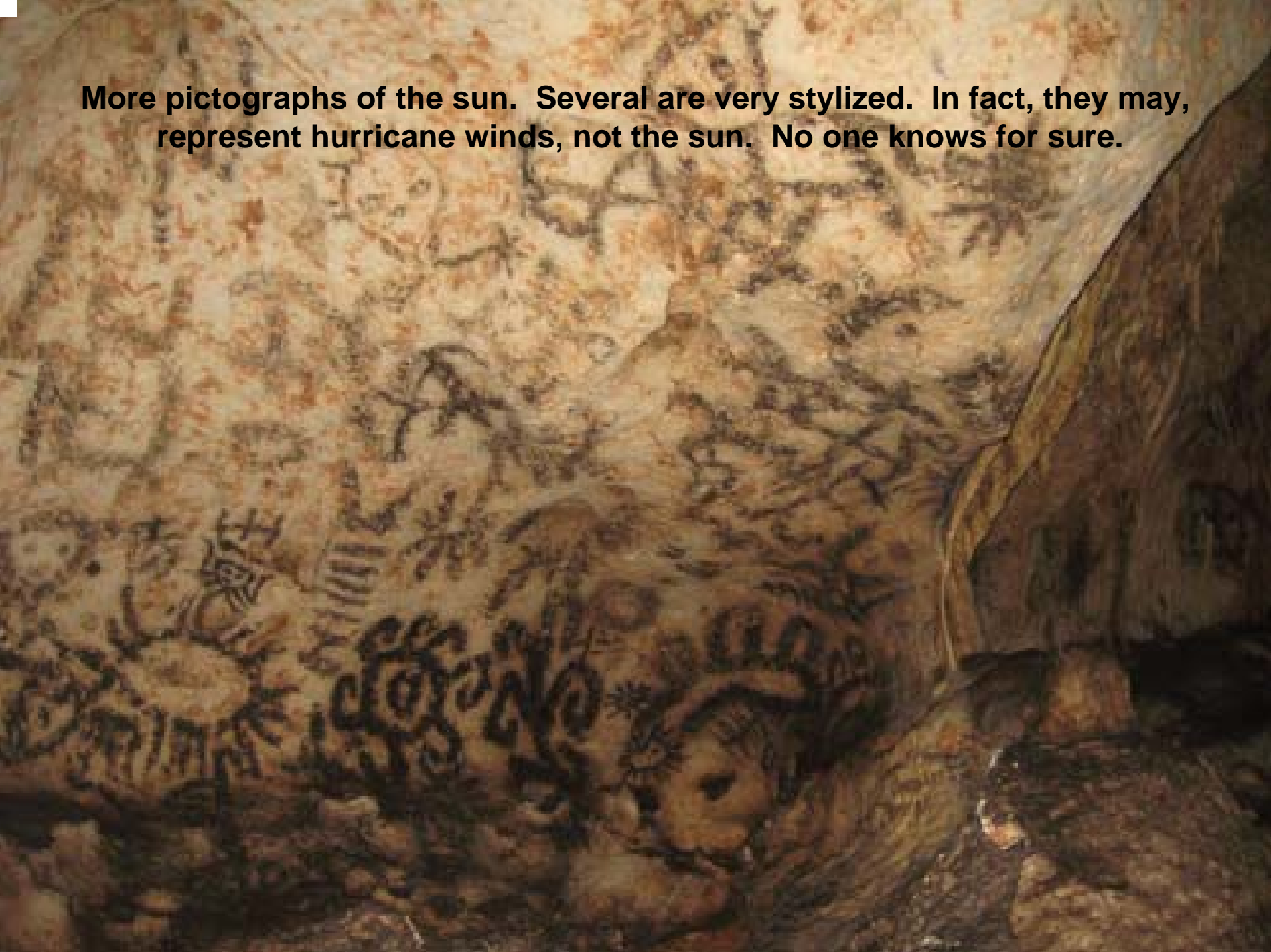




Perhaps because it is situated at the eastern end of the island, there are multiple pictographs of the sun inside Cueva José María.



More pictographs of the sun. Several are very stylized. In fact, they may, represent hurricane winds, not the sun. No one knows for sure.



Whole sections of many of the cave's walls are jam packed with vast pictographic panels. Do they tell stories, if only we knew the themes, if only we knew how to "read" them?





















Dominican ecologist Domingo Abreu believes that the incredible multitude of repeated drawings of frightened looking people in Cueva José María might be the cries for help of the Taíno elders, women, and children who hid out in this cave while Spaniards were massacuring those who were out in the open during a series of wars—called the Wars of Higüey--ordered by Governor Nicolas de Ovando in the early 1500s “to pacify the Indians.”

Or perhaps these drawings represent the Taínos’ history of the wars?





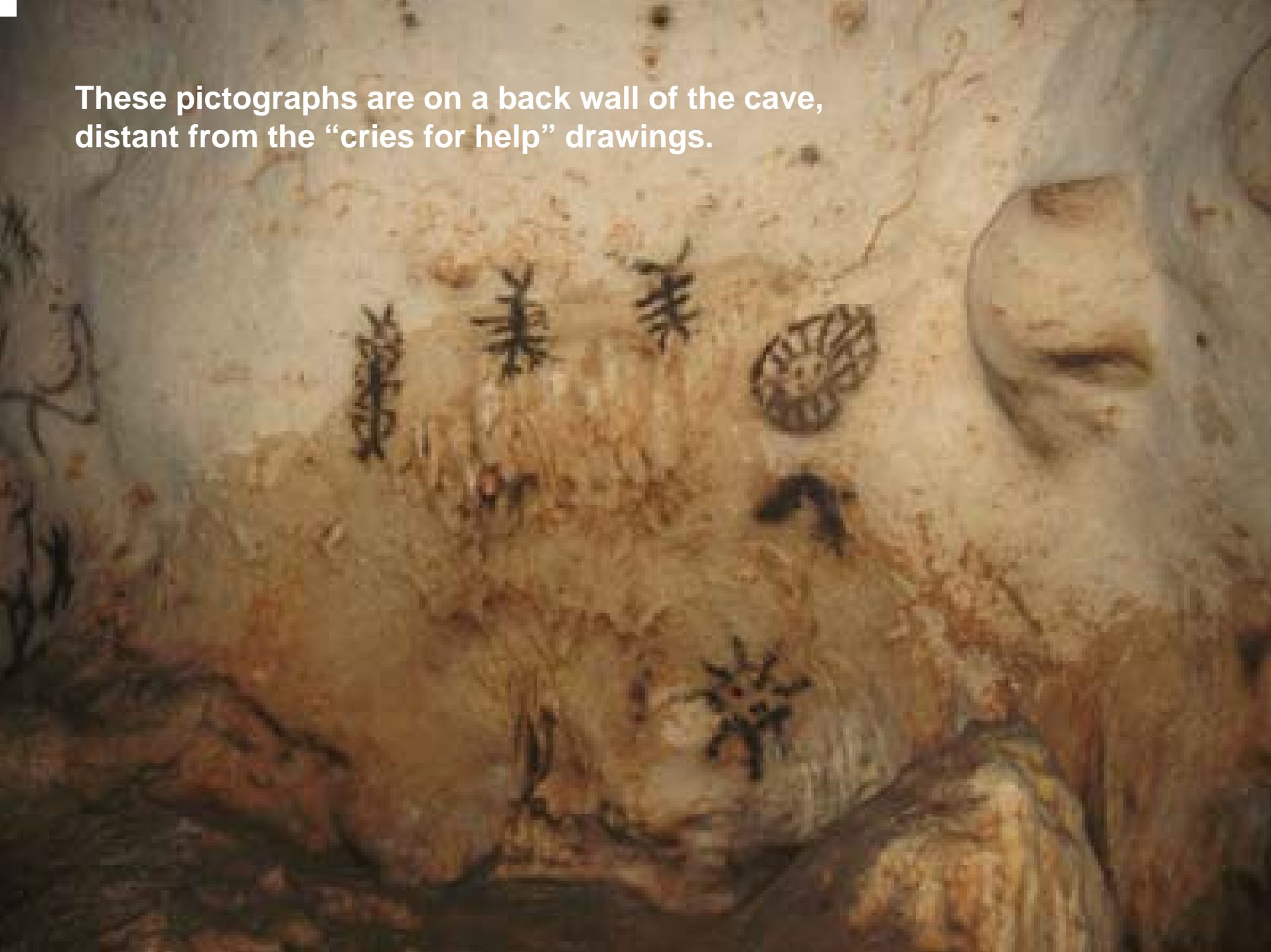




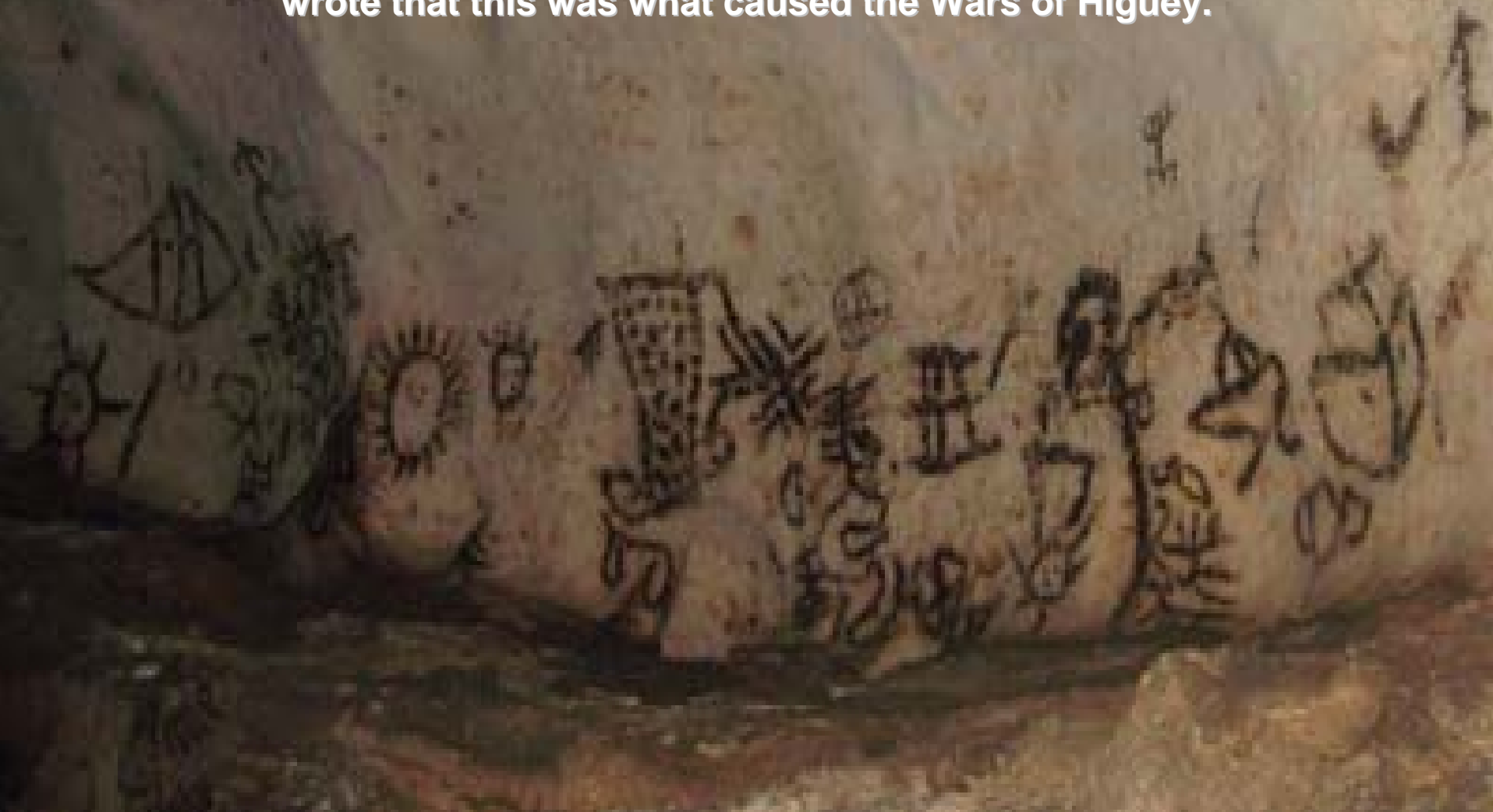




These pictographs are on a back wall of the cave,
distant from the “cries for help” drawings.



This is the controversial “Tribute Panel” (about 25 feet long) that some specialists believe can be “read” from left to right. They say it illustrates the Taínos’ sale of *casabe* bread to the Spaniards and the violence that broke out when a Spanish war dog attacked a cacique, tearing out his innards, which caused a Taíno uprising in the early 1500s. The Spaniards wrote that this was what caused the Wars of Higüey.



Here's a close-up of the part of the Tribute Panel illustrating the violence of the wars that took place in the eastern region. Is that a Spanish sailing ship on the right?



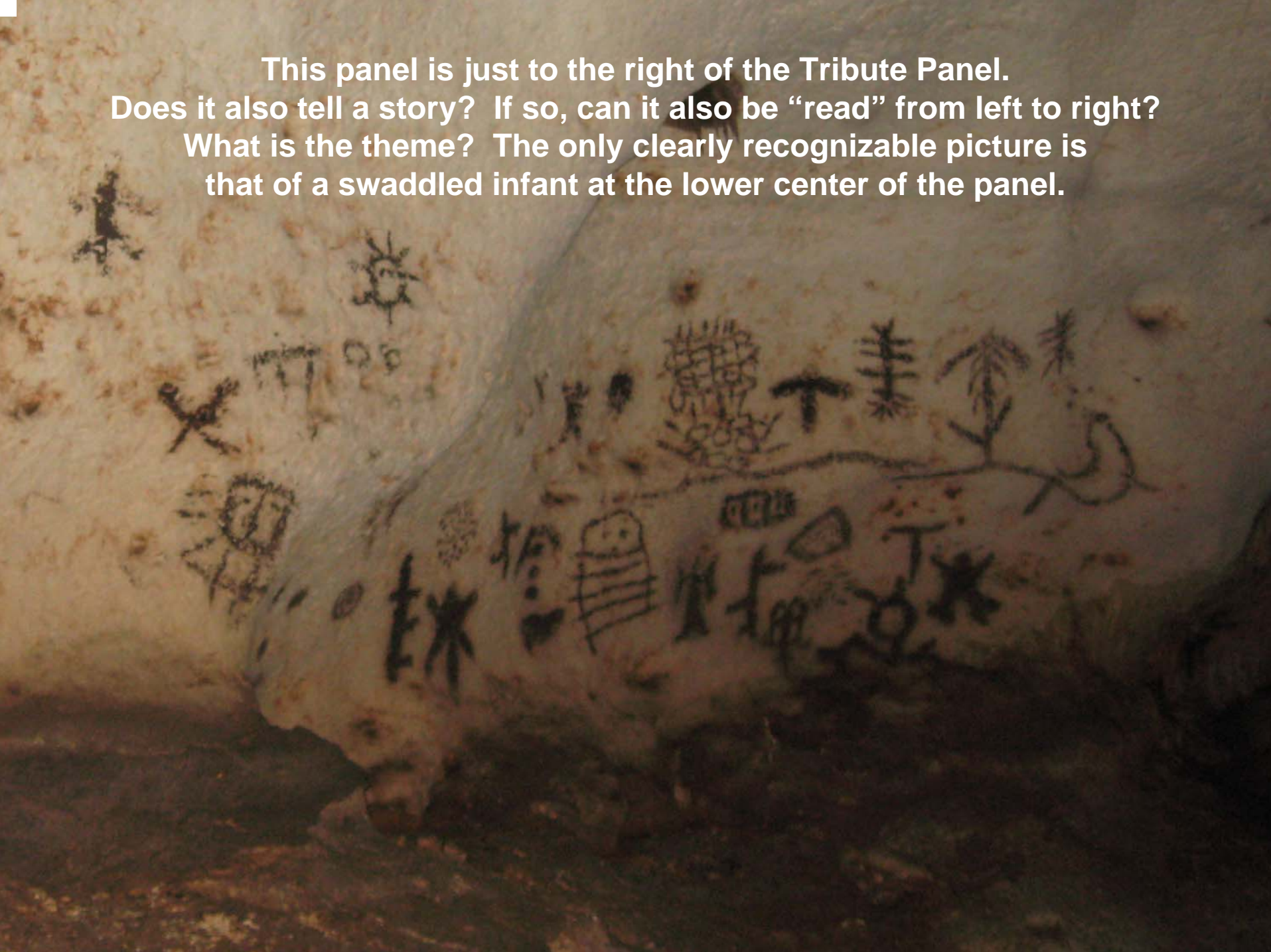
Center of the Tribute Panel. The central figure (with "dots") is a yucca grater, used to make casabe bread, which Taínos sold to Spanish sailors.



Left side of the Tribute Panel.



This panel is just to the right of the Tribute Panel.
Does it also tell a story? If so, can it also be “read” from left to right?
What is the theme? The only clearly recognizable picture is
that of a swaddled infant at the lower center of the panel.



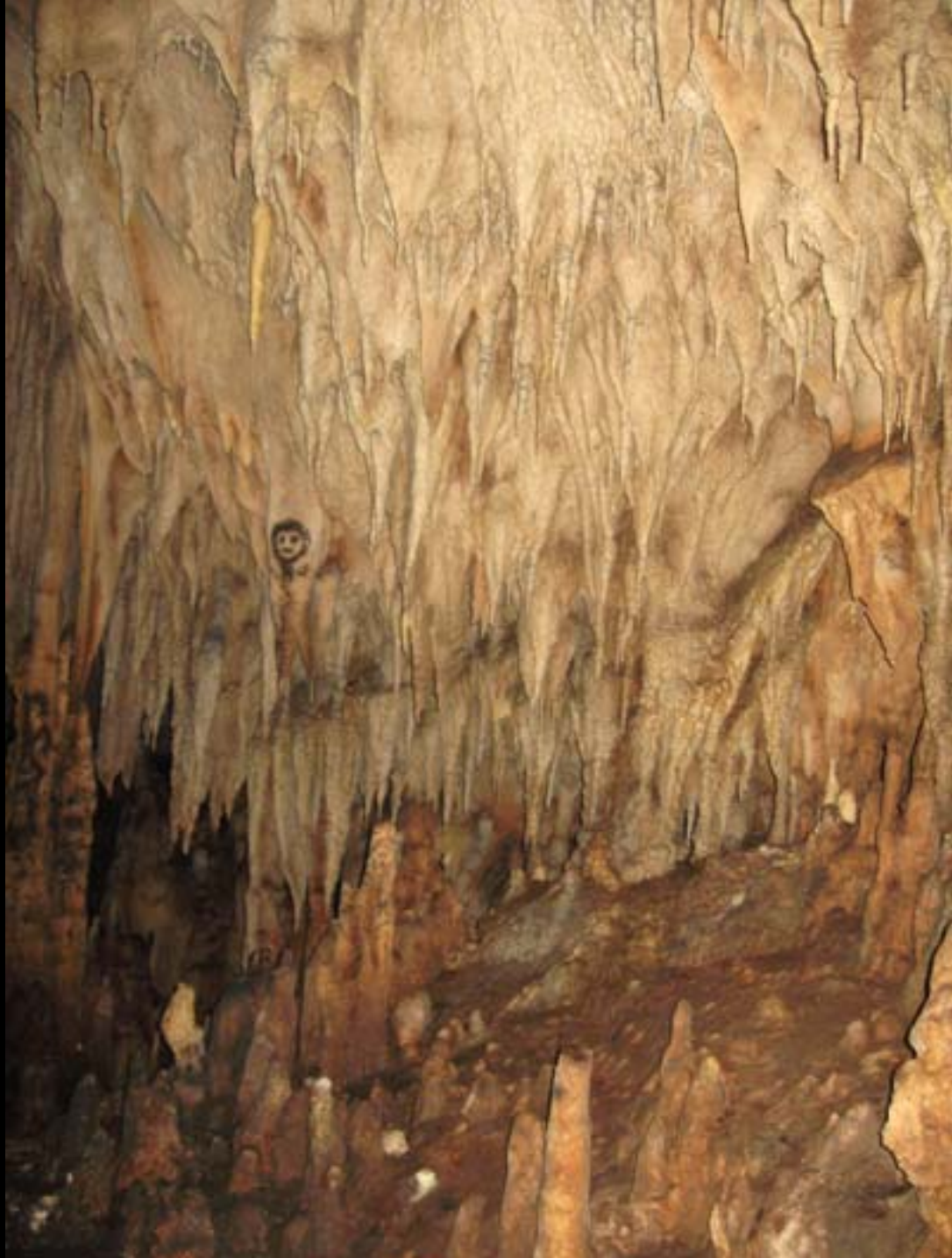


This angry looking face, about one foot tall, is all by itself, high above the entrance to a secondary tunnel at the back of the main cavern.

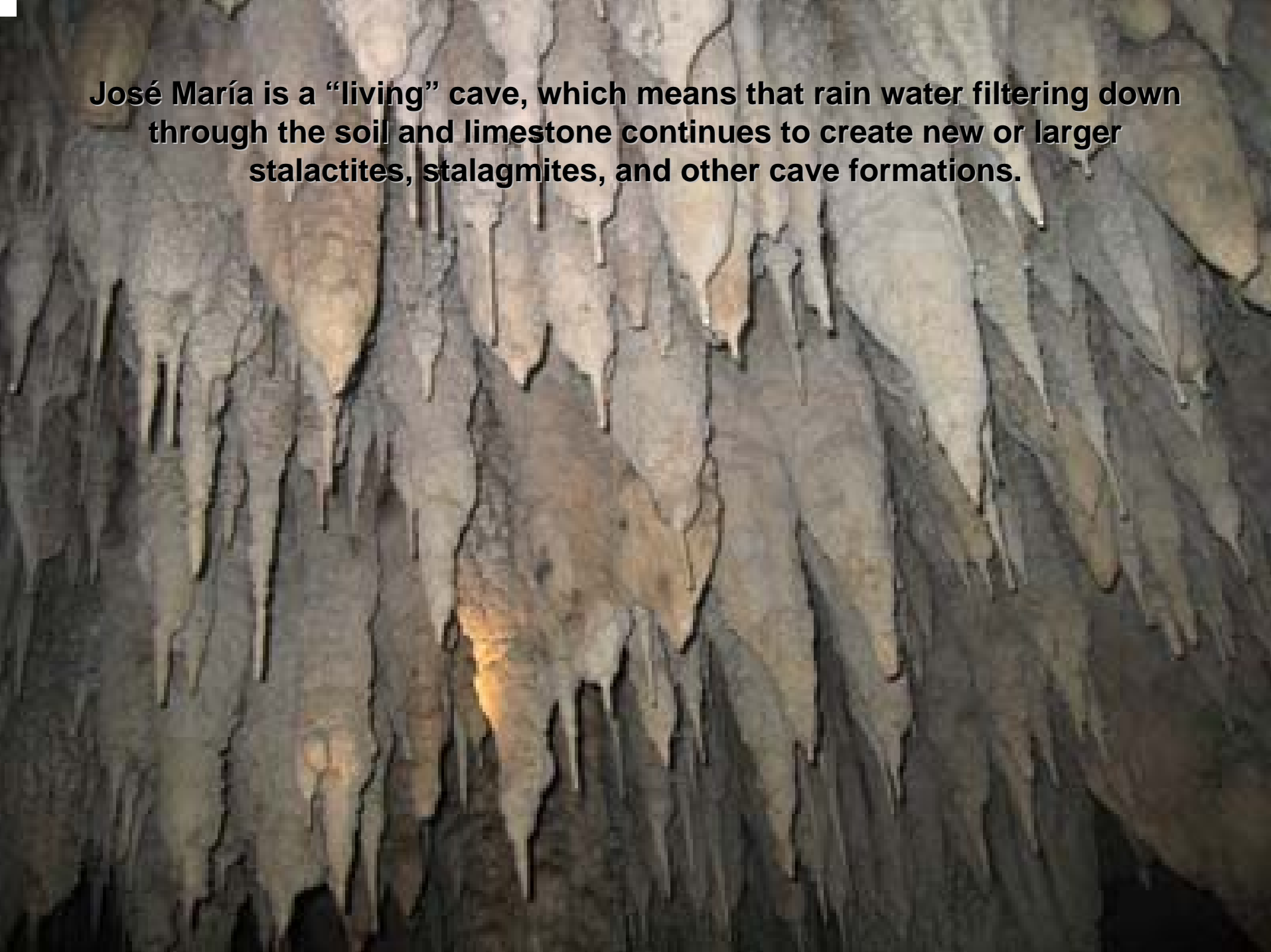
Were the Taínos' ancestor spirits angry about all the people killed by Spaniards in the so-called Wars of Higüey?



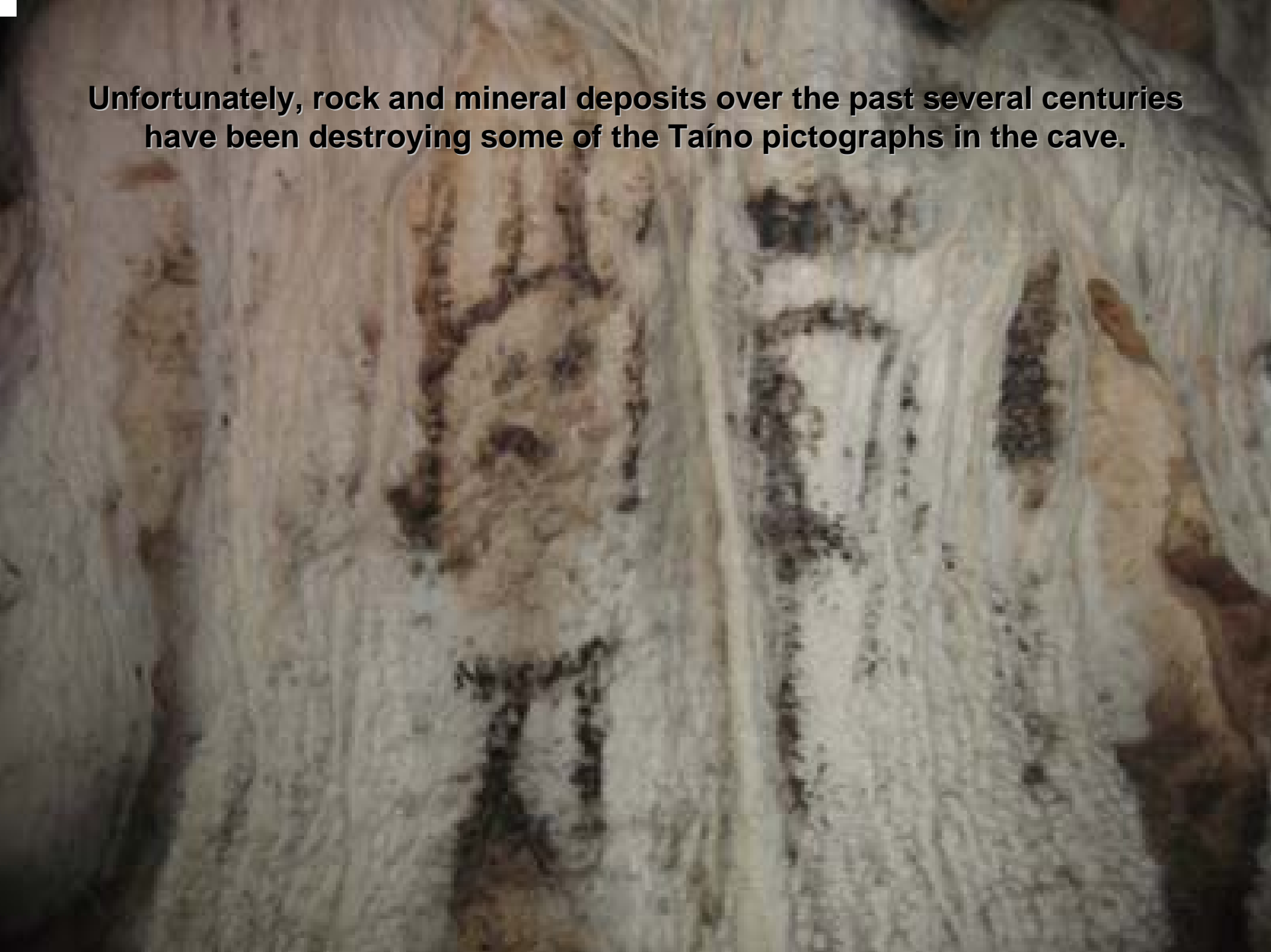
Look at the faces painted H-I-G-H up on some of these stalactites! Why would the artist have risked life and limb to paint them way up there?



José María is a “living” cave, which means that rain water filtering down through the soil and limestone continues to create new or larger stalactites, stalagmites, and other cave formations.



Unfortunately, rock and mineral deposits over the past several centuries have been destroying some of the Taíno pictographs in the cave.













Any ideas what this pictograph might represent? It was important enough for some Taíno to climb way up to paint it.

Playing the Interpretation Game: Some specialists say the three images in the pictograph in the photo below left represent a bearded Spaniard, a Spanish ship, and a Spaniard on horseback. And the central-left figure in the photo of the pictograph below right is said to also be a bearded Spaniard.

What do you think? Remember, no one knows for sure except the ancient Taínos.



Entrance to Cueva la Iglesia, San Pedro de Macoris

--This cave has no pictographs, but does have some beautiful formations, lots of bats, and is very near Cueva de las Maravillas, a popular educational center.





Three crudely carved guardian petroglyphs are just to the left of the cave's main entrance.









Bats!



**Some time in the distant past,
the roof of the central cavern
fell in, exposing it to sunlight.**











Here are some of the local guides who led us to the cave.

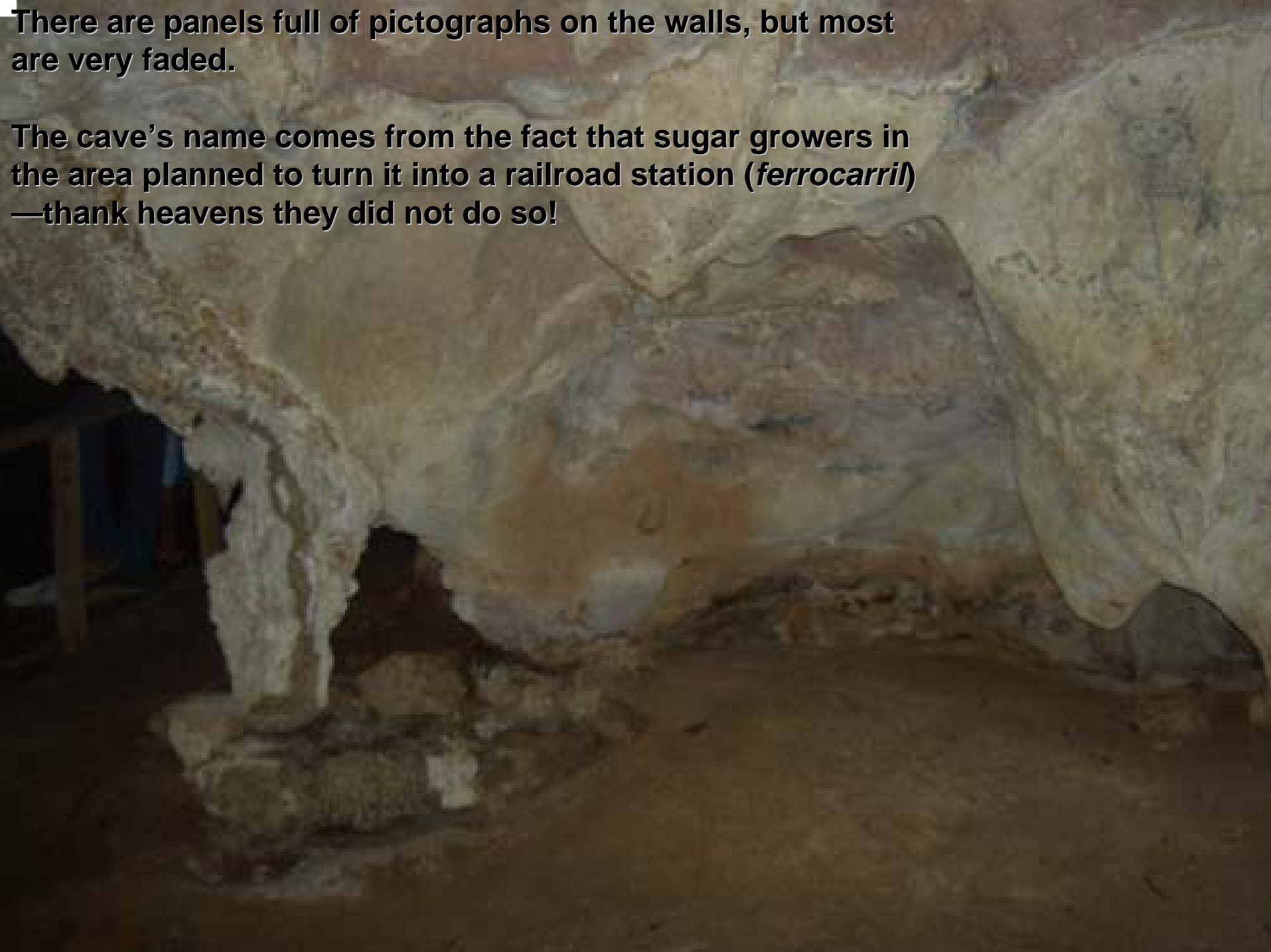


A photograph taken from inside a dark cave, looking out through a jagged, irregular opening. The view outside is a dense, vibrant green forest with sunlight filtering through the trees. The cave walls are dark and textured. The text is overlaid in the center of the image.

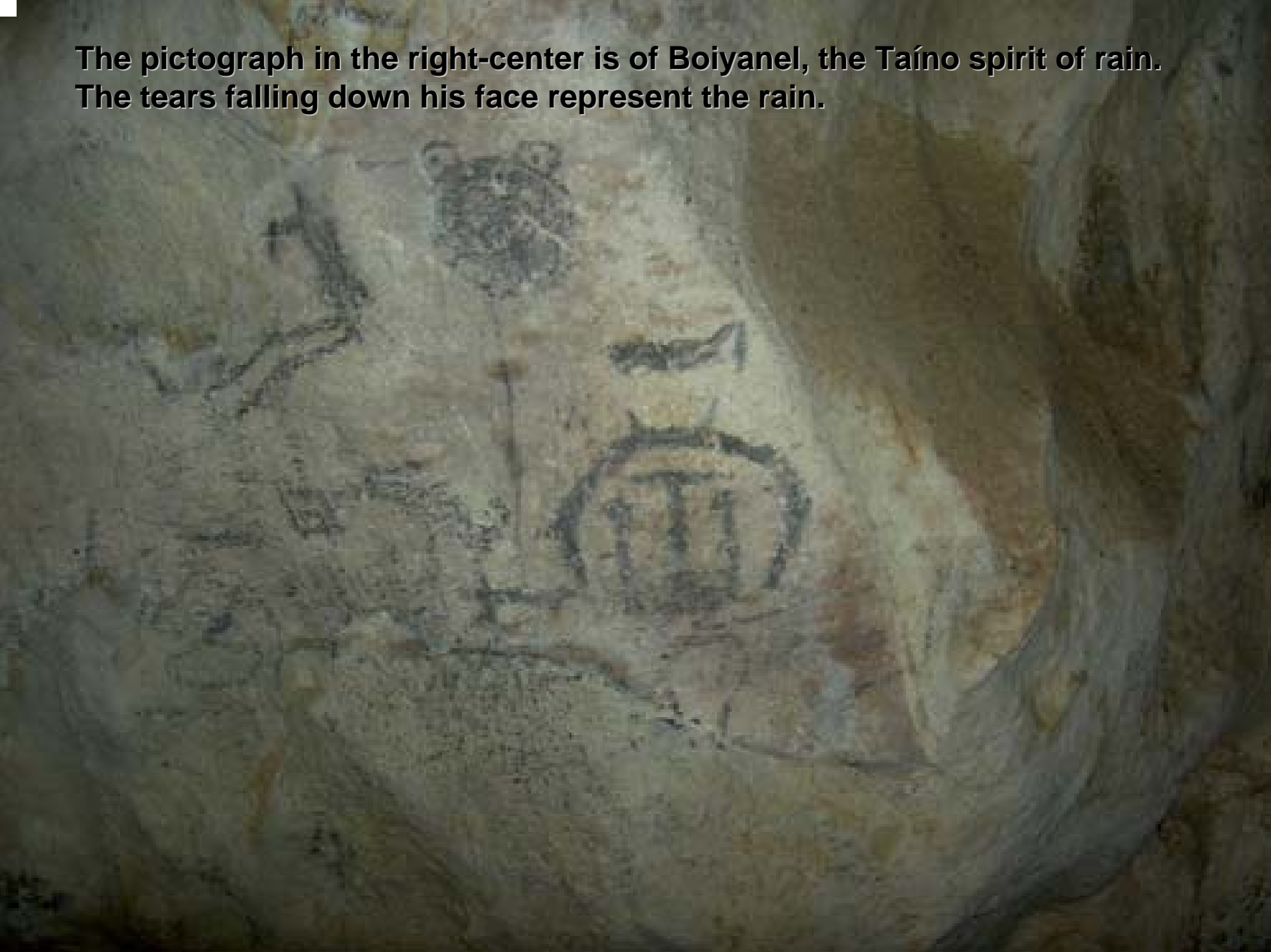
**Cueva La Linea
(or Ferrocarril), Los
Haitises National
Park**

There are panels full of pictographs on the walls, but most are very faded.

The cave's name comes from the fact that sugar growers in the area planned to turn it into a railroad station (*ferrocarril*)—thank heavens they did not do so!



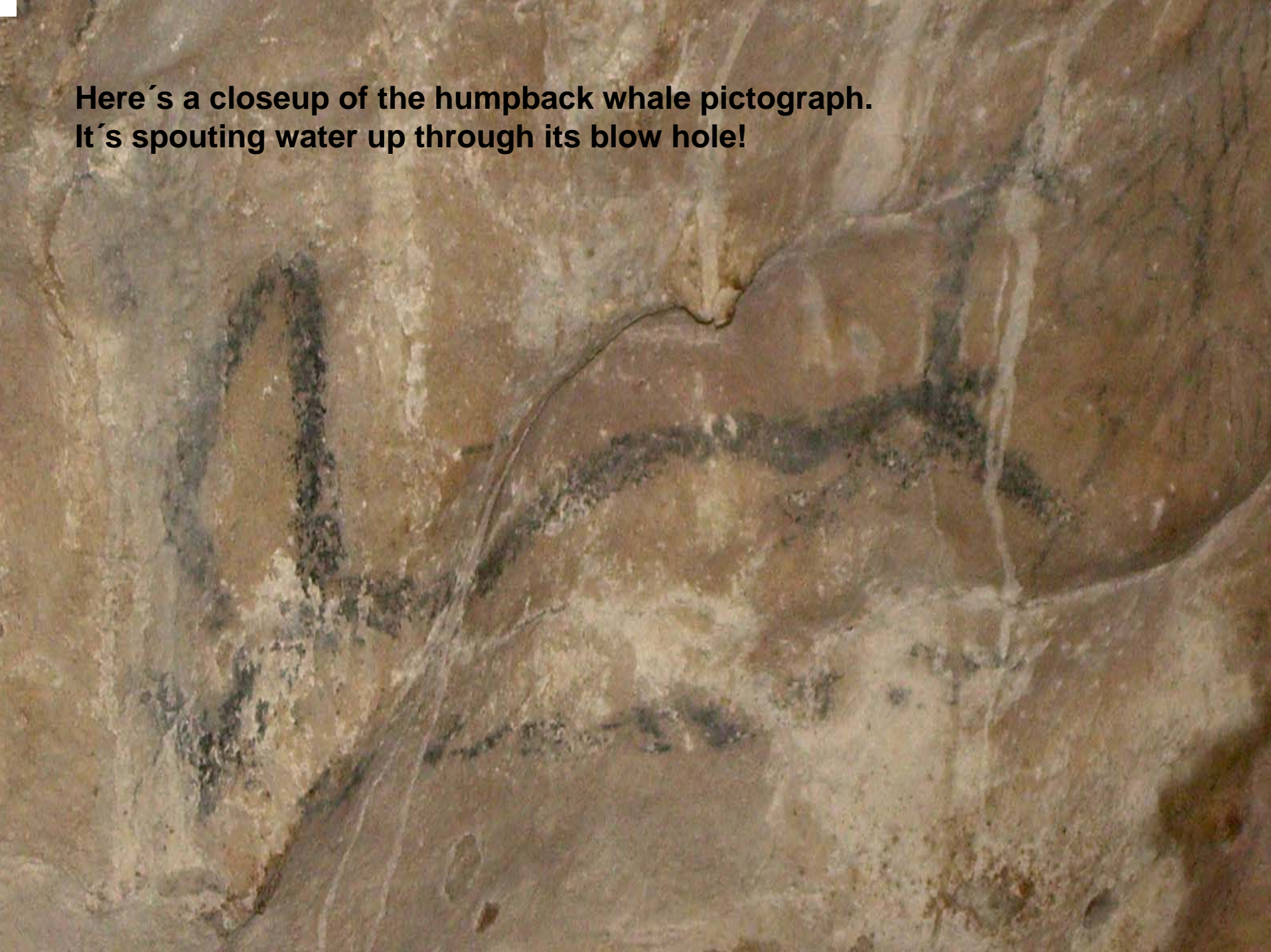
The pictograph in the right-center is of Boiyanel, the Taíno spirit of rain. The tears falling down his face represent the rain.



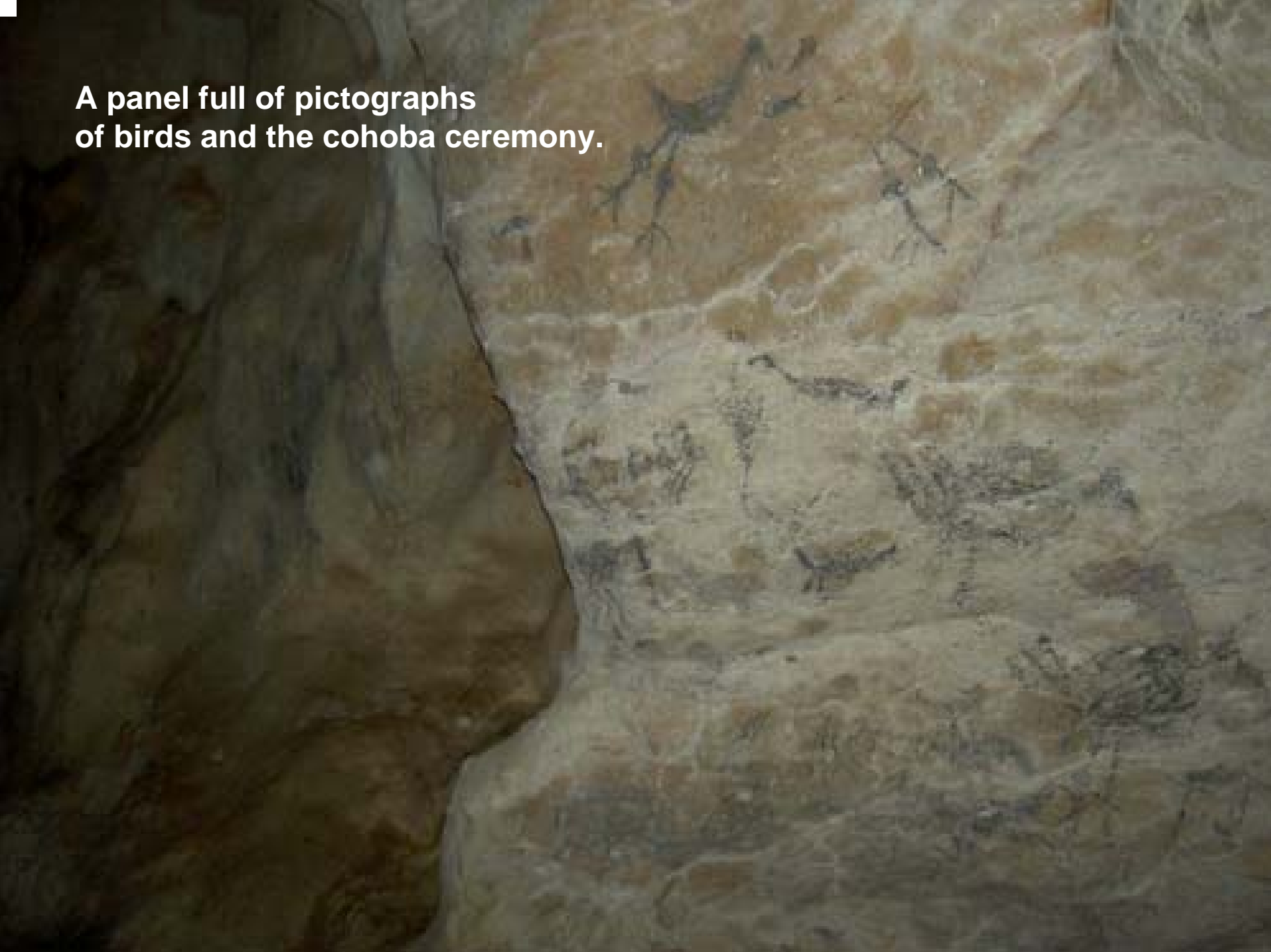
**Look closely at the lower central pictograph—a humpback whale!
Proof positive that these creatures have been mating and giving
birth to their babies in Samaná Bay for many centuries.**



**Here's a closeup of the humpback whale pictograph.
It's spouting water up through its blow hole!**



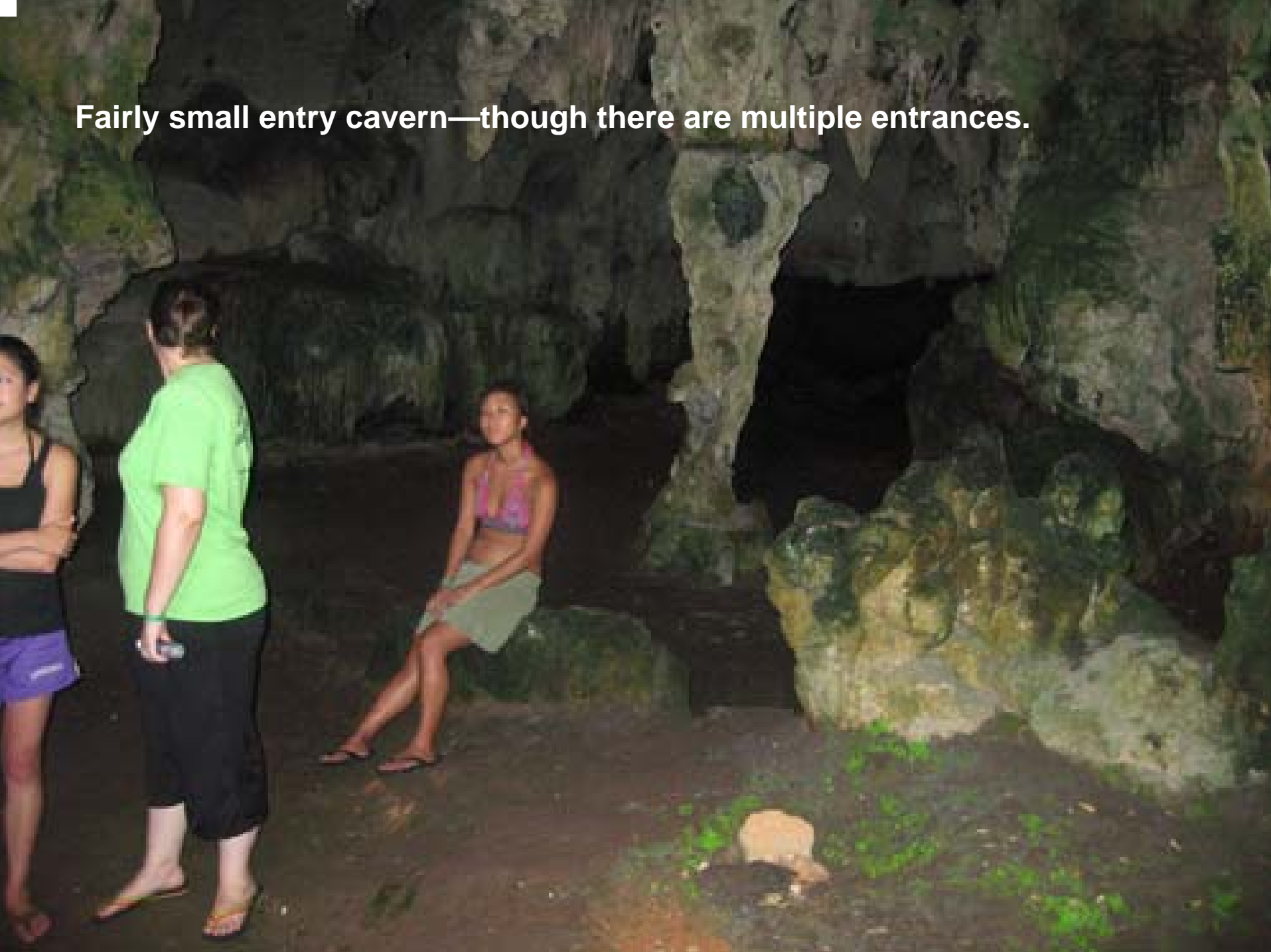
**A panel full of pictographs
of birds and the cohoba ceremony.**



Entrance, Cueva San Gabriel, Los Haitises National Park



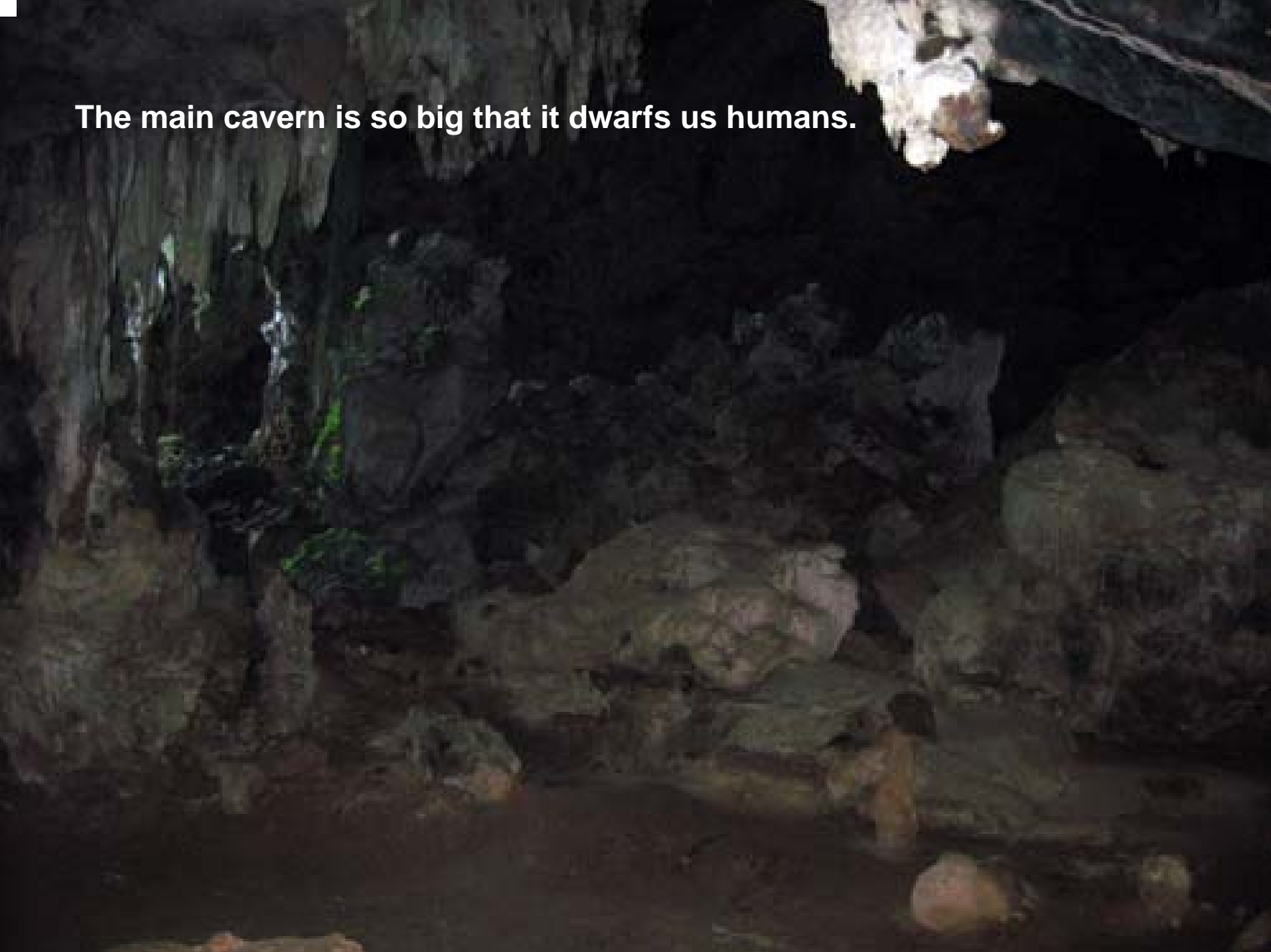
Fairly small entry cavern—though there are multiple entrances.







The main cavern is so big that it dwarfs us humans.







A beautiful petroglyph carved into the base of an old stalagmite that stopped growing millions of years ago.




**There are only four
pictographs inside Cueva
San Gabriel.**



**Closeup of the
pictographs.**



A photograph taken from a dark, enclosed space, likely a cavern, looking out onto a bright, open bay. The view is framed by dark, silhouetted leaves and branches in the foreground. The water of the bay is a clear, light blue-green color, extending to a distant, tree-lined shore under a bright sky. The overall scene is a stark contrast between the dark interior and the bright exterior.

**View from main
cavern, looking
toward the Bay
of Samaná.**

Entrance guardian to the Sand Cave, Los Haitises National Park

--This cave supposedly has pictographs, but all three times that I visited it, the guides did not know where they were.

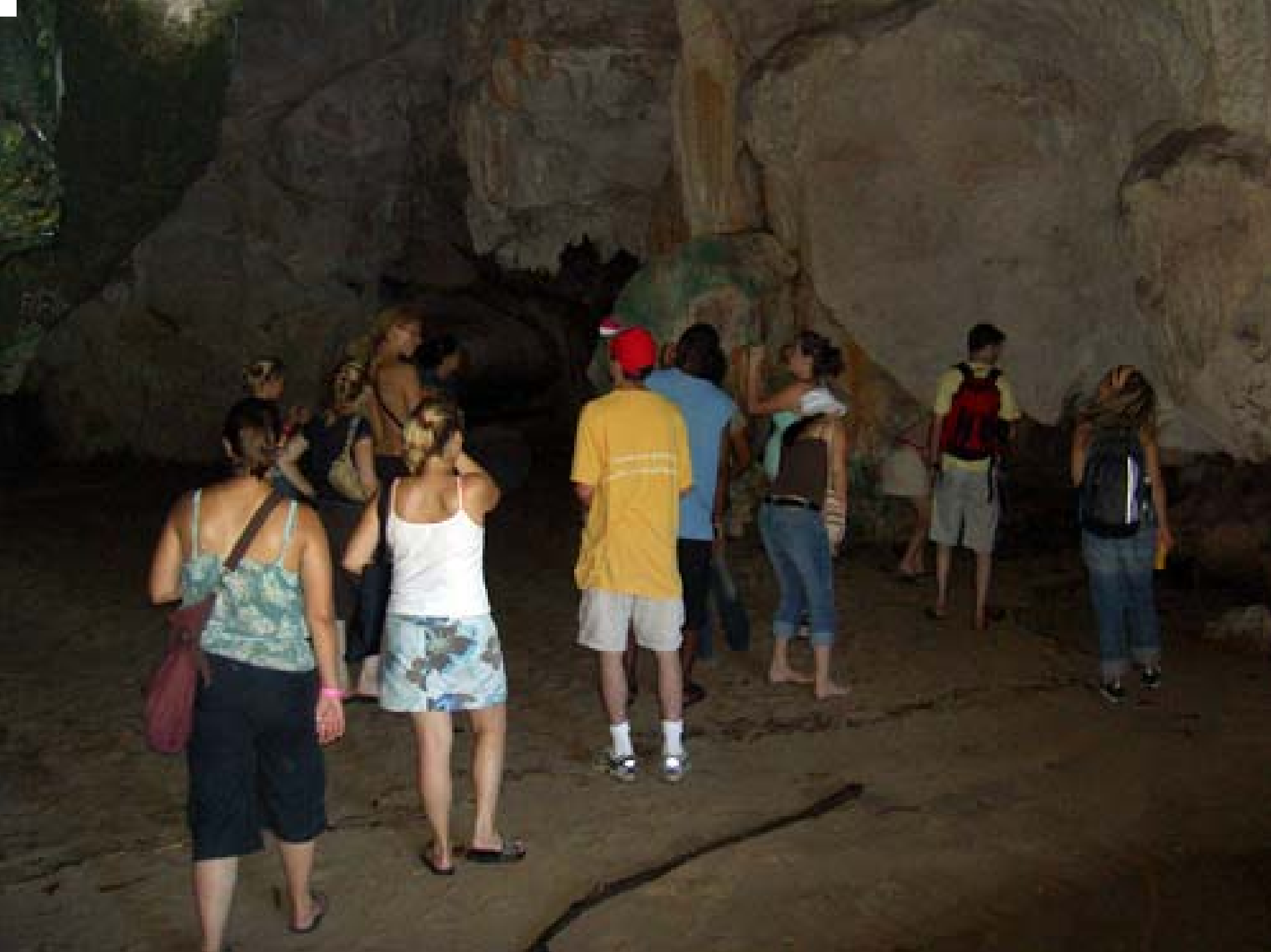


**Students just inside
the entrance of Sand Cave.**



Water has carved multiple openings to the exterior and within the interior.



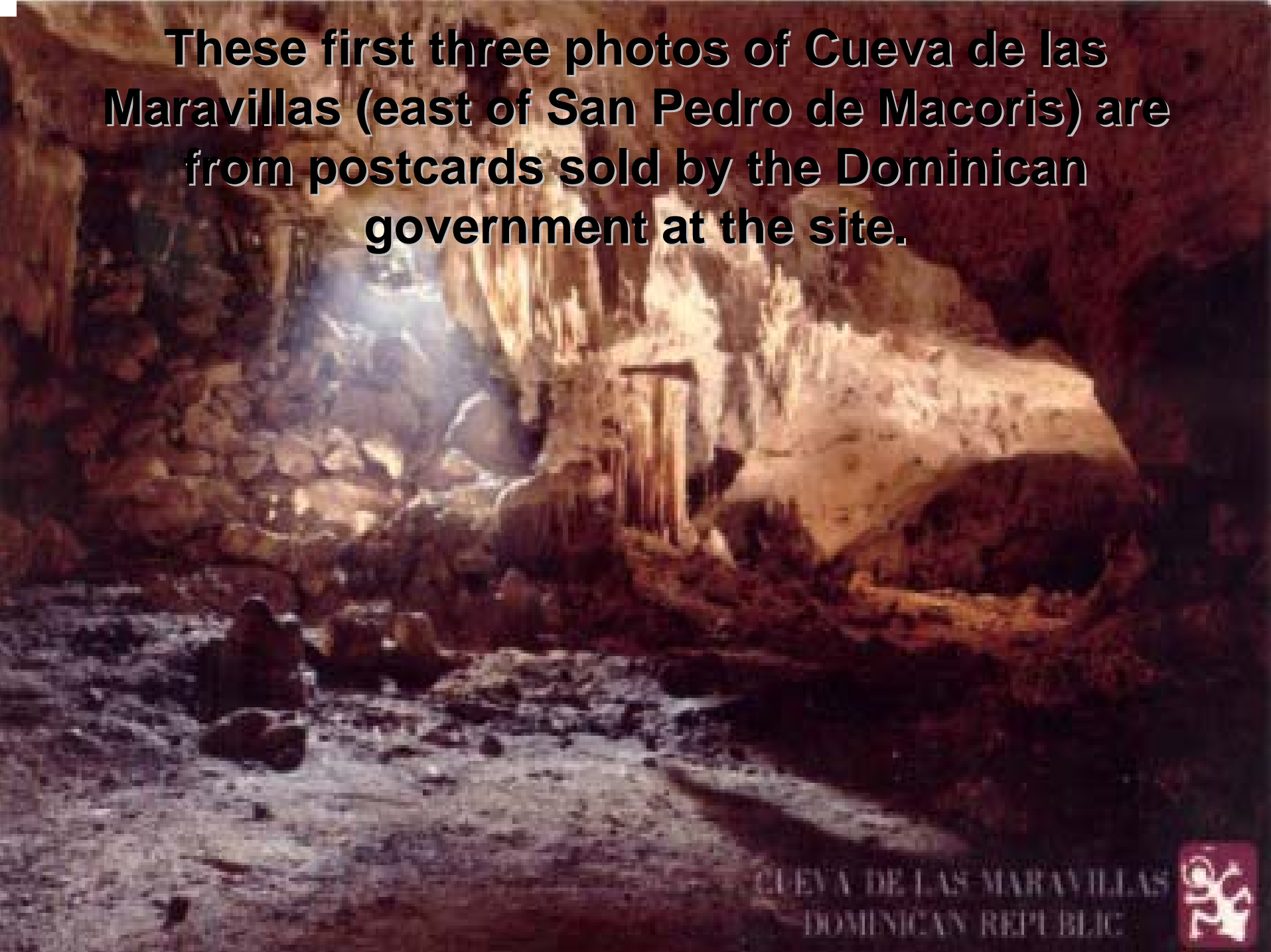








These first three photos of Cueva de las Maravillas (east of San Pedro de Macoris) are from postcards sold by the Dominican government at the site.



CUEVA DE LAS MARAVILLAS
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC





CUEVA DE LAS MARAVILLAS
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC





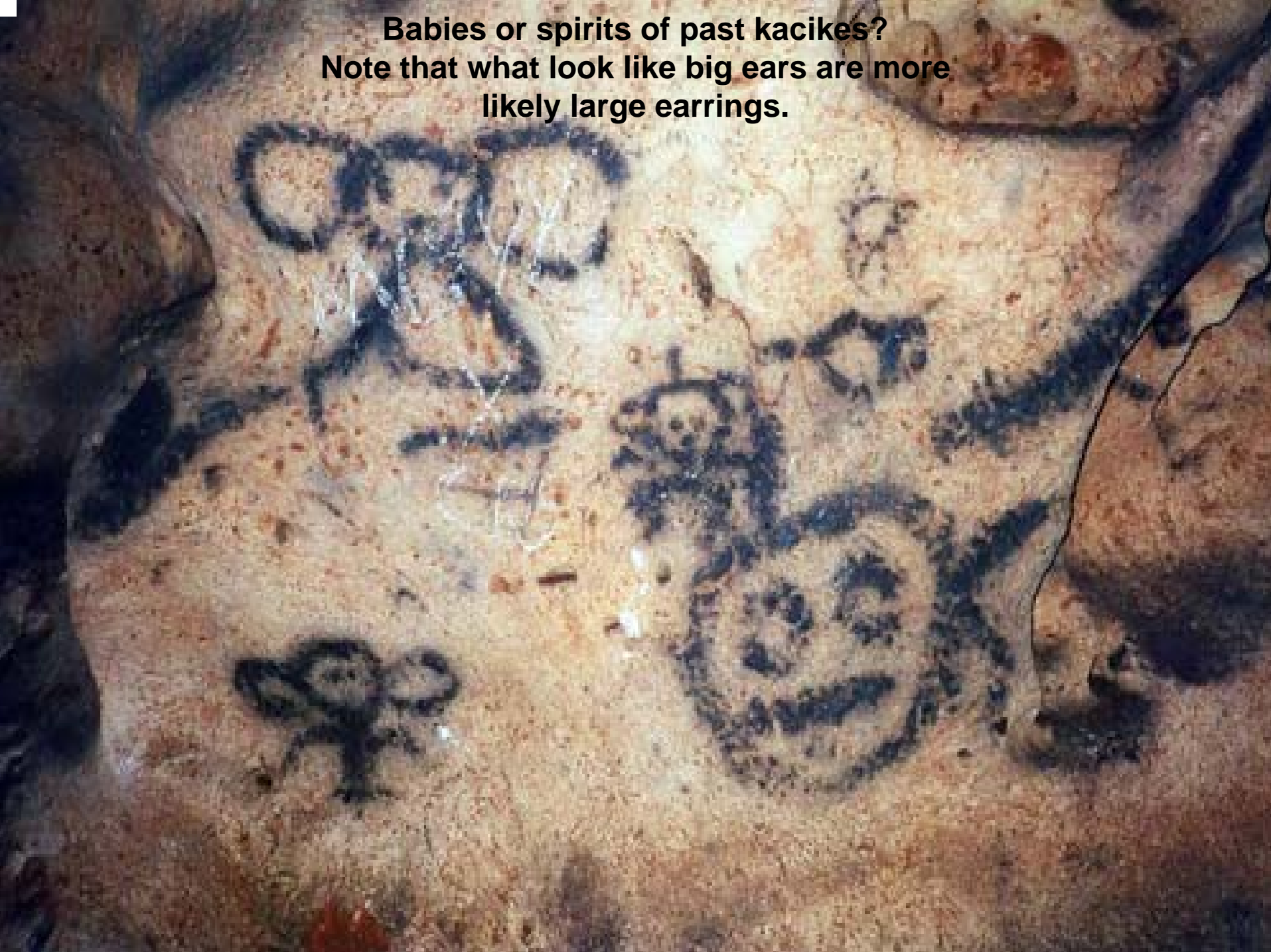
CUEVA DE LAS MARAVILLAS
DOMINICAN REPUBLIC



Famous Kacike Wall, with central figure possibly representing Maquetaurie Guayaba, the lord of the dead (Kacike of Coaybay).



**Babies or spirits of past kacikes?
Note that what look like big ears are more
likely large earrings.**



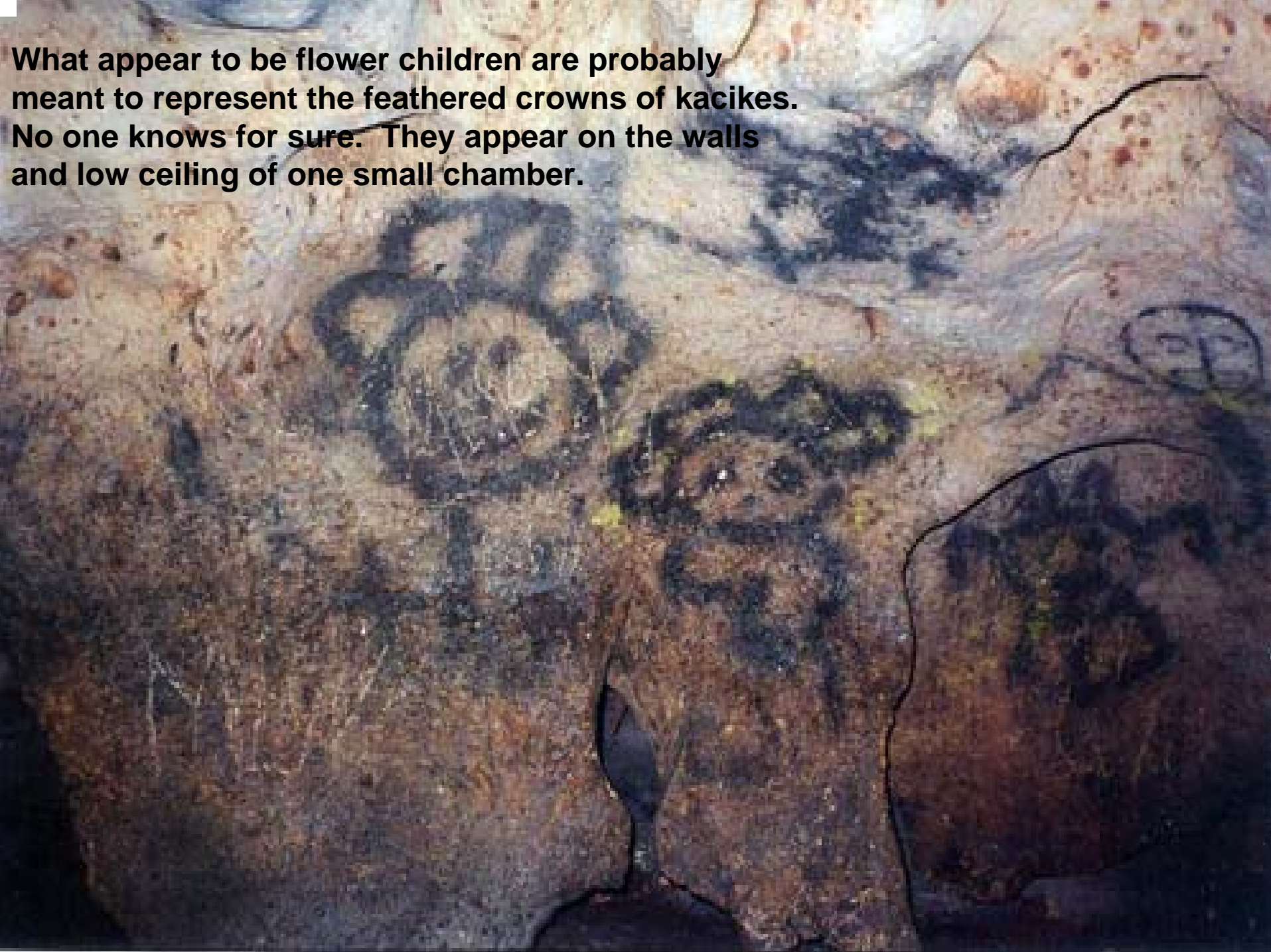


Here's another figure with large earrings—no doubt a sign of high status.



This pictograph probably represents a behike in a ritual mask, but we do not know for sure.

What appear to be flower children are probably meant to represent the feathered crowns of kacikes. No one knows for sure. They appear on the walls and low ceiling of one small chamber.

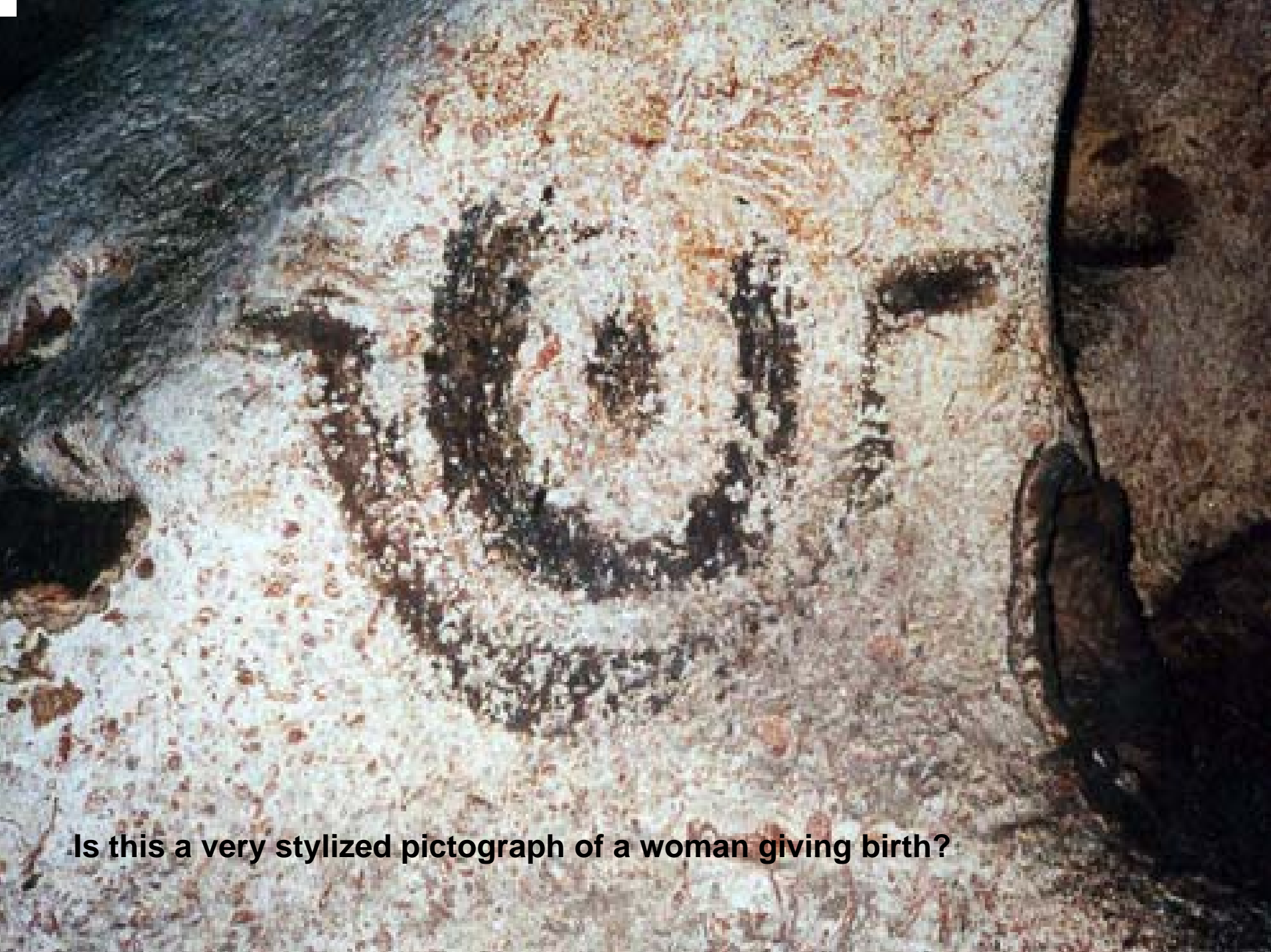




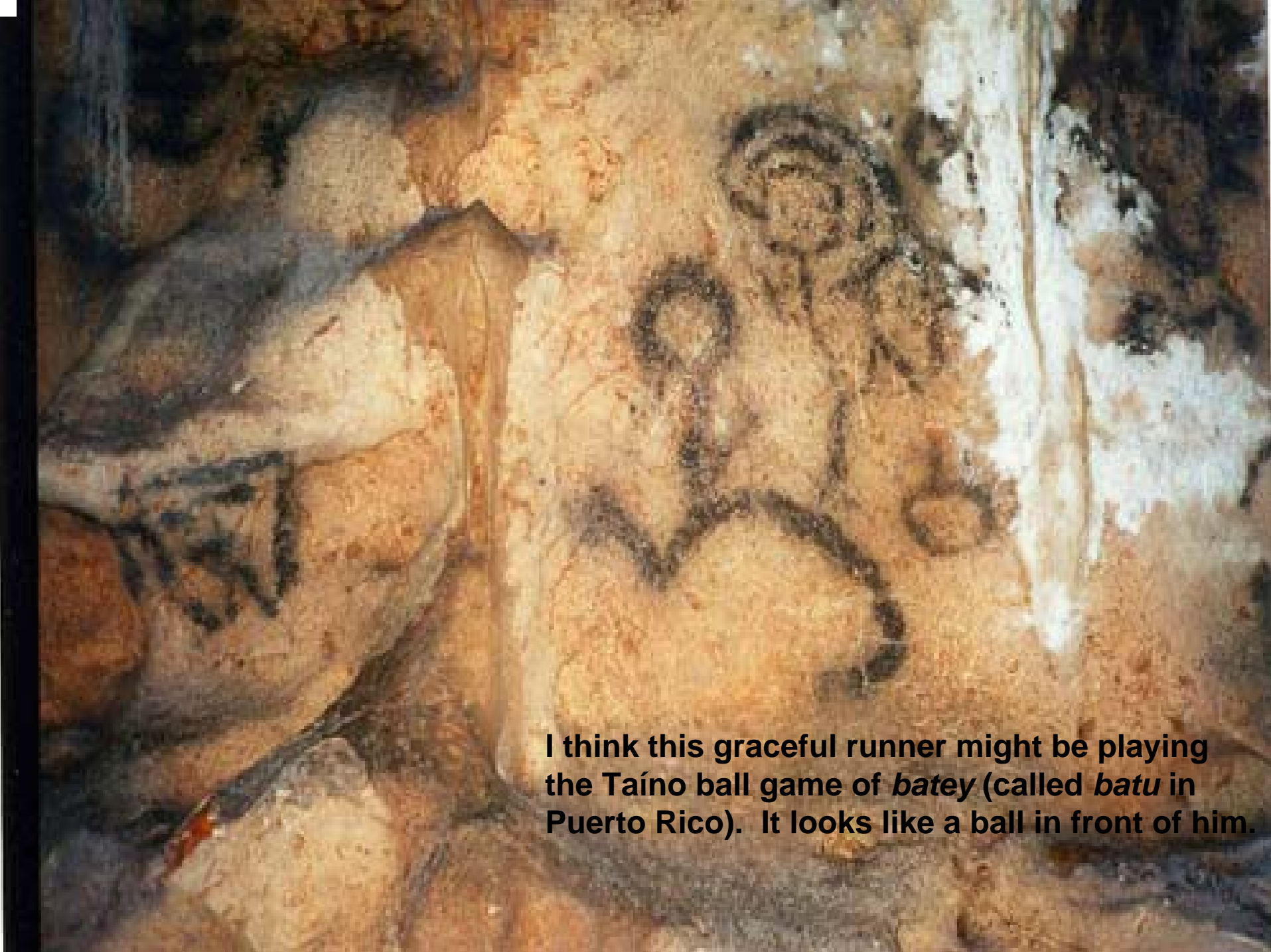
Speaking of not knowing for sure, anyone with a guess about what this pictograph might represent? Is it a kacike with feather crown and large earrings? Or something else?



Part of the cave that appears to have been dedicated to childbirth.



Is this a very stylized pictograph of a woman giving birth?



I think this graceful runner might be playing the Taíno ball game of *batey* (called *batu* in Puerto Rico). It looks like a ball in front of him.

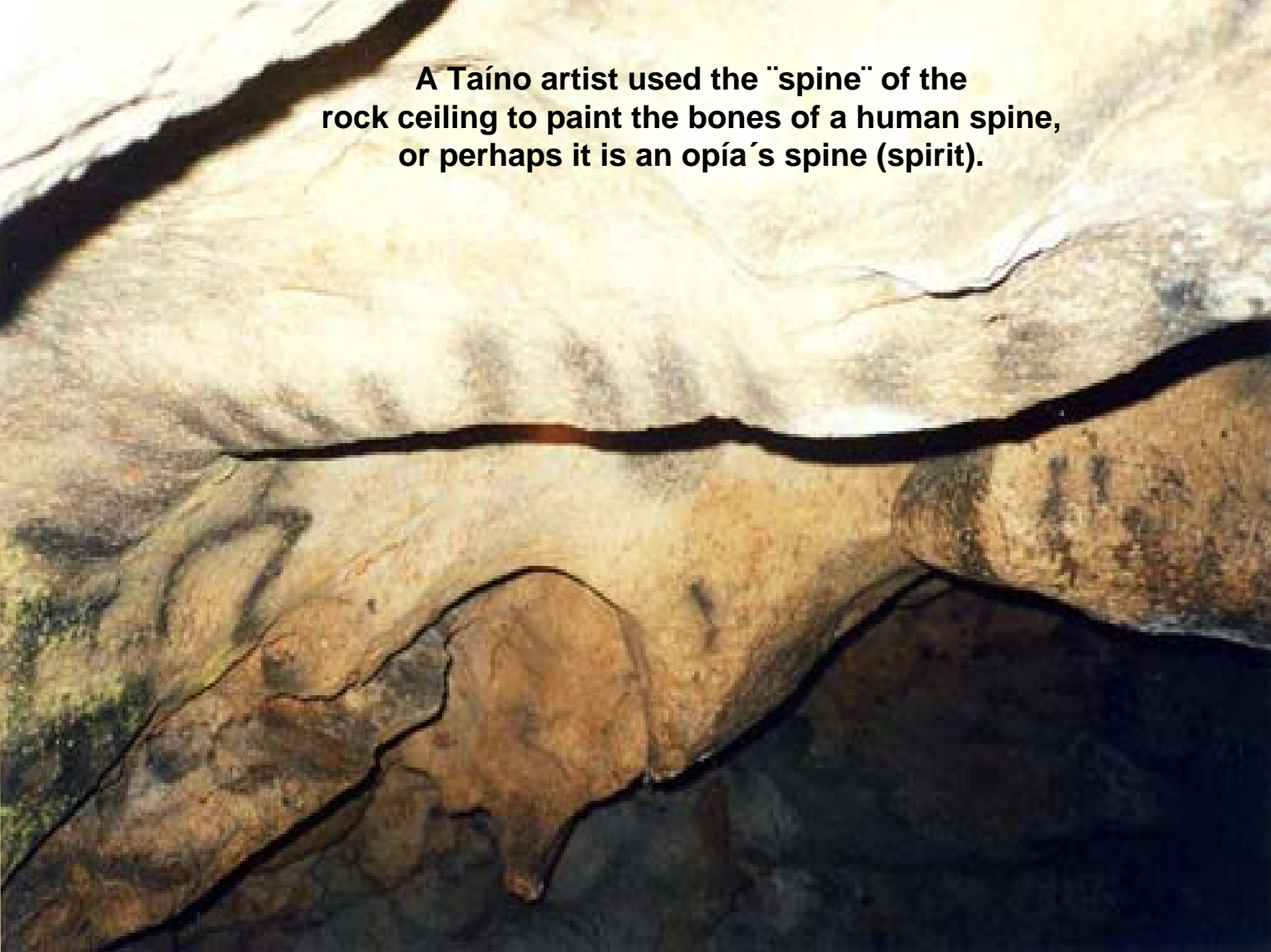
Some walls are covered with panels of pictographs. Perhaps they are related and tell a story, but we do not have enough information to interpret it or to even know if the various pictures are related or not.







A Taíno artist used the "spine" of the rock ceiling to paint the bones of a human spine, or perhaps it is an opía's spine (spirit).





The natural rock formation on which this frightening figure is painted gives it a shape that makes it appear even more frightening.

He looks like he's jumping out and is about to grab us!

Entrance, Cueva Los Patos, Paraiso (Barahona)

--a very small cave with two petroglyphs,
no pictographs







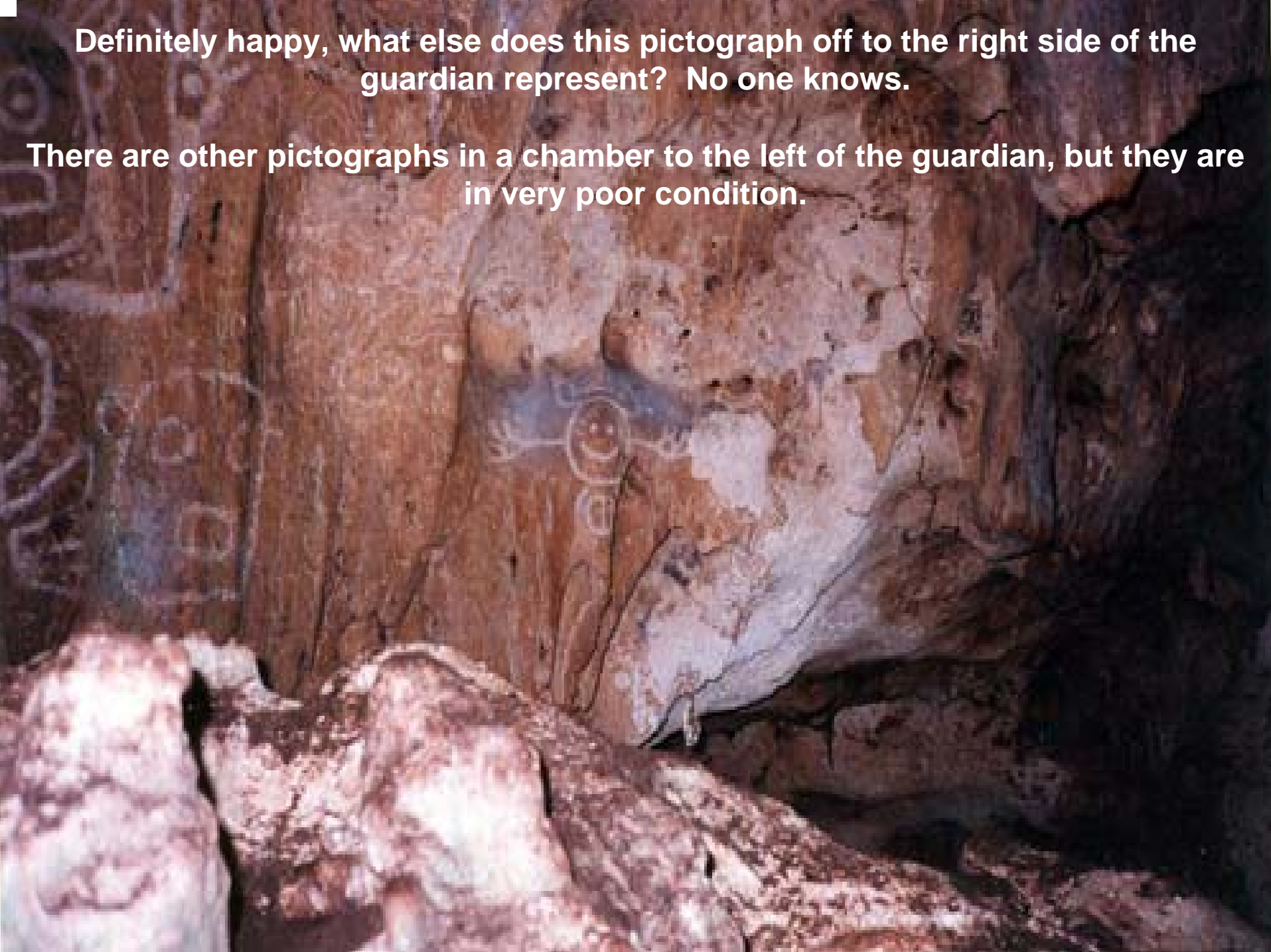
Entrance, Cueva Peñón Gordo, Parque Nacional del Este

--a small cave famous for its white-painted guardian figure(s)



Definitely happy, what else does this pictograph off to the right side of the guardian represent? No one knows.

There are other pictographs in a chamber to the left of the guardian, but they are in very poor condition.



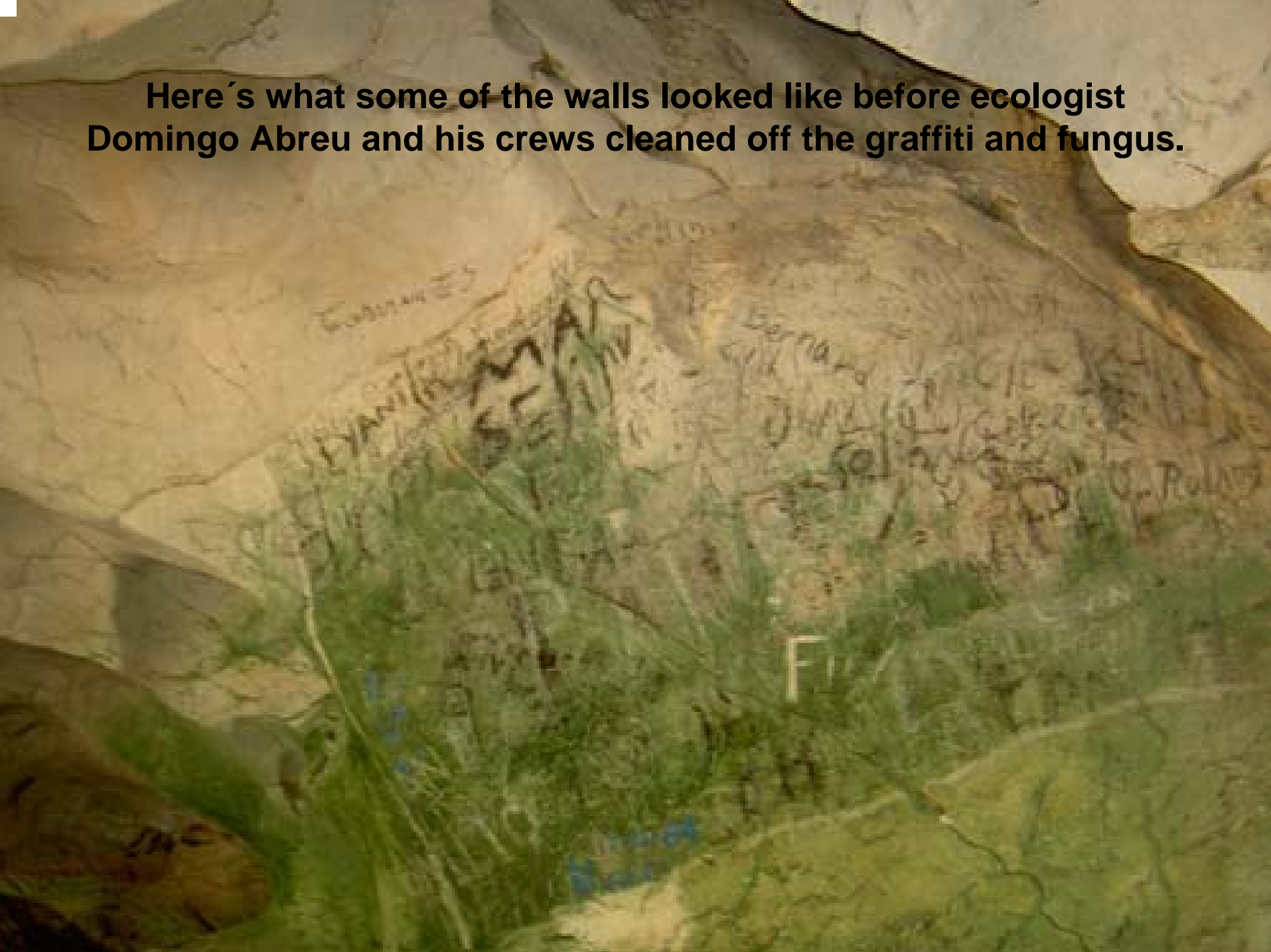
Cueva Pomier Complex, San Cristobal—more than 54 caves!



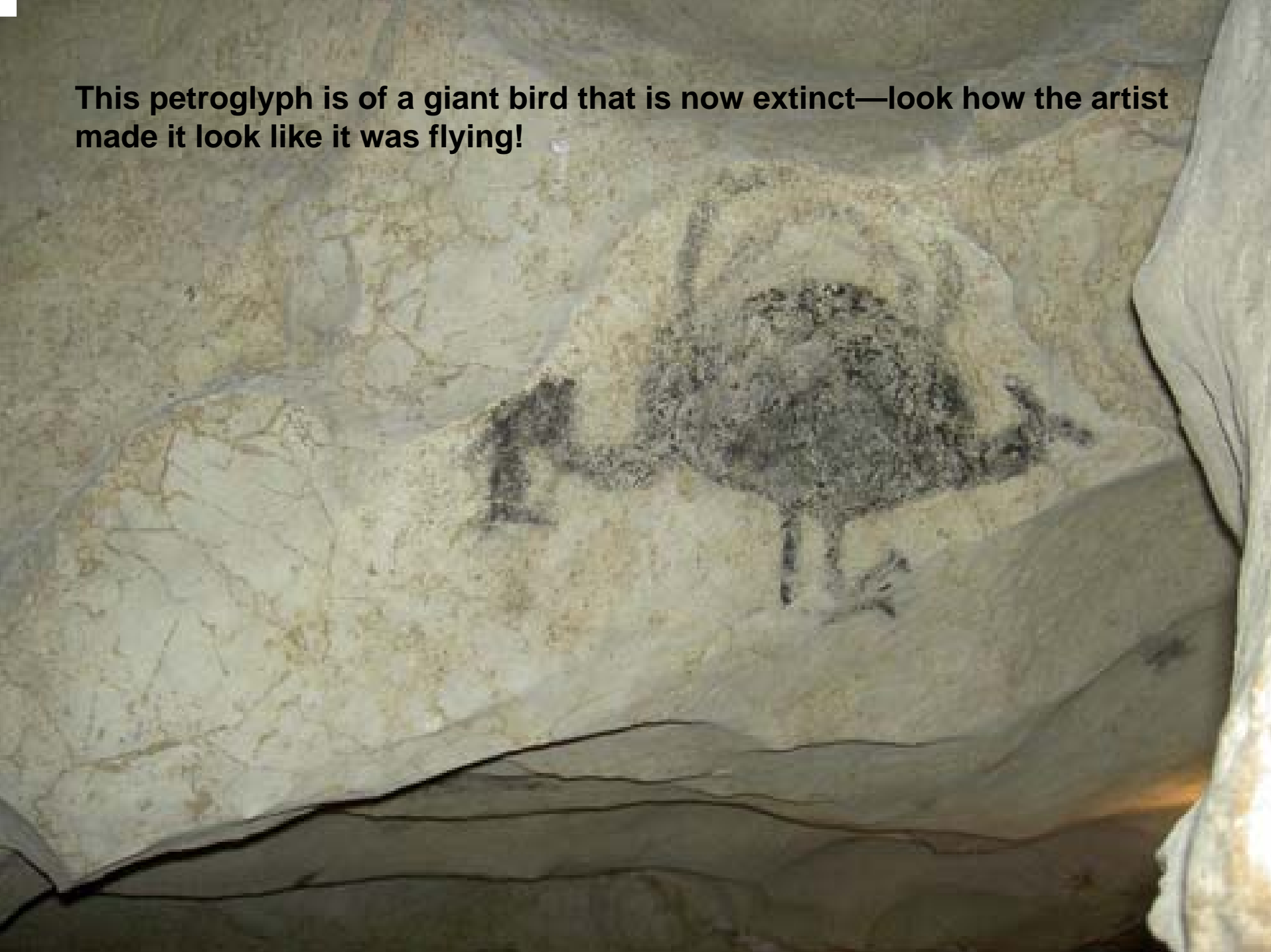
Entrance guardians to Cave #1, Pomier



Here's what some of the walls looked like before ecologist Domingo Abreu and his crews cleaned off the graffiti and fungus.

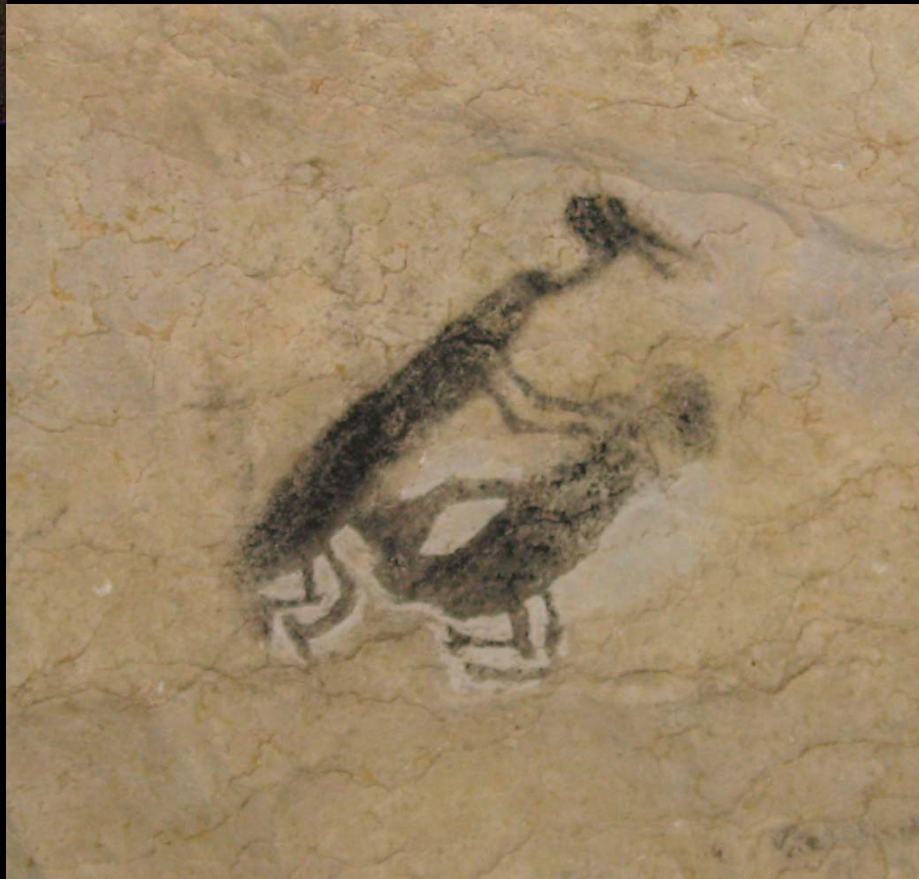


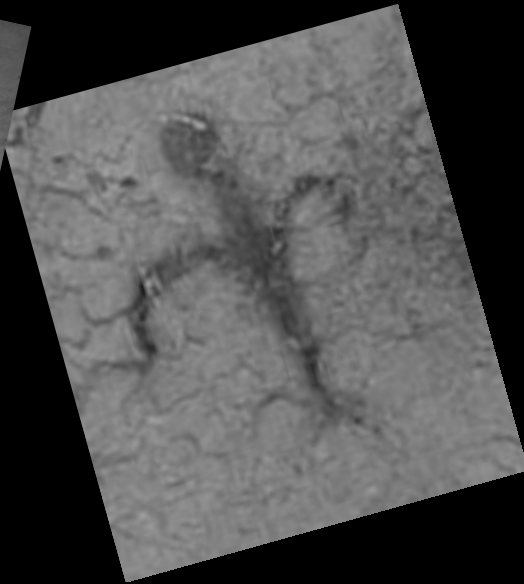
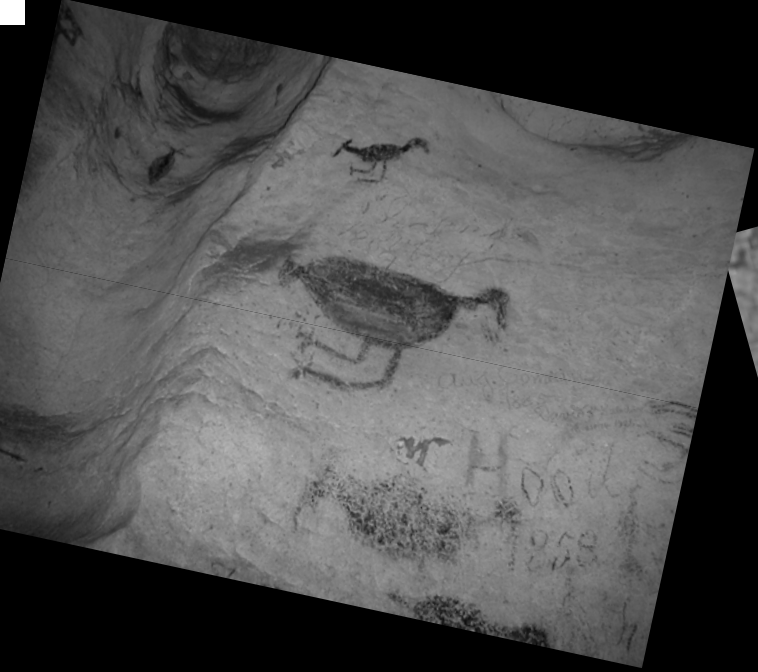
This petroglyph is of a giant bird that is now extinct—look how the artist made it look like it was flying!



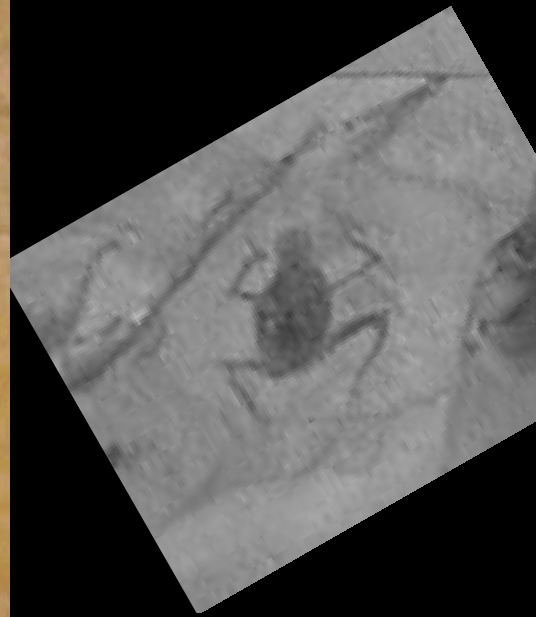
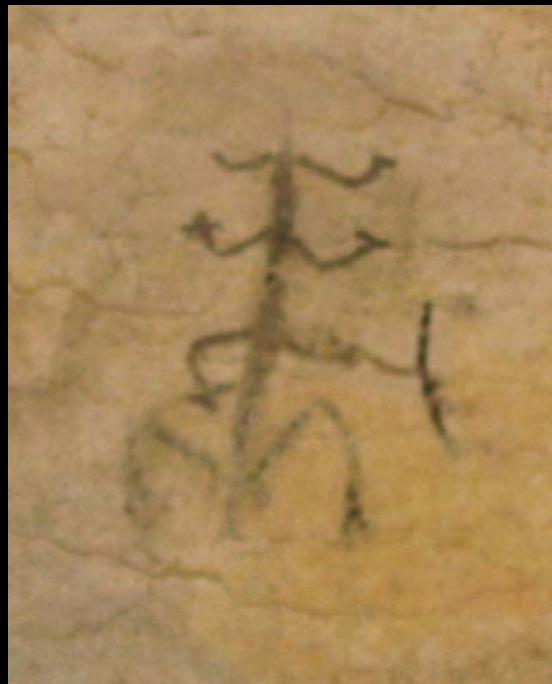
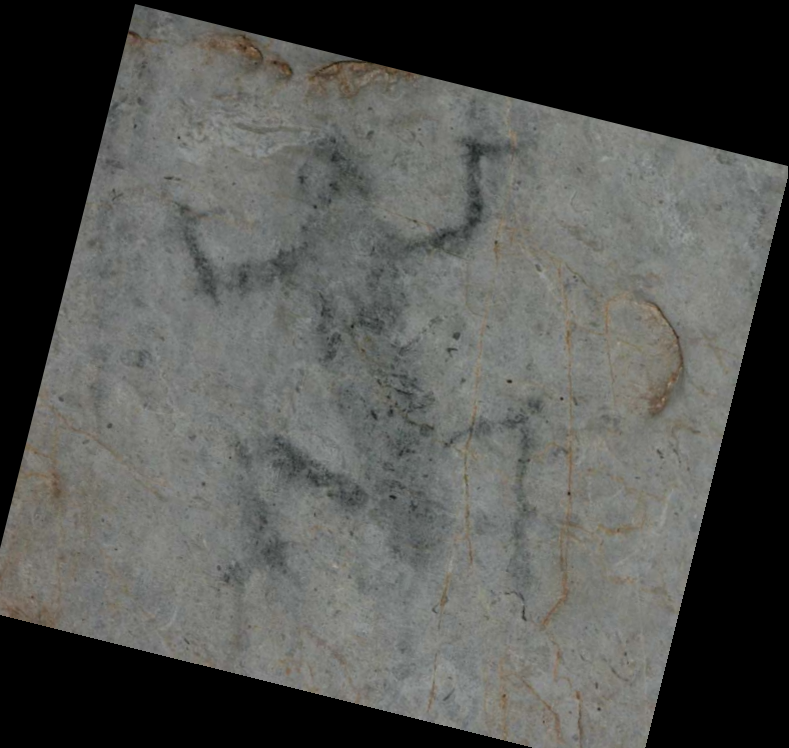
Panels of pictographs in this cave are dedicated to fertility of all kinds—there are dogs making love, insects making love... and illustrations of all the foods necessary to life. Additionally, there are multiple pictographs of the cohoba ritual, which also helped to insure the fertility, growth, and continuation of the Taíno people and their culture.



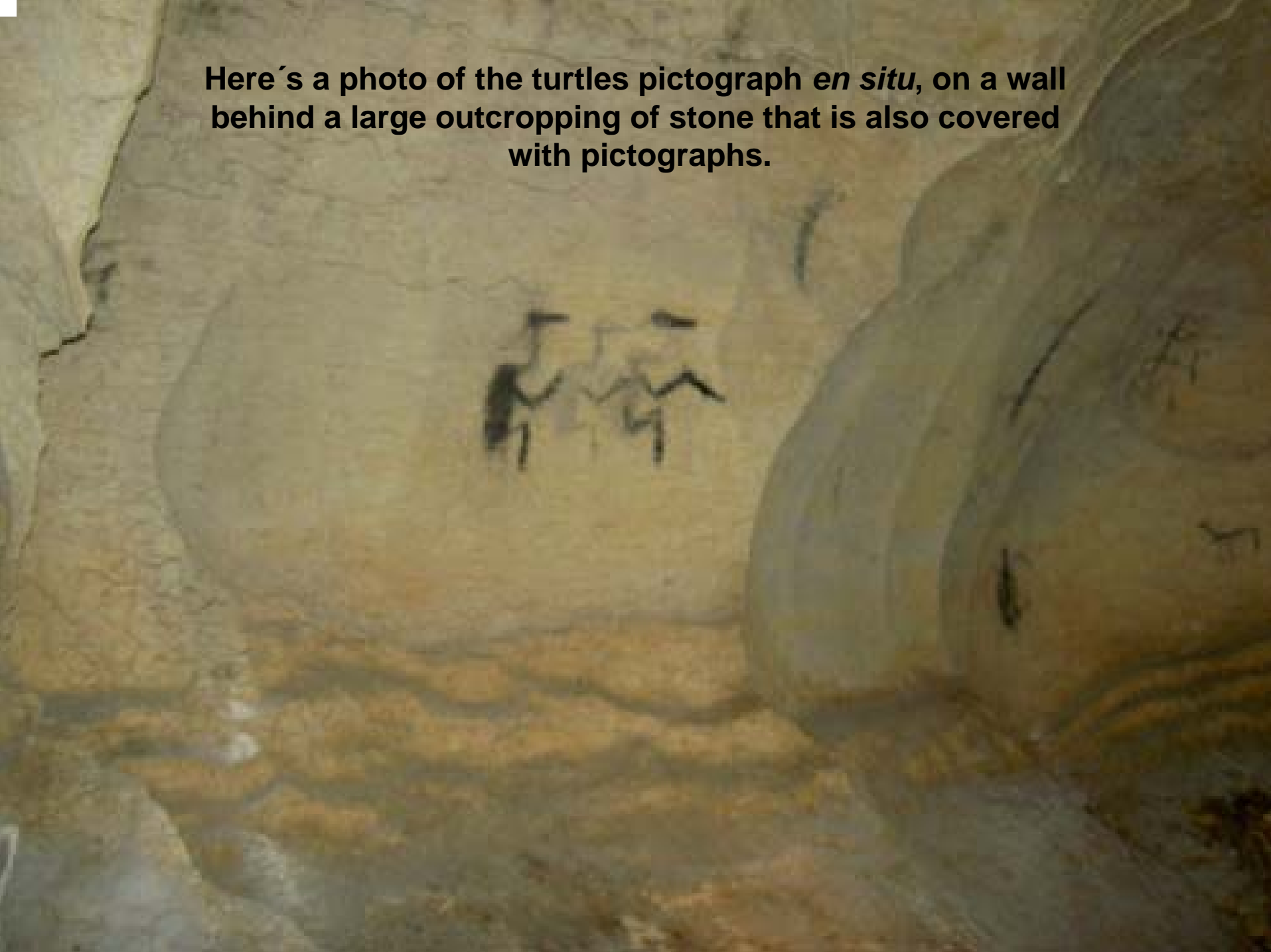




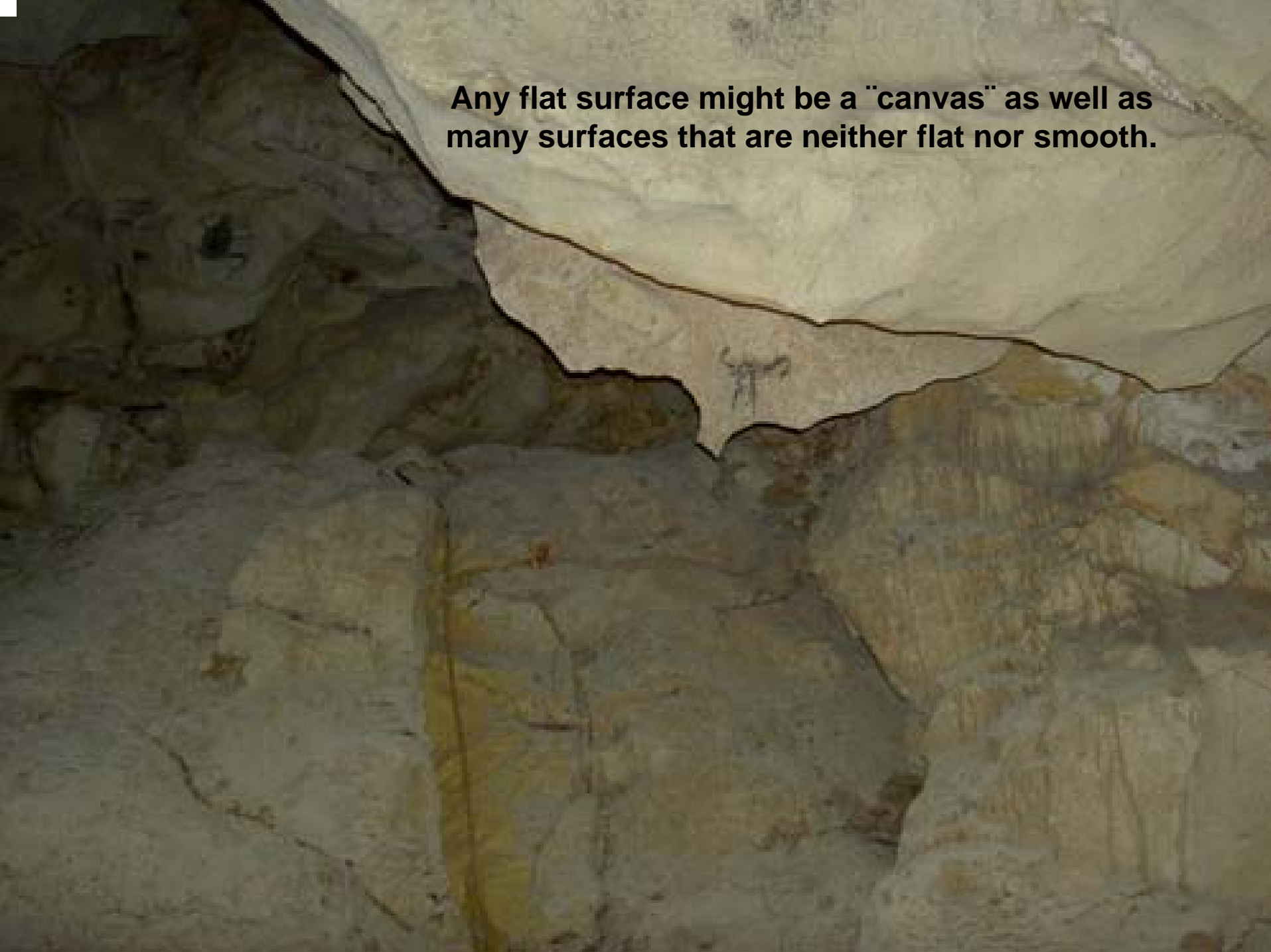
This graceful pictograph (above) of turtles "dancing" is one of my personal favorites.



Here's a photo of the turtles pictograph *en situ*, on a wall behind a large outcropping of stone that is also covered with pictographs.



Any flat surface might be a "canvas" as well as many surfaces that are neither flat nor smooth.



To the left in this small panel is a person taking cohoba.





**Closeups of two of the most famous
of Pomier Cave number 1's cohoba
pictographs.**



This pictograph painted on an overhead rock face depicts an insect standing erect and taking Cohoba. Or is it a turtle?

Why would a Taíno paint either one?

What could it mean?



**While we´re asking questions, what in the world is this?
Some have guessed that this faded pictograph represents a sea creature,
but if so, what sea creature?**

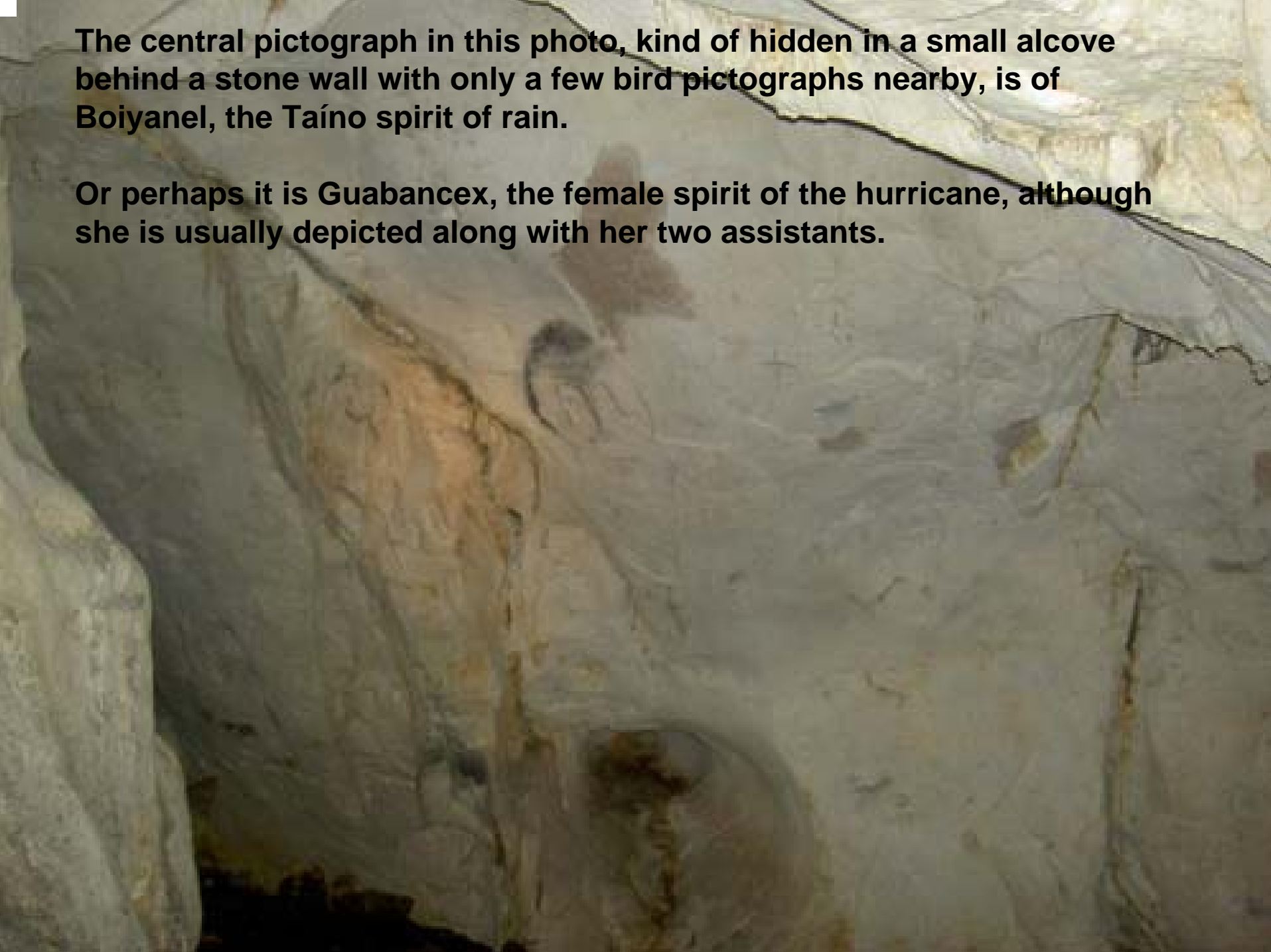


And this pictograph, although very faded, appears to be a horse, which would mean it was drawn after the Spaniards' arrival.



The central pictograph in this photo, kind of hidden in a small alcove behind a stone wall with only a few bird pictographs nearby, is of Boiyanel, the Taíno spirit of rain.

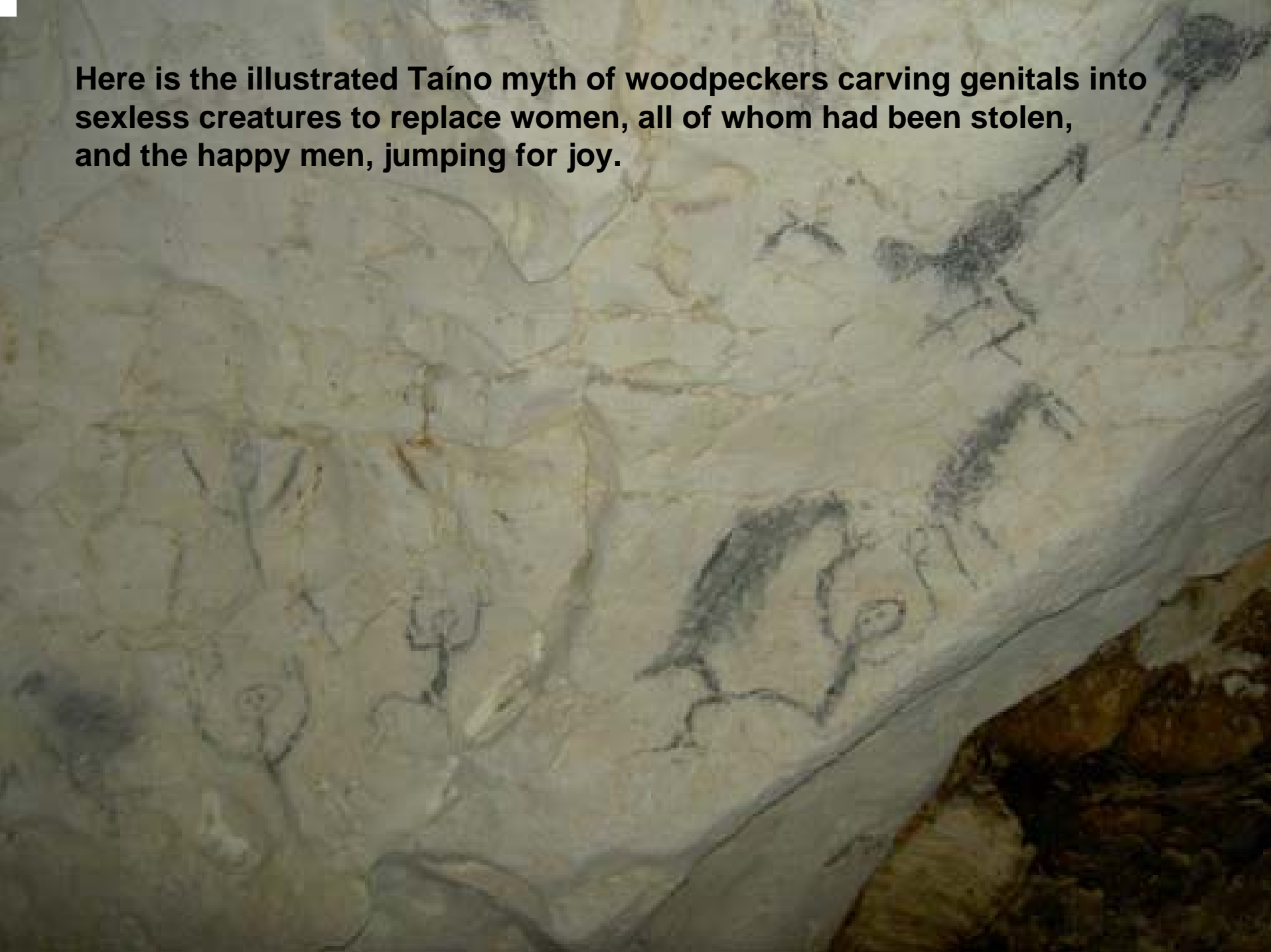
Or perhaps it is Guabancex, the female spirit of the hurricane, although she is usually depicted along with her two assistants.



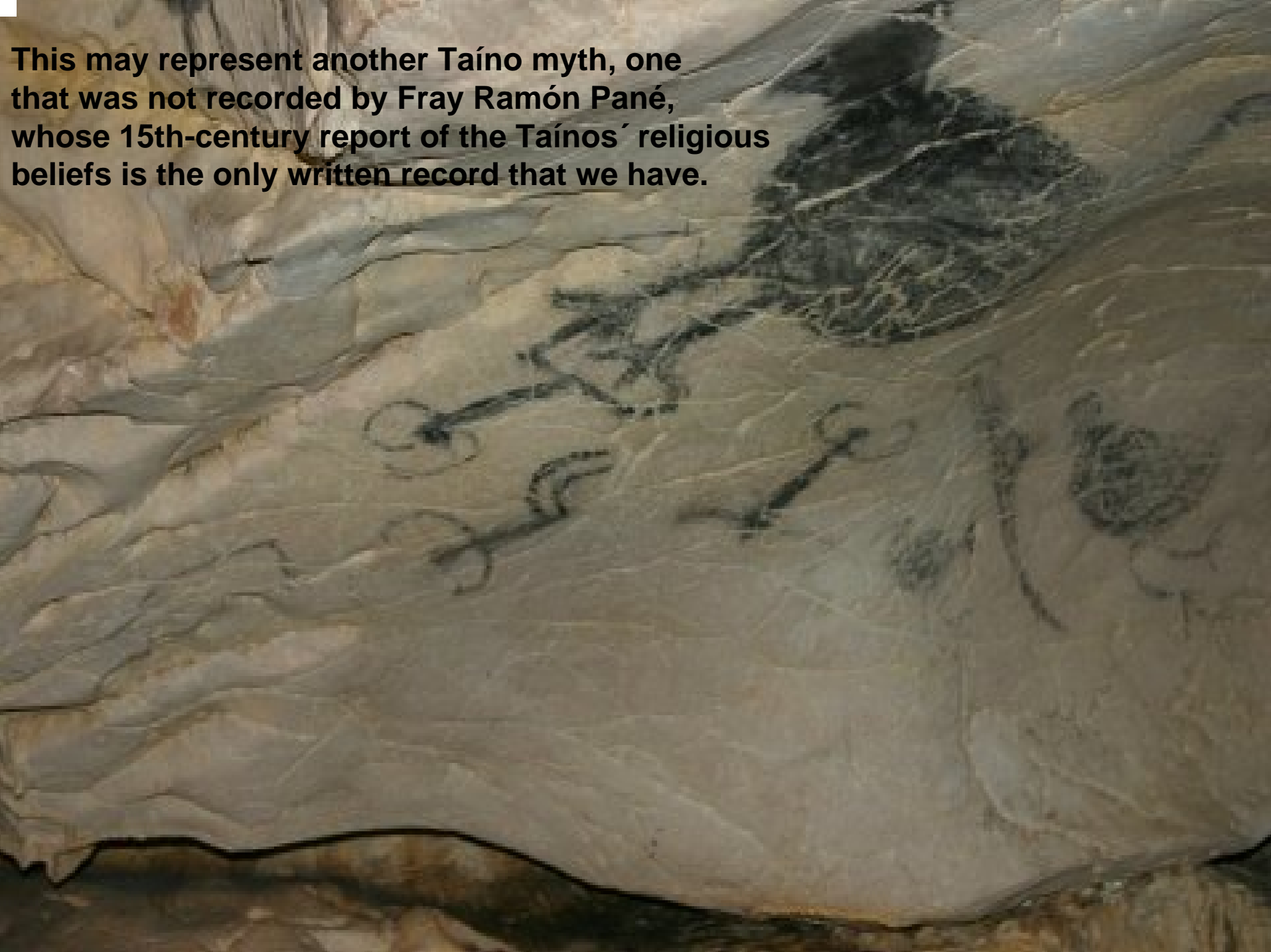


Here's a closeup. There is a dark rain cloud, an image with "arms" within the circle that appears to represent the swirling wind, and "rain" falling at the bottom of the circle.

Here is the illustrated Taíno myth of woodpeckers carving genitals into sexless creatures to replace women, all of whom had been stolen, and the happy men, jumping for joy.



This may represent another Taíno myth, one that was not recorded by Fray Ramón Pané, whose 15th-century report of the Taínos' religious beliefs is the only written record that we have.

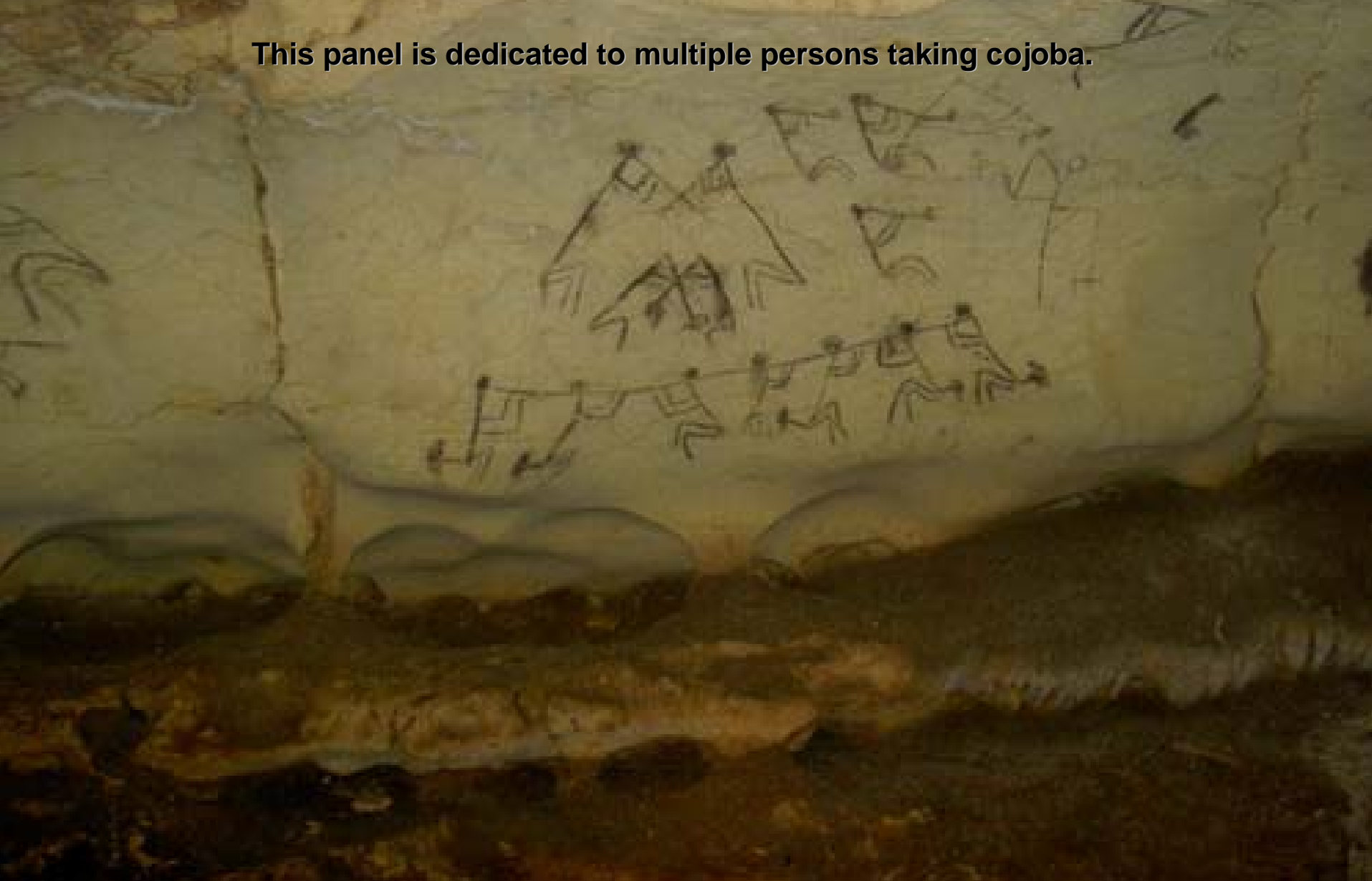


Entrance Guardians, Cueva #2, Pomier Complex

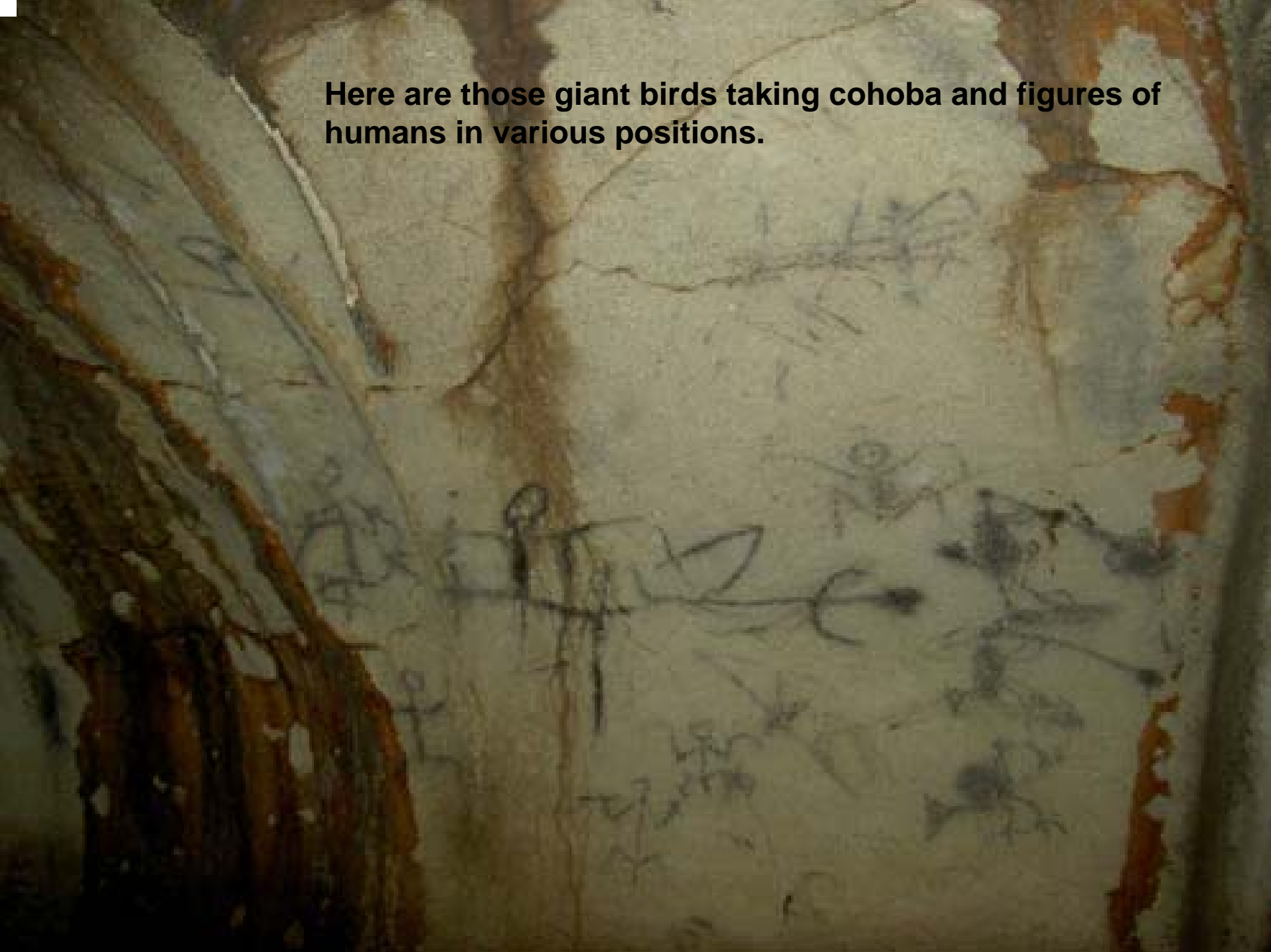


It is believed that indigenous peoples who arrived long before the Taíno people and their culture evolved (ancestors of the Taíno) drew most of the pictographs in this cave, which is located just above Pomier Cave no. 1. Note the stylistic differences.

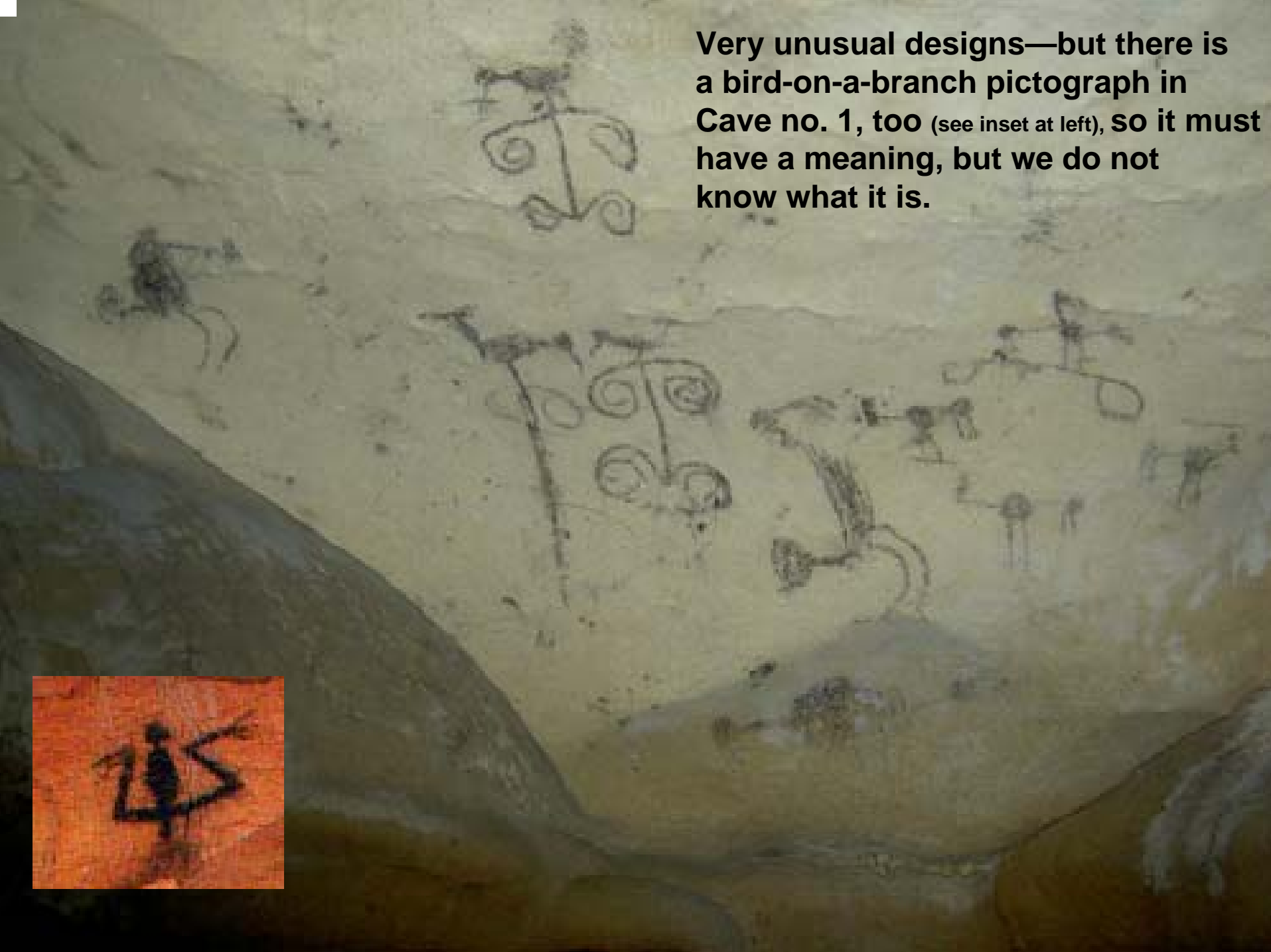
This panel is dedicated to multiple persons taking cojoba.



Here are those giant birds taking cohoba and figures of humans in various positions.



Very unusual designs—but there is a bird-on-a-branch pictograph in Cave no. 1, too (see inset at left), so it must have a meaning, but we do not know what it is.



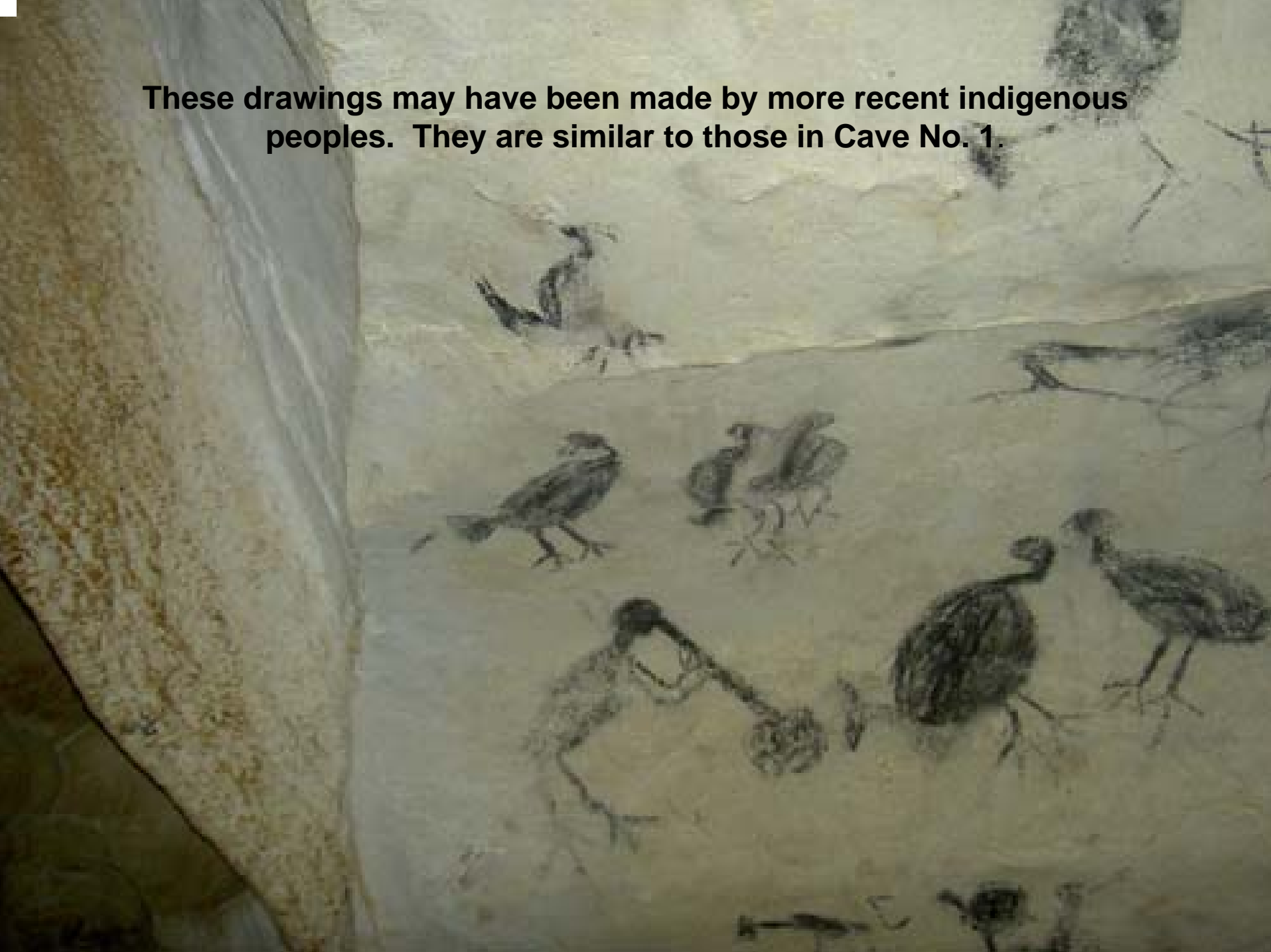


This stretched-out looking person is similar to those drawn in the Cueva Guácara Sanabe, which you'll see in a few moments. They were probably drawn by the same ancient group of people.



**Here are those strange
sea creatures again, if
that's what they are.**

These drawings may have been made by more recent indigenous peoples. They are similar to those in Cave No. 1.



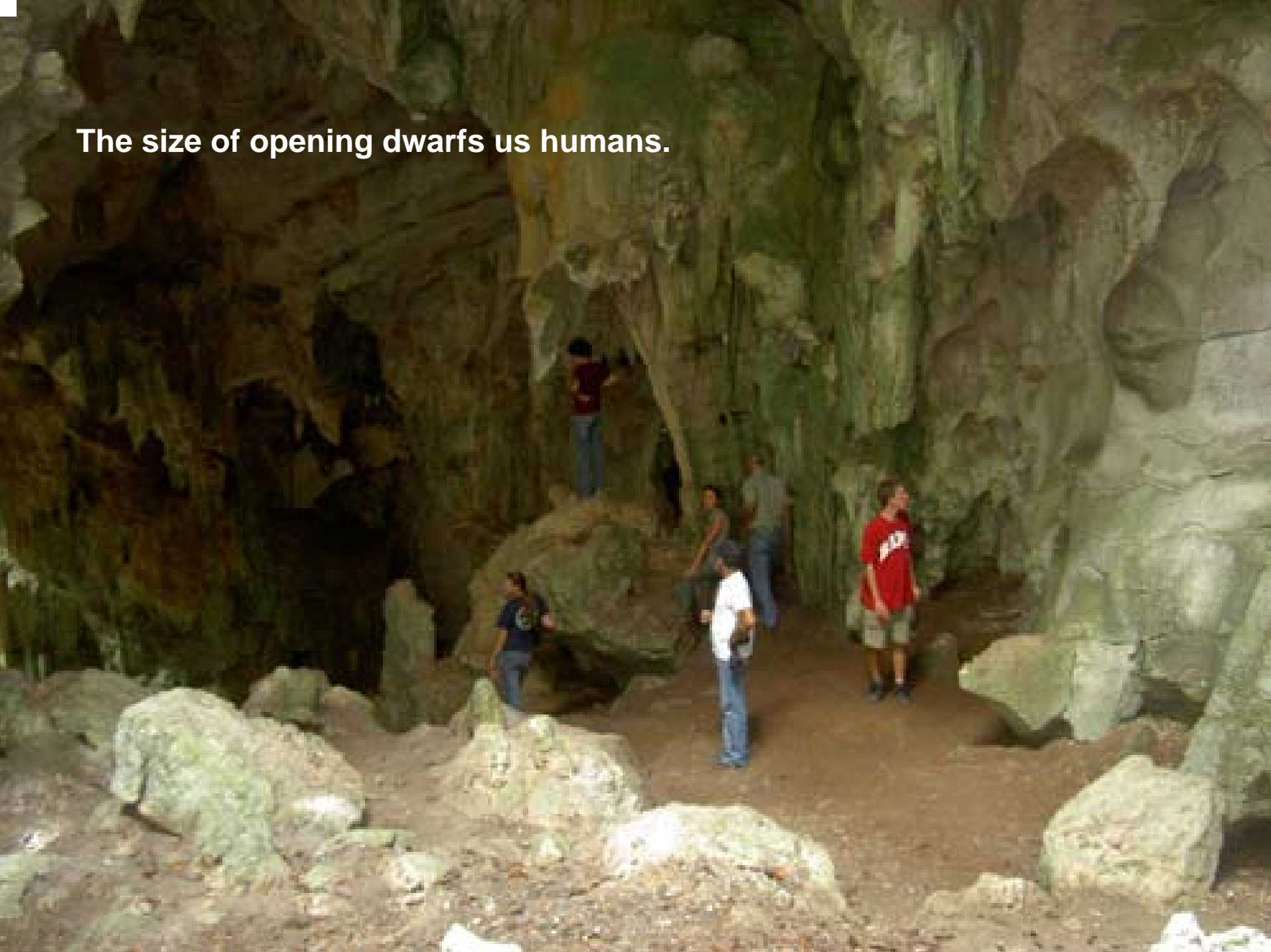
**This magnificent column
is just inside the entrance
of Cave no. 2.**





Entrance, Cueva del Puente, Pomiers Complex

The size of opening dwarfs us humans.



The adventurous and sure-footed can explore tunnels and overhangs within the entrance cavern, but it's pretty dangerous.

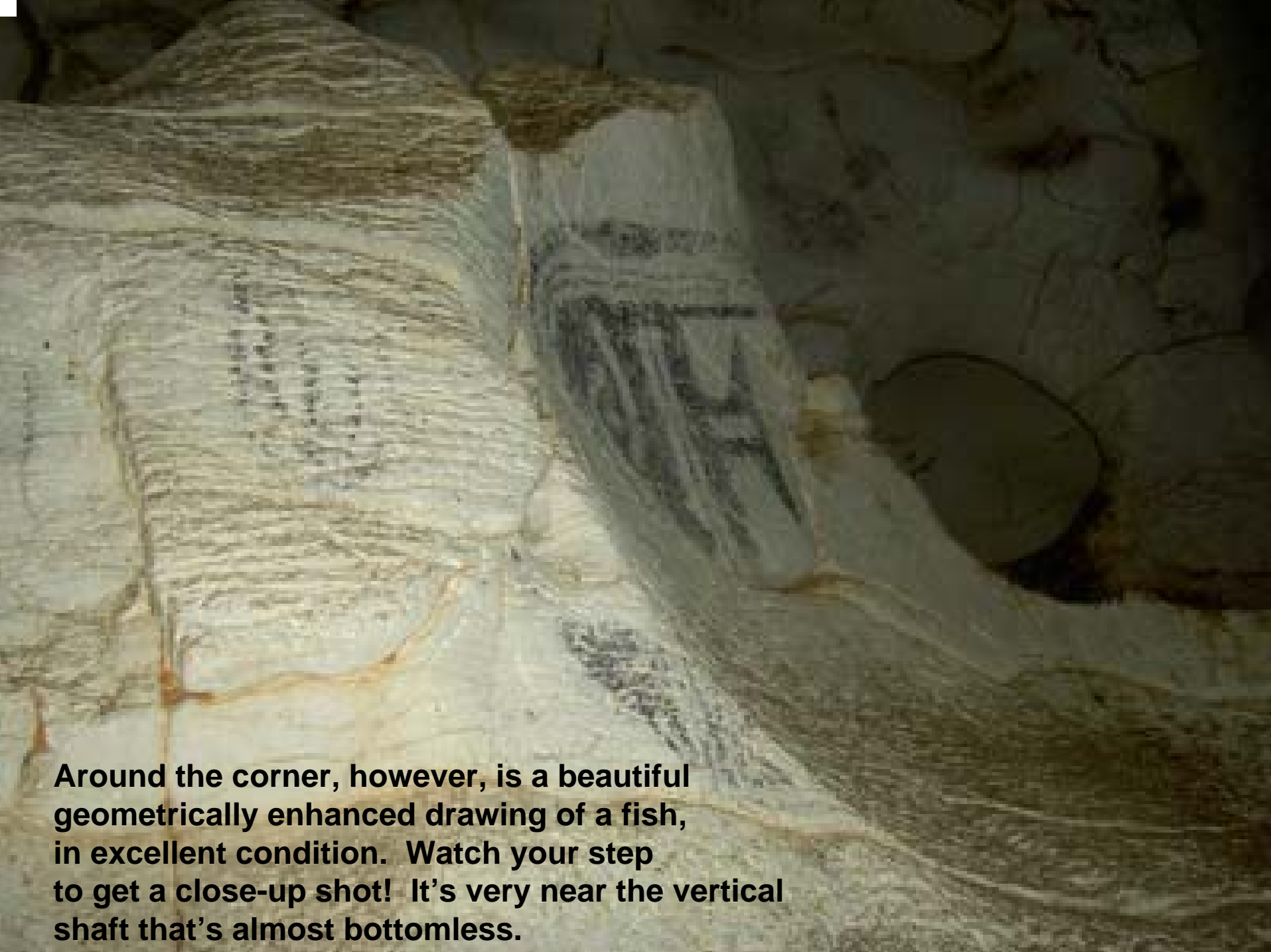


Here is a cave guardian that is very distinct from the average depiction of Macocael—it has flourishes like the bird-on-a-branch pictograph in Cave no. 2.





Some of the pictographs are very old and faded.

A photograph of a large, textured rock formation, possibly a cave wall or a large rock face. The rock is light-colored with a rough, crystalline texture. A prominent vertical shaft runs down the center of the image. To the right of the shaft, there is a large, dark, circular opening. In the foreground, there is a large, light-colored rock formation with a distinct fish-shaped drawing or carving. The drawing is dark and appears to be a fish in profile, facing right. The overall scene is dimly lit, suggesting an underground or shaded environment.

Around the corner, however, is a beautiful geometrically enhanced drawing of a fish, in excellent condition. Watch your step to get a close-up shot! It's very near the vertical shaft that's almost bottomless.



Here is the geometric fish, in close-up.

**Standing on the edge of
the vertical shaft.**

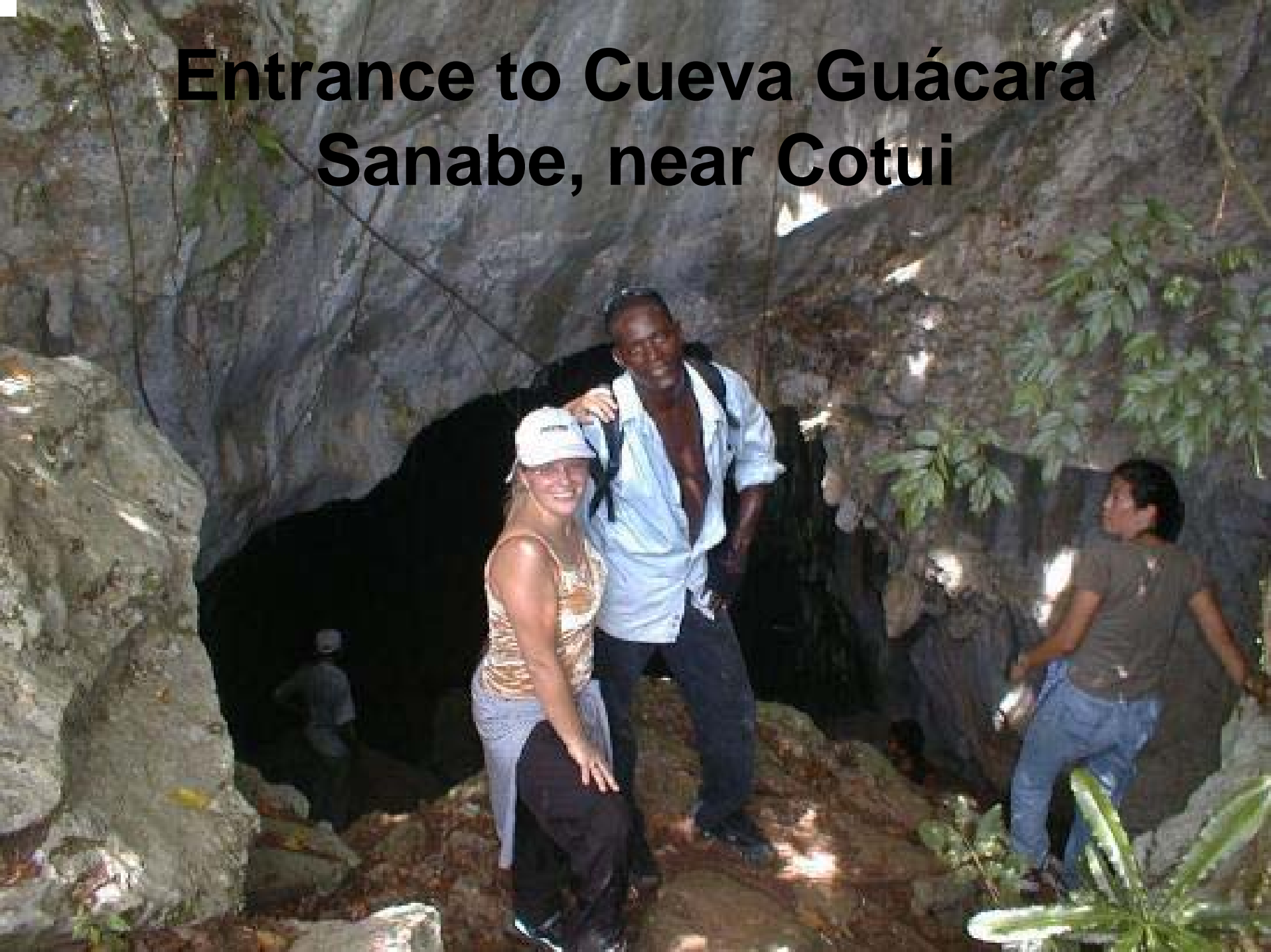


**Down, down, down...
into the dark depths.**

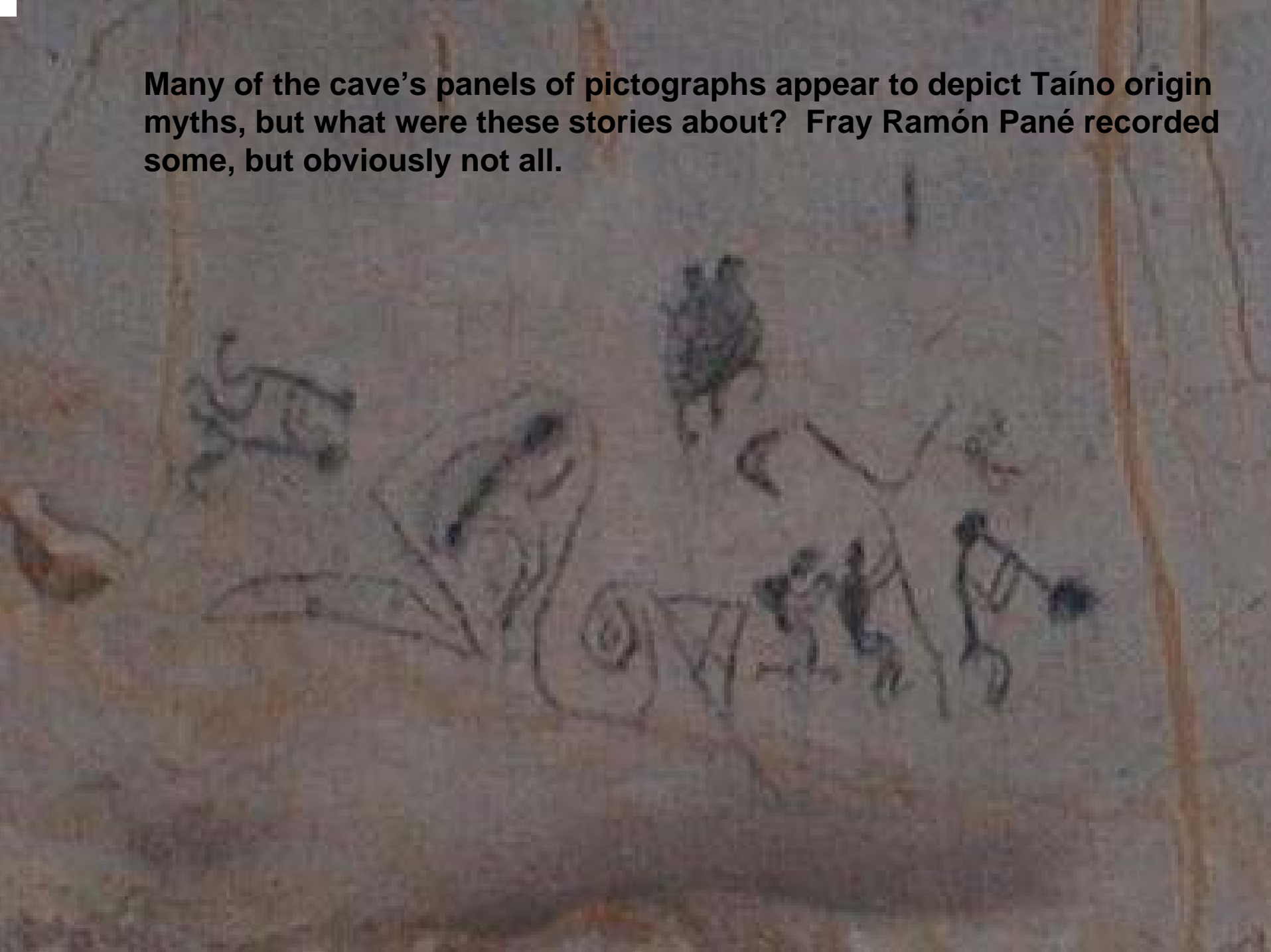
**But at noon, it appears
as if the sun shines
U-P from the almost
bottomless pit!**

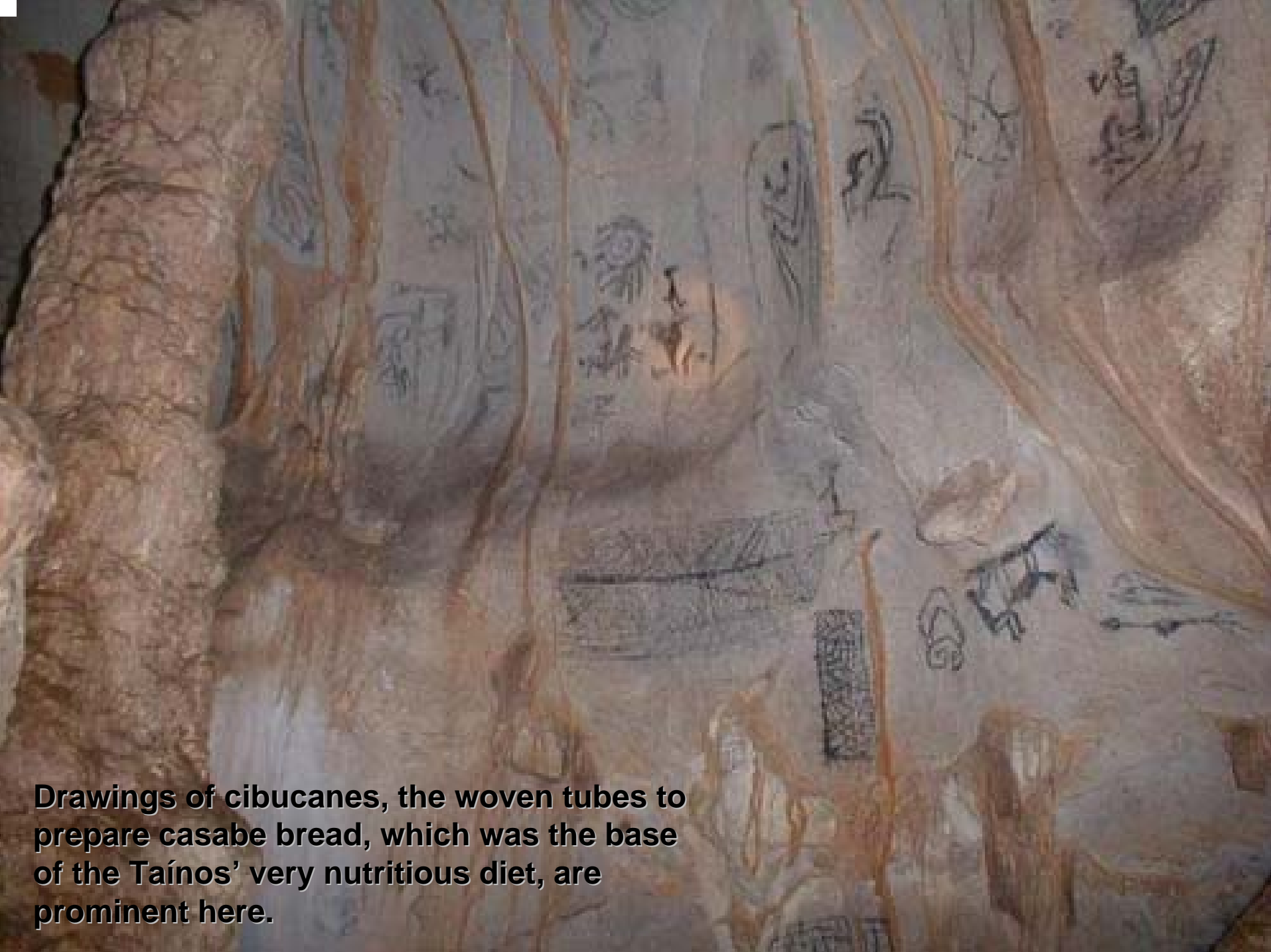


Entrance to Cueva Guácara Sanabe, near Cotui



Many of the cave's panels of pictographs appear to depict Taíno origin myths, but what were these stories about? Fray Ramón Pané recorded some, but obviously not all.



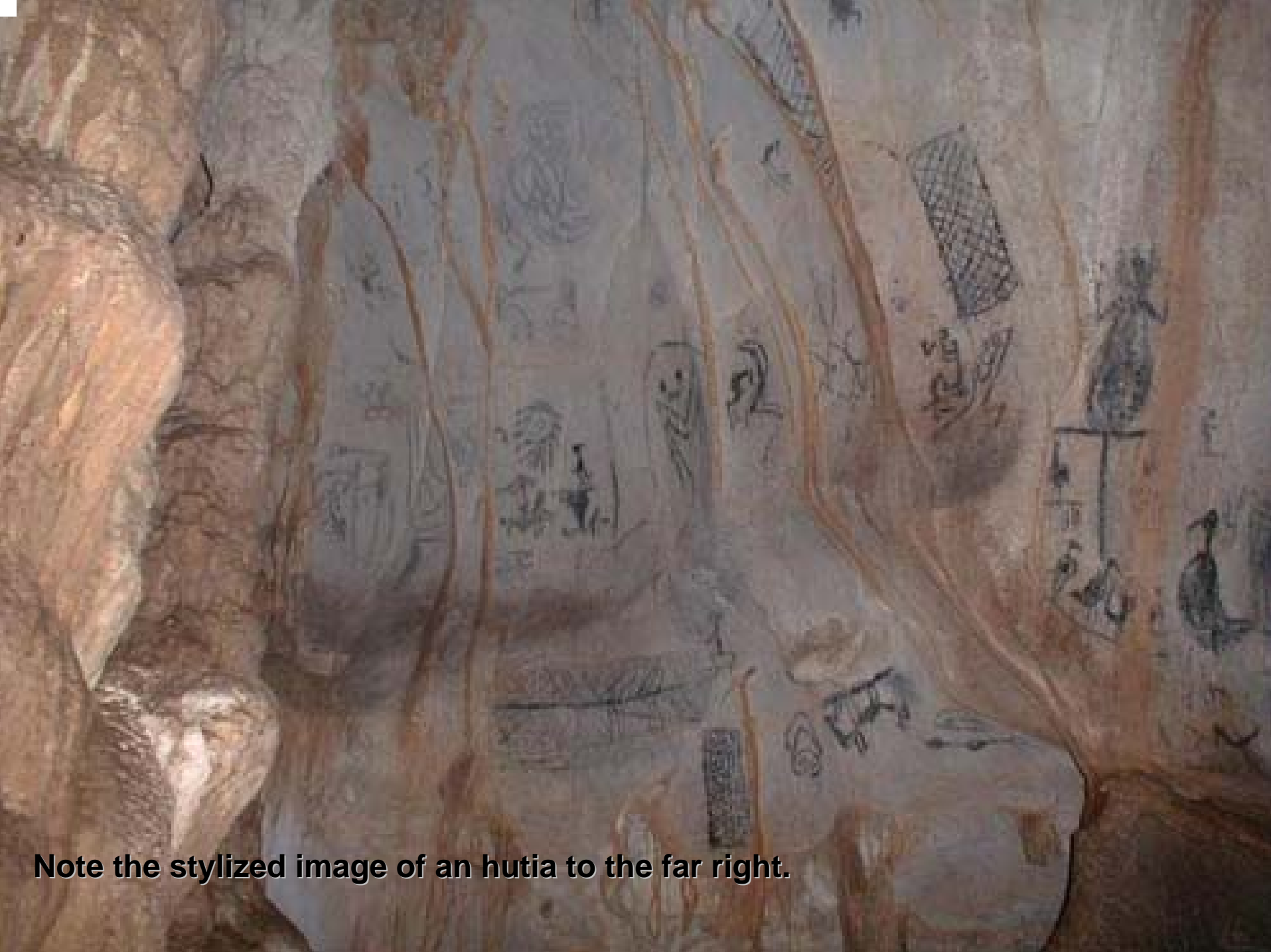


Drawings of cibucanes, the woven tubes to prepare casabe bread, which was the base of the Taínos' very nutritious diet, are prominent here.



Birds, multiple images of men carrying something (an ill friend?) trussed to a pole... the panels are jam packed with figures.



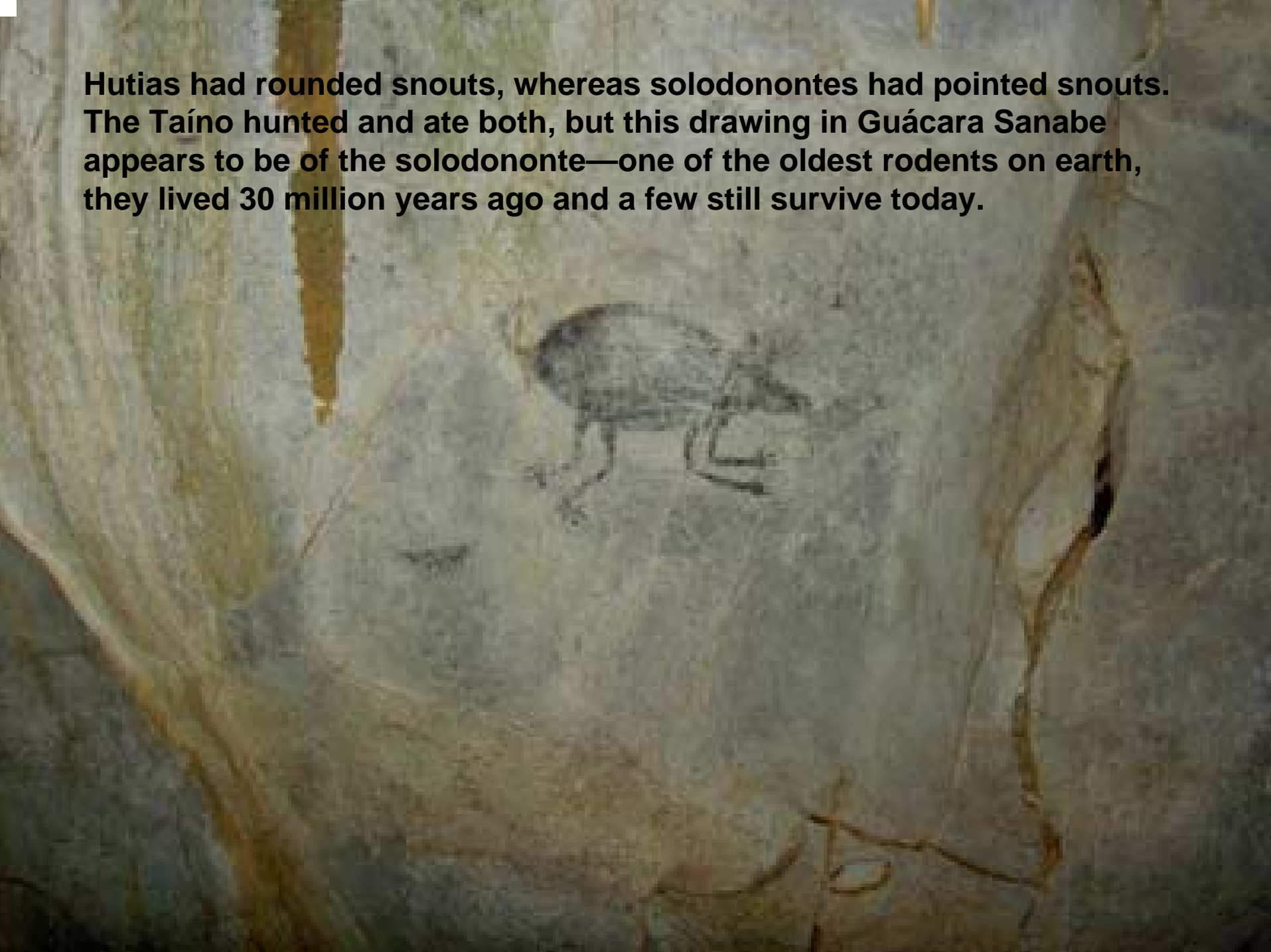


Note the stylized image of an hutia to the far right.



Here is a closer-up shot of the stylized hutia. Note that there is a wooden “behike’s maraca” of exactly the same style on exhibit at Santiago’s Centro Cultural León Jiménes.

Hutias had rounded snouts, whereas solodonontes had pointed snouts. The Taíno hunted and ate both, but this drawing in Guácara Sanabe appears to be of the solodononte—one of the oldest rodents on earth, they lived 30 million years ago and a few still survive today.



This big dog painted on the ceiling is 6 feet long! Dogs were the Taínos' pets and their companions to hunt hutías and solenodontes.



Here's a close-up of one of the many pictographs in Guacara Sanabe that may depict the ill being brought to the cave. That's what the Dominican ecologist Domingo Abreu believes—that this was a special healing cave.





Here is another. Note the special clothing and hairstyle of the man on the right. Perhaps it is a behike or kacike with high-status large earrings, a feather crown, and cotton robe?

Probably two ritual masks used by behikes. They appear together high up on a wall, above a ledge. (See next photo.)





This may represent another behike's ritual mask or perhaps a stylized owl, using a similar geometric design to that of the fish in Cueva del Puente.





One of the most beautiful of all the pictographs is this graceful Areito Dancer.



Among the most fascinating Images in the cave are the “climbers,” who appear to have been painted as “signs” that you have to climb up and down rope ladders to reach the bottoms of two shafts or vertical tunnels that have since caved in and are no longer accessible—I wonder what images were once at the bottom of those shafts?



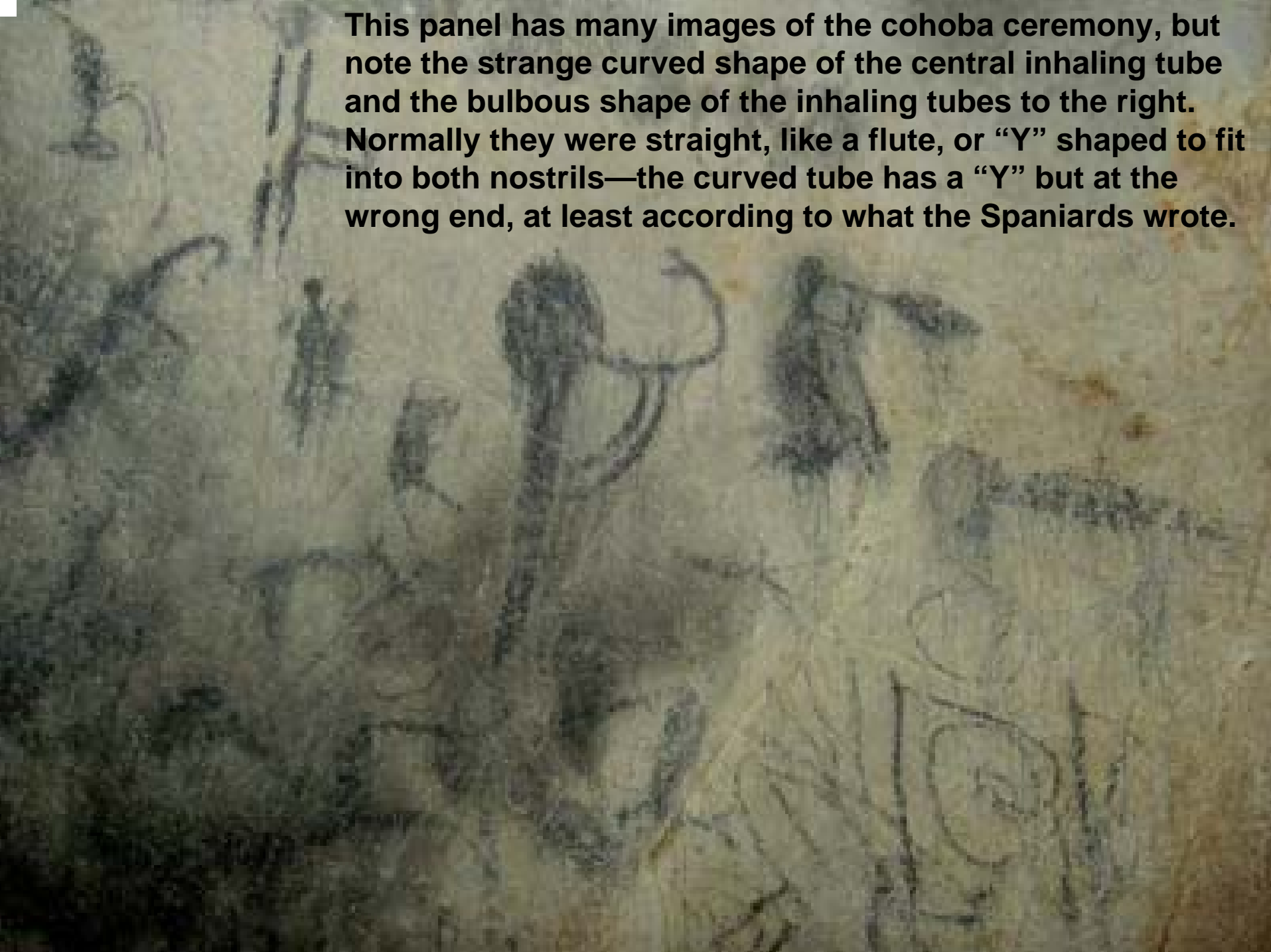
**Here is another “climber.”
Note the similarity in style to
the stretched-out drawing of
a man in Cueva Pomier no. 2.**

This panel has several images of turtles—the upper one is double headed!

Sea turtles were an important part of the Taíno diet, but they did not eat land turtles, which formed the base of the earth in one of the Taíno creation myths.



This panel has many images of the cohoba ceremony, but note the strange curved shape of the central inhaling tube and the bulbous shape of the inhaling tubes to the right. Normally they were straight, like a flute, or “Y” shaped to fit into both nostrils—the curved tube has a “Y” but at the wrong end, at least according to what the Spaniards wrote.





Here are more cohoba images, but what's that big creature in the center, and is that a man riding a horse on the lower right? It may be some other cohoba-induced fantasy, for the Taíno had no animals larger than a crocodile or iguana.

**I have absolutely no idea what
this was supposed to represent.
Do you?**



And here's yet another image of those strange sea creatures that are depicted on many of the caves walls. Wonder what it is?



Guácara Sanabe has beautiful cave formations.



Some with glittering crystals.





And elegant drapery.



The indigenous artists sometimes had to paint around and behind the cave's columns.

This complex and skillfully carved guardian faces what used to be the cave's main entrance-- falling rocks have since closed it off (only a small amount of sunlight filters in).



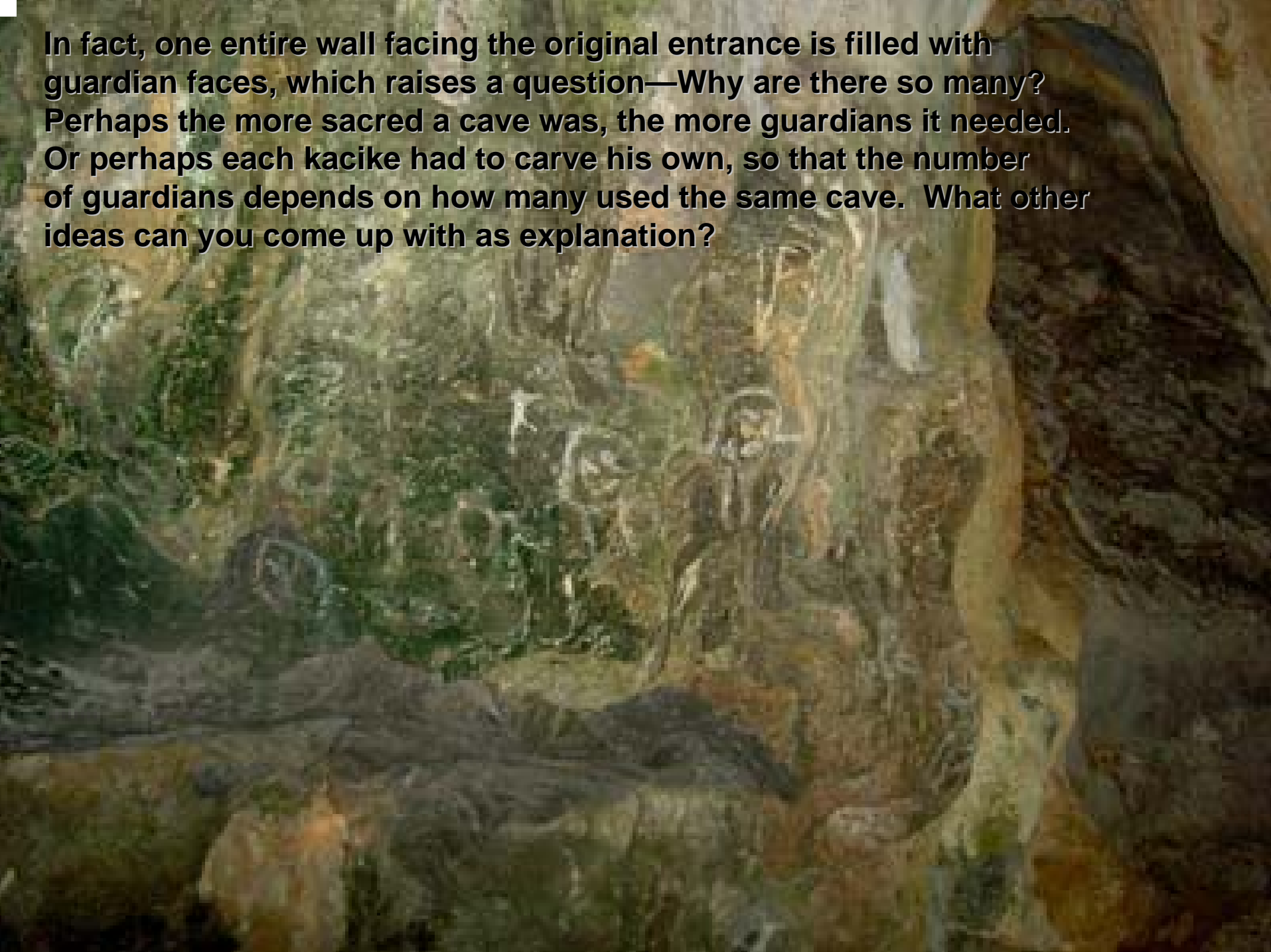


Here is another, which must have been very elaborate before dripping minerals began to cover it over.

Here are more guardian faces! These are cruder, more simplistic.



In fact, one entire wall facing the original entrance is filled with guardian faces, which raises a question—Why are there so many? Perhaps the more sacred a cave was, the more guardians it needed. Or perhaps each kacike had to carve his own, so that the number of guardians depends on how many used the same cave. What other ideas can you come up with as explanation?



WE NEED MORE RESEARCHERS

Visiting caves on Hispaniola is always a fascinating adventure, especially those caves with petroglyphs and pictographs, because no one alive today really knows what any of the images represent (they only make guesses). The more you know about the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean, the more your ideas are likely to be right—or at least close. What we call “educated guesses.” Find out all you can!