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The age of Barrier Canyon-style rock art constrained by cross-cutting relations and new OSL dating techniques

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Rock art compels interest from both researchers and a broader public, inspiring many hypotheses about its cultural origin and meaning, but it is notoriously difficult to date numerically. Barrier Canyon-style (BCS) pictographs of the Colorado Plateau are among the most debated examples; hypotheses about its age span the entire Holocene epoch and previous attempts at direct radiocarbon dating have failed. We provide multiple age constraints through the use of cross-cutting relations and new and broadly applicable approaches in optically stimulated luminescence dating at the Great Gallery panel, the type-section of BCS art in Canyonlands National Park, southeastern Utah. Alluvial chronostatigraphy constrains the burial and emplacement of the alcove containing the panel, and limits are also set by our related research dating both a rockfall that removed some figures and the rock’s exposure-duration before that time. Results provide a maximum possible age, a minimum age, and an exposure-time window for the creation of the Great Gallery panel, respectively. The only prior hypothesis not disproven is a late Archaic origin for BCS rock art, though our age result of ~1-1000 AD coincides better with the transition to and rise of the subsequent Fremont culture. This chronology is for the type-locality only, and variability in the age of other sites is likely. Nevertheless, results suggest that BCS rock art represents artistic traditions that spanned cultures and the transition from foraging to farming in the region.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeology is focused upon material records, contextualized in time. Rock art is a record with the potential to provide unique insights into the dynamics and evolution of culture, but it generally lacks stratigraphic or chronologic context. Interpretation of the origin and meaning of rock art is indirect at best, or simply speculative. In the case of some pictographs, pigments may include or have enough accessory carbon for AMS radiocarbon dating (1-4). In other special situations, such as caves, minimum age constraints have been obtained by various techniques of dating material that overlies or entombs rock art (5-7). Yet most rock art remains undatable and researchers rely upon stylistic comparison and indirect associations with artifacts at nearby sites (8,9). The case in point for this study is arguably the most compelling and debated rock art in the United States—the Barrier Canyon Style (BCS) of the Colorado Plateau. Previous attempts to derive an absolute chronology have failed and its age remains unknown, with widely ranging hypotheses that have remained untested until now.

The continued development of dating techniques offers new possibilities for hypothesis testing. The optically stimulated luminescence (OSL) signals from mineral grains make it possible to date the deposition of most sediment that is exposed to a few seconds of full sunlight before burial, and its use in the earth and cultural sciences has greatly increased (10,11). Amongst the latest applications of OSL are techniques dating the outer surfaces of rock clasts that have become shielded from light, including those with archaeological context (12-15). Recent work has furthermore utilized the “bleaching” profile of decreasing luminescence signal towards the surface of rock in order to estimate exposure time to sunlight (16,17). Using these dating tools, we can constrain the age of rock art and gain new insight into past cultures and landscapes.

Here we synthesize results from three novel approaches to dating the type section of BCS art, the Great Gallery in Canyonlands National Park of southeastern Utah. Through dating the full alluvial stratigraphy and a rockfall event that both have incontrovertible cross-cutting relations with the rock art, and then by determining the exposure-duration of a painted rock surface, we greatly narrow the window of time when the rock art was created. These approaches do not require direct sampling of rock art, and have strong potential for application to other archaeological and surface-processes research. While our results are only for the type-section of BCS art, and chronological variability should be expected for the style across the region, they suggest that BCS art coincides with the transition to agriculture in the northern Colorado Plateau and may not have been limited to a specific archaeological culture.

BACKGROUND

Barrier Canyon style (BCS) rock art was recorded in the central Colorado Plateau by the Claffin Emerson Expedition in the 1920s (18), and defined as a style by Schaafsma (ref. 19). This distinctive rock art stands out from its sandstone canvas in sharp, ruddy relief and is grouped in panels of life-sized, mummy-like rock art | OSL dating | Colorado Plateau | Barrier Canyon style

Significance

Key physical relations between the famous Great Gallery rock art panel in Utah, stream deposits, and a rockfall that removed some art, allow us to disprove all but a late Archaic hypothesis for the age of this type-section of the Barrier Canyon style. Use of a new luminescence-profile technique on the same rockfall furthermore outlines a window of time ~1 to 1100 AD when the figures could have been painted, generally more recent than expected. Our study illustrates novel and widely applicable approaches for dating rock art that don’t require destructive sampling, and results suggest that Barrier Canyon rock art persisted across the transition from the late Archaic into the agrarian Fremont culture in the American Southwest.
anthropomorphs, often accompanied by realistic representations of animals and organized in 3-dimensional displays. The figures were formed by a meticulous combination of pecking and application of multiple pigments (19,20). The Great Gallery is the type locality for the BCS (Fig. 1), and researchers have called it the most spectacular pictograph site in the United States (18). The many figures of the Great Gallery are arranged along the nearly 100 m length of a sandstone alcove, anchored by the distinctive "Holy Ghost and his attendants" (Fig. 3A below). Barrier Canyon rock art is commonly interpreted as shamanistic (20,21), although this is contested (22). Similarity to other neighboring, potentially contemporaneous, styles most notably includes the Esplanade style of Grand Canyon (ref. 23, included in BCS area of Fig. 1). In the San Juan River drainage to the southwest there are several Basketmaker II (early farmers 1500 BC – AD 400) styles known (20), including the San Juan Anthropomorphic style, which shows elements of similarity to BCS (21). Stylistic consistency perceived between BCS panels has raised the prospect that they were painted by a single person (19). On the other hand, as Barrier Canyon style art may in fact span considerable time and cultures, but the ability to test such ideas hinges upon building directly-dated chronologies.

The age of BCS rock art has been estimated by indirect methods, including typological cross-dating, stylistic content, and by association with dated sites in the vicinity. These approaches are useful for framing models, but they cannot be empirically tested in the absence of numerical ages. In fact, there have been two prior attempts to directly date BCS art at the Great Gallery through AMS radiocarbon methods. Successful AMS dating of Fremont rock art in Canyonlands National Park (2) lead to attempts to date pigment from fallen talus blocks at the Great Gallery (25). Unfortunately, there is no organic binder in the pigment and contamination by ancient hydrocarbons and modern aqueous carbon from the sandstone bedrock produced variably old and young dates (26). A second attempt at direct radiocarbon...
dating was also undermined by a lack of carbon, but one sample produced a tenuously reported and uncertain calibrated age of AD ~900 (26).

Although there have been unpublished arguments made for a Late Pleistocene age of BCS art based on stylistic similarities to rock art on other continents, the focus has been on an origin in early or late Archaic time (Fig. 2), before the advent of the Fremont culture in Utah (AD 250-1300). Similarities to clay anthropomorphic figurines from nearby Waiilatpu Cave and Cowden Cave in the headwaters above the Great Gallery, in a radiocarbon-dated stratigraphic context of 5600-5000 BC (calibrated), imply an early Archaic age for BCS art (27). Yet, this inferred age is much earlier than most other evidence for the age of BCS, and the deposits at both caves are mixed in nature (28), highlighting the need for more direct dating of the rock art.

The most frequent chronology for BCS art places it in the late Archaic period, before the spread of farming, the bow and arrow, and the Fremont culture (19). This is based on the rarity of the bow and arrow in BCS art, superposition of Fremont style rock art over BSC art in a few cases, and similarity to the Pecos River style of the Rio Grande in western Texas (Fig. 1). Maize and the bow and arrow made their way into southern and central Utah by AD 1–100 (29), and the Pecos River style is directly radiocarbon dated to 2000-1000 BC (30), so we illustrate this hypothesis in Figure 2 as ranging across those dates. Although late Archaic archaeological sites also have been used as evidence for the age of nearby BCS panels (19), sites from post-Archaic cultures are also common across the entire geographic range of the BCS. With a late Archaic age in mind, Cole (ref. 20) explores relationships between BCS and various Basketmaker II styles in the neighboring region, with a focus on interaction among peoples, while also noting affinities of BCS to Fremont rock art at a few sites. Thus, the cultural context of this rock art may be one of greater continuity and interaction than allowed in past conceptualizations.

A final, contrasting hypothesis is that at least some BCS art is post-Fremont (Fig. 2), associated with the Southwest kachina complex that was fully formed AD ~1400, based on iconography such as fox-pelt pendants important in Puebloan ritual (31). Manning (ref. 31) also makes the observation that the very preservation of the delicate art, sometimes in exposed locations, argues against great antiquity.

RESULTS

Maximum age constraint, terrace chronostratigraphy

The Great Gallery lies along a reach of Horseshoe-Barrier Creek that is carved in sandstone of the Jurassic Navajo Formation. Farther upstream, the relatively wide canyon bottom

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OSL sample</th>
<th>UnitLocation-position</th>
<th>Dose rate (Gy/ky)</th>
<th>De (Gy)</th>
<th>Age model</th>
<th>Age (ka)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USU-186</td>
<td>T1 Alcove upper</td>
<td>2.00 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>B3 MAM</td>
<td>0.83 ± 0.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-178</td>
<td>T2 South park top</td>
<td>1.87 ± 0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-160</td>
<td>T3 Rincon middle</td>
<td>1.73 ± 0.10</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>B3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
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<td>USU-149</td>
<td>T4 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.64 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-134</td>
<td>T5 South park middle</td>
<td>1.54 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>USU-129</td>
<td>T6 Alcove upper</td>
<td>1.49 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.06</td>
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<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>USU-119</td>
<td>T7 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.46 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-110</td>
<td>T8 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.43 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
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<td>USU-101</td>
<td>T9 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.40 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>USU-98</td>
<td>T10 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.38 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-94</td>
<td>T11 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.36 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-92</td>
<td>T12 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.34 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-87</td>
<td>T13 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.32 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-83</td>
<td>T14 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.30 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
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<td>USU-79</td>
<td>T15 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.28 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>USU-75</td>
<td>T16 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.26 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-71</td>
<td>T17 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.24 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
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<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>USU-67</td>
<td>T18 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.22 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-63</td>
<td>T19 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.20 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-59</td>
<td>T20 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.18 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-55</td>
<td>T21 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.16 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-51</td>
<td>T22 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.14 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-47</td>
<td>T23 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.12 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-43</td>
<td>T24 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.10 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-39</td>
<td>T25 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.08 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-35</td>
<td>T26 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.06 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-31</td>
<td>T27 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.04 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-27</td>
<td>T28 Alcove top</td>
<td>1.02 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-23</td>
<td>T29 Alcove middle</td>
<td>1.00 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-19</td>
<td>T30 Alcove top</td>
<td>0.98 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
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<td>USU-15</td>
<td>T31 Alcove middle</td>
<td>0.96 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-11</td>
<td>T32 Alcove top</td>
<td>0.94 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
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<td>USU-7</td>
<td>T33 Alcove middle</td>
<td>0.92 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-3</td>
<td>T34 Alcove top</td>
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<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USU-1</td>
<td>T35 Alcove middle</td>
<td>0.88 ± 0.09</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>H3 MAM</td>
<td>0.73 ± 0.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figures 3 and 4). The T2 terrace has a bedrock strath mantled older, have important physical relations to the Great Gallery drainage, and the younger two, designated T1 (youngest) and T2, reveals a series of three fluvial terraces traceable through the tated alluvial floodplain, and preserved fill terraces (32). Mapping the drainage has a broadly convex longitudinal profile, a vege-

tation of bedrock cement has subsequently promoted preferential weathering. During exposure, liberation (bleaching) of 
dosing, the OSL signal accumulated over time towards a saturated level set reported with analytical error, modified from ref. 16. During burial and 
sample with known exposure age (red data points and model-fit line), 

rockfall. 

This highlights both the coherence of results and the 
Suppl. Info. radiocarbon results and in stratigraphic order, as illustrated in the 

gallery figures is about the height of the top of the T1, and it 
may represent weathering related to those flood deposits (Fig. 
3A). Alternatively, the etched horizon may mark where the water-
saturated basal T2 deposit used to lie, and where local dissolu-

tion of bedrock cement has subsequently promoted preferential weathering. 

Optically stimulated luminescence results on sediment in 
Table 1, dating to 8.01 ± 0.5 below the preserved top of the T2 at the Great Gallery, and one re-
sult from an ash and charcoal horizon in the upper T2 corroborate the OSL geochronology, with calibrated results converted to ka 

before 2010 AD in Table 1 for direct comparison to OSL ages. The age results, combined with their stratigraphic context, reconstruct fluvial activity over latest Quaternary time (Fig. 4). T2 deposition in the Navajo reach corresponds to the Pleistocene-Holocene transition, 15-8 ka. The highest OSL sample (USU-6715g) lies 

~0.5 below the preserved top of the T2 at the Great Gallery, and so sometime after 8.01±1.13 ka deposition ceased and incision 
began (Fig. 3A). By ~3 ka, the basal flood deposits of the T1 were emplaced at essentially the same elevations as the modern wash throughout the drainage. Erosional bounding surfaces and chronology within the T1 suggest three distinct packages of flood deposits are preserved (31), dating to ~3 ka, 2.3-1.2 ka, and 1.1-0.8 ka (Fig. 4, SI Fig. 3).

The Great Gallery art must be younger than the episode of incision bracketed between the T2 and inset T1, which began sometime after ~8 ka. Indeed, incision through late Pleistocene talus and alluvium, and then bedrock, must have proceeded for 

with 0.5-1 m of clast-to-matrix supported, pebble-cobble gravel. As the drainage enters the Navajo reach, the preserved T2 deposit thickens to include more than 6 m of sandy alluvium atop the basal gravels. The inset T1 is up to 6 m thick and is a finer-grained package that occupies much of the valley bottom in the Navajo reach. It is comprised of medium beds of massive to upper-plane-bed, fine-medium sand interpreted as high energy channel deposits, as well as thinly bedded, fine sand with ripple cross-stratification and thin mud drapes interpreted as slackwater deposits.

The figures of the Great Gallery are situated 8-12 m above Horseshoe-Barrier Creek in an alcove. The stream aggradation recorded in the T2 deposit throughout the reach of the canyon buried this lower alcove, as indicated by the T2 remnant next to the Great Gallery, which buttresses the bedrock wall to a height above nearly all of the rock art (Fig. 3A). The bedrock bench below the panel is the locally-exhumed strath of the T2, and the remnant deposit embanked against the alcove includes interbedded lenses of bouldery talus fallen from the alcove and buried along the edge of the aggrading floodplain. The main rock art panel could not have been created until these deposits were subsequently buried by the stream, exposing the lower alcove. Nor could the rock art pre-date the T2 because the pigment would not have survived burial, groundwater flow, exhumation, and then abrasion by subsequent flood discharges. Thus, the art is incontrovertibly younger than the top of the T2 alluvium, and moreover, it postdates most of the subsequent incision to where the inset T1 flood deposits lie along the channel. A conspicuous, etched horizon in the bedrock just below the toe of the Great Gallery figures is about the height of the top of the T1, and it may represent weathering related to those flood deposits (Fig. 3A).

The upper T2 terrace (Fig. 3) comprises a fluvial deposit (Fig. 3B) dissected by the incision between the deposition of T2 and T1 deposits. Mapping of this incisional surface in situ and dated alluvial deposits (33), reveals a series of three fluvial terraces traceable through the tated alluvial floodplain, and preserved fill terraces (32). Mapping the drainage has a broadly convex longitudinal profile, a vege-

tation of bedrock cement has subsequently promoted preferential weathering. 

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Filamentous cyanobacteria were recently isolated from the Great Gallery alcove, and they are believed to be the primary producers of the pigments used in the artwork. These bacteria thrive in environments with high light intensity and are well adapted to the conditions found in the alcove. However, the exact role of light in the survival and replication of these bacteria remains unclear.

**DISCUSSION**

Our ability to test hypotheses and understand prehistory increases with each advance in geochronology, as experienced with AMS radiocarbon dating and U-series dating of rock art (4, 7). In situations such as the Great Gallery pictographs where organic material is completely absent from pigments or contamination is an issue, or in the case of the countless petroglyphs directly etched into rock, age control has nevertheless remained elusive. This study illustrates that new techniques in OSL dating can help; these have the advantage of analyzing deposits and surfaces associated with rock art, rather than destructively analyzing the art itself. Also, basic cross-cutting relations may be utilized more than previously recognized. It is likely there are several other situations where natural or man-made deposits, episodes of erosion, or mass-movement events could provide constraints on the timing of rock art or other archaeological features. In addition, the OSL-exposure dating technique is broadly applicable where estimates of rock-surface exposure on decade-to-millennial timescales are needed, making it well suited for a wide range of applications in archaeology and active surface processes.

Traditional OSL dating of alluvium along the Horseshoe Barrier drainage produces a chronostratigraphy reflecting a paleoenvironmental context important for interpretations of regional archaeology. Like other alluvial archives throughout the Colorado Plateau, our record was generated by episodes of changing sediment transport, storage, and incision, which have long been linked to changing paleoclimate, but in ways that are still poorly understood (e.g. 34-37). The T2 deposit dates to the latest Pleistocene-early Holocene transition, which in this area was a time of highly variable climate, vegetation disturbance, and later, an enhanced onset of the Southwest Monsoon (38,39). Middle Holocene incision along the drainage may be driven by the monsoon, but also corresponds to a long-recognized episode of aridity (38-40). Finally, paleoflood deposits of the T1 coincide with the late Holocene increase in front-valued winter moisture (41) and more variable climate with episodes of drought, flooding and arroyo cutting. These have been linked to century-scale shifts in El Nino patterns, the Medieval Warm Period (AD ~900-1300), and the subsequent Little Ice Age (42,43). The Great Gallery was painted in the overall wetter and more variable late Holocene, during the transition to agrarian societies in this region, but before the shifts in settlement patterns that coincide with drought and arroyo cutting towards the end of the Medieval Warm Period (43).

The timeframe for the Great Gallery type locality provides a new context for BCS rock art within not only the paleoenvironmental record, but also, of course, the archaeology of the region. The painting of the Great Gallery pictures during a window between late Archaic (BM II) time, around AD 1, through the

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**Footnote**

1. **AD 1100, the height of the Fremont culture, ruling out the post-
2. **900-1300),
3. **43).**
introduction of maize and the bow and arrow to Utah, and on to the peak of the Fremont culture AD ~1100. The Archaic roots of the Fremont were noted long ago, and a variety of evidence indicates continuity between Archaic foragers and Fremont-time culturalists between AD 1–400 (29). It appears that at that time, immigrant populations brought agriculture and village lifeways from the Four Corners region to north of the Colorado River and a landscape already inhabited by forager populations (44). There is some evidence for multiple ethnic/language groups among these immigrants, and the Fremont emerged from this diversity and interaction, with their cultural variation expressed in Fremont rock art (19, 44).

Likewise, as rock-art scholars have documented increasing variability in BCS art and noted overlaps of style and execution with neighboring rock art, it has been suggested that BCS art was a living tradition built over time as well as space (20). There are contrasts between Fremont and BCS rock art, and although our current chronology from part of the Great Gallery panel cannot specifically decipher whether BCS just preceded or coexisted with Fremont rock art, our results are consistent with there being multiple rock-art traditions within the greater Fremont temporal window. If the BCS was established before the origins of the Fremont, then it is nevertheless possible it persisted during the development of distinctively Fremont rock art styles. Rather than an exclusive match of rock art styles to particular archaeological cultures, BCS rock art may have endured in the midst of human mobility, interaction, and new traditions appearing. As more age constraints are obtained on BCS panels, we can test whether it was produced over a considerable span of time. If so, then it was made by peoples of contrasting heritage, but who nevertheless maintained a common tradition, expressed in the compelling iconography of the Barrier Canyon style.

**METHODS**

Details of OSL methods, data analysis and data are found in the Suppl. Info., including a primer on the exposure-profile method. Full data and analysis of the step-by-step OSL dating and rock-art dating results are given in ref. 15, 16, respectively. For the OSL alluvial chronology presented here, samples were collected in steel tubes, and representative sediment was collected within 30 cm for determination of dose rate. The bulk concentration of 40K, 226Ra, 238U and 232Th were measured using mass spectrometry, and dose-rates incorporating this, estimated water-content history, and cosmic contribution were calculated using the conversion factors of ref. 45. Optical measurements were conducted on a target grain-size fraction of quartz isolated and etched following routine procedures. Measurements with RISO TLD/OSL-DA-20 readers followed the single-aliquot regenerative protocol of Murray and Wintle (ref. 46), with the reported age calculated from >20 aliquots that passed criteria of signal reproducibility and reliability. The equivalent-dose distributions of most alluvial samples were analyzed with a minimum age model (MAM, ref. 33) to statistically isolate data from mineral grains that were completely bleached before burial. Use of the MAM was based partly on the dispersion and skewness of equivalent-dose distributions (Suppl. Info.), but also by requirements of field-stratigraphic coherence.

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