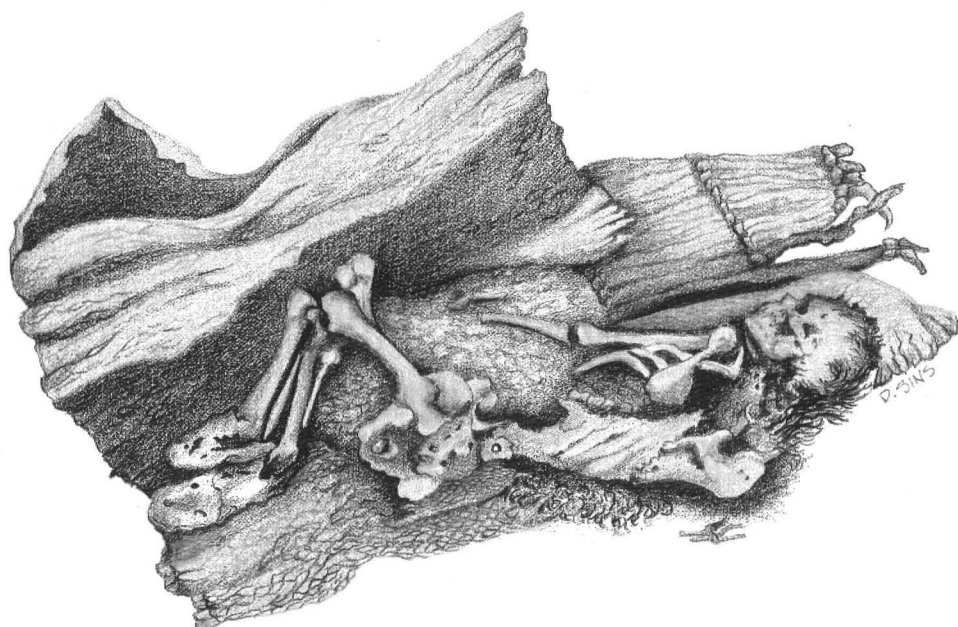


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CAVE BURIALS NEAR FALLON, NEVADA

S. M. Wheeler

During the 1940 field season, my wife and I investigated, for the Nevada State Park Commission, more than a score of caves near Fallon, Churchill County, Nevada. In the course of this work, we uncovered two burials and two cremations which greatly increased our meager store of information regarding the mortuary customs of the prehistoric inhabitants of the area.

On the 11th of August, we decided to check a cave we had seen many times but had not explored. The mile walk through the hot, loose sand and the climb over the rocky terraces of ancient Lake Lahontan justified a rest at the entrance to our objective. This proved to be a rockshelter, facing west, about 25 feet wide, 15 feet deep and averaging about 5 feet high. From the northeast corner an opening led into a small chamber. The ceiling and walls, covered with tufa deposited by the prehistoric lake, showed little remaining trace of the fires which later excavation revealed had been built within the shelter.

On the left, as we looked in, a slightly raised portion of the floor was bordered by a quarter-circle of rocks which extended from near the center of the rear wall to the north wall just inside the entrance. The shelter was so situated that it appeared that little, if any, rain or runoff water could enter, an opinion later confirmed by the dryness of the deposit and the excellent state of preservation of the perishable materials.

It had not been planned to make any test excavation during this first visit but, at my wife's insistence, I pointed to the area enclosed by the line of rocks. She commenced to dig near the rear wall while I explored the inner room. The first foot revealed no evidence of occupancy, just dry, windblown sand. Under this she laid bare a portion of what had been a large mat, very finely twined, with the warp of spit tules and the weft of native hemp cord. When completely uncovered, this was found to be wrapped around a few human bones, all that remained of some early Nevada inhabitant.

Immediately under this was another large mat of tules, the warp held together with rows of tule twining about 5 inches apart. When the pit was enlarged to uncover the complete mat, we saw we had a second burial, the more important of the two because the wrappings were nearly perfect.

This is the first version of the report S. M. Wheeler made on the discoveries at Spirit Cave.

The burial pit consisted of an excavation 6 feet long, 4 feet wide and 3 feet 9 inches deep. It was lined with sagebrush on which the mortuary bundle was deposited and then covered with more brush. The head, at a depth of 2 feet 4 inches and slightly higher than the hips was oriented 55 degrees east of true north. The upper part of the pit had been filled with rocks which the wind eventually concealed with fine sand. Later, the intrusive upper burial was laid on the first.

The necessary photographs taken and data recorded, we were faced with the difficult problem of transferring the bundle to our bed in the station wagon. With the assistance of Fallon residents, we were able to accomplish this without doing any damage to the specimen.

The next few days were spent in cleaning and studying the bundle. It was possible to open it, without injury, in order to determine the method of preparing the body for burial. It lay on its right side on a fur blanket, the legs being semi-flexed, with the knees opposite the hips. The upper half was wrapped in a close-twined mat of the type found with the intrusive burial. This was sewn together around the head. A similar mat was wrapped around the balance of the body and the large mat of tules, 35 inches by 50 inches, was laid over the entire bundle, the lower corners being tied together under the feet. All these mats were of types found elsewhere in the caves of the Fallon area and in Lovelock Cave, about 40 miles to the north (L.L. Loud and M. R. Harrington 1929).

[Wheeler was wrong in his identification of the mats. Amy Dansie was the first to point this out. Both burials were wrapped, not in twined mats, but in matting which we called *diamond-plaiting* after the technique first described by Charles Rozaire (1974:69). See Dansie's notes at the end of this article.]

The bones of the lower portion of the body were exposed but, from the hips upward, it was partly mummified. The scalp was complete with a small tuft of hair remaining. Within an hour after exposure to the light and air the black hair became reddish. The clothing consisted of a pair of leather moccasins and a breech-cloth of fiber. There were no other accompaniments with the burial.

The body was identified by Dr. [Harry] Sawyer of Fallon, as that of a young adult male. Mr. M. R. Harrington, Curator of the Southwest Museum, after examining the bundle, concurred in placing the age of the burial at approximately 1500 to 2000 years. . . .

. . . Five days after the removal of the Spirit Cave burials, we returned to make an additional test excavation. On our previous visit we had noted several interesting-looking places that might hold other burials. My wife selected the location for her work against the rear wall at a point about 10 feet south from the initial discovery. She soon reported finding a small unshaped metate leaning against the wall at a depth of 20 inches. Four inches under this, she uncovered a small twined bag of split tules from beneath which protruded the edge of a close-twined bag of native hemp. These lay on the bottom and at the rear end of a pit 5 feet wide, 6 feet long and 2 1/2 feet deep which had been used for crmatory purposes and then filled in.

The upper bag was of split tules closely twined with weft of native hemp string. It had been made flat, like a rectangular mat, folded in half and the sides overcast to form a container 14 1/2 inches long and 9 inches deep. At the top, 3 3/4 inches from each end, were two pairs of tie strings. On the reverse side there were three of these strips, the middle one being 6 1/4 inches from the end.

This bag contained a side-opening open-twined bag [made] of hemp with a 4 inch fringe made by extending the warp elements at either end. This inner bag, which held cremated human bones, was 12 inches long (less fringe) and 9 inches deep. It, too, had been made as a mat and folded and sewn. A carrying handle was made of 1/8 inch native hemp cord tied to the fringe at either end of the opening.

The lower bag, also containing burnt fragments of human bones, was 15 3/4 inches long and 8 inches deep and originally had a 6 3/4 inch fringe of native hemp cord on each end. In construction it was the same as the inner bag described above.

From the specimens themselves there is no evidence on which to base a determination of their age. Both were definitely buried at the same time. If the cremations actually took place in the trench (and the evidence all led to that conclusion) they are at least of sufficient ages that nearly all trace of the fire has disappeared from the wall and low ceiling of the cave.

Complete excavation revealed that the Spirit Cave had not been inhabited but the shelter had been used for burial and the small inner chamber for storage.

NOTE ON TEXTILES ASSOCIATED WITH THE SPIRIT CAVE BURIALS

Amy Dansie

Burial no. 1. When the Wheelers first excavated Spirit Cave they encountered a disturbed burial about a foot below the surface. It was represented by a large piece of matting that Wheeler called *twined*, but which is in fact diamond-plaiting. This matting dates to 9,270±60 B.P. (UCR-3480). A few disarticulated human bones were found with the matting, and Wheeler claimed to have reburied the bones in the cave, collecting only the matting. Scattered human bone of a young male and an adult female was collected from the site deposits, and the female bone dates to 9,300±70 B.P. (UCR-3475), statistically identical to the Burial no. 1 matting. (The male bone is much more recent, at 4,640±50 B.P. (UCR-3473).

Burial no. 2, The Spirit Cave Mummy. Directly below Burial no. 1 was the undisturbed, partially mummified body of a 35-to-55-year-old male, wrapped in two large pieces of diamond-plaiting matting, and covered with a large open-twined tule mat. He was also wrapped in a rabbit-skin blanket which retained a significant amount of fur, and had well-constructed hide moccasins on his feet. No other diagnostic artifacts were associated with the mummy. The following article by Tuohy and Dansie lists (Table 1) the seven radiocarbon assays run on hair, bone,

twined tule matting, and diamond-plaited matting, with a weighted mean of $9,415 \pm 25$ radiocarbon (uncalibrated) years B.P. It is important to note that Charles Rozaire mentioned a "distinctive kind of plaited matting. . . composed of string wefts and tule warp," from Crypt Cave. He noted that "the warps form their unique diamond pattern as a result of the spacing of the wefts" (Rozaire 1974:69). He compared it to a similar piece in L. S. Cressman (1942: figure 89i), which will be discussed later. Since then, only one other Nevada reference has appeared, a brief note in the Hidden Cave report of a small fragment with no context within the cave. Based on Rozaire's description, the Nevada State Museum adopted the term *diamond-plaiting* to describe this weave to highlight its distinctive technical features.

Cremations no. 1 and no. 2. About ten feet from the mummy, Georgia Wheeler uncovered a pair of finely woven bags containing thoroughly cremated human bones. They were lying on top of each other, with no sediment between them. The top bag, Cremation no. 1, was made of diamond-plaited matting very similar to the mummy wrappings. Within that bag was a twined hemp cordage bag with long fringes which contained the human remains. The bottom bag, Cremation no. 2, was a twined hemp bag with damaged fringes, also containing human remains. Damaged but attached cords from Cremation no. 2 yielded a radiocarbon date of $9,040 \pm 50$ B.P. Because the original provenience is so well documented, there is no doubt the bags are contemporaneous, and the date is applicable to both bags.

Other textiles from the cave have been dated to more recent times. The coiled basket dates to $2,200 \pm 60$ B.P., and the twined grass matting fragment dates to $1,700 \pm 60$.

FIGURES

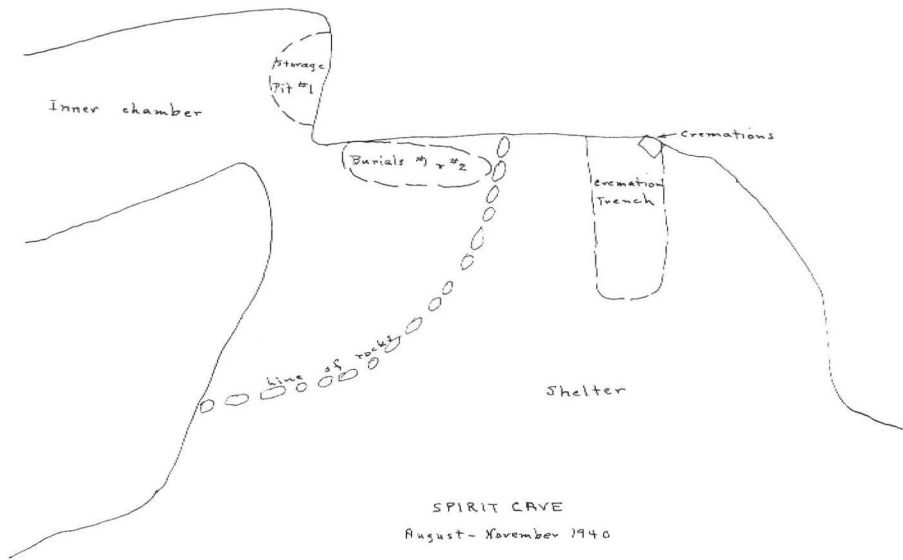


FIGURE 1. Plan of Spirit Cave showing where the two burials and the two cremations were found (S. M. Wheeler, Nevada State Museum)

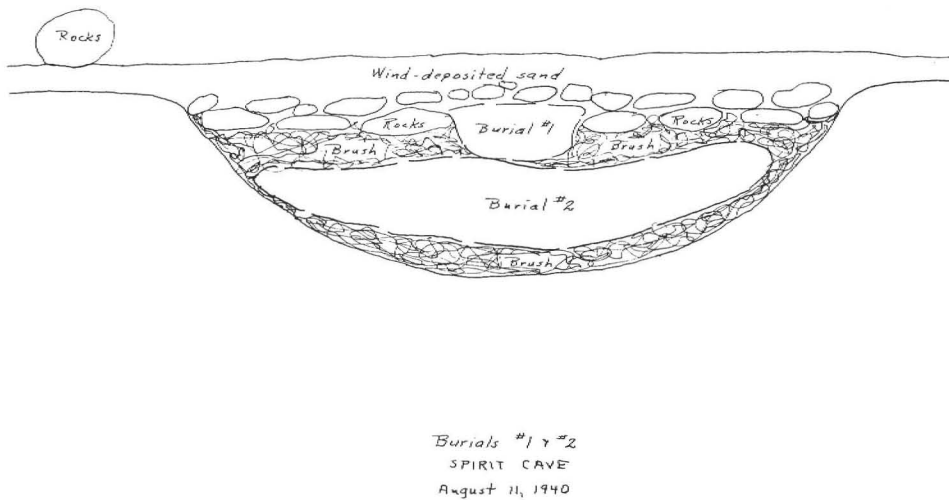


FIGURE 2. Cross section of Spirit Cave showing the position of the two burials, Burial no. 1 and no. 2. (S. M. Wheeler, Nevada State Museum)

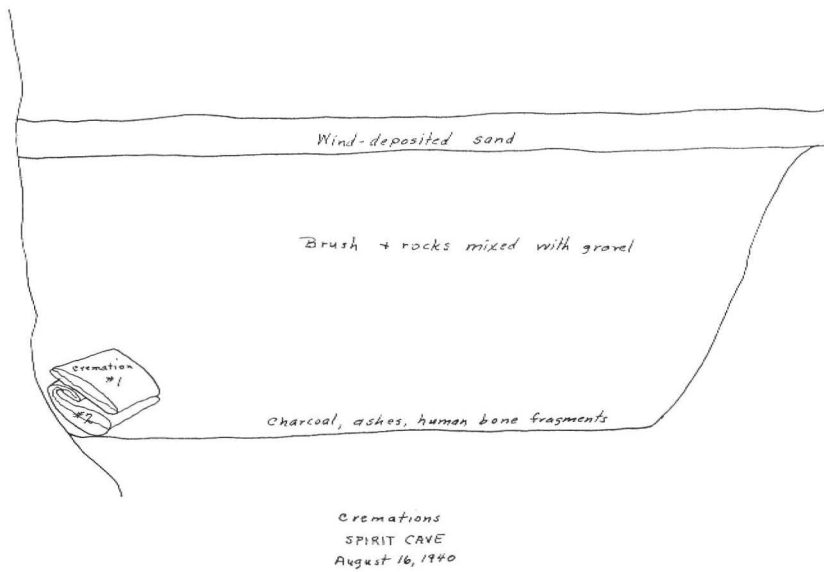


FIGURE 3. Cross section of Spirit Cave showing the position of the two cremations, Cremation no. 1 and Cremation no. 2 (S. M. Wheeler, Nevada State Museum)

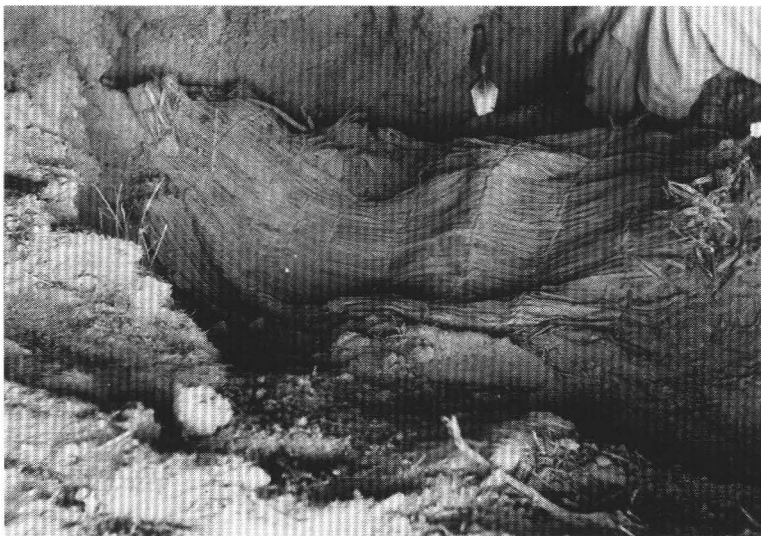


FIGURE 4. Spirit Cave, showing the tule mat covering Burial no. 2, *in situ*. (S. M. Wheeler, Nevada State Museum)

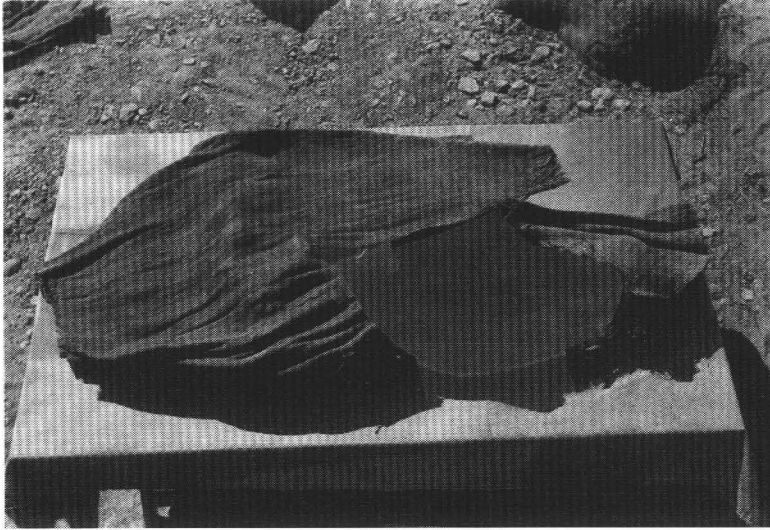


FIGURE 5. Burial no. 2, with the outside tule mat removed, showing the two inner diamond-plaited mats (S. M. Wheeler, Nevada State Museum)

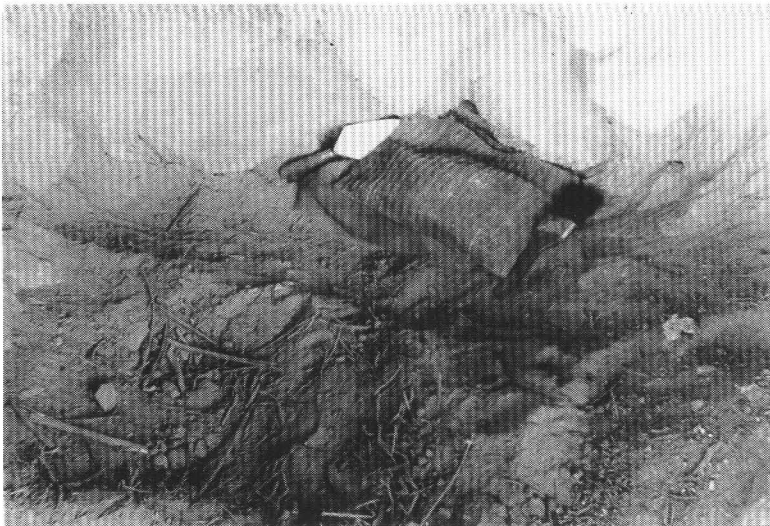


FIGURE 6. Spirit Cave, showing the two cremations in their respective bags. (S. M. Wheeler, Nevada State Museum)

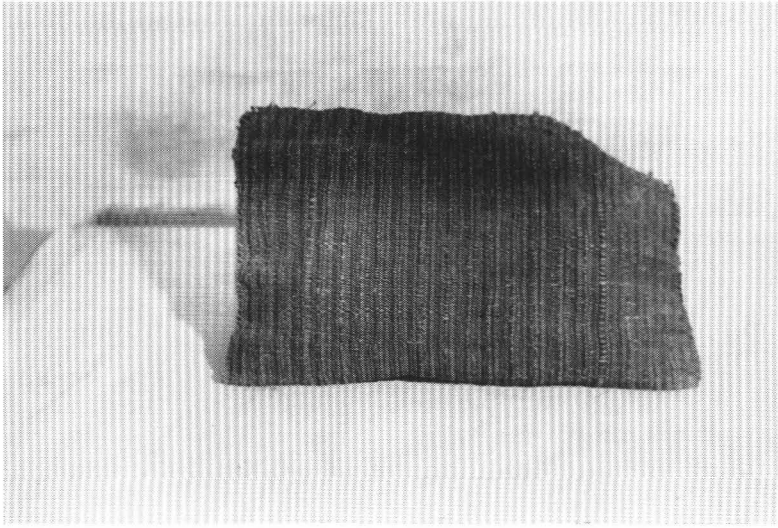


FIGURE 7. Spirit Cave, showing the exterior bag which held an interior bag with the bones of Cremation no. 1. The exterior bag is re-enforced with leather straps and it is made by the diamond-plaiting method (S. M. Wheeler, *Nevada State Museum*)

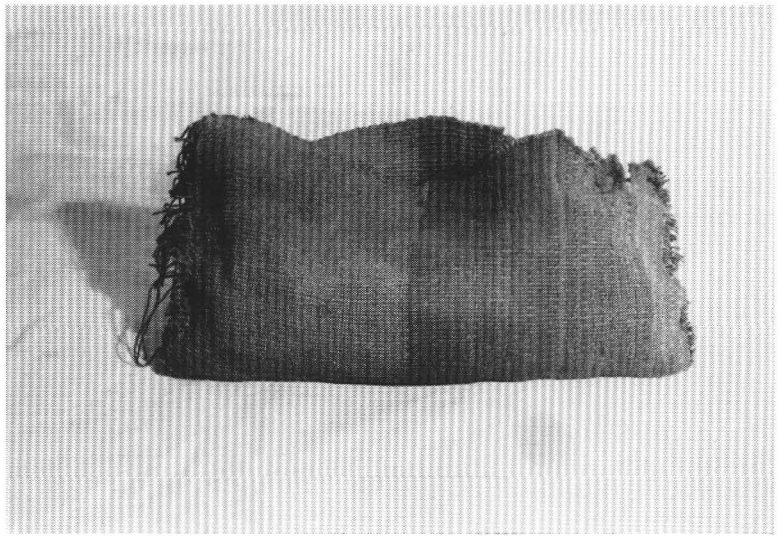


FIGURE 8. Spirit Cave, showing the close-twined bag which held the bones of Cremation no. 2 (S. M. Wheeler, *Nevada State Museum*)

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