



What Did Ice Age People Do in the deep caves?

BY JEAN CLOTTES

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The walls and stalactites in Cougnac Cave (Payrignac, France) have been repeatedly touched by fingers covered with black or red paint.

Possible Ritual Behavior by Neandertals in Deep Caves

There are at least two possible instances of ritual deep cave use among Neandertals. In the depths of France's Bruniquel Cave, broken stalactites and stalagmites were found piled and arranged in an oval adjacent to a smaller round, stone structure. On an open air site, these might be interpreted as a tent's substructure, but no such protection would be needed in a deep

cave. Furthermore, the absence of any living remains indicates that people did not live there. The only hypothesis that makes sense is the delimitation of a symbolic or ritual space inside the subterranean world. Although the stalactites and stalagmites were not directly dated, a burned fragment of bone from a nearby hearth dated to more than 47,600 years ago. With no other traces of human activity in the middle of this cavern, it seems likely that the hearth is contemporary with the stone structures—dating them to the Mousterian period (*ca.* 200,000–30,000 BP) when the Neandertals occupied Europe.

The small Régourdou Cave in France's Dordogne provides another possible example of Neandertal ritual cave use. Here, a Neandertal burial was found in association with grave goods, including two bear leg bones, stone tools, and evidence that the body lay on bear hides. Professor Eugene Bonifay's excavations indicate that stone structures incorporating brown bear bones were deposited before and after the burial. A deer antler was found on top of the burial mound, covered with another layer of stones and capped by the remains of a small fire.

IN OUR MODERN Western world, deep caves have lost their supernatural aura, now serving primarily as areas for sport and study for exploratory spelunkers. In the past and in other parts of the world, however, people have often been awed by caves. The Inka believed caves to be respected places of emergence or origin, while among the Maya they provide physical access to the other world. In Greek and other mythologies, they can be the realm of supernatural powers, of the spirits, the gods, or the dead.

Traditional feelings toward caves generally entail two attitudes. They are either seen as spiritually dangerous places from which people must keep away or they are a valuable resource to be used when necessary. For archaeologists caves provide excellent conditions in which to preserve traces of past human behavior and action. Often including art, these remains allow us to better understand some ancient peoples' state of mind and their beliefs about the underground world they discovered under the flickering light of their torches.

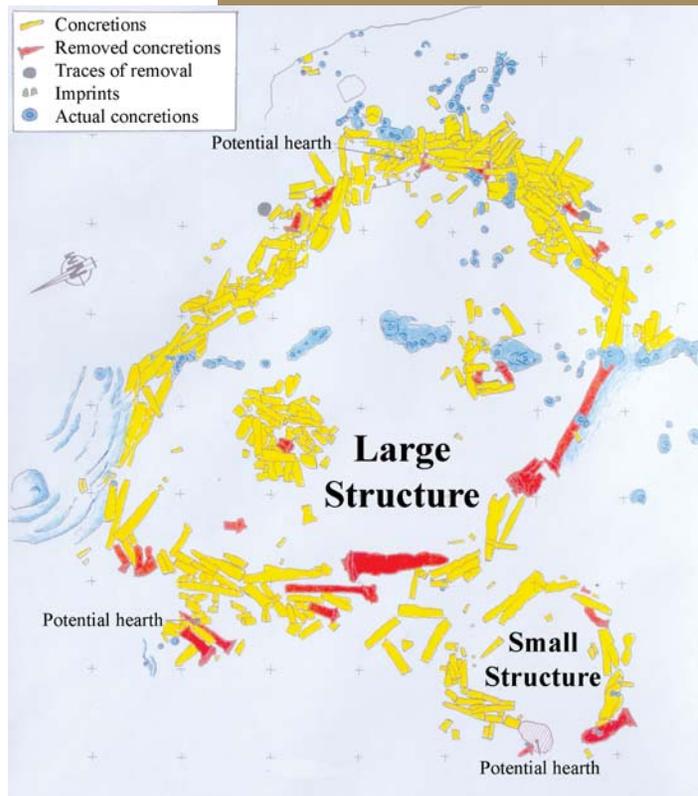
ART IN THE DARK AND OTHER ACTIVITIES DURING THE UPPER PALEOLITHIC

Between 35,000 and 12,000 years ago, during the last Ice Age, modern humans in Europe performed numerous activities

inside caves. Contrary to popular imagination, they did not generally live in deep caves, but instead favored rock shelters like their Neandertal predecessors. Evidence of long stays in the dark zones of deep caves can be found, however, particularly in southwestern France's famous painted caves. The abundance of portable art objects along with wall art discovered there suggests that activities conducted in their depths were closely related to ritual.



Many decorated objects such as this small carving of a young animal have been found in the Cave of Enlène (Montesquieu-Avantès, France).



Stone structures in Bruniquel Cave (Tarn-et-Garonne, France) made of an accumulation of stalactites and stalagmites may indicate ritual behavior on the part of Neandertals.



The ritual use of caves in Europe was exceptional during the Ice Age. Only a few deep caves, approximately 150, bear evidence of wall art. Given the extremely long duration of the Upper Paleolithic, this suggests only sporadic usage. On average, for the whole of Europe, there was one painted cave for every five generations of people. Furthermore, even the most-utilized caves seem to have been in use for only a restricted time by a limited number of people.

Despite the relative scarcity of such occurrences, similar sophisticated forms of art can be found in the deepest parts of caves all over Europe, from Gibraltar to the Ural Mountains. For this tradition to have gone on for so long over such distances, there must have been firmly rooted beliefs passed from generation to generation, as well as numerous contacts between geographically disparate groups. We see this in Paleolithic art that evinces an overall unity. Not only are there similarities among themes (big animals, few humans, many geometric signs) and the techniques used, but also the use of caves themselves.



Above, in Chauvet Cave an ibex has been engraved as if coming out of a crack in the wall. To the left, a hand stencil from the Cosquer Cave (Marseille, France).



A cave bear humerus in Chauvet Cave (Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, France) was stuck halfway into the ground next to a cave bear skull. Another one was stuck in the same way about 10 m away.

People of the Upper Paleolithic consistently used the topography and unique wall surfaces of caves in their art throughout the entire period. They concentrated images around shafts in several caverns. In Niaux, France, most of the images were located at the end of a deep gallery in a place where the voice resounds in a most impressive way. A number of examples of animals are painted or engraved on walls as though they were issuing from or disappearing into recesses. The cave as a place crawling with spirits in animal form, literally at hand, ready to emerge from the walls, is also apparent in the use of natural relief surfaces in the rock. People seem to have believed that animal spirits were there inside the walls, half ready to come out. Perhaps painting the missing outlines to complete them aided humans in accessing the spiritual power of the animals.

The creators of the art explored extensive caves sometimes more than a mile long, such as the French caves at Niaux, Montespan, Rouffignac, and Cussac. They crawled through narrow passages, climbed avens (natural chimneys), crossed precipitous ledges, and even descended shafts several meters

deep. These speleological feats make sense only if they wanted to get to the deepest and farthest parts of the earth—probably to access the hidden powers of the underground rather than achieve exploratory prowess.

SUPERNATURAL PLACES OF POWER

The caves were probably felt to be places of power that could be attained and used in a variety of ways through images, but also by touching and marking the walls to access the supernatural power believed to reside in the cave. One possible procedure was to make finger meanders on the soft rock surfaces. On occasion, they were made by children, for example at Rouffignac and Cosquer, and perhaps also by the uninitiated or the sick—directly exposing them to any supernatural power in the rock. Hand stencils and hand prints could have played a similar role, with the paint facilitating contact through the wall. At La Garma, Spain, and Cougnac, France, the walls were simply touched with fingertips covered in paint.

We have many examples from deep painted caves of deposits of objects in special places that may have been made to placate spirits, and more have been discovered recently at La Garma and Chauvet. Another ritual gesture seems to have involved sticking bits of animal bone into the cracks and fissures of the walls in 17 painted caves in southern France and Spain. At Chauvet, France, bones were found stuck vertically into the ground.

These examples of artistic and apparently ritual behavior testify to an attitude among Europe's Ice Age people toward caves. They desired to reach beyond the ordinary world of the living, to pierce the veil separating it from the supernatural forces close by, and to touch the spirit world either directly or by means of an offering, however symbolic. When sticking bits of bone into fissures or into the ground, it was probably not the object itself that was important, but rather the will to bridge the gap and contact the power in that supernatural world of the dark and bring some of it away to help with the problems of everyday life—much like the Jewish practice of inserting prayers written on bits of paper into the cracks between the stones at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

This supernatural connection has recently been supported by the discovery in 2000 of the first Ice Age burial in a deep painted cave, Cussac Cave in France, which created quite a stir. About a mile long, its abundant art, mostly engravings, is stylistically homogeneous and attributable to the Gravettian period (28,000–23,000 BP). The remains of seven human skeletons were discovered in bear wallows deep inside the cave. A radiocarbon date obtained from a bone (25,120 BP \pm 120 years) suggests that the cave's art and the skeletons could be contemporaneous. Given the otherworldly nature of deep caves and their likely association with the supernatural, it is quite understandable that they might be considered a fitting location in which to deposit the dead.

The data we have point to ritual activities on the part of Ice Age people. That they went underground repeatedly over more than 20

Jean Clottes in front of the Panel of the Horses in Chauvet Cave (France).

millennia to produce art, to perform ceremonies, and to bury their dead reveals the longest lasting religion in the history of the world. Deep caves and their supernatural connections played a major part in that religion. 🏠

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For Further Reading

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