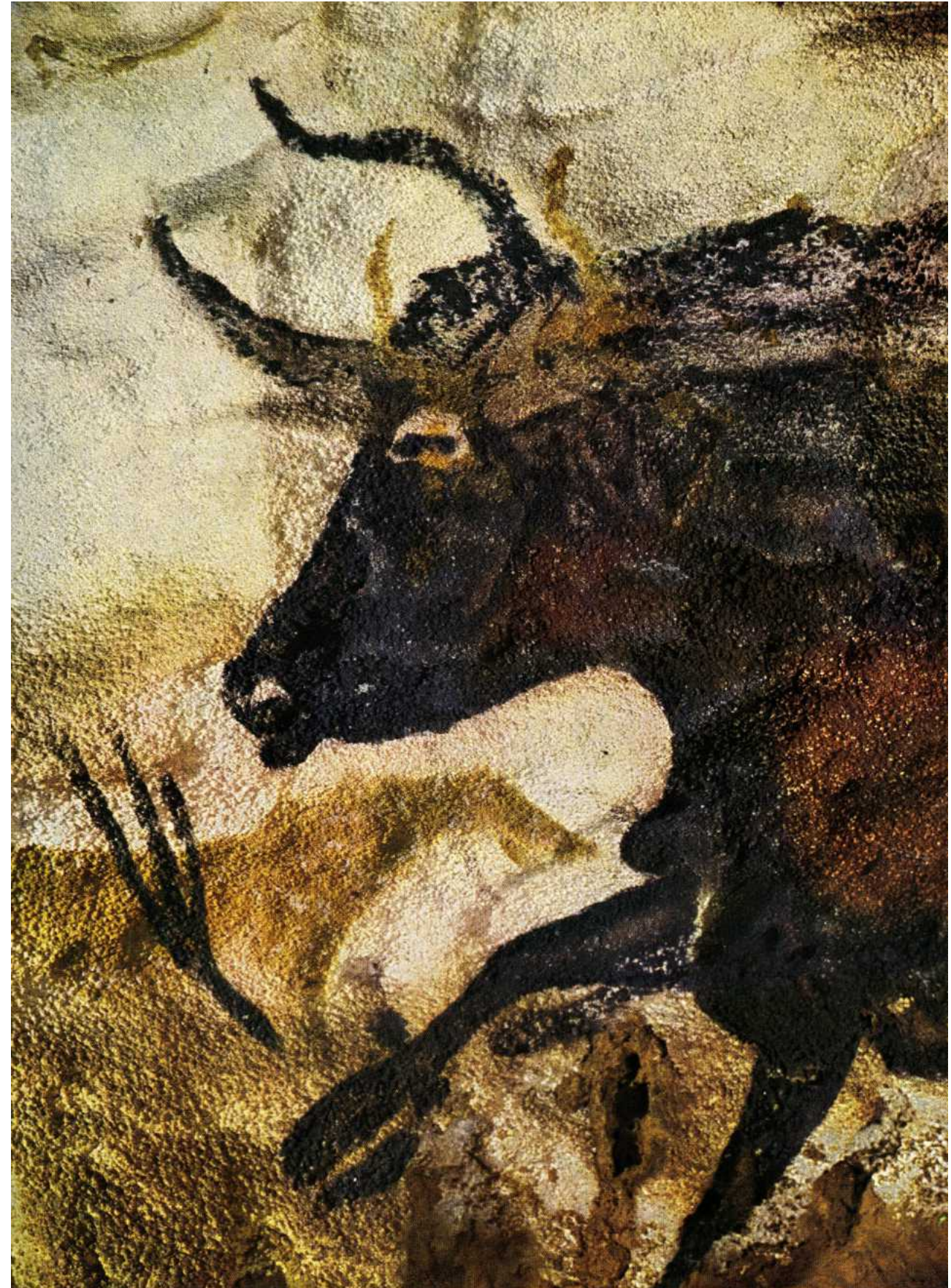


Seeing in the Dark

A History and Speculation on the Painted Caves of the Paleolithic

The great painted caves of the Paleolithic have been called the birthplace of art (Herzog 36). They have been likened to cathedrals and temples (Campbell-1, 58). Archeologists now have had 100 years since the first discovery to theorize what was going on in the minds of the people as they executed these great works in the darkest, most difficult, secret and inaccessible locations. From the beginning, their location seemed to indicate some kind of fertility magic conjuring plentiful herds, or hunting magic facilitating a successful hunt. However, more scientifically grounded archeologists found that the animals depicted were not the same ones whose bones were dug up around the campfires. The modern trend in cave art studies is towards the collection of data and away from over-explaining, where theories derive from discoveries, not parallels to modern hunting societies. While this is invaluable in placing attention on the caves themselves, it does not produce a basic explanation of motivation, anymore than finding a cross would tell the story of Christianity. The paintings and numerous marks do mean something. There is a mythology behind them, but without recourse to the stories, it is not possible to know what message they contain. The best approach to understanding the cave paintings is to study modern primitive hunting societies, especially those that still practice rock painting, and piece together from all sources what we know of the mythologies of the hunting societies. This approach leads to a full consideration of what it meant to live in the Ice Age totally dependent on and surrounded by animals, with the daily requirement that they must be hunted, killed and eaten. It also leads to a difficult area of speculation on the nature of human consciousness and the natural abilities of humans to see visions. The best current explanation for the painted caves is that they were an expression of what anthropologists today call shamanic visions. These visions went hand in hand with the mythological belief that animals have a sacred power of life, and to draw an image of that animal was to share that power. The animals they painted most often – the horse, the bull, the bison – combined power and speed. The paleolithic artists painted in the dark the revered animal spirits they saw in their mind.



Background

Modern man's first appearance in Europe was 45,000 years ago, the beginning of the upper Paleolithic, so-called because it is the uppermost layer in the archeological dig. Paul Bahn states that some of the greatest masterpieces of portable art date to about 30,000 BC, clearly indicating to him that "they must have been preceded by a long tradition in carving materials which has not survived" (85). This has been called the creative explosion, the arrival of modern man in Europe fully formed (Lewis-Williams 40). Neanderthal man had previously inhabited the continent alone for 200,000 years (middle Paleolithic), years marked by very little change and virtually nothing that could be considered art. By 35,000 BCE Neanderthal was nearly gone. Lewis-Williams believes (190) that Neanderthal had a form of consciousness not only lower than modern man, but it had a different type of consciousness, a consciousness essentially incapable of language, art, and belief in a spirit world. Neanderthal and dogs may dream, he says (191), but they do not remember them, communicate them, and make them a part of the waking life.

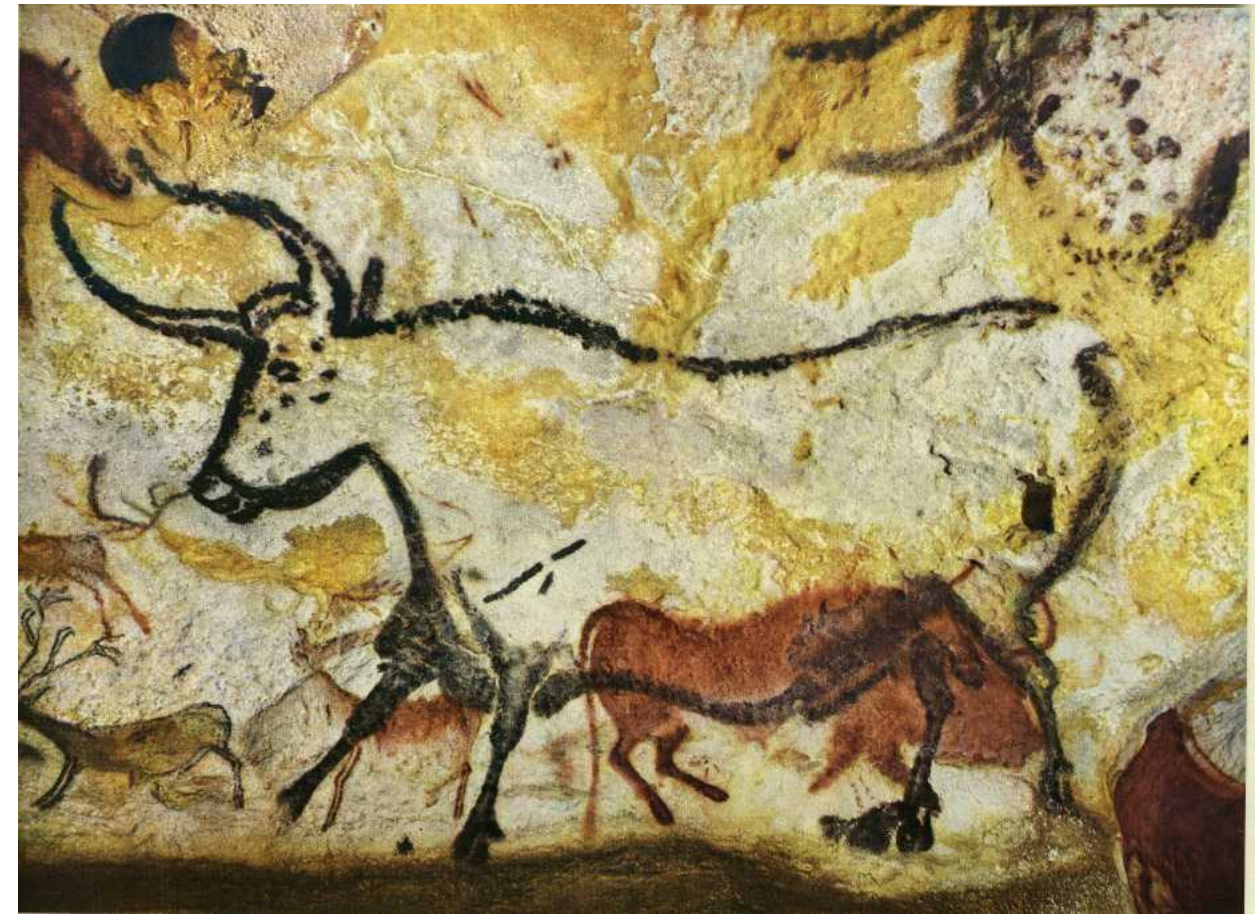
The oldest dated painted cave, also one of the most skillfully done, is Chauvet at 32,000 BCE. It was the exception that broke entirely the perception of a long history of progression of style, resulting in the most spectacular caves being done 12,000 to 20,000 years ago. Most of the painted caves are in a region near southern France and northern Spain. There are today approximately 300 caves identified with Paleolithic art on the walls (Bahn-Fagan 596). The Ice Age climate in the area of the caves was much colder than today, possibly by as much as 10 degrees celsius. In the winter "heavy snow falls would have made human movement difficult, but during the summers an absence of dense forests had the opposite effect: people could travel freely." Vast glaciers to the north locked up so much water that land bridges to the British Isles existed, and the coastlines of the mainland were much farther out. The tundra and open plains were inhabited by "herds of bison, wild horse, aurochs and reindeer, as well as mammoth and woolly rhinoceros, creatures whose thick coats were strikingly adapted to the cold" (Lewis-Williams 74). These herds migrated regular routes and it is assumed hunters followed them.



Art for Art's Sake

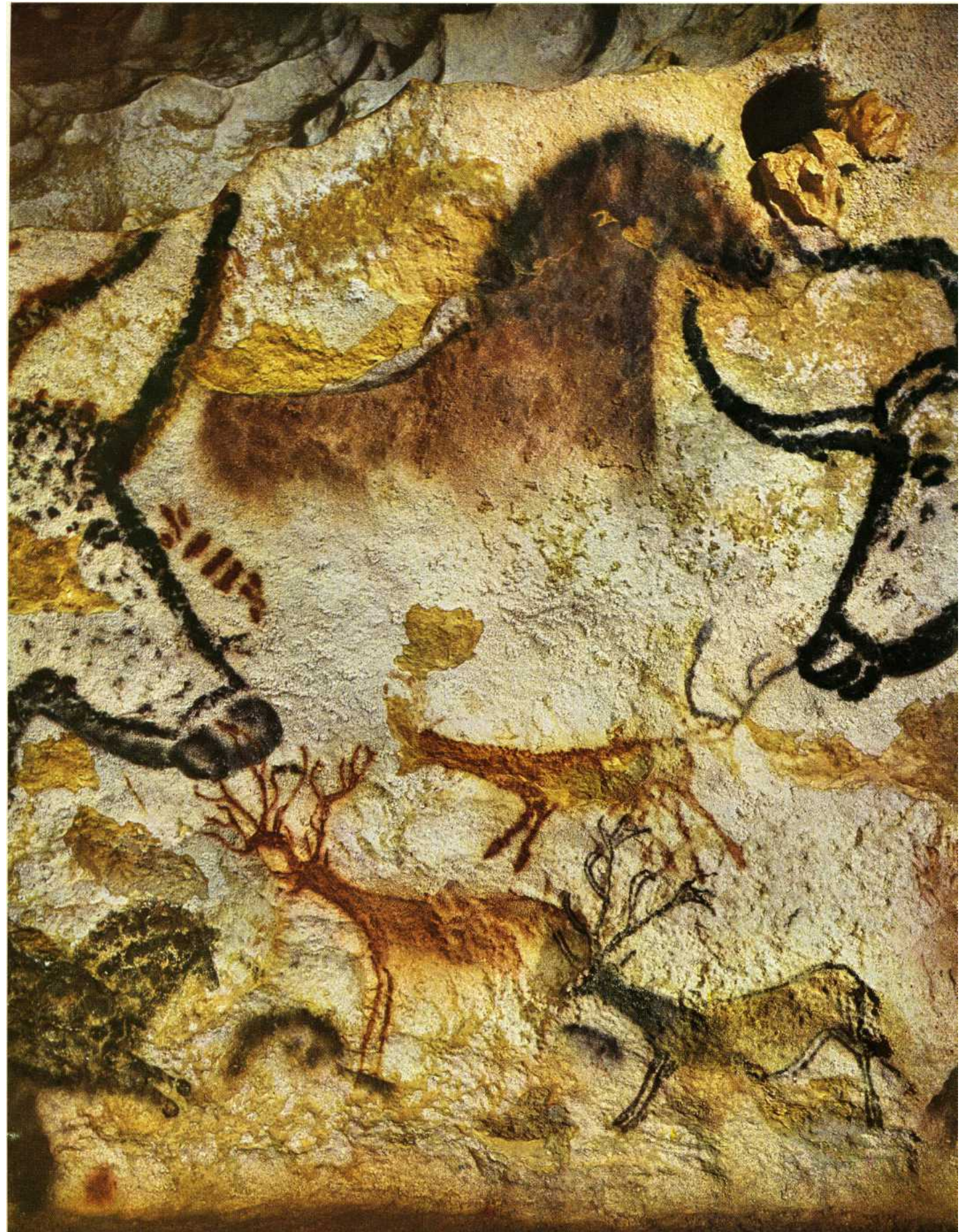
Prior to discovering the painted caves, archeologists in Europe had frequently been digging up portable art from Paleolithic shelters. The objects were usually small carved bone or ivory. Primitive man had no religion, it was thought, and could not conceive of God. The artifacts were mere decoration (Bahn 149). Humans have an inherent trait for appreciation of beauty. Paleolithic people must have hunted abundant animals with relative ease to have time left over to carve designs into their spear throwers (Bahn-Fagan 597) (Lewis-Williams 42). The decorated objects themselves had no deep or symbolic meaning, they were “art for art’s sake.”

With the discovery of the first painted caves, however, the idea that Paleolithic art had no meaning other than aesthetic was no longer sufficient. Altamira, the first cave discovered, was so surprising in its execution that the archeological establishment thought for 20 years it was a hoax. With further discoveries it became clear, as Bahn says, this was not idle doodling: “the restricted range of species depicted, their frequent inaccessibility and their association in caves, the palimpsests (paintings on top of other paintings) and undecorated objects or panels, the enigmatic signs, the many figures which are purposely incomplete, ambiguous or broken, and the caves which were decorated but apparently not inhabited, all combine to suggest that there is complex meaning behind both the subject matter and the location of Paleolithic figures” (Bahn 150).



Hunting Magic

If Paleolithic hunters were anxious about the success of the hunt, perhaps the pictures were a ritual of pre-hunt magic. Pictures of large, healthy animals were drawn to foreshadow a successful hunt. Ethnographic studies indicated that nearly all modern day primitive societies had beliefs in the supernatural (Lewis-Williams 131). This was the view held by Abbe Henri Breuil, who dominated Paleolithic cave studies in the early 20th century. With this theory, all the lines drawn through the animals seemed to be spears. Any discharge from the mouth was blood. Besides paintings of animals, the caves hold even more numerous abstract geometric signs. These were interpreted to be weapons, nets and pits used in the hunt. Images in the dark made magic in the light. Some caves have many small broken tablets with engravings on them. Many images on the walls have masses of lines engraved or painted over them. These were interpreted to be images no longer needed if the hunt was successful, or images destroyed if the hunt had failed. A story of hunting magic could be spun around almost any image in the cave (Bahn 153). The hunting magic theory sounded plausible and was widely adopted, but lost influence as the evidence collected. Researchers could determine the diets of encampments nearest the caves by analyzing the layers, and found the animals depicted had little correlation to the animals hunted. Many sites relied chiefly on reindeer herds for food, but pictures of reindeer were rare, while the horse and bison were the most common. Very few of the pictures actually had lines through them which might indicate spears or injuries. All the pictures of supposed missiles, weapons or blood could just as easily have other meanings. There were no actual scenes of humans hunting animals. Carnivores, which might be a problem and need to be killed, were rarely shown (Bahn 152). Bahn makes an interesting point – excavations of much later Roman sites show pottery decorated with wild species while bones indicate nearly all meat from domestic animals (157). The hunting magic theory “fitted in well with what people in Europe knew about witchcraft” (Lewis-Williams 47), but it was too simple to explain all the complex images.



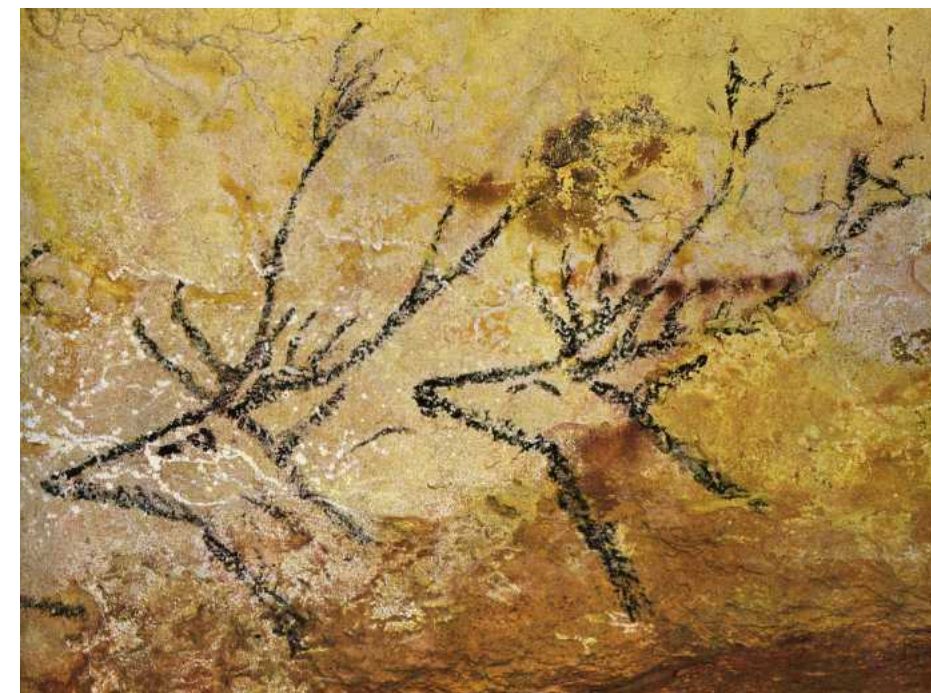
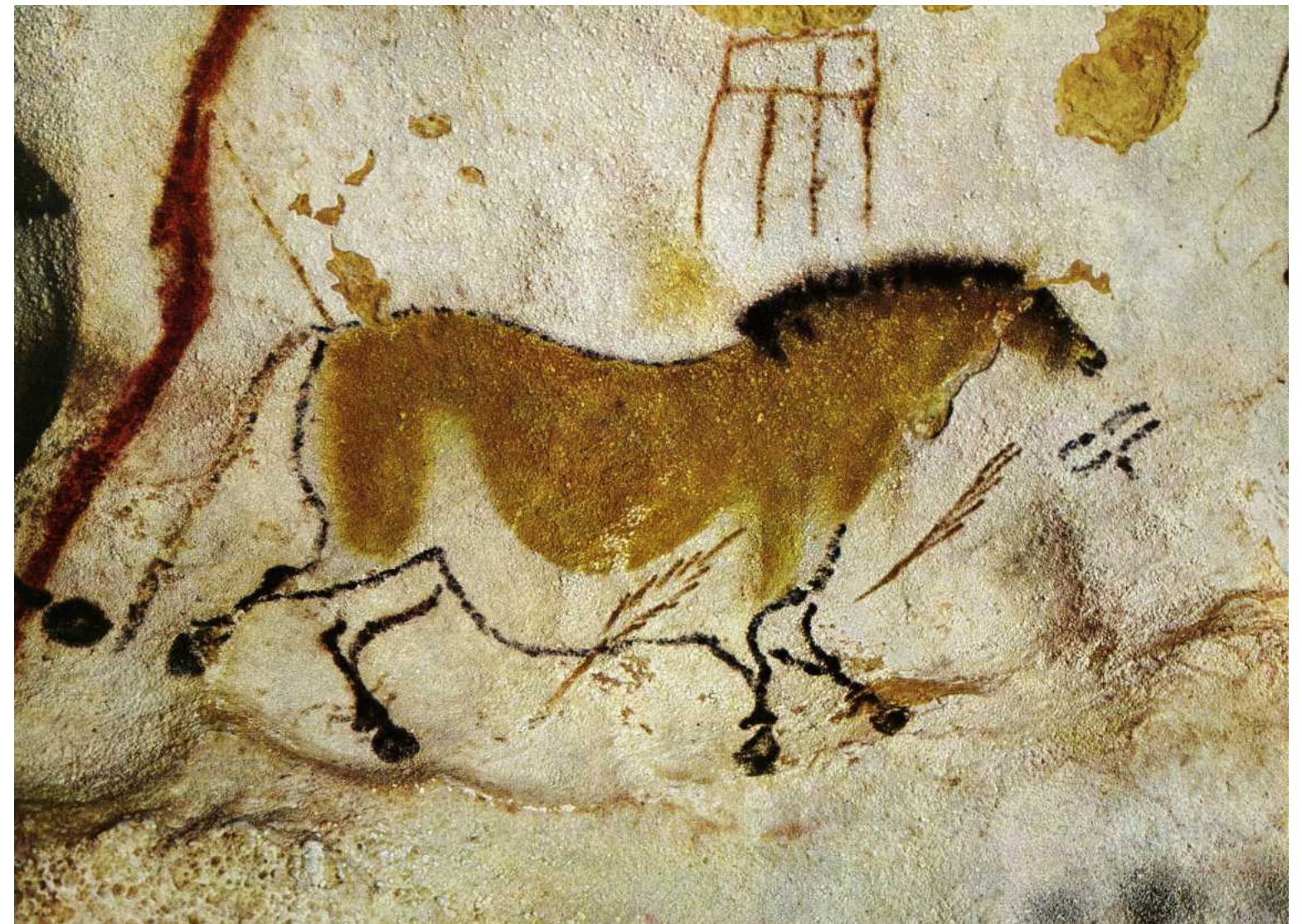
Andre Leroi-Gourhan's dualism

Andre Leroi-Gourhan brought an attitude of scientific analysis to the study of Paleolithic cave art that had been missing. He began amassing statistical data on the animals depicted, and tried to analyze the cave as a complete manuscript, not as a collection of single images. Breuil, his predecessor, was an illustrator and explainer who tended to see each image in isolation. In fact, there are not many obvious scenes or groups. Animals are placed right next to each other at different scales and there is never a groundline or background. Leroi-Gourhan though began to see some patterns. He became convinced that there was often a main gallery showing a pair of animals, usually a horse and a bison, but a horse and a bull (a male auroch – an extinct ancestor of modern cattle) was also common. The animals were symbols, not to be read with intuitive explanations of “magic” or with reference to the beliefs of modern tribes, but with literal analysis of species, number and location.

“Leroi-Gourhan eventually divided animal figures into four groups. Group A was the horse, which constitutes about 30% of all parietal (permanent – cave wall as opposed to portable) animals; B was the bison and aurochs, also 30%; C was animals such as deer, ibex and mammoth, another 30%; D, the final 10%, comprised the rarer animals such as bears, felines and rhinos...He also divided caves into entrance zones, central zones, and side chambers and dark ends. About 90% of A and B were concentrated on the main panels in the central areas, the majority of C figures were near the entrance... while D animals clustered in the more remote zones” (Bahn 167).

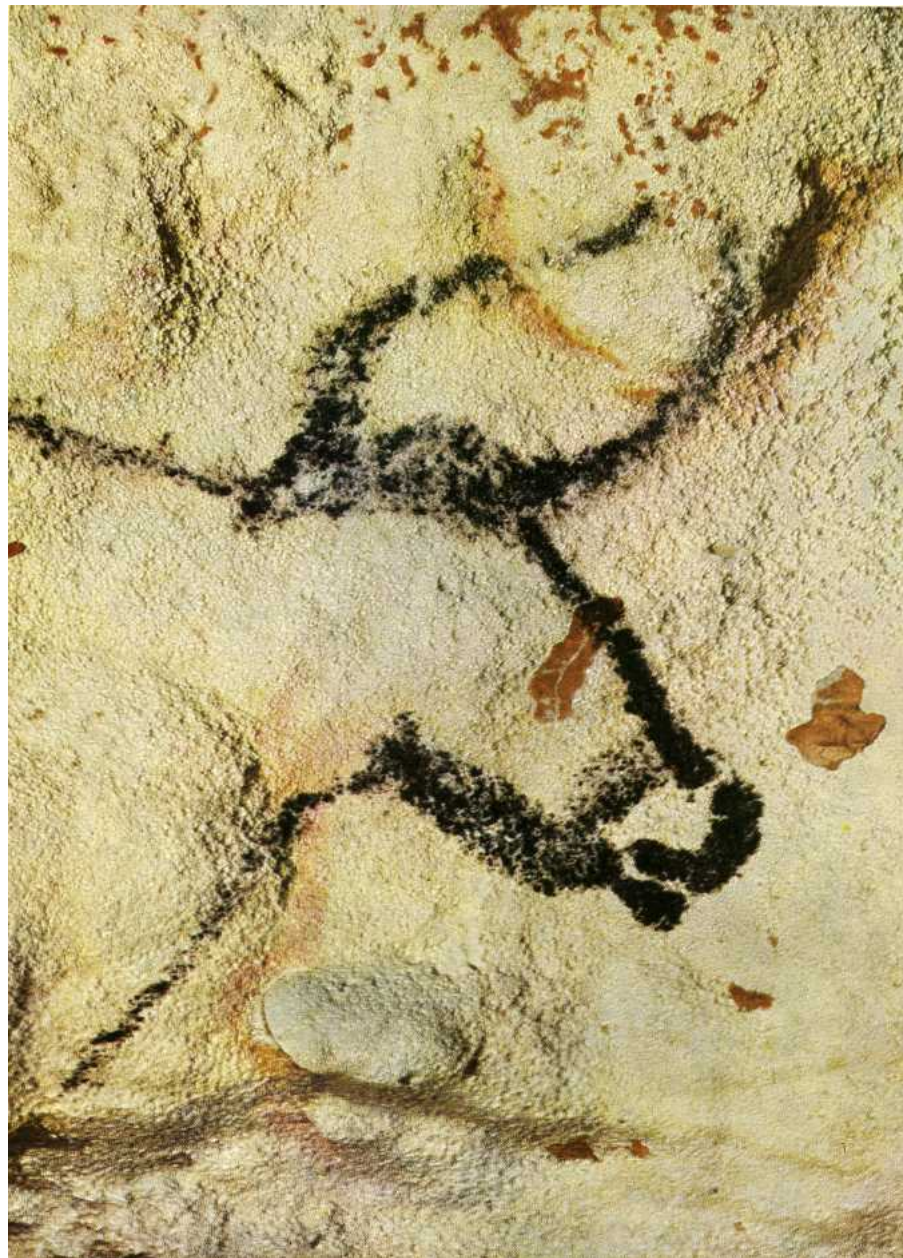
Leroi-Gourhan saw the central pair as a “mythogram” – an unknown but definite message implicitly stating a world-view of duality – and extended this to the even more enigmatic signs. His most ambitious theory was to divide all animals and the abundant signs into two classifications, male and female. He saw signs as either being wide, a vulva, or being thin, a penis.

Modern archeologists believe he went too far. The theory that all animals and signs somehow represented a male-female duality has been almost entirely rejected. Paleolithic cave art encompasses 20,000 years, too long for a single canon to hold. The caves themselves are unique. They do not always have a known entrance and an obvious central area. There are regional differences in animals shown and style. In the end, his theories were contradicted by actual data. Nevertheless, caves do have some remarkable similarities in the style and limited number of species. His ambitious approach to catalog all known caves suggests to many the beginning of real science. “His results are too erroneous to be fully accepted, but also too revelatory to be dismissed. He found order and repeated associations, but not a universally applicable formula”(Bahn 173).



Archeological Agnosticism

Despite the failure to uncover the mythology of the Paleolithic by statistically analyzing the images of the cave, Leroi-Gourhan, according to Bahn, made it clear that the images do represent a metaphysical concept and they do not have a simple or obvious meaning (173). Leroi-Gourhan was also important, says Bahn, for putting aside “the traditional approach of compilation, intuitive and ethnographic explanation”(176), in other words, for putting forward testable hypotheses, not those derived from field studies of modern hunting societies or folklore. For Bahn, using ethnographic analogies to reach for an all-embracing theory is bad science. “The current emphasis is on total recording of the art”(191). Theory should not precede data. “Without informants, we can use the art only as a source of hypotheses, never as a confirmation of them; without the artists, our chances of correctly interpreting the content and meaning of a decorated cave are very slight – and how would we know if we were right or not?”(193). Bahn’s point is well taken if the interpretation of the past is not to be allowed except under the rules of rational science, but he admits that “the most recent work on Paleolithic art is splintering in many directions” (Fagan-Bahn 598).



Case Study – the San of South Africa

Modern hunting people, even those who paint on rocks, are not frozen replicas of Paleolithic man, as David Lewis-Williams acknowledges in his influential book *The Mind in the Cave*, but without the testimony of hunting societies, modern archeologists are just guessing, mostly from their own biases. Modern hunting societies are the closest thing we have to being Bahn's informants.

Lewis-Williams uses the San of South Africa as a case study (136). The San are a primitive tribe with both rock painting and shamanic traditions, and a long history of cooperation with researchers. The central religious event to the San was a circular dance, attended by the entire tribe, around a fire, with women sitting, clapping and singing, and men dancing around the women. This went on for hours while many men and women would fall into trance. While in trance, the man or woman would transform into a lion or some other animal. God has given potency, a kind of electricity, to both humans and the greater animals. Up to half the men and a third of the women have the ability to go into trance and have visions. Lewis translates the San word for people with this ability as Shaman. Through trance, the San Shaman enter the other world (138).

“In deep trance, the shamans' spirits are believed to leave their bodies through the top of the head. They may then travel to other parts of the country to find out how friends and relatives are faring, or they may go to God's house, where they plead for the lives of the sick.(141)”

In the late 1800's when the ethnographic studies on the San began, they were still living the lives of hunters, still painting on the rock walls of Southern Africa, not what they saw around them in the day, but what they saw in trance. The rock walls not only give the vision to ordinary people, “they are the ‘veil’ between the material and spiritual realms”(162). The drawings themselves carried the potency of the vision. Shamans could capture a rain-animal, a mythical creature, under a water hole, take it into the sky, butcher it and spread its blood and milk as rain, fertilizing the world, then paint the scene for all to see (Lewis-Williams 149). Even the paint itself was an object of power. The blood of an eland, the largest antelope and the most potent animal master to the San, was mixed with red paint (159). A person could absorb potency not only by looking at the painting but by putting his hand on it (160).

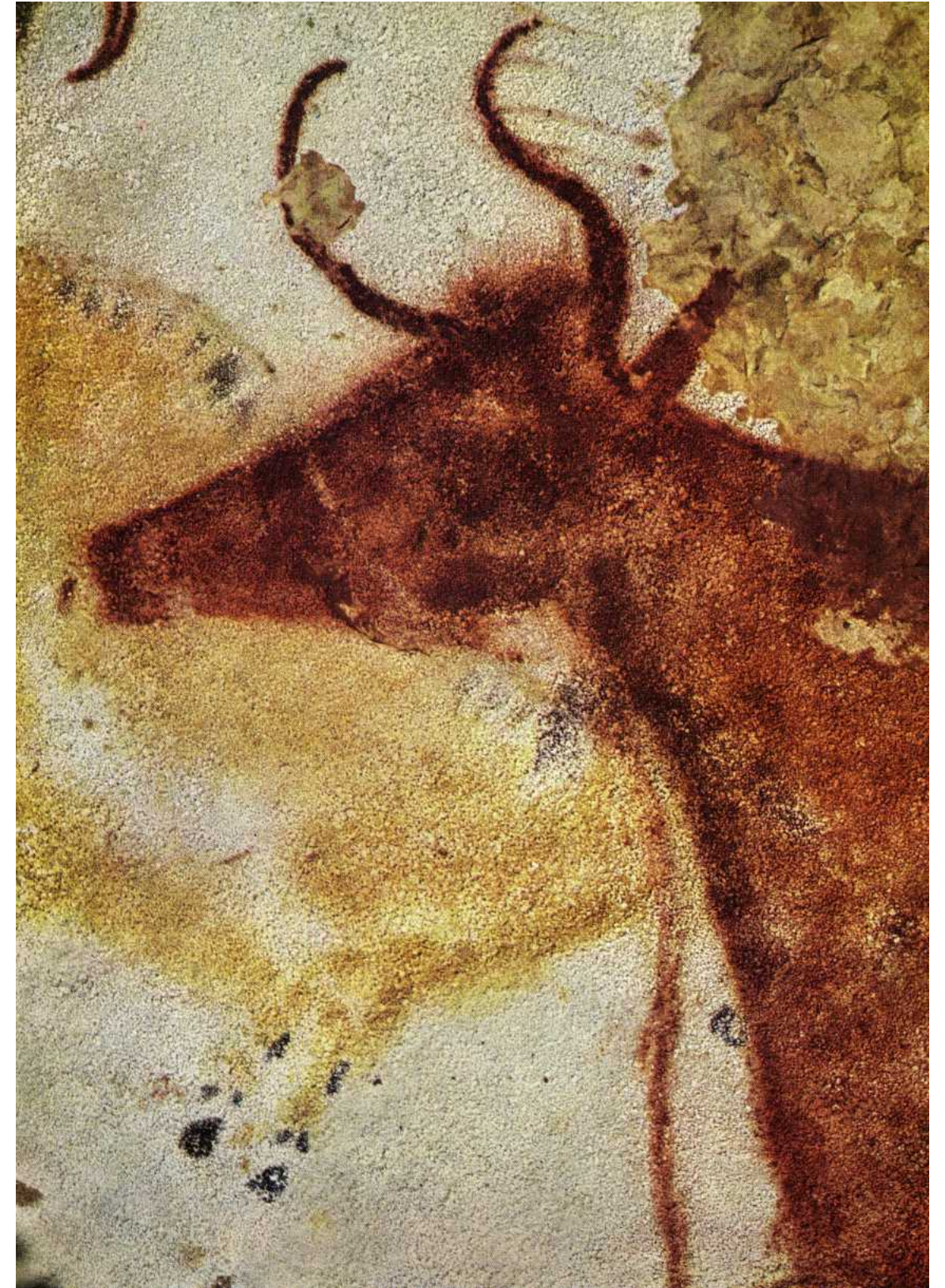


Case Study – the San of South Africa

Modern researchers have a “consciousness of rationality” (111), Lewis-Williams argues, because that is what they value, but it causes them to give little consideration to the existence and universality of altered states of consciousness. Other societies have not had this bias, even Medieval society trusted messages from God, and rationality is not necessarily what is required to create visual images. Nearly every culture reports some form of altered state (131). Native people believe these alternative inward realities may be more real than the world of daily life (132). Lewis-Williams quotes Weston La Barre on altered states: “...hallucination, trance, possession, vision, sensory deprivation and especially the dream state – apart from their cultural contexts and symbolism - are essentially the same psychic states found everywhere among mankind... shamanism or direct contact with the supernatural in these states... is the de facto source of all revelation, and ultimately of all religions”(135). In modern studies, subjects who are put into a sound proof dark condition report hallucinations after a few hours (124). Traditional methods of inducing altered states include prolonged rhythmic drumming, flashing lights, sustained rhythmic dancing, as well as fatigue, pain, fasting and hallucinogenic plants. Lewis-Williams is an atheist and a materialist. Whatever is taking place, he believes, it is taking place firmly within the skull and it is entirely an electro-chemical process. Nevertheless, inward visions, he calls them entoptic states, others call them phosphenes, are universal among mankind. His theory is that Paleolithic man was neurologically identical to ourselves (205). Dreams prove that everyone has the ability to hallucinate, he says, and accounts for the worldwide similarity of shamanic visions. Dots, zigzags, shimmering light, wavy threads are often seen in the beginning of a trance. People who have migraine headaches see similar structures. These types of simple hallucinations, he believes, could explain some of the non-figurative signs in the caves, the geometric figures (207).

Lewis believes that for Paleolithic man, entering the caves was not merely metaphoric or symbolic but that it was virtually the same thing as going into trance. The underworld was the spirit world. Having a vision underground was a validation of their world view (209). Many shamans believe that spirit animals mingle with herds of real animals (196). Similarly, cave artists often used natural rock features as features of animals they painted. Bison could be painted sideways or upside down if a bulge in the rock could be used to represent its back (220). A rock that looks like a horse’s head simply has eyes and a mouth drawn. The navel of the Venus of Willendorf (a well known small carving) is a natural feature of the rock in which it is carved. (If it is a fertility symbol, the navel would be the connection with the mother of the mother.) The animals are seen and released from the rock (211). Many animals are unfinished – possibly only enough is drawn to represent the vision. They often have no hooves. They seem to float on the walls. They lay over each other. Lewis believes the images were not so much taken underground, they were found there (210).

In the caves, often in notable locations, there are hybrid man-animal images that are usually referred to as sorcerers. Primitive hunting societies identify with certain animals. They put on animal masks in their rites and act the part. “Transformation into an animal is an integral part of shamanism” (Lewis-Williams 202). Shamans in trance merge with animal spirits and become animal-men. Master-animals are used as messengers of a higher spirit. When the Pawnee went into solitude on his vision quest, it was “Tirawa (God)... who sent his message though the animal. He never spoke to man himself, but gave his command to beast or bird” (Campbell-1, 18).



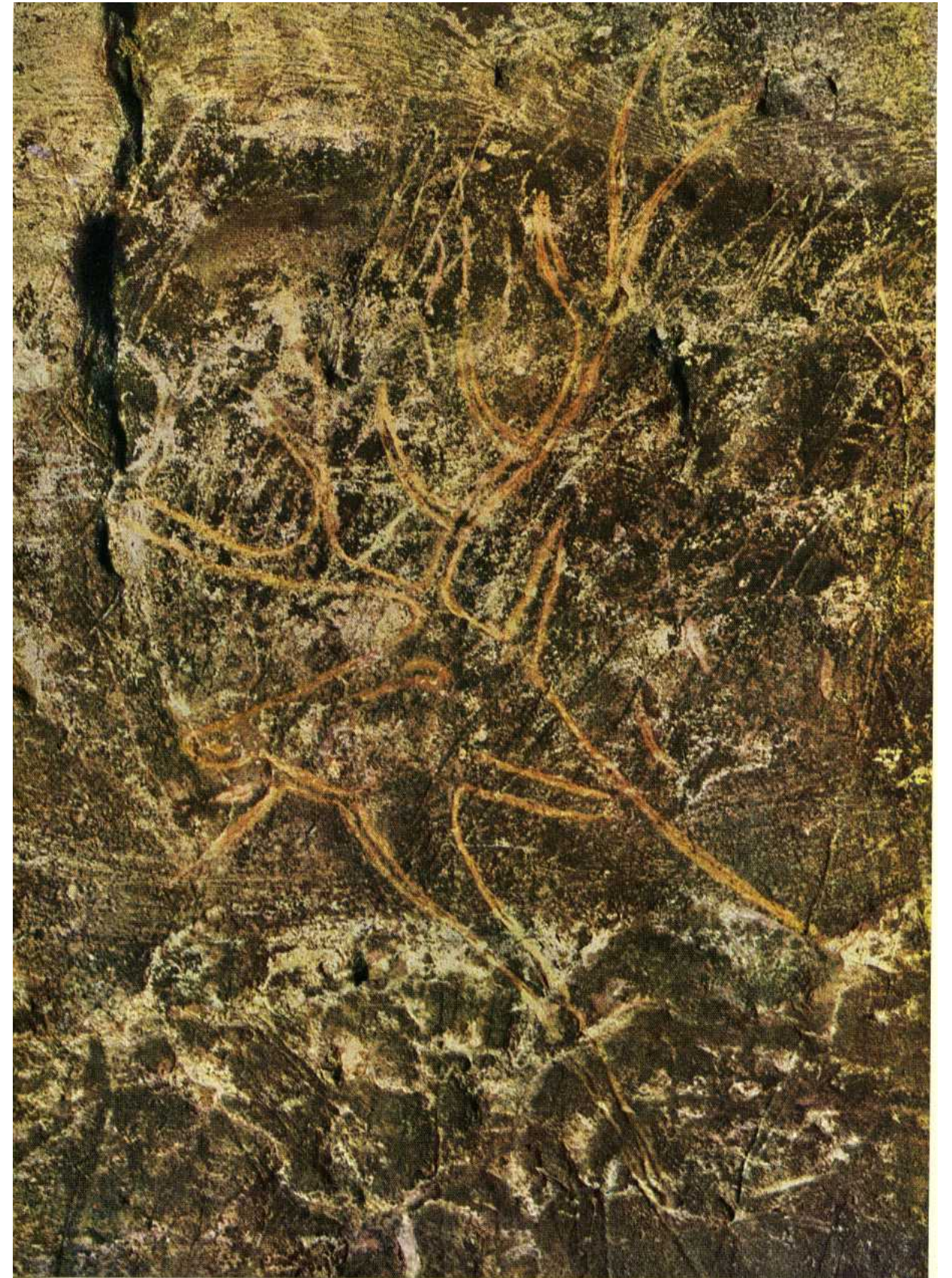
The Sacred Kill

Joseph Campbell is a mythologist who studied the beliefs and stories of people all over the world. In looking for universal themes, he made a distinction between elementary forms and the local variations. Hunting people everywhere had a similar hunting mythology.

“The total worth of the community of Paleolithic man in Europe was derived from the animal world. They ate nothing but meat. The clothes they wore and the lodges they lived in were made of animal skin. Every day was killing. The winning of the food was the work of the male. In these hunter societies the aggressive masculine principle was predominant. These were nomadic, masculine oriented, warrior people, killing animals every day, living in blood.”

“A mythology comes into being to protect the psyche from the impact of what it is doing. The mythology of all these races is based on the idea that there is no death. The individual comes and goes. When you kill him all you do is take his body off. His life goes back. The blood must be poured back into the ground. The life is in the blood, the earth is the womb, and the animal will be back again. This is a basic hunting rite of all peoples. Similarly the individual human is everlasting. This is a mythology of no death with great stress on the individual as an eternally enduring creature and great stress on the individual's power. This is a culture of shamans and warriors.”(Campbell, “Mythology”)

Reconciling this fundamental fact, the necessity of death, the need to kill and eat, the foreknowledge of death, is the foundation of religious thought. Campbell says, “the mystery of death and the mind's requirement to come to terms with it have been everywhere the prime inspiration of spiritual inquiry and practice... the killing and eating of other living beings is the one daily requirement of all human, as well as animal life” (Campbell-2, xiv). In the modern religions of the West, God is not in the creation, but for primitive people, the landscape and the animals are spiritual objects. This would apply also to the animals killed. A way of thinking is developed in which the animal is a willing and necessary sacrifice, but the spirit of the animal must return for another hunt. It is the self-sacrifice of the animal, and the taking of the animal with neither fear nor anxiety, that is the mythology of the hunting tribes. If done correctly, the animal will be back next year.



The Initiation of the Boy into the Society of Men

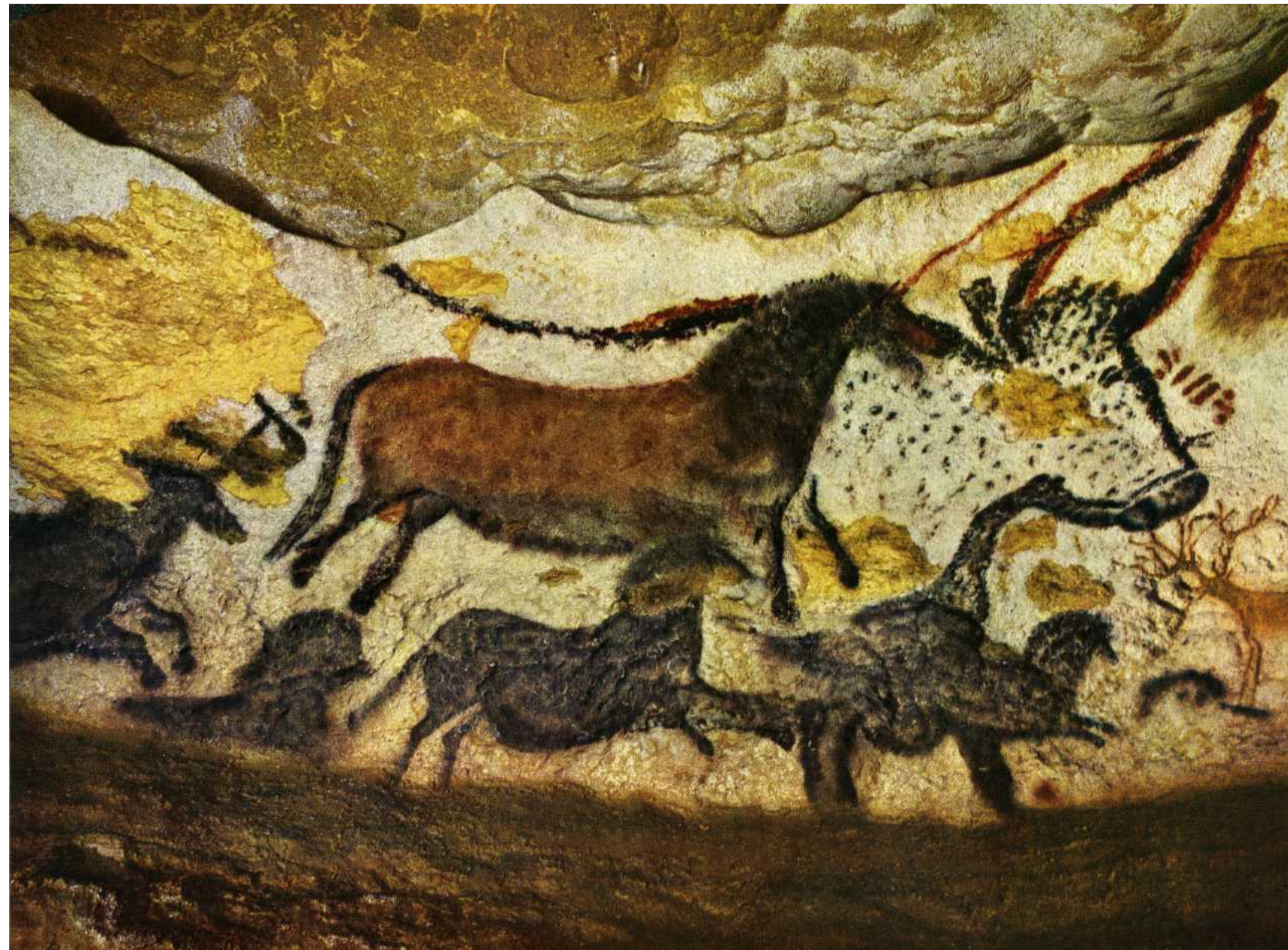
In all the hunting cultures, Campbell maintains, one of the most important rites is the initiation of boys into manhood. The society requires a type of man who knows how to act and who knows what the tribe knows. This was most important among societies that existed on the thin margin of survival, without the written word. These rites have been observed in Australian bushmen among others where they are quite fierce and go beyond mere ritual. They change the boy's mind and body. Besides cutting and marking the body, they involve isolation, disorientation, fear and imparting the founding myths of the tribe. The primary message Paleolithic man would have been handing down to the generations was the mythology of the hunt and the kill (Campbell-2, xiii).

Bahn summarizes the case for the cave as a place of initiation:

“It has long been assumed that cave-art has much to do with the initiation of young members of the group..the secrecy and darkness involved in a visit to them must have been a memorable experience for any initiate. Quite apart from the physical difficulties encountered in some caves, whether rock formations, flowing water or holes to crawl through, there is the utter blackness, the total silence, the loss of sense of direction in the often labyrinthine passages, the change of temperature, and the frequent sense of claustrophobia. The fear of being abandoned, lost and alone in the dark, would have concentrated the mind wonderfully and prepared the apprehensive initiate for anything. Similar techniques are still in use today for purposes such as brainwashing or debriefing...The technique of sensory deprivation also concentrates the mind. A cave would affect all the senses of scared initiates and leave them vulnerable to indoctrination“ (Bahn 186-188).



The modern San ethnographers uncovered testimony that rock art of the most admired and revered animals was a way of mystically connecting with the spiritual power the animals possessed. It's hard for moderns to set aside all their training and beliefs to imagine a new world where language, art and religion have no precedent, where large, fast, powerful animals are the most fascinating beings in all the world. Killing animals and eating them, according to our best information, led to a mythology of reverence for animals, of rebirth, but also a belief that humans and animals shared the same life power. The animal flesh became human flesh. The animal spirit was the human spirit. When flesh died, it merged into the earth. Going underground to see and paint the animal spirits down there may have taken a similar kind of courage it took to kill a mammoth. Shamans, which in Paleolithic times may have been anybody, were dreaming themselves into the mystery and bringing part of it back. The caves were the parchment, may have been the place of awakened visions. The painted animals are not so much a message as they are a direct perception of the force of life. In a sense we can say the Paleolithic is no longer pre-historic, because the people left a record. We have trouble reading it, but all one has to do is look at the paintings to appreciate the work of our ancestors who left these images of their own profound amazement. Whatever the motivation, everyone now agrees, the result was art.



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