

PREHISTORIC CAVE ART AS A COMMUNICATION SYMBOL

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Abstract: With an emphasis on its implications for comprehending early human intellect, communication, and creativity, this article examines the origins, evolution, and cultural relevance of prehistoric cave art. The article provides data about famous finds, such as Altamira in Spain and Lascaux in France. These paintings of animals, people, and abstract symbols, frequently found in acoustically resonant cave chambers, suggest functions ranging from ceremonial and storytelling to marking territory and perhaps even early forms of communication. The connection between the origins of language and cave art is also examined in the work.

Keywords: cave paintings, symbols, lascaux, altamira, conservation of cave art.

Introduction

In archaeology, cave paintings are a form of parietal art (which category also includes petroglyphs or engravings) found on the walls or ceilings of caves. Much of the archaeological and anthropological work in this area has focused on the motivations for creating these artworks. However, the focus of this brief overview is on what cave paintings teach us about the origins of human language. One of the most remarkable examples of prehistoric art that has been discovered to date can be found in the Lascaux cave.

The cave was discovered by four teenage boys in September 1940 and was first studied by the French archaeologist Henri Breuil.[1] It consists of several steep galleries, each



magnificently decorated with engraved, drawn, and painted figures—approximately 600 painted and drawn animals and symbols, along with nearly 1,500 engravings. Among the most remarkable images are four huge aurochs, their horns depicted in a “twisted perspective”; a curious two-horned animal (misleadingly nicknamed the “unicorn”), possibly intended as a mythical creature; red deer with fantastic antlers; numerous horses; the heads and necks of several stags, which appear to be swimming across a river; a series of six felines; two male

bison; and a rare narrative composition at the bottom of a shaft, which has been variously interpreted as a hunting accident or as a shamanistic scene.

The cave contains nearly 2,000 figures, which can be grouped into three main categories - animals, human figures, and abstract signs. Additionally, the bulls appear to be in motion. There are no images of reindeer, even though that was the principal source of food for the artists. Cave art is better known for its graceful horses and ghostly handprints, there are thousands of nonfigurative or abstract marks that researchers have begun studying only in the past few decades. In a study published Jan. 5 in the *Cambridge Archaeology Journal*, a team of scholars suggests that these seemingly abstract dots and lines, when positioned near animal imagery, actually represent a sophisticated writing system that explains early humans' understanding of the mating and birthing seasons of important local species. Early humans in Europe were hunter-gatherers who ate a lot of meat from species such as horses, deer, and bison. When those animals came together seasonally in herds, they would have been vulnerable to slaughter by humans. "It follows that knowledge of the timing of migrations, mating, and birthing would be a central concern to Upper Paleolithic behavior," study first author Bennett Bacon, an independent researcher and furniture conservator based in London, and colleagues wrote in their study. "We hypothesize that sequences are conveying information about their associated animal taxa in units of months," they wrote, noting that spring, "with its obvious signals of the end of winter and corresponding faunal migrations to breeding grounds, would have provided an obvious, if regionally differing, point of origin for the lunar calendar." [2] The researchers plan to expand on their work. Bacon told *Live Science* in an email: "Rather than searching for the meaning of individual signs, what we are looking for is the linguistic and cognitive bases that underpin the 'writing' system." Nowell agreed with the study authors that the symbols were likely not randomly chosen and that the lines and dots may represent numbers. Even if the authors are correct, she noted, that leaves 90% of the signs without any known meaning. "There is still a lot about graphic communication in the Paleolithic that we do not understand," Nowell said.



The cave, discovered by a hunter in 1868, was visited in 1876 by Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola, a local nobleman. The roof of the chamber is covered with paintings and engravings, often in combination—for example, the bison figures that dominate were first engraved and then painted. Numerous additional engravings in this chamber include eight anthropomorphic figures, some handprints, and hand stencils. The other galleries of the cave contain a variety of black-painted and engraved figures. They are inscribed as exceptional testimonies to a cultural tradition and as outstanding illustrations of a significant stage in human history.

One of the earliest examples of visual storytelling is cave painting, which was a way for prehistoric people to express their creativity, communicate, and document events. These old drawings offer priceless insights into the thoughts and lives of our ancestors and are more than

just remnants of prehistoric art. You can discover tales of survival, rituals, and the daily lives of people from tens of thousands of years ago by looking at these ancient artworks. Animals, people, and abstract patterns are frequently shown in cave paintings. They are believed to be tools for telling stories, possibly documenting migrations, hunts, or other group experiences. These visual narratives can provide information about early humans' daily routines and surroundings, pointing to a mode of documentation and communication that existed long before writing.

Some specific features of cave art may provide clues about how our symbolic, multifaceted language capabilities evolved, according to a new paper co-authored by MIT linguist Shigeru Miyagawa. A key to this idea is that cave art is often located in acoustic 'hot spots' where sound echoes strongly. Those drawings are located in deeper, harder-to-access parts of caves, indicating that acoustics was a principal reason for the placement of drawings within caves. The drawings, in turn, may represent the sounds that early humans generated in those spots.

In the new paper, this convergence of sound and drawing is referred to as 'cross-modality information transfer', a convergence of auditory information and visual art that, the authors write, "allowed early humans to enhance their ability to convey symbolic thinking." The combination of sounds and images is one of the things that characterizes human language today, along with its symbolic aspect and its ability to generate infinite new sentences. Miyagawa, a professor of linguistics and the Kochi-Manjiro Professor of Japanese Language and Culture at MIT, explains that "Cave art was part of the package deal in terms of how homo sapiens came to have this very high-level cognitive processing. The advent of language in human history is unclear. Our species is estimated to be about 200,000 years old. Human language is often considered to be at least 100,000 years old. Miyagawa explains that "It's very difficult to try to understand how human language itself appeared in evolution. We don't know 99.9999 percent of what was going on back then. There's this idea that language doesn't fossilize, and it's true, but maybe in these artifacts, we can see some of the beginnings of homo sapiens as symbolic beings."

But what exactly was going on in caves where people made noise and rendered things on walls? Some scholars have suggested that acoustic 'hot spots' in caves were used to make noises that replicate hoofbeats, for instance; some 90 percent of cave drawings involve hoofed animals. These drawings could represent stories or the accumulation of knowledge, or they could have been part of rituals.

In any of these scenarios, Miyagawa suggests, cave art displays properties of language in that "you have action, objects, and modification." This parallels some of the universal features of human language — verbs, nouns, and adjectives — and Miyagawa suggests that "acoustically based cave art must have had a hand in forming our cognitive symbolic mind." The ideas proposed by Miyagawa, Lesure, and Nobrega merely outline a working hypothesis, which is intended to spur additional thinking about language's origins and point toward new research questions. For Miyagawa, the bottom line is "art is not just marginal to our culture, but central to the formation of our cognitive abilities."

In contrast to the detailed portrayal of animals, human figures in cave paintings are often depicted in a more stylised or symbolic form. Moreover, you'll encounter hand stencils, which could signify ownership, identity, or a form of self-expression. Hunting scenes found in cave art often have both humans and animals, showcasing the interaction between them. Certain repetitive patterns may also appear alongside these figures, hinting at a possible symbolic or communicative purpose, but their exact meanings are still debated.

Previously overlooked patterns in the cave art of southern France and Spain suggest that man might have learned written communication 25,000 years earlier than was previously thought. Symbols are frequently found in cave art, which are separate from the representation of animals such as horses and bison. Ice Age caves contain more than twice as many abstract signs as animal images. According to recent research by Genevieve von Petzinger, this mysterious type of cave art may be the earliest known pictorial language. Some are gathered in groups, many appear in ones or twos, while others are mixed in with the caves' images of animals. The abstract signs include triangles, squares, full circles, semicircles, open angles, crosses, and groups of dots. Others demonstrate more complexity: drawings of hands with distorted fingers (known as negative hands); rows of parallel lines (called finger flutings); diagrams of branch-like symbols known as penniforms, or little sketches of hut-like entities called tectiforms. In total, 26 specific signs are deployed repeatedly in these caves, created in the millennia when Europe descended into – and emerged from – the last great Ice Age. Von Petzinger argues that the symbols indicate that our ancestors moved from realistic representations of ideas, like beautiful images of bison and mammoths, to symbolic representation and are a code painted onto rock by Cro-Magnon people, who inhabited Europe 30,000 years ago. Some of these symbols are abstract and difficult to interpret, while others are more straightforward. One of the most common symbols in cave art is the handprint. Handprints are found in many caves around the world, and they are often accompanied by other symbols. Other common symbols in cave art include circles, spirals, and dots. These symbols are often repeated and arranged in patterns, which suggests that they had some sort of meaning for early humans. The meaning of these symbols is not always clear, but some researchers believe that they may have had religious or spiritual significance. The iconography in cave art is diverse and varied. Animals were an important subject in cave art, and they were often depicted in motion. Symbols and signs were also common in cave art, and they may have had religious or spiritual significance.

Prehistoric cave painting is not just old decoration; it is a very early example of symbolic communication and it shows the cognitive abilities as well as the cultural refinement of our ancestors. This symbolism in the representation of images was the beginning of the gradual development of language, storytelling, and cultural transmission—the main ideas of human civilization. Examining cave art along with language science is very important since it allows us to recognize the role of communication and symbolic representations in the formation of the human experience.

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