

Shamans breathe life into cave art

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Les Chamanes De La Préhistoire
Jean Clottes and
David Lewis-Williams
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LES CHAMANES De La Préhistoire (The Shamans Of Prehistory) is a book that is bound to cause controversy. It advances new solutions to questions that have been debated for more than 100 years: why did our distant ancestors leave drawings in deep, pitch-dark caves? What do the rock paintings mean?

The authors bring together their areas of specialised knowledge. Jean Clottes is a distinguished French prehistorian and expert on cave art. The South African archaeologist David Lewis-Williams has spent years studying the art and beliefs of the Bushmen, one of the remaining hunter-gatherer communities in the world.

What prompted the authors to reinterpret prehistoric art was a series of recent discoveries, in particular the Cosquer and Chauvet caves in France and the Foz Côa site in Portugal, which have undermined some of the best-established theories on the subject.

The earliest explanation of rock paintings and carvings was straightforward: they had no purpose other than the decoration of prehistoric "homes". The authority who in 1864 wrote that "the leisure of the easy life gives birth to art" clearly believed in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of the "noble savage".

At the turn of the century, the anachronistic theory of art for art's sake was abandoned, for it failed to explain why paintings were executed in deep meandering caves, far from areas of habitation. Prehistorians such as Salomon Reinach began to promote the idea of totemism.

Ethnological research showed there might be a correlation between human groups and animal or vegetable species. Such groups were shipped and identified with their totem. But that did not explain why animals were often depicted with



Animal magic... a bison in the Chauvet caves, an image frequently represented in wall paintings

wounds caused by projectiles. Surely that was incompatible with the respect due to a totem?

Reinach himself eventually abandoned his explanation and devised the theory of the "magic of hunting". Primitive man thought that certain practices could affect the course of events. Representing an animal was a way of dominating it.

Magic ceremonies, performed in secret but given a visual expression, had three main aims: they set out to increase the number of animals hunted and killed, improve the fertility of edible species, and help destroy large predators.

Those who believed magic to be the fundamental driving force behind cave art remained in the majority until the fifties, when André Leroi-Gourhan demolished their attractive theoretical edifice. He pointed out that only a tiny percentage of animals showed any sign of having been hit by a weapon. Sexual allusions were even more rare.

And what was the meaning of the hands stencilled on to cave walls, or the human or grotesque figures that had nothing to do with the "natural" world?

Leroi-Gourhan and his colleague Annette Laming-Empeaire offered a different explanation. The cave itself was a structured space: its spatial organisation was well thought out. Paintings were positioned in the cave in relation to entrances, dead ends and other topographical features.

It was no coincidence that the most frequently represented animals were bison and horses, or that they were accompanied by other species according to very specific rules. After drawing up an exhaustive inventory, Leroi-Gourhan

posited the existence of a binary system of sexual symbolism, which brought together bison (the female pole) and horses (the male pole), and which was reiterated by geometrical signs (a long thin sign rep-

resented the penis, and a thick sign the vulva).

As research into palaeolithic art continued, this structuralist approach came in for mounting criticism. The drawings did no doubt represent a system of myths and ideas, but in no way did that explain why they were executed in deep caves.

The sexual typology was based on subjective criteria. Why would the Magdalenian hunter have chosen the bison, whose male attributes he conscientiously depicted, to symbolise the female? And did not the dividing up of caves into distinct areas also depend on rather over-subjective criteria?

As it turns out, Leroi-Gourhan's somewhat rigid chronological classification of how styles evolved has been invalidated by the Chauvet datings so far carried out. The Leroi-Gourhan school did however have a beneficial effect on the study of cave art. "The importance of the

cave in terms of choice and, probably, meaning can no longer be challenged," write Clottes and Lewis-Williams.

The way drawings are positioned on the rock depending on its relief and topography has become a fundamental element of modern research. The choice of animal species obeys a logic that has nothing to do with whether they are edible or not. It is now clear that some animals were preferred and others spurned according to cultural criteria.

What those criteria were remains a mystery. Should all attempts at interpretation be abandoned? Clottes and Lewis-Williams think not. They see a parallel between cave art and shamanism.

Shamanism is a system of beliefs that includes healing techniques, rituals designed to affect events (hunting) and the elements (bad weather), prophecy, witchcraft, and the possibility of communicating with spirits. Trances, which can be produced in various ways, are the means used by shamans to take on those powers.

The authors point out that all cultures, including those of the palaeolithic period, have been familiar with the "distorted state of consciousness that often produces art. One such culture is that of the hunter-gatherers: there is a parallel between the shamanistic art of San Bushmen in South Africa, which was thoroughly studied in the 19th and 20th centuries, and examples of palaeolithic art studied in Europe.

On both continents — and both today and in the distant past — "paintings and engravings do not represent real animals that are hunted for food in an actual landscape; rather they are visions drawn from the subterranean world of spirits because of their supernatural powers and ability to help the shamans."

Clottes and Lewis-Williams's theory, which is backed up by much ethnological and neuropsychical evidence, is based on a detailed knowledge of dozens of "sanctuaries". It is a tempting hypothesis, and one that has been elaborated with great erudition and enthusiasm. But that will not prevent some people from trying to shoot it down in flames.