

## Review article

# From totems to myths: theorising about rock art

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ROMAIN PIGEAUD. 2017. *Lascaux. Histoire et archéologie d'un joyau préhistorique*. Paris: CNRS; 978-2-271-11580-5 €22.

JEAN-LOÏC LE QUELLEC. 2017. *L'homme de Lascaux et l'énigme du puits*. Camille Bercot: Tautem; 979-10-97230-05-0 €15.

GWENN RIGAL. 2016. *Le temps sacré des cavernes*. Paris: Corti; 978-2-7143-1179-5 €25.



Almost instantaneously as cave art was finally accepted as Palaeolithic, after Cartailhac's 'Mea culpa d'un sceptique' (1902), prehistorians started developing explanations for why Palaeolithic groups would create such displays in the interior of caves. Initial interpretations split into two factions; on one side, researchers linked to the Church explained cave art as a form of religion. On the other, their antagonists, striving for an atheist justification, argued that humans have an inherent desire for the aesthetic. From that point, a multitude of theories developed, from simple to quite elaborate, and from there to plain crazy. In the 1960s, the interpretation of cave art was heavily criticised by archaeologists, and, with some exceptions, new approaches dwindled for a while, especially those based on ethnographic explanation. Later on, in the late 1990s, Clottes and Lewis-Williams reinvigorated this branch of archaeology, with the famous *Les chamanes de la Préhistoire* (1996). Since then, the theory and interpretation of cave art has experienced quite a comeback.

The three books reviewed here have two things in common: Lascaux and cave art interpretations. *Le temps sacré des cavernes* and *L'homme de Lascaux et l'énigme du puits* are mainly focused on the

interpretation of cave art, the first in the general sense, the second in the specific case of Lascaux's shaft scene. By contrast, *Lascaux. Histoire et archéologie d'un joyau préhistorique* collates research done therein, but also includes a chapter on interpretative theories applied to the cave. *Lascaux. Histoire et archéologie d'un joyau préhistorique* is actually a scientific outreach book. Created for an audience unfamiliar with prehistory and rock art, it is, nonetheless, a pleasurable read for a prehistorian. It includes up-to-date studies carried out in the cave and interesting information for those in the research community who want a quick way to get updated on the latest thoughts in this area. The references allow the reader to consult further on the topics that are of their interest.

As the author says, the book presents the Lascaux of the artists and of the prehistorians. The illustrations include a mix between old documents and publication images, with high-quality photographs of the cave and some reconstructions of the moment in which the art was created. The book starts with a chapter set in the Magdalenian, when the cave was painted, and includes a 'poetic' interpretation of how the artists created their art. After that, it describes the discovery and research history, including the infamous tourist adaptations and their consequences. These chapters are followed by a swift description of the different images and the practical details of how the figures were traced. The chapter 'Le Lascaux des prehistorians' unconsciously introduces the next book discussed here, providing a complete and structured account of the theories proposed, mostly by prehistorians, to explain the cave. Finally, the author concludes with the chronological framework of the cave, asking who the people that painted the cave really were.

*L'homme de Lascaux et l'énigme du puits* discusses probably the most examined scene in Western Palaeolithic cave art: Lascaux's shaft scene. It

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includes at least three (possibly four or five) actors: a therianthrope—part human, part animal—depiction with a (much discussed) ithyphallic human body featuring an erect penis and a bird-shaped head; to its right, a disembowelled bison figure and a bird perched on a line; to the left, a rhinoceros and, in front of the whole scene, a horse.

The book is divided into three parts: the longest is an anthology of all of the potential interpretations of the scene, followed by an evaluation of the scene itself by the author, and a conclusion criticising this proliferation of theories, which will no doubt continue. Written by Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, one of the foremost researchers on rock art of the time, the book promises new insights into these theories. What initially seems to be an easy read—the book is meant for a wider audience and is slightly longer than 100 pages—is in fact a long essay without much structure. From archaeologists to astrologists, the names of various researchers are introduced, without any information on their (sometimes doubtful) expertise or backgrounds (anthropology, ethnography, philosophy, mythography, astronomy, ethnoastronomy and so on), followed by lengthy quotations that are sometimes difficult to follow. Interpretations for the impetus behind the images include adaptations of Freudian psychoanalysis, hallucinations caused by the lack of oxygen in the shaft and ‘séances neochamanistes’ using the position of the male body. Others consider the scene to be a record of celestial positions, meaning that the identification and location of celestial bodies can help ‘determine’ the chronology of the scene (for some, 16 500 years ago; for others, rather specifically, the 25 December 9273 BC). Further interpretations argue that the scene marks the position of the sun during the solstice, or relate the image to myths taken from other cultures. The author’s conclusion in most of the cases is that the theories presented are outrageous and lack any scientific grounding.

The long quotations taken from different authors and used to illustrate the theories mean that the reader has to wade through a description of the scene over and over again. As a prehistorian, I recognise many of the authors discussed (Breuil, Leroi-Gourhan, Laming-Emperaire and the like), and can evaluate, through experience, how credible an opinion is, but I do not have the expertise to judge the more esoteric authors, other than by their explanation of the scene. The problem in this case is that all of the interpretations are mixed together. For that reason,

some background on the authors and their research would have been welcome.

In the second part of the book the author discusses the archaeological evidence that might help with the interpretation(s). He searches for similar scenes in the record only to find that those that were said to be analogous are actually not similar. In fact, these parallels are old comparisons that were quite far-fetched. He also discusses the pigment analyses undertaken on the depictions. The results indicate that the rhinoceros was probably traced at a different time than the horse and the main ‘scene’. These are very valuable results, and they support the author’s conclusion that the scene is entirely unique and thus especially difficult to interpret: the only link between the depictions is their placement, seemingly creating a scene that could, in fact, represent a composite of multiple acts. Nonetheless, he argues that it is human nature to try to explain the scene, and that interpretations will always abound, even if they have no scientific foundation.

On the same subject, the main objective of our final book, *Le temps sacré des cavernes*, is to break down theories on rock art. Divided into two parts, the author, Gwenn Rigal, first introduces the ‘actors’ in their environment, starting with the potential evidence for symbolism in early humans, especially in Neanderthals. She then provides an in-depth introduction to the prehistory of anatomically modern humans: the way they lived, their subsistence strategies, theories regarding their social organisation and the development of symbolism through the analysis of burials, ornamentation and ‘art’, both portable and parietal. The theories analysed are presented in the order in which they were initially proposed, but Rigal brings in later researchers who adapted a particular theory afterwards. Initial theories focused on the link between hunting and depicting, based on the simple idea that ‘humans depict what they see’. These are followed by much discussed ideas relating to totemism and chamanism, often initially proposed by ethnographers and therefore working from ethnographic assumptions, and later adopted by prehistorians. These ideas were subsequently criticised, especially by Leroi-Gourhan. He popularised theories based on structuralism, initially proposed by Raphaël and Laming-Emperaire. This was, in turn, criticised as a method for analysing the archaeological record. More recently, however, some authors, such as Sauvet, have been using statistical methods to revive these theories to explain rock art.

Finally, the mythical theories are tackled. On this reading, representations in the caves were symbols of a belief system; this is supported by the use of a limited selection of themes and highly standardised signs, which, in combination with spatial differences, seem to point to different systems depending on the group(s) within the image. In this case, the discussion is centred on the question of whether we can reconstruct prehistoric myths and beliefs. The book ends with a discussion of why Palaeolithic art disappeared and a simple yet striking conclusion: no single theory can explain Palaeolithic art and we are probably doomed to live, at least partially, in the dark.

Gwenn Rigal is not an archaeologist or a prehistorian, but a guide at the site of Lascaux. She clearly knows how to share information, and she does it brilliantly, explaining concepts that are sometimes difficult to convey to a less experienced audience. This does not mean that the book is not valuable for researchers. The way that the theories are organised, by chapter, considering the researchers that have followed a particular trend and explaining it using examples, makes for a great tool. The final, and invariably the most interesting, part of every chapter is a 'Discussion'. She compiles the detractors of the theory alongside its proponents, producing a balanced record with updated references. Best of all, in not being a prehistorian, Rigal retains her objectivity throughout the different theories. This is what makes the book unique.

To sum up, as we can see in Gwenn Rigal's book, theorising on the meaning of rock art is a flourishing subject. Yet when examining the compendium included in Le Quellec's book, there is still a lot of variability in the production of theories regarding cave art, and it seems that anyone, no matter the discipline (or pseudo-discipline), feels entitled to have an opinion. For this reason, a careful examination, considering archaeological evidence and cautiously incorporating ethnoarchaeological studies, is mandatory before we can theorise on meaning. One of the main problems is that most of the models proposed are mutually exclusive, meaning that they reduce the potential for interpretations that allow anatomically modern humans to incorporate a multiplicity of meanings into a single piece of 'art'. Given our cultural diversity nowadays, and the potential for the cave paintings to have been constructed over thousands of years, this would seem to be an error. There is more than one way to explain Palaeolithic art, and, as researchers, we have to be prepared to consider a variety of explanations, and deal with the different standards of proof involved in each.

## References

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