

Caves

You've just entered one of the caves, leaving behind the sun's light and today's date.¹ It's a long passage, with many side passages leading off in other directions. You descend deep into the earth, among the damp and the stalactites. The only sound is of water dripping from the ceilings and of your breathing. The only light is that which you carry. At places you must creep along low on all fours. You lose your sense of time and place, no longer sure how long you've been in the cave or in what direction you're moving. These are caverns which have never served as places of human shelter, habitat, or home. But then, as now, these are places visited only on special occasions, for special purposes; though those who came before, undoubtedly came for very different purposes.

You've emerged into the great gallery. Before you are the images of hundreds of animal drawings, many overlapping each other, animals such as wild horses, bison, ibex and reindeer. They are images rich in earthen colors: yellows, reds, browns, and black. Many are life-sized, and all are rather realistically portrayed. Some of the images are painted over natural bulges in the rock, giving the animals a further sense of relief and life. There are, however, few representations of human images, and those you find are simple, stick-like images.

You've journeyed to Europe and are now viewing the cave paintings of the Upper Paleolithic period, dating to 18,000 years ago. Three of the over seventy cave sites of northern Spain and France are visited: Altamira, Lascaux and Les Trois Freres. As you gaze among the varied images, four catch your eyes.

The first image is from Altamira, in northern Spain. The bison is painted in vivid reds and black.

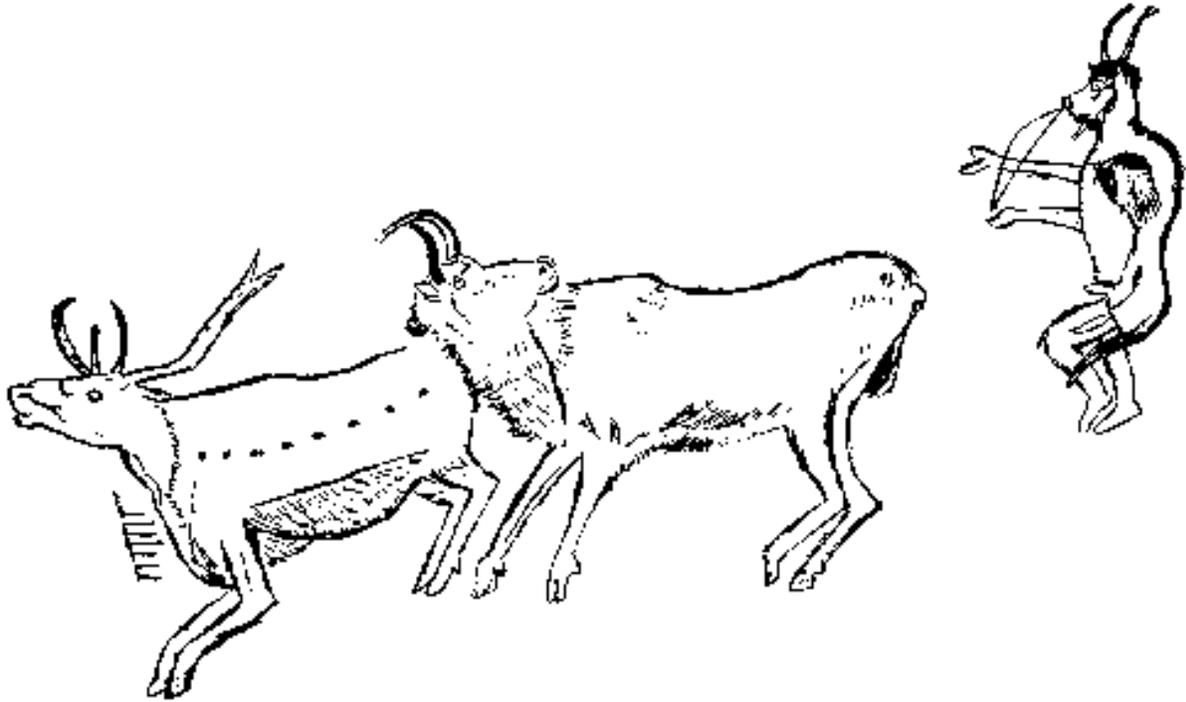


¹For additional ethnographic background, see Campbell 1959 and Fagan 1989.

Your second image comes from Lascaux cave in central France. A great bison was speared, apparently by the crudely drawn human figure. As mentioned, human images are few. This particular one is interesting because of its bird-like features, i.e., bird's head and bird's hands, and staff with perched bird attached atop. Images of birds are even rarer than those few of humans. Also notice what appears to be a phallus on the human figure.



The third image comes from the walls of the Les Trois Freres cave in the French Pyrenees. Amongst a vast assemblage of overlapping animal images (not presented here) we see a human-like figure with a bow in hand (apparently a hunting or musical bow) and in pursuit of two unidentified animals.



In the innermost region of the Les Trois Freres cave we come across a most astonishing image. It is painted in black and stands two-and-a-half feet tall. The figure has the body of a human, the horns and ears of a reindeer, the tail and location of the penis of a horse, the hands that resemble the paws of a feline, and the face of a lion or perhaps an owl?

