

Periods of Art History I:  
from Prehistory to Trajan

II. 'PREHISTORIC' ART

or

WHERE DOES IT START?



## Plan of the lesson

1. Introduction: Since when can we talk about ART? Visual culture before and after the “Ice Age Revolution”
2. Cave art in Western Europe: Altamira, Lascaux, Chauvet
3. Earliest forms of sculpture: “Venuses” and other objects
4. Conclusion: Avant-guard reception of prehistoric art and problems of its interpretation

# Prehistory

3 millions years to  
c. 3'300 BCE

Paleolithic

3 millions to  
10'000 BCE

Neolithic

10'000 to  
3'300 BCE

Antiquity

3'300 BCE  
to 476 CE

Middle Ages

476 to 1453  
or 1492

Modern Age

1453–1789

Contemporary?

1789–2024 etc....

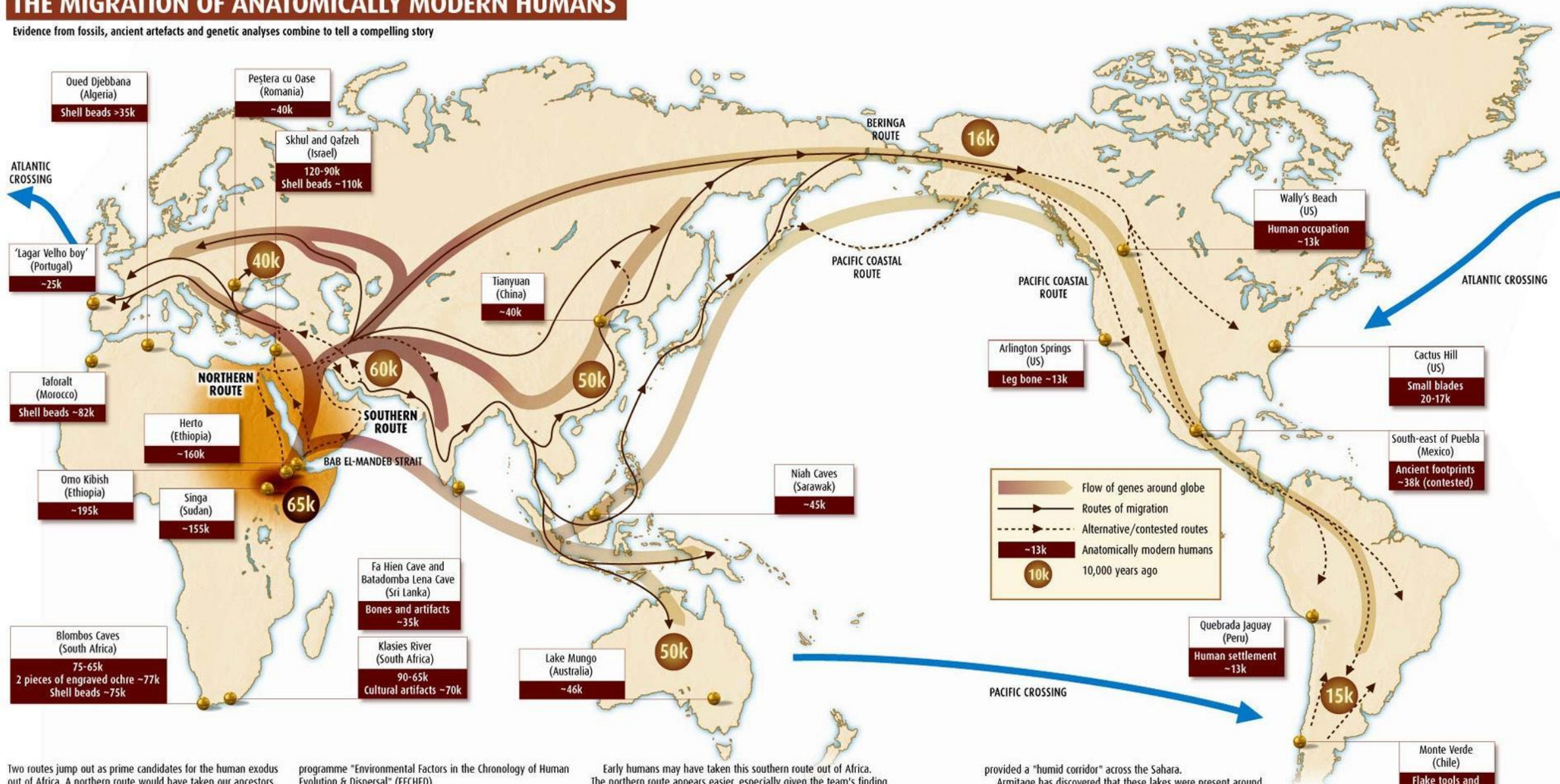
# History

c. 3'300 BCE to nowadays



# THE MIGRATION OF ANATOMICALLY MODERN HUMANS

Evidence from fossils, ancient artefacts and genetic analyses combine to tell a compelling story



Two routes jump out as prime candidates for the human exodus out of Africa. A northern route would have taken our ancestors from their base in eastern sub-Saharan Africa across the Sahara desert, then through Sinai and into the Levant. An alternative southern route may have charted a path from Djibouti or Eritrea in the Horn of Africa across the Bab el-Mandeb strait and into Yemen and around the Arabian peninsula. The plausibility of these two routes as gateways out of Africa has been studied as part of the UK's Natural Environment Research Council's

programme "Environmental Factors in the Chronology of Human Evolution & Dispersal" (EFCHED). During the last ice age, from about 80,000 to 11,000 years ago, sea levels dropped as the ice sheets grew, exposing large swathes of land now submerged under water and connecting regions now separated by the sea. By reconstructing ancient shorelines, the EFCHED team found that the Bab el-Mandeb strait, now around 30 kilometres wide and one of the world's busiest shipping lanes, was then a narrow, shallow channel.

Early humans may have taken this southern route out of Africa. The northern route appears easier, especially given the team's finding that the Suez basin was dry during the last ice age. But crossing the Sahara desert is no small matter. EFCHED scientist Simon Armitage of the Royal Holloway University of London has found some clues as to how this might have been possible. During the past 150,000 years, North Africa has experienced abrupt switches between dry, arid conditions and a humid climate. During the longer wetter periods the huge lakes existed in both Chad and Libya, which would have

provided a "humid corridor" across the Sahara. Armitage has discovered that these lakes were present around 10,000 years ago, when there is abundant evidence for human occupation of the Sahara, as well as around 115,000 years ago, when our ancestors first made forays into Israel. It is unknown whether another humid corridor appeared between about 65,000 and 50,000 years ago, the most likely time frame for the human exodus. Moreover, accumulating evidence is pointing to the southern route as the most likely jumping-off point.

## MANUPORT: the earliest form of art?



5 cm

Makapansgat pebble, found in South Africa, ca 3 millions BP



Erfoud manuport, found in Morocco, 300,000-200,000 BP

# Pareidolia



Female, Younger, Happiness  
-0.05 0-10



Female, Older, Sadness  
-0.06 40-49



Female, Younger, Surprise  
-0.03 0-10



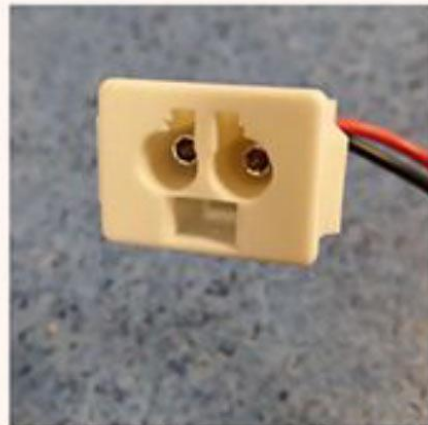
Female, Younger, Neutral  
-0.12 0-10



Male, Older, Happiness  
0.60 80-89



Male, Older, Anger  
0.69 80-89



Male, Younger, Fear  
0.21 0-10



Male, Younger, Disgust  
0.14 0-10



Blombos cave, South Africa, deposits with artifacts (engraved and cross-hatched ochre), dated between 103,000–73,000 BCE

# Ice Age Technological Revolution



*Before* 40,000 BCE

Acheulean Hand Axes, simple stone tools and scrapers



*After* 40,000 BCE

Needles, microblades, bifacial spear points, harpoons, etc



**Aurignacian  
Culture**

43000 – 26000 BP



Hohle Fels

Hohlenstein Stadel

Geißenklösterle

Chauveut

Abri Pataud

Laussel

**Gravettian  
Culture**

33000 – 17000 BP



Kostenki - Костёнки

Malta - Мальта

Zaraysk

Gagarino

Avdeevo

Khotylevo

Eliseevichi

Petřkovice

Moravany

**Magdalenian  
Culture**

17000 – 12000 BP



Balzi Rossi

Mauern

Milandes

Laugerie-Basse

Mas d'Azil

Petersfels

Gönnersdorf

Monruz

Pekarna

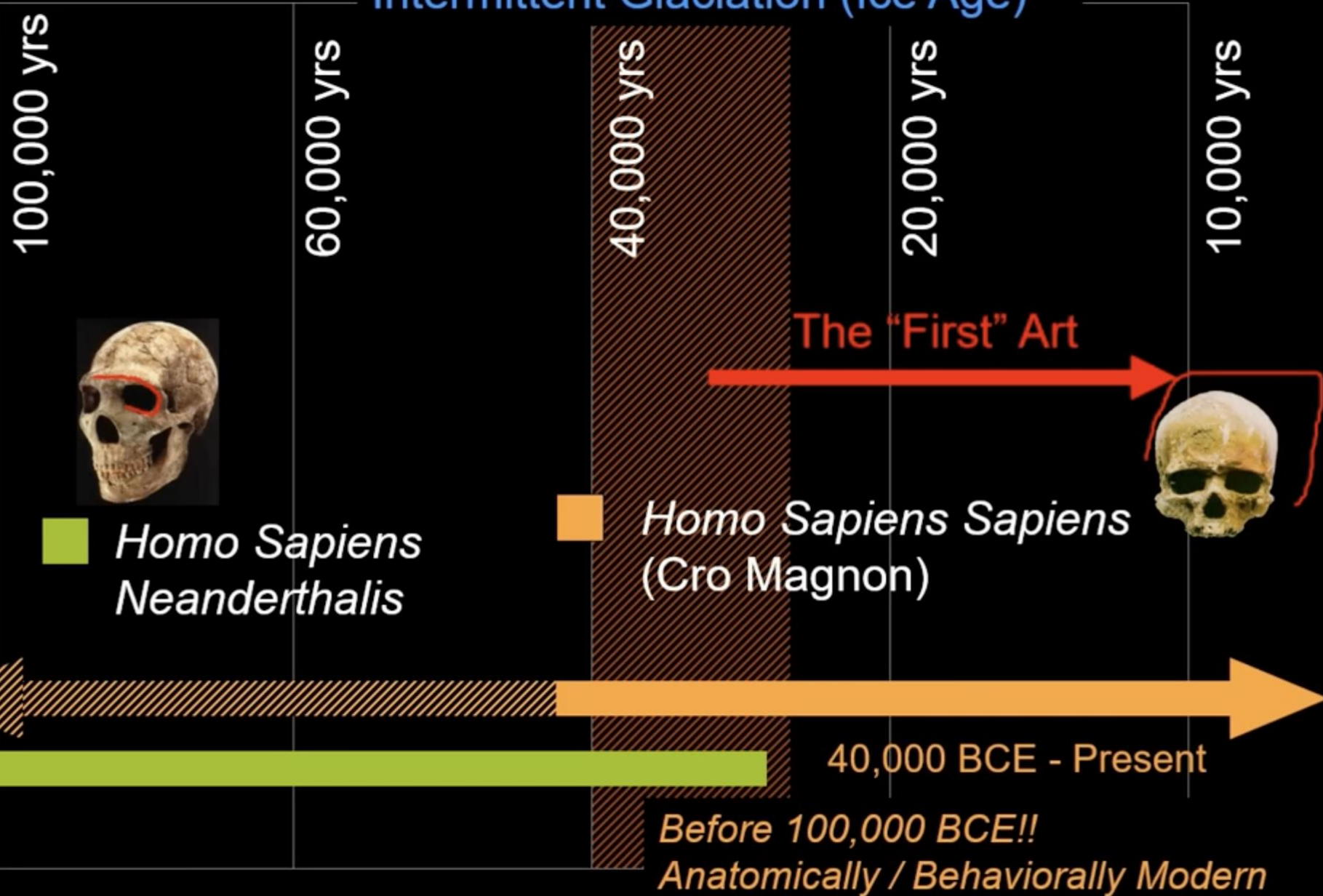
Nebra

Upper Paleolithic

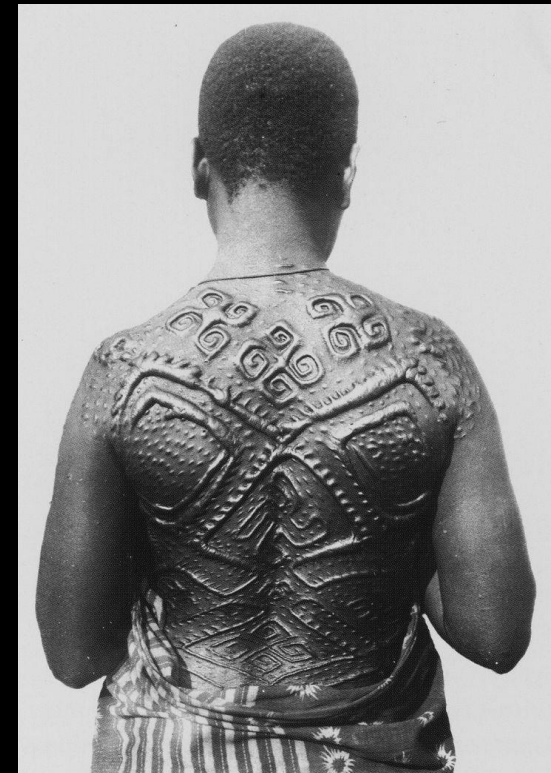
Mesolithic

Neolithic

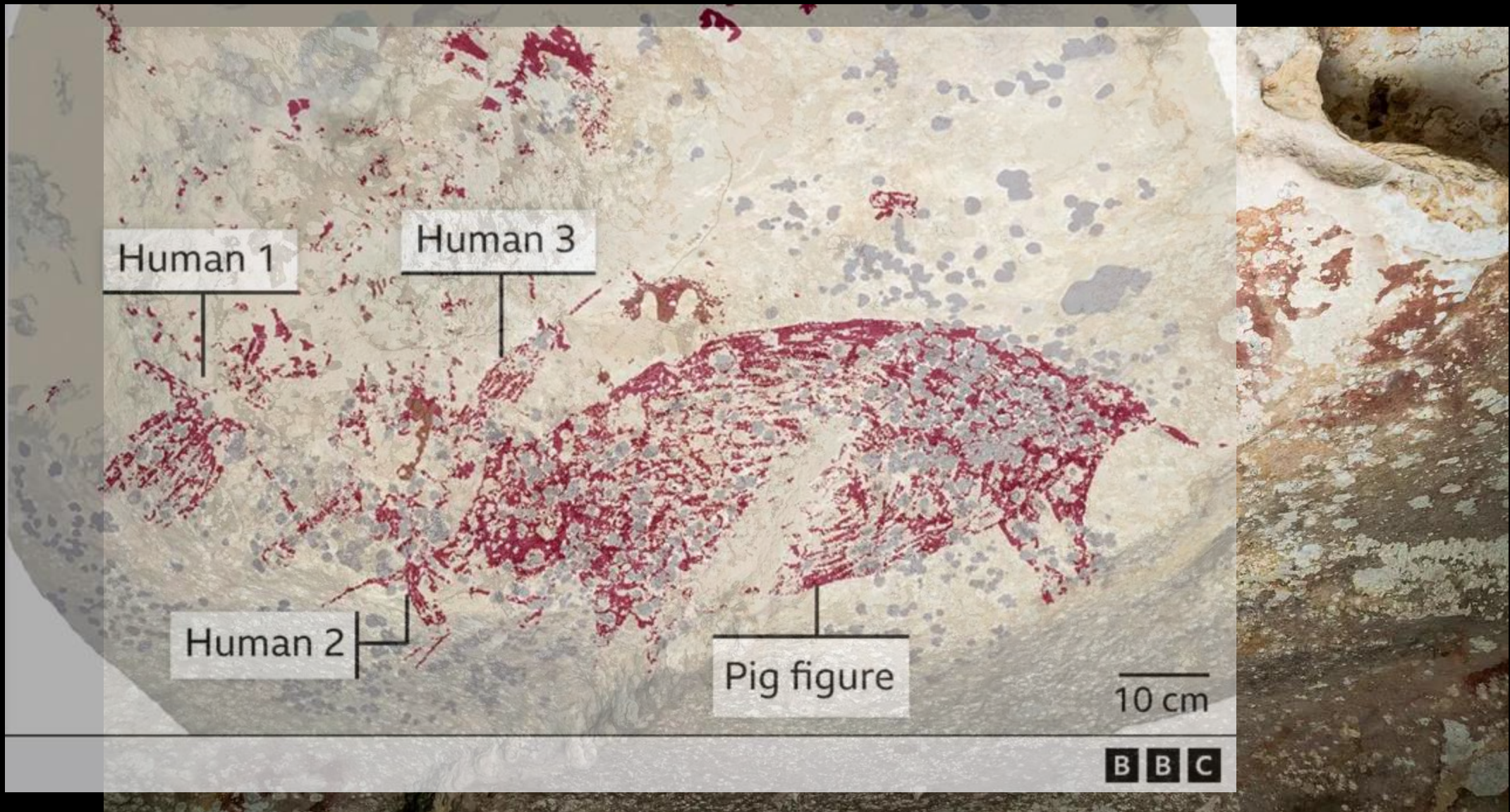
Intermittent Glaciation (Ice Age)



Visual culture before “Art”?



Pazyryk tribe tattoo, ca 600-300 BC



Painting of a pig and three human figures, Leang Karampuang, Sulawesi, Indonesia, 51 200 BP

# Europe's first cave artists were Neandertals, newly dated paintings show

Spanish paintings were made 20,000 years before modern humans

22 FEB 2018 • BY [TIM APPENZELLER](#)



First dated cave painting in La Pasiega, Spain c.a. 64,800 BP

# Distribution of primary Palaeolithic cave-art locations in Eurasia.



“The precursors of Raphael and Michelangelo, or the Birth of the Arts of Drawing and Sculpture in the Age of the Reindeer” 1870

# CAVE ART



Altamira (20 – 16 000 BC)  
discovered 1868

Lascaux (15 – 10 000 BC)  
discovered 1940

Chauvet (32 – 30 000 BC)  
discovered 1994

Altamira cave, 20,000-16,000 BCE,  
Santillana del Mar, Cantabria, Spain



# ALTAMIRA

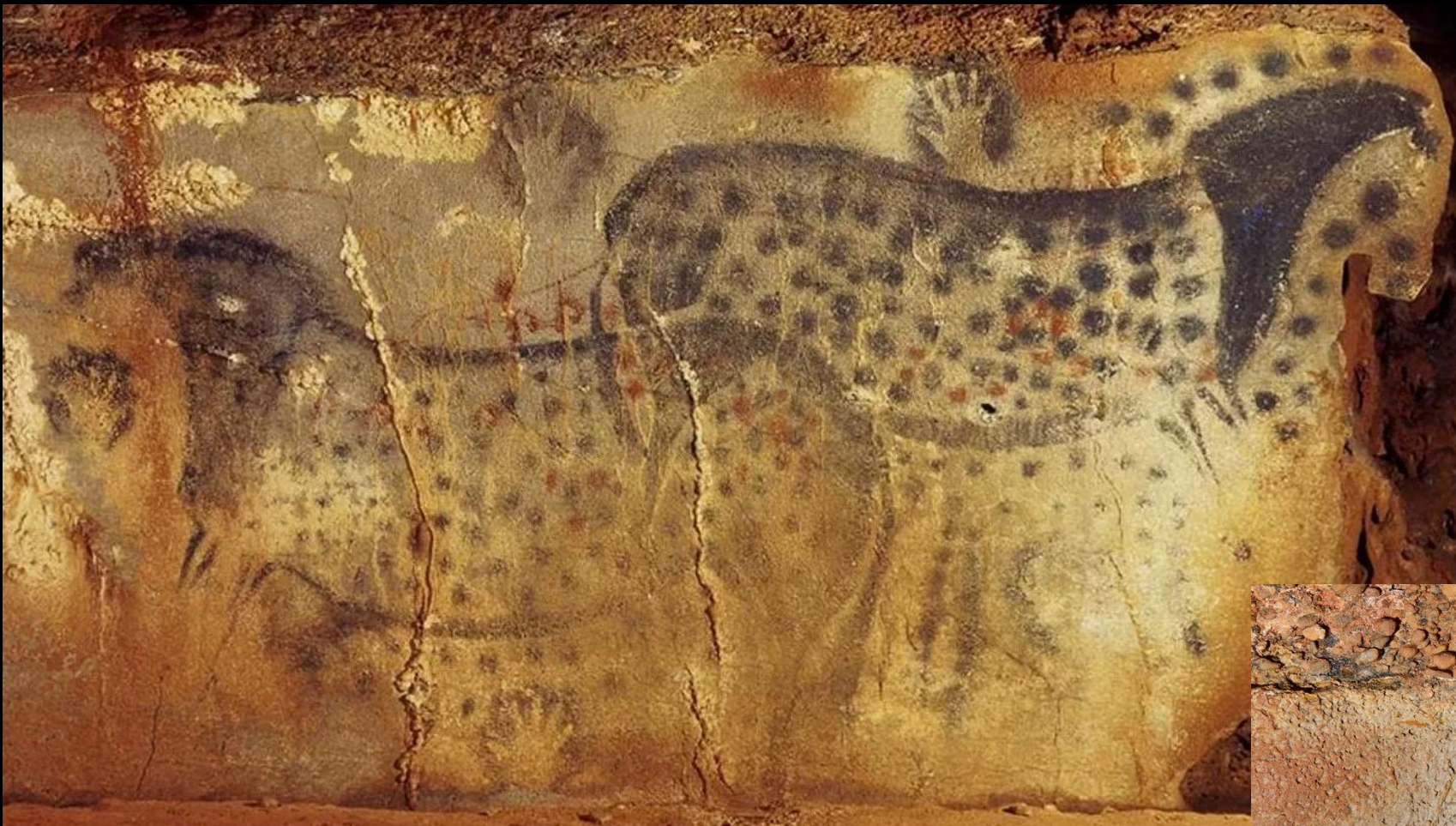
cave, 20,000–16,000 BCE,  
Santillana del Mar, Cantabria,  
Spain











Cave of Pech Merle, France, 16–25 000 BP

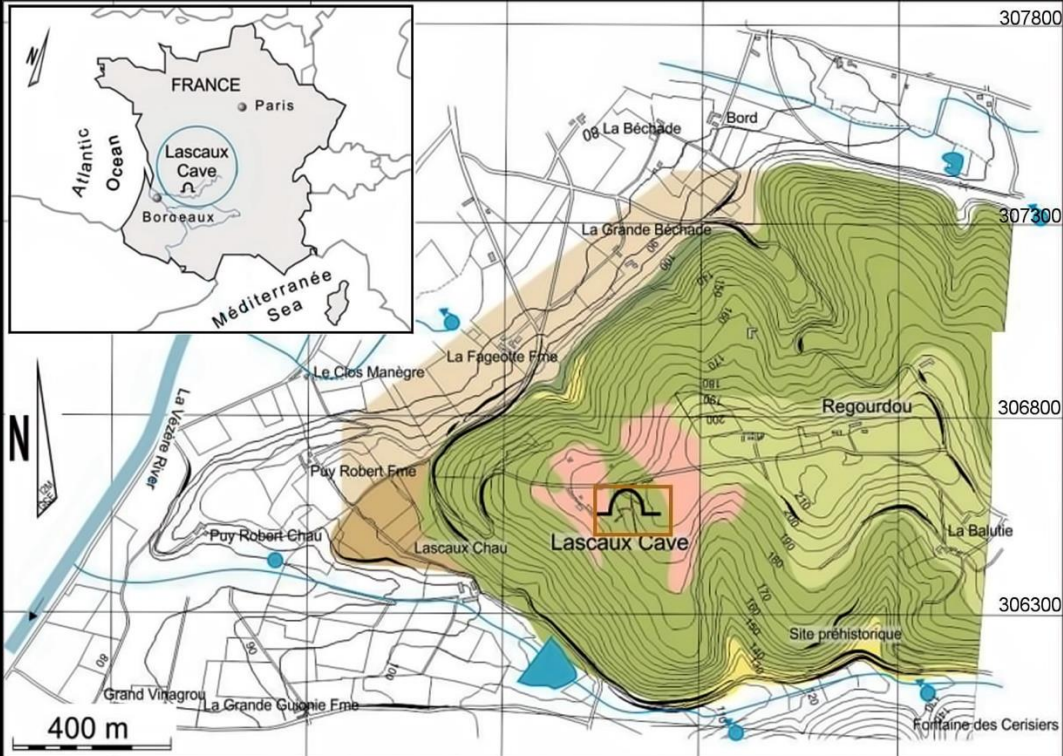
# LASCAUX

15 – 10 000 BC

Montignac. France

Discovered in 1940





**QUATERNARY**

- a<sup>2</sup> Recent alluvium
- a<sup>1</sup> Ancient alluvium
- SP Slope deposits

**TERTIARY**

- Clayey sand of Perigord

**CRETACEOUS**

- C5a Sandy Santonian limestone
- C4b Coniacian limestone
- C4a Coniacian marl

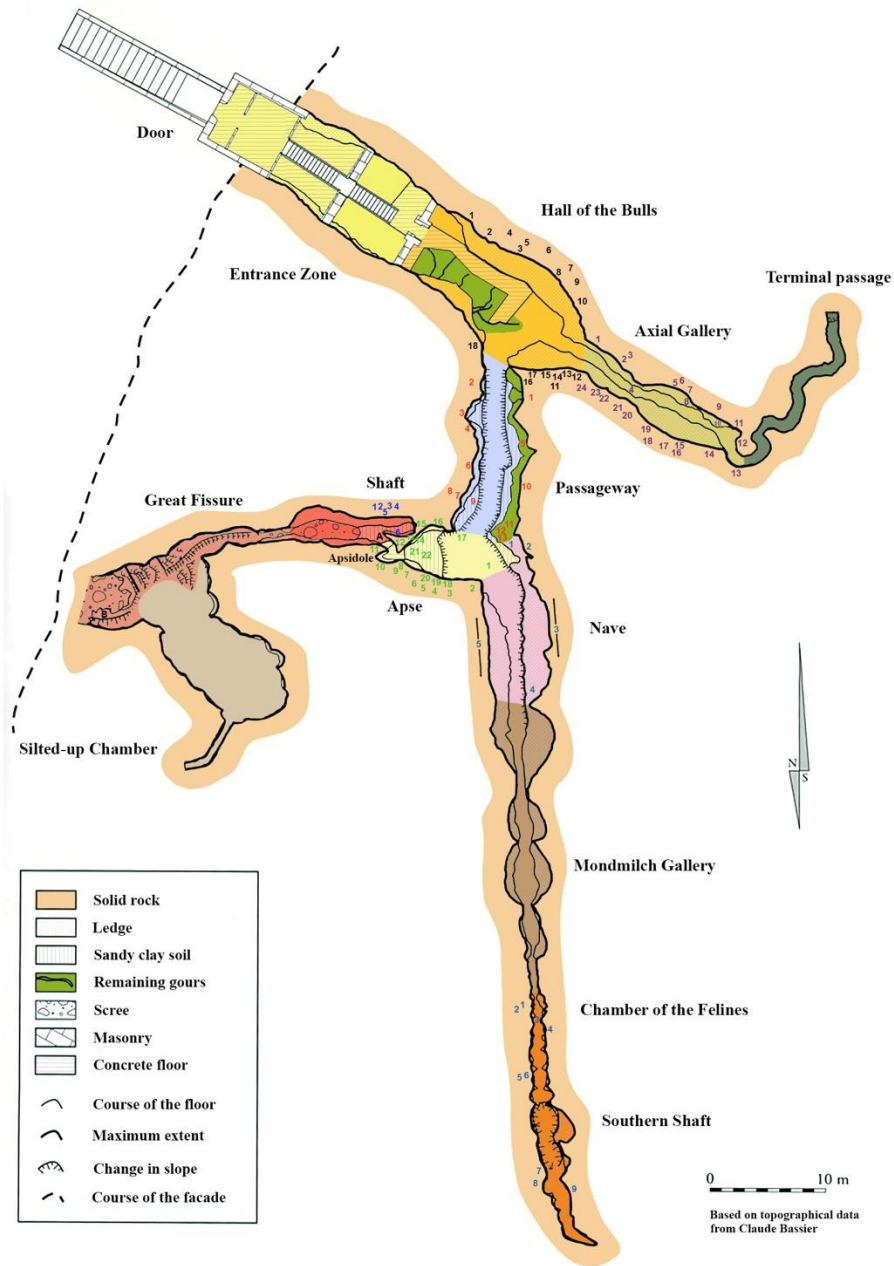
- ERT survey areas





“Hall of the Bulls”, or “Rotunda”,  
Lascaux,  
18,000-17,000  
BCE,  
Montignac,  
France





- Solid rock
- Ledge
- Sandy clay soil
- Remaining gours
- Scree
- Masonry
- Concrete floor
- Course of the floor
- Maximum extent
- Change in slope
- Course of the facade

0 10 m

Based on topographical data from Claude Bassier

#### The Hall of the Bulls

1. Black horse's head
2. Unicorn
3. Frieze of the black horses
4. Head of the first bull
5. Great red and black horse
6. Second bull
7. Brown horse
8. Frieze of the Small Stags
9. Third bull
10. Red cow
11. Fourth bull
12. Black horse in the forequarters of the fourth bull
13. Small black stag
14. Polychrome headless horse
15. Bear
16. Fifth bull
17. Red cow followed by her calf
18. Head of a bull

#### The Axial Gallery

1. The Red Cow with the Black Collar
2. Frieze of the yellow small horses
3. The Cow with the Drooping Horn
4. Red cow painted on the ceiling
5. Great Black Bull
6. Frieze of the heads of yellow cattle
7. Red cows covered by the Great Black Bull
8. Panel of the Hemione
9. Galloping Horse
10. Feline
11. Yellow horse and polychrome horse
12. Upside-down Horse
13. Red Panel
14. Confronted Ibexes
15. Superposed horses
16. Large red quadrangular symbol
17. Falling Cow
18. Solitary head of a bull
19. Frieze of the Small Horses

#### The Passageway

1. Traces of a painted equid
2. Hindquarters and beginning of the belly line of a painted equid
3. Head of a bison
4. Procession of engraved horses
5. Horse rolling on the ground
6. Engraved ibex and painted hooves of an equid
7. Engraved and black painted horse
8. Horse with the turned-back foot
9. Heads and horns of cows
10. Red drawing of a headless equid
11. Engraved ibexes and horses
12. Two horses engraved one above the other
13. Bearded Horse

#### The Apse

1. Stag with Thirteen Arrows
2. Fallen Stag
3. Third great stag
4. Horse and aurochs
5. Confronted stags
6. Confronted ibexes
7. Upward-turned Horse
8. Panel of the Musk Ox
9. Horse with Claviforms
10. Frieze of the painted and engraved stags
11. 'Chimney' sign
12. Small Sorcerer
13. Great Reindeer
14. The two bison
15. 'fend-la-bise' Stag
16. Major Stag
17. Great stag and horse with merged outlines
18. The Hut
19. Engraved stag on black background
20. Great Sorcerer
21. Red horse
22. Yellow horse

#### The Nave

1. Panel of the Ibexes
2. Panel of the Imprint
3. Panel of the Great Black Cow
4. Crossed Bison
5. Frieze of the Swimming Stags

#### The Shaft

1. Rhinoceros
2. Six black dots
3. Man
4. Bison
5. Bird
6. Black horse

#### The Chamber of the Felines

1. Niche of the felines
2. Horse in frontal view
3. Quadrangular signs
4. Crossed bison
5. Panel of the horse
6. Tree house
7. Sign XIII
8. Head and horns of a bison
9. Six red dots





"I think that the power that we see expressed here for the first time is the power of anticipation: the forward-looking imagination. In these paintings the hunter was made familiar with dangers which he knew he had to face but to which he had not yet come."

# CHAUVET

Grotto of Chauvet-Pont-d'Arc  
(Ardèche, France),  
38,000–32,000 BCE

Discovered in 1994





# The Chauvet "Venus"?





Altamira  
16 – 20 000 BP



o, Sulawesi, Indonesia  
ils estimated between  
35,000–40,000 BP

*Cuevas de la Manos*, two different periods: 13,000–9,000 BCE  
and 7,000–3,300 BCE, Argentina, province of Santa Cruz,  
Patagonia

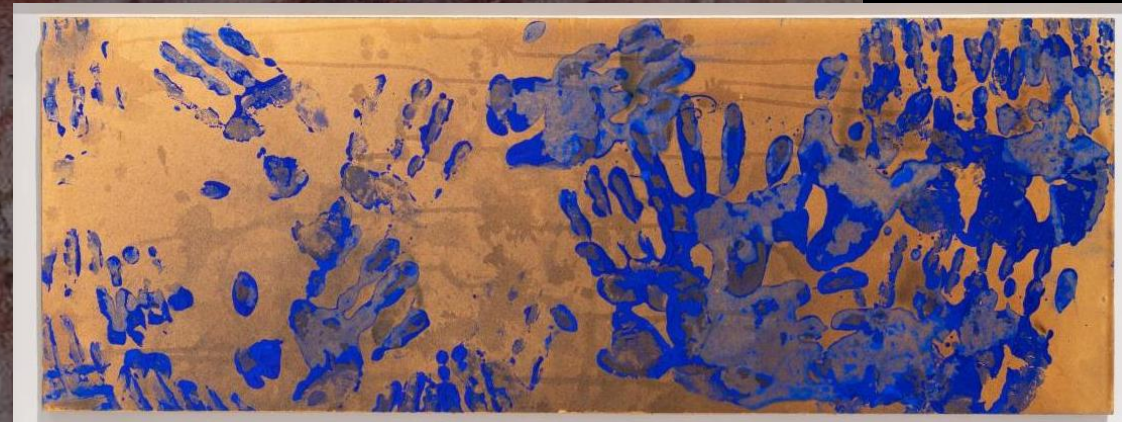




**Vassily Kandinski**, Empreintes des mains de l'artiste,  
1926, Centre Pompidou, Paris



**Yves Klein**, Peinture de Feu. Couleur sans titre (FC  
21), 1961



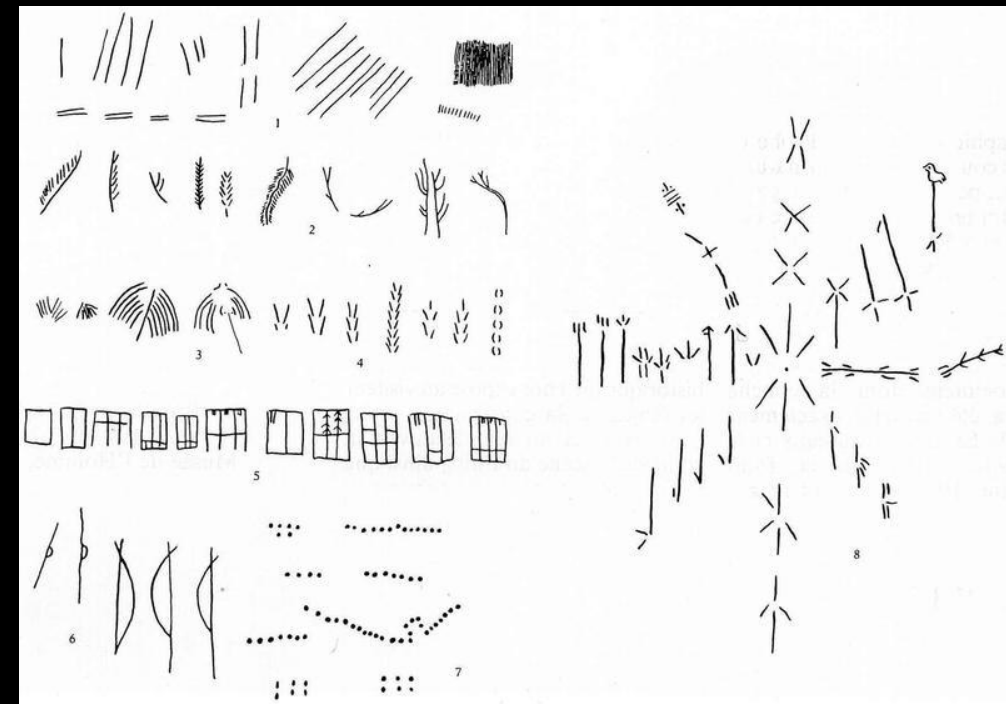
# Function(s) and perceptions of the cave art

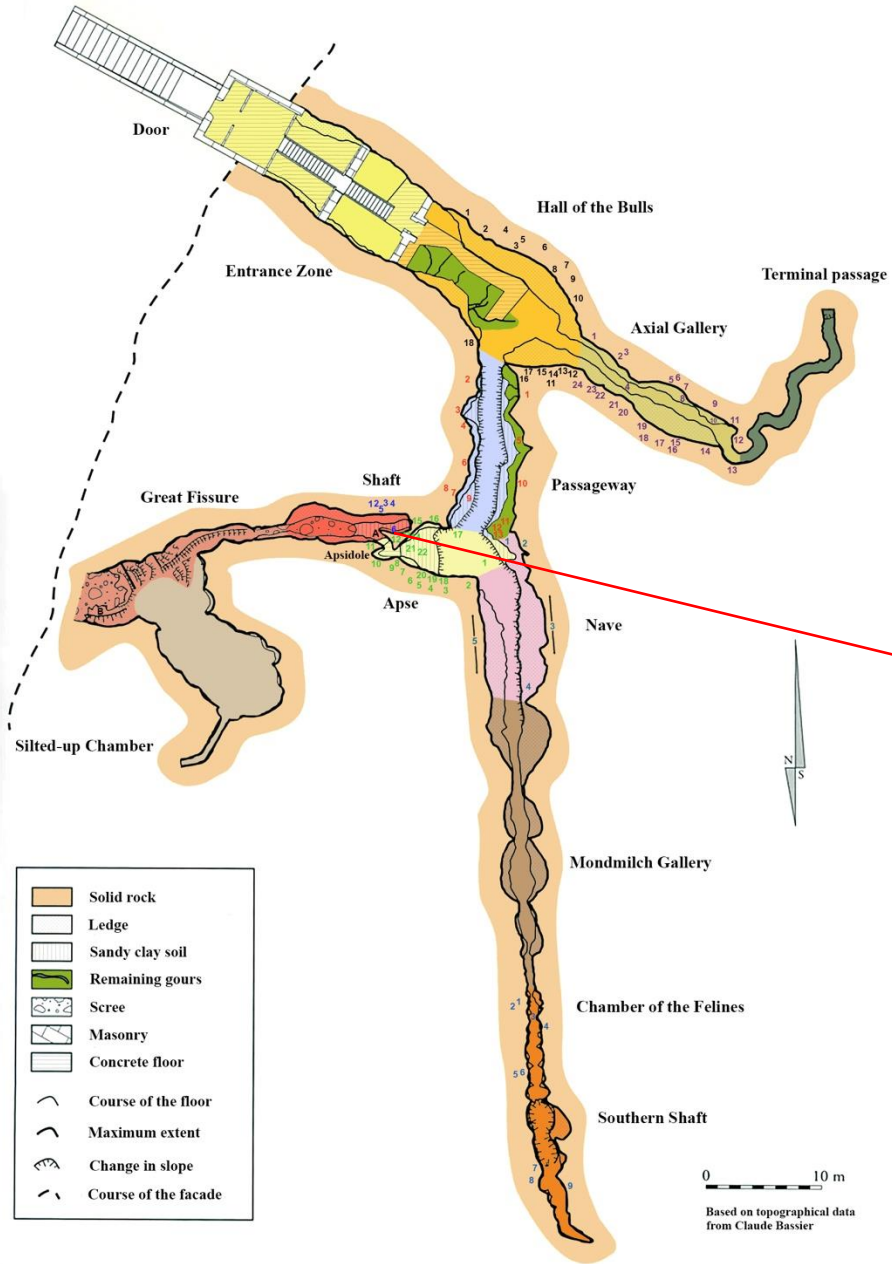






Lamp, found in the Lascaux grotto, 11 x 22,5 x 3 cm, 17,000 BCE





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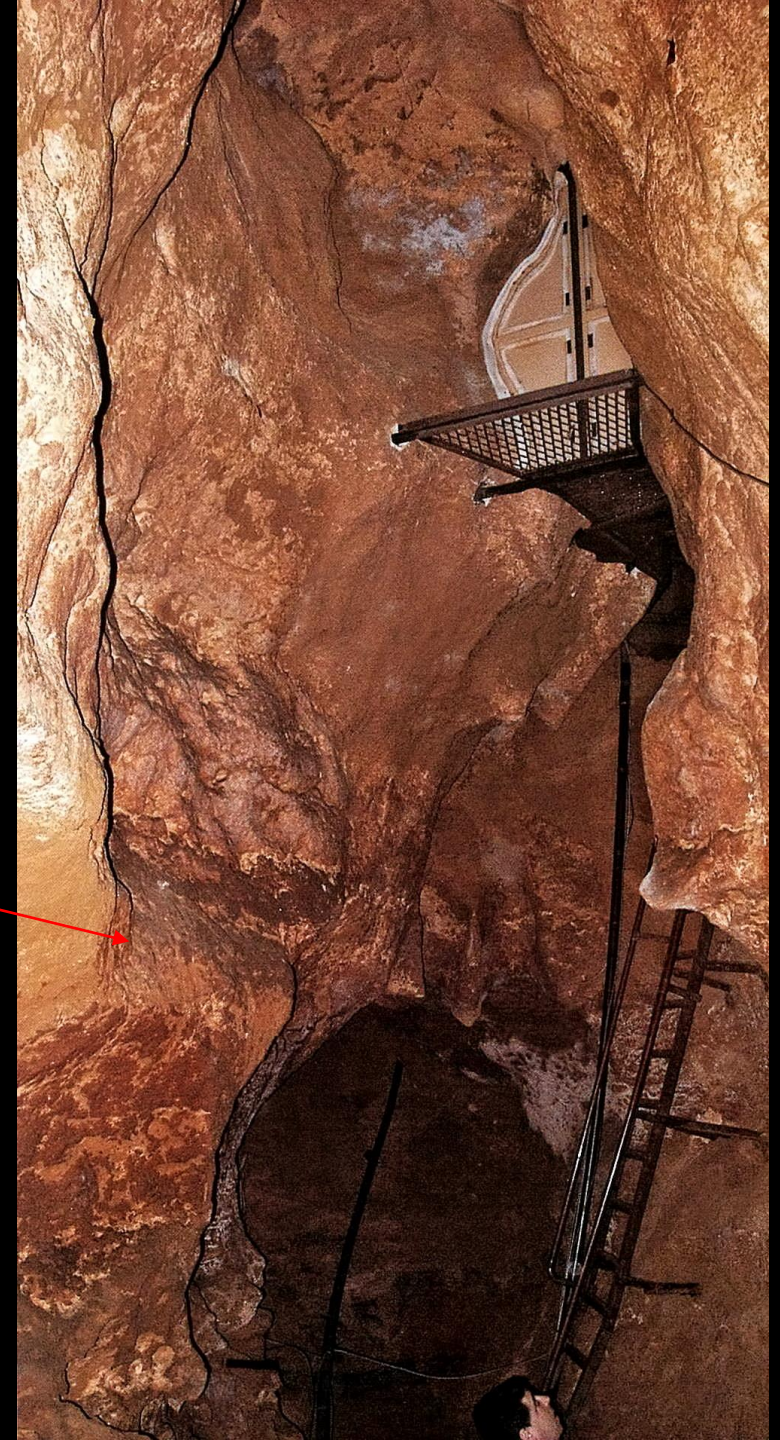
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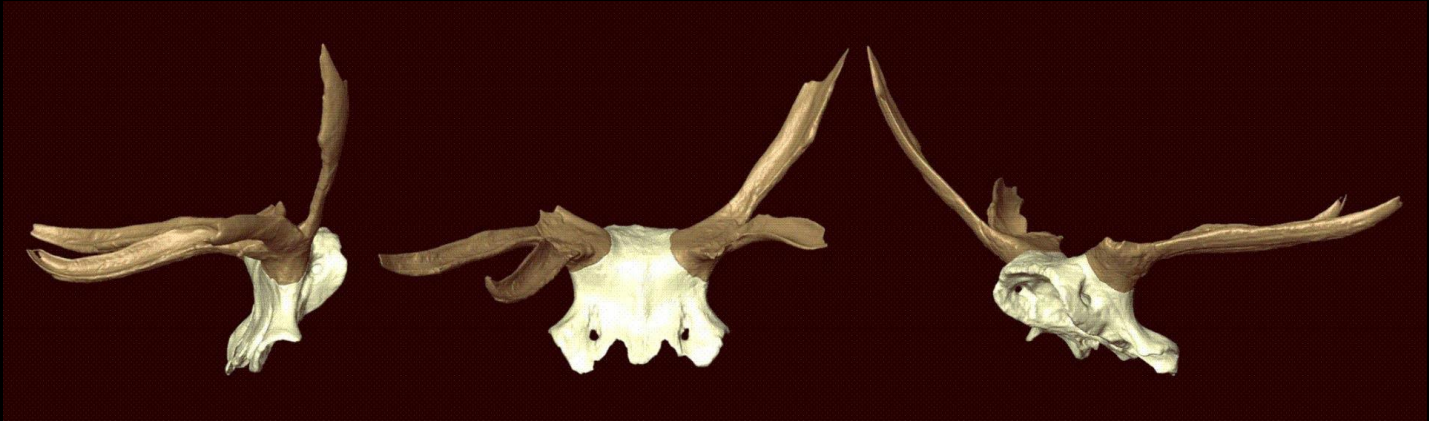


Flute, Hohle Fels Cave in southern Germany, 42,000 BCE



*Löwenmensch* figurine, Hohlenstein-Stadel (Germany), mammoth ivory, 31,1 x 5,6 x 5,9 cm, c. 35,000 – 40'000 BCE / Museum Ulm





“VENUSES”



Venus of Lespugue, ivory,  
c. 26,000-24,000 BCE



Venus of Willendorf, limestone,  
c. 28,000-25,000 BCE



Venus of Dolní Věstonice,  
ceramic, c. 29,000-25,000 BCE





Venus of Laussel, 18,000–25,000 BP



*Dame de Brassempouy* (France) 3,6 x 1,9 x 2,2 cm, mammoth ivory, c. 26,000 - 24,000 BCE / Musée d'archéologie nationale, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, discovered in 1894



Female face, ivory carving, Dolní Věstonice, Gravettian, 28 000 - 22 000 BP

# Fertility symbols, images of Mother Goddess and/or totemic and protective amulets?

<p><b>Aurignacian Culture</b> 43000 – 26000 BP</p>										
<p><b>Gravettian Culture</b> 33000 – 17000 BP</p>										
<p><b>Magdalenian Culture</b> 17000 – 12000 BP</p>										

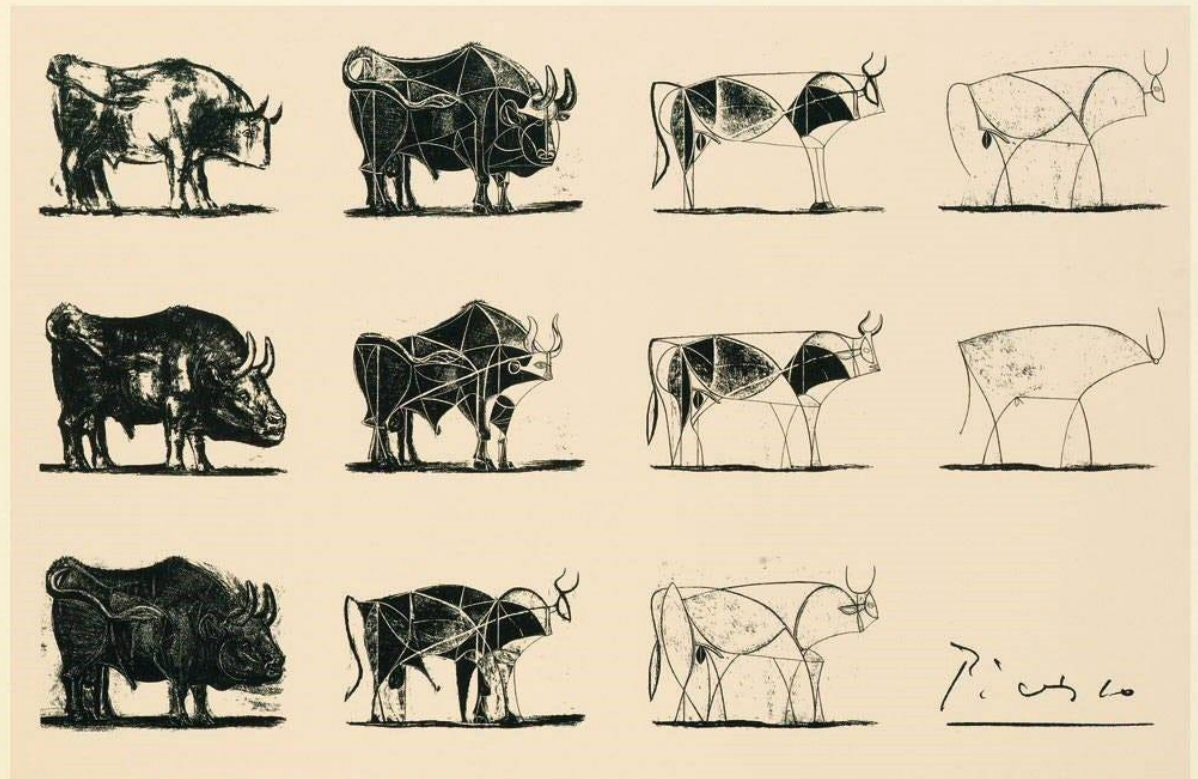


“I am struck by the fact that new light is shed on our birth at the very moment when the perspective of death is appearing”

Georges Bataille, *Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, 1955



“After Altamira, all is decadence”: Pablo Picasso



*Bull*, Lascaux cave paintings, 18,000–17,000 BCE

Pablo Picasso, *Bull*, 1945

# Préhistoire

— Une énigme moderne

## Prehistory

— A Modern Enigma

L'exposition  
*The Exhibition*



Centre  
Pompidou





Venus of Lespugue, ivory, c. 26,000–24,000 BCE



Louise Bourgeois,  
*Harmless Woman*,  
1969



# PROBLEMS IN THE STUDY OF PREHISTORIC ART

1. The field of paleoanthropology and human evolution is a fast developing discipline
2. The still limited corpus of artefacts: every new discovery challenges the hitherto narrative of “primacy”, “origins” or “development”
4. Problem of dating: often only indirectly
5. Absence of other forms of “art” that do not preserve in time
6. Local vs. global



Distribution of primary Palaeolithic cave-art locations in Eurasia.

