

States of Consciousness and Rock/Cave Art

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I had been thinking about this issue for a long time. Ever since I learned about cave art in an introductory archaeology class, I've been a nut on the subject. My fantasy/dream was fulfilled in the summer of 1995, when I went on a tour of the Paleolithic painted caves in France. My time in Lascaux (the original, not the reproduction) was easily the most profoundly moving experience of my life.

Rock art has not obsessed me in the same way, but it is something that I have been drawn to in my brief travels. While at UC Santa Barbara, I took a course in art of North American Indians. I hated the course—it was taught in the art department, and generally ignored the anthropological issues that interested me. However, that was where I first encountered the Anasazi figure, Kokopelli. I spent most of my time in class, doodling various versions of Kokopelli, in all sorts of modern-day activities (e.g., Kokopelli goes bowling).

The most intriguing questions to me are the ones that have to do with the meaning and significance of cave/rock art. Why did people draw on cave walls and rock faces? What do the images mean? There have been many interpretations (and of course, no single interpretation can explain the various drawings made over time at even one site, let alone hundreds of different ones around the world) ranging from art for art's sake to hunting magic to territorial markings to visual history. It was not until fairly recently that I came across suggestions that some cave and rock art may in fact be related to depictions of altered states of consciousness. I thought that would be an interesting subject to explore in an issue of *Anthropology of Consciousness*.

Once I had decided on the theme for the issue, I thought putting it together would be a rather easy task. I had no idea that I would be placing myself in the midst of an academic hurricane.

At the center of the hurricane is David Lewis-Williams, who, along with Thomas Dowson, wrote a seminal and highly controversial article, published in *Current Anthropology* in 1988. In it, they present a neuropsychological model of upper Paleolithic cave art. Although I am an outsider to the field of rock art, I got the distinct impression that most people in the field either hate his work, or think he is a genius. I contacted many of the major researchers in the field, and when I told them the theme of the issue, they were either delighted to share their research, or wanted to write an article criticizing the work of Lewis-Williams.

I was not interested in having the issue be a forum on Lewis-Williams. What I

wanted was something simpler, and less controversial. As I described in my letter to potential authors, I wanted to focus on the relationship between rock/cave art and consciousness in terms of its use in shamanistic traditions, the way it represents trance states or psychedelic drug states, or anything else having to do with states of consciousness.

I "lost" a number of authors due to my unwillingness to make the controversy the focus of the issue. What I have instead are four papers which fit the theme, as I saw it. One is co-authored by Lewis-Williams; the others draw upon his work, for the neuropsychological model is the key to understanding the relationship between cave/rock art and altered states of consciousness. I have tried to edit the papers in such a way that they present the facts and interpretations, and leave it up to the reader to decide whether or not they make sense. I felt compelled, however, to share some of the history of this issue, so that the naive reader (and I am assuming that most of the readers of AOC are naive to the controversies within the field of rock art) will at least be aware that this is the stuff of great controversy and high passion.

The issue begins with the paper, "On Neuropsychology in Southern African Rock Art Research" by Geoffrey Blundell, a colleague of David Lewis-Williams at the Rock Art Research Center in Johannesburg, South Africa. He presents the neuropsychological model, and applies it to San (Bushman) rock art research. He emphasizes the use of this model in conjunction with ethnographically-based interpretations of the art.

Next is the article, "The Mind in the Cave — the Cave in the Mind: Altered Consciousness in the Upper Paleolithic," co-authored by Lewis-Williams and Jean Clottes, the Scientific Advisor on Prehistoric Art to the French Ministry of Culture. They argue that at least some of the Upper Paleolithic cave art (of which I am so enamored) was intimately associated with a variety of shamanic practices. They posit that the underground location of the caves, as experienced in altered states of consciousness, helped to create notions of a subterranean spirit-world which then became sites for vision quests. My own experience of being in the caves after having studied their art in books for decades, has lead me to believe that the caves themselves are an essential and integral part of the viewing experience — in a way I never could have imagined before being there.

The next article continues upon the foundation of the first two, in that it integrates both cognitive neuroscience and shamanism in an examination of the rock art of California. The article, aptly entitled, "Cognitive Neuroscience, Shamanism and the Rock Art of Native California" is written by David Whitley. He argues that an important function of California rock art is to record the memory of what occurs during shamanic states of consciousness.

The final paper, by Carol Patterson, also focuses on California rock art, but at a single site. In her article, entitled, "Seeking Power at Willow Creek Cave, Northern California" Patterson suggests that the caves have been used continuously for the last 2,000 years for vision quests and seeking power. Her interviews with practicing shamans who have experienced the entoptic phenomena support Lewis-Williams and Dowson's theories about the universality of the images and their role in enhancing the acquisition of power through altered states of consciousness.

As you read these articles, keep in mind that they are only one point of view, but an intriguing one, nonetheless.