

Chapter 1

The Adventure of Niaux

Waiting was hard, but my wife and I knew we didn't have a choice. Being allowed to see this cave was a great privilege—one that might some day cease to be offered: The cave's treasures are too fragile to expose long-term to human beings and the carbon dioxide they invariably bring with them, along with body heat and bacteria—all of which are injurious to this pristine environment, for millennia sealed off from the outside world. To be allowed the privilege of entry, you must apply weeks in advance—and await your turn.

So we waited in the beautiful countryside of southwestern France, enjoying this peaceful part of the world, with its small traditional towns and picturesque villages perched on hilltops. The French Pyrenees are a rustic, heavily forested mountain region where wild game is served in rural inns, along with regional wines made in small family vineyards on the foothills of these mountains.

This is the region of the Cathars, a secretive religious sect that split from mainstream Catholicism in the Middle Ages; its members were brutally persecuted by the Inquisition, and found refuge in inaccessible chateaus they built on desolate mountaintops in the twelfth century. Their ruins can still be seen today, and they dot the lower reaches of the Pyrenees.

The Pyrenees are not quite as high as the Alps, but they are imposing mountains, steeply rising to about 10,000 feet. There are deep ravines here, and much water from melting snows flows through streams. These mountains are teeming with wildlife, including birds of prey, deer, ibex, and even some bears—which have recently been reintroduced.

And what is amazing about this land is the antiquity of its habitation: people have lived on the lower slopes of these mountains almost ever since our *Homo sapiens* ancestors first arrived in Europe from Africa by way of the Middle East—The oldest finds in caves in the craggy mountain slopes here date from 30,000 years ago. The cave of Niaux, however, is only half as old—it was decorated by prehistoric artists about 14,000 years ago.

Finally they called us. We rose early the next morning and drove uphill from the village of Tarascon, on the turbulent, muddy Ariège River, to the entrance of the cave of Niaux. The cave is situated in a thick forest above an ancient riverbed on a lower slope of the mountains.

The morning mist was just starting to dissipate as our young French guide called us to assemble. She had a tough, commanding demeanor. “Stand here,” she ordered, “and everyone take his own electric lantern from the pile. Do not turn it on.”

We were a small group, since only a handful of people are allowed each day to enter this primeval cave. There was a Dutchman, middle-aged and attentive; a young French couple in their twenties who wouldn't give up their cigarettes until the last moment; and then there was George, an Englishman in his seventies—who had introduced himself to me at the gift shop—accompanied by his daughter and a grandson. I worried about George, since I already had an idea about what our guide would say next.

“So remember, you have to walk fast. We have a very long way to go underground: eight hundred meters [half a mile]. And it is on rocks, and sand, and up and down. And the rocks are very, very slippery. And you cannot see very well inside the cave. Every day, somebody falls. Do you want to be that somebody? No? Then you must be careful. And do not get behind. If you do, you fall or even get lost and we never find you.”

We looked at each other, some smiled, some shrugged their shoulders. Then we turned on our lights and filed one by one through the narrow, jagged cave entrance. I had a feeling that our guide was not exaggerating. “Remember,” she continued once we were all inside the cave, “you are not allowed to touch *anything*. Never, *ever* touch the cave walls—even if you are about to slip and fall. These walls have been here millions of years and if you touch them you give them bacteria that can destroy the art. OK? So let's move.”

Water was slowly dripping from the stalactites above onto the cave floor, and we all started to slip here and there, barely catching ourselves from falling as we progressed ever deeper into this dark cavern. The lanterns did not provide enough light to see everything in front of us: If you focused your attention too much on the ground, you might not see a sudden lowering of the cave ceiling in front of you in time to duck and avoid smashing your head.

About fifteen minutes into our brisk march through this tortuous, dark and narrow rocky corridor, our guide suddenly stopped. The French couple, my wife, and I were right behind her, but the Dutchman and George and his family were somewhere behind. The Dutchman finally appeared; but no Britons. I feared that perhaps George couldn't walk as fast as required, and his daughter and grandson had to stay behind with him. Tense moments passed: had they inadvertently made a wrong turn?

This was a very tricky underground trail. Few people traverse it, and there are no aids to finding your way: no cleared paths, no steps or pavement, no electric lighting— aids that almost all caves open to the public now have. There were several branching points along the trail, leading to distant dead-ends, and you could walk or crawl for miles only to realize that you were completely lost.¹ In addition, it was cold: a constant 51 degrees (outside it was in the mid-80s)—we had all been instructed to bring sweaters and other warm clothing, as well as good walking shoes, or else we would not be allowed to enter. The dampness, the constricted space, and the nearness of forbidding cave walls

made it feel even colder than the actual temperature. I could see that some in our group were shivering.

Finally, we saw a dim light turning a corner in the pitch-darkness of the cave. It was George with his daughter and grandson; and nobody had fallen. We were all relieved. We continued, but grew increasingly tired from the exertion of constantly watching where we stepped and worrying about the changing ceiling level in this dark and narrow way. Claustrophobia was setting in: how deep underground were we now? The terrain changed frequently as we descended on a trail that was once an underground river fed by ice from the melting glaciers that engulfed these mountains in the Ice Age. Then we found ourselves walking on silt and sand that was once the bottom of an ancient underground lake.

“We must go, we must go!” urged our guide. “We have a long way still.” We staggered on for what seemed an eternity, checking our every step: nobody wanted to fall and break a leg deep inside this mountain. No cell-phone worked here; and I remembered the sound made by the heavy steel entrance door when it was locked behind us as soon as we had all entered this cave. It would be almost impossible to find our way back without a guide.

Our guide stopped once again to wait for the laggards, but this time she just stood in the darkness, not saying a word. When everyone finally arrived, she moved forward again, and after another ten minutes suddenly stopped. “This is the entrance to the Black

Salon,” she said, motioning with her light forward and to the left. “Be careful, you have to turn here sharply, and at the same time walk steeply uphill. And bow your heads—it is very low and narrow here.” The rocks here were very slippery, and we continued slowly. Then the path suddenly rose sharply and the walls widened all around us. Our narrow, low and uneven passage had given way to an unexpectedly large underground hall.

Our guide stopped. “Everyone come together,” she said, “get closer.” Once we congregated around her, she turned off her light and said: “All lights off now.” Reluctantly, we did as she commanded. It was the most eerie moment of my life—and probably in the lives of my companions. We stood there, half a mile deep inside a mountain, now connected to the outside world through an impossibly intricate system of narrow rocky passageways, in a darkness none of us had ever experienced. It was as if we had gone blind. We stood there in complete stillness; nobody said a word or dared to move for fear of losing one’s balance.

All of a sudden, our guide turned on a powerful electric lamp she had brought along—one that was much more luminous than our lanterns. She directed its light on the wall in front of us.

What we now saw stunned us all. The light revealed beautiful and detailed charcoal drawings of Ice-Age bison, horses, deer, and ibex. The stark cave wall seemed teeming with life. Images overlapped: a horse and a deer shared the same eye; a bison’s tail became part of a horse’s belly. And each animal had been drawn in such perfect

detail as to really come alive. These drawings looked as if they had just been completed by a gifted modern artist. In fact, radiocarbon dating had confirmed they were drawn 14,000 years ago. Figure 1 shows the drawing of a Pyrenean ibex from the wall of the Black Salon in Niaux.

Our guide pointed out details we could not at first observe. By turning her light sideways on the drawings, she made them appear three-dimensional. A bison's tail seemed to emerge out of the stone wall in front of us, and a deer's ear looked as if the animal had just turned it toward the visitor. "Notice how they used the cave's surface—the horse's hooves are placed exactly on the line where the cave wall curves outward."

"Why did they do it? Why did they come so far inside the cave?" she asked. "And they had to cross the lake, you know," she added, "it was still there when they were here, these *Magdalenians*. We know that, because their footsteps disappear when we get to the edge of what was once the lake." Then she said: "And imagine—they did all of this without flashlights: only carved-out little rocks into which they had melted animal fat to burn. How could they see so well to draw in such detail? And why? Why did they make these drawing?" She waited. But none of us would even venture a guess. "Nobody knows," she concluded. We stood there, in the darkness, for many moments, looking at these startling drawings. Then our guide turned briskly and said: "There is more—come along." We continued, past a narrow exit from the Black Salon, walking very slowly. After another hundred yards, our guide stopped before a widening of the

passageway. She shone her light on the cave wall, and what we saw there was incomprehensible.

We faced an array of bizarre symbols: rows of red dots, black lines, and designs that looked like lines with half-circles joined to them. And finally, there were what appeared to be spearheads. “We have no idea what these signs mean,” our guide informed us. “People have tried to analyze them for a hundred years now—since this cave was first discovered in 1906. Nobody has a clue.”

As we turned back to begin our long, slow return to the outside world, I took one last look at these signs. I was very tired now, exhausted—as were all of us—and it seemed to me that my weary, twenty-first-century male imagination was playing tricks on me: that last sign on the left looked to me like the drawing of a vulva. I must be losing my mind, I thought.

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We finally staggered out of the cave, squinting in the bright sunlight. We had all survived this experience—nobody had fallen or gotten hurt, and nobody was lost. The following weeks were bewildering: we continued to be haunted by the images from the cave of Niaux. We spent much of our time pondering what we had seen: the drawings and the strange signs. We knew that Niaux was not the only prehistoric cave; there were many ancient drawings inside caves in France and Spain, mostly found within the

deepest, most hidden and inaccessible parts of the caverns. The drawings and signs were all that such caves contained: there were no indications of any permanent habitation inside these deep grottos, such as bones or stone tools (very few tools have been found; perhaps dropped by accident) or any remnants of hearths. Such signs of human occupation have been found only in shallow caves or rock shelters, which contained no art, and in which the Magdalenians (Cro-Magnon peoples who lived in Europe around 18,000 to 11,500 years ago), and earlier Cro-Magnons, had lived.

The cave drawings always followed the same pattern: they represented animals with no surroundings or landscape, with no apparent connection to actual terrain, and rarely in relation to any human presence. These animals were often drawn on top of one other, appearing as if to float in space. And the varieties of animals, their positions, and their proportions seemed to be governed by mysterious rules that were always roughly the same, as were the accompanying abstract symbols in caves from Cantabria, in northwest Spain, to France's Dordogne region, the Ardèche, and the Pyrenees, to a couple of isolated sites in Italy. These drawings spanned thousands of years without noticeable change in style or subject matter. The earliest date from around 32,000 years ago (the Chauvet cave in France), and the latest are about 12,000 years old.

European cave art is mysterious because there seems to be a strong common design behind everything these Magdalenians and earlier Cro-Magnons did, but the purpose of the art and the meaning of the symbols remains a deep mystery.

After our trip, my wife and I purchased a scholarly treatise on the prehistoric cave art of France and Spain. The book contained a display of the drawings and signs found at Niaux, Lascaux, Chauvet, and many other caves. Leafing through its pages, I suddenly came upon a photograph of that last sign I had seen inside Niaux—the one I thought I somehow understood but later dismissed as a figment of my imagination. To my great surprise, I found it displayed together with many similar—and even more explicit—signs of the same kind. Such symbols had been discovered in great abundance in prehistoric caves. And there was a two-word caption in French below the photographs of these signs: “Symboles Sexuels.”

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The prehistoric European cave drawings represent the first evidence of our ancestors’ ability to *think symbolically*. These fabulous paintings of very specific animals with no background and no apparent connection to terrain or context are presumed to be *symbols*. But nobody knows for sure. And these totemic animals are almost always accompanied by very specific stylized signs: arrows, pairs of lines, sets of dots, and what appear to be sexual symbols. The signs may represent the very root origin of language and communication—even though we do not know how to interpret them. Their meaning is the oldest unsolved mystery of the human experience.

The mysterious practice of entering deep and dangerous caves—besides the physical hazards, there were bears and lions in many caverns—lasted for twenty thousand

years. And then, around 12,000 years ago, as the reindeer, bison, and mammoth herds of the Ice Age vanished with the melting ice and the drastically changing climate, the cave art activity came to an abrupt end. Cro-Magnon societies gave way to civilization beginning with agricultural communities and the domestication of animals in the Neolithic Revolution. The earliest writings appeared several thousand years later, and then came the copper, bronze, and iron ages. Prehistory, as we define it, ends with the invention of writing some 5,000 years ago in Mesopotamia.

Why did the cave art appear thirty millennia ago, how did it survive virtually unchanged over 200 centuries, and why did it end? What was the significance of this unusual practice? These were the questions I was eager to address.

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Niaux is one of the major decorated caves in the world. It was not the first to be discovered—some cave art was found as early as the 1870s, including the famous “Ceiling of the Bulls” in the cave of Altamira, in the Spanish region of Cantabria. In the case of Niaux, the first “gallery” of cave drawings, the so-called Black Salon, which we visited, appears half a mile deep inside the cavern. For this reason, while the cave had been known for centuries, perhaps only one person (who left his mark in the cave) had ventured all the way into its depths from the time the cave was abandoned some 13,000 years ago until the beginning of the twentieth century. Hundreds of graffiti have been

found in this cave, but all of them were made around the entrance to the cave, and certainly no more than 100 yards inside it. The oldest dated graffiti bears the year 1602.

But in 1660, a visitor named Ruben de la Vialle carved his name and the date all the way inside the Black Salon—half a mile deep inside this cavern—right next to the drawings of the animals. Did de la Vialle realize how ancient were these drawings? We don't know, and there is no evidence that anyone else had penetrated the cave to this depth. De la Vialle must have lighted his way in with fire, using a candle or torch not much different from what the Paleolithic artists who decorated this cave had used.

Negotiating this complicated underground network of cavities—which continues for six more miles underground in a part of the cave very rarely visited today, called the Castres Network—must have been a daunting task. And it was dangerous. We know that people have died when they got lost inside some of these deep caverns.

But somehow, Ruben de la Vialle made it alone all the way in. He saw this great art, and he made it back out of the cave. His footsteps have been found in the cave, showing his way in and out. There are also footsteps of the Paleolithic people who made the art, and those of ancient visitors who entered the cave still in the Ice Age, a couple of thousand years after the artists had left. These Ice-Age visitors were two women and two young children, as revealed by an analysis of their footsteps. They too made it all the way in to the Black Salon. We know this because the cave environment was undisturbed

by wind or fire or much geological erosion, and therefore ancient footsteps inside remained intact for millennia.

Once de la Vialle had left the Cave of Niaux in 1660, the beautiful ancient drawings of the Black Salon were not to be seen again for almost 250 years. The artists clearly aimed—and succeeded—at hiding their drawings well.

On September 21, 1906, the Paleolithic treasure hidden in the depth of Niaux was discovered. That day, two young brothers, Paul and Jules Molard, and their father, known only as Capitain Molard in the rural region of the lower central Pyrenees, were hiking in the woods. The boys and their father were in the habit of spending their time leisurely exploring the countryside around their vacation home in the nearby hamlet of Sabart, and by late September, they had discovered several previously-unknown cavities in the craggy terrain of these steep hills, often by climbing with ropes on cliffs that were very difficult to reach.

On the morning of the 21st, they were hiking near the entrance to Niaux, and entered the cave to find the graffiti in the first hall. This part of the cave had been known for many decades. But the three men decided to venture farther in. Rocks were covering the entrance to the corridor that continued into the depth of the cavern, and they removed them one by one and filed through the very narrow entrance they had made. Excitedly, the two boys continued and reached the dry bed of the ancient lake, where only the Magdalenians and Ruben de la Vialle had tread, and came to the second narrowing of the cavern. Their father followed a few yards behind. They climbed up through this last

hurdle, and when they shone their lights on the face of what we now call the Black Salon, they were stunned to discover it covered with spectacular drawings of bison and horses and ibexes.

That evening, Capitain Molard went over to his neighbor's house. This neighbor was the well known French prehistorian Félix Garrigou. The latter, too old and frail to venture into the cave his friend had just described to him, immediately wrote a letter to Professor Émile Cartailhac, a prehistorian at the University of Toulouse. Cartailhac, upon receipt of the letter with the exciting news about the new discovery, rushed to the site of Niaux, bringing with him the most important expert on Paleolithic art, the French scholar Abbé Henri Breuil (1877-1961). The pair of experts authenticated the drawings as Paleolithic (rather than present-day or at most a few hundred years old), and Breuil, who was a good artist, copied many of the drawings, which were published and roused much interest among prehistorians and the general public.

As a result of this publicity, the cave of Niaux attracted huge attention, and tours were led here regularly. People marveled at the detailed art created by our Cro-Magnon ancestors and were intrigued by the mysterious signs that abound here.

But the pattern of major art being hidden in the deepest parts of caves, accompanied by marginal art in the periphery, and signs at specific locations within a cave, appears in every important decorated cave in the *Franco-Cantabrian region*, which comprises Cantabria and the French Dordogne (also called Périgord), Lot, Ardèche, and the Pyrenees. In the following chapters we will explore many of these caves and consider

the theories that have been proposed in an effort to explain the mystery of the practice of decorating deep caves.

ⁱ In an interesting article about cave art in *The New Yorker* (June 23, 2008), Judith Thurman described an experiment in which the guides who have been working at Niaux for years tried to see if they could find their way out of the cave without light. Not one of them could.