Anthropology without Informants

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Before embarking on a somewhat speculative discussion of the nature of Paleolithic art and its environment, I should like to qualify what I am about to write. First of all, we ought never to attempt to explain what we do know—the Paleolithic decorations themselves—in terms of something we cannot know or do not know, such as their supposed religious/magical significance. It seems evident to me that Paleolithic art must be approached empirically. We must try to understand it in its own terms. What seem to us to be logical meanings or connections of figures are probably quite unlike the meanings and connections the Paleolithic artists saw. Nor does getting free from our own ethnocentrism to draw on ethnographic analogy—in this case the study of the ways in which living non-Western peoples such as Bushmen, Australian Aborigines, or Eskimos, make, use, and interpret their art—clarify the purposes of artistic production and interpretation that characterized the very different cultures of the Paleolithic past. All of today’s societies, hunter/gatherers as well as urban capitalists, have equally long histories of adaptation to the changing world around them. None has remained static and frozen in time. All cultures are parts of ecosystems that are constantly in flux, so the idea that an adaptation made long ago could be preserved unchanged for millennia is an absurdity. There are no living Paleolithic peoples. They all vanished some 10,000 years ago, and no modern people are their
living representatives. The Paleolithic cultures are extinct, and consequently, it is highly likely that many of the ways they thought and behaved have vanished without trace, being replaced by newer ways that conveyed some advantage as living conditions changed. Despite these cautions, I believe that there is utility in the postulate that at least some Paleolithic caves, including some decorated Paleolithic caves, served as sanctuaries. But I repeat that my comments are not intended to be an explanation of Paleolithic art; they are rather my own interpretation of some of its documents and their occurrences.

The pioneers in the study of Paleolithic art—the Abbé Breuil, Max Raphael, Annette Laming, André Leroi-Gourhan, Herbert Kühn among them (Breuil 1952: esp. 52–53; Raphael 1945; Laming-Emperaire 1962; Leroi-Gourhan 1964, 1965; Kühn 1956a, 1956b)—were uniformly in agreement that many or most caves containing Paleolithic depictions, or at least some portions thereof, are prehistoric “sanctuaries.” As Siegfried Geidion succinctly put it: “the depths of the caverns were holy places where, with the aid of magically potent symbolic pictures, sacred rituals could be performed” (Geidion 1962: 525). However, none of those authors defined in any further detail what they meant by the term “sanctuary,” nor have they told us what kinds of archeological remains a sanctuary might leave for the prehistorian to recover. It is true that many modern visitors experience feelings of unease and reverential awe while viewing incredibly ancient decorations in the depths of a cavern, but those may simply be a reaction to the unfamiliarity of the experience, or the prior expectations of the visitor, and are not in themselves sufficient reason to believe that all caves where such feelings are experienced were truly prehistoric sanctuaries.

### SANCTUARY: A DEFINITION

Let me define a sanctuary as a “holy place”: a symbolically structured space set apart from the routine activities of daily living, and dedicated to the performance of activities that establish culturally patterned interactions with a culturally postulated supernatural, including activities intended to promote the inculcation of, and reflection by the communicant on, culturally patterned beliefs about the relationship between the natural world and the culturally postulated supernatural. In the case of the Paleolithic caves, the symbolic alteration of the natural space that makes a sanctuary may be the deliberate construction of buildings and features, or decoration, or both. However, these alterations must be “out of the ordinary”—that is, both unusual and inexplicable in terms of workaday routine. Usually the fact that sanctuaries were set apart from the (other) routines of daily life is suggested by the absence in them of the wastes and discards of more strictly economic activities, but contemporary or later reuse of sanctuaries may invalidate this criterion, so that need not always be the case, and more evidence than that, in the form of intentionally patterned remains of other types, is required. The phrase “culturally postulated supernatural” is meant to include conceptions of those powerful “natural forces” that are thought to control the survival and prosperity of humans as individual members of social groups,
and the resources on which they depend. So, particular sanctuaries need have no relationship to concepts of divinity or spirituality sustained by mainstream modern religions; they can be the loci of operations designed to establish or maintain a positive balance of relationships between humans and those natural forces.

Be aware that we do not suggest that all caves with Paleolithic levels, or all caves with Paleolithic wall art, are sanctuaries in this sense. The simple-minded equation of painted cave and sanctuary must be rejected. Decorated cave sites may have served a great many purposes. And those purposes must have changed over time. As a modern example of such change, the church of Hagia Sophia, once a Christian sanctuary, was transformed first into an Islamic sanctuary, and then into a museum. The cave of Altamira, too, is now a museum, which was certainly not its function when its remarkable polychromes were produced. The identification of places that may have served as sanctuaries must rest on solid evidence of their extraordinary character, and its relationship to behavior of the time, rather than on the ill-defined feelings of awe that they produce in today’s viewer.

Just as the painted caves undoubtedly had multiple and sometimes changing functions, so too did the depictions themselves. It is certainly not the case, as many think Breuil suggested, that all of Paleolithic art was produced by specialized groups of dedicated and trained “professional” artists and ritual practitioners. The inexpert quality of some depictions in some galleries suggests that they might have been produced playfully, by persons who were not trained artists. Some decorations may simply be means of “domesticating” space: of turning the apparently chaotic and threatening natural cave environment into culturally organized space, whose formerly confusing galleries are now made comfortingly familiar by the presence of familiar figures on the walls and ceilings. Cave decorations illustrating the nature and behavior of the major prey animals, or suggesting how to deal with predators, had educational value, and made it possible for those who had successfully dealt with problematic or dangerous encounters to share their experiences with others in vivid fashion. Partaking with others in the production or viewing of cave art might have served several purposes. It was a socially integrative mechanism, reinforcing group solidarity. By creating a symbolic environment where the spatial separation between hunters and their prey was denied, it gave the illusion of control over nature, thus allaying anxieties that the hunt might be unsuccessful. When the hunt did fail, producing and viewing the art provided a supplementary source of gratification, relieving individual and group anxieties and restoring the hunters’ confidence in their prowess and eventual success. When the hunt was successful, communal rituals centered in the painted caves might have served to reintegrate successful hunters with their communities, restoring the balance of nature, perhaps atoning for the violence of the hunt, and giving thanks to the prey for their voluntary sacrifice, and by providing all communicants a feeling of collective participation and accomplishment, reducing the envy of those less successful or less competent members of the group. We should also bear in mind that overpainting or superimposition of figures, or the imposition of meandering lines over earlier depictions, may not have been done by the group that originally produced the decorations. It may instead indicate an
attempt to alter and reinterpret, or deface and obliterate, figures originally produced by a group that used symbols that differed from and were considered foreign to, or even opposed to, the values of a later group of decorators.

Let me proceed to demonstrate that some Paleolithic sites do contain true sanctuaries as I have defined them, using concrete examples drawn from my own research experience in Cantabria. In the last thirty or so years, careful excavations, combining scrupulous vertical control and the exposure of relatively large expanses of single occupation levels in some Paleolithic sites, have shown that contrary to usual preconceptions, the different sectors of many archaeological levels are neither chaotic nor random in contents, nor were the activities performed in prehistory conducted uniformly (or equally) in all parts of a site. This should not be news to anyone, but its implications invalidate the traditional idea that any sample of a hundred or more tools from a particular level will be characteristic of all the artifacts contained in the level, and adequate (as good as any other) for the assignment of the assemblage from that level to a particular Paleolithic industrial complex. It also contradicts the traditional belief that any difference between assemblages is mostly due to the evolution of industrial complexes over time, or (in the case of the Mousterian facies, for instance) to the differences between the assemblages that characterize distinct identity-conscious socio-cultural groups—tribes or what have you. The different areas in a single occupation site can be shown to have had different functions, and some of those areas are appropriately called sanctuaries.

THE EARLY AURIGNACIAN MORTUARY COMPLEX AT CUEVA MORÍN

As a first example of a level containing a Paleolithic sanctuary, let me describe an Early Aurignacian occupation at Cueva Morín. There, in one and the same level, there was a hut foundation with fireplace and cooking debris, separated, by a screen wall supported by wooden posts, from a distinct area dedicated to the burial of deceased members of the group.

It is the nature of the structures in this area and their contents that indicate it to have been a sanctuary; it lacks artistic decorations. Southwest of the posthole alignment, between it and the cave wall, we found in 1969 two excavated tombs, each covered by a mound of dark earth. Part of these mounds had been removed by excavations earlier in the twentieth century. The best-preserved tomb complex consisted of a trench containing the three-dimensional soil shadow or pseudomorph in fine sediment of a tall Aurignacian human, probably male. The pseudomorph had its arms bound to its chest, and its head and feet were severed from the body—the head was found in the grave beneath the rest of the body. Atop the upper body we found the pseudomorph of a small ungulate, and what seems to have been a slab of animal ribs was deposited on the legs before burial. Next to the grave proper, at the level of the thighs, there was a small pit containing burnt bone fragments and red ochre. An earthen mound covered the tomb, and during its construction a small fire, intense enough to redden the underlying mound fill, had been lit atop it—it
too contained burnt bone. This hearth was covered by another layer of mound fill. In the process of digging this grave, designated Morín I, the prehistoric cave residents destroyed the remains of an earlier burial (Morín III), whose legs, intentionally truncated and charred, were found in the base of the trench containing the later burial. To the south of the tomb of Morín I was another smaller grave, Morín II, but the organic material found in this one was a formless deposit of a rank-smelling buttery substance rather than a pseudomorph. Beside this grave, near its narrower end, there was another “offering pit” filled with burnt bone and ochre, and this one communicated with the interior of the trench by means of a narrow tube (see also González Echegaray et al. 1973; Freeman and González Echegaray 1973; González Echegaray and Freeman 1978). We interpreted the mutilation of the two cadavers of Morín I and Morín III, and the presence of food offerings in and near the graves, as indications of concern for the possible survival of the physical form after death, while we think that the location of the burial complex, in close proximity to the hut foundation, shows that the deceased ancestors were thought to continue as part of the social group, but with a change of status. Clearly, the physical remains of the deceased became unimportant after a short time, as witnessed by the callous disturbance of Morín III to bury Morín I. Morín, of course, is not unique. Elaborately treated burial precincts are known from other Paleolithic sites. But Morín provided a wealth of detail that is often missing from the reports of earlier excavations, which makes it an especially convincing example. In several respects, the Morín burial complex has all the earmarks of a sanctuary: it was used for purposes apart from daily routines, and was the scene of performance of elaborate rituals that must have some connection with a supernatural world. Yet the Morín mortuary area belongs to a very special subset of “holy area.” It is more than just a cemetery as an area for disposal of bodies of the dead: it is their temporary repository while their material substance dissipated, the site of ritual treatment to facilitate their transition from this life to the afterlife, from the natural world of the living to the supernatural world of the ancestors.

### THE SANCTUARY AND FACE AT EL JUYO

The second case concerns finds at our more recent and extensive excavations at the cave of el Juyo near Igollo. In the latest Cantabrian Earlier Magdalenian occupation at this cave site (Level 4), Dr. González Echegaray and I found a large structural complex, containing curiously patterned debris of a highly unusual nature (see, e.g., Freeman and González Echegaray 1995).

This complex consists of a nearly 2-meter-deep semicircular dugout depression, some 6.5 square meters in area, whose straight side opens to the northwest. Its curved side is walled with a lining of small fragments of limestone, often held in place by a mortar of clay. Along its northern portion, the west side of the structure is partly closed by a large flat limestone slab. Inside the dugout we found three smaller trenches, each filled and covered by elongated mounds. The fill of the trenches and the mounds consisted of from four to seven pairs of alternating levels of (1) usually...
reddened earth, ash, and elongated goods such as spear-points and the atrophied lateral phalanges of deer (“offering levels”), deposited paralleling the long axis of the mounds; (2) other layers of mottled earth partly brought into the cave from outside, partly dug from underlying occupation levels in the cave, which were deposited as cylindrical lots, almost all of them ca. 10 centimeters in diameter; these lots were usually arranged in groups of seven (“fill levels”). The cylinders of fill—there were apparently more than 1,200 of them—appear to have been carefully deposited from thin-walled cylindrical containers. In some areas they were easy to detect because adjacent cylinders contrasted in color; in others their presence was betrayed by differences in texture and the vertical orientation of included artifacts along the sides of the containers. Associated with these mounds were four small pits containing mollusk shells and other objects, especially eyed needles, and one of the pits contained the masterful cutout contour of a hind’s head; the complex also included two accumulations of fossil shells, each containing a single whistle made of a hollowed nodule of iron oxide. And, set into a wall made of clay and large stones, facing the cave entry so as to dominate the whole complex, was the large (35 × 32 × 22 centimeters) stone face or “mask” of a hybrid being, divided along its midline into two sides, its proper right a human face with beard and moustache, its proper left a large cat, probably a cave lion. The last rays of the setting sun would have entered the cave to strike the face on what would have been the summer solstice 14,000 years ago.

As a final act before its Magdalenian occupants abandoned the cave, never to return, the complex, mounds, face, and all, was covered by a pavement of stones, including one huge flat slab measuring 2 meters × 1.2 meters × 15 centimeters, and weighing about half a ton, that seems to have been carried some distance from its source. Two shallow hearths encrusted in this pavement were aligned with the top of the stone face, perhaps as a cryptic indication of its location. This would seem to indicate the great importance of the precinct in the system of beliefs and behavior of the cave occupants, and their desire to conceal and protect it during their absence. We consider there to be sufficient reason, from the lack of evidence of routines of daily life within it, the strikingly anomalous nature and relationships of the materials it contained, and the elaboration and painstaking detail with which its structures were built and finally hidden, to call this complex a sanctuary, and the face the representation of a supernatural being with central significance to the beliefs and activities focused on the sanctuary. (Curiously, though the nature of the sanctuary, its orientation, and the character of the face suggest beliefs and rituals that are associated with death in more recent periods, there is no direct evidence that human remains played any part in whatever rites were performed there.)

These two cases should be sufficient to demonstrate that precincts that are legitimately called sanctuaries do exist in Upper Paleolithic contexts. The third and last case I shall discuss, and the one most relevant to this volume, is that of the decorated cave of Altamira (Freeman and González Echegaray 2001). I shall try to show from the nature and organization of its depictions and archeological deposits that the term “sanctuary” is appropriately applied to this cave and its decorated areas, as well.
ALTAMIRA: THE POLYCHROMES ON THE “GREAT CEILING”

The first piece of relevant evidence is that there is no significant occupation debris in the painted precincts at Altamira. Certainly, a small number of tools and other residues have been found below the Great Ceiling, as elsewhere in the cave. But the true occupation levels, with more than a small scattering of objects, are restricted to the vestibule nearer the cave entry, an area a few meters from the paintings, and any material found beneath the painted ceiling could have been accidentally scuffed there from the intensively occupied vestibule. There is no doubt that routine economic activities such as cooking and waste disposal took place in the vestibule, so the absence of any accumulation of such living debris under the paintings is significant. The use of the decorations as a cultural means of organization of unfamiliar and confusing space, a plausible motive for the decoration of some caves, is very unlikely at Altamira, since there is no conceivable way for a visitor who has enough light to see the figures on the Great Ceiling—or elsewhere, for that matter—to become disoriented.

The decorations in true sanctuaries are known to reflect a society’s most fundamental beliefs and values. Consequently, they are not to be displayed in haphazard fashion, but are systematically organized. There is overwhelming evidence that the nature and placement of the famous polychrome figures on Altamira’s Great Ceiling are not random, but obey strict principles of planning and organization. The evidence is the following. Obviously, all the figures are polychromes, a fact that by itself makes them stand apart as a stylistically and technically homogeneous group. All the bison are depicted as of approximately the same size, between one and a half and two meters in maximum dimension, and very much larger than all but one of the other figures on the ceiling and walls of the chamber. There is unity in subject matter, as well, since all but three of the figures are now correctly identified as bison, and those three (deer and horses) are symbiotic species, creatures whose ranges overlap with each other and with that of the bison, so that they can and do share the same habitat. In position and arrangement the figures form a patterned composition. Modern viewers of Western art are used to the idea that a composition should have a “ground line,” atop which the feet of all standing figures should rest. While there is no ground line at Altamira, nevertheless the legs of all the standing animals are all oriented in the same general direction, more or less southward. None is either “upside down” or even “perpendicular” with reference to the other standing bison. That is equally true for the hind and the standing horse. The reclining or wallowing animals, all bison, are all “perpendicular” to the standing animals, and all have their heads to the north and their backs to the west. While the artists have sometimes incorporated natural bulges or hollows on the ceiling into the depictions of particular animals, to suggest the three-dimensional volume of their bodies, the outlines of one polychrome figure never interfere or overlap with those of any other, with one exception. In that single case we see two animals that were deliberately drawn sharing a single pair of hind legs, rather than an accidental or careless superimposition of
unrelated figures. It is abundantly evident to any open-minded observer that the artists followed a plan for the placement of the animals that was carefully thought out and systematically executed. The polychromes seen together form a harmonious and integrated whole. In fact, most of the figures in other galleries of the cave are also arranged in orderly compositions, whose organization is as well expressed in its Final Gallery as on its Great Ceiling. That means, of course, that any attempt to understand the individual figures must consider them as interrelated parts of the larger composition, whose meaning is more than the isolated animals that compose it.

As a preliminary to their understanding, we must start with what we know, the characteristics of the animals and their arrangement, and in the process we must at least consider the possibility that an observed composition may in fact be a faithful reflection of a normal, expectable association of free-ranging animals. In many, perhaps most, cases the interpretation of a composition including several animals as a literal representation of a familiar natural scene is far and away its simplest and most logical explanation, no matter what its deeper symbolic meaning may be. Without first understanding what (if any) natural association is portrayed by considering all its details, we cannot hope to reach its deeper levels of meaning.

The principal composition on the Great Ceiling is the group of large polychromes. Since all the figures once considered to be wild boars are now correctly identified as bison, this composition consists of animals of three species: some twenty bison; possibly two cervids: a large and stretched-out figure at one end of the composition, another debatable figure that Breuil saw atop another bison; and possibly two horses (both the full profile and the large head). The co-existence of these three species in nature is well-known. Bison are the most numerous animals depicted, and thus the richest source of analytical information. The artists have depicted both adult male bison and adult females of that species. Bulls are easy to recognize, since the prepuce of an adult bull is often clearly visible on the animal standing in profile, the favorite attitude of the Paleolithic artist. Recognizable representations of cows are more difficult to produce than are those of males, since the distinctive sexual attribute of the cow is her udder, so much smaller than in domestic milk cows that it is virtually invisible when the animal is shown in the broadside standing position. The artists have been at some pains to show their audience that cows are present, illustrating several animals rolling in the dust, with hind legs spread. In one case, the udder of the wallowing animal is clearly displayed, and the other rolling animals may be cows as well. There is marked sexual dimorphism among bison. The bulls are much more robustly built, more heavily bearded, and have more massive, rounded heads and deeper chests than the slighter, more angular cows. There are animals with both builds on the Great Ceiling, and one might have guessed that cows as well as bulls were probably shown, but there could have been no proof of this without the displayed udder on the wallowing cow.

Recognizing that adult bison of both sexes are unquestionably represented helps us decipher other aspects of meaning of the composition. The social organization of European bison is known in some detail. Some early observations of native bison were made, and they are in agreement with the more detailed studies of
reestablished herds in the Bielowicza forest/heathlands in Poland. During most of the year, adult bulls are solitary, while adult cows form small herds with their young. However, adult bulls and cows come together in larger herds annually, during the breeding season (Hainard 1949). Altamira’s artists deliberately depicted a herd of bison in breeding condition, during the period of rut. The polychromes include several curiously posed animals, in stereotypic postures that are characteristic of the rut. These unusual postures have not been recognized for what they are by most modern investigators. Once the possibility is entertained that the composition depicts a herd of rutting bison, however, one recognizes in those curious poses some of the stereotyped species-specific attitudes that are peculiar to or at least most common during the season of the rut.

Such are, for example, two of the male bison. The first seems to be a young male, back exaggeratedly humped and tail up. The second is a large male, whose head and forequarters were badly copied by Breuil. In both cases, the animals’ attitudes, their hunched backs and upraised tails, are characteristic of sexually excited animals.

A female is shown with tail raised, back arched, neck stretched forward, and head straining upward open-mouthed. She has always been correctly identified as a mooing cow, but more important, this tense bellowing posture is typical of cows at the peak of sexual excitement. Her figure overlaps that of a large male, whose body may be seen quite clearly as a darker shape within her outline. The two apparently share a single pair of hind legs, a convention we shall see again in a pair of engraved bison in the Final Gallery. What is more, the same subject matter seems to be depicted in the two cases: a cow mounting a bull in a pre-copulatory ritual characteristic of bison and other bovids.

Even the arrangement of the group is typical of a herd of rutting bison. The females are in the center of the group, as they would be in the middle of the herd, surrounded by the adult males. Four of the central animals (at least two of whom are apparently female) are shown rolling or wallowing, and dust-wallowing, a characteristic of the behavior of bison of both sexes in wild herds, has been noted to be especially frequent in the breeding season, and may serve as a “displacement activity” for sexually excited animals. On the edges of the composition, male bison face the center of the group, as though they were confronting the other males closer to the center. Battles between peripheral males and senior, dominant males are also characteristic of the breeding behavior of these large bovids. In short, in every detail the attributes, attitudes, and positions of the polychrome bison on the Great Ceiling are characteristic of a herd of free-ranging bison during the breeding season.

The recognition that the composition shows a rutting bison herd (and associated other animals) leads to further interpretations, for like most large mammals, bison are seasonal breeders. The period of the rut is late summer, from July through September. Consequently, there is a temporal component to the meanings of the Altamira polychromes, as well. The artists apparently intended their depictions to suggest the late summer, although there is no reason why the paintings would have had to be produced at that season. In fact, the ceiling could have been decorated at any time of the year.
The bison are often outlined with fine-line engraving, or have engraved details. Although neither Breuil nor Leroi-Gourhan seems to have paid special attention to the fact, on several of the polychromes—at least five—there are linear scraped areas or long groups of fine lines forming narrow shapes that look like the shafts of spears penetrating the bodies of the bison. Breuil mistook one of these linear forms for the back of a “wolf” he recorded on one of the bison. The lack of attention Breuil gave to these lines is somewhat surprising, since the symbolic spearing of animals fits so well with his interpretation that much of Paleolithic art was motivated by the concerns of “hunting magic.” In fact, there may be some truth to his interpretation in this case. Rutting animals are known to be less wary of hunters, making them easier to approach and perhaps to kill than they are when they are not in breeding condition.

There are many other figures in the Great Hall, but they neither add nor detract much from this interpretation. The monochrome figures, including the archaic-looking red drawings on its southern part, which may make up a still earlier composition, are a repetition of the bison theme, with additional horses, aurochs, deer (the supposed moose are probably stylized red deer), and ibex. Since they would seem to correspond so well to his theory of bovine-horse opposition, it is surprising that Leroi-Gourhan ignored these figures in his analysis (1965). In addition there is a small number of hands, including both lefts and rights, one positive, the rest negative. The painted signs, interesting though they are, add little to the previous interpretation.

ALTAMIRA: ENGRAVINGS ON THE GREAT CEILING

The engraved mammals, on the other hand, seem to make up a different but complementary composition that reflects, as did the polychromes, a concern for the reproduction of important food animals. But in this case, unlike the polychrome series, the engraved series is principally concerned with the herds of red deer. The engraved deer include both complete or near-complete figures, and some 20 isolated heads, all of which seem to be of hinds. As was the case for the polychrome bison, both adult males and females are represented among the engraved cervids. And, as with their bovine counterparts, stags spend most of the year apart from the hinds and young, traveling alone or in pairs, while the females and fawns form separate herds. Stags and hinds will usually not herd together except during the autumn rutting season, from September through October, though they may be found together in winter in areas where snowfall is heavy. But in this case, too, the Altamira artists have left us in no doubt as to the season intended. The engraved figures include a calling or “belling” male, in a stereotyped posture characteristic of rutting deer. Breeding herds characteristically consist of a single male and a harem of as many females as he can defend, and belling is an important means of signaling territory and maintaining control over the harem (Laurent 1974). There are as well a few engraved horses or horses’ heads. It is also interesting to note that an engraved bison’s head nearby, that looks quasi-human, recalls the hybrid bison/human masks in the Final Gallery, to be described in another paper. In marked contrast to the polychromes, engraved figures of deer greatly outnumber the bison or other engraved animals. What is more,
there is but a single isolated head among the polychromes, outnumbered by the many depictions of whole animals. But among the engravings, the majority are not whole animals, but isolated heads. It is likely that these contrasts are deliberate, and that the two compositions (the polychromes and the engravings) stand in a special relationship to each other. That idea, as we shall see later, is strengthened by figures in the rest of the cave.

If the polychromes and engravings of the Great Ceiling are any indication, there can be no doubt that sexual differentiation of individuals within a single species was an important element of symbolic classification to the artists at Altamira. This is clear enough in the case of the cervids, where secondary sexual characteristics obviously set off the predominantly female animals from antlered males. The illustration of primary and secondary sexual characteristics of bison of the two sexes is a significant aspect of the organization of the polychromes. A concern for true, rather than analogical, sexual complementarity, and an obvious interest in procreation, are even more clearly manifest in the painting of pre-copulatory ritual of rutting bison, also represented by one of the principal engravings in the Final Gallery. Only the uncritical imposition of preconceived classificatory schemes of a higher degree of abstraction kept Breuil, Raphael, Leroi-Gourhan, and the others who have gone before us from recognizing the subject matter of the Great Ceiling correctly. Had they proceeded otherwise, having the slightest familiarity with the behavior of the depicted animals, even their captive or domestic relatives, they would certainly have recognized the artists’ concern for sexual differentiation of individuals and the reproductive behavior of two of their principal food animals.

The engravings on the Great Ceiling include at least seven unusual anthropomorphic figures, most obviously male, with distorted heads. Three of these are within or right next to the large hind, three near one of the male bison, and one just below another. Although these figures are by no means as realistic representations as the engraved or painted animals, they look enough like people to be identified as human figures. The figures stand erect with their arms upraised as though they were praying (for which reason they are often called “orants”). There is little doubt that they are oriented with respect to the painted animals, whom they seem to be supplicating.

Since the engravings on the ceiling are sometimes covered by painted figures (particularly the polychromes) it is usually assumed that they are part of a previous phase of decoration. However, the close association of polychromes with some of the engraved figures, particularly several large hinds, and the attitudes of the “anthropomorphs,” suggests that they are not entirely unrelated. Whether there was actually a significant lapse of time between the engravings and the superimposed figures is less important than the thematic analogies between them.

ALTAMIRA’S GREAT CEILING: THE NATURE OF THE SPACE

The figures on the Great Ceiling are not in “ordinary space.” The floor under them has been so lowered that today’s visitor gets little impression of the precinct’s original
condition. The visitor now examines the polychromes with relative ease, but it was by no means easy to execute or to view the decorations in the prehistoric past. Imagine the condition of the great painted gallery as it was when the Paleolithic artists knew it. Its floor was rough, and its ceiling sloped irregularly downward. Where it was highest on the north side under the polychromes, the ceiling was only 2 meters above the floor, and where it was lowest to the south, it was just under 1 meter high. No erect adult could have walked about under such a low roof. The artists must have worked in extreme discomfort, spending hours squatting or kneeling, with heads tipped back at a painful angle, eyes smarting from sweat and dripping paint, arms outstretched, muscles cramped or trembling from fatigue, as they worked on the figures overhead. The projections on the ceiling were so obtrusive, the multicolored animals so large, the painters who produced them were so close to their work, that there could have been no possible way for a painter to see an entire polychrome, and maintain correct relationships between all its elements, as it progressed. Contrary to Apellániz’s conclusions (1982), the artists must often have worked in pairs or teams, some mixing color, others applying it, some drawing the animal’s outline or modeling its body by applying paint or scraping it away, while others guided the proper placement of lines and masses of color from a viewpoint that gave the correct perspective. (Incidentally, the difficulty of representing another person’s hallucinations makes this an obstacle to the “shamanistic” hypothesis of Clottes and Lewis-Williams [2001].) Under such conditions, painting is not a means of self-gratification but a laborious, exhausting, painful sacrifice. The decision to locate the largest and finest figures in the cave in such an incommodious position reflects a deliberate choice of an area that was not only painful to decorate, but inconvenient to view. In several places, visitors must have had to crouch or recline to see the paintings. To see the engravings, visitors had to move their illumination and their bodies from place to place while maintaining uncomfortable postures. The Great Ceiling required a sacrifice on the part of the viewer as well as the painter. Despite its uses today, the Great Ceiling at Altamira was not simply a sort of Paleolithic “art gallery” that would have been visited purely for pleasure. Neither was it the sort of space one used for the routines of daily life. Even if it had been accessible to anyone who wanted access, decorating or visiting it was an extraordinary experience.

The idea that Altamira was a Paleolithic sanctuary, then, seems eminently reasonable. That there is something out of the ordinary about its decorated spaces is obvious. The paucity of archeological residues under the Great Ceiling shows that that part of the chamber was treated as “special,” and was not regularly utilized for the routine activities of daily life. While all living space is culturally ordered, the symbolic organization of the decorative program at Altamira is so systematic, regular, and all-inclusive that it goes well beyond the most elaborate symbolic structure characteristic of those “secular” spaces used for mundane social and economic activities. The values and beliefs symbolized by the figures at Altamira have to do with the reproduction of the principal food resources used by the human group: especially bison and deer. The orants (and likely, as we shall show later, the engraved human-like bison’s head) show that there is more to the picture than the animals themselves:
a concern for the maintenance of a balanced relationship between humans and the natural world on which their survival depends, and for the continued well-being and growth of the human group itself. The rigor with which the organizational program is applied to the Altamira figures also indicates that it is justifiable to apply the designation “Sanctuary” to the Great Ceiling at Altamira.

**NOTES**

1. Breuil considered Paleolithic art to have been an integral part of ceremonies conducted by “cult ministers,” that were held in specially dedicated sanctuaries, the painted galleries. There, “se sont déroulées des cérémonies sacrées, dirigées sans doute par les grands initiés de l’époque et introduisant les novices à recevoir, à leur tour, les instructions fondamentales nécessaires à la conduite de leur existence. Les fresques, les gravures exécutées par les ancêtres étaient l’objet de gestes rituels et l’occasion des enseignements jugés indispensables, et de nouvelles fresques exécutées sur ces mêmes parois, venaient compléter la décoration de ces lieux révés” (Breuil 1952: 23). It was the influence of Breuil that generalized this idea of the decorated cave as “Sanctuary,” in whose depths took place “la recherche de véritables arcanes presque inaccessibles au vulgaire . . .” (Breuil 1952: 23).

2. For purposes of this chapter, it is unnecessary to make a distinction between “religion” and “magic,” terms now distinguished by a load of meaning and emotion that would probably have been unfamiliar to Paleolithic people.

3. Of course, we must always be aware that what we consider inexplicable in such terms may not have been so considered by the prehistoric people who used the caves in question.

4. Not everyone, nor even everyone endowed with the needed talent, became a producing artist, according to Breuil. Art was, he believed, not an individual phenomenon, but “un fait social, collectif, témoignant d’une véritable unité spirituelle, . . . supposant l’existence d’une sorte d’institution en régissant le développement par une sélection et un enseignement des mieux doués” (Breuil 1952: 22). Art, then, was institutionalized and its production entrusted to a select and well-trained few. Following Breuil’s argument to its logical conclusion, many who are “consumers” of archeological fact, and have written about Paleolithic art without knowing it at first hand, have promulgated the idea that every artistic product of the Upper Paleolithic is a masterpiece, an error that Breuil himself would scarcely have sustained.

5. The function of cave paintings as “transitional phenomena” is discussed more fully in Freeman et al. (1987).

6. This stereotypic behavior of bovine animals has been known since the time of Aristotle: see his *Historia Animalium* (Loeb Classical Library, 1970 [345?/342? B.C., no. 348]), vol. 2.

**REFERENCES**


