Anthropology without Informants

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In a previous chapter in this volume, I discussed some of the evidence that leads to the recognition that certain precincts in Paleolithic sites with or without decorations are truly sanctuaries, citing cases from Cueva Morín, the Cueva del Juyo, and the Great Ceiling at Altamira. But the evidence I presented for Altamira was incomplete. The cave and its decorations provide a more extensive demonstration of its uniqueness and the propriety of calling it a sanctuary in its integrity. In its decorations, the Great Ceiling bears a symbolic relationship to the depictions in the Final Gallery of the cave (also called the Cola de Caballo) that is so striking that it can only have been intentional. The central galleries at Altamira seem to serve as a sort of symbolic bridge between the decoratively richer galleries near the vestibule and the final recesses of the cavern. What is more, some of these details suggest that the Altamira sanctuary was the locus of periodic rites of transition or initiation. Before we can evaluate this suggestion, it will be necessary to complete the description of the galleries of Altamira and their depictions (Freeman and González Echegaray 2001).

ALTAMIRA’S CENTRAL GALLERIES

As one goes beyond the Great Ceiling into the central galleries of the cave, finger-engraved meanders appear on the ceiling. Another set of meanders was part of a
fallen frieze further on, where it may perhaps mark a break in the continuity of depicted subject matter. Animals in this area are represented by finger engravings, by engraving with a sharp implement, or by painting, and there seems to be no difference in the selection of species represented in each technique. The series of animal depictions begins with digital engravings of wild oxen, followed by the true engraving of a hind. Engraved horses and deer and one large bison occupy the next gallery in the sequence. Black horses are followed by the red scalariforms of the “Rincón de los Tectiformes”; its end is marked by a large patch of red paint. Along the sides of the main gallery there were friezes (one of which is now partly collapsed), with engravings of horses, deer (stags as well as hinds), an anthropomorph, and more meanders.

Further on, when the corridor turns sharply, engravings of deer vanish as if by magic, not to reappear until the Cola de Caballo. We find engraved figures of wild oxen and goats, and black drawings of horses and bison, but no deer. Black ibex are added to those animals as we pass along the next gallery, when at last the hind also reappears, but only as a single head in black outline. Black horses are found with the first enigmatic black marks (like those in the walls of the Final Gallery) and along the irregular wall we find the first “masks,” in this case less well defined than they are in the Cola de Caballo. In these intermediate galleries, the figures and their relationships correspond more and more closely to the symbols and organization of the Final Gallery as we progress in the direction of that gallery from the Great Ceiling.

ALTAMIRA’S FINAL GALLERY: THE COLA DE CABALLO

When we began our part in the 1980s reevaluation of Altamira and its depictions, we chose to invest a great deal of effort in a reexamination of the Final Gallery of the cave. (The methods we employed are described in great detail, with our conclusions, in an earlier report [Freeman et al. 1987].) This gallery, also called the “Cola de Caballo” from its fancied resemblance to that appendage, has a number of characteristics that make it an ideal laboratory for the testing of recording methods and the development of analytical techniques concerning the importance of positioning and relationship in the organization of Paleolithic art. It could be studied as an “isolate” (though we now know that it is not unrelated to other parts of the cave), and it is small enough (just 70 meters long, usually less than 2 meters wide, and sometimes even narrower, and from less than a meter to about 2 meters in height) so that it could be examined completely in a reasonable time. An adult can usually touch the walls on either side without having to move from the middle of the track. In addition to these spatial constraints, the gallery is richly decorated, with fingertip meanders, deep and fine-line engraving, and black drawings, some representing animals, others depicting complex geometric figures, and others that are just “marks.” Its size and the shape of its corridors naturally constrained the ways the Paleolithic artist could place the decorations, as well as the ways they would later be viewed or studied. The gallery makes many sharp bends that divide its topography into clearly distinct
sections. The walls and ceiling of the gallery are highly irregular, covered with projections and crevices that provide a large number of surfaces suitable for decoration, and these irregularities keep many of the figures from being seen from anywhere but one strategic viewpoint. These characteristics make it possible to deduce where the Stone Age artist or viewer stood (or crouched, or lay) to produce or see such figures, and in what direction he or she must have been looking at the time. Since there is only one way into the gallery, and one way out following the same track, we can even establish the most probable order in which most of the figures were intended to be seen, to determine which were seen entering and which were only visible on the return trip. Of course, this is much harder, usually impossible, for larger, more open spaces. Our first step was to produce an accurate map of the Final Gallery, locating on it each and every figure we detected.

The twists, bends, and irregularities of this gallery subdivide it into six distinct segments or corridors, that we have given names. With one exception (the “Empty Corridor”) each of them contains decorations, including a total of 74 masses of undecipherable charcoal lines and patches. The other depictions are one positive handprint in black, two patches of finger meanders (one that is an extension of the meanders at the entry into the first five meters of the first corridor), several black tectiforms, several engravings including both geometrics and the figures of five bison, eighteen deer, two horses, and three supposed “goats,” as well as three black outline drawings, all of which seem to portray horses. The positive handprint, near the end of the first patch of “macaroni,” is that of a youngster’s left hand, which from its outline may have worn a glove. There are also some indeterminate figures that may be clumsy or unfinished attempts to represent unidentifiable animals. One of the fine-line engravings, a bison, had been partly completed by the addition of black lines to form its haunch and foreleg, suggesting that the engravings and black line drawings in this gallery are most probably contemporaneous. A series of large projections from either wall of the Final Gallery, uncannily suggestive of the heads of humans or bison, has been minimally altered by engraving, pecking, or the addition of black lines, to enhance the resemblance. These are the so-called masks at Altamira. So far, nine certain masks are known from the Gallery.

The Empty Corridor splits these representations into two series. The two galleries nearer the entry are the Bison Gallery, where all three engraved animals are bison, and the Low Gallery, where there are four engraved animals on the ceiling, all stags, and two black outlines of horses, one on the right wall, the other on a block projecting from the floor. No engraved horses appear between the entry and the Empty Corridor. The Low Gallery ends with an engraved “geometric” figure on the ceiling, and near it, in a lateral fissure on the left wall of the corridor, there are more finger-engraved meanders.

Beyond the Empty Corridor comes a complex corridor consisting of our Gallery of Tectiforms and a wider room at its end called the Chamber of Masks. The former contains two groups of black tectiforms, each accompanied by spider-like figures (circular or oval figures with lines radiating outward) next to recesses in the right wall of the corridor, and a third engraved geometric a few meters farther on. Aside
from two horses, one of which is among the finest engravings in the cave, the other
engraved figures in this unit are three bison, including a pair of animals shown en-
gaging in stereotyped breeding ritual, the female mounting the male. The last cor-
ridor is the Cervid Gallery. It becomes so low and narrow that one must lie flat to
wriggle through it until it finally becomes impassible. There are fourteen figures of
deer, including two stags and twelve hinds, and three other animals interpreted as
goats, though they may be yearling stags instead. It is important to note that in each
series, the one before and that after the Empty Corridor, representations of bison
come first, with deer present only in the innermost part of each.

\section*{figure distribution in the final gallery}

There is much more evidence, if that were needed, that the distribution of figures in the Final Gallery is organized rather than haphazard, and that their placement cor-
responds to a carefully executed plan followed by all the artists. The divisions we de-
tected evidently provided the framework for this symbolic pattern. Even the appar-
ently random black marks obey its dictates. In the first part of the Final Gallery, there
are about twice as many of these patches of linear marks on the left wall as on the
right (20 as opposed to 12). Beyond the Empty Corridor, this lateral distribution is re-
versed, with about twice as many on the right (26) as on the left (16). The difference
is statistically significant: the likelihood that the reversal of proportions is accidental
is less than 0.05 (less likely than one chance in twenty). There are so many of them,
and they are often so far from the few black drawings, that the explanation that the
black marks may result from the artists’ sharpening their charcoal crayons as they
worked is also unreasonable, and another alternative, that they were used to blaze a
trail to be followed, is ridiculous for a corridor where there is only one possible route
in and out. Other practical reasons for the distributions have been considered, and all
rejected, leaving the conclusion that their organization is simply a reflection of the
intentional symbolic organization of space. Other evidence for lateral differentiation
comes from the placement of the engraved bison and the painted geometrics, all
on the right wall of the Gallery. All but one of the hinds’ heads are also on the right
wall of the Gallery, an apparent reflection of the fact that these figures occupied a
symbolic position that was somehow complementary to that of the bison.

However, the most revealing evidence of deliberate organization of the deco-
rations is the differential distribution of engravings of bison on the one hand and
deer on the other. In corridors where bison are found, there are never any deer, and
(of course) where there are deer there are no bison. It is remarkable to us that this
mutual exclusion, which seems so obvious, was not detected before. It is all that is
needed to show that, in the Final Gallery, cervids and bison stand symbolically in
equivalent positions in a system of complementary opposition. Contrary to Leroi-
Gourhan’s interpretation (1964), the ubiquitous horse does not seem to occupy any
particular place in this system. Figures of horses are represented in every technical
style known in the site: polychromes, red outlines, black outlines, and engravings.
Since horses are found next to both the animals that are at the poles of the comple-
mentary opposition, it is unlikely that they are themselves part of either group more than the other.

Other details of the size, positioning, and distribution of the representations help complete this interpretation. First of all, while the density of depictions of deer increases as we go deeper into the gallery, bison are if anything more numerous toward the cave entry. This difference of focus is underlined by the fact that all but one of the bison actually face the entry, while all but three of the deer face into the Final Gallery. All the engraved bison without exception are whole animals, but only six of the deer (five of them males) are whole: the other twelve are represented by heads or heads and necks alone. The bison are represented as proportionally larger in scale than the deer: only seven of the deer might be called “large” if we are generous in our usage, but all six of the bison are “large” by the same standard. The degree of aggregation represented also differentiates the two species. Except for one case (a pair of bison engaged in pre-copulatory behavior, the female mounting the male), individual engravings of bison are always some meters distant from each other (a minimum of 2.5 meters, an average of 11). Engraved deer, on the other hand, always appear in groups. True, the two major concentrations are separated by more than 30 meters. But within either concentration, that in the Low Gallery or that in the Cervid Gallery, the average distance between individual engravings on the same wall is just over 1 meter, and the closest non-superimposed figures actually touch. In the Cervid Gallery, the distance between any engraved deer and another on the opposite wall may be as little as 1 meter and is never greater than a meter and a half. These observations all reinforce the interpretation of bison and deer as symbolically related by the principle of complementary opposition.

Possible correlates of the symbolic opposition of deer and bison that would have been meaningful to prehistoric hunters are not hard to find. The fact that representations of deer far outnumber those of bison is in accord with the archeological evidence from Altamira’s Paleolithic levels, where the most abundant mammal bones are those of red deer. Deer were probably a more frequent prey, and a more frequent dietary item, than were bison (and deer were certainly more common than bison in the landscape). Deer and bison contrast markedly in behavior, as well. Deer remain hidden as much as possible, do not move about much during the day, and (except during the rut) are timid, skittish, and difficult to approach. Bison, on the other hand, are ordinarily highly visible animals, and are active during the day. Deer fall prey to wolves and other large predators quite frequently, while adult bison are such large, powerful creatures that herds are relatively untroubled by non-human predators. Descriptions of techniques used in the bison hunt by Plains Indians before the introduction of the horse and firearms indicate that the animals allowed stealthy hunters (sometimes disguised in wolf- or deerskins) to approach nearly within arm’s reach of them before moving away. (Hunters armed with spears or bows sometimes approached the herd concealed behind horses, when they had them.) There was in fact a quite peculiar relationship between these majestic beasts and their human hunters, involving aspects of prey behavior and techniques and organization of the hunt, that clearly differentiate deer from bison as subjects for physical, mental, and
cultural manipulation. The analogical relationship of people and bison in the art of the Final Gallery suggests that people thought of themselves, as well as the bison, as essentially unthreatened, dominant creatures of their kind in a usually predictable and benevolent environment.

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THE MASKS IN THE FINAL GALLERY

There is one other kind of decoration in the Final Gallery, the eerie, minimally retouched natural projections that are conventionally called “masks.” They are in many ways the most remarkable of the decorations in the Final Gallery. These are natural head-like projections from the cave wall that resemble face-on or profile heads of men or animals. Each of them has been deliberately modified to make their naturally suggestive appearance still more evocative, just as was the case for the face in the sanctuary at el Juyo. In the course of our investigations, we discovered six of these figures, which when added to the three already known raises the total to nine. The presence of masks is not restricted to Altamira among Cantabrian sites. There is a particularly fine example of a large mask representing the profile of a bison in the cave of Castillo. A smaller, frontally viewed face of a small horned animal was also found in the same site (Alcalde del Río, Breuil, and Sierra 1912: esp. fig. 144, lams. 62, 85, 86), next to what may be yet a third such figure.

Most of the masks at Altamira are clearly intended to represent bison. One is the frontal view of a human face. There are also three that while apparently representing bison also suggest human features, or, in one case, represent a hybrid figure that from one viewpoint is a bison, but becomes very man-like when viewed from a different perspective. The conclusion is inescapable that the artists intended to represent a transformational series, including figures that are bison in every respect, figures that are wholly human, and hybrid figures that establish a symbolic equivalence between the two species.

Masks are related in both subject matter and frequency to other depictions in the Final Gallery. The relationship between the engraved whole bison and the bison masks is in many ways analogous to the relationship between whole engraved deer and engravings of deer heads. If the masks are included in the count of bison figures, however, the density of depictions of bison increases from the Bison Gallery to the Chamber of the Masks, just as the deer increase from the Low Gallery to the Cervid Gallery. Beyond the Empty Corridor, the ratio of heads to whole deer is 9 to 5, while the ratio of masks to whole bison is 5 to 3. The difference between the ratios is negligible. Near identity in proportions in this case confirms the postulated correspondence, leading us to conclude that consciously or not, the Paleolithic artists intended these figures to be compared, weighing one against the other.

But there are also major differences between the series “whole deer + deer heads” and “whole bison + bison masks.” All the masks are very much larger than the heads of the engraved bison, but that is only true for a minority (three of twelve) of the deer heads. While six of the nine masks are on the left wall, all six engraved bison are on the right, as are all but one of the heads in the Cervid Gallery. These
differences are statistically significant, and there is a very small probability of their
being due to chance. So, while the bison + mask group is intended to be seen as
somehow related to the engraved deer head + whole deer group, the relationship
indicated is not one of equivalence. Neither the sequences nor the species are in-
tended to be seen as interchangeable. The difference becomes clearer when the mask
distribution is examined more closely.

THE FINAL GALLERY: EQUIVALENCE
AND TRANSCENDENCE

The largest concentration of the masks (four) is found in the Mask Chamber. This is
the room where the figurative depiction of bison reproduction in the Final Gallery
is located. It is also the room in which the masks make the clearest statement of the
equivalence of humans and bison. In that sense, the Mask Chamber is a focal part
of the Final Gallery—the locus of a most important condensation of fundamental
symbolic values. These symbolic statements are distinctly separated from the cham-
ber filled with cervids. They embody aspects of belief that differentiate bison from
deer.

The positions of the remaining masks indicate that they also serve other im-
portant symbolic functions. Those five masks are strategically sited at liminal points
along the Final Gallery where there is a fundamental change in the nature of the
decorations, as if they were the guardians of “gates” or portals through which one
passed as one symbolic assertion was completed and another began. Most often,
the masks at these portals are all but hidden from view until the visitor is right atop
them, when they suddenly spring into the peripheries of the visual field in a way that
can be startling even to the viewer who is familiar with the experience. All the “Mask
Gates” but one are marked by a single mask. The other, the first gate one sees on en-
tering and the last on leaving, is flanked by a pair of masks, one on either side of the
corridor, but even in this case, only one was intended to be seen at a time. The one
seen on entering is wholly a bison. The one seen on leaving is a bison-human hybrid.
The masks on the right wall invariably face the entering visitor, and those on the left
the exiting viewer. The visitor who passes through the Final Gallery viewing all its
decorations in the most efficient manner, without stopping to retrace steps or turn-
ing to look about, will in every case but one see the masks on his or her right—the
exception can be seen from both directions.

In the case of the engraved heads of deer, a part animal, less than a complete
deer, is used to evoke the animal as a whole in a sort of graphic synecdoche. In
contrast, some of the masks suggest hybrid beings, part-human, part-bison, that are
something surpassing a whole animal: strange and complex “supernatural”1 entities
whose nature transcends that of either humans or bison. All three of the masks on
the right side entering are simply bison, and none really suggests a human visage.
But the very next mask, the first one the visitor sees on turning back through the
Mask Chamber, is a purely human visage. It takes no overdeveloped imagination to
see in the long, saturnine mask that next appears a suggestion of blended human and
bovine features. The two profiles that follow are simply bison, but the next, though fundamentally bovine, once more looks oddly human. The last mask one sees on exiting is the most extreme example of a hybrid visage in Altamira. It behaves almost as an optical illusion. Without any voluntary effort on the viewer’s part, it shifts back and forth between its human and animal aspects. Seen in sequence, the masks present a gradual transition from depictions that are simply bison or purely human to representations of hybrids blending bison and human natures, suggestive of the symbolic metamorphosis of the former into the latter, and a metaphoric equation of these two very different beings.

Significantly, the equivalence of humans and bison is also suggested by figures in other decorated caves. A vertical red bison at Castillo is one example, and the “calligraphic” black bison at La Pasiega another that is even more remarkably human. Figures of hybrid men-bison are also known from France. There are two examples in the Sanctuary at Trois Frères, one of them the well-known semi-human, bison-headed figure, said to be playing a flute or musical bow. The most remarkable figure of the kind in Spain is the vertical bison/man modeled by the natural relief of a stalagmitic column at Castillo. This figure has a bison’s head and body, supported by human legs and feet (Ripoll Perelló 1971–1972). The column is crowned by the roughly sculpted head of another bison, made by enhancing a naturally evocative formation.

THE COHESIVENESS OF SYMBOLS AT ALTAMIRA

It is evident when all the evidence is reviewed that the compositions at Altamira, engravings as well as paintings, polychromes included, form a single interrelated whole that represents similar concerns in different ways. Once the figures are correctly identified and the structure that underlies their placement and their relationships is understood, the unifying integrity of the whole can be seen. We found exactly the same subjects—deer, bison, horses, ibex, anthropomorphs, and geometric figures—represented both on the Great Ceiling closest to the cave’s entry and the Final Gallery in its deepest recesses. The same animals are found in the central galleries, and those galleries make a structured symbolic transition between the galleries at the two ends of the decorated space.

The same curious scene of an excited cow mounting a bison bull is repeated both on the Great Ceiling and in an engraving in the Final Gallery. The use of a virtually identical design, with both animals sharing a single pair of hind legs, to repeat this unusual subject matter in different media is enough by itself to show that the procreation of the bison herds was as much a concern of the engravers of the Final Gallery as of the painters who made the polychromes on the Great Ceiling. Cervid reproduction is another theme uniting the two galleries, as is evident from the association of antlered stags and antlerless hinds in the Cervid Gallery and in the Great Ceiling’s engraved series. The human-bison relationship so clearly seen in the masks of the Final Gallery is also present in muted form in the man-like face of an engraved bison on the Great Ceiling.
A single set of structural principles was applied to the symbolic organization of the two galleries in precisely complementary and opposite ways. While the species and themes represented are continuous between the Great Hall and the Cola de Caballo, and the organization of symbols in both areas obeys the same underlying structural principles, the application of those principles in one gallery consistently yields inverted transformations of the placement and relationships of figures in the other. The Great Ceiling gets its name from the fact that its famous polychrome decorations are all on its ceiling. Most of the important figures in the Final Gallery, in contrast, are on its walls, with few on the ceiling. The most numerous and striking figures in the Final Gallery are its engravings; it is painted figures that dominate the Great Ceiling. The decorated area on the Great Ceiling is undivided space, whose two major compositions, the paintings (principally bison) and the engravings (principally deer), are superimposed on each other without separation. The Final Gallery, on the other hand, is split into two major segments, each with subdivisions, and the bison and deer themes are segregated and occupy alternate galleries. The polychrome composition contains just one hind and several bison, while the Final Gallery, like the engravings on the Great Ceiling, has many hinds and few bison. The polychrome hind is disproportionately large compared to the bison, while the bison in the Final Gallery are much larger than the deer. In the Final Gallery, there are several large heads (the masks), while on the Great Ceiling there is but one each in the paintings and the engraved series. Complete polychromes on the Great Ceiling are often three-dimensional (from the natural irregularities over which they were painted), while the large painted head is flat; in the Final Gallery, the heads are three-dimensional projections, and the whole animals are flat. Further contrasts are numerous, but the enumeration of data that all point to the same conclusion would serve no purpose other than to burden the reader with redundancies.

It is also true that there are systematic similarities and contrasts between the engraved symbols on the Great Ceiling, on the one hand, and its paintings on the other. They do not coincide exactly with the comparisons and contrasts we have made of the figures in different galleries. In fact, one can find enough points of contrast between the engravings on the Great Ceiling and those in the Final Gallery considered by themselves to show that the two sets of figures were also intended to embody the same pervasive set of concerns in contrastive and complementary ways.

All the evidence we have reviewed indicates that the decorations in all Altamira's galleries were produced and arranged according to a single uniform program of symbolic organization. This program involves such a complicated and multi-faceted interplay of parallels in subject matter and relational oppositions, and its application was so pervasive and time-consuming for those who produced it, that it can scarcely be accidental. (Incidentally, in my opinion, that implies that the different compositions I have discussed, in all the galleries, must be broadly of the same age.) The remarkable extent and consistency of interrelationships between the major compositions in Altamira's decorated galleries clearly show the importance of the symbols employed to the cultural system of the artists, support the identification of Altamira as a sanctuary or set of interrelated sanctuaries, and reveal the operation of sophisticated,
insightful, and playful human minds capable of tours-de-force of symbolic construction and cultural complexity rivaling those of any living human group.

**SPECULATIONS: ALTAMIRA AND INITIATION**

The observations presented in the preceding interpretation, including, I submit, the identification of Altamira as a sanctuary, have a sound basis in the data, and can be empirically demonstrated. While it is possible to carry interpretation further, I realize that to do so involves a great deal of speculation. In this case, by speculation I mean logically constrained conjecture, not the free play of imagination. The facts in the case of Altamira permit plausible inference that leads to interesting suggestions. I caution the reader that conjecture is not fact, and assertion is not proof. While my conjectural interpretation may in fact be correct, it may also be wrong, and alternate interpretations I have not considered may fit the data equally well.

I have said that the idea that Altamira was a prehistoric sanctuary is justified. There are many kinds of sanctuaries that serve different purposes. The themes represented by Altamira’s decorations indicate some dimensions of its purpose, while the correspondence of the characteristics of the Final Gallery to those of some sacred sites used for initiation ceremonies—rites of transition and transformation—in historic times suggests that it too may have served similarly.

The masks of the Final Gallery, hidden away deep in the bowels of the cave, depict a transformation or intergradation between humans and bison, suggesting that, for the artists, the two were somehow equivalent. In the same gallery they represented deer (which, to judge from their frequency in the Magdalenian level, were the principal prey of the hunters) as more abundant but at the same time markedly smaller than either the masks or the engraved bison, emphasizing the symbolic preeminence of the latter over the deer.

On the contrary, in the most accessible composition, and the nearest to the light of day and to the space used for the ordinary activities of daily living, the polychrome figures of bison are much more abundant than are those of deer. At the same time, the bison are drawn at a relatively smaller scale than the painted deer. Significantly, the closer they approach the large hind, the smaller the polychrome bison become. And there is a group of much smaller black outlines of bison near her figure, one just below her neck.

It seems possible that the artists, decorating the most visible part of the cave, tried to emphasize the special importance of the hind relative to humans and bison by painting her at an exaggerated scale and associating her with engraved “orants.” Perhaps it would not have been advisable to show disdain for deer, a principal mainstay of human subsistence, despite the fact that they were comparatively easier than the bison to capture and kill. Perhaps, in order to counterbalance any suggestion of disdain that might be inferred from the treatment of deer in the Final Gallery, to avoid insulting so important a subsistence resource, and to ensure that deer would continue to sacrifice themselves to the needs of humans, the artists symbolically expressed reverence for and supplication of the large hind as a representative or em-
bodiment of all deer in general. No such symbolic compensation was needed in the case of the bison. The artists had already convincingly incorporated their belief in the equality of humans and bison by means of the symbolism of the masks in the Final Gallery.

The Magdalenian artists at Altamira seem to have declared in the polychromes on the Great Ceiling and the masks of the Final Gallery some of their society’s fundamental beliefs concerning the relations between humans and the natural environment. If the Final Gallery expresses the wisdom of a community by means of figures whose attitudes and arrangement correspond to definite principles of symbolic organization, the Great Hall recombines the same symbols in accordance with a new and complementary structure, to reveal another side of the same message.

The animal world as revealed at Altamira is divided into two principal groups. One is that of the large, powerful bison, animals that aside from human beings had almost no effective mortal enemies in nature. The bison are contrasted to the timid and vulnerable deer. In a stable, rich, nurturing environment, a perceived equivalence between the sturdy, brave, and carefree bison on the one hand and human beings on the other would be quite understandable. As the bison did in their proper domain, humans reigned in their own.

The polychromes, executed on the Great Ceiling so close to the light of day, express their message with simplicity, clarity, and power, and their content is not hard to decipher. But their message is incomplete. In the shifting shadows of a dark and twisted gallery lay hidden their secret conclusion. That conclusion is only revealed to those who follow a narrow and arduous path, finally creeping along on their bellies, until finally they arrive in the very innermost entrails of the grotto, from which the only possible way out is to return along the selfsame constricted path. Their secret is a simple but profound equivalence: bison and humans are each the shadow of the other. The multiplication of the bison herds signifies the florescence and increase of the society of humans.

The characteristics of this obligatory itinerary and its hidden message suggest that Altamira was the locus of prehistoric rites of initiation. Following a narrow and menacing path, the novice was eventually swallowed up in the deepest bowels of the earth and lay there nearly helpless and immobile. Only after contracting to turn in the smallest possible space to force a way back out the womb of the earth was it possible to emerge again, first to a wider gallery where ritual practitioners could explain the hidden message of the depictions to the initiates, then to daylight, symbolically reborn, but transformed by the revelation bestowed in the process of symbolic death and rebirth.

Symbolic indications of transformation and transcendence characterize the three sanctuaries that I have discussed in these chapters. I have indicated that the treatment of the Early Aurignacian burials and the mortuary precinct at Cueva Morín suggests a concern for the neutralization and placation of the possibly threatening physical remains of the deceased by means of mortuary rituals, and the transition of the dead by such means to a new social status, still as members of the ongoing social group. At the Cueva del Juyo, whatever the exact nature of the rituals there
performed, the sanctuary shows a preoccupation with both the change of seasons—the regular periodic diminution of day length, the annual regression of the sun from the time of its longest and most beneficent appearance—and the fusion of the two sides of humanity and the natural world: their more “natural,” uncontrollable, instinctive, and bestial side symbolized by the large cat that is the head’s proper left side, and the more “cultural,” controlled, and benign side, symbolized by the bearded human that is its proper left. At Altamira, it is a symbolic equivalence of bison and people that is indicated by the mask series in the Final Gallery. In all these cases, a fusion of “opposites” that transcends what we can observe in nature is indicated. The late Mircea Eliade called such reconciliations of opposed principles a characteristic of the oldest and most widespread symbols of the “paradoxical state of the totality, the perfection, and, consequently, the sacredness of God” (Eliade, 1971: 146; see also 1979). While we need not believe that all that is implicit in this affirmation can be applied to the Paleolithic evidence, the fact that it comes from such a respected authority on the history of religious systems reinforces our interpretations.

The conclusions concerning relationships between the depictions presented in the previous chapter as certain are susceptible to validation and proof. We do not pretend that the more speculative aspects of our interpretation are necessarily correct, or that they are less imaginative than those of Henri Breuil, Max Raphael, or André Leroi-Gourhan: in fact, our interpretation shares some particulars with each of theirs. But because it is based on a minute examination of the cave and its compositions in their manifold details, it is more consistent with all the data, and explains more of the characteristics of Altamira and its decorations than did they, and at the same time it is in better agreement with what we know of ecology, ethology, psychology, and socio-cultural anthropology, and all that we know of the history of symbols.

NOTES

1. By the term “supernatural” I mean here that the figures go beyond any possible experience of the natural world. I do not mean the term to be understood as it is in ordinary everyday usage, with its accompanying baggage of meaning and emotion.

2. I did not approach the study of the Altamira figures using the theoretical framework of French “Structural Analysis,” as exemplified by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (esp. Anthropologie structurale, 1958). Though my stance is not by any means “anti-theoretical,” I believe that a slavish and overly rigid adherence to any theoretical viewpoint can or must lead to distortions of or falsifications of the data studied, or (at very least) to the imposition of an inappropriate and subjective interpretive scheme on them. The relationships of complementary opposition described here in fact suggested themselves as our investigations of the cave and its depictions progressed.

REFERENCES
