

Cave art & Lascaux: Background information for teachers

Cave art

The Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) is a huge period of time that runs from the first evidence of tool making by the earliest humans 2.5–3 million years ago to the end of the last glacial period 10,000 years ago. Throughout this period, humans lived by hunting and gathering, as they did in the succeeding Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) period from 10,000–4000 BC, when the land became forested.

Cave art is restricted to the very end of the Palaeolithic period and is associated with populations of modern humans (*homo sapiens*). It is closely centred in areas of south-western France, particularly the valley of the Dordogne, and north-eastern Spain, along the coastal strip. The most famous cave in the first area is [Lascaux](#); the most famous in the second area is Altamira. Both are now closed to visitors to protect the paintings, but full-scale replicas of them exist on the sites. The reason the painted caves are in these areas is almost certainly that during the last glacial maximum (20,000–15,000 BC) these were places where large numbers of people came together seasonally. They assembled to hunt the herds of reindeer that migrated through the valleys from upland summer to lowland winter grazing areas. At this time, huge herds of reindeer, wild horse, bison and mammoth roamed over the open tundra that stretched across Europe.

Why they painted pictures of animals in caves is still debated. The images couldn't have been simply decoration for their living areas as they were placed on walls deep inside caves, often in quite inaccessible areas. They often painted over the top of other paintings as well, producing a muddled effect. Nor can they have been associated with simple 'hunting magic' – the food refuse, and the tools made from bone used by the people who painted Lascaux, tell us that they lived almost entirely off of reindeer. Yet only one reindeer is depicted amongst 600 paintings and 1500 engravings. They must have had some magical purpose, but what that was remains mysterious.

The paintings at Lascaux can be dated to about 18,000 BC. Engravings recently discovered in Church Hole cave at [Cresswell Crags](#), Nottinghamshire are later in date, probably 12,500–12,000 BC, but were produced by people using the same types of tools. They would have had no difficulty reaching Britain as the English Channel was dry land at that time. Cresswell Crags, though, was much closer to the edge of the ice sheets that still covered much of Britain at that time.

Further reading

[Ice Age learning resources](#)

David, B. 2017. *Cave Art*. London: Thames & Hudson

The Bradshaw Foundation. nd. *Lascaux Cave Paintings: An introduction*. Available at:

<http://www.bradshawfoundation.com/lascaux/>

Pettitt, P. nd. *Palaeolithic Art and Archaeology of Cresswell Crags, UK*. Available at:

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/archaeology/research/projects/all/?mode=project&id=639>

Bahn, P. & Pettitt, P. 2009. *Britain's Oldest Art: The Ice Age Art of Cresswell Crags*. London: English Heritage



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