

## Making our Marks



The cave paintings at Lascaux in France and in several other sites in Europe, including our own Creswell Crags in Derbyshire, have long attracted the attention and intellectual curiosity of archaeologists, social historians and, of course, lovers of art. What conclusions can be drawn from these vivid and vibrant images of animals? Was it perhaps to teach a new generation of hunter-gatherers how to recognize and hunt the creatures which would provide the food for their survival? Were there religious overtones? By depicting cattle, bison, felines and even a rhinoceros was there an element of wishful thinking? Drawing them will somehow make them appear in real life. Or perhaps they reflect merely man's innate creativity, his desire to come to some understanding of the world in which he finds himself through artistic expression. Although painted some twenty to forty thousand years ago these artists were no less sensitive or less intelligent than artists today. Were they the David Hockneys of the Stone Age?

More recently another aspect of this cave art has been scrutinized in considerable detail. Genevieve von Petzinger, a paleoanthropologist from the University of Victoria in Canada has been studying not so much the animals, but the many marks, geometric symbols and other graffiti which exist alongside the bulls and horses. Were these just random meaningless doodles, the product of a boring winter's day in the cave, or symbols which carried their own meaning, if only we were clever enough to decipher them? Miss von Petzinger thinks that they do and goes on to suggest that these squiggles mark a point in history when man first began to create a written language, using abstract signs to convey ideas and concepts. If she is right this marks a massive shift in our understanding of when writing began. Up to this point the earliest accepted symbols of our ability to write dates from about 5000BC from clay tablets found in what is now Iraq.

Miss von Petzinger offers some very persuasive evidence collected from a number of caves in many different locations. Over several thousand years starting in the ice age she notes a growing sophistication on the marks and symbols painted on the walls. In European caves she identified some thirty symbols and these symbols were replicated in widely separated caves, suggesting movement of people or perhaps trading links over large areas of Europe. Further research discovered similar symbols from caves throughout the world. It is impossible to say whether these symbols actually represent writing, but von Petzinger is convinced that these pictograms mark the beginning of an effective communication system, meaning, for example, that information could survive independent of those who had first made the marks and knowledge could thus be handed down the

generations. All this can only be speculation at the moment, but von Petzinger herself states: "We only have part of the picture now. We are on the cusp of an exciting time."



### References

1. **New Scientist Magazine November 12th 2016**, page 36 following. A long article by Alison George summarising the work of Genevieve von Petzinger.
2. **"The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols"** by Genevieve von Petzinger, published by Simon and Schuster.
3. Googling **Genevieve von Petzinger** will provide further links to her work.

David Cockman for HDAS December 2016

