

FOUNDATIONS OF CIVILIZATION

Primary Source

In 1985, a French deep-sea diver found ancient cave drawings on the walls of a huge sea cave in a cliff at the edge of the Mediterranean Sea. An expedition to study the Cosquer cave required people with unusual qualifications—expertise in art, plus enough skill in diving to get to the cave. One of the experts was Jean Courtin, who wrote this article with another French rock art expert, Jean Clottes. ♦ *As you read this excerpt, think about how scientists interpret things they find. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Ice Age Art in an Underwater Cave

by Jean Clottes and Jean Courtin

The evidence tells us that ancient people went into the Cosquer cave during at least two different periods. During Paleolithic times, the sea level was about 360 feet lower than it is now, and the coast was several miles away from the cliff. When the sea rose dramatically [about 12,000 years ago] more than half the cave was flooded. . . . We can thus safely assume that what remains above water is just part of the art in what must have been one of the greatest decorated caves in Europe.

The first period of activity at the Cosquer cave produced the forty-five stenciled handprints and thousands of finger tracings discovered so far. . . . What we have called Phase 1 is now well dated at about 27,000 years ago by four radiocarbon analyses. . . .

Following Phase 1, the cave was abandoned for about 8,000 years, unless people used it without leaving any evidence of their presence. . . . We believe it was during Phase 2 that all the animal paintings and other engravings were made. This period is well dated at about 18,500 to 19,000 years ago by radiocarbon analyses of the charcoal in some

of the paintings, as well as by some charcoal lumps found on the floor. . . .

We have now documented about one hundred images of animals. Horses are the most numerous, making up nearly one-third of the total. In some drawings they are represented by a single head; in others, by the whole animal. Such minute details as the difference in coat color between belly and flank are discernible in one painting. On the same panel are three black horses with an ibex [wild goat] engraved over one of them. Horses are the animals most often depicted in other Upper Paleolithic caves, so their dominant presence in the Cosquer cave is not unusual.

The next most commonly depicted animals are ibexes and chamois [small goat antelopes], animals that favored the rocky environments that existed during Paleolithic times. All but one of the black ibexes are engraved. Their bodies are accurately proportioned, except for the horns. . . . Also represented are several European bison. . . .

One of the most delightful surprises of the Cosquer cave was its depiction of sea animals.

Source: "Neptune's Ice Age Gallery," by Jean Clottes and Jean Courtin, in *Natural History* (April 1993).

Questions to Think About

- How did the paintings differ in the two periods called Phase 1 and Phase 2?
- Recognize Cause and Effect** How did the surroundings of the cave influence the kinds of animals drawn by the Paleolithic artists?
- Activity** Suppose that you found a cave filled with ancient rock drawings. What animals or symbols would you expect to find? Write a paragraph explaining why you think ancient artists would have drawn those images.