
Global Distribution of Prehistoric Cave Paintings

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Abstract

The history about the discovery of cave paintings is very interesting. As is generally the case with other discoveries, the detection of cave painting was not a result of an expedition or due to a research project in art. The initial sighting was not even by an expert in the field. It is stated in many books and articles written on cave paintings or rock art that the finding was accidental and by a girl in the caves of Altamira in Spain.¹

Over a century and two decades have passed from that time, when in the year 1879, Maria, the young daughter of Don Marcellino S. Sautola, rushed out of a cave in which she was playing, calling out loud, "Bulls, Bulls," hence accidentally helping out her father and providing him the opportunity to become the founder of rock art studies. The news of the discovery is known today as the "Sistine Chapel of Prehistory".²

This discovery of art by Sautola was initially treated with disdain and contempt by the archaeological community, as they contested that the paintings were done by man's long-dated ancestors. The argument provided was that they were painted by soldiers hiding in the caves to

protect themselves from harsh weather and defeat in a war. After over twenty years, the eminent prehistorian, Emile Cartailhac, changed the perception of the archaeological society through an article "Mea Culpa d'un sceptique," acknowledging the importance of Sautola's finding and recognizing the intellectual and artistic ability of our forebears,³ and by a similar discovery of paintings in the caves of Font de Gaume in 1895.

In Europe, new discoveries of rock art and cave paintings were being made by scholars like L'abbe Breuil, Cartalhae, Perony, Alcalde del Rio, Obermaier, and others. These researchers visited caves from France to South Africa, where they excavated, discovered, and made copies through photography, sketches, and drawings of the caves and art discovered by them. The most admirable of these scholars, Breuil, established the first rules for rock art studies.

Similar discoveries occurred elsewhere in different parts of the world, which altered the supremacy of the European rock art in quantitative and chronological terms. Rock art is found around the world. As of today, rock art is

reported from more than 70 countries, and over 20,000 sites are documented around the world.⁴ The six principle regions recognized for rock art worldwide in terms of their concentration and antiquity are:

1. South-western Europe
2. Northern Africa
3. Southern Africa
4. Australia
5. India and Russia
6. North America

Rock art has been reported from Spain (Betran, 1982), Italy (Anati, 1964), Portugal (Bahm, 1985), Scandinavia, Sweden, and Siberia (Lommel, 1966), Western Alps (Seglie, 1988), France (Wagneur, 1988), Japan (Ogawa, 1988), China (ZhaoFo, 1988), USSR (Ksica, 1988), Turkey, Syria, Jordon, Israel, and Saudi Arabia (Anati, 1979), Tibet (Hui Sheng, 1988), Pakistan (King, 1940), Sri Lanka (Bandranayake et al., 1986), Thailand (Bullen, 1988), New Guinea (Newman and Mark, 1988), New Zealand (Taylor, 1988), and Fiji Land (Brodick, 1948).⁵

In the book *World Rock Art*, directed and edited by Emmanuel Anati, who is well-renowned and recognized for his understanding and knowledge of rock art, it is stated that the world production of rock art documented so far numbers over 35

million figures, but it can be safely estimated that the total number of rock art figures still preserved should be well over 50 million. This constitutes an extraordinary documentation of man's intellectual adventures, an outstanding world heritage, and a unique source for historical reconstruction.

The discoveries made to date place southern Africa with the greatest concentration of rock art in the world. The concentration of caves consisting of rock art or prehistoric cave painting have been discovered and excavated in Angola, Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. In northern Africa, the major concentrations are located in Algeria, Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Somalia, and Sudan.

In Asia, numerous discoveries have been made of the presence of rock art in the caves of countries like Iran, Israel, Jordan, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, Afghanistan, China, India, Mongolia, Pakistan, and in several areas of Russian Central Asia and Siberia.

Major rock art sites in North America are located in both Canada and the USA. In Latin America, they are known in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil,



Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Peru, Dominican Republic, and Venezuela.

In Europe, the findings have been made in France, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, England, and Russia.

In Oceania, by far the major concentrations are known in Australia, including Tasmania, while others are found in Eastern Island (Chile), Hawaii, New Guinea, New Zealand, and the Solomon Islands.

In the world contexts, many popular and diligent associations have been working in this field, such as the **International Federation of Rock Art Organization (IFRAO)**, which is a federation of national and regional organizations promoting the study of Palaeolithic art and cognitive archaeology globally.⁶ In addition, the **American Rock Art Research Association (ARARA)** is at work in America, while in India the **Rock Art Society of India (RASI)** and the **Wakankar Rock Art and Heritage Welfare Society, Bhopal (INDIA)** is working enthusiastically in this field.

In Africa, which has the greatest variety of rock art, many of the greatest centres are working. The **Rock Art Research Centre** at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, offers degree courses in rock art studies, and

Botswana has built an interpretive museum at its popular Tsodilo Hills site, as well as establishing the **Southern African Rock Art Project**. In 1996, they established the **Trust for African Rock Art**, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to survey, document, and monitor sites, be an information resource, create global awareness of the importance and endangered state of Africa's rock art, and promote and support its conservation.⁷

In Australia, which is very famous in the world context for rock art research, the **Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA)** has been doing extremely good work on rock art.

The **European Rock Art Association pour le Rayonnement de Part paricial European (ARAPE)** has been working for a long time. In India, too, there are both governmental and non-governmental efforts being made in this direction.⁸

References:-

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- [3] Ibid.
- [4] Anati, Emmanuel, World Rock Art, 1994 P. 11.



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