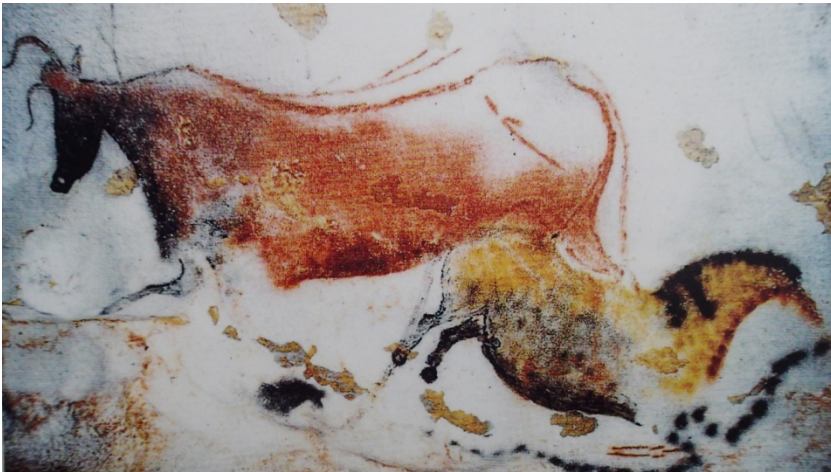


Lascaux Cave and Prehistory's Roots

August 2015



On that first drive down from Paris to Spain in '73 in the '62 Morris Minivan, as we came even with Lascaux off to the west about 100 miles, I ached to go but, alas, we were travelling on a shoestring. Sacrifices had to be made....



It was just as well I waited 42 years. The caves themselves had been closed since '63 due to CO2 paling and mould brought in by visitors. It was only in '83 that a near perfect reproduction of the cave was opened only 200 meters from the original. Lascaux II displays the two major galleries and 90% of the art.



Lascaux has been called the Sistine Ceiling of the Paleolithic.



It's obvious that the artists were accomplished before entering the cave, that they had practiced their art on everything from their limestone shelter walls to leather tenting material. They even had perspective worked out, as in the horns. Pretty impressive.



And the legs. This was 17,000 years ago.



Even more impressive is – if we jump back another 17,000 years and jump over to Chauvet Cave a couple hundred miles away - they even had *motion* worked out. Chauvet displays the oldest art on the planet.



Here's another from Chauvet – 34,000 years old – to give you an idea of the artists' skills, and how far advanced we were artistically.



And note the...oh, wait, sorry. This came later. This is his painting of Picasso and from the Dali Museum in Figueres, Spain. Mind blowing place. May do a Blah Blah on it.



Brigitte and Gilles Delluc, supposedly Lascaux experts, in one of their popular books (they're stacked for sale in the gift shop) state fatuously that the art was "designed to serve a veritable religious cult," then add preposterously that "it had no connection with any magical or shamanistic rites." How one can separate religion from magic I don't know, as turning water into wine is a trick for David Copperfield. Today's priests are yesterday's shamans. Some, the Greek Orthodox into which I was baptized (and fallen a long way), still dispense incense like

pagans. Catholics practice ritual cannibalism, symbolically eating the flesh of Jesus, to take on his attributes. Religion, shamanism and magic have always been bundled.



Most of the large animals have huge, distended stomachs. No scholars that I'm aware of have suggested that perhaps they're pregnant. Why not? It's so obvious. That's an important clue as to what was going on.



Fertility rites were a common denominator of the Paleolithic. Mother goddess figures are found in all early pre-historic cultures. We have examples in our collections from Egypt to Sri Lanka. Like the Venus of Laussel here from La Roque St. Christophe (which we'll get to). "Venuses" have been found everywhere and were probably worshipped, or propitiated, in the hope of

becoming pregnant. Paleolithic man was animist. Everything had a spirit – trees, rivers, the weather – even the earth itself. The concept of Mother Earth, as a living thing, is very old. So why crawl way back in dark, dangerous caves to decorate walls that will rarely if ever be seen by contemporaries? It had everything to do with animism, with magic. And with fertility.



I'm convinced that they were attempting to fertilize the Earth mother. They saw that everything living sprang from the Earth. To them, Mother Earth was a great and powerful goddess, as important as the sun god. They possibly saw the caves as vaginas, certainly the galleries within as wombs. By impregnating the wombs with their art, they hoped to stimulate mother Earth to bring forth these very animals displayed in greater abundance. Big, juicy, delicious ones. I'll bet you that after a painting had been completed a shaman then stepped in to call forth the Earth Mother and do his hocus-pocus.



Although 90% of their diet was apparently reindeer, they're a migratory animal and not that big. The others aren't migratory, thus allowing our forefathers to be less nomadic, and they are believed to have been semi-nomadic. The Ice Age climate then in southern France was like Scandinavia's. If they could tap into these larger animals, they'd be so much better off. If one has a sense of animistic belief – and I explored this in *The Manila Galleon* – my theory makes eminent sense. I'm only surprised it hasn't been raised before...? It's so *obvious* to me.



I really should have waited another year. Just down the hill atop which the cave is situated they're building the enormous International Cave Art Centre to house other cave replicas like Lascaux's. The Centre is to be the benchmark facility for these studies. And this is the place for it. Lascaux II (the repro) sees 250,000 visitors annually. It's big industry here, drawing visitors from around the world.



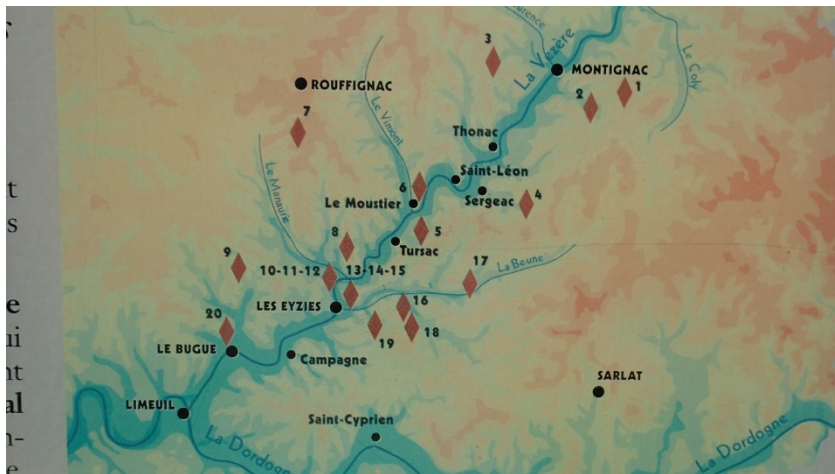
It'll also be on the edge of Montignac, which serves Lascaux. (Sorry about the pole. I was driving.)



Lascaux cave was found in September 1940 by the 18-year-old kid with the cigarette. Marcel Ravidat's dog Robot had fallen down a hole created by a tree blown over, the upended roots exposing the entrance. After crawling into the cave, like Howard Carter at Tut's tomb, Marcel viewed wonderful things. He became a guide and it was he who, in '63, first noticed the damage caused by the million tourists who had passed through since it opened in '48. In the pic above, the entrance has been widened.



Montignac, like so many French towns, is delicious it's so beautiful. Les Frogs take great pride in their country and it is tres beau.



But Lascaux is only one of several major discoveries in a 20 kilometer stretch along the La Vézère River. The entire saga of prehistory from 450,000 years ago, through the Neolithic, Bronze, Iron and Middle Ages to modern times is told in this short, incredible valley. UNESCO rightly terms it the Valley of Mankind. Indeed, the science of prehistory really began – and blossomed – here.



It's an astonishingly beautiful limestone gorge carved out by the river, the floor broad and flat. Dordogne department (the Frogs call provinces or states "departments") is one of the most beautiful areas of southern France to begin with. The Vezere kicks it up a couple more notches. The Dordogne has thousands of caves and dozens with art. Southern France has over 300 caves with prehistoric art.

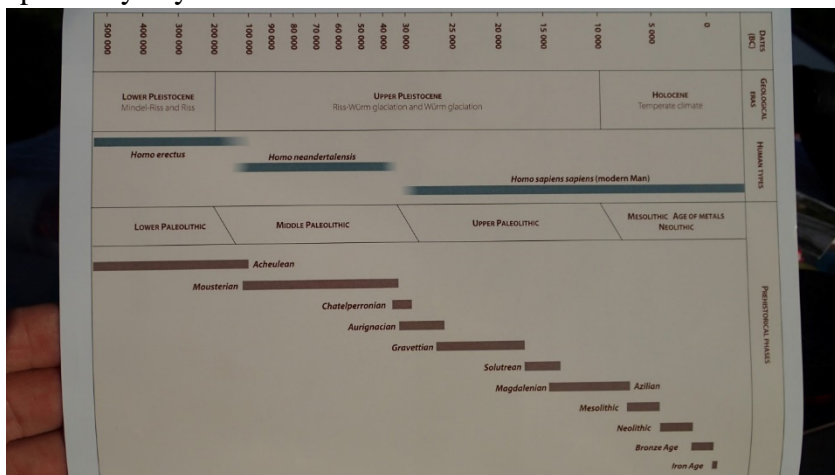




Rock shelters – where early man really lived rather than caves per se – are everywhere. The walls are often still covered with soot. Did I say this valley is central to our knowledge of prehistory? Here's an example. In 1834 Francois Jouannet, an early explorer here, postulated a worked stone age predating the polished stone culture.



In La Madeleine cave (the above two shots), the Magdalenian culture was birthed. Well, as an epoch anyway.



Subsequently, many of the epochs of Paleolithic man were worked out right here, in this 20 kilometer stretch. The same ones we refer to in our digs along the River Kwai in Thailand. Amazing. This is Mecca for archaeological dabblers like us.



Like many of the rock shelters, they found use for thousands of years, then on into the Middle Ages. This is part of the La Madeleine site, just steps from the cave.



The shelter is on the neck, left side.



Make the houses disappear and it would look much the same as 17,000 years ago.



Visiting sites can be done by canoe. It's a huge industry in Dordogne.



Cro-Magnon man (he is us, as Pogo would say, Homo sapien) was discovered just a few kilometers down at Les Eyzies, called the Capital of Prehistory.



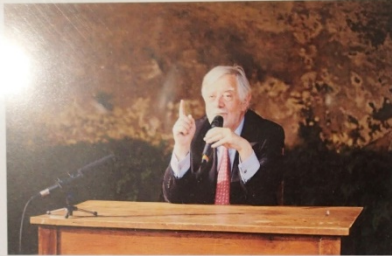
Workers in 1868 building a road to service the tiny railway station across the street discovered five skeletons, four adults and a child.



That's the little yellow station below. I'm atop the cliff with the shelter below me. Digging revealed innumerable tools and examples of portable art. The skeletons were found with mammoth bones.



Some of the finds are on display in the on site museum. The bones are at the main archaeological museum just outside of Paris at St. Germain. Cro means hole and Magnon was the land owner's name, by the way.



Le 5 juillet 2014, le professeur **Yves Coppens**, inventeur de **Lucy**, a inauguré le site de l'Abri Cro-Magnon.



I was startled to see this commemoration of the launch of the new Cro-Magnon museum last year by this fat guy touted as the discoverer of Lucy. To the rest of the world it was Don Johansson, who contributed to my *Adventurous Dreams, Adventurous Lives*. I gather Monseur Coppens was part of Don's dig and famous find in Ethiopia. Oh, zee French....



Cro-Magnon's brain was 20% larger than ours, and he was over six feet tall. We've shortened and dumbed down. Civilization does that to you. Other than that, there's no difference. He laughed and cried and had all the emotions we do. An image of early man emerges that is

similar to our plains Indians prior to contact. They were Stone Age too, though archaeologists avoid associating that term with them. Political correctness you know. I would place them in the Upper Mesolithic.



Talk about concentrating my favorite interests! Right next door a dino bone dig was going on! Plus the geology of the region is gorgeous.



We've been here a long time. Homo Erectus emerged in Africa 700,000 years ago and was in France 500,000 years ago, about the time fire making was invented. 300,000 years ago Neanderthals arrived. Les bones of one were found here at Le Moustier just a few clicks up the road (he's in a Berlin museum).



His place was between these two houses. He'd moved out and disappeared by 28,000 years ago. Cro-Magnon/Homo sapiens arrived about 40,000 years ago and either wiped them out or bred over them. I'm 4% Neanderthal. Yes, yes, it explains many things.



Just half a click away is the incredible rock shelter of La Roque St. Christophe known to have been used by man for 40,000 years, through the remainder of the Paleolithic and the following periods:

Neolithic 6,000-2200 BC

Bronze & Iron Ages 2200-50AD

Romans 50-500AD history begins here with Caesar's conquest

Middle Ages 500-1500 (though there was a break in the 100 Years War)

Renaissance to end of 19th century

Oh, to have been collecting rent all this time....





Medieval crane, sometimes seen in 15th century paintings.



Early stairmaster. But watch that first step.



The troglodyte lifestyle reminded me of Cappadocia in Turkey and Mesa Verde.



We parked one night across the river from it. We had great wild camping throughout France. It's perfect for camper vanning.





Back in Les Eyzies is the local branch of the national archaeological museum and it's world class, naturally. The different epochs are largely determined by improvements in stone tool technology and I was able to study them closely.



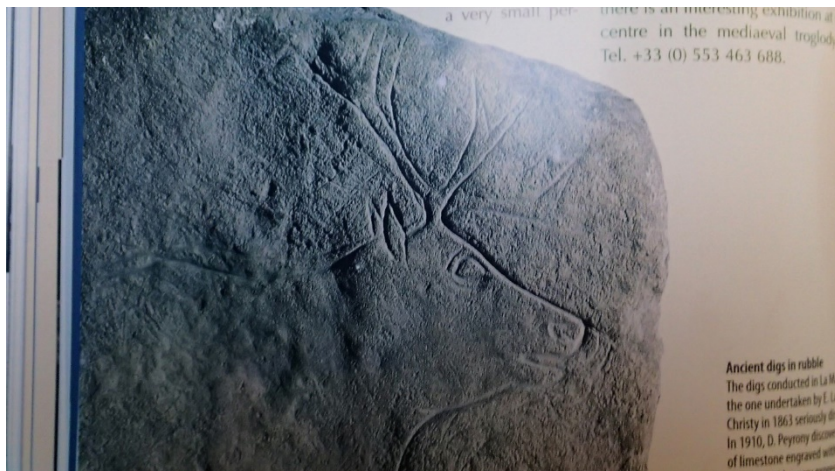
As always, I was astonished by the near perfect similarity in Neolithic polished stone axes around the world. The ones in our collection from South America, Turkey and Southeast Asia (and the ones I saw in BC while sailing this spring with the Glickpersons and in that Blah Blah) are exactly like this green one. That bespoke of the speed with which new ideas – whether tool technology, the invention of fire, or the bow and arrow - spread.



Millions of artifacts have been found in the valley, including a lot of portable art. Early man liked to etch and paint and whittle in his off hours. Really, art in the West was born here. Creativity is one of the traits we developed so as to better survive. Darwin.



This famous one was discovered in La Madeleine cave, along with many other works.



Another from there is this excellent work. For people with a deep desire, verging on obsession, to understand our Paleolithic ancestors, it's been a very enriching experience. I feel I understand them better than ever. I can feel the kinship. Those are my roots. My actual once living ancestors came through what became France. And yours too if you're Caucasian. I spent thousands of dollars, hours and miles to unlock my family genealogy back 13 generations. This is the continuation into deep genealogy.



The province, er, department is incredibly beautiful as I say. We found another camping spot in a tiny park with three picnic tables at the bottom of the bridge.



By this stream where we had our morning bath. The bridge was built in the 11th century.







Southern France is something else, magic in its beauty and ambience. The people have been fabulous as well. There seems to have been a sea change in the Frog attitude, or perhaps it's because I'm an old fart now and youngsters (anyone under 50, and don't trust anyone over 80) tend to treat geezers differently. Even the Parisians I met two years ago while in the city of haughtiness were actually normal. And acting like (very) decent human beings. I'm part Frog and for the first time, this trip, I've begun to acknowledge it.



Alors, enough. Time to get woman home to burn Grog brontosaur steak on fire. So, for now, as my fellow amphibians say, au river.

