Connecting the Dots at Covalanas Cave

By John Rommereim

Do you sense them there, the ones
Who invented art, who saw
That we might see? They linger
Now within these galleries,
Mute, marginal in their minds,
And surpassing in their touch.[1]

N. Scott Momaday

Covalanas Cave, situated about a half hour's drive to the west from Bilbao in Northern Spain, is a relatively small cavern, and the spare monochrome paintings on its narrow walls are modest in comparison to monumental Paleolithic sites such as Lascaux or Altamira, which feature stunning arrays of large, multicolored figures. The natural comparison that comes to mind at places like Altamira or Lascaux is to the broad sweep of grand spaces like the Sistine Chapel; we marvel that Ice-Age artists were capable of such visionary splendor. Entering the Covalanas cave, there is a different kind of dazzlement: the spirit of the place encourages the sense that you have been abruptly transported to a distant era. And the place that the Covalanas wormhole takes you to is not an Ice-Age version of the Sistine Chapel, but a private, secluded chamber that, it seems, an individual artist has ornamented and prepared for you. The time-travel impression is inherent to the artwork: the artist's gestures are so fluid and distinct, and the red paint stands out so clearly against the white limestone, that it seems as though the artist is "lingering nearby, as in N. Scott Momaday's poem, and they might just return to finish some of the images that they left incomplete.

My colleague David Campbell and I arrived at Covalanas after an hour's drive east from the town of Santilliana del Mar, our home base for our week-long exploration of cave art in Spain. Due to some navigational incompetence, we almost missed our chance to tour Covalanas, which we already had to postpone to our last day in Spain after a mishap with a flat tire on the previous day. Arriving at the site, we turned off the road at a sign identifying the cave, and, and, in a Keystone Cops move, we drove right by another small sign in the parking lot saying that the cave is accessed by a footpath up the side of the mountain. Thinking that the cave entrance must be farther down the dirt road that branched off the main highway, we turned the car onto it – a very rough road strewn with rocks that became more uneven as we went, and steeper as well. Eventually we realized that that rough path couldn't be right. If we had gone even a few yards further, our rental car, with its short wheel clearance, would have surely gotten stuck. As it was, there were some dicey moments as we tried to turn the car around on the steep road with just a couple of feet to spare on either side. Once we succeeded in turning the

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[1] N. Scott Momaday. The Death of Sitting Bear (p. 71). HarperCollins. Kindle Edition.

car around, we grinded our way back up the rocky track, and some rock climbers who happened to be there getting their ropes and gear in order as they prepared to scale the nearby cliff told us that it was roughly a half hour walk up the marked trail to the cave. By this time, given our unfortunate detour, we had missed the time for our appointment at the cave. Because David was having trouble with his back that day and was not in a condition to scramble up the mountain, we decided that I should just go ahead alone and quickly hike up to see if the visit could be salvaged. It turned out to be a short, steep, ten-minute hike that afforded gorgeous views. Here's a photo I took as I walked:

A view from Monte Haza hill, where the Covalanas cave is located. Photo by John Rommereim

To reduce the human impact on the art in the tight space of the cave, they restrict the groups visiting Covalanas to fewer than six people. When I came to the one-room cave office, the guide, Xavier, was there alone, and since no one had signed up for the next time slot, he graciously gave me a one-on-one tour. Xavier didn't have a lot of English, and I have even less Spanish, but using whatever English he had, some gestures, and a lot of repetition, he helped me gain an understanding of the paintings.

The entrance to Covalanas cave. Photo by John Rommereim

Once our eyes had adjusted to the darkness, Xavier began pointing out the artwork with his flashlight, and among the paintings we encountered, the most extraordinary one was a collection of images that combined to form a single, unified scene[2] – something that is exceedingly rare in cave art. In the photograph below, you can see that there seems to be something to the right that has attracted all three of the hinds' attention. The hind on the bottom right (the one whose body is filled in with the red pigment) seems to have suddenly turned her head sharply toward the same source as the other two deer to its left:

[2] In addition to Xavier's explanation on site, I came across this observation regarding the unified scene in César González Sainz, Roberto Cacho Toca, and Takeo Fukazawa, *Introduction to Paleolithic Cave Paintings in Northern Spain,* 145. –Unfortunately, I did not think to learn Xavier's last name during the visit.

Photo by Takeo Fukuyama

There are many instances where the arrangement of figures in Paleolithic caves show intentionality. One of the most spectacular examples of such an arrangement is the Salon of the Bulls in Lascaux. David Lewis-Williams has described it as a swirling spiral, as if the animals are "spinning into a maelstrom," and he suggests that the arrangement of the animals can be seen as a "massive painting of the vortex of a shaman's trance."[3] The naturalism of this smaller scene at Covalanas, and the way in which it captures a signal moment and creates a brief narrative — is something very different from Lascaux, but it is extraordinary in its own way. Rather than creating an elaborate dreamscape, the artist focuses on a sudden reaction to an event in the environment, depicting a perfectly natural interaction among the small group of deer. Because the event that the deer are responding to is occurring outside of the frame, the scene has a way of expanding beyond its confines and pointing toward a wider environment.

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[3] David S. Whitley. *Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit: The Origin of Creativity and Belief* (Kindle Locations 381-385). Kindle Edition. David Whitley is recounting David Lewis-Williams' interpretation of the scene when they visited the cave together.

With just a few lines, the artist freezes time and evokes a world; we in turn are able to share that brief moment 18,000 years later.[4]

As with so much of the cave art, the artist, or artists in Covalanas often built the imagery upon preexistent features in the rock. If you zoom in on the central deer in the panel discussed above, you can see that there is a lighter patch in the rock that helps to bring added fullness to the deer's body:

Photo by Takeo Fukuyama

In another image at Covalanas, the artist made use of two holes in the rock wall.[5] The artist built an image of an injured deer around those holes such that they become the wound

[4] I used 18,000 as an approximation. The figures in Covalanas are estimated to have been painted between 20,000 and 17,000 years ago according to Sainz, Toca, and Fukazawa, 145. In *Discover Prehistoric Cave Art in Cantabria,* (Cantabria: Sociedad Regional de Educación y Deporte, 2020), Daniel Garrido Pimentel and Marcos Garfia Diez report that current research is tending to move the date of the cave art earlier, perhaps to as old as 30,000 years before the present, but no definitive conclusion has yet been reached.

[5] Xavier pointed this feature out to me.

from which the animal is bleeding. Significantly, the wound is located at a spot on the deer's body that would cause a mortal injury:

Photo by Takeo Fukuyama
Note: The holes are hard to discern from the photograph, unfortunately. Also, some of the lines have been smudged in this painting, most likely due to moisture on the cave wall.

This tendency to exploit the rock's contours, cracks, and variations in color is a well-known theme in paleolithic rock art. It becomes obvious in any Paleolithic cave you visit, once you are attuned to the possibility. Often these adaptations of features in the rock show great cleverness, and as an observer, there is pleasure in having that "aha" moment when you perceive the pattern in the rock, just as the artist at some level must have had a similar experience when they found the affinity themselves. It seems natural that there would be an element of play in that process. On the other hand, it also bespeaks a certain close attention, and even a reverence for the rock itself. Jean Clottes, in *What is Paleolithic Art, Cave Paintings and the Dawn of Human Creativity,* points out that contemporary practitioners of shamanic rituals who make use of rock art in their religious practice tend to show a deep veneration for the rock.

Members of the Hopi Nation, for instance, have told Clottes that It is not a foregone conclusion that any rock face will be acceptable for painting or engraving. Clottes writes:

> It was indeed the case that the rock face must accept being engraved or painted. That called for lengthy meditation and communion with the rock before it could be known whether it accepted or refused.[6]

Making an ethnological comparison like this, that is, looking to contemporary practitioners of shamanism to try to glimpse something about the attitudes and approaches of the Paleolithic artists, is a fraught endeavor, and naive analogies are rightly greeted with skepticism.[7] Nonetheless, it is safe to say that scholars are in agreement that the decorated caves had a spiritual or religious dimension,[8] and at a minimum, it is reasonable to suppose that the artists' tendency to build imagery from features of the rock is more than a stylistic mannerism; it must be in some way informed by their beliefs. One of the most compelling speculations on this question of the Paleolithic artists' attitude toward the rock was offered by David Lewis-Williams. In *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art.* Lewis-Williams discusses the offerings of bone and other objects that Paleolithic people placed in crevices in decorated caves. He proposes that this practice of inserting bone fragments into the wall is consistent with a belief that the wall constitutes a permeable barrier:

> People saw the walls as a 'membrane' between themselves and the spirit world; they were performing a two-way ritual. They were drawing (in two senses) spirit animals through the 'membrane' and fixing them on the surface; they were also sending fragments of animals back through the 'membrane' into the spirit world.[9]

Xavier was particularly excited to show me one particular image that exploited the contours of the cave wall in a distinctive way. Building suspense, he first took me to the image, and pointed out that the deer's head seemed to be distorted. He then took me several feet back to observe the same image, and I found that the form of the deer's head suddenly made sense, given the contours of the wall. The deer now was peering around the corner to meet us. The artist had taken the contours of the cave into account and had thought about how the image would look if you were viewing it as you walk through the cave. While standing in front of the

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[6] Jean Clottes, *What is Paleolithic Art: Cave Paintings and the Dawn of Human Creativity, (*Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016), Kindle Edition, 49.

[7] Jean Clottes describes one of the more famous and egregious examples of this ethnological approach in *What is Paleolithic Art.* The eminent parietal art specialist Henri Breuil unwisely made a direct comparison between a photograph of a "black Sorcerer of Guinea" and an anthropomorphic figure from Lascaux, saying, "It probably represents a Paleolithic Sorcerer wearing a costume made of grass." This simplistic parallel was derided by others in the field and has come to be summarily rejected. Clottes, 36.

[8] Clottes, 135. Clottes writes: "In all of the decorated caves the art is a result of magico-religious practices. A virtually general consensus regarding this topic explains why they are so often described as 'sanctuaries.'"

[9]' David Lewis-Williams, *Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (p. 333). Thames & Hudson. Kindle Edition. 333.

wall as they painted this image, the artist must have strategized about how the image needed to be distorted so that it makes the right impression when it is first encountered. The artist collaborated, in a sense, with the rock, to create a form that seems to grow out of the wall, and to be alive and active.

photo by Takeo Fukuyama

(Note: unfortunately, the effect regarding the deer's head is difficult to discern from the available photographs, and it wasn't permissible for me to take a photograph in the cave myself demonstrating it.]

The image's incompleteness also seems to contribute to this sense of partnership between the image and the rock. For most of this deer image, the painter used overlapping dots to form the outline, placing them so close together that they form a continuous line. The contour of the belly, however, fades into a dotted line, and the legs are omitted almost entirely. A similar situation holds for the second deer that is pictured above it. The bottom half of the upper deer also is composed of dotted lines:

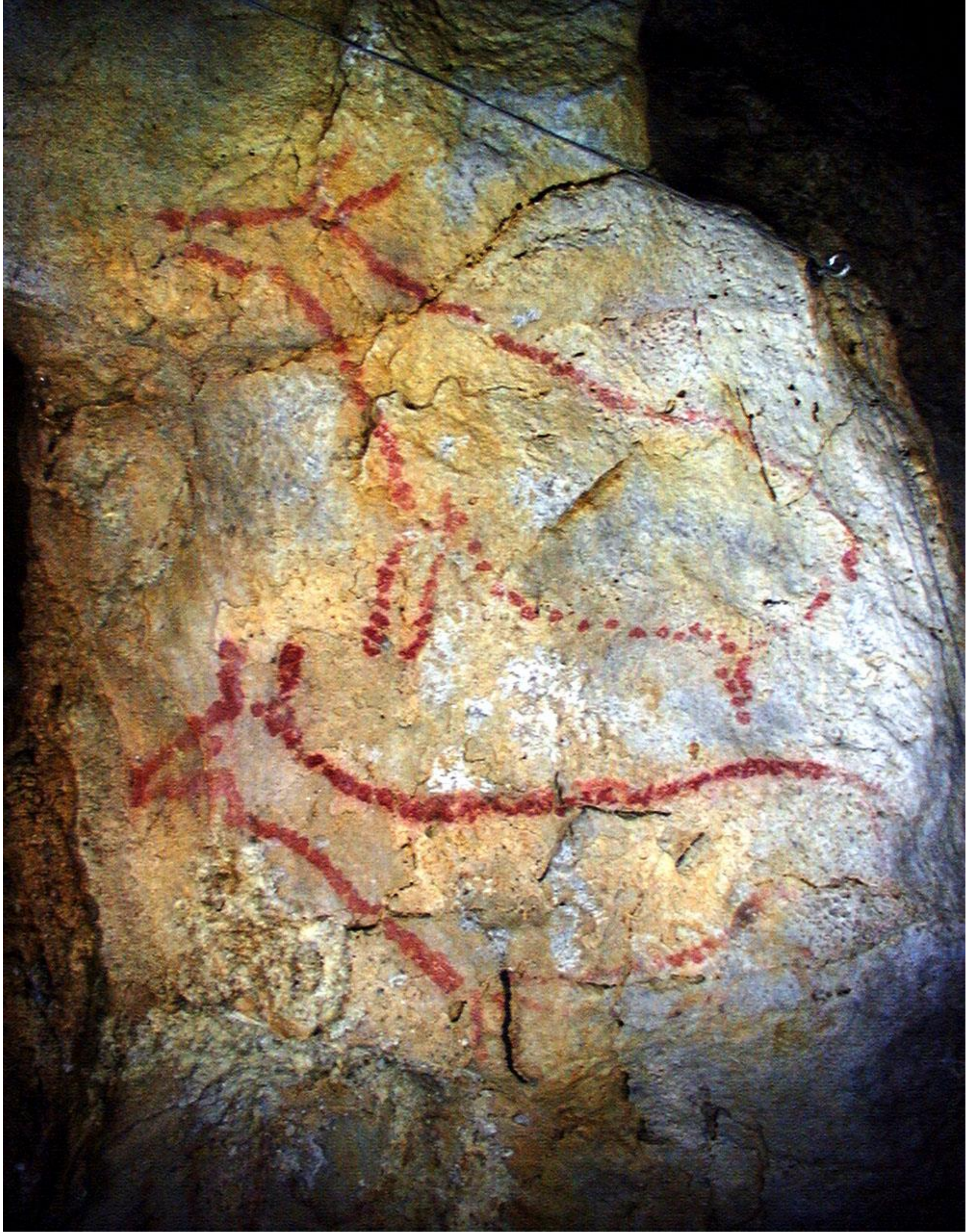

Photo by Takeo Fukuyama

Did the artist simply fail to finish these images, and are the dotted lines and the missing legs just a result of laxness on the artist's part – or are there some other intentions that lie behind these choices? To be fair, there are poorly executed and unfinished images in many paleolithic caves, and there truly are moments when the artists seem to have been either inept or negligent.[10] In this case, however, the dotted lines are part of a clearly defined style that is specific to caves in this region of Spain[11] The use of the dots is therefore clearly an intentional choice. Assuming, then, that both the incompleteness of the images and the use of dotted lines are not the least bit evidence of negligence, but choices that serve an artistic purpose, several speculations come to mind: First, could it be that the incomplete rendering enhances the perception that the animal is emerging from the 'membrane" of the rock? The dotted lines and the incompleteness seem to be complementary: they work together to point our attention toward the rock itself. Rather than tracing the figure's solid outline, the artist draws a dotted line, which encourages us to perceive the image that is in the rock. We have to do the work; the dotted lines direct our imagination as viewers and teach us to *see into* the rock.

Secondly, are the firm lines of the upper and front parts of the image intended to create a chiaroscuro effect, such that the front of the animal seems more brightly illuminated? If light were to be cast on the figure using a flickering lantern, as the original visitors would have done, perhaps the bottom part of the body would seem to fade into a quivering shadow.

Thirdly, and more speculatively, as in action painting, could it be that the dots used in this tradition draw attention to the physical presence and the individual gestures of the artist? Seeing the dots, we immediately understand that the artist placed their fingertip[12] at each successive spot. This process of marking the wall with a series of dots calls to mind the patterns of red discs that are found in so many caves (filled-in circles that are several times larger than an individual fingertip mark). These red discs are among the earliest markings that lie on the spectrum of "art."[13] A red disc in the "gallery of hands" in El Castillo cave in northern Spain, for instance, has been given a minimum date of 40,800 years BP using Uranium-Thorium dating.[14] Because it is known that the El Castillo cave was visited over many thousands of years,[15] those discs would have been present for millennia while successive generations visited and painted in the cave. Similarly, some of the handprints at El Castillo have also been determined to be very ancient. Both of these elemental patterns, the red discs and the handprints, at some level, seem to be about establishing the mere fact of a human presence, or perhaps demonstrating participation in rituals. Could the finger-daubed dots be in some way a faint echo of the red discs, or in some way a continuation of that gesture?

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[10] Whitley. Location 1142.

[11] Pimentel and Diez, 41.

[12] It's possible that they might have used a piece of animal skin instead of their bare finger, but the point still holds, even if more tentatively. Sainz, Toca, and Fukazawa, 144.

[13] Michael Lorblanchet and Paul Bahn, *The First Artists: In Search of the World's Oldest Art,* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2017), 305. The word "art" is placed in quotation marks because "art" can be a surprisingly problematic term. The designation of "art" is not something that can be easily and categorically decided.

[14] Hoffmann, D L et al. "U-Th Dating of Carbonate Crusts Reveals Neandertal Origin of Iberian Cave Art." *Science (American Association for the Advancement of Science)* 359.6378 (2018): 912–915. Web.

[15] Sainz, Toca, and Fukazawa, 91.

Given the consistency of the images, and their small number, it is likely that the images in Covalanas are synchronic, rather than being the result of multiple, widely spaced visits over thousands of years, as is often the case at other caves.[16] Their stylistic unity suggests that it is not totally inconceivable that they were made by one person. As I was guided through these narrow chambers, I began to imagine an alliance, of sorts, between this hypothetical individual artist and my guide Xavier, the state employee who some 18,0000 years after the paintings were made, is now responsible for protecting them and who acts as the artists' interpreter. This sense of a special relationship across the millennia was reinforced when Xavier looked me in the eye as we were alone in the cave and said, "I love this cave. I want to stay here the rest of my life." Xavier spends his days in an isolated hut halfway up a mountain, tending to this small, dark, sanctuary. There's a connection that has been formed between him and the cave artists, despite the unimaginable stretch of time that separates them, and it is the artwork that facilitates that bond.

[16] Sainz, Toca, and Fukazawa, 145.