

# Archeologist suggests much of Paleolithic cave art was done by women

October 11 2013, by Bob Yirka

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Handprints in ancient cave art most often belonged to women. Credit: Dean Snow

(Phys.org) —Pennsylvania State University Archaeologist Dean Snow is reporting to National Geographic that studies he's undertaken of cave art dating back to the Paleolithic indicate much of it was done by women, not men as is commonly believed.

Dean Snow has been studying ancient handprints in caves at the behest of National Geographic for nearly a decade. It began, he says, after reading about work done by geologist John Manning—he'd found that

average finger lengths in people vary by gender. Men tend to have longer ring fingers than [index fingers](#) for example, while the opposite is true for women. Some time later, he reports, he was looking at pictures of [cave art](#) and noticed that the fingers on the hands appeared to conform to Manning's description of female hands. That set him off on a voyage of discovery. He began looking at cave art in a new way, and even developed an algorithm that offers the likelihood of a handprint belonging to a man or woman—he tested it on modern volunteers in Europe and found it to be approximately 60 percent accurate. He notes that differences between gender finger length in Paleolithic people was more pronounced than it is in modern humans who have more overlap. Because of this, he believes his algorithm is more accurate when measuring the people who made the cave art.

The cave art under review is early examples of hand stencils, where the person making them placed their hand against a wall then blew paint at it (through a straw or directly from their mouth) to create an outline. Such art has been found in caves in Australia, Africa, Borneo, Argentina and more famously in Spain and France. Snow says that thus far his studies have revealed that approximately 75 percent (24 out of 32) of such hand art was likely done by women.

Up until recently most scientists have assumed cave art was most likely done by men—the depictions of women and animals being hunted seemed to sum up the life of hunters, the male half of a hunter-gatherer society. That idea has slowly been changing as archeologists have begun to take a closer look. Biologist Dale Guthrie, for example, conducted a study of the hand art and concluded that they were most likely made by adolescent boys.

Snow theorizes that if [women](#) were doing most of the cave art, it's possible they played a larger, more important role in how hunter-gatherer societies functioned than has been thought.

**More information:** via [National Geographic](#)

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