

Cave art in Patagonia found to be oldest pigment-based cave art in South America

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Example of a rock art panel at the site Cueva Huenul 1 (northwestern Patagonia, Argentina) Credit: Guadalupe Romero Villanueva

An international team of scientists reports that cave art at a site in Patagonia is the oldest of its type ever found in South America. In their

study, [published](#) in the journal *Science Advances*, the group conducted radiocarbon dating of the material used to create the art thousands of years ago.

Patagonia is in South America, covering the continent's southern tip. It is mostly desert, tableland or steppe terrain, though it also includes some of the southern Andes. Prior research has suggested that humans began to inhabit the area approximately 12,000 years ago, making it one of the last places on Earth reached by [modern humans](#).

Prior research has also led to the discovery of pictures painted on the walls of some caves by early inhabitants of the region. Most of this research has suggested that the [cave art](#) was likely made just a few thousand years ago. In this new effort, the research team found that it is much older, going back as far as 8,200 years ago.

Little is known about the ancient people who inhabited Patagonia because little was left behind to study. What is known is that life in the region could not have been easy, with little rain and scarce food sources. Early humans must have lived near the ocean. Making things worse, the area experienced a hot and dry spell starting approximately 10,000 years ago that lasted several thousand years. Still, humans persisted, as evidenced by the cave art they left behind.



Panoramic view of the rock art site Cueva Huenul 1 (northwestern Patagonia, Argentina). Credit: Guadalupe Romero Villanueva



Views of the rock art site Cueva Huenul 1 (northwestern Patagonia, Argentina)
Credit: Guadalupe Romero Villanueva



Archaeologist and rock art specialist Ph.D. Guadalupe Romero Villanueva registering painted motifs from the rock art site Cueva Huenul 1 (northwestern Patagonia, Argentina). Credit: Anahi Re

To learn more about ancient cave art at a site known as Cueva Huenul 1, which holds approximately 900 paintings, the research team scratched off samples of the "paint" from several locations for lab study. Because the substance was plant-based, the researchers were able to use radiocarbon dating, which revealed that the age of the paint ranged over thousands of years.

The oldest painting dates as far back as 8,200 years, making it the oldest of its kind in South America, though not the world; that record is held by cave art [found in Indonesia](#).

More information: Guadalupe Romero Villanueva et al, Earliest directly dated rock art from Patagonia reveals socioecological resilience to mid-Holocene climate, *Science Advances* (2024). [DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.adk4415](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.adk4415)

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