

today as they were over 27,000 years ago when they were applied.

The Gargas paintings are similar to many found in this region. Other caves also have paintings of animals, lines and dots. Many also have both positive and negative images of human hands. But only in the Gargas cave are the hands shown without fingers.

Today you can still see the missing fingers in the cave at Gargas. It is open for tours.



THE MYSTERIOUS HANDS AT GARGAS



By Caitlind L. Alexander



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The Mysterious Hands at Gargas/Caitlind L. Alexander
Summary: A brief look at the Gargas Cave in France and the cave paintings of hands with missing fingers.

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Ochre Rock.

The drawings were in a red-orange color and in black. The red-orange was made with ochre, a rock or clay that has a lot of iron in it. The rock or clay is often yellow, and the iron is red. This is what makes the orange color. The more iron the rock or clay has, the redder the color is.

Black paint was made with manganese. This is a black metal that is also found in rock and clay.

The manganese or the ochre would be ground up to a fine powder. Then it would be mixed with animal fat to make a thick paint. When applied to rock or clay, these colors would remain for centuries. In fact, the colors are nearly as bright

drawings appear in caverns the people could not have survived in for long. They are too far from the surface. In fact, some of the drawings even appear at the bottom of deep shafts. The only way to reach these areas is by climbing up and down a rope or rope ladder.

There is also no smoke in these caves. That shows that fires were not burnt there on a regular basis. Instead, people went into the cave to paint on the walls. Then they left.

Some of the images were painted directly on the rock. Others appeared to show a thin layer of clay laid over the rock before the image was applied. This left a smoother surface that the paint could sink into.



THE MYSTERIOUS HANDS AT GARGAS

The Discovery

It happened in 1887, in the south of France. A now unknown man was exploring the hills near the town of Saint-Gaudens. He was only 25 miles from the border of Spain, in an area with lots of caves nestled into the soft rock and steep cliffs.

Suddenly he came upon an opening in the rock. He pushed aside the bush covering the hole and looked into a long tunnel.

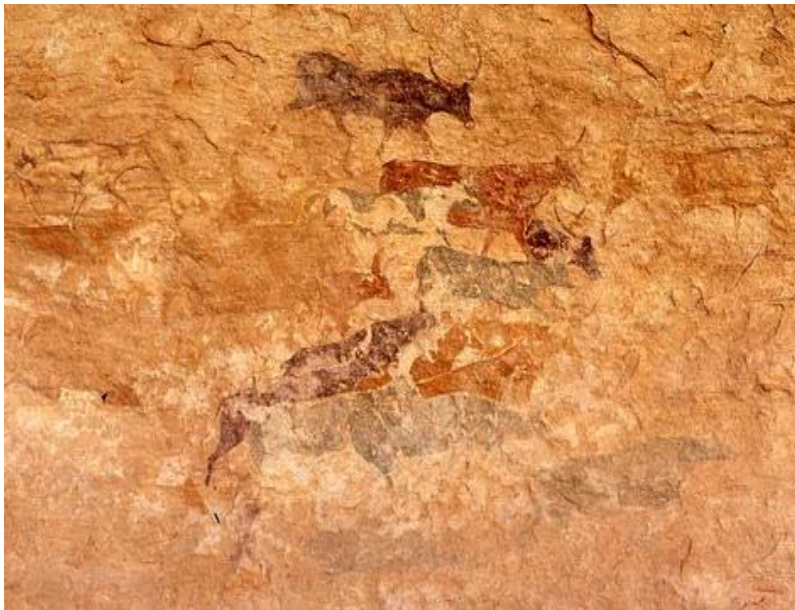
The man decided to explore the cave. He lit a torch and slowly made his way forward. Inside he found a number of passageways and caverns.

As he went deeper and deeper into the cave, prehistoric drawings began appearing on the walls. The drawings included pictures of wild horses,

bison, and mammoths. Many were cut into the rock with a sharp tool or painted with manganese and ochre.

The drawings of animals were all very realistic. Some of the animals showed lines or dots near them. Perhaps a single line represented a spear. A dot could mean a person, or it could be a count of the animals.

The drawings could mean a wish for good luck in an upcoming hunt. It could also be telling the story of a hunt that had already happened. The images could be used to keep a historical record of the people who lived here.



The Gargas Cave People

Scientists have discovered some things about the cave people. They believe that they lived in the area about 27,000 to 30,000 years ago.

They lived by hunting mammoths and bison. They would even hunt and eat prehistoric horses and deer. They also ate fruits and nuts that they gathered from the trees and bushes nearby. Roots and edible leaves helped to round out their diet.

The people lived in caves and used fire to cook their meals. Pieces of their pots and charcoal from their fires have been found in other caves in the area.

While the people may have lived in caves, they may not have lived in the Gargas cave. Many of the

leave a blurred image or a gap where the hand had not been pressed tight. It would also leave an unclear impression at the tip where the end of the finger could not be pressed tight to the rock.

This is not the case. The images show a clear imprint of a full hand with fingers that suddenly stop short.

Because of that, most scientists think the fingers have actually been removed. Some think that the fingers may have been lost to cold or frostbite. Many others think that the fingers were cut off in a sacred ceremony or for some other religious reason.

Cutting off fingers is not unheard of. In the Fiji Islands, the death of a chief would require the sacrifice of 100 fingers. In Central Africa, some native tribes still cut off a finger as a sign of mourning for a dead relative. In the 1940s some Japanese kamikaze pilots would cut off a finger and leave it with their parents. That way a part of their body could be buried in their homeland.

Maybe the people of ancient France cut off their fingers in mourning. Then they painted pictures of their sacrifice on the walls of this cave for future generations to see and worship.

No one really knows.

The Mysterious Hands

But the animals, lines and dots weren't the only paintings in the cave. There were also over 200 images of human hands. These hands were in both "positives" and "negatives." In the positive images, the hand was dipped in paint or was painted with paint. It was then pressed firmly against the wall. This left a clear impression of the hand on the rock.

The negative handprints were made by placing the hand against the rock, then putting the paint around the hand. This may have been done with a sponge, a piece of cloth or fur, or even the leaves of a plant. It could also have been done by blowing the paint around the hand.

The hand prints came in all sizes. There are large ones belonging to the grown men of the tribe. There are smaller ones that could belong to women or to teenagers. There are also the handprints of children! The youngest handprints appear to belong to children no more than two years old!

The child's prints often came high up on the walls. There is no way they could have reached that height on their own. Perhaps they were held up by a parent or a priest while the painting was done.

As the man explored the cave, he knew he had found something very strange. The paintings in the cave at Gargas were very unusual.

It wasn't that finding a cave in this area was unusual. There are a lot of caves in Southern France. Finding the drawings wasn't even unusual. Many of these caves have similar drawings.

The painting itself wasn't unusual. It seemed to be made the same as other paintings in the area. Even the animals weren't unusual. Prehistoric man painted lots of animals on the walls of their caves.

But there was something unusual about the hand paintings in this cave. Most of the hands on the walls seemed to have short fingers, as if they were cut off! Sometimes it was just one finger. Sometimes it was all of them.

The men, women, and even the children; all were missing fingers!

The man hurried back to town and told his friends what he had found. They went to see the strange handprints for themselves. Soon many people were coming to look at the handprints.



Why the Missing Fingers?

Not long after the scientists and archeologists began to come. They studied the cave paintings at Gargas to see what they could find. They didn't learn much.

No one knows why the fingers are missing. There are some people who think that the fingers have not been cut off. They believe the fingers are only turned under. This may signify some sort of symbolic language or meaning.

However, most of the images are very clear. If a finger was turned under, it would push part of the hand up off the rock during painting. This would