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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



THE OLDEST ROCK ART IN CENTRAL BRAZIL:

Current Knowledge

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There is clear evidence for human presence in central Brazil (States of Mato Grosso, Bahia, Minas Gerais and Goiás) starting at 12 000 BP, while large “Pleistocene” fauna survived until approximately 9 000 BP. Claims have been made for the identification of a mastodon, a toxodon, a smilodon, giant sloths, a flat-faced bear and American horses, though none of these interpretations have been substantiated.

Drips and trails of pigments have been observed on the occupation floors, dated to between 10 000 and 12 000 BP, of rock shelters with painted walls in the State of Minas Gerais (Gentio Cave, Santana do Riacho, Boquete and Dragão rock shelters). Unfortunately, we cannot be certain that these pigments are associated with the rock art. In the State of Mato Grosso, at Santa Elina, used pigments have been dated to between 8 000 and 11 000 BP, and between 5 500 and 7 000 BP. But once again, their association with the paintings visible on the walls is not certain.

A block that fell from the ceiling of the Boquete rock shelter 9 500 years ago was gradually buried. It is covered with engravings (incisions and cupules) starting at its base, indicating that they were made between 9 500 and 8 000 BP. A few pecked circles and a biomorph were found higher up and could be more recent, but older than 7 000 BP, the date at which they were completely covered. Unfortunately, these figures are atypical and cannot be attributed to any of the stylistic traditions well-represented in the site and the region.

At 200 km from the Boquete rock shelter, the oldest occupation of the Dragão rock shelter is dated to 11 000 BP. It was unfortunately not possible to verify this date due to a lack of time to extend the excavation.

The limestone floor of the Poseidon rock shelter, near Lapa do Dragão, was covered with nearly 5 000 pecked engravings (figure). A calcite crust containing quartz grains and covering the engravings was subject to EPR analyses. After elimination of the quartz, a date of 55 000 was obtained for the crystallization of the calcite. This result must be considered with great caution, however, because it is highly doubtful that humans were present in America at this time.

In the Lapa Vermelha IV rock shelter, near Lagoa Santa, a group of very faint lines were painted at the entrance to a small cave that was completely buried before the excavation in the back of the rock shelter. The minimum age is no more than 6 000 years ago (overlapping fireplace), but if these lines were made by a standing person, they could date to around 10 000 years ago, which is the age of the gravel at the base of the cavity. Recent excavations revealed an anthropomorphic engraving buried under a floor dated to more than 9 000 years ago.



Engravings at Poseidon (Montalvânia).

On the walls of the Lagoa Santa rock shelters, we observe interlocking stone flakes (fallen from the walls) among which we find paintings of different styles and with highly variable degrees of patina. We were thus able to establish a precise relative chronology based on the superimpositions, patinas and the layers of flaked stone. The oldest patinas appear to have formed during a very dry phase; we unfortunately do not know if this is the phase that occurred during the Final Pleistocene, or a shorter episode dated to approximately 7 000 years ago.

What we can say is that the oldest graphic art in central Brazil was already regionally differentiated, reflecting populations with distinct preoccupations. In the northern part of the State of Minas Gerais, we first observe very rare, large anthropomorphic figures, which are succeeded during the Holocene by geometric figures and representations of weapons. In the center of this same state, nearly all of the oldest representations are of cervids and fish, which are sometimes surrounded by tiny, very schematic anthropomorphic figures.

It is possible that these figures were painted when the territories were already well-defined and there was a need to affirm the possession of them to neighbors and possible invaders. In effect, starting in 8 000 BP, we observe the replacement of one biological, non-mongolized, population (called “Lagoa Santa”) by the ancestors of the modern indigenous groups.





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