

Chiribiquete

New Colombian Rock Art Site





South America with its vast uninhabited jungles areas is the last continent on earth where unknown sites with amazing pre-historic rock art paintings still can be discovered today. And each time this happens again two important questions are being raised anew. When did the first human immigration of the American continent happened? And where did these first Americans come from?

Many Questions

And when we look at their sophisticated and most varied paintings on large rock surfaces with hundreds of lively images, we ask us some further questions. How developed were our ancestors and creators of these intriguing images already? And more interestingly, why did they create this astonishing variety of geometric symbols and animal as well as human images? This is what we are trying to investigate and hopefully explain to some extent in this article.

Human Development

To better understand their messages imbedded in their rock paintings, we are first looking at human intellect during paleolithic times. Our ancestors were living fully in balance with nature, because they were dependent on climate, flora and fauna around them. We can say they had an environmental intelligence perfectly developed and focused all around nature. Furthermore, they possessed an in-depth knowledge about plants as food source and herbal medicine, as well as animal behavior to be able to successfully hunt them and not to

forget predominant weather conditions.

Water Resources

We also know humans always lived near water such as lakes, rivers or springs. Not only were they dependent on this water supply, but also the animals they hunted. So, the best hunting ground was near these water resources. About 20,000 years ago the climatic conditions in the Chiribiquete region were ideal. Enough water and ample supply of food for the giant herbivores as well as our ancestors. Did the water resources play a role in their paintings and symbolism? Do the wavy lines represent water? We will see further on.

Shamanism?

Their lifestyle led to certain beliefs to explain all weather phenomena such as thunder, lightning, rain and floods. So, sun, moon and stars, as well as sky, water and earth must have played an important role if not even a mythical part. Here is where possibly shamanism comes into the picture as well. This might explain the multiple symbols and strange figures being depicted here which we will talk about more in detail later on.

Mental Capabilities

Before our ancestors entered the American continent, they had already much higher mental capabilities, then we previously thought. They had a well-developed pre-frontal cortex and were capable of structured thinking and planning, reasoning and decision taking. For example, this includes the ability of planning a

well-organized hunt or how to place numerous motives on a rocky cliff to create a complex story telling scene or ceremony with a message. Because rock art is all about rituals and messages either directed to gods and spirits, to other clans or the next generation.

Artistical Skills

Our ancestors at the time could also communicate well in words, pictures as we see here and even with music. Therefore, they had a high level of creativity to paint animals with imagination, abstraction, composition, perspective, dimension with space, scale and form. Not all of that we find here, but still enough to transform these images into an impressive message to the after world. In addition, they produced defined working tools for very specific purpose made from stone, bone, antler or teeth. We presume that in future excavations some pieces of jewelry might be discovered as well.

American History Re-written

So far US archaeologists kept praying their so-called Clovis First theory like a mantra. This so far believed fact maintains that the Americas, which means the North, Central and South American continents were immigrated by our ancestors from Asia via Alaska around 15,000 years ago. At that time the sea level was one hundred twenty meters lower than today and both continents were connected by a land bridge. This ancient land connection was called Beringia. But can US scientists still maintain this belief after those fascinating discoveries in Colombia?

Similar Sites

Not to forget another paleolithic rock art site

situated three thousand kilometers south east in Brazil which have been discovered some time ago. But the dating from local experts were doubted by US archaeologists. Recent research from French experts at Serra da Capivara with a dating around 30,000 years proves them wrong too. For more information, please see the article on this website. And Serra Capivara is not the only archaeological site on the South American continent showing such early human activity. In the Chilean Andes in the Atacama Desert at an altitude of four thousand meters various mummy bundles were discovered and dated to be 28,000 years old.

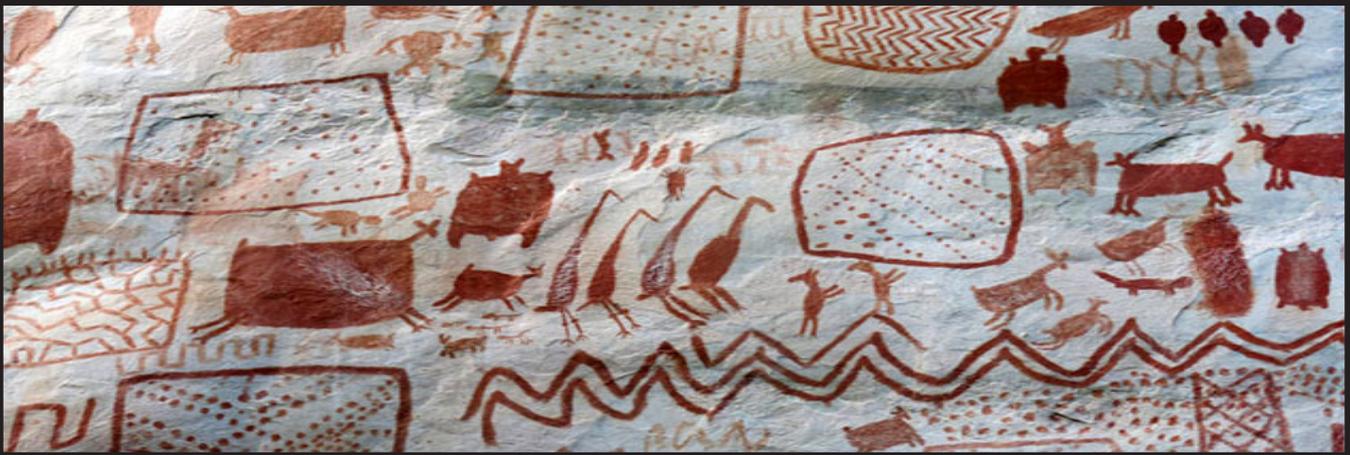
Much Earlier Immigration

What we can say today is, that the immigration of America might have come via Alaska in several waves and at different times. And possibly also via the Atlantic from Africa. And it took place as early as 30,000 years ago or even before that. Because a similar passage via an ice-free corridor in Alaska was also possible about 45,000 years ago. That time horizon would have given men enough time to move 15,000 kilometers further south into South America. New research also indicates that our ancestors moved along the coast lines in a much fast way than we previously believed. Possibly they covered this amazing distance in a few hundred years. It is not surprising that all human finds possessed the same blood group zero equally to all homo sapiens at the time.

Chiribiquete National Park

To start with here is just a short overview of this unique area covered with paleolithic rock art images. The area is huge and covers about two hundred by fifty kilometers. After the Co-





Colombian Government had signed a peace treaty in 2016 with the Rebellion Army FARC the area under their control could be entered after nearly thirty years for the first time without risk.

Remote Location

In the corner of the four Colombian provinces North Andes, Amazonia, Guyana and Orinoquia lies the newly declared huge Chiribiquete National Park. This is some four hundred kilometers southeast of Bogota. Only in 2017 the first rock art paintings were discovered at the base of some of the many table mountains typical in this isolated area.

Huge Amount of Images

There are no roads, trails nor settlements in this huge area. Experts established that undisturbed tribes still live here in self-wanted isolation fully consistent with nature. But some indigenous tribes living on the fringes gave the first hints of the existence of pre-historic rock art. The vast area is full of natural arches, rocky labyrinths and caverns as well as many rock shelters. It is no surprise that these natural rock overhangs were camping grounds for our ancestors. And here they started to create their paintings like a story book of their beliefs and daily lives. Since the first excavations in 2017 about 75,000 figures and symbols painted on rock surfaces at about sixty rock shelters have been identified and documented.

Many Fire Places

Luckily over fifty fire places were found during excavations. This helped to date the creation of rock art at about 20,000 years ago. But some fire places were still in use only 500 years ago. Are they proof of the disappearance of human presence in this area at that time? Interesting date though, because it falls in the time horizon of the arrival of Spanish conquistadores.

Chiribiquete Details

This new Colombian site in the Solano Rio Guaviare and Serrania de la Lindosa area and its paleolithic dating supports the theory of much earlier human immigration. The enormous variety of painted symbols and animals as well as humans interacting in a multiple of ways are surprising. Here we see hunting and battle scenes, dances and ceremonies. Most interesting is the fact that the jaguar is the most common depicted animal here. Experts assume that the jaguar was worshiped as a symbol of power and fertility.

Animal Images

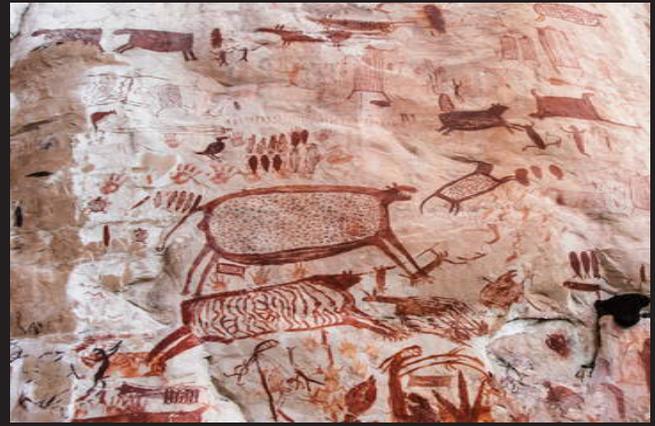
At sites of pre-historic rock art paintings the world over our ancestors always depicted their local fauna. Therefore, we know which animals lived here at the time. The long list includes: jaguar, black and sandy colored puma, tapir, capybara, giant otter, Howler and brown woolly monkeys, porcupine, alligator, various fish including piranha, crab, bat, various insects, different birds including water birds, turtle, snake and lizard.

Animals on Menu

Fascinating is the list of animal bones found next to the fire places excavated. These our ancestors must have consumed: piranhas, alligators, snakes, frogs, capybaras, armadillos and paca. In addition, their menu included many locally available fruits, flowers, leaves, nuts, seeds and roots from palms, trees, bushes and plants. Their paleolithic diet was certainly quite varied and included a couple of dozen items on their menu.

Huge Mammals

At the time the area was also inhabited by some huge animals extinct today like mastodon an elephant like species weighing up to nine tons,



as well as toxodon looking like a rhino without horns and a weight of two tons, plus the giant sloth reaching a height of six meters and a paleo llama species, all were herbivores. The only carnivore was the simlodon also called sable toothed tiger and the three different species were present in this area. All these pre-historic animals became extinct around the same time 10,000 years ago, which shows that climate drastically changed then.

Mythical Figures

The discovery only five years ago has not yet resulted in detailed studies of painted figures and symbols. The following assumptions are therefore just that. Because we are in South America some experts see similarities of some images to famous Aztec, Toltec and Maya depictions despite the fact these cultures existed about four thousand kilometers further north in Mexico and 15,000 years later.

Fact or Fiction?

So, it is difficult for us to believe that, but nevertheless we mention them here. These

are the so-called “jaguar man” and “feathered snake” representing the creation god Quetzalcoatl. Another figure should symbolize the important god Wiraqucha. It does not sound reasonable, but it is a theory. Hopefully we will learn more about the truth in these assumptions in future, or get another meaningful explanation to the similarity.

Intriguing Human Images

Amazing images which we see here are various rituals and dances including humans raising their arms in the so-called adoring position in front of a wild animal with what looks like two horns. But this interpretation might be wrong, as the animal has been painted with huge paws and therefore might represent a jaguar just with a chubby body and short tail.

Or was it the dangerous simlodon sable tooth tiger and the interpreted horns were his long bended teeth before attack when he raised his head? The simlodon was the only cat with a short tail. This depiction is insofar interesting as the six men standing behind each other are shown with their penises in horizontal position. Is this a specific fertility ritual scene?



Stick Figures & Box Men

We can assume that one of the other basic facts of human depictions in pre-historic rock art do also apply here. The painted figures do not represent individuals but specific scenes with a message. They stand for certain rituals or happenings. Looking at the human figures we encounter various types, but none are very naturalistic. In addition, they were created rather small in size around forty centimeters or less. This can be well judged looking at the hand palm prints next to them. Some of the figures have just the same size.

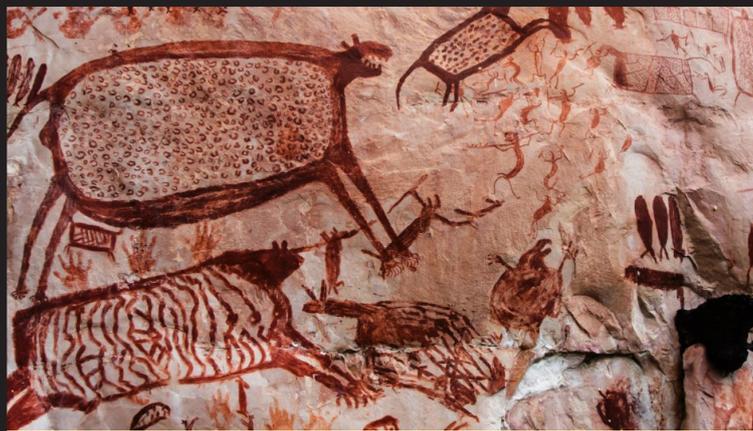
Most bodies look rather simple in style and in row dances they were even reduced to artless stick figures. Interesting though is a dancing scene which can be described as a wild dance with weapons. Due to its fading in colors it might be older than the darker images around. Another interpretation might be that of a hunting scene with many hunters in action in front of a jaguar attacking one hunter. But see for yourself.

Clothed Figures?

But how can we explain the box figures? Only at Val Camonica in Italy we have seen similar images. There they indicate warriors with protective gear. But due to the distance and time difference they cannot be compared. Therefore, they could represent long colored clothing possibly also with ornaments. Another case is the bag like figures without heads but with indication of few hairs. Very similar images we have seen at Serra da Capivara. This could be interpreted as shamans in costumes. The scene in Brazil is more telling as those figures are being accompanied by praying humans. Please see comparative picture.

Missing Scenes

Interesting is also what we do not see at Chiribiquete. We have not found yet any birth or sex scenes. And typical female depictions as we see them at many other sites worldwide are rare here as well. What does this tell us? In



paleolithic societies equality of sexes was a common principle. Was this different here?

Ritual Group Dance

In other scenes various humans standing or dancing in line and are holding hands. We have counted in some groups between ten to twenty individuals. And there are also dancers wearing animal masks. This is typical for dances praying for hunting luck. Looking at other rock art sites worldwide some dance images are similar and could indicate human fertility dance rituals. Dancing was an important social interaction in pre-historic times. It created clan bonding and was used to solve problems. But the most important reason of dances was really that of ritual practices to pray



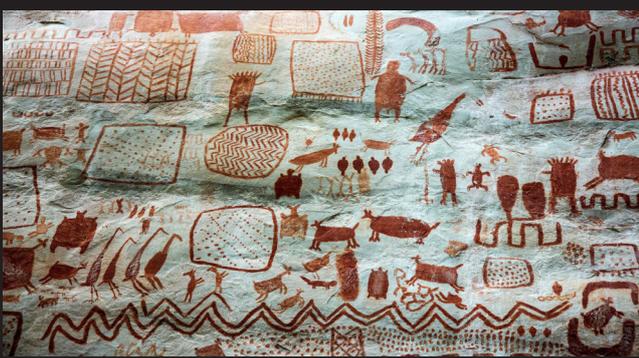
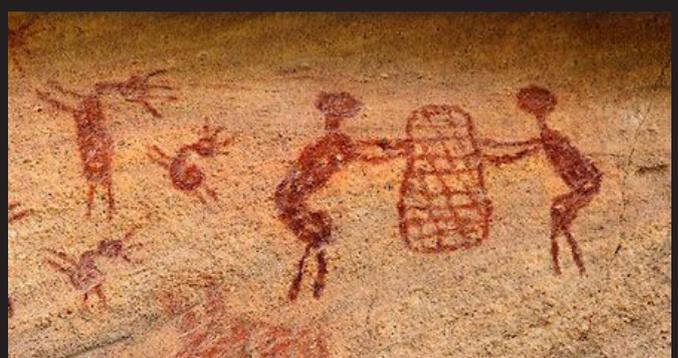
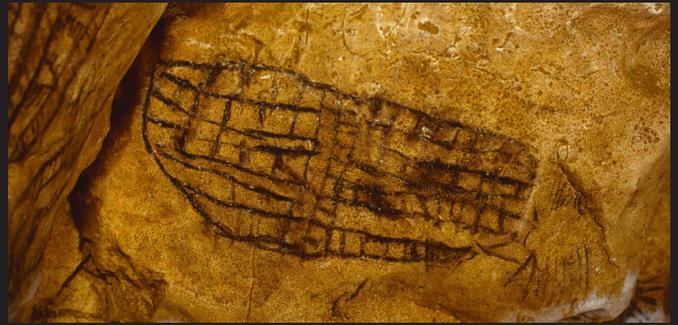
for either hunting luck or human fertility. The so-called adorant depiction with raised arms is found at various rock art sites worldwide.

Adorant Position

At a closer look this might be interpreted differently. We became suspicious when we saw some persons with three arms raised. We have noticed that human figures without raised arms always have short arms pointed forward. The presumed raised arms are rather long and we see two long lines coming out of one hand and in the other case even three. And each figure still has one arm pointing forward. So, it must be some sort of club or stick they are holding in one hand. This observation does not support the adoring theory.

But let us think about another theory for this image. From Africa we know that ancient San Bushmen who also created rock paintings used branches or long pieces of tree bark to defend themselves. They hold them up over their head to give the impression that they were taller, because wild animals are more cautious to attack animals larger than themselves.

All pictures on the right are from different sites noted from top to bottom: Altamira cave Spain, Catimbau Brazil, Wadi Abu Ud Saudi Arabia and the last two from Serra da Capivara Brazil. They are show here for reasons of comparison.



Missing Images

What else do we not see at Chiribiquete what is common to other sites? This might tell us also a lot about the creators and their daily lives. We have not noticed any injured animals which is typical for hunting scenes. Despite the fact that hunters are depicted with lances, spears and spear catapults. With regards to signs, we miss circle and spiral symbols. We have only noticed interesting depictions of hand palms with two circles and a central dot.

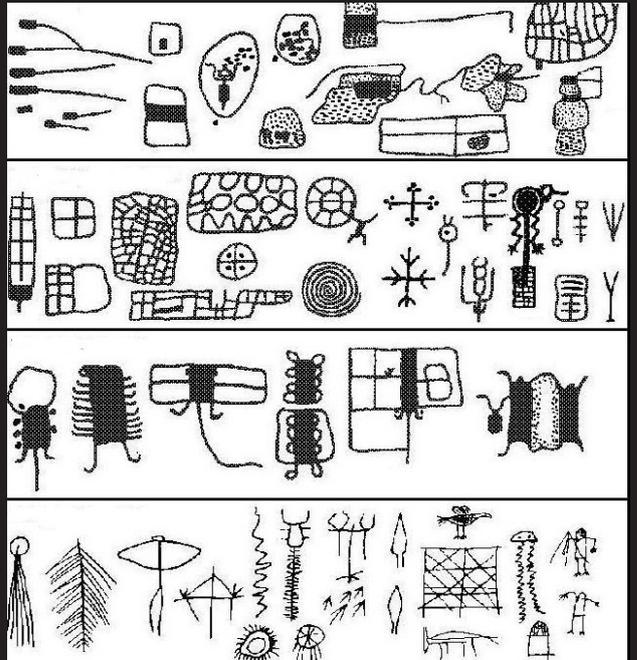
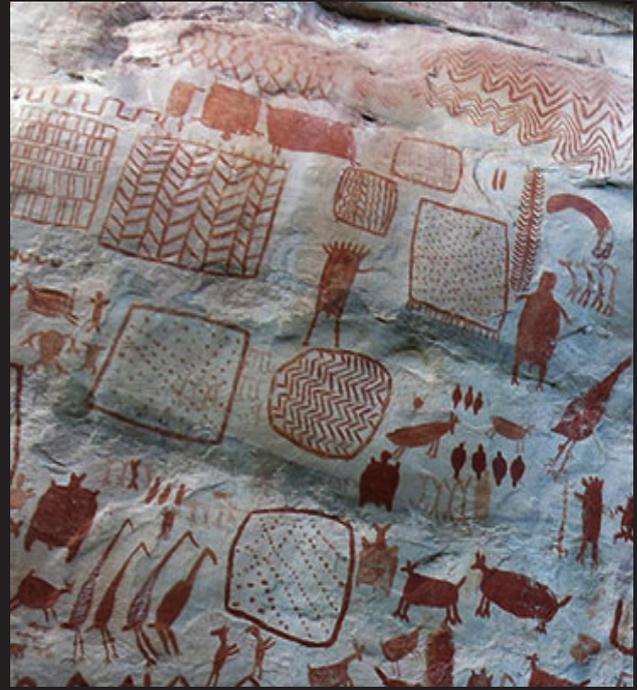
Ceremonial Sites

One thing is certain, all painted rock panels are ceremonial sites. And here we find twelve huge rock panels fully covered with hundreds of images and symbols. We also know that they were used and created over time possibly thousands of years. We see that in the difference of patina and fading as well as skill. For example, the paintings at Cerro Montoya and Limoncillos are more faded. Looking at the skill and the situation at similar European sites experts could establish various facts.

Established Facts

The older the images are the more naturalistic and realistic the animal figures were created with great care and detail. Over time the paintings became more primitive in skill and looks and humans ended up as pure stick figures. The reason being that first talented individuals in clans possibly shamans created these as holy regarded ritual depictions and messages.

The graph on the right shows similar box designs in France.



Later this privilege and importance might have fallen away. So, looking at the time line of 20,000 years the type of animal and human bodies here fit into the big historical picture.

Important Symbolism

But the most important judgement for the ceremonial purpose are the motives. Compared to other rock art sites worldwide in Chiribiquete we have a balance between figures and symbols, but an over representation of symbols. And these symbols are the most fascinating as we can see.

Box Motives

The most intriguing to us is the great variety of what we call boxes. On the few pictures available to us, we have identified a dozen different designs. Some are filled with small dots, others with dots in lines or showing certain patterns. Interestingly dots outside boxes are extremely rare here in comparison to other sites worldwide. The next group has linear designs and some look like palm leaves or feathers and again wavy lines. Compared to dots the palm leaf and wavy line designs are found also without surrounding boxes. Some boxes are square others have rounded edges or are true circles. Another set depicts various wavy lines which we see here predominantly without a square around them. If we look at an image from a Brazilian site the possible purpose of some of these boxes become clear. There two figures hold a box with cross design which actually is a hunting net. Might this explanation also fit our boxes here? Please see the pictures from other sites around the world with similar box designs.

Box Images Elsewhere

One painted animal image from Brazil gives us the idea that these boxes might be animal hides indicating successful hunting. In Argentina at Palancho an engraved image of a dotted box can be seen. It looks like the typical cup holes. Most fascinating are the various dotted boxes at a special rock art site in Italy at Berolina. Experts interpret these as fields and the bedrock surface as the first map in history. But these theories are possibly just that unproven assumptions. Similar boxes were also discovered at Catimbau in Brazil and far away in Europe France at Vallee des Merveilles plus in Spain at the Altamira cave as well as in Saudi Arabia. But



see the comparative pictures for yourself.

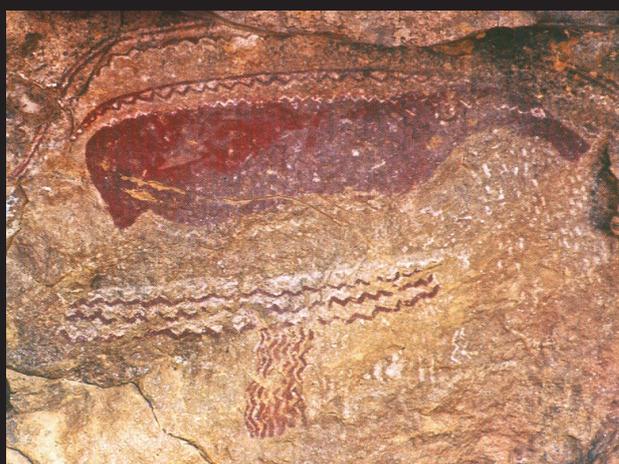
Wavy Lines

Here we have less variety. Most are horizontal, but they also appear as vertical lines. We identified in principle three types: the regular nicely curved line, the line of many connected triangles and the rare curved line with a dotted line below and above. All these lines may also be used in the boxed version. The regular curved lines appear in two and more lines running parallel. So do the triangular string lines where we have counted between six to nine lines running very close to each other.

Water Theory?

Naturally we think of water or rivers when we see wavy lines. But did this apply too for our ancestors at the time? There is really no proof for this interpretation. We see these lines as horizontal as well as vertical symbols. Now let's assume flooding after torrential downpours in a jungle area occur. But this landscape was mountainous.

Below example with wavy lines San bushmen paintings in Southern Africa





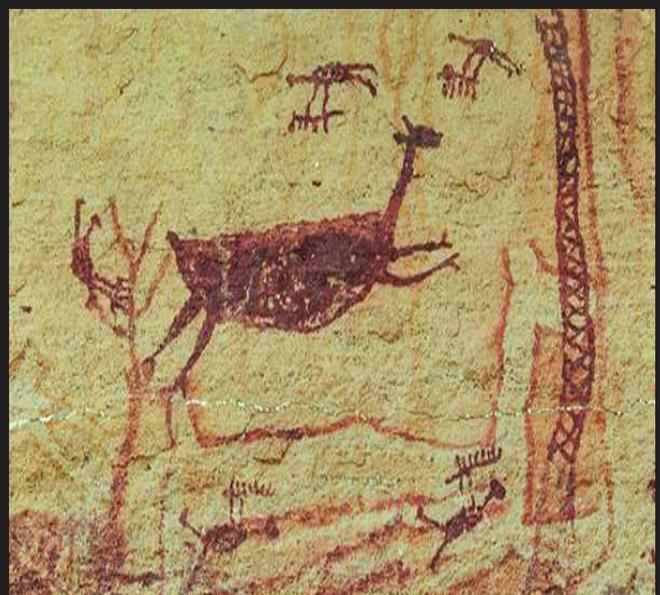
So, flooding happened only for short periods and did not pose a problem. We also can assume that our ancestors could swim and were able and did build boats such as the dug-out tree trunk type. Interestingly boats were not depicted.

Climate Change

The climatic conditions did only change later around 10,000 years ago. Are these wavy line symbols perhaps younger in age? Might they be a praying for rain symbol? We actually do not know.

Animal Markings

Most animal bodies are pictured fully filled with paint. But some show interesting markings. Dots all over their bodies is the most common design. Intriguing are the irregular striped animals which remind of tiger stripes. Does this image perhaps represent the simlodon? We have to remember that in South America both types of pumas exist sandy color and pitch black. But the jaguar is stronger than the puma. And some bodies show typical jaguar spot markings.



Above on the right we see a net type crossed design, but was it really that?

The below picture is from Serra da Capivara Brazil which clearly shows a net hunting scene. That might prove the fact that net hunting happened near to conpemporary at Chiribiquete

Color and Styles

It was established that the creators first prepared the rock surfaces. They used fire to clean and smooth them up to apply the paint with fingers and brushes either made of feathers or plant fibers. Which kind of bonding agent came to use has not yet been established. During excavations pieces of ochre have been found. This explains the brownish color. The red color has been produced from red earth pigments. It seems reddish images are older because they are more faded. The dark brown colored pictures are younger because they are better preserved.

Other Symbols

Not to forget the most personal human identification hand palm prints. They appear the world over at many sites both as negative and positive prints. Here they are found quite frequently at various Chiribiquete sites both left and right hands but only as positive prints. It was not yet established if they are both male and female. Fascinating are the few hand palm prints with a double circle and dots in its center. What do they tell us? Was it the shaman leaving a kind of proof like signature? But the complex sun circle image intrigues us most. It is quite detailed and a beautiful design with sun rays.

Weapons Used

Unfortunately, it is quite difficult to recognize the different weapons depicted here in the hands of hunters. We have given it a try and identified the following: clubs, lances or spears, spear catapults and slingshots. But we also looked at the symbols and interpreted some of them as boomerang or throwing sticks, as well as bolas which are three stones connected by strings. These were thrown to swirl around the feet of animals and stop them running away. A truly effective weapon it is. Not to forget the nets which were used in two ways. Thrown over smaller animals or birds, or fixed between trees and used in a chase hunt for animals with a fleeing instinct. Most interesting is the fact that bows and arrows are missing in the Chiribiquete weaponry.

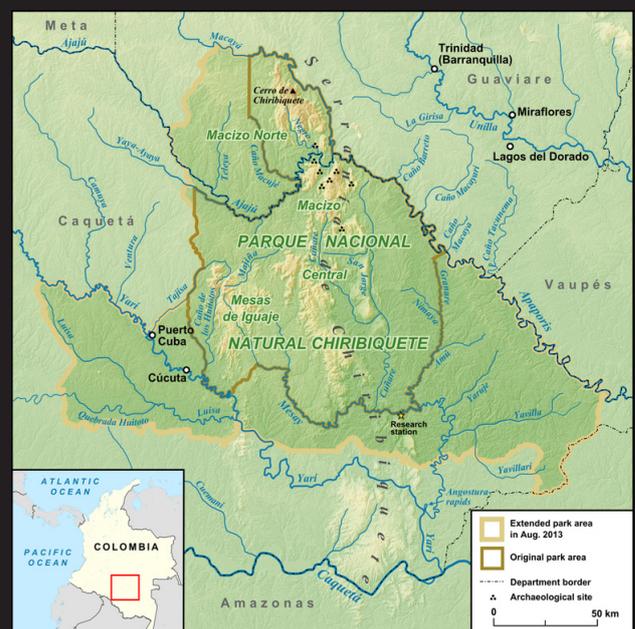
Painting Size

The largest figures are hundred fifty centimeters tall. Normally animals are larger than human figures, also when these animal species actually are in shoulder height smaller

than men. Human figures are depicted rather small from twenty to forty centimeters.

Superimpositions

Superimpositions means newer painting covering partly or totally older works. These we find especially at the easy to reach bottom of a rock surface. But this raises another question. How did the painters at the time reach the upper part of the cliff at height of up to eight meters? Did they use ropes or some kind of ladder? Possibly they used long wooden poles or tree trunks with cut out steps as they are still used by indigenous tribes on the continent to reach tree houses.



Summary

In 2018 the new National Park was declared UNESCO World Heritage Site and now is the largest park worldwide. Chiriquete National Park has not been created to facilitate tourism. In contrary it was set up to protect this fast remote and inaccessible area with few indigenous tribes living here still in total isolation. It seems they still visit these paleolithic rock art sites.

No roads, airstrips or accommodation is allowed to be built in future and visits by archaeologists are limited not to disturb the environment. So far only one camera team accompanied local archaeologists and this film can be seen on dedicated channels.

Picture Credits

We thank J Denzer, J Alvaro Gaviria, A Alvarez Arango, C Besancon and others for making available some of their photographs.

