
NEWS & TECHNOLOGY 28 February

2018

Neanderthals made the oldest cave art in the world



Art at La Pasiega, Spain, predates the arrival of modern humans

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By Michael Marshall

OUR extinct Neanderthal cousins were the first known cave artists in the world.

Many European caves contain prehistoric art, all of which has been attributed to modern humans. There have been past claims of Neanderthal paintings, but the evidence was weak.

Alistair Pike at the University of Southampton, UK, and his colleagues

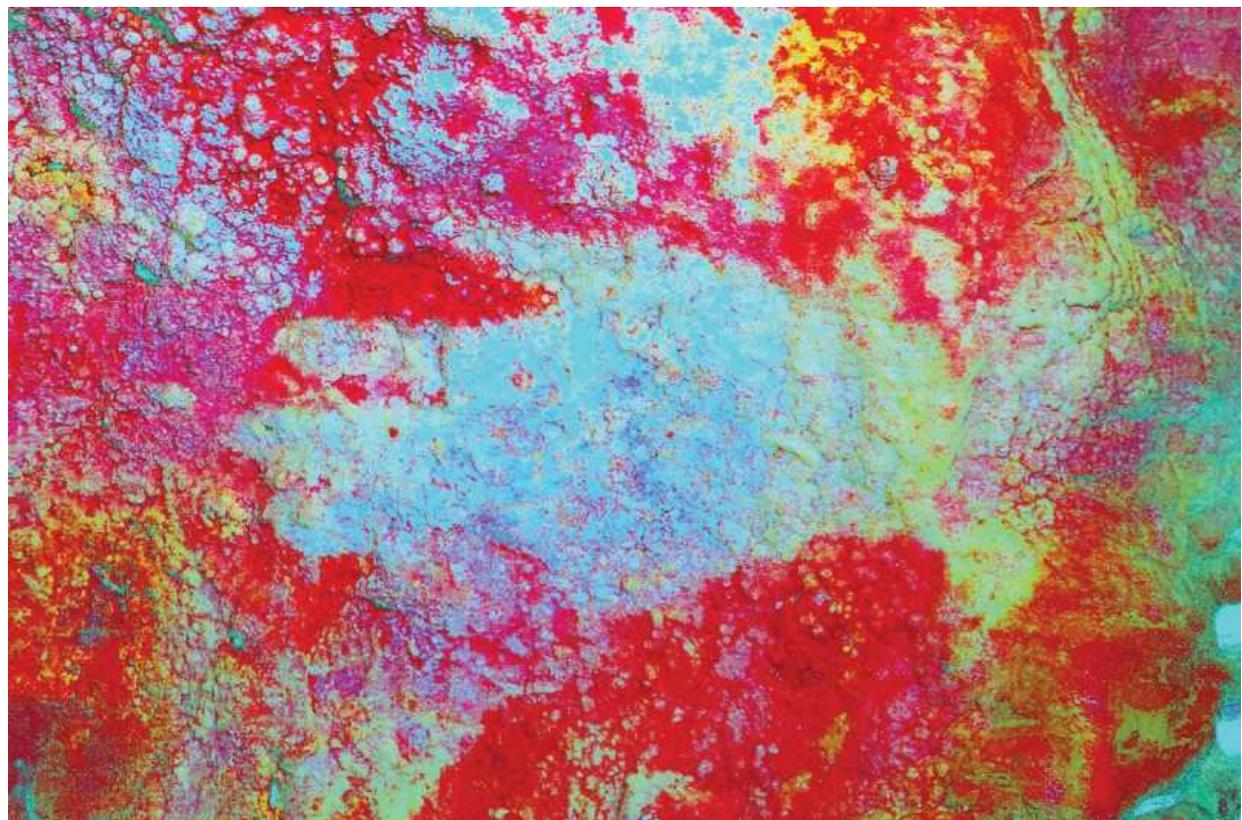
have been studying prehistoric art in the Monte Castillo caves in northern Spain for a decade. In 2012, they reported that a red dot in one cave, El Castillo, was at least 40,800 years old – when Neanderthals were disappearing from Europe and modern humans arrived.

“We couldn’t work out whether it was modern humans or Neanderthals that did that painting,” says Pike.

Now his team has studied art in three more caves and found older paintings that must be by Neanderthals, since modern humans weren’t in Europe at that time (*Science*, doi.org/cks5).

The first cave, La Pasiega, is also part of Monte Castillo. It is a long tube with arches that have been painted. One painting is a symbol made up of red lines (pictured, above). By studying the radioactive decay of a mineral that had been deposited over the painting, the team determined it must be at least 64,800 years old.

A second cave, Maltravieso in western Spain, houses a hand stencil the team dated using the same method to 66,700 years old, making it the oldest known cave art in the world (pictured, below).



A false-colour image of a 66,700-year-old Neanderthal hand

H. Collado

The third cave, Ardales in southern Spain, contains some painted stalagmites. The team dated one painting to between 45,300 and 48,700 years old, while others were at least 65,500 years old. “There’s at least two separate instances of painting by Neanderthals,” says Pike.

That’s not their only art. Dirk Hoffmann at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology in Leipzig, Germany, led a study of Aviones cave on Spain’s south-east coast. Prehistoric jewellery – seashells that had been perforated and painted – was found beneath the cave’s floor in 2010 by João Zilhão at the Catalan Institution for Research and Advanced Studies in Barcelona, Spain.

The sediments on the cave floor have hardened into rock, preserving them. Hoffman has now dated a mineral layer on top to 115,000 years old (*Science Advances*, doi.org/cks6). This makes the sediments, including the shells, older still, he says.

The finds end a long debate over Neanderthals’ intelligence. “The discovery of Neanderthal painting is a smoking gun,” says Pike. “It’s going to be difficult for anyone to deny that Neanderthals were behaving like modern humans.”

What’s more, it wasn’t a one-off. The caves are far apart, and the artworks were made over tens of thousands of years. “It’s very much embedded in their thinking and culture,” says Pike.

“There can be no longer any doubt that Neanderthals were, at least cognitively, people like us,” says Zilhão.

This article appeared in print under the headline “Neanderthals painted just like us”

