



Rhetorical prehistory and the Paleolithic

Thomas Rickert

Department of English, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT

I contribute to a prehistory of rhetoric by exploring early rhetorical practices in the Paleolithic era. Using new materialist methodologies (Karen Barad, Andy Clark), I theorize how humans are constitutively entangled with material environments and objects. I also emphasize a materialist historiographic method that seeks bottom-up, emergent explanations for cultural innovations. I propose two rhetorical forms in the Paleolithic: first, rhetoric as an emergent development stemming from increased sociomaterial complexity, performed via plaques, beads, pigments, and spatial arrangement; and second, rhetoric as integrated into mysterious cave rituals, which are given lasting inscription in the famous cave images. Contemporary theories argue that some of the cave imagery stems from visions achieved through altered states, but we might well understand such states as something environed—a capacity of human beings elevated to a *techne* and performed via the material affordances of cave properties. These cave rituals show that rhetoric recruited from other cultural developments, including magic and religion, a point that can help differently illuminate Greek rhetoric as well. My overall goal is to help forge a materialist-oriented prehistory that demonstrates rhetoric to be fundamentally entwined with the emergence of modern humans.

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We need an account of the material world in which it isn't absurd to claim that it produced us. (Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers)¹

This essay addresses rhetoric's prehistory in the Paleolithic, but it should be admitted at the front that the term prehistory is a conceit. To talk of rhetoric's "prehistory" is to suggest there was a moment when rhetoric achieved full rhetoricity, and what transpired prior to that is somehow not as fully rhetoricized—something about it marks it as *proto*. Depending on the sense of rhetoric in play, that might or might not be the case. The phrase "in play," however, marks the historiographic point: there is no consensus on these issues, although there is a dominant narrative, which is that the Greeks named and codified rhetoric.² Because of this, most understandings of rhetoric fall out from the Greek umbrella, even in attempts to move beyond or before them, of which there are a growing number. Still, there may be aspects of this issue that are inescapable—our vocabularies, our histories, our legacies, are quite sedimented in the culture we inherit. This suggests

one reason I want to ply a two-way street here: to situate rhetoricity before the Greeks, yes, but also to lay the groundwork for a different understanding of the Greeks themselves. The term “rhetoricity” itself glosses this need. It suggests something bare, a free-floating form of inducement or epideictic, when that is obviously impossible outside of symbolic abstraction. In this sense, all rhetorics are enculturated and materialized. Nor can rhetoric simply arrive as a package deal. Rather, it coalesces out of multiple cultural, material, and semiotic strands that are mutually entangled and coevolving. In this sense, I am addressing rhetoric as an incremental, bottom-up achievement. Rhetoricity’s coalescence recruits from resources that are also integral to other cultural and material formations, including the musical, the medical, and the religious. To read Gorgias and Plato, then, is to be confronted with formations long in the wind, at least going back to the Paleolithic. Overall, I argue for two rhetorical forms in the Paleolithic: rhetoric as an emergent development stemming from increased sociomaterial complexity, performed via plaques, beads, and spatial arrangements; and rhetoric as performed through mysterious cave rituals, given lasting inscription in cave images, and, as we now know, accompanying sonics. I see these two strands as connected, too, and attempt to demonstrate why.

I emphasize that I am not interested in replacing a Greek dawn with a European Paleolithic dawn. I will complicate both narratives, showing that each depends on earlier developments.³ Indeed, part of what makes the European Paleolithic special is preservation bias: the fact that some of its materials survived, often preserved in the caves, grants weight to particular cultures; and particular kinds of evidence survive (for instance, stone and bone, but typically not wood, sinew, hides, etc.), which again skews matters, especially as regards cultures that may have worked with materials less likely to survive over time.⁴ We know that Paleolithic peoples spoke language, although there is little trace of this; and they did not write (although this assessment may be about to change).⁵ However, such lack of access to a Paleolithic symbology is, perhaps paradoxically, an advantage in claiming that a step in rhetoric’s emergence takes place in Paleolithic caves—the lack of discursive evidence (at least that we can understand) induces us to look for rhetoricity in other forms of evidence, especially material traces.

For these and other reasons, I will at times foreground methodology, highlighting materialist evidence alongside the usual cultural ones. Key here will be ideas concerning the entanglement of culture with environments and things, in particular rhetorical performances achieved through material and nonlinguistic albeit still semiotic means.⁶ Sensing a change in the weather, noting significance in sky movements, or identifying forms of animal behavior are minimal forms of making meaning; even if only indexical, they are ubiquitous forms of nondiscursive signing, common in varying degrees to animals and humans. Further, I am pursuing ideas of ambience that I have previously explored, especially as they relate to Karen Barad’s argument that human being is fundamentally entangled with a “meaning-full” material world, and the thesis advanced by Andy Clark that human cognition is extended beyond the body proper.⁷ Barad and Clark, while having clear differences, nevertheless understand that taking entanglement seriously transforms our sense of human being in the world, including the practices that humans develop. Right alongside this issue of sorting out the plastic, modulating mergers of human and material environs, tools, and burgeoning semiosis is another: the *how*, i.e., the mood and mode of those mergers. Narratives of rhetoric and the Greek dawn have long benefited from archaeology and other materialist-oriented study, but such work



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can be well augmented by increased attention to materialist factors, including the neurology of brain functions, complexities of embodiment and situatedness, and so on. Hand in hand with this is a theoretical shift that rethinks cognition itself. **Evolutionary history tends to emphasize intellectuation**, through the tool and symbol; indeed, modern humanity itself is the heroic tale of increased intelligence, rationality, and problem-solving — “masters of the planet,” or “lone survivors,” as two recent surveys of human evolution are titled.⁸ Rhetorical history and theory has begun to emphasize embodied, situated performance beyond intellectuation, however, and this essay joins with those efforts and seeks to further them.⁹

The notion of entanglement I propose here has a distinct bottom-up character, in line with theories of nonlinear emergence.¹⁰ Thus, **I argue that rhetorics take cultural form through being an emergent likelihood given certain conditions** (for instance, social complexity, hierarchy, division, transcendence of immediacy, and conflict), and these conditions are sedimented not solely in cultural narrative, ritual, and practice, but in how they are made, accumulated, and enacted in (or through) material forms. As Barad theorizes it, “intelligibility and materiality are not fixed aspects of the world but rather intertwined agential performances.”¹¹ I push harder on the notion of intertwinement here, perhaps, than Barad does; it means not just that matter and meaning mutually scaffold each other in performance, but also that cultural achievements coalesce by recruiting from other achievements, necessitating that as they shake out and diverge through time, they harbor within them traces of those previous forms. As Terrence Deacon remarks, “there are many possible ways that microdetails of structure and interaction can converge to produce the same higher-order properties.”¹² There’s no one path to rhetoric or other cultural formation. If we wonder at rhetoric’s closeness to magic, religion, healing, epiphany, and the poetic in Greek rhetorical theory, here we might start seeing why in a different way: **it is because rhetoricity enlists from resources common to all of these as they winnow out into their modern forms.** Although I could focus on other paths, here I lean toward the spiritual, in part because it is necessitated by the cave evidence itself, which seems to involve shamanic spirit journeys. I note that spirituality is often relegated to the side or critiqued for its metaphysical insubstantiality. Nevertheless, it remains a neuro-physical capacity of humans, one increasingly granted a role in human evolution. As spirituality is explored through bio-material technics (ritual, meditation, trance, and so on), such experiences transform consciousness, fostering modulations in the notion of “selfness” and seeding intimations of a “soul.” Profound social effects fall out from those changes. They help establish cultural plateaus spurring tremendous **expansive developments**, including the groupishness that conjoins unrelated peoples, which eventually grounds concepts such as the civic, or more grandly, a cosmology that places human being within a larger universe, typically with a divine presence. It would be an understatement to point out that these issues, here at the dawn of the Anthropocene, consume us as much now as they ever have.

Orpheus and rhetoric’s primal scene

In *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity*, Jeffrey Walker challenges the practical, civic grounding for rhetorical history with his version of rhetoric’s primal scene: Orpheus, charming a group of Thracian warriors with song.¹³ Walker notes the psychagogic force of the scene,

and some argue that these conditions drive increases in intelligence

religion & the posthuman

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as the bemused warriors are called to “acts of judgment and ethical positioning.”¹⁴ Walker suggests that this scene could be shifted beyond its masculinist orbit—one could substitute Sappho and her circle, for instance—and this reinforces the centrality of the poetic in rhetoric’s emergence. Orpheus’s performance sets up the framework for understanding the lines from Hesiod’s *Theogony* Walker quotes a few pages later, which ties eloquence to guiding, leading, and deciding. The lines put the poetic and the princely together, acknowledging the gifts of the Muses in how the prince can persuade with gentle words and honeyed voice, inspiring, comforting, enlivening, able to settle disputes and arise as a beacon of justice.¹⁵ While this picture of a poetically inspired rhetoric is pretheoretic, it resonates strongly with us. It is easy to draw a line from this picture to, say, Gorgias or Isocrates. **The power of strong words to guide the soul constitutes rhetorical essence.**

Walker marshals this scene to put rhetoric and poetic back together as a riposte to the emphasis on civic practicality, and successfully so. But as is often the case with great achievement, the argument raises as many questions as it answers. Why should we remain within Greek culture, and its forms of social organization, to recognize the bardic qualities of a leader? **Why tether persuasion *only* to argument, judgment, and praise, as opposed to other forms of inducement?** Walker notes that the Orpheus image certainly conjures the notion of song as soothing, but this trajectory is not pursued —“song” does not merit its own index entry.¹⁶ Stronger forms of the psychagogic are acknowledged, too, but there is reservation concerning how far—the ability to judge in some manner is preserved. Finally, Orpheus, famed in song, was the key figure in various cults of Orphism, which promised the keys to a joyous afterlife; and here we see a religious connotation entwined with the rhetorical and the musical.¹⁷ Why this conjunction? It is not in fact obvious that these practices should go together.

Such questions set the stage for my argument here. To what extent do shamanic traces in Paleolithic caves foreshadow (or cradle, if we can posit nonlinear, incremental development) later developments such as Orpheus bemusing a group of listeners with song and word? Can focusing on other forms of evidence excavate potentials in rhetoric that still lurk there, albeit in ways that challenge contemporary conceptions, in the same way Walker finds aesthetic potentials civic histories foreclose on? What can attending to the materialist conditions of neurophysiology and setting do for us? While it can offset the focus on symbolicity and sociality built into our histories, I argue that it does more than that. It challenges us to take on new theories of ontology that decline the separation of human from world, subject from object. Such ideas are already threaded through theories of rhetoric as performative, such as that of James Fredal, whose book-length study of Greek rhetoric’s performative nature grants considerable attention to the materialities of the surrounding city space, monuments, and views—rhetorical performance was “bodily, spatial, and visual.”¹⁸ But this welcome step can be furthered. **What if we rode harder on the performative,** as Barad urges, seeing it as “material enactments that contribute to, and are a part of, the phenomena we describe.”¹⁹ This ontological shift asks us to situate the human more complexly in the material world, and seek out fresh understandings of how it manifests in who we are and what we do. Here, that will mean considering what insight it offers in **thinking of how rhetoric came to be materially enacted in the Paleolithic,** and in ways that illuminate rhetorical theory and history more broadly, including the psychagogic.

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with
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Shaman

... And there were glaciers, with epicycles

Before we delve into the cave art proper, it is necessary to know something about who these peoples were, where they came from, and what their environs were like. Since they lived in Europe, it is tempting to understand them as Europeans, but that is not quite right. It assigns to an origin an endpoint not reached until millennia later. The current snapshot of early human settlement is that the *Homo sapiens* who slowly populated Europe came from migrations out of Africa approximately 60,000 years ago.²⁰ These migrations, typically in bands of 50 to 200 or so, seem to be the last of various waves of African migrations going back millennia. They were aided by climate changes, in particular the waxing and waning of glaciation, which was itself not a steady event, but frequently shifting patterns within what is a relatively cold period, from 114,000 to 11,700 years ago. The power of glaciation and climate in shaping movement, lifestyle, and innovation cannot be underestimated, since it opened up and closed down land, affected the plants and animals they needed for survival, and in general forced adaptations to glaciation's recurrent harshness. In response to the waxing and waning of the cold, the migrations were discontinuous, with some populations surviving, some dying out; some returning to Africa, some continuing on into Europe, Asia, and Sahul (the continent formed of Australia, New Guinea, and Tasmania at low sea levels). These migrating populations often met groups settled from previous migrations, which could be a tense event, although, since trade did develop, not always. In any event, what we see are small populations, alternately migrating and settling, in various waves, competing with and sometimes mingling with other populations. Different populations thrive or make advancements in some area, and these innovations sometimes spread. **Population density was a crucial factor for maintenance of cultural practice and especially innovation.**²¹ But in the end, some populations succeed, some perish. By the early 40,000s, *Homo sapiens* had established themselves in what we call Europe, **and their main competition was each other and the still-surviving Neanderthals.**

There are further methodological points to be made here, however. The earliest cave art we have stems from the Aurignacian culture, with some of the oldest finds being in what is now Germany. These sites, such as Hohle Fels, Geissenklosterle, and others, have yielded many ancient artifacts older than 40,000 years ago, including musical instruments. The paintings in Chauvet, France, are placed around 37,000 years ago, although some may be older. And while there are some differences, overall, a general and recognizable style is maintained in these European caves down to around 11,000 years ago. A similar issue will arise with my discussion of the Blombos Cave culture, circa 100,000 to 70,000 years ago. These are immense spans of time, longer than, say, the age of agriculture. It stretches credibility that an ancient culture, living precariously in smallish bands, could thrive for so many millennia. The consensus now is that cultures waxed and waned, alternately dying out or moving on and repopulating. But we are left with the puzzle of how cultures similar in practices and styles could emerge. **How can we explain such seeming unities? Transmission and descent models depend on population densities sufficient to maintain cultural achievements, among other issues, and so we cannot look to them for all aspects of understanding Paleolithic developments. This point dovetails with a materialist orientation keyed to the complexities of nonlinear, bottom-up emergence.** Nonlinearity manifests from within complexly entangled relations; what marks it as nonlinear is that

and such models are particular Western

the transition appears discontinuous from what came before.²² The appearance of new forms is emergence, and, as Barad states, it is “dependent not merely on the nonlinearity of relations but on their intra-active nature.”²³ That is, each microchange in some aspect of the dynamic in turn affects the others, in accordance with their specific properties and capacities, which in turn spur still more changes. Some states, however, are better favored than others. The upshot of a materialist, bottom-up perspective is that the achievements of a culture are not ideas realized in advance intellectually and then materialized in technical and practical forms. They are better understood as attractors near at hand and, over time, selected for given certain sociomaterial conditions. Thus, they are achieved through the complex intricacies of exaptation. (Exaptation refers to evolutionary developments beyond those selected for their role by adaptation alone.²⁴ It is where a trait emerges for one function that is coopted afterwards for another.) We need to account, then, for varying forms of emergence, including simultaneous emergences (across spans of time or distance) and reemergence. In other words, we need to conceive culture and its innovations as working bottom up through feedback and feed-forward loops. These loops are necessarily as bio-materialist as they are social.

In this regard, rhetoric, or any other capacity of modern humans—music, art, language, technology—does not arrive on the scene as fully formed. Rather, it emerges out of needs (and not only bare survival), assembled and innovated from simpler or previously unsociated achievements. For rhetoric, this explains why it shares commonality with other cultural productions, such as music, poetry, sermon, and so on; rhetoric drinks from cultural, biological, and material capacities shared with these other forms, going back deep into our prehistory. Gary Tomlinson makes this point in his prehistory of music as a means to account for the fact that music and language were not separate achievements, but rather recruit from earlier, shared capacities—it is only later, through processes of nonlinear coevolution, that they shake out as distinctive human practices.²⁵ Tomlinson, drawing on postneo-Darwinian theory, Deleuze, and other sources, coins the term *epicycle* to account for a given society’s cultural plateau.²⁶ Such plateaus are only as stable as the distance they achieve from base survival, and such stability includes numerous factors, from population density to material and environmental affordances, from social complexity to their depth as established in social, technical, and material accomplishments.²⁷ Thus, he argues, we must be prepared to understand forerunning European cultures such as the early Aurignacian in the Germanies, circa 40,000 years ago, as possibly *dying out*. That is, while they remain impressive, their achievements—cave paintings, beads, musical instruments, tools and weapons, social arrangements, shamanistic spirituality, and so forth—were probably not handed down to later cultures such as the Gravettian (circa 25,000 years ago).²⁸ Rather, certain achievements, a base level of cultural and technological know-how, increasing population density, complexity, and hierarchy, knowledge, competition with others, and more, cradled feed-forward loops of innovation; and these waxed and waned as peoples flourished, perished, migrated, and intermingled. It is quite likely that the Gravettian peoples knew little and perhaps nothing of their ostensible forebears. From a baseline cultural plateau, or epicycle, certain patterns and tendencies recur—they are *attractors* given certain initial and environmental conditions.²⁹ In fact, it is likely a mistake to think of the Aurignacian culture as being homogeneous—thus, Tomlinson argues, we need to think of some of their most spectacular achievements, such as the various bone flutes discovered at Hohle Fels, Vogelherd, Ulm and so on, as independently

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The braided streams metaphor mentioned
in NOVA special works against transmission
model

achieved innovations. Certainly, they are sufficiently different in make from each other. Social and material complexities drive, or pressure, continual innovation—impetus without goal, we might say, accompanied by the winnowing of selection. Thus, we see pipes as an available, even unsurprising innovation sprung from smallish tribes that had developed the prerequisites for them—song and rhythm, skilled bone and wood techniques, ritual, capacity for abstraction (since they had to measure pitch), and a sense of cultural benefit.³⁰

This point is, I think, an important one for rhetorical history, and its one implicit in new materialist orientations attuned to emergence. To single out one example, while it is Greece that is held to be the birthplace of the sophists, professional and itinerant masters of discourse, new historical work shows that places as far away as China gave rise to their own equivalents of the sophists. For instance, as George Q. Xu outlines, the Confucians fought against “glib talk,” i.e., the rise of the discursively clever, who clearly had their own, competing schools of thought.³¹ **While transmission models remain important, they are insufficient to account for such simultaneous Axial Age innovations.** We see instead that the accumulations of culture from smaller bits, simpler strands of culture, technology, ritual, politics, and knowledge, are recruited toward ends already close at hand. In the case of the sophists and glib talkers, that would mean that increased discursive sophistication was an attractor for their situations. In what follows, I will attempt to follow **this understanding of epicyclic achievement**, in order to make visible, albeit tentatively and incompletely, aspects of rhetoricity that will come to new flower later in the Axial Age, and (arguably) most completely with the Greeks.

I wrote the above paragraphs half a year ago; as I revise, I see a new archaeological find has been published: Neanderthals constructed a large stalagmite structure deep in Bruniquel Cave, located in Southwestern France, approximately 175,000 years ago.³² Neanderthals are not known to have displayed quite this “modern” sophistication before, and the authors of the study cautiously intimate that the structure could indicate symbolic and ritualistic behavior not seen again in Europe until a millennia later with *Homo sapiens*.³³ I bring this up to note the importance of connecting materialist historiography with nontransmission theories of advance and innovation. **A transmission model cannot account for this anomalous and strikingly ancient find.** What we likely have is a small band of Neanderthals that achieved sufficient social complexity and cultural-material advance that ritualistic construction and behaviors were, innovatively speaking, at hand—available briefly for them, and then vanished. Other such finds may well be discovered, and we will find that to understand them, vertical descent and transmission models will need augmentation with emergent, bottom-up models. Here we see how materialist and historiographic methodologies can inflect each other, inducing us to look for strikingly different explanations of modern humanity’s emergence, and in turn, rhetoric’s development.

Setting the scene

Opening scene: 32,000 years ago a Paleolithic artist, possibly a shaman—who could be male or female as both are known to have created images in the caves—enters France’s Chauvet Cave with a tallow lamp and works deep into its recesses. Sounds are dulled and deafened. The darkness is deep beyond the bubble of light cast by the lamp. Obstacles come and go—pits, narrows, stalagmites and stalactites. The cave presence is itself alive,

Shaman

looming, weighty. Time moves strangely—how long does it take? The customary markers of sun and moon and stars are absent. There is a profound disorientation. The world is reduced down to the precious low light, the cave walls, and the darkest of darks everywhere else. There is only the slow movement through the cave as time creeps on, until eventually the artist reaches an opening into a large cave chamber. The walls thrust up, massive and twisted, up past where the light reaches. The pressure changes slightly, and the sound echoes mutedly. In the cave wall nearby is a crack, a piece of quartz lodged in it. To the left are drawings of four horses facing each other done carefully and delicately in charcoal; behind the horses are the tail and hindquarters of a lion. And then the artist claps, hears reverberating clip-clops, and begins delicately drawing a bison in charcoal. Or does something else. Or moves on. It is unclear.

What transpires here? How do environment, image, and cave journey go together? To generate what experiences, what meanings, and toward what ends? What, finally, pertains to rhetoric here? One partial answer is that the caves—at least the deeper sections—are more akin to Paleolithic cathedrals than anything else. **People did not live in the caves, although they sought shelter around them and in their entrances.** They journeyed more deeply into the caves, singly or in groups, but not often. Men and women both made such journeys, and both drew—indeed, a recent study demonstrates that three quarters of the paintings of hands are female hands; it may well be that overall there were more female painters than male.³⁴ Evidence suggests there were rituals—music, movement or dancing, vocalizations, touching of the cave walls, and undoubtedly other practices.³⁵ It is highly likely that people experienced altered states of consciousness in the cave depths, a point we will come back to. Further, while the great majority of clearly identifiable images are animals, there are other symbols as well—dots, hand outlines, lines, geometric patterns such as spirals, and more.³⁶ There are also a few objects, such as animal statues and rocks and animal teeth placed in cracks. Acoustic archaeologists have found that images are often placed carefully for particular sounds and echoes, underscoring the point that ancient peoples explored the full potential of the cave environment, including its deep darkness and unique sonic properties.³⁷ And there is now suspicion that the images have yet other rationales for their placement, and may be interconnected in some fashion.³⁸ **But perhaps what is even more striking is what is not depicted: no landscapes, objects, food, and hardly any people. The exceptions would be a few depictions of shamans themselves.**

The depictions of animals and symbols all seem highly stylized, indicating that in some fashion, aesthetics were also present (although as we shall see, there are complications here); and with some variation, including an increase in the color palette, these forms were painted for over 20,000 years, an exceedingly long period of time. Above, I argued that we must be prepared to accept the idea of independently achieved patterns of similarity over this long haul, rather than seeing the images solely as the result of a dominant, long running culture. But this does not allay the challenge of understanding why such images become a recurring pattern.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to survey all the attempts at explanation so far; instead, I will explore what Lewis-Williams calls the neuropsychological model.³⁹ One of its advantages is the attention to the full spectrum of human consciousness, including altered states, and how such modes of being emerge in material and social environments. This is important for any number of reasons, but in particular it is important for rhetorical theory, since so many accounts of rhetoric, including those of the Greeks, emphasize its

transformative, transporting, even magical powers. But we need to see such transformations of consciousness as integrated into all aspects of cultural evolution, including its contributions to the building of new senses of the self (and perhaps the seed of what we call the “soul”), the world, transcendence, and metaphysics—which is to say, a cosmology. I will return this theme at the end.

The neurological model

One of the first problems we encounter when discussing how the brain functions is the nature versus culture split. Human brains are biological, and that biology is stabilized, albeit subject to evolutionary drift. In terms of Paleolithic cave art, we know that Paleolithic peoples were inspired to create, view, and experience what they made; and we know that their brains and bodies functioned so that their base encounter with the world would not be so different from ours today. For example, they “saw.” But the deeper, more problematic question is *what* did they see? The entanglements of world, image, and word ensure that meaning was buoyed up in the encounter, no different than for us. But nothing is simply given. For instance, explorers of the caves before the 1800s—that is, before Western peoples had developed a concept of *prehistory*—tended not to see the cave art as significant. In other words, while brains may be wired to see the world, how and what is seen is never without a cultural component.

In *Supersizing the Mind*, Andy Clark argues that the brain is deeply plastic in forging mind-world circuits that scaffold cognition via nonbiological phenomena, exchanges that in turn transform the brain itself. Learning a musical instrument, for instance, changes the brain, and in ways that are perhaps quite subtle, changes how one is in the world.⁴⁰ Seeing works similarly. For instance, in his studies of the New Guinea Abelam tribe, Anthony Forge discovered that their art was considered a repository for the spirits they invoked, and not a representation per se; and thus, when they first looked at photographs, they had difficulty picking out what was depicted—it took them several hours to learn how to see them rightly.⁴¹ They did not make representational art, and they did not see representationally, even if they learned how to fairly quickly. Another example is that the ancient Greeks never speak of the color blue—Homer’s “wine-dark sea” being a famous example. The apparently obvious fact of color is not universal; there is variation in how peoples perceive color.⁴² The deeper lesson is that, while we may see “art” painted on the cave walls, and interpret that as the aesthetic representations of animals, we cannot assume that is what Paleolithic peoples saw. Attending to the materialist fact of sight does not provide any easy shortcut into Paleolithic imagery. Certainly, the growing strand of comparative rhetoric is highly attentive to the problem of importing concepts and assumptions from one culture to another—Greek into Chinese, for instance, particularly in accordance with emic/etic split.⁴³ But here we see a different problem: not simply importing concepts, *but rather importing one’s way of being in the world*, including how one sees that world. It is no longer a problem of culture alone but worlding—how ways of being, and the practices particular to such ways, take shape through bio-technic intra-action in social and info-material environments.

We see here the precarity of overly stretching a notion of biological universality, but we see also how it affords opportunities, since there are connections that can be made across the spans of time. Color may not be experienced the same way, but color is present. Lewis-

Williams's neuropsychological model finesses this bridge. What sparks the approach is that a large portion of Paleolithic art demonstrates patterns that are, within cultural variation, present in other hunter-gatherer societies and produced via altered states of consciousness, typically by a shaman. These patterns have sufficient distinctiveness as to be cross-culturally recognizable, especially when connected to other supporting evidence. Lewis-Williams details how, through both field studies and neurological laboratory research, the brain experiences the world differently as consciousness is altered across a spectrum from what is considered "normal" waking consciousness to reverie and day-dreaming, hypnagogic states, entoptics, hallucinations, dreaming, and unconsciousness.⁴⁴ Hypnagogic states can include hypnosis, meditation, revelation, and, as we see in the rhetorical tradition, powerfully moving or enrapturing forms of persuasion. Entoptics are things the mind sees as consciousness is altered. That is, they are produced within the human visual system, and hence a part of our neurological hard-wiring. At the first, lightest stage of three possible stages, the entoptics perceived are geometric visual patterns, flashes of light, zigzags, meandering lines, and so on, that shift about, flicker, combine.⁴⁵ They are common to all people; migraine sufferers are particularly prone to seeing certain entoptics, such as a flickering curve with a jagged perimeter. More deeply altered states produce different patterns and sensations. Perhaps the most famous is the Stage 3 experience of a rotating tunnel or vortex that surrounds or pulls someone down; this is the tunnel of light that so many people who have near-death experiences report.⁴⁶ Of course, wide cultural variation applies here: Westerners tend to describe the experience in terms of funnels, corridors, alleys, etc.; other cultures can describe it as a hole in the ground that gives access to the spirit world, or a road down into the earth, or following the roots of a tree down below the ground.⁴⁷

A few shaman-based hunter-gatherer societies survived into the modern era, including the San of South Africa. The San also have painting, but on open rock walls—there are few caves in South Africa. What is important to the argument here is that the paintings they create are made by shamans, and that the experience of trance that they seek through sophisticated techniques is reflected in what they paint. The traces of the experience show through in the images, in part because the images are not simply representations but important elements in the ecstatic performance.⁴⁸ With the San, then, we see the coalescing of mutual strands: our neurological capacity for altered states of consciousness, including visions of entoptic images; the harnessing of multiple vectors for achieving such altered states, including physiological techniques such as fasting and sleep deprivation, and ritualistic techniques such as chanting, dance, and audio-driving. Lastly, there are also the kinds of training that allow one to enter and negotiate these states, and the cultural beliefs that not only place their interpretative stamp on them, but are grounded in the deeper cultural and artifactual sedimentation setting it up as an attractor. We see that cognition is thus ecological: it is extended out and enmeshed with symbology and techniques, material features and aids, and enviroing forces, all of which in turn form a constantly evolving, shifting dynamic.

Interlude in Blombos: material enaction

As has been stated, the cave images were created during a 20,000-year span. This suggests that while tribal groups came and went, migrating, flourishing, or dying out, certain

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towers in
Annihilation

a post-
humanist
claim

practices were maintained or reinvented over a tremendous span of years. We also know that they spoke, even if we do not know the language. There are abstract signs accompanying the animal images in the caves, but what or how they mean is unclear, nor do they appear to form a syntax—at least, one we have cracked.⁴⁹ So, Paleolithic peoples certainly had access to the symbolic, but it is difficult to say what this meant for them. That is, we assume, typically, that ancient markings and images are in fact representational, as they are for us today. They are deliberate achievements of mental intentions to represent something that has been sensed. Put differently, we tend to assume that the images are the product of conceptualization. Thus, with the cave art, a drawing of a bison is understood to be a representation of the artist's conception of a bison. While the image may afterwards be involved in performative actions, as image, its inscription retains a representational function. But this may not be the case, as the Abelam tribe example above illuminated. So, the contemporary way of seeing had to develop, and we cannot assume Paleolithic saw and drew pictures exactly as we do.

Further, there is archaeological evidence to support this claim, which has additional benefit of highlighting that “the Paleolithic” is widely heterogeneous and not a “time period” as were accustomed to viewing such. While I have so far addressed the European Paleolithic circa 25,000 to 40,000 BCE, I now turn to Africa circa 75,000 to 100,000 BCE. One of the earliest known artifacts with something akin to deliberate marking is an ochre plaque called M1-6 found in Blombos Cave, located on the coast of the Indian Ocean in South Africa. It appears to be about 75,000 years old. The artifact was selected for its red color; the surface was prepared; and the criss-cross markings it bears are deliberate. But it is difficult to say that they are symbolic in the conceptual sense. Scholars have been puzzled about how to interpret them, but most consider them some indication of an emergent aesthetic sensibility. But one wonders if aesthetics as we know it was an available compartment then. Deeper insight may come from the work of Lambros Malafouris, who calls the markings a form of “epistemic action,” meaning that they are markings that enable new ways of thinking or interacting.⁵⁰ There was not a mental image first, laden with meaning or aesthetic weight, then the markings as their achievement. Rather, the act of making the image enabled the markings to take the form they did. Thus, in line with the extended cognition theories such as those of Clark, we need to dislodge cognition from its customary seat in the head, and see it instead as extended out and threaded through material objects and practices. The artifact thereby manifests micro- and macro-acts of etching, in the moment for the artifact, and as stretched over time in building deeper cultural archives. Such thinking and interacting are in turn part of a larger web of practices, some of which may be symbolic as we understand it, but much of which may not be. The key point is that cognitive work is not solely a mental act but one constitutive entangled with material artifacts. We move from a focus on epistemological or aesthetic behavior to exaptive behavior and, in this, find in miniature the same logic as the epicycle.

Artifact M1-6, then, is one element in a growing ensemble of material-semiotic enactions. For instance, besides their increasingly sophisticated stone tool kits, the peoples of Blombos made beads formed from shells and ostrich eggs, which were colored with various natural pigments such as hematite (red iron oxide), or heated so as darken or otherwise modify them.⁵¹ While the use of beads was comparatively new, going back to 110,000 years or so, the use of pigments goes back to at least 260,000 years ago.⁵² We are not sure what the pigments were used for, but they likely were not representational.

Still, they were markers for something, and they were chosen deliberately—shades of red were particularly favored. The pigments may have had numerous usages, from the functional to the performative. In short, **we see baseline semiotic evidence of some rhetoricity extending far back into the evolution of *Homo sapiens*.** Such pigments are not the *representation* of social niches, belonging, and hierarchy, but rather part of the ensemble of actions that perform these distinctions, including the rhetoricity of negotiating such hierarchies. This interpretation is borne out by further evidence, such as the clear distribution of spaces for certain activities and groups that demarcate Paleolithic encampments. Body adornment, including pigments, would have been a visible component of an ensemble of complex markings and actions carving out social status, role, and position (in a rather literal sense).⁵³ Sociality for the Blombos residents was not achieved among the people first, then extended to pigments, beads, spatial divisions, and so forth; rather, they are integrated into the enaction of Blombos sociality, and hence inseparable from it. So **Blombos art and rhetoricity are not really symbolic as we understand it, but instead aspects of enacted sociality.** They can be considered attractors for when social complexity intensifies, marking these stages as an achievement needed for the later emergence of more full-blown symbolicity. Material trajectories enable further innovations, including the intensification and deepening of what we call “culture.” I underscore this point because we must attend to the forging of new brain–body–world circuits later on in Europe as well, particularly in light of the rich palette of affordances granted by caves.⁵⁴

In the 30,000 or more years separating Blombos from the *Homo sapiens* who evolved further in Africa, or migrated out of Africa into Europe, Asia, and other areas, social complexity and symbolism came more fully into their own. For instance, in Sungir, Russia, researchers have excavated numerous graves, including that of a 50 year old man, dating from about 30,000 years ago. He was buried in strings of ivory beads, about 3,000 beads in total, and he had a hat decorated with fox teeth and about 25 bracelets on his wrists.⁵⁵ Another grave contained skeletons of a boy and a girl, and they too were covered in ivory beads, over 10,000 between them, plus another fox tooth hat and belt, and statuettes and other object.⁵⁶ Few of the other graves were as impressive, indicating that these dead were honored, and also indicating that their society was strikingly hierarchized. A batch of beads and fox teeth may not sound like wealth to us, but researchers have discovered that it takes about 45 minutes to craft a single bead; to make 10,000 such beads totals 7,500 hours of work, or three years of labor by skilled craftspeople.⁵⁷ That is wealth. It also indicates an understanding of wealth in social strata that goes beyond what we have so far seen in examples such as Blombos. We do not know, ultimately, why these people were buried so. **What is important is that wealth and honor are tightly bound, and once again, we see a form of rudimentary rhetoricity.** The dead are honored, indexing an early form of what will become the epideictic, and the community is in some fashion motivated to devote resources to less utilitarian, certainly symbolic, and possibly meta-physical ends.

This negotiation of wealth occurs in an increasingly complex social organization. What marks the European Paleolithic starting around 45,000 years ago, what is called the Aurignacian period, is the continual expansion on earlier developments, such as the spatial organization and distribution of encampments; the emergence of more specialized jobs; the explosion of new forms of craft, including pendants, bracelets, pins, statuettes,

musical instruments, and more, made from a wider mix of material, such as bone, ivory, antler, bark, sinew, and wood.⁵⁸ Indeed, it makes sense to call this one of the first industrial ages. The stone tool kits and other objects required increasingly difficult techniques to create, which in turn required specialization, and hence specific labor distributions. Further, there is evidence of trade going back well over 100,000 years ago in Africa, but here in the Aurignacian that becomes more extensive, indicating a rudimentary economy based on exchange value.⁵⁹ All in all, we need to see how these complex developments form the background for the production of the cave art.

Such evidence also cements the idea that rhetoric and sociality are mutually entwined for all of our prehistory. Later developments build on this. **The art of rhetoric as it emerges in Greece or elsewhere is the separating out and making explicit in new form something already implicit in long periods of human development; or, put differently, growing self-consciousness about rhetoric's spectrum of possibility and achievement is an ever-present attractor in human societies—and all the more so with greater social complexity, social density, and cultural archives. We need not rely on a descent model, particularly where it is questionable due to insufficient population densities, because groups will irrepressibly find exaptative forms of innovation,** whether through contact with others or independent development.

Still, to focus only on this social evolutionary aspect misses less familiar forms of rhetoricity. We understand that a shaman-centered hunter-gatherer society demonstrates some rhetorical success of religious and charismatic narratives within a segmented, hierarchized society. But we need to augment this easier narrative with a fresh take on the cave images, which illuminates alternate but equally necessary exaptative forms for rhetoric's later flowerings. In fact, such cave art plays a role in the success of shamanistic narratives anyway—these two strands are necessarily connected in an escalating spiral, since shamanism itself stems from the need for and in turn helps propagate social integration.⁶⁰ But to excavate this other rhetorical trajectory, we need to come back to the lesson of the Blombos pigments and carvings. **We are looking for rhetoricity in a material-semiotic key, declining the temptation to corral rhetoric solely within the social or cultural.** In what way, that is, does Paleolithic social organization and rhetoricity work with and through the material environment—how is it enacted and performed? Here things take a more meta-physical turn.

Altered states as bio-material-affect

As I have explained above, Lewis-Williams's "neuropsychological model" provides compelling explanations for at least some Paleolithic cave art. The basis of this is the parallels established between some ancient imagery and what are called "entoptic visions," visual patterns that people experience when they enter altered states of consciousness. An interesting example would be the art of the San of South Africa, a still-surviving shaman-based hunter-gatherer society. Their rock art frequently depicts scenes drawn from shamanistic experience. A common form is a navicular phosphene. The San frequently drew this form as honeycomb, sometimes with bees surrounding it, and unsurprisingly, this is a common site in their landscape.⁶¹ So what takes form in the art is an intersection of cultural and biological potentials, like the double-helix of DNA. But even here we still have a problem: despite the fact that such images derived from altered states of consciousness,

the Western way of understanding them is as representations. They either represent some aspect of the shaman's vision or are enculturated versions of that vision.

Lewis-Williams argues that the cave imagery, at least a certain portion of it, does not so much represent something, like hands or animals, as actively perform it. **The image does not symbolize something, at least in the customary mentalist way; rather, it is an integral element in what is expressed or enacted.** The images are activated in the feedback and -forward loops of a cave-person-experience-culture ecology, and hence a part of a performance. He does not make this claim for all the images, of course; and in fact, there's significant evidence that some drawings were made by children, inexperienced artists, or other parties.⁶² Further, since Petzinger has begun cataloging all the images in Paleolithic Europe, the idea that the symbols and images involve more than shamanistic enaction is gaining traction.⁶³ I do not see Petzinger's objections as strong enough to disprove Lewis-Williams, however—indeed, the cave images include shamans themselves—but she certainly qualifies his hypothesis. I return to my refrain about exaptation: shamanic experience was one strand of many that contributed to the production of imagery, symbols, and sounds; and it is entirely likely that, just as they are numerous reasons for the images, even the shamanistic-inspired ones were in turn subject to cooption toward new and different ends by later generations.

So it is important to emphasize that no one, single type of painter, rationale, or time-frame underlies all the images. But there remain significant continuities. For instance, one of the more striking aspects of the cave art is the limited spectrum of images: some signs and symbols; hands, and certain animals, including deer, bison, horses, mammoths, and so forth. There are no plants, rodents, or landscapes; there are very few people, fish, or birds. Much of what was drawn on the cave walls already played a role in tribal society; they had preexisting motivic value.⁶⁴ It is helpful to recall that, as related above, these Paleolithic tribes were socially stratified and conflicted, with many competing understandings of how to live and think. **So the ascendance of a tailored zoology of memorable images indicates rhetoric at work: the tribal storehouse of valued images demonstrates the success of particular values and narratives in the face of dispute, apathy, or other reactions.**

But the images are also finely stylized. They are drawn using similar pigments and techniques, although the sophistication increases as time goes on. Analogy with the San would further suggest that the materials for making the images have significance. Given that the kinds of pigment changed slowly over time, from charcoal early on to reds, browns, and ambers later, this is a suggestive but still hypothetical line of inquiry. Further, even though the images evolve in detail, they maintain a similar, and recognizable, style over the course of thousands of years, indicating either some continuity in beliefs and practices, or the fact that, given certain Paleolithic environmental and cultural conditions, such patterns are easily and predictably re-achievable. But even here, qualifications must be layered in: the low population densities during the Aurignacian favor independent, epicyclic-driven innovation; the higher population densities, and deeper cultural archives, from the Gravettian (31,000 to 22,000 years ago) down to the Magdalenian (20,000 to 12,500 years ago) suggest more customary forms of transmission develop over time, giving a culture's achievements greater stability and "stickiness."

Alongside all this, there are oddities to the drawings indicative of the entoptics of altered states of consciousness. Lewis-Williams points out how the images often appear free-floating in space, an idea reinforced by the fact that a good number of the animals

have no hoofs.⁶⁵ A good example would be the so-called Sanctuary in Les Trois Frères Cave, where a panel portrays a densely packed and encircling group of animals, while down in the lower corner is one of the few depictions of a human being: a musical bow player with a bison head. The role of music in achieving altered states reinforces the sense that there is something odd about this scene—nonnormal reality, we might say. Given the pipes found in the ancient German sites, we know that musicking was well developed; and, in combination with the psychotropic capacities of the caves—dark, isolation, muffling of sound—the transportive powers of music had to have been well established. Additional evidence demonstrates that the images are located in places that produce particular sonic qualities, such as cave echoes mimicking animal sounds, openings that modulate the sounds of drums, flutes, and other early musical instruments. So not only was the performance multisensory, emphasizing again that images are poorly parsed as simply being representational, but it is likely the kinds of sound were significant. Igor Reznikoff points out the sheer power of sound in such dark environs, and he attempts to further parse the meaning. **When body and cave vibrate together, an earthen or mineral sound occurs; yet, with the images around, there is also an animal association, all of which tips us to primordial elements of “sound meaning, including, finally, the ephemerality of the sonic itself, a “relationship to the invisible.”**⁶⁶ Images, sonics, and altered state experiences come together here in mutually supporting and escalating spirals of meaning and performance.

There are still more oddities: various panels from Chauvet Cave appear to show animals coming out of and entering holes and cracks in the cave wall. Some animals are drawn with a reduplication of lines, as if something is flickering, wavering, or out of normal focus. Other images have patterns drawn over them—dots, lines, and cross-hatching. Finally, there are images of shamans, usually in hard to find recesses in the caves, which indicates already substantial cultural resources sustaining such achievements and supporting their deeper patterns of meaning. Here we are also left to make analogies. Shamans typically experience their visions as a spiritual or supernatural realm that they can visit and return from; and they are often associated with shapeshifting, particularly into animal forms. While the pattern cannot be exact, nevertheless, we can see similar such shamanistic elements in the caves. One of the more famous images portrays a shaman, tranced, near-dead, or dead, with a bison looming over him. Another shows a shaman with antlers and hoofs. There is also a particularly ancient painting from deep in Chauvet Cave, dating to 36,000 years old, which shows a shaman emerging from what appears to be a vulva, with a lion also integrated into the composition. Other examples of shamanistic imagery could be given, but the larger point is that while this certainly cannot explain all the imagery in all the caves, it helps explain some.

But we have to ask next, **what does it in fact help explain?** By means of comparison with other shamanistic societies, ancient and modern, Lewis-Williams argues that while these images will eventually come to carry representational power, they function differently here, or at least, **do more than represent.** The images are not “so much painted onto rock walls as released from, or coaxed through, the living membrane... that existed between the image-maker and the spirit world.”⁶⁷ The shamans’ experience of animal helpers in the spirit world, circulating already in tribal groups, is given sacred shape in cave environments, opening this world to allow the sacred world entry. Not only, then, do we see images of animals gathering around cracks and holes in the walls, as if literally

traveling through them, but many of the images take shape from specific features of the cave walls—as if the walls simply needed finishing touches from the painters. This idea is given further credence by the investigations of the role of sound, discussed above, so that other senses are engaged in the performative rituals.

The caves served many purposes for Paleolithic peoples, and it is likely that the images did as well. But among the many and shifting purposes—we need to recall that images were being made over a span of 20,000 years—it is difficult to ignore the shamanistic aspect. When contemporary researchers and writers enter these caves, they describe them as moving and profound, akin to Stone Age cathedrals. Paul Kingsnorth, admitting that he is not in fact particularly religious, describes his sense of awe, one he did not expect: “It is as if,” he writes, “something age-old and darkly powerful has descended from the roof of the cavern and settled in me and will not leave ... I can feel the power in the place.”⁶⁸

What such statements describe involves more than just the images. It invokes their *placeness*. It is worth reflecting on the looming, dark power of caves. They isolate, muffle, disorient. Left alone in the total darkness of a cave, human beings soon begin to hallucinate, no different than in an isolation chamber. **All human beings do this.** Paleolithic peoples experienced this, too, and the mixture of image, sound, and environment demonstrates that they were quite aware of how to carve out a theater of the sacred—a multimodal machine for bringing the divine world into the mundane world.

But upon this recognition, we also have to acknowledge that there is no easy separation of the religious, and whatever sense of the divine they culled from their experiences, from how rhetoric circulated in their societies. That is, there are deep interconnections among pursuits the modern world—or even, in various ways, the ancient Greeks—like to hold separate. Politics, aesthetics, the study of the natural world (science), math, and the supernatural (spirituality) seem grounded in different impulses. But if rhetoric is not the achievement of an idea of how to persuade, but rather the growing recognition and discourse about what is an *attractor* given certain social complexities and cultural archival depth, **then it becomes plain that rhetoricity, in whatsoever forms it takes, will recruit from whatever is available to it.**⁶⁹ Rhetoric, if as argued here remains an emergent capacity that takes a particular shape in the Paleolithic, is as liable to recruit from the spiritual as anything else. **And this was itself grounded in biological potentials of human beings, tapped through rhetorical and other technical means, making it, too, a bio-technical form of persuasion.**

Concluding thoughts

I have discussed how a germinal rhetoricity inhabits and is performed through these early stratified societies. This, of course, is the kind of rhetoric we view with a sense of kinship, the kind that will spring into a full-blown art in Axial Age societies, and especially Greece. But it is equally the case that rhetoricity inhabits these caves. I note at least two trajectories. First is the calling or evoking of the supernatural through the intermixing of human exploration and design, biological potentials, and environmental affordances. In this sense, **what we call the spiritual or supernatural is necessarily tied to and emergent from the material world.** While we tend to want to separate these, it is also important to see how they have their genesis in evolving, exaptative sociomaterial complexity. In this sense, the creation of the first spiritual insight provides ground for further selection

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and evolution, often in surprising ways. We see in this gesture aspects crucial to fuller rhetorics that emerge later: senses of copresence and transcendence. Copresence here means, however, not just the traditional idea that other people have minds different than my own that can be influenced, but rather a supernatural presence in some fashion amenable to human device; and this supernatural presence exists beyond the world as customarily experienced. As Brian Hayden rightly observes, it is through the pursuit of shamanistic techniques of exploration of consciousness that new kinds of hierarchy, transcendence, higher ideals, and ultimately cosmology are forged.⁷⁰ **We immediately grasp that these innovations are of immense importance, for all aspects of human being in the world, including rhetoric's winnowing out from less specialized formations.** Winkelman points out that shamanism develops a notion of the *soul* through its "out of body" explorations and experience of a dimension other than worldly reality; not only is this **an augmentation of what the symbolic is and can do**, but it stretches the sense of self, helping build a sense of transcendence of subjectivity, an afterlife, and more.⁷¹ (Recall that Orpheus, discussed above, was believed to hold the keys to the afterlife.) These developments are rhetorically suasive of themselves but also they in turn begin to circulate and develop through other symbolic, cultural, and political means, finding new exaptative forms and rhetorical bearing. The influence of these ideas is incalculably massive. In a more historiographic vein, however, what is especially notable here is that **we see religion working right alongside rhetoric's developmental history, weaving in and out of it continuously.** It can take shape in manifold form later, including perhaps most fatefully that sense of divine authority so potent in rhetorical discourse to this day. Thus, transcendence of this world appears in new guise, giving itself to further evolution in diverse human societies. But **the development of a sense of transcendence**, which appears alongside evolving forms of rhetoricity and in turn helps innovate new forms of rhetorical power, **is not merely inner experience, but rather a richly and complexly enworlded set of practices**, one that continually presents itself as something calling to be explored and developed.

But right alongside the presence of the supernatural in rhetoric's emergence is the vertiginous weight we grant normal states of being. What little bit of evidence that has survived from Paleolithic societies presents an odd benefit, in that it asks us to focus on aspects of human being we downplay elsewhere. The shaman-based images demonstrate the potent role altered states of conscious play in human life, whether minor forms of reverie up to transformative states of trance. Putting issues of the bio-technical exploration of consciousness into rhetorical history tilts us toward thinking differently about rhetoric's developmental trajectory in general, including the Greeks. **It suggests that the Greek association of rhetoric with drugs, magic, and a powerful sense of transformation is not simply metaphoric. Rhetoric is interior, not exterior, to these phenomena**—it coevolved and coalesced into a full-blown art alongside the coalescence of music, aesthetics, healing, and religion, and this is why it always maintains such close ties to what seem different pursuits. It is unsurprising, then, that sophists such as Gorgias clearly saw that rhetoric can sway in a manner more akin to drugs or magic, or Isocrates saw rhetoric as fundamental to social health—such associations are implicit in rhetoric's developmental history.⁷² Hence also Walker's suturing of Orpheus charming listeners to later rhetorical developments.

the immanence of transcendence

But we can go further, as figures epiphenomenal to rhetorical histories, such as Parmenides and Empedocles have shamanistic elements to them—they are not just philosophers, but healers, too, and both are tied to caves, magic, poetry, and altered states.⁷³ Rather than excluding these aspects, it is perhaps time to investigate them fully on. Indeed, it may even be that some traces of the Paleolithic conjunction of caves, sleep, healing, incubation, and poetry survive in faint, ancient traces in numerous languages to this day.⁷⁴ **Rhetoric in a Paleolithic key underscores that the bio-semiotic potential for altered states and their expression in practice, marking, and belief is niched into all aspects of human engagement.** While I emphasize the religious angle here, the richer point is that rhetoric's shaking out as a distinct art taken up by a distinct class was a long, incremental development, one whose finer details I have scarcely attended to. Connections to the Neolithic, and then Sumer, China, Egypt, and more beckon to be explored. And, finally, we see the theoretical/historical point that it is only in attending to how material and biological elements are fundamentally entangled in what we call the cultural that such a prehistory, however tentative, can even be possible. And the path is now open to so much more.

Notes

1. Qtd. in Terrence Deacon, *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York: Norton, 2012), 143.
2. Edward Schiappa, "Did Plato Coin *Rhetorikē*?" *American Journal of Philology* 111 (1990): 457–70. As we have known for a long time, and particularly in light of Schiappa's famous essay, the meaning of "rhetoric," including the term itself, is unstable and contestable. I use the word "rhetoric" throughout this essay largely as a placeholder, marking a field of contention with a deep history loosely centered on persuasion and epideictic. I attempt to show that we cannot simply thrust that understanding of rhetoric into the deep past, but rather need to see how it emerges from other or associated tendencies. I frequently use the term "rhetoricity" to gloss this expansive, emergent aspect of rhetoric.
3. For reasons of space and focus, I am omitting discussion of animals, on which there are a number of important studies. See George Kennedy, "A Hoot in the Dark: The Evolution of a General Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25, no. 1 (1992): 1–21; Diane Davis, "Creaturally Rhetorics," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44, no. 1 (2011): 88–94; Debra Hawhee, "Toward a Bestial Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44, no. 1 (2011): 81–87. Kennedy also notes the importance of thinking about evolution, and in particular, human evolution, for rhetoric. While I remain indebted to Kennedy's groundbreaking work, refinements in evolutionary theory suggest alternative narratives, where rhetoric becomes an emergent consolidation built from other, earlier achievements and capacities, both biological and material.
4. R. Dale Guthrie, *The Nature of Paleolithic Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 32–37.
5. For an intriguing argument that we can still detect the faintest traces of Paleolithic thought in language, see Francesco Benozzo, "Sounds of the Silent Cave: An Ethnophilological Perspective on Prehistoric 'incubatio,'" in *Archaeologies and Soundscapes*, ed. G. Dimitriadis (in press) http://www.continuitas.org/texts/benozzo_sounds.pdf (accessed May 24, 2015). For groundbreaking work on the symbols accompanying the cave images, see Genevieve von Petzinger, *The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World's Oldest Symbols* (New York: Atria Books, 2016) and Genevieve von Petzinger, "Making the Abstract Concrete: The Place of Geometric Signs in French Upper Paleolithic Parietal Art," Masters Thesis, University of Victoria, 2009. Petzinger's master's thesis involved creating a database of these signs, of which there are over 20, common to numerous Paleolithic cave sites. The near future may yet see tremendous progress on this front, pushing back the advent of inscribed symbolism—if they are in fact symbolic—far further than heretofore.

6. The emerging fields of biosemiotics and ecosemiotics, heavily indebted to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, argue that signs emerge well before human being, perhaps with life itself. Even a basic sense of learning from the past, where a similarity is established between two events, works on the idea that one event signifies similarity to another, and hence would be a base mode for establishing more complex forms of signification, including, eventually, language. For a quick introduction, see Winfried Nöth, "Ecosemiotics and the Semiotics of Nature," *Sign Systems Studies* 29, no. 1 (2001): 71–81.
7. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007) and Andy Clark, *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension* (New York: Oxford, 2008).
8. Ian Tattersall, *Masters of the Planet: The Search for Our Human Origins* (New York: St. Martin's, 2012) and Chris Stringer, *Lone Survivors: How We Came to Be the Only Humans on Earth* (New York: Henry Holt, 2012).
9. See, for instance, James Fredal, *Rhetorical Action in Ancient Athens: Persuasive Artistry from Solon to Demosthenes* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006) and Mindy Fenske, "The Movement of Interpretation: Conceptualizing Performative Encounters with Multimediated Performance," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (2006): 138–61. Fredal is also attuned to materialist factors of embodiment and environs, demonstrating how ancient rhetors utilized their "surroundings—spaces, object, movements—as a symbolic field for persuasive performances" (51).
10. The literature on complexity and emergence is vast, but see Deacon for one introduction, pertinent here because it addresses evolution, arguing, as I do here, that more complex formations (such as rhetoric) coalesce in nonlinear ways from other, often simpler formations. Terrence Deacon, "Emergence: The Hole at the Wheel's Hub," in *The Re-emergence of Emergence*, ed. Philip Clayton and Paul Sheldon Davies (New York: Oxford, 2006), 111–50. See also Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*.
11. Barad, *Meeting*, 376.
12. Deacon, "Emergence," 127.
13. Jeffrey Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (New York: Oxford, 2000), ix.
14. *Ibid.*, ix.
15. *Ibid.*, 3; Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*, tr. Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins, 1983), 81–104.
16. Walker, *Rhetoric*, ix.
17. See Walter Burkert, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2004), 71–98. Note that Orpheus is famed for journeying to the underworld and returning, and hence, is also strongly associated with caves as well as music. As Burkert points out, "Orpheus controls the terror of the underworld with his music" (85). My argument in this essay hopes to shed light on the mutual resonance of these motifs: caves, music, religion, and transporting experience.
18. Fredal, *Rhetorical*, 4.
19. Barad, *Meeting*, 32.
20. For more specifics, see Peter Bellwood, *First Migrants: Ancient Migration in Global Perspective* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2013), 58–66. I am also indebted to Tomlinson for much of these paragraphs. Gary Tomlinson, *A Million Years of Music: The Emergence of Modern Humanity* (New York: Zone, 2015).
21. Adam Powell, Stephen Shennan, and Mark G. Thomas, "Late Pleistocene Demography and the Appearance of Modern Human Behavior," *Science* 324 (June 2009): 1299–300.
22. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature*, 144. Deacon further explains that emergence is thus associated with what appears as newness, novelty (145).
23. Barad, *Meeting*, 393. Barad attempts to distance herself from complexity theory, but it is unclear to me that she has a target if her objection is that complexity theory does not have a viable sense of entangled immanence (see 180, 438n83). Putting Barad and complexity theory, in particular theories of emergence, into more direct conversation would be a productive pursuit.

24. The term “exaptation” was introduced by Gould and Vrba in their classic article. See Stephen Jay Gould and Elisabeth S. Vrba, “Exaptation—A Missing Term in the Science of Form,” *Paleobiology* 8, no. 1 (1982): 4–15.
25. Tomlinson, *Million*, 12.
26. *Ibid.*, 16.
27. Powell, Shennan, and Thomas, “Late Pleistocene,” 1298–301.
28. Tomlinson, *Million*, 222–3.
29. *Ibid.*, 225.
30. *Ibid.*, 248–9. We might keep the sense of benefit in our sights, since that is itself already a striking innovation. By analogy, consider Burkert’s illuminating point about Axial Age wisdom literature providing the ground for philosophy to develop: wisdom literature is “based on the hypothesis, which is anything but obvious, that it is helpful to have wisdom, that it pays to learn from wise men—an optimism of the *logos*, one might say” (58). With the Aurignacian pipes, then, we see a first, material trace for an *optimism of the sonic*.
31. George Q. Xu, “The Use of Eloquence: The Confucian Perspective,” in *Rhetoric Beyond and Before the Greeks*, ed. Carol Lipson and Roberta Binkley (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 116, 124. See also Yameng Liu, “Nothing Can Be Accomplished If the Speech Does Not Sound Agreeable: Rhetoric and the Invention of Classical Chinese Discourse,” in *Rhetoric Beyond and Before the Greeks*, ed. Carol Lipson and Roberta Binkley (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 147–64.
32. Jacques Jaubert et al. “Early Neanderthal Constructions Deep in Bruniquel Cave in Southwestern France,” *Nature* May 25, 2016; 534 (7605): 1–4. doi:10.1038/nature18291.
33. *Ibid.*, 4.
34. See Dean R. Snow, “Sexual Dimorphism in European Upper Paleolithic Cave Art,” *American Antiquity* 78, no. 4 (2013): 746–61. Snow not only demonstrates that the majority of hand stencils are female, but ties the argument back to male biases at work in archaeology in general. Snow’s argument further resonates with the views of many scholars that Paleolithic societies tended to more communal and egalitarian, including between the sexes, than later societies; for a quick overview of this perspective, see Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), 40–42.
35. While I will be emphasizing the spiritual element of the cave images, it is important to underscore that there were undoubtedly many purposes behind the images; nor are all images even well drawn—some are practice, doodles, or simply poorly done. **This suggests that not all those who drew were good, and that Paleolithic painters practiced.** Guthrie provides abundant evidence to this. Children were often present, and sometimes “fluted” their fingers over the images; see K. Sharpe and L. Van Gelder, “Evidence for Cave Marking by Paleolithic Children,” *Antiquity* 80 (2006): 937–47. In short, it is important not to overemphasize the spiritual element.
36. For a graph depicting all the signs that have been found, see Petzinger, *First*, vi.
37. Chris Scarre and Graeme Lawson, ed, *Archaeoacoustics* (Cambridge, U.K.: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2006) and Iegor Reznikoff, “On Primitive Elements of Musical Meaning,” *The Journal of Music and Meaning* 3 (Fall 2004/Winter 2005), <http://www.musicandmeaning.net/issues/showArticle.php?artID=3.2>.
38. David S. Whitley, *Cave Paintings and the Human Spirit* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009), 32.
39. For an overview of previous models, see David Lewis-Williams, *The Mind in the Cave*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 41–68.
40. For one example among many studies, see Catherine Wan and Gottfried Schlaug, “Music Making as a Tool for Promoting Brain Plasticity across the Life Span,” *Neuroscientist* 16 (October 2010): 566–77.
41. Lewis-Williams, *Mind*, 183.
42. Guy Deutscher, *Through the Language Glass* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2010). Deutscher explores the curiosity of the Greeks’ inability to see blue as well other, similar examples hinging on the relation of experience to language.

43. For a general overview of the comparative rhetoric approach, with remarks on the emic/etic split, see LuMing Mao, "Beyond Bias, Binary, and Border: Mapping out the Future of Comparative Rhetoric," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 43, no. 3 (2013): 209–25.
44. Lewis-Williams, *Mind*, 125.
45. *Ibid.*, 126.
46. *Ibid.*, 128–29.
47. *Ibid.*, 129.
48. Davis Lewis-Williams and Sam Challis, *Deciphering Ancient Minds: The Mystery of San Bushmen Rock Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011).
49. See Petzinger, *First*; her cataloging of the signs has brought greater insight, but finding there meaning may never be possible.
50. Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2013), 194.
51. Stringer, *Lone*, 129.
52. *Ibid.*, 129.
53. Lewis-Williams, *Mind*, 79.
54. But there is a further point that should be emphasized: examples such as Blombos demonstrate that what took place in the caves of Europe is not the "Creative Explosion" it is taken to be in Eurocentric narratives; rather, such cave art is itself tethered to long and incremental developmental histories, without which it could never have been accomplished. There is a clear parallel with the creative explosion we associate with Ancient Greece, too often glorified as a singular pinnacle, as if there were not profound contributions from other cultures such as Egypt, Sumeria, and others. **But focusing on such moments for their advances distorts the importance of other necessary developments, distributed over distant times and places.** Thus, while the Paleolithic caves are upheld as the first time we see art in ancient peoples, this is not quite right. **"Art" didn't suddenly "arrive" on cave walls for the first time in Europe; it had long developed and been prepared for by instances of nonrepresentational cognition extending back thousands of years, and it is difficult to say when a new tipping point was reached where aesthetics came into its own.**
55. Harrari, *Sapiens*, 56–7.
56. *Ibid.*, 56–8.
57. *Ibid.*, 58.
58. Lewis-Williams, *Mind*, 77.
59. *Ibid.*, 78.
60. Michael Winkelman, *Shamanism: A Biopsychosocial Paradigm of Consciousness and Healing*, 2nd ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), xviii.
61. Lewis-Williams and Challis, *Deciphering*, 146–52.
62. See Guthrie; Sharp and Van Gelder.
63. Petzinger, *First*, 243–61.
64. Lewis-Williams, *Mind*, 185.
65. *Ibid.*, 194.
66. Reznikoff, "Primitive Elements," 2.1; 2.9.
67. Lewis-Williams, *Mind*, 199.
68. Paul Kingsnorth, "In the Black Chamber." <http://paulkingsnorth.net/journalism/in-the-black-chamber/>.
69. I am extrapolating from Clark's discussion of the Principle of Ecological Assembly, which suggests that organisms recruit on the spot whatever problem-solving resources will yield an acceptable result with a minimum of effort; see Clark, *Supersizing*, 13.
70. Brian Hayden, *Shamans, Sorcerers, and Saints: A Prehistory of Religion* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2003), 53.
71. Winkelman, *Shamanism*, xiv.
72. Gorgias, "Encomium of Helen," in *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy Part II*, ed. and tr. Daniel W. Graham (New York: Cambridge, 2010), 755–63. For more on the deep connections between Greek rhetoric and magic, see Jacqueline De Romilly, *Magic and Rhetoric in*

Ancient Greece (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1975). For shamanistic and magical aspects of Parmenides and Empedocles, see Peter Kingsley, *Reality* (Point Reyes, CA: The Golden Sufi Center, 2003).

73. See Kingsley, *Reality*. For an overview of caves in Greek society, ritual, and philosophy see Yulia Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth* (New York: Oxford, 2009).
74. See Benozzo, who traces these connections as a way of introducing the methodology of ethnophilology. Further, to connect *enthusiasm*, that sense of bedazzlement by the gods or the muses, to rhetoric is not to idealize a kind of rhetoric, say persuasion, and impose it on culturally related phenomenon; rather, it is to say the opposite. Enthusiasm is already a form of rhetoric, an attractor suffused by the call/lure/belief in altered states and the divine, one grounded in culturally modulated biological experience. While the Greeks, particularly in the philosophical tradition, are understood to be shaking out such inspiration to find new grounds, even in the key texts for this abandonment odd elements remain, such as Plato's *Phaedrus*. Regardless, what is telling is that rhetoric's spelling is never so very far away, speaking to a deep interconnection that is perhaps irrepressible because it is an always available and, in the sense of being an attractor, *attractive* possibility.

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