In February 1995 I read in Time Magazine about the discovery of an exciting new Palaeolithic cave in southern France - the Chauvet Cave - featuring exquisite paintings of rhinos, lions, mammoths and aurochs. Some of these paintings are thought to be a staggering 32,000 years old. Dr Jean Clottes, who heads up the scientific team studying the Chauvet Cave, has described it as one of the most valuable archaeological sites on earth. The cave will never be open to the public, unlike Altamira and Lascaux, where so much priceless information from the past was trampled by tens of thousands of visitors and lost forever. You can imagine my enormous surprise and delight, therefore, when last year Jean invited Alec Campbell, myself and our wives to visit the Chauvet Cave.

On June 3rd this year, Alec, myself and our wives, Judy and Deborah arrived at Vallon Pont d’Arc in the Ardeche, where the Chauvet Cave is located. Reaching the cave involved a stiff climb up some 1000 feet above a river flowing at the base of a deep gorge. The original entrance to the cave was blocked by a rock fall some 25,000 years ago. The current entrance is a very low profile, tiny opening sealed with a 4-foot metal door not far from the original entrance. Kitted out in overalls, helmets with headlamps, harnesses and special rubber shoes to guard against contamination, we began our descent single file, down through a dark and narrow tunnel, then continuing down a ladder about 25 feet to the base of the cave. Here Jean flicked a switch and lights came on revealing a cave of incredible beauty, with large areas of the roof being covered by veils or curtains of pure white and reddish streaked...
stalactites. The effect was as if we were entering an extraordinary cathedral, filled with a sacred presence - perhaps of souls or spirits. The skulls and bones of ancient animals lay everywhere. The silence was total with every sound we made accentuated, but then within the silence, a thousand distant voices like the sound of the stars in the midnight sky. The atmosphere should have been spooky, but instead it was intimate.

We moved from chamber to chamber through the 500 meter depth of the cave, at times through narrow passages, and at times crawling through tunnels, with our torches illuminating gallery after gallery of the most extraordinarily beautiful paintings. The initial galleries revealed red paintings of bears and a spotted leopard, as well as dots, hand prints and strange geometrics. Engraved images followed of horses, aurochs (the prehistoric ox which finally became extinct about 6000 years ago) and rhinos, as well as an owl on a stalactite, and lions. These cave lions were twice the size of lions we know today. Our torch beams revealed heads of bison and other animals drawn some 25,000 years before the great Pyramids, and one chamber depicted a Megalaceros, or Giant Deer with 12 foot long antlers - the biggest deer that ever lived.

Jean led us to a chamber featuring what looked like a sort of altar, on top of which was a skull which must have belonged to a huge cave bear. The scene sent prickles up my spine as I learned that the skull had been carefully placed there by the Aurignaceans. The scientific team had found evidence of a fire having been made (with the charcoal dated around 32,000 years ago) and it was hard to escape the conclusion that some form of ceremony or perhaps sacrifice had taken place. Had a shaman deliberately placed the skull on the rock for ritual purposes?

Moving back to join the main ‘passarelle’ we approached the major, big panels of paintings. On my left in an alcove, I saw the most exquisite drawing of a female rhino with a long curved horn. This was followed almost immediately by powerful images drawn mainly in black, of life-size heads of horses, so strong and life-like that they stood out in 3D from the wall. The rest of this wonderful panel featured a turbulent mass of horses, reindeer, aurochs, and two fighting rhinos, all caught in perpetual movement. In the next chamber a pride of huge cave lions was skillfully drawn, using only a few adeptly placed lines to convey the power and strength of these beasts.

The final chamber, the inner sanctum, was dominated by a panel about 25 feet wide featuring a mass of spectacular images that included mammoths, rhinos and lions all powerfully on the move. The centre of the panel featured a small alcove at the back of which was a beautiful horse. Had someone, perhaps a great shaman, perhaps generations of shamans, once sat in this alcove as Master of Ceremonies?

Jean told us about one chamber containing a child’s footprint, perfectly preserved in the mud for 30,000 years ago. What, I wondered, had a child been doing right at the back of this immense cave? The paintings were clearly not made purely for art’s sake, and the positioning of the greatest number of images at the furthest end of the cave suggests a ritual or deep spiritual purpose. Almost certainly these paintings must have been made by shamans, who would have occupied a special status in society. Meanwhile they must also have been some of the greatest artists of their day, which would suggest that the art had a special significance and the caves were important destinations, to which perhaps people travelled from long distances.

One of the tantalizing questions for me was what relationship may have existed between the artists and the animals represented? Just as the San of southern Africa revered the eland for its magical powers, so the Aurignaceans revered the cave lions, bears and rhinos. Looking at these paintings I thought of all the precious mythologies that have disappeared through time, and yet one priceless legacy had survived: this remarkable art.