

by Gerhard R. Damm

# The Oldest Story Ever Recorded is a Hunting Narrative



*Some 44,000 years ago, people on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi painted a hunting scene on cave walls. This is the oldest known recorded human story, and it may offer a glimpse into the origins of spiritual belief.*

Archaeologist Maxime Aubert, from Griffith University in South East Queensland, Australia, and colleagues published, on December 11, 2019, in *Nature* their discovery of the world's earliest-known figurative artwork, the pictorial record of a hunt. They also tell their story and show amazing footage on YouTube.

Made by prehistoric people on the island of Sulawesi, Indonesia, the painting is about 4.5 metres (15 feet) long and is situated some three metres (10 feet) above the floor of a hard-to-reach upper chamber of a limestone cave called Leang Bulu' Sipong 4. This elaborate, 43,900-year-old rock-art panel—about twice as old most similar cave-art scenes in Europe—portrays human figures hunting what appear to be



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pigs and dwarf buffalo.

On the panel, several animals face off against a group of strangely tiny hunters in monochrome dark red. In the same pigment, a handprint is stencilled on the left end of the mural—likely a signature. The scene suggests a classic game drive, in which people flush two pigs and four buffalo from cover and drive them toward a trap or a line of hunters holding long spindly objects that might be ropes or spears.

Many of the hunters have elongated faces that resemble animal snouts. One hunter has a stubby tail and another appears to have a bird-like beak. These figures could represent humans clad in skins or masks, or therianthropes, representations of people with animal features—heads or other body parts.



Rock-art hunting scene at Leang Bulu' Sipong 4. The top image shows a photostitched panorama of the entire panel. The bottom image is a digital tracing of the scene. Ratno Sardi (top); Adhi Agus Oktaviana (bottom). Aubert et al. 2019

The island is the home of two wild pig species, the Sulawesi warty pig (*Sus celebensis*) and the babirusa (*Babirusa babirusa*), and two wild dwarf cattle, the lowland and mountain anoa (*Bubalus depressicornis* and *quarlesi*). The shoulder height of both anoa is less than 100 centimetres (40 inches); both wild pig species on Sulawesi stand less than 80 centimetres (31 inches) high. Yet this mural depicts animals of monstrous proportions, many times larger than the hunters.

The long-ago artist may simply have recorded how his or her people made their living. Alternatively, this could show a scene from a legend or a vision, or it might convey a spiritual connection between humans and animals, perhaps by retelling a unique origin story.

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Since the researchers found no other trace of human life—no tools, discarded bones or evidence of cooking fires—anywhere in the cave, one conclusion could be that this was a sacred or spiritual place for the prehistoric people of Sulawesi. Thus the mural might hold some mythological quality. The people who created it clearly had the cognitive ability to develop myths—the capacity to think and talk about things that don't exist in the natural world—and therefore perhaps shamanic beliefs.

*Gerhard R. Damm is the founder and editor-in-chief of Conservation Frontlines.*

*Banner image: A group of small part-human, part-animal figures is apparently capturing an anoa with what seem to be ropes or spears. Ratno Sardi. Aubert et al. 2019. Ref: Earliest hunting scene in prehistoric art. Maxime Aubert, Rustan Lebe, Adhi Agus Oktaviana, Muhammad Tang, Basran Burhan, Hamrullah, Andi Jusdi, Abdullah, Budianto Hakim, Jian-xin Zhao, I. Made Geria, Priyatno Hadi Sulistyarto, Ratno Sardi & Adam Brumm. Nature, December 2019, pps 442-445.*