

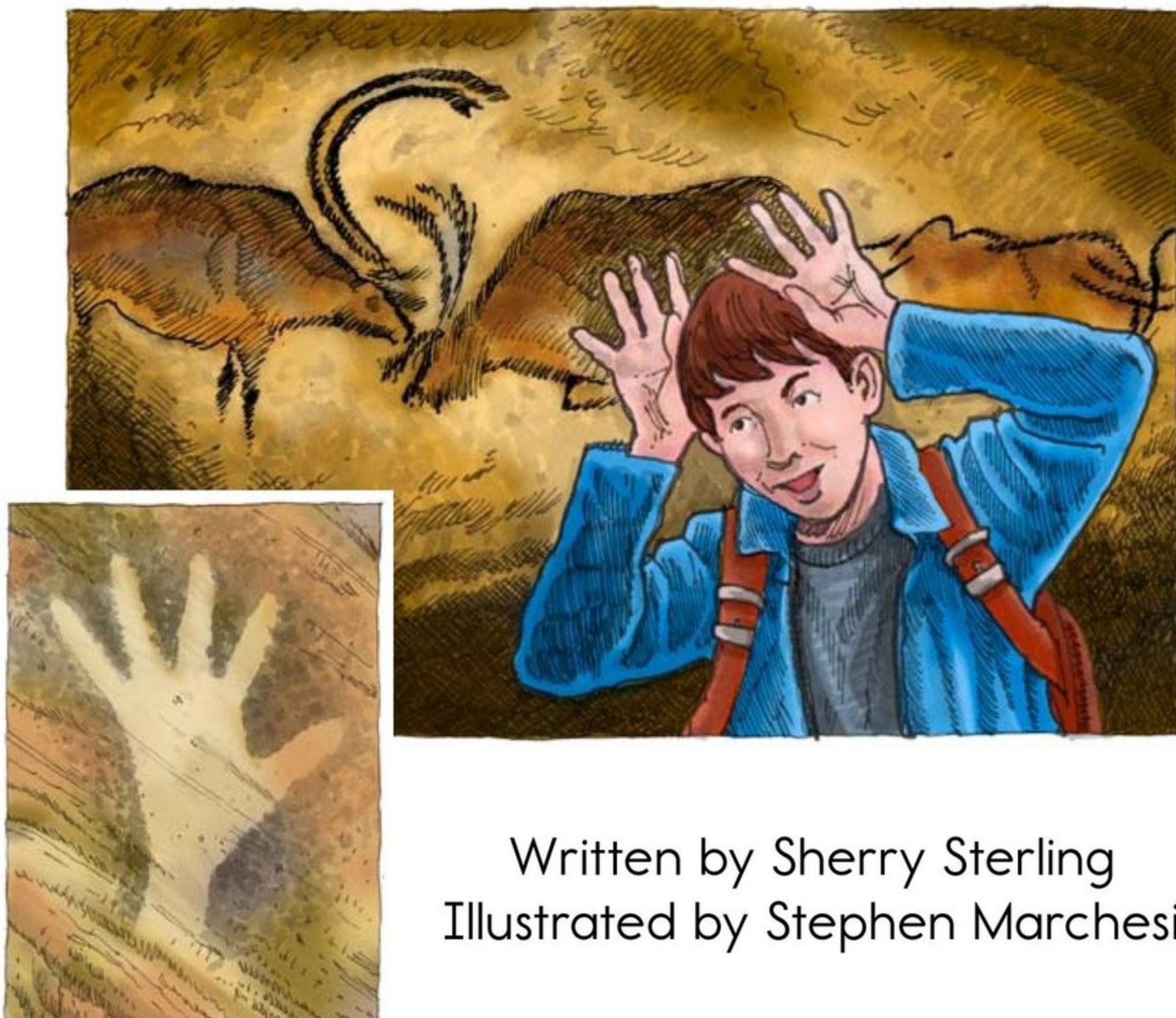
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A Trip to a Prehistoric Cave



Written by Sherry Sterling
Illustrated by Stephen Marchesi

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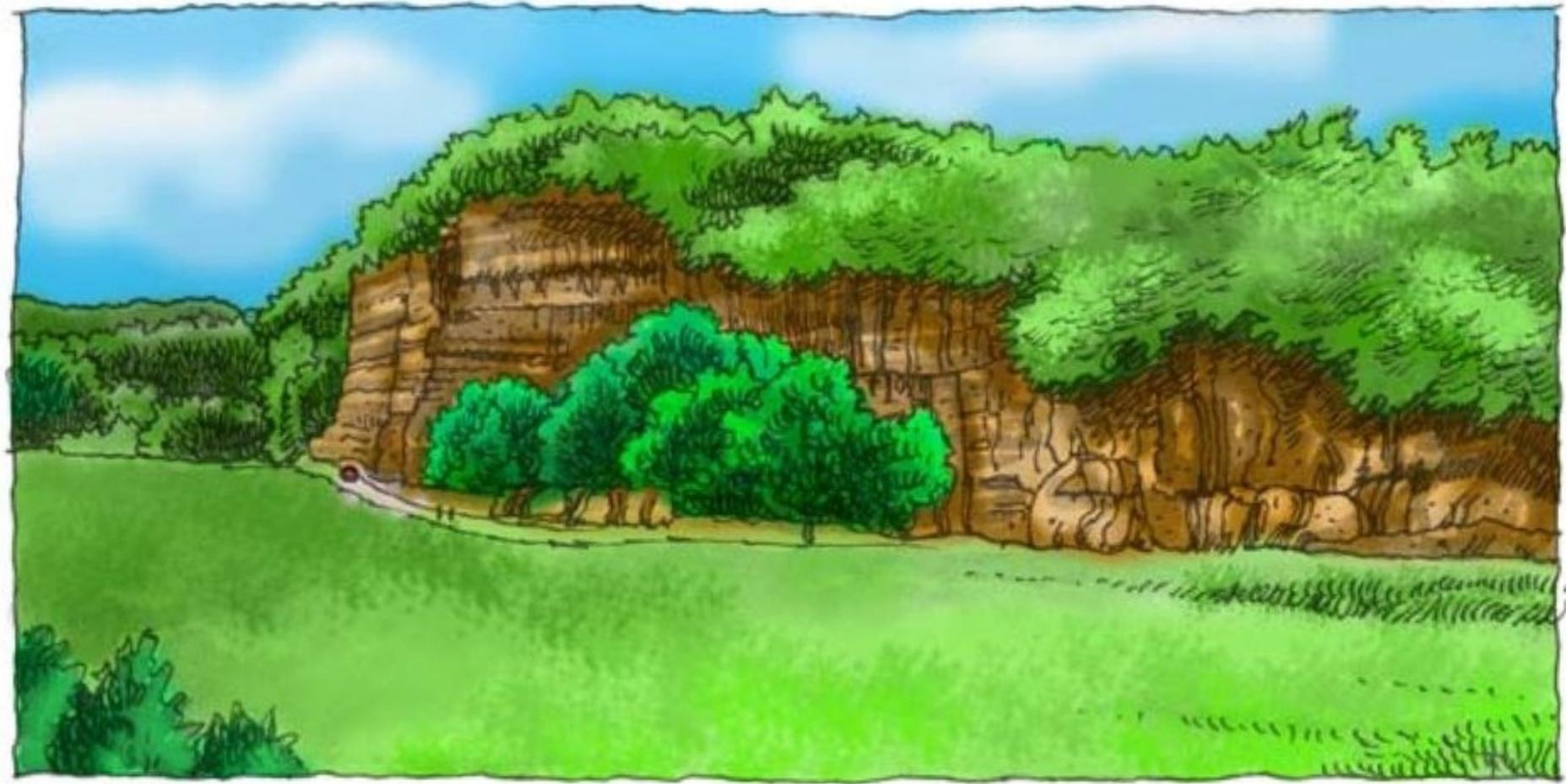


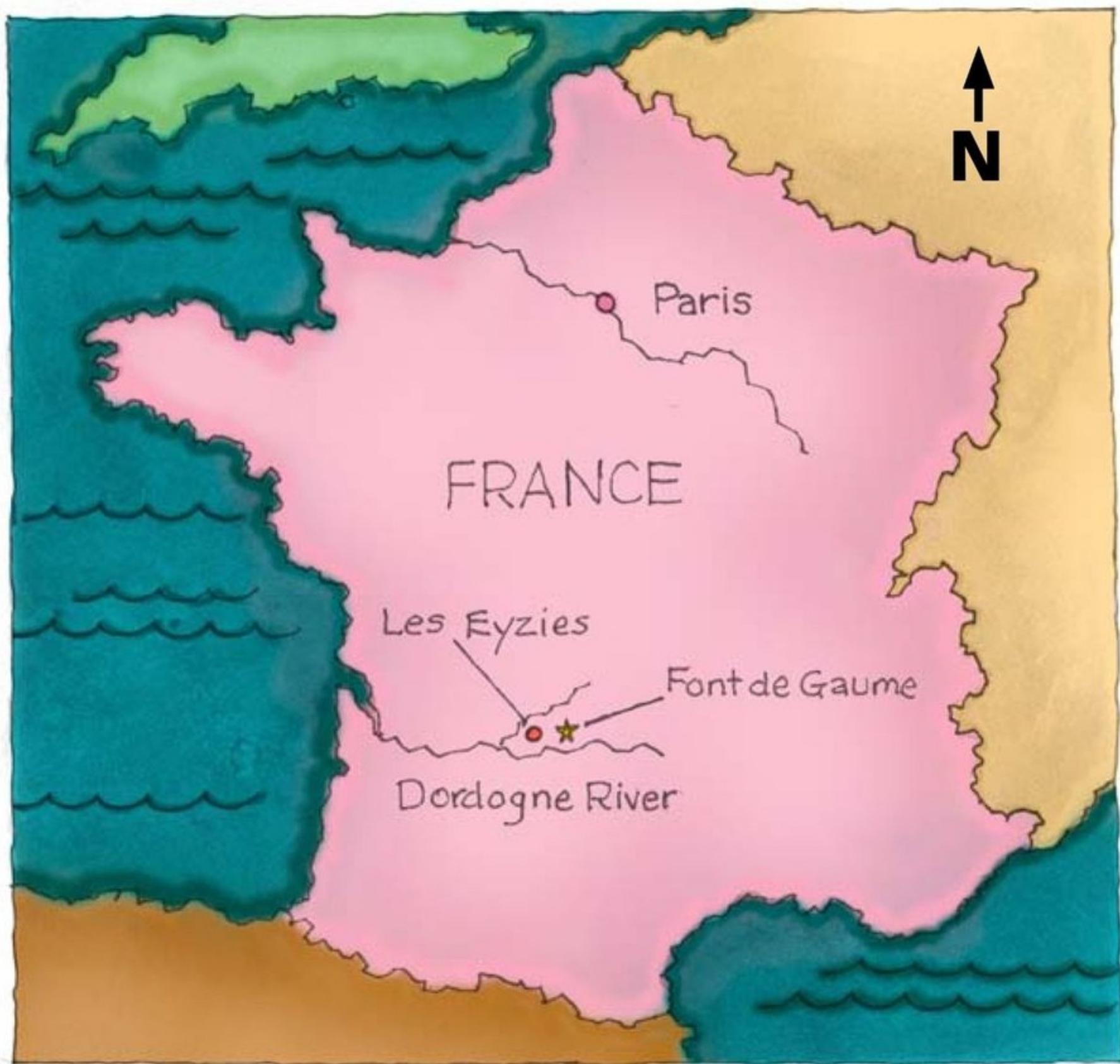
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Introduction

Eager to see stalactites and stalagmites, Emmanuel and Victor begged to see caves while driving through France. They were learning about caves in school and wanted to see some bats, too.

"Let's stop at Font de Gaume," said their dad. "It's not far from here, in Les Eyzies (Layz Ay-ZEE)."





A Tour of Font de Gaume

Victor, Emmanuel, and their mom and dad signed up for a tour and walked up some steps to the mouth of the cave. A heavy, padlocked door blocked the entrance. Sitting in the shade with other families, they waited for the tour guide. When the tour guide arrived, she locked their backpacks and purses in a cabinet. “This helps to protect the cave from objects brushing its sides,” she said. Then she offered a suggestion: “If you have jackets, keep them with you. It’s much cooler in the cave.”

Once inside, the boys' hearts sank. The cave was dry, which meant no new stalactites or stalagmites were forming. They also didn't see any bats flying around. Victor shuffled his feet and whined, "What's so great about this place?"

After walking 19.8 m (65 ft), their tour guide used her flashlight to **illuminate** a scene painted on the cave wall. The group gasped in unison. They saw five bison painted in several colors, outlined in black, and partly **engraved**.

"Wow—this is better than stalactites!" exclaimed Emmanuel.





Their tour guide shared that they were in one of the six most important caves in the world from the upper **Paleolithic** period. “Scientists think this cave was painted around 14,000 BC, when only modern *Homo sapiens* lived. A unique thing about this cave is that the paintings are **polychromatic**, which means they are made up of many different colors.”

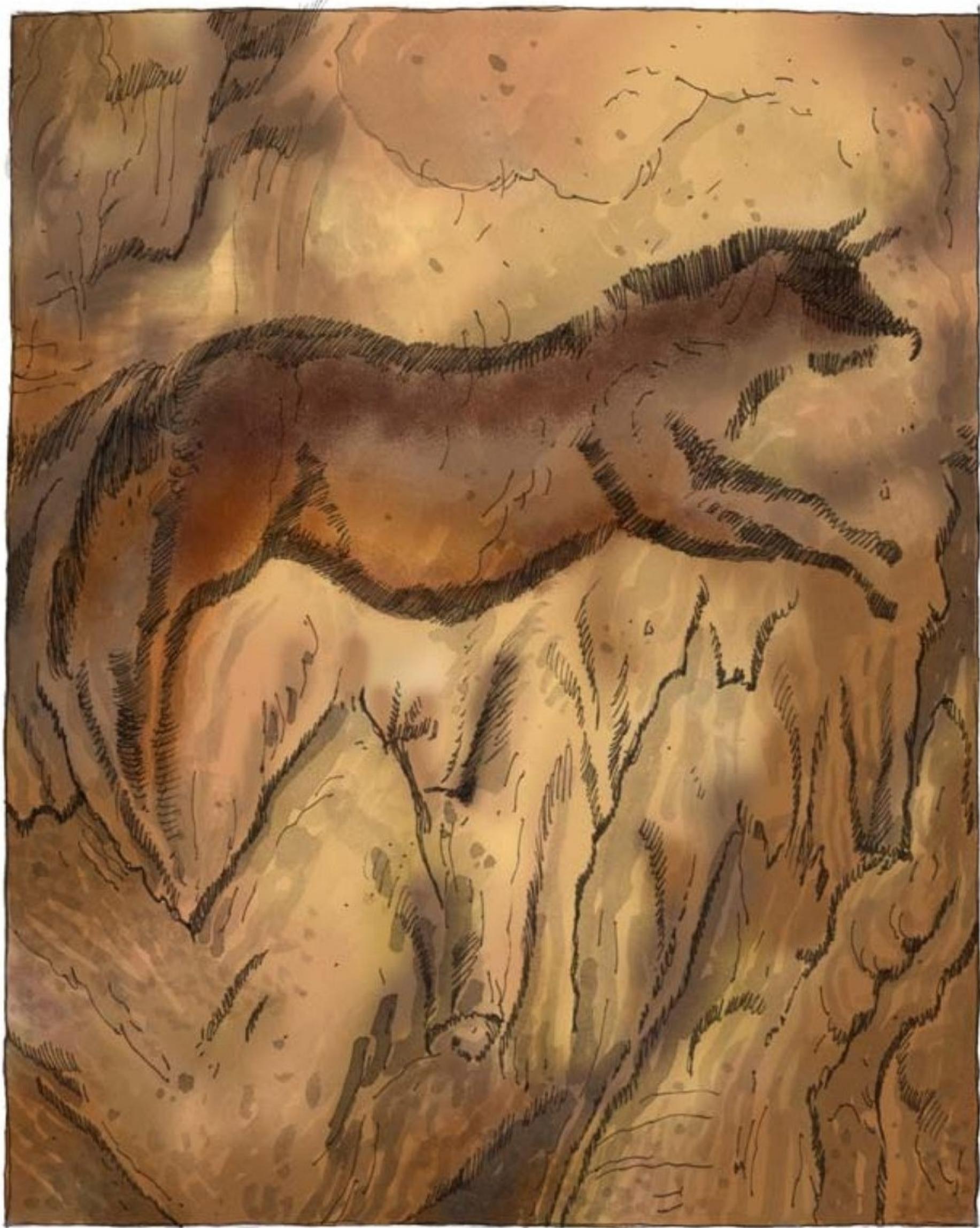
Their guide led them deeper into the cave and shined her flashlight on another painting—this one showed reindeer. Victor noticed the antlers first, then found the edges of a body and laughed when he saw that one reindeer was licking the other.

Moving Pictures

The guide showed them another bison scene. She turned off her flashlight's white light and switched to a red light. Moving it quickly, she imitated the flicker of fire and an amazing thing happened. A bison that looked pasted on the stone wall in the white light now seemed to come alive. Its side filled out, and it looked as if it were breathing. The painting seemed to leap off the rock with stamping hooves.

"Remember," said the guide, "these paintings were made and viewed by people using torches, not flashlights. The flickering red light lets you see the surface of the rock through the paint. Now you can see the carved paintings in the light that ancient humans saw them."

The group continued to wander through the cave. Victor and Emmanuel saw a bison with red horns, two deer with two bison, and a room decorated with little bison. Next, they saw two horses, one raising its forelegs.



“Here’s your stalactite,” the guide said, pointing to the hind legs of the horse. “Ancient painters used stalactites to help them represent movement. They used the unevenness of the rock to show the fullness of an animal’s body.”

"What kinds of paintings have you seen in this cave?" asked the tour guide.

A girl on the tour answered, "They're all animals."

"Right!" said the guide. "For thousands of years, cave paintings had only three kinds of subjects: animals, symbols, and people. There are no paintings of trees, plants, flowers, or the Sun."

Types of Cave Paintings

Animals



Symbols



People





As they stepped out of the cave into the bright warmth of the summer afternoon Sun, Victor nudged his brother. “Remember when you were little and you drew a horse on the dining room wall?”

“Yeah, and Mom said, ‘You’re not a caveman! Use paper to draw on.’”

“When we asked Mom who cavemen were, she said they were people who lived in caves a long time ago.”

The tour guide overheard the boys and said, “Actually, cavemen didn’t live in caves. You can go to Prehisto Parc to see how people really lived when this cave was painted.”

“Let’s go!” chimed the boys eagerly.

Prehisto Parc

After the tour, the family ate sandwiches for lunch at a cafe and then drove up the road to Prehisto Parc. It was filled with life-sized scenes of Paleolithic hunter-gatherers. Each scene had a sign describing the history of the scene. Victor and Emmanuel learned about the people and their homes, food, and art.





The People

People today often think of cavemen as hairy humans who lived at the time of dinosaurs, wore animal skins, carried a club, and dwelled in caves. Victor and Emmanuel learned first that dinosaurs didn't have any human company. Second, the boys learned that while early humans may have worn animal skins, they probably carried spears, not clubs. And who would want to live in a damp, dark cave? Not even prehistoric people, according to the first sign.

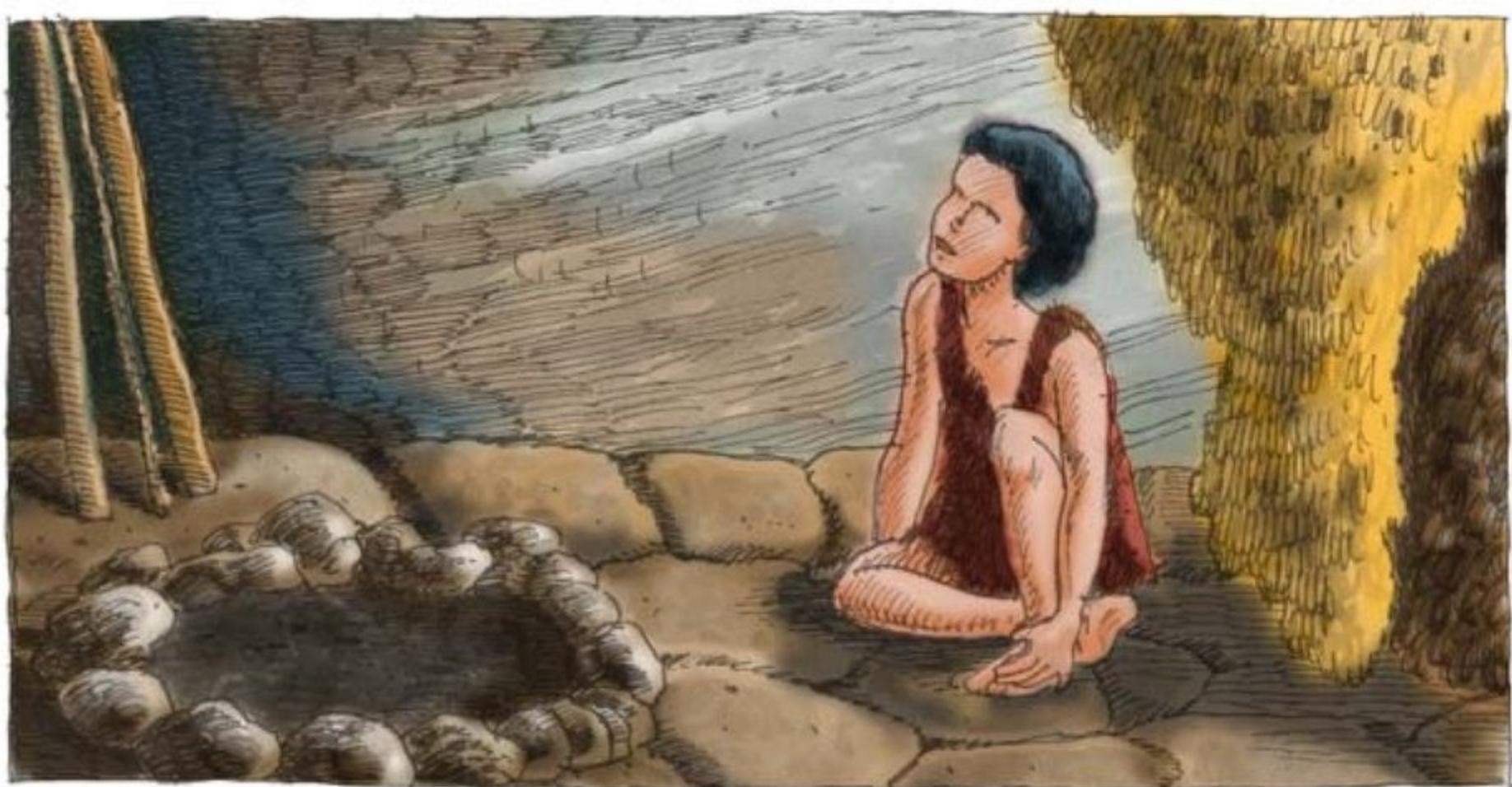


Their Homes

"If these hunter-gatherers didn't live in caves, what *did* they live in?" Emmanuel asked.

The first few scenes in the park answered his question. Ancient people built lean-tos near rock **outcroppings** by stretching animal skins over wooden poles. To keep warmer during the cold winter, they dug into the ground to make a wall of earth. Mammoth bones and tusks made the walls strong. The roof was made with wooden poles and covered with reindeer skins and dirt.

One sign read: *Prehistoric builders carefully chose where to build their homes. They built their shelters in the spaces under rocks to keep out bad weather. To get the Sun's warmth in winter and the most shade in summer, their dwellings faced south or southwest. They also built homes near a water source, such as a spring or river.*



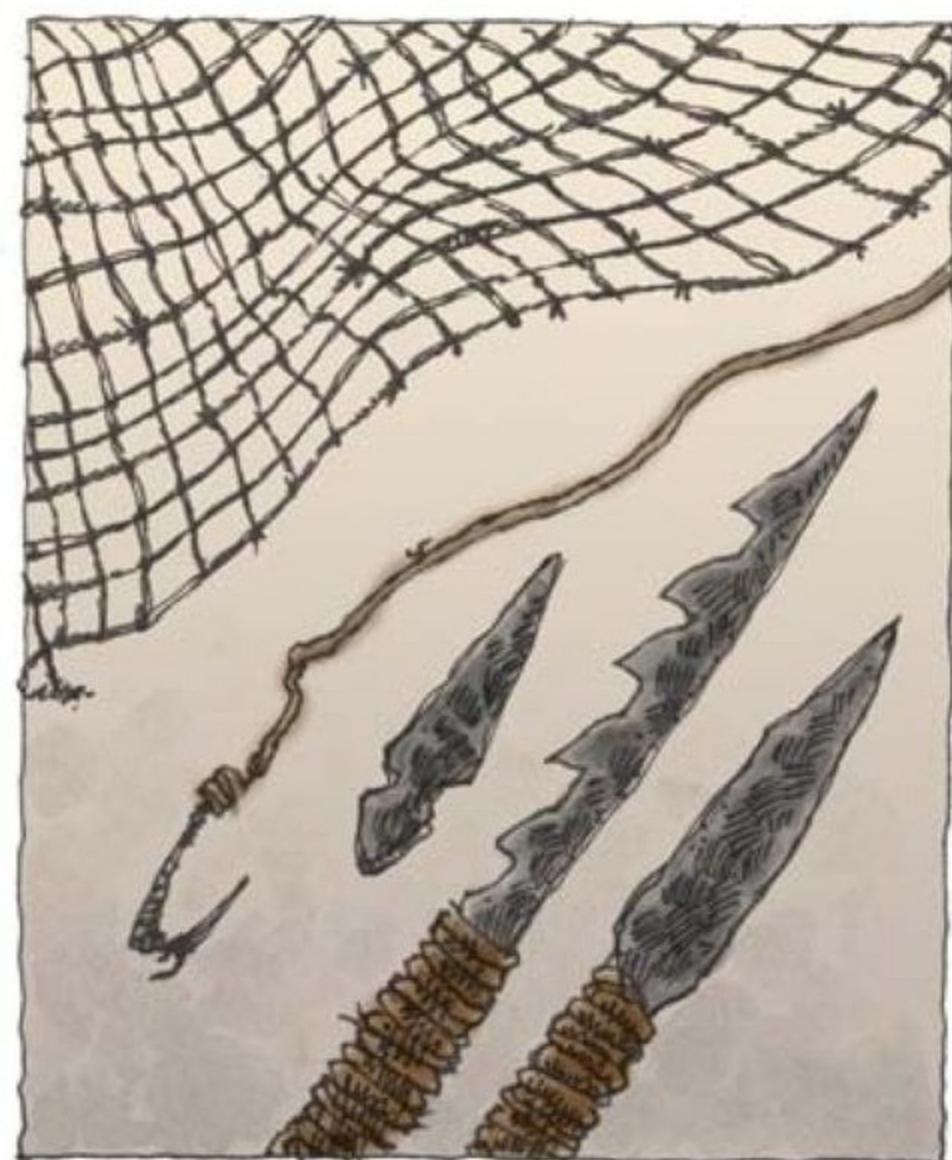
Inside the dwellings, Emmanuel and Victor saw that ancient humans had places for a fire, for sleeping, and for making weapons. A layer of flat stones kept the floor dry. Outside, the boys saw places to cut meat, cook meals, scrape skins, and make weapons and tools. The ancient people even had a place to put their garbage.

Their Food

The boys came upon a scene of a mammoth hunt. Their dad said, "This looks a bit different from going to the grocery store to get food."

The sign read: *To hunt, early humans worked together setting traps in the marshland. Then they lured an animal close to the trap. Once a mammoth fell into the trap, it got stuck in the mud, and men could more safely kill it by throwing spears.*

Emmanuel and Victor learned that prehistoric people probably fished more often than they hunted. Fishing was not as dangerous as hunting. **Archaeologists**, or people who study ancient cultures, have found fish hooks, nets, and traps. This shows them that ancient people probably fished. They think early humans probably used harpoons to fish, as well as to hunt animals such as bears.





The boys' father, who had wandered ahead, came back to tell them of a scene down the path. "Hunting and fishing were not the only sources of food. Come read about this!"

Gathering was even safer than fishing, the boys read. While early humans didn't farm, they gathered and ate wild roots, berries, and mushrooms. They also found eggs and honey, and even ate larvae and mature insects.

"Yuck!" exclaimed the boys at the same time. They were so grossed out, they didn't even say *jinx*.

Their Art

Next, the boys saw a scene of an early human drawing on a cliff. “Maybe this will tell us more about the cave paintings,” said Emmanuel.

The boys learned that early *Homo sapiens* liked to draw, often on animal bones and cave walls. These ancient people didn’t just draw anything they saw in their world; they drew things that meant something to their hearts—maybe as an act of worship.

The scene’s sign read: *Prehistoric painters used their fingers or brushes (made from hair or plants) to apply paint. They used yellow, red, and black paint made from minerals in rocks. For 20,000 years, they painted the same way, using the same three paints. They used the rock’s shape to enhance their paintings and used tools to carve the surface.*





Conclusion

Victor, Emmanuel, and their parents took a canoe trip on the Dordogne (door - DOAN) River, passing castles and caves that dotted the golden cliffs. When the boys stopped paddling, their dad asked, “Are you getting tired?”

Victor answered, “I was imagining the paintings that might fill those caves up there.”

“Wouldn’t it be great to be the one who discovers them?” Emmanuel added. He was already dreaming of becoming an archaeologist and discovering more about the people who painted caves long ago.

Glossary

archaeologists (<i>n.</i>)	people who study prehistoric cultures (p. 16)
engraved (<i>v.</i>)	cut or fashioned for decoration (p. 6)
enhance (<i>v.</i>)	to improve or make better (p. 18)
<i>Homo sapiens</i> (<i>n.</i>)	modern human beings (p. 7)
illuminate (<i>v.</i>)	light up (p. 6)
larvae (<i>n.</i>)	worm-like forms of some insects when they are young (p. 17)
lured (<i>v.</i>)	to have led someone with the promise of something good; tempted (p. 16)
outcroppings (<i>n.</i>)	parts of a rock that stick out from their surroundings (p. 14)
Paleolithic (<i>adj.</i>)	describing a time from 750,000 to 15,000 years ago (p. 7)
polychromatic (<i>adj.</i>)	having many colors (p. 7)

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