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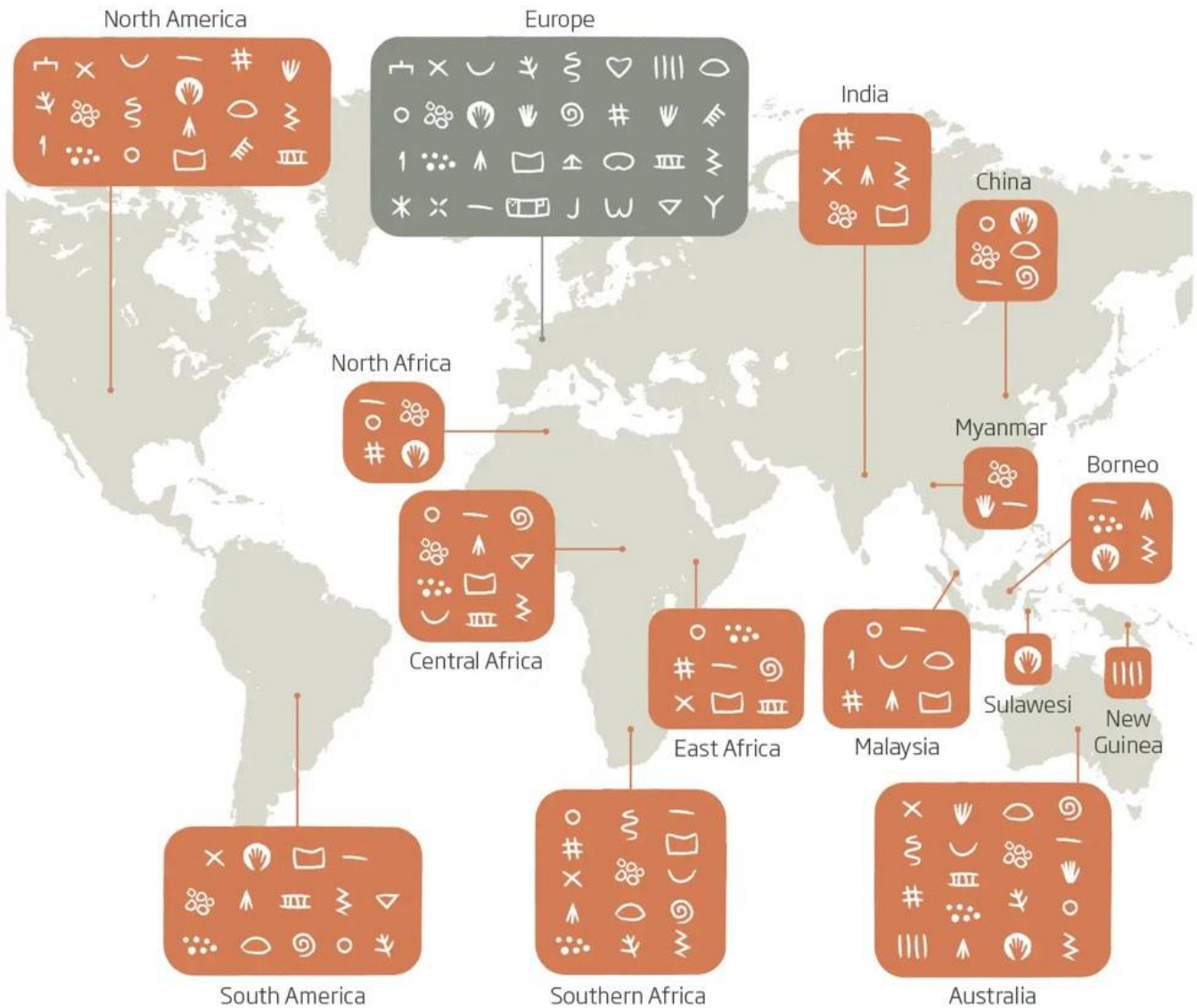
Stone Age Cave Symbols May All Be Part of a Single Prehistoric Proto-Writing System

posted by Jason Kottke  Mar 04, 2019

While studying some of the oldest art in the world found in caves and engraved on animal bones or shells, paleoanthropologist Genevieve von Petzinger [has found evidence of a proto-writing system](#) that perhaps developed in Africa and then spread throughout the world.

Consistent doodles

The symbols seen on relics from Stone Age Europe are also found in caves throughout the rest of the world. The similarities suggest the marks are more than just random scribbles



SOURCE: GENEVIE VONPETZINGER, ANDRÉ LEROI-COURHAN, DAVID LEWIS-WILLIAMS, NATALIE FRANKLIN

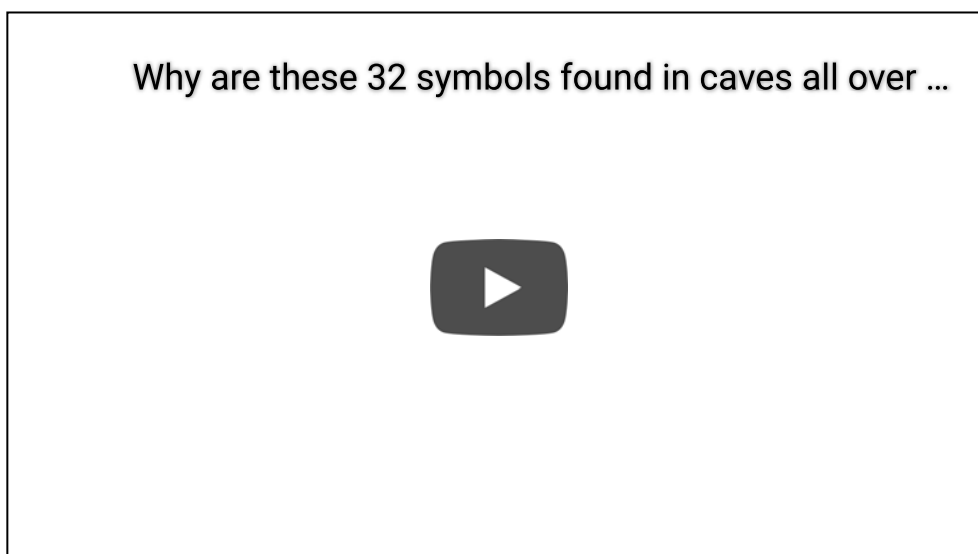
The research also reveals that modern humans were using two-thirds of these signs when they first settled in Europe, which creates another intriguing possibility. “This does not look like the start-up phase of a brand-new invention,” von Petzinger writes in her recently published book, *The First Signs: Unlocking the mysteries of the world’s oldest symbols* (Simon and Schuster). In other words, when modern humans first started moving into Europe from Africa, they must have brought a mental dictionary of symbols with them.

That fits well with the discovery of a 70,000-year-old block of ochre etched with cross-hatching in Blombos cave in South Africa. And

when von Petzinger looked through archaeology papers for mentions or illustrations of symbols in cave art outside Europe, she found that many of her 32 signs were used around the world. There is even tantalising evidence that an earlier human, *Homo erectus*, deliberately etched a zigzag on a shell on Java some 500,000 years ago. “The ability of humans to produce a system of signs is clearly not something that starts 40,000 years ago. This capacity goes back at least 100,000 years,” says Francesco d’Errico from the University of Bordeaux, France.

Nonetheless, something quite special seems to have happened in ice age Europe. In various caves, von Petzinger frequently found certain symbols used together. For instance, starting 40,000 years ago, hand stencils are often found alongside dots. Later, between 28,000 and 22,000 years ago, they are joined by thumb stencils and finger fluting — parallel lines created by dragging fingers through soft cave deposits.

Von Petzinger lays out the results of her work in a 2016 book called [The First Signs: Unlocking the Mysteries of the World’s Oldest Symbols](#) and in a TED Talk from 2015:



It's not writing (because the symbols don't appear to be capable of representing the full range of spoken language) and it's not an alphabet, but it's definitely an intriguing *something*. (via [open culture](#))

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