

Getting high on hypoxia: Ancient humans went deep into caves in search of euphoria, and depicted the experience in their paintings

As archaeologist [Yafit Kedar](#) from Tel-Aviv University in Israel was in France enjoying some cave art deep within the ground, she started to wonder why their creators would choose to create images so far away from natural light sources. These places are also airless, where what little oxygen there could have been would have been consumed by the burning torches the painters needed in order to see what they were painting.

Maybe, she thought, the reason these long-ago artists chose to create in such remote chambers was because of their lack of fresh oxygen. Perhaps the painters would have been down there creating in a [hypoxic](#), trancelike state. In that pre-agricultural, pre-chemistry time, cave painting might have been a way to get inspirationally baked.

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Hypoxia releases dopamine and can produce euphoria, visions, and out-of-body sensations. Modern visitors have reported experiencing some of these same sorts of mental phenomena when viewing the artwork.

The paper suggests that, "The cave environment was conceived as both a liminal space and an ontological arena, allowing early humans to maintain their connectedness with the cosmos." The hypoxic mind may well have found it easy to imagine that they were seeing beyond the rock, and indeed, beyond their world.

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