Book Review

Sacred Darkness: A Global Perspective on the Ritual Use of Caves. (2012). Holley Moyes, Editor. Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado.

Reviewed by Joel Weishaus

When C. G. Jung was about to begin his university studies, uncertain as to which direction he should take, he was "intensely interested in everything Egyptian and Babylonian, and would have liked best to be an archaeologist. But I had no money to study anywhere except in Basel, and in Basel there was no teacher for this subject. So this plan very soon came to an end" (Jung, 1965, p. 84). Although he chose to become a medical doctor and psychiatrist, Jung's archeological dreams continued to haunt him. In perhaps the most famous one, he is in a house that was his house. Its upper story had "a number of precious old paintings," but he wanted to know what was below. He found a staircase to a lower floor, where he realized he was in "the fifteenth or sixteenth century," as "the furnishings were medieval." Now he was determined to explore the whole house. He found "a heavy door" that led him to a stone staircase down into "a beautifully vaulted room which dated from Roman times." Its floor had stone stabs. A ring was attached to one. He grabbed the ring and lifted the slab, revealing a narrow staircase that led down into "a low cave cut into the rock. "Thick dust lay on the floor, and in the dust were scattered bones and broken pottery, like the remains of a primitive culture. I discovered two human skulls, obviously very old and half disintegrated. Then, I awoke" (all quotes, Jung, 1965, pp. 158–159).

It could be that an archeological dream such as this is what brought Jung to fashion his particular practice of psychology. Meredith Sabini (2000) put it this way:
Jung's dream might be considered the "initial dream" for analytical psychology, the vastness of the field he founded well depicted by the house's multiple levels and historic[al] contents. It was surely a "big dream" relevant to Jung's own life and the development of a new psychology as well as to the tasks we face at this point in history. (p. 19)

Jung was an archeologist of the soul, spelunking into the unconscious, the "dark zone," even though, as Susan Rowland wrote, "Since we cannot know what our limited consciousness is missing, then what we claim to perceive about the universe can only be partial. Mystery is not only part of our being, it is also part of our knowing" (Rowland, 2017, p. 3).
Although Jung did not write much about caves in particular, the analogy between deep caves and the karstic depths of the unconscious mind is as old as Plato's Cave, and as recent as South African archeologist David Lewis-Williams' popularization of a shamanic, neuropsychological model of Paleolithic cave art (Lewis-Williams, 2002). To an already provocative archive of scholarship, Sacred Darkness: A Global Perspective on the Ritual Use of Caves adds 29 essays by eminent archeologists, from which we get a sense of the Earth as a living body riddled with cavities of an apophatic mysterium.

In her introduction, Holley Moyes, a professor of archeology at the University of California, Merced, begins by defining what is meant by a cave, quoting geoscientist William White. In a statement of discrete anthropocentrism, White defines a cave as "a natural opening in the Earth, large enough to admit a human being, and which some human beings choose to call a cave" (Culver & White, 2004, p. 81).

By the late 1800s, the figure of the caveman was entrenched in popular culture, exemplified by the popular 1960s animated TV series The Flintstones, in which Stone Age

people adapted modern technology to their time, such as cars made of stone and animal skins, and locomoted by one's feet. The series, which ran for six years, was very successful, and instilled a humorously warped vision of our Stone Age ancestors into the cultural psyche, one that pops up in such pseudo-religious fantasies as humans and dinosaurs having lived at the same time (e.g., see http://www.icr.org/men-dinosaurs).

It would seem logical that during the Ice Age people would seek shelter in caves; however, evidence, or the lack of it, points to their having lived in rock shelters outside of caves Possible reasons for this include that the caves were/are pitch black and disorienting; many of the caves had entrances that were not much more than crawl spaces; and the environment of caves was/is chillingly damp. Although Cro-Magnon people may have also built shelters of wood covered with animal skins and fastened with animal gut, materials that break down or don't fossilize open black holes in archeological research. What we do know is that caves were used for rituals, which may have included coming-of-age initiations, and perhaps the beginning of religious rites. For these purposes, the difficulty of access and the danger, fear, and disorientation that the pitch-black incubatory environment offered would have been ideal.

Although small fires could be, and were, made, fuel—usually animal fat—had to be carried in with great difficulty, as there were no sealed containers to hold it. Yet enough light could be cast from small lamps for paintings and sculptures to be made that tens of thousands of years later are still a source of marvel. There are many theories as to why this art was made, from hunting magic to art for art's sake. My own theory is that because most of the animals portrayed were not the ones that were hunted for food, many of the images flickering and some seemingly running across the walls, were archetypes of animate powers our ancestors discovered in their imagination and dreams.

Accompanying the visual art would have been music (flues have been found) and dancing, making the caves into multimedia temples. However, as Holly Moyes writes, "it was not until the late 1990s, following archaeological investigations and reinterpretations of major cave sites, that the field widely accepted archaeological interpretations of caves as sacred space" (p. 4). Or, as she more succinctly defines them, as "ideologically charged spaces imbued with meaning" (p. 9).

In the first essay of Sacred Darkness, the noted French paleohistorian, Jean Clottes, begins a line of inquiry into the caves of Southern Europe by quoting the paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan (1911–1986): "One fact struck prehistorians (most prominently the Abbé H. Breuil), it is that the cave sanctuaries were not all intensely frequented, as traces within them show . . . some—not the least elaborate, like Niaux—even seem to have had very few visits" (Leroi-Gourhan, 1977, p. 23). From this finding, Leroi-Gourhan speculated that the caves may have been used for shamanic purposes, an explanation upon which Clottes and Lewis-Williams elaborated in The Shamans of Prehistory: Trance and Magic in the Painted Caves (1998). (Other paleoarcheologists have disputed these claims; e.g., Francort & Hamayon, 2001.)
Clottes also describes how "the creators of [cave] art consistently explored extensive caves, sometimes more than a mile long," going on to say that "these speleological feats only make sense if they wanted to get to the deepest and farthest parts of the earth. It is far more probable that they did so to access the hidden powers of the underground than to achieve exploratory prowess" (p. 19).

One day in 1913, C. G. Jung was sitting at his desk when he suddenly "plunged down into dark depths": After a while my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, which was rather like a deep twilight. Before me was the entrance to a dark cave, in which stood a dwarf with a leathery skin, as if he were mummified. I squeezed past him through the narrow entrance and waded knee deep through icy water to the other end of the cave where, on a projecting rock, I saw a glowing red crystal. (pp. 203–204)
This was followed by "the corpse of a youth with blond hair and a wound in the head…a gigantic

black [Egyptian] scarab" and a "red, newborn sun." As far as Jung understood this dream, it was "a drama of death and renewal" (1963, p. 204).

In another chapter in this book, "Caves for the Living, Caves of the Dead," Simon K. F. Stoddart and Caroline A. T. Malone take us to the Maltese islands, where "caves and more often rockshelters were commonly used for domestic shelter, burial and ritual activity over several millennia" (p. 48). Later the prehistoric Maltese population constructed "a disproportionately large number of ritual caves both above and below ground," which the authors call a "monumental transformation" (p. 48). The problem here is, as it is with so many prehistorical anthropological texts, that there is no explanation, no written history, and no informants to interview. Basically, we are left with theories based on ruins.

Scientific work begins, and begins again, by defining and refining its subject. Holly Moyes and James E. Brady (Moyes coauthored several essays in the book she edited), in "Caves as Sacred Space in Mesoamerica," offer that "the Maya word ch'en or ch'een, for instance, can be translated as 'cave' but it also includes springs, water holes, sinkholes, crevices, rockshelters, and virtually any hole within the earth be they natural or man made." Hole / holy, uniting nature and culture in "materialized metaphors" (all quotes, p. 45). "Throughout the Americas," Moyes and Brady continue, "indigenous people believe that the earth is animate and populated with spirits or deities that dwell within landscape features such as mountains, trees, springs, lakes, rivers, and caves. The earth itself constitutes one of the most revered elements in indigenous cosmology, assuming the role of the universal creator of life" (p. 152). In their conclusion, Moyes and Brady write that "as entrances to the underworld and the home of earth deities," the caves are "ideally suited for earth-based rites such as rain, fertility, and renewal ceremonies. They also form the basis for the reification of Mesoamerican cosmological culture" (p. 165). That in their darkness the caves nurture seeds for a renewal of indigenous culture is an exciting gesture.

Working six thousand miles away from the American continent, Timothy Kaiser and Stašo Forenbaher discuss Nakovana Cave, which overlooks the Adriatic Sea on Croatia's Dalmatian coast. There, "activities tend to be carried out at locations with unusual characteristics, in places that can contain the participants, focus their attention, and veil them in mystery" (p. 265). Always the mystery and what it reveals are coeval, as "religious ritual is a communion between human participants and a transcendental power." Also, "the presence of this power is often symbolized by an image" (p. 270). When Kaiser and Forenbaher focus on "the phallic stalagmite—[which] may be interpreted" as having "obvious iconographic associations of masculine fertility, potency, and other traditional male-related qualities such as warrior strength and prowess" (p. 270), I thought back to Jean Clottes' mention of Bruniquel Cave in the Tarn-et- Garonne of France, where more than 47,000 years ago Neanderthals had arranged stalactites and stalagmites on the floor in an oval measuring 5 meters by 5 meters.
Clottes opines that "[no] practical purpose can be suggested" for the constructions in Bruniquel Cave (p. 17). However, now that there is at least a theory that the Neanderthals had some capacity for symbolic thinking, one wonders what a deliberate arrangement such as this oval could have symbolized. Could the arrangement into an oval have been a mandala, which Jung wrote "is an archetypal image whose occurence [sic] is attested throughout the ages" and "represents the wholeness of the psychic ground or, to put it in mythic terms, the divinity incarnate in man" (1965, p. 367)? Moving past Jung's unfortunate term "man," perhaps the Neanderthals, too, were drawn into the womb of "sacred darkness," in order to perform their rituals honoring the unknown.

Mark Aldenderfer's contribution, "Caves as Sacred Spaces on the Tibetan Plateau," discusses caves that became "especially important with the advent of Buddhism [in Tibet] in the seventh century AD" (p. 125). Then, in the eight century, a semi-mythical anchorite named Padmasambhava arrived from India. Invited by Tibet's king to subdue demons, he converted many

believers in the indigenous Bo religion to Vajrayana Buddhism. Guru Rinpoche, his honorific title, deposited temas, religious treasures, in various places around Tibet, including caves, to be discovered by later generations. Among the temas was the Bardo Thodol, The Tibetan Book of the Dead, which was discovered by Karma Lingpa (1326–1386). Jung wrote a "Psychological Commentary" to this still popular book (Jung, 2005). (For an interesting discussion on Jung's approach to Eastern texts, see Bishop, 1993.)

One hears stories of Tibetan lamas spending years meditating in caves; however, although Tibet has deep caves with "natural dark zones and extensive subterranean chambers," most Tibetan eremites lived, and still live, in what "are better described as chambers (that) have been excavated by people." These chambers are "small and simple, and consist of a single room" (p. 125). Even in shallow recesses the numinous can be fathomed by a deeply meditating mind. Aldenderfer asks a key question, "What makes a cave or chamber [in Tibet] sacred?" After defining gnas (pronounced né) as "abodes of spiritual power [that] may be associated with an animistic entity, spirits or deities" (p. 129), Aldenderfer concludes: "Although it can be argued that caves and chambers are no more special than other landscape features, such as mountains, lakes, rivers and boulders,… there seems to be no question that there is a kind of chthonic sensibility within Tibetan religious traditions of all kinds. Caves are places of origin, and powerful spirits and religious artifacts emerge from them." (p. 133)

Sacred Darkness is a 410-page, large-format, double-columned book that offers a worldwide range of paleoanthropological research and creative speculation. It is, I suggest, a valuable resource not just for archeologists, speleologists, and historians of religion, but also for depth psychologists, artists, and seers of all disciplines whose work takes them, as did Jung's, "down into the dark depths."

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Further Reading

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