CACERES: Spain: This handout photo released by HANDPAS project shows prehistoric hand paintings in the Snake gallery of the Maltravieso cave, in Caceres. —AFP photos

CACERES, Spain: It’s dark and surprisingly warm in a cave in western Spain that holds our most intimate connection to the prehistoric past—hand silhouettes painted tens of thousands of years ago. Archaeologist Hipolito Collado and his team had not entered the Maltravieso Cave in the city of Caceres for close to a year to avoid damaging the 17 faded hands that adorn the gate barring the entrance in the mid-1980s.

Collado’s colleague Jose Ramon Bello Rodrigo. According to Collado, a Spaniard who is also head of the International Federation of Rock Art Organizations, painted hands have been found in 36 caves in Europe all in France, Spain and Italy. Some also contain animal drawings and fossils but his project focuses only on hands. Further abroad, hands have also been discovered in South America, Australia and Indonesia, with one area were done by women? Did they lose them in freezing cold weather? Or—some cases fingers are missing. Was this a ritual?

‘Inaccessible art accessible’

Archeologist Hipolito Collado working in the Maltravieso cave.

“Inaccessible art accessible” says Collado, as he checks sensors for temperature and humidity since he last visited the meandering, cramped cave. Surrounded by high rises in what was a poor neighborhood of Caceres, the cave was discovered in 1981 in a quarry but left neglected for decades, squared by thrill-seekers, junkies and others until authorities put up a wrought iron gate barring the entrance in the mid-1980s.

“Was it was?”

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Theories abound about what the hands mean, but with no written records, much of it is conjecture. Researchers have tried to determine whether they were male or female, and why in some cases fingers are missing. Was this a ritual?

Why did our ancestors or distant relatives paint their hands over the walls, precious remnants of a far-flung piece of history we know little about?

Why did our ancestors or distant relatives paint hands in caves? Was it merely to make their mark, part of a ritual to commune with spirits? Do they tell us anything about the role of women during the Paleolithic era that ended some 10,000 years ago? And why are some fingers missing?

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