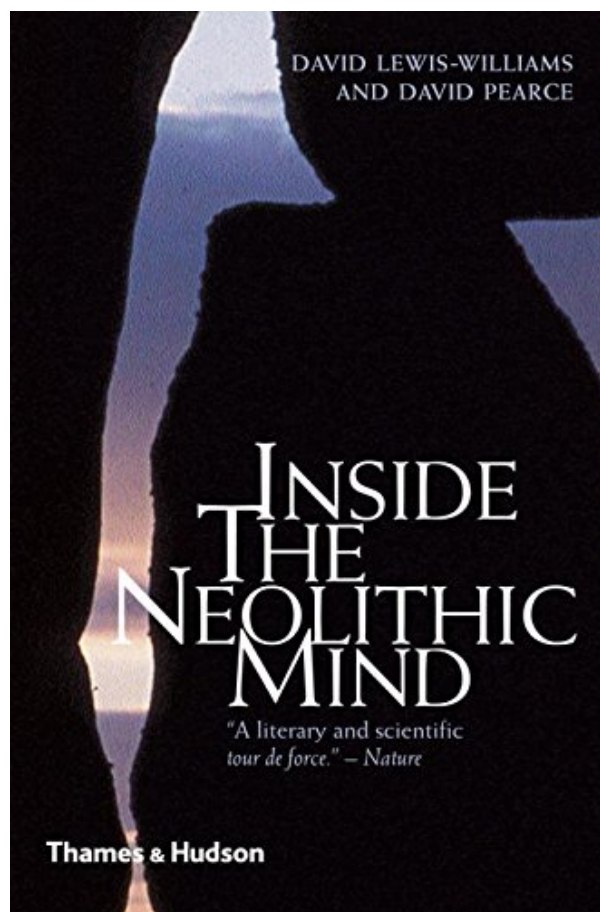
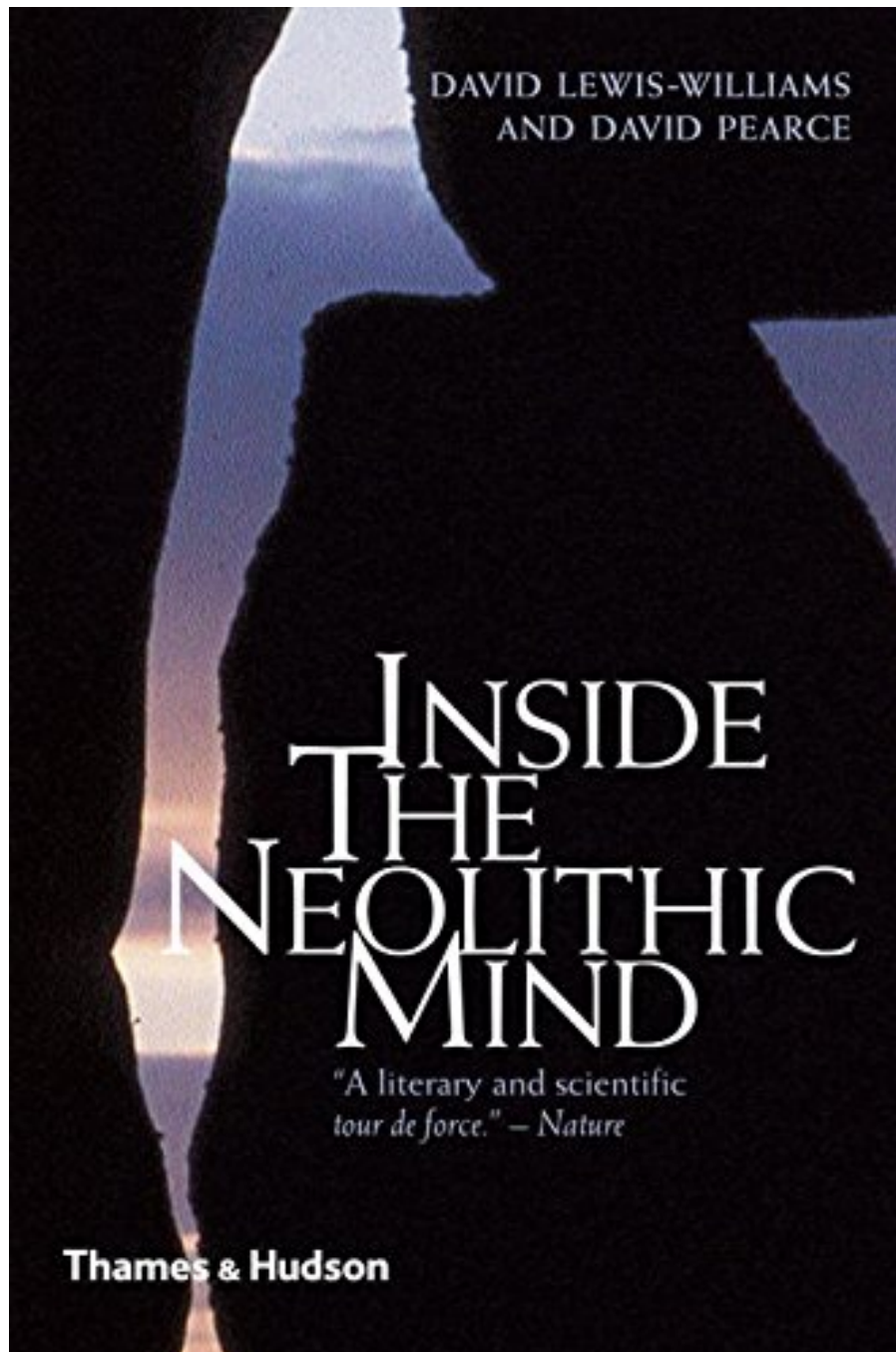


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CONSCIOUSNESS, COSMOS AND THE  
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## Review

“Features superb writing, lavishly illustrated descriptions . . . and a powerfully evocative stone-by-stone tour of the megalithic tombs. . . . Lewis-Williams and Pearce can be assured that their foray into the Neolithic mind will not be ignored.” (Archaeology)

## About the Author

David Lewis-Williams is Professor Emeritus and Senior Mentor at the Rock Art Research Institute, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He is the author of *The Mind in the Cave*, *Conceiving God*, *Inside the Neolithic Mind*, and *Deciphering Ancient Minds*.

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# **INSIDE THE NEOLITHIC MIND: CONSCIOUSNESS, COSMOS AND THE REALM OF THE GODS BY DAVID LEWIS- WILLIAMS, DAVID PEARCE PDF**

An exploration of how brain structure and cultural content interacted in the Neolithic period 10,000 years ago to produce unique life patterns and belief systems.

What do the headless figures found in the famous paintings at Çatalhöyük in Turkey have in common with the interlinked spirals carved on the monumental tombs at Newgrange and Knowth in Ireland? How can the concepts of “birth,” “death,” and “wild” cast light on the changes in relationships between people and animals? David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce examine the intricate web of belief, myth, and society in the Neolithic period, arguably the most significant turning point in human history, when agriculture became a way of life and the fractious society that we know today was born.

The authors focus on two contrasting times and places: the beginnings in the Near East, with its cult buildings and skull burials, and western Europe, with its massive stone monuments. They argue that neurological patterns hardwired into the brain help explain the nature of the art, religion, and society that Neolithic people produced. Drawing on the latest research, the authors skillfully link material on human consciousness, imagery, and belief systems to propose provocative new theories about religious motivation in ancient times. 29 color, 75 b&w illustrations

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cognitive-neuroscience take on neolithic society, religion, and artifacts

By Robert J. Crawford

This is an interesting, if uneven, book that attempts to penetrate the thought processes of neolithic peoples in the Near East and Western Europe. For anyone who is familiar with the issues, the sudden appearance of cities, stone structures, and art objects constitute a great mystery. Sure, they accompanied the adoption of agriculture, but what did they mean? Why did they share certain characteristics? How did the creators think of them at the time? How did they conceive of life and the cosmos?

The authors attempt, via the precepts of cognitive neuroscience, to answer these questions. While I have doubts about the approach, archaeologists currently view cognitive neuroscience - maps of how brains process information - are a fundamental step forward in their methodology, on the same level as radio-carbon dating and the application of population genetics were in the latter half of the 20C.

The principal ideas are strikingly clear. First, the human mind is "hard wired" with certain concepts, which are universally found in all cultures. In this case, the relevant ones involve a kind of cosmological hierarchy, whereby there is an underworld (death/birth), the mundane world of the everyday, and an ethereal realm of transcendence (afterlife/realms of the gods). Second, this hierarchy is displayed in everything that survives of neolithic culture, from the burial sites and stone architecture to the hallucinogenic states of ecstatic religious visions so central to religious experiences. Third, as supported by anthropological evidence in existing primitive cultures, the mental categories of the neolithic mind were more fluid than ours are today, melding into each other, e.g. so that a person can be in a trance and thus elsewhere as well as momentarily dead, only to return to life later. It also meant that religious authorities represented power relationships, reflected in the division of labor, class. In this way, society, religion, cosmology, art, architecture, and even work are all of a piece, hardly distinguishable as mental categories but seen as part of a continuous spectrum. Fourth, religion can be defined as a) experience; b) the beliefs that come therefrom; c) the practices that are hence adopted to support them. Fifth, and this was really new to me, the authors argue that this hierarchical ideology took hold BEFORE the adoption of the agricultural innovations that have come to define the period.

Everything in the neolithic can, the authors assert, be understood in accordance with this framework of ideas. Not only are architecture, design motifs, and sculpture a reflection of this hierarchy, but so were the organization of society and religion. This provides a tidy way to interpret things. With the urbanization that was made possible with farm-food surpluses, elites could justify themselves and their place in the hierarchy by their monopoly on visions and access to other realms. Even animal totems are explainable: as water is a nether realm, so snakes that inhabit land and water are gateway beings between the hierarchical levels, hence merge with man in certain visions.

This is all fine, but there are some serious problems with the approach. Most importantly, the authors never defined to my satisfaction what they meant by "neurologically hard wired". On the one hand, they say it is the common basis of all mankind, but never explore whether we are born with it, whether the brain's structure is the reason, or if experience programs it in. On the other hand, they repeatedly assert that their argument is not deterministic. This is irreconcilable in my opinion. In addition, there is no way to prove or disprove their conjectures scientifically, except to fit all available archaeological observations into their framework. Finally, they apply as support for their argument many observations from contemporary cultures, such as the bushmen of south Africa. Perhaps it wasn't always so. At any rate, the jumps in logic were often too much for me, for example when they state what the meaning of red paint would have been (blood, underworld, or some such as sacred).

Regarding the book's scope, there were too many loose ends for my taste. Without more on the cognitive

neurosciences, I often felt adrift with the jargon and could not accept their assumptions. Then, why did this hierarchical politico-religious ideology arise at the time it did? I think it is easier to assume that it followed the spread of farming rather than the other way round, as the authors continually argue, but this theme, too, is glossed over and not explored in the depth that such a revolutionary claim deserves.

This is an interesting book and it is a fun read. Unfortunately, I found the prose rather clunky and academic, too abstruse, if often well expressed. Recommended with these caveats in mind.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

As Meaningful For Modern Humans as For Stone Age People

By Bernard Z. Friedlander

Links that connect the neurophysiology of the human brain, the integrative functions of mind, and the dynamics of behavior in the real world include some of most important territories human beings can explore about themselves in all the world. These topics constitute the essence of human nature. David Lewis-Williams and David Pearce outdistance themselves and many of their professional colleagues in the breadth and clarity with which they pursue these subjects. Their insights are as valid for modern Generation X, and beyond as they are concerning cave dwellers. The breadth of their scholarship and of their insights are equally profound. Their way of being thorough may require slow and careful reading, but the rewards for meeting them on their own ground justify both them and the effort that goes in to embracing the huge domain of their accomplishments.

B Z Friedlander, PhD, Research Professor of Human Development, Emeritus, University of Hartford

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

almost spellbinding!

By Lester M. Stacey

I agree with the positive comments of the previous reviews. In addition, I would point out that the neuropsychological basis of the descriptions and explanations presented has serious implications for any student of science and philosophy.

Beyond this profound benefit, one can use this book as an analytical tool to evaluate one's own consciousness and beliefs.

Once you understand where and why humans have gone so horribly wrong, you can resolve to take actions to ensure you do not repeat the same mistakes.

THAT is precious knowledge!

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