

When I first saw the creations of Axel Neumann and learnt that the impetus for these works of art was his retreat into absolute darkness for three weeks, I was stunned. I am a Classical scholar studying ancient religion, and about a dozen years ago I realized that in their quest of the hidden truth and ecstatic illumination, ancient Greek sages, seers, and initiates into mystery rites practiced prolonged isolation in caves and other closed dark spaces. In antiquity, sensory deprivation attained in such places was used as a technique of imagery cultivation. In the modern research of alteration of consciousness, the sensation of passage through a rotating dark space terminating in bright light in the center of the field of vision is known as the vortex experience. It often occurs in the state of sensory deprivation, when elimination of external stimuli forces the mind to concentrate within itself and brings about intensive discharge of inner imagery. Axel Neumann discovered the tremendous potential of this experience and revealed it in his paintings.

There was much more than scholarly interpretation in my impression from Axel Neumann's work. When I looked at his striking images, I could not but recall the account of the visions experienced by a young Greek who descended for two nights and a day into an underground artificial cave sacred to a deity named Trophonios. The young man's spiritual flight above a magnificent shining country, passage through darkness to translucent and pure light, and the final revelation attained in the total darkness of the grotto were described by Plutarch in the late first or early second century AD. Another ancient Greek, the great philosopher Parmenides who lived in the fifth century BC, wrote a poem about his own vision of a swift flight in a chariot, escorted by 'the daughters of the Sun' to the gates where the path of Night and Day meet, and leading to an encounter with a goddess who disclosed to him the unshakeable truth. In a word, Parmenides described his own vortex experience followed by an all-encompassing revelation. Significantly, the philosophical school founded by Parmenides owned an underground building called a den.

Viewing Axel Neumann's creations, I thought about ancient Greeks descending into caves and later narrating stories of tunnel-like experiences, images surrounding them and the bright light that they perceived as an image of a divine creature. I feel that these overwhelming visions and sensations of a mixture of joyfulness and awe are timeless, and they are embodied in Axel Neumann's art.

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