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A set of tracks left in the mud 28,000 years ago paints a poignant picture that set the prevailing theory of when man and dog became partners on its ear.

The Chauvet Cave in southern France was discovered by cavers in 1994, the first humans in the cave for 20,000 since a cave-in sealed the original entrance. What they found has been dubbed "the Sistine Chapel" of prehistoric cave art — hundreds of depictions of cave bears, hyenas, horses, cattle and mammoths, including some species rarely seen in other ice age paintings. The cave was named a World Heritage site in 2014 by UNESCO because of its significance and was the subject of Werner Herzog's popular "Cave of Forgotten

Dreams" on Netflix.

But the cave yielded one more treasure — the oldest set of footprints ever discovered of *Homo sapien sapiens* — modern man. Only, it wasn't the tracks of a man pressed into the mud deep in the Chauvet Cave. They belonged to a young barefooted boy. He wasn't alone. Trailing his prints were the tracks of what explorers first thought belonged to a very large wolf. But the canid prints have a shortened middle digit on the front paws, a characteristic of dogs, not wolves.

At the time, based on DNA and the fossil record, it was thought that dogs had only existed for about 15,000 years. But these tracks were nearly twice that old. Paleontologists know this because the boy stopped at one point to stoke his torch by grinding it on the cave wall, leaving a charcoal deposit. That smudge has been radiocarbon dated to 28,000 years ago.

The tracks go on for about 150 feet, ending in a chamber called the Room of Skulls, where the remains of several cave bears have been found. Evidence of wolves has also been found in the Chauvet Cave.

What the boy was doing there deep in the cave without adults is not known. But the experts say he was not hurrying and neither was his large, furry companion. He wasn't being stalked. The tracks of the boy and the wolf dog move in tandem at a measured pace, as if they were casually exploring the cave together.

Adults may have been higher up in the cave, involved in the elaborate ritual of making cave paintings when the boy wandered off. Whatever his story, one thing is clear — he did not go down into the dark alone. He had a trusted guardian. And the two of them left for the ages a record of the love and respect between man and dog... 28,000 years ago.