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Fire – the enigma that continues to blaze

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Abstract

How did humans first discover fire? What stories do we pass down to explain the discovery of fire?

Keywords

Fire, mythology, human evolution

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When Homo Erectus first roamed the earth, the environment dictated each day. It was not until man learned to control the surrounding environment that each day was dictated by the individual. One of the first victories was the ability to harness fire. Today we use it for cooking, for warmth, or even for artwork such as the piece I created above.

What sparked the idea to first create fire?

Greek mythology suggested that Prometheus took fire from the gods and gifted it to humans. Several Native American cultures believe an animal such as a wolf, woodpecker, or coyote took fire out of the hands of an evil spirit and into the hands of gentle humans. The legend from the Caroline Islands in the Pacific tell of a young boy named Olofat who gave fire to humans by letting a bird fly from heaven with fire in its beak. Similarly in the Lenape legend the Rainbow Crow, flew up to save everyone from the cold that Snow Spirit brought to Earth. Rainbow Crow, once colorful was charred black, by carrying a stick back to Earth that burned with fire from the Sun.

Why assign stories to a simple action of creating fire, that humans have known for so long? There are many scientific theories about when humans first controlled fire. The chemical reaction of oxygen and a fuel source we know as fire has been around as long as oxygen and sources of fuel have been around, so fire has existed for millions of years. When lightning would strike a forest and create a fire, so humans could readily observe fire making. Yet, throughout the ages, across various cultures there are stories of fire, passed onto to generations. Is it that the imagery of a bird bringing fire is more alluring than that of the science?

The burning question remains... how was fire truly first discovered?