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At the crossroad: A new approach to the Upper Paleolithic art in the Western Pyrenees



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ABSTRACT

The main corridor that has acted as an entrance to the Iberian Peninsula through the Western Pyrenees was as an important communication route in Western Europe during the Paleolithic. This is an area where, despite having documented intense human occupation during different periods of the Upper Paleolithic, the symbolic activity seems incomprehensibly limited compared to other regions, such as the Cantabrian, the Northern Pyrenees, or Dordogne.

The reactivation of research during this last decade, when referring to cave art, leads to a very different model than the one that had been previously posed for this region, mainly due to a series of new discoveries, some of which are worth mentioning, such as Askondo and Lumentxa, or others of lower interest such as Astigarraga, Praile Aitz, and Aitzbitarte IV. The re-examination and revision of previously known representations has also contributed to the development of this new model, especially thanks to the research carried out in sites such as Santimamiñe, Altxerri, Isturitz, Oxocelhaya, Sasiziloaga, Sinhi-kole, or Sainte Colome, as has the revision of the great amount of portable art, mainly from Isturitz, as well as the discovery of new objects from Antoliña, Ekain, Praile Aitz, Aitzbitarte III, Santa Catalina, Arlanpe, and Bourrouilla. Due to these advances, the image that we have of the artistic activity around the epicentre that was the Gulf of Biscay has substantially varied in a way that allows us to carry out a more detailed approximation to a series of relevant questions such as the chronology of the artistic representations, the variability of their contexts, the technical and formal relations among different neighbouring regions, and their relation to the non-symbolic archaeological record.

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1. Introduction: evaluating a new reality

During the last decade, a series of important advances have taken place in the knowledge of the artistic record belonging to the Upper Paleolithic in the Western Pyrenees, thus breaking the hiatus in investigation that has characterized the past few decades.

On one hand, we must highlight the discovery of new wall paintings in the caves of Praile Aitz in 2006 (García Díez et al., 2012), Astigarraga in 2009 (García Díez et al., 2011), Askondo in 2011 (Garate and Ríos-Garaizar, 2011b), Lumentxa in 2012 (Garate and Ríos-Garaizar, 2012a) and Aitzbitarte IV in 2012 (Garate et al., 2013b), and of the portable art that have been documented during the excavation of different caves such as those of Santa Catalina (Berganza and Ruiz Idarraga, 2004), Antoliña (Aguirre Ruiz de

Gopegui and González Sainz, 2011), Ekain (Altuna et al., 2012), Praile Aitz (Peñalver and Mujika, 2003), Aitzbitarte III (Garate and Ríos-Garaizar, 2011a), Isturitz (Labarge, 2011), Bourrouilla (Aurière et al., 2013) and Arlanpe (Ríos-Garaizar et al., 2013a,b).

On the other, and parallel to the aforementioned discoveries, the revision of other caves that were already documented but lacked a deeper study and/or needed to be updated has also been carried out, such as at Santimamiñe between 2006 and 2008 (González Sainz and Ruiz Idarraga, 2010), at the massif of Arbailles – Etxeberri, Sinhi-kole and Sasiziloaga – between 2007 and 2010 (Garate and Bourrillon, 2011), at both galleries of Altxerri between 2011 and 2013 (Ruiz Redondo and González Sainz, 2012), at Gaztelu hill – Isturitz and Oxocelhaya – between 2011 and 2016 (Garate et al., 2013a) and at Sainte Colome in 2012 (Garate et al., 2013c). This revision has also been applied to some of the most important ancient portable art collections such as the collection belonging to Isturitz (Rivero, 2014; Rivero and Garate, in press).

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Therefore, during the last decade a huge amount of novel information has been incorporated but still has not been analyzed and valued in its totality, nor has it been compared to the previous knowledge. Our objective in this paper is to reinterpret the role played by artistic activities in Upper Paleolithic societies from the Western Pyrenees based on the advances that have been carried out during the past ten years.

2. Geographical setting: the Western Pyrenees

In the case of the territory we are studying, this area is not defined by a series of natural borders or limits, but on the contrary it can be defined as a crossroad that unites or acts as a communication corridor between many regions. This area is limited to the north by the desert of Les Landes connected by the Adour River, to the west by the embedded valleys of the Cantabrian region that run N–S connected by the Nervión River, to the south with the Central Plateau, and the Ebro River basin by the Urbasa and Vitoria Mountain Ranges, and to the east by the Central Pyrenees, through the last mountain passes that existed from the Glacier period. Therefore, this is not a closed area as it is relatively well connected with the surrounding areas, creating a crossroad between the continent and the peninsula, and the Ebro Valley and the Cantabrian Cornice, for the people and ideas of the Paleolithic (Arrizabalaga, 2007). Furthermore, this territory is characterized by a sort of landscape unity, made of abrupt and sheer landscape of the Atlantic valleys and the Pre-Pyrenees, and of hilled plains in some coastal areas, especially south of the Adour River and the plains of the Llanada Alavesa and the Pamplona Basin, as well as the western limit of the Pyrenees, all of which allowed a fluid transit during times with the harshest climatic conditions.

3. Cultural setting: human settlement in the Western Pyrenees

Modern human settlement in the Western Pyrenees begins with the Protoaurignacian (ca. 40–36 ka cal. BP), constituting one of the main distribution areas of this technocomplex. During this moment, a certain unity alongside the Cantabrian region can be observed, with Protoaurignacian sites in the Western Pyrenees (Gatzarria, Isturitz, Labeko Koba), central Cantabria (Morín, Castillo), and Asturias (La Viña). The archaeological record from these sites is quite similar, with a distinctive lithic industry, dominated by straight bladellet production and Dufour bladelllets, limited bone industry, and non-standardized ornaments (Arrizabalaga et al., 2007; White, 2007). Furthermore, although it has not been fully investigated, the circulation of raw materials, especially high quality flint, clearly links Southwestern France with the eastern Cantabrian region. During the Early Aurignacian, a similar distribution of sites can be observed. At this moment, the sites of Isturitz and Gatzarria seem to concentrate a high intensity of occupations, with clear links to the classic Charente, Dordogne and central Pyrenees regions, accounted by the presence of certain elements such as lithic industry, characterized by carinated endscrapers, aurignacian blades and few Dufour blades; a rich bone industry, with split based bone points, awls and chisels (Liolios, 2006; Tartar, 2012), as well as ornaments with standardized forms, mainly basket-shaped beads, made in soft stones and other ornaments made in antler and ivory (White, 2007). Furthermore, the raw material distribution indicates the existence of links inside the Western Pyrenees region (Tarriño et al., 2007), but also with Charente and Dordogne (Bordes et al., 2005). Nevertheless, out of the area situated between the Adour River and the Pyrenees, the Early Aurignacian seems less characteristic and, overall, poorer in some elements such as split-based points or characteristic

ornaments such as basket-shaped beads. For the Late Aurignacian, several sites have been identified in the Cantabrian region dated between 38 and 30,000 cal BP (Rios-Garaizar et al., 2013a). Although it has been detected in many sites, the most characteristic ones are Isturitz, Gatzarria, and Aitzbitarte III, the last having a distinctive industry with typical aurignacian tools and carinated burins, mainly “Vachons type” (Rios-Garaizar et al., 2011). Bone industry is scarce and not very diagnostic, and ornaments are not very abundant.

During the Gravettian period, the Eastern Cantabrian region differs more clearly from the Central and Occidental sectors. The existence of an early Gravettian period with flechettes and Font Robert points has not been clearly established south of the Garonne. On the other hand, the existence of an early Gravettian with Noailles burins has been recognized in Aitzbitarte III (Rios-Garaizar et al., 2011). The extension of the Noailles rich assemblages, interpreted as belonging to the Middle Gravettian, reaches the Nervión River, with the sites of Isturitz and Aitzbitarte III the most striking examples. Furthermore, the few Isturitz type points found in the Cantabrian region cluster in the eastern area. During the Gravettian, several open air sites have been identified, having been interpreted as flint knapping workshops (Tercis, Mugardua, Prado) and habitats (Ametzagaina), and are also concentrated around the Western Pyrenees (Arrizabalaga and Iriarte-Chiapusso, 2011). The end of the Gravettian probably extends up until 22,000 cal BP, overlapping with the first evidence belonging to the Solutrean period (Altuna et al., 2013).

Lower Solutrean has not been identified in this region. In the Western Pyrenees, the Solutrean assemblages have been attributed to the Upper Solutrean, with typical foliates: shouldered points, similar to those found in SW France, and concave based points, typical from the West-Central Cantabrian region. In Isturitz, Middle Solutrean was described during the excavations, and some of the materials recovered in Koskobilu could possibly be attributed to this period. The end of the Solutrean period in the Western Pyrenees extended until ca. 20,000 cal BP in sites such as Arlanpe or Amalda, overlapping with the Badegoulian, identified north of the Adour River. In the Cantabrian region, this period has been considered by some scholars (Aura et al., 2012), but discarded by other ones (Rios-Garaizar et al., 2013b).

The archaeological record belonging to the Magdalenian is, if compared with the previous technocomplexes, very rich in the Western Pyrenees, especially that belonging to the Upper Magdalenian. Some sites, such as Ekain, Urriaga, Santimamiñe, where previous human presence was scarce, developed intense activity at this time, whereas others such as Isturitz remained occupied. This site shows one of the most complete records for this time period in Western Europe. Nevertheless, there are differences between peninsular and continental areas. Lower Magdalenian is best represented in the peninsular area (Erralla, Bolinkoba, Lumentxa, Urriaga, Ermitia and Praile Aitz) (Utrilla, 2004; Mujika Alustiza and Peñalver, 2012), while in the northern area this period is represented only by the presence of Lussac-Angles bone points in Isturitz and by some old dates in this site as well as in Duruthy (Szmíd et al., 2009). During the Middle Magdalenian Period, there is an early phase represented in sites such as Santimamiñe, Antoliña, Ekain, or Arlanpe, while typical Middle Magdalenian is present in the southern Pyrenees sites of Ermitia, Berroberria and Abauntz, and especially towards the northern area in sites with very intense occupations such as Isturitz, Brassempouy, Espalungue, and Saint-Michel. During the Upper Magdalenian, there is a considerable increase in the number of sites in the peninsular area, for example around Lumentxa, while in the continental area sites occupied during the Middle Magdalenian present less intense occupations, except for some cases such as the sites of the Cliff of Pastou

(Dachary, 2009). Despite these differences, there is a relative continuity and homogeneity in Magdalenian occupations on both sides of the Pyrenees, with similarities in lithic industry and portable art (Cazals, 2000; Rivero, 2010) (Fig. 1).

4. Reviews and new findings in cave and portable art

The density of decorated caves in the Western Pyrenees, between the basins of the Adour and Nervión rivers has been traditionally low, compared to the extremely well known areas of the central Cantabrian and central Pyrenees, and when compared to the high density of population in the area during different stages of the Upper Paleolithic. The permeability, in a way characteristic of an epicenter for transit among areas, does not correspond to the knowledge we had a few years ago of the extent and density of symbolic manifestations in this area. Mainly, we only had knowledge of the rich rock art sites such as the ones at Ekain, Altxerri and Erberua, and at a minor scale, Santimamiñe, Oxocelhaya and

Etxeberri, while the sites with few representations, such as Alkerdi, Sasiziloaga, Sinhikole or Sainte-Colome were almost unknown. Furthermore, most were decorated sets made *ex novo* during the Recent Magdalenian period, whereas previous cave art was extremely exceptional in this area (Garate, 2009).

During the last decade, both the scarceness of decorated caves and the unbalanced relation between pre-Magdalenian and Magdalenian representations has been reduced thanks to the discovery of five new rock art sites, added to the previous ten, and to the newest contributions and revisions of some of these ones.

Two of the new sites are especially worth mentioning. Askondo cave contains 9 large horses painted in red, disposed in pairs near the entrance of the cave (Fig. 2). Next to them a positive handprint, a series of parallel strokes, and a series of lines and stains, possibly belonging to a figure covered by calcite, can also be identified. Furthermore, near one of the panels, a deer's diaphysis was found stuck in the wall 2 m from the ground. A fragment of this bone has been dated to $23,760 \pm 110$ BP (Garate and Rios-Garaizar, 2012a,b).

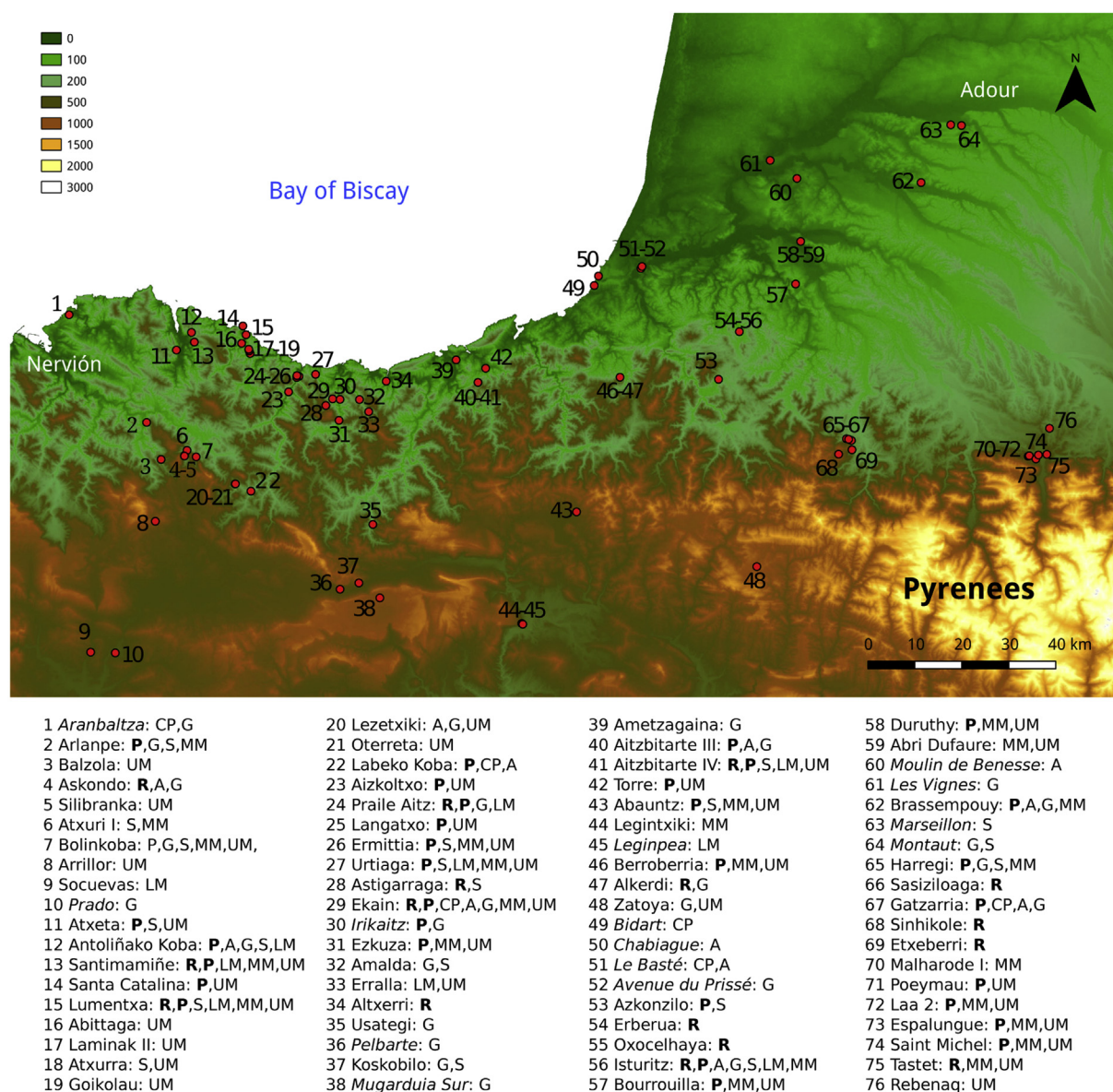


Fig. 1. Upper Paleolithic archaeological sites in de Bay of Biscay (CP: Chatelperronian, A: Aurignacian, G: Gravettian, S: Solutrean, LM: Lower Magdalenian, MM: Middle Magdalenian, UP: Upper Magdalenian; R: rock art, P: portable art).

more precise analysis of the representations that were already known, a series of new representations have been found, including a group of red stains in the cave's hall, and a series of early intentional modifications of two of the main panels (González Sainz and Ruiz Idarraga, 2010). At the Massif of Arbailes, the information has been updated almost half a century after its original publication, including new figures, pigment analysis and dating surveys which correspond to the Middle Magdalenian for the archaeological context of the “Salle des Peintures” in Etxeberri (Garate and Bourrillon, 2011; Garate et al., 2012). The site of Altxerri is of special interest due to the re-examination of the superior galleries, which has revealed new animal figures and a great amount of new red stains, as also for the dating of the archaeological context and the detection of the original entrance to the cave (González-Sainz et al., 2013). The famous intermediate gallery is currently under ongoing research (Ruiz Redondo and González Sainz, 2012). At the Gaztelu Hill, recent revision of the cave art at Isturitz has allowed the identification of twenty red lines and stains as well as new animal representations at “Pilier Gravé”. On the other hand, 283 objects (bone, flint, and ocher) have been documented inside the wall's cracks (Garate et al., 2013a). At the site of Sainte Colome, the revision of the decorated panel was carried out, with identification of two engraved horses and two bison, one also having been painted red (Garate et al., 2013c). Furthermore, the revisions of the abundant Magdalenian portable art belonging to Isturitz has evidenced a series of formal and technical normalized parameters, as well as mass production of determined motifs and supports, as well as the development of some innovational characteristics (Rivero, 2010, 2014; Croidieu, 2012; Lucas, 2012).

5. Paleolithic art in the Western Pyrenees: an updated approach

The new information retrieved over the last few years, both when referring to the location of new assemblages of art and to the revision of those that were already known, offers us a very different perspective of the graphic activities that had been carried out in the Western Pyrenees during the Upper Paleolithic.

5.1. The first art in the Western Pyrenees

The first examples of figurative art happen to chronologically coincide with the expansion of the Aurignacian culture throughout Europe, especially in the central areas of Swabian Jura, the Rhône, and Dordogne. As for the Iberian Peninsula and especially the Cantabrian region, the information is limited and nothing is fully determined (Garate et al., 2014). Only recent dating obtained by U/Th techniques of the carbonate crusts associated with paintings at Castillo, Tito Bustillo and Altamira (Pike et al., 2012) seem to vary from this tendency, though they still lack unanimous acceptance (Clottes, 2012; Pons-Branchu et al., 2014).

In the area of the Western Pyrenees, some data also suggest an early beginning of graphic activities. Using portable art as a basis, the Isturitz cave has provided fundamental documentation such as the two objects of portable art found in a stratigraphic context belonging to the Proto-aurignacian. At layer C4c6, situated between layer C4b dated to $32,400 \pm 310$ and layer C4d dated to $34,630 \pm 560$ BP, an ophitic stone with engraved dubious figurative representations was located, and in layer C4d1c a bone diaphysis with four engraved crosses in line was also found. Layer C4d has been dated from two burnt bones, the upper part dated to $34,630 \pm 560$ BP and to $36,550 \pm 610$ BP in the lower part (Labarge, 2011). In other contexts belonging to the Early Upper Paleolithic, other non-figurative objects have been identified with a series of more or less structured traces similar to the ones documented at

Labeko koba, Aitzbiarte III or other areas of Isturitz (Garate et al., in press).

Cave art of the Upper gallery of Altxerri could possibly be the first representation of figurative art in the area due to the dates offered by its context (Fig. 4). This context is a small closed space, with a filled-in access and ancient lithochemical reconstructions, independent from the intermediate zone where the Magdalenian representations are located. In the upper gallery, a panel composed of a bison of exceptionally large proportions, a feline and a bear, as well as paired traces and other non-legible figures can be seen. At the foot of the panel, charcoal, ochre and bones, some of which are burnt, have also been documented. Three dates have been obtained from some of the bones ($34,195 \pm 1235$, $29,940 \pm 745$, and $34,370 \pm 180$ BP). These paintings offer, from a formal point of view, a stronger link to continental art, such as documented at Chauvet (Ardèche) than with the Cantabrian region, where no known parallels have been documented (González-Sainz et al., 2013).

5.2. Between the Cantabrian side and the continent

Parallel to or a short time after the appearance of the earliest artistic representations, the first artistic tendencies seem to surge with a very marked character on the Cantabrian side on the one hand, and on the continental on the other, and whose areas of influence met at the Western Pyrenees.

During the excavation of the Antoliña cave at the roof of the Gravettian “Smbk” level, a sandstone retoucher with an engraved hind's head on one of its sides was recovered (Fig. 5). Near the object, two dates were obtained from bone fragments, dating to $27,100 \pm 190$ and $26,720 \pm 180$ BP (Aguirre Ruiz de Gopegui and González Sainz, 2011). The triangular nose, the ears in “V” shape and the maxillary are standard elements that belong to the Cantabrian red-dotted hinds whose chronology is estimated to be between the Gravettian and the Solutrean (Garate, 2008). Furthermore, this object is a solid basis to help settle the dates obtained by TL and U/Th carried out on calcites covering dotted red figures (González Sainz, 2005).

On the other hand, the new findings have helped significantly to the characterization of pre-magdalenian art in the area we are studying. This is the case of the Askondo cave, which presents clear Cantabrian links with the same representations of handprints and horse heads with the so-called “duck bill” standard, that have an extra-regional expansion mainly during the Gravettian period (Petrognani, 2013). It is closely linked to the red horses of Altamira and Pasiega B, which are also of large dimensions and are disposed in pairs, near the entrance and display the marginal dotting technique. A bone driven in to the wall at Askondo provides a result of $23,760 \pm 110$ BP, which means that it is clearly Gravettian. The association of driven bones in cave walls and cave art is a recurring phenomenon (Clottes, 2007), which is why the synchrony of both actions is most probable, even more when the optimum level, based on the manual field, for the creation of these paintings lies in the same period (Garate and Rios-Garaizar, 2012b). The panel with the paired strokes found in the Astigarraga cave also has clear links with the Cantabrian region, such as other representations located in caves La Garma, Cudón, Fuente del Salín, Chufín, Tito Bustillo, and La Lloseta. Nevertheless, it is harder to establish the chronologies of these representations, as they are estimated to persist during, at least, the Gravettian and the Solutrean periods (Garate and Rios-Garaizar, 2012b).

Continental influence is represented at Gaztelu Hill, though some of the data has not been sufficiently investigated. The first excavations at the Isturitz cave recovered a limestone pebble with a non-identified engraved representation from a level immediately subsequent to the Aurignacian A level (Passemard, 1930), recently

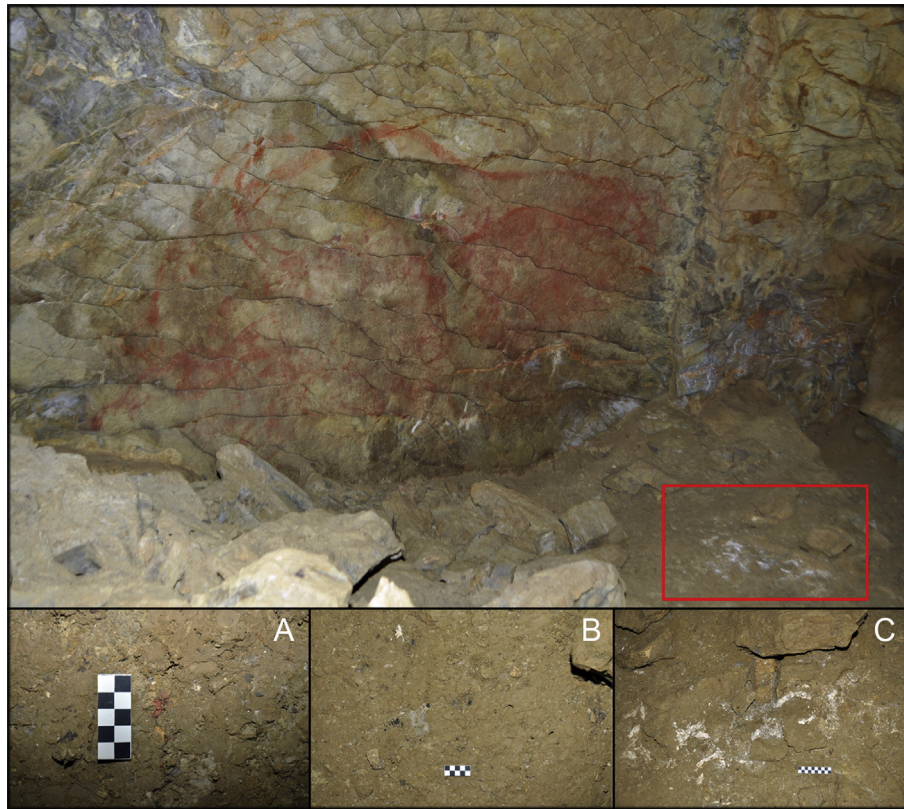


Fig. 4. Upper gallery of Altxerri cave, recently re-studied ([©]A.Ruiz-Redondo, D.Garate & C.González-Sainz). A. ochre; B. charcoal; C. bones.

attributed to belong to the Middle or Upper Aurignacian or even earlier, though we must have some reservations considering that the excavation was carried out many years ago (Normand et al., 2012). The traces present a clear representation of a mammoth with the abdomen in an arch (Rivero and Garate, in press), a conventional characteristic of the French Initial Upper Paleolithic (Sauvet et al., 2007). Another case is the Erberua cave with two negative red handprints and one black handprint next to an

engraved deer with the frontal legs in a “Y” (Prudhomme, 1989). This is a much extended Gravettian convention in the French region (Garate and González Sainz, 2012). As well, the Gravettian occupation of Brassempouy cave offers an exceptional series of feminine sculptures whose parallels are found throughout the continent, although there are no such examples in the Iberian Peninsula (Delporte, 1996; White, 2006). Therefore, during the Initial Upper Paleolithic when referring to art, the Western Pyrenees acted as a frontier between the specific characteristics that identify the Cantabrian area and those of the Continental one, inside the general background that affected all the regions.

5.3. In the crossroads of Magdalenian art

From the Magdalenian onward there is a spectacular development of graphic activity in the regions of the Cantabrian, the Pyrenees and Dordogne, as well as the area that is under consideration, since it acts as the epicenter for all the other regions. Furthermore, circa 14,500 BP, this expansion is accompanied by a thematic and stylistic homogeneity that has not been registered in previous periods (Fritz et al., 2007; Rivero, Sauvet, 2014). The new findings, limited for this period, and the revision, much more abundant, clearly exemplify this cross-point of influence.

The site of Isturitz contains one of the most notable sequences belonging to the Middle Magdalenian. It stands out because of the presence of a rich collection of portable art (Rivero, 2014), which is closely linked to the wall representations from <Pilier Gravé> in the “Grande Salle” of Isturitz, recently revised 100 years after its discovery (Garate et al., 2013a). Originally, the pillar was covered by archaeological sediment and, more precisely, the engraved reindeer was completely covered by levels F1 and E. The first level was assigned to the Upper Magdalenian and the second to the Solutrean

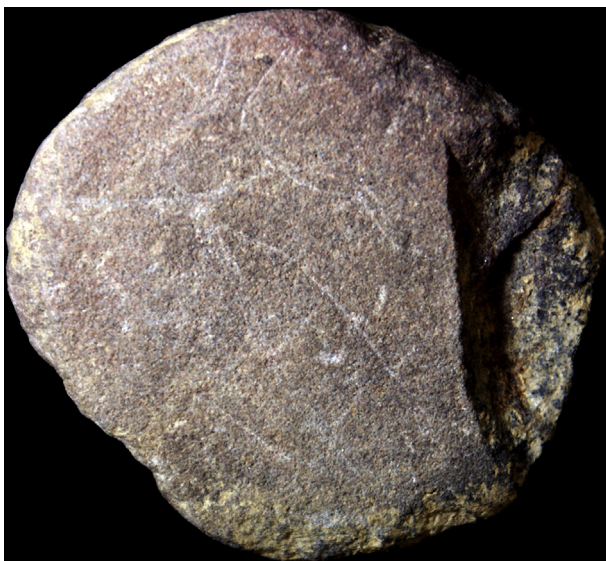


Fig. 5. Decorated sandstone retoucher from the Gravettian levels of Antoliña cave ([©]D.Garate).

period at its base, and Early and Middle Magdalenian in the center and upper part (Passemar, 1944). The stratigraphic revision and the dating of materials (Szmidt et al., 2009) suggest a chrono-cultural association of level E to the Lower and Middle Magdalenian periods. The study of the engraved figures of the pillar (Fig. 6) have allowed us to relate them to the plaques with representations of reindeer found during the historical digs at the site (differential relief, double chest line, split hooves, muscular insertions, etc.), though we must take into account the stratigraphic context of these representations varies from the initial to the mid-phases of the Magdalenian. The analogies to the <Pilier Gravé> also point towards Charente, more specifically to Angles-sur-l'Anglin, whose bas-reliefs are linked to the Magdalenian III of the Lussac-Angles assegai, also identified and dated in Isturitz.

The artistic influence is particularly relevant during the Middle Magdalenian period. Nevertheless, it is hard to objectively define the stylistic characteristics that are shared. Therefore, the application of statistical methods with the objective of differencing the attributes that correspond to each stage and region is necessary. This method was applied in the case of the bison, with two different morphotypes characterized by a series of different attributes (Fortea et al., 2004). Both types have been defined based on the sites of Niaux and Font-de-Gaume, though they do not exclusively belong to these sites. We can find Niaux-type representations in sites in Asturias such as Covaciella and in other sites in Dordogne such as Rouffignac. In contrast, a bison of Font-de-Gaume type is represented in Niaux and in Cantabrian sites such as El Pindal or Covaciella. Therefore, it consists of two different means of representations that circulated throughout the regions of Cantabria, the Pyrenees, and Dordogne. In this framework, the sites from the crossroad of the Western Pyrenees equally participated in the circulation of artistic tendencies. The Niaux morphotype is well represented in caves such as Santimamiñe and Altxerri where the bison is the major animal theme, while the Font-de-Gaume type is almost undetected: it appears in Ekain in a red figure that we have recently reinterpreted as a bison (Fig. 7).

The Lumentxa cave, whose main panel is composed of two bison and one horse, introduces an unusual element, which is the use of red painting for the representation of animals, specifically bison. In the Western Pyrenees, the Sasiziloaga cave contains a panel that represents two red bison facing each other though their graphic standards are less diagnostic, and at Sainte Colome a red stain has been reinterpreted as the outline of a bison that was also engraved. This bison's back and its hump are portrayed using the natural stone support, as in the case of Lumentxa. These resources were traditionally used during the Magdalenian, which can also be identified at Oxocelhaya and Ekain (Sauvet and Tosello, 1998). In Ekain, La Garma, or Marsoulas there are a great number of painted bison, but almost none of them are painted in red. Only in El Pindal is there a predominance of Magdalenian style bison painted in this color (Garate et al., 2012).

The recent revision of the representations at Etxeberri cave provides new chronological information of great interest. In the <Salle des Peintures>, at the foot of the panel with the representation of horses, different traces made with clay next to a bichrome horse in black and red, and different stains of this last color, some ochre masses and flints can be observed (Fig. 8). A small survey helped in recovering many small pieces of flint and burnt bone linked to the ochre. Two dates between approximately 13,800 BP and 13,400 BP have been obtained from analyzing the bones. Considering the extremely difficult access to the decorated area and the complementary activities that were documented, it is reasonable to link these results to the cave's decoration (Garate et al., 2013c).

This tendency, characterized by the great geographical dispersion of themes and techniques during the Middle Magdalenian continues during the Upper Magdalenian, in particular when referring to some specific motifs of this period such as goats in frontal view. This motif, which appears represented both on cave art and on portable art seems to be, nevertheless, more characteristic of the Cantabrian region, where it has a particularly large number of representations and also has a larger formal variability,



Fig. 6. Engraved pillar and portable art from Isturitz cave (©O.Rivero & D.Garate).

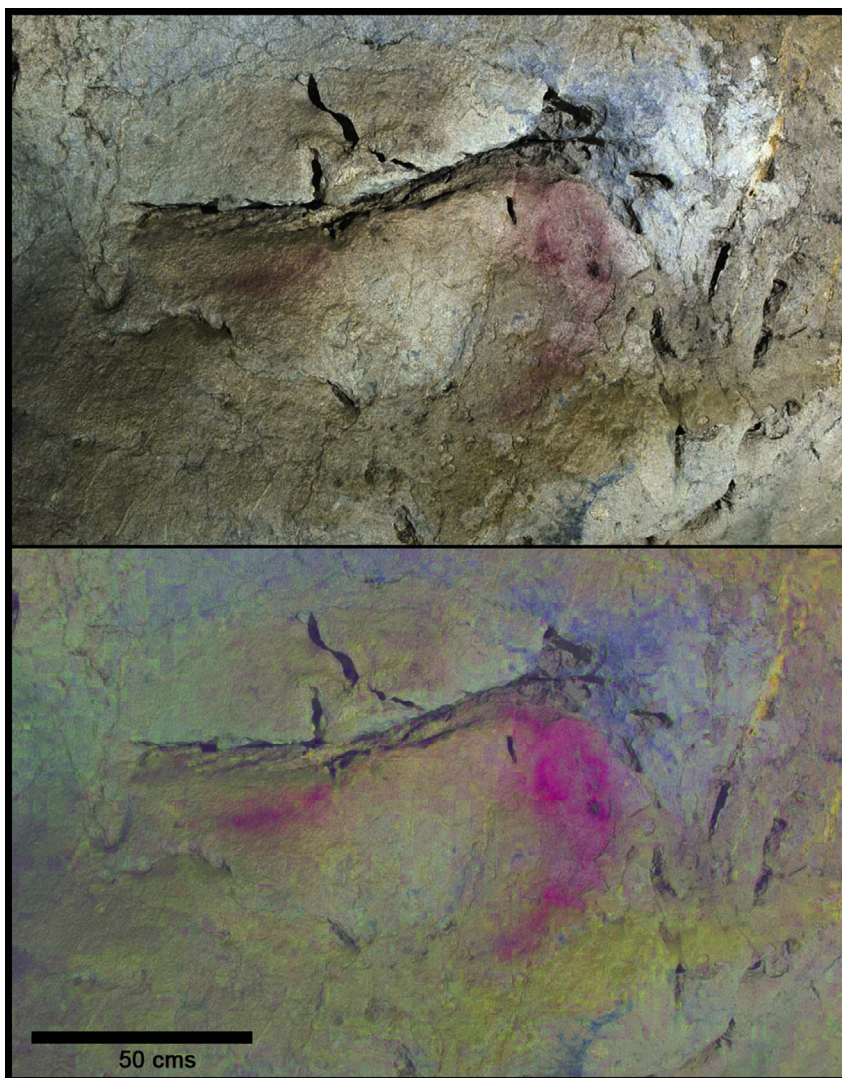


Fig. 7. Red bison found in Ekain cave and digital treatment of the image (©J.Wesbuer). (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

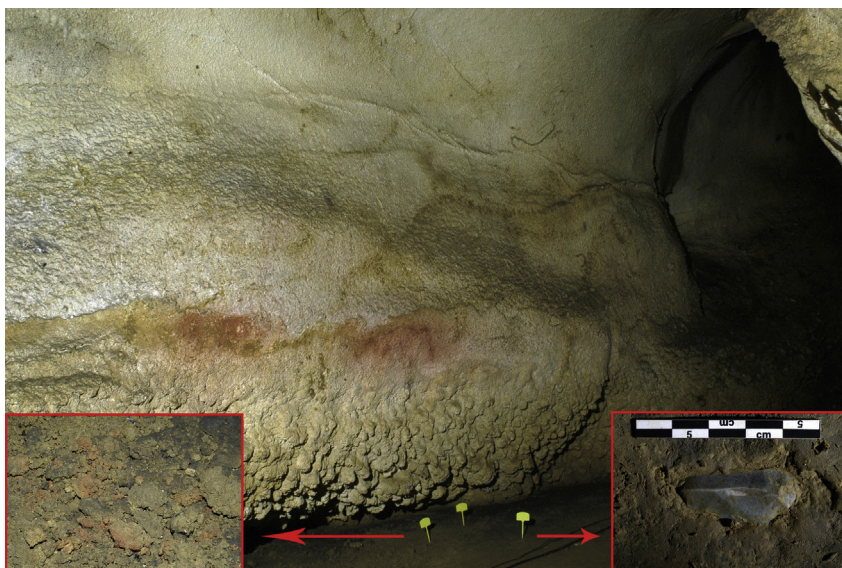


Fig. 8. Brown horses, red stains and ochre masses and flints in Etxeberri cave (©D.Garate & R.Bourrillon). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

varying from goats with simple horns represented in sites such as Ekain or Urtiaga, to more complex representations with facial fill-in and horns such as the ones represented on the bone from Torre (Rivero et al., 2013). The number of these representations decreases towards the Pyrenees region with exception of a few sites such as La Vache, and are very scarce in the Aquitaine region, which seems to indicate a fluctuation in the exchange network. This same tendency, but inverted, is characterized by the distribution of schematic female representations, which differ with the previous networks, a very marginal representation in the Iberian Peninsula. Only a few examples are known in the Cantabrian cornice, such as the one identified at Arlanpe (Rios-Garaizar et al., 2013b).

To synthesize, the new information obtained has helped in completing a scenario where, throughout the Magdalenian period, the interconnection between the Cantabrian, the Pyrenees and the Dordogne regions is apparent. Nonetheless, these investigations also point towards certain differing aspects, especially when referring to the dispersion of certain representations, which seem unequal during some of the initial and final phases of this period. These aspects also seem lead toward the more or less early appearance of certain standards, or towards the role played by some sites such as Isturitz, which seemed to have developed as central points for the dissemination of technical and formal models.

6. Discussion

The new findings and investigations carried out during the past decade in the Western Pyrenees has offered a more complete understanding of the geostrategic role played by this area during the Upper Paleolithic, different from what was thought previously about this region.

First of all, and based on what we have been able to observe, it is evident that figurative cave art (Altzerri) and portable art (Isturitz) are very ancient in this region, and can correlate at a formal level with the artistic expressions of similar chronology now in other regions of the continent (Dordogne, Rhône, Swabian Jura). Though the richness of the representations is not comparable to those other areas, we cannot ignore its great importance, moreover when the dates of the artistic representations previously attributed to the Aurignacian in the Cantabric region were very scarce and of doubtful attribution (Garate et al., 2014). This continental correlation can also be observable in the archaeological record of the Initial Upper Paleolithic. The first occupation of modern humans in the Western Pyrenees shows a certain degree of continuity since the Protoaurignacian. In a broad sense, the sites situated between the Adour and the Nervión rivers show strong elements in common, such as the circulation of high quality raw materials, the similarities of lithic assemblages from a technological and typological perspective, and the bone industry. Nevertheless it seems that Isturitz and neighboring sites such as Gatzarria centralize human presence, maintaining stronger links with SW France or sites such as Labeko Koba, than with the central and western Cantabrian region.

Due to the discovery of new artistic representations, we have been able to fill in the emptiness that has been traditionally observed in this area. Furthermore, the characteristics of these representations (the engraved plaque from Antoliña, the red paintings from Askondo and the paired red strokes from Astigarraga) coincide with all the aspects of graphic activities that were developed in the Cantabrian region during this time laps, seeming to reflect a particular idiosyncrasy that has not been detected on the other side of the Pyrenees. Therefore, this is a change in the tendency respect to what is reflected in Aurignacian art, though the data is partial due to the low number of representations and does not allow us to establish general conclusions. The material culture

also seems to reflect a change between the Central and Western Cantabrian area and that of the Pyrenees, with an ancient Noailles Gravettian in the Western Pyrenees and the presence of Isturitz type points in the same region without expanding towards Central and Western Cantabria. The Solutrean in this region is not well reflected in the archaeological record until its final phases, which are more or less coincident in time with French Badegoulian, but clearly different in the material culture.

Finally, based on the Middle Magdalenian, we have been able to document the great dispersion in themes, techniques, and formal models between the Cantabrian region, the Pyrenees, and Dordogne. During this period, the Western Pyrenees act as a meeting point between these three regions, and, at the same time, in some specific cases, such as Isturitz, acts as a focal point for the creation and the dispersion of artistic tendencies, especially when referring to the large amount of portable art (Rivero, 2014). The excavation (Etxeberri) and re-study (Isturitz) of the archaeological contexts, next to the revision of the graphic representations has allowed us to sharpen the chronology of the advanced Magdalenian, hard to establish until this moment. The record of the occupations at these sites seems to also point to this homogeneous character, with the appearance and diffusion, more or less synchronically, of new industrial types, with limited differences in this sense.

To sum up, in the Western Pyrenees a great diachronic variability exists in the graphic representations throughout the successive periods of the Upper Paleolithic. Its role seems to be, none the less, determining, either as a confluence point, or as the limit in the expansion of different tendencies, some of which are key throughout the whole period, demonstrated by the presences of some sites as is the case of Isturitz.

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