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Short articles



## A NEW LATE PALEOLITHIC “OFFERING VENUS” FROM FRASASSI GORGE (CENTRAL ITALY)

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We present a new find coming from a cave in the Frasassi Gorge, (Marche, central Italy). The Venus was discovered by one of us (SP) at the base of a local man-made scarp at the entrance of the cave. Although it was not found *in situ*, the simple stratigraphical setting of the nearby sequence and the fact that in the past there was an archaeological layer, later destroyed, allow us to establish that layer 3 is the best candidate for the provenience of the Venus and, together with the typology, its preliminary attribution to the Late Pleistocene. Layer 3, 26/32 – 32/42 cm thick, consists of sandy silt (10YR 6/2 light brownish gray and 10YR 6/6 brownish yellow) with scarce chalky angular clasts. The darker colour of the layer seems to derive from the final shred, close to the wall, of an anthropic level with organic matter and charcoal observed in the past during the mapping of the cavity.

The statuette is made on a stalactite and is elongated in the direction of the growth of the stalactite itself. The rear view shows a volume roughly shaped in four parts (head, chest, abdomen, legs). The frontal view displays a vaguely shaped head, with the face separated from the nape by a long furrow that reaches the shoulders, suggesting the hair or a cap. The breast is well recognizable and rests over the arms that join in an unusual offering position. Below the arms, the waist band is typically that of a pregnant woman, with a well recognizable triangular pelvic area. The legs, in their frontal side, have been modeled with another long furrow as far as the base of the statuette. The state of preservation of the piece is good even if a fracture affected the end of the legs.

The colour according to the Munsell code is: 2.5 y 8/3 pale yellow.

This statuette shows clear analogies with the so-called “Venus figurines” that have such peculiar stylistic features and are cultural markers of the European Gravettian. However, their typology is not homogeneous and in Italy, as well as in the rest of Europe, there is a large variability of these artistic handicrafts. In the Italian repertory the so-called “Ponchinello” in steatite, the “Abrachial” and the “Ochred Lady” in ivory from the Balzi Rossi (Northern Italy), the Savignano Venus in serpentine (Northern Italy), the Bracciano Venus in steatite (Central Italy) and the bigger one of the two bone figurines from the Venus cave (Southern Italy) show a constellation of details like the position and/or the morphology of the head, the prominent breast and abdomen, the pubic triangle in evidence and the joined straight legs that liken them to the Frasassi figurine. As to the flattish posterior side there are similarities with the so-called “Hermaphrodite”, the “Lozenge” in steatite and the “Goitered Lady” in antler from the Balzi Rossi and with the smaller one of the two bone figurines from the Venus cave. Absolutely unique is the posture of the protruding arms. The raw material selected for the statuette is rarely attested at the end of the Italian Upper Paleolithic; till now there is no data about the use of this kind of raw material in the Gravettian. The analytical study of the piece we have planned includes, besides the laboratory analyses, an experimental activity devoted to the carving technique.



The Venus of Frasassi Gorge,  
Central Italy (photo : G. Filippini).

The figurine dimensions

Height	Max Width	Min Width	Max Thickness	Min Thickness	Weight
87 mm	27 mm	12 mm	36 mm	12 mm	66.5 gr

As to the general picture of the UP of the Marche, the large open-air Late Gravettian sites Ponte di Pietra and Fosso Mergaoni, located a few kilometers from the Frasassi gorge, record the human presence in the region at 18-20 <sup>14</sup>C ky BP). The data on Gravettian peopling indicate that it began around 26 000 BP. In the area including the Adriatic coast and the first Appennine foothills the sites are very few. The record of Late Paleolithic peopling includes a series of Epigravettian sites, going back to the Tardiglacial and spreading both in the karstic cavities of the Frasassi gorge and in other areas. At the end of the Epigravettian a series of cave sites are documented along the Esino river basin.

In conclusion, the Frasassi Venus, likely going back to the Gravettian / early Epigravettian, will add new information to our knowledge on this kind of Paleolithic portable art. It represents a master of art of our antecessors in Italy, a real world heritage.





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