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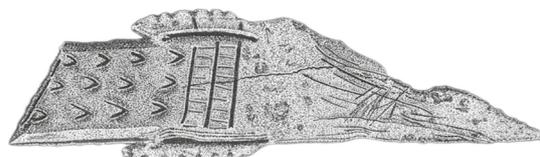
THE BIRD *CONTOUR DÉCOUPÉ* AT THE SITE OF EKAIN (DEVA, BASQUE COUNTRY)

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The Cueva de Ekain is known for the magnificent collection of figurative rock art that is located deep within the cave. The first archaeological excavations of the site took place between 1969 and 1975, and new excavations were carried out between 2007 and 2011. This paper presents a *contour découpé* that was found there in 2008.

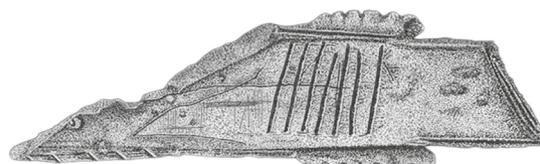
The *contour découpé* in question was made on the rib of a large bovid that had previously been split and had the spongy inner part of the bone scraped away. It represents a bird, and it is the first time that such a motif has been seen on a *contour découpé* (see figure). The majority of *contour découpés* are made on horse hyoid bones and tend to represent the heads of horses, bison, goats, chamois, cervids, or occasionally fish. The piece is 66.2 mm long and 19 mm wide and has numerous carvings on both sides.

The bird is represented from a skewed perspective in which the bird's head is shown side on, but its body is depicted from below (or above). In this way both wings could be shown at once. As a result, the figure is not symmetrical on both sides, and it is not the left and right side of the animal that have been represented, as is usual with a *contour découpé*, but rather its back and underside.



1 cm

Contour découpé from Cueva de Ekain on a split bovid rib (photograph: outer face. Drawing: outer and inner face with man-made incisions).



Outer face. There is a series of longitudinal and transversal incisions across the entire neck area and the upper part of the bird's body. Its wings are folded down against its body and have been marked with grooves to distinguish them. On the outside edge of the wings there are 5 cuts in the "upper" wing and 6 in the "lower" wing, which give them scalloped edges. The far ends of the wings come away from the body and are partially broken away. Between the grooves that separate the body and the wings there are three deep transverse incisions, and between these three incisions there are another eight short, perpendicular ones.

Behind these incisions are 12 angular or wedge-shaped incisions that are aligned into three longitudinal rows of four. The final series is only partially complete as the rib has been cut off at an oblique angle at the end, implying that the incisions were made before the end was cut. In order to cut the end of the rib, several subparallel incisions were made on each side of the rib so that it could then be snapped off.

The deepest incisions each have several strictly parallel lines at the bottom of them, indicating that the tool used to make them had something unusual at the end of it such as a microdenticulate burin.

Inner face. On the ventral edge of the head, in other words on the chin and throat, there are five short, regular oblique incisions. The wings are marked in a similar way to the outer face, although the grooves are narrower.

Between these two grooves there are seven transverse lines that are similar to the three on the outer face, however there are no angular or wedge-like incisions at the end of it.

Identification. As with other cases of birds in prehistoric art, identification has proved difficult. Birds are far more numerous than large mammals and do not "lend" themselves as models with the realism of large mammals.

In this case, one tends to imagine a bird diving into water in the manner of the *Alcedo atthis*, because of the way in which its wings are folded down against its body, but we would need to know whether the wings have been deliberately depicted in this way or whether it is simply because the constraints of the rib meant they could not be shown spread away from the body.

The general appearance of the bird is reminiscent of an anatid. The stripes on the neck and wings of an anser can look like this, and the tips of the tail feathers, which meet its webbed feet when it is in flight, are also reminiscent of the back portion of the Ekain bird. The scalloping that we described on the outer edge of the wings may have defined the shape of the ends of the feathers. In any case, in terms of the external morphology of different birds, it is possible to see features that resemble those of the Ekain bird.

Chronology. Another bone was found together with the bird bone and in contact with it, which could not be identified, but which had not been carved at all, and which has been dated by C¹⁴ AMS to 13 862 ± 129 BP (U-13108), CAL (95.4%) 15 050-14 100 BC, placing it in the middle Magdalenian, in its earlier phase. As we all know, the magnificent series of *contour découpés* made from horse hyoid bone in the site of Isturitz, 70 linear kilometers from Ekain, dates to this same period. The same is true of other cases in the French Pyrenees and the Cantabrian region.





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