



PROCEEDINGS OF THE IFRAO CONGRESS
September 2010

2013 # 5

<http://www.palethnologie.org>
ISSN 2108-6532

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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



DECORATED PLAQUETTES FROM MAGDALENIAN HABITATION FLOORS IN THE LOWER GALLERY AT LA GARMA (CANTABRIA, SPAIN)

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The Lower Gallery of La Garma is a cave whose original entry was blocked in an advanced moment of the Late Glacial, trapping inside hundreds of square meters of settlement floors dated to the Middle Magdalenian. These archaeological floors consist of thousands of bones, stone and antler tools and artefacts and are, in some areas, spatially organised with artificial stone structures that define subcircular enclosures. They extend through the entry and first section of the cave (called Zone I, which corresponds strictly to the area of habitat), and also in two other inner sectors of the cave, located respectively 90 m and 130 m from the entrance (areas III and IV).

Among the various elements that constitute the context, there are hundreds of stalagmite slabs, some of them with engravings. Seventeen have been identified so far in Zone IV. There also are more decorated slabs in other areas of the Lower Gallery.

The raw material is found in abundance in the cave itself: slabs of stalagmite and limestone fragments that make up the floors of large sections of the cavern. This immediacy of resources is crucial as the use of speleothems conditions the execution and results of the decorative work, by providing small and irregular surfaces in unequal levels. The stroke must overcome these irregularities, resulting in discontinuities and deviations not attributable to the inexperience of the artist but to the deficiencies of the support (figure).

The technique used in all cases is engraving, which could be classified in two main categories: broad and deep etching, and fine and superficial engraving. These two types of engraving were exclusive of each other as we do not find them combined in a single motif, but they may appear in different motifs executed on the same slab.

The themes include figurative and abstract representations. Among the first are complete figures of animals such as deer, aurochs, bison, and also anatomical parts, mainly heads. The collection also includes a peculiar anthropomorphic hybrid representation that combines animal – general morphology of the genus *Capra* in this case, and some human body features – arm and hand (figure). The non-figurative motifs are grids of lines with various shapes and arrangements. There are also sets of lines forming schematic outlines not interpreted yet.

The layout of the figures on the surfaces is also diverse, ranging from individual shapes to complex compositions in which many lines intersect including sometimes figurative motifs. The first case would support the hypothesis of a single episode of decoration, while the latter could indicate a recurrence of the action on the same support.



Plaquette with anthropomorphic figure (hybrid of ibex and human)
(© La Garma Research Team / Luis Teira).

In the overall context of Palaeolithic portable art in the Cantabrian region, several features individualize Zone IV of the Lower Gallery:

- a. the use of an unusual raw material: generally rocks with smooth surfaces (slate, schist, sandstone) were used as they provide excellent supports for this kind of decorative work;
- b. the presence of a peculiar theme such as the hybrid figure;
- c. the presence of these objects within an exceptionally well preserved surface archaeological context, which allows us to propose testable hypotheses about the manufacture and use of this class of objects: although the analysis of the floor is not yet complete, several indications suggest that these slabs, like other portable art objects on organic materials, were produced on the spot and then used and abandoned.

The spatial information available points to a non-random distribution of certain material categories including decorated slabs: all of them lie among the remains and debris carpeting the outer space of the existing structures. This rejection pattern, consisting of carelessly abandoned slabs on the floor, is known in several cave and open air archaeological contexts in Palaeolithic Europe.

In view of the existing archaeological evidence, it is possible to support a preferential association of this class of decorated objects with spaces of group activity, not necessarily equated to dwelling areas (as illustrated in the case of Zone IV of the Lower Gallery).

These decorated slabs would have undergone three main phases: acquisition of the support; its transformation through the application of decoration; and its subsequent abandonment on the ground in which the group operates. This last step would reflect a “loss of value” of the engraved pieces after their decoration, unless such action would not constitute the symbolic end of the slabs but, instead, what would give them their ultimate meaning (remember, in this regard, the examples of systematic destruction of engraved slabs).

About their function, it is important to remember finally that, unlike other portable art objects made of organic or inorganic materials, slabs would not be considered in any case as tools, i.e. manufactured articles involved in the processes of social production and reproduction (as decorated utensils or ornaments). The explanation for their manufacture, sometimes tens or hundreds in the same context, must be tied exclusively to the symbolic character which gave them their decorations. Their presence in dwelling contexts reveals the dual dimension, at the same time everyday and transcendent, of these decorated objects as well as of the actions that took place in these areas of activity. This should warn us, at last, against any simplification in the interpretation of the behaviour of Palaeolithic groups.





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Bilingual review of prehistory