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Short articles



EPIGRAVETTIAN PORTABLE ART IN CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN ITALY:

the Case of the Grotta Continenza (Abruzzo) and the Grotta delle Veneri (Apulia)

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During excavations at the Grotta Continenza (Abruzzo) and the Grotta delle Veneri (Apulia), hundreds of portable art objects were discovered.

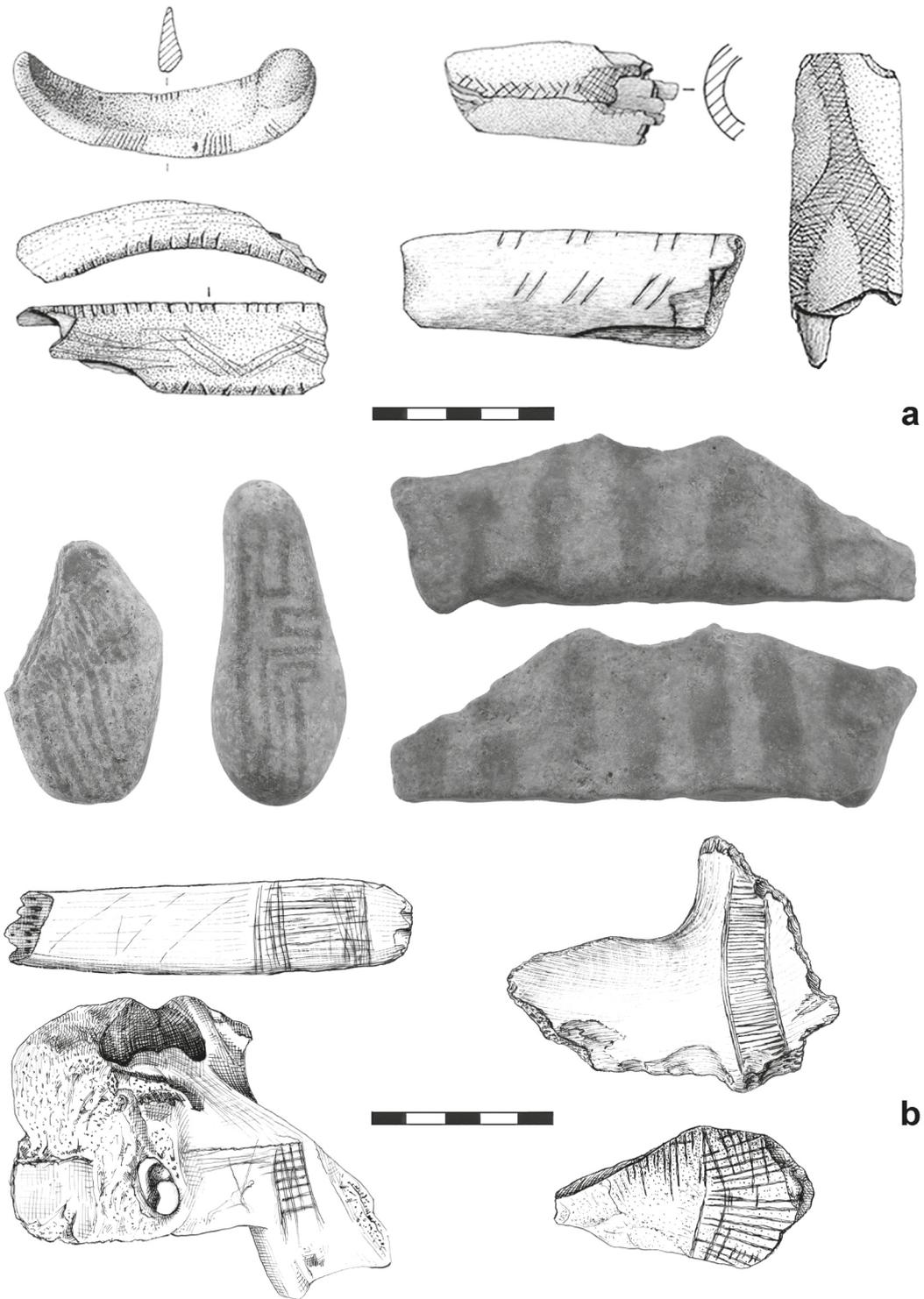
In the Epigravettian layers of the Grotta Continenza (layers 29 to 46), 7 red painted stones and 83 decorated objects on hard animal supports (bone, antler, wild boar tusk, *Glycymeris* shell) were recovered. Painting is observed only on stones and engraving by incision only on other materials.

In the deposit with a typical Epi-Romanellian industry, located outside of the Grotta delle Veneri, 505 portable art objects were discovered, 389 in stone and 116 in bone. The stones used were pieces of flint cortex, plaques, pebbles and large fragments of limestone, including at least four varieties that can be found near the site. A more distant origin should nonetheless not be excluded. All of these supports are medium to small in size and usually have flat and regular surfaces with several naturally smooth surfaces.

The bone supports originate from numerous animal species and their anatomical position is very diverse. Around thirty pieces cannot be identified due to their small size and their poor state of preservation.

The range of decorations at the Grotta Continenza is particularly rich in terms of the decorative elements themselves, but also in the different manners in which they are combined: there is a high dominance of basic motifs, consisting of rows of notches, over the other types. Among the more original motifs, there is the “Greek”, the “reticule” and the “tree-form”, realized with remarkable precision and great skill.

The artistic manifestations at the Grotta Continenza correspond to a linear geometric style known in the Final Epigravettian of central Italy. They are all stylistically very homogeneous. We nonetheless detected a few elements that could attest to original choices made by the artists of the cave (e.g. the split reticule and the painted meander). The closest points of contacts with other Epigravettian artistic manifestations are found at the Grotta Maritza and in the Latium caves: Grotta di Settecannelle and Grotta Polesini.



Art objects: a few examples from the Grotta Continenza [a] and the Grotta delle Veneri [b] (drawings: S. Martelli; photos: P. Astuti, L. Angeli).

The portable art of the Grotta delle Veneri is apparently linked to the Salento zone (southern Apulia), which is typically “Romanellian”, and where the production of geometric-linear portable art reaches its apogee between 11 000 and 10 000 BP. At this time, the iconographic patterns become more complex, with a tendency toward rows of parallel notches or stepped motifs and groups of lines in opposing rows (interpreted as an extreme stylization of the human figure).

These types of decorations are known in other sites as well, such as the Grotta Romanelli, the Grotta del Cavallo and the Grotta dei Cervi de Porto Badisco, but the assemblages at these sites are not as large, complex or standardized as those at the Grotta delle Veneri. At this site, we observe a precise choice of a graphic form expressing a language shared by a community. The remarkable formal maturity, technical skill and precision in the realization of these works suggest the existence of a “school” of production, or at the least, the work of specialists that were taught through a stylistic and technical apprenticeship.

Finally, it is interesting that most of the stones (89%) are broken and that the fracture is posterior to the incisions. The broken stones are also those with the most carefully realized engravings, often made with several tool strokes. The fracturing always occurred after the stone was painted and appears to be associated with stones having a specific type of decoration (stepped motifs and groups of lines). We can thus conclude that in most cases the fracture was intentional and occurred after the painting and engraving.

Before us, A.M. Radmilli proposed the hypothesis of a ritual fragmentation. In effect, if the pieces were broken after they were painted and engraved, and always on the same type of motif with, moreover, very little or no usewear on the pieces, it is possible that these stones were broken as part of a ritual activity. This fracturing would then take on a deeper meaning, being the result of acts that were not part of the daily activities of the group.





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