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Short articles



## THE UPPER MAGDALENIAN GEOMETRIC MOTIFS OF ISTURITZ CAVE (PYRÉNÉES-ATLANTIQUES):

### Did they Play a Specific Role?

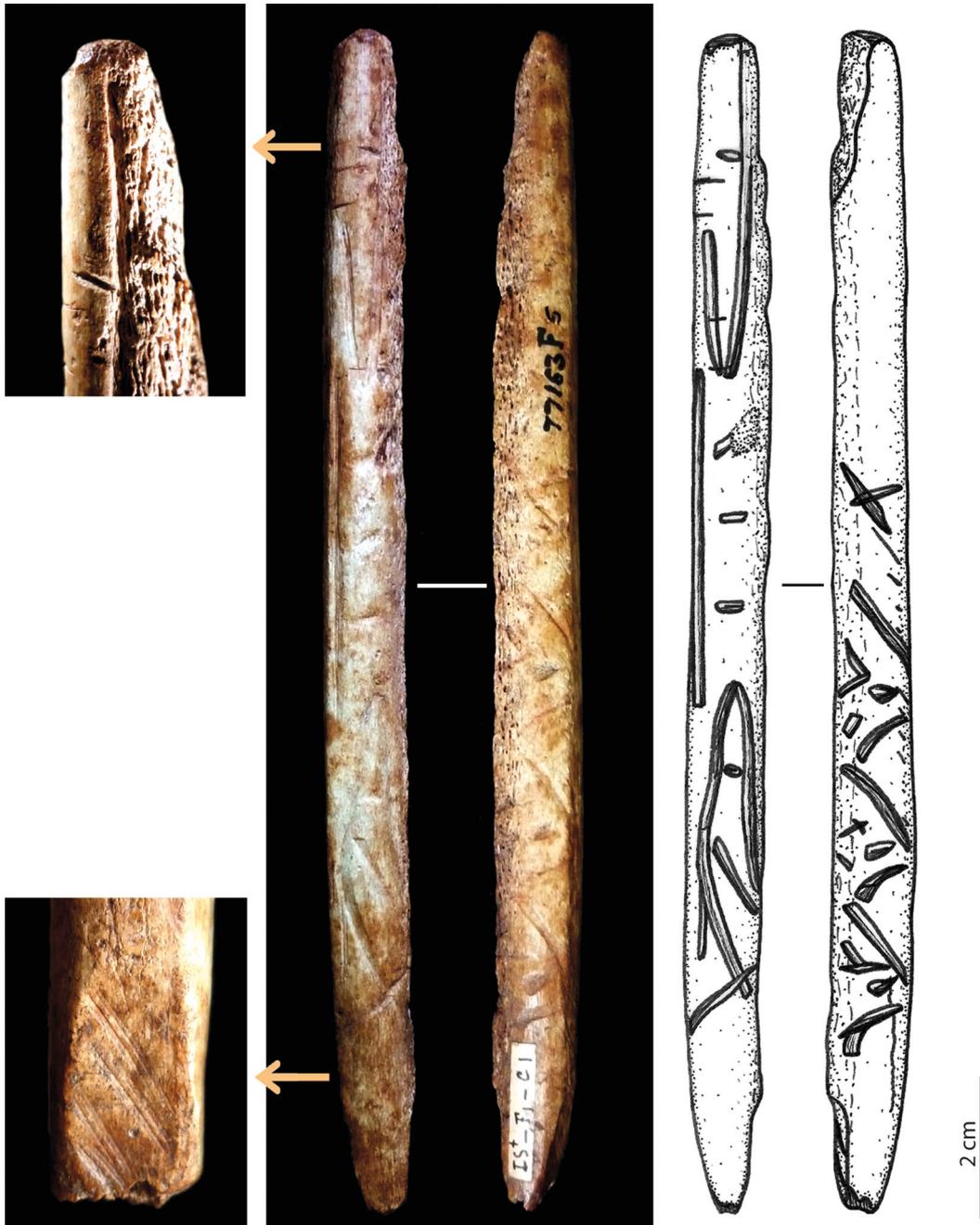
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In the Upper Magdalenian levels of Isturitz Cave (Pyrénées-Atlantiques), geometric motifs, represented on at least 39 objects, dominate the portable art objects. A technological and structural analysis has revealed that most of these decorations were realized on intermediary tools and/or atypical weapons. We present the results of these first observations, suggesting that these geometric motifs played a specific role in the life and the art of the occupants of Isturitz Cave during the Upper Magdalenian period.

In addition to 13 pieces with diverse motifs, the assemblage contains 26 pieces distributed among four groups of recurring decorations. These are lateral decorations on intermediary tools and/or projectile points. They include sinuous motifs, parallel oblique lines, transverse dashes associated with longitudinal lines and fusiform or oval motifs. Due to the stratigraphic problems of the Magdalenian at Isturitz, we chose to include the 20 pieces with similar decorations originating from the Middle Magdalenian in this group and to study them conjointly.

Lateral sinuous motifs, represented on at least 16 objects, are the most common representations. This motif is present on weapons (one fragment of a foreshaft and 6 projectile points) and on objects with usewear attesting to their use as intermediary tools. Meanwhile, several elements indicate that most of these traces were produced when the piece was reused after it was broken, repaired or reconfigured. We observe incisions that are truncated and traversed by usewear on the proximal extremity, distal extremities reworked after they were broken and lipped fractures. These could be intermediary tools that were reused after being damaged or large points that were recycled as intermediary pieces. The existence, though rare, of striated bevels and convergent edges supports this second hypothesis. In this case, these would be particularly large weapons with a maximum width much greater than the average of Upper Magdalenian points at Isturitz (generally from 10 to 12 mm).

The basic structure of the decorations is rather simple since the only unchanging element is the realization of a longitudinal sinuous motif on at least one edge of the object. Twelve large pieces make up a very homogeneous group, decorated only with broken lines formed by very large incisions. In association with this decoration, there are nonetheless many pieces with more diverse dimensions and variations. The variations concern the morphology of the sinuous motif (broken lines, succession of half-circles or sinuous lines, sometimes doubled), the technique used to realize them (variably wide and deep incisions), and their possible association with other motifs.



A piece with lateral decoration reused as an intermediary tool, from the Upper Magdalenian at Isturitz (photos and drawing: C. Lucas).

Given their formal variability, the three other groups of recurring motifs do not appear to constitute true decoration types. In a few cases, these less frequent motifs were associated with sinuous motifs, which are also similar in their techniques of realization (often with very wide incisions) and their presence on the edges of the same types of objects. The few diverse decorations occur on different types of supports (perforated batons, harpoons, semi-round rods, unworked bone fragments).

Among the objects discarded by the Upper Magdalenian occupants of Isturitz, geometric motifs are found only on osseous materials, and mainly on intermediary tools and/or weapons. In contrast to the majority of Middle Magdalenian points, those of the Upper Magdalenian are systematically decorated on their edges. In addition, the selection of points-supports does not appear to be random since their morphometric features suggest a selection oriented toward the less common points. Consequently, geometric decorations are found mostly on supports that were generally not selected for figurative representations, with which they are usually not associated (only one piece associates geometric motifs and animal representations). Nonetheless, there also exist points with rows of horses engraved on the lateral faces in the Upper Magdalenian.

It remains to be seen whether the geometric decorations in the Upper Magdalenian of Isturitz should be considered as a specific case or as being representative of this period. We already know that lateral zigzags were present in a large geographic zone across Europe since we find similar motifs in the Czech Republic. At this stage, these preliminary observations of the geometric decorations of the Upper Magdalenian of Isturitz raise new questions. Though they are less spectacular than those of the Middle Magdalenian (which employ more complex structural concepts), some of them correspond to specific norms that were diffused over a large area in the context of the geographic expansion of Magdalenian groups across Europe.





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