

DATING AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE NEW ENGRAVED SCAPULA AT ALTAMIRA

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This article concerns a red deer scapula with an engraved doe head discovered during the current archaeological excavations realized outside of the cave of Altamira. The interest of its chronology lies in the similarity of these engravings to other parietal ones with the same theme, techniques and style. In addition, the same date can be attributed to them and they are present in the same territory.

History

In 1902, Cartailhac and Breuil discovered representations of does in Altamira, all engraved using the same technique of multiple lines and a similar style. One year later, Alcalde del Río found, in the archaeological site, seven scapulae with engraved does similar to those previously discovered on the walls.

On the walls of Castillo Cave, Alcalde del Río also observed does analogous to those at Altamira. In 1911, Obermaier discovered 33 engraved scapulae in the Magdalenian level of El Castillo Cave. In 1977, a new specimen was discovered in the cave of El Cierro, followed by diverse fragments of engraved scapulae in the cave of El Mirón.

In parietal art, the parallelisms in several caves in northern Spain demonstrate the existence of cultural and chronological links between these sites, within a specific space and time.

The engraved scapulae: archaeological context and chronological issues

The engraved scapulae permitted a link to be established between their stratigraphic position and the chronology of the similar parietal figures. All of the engraved scapulae originate from Lower Magdalenian levels, even if those of Altamira were initially attributed to the Solutrean by Alcalde del Río. After that time, no more engraved scapulae were discovered at Altamira until 2009.

In 2008 / 2009, excavations were realized outside of the cave to find the Paleolithic levels that could be buried under the large rockfall that destroyed the outer part of the cave around 13 000 years ago. A single archaeological level was found, containing a new scapula with engraved does. One hundred years after the discovery by Alcalde del Río, we finally obtained a reference point for the stratigraphic position of these objects at Altamira.

The direct date obtained from the scapula is the second one for this type of object. Until then, the only dated object was another scapula from the assemblage discovered by Alcalde del Río, also

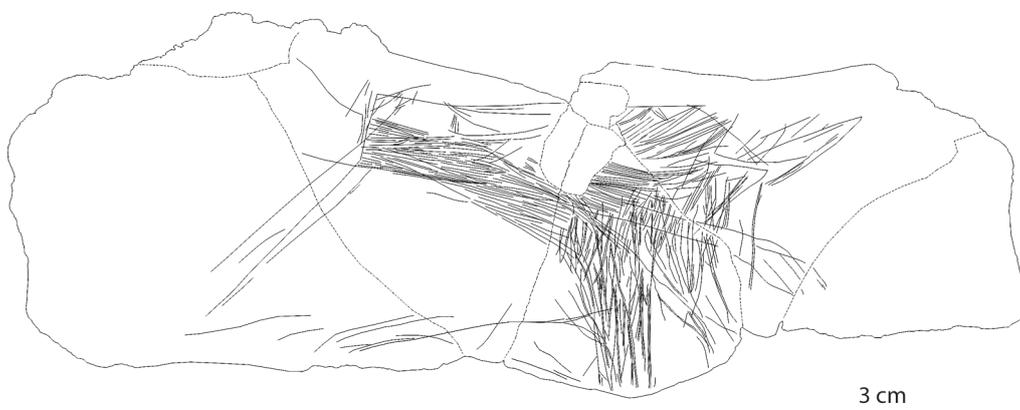
at Altamira. Its date of $14\,480 \pm 250$ BP permitted its attribution to the Lower Magdalenian. The piece discovered in 2009 is dated to $14\,830 \pm 60$ BP, which is similar to the preceding one and to that of $14\,910 \pm 60$ BP obtained at the contact between levels 1 and 2 of the stratigraphy inside the cave. These dates provide a well-defined chronological framework for the scapulae at Altamira, which we can extend – at least provisionally – to all of the decorated scapulae found at other sites, dated by the archaeological levels in which they were discovered. The Magdalenian level recently discovered outside of the Altamira Cave has yielded three dates that situate it between approximately 15 300-15 700 BP, which is compatible with levels 2 to 4 inside the cave.

Only a few chronological comparisons can be made with the other scapulae: those from El Juyo are from level 8, which has not been dated, while level seven has yielded a date of $14\,440 \pm 180$ BP. Four dates were obtained from level 17 at El Mirón, but that of 15 700 is the closest to the place where the scapula was found. The dates of level 17 at El Mirón and of the Magdalenian level at Altamira are very similar.

The two scapulae from Altamira have similar dates. The discrepancy between the dates of the scapulae themselves and those obtained for the stratigraphic context in which they were discovered is evident. There are two possible ways to interpret this:

1. The direct dates of the scapulae with multiple lines are the most reliable evidence and reflect their precise chronology, between approximately 14 200-14 900 BP (ca. 17 300-17 950 cal BP). The presence of scapulae in the oldest archaeological contexts could be the result of a stratigraphic intromission or an intentional anthropogenic burial. The parietal versions would then be contemporaneous with the realization of the polychrome images;
2. The scapulae decorated with does have their own stratigraphic framework identical to that of their archaeological level. In this case, the engravings – parietal and on scapulae – would have been realized during the longest part of the Lower Magdalenian, from approximately 14 200 to 15 900 BP (ca. 17 300-19 000 cal BP).

To conclude, the locations of the doe head engravings with multiple lines and other portable and parietal art works in the central part of Green Spain during the Lower Magdalenian could be the identity markers of a group or their mobility across a specific territory during a limited chronological interval.



Drawing of the engravings on the new engraved scapula (© Museo de Altamira).





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