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Jean CLOTTE

PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



THE DISTRIBUTION OF FRANCO-CANTABRIAN ROCK ART

Robert G. BEDNARIK

Rock art of Pleistocene antiquity has been proposed to exist at up to 400 sites across Europe. Until about 25 years ago, the only sites admitted to this list were limestone cave sites, but then began efforts to admit other types of sites. This included especially a series of open schist sites on the Iberian Peninsula. Since then, more sites have been added, sometimes under controversial circumstances, often without critical assessment of the claims made, and always without credible dating evidence. It has therefore become necessary to review this growing list sceptically.

At the eastern boundary of Europe, Kapova and Ignatiev Caves in the Ural Mountains reputedly contain Pleistocene paintings, but carbon dating from the second site has yielded a Holocene age. There is no evidence in favour of Pleistocene antiquity of the paintings in Cuciulat cave, Romania, but the cave art discovered only this year in Coliboaia is certainly of the Pleistocene.

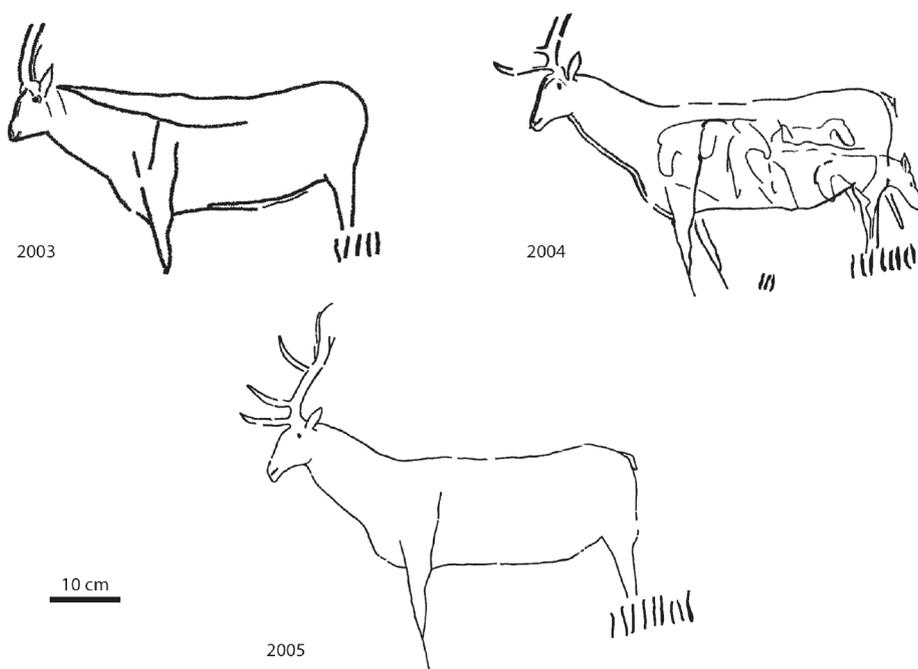
In central Europe, palaeoart and natural or recent markings have been claimed to be Pleistocene rock art in Kleines Schulerloch, Kastlgänghöhle, Hohle Fels, Geissenklösterle (all Germany), Mladeč Cave and Bycí Skála (both Czech Republic), Stubwieswipfel and Kienbachklamm (both Austria); all of these claims have been convincingly refuted.

The first open air rock art site assigned a Pleistocene antiquity was Fornols-Haut, Campôme, in the French Pyrenees. However, in view of the high elevation of the site, which during the Final Pleistocene would have been within the periglacial zone of the Pyrenean glaciers, it seems odd that people would have even visited the site during that time. Since then, a whole series of open petroglyph sites, in various parts of the Iberian Peninsula, have been attributed to the Upper Palaeolithic (UP). In all cases this was initially on purely stylistic hunches, which in some cases it was later sought to reinforce with occupation evidence. These sites are of percussion petroglyphs, i.e. of a technique that has typically not been used in the Franco-Cantabrian cave art. They all occur on schist, usually in deeply cut, geologically recent valleys. With a few exceptions, horses and cattle appear to be depicted. The fluid, accomplished artwork that is the usual hallmark of the cave art is absent in most of these depictions. Moreover, the dominant motif type in the Franco-Cantabrian cave art are the so-called signs, geometric images of unknown significance, outnumbering the zoomorphs several times. They are completely absent at all of the open sites, as are any images of extinct species. Finally, these many sites are controversial because those who advocate the Pleistocene age of their contents tend to be rather emotive when their claims are subjected to testing.

One of the largest of these sites, Siega Verde in western Spain, comprises hundreds of zoomorphs and inscriptions, some with dates. The wear occasioned by the suspended load of the frequently flooding Agueda River has been calibrated via these dates, showing that only very few of the petroglyphs can be >200 years old. The same geological context applies to the approximately

15 rock art sites on the lower Côa River in eastern Portugal, only about 50 km from Siega Verde, and all of that rock art is of the late Holocene. Another nearby site, but in the Douro valley, that had already earlier been claimed to be of the Pleistocene is Mazouco. The only complete figure there has been vandalised and is of no analytical relevance. The UP age of a few engravings in Escoural Cave in southern Portugal has also been questioned, as there is only Middle Palaeolithic and Chalcolithic occupation evidence and the few motifs bear no stylistic resemblance to securely dated rock art of the UP.

There are numerous further open schist sites in the Iberian Peninsula that have been claimed to be UP. They include Domingo García and the nearby sites Carbonero Mayor, Bernardos and Ortigosa; Piedras Blancas near Escullar, and Almería, all in Spain. Ocreza in Portugal, like some of the other sites, comprises a single image, and a few other petroglyphs in the vicinity are clearly not Palaeolithic.



Three published recordings by the same authors of one petroglyph in Church Hole, UK, claimed to be Palaeolithic.

There have also been a few claims of Ice Age palaeoart from Britain, all of which are surrounded by controversy. The first for rock art, in 1912, concerned Bacon's Hole in Wales. The red paintings turned out to be only 18 years old. A series of portable finds has been plagued by uncertainties, including equine engravings from Robin Hood's Cave and Sherborne, and an engraved horse mandible from Kendrick Cave. The Pleistocene "petroglyphs" in Wye Valley, "inlaid with green malachite", were natural markings with some green algae. Recently three petroglyphs in Church Hole were attributed to the Palaeolithic, and the number of images gradually increased first to 125 ("the most richly carved and engraved ceiling in the whole of cave art"), but after critical review fell to ten, of which only three are figurative. There is no proof of Pleistocene antiquity, a Th/U date tendered has no relevance or credibility.





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