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Short articles



REVIEW OF SEVEN YEARS OF RESEARCH IN THE DECORATED CAVE OF EL CASTILLO (CANTABRIA, SPAIN)

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With its impressive stratigraphic sequence, the hundreds of motifs that decorate its walls and the dozens of portable art works discovered there the cave of El Castillo is a major Upper Paleolithic site. Other than the first study realized by H. Alcalde del Río, H. Breuil and L. Sierra in 1912, and a few occasional works, there is no published work on this important parietal art site. It was thus urgent to conduct a new exhaustive study using the most modern research methods in this domain. Our study began in 2003 and consisted of two sessions per year. The cave was classified as a national heritage site in Spain and has been designated as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO since July 2008.

As of today, we have inventoried 2 497 painted, drawn, engraved or sculpted motifs, figurative and non-figurative, including 2 039 paintings and drawings and 458 engravings and sculptures. Among these, we have counted 1 553 signs, 450 animal figures, 226 colored areas, 85 stenciled hands, 138 torch marks, 138 color speckles, 22 humans (including 16 Protohistoric ones), 74 color smears, 2 composite animals and one composite human. Most of the figures discovered and recorded by researchers in the caves of the Cantabrian region have been corrected or reinterpreted. It is especially important that a large number of newly discovered motifs have enriched the corpus. In our current state of research, it appears that all of the space in the cave was decorated, down to even the most difficult to reach corners. In addition, numerous archaeological remains, until now unknown, are scattered throughout the cave despite the numerous modifications it has undergone since its discovery. These include the footprints of a child, a large number of objects, such as blades, teeth, fragments of concretions, and diverse stones found on the ground or in the fissures of the wall, as well as marks left by actions on the walls (clay removal, blows, breaks, ...).

The new motifs are numerous; repeated observations and the use of digital techniques obviously had a hand in these results. We would like to insist on the discoveries that have contributed elements to the interpretation of the parietal ensemble. The study of the paintings shows in particular that many representations were partially or totally reactivated, using the same colorant or a different color. The most striking example is the large painted horse on the Polychrome Panel. We were able to show that this was the second state of a purple horse punctured by a set of projectile weapons, and then repainted in red. Something curious is that there must have been several stages, since some of the purple projectiles were erased and are now visible only as “shadows”.

Concerning the engravings, it is important to note the abundance of figures that fit into each other. These nested figures often associate animals of the same species, such as hinds, as well as different species, such as horse and aurochs. The head is most often concerned, though there are a few whole nested animals in the cave as well. The analysis by macrophotography and the high definition 3D scanning of engraved motifs confirmed that multiple techniques were employed. Though incision was the most frequent, we also observed deep engraving close to carving (herbivore head at the entrance of the Disk Gallery), as well as the use of a “rubbing” technique (cervids Gallery A and on the Ceiling of Hands).



Engraved horse on the floor in the ground in the Depths. A bifurcated projectile was engraved at the level of the back. A burned twig (above, to the left) was left in place.

In Gallery A, the discovery of sculpted animal representations on a wall covered with a layer of calcite sediments is yet another original element in the site. These poorly preserved “mud sculptures” represent the hindquarters of herbivores with certain anatomical details emphasized by incision. Finally, we must report the discovery of two horses and deeply engraved lines on the clay floor in the last part of the cave, the “Depths”. These representations remind us that, as at Niaux, for example, not only the walls were decorated: like some of the ceilings, the ground was undoubtedly decorated by some groups. One of the horses in the Depths, other than being headless, has the particularity of having been pierced with blows by a pick.





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