The discovery of Levantine art in the early 20th century caused much debate over its chronological and cultural attributions. This century-old debate still lacks a satisfactory conclusion, despite becoming increasingly nuanced, and researchers remain divided between those who see an earlier Palaeolithic origin and those who see a Neolithic or subsequent horizon. Still others argue for its emergence in the intervening Epipaleolithic / Mesolithic periods and its continuation into later stages.

Unfortunately, no direct dates or comparable portable art are available for Levantine art with the exception of several Palaeolithic plaquettes engraved with animal figures that bear certain similarities. The recent discovery of small cervids and human figures engraved with fine and striated lines from rock shelters around the Mediterranean Basin of the Iberian Peninsula (Teruel, Castellón and Tarragona) is now forcing us to consider the continuation of these Palaeolithic techniques and the implications of this on the origins of the so-called Levantine style. These new zoomorphic figures include figurative and outlined elements that have been narrowed down to the final stages of the Palaeolithic, and some of them have been associated with the Levantine style.

Levantine engravings

Since the first publications dedicated to Levantine art, references have been made to finely engraved figures in the rock shelters of Calapatá, Gascons, Albarracín, and Cogul which were not included in peninsular studies. All of these rock shelters contain outlines and engraved anatomical details of cervids and bulls that precede the paintings themselves.

Recent discoveries include engravings from Barranco Hondo (Castellote, Teruel), Abric d’en Melià (Serra d’en Galceran, Castellón), Abric del Cingle del Barranc de l’Espigolar (Serratella, Castellón), and Abric de Llaberia P-IV (Capçanes, Tarragona) which although not painted, were nonetheless created using the same fine-line techniques, suggesting a stage anterior to the development of more “classic” Levantine art styles.

Thoughts and initial considerations

Among the animals (engraved with fine lines and filled with parallel, striated, or scraped incisions) there is a formal diversity that includes clear Palaeolithic forms and those which could just as easily be Palaeolithic as Levantine, and which can be dated to somewhere between the end of
Engraving of a deer made with fine and striated lines from the Llberia P-IV shelter (Tarragona).
the Palaeolithic and the uncertain inception of Levantine art. Examples include Abric d’en Melià, la Roca dels Moros del Cogul, Barranco Hondo, and Abric de Llaberia P-IV.

As some authors have pointed out, there is no known link between Magdalenian and Levantine art. However, we believe that in the light of these new findings, this assumption needs to be reassessed, as summarized below:

A. Fine engraving and striated line techniques of Palaeolithic age are not exclusive to representations located in deep caves or to portable art; they also appear among the naturalistic figurative representations engraved in open-air sites in the Levantine peninsular area. This technique exists in other peninsular areas such as in the Duero region, which for some researchers is evidence of a progressive evolution which confirms that Palaeolithic art continued until 9000 BP.

B. Engravings made with fine and striated line techniques can be seen on the plaquettes from San Gregori (Tarragona) which include figures of cervids, a bovine, and what may be an equine. These examples appear to have been made during the final stages of the Palaeolithic or during the Epipaleolithic.

C. Engravings made with fine and striated line techniques can be seen in the figures from the Levantine area (Bajo Aragón, Roca dels Moros, Barranco Hondo, and Llaberia P-IV). Several figures from Tarragona and Lleida have thin longitudinal parallel incisions within the bodies, as is also the case with the plaquettes from Cova del Parpalló in Foz Côa, Siega Verde and those at the perimeter of the Molí del Salt site. At Molí del Salt, figures of animals, primarily cervids, have been found engraved with fine lines and have been dated to 10,990 ± 50 BP.

D. The fine line engravings at the shelters in Aragona and Lleida are also important as they predate Levantine paintings.

All of these findings indicate the continuation of faunal themes and styles using Palaeolithic techniques (fine and striated lines) culminating in a Style V that continued into the post-Palaeolithic. These techniques subsequently extended into Levantine paintings, imitating this infill with bands or variegated lines, and possibly enduring into the Neolithic, demonstrating the continuation of earlier Palaeolithic techniques and concepts into the post-Palaeolithic.

The discovery of engravings created using fine and striated lines not only raises new questions, but allow us to partially review older hypotheses concerning the continuation of Palaeolithic art techniques into early “Levantine art”. At the moment, we cannot rule out the possibility of an early stage of Levantine art focused exclusively on faunal themes, with human figures only introduced at a later stage. In our view, the new engravings from open-air sites in the Levantine area provide new evidence with which to address the techno-cultural links between Late Pleistocene groups and their Holocene successors.