SYNTHESIS OF NEW PARIETAL AND PORTABLE ART DISCOVERIES IN THE CAVES OF ISTURITZ AND OXOCHELAYA (PYRÉNÉES-ATLANTIQUES):
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Aude LABARGE

Located in the heart of the French Basque Country (Pyrénées-Atlantiques), 12 km from Hasparren, the group of three caves, Isturitz, Oxocelhaya and Erberua, constitutes a heritage site of utmost importance since the caves contain many remains of human activities attesting to an intensive daily life (hunting site and social gathering site), as well as abundant and diverse parietal and portable art production activities, spanning the entire Upper Paleolithic.

The main archaeological discoveries, starting in 1912, were completed by multiple excavations conducted throughout the 20th century under the direction of E. Passemard, the Count and Countess of Saint-Périer, G. Laplace, and finally, C. Normand.

With the aim of constituting a White Paper covering the entire hill on which the sites are located, test pits made in 1996 by C. Normand instigated a renewed interest in the archaeological potential of the site. The Archaic Aurignacian layers, the bits of Magdalenian layers, the ancient archaeological debris and finally, the human manifestations on the walls, drew great attention.

On the occasion of new observations of a decorated pillar in the center of Isturitz Cave (figure), the animals represented, first determined by E. Passemard and then corrected by G. Laplace, were once again discussed. The representation of a bear in bas-relief is in fact a Glutton, as is shown by its fluffy tail and other anatomical characteristics (gait, body posture). This work, realized by anamorphosis in a convexity opposite the panel of cervids, seems to relate an animal hunting scene at the moment of anticipation and full attention before the violent act. In front of the pillar, one of the largest fireplaces of the cave was uncovered. It is surrounded by stones used as seats and large serial art production workshops. Situated in the heart of the economic life, this artistic composition reveals the importance of the oral link between parietal art and daily, economic and artistic life, and suggests interrogations on the role of art in the society of Middle Magdalenian peoples, as well as the filiation and transmission between successive cultures.

The central pillar in the Great Hall of Isturitz, until now the only parietal manifestation in Isturitz Cave, has been gradually enriched by a multitude of artifacts in and on the walls. Bone fragments (most less than 1 cm³), four flint tools and flakes, a hematite crayon and one longitudinally cut bovid tooth were inserted into fissures. Today, these new discoveries raise questions concerning the dating of these various manifestations on the wall. Are they contemporary with each other? What is their relationship to the economic, social and daily life of the site?
During these surveys, programmed excavations begun in 1999 led to the discovery of four portable art objects. Dated to the Archaic Aurignacian (35 550-32 400), an ophite pebble displays a multitude of lines with a hierarchy in their thickness, forming the hindquarters of a probable cervid and a structural line for the background. This pebble was reused as a hammerstone, and thus broken. The second object is a diaphysis with deeply incised crosses in a row. These objects are among the oldest known artistic manifestations in the cave. Two discoveries in the Middle Magdalenian complete the already known assemblage of portable art objects from Isturitz. On a fragment of a baton percé in cervid antler, one bison head is placed horizontally and another vertically, using a graphic trick. They are somewhat realistic, showing stereotypical artistic conventions and skill. The plastic quality of the head of a grayish-yellow lion is seen essentially in its use of volume: it was intentionally cut at the neck, like the already known series of statuettes of horses and bison in sandstone.

A study of three graphic ensembles in Oxocelhaya Cave (the panel with a bridled horse, the bison on the ceiling and the horse on clay) revealed different plastic methods, such as the balance of elements or the association of full and empty spaces and their complementarity. In addition, the repetitive stylistic conventions from one gallery to the next suggest that certain works are contemporary with each other, while others are temporally and stylistically isolated.

Since 1996, a great quantity of new archaeological information has completed and modified the accepted and published artistic knowledge of Isturitz and Oxocelhaya Caves. This new knowledge raises fundamental questions: what was the role of parietal and portable art in Upper Paleolithic art in Upper Paleolithic societies, and what was the relationship between portable and parietal art?