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PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD
Short articles
THE DECORATED CAVE OF ETXEBERRI
(CAMOU-CIHIGUE, PYRÉNÉES-ATLANTIQUES):

an Audacious Art

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The cave of Etxeberri or Kanpainaga Lezea (Camou-Cihigue commune) is located at 440 m altitude on the western slope of an urgonian limestone cirque of the eastern flank of the Arbaïlies massif. This cavity is composed of a long, north-south oriented joint, approximately 200 m long, which is difficult to access (three shafts, one small tunnel, an 8 m relief and an 18 m sink-hole).

Etxeberriko Karbia, already known before the discovery of its decorated parts, has been explored by speleologists since the beginning of the 20th century. It was during a visit lead by P. Boucher, in the company of G. Laplace, on May 1, 1950, that these latter discovered a small red horse on their way back out of the cave. In 1951, G. Laplace undertook a study of the parietal art and published the results, along with those of the cave of Sasiziloaga. Thirty years later, É. de Valicourt and M. Lauga identified new figures – an engraved horse and a painted horse. The last publication of the parietal art of Etxeberri, by P. Paillet, is based on bibliographic references.

The first decorated hall – The Hall of Paintings – accessible through a narrow tunnel 150 m from the current entrance contains more than half of the recorded graphic entities. The two decorated walls display horses, a bison and an ibex, all very large and composed of a simple
outline. On the right hand wall, another manifestation consists of smaller, duotone (red and black) flat tint representations. At the end of the Hall of Paintings, a red dot located high up seems to indicate an abrupt change in altitude giving access to a ledge on which red smears and a well preserved black horse are visible. This ledge is about 4 m high in the second decorated hall of the cavity – the Hall of the Sink-Hole. Starting in this hall, and following the 18 m deep sink-hole, we reach a narrow promontory with a horse engraved on the clay floor, preserved due to its location close to the wall. The last chamber of the cavity – The Decorated Fissure – is currently accessible from the sink-hole. The first visitors reached the gallery through a relatively wide chimney, located 6 m above the fissure, and thus significantly damaged the figures. In this corridor, with a maximum width of 50 cm, there is a row of black painted and engraved horses, a black bison framed in a concavity, the remains of figures, and a red sign. Sometime between the work of G. Laplace (1950’s) and today, one representation of a horse completely disappeared and others have been nearly erased.

The themes in Etxeberri Cave correspond well with those in the Magdalenian context of the Cantabria / Pyrenees band. The bison-horse pair is well represented and accompanied by a classic secondary species, ibex. We also observe a particular preference for horses over bison in the cavity. This is characteristic of the later Magdalenian, as is shown by the caves of Labastide, Montespan and, even more clearly, those of Ekain, Oxocelhaya and Erberua.

Concerning the techniques used at Etxeberri, we observe the presence of a horse engraved in clay, a typical technique in the Pyrenees region (Erberua, Oxocelhaya, Labastide, Montespan, Niaux, …) but much less frequent in Cantabria.

In addition to the two isolated horses (ledge and promontory) and a few red lines, the figures are organized in a succession of small panels adapted to the available space, in two main halls. In both the Hall of Paintings and the Decorated Fissure, an identical scheme is repeated and consists of a frieze of aligned horses. In the first hall, there is also the bison-horse-ibex triad.

Chronologically, A. Leroi-Gourhan proposed several arguments to justify the attribution of Etxeberri to the Middle Magdalenian, including that of its sanctuary-like nature, being deep and difficult to access. It indeed appears that in decorated caves with this characteristic, some of the representations are attributable to the early style IV (Arcy-sur-Cure, Les Combarelles, La Cullalvera, Labastide, Montespan, La Mouthe, Niaux, Rouffignac, Santimamiñe, Les Trois-Frères and Le Tuc d’Audoubert). A second argument is the presence of the bison-horse + ibex association in caves attributed to this chronological period: Las Monedas, La Pasiega, Les Combarelles, Angles-sur-l’Anglin, Le Cap Blanc, Niaux, Le Portel (Camarin), Les Trois-Frères, Les Églises. Other stylistic comparisons and ¹⁴C dates in other caves (Niaux, Le Portel, Monedas, …) support this proposition but also correspond to the Upper Magdalenian. Awaiting ¹⁴C dates at Etxeberri, it thus appears that it is attributable to the Middle to Upper Magdalenian.