HORSE FIGURES IN THE PARIETAL ART OF GARGAS (AVENTIGNAN, HAUTES-PYRÉNÉES):

a Homogeneous Group?

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The Lower Gallery of Gargas, famous for its stenciled hands, is also known for its 145 engravings of animals classically attributed to the Gravettian. Nearly 30% of the figures are equids, and more precisely, horses. The objectives of my study of the latter were to understand modalities of their representation and to determine if this corpus is “coherent” from a graphic and chronological point of view. With this aim in mind, I recorded and analyzed the topographic distribution, techniques of realization, proportions, anatomy and the conventions of representation of these horses.

According to my analysis of these figures, 43 of them are attributable to horse and, in my opinion, none of them correspond to another equid type (*hydruntinus*). They are present in all of the decorated sectors, except in the Crevice zone, and are the dominant species in several sectors. They sometimes play a central role in the composition of a panel, as is true of the large, complete horses on the left wall of the Camarin Chamber (horses 12 and 13). Each one occupies all of the available space within a concavity where numerous other figures are juxtaposed in smaller dimensions.

Horse 7 in the Camarin Chamber. Detailed head: open mouth, eye, nostril, striated mane and beard (photo: O. Huard).
Nearly all of them are realized with the same technique: shallow to medium depth engraving, and little use of the natural reliefs. Engravings with much wider sections are found only on walls with a softer mineral density, due to a change in the tool used, passing from a flint tool to a finger (or stick or bone). The only original technique is seen in the back line of horse number 25; it is drawn with black pigment and recalls the techniques used in a distinct entrance to the cave, in what is called the Upper Gallery of Gargas.

Even if very few complete horses are represented (5 individuals), my analysis of the proportions adopted shows a certain liberty of choice by the artists since some are very exact and naturalistic, while others are more extravagant (body curved in the form of a banana, long, flat heads). These graphic extravagances are also seen in the details represented with, for example, the presence of bifurcated tails (Horse 5 of the Camarin Vestibule and Horse 2 Left in the Camarin Chamber). The heads show the most detail, with a high number of sensory organs (nostrils, eyes, ears and mouths (figure), while the extremities of the limbs and the coat (exception for the mane, which is almost always present) are less frequent.

Concerning the conventions of representation, my analysis of the horses shows great diversity, or even originality, as if the authors sought to distinguish themselves from that which already existed (see details in the full article). Despite this, the recurrence of certain conventions in different sectors of the cavity shows a degree of graphic unity in most of the works (except for Horse 4 in the Vestibule and figure 25). These sometimes strange (looped lines, with parallel and sinuous lines) recurring graphic conventions are associated with diverse perspectives of the limbs, suggesting that the latter were indifferently employed. This idea counters the preceding attempts to make chronological classifications of the Gargas figures, partly based on the choice of perspectives.

This new analysis shows recurring formal particularities indicating that there was only one phase of realization for the great majority of equid representations in Lower Gargas, thus reviving the debate concerning the presence of distinct styles or a succession of phases. While my analysis of the equids represented contributes its share arguments concerning the time interval involved in the realization of the animal figures, it should now be completed by a new study of the figurative art as a whole.