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directed by
Jean CLOTTE

PLEISTOCENE ART OF THE WORLD

Short articles



OBJECTS DEPOSITED IN THE WALL CRACKS OF THE GARGAS CAVES (HAUTES-PYRÉNÉES, FRANCE):

Analysis and Contextualization

Magali PEYROUX

Gargas is famous for its painted hands and figurative parietal art, which is classically attributed to the Gravettian. The caves also contain numerous deposits of objects in the walls (identified in this site in 1991 by J. Clottes, who sampled one in the *Lower Cave* and had it dated to $26\,860 \pm 460$ BP).

In the context of my Doctoral research on such parietal acts in the decorated caves of the Upper Paleolithic, I conducted a study of these deposits (figure) at the site of Gargas (*Lower Cave* and *Upper Cave*). In each of these caves, my aim was to realize an exhaustive inventory of these deposits, to describe them (without touching or removing them), to study the construction of this parietal act, to propose a chrono-cultural attribution, to evaluate the articulation of this parietal intervention with the other types of human interventions observed in order to study its interrelation with the underground environment, and then to compare the acts observed in the two caves.



Fragmentary faunal remains deposited in the wall,
Gargas, Lower Cave, Hall 1 (photo: M. Peyroux).

In addition to understanding this act, another objective was to evaluate how studying it in its context could contribute additional information on prehistoric human activities in each cave.

In the framework of my Doctoral research, the information obtained at Gargas will also permit comparisons of the acts observed in this site with those in other Upper Paleolithic decorated caves.

This work has shown, in the *Lower Cave* and *Upper Cave*, a construction of the acts based on shared characteristics that are fundamental and constant: the nearly exclusive selection of fragmentary faunal remains (mostly bone chips); the presence of small sized, mostly non-burned and undetermined elements; the probable presence of elements attributable to medium to large herbivores (including rib, long bone diaphysis and cervid long bone fragments); the presence of objects with a low economic value that are not worked or only slightly worked (in principle, mostly butchery / consumption waste and residues of worked bone materials); the selection of a preferential type of stone support for the deposits (walls densely covered with long, narrow fissures); a correlation between the morphometric attributes of the fissures and those of the objects deposited; no clearly identifiable evidence of modifications to the stone support; the insertion of remains more or less close to the wall surface; no preferential deposition of objects in the fissures; the importance of topographic factors in the location of the deposits; no observable tangible relationships with the parietal graphic context; no intention to produce a visual (and visible) result; no apparent utilitarian or technical reason for the deposition of objects in the wall.

These deposits appear to have been realized with a symbolic intention, the act itself probably having more meaning than the final result on the wall. These precise observations are shared, from the perspective of the fundamental construction of the act, by all of the caves of Gargas and those observed in other European Upper Paleolithic decorated caves. Nevertheless, this act is not homogeneous in the site. Clear differences exist between the two groups, and could indicate chrono-cultural differences in the realization of this act in the site. For instance, the density of the deposits is different: 230 for the *Lower Cave* and “only” 62 for the *Upper Cave*. The topographic distribution differs as well: the act is limited to the entrance halls (linked to the location of human occupations on the ground) in the *Lower Cave*, while it is distributed among remarkable topographic points in the *Upper Cave* (including in the deep zone among the parietal animal figures). Clear, albeit few, typological differences exist: the presence of possible spear points and “deposits” of a red colorant material only in the *Upper Cave*. These differences probably indicate the presence of different traditions of investment in the underground environment and the appropriation of this parietal act. They suggest the presence of several occupation phases in the site during the Upper Paleolithic (Gravettian and / or Magdalenian in the *Upper Cave*?). At Gargas, it appears that this was a particular parietal act consisting of a symbolic production closely linked with the occupation of the underground environment, which survived in European Upper Paleolithic societies regardless of geographic and chronological differences.





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