PICTORIAL ART AT LE ROC-AUX-SORCIERS (ANGLES-SUR-L’ANGLIN, VIENNE):
the “Language” of a Cultural Group?

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Located in the Vienne Department and in the commune of Angles-sur-l’Anglin, the Le Roc-aux-Sorciers rock shelter is famous for its monumental parietal sculptures attributed to the Middle Magdalenian. It is less known, however, for its pictorial art, whose remains are inconspicuous compared to the sculpted and engraved images that compose the 18 meter long frieze preserved in situ in the Abri Bourdois (downstream part of the site) and the numerous blocks that composed the ancient decorated ceiling in the Cave Taillebourg (upstream part).

Though the traces of paintings were observed at the time of the discovery of the parietal art in the site by Saint-Mathurin and Dorothy Garrod, at the end of the 1940’s, they were long interpreted as the remains of ancient coloring of the sculptures and engravings. However, their intermittence and location relative to the sculpted and engraved images, as well as their appearance, do not support this hypothesis, which is still accepted by many researchers. A detailed analysis of these remains thus appeared necessary.

I began this work during my Master’s research and am now continuing with it in the framework of my Doctoral research. My study of the traces of color, today concentrated in the Abri Bourdois – the analysis of the decorated blocks in the Cave Taillbourg being in progress – is based on a methodology aimed at making them more visible through multiple explorations of the wall using different light sources and varied angles of incidence of the light rays on the stone surface. Each pictorial remain observed was then recorded by digital photography with a white light; these photos were processed with an image processing software program to enhance the outlines of the paint traces. Finally, based on these two types of photos, I proposed a graphic reconstruction for each of the traces and integrated these into a complete analytical recording of the frieze in order to study their distribution on the wall (figure).

It thus appears that, in contrast to the mainly figurative sculptures and engravings, painting was used by the Magdalenian artists of Roc-aux-Sorciers to add abstract touches to the frieze. The use of colors and their different shades obeys strict rules that depend on both the technique and the associated theme.

While the color black is always closely associated with figurative images, emphasizing the particular volumes of the sculpted and engraved subjects, the color red plays a more complex role.
Light red, which is integrated with the parietal animal sculptures, is applied in flat zones peripheral to the sculptures, while dark red is used to draw simple signs (dots and bars) and more complex signs (parallel dotted lines) superimposed on the figures. Black was smeared onto the bottom of the hooves of some male ibexes and bison.

When associated with fine animal engravings, on the other hand, light red is applied in zones superimposed on the engravings, anterior and/or posterior to them. Dark red was used to draw large quadrangular signs composed of solid and dotted lines, while black was used to emphasize a particular volume of the engraved figures; for those identified and recorded, this volume was the ventral line of the bison.

These rules of use are not unique to Le Roc-aux-Sorciers. They seem to exist as well at other sites attributed to the Middle Magdalenian with Lussac-Angles spear points, such as at the cave of La Marche (Lussac-les-Châteaux, Vienne), where a block with an engraved and sculpted hind paw of a feline has red and black paintings that “seem to have had well defined outlines” according to L. Pales and M. Tassin de Saint-Péreuse. Further away, in the Pyrenean cave of Marsoulas (Marsoulas, Haute-Garonne), C. Fritz and G. Tosello observed in 2004 that in the lower part of group of engraved figures, “the Magdaleniens used duotone painting in a very particular manner: red was employed to cover the surfaces and black pigment to delimit the volumes (lower-stomach, limbs, fetlock) and to portray an expression (head)”.

Could the use of color in parietal art enable us to identify human groups, or even communities? Through my doctoral research, I hope to contribute some elements of response to this question.