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Short articles



GROTTICELLA BLANC-CARDINI AT BALZI ROSSI (VENTIMIGLIA, ITALY)

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In the caves of Balzi Rossi, the parietal art includes engravings in the following cavities and shelters: Grotte des Enfants, Grotta di Florestano, niche in the wall near Riparo Mochi, Grotticella Blanc-Cardini, Grotta del Caviglione and Barma Grande (figure). We present here the Grotticella Blanc-Cardini (2.80 m high, 0.55 m wide and 2.60 m deep). There are no traces of sediment indicating an archaeological layer. An adult can slide into the cave with difficulty by hoisting themselves up 2 m from the trail that runs along the foot of the cliff. Ancient documents indicate that the same was true in the 19th century.

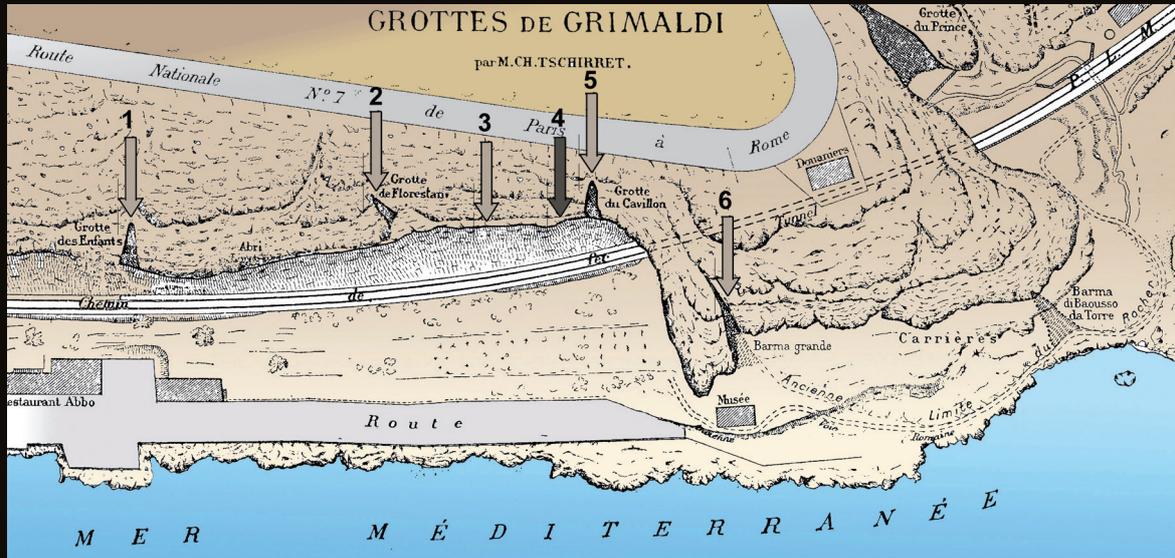
Description

East wall: the panel in the entrance (1 × 1.5 m) has 300 linear signs up to more than 20 cm long, surrounding a dozen small niches and irregularities in the wall. An elongated, vertical figurative motif, 23 cm long, is formed by two sub-parallel lines that meet at the top. The axis is emphasized by a slightly undulating line that continues lower down. On the left, a small oblong figure is formed by half-circle lines that meet in a point and frame a central hole. These two figures compose a probable phallus or a possible vulva.

West wall: on the panel in the entrance (0.80 × 0.50 m), the signs are more numerous, longer and usually deeper. The only figurative element (around 10 cm high) is similar to that on the other wall, consisting of two parallel lines that converge at the top. Next to this, a second motif is delimited by two half-circle lines, with a third line in the same axis that divides the figure in two. This could be a second phallus next to a second vulva.

Comparisons and dating

The borders of the niches and fissures that are emphasized by incisions, as well as the linear engravings, are found in the Grotte des Enfants (unpublished), Grotta di Florestano, Grotta del Caviglione and Barma Grande. Their dating is approximate because the excavations are too ancient. At the Grotte des Enfants, it would have been difficult to realize them before the formation of the layer designated as “fireplace” D, and thus before the Final Epigravettian. This layer is located below the eponymous burial of “children”, dated to 11 130 ± 100 BP. The Final Epigravettian is found in layer A at Riparo Mochi, from which it would have been rather easy to climb into the Grotticella. At Grotta del Caviglione, the engravings are 5-6 m above the Gravettian burial: we can only suspect the presence of a Final Epigravettian in the upper part of the stratigraphy, which is no longer present. Finally, at Barma Grande, they are located at the height of a witness section that yielded a few Microgravettes. Based on different sources, it is possible to affirm that a Gravettian layer, known from the famous Triple Burial, was located 3 or 4 meters below the engravings. The highest part of this stratigraphy contained Ancient and Final Gravettian artifacts.



Plan of the Balzi Rossi caves (after Villeneuve *et al.*), with an indication of the points where engravings and other traces of parietal art are found:

1. Grotte des Enfants;
2. Grotta di Florestano;
3. Niche;
4. Grotticella Blanc-Cardini;
5. Grotta del Caviglione;
6. Barma Grande.



Grotta del Caviglione at the time of the excavations by Albert 1st of Monaco, after the monography of the caves of Grimaldi, with the Grotticella Blanc-Cardini.



Grotticella Blanc-Cardini, east wall with probable phalluses and vulvas (photo: A. Todero).



Grotticella Blanc-Cardini, west wall with deep incisions, included a phallus next to a possible vulva (photo: A. Todero).

Outside of the Balzi Rossi caves, we find fissure edges and holes, or angles in the wall, emphasized by engravings at Caverna delle Arene Candide, Grotta Paglicci and Grotta Armetta, indicating a chronology between 15 500 BP uncalibrated and the end of the Tardiglacial. Phallus representations, on the other hand, are completely absent from the Italian art. Vulvas are known at Grotta Romanelli and Grotta di Pozzo, where they are engraved on the walls. These are dated respectively to approximately 10 000-12 000 BP and 12 000-13 000 BP.

Discussion and conclusion

It was possible to climb up the walls from the Gravettian and Early Epigravettian layers to reach the part where the engravings were made. Nonetheless, the access to the Grotticella Blanc-Cardini did not become easy until the end of the Tardiglacial, when the Final Epigravettian layers were formed. At most, an advanced phase of the Early Epigravettian could also be a candidate. This same chronological framework is indicated by comparisons made with other decorated caves in Italy, suggesting an age between 10 000 and 16 000 BP uncalibrated, and thus 12 000 and 19 000 BP.

This tiny cave that is difficult to access had very little to offer since its small dimensions would have permitted only two to three adults to stand upright and extend an arm to realize the engravings. The function of the site was thus not domestic. At the end of the Pleistocene, the Balzi Rossi cliff face contained a series of caves and shelters that were used and inhabited (Grotte des Enfants, Grotte de Florestan, Riparo Mochi, Grotta del Caviglione, Barma Grande and Baouso da Torre). The Grotticella Blanc-Cardini stands out as it was a sort camarin to the Balzi Rossi caves. Here it is difficult not to remark the remains of specialized activities associated with rituals and linked to a very clear sexual symbolism, reinforced by the form itself of the Grotticella, whose opening evokes that of a gaping vulva in the cliff face.





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