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Short articles



THE DISCOVERY OF A NEW PALEOLITHIC DECORATED CAVE IN ROMANIA (BIHOR DEPARTMENT)

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The cave of Coliboaia, where parietal drawings were discovered on September 20, 2009 by five Romanian speleologists, is located in the Apuseni Mountains (Western Carpathians of Romania). Upper Paleolithic occupations are also known in the region.

In May 2010, during a mission coordinated by Viorel Lascu, president of the Romanian Federation of Speleology, a French team composed of Jean Cottés and Bernard Gély (parietal art), Michel Philippe (bear specialist), Marcel Meyssonier and Valérie Plichon (French Federation of Speleology), and Françoise Prud'homme (Musée de Préhistoire d'Orgnac, Ardèche) went into the cave to make first observations. They were accompanied by Romanian speleologists, including some of the discoverers of the paintings.

Once all of the physical and administrative protection measures had been put into place, the discovery was officially announced on June 11, 2010.

Evidence of bears in the cave

Skulls and other bone remains are visible in many places in the cave, along with remains of activities showing that Ursids occupied the cavity over a long time period, mostly in the upstream part, beyond the passage with a submerged ceiling.

All of the remains are attributed to cave bears (adults, juveniles and very young cubs). Most are covered with a blackish film (manganese bioxyde and or organic material), indicating that they have been in the river bed for a long time.

Bears thus used the cave for a long time as a hibernation den. This explains the presence of many wall surfaces with claw marks or polish resulting from plantigrades rubbing on them, such as in the decorated gallery and in the chaotic chamber at the upstream extremity of the main gallery. This must be taken into account when the site is studied in order to differentiate the traces left by humans and bears and to determine if there is evidence of interactions between them.



Rhinoceros head in right profile (around 30 cm long). If it is not due to erosion, the very long nasal horn was left "open" (photo: A. Posmosanu / Romanian Federation of Speleology).

The decorated gallery

The drawings are preserved in a high gallery, 6 or 7 meters above the current river bed. Many others may have been destroyed by water flow in the lower parts. We access the gallery by climbing a small stalagmite waterfall that probably covers clay ledges. The entrance to the gallery is slightly lower than the ground of the decorated zone.

On the two walls, there is bear polish and a few claw marks, some of which traverse the art, while only a few bones are directly visible. The right wall upon entering, which is mostly vertical, appears to be better adapted to decoration and is indeed that on which there is a greater number of drawings. No artifacts have been found so far.

Description of the art works

The black drawings, made with a wood charcoal crayon, represent a bison, a horse, an undetermined figure (horse or feline), one, or perhaps two, bear heads, two rhinoceros heads, other undetermined lines and a few engravings. They are located on the two walls of the gallery with no intended symmetry, except perhaps in the deep part (horse and rhinoceros facing each other).

The homogeneity of the decoration is evident: black linear lines, animals reduced to protomes in right profile, the use of natural reliefs (outlines integrating the faults in the wall or framed on recesses, ...).

Our first hypothesis, based on stylistic and thematic analyses, and in particular the clear dominance of “dangerous” animals, is that these images were made during an early phase of Paleolithic art. This opinion was confirmed by two radiocarbon dates: $27\,870 \pm 250$ BP (GifA11002) for an undetermined animal and $31\,640 \pm 390$ BP (GifA11001) for a sample of charcoal collected below.

Research, education and development

The study of this cave will be coordinated by the Tarii Crisurilor museum in Oradea and the archaeologist, Călin Ghemiș, under the scientific supervision of Jean Clottes, in collaboration with Romanian scientists and speleologists, and in agreement with the Apuseni Natural Park. A collaboration agreement between the Museum and Orgnac – Grand Site de France®, Prehistoric cave and Museum, signed in April 2010, will permit a French-Romanian collaboration for the karstological, paleontological and archeological studies of Coliboaia and its context.

The main objective of this global study is to identify the remains of Paleolithic human activities and to establish the chronological and paleoenvironmental framework of the site. In parallel, studies of the traces and bone remains left by Ursids will be conducted. All of these new data will serve as the basis for a comparative approach to other sites in the region.

This is the first time that parietal art this old has been indisputably identified in central or eastern Europe.





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