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directed by  
Jean CLOTTE

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Short articles



## GROTTA DI POZZO (AQ, CENTRAL ITALY), A CAVE DECORATED WITH A “WOMAN’S TOUCH”

Margherita MUSSI

Grotta di Pozzo, in the center of the Italian peninsula, is a rock shelter 13 m long and 4 m deep (figure A). The Upper Paleolithic levels are dated from 23 000 to 14 000 cal BP. They contain an Early Epipaleolithic lithic industry with shouldered pieces, followed by a Final Epigravettian industry. The Late Dryas is represented by a very poor level, overlain by a snail shell layer with a Sauveterrian industry and a few mixed artefacts from the Neolithic. In the slope, the levels date up to 20 000 cal BP.

The semicircular shelter ends with a small vertical wall at least one meter high, on which the parietal works are found at a regular distance of 2-3 m from each other, and at the same height:

1. horizontal incision – 47 × 5 × 5 mm – just next to a poorly preserved part of the wall;
2. vertical vulva number 1 (figure B), in low-relief, 90 mm tall, with a relief varying from 15 to 35 mm. It is symmetrical, in the form of an elongated triangle surrounding a central hole, whose origin is natural, in the upper part. The surface is polished, but marks when the stone was worked are visible on the surrounding wall;
3. vertical vulva no. 2 (figure C) – 50 mm tall and up to 20 mm wide – made from a natural crack on a part of the wall that creates a relief. The surface is polished, but laterally, we still see the deep parallel grooves that accentuate the relief;
4. female silhouette of the Gönnersdorf-Lalinde type (figure D), 75 mm tall, and made on a vertical ridge on the wall using percussion and abrasion. In front, it is partially delimited by a vertical, wide and shallow groove.

The vertical vulvas nos. 1 and 2 can be compared to those at Gouy and Bédeilhac. In Italy, some engravings at the entrance of Grotta Romanelli may be similar, but no Paleolithic figures with relief are known. The Gönnersdorf-Lalinde type, a theme that has been identified across all of western-central Europe, is present in Italy at Grotta Romanelli.

While there are no similarities with Holocene art, the themes at Magdalenian sites in France and the age of Gönnersdorf-Lalinde type figures, between 15 500 and 13 000 cal BP [personal communication Bosinski], suggest that they can be attributed to the Late Glacial period. The elements found are situated at the height of a human relative to the Final Epigravettian levels, dated to between 16 000 and 14 000 cal BP. Their position would be difficult to reach from the levels containing an Early Epigravettian industry. They thus most likely belong to the upper levels, whose dates indeed correspond to those of the Gönnersdorf-Lalinde. Finally, the consistent high position and the thematic coherence suggest a single phase of realization, or at least different moments within a short time period.

At the foot of this wall in full daylight, there are hearths and domestic structures. The hunted fauna is dominated by chamois and red deer, but other species are present as well (marmots, birds and trout).



A. General view of Grotta di Pozzo. The parietal art works were discovered on the vertical wall in the back, under which we see the beginning of the ceiling of the back part of the cave, which is filled with sediments.



B. Vulva no. 1.



C. Vulva no. 2.



D. Silhouette of the Gönnersdorf-Lalinde type.

For this parietal art with a very explicit feminine nature, fully in the habitat zone of the site, hypotheses referring to erotic activities or paleo-pornography, such as those proposed by D. Guthrie do not appear valid. The position opposite a fully open porch does not argue in favor of a sanctuary, as defined by Leroi-Gourhan, nor of any interpretation involving paleo-shamanism, as described by Clottes and Lewis-Williams. We must also consider the symbolic distribution of the space within Grotta de Pozzo: the two vulvae were created by modifying natural features of the wall, a practice well known in Paleolithic art, indicating that this location itself was seen to represent the female world. The function of the cave, or at least this part of the cave, must be taken into account. There is no current evidence to indicate that this location was dedicated to activities concerning only women, such as puberty rituals. The presence of complete human groups is suggested by the archaeological remains (habitat structures, diverse tools and diverse resource procurement). The decorated wall, with a clear female signature, could thus correspond to division of the daily space according to the sex of the occupants, as was practiced in numerous pre-industrial societies. The back of Grotta di Pozzo, near the hearths and other domestic features, would thus be associated with the females.





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