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Decorated plaquettes from Magdalenian habitation floors in the Lower Gallery at La Garma (Cantabria, Spain)*

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Abstract

The Lower Gallery at La Garma is a cave whose entrance became blocked near the end of the Late Glacial period, sealing off hundreds of square metres of Middle Magdalenian habitation floors. Among the different portable artefacts found on these floors are one very characteristic type: calcite plaquettes decorated with engravings representing animals such as bison and deer, anatomical parts (heads, above all), and an anthropomorph. They also contain non-figurative designs, in the form of different kinds of grids of intercrossing lines. To date, seventeen engraved plaquettes have been found in Zone IV of the cave, and the perspectives for future research are excellent, if we consider that the floors in the Lower Gallery contain thousands of potential surfaces for portable art. The outstanding state of conservation of these occupation floors, which have remained intact since their formation about 16,500 years ago, allows us to study these Magdalenian objects in their archaeological context. Although the study of Zone IV has not been completed yet, the available evidence suggests that these plaquettes, together with other portable art objects made from organic materials, were produced, used and abandoned in the cave, finally being added to the thick carpet of remains covering the habitation floors.

Resumen – Las plaquetas decoradas en los suelos de habitación magdalenienses de la Galería Inferior de La Garma (Cantabria, España)

La Galería Inferior de La Garma es una cueva cuya entrada original quedó sellada en un momento avanzado del Tardiglaciar, encerrando cientos de metros cuadrados de suelos de habitación del Magdaleniense Medio. Entre los diversos elementos muebles que integran esos suelos se encuentra un tipo muy característico: plaquetas de concreción estalagmítica decoradas con grabados que representan animales como bisontes y ciervos, partes anatómicas (sobre todo cabezas) y un antropomorfo. Contienen también diseños no figurativos, a modo de entramados de líneas de formas diversas. Hasta el momento se han documentado 17 plaquetas grabadas en la Zona IV y las perspectivas de la investigación son verdaderamente excelentes teniendo en cuenta que en los suelos de la Galería Inferior hay miles de estos potenciales soportes para el arte mueble. El excepcional estado de conservación de esos suelos de ocupación, que han permanecido intactos desde su formación hace unos 16.500 años, nos permiten estudiar estas objetos del repertorio magdaleniense en su contexto arqueológico. Aunque el análisis de la Zona IV no se ha completado aún, diversos indicios indican que estas plaquetas, como otros objetos de arte mobiliar sobre materiales orgánicos, fueron aquí elaborados, utilizados y abandonados, quedando finalmente incorporados a la densa alfombra de restos que constituye el suelo de habitación.

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Résumé – Les plaquettes décorées des sols d'habitat magdaléniens de la Galerie inférieure de La Garma (Cantabria, Espagne)

La Galerie inférieure de La Garma est une grotte dont l'entrée originale a été fermée à un moment avancé du Tardiglaciaire, scellant des centaines de mètres carrés de sols d'habitat du Magdalénien moyen. Parmi les divers éléments du mobilier présent sur ces sols se trouve un type d'objets très caractéristique. Il s'agit de plaquettes faites de concrétions stalagmitiques, décorées de fines gravures qui représentent une thématique animale très variée avec des figures complètes de bison et de cerf, des parties anatomiques – notamment des têtes - et un anthropomorphe. Elles comportent aussi des dessins schématiques, voire des entrelacs de lignes de formes diverses. Jusqu'à présent, nous avons étudié 17 plaquettes ornées dans la Zone IV, et les perspectives de la recherche sont vraiment excellentes si on considère que les sols comprennent des milliers de ces supports éventuels pour l'art mobilier. L'état de conservation vraiment extraordinaire des sols, restés intacts depuis leur formation il y a environ 16 500 ans, nous permet d'étudier ces pièces du mobilier magdalénien dans leur contexte archéologique. Bien que l'analyse du site ne soit pas encore fini, des indices divers indiquent que ces plaquettes, comme d'autres objets d'art mobilier, furent élaborées sur place, utilisées et abandonnées, s'incorporant finalement, comme les autres déchets, dans la dense nappe de vestiges qui constituent les sols d'habitat.

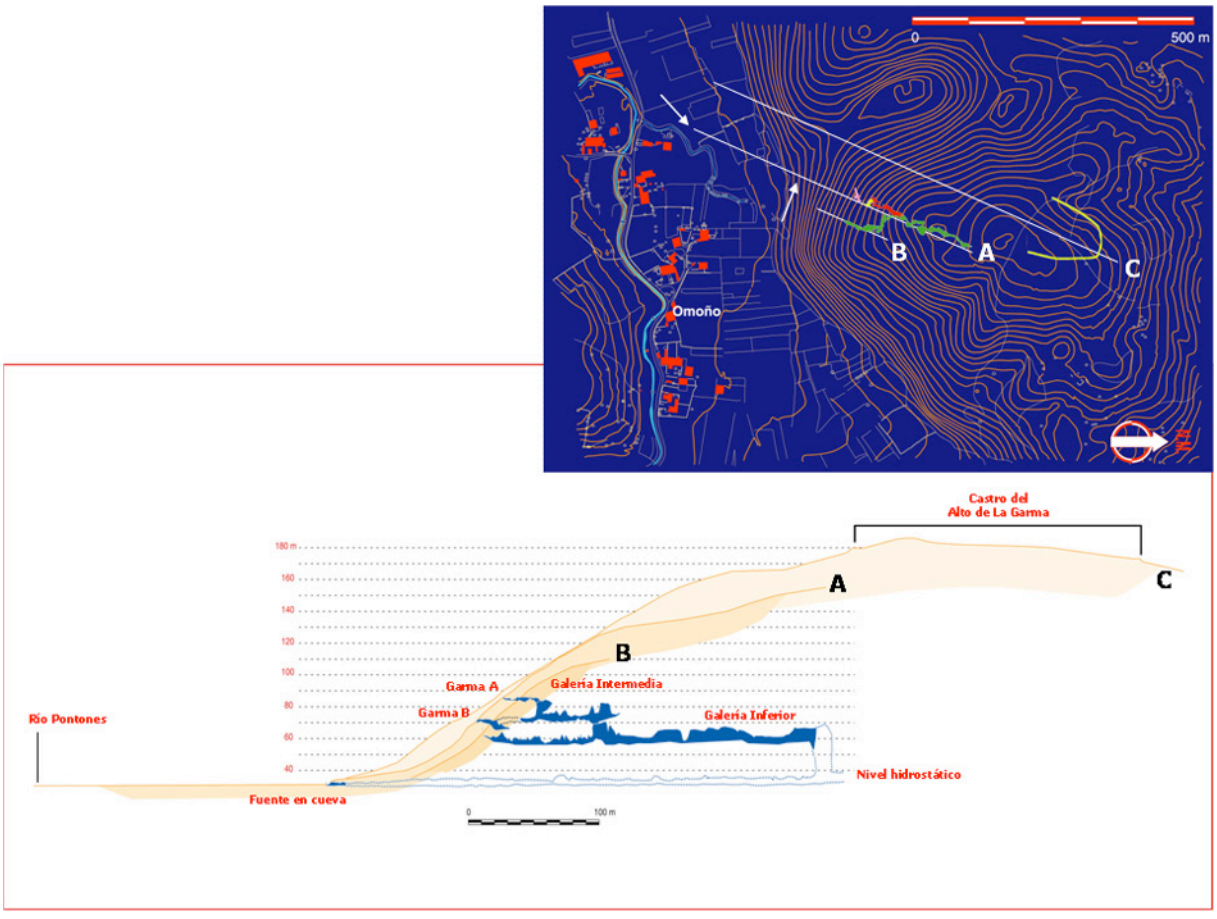


Fig. 1. Topographic map and transverse section of La Garma Hill, indicating the main archaeological sites. *(© La Garma Research Team / Luis Teira.)*

1. The Lower Gallery in La Garma Archaeological Complex

La Garma is the name of a hill, 186m high, located on the southern side of a small littoral ridge, near the mouth of the River Miera, to the south-east of the Bay of Santander and 5km from the present coast-line. This hill, made of Lower Cretaceous (Middle Albian and Lower Bedoulian) limestone, contains ten caves with archaeological deposits, representing all the stages of human occupation known in the region, from the first populations to the Middle Ages. In addition, the top of the hill is occupied by a fortified Iron Age settlement (Fig. 1). The hill is listed as an Archaeological Zone and has been given the maximum level of protection within Spanish legislation on cultural heritage. In July 2008 it was added to UNESCO's list of World Heritage, together with another sixteen caves in northern Spain, as part of the property named "Altamira Cave and Palaeolithic Cave Art in Northern Spain" (Ontañón coord. 2008; Ontañón 2009; http://whc.unesco.org/).



Fig. 2. Plan of the Lower Gallery of La Garma, indicating the sectors in the cave with archaeological floors. *(© La Garma Research Team / Luis Teira.)*

Since 1996, this archaeological ensemble is being studied by a large pluri-disciplinary team coordinated by the *Instituto Internacional de Investigaciones Prehistóricas de Cantabria* under the supervision of Pablo Arias and Roberto Ontañón (Arias *et al.* 1997, 1999; Arias & Ontañón 2008).

The Lower Gallery, a large cave sealed off by natural causes in the late Pleistocene, is one of the sites comprising this impressive karst complex. Its natural entrance, now blocked off, was located on the southern side of the hill, some 55m above sea level and about 20m above the valley floor near the village of Omoño. Modern access is extremely difficult as the gallery is reached via galleries on a higher level which are inter-connected. The only useable entrance today is almost 30m higher and it is necessary to cover several hundreds of metres of cave passages and descend two shafts to reach the Lower Gallery. This is a practically straight passage, about 300m long. It is a large passage although, as usually occurs in this type of cave, it varies in morphology along its length (Fig. 2). The roof is generally very high (over 15m in some places) as a result of the collapse of older high levels, of which evidence can still be seen in the form of side platforms. The floor is generally horizontal and it is easy to move along the gallery apart from in some sections with a low roof and others that are occupied by boulder piles. The main difficulty for moving through the cave are in fact the abundant and delicate archaeological deposits that cover much of the cave floor, especially in the part nearest the old entrance, and these make it impossible to access large areas of the floor and walls. This is no small

problem, as the walls contain a magnificent ensemble of Palaeolithic cave art, consisting of over 500 graphic units whose full documentation awaits progress in the study of the floor deposits (Arias *et al.* 1996; González 2003).



Fig. 3. View of the Middle Magdalenian settlement floors on the first sector of the cave (Zone I). *(© Pedro Saura Ramos.)*

The particular conditions of isolation are what have enabled the conservation of the Lower Gallery (a true "closed deposit") and its outstanding Middle Magdalenian habitation deposits, which cover different parts of the cave floor, with a total surface area of over 600m^2. These consist of an enormous amount of the remains of human activity – mostly animal bones, but also lithic and osseous industry – and also several structures and artificial features (stone structures, pits, and accumulations of objects) (Fig. 3). The available radiocarbon determinations attribute the observable part of these deposits to the Middle Magdalenian, about 14,000-13,500 years BP (about 14,500 cal BC). As mentioned above, this enormous occupation floor is associated with a large ensemble of Palaeolithic parietal art, especially rich in the first part of the cave. The art belongs to a very long time-span, about 20,000 years. Therefore, although it is partly contemporary with the deposit seen on the cave floor, it goes back much further in time than the occupation floors. Not only the final products of artistic activity have been recorded, that is, the depictions, but also evidence of work prior to the production of the paintings: drips and stains of pigment and even "palettes" for the preparation of the paint have been documented on the floor in different parts of the cave.

Finally, evidence of human activity attributable to the early Middle Ages (seventh-ninth centuries AD) has also been found, in the form of a large amount of charcoal

dispersed on the floor and concentrated in hearths, but especially the remains of five human skeletons belonging to juvenile male individuals, some of them adorned with Visigothic ornaments. Other signs of the human use of the Lower Gallery are isolated remains of bovid limbs (bison), several piles of broken pieces of stalagmite and, above all, a number of isolated foot-prints or groups of them in areas with a soft floor. This brief summary of the anthropogenic contents of the cave gives a simple idea of the outstanding conservation conditions and, consequently, of the extreme fragility of the archaeological ensemble inside it (Arias *et al.* 2004).

The areas with Middle Magdalenian occupation floors are located in three zones: the large original vestibule of the cave (Zone I), a chamber 90m from the former entrance (Zone III) and an area deeper inside the cave, 130m from the entrance (Zone IV).

Zone IV, which is the archaeological context of the materials forming the subject of this paper, exhibits the characteristic shape of the cave: on the west side of the passage, the wall slopes away, forming a side chamber with a low roof (between about 30cm and 1.7m high), a secluded area away from the main route through the cave, some distance from the entrance. An important activity area is visible, with chaotic floors and walls and stalagmites stained with red ochre (Fig. 4). The interim results of the study of this area (Arias, Ontañón *et al*. in press) have revealed some unusual traits for a Magdalenian site in Cantabrian Spain.



Fig. 4. Side view of the central area from Zone IV. *(© Pedro Saura Ramos.)*

The archaeological repertoire is clearly biased towards faunal remains. Bones of horses dominate in the assemblage and make up approximately 60% of the documented material and 70% of the mammals consumed, whereas at any other Magdalenian site in North Spain either red deer or ibex are the main species. Other objects that can be highlighted because of their rarity are, for example, an equid skull with a hole cut in the top of the skull, bones of a cave lion (*Panthera (Leo) spelaea*) with defleshing marks, and two almost whole shelduck skeletons (*Tadorna tadorna* L.) whose bones show no signs of butchery marks or burnt surfaces, which suggests the birds were deposited on the floor whole. The implements recorded include bone needles, the remains of a necklace made with marine shells and, above all, portable art objects: a spatula made from a rib with the figure of an ibex carved in low relief; a horse incisor with a pointed root, decorated with an engraving representing the head of a horse; a rib with the minutely engraved profile of a horse's head; a perforated object with a depiction of a bear; a "bull-roarer" and a rod made from bone, both decorated with geometric patterns; and a red deer incisor with a double perforation in its root. In addition, some objects have been observed on vertical speleothems in this chamber, such as a *contour découpé* representing an ibex head, an unfinished pendant made from a carnivore canine tooth and a flint flake pushed into a fissure. In this group of portable art, we should also include the engraved plaquettes being presented here.



Fig. 5. Frontal view of the central area from Zone IV, with the structures IV-A (on the left) and IV-B (on the right side). *(© Pedro Saura Ramos.)*



Fig. 6. Magdalenian engravings of two horses on the roof over the structure IV-B. *(© Pedro Saura Ramos.)*

2. The decorated plaquettes

2.1. Discovery and research

During the 2005 fieldwork season in Zone IV of the Lower Gallery, several small stone plaquettes were discovered, decorated with engravings. Plaquettes of this kind, made of calcite and flowstone, are very common on the Magdalenian floors in the Lower Gallery, and in previous seasons it had already been noted that some of them displayed lines, although no significant shapes or patterns had been identified. This discovery forced the design of a new strategy to study the floors, paying greater attention to this kind of object.

The study process, currently in progress, consists in the first place of examining exhaustively *in situ* all the plaquettes on the Magdalenian occupation floors. In order to study this peculiar material in detail, Alexandra Güth, a graduate in prehistory from the University of Cologne with experience in this kind of portable art object, joined the team studying the cave. Once the existence of decoration had been determined, the engravings were recorded with detailed digital photographs and by tracing each plaquette on plastic film. In the next step, the technical analysis and graphic interpretation was carried out by applying computerised techniques for working with images (by Luis Teira) and for micro-topography (by Nicholas Mélard).

To date, 17 decorated plaquettes have been studied in Zone IV in the Lower Gallery. They contain animal figures, an anthropomorph and numerous non-figurative designs. It has also been seen that more decorated plaquettes exist in this chamber and in other parts of the Lower Gallery, and they will be studied in future years. The perspectives for research are therefore excellent.

2.2. General Description

2.2.1. Raw material and use of the objects

In the Lower Gallery at La Garma, Magdalenian artists used a rich source of raw material located in the cave itself: the plaquettes of calcite and flat pieces of flowstone that make up the floor in large areas of the cave. There could be no greater immediacy in the catchment of resources. However, this economy of means would influence the use that could be made of the surfaces. The size, shape and roughness of the pieces of calcite being used conditioned the production and results of the decoration enormously, since these have small, irregular useful surfaces, in unequal planes and on different levels. The engravings therefore had to adapt to all these irregularities, and display discontinuity and deviations that are not due to the artist's lack of skill but to the defective surfaces (see *infra* Fig. 9).

2.2.2. Techniques

All the decoration seen to date was produced by the technique of engraving. Within this, however, two main categories can be differentiated: deep engraving and a fine and superficial engraving. The use of one of these types seems to exclude the other as they are not found together in the same depiction, although they do appear in different depictions on the same plaquette (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Plaquette with a depiction of the rear part of an ungulate deeply engraved and several thin lines. *(© La Garma Research Team / Luis Teira.)*

2.2.3. Themes

The plaquettes studied to date offer a wide range of themes, including figurative and abstract depictions. Among the first there are animal figures like red deer, aurochs and bison (Fig. 8a) and also anatomical parts – mainly representing heads. The ensemble also includes a curious anthropomorph, a hybrid figure combining a generally animal form, an ibex in this case, and some human body parts; an arm and a hand (Fig. 9). The non-figurative patterns consist of inter-crossing lines in geometrical forms and different shapes. Groups of lines forming schematic figures have also been observed, but have still not been interpreted (Fig. 10).

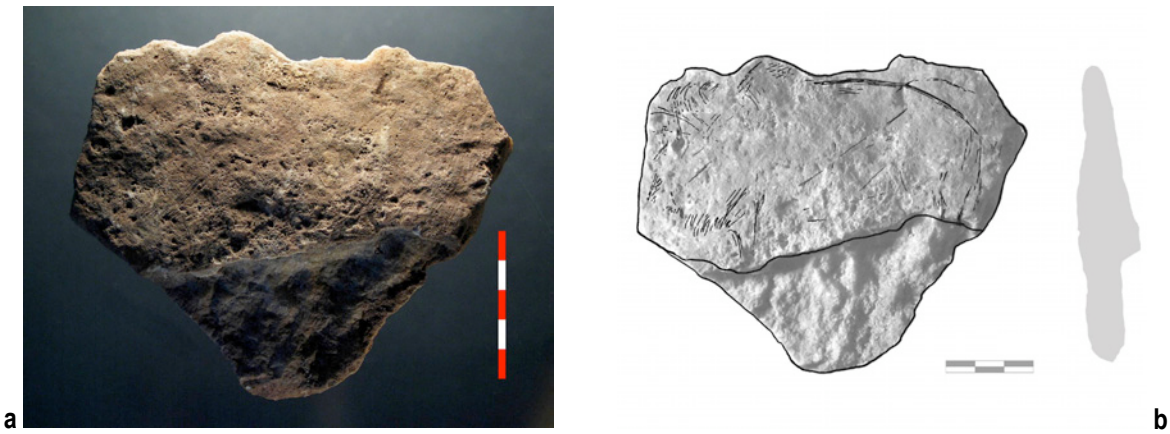


Fig. 8. Plaquette with engraved figure of a bison: **a.** photo; **b.** Synthetical image *(© La Garma Research Team / a. Luis Teira; b. Nicholas Mélard.)*



Fig. 9. Plaquette with anthropomorphic figure (hybrid of ibex and human). *(© La Garma Research Team / Luis Teira.)*



Fig. 10. Plaquette with geometric motifs and other figurative or schematic designs. *(© La Garma Research Team / Luis Teira.)*

2.2.4. Composition

The position of these themes on the surface of the plaques is also varied. Some figures are in isolation, alone on their plaquettes, whereas in other complex compositions numerous lines, occasionally including figurative depictions, are superimposed upon one another (Fig. 11). The former suggest the hypothesis of a single decorative moment (a single use of the plaquette) while the latter seem to suggest a repetition of the decorative act; a re-use of the objects. An understanding of these true engraved palimpsests with micro-topography techniques will be able to determine the order of the superimpositions of lines and reconstruct the procedure followed in the decoration of the plaquettes.



Fig. 11. Plaquette with decoration made by deep engraving figuring the contour of an ungulate and other geometric patterns. *(© La Garma Research Team / Luis Teira.)*

2.2.5. Chronocultural contextualisation

This kind of portable art is not common in the archaeological record of Cantabrian Spain. The main examples known until now were found in Magdalenian levels in the caves of La Paloma, Las Caldas and Tito Bustillo, in Asturias (Hernández Pacheco 1922; Barandiarán 1973; Moure 1982; Corchón 1986) and amount to several tens of decorated plaquettes. Isolated examples of this kind have been found at other sites in Cantabrian Spain, such as Cueva de Sovilla in Cantabria (González *et al.* 1994) and Ekain in Guipúzcoa (Altuna & Apellániz 1978). In the middle and late Magdalenian in other parts of Iberia, collections of this kind of portable art have been found at a few sites, particularly at Cueva de Parpalló in Valencia (Pericot 1942; Villaverde 1994). In France and Germany, some large ensembles have been found at, for example, La Marche (Vienne) (Pales & Tassin de Saint-Pereuse 1969, 1976) or the open-air site of Gönnersdorf (Rhineland-Palatinate) (Bosinski 1979), where hundreds of engraved plaques have been recovered.

Within this general context, the case of Zone IV in the Lower Gallery at La Garma may be set apart out for several reasons:

a) The unusual raw material used. For this kind of portable art object, normally rocks are used that split with flat surfaces (slate, schist, sandstone) and which therefore provide excellent surfaces for this type of decoration.

b) The abundance of the plaquettes themselves, as there are thousands all over the cave floors. This means that the inventory of decorated pieces might increase exponentially in the course of research. The ensemble at La Garma may therefore reach or surpass the numbers in the main collections known in Cantabrian Spain and approach such large collections as at the French and German sites cited above.

c) The presence of unusual depictions like the anthropomorph combining human and caprid features.

d) Finally, the association of these objects with an exceptionally well-conserved archaeological context on the surface of the cave, which will enable us to propose testable hypotheses about the manufacture and use of this kind of archaeological heritage. The occupation floor includes varied remains of human activity, with

large concentrations of portable art objects, parietal art and constructions in the cave interior. These different forms of evidence suggest that the plaquettes, like the other portable art objects, were made, used and finally discarded in the cave, being added, like any other artefact, to the thick tapestry of remains forming the habitation floors in the Lower Gallery at La Garma. This important aspect will be discussed in the following section.

3. The immediate archaeological context: Zone IV in the Lower Gallery at La Garma. Spatial distribution of the remains: organisation and use of the space

It is perhaps premature to speak about this aspect of the study of Zone IV in the Lower Gallery at La Garma, as the full recording of this archaeological context has still not been completed and, in consequence, it is not possible to apply quantitative analytical techniques to obtain a rigorous understanding, both descriptive and explanatory, of the spatial distribution of the evidence. However, with precaution, we can make an interim qualitative description based on the direct observation of the reality being interpreted (basically through the study of the distribution plans: Fig. 12), which act as a starting point to propose working hypotheses which should be validated or not with the application of the appropriate analytical tools for the object of study (Ontañón 2003; Arias & Ontañón 2005).

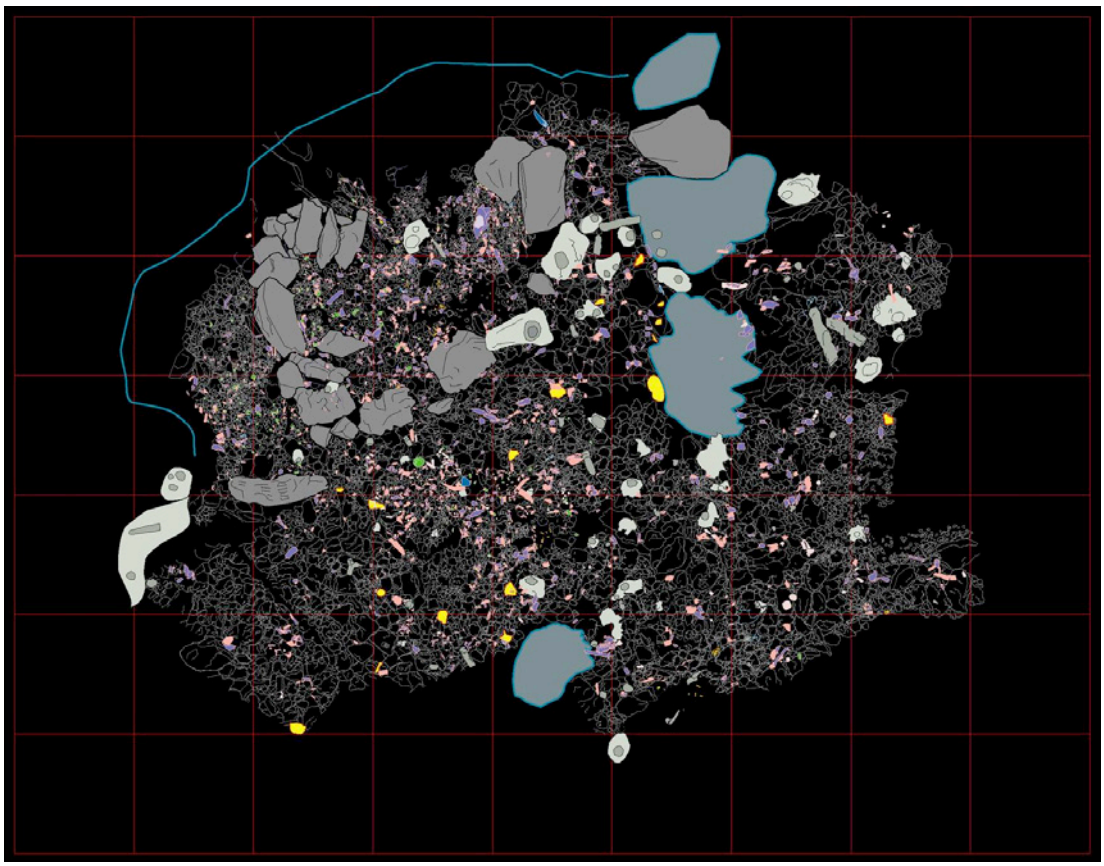


Fig. 12. Plan of the central area from Zone IV, representing the stalagmite pillars (in blue colour), the IV-A and IV-B structures (in grey) and the distribution of the archaeological items that constitute the Middle Magdalenian floor: in yellow, the decorated plaquettes; in dark blue, the portable art on bone and antler; in green, lithic industries; in purple and rose, the animal bones. *(© La Garma Research Team / Luis Teira.)*

This commentary on Zone IV in the Lower Gallery at La Garma should begin with a mention of the layout of this part of the cave. As stated above, this sector is located 130m from the original cave entrance, within a section of the passage with a low roof, where an adult is unable to stand upright. This characteristic of its isolation and distance from the main habitation area, and its location in a sheltered, spatially constricted area, where it is difficult to move about the cave, are the two main traits in connection with the spatial organisation of this activity sector. The distribution of the archaeological materials is therefore restricted, in the first place, by the part of the cave chosen by the Magdalenian occupants, within an area of a little over 100m^2 which indeed has few advantages for its occupation.

The geomorphological characteristics of this sector of the cave are also relevant for both the horizontal and vertical distribution of the archaeological remains. Unlike other well-documented examples of habitation floors in caves and in the open-air (as in the Paris Basin or the sites on the loess of eastern Europe), where the sedimentary matrix holding the remains is fine and forms a more or less regular and uniform surface, the floor in Zone IV is profoundly irregular. It is formed by a layer several centimetres thick, made up of fragments of speleothems in different positions, on top of which and in the spaces between them the archaeological objects (including the decorated plaquettes, which formed part of the floor itself and in turn are a part of the archaeological record) were deposited. This essentially uneven surface has obviously influenced the depositional dynamics of the remains, and has clearly limited their post-depositional movements. This is an obvious advantage for the study of contexts like this, which can be regarded as mostly undisturbed. On the other hand, it should be borne in mind that this kind of floor, consisting of overlapping calcite plaques with hardly any sediment between them, has permitted certain vertical movement of the smaller artefacts, which without any kind of obstacle have been able to fall to the base of the deposit.

However, the fundamental factor in the spatial distribution of the archaeological remains found in Zone IV is, naturally, anthropic. This is seen above all in the transformation of this part of the cave by dividing it up with stone structures. This procedure of spatial organisation, veritable prelude to architecture, is uncommon but by no means exceptional at sites of a similar chronology. The closest example is Zone I in the same Lower Gallery (Ontañón 2003; see *supra*), while other cases are, for example, the massive constructions in Levels 4 and 6 in Cueva de El Juyo in Cantabria (Freeman & González Echegaray 1984), the stone rings at Étiolles in the Paris Basin (Taborin 1983; Pigeot 1987) and, on a larger scale, the stone structures in the settlements in the middle Rhine Valley (Bosinski 1979; Terberger 1997). The construction of these enclosures has had direct consequences in the distribution of the remains on the habitation floors. Indeed, notable differences can be seen in the general distribution of the materials and also in the different categories of remains. This can be explained by the combined action of the “barrier effect” introduced by the structures themselves and the differences in the dynamics of the use of the divided up areas. In this way, human action has doubly influenced the formation of this archaeological deposit and, consequently, the position of the remains being studied here, the result of the process of production and disposal of portable objects in an artificially segmented space.

Between Structures IV-A and IV-B, and even more so, between these and the surrounding areas, at first sight clear differences can be seen in the formation of the floors, whose spatial boundaries are defined precisely by the walls of the structures.

Thus, the interior of the built enclosures has a finer, earthy floor with small-sized inclusions, whereas the floor of surrounding areas consists of a chaotic mass of speleothem fragments piled up on each other. This contrast between the interior of the structures and the surrounding area is due, in the first place, to the way the enclosures were built, particularly in the case of IV-C, by clearing the floor and accumulating the broken pieces of calcite around the cleared area. However, it can also be interpreted as due to the different dynamics of the use of the area thus divided up, characterised by the cleaning-up activities inside the structures which kept them clear of remains, whereas the surrounding areas accumulated the objects produced there and also the ones emptied from the enclosures. It is precisely in the areas outside the structures where most of the archaeological remains are concentrated.

These dynamics of spatial use have been documented at numerous open-air habitation sites, where “working posts” and “rest areas” are differentiated by the vivid contrasts in the different types of accumulation of waste (Julien *et al*. 1988; Audouze & Enloe 1997; Olive *et al*. 2000). This is particularly noticeable in connection with some of the categories of remains found on the floors in Zone IV. Above all, this is the case of the lithic artefacts.

This industrial category (a little over 300 pieces have been recorded to date, representing different phases of the flint *chaîne opératoire*) is clearly concentrated inside Structures IV-A and IV-B. Lithic pieces are rare outside these structures, and only a small group of remains have been found to the south of Structure IV-B. This spatial pattern suggests the centralisation of the few lithic reduction tasks carried out inside these enclosures. Little more can be said about this dispersion of the evidence in the lack of a detailed spatial study that will enable a quantitative assessment of this apparent distribution and determine the relationship between the distribution and the operative chain or chains that lie behind the documented position of the remains (location of the different kinds of remains, refits, etc).

The pieces and fragments of bones, which form the largest part of the objects on these occupation floors, do not seem to exhibit such a clear distributional trend as seen in the case of the lithic assemblage. They are found apparently at random all over the occupied area, as the remains of food immediately discarded after being consumed. No significant differences can be observed between inside the enclosures and in the surrounding areas. The same can be said of the portable art in bone and antler, located both inside Structure IV-B and outside it, although the small number of artefacts does not allow a significant quantitative assessment of their spatial distribution. Despite this, it seems that most of the decorated pieces, and especially the objects of adornment, are concentrated inside Structure IV-B and the space between this and Structure IV-C.

With the available information, it may therefore be concluded that certain material categories, such as the lithic assemblage, are distributed in a non-random way, in common with other studies of the spatial organisation of Palaeolithic habitats. The other main category, among the objects documented in Zone IV, the subject of this paper, the decorated plaquettes, also appear to exhibit a biased distribution pattern, although completely the opposite to the lithic assemblage. All the examples found to date are found among the objects covering the floor outside the structures, forming part of the carpet of remains, like any other kind of waste. This pattern of the disposal of decorated plaquettes, carelessly abandoned on the floor, is not an exception, as it has also been documented at other habitation sites in caves and in the open-air, as is described in the next section.

4. Comparison with other objects in Cantabrian Spain and their contexts

The archaeological site of Cueva de Tito Bustillo in Asturias provides highly interesting information about the context of this kind of portable art object. According to A. Moure (1982), the rich collection of portable art found in the cave, consisting of 83 plaquettes, of which 25 were decorated, 12 of them with animals, comes from an Upper Magdalenian "living area", with numerous hearths and other evidence of intensive human use *in situ* (Moure & González Morales 1988), including a structure described as a stone floor. All the plaquettes were found in a surface area of less than $5m^2$, around an elongated pit (Moure 1985).

Using the documentation obtained by T. de Aranzadi y J.-M. de Barandiarán at the site of Urtiaga in Guipúzcoa (Barandiarán 1947), C. González Sainz (1984) succeeded in reconstructing a large portable art ensemble spatially. It consists of thirteen plaquette fragments, four of them decorated, located in Sectors 7 to 9 in the cave, within a Late-Final Magdalenian stratum (Level D). The decorated fragments originally belonged to a large plaque that broke before the engravings were made. Judging by the stylistic diversity of the depictions, they were probably drawn by different artists although, owing to the context in which they were found, they must be approximately coetaneous. The concentration of plaquettes is located at the end of the passage, in the sector of the deposit with the greatest density of archaeological remains, which suggests it was an intensely occupied area. González suggests the possibility that the plaquettes come from a stone floor, possibly laid over an area of the cave where water tended to pond.

The plaquette with drawings of a stag, ibex and horse from another important Late-Final Magdalenian deposit in Guipúzcoa, Level VIa in Cueva de Ekain, represents the opposite case to Urtiaga. This object, broken after it was decorated, was found in seven fragments, scattered across a large part of the level (Altuna & Apellániz 1978).

However, this category of portable art consisting of decorated stones does not only seem to be linked to so-called "living areas". In Level IXc in the deposit in Cueva de Las Caldas (Oviedo, Asturias), dated to the start of the Middle Magdalenian occupation, a group of selected objects were deposited in the semi-flooded area at the back of the occupied zone: Chamber II (Corchón 1992: 37 & 43-44, 1994: 249). The context, interpreted as a ritual deposit, included, as well as engraved sandstone plaquettes, horse and cervid hemi-mandibles, an aurochs horn, bear teeth, horse incisors engraved with angular patterns, flint cores and some tools (end-scrapers, burins and retouched blades).

5. Some final considerations

It seems possible to propose, in view of the available archaeological evidence, that this kind of decorated objects is apparently associated with areas of group activity which in a general way can be classed as habitation areas, although with some reserves.

Zone IV in the Lower Gallery at La Garma, for example, cannot really be considered a living area. It is located in a deep part of the cave, in total darkness, under a low roof where it is difficult to move about, and cannot be regarded as a habitation area, despite the hundreds of remains of food found there and the solid constructions that divide it up artificially. The dense concentration of portable and

parietal art in close spatial association (as for example at Bédeilhac (Jauze & Sauvet 1991; Sauvet 2004) and the presence of truly unusual objects in the archaeological record (such as the cut equid skull or the shelduck skeletons) are evidence to be added to the characterisation of an underground area where not only anatomical parts of ungulates (above all of horses, the animal that together with ibex dominates in the thematic repertoire of the portable art in this zone) were processed and consumed. In addition, objects of adornment and portable art were made, used and abandoned there, parietal art was executed and unusual faunal remains were manipulated there, all within enclosures that increased the segmentation of an area that was already remote and separate from the rest of the cave.

The model of the use of the decorated plaquettes seems to follow a common pattern whose main phases were selecting the plaquette, transforming it through its decoration, and finally disposing it by abandoning it on the floor where the group carried out their everyday activities, simply mixed with other waste. This “loss of value” of the engraved objects after they had been created has also been noted at some sites excavated decades ago, where the spatial distribution of the remains was not documented exhaustively, such as at Parpalló (Pericot 1942: 336, cit. in Villaverde 2005).

Some of these objects have been found whole and others broken at a time after their decoration. Researchers in Cantabrian Spain, such as S. Corchón (1998) have wondered whether in cases like the cited Level VIa at Ekain or some of the plaquettes in Chamber II in Las Caldas, these are merely accidental breakages or it could be deliberate ritual destruction of objects in the context of certain social acts. The same can be said of the Pyrenean site of Isturitz, where the systematic destruction of objects suggests the existence of some kind of “iconoclast” ritual (Tosello 2005). Another Pyrenean cave, Labastide, provides a good example of this phenomenon, as evidence of the voluntary breakage of plaquettes has been found there (Simonnet 1990). The large ensemble of engraved plaquettes in the cave of Limeuil, re-studied by G. Tosello (2003), throws more light on this matter as it provides evidence of a systematic procedure of use and disposal of this kind of object. In view of these cases of intentional breakage of decorated plaquettes, an opposite hypothesis to the idea of “loss of value” could be proposed, and instead of the disposal of the plaquettes being an insignificant end, in fact it is the act which precisely gives these pieces their definitive significance. Zone IV at La Garma still cannot provide any data that might help to elucidate this point.

In contrast, examples like the large decorated cobble-stone at the site of Étiolles (Essone), which formed part of an excellently conserved open-air habitation context, seems to suggest that some of these objects were treated very differently and were carefully deposited in order to aid their conservation (Taborin *et al*. 2001; Tosello 2005). A very similar treatment is sometimes given to portable art objects made from organic raw materials and disposed in small deposits.

It seems possible to state that, in general, this kind of decorated object was mostly related, at least spatially, with the everyday activities of Magdalenian communities, as occurs with other types of portable art objects made from perishable materials. However, unlike some of these, in no case would they be “tools”, artefacts involved in the processes of production or social reproduction (such as decorated utensils or objects of adornment). Therefore, with what purpose were they made, occasionally tens or hundreds of them in the same occupation context? There is no doubt that the decoration would give them a symbolic character, at least during the time when the

engravings were drawn and, in some cases, during the later breakage of the plaquette. However, it does not seem that this attribution lasted very long after the artistic act or following the succession of decoration-destruction actions, as is shown by the finally and definitive functional transformation which led them to being included in such ordinary domestic structures as hearths or even in stone floors covering areas of mud. Unlike parietal art, doubtlessly imbued with a certain intention of permanence, it seems that the symbolic charge of these decorated objects, linked with the very process of creation and destruction, was characterised by its ephemeral nature.

The lack of utilitarian functionality (at least in the "decorative phase"), together with the presence of single decorated plaquettes or groups of them associated with parietal art ensembles or other contexts interpretable as "ritual" reinforces the symbolic attribution of this kind of object. In any case, this dimension of decorated plaquettes, at the same time ordinary and transcendent, warns us against any simplification in the interpretation of the behaviour of Palaeolithic groups who, as we know from other sources of archaeological evidence, is complex enough to combine artistic and utilitarian, or creative and destructive practices, as the study of this aspect of the archaeological record reveals.

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