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AURIGNACIAN GENIUS

**Art, Technology and Society
of the First Modern Humans in Europe**



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EARLY AURIGNACIAN GRAPHIC ARTS IN THE VÉZÈRE VALLEY:

In Search of an Identity?

Raphaëlle BOURRILLON, Randall WHITE

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EARLY AURIGNACIAN GRAPHIC ARTS IN THE VÉZÈRE VALLEY:

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Abstract

Since 2007, programmed excavations directed by R. White in the Aurignacian sites of Blanchard and Castanet have resulted in renewed studies of graphic representations and have led to a new approach to some of the earliest parietal art from a cultural, chronological and environmental perspective. The analysis of the formal and technical artistic characteristics within each archeological context as part of all the known representations on limestone blocks in rock shelter habitation sites in the northern Aquitaine reveals a form of cultural territory.

Although certain graphic, as well as socio-economic choices, seem to be used partly as identity markers, convergences with other European regions can also be observed. These graphic representations thus seem to express both the need to mark out territory and at the same time, to convey a sense of belonging to a wider cultural entity. This dichotomy undoubtedly contributes to the broad stylistic diversity present at the beginning of the Upper Paleolithic. In this paper, we seek to define the reasons for such diversity of behavior and graphic arts within the Aurignacian culture.

Keywords

Aurignacian, parietal art, portable art, living sites, Aquitaine.

Introduction

Since the 1990s, several major discoveries recognized as among the first examples of Aurignacian graphic art have been made in France (Chauvet, l'Aldène, l'Abri Castanet, Baume-Latrone; Ambert *et al.*, 2005; Azéma *et al.*, 2012; Clottes *et al.*, 2001; White *et al.*, 2012), in Germany (Hohle-Fels; Conard, 2009), in Italy (Fumane; Broglio, Gurioli, 2004), in Central Europe (Coliboaia; Clottes *et al.*, 2011) and in the northeast of the Iberian Peninsula (Altixerri B; González-Sainz *et al.*, 2013; [figure 1](#)). These discoveries expand the limited corpus of sites, renew our perspective on early Upper Paleolithic symbolic expressions (Leroi-Gourhan, 1965) and rekindle the debate surrounding their emergence.

In recent years, debates relating to the concept of “modernity” have included a heavy emphasis on symbolic productions (Bar Yosef, 2006; Bon, 2010; Conard, Bolus, 2008; D’Errico *et al.*, 2003; Henshilwood *et al.*, 2002; Higham *et al.*, 2012; Mellars, 2004; Soressi *et al.*, 2007; Szmidsztajn *et al.*, 2010; Teyssandier *et al.*, 2010; White, 2007; Zilhão, 2007). While certain researchers consider that the emergence of traits characterizing this modernity (e.g., reasoned management of resources or production of decorative elements and figurative motifs) are related to *Homo sapiens*, others propose that some of them (particularly ornaments) are also associated with Neanderthals and

affirm that the latter were not influenced by *Homo sapiens* (D’Errico, 2010; Soressi *et al.*, 2007). The emergence of ornament production and geometric motifs before the Upper Paleolithic occurs around 60 000 BP onwards in different places: in the Near East (Qafzeh; Shea, 2001), as in Europe (Bacho Kiro, Ferrassie, Quina, etc.; D’Errico *et al.*, 2003; Verna *et al.*, 2012; Zilhão *et al.*, 2000¹). Only a very small portion of these objects are attributed to Neanderthals and the vast majority of them are ascribed to *Homo sapiens*.



Figure 1 - Inventory of Aurignacian sites in Europe and examples of graphic representations attributed to this period (Map: F. Tessier, modified and adapted by R. Bourrillon; photos and plan: Castanet and Blanchard (unpublished), R. Bourrillon; Chauvet, C. Fritz; Fumane, R. Broglio; Hohle-Fels, H. Jensen; Coliboaia, A. Posmosanu).

On the other hand, the advent of figurative art in Europe is, for the time being, an exclusive characteristic of *Homo sapiens* and is attributed to the Aurignacian.² This occurs “relatively” late (ca. 35 000 BP) in relation to the territorial expansion of *Homo sapiens*. It is characterized by a certain unity as regards the types of figures depicted and, at the same time, by marked stylistic and technical diversity (Broglio *et al.*, 2009; Conard, 2009; Petrognani, 2013; Sauvet *et al.*, 2007; Tosello, Fritz, 2005; White *et al.*, 2012). Diverse hypotheses have been advanced to account for the origin and the expansion³ of the Aurignacian. Debates are often heated and data are still too sparse to fully comprehend even the broad outlines of this culture (Baffier, 2010; Conard *et al.*, 2008; Rigaud, 2001; Slimak *et al.*, 2006; Teyssandier *et al.*, 2010).

Before identifying or determining the emergence and cultural origins of these figurative productions, it is essential to reconsider the very definition of Aurignacian culture and traditions. In addition to pursuing new analyses of the styles and techniques underlying this Aurignacian art, the challenge today is to understand these vehicles of meaning and tradition in their social,

1. Other productions of ornaments and geometric incisions are documented in South Africa between 100 000 and 60 000 BP (sites of Blombos, Klasies River, Diepkloof) and are, on the other hand, all attributed to *Homo sapiens*. On account of these discoveries, some researchers consider that the emergence of human modernity must be sought before this chronological period and in South Africa (D’Errico *et al.*, 2012a and b; Mackay, Welz, 2008; Texier *et al.*, 2010).
2. An anthropomorphic pendant was discovered in the site of Isturitz (Pyrénées Atlantiques) in a layer dated to 37 180 ± 420 BP and would thus belong to the Proto-Aurignacian (Szmidi *et al.*, 2010, White and Normand, this volume).
3. Intrusive, gradualist, diffusionist, multi-faceted innovations (Brun-Ricalens *et al.*, 2007; Kozłowski, 2010; Tartar, 2012; Teyssandier, 2007; Zilhão, 2007).

economix and religious context. Indeed, many ethnographic and anthropological studies point out that symbolic factors play a fundamental role in the organization of societies and are much more than just esthetic expressions (Carpenter, 1973; Godelier, 2007; Whallon, 2006; etc.): “the activities of individuals are largely determined by their social environment, but reciprocally, their activities influence the society in which they live [...]” (Boas, 1927 [2003]: 285).

Due to the presence of different cultures before or during the early Upper Paleolithic (Proto-Aurignacian, Chatelperronian), as well as living sites revealing the whole spectrum of daily activities, rock shelter living sites in the Vézère region are central to defining Aurignacian graphic characteristics and figurative practices and to identifying their structural role in the organization of Aurignacian culture (Bourrillon, White, 2014; Delluc, Delluc, 1991; White *et al.*, 2012; Mensan *et al.*, 2012).

1 - From block to block: a long history

In the Dordogne, the Aurignacian “culture” has been identified at many sites, particularly in rock shelters; most of which are now partially or totally collapsed. These sites were excavated from the first half of the 19th century onwards but remain poorly known. Out of the 45⁴ Aurignacian rock shelters in the region, 13⁵ have yielded fragments of ceilings or semi-portable blocks with bicolored or black figures, engraved or pecked animal or vulvar outlines, as well as cup marks and rings. The remaining 32 rock shelters are not devoid of symbolic activities, as shown by the incisions or decorative elements on osseous objects (e.g., abri Cro-Magnon, Roc de Combe, etc).

The first engraved block was discovered by O. Hauser at the site of Fongal, on May 1 1909, embedded in the occupation layers (figure 2) of the site. Several kilometers away in 1910, in the Castel-Merle Valley, Marcel Castanet unearthed the most important collection of blocks and decorated vault fragments in the famous Aurignacian rock shelters of Blanchard and Castanet (Bourrillon, White, 2014; Delluc, Delluc, 1991); other examples were identified at La Ferrassie by D. Peyrony and L. Capitan in 1912 (Capitan, Peyrony, 1921) and additional discoveries were made at nearby sites in the 1920s (table 1 and figure 3).

The fact that most of these discoveries are from pre-modern excavations raises problems for understanding their archeological contexts. Between 1995 and 1998, then between 2005 and 2013, a French-American team⁶ resumed research in the Castanet and Blanchard rock shelters (Castel-Merle valley). Using innovative recovery methods and modern excavation technologies, these sites have now yielded a precise and well-dated archeological context (by ¹⁴C-AMS⁷), not only for the decorated blocks and fragments but also for all the artefacts, providing evidence of daily activities (Bourrillon *et al.*, in press; Castel, 2011; Chiotti, Cretin, 2011; Mensan *et al.*, 2012; Tartar, 2012; White *et al.*, 2012). Apart from the several thousand provenienced artefacts (lithic and bone industry, fauna, decorative elements, etc.), it is clear that these two shelters hold a major quantitative position with respect to the inventory of Aurignacian decorated blocks and fragments in the Dordogne region (cf. figure 3). The analysis of the archives of M. Castanet and the

4. Cf. Michel, 2010.

5. Belcayre, Blanchard, Castanet, le Cellier, la Ferrassie, Fongal, La Souquette (cf. O’Hara *et al.*, this volume), Laussel, Pataud and Poisson. And sites for which the blocks have disappeared: la Rochette, Lartet, Pasquet.

6. Excavations led by R. White and J. Pèlerin from 1995 to 1998, then by R. White and R. Mensan between 2001 and 2013.

7. For abri Castanet, the latest ¹⁴C-AMS dates place the early Aurignacian occupation of the site in a relatively short period, between 36 940 – 36 510 calBP (68.2% prob.; White *et al.*, 2012).

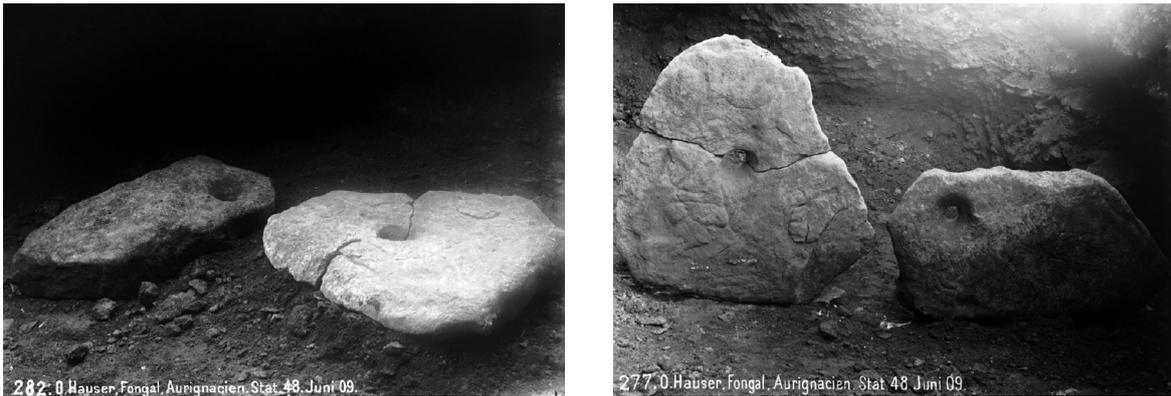


Figure 2 - Decorated blocks discovered in the site of Fongal (archives O. Hauser ; assembled by R. White).
On the first photo, the blocks still seem to be *in situ*.

Year	Site	Number of blocks (in 2013)
1909	Fongal	4
1910-1912	Blanchard	38
1911-1912	Laussel	6
1912	La Ferrassie	29
1911-1912 et 1924-1925	Castanet	36
1921	La Souquette	2
1923	Abri du Renne - Belcayre	1
1927	Abri Cellier	7
1963	Abri Pataud	2

Table 1 - Inventory of blocks and fragments from decorated ceilings in Dordogne since the beginning of the last century.

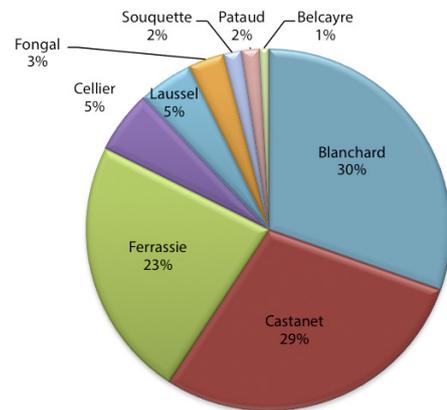


Figure 3 - Percentage of decorated blocks and fragments in rock shelters, site by site, for the whole Aurignacian corpus from the Dordogne (n = 125).

major discovery of new decorated blocks (White *et al.*, 2012; Bourrillon *et al.*, in press), stimulated us to undertake an important re-study of the old collections of decorated blocks in order to better grasp their role in the structure of Aurignacian life. This study involved: 1. Analysis of field archives; 2. High resolution photographs and photogrammetry of the decorated surfaces; 3. Rhodoid sketch of the anthropogenic drawings; 4. X-ray fluorescence analysis to detect colored surfaces; 5. Replicative experiments; 6. Reconstruction of the graphic operational sequence; 7. Restitution of this operational sequence within the context subsistence and economic activities at the sites concerned; 8. ¹⁴C-AMS dates (of the levels in which the blocks were discovered); 9. Analysis of the spatial position of the blocks at the site.

The results of this research provide new perspectives on the earlier data for Aurignacian sites in Dordogne with such decorated surfaces, to better grasp the importance of these productions and to establish inter and intra-regional links.

2 - Everyday symbolic acts

A - A regional graphic and technical identity

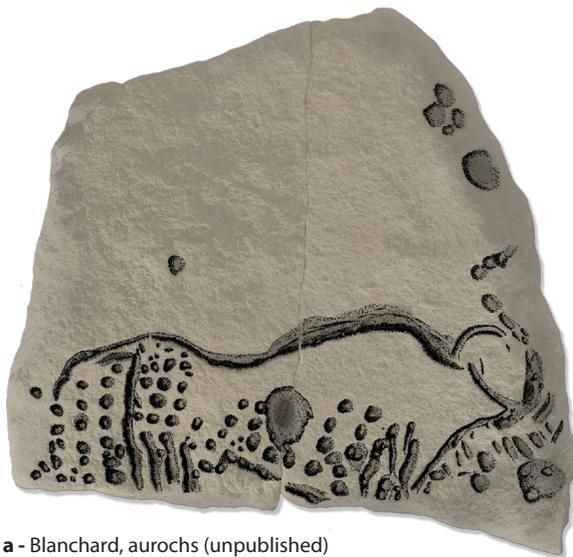
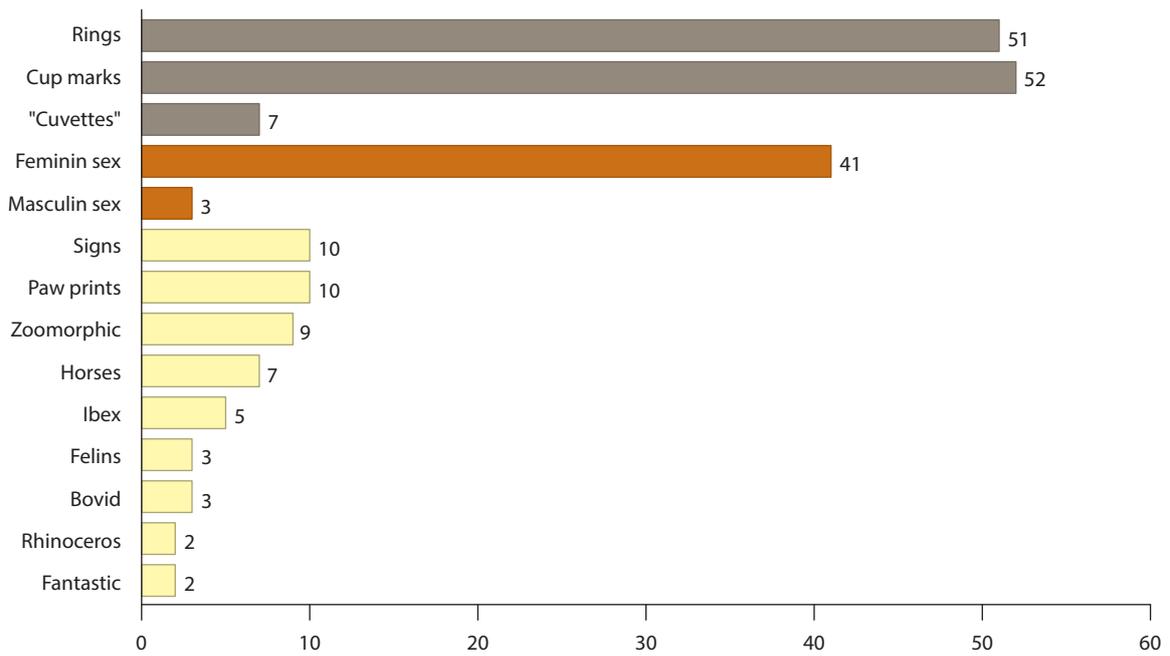
The recent analyses of these “human-altered” limestone surfaces have updated our understanding of the subjects depicted and the techniques used. This revision brings to light regionally distinctive features as well as strong inter-regional similarities. Contrary to common belief, while rings (anneaux) and female genitals (vulva) predominate the sample, animal subjects are present and are part of the general repertoire of subjects in early Upper Paleolithic art (Petrognani, 2014; Tosello, Fritz, 2005; [figure 4](#)) in SW France.

While all subjects are not present at all sites, there are clear stylistic similarities, particularly the female genitals isolated from the rest of the body (Bourrillon *et al.*, 2012). Their generally rounded shape, their outline sometimes split into two and “engraved” lines constructed of sequential punctuations are territorial and chronological markers. The animal figures, while often incomplete, show several common elements. They are systematically depicted from a side view, either representing the whole body or just the forequarters; or even metonymically through the depiction of paw prints (felid?; [figures 4-5](#)). The horns and limbs (with spherical extremities for horses and pointed extremities for bovids) are parallel to each other and internal detail (eye, hair, groin, etc.) is exceedingly rare. Another example of marked intra-regional characteristics can be seen in the three ibex fore-quarters identified at Cellier and Blanchard. They are represented solely by the external outline of the head with (parallel) horns and only one of them shows the beginning of the back line ([figures 5^e et 5ⁱ](#)). In terms of subjects represented, while the mammoth is one of the key subjects in European Aurignacian art, it is absent from the Vézère sample. At Castanet, Blanchard and La Ferrassie, the combination of feline representations and paw prints is a shared theme.

The techniques used by the Vézère Aurignacians are typical of the region and show considerable know-how ([figures 4-5](#)). Vigorous pecking (regularized or not) remains the main line-construction technique although there are also bicolored figures (red and black; [figure 5^b](#)). Black is used for the contour; red is used to fill in the figures or to coat the surface.

Detailed analysis of the markings combined with intensive experimentation⁸ enabled us to identify a relatively simple graphic operational sequence: 1. Preparation of the surface (removal of the flaky surface and/or weathering rind); 2. Preparatory line often composed of individual, aligned punctuations; 3. Engraving per se; 4. regularization of the line or addition of pigments (Bourrillon *et al.*, in press). The identification of the tools used remains complex for several reasons. Our assessment of the percussion marks is altered by post-depositional alteration of the Coniacian limestone bearing the paintings and engravings. Moreover, due the relative softness of the limestone (6 on the Mohs scale), the graphics were made rather quickly. Softness of the material worked and rapid execution of the images means that the tools used only bear subtle traces, making it difficult to identify them within the associated archeological assemblage. In spite of these drawbacks, our observations and comparisons of the archeological and experimental material reveal that, for the figures engraved by pecking, the tools used were only slightly modified for use, or even unmodified (e.g., pointed quartz pebble, non-transformed antler, etc.), and that

8. Experiments conducted in collaboration with É. Tartar (UMR 7041, Paris), F. Le Mené (independent researcher, Montpellier), C. Cretin (CNP, UMR 5199, Bordeaux), L. Chiotti (MNHN, Paris) and A. Morala (MNP, Eyzies), as part of the research program “Aurignacian Genius”, directed by R. White and F. Bon and funded by the Partner University Fund.



a - Blanchard, aurochs (unpublished)



b - Castanet, ring



c - La Ferrassie, female genitals

10 cm

f - Blanchard, feline head and cupule alignments



d - Castanet, male genitals



e - Castanet, animal foot print



Figure 4 - Subjects depicted on the decorated blocks and fragments from Aurignacian sites in the Dordogne region: Belcayre, Blanchard, Castanet, Cellier, Ferrassie, Fongal, Laussel, Pataud, Souquette (unpublished, figure identified by G. Tosello, R. Bourrillon and R. White in the process of being published ; photos, sketches and plans R. Bourrillon).



a - Abri Belcayre, caprid

10 cm

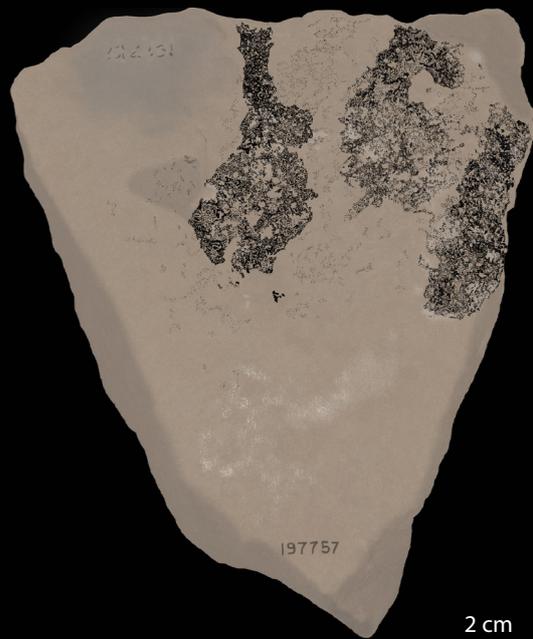


b - Abri Blanchard, horse

10 cm



c - Abri Blanchard, horse limbs (unpublished)



2 cm

Figure 5.1 - Examples of animal depictions identified in Aurignacian sites in the Dordogne (plans, drawings and photos: R. Bourrillon).



d - Abri Blanchard, zoomorph and horse limbs

10 cm



e - Abri Blanchard, ibex

10 cm



f - Abri Blanchard, vestiges of a zoomorphic figure

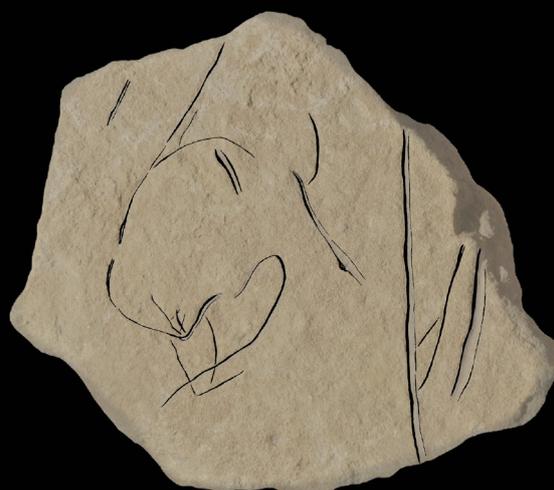
10 cm

Figure 5.2 - Examples of animal depictions identified in Aurignacian sites in the Dordogne (plans, drawings and photos: R. Bourrillon).



g - Abri Castanet, zoomorph

10 cm



h - Abri de la Ferrassie (only the engravings are shown on the plan; a red post-engraving mark is visible on the photo), possible feline head

5 cm



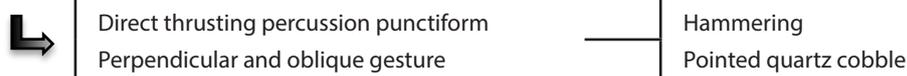
i - Abri Cellier, ibex

10 cm

Figure 5.3 - Examples of animal depictions identified in Aurignacian sites in the Dordogne (plans, drawings and photos: R. Bourrillon).

bone materials were used as much as lithics (figure 6). Indeed, the variability of the observed markings suggests that a number of these “tools” were simply selected from knapping waste (e.g., exhausted core used as a pick).

Surface preparation

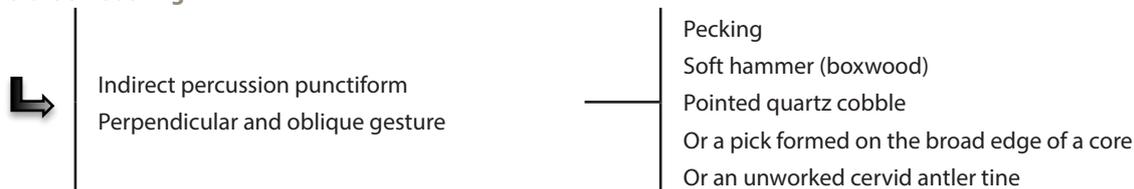


Preparatory outline



Engraved outline (with or without smoothing of the pecked preparatory outline)

Before smoothing



Smoothing of the outline



Figure 6 - Procedures, techniques and tools used for the experimental engraving of a pecked out and regularized line.

B - A specific context

We have seen that the sites concerned by this study are thus rock shelters formed in Coniacian limestone. Before they collapsed, they provided potential occupation surfaces of wide-ranging dimensions (e.g., Laussel 126 × 15 m, Blanchard 20.75 × 6.50 m). At the sites of Blanchard and Castanet in particular, Aurignacian groups, perched on rocky terraces, situated their camps directly on the rocky substratum into which they hollowed out hearths. The whole range of activities imaginable for a living site has been identified in all these shelters (apart from at Belcayre for which data are lacking; Delage, 1949; Delluc, Delluc, 1991). Blanchard, Castanet, Pataud and La Ferrassie have yielded immense quantities of artefacts (Bourrillon, White, 2014; Delporte *et al.*, 1984; Peyrony, 1935; White *et al.*, 2012), suggesting that they were major occupation places or even aggregation sites for Aurignacian groups (Conkey, 1990). This assemblage richness combined with the presence of graphic representations on blocks or vault fragments, identified in or between the Aurignacian layers (Bourrillon *et al.*, in press; Delluc, Delluc, 1971; White *et al.*, 2012; cf. table 2), supports the notion of a numerous recurring occupations or a single intensive occupation, over a short span of time as appears to be the case at Castanet, according to the latest ¹⁴C-AMS dates (White *et al.*, 2012).

Sites	Stratigraphic context	Excavation	Main bibliographic references
Belcayre	Between two layers, both attributed to the Early Aurignacian	Pre-modern	Delage, 1949; Delluc, 1991
Blanchard	Within and between Early Aurignacian layers as well as in the backdirt	Pre-modern and recent	Bourrillon <i>et al.</i> , in press; Delluc, 1978; Didon, 1911
Castanet	Within and above the Early Aurignacian layer as well as in the backdirt	Pre-modern and recent	Chiotti <i>et al.</i> , 2011; Delluc, 1978; Peyrony, 1935; White <i>et al.</i> , 2012
Cellier	Within and above the Early Aurignacian layer as well as in the backdirt	Pre-modern	Delluc, 1978; Nesbitt, 1928; Peyrony, 1946; White, 1992
Ferrassie	Within the Early and Later Aurignacian layers	Pre-modern and recent	Capitan <i>et al.</i> , 1912 and 1921; Delporte <i>et al.</i> , 1984; Delluc, 1978
Fongal	Within the Early Aurignacian layer	Pre-modern	Delluc, 1978; Peyrony, 1941
Laussel	Within the Early Aurignacian layers?	Pre-modern	Delluc, 1978; Lalanne, 1912; Roussot, 1984
Pataud	Within the Early and Later Aurignacian layers	Pre-modern and recent	Chiotti <i>et al.</i> , 2003; Delluc, 1991; Movius, 1966
Souquette	Within the Early Aurignacian layer	Pre-modern and recent	Delage, 1938; Roussot, 1982

Tableau 2 - Stratigraphic attribution of the decorated surfaces discovered in Aurignacian rock shelter sites in the Dordogne region.

3 - Discussion

A - A common base overlain by regional diversity

During the course of the early Aurignacian, portable and parietal figurative art employing different media, developed in sites in the Swabian Jura, in Central Europe, in NE Italy, SW France and NW Iberia. Between 35 and 32 000 BP, this new form of art displayed strong inter-regional similarities in subject-matter with, in descending order, the depiction of horse, cervid, mammoth, bison, ibex, feline, rhinoceros, and much more occasionally the bear and human figures. Other types of graphic motifs, such as alignments or clusters of punctuations, are also part of broader Aurignacian practices (Bourrillon *et al.*, in press). Some of these “subjects” are better represented in certain regions (e.g., female vulva in SW France; [figure 7](#)), or sometimes even absent (e.g., cervids in the Swabian Jura), but they make up the corpus of subjects known to and represented by Aurignacian groups across Europe. Formal similarities can be added to this common background, such as rounded horses’ hooves (Tosello, Fritz, 2005), the double “S” contour of feline heads from Abri Blanchard and Chauvet Cave (Bourrillon *et al.*, in press) or the distinctive rhinoceros ears from the caves of Latrone, Chauvet or Aldène (Azema *et al.*, 2012; Clottes *et al.*, 2001; Vialou, 1979; [figure 8](#)).

On the other hand, significant diversity against this common backdrop is observed among the different regions from the very “first” Aurignacian representations onwards. In SW France, art develops mainly in rock shelters,⁹ amidst everyday tasks, with the widespread use of the pecking technique and the prevalence of female vulvar representations. In Northern Iberia, SE France and Central Europe, this art develops in caves separated from living areas, and is constituted of more-or-less finely made engravings. Finally, figurative art in the Swabian Jura is characterized by smooth-outlined sculpture in the round and bas-relief with figurines discovered in shallow cave living site contexts.

What factors can account for such formal and technical diversity during the course of the Aurignacian in Europe?

9. The graphic style of certain parietal engravings and paintings in Dordogne seems to link them to the Aurignacian period, in particular in the caves of Bernous or Cavaille (currently being studied by S. Petrognani and E. Robert).



a - Abri Cellier

10 cm



b - Abri Blanchard



c - Abri Castanet

Figure 7 - Examples of female genital depictions in Aurignacian sites in the Dordogne (photos a and b: R. Bourrillon; photo c: P. Jugie).



Figure 8 - Stylistic similarities in the representation of rhinoceros ears in Chauvet Cave (Ardèche) and la Baume-Latrone Cave (Gard) (photos: J. Clottes and M. Azéma).

B - Searching for an identity?

We know today that as early as the Proto-Aurignacian, then during the Aurignacian, human groups had relatively vast ranges or at least extended zones of between-group contact. The presence of raw materials from distant sources in the Vézère rock shelters provides evidence of this (e.g., ornaments in talc from the Pyrenees and shells of Mediterranean and Atlantic origin; White, 2007; Taborin, 1993). This new form of long-distance procurement stems from (or is responsible for) what F. Bon calls “a profound redefinition of social relations” at the beginning of the Upper Paleolithic (Bon, 2010: 141) and therefore the internal organization of groups. Based on ethnographic studies (e.g., Whallon, 2006), groups of hunter-gatherers are organized on two different levels: a local group made up of 20 to 50 individuals and another with a maximum of about 700 people. Social traditions and access to other resources are perpetuated through regular reunions or aggregations. It is also important to note that during these reunions, exchanges between groups are as much symbolic, ceremonial and ritual as they are economic. This aspect is also emphasized by M. Godelier (2010), who considers that groups are ruled as much by political-religious concerns as by economic ones. This organization into local and maximum groups leads to the circulation of technical know-how and symbolic traditions from “one person to another” over vast territories. It could partly explain the existence of the common Aurignacian art base noted above. This would have had utility for the cohesion of groups across large geographic spaces. On the other hand, regional graphic diversity (cf. [figure 1](#)) would be a consequence of the division of the maximal group into local groups. We could construe this as a drifting away from or regionalization of the common base and shared motifs.

Remember that these symbolic productions appear in environmentally different contexts (the Swabian Jura, Dordogne, Hérault, etc.) and in different kinds of places (rock shelters, cave entrances, in the depths of caves), which undoubtedly have different meaning potential (Poor, 2010). Choice of media appears then, to be cultural and not “practical” or “environmental” (e.g., limestone in the open air in the Dordogne, ivory in the Swabian Jura, cave walls in the Gard and Ardèche), as ivory was available in Dordogne just as cave walls were in the Swabian Jura. The various media used influence the choice of techniques, which are themselves adapted to the particular modes of representation and traditions of different regional groups.

We can also imagine climatic parameters as the first Aurignacian phases are marked by climatic instability with two major deteriorations (Heinrich 4 and 3) between 40 000 and 30 000 BP (Banks *et al.*, 2013; Sanchez-Goni, 2000; Stuiver, Grootes, 2000). Bruxelles *et al.* note that the Aquitaine and the southern zones, which encompass most of the Aurignacian graphic representations in France, seem to have served as refuges during particularly severe periods (Bruxelles, Jarry, 2012). This retreat into specific zones and the observed climatic instability during the course of this period could thus be contributing factors to the emergence of regional graphic variations within a shared Aurignacian framework, due to (temporary) isolation or group displacement.

In sum, all these parameters suggest a strong tendency to forge intra- and inter-group identity during the course of the Aurignacian. This trend finds a parallel in studies of the osseous (Tartar, 2009) and lithic industry (Bon, this volume), portable art (Floss, this volume, 2007) or ornaments (Taborin, 2004; White, 2007; Wolf, Conard, this volume). The preservation of a common base underlying more regional symbolic traditions leads to a certain cohesion linking different regional groups. This is really nothing more than the “mechanical solidarity” elaborated by E. Durkheim, whereby individuals are united by the sum of different similarities (Durkheim, 1893). However, Durkheim points out that the collective conscience dominates individuality, which is not really coherent with Aurignacian regional variability in the domain of decorated blocks or walls or for

decorative objects or the bone industry (e.g., lissoirs), as shown by the plurality of geometric lines on these objects (Tartar, this volume). Could we then interpret the Aurignacian pattern as evidence for “organic solidarity” within groups on a regional scale, as defined by E. Durkheim (1893)? The appearance of specific tasks in the organization of human groups would thus develop, in this sense, a more acute individualization of the group and the individual. This in turn would promote an intrinsic regional, or even local, variability.

4 - By way of a conclusion

The emergence of figurative art at around 35 000 BP is one of the characteristics of Aurignacian “genius”. But above and beyond this innovation, this cultural period is deeply marked by the rapid diffusion of this art throughout Europe and by the maintenance of a common basis underlying marked regional variation. With the Aurignacian, symbolic practices seem to play a preponderant role in the organization of societies, as shown in particular by certain rock shelters in the Vézère Valley, where decorated surfaces on the shelter ceiling and floor occur in the same place as daily activities (Mensan *et al.*, 2012). Such practices are not separated from daily life and are visible to the whole community and to other groups. This observation is also valid for the portable ivory sculptures worn or transported, in the Swabian Jura, in particular. In other cases, such as Chauvet, representational images are found in isolation deep in caves, and must undoubtedly have a different place and significance in the lives of the Aurignacians concerned.

In conclusion, it is our position that these symbolic practices play a cohesive role among dispersed groups through shared techniques, beliefs and contexts. At the same time, these same symbolic practices permit expressions of identity at regional, local and even individual levels.

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