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# What was Depicted?

For convenience, Palaeolithic images are normally grouped into three categories although, as usual, there is a degree of overlap and uncertainty in this division; the categories are animals, humans and non-figurative or abstract (including ‘signs’). Each presents its own problems, but the first two share fundamental questions of zoology (identification of the species) and ethology (what are they doing?). Neither question is straightforward.

### *Animal figures*

The vast majority of animal figures are adults drawn in profile; there are a number of possible reasons for this – it is easier than drawing them full-face, particularly if one wants to convey the important features of the animals’ anatomy, which are also far clearer on adults than on the young; and it is certain that this was how the animals were observed and identified by Palaeolithic people.

Allowing that we can never *know* what any prehistoric image was meant to depict – only the artist can tell us – it is obvious that most of the animals drawn seem easily ‘recognisable’ at genus level; but there are great numbers of figures which are badly drawn (in our eyes), incomplete, or (perhaps purposely) ambiguous. Numerous examples can be found of figures which have received markedly different attributions – beaver or feline, fish or porcupine, bear or reindeer, big cat or young woolly rhino, and crocodile, reindeer or horse!<sup>1</sup> The same is true in Australian rock-art, where there can be difficulties in deciding between possums and dingoes, or tortoises and echidnas, since figures have few diagnostic features, and Aboriginal identifications can differ from those reached by zoological reasoning.<sup>2</sup> However, in the absence of informants about Ice Age images, zoological reasoning is all we have to go on – comparison with present-day animals, or, in the case of mammoths or woolly rhinos, with their closest living relatives or with frozen carcasses from Siberia – but such comparisons have an inevitable degree of subjective assessment.

It is therefore no surprise that, just as scholars differ on the numbers of figures in a cave, they also tend to produce very different totals and

prodigious amounts of fat on some animals, together with the lack of emaciated animals in the art, have been interpreted as proof of the rich environment and long growth season in these parts of Europe.<sup>19</sup>

The age of the animals can almost never be estimated, except in the case of the few juveniles such as the calf with two adult bison on a bone fragment from abri Morin, the calf on a bone disc from Mas d'Azil (with an adult bovid on the other side), or the fawns apparently suckling at does drawn on the wall at La Bigourdane (Lot) and a plaque from Parpalló.<sup>20</sup> In other cases, one can make only a subjective assessment of the size of the antlers or horns, which may be an artistic convention rather than an accurate record.

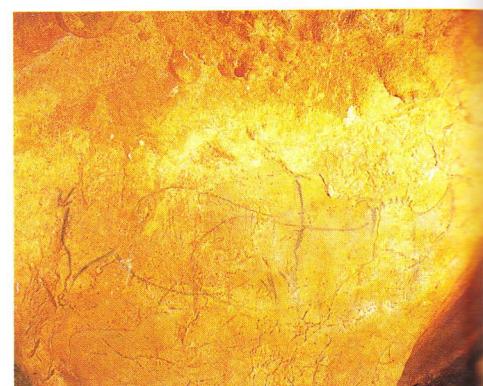
The animals' sex is sometimes displayed directly but almost always discreetly – usually on male bison or deer,<sup>21</sup> but rarely on horses for some reason (eg at La Sotarriba). Only a few animals are known which have female genitalia depicted;<sup>22</sup> this may be partly due to the predominance of profile views, in which the vulva is not visible, though this could easily be overcome through twisted perspective if it was important to convey gender. Even udders are rarely shown (eg on one of the curled-up bison of Altamira), even where they could be, as in the 'jumping cow' of Lascaux.

One therefore has to look for secondary sexual characteristics, such as antlers in red deer, differing horn shapes in ibex, or sheer size and proportions in other species – though there is always a potential overlap between females and juvenile males.<sup>23</sup> These secondary features were sometimes exaggerated – particularly deer antlers and bison 'humps' – and thus comparisons of size cannot be undertaken between sites, since the massive mammoth-like humps of some Font de Gaume bison, when placed beside some of the more streamlined, 'boar-like' bison of Niaux, make the latter appear to be the females to Font de Gaume's males.<sup>24</sup>

So much for identification; but what are the animals doing? Many of them are 'motionless', to the point where it has been claimed that they are dead, or at least copied directly from carcasses<sup>25</sup> – primarily because they seem to be standing on tiptoe, and show no sign of weight-bearing in the limbs; these features are not to be found in living animals. The hypothesis also accounts for some of the twisted perspective in hoofs (since the underside of the foot is frequently turned up by a fallen animal), for the fact that nearside feet are sometimes higher than the others, for the prominence of the belly, and for projecting tongues and raised tails. It is, of course, possible to attribute all of these features to muddled memories of living and dead animals,<sup>26</sup> or simply to artistic conventions, but it must be admitted that close observation of carcasses was certainly the artists' principal source of anatomical detail.

One cannot, however, imagine them dragging such dead-weights far into caves to be copied directly! Perhaps some portable depictions are outdoor sketches of carcasses, which were later carried into the caves and copied on to the walls, but this is pure speculation. The fluent, effortlessly drawn and well-proportioned animal figures in parietal art suggest that the artists carried everything in their mind's eye. As Breuil, who used the same technique, said of the Palaeolithic artists: they never took a measurement – they projected on to the rock an inner vision of the animal.<sup>27</sup> Even if the Palaeolithic figures were ultimately based on dead specimens, it is noteworthy that their motionless figures are nevertheless imbued with an impression of life and power.

Fig. 78 *The so-called 'antelopes' of Pech Merle (Lot): this panel is c 1 m long. (J.V.)*



Some hunting specialists have chosen to interpret many of the features of these images in behavioural terms: for example, the raised tail is seen as a signal of alarm, anger or threat, of submissiveness, or of a copulatory invitation by females<sup>28</sup> – and thus as an illustration of autumn, when such displays are common due to the interactions of rutting behaviour, although if the threat were directed at a hunter it could occur in any season.

There have been two particularly famous examples of zoological deliberation about posture in Palaeolithic images. The engraved reindeer from Kesslerloch (Switzerland) was traditionally thought to be grazing, until it was pointed out that its stance was exactly that of a male in rut – either sniffing a female's track or, more likely, in a position for attacking a rival.<sup>29</sup> The curled-up bison on the bosses of the Altamira ceiling have been described as sleeping, wounded or dying (see below, p.153), or as clear pictures of females giving birth;<sup>30</sup> currently, the dominant view is that they are males, rolling in dust impregnated with their urine, in order to rub their scent on territorial markers – even though one of them has udders, according to Breuil's copy!<sup>31</sup> In fact, they may simply be bison figures drawn so as to fit the bosses – they have the same volume, form and dorsal line as those standing around them, but their legs are bent and their heads are down.<sup>32</sup>

'Animated' figures are rare, and although they have occasionally been placed in the centre of a decorated 'panel', they are more usually to be found at the edges.<sup>33</sup> Such movement seems to appear in Solutrean and early Magdalenian times (as at Roc de Sers), but is most common in the middle and later Magdalenian, although this kind of 'realism' never predominates. However, it is Lascaux which has the most abundant and

Fig. 79 *Three bison drawn in the Réseau Clastres (Ariège) in different degrees of completeness [see also Frontispiece]. The most complete, on the left, is 1.14 m long. Probably Magdalenian. (JV)*



varied animated figures; the cave of Gabillou, in the same region and thought to be of roughly the same period, also has lots of movement in its figures.

'Scenes' are very hard to identify in Palaeolithic art, since without an informant it is often impossible to prove 'association' of figures rather than simple juxtaposition. In a few cases, however, this can be done: for example, the Laugerie-Basse engraving, mentioned above, clearly shows a supine woman beneath and beyond a deer. Different versions of one possible scene, depicting what may be a wolf menacing a deer, have been found on portable engravings from the Pyrenees (Lortet, Mas d'Azil), Cantabria (Pendo) and Dordogne (Les Eyzies), which is an impressive distribution.<sup>34</sup> A few other portable engravings such as the 'bear hunt' of Péchiallet (Dordogne), or the 'aurochs hunt' of La Vache have also been interpreted as scenes, as has the parietal group of figures in the shaft at Lascaux (see below, p. 186), though one cannot be sure that a narrative is involved rather than a symbolic mythology.<sup>35</sup>

In short, therefore, one has to be very careful in making zoological and ethological observations from Palaeolithic images. If one has photographs of animals, one can accurately identify them and assess what they are doing; but here we are dealing with drawings by artists with a message to convey, and using stylistic conventions: nobody would assume, from the spotted specimens at Pech Merle, that the horses of the period had big bodies, small legs and tiny heads; so how reliable are the other features on display? These are not 'Palaeolithic photographs' – we need to allow for convention, technique, lack of skill, faulty memory, distortion, and whatever symbolism and message were involved. Only the most complete and 'naturalistic' figures are really informative, but even the finest Palaeolithic pictures may prove a disappointment to the zoologist. Ice Age images are exciting because they allow us to 'see' the fauna of the time, to put flesh on the bones which we dig up;<sup>36</sup> but we are seeing the animals through the artists' eyes.

Despite the different identifications and percentages of species produced by each specialist, one fact remains clear: the overwhelming overall dominance of the horse and bison among Palaeolithic depictions. In Leroi-Gourhan's sample of 2,260 parietal figures, no fewer than 610 were of horse, and 510 were bison,<sup>37</sup> which thus account for about half between them. No other type of animal comes close, although, as we shall see, other species do dominate at particular sites. The next most numerous include deer, ibex and mammoth, followed by a cluster of rarer species.

### ***The horse***

Study of the most important animal in Palaeolithic iconography has, in the past, wasted a great deal of effort on attempts to establish exactly which 'races' were depicted; Piette had a try at this in the nineteenth century,<sup>38</sup> and was later followed by other scholars who distinguished up to 37 varieties!<sup>39</sup> However, all such exercises were eventually abandoned; as mentioned above, they were based on the shape and size of the figures, their manes, and the colour and pattern of the coats, all of which were subject to artistic whim – for example, Gravettian figures tend to have elongated heads, while those of the Solutrean and lower Magdalenian tend to have tiny heads! The only firm basis for subdividing horses into different species is palaeontological differences, primarily in the skull and backbone, and it is therefore a matter best left to those working with faunal remains.

More recent studies have avoided this topic, and instead approached important collections of horse figures from a more rigorous knowledge of equine anatomy.<sup>40</sup> At Gönnersdorf, 74 mostly fragmentary horse depictions are known from 61 plaquettes, making this animal dominant among the animals depicted at the site. Horses likewise dominate the animal figures at La Marche, where at least 91 whole or partial specimens have been found on 64 stones; 62.4% of them face right, a percentage similar to that (57–59%) at sites such as Ekain, Lascaux and Les Combarelles.<sup>41</sup> Not one of the La Marche examples can be sexed; and it has been found that, like artists throughout prehistory and history, those of La Marche consistently made the horses' bodies too long<sup>42</sup> – perhaps to give an impression of speed and lightness. Certainly, in Palaeolithic art as a whole, horses strike a number of different poses, which can be interpreted from a behavioural point of view, such as the jumping horse on a spear-thrower from Bruniquel, or the neighing horse head from Mas d'Azil.<sup>43</sup>

One piece of zoological information which is probably reliable in these horse depictions is that of the length of the coat, since present-day Przewalski horses (thought to be among the closest surviving equivalents to the Palaeolithic types) do display striking seasonal differences: hence the shaggy ones recorded at sites like Niaux must be the long pelt of winter, and, interestingly, no distinct 'winter horses' are known in Cantabrian caves.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, these differences might also denote different climatic phases, as has been suggested for a similar range in bison depictions (see below).

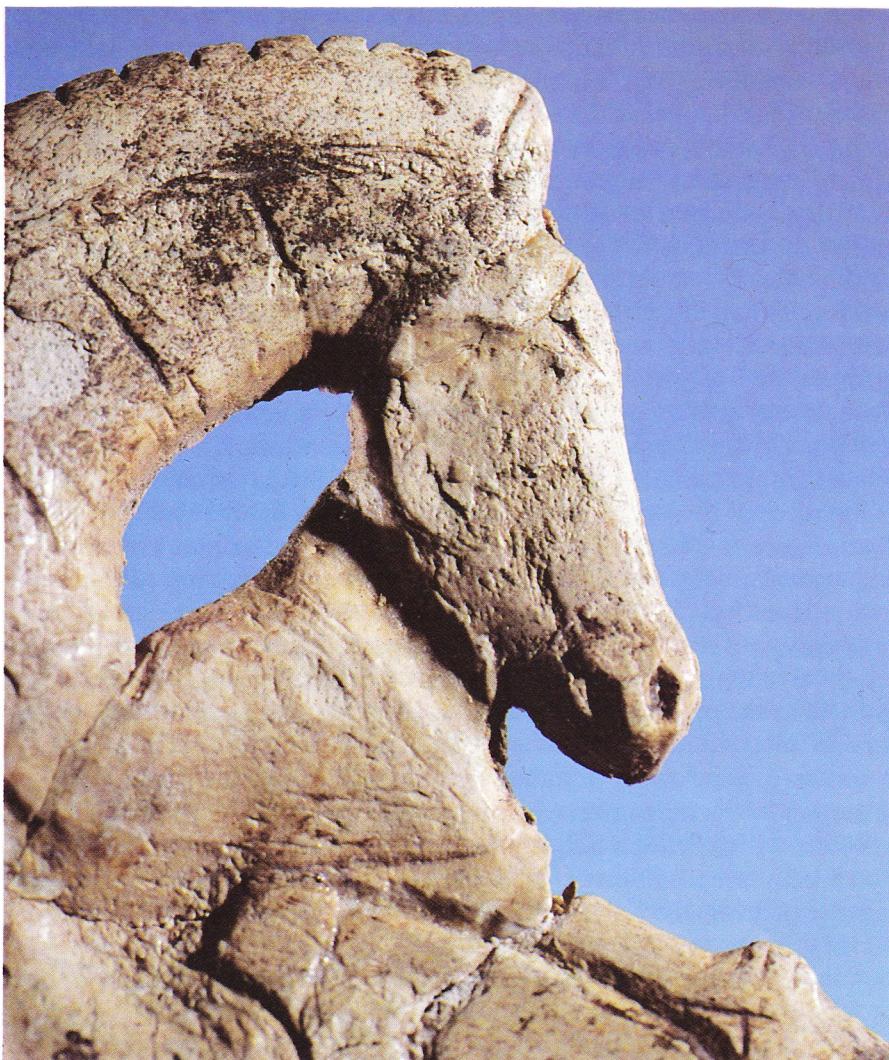
Another frequent feature of Palaeolithic horse figures is the 'M' mark on their side, which denotes a change in colour between the dark hide and the lighter belly area – a shape and change still clearly visible on modern animals such as the little semi-wild '*pottoks*' of the Basque country (Fig.114).<sup>45</sup> Stripes also sometimes occur on the horses' shoulders (for example, at Ekain), a feature which Darwin noticed on living specimens, but which the Palaeolithic artists may have exaggerated.<sup>46</sup>

It is certain that the horse was of tremendous cultural importance to people in western Europe during the Upper Palaeolithic – horse teeth and bones have been found carefully placed in Magdalenian hearths in a number of deep Pyrenean caves such as Labastide and Erberua,<sup>47</sup> as well as near hearths at the Magdalenian open-air camp of Pincevent near Paris (despite the fact that reindeer account for almost 100% of this site's faunal remains).<sup>48</sup> At Duruthy (Landes), the carved horses (see above, pp. 84/6) were found in a kind of 'horse sanctuary' dated to the twelfth millennium BC; the biggest, a kneeling sandstone figure, rested against two horse skulls and on fragments of horse-jaw, while three horse-head pendants were in the immediate vicinity.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that the horse may well have been under close control during the Upper Palaeolithic, as suggested by a variety of evidence including some possible depictions of simple harnesses on certain figures, especially one from La Marche (Fig.22).<sup>50</sup>

### ***The Bison***

Like the horse, depiction of the bison varied through the Upper Palaeolithic, in terms of shape, size and shagginess; some scholars have argued that not only artistic convention was involved but also perhaps climatic change, so that the heavy, shaggy bison would denote cold phases and the lighter forms would be linked with milder phases<sup>51</sup> – it is a nice



Figs. 80/81 *Perforated antler baton with carving of horsehead with ears raised and a stylised mane; the shaft is also decorated. Le Mas d'Azil (Ariège). Magdalenian. Total length: 20 cm. (JV). Detail of the horsehead. From muzzle to ear-tip it measures less than 4 cm. (JV)*



idea, but a lot of work and more accurate dating would be required to prove that climate was indeed responsible, rather than style or different species/subspecies. As mentioned above, different sites have their own characteristic bison 'construction', seen in an extreme form at Font de Gaume, and attempts to differentiate specific varieties have led no further than similar studies of horses.

The best study of bison figures, albeit of a small sample (13), concerns those of La Marche,<sup>52</sup> an earlier attempt to establish the proportions and rules of construction that characterise Palaeolithic depictions of bison proved of limited value because it was derived from the figures themselves; it is in fact necessary, in studies of this kind, to proceed from precise anatomical markers taken from living animals or at least from photographs of them in profile.<sup>53</sup> Thus nature, rather than artistic convention, is the reference point. Using this method, Léon Pales found that Palaeolithic bison figures, even within a single site (such as Niaux or Fontanet), showed differences in execution and style, whereas other groups (such as at Altamira) were fairly homogeneous. Of all those examined, the La Marche specimens were the 'closest to nature'.

It was also found that in this site, as at Trois Frères and Font de Gaume, there was a tendency to have bovids facing left. Depiction of gender varies

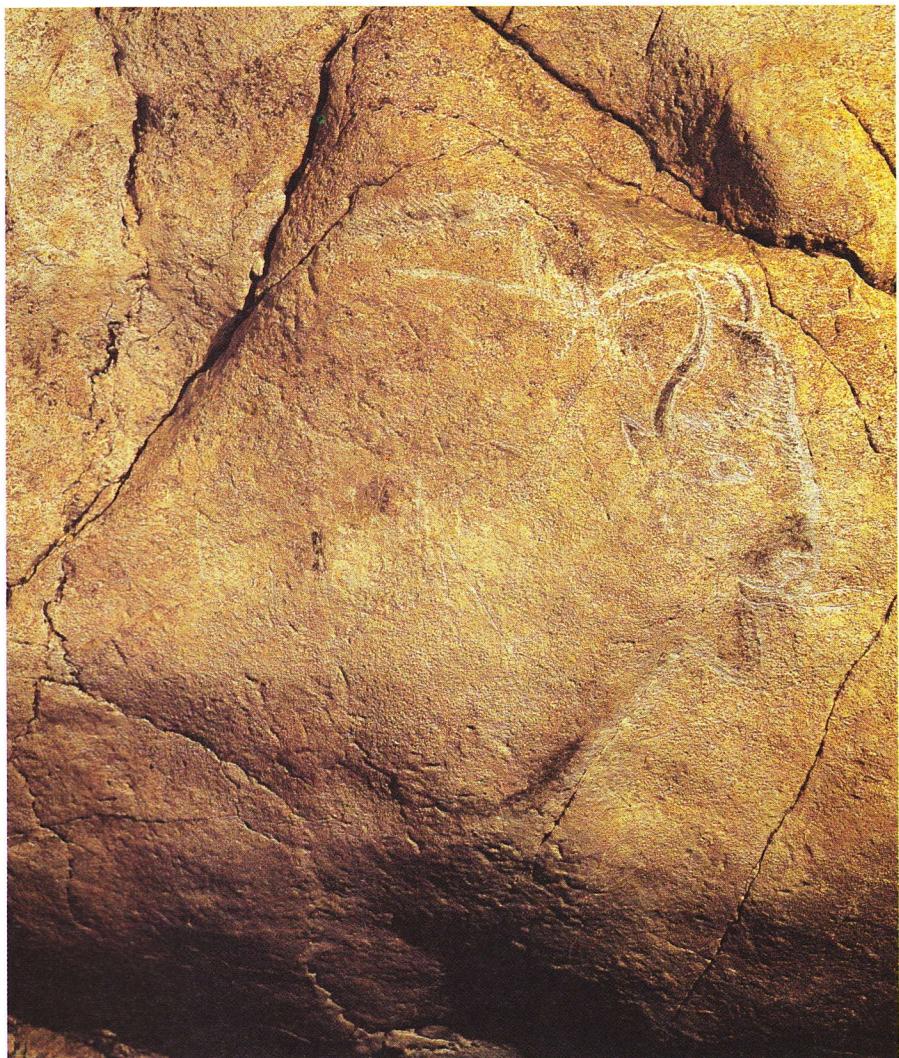


Fig. 82 *Bison engraved and painted in Trois Frères (Ariège). Magdalenian style. Length: 1.5 m. (J.V., collection Béguën)*

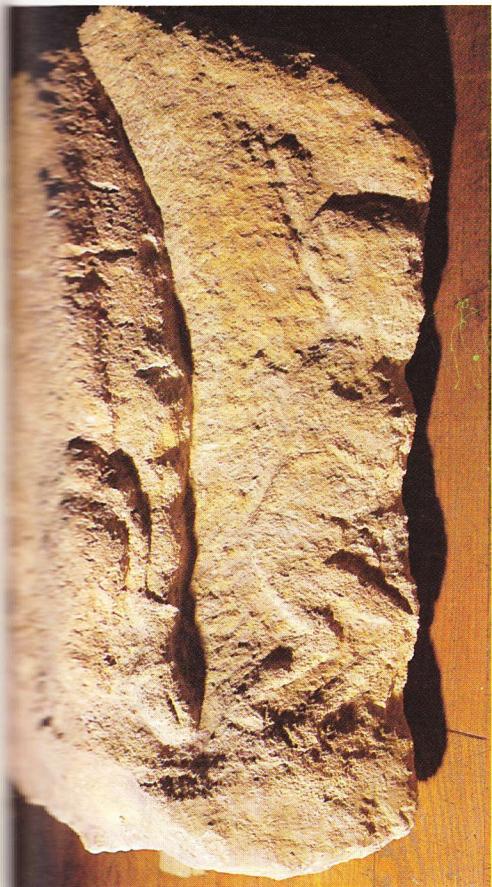


Fig. 83 *Apparent scene of bison pursuing a human, carved in bas-relief around a block from Roc de Sers (Charente). Solutrean. The block is c 35 cm thick, the human is 50 cm high, and the bison 54 cm. (J.V.)*

from site to site: at Font de Gaume, 12 of the 39 bovids have a phallus, whereas none of Niaux's 47 bison has one (although many look male from secondary sexual features such as the hump, the massive head and the short, thick horns); only one at Trois Frères, standing on its hind legs, has a phallus – one of the rare erect phalli in Palaeolithic art – and only one or two of the La Marche bison may have the sex indicated.<sup>54</sup> Anatomical details seem to be incorrect occasionally: for example, horns that point forward, or which differ in volume from those found among faunal remains.

Most bison are 'immobile', but a few do show movement – some hypotheses about the curled-up specimens at Altamira have been mentioned above, and we shall return to them later (p.153). One famous bison, a carving from La Madeleine, has turned to lick its flank; while that in the 'shaft scene' of Lascaux appears to have lost its entrails and perhaps to be charging a man. Other 'scenes' involving bison attacking people may be depicted on the cave-wall at Villars (Dordogne), on a block from Roc de Sers (Fig.83) and a portable engraving from Laugerie-Basse.<sup>55</sup>

#### **The aurochs**

Wild cattle are the other large bovids represented in Palaeolithic art; the most lifelike are perhaps those of Teyjat, and the portable engraving from

Trou de Chaleux (Belgium) (Fig.37), but the biggest and best known are those of Lascaux, including the 5-m bulls (Figs.30-2). Nobody has ever questioned the attribution of the latter to *Bos primigenius* but, for some reason, certain leading scholars thought the smaller cattle of Lascaux to be *Bos longifrons* or *brachyceros*, a domestic type with long forehead and short horns which is not dated earlier than the Neolithic period.

The simple explanation is that of the pronounced sexual dimorphism of *Bos primigenius*: the big cattle of Lascaux are bulls, while the smaller are probably cows of the same species. Studies of similar cattle in Morocco with the coloration of their wild ancestors show that the great bulls are black or reddish-black, with a light-coloured strip along the back and some light hair between the horns; the cows are usually reddish-brown, with darker legs, a darker and slimmer head, and thinner horns. All of these features are on display at Lascaux, some to an exaggerated degree, together with other specimens which are slightly abnormal in colour.<sup>56</sup> The sexual dimorphism can also be seen, to a lesser extent, in the bull and two cows engraved at Teyjat (Figs.85-6).

### **Deer**

Apart from a few depictions of the giant deer (*Megaceros*), such as those of Cougnac which cleverly use natural rock shapes for the dorsal line and hump (Fig.89), and sporadic claims for elk, and for fallow deer, as at Tursac,<sup>57</sup> all Palaeolithic depictions are either of red deer or of reindeer.

In red deer, only the males have antlers, so that these can denote sex, although some figures taken to be hinds may actually be males whose antlers have been shed. In the reindeer, however, both sexes have antlers.

Many depictions of reindeer show clearly the characteristic shape and markings of the species, as in the series of engravings at Trois Frères; ironically, some of the best figures are to be found in Cantabria (Altzerri (Fig.87), Tito Bustillo (Fig.29), Las Monedas), a region where this animal was never plentiful, according to faunal remains.<sup>58</sup>

Occasionally, it is difficult to differentiate between the two types of deer; on the famous baton from Lortet with a scene of deer and fish engraved around it, some scholars see stags, but others see reindeer. (Indeed, Piette first saw them as reindeer, and later as stags!) In the portable engravings of La Colombière, most of the animals thought to be red deer have recently been reinterpreted as reindeer.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, all but one of the 91 deer on the walls of Lascaux have been assumed to be red deer by most specialists of Palaeolithic art;<sup>60</sup> but a number of experts on caribou instead see some of them as reindeer – particularly the series of heads, often called the ‘swimming stags’, since groups of swimming stags are very rare, whereas swimming caribou are a common sight in the migration season (Fig.84). This alternative identification may well be correct since 74 of the Lascaux cervids (81%) have antlers, and the wide variety of shapes includes some which closely resemble those of tundra caribou and depictions of them by Eskimo hunters during prehistoric and historic times.<sup>61</sup>

As usual, some authors have chosen to see these Palaeolithic figures as accurate depictions of individual animals; thus, the remarkable examples in caves such as Lascaux were detailed records of prize stags (mostly at least 15 years old) with fine antlers,<sup>62</sup> whereas it is far more reasonable to assume that the style and ability of individual artists played a major role, and that the antlers are merely an artistic translation of reality.<sup>63</sup> Attempts



Fig. 84 The so-called 'swimming' deer of Lascaux (Dordogne). Probably Magdalenian. This panel is c 5 m wide. (J.V.)

to differentiate tundra and forest reindeer types from antler shape in the art have also been made, but are unlikely to be reliable.<sup>64</sup>

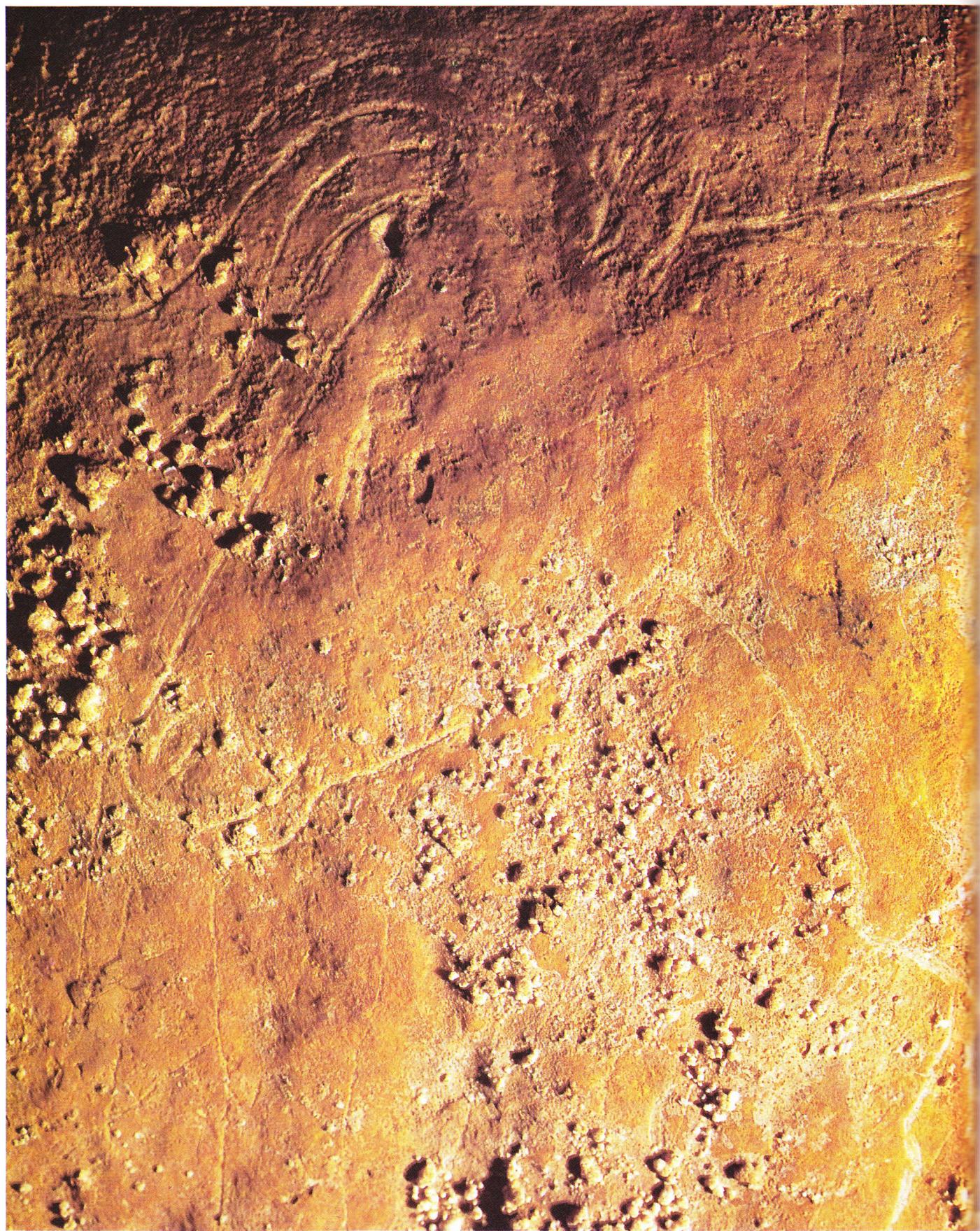
Pending publication of a detailed anatomical study of deer depictions,<sup>65</sup> one can still make a number of observations: many features, such as the antlers, tail, hoofs, ears and eyes, are often incomplete or done badly – yet, occasionally, even the gland below the eye of the rutting reindeer is depicted, as on the engraving of Kesslerloch, and on seven or eight of the Lascaux deer.<sup>66</sup>

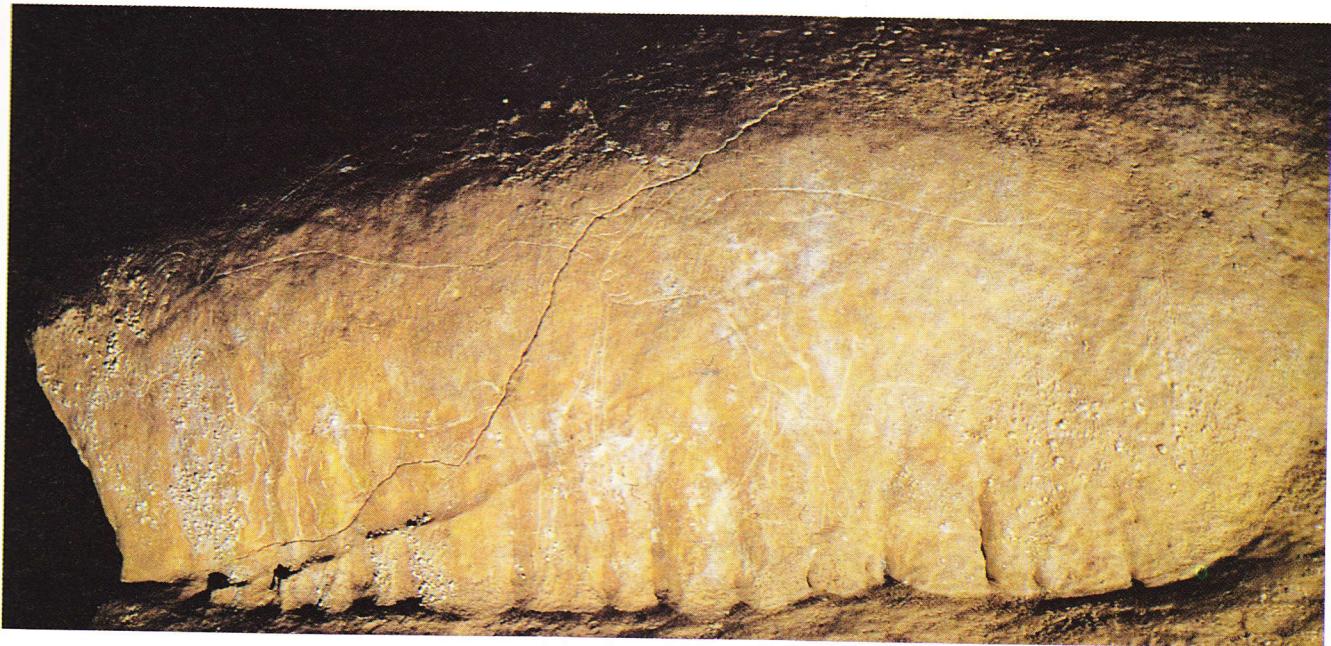
A number of different positions are known for cervids, such as the male bending to lick a female's head at Font de Gaume, the rutting male of Kesslerloch, and other variations at Limeuil and elsewhere – grazing, bellowing, and so forth – and it has been pointed out that both reindeer and red deer are most often depicted in what appears to be the rutting season (autumn/early winter), characterised by features such as the white mane on the reindeer bulls and the thick mane on mature stags, and bodies rounded with fat:<sup>67</sup> for example, a stag from abri Morin has been described as having its antlers thrown back, its ears down, nostrils dilated, mouth open and neck extended.<sup>68</sup>

### **Ibex**

One should really use the term 'ovicaprids' here, since it is quite possible that some Palaeolithic depictions represent the mouflon or even the Tahr *Hemitragus*, and a few have been attributed to these species;<sup>69</sup> but by and large, animals of this type are automatically assumed to be ibex.

The question then arises whether they are the Alpine variety (*Capra ibex*) or the Pyrenean (*Capra pyrenaica*); the former has curvilinear horns, while the latter's horns are more lyre-shaped, and rise at the tips. However, they are often difficult to differentiate in art, for the simple reason that in profile one cannot assess how sinuous or divergent the horns are – indeed, this may be another role for twisted perspective – and in





Figs. 85/86 Engraved aurochs cow (left) and bull (right) from Teyjat (Dordogne), with tracing by Breuil. The animals are 55 and 50 cm long. Magdalenian. (JV). The detail (left) shows the cow's head. (JV)

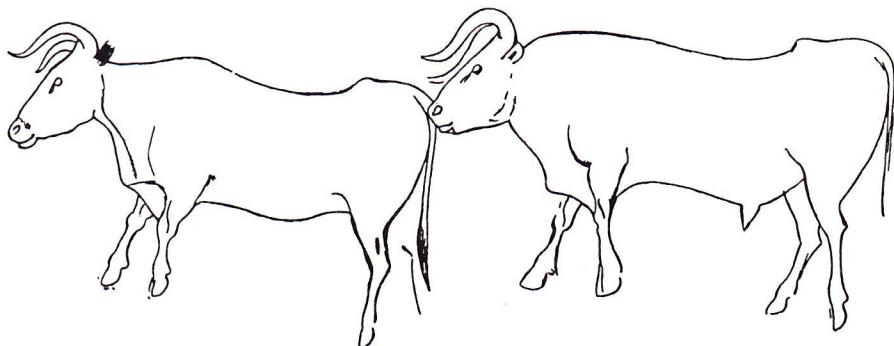
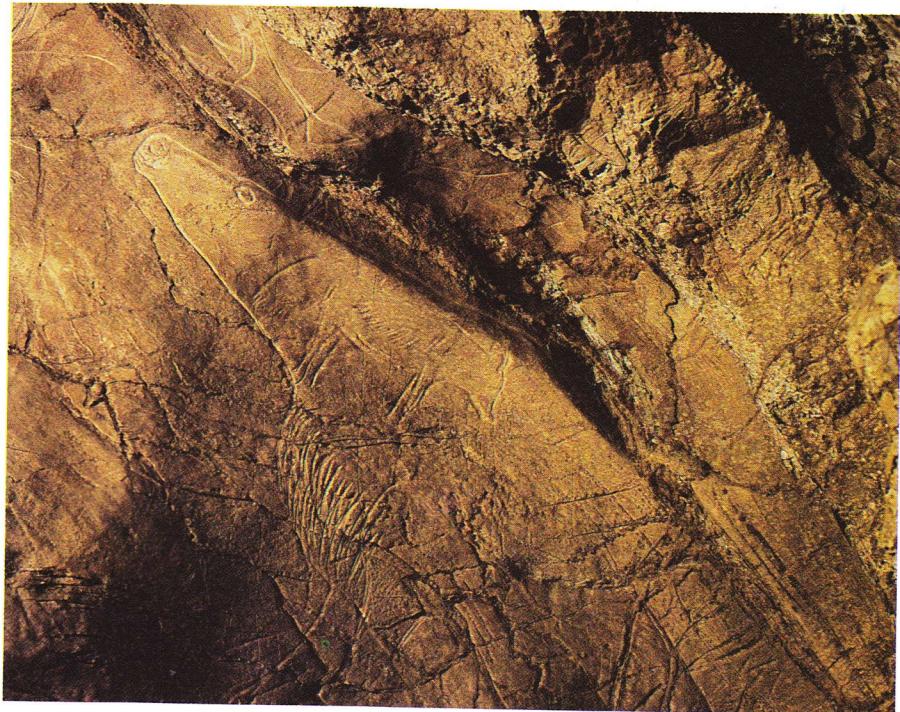


Fig. 87 Engraved reindeer and fox at Altzerrí (Guipúzcoa). Magdalenian style. The fox is 25 cm long. (JV)



many cases, particularly in portable art, the shape of the available space caused distortion in the shape and curve of horns: one example from the Mas d'Azil even has them sticking straight out in front!<sup>70</sup>

Some depictions appear ambiguous – an ibex carved on an antler shaft from the Mas d'Azil has an Alpine horn-shape when seen from the front, but a Pyrenean shape in profile, while an engraving from Limeuil appears to be a Pyrenean type which has been transformed into an Alpine ibex.<sup>71</sup>

It is, of course, possible that the Limeuil example is really a young animal which was turned into an adult through extension of its horns, or that it represents the bone-stumps within the horns. However, there is evidence that different varieties of this animal coexisted in western Europe – at Isturitz, for example, there seem to be depictions of a number of types, even if one allows for distortion, artistic licence, and so forth; and certain figures seem to be accurate portrayals of the Alpine type (eg the figure on the La Mouthe lamp), and of the Pyrenean (eg some of those in the Salon Noir at Niaux).<sup>72</sup>

Horn-size serves to distinguish males from females, and where two animals with horns of different size are found together, as at Cougnac, it is reasonable to suppose that they represent one of either sex; but, as mentioned above, small horns may also denote a young male. An occasional phallus was depicted (as on a La Marche animal with big horns), and a beard is a useful secondary sexual characteristic.

Ibex figures were sometimes animated – the animals carved on spear-throwers, with head turned back to see the emerging turd and birds, are probably young ibex (Fig. 46), as are the two headless animals fighting or playing together on another famous spear-thrower fragment from Enlène. A baton from Duruthy shows two ibex fleeing in apparent terror from some large animal (Fig. 40); elsewhere, ibex are often found in pairs, facing each other, head to head.<sup>73</sup>

### **The mammoth**

Pending publication of the magnificent mammoths of La Marche,<sup>74</sup> the most thorough study of this species in Palaeolithic art concerns the 61 specimens on 46 plaquettes from Gönnersdorf.<sup>75</sup> About half are complete, the rest having become fragmented along with the plaquettes. It proved possible to divide them into adult and young animals; a few are grouped together on the same plaquettes, but most are individual depictions.

Some details, such as the ‘anal flap’, coincide with observations on frozen mammoths in Siberia; but others are troubling: a few of the Gönnersdorf mammoths have small, short tusks, but most have none at all, although the depictions seem very naturalistic; similarly, there are no tusks on the far older mammoth figures from Vogelherd and Geissenklösterle, on an engraving from Kostenki, and on a number of parietal depictions.<sup>76</sup> It has therefore been suggested that some mammoths had no tusks, perhaps through a depletion in natural resources; but other scholars prefer to see it as artistic licence – or perhaps even as a sexual dimorphism. One might compare it to the lack of hair on figures from Pindal, Cougnac, La Baume-Latrone and other sites, which led to their erroneous identification as warm-climate elephant species such as *Elephas antiquus*.<sup>77</sup>

The Gönnersdorf mammoths show little sign of ‘movement’, and mammoth depictions in general are not found in ‘scenes’. They are, however, sometimes found head to head, and other signs of animation

include a raised tail, and the trunk either raised or curled up; occasionally, as in Pech Merle, one finds both detailed depictions and simple abbreviations in the form of characteristic dorsal lines.<sup>78</sup>

Finally, it is perhaps noteworthy that the few mammoth figures in Spain all face left.<sup>79</sup>

### ***Big carnivores***

Large carnivores in the art comprise bears and big cats. In the past, some pretty uncritical inventories of supposed depictions of these animals were drawn up, including many figures which even the authors found highly dubious, and omitting others<sup>80</sup> – inevitably, they relied heavily on old interpretations and unreliable tracings; they have since been superseded by more objective studies based on anatomical expertise<sup>81</sup> – once again, primarily that of Léon Pales in his study of the La Marche figures.

Bears, according to faunal remains, comprised two principal species during the Upper Palaeolithic of Europe – the cave-bear (*Ursus spelaeus*) and the brown bear (*Ursus arctos*). The former is characterised by the domed shape of its skull, and traditionally it was assumed that any depiction of a bear with a similarly domed forehead could safely be assigned to that species. However, it has now been shown that a whole spectrum of head-shapes is present in the art – only a few, such as those on pebbles from Massat and La Colombière, have really domed heads – and this criterion is thus not sufficiently reliable to permit identification.<sup>82</sup>

It is noteworthy that all the La Marche bears face right; a number of different postures can be found in Palaeolithic art, including bears walking, or with nose raised, or with head down – the latter seen as the threatening posture it would adopt towards humans.<sup>83</sup> The Péchiallet ‘scene’, mentioned earlier, seems to show a bear on its hind legs and menacing two ‘humanoids’.

Bear and lion heads can appear very similar, and thus it has been hard to differentiate between them in the fragmentary terracotta figurines of Dolní Věstonice; this site, together with that of Pavlov, is important because its art is dominated by carnivores: of 77 miniature figurines in good condition, no fewer than 21 are thought to be bear, 9 lions, 5 wolves and 3 foxes (=50%).<sup>84</sup> Only those of bear and lion are pierced and have little ‘decorative’ notches, but all the figures are caricatural, with few details, and thus little can be deduced from them about the species depicted.

Indeed, in Palaeolithic art as a whole, carnivores, and especially felines, are consistently among the most inaccurate figures – perhaps because they were far less easy to observe at close quarters than herbivores: the commonest mistake is the position of the canine teeth in both felines and bears – in nature, the lower canines are in front of the upper when the

Fig. 88 *Engraved bone fragments from La Vache (Ariège), showing a line of three felines; the fragment on the right was discovered recently to be part of this scene. (Drawing by D. Buisson & S. Rougane)*

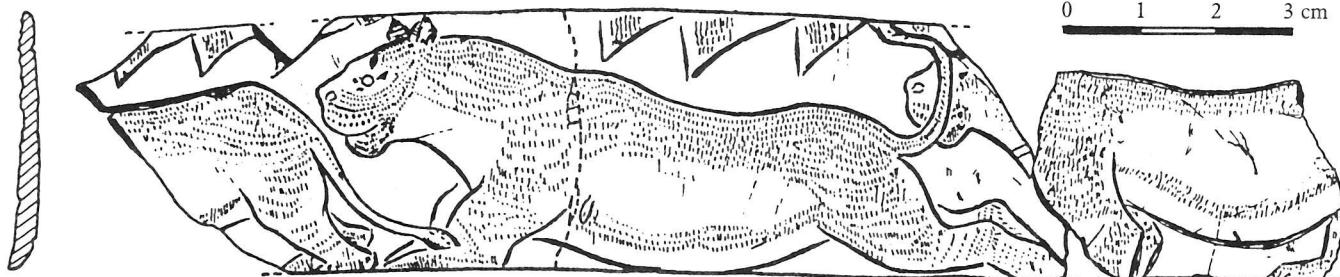




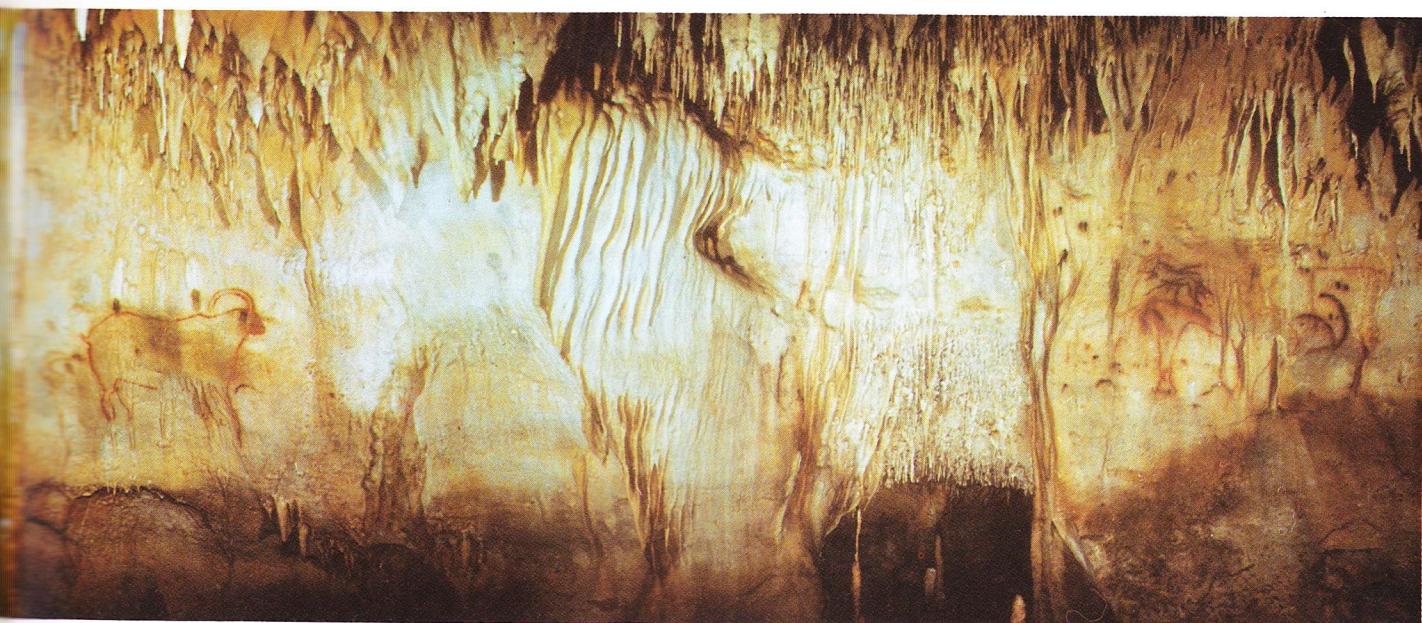
Fig. 89 Photomontage of the decorated panels at Cougnac (Lot): note the use of natural rock formations for the neck and chest of the giant deer. The female ibex at the top (facing left) is 50 cm long; the ibex on the right (and facing right) is 81 cm in length. (JV)

Fig. 90 The two headless bears of Ekain (Guipúzcoa). Probably Magdalenian. Panel size: 1.2 m (JV)

Fig. 91 Mammoth sculptured in bas-relief in the Grotte du Mammouth (or de Saint-Front), Dordogne. It is 1.25 m high, 1.1 m long, and located 4 m above the present cave floor. (Photo B. & G. Delluc)

mouth is closed, whereas in these figures, if the jaws were to be closed, they would be in contact with the upper, or even stand behind them.<sup>85</sup> Carnivore canines clearly impressed Palaeolithic people, who, as we have seen, often used them for jewellery; they are the only teeth ever drawn in carnivore figures, and their size is often exaggerated, like deer antlers or bison humps – in one case, however, the large teeth on a figure from Isturitz have been taken at face value as a depiction of the scimitar cat.<sup>86</sup>

Nevertheless, a few felines are accurately portrayed, including those of La Colombière and Labouiche; the 15 of La Marche are fairly realistic – but only 43% of them face right (as opposed to 100% of the bears). We cannot tell for certain whether or not the male big cats had manes, though one or two depictions in Palaeolithic art seem to have one.<sup>87</sup>



### **The rare mammals**

Finally, there is a whole range of animals which are depicted extremely rarely, although often well.<sup>88</sup> Many of them belong to the Magdalenian, and their existence may thus simply be a result of the overall increase in numbers of figures in this period: one can mention the rhino, musk-ox, ass, saiga, chamois, wolf and fox, hare, glutton, otter and possibly the hyena; there is also the remarkable weasel-like animal of the Réseau Clastres (Fig.2). The 'boars' on the Altamira ceiling are now generally thought to be 'streamlined' bison since at least one of them has horns! So far, animals such as small rodents seem to be absent from Palaeolithic art.

Where sea-mammals are concerned, most are seals of various species,<sup>89</sup> some of the portable depictions found hundreds of kilometres inland. Among the finest are the male and female grey seals (*Halchoerus grypus*) on the famous baton of Montgaudier (Charente); they are characterised by their elongated muzzle, their size difference and the male's neck folds. Three enigmatic small shapes above them were recently claimed to be whales seen in the distance.<sup>90</sup> Some parietal figures at Nerja (Málaga) have been interpreted as dolphins, but others believe them to be seals.<sup>91</sup>

### **Fish, reptiles, birds, insects and plants**

Fish are quite plentiful, particularly in the form of portable depictions – unfortunately, Breuil's corpus also includes a mass of decorative motifs which he believed to have been derived from schematised fish; some of them are quite plausible, many others are not.<sup>92</sup> Fish species are especially difficult to identify in Palaeolithic art: most of them seem to be salmonids – sometimes males with a kipe on their lower jaw in the characteristic state of exhaustion after spawning, and thus perhaps representing the autumn.<sup>93</sup>

Marine fish are also represented, both on portable objects (such as the Lespugue flatfish figure, in the central Pyrenees) and on the walls of caves, particularly those near the sea, most notably at Pileta.<sup>94</sup>

One or two tortoises (St Cirq, Marsoulas) and perhaps a turtle (Mas d'Azil) occur in portable art, and one possible salamander from Laugerie-Basse; there are also a number of snakes, although once again Breuil's attributions are excessive, with all manner of wavy lines being interpreted as these creatures – one wonders why eels or worms were not envisaged: the specimens next to the seals on the Montgaudier baton are clearly males.

Birds occur in both types of art;<sup>95</sup> the most recent survey of French specimens found 121 depictions in 46 sites, and once the doubtful cases had been weeded out there remained 81 birds in 31 sites<sup>96</sup> – remarkably few compared to numbers of animal figures. Portable depictions are more abundant than parietal (the latter comprise 15 figures, or 18.5%). Most are Magdalenian (86.4%; 69% are from the mid- and upper Magdalenian alone), while the oldest are all parietal. Water-birds such as swans, geese, ducks and herons seem to be the most numerous (about 37%). The species and even the genus can be very difficult to identify, as the depictions are often mediocre: indeed, in some cases it is not sure whether faces on cave-walls belong to owl-like birds or to humanoids and 'phantoms', although Leroi-Gourhan's belief that the owls of Trois Frères are 'anthropomorphs' seems to rest on his theories about cave topography (see below, p.172) rather than on resemblance.

Another feature which birds can share with humans is a vertical, bipedal posture; recently, portable engravings from Les Eyzies and from Raymonden, traditionally seen as groups of tiny humanoids approaching a

bison (in the former) and standing around a bison carcass (in the latter), have been reinterpreted by a specialist on birds as lines of swallows:<sup>97</sup> certainly, their stance is identical, and microscopic study revealed tiny incisions by the heads which seem to be beaks; another piece from Raymonden seems to include two swooping birds.

Only about a dozen definite or probable depictions of insects are known, all in portable art, and mostly Magdalenian.<sup>98</sup> Apart from what seems to be the larva of a reindeer-botfly from Kleine Scheuer, and the famous grasshopper of Enlène, most are beetle-like bugs. However, even the grasshopper, the clearest and most detailed depiction, cannot safely be identified to the genus level.

Finally, plants are also rare in Palaeolithic art,<sup>99</sup> especially in parietal art, and only a very few, such as those on a baton from Veyrier and a pebble from Gourdan, can be classed as definite rather than possible. None can be identified accurately.

To sum up, therefore: the ‘animal’ category in Palaeolithic art is of limited information value to zoology, and vice versa. The greatest caution and rigorous objectivity must be applied to any attempt at identification of the genera or species, and assessment of other external features and their posture.

It is clear that large herbivores dominate the art, and that other types of creature are either comparatively rare (carnivores, fish, birds, etc), extremely rare (reptiles, insects, plants) or totally absent (rodents, and many other species of mammal and birds). Since Palaeolithic people were certainly familiar with all aspects of their environment, and since birds, fish and plants were important resources for them, at least in the Magdalenian, it follows that Palaeolithic art is not a simple bestiary, not a random accumulation of artistic observations of nature. It has meaning and structure.

This becomes even more obvious when one looks at the differing frequencies of species in a variety of contexts. It has already been mentioned (see above, p.56) that the Tuc d’Audoubert has different species in its portable and its parietal art, and this observation has been repeated elsewhere. Overall, reindeer, fish, birds and plants are primarily found in portable art rather than parietal,<sup>100</sup> while insects are limited to portable depictions.

Some themes are associated with particular forms of artefact: the horse is rare on harpoons and ‘*baguettes demi-rondes*’, while bison are not found on spearpoints, are rare on perforated batons, but predominate on plaques.<sup>101</sup> Horses and fish are common on perforated batons.

Different species also predominate in different periods and regions: for example, the bison tends to dominate on cave-walls in Cantabria, although it is rare in the region’s portable art, where hinds are predominant on shoulder-blades. The aurochs is more important than the bison in the art of the early phases, but the situation is reversed in the middle and late Magdalenian. The mammoth is of importance in the Rhône and Quercy regions only during the early phases, but in Dordogne during the Magdalenian, when the bison dominates in the Pyrenees.<sup>102</sup> The horse and ibex seem to maintain roughly the same frequency in most places and periods, though the horse appears particularly important in a cluster of Dordogne caves in the Magdalenian (Cap Blanc, Comarque, St Cirq, etc)<sup>103</sup> like the ibex in the late Magdalenian of Cantabria. Such regional and

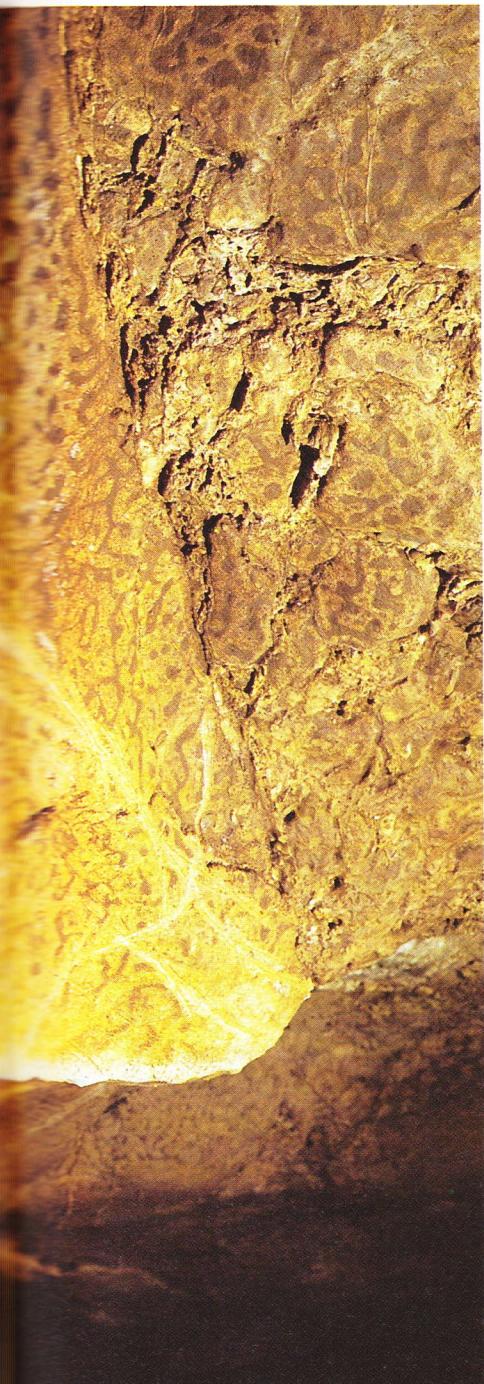


chronological differences may be at least partly ecological in origin, rather than purely cultural or a matter of 'preference'.

Leroi-Gourhan's calculations concerning species frequency in different regions have recently been presented in the form of graphs; and cumulative percentage frequency graphs have also been produced to compare the depictions in different sites; exercises of this type obviously have to assume that all the figures have been correctly identified, but cumulative percentages are a particularly risky statistic.<sup>104</sup>

Finally, it should be noted that different species are not scattered at random through the sites; this is well known for parietal art (see below,

Fig. 92 *The owls engraved at Trois Frères (Ariège) [see also Fig. 56]. Panel width: 87 cm. (JV, collection Bégoën)*



p.167), but the same phenomenon occurs with portable depictions. The differential distribution of depicted species at Dolní Věstonice has already been mentioned (p.83); at La Madeleine, the horse and bison dominate on the objects of bone and antler, but the reindeer was predominant on a cluster of engraved limestone slabs found in part of the shelter.<sup>105</sup> An excellent example of this phenomenon occurs at Gönnersdorf, where most of the mammoth engravings were found inside a habitation near the hearth, with another concentration a few metres away; depictions of birds, on the other hand, were concentrated precisely in those zones devoid of mammoths, whereas horses and humans were found all over the excavated area.<sup>106</sup> Since the mammoth engravings came from a winter habitation (according to the faunal remains) and the birds from a summer one, it is possible that there is a link between season and depicted species at this site.

### ***Humans***

The category of humans has traditionally been given the unwieldy title of ‘anthropomorphs’, comprising not only unmistakable human forms but also images which overlap with the other two categories, and many which seem to have been included simply because they looked figurative but did not resemble any known animal. The fact that humans lack the specialised anatomical features of other mammals (horns, antlers, etc) meant that all kinds of vague, amorphous images were unjustifiably lumped together with clear depictions of people.<sup>107</sup> Instead, a distinction should be made between definite humans, ‘humanoids’ and composites, and the rest should be left undetermined.

#### ***Definite humans***

Perhaps the clearest images in this group are the painted stencils and prints of hands which, as we have seen (p.104), are quite numerous and can dominate the art of whole caves (eg Fuente del Salín) or parts of caves (Gargas, Castillo). Apart from a stencil on a block from abri Labattut (which may have fallen from the wall), found between two Gravettian layers, all hands are parietal; only the Labattut hand has any sort of date, but studies of superposition, composition and association in different caves suggest that this simple motif spans the entire Upper Palaeolithic.

As mentioned earlier, a few caves have incomplete hands, which may be due to mutilation, pathologies, or some system of signals and gestures using bent fingers. Ethnography provides a wide range of possible explanations for hand stencils, both intact and incomplete: eg a signature, a property mark, a memorial, a wish to leave a mark in some sacred place, a record of growth, ‘I was here’, or simply ‘just put there’. In view of the timespan involved, it is probable that all these roles and many more were involved in the Palaeolithic stencils; and since the specific reasons for making such marks seem to be remembered for only a couple of generations<sup>108</sup> it is unlikely that we shall ever be certain why Palaeolithic people painted them.

For decades, despite the steadily growing number of ‘Venus figurines’, it was believed that depictions of humans were rare in Palaeolithic art, and that they were badly done (even though many animal figures were equally incomplete or sketchy!). Now that at least 115 quite realistic human figures are known among the engravings of La Marche,<sup>109</sup> outnumbering all other species depicted at the site, it is clear that they are not so rare; their

quality, together with that of the figures at nearby Angles-sur-l'Anglin, and that of the ivory heads from Brasempouy and Dolní Věstonice, shows that realistic images of people were by no means taboo, as had been supposed.

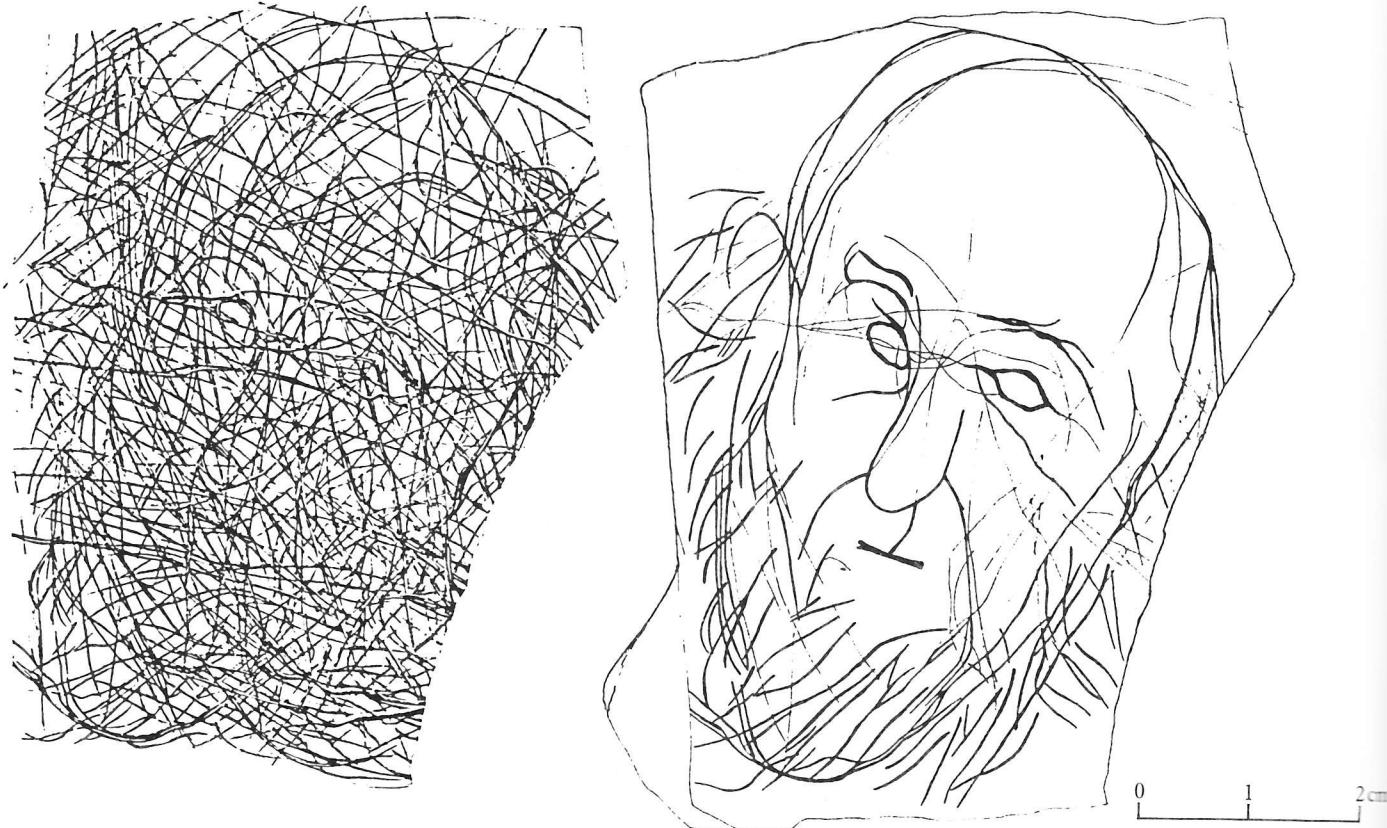
Nevertheless, it remains true that few depictions of humans can match the finest animal images in detail and beauty. More effort may have been put into the animal figures for some ritual purpose, but the answer might simply be lack of ability. Drawings of humans and animals require different skills, and it is noteworthy that Breuil, who learned much of his art from the 'Palaeolithic school', had a talent that was 'confined to portraits of animals. When he ventured to reproduce human figures ... his work was not on a higher level than that of any fairly efficient amateur.'<sup>110</sup> Breuil drew amusing caricatures of his teachers at school, and it is quite possible that some of the Palaeolithic portraits which look funny to our eyes are actually caricatures rather than attempts at serious portraits.

Genitalia are rarely depicted on Palaeolithic humans, even on figurines.<sup>111</sup> On bodies drawn in profile, the phallus can be seen, but the vulva cannot. Where genitals are absent, or on isolated heads, males can still be confidently recognised from beards and moustaches, whereas breasts denote females (though it should be noted that the Brno male statuette has small breasts or exaggerated nipples). At La Marche, using these criteria, there are 13 definite males (including 11 with beards).<sup>112</sup>

Of 51 bodies drawn at the site, 4 are definitely male, but only 27 of the rest can confidently be seen as female: 8 of these have breasts; the others have been identified on the basis of the size of hips and buttocks.<sup>113</sup>

Heads without facial hair have to be left 'neutral' – length of hair is not a sure guide. Hence the Brasempouy head is unsexed, although it is usually called a 'Venus' or 'Lady', and it has even been placed on a female body in

Fig. 93 Tracing of engraved plaquette from La Marche (Vienne), and the face of a bearded man extracted from the mass. Magdalenian. (After Airvaux & Pradel)



one reconstruction.<sup>114</sup> Other scholars have attempted to identify males on the basis of nose-shape or faces that jut forward<sup>115</sup> – despite the fact that the two females engraved at Isturitz have equally jutting faces (Fig. 100). There is a wide range of nose- and face-shapes at La Marche alone.

The presence of adornments can denote females, though it is not an infallible guide: the nine bodies at La Marche that seem to have bracelets and anklets are all female; analogous ornaments including ‘necklaces’ can be seen on the above-mentioned females from Isturitz (identified by their breasts), as well as on the similar ‘*Femme au Renne*’ from Laugerie-Basse (who has a vulva but no breasts), and on a number of female figurines from the Soviet Union.

Clothing is rarely clear; the ‘Venus of Lespugue’ (Fig. 94) seems to have a garment of some kind showing at the back, and belts are depicted occasionally (eg at La Marche and Kostenki). The bearded male, sculptured, engraved and painted at Angles-sur-l’Anglin, appears to be wearing a garment with a fur collar, and perhaps also some form of headgear.<sup>116</sup> However, the so-called ‘*Femme à l’anorak*’ at Gabillou is unsexed, and the ‘hood’ may simply be a hair-line. Elaborate hairstyling is extremely rare (eg the Brasempouy head, the ‘Venus’ of Willendorf).

Using the strict criteria outlined above, it has been established that La Marche has 13 male, 27 female, and 69 undetermined humans; a study of 410 parietal and portable human figures from western Europe (including those of La Marche but not those of Gönnersdorf) produced a very similar picture: approximately 10% male, 25% female and 65% neutral. However, 70 figures from eastern Europe – all in portable art – proved to be approximately 4% male, 60% female and only 36% neutral.<sup>117</sup> The difference with the west is largely due to the fact that almost all the eastern figures are statuettes, on which gender tends to be more easily recognisable.

In Palaeolithic depictions of humans as a whole, details such as eyebrows, nostrils, navels and nipples are extremely rare. The legs are often too short (as in the art of many later cultures); the legs and/or feet of figurines are held together or slightly apart. Few figures have hands or fingers drawn in any detail (examples include La Marche, the ‘Venus’ of Laussel and Willendorf, the man in the Lascaux shaft-scene, etc). Arms on statuettes are usually held close to the body, for technical reasons, and rest on the stomach or, sometimes, the breasts. On other figures, the arms may be at the sides, raised horizontally (as on the Sous-Grand-Lac man), or up in the air – all these poses are represented at La Marche.<sup>118</sup>

Except for the two ivory heads mentioned earlier, very few statuettes (apart from those of Siberia) have any kind of facial detail; their heads are held erect or tilt forward slightly (though one from Kostenki tilts upwards). Many Palaeolithic humans are headless: in some cases, as in the female bas-reliefs of Angles-sur-l’Anglin, it is clear that they never had heads. The same is true of nine engraved humans at La Marche, but others at this site and elsewhere may have had their heads broken off, either purposely or accidentally.<sup>119</sup>

There are three heads seen full-face at La Marche; all the others, together with 90% of the bodies, are in profile, and it is therefore worth examining which way they face. Of 57 isolated heads, 35 face right and 22 left; of 51 bodies, 33 face right and 18 left. In short, of 108 people, 68 (63%) face right and 40 (37%) left. Once again, as with sexing (see above), the percentages are found to be consistent when the analysis is extended to 167 humans from other sites: 100 (60%) of them face right, and 67 (40%) left.<sup>120</sup>

### ***The depiction of women***

Apart from a few definite males (eg Brno, Hohlenstein-Stadel) (Fig.49), most carvings of humans are female. The 'Venus' figurines<sup>121</sup> have been presented in so many art histories and popular works on prehistory that they have come to characterise the period and its depiction of women; this is unfortunate, partly because such statuettes are rare when seen against the timescale of 25 millennia, and partly because the constant display of a few specimens with extreme proportions presents a distorted view.

The term 'Venus' was first used by the Marquis de Vibraye in the 1860s in connection with his '*Vénus impudique*' from Laugerie-Basse (ironically, a very slim lady!), and was later adopted by Piette for the more corpulent figures from Brasempouy and elsewhere; subsequently it seems to have become attached primarily to the obese statuettes.<sup>122</sup>

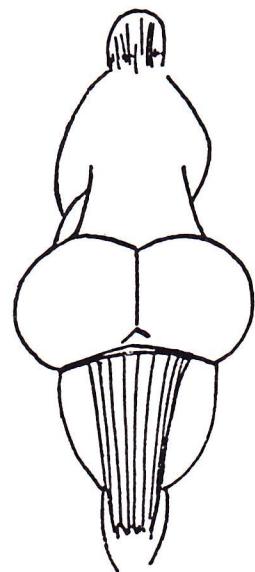
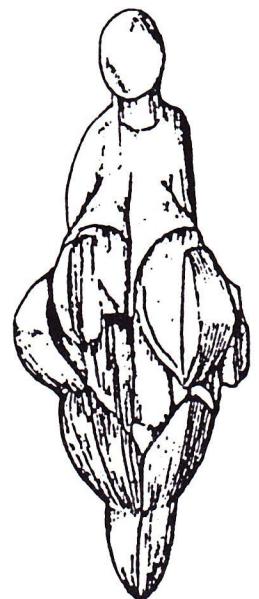
Despite the accepted view that Palaeolithic depictions of humans were badly done, early scholars nevertheless tried to use them as evidence of different races during the period. As with similar attempts involving horses and other species (see above), they were doomed to failure. Piette was among the first to have a try; apart from his erroneous belief that a Grimaldi carved head was negroid, his major mistake was to see the obese 'Venuses' as steatopygous: ie having the special fatty deposits which produce the massive, high and wide buttocks of some female Bushmen and Hottentots.<sup>123</sup>

In fact, he was confusing this phenomenon with the kind of buttock development which is found in all races. Only one statuette (the 'Polichinelle' of Grimaldi) could conceivably be steatopygous; the rest merely present proportions which one can see at any time and anywhere on women who have produced lots of children. In short, 'Venus' figurines have no value whatsoever as indicators of race.<sup>124</sup> Only four (Lespugue, and one each from Willendorf, Grimaldi and Gagarino) have really extreme proportions, and only Lespugue has truly monumental breasts (Fig.94). On the whole, the obese carvings are not anatomically abnormal – they are simply bodies worn and altered by age and childbearing. They seem well nourished, with their adipose tissue concentrated in discrete areas rather than spread out as a continuous layer.

One recent study has looked at 132 Palaeolithic 'Venuses' and has tried to estimate their age group, dividing them into the following categories: young (pre-reproductive, with a firm body, high breasts and a flat stomach); middle-aged (reproductive and potentially pregnant, with a fleshy body, big breasts and a protruding stomach); and old (post-reproductive, sagging all over). The result was 30 (22.7%) young, 23 (17.4%) middle-aged and apparently pregnant, 50 (37.9%) middle-aged but not pregnant, and 29 (22%) old.<sup>125</sup> Despite its tentative and subjective nature, this exercise does at least suggest that the carvings probably represent women throughout their adult life.

As with bison and other species, some scholars have attempted to establish the measurements and conventions used in the construction of Palaeolithic human figures, but made the same mistake of using the images themselves, and not human anatomy, as the base of the study. Drawing lozenges around the Venuses merely shows that they have the same basic shape (as one would expect of human depictions), though with variations, and exaggerates the degree of their deformation. Anatomical studies, on the other hand, suggest that the figures' proportions are close to reality.<sup>126</sup>

Fig. 94 The 'Venus' of Lespugue (Haute Garonne) seen from the side. Ivory, probably Gravettian. Height: 14.7 cm. (J.V.). (Drawings show front and back views after Pales and Leroi-Gourhan respectively)



As was mentioned earlier (p.85), 'Venus' are not limited to the Gravettian and Magdalenian; there is some reason to believe that those of Brasempouy, at least, are Aurignacian; a possible 'rough' for one was reported in the Solutrean of Roc de Sers,<sup>127</sup> but is a most unconvincing Venus. So far, however, only Angles-sur-l'Anglin has produced both parietal (four in bas-relief) and portable specimens (two statuettes), together with over a dozen other human depictions, including the famous large and small 'versions' of a male 'portrait'.<sup>128</sup> However, the 'Venus' figurines were not found in any kind of privileged position. Very few such statuettes in western Europe have any stratigraphic provenance, though some (eg Lespugue, Courbet) seem to have been carefully hidden under rocks in caves and shelters. In eastern Europe, however, the excavation of open-air habitations has frequently encountered intact female figurines in special pits in hut-floors:<sup>129</sup> for example, one from Kostenki I, found in 1983 and dating to about 23,000 years ago, was upright in a small pit, leaning against the wall and facing the centre of the living area and the hearths; the pit was filled with soil mixed with red ochre and was capped by a mammoth shoulder-blade.<sup>130</sup> The eastern statuettes are often interpreted by Soviet scholars as a mother- or ancestor-figure, a mistress of the house.

These hidden figurines, in both western and eastern Europe, cast doubt on the theory that Venuses were meant for public exhibition, and that those with a protuberance at the base (Tursac, Sireuil) or with peg-like feet were hafted on to stakes or stuck in the ground for display.<sup>131</sup>

Finally, it is worth noting that no definite 'Venuses', either parietal or portable, have yet been found in the Iberian Peninsula; this is partly because bas-reliefs are limited to parts of France; but in view of the remarkable distribution of female statuettes from the western Pyrenees to Siberia, there seems no reason why Spain and Portugal should not contain a few, and no doubt future discoveries will alter the situation.

### 'Humanoids'

This category should comprise all those figures interpreted, but not positively identified, as being human. For example, there are many heads which could belong to animals but also resemble some of the more 'bestialised' heads on definite human figures: one, engraved on the wall at Comarque, represents a bear for some scholars, but others see it as human.<sup>132</sup> It cannot safely be assigned to either group. A number of rudimentary and sometimes grotesque heads on cave-walls, seen full-face, are potentially human (eg Marsoulas, or Trois Frères), while others (such as 'phantoms') are best left undetermined. As mentioned above (pp.132-3), the miniature figures grouped on some engraved bones have traditionally been interpreted as human (despite the lack of any distinguishing features) but may in fact be realistic birds.

This is by no means a new problem. From the start, Breuil was well aware of the difficulties in separating 'elementary anthropomorphs' not only from animals but also from 'signs'. It occurred to him that the 'claviform' (clublike) signs might be derived from stylised females, but he dropped the idea because too many intermediate steps in the stylisation were missing.<sup>133</sup> Today, however, we have far more 'stylised females', and the idea has re-emerged.

Such stylisations are particularly abundant in the late Magdalenian, though they are not exclusive to the period. They occur both on cave walls

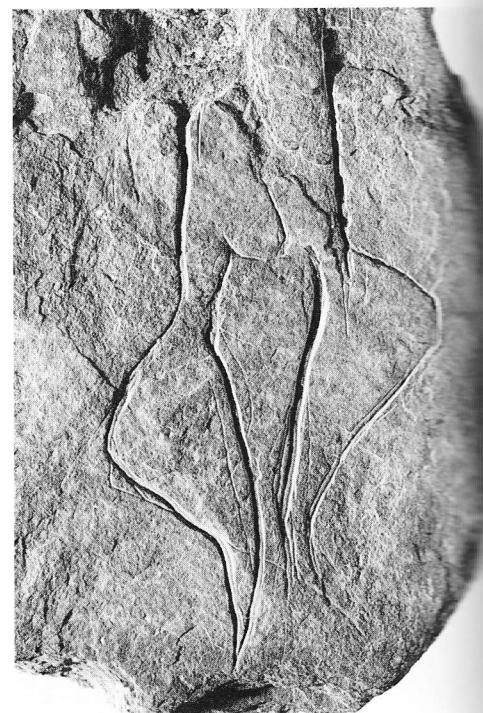


Fig. 95 Stylised humans engraved on plaque from Gönnersdorf (Germany): two female figures are depicted, 'face to face'. Magdalenian. The figure on the right is 11.3 cm long. (Photo G. Bosinski)



Fig. 96 Engraved plaque from Gönnersdorf (Germany), showing four schematised females with what may be a small child between them. Magdalenian. Width of plaque: 8 cm. (Photo G. Bosinski)

(eg Fronsac<sup>134</sup>) and on slabs and plaquettes as at Gare de Couze and La Roche-Lalinde: Gönnersdorf alone has 224 such figures on 87 engraved surfaces, as well as about a dozen figurines of similar type, in ivory, antler and schist; some of the figurines are perforated.<sup>135</sup>

The engraved figures are all stereotyped headless profiles (mostly facing right) with protruding buttocks; about a third can safely be identified as female humans because they appear to have breasts, as well as arms and other details. The other, more sketchy outlines from this site and elsewhere have been interpreted as females because of their resemblance to the more definite examples,<sup>136</sup> but they could be either young females or males (none is definitely male), and are best left as 'neutral': some of them would probably be classed as non-figurative if found out of context!

The Gönnersdorf females have a wide range of proportions, and occur both singly and in groups of two, three, and more, which have been interpreted as 'dances' for some reason. Some couples face each other, and one woman has what may be a baby on her back (Figs. 95-6).<sup>137</sup>

In view of the position of Venus statuettes in open-air habitations (see above), it is important to note that the intact figurines from Gönnersdorf were all found in pits.<sup>138</sup> It will be recalled that such statuettes are thought to have been made for long-term use while plaquettes had a short-term use before being discarded and/or broken (see pp.54 and 77).

Various authors have proposed unilinear sequences of development from realistic to stylised, and even to 'signs'; Breuil did this for a number of species, and Leroi-Gourhan saw humans as being stylised into the headless profiles and ultimately into 'claviform' signs which, like the profiles, occur singly and in groups.<sup>139</sup> Alas, all such schemes are to some degree subjective, and often ignore dating and other factors: for example, true claviform signs are exclusively parietal, probably mid-Magdalenian in date, and limited to the Pyrenees and Cantabria (and possibly also earlier at Lascaux); but the headless female profiles are most abundant in Germany (and to a lesser extent in Dordogne), and seem to be late Magdalenian! The claviform comprises a vertical line with a bulge at one side; but unlike the buttocks on the stylised females, the bulge is usually on the middle or the upper half of the 'sign'!<sup>140</sup> It has been suggested that the 'upper bulge' on a claviform instead represents breasts, but this is based on supposedly stylised statuettes from Dolní Věstonice and elsewhere, comprising a rod with two little lumps near the top, and thus on analogies with sites even further away in space and time from the claviforms. In any case, stylisation of humans or of any other theme can and probably did take place independently, in a number of phases and regions.<sup>141</sup>

The claviform question demonstrates the dangers of subjective impressions in these matters; a similar debate concerns some carvings from Mezin (Soviet Union) which different scholars see as schematic images of women, as phallic symbols or as birds.<sup>142</sup> They may, in fact, be schematic female symbols (triangles, etc) engraved on phallic birds! Clearly, in situations of this kind, the figures must be left undetermined, and speculation about what they depict must never be claimed as a firm identification.

### **Composites**

We have just encountered some undiagnostic examples which could be either animal or human; but what of those figures which have clear and detailed elements of both? They been called 'anthropozoomorphs' or 'therianthropes', but the term 'composites' is simpler, and does not give priority to either the human or the animal features.

In the past, thanks to the dominance of the 'hunting magic' theories (see below, p.150), all such figures were automatically and unjustifiably called 'sorcerers', and were assumed to be a shaman or medicine man in a mask or an animal costume.

But how can we differentiate between people wearing masks, people with jutting, bestialised faces (see above) and humans with animal heads? Unfortunately we can't, and it is likely that all the above are represented in Palaeolithic images. Inevitably, interpretations have been heavily influenced by ethnographic parallels: for example, a bison-headed humanoid at Trois Frères (with the supposed 'musical bow') (see Fig.104) bears some resemblance to North American Indians disguised as bison for a dance,<sup>143</sup> while an equally famous figure from the same cave – the 'Sorcerer', with his antlers and other animal parts (Fig.97) – looks just like an eighteenth-century depiction of a Siberian shaman.<sup>144</sup> These



Fig. 97 Photomontage of the 'sorcerer' of Trois Frères (Ariège), together with Breuil's version of this painted and engraved figure. Probably Magdalenian. Length: 75 cm. (J.V. collection Béguen)



Palaeolithic images may indeed be disguised humans, although it cannot be proved.

On the other hand, many scholars have noticed the strange resemblance between the Hohlenstein-Stadel statuette (Fig.49) and Egyptian figures of a deity with a human body topped by a lion's head; in this case, therefore, the ethnographic analogy points towards an imaginary being – again without proof. Likewise, Breuil called the Trois Frères 'sorcerer' the 'God of the Cave' and considered him an imaginary figure, dominating the 'sanctuary'. Not all such 'sorcerer' figures, however, are in imposing positions – indeed, some are hidden away among other images, and can be very hard to see.<sup>145</sup>

The Trois Frères figure is certainly strange: only the upright position and the legs and hands are really human. The rest is a mixture of different animals – the back and ears of a herbivore, the antlers of a reindeer, the tail of a horse, and the phallus in the position a feline would have it.<sup>146</sup> Very few such composite figures have horns or antlers (apart from the Trois Frères examples, Gabillou has the clearest); overall, composites or 'monsters' are fairly rare in parietal art – according to Leroi-Gourhan, only about 15 sites have them, with no more than half a dozen in each, and some of those he includes are probably not even humanoid.<sup>147</sup>

The distribution of human figures is interesting: as with parietal and portable art, there are many sites with none, some with one or two, while others like La Marche or Gönnersdorf have many. Pales' sample of 410 in western Europe (including La Marche but excluding Gönnersdorf) comprised 187 realistic figures, 214 humanoids, and 9 composites<sup>148</sup> – the vast majority (c 80%) were engravings, with carvings accounting for almost all the others: painted humans are extremely rare.

Definite humans are scarce in parietal art, and there are few women resembling the Venus figurines or the stylised profiles (examples include Angles-sur-l'Anglin, Laussel, Fronsac). The distribution of sexed and unsexed humans within caves will be studied later (p.172).

Portable art accounts for over 75% of Palaeolithic human depictions; as mentioned earlier, at Dolní Věstonice the human figures were not found in the same hut as those of herbivores, but were with carnivore figures. At Gönnersdorf they were scattered throughout the excavated area, unlike engravings of mammoths and birds: animals predominated on some slates at this site, while other slates were primarily devoted to stylised females; no intentional grouping of human figures with animals or with symbols could be discerned.<sup>149</sup>

### ***Non-figurative: 'signs'***

The non-figurative category of Palaeolithic markings was neglected until relatively recently, for the simple reason that it seemed uninteresting, or impossible to explain or define. Many lines, as mentioned earlier (p.44), were simply ignored as '*traits parasites*'. Nowadays, however, thanks to the attention paid to the abstract 'signs' by Leroi-Gourhan and to the discovery of similar non-figurative motifs in Australia and elsewhere (see above, p.28), we have to come to terms with the possibility that these marks may have been of equal, if not greater, importance to Palaeolithic people than the 'recognisable' figures to which we have devoted so much attention. Certainly, it has been estimated that non-figurative marks are two or three times more abundant than figurative, and in some areas far more: for example, on 1,200 engraved pieces of bone and antler from 26

Magdalenian sites in Cantabria, there are only 70 identifiable animals – all other motifs seem non-figurative.<sup>150</sup>

As already mentioned, it is hard to separate this category from the two others; and it comprises a tremendously wide range of motifs, from a single dot or line to complex constructions, and to extensive panels of apparently unstructured linear marks. There are significant differences in content between portable and parietal examples, which make it extremely difficult to date parietal ‘signs’, particularly in cases where they constitute the only decoration and figurative images are absent, as at Santián and other sites.<sup>151</sup> Even in caves with both figurative and non-figurative images on the walls, ‘signs’ can be either totally isolated, clustered on their own panels or in their own chambers, or closely associated with the figurative – and sometimes all of these.

In the past, certain shapes were assumed to be narrative or pictographic: ie to represent schematised objects on the basis of ethnographic comparisons (see Chapter 7, below) or, more often, subjective assessment of what they ‘looked like’: hence, we have terms such as ‘tectiforms’ (huts), ‘claviforms’ (clubs), ‘scutiforms’ (shields), ‘aviforms’ (birds), ‘penniforms’ (feathers), etc. These are no longer taken literally but, as they have entered the literature so decisively, are retained simply as rough guides to particular shapes. Even if these motifs were ultimately derived from real objects, they could now be purely abstract,<sup>152</sup> although it is impossible for us to separate them fully from ‘realistic’ figures: some signs may indeed be schematised or abbreviated (or unfinished!) versions of some object. Some authors now regard ‘signs’ as ‘ideomorphs’ – ie representations of ideas rather than objects, but we simply don’t know whether they are real or abstract or both.

We inevitably apply our understanding to what we see; our background, culture and art history come into play, and hence the early scholars tried to translate some signs as if they were hieroglyphics, in the vain hope of finding a Palaeolithic Rosetta Stone. Even if these signs were representational, their meaning would be far from straightforward without an informant: for example, among the Walbiri of Australia, a simple circle can mean a hill, tree, campsite, circular path, egg, breast, nipple, entrance into or exit from the ground and a host of other things; similarly, ‘translation’ of simple signs and pictographs in North America can often produce differing and unexpected results.<sup>153</sup> A mere resemblance of shape does not necessarily mean that a motif is an image of an object.

What is clear is that the simpler motifs are more abundant and widespread, as one would expect, since they could have been invented in many places and periods independently. The more complex forms, however, show extraordinary variability and are more restricted in space and time, to the extent that they have been seen as ‘ethnic markers’, perhaps delineating Palaeolithic groups of some sort.<sup>154</sup> hence, ‘quadrilateral’ signs seem concentrated in Dordogne, particularly at Lascaux and Gabilou; a different kind of ‘quadrilateral’ is found in a Cantabrian group of caves (Castillo, La Pasiega and Las Chimeneas, all in the same hill, together with Altamira, some 20 km away); ‘tectiforms’ are found in the Les Eyzies region (Dordogne), in a small group of caves only a few kilometres apart, including Font de Gaume and Bernifal;<sup>155</sup> very similar ‘aviforms’ are known at Cougnac and Pech Merle, 35 km apart; triangles are predominantly found in the centre of Spain, but are rare in Cantabria; perhaps most remarkable of all is the distribution of true

'claviforms', which are known in Ariège (Niaux, Trois Frères, Tuc d'Audoubert, Le Portel, Fontanet, Mas d'Azil) and in Cantabria (Pindal, La Cullalvera) some 500 km away (and perhaps also at Lascaux).

As will be seen below (p.169), Leroi-Gourhan divided 'signs' into two basic groups, the 'thin' and the 'full', which he linked to a sexual symbolism (phallic and vulvar); he later added a third group, that of the dots.<sup>156</sup> In view of the wide range of shapes on display, such a division was far too simplistic and schematic; using geometric criteria, other scholars have proposed seven or even a dozen classes of parietal sign but still found some very hard to fit in.<sup>157</sup>

Similarly, the non-figurative motifs in portable art have been receiving an increasing amount of attention lately, and likewise have been divided into different groups.<sup>158</sup> Meg Conkey, for example, has sought out the basic units of decorative systems in Cantabrian portable art, and their structural interrelations. In a sample of 1,200 pieces, she found a set of about 200 distinct 'design elements', which she organised into 57 'classes'.<sup>159</sup> Her analysis revealed that a core set of 15 elements was used throughout the Magdalenian, and was widespread within and outside the region. As with the parietal signs, therefore, it will be necessary to focus on the more complex designs in order to identify regional variations in style (and possibly distinct social groups of some kind).

In both parietal and portable art, a full survey of the presence and interrelationships of different motifs, as well as of their association with each other and with other figures, is required, but will entail a more complete published corpus than we have, followed by computer analysis. It is the presence and absence of particular combinations which is revealing: in parietal signs, for example, very few binary combinations occur out of the range of possibilities, and only signs found in binary combinations also occur in 'triads'.<sup>160</sup> Clearly these marks were not set down at random, but follow some set of rules and simple laws.

Can they therefore be seen as a primitive form of writing? Theories about this go back to the discovery of portable art, when a variety of enigmatic motifs associated with animal figures were seen as possible artists' signatures by a number of scholars including Lartet, Garrigou and Piette.<sup>161</sup> It is inevitable that, despite their wide variety of shapes, some of the Palaeolithic signs will resemble some of the simpler characters in certain early forms of writing; after all, the range of possible basic marks is somewhat limited. It has recently been claimed that some Palaeolithic signs have very close analogies with characters and letters in ancient written languages in the Mediterranean, the Indus valley and China,<sup>162</sup> but, as with resemblances to objects, this does not necessarily prove anything. As far as parietal signs are concerned, it often appears to be their presence which was important, rather than their layout or orientation;<sup>163</sup> instead of forming a script, they were sometimes joined through superposition, juxtaposition or actual integration to form composites.

Where motifs on portable objects are concerned, however, it is still possible that they include some sort of 'pre-writing'; we simply don't know. What is almost certain is that the meaning of the signs and marks, no matter how abstract they may appear to us, must have been clear to the maker and to those who saw and/or used them. We can see this today with our road signs and warnings: some have meanings obvious to everyone, others have to be learnt, but all are known to those who operate within that system.<sup>164</sup>



Fig. 98 'Signs' in the cave of Castillo (Santander). Width: 58 cm.  
(JV)

### ***Colour schemes***

A final factor in the content of Palaeolithic art which we have yet to consider is the use of different colours; we have already seen that the range was limited and usually involved a straight choice between red and black. At first sight, it might seem possible to present a theory that one of these represented males and the other females (for example in hand stencils), just as we have blue for boys and pink for girls; but the situation is far more complex.

Where signs are concerned, their colour seems linked to different regions and periods, but red usually dominates. As mentioned earlier (p.110), red is more visible in dark caves, so that whatever message (of warning, topographic guidance, instruction, etc) the signs conveyed could readily be seen and understood. In the Iberian Peninsula, 23% of the

parietal signs are engraved, 27% painted in black, and no less than 50% painted in red;<sup>165</sup> in France too, about two-thirds of painted signs are red, and they are often the only (or almost the only) red figures in the cave.<sup>166</sup> This is particularly noticeable on friezes of black outline animals, such as Niaux's Salon Noir, or the frieze at Pech Merle (Fig. 73).

The use of colour for both signs and animal figures alters significantly through space and time: a survey of 38 caves in France and Spain found that black accounted for 48% of figures and red for 43.7%, only 5.3% in yellow and brown, and mixtures (bichromes and polychromes) a mere 3%;<sup>167</sup> – a statistic which underlines the fact that the latter are exceptional and unrepresentative of Palaeolithic art, despite their popularity in art-history books.

However, when the paintings were dated according to Leroi-Gourhan's styles (see above, p.62), a difference was found: in Style III (late Solutrean/early Magdalenian), 56% of figures were red, and 34.7% black, while in Style IV (mid- and late Magdalenian) these percentages were almost exactly reversed, with black animals becoming particularly dominant at the end of the period. Style IV appears to have a marked tendency for black animals and red signs.

Black and red, whether in signs or figures, are sometimes found in different parts of the same cave (eg Pech Merle, Castillo, Altamira), which may denote a chronological difference, or some purposeful colour scheme. Some signs are associated with a particular colour: about 94% of claviforms are red, as are 100% of painted tectiforms in Dordogne; most dots are red, and isolated dots are always red.<sup>168</sup>

There are also a few such associations discernible in animal figures, but these appear to be of regional rather than general significance: for example, in Spain 95% of hinds are red, whereas stags can be either colour; Las Chimeneas has only stags, and they are all black, whereas all the 17 hinds in Covalanas are red. At Castillo and La Pasiega, however, red dominates for deer, no matter what their sex.<sup>169</sup>

All of the above should have made it clear that in Palaeolithic art there are no absolute rules, no certainties, and a very broad range of complex problems; but also that this is no random accumulation of pictures – on the contrary, it is characterised throughout by careful selection of surface, size, technique, colour, species, anatomical detail, degree of accuracy or stylisation. It is now necessary to examine the sense that different people over the last century have tried to make of all these facts, and in what directions current research is taking us.