



The Magdalenian human burial of El Mirón Cave (Ramales de la Victoria, Cantabria, Spain): introduction, background, discovery and context



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ABSTRACT

During the course of long-term excavations of El Mirón Cave in Cantabrian Spain, remains of an adult human woman were found in deposits dating to the Lower Magdalenian (18.9–18.7 cal. kya). Interred with abundant red ochre (including specular hematite crystals) in culturally rich sediments characterized by abundant lithic and osseous artifact assemblages, faunal remains dominated by red deer and ibex, with some marine shells from an Oldest Dryas shore ca. 25 km distant, the “Red Lady of El Mirón” was buried between the rear cave vestibule wall and a large block, both of which (but especially the latter—also stained with red ochre in proximity to the corpse) bear engravings, possibly symbolically related to the burial. The papers of this special issue of *Journal of Archaeological Science* present the stratigraphic and archeological contexts, environmental background, dating, taphonomy, spatial distribution, human osteology, dietary information of the skeleton, and the rock art, ochre, artifacts and faunas associated with this burial, the first major human interment of Magdalenian age to be discovered on the Iberian Peninsula.

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1. Preamble

This article constitutes the introduction and contextual background to the monographic study of the Lower Magdalenian human burial unearthed during recent excavations in El Mirón Cave, northern Atlantic Spain. It is followed in this special issue of the *Journal of Archaeological Science* by articles on the taphonomy of the skeleton by A.B. Marín-Arroyo, on the spatial distribution of the human bones by J.M. Geiling and A. Marín-Arroyo, on the complete osteological inventory and study of the skeleton by J.M. Carretero et al., on dental micro-wear and stable isotope analyses of the human remains by R. García-González et al., on analyses of dental calculus by R. Power et al., on the red ochre intimately associated with the interment by R. Seva et al., on the palynological and micromammalian analyses of the burial deposit by M.J. Iriarte, A. Arrizabalaga and G. Cuenca-Bescós, on the lithic and osseous artifacts found in the burial deposit by L.M. Fontes, L.G. Straus and M.R.

González Morales, on the large mammal faunal remains and mollusk shells found in the burial deposit by A.B. Marín-Arroyo and J.M. Geiling and by I. Gutierrez-Zugasti and D. Cuenca respectively, on artistic activity associated with the burial by M.R. González Morales and L.G. Straus, and an overview of the burial and its significance by L.G. Straus, M.R. González Morales, J.M. Carretero and A.B. Marín-Arroyo. All these articles should be read together to obtain the complete picture of this burial and its environmental, archeological, archeofaunal and ritual contexts.

2. Introduction

Although human burials are relatively common in the Gravettian record within the Upper Paleolithic of Western and Central Europe, they are mainly from the Czech Republic and Italy, with a few isolated examples from Wales, France and Portugal. These include the (in-)famous “Red Lady of Paviland”, discovered in 1823, misinterpreted in every conceivable way (including sex and geological age) for over a century and three-quarters, ochre-stained and headless (Aldhouse-Green, 2000; Sommer, 2007).

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During the following Solutrean period, which corresponded to the Last Glacial Maximum, burials and indeed any human remains become extremely scarce in the archeological record. It was in the Magdalenian, which developed during the most of Greenland Stadial 2 and Interstadial 1e-d of late MIS 2 (ca. 20.5–13.5 cal kya), that there was an explosion of evidence for the manipulation and/or burial of whole or partial human corpses or skeletons. This phenomenon has been recently synthesized by Pettitt (2011: 215–242). The evidence comes mainly from sites in France, and is supplemented (mainly for the late phases of the Magdalenian) by cases from Poland and Germany. The Magdalenian record is paralleled by the rich Epigravettian one from Italy, featuring numerous burials of whole skeletons. In France there are burials of whole (or originally whole) skeletons in the Magdalenian sites of Saint-Germain-la-Rivière, Laugerie-Basse, Bruniquel, Duruthy and Chancelade (see e.g., Henry-Gambier, 2006; Gambier et al., 2000). However there are also many cases of secondary deposits of isolated skeletal elements, notably at Le Placard, La Madeleine, Le Rond-de-Barry, Enlène, Rochereil and Isturitz, as well as also at Saint-Germain. Significant manipulation of human remains during the Magdalenian is also documented at Brillenhöhle (Germany), Maszycka (Poland) and Gough's Cave (England). The Magdalenian custom of human skeletal manipulation has recently been highlighted with the direct dating of 3 of the 119 scattered remains (almost all cranial) from the early excavations in Isturitz, only 18 km from the border of the Spanish Basque Country (Henry-Gambier et al., 2013). However, until now there had been few finds of human remains and no substantially complete skeletons from Magdalenian sites in Spain, despite over a century of excavations and scores of sites, notably in the Cantabrian region. From that region there were only the two famous “cranial cups” (in fact unmodified, frontal bones) from the early Magdalenian of El Castillo Cave discovered by H. Obermaier in 1911, a few loose teeth from Cobalejos, Morín, Rascaño (also with a small occipito-parietal fragment) caves (plus, more problematic in terms of age and context, a small maxillary fragment in La Pasiega Cave and a partial child cranium from El Pendo Cave (all in central Cantabria Province), plus Tito Bustillo in Asturias and Erralla in the Basque Region (Garralda, 1992; Guerrero and Lorenzo, 1981). The irony of the El Mirón human burial is that, while many medium-size and especially small bones were preserved, it is the cranium together with most of the long bones that are missing, making this an unusual case compared with the relatively many Magdalenian instances in France and Germany of either crania with many or some post-cranial bones or of isolated crania (or parts thereof).

The absence of Iberian Magdalenian human burials ended in 2010, nearing the conclusion of a long series of excavation campaigns in El Mirón Cave (Cantabria) that had begun in 1996, when we uncovered a complete mandible and then (over the course of three summers) more than one hundred other skeletal remains of a single human, part of them stained (some intensively) with red ochre and unambiguously dating to the Lower Cantabrian Magdalenian. This period (ca. 19–17.5 cal kya) is very well represented in El Mirón by massive habitation layers, as well as by rupestrian engravings and temporally diagnostic works of portable art. Discovery of the burial closely surrounded by arguably contemporaneous rock art strongly suggests the inclusion of a ritual aspect among the multifunctional residential uses of the site during the late part of Oldest Dryas. This special issue of the *Journal of Archaeological Science* describes and analyzes the human remains from El Mirón in their paleoenvironmental, archeological and archeozoological contexts. In short, the articles that follow report on another “red lady” – this one actually of probable female sex, with well-established age, empirically revealed diet, but mysterious, but probably ritual burial history: the “Red Lady of El Mirón”.

3. El Mirón Cave and its Magdalenian Sequence

El Mirón Cave is located in a foothill range of the Cantabrian Cordillera near the border between the provinces of Cantabria and Vizcaya, equidistant between the cities of Santander and Bilbao and 20 km from the Holocene shore of the Cantabrian Sea. It is at 14°14'43" N × 3°27'09" W (ETRS89 datum) and 255 m a.s.l., faces due west and dominates a relatively broad, intermontane stretch of the upper Asón River valley from about 150 m above the valley floor on the steep, rock cliff-face of 495 m-high Monte Pando. The cave is surrounded by summits of ≥1000 m and there are peaks up to 1700 m a.s.l. in the nearby main range of the Cordillera. The site is near the crossroads of important avenues of communication west – east between central Cantabria via 674 m Alisas Pass, the Asón and its tributary the Carranza and between the coast and the *meseta* of Old Castile via the Asón and 920 m Los Tornos Pass (Fig. 1). The cave, with a mouth some 20 m high by 16 m wide, is accessible to a depth of about 130 m and consists of a sunlit vestibule (30 m deep × 8–10 m wide × 13 m high) and a dark inner cave filled (ultimately to the ceiling) with alluvium of probably Lower Pleistocene age, connected by a 4–6 m-wide corridor occupied by a steep ramp of eroded colluvial-alluvial sediments.

Scientifically discovered as a Paleolithic site by H. Alcalde del Río and L. Sierra in 1903 (at the same time as the adjacent painted caves of Covalanas and La Haza), El Mirón was essentially ignored and written off as supposedly being disturbed until MRGM and LGS began their excavations in 1996, 23 years after a visit by LGS. Excavations (Fig. 2) have been conducted principally in the vestibule: within the foundation of a historic-era stone cabin (“Outer Vestibule”: 9.5 m²) and in the area of a wooden corral that existed until 1996 (“Vestibule Rear”) (Straus and González Morales, 2012a). These two excavation areas are connected by a 9 m-long × 0.5–1.0 m-wide “Mid-Vestibule Trench” in the middle of which was dug a 1 × 1 m test pit that reached the base of the Magdalenian sequence. The Vestibule Rear area consists of three subareas: a main one in which the full Magdalenian sequence was excavated (10.5 m²), a test pit dug below the base of a large looters' hole through Solutrean and Gravettian layers and into the terminal Mousterian (2 m²), and a small subarea (3 m²) between a 2.5 × 1 × 1 m block (whose west face is covered with engravings (García Díez et al., 2012)) and the SE corner of the vestibule rear where the human burial was discovered. These subareas are connected, but the main and burial areas only barely so. Our section-cleaning of and a test pit we made in the base of an unpublished trench dug in the inner cave in the 1950s and our sampling of the fill of niche in the cave wall above the present ramp floor and of a breccia remnant adhering to the cave wall at the top of the ramp yielded radiocarbon and limited artifact evidence of early Magdalenian, Azilian, Bronze Age and Medieval visits to the inner cave. The full culture-stratigraphic of the vestibule continues through the Azilian, Mesolithic (with minimal evidence of ephemeral human visits), early and late Neolithic, Chalcolithic and early Bronze Age. The whole site has been dated by 84 radiocarbon dates (Straus and González Morales, 2003, 2007a, 2010). Forty-nine or fifty of these dates refer to the Magdalenian sequence, which at its recent end intergrades with the Azilian-an Epi-Magdalenian cultural phase that straddles the Pleistocene–Holocene boundary. The dates range from 20.5 to 13.5 cal kya and represent the Initial, Lower, Middle and Upper Magdalenian phases, making El Mirón one of the most complete Magdalenian sites in Spain or indeed Europe (González Morales and Straus, 2005; Straus and González Morales, 2012b).

Of direct relevance to the burial are the Lower Cantabrian Magdalenian levels found in the Outer Vestibule (Levels 17–15), Mid-Vestibule test pit (Level 312) and main Vestibule Rear area (Levels 116–110) (Straus et al., 2008; González Morales and Straus,

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