



Magdalenian-age graphic activity associated with the El Mirón Cave human burial



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ABSTRACT

The human burial of Lower Magdalenian age in El Mirón Cave was found in the narrow space between the outward (westward) sloping bedrock wall of the vestibule rear and a very large limestone block. The corpse had been deposited in contact with both engraved lines on the cave wall and red ochre staining on the eastern face of the block. In addition, the burial was made at approximately the same time (ca. 18,700 calendar years ago, per multiple radiocarbon dates) that the western (daylight-facing) face was engraved with numerous lines, some of which (although not provable) could be seen as suggestive of a schematic, partial representation of a human female, which in turn could speculatively be interpreted, on chronological and physical associational grounds, as marking the presence of the human female interment behind the block. Furthermore, masses of engravings on the rear vestibule wall (including images of a horse and a possible bison) can potentially be attributed to the Lower Magdalenian, and thus roughly contemporaneous with the burial.

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1. Introduction

Despite having been identified as a Paleolithic archeological site in 1903 (see Alcalde del Río et al., 1911), and despite the fact that it is adjacent to three cave art sites (Covalanas, La Haza and La Luz) and near a dozen others (e.g., González Sainz and San Miguel, 2001; Ruiz and Smith, 2003), no one had ever reported finding evidence of Ice Age “art” in El Mirón Cave until we began our excavations in 1996. At the time of the first discovery of the cave as an archeological site, the early explorers, L. Sierra and H. Alcalde del Río, did not see any evidence of paintings or engravings on its walls, even after looking for them. Alcalde del Río (1906:46) includes an explicit reference to that search: “All the walls lack the slightest trace of graphics”. (Covalanas and La Haza have recently been the subjects of monographic studies [García Díez and Eguizabal, 2003, 2007], but the art in both these caves is arguably much older [Gravettian/Solutrean] than that which we have discovered in El Mirón.)

At the very beginning of our research project in the cave, as we were removing goat excrement, mixed surface fill and the contents

of a very large looters’ crater at the rear of the cave vestibule, one of us (MRGM) began to spot engraved lines descending beneath the ground surface (Fig. 1). As work progressed, it became apparent that the lines on both the vestibule rear bedrock wall and on the western (sunlit) face of a nearby, very large block continued downward below the top of intact archeological sediments that we eventually were able to date to the Mesolithic and terminal Upper Paleolithic periods. Fine, apparently non-representational engraved lines, a small engraved horse image and a possible bison representation that is formed by natural rock features that had been enhanced with engraved lines, were discovered in the course of systematic washing and inspection of the cave wall above the 1996 ground surface both to the north and to the south of the narrow ramp gallery that leads east- and upward toward the inner cave from the northeast corner of the vestibule rear. These traces of graphic activity were studied by González Morales and Straus (2000) and by García Díez et al. (2012) before the discovery of human remains behind the block. While the studies of these “works of art” are not complete, it is clear that they date to pre-Holocene times, most probably to the Lower–Middle Magdalenian. This is based, in the case of the wall art, on the height of the engravings above the living surfaces we excavated nearby (and whose slope could be calculated) and (especially for the horse image at the northeast corner of the vestibule) on stylistic grounds

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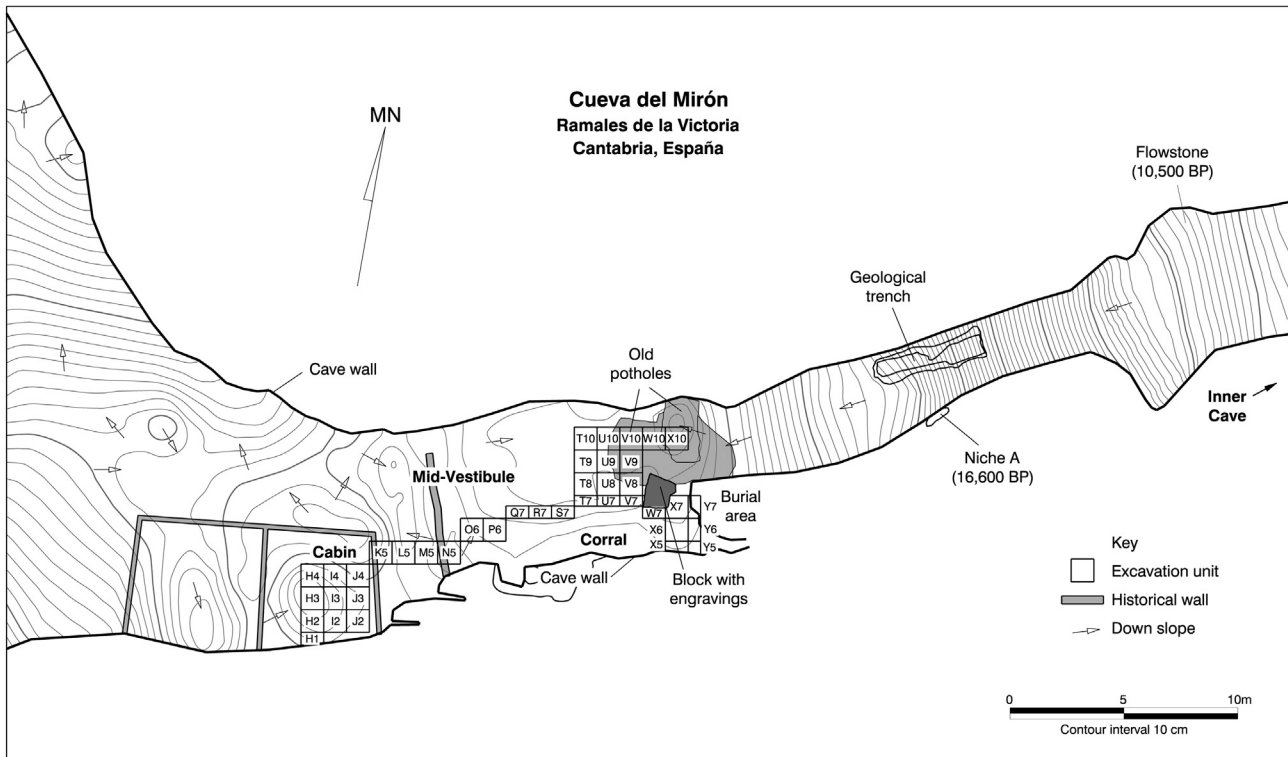


Fig. 1. Plan of the vestibule of El Mirón Cave, showing the excavation areas, engraved block and burial area (E. Torres, redrafted by R. Stauber).

that are well established in the Cantabrian region. It is possible that there is some anthropic red pigment staining on the cave wall in some of the engraved areas, but this possibility is not yet resolved (Hernanz, n.d.). In this article we will focus on the engravings on the block which turned out to be in intimate spatial relationship to the burial at the southeast corner of the vestibule rear. All other aspects of the burial, the skeleton, and its environmental, spatial, archeological and archeozoological contexts are to be found in the

other articles of this special issue of the *Journal of Archaeological Science*.

2. The engraved block

By far the largest block encountered in our 17 years of work in El Mirón Cave was partially visible at the outset. It is located in squares W8, W7 and the western quarter of X8, northwest corner of X7 and



Fig. 2. Photo from above the block showing the engraved west face. The burial was in the space between the red ochre-stained east face and the engraved, sloping, rear cave vestibule wall at top of photo (L.G. Straus).

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