



## The past is out there: Open-air Palaeolithic sites and new research strategies in the Cantabrian region (northern Iberia)



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 23 August 2014

#### Keywords:

Open air sites  
Site formation processes  
Lower Paleolithic  
Middle Paleolithic  
Upper Paleolithic

### ABSTRACT

The development of Paleolithic studies in the Cantabrian Region has been historically biased towards cave deposits. This can be explained by a concurrence of factors, as the richness of cave deposits, the heritage regulations, and the interest of researchers. This bias affects the way we interpret the archaeological record in order to understand paleolithic human behaviors, and environments. Nevertheless some advances in the open air research have been done in the last 20 years at Irikaitz, Ametzagaina, Uribe Kosta, El Barandiallu, Cabo Busto and Bañugues. These efforts help us to understand the limits and possibilities of open air paleolithic surveying and excavation in order to understand the non-cave human activities in this concrete region.

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## 1. Introduction

Owing to numerous concurrent circumstances, archaeological research into hunter-gatherer groups in the Cantabrian region in the last 120 years has suffered from certain biases that have affected our current perception of the phenomenon. Of all these, perhaps the one that has most influenced our view of these groups has been the predilection of all generations of researchers for the record found inside caves. Now, when the cave record appears to be rather exhausted and many of the open-air sites must have succumbed under the scourge of urbanism, the study of open-air sites has become crucial within Palaeolithic archaeological research. The likely differences in scale between caves and outdoor sites were detected and highlighted by Bailey (2008), as a factor affecting the understanding of singular event and general archaeological processes. The present generation of Cantabrian archaeologists, and even more so future generations, should be aware of this circumstance so that they can circumvent it to a certain extent and formulate and test new hypotheses in a less unbalanced way than in the recent past (Arrizabalaga and Iriarte-Chiapusso et al., 2005a, 2010, 2011a). This brief historiographical reflection examines how

this new circumstance is manifested in several case studies, and the methodological and epistemological repercussions it may have.

## 2. The link between Palaeolithic archaeology and caves in northern Iberia

If we go back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and observe how the first Palaeolithic studies were carried out in the Cantabria region, we will rapidly associate research into the Palaeolithic with a certain person (a leading figure in science or regional culture) and motivation (demonstrate the presence, also in northern Iberia, of prehistoric human groups similar to those discovered in France). This task had to be performed relatively swiftly, as the creationist debate was still far from being supplanted in Spain. The Count of Vega del Sella, Obermaier, Aranzadi, Barandiarán and Alcalde del Río, among others, took part in this work and proposed, from the start, the authenticity of cave art and the antiquity of Cantabrian prehistory by resorting to similarities with the better-known French sequences, nearly all of them in caves. The presence of French prehistorians and palaeontologists, including Breuil and Harlé, had the same objective.

This task, and the speed with which it had to be carried out, was helped by focusing the archaeological research on caves. The caves are nearly always found in limestone karst areas, which limits the areas to be explored, and practically eliminates other territories with different geologies as the western half of the Cantabrian

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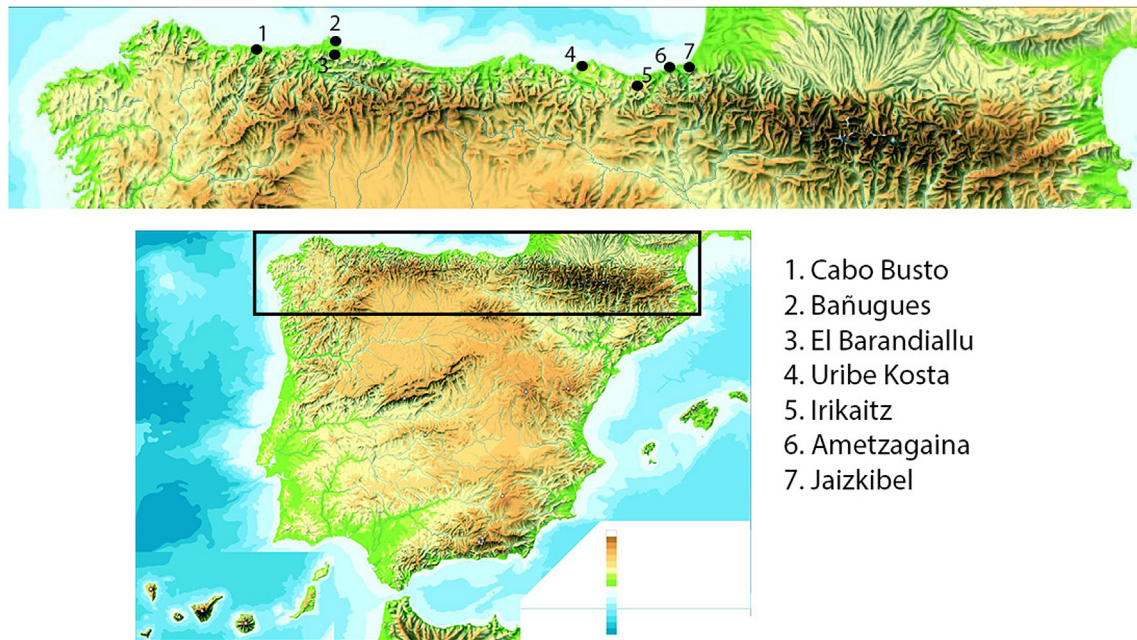


Fig. 1. Main sites and archaeological areas included in this text.

region (nearly all Galicia and much of Asturias). Caves are relatively easy to explore, as they are known by local inhabitants who even make use of those with suitable conditions for occupation. The preservation of the archaeological record in the caves is relatively good, both the preservation of organic materials (bone, antler, shell, charcoal, etc) and the stratigraphic sequences themselves, enabling the study and interpretation of the deposit. The same circumstances of relative temperature and humidity stability which meant that the caves were used by prehistoric groups for millennia also enables their remains to be preserved, in an unequal balance between factors of alteration (high humidity and occasional erosion of the remains) and preservation (an alkaline environment with precipitation of calcite carbonate favouring fossilisation phenomena inside speleothems). Finally, due to their finite size and precise delimitation in space, archaeological work in caves enjoys a better relationship between the time invested and the results obtained. On the other side of the equation, hunter-gatherer sites in the open-air are very difficult to locate, very hard to delimit and rarely produce good results in terms of the archaeological information recovered for the huge work involved.

This trend clearly continues today. As regards hunter-gatherer groups in the Cantabrian region (and even more so in its eastern sector), systematic open-air surveying programmes and long-term excavations (rather than the collection of some artefacts) are still infrequent. Analytical and fieldwork protocols display an equivalent bias. Procedures such as GPR are still little used, geochronological studies display a clear preference for radiocarbon dating (of little use at open-air sites), sedimentological and geomorphologic reconstructions concentrate on cave sites (little information is available for open-air deposits), and methodology as a whole clearly ignores this archaeological reality that is so well-known in most other regions of Europe similar to this part of Iberia.

Over the last twenty years, new circumstances are forcing a modification of this biased view of the record. First, cave sites are displaying signs of exhaustion; for example, all the Cantabrian caves with the potential for providing significant information about the disappearance of the last Neanderthals and the arrival of the first modern humans had been excavated recently or were being

excavated a decade ago. Fortuitous open-air finds, or discoveries made during infrastructure monitoring programmes, or rescue archaeology, have been able to add more points of interest to the map of sites. At the same time, increasing interest in the Lower Palaeolithic and early Mousterian is leading to more surveying outside the caves (Arrizabalaga, 2006). Several archaeologists have recently detected this bias and are attempting to identify and survey those places where open-air sites might be expected.

### 3. Unexpected development of an open-air record: some examples

It is not entirely correct to attribute a concern with the systematic search for the open-air record to the latest generation of Cantabrian archaeologists. Among some very notable antecedents we can cite the surveying carried out by José Miguel de Barandiarán and collaborators in the Kurtzia area (Sopela-Barrika, Bizkaia) in the late 1950s (Barandiarán-Ayerbe et al., 1960). José Manuel González began searching for Lower Palaeolithic deposits in Asturias in the 1950s (González-Fernández, 1968) and his work was followed up by José-Adolfo Rodríguez-Asensio. In the early 1980s, in the vicinity of the Cantabrian region, surveying was carried out in Sierra de Urbasa-Entzia by a team lead jointly by Ignacio Barandiarán and José Ignacio Vegas, while surveying and excavation of open-air sites increased in Galicia. At the start of the following decade, the team co-directed by Javier Baena and Ramón Montes (Montes-Barquín, 2003; Carrión and Baena, 2005; Muñoz-Fernández, 2005) searched from Lower and Middle Palaeolithic sites in the Province of Cantabria.

In short, pioneering work has been undertaken by several projects, but research is far from systematic and therefore still not representative of the complexity that this kind of outside site implies. Some case studies will be described. Fig. 1.

#### 3.1. Irikaitz (Zestoa, Gipuzkoa)

The site of Irikaitz was not found by systematic surveying, but by members of a local group of researchers in 1995. The recognized

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