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## Early symbolism in the Ach and the Lone valleys of southwestern Germany

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### ABSTRACT

The two cave sites of Hohle Fels in the Ach Valley and Vogelherd in the Lone Valley in southwestern Germany have yielded hundreds of personal ornaments and graphic symbolic expressions from the Aurignacian. They are mainly made of mammoth ivory and are among the earliest symbolic expressions worldwide. In this study, we examine the differences and similarities in the symbolic expressions among personal ornaments and symbolic markings from both sites. These finds allow a detailed view of the Aurignacian society in the Swabian Jura and the beginning of modern symbolic behavior.

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### 1. Introduction

The Aurignacian is a well-defined archaeological culture at the beginning of the Upper Paleolithic. Scholars established different regional groups within the pan-European Aurignacian complex. This techno-complex has a blade-based lithic industry and a rich osseous assemblage that shows differences from region to region (eg. Albrecht et al., 1972; Bolus and Conard, 2006; Conard and Bolus, 2003; Hahn, 1977; Otte, 1979, 2010; Tartar, 2015; Tartar et al., 2006). However, these categories of artifacts do not provide comprehensive information about the cultural identity of Aurignacian groups, as they are primarily functional. The Aurignacian is one of the first Paleolithic techno-complexes that uses symbolism on a broad scale. Artifacts with symbolic content are suitable for studying subunits within broader archaeological cultures because they likely reflect ethnic units (Vanhaeren, 2005, 2010; Vanhaeren and d'Errico, 2006) and even personal styles.

One important region for the Aurignacian is the Swabian Jura, specifically the valleys of the rivers Ach and Lone. This area is well-suited for studying the regional variety of the Aurignacian, as it has a long research history, modern standards of excavations, as well as

many well-studied sites with long stratigraphic sequences. It is appropriate to speak of the Swabian Aurignacian as a cohesive cultural unit because its coherence within the Aurignacian technocomplex is evident. The lithic industry, bone technology (Bolus and Conard, 2006; Conard, 2006; Conard and Bolus, 2003), and especially the personal ornaments (Vanhaeren and d'Errico, 2006; Wolf, 2015a, b) document the shared cultural identity of the ancient inhabitants of the two valleys. The artistic expressions, for which the Swabian Jura is famous, count among the earliest examples of art worldwide. Excavations in both valleys have yielded a large number of small ivory figurines that depict animals, therianthropes, and human representations. This kind of figurative art is so far limited to the Aurignacian in the Swabian Jura, and therefore demonstrates and underlines the cultural unity of these sites (Conard, 2007, 2009; Floss, 2007; Hahn, 1970, 1986, 1988; Müller-Beck and Albrecht, 1987; Riek, 1934; Schmid et al., 1989; Wehrberger, 2013). Here we use the term “Swabian Aurignacian” to refer to this archaeological culture. As the study of the material is still in progress, we will concentrate on two cave sites, Hohle Fels in the Ach Valley and Vogelherd in the Lone Valley. Our research aim is to determine if it is possible to identify smaller social-cultural units within the relatively large unit of the “Swabian Aurignacian”. Our main priority is to explore whether or not there were distinct groups of people who lived in the two valleys simultaneously or the same group that moved from one valley to another. We also examine the question of whether or not we can identify

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distinct chronological phases of the Swabian Aurignacian.

### 1.1. The region und history of research

The region of the Swabian Jura hosts low mountains and plateaus in the eastern part of the State of Baden-Württemberg, Germany. It is characterized by karstic limestone formed during the Jurassic period. The Paleolithic sites in question lie in two small side valleys of the Danube: The Ach Valley and the Lone Valley. The Ach Valley is located about 15 km west of Ulm between Schelklingen and Blaubeuren, the Lone Valley lies about 25 km north of Ulm (Fig. 1).

In 1931, one of the most important Paleolithic sites in this region of Germany was excavated by Gustav Riek. Vogelherd Cave is located on a limestone hill in the middle of the Lone Valley, about 20 m above the valley floor. Riek distinguished a total of eight Paleolithic layers, four Middle Paleolithic and four Upper Paleolithic deposits. Of these, layers V and IV belong to the Aurignacian, which are by far the richest contexts at the site. The most famous finds are ten small figurines, nine made of ivory and one of antler (Fig. 2) (Hahn, 1986; Riek, 1932a, b, 1934). The figurines derive from the two Aurignacian layers V and IV (for a detailed reconstruction of the localization of the figurines, see Dutkiewicz, 2015; Dutkiewicz et al., in press; Hahn, 1986). Gustav Riek excavated the entire cave in only three months and left the backdirt on the slope in front of the cave. From 2005 to 2012, Nicholas Conard from the University of Tübingen re-excavated the backdirt from Riek's original excavation. The aim was to find objects that Riek might have overlooked during his short campaign. The new excavation added thousands of lithic artifacts and animal bones, hundreds of osseous artifacts, personal ornaments, flutes and dozens of ivory figurines and fragments to the assemblage from Vogelherd (Conard et al., 2015b; Conard et al., 2007, 2016; Conard and Malina, 2006).

Hohle Fels Cave in the Ach Valley is another very important site of the Swabian Jura. The cave has a very long research history as it was historically known and explored by the local people (Blumentritt and Hahn, 1991; Blumentritt and Mall, 1984; Saier, 1994). The first regular excavations at Hohle Fels by Oscar Fraas and Theodor Hartmann took place in the years 1870–71. Several smaller campaigns followed, including Gustav Riek and Gertraud

Matschak's work from 1958 to 1960. More large-scale excavations were carried out by Joachim Hahn in 1977–1979 and 1987 to 1996 (Hahn, 1989). After Joachim Hahn's death, Nicholas Conard continued excavating Hohle Fels in 1997, and the excavations continue annually to the present day (Conard et al., 2014; Conard and Malina, 2009, 2015; Conard and Uerpmann, 1999). In 1999, a horse's head carved from mammoth ivory was found in layers IId and IIIa (Conard and Floss, 2000; Hiller, 2003). In 2001 excavators found a bird-like figurine in AH IV, and in the following year, its head was recovered, which allowed the identification of this figurine as a waterfowl. In 2002, a figurine measuring only 2.5 cm high was found in the same layer that contained strong similarities to the depiction of the Lion Man from Hohlenstein-Stadel (Kind et al., 2014; Wehrberger, 2013), and is thus referred to as the «Little Lion Man» (Conard, 2003). In 2008, excavators found a female figurine, the so-called «Venus» from Hohle Fels, at the base of the Aurignacian (AH Vb) (Conard, 2009). In 2014 a probable fragment of another female figurine was found in layer Va (Conard and Malina, 2015).

The long and intensive research history of the Swabian Jura and its sites cannot be discussed here in detail (for further information see Bolus, 2015; Conard, 2002a; Conard et al., 2015a; Müller-Beck, 1983; Wehrberger, 2013).

Several series of dates show that the Swabian Aurignacian provides the oldest evidence for this technocomplex. Recent  $^{14}\text{C}$ -dates are available for Vogelherd Cave (Conard and Bolus, 2003, 2008), for Hohlenstein-Stadel Cave (Kind et al., 2014) and for Hohle Fels Cave (Conard, 2009; Conard and Bolus, 2003, 2008). The latest AMS-dates for Geißenklösterle range between 43,000 and 37,000 years cal. BP, making it one of the earliest Aurignacian sites (Higham et al., 2012) (for an overview of the uncalibrated dates for the different archaeological layers of the Swabian caves see Table 1).

### 1.2. Symbolism in the Swabian Aurignacian

The Swabian Aurignacian technocomplex was likely made by modern humans. This culture is characterized by the distinctive production of blades and bladelets, a rich osseous industry, as well as symbolic artifacts such as personal ornaments, figurative

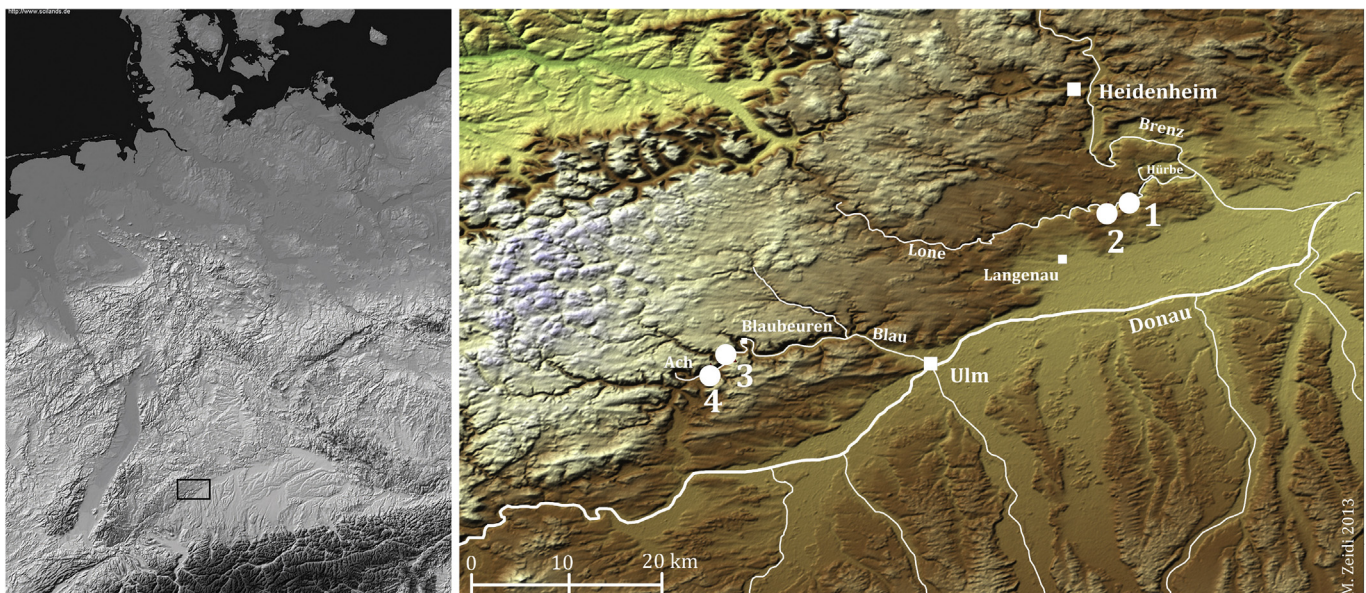


Fig. 1. Map of the Ach and the Lone Valleys. 1) Vogelherd, 2) Hohlenstein-Stadel, 3) Geißenklösterle and 4) Hohle Fels (map M. Zeidi, modified).

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