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A new Aurignacian engraving from Abri Blanchard, France: Implications for understanding Aurignacian graphic expression in Western and Central Europe

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ABSTRACT

In the excitement of the widely publicized new finds of Aurignacian art from Chauvet, from the Swabian Jura and from as far afield as Pester Coliboaia in Romania, it has almost been forgotten that a rich corpus of Aurignacian wall painting, engraving and bas-relief sculpture had been recognized and studied before World War I in the Vézère Valley of SW France. Scientific knowledge of the chronological and cultural context of that early-discovered graphic record has been limited by the crude archaeological methods of that pioneering era, and the loss and dispersal of many of the works discovered. In 2011, we launched new excavations and a re-analysis of one of the key sites for such early discoveries, the collapsed rock shelter of Abri Blanchard. In 2012, we discovered in situ a limestone slab engraved with a complex composition combining an aurochs and dozens of aligned punctuations.

This new find, recovered by modern methods and dated by molecular filtration and Hydroxyproline 14C, provides new information on the context and dating of Aurignacian graphic imagery in SW France and its relationship to that of other regions. The support is not a fragment of collapsed shelter ceiling and is situated in the midst of quotidian occupational debris. The image shows significant technical and thematic similarities to Chauvet that are reinforced by our reanalysis of engraved slabs from the older excavations at Blanchard. The aligned punctuations find their counterparts at Chauvet, in the south German sites and on several other objects from Blanchard and surrounding Aurignacian sites. In sum, we argue that dispersing Aurignacian groups show a broad commonality in graphic expression against which a certain number of more regionalized characteristics stand out, a pattern that fits well with social geography models that focus on the material construction of identity at regional, group and individual levels.

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1. Introduction

Scientific understanding of the origins and early evolution of graphic and plastic imagery underwent a revolution in the 1990's and 2000's with the discovery and dating of Aurignacian images and representational objects. This new body of work amplifies both the research sample available and the previously restricted view of symbolic expressions attributed to the early Upper Paleolithic (Leroi-Gourhan, 1965). Well-dated discoveries include the wall

images from the Grotte Chauvet in SE France (Clottes, 2001), part of the decorated ceiling from Abri Castanet in SW France (White et al., 2012), new ivory sculptures from Hohle Fels and Vogelherd in SW Germany (Conard, 2003), painted limestone slabs from Fumane in Northern Italy (Broglia and Gurioli, 2004) and black outline drawings of animals from Pester Coliboaia in Romania (Besesek et al., 2010; Clottes et al., 2011). The attribution of already known works to the Aurignacian, such as those in the Grotte d'Aldène (Ambert et al., 2005), Baume-Latrone (Azéma et al., 2012) and Altxerri B (Garate et al., 2014a,b; Ruiz-Redondo et al., 2016) adds to the impressive corpus of Aurignacian graphic works and debates surrounding the chronology of early Upper Paleolithic graphic representation (Ochoa and Garcia-Diez, 2014; Ontañón and Utrilla,

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2015; Pike et al., 2016, in press).¹

In the justifiable excitement of the widely publicized new finds from Chauvet and from the Swabian Jura it has almost been forgotten that a large corpus of Aurignacian wall painting, engraving and bas-relief sculpture had been recognized and studied before World War I in the Vézère Valley of SW France (Delluc and Delluc, 1978, 1981). This “neglect” is in part a result of the fact that scientific knowledge of the chronological and cultural context of that early-discovered symbolic record has been limited by the crude archaeological methods and anecdotal descriptions of that pioneering era as well as the loss and dispersal of many of the works discovered (White, 1992a, b; 2002).

In May 1909, at the site of Fongal in the Vézère Valley, Otto Hauser would be the first to discover engraved and otherwise modified limestone blocks of Aurignacian age² (Peyrony, 1941). Although he would see in these figures the crude forms of animals, we can now recognize classic Aurignacian “vulvar” imagery. Shortly thereafter, in early 1910, Marcel Castanet reported finding “heart-like” images on limestone blocks from the rich Aurignacian site of Abri Blanchard (Didon, 1911), just 3 km from Hauser's diggings at Fongal. Presented with images of one of these engraved forms, the abbé Breuil would declare it to represent a “*pudendum muliebre*” (letter from Breuil to Didon dated January 25, 1911, in Delluc, Delluc, 1978) in other words a female vulva. Although several more discoveries of Aurignacian engraved blocks were made in the period between 1912 and 1927, Abri Cellier (when 7 modified blocks were discovered by an American team at Peyrony, 1946), discoveries of this sort would soon dry up. The only blocks to be found subsequently were those recorded by Movius's team at Abri Pataud (painted vault fragments and gouged ring) (Brooks, 1979; Delluc and Delluc, 2004).

We report here on a major new find of Aurignacian art from the classic site of Abri Blanchard, located on the east side of the vallon de Castel-Merle just outside the village of Sergeac, in the historically-important Vézère Valley of SW France. Last excavated from 1910 to 1912 by hotel owner and amateur archaeologist Louis Didon, the Abri Blanchard yielded to Didon's workman, Castanet, several limestone blocks bearing engraved “vulvar” and animal images assigned with considerable uncertainty to the site's two identified stratigraphic units. In 2011–2012, new excavations by our team over an area of several square meters yielded a significant Aurignacian record in situ. These newly excavated archaeological units contained a large engraved slab bearing a complex animal image presented below.

The excavation of this new sector of Abri Blanchard and the meticulous extraction of this limestone slab provide precious new contextual and chronological data on Aurignacian art from the Vézère. Excavations documented the direct association between the engraving and in situ artifacts typical of a classic living site: lithic implements and debitage (including dozens of refits and conjoins), osseous weapons and implements, fauna and personal ornaments. A series of four AMS dates were obtained from bone samples in the immediate proximity (Fig. 16) of the slab. Seemingly too recent on archaeological grounds, two of the four dated samples were re-dated by the same laboratory using the Hydroxyproline (Hyp) method, which excludes possible groundwater

contamination. The resulting Hyp dates in the vicinity of 33 000 BP are more consistent with expectations (see below, Fig. 17; Table 3).

2. Abri Blanchard: history of research

Abri Blanchard is a partially collapsed rock shelter situated in the Vallon de Castel-Merle about 9 km downstream from Montignac-Lascaux in the Vézère Valley of the Department of Dordogne (SW France) (Fig. 1). Tested in 1868 by Reverdit,³ then excavated by Castanet from 1910 to 1912 under the directorship of Didon, Abri Blanchard is recognized as a major site for our understanding of the Aurignacian in Europe. The size of the site (ca. 20 m long and 6.5 m wide), the several thousand artifacts that it yielded (including virtually every bone, antler, ivory and stone artifact class known for the Aurignacian) and its proximity to the Abri Castanet (Fig. 2) make it relevant and important to larger questions surrounding Aurignacian systematics.

Reverdit's initial work and hence the discovery of the site was almost certainly prompted by the large-scale construction in the mid-19th century of agricultural terraces that intruded into the naturally sloping talus. Castanet notes having found a certain number of engraved slabs in the retaining walls of the terraces themselves, suggesting a borrowing of large elements from the upper levels of the archaeological deposit on the terrace proximate to the cliff face.

Didon identified two archaeological units (Fig. 3) that he attributed to the Middle Aurignacian (sensu Breuil, 1912), broadly known today as the Early Aurignacian or Aurignacian I. The two units (layers B and D) were separated by a sterile layer containing roof collapse blocks from the ancient shelter ceiling (Didon, 1911). The uppermost archaeological layer (D) was capped by a yellow “éboulis”(E) containing large roof collapse blocks.

According to archival sources as well as the detailed publications of Didon (1911, 1912), the lower unit (B) rested directly on a friable bedrock into which the Aurignacians had excavated four fire features. Nearly fifty years after the excavation, Sonnevile Bordes (1960) re-analysis of a portion of the lithic collections raised the possibility that the upper level (D) could be attributed to a more recent phase of the Aurignacian, a subject to which we will return below.

This key Aurignacian site, excavated by a single workman in the course of a few months, was among the most prolific in all of Europe, yielding to Didon (1911):

- an abundant fauna dominated by reindeer with some bovids (bos/bison) and equids; - ca. 1500 (Didon, 1911) retouched lithic tools (end scrapers on retouched blades, Aurignacian blades, burins); - an unparalleled osseous industry (bone, antler and ivory) with more than 200 split-based points (including fragments); - ca. 350 personal ornaments in a variety of raw materials (ivory, bone, antler, talc, animal teeth, marine shells), many from distant sources (the Mediterranean and Atlantic littorals, the high Pyrenees); - 14 kg of mineral pigments and abrasives (see White, 2007) varying from large raw chunks to shaped “crayons”; Approximately 40 limestone blocks or roof fragments engraved or painted with “vulvar” or animal subjects, or bearing gouged rings (“anneaux”) (Delluc and Delluc, 1978; Mensan et al., 2012; White et al., 2012; Bourrillon, 2013).

¹ While there has been some debate as to the age of some works (see Ontañón and Utrilla, 2015 in press), our position is that, contra Pettitt (2008), the Chauvet paintings are as old as their 14C dates indicate (Clottes and Geneste, 2007; Valladas et al., 2004) and, that claims for pre-40,000 year-old dates in Spanish caves (Pike et al., 2012) are methodologically unsustainable (Pons-Branchu et al., 2014).

² The Aurignacian age of the Fongal blocks is clearly indicated in a letter containing a stratigraphic profile of the site sent by Hauser to the museum in Jena and dated January 21, 1912.

³ While Reverdit (1878, 1882) never states in publication that he excavated on this side of the valley, Castanet claims to have recognized Reverdit's excavation during his work in 1910–1912.

⁴ All images and illustrations are those of the authors except where noted.

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