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Painted in red: In search of alternative explanations for European Palaeolithic cave art

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, studies of Palaeolithic cave art have largely ignored or directly overlooked the red marks of anthropogenic origin that do not belong to figurative categories, in spite of their importance in quantitative terms in this type of art. This paper highlights their importance for better understanding the significance of the cave remains commonly classified as “rock or cave art.”

To this end, we analysed these marks directly in a number of caves (Etxeberri -Pyrénées-Atlantiques, France-, Lumentxa -Bizkaia, Spain-, Morrón -Jaén, Spain- and Nerja -Málaga, Spain-). This allowed us to differentiate between intentional and other incidental or involuntary red marks. Furthermore, depending on the intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of these marks, as well as information provided by archaeological and ethnographic findings, we related them to the body painting of their authors.

Therefore, an identifiable part of the red marks so common in Palaeolithic cave art (and which could therefore not be considered as art *sensu stricto*) seems to be produced involuntarily. This could be related with the customs of the Palaeolithic groups attested by the archaeological record, as the frequentation of the innermost areas in the caves or as the decoration their bodies with ochre-based paint.

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1. Introduction

Decorated caves dating from the European Upper Palaeolithic contain different thematic categories encompassing evidence of cave art. These remains are normally classified into three basic categories according to their form: anthropomorphic (human figures), zoomorphic (animal figures) and signs. The latter have served as a “catchall” including a wide variety of figurative artwork, ranging from so-called complex geometric and/or integrated signs to much less elaborate and simple signs, *traits parasités*, finger lines or *macaronies (traits digités)*, unfinished edges (*contours indéterminés ou inachevés*), black marks and/or torch marks (*frottis et mouchages de torches*), marks (*taches*), remains of colorant, among others (Sauvet, 1993).

This study focuses on the red parietal paintings discovered in some caves containing Palaeolithic art in Southeast Europe,

anthropogenic marks that are not figurative graphical symbols, elaborate or simple signs or defined outlines. The aims of this paper are:

- to revalue the data and detailed examination of the red marks in the cavities with Palaeolithic art,
- to analyse different types of red marks, based on the examination of the intrinsic and extrinsic characteristics of the red evidences of the caves selected for this study. This paper examines the red marks found in four decorated caves in Western Europe, most notably those in Spain and France - Etxeberri (Pyrénées-Atlantiques), Lumentxa (Bizkaia), Morrón (Jaén) and Nerja (Málaga) -,
- to reflect, on the basis of archaeological and anthropological data, on the origin and significance of these red marks and on their consideration like a rock art remain.

In recent years, the number of such remains has increased exponentially at both new sites and at previously studied caves where records have been updated. Some examples of this new reality can be found at the following caves: Ardales (Málaga), La Peña de Candamo (Asturias), Ekain (Gipuzkoa), Etxeberri

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(Pyrénées-Atlantiques), Lumentxa (Bizkaia), Morgota (Bizkaia), Morrón (Jaén) Nerja (Málaga), Oxocelhaya (Pyrénées-Atlantiques), Pindal (Asturias), etc. (Altuna and Mariezkurrena, 2009; Cantalejo et al., 2006; Corchón et al., 2014; Garate et al., 2012, 2013, 2015; González-Pumariiega, 2011; Labarge, 2012; Medina-Alcaide and Sanchidrián, 2014; Sanchidrián et al., 2015).

The keys to this significant increase may be related to specific theoretical and methodological changes that have occurred in investigations in caves containing Palaeolithic art since the fall 20th century but specially in recent years: a) the incorporation in fieldwork of powerful lighting LED systems (essential for detecting, for example, some of the red marks described later) and digital cameras for photography; b) the systematic and thorough prospection of the entire cave and all its interstices (not just traditionally examined spaces - large parietal canvases, easily accessible areas, etc.); c) the documentation of all archaeological remains and not just figurative graphic elements (thus, documented evidence includes charred plant remains, pieces of stone, portions of ochre, karst transformations, etc., as well as painted non-graphic remains); d) the study of other human activities inside the decorated caves, and not just those associated with graphic artwork, such as lighting, paleo-speleology, etc.; e) the application of a methodology for interdisciplinary work both in the caves and in laboratory. These aspects enable a more comprehensive study of karst formations and provide knowledge of all the anthropogenic activities developed in these spaces by Palaeolithic societies.

2. Materials and methods: archaeological background

2.1. The selected cave art

This paper examines the red marks found in four decorated caves in Western Europe, most notably those in Spain and France - Etxeberri (Pyrénées-Atlantiques), Lumentxa (Bizkaia), Morrón (Jaén) and Nerja (Málaga) -, in order to understand and explain the existence of these types of parietal evidence (Fig. 1). We have studied all the marks in documented the Morrón (8), Etxeberri (21) and Lumentxa (10) caves, as well as a significant set of those ones registered in Nerja (100 from 263).

The election of these sites of study allows us to value the whole phenomenon at geographic, temporary, topographic level, in relation to its chrono-stylistic context, as well as the quantitative importance of the red marks in each rock art cave. Because the selected study sites allowed us to cover different geographical areas, chronological circumstances, dimensions and underground topographic structures, as well as the number of parietal motifs (Table 1). These caves were also recently examined by the authors of this study, and the detection and detailed documentation of these red marks was a common feature of our study in all four caves, enabling and facilitating the comparative analysis (Garate et al., 2012, 2013; Medina-Alcaide and Sanchidrián, 2014; Sanchidrián et al., 2015).

2.1.1. Etxeberri cave

The Etxeberri cave (Camou-Cihige, Pyrénées-Atlantiques) is located in the foothills of the western Pyrenees, specifically in the foothills of the Arbailles Massif and near two other decorated caves: Sinhikole and Sasiziloaga. Its internal development has been studied since the early 20th century but the cave art was not discovered until 1951 (Laplace, 1952). The main feature of its parietal motifs stems from their location in the innermost part of the cave along a linear section, about 300 m from the entrance and which can only be reached by crossing three wells, two crawlways and several changes in level of between 6 and 8 m, to a final 30-m chasm which was bordered along a narrow clay ledge (Garate and

Bourrillon, 2012). The decorated area covers five different spaces boasting a total of 19 animals (14 horses, 2 bison, 1 ibex, 2 indeterminate animals) and 68 non-figurative elements all in red (43 marks, 16 lines, 6 dots, 1 couplet (two lines) and 1 sign formed by crossed lines). During an inspection by foot of one of the panels, some stone pieces, processed ochre, shells, plant remains and charred bones were recovered. C14-AMS radiocarbon dating of the latter materials and the stylistic comparison of the figures enabled the site to be dated to the middle Magdalenian Pyrenees period (Garate et al., 2012, 2015).

2.1.2. Lumentxa cave

The Lumentxa cave (Lekeitio, Bizkaia) is located in the east of the Cantabrian Mountains, in the north of the Iberian Peninsula, on a small promontory at the mouth of the River Lea. It has a linear structure through a gallery without lateral sections and 75 m deep. Although the cave was excavated at three different times in the early, mid and late 20th century, revealing a broad sequence of human occupation, the cave art was not discovered until 2012 (Garate et al., 2013). In the final section of the cave, on a large block that became detached from the ceiling, two bison and one horse painted in red on the relief were discovered. Approximately twenty red marks were documented around these paintings and in different lateral spaces, together with an ochre deposit on a large block and a flint introduced in a cavity in the lobby of the cave. Figurative animal motifs reveal evident parallels with nearby caves like the Ekain cave and, in general, with Cantabrian-Pyrenean art dating from the late Magdalenian period (Garate et al., 2015).

2.1.3. Morrón cave

The Morrón cave (Torres, Jaén) is located in the southeast of the Iberian Peninsula, in the outer foothills of the Baetic Mountains, in Sierra Magina, specifically on the northern slope of the hill of El Morrón at 910 masl. The Palaeolithic paintings were discovered in 1981 and published one year later (López et al., 1982; Sanchidrián, 1982). Work in the cave was resumed in 2013 and consisted of an interdisciplinary review of the site's geological, biological and archaeological potential (Sanchidrián et al., 2015). The topographic structure of the cave is circular and compact, with a maximum length of 45 m and measuring 28 m wide in the central hall. Palaeolithic graphic art found on the interior consists of two caprid figures, one in red and one in black, together with other non-figurative evidence. These abstract remains include three concentrations of red marks. All the Palaeolithic paintings - both figurative and non-figurative - can be found in the area furthest from the entrance and in confined spaces (crack between blocks and areas with low ceilings). Although few solid data are available to date the graphic elements in the El Morrón cave, the graphic conventionalisms of the red ibex (coordinated animation, interior modelling and scant limbs, etc.) together with the ibexes present in plate numbers 16,570 and 17019B discovered in the middle Solutrean level in the Parpalló cave (Villaverde, 1994) would make them easier to date (Sanchidrián, 2000).

2.1.4. Nerja cave

The Nerja Cave (Nerja, Málaga) is a large cave located at the southern tip of the Iberian Peninsula on the south-western edge of Sierra Almijara in the Baetic Mountain Range. The cave was discovered in 1959 and the reference monographic study of the prehistoric rock art in the cave was published by one of us a few decades ago (Sanchidrián, 1994). The Palaeolithic graphic art can be found in multiple and extensive underground spaces, from areas near the natural entrances to areas far from the entrance, both on the surfaces of large rock walls in different interstices and diverticula. Further inside the cave it becomes more difficult to progress

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