

News and Views

New hominid remains associated with gravettian parietal art (Les Garennes, Vilhonneur, France)

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A remarkable discovery in France raises anew the question of the relationship between parietal art and funerary practices. France is rich in Gravettian decorated caves, but human remains from this period (28–21 000 years BP) are very rare (Henry-Gambier, 2002). Consequently, the discovery of human and hyena remains in a decorated cave system at « Les Garennes » near the village of Vilhonneur (Charente), just 500 m from the well-known cave of Placard (Clottes et al., 1991), is extraordinary. This new find will result in important new data on the biology and behavior of the Gravettians as well as the disappearance of hyenas at the end of the upper Pleistocene. Here we report on the preliminary results of *in-situ* observations and radiometric dating of the remains.

The « Les Garennes » discovery was made by spelunkers (D. Augier, B. Delage, G. Jourdy, A. Louis, J. Louis, J.M. Rainaud, P. Vauvillier, A. Binet, G. Boudault, P. Groulade, and A. Terrade) in December, 2005, during the exploration of the La Rochefoucaud Jurassic limestone karst (Airvaux et al., 2006). The

karst system explored is over 266 m long (Fig. 1). The remains are concentrated in two chambers and a gallery, accessible only after circumnavigating three sinkholes.

The first chamber reveals the remains of at least five young adult hyenas found on the surface of a limestone scree (Fig. 2a). Their age is inferred from the degree of wear on their adult teeth. Crania, mandibles, long bones, some ribs, and vertebrae are preserved; although, gravitational sorting along the scree has resulted in an under-representation of small elements. The bones are intact and partially covered in dripstone. Ribs bunched in close proximity, as well as articulated vertebrae, imply little disturbance of the skeletons by other than gravity. Of 80 skeletal elements easily observable *in situ*, only one shows carnivore gnawing.

The walls of the deepest (second) chamber are decorated with red dots, black bars, various traces of color, and a well-executed black hand stencil (Fig. 3a). On a flat surface delimited by concretions, black lines evoke a face (Fig. 3b). Nearby, the partial skeleton (ribs, vertebrae, sacrum, left and right os coxae, left and right femora and tibiae) of a young adult male human is dispersed across the surface of a limestone scree (Fig. 2b). The cranium (Fig. 4) is in a small, low gallery opened just below a painting. For the moment, the mandible, the upper limbs, and smaller bones are absent. The entire accumulation is strongly concreted, and all the long bones show carnivore tooth-marks. The talus bone of a horse and a diaphysal fragment of a large ungulate have also been discovered near the human postcranial bones.

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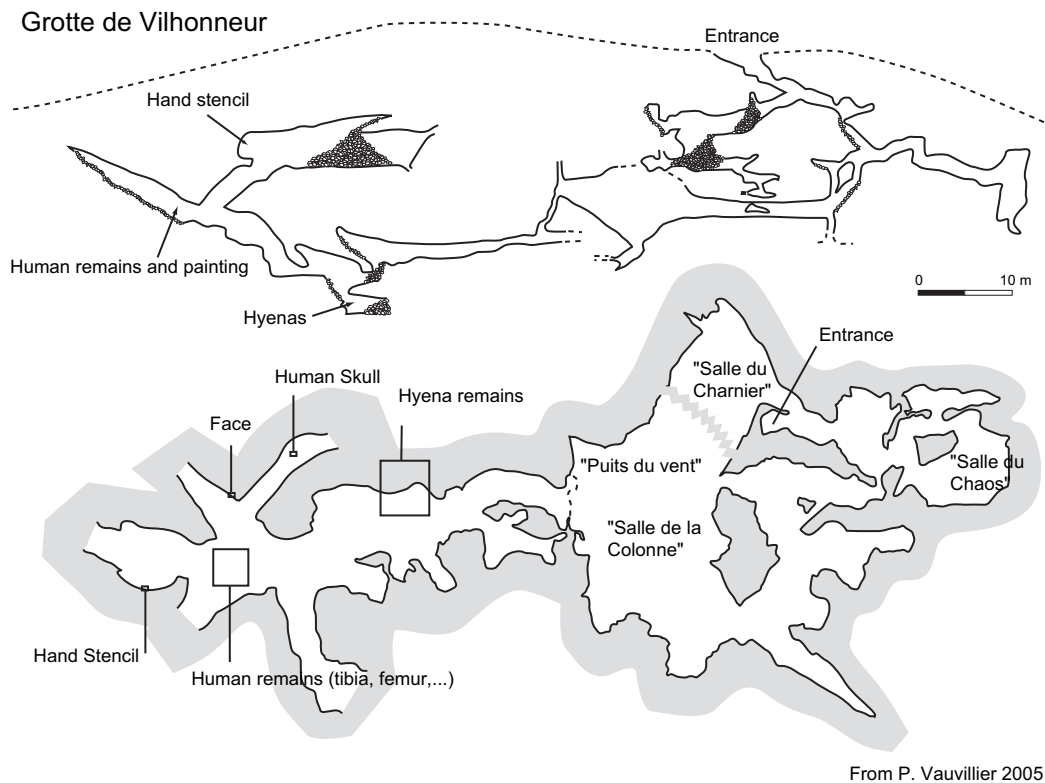


Fig. 1. Preliminary cross-section (above) and plan view of Les Garennes (Vilhonneur, Charente, France) (after P. Vauvillier).

All the remains are still in the cave and the preliminary observations have been made without moving the bones. The estimation of age at death is based on a combination of skeletal and dental features. For instance, on the tibiae, the epiphyses are ossified to the shaft, but the line of demarcation is still evident. On the cranium, the third molars are not fully erupted. As both of these would indicate an individual in their later teens or early twenties (Scheuer and Black, 2000), and considering the proximity of the cranium to the postcranial bones, we infer the presence of a single individual, Vilhonneur 1. The assessment of sex is based on the preliminary study of the morphology of the os coxae. Additional investigations are necessary to provide a firm conclusion.

Vilhonneur 1 is attributed to *Homo sapiens* on the basis of cranial features (Wolpoff, 1999). The supraorbital region of the frontal shows a distinct separation of medial, midlateral, and lateral toral components; the infraorbital region of the maxilla presents a canine fossa; and in posterior view, the vault presents a typical pentagonal configuration, with parallel-sides and its greatest breadth high on the parietals. Based on these traits, it is apparent that Vilhonneur 1 is a modern human.

In form and style, the hand stencil strongly resembles those from the cave of Pech-Merle (Lot), which is attributed to the early Gravettian (Lorblanchet, 1996). Since no artifacts were associated with the human and hyena bones, two human rib fragments and a hyena rib were submitted for AMS ^{14}C dating (Table 1). Bone samples were prepared for AMS ^{14}C dating at Beta Analytic (Miami, USA) using their standard pretreatment protocol (collagen extraction with alkali). The C/N ratio was

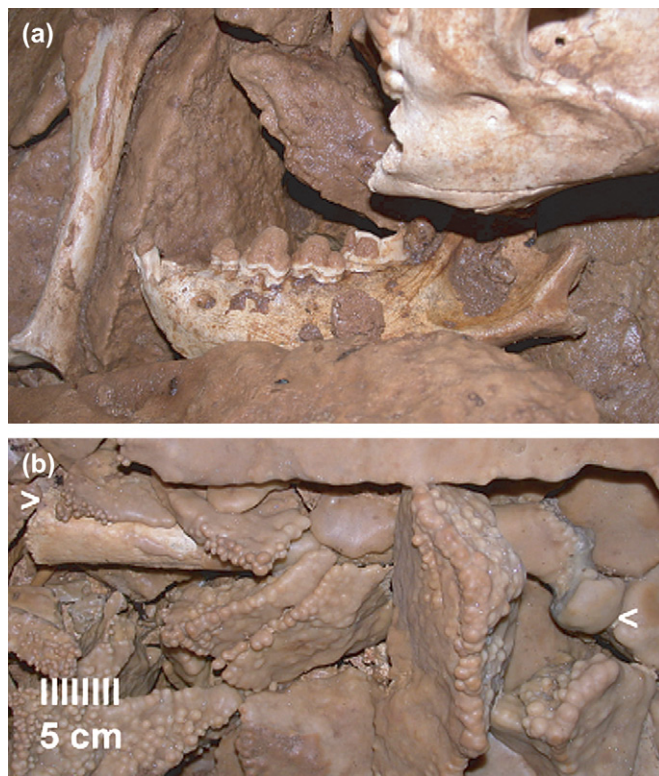


Fig. 2. (a) Hyena bones in the first chamber; (b) Human femur concreted with traces of gnawing at the distal part (Photography after C. Beauval, Archéosphère).

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