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Back to the past: Symbolism and archaeology in Altxerri B (Gipuzkoa, Northern Spain)

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ABSTRACT

In a previous publication on Altxerri B Cave, we explained a chronological hypothesis which proposed that the graphic activity in the site dates to an early Aurignacian phase. This paper presents a complete study of the parietal ensemble, including descriptions of the graphic motifs and other anthropic evidence that has been documented. The number of figures identified in the only panel documented in previous studies has been increased considerably, while several previously unpublished panels in other parts of the cave are described. The iconographic and stylistic characteristics of the rock art, far from contradicting our first conclusions about the chronology, support these and link the art in Altxerri B with other European Early Upper Palaeolithic graphic ensembles.

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1. Introduction

One characteristic of Anatomically Modern Humans (AMH) traditionally used to distinguish them from their predecessors is complex symbolic culture, including portable and parietal art forms. Personal ornamentation is documented in many of the Earliest Upper Palaeolithic sites (White, 1989, 2007; Kuhn et al., 2001; Vanhaeren and d'Errico, 2006) and the first definitely intentional Palaeolithic graphic productions are also associated with AMH. In recent years, archaeological understanding of the beginnings of this phenomenon in Europe has advanced considerably. Since the 'shock' produced by the first dates for Grotte Chauvet (Clottes et al., 1995), new discoveries and analytical methods have expanded the repertoire of parietal art in the Early Upper Palaeolithic to include sites such as Aldène (Ambert et al., 2005), Fumane (Broglia et al., 2006), Arcy-sur-Cure (Baffier and Girard, 1998), Coliboaia (Clottes, 2012), Castanet (White et al., 2012), Baume-Latrone (Azéma et al., 2012), Tito Bustillo, Altamira and Castillo (Pike et al., 2012) and Altxerri B (González-Sainz et al., 2013). The widespread distribution of this "first" rock art has passed European borders to include sites in Indonesia (Aubert et al., 2014) and Australia (David et al., 2013). These sites comprise the patchy

Aurignacian artistic record. Before 1995, Aurignacian art was scarce in south-western Europe, apart from a few geometrical decorations on stone and bone artefacts and some simple engravings in French and Spanish rock shelters (Delluc and Delluc, 1991; Fortea, 1994). However, this relative poverty contrasted with the abundant remains recovered from some sites in Central Europe, such as the famous statuettes from the Swabian Jura (cf. Conard, 2003; Floss, 2007).

In Cantabrian Spain, one of the "classic" areas in the distribution of European Palaeolithic art, new studies of some major ensembles have assigned part of their decoration to very early phases of the Upper Palaeolithic (Pike et al., 2012; González-Sainz et al., 2013). One such ensemble is Altxerri Cave, located in the east of the northern Spanish coast, near San Sebastián (Fig. 1). The cave, which had been sealed off for millennia, was discovered in 1956 when a temporary quarry was opened during road-building. This broke through to the intermediate level of the cave system. In 1962, speleologists discovered paintings in this passage (Altxerri A), which J. M. Barandiarán studied and published two years later (Barandiarán, 1964). A second complete study of the parietal ensemble in this level was carried out later (Altuna and Apellaniz, 1976). Apart from some small contributions to knowledge of the ensemble (cf. González Sierra, 1993; Altuna, 1996), the last monographic study was published more recently (Ruiz-Redondo, 2014). This analyses Altxerri A in depth, an independent ensemble where 150 graphic units were defined. A high variety of animal figures was identified among them, including bison, reindeers, horses, ibices,

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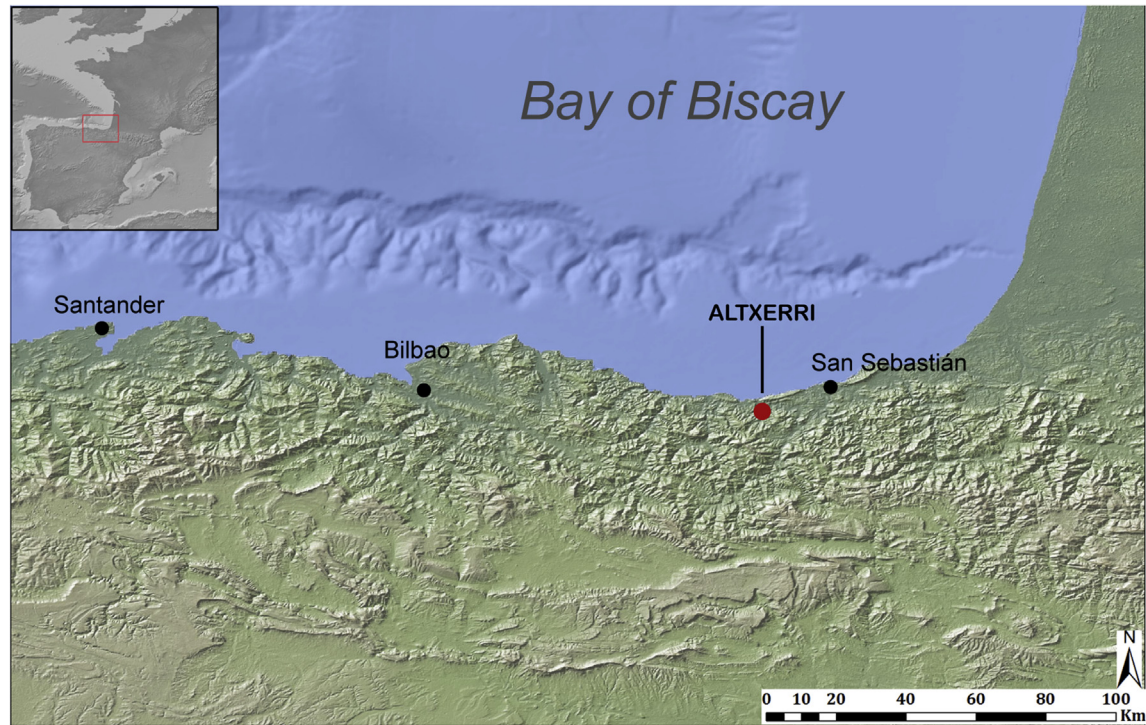


Fig. 1. Map of the Bay of Biscay marking the location of Altxerri cave.

fishes, chamois, an auroch, a red deer, a bear and some rare representations, such as a bird, a fox, a snake and a hare. The study also describes Altxerri B and some of the more recent discoveries in this level, but in much less detail.

The existence of an upper decorated level (Altxerri B) had been known from the time of the first research in the cave. The difficulty of access through the intermediate passage made it impossible for J. M. Barandiarán to study it directly, but he mentions the existence of paintings (Barandiarán, 1964). The discoverer later published a more complete account of the main panel (Fernández-García, 1966). However, this decorated passage was ignored in the 1976 monograph, which makes no mention of it. The next information about this level was the publication of two radiometric determinations obtained for two bones from its archaeological deposit (Altuna, 1996). A new study of the ensemble was initiated in 2011 and the first conclusions of this research were published recently: a chronological approach to the graphic activity (González-Sainz et al., 2013). The present paper reaches beyond that chronological study to include the graphic, symbolic and archaeological characteristics of the ensemble.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Characteristics of the cave

The Altxerri Cave System consists of three parallel levels connected by a series of avens and shafts. A total of 2.5 km of passages have been explored, extending over 785 m in plan view, with a total depth of 58 m. Both the upper (Altxerri B) and intermediate levels possess parietal graphic representations although they are separate graphic ensembles, produced at very different times in the Upper Palaeolithic.

The modern entrance to Altxerri Cave leads into the intermediate passage through a small opening 80 × 100 cm in size, breached in 1956 by the quarry which uncovered the cave. The

original entrance to this level was some 5 m further north-east (and faced in that direction), and was located by Barandiarán (1964). From this entrance, after descending the talus cone deposited inside it, the cave continues for 45 m towards the WNW in a large passage, as a kind of vestibule, with a high roof and very uneven floor because of blocks fallen from the roof. At the end of this part, the roof lowers in a series of strongly folded strata, which forms the modern access to Altxerri B Cave.

It is unlikely that this access, up a 14 m-high aven, was used by the Palaeolithic explorers. Another entrance must have existed, which collapsed during the Palaeolithic, and which is marked by a large talus cone covered by a thick layer of flowstone. This entrance, which faced east, leads into a small entrance hall up to 10 m wide (Sector III). A short low passage reaches the Main Hall (Sector I), a rectangular chamber with the roof 5 m high and the floor rising towards the south-west. This is the location of the Great Panel, as well as two small groups of red dots. Following the Great Panel towards the north-east, a short passage ends abruptly at a shaft, which is the modern access from the intermediate passage. In the opposite direction, ascending towards the south-west, the wall following the panel has collapsed creating a pile of boulders, and Sector I then ends in another shaft, about 4 m deep. At its base, the passage first runs south-west and then turns to the south-east. This is the location of the unpublished parietal motifs in the ensemble (Sector II).

2.2. Methodology

The study of the parietal art in Altxerri B involved several procedures. To identify and follow the graphic units, we have used four types of illumination with different luminosity and colour temperature. For the photography we used a Nikon® D90 camera with macro lens to photograph details. We also used a 30×–200× handheld microscope to identify superimpositions. The photographs were processed with the Dstretch® plug-in for the ImageJ®

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