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GARGAS CAVE
(HAUTES-PYRÉNÉES, FRANCE):
the Archaeological Context and the Interpretations of the Parietal Art

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A few years after the discovery of hand stencils at Gargas, É. Cartailhac and H. Breuil carried out two excavation sessions (1911 and 1913) in Hall I of the Lower Gallery. Their objective was to obtain archaeological elements that would enable them to date the parietal art in the cave. Nearly a century later, a new interdisciplinary research project has been undertaken with a global approach to the Paleolithic human occupations. One of the main topics addressed is the relationship between the habitat space, where daily activities took place, and the symbolic space, where parietal art was made. The first results of integrated studies of the archaeological artifacts recovered during the new and ancient excavations contribute to our understanding of the context in which the Gravettian parietal art was realized.
According to the available radiocarbon dates, the Noailles burin facies of the Gravettian culture was present in the Pyrenees for at least 6,000 years. This observation is based on the typological analysis of lithic industries from reference sites (Isturitz, Gargas, La Tuto de Camalhot and Enlène). This apparent techno-cultural homogeneity can mask diachronic and/or territorial variability, however, which must be detected through the integration of different approaches. The interdisciplinary study of ancient and new assemblages contributes new information on classic sites with stratigraphic sequences that have disappeared forever, and helps us to orient new research perspectives, in particular on the fundamental questions of the status of sites. What are the chronological and/or functional relationships between decorated caves with hand stencils and those with female statuettes, though these two symbolic manifestations have never been found at the same site? Why did one of these two manifestations (hand stencils) crossed the Pyrenean mountains and not the other? Did the Pyrenees serve as a crossroads where communities with different territorial origins met?

Our work at Gargas, a decorated site with a strong symbolic meaning for Gravettian populations in the Pyrenees – shown by the more than 200 hand stencils and an abundance of engraved parietal and portable art – already contributes some answers. We identified technical sequences for the in situ manufacturing of personal ornaments on animal teeth corresponding to the hunted species, as well as those recovered from the skeletons of cave bears in the galleries or in the ancient clay filling of the cavity. Through a detailed description and comparative analysis of the bone/antler industry, we were able to show the existence of technical traditions that appear to be unique to the northern Pyrenees region, as well as others that extend over a larger scale, including the eastern part of the Iberian Cantabrian coast and the entire Aquitaine region of France. Finally, the discovery of new ornaments made from Atlantic and fossil shells, confirms the orientation of intra-regional movements already revealed by a preliminary study of flint provisioning sources.

All of these new elements inform us on the diversity of the activities carried out at the site, which clearly exceed those characteristic of a short duration occupation, while they nonetheless do not attain the intensity and volume of remains known at so-called Magdalenian “aggregation” sites. These data, integrated with those contributed by zooarchaeological analysis, indicate passages at different times of the year, the realization of hunting and butchery activities, and the exploitation of different parts of the carcass and antlers of cervids (Reindeer and Red Deer) to manufacture tools and personal ornaments.

We had already obtained some information on the composition of the Gravettian groups at Gargas through the observation and anthropometric study of the painted handprints. They indicate that human groups consisting of men and women of all ages, from adults to small children, were present at the site. Based on the new data, we can now postulate on other components of their occupation of the cave, in addition to their participation in this collective activity, which was highly meaningful in terms of identity and probably played a significant spiritual role. Even if it appears difficult today to precisely determine the size of the group and to identify other sites occupied at exactly the same time, these new data contribute to a better understanding of the social relations that were formed at the scale of the vast Pyrenean territory through economic and symbolic ties.