
A bison in Provence: the “bison” rock-shelter in Ségriès, Moustiers Sainte-Marie (Alpes-de-Haute-Provence) – *abridged version*

Eléna Paillet, Patrick Paillet and Stéphane Konik



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EDITOR'S NOTE

This article is not quite a translation but rather a long summary of the French article: *Un bison en Provence : l’abri du bison à Ségriès, Moustiers Sainte-Marie (Alpes-de-Haute-Provence)*.

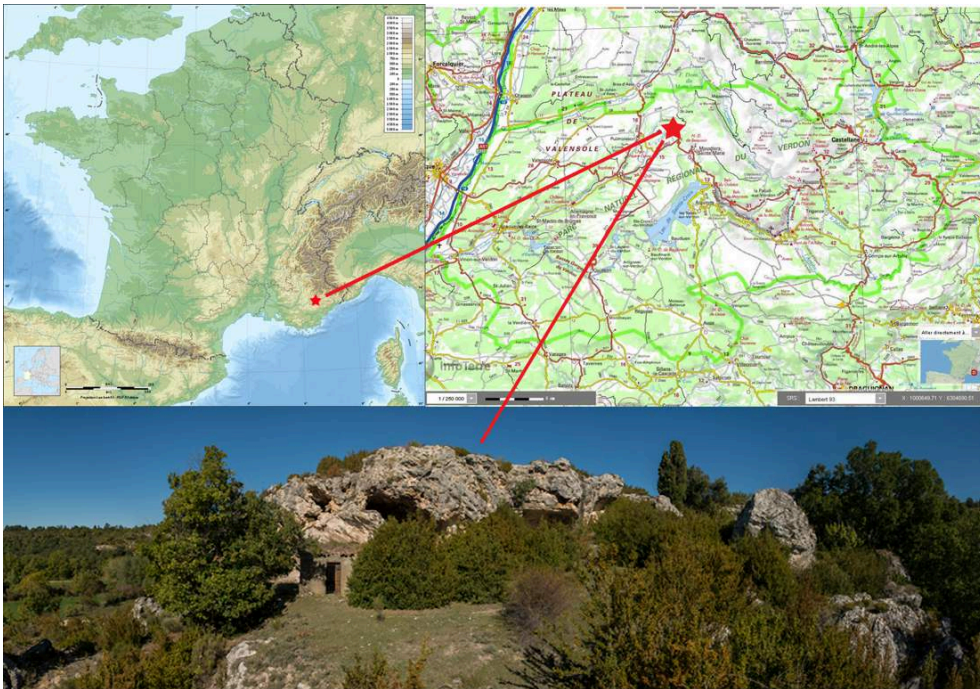
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The “abri du Bison”

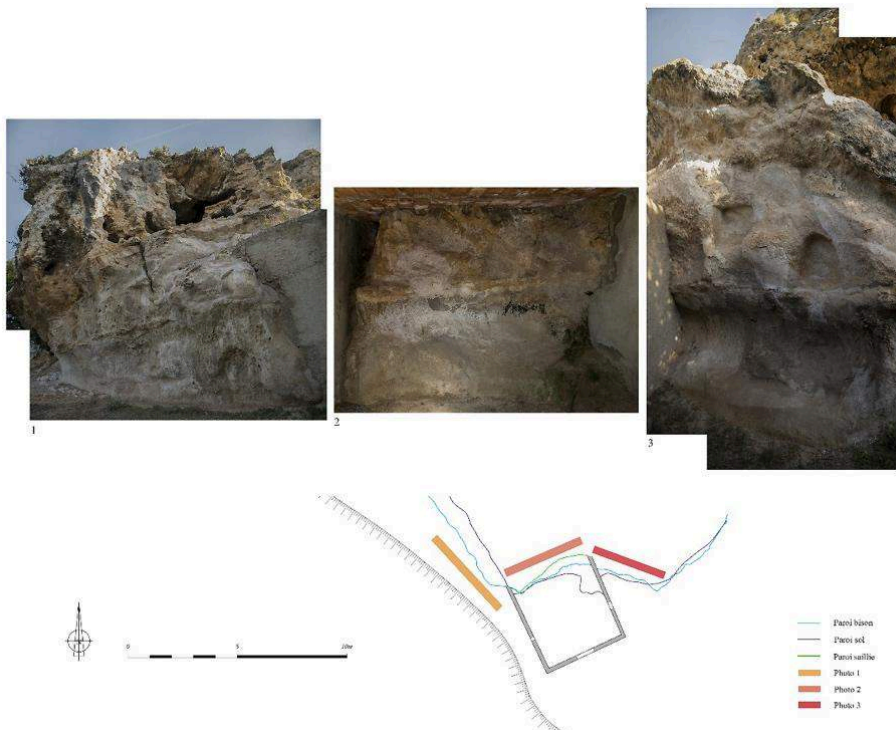
- 1 The site sits in a locality called Ségriès, in the municipality of Moustiers-Sainte-Marie, in the south of the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence department and in the heart of the Verdon regional natural park. The shelter opens within a rocky ridge, visible from afar in the landscape (fig. 1). It is 2 m deep for a height of 3 m and a span of 3 m. A concrete construction protects the wall (fig. 2). The shelter is 770 m NGF, and has a South-East exposure.

1. Localisation of abri de Ségriès.



Basemap IGN – Geoportail.
Photographs E. Lesvignes; CAD E. Paillet.

2. Views and topography of abri du bison.



Photographs E. Lesvignes, topography Y. Dedonder, Departemental Archaeological Service of Alpes-de-Haute-Provence.

The bison in its archaeological context

- 2 The Ligurian-Provençal arc probably constituted an important route of settlement during the Paleolithic, bordered to the north by the important glaciers of the Alps and to the south by the Mediterranean Sea. For about thirty years, the discoveries of settlement sites and the study of population dynamics, for example from raw materials (Binder 1994 and 1997, Tomasso 2015), has enabled our knowledge of regional prehistory to evolve. In addition, work carried out since 2012 about fifty km west of Ségriès, in the Jabron valley (site of Prés-de-Laure in Combs-sur-Artuby, Var) revealed an occupation from the Upper Paleolithic, attributable to the Final Gravettian (Porraz *et al.* 2014, Tomasso *et al.* 2018).

History of an unusual discovery

- 3 The bison was identified on August 27, 1963 by a Parisian architect, Paul Moscovino. An expertise led by Bernard Bottet at the request of Sylvian Gagnière concluded that the figure was authentic. A molding was made at the same time. In 1966, H. de Lumley published his study on the occasion of the *Simposio internacional de Arte Rupestre* in Barcelona (Spain).

An original study method

- 4 The current state of conservation of the wall (fig. 3) is making a detailed study of the representation almost impossible. We have therefore studied both the wall and the original molding of the figure (fig. 4).

3. The engraved bison on the wall or "wall bison".



Photograph E. Lesvignes.

4. Moulding or "bison moulding".



Quinson museum collections; Photograph E. Lesvignes.

"This is a bison"

- 5 The parietal system is limited to a single representation: a bison. Other elements engraved in the immediate vicinity have also been identified, but they offer a more modern character both technically and thematically. They correspond to another phase of occupation, or at least of passage, in the shelter.
- 6 The animal is engraved in its left profile (fig. 5). It is complete. The head is small and triangular in shape with a large ear and a pair of horns seen from the front. The forequarters are massive, the withers prominent. There is a single Y-shaped fore member. Two hind legs are visible.
- 7 The jars of the chest are represented by hatching.
- 8 The style of production conforms to what is known in Paleolithic art, beyond the cultural divisions made for the Upper Paleolithic period. H. de Lumley proposed parallels both with the Magdalenian representations from Languedoc (belonging, for the most part, to the old / middle Magdalenian, around 17 000 years BP) and with those from the Pyrenees, such as Niaux cave (middle Magdalenian, around 15 000 years ago cal. BP). It must be said that at the time of its study in the 1960s, there was a lack of sources of comparison, which is no longer the case today.
- 9 Stylistic similarities with some figures from Cosquer cave should be emphasized. We find the same Y-shaped representation of the limbs, and "cradle"-like treatment of the horns (Clottes *et al.* 2005). However, this type of formal treatment occurs in other chrono-cultural periods, including very recent ones such as the Laborien of Aquitaine (Paillet & Man-Estier 2014).

Times of an unloved engraving

- 10 The first issue with Ségriès, as identified in de Lumley's study (de Lumley 1968a), is the age of the representation. An attribution to the Upper Paleolithic, defended by this author, meant a notable evolution in the landscape of Paleolithic art in South-East France at the time (fig. 7). The geographical isolation of the Bison shelter was mentioned in early publications (Anonyme 1964; de Lumley 1968a), as well as in texts alerting on possible deliberate damages made on the engraving (Clappier 1986). The attribution to the Upper Paleolithic is possible on the basis of several criteria. The site constitutes a milestone in terms of artistic expression between sites in the Rhone valley and, further south, sites on the Mediterranean coast.
- 11 The second issue, which must be considered regardless of the age of the engraving, is conservation. Since its discovery, the motif has been altered by a series of treatments intended to make it more legible (ironing of lines with chalk, possibly charcoal, and casting), but poorly suited to its conservation. The engraving is now extremely degraded. On a macroscopic scale, the wall surface shows detachments of millimeter to centimeter-size flakes. In fact, it is not so much the wall that crumbles, but the superficial layer of concretions that we have studied in detail. We will see that they have played an important role in the preservation of the rock until today (fig. 6).
- 12 While it is exceptional, in the strictest sense of the word, the conservation of an engraved rockshelter like Ségriès is no less plausible, even over millennia. In addition,

H. de Lumley pointed out as early as 1966 the existence of what he called a "recovery cullet", which seemed to him a valid argument to attest to the age of the engraving. In turn, we suggested in 2013 (Man-Estier 2013), that this was indeed an excellent argument. The detailed study carried out in 2014 allows us to go much further on this subject.

- 13 The rock face is locally covered by very thin concretions with the appearance of whitish veils of calcite, millimeter thick, themselves affected by numerous desquamations and exfoliations. Several overlapping films have been identified, some of them separated by thin layers of grayish clay.
- 14 The microstratigraphic study of the support at the level of the bison and of the engraved cross (fig. 8), has shown an interesting chronological sequence which makes it possible in particular to demonstrate that a significant lapse of time has elapsed between the engraving of the bison and that of the cross. Moreover at Ségriès, the execution technique and the identifiable backdrops on both the *in situ* representation and the molding absolutely exclude the use of a metallic point.
- 15 The presence of the engraved crosses in the immediate area of the bison raises questions. It was carried out by a very deep engraving which largely cut into the rock. In our view, its position is no accident. It testifies to the legibility of the animal engraving at the time of its own realization. One probably wanted to Christianize a place considered as pagan from the presence of the bison representation.
- 16 While prospecting along the rocky ridge, we discovered other historical engravings of Christian inspiration. More precisely, they are two Jesuit monograms (fig. 9a and fig. 9b).

Conservation, a major issue

- 17 The current and future conservation of the engraving, but also of the shelter as a whole, must be considered with the greatest care. Thanks to the analysis of photographic archives, we can offer a dynamic reading of the evolution of the surface condition of the wall. It shows how fast changes are taking place, but it also shows that the representation has not been entirely damaged. In addition, a condition report was carried out, which could be used in the future for monitoring the state of conservation. It seems to us that this little bison, which we thought had been deliberately destroyed, can become an example of the joint work of all the heritage partners in the broad sense.
- 18 *Acknowledgements.* This work was authorised by the prefecture and funded by the DRAC PACA, *Service régional de l'Archéologie*. We would like to thank all the scientific and administrative partners we met in 2013 and 2014, and especially Isabelle Dubset, Mathias Dupuis and Xavier Margarit. We would like to thank Émilie Lesvignes for her permission to publish the photographs she took in 2014 as part of the study, as well as Vincent Buccio and Yann Dedonder (Alpes-de-Haute-Provence departmental archaeology service) for their permission to use the topographic survey carried out at the same occasion.

We would like to thank Michel Clappier and Jean-Paul Moscovino for their interest in our study.

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2011) was supplemented by numerous documents provided by the *Service archéologique départemental* (M. Dupuis), by the team of the *Musée de Préhistoire des Gorges du Verdon* (I. Dubset) and by the Clappier family (M. Clappier).

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ABSTRACTS

Ségriès shelter is one of the rare examples of prehistoric art in the Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region in South-East France. At the time of its discovery in the 1960s, Cosquer cave was unknown and therefore the site was the only one that could claim evidence of Paleolithic cave art in the area. However, Ségriès has long been ignored by the scientific community and has been excluded from most of the major syntheses on the subject, as much by ignorance as by mistrust. Indeed, the isolated character of the engraved panel, in a remote area of the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, had something doubtful. The study carried out in the 1960's by H. de Lumley (de Lumley 1968) had, however, confirmed the authenticity of this singular engraving. Thanks to an expertise carried out at the request of the Gorges du Verdon Natural Park, we were able to re-observe the engraving and alert on the worrying state of its conservation. Subsequently, a rock art survey, authorized and funded by the DRAC Paca (Regional Archaeological Service) made it possible to lead to a better recording of its state of conservation and to return to the question of its authenticity.

L'abri du bison de Ségriès constitue l'un des rares témoignages d'art préhistorique dans la région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur. Au moment de sa découverte, dans les années 1960, la grotte Cosquer n'était pas encore connue et ce site était donc le seul à pouvoir revendiquer l'existence d'un art pariétal paléolithique dans la région. Il est cependant longtemps resté ignoré de la communauté scientifique, écarté de la plupart des grandes synthèses sur le sujet, autant par méconnaissance que par méfiance. En effet, l'existence d'une gravure isolée, dans une zone relativement reculée des Alpes-de-Haute-Provence, avait de quoi provoquer des doutes. L'étude réalisée à la fin des années 1960 par H. de Lumley (de Lumley 1968) était cependant venue suggérer l'authenticité de cette gravure, au parcours décidément singulier. À la faveur d'une expertise conduite en 2013 par le Centre National de Préhistoire sur la demande du Parc naturel des Gorges du Verdon et du Service Régional de l'Archéologie de la DRAC Provence-Alpes Côte d'Azur, nous avons été amenés à revoir cette gravure et à alerter sur l'état inquiétant de sa conservation. Par la suite, une opération de relevé d'art rupestre, autorisée et financée par l'État (DRAC Paca- Service régional de l'Archéologie) a permis de documenter au mieux son état de conservation et de revenir sur la question de son authenticité.

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Mots-clés: préhistoire, art paléolithique, abri-sous-roche, Provence Alpes Côte-d'Azur, bison, gravures

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AUTHORS

ELÉNA PAILLET

DRAC Bretagne – Service régional de l'Archéologie et UMR 6566 CREAAH – Université de Rennes 1

PATRICK PAILLET

UMR7194 – HNHP, Musée de l'Homme

STÉPHANE KONIK

Centre National de Préhistoire et UMR 5199 PACEA, Université de Bordeaux