

The Shock of the Old: Cave Art in Britain

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Summary

In April 2003, the first discovery of Upper Palaeolithic cave art was made in England, at Creswell Crags, in the north/central part of the country. Since then, more figures have been found in the same small cave, Church Hole, comprising not only engravings but also bas-reliefs. This cave now has the richest sculpted and engraved ceiling known in the whole of palaeolithic art.

Keywords: Creswell Crags, Upper Palaeolithic cave art, Creswellian, engraving, bas-relief.

I had wanted to find Ice Age cave art in Britain for more than 25 years, and that dream has finally come true. It is perhaps slightly ironic that the discovery came in the year that marked the centenary of cave art being found in several important Spanish caves such as Covalanas and El Castillo. Britain has had to wait a long time, but its hour has come at last.

There was never any reason why cave art should not exist in this country. After all, we have no lack of caves with Upper Palaeolithic occupation, and we already had a few pieces of portable art from the period, most notably the figurative specimens from Creswell Crags, the horsehead from Robin Hood's Cave and the humanoid from Pin Hole Cave. So why no cave art? Belgium is equally rich in occupied caves, and considerably richer in portable art, but likewise had no cave art. It seemed simply to be an accepted fact of Ice Age studies that cave art stopped in Normandy, and there was nothing further north. It was a phenomenon of France, Spain and Italy. The United Kingdom had « nul points ».

There had been two false alarms in the past which did not help matters — and nor did the portable engraving of a horsehead from Sherborne which divided opinion for decades until finally proven a fake a few years ago. The first claim came in 1912 when the already eminent abbé Henri Breuil from France, and W. J. Sollas from Britain, declared in the *Times* of 14 October (p. 10) that ten wide red parallel horizontal painted stripes under calcite in the cave of Bacon Hole on the coast of South Wales were « the first example in Great Britain of prehistoric cave painting ». Breuil later admitted that the age of these stripes could not be fixed, and in any case they quickly faded, and are now reckoned to have been entirely natural, or marks left by a Victorian sailor cleaning a paint brush.

As for the second claim, I still remember vividly the moment when, in January 1981, I spotted in my local branch of W. H. Smith the new issue of the *Illustrated London News*, bearing on its cover the words « Cave Art Discovery in Britain: Exclusive Pictures ». My reaction, of course, was «Damn, I wanted to do that!» (or words to that effect). I was somewhat puzzled and relieved when I opened the magazine and saw the photographs provided, because I could see nothing at all that looked like any cave art with which I was familiar. And sure enough, when specialists went to the cave - Symonds Yat in the Wye Valley - they found absolutely nothing but natural marks. The principal claimant, a mysterious Canadian called Tom Rogers, rapidly vanished from the archaeological scene; while the *Illustrated London News*, which had so rashly published its « exclusive » without any verification, printed an incredibly grudging retraction, and soon ceased to cover archaeology altogether. So that episode was very damaging in several different ways, not least because, once the *ILN* had cried wolf, it meant that any future claim for British cave art would need to be rock solid.

Over the next couple of decades I tried to expand and improve my knowledge and experience of Ice Age cave art. It seemed obvious to me that - short of finding a new cave, or a new chamber in a known cave - no paintings from the period were likely to be discovered in Britain; they tend to be quite visible, and somebody - speleologist, tourist, owner - would surely have spotted them by now. But as far as I was aware, nobody with an experienced and practised eye had combed the British cave sites looking for engravings, which can be notoriously difficult to see, even when one knows they are there. Since engravings are usually incised with the light coming in from the side, to avoid

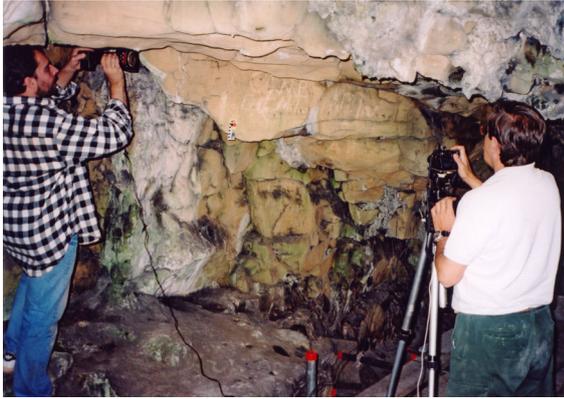


Fig. 1 — Photographing some of the engravings in Church Hole cave, Creswell Crags. Photograph: Paul Bahn.
With the authorization of Sergio Ripoll
(<http://www.uned.es/dpto-pha/creswell/fotos.htm>).

the shadow of the artist's hand obscuring his or her view, they often require lighting from the side to be seen clearly. Frontal lighting can render them quite invisible. And of course it takes considerable experience to be able to differentiate natural cracks in rock from engraved lines.

Some years ago, I met Dr Sergio Ripoll of Spain's Open University. A leading specialist in cave art and the Palaeolithic, Sergio comes from one of Spain's foremost archaeological families, and his father

Eduardo has also been a major figure in prehistoric art studies for decades. I think I have developed a pretty good eye for cave art, but Sergio has the keenest eyes I know, as well as a lot of luck, which is equally important. We made plans that one day we would explore some British caves together to try and find Ice Age engravings. But time passed, and we could never settle on a period when we might both be free.

The catalyst was the founders and benefactors feast at Keble College, Oxford, in November 2002 to which I was invited by Dr Paul Pettitt, with whom I had recently written a paper for *Antiquity* in which we expressed serious misgivings about the reliability of the very early dates for the art in Chauvet cave. That evening I told Paul of my unfulfilled plans to explore some caves with Sergio, and he immediately offered to deal with the logistics, contacting the relevant cave owners and fixing a timetable and itinerary. We found that all three of us would be free a few days before Easter, so firm plans were laid. By pure chance, and for practical reasons, it was decided that we would begin our survey at Creswell Crags, located on the Derbyshire/Nottinghamshire border, and so it was that, on the very first morning of our search, on April 14, 2003, we found engravings in not one but three caves!

Some apparently non-figurative marks were first found in Robin Hood's Cave, and others - plus a possible animal head - in Mother Grundy's Parlour; both of these caves are on the south-facing, Der-

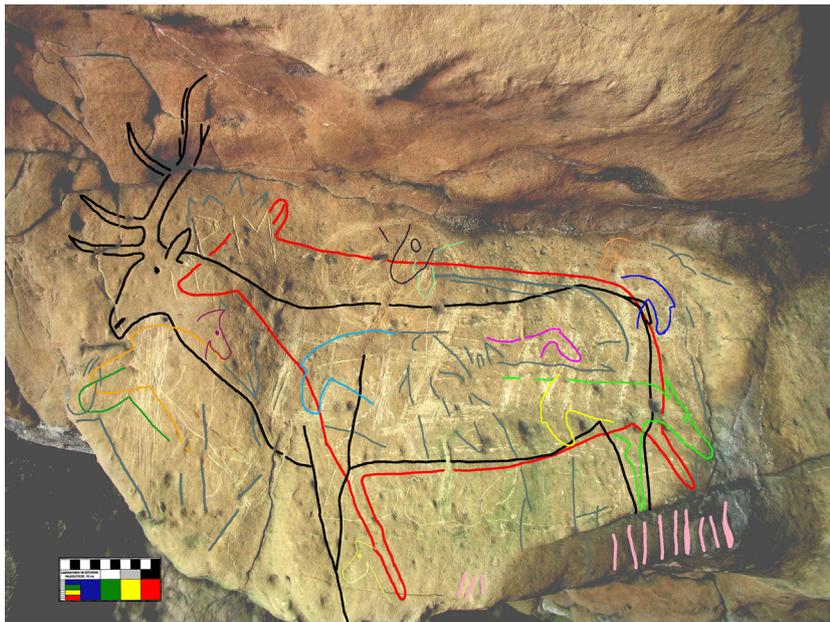


Fig. 2 — Church Hole (Creswell Crags, England): photograph and tracing by Sergio Ripoll.

byshire side. However, it was in Church Hole Cave on the Nottinghamshire bank that we really hit the jackpot — yet we had almost decided against checking that site since its 19th-century excavations had revealed primarily Middle Palaeolithic occupation, albeit with some Creswellian material above. The original floor level near the entrance had been dug down about two metres by those excavations, which took place in the 1870s and hence before the existence of cave art was discovered and accepted. In other words, even if the excavators had spotted engravings on the walls, they would have ignored them completely!

In Church Hole we first found a pair of deeply engraved enigmatic motifs on the wall which looked to us like two bird figures, possibly a crane and a bird of prey, on first viewing. But then Sergio made our greatest discovery so far: a large figure of what we at first took to be a wild goat - clearly a male from its proportions - which bowled us over not only by its size (about 57 cm long) but also by the beauty of its head. The body was mostly obscured by scratched graffiti, some dating to 1948; but by some miracle the graffiti - whose creator(s) had doubtless not seen the animal figure - missed the head, which remains pristine. But

when not lit from the side, it is virtually impossible to see, which explains the fact that we were probably the first people to notice it since the Ice Age — except for one person who, in the 1960s or 1970s (to judge by the brightness of the marks), had not only seen the figure, but thought - as we did initially - that it was a male goat, and carefully scratched a beard beneath its chin! The one positive aspect of the graffiti was that, being very bright and sharp, they provided a stark contrast to the darkly patinated lines of the animal figure, a crucial proof that the image is far older than 1948 and could not possibly be a modern fake. Our assessment of this figure was modified in April 2004 when oblique lighting from the right revealed the engraved point of an antler tine in front of it; other lines were subsequently detected, and it is now clear that the image is that of a red deer stag, and its style suggests a date of 12,500 - 12,000 years ago.

After weeks of secrecy, our discovery was made public, first in an article in the journal *Antiquity* in June 2003, and then at a press conference on July 3rd, during a further campaign of exploration at Creswell Crags, when we were joined by Sergio's associate, Dr Francisco Muñoz. In the course of this exploration,



Fig. 3 — *Church Hole* (Creswell Crags, England): bas-relief bird on Panel IV. Photographer: Sergio Ripoll.

which was funded by English Heritage and greatly facilitated by the erection of a scaffold at the original Creswellian floor-level, we expanded our finds at Church Hole to 12 figures; the two birds turned out to be five, there is a second, smaller herbivore figure to the left of the stag, and we also found a bison, an incomplete horse, a probable aurochs head, and two triangles. A further triangle (vulva?) was discovered in Robin Hood Cave, while the « animal head » in Mother Grundy's Parlour turned out, with improved lighting, to be more like a boomerang shape.

In April 2004 we gathered at the cave once again in order to check and finalise the tracings made from photographs, before the international conference on « The Cave Art of Creswell Crags in European Context » which was held in Creswell village from 15 to 17 April. During this stay we were blessed with fine weather (unlike in 2003), and quickly ascertained that natural light, especially on sunny mornings and evenings, provided perfect conditions for seeing and detecting figures, often far better than the artificial lights which we had used hitherto. In particular, we recognised that some enigmatic shapes which we had previously noticed on the ceiling were not, as we had assumed, natural, but instead bas-reliefs, most notably a beautiful and unique depiction of a bird-head with a long curved bill. This was totally unexpected, especially in our first British decorated cave, but once our minds and eyes became attuned to the new phenomenon, the natural morning light began to reveal a whole series of bas-reliefs carved into this soft and very sandy Magnesian limestone. In many cases, artificial light makes these harder to see, or even totally invisible.

Currently, the total of figures detected is about 90, all of them (with the exception of the 5 motifs in the « bird panel », in total darkness down the passage) located in the entrance chamber and visible in daylight, as is normal for carvings in European caves and shelters. Moreover, a high proportion of these figures (58) are located on the ceiling which makes them particularly difficult to detect and study since they have a wide variety of orientations and sizes. Since bas-reliefs on cave ceilings are extremely rare even on the continent (the single depictions at the Abri Pataud and the Abri du Poisson come to mind), it is obvious that Church Hole possesses the most richly carved and engraved ceiling in the whole of cave art, and this within quite a small surface area (c. 14 sq. m.).

Church Hole is of huge importance not only because of its quantity of figures, but also their variety (at least six kinds of animal, plus two or three species of bird, together with « vulvas », etc). In addition, a few of the many peculiarities observed so far can be mentioned: e.g. the fact that, with the exception of the large stag and the first bison engraving detected nearby,

which are complete, most figures comprise only parts of the animal, primarily the head or forequarters: as so often in cave art on the continent, the artists often used natural shapes in the rock, and merely added ears, eyes or muzzles by engraving.

It is hard to exaggerate the significance of these discoveries. Quite apart from the fact that we have discovered the oldest rock art known in Britain, this country has at last been added to the distribution map of decorated Ice Age sites in Eurasia. At a stroke, the northernmost known decorated cave leaps 280 miles (450 km) from Gouy, near Rouen, to Creswell Crags in Derbyshire. But this should not cause too much of a surprise, as mentioned above, portable art of the period was already known here as well as in Belgium, and Britain merely formed part of the continent at this time.

In technique and style, and in their proportions, most of our figures would be equally at home in a French or Spanish cave, and had the stag, for example, been found there it would be acclaimed as a world-class image. The fact that this is British art is meaningless in a sense, since it merely forms part of a geographic continuum, but nevertheless it arouses a certain amount of national pride: we have cave art too! Our Ice Age people could draw as well as anyone else.

And of course, it is a classic phenomenon in Archaeology that once something has been looked for, and been shown to exist, it starts being found elsewhere. It is a fair bet that more cave art will soon be found in Britain, and there is every hope that a major decorated cave - or perhaps several - may await discovery by some lucky individuals in this country. A new chapter in British prehistory has just opened.

Bibliography

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