

New Insights into the Study of Paleolithic Rock Art Dismantling the “Basque Country Void”

DIEGO GARATE MAIDAGAN, *The Cantabria International Institute for Prehistoric Research (IIIPC), Edif. Interfacultativo, University of Cantabria. Avda. Los Castros s/n., 39005 Santander (Spain). Email: garatemaidangandiego@gmail.com*

The Vasco-Cantabrian region of northern Spain, together with southwestern France, is one of the richest areas in terms of Paleolithic cave art, but, until recently, by far the highest concentration of sites had been in the central-western sector: the provinces of Cantabria and Asturias. In contrast, the eastern sector, the Basque Country—between the Asón River and the Pyrenees—was thought to have a significantly lower density of cave art loci, and few of them were major “sanctuaries.” The density of cave art sites seemed to increase again in the central French Pyrenees. This unequal distribution was difficult to explain given the homogeneity in the distribution of undecorated (i.e., habitation) Upper Paleolithic sites, as well as the lack of major lithological or orographic differences between the eastern and central-western sectors of the region. In addition, the important geostrategic position of the Basque Country between southwestern France and northwestern Iberia seemed to contradict the marginal role traditionally suggested by the parietal art record. During the past decade, however, research projects aiming to address the issue of the so-called Basque rock art void have led to the tripling of the number of known decorated caves in the eastern sector. Some of the very recent discoveries, notably in Atxurra, Armintxe, and Aitzbitarte IV, fall into the category of major cave art sites. The evidence presented here contributes to a fuller understanding of artistic production, human connections, and settlement dynamics during the entire Upper Paleolithic among the Cantabrian, Pyrenean, and Aquitaine regions, underlining the importance of the Basque Country record.

Keywords: cave art, recent discoveries, Upper Paleolithic, Basque Country, northern Spain, southwest France

THE BASQUE COUNTRY AS A UNIT OF ANALYSIS FOR THE UPPER PALEOLITHIC

The study of prehistory in the Basque Country throughout most of the twentieth century has been carried out in the tradition of the work of the late Father Jose Miguel de Barandiarán. The spatial unit of analysis established by Barandiarán continues to be a

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valid analytical framework and is still in use. The current study area is bounded to the northeast by the Adour River at the southern edge of the sand-covered French region of Les Landes; to the east by the valley of the Nervión River, at whose mouth is the city of Bilbao (Vizcaya); to the south by the Atlantic-Mediterranean watershed divide along the crest of the eastern Cantabrian (Basque) Cordillera; to the east by the Central Pyrenees; and to the north by the Bay of Biscay (Cantabrian Sea). It is the space historically linked to the core area of modern Basque speakers, except to the west of the Nervión where the landscape is more akin to that of the historically Castilian province of Cantabria. The territory allows for relatively good communication with its neighboring regions (Figure 1) and therefore constitutes a corridor between France and the Iberian Peninsula, between the Ebro Valley and the Cantabrian coast, as well as between the Pyrenees and the Cantabrian mountains (among them the Picos de Europa), which were traversed with varying intensity by people carrying objects and ideas during all historical periods (Arrizabalaga 2007). This transit area is made up of mostly similar landscapes: abrupt and steep in the Atlantic and pre-Pyrenean valleys, with rolling plains in certain coastal sectors, especially south of the Adour (Chalosse) and in the Mediterranean watershed in Alava and Navarra. The access points between these areas are characterized by low-elevation mountain passes that allowed fluid transit even during times of harsh climatic conditions.

The earliest archaeological evidence for the presence of anatomically modern humans in this Basque region is from the Proto-Aurignacian technocomplex at sites such as Gatzarria, Isturitz, and Labeko Koba, and this presence extends throughout the Upper Paleolithic. The Aurignacian occupations at Gatzarria and Isturitz were particularly intensive and have yielded very diverse assemblages. The Gravettian, which appears quite early on, is mostly of the Noailles type and is well represented at sites such as Isturitz and Aitzbitarte III; several open-air settlements of this period have also recently been found. The Solutrean record is much more limited, centering mostly on its final phases, and is found at such sites as Antoliña, Arlanpe, Amalda, Aitzbitarte IV, Azkonzilo, Ermitia, and Isturitz. Lastly, the Basque Country is very rich in Magdalenian assemblages, with a more intensive presence in such sites as Ekain, Urtiaga, Santimamiñe, and most especially, Isturitz. In its earlier phases, the period is best represented in the Peninsular (Spanish) area (Erralla, Bolinkoba, Urtiaga, Ermitia, Santimamiñe, etc.), whereas Middle Magdalenian occupations are more abundant on the northern Pyrenean (French) side (Isturitz, Brassempouy, Espalungue, Saint-Michel, etc.). Toward the end of the Magdalenian, the number of sites increases considerably throughout the territory. In sum, the area under study is characterized by continuous settlement during all Upper Paleolithic periods with the possible exception of the initial phases of the Solutrean, and an especially dense occupation during the Tardiglacial (Garate et al. 2014).

Until a decade ago, in terms of Paleolithic artistic production, research in the area focused on two matters. On the one hand, specialists wondered about the small number of rock art sites relative to the considerable density of Upper Paleolithic habitation

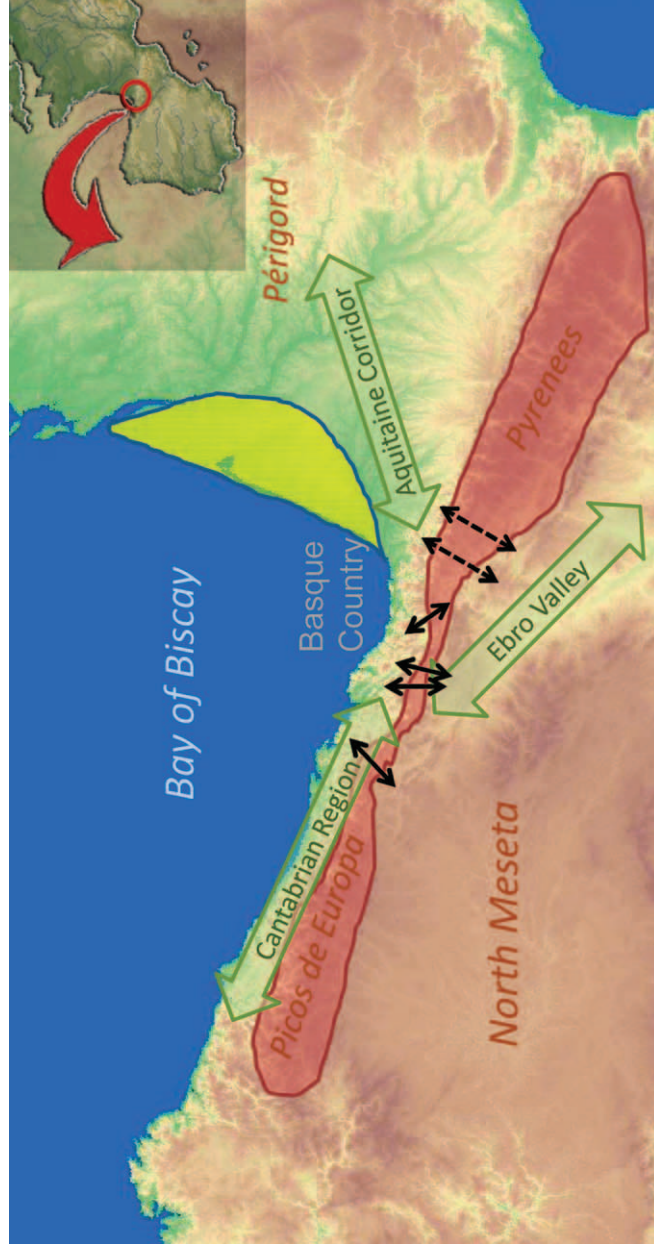


Figure 1. The Basque Region “crossroads” between the Iberian Peninsula and continental Europe (yellow: Les Landes sand-covered region; black arrows: passes through the Basque Mountains).

sites. This fact was even more striking given the nature of this area as a corridor, located as it is between the two European regions with the richest and most numerous rock art records: the French Central Pyrenees and the Périgord (including Quercy), and Cantabria and Asturias. On the other hand, the distribution of caves containing art appeared not to be homogeneous in temporal distribution either, given the almost complete lack of artistic activity up until the very beginning of the Magdalenian, at which time great decorated sanctuaries appear. Therefore, traditionally the idea had been that the number of decorated caves in the Basque territory was smaller than in the central/western Cantabrian region and the central/eastern Pyrenees, and especially in relation to the relatively dense peopling of the area during the various phases of the Upper Paleolithic.

RESEARCH HISTORY: JOSE MIGUEL DE BARANDIARÁN AND THE GREAT BASQUE SANCTUARIES

The discovery and study of the decorated Paleolithic caves of the western Pyrenees—between the basins of the Nervión and Adour rivers—was different from that of the neighboring regions in that it entailed little involvement from international researchers in favor of local specialists, and especially Jose Miguel de Barandiarán. He was a storied ethnologist, folklorist, and archaeologist who worked in the Basque region from the time when rock art was first discovered at the cave site of Santimamiñe near Guernica (Vizcaya) in 1916 all the way to the discovery and study of Ekain cave near San Sebastián (Guipúzcoa), a half a century later in 1968.

Following recognition by the international community of the existence of Paleolithic rock art—whose authenticity at the Cantabrian site of Altamira and in a few French sites was finally accepted at the Congress of the Association Française pour l'Avancement des Sciences in 1902—a vertiginous increase in the number of discoveries took place during the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, primarily along the Cantabrian coast. This process was headed by international researchers, mainly H. Breuil and H. Obermaier in very significant collaboration with local scholars L. Sierra and H. Alcalde del Río, whose seminal study of sites in Cantabria (then called Santander Province) and Asturias, *Les Cavernes de la Région Cantabrique* (Alcalde de Río et al. 1911), presented descriptions of the decorated caves known at that time (followed by *La Caverne de la Pasiega*—also in Cantabria; Breuil et al. 1913). The lack of sites from the Basque region in these publications is striking.

Not until the first archaeological excavation at the cave site of Isturitz in 1913 by E. Passemard was evidence of artistic representations found, in this case in the form of a series of animal bas-reliefs engraved onto a pillar of calcite at the center of the Grande Salle. This same pillar would be restudied by I. Barandiarán and G. Laplace (and reported in Laplace 1984), whose reevaluation was significantly different from the original study. A century after its discovery, Isturitz's rock art was once again studied following the fortuitous discovery of red stains on and objects stuck into its walls (Normand and Turq 2003; Labarge 2011) and later, as part of a comprehensive re-

study of the rock art at the site (Garate, Labarge et al. 2013; Garate, Rivero et al. 2016b).

In 1916, a group of children found the paintings at Santimamiñe cave, a discovery that had a great impact on the local populace (Arribas 2006). The excavation of the site and the study of its art was carried out by a team headed by T. Aranzadi, J. M. de Barandiarán, and E. Eguren (1925), true pioneers of scientific Basque prehistoric research. Almost in parallel, Cuadra Salcedo and Alcalá Galiano (1918) carried out another study of the cave art. The monograph compiled by Aranzadi, Eguren, and de Barandiarán was updated by de Barandiarán in various publications until 1976. A few additional, more modest discoveries and overviews were made by others in the mid-twentieth century (Apellániz 1971; Fernández García de Diego 1971; Goicoechea 1966; Nolte 1968). Santimamiñe cave was most recently studied by Gorrotxategi (2000), González Sainz (2009), and González Sainz and Ruiz Idarraga (2010).

In 1930, the famous French speleologist N. Casteret (1933) discovered a small assemblage of engraved rock art at the cave of Alkerdi 1 in the pre-Pyrenean Mountains of northern Navarra, although it was not studied in depth until a few decades later, by I. Barandiarán Maestu (1974b). Recently, in a lateral gallery, a large number of engravings, mostly depicting bison and horses, have been found, and these offer a very different perspective on the art of this cave (Garate and Rivero 2015).

The first overall study of Basque Paleolithic art dates to 1934, as part of J. M. de Barandiarán's *El Hombre Primitivo en el País Vasco* (Primitive Man in the Basque Country), reported in more detail a year later (1935), as well as through two publications concerning mobile art (Aranzadi and Barandiarán 1927, 1934). On the one hand, this work assigns a geostrategic role to the territory, which is a very modern idea as outlined above. On the other hand, following H. Obermaier, it insisted on the theory of hunting magic as a way of interpreting the cave art phenomenon, linking it to Basque mythology (the goddess Mari) to defend the idea of supposed Basque population continuity from the Paleolithic to the present day.

J. M. de Barandiarán (1946) found a horse image engraved on the wall of the cave site of Uriogaina in 1940, a drawing of which was published by the Abbé Glory (1964), with whom he had excavated the site; they determined that the oldest habitation levels were Mesolithic. A restudy carried out by D. Garate in 2010 concluded that the engraved grooves and the style itself do not correspond to the Paleolithic.

In sum, during the first half century of research on Paleolithic rock art in Europe, the information uncovered in the Basque territory was scant, as attested by *Quatre Cents Siècles d'Art Pariétal*, published by H. Breuil in 1952, in which only Santimamiñe acts as the link between two artistic regions—Cantabria and the Pyrenees—separated by 400 km of otherwise near-absolute emptiness.

Shortly before this seminal work on the entirety of known Paleolithic rock art was published, in 1950, the French speleologist P. Boucher discovered paintings in the caves of Etxeberri and Sasiziloaga in the Arbaila Pyrenean massif of the French Basque

Country. These were immediately studied by G. Laplace (1952) and most recently revisited by Garate and colleagues (Garate 2012a, 2012b; Garate and Bourrillon 2009, 2011; Garate et al. 2012). In 1955, in the middle level of the karstic system of the Gaztelu (Isturitz) hill, the presence of paintings and engravings at the far end of the cave of Oxocelhaya was revealed, although they were not studied until many years later (Labarge 2003, 2011; Laplace 1960; Larribau 1982, 2011); the site's art is currently being restudied along with that of Isturitz. At both caves, the expert opinion of J. M. de Barandiarán had been relied upon to validate the authenticity of the discoveries.

In 1958, this same notable prehistorian shared his thoughts on the state of knowledge of Basque region rock art with the Regional Assembly of Speleologists (Barandiarán 1959), closing out the first half-century of the limited cave art discoveries in the Spanish and the French Basque Country (known in Basque as Euskalherria).

Early in the second half of the twentieth century, interest in Paleolithic rock art was reactivated by momentous discoveries, notably those of the decorated caves of Altxerri and Ekain in Guipúzcoa, and the first map of known rock art was put together by J. M. de Barandiarán.

At the cave of Atxuri, during the 1960 excavation season, led by J. M. de Barandiarán, several faded red traces were found (Fernández García de Diego 1971), but they were destroyed by quarrying before they could be verified or studied. The poorly preserved stratigraphic sequence was not helpful when attempts were made to establish the cultural context of the (lost) rock paintings. Two years later, during the excavation of Goikolau cave, J. M. de Barandiarán (1964a) found a series of engravings attributed partly to the Paleolithic and partly to the Iron Age. Subsequent studies (Apellániz 1982; Basas 2000–2002) have ruled out the Paleolithic origin of some of the paintings, which is why we do not include the site in Figure 1. However, a study of the assemblage is currently being carried out by J. C. López Quintana (personal communication, 2017), and it appears to confirm the Paleolithic origin of at least some of the art.

The engravings and paintings at Altxerri were found by three speleologists from the Aranzadi Science Society in 1962 and immediately studied by J. M. de Barandiarán (1964b). Given the number of images and the wide range of themes depicted, this represented the most significant find since Santimamiñe. Different interpretations have been published since then (Beltrán 1966; González Sierra 1993), along with previously unpublished figures (Altuna 1996). The assemblage as a whole has been studied on two more occasions (Altuna and Apellániz 1976; Ruiz Redondo 2014). The discovery of the upper gallery of Altxerri B took place shortly after that of the intermediate gallery and was first noted by F. Fernández García de Diego (1966); the main panel would later be restudied (Altuna and Mariezkurrena 2010). A new, comprehensive study (González Sainz et al. 2013; Ruiz Redondo et al. 2017) has located the original entrance, separate from the lower gallery, and has also identified new painted motifs and refined the chronology of the art. Also in the mid-1960s, the first assessment of

Paleolithic rock art in the Basque Country was published (Barandiarán Maestu 1966a, 1966b).

Shortly afterwards, in 1969, paintings and engravings were found in Ekain cave by two members of the Antxieta archaeology group of Azpeitia, and, once again, it was J. M. de Barandiarán who directed their study (Barandiarán and Altuna 1969). The spectacular bichrome horses would later be studied more specifically by Barandiarán Maestu (1974a) and the whole of the cave restudied by J. Altuna and J. M. Apellániz (1978). More recently, some previously unseen figures have been published (Altuna and Mariezkurrena 2008; González Sainz et al. 1999; Fano et al. 2012; Garate, Rivero et al. 2014) as well as an analysis of the pigments (Chalmin et al. 2002).

The small painting assemblage at Sinhikole was found in 1971 by three speleologists from the Société Spéléologique et Préhistorique de Bordeaux and three years later was featured in a short publication by Séronie-Vivien (1974). Like the rest of the caves in the Arbaila massif, Sinhikole would later be reexamined (Garate and Bourrillon 2009).

Lastly, in the still-active, lower karstic level of the Gaztelu (Isturitz) hill, engravings and paintings were found in 1975 in Erberua cave by speleologist J. D. Larribau. These would not be studied until a few years later (Larribau and Prudhomme 1983, 1989) given the difficulty of access to the site. It has recently been the subject of a monograph based on the fieldwork carried out in the 1970s and 1980s (Larribau 2013).

In short, between 1950 and 1975 a considerable number of discoveries were made, some of which were particularly important, namely those of Altxerri, Ekain, and Erberua (Figure 2). During the remaining quarter of the twentieth century, no such discoveries took place (Table 1). The main contribution to the subject of rock art in the late twentieth century was the publication of general summaries of Basque Paleolithic cave art (Altuna 1994; Apellániz 1989, 1990; Barandiarán Maestu 1988) and the “authorship” studies by J. M. Apellániz (1980, 1982). The Zubialde affair—the scandal of a forged cave art site in the interior Basque province of Alava—cannot be ignored, nor its consequences for the study of rock art in the Basque Country (Altuna et al. 1992; Apellániz 1995, 2003; Barandiarán Maestu 1995).

NEW RESEARCH ADVANCES: DISMANTLING THE “BASQUE COUNTRY VOID”

The scant research activity that took place in the eastern Cantabrian region during the last decades of the twentieth century coincided with an increase in the number of discoveries in neighboring regions to the west. Because of this, the difference in density of decorated caves between those sectors substantially increased. Researchers even coined the term “Basque void” to refer to the scarcity of decorated caves in this area (Garate 2009).

Explanations for these different densities were sought, for example, in the smaller amount of limestone bedrock in the Basque territory—and therefore the presence of fewer caves; in an aggressive anthropogenic impact on the environment and thus



Figure 2. Decorated caves between the Nervión and Adour rivers discovered between 1900 and 1999 (black: Magdalenian; red: Pre-Magdalenian).

Table 1. History of the discovery of decorated caves in the study area

Decade	<i>N</i>
1900–1909	–
1910–1919	2
1920–1929	–
1930–1939	1
1940–1949	–
1950–1959	3
1960–1969	4
1970–1979	2
1980–1989	–
1990–1999	–
2000–2009	3
2010–2017	17

destruction of sites from mining, quarrying, and industrialization in the Basque Country; in marine regression—a more distant and now-flooded Last Glacial coastline in the eastern sector than off Cantabria and Asturias; in a supposedly later settlement of the territory, with a smaller percentage of sites antedating the Magdalenian (Solutrean, Gravettian, or Aurignacian) than in the western sector; or in an unbalanced prehistoric research tradition, centered mostly around the study of Neolithic megaliths in the Basque provinces.

It would not be until 2001, a decade after the death of J. M. de Barandiarán, that the search for decorated caves was resumed in the Basque Country. At first these discoveries took place purely by chance during new excavation projects at cave sites, and only later, from 2011 onward, as a result of survey projects specifically aimed at finding decorated caves. Projects developed since then by the team led by D. Garate (primarily along with O. Rivero and J. Rios-Garaizar) and by the Antxieta archaeology group re-activated research in the territory.

During the 2001 excavation at Antoliña (Vizcaya) by M. Aguirre, a red, possible fingerprint dot was found on the ceiling at the end of the north gallery (2002). Shortly afterward, during the excavation at Praile Aitz (Guipúzcoa), directed by X. Peñalver (Peñalver 2007; García Díez et al. 2012), a series of red stains was identified in 2006, and three years later at the cave of Astigarraga (Guipúzcoa), during an excavation project directed by J. A. Mujika, traces of red paired with bones embedded into the wall were found (Alberdi et al. 2010; García Díez et al. 2011).

Over the past decade there has been an increase in the number of finds as a result of projects specifically aimed at surveying rock art, first by archaeologists and later by speleologists. As a result of this work, between 2011 and 2017 seventeen new decorated

assemblages have been found both in already-excavated caves as well as at sites not previously studied archaeologically.

In 2011 a series of horses painted in red and a bone inserted into the wall were found at Askondo in Vizcaya (Garate and Rios-Garaizar 2011, 2012a, 2013). The cave, which has been studied archaeologically since the beginning of the twentieth century, had been listed as a “destroyed site” (Marcos 1982).

A year later, a series of red paintings—including two bison and a horse—was found on a large block detached from the ceiling at Lumentxa in coastal Vizcaya (Garate and Rios-Garaizar 2012b; Garate, Rios-Garaizar, and Ruiz-Redondo 2013). This site is one of the best-known in the territory and was the focus of many excavations during the beginning, middle, and latter part of the twentieth century, but no archaeologist had ever taken notice of the art even though it is adjacent to areas that were excavated near the cave mouth.

That same year and within the framework of systematic survey conducted by the discoverers of the art at the aforementioned caves, red stains were found inside the very long-studied and excavated Aitzbitarte IV cave near San Sebastián; one of them may pertain to a now-lost zoomorphic representation (Garate, Rios-Garaizar et al. 2013).

The role of speleologists in surveys and in the discovery of Paleolithic rock art is not new—it is worth recalling their role in the findings in Ekain and Altzerri, as well as all the “recently” identified cave art sites in the French Basque Country—but their participation has increased over the past few years.

In 2014, speleologists from the Asociación Deportiva Espeológica Saguzarrak (ADES) identified a series of red paintings at Morgota (Vizcaya). The cave, although known, was yet to be fully assessed archaeologically. As a result of this collaboration, it has been possible to excavate a site containing an ochre-processing deposit (López Quintana et al. 2015) associated with a panel with three animal figures and a dozen paint stains and dots (Garate et al. 2015a, 2015b).

That same year, and close by, ADES noted some red stains at the cave of Ondaro, on a rock platform, accompanied by archaeological stratigraphy at the foot of the panel (Garate, González Sainz et al. 2016). Prospection had already been carried out at the site by J. M. de Barandiarán in 1921, but little information was gathered from this work (Aranzadi et al. 1925).

Also in 2014, the Antxieta Jakintza Taldea archaeological group found a series of very faded paintings at Danbolinzulo (Guipúzcoa), where the archaeological site had been known since 1980. The paintings, currently under study, are close to the entrance and represent red deer hinds and ibex, painted in red using lines and dots (Abaunza et al. 2016).

At the start of 2015, this same group revealed the engravings they found in the cave of Erlaitz (Guipúzcoa): close to a dozen figures of horses, hinds, and aurochs. Currently under study, the archaeological status of the cave had been known since 1978.

The year 2015 proved to be especially prolific in terms of the discovery of decorated caves. Under the aegis of systematic surveys carried out in the basin of the Lea River, a

series of red stains were found in the hall of Abittaga (Vizcaya) (Garate, Libano, and Vega 2016). The cavity had previously been excavated by J. M. de Barandiarán in 1965 and 1966 and by J. M. Apellániz in 1970.

The joint work carried out by archaeologists and speleologists enabled D. Garate accompanied by J. Rios-Garaizar and four members of the Felix Ugarte Elkarte (FUE) speleological group to discover a new rock art assemblage at the site of Aitzbitarte V. The assemblage consists of various bison engraved in the “Pyrenean style,” characteristic of the Middle Magdalenian. A few days later, the speleologists shared the discoveries they had made in the caves of Aitzbitarte III and IX of animal engravings in the Gravettian style, perfectly comparable to the mobile art of Isturitz and Gargas in the French Pyrenees, and to the French rock art assemblages of Cussac, Cosquer, Roucadour, and Gargas, but until then unknown in the Cantabrian region (Garate, Rios-Garaizar et al. 2016).

Simultaneously, during the second excavation season at the long-known cave of Atxurra (Vizcaya), directed by D. Garate together with speleologist I. Intxaurbe from ADES, an exceptional assemblage was discovered. It contains approximately 100 Magdalenian engravings and paintings on a dozen parietal sets in the final sector of the cavity, which also has intact floors with hearths and archaeological material at the foot of the art panels (Garate, Rivero et al. 2016a).

A century after the discovery of Santimamiñe, the search for Paleolithic rock art assemblages continues. This systematic work led to the staggering discovery by ADES speleologists of a large, boldly engraved panel with images of lions, bison, horses, and ibex in Armintxe cave, under an apartment building in the town of Lekeitio (coastal Vizcaya) in late 2016. This unique find for the Cantabrian region reflects themes (felines), conventions (use of scraping to show fur), and signs (P-shaped claviforms) that are all more typical of French Pyrenean art than that of northern Spain. This is another good indication of significant contact between the Basque region and southwestern France during the late Magdalenian, the period to which the highly realistic art of Armintxe clearly pertains.

The Antxieta group recently made the modest but valuable discovery of Astuigaña, and a team from the Aranzadi Science Society composed of J. Tapia and D. Garate along with speleologists from Satorrak reported on the finding of Alkerdi 2 (Garate et al. 2017).

In 2017, the discoveries continue. In the long-known Balzola cave (Vizcaya), I verified some red stains found by I. Intxaurbe from ADES the year before. The Antxieta group continues the surveys in the Deba/Urola valleys, where some engravings have been detected at Arbil V. Finally and most spectacularly, the FUE speleological group has just discovered a notable assemblage of modeled clay images (including a visually striking bison) in an upper gallery of Aitzbitarte IV.

As a result of these major discoveries of rock art (Figure 3), new summaries have been published (Altuna and Mariezkurrena 2014; Garate 2009) and the wider geographical framework is beginning to be known (Garate, Ruiz-Redondo et al. 2014;



Figure 3. Decorated caves between the Nervión and Adour rivers discovered between 2000 and 2017 (black; Magdalenian; red: Pre-Magdalenian).

Garate, Rivero et al. 2014; Garate, Rivero et al. 2015; Ochoa and García-Díez 2014).

At present, the Basque archaeological record, in terms of its Paleolithic rock art, is very different from that which J. M. de Barandiarán knew in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Figure 2). The advances made have been very significant: 20 new rock art assemblages were discovered between 2001 and 2017, whereas only 13 had been found during the whole of the twentieth century (Table 1). In addition, some of these later discoveries, such as Atxurra, Armintxe, and Aitzbitarte IV, can be placed in the category of “great Basque sanctuaries,” alongside Santimamiñe, Ekain, Altxerri, and Erberua.

The projects specifically aimed at locating and studying this kind of archaeological evidence has led to a threefold increase in the number of decorated caves known in the Basque territory and, as a result, has caused us to revise and reevaluate our knowledge of the origin and development of cave art in this region and in southern France/northern Spain more generally. The survey work carried out by both archaeologists (teams led mainly by D. Garate and the Antxieta group) and speleologists (mainly ADES, FUE, and Satorrak) has played a particularly important role in this process.

TOWARD A NEW VIEW OF BASQUE REGION CAVE ART

The data obtained over the past few years represent an important shift in our knowledge of the archaeological record. As a matter of fact, we have gone from a nearly empty space, especially for art probably done prior to the Magdalenian, to an area with evidence of dense artistic activity that also indicates a long process of development during the whole of the Upper Paleolithic, with its own characteristics and evolutionary trajectory. These themes and techniques sometimes placed it at the margins of the Cantabrian or Pyrenean art orbits but at other times fully integrated it within the stylistic circulation axes of much more extended artistic forms.

All these novelties have modified the image of the artistic activity developed in this area during the Upper Paleolithic significantly. Of the 20 new assemblages, 16 provide considerable information; they include figurative representations—especially Atxurra and Armintxe, with more than 100 and 50 each, respectively. The remaining four (Praile Aitz, Abittaga, Ondaro, and Antoliña) are not as informative, given the small number, overall lack of diagnostics, and poor state of preservation of their rock art.

The supposed scarcity of assemblages in the Basque Country in terms of the rest of the Cantabrian region has been disproved with the considerable increase—nearly triple—in the number of known rock art sites (Figure 4). On the other hand, what was thought to be a total absence of small assemblages with no figurative representations, which are so common in the rest of the Cantabrian area, is no longer true after the discovery of simple rock art motifs in Antoliña, Astigarraga, Praile Aitz, Ondaro, and Abittaga, just to name a few. Lastly, the near-absence of assemblages from before the Magdalenian period has been reevaluated now that more than a dozen sites can probably be assigned to this period, some discovered recently (Aitzbitarte III and IX,



Figure 4. All the now-known decorated caves between the Nervión and Adour rivers (black: Magdalenian; red: Pre-Magdalenian; black symbols: pre-2000; white symbols: post-2000).

Askondo, Astigarraga, Alkerdi 2, Danbolinzulo, and Erlaitz) and others restudied (Alt-xerri B and Erberua, first phase).

These data enable us to outline the development of artistic activity during the Upper Paleolithic in the Basque Country in relation to its neighboring regions.

Initial Upper Paleolithic

Information about the earliest rock art in the Iberian Peninsula is scarce and to a large extent inconclusive. The Basque Country is home to one of the most reliable pieces of evidence of Aurignacian-age rock and figurative art based on archaeological context. Aurignacian art is found in the form of pictorial motifs at Alt-xerri B. The assemblage is in a closed gallery, with a collapsed access and reactivated speleothems, and is independent from the intermediate gallery, where the Magdalenian assemblage is located. A main panel containing representations of an exceptionally large bison (4 m), a feline, and a bear stands out, as well as paired traces and the remains of less legible figures, all in red and maroon. Charcoal, ochre, and bones (some burnt) were found at the foot of the panel. Three radiocarbon dates obtained from bones ($34,195 \pm 1,235$, $29,940 \pm 745$, and $34,370 \pm 180$ BP) suggest an age for the archaeological assemblage of around 39,000 cal. BP (Altuna 1994; González Sainz et al. 2013). The paintings are, from a formal point of view, more closely linked with French sites such as Chauvet (Ardèche) than with those of Cantabria or Asturias, where there are no known parallels, making the art at Alt-xerri B an isolated find in the northern Spanish context.

Later, during the Gravettian, Basque Country rock art exhibits greater parallels with the Cantabrian art traditions, and with other motifs more widely distributed throughout southwestern Europe. The assemblage from Askondo (Figure 5) is an example, with hand imprints and horse heads in the “duckbill” style, as defined by the Abbé Henri Breuil and widely recognized throughout southwestern Europe. However, a connection with the artistic activity of Cantabria can also be noted: the horses are closely linked with ones in Altamira and La Pasiega B, also large in format and composed in pairs, located close to the entrance, and using dotting only occasionally. A bone embedded in a crack in the wall next to the Askondo panels was radiocarbon dated to $23,760 \pm 110$ BP. Starting from the probable contemporaneity of the art and embedding the bone, and given the level—based on the hand imprints—from which a standing human could produce the paintings, together with their style, a Gravettian origin is most probable (Garate and Rios-Garaizar 2012a). The cave of Danbolinzulo, mainly decorated with small ibex in red made with the dot technique, has direct parallels in central/western Cantabria (Garate 2010)—the so-called Ramales School of J. M. Apellániz—and widens the perceived area of influence for this artistic tradition all the way to eastern Cantabria, where it had been unknown until now. In the case of Balzola, the red claviform signs had only been known before in Cantabria per se (Fortea 2005), but not to the east.

At Erberua, the five negative hands in red and black (Larribau 2013) and a number of engraved figures with parallels in the mobile art of adjacent Isturitz and the rock art



Figure 5. Red hand stencil in Askondo cave (© D. Garate).

of Gargas and Cussac all point toward a first Gravettian phase of decoration of the cave (Rivero and Garate 2014), albeit still to be confirmed. The engravings at Aitzbitarte III and IX (Figure 6) correspond to the scheme of the Gravettian caves of the Pyrenees and Périgord, and they represent the only such examples known from the Iberian Peninsula at this time (Garate, Rios-Garaizar et al. 2016) (Figure 7). Recently, the discovery of rock art very similar in style to that of Alkerdi 2 (Figure 8) and its direct dating via AMS-C14 have placed it alongside the previous discoveries at Aitzbitarte (Álvarez et al. 2016).

The newly discovered caves fill the previous void for the beginnings of Upper Paleolithic art in the Basque region. The westernmost ones (Askondo, Danbolinzulo, and Balzola) connect directly with the art known in the greater Cantabrian region, while those from the eastern sector (Aitzbitarte III-IX and Alkerdi 2) are markedly similar to assemblages in France. This is to say, the study area was a boundary between two different artistic territories at this time.

Middle Upper Paleolithic

The panel with paired traces at the cave of Astigarraga also exhibits clear links to Cantabria and Asturias, with similar art in caves such as La Garma, El Castillo, Cudón, Fuente del Salín, Chufín, Tito Bustillo, and La Lloseta. These kinds of motifs (hands, dots, discs, etc.) are known from the earliest phases of the Upper Paleolithic, although their precise chronology is unknown (González Sainz 1999).

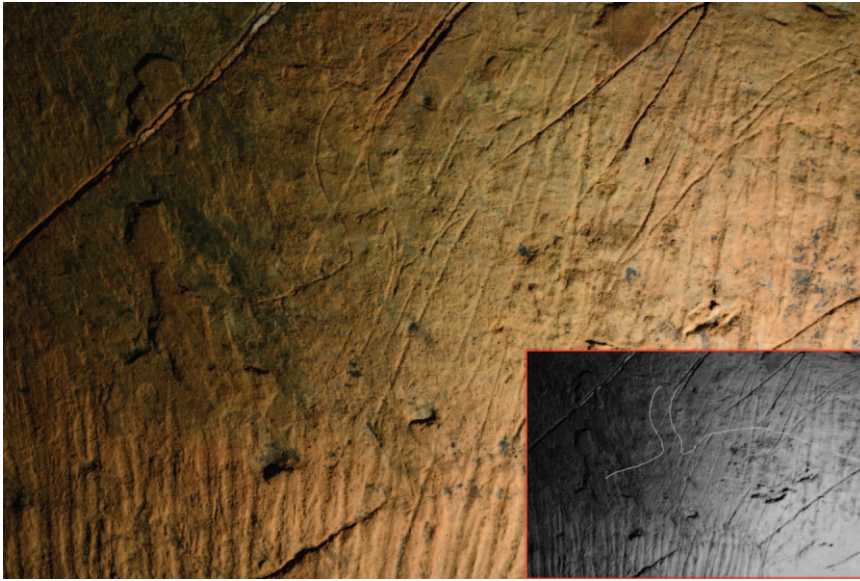


Figure 6. Engraved Gravettian bison in Aitzbitarte IX cave (© D. Garate).

Another modest assemblage is that of Erlaitz, comprising half a dozen engraved animals of which the closest parallels can be found during the Cantabrian Gravettian and Solutrean periods. At present, before a complete study, it is difficult to provide a more specific attribution.

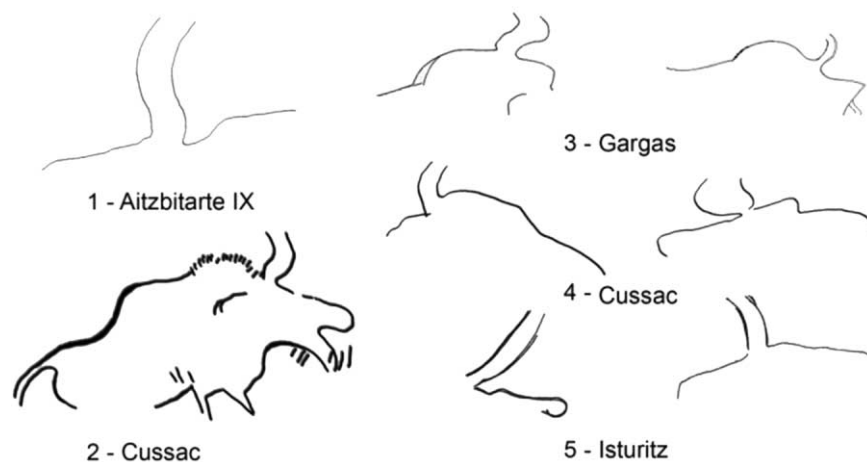


Figure 7. “Gargas style” Gravettian bison engravings, including those of Aitzbitarte III and IX, the only ones in the Iberian Peninsula (1, D. Garate; 2, 4 after Aujoulat et al. 2001; 3 after Barrière 1976; 5 after Rivero and Garate 2014).

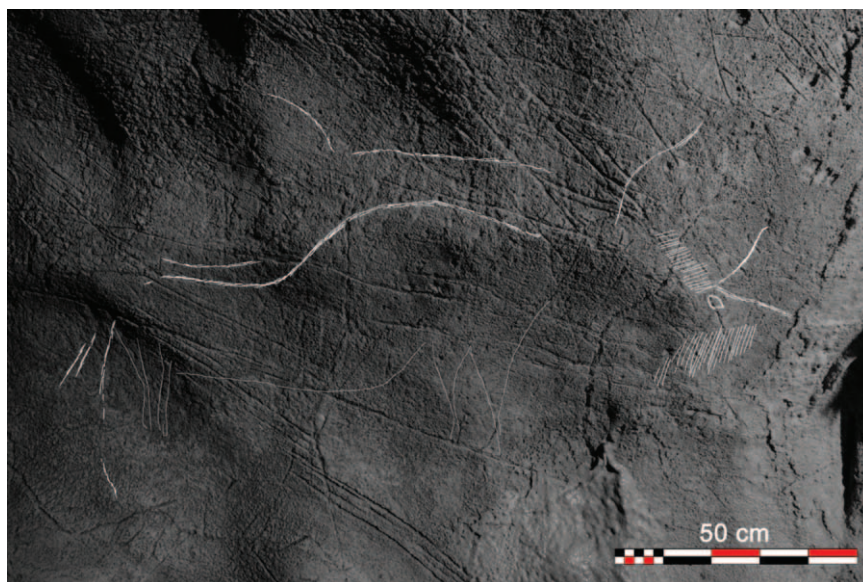


Figure 8. Tracing of the engraved Gravettian bison in Alkerdi 2 cave (© D. Garate).

Final Upper Paleolithic

This period saw the spectacular development of artistic activity in Cantabria, the Pyrenees, and the Périgord. Around 14,500 BP, this increase took place alongside a thematic and stylistic homogeneity previously unseen. The new finds from the Basque Country, including especially relevant assemblages such as those of Atxurra, Armintxe, and Aitzbitarte IV, and the numerous revisions of other, previously known sites, clearly show this confluence of influences.

The recent restudy of the “Pilier Gravé” of Isturitz has highlighted how little was really known about this art assemblage (Garate, Labarge et al. 2013). At the time of excavation, the pillar was covered by levels F1 and E, the top of the former attributed to the Upper Magdalenian and the bottom to the Solutrean, and the middle and upper parts of the latter level to the Early and Middle Magdalenian (Passemar 1944), although postdepositional processes may have given rise to this overlap (Garate, Rivero et al. 2016b). The study of the engravings on the pillar has enabled them to be placed in relation to the engraved slabs with reindeer images found during the early excavations of the site (differential relief, double chest line, cloven hooves, muscle insertions, etc.) that belong to the levels assigned to the Middle Magdalenian.

The recent review of the assemblage from Etxeberri provides new information on its chronology. In the Salle des Peintures, at the foot of the panel containing horses traced using clay, and next to a bichrome (black and red) horse, and various red stains, lumps of processed ochre can be seen on the surface. A small prospection led to the recovery of various flint artifacts and burnt bones associated with the ochre. Two dates were ob-

tained from bones: ca. 13,800–13,400 uncal BP. Considering the extremely difficult access to the decorated area and the complementarity of the documented activities, it is reasonable to link these dates to the rock art (Garate et al. 2012).

Other full (Altzerri A, Santimamiñe, Oxocelhaya, Sinhikole, Sasiziloaga) or partial (Ekain) restudies have also enabled us to reinterpret their rock art and these cave art loci in the regional context. In the case of Alkerdi 1 (Figure 9), the discovery of a previously unpublished decorated gallery, with representations of bison and horses in the Pyrenean style, provides further knowledge (Garate and Rivero 2015).

In terms of the newly discovered decorated caves, some offer modest but very representative examples of the Middle/Upper Magdalenian, as at Aitzbitarte V (Garate, Rios-Garaizar et al. 2016) (Figure 10) or even Lumentxa (Garate et al. 2012) (Figure 11), with clear links to Pyrenean caves (Figure 12). The caves of Astuigaña and Arbil V could probably also be attributed to this period. What are most surprising, however, are the very recent discoveries in the upper gallery from Aitzbitarte IV of figures modeled in clay and the two large Paleolithic art assemblages in the lower basin of the River Lea, Atxurra and Armintxe. Although yet to be studied in detail, they are similar to what are known as the “great Basque sanctuaries”: Santimamiñe, Ekain, Altzerri A, and Erberua.

The first, Aitzbitarte IV, is a very well-known Paleolithic site at which excavations began 125 years ago. The Felix Ugarte speleological group leads the current explorations in collaboration with the archaeological group directed by D. Garate. They found



Figure 9. Engraved Magdalenian bison in Alkerdi 1 cave (after Garate and Rivero 2015).



Figure 10. Engraved Magdalenian bison in Aitzbitarte V cave covered with graffiti (© D. Garate).

a unique ensemble of rock art in an upper chamber including at least 15 engraved figures (bison, horses, and vulvas), some of them modeled in the clay (Figure 13). This technique had not been detected before in the Cantabrian region and is closely related to Middle Magdalenian decorated caves in Ariège (the Central Pyrenees of France), such as le Tuc d'Audoubert, Montespan, and Bédeilhac.

In the Lea Valley, archaeological work at the well-known cave of Atxurra resumed in 2014 (Garate, Rivero et al. 2016a). In the deep part of the cavity, and mainly on projections and high, difficult-to-access areas, more than a dozen decorated sectors were found, composed mainly of engraved animal figures along a 200-m-long stretch. Three sectors stand out given their large numbers of representations—dozens in each case—and because of the presence of archaeological material on the surface (charcoals, flint tools, etc.) at the foot of the engraved panels (Figure 14). More than 100 animals are painted in black and/or engraved, mainly bison, horses, goats, reindeer, and red deer hinds. The double-line mane of the horses and the frontal perspective of the ibex would suggest an Upper Magdalenian chronology, which can be corroborated by radiocarbon dating of the archaeological remains.

Also in the same watershed, the partly destroyed cave of Armintxe in the town of Lekeitio was found thanks to the clearing of an infilled gallery by a team of speleologists from the ADES group. The main panel consists of around 20 engravings, among which two felines surrounded by various ibex, horses, and bison stand out (Figure 15). Alongside these animal figures is a series of P-type claviform signs with clear parallels

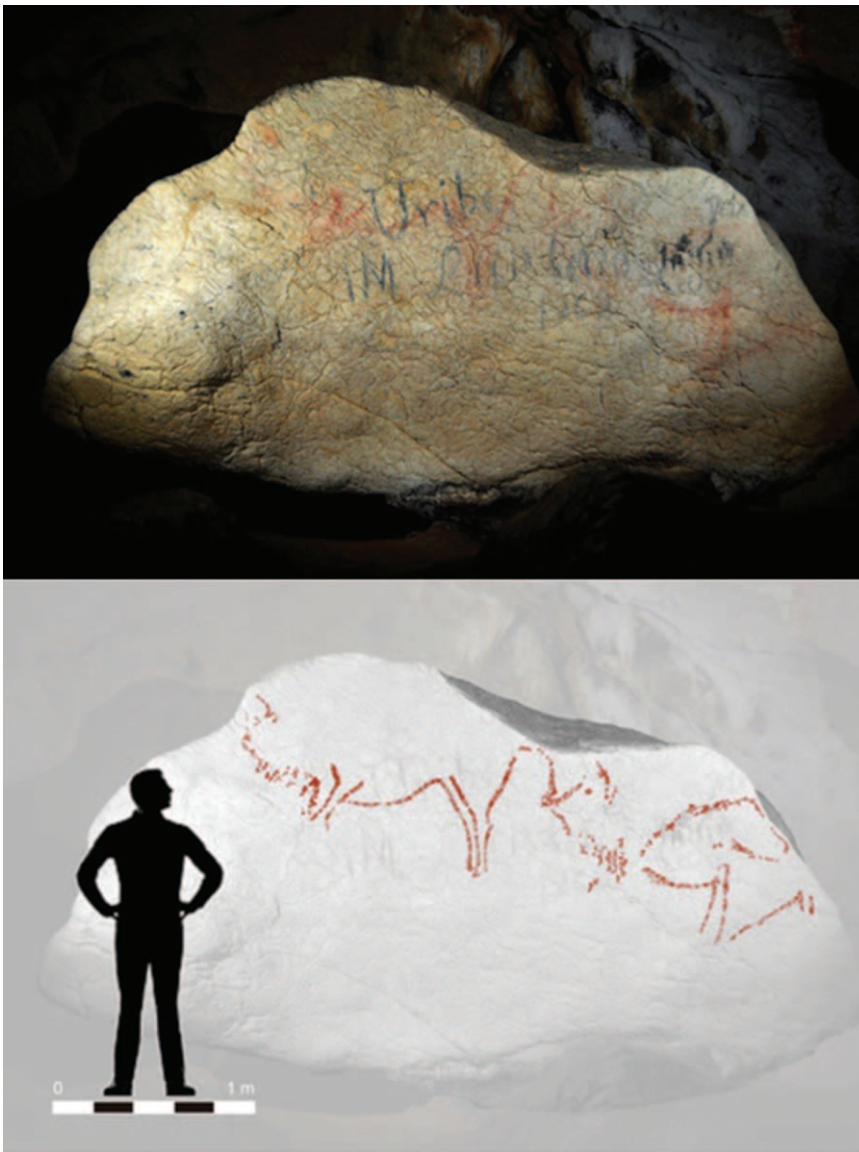


Figure 11. Large red bison found in Lumentxa cave covered with graffiti (after Garate, Rios-Garaizar, and Ruiz-Redondo 2013).

in the caves of Trois Frères and especially Tuc d'Audoubert (Ariège, France). The felines also exhibit parallels to Trois Frères. These similarities suggest a Middle Magdalenian chronology for this assemblage.

Lastly, although its state of preservation is extremely poor, some stylistic indicators in the assemblage of red paintings from the cave of Morgota point to a pre-Magdalenian

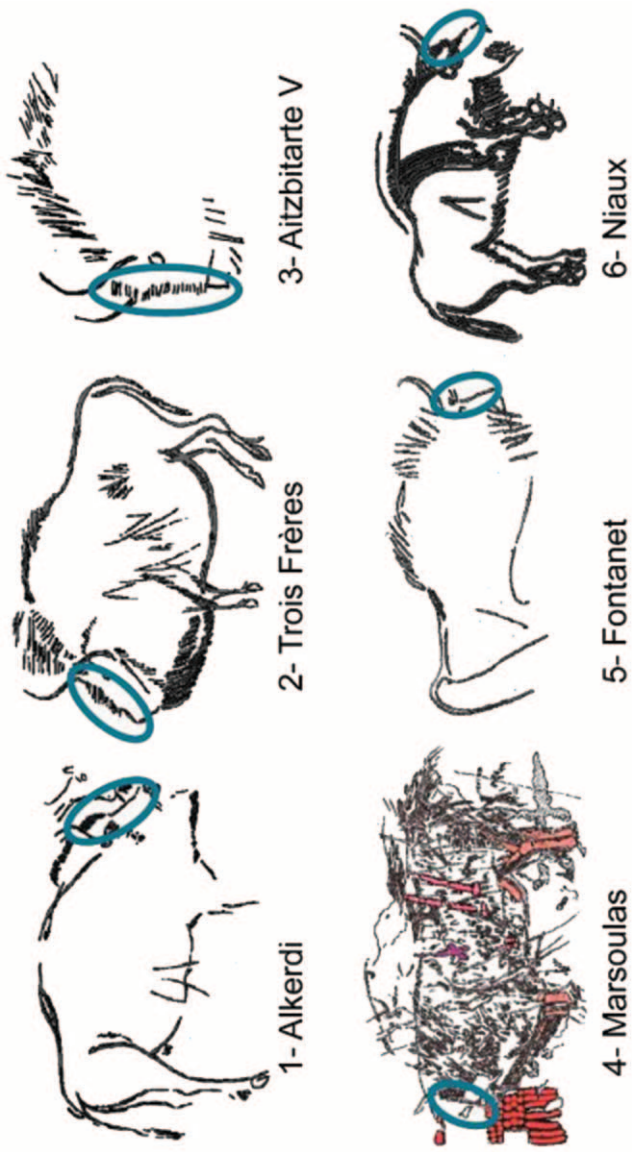


Figure 12. "Pyrenean style" Magdalenian engraved bisons, including those found in Alkerdi 1 and Aitzbitarte V (1 after Garate and Rivero 2015; 2 after Bégouën et al. 1958; 3, D. Garate; 4 after Fritz and Tosello 2004; 5 after Vialou 1986; 6 after Clottes 1995).



Figure 13. Magdalenian-style bison modeled in clay in Aitzbitarte IV (© D. Garate).

chronology (Garate et al. 2015b). The excavation of the immediate archaeological context, including the processing of ochre that took place at the foot of the panel, however, suggests a link with activities that may date to the Upper Magdalenian (López Quintana et al. 2015).



Figure 14. Engraved Magdalenian horses in Atxurra covered with graffiti (© D. Garate).



Figure 15. Engraved Magdalenian animals in Armintxe (© Diputación Foral de Bizkaia, used with permission)

Dating Period	Contextual	Radiocarbon	Stylistic	Imprecise
Aurignacian	Altxerri B		Aitzbitarte III	Abittaga
Gravettian	Askondo Ondaro	Alkerdi 2	Aitzbitarte IX Balzola Danbolinzulo Erberua (1st phase)	Aitzbitarte IV (1st phase?) Antoliña Atxuri I Praile Aitz
Solutrean			Astigarraga Erlaitz	
Early Magdalenian				
Middle Magdalenian	Etxeberri Isturitz		Aitzbitarte IV (2nd phase?) Aitzbitarte V	
Upper Magdalenian	Morgota		Alkerdi Altzerri A Arbil V Armintxe Astuigaña Atxurra Ekain Erberua (2nd phase) Goikolau Lumentxa Oxocelhaya Santimamiñe Sasiziloaga Sinhikole	

Figure 16. Timeline of the decorated caves in the Basque Country based on various dating methods (© D. Garate).

The new finds discussed here enable us to review regional influences during the Magdalenian. “Pyrenean” characteristics are very much present in such caves as Aitzbitarte V and Atxurra. In the case of Armintxe they include specific signs such as the “P” claviforms, and in Aitzbitarte IV the bison modeled in clay, both previously unattested in the Cantabrian region. These markings are also present at Erberua, in the same territory where the absence of “complex” signs had been traditionally asserted—

an idea disproven by the new discoveries. Contrary to the Cantabrian or even the Pyrenean situation, the assemblages dominated by horses (Ekain, Armintxe, Erberua, Oxocelhaya, Etxeberri) are still in the majority compared with the bison-dominated panels (Altzerri and Santimamiñe). In addition, the exaggerated hindquarters of the horses remains a strong convention in this area, especially at Ekain cave. Further studies will give us a deeper understanding of Magdalenian style and symbolism.

CONCLUSIONS: NOW WHAT?

During the past fifteen years, our knowledge of the earliest art of the Basque Country has changed substantially. The inception of specific projects aimed at pinpointing and studying this kind of archaeological evidence has led to a tripling of the number of known decorated caves in the Basque Country and, as a result, has led to the refinement and reevaluation of the approaches used to study the origin and development of Paleolithic artistic activity. The systematic survey work carried out by both archaeologists and speleologists has been a key part of this process.

Conclusions drawn from the record known by J. M. de Barandiarán and up to the end of the twentieth century have become totally obsolete. The “Basque void” in cave art in this geographically strategic area between the central-western Cantabrian, Pyrenean, and Aquitaine regions is no longer true. In sum, the data newly obtained from decorated caves in the Basque Country show an area rich in artistic production, with a very prolonged trajectory of development throughout the Upper Paleolithic (Figure 16). It can now be seen as having its own characteristics and evolution, which at times place it on the margins of the Cantabrian or Pyrenean art styles and, at others, fully integrated in the orbits of much more extensive artistic traditions.

The fast rate of discovery in the past few years—six decorated caves found in 2015 alone, and several more, including major sanctuaries in 2015, 2016, and 2017—and the training of speleologists now fully involved in this new research dynamic lead me to believe that more discoveries will follow in the years to come, adding to those currently underway that are briefly reviewed here. The “gap” is closed and the two “wings” of the Franco-Cantabrian Upper Paleolithic culture area are now firmly bound together by the record of both habitation and cave art sites in the Basque Country, although the nature and intensity of the human contacts across the western end of the Pyrenees certainly changed throughout the ca. 30,000 years of the Last Glacial.

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