

Ice Age Art German Aurignac

Homo Sapiens Arrival in Europe

Since long I had a special trip on the agenda, which became more and more overdue, because of its critical relevance in European Paleolithic history.

It was a trip to the Schwabian Alb in southwestern Germany to visit various pre-historic caves and museums in the area.

All these are situated in the arch Danube Valley west and east of the city of Ulm. And what a surprise was waiting for me.

French archaeologists were quick to name all Paleolithic cultures after French sites like Le Moustier, Aurignac, La Gravette, Solutré and La Madeleine.

Ach Valley view from Geissenklösterle



But *homo sapiens* arrived from Africa via the Near East in Europe. So he had only two ways to reach France, either via Italy or Germany. It took French archaeologists over 50 years to acknowledge, that the discoveries in Germany were so sensational and Paleolithic history had to be rewritten.

Firstly the German discoveries were much older. Secondly they included for the first time beautiful art objects like human and animal figures. And to top it all the world's first musical instruments various flutes were discovered.

Pre-History

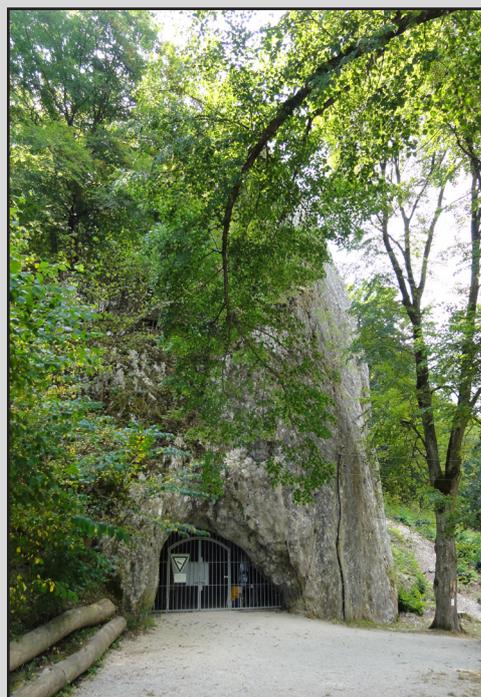
Let's take a step back and look at our pre-history. The first human presence in Germany is recorded from 600,000 BP (before present) at a site close to Heidelberg in Germany. This is why this human species was called *homo heidelbergensis*.

He was the creator of another archaeological world sensation in 2009, when in Schöningen in northern Germany 300,000 year old hunting spears were discovered – see my separate article on this website.

From 115,000 BP *homo neanderthalensis* a new human

species moved in, who left behind many Mid Paleolithic Mousterian stone tools. Much later from 42,000 BP the valley was inhabited by modern man *homo sapiens*.

Let me answer the obvious question straight away. No there isn't any archaeological prove, that both species met and lived here together at the same time. But scientists of the Max Planck Institute in Leipzig recently found out through a new advanced DNA analysis that this must have happened. So we carry today some 5% Neandertal genes in us.



Aurignacian Period

It really was the first rich and widespread culture in Europe, stretching from Spain to Southern England and as far to the Levant in the Middle East, as well as the Krim and Don Region in Russia. The so-called "full package" of various new cultural developments, which are typical for the Aurignacian Period, were found in abundance around Ulm.

This included the first fine art objects and musical instruments in pre-history all made from mammoth

ivory. What is surprising, this “full package” was not present in this sophisticated form at all other Aurignacian sites in Europe.

This leads to the assumption, that these new developments were actually created in the numerous caves in the Schwabian Alb area. How was this possible? Based on good living conditions in the Danube Valley including sufficient water, huge herds of animals and caves ideal for living, this “cultural explosion” could be explained.

With the latest research results, it is now certain, that all Aurignacian finds are of *homo sapiens* origin. They also started the first serial stone tool production, and also introduction of new use of bones, antlers and ivory as tools.

These amazing human and animal figures, plus musical instruments, such as flutes all made of ivory, were found in great numbers mainly at four cave sites: Hohlenstein complex with Stadel, Vogelherd, Geissenklösterle and Hohle Fels.

The first and the last pair of caves are situated very close to each other, but in between the pairs is a distance of about a 100 km. But the objects found are so similar, that a close social contact and interchange of ideas between the groups in the Ach and Lone Valley must have existed.

Intriguing Lion Man

Over 50 human and animal figures made of mammoth ivory have been excavated

so far in total. They are all dated between 45,000 - 35,000 BP. But one figure stands out by far – the lion man. This unique figure was found in the Stadel Cave, which is part of the Hohlenstein cave complex.

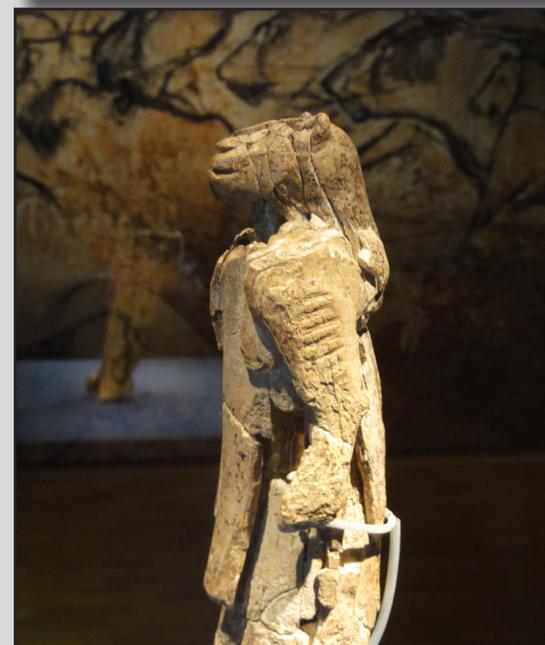
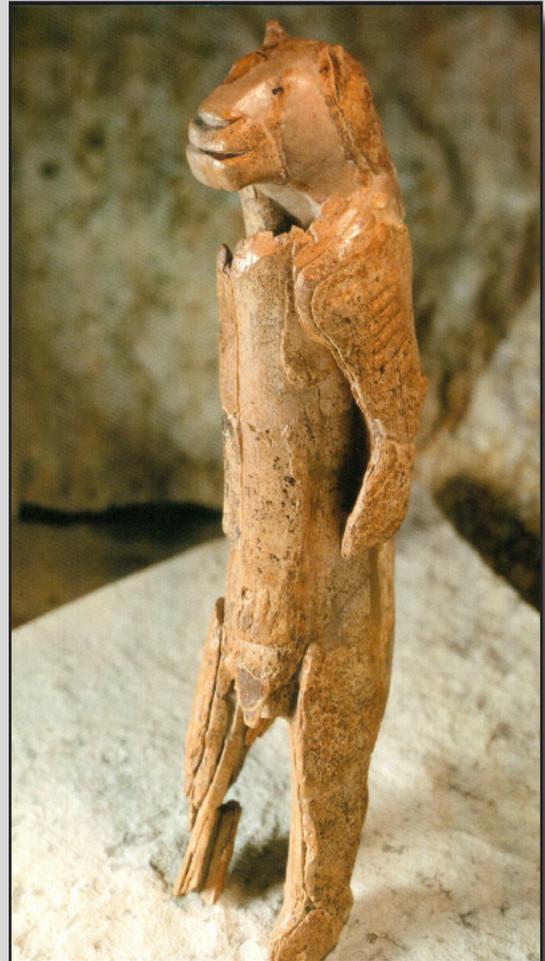
Alone its size with 31 cm is extraordinary large for this period. And the whole story around it sounds so intriguing to me really like a criminal investigation rather than a typical archaeological research.

About 200 ivory fragments were excavated in 1939 and stored away, as no one had any idea at the time, what they represented. A young archaeologist doing inventory work in the magazines of the Ulm Museum some 30 years later became aware of their significance.

He assembled the parts in 1970 and believed at first it was a bear man figure. But it is not really clear today, if it is a male or female figure. Lately the latter is believed to be more likely.

The result of this sensational assembly led to more excavations at the site. But only in 1989 and even later in 2009 further fragments were found and added. Now it became clear through an added head piece, that the head of this mixed being was that of a lion!

But this was not the end of this truly fascinating story. More fragments were found even recently during very detailed re-examination of the site including the waste dumps left by earlier excavation teams.





40,000 Years Later

Finally in 2013 the figure was taken totally apart and sophisticated computer scanning and virtual modelling was used.

This allowed archaeologists to correctly reassemble the figure around some still missing parts. The “new lion man” grew and now consists of over 600 assembled fragments.

It is the most famous masterpiece of a highly interesting and complex pre-historic puzzle. And it is the oldest and largest human and/or animal sculpture of the Aurignacian Period.

Its creator must have been an especially talented individual. Very skillful and well planned he crafted from the tusk of a young mammoth bull this extraordinary piece of pre-historic art.

Early Shamanic Cult

Seven carved horizontal lines of unknown meaning on its left arm complete this remarkable artistic creation. The interpretation of this mixed human animal being is still unclear to scientists.

Possibly the human-animal coupling or temporary human transformation into animal has its

origin in a shamanic cult.

Certainly it has a ritual and spiritual or totemic character. In recent years we learned, that our ancestors were much more intelligent and therefore sophisticated and skilled than we previously believed.

Extremely Skilled Creators

Tests with producing replicas have shown, that it took about 400 hours to create this incredible figure. So we can be certain, that our ancestors were skilled hunters and socially well organized, so that spare time allowed them to create these beautiful art objects.

The position of the figure to be carved out of the mammoth tooth had to be carefully planned and needed quite visionary skills.

But this is not all, three more lion man figures were found at two other caves, which proves established shamanic cult activities at that early time in pre-history.

Famous Venus

Another “First” was the thrilling discovery in 2008 of the famous venus figurine made out of mammoth ivory. Again it had to be assembled from nine fragments and measured only six centimeters. This small size was a normal dimension for Aurignacian figures.

Its unusual looking quite oversized form with huge breasts, wide hips and clearly defined vulva points into the direction of a fertility idol. The lack of a pregnant belly makes no difference. The tiny body was carved with lines and a small hole below the missing head shows, that

it was used as pendant.

This important venus figurine is dated to Early Aurignacian and about 40,000 years old. She is the oldest fully sculptured female figure. Other female figurines only appeared 10,000 years later during the Gravettian Period. Despite her small size she has an impressive aura and it is clear what her purpose was.

Astonishing Flutes

It is incredible that eight flutes have been found so far in the Ach as well as Lone Valley and they are all dated around 40,000 BP.

Similar to the lion man these flutes were also assembled years after finding their fragments. Some flutes were put together from up to 30 fragments others from less. A flute from the Hohle Fels Cave is the only one found in situ.

All other flutes were found during re-examination of waste dumps from earlier excavations. This was done after the Geissenklösterle Cave flute was successfully assembled in 1995. Finally this yielded an incredible number of seven more flutes.

The flute found in 2008 next to the famous “venus” figure was unique. Both items were





excavated close to the legendary lion man figure. This flute was made out of a hollow wing bone of a Griffin vulture. Having a length of 22 cm it had place for five playing holes.

Flutes made out of hollow swan wing bones could be produced within one hour. Due to the naturally narrow hollow bone, the sounds they produced were rather high.

Swan wing bone flutes were also limited in length and therefore had less playing holes. The length of found flutes ranged from ten to twenty centimeters.

But producing an ivory flute was very difficult and took very much longer. The blow pipe needed to be carved out. For that the ivory piece was split into two, carved out and glued together again with birch tree resin.

But they could be produced as

longer instruments with more holes. Ivory also produced a deeper and nicer tone. The three to five holes of all examples were carefully scraped out and not drilled, which eased playing allowing fingers to cover the holes fully.

Amazing Adorant

This seems to be the first human figure in history. The archaeologist who found it called it the “worshipper”, because of its raised arms. Measuring only four centimeters this extraordinary discovery is carved in low relief on an ivory platelet.

It was found in 1979 and was dated to 38,000 BP. In its back it is decorated with four vertical lines with 10 to 13 dots of unknown meaning. Possibly it was carried in leather pouch around the neck.

Finding The Cave

Doing a lot of research before the trip I was well prepared. So before visiting the museums I decided to see the caves and their environment first. I choose the one, which many years back I first have heard about, Geissenklösterle. It became for me synonymous with Ice Age Art.

It was difficult to find the cave,



there were no signs. But I was lucky, because I did zoom down to it on Google Earth before. After following the path in the forest up the slope, I first passed it.

But then recognized the specific rock formation with the natural arch on my way back. What an impressive setting it was. A horse shoe shaped recline in the rock face with the cave at its center. And I was totally alone, because these cave are seldom visited.

True or False?

Automatically I sat down on a boulder and closed my eyes. Immediately the pictures came up. I was watching a large group of pre-historic people around a fire place.

It was a peaceful and happy situation. Joyful laughs and very articulate communication in a soft sounding language I

did not understand were exchanged.

These people were busy with all the activities I have read about. Milling corn, cooking meat, stripping and preparing hides and producing stone tools with retouch technique.

And then there was the old man, who carefully carved a lion figure out of a cut piece of mammoth tusk. Children were quietly sitting around the men watching with great interest how they split the flint stones and worked on the mammoth ivory.

Everything was done very skillfully and so precise. It looked so easy, but nevertheless highly professional. They all women and men were true experts at what they were doing.

And then I heard the sound of a flute and some family members stood up and joined the dance around the fire.

Now I saw how beautifully their accurately stitched leather cloths were decorated with numerous ivory pearls and feathers. Men and women wear necklaces and pendants made out of animal



teeth and bone pieces.

Some shiny ivory pendants were small animal figurines, others hidden in a leather pouch around their neck. Or was it medicine they carried in that bag?

Hohle Fels Cave

Let's now look at these four incredible caves. The Hohle Fels is a very important cave and still yields today many new finds. The first excavations took place in 1830 and five more digging campaigns followed over time.

Since 1997 annual excavations are still ongoing today, which I witnessed during my visit. A 30 meter long entrance tunnel leads into a 500 m² large hall with a maximum heights of 30 meters.

Imagine this is as high as a

ten floor building. It is the largest cave in southwestern Germany. The two side arms are both 22 meters long.

Mid Paleolithic Mousterian stone tool produced by *homo neanderthalensis* were found. He used the cave on a regular basis, but only for short periods in winter.

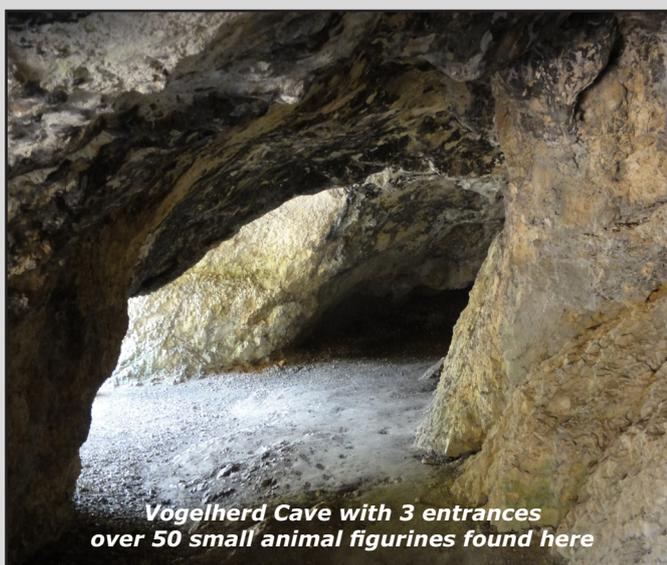
The most important finds are dated to the Aurignacian Period. But also finds from the later Gravettian and Magdalenean Period were excavated.

Geissenklösterle Cave

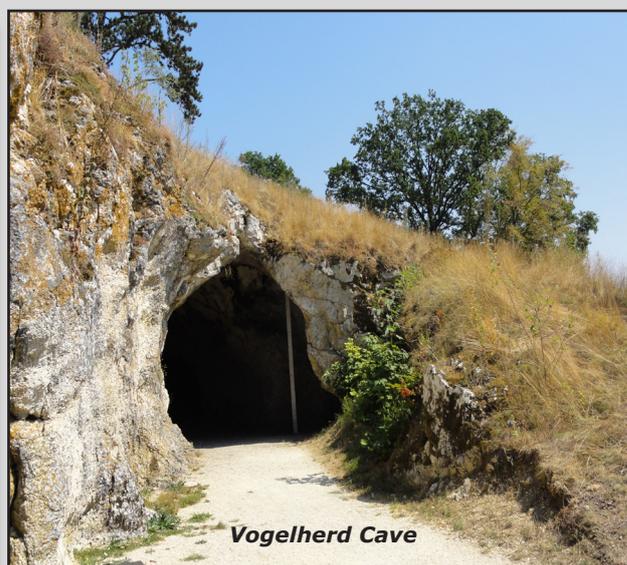
Is one of the very important caves and was discovered only in 1958. Situated on a slope 60 meters above the Ach Valley, the cave has excellent views, which was so important for hunters to spot early enough arriving herds in the valley.

Its setting in a horse shoe like rock formation with a natural arched gate must have given its pre-historic inhabitants a special feeling.

Because of the numerous



Vogelherd Cave with 3 entrances over 50 small animal figurines found here



Vogelherd Cave



items discovered here and the in detail researched stratigraphy, it serves as European reference cave with regard to dating other Aurignacian objects. First excavations started straight in 1958.

Eight horizons with settlement traces were identified from Mid Paleolithic Mousterian stone tools produced by *homo neanderthalensis* to more developed Magdalenean tools prepared by modern man.

Vogelherd Cave

This exceptional cave yielded the richest findings. Over 50 small sculptures were found in and around the cave, mostly made of ivory, rarely bone. The sensational finds here include eleven mammoth tusk ivory animal figurines dated around 35,000 BP.

The first use as human shelter is assumed to have taken place 115,000 BP and was mostly used during the hunting season in summer and autumn.

A forest elephant tooth from the Eem Period 130-115,000 BP is the best prove for that.

The cave was discovered in 1931 and is 170 m² large. Unique is its star shape form with three entrances on top of a small hill. During the

first excavation in 1931 precise scientific dating was not yet possible.

But the oldest lion figure was found here from a total of seven. Further regular excavations followed and stopped in 2012, when the new Archaeopark and Vogelherd museum was opened. Here the original

Hohlenstein Complex

Consisting of two big caves only 20 meters apart, the Stadel and Bear Cave, were discovered in 1834. Both Caves are about 60 meters deep. The first is more a tunneled cave, but the other is opening up into a large hall. And as its name indicates was used by bears as winter quarters.

Here over 100 bear skulls were found and there is also prove, that bears were killed by hunters during their hibernation period.

The caves have been aim of many excavation campaigns from 1861 and then ongoing from 2008 till today. Thirteen

horizons have been identified from 100,000 to 12,000 BP.

Fauna

Everything in pre-history evolved around hunting and regular food supplies. Approximately 30 large and medium sized wild animals roamed the area during the discussed time span.

The cave bear was most common animal in the area. But most hunted animals were wild horses and reindeer. The latter was an easy to hunt animal and a main menu item.

During Late Paleolithic Period mammoth was hunted for the additional useful material it offered, such as ivory for art objects and its bones were used as tent poles. Other animals hunted were lion, hyena, wooly rhino, wild ox, deer, ibex, saiga antelope and wild boar.

Sensational Discoveries

Besides the sensational items described above, I have listed below some of the other amazing finds to demonstrate you the immense importance of these pre-historic sites.

These artistically created objects are all from the Aurignacian Period and made out of mammoth ivory.





The figurines include: wild horse, various mammoth, bear and lion figures, bison, flying duck and fish. But some of the present animals at the time are missing from the pre-historic art work. Here I can list: hyena, wolves, wild ox, wild boar, deer or reindeer.

Art & Purpose

All the animals served a purpose in pre-historic beliefs and cults. The explanation could be simple. Either the missing animals were not found yet in any excavation, or ancient man did have a complete religious cosmos with various dieties being represented on earth by animals.

The carved animal figures are often covered with decorations such as short engraved lines and or multiple X signs again arranged in a line along the body as seen in the picture above. The meaning of these decorations and signs is not yet clear.

We already mentioned the venus as important fertility symbol. But what about the first phallus object in pre-history? Yes this symbol was also found here. And it is also part of the long list of extraordinary discoveries.

This phallus is made out of silt stone and

measuring a rather realistic 20 centimeters. Like all the other objects, it is a beautiful piece of pre-historic art. What totally surprised archaeologist is, that it was possibly used for retouch tool making purposes scientist believe.

Other Findings

Over 117,000 stone artefacts and tools were collected in the excavated caves and are divided into the following cultural periods: Aurignacian 61,000 pieces, Gravettian 30,000, Magdalenean 25,000 and Neolithic 1,200.

This is a clear indication of the high intensity of use of the caves during the different periods.

Various ivory pendants and animal teeth including horse, fox, red deer and wolves and holes and were used for jewelry purposes. As well as the

numerous ivory pearls with one or two holes.

The archaeological findings also indicate, that the three caves Hohle Fels, Geissenklösterle and Brillen, lying in a triangle in the Ach Valley just kilometers apart, were used by the same groups of hunter and gatherers.

Summery

All those who are interested in pre-history will certainly be rewarded, when visiting the Schwabian Alb. Different to France, Germany has not got any colorful cave paintings, but much more to offer with regards to the Aurignacian Culture.

I especially liked exploring the many caves. There are over 50 in the area. Visiting the bare caves is a perfect setting to better understand our ancestors and their way of living.

The number and closeness of caves created for these groups living here an incubator like innovative atmosphere. And possibly a competitive situation played a role as well.

It might have worked as a cultural cross fertilisation, when it came to the beauty and expressiveness of ivory art objects. Same might be true for the development of useful tools and using new materials like hard antlers.





Geissenklösterle Cave



Hohlenstein-Stadel Cave & 2 pictures below

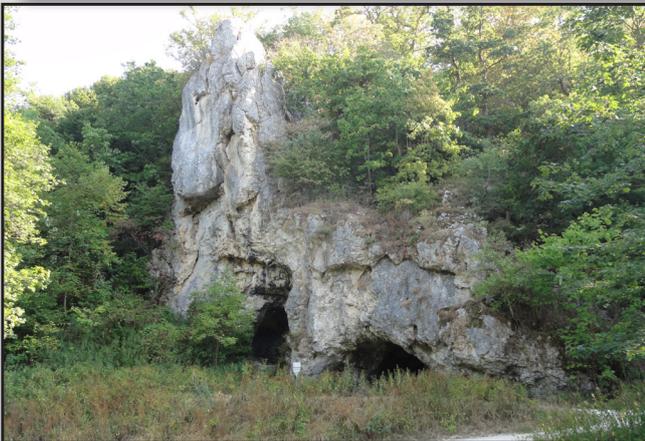
Travel Tips

If you have limited time, in two days you can see the most important four caves described in this article plus the Ulm and Blaubeuren museums.

Renting a bicycle is useful as there are well assigned routes to reach all caves. In the Lone Valley they are right next to the bicycle routes.

The Vogelherd Cave lies in the new Archaeopark and is a must see. The Hohle Fels is only open on Sunday or by appointment to be arranged via the Blaubeuren URMA Museum.

The Ulm Tourist Info Office has good brochures specifically on the caves in both Ach & Lone valleys.



Fohlenhaus Cave



Hohlenstein-Bear Cave

Sirgenstein Cave

