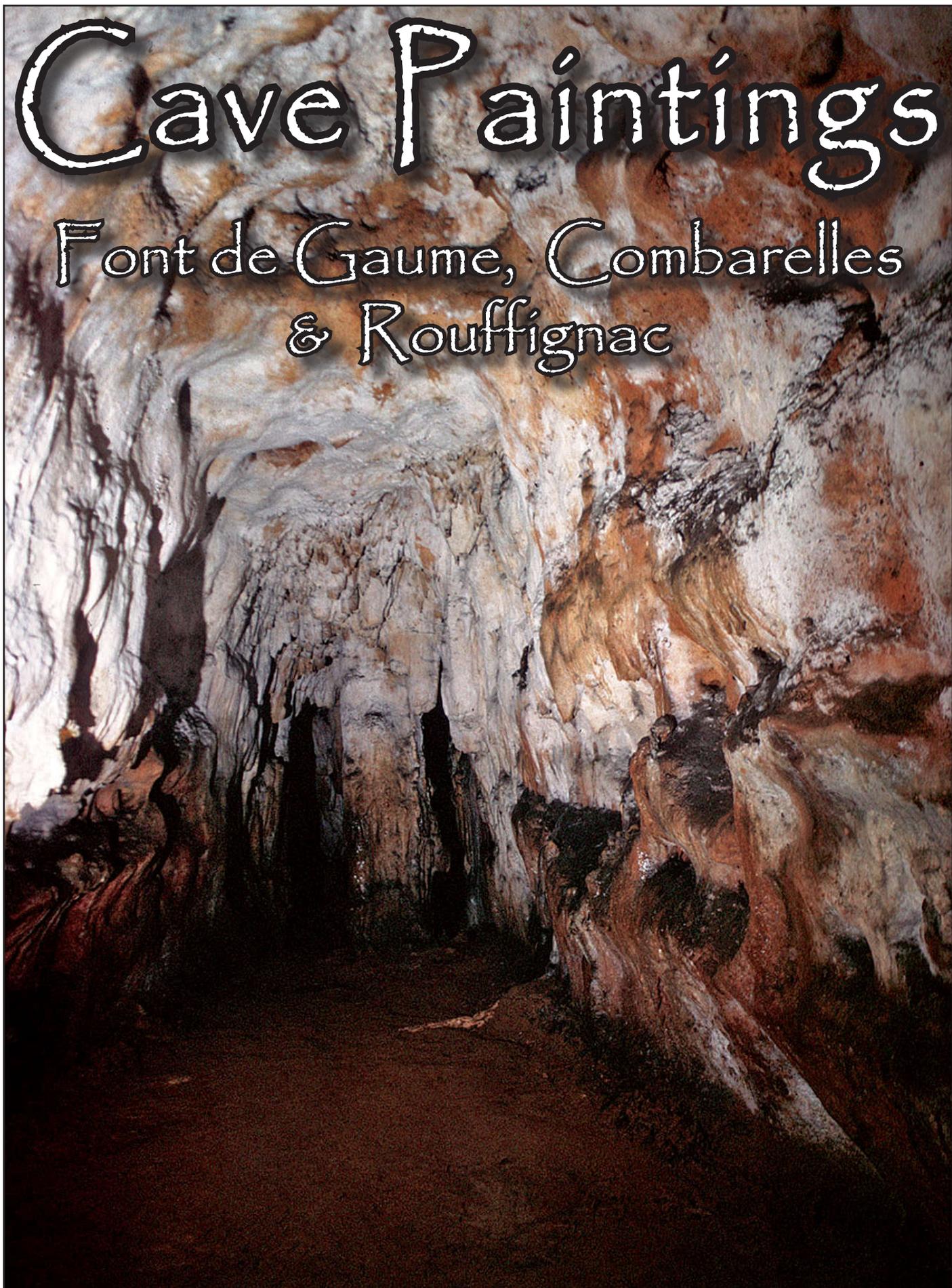


# Cave Paintings

Font de Gaume, Combarelles  
& Rouffignac





It is no surprise that the Dordogne in south-western France is one of the regions which hosts most of the caves where ancient men like homo neanderthalensis and homo sapiens lived. Two very important factors come here together, rock formations with plenty of natural caves suitable as cult places and camp sites plus rivers with ample water supply. Here even better as all caves are situated in the cliffs along various the rivers in the area. This was perfect as all animals came to their doorstep to drink and hunting prey was an easy target. And this stimulated our ancestors to decorate many caves with extraordinary images of the local fauna.

#### ***Numerous Caves***

Just to give you an overview the Dordogne counts over thirty painted and engraved caves plus many more undecorated caverns. In addition, our ancestors also camped below at least over forty large rock overhangs or so-called abri. These were perfect shelters against the elements. And in southern France homo sapiens started very early about 40,000 years ago to decorate cave walls with elaborate and amazingly realistic paintings of the animals they hunted. Much debate exists for what reason human depictions were created as well. Therefore, it is no surprise that alone in the Dordogne thirteen caves and abris were nominated UNESCO cultural world heritage sites.

#### ***Cave Paintings***

The famed Chauvet cave is for us the most incredible and naturalistic example of animal

images and artistically at the highest level of ancient cave paintings worldwide. It shows the complete fauna at that time in huge interactive compositions. Australian cave paintings are very diverse and unique and outstanding in a different way. So are many other sites worldwide. But Chauvet is one of the first and shows from the start of human cave paintings such a high level of artistic skill. Was it only one clan member with outstanding talent who did it? At Chauvet it looks like it as the most important charcoal panel creations fall into a short time frame.

#### ***Mythology & Rituals***

We know that all decorated caves were used by ancient man as sanctuaries reserved for rituals like initiations, shamanic cults and mythological rites, transmission ceremonies and search of contact to spirits and gods. These rituals possibly included shaman dances to reach the state of trance and go through the envisaged man-animal or living-dead ancestors and underworld transmission. This could explain the various man-animal images. As certain animals often represented spirits and gods for our ancestors.

#### ***Meaning & Interpretation***

Paleolithic cave art is only possible through strong beliefs, important rituals, deep seated shamanic cults and resilient tradition of passing knowledge down to the younger generations. The images show the spiritual closeness between animals and their creators. Scientists believe that our hunter-gatherer ancestors

in their spiritual world did not differentiate between man and animal nor the living and dead. Therefore, animal depictions express this spiritual closeness between man and beast here.

### **Cro-Magnon Culture**

Only in southern France homo sapiens started to paint very natural looking animals on cave walls. Excellent examples are the caves of Chauvet and Lascaux just to name some of the most important in southern France. But there are many more caves decorated by the so-called Cro-Magnon culture in this natural cave rich karst area. His motifs were animals, hand prints, as well as few male and female figures.

### **Purpose & Expression**

What meaning do the animal representations have and should tell us? What was the mystic message their creators wanted to preserve? We should have discovered enough examples of cave art to be able to interpret them. But all explanations are still assumptions with various experts having different opinions how to best answer these questions. For further information about the franco-cantabrian decorated caves please see the articles about Chauvet, Lascaux and Altamira on this website.

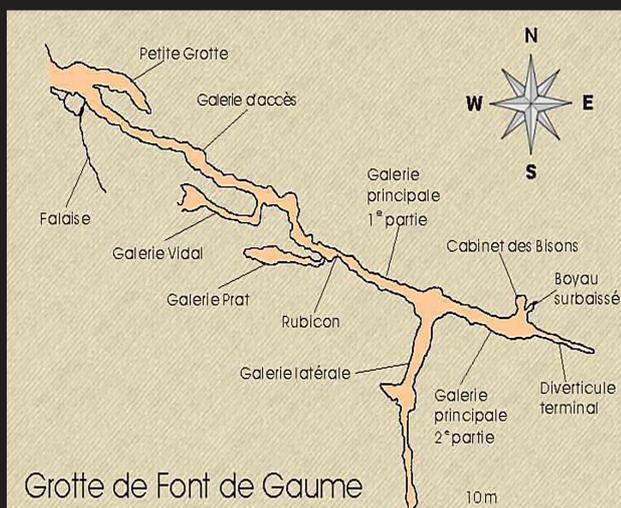
### **Franco-Cantabrian Rock Art**

This raises an important question. Why were only caves in southern France and northern Spain decorated? And why did our ancestors living in the many caves along the Swabian Alb did not leave any painted or engraved images on their cave walls. But instead, they created beautiful animal figurines out of

mammoth ivory. Different to southern France they used the caves as living quarters and not as cultural places which might explain the missing decorations.

### **Immigration Routes**

The theory indicates that homo sapiens left Africa between 300.000 to 200.000 years ago and moved via the Near East and Austria north of the Alps along the Danube, Rhine and Rhone to southern France. The slightly older animal figurines and flutes found on the Swabian Alb compared to the first cave paintings in France support this theory. Nevertheless, homo neanderthalensis was already roaming through Europe for 600.000 years. And to answer the most important question. Yes, he mixed with our ancestors. This is why we have about two percent neanderthal genes in our DNA still today.





### ***New Research***

But immigration routes of homo sapiens into Europe might have been different or at least using various routes for example via the Gibraltar strait to Spain. Newest research results indicate much earlier arrivals in Europe or even a parallel development in Africa and Europe. Much debate also was started by the recent indicative dating of three to seven million years by using newly developed technologies analyzing two different foot traces of upright walking humans in Greece.

### ***Dordogne Caves***

Now let us look at some other important painted and engraved caves along the Vezere valley area where most archaeological sites in the Dordogne are situated. Archaeologists found homo neanderthalensis traces starting with Acheulian stone tools right down to Neolithic artefacts. But the most active prehistoric periods in the human activities in the Dordogne caves were from the Aurignacian, Solutrean, Gravettian up to Magdalenian. We have selected three outstanding UNESCO caves Font de Gaume for its bison images, Combarelles for its wild horses and Rouffignac for its mammoth depictions.



### ***Font de Gaume Cave***

This extraordinary cave is situated only a kilometer outside of the town of Les Eyzies on the border of the Beune river about two hundred meters from its confluence into the Vezere. Font de Gaume is one of the few original caves left in France to be visited by the public. Therefore, the number of visitors is rather limited and online booking is essential. The cave was already discovered at an early stage in 1901 and was the first cave in the region where paintings were found and their prehistoric age and importance recognized.

### ***Cave History***

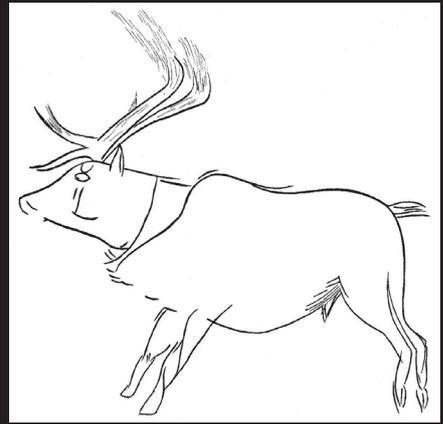
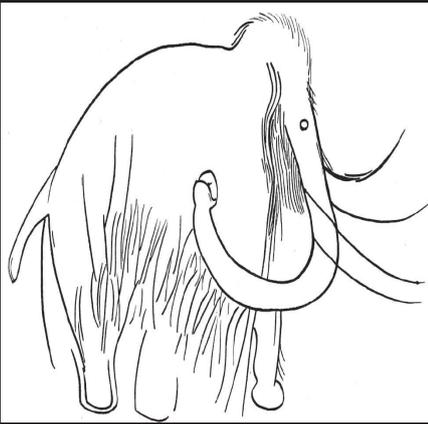
The cave has been known to local residents before its prehistoric importance was discovered over hundred years ago by a local teacher. Unfortunately, some graffiti on the walls are proof of this. The teacher only recognized its significance because he was part of a team investigating shortly before the discovery of the nearby Combarelles cave we are also describing further on in this article.

### ***First Excavations***

At first colored copies of the paintings were prepared by its discoverers. Only fifty years later in



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1966 the famous panel with five bison were cleaned of a covering calcite layer. First excavations took place in 1958, 1964 and again in 1967. Archaeologists established that the cave was first used as seasonal camp site about 25.000 years ago but never as permanent living quarters. Discoveries of various silex tools prove the recurrent use across different periods from Mousterian through to Magdalenian. But our ancestors only used the cave entrance area as camp site and not the inner part of the cave.

### *Two Periods*

But the paintings were created at a much later stage during the Magdalenian period 17.000 years ago. The first images were painted in the early Magdalenian contemporary to the Lascaux cave images further up the Vezere valley. Others during the later Magdalenian contemporary to the depictions of Combarelles, Rouffignac and Bernifal.

### *Painted Images*

In total two hundred thirty paintings and engravings were counted so far. Two hundred of which were painted either as polychrome or multi-chrome animal images. Experts tal-

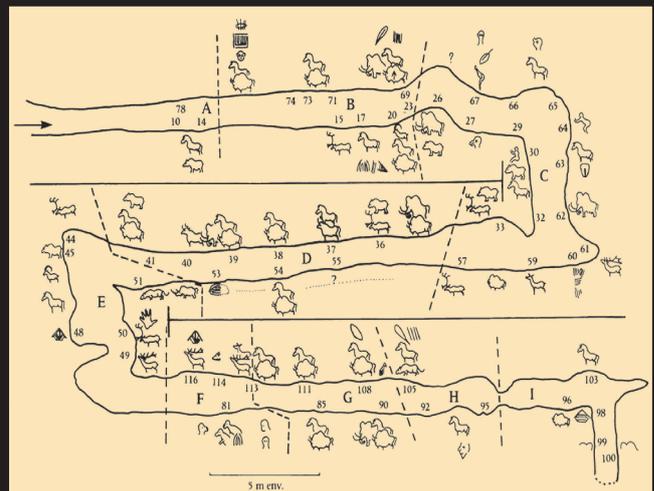
lied a total of eighty bison depictions, forty horses, over twenty mammoths, two wooly rhinos, eight aurochs, two lions, a bear and wolfe as well as close to twenty reindeer and some ibex. In addition, a human figure, various vulvas and hand negative imprints were discovered on the walls. This list includes most of the present fauna at the time in the Vezere valley. But not all were hunted. Reindeer was the favorite meat on the menu of our ancestors. It was also the easiest to hunt and seems to have existed in great herds.

### *Early Aurignacian*

Simple outline images of animals might have been created already during Aurignacian times experts believe. These include depictions of horse, ibex, bear, aurochs, reindeer, rhino, mammoth as well as such early engravings of lionesses and horses.

### *Special Sketches*

There is always much debate between experts of the purpose and meaning of special forms and drawings which increased towards Magdalenian times. About twenty so-called tectiform or schematic drawings with various parallel lines and dots belong to the repertoire of



images in this cave. Is the most obvious the right answer? Experts believe so. Most possibly these were representing huts or tents. Hunter gatherer clans had to move around with their targeted prey and regularly establish seasonal camping sites. So tents or huts were the quick solution against the elements and defense against wild animals at night.

#### *Cave Details*

Half way up the cliff lies an abri in which the entrance is found. A narrow hundred meters long passage lead into the cave which has various side passages as can be seen from the graph. The painted images begin after a tight spot called Rubicon in the second half of the main passage and follow on in two side passages. The lack of air circulation has preserved these images well. Which is not the case for those closer to the entrance. Only the polychrome images of Lascaux and Altamira are better preserved because in both cases a natural rockfall in antiquity covered up their entrances.

#### *Painting Technique*

The creators used red ochre and black manganese oxide colors which were pressed or stamped on via a medium or blown onto the rock surface. This was possibly done using hollow bird bones. Archaeologists found tools for this early airbrush technique. The contours of animals were first engraved onto the walls and then the whole body painted. Uneven surfaces were used to create the impression of dimension and movement. This was a common technique and used in many other caves as well.

#### *Design & Composition*

Animal images were often composed showing them as pairs and in groups or following each other. They were created by our ancestors as they saw them in reality. And again, they were always painted in the dark end section of the cave. We assume that the deep ends of caves were regarded by our ancestors as holy places closest to the spirits or gods.

#### *Combarelles Cave Ensemble*

The second UNESCO cave we are now looking at is Combarelles. It is situated about two kilometers further up the Beune river from Font de Gaume and still within the borders of the Les Eyzies community. After the en-



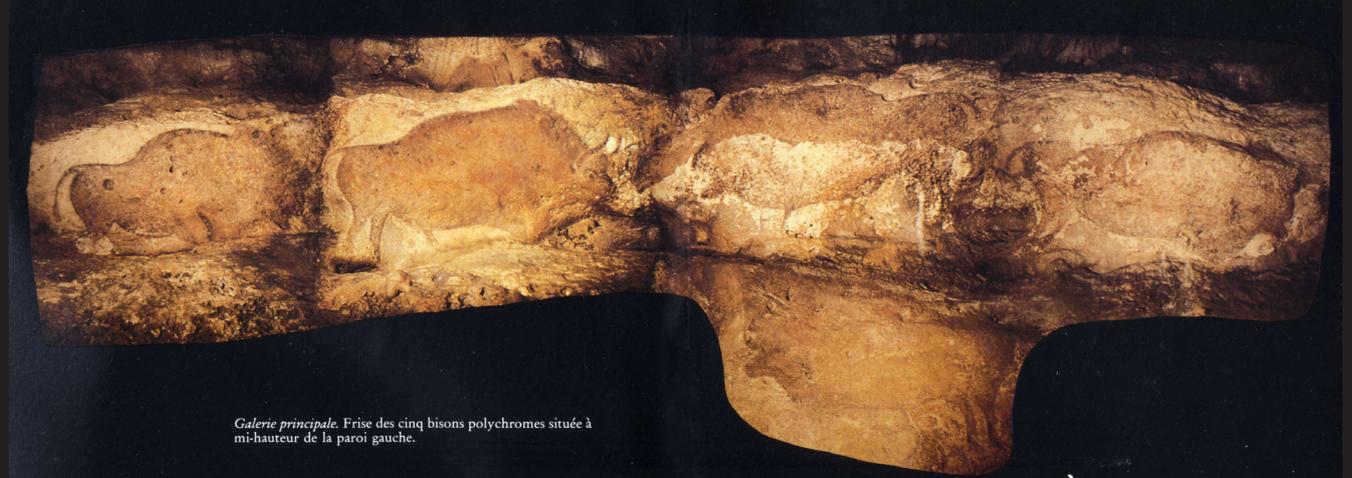
trance the cave separates into two passages which are called Combarelles I. and II. Only the first is open to visitors and those are limited to forty per day and are guided only in small groups of seven. Excavated tools indicate that the cave was inhabited by people of the Cro-Magnon culture who were widely spread in the Dordogne region at the time.

**Discovery & Excavations**

The Combarelles I. gallery was discovered rather early in 1891 with first excavations taking place. This gallery is about three hundred meters long and has a limited width. But first images were only recognized ten years later. The Combarelles II. passage was only found in 1934 and is a rather short side gallery. Further excavations were happening much later in 1968. A new research investigation of the paintings took place in 1978. In a new approach a third gallery has been identified in 2005 and called Combarelles III.

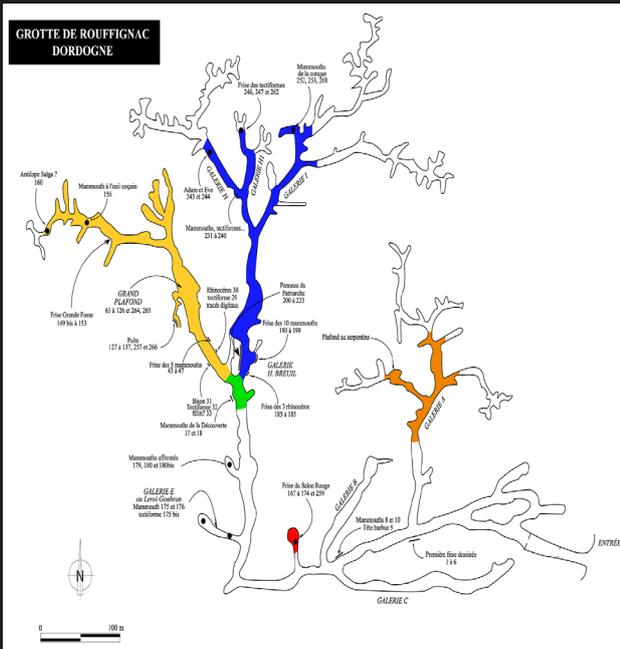
**Combarelles I.**

The cave was decorated by our ancestors mainly with engravings and a few black outline paintings. In the long Combarelles I. gallery images were placed only in the last hundred meters. Here eight hundred depictions of animals and symbols were engraved. These images include over hundred forty wild horses, many bison and aurochs as well as reindeer, ibex, bear, lion, wolf, mammoth and woolly rhino. Extraordinary are the high number of over fifty human depictions. The specific tectiform symbols again are possibly representing huts or tents which were used as seasonal



*Galerie principale. Frise des cinq bisons polychromes située à mi-hauteur de la paroi gauche.*





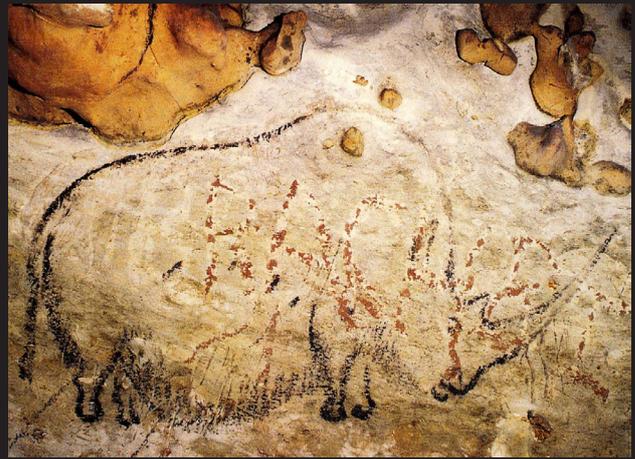
camp sites on longer hunting trips.

### *Combarelles II.*

This side passage is rather short and here experts found around thirty engravings. These include various bison, mammoth, horses and ibex, as well as saiga antelope, woolly rhino and a bird. All depictions were created during the Magdalenian period with dating results from 13.600 to 11.000 years ago.

### *Rouffignac Cave*

The third cave we want to introduce to you is situated about five kilometers south of the town of Rouffignac on the border of the La Binche river near the village of Fleurac. It is also known as Grotte de Miremont, Cro du Cluzeau and Cro de Granville. The caves of Rouffignac and Villars are the most extensive and deep cave systems in the region.



### *Early Mention*

What is surprising the Rouffignac cave was mentioned nearly 450 years ago in the *Cosmographie Universelle*. And again in 1715 by the Marquis de Miremont which gave the cave its first name as Grotte de Miremont.

### *Cave Details*

With a total length of over eight kilometers this cave stands out. The cave system has three major branches and many side galleries plus ten natural shafts leading to lower levels. The lowest level even has a minor waterflow. But the rest of the cave is today dry.

### *Train Tour*

Rouffignac was opened to the public at an early stage in 1958. Today visitors are taken in total darkness on a four kilometers train drive. Lights are only switched on when the train stops to see the astonishing ancient rock art. This helps to reduce fungus build-up on the surfaces.

### *Mainly Engravings*

The different galleries were decorated with over two hundred fifty engravings and few paintings with black manganese oxide contour drawings. Here no polychrome paintings were created like at the nearby cave of Lascaux.

### *Animal Images*

Rouffignac is also called the cave of the hundred mammoths because more than hundred fifty engravings of mammoth were counted so far here. This represents seventy percent of the cave images and thirty percent of all mammoth depictions in three hundred fifty decorated caves all over Europe. Experts were also surprised to find here a relative high number of woolly rhino engravings because in other caves they are rather rare. This raised the question, were they really hunted in great numbers or just created for spiritual purposes. The latter is our suggestion looking at other sites. If you want to carve animal figurines out of mammoth ivory like on the Swabian Alb than you have to hunt them. But no mammoth nor woolly rhino bones were discovered here.

### *Image Repertoire*

In the Rouffignac cave are also found about thirty bison, sixteen horses, a dozen ibex and as many woolly rhinos plus a single saiga



antelope and cave bear. This is interesting as bears hibernated in winter times here. Their sleeping places and scratch marks on the walls are proof of that. When waking up in spring cave bears used to sharpened their claws on cave walls.

### *Other Images*

Four human depictions were identified plus nearly twenty tectiform images which are assumed to show the already mentioned huts or tents pictures. The purpose and meaning of six serpentine forms have not yet been established. Rouffignac shows another speciality. Over sixty animal images were created on its ceilings at locations close to shafts leading to lower levels. This is another



unique feature and leaves experts to discuss the purpose of this positioning. Was this done for spirits moving up from the underworld through these shafts?

### *Finger Drawings*

These we see in various caves where the walls were covered with soft calcite. These soft layers could easily be smeared with fingers. In the famous Chauvet cave for example a beautiful owl was created in such a way. But in Rouffignac the rock art is much younger and created during Magdalenian times about 14.000 years ago and therefore 20.000 years later. The finger drawings here are mostly parallel lines and cover a huge surface on walls as well as ceilings of a total of five hundred square meters. Now comes the surprise. In a new research project experts established that these finger lines are those of young children. What does this tell us? Is it true that caves were also used for initiation purposes? Caves were cult places, so this is a valid possibility.

### *Human Presence*

Inside the cave only single stone tools were found. The fire places, stone tools and animal bones found in the entrance area were of neolithic origin dated about 9.000 years ago much later than the images inside.

### *Summery*

All three caves are definitely worth a visit but can not be visited within a day possibly two. If you get the online bookings for at least two of them. Rouffignac is famous for its mammoth engravings, Combarelles for its numerous and varied horse images and Font de Gaume for its naturalistic bison depictions. Each site is different and all three give you a perfect impression on the artistic skills and talent our ancestors already possessed at such an early stage.

### *Picture Credits*

We thank all institutions, institutes, museums and photo graphers for making available some of their pictures and graphics.

