

Cave Paintings

Cullalvera & Covalanas

El Pendo





We have already reported of our visit to the four impressive original caves of Monte Castillo in Cantabria covered by astonishing palaeolithic rock art. They are El Castillo, Las Monadas, El Pasiega and Las Chimineas. Now we want to describe three more prehistoric picture caves in the same province on the northern Atlantic Coast of Spain.

Covalanas, Cullalvera & El Pendo

Covalanas and Cullalvera are also original caves which can be visited in limited numbers and need prior reservation. These two are situated near the town of Ramales de la Victoria about twenty-five kilometres from the coast. The third cave is El Pendo which lies further west and is one of the most important sites of discoveries of engraved palaeolithic artefacts made of bone.

Original caves

Normally caves with prehistoric rock paintings are prone to fungus growth on walls which destroys this important cultural heritage. Therefore, many copies have been erected such as Lascaux, Chauvet, Henry Cosquer, Altamira, Ekainberri and others. Original caves can only be visited when they are large enough and visiting numbers and time restricted.

Cullalvera Cave

It is only a short walk from Ramales to this cave which unfortunately only offers a few stone age paintings. But with over twelve kilometres length it is one of the longest caves in Cantabria. Today one can only visit about one kilometre and see the amazing paintings of various animals which our ancestors

left here. The entrance is rather huge with a height of thirty and width of fifteen meters and was used during the Spanish civil war as hiding place for people and vehicles.

Occasional cave river flow

It is a straight path leading into the cave without bends but with small and short side paths and chambers. Some are covered with cave paintings. Further inside the cave gets narrower. Like all caves in Cantabria, it is a stalactite cave with various formations including stalagmites, stalactites, columns and cascades of various forms. Looking on the ground we recognize the river bed which fills up during heavy rainfalls. Unfortunately, it has certainly carried away palaeolithic artefacts and tools left behind by our ancestors.

Ancient settlement traces

Despite this regular river flow archaeologists could establish that the cave was used as camp site about 13,000 years ago during the Magdalenian period. Possibly they used it even thousands of years before but unfortunately those traces might have been washed away.

Various painted motives

The first paintings are simple red dots and so-called claviform symbols. These belongs at the time to the sign tradition of our ancestors in the caves of northern Spain and southern France during the Magdalenian. Interestingly, bones with the same engraved symbols have been found. After one kilometre into the cave, we recognize three char-

coal painted wild horse depictions which are similar to those found in the Pyrenean caves.

Our ancestors were true artists

We have seen it various times that our ancestors were able to perfectly adopt their masterpieces to the unevenness, cracks and small boulders of the rock walls to create certain dynamics and expression to the animal bodies. Some lines were even painted as line of dots. If they used their finger tips or a vegetal stamp instrument we do not know.

Typical painting technique

This painting technique is typical for our ancestors which were active hunting and gatherer nomads roaming the northern Spain valleys. Such paintings with lines of points we also find in the caves of La Haza, Arco B, Pondra, El Pendo, El Castillo, La Pasiega, and El Salibre. The cave entrances served as secure camp site. The cave interior was not used for settlement but primarily as ritual space.

Experts assume that the animal depictions here were created all about 22,000 years ago during the Solutrean period. Some archaeologists see an even later age of about 30,000 years as possible. This would fall in the Aurignacian palaeolithic period.

Covalanas Cave

It is situated in the same Rio Calera valley at the foot of Monte Pando only two kilometres away from Cullalvera. This cave also is called by locals Las Herramientas or cave of the tools. Straight at the entrance the cave is divided into two passages.

Cave with two passages

The first is only eighty meters long and has beautiful stalagmites and stalactites formations but no prehistoric paintings at all. It is called music gallery because it is still used for concerts.

Gallery with paintings

The walls of the second passage have been covered by our ancestors with ancient rock art because there are no stalagmite formations here. The passage is over hundred meters deep. The cave has been discovered 1903 and no traces of a camp site at the entrance area were found.





Camp site El Miron

This well-known cave is situated a bit further down on the slope and was used as camp site. The settlements traces are rather old about 45,000 years ago. El Miron has been used by the first homo sapiens clans arriving in northern Spain. This cave was the settlement site and Cullalvera their ritual space.

Animal motives

The red coloured paintings in this cave include ten deer and roe depictions as well as two wild horses one aurochs and a rare zoomorphic animal man mixed creature. Figures of human beings are non-existent in northern Spanish caves.

Symbolic motives

Symbols are part of the common repertoire in the caves here including dots, lines, lines of dots and geometric designs. Interesting are the violet motives which are the oldest of all. A good example are the famous violet horses of the Tito Bustillo cave we have reported on as well.

Further motives

In the first part of the cave, we see numerous red points mostly created in long lines along the walls or in groups. Thereafter the cave becomes narrower and we recognize two deer painted in reddish. It is surprising that in northern Spain our ancestors first used natural red ochre mixed paint and later on black charcoal to create their beautiful rock art pictures.

Chauvet comparison

In one of the oldest painted caves in southern



France it was the other way round. The very detailed and stunningly naturalistic charcoal depictions here have an age of 40,000 years and belong to the earliest rock art works of our ancestors having just arrived in Europe.

El Pendo Cave

This cave is situated near the village of Escobedo de Camargo about fifty kilometres west of the caves of Ramales. It is a very hilly countryside and about ten kilometres away from the coast. The cave entrance is rather large and spans over forty meters with a height of twenty. A rock fall about 10,000 years ago closed off most of the entrance. Archaeologists could detect settlement traces of neandertals as well as homo sapiens.

Large hall

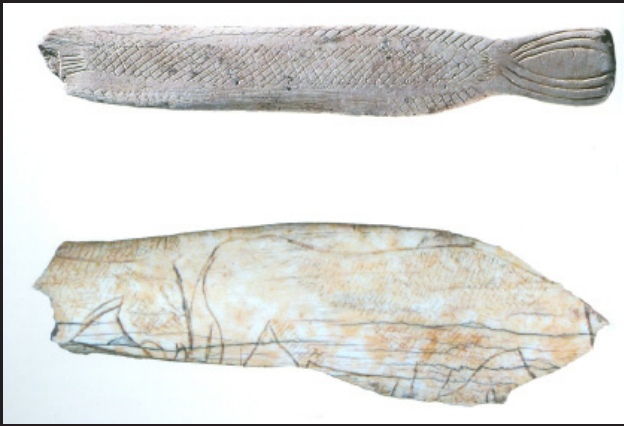
The first hall is about six hundred square meters large. The first rock art was created about eighty meters from the entrance. Thereafter the cave gets narrower. The prehistoric paintings were discovered 1878 but the cave was already known to the locals in the area.

First excavations

First excavations took place 1910 with many important discoveries being made. Numerous beautifully engraved bone and horn tools surprised archaeologists. Further excavations followed after 1950. But the large panel inside with plenty red paintings were only discovered 1997. Why they have not been discovered earlier we do not know.

Camp of Neandertals

The excavators have so far discovered 33 dif-



ferent settlement horizons with the oldest going back 84,000 years which confirms the presence of Neandertals. They hunted bison, red deer and wild horses. Thereafter the cave has been in disuse for a long time. Only 40,000 to 12,000 years ago it was used again by homo sapiens.

Gene interchange

Neandertals died out in Europe about 30,000 years ago. This means that both species lived in co-existence for over 20,000 years. That they interchanged genes we know because in Europe today we all carry about two percent Neandertals genes in us and in Asia even four percent.

Important discoveries

El Pendo is the most important site in the region for engraved artefacts also called mobile art. Excavators found over 250 decorated bone and horn tools for various tasks. The beautiful engravings show horses, deer, ibex and rare snakes and fish as well as many symbols. The latter we also often see painted on the cave walls.



Holed batons

Here eleven engraved so-called baton sticks were found which all had a large drilled hole. For what purpose they were used we do not know. But various experts have their theories.

Important meeting place

Archaeologists assume that El Pendo was an important meeting place for clans in the wider area. Because many tools they must have brought with them as research results showed. It was not uncommon that our ancestors moved over long distances to meet other clans for special rituals. They were anyway very mobile hunters following their prey.

Prevention of inbreeding

Some experts call them smilingly the marriage market meetings. As human population was still very small at the time this might be possible and certainly necessary. We know from DNA analysis that at the same time only 4,000 Neandertals lived in Europe. For our ancestors 40,000 years ago, this number was possibly ten times higher as they lived in larger families. But it grew rapidly.



Great panel

The mention large panel was twenty-five meters long and was created after a rock fall left an even wall surface. But how did they paint it seven meters above ground? Have they used first ladders or archaic scaffoldings? Or was it a wooden pole with cut outs on both sides as we know it from tribes in Africa, South America and Oceania.

Many animal motives

The main composition of motives is nine meter wide and comprises twenty animal depictions such as red deer, ibex, wild horses and two birds which are rare motives in the caves here. Archaeologists assume their age to be about 22,000 years falling in the Solutrean period.

Already existing creativity

Our ancestors proved with their paintings a high level of creativity by integrating uneven rock surfaces in their art work. With this they created certain effects such as dynamic movement and perspective. Some bodies were only painted in contour lines other filled with colour sometimes with differences in shade from head to lower body possibly indicating checkered horses.

Summary

If you have never visited an original cave with palaeolithic paintings and engravings before than the copy caves of Lascaux, Chauvet, Henri Cosquer in France and Altamira and Ekainberri in Spain are really impressive and seem real. Everything including the paintings are so well done that you forget it is not

the real thing.

When we visited our first original cave, we asked the guide to switch off all lights which fortunately he could and did. We heard the cave come alive and had a perfect imagination what sensation it must have been for our ancestors when they entered the cave and painted from memory animals on the walls in poor and flickering light. But which precise meaning and role these painted animals played to them we do not know. This we can only assume with much fantasy.

It is really a totally different experience visiting an original cave. We were surprised by the great similarities between animal motives in the caves of northern Spain and southern France. We know our hunting ancestors followed their prey during the seasons over large distances. But was it possible that already such a large common cultural space did exist at those early stages 50,000 to 30,000 years ago?

Many facts point into this direction. And all new research results show that our ancestors were far more intelligent and further developed than we assumed so far. Unfortunately, they did not yet have any script to share their thoughts and believes with us. Or would they despair looking upon us that we are so incompetent not to understand their clear messages and picture script?

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