

# Grail of Horses

## Ekain Cave







The “Holy Grail of the Horses”, as this Palaeolithic cave is called, unfortunately cannot be visited to protect its wonderful rock paintings. Instead, the Regional Government of the Autonomous Basque Region has built a museum with a replica of the cave only six hundred meters away near the town of Zestoa.

#### *Location of Ekain Cave*

This site is located forty kilometres from San Sebastian and approximately ten kilometres from the coast at that time. It’s important to note that the sea level was about a hundred metres lower back then due to water being bound in the northern ice caps.

#### *Basque Geography*

Although the cave is only ninety metres above sea level, it is situated in a very hilly landscape. The surrounding mountains reach a height of up to eight hundred metres and many rivers and streams run through the valleys in between. These rivers running towards the sea were ideal travel routes for our ancestors. The cave is located precisely at the confluence of two mountain streams, as water sources were crucial for animals and man. They were an ideal hunting ground.

#### *Late Discovery*

The cave was discovered in 1969, relatively late compared to numerous other Stone Age painted caves in the region, some of which were discovered around the turn of the century. Even today, new, sometimes buried entrances to caves with numerous rock paintings are occasionally found in this area.

#### *Original Cave*

The entrance to the original cave was only just over a meter high and arched. Remarkably, the initial paintings were right behind the entrance. In most of the other caves such paintings are found in the completely dark rear part. This fact suggests that the cave, with its paintings, served as a ritual site for our ancestors.

Why is this different here? Could it be because it was a bear cave? It’s also interesting that the paintings weren’t created during times when the cave entrance served our ancestors as a hunting or winter camp site.

#### *UNESCO World Heritage*

In 2008 Ekain, along with other caves in the region, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Why was it named the “Holy Grail of Horses”? The magnificent horse depictions dominate in beauty and number among the Palaeolithic rock art in Ekain. However, it is likely that the special rock in the middle of the cave, resembling a horse sculpture, prompted our ancestors to create a ritual site here.

#### *Numerous Animal Motifs*

The motifs in the cave are surprisingly clear. There are distinct outlines and painted depictions of wild horses, bison, aurochs, ibex or wild goats, red deer, bears and a clearly recognizable salmon. All these rock paintings and engravings belong to the Magdalenian period lasting from 18,000 to 12,000 years ago.



### *Large Panel of Horses*

The cave features over seventy representations, with over sixty painted and the rest engraved. Compositions with more than five figures were observed on three rock walls. The largest composition is the Panel of Horses, with eighteen motifs, including eleven closely grouped horses. These depictions are painted in red, black, or both colours used for the same motif.

### *Other Animal Motifs*

Another panel is fifteen metres long and two metres high, displaying two red deer, four goats, and the previously mentioned rare fifty-centimetre-long salmon. All these depictions are engraved. It's noteworthy that there is no overlapping of motifs in this cave, a characteristic absent in many other caves in the region.

### *Motif Repertoire*

Sixty percent of all motifs in this cave are wild horses, twenty percent are bison, ten percent are wild goats and five percent are red deer. Additionally, there is a depiction of a bear with its cub and a woolly rhinoceros. Interestingly, what's missing are aurochs, reindeer, chamois and roe deer, which regularly appear in other rock art caves in northern Spain.

### *Prey vs Motif Animals*

The significant difference between the animals painted in the ritual cave and the animals hunted is intriguing. The prey animals consisted of seventy percent wild goats and five percent each of red deer, roe deer, chamois, and reindeer.

The wild horse's status as a totem animal in northern Spain might explain this. Given their rather social interactive behaviour and male fighting for the leader of the pack position in the group differentiated them very much from other leisurely grazing herd animals.

### *Colour Production*

The colours for Palaeolithic rock paintings depended on locally available minerals. For black, charcoal from various trees and milled magnesium powder were commonly used. In Ekain, red colour was derived not from brown to red ochre but from iron ox-







ide limonite minerals. Unfortunately, we do not know the binding agents used by our ancestors, if any.

#### *First Excavations*

Excavations began immediately after the cave's discovery and lasted for six seasons. In 2008, excavations were again carried out. So far, twelve settlement horizons with various, sometimes decorated bones and stone artifacts have been discovered in the entrance area.

#### *Intermittent Use*

The cave was used sporadically as a camp site, with usage periods identified around 42,000, 33,000, and 24,000 years ago. From 18,000 to 11,000 years ago, the cave was more regularly used by Magdalenian hunter-gatherer clans. The last use was as a burial site for the first farming communities that migrated from Anatolia over 5,000 years ago, evidenced by the discovery of early ceramics.

#### *Bear Cave*

The significant temporal gaps in human use may be attributed to the fact that bears also used the cave in winter for hibernation. The discovery of a curled up bear skeleton, likely to have died during hibernation, attests to this. Another testament is the rock painting of a bear with its cub.

#### *Interesting Discoveries*

Excavations revealed many fascinating discoveries, including animal bones from red deer, chamois, ibex and wild boar, all typical prey animals for our ancestors at that time. In



addition to decorated bone tools, tools and blades made of rock crystal were found. Since bird depictions are rare in rock art caves in northern Spain, a small bird motif engraved on an aurochs or bison bone is surprising.

#### *Were Hunters also Fishermen?*

The discovered harpoon tips indicate active fishing in rivers and the sea, as evidenced by remains of marine and shellfish. Birds were likely also hunted, as indicated by corresponding bone finds.

#### *Mobile Art Objects*

The decorated bone tools are referred to as mobile art objects, featuring engravings of horse, ibex, deer, and birds. They were discovered in many caves in northern Spain.

#### *Ekainberri Copy Cave*

In Basque language, the replica built in 2008 is called "Ekainberri" which means New Ekain. This is part of the new museum. Here a demonstration was provided on how our ancestors made fire and left their handprints on cave walls using blown ochre paint.

#### *First Spray Painting*

20,000 years ago, they had already invented spray painting using two hollow bird bones. We were surprised at how simple it was and equally amazed by the straightforward yet highly effective experiment with the short spear thrower, which could lethally hit fleeing animals like wild horses over long distances.

#### *Other Motif Caves*

In close proximity and within a few kilometres





of Ekain, there are numerous other rock art caves. Altxerri, also a UNESCO cave, is only ten kilometres away.

Situated closer by are Urtiaga, Ermitia, Aitzbeltz, Agarre, Erralla, Astigarraga, Irikaitz, Amalda, Erlaitz, and Danbolinzulo, most bearing distinct Basque names. The language is widely spoken in daily life here. Even tours are offered in Basque, and most museum designations are in both Basque and Spanish with lesser English comments.

#### *Translation Note*

*The translation from the german original text has been done with the help of OpenAI.*

#### *Picture Credits*

*We thank the museum for allowing us to photograph the rock art paintings and participating ourselves in the use of throwing spears, spray painting and the various arts of palaeolithic fire making.*

