

# Tito Bustillo & El Píndal Caves



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This particular cave is located today at a coastal lagoon on the outskirts of the coastal town of Ribadesella in the Asturias region. During the Stone Age, the sea level was about a hundred metres lower. Therefore, it can be assumed that the cave was farther from the coast but still near a river.

Palaeolithic life mainly took place near waterways, as riverbanks provided good hunting grounds. Humans and animals regularly encountered each other by the water.

#### *New Entrance*

The old cave entrance used by our ancestors was higher up in the Ardines hill range. This entrance was a vertical shaft and difficult to access. In 1970, a new tunnel entrance at river level was created for further exploration and visitor access.

To prevent the airflow generated by this tunnel from damaging the paintings over time, two airlock doors were installed. The old entrance from the top was located in the middle of the cave, is now closed, as it was too difficult to enter.

#### *Caves in Asturias*

Tito Bustillo is the most important Palaeolithic painted cave in Asturias, named after its late discoverer. Initially, it was also called Pozu'l Ramu, Cueva del Lloreu and Cueva de la Cerezal. Discovered in 1968, it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2008.

Asturias has four other significant caves, including El Pindal, which we report on at the

end, La Pena de Candamo, Llonin and Cova-ciella. Additionally, there are others like La Loja, El Bosque, Coimbre, Herrerias, Mazaculos and La Lluera.

#### *Other Caves Nearby*

The northern Spanish karst region has many caves, not all of which were used or useful as shelters or ritual places for our ancestors. Often, in a good hunting area, several caves close to each other served as camping spots.

These could have been used simultaneously or at different times by multiple clans. Nearby caves to Tito Bustillo include La Cueva-na, El Tenis, La Lloseta, Les Pedroses and San Antonio. There is even a connection to a neighbouring cave.

#### *Two Cave Theory*

When we visited the cave, we didn't notice, but archaeologists believe, based on recent studies, that the present cave in the Stone Age consisted of two separate caves with different entrances. Archaeologists assume that the Great Hall and Cueva-na were initially separate caves. There is even a third entrance to the neighbouring La Lloseta cave.

#### *Later Connection*

At some point in the past, there must have been a natural collapse of a wall separating both caves. This might explain the difference in paintings. Archaeologists believe that two clans from different periods, during the Solutrean and Magdalenian, painted the two cave sections using different techniques and motifs.



### *Many Animal Motifs*

Today the combined cave boasts a rich repertoire of animal motifs. Experts have counted over two hundred paintings and engravings. Determining the exact number is challenging as some images have faded and tectonic rock movements have caused some to disappear. Moreover, new paintings are continually being discovered in the narrow side passages.

### *Animal Repertoire*

Motifs include reindeer, bison, mammoth, aurochs, wild horse, ibex, deer and roe deer. Less common are cave lions, bears, whales, salmon and shells. The latter motifs being typical in coastal areas. The good state of preservation is attributed to the historical entrance being sealed by an earthquake around 11,000 years ago.

### *Internal River Course*

The cave is approximately seven hundred metres deep. Following the one hundred sixty-metre-long artificial entrance tunnel, you enter a long, higher gallery with short side passages and chambers. Suddenly, you find yourself in a high cathedral-like hall, hearing the sound of a watercourse. We were surprised because this was the first cave, among many we had visited, with a permanent river at a lower level. Due to a larger opening to the lower-level cave section, there are still occasional floods during heavy rain periods. Surprisingly, this has not affected the brightness of the colours.

### *Human Bone Discoveries*

In the old entrance area, known as Pozu'l Ramu in Asturian, human bone fragments were found. Their age was determined to be 9,500 years, marking the last period of human cave usage. Numerous flint and bone tools were also found, including needles, spatulas, harpoons, and perforated batons, many decorated with animal motifs.

### *Our Exploration Tour*

We entered the cave through the newly created tunnel, actually entering the historical cave from the end. In the initial side passages and chambers, we discovered paintings, engravings, negative handprints and even some depictions of vulvas in forms of depictions that we had not seen before. The hand-







prints were particularly impressive and are often the oldest traces left by our ancestors in northern Spain. They were likely applied using the oldest spray-painting technique in history.

#### *The Great Hall*

Over a hundred animal depictions were created in this cave. The main panel is over twenty metres long, with paintings dating back 14,400 years falling into the last Palaeolithic period the Magdalenian. They were probably created at different times, as evidenced by the overlapping representations.

#### *Highlight Violet Horses*

This cave is known for its violet horse depictions, serving as its distinctive trademark. The ochre colour was not mixed but naturally occurred near the cave due to the influence of magnesium and floral elements. Seeing how vibrant these purple images still appear today is a unique experience.

#### *Large Rock Panel*

The individual animal depictions are approximately one meter wide. Observing the composition of the group representation, one wonders if it was meticulously planned or if each animal was painted one after the other. From Chauvet, we know that precise planning of the painted panel composition took place already 35,000 years ago.

#### *True Artists*

Upon closer inspection, one can see shading on the bodies. Was this a deliberate play with light and shadow? It's essential to remember that this rock art was created in the weak and



fluctuating light of natural torches and small oil lamps.

#### *Both Genders!*

Our ancestors placed great importance on depicting the genders of various animals. They clearly differentiated between female reindeer, as well as roe deer and deer. Sheep could be easily identified by their horns, but horses and bison could not. So, one has to look closely. The difference was certainly important and part of the message of the depiction.

#### *Great Similarity*

One of the most astonishing aspects is the striking similarity to animal motifs found in caves on the other side of the Pyrenees and further north in southern France. Most motifs in northern Spanish caves, however, were created in red ochre, ranging from light to dark. This proves that for various reasons our hunter gatherer ancestors were great travellers.

#### *Magical Red Colour*

Red ochre was an important symbolic colour for our ancestors, certainly with magical significance. Therefore, the deceased were buried in red ochre. In Tito Bustillo various shades of red were used. Here, we also see more extensive colouring of entire bodies, creating partly bichrome impressions.

#### *Black Charcoal*

Only about twenty percent of the depictions were made with black charcoal. For Tito Bustillo, a magnificent black horse head serves as a





symbolic figure, painted three meters above the ground on the rock wall. Was the cave ground level higher at that time? Or were archaic structures and ladders used for painting?

#### *Various Horse Breeds?*

Some archaeologists believe they can recognize Przewalski-like horses or even Mongolian horse breeds in the horse depictions. Just for clarification, recent findings suggest that horses were domesticated not just 4,500 years ago, but probably over 9,500 years ago on the Arabian Peninsula at Al Magar. See our article thereon.

However, in Europe, they were introduced only in the Bronze Age. It is proven, though, that Homo Heidelbergensis hunted wild horses with spears in central Germany near Schöningen over 300,000 years ago. See our article thereon.

#### *Native Wild Horses*

Some horse depictions are over two metres wide, almost life-size. All northern Spanish



caves feature horse depictions that seem to originate from different breeds. This is also true for France. Or were there different artistic perceptions among Palaeolithic painters during various time periods? We cannot imagine this as they were able to perfectly paint the real picture from imagination. Or did different wild horse breeds roam through northern Spain during Palaeolithic periods? This might be rather possible.

#### *Radiocarbon Dating*

Dating rock paintings with this method is not entirely reliable. This is evident from varying results, with differences of up to 5,000 years for the same motif's colour. Reliable dating can only be achieved in a proven archaeological context in conjunction with dated stone tools and adorned bone artifacts.

#### *Stone Age Periods*

There is another way to categorize dating into periods. The periods determined by archaeologists have slightly shifted timelines in different regions of Europe, explained by migration patterns and the beginning of settlement of





these areas by our ancestors.

For the rock paintings in northern Spain and southern France, the cultural periods are as follows:

- Aurignacian 35,000 – 29,000 BP
- Gravettian 31,000 – 22,000 BP
- Solutrean 22,000 – 17,000 BP
- Magdalenian 18,000 – 11,500 BP

These cultural dating apply to all tools and paintings, as well as engravings, using various techniques. Tools can be clearly determined by their typical production and design form, as well as their found horizon. From this, at least the Palaeolithic cultural period can be determined, providing a time frame.

Archaeologists were able to date motifs like hands to the Gravettian period and vulva depictions and engraved horse heads to the Solutrean era. Representations of complete horses and black figures, for example, were created in the Magdalenian period.

#### *Painted Rock Walls*

Not only flat rock walls were painted. Actually, there are relatively few of those. In the original caves, the installed lighting for visitors is deliberately sparse and directed towards the floor to protect the paintings. Only the guide has a special cold light lamp. When directly illuminated, the horse depiction looked very naturalistic and perfectly proportioned. They are impressive early artworks.

#### *Skilled Artists*

However, we truly recognized the skill of our

ancestors in creating this image when the light beam struck the wall from the side, revealing all the shadows. The wall was covered with numerous round depressions, perfectly painted out and the image did not change from different angles.

#### *Alignment Of Motifs*

It is an interesting question whether the left or right alignment of animal images in relation to the cave has any significance. Do they face the exit or enter the cave? There are various theories, but it remains unknown. And what does it mean when animals are depicted close to each other? Does it perhaps signify fertility? Many things surely have symbolic or ritual significance.

#### *Playing With Colours?*

Stone Age artists played with colour, perspective, rock shapes, and existing irregularities when applying their depictions. Some created only a very characteristic animal head, or only the body with outline lines, painting the inner surface partially or entirely.

A bichrome image was created by a black outline and red colouring. The white calcite areas typical of stalactite caves were also incorporated as a third natural colour.

#### *Unusual Motifs*

Here, the over two-metre-long whale is remarkable. It is found alongside an engraved goat, horse, deer and bison paintings. Seen in the context of cold and warm periods, this is an unusual mix and these motifs likely were created at different times.





### *Painted Stalactites*

Even hanging stalactite formations were subject to being painted. Some are quite thin and translucent. So, this might have inspired our ancestors. Notably, there is a human figure, possibly a hybrid being. This stalactite was painted on both sides.

There is a similar example in another cave, but here, it does not depict the male and female sides. As stalactites can also be excellent resonators, it is assumed that this depiction had a ritual and mystical meaning for our ancestors. But see for yourself.

### *Another Fertility Symbol?*

The meaning of the brightly red-painted ends of several broken stalactite tips is unknown. Were they deliberately broken? Some break-ages resemble the shape of a vulva. There is also a small undamaged stalagmite in the shape of a phallus, painted in red. This suggests a fertility symbol. Let's move on to the most certain fertility symbol.

### *Multiple Vulva Symbols*

This is the strongest fertility symbol our ancestors knew. These depictions, which can be human or animal in nature, are usually created in groups. In the Tito Bustillo cave, despite their age, they are still vividly red and very impressive. Here, we have four very different and unique forms, placed close together in a small side niche.

### *Rare Vulva Forms*

The vulva forms here are unique and exceptional. The opening of the vulva depicted here is interesting. Additionally, there is an image of female body curves framed with a typical female line, something we have not seen before. Another is simply painted as a basic Y, as seen in many other caves.

### *Many Dotted Lines*

Adjacent to these are numerous red dots, some forming close and others rather long lines. Since dot lines are found in almost all northern Spanish caves with painted Palaeolithic rock art, it would be interesting if one of the many existing theories could be scientifically proven in the future. At Tito Bustillo, we also see a symbol new to us. It looks like a balloon on a string, accompanied by several short vertical lines.





### *Interesting Mobile Art*

These are so-called decorated tools, mostly made from bone and antler. Many multi-barbed harpoon heads were excavated here, proving regular fishing by hunter-gatherer groups in northern Spain. Particularly well-crafted is an artistically beautiful ibex head made from antler. As it is broken off it likely belonged to a perforated baton.

### *Museum & Park*

Just a few hundred metres from the entrance is a modern museum with interesting images, films and artifacts. We recommend visiting it beforehand to better understand the cave tour with its many paintings.

Elsewhere in the Historical Museum in Tevergo Park near the town of San Martin, a replica of the Great Panel of Tito Bustillo has been created. You can view it if the limited number of visitors has been reached or if you missed the few open months in the year.

### *Tito Bustillo Summary*

Tito Bustillo Cave ranks among the top ten of the numerous Palaeolithic painted caves in northern Spain regarding the diversity of animal depictions, symbols and colours. The unique feature of an internal river course and the fact that it was once two different caves, later merging due to tectonic events, add to its significance.

The violet horse paintings are particularly impressive. When we first heard about them, we were curious and found it challenging to imagine. However, seeing them for ourselves, we were surprised by the vibrant purple colour. What ritual significance did this colour have for our ancestors?

Another peculiarity is the unique vulva depictions and painted stalactites. Tito Bustillo is worth the journey and visit, but reservations are essential. Afterward, we also visited the beautifully located El Pindal Cave with a view of the sea.

### *El Pindal Cave*

This is a very special cave, unlike any we have seen before. It is located right on the coast on a steep cliff about a hundred metres above sea level. The view is breathtaking, but back then, the sea level was a hundred metres low-





er than it is today, as a significant amount of water was bound in the northern ice caps.

### *Many Bison Motifs*

So, El Pindal Cave was not directly by the sea at that time, which explains the abundance of bison motifs. The cave should actually be called “Los Bisontes” because this motif is very dominant here.

In addition to the thirteen bison motifs, there are also eight wild horses, typical for all caves in northern Spain. But we saw also male and female goats, female deer, a single mammoth and an engraved fish.

### *Small Cave*

The cave was discovered only in 1908 and was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2008, along with many other Palaeolithic painted caves in the region. With a length of 350 meters and fewer than thirty paintings, it is one of the smaller caves but still impressive given the repertoire of depictions.

It is a very straight cave without bends like a mine tunnel going into the hill. Only half of the cave is open to the public as the rest is very narrow and partially low.

### *Many Red & Few Black Motifs*

Most motifs were painted with red ochre. There are only a few different coloured depictions, such as a black-brown bison. Both colours are typical for northern Spain caves. Some are created as pure outline paintings, while others are partly coloured red or engraved and then outlined with red paint.

### *Exploring The Cave*

Shortly after the entrance, we noticed the first motif of a red horse head on the ceiling. Then, on the right side in the last third portion of the cave, there is the ten-meter-long main panel where most motifs were created. This includes six animal motifs, more or less clearly visible.

We identified three bison, a horse head and a single mammoth. Another animal we couldn't identify as it looks today too faded but might have been a horse once. There were also some symbols like short lines and dots.





### ***Zoomorphic Being?***

A bit further on the opposite side, we see several black depictions. The symbols are located next to them at the end of the cave. Due to the not-so-good preservation state of some motifs, archaeologists are not certain whether one of the figures represents a zoomorphic being.

### ***Different Creators & Periods***

The paintings and engravings were created by different tribes of our ancestors over various periods. The oldest paintings are 20,000 years old and the youngest ones are 14,000 years old. This means perhaps more than 200 generations visited this cave and held their rituals here.

### ***Other Motifs***

There is no cave in northern Spain without symbols. Here, they are all red and we again recognize the typical dots and lines. The cave was painted during the last Magdalenian period of the Palaeolithic Age.

A few tools from this period were also found here. The first publication of the paintings was done in 1911 and a somewhat more detailed study was published in 1954.

### ***Special Location***

The cave is not easy to find. Taking narrow side roads leads to the village of Pimiango and from there, a few kilometres along a paved and very winding coastal road to a small hermitage.

The landscape is wonderful and a short steep rock staircase leads to the small plateau in front of the wide cave entrance. Without a reservation you have no chance.

### ***Caves Nearby***

These include La Loja in Penamellera Baja, Mazaculos near Ribadedeva and Quintanal near Llanes. Unfortunately, we were not able to visit them.

### ***Translation Note***

The translation from the german original text was done with the help of OpenAI.

### ***Picture Credits***

We thank the muesums, authors and photographers for making available some of their pictures.

