The background of the entire page is a photograph of a rock surface with several dark, prehistoric horse images. The images are rendered in a dark, almost black color, making them stand out against the lighter, textured rock. The horses are shown in various poses, some facing left and some facing right. The rock surface has a rough, uneven texture with some lighter-colored patches.

Pre-Historic Horse Images

Comparison Across Continents

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The depiction of wild horses in pre-historic rock art, or petroglyphs as some prefer to call it, is wide spread and similar to other animals being depicted by our pre-historic ancestors.

But horses seemed to have always a special meaning to men different to other animals. Their relationship was and still is more specific.

Therefore in this article I want to look at the different ways horses were engraved or painted on rock surfaces thousands of years ago. But this time we start with the most recent or youngest images and then go back in time looking at Neolithic and then at the first Paleolithic depictions.

Horse Domestication

There is an important distinction of pre-historic horse images we want to deal with first. We do not know the exact timeline when it really happened. But one thing is clear, horses with riders indicate that domestication had taken place.

These riders are most shown with arms, predominantly long spears and seldom with bow and arrows.

On very late images dating around 2,000 years ago we also see riders with defensive shields indicating the use of horses not for hunt but in military action. Please see the various pictures from Capo di Ponte in the Val Camonica in northern Italy showing Roman influence. It is interesting that the Neolithic art of rock engravings were still practiced throughout the Bronze Age.



First Working Horses Depictions of working horses are seldom as single or double axel carriages normally are shown drawn by oxen. But in the Val Camonica these do exist.

And plough drawing horse images are also to be seen here. We have to remember that petroglyphs never were created

in perspective. Therefore carriages are shown as flat images in top down view with wheels sticking out as flat circles on the side.

This is also true for the amazing Vallee des Merveilles petroglyph site high up in the French Sea Alps close to the small picturesque French mountain town Tende on the border with Italy.

These images are maximum 2,500 years old. Which really is not old for petroglyphs but we are talking here about working horses which just came to Europe about that time.

Bright Red Rock

Another fact makes these images special. Most rock engravings were created on red rock surfaces which shine brilliantly red in the late afternoon sun.

This red surface coverage was created by a natural chemical process over very long time through oxidation of strong iron content in the rock. This varnish type coverage makes rock engravings easy as simple scratching removes the red surface.

Puzzling Horse Carts

But the horse cart images in northern Saudi Arabia are older and specifically interesting. First they were not recognized as such as they are misleading. Reason being that the engravings are not precise and look rather unfinished.

But then on one of my many trips in northern

Saudi Arabia I discovered a very telling engraving pictured in this article.

Because it is of such interest this image found its way into a 500 page book only showing pre-historic horse images.

The image of a horse drawn single axel cart looks unfinished as the rider sits on a kind of stool without wheels. But he holds the reigns attached to the horses head. These images are only found near Al-Ula.

We can be certain that these horse carts could not be used in this sandy and rocky desert area. We know that Pharaoh Ramses II passed close by with his army to fight the Hittites about 3,300 years ago.

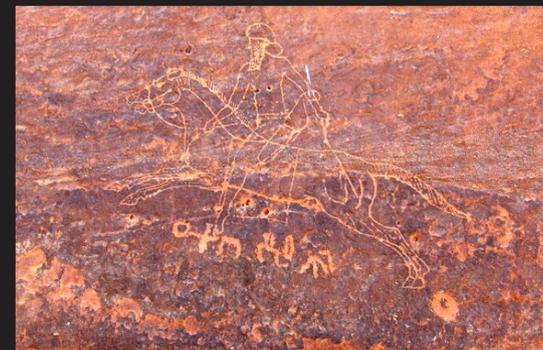
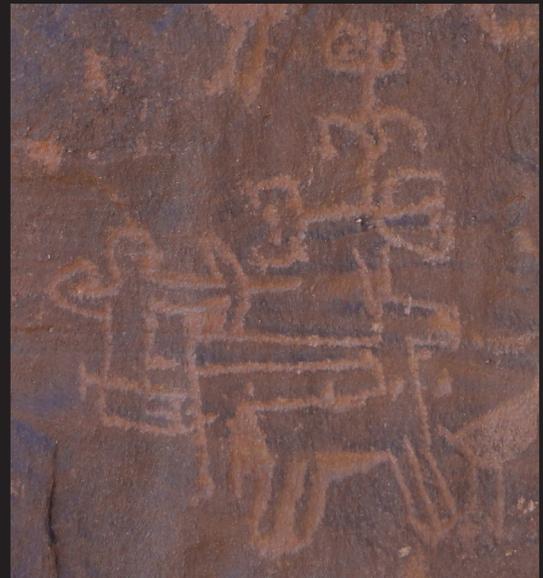
They transported many dismantled horse carts by hand. How light these carts were, we can see in the Tutankhamun burial chamber with its rich furnishings.

King Nabonidus

Why has the last Neo-Babylonian King Nabonidus been depicted on horseback in the Saudi Arabian desert near Tayma?

The reason is obvious about 500 before Christ he conquered the important desert oasis with huge water resources and strategic trading center of Tayma.

And he erected a huge palace here to stay. In the





rock engraving picture he is clearly recognizable through his Babylonian clothing.

An inscription below also indicates, who this important rider is. In Tayma still today ongoing excavations deliver interesting new discoveries about his stay far away from home.

First Place of Domestication

So far the general expert opinion was that horses were domesticated in the greater region of today's Kazakhstan about 4,500 years ago.

Here in the open horse depictions were created using the simple direct stone hammering method. This can be easily distinguished by the uneven surface engraving lines.

And next to wild horses we also see first horse riders. We knew already that wild horses existed for over hundred thousand years. So the conclusion was clear.



Surprising Discovery

But newer research comes to a different result. In March 2010 a new archeological site in Saudi Arabia called Al-Magar was investigated.

Various archaeological important items were discovered in this isolated desert area between Najran and Wadi Al-Dawasir.

The most surprising discoveries were various rather large horse statues skillfully crafted out of stone. These and the other Neolithic artifacts and stone tools were all dated with an age of 10,000 years.

Amazing Al-Magar

These horse statues turned out to be a world sensation. First for their rather large size of about one meter, which was enormous for that time.

And secondly they still showed painted headgear and bridle. Al-Magar gave us the proof, that horses were domesticated for the first time worldwide in Saudi Arabia 4,500 years earlier than previously thought.



The features of the Al-Magar horse statues are similar to those of the original Arabian horse, characterized by its long neck and unique head shape. For more information please read the specific article about Al-Magar on this website.

Horse or Mule?

Nevertheless the Al-Magar horse domestication history was disputed, like it is common with all new discoveries.

Hundred experts have thousand theories one archeologist once explained to me. So some experts think that the Al-Magar horse heads look rather like mules.

This could be possible as wild donkeys or onager did exist in this region. Yes one stone head looks like a mule. But all the others look clearly horse like.

Further I doubt this opposing opinion and can prove it. Look at the pictures of two engraved horse riders from the Al-Magar area I took myself.

These horses really look like Arabian horses and fit with their patina and other animal images next to them well into the Al-Magar dating.

Horse Petroglyphs

There are various rock art drawings in the Al-Magar area. The petroglyphs were created





by deep pecking and engraving the dark patinated rocks.

The blackish rock surface receives its color through the same natural chemical process explained before. The black color here results from manganese content in the rock and is called desert varnish.

Ibex, ostriches and other animals as well as human figures including horse riders were carefully depicted. The petroglyphs collected over time a certain amount of black desert varnish coverage again.

This indicates that they were made rather early on during the time when the site was inhabited 10,000 years ago and not thereafter by passing caravans.

Age Evaluation

Can we apply the same research results for pre-historic human depictions? If we as non-experts look at human images engraved on rock, we would assume, that simple stick figure depictions are certainly the oldest.

But petroglyph experts established, that the more realistic an image is the older it is. So it really is the other way round, when it comes to ancient rock art dating. In addition we also have the engraving technique to help us with dating images.

Different Depictions

This is also true for horse depictions. Horses without riders were created in a more realistic look.

The most realistic in my view are the 35,000 year old paintings in the Chauvet Cave. Then we can look at the 20,000 year younger horses of Lascaux. They are still rather realistic, but already somewhat less.

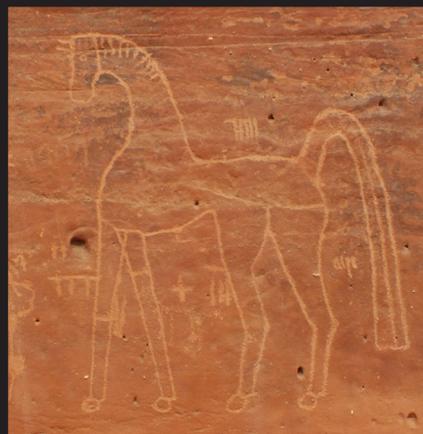
The 5,000 year old wild horses of Kazakhstan also still fit the realistic picture. But then 2,000 years later when horses were used for hunting purposes they became more stick figure like.

Important Hunting

In hunting scenes they were engraved with stretched front and hind legs to show speed. Their riders were using very long lances to pierce wild animals rather than throwing spears. We also see chasing dogs to assist in the hunt. Using horses for hunting purposes needed really well trained animals to be successful.

Bedouin Images

Interesting are the horse engravings in the north Arabian Nafud Desert. They are rather specific and look like coming out of a children's book.



Some say they are typical Arabian horses. Yes they have some similarities.

But I am intrigued by the childish depiction. How can this be explained? There is only one explanation. They have been created by Bedouins who loved their horses and wanted to create the perfect image.

Oldest Horse Figurines

Now let's take a step back in time. The oldest horse images were created by homo sapiens after he moved into Europe.

He roamed huge areas as hunter-gatherer in small clans of twenty to forty members. This happened around 50,000 years ago. Interestingly in today's Germany our ancestors did not paint animals including horses on rock surfaces, but they carved skillful figurines out of mammoth ivory.

In the southern Swabia Alb region they created about 30,000 years ago magnificent figurines including horses. Here the oldest venus figurine worldwide was also discovered.



No they were important messages for generations to come. And possibly they were crafted for religious beliefs and to appease their gods. Therefore images in the open were not painted but engraved.

Ceremonial Caves

These caves were not used for living purposes, but as places for rituals and ceremonies. What we still do not know is, which rituals were practiced here.

One reason might be that large and deep caves were used by animals such as bears to hibernate in winter.

A different species living in caves with their off-spring at the time were cave lions. Was it a mythical reason to hold up ceremonies here?

Lascaux Cave

Nearly 20,000 years later the horse images in the Lascaux Cave look surprisingly less skillfully refined.

But now our ancestors used color in their paintings like

Chauvet Cave

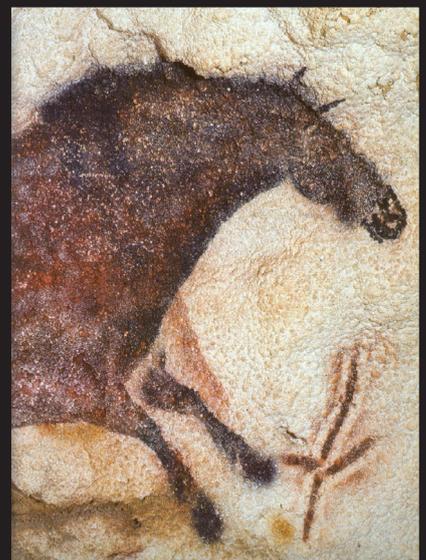
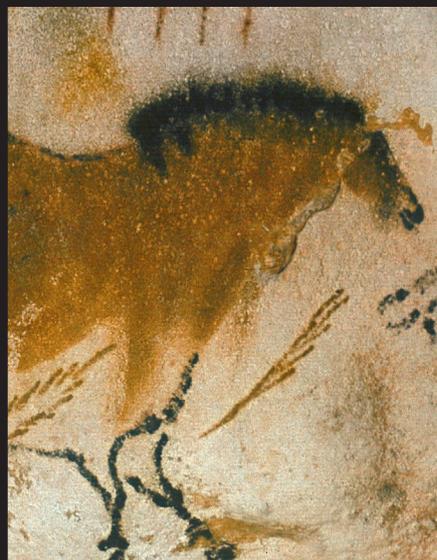
At the same time in southern France various caves were skillfully decorated with elaborate wild animal scenes.

The black charcoal paintings on white calcite covered wall surfaces up to 200 meter deep in the Chauvet Cave were discovered only in 2009 and look amazingly realistic.

They show great detail and differ in character. It seems each horse has a different facial expression and personality.

Important Message

It is interesting to note that our ancestors certainly wanted their art work to survive for long. Their elaborate paintings were not pictures created only for themselves to fade away quickly.





brown, reddish and black. And the type and form of horses have changed too.

One looks like a cold blood, others seem larger or carrying a baby.

Horses depicted here are still wild horses. We know they were probably not hunted. Because the main diet of our ancestors consisted of reindeer.

This was available in abundance at the time and easy to hunt. Its leather and fur was also better for clothing compared to horses.

300,000 Years Ago

Now we take a really huge step back in history. A sensational discovery was made 1992 in Germany.

In an open pit coal mine the oldest wooden hunting spears were saved shortly before destruction by huge scraping shovels.

Later research showed that homo heidelbergensis hunted wild horses here. After each kill they cut the meat off the bones with sharp stone cutting tools.



But imagine this! Than they buried the horse skeletons together with their hunting spears, which killed the horses. In total eight such burials were attested. It really was the first ceremonial burial of a horse. Let's call it a "thanksgiving" burial to appease the gods?

For what other reason would they have done it? And think again - this happened 300,000 years ago! Is this enough proof that the relationship between men and horse is special?

Highly Developed Ancestors

Let me give you another amazing fact about these spears.

Imagine these spears were as long, heavy and had the same point of gravity as modern

Olympic high tech spears. And tests proved they had a similar flight pass and went as far as modern spears.

Impossible to believe that spears could not really be improved through our sophisticated technology over three hundred thousand years.

Through trial and error pre-historic men had developed already the perfect long distance hunting weapon.

This proves that we have to re-examine our opinion about the sophistication and physical as well as mental abilities of pre-historic humans.

Conclusion

Neolithic horse images were mostly engraved on rock throughout Europe, Middle East and Asia.

Cave paintings were predominantly created in France and Spain. From the many examples we have described in this article we can conclude that the relationship between horse and man was special already before horses were domesticated.



So far we have no good examples of pre-historic horse images in the Americas and Africa as well as Australia.

But in Europe and Asia there are plenty and wide spread.

In the various images we see different horse heads and types.

But we have to remember that not all creators of pre-historic rock art images were similarly talented.

That we often see in some

depictions. And they often engraved their objects later from imaginations in their mind.

Horse images changed over time. We can say that first images were created by direct pecking with a hammer stone.

Later the more precise indirect pecking technique with a hard stone chisel was used.

During the Bronze Age metal chisels came in use. Where rock surfaces were softer or covered by red or black desert

varnish the scratching method was common as it showed quick results.

There are also specific regional styles we see in horse images. These came up later with horse domestication and might have resulted from copying a preferred shape and look.

Interesting is the variance in size of riders compared to their horse. Sometimes they are ridiculous small. Here it seems the horse depiction was more important than the rider or owner.

Travel Tips

The following sites can be visited:

Italy – Capo di Ponte, visit Naquane National Park & Seradina-Bedolina Park

France – Tende, Valle des Merveilles, pre-book guided mountain tour

France – Dordogne, Lascaux Cave, pre-book tickets

France – Ardeche, Chauvet Cave, pre-book tickets

Spain – Santander, Altamira Cave, pre-book tickets

Portugal – Villa Nova da Foz Coa, Coa Valley, pre-book tours

Germany – Ulm, Blaubeuren & Vogelherd museums, the last two situated close to Ulm

Germany – Palaeon Museum, close Schöningen / Helmstedt, pre-historic spears

Weblinks

Italy - Capo di Ponte National Parks

www.archeocamuni.it

France – Valle des Merveilles

www.destination-merveilles.com/vallee-merveilles/

France – Lascaux Cave

www.lascaux-dordogne.com www.lascaux.fr

France – Chauvet Cave

www.archeologie.culture.fr/chauvet/

Germany – Palaeon Museum

www.palaeon.de

Portugal – Coa Valley

www.arte-coa.pt

Spain – Altamira Cave

www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/mnaltamira/home

Picture Credits

We thank the Lascaux, Chauvet & Altamira authorities for making available some of their pictures.