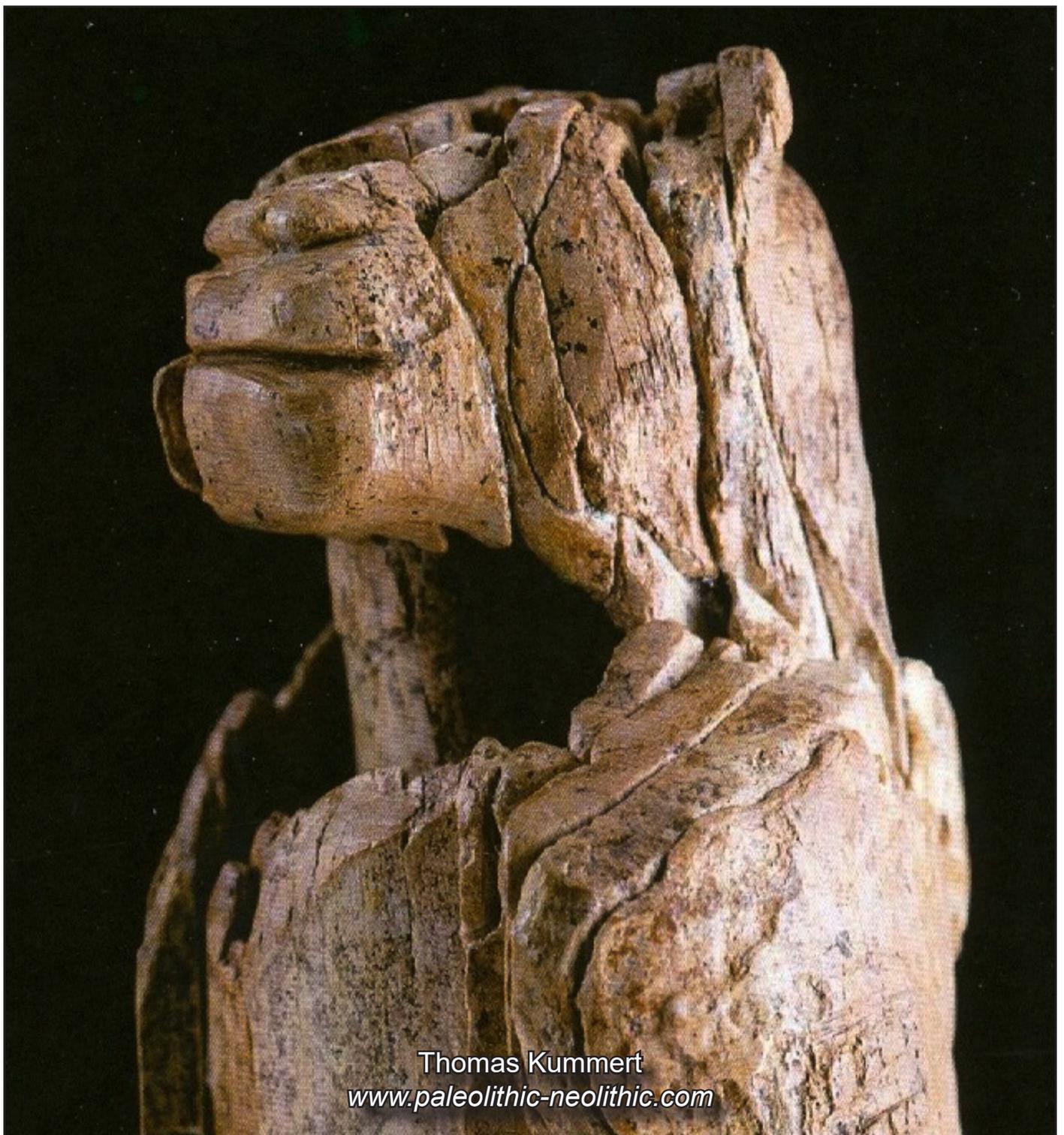


# Lion Man

## German Aurignacian



Thomas Kummert  
[www.paleolithic-neolithic.com](http://www.paleolithic-neolithic.com)



Over fifty human and animal figures made of mammoth ivory have been excavated so far in various caves on the Swabian Alb in southern Germany. These caves are situated west and east of the city of Ulm in the arch valley of the Danube.

Today two small rivers Ach and Lone are left to meander in the west and east through an idyllic landscape. The Danube found in antiquity already a new riverbed further south.

#### *Aurignacian Caves*

These caves have been used as shelter for a long time by our ancestors. But carved figurines have been only found in four caves such as Geissenkloesterle and Hohle Fels in the Ach Valley and Vogelherd and Stadel in the Lone Valley. These wonderful figures have been dated at an age of 41,000 to 35,000 years.

#### *Unique Huge Figure*

But the famous lion man figure is really outstanding. The skillfully crafted ivory figure has been found in the Stadel Cave close to the village of Asselfingen. Alone it's size with 31 centimeters is extraordinary for an early paleolithic figure from the Aurignacian period, when figurines measured maximum ten centimeters.

#### *Real Crime Story*

The whole story behind its discovery sounds to me more like a criminal forensic than an archaeological investigation with various turns and surprises. Over 200 ivory fragments were found on the last day of excavations in August 1939. They were quickly packed and transport-

ed to the Tübingen University, because the Second World War began few days later. And nobody had any idea what they have found. But this is no wonder considering the many small broken and heavily eroded ivory pieces.

After the war the excavated pieces were officially presented to the city of Ulm and passed over in 1962. During later inventory checks in the storage rooms of the Ulm Museum a young archaeologist found the respective boxes and became aware of their importance.

#### *Puzzle Fit Together*

He began 1970 to fit the puzzle for the first time together. But he could only assemble 200 of 260 fragments. He first believed to have a bear man figure in front of him. At that time, it was not clear, was it a male or female figure. Today experts are certain the figure is a male one.

It is unbelievable, but incidental visitors to the cave, which is open to the public, found 1974 further ivory pieces of the figure. They were inspired through the reports in local newspapers and delivered their finds to the museum. And in another coincidence a box was found in an office at the Tübingen University with further fragments.

#### *Reassembling Lion Man*

In 1987 the lion man figure was anew reassembled in a six-month lasting difficult job. Now it became clear through a missing head piece, the figure was a man with lion head. From 1994 the figure was officially called the lion man.



### *Initial Place of Discovery*

The result of this sensational puzzle led finally to further excavations in the Stadel Cave, because one third of the figure was still missing. Only in 2009 the initial place of discovery was found in a depth of 1.2 meters. It was lying in an alcove thirty meters from the cave entrance. In 2010 to 2012 further fragments were found and added to the statue.

But this was not yet the end to this fascinating story. Further fragments were found in the past years, when the spoil heaps of old excavations were again examined in detail. Finally, in 2013 the lion man figure was totally taken apart and scanned with newest available technology. Now it was possible to virtually piece it correctly together and be able to conclude the work than manually.

But still some pieces are still missing. The latest result looks really good and consists of over 600 fragments. It is the oldest and best-known masterpiece of art in mankind and also the biggest sculpture of the Aurignacian period.

### *Skilled Artist*

Its creator must have been a rather talented artist. Very experienced and well planned he carved this extraordinary fine figure out of a tusk of a young mammoth bull. Seven horizontal lines with unknown meaning were carved on the left arm and complete this remarkable piece of art of a mixed creature.

The left ear has also been marked with a dozen fine lines. Are they tattoos like we know them from iceman Ötzi? But how can the lines under his left foot be explained? Why were all markings done on the left body parts?

### *Mixed Creatures?*

The exact interpretation of prehistoric human animal mixed beings is still not clear to scientists. Possibly these human animal unions are a temporary human transformation resulting from shaman rituals like trance dances. Most certainly this ritual has a spiritual or totemic character, because animals often represent gods on earth or seen as such.

Was the lion man figure a mythical creature from the past, or was it a mixed being resulting from shaman trance dances? It also may be an early divine figure, which was adorned and asked for advice.

### *Important Ritual Cave*

The place of discovery or the whole cave was possibly an important ritual site, because no settlement traces





and stone working tools were found here. But various ivory amulets, animal teeth with drilled holes from red deer, fox and wove were excavated in this part of the cave. This is typical for holy shrines and places of worship.

### *Talented Creator*

Tests to reproduce the ivory figure with prehistoric stone tools of the time have shown, that over 400 hours were necessary to carve this unbelievable piece of art.

Our ancestors were talented hunters and socially well organized to have enough time to create such a wonderful statue. To carve this detailed figure out of a mammoth tusk, needed good planning and perfect imagination and artistic skill.

### *Other Figures*

But this is not all. More lion figures were found in two other caves in the area. Of its so-called small brother, only the upper half was found measuring 2.5 centimeters. It was found in 2004 in the Hohle Fels Cave.

An amulet called adorant shows also a mixed human-lion being and was dug out at Geissenkloesterle. This is proof of widely established shaman cult activities in the arch valley of the Danube River 40.000 years ago.

### *Mammoth Ivory*

One question is difficult to answer. Why did this hard ivory eroded and disintegrated, when other smaller animal figurines, also made of ivory survived in neighboring caves more or less intact? Mammoth ivory is an interesting material, but not

as hard as we think.

### *Relative Soft Material*

On a scale from one to ten it has a hardness of only two to three similar to gold. Therefore, you can carve it so easily and relatively well. With increased mineral nutrition the mammoth tusks become a bit harder over time. And naturally the tusk peaks are harder than the shaft.

### *Dentin and Collagen*

Mammoth ivory consists to 60 percent of dentin and 30 percent collagen and the rest is water. The lion man figure consists only of dentin. The protecting tusk surface of teeth cement was removed to be able to polish out a nicer shining surface of the finished figure. The artist knew exactly what he was doing.

The collagen parts in the dentin holds the tusk normally together. And another specialty of ivory is, it adapts to the ambivalent humidity. That means it can change its water content. So conservation is under normal circumstances not necessary.

### *Ageing and Splitting*

Mammoths died out 4.000 years ago. Their ivory was 25 percent heavier than elephant ivory today. With drying out it loses 20 percent of its weight and becomes more breakable. But when buried underground the collagen disappeared. Therefore, the lion man figure disintegrated





along its growth layers.

### **Coloring**

Different ambivalent conditions in the caves influence breaking up and coloring. Ivory therefore can show yellowish, reddish, greenish and even blackish coloring as well as black spots from a high level of manganese content in the ground.

Next to the ambivalent situation the brittleness of the lion man statue can also result from further factors. The figure was carved head down out of the upper part of the tusk and the pulp canal ended between its legs.

Also, the nerve channel can be seen starting between the legs and coming out at its head.



### **Spiritual World**

We know that our ancestors used caves as holy places for rituals such as initiation, shaman practices, transmission ceremonies and contact to their divine world.

To these rituals most certainly also belonged trance dances to reach to envisaged transmission of man to beast or world of living to the world of the dead ancestors.

### **Free-flowing Transition**

The detailed cave paintings in French caves are proof of the spiritual closeness between man and animal. Scientists believe that these hunter and collector clans did not make any difference between man and beast nor living and dead. They were a permanent part of them to which they had



regular access.

Trance dances were an important part of their spiritual beliefs and the way to get in contact to their ancestors and divinities. Therefore, this closeness was demonstrated with mixed being figures. The lion man statue is the best example of this deep-seated faith.

### Summary

The lion man statue is really unique because of its huge size at the time and its outstanding skillful carving. It truly is the oldest sculpture of mankind worldwide.

Further it is proof of the enormously advanced development of our ancestors already 40.000 years ago. A few years back we could not even imagine this level of development and ability.

I am surprised by the numerous wonderfully carved animal figurines found here, but missing cave paintings. Whereas in France the caves at the same time were beautifully painted with hundreds of animals, but no figures found there at all. How can this be explained?

When visiting Ulm plan for two days. The Vogelherd Cave in the Lone Valley has its own museum worthwhile seeing, because of the various ivory animal figures found here. And in the Ach Valley the museum at Blaubeuren is important to visit too.

### Picture Credits

We thank the Ulm Museum and the photographers for using some of their pictures and sketches.

Tips. [www.museum.ulm.de](http://www.museum.ulm.de), [www.loewenmensch.de](http://www.loewenmensch.de)

