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CANTABRIAN PLEISTOCENE ART





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Rodrigo de Balbín Behrmann*, Cesar
González Sainz** &
J. Javier Alcolea González*

Cueva de la Pasiega (Puente Viesgo, Cantabria)

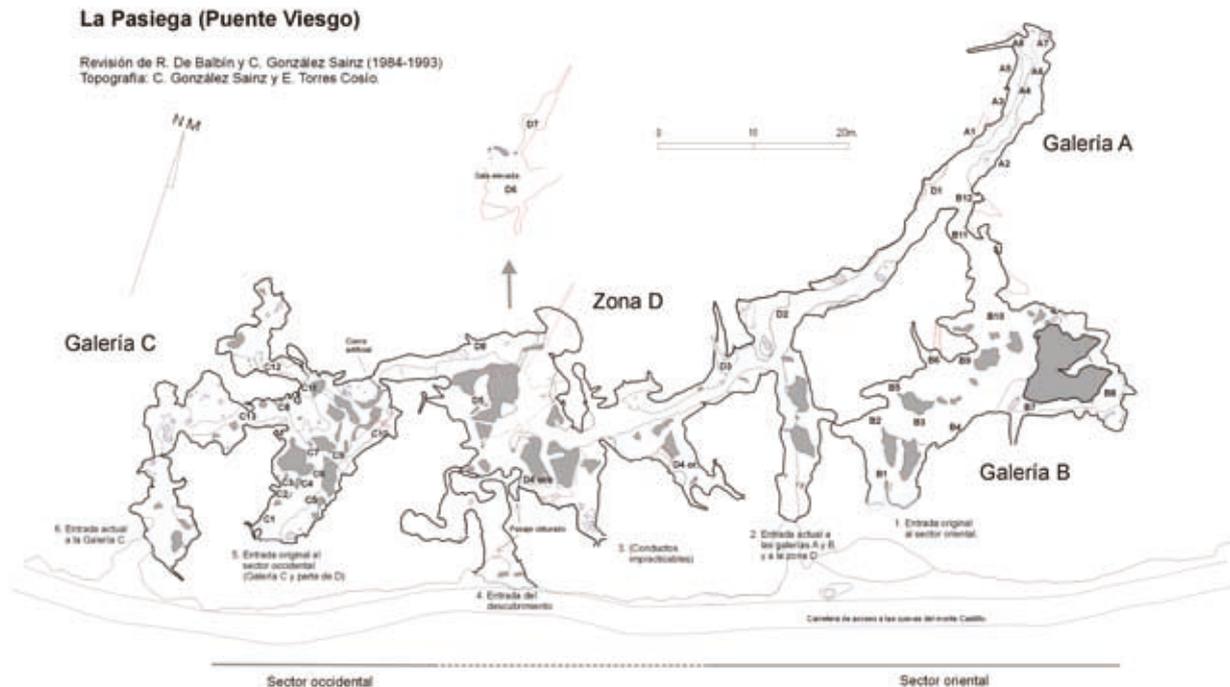


Figure 1. Survey of Cueva de La Pasiega.

The hill of Monte Castillo contains one of the most important groups of caves with Palaeolithic rock art in Europe. La Pasiega (Fig. 1) is located on the steep side of the hill, half way between the caves of Las Chimeneas and Las Monedas and very near to El Castillo Cave. It consists of passages in different directions, sometimes on different levels and connected by shafts.

The cave was discovered in 1911 by the team excavating the deposit in Cueva de El Castillo. A. Leroi-Gourhan's revision was incomplete but fundamental for understanding iconographic structure and chronology of the ensemble. Despite the excellent monograph published in 1913 and the cave's long history, in the 1990s Balbín and González Sainz began a new study which is still on-

going. La Pasiega is one of the least well-known great European rock art sites. In addition, work undertaken in the 1950s completely altered the cave by sealing off entrances and blocking passages with artificial walls.

Palaeolithic occupations

Excavations in the 1950s found evidence of human occupation in the Solutrean and lower Magdalenian in the areas around the entrances to Galleries B and C. The names of the passages (Galleries A, B and C) reflected the order in which the rock art ensembles were discovered from Entrance number 4. Leroi-Gourhan's study differentiated four areas, Galleries A, B and C, and Zone D bet-

* Dpto. de Historia I, Universidad de Alcalá de Henares. c/ Colegios 2, 28801 Alcalá de Henares, Madrid. rodrigo.balbin@uah.es & javier.alcolea@uah.es

** Dpto. de Ciencias Históricas, Universidad de Cantabria. Avenida Los Castros s/n, 39005 Santander. cesar.González@unican.es

ween the junction of the first two and Gallery C. Bearing in mind the difficulty in moving between the different parts of the cave, the differences between the four main areas, and the position of the original entrances, it is thought that in the Upper Palaeolithic two or three parietal ensembles may have functioned independently of each other: the eastern part, Galleries A, B and the eastern part of Zone D; the western part or Gallery C; and a central ensemble in the western sectors of Zone D.

Eastern series

Gallery B

From its entrance, with Solutrean and probably Magdalenian layers, this passage was the access to deeper parts of the eastern half of the cave (Gallery A and parts of Zone D). The state of conservation of the depictions is poorer nearer the entrance than in the interior area.

It contains over 200 representations: 24 horses, 20 ibices, 16 indeterminate quadrupeds, 11 hinds, 8 stags, 3 aurochs, 2 bison, unidentified

bovids, cervids and a carnivore, a giant deer, a bird, a fish and an engraved anthropomorph. The ensemble also includes classic red claviforms, series of dots, several elongated quadrilaterals and a so-called “symbolic inscription”. The main panels are on the walls near the entrance with figures of large painted animals and many smaller engravings (Fig. 2).

Gallery A

This refers to the final 20m of the long passage that connects the central and eastern parts of the cave. It displays a “cave-end” ensemble, with one of the region’s most outstanding concentrations of animals and signs in red (apart from exceptions in sepia, brown, black and occasional engravings). It is additionally very well conserved.

The density of the representations increases towards the end, with complex compositions on the walls of a narrow passage, domes and side hollows. The first part of the passage is wider and the compositions are simpler, with pairs of animals.



Figure 2. Horse facing a giant deer in the entrance of Gallery B in Cueva de La Pasiega.

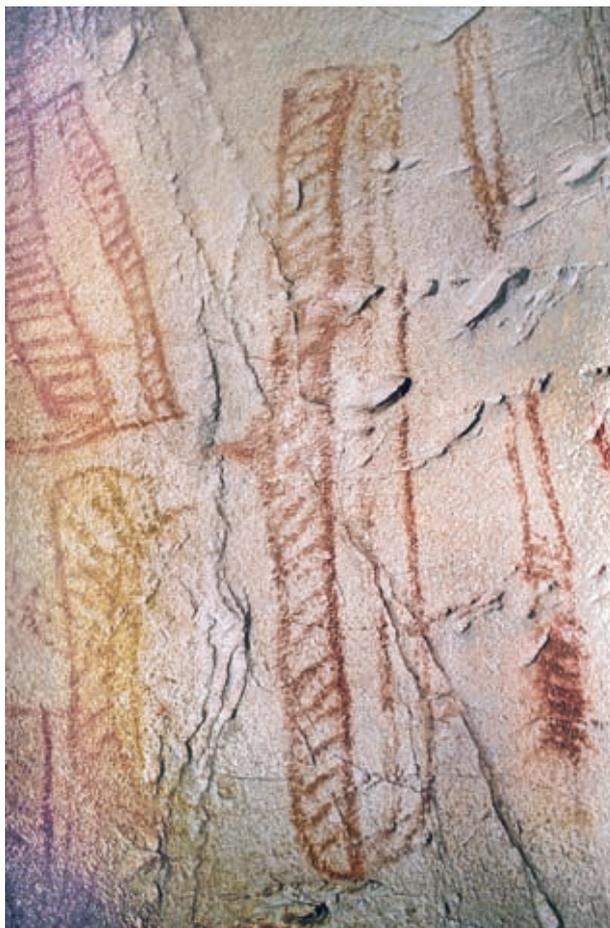


Figure 3. Signs at the end of Gallery A in Cueva de La Pasiega.

Gallery A is essentially a pictorial area. It displays 35 hinds, 31 horses and 60 complex signs (elongated quadrilaterals with a pointed protuberance, crescents, ovals, etc.) In addition, there are 14 stags, 5 aurochs, 4 bison, 4 ibices, 2 reindeer, a cervid and 8 indeterminate quadrupeds. The non-figurative motifs also include series of dots, isolated lines, and stains of colour. However the proportion of these motifs is smaller than in the other parts of the cave.

The style of most of the representations is assimilable to pre-Magdalenian art, probably to its later stages. However, they are not synchronic. Some of the black figures, especially in the dome in Sector A6, superimposed on the red figures, evoke the more naturalistic art of the lower Magdalenian.

Eastern part of Zone D

This is a deep part of the cave the prehistoric artists reached from Gallery B. Access must have

been easy as far as Sector D2, and more difficulty from there on because of the low roof. At the junction of Galleries A and B, the first group of representations are engraved and painted in red (Sector D1): two hinds, painted signs and several engraved animals. The density of representations decreases towards the centre of Zone D.

Western series

This is the most complex part of Cueva de La Pasiega. In both Gallery C and the western part of Zone D, there are mazes of passages, chambers and high and low level areas. During the Upper Palaeolithic, the usual entrance to this western series was Number 5, which connects with the most decorated part of Gallery C, and where artefacts were found. This entrance was not usable when the cave was discovered, like Number 1 to Gallery B, and today they are both sealed off.

Gallery C

This contains numerous and diverse representations from the technical, stylistic and chronological points of view. In a small area it condenses the same phases and conventions as in Galleries A and B and Zone D, with the clearest examples of the upper Magdalenian (mainly in Sectors C7 and 8).

The panels in the first 5m (Sector C1) are complex and diverse in techniques and colours, but also poorly conserved. The complexity increases noticeably from this point. Several animals in an archaic style are painted in red or sienna, together with abundant series of repeated single lines. Then Sectors C2 and 3 display a large group of animal figures, signs in several colours and engravings superimposed on the paintings. In Sector C4 a single panel has been documented, facing the main passage. C5 contains numerous superimposed figures and C6 at the end of the first main chamber has a group of small finely-engraved figures. The composition in Sector C7 is clearly Magdalenian and structured, with bovids, horses and some hinds.

Gallery C possesses all the phases that appear in the rest of La Pasiega, as well as others dated in the Magdalenian. Many of the panels in the first part (Sectors C2, 3, 4 and 5) display superimposed figures that usually follow the same sequence (sienna, red or violet, black, and engravings of animals over both the red and violet and the black figures).

Western parts of Zone D

The western Sectors D4 to D8 would have been reached from the end of Gallery C through a narrow passage that connected with the surface, or even from the eastern series. Some remains of representations painted in red and sienna are found in very small passages near the access to western Sector D4. In a small chamber in the middle of a maze (D5), animals are engraved with single lines, with archaic style and conventions, associated with paired finger-marks in red. These are possibly the oldest panels in the whole cave.

Final assessment

In the past, Cueva de La Pasiega had three usable entrances, although the cave must have been difficult to reach from Cueva de El Castillo and even more so from the valley bottom, owing to the steepness of the hillside where it is situated. The remains of industry and fauna belong to the Solutrean and lower Magdalenian, and most of the representations also correspond to that period (21,000-

14,500 BP). The Magdalenian style of some animals painted in black and engraved is supported by C14 AMS determinations, which mark the end of artistic production at a little before 12,000 BP.

A total of 41 decorated sectors have been differentiated. The inventory includes over 800 Palaeolithic representations. Among the figures there are 78 horses, 72 hinds, 34 ibices, 28 stags, 18 bison, 15 aurochs, 2 reindeer, 2 anthropomorphs, 2 bovids and 3 indeterminate cervids, as well as a carnivore, chamois, giant deer, bird and fish, and 42 indeterminate quadrupeds. There are also 148 complex signs, above all quadrilaterals, crescents and claviforms, and 32 isolated dots or group of dots. Finally, there are also 284 stains of red or black paint and engraved marks.

The techniques employed were diverse: dotted and simple painted lines, partial or complete colour-wash occasionally complemented with engraving, and bichrome paintings. The ways of applying red pigment were more varied than those employed in the black paintings. Yellow, brown and violet were also used. The engravings are equally varied and become more frequent in the Magdalenian.

Marcos García-Diez * &
Daniel Garrido Pimentel **

Cueva de las Monedas (Puente Viesgo, Cantabria)

This cave, situated in the hill of Monte Castillo, was discovered in 1952. It is 700m long, and contains a number of large chambers as well as evidence of geological processes. Information about its archaeological remains comes from non-systematic research and is scanty. It is known to contain bear bones and pits indicating that these animals hibernated in the cave, humans visited the cave at certain times in the Palaeolithic and also occupied it occasionally in the Bronze Age, and the cave was visited during the sixteenth century AD.

The oldest evidence, for which there is no scientific agreement about its anthropic or natural origin, is located on a column in the entrance chamber. A bison, a mask, a caprid and a hind's head appear to be represented with deep wide engraved lines which, in combination with the rock surface, give the impression of a low relief.

Off the second chamber, a passage contains almost all the black charcoal figures in the cave. They are found in a small space, contrasting with the great size of the chamber, where the figures are located on the walls and a false ceiling. On the right, at the end

* Dpto. Geografía, Prehistoria y Arqueología, Universidad del País Vasco. c/ Tomás y Valiente s/n, 01006 Vitoria (España). marcos.garcia@ehu.es

** Cuevas Prehistóricas de Cantabria, Sociedad Regional de Educación, Cultura y Deporte, Gobierno de Cantabria. Cuevas de Monte Castillo, 39670 Puente Viesgo (Cantabria). daniel.garrido@srecd.es