

Calum Hazell, 2022 Travel Award Winner

### **Palaeolithic Cave Sites in Cantabria**

In June 2022, I was the privileged recipient of a Royal Holloway Travel Award which enabled me to visit a series of Palaeolithic cave sites across Cantabria, Northern Spain. Since returning to the UK from my 5-day trip, I have written a 20,000 word thesis chapter, initiated a new multimedia art project, and begun to develop two academic papers based upon my findings. None of this recent work would have been possible without the generous financial support provided by the RHUL Travel Award scheme, and I am truly grateful for the opportunities it has provided and experiences it has facilitated.

Two of the chapters in my (soon-to-be submitted) PhD thesis are concerned with speculatively diagnosing, decentring, and displacing prevailing understandings of human being with recourse to the work of art. One of these chapters approaches this topic via contemporary practices, and the other with recourse to Palaeolithic parietal images. Whilst conducting preparatory researches for the latter to support my line of inquiry, it soon became clear to me that the series of caves situated in Cantabria detail some of the most important and accessible examples for my purposes.

In part, this is because several geometric and abstract inscriptions found at these sites (most notably the finger flutings, negative hand impressions, and ochre disks at El Castillo and La Pasiega) have recently been attributed to Neanderthals. This insight is of special significance for my research, not least because it both challenges long-held assumptions that treat artifaction and symbolic mark-making as exclusively human endeavours, and undermines (more or less ubiquitous) anthropocentric identifications of cave painting with the dawn of human creativity and culture.

Through the conversations I held with locals, tour guides, and experts at the National Museum Research Centre at Altamira, and the time I spent exploring the Cantabrian landscape and several of its innumerable caves, I began to realise that the painted and engraved images discovered in the latter comprise but one aspect of the challenge the worlds of the Lower and Upper Palaeolithic articulate for our understandings of what counts as human in the present.

As Jean Clottes has noted, for instance,

the term “cave art” is commonly used to designate Paleolithic art. This is both true and false. It is false in the sense that the overwhelming majority of the images were produced in daylight, either in rock shelters or on freestanding rocks. In our current state of knowledge, about half—one would be tempted to say *only* half—of known Paleolithic art is found in the total darkness of deep caves. For the most part, the other sites are rock shelters, individual rocks, or cliff faces. With the exception of the engraved rock at Campome in France (Pyrénées-Orientales), the latter type has been found only in Spain (Siega Verde, Piedras Blancas) and, especially, Portugal (Côa Valley with its thousands of engravings, Mazouco). It is notable that these are all engravings and that they are located only in the southernmost parts of Europe. Two obvious inferences follow from this: *paintings* are not preserved at all in open-air sites and generally quite poorly in shelters; open-air *engravings* have only exceptionally been able to withstand the elements, under milder climatic conditions and when permitted by the manner of their exposure. Accordingly, we clearly have at our disposal only a minute and biased portion of Paleolithic parietal art.<sup>1</sup>

Another inference that appears to follow from Clottes’s corrective is that we do not know the significance of the cave site insofar as the production of images in the Palaeolithic is concerned. Which is to say that if

despite the lack of evidence, it is logical to imagine that numerous paintings, engravings and drawings were made in the open air [at Monte Castillo], but geological and environmental processes have weathered the rock surfaces and removed similar depictions to those we can admire in caves such as El Castillo<sup>2</sup>

then the paintings, engravings, and drawings *we can in fact admire* might describe a *lusus naturae* under which other such ‘tricks’ are played out in the present. The Palaeolithic cave site is a found object that emerges at the limits between its singular significance and statistical anomalousness for the entrapment, derangement, and deflation of contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Clottes, *What is Paleolithic Art?*, 95.

<sup>2</sup> García Díez et al., *Monte Castillo*, 25-6.

human thought. In future work and ongoing researches, thanks to the RHUL Travel Award, I will continue to follow these lines of inquiry.