

Palaeolithic cave art found in Britain

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In April 2003 Britain's first unequivocal Palaeolithic cave art was discovered by a team comprising Paul Bahn, Sergio Ripoll and myself. Although we undertook an initial survey of several caves across the British south and midlands, we found art only in Creswell Crags, a narrow gorge to the south of Sheffield that runs east to west and forms part of the border between the counties of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire.



The discovery results from the initial phase of a collaboration between the UK (Bahn, Pettitt) and the Spanish Open University in Madrid (Ripoll). We undertook a selective survey of the accessible walls of Church Hole, Robin Hood's Cave, Mother Grundy's Parlour and Pin Hole (all part of the Creswell Crags site), and found engravings in both the cave mouth and deeper phreatic tube of Church Hole. Following the initial discovery, published as a preliminary note in *Antiquity* (Volume 77, June 2003), we returned in June to undertake a systematic survey of all accessible caves at Creswell, as well as to record properly the engravings we had found. This has been generously supported by English Heritage, a collaboration we hope will continue into the future as we broaden our search nation-wide. The discovery dispels the dogma that no cave art would be found in Britain, and

opens up a new paradigm in which archaeologists will take the surveying of caves for art very seriously.

As it stands, we have some ten clear images engraved onto the walls of Church Hole (with one in Robin Hood's Cave) and several engraved lines. The most obvious is a c 45 cm long figure of an ibex, which uses a natural solution hole as an eye and a small lump as the mouth, but otherwise is formed of shallow incisions covered in places by thin flowstone. This is itself overlain by graffiti dating to 1948, of a much sharper definition, profile and colour. Some 17 metres into the cave, in the narrow phreatic tube to the rear of the cave mouth, we found the engraving of four separate long necked birds, perhaps swans. These form



Picture of Church Hole ibex, courtesy of Sergio Ripoll

one composition and are remarkably similar stylistically. Small flecks of charcoal eroding out of what remains of the Late Upper Palaeolithic archaeological deposit below, spotted by Dr Roger Jacobi of the British Museum, indicate that activity was clearly occurring in this part of the cave during the period in which we believe the art was executed. Several other examples of figurative art came to light during the systematic survey, including another, smaller, ibex and a bovid (probably an aurochs). The location of most of the art in the same area of the cave mouth suggests some connection between the existing images, although anything further would of course be speculation.

We can rule out the possibility that the art is a forgery. Many of the figures are overlain by flowstone formation, suggestive of a great antiquity of the works. The condition of all examples of Palaeolithic engravings is very different from engravings made in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The ibex clearly must pre-date 1948, before which examples of forgeries of cave art are very rare. In addition we believe the choice of ibex for such a forgery is improbable. We believe that the art dates to the Creswellian, the regional name for the Late Upper Palaeolithic of Britain which is well dated to the earlier part of the Late Glacial Interstadial, ie, between 12,000 and 12,500 (uncal) BP. The Creswellian, so named due to the importance of Creswell Crags as an occupational focus in this period, shares a number of characteristics with its contemporary continental counterparts such as the Late Magdalenian and Federmessergruppen. We selected caves to survey for potential art on the grounds of evidence of Creswellian occupation, ie, with the belief that if any caves would yield art it would be those occupied during this period. It is apparent to us that the Church Hole art shares a number of similarities with examples on the continent, which we are now investigating more fully. In this sense the discovery adds to the notion that the groups operating in the UK towards the end of the Pleistocene were either the same as those operating in France, the Netherlands, Belgium,



Picture of the Church Hole birds, courtesy of Sergio Ripoll

Germany and the Doggerland under what is now the North Sea, or at least were intimately connected with them.

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