

A Palaeolithic star chart, or stars in our eyes?

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“The oldest image of a star pattern, that of the famous constellation of Orion, has been recognised on an ivory tablet some 32,500 years old. The tiny sliver of mammoth tusk contains a carving of a man-like figure with arms and legs outstretched in the same pose as the stars of Orion.”

So opened the science and technology news of the BBC World Service website for 21/1/03. This claim has been made by Dr Michael Rappenglueck, described as “formerly of the University of Munich, who is already renowned for his pioneering work locating star charts painted on the walls of prehistoric caves”.

The interpretation relates not to a newly discovered piece, but to one of several carvings on mammoth ivory excavated in the Geißenklösterle Cave (Ach Valley, southern Germany) in an Aurignacian horizon that seems well-dated to ca 32-35,000 BP. Central to Rappenglueck’s claim is the pose of this bas relief carving of an anthropoid shape on the flat ‘face’ of the c 14 cm long fragment. This depicts a human like figure standing with its legs apart, the left (as one views it) slightly more flexed than the right, and its arms raised above its head, the right (again as one looks) slightly higher. To Rappenglueck, “the proportions of the man correspond to the pattern of stars that comprise Orion, especially its slim waist - which corresponds to its famous belt of three stars and the left “leg” of the constellation being shorter”. An apparent “sword” hangs between the figure’s legs, and the waist is seen as “thin”, both of which Rappenglueck further links to Orion. Thus, Rappenglueck believes, Orion,



After Delporte, H 1993.
L'image de la femme dans
l'art préhistorique. Paris:
Picard:128

possibly even in his guise as the “hunter”, may date back to the early Aurignacian.

I have not personally viewed this relief. A high quality colour photograph of the item (reproduced in Müller-Beck and Albrecht 1987 Plate 9b) does, however, permit me to make some comments on Rappenglueck’s interpretation. The relief is highly eroded, and the ‘granular’ structure of the mammoth ivory support has clearly dictated the manner in which the carved surface has eroded, leaving a number of what appear to be deeply incised lines running from the top to the bottom of the piece. One of these is the supposed ‘sword’. It appears to me that this feature, therefore, is natural. Even if we were to assume without examining the piece that this were deliberately carved, I need not

remind Palaeolithic archaeologists that the nearest items potentially resembling 'swords' are the serially mounted flint blades on mammoth ivory rods on sites such as Avdeevo on the Russian Plain, at least 10,000 years younger than the Geißenklösterle relief. Again, if it were an intentional feature of the figure, given the attention to vulvas in other Aurignacian art, should it not better be interpreted as phallic? The waist is no 'narrower' than the entire torso up to the beginning of the arms, thus no specific rendering of the three stars that comprise Orion's belt is visible. The 'attitude' of the figure is reminiscent of the broadly similarly aged 'Dancing Venus' from the Galgenberg, Austria, which it would be pushing interpretation somewhat to see in the same way. The Geißenklösterle figure also bears several deeply incised lines on its left arm (right as we view it) which recall those on the left arm of the Aurignacian 'lion-anthropomorph' from the Hohlenstein-Stadel. It is tempting to interpret

these as tattoos, scarification or bracelets. If this is so, unless Rappenglueck believes he can see bracelets in the constellation of Orion – a feature that would have escaped astronomers for millennia - it is surely more parsimonious to view this as the representation of a human, rather than the anthropomorphisation of a group of stars?

Whilst it is not inconceivable that certain constellations were given importance by early modern human hunters, perhaps even Orion given its clarity in the night sky, this is hardly a convincing interpretation. We should rather celebrate the carving's importance as a very early – and very rare – celebration of the human form, for whatever reason that will always be unknown to us. Rappenglueck's interpretation is perhaps not surprising given current fashions in the interpretation of Palaeolithic art: it is only a short step from shamans to stars. And like entoptic hallucinations I rather think Rappenglueck has seen too many of these before his eyes.

Muller-Beck, H & Albrecht, G 1987. *Die Anfänge der Kunst vor 30,000 Jahren*. Stuttgart: Theiss Verlag.
