

Press release
30 March 2023

A Magdalenian “*origine du monde*” ...

Between Nîmes and Arles, a team of Inrap archaeologists discovered Upper Paleolithic engravings at the site of Bellegarde (Gard, Southeastern France). The depictions include horses profiles made on small limestone slabs. The location and age of these discoveries are exceptional. Portable art is very rare in southeastern France and completely unexpected on the edge of the Camargue region. These works date to the very beginning of the Magdalenian (20,000 years BCE) and are thus some of the oldest art works known for this Paleolithic culture, along with the paintings and engravings in Lascaux Cave.

Portable art the same age as Lascaux

In general, portable art (made on transportable objects) is more common in the Aquitaine Basin and the Pyrenees, and is much more often found in caves than in open-air campsites, as is the case reported here. At Bellegarde, the oldest depictions (Lower Magdalenian, 20,000 years BCE) are horses profiles. One of the decorated slabs has a single horse profile, with many precise anatomical details: nostrils, mouth, jawbone, eye, mane, and ears. The other object has three juxtaposed horse profiles with eyes, jawbones, and cheeks. The way in which the ears of one of the horses are depicted—consisting of small straight segments, or “antennas”—is a stylistic trait found in some caves in the Ardèche, as well as in Cosquer Cave in Marseille and Lascaux in the Dordogne.

An exceptional female representation

In a later level (Middle Magdalenian, 16,000 years BCE), an exceptional engraving has been interpreted as a vulva, depicted in an exaggerated and disproportionate manner, framed by the upper legs. Isolated vulva representations are known on stone slabs and blocks at a few older sites (Aurignacian) in the Dordogne. In the Magdalenian, most of the examples recorded thus far are made on cave and rock shelter walls in Spain and south-western France. This configuration found at Bellegarde, associating a pubic triangle and two legs, is exceptional since only one other specimen is known, located on a wall in the Cazelle Cave in the Dordogne.

Artistic representations on large upright slabs

Fine, more difficult to interpret, incisions were also observed on a large slab measuring approximately 50 cm at its greatest length. This piece was discovered broken on an occupation floor among a very large number of knapped flint pieces. This object represents an extremely rare and little known form of artistic expression as it suggests an art form made on an upright stone slab, displayed within a domestic space. Visible to all, this piece is very different from the paintings and engravings in decorated caves, which were probably largely inaccessible to “ordinary” people. Because it would have been difficult to transport, this piece is also not a portable art object.

The Magdalenian of Bellegarde

The Paleolithic site of Bellegarde was explored across approximately 2,000 m² by Inrap archaeologists in 2016. The extension of a landfill waste site prompted a

preventive excavation. The site contains an exceptional succession of occupations divided into five large phases encompassing around 6,000 years and covering nearly all of the Magdalenian, from 20,000 to 14,000 years BCE. The sequence has yielded 17, remarkably coherent 14C dates. Due to these homogeneous, representative, and well-dated assemblages, Bellegarde will become a reference site at the regional and national level.

A total of 24,000 liters of sediments have been water-sieved, enabling the collection of a large number of flint tools and weapons, sometimes made on very small microbladelets. The meticulous excavation and sorting of sieved sediments yielded information concerning the site's paleoenvironment. Reindeer bones indicated a cold climate. Temperatures lower than current ones are confirmed by the presence of sylvester pine and birch charcoal. Several occupation levels also yielded small perforated shells originating from the banks of the Mediterranean Sea. Some of these shells bear use-wear indicating they were worn as beads, suspended or sewn onto clothing.

Geographically, the site is located near the border between two regions considered as distinct cultural zones delimited by the lower Rhône and the Durance. To the west and north, there is a zone associated with the classic textbook succession of Prehistoric cultures: Aurignacian, Gravettian, Solutrean, Magdalenian, and Azilian. To the southeast, the Epigravettian succeeds the Gravettian, and some of its specific technical and cultural traits continue until the end of the Late Upper Paleolithic. The industries, ornaments, and engraved art works of Bellegarde provide an opportunity to investigate the relevance of this bipartition since the stylistic elements are similar to the artistic representations of the second occupation phase in the cave of Cosquer, located in the heart of the Epigravettian territory.

A regularly occupied site

The Bellegarde operation consisted of five excavation zones covering 6 hectares. In addition to the Late Paleolithic occupations, others dating to late Prehistory (Early, Middle and Final Neolithic), Protohistory (Bronze and Iron Ages), Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Era were also excavated.

Nearly one thousand structures were exhumed. Some of these define habitation, storage, and craft units, while others are associated with the agrarian exploitation of the region. Finally, during the 5th millennium BCE, human groups sometimes buried their dead.

These discontinuous but repeated occupations attest to the attractiveness of this location: it is well situated at the piedmont of the Costières, near a spring, and opens onto the Camargue plain and, depending on the period, the Mediterranean coast a few kilometers away. Wood and water were available, along with underground resources (clay, sandy limestone, and cobbles), some of which were used to make tools or were transformed in place into construction materials.

Inrap

The French National Institute for Preventive Archaeological Research is a public institute under the tutelage of the Ministries of Culture and Research. It identifies and studies archaeological heritage sites in advance of development projects, each year conducting some 1,800 diagnostic operations and more than 2000 excavations on behalf of private and public developers in metropolitan France and its overseas territories. Its work also includes the scientific analysis and interpretation of excavation data and the transmission of archaeological knowledge. Its 2,200 agents, distributed among eight regional and interregional directorates, 42 research centers and the headquarters in Paris, constitute the largest archaeological research operator in Europe.

Developer Sita-Sud **Suez Environnement**

Curation **Regional Archaeology Service (Drac Occitanie)**

Archaeological Research **Inrap**

Site director **Marilyne Bovagne, Inrap**

Paleolithic operation director **Vincent Mourre, Inrap**

Paleolithic sector directors **Christophe Fourloubey and David Colonge, Inrap**

Study of artistic objects **Oscar Fuentes, Centre National de Préhistoire (CNP)**

Contact

Mahaut Tyrrell

Media relation officer

Inrap, Direction du développement culturel et de la communication

+33 6 07 40 59 77 – mahaut.tyrrell@inrap.fr