

DECORATIVE PATTERNS IN THE MOUSTERIAN OF CUEVA MORIN

by

J. GONZÁLEZ ECHEGARAY *

1. PRESENTATION

The discovery of decorated bone pieces among the materials recovered from Mousterian levels at Cueva Morín (Cantabria, Spain) has already been noted in several publications (FREEMAN, 1978, 1983; FREEMAN and GONZÁLEZ ECHEGARAY, 1983; GONZÁLEZ ECHEGARAY and FREEMAN, 1978). Such pieces make up a very small part of a much larger assemblage of worked bone items whose artifactual nature cannot appropriately be challenged by anyone who has not examined the pieces at first hand.

Before proceeding, we must briefly remind the reader of the Middle Paleolithic stratigraphy of Cueva Morín, so that necessary allusions to the levels made in the course of these pages will be understandable. The stratigraphic series, from bottom up, is as follows:

- Level 22 - Indeterminate Mousterian. Moist, temperate climatic conditions. Fauna including *Dicerorhinus hemitoechus*.
- Level 17 (Lower) - Denticulate Mousterian. Moist temperate climate.
- Level 17 (Upper) - Typical Mousterian with cleaver-flakes. Cold climate (possibly the so-called Würm II of the French authors). Fauna including *Dicerorhinus hemitoechus*.
- Level 16 - Typical Mousterian with cleaver-flakes. Cold climate. Fauna principally bovines and equids.
- Level 15 - Typical Mousterian with few cleaver-flakes. Temperate climate. Fauna includes roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*).
- Level 14/13 - Less characteristic Typical Mousterian with a few cleaver-flakes. Temperate climate.
- Level 12 & 11 - Denticulate Mousterian. Temperate climate, possibly corresponding, as do the immediately preceding levels, to the so-called Hengelo stage.

These levels are followed in sequence by Chatelperronian and later Upper Paleolithic horizons (GONZÁLEZ ECHEGARAY and FREEMAN, 1971).

The greater part of the worked bone pieces were recovered from level 17, but one decorated piece was also found in Level 22. From this level comes a small rib fragment with three pairs of inclined double grooves (Fig. 1). From Level 17 we have a flat bone fragment showing 6 inclined grooves (Fig. 2), another more massive fragment on whose smooth surface are seen various series of uniformly distributed rays (Fig. 3), and finally seven pieces with surface markings reminiscent of the decorations in Paleolithic cave art called "macaroni" (Fig. 4).

* Institute for Prehistoric Investigations, Av. Pontejos 9, 39005 Santander, Spain.

II. CLASSIFICATION

An examination of the bone pieces in this collection clearly reveals, despite the smallness of the sample, the presence of well-differentiated patterns of decoration. In the first place, the most surprising and best-differentiated type is that of the "macaroni" – marked pieces, which offer obvious analogies with similar decorations in rock art, and especially with examples considered to represent the most remote period of the Upper Paleolithic. Confining ourselves to the limits of the Cantabrian region, the intricate series of intersecting meander patterns observed on some of the Morín bones may best be compared with certain works of parietal art in the caves of Hornos de la Peña, La Clotilde, Las Chimeneas and Altamira. At the present time, there are no known parallels in mobile art, although the outlines of a head, apparently that of a bovine, on a "baguette" from Hornos de la Peña, are perhaps reminiscent in their sinuous form, of such macaroni. This comparison is in any case somewhat dubious, since, as BARANDIARÁN has noted (1973: 134), that figure has more in common with certain engraved objects from the Magdalenian IV of the Pyrenees.

Another evident pattern consists in the repetition of series of paired incisions, one of each pair larger than the other (Fig. 1). The third is a sequence of slanted striations with barbed points, illustrated in Fig. 2. The piece illustrated in Fig. 3 is marked with repeated groups of two or three incisions on one of the smooth surfaces of the bone; other surfaces bear series separated by empty spaces of equal size, even though the number of marks in each group is irregular.

While the regular repetition of series of incisions is a well-known motif in decorations of Upper Paleolithic mobile art objects, nevertheless the specific details of these Mousterian marks distinguish them from all but a very small number of these Upper Paleolithic analogs. For example, in the Upper Paleolithic, comparable series most frequently consist of sets of more than three elements (MARSHACK, 1972), while in these pieces elements most frequently appear in pairs, as is also the case for parietal art (LEROI-GOURHAN, 1958, 1958a). A small number of pieces with paired incisions is found in Paleolithic mobile art from the Cantabrian region: for example, on the bevelled base of a spear point from Lumentxa, or on some spearpoints from Urtiaga and Cueto de la Mina, and on a few decorated bones from Bolinkoba (BARANDIARÁN, 1973: Plates 1, 3, 4, 9, 41 and 62). What is more, barbed lines in Upper Paleolithic art more frequently "Y"-shaped than pointed.

In any case, except for certain details of execution, the types of decoration found in the Mousterian pieces from Mousterian levels at Morín fall broadly within the limits of variation of European Upper Paleolithic motifs, and were previously practically unknown in the Middle Paleolithic (FREEMAN, 1978).

III. DISCUSSION

In spite of all the discussions and arguments presented in the references cited above, we are now of the opinion that the majority of the so-called macaroni on Mousterian bone from Cueva Morín may in fact have been produced by natural causes (GONZÁLEZ ECHEGARAY and FREEMAN, 1978: 261-262), even though the nature of those causes has still not been clarified (we have considered worm-trails, bacterial destruction, impressions of blood-vessels, etc.). Nevertheless, each of them bears some marks that are deliberate products of human activity. Their stratigraphic position, in Mousterian levels in association with other deliberately marked bones, is absolutely unquestionable.

In the case of the piece illustrated in Fig. 1, production by human agency is undeniable, and given the regularity of the marks, they seem most likely to be intentionally

decorative, whatever other motives for their production there may have been (ideological, religious, recreational, etc.). The characteristics of its markings seem to rule out accidental production in the course of execution of other activities (such as cutting some material such as cord or skin at regular intervals with the bone as a support). Nonetheless, given the fact that the piece was recovered from a deep level known only in the walls of a sondage, rather than from a major horizontal exposure, as is the case for the other pieces, its stratigraphic situation cannot be said to be as completely certain as in the other cases discussed here.

The stratigraphic position of pieces number 2 and 3, found in the course of careful exposure of Level 17, is on the other hand absolutely certain. They were found in a Mousterian occupation surface, which was exposed only after overlying Upper Paleolithic levels had been removed from the excavated area. While it is always possible, excavating vertically in a deep trench, that some items from upper levels may manage to fall out of place to contaminate lower horizons, this cannot happen when there are no overlying levels that can serve as sources of contaminants.

On the surface of piece number 2, there are a number of shallow, chaotically placed striations that may have been produced unintentionally, by pressure from sediments, or non-decorative manipulation of the fresh bone. These disorganized traces clearly contrast with the deeper, more regular sequence of barbed lines, that obviously resulted from some intentional prehistoric human activity with "decorative" intent, in the broadest sense of the word. In the case of piece number 3, we must also distinguish between superficial and readily visible "accidental" use striations, and the series of intentional markings, even though on this piece decorative intent is less obvious than in the case of piece 2.

CONCLUSIONS

The rich Mousterian from Cueva Morín, at present the most carefully excavated and well documented multicomponent Middle Paleolithic site in the Iberian peninsula, has provided a small collection of engraved bones that are perfectly differentiated from the other bones that are simply worked, used, or naturally altered (by carnivore gnawing, for example). While these engravings are somewhat similar to those that appear on certain Upper Paleolithic bone pieces, they nevertheless conform to patterns that are idiosyncratic and relatively original.

An exhaustive and rigorous discussion of the details of each and every one of these pieces might lead to the rejection of particular ones for reasons having to do with uncertainties in stratigraphic attribution or the fact that we cannot be absolutely certain that there is convincing evidence for decorative intent. On the other hand, these artifacts cannot all be so easily dismissed. In any case, the patterns shown by the most convincing representatives of the series reinforce the interpretation of its less convincing members, making the intentional decorative nature of marks in the assemblage as a whole more likely.

Thus it seems that "artistic decoration" on bone pieces, until now considered the exclusive domain of Upper Paleolithic humanity, and one more manifestation of the symbolic capacity of the modern mind, already existed, albeit in a more primitive and simple, but nevertheless real, form among peoples of the Middle Paleolithic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BARANDIARÁN I., 1973. *Arte Mueble del Paleolítico Cantábrico*. Zaragoza, Universidad de Zaragoza.
- FREEMAN L.G., 1971. El Hueso Trabajado Musteriense de Cueva Morín. In: GONZÁLEZ ECHEGARAY J. and L.G. FREEMAN (eds.), *Cueva Morín, Excavaciones 1966-1968*: 135-161. Santander, Patronato de las Cuevas Prehistóricas.
- FREEMAN L.G., 1978. Mousterian Worked Bone from Cueva Morín. In: FREEMAN L.G. (ed.), *Views of the Past*: 29-51. The Hague, Mouton.
- FREEMAN L.G., 1983. More on the Mousterian: Flaked Bone from Cueva Morín. *Current Anthropology* 24: 366-372.
- FREEMAN L.G. and J. GONZÁLEZ ECHEGARAY, 1983. Tally-marked Bone from Mousterian Levels at Cueva Morín. In: FORTEA J. (ed.), *Homenaje al Prof. Martín Almagro Basch*: 143-147. Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura.
- GONZÁLEZ ECHEGARAY J. and L.G. FREEMAN, 1971. *Cueva Morín. Excavaciones 1966-1968*. Santander, Patronato de las Cuevas Prehistóricas.
- GONZÁLEZ ECHEGARAY J. and L.G. FREEMAN, 1978. *Vida y Muerte en Cueva Morín*. Santander, Institución Cultural de Cantabria.
- LEROI-GOURHAN A., 1958. La fonction des signes dans les sanctuaires paléolithiques. *Bulletin Société Préhistorique Française* 55: 307-321.
- LEROI-GOURHAN A., 1958a. Le symbolisme des grands signes dans l'art pariétal paléolithique. *Bulletin Société Préhistorique Française* 55: 394-398.
- MARSHACK A., 1972. *Les Racines de la Civilisation*. Paris, Plon.



FIGURE 1

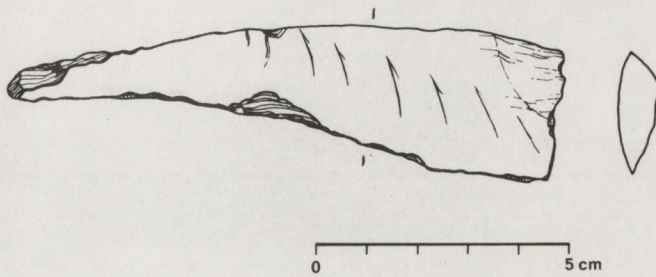


FIGURE 2

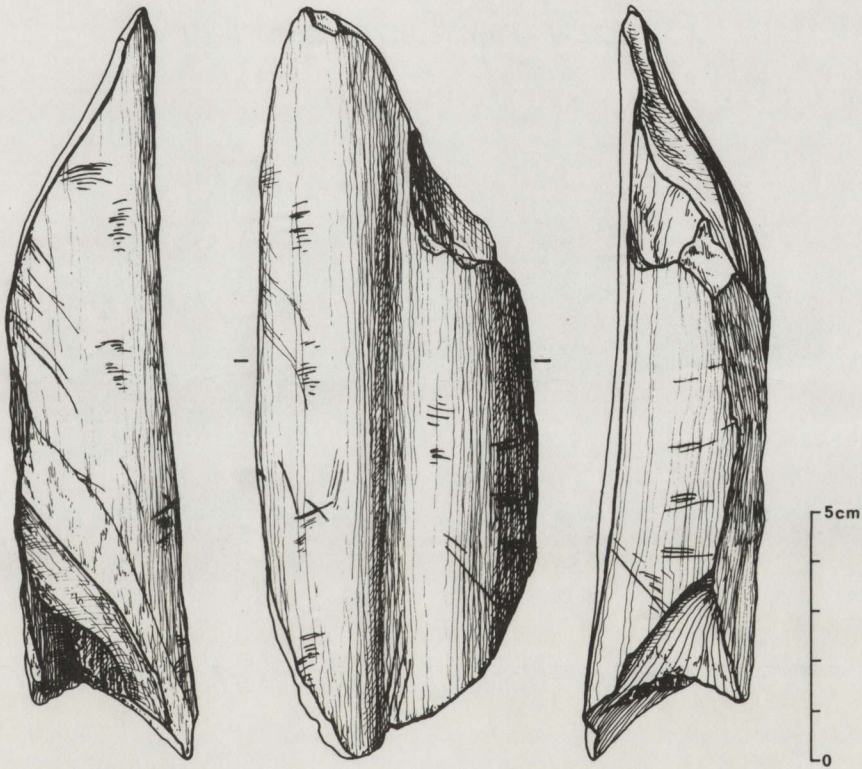


FIGURE 3

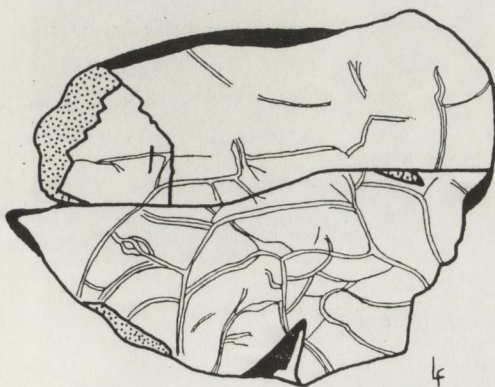


FIGURE 4

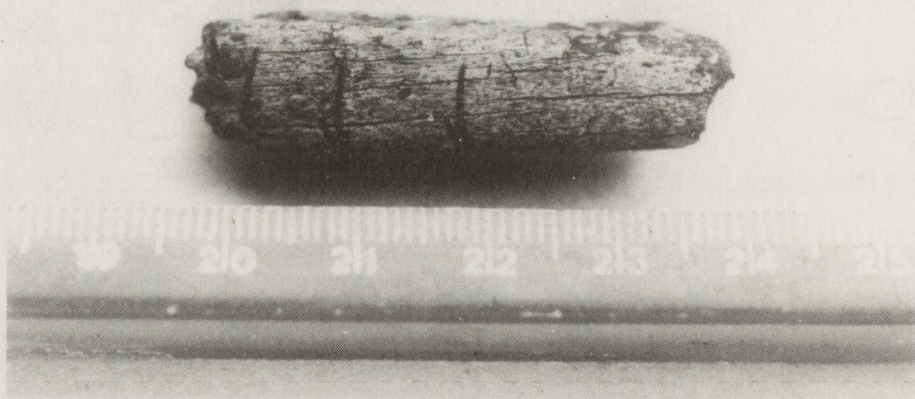


PLATE 1 – Engraved rib fragment of Fig. 1

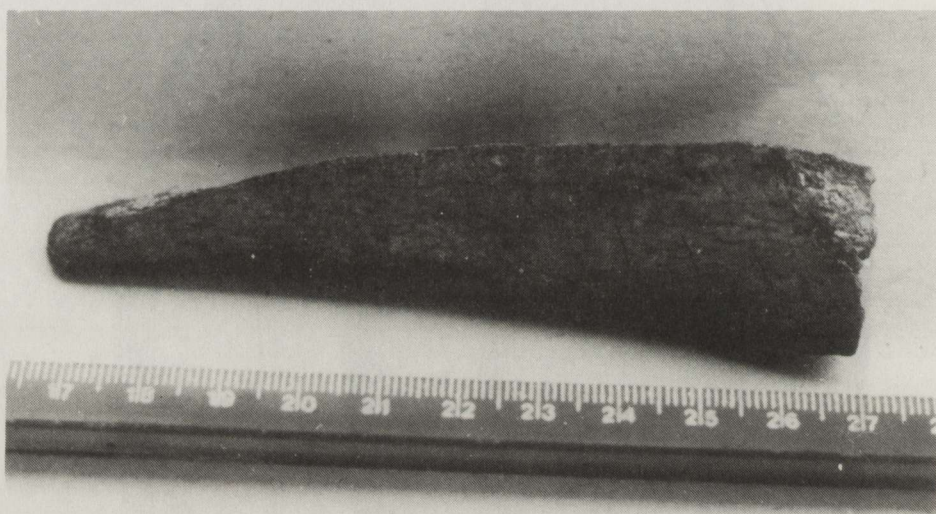


PLATE 2 – Engraved bone fragment of Fig. 2

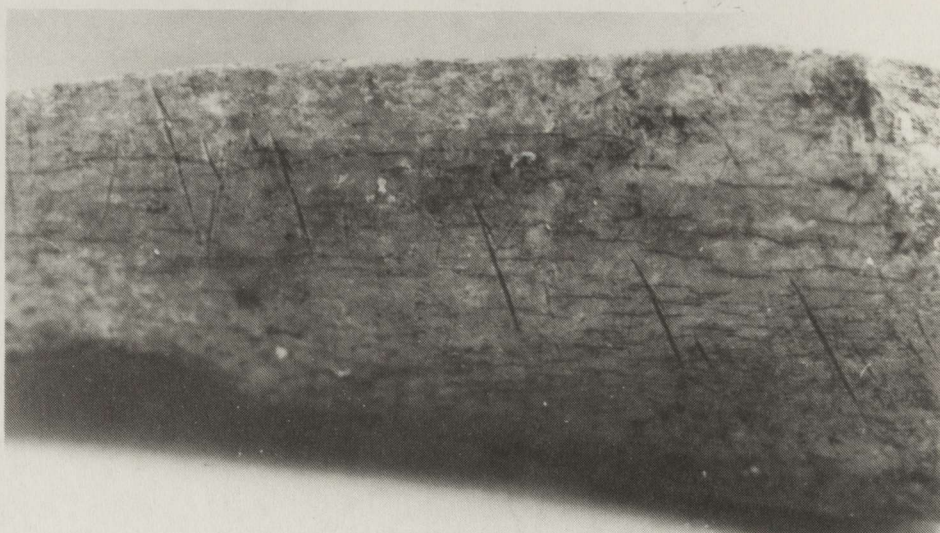


PLATE 3 – Engraved bone fragment of Fig. 2