The Epigravettian funeral structure of the Villabruna Shelter A: a tendency to mythicize the dead?

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Résumé

La structure funéraire épigravettienne de l'Abri Villabruna A: vers la création d'un mythe?

La démolition d'un grand conoïde détritique adossé à une paroi rocheuse le long du flanc gauche de la Vallée du Cismon (Dolomites de la Vénétie), à 500 m d'altitude, a mis au jour trois abris remplis par les éboulis, dans lesquels s'intercalaient plusieurs niveaux archéologiques. Les fréquentations les plus anciennes datent du Tardiglaciaire et s'encadrent dans le processus de pénétration des chasseurs épigravettiens dans les Alpes après le recul du glacier würmien. La fouille de la couche inférieure de l'Abri A, datée 12.040±125 B.P., a montré une fosse de forme a peu près rectangulaire, où avait été déposé en position étendue, couché sur le dos, le corps d'un individu de sexe masculin décédé à 25 ans. Un sac contenant six objets qui constituaient probablement le bagage habituel du chasseur avait été déposé sur l'avant-bras gauche. Après la déposition du corps? la fosse fut remplie de terreau, puis couverte de pierres, disposées l'une à coté de l'autre. Ces pierres, recueillies sur la grève des torrents Cismon et Rosna, à proximité du site, sont constituées de grands morceaux de calcarénite du Lias, arrondis par le transport hydrique. Quelques-uns présentent des zones faiblement teintées d'ocre; quatre des motifs peints. Des différentes observations nous suggèrent que autrefois des autres pierres de la couverture étaient peintes. La paroi de l'abri a été également décorée autour de la sépulture par des bandes verticales peintes à l'ocre rouge. Donc nous pouvons classer l'inhumation de l'Abri Villabruna A comme "sépulture-monument".

La couverture-tumulus contient des pierres décorées, dont la pierre n° 2 peinte en fonction de sa mise en place dans la couverture: elle est donc étroitement liée à la sépulture. Le motif peint appartient aux représentations dites schématiques, et présente des affinités avec les schémas hyperanthropiques de la préhistoire récente. Le schéma pourrait symboliser le chasseur mort, et exalter ses qualités par la répétition des lignes représentant les membres. Si on accepte cette hypothèse, la sépulture de l'Abri Villabruna A anticiperait à la fin du Paléolithique un aspect du culte des morts qui ne se développera que au cours de la protohistoire.

Zusammenfassung

Die Struktur des epigravietiènezeitlichen Grabes von Riparo Villabruna: eine Tendenz zur Mythizierung?

Der Abbruch eines Schuttkegels an einer Felswand an der linken Seite des Cismon Tales (Venezianische Dolomiten) auf einer Höhe von 500 m, hat drei Abris ans Tageslicht gebracht, die fast zur Gänze von den Schuttmassen zerstoßen worden waren. Unter diesen Schuttmassen sind verschiedene archäologische Schichten eingelagert worden. Die ältesten „Begehungsspuren" stammen aus der späten Würmeiszeit und schließen an das Auftauchen der eipgravetiènezeitlichen Jäger nach dem Rückzug des würmeiszeitlichen Gletschers an. Die freigelegte unterste Schicht von Riparo A datiert um 12.040±125 BP. Es kam eine annähernd rechteckige Grube zum Vorschein, in welcher sich die Reste eines ausgestreckt bestatteten Menschen, welcher im Alter von 25 Jahren verstorben war, befanden. In einem Sack über dem linken Unterarm wurden sechs Gegenstände gefunden, die wahrscheinlich zu seiner „Standardausstattung" gehörten. Die Grube war danach mit Erdmaterial gefüllt und schließlich mit übereinandergeschichteten Steinen bedeckt worden. Diese Steine waren in unmittelbarer Nähe in den Sandgruben der Flüsse Rosna und Cismon gesammelt worden. Dabei handelt es sich um große Kalkbachsteine aus dem Lias. Einige von diesen Steinen weisen an der Oberfläche leichte Ockerfarbspuren auf, vier der aufgemalten Motive sind gut erkennbar. Weitere Beobachtungen zeigen, dass ursprünglich auch andere Abdecksteine bemalt gewesen waren. Dies in einer Art, so dass das Ganze an der Oberfläche, als Mosaik geformt, gut sichtbar war. Auch die Wand des Unterstandes war rund um die Bestattung mit vertikalen Streifen aus rotem Ocker bemalt. Daher können wir die Bestattung am Riparo Villabruna A als Bestattungsdenkmal bezeichnen.

Einige der Grabhügeldecksteine sind verziert; Stein Nr. 2 war bestimmt im Zusammenhang mit seiner Funktion als Deckstein bemalt. Er war auf jeden Fall mit der Bestattung eng verbunden. Das Motiv der Malerei gehört in den schematischen Bereich und stellt eine starke Anlehnung an hyperanthropomorphe Darstellungen der „jüngsten Prähistorie" dar. Das hyperanthropomorphe Schema" könnte den toten Jäger symbolisieren. Seine Fähigkeiten werden durch das Wiederholen der Linien, die die Künste darstellen, hervorgehoben.Wenn wir diese Hypothese akzeptieren, müssen wir daraus schließen, dass das Grab Riparo Villabruna A am oberen Ende des Paläolithikums einen Aspekt des Totenkultes vorweggenommen hat, der sich nur in frühgeschichtlicher Zeit entwickeln konnte.

The site in the context of the late glacial settlement of the Venetian Prealps and Alps

The Villabruna Rock Shelters are situated along the left side of the Cismon Valley (Venetian Dolomites, Sovramonte, Belluno Province), about 500 m above sea level. Twenty years ago, during straightening of the Grappa - Passo Rolle road, a large detrital fan leaning against a 100-metre-high rock face was demolished, upstream from the confluence of the Rosna - Cismon torrents.Three rock shelters came to light, almost completely filled by rubble, with several alternating horizons contain-

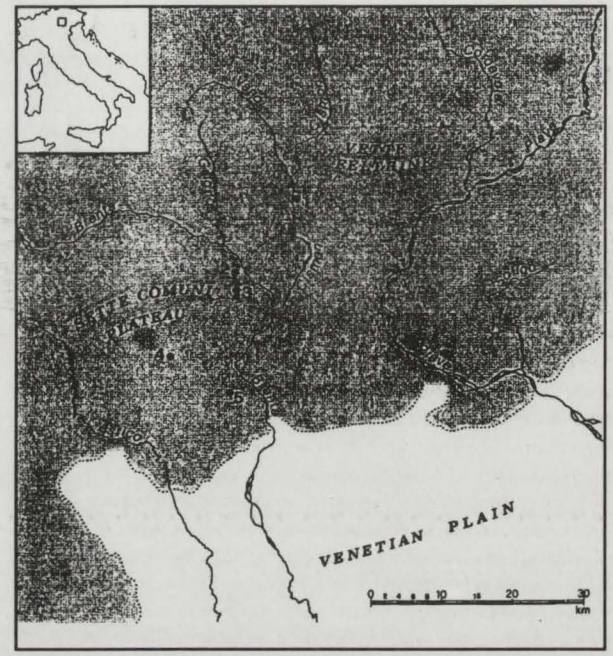

Figure 1. *Distribution of the main Late Glacial Age sites between the Astico and Piave Rivers. 1: Villabruna Shelters; 2: Dalmeri Shelter; 3: Marcesina; 4: Battaglia Shelter; 5: Val Lastari.*

ing signs of human settlement. Only a few strips of deposit sticking to the face were spared by the demolishers; these were reported by A. Villabruna in 1987, and were the object of systematic excavations in 1988-89.

From the very beginning of the excavations in 1988, a grave was recognized at the base of the lowest layer of the biggest shelter (Villabruna Shelter A). The 1988 excavation concerned the area where the burial was found; it was investigated over a total surface of about 1 square metre in the upper part (subunits 1 - 5), and about 5 square metres in the lower part (subunits 6 - 18). An interdisciplinary study of the deposits allowed the site to be collocated within the process of penetration by the late Epigravettian hunters into the Alpine region during the Late Würmian Glacial.

In the 20-km long section of the valley between the Fonzaso (300 m) and Primiero (800 m) plains runs the Cismon torrent, deeply embanked between steep slopes. During the maximum Upper Würmian Pleniglacial two thick tongues of ice ran through the Cismon and Belluna Valleys, joining in the Fonzaso Plain. Close to the Villabruna Shelters the glacier was around 500 m thick, as can be deduced from the Würmian moraine reported between 800 and 1100 m above sea level along the western side of Mount Avena. Following the regression of the glacier, the sides of the valley-freed of ice and still devoid of vegetation - were affected by distensive and cryoclastic phenomena, leading to the formation of fans. Simultaneously, the Cismon torrent began to cut into the gorge it runs through today. During the temperate interstads of the Late Würmian Glacial, as in other alpine valleys, the reascent of the vegetation and reappearance of ungulates created the necessary conditions for hunters.

The Villabruna Shelters can therefore be collocated in the Late Glacial Age sites of the Venetian Prealps and of the southern side of the Eastern Alps; the distribution of these sites suggests a gradual penetration of the Epigravettian hunters into the Alpine regions (Broglio and Lanzinger, 1996). This process began with the environmental modifications caused by the temperate-humid climate of the Bølling and Allerød pollen zones. The first settlements in the Soman Shelter (Adige Valley) and the Villabruna Shelters (Cismon Valley) date back to the end of the Bølling zone or beginning of the Allerød (^{14}C datings: Soman-lower 11,880±170 B.P.; Villabruna 16 12,040±125 B.P.). Numerous open-air sites and some rock shelters situated between 1000 and 1500 m, on the prealpine plateaux (^{14}C datings of the Dalmeri Shelter, at an altitude of 1250 m on the Sette Comuni Plateau: 11,260±100 B.P.), can also be attributed to the Allerød zone and Late Dryas. In the shelters, where the deposits have conserved animal remains, by far the most commonly hunted mammals were ibex , with the addition of red deer and other ungulates mainly in the valley sites. Red deer became more and more frequent in the valley sites, gradually predominating over all the other ungulates.

The excavations at the Villabruna Shelters have highlighted a series of settlement levels in Shelter A, of which the lower ones have been dated (Broglio and Improta, 1995).

Villabruna Shelter A			
layer 10A	*charcoal*	*AMS*	*UtC-1771*
11.910±160 BP		11.723÷13.961 AC	
layer 13	*charcoal*	*AMS*	*UtC-1979*
11.910±120 BP		11.760÷12.120 AC	
layer 14	*charcoal*	*AMS*	*UtC-1770*
12.150±110 BP		12.048÷12.422 AC	
layer 16	*charcoal*	*conv*	*R-2022*
12.040±125 BP		11.904÷12.290 AC	
burial	*charcoal*	*conv*	*R-2023*
12.040±150 BP		11.881÷12.317 AC	

Table 1. *^{14}C datings obtained from charcoals taken from the deepest layers of Villabruna Shelter A. The table reports: layer, nature of sample, technique adopted, laboratory reference, B.P. radiometric age and range within which A.C. calibrated age falls (for 1 sigma values).*

This group of datings suggests that human settlement began around the end of the Bølling zone and continued into the Allerød (to which layers 9÷4 of Shelter A can probably be attributed). The overlying layer 3 unearthed a Sauveterre-point, indicating that this layer can be referred to the Preboreal or Boreal.

In the older layers (16÷10), pollen analyses did not provide any significant results, while anthracological examination allowed the charcoals to be attributed to *Pinus sylvestris/montana*. Among the hunted mammals, ibex were the most commonly found (56.6% of remains), followed by chamois (21.4%) and red deer (17.9%). We can imagine that ibex and chamois were hunted along the steep sides of the valley and on the pastures above, while

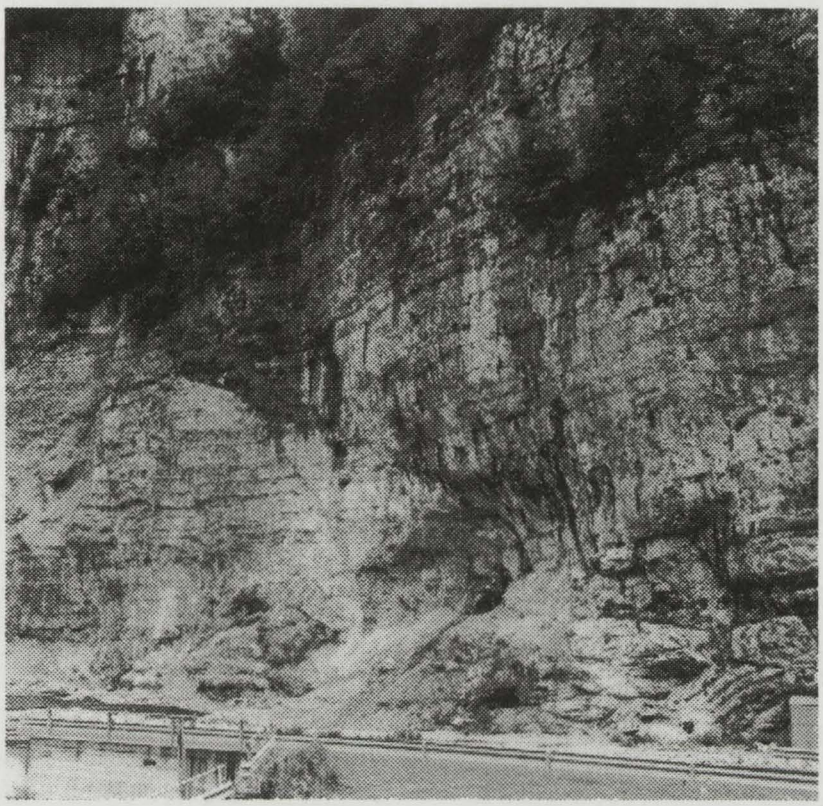

Figure 2. *The Villabruna Shelters, in the Cismon Valley (1988).*

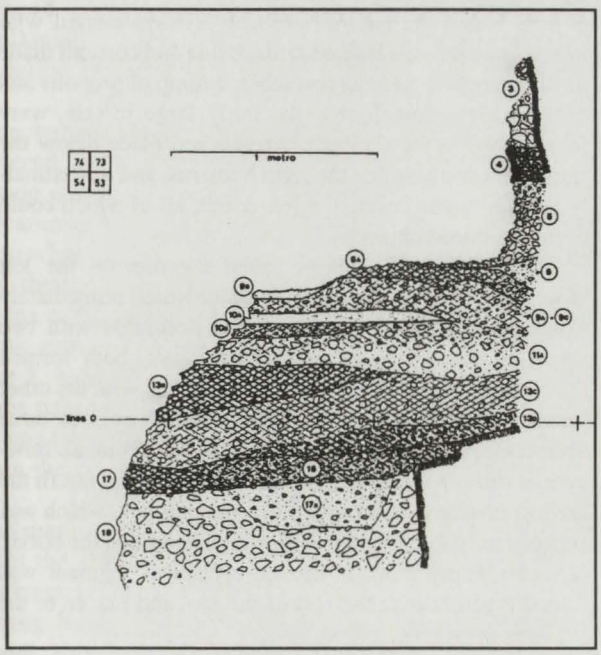

Figure 3. *Section of the Villabruna Shelter A deposits. Subunit 17A corresponds to the grave.*

red deer were hunted in the more wooded areas around the torrent, or further south, in the Fonzaso Plateau. The local flint was used in small quantities, whereas Biancone grey flint and Scaglia red flint were imported. The more recent layers (9÷4) correspond to a modification of the environment, as can be observed from the composition of the hunted mammals, among which red deer prevail (69.9%), followed by ibex (13.5%) and chamois (10.1%) (Aimar *et al.*, 1994).

The burial

From the very start of the excavations, when the sections of detritic deposits untouched by the demolishers were cleaned, in Villabruna Shelter A two human femurs came to light: these had been broken by the machines, but were still in their anatomical position. After digging the overlying deposits, a stone paving which covered the burial was unearthed. The paving and the earth filling the grave were removed, uncovering the skeleton, which was taken away after a cast had been made.

The burial rite, reconstructed on the basis of archaeological evidence, can be thus described. A 25-year-old hunter had died (Alciati *et al.*, 1995). Near the

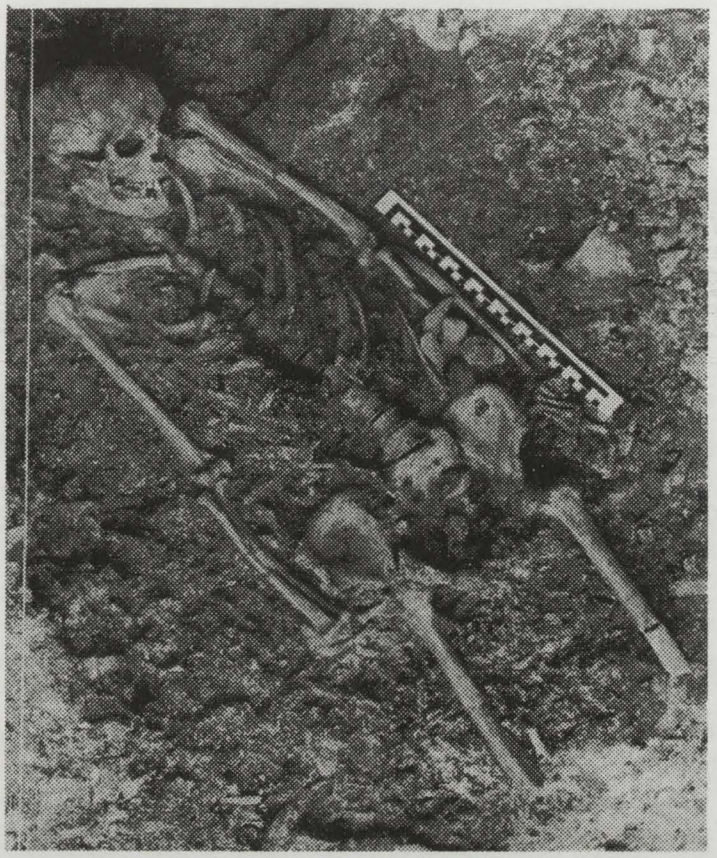

Figure 4. *The burial.*

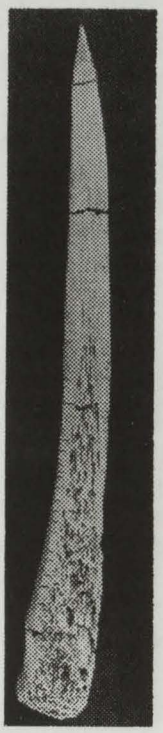

Figure 5. *The bone point of the burial.*

hearth at the centre of the shelter, a 30-40 cm deep, roughly rectangular grave was dug in the underlying detritus. On the bottom of the grave, where the head and hips were to lie, a small quantity of red ochre was scattered. The body was then laid in the grave, lying on its back, head turned left and arms along its sides. On its left forearm a container, perhaps a small bag, was placed, containing six objects which the hunter probably always carried with him: a bone point; a backed knife, blade and core, all made of flint; a pebble used as retoucher; a lump of propolis and ochre. Three more flint tools, fairly large in size, were found close to the skeleton: a retouched blade below the skull, a blade alongside the right humerus, and a proximally notched blade beside the left femur, all of which could represent burial objects.

Of the six objects found together on the left radius and ulna, it was the bone point which immediately caught our attention. This tool was decorated with two symmetrically-arranged, lengthwise bands, both formed by transverse notches. When first unearthed with the other burial objects it appeared whole, although split in three segments by post-depositional events. On removal, however, it was observed that the apical segment did not fit the median one; in fact a fourth piece was missing, which was subsequently found in the earth which had filled the burial. It seems likely that the broken-off apical segment was joined together with the rest of the tool and placed in the grave at the time of burial.

The reddish lump is also of great interest. Pollen and chemical analyses have established that it consists of

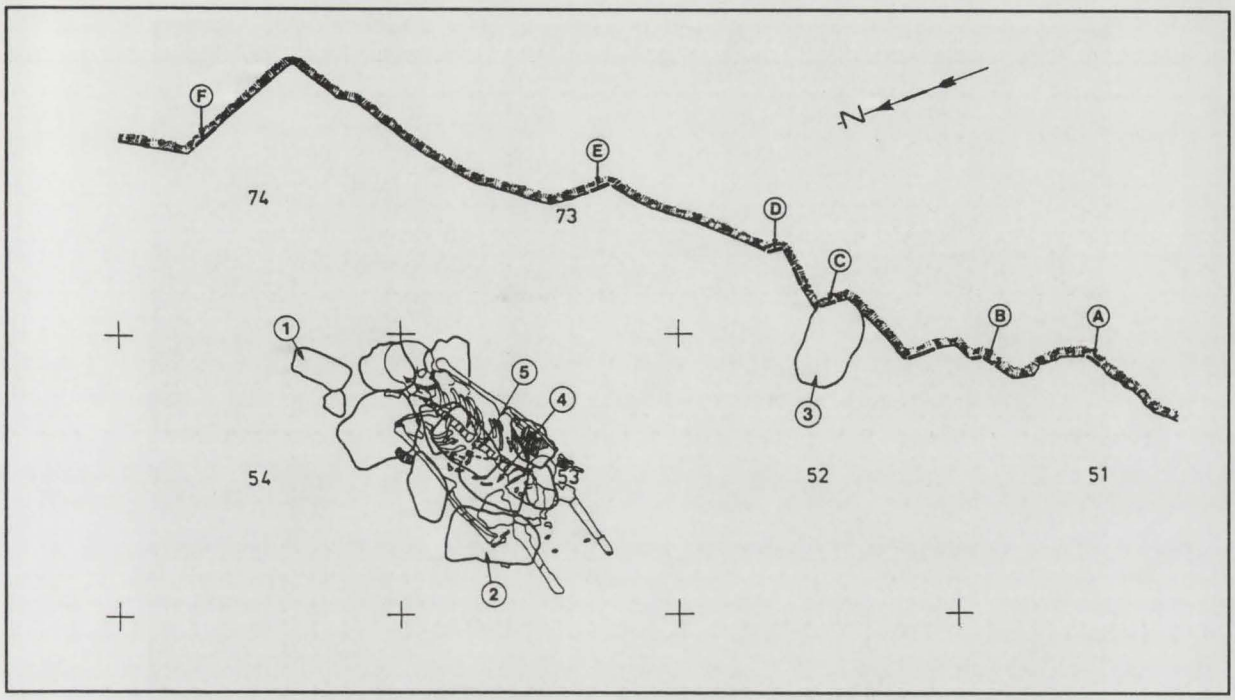

Figure 6. *Planimetry of the burial. 1 -5: painted stones; A - F: vertical coloured bands along the rock wall.*

propolis and ochre (Cattani, 1992). There is evidence of intense corrosion on everything that was in contact with it: the hip bone and left radius present two eroded areas, while the untouched blade, flint core and pebble each show an altered area (the colour of the flint has changed, and the calcareous pebble is broken). When the hip bone was cleaned, another surprising discovery was made: the posterior face close to the eroded area reveals two V-shaped lines, one above the other, clearly marked by ochre. These marks cannot be easily explained, whether a naturally-occurring phenomenon or deliberate addition.

After the corpse and acompanying objects had been buried, the grave was filled with earth and then covered with a dozen stones, arranged horizontally beside one another. Most of these stones are large Lias calcarenite boulders, sometimes quite regularly shaped, somewhat rounded by the action of the water transporting them. They were gathered from the bed of the Rosna or Cismon torrents, close to the site. Some show weak signs of ochre tingeing; four (indicated by numbers 5, 4, 2 and 1) are clearly seen to be painted. A fifth stone painted with definite motifs (indicated by number 3) was found in the same subunit, about one metre away from the cover, leaning against the shelter wall.

The wall of the shelter close to the burial was also marked. At a height of approximately 50 to 100 cm from the original shelter floor there is a bank of more compact limestone, which forms a horizontal, slightly jutting ledge. Along a stretch of 370 cm, around the burial, this ledge reveals six vertical bands painted in red ochre. Faint traces of these bands can still be seen; only the occasional patch presents a more intense colouring.

The painted stones

The painted stones in Villabruna Shelter A constitute an extremely interesting group within the context of Late Glacial Palaeolithic art, as they document the beginning of the abstraction process leading to the anorganic production of the terminal phase of the Epigravettian (Martini, 1996). In the present paper we shall take these stones into consideration, particularly with regard to their role in the Villabruna Shelter A burial complex.

Stone no. 5. This stone was found above the other cover stones, in correspondence with the lumbar-sacral vertebrae of the skeleton, and was almost completely incorporated within a concretion, the painted side facing downwards. It was discovered during demolition of the concretion; unfortunately, the use of a demolisher caused a transverse fracture. It has the shape of an irregular parallelepiped (maximum dimensions 27.4 x 16.6 x 14.5 cm; weight 9080 grammes), with one of the bigger sides flat and painted. The yellow-ochre colour is extremely faded, to the extent that its photographed image had to be specially treated in order to show up the painting. It represents a human figure, 24 cm high, in which one can make out: the head, globe-shaped, with a sort of hood; the trunk, erect, with one arm reaching upwards, the other downwards, parallel with the trunk but separate from it; and the legs, bent at the knees.

This depiction of a human figure is rarely found in Magdalenian art; in particular, it calls to mind the painted figure of a man in the Villars Cave hunting-scene (Delluc and Delluc, 1974; Duhard, 1976).

Stone no. 1. This was found at the edge of the cover, near the skull. Its shape is roughly that of a parallepiped (maximum dimensions 22.0 x 9.0 x 8.0; weight 4194

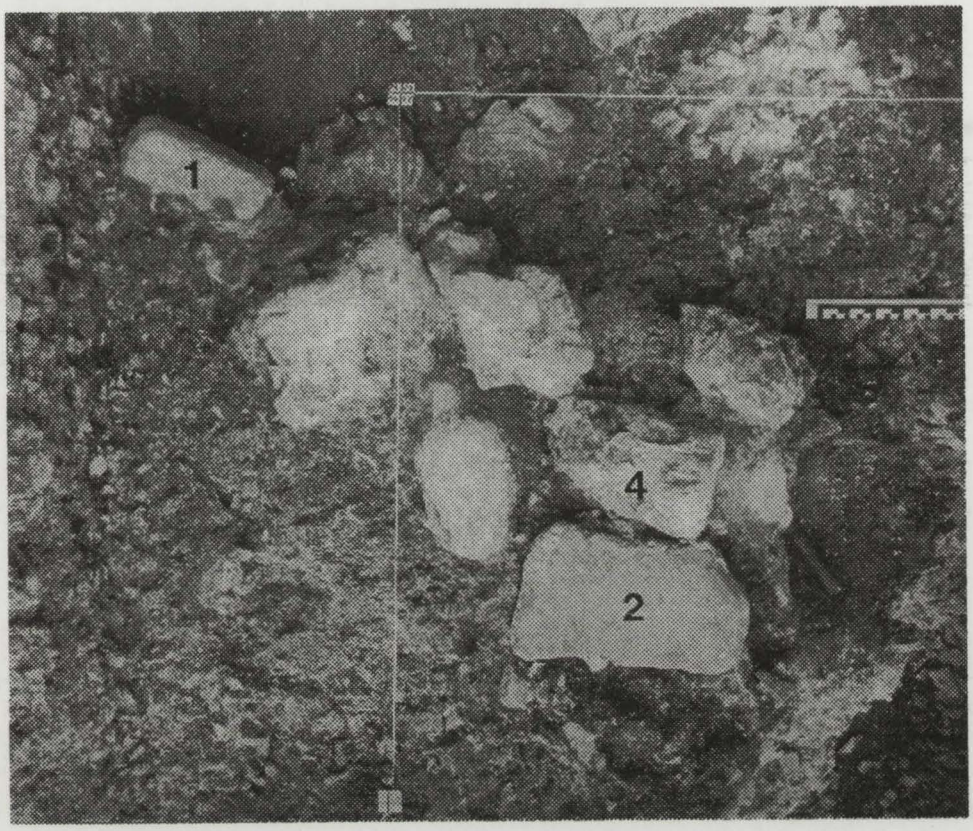

Figure 7. *The rock cover. 1, 2 and 4 : painted stones.*

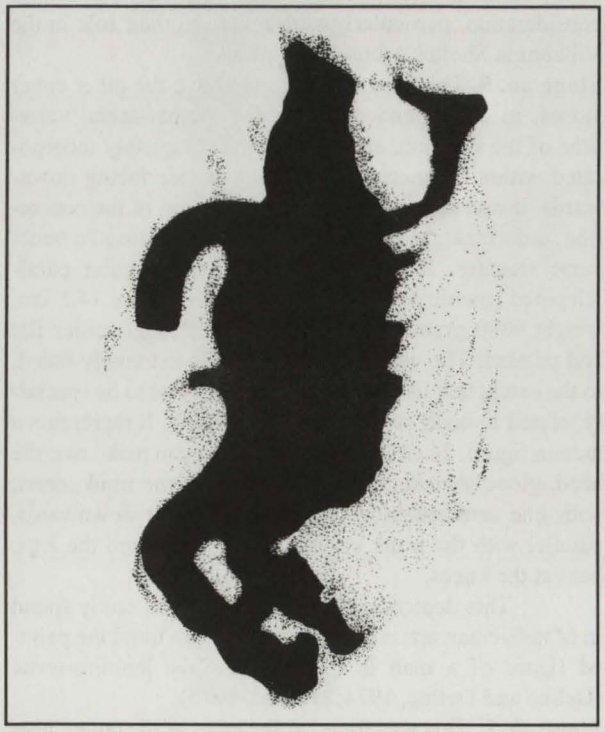

Figure 8. *The painted motif on stone 5.*

grammes), with the sharp edges blunted. The four largest sides reveal longitudinal bands of various widths, with irregular edges not always clearly defined, painted in red ochre.

Painted band motifs are well known, even if on smaller stones, among the Azilian painted pebbles of the site bearing the same name (Piette, 1896; Couraud, 1985).

Stone no. 4. It was situated at the centre of the cover, in correspondence with the sacral and coccygeal vertebrae. The shape of this stone is reminiscent of a truncated cone (maximum dimensions 25.6 x 17.0 x 13.8; weight 8100 grammes), with its smaller base rounded and an uneven lateral surface, thus forming two rather flattened, symetrically-arranged areas: one of these, painted, was facing downwards. At its centre there is an unpainted area, oval in shape (axes 90 x 75 mm), with two diverging lines in the middle; five symmetrically-arranged shorter lines branch out from each of these.

The painted motif in the oval area brings to mind another, much smaller motif, partly engraved and partly painted on flint cortex, from the Tagliente Rock Shelter (Guerreschi, 1987).

Stone no. 2. This stone has a roughly parallelepiped shape (maximum dimensions 34.1 x 20.8 x 9.0 cm; weight 11,409 grammes), with blunted edges. It was uncovered in correspondence with the distal parts of the right radius and

Figure 9. *The painted motifs on stones 4 and 3.*

Figure 10. *The hyperanthropic motif painted on stone no. 2.*

ulna and the proximal part of the right femur. It has two painted faces, both visible because the larger of the two was facing upwards, the smaller at the side. The remaining three lateral faces were touching other cover stones (especially stone no. 4), and hence were not visible. The two painted faces show a motif which presents a bilateral symmetry, not respected by the artist in only one restricted area due to the morphology of the stone. In fact, if the symmetrical pattern had been respected here too, this would have involved extending the painting onto the unexposed side; instead, the painting extends onto the opposite visible side. This suggests that stone no. 2 was painted considering its subsequent collocation, perhaps afterwards. In any case, the relationship between the burial and the painted stone is certain: we wish to emphasize this point because, in similar cases of engraved or painted stones found in Palaeolithic burial structures, several Authors have observed that the connection between burial and work of art was not proven.

The larger of the two painted faces has a reddish-violet background colouring, better preserved in some places and rather faded in others. On this background one can clearly make out a painted brick-red motif with distinct contours. This consists of a longitudinal band, 13-16 mm wide, formed by three parallel lines, dividing the face in two almost identical halves. From this axial band, six pairs of broken lines branch out: these are 12 mm wide on average, and in some places clearly show three parallel lines. Each broken line is made up of three segments, of which the one branching from the axial band is always the longest. The left-hand broken line of the first pair and both the broken lines of the last pair all have only two segments. In the first three pairs, the left-hand broken line branches off the axis higher up than the corresponding one on the right, whereas in the remaining pairs the arrangement is inverted; the position of the two central segments in each pair is such that each segment originates in the imaginary extension of the corresponding segment on the other side. From the last segment of the second broken line on the left, a line 6 cm long and 6 mm wide branches off; this is not repeated on the right.

This motif is to be attributed to the so-called schematic figures, known in the Palaeolithic in certain ages and regions (Gravettian and Epigravettian of central-eastern Europe, Upper Magdalenian, recent Epigravettian), and widespread in subsequent ages throughout Europe (Breuil and Lantier, 1951; Graziosi, 1956). Schematic representations are placed in an intermediate position between realistic and abstract productions. They imply a theoretic process whereby the subject to be represented is divided into its constituent parts: those elements considered banal are eliminated, while the distinguishing elements (for example, the horns of an ibex or deer, a bird's wings, a man's head or limbs) are emphasized. In certain cases the characterizing elements are realistically depicted; in others, as in our case, they are markedly stylized.

The motif represented on stone no. 2 has evident affinities with the hyperanthropic figures of the Iberian Peninsula, considered as belonging to the Holocene age, and thus much later. In these figures too the human figure is represented by a central stroke with several pairs of limbs branching from it, sometimes in the form of broken lines. Our painting differs from these in both its accuracy of depiction and the highlighting obtained by the contrast between the two shades of red used, in the background and in the motif itself.

Stone no. 3. This has a more rounded shape than the other stones (maximum dimensions 31.5 x 18.4 x 10.5; weight 8,011 grammes). It was found at about 1 metre from the burial structure, leaning against the rock wall of the shelter, its painted face downwards. The painted face, convex, has longitudinally- arranged subparallel motifs, of which the three central ones are the most complex. Two of these belong to the tree-shaped type, while the third can be compared to the dentate-type motifs. Two strokes run parallel to the right-hand motif, with a third stroke parallel to the motif on the left. On closer examination, the external right-hand motif reveals a group of thin parallel lines, suggesting a bristled brush was used.

A tree-shaped motif similar to ours can be seen on a stone slab from the Parpallo Cave (Pericot, 1942, p. 246 and fig. 646), while a comparable dentate-type motif is found on some pebbles of the Mas d'Azil (Couraud, 1985, tables 1, 2, 3 and 4).

Signs of burial

The cover stones were all found in the same stratigraphic subunit, at roughly the same altitude and close to one another, except stone no. 3, which was about 1 metre from the cover, and no. 1, isolated from the rest of the stones. These covered the area where the grave had been dug, forming a sort of mound, built to indicate the exact burial place. As we have seen, four - perhaps five - of the burial stones were painted. The presence of a faint reddish colouring with poorly-defined edges on other cover stones implies that their surface has been washed away, and that they had formerly been more intensely coloured; we are therefore entitled to hypothesize that, at the time of burial, the number of stones bearing painted motifs was greater. However, most of the painted stones (nos. 3, 4 and 5) uncovered during the excavations were lying with their painted face downwards. This observation makes it unlikely that they were originally arranged to form a kind of mosaic, unless one considers the possibility they were subsequently turned over again. Perhaps the paintings in such cases are the result of ritual gestures, to be viewed as part of the burial rite itself, rather than elements of the burial in monument terms.

The considerations made above regarding the position of stone no. 2 lead us instead to believe that it served a different function. This stone was in fact painted on the basis of its position in the cover, and may indeed have been painted after its collocation: the hyperanthropic motif was intended to be seen by those entering the site after the burial of the dead hunter. Given the close link between stone no. 2 and the burial, it can reasonably be

hypothesized that the hyperanthropic motif portrays the buried hunter. The multiplication of the limbs may reflect the intention of exalting his prowess; the segment branching off the second broken line on the left may represent a weapon.

The marks painted on the shelter wall in correspondence with the burial, the construction of a mound, the placing of the painted stone with a schematic depiction of the hunter in order to exalt his gifts, all appear to be elements tending to mythicize the dead man.

Acknowledgments

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