



## Book Reviews

### BRITAIN'S OLDEST ART. THE ICE AGE CAVE ART OF CRESWELL CRAGS BY PAUL BAHN AND PAUL PETTITT

Swindon, English Heritage, 2009. 120pp, 76 illustrations (pb) ISBN 978-1-84802-025-2. (£14.99)

Upper Palaeolithic engravings were found in the small caves at Creswell Crags, a modest limestone gorge situated between Worksop and Bolsover in central England, in April 2003. Closer examination of each cave ensued, and a large inventory of images was created. Despite the publicity, security at the site was not a serious issue: the caves were already legally protected, managed and presented by a combination of national and local authorities through the Creswell Heritage Trust, long-standing metal grilles preventing access to the actual caves. A year later an international conference was organised to debate the new finds – fittingly held at the proud village of Creswell - and the delegates were invited to examine the discoveries for themselves. They found that the figures had been created using two basic techniques: finely engraved lines, and deeper sculpturing or bas-relief. The nature of the caves has not been conducive to the preservation of paint, and unsurprisingly no anciently-painted images have been found. None of the images was obvious, and hence they had avoided detection previously, despite the work of antiquarians and archaeologists in the caves since the late nineteenth century. Although one of the early interventions in Robin Hood Cave had produced a bone, finely engraved with the forequarters of horse that would not be out of place in a 'classic' French Magdalenian context, it was found even before the very first Palaeolithic paintings were recognised (at Altamira in Spain). Immediately after the discovery of the rock art, a number of brief articles appeared, and a more substantial book followed (Pettitt *et al.* 2007. A review is published on the Prehistoric Society's website.)

The production of a new volume on the Upper Palaeolithic engravings comes after a period of re-examination of the evidence, and mature reflection. It has been published in time for the opening of a new interpretation centre at the site, and has been written in a style that will be accessible to the anticipated new visitors. Unquestionably authoritative, it is written in plain English, and both authors and editors must take full credit for explaining scientific theory and results in such a clear fashion.

The book itself is divided into seven chapters. The two principal authors review the earlier erroneous claims for Palaeolithic wall art at other sites in Britain, and recall the circumstances that led to the discoveries at Creswell. I believe it is important for those actually involved to have provided this account, as memory, detachment and 'record' inevitable distort the truth. For example, even for a cave as famous as Lascaux, the description of its discovery varies significantly from witness to witness (Delluc & Delluc 1979).

Paul Pettitt and Roger Jacobi expertly describe the physical context of the caves, the previous history of their investigation and the results. Although there is evidence for several periods of inhabitation, the authors focus on the Magdalenian material, placing it in the context of other contemporaneous finds from the country and its hinterland. (In the light of this, they call for the abandonment of the term 'Creswellian' devised by Professor Dorothy Garrod.) Andrew Chamberlain continues the review by providing a brief assessment of the archaeological potential of known caves in the region (delineated for management purposes as 'The Creswell Heritage Area').

Detail of the Palaeolithic images, each one individually described and illustrated by colour photographs and an interpretative drawing, is central to the new volume. Here, the principal authors seek to '*present a definitive account*'. Previously, the number of images cited has ranged from 42 to 215, but the latest 'definitive account' has reduced the number to only 25. The majority are situated in the cave known as Church Hole, but there is one in Mother Grundy's Parlour, and one in Robin Hood Cave. The authors describe the difficulties inherent in trying to understand the rough surface of the rock and in discriminating between natural features and the man-made – the challenges that have led to variations in the count of possible images. Michael Mawson explains the nature of the bedrock and its surface expression more fully in a later chapter. Michel Lorblanchet has helped to verify the inventory (and has contributed a welcome foreword to the volume). He has a lifetime's experience of recording decorated caves, some, such as Pergouset in Lot (Lorblanchet 2001), decorated in a similar fashion to Creswell, and hence he has the best possible credentials to assist in this difficult task. Nonetheless, the origin of a number of marks remains uncertain, and doubtless counter claims will emerge. Obviously, the inventory is selective, as it does not include details of all the man-made marks in the cave. Although the modern graffiti also form part of the site's history, and may even identify those responsible for defacing the earlier images, they do not have the international importance of the Palaeolithic works, and hence are outside the focus of this report.

Few of the engravings depict animal figures, and many consist of simple parallel or converging lines, the significance of which is difficult to assess. However, the list of these schematic motifs comprises five birds or women (the identification of which was discussed by Paul Pettitt in 2007), five 'vulvae' (one of which is in Robin Hood Cave), and nine small groups of lines. Six animal figures are listed, three being more obvious than the others. The low relief images of a stag (initially described as an ibex), a bison, and a bird are quite clear. The mammalian species

represented are commonly depicted amongst the Upper Palaeolithic motifs in the decorated caves of Western Europe (Sauvet & Włodarczyk 2008 demonstrate that bison form more than 22% of all recorded parietal figures, while stags represent nearly 6%), but images of birds are much rarer. Although the Creswell image is tentatively likened to an ibis (no remains of which are known from British Pleistocene deposits), seldom can the depictions of birds be attributed to species, and their significance to the makers of the image is also difficult to judge.

A minimum age for the engravings has been established by the uranium-series disequilibrium dating of flowstone over the images, and Alistair Pike, Mabs Gilmour and Paul Pettitt explain the theory behind this method with great clarity. The combination of these results with radiocarbon age estimates derived from samples taken from the cave floors persuasively points to a Magdalenian date.

A final chapter describes the (unsuccessful) search for Palaeolithic images in other British caves.

When comparing the new report with the earlier book (Pettitt, Bahn and Ripoll 2007), there are both overlaps and differences, and each is aimed at a different readership. Greater detail about the archaeology of Church Hole, and the background to the discovery of the rock art can be found in the earlier volume, but crucially the description of images on the 'definitive list' occurs in the second. I was disappointed, therefore, not to find any plans that show the location of the images within the three decorated caves. This oversight may well reduce the value of the report for both visitors and analysts. Although a small plan of Church Hole appeared in the 2007 book (fig 2.2), a revision would have helped the 'definitive' account. The earlier volume offers a taste of some continental parallels, but this is also lacking in the latest work. Although English Heritage's remit is to enhance our understanding of the country's most important archaeological sites, the context of Creswell's engravings is truly European. The volume *is intended to inform specialists, students and visitors*, yet some readers may wonder how Creswell fits with the decorated sites they have visited in France, Portugal and Spain, or the slight images they have seen scratched on portable pieces as far afield as the Rhineland and beyond. They may also question why the images were created. Although there is no need to debate the many competing theories over the purpose of Palaeolithic 'art' at length, a steer towards general reviews (such as the well-illustrated books by Bahn & Vertut 1997, or White 2003) might have been helpful.

In summary, the new volume is authoritative, well-written, beautifully illustrated, and not too expensive. It largely fulfils its stated aim, and will serve one of Britain's most important prehistoric sites well. It is encouraging to find that English Heritage continues to publish such books, and I sincerely hope that while they make money from marketing jam, they ensure that copies are readily available in all suitable outlets.

The study of British rock art is flourishing as never before, and these two books are both outstanding contributions to the field, although markedly different in content and approach.

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*Andrew J. Lawson*  
*Salisbury*

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