



Book Reviews

LE SANCTUAIRE SECRET DES BISONS. IL Y A 14 000 ANS, DANS LA CAVERNE DU TUC D'AUDOUBERT, BY ROBERT BÉGOUËN, CAROLE FRITZ, GILLES TOSELLO, JEAN CLOTTES, ANDREAS PASTOORS & FRANÇOIS FAIST

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French with English summary*

The subject of this major new work, Le Tuc d'Audoubert, is one of three caves that form a linked system hollowed from the foothills of the central French Pyrénées by the River Volp. Known since its discovery in 1912 for its unique clay modelled bison, Le Tuc d'Audoubert rightly enjoys a status among the most important Upper Palaeolithic sites of Western Europe. However, as this volume reveals, there is much more to the site than the famous clay bison. The product of fifteen years' hard work, this magnificent report is the culmination of research initiated by the Bégouën family, the proud and conscientious landowners of the local estate since 1893. Notwithstanding the contributions of many other dedicated experts, the efforts of four generations of the family in the exploration, recording, conservation and security of the Volp caves cannot be overstated: their commitment and care stand as a model of diligent stewardship.

Until now, Le Tuc d'Audoubert was only known from a number of short reports and the rapid assessment of its decoration conducted by the renowned Abbé Breuil and published over fifty years ago (Bégouën & Breuil 1958). By contrast, the latest report is comprehensive and covers every aspect of the cave in detail from its discovery and geology to its place amongst other contemporaneous sites. It raises the early estimate of the number of individual Upper Palaeolithic images within the cave from 17 to 385.

The complex Volp system is conventionally divided into three caves: Le Tuc d'Audoubert to the west, Les Trois-Frères in the centre, and Enlène in the east. Whereas a narrow corridor connects the second two, no useable passage links Le Tuc with Les Trois-Frères. The system also has three levels. Today, the lowest part (*Le Réseau Inférieur*) is active and carries the modest River Volp through Le Tuc, but it was the dry riverbed that was used by Palaeolithic people to enter the cave. The vast median network (*Le Réseau Médian*) lies only 3 m higher, while the upper network (*Le Réseau Supérieur*) is 12 m higher still, being accessible via a natural sloping chimney. The presence of cave bear bones suggests there may once have been another entrance at the western end of the median gallery, which was already blocked by the time the cave was embellished with images. Both Les Trois Frères and Enlène also lie at this level. Although Enlène saw significant phases of occupation that included the manufacture of a considerable range of engraved objects, Le Tuc and Les Trois Frères were reserved for more ritualistic activity that included the creation of a wealth of parietal images (Bégouën & Clottes 1991).

The report usefully summarises the results of archaeological investigations in the other two Volp caves (Les Trois Frères and Enlène), and considers the natural but fluctuating conditions that have led to the fine conservation within Le Tuc. It continues with an outline of the recording methods employed, as a prelude to the most substantial sections: 240 pages are dedicated to a systematic description of the archaeological evidence found in the various galleries of the median and upper networks. Gallery by gallery, surface evidence, archaeological remains from sondages, and images on the floors and walls are painstakingly described. An overall site map helps to locate the different galleries, each of which has its own plan showing the precise location of the groups of images. Every animal or human figure and every stroke or potential 'sign' is individually numbered, measured, described, photographed and drawn to scale. Occasional shots of work in progress and reconstruction sketches enable the reader to gain a sense of the (sometimes constricted) voids penetrated and utilized by the original image makers.

Much of the archaeological material was recovered from the median gallery. It includes small quantities of typical stone and bone artefacts, as well as decorated bone, and stone plaquettes (notably in the *Galerie du Bouquetin*) that together provide the cultural identity of the ancient visitors and help to link their activities with that from sites elsewhere. Early visits might have been made by people using Mousterian or Aurignacian technologies, but most of the material derives from brief Middle Magdalenian stays. Particular note is made of the objects purposefully stuck into crevices, the stalagmites deliberately broken, and the footprints inadvertently left on the soft clay floor. It is suggested that the archaeological traces were left by a small group, or groups, of people that included a child, who remained in the cave only to support certain rites associated with the creation of the images on the walls and floor. The modelled clay bison themselves were created from the same natural clay sediment beneath a low ceiling at the very end of the upper gallery, 640 m from the entrance and some 465 m from the river. Such is the remarkable preservation of these unique figures (and the quality of the photography used in the report) that their surfaces still carry the marks of the sculptor's fingers and the skilful finishing touches.

During the course of the project, 27 radiocarbon age estimates were obtained by several different laboratories from suitable materials collected from the cave floor. Some results relate to earlier activity in the cave but 19 form a coherent group around 13,686 BP (16,795 cal BP). They firmly place the main period of residence, and probably most of the decoration, in the Middle Magdalenian. These age estimates also overlap those derived directly from black wall paintings in other caves, such as Altamira and Covaciella in Cantabrian Spain, or Niaux in Ariège.

The detailed recording and analysis shows the images include 103 animals and 282 non-figurative elements, more than three quarters of which are engraved. The subjects are diverse, and up to 11 species may be represented amongst the animals. However, in common with other Magdalenian sites, bison is clearly the most frequently depicted animal (40%). The images are often carefully placed, and on four occasions they are deliberately shown as a male and female couple. Horses are also frequently depicted (16%) but next come a group of imaginary beasts, mainly found in the median gallery, that are described as 'monsters' (9%). Among the non-figurative images, *claviformes* (standardised club-shaped symbols) are most common (52%), many arranged in series, but 71 others are also structured designs of various kinds. Four fifths of the signs occur in the median level.

The report analyses the infrequent relationships between the figurative and non-figurative images, as well as the attributes that contribute to the naturalistic form and style of the figures, including orientation and completeness. Not surprisingly, the methods used in the creation of the modelled bison are also carefully explained. Many of the animal figures in Le Tuc are not as complete or detailed as other contemporary assemblages. However, comparison in the overall composition of the assemblage closely links Le Tuc in various ways to other Pyrenean sites, such as Montespan, Fontanet, Labastide or Bèdeilhac. The claviform signs similarly link it with sites farther afield, such as El Pindal and La Cullalvera in northern Spain. The iconography can be used to suggest a realm of shared ideas that ranges from Asturias to Switzerland, while raw materials and lithic typology imply a strong economic hub that extends from Périgord and Poitou to the base of the Pyrénées.

As if to continue the same tradition as Max Bégouën's 1925 romance, and '*putting to one side, science and prudence in order to let the imagination wander...*', Gilles Tosello contributes an 'epilogue' in the form of a speculative account of the possible ancient events in the cave.

The report is clearly written, logically structured and beautifully illustrated, while the quality of printing and binding is also of the highest standard. Whereas all the authors should accept credit for the academic content of the volume, HRH Queen Margrethe of Denmark and the Prince Consort, together with a host of other individuals, institutions and bodies must be praised for their financial contributions, so that this sumptuous book can be offered at such an affordable price. Last but not least, congratulations must be heaped upon the *Association Louis Bégouën* for their efforts in ensuring the completion of the volume, and for their enduring commitment to the long term research and conservation of the Volp caves.

A detailed report on Le Tuc d'Audoubert has long been anticipated, but the quality of the end-product has made the wait worthwhile.

References

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