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## Some new depictions of mammoths in ice age art

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During the past few years, new depictions of mammoths have been found in Paleolithic sites in France and Spain. Some of these finds are important for their quality and quantity (such as in the French sites Chauvet and Arcy-sur-Cure), while others are unusual because of the local rarity of mammoth depictions (such as in the site of Las Caldas, Spain).

*Enkele nieuwe afbeeldingen van mammoeten in kunst uit de ijstijd* – De laatste tijd zijn nieuwe afbeeldingen van mammoeten ontdekt in Paleolithische vindplaatsen in Frankrijk en Spanje. Een aantal daarvan is van belang vanwege de kwaliteit en de hoeveelheid (zoals in de Franse vindplaatsen Chauvet en Arcy-sur-Cure), terwijl andere interessant zijn vanwege de lokale zeldzaamheid van mammoet afbeeldingen (zoals in Las Caldas in Spanje).

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### INTRODUCTION

Until recently, the most important new set of ice age mammoth depictions was to be found in the fourth and last volume published on the engraved plaquettes from the French site of La Marche, the subject of an incredible 25-year study by the late Léon Pales (Pales & de St Péreuse 1989). The book contains his superb tracings of the striking mammoth figures from this site. However, in the past few years further mammoth figures have been discovered in France and Spain, and here they are briefly presented.

### PORTABLE ART

The Iberian Peninsula has, until now, produced only two clear, definite mammoth images, painted in red on the walls of the caves of El Castillo (Santander) and El Pindal (Asturias), both in northern Spain (see Lister & Bahn 1994). Now,

however, an engraving of a mammoth head and trunk on the wall of El Castillo has been reported (Corchón 1991/2: 35, 52), and a series of superimposed mammoth images has been discovered on a small stone plaquette in the cave of Las Caldas, in Asturias (Corchón 1991/2: 45-52; see Fig. 1). The plaquette dates to the Middle Magdalenian, around 13,700 yBP. This small slab of sandstone is covered with engraved lines, which have been found to form a superimposition of three mammoths, a rhinoceros and an anthropomorph. The first and biggest figure to be drawn seems to have been a large mammoth (Fig. 2) produced with multiple lines. It has a straight back, a slight cervico-dorsal depression, and a voluminous rounded head. The eye is low, with two lines above it, and the characteristic bulge in front of it. The trunk is long and curved, and the base of two tusks can be seen.

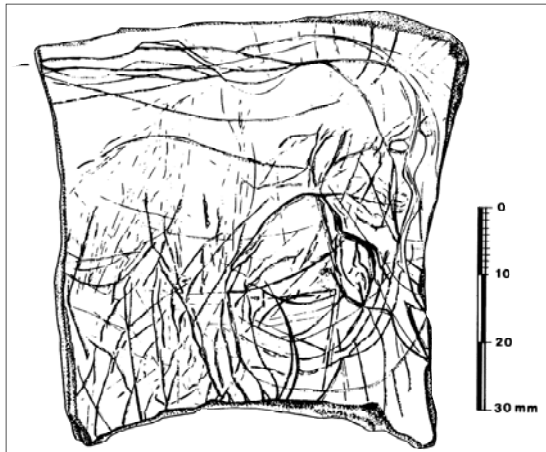


Figure 1 Complete tracing of engraved lines on the Las Caldas plaquette (after Corchón).



Figure 2 Tracing of the first mammoth, Las Caldas (after Corchón).

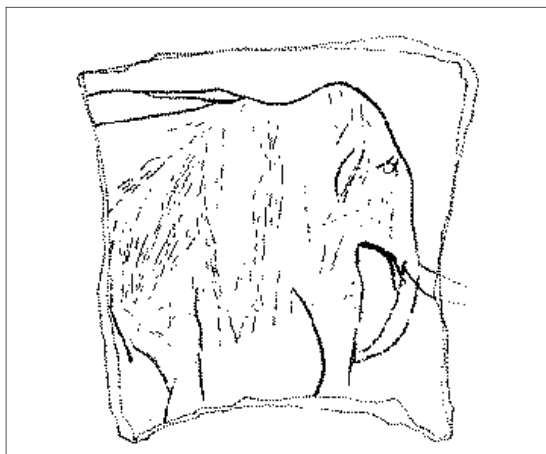


Figure 3 Tracing of the second mammoth, Las Caldas (after Corchón).

The second mammoth (Fig. 3) is smaller, and may be a youngster; its engraved lines are deeper, and cut through the first animal. It is more detailed, with an accentuated cervico-dorsal depression, an eye and a small oval ear. The trunk is shorter and finer than the first, with simple lines for the tusks. The third mammoth (Fig. 4) is another adult, with a very accentuated cervical depression and a voluminous head. Once again, its ear and eye are marked, with the bulge in front of the latter, as well as a trunk and faint tusks.

### PARIETAL ART

Engravings, including seven mammoths, have been known in the Grotte du Cheval at Arcy-sur-Cure (Yonne, northern France) since 1946; an eighth mammoth figure was discovered there recently (Baffier *et al.* 1991). However, it was only in 1990 that figures were also found in the neighbouring Grande Grotte, although it had been visited for centuries. The walls were covered by dirt and lamp-soot, and it was when some of this was cleaned off that the figures were spotted. Most of them are now very difficult to see, and require infra-red photography to be recorded. Most were done in red ochre. Of the 39 animal figures recognized so far, there are 20 mammoths (Baffier & Girard 1995: 215, 216). All are done in simple outline, with no internal details such as eyes; only one leg per pair is shown, and is left open at the extremity, with no foot. Some have the trunk curled up, others have a raised tail.

The greatest collection of mammoth figures to be found recently is in the spectacular Grotte Chauvet, found in the Ardèche (France) in December 1994 (Chauvet *et al.* 1995). The cave contains at least 300 animal figures - paintings and engravings - three of which (two rhinoceroses and a bison) have been radiocarbon dated to more than 30,000 years ago, making these the oldest known

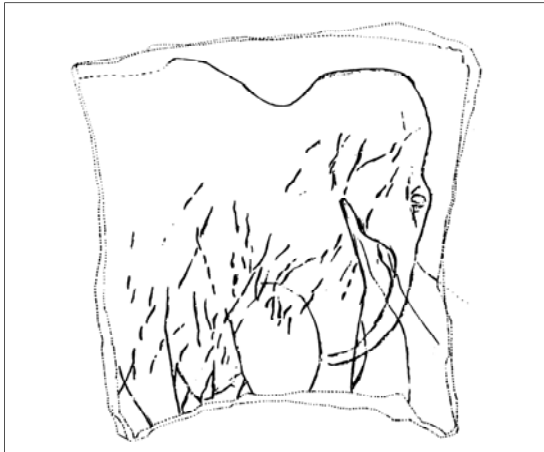


Figure 4 Tracing of the third mammoth, Las Caldas (after Corchón).

paintings in the world. The cave's figures are dominated by rhinoceroses, big cats and mammoths - there are at least 34 of the latter on initial estimates, including some very striking images: for example, a black painting of a mammoth which seems to have three tusks (Chauvet *et al.* 1995: 50). This could be artistic licence, or an attempt to depict movement, but since elephants today occasionally have three tusks (Dick Mol, personal communication 1995) it is possible that this was an actual reproduction of a freak of nature which certainly would have impressed prehistoric people.

However, the most striking of Chauvet's mammoth images is undoubtedly that which is located in the midst of the Lion Panel (Chauvet *et al.* 1995: plate 83). It has been interpreted as a young and ungainly animal, with enormous ball-shaped feet (Fig. 5). It has internal shading, its eye and ear are depicted, and either it has a double outline, or - in one of the cave's varied and successful experiments with perspective - it is depicted standing next to another, larger mammoth. At the St. Petersburg conference, in October 1995, some delegates expressed the opinion that, from its posture, this might be a human in a mammoth costume! Alternatively, it is possible that the artist wished to end this mammoth's legs with the characteristic tracks the animal leaves, just as the famous bison



Figure 5 The 'young mammoth' in the Grotte Chauvet. [sketch by Peter Bahn, from photograph]

Painted on the ceiling in the Spanish cave of Altamira have legs ending in hoofs drawn in twisted perspective so that they resemble animal tracks. In fact it has been said that if the bison on the Altamira ceiling were to be wiped out, and only their feet were left, a professional hunter would at once recognize them as a good representation of a bison's spoor (Bahn & Vertut 1988: 60/61). Perhaps the same is true of this strange mammoth figure.

For years, there were very few caves known that had large numbers of mammoth depictions, other than Rouffignac (Dordogne). Although Rouffignac remains unique in terms of its dominance and number of mammoths, others now have a dominance of this species (both the caves at Arcy); and, although the mammoth is outnumbered by both rhinos and big cats at Chauvet, its 34 depictions constitute a tremendous new collection of images of this animal, images whose study may help increase our knowledge of the species.

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