

A “Lascaux open air site” in the Swiss Alps

Abstract

In 2020 several rocks with painted representations of animals and a few human beings were discovered in a forest in the Valle Mesolcina in the Swiss Canton of Grisons. An initial inspection on site quickly revealed that these were not original prehistoric rock paintings, but modern copies closely based on well-known motifs. The rock paintings were documented photographically and recorded as “archaeological” sites. Subsequently attempts were made to identify the artist. Thanks to local contacts it was possible to discover the creator of the “prehistoric” rock paintings, which he made in the year 2000.

A surprising discovery: New rock art in an alpine valley

In spring 2020 the Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons (Switzerland) received information of a new find by two

archaeologists working in the neighbouring Canton of Ticino, Giorgio Noghara and Christian Bader. In the Valle Mesolcina/ Misox, a valley in the Italian-speaking south of the canton, apparently ancient paintings

Fig. 01: The Valle Mesolcina/Misox, an alpine valley in the south of the Swiss Canton of Grisons, where the rock paintings were discovered in 2020 (© swisstopo / Illustration: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).



were discovered on various rocks in a forest above Pian San Giacomo (Fig. 01 and 02). Initial photos immediately showed that these paintings were very similar to those from the Upper Palaeolithic. But was such a thing possible in the Canton of Grisons, in the middle of the Alps, original rock art of the Upper Palaeolithic? As we know, archaeology always has great surprises in store, and much is possible; the ground is a mysterious treasure chest. The possible existence of Palaeolithic cave and rock art in Switzerland has recently been pointed out again (Braun: 2018). According to the current state of research, the oldest rock art in the Grisons dates to the Bronze or Iron Age. The best-known examples are the engraved or pecked geometric and figurative representations on large rocks at Carschenna, municipality of Sils/Domleschg, Canton of Grisons (Schwegler: 1992 and 1997). Such a dating is also consistent with the prehistoric colonisation of these inner alpine valleys, especially in the 2nd/1st millennium B.C. So far the site of Carschenna

is the most important site with prehistoric rock art in Switzerland.

Back to the new discovery in summer 2020: Shortly after the first report specialists of the Archaeological Service were able to visit this area with the Swiss expert on Palaeolithic art, Dr Ingmar M. Braun from Basel. At this occasion more rocks with paintings were discovered. The Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons has documented and precisely described all the rocks with paintings so that later generations will also find this information in the cantonal/state archives (Fig. 03). The photos of the rock paintings have been treated with D-Stretch, too, but there were no significant results.

Although the paintings on the rocks were of good quality, they were already heavily covered with lichen and moss, so that at first glance they really did give the impression of being ancient. However, it quickly became clear to the experts that they were obvi-

Fig. 02: One of the painted rocks in a forest above Pian San Giacomo (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).





Fig. 03: Photographic documentation of the rocks with paintings (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).

ously similar to prehistoric paintings, mainly of animals. However, they are not originals, as we quickly discovered, but excellent copies or new creations, painted on the basis of the famous models of Palaeolithic art. The precise documentation ensures that future researchers do not have to ask again whether these are original prehistoric paintings.

Different positions of painted rocks have been defined which are being described below.

The different positions of the rocks with paintings

Position 1:

There are several motifs, all painted on a big rock in a kind of niche. From left to right, an ibex, a horse, an aurochs, a horse and two mammoths can be recognised (Fig. 04).

The ibex is shown in black outline in profile to the right (Fig. 05). The head and hind body are drawn in profile, but the two horns are almost frontal. This so-called twisted perspective is well known in animal depictions in Upper Palaeolithic cave art. The shape of the horns shows an Alpine ibex. This painting is strongly reminiscent of the outlines of two painted ibexes facing each other in Lascaux cave.

A head of a horse is depicted looking to the right (Fig. 05). The outline is black. The inside of the body is painted yellow-brown. The mane is depicted with black lines. The head of the horse is reminiscent of one of the so-called "Chinese horses" in Lascaux. Unlike this one, however, it is incomplete. The aurochs is orientated to the left (Fig. 05). The outline is in black colour. The inside of the head is filled with black colour. The two downward-pointing horns are still faintly recognisable. A pointed ear is also



Fig. 04: Position 1. From left to right: one ibex, one horse, one aurochs, one horse and two mammoths (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).

Fig. 05: Detail of position 1 with one ibex, one horse and one aurochs (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).





Fig. 06: Two horses, one female aurochs and different signs in Lascaux cave (Photo and © J.-M. Geneste, Centre National de Préhistoire/Ministère de la Culture).

Fig. 07: Detail of position 1 with one horse and one large head of a mammoth (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).



recognisable. It is unclear whether the inside of the body is a yellow-brown colour or vegetation. With the position of the head, with the horns pointing downwards, the ear and together with the two horses, this depiction most closely parallels a female aurochs and two horses in Lascaux (Fig. 06). Below the aurochs a horse, orientated to the right, is drawn in black outline (Fig. 07). Yellow-brown traces of colour can still be seen inside the body. There are black lines in the shoulder area. The mane, which is marked with lines, is clearly recognisable. In contrast to the other horses, its head is large and "tubular". The model for this depiction probably is the horse on the right below the female aurochs in Lascaux (Fig. 06).

Finally, there are two depictions of mammoths in the right part of the frieze (Fig.07 and 08). The first one is a large head orientated to the right (Fig. 07). The eye and two long tusks are painted in black colour. In the upper part of the head traces of yellow paint are still visible. The black line

of the head follows a natural crack in the rock from the forehead downwards. In cave art the natural relief was often either integrated into the depiction or modified for the artist's benefit.

The second mammoth is a black outline and is orientated to the left (Fig. 08). In contrast to the other mammoth from position 1, the dorsal line is complete and the trunk is clearly marked. The left tusk and possibly an eye are also depicted. The upper part of the head of this mammoth is also painted yellow.

The two mammoths are reminiscent of the depictions of mammoths in Rouffignac cave (Fig. 09).

Position 2:

There is only one representation for position 2. It is a depiction of an animal orientated to the left in profile, possibly a bear with its head pointing downwards (Fig. 10a and 10b). The animal is mainly painted black. The ear is also clearly recognisable. The inside of the body is filled in with

Fig. 08: Detail of position 1 with the second mammoth (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).





Fig. 09: Mammoth in Rouffignac cave (Photo and ©: J. Plassard).

mainly black colour. Small traces of red paint are still visible in the head. Possible yellow-brown traces of colour can also be seen in the front body behind the head. The hind leg is formed by a natural crack in the rock and is painted with black colour. An unevenness in the rock in the area of the front body probably forms the shoulder. Was this painting possibly modelled on one of the cave bears from Chauvet cave, painted in red with the relief of the wall in the shoulder area also included in the depiction (Fig. 11)?

Position 3:

As for position 2, only one depiction is painted on the rock of position 3. It is a black and yellow-brown coloured horse looking to the right (Fig. 12). The outline of the body, the two forward legs pointing forwards and the head with the two ears also pointing forwards are painted in black colour. The body area is painted in yellow-brown colour. The neck-back line and the belly line are black lines. The left, barely visible hind leg is only one coloured line. The space between the two hind legs is left

“white”. Parts of the front body and the back are heavily covered with lichen. Of all the animal depictions in the Valle Mesolcina, this horse has the clearest model in cave art. It is a painting of a horse in Lascaux cave (Fig. 13). The posture, perspective, and the colouring of the two paintings are almost identical.

Position 4:

Several paintings, only in black, were applied to an almost flat wall, of which only the two on the right are still clearly recognisable. From left to right there are: two human beings, an aurochs, an ibex, a cervid, an ibex and a mammoth (Fig. 14).

The two human figures are depicted schematically with round heads and raised arms (Fig. 15). The meaning of the black line to the right of the figure on the right is unclear. Is it a figure with a hunting weapon? Such schematic depictions of human beings are typical of post-palaeolithic rock art. They are known, for example, from the Iberian Peninsula and date to the Neolithic period or early Metal Ages (Fig. 16).



Fig. 10a: Position 2 with a possible bear (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).

Fig. 10b: The same photo treated with D-Stretch (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).





Fig. 11: Three red paintings of cave bear in Chauvet cave (Photo and ©: J. Clottes).

Fig. 12: Position 3 with the single painting of a horse (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).





Fig 13: The model of Lascaux cave for the painting of position 3 (Photo and © N. Aujoulat, Centre National de Préhistoire/Ministère de la Culture).

The aurochs is an outline drawing looking to the right and is located above the two human beings (Fig. 17). Its head and hind body are drawn in profile, but the two horns are almost frontal. The two front legs are pointing forwards and the two hind legs backwards. This gives the impression of a running or jumping animal. No parallel is known.

Above the aurochs there is a schematic black outline drawing of an ibex looking to the right (Fig. 17). The neck line, the head, the two horns and the back line can be seen. An exact model in prehistoric cave or rock art is not known.

The cervid drawn in outline is also orientated to the right and it is located on the right of the aurochs (Fig. 17). Apart from the missing ventral line and the incomplete antlers, the depiction is complete. The two hind legs are pointing forwards. A black

dot in the head most likely represents the eye. Because of the branched antlers, this is a red deer. Here, too, no direct model is known.

In contrast to the figures already described on this rock, this outline drawing is very large. It is a complete ibex looking to the right (Fig. 14). The two front legs and the two hind legs are shown crossed. The body and head are in profile, while the two horns are painted in frontal view. The eye and the two ears are also depicted. There is no model known from prehistoric cave or rock art.

The almost complete outline drawing of a mammoth is the only animal depiction on this rock that is orientated to the left (Fig. 14). The head in particular is realistically reproduced. You can also see an eye, two short tusks and the downward-pointing trunk. The long fur, typical of mammoths, is



Fig. 14: Position 4. From the left to the right: Two human beings, one of them with a hunting weapon (?), one aurochs, one ibex, one cervid (these paintings cannot be seen well seen on this photo), one ibex and one mammoth (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).

Fig. 15: Detail of position 4 with the two human beings (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).





Fig. 16: Schematic depictions of human beings in the rock shelter Peña del Escrito II (Photo and ©: I. M. Braun).

indicated by short black lines on the front of the body. The rump is characterised by an unevenness of the rock and is additionally marked with a black line. Like the two mammoth depictions of position 1, this one can also be most closely compared with the mammoth depictions from the Rouffignac cave (Fig. 09).

Position 5:

On the rock of position 5 you can see from left to right an ibex and two cervids which fill the entire available length (Fig. 18). All three animals are orientated to the right.

The ibex is a schematic black outline drawing. The shape of the horns indicates

that it is an Alpine ibex. As with the large ibex from position 4, the two hind legs and two front legs of this ibex are also shown crossed. The two horns are also seen almost in frontal view while the rest of the body is drawn in profile.

The outline of the complete cervid depiction is drawn black. The body area, including the antlers, is yellow-brown. The two hind legs and also the two front legs are pointing forwards. This posture gives the impression of an animal in motion. It is not a red deer as its antlers are shovel antlers. It is not an elk because of the morphology of the body and the typical shoulder hump of a giant deer is missing. Thus most likely it can be a reindeer or a fallow deer. The bulge in the neck area also speaks in favour of fallow deer, even if the typical spots on the body are missing.

The second cervid of this rock is nearly complete. The head is mainly painted black. The rest of the visible body is only outlined in black colour. The tail is also depicted. The large branched antlers indicate a red deer. The lower part of body of the animal is either no longer visible or was never depicted. Below the dorsal line, at least three black spots can still be recognised. This depiction of a deer can also be compared with the painted deer in Lascaux.

Who was the creator of these paintings?

As already mentioned in the introduction it quickly became clear from the condition and above all the motifs that these were not original Palaeolithic rock paintings, but contemporary copies or interpretations based on known prehistoric models. The central question was therefore who could be the author of these images and what reasons might be behind the work?

Thanks to the help of Luigi Corfù/Mesocco, a retired teacher and historian of this valley, it was finally possible to identify the creator of the paintings. Egon Tallone made all these paintings in 2000. Another visit to the site with the artist was very important and interesting for archaeology (Fig. 19). Egon Tallone, an amateur from the Canton



Fig. 17: Detail of position 4 with two human beings, one aurochs, one ibex and one cervid (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).

Fig. 18: Position 5. From left to right: One ibex and two cervids (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).





Fig. 19: Ingmar M. Braun in discussion with the artist Egon Tallone and Luigi Corfù in front of the painted rock of position 1 (Photo and ©: Archaeological Service of the Canton of Grisons).

Ticino, was certainly also surprised that professional archaeologists discovered his work and documented it so precisely.

It is clear that these sites in a forest of the Valle Mesolcina do not have the same scientific value as the original Palaeolithic cave paintings in the caves of France or Spain. But the “new” paintings of Pian San Giacomo have another value: they show the fascination that the past can have on us – the paintings of the past are a source of inspiration for us in the present, and they also show Egon Tallone’s respect for

the great artists who created these masterpieces many thousands of years ago. This is a very important aspect, and we also know that Stone Age painting had a very significant influence on the development of modern painting, especially in the last century. Many great painters were inspired by these ancient paintings and developed and transformed the ancient works into their own style (Braun & Reitmaier : in prep., Debray et al.: 2019, Faass & Schmidt: 2023, Jouary: 2016). Egon Tallone did the same with his “alpine open-air museum” and also

comments on this on his website (<https://egontallone.weebly.com/temi.html>):

"La natura é stata la mia Accademia d'Arte con la sua luce, le sue sfumature i suoi sfondi naturali fonte di immaginaria ispirazione, mi ha fatto scoprire in modo spontaneo la bellezza dell'espressione attraverso la pittura in maniera primordiale ed istintiva, quasi a ricordare i primi artisti dell'era Preistorica".

(Nature has been my Art Academy with its light, its nuances, its natural backgrounds a source of imaginary inspiration, it made me spontaneously discover the beauty of expression through painting in a primordial and instinctive way, almost reminiscent of the first artists of the prehistoric era.)

"Desidero con questi miei dipinti, rendere omaggio a questi luoghi magici, ai primi artisti che con gesti semplici ma essenziali hanno saputo regalarci queste splendide antiche testimonianze sull'evoluzione dell'uomo".

(I wish, with these paintings of mine, to pay homage to these magical places, to the first artists who, with simple but essential gestures, were able to give us these splendid ancient testimonies to the evolution of mankind.)

*Ingmar M. Braun
Wyhlenweg 4, CH-4126 Bettingen (Switzerland);
ingmarbraun@gmx.ch*

*Thomas Reitmaier
Archäologischer Dienst Graubünden, Gürtelstrasse 89, CH-7001 Chur (Switzerland);
thomas.reitmaier@adg.gr.ch*

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<https://egontallone.weebly.com/temi.html>