



MARTINA LÁZNIČKOVÁ-GALETOVÁ

REDISCOVERED BONE ENGRAVING “RANGÉE D’INDIVIDUS MARCHANT” FROM GOURDAN CAVE (HAUTE-GARONNE, FRANCE)

ABSTRACT: The bone engraving from Gourdan Cave (France), which is known as the “Rangée d’individus marchant”, was discovered among bequests left by K. Absolon. It is a fragment of a decorated smoother bearing an engraving that has often been interpreted as a grouping of anthropomorphs. The artefact was an object of exchange in the course of history, and is now curated by the Moravian Museum.

KEY WORDS: Portable art – Engraved smoother – Gourdan Cave – Magdalenian

INTRODUCTION

The bone engraving that has come to be known as the “Rangée d’individus marchant” (Figure 1) was found in 1885 during excavation in the Magdalenian strata of the Gourdan Cave (Haute-Garonne, France) by the French palaeontologist E. Harlé, who was in charge of research in the cave (Soubeyran 1994). The fact that the object came to light at a very early stage in the evolution of prehistory as a discipline has marked perceptions concerning its significance. The period in which the artefact was found was still a time of “wavering” on the authenticity of prehistoric art, a time when the paradigm had been subject to change. The genuineness and originality of both types of prehistoric art – mobiliary and parietal – were not recognised simultaneously (Moro Abadía, González Morales 2004). At the time when the artefact was found, the discussion on the authenticity of parietal art was still in full progress, whereas mobile art was no longer doubted (Lartet, Christy 1865-75). These facts had a strong influence on the perception of value of the above objects. E. Harlé was part of this debate since he also participated in the discussion concerning the authenticity of paintings in the Altamira Cave (discovered 1879), casting doubt on their antiquity. Objects of prehistoric mobiliary art were seen by him as the works of

primitives, and were not taken seriously, just as the whole contemporary young prehistoric research. That is why he abandoned this field of study, and began to focus on palaeontology. This fact as well probably accounts for a “loss” in value of the discussed artefact, and later maybe also for an easy sale thereof.

It was the Czech palaeontologist K. Maška, who had bought the object for his personal collection. The contact between the scholars E. Harlé and K. Maška is also confirmed by J. Skutil (1939). Following up further history of movements of this artefact, Maška’s collection was purchased in 1909 by the Moravian Museum in Brno. K. Absolon reported on this transaction in his article published in the journal *Acta Musei Moraviensis* (Absolon 1926). The inheritance left by K. Absolon also contained a 1932 letter from Count Bégouën telling about: “...re-exchange of the object from Gourdan for 2 painted pebbles, one flat harpoon...” (private archive of Prof. K. Absolon). The object was probably not inventoried in the Moravian Museum, since we cannot find any mention of it. This explains why the Moravian Museum gave a negative answer to H. Delporte, curator of the Museum in Saint-Germain-en-Laye (France), when he asked whether the object was in collections of the Moravian Museum. The artefact was rediscovered incidentally by K. Valoch in the worktable of K. Absolon

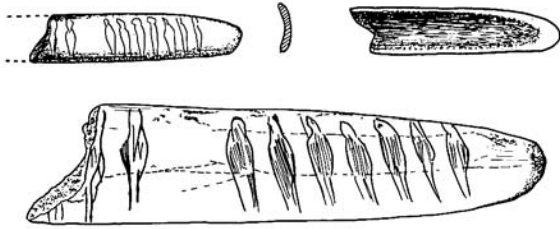


FIGURE 1. Relevé drawing of the artefact by J. Pilloy (Duhard 1992).

while Valoch and employees of the Moravian Museum were taking an inventory of bequests left by K. Absolon in his flat.

PUBLICATION HISTORY

When dealing with the artefact's publication history, we find out that it was first published in 1907 in the work *L'art pendant l'âge du renne* by E. Piette (Figure 2), who led the research in Gourhan Cave in 1871–1875 (catalogue). Piette presents the object in this book as part of his collection, although it probably actually belonged to the collection of E. Harlé. Later publications repeated Piette's claim to ownership, again ascribing it to Piette's collection (Reinach 1913, Saccasyn della Santa 1947). The artefact was often published in subsequent monographs on prehistoric art, without specifying the place of its deposition. Historical details about the



FIGURE 2. The artefact as published by E. Piette (1907).

engraving are presented in an article by J. Skutil (1961) in the *Bulletin de la Société préhistorique française*. Here it is specified that the artefact was part of the collection stock of the Moravian Museum in Brno. Despite that, in a work by M. Chollot-Varagnac (1980) we can read that the artefact was not stored in the Musée d'Antiquités Nationales but the place of its deposition is not mentioned here. The author implies that the engraving may have been confused with some other item, even if the publication by Skutil clearly describes the genesis of its journey. J.-P. Duhard (1991, 1992, 1995), too, lists the place of deposition of the artefact as unknown.

ARTEFACT DESCRIPTION

The artefact represents the distal part of a decorated smoother manufactured of bone, more precisely of a reindeer rib (*Rangifer tarandus*, determined by G. Dreslerová) (Figures 3–4). The dimensions are as follows: length 63 mm, width 14.5 mm, thickness 3.8 mm. The object was made by the technique of splitting the rib along grooves (Averbouh, Buisson 1996). On the top side (that with the engraving, where the original surface of the bone is preserved) we can observe technological traces in form of scraping marks, which were made prior to engraving (Figure 5). *Raclage* may have occurred as part of the processing of the bone for



FIGURE 3. Top side of the artefact with the engraving.



FIGURE 4. Bottom side of the artefact with original paper label: "Fond de la grotte de Gourdan".

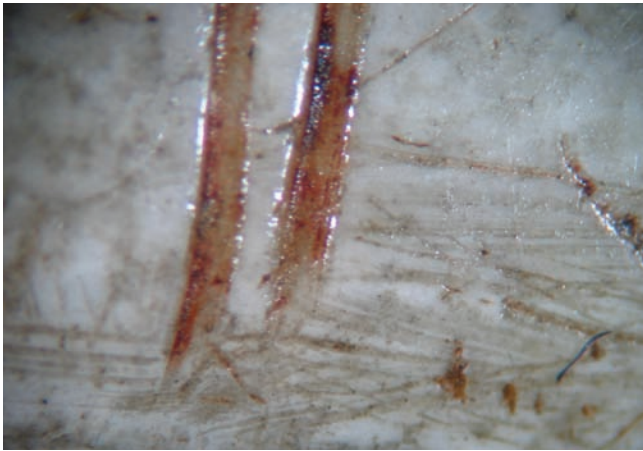


FIGURE 5. Micrograph of the grooves which were made later than the scraping marks – striae.



FIGURE 7. Detailed view of the fracture and the engraved scene.



FIGURE 6. The engraving filled in with sediment.

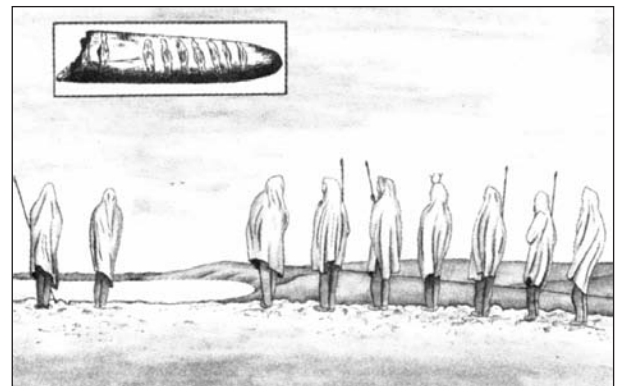


FIGURE 8. Reconstruction of the scene after D. Guthrie (2005).

alimentary purposes. Any other technological traces have been wiped out; the artefact is very smooth. The engraving on the artefact is quite simple, the image being composed of straight grooves of various length. The grooves are filled in with sediment (Figure 6), and the whole object is covered with a coat of conservation substance, so that the character of sediment cannot be determined. Whether or not it was an intentional act, the sediment detected inside the engraving highlights the entire image, making it all the more distinct.

The artefact is well preserved except for an old fracture (Figure 7) that arose after the final decorative modifications of the bone. Therefore it may have been caused by the object’s function or during its use. According to the usual interpretation and the name as well, the engraving represents 9 individuals in a row, 8 of them complete and 1 fragmentary.

INTERPRETATION OF THE ENGRAVING

E. Piette wrote in 1907: “...we cannot identify the subject of this engraving with certainty. It seems that the engraver wanted to depict a row of individuals walking one behind the other...” (legend to Figure 7, Piette 1907).

Providing that E. Piette considered the scene on this artefact as a row of anthropomorphic individuals or tadpoles, or simply as a row of repeating motifs, he encompassed already at that time all of the main avenues for later readings. S. Reinach (1913) claims that the image may represent a row of penguins. According to Breuil and Saint-Périer (1927) it may be a fish (*Osmerus eperlanus*). K. Absolon explains the scene again as a row of picturesque

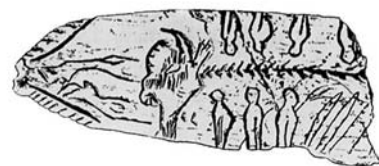


FIGURE 9. Analogous scenes on the engravings from the French sites of Raymonden and Les Eyzies (after Graziosi 1956).

anthropomorphic figures (Absolon 1926). Another similar finds depicting a grouping of people probably gave rise to the hypothesis that the Gourdan engraving portrayed a scene with 7 hunters – men clothed in leather carrying weapons – and an eighth man standing face to face with an animal (the last fragmentary figure near the fracture) (Duhard 1992). Recently, the scene was re-interpreted by D. Guthrie (2005). In his drawn reconstruction we can see again nine human figures in cloaks, some of them carrying weapons, and the fourth one from the right having reindeer antlers on his cape (Figure 8).

Analogous scenes which support the most frequent interpretations of the depicted scene as a group of humans or of humans confronting an animal, can be found on the engraving called “*Hunters and bison*” from Raymondon (Dordogne, France) or on an engraved rib discovered in Les Eyzies (Dordogne, France) (Duhard 1991, Soubeyran 1994) (Figure 9). These engravings have also been interpreted as hunting scenes (Duhard 1991). Another explanation of the above scenes turns back to depiction of animals – namely swallows (Eastham 1988).

CONCLUSIONS

According to its meaning, the engraving has been usually assigned to the most significant examples of anthropomorphic group images, which might refer to social relations in the Palaeolithic. The rediscovered artefact is currently part of the Palaeolithic collection of the Anthropos Institute, Moravian Museum in Brno, and was shown for the first time in the exhibition of authentic works of prehistoric art “The Oldest Art in Central Europe” at the Anthropos Pavilion in the spring of 2009.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to K. Valoch who rediscovered this object for prehistoric science, to M. Oliva who made it possible for me to study it, and to G. Dreslerová for the anatomical determination of the material from which the artefact was made.

REFERENCES

- ABSOLON K., 1926: Bericht über die palaeolithische Abteilung am mährischen Landes-Museum und die palaeolithische Forschung in Mähren. *Acta Musei Moraviensis* 24: 1–11.
 AVERBOUH A., BUISSON D., 1996: Approche morpho-fonctionnelle des objets nommés “lissoirs”: proposition

- d’une fiche analytique théorique. *Antiquités nationales* 28: 41–46.
 BREUIL H., DE SAINT-PÉRIER R., 1927: *Les poissons, les batraciens et les reptiles dans l’art quaternaire*. Archives de l’Institut de Paléontologie Humaine, Mém. 2. Masson et Cie., Paris.
 CHOLLOT-VARAGNAC M., 1980: *Les origines du graphisme symbolique: Essai d’analyse écritures primitives en préhistoire*. Éditions de la Fondation Singer-Polignac, Paris.
 DUHARD J.-P., 1991: Images de la chasse au Paléolithique. *Oxford J. of Archaeology* 10: 127–157.
 DUHARD J.-P., 1992: Les groupements humains dans l’art mobilier paléolithique français. *Bulletin de la Société préhistorique française* 89: 172–183.
 DUHARD J.-P., 1995: *Réalisme de l’image masculine paléolithique*. Éditions Jérôme Millon, Grenoble.
 EASTHAM A., 1988: The season or the symbol: the evidence of swallows in the Palaeolithic of western Europe. *Archaeozoologia* 2, 1-2: 243–252.
 GRAZIOSI P., 1956: *Die Kunst der Altsteinzeit*. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart–Florence.
 GUTHRIE D. R., 2005: *The Nature of Palaeolithic Art*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
 LARTET E., CHRISTY H., 1865–75: *Reliquiae Aquitanicae*. Williams & Norgate, London.
 MORO ABADÍA O., GONZÁLES MORALES M. R., 2004: Towards a genealogy of the concept of “Paleolithic mobiliary art”. *Journal of Anthropological Research* 60: 321–339.
 PIETTE E., 1907: *L’art pendant l’âge du renne*. Éditions Masson et Cie., Paris.
 REINACH S., 1913: *Répertoire de l’art quaternaire*. Ernest Laroux, Paris.
 SACCASYN DELLA SANTA E., 1947: *Les figures humaines du Paléolithique supérieur eurasiatique*. De Sikkel, Antwerp.
 SKUTIL J., 1939: Les relations préhistoriques entre la France et la Tchécoslovaquie. *Bulletin de la Société préhistorique française* 36: 217–220.
 SKUTIL J., 1961: Sur l’histoire de la gravure “Rangée d’individus” de Gourdan. *Bulletin de la Société préhistorique française* 58: 175–178.
 SOUBEYRAN F., 1994: Un reportage en direct: le défilé au bison. *Bulletin de la Société historique et archéologique du Périgord* 121: 171–188.

Martina Lázničková-Galetová
 Anthropos Institute
 Moravian Museum
 Zelný trh 6
 659 37 Brno, Czech Republic
 E-mail: laznicko@yahoo.fr