

# New discoveries in the Sanctuary of Les Trois-Frères cave (Ariège)

*Neue Entdeckungen in der Bilderhöhle von Les Trois-Frères (Ariège)*

Éric BÉGOUËN & Marie-Brune BÉGOUËN\*

Laboratoire de Préhistoire de Pujol, F-09200 Montesquieu-Avantès

**ABSTRACT** - Recently important new depictions were found in the centre of the well known cave Les Trois-Frères. The discoveries are surprising in so far as, during the past 100 years neither the Bégouën family nor Breuil and other researcher have recognized these figures: a human phallus in the vicinity of a naturally shaped vulva.

**ZUSAMMENFASSUNG** - Kürzlich wurden im Zentrum der bekannten Höhle Les Trois-Frères überraschend neue Felsbilder entdeckt. Dies ist umso erstaunlicher, da in den letzten 100 Jahren weder die Familie Bégouën noch Breuil oder andere Wissenschaftler diese wahrgenommen haben. Es handelt sich um die Gravierung eines menschlichen Phallus in unmittelbarer Nachbarschaft zu der natürlichen Form einer Vulva.

**KEYWORDS** - Magdalenian, cave art  
Magdalénien, Höhlenkunst

## Introduction

Les Trois-Frères cave in the Commune of Montesquieu-Avantès (Ariège) was first explored on 20 July 1914 by Max, Jaques and Louis, the three sons of Count Henri Bégouën.

The copies made by Abbé Henri Breuil between 1920 and 1938 enabled a detailed study of hundreds of parietal engravings from the deep gallery called the "Sanctuary". The monograph published in the late 1950s (Bégouën & Breuil 1958), broke into different panels the multitude of subjects represented, which gravitated around three majority species (bison, horse and reindeer) and are dominated at a height of 3 m by the celebrated "Sorcerer".

There is systematic use of natural relief and other features of the rock wall. Also, some fifteen dates from Les Trois-Frères confirm its principal prehistoric frequentation to have been in the Middle Magdalenian, mainly around 17 000 calBP.

The composition and complexity of the fantastic bestiary of the Sanctuary has not yet ceased to surprise us and pose new questions. In fact it took a new examination to notice a large engraved phallus in the middle of the first panel, situated just above a natural concavity in the wall which evokes the shape of a vulva (Fig. 1).

We immediately asked ourselves how neither the Bégouën family nor other visitors over the course of almost a century, nor Breuil in his 18 years of work in the cave, noticed this figure which is nevertheless clearly visible upon arrival in the Sanctuary. To suspect them of prudery or even censorship does not seem credible. However, the precise position of the phallus, situated on an edge of the wall forming a near right angle, and separating two panels studied until then one after the other, might perhaps be a reason. Reading the right-hand panel is fairly difficult and less attractive than that of the preceding one with its mammoth, humans and arrow-marked bison. Perhaps the exceptional size of this engraving plays a part? It is much bigger than the surrounding drawings and necessitates standing back to understand it.

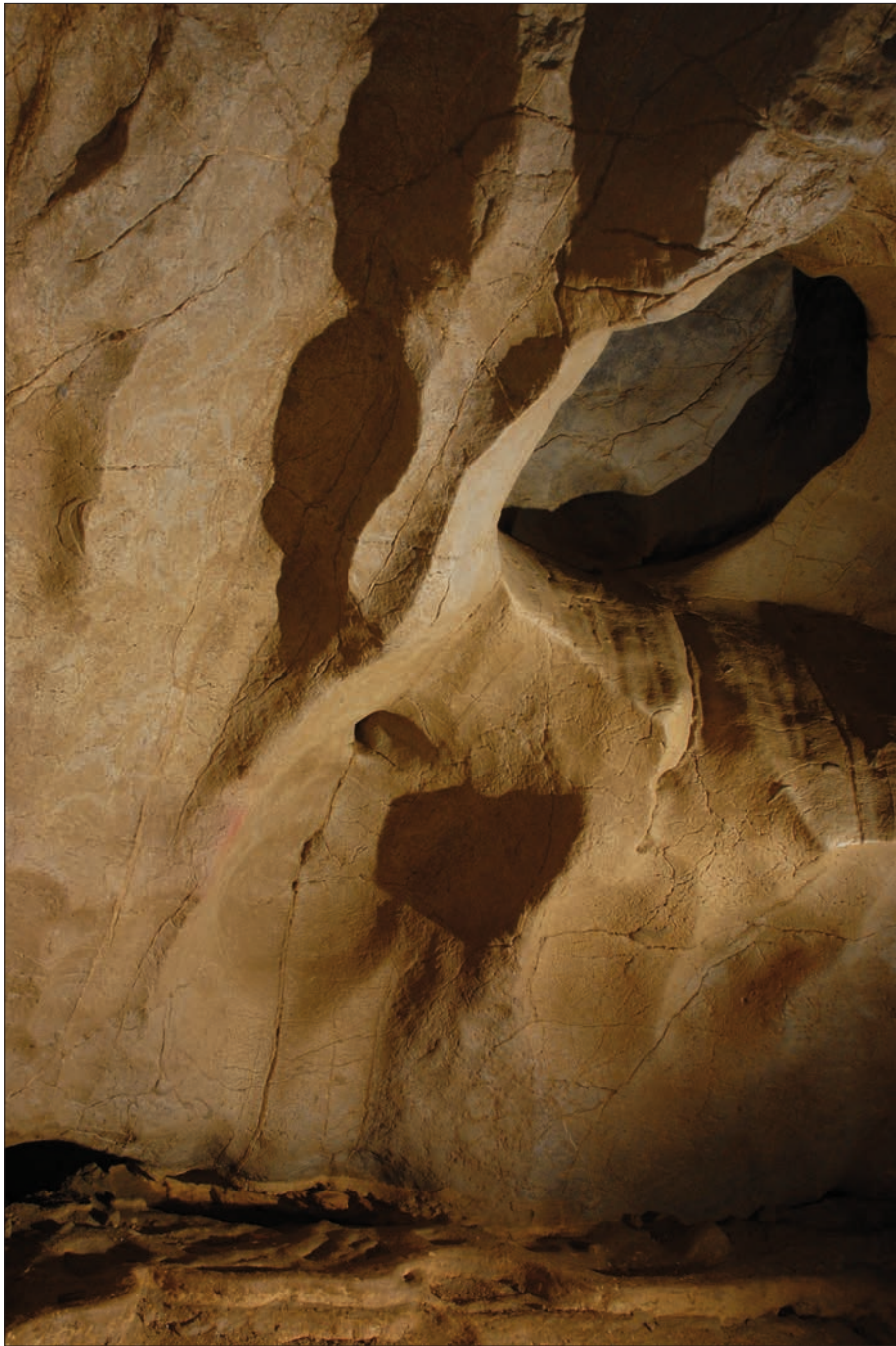
The extremely delicate Magdalenian art of Les Trois-Frères cave has survived its first 'public' century intact. To mark this centenary the publication of a study "Les Trois-Frères cave, an anthology and new finds" will provide an updated overview.

## Localisation and description of the phallus

Breuil described the engraved panels of the Sanctuary from right to left (Bégouën & Breuil 1958: 34-35). The phallus is situated in the middle of the first part of the right-hand wall, at 1.2 m from the floor, at the intersection of the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> panels.

The whole of the engraving measures 59 cm long from the glans to the pubic triangle and from 7 to 11 cm wide. The phallus appears to be vertical and angled

\*corresponding author:  
mariebrune.begouen@free.fr



**Fig. 1.** The engraved phallus in the Sanctuary of Les Trois-Frères (Photo: Association Louis Bégouën).

**Abb. 1.** Gravierter Phallus im Sanctuaire von Les Trois-Frères (Foto: Association Louis Bégouën).

towards the floor (Fig. 2). The engraver followed almost totally the natural shape of the limestone wall, which explicitly evokes that of the male genitals. The line continues above, contouring and showing the pubic triangle. Even though the relief is suggestive enough with rounded shapes and clean breaks, these were rigorously underlined with one or several engraved lines. The principal anatomical details were added. In addition, a very small red mark which we will discuss later, faded and only just visible, is situated on

the right-hand edge of the penis, half-way up. The representation of the pubic triangle seems to infer the idea of a penis seen face-on. In the middle of the pubis can be seen a series of lines some 4 to 5 cm long, representing two semi-ovoid shapes more or less parallel. If these two symmetrical designs represent testicles, their situation is anatomically inexact unless the phallus is being shown from below. Perhaps we are in the presence of a deliberate act of artistic freedom, echoing the inverted position of the genitals of the





**Fig. 2.** Tracing of the engraved phallus in the Sanctuary of Les Trois-Frères (Photo and tracing: Association Louis Bégouën).

**Abb. 2.** Umzeichnung des gravierten Phallus im Sanctuaire von Les Trois-Frères (Foto und Umzeichnung: Association Louis Bégouën).

Sorcerer in the same gallery (Fig. 3)? We might envision that the force of the message to be transmitted transcends any other consideration.

The orientation of the phallus pointing towards the ground could be opposed to the definition of an erect penis, but the rounded form of the prepuce and the visibility of the meatus are typical of a glans with the foreskin pulled back (Fig. 4). It should be noted that the phallus in the Cosquer cave (Bouches-du-Rhône) found next to finger-lines and

notably a hatched triangle, is also pointing towards the floor. It has been considered as a semi-erect member or one in a post-coital position (Clottes et al. 2005: 176). Finally, the size of the sex, its rigidity and its relation with the vulva form that we will describe, are all concordant indications. Additionally, if this association and the utilization of the reliefs are dominant, the orientation can no longer be considered a priority in the composition.

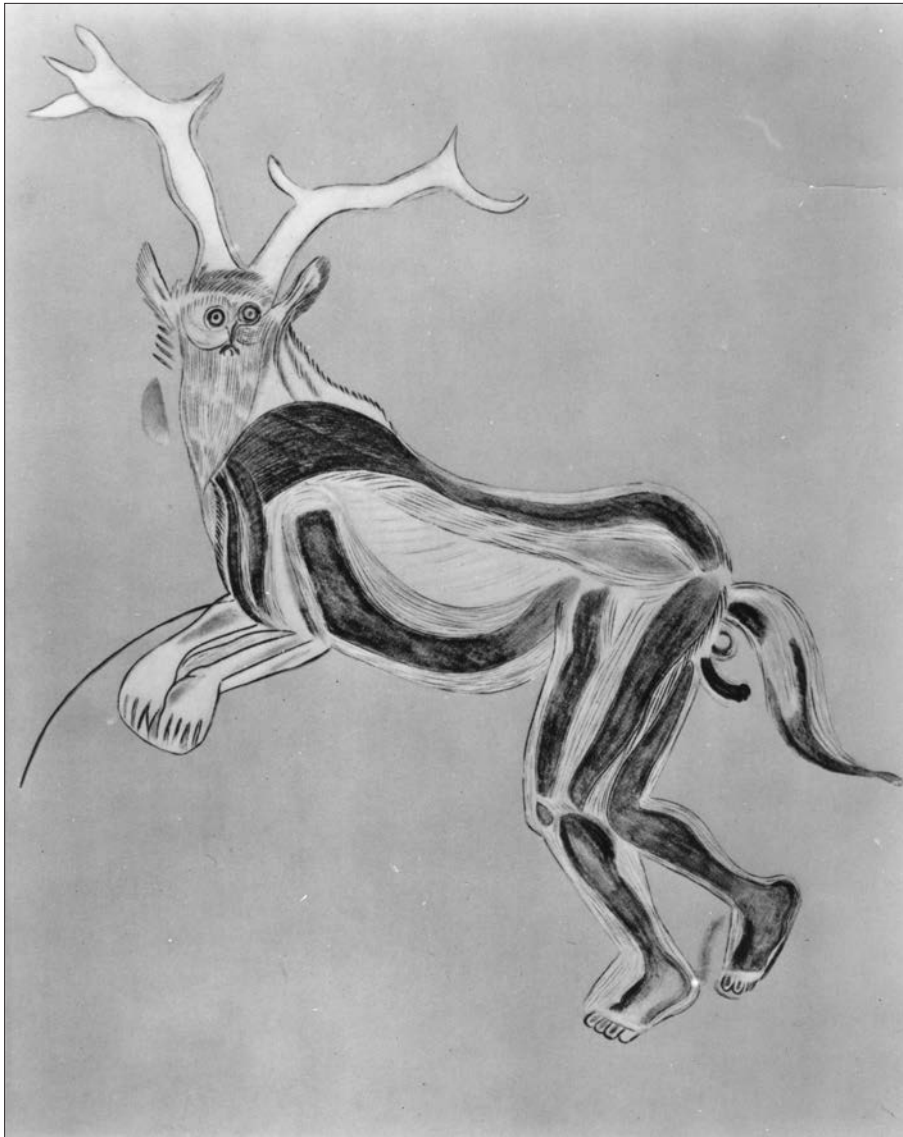


Fig. 3. The 'Sorcerer' in the Sanctuary of Les Trois-Frères (Bégouën & Breuil 1958).

Abb. 3. Der Zauberer (Sorcier) im Sanctuaire von Les Trois-Frères (Bégouën & Breuil 1958).

### The adjacent vulva form

Just below, in the continuation of the phallus, can be seen a natural concavity around 77 cm high, 65 cm wide and about 40 cm deep, in the middle of which are found two small holes one above the other, forcefully evoking the female genitals (Fig. 5). The imposing measurements accord admirably with those of the phallus.

Admittedly, no human evidence confirms this hypothesis apart from an ochre mark a few centimetres long, situated on the left side of the cavity, in the exact continuation of the phallus. Is it linked with the small red mark observed on the latter? In any case, it is certainly not insignificant, especially as a number of painted or engraved natural fissures assimilated into vulva representations have been inventoried (Delporte 1993), notably in Pyrenean

caves like Gargas, Labastide, Bédeilhac and Fontanet (Bourillon 2009).

The niche forming the vulva contains a certain number of figures assembled in the 4<sup>th</sup> panel of the right-hand wall (Fig. 6). Breuil's caption describes them: "in a cavity, group of 7 or 8 Périgordian bison. Height 1.19 m", or again the "niche with little bison" (Bégouën & Breuil 1958: 34). We have, however, modified their orientation in our copy, as it was inaccurate in the publication (Bégouën & Breuil 1958: 34, Fig. 38).

### Discussion

While the female sexual organ is relatively frequent in Palaeolithic parietal art, the rarity of phallic representations gives this discovery a particular importance, particularly because most of the other known





**Fig. 4.** Details of the engraved phallus in the Sanctuary of Les Trois-Frères: prepuce and meatus (Photo: Association Louis Bégouën).

**Abb. 4.** Details des gravierten Phallus im Sanctuaire von Les Trois-Frères (Foto: Association Louis Bégouën).

phalli have few anatomical details (Duhard 1996). Up to now, only 5 isolated engraved phalli have been inventoried in decorated Magdalenian caves: one in each case at Bédouilh, Mas d'Azil and Massat and two at Fronsac (Tosello & Fritz 2005: 12). There are also some other rare isolated phalli from the very beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic such as those from Cosquer (Clottes et al. 2005) and from Bara-Bahau (Delluc 2006: 280). Considering all the isolated or specifically associated representations,

the use of natural relief to evoke the male genitals is essentially localized in the Pyrenees, while the female versions are found above all in Aquitaine (Bourillon 2009: 264).

In effect, the recumbent ithyphallic figure at Bédouilh (Ariège) as much as the two men from Portel (Ariège) drawn around a calcite penis take a similar approach (Beltran et al. 1996). Among the inventoried phallic representations, a realistic morphology seems to dominate the sometimes





**Fig. 5.** Natural concavity evoking a feminine sex nearby the engraved phallus in the Sanctuary of Les Trois-Frères (Photo: Association Louis Bégouën).

**Abb. 5.** Natürliche Konkavität in Form eines weiblichen Geschlechts neben dem gravierten Phallus im Sanctuaire von Les Trois-Frères (Foto: Association Louis Bégouën).

exaggerated dimensions as at Bédheilhac, 28 cm phallus, or at Fronsac, a 38 cm phallus (Duhard 2011: 133). Thus the Les Trois-Frères phallus follows the same formula.

The figure taken as a whole, from the glans to the pubic triangle, dominates with its 59 cm in a panel where the length of the largest figure, a mammoth, is 53 cm. For this reason we cannot help asking if the form of the walls alone determined the dimensions or

whether the size implies considerable significance relative to the other large figures in the Sanctuary?

Contrary to other decorated Magdalenian caves, feminine representations are almost absent at Les Trois-Frères, apart from the supposed vulva shape, while male sexual representations are clearly present, such as the ithyphallic bison-man, the small sorcerer with the nasal flute and, of course, the "Sorcerer". This predominance underlines the



**Fig. 6.** Position of the phallus in the 4th panel of the right-hand wall (Bégouën & Breuil 1958) (Photo and tracing: Association Louis Bégouën).  
**Abb. 6.** Position des gravierten Phallus im vierten Bildfeld der rechten Höhlenwand (Foto und Umzeichnung: Association Louis Bégouën).

uniqueness of Les Trois-Frères (Bégouën 1929).

Obviously, the object of this article is not to envisage a narrative reading of this panel, even if the idea of a reproduction or creation myth could be evoked. Given the fact that there is no obvious or frequent association of the two sexes and taking into account their late appearance in Palaeolithic iconography, there cannot be an exclusive procreation reading, no matter how attractive it is. André Leroi-Gourhan adopted a "chaste" vision of Palaeolithic art, excluding any idea of scenes of human coupling (Leroi-Gourhan 1965: 90). Since then, two engraved plaques whose theme could be qualified as erotic have been found at Enlène, a Magdalenian cave-habitat communicating with Les Trois-Frères. The first shows a bison and three humans, of whom two are in the coital position (Bégouën & Clottes 1982, 1984). The other is a genuine scene where two people are face to face, one stretching an arm towards the sex of the other, which is prolonged by several lines

suggesting an emission. Similar lines are engraved at the end of the phallus from the cave of Mas d'Azil, also situated in Ariège (Vialou 2000).

Moreover, the rare associations between phallus and isolated vulvae (Castanet, La Ferrassie, Pataud and Laugerie-Haute) are engraved, even sculpted, on limestone blocks and are Aurignacian or Gravettian. For the Magdalenian, it seems that only one or two parietal associations have been noted in the depths of a narrow gallery at Fronsac (Dordogne) where a niche contains an engraving of a small phallus on one side and a vulva on the other (Delluc 2006: 280). Other correlations are in the form of portable art.

Ultimately, the extreme rarity of this type of association could reinforce the concept of an opportunistic graphic representation at Les Trois-Frères, dictated by the wall's morphology. Even so, its exceptional character confers upon it a particular significance.



## Conclusion

The discovery of the Les Trois-Frères phallus is important, partially because of its dimensions and partially with regard to the rarity of this type of representation. While isolated feminine sexual symbols are a recurrent theme in Magdalenian parietal art, only 5 isolated phalli have been inventoried. Here the use of the wall's morphology accentuates the ostentatious character of this masculine sex whose shape and uprightness confirm that it is certainly an erect penis. The probability of an association with the vulva shape in immediate proximity is reinforced by the presence of red pigments. The two sexual shapes seem therefore a very likely grouping.

Thus, without extrapolating the existence of a phallic, fertility or any other cult, this highly symbolic figure, if not helping us to negotiate the maze of multiple engraved subjects at Les Trois-Frères, serves to further enrich its thematic complexity.

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