

overall background, that never had any stylistic intention, is an initial rudimentary symbolic formula that at times when it is scratched by the superimposed engravings baring the rock, may make us see some sort of figure within it if we let ourselves be unduly carried away by our imagination. The large stains of red ochre have been used by Prehistoric man not just to smear the profiles of the rocks, but the ground, his weapons and the human body itself, according to an old tradition known since the lower Paleolithic age. Maybe this color was used for protective magic; or to encourage bravery or life, or perhaps all this together. But there is no doubt that the color red in itself had undeniable virtues in the eyes of primitive man, even though it may have not been involved with stylization, and simply perhaps due to its relationship with the color of blood. Therefore, it may be thought that this hall where the *Great Panel* was made might have been selected as a *sanctuary* much before these stylistic depictions had been designed and by that time, it had already been designated as a sacred place by the large blot of ochre.

After this rather long digression on the comings and goings of water, the samples from this excavated site and the allusion to ochre stains, it would be a good idea to concentrate again on the paintings on the wall. The first figures are small in proportions; the largest is no more than 14

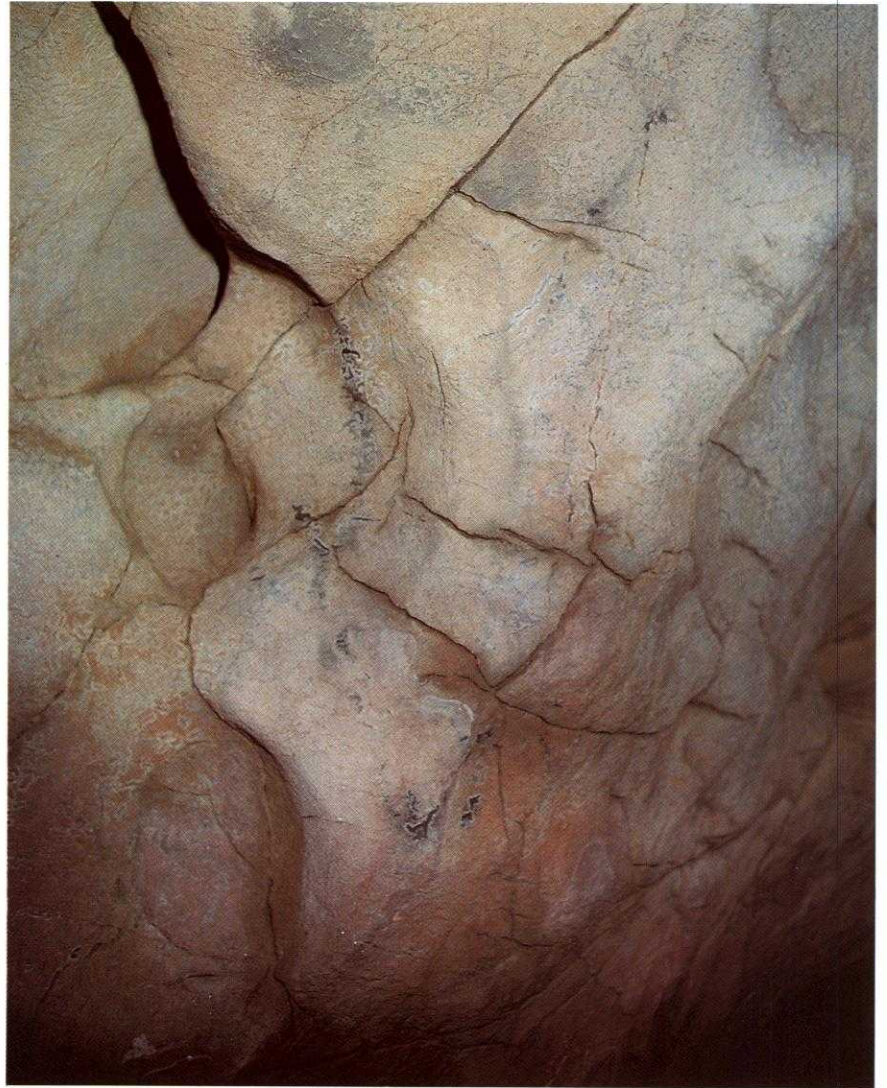


Fig. 106.— Tito Bustillo Cave. Hind figure painted in black line.

Fig. 106.— Cueva Tito Bustillo. Figura de cierva pintada en línea negra.

inches long. These are outlined by dull black lines, partially covered up by a film of calcinate deposit that is quite transparent but does not allow the entire outline to be seen. The inside surface of the figures has a red stain that is also quite thin, perhaps due to the action of water, for its location is almost at ground level. First there is a depiction of what with some

doubt might be a deer, and then a bit lower to the left, another deer, with the same doubt, that seems to be going after the first one. Another figure can be made out to the left (fig. 102).

These figures are done with awkward, evidently clumsy drawing if they are compared to the airy sensitivity and naturalistic feeling that were behind the fine workmanship of the large size



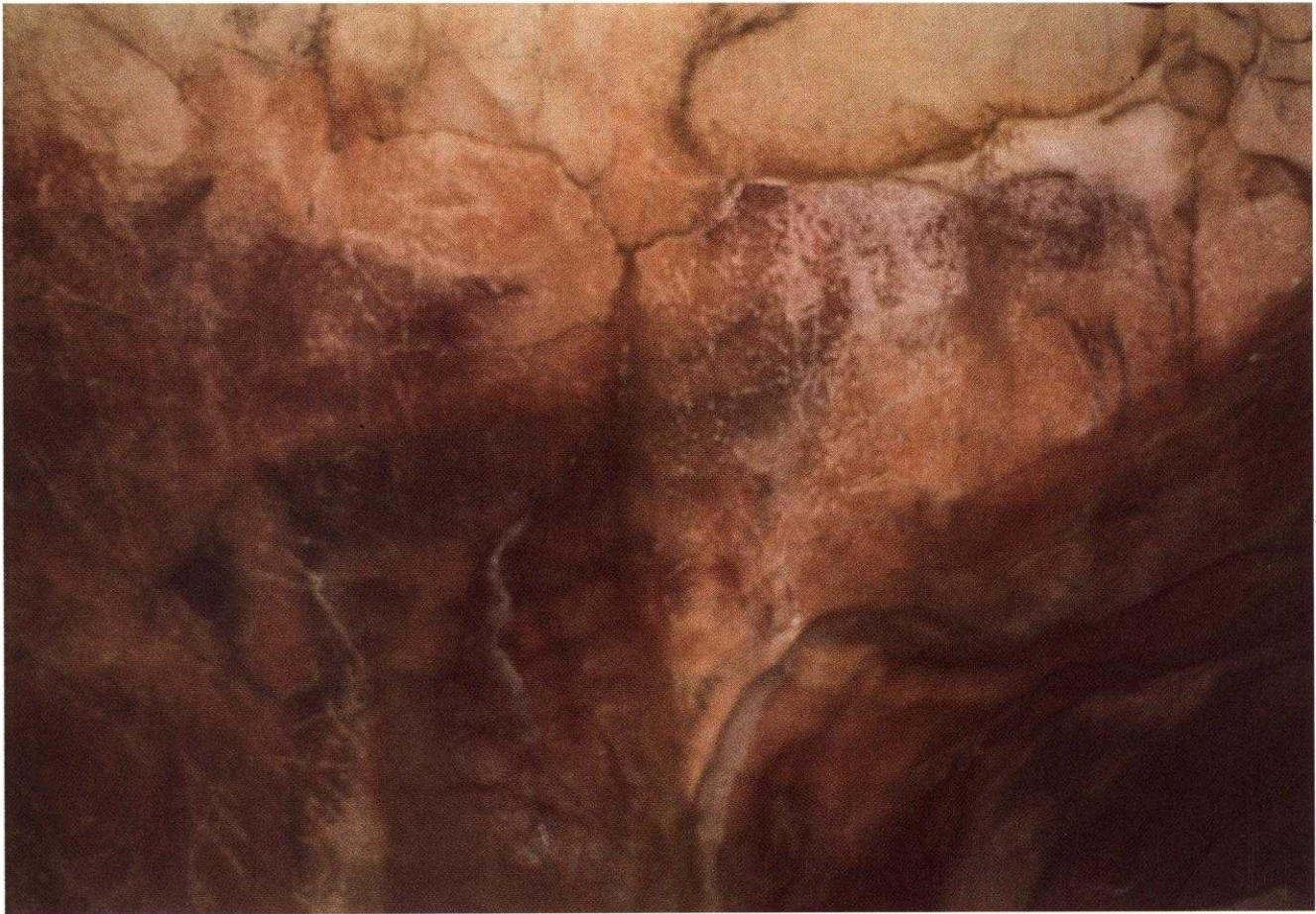


Fig. 107.— Tito Bustillo Cave. Partially destroyed painting showing a horse located to the right of the photo, and underneath, painting of a deer in a running position with its head turned back.

Fig. 107.— Cueva Tito Bustillo. Pintura de équido, parcialmente perdida (derecha de la foto) y ciervo en actitud de correr, volviendo la cabeza hacia atrás.

figures which shall soon be described.

Other lines continue on to the left allowing fragments of heads, flanks and possibly feet to be seen, all of which leads to the supposition that this whole group of figures represented there with similar stylistic features (black outlines and small size) must have been numerous. The last figure of this group can be more clearly distinguished; it is of a reindeer and an improvement over the poorer drawing of the others (fig. 104).

The concavity in the wall where this group is engraved bends at an angle and at the very peak of the angle, right down at ground level, the figure of a horse is depicted. The style totally changes. This figure measures 5' 9" from the base of the tail to the muzzle, and the height from the rear hooves to the back is 4' 11". Its profile is facing to the left, drawn in thick black line, with the surface of the body covered by pigmented stain with dark red and natural sienna. The

build of this horse is very sturdy: thick, short neck, strong head and stocky body. The artist has expressed himself with vigor, bravely simplifying the technique to achieve better representation of strength in the figure depicted (fig. 103). Below this figure there is a large black stain with almost lost outlines; however, after long study, it appears to depict the shape of a bovine with a very high neck and hanging jowls. These features could suggest a bison. This figure is



facing toward the spectator's right.

The wall where these two paintings are found, which continues on somewhat concave and bordered on the top by a low overhang, makes a turn with a projecting angle and the surface following is more or less smooth rock. This rises and spreads out, providing a wide, inviting canvas for the artistic statements of Prehistoric man who also saw it as such, and freely went ahead to create the wonderful decoration of the *Great Panel* (fig. 105). This begins with the figure of a deer drawn in black line with its lengthwise axis perpendicular to the ground. Only the head, neck, part of the breast line and the back down to the middle are visible, taking intentional advantage of a crack in the rock with a shoulder to define and reinforce the withers line (fig. 106).

Following the wall surface from right to left as one looks at it, is the figure of a horse done in very dark carmine red stain with touches of black on the outlines. It is smaller than the rest of the figures painted on this wall. The head and front feet have been lost, and the profile faces left (fig. 107).

Below there is a large deer depicted in red stain, and this stain does not extend to certain parts of the body, thus showing the color differences in the coat of these deer. The profile of the body is facing toward the right of the observer, but the animal's head turns back to the left,

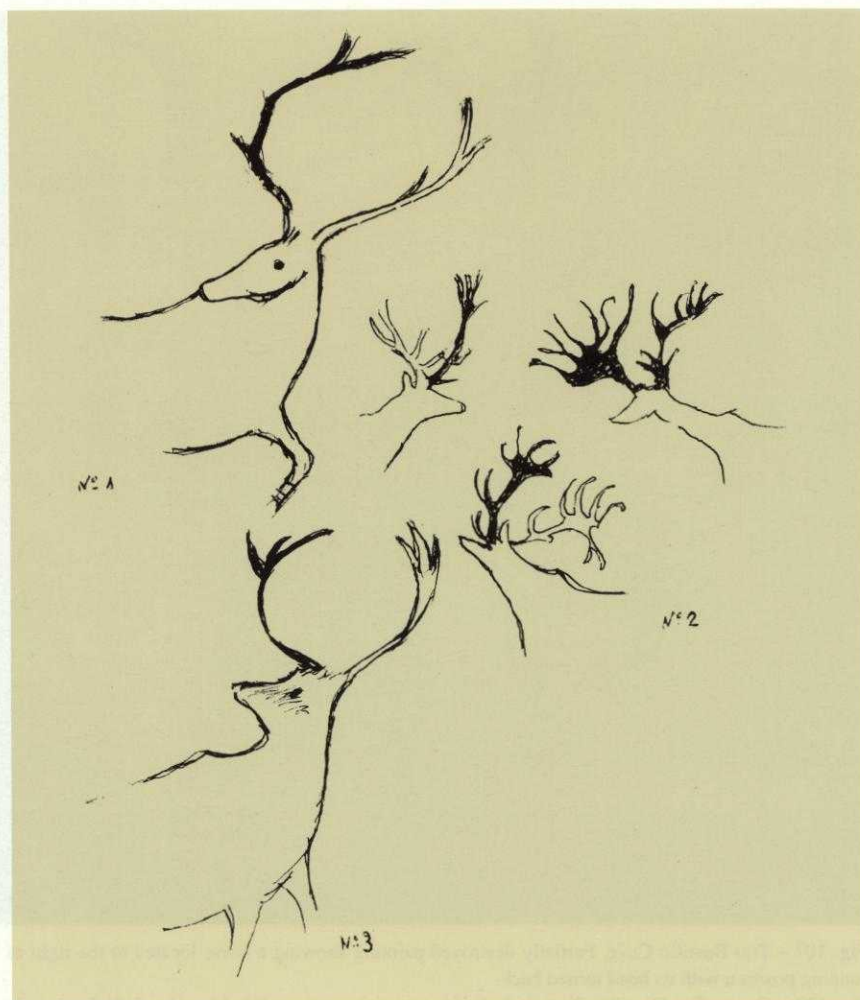


Fig. 108.— Tito Bustillo Cave. Schematic drawing of several examples of deer antlers in Prehistoric paintings.

1. Buck in Tito Bustillo Cave, reconstructed. 2. Lascaux Cavern. 3. Candamo Cave.

Fig. 108.— Dibujos de varios ejemplos de cornamentas de ciervo en pinturas prehistóricas;

1. Ciervo en Tito Bustillo (reconstituido); 2. Caverna de Lascaux; 3. Cueva de Candamo.

toward the back. It is drawn at the moment of fleeing as it glances back toward a supposed pursuer (fig. 107). This very clear movement of the neck was challenged by some publication I can no longer recall, because the fragment of the antler that can be seen comes out toward the front although the top branches curve to the rear. Actually, these antlers always come out toward

the rear. This argument is not valid, because the depiction of movement in the drawing is determined by the perspective of the antlers. This would become clear if we were to complete the rest of it the way it should have

Fig. 109.— Tito Bustillo Cave. Detail of reindeer and horse facing each other.

Fig. 109.— Cueva Tito Bustillo. Detalle de la pintura del caballo y reno enfrentados.







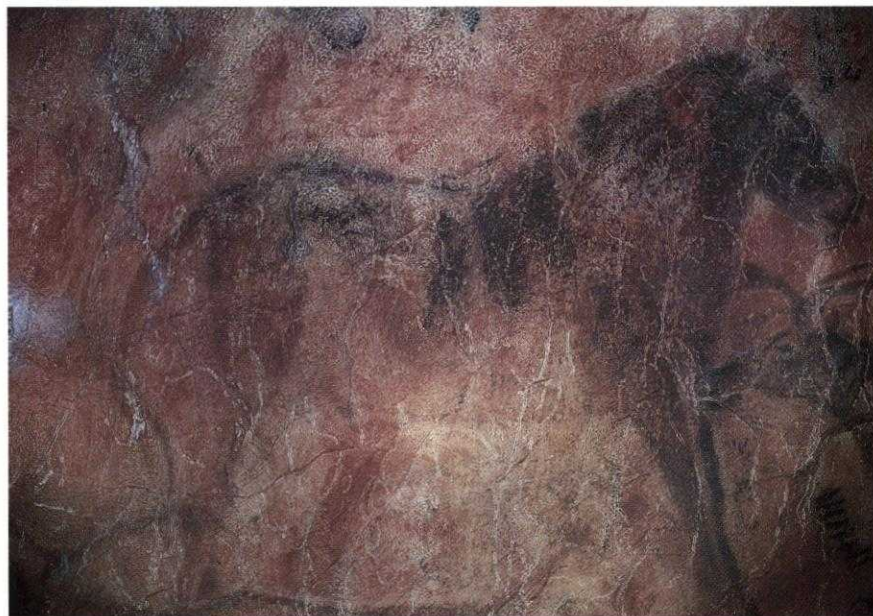


Fig. 110.—Tito Bustillo Cave. The complete painting of the black horse.

Fig. 110.—Cueva Tito Bustillo. La pintura del caballo negro completa.



Fig. 111.—Tito Bustillo Cave. Polychrome painting depicting a reindeer buck.

Fig. 111.—Cueva Tito Bustillo. Pintura polícroma representando un reno.

been in the original, which would be more or less how it looks with the drawing filled in. There are many examples of this perspective, among which we

can offer the group of deer from *Lascaux* and a specimen from the *Candamo* cave to support the correctness our point of view (fig. 108).

This figure measures 5' 7" from the base of the tail to the outline of the neck and 3' 7" from the rear hooves to the back. It is partially superimposed upon the above mentioned horse drawing, which would seem to indicate that it was painted later. At a higher level the hind quarters of another deer can be seen painted in very dull violet and done before the black deer. To the left, and with the profile pointing in the same direction, is a figure of a reindeer. From the tail to the muzzle it measures 5' 11" and from the bottom of the front feet to the farthest part of the antlers, 5' 9". This is one of the most beautiful figures of the *Great Panel*. It depicts a strong buck with its head thrust forward as though it were getting ready to attack. It is painted in black stain, with the neck and visible part of the body modeled with striped touches that I think are an attempt to represent folds of the skin. This figure has been gone over with thick, multiple incision engraving, and from the lower jaw to the shaggy chest coat, there has been scraping done to define the lighter hair these animals have naturally on the front part of the neck and on the chest.

Facing this reindeer and a little higher, there is the depiction of a large horse painted in black stain. On the chest it touches the muzzle of the reindeer and part of one of the front branches of the reindeer's antlers pierces the horse. These two horse and reindeer figures seem to belong to a



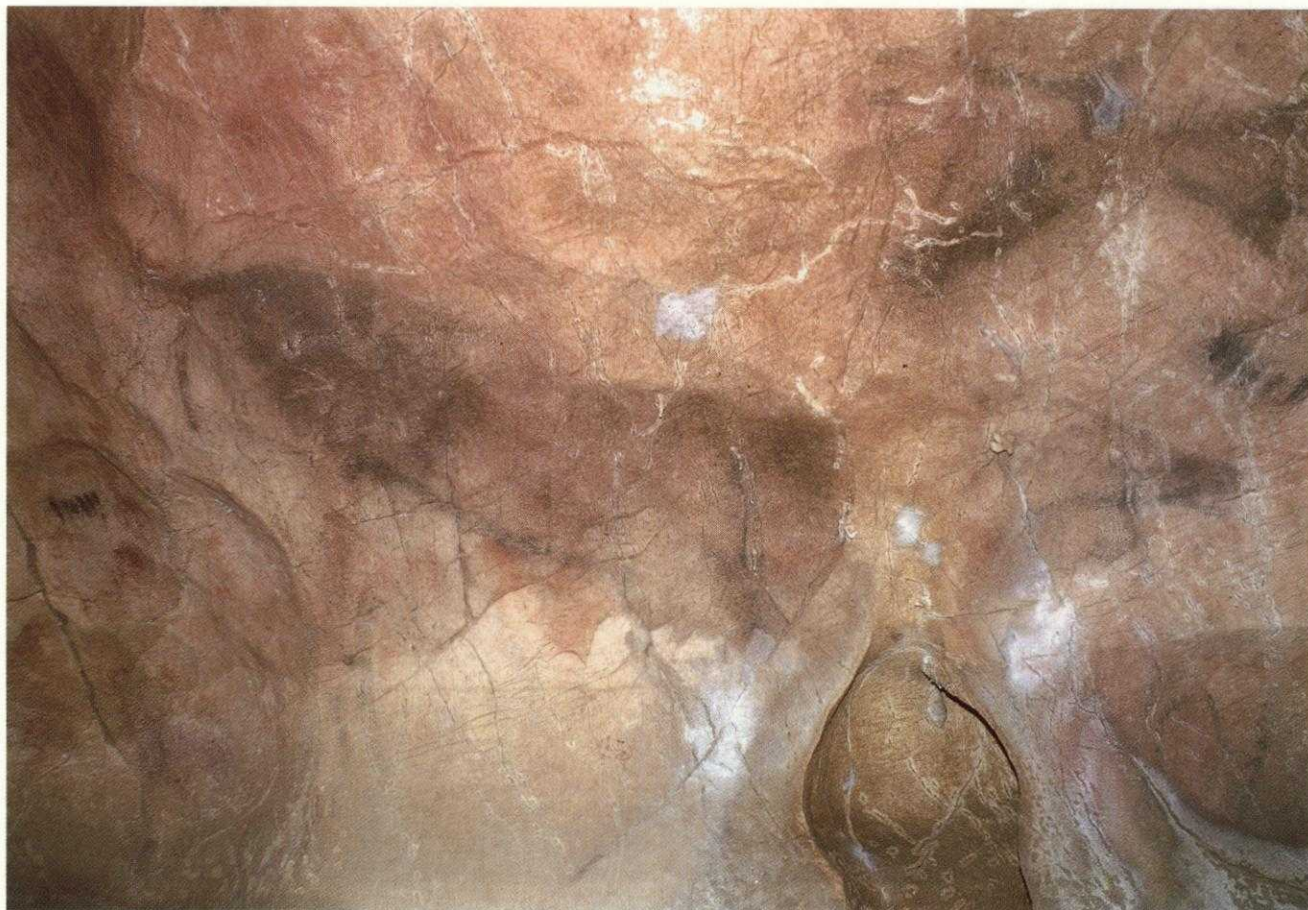


Fig. 112.— Tito Bustillo Cave. Painting of female reindeer or doe, also polychrome;

Fig. 112.— Cueva Tito Bustillo. Pintura polícroma de reno hembra. Compone escena con la anterior.

composition, despite the fact that such depictions are infrequent in Cantabrian wall Art. The fact is that the horse is stretching up its neck and throwing its head back while putting its feet forward, as though it were trying to stop or get away to escape the reindeer's charge. Toward the withers of the horse there are three striped spots, as though the color had been reinforced to define details of the coat. This figure measures 5' 11" from the base of the tail to the muzzle, and its height from the end of the front feet to the top of the ear is 5' 3". The

outline is also gone over in engraving (figs. 109 & 110).

Below the figure just mentioned there is another reindeer, which is different from the first one described both in drawing and color, which for me is an indication that the two of these were not done at the same stage in time. In this last specimen coloring is varied, with the use of a brown which was probably obtained from natural earth, a black and a red. These colors are sometimes mixed together, giving shadings to model the body of the animal. Those parts of the hair that are naturally

white are left alone without any color applied: the stomach, back of the flanks, front of the head and neck (fig. 111). The profile faces to the left and from tail to muzzle it measures almost 6' 8", reaching a height of 4' 3" from the front hooves to the withers. Some of the irregularities of the stone are taken advantage of in the flank area to give to some parts of the figure sculptural strength. The outline is also gone over with engraving in the same way as the ones before.

The possibility should be mentioned that maybe there is an



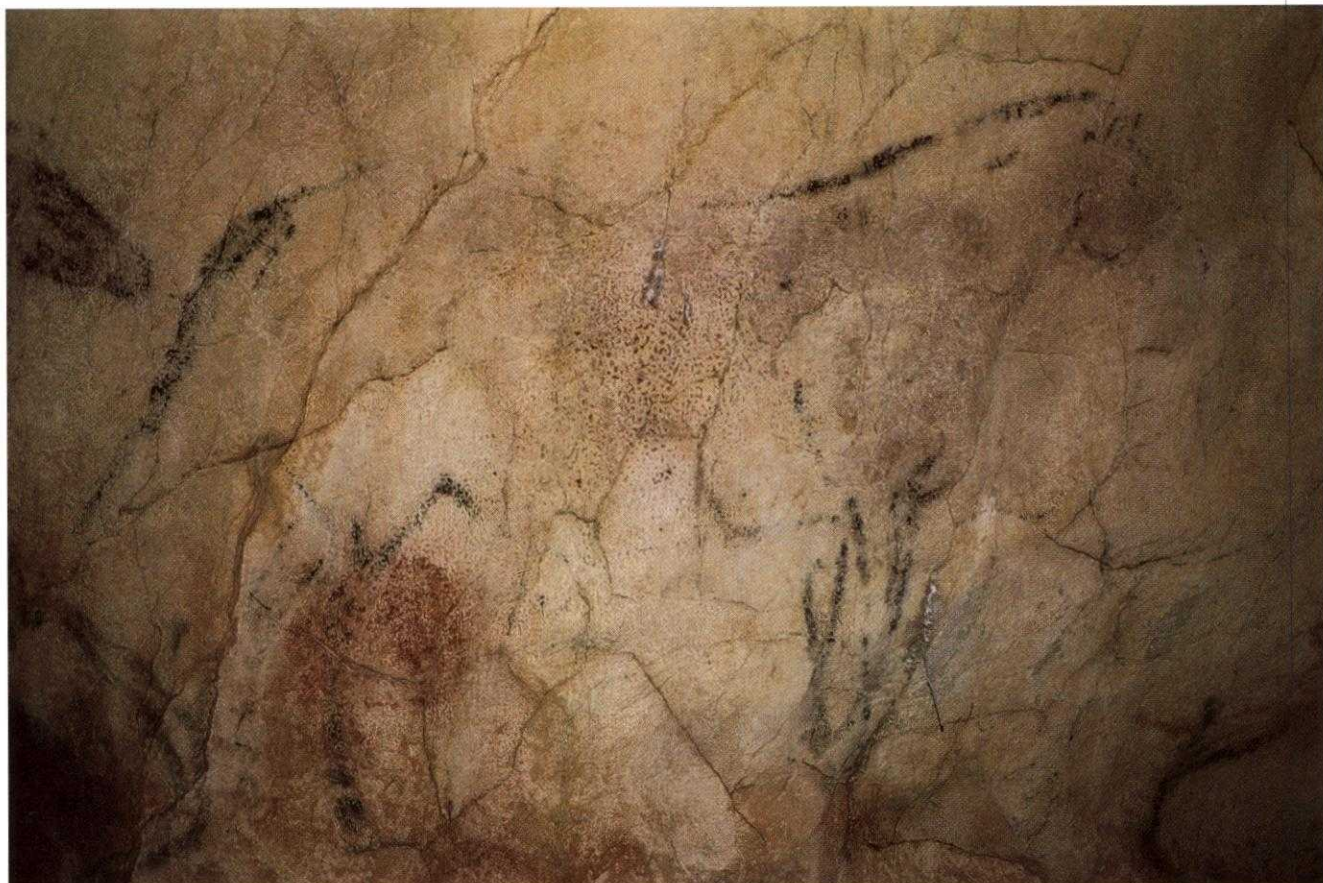


Fig. 113.—Tito Bustillo Cave. Painting of horse in light colors outlined in black line.

Fig. 113.—Cueva Tito Bustillo. Pintura de caballo en colores claros y silueteado en línea negra.

attempt here to represent the two recognized species of reindeer with these two different specimens. Given the features of these painted figures, the one facing the horse would be similar to the *Rangifer caribou* and the other, to the *Rangifer tarandus*.

To the left of this figure and facing it, there is another of a female reindeer or doe, doubtful because the painting of the head is very dull, making identification difficult. But the fact that it is part of the group with reindeer gives greater credence to the first supposition. If we add to this its similar color treatment, proper size

proportions between male and female and shape with the head drawn no higher than the withers, then this identification becomes fully confirmed. From the tail to the muzzle it measures 6' 1" and its outlines are also gone over with engraving (fig. 112).

At the top of this *Great Panel* and again describing from right to left, we have the figure of a horse with the profile facing to the right, outlined in black line. Though dull, the very pale violet stain coloring the body surface is still visible. It has two black striped spots on the withers. Most of this figure is gone over with

engraving on its outline with the same technique as the others before. From the base of the tail to the muzzle it measures 6' 5" and its height, from the front hooves to the ear, is 5' 1". Its appearance is elegant, with long legs, fine body, a long neck and small head (fig. 113).

To the left of this horse there is another one depicted with its profile also facing to the right. Its outline is shown with black line and it has thick, soft lines on the mane and back line. The body is painted with faded out stain of bright violet color. On the feet, the violet paint fades





Fig. 114.— Tito Bustillo Cave. Horse painted in violet with black zebra stripes on feet.

Fig. 114.— Cueva Tito Bustillo. Caballo pintado en color violeta con cebraduras negras en las patas.

out and gradually fades into a yellowish brown color, with some black horizontal lines on the feet in the form of zebra stripes. From the tail to the muzzle it measures almost five feet and its height, from the rear hooves to the back, is 3' 6". Similar to the above figures, it is engraved over part of the outline. Contrary to the horse described before, this one has short legs, large head and fat body.

There is another horse depicted further to the left and a bit lower. Its profile also faces the right. It is drawn in black line and the stain in which it is pain-

ted on the surface of the body is grey and faded out; that is, with no coloring in the area of the stomach and back of the legs. It is 6' 1" long and its height, from the bottom of the rear feet to the back, is 4' 3". As in the above figures, its outline has been gone over with multiple incision deep engraving (fig. 115).

Partially superimposed on this last equine figure and at about the same height as the horse with zebra stripes, there is an engraving depicting another horse, but this time with the profile facing left. It is well drawn and reproduces with precision the horse

painted to its right, with the zebra stripes included (fig. 116).

The multitude of lines engraved on the *Great Panel* make up a complicated web that we still have not been able to unravel. From among these engravings we shall mention another that is sufficiently clear, in addition to the above.

Under the stomach of the grey horse there are zig-zag shaped drawings making up a sort of screen, and fragments of back lines of horses and deer. To the left and a bit lower, there is a tectiform engraved in single deep line with zig-zag symbols



repeated at its bottom. To the left of this there is another rectangular, crosshatched engraving partly done by scraping with a spatula, and on top of this, a deer head touching the top of the crosshatch with its lower jaw. The unique position of this head on top of the abstract engraving brings up the possibility of an attempt to show how a deer is caught in a trap.

At the left side of the panel there is a small doe head, on which the inside surface of the drawing is filled in using multiple, fine engraving technique for a shading effect. Its similarity to the does engraved at *Llonín* and *Altamira* is total, and going on with this parallelism, we could consider this type of engraving to be within a late Cantabrian Solutrean. Almost at the same height there is the head of a bovine, and off to the left, two deer heads together that also recall the technique of the ones from *Llonín*.

At a much greater height, where the rock starts to form a noticeable dome, there is a large horsehead painted in black line. The mane is depicted by a stylization of lance-shaped leaves. The border between the hairline and the soft, hairless tissue of the muzzle is shown by a black line, just as in the large bovines of *Lascaux*, for example. The size of this head is just over three feet from the base of the muzzle to the top of the ear (fig. 117).

Below this there is another sign drawn in black line. This is a

horizontal line with nine vertical lines sprouting from it, having another horizontal line under them. This concludes the pictorial depictions on the *Great Panel*.

On the opposite wall there is also the figure of a cow depicted in black line, and to the left of this and a bit lower, the figure of a bison with the drawing not being as well preserved as the former, but at least well enough to be able to identify the figure and to realize that it seems to be depicted at the moment of charging, with head lowered and tail straight out (figs. 118 & 119).

The wall Art of this cave also has other traits worth reflecting upon, in addition to its great art value placing it among the finest specimens known. For example, one of these is the varied typology of the equines represented.

The different modes or character of the zoomorphic stylizations depicted are often attributed to the imagination or temperament of the artist, even when they are all of the same species. Of course, in many cases this is true, but without denying this expressive variety, we also wish to point out that there are other cases in which this reasoning is not applicable, specifically with regard to the horses depicted on the *Great Panel* of the *Tito Bustillo* cave. What we have here is not the stylization of a *horse*, but rather of *different horses*.

The largest group of those present shows uniform workmanship and esthetic concept in line, coloring and application of

stain, which would allow us to assume that they are from the same school. Three of these, which are precisely the same ones showing the greatest typological differences, were probably done by the same hand. One of these equine types is known and is faithfully reproduced in the specimen located to the left of the high frieze of the *Great Panel*: it is a wild *tarpan* horse that became extinct over a hundred years ago; but its description corresponds exactly to our painting: rat grey coat (winter coat), the stomach and back of the legs are white, short in height, potbellied, etc. (fig. 115). If this figure is a meticulous portrait, we must then assume that the little horse with short legs with zebra stripes (fig. 114) also corresponds to the description of a species and is not just the artist's imagination, especially in the light of species that have developed up to the present day. We can say the same about the slim, white horse with long legs and neck with a somewhat smallish head (fig. 113). This same opinion is also reasonably applicable to the black horse facing the reindeer. Thus, one of the Prehistoric artists that worked at the *Tito Bustillo* cave has left us a detailed description of the different kinds of horses that shared the fortunes of life with mankind during the Upper Paleolithic era.

There are other circumstances further affirming the relationship between these four horses in comparison to the rest of the draw-





Fig. 115.— Tito Bustillo Cave. Horse painted in grey.

Fig. 115.— Cueva Tito Bustillo. Caballo pintado en color gris.

ings, and it is that they have been drawn with their profile facing to the observer's right. That is not the case of the fat horse described first nor of the second, which is small in size and stained in dark red; both of these are facing left.

We shall attempt to define the stages in which these paintings were done, both in the introductory paintings before the *Great Panel* and within it, through use of iconographic comparisons with paintings from other caves

and supporting evidence from the deposit found at the foot of the wall. As we have said, this is the most recent one and the only one that has been preserved; but at least it can serve as a basis for dating the most recent stage. As will be recalled, testing and in some ways craft, place it in the Cantabrian Middle Magdalenian for us. Among the paintings, we have the one of the female reindeer with options for identification as a doe. Very similar to this in position, movement, coloring

and even size, is the potential doe of the large ceiling group at Altamira, which is dated within the Cantabrian Middle Magdalenian. We believe this date to be very appropriate for the female reindeer in the *Great Panel* of this cave in Ribadesella, especially when we consider that Carbon 14 tests of the deposit at the foot of the wall have given us a very appropriate age of 14,500 years. This dating of the doe or female reindeer takes the reindeer facing it along with it,





Fig. 116.— Tito Bustillo Cave. Engraving depicting the horse with zebra stripes painted to the right of it, with profile facing the opposite direction.  
Fig. 116.— Cueva Tito Bustillo. Grabado representando al caballo con cebraduras pintado a su derecha, con el perfil en sentido contrario.

because the treatment of the two figures is so similar that I personally have no hesitation in attributing them to the same author, having been made together as parts of the same composition.

The figures of the three horses on the high part of the panel would be contemporary to these two: the tarpan horse, the one with zebra stripes and the white horse of elegant appearance. I am basing this opinion on the fact that the mannerisms of style and technique are very much in tune with the artistic moment of

the pair of reindeer, though the hand of the artist may not have been the same in both cases.

The figures of the horse and reindeer in black stain, which I believe to belong to the same composition, have a more sober technique than the above depictions, and in their execution we do not see the rich shadings, nor use of varied colors, nor the black outlining around the drawing. Despite all this, they do have the advantage of more expressive force. This, together with the fact that a small portion of the pain-

ting of the reindeer first mentioned is superimposed on the painting of the horse, which would already indicate that it was done later, makes me inclined to consider the horse-reindeer scene in black as work belonging to the early Magdalenian or to a time of transition between the Solutrean and Magdalenian. We could also include therein, the figure of the deer in black stain that is running and turning its head back to observe a possible pursuer.

The figure of the fat horse (fig. 103) with profile facing left





Fig. 117.— Tito Bustillo Cave. Horsehead painted in black line.

Fig. 117.— Cueva Tito Bustillo. Cabeza de caballo pintado en línea negra.

in contrast to the four that are found on the *Great Panel*, shows a surprising similarity to an example appearing at the *Labastide* cave (High Pyrenees) in its stylistic conception and typological structure, and to another at *Le Gabilhou* (Dordogne), that are both classified as late Solutrean.

The deer in black line and axis perpendicular to the ground and the horsehead, also drawn in black line, remain as the last significant figures of the *Great Panel*. The location of these two figures is first and last on the wall respectively. Concerning the horsehead, we find a rela-

tionship with the large bovines of *Lascaux*. Their workmanship is similar, even in manner of drawing, showing the area where the hair ends and the hairless part of the muzzle begins. The bovines of *Lascaux* are considered to be Magdalenian work. Personally, I would include these two figures in the *Tito Bustillo* cave, the doe and the horsehead, in a late Cantabrian Magdalenian. The date for the black line *ideomorph* of this same panel would be even later.

So I therefore believe in general, that this main group of paintings in the cave would fall between the Solutrean and Magdalenian, both in their middle Cantabrian phase.

We still have to arrange the remaining engravings. We would have no doubt in classifying the pair of small deer heads as Solutrean-Magdalenian, due to their evident relationship to *Llonín* and others. I believe that the engraving with the depiction of the horse with zebra stripes, made with weak and very superficial cutting, belongs to a late stage of the Magdalenian.

We must of course address the large group of engravings made at the hollow of the *Long Gallery* (fig. 97). Its single deep stroke technique is the one that prevails, although in some parts of the figures the stroke is reinforced and becomes multiple. These engravings belong to the best Solutrean stage of Art which to me, belongs to the first third of the period.



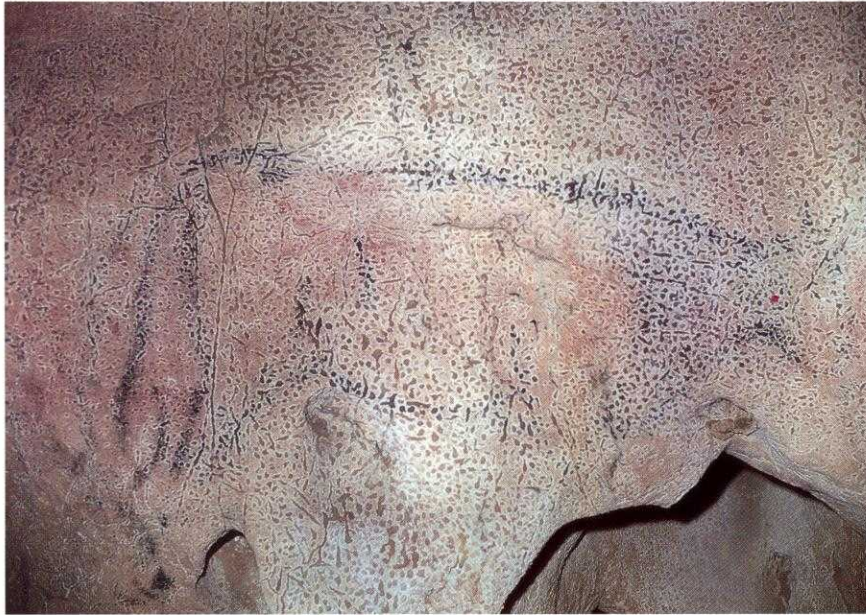


Fig. 118.—Tito Bustillo Cave. Cow figure painted in black line.

Fig. 118.—Cueva Tito Bustillo. Figura de vaca pintada en línea negra.



Fig. 119.—Tito Bustillo Cave. Bison figure painted in black line.

Fig. 119.—Cueva Tito Bustillo. Figura de bisonte pintada en línea negra.

The engravings incorporated into or related to painted figures deserve special consideration. In this latter sense we first have the engraved reproduction of the horse painted with zebra stripes.

It is like an almost invisible image unfolded from the body bulk of the painted horse and it is also one more mystery of the magical ceremonies practiced by Prehistoric man. Another for-

mula that could be in accord with these ideas is the multiple, deep engraving technique that is used to go over the outlines of the figures painted on the *Great Panel* which was done after painting, because among other reasons, it was superimposed upon it and the paint was scratched again and again. Technically the engraving would have been explainable if it had been used as a sketch of the figure in preparation for painting. The theory that the function of the engraving would be to make the stain stand out more is not applicable either, because these figures gone over with engraving have been perfectly well drawn in a black paint outline with the smallest line details. On the other hand, the painted figures do belong to different styles and stages as we have seen, whereas their emphasizing with engraving observes the same technique and style. I would even say they were executed at the same time. Thus, it may be supposed that the prayerful rite came into a phase in which it was manifested by engraving over the shapes of these painted figures of already proven magical qualities. Perhaps this solution might be partially attributed to the lack of smooth, useable painting surfaces on rocks in the selected locations of the *sanctuary*; because, let us remember that although superimposing engravings on depictions is frequent in Prehistoric Art, superimposing on painted figures is unusual and at



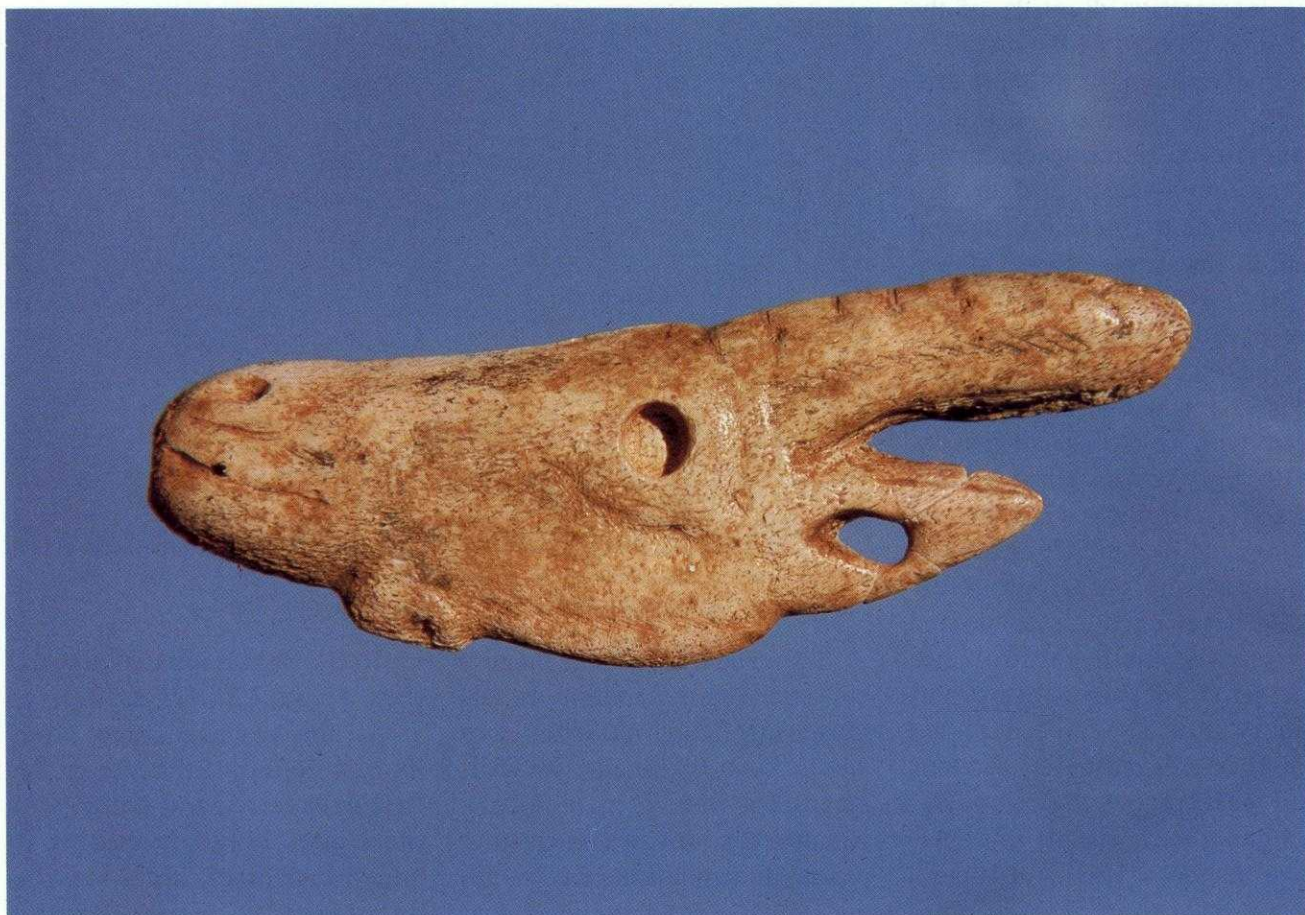


Fig. 120.— Tito Bustillo Cave. Pendant carved in the shape of a goat head.

Fig. 120.— Cueva Tito Bustillo. Colgante tallado en forma de cabeza de cabra.

most, limited to superimposing small fragments. It is as though the engraving were a valuable message from the mere fact that it was done, without any further contemplative purpose. On the other hand, the painting itself fulfills both conditions: the value of its creation and the value of permanent admiration.

After these observations and continuing on with this hypothetical discourse, it could be surmised that the engraving of the outlines of these figures may perhaps be motivated by an action to *renew* their magical power;

which I say with all kinds of reservations. We must again emphasize the extraordinary artistic quality of this sensational group in the *Tito Bustillo* cave, evidencing the *European* character of this Prehistoric ancestor in the area of Art at very least.

Though Asturias was already the custodian of a very significant Prehistoric Art legacy including the splendid examples from *El Pindal*, *Candamo* and *El Buxu*, it had never been able to equal that quintessence of the Art of *Altamira* and *Lascaux*. Nonetheless, ever since the *Tito Bustillo* cave

was discovered and appraised, it can be said that it has now gained a position equal to that of those renowned caves, with one of the most exclusive and beautiful collections of paintings ever made by the hand of Prehistoric man.

Upon comparing the paintings from the Sella River caves with the paintings from those two great monuments, the notable differences in concept distinguishing them from the latter may be noticed, due to their very personal interpretation of nature. With no doubt at all, we are witnessing here a new example of



the interpretive diversity of the artist confronted by the model.

For example, in its most characteristic painting, Altamira generates admiration channeled along the suggestive roads of a very evident figurative stylization in flat, tense colors, subjectively modeling anatomies that are equally tense from the effort of the body in an action pose, thus giving rise to an expressionism with an element of fantasy. With this, the naturalist idea breaks off; though without our being able to notice it clearly. In contrast, the paintings of the Sella River cave are dominated by great stylistic faithfulness. The artists, possessed of extraordinary mastery, have depicted the character, attitude, reactions and gestures of their models, assigning each one its own personal features. That is; it is not a *horse*, but *specific horses*; not a *reindeer*, but *specific reindeer*.

Prehistoric man created his Art works in the *Tito Bustillo* cave during a time period between thirteen and twenty thousand years B.C. The first time I beheld the paintings on the *Great Panel* was a very stirring moment. Over twenty thousand years ago, unknown beings had met together to leave us this message of their existence through a feat of supreme magic, a message that is so intensely felt, that standing before this display of their paintings amid the starkness of that buried silence, we can still sense the breath and heat of their living humanity.



Fig. 121.—Tito Bustillo Cave. Fragment of Magdalenian perforated staff.

Fig. 121.—Cueva Tito Bustillo. Fragmento de bastón perforado magdalenense.

Before concluding this lengthy but deserving dissertation on this most significant Asturian cave due to its many details, we shall make reference to its mobiliary Art that has provided interesting pieces, though lacking the spectacular qualities of the wall Art. Included among these are two really exceptional pieces: a fragment of a *drilled staff* and a small flat sculpture depicting a goat's head that was used as a pendant, judging from the hole it has near the ear. These pieces are both very finely made, especially the latter. The sum of the utensils found in the dig is very large: harpoons with geometric type engravings, palettes also having incisions and some with animal figures. In addition to these decorated instruments, a collection of slate and sandstone tablets was also found whose only purpose was for engravings to be made upon them, some of which were

stylistic depictions of nature (figs. 41, 42, 120, 121 & 122).

All this material comes from the last period of the site or the first excavated, and belongs to the Upper Magdalenian. It is hoped that older strata may be uncovered as deeper digging progresses at the deposit.

In addition to its extraordinary wall Art, the *Tito Bustillo* cave has also left us the portable message of its tablets, lances, palettes, etc. under the ground, that are beginning to give us a handle on dates.

Overcome by a dizzying array of ages, mysteries and silences, we now leave behind the world of our ancestors, who left us their desperate cries for attention on the walls of these caverns so that we would not forever be ignorant of the dual truth of their life: spirit and substance, already in perfect harmony thousands of years ago.



## CHAPTER IX

# A CAVE AT CANGAS DE ONIS

### The El Buxu Cave

Although the Cangas de Onís area is not a part of central Asturias, it seems that there, Asturias is even more so, or at least it is that bucolic Asturias that nonetheless was capable of taking action with bravery when outsiders tried to break up this beloved land. There, Asturias is a more authentic Asturias because a mountain is more a mountain, the snow is whiter and the rivers clearer. Everything is more virgin and more original. It is like when the rain falls hard and fast after a hot summer afternoon, leaving nature clean and refreshed.

From Cangas de Onís, the highway goes to Onís, to Cabrales and to the two Peñamelleras. Starting off it follows along the Güeña River, that is born yonder, at La Rebollada, and rushes down to join the Sella.

The highway has a fork leading over to Covadonga, but before meeting History we must meet Prehistory. Therefore, only two and a half miles from Cangas, before we get to that Covadonga fork, we find another coming from *molín de Teleñes* or *Teleña*?; the mill and inn of Teleñes. This highway crosses the Güeña and goes to the town of Cardes and there it stops. But from Cardes, there is a trail going to the *El Buxu* cave.



Fig. 122.— Tito Bustillo Cave. Magdalenian needles.

Fig. 122.— Cueva Tito Bustillo. Aguja magdalenienenses.

Years ago, in 1956, back when I was studying the Art of that cavern, the river had to be crossed by a jumbled collection of rocks, some of which were under water whenever the river rose a bit, and you had to get wet. But the bridge and highway soon to be built were already being considered. Cardes still had elevated granaries and stone houses with sun porches. On cool mornings it still smelled of wood fueled ovens; there were still those fat, generous loaves of bread packed with flour that also speckled their rough, toasted crust. The *tayuelu* and the *esquirpia* cart were still used in the chores of the country house.

Today we leave the mechanical fury of the automobile behind, and at a trail's pace, off we go to the *El Buxu* cave. At our side is a creek called *Entrepeñas*. At times it gets so bottled up in the canyon that the trail strays from its bed.

Finally, way back in the shade, the blue-grey bulk of an enormous limestone rock comes into view, with a surface wrinkled and cracked like an elephant's hide. At its base we have the entrance to the *El Buxu* cave.

Does Buxu mean "búho" (owl)? This does not seem probable because the name given to that nocturnal bird around there is nothing like that form. But there is *bruju*, from "brujo"



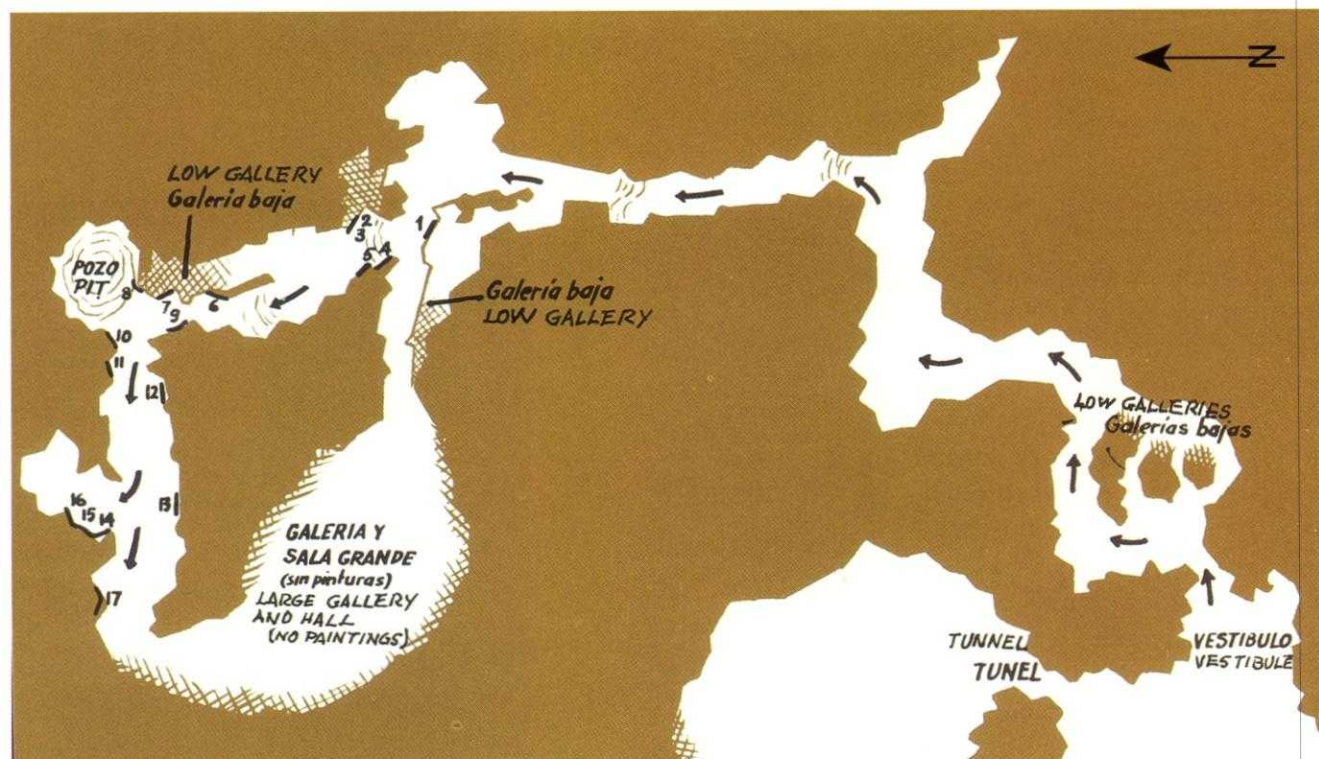


Fig. 123.— El Buxu Cave. Schematic map of the cave.

Fig. 123.— Cueva de El Buxu. Plano esquemático de la cueva.

(warlock), which in the purest dialect is *bruxu*, and from this it could indeed have become Buxu. So this is how it could have become the *Warlock's Cave*, since by exercising their sharp imagination, people would have associated the unfathomable mysteries of the dark, disquieting depths of those galleries with the unnatural and made up this warlock; or else, some wandering misanthrope may have found shelter in this cave and provided a reason for it to be named so.

Seventy-two years ago, in 1916, Cesáreo Cardín, hired by Count de la Vega del Sella to do an initial location of the caves to be explored, discovered the decorated walls of *El Buxu* cave

that were studied right away by the Count himself and Hugo Obermaier. They made the results of their work known in a book published in 1918 by the Commission for Paleontological and Prehistoric Research, Paper N° 20, under the title *La cueva del Buxu*.

In 1970, Emilio Olávarri did some excavation assays at the edge of the main deposit providing material that was not very characteristic, but that nonetheless gave an indication of belonging to Solutrean occupation. The most important deposit is sealed off by several stalagmite layers, which causes serious problems in excavation. The wall Art was recently studied by

Mario Menéndez, who published the results of his work in Bulletin 112 of the I.D.E.A. Here, he believes that the Art of *El Buxu* falls between a Cantabrian Upper Solutrean and the beginnings of the Magdalenian, and provides nine wall Art specimens that had been unknown until then.

The galleries of the *El Buxu* cave containing the Art of our Prehistoric ancestors are small, and as intimate as a pocket date book. It also dried out all of a sudden with no further seepage. Therefore most of its hollows and ceilings are smooth. Though it is small in size and intimate, at the same time it is also a maze. It spreads out in little branches of low galleries, cat holes or



halls, that branch out in an attempt to make one stray from the proper road.

I only made occasional return visits to the *El Buxu* cave after the work I had done there in 1956. For such reason, my story refers to what I saw back then and to the conclusions I put down in my notes, having in mind the publication of a study that was never done.

Wall Art depictions do not start until some two hundred thirty or so feet from the entrance; and then begin with an incomplete drawing of a horse, marked as N° 1 on the map of the cave (fig. 123). This is an engraving showing the outline with a multiple stroke line (fig. 124). In 1963 this engraving had disappeared. Opposite this figure, where the stone becomes a sort of low arch preserving its natural roughness and then smooths out in an intrados to go up to the ceiling of the gallery that continues on, there are two small sized deer. They are about a foot long and are painted in very faded black that is hard to see (nos. 2 & 3) (fig. 125). To the left, on the main surface of the wall, there is a depiction of a doe also painted in black, and to the right of this, another engraved and painted doe (nos. 4 & 5) (fig. 126).

This display starting at the above mentioned arch has a length of some 23 feet and toward the end it opens up into a very low gallery to the right of the entrance path. We are going to continue along to the left to



Fig. 124.- El Buxu Cave. Engraving of a horse.  
Fig. 124.- El Buxu. Caballo grabado.

The same happens in the following specimen (N° 7 on the map). On the top of this location may be seen an engraving drawn in an abstract fashion made with deep cutting and single line. Under this, there is another series of fine lines and a little farther down, another group of lines that are hard to interpret.

In N° 8 on the map, which is now a part of the wall of the pit, there is another engraved abstract sign drawn in a well defined manner. This consists of a sort of rectangle crossed inside by lines and outside it has some lines like fringe at its sides. At

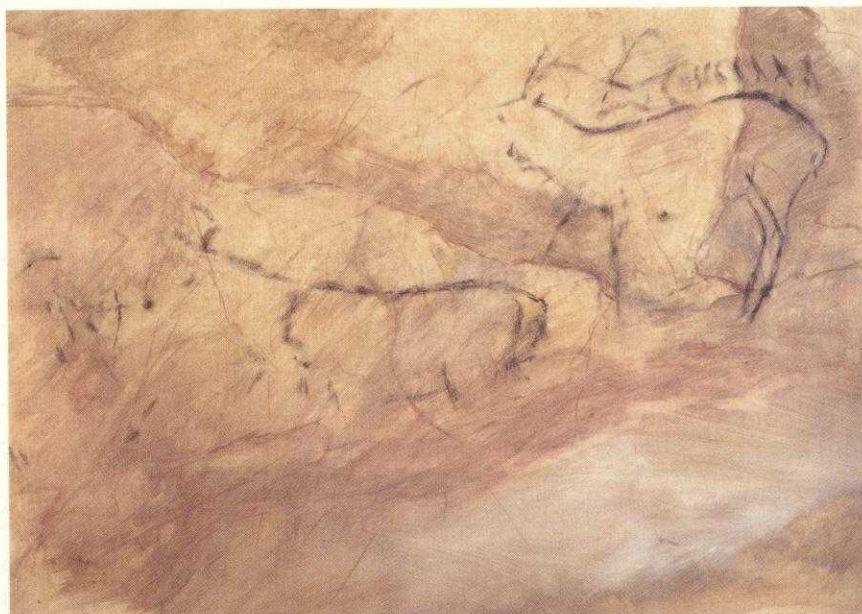


Fig. 125.- El Buxu Cave. Two deer painted in black line.  
Fig. 125.- El Buxu. Dos cérvidos pintados con línea negra.

then come out into a higher continuation, and on the wall to the right, a group of engravings appears. One of these (N° 6 on the map) has a series of very vague lines that could have belonged to a zoomorphic figure.

the top right corner there is another group of lines that look like the neck and head of a horse in their shape (fig. 127).

Going back a little and on the left wall, N° 9 on the map, there



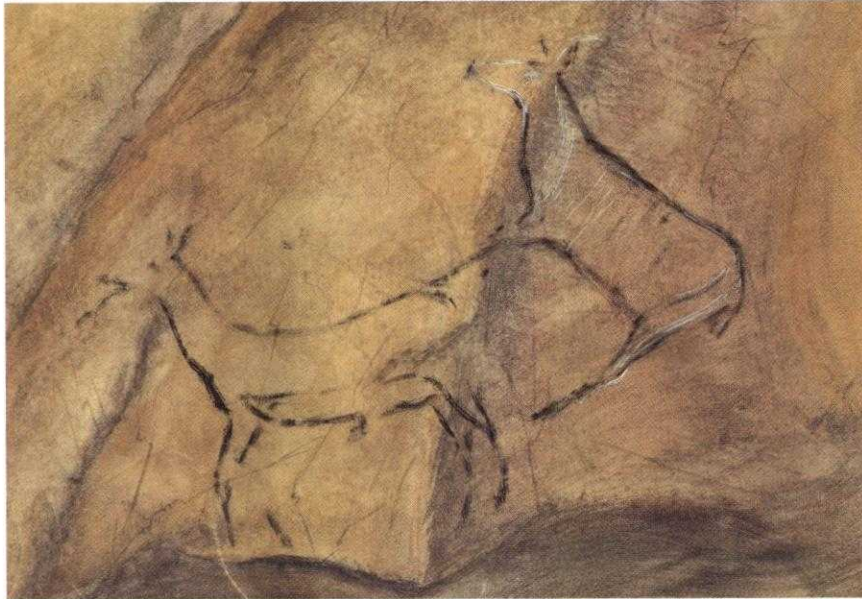


Fig. 126.—El Buxu Cave. Hind figures painted in black with one also engraved.  
Fig. 126.—El Buxu. Ciervas pintadas con línea negra.

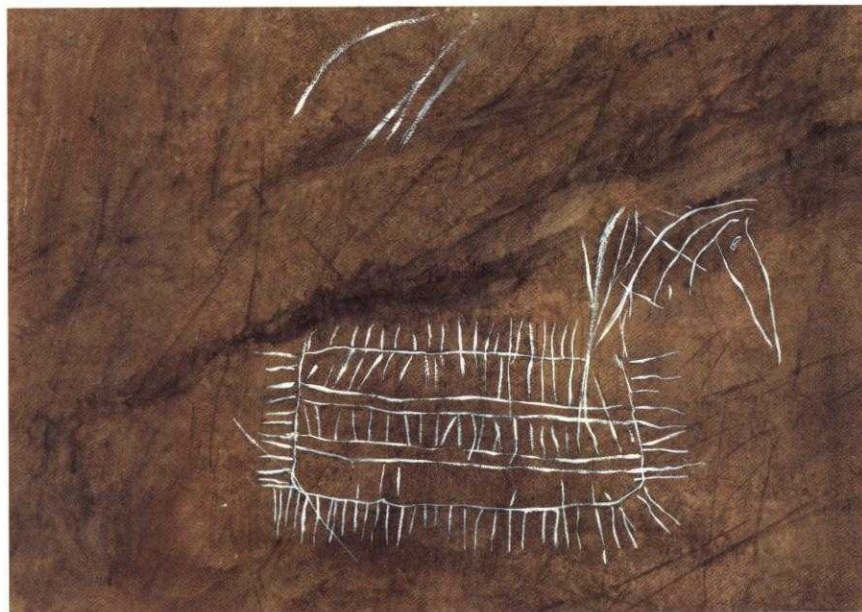


Fig. 127.—El Buxu Cave. Ideomorphic engraving.  
Fig. 127.—El Buxu. Grabado ideomórfico.

are two engraved horses measuring around 20 inches long each. The engraving is deep cut and single line, especially on the bottom one (fig. 128). I noticed the disappearance of these engravings more than twenty-five years ago.

After having gone around the pit area and following along in a Westerly direction, again on the right wall, N° 10 on the map, there is a set of deer antlers painted in black with its bottom part superimposed on an abstract

engraving. From appearances this shows that the making of abstract engravings was first in order before the stylized paintings in black. Another series of engraved abstract shapes may be seen in this group, but among these there is a drawing that is also engraved with deep, single line showing a goat and at the bottom of this group, a somewhat vague red painting looking like a letter E (fig. 129). To the side of N° 11 on the map, there is a series of paintings and engravings that are impossible to identify, but the head, neck and beginning of the front feet of a goat can be seen clearly among these, drawn in black paint (fig. 130). Going back to the wall to the left, almost opposite N° 10, there is another very faint engraved tectiform shown on the map as N° 12. Following along the wall to the left, N° 13 on the map, we find the figure of a horse engraved with deep, but incomplete cutting (fig. 131). Almost opposite this figure there is a hollow with a very low ceiling, and on the left wall at its entrance there are other groups of figures which are the most beautifully expressed figures of the entire cavern. One of them achieves perfection equal to that of the best specimens from other caverns of the Cantabrian region. Close to the start of this wall and almost at ground level, there are two horses one after the other shown in engraving. In the one in front, the lines of the engraving cover the entire body, modeling



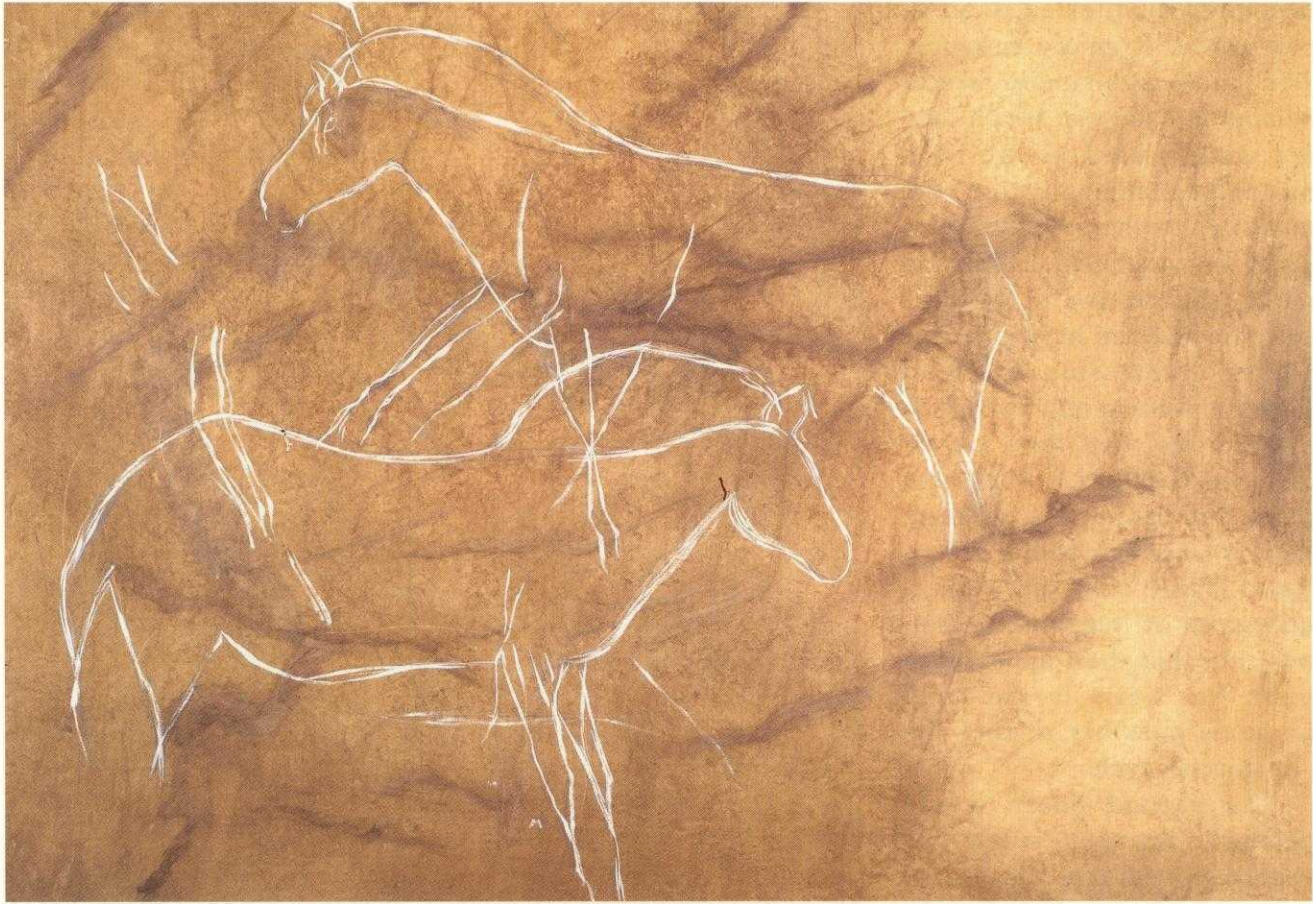


Fig. 128.—El Buxu Cave. Engraving depicting two horses.

Fig. 128.—El Buxu. Grabado representando dos caballos.

with their lines the anatomic layers of the animal (fig. 132). Over these, separated by close to five feet and by a crack in the rock, there is another engraved horse (fig. 133). The first two have sets of lines drawn perpendicular to the stomach, as though to indicate weapons piercing it.

Going along, we find the drawing marked as N° 15 on the map, corresponding to the location of a small bison engraved with single cut and a sure hand, mostly retouched with black outlines (fig. 134). To the right of the bison, N° 16 on the map, is a

deer figure also having a combination of engraving and black paint. It measures some 15 inches long and is of truly admirable drawing quality. Superimposed, there is another very incomplete engraved figure that appears to be another deer. On the highest part of the wall there is an engraving of a horse that is also incomplete and higher up, a figure of a fallow deer drawn in black paint with six dots of the same color on the neck and body. This animal seems to be depicted at the moment of bellowing (fig. 135). Part of this figure is done on the

low ceiling of this grotto and all the way inside there is another large deer figure executed in engraving with black paint retouching. This is also quite expressive; it is falling down wounded by some javelins piercing its chest. Over this deer there is a goat engraving (fig. 136).

Lastly, shown by number 17 on the map, there is a black paint sign that looks like it represents the antlers of a deer.

We think that the abstract stylizations in engraving at the *El Buxu* cave are the first to be cut into the walls of this *sanctuary*,



becoming manifested in areas that are far from the entrance. The small *ideomorphs* would belong to a stage in which they are widely used as the only means of communication, for man does not have the technical skills for naturalistic expression on flat surfaces due to the difficulty involved in having to create an impression of three dimensions using only two. This, and the fact that they are all grouped together at the same place, and the few places where there is some link with a naturalistic figure they are always underneath it, supports the supposition that their appearance upon the walls is the most ancient, possibly during the Aurignacian cycle.

The second phase would belong to the deep, single line engravings with very schematized naturalistic figures, including the drawings of the two goats, one of which is located inside the group of the ideomorphs, N° 10 on the map, and another in the fallow deer hollow. We also define the figures of three horses as being of this same type of engraving, two of which are under N° 9 of the map and the third, in location N° 13. These figures would already be included in the Solutrean cycle, perhaps its initial stage, and those engravings that follow the deep cutting technique would continue to become intertwined with them until the end of the Solutrean, though they nonetheless go on with a multiplication of strokes, a circumstance that is



Fig. 129.— El Buxu Cave. Ideomorphic and goat engravings.

Fig. 129.— El Buxu. Grabados y pintura ideomórficos y grabado de cabra.

not present in the above described engravings.

Lastly, we would have examples of shallow, weak, multiple stroke cut engraving, sometimes retouched with black paint, which we assume to be definitely of a Magdalenian stage, the same as the figures painted in this color:

the fragment of a goat, the fallow deer in the hollow, etc. Finally, those half abstract, half stylized signs also painted in black, the deer antlers, would belong to a very recent Magdalenian stage.

The long period of use of the cave and *sanctuary* supposed by this classification is not suppor-



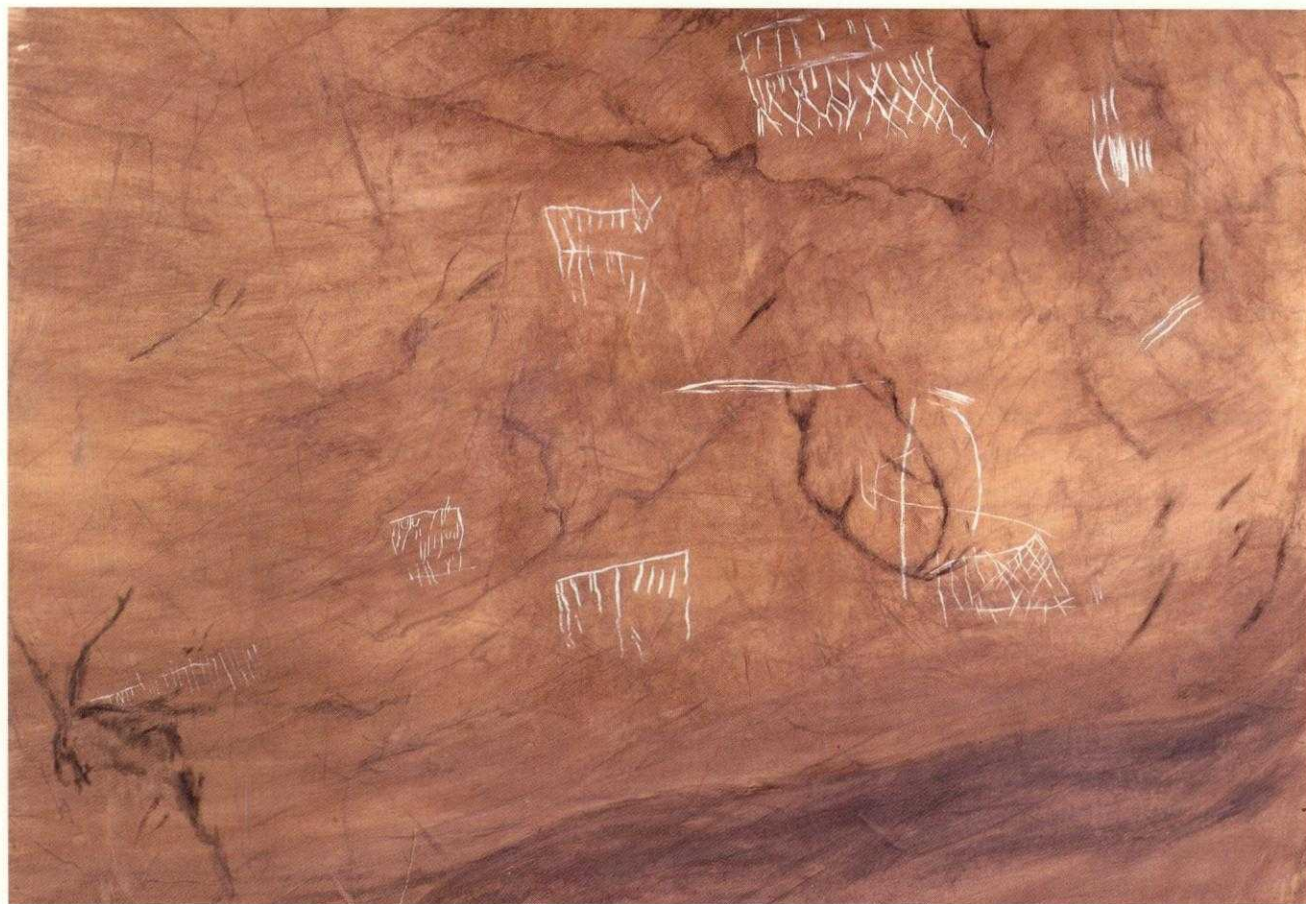


Fig. 130.—El Buxu Cave. Ideomorphic paintings and engravings and fragment of a goat in black paint.

Fig. 130.—El Buxu. Grabados y pintura ideomórficos y pintura de un fragmento de cabra.

ted by the results of excavations that have been performed up to now, which show a possibility of Cantabrian Upper Solutrean in the most ancient strata; but we are still deprived of knowledge of the main deposit due to the difficulties that have already been mentioned. Once these are overcome, then perhaps one day we shall know if all this classifying we are putting forth with so many reservations is correct, or if our guesses will be proven wrong.

The Art of the *El Buxu* cave mixes the capabilities of the most skilled artists with the

capabilities of others who never quite achieved the degree of workmanship that shines in the stylizations depicted in the fallow deer hollow.

The large number of *ideomorphic* representations concentrated in this cave still remains to be considered. Years ago, many of these abstract symbols were grouped under the name of tectiforms, or roof shapes, because there was an idea that they might have represented huts or houses. Today, the variety of their shapes also increases the variety of suppositions; but there

is no doubt that the first hypothesis was tempting. They might have been a depiction of shelters to be occupied during a possible survival of mankind after death. Such a shame that these messages must be hidden from us in the deepest recesses of darkness!

Concerning mobiliary art from this cave, we should mention that a piece of obvious interest was recovered in the excavations directed by Dr. Olávarri in 1970. This is a figure of a bird sculpted from a bear tusk. It was held to be Solutrean work. No doubt it was used as a pendant (fig. 137).



## CHAPTER X

### THE CAVERNS OF THE CENTRAL REGION

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In our tour through the Asturian region in pursuit of the Art legacy left to us by our ancestors, we must make a big leap from Cangas de Onís to the central area of the province because it is here, where the Nora and Nalón rivers join together under the beneficial influence of both their channels, that the most Westerly habitat of the first Asturians spread out.

#### The Cave of Caldas

This is one of the caves that snuggles up to the Nalón. Some thirty-odd years ago, Prof. Jordá made some explorations and assays in it where he found out about a formidable site very rich in Solutrean tools of model perfection. Later, in the seventies, M. Soledad Corchón made a systematic study of the deposit after having made an equally systematic excavation, recovering four successive layers of occupation with Cantabrian Early Solutrean and Middle Solutrean, and contributing laurel-leaf and asymmetric bifacial tips and the most ancient items of mobiliary art; but there was no specimen of great wall Art. The scale of levels goes down to the Magdalenian.

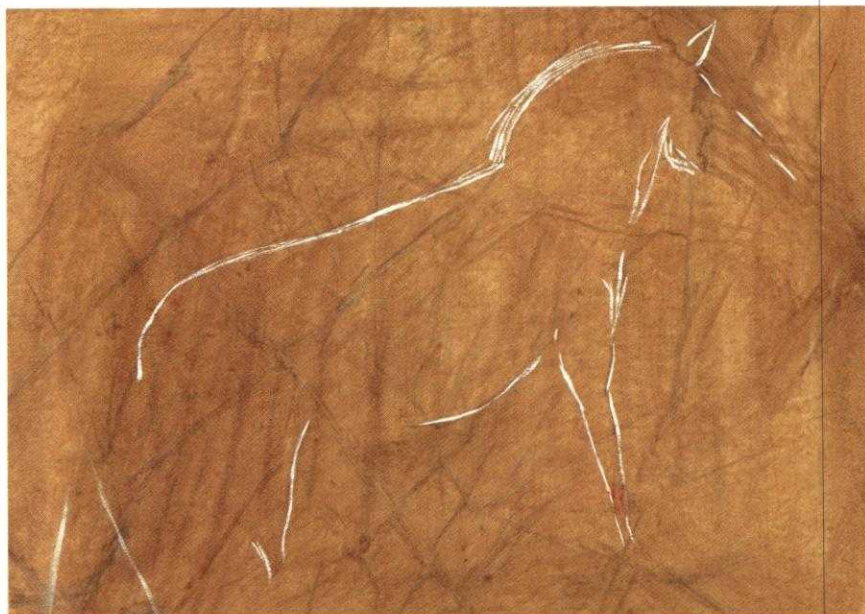


Fig. 131.— El Buxu Cave. Engraving of a horse.

Fig. 131.— El Buxu. Grabado representando un caballo.

#### The Cave of Las Mestas

*Las Mestas*, in the Las Regueras district on the bank by the confluence of the Nalón and the Nora, provided poor specimens of wall Art, but these are very interesting because they belonged to the Aurignacian-Gravettian cycle. Aside from some undecipherable strokes engraved on the wall, there is a neck and back line which could be the figure of a horse. The stroke is wide and deep.

#### The Sofoxó Cave

Another interesting Prehistoric deposit is found at the cave

of *Sofoxó*, also located in the Las Regueras district close to Balsera and next to the Nora river. Around 1916 it was discovered and excavated by Count de la Vega del Sella. It provided Magdalenian crafts, and notable among these is a group of bone shafts with abstract type decoration (fig. 138). No wall Art.

#### The La Paloma Cave

Also located in the Las Regueras district close to the Soto river, a tributary of the Nalón. Aside from tool kit objects such as palettes, shafts, drilled staffs, etc., it also provi-





Fig. 132.— El Buxu Cave. Engraving of two horses.

Fig. 132.— El Buxu. Grabado representando dos caballos.

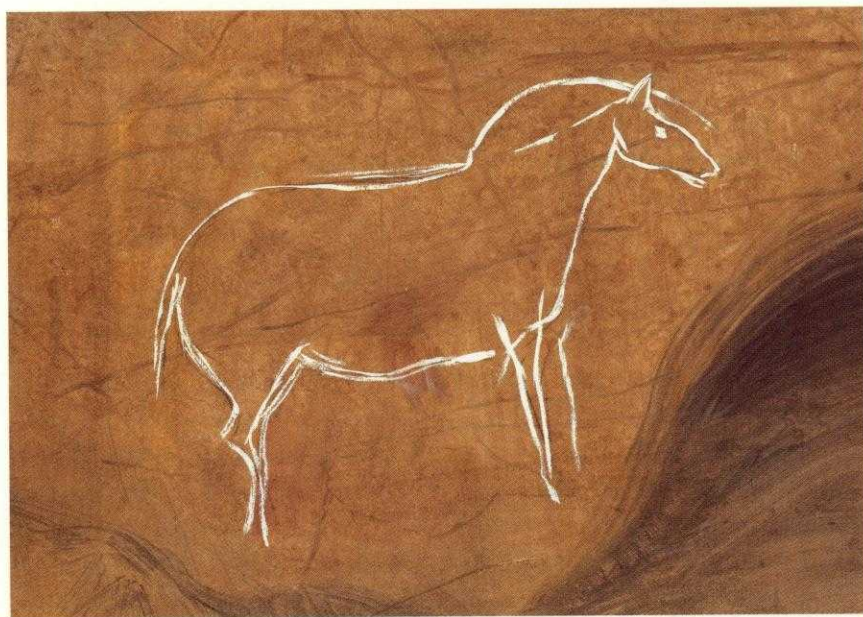


Fig. 133.— El Buxu Cave. Engraving of a horse.

Fig. 133.— El Buxu. Grabado representando un caballo.

ded interesting specimens of mobiliary Art in a group of stone tablets with engravings having drawings of deer, horses and others.

### **Dark Cave of Ania**

Another name linked to the Las Regueras district is the *Dark Cave of Ania*, which has been under excavation by J.M. Gómez Tabanera and Manuel Pérez since 1975. In the vestibule area there are stylizations, among which a supposed bison and a horsehead seem to be distinguishable, possibly from the



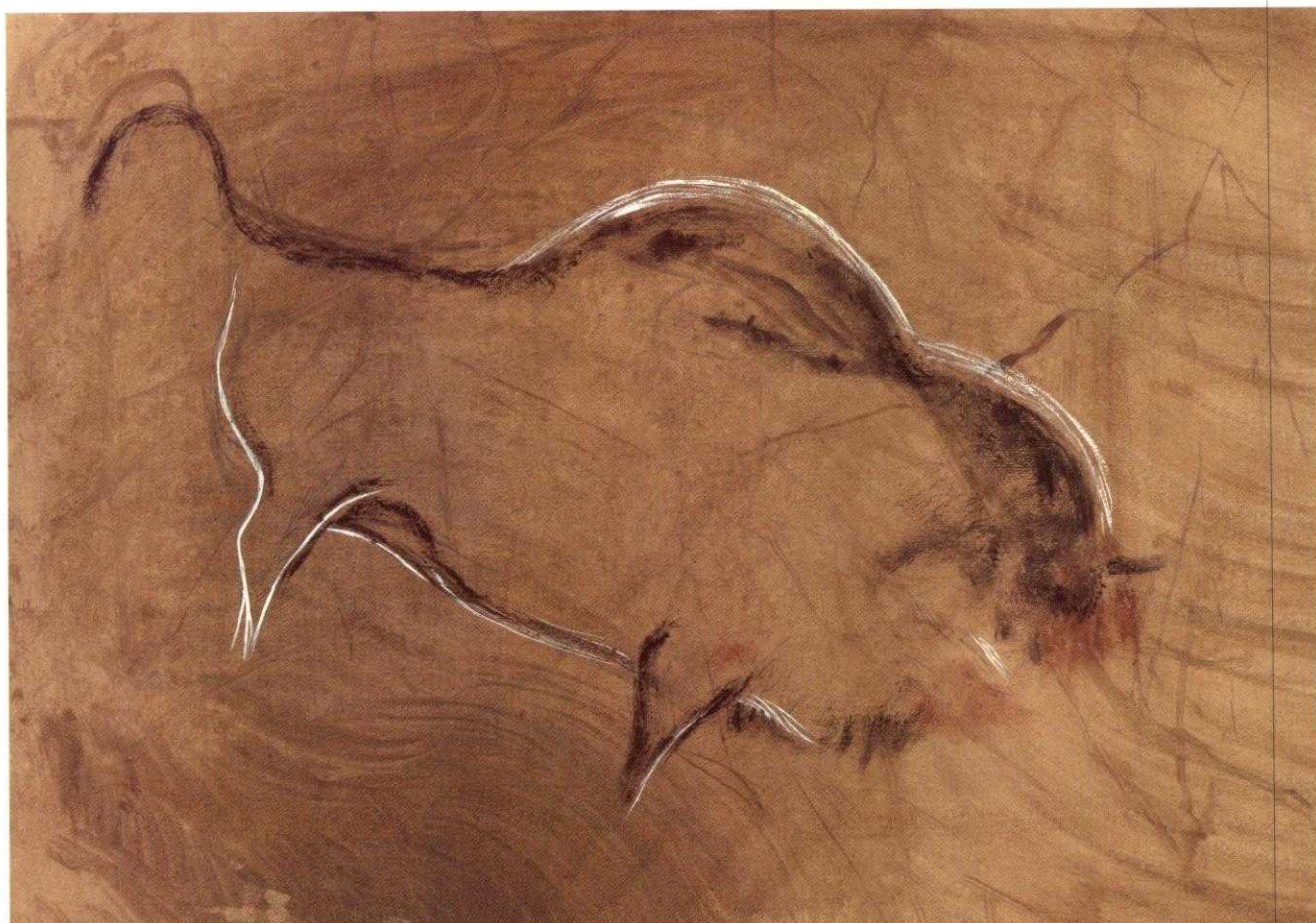


Fig. 134.— El Buxu Cave. Bison figure, engraved with touches of black paint.

Fig. 134.— El Buxu. Figura de bisonte grabado y con toques de color en negro.

Aurignacian-Gravettian cycle some 25,000 years B.C.

### **The Conde Cave**

Also known as the *Cave of Tuñón*. This is situated in the Sto. Adriano district and was discovered by the Count de la Vega del Sella in 1915. It has a rich Aurignacian deposit and wall engravings from that period have also been recognized. There are two series located on the shelter walls; to the left are some more or less vertical deep

cut strokes and to the right, in a sort of little hollow, there are more or less parallel stairlike deep-cut lines.

### **The La Moratina Cave**

Close to the place called Amieves in the parish of Tudela de Agüeria, district of Oviedo, is this cave they call *La Moratina*. It was examined by José Manuel Quintanal in 1975, with magnificent Magdalenian specimens and various tablets with engravings found along with a pebble pain-

ted with superimposed symbolic depictions.

### **The Cave of Los Murciélagos (Bat Cave)**

In the district of Ribera de Arriba on the border with Oviedo, also close to the Nalón, is found the cave of *Los Murciélagos* (Bat Cave), explored in 1972 and examined again in 1978 by the *Polifemo* speleological group. In this last examination, an engraving depicting a