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Comments on a recent challenge to the authenticity of the La Marche engravings

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Debatt

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Last year, Sven Sandström (2015) published a note in this journal in which he challenged the authenticity of portable art from the cave of La Marche, located in Lussac-les-Châteaux, Vienne, south-west France. The site has been dated to the Middle Magdalenian (c. 14,500–14,000 uncal BP or 16,000–15,000 cal BC) but is little-known to foreign researchers. Indeed, no publication in any language other than French is available. In this note I will not focus on every detail of the research or all the bibliographical references concerning the site. Interested readers may consult specific publications that provide more information on this cave's history of research and discoveries: e.g. Lwoff 1941; Airvaux et al. 1999; 2001; Mélard 2006; Gaussein 2012.

I will not concern myself here with every problematic issue in Sandström's narrative (erroneous historical information and assessment of the local prehistory, comments on obese women, comparison with modern art, confusion between elephants and mammoths, etc.), but focus on one aspect only. La Marche has yielded thousands of limestone blocks with numerous engravings depicting mainly animals but also many humans (fig. 1). Sandström is not satisfied with the recording of these engravings, particularly by one of the first amateur archaeologists who worked at the site, namely Stéphane Lwoff. Sandström accuses Lwoff of having made these human representations himself, and claims that these engravings are fakes. This attempt to discredit the finds from La Marche should not be underestimated or ignored. In this reply I will attempt to show that Sandström's criticisms are not new, and certainly not original, but that for the most part they are unfounded.

Not all of La Marche's engravings were found by Péricard & Lwoff

Sandström's knowledge seems to be limited to the excavations by Léon Péricard, associated with Stéphane Lwoff, from 1937 to the early 1940s. He appears unaware of all fieldwork after World War II: that by Louis Pradel in 1957 (Pradel 1960) and by Jean Airvaux between 1988 and 1993 (Airvaux et al. 2001). The site was not protected for all those years, and we know from local oral sources that the inhabitants of Lussac came freely to explore what was left of the deposits.

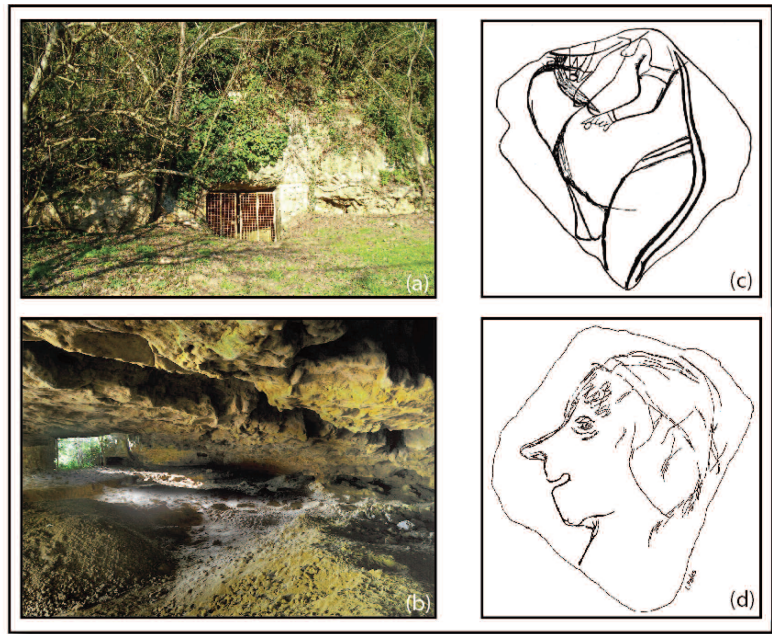
The excavated material is considerable and very diverse for an site of its period. Studies carried out on the lithics, hard animal materials, engraved horse teeth, jewelry, human remains and portable art, demonstrate this. This material reveals an enormous potential for the understanding of communities of hunter-gatherers in the Middle Magdalenian (Delage 2013).

All of this justified early initiatives – mainly by individuals – to create a first local Prehistory Museum in the early 1980s. Later, the efforts of the municipality led, in 2010, to a new museum that showcases many engraved stones from La Marche (Bougnoteau 2010).

Let us now turn our attention to the most spectacular category of remains from that cave, namely the portable art. During the first fieldwork campaign (by Péricard & Lwoff), about 1500 engraved stones were discovered. Then Pradel brought to light about another hundred. And finally, Airvaux unearthed another imposing corpus of more than 1,400 engraved limestone blocks. If we add the number – currently impossible to quantify – of stones in private collections, it may be argued that approximately 3,500 engraved stones have been found in the cave.

Stéphane Lwoff (1941; 1942; 1943b; 1957; 1970–71) was the first to describe and interpret

Fig. 1. Views of the La Marche cave and human representations in its artwork. a) Outside view of the entrance of the cave, photo: C. Delage; b) Inside view of the cave, photo: C. Delage; c) Drawing of an obese woman (after Lwoff 1943b, fig. 11).



these engraved stones. His many drawings highlighted various human subjects. These representations were quite intriguing; but Lwoff's drawings also became a source of confusion and unease within the scientific community. This amateur researcher certainly had a tendency towards subjectivity – and even great creativity – in his reading and recording of the engravings. Reactions, such as that by Count Bégouën (1943) challenged the authenticity of this art. The great prehistorian of the time, the Abbé Henri Breuil, responded rapidly – and firmly – to suppress these reactions regarding La Marche's art (Breuil 1942; Lwoff 1942; 1943a).

A decade later, Breuil offered Léon Pales, as a research topic, the decipherment of more than 1,500 pieces of portable art from Péricard & Lwoff's excavations at La Marche. Assisted by Marie Tassin de Saint-Péreuse, Pales spent decades studying and recording each of these engraved stones. With the analytical protocol they implemented specifically for this archaeological corpus, the two scholars were also able to document many human representations. Their main publication on the topic is the monumental four-volume series *Gravures de La Marche* which stretch-

ed over twenty years between 1969 and 1989. Pales was never a »collector«, as Sandström assesses his trade and career. He was a distinguished army surgeon before specialising in biological anthropology and prehistory. Moreover Sandström criticizes Pales's work as being in the same vein as that of Lwoff, whereas it is considered by most Palaeolithic art specialists as extremely rigorous methodologically, indeed a benchmark achievement (e.g. Tosello 2003; Mélard 2006).

The engraved stones unearthed during Pradel's excavations were partly integrated into Pales's study. However, some items remained unstudied until the early 1980s and the creation of the first local prehistory museum. On this occasion, Airvaux extracted the head of an older man (a depiction quite rare in Paleolithic art) from a complex pattern of multiple entangled grooves (Airvaux & Pradel 1984; Airvaux et al. 2001, figs 67–69).

At the time Airvaux was passionate about the reading and deciphering of engraved stones, including those of La Marche (Airvaux et al. 1991; Airvaux 2002). Yet he did not study the extensive collection of mobiliary art uncovered by his own fieldwork. This task was entrusted to a young student, Nicolas Mélard, devoted his doctoral

thesis and several years of research to the subject (Mélard 2006; 2008). He implemented very sophisticated means of investigation: micro-topography, micro-rugosity, SEM, three-dimensional surface imaging. Similarly, another recent academic work has focused on the horse representations (Gaussein 2012).

In short, the various researchers who have carried out studies of this cave and its corpus of engraved stones all agree on the consistency and originality of the settlement and its art. They have all shown astonishment vis-à-vis these engravings, and all seem to have been struck by the skill, creativity and sense of observation displayed by the Magdalenian artists. Most of these engraved slabs yield multiple entangled lines forming quite unclear patterns. These are the result of many superimposed engraving phases, associated with the application of reddish pigments. There are many figures of animals, such as horses, bison, aurochs, mammoth, deer, reindeer, ibex, hare, seal, bear, lion, etc. But the subject that singles out this settlement is the human being.

These human representations have played a prominent role in recent discussions and analysis of La Marche's portable art, especially on the part of Oscar Fuentes whose research focuses much of its attention on this topic. He has well documented the specificities of this art, and I encourage the interested reader to look at his various publications (e.g. Fuentes 2010; 2013). Alongside often realistic and evocative portraits, as well as women's bodies (often headless) in pregnancy, one can recognize scenes with several characters, with dancing characters, with a woman and her newborn infant, and many vulvas (Airvaux 1998; Airvaux et al. 2001). »Some items of clothing, hair and jewelry were, on many occasions, clearly depicted» (Airvaux et al. 1999, p. 160, my translation). During the first investigations of the cave, the amateurs seem to have noticed that the engraved stones were organized into a pavement on the floor, and that the engravings were often placed face down, so that they were hidden from the occupants' view. Moreover, these engraved stones often seem to have undergone exposure to fire, and to have been the subject of intentional breakage.

Despite the diversity of hypotheses to account

for and interpret this art, we are still far from being able to adequately understand these highly original aesthetic and symbolic practices.

To conclude this section, La Marche's engraved stones were not discovered exclusively by Léon Péricard and Stéphane Lwoff during the first exploration phase of the cave. I hope I have shown clearly that limestone blocks with engravings, including humans, were also discovered by Louis Pradel and Jean Airvaux. Furthermore, although Lwoff often discovered human representations through somewhat whimsical and daring recordings, newer means of investigation, which are far more rigorous and scientific, have also identified humans, beyond dispute.

La Marche-style engraved stones are found elsewhere too

Engraved stones attributed to the same period of the Middle Magdalenian have been found at various times in the 20th century, at several sites in the same valley and within the same township of Lussac-les-Châteaux (Airvaux 1998; Airvaux et al. 2001; Delage 2013). The caves of Les Fadets and Les Terriers were explored by various amateurs, including Lwoff. Thus one might expect to find engravings from these sites too, if one shares Sandström's suspicions. But the fact is that Lwoff did not find La Marche-style engraved stones at all the sites in Lussac that he excavated, the best example being the rock shelter of l'Ermitage. Still, the best counter-example is located only a dozen metres above La Marche. It is a small cave, called Réseau Guy-Martin, discovered by cavers in 1990, and then excavated and studied by J. Airvaux. This station was sealed and unknown at the time of Lwoff's research in the region in the 1930s and 40s. Here La Marche-style engraved stones were found in an archaeological layer radiometrically dated to the same Magdalenian period as the occupation of La Marche. Fine parietal engravings were also recognized, which include a newborn child comparable to those already identified in the portable art.

Further away in the same department (Vienne), items in a similar style have been unearthed in the cave of Le Puits at Le Chaffaud (Savigné) and in the rock shelter of Le Roc-aux-Sorciers, this latter site featuring – among the subjects repre-

sented – some human figures very similar to those of La Marche (Fuentes 2010; 2013). Lwoff was never involved in the excavation of these sites.

Thus, La Marche is not the only Middle Magdalenian site where engraved stones and human representations of the style under discussion have been unearthed.

The Lussac-Angles Culture

The theme of human figures is highly developed and treated in an original manner in the Poitou-Charentes region during the Middle Magdalenian. The literature also reveals more complex cultural phenomena at the time in this region. Indeed, the principle behind Sandström's suspicion, viz the discrepancy between what happens at La Marche and what is roughly known elsewhere in the Magdalenian, applies not only to the portable art (and also parietal art), but also to adornment, lithics and bone industries, etc. An unusual cultural complex seems to emerge in the Poitou-Charentes region in the Middle Magdalenian. We might call it the Lussac-Angles Culture (Delage 2013), taking its name from Lussac-Châteaux and Angles-sur-l'Anglin, where the two iconic megasites of this archaeological entity (i.e. La Marche and Le Roc-aux-Sorciers) are located.

If we follow Sandström's criticisms vis-à-vis the portable art, then what should we make of horse incisors carved with triangles, spear points with a single bevel and a longitudinal groove (*sagaies* of Lussac-Angles, a diagnostic type of this prehistoric culture), the La Marche-style flint knapping method, that is, cultural traits that show their highest concentration in the Poitou-Charentes region in the Middle Magdalenian, being present only occasionally elsewhere? Should we also consider them as fakes? Of course not. It would be absurd.

The admittedly vague outlines that current research is beginning to draw of this archaeological culture constitute a phenomenon that is rather rare in French prehistory. But there is no doubt that this situation is linked to the state of research rather than to prehistoric reality. It is time to accept that prehistoric cultural entities like the Lussac-Angles Culture existed in Upper Palaeolithic, and that we need to pursue their

investigation rather than being skeptical about them, which inevitably hinders the progress of research.

Are we dealing with fakes at La Marche? Would Lwoff be a forger and the author of these fakes?

Sandström's criticism is quite untenable when one considers the sources and information on which he bases his reasoning. We may acknowledge the fact that the specialised literature is exclusively in French and often disseminated in local journals with limited circulation, and hence not readily available. But a researcher who is ill-equipped to address the research on La Marche should not engage in such a serious critique without a thorough knowledge of the subject. Sandström's misunderstandings of the literature and research are gross and unfortunate. The few bibliographical references he cites are the best illustration of this. He has reasoned exclusively from the fieldwork and analyses carried out by Stéphane Lwoff and Léon Péricard, that is, what might be called the first research phase of the 1930s and 40s.

Lwoff was by no means a forger, though he was wrongly accused of such practices many times. Coming from Count Bégouën such an accusation might be tolerable because the discoveries revealed a phenomenon that was unknown at the time. Seventy years later, Sandström's attack is clearly part of the same tradition, but it is rather surprising. His criticism mainly focuses on the stylistic gap between the represented subjects (notably humans) and how they are treated at La Marche, on the one hand, and what is supposed to be known about Magdalenian art, on the other hand. Why not? The dating of a work of art by stylistic comparison is not a new approach. But it has been a matter of intense dispute, and is now considered increasingly problematic. A stylistic discrepancy is not in itself sufficient to discredit an artistic production. One need only mention the passionate debates about the discovery and authentication of the open-air parietal art in the Côa Valley in Portugal to be convinced (Bahn 2015).

Thus I have chosen to reply to Sandström because I found his criticisms of the archaeological research conducted at La Marche – and beyond,

concerning the Middle Magdalenian of central France – harsh and unjustified. Sandström openly accuses Lwoff of having made the engravings himself, including the humans, at the time of his excavations at La Marche. To show how his position is absurd, I have first showed that, at the site itself, engraved stones were not only discovered during the first excavations by Péricard & Lwoff, but also during later explorations; I have then showed that such engraved stones and similar human representations have also been found at other coeval prehistoric sites untouched by Lwoff; and finally, I have argued that the discrepancy between what is known in the Middle Magdalenian in the Poitou-Charentes region and what is known elsewhere at the same time should not lead to an extreme position of rejection (such as Sandström's). We must investigate the possible presence of a new and complex cultural phenomenon in this region.

Acknowledgments

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Reply to Christophe Delage regarding La Marche

When writing my piece on the engraved drawings from La Marche, I hoped that my arguments would be met with an understanding or a counter-argument of the anachronisms I pointed out. I was rather confident that the presence within the concerned imagery of an unmistakable elephant would be accepted as an argument against its authenticity, or tested and hopefully accepted as such by zoological specialists. My assertion that we find a quite modern type of obesity in female representations here relates to current conditions before the mid-20th century, familiar to my generation. But of course, today my assertion might call for a confirmation from expertise in medical history. My third main argument demands some knowledge of art history, viz that the drawing in half-profile of a female body is clearly anachronistic.

However, Christoph Delage does not engage with my arguments at all. (I do not find his vague mention of “mammoth” – an animal with enormous curved tusks, pointed head and long hair – next to “elephant” to be a serious proposal of an alternative interpretation). So there is no direct contestation of my theses to discuss.

Instead, in getting into the extensive archaeological research and discussion related to La Marche and to a number of Magdalenian sites in the same area, Delage seems to suggest that language problems might have prevented me from orienting myself sufficiently in the archaeological situation of the area in question. In fact I have no problem reading in French. Of course, if there could be shown drawings/engravings from the epoch and from other caves sufficiently alike those from La Marche, that might have given me reasons for second thoughts, even if not necessarily making me retreat from my conclusions. But when five and four years ago I spent time studying in the archaeological libraries of Les Eyzies and Saint Germain-en-Laye respectively, surveying many thousands of pages in archaeological reviews and bulletins, I did not come across any imagery that was similar in the least.

With “image”, I here intend a consistent and articulate depiction. When we speak of forms found on a cave wall as “images”, we may perhaps partly rely on different features or criteria. Finally, it is true that I was unaware of current hypotheses departing from the La Marche engravings.