La asociación ciervo/a-cabra montés en los conjuntos rupestres del Magdalenienense Inferior/Medio del centro de la Región Cantábrica: nuevos hallazgos y algunas interpretaciones

R. MONTES, E. MUÑOZ, J. A. LASHERAS, C. DE LAS HERAS, P. RASINES, P. FATÁS

Abstract
The deer/ibex association in Early/Middle Magdalenian cave art in the central sector of Cantabrian Spain – New discoveries and some interpretations

The thematic association of deer and ibex in Cantabrian cave art, dated in the Early and Middle Magdalenian (circa 16,500-13,000 BP), has been noted in the central part of Cantabrian Spain throughout the history of archaeological research (especially in the sites of Altamira and El Castillo). In the last few years, this theme was discovered in new small groups of art.

In fact, the discovery of two new groups, each one consisting of a single panel of engravings with only figures of deer and ibex (in the cave sites of El Juyo and Cualventi), added to other relatively recent finds (in the last quarter of last century) that have not been analysed sufficiently. They have shown the existence of a supposed association of these themes in the middle phases of the Magdalenian period in Cantabria. This communication reviews the Magdalenian sites in the centre of Cantabrian Spain, which display this thematic association, presents the latest finds, assesses them chronologically in connection with examples of mobile art, and offers some possible interpretations for this association.

Key words:
Palaeolithic cave art, thematic association, early and middle Magdalenian, mobile art, Cantabrian Spain

Resumen
La asociación temática ciervo/a-cabra dentro de conjuntos parietales cantábricos datados en el Magdaleniense inferior y medio (circa 16.500-13.000 B.P.), ha venido documentándose en el centro de la Región Cantábrica a lo largo de la historia de la investigación (especialmente en los conjuntos de Altamira y El Castillo), y más recientemente, en pequeños conjuntos descubiertos en los últimos años.

Precisamente, el hallazgo de dos nuevos conjuntos compuestos de un único panel de grabados que tan sólo presentan como representaciones figurativas ciervos y cabras (El Juyo y Cualventi), que vienen a sumarse a descubrimientos relativamente recientes (último cuarto del pasado siglo) no analizados suficientemente, ha vuelto a poner de manifiesto la existencia de una presunta asociación de estos temas durante las fases centrales del Magdaleniense cantábrico.

En esta comunicación se repasan los conjuntos magdalenieneses del cantábrico central que poseen esta asociación temática, se presentan las últimas novedades, se valoran cronológicamente en relación con las manifestaciones sobre arte mueble, y se aportan algunas potenciales interpretaciones para este fenómeno.

Palabras claves: Arte rupestre paleolítico, asociación temática, Magdaleniense inferior y medio, Arte mueble, Región Cantábrica.

Introduction
In this communication we analyse the thematic association between deer and ibex found in cave art assemblages in the centre of Cantabrian Spain and attributed to the early and middle Magdalenian (circa 16,500-13,000 BP). Deer and ibex are common themes in Palaeolithic art in Cantabrian Spain, although to
date they have never been described in a particular way nor have the relationships and analogies between the assemblages been analysed.

The chamber known as *La Hoya* ("The Pit"), in Cueva de Altamira, is the only one of these assemblages that was painted and which has been known for a long time (Breuil and Obermaier 1935). The other groups of art which we will refer to are more recent discoveries and are in all cases engraved depictions, located in the caves of Cualventi, El Juyo, Cobrante and Cueva Grande. Considered together, they point to the existence of a possible association of these themes during the central phases of the Magdalenian period in Cantabria.

The temporal variations in the distribution of animal themes throughout the Upper Palaeolithic have been examined by several writers during the 20th Century. Recently, C. González Sainz (1999, 2002) has studied this question again, and summarised the available information about animal themes, indicating the existence of a greater frequency of assemblages composed of hinds, horses and aurochs (with very few bison) in the pre-Magdalenian periods. In the Magdalenian there is a noticeable increase in the number of bison in comparison with aurochs, and the species depicted are more diverse, with an increase in the numbers of ibex and the appearance of chamois, reindeer, fish, etc. In the early part of the Magdalenian, hinds are still common, but clearly decrease in number in the central phase, whereas ibex, reindeer, bison, fish etc. increase. None of the associations that have been noted in the two main periods of the Upper Palaeolithic, have reflected the existence of a clear relationship between the themes of deer (normally hind) and ibex.

However, the review of some known sites and the recent discoveries mentioned above, some of which are still unpublished, have shown the reality of this association, which could be an indication of a standardised tradition, characterised by the aspects given below:

1. They are all art assemblages located in the centre of Cantabrian Spain, within the boundaries of the modern-day Autonomous Community of Cantabria, and can be attributed chronologically to the early and middle Magdalenian, based on their stylistic conventions and the comparison with well-dated examples of mobiliary art.

2. All the caves being considered have excellent habitat deposits, with thick layers of Upper Palaeolithic age, especially Magdalenian.

3. In all cases, they are small panels, separated from the main art assemblages, and located in side passages in the cave, always in the interior of the cave and relatively distant from the habitation area (at least 15 metres). These groups are, however, not too far from the usual route through the cave.

4. In most cases, they use the technique of engraving with single or occasionally repeated, fine lines. In other cases they are striated, which is a characteristic technique in the depiction of deer in the early Magdalenian in the Cantabrian Region, in both rock and mobiliary art.

5. The panels contain a small number of figures, between two and four. They are rarely complete (especially in the case of the deer) and may be accompanied by the representation of isolated anatomical parts of animals, such as hindquarters, or other non-figurative lines.

6. The figures are of average size, of up to 40 cm in length. The deer are often larger than the ibex.

It is necessary to point out that as well as the association found in early Magdalenian assemblages, there are some pre-Magdalenian groups of art with deer-ibex associations, although their characteristics tend to be different.

Thus, the caves of El Salitre, El Pendo and El Cuco have clear examples of this association. In the case of El Salitre (Cabrera and Bermaldo de Quiros, 1981), there is an almost whole figure of a hind together with two ibex (one complete and one represented by the forequarters) painted in red with the techniques of dotted and single lines. In El Pendo (Montes and Sanguino, 2001), the association appears in the lower left part of the "Frieze of Paintings", with a figure of an ibex between two hinds and a sign, all painted in
red with dotted lines. In both cases they are large figure (generally over 45 cm long) within a wider context of large panels, together with other depictions; signs in the case of El Salitre, and horse and signs in El Pendo. The chronology of these assemblages can be situated between the end of the Gravettian and the early Solutrean.

The cave of El Cuco (García Guinea, 1968) shows greater similarities. It has a panel of engravings, located in a small chamber in the intermediate sector of the cave, where a large stag, with the headquarters of an animal and other signs engraved inside its body, faces the head of an ibex with long horns. This panel, which could correspond to the “Centre of the Shrine”, is different in several ways from the other sites described in this paper. In the first place, the figures are quite large, and secondly they are located in the main panel in the cave, around which the other figures in the cave are arranged. Finally, both the artistic conventions and the style of the figures suggest an age slightly before the early Magdalenian, possibly in the late Solutrean. In this case, the figures could be a possible antecedent, in time, of the association being studied here.

Description of the assemblages

Cueva de Altamira (Santillana del Mar)
The chamber of La Hoya is off to one side of the main passage in Cueva de Altamira. It is reached by going down a slope from the passage to the chamber. A panel on the left-hand wall has three ibex (depicted practically whole) and the head of a hind. They are all painted in black and chronologically and stylistically they can be attributed to the early Magdalenian1.

Cueva de Cualventi (Oreña, Alfoz de Lloredo)
The cave art is located in a small chamber at the base of the entrance rock-shelter, which is reached down a very steep slope. The engravings are found in a small hollow in the roof of the chamber, and they form a very small panel, barely 30 x 30 cm in size.

All the figures face the left. At the top right there is a hind’s head, which displays some details such as ears, mouth and an eye, although the back of the neck is missing. The mouth has been prolonged to suggest the tongue. It has been drawn with a single line, which is repeated in places (the front of the neck, forehead and ears). It measures 15 x 10.5 cm. There is a curved line just above its muzzle.

The belly, groin and hind leg of a quadruped can be seen below the hind’s head. To its left there is an almost whole ibex, with only the rear-quarters missing, in an area that is taken up by a crack in the rock. The front legs are extended forwards, and the two horns are very long and only slightly curved. It has no interior details, although there is a fossil in the place of its eye. It was drawn with a single line which was sometimes corrected. Its measurements are 8 x 8 cm.

At the top left, the head of another ibex was represented more carelessly, with long horns that are not parallel, muzzle, line coming out of its mouth in the form of its tongue and a fossil indicating its eye. It measures 3.5 x 4 cm.

Finally, the head and neck of another ibex can be seen above the first ibex. It was also drawn carelessly and schematically, with a long arched horn, and with single, partly corrected lines. It is 5 x 5 cm in size.

El Juyo (Igollo, Camargo)
The art is found on the left-hand wall of the main passage, inside the cave. On the right of the panel, there is a hind represented by its head, neck and front part of its back. It was drawn with three different techniques. Wide engraved lines were used to mark the back, neck and head; a single fine line for the ears and even finer line in the muzzle and oval eye; and fine lines were scraped in the neck, right of the head and muzzle.

On the left there is the head and neck of an ibex. Its neck is very strong, its horns are long and slightly arched, the nose is shown and the line for its mouth is prolonged in the form of its tongue. A fossil could suggest its eye. It was drawn with a single fine line, and the back part of its neck was finely scraped. A possible V-shaped sign is located below its ear. This figure measures 14 x 13.5 cm.
Cobrante (San Miguel de Aras, Voto)
The engravings to be considered here are located on the right hand wall of the main passage, about 120 m from the entrance (García Guinea, 1968). Here there are three panels of engravings separated by calcite formations. The one on the right has an anthropomorphic figure 20 cm tall drawn with single lines, and the head of a hind 15 cm long, outlined with single lines, and scraped lines in its head and neck. It has an oval eye. Some non-figurative lines can be seen below it (Rasines y Serna 2002).

Twenty centimetres to the left, another panel of figures is represented by finely incised lines. At the top, the body and forequarters of an animal can be seen, with two curved lines below it, and below this the sketched forequarters of an ibex with long horns, 10 cm long. The same panel also has another anthropomorph 11.5 cm tall. The last panel has two figures; a stag placed vertically, which has no limbs although lines mark the hair under its belly, 35.5 cm long; and the hind-quarters of a bovine or horse, drawn with a single line, except in its back, one leg and the tail, where the lines are multiple. It measures 20 x 25 cm.

Cueva Grande (Otañes, Castro Urdiales)
The panel of engravings is located at the end of the passage on the right of the cave, 78 m from the entrance. They are found on the left-hand wall, in a clearly visible frieze (González Sainz et alii, 1994). It contains the whole figure of a stag with long antlers facing right, drawn with single lines, except in its face, where the lines are very fine and repeated, and the chest and belly, which are striated. It has a line in its chest, possibly an assegai. This figure measures 31.5 x 19 cm. It faces an ibex, looking to the left, which is complete, except for the croup and rear limbs. It has long horns and the only details are an ear and almond-shaped eye. It was engraved with single lines, except in the cervical-dorsal line and start of the tail, horns, chest and belly, with repeated lines, which are striated in the posterior part of the belly area. It measures 46.5 x 26.5 cm.

As well as the caves described above, which have been studied and / or published, several sites have art assemblages which are insufficiently known and which may display this same association. This will be determined in the immediate future, as they have figures of stags and other engravings which have not been interpreted yet, and where there could be ibex. This would be the case of the caves of Sotarraña or Patatal (Matienzo, Ruesga) (Balbín, González Morales y González Sainz, 1987) and El Rincón (Carranza, Vizcaya) (unpublished).

Character and chrono-stylistic parallels
All the assemblages that have been described, except the one in La Hoya in Altamira, were produced with incised engravings, usually single lines although multiple and striated lines also appear; and occasionally both techniques are found in the same figures. Without doubt the striated technique is the most interesting from the chronological point of view, as exact parallels are known in the famous decorated scapulae from El Castillo, Altamira and El Cierro, with dates of around 14,500 BP (early Magdalenian) (Valladas et alii, 1992). However, this stylistic formula may have lasted until the end of the Palaeolithic art in Cantabrian Spain, appearing on both rock and mobiliary surfaces (González Sainz, 1999).

From the stylistic point of view, all the figures can be situated in Leroi-Gourhan’s Style IV. Some details allow the chronology to fixed more precisely in the early Magdalenian. These are the use of striated surfaces in some of the hind’s heads (such as in El Juyo and Cobrante) with very clear parallels in the engraved scapulae with the same themes and technique; and the separation of the ibex’s horns, in contrast with the more usual design in the middle Magdalenian, where the horns overlap in their lower third and are slightly divergent at their distal ends, and with the growth rings often shown. Other features that suggest these assemblages can be dated in the early Magdalenian are the simplicity of the figures, which have few interior details, the generally rounded muzzles and the lack of naturalism. In addition, this chronology is supported in the case of Cualventi by the fact that the chamber with the engravings was sealed off by strata of early or middle Magdalenian age.

The type of association being studied here does not appear in all sites with Magdalenian engravings. El Otero only has two ibex (González Sainz, Muñoz and San Miguel, 1985). Los Moros de San Vitores has the association of horse and bison (Montes, Muñoz and Morlote, 2001). Sovilla has horse associated with hind, and the presence of bison and reindeer (González Sainz, Montes and Muñoz, 1995). Bison, ibex, chamois, hare (?) and a “venus” appear in Linar (San Miguel Llamosas, 1989), whereas in Emboscados a hind is
associated with a stag, with the presence of ibex (Balbín, González Morales and González Sainz, 1987).

All these sites can be dated to more recent phases of the Magdalenian. Los Moros de San Vitores is possibly of middle Magdalenian age, as the bison is represented with its tongue out, which was a common motif at that time (Fortea et alii, 1995). El Otero is late-final Magdalenian as the ibex are drawn as frontal views, with magnificent parallels in mobiliary art (González Sainz, Muñoz and San Miguel, 1985). The assemblages in the caves of Linar, Sovilla and Emboscados are also probably of late-final Magdalenian age.

Conclusions
It is true that, with the data we have presented above, we cannot assert that there was a “cultural tradition”, located chronologically and geographically, which led the human groups in the centre of Cantabrian Spain during the early Magdalenian to develop assemblages with the association we have described. However, we consider that the corpus of examples of this type is becoming sufficiently large to be able, at least, to propose this possibility.

In the light of the documentation above, the hypothesis can be proposed that in certain caves there exists a standardised association of the themes of deer and ibex in small panels, separated from the main panels or on their own.

This communication therefore proposes a new line of research in the study of early Magdalenian cave art which evidently needs to be continued in the future, with new evidence that may help to consolidate the hypothesis we have put forward.

References


Endnotes

1 There is an absolute date for the hind’s head of 15,050 +/- 180 (Gif – A 96062)