

Tracing Upper Palaeolithic Iconography: The Strange Case of Animal Tracks



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Abstract

The notion that the "Q" shaped motifs in Upper Palaeolithic art represent *vulvae* has become accepted dogma. This assumption is critically examined by showing that such motifs more closely resemble hoof prints. A number of examples of hoof prints made by large herbivores are illustrated highlighting this correspondence, which suggests such motifs should be reclassified as representing tracks made by certain animals. The idea that such motifs represent *vulvae* is deemed to result from prior assumptions regarding the pre-eminence of the male gaze.

Keywords: Aurignacian; Upper Palaeolithic Art; Hoof prints; Tracks; Classification; Vulvae; Q shaped motifs; Palaeolithic art; Iconography

Introduction

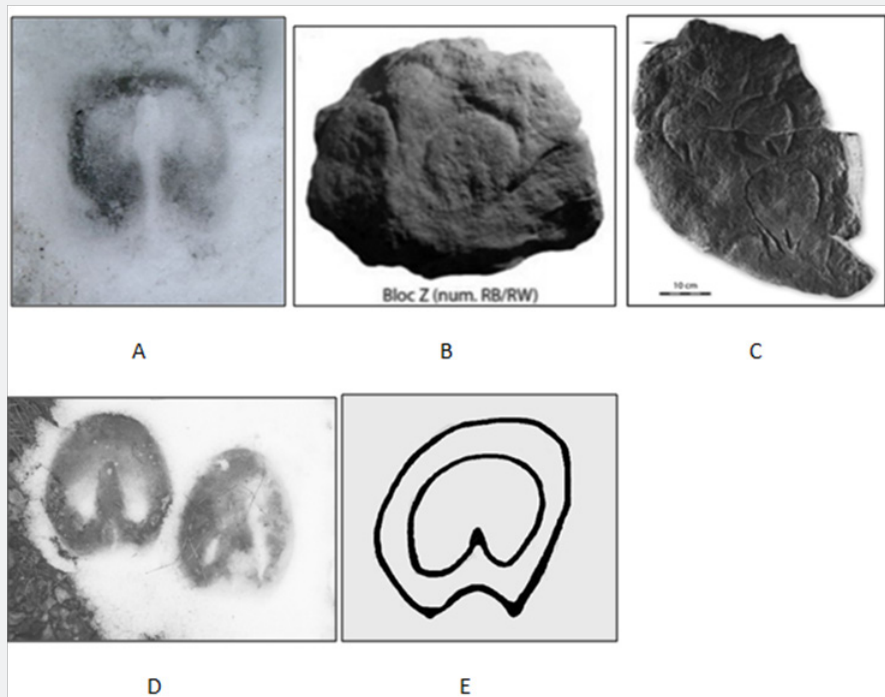


Figure 1: Examples of engraved blocks with "Q" shaped motifs compared to hoof prints.

- A. Hoof print made by bison in moderate snow (permission of Dennis Deck).
- B. Abri Blanchard (from Figure 5b [5], permission of Elsevier)
- C. Abri Cellier (from Figure 16J [4], permission of Elsevier)
- D. Hoof prints made in snow by unshod horse (public domain).
- E. Drawing of a horse's twisted perspective hoof extracted from full outline of a horse at Abri Blanchard (from Figure 5c) [5]

Many of the “Q” shaped motifs found in the Upper Palaeolithic art are interpreted as representing vulvae (Figure 1). Despite criticism of this reading [1-3] researchers continue to define such motifs accordingly, as in the case of the engraved blocks from Abri Blanchard and Abri Cellier [4,5]. As Bourrillon et al. [5] point out, the interpretation of such “Q” shaped motifs as vulvae rests mainly on an interpretation stemming from Breuil. However, Nowell and Chang as well as Hosking draw attention to the fact that this interpretation has not been held up to scrutiny due to an over reliance on historical precedence. The fact that the motifs are highly stylised makes the accepted reading even more debatable. Thus, current interpretations continue to be based on previously unverified postulates regarding status.

Importance of tracks

In fact, “Q” shaped motifs may represent animal tracks [1,6]. In support of such a possibility, I provide an illustration of a track made by an unshod horse in snow (consistent with the ecology of the Upper Palaeolithic), which illustrates the close similarity with the engravings on both the Abri Blanchard and Abri Cellier engraved blocks (Figure 1). It should be noted that the front hooves of horses are rounder than the rear ones, which is simulated by the round and more ellipsoid engravings on the blocks. In snow, bison leave similar, but rounder, symmetrical hoofprints. Note the tracks made in snow leave a slightly different signature to those found in clay; in other words they are more abstract. The horse and bison are major taxa portrayed throughout the Upper Palaeolithic (the remains of bison and horses were found at Abri Blanchard and possibly Abri Cellier and commonly occur during the Upper Palaeolithic). It is therefore no coincidence that horses are the main animal depicted on the Abri Blanchard blocks. Correspondingly, hoofprints are

often depicted as such in twisted perspective at the base of the legs of fully depicted animals in Upper Palaeolithic art and can also be found adjacent to animal depictions [7]. Similarly, the painted outline of a horse from Abri Blanchard [5] portrays two hooves of a horse unnaturally twisted toward the viewer (see drawing of one hoof in Figure 1E extracted from the original depiction), which is also similar to the “Q” shaped engravings. In addition, because the engraved motifs were found in conjunction with engravings of horses and other animals, it would seem parsimonious to regard them as associated with fauna rather than female anatomy - especially as this accords with the fact that, in order to survive, Upper Palaeolithic hunters needed to have an intimate knowledge of animal tracks [8]. Though the authors mention the existence of eight “foot/hoof prints” at Abri Blanchard they are not illustrated. I would suggest that the “Q” shaped motifs interpreted as vulvae from both Abri Blanchard and Abri Cellier should be regarded as representations of hooves that need to be added to the existing inventory of eight hoof prints. These insights have implications for other Upper Palaeolithic sites where similar circular motifs have been found in that many also need to be reclassified as hoof tracks.

A second example of a “Q” shaped motif that may be hoof tracks of a horse pertains to a reindeer antler from Roc du Marcamps (Figure 2A) where the engravings display a striking similarity to how horse prints are currently represented in, for example, tracking guide books (Figure 2B). The fact that the motifs are portrayed successively in a similar way to natural tracks adds credence to the notion they should be interpreted as such. Moreover, there are four tracks represented in pairs where two are circular and two more oval just as in natural horse hoof tracks (Figure 1D).



Figure 2: A. Bâton of reindeer antler from Roc du Marcamps depicting what may be horse tracks rather than vulvae. (Photo: Don Hitchcock 2015, donsmaps.com) B. Horse track as typically depicted graphically today.



Figure 3: A. Engraved motifs from Laussel. B and C Close up of the motifs. (Original, Muséed'Aquitaine à Bordeaux; Photos: Don Hitchcock 2015,donsmaps.com)

Note the similarity with the horse track and bison snow track in Figure 1.



Figure 4: Abri Castanet, Block K. (Aurignacian) showing a line in relief emanating from the circular motif. Reproduced from Figure 57 in: White, F. R., Mensan, R., Bourrillon, R., Cretin, C., Higham T. F. G. et al. 2012. Context and dating of Aurignacian vulvar representations from Abri Castanet. PNAS. 109 (2): 8450–8455. (Copyright: 2012 National Academy of Sciences).

The third example comes from Laussel (France) in the form of a block dated to the Aurignacian (Figure 3) that portray circular motifs. Again, there is an obvious similarity between the horse track and bison snow track illustrated in Figure 1. Note that the bison snow track includes a central line that extends beyond the circular outline of the track in the same as in some of the “Q” shaped engravings. Interestingly, as can be observed in Figure 4 such protrusions are replicated in the tracks made in snow by bison as illustrated in Figure 1A. Alternatively, it may represent the central sulcus pertaining to the frog of a horse hoof Figure 1D.

Discussion

The proposition that “Q” shaped motifs should be interpreted as hoof prints rather than vulvae dovetails with the larger debate as to the role of female imagery in Paleolithic art in that observers, usually male, see what they are primed to see. There are several compelling reasons to suppose that the “Q” shaped motifs represent hoof prints. First, they display a greater similarity to animal tracks than vulvae. Second, the detection of and knowledge of animal tracks were crucial to the survival of hunter-gatherers during the Upper Palaeolithic. Third, animal tracks were salient in a snowy environment. Fourth, they were actively sought after by recruiting a visual memory template in order to facilitate a match. Fifth, natural animal tracks are repeated in a similar way to how they are repeated in depictions. Six, as the motifs are abstracted, the fact they are more obviously similar to hoof tracks than vulvae, suggests it would be parsimonious to regard them as representing tracks. Lastly, authenticated vulvae in Upper Palaeolithic art are mostly triangular in form whereas,

when represented, tracks are rounder and, therefore, are more similar to the “Q” shaped motifs. The conclusion from the above is that one should not automatically assume all “Q” shaped motifs and similar circular motifs represent vulvae unless other obvious contextual information is available, such as relevant corresponding anatomical components.

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