

Prehistoric Art and Cultural Connections



Horse, La Garma, Cantabria (Spain)



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The Rocky Valley, Cornwall (UK)



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PREHISTORIC PEOPLE

Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Bronze age and Iron age

The Upper **Palaeolithic** is the period which corresponds to the people of our own species (*Homo sapiens*, or AMH-anatomically modern humans) who lived during the Ice Age. In Europe it can be dated between ca. 40,000 and 11,700 years before present.

The **Mesolithic** followed the Upper Palaeolithic. It began around 11,700 - 11,450 years ago as it spread from the south to the north of Europe and continued until the Neolithic first appeared near the Atlantic coast.

The beginning of the **Neolithic** occurred with the introduction of farming; when people became settled in fixed locations; when social systems became more complex and when substantial monuments were being erected and when flint tools became much exquisitely refined.

In the Iberian Peninsula, agriculture appears around 5500 BC (around 5000 BC in the north), the first dolmen around 4400 BC and copper around 3400 BC.

In south-western France, agriculture appears a little before 5000 BC, the first dolmen around 4600 BC and copper about 2500 BC.

In England, agriculture appears about 4300 BC, the first mounds about 3700 BC and copper about 2500 BC.

Protohistory, (2200 to 52 BC) is the period which sits between the Neolithic era and Antiquity. It is divided into two main ages:

-The **Bronze Age** (2200 to 800 BC) is characterised by the metal industry of bronze (copper and tin alloy) which quickly became widespread among all societies.

-The **Iron Age** (800 to 52 BC) began when Iron made its appearance and soon became the dominant metal.

Suggested websites:

<http://arthistoryresources.net/ARTHprehistoric.html>

<http://grupos.unican.es/Arte/Ingles/prehist/Default.htm>

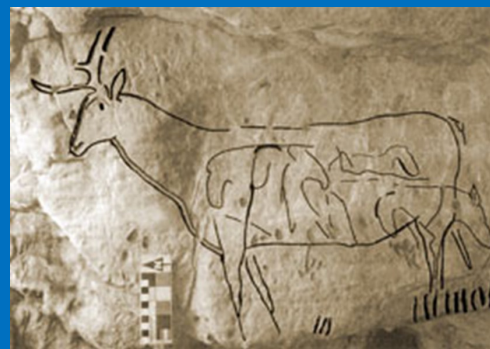
What is Rock Art?

Archaeologists define rock art as images carved, drawn, or painted onto immovable rock surfaces.

Images that are carved or engraved into rock are called **petroglyphs**.

Images made with paint or other pigment are called **pictographs**.

Rock art is also a testimony of the incredible extent of the cultural communities during the Upper Palaeolithic. From the Straits of Gibraltar to the Urals, similar stylistic solutions were used for the representation of a restricted catalogue of motifs (animals such as horses, bison, red deer, ibex or mammoth, humans, signs). The recent discovery of Palaeolithic engravings in the cave of Creswell Crags, in northern England, shows that Great Britain was included, together with the classic areas of SW France and northern Spain, in that wonderful circle of the oldest aesthetic expression of humankind.



Ibex/Deer from Creswell Crags, England

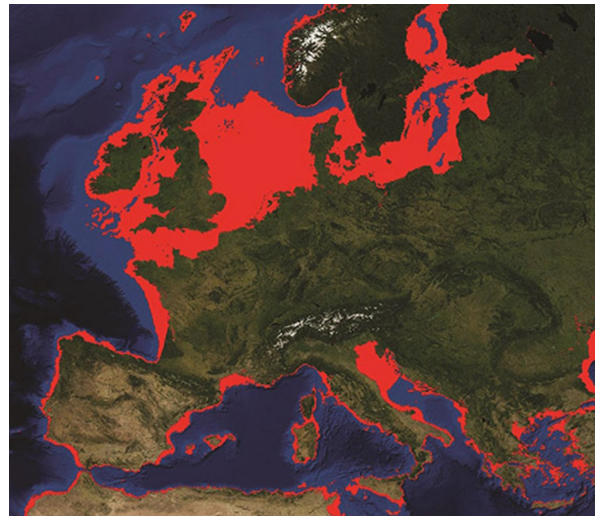


Pedra do Labirinto, Galicia (Spain)

UPPER PALAEOLITHIC AND MESOLITHIC PEOPLE: PICTOGRAFS

Upper Palaeolithic people were hunter-gatherers who lived in very mobile groups. Estimations based on the behaviour of recent societies such as the Inuit (Eskimos) of Alaska suggests territorial ranges of around 200 km.

Travelling was a necessity for Upper Palaeolithic groups of Atlantic Europe as their subsistence largely depended on very mobile resources, such as herds of reindeer. Moreover, long-distance mobility was facilitated by an open landscape, where thick forests were absent.



This was caused by the Ice Age that was at its coldest around 22,100 years ago. Water was frozen in large glaciers and ice sheets making the sea level much lower. This meant Great Britain was not an island, so the Palaeolithic hunters could travel from France to England just walking, without any necessity of navigation.



With the melting of the ice caps the sea level rose, the environment continued to improve and Western Europe became dominated with deciduous forests. Mesolithic territories on the continental shelf drowned, Great Britain became separated from mainland Europe and groups began to live in more tightly defined territories. As the climate warmed, early Europeans grew in numbers and spread back to all corners of the continent.

Techniques and common graphic styles within the Upper Palaeolithic groups suggest the existence of a vast cultural community. During the Middle Magdalenian (17.700-16.256BP) similar portable objects were manufactured in distant places, such as Asturias and Cantabria in northern Spain, Ariège in the French Pyrenees or in the Rhine Valley.



Decorated pebble, Mas d'Azil cave (France)

ATLANTIC ROCK ART IN THE NEOLITHIC

The Neolithic is a period of progressive but substantial social and economic changes, also reflected in the beliefs and ideas of human groups. It is generically defined by the adoption of agriculture and/or livestock breeding as an important source of food. For that, a process of 'domestication' of plants and/or animals needs to occur. The introduction of agriculture and livestock breeding is often accompanied by changes in other facets of life, including beliefs, funerary practices, dwellings, tools and artefacts,



Bryn Celly Ddu mound, Wales (UK).



La Roche Longue, Quintin, Brittany (France)

At different times, and a few centuries after the spread of Neolithic practices, Atlantic Europe saw the emergence of hundreds of monumental structures: Mounds, cairns, stone settings, menhirs, chambered tombs and palisaded enclosures, among others.

'Dolmens' or chambered tombs refer to places of burials. They are very often covered by an earthen mound and associated with the deposition of human remains. There is considerable structural and formal diversity. When the mound over a chamber-tomb is made of stones it is called a cairn. Menhirs and Stone Circles are Megaliths that are believed to be used for rituals rather than burials.

Rock art delivers some of the most interesting evidence for relationships among human groups during Prehistory in Europe. The Atlantic Petroglyphs are schematic engravings on rocky outcrops. These surfaces became a canvas for their graphic language.



Pedra do Labirinto, Galicia (Spain).



The Rocky Valley, Cornwall (UK)



Gavrin's Cairn, Brittany (France).

The Atlantic Petroglyphs are all generally inscribed onto near horizontal rocky outcrops where they share common characteristics. It is possible to identify similarities among individual drawings while common design conventions appear to be applied to clusters of engravings.

Concentric circles with a high number of rings can play a central role in the composition, although these are likely to form the hub of more complex drawings.

Suggested websites:

<http://www.megalithic.co.uk/>

<http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/era/>

<http://generic.wordpress.soton.ac.uk/ditchedenclosures/>

BRONZE AGE & IRON AGE ART

The rapid transfer of knowledge and technology followed the long distance exchange trade networks that were developed in Europe during and before this period.

The search for copper and tin needed to produce bronze resulted in the establishment of new maritime routes in the European Atlantic area.

Metal production spread quickly and natural resources such as minerals, lithics and even amber are widely exploited throughout Europe.

As an example, bronze daggers enhanced by Spanish arsenic have been found in the Tumulus of the Carnoet Forrest in Brittany (France).

This new metal was used to make functional objects such as cooking pots, axes and shields. Gold was the preferred metal to make jewellery and decorative ornaments.

Ornamental and decorative designs on helmets, body armour, swords, axe-heads and other weapons became more widespread. Ceramic designs became more elegant, and a new range of ceremonial and religious artefacts and artworks began to emerge.



© Museo de Prehistoria y Arqueología de Cantabria

Cabarceno Cauldron. Cantabria (Spain).



Early Bronze Age Gold Disc. British Museum

During the early Iron Age (800 to 450 BC) and at the beginning of the Middle Iron Age (450 to 100 BC.), there is continuity in the characteristic of the exchanges. During the late Iron Age (2nd and 1st centuries BC) a new typology of exchange finally arose with the appearance of everyday products such as Wine, olive oil, fish sauce, salt, fine ceramics are examples of the variety of objects being traded widely over large areas. From the 3rd century BC the use of currency is the main factor that characterises the growing trade. Iron became the metal to make tools such as knives, axes and functional objects such as cooking pots and stirrups, however, bronze and gold continued to be used during the Iron Age for their beauty and because these metals do not rust or decay like Iron.

Suggested websites:

http://www.britishmuseum.org/learning/schools_and_teachers/resources/all_resources/bronze_age_britain.aspx

<http://www.ashmolean.org/ash/britarch/collections/iron-age.html>

<http://www.dovermuseum.co.uk/bronze-age-boat/bronze-age-boat.aspx>

Activity

Learning Objective: Pupils will learn about prehistoric peoples, particularly their artistic expressions and how these are shared, or have similar characteristics, across large areas of Europe at different periods. They will be encouraged to study different artistic styles, symbols and media and how these relate to the lifestyles of the populations in prehistory.

Activity: (to be done in two or three sessions)

1. Provide pupils with access to copies of the information sheets for each period and the recommended online links about rock art and cave painting.
2. Encourage pupils to think about the lifestyles at different periods, how this might have affected the movement of groups and how they interact over wide territories.
3. Looking at different examples of pictographs from different sites in Europe, pupils are encouraged to think about the role of art and symbols for represent every day's people life and their activities.
4. Using their knowledge and creative imagination pupils should then create their own artistic representation about a chosen specific moment/activity in their every day's life which they think represent Who they are and what they do in life.
5. These paintings will be scanned and send to the other partners' schools in France, Spain or UK. The teacher of the group participating in the activity will give one of these paintings to each of their pupils.
6. Pupils must describe what they see in those paintings and what those paintings say about the life of their colleagues in Spain, France or UK. They should think as well about any symbolism that their colleagues might use in their paintings.
7. After that, they will compare their paintings with those from the pupils of the partner schools. Which are the similarities? Is there any common symbolism?

8. Finally they must discuss why they think their paintings and those from their colleagues express similar ideas or symbolism.
9. Now, pupils will come back to the pictographs from different sites in Europe; the ones they analyse at the beginning of this activity. Which are the similarities on the life of the different prehistoric groups that those paintings express. Is there any shared symbolism?
10. Finally they must discuss why they think those pictographs made by people living far away from each others, have so many similarities. Which is the reason for that?