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Images from La Marche cave. Palaeolithic art or recent fakes?

By Sven Sandström

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In 1937 various Palaeolithic finds were made in the cave of La Marche in south-western France. Two years later numerous incised drawings, allegedly of the same origin, appeared and were shown to a collector, Léon Pale, who published them. Many of these images are very different from other Palaeolithic drawings, showing human figures, not least women, with clothing and vivid facial expressions, as well as an elephant. This paper argues that the drawings from La Marche, which are sometimes cited in current literature on cave art, are fakes.

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Caves are common around the small village of Lussac-les-Châteaux (Vienne) in southern France. In one of them, Cave of the Goblins (Grotte des Fadets), had been found numerous stone slabs with incised Palaeolithic drawings, but apparently nothing judged to have been of any great importance. In November 1937, however, a villager found some flint and bone objects in the nearby small cavern of La Marche. He brought them to his neighbor, the miller Léon Péricard, who recognised them as prehistoric tools. Péricard began excavations in the cavern and found among other things some slabs or flagstones with incised or engraved drawings. He in turn entrusted the management of the investigation to Stéphane Lwoff, head of the region's telephone and telegraph services and once a student at the School of the Louvre. Together they found other objects of flint and bone, but also reported numerous further limestone slabs with drawings.

In addition to quite a number of horses and other animals, these slabs mainly presented an extraordinary variety of human motifs, several showing people wearing various clothing articles

– things otherwise unknown within the overall Palaeolithic tradition.

Already in the following year the abbé Henri Breuil, at that time the by far most respected specialist in the field, was invited to the site and spent some time there. Later Breuil wrote a short presentation (1942) of the site and the finds. Péricard also arranged for some of the objects, including several with drawings, to be brought to the Musée de la Préhistoire in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. In 1939 he and Lwoff were joined for a short time by Léon Pales, a collector who later undertook an extensive publication of the items (Pales 1969; 1989). The following year Lwoff showed Pales an extensive collection of incised slabs that he had recently brought together – mainly fragmented but most apparently still complete as drawings.

Lwoff presented his own depictions of a few slabs with commentary to the local archeological association of Ariège and the Société Française d'Archéologie (Lwoff 1957; 1962). His presentations caused some excitement, but they were not given universal credence. Count Henri Bégouin,

who taught archeology at the university of Toulouse and was responsible for several investigations of cave art, reacted strongly and labeled the imagery a scandal and a mystification. In the following discussion, however, he apparently accepted the authenticity of the drawings themselves – Breuil had so far accepted them – while still opposing Lwoff's interpretations of their meanings. In any case it was evident that the excavations had been carried out in an unprofessional manner. There was no documentation whatsoever for the original positions of the objects. In spite of the troubled ground conditions, it had seemed possible to date them to the Magdalénian – slightly later than the celebrated cave paintings of Lascaux, but earlier than those of Altamira and actually earlier than most art in and from caves in southwestern Europe.

Approaching La Marche

When first confronted with depictions of these images in various brochures I was intrigued and wondered about the possibilities of really reaching the truth in the matter. The only way to deal with it appeared to be through the intermediary of not very satisfactory depictions. As an art historian I am engaged in an independent study of pictorial art from the Late Palaeolithic, and I approach the images primarily from the perspective of the thorough formalism in their shapes, not their style or type categorization. Yet some of the subject matter in the La Marche imagery seemed almost revolutionary, and Breuil (1979, p. 336) gave it a very positive mention in his major survey. Thus I devoted some time to Léon Pales' volumes, and later studied the depictions in Stéphane Lwoff's reports.

The only way to account for the original forms of the incised pictures has been in a painstaking labor to separate, by sight, the lines of each one from the superimposed lines of other drawings or other irrelevant forms, and then to depict the result by hand. Objectivity must thus be sought in relation to the motifs, while anyone involved in these matters will be aware that the quality of the depictions rarely approaches that of the originals. Lwoff was an acceptable draughtsman, but his drawings are far too summary and moreover quite personal in style, while Pales' drawings are

throughout quite unsatisfactory, to say the least – but that is not to say that they would be untruthful to their motifs.

The publications contain many photographs of the incised slabs, but few of them offer any possibility of verifying the drawings. All are very dark, and almost all the relevant drawn lines are doubled and crossed over with a mass of unrelated lines. Only in two or three cases could I keep them together in one single undisturbed glance, sufficient for really judging the real shapes in a continuous interrelation.

However, in this case I would not really have preferred to deal with more skilful depictions. That would just have added to the uncertainty about the original engravings. To draw by hand is never simply to reproduce something; drawing entails abstraction, and the more qualified it is the more probably the result will have a lot to say about the draughtsman rather than about the original.

The overall Palaeolithic pictorial tradition as we know it is not very rich in pictures of humans – but there are enough of them for us to make out a rather firm tradition with some variations. The La Marche imagery numbers quite a few human representations, so there is an evident interest in scrutinising these in relation to the otherwise recurrent features of such pictures.

Heads and physiognomy

In the picture of two males (fig. 1) the heads and faces are slightly grotesque, not naturalistic at all, and the outlines of the bodies are simple and casual. There are however plausible parallels in drawings from other caves, though not with grimaces as evident as those from La Marche. But one to my knowledge rare feature here is the representation of two individuals together. And unlike other pictures of humans from the same era, these heads have physiognomies, though not really expressive ones, just two wry faces. All through the La Marche repertoire the faces are strikingly stereotyped, yet otherwise stereotypy is almost never possible to establish in unchallenged cave drawings.

There are apparent similarities between these figures and the single head fig. 2. This one, without being more of a portrait, is designed in more detail, with an ear like a small sausage and a nose



Fig. 1. Drawing signed L. Pales of a slab with two incised men. Pales 1969–89, pl. 156.



Fig. 2. Photograph of the slab in fig. 1, detail of a man's head. Pales 1969–89.

that is clearly distorted by the way the nostrils are accounted for. And it is difficult to find features in cave drawings that are not in a general accordance with nature. In this context there is a long series of similar heads, some of which have been frequently reproduced.

The drawings in figs 1–2 deviate entirely from the dominant naturalistic tradition. Some of these depictions are verified in Pales' book by photos of original slabs; no doubt these depictions belong together with them. A few of these depictions of heads are drawn with a firmer hand – such as the one in fig. 3. Fig. 4 belongs to the majority and seems fairly true to the corresponding slab. The same goes for most of the other items that I have been able to check directly against reproductions on the pages. Thus we must conclude that they all relate directly to the supposed originals. Below I will show that the distinction between these two aspects is important.

Judging from Pales' depictions, three individual artists can thus be identified in the La Marche imagery. And in his volumes Pales reproduced most or all of the known depictions in question. His own drawings are too vague to allow us to judge any more precise qualities in their originals – and so there is no reason to believe that Pales' drawings depict images that he had himself incised on the slabs (fig. 4).

Note that within the overall Palaeolithic tradition, men's heads are very rare motifs. When they appear at all, drawings of male figures tend to wear animal heads or masks. To my knowledge it is only towards the end of this epoch – later than the date suggested for the La Marche imagery – that any distinctly human heads whatsoever appear. And even these have quite schematic facial features and not even attempts at physiognomies.

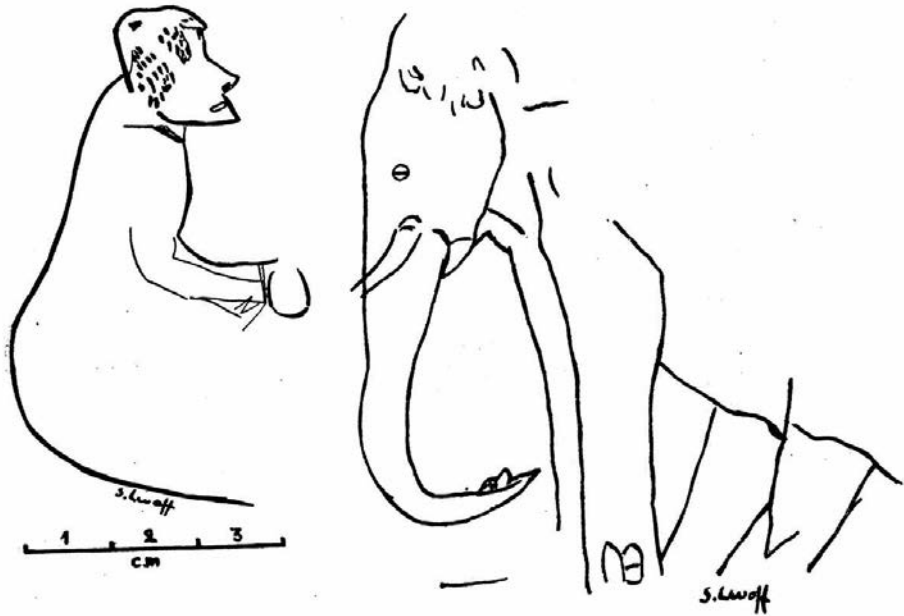


Fig. 3. Drawings signed S. Lwoff of two slabs, one with a sitting man and one with an anachronistic elephant. Lwoff 1957 figs 2 and 4.

Fig. 4. Photograph of a slab with an incised man and drawing of the same signed L. Pales. Pales 1969–89.



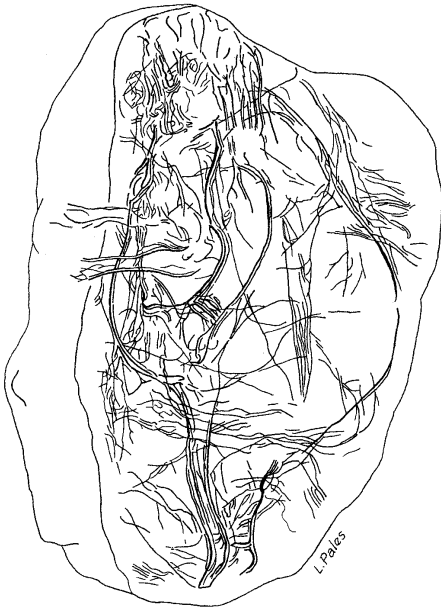


Fig. 5. Drawing signed L. Pales of a slab with an obese woman. Pales 1969–89, pl. 97.



Fig. 6. Drawing signed L.P. of a slab with an obese woman and a bald bearded man. Pales 1969–89, pl. 108.

Rotund women and the body outline

Drawings and paintings of women are somewhat more common, but above all there are the famous female figurines. These are mostly conspicuously fat and have not the slightest suspicion of facial features. (Bar one or two rather inarticulate and geographically dispersed exceptions.) Some female figurines have no heads at all despite seeming to be complete. When something like an articulated head can be seen – as with most “Venus” type figurines – it may seem to be neatly hair-dressed or perhaps just crowned with a dense pattern, but the little surface left for the face is always blank.

A few pictures of females among the many from La Marche follow the same rule. But most break it: they have articulate faces, even expressions or at least grimaces, and moreover they are depicted with loose hair under bonnets or broad hair ribbons (figs 5–6). This contrasts completely against the overall Palaeolithic iconographic tradition. And bonnets are far from the only elements of clothing depicted.

Most women from La Marche are markedly obese as with most cases in the older and overall

Palaeolithic tradition. But not all of them: some are just not very slim. Almost all of these figures have quite a loose body shape, obese or not. There is an overall generosity in the lineament among the depictions that allows us to understand the beings as well fed. This comes forth clearly in Lwoff’s depictions and it tallies with Pales’ presentations where photographs of the original slabs verify it. These features must have been manifest on the original slabs.

In contrast, in the absolute majority of Palaeolithic depictions of any other being these appear slim and firm, normally within a continuous outline. This might seem natural in view of the overriding naturalistic direction within Palaeolithic art, and given the often harsh conditions of a life for people and animals in an Ice Age wilderness.

In the scholarly literature the same general reasoning concerning life conditions has widely been used in interpretations of the recurrent obesity of the “Venuses” and other female figurines and drawings from the epoch. According to these views, the obese body form was not a simple report on factual conditions, nor an indication that all women



Fig. 7. Seated woman, engraved drawing on stone slab, La Marche. Musée Nationale des Antiquités Nationales, Saint-Germain-en-Laye.

at the time were obese. Obesity would not have been seen as a burden – it may have been considered an important and imposing quality, and rare at a time when starvation was a common experience (fig. 7).

In this particular aspect the women from La Marche do not deviate from the tradition. But there is at least one feature in which some of them differ. In the general tradition the bellies of the obese women are carried high, expanding the waistline – as expected in a culture where clothing did not support the body. But some of the obese women from La Marche (e.g. fig. 7) have bellies that hang loose towards the knees, which was probably more typical for obese sisters of e.g. the 1930s and 40s, when many women wore corsets.

That same picture also illustrates another interesting deviation from a Palaeolithic manner of drawing. The guiding principle within that entire tradition was a continuous, absolute profile or silhouette for the represented being, animal or human. This trait is structural, and in my opinion not even the slight modifications that researchers have pointed out in certain late drawings ever really deviate from that principle – even though in late productions you can see two backbones in an animal and occasionally even all four legs. The woman in fig. 7 is seen in a broad and open $\frac{3}{4}$ -profile which offers a structural differ-

ence, in that some of the major lines indicate the mere volume of the body. A continuous line sweepingly joins the contour at the right with the belly and the opposite thigh.

European artists make many approaches in a similar direction shortly after 1400, but hardly ever before. Only with Raphael's mature drawings do we see such a way of accounting for body volume developed fully, as is seen in fig. 8. It is not least in this development due to Raphael that our realistic tradition of shaping an illusion of three dimensions in images starts.

Mammoth vs. elephant

There are quite a few images of mammoths from La Marche, all fitting perfectly into a long tradition of mostly relatively simple drawings of the same animal. A curious trait is that tusks are never shown – and this goes also for the La Marche items.

But finding at least two pictures of elephants from La Marche (fig. 3) is something entirely of its own. Here also we see the tusk, and this in perfect fitting with that species. No elephants lived in Europe during the Magdalénian, and no other Palaeolithic site has yielded any images of elephants (Delporte 1909, pp. 205–206). The single species of the kind that had once lived here – the straight-tusked elephant, *Palaeoloxodon antiquus* – disappeared far earlier in the history of the world.

Fig. 8. Raphael, Study for the Alba Madonna, 1510. Sanguine, pen and ink. Palais des Beaux-Arts, Lille.



Modern fakes

There seems to be something fishy with this story. There was never any ancient reality behind the many sensational features of a relatively advanced culture suggested by the La Marche imagery. Simply because of the elephants that conclusion is inescapable to me. But there is much more to support it. There is an impressive number of disagreements between La Marche and the overall Palaeolithic tradition, concerning formation as well as iconography, as discussed above. Most of the pictures on the slabs seem to have been made by two different people. I am convinced that one

of them was the Louvre-trained Léon Lwoff, while the other had less formal training as a draughtsman. The second person relied instead on a tradition of humorous caricatures in local newspapers, where a certain comical style, easy for anyone to copy, was spread all over Europe long before the 30s and 40s.

In the scholarly literature about prehistoric culture and art I have found reproductions and quite a lot of rather blank comments on the drawings from La Marche, but almost no traces of any prevailin influence from them. It seems that scholars have avoided exploring or using them in any

depth – even though half a century ago they seemed to enjoy general acceptance as genuine Palaeolithic art. But certainly, more than one serious student must have started to investigate and develop ideas on the basis of this source, probably rather soon to become quite bewildered and then eventually dropping the project – if not before, then when they came across the elephants.

But, as mentioned, a few of the depictions appear rather often as illustrations of scholarly texts, not to mention in popular publications. Therefore it cannot be considered sufficient that the learned world has seemingly turned its back quietly on the matter. There is a need for a more emphatic termination of the case. That is what I hope to offer with the present piece.

Real archaeology from La Marche

I do not call all finds from La Marche into question. Certainly the flint tools etc. may have been authentic, and the same is possibly the case for a number of the incised slabs, especially those accounted for directly by Pales in his publications. Firstly, many of his depictions, although weak, are in accordance with known types of Palaeolithic art. Secondly, given Pales' poor draughtsmanship, he could not have incised the slabs that he struggled so to depict. When it is possible to identify those known iconographic types among his depictions, it must be because he worked with something clearer and more consistent than the resulting pictures before his eyes.

All of Pales' depictions relate to elements of the collection of incised slabs. None are likely to have been pure inventions. Though not established in detail, this view is made probable by the considerable number of photos of the originals that were published together with the depictions. So from a scientific point of view it is more important to acquit Pales from suspicions of fraud than divide the responsibility between the two other men. When we try to find out what contribution La Marche can really make to the understanding of Palaeolithic art, it does not really

matter if the fakes were made by one or two people.

Leaving these weightier considerations aside, we can conclude by pondering the picaresque hoax in itself. Pales came into the picture too late to have made anything beyond depictions of slabs. Also, in his publications a lot of the drawings are signed by Lwoff. His style is very much the same in published photographs of incised slabs and in his signed drawings of slabs, such as the one in fig. 4. This is a far more advanced drawing than the one in fig. 2, the manner of which is as characteristic as it is poorly articulated. There are published photos of incised slabs done in the same manner. Thus it must be concluded that the maker of the drawing in fig. 2 had also incised its model, and the same would then also go for the entire group with the same characteristics.

We know that Léon Péricard and Stéphane Lwoff worked together on the La Marche matter over several years, and it is evident that the drawings of type fig. 4 cannot have been done by the maker of fig. 2. In signing his drawings, Lwoff actually declared himself guilty of fraud. But there is no such proof against the other maker of drawings and corresponding slabs, nothing that would hold up in court.

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Summary

In November 1937, a villager in Lussac-les-Châteaux (Vienne) in southern France found found Palaeolithic objects in the cave of La Marche. He showed them to his neighbour, Léon Péricard, who began excavations there and soon announced that he had found slabs with incised or engraved drawings. Péricard then entrusted the management of the investigation to Stéphane Lwoff, a one-time student at the School of the Louvre. Together they reported numerous further limestone slabs with drawings.

In addition to quite a number of horses and other animals, the slabs mainly depicted an extraordinary variety of human motifs, several showing people wearing various articles of clothing – things otherwise unknown within the Palaeolithic tradition.

Some of the objects with drawings were brought to the Musée de la Préhistoire in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. Lwoff presented a few depictions of these slabs of his own with his commentary to the local archaeological association. In 1939 the collector Léon Pales learned about these

drawings and began copying them, personally and not very well, finally publishing them in several volumes. Judging from Pales' depictions, three individual artists can be identified behind the La Marche imagery.

Many of the incised drawings have a general similarity to well-known cave art, but there is also an unexpected number of images of people, including obese women like Venus of Willendorf, but with facial expressions and elements of clothing, otherwise unknown in the Palaeolithic record. There are also a lot of animals, including an elephant, a species that had gone extinct in Europe several tens of thousand years before the Magdalenian.

Though the poor artistic quality of the published drawings make for some difficulty in judging the style, there are many individual features in these drawings that suggest a modern original. Together with the presence of the elephant they confirm long-held suspicions – most of the La Marche drawings are modern fakes.