

A Newly Discovered Horse Engraving from La Madeleine (Dordogne), France

By MICHELLE C. LANGLEY¹

A new engraving of a horse head has been discovered during a recent re-examination of the Magdalenian osseous projectile point assemblage from La Madeleine curated in the Musée d'Archéologie Nationale (St-Germain-en-Laye, France). Found on one side of an unmodified tip of reindeer tine, this piece was uncovered in amongst a collection of distal (tip) fragments of antler sagaies. While this piece is not unique to La Madeleine – a number of similar pieces having been recovered in early excavations at this site – it nonetheless contributes another small piece of information regarding Magdalenian mobiliary art. The horse engraving is compared with other known finds from La Madeleine, as well as several additional Magdalenian sites in order to outline its place in the current state of knowledge regarding these enigmatic artefacts.

Keywords: La Madeleine, Magdalenian, France, Dordogne, Upper Palaeolithic, reindeer antler, horse engraving, mobiliary art

Decades after their initial excavation and acquisition by museums, Palaeolithic engravings are still being discovered on small portable objects such as bone and antler fragments and stone slabs, even from some of the most intensively studied collections (eg, Cook & Welte 1992; Kaagan *et al.* 2011). In the course of examining Middle–Late Magdalenian osseous projectile point assemblages curated in the Musée d'Archéologie Nationale (St-Germain-en-Laye, France), an engraving of a horse was discovered among the artefacts recovered from La Madeleine, Dordogne, France.

This piece came to the Musée d'Archéologie Nationale as part of the Girod collection in 1910. Included among a large collection of *sagaie* (unbarbed projectile points) distal extremities, upon examination it was found to be neither a segment of *sagaie*, nor a simple unmodified antler tip. This piece is now catalogued as MAN 54450.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PIECE

The engraving is found on one side of an unmodified tip of reindeer (*Cervus elephas*) antler. Measuring

44.21 mm in total length, 16.41 mm at its maximum width, and weighing only 2.6 g, this piece appears to be made up of the very tip of the antler tine.

The engraving depicts the head of a horse in right profile – there is a possibility that this image shows two horse's heads, one next to and overlapping the other – though this is a little unclear owing to post-depositional wear (Fig. 1). Additionally, one must be careful when attributing lines on antler artefacts to anthropogenic cut marks rather than scratches accrued by the deer while in life (see Jin & Shipman 2010; Olsen 1989 for discussion on distinguishing natural damage from cultural activities on antler tine). Figure 1 shows a line drawing of this artefact indicating those lines which are believed to be intentionally added as part of the engraving process and the possible second horse head is indicated in a dotted line.

An example of a 'naturalistic' style typical in Middle–Late Magdalenian assemblages, the horse has a series of parallel lines down its neck and muzzle – a feature seen on a number of similar engravings of horse heads found at this site (Fig. 2). The angular features of the muzzle are also consistent with similar pieces documented at La Madeleine (for examples see Capitan & Peyrony 1928, 91, fig. 54 nos 16, 17; 42, fig. 19 no. 7; Leroi-Gourhan 1968, 430, no. 448).

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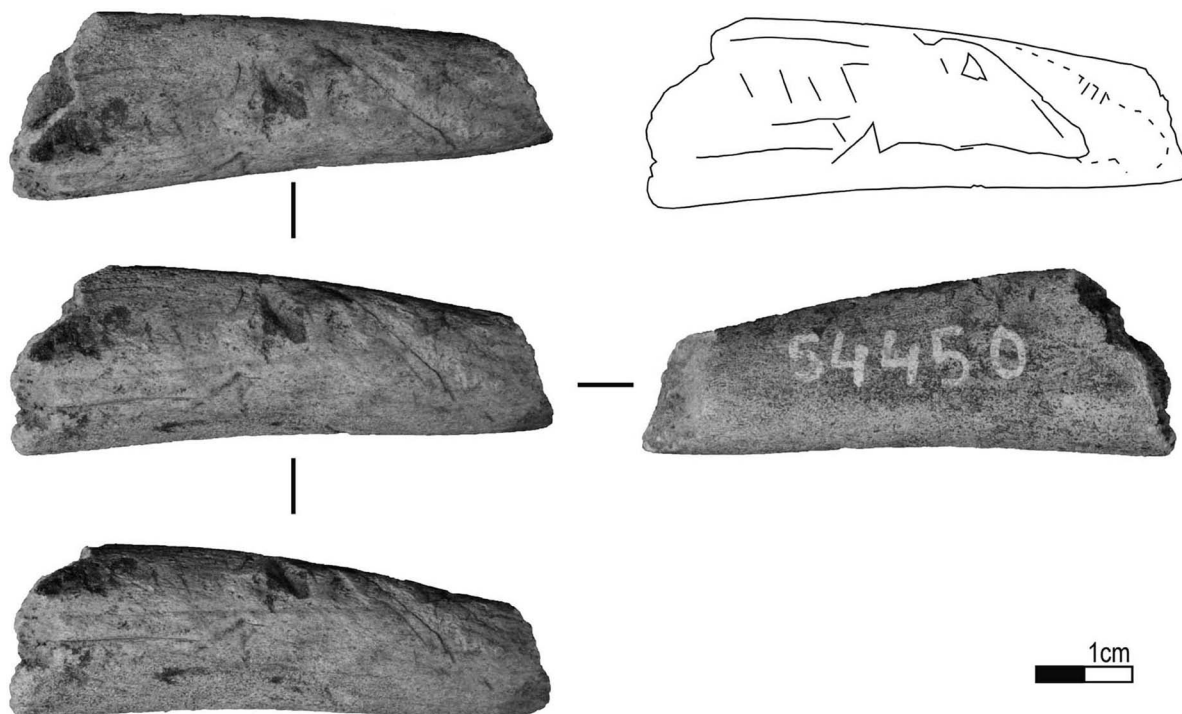


Fig. 1.

Antler tine with engraved horse head (MAN 54450) from La Madeleine, Dordogne. *Top right*: Drawing of the artefact with dotted line indicating possible second horse head. (Photos by M. C. Langley with permission of the Musée d'Archéologie National, Saint-Germain-en-Laye)

Both the distal (tip) and proximal end of the piece exhibit post-depositional breaks and wear. While the distal break does not seem to have encroached on the engraving (the muzzle of the horse appears to be intact), the lines depicting the neck of the animal run into the proximal break, indicating that this engraving probably continued past this fracture. Whether this fragment was part of a larger, worked tool is impossible to know, however, the piece showed no evidence of use-wear indicating that it is most likely simply a fragment of antler tine decorated without significant modification to the whole.

SIMILAR FINDS ELSEWHERE AND ITS PLACE IN PREHISTORY

The horse (Late Pleistocene wild horse similar to the modern Przewalski's horse) is the most important animal depicted in Late Palaeolithic iconography. As such, small portable artefacts with engravings of these animals are found in numerous sites throughout the Magdalenian territory. In fact, Rice and Paterson (1996) report that 43.7% of Palaeolithic engravings

are of horses. These authors also observed that only the heads of horses were more likely to be engraved during the Middle Magdalenian with whole animals much more commonly depicted in the Late Magdalenian.

Magdalenian engravings of horse's heads (along with various other animals) on small fragments of bone, antler, ivory, or stone and which may or may not have been originally part of larger, more complete pieces, have been recovered from numerous sites dating back to the Aurignacian and continuing right through to the Late Magdalenian (see Graziosi 1960 for examples from each period). Most of these examples are represented on 'engraved' or 'decorated plaquettes' – small pieces of sandstone, limestone, slate, schist, or any other stone, bone, ivory, or antler piece with a somewhat flat surface on which figurative or abstract designs could be engraved. In Magdalenian contexts, examples of engravings of horse's heads found on small fragments of bone or stone are individually too numerous to describe in detail here, however sites where these artefacts have been recovered include Laugerie-Basse (Leroi-Gourhan 1968, 430, no. 447;

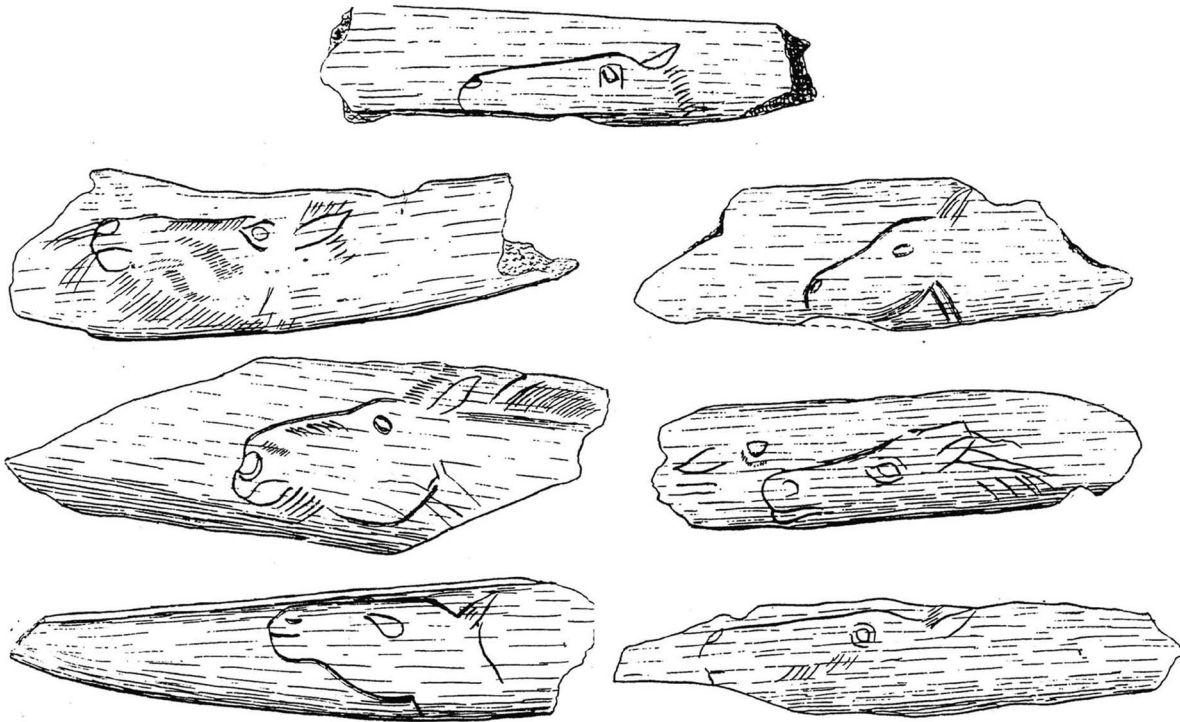


Fig. 2.

Examples of engravings of horse's heads found on bone and antler fragments recovered from La Madeleine (after Capitan & Peyrony 1928, 42, fig. 19).

Tosello 2003, 86, 69–70); Isturitz (Leroi-Gourhan 1968, 430, no. 449); Limeuil (Graziosi 1960, pl. 80, b; Tosello 2003, 139, 91–3, 235, 239); Le Soucy (Tosello 2003, 462); La Pierre aux Fées (Allain 1974); Villepin (Tosello 2003, 484); Robin Hood's Cave (Sieveking 1992); Las Caldas (Corchón & Rivero 2010–11); and Cueva de Ekain (Ontañón & Arias 2010–11), as well as many other sites located throughout western Europe (see Sieveking 1987 and Tosello 2003 for a synthesis of these objects during the Magdalenian).

Horse heads found on unmodified reindeer antler tine – and are therefore most similar to the piece reported here – include Raymondén (Leroi-Gourhan 1968, 430, no. 454) and La Vache (Baffier & Cremades 2003, 253) in addition to the several other examples previously reported from La Madeleine (Fig. 2; Capitan & Peyrony 1928). Antler pieces with full horses have also been recovered from La Madeleine (*ibid.*; examples BM349 and BM350 curated in the British Museum; Sieveking 1992).

These engravings, executed on fragments of bone, antler, ivory, and stone rather than finished

objects that were used in everyday life (such as weapons, tools, or other utilitarian or religious worked items), remain enigmatic despite their early recognition by researchers during the 1860s. Owing to the portable nature of these items, the actions which led to their manufacture, use, and discard as well as any potential spatial patterning which may have been present within their use lives is potentially erased. Certainly there is evidence from a number of examples, such as the engraved rib with a horse head and forelimb behind a series of lines from Robin Hood's Cave and the ivory horse from Lourdes, which show a high degree of handling polish, that these smaller artworks may have been carried extensively around the landscape and perhaps handed down from one generation to the next (Sieveking 1991; 1992).

Despite these uncertainties, however, researchers have concluded that plaquettes (along with other osseous mobiliary art) 'were done in the context of ordinary life, and were directed at smaller domestic, social audiences' (Rice & Patterson 1996, 232). While others suggest a more religious focus for these items

(eg, Leroi-Gourhan 1965; Sieveking 1987; 1991), there seems to be some consensus that it was the *act of creating* the engraving which was important. Having been made, these items were then discarded having no further role to play in Magdalenian (religious) life after the event in which they were manufactured was concluded. These plaquettes, unlike parietal art which survived in a relatively protected environment, would then be exposed to trampling and other types of damage commonly accrued through exposure to everyday activities, having been discarded on a shelter (or other site) floor. Additionally, they were often reused and recycled in domestic activities (such as lining a hearth or a shelter floor) suggesting that their use-life continued in possibly an entirely different function to that for which they were originally created (Sieveking 1987). This scenario certainly seems to be the case for the site from which the engraving described here was recovered, La Madeleine, where researchers have concluded that the role of mobiliary art was embedded in activities of the everyday and involved multiple aspects of Magdalenian life (Pettitt 2005; Tosello 2003).

CONCLUSION

The engraving of a horse's head found on MAN 54450, while not an outstanding addition to the already impressive collection of engraved Magdalenian artefacts recovered from La Madeleine, nevertheless demonstrates that, even more than 100 years after its excavation and acquisition by a museum, new discoveries can be made in intensively studied assemblages. This small example of Magdalenian art adds yet another piece to a growing corpus of data on one of the most intriguing Palaeolithic cultures under study.

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RÉSUMÉ

Gravure de cheval récemment découverte à La Madeleine (Dordogne), France, de Michelle C. Langley

Une nouvelle gravure d'une tête de cheval a été découverte au cours d'un récent ré-examen d'un assemblage magdalénien de pointes de projectiles osseux de La Madeleine conservé au Musée d'Archéologie Nationale (St-Germain-en-Laye, France). Trouvé sur le côté de la pointe inaltérée d'un cor de bois de renne, cette pièce a été découverte parmi une collection de fragments discaux (pointe) de *sagaies* en andouiller. Bien que cette pièce ne soit pas la seule à La Madeleine, un certain nombre de pièces similaires ayant été retrouvées au cours de fouilles antérieures de ce site, elle apporte néanmoins un nouveau petit renseignement en ce qui concerne l'art mobilier magdalénien. Nous comparons cette gravure de cheval à d'autres trouvailles connues de La Madeleine, ainsi qu'à plusieurs sites magdaléniens supplémentaires de manière à retracer sa place dans l'état actuel de nos connaissances de ces artefacts énigmatiques.

ZUSSAMENFASSUNG

Eine neu entdeckte Pferdegravur aus La Madeleine (Dordogne), Frankreich, von Michelle C. Langley

Bei einer jüngst erneut durchgeführten Untersuchung des Ensembles von Knochenprojektilen des Magdalénien aus dem Musée d'Archéologie Nationale (St-Germain-en-Laye, Frankreich) wurde eine Gravur eines Pferdekopfes neu entdeckt. Die Zeichnung ist auf einer Seite einer unmodifizierten Spitze einer Rentiergeweihsprosse angebracht, ein Stück, das in einer Gruppe distaler (Spitzen-) Fragmente von Geweihspeeren (Assagaien) gefunden wurde. Zwar ist dieses Stück nicht einzigartig in La Madeleine – eine Reihe ähnlicher Stücke wurde während der frühen Ausgrabungen dieses Fundplatzes geborgen –, aber es liefert dennoch ein weiteres kleines Stück an Erkenntnis in Bezug auf die transportable Kunst des Magdalénien. Die Pferdezeichnung wird verglichen mit anderen Funden aus La Madeleine wie auch mit mehreren weiteren Fundplätzen des Magdalénien um seine Stellung innerhalb des gegenwärtigen Wissens über diese rätselhaften Artefakte beschreiben zu können.

RESUMEN

Un grabado de caballo recientemente descubierto en la madeleine (dordoña), francia, por c. Langley

Recientemente se ha descubierto un nuevo grabado de cabeza de caballo durante la revisión del conjunto de puntas de proyectil óseas de La Madeleine, conservado en el Museo de Arqueología Nacional (St-Germain-en-Laye, Francia). El grabado se localiza a un lado de la punta de un candil no modificado de reno, y la pieza fue descubierta en una colección de fragmentos distales de azagayas en asta. A pesar de que no es única en La Madeleine –otras piezas similares se descubrieron en las primeras excavaciones en el yacimiento– aporta, sin embargo, más información relacionada con el arte mueble magdaleniense. El caballo grabado se compara con el resto de los conocidos en La Madeleine y en varios yacimientos magdalenenses con la finalidad de subrayar su papel en el estado actual de conocimiento sobre estos enigmáticos artefactos.