



## Intersecting perspectives via two Prehistoric feminine sexual figurations.

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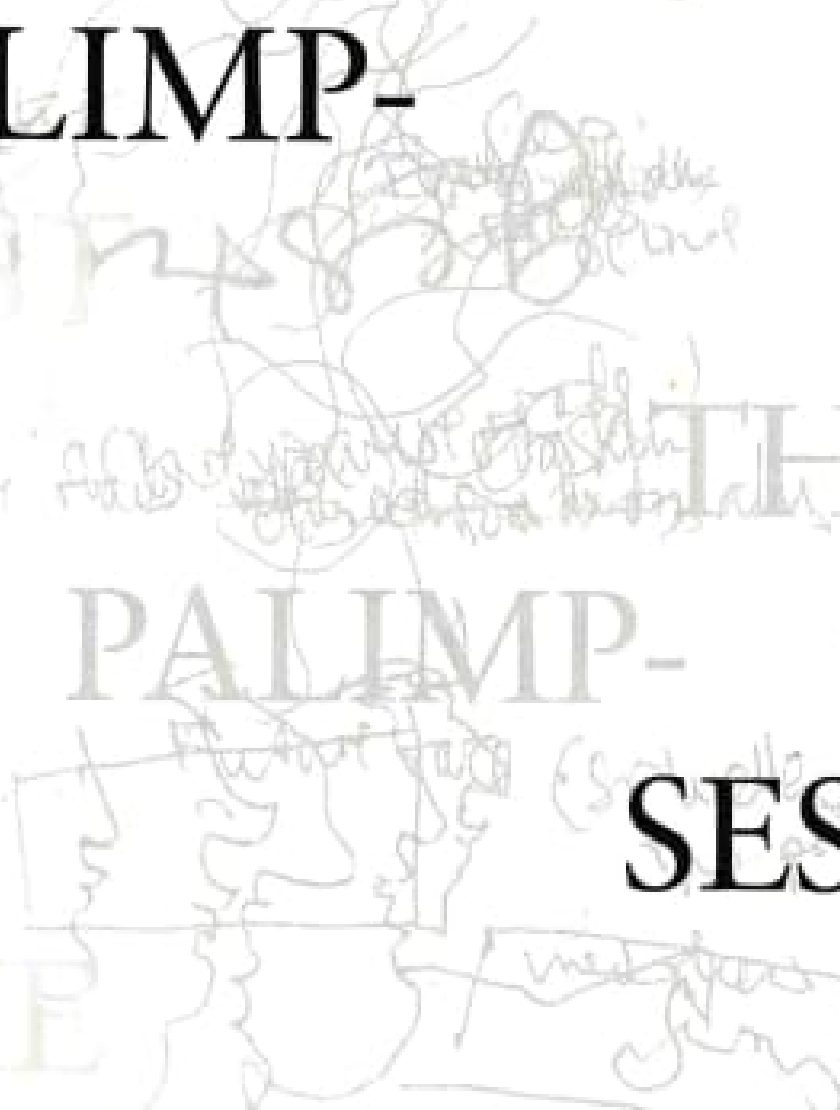
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### *The Palimpsest*

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Fakultet for kunst,  
musikk og design



Direktoratet for  
høyere utdanning  
og kompetanse

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"The artistic way of experiencing life is indeed so incredibly close to sexual experience, to its pain and its pleasure, that both phenomena are actually only different forms of one and the same longing, of one and the same bliss."

Rainer Maria Rilke  
*Letters to a Young Poet*  
Leipzig 1929

# INTERSECTING PERSPECTIVES VIA TWO PREHISTORIC FEMININE SEXUAL FIGURATIONS

Médard Thiry, Marie Nieves Liron & Marie-Claude Auffret

We would like to add that both hold the same vital impulse: that of leaving a trace of oneself, that of confining the opacity and the mystery of the world we live in. Scientific research also proceeds from such a thrust: to search and find the unknown to transmit it, to open new spaces and leave a trace of oneself that may rebound in the future. Opening new spaces is initially done by imagining and dreaming of what could be an argument for, or the outcome of, the research. It is the intimate dream, without any restraint or control, that is often the most fertile. It often ensues a long-term seeking of facts and arguments, with sufferings and disappointments, but each achievement brings closer the coveted object. Pleasure is born each time a veil of the unknown is torn. It produces the impulse and the adrenaline to go on to flush out the unknown. This pleasure ever shines and grows when the accumulated elements become consistent, fit together, and harmonize like the colors of a painting. Darkness illuminated by scientific creation engender a rupture by questioning what might have been taken for granted, considered as the norm. Such a rupture recalls the effect of an artistic work that engenders new sensitivity to gaze, hear, touch ... We started with a quotation from a poet and would like to mirror it with a quotation from a scientist.

"It has not to be forgotten that in scientific research success often goes to those who preserve game and dream in the most serious work they are doing." Marianne Grunberg-Manago, first woman to preside the French Academy of Sciences (1995–1996).

We plan to present herein some archaeological research in which the science intersects human aspects and points to existential questions of prehistoric populations, or simply of Humans. Our focus is the intersection of artistic and existential approaches that may lie behind two prehistoric figurations, which we have raised questions about and inquired into in the context of our so-called modern world. What is the symbolism of these representations? How is it experienced today in our societal relationships? Is it distinct?

Is it universal? To what extent is it a depiction of the societal organization of that ancient time in which it was generated? Until recently, interpretation of these prehistoric female sexual representations was mainly permeated by male archaeologists and often tinged with a certain machismo. It appeared paramount to us to provide a feminine viewpoint to learn how women may interpret them.

## Engraved Female Pelvic Triangle of La Ségognole 3 Shelter

A substantial aggregate of more than 2,000 carved shelters occurs within the sandstone that crops out south of Paris in the Fontainebleau region. The carvings are essentially non-figurative and geometric, including parallel straight grooves and grids, carved by the hunter-gatherers of the Mesolithic Period, about 9,000 years ago.<sup>1</sup> Amongst these repetitive patterns there is a much older figurative exception, left by the older Palaeolithic inhabitants of the Fontainebleau area, about 20,000 years ago. It shows a panel engraved with two horses arranged on either side of three slots, initially assumed to be natural, evoking a pelvic triangle.<sup>2</sup> A thorough re-examination revealed the artificial character of the slots as well as numerous anthropogenic interventions to modify the hydrology of the shelter to drain water to the slot representing the vulva.<sup>3</sup> Such an “installation,” in the modern artistic sense, both functional and evolutionary, from the Paleolithic period, had never before been found.

### Shelter Layout

One of the remarkable aspects of the *Ségognole 3 shelter* is its natural lighting through the openings to the galleries that cross the sandstone block from side to side (Fig. 1). The SE entrance is largely open to the outside and gives way to a wide gallery in which it is easy to squat. This divides into two galleries offset in height and which diverge towards the NW openings (Fig. 2): the wall separating the two galleries is initially reduced to a thickness of 20 cm and never exceeds 50 cm. From the other side (NW façade), the upper gallery has a narrow opening (height 30 cm) and two small, circumscribed basins dug in its floor just above and behind the carved panel with the pelvic triangle. The lower gallery is more isometric, with a wide opening to the outside. It consists of a space that resembles an entrance vestibule.



Figure 1. Orthophotogrammetry of *La Ségognole 3 shelter* and its sub-joined neighbouring blocks with the narrow corridors onto which the shelter opens. SEG3 is *La Ségognole 3 shelter* and the bars with arrows mark the placement and width of the three entrances. Orthophotogrammetry by society Summum 3D @Summum3D.

This constricts to form a narrowing that separates the vestibule from the chamber of the engraved panel, which reaches about 120 cm in height at its centre.

1 (Colas Guéret & Benard, 2017, pp. 99–120)

2 (Bénard, 2010, pp. 521–536)

3 (Thiry et al., 2020)



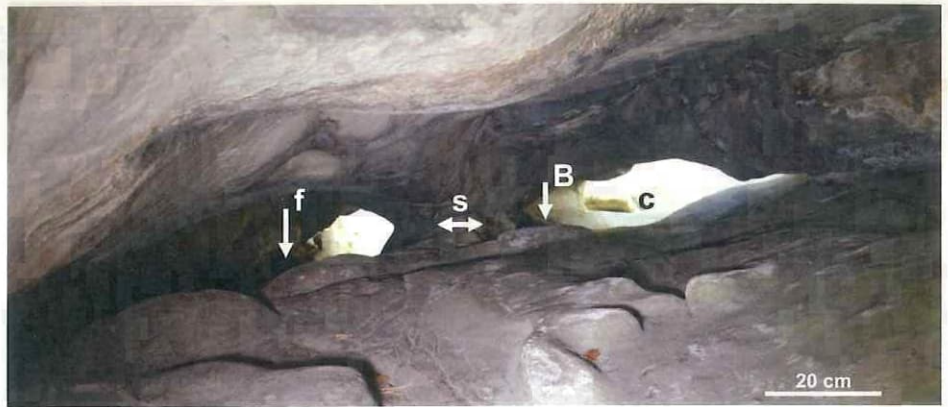


Figure 2. Views from the SE entrance. The gallery divides into two galleries separated by a narrow wall (s) accompanied by the narrowing of the upper gallery (c) that contains two basins (B) dug into its floor. The lower gallery drops an approximately 80 cm recess and gives rise to the chamber (f) where the engraved panel is located. Diagram by the authors.

## Chamber and Engraved Panel Layout

The chamber containing the engraved panel is relatively enclosed but spacious in volume, allowing for three to four people to crouch in front of the panel. The engraved panel is situated on an inclined surface that connects to the chamber floor (Fig. 3A). The female sexual figuration is particularly expressive. The pubic triangle is marked by two converging lateral slits that do not join, thus exposing the very elongated vulvar slit, the base of which marks the point of the triangle. At the top the pubic slits extend laterally through a less sloping slit that clearly evokes the groin fold. The triangle is surmounted by an organo-mineral crust delimited with a curved upper contour that evokes a pubic hair tuft. The panel is delimited on the left by the entrance narrowing and on the right by a curved slit: the two curves that limit the panel suggest the widening of hips. In addition, the outline of the meridian section evokes a woman's profile (Fig. 3B). The pubic triangle rests on a concave surface, then, above the slits corresponding with the groin fold, the panel continues to the ceiling of the chamber, which in this shape evokes a pregnant woman's belly with its pubic tuft at the base which overhangs the triangle.

The sexual representation is particularly impressive when entering the room by crawling through the narrow section: the curved panel supporting the pelvic triangle and the pubic hair overlook and dominate the visitor (Fig. 3C).

The most spectacular aspect of this sexual representation was discovered fortuitously on a misty winter's day. The room was literally steaming. The walls were dripping with moisture and covered with water droplets that shone in the light and, amazingly, two fine streams of water flowed from the vulvar slit! The pelvic triangle appeared to be alive! This imagery stemmed from the depths of prehistory. It had to be captured so as not to miss this exceptional moment, to give it reality and to retain the magic that emanated from it (Fig. 4).

## Staging of a True Artistic "Installation"

Geological analyses of the panel revealed that fractures had obviously been enlarged and slots even dug de nihilo (Fig. 5). Archaeological analyses of wear patterns confirmed anthropogenic workings from grooving and percussion.<sup>4</sup> Three "sculptural" features were reworked: (1) the slits of the pelvic triangle were completely engraved, and the sexual symbol was therefore created intentionally; (2) the fracture that emphasizes the groin fold had been widened and deepened on both sides of the triangle, but not

4 (Thiry & Cantin, 2018, pp. 101-146)

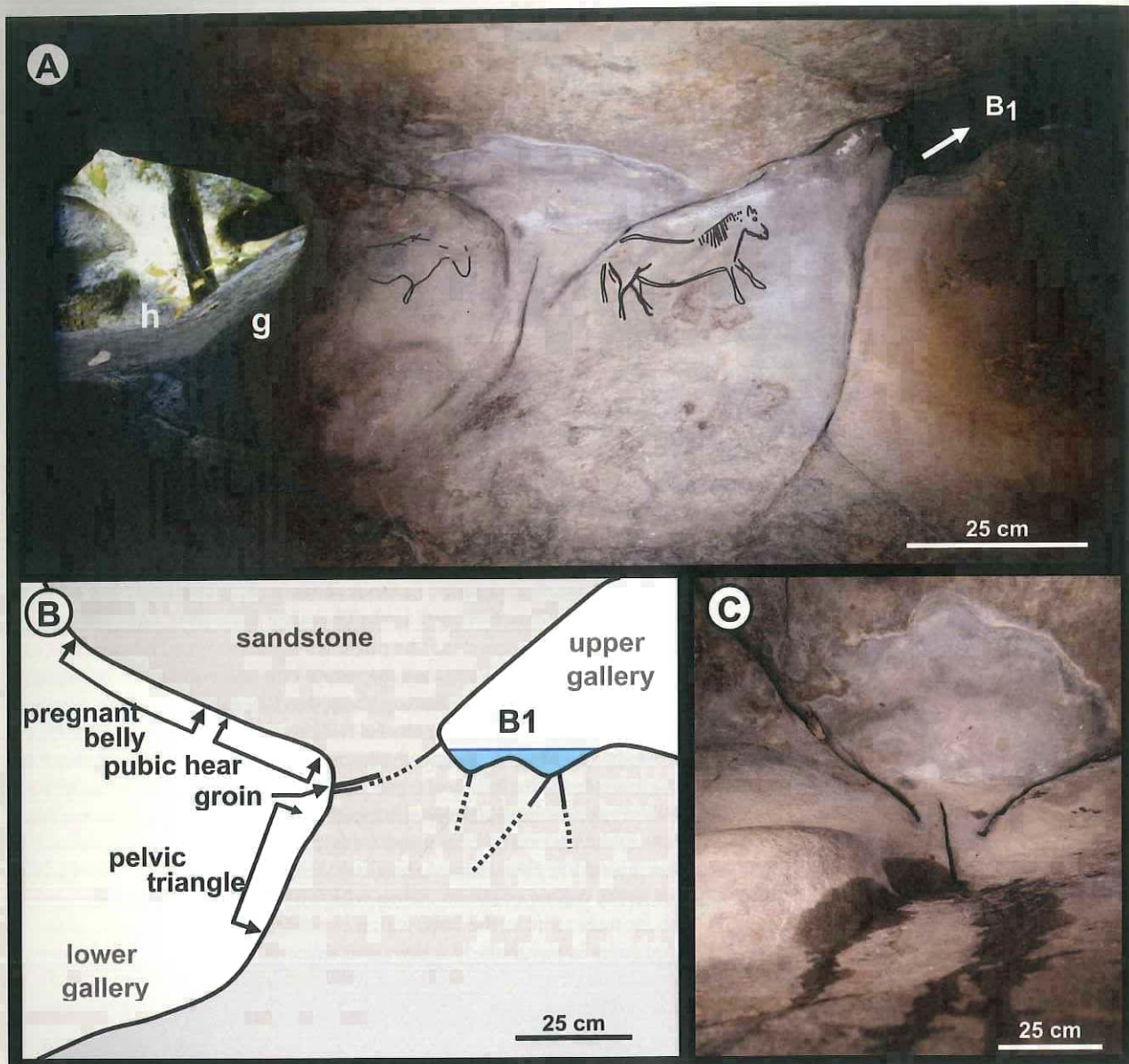


Figure 3. Views of the chamber and the carved panel. (A) Carved panel with the layout of the feminine sexual representation and the two carved horses (drawn on the photograph after Bénard 2010). NW entrance vestibule (h) beyond the narrow section (g) at left and Basin B1 of upper gallery behind the panel (arrow). (B) Panel in cross-section with the disposition of the main elements of the sexual representation. (C) Bottom-up view of the sexual representation, as it appears when one enters the chamber by crawling through the narrow section; notice water flowing out the base of the vulvar slit. Diagram by the Émilie Lesvignes (PCR ARBap).



Figure 4. Appearance of the water saturated panel on January 23, 2018. Leakage and water outflow at the base of the vulvar slot with water exuding from sandstone pores at the lower end of the panel.

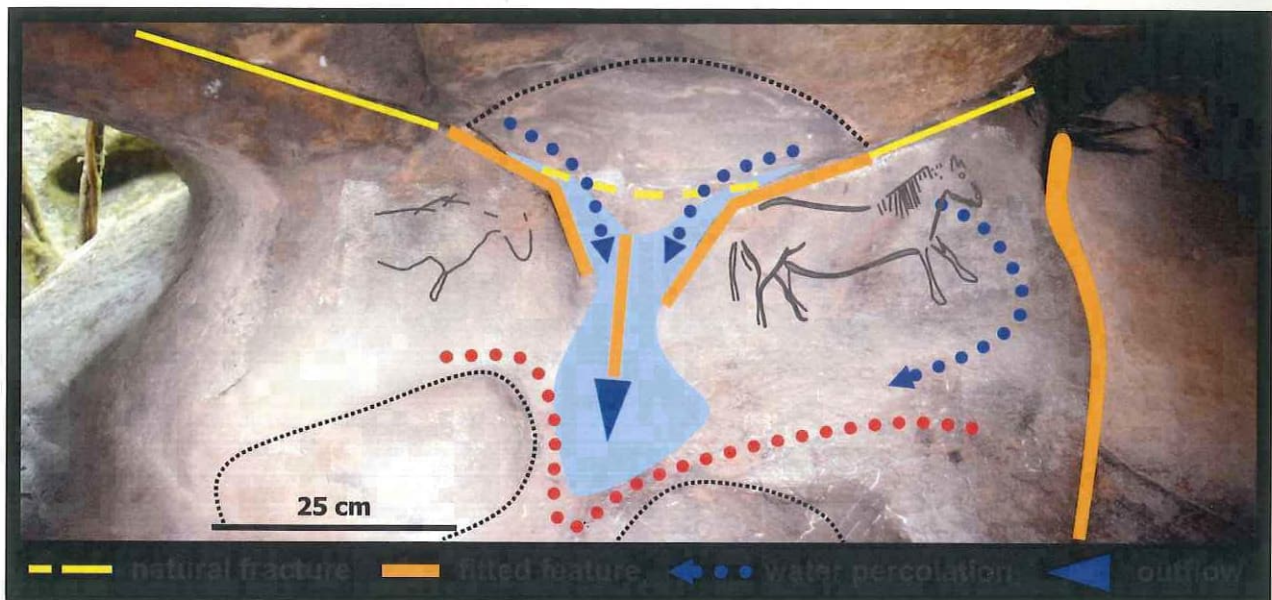
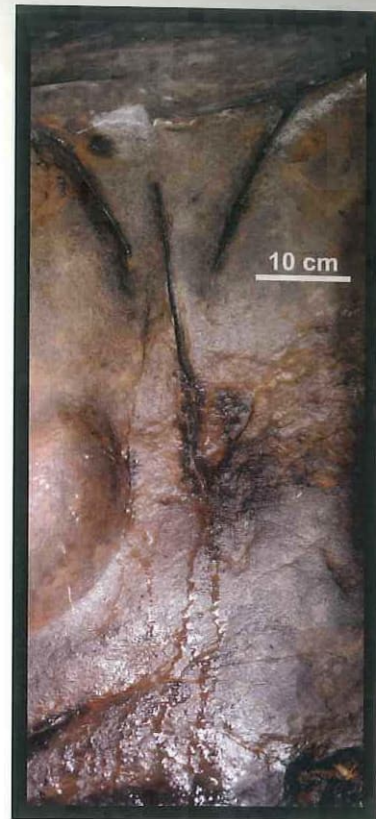


Figure 5. Diagram of the hydrological functioning of the horse panel. The anthropogenic workings channel pore water to outflow at the base of the pelvic triangle. The slots fulfil a dual function, aesthetic and functional, a full integration of the sexual representation in the natural environment. Diagram by the authors.



retouched in between to avoid a rupture with the triangle; (3) the slot that limits the panel to the right had been sharply widened to emphasize the curve of the hip. In addition, the basin at the rear of the panel had been deepened by chipping out sandstone flakes to clear and widen the fractures that run along its bottom. What was the point? Water infiltrating from the basin B1 (Fig. 3) is constrained to move along the side slots of the triangle towards the central slit and feed a "vulvar fountain" (Fig. 5). To prove this, an experiment was conducted by maintaining a constant level of water in the basin for a week during a dry period. After two and a half days and the addition of 50 litres of water (two buckets per day), the vulvar slit was flowing! Thus, Palaeolithic people could potentially have operated the 'vulvar outflow' on demand and without weather constraints.

## Outstanding Shelter of Female Sexual Morphology of Courdimanche

Sexual representations are not often mentioned in the profuse literature on younger Mesolithic engravings in the Fontainebleau Sandstone, but they do exist. Some are unequivocal, but most cannot be inventoried as a sexual representation because they are only deep and wide furrows. Sometimes a simple detail reveals their character. For example, a deep furrow scraped by several grooves can be crowned by a few small grooves that undoubtedly evoke the pubic hairs surmounting a vulvar slit. You find a bas-relief sculpture of a pregnant woman's belly adorned with a navel and grooves that could represent stretch marks. First and foremost is an outstanding sexual feature in a small cavity which, by its structure and wall morphologies, is a sculpture of a feminine sex in the form of what we today would call a 3D model! This very special sexual morphology was discovered by J-C and Marie-Claude Auffret in 2003 and described for the first time here.

### Cavity with Sexual Likeness Morphologies

The cavity is contained within a Fontainebleau Sandstone boulder about seven meters long, 1.80 m high, and two meters wide. It is a small, rounded hollow with a geodic configuration of about 80 cm in diameter, and thus a volume of approximately 1/5 cubic metre, or 200 litres, like the capacity of a barrel of wine! It has a very narrow entrance about 40 cm wide and 20 cm high (Fig. 6A & B). The sexual morphology is visible at an angle from the outside through the entrance hole, illuminated by daylight. To view the whole cavity, one must enter by laying on one's back, retract the arms, insert the head and push the body in with one's feet. It is possible to penetrate and fit the entire body in the cavity by folding the legs and bending back (Fig. 6C). Two people folded up right next to each other might fit in the cavity, but it seems impossible it would accommodate three people.

Lying on one's back is how one has a panoramic view of the geode. The entrance into the cavity is striking. It is almost always wet, has engravings on the vault, and a giant sexual morphology of about 60 cm in diameter facing you on the left (Fig. 7A). This means it is four times wider than your head and dominates your field of vision. It is a striking, dizzying view, and after a few minutes most visitors experience a headache. Prolonging the stay can induce a "seasickness" that settles and may last for 2-3 hours after exiting the structure. The sexual figuration consists of four superimposed sandstone reliefs: a pierced dome composed of three sandstone crowns like folds, the diameter narrowing towards the rear of the structure, and which emphasize at their centre a rounded protuberance that encloses the concentric structure (Fig. 7B). To the right of the sexual figuration there is a recess that forms a small secondary cavity about 50 cm in depth, and which ends in a cul-de-sac. On the left of the sexual figuration two sausage-like protuberances are superimposed on the wall (Fig. 7A). They contrast with the yellowish and grainy wall due to their dark greyish colour and smoother, glossy surfaces.

Figure 6. Shelter's access.  
(A) entrance of the of cavity.  
(B) outward view.  
(C) curled up inside.



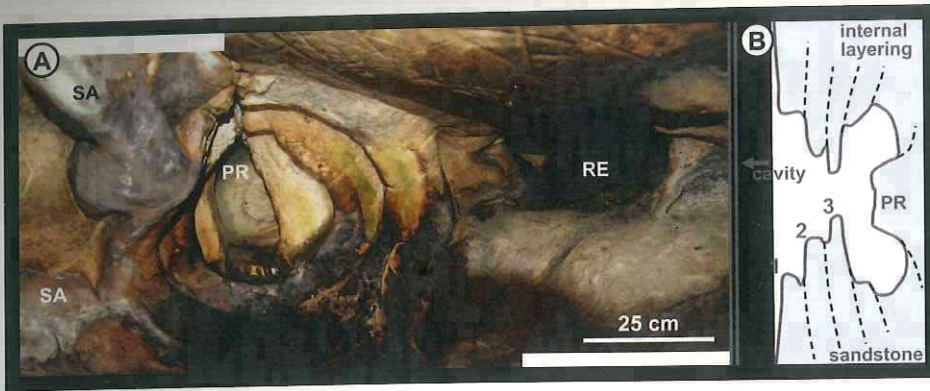


Figure 7. Overview of the sexual likeness morphologies and their surroundings. (A) Note the depth of the structure closed by a central protuberance (PR), the rounded and elongated sausage-like protrusions (SA) on the left, and to the right the cul-de-sac recess (RE) to which the engraved vault descends. (B) section through the sexual figuration. Notice the depth of the figuration with the emergence of the central protuberance (PR), crowned by a small depression, likely a peeling, 1-2-3 crowns.

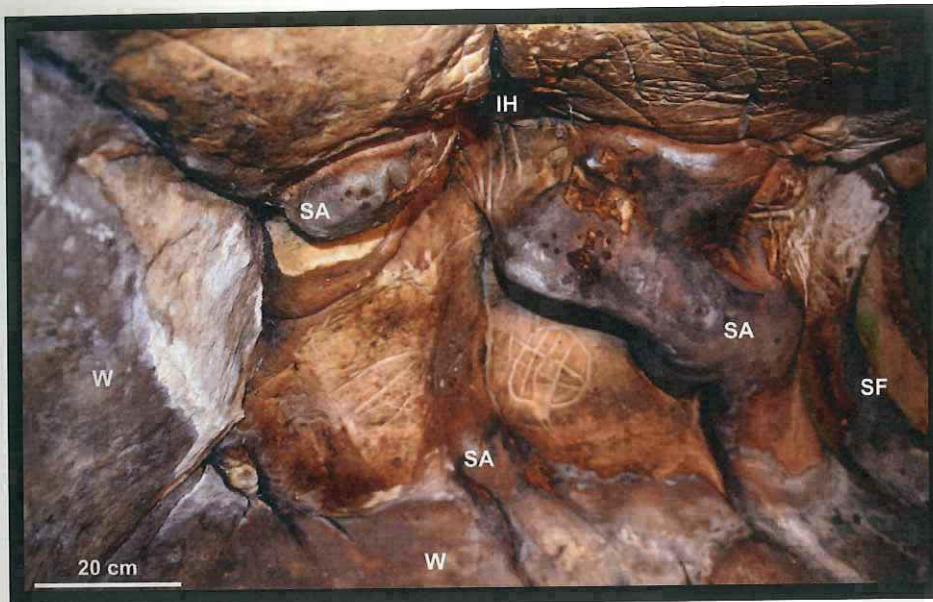


Figure 8. View of the ceiling of the cavity. (A) convergence of several reliefs and slots from which appear "emerging" grey and brownish bulbous sausage-like reliefs stuck on the cavity walls (SA) and descending along the sexual figuration (SF). Carvings at top of the photo are those of the carved panel between the entrance and the auxiliary hole. Note the few furrows from the infiltrating hollow (IH) that fed formation of the secondary silica deposits (SA) and circular and ogive-shaped carvings on two bulges in the middle of the picture. The grey and brownish surfaces at left and in the lower edges of the photo are the basal border of the cavity impacted and weathered by rising moisture (W).



They bring to mind the flow of a viscous material from the ceiling of the cavity and seem to emerge and flow from a point of convergence of several reliefs and slots in the vault (Fig. 8). The base of the walls all around the cavity is strongly weathered and the sandstone dark grey, encrusted, and pustular.

All morphologies within the cavity are natural and were not remodelled by pre-historic people. The cavity and its entrance were actually masses of sand that remained uncemented during the formation of the sandstone and spilled out when the outcrops of sandstone were developed.<sup>5</sup> The same is true of the meso-reliefs on the cavity walls and, in particular, the recess to the right of the sexual figuration. They were generated by the flux of groundwater that cemented the sandstone. The sausage-like protuberances adjoining the vault and the walls of the cavity are also natural. They are secondary cementations that were fed by waters infiltrating through cracks in the vault when the sandstone slab was close to the land surface, but not yet broken into blocks nor flushed by uncemented sand masses. The sausage-like reliefs have not been engraved because they are very hard, with a cortex that is not scratchable by the use of a flint.



Figure 9. Engraved panel on the right of the sexual figuration. The most marked and deepest engravings have an overall orientation "pointing" towards sexual figuration. Diagrams by the authors.

## Carvings

The carved panel is the only large smooth surface of the cavity, located on the inclined vault between the recess to the right of the sexual figuration and the cavity entrance. At first sight, there are two types of carvings: deep grooves with a clear outline and shallow grooves with less precise outlines and less clear arrangements. These engravings correspond to different techniques and gestures of carving. The deep furrows are the result of repeated tool movements, which are estimated to be 10–20 repeated move-



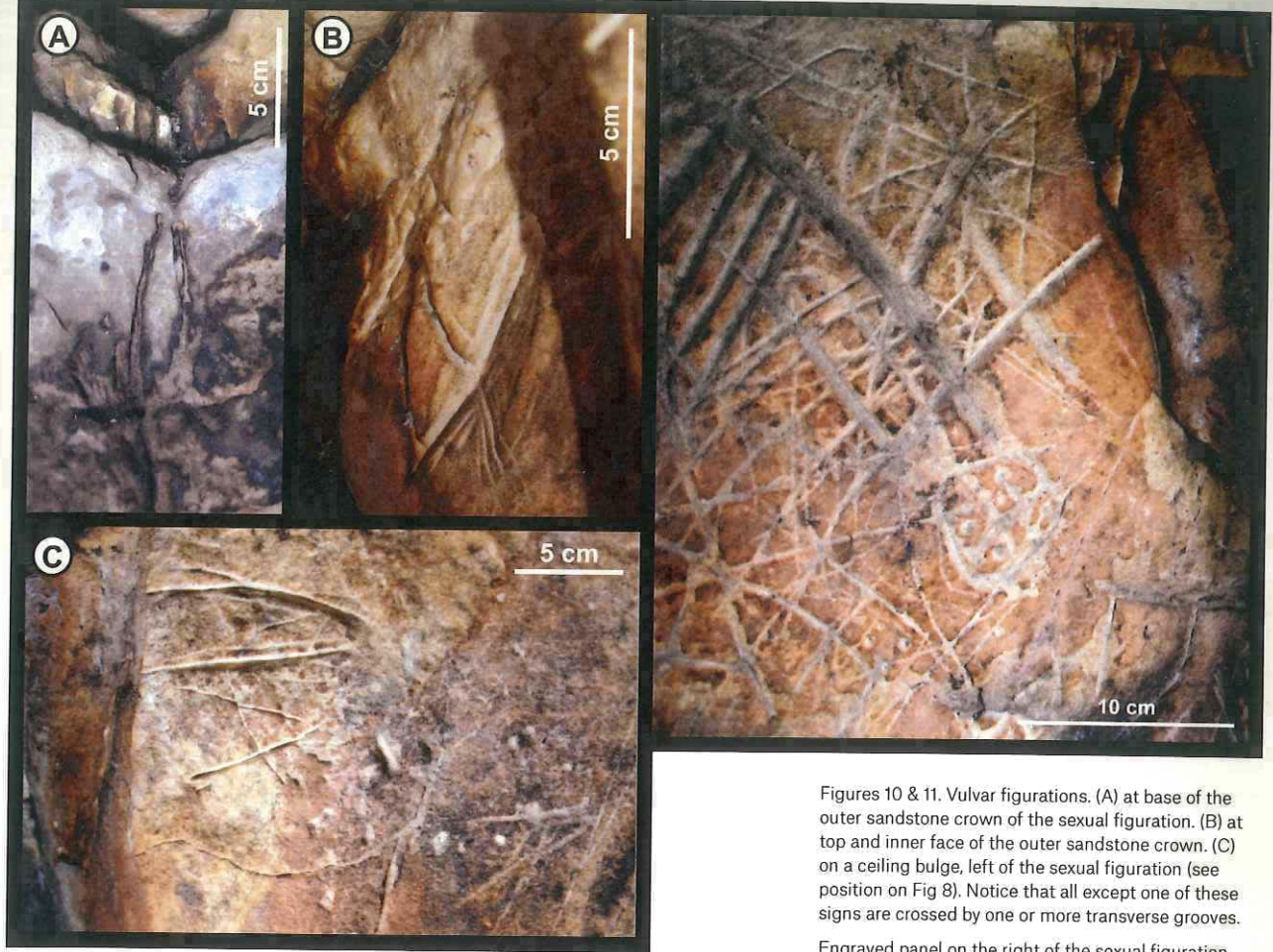
ments, calibrated on the length of the groove.<sup>6</sup> They are typical of the profuse corpus of the Fontainebleau Sandstone carvings. On the other hand, the numerous engravings with shallow furrows in this cavity are uncommon in the carved shelters within the Fontainebleau Sandstone. They are more like drawing than carving and were probably made by a single movement of the tool.

In fact, there is only one engraved composition with deep furrows, and which presents an undeniable polarity in the direction of the recess and sexual figuration (Fig. 9). We have no legitimacy to analyse these figures. Future rupestrian surveys will discuss whether our groupings are warranted and may provide interpretations of these signs. On the engraved panel the shallow grooves assembled in geometric figures or forming very simple curvilinear traces are more abundant than the deep engravings (Fig. 9). Shallow grooves also exist elsewhere in the cavity, but do not form large compositions. The scatter of the engravings away from the engraved panel is due to the lack of flat and non-fractured surfaces with a suitably friable engravable cortex. Among these fewer neat engravings there are several symbols that presumably are vulva figurations. The most conspicuous are carvings directly attached at the outer sandstone crown of the sexual figuration. One is at the base, directly on the meridian line (Fig. 10A), and two others are on top of the crown, also close to the meridian line, but on the inner face of the sandstone crown, hidden from the frontal view (Fig. 10B). The three signs are crossed by a transverse engraving. On a ceiling bulge, left of the sexual figuration, three “furtively” carved V-shaped or ogive shaped signs may also be regarded as vulva figurations (Fig. 8 & 10C). Two of them are also crossed by a transverse groove. These later carvings are surrounded by percussion points from hammering the wall with a hard stone.

There are also several engraved circles, which are relative uncommon figures within the Fontainebleau Sandstone carvings. Left of the sculptural figuration is an engraved circle (10 cm in diameter) that presents an internal grid made of 3 parallel grooves intersected by two other perpendicular grooves (Fig. 8). Two of the three parallel furrows extend and meet outside the circle. The two perpendicular grooves close ogive-like on the inner edge of the circle and protrude on the opposite side, bounded by a perpendicular groove that closes the figure. To the right of the sexual figuration, on the upper right corner of the engraved panel, is a slightly smaller engraved circle (5 cm in diameter), punctuated by cupules engraved by an oscillating movement of the tool and cut by two parallel furrows (a deep one and another just marked), cut across by a third furrow (Fig. 9).

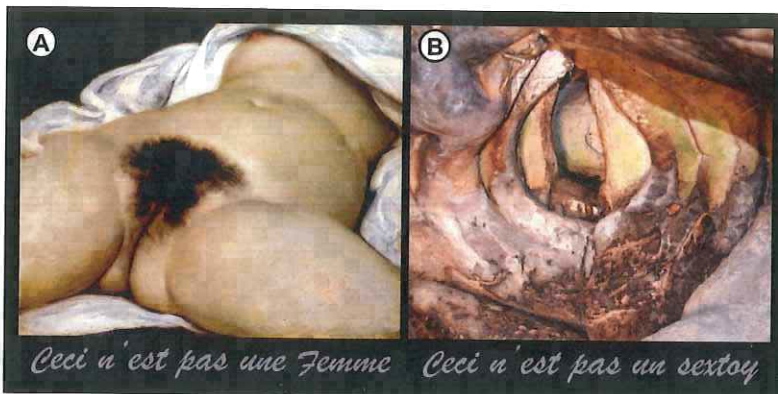
## Assumptions and Conjectures

This shelter of Courdimanche has been known for about fifteen years but had not been studied particularly. It was regarded as exceptional. Apart from its aesthetics, there was no subject to study scientifically, so what if it's natural? The engravings are neither abundant nor exceptional, and there are nearly 2,000 similarly engraved shelters. These thoughts changed completely with the highlighting of the installation of the pubic triangle of the *La Ségognole 3 shelter*. What if there's more than just a natural sexual figuration? That triggered the urge to go back and see it again. The above descriptions are the result of an initial survey. These are raw readings, with no critical analysis yet. We do not claim to be able to make scientific interpretations at this stage of the study. However, we have decided to analyse situations, make hypotheses, and construct scenarios without worrying at this stage about how to argue or demonstrate their legitimacy. We ignore any constraints that could hinder our imaginations, we explore all possible paths to be sure that we are not missing one, at times being in the role of the shopkeeper. Imagination and dreams often give rise to working hypotheses. Then the game continues by imagining demonstration scenarios and where to look for evidence and arguments. This is when the research work begins. It is this snapshot of a research process being built, which is almost



Figures 10 & 11. Vulvar figurings. (A) at base of the outer sandstone crown of the sexual figurine. (B) at top and inner face of the outer sandstone crown. (C) on a ceiling bulge, left of the sexual figurine (see position on Fig 8). Notice that all except one of these signs are crossed by one or more transverse grooves.

Engraved panel on the right of the sexual figurine (enlargement of figure 9). The shallow and the curved strips probably correspond to fast and spontaneous tracing gestures. They may testimony of impulses felt by the engraver housed in the cavity 10,000 years ago—fossilized emotions?



Figures 12. Contrast of modern and Paleolithic female sexual representations, subtitled in the manner of René Magritte's 'trahison des images.' (A) 'Origin du Monde' by Gustave Courbet, 1866, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. (B) Female sexual figurine in relief in the sandstone of the Courdimanche shelter.

never commented, that we present below. Boris Vian, who adored the absurd, the party, and the game, wrote "This story is true because I invented it" in the novel *L'Écume des Jours* from 1947. We endorse this quotation in the hypotheses and conjunctures below.

In the first instance, we would like to sustain a sexual interpretation of the engraved circles. Elements that protrude from the circle could symbolize male elements that penetrate the circle sketching a female sex or even the described sexual geode and the meridian furrows depicting the vulvar slit. In any case, there is a great temptation to see a sexual figuration in the context of this emblematic shelter. Secondly, it must be emphasized that it is not the rule in the Fontainebleau engravings to have vulva figurations crossed by transverse furrows. These seem to be characteristic of the Courdimanche cavity. Thereby, with the below hypothesis that the sexual figuration may depict a penis penetrating the vagina, the grooves across vulvar representations could depict sexual intercourse.

Also, it may be that the shallow carvings and the curved strips are due to gestures hindered by the narrowness of the cavity. Nevertheless, there are also relatively complicated geometric figures engraved in this slight and easy-going way. They are of eminently faster execution than the typical engravings; they are probably made through fast and spontaneous tracings (Fig. 11). With these fine lines, and more particularly with the curvilinear lines, one has the impression of having left the field of formal carvings and being immersed in engravings executed, on impulse, like quick gestures scratching the friable cortex of the geode. The hammering of the wall around one of the vulvar signs probably also stems from a snap impulse. The opposition between artwork and graffiti is an ethnocentric reflex. But how do we perceive an impulse in a 10,000-year-old inert object? Only fixed gestures may be an index. Would the relative abundance of the slightly marked curvilinear engravings be the fossilization of impulsive and/or trance gestures born of the arrangement of this cavity of undeniable sexual character?

And finally, if all the reliefs of sexual figuration are natural, without prehistoric Man intervening to modify them, we can freely interpret them with our present anthropocentric gaze without worrying about being suspected or accused of over-interpretation. So, we will make a raw, direct, unconstrained analysis of what we are talking about. At first glance, it appears that the central figuration of the cavity evokes a female sex. This is how it has been designated throughout our description above. The three superimposed crowns depicting the big and small lips and their folds, it is an open vulva that shrinks inwards. The reading of the central protuberance can be dual, depending on one's position. A first reading is to see the figuration of the clitoris. So, we're facing the vulva, but the observation is done from a cavity. This cavity may itself have an anatomical connotation. The observer could be immersed in the vagina or the uterus. With this reversal of the position of the observer (actor?) the central protuberance could figure the glans that penetrate the vagina. And by pushing this last interpretation to the extreme, the sausage-like sandstone protrusions next to the vault and the walls would be cum! And who is the observer: a man or a woman? All fantasies are possible! And for a man this macho fantasy could be to fully penetrate the sex, to plunge into it to increase the surface of contact and pleasure and at its extreme an egocentric feeling, dominant and tinged with megalomania. But a gynocentric look may not be less extravagant.

## Worthy Features from a Palaeolithic Perspective

In the *La Ségognole 3 shelter*, the central chamber with the engraved panel is isolated within the sandstone block and curtails access to reach the intimacy of the room where the key panel is located. The pubic triangle is therefore integrated into a natural space that possibly has feminine connotations, as often called to mind in the European Upper Palaeolithic rock art.<sup>7</sup> The fittings changed an evocative natural relief, featured in three dimensions, to a complex and functional installation including the fourth dimension of

7 (Leroi-Gourhan, 1965, p. 482)

moistening cycles, which enables planning the “event” in a reliable manner. It presumably had symbolic force. In this perspective, some “initiates” could possess the secret and derive power from it! Whether or not this was so, there are without doubt religious myths and incantations practices behind the installation. The flow of the vulvar slit can refer to the lubricating flow accompanying sexual arousal, as intuitively imagined (by MT) at the time of the discovery of the phenomenon, or to the menstrual flow, or the flow of amniotic fluid from the loss of water and thus refer to birth, and more globally to the fertilization of the world, its perpetuation and immortalization.

In the Courdimanche shelter, the visitor is in woman’s body, not just in the vagina, but in the uterus, and one sees the anatomical details from the inside! All is natural—no element has been worked by man. It is the almost perfect illustration of the integration of Paleolithic parietal works into the natural elements to highlight cave graphics.<sup>8</sup> But in this case there is not even integration! The visitor is at the centre of a 3D installation and can barely move, as if locked in this matrix. It remains for us to move forward in our research to determine if there too, as in *La Ségognole shelter*, the sexual figuration was staged with an animation.

In our eyes the two shelters differ sexually: at *La Ségognole* it is the female sex that is staged and animated with the flow of a vulvar fountain; at *Courdimanche*, with the protuberance that points from the back, it is the male sex that is at the centre of the figuration, and it remains to be seen if there was not an animation related to this male sex. From there, we can imagine that the two shelters were each dedicated to one of the sexes: to the women at *La Ségognole* and to the men at *Courdimanche*. Indeed, it is common in Australian Aboriginal societies to have very separate male and female places and ceremonies, with severe punishment for each intruding on the other.<sup>9</sup> Some remote aboriginal societies still practice such things today but maintain great secrecy concerning their ceremonies and sites. It would not be surprising that this would also have been the case in early European Prehistorical societies. The shelters in the Fontainebleau Sandstone may be the key to demonstrating this.

## La Trahison des Images—The Treachery of Images

The engraved female pelvic triangle of the *La Ségognole 3 shelter* was compared to the painting “Origine du Monde” (1866) by Gustave Courbet in an article published in the *Le Monde*, which reported the discovery of the installation of the shelter and the functioning of the “Vulvaire Fountain.”<sup>10</sup> The comparison has since been taken up in writings and discussions during site visits. But into which extent is this rapprochement justified?

The “Origine du Monde” was commissioned by an Ottoman diplomat, Khalil-Bey, a collector of works celebrating the female body, for his private enjoyment. The painting remained hidden in his bathroom, and a century later it was acquired by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who, in turn, dressed it with a cache made by the painter André Masson and showed it only to selected visitors. In 1995 this painting entered the Musée d’Orsay, where it is visible to the public. In his “Origine du Monde” Courbet gives an anatomical and naturalistic representation of the female pubis that broke with centuries of Western art. He also freed himself from the alibis of mythological or historical staging which had been tolerated until then in the representation of a nude. Prior to this painting, Fernando Goya had dared to paint, in “*La Maja desnuda*” (1790–1800), the sensual body of a woman including the hair of her lower abdomen, thus a real woman and not a smoothed or asexual goddess.

What strikes us first in the “Origine du Monde” are the choices made in its composition. In the foreground there is this female sex, with tight photographic framing, towards which Courbet deliberately focuses the view. With the opened thighs, the eye is

8 (Halverson, 1992, pp. 389–404; Lorblanchet, 2010, p. 480; Lorblanchet, 2020, p. 171; Testart, 2016, p. 380)

9 (Kaberry, 1939, p. 352; Hamilton, 1980, pp. 4–19; Merlan, 1992, pp. 169–193)

10 (Barthélémy, 2020)



caught by the bushy fleece. The vulva is exhibited, the woman is passive. Everyone who discovers this painting becomes a de facto voyeur, and in this Courbet skilfully exploits one of the fantasies of eroticism, the voyeurism. The other peculiarity of the composition is the absence of the face. As a subject, this woman does not exist. The body is truncated, it is a woman-object, an "obscure object of desire." Was this the choice of the artist or an expectation of the sponsor? In any case, the canvas displays the image of a woman in the bourgeois society of the industrial era and reflects the duality of roles in which the collective unconscious will lock her up for decades: the Mother or the Whore. If the feminist movements and other currents of progressive thought today have somewhat deconstructed this representation, Western societal evolution is slow, and Orlan with the "Origine de la Guerre" (1989) denounces it with irony.

So, what is the relevance of establishing links between the "Origin du Monde" and the shelter of the *Ségognole*? Certainly, in each of these two pieces there is, violent or hypnotic, a female vulva. But going further in this rapprochement is perhaps one of those tendencies in our "rapid communication era," an efficient media shortcut. And in doing so, it is a "trahison des images" (treachery of images) analogous to those conceived by René Magritte. Just as in the famous painting "Ceci n'est pas une pipe," one could say of the vulva engraved of the *Ségognole*, "This is not a female sex!" Indeed, in the pelvic triangle of *La Ségognole* the framing of a particular anatomical element corresponds to a fragmentary representation characteristic of Palaeolithic art.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the history and symbolism of the engraved female pelvic triangle of *La Ségognole 3* is quite different. It represents neither a rupture nor a provocation, it is one element among hundreds, if not thousands, sculpted, engraved, or painted over tens of thousands of years. It is both part of and illustrative of a symbolism of the origin of the world, or more precisely of the origin of life and its becoming. It is the Mother-Goddess connected with worship practiced in many ancient religions, as shown by the anthropology of archaic populations, and envisioned as rooted in Palaeolithic myths. The Mother-Goddess would be the supreme and primordial power of life and fertility, responsible for the reproduction of human and animal species. The pelvic triangle together with the two horses also evoke the turnover of lives and the totemic approach of the Paleolithic religions, where life is latent in caves and sacred sites.<sup>12</sup> The two horses on either side of this powerful sexual representation could represent a cycle of rebirth. The vulva would symbolically give birth to the horse species and the Men who have it as a totem via the right horse, which springs out of it, while the left horse would symbolize the deceased individuals who come to "refill" the site. It is an anonymous work, without commercial value, but it is a work of the world's heritage and so a universal symbol.

We are pleased to frame these intersecting perspectives via two feminine sexual figurations presented here with a graphic wink that summarizes the essence of these representations (Fig. 12).

11 (Leroi-Gourhan, 1965, p. 482; Delluc & Delluc, 2009, pp. 629–661; Bourrillon et al., 2012 pp. 85–103)

12 (Testart, 2016, p. 380)

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