

REVIEW

Le Sanctuaire Secret Des Bison: Il y a 14,000 ans dans la caverne du Tuc d'Audubert by Robert Bégouën, Carole Fritz, Gilles Toscello, Jean Clottes, Andreas Pastoors, Francois Faist. Somology éditions d'art, Paris, 2009 and Association Louis Bégouën, Montesquieu-Avantès, 2009. ISBN 978-27572-0203-6. €49.50.

Hardback 415 pages. French, with forward in English. Copies are available by post from the Association Louis Bégouën<www.cavernesduvolp.com>

In 2004, Graham Mullan and I had the privilege of visiting to cave of le Tuc d'Audubert in company with two of the authors of this book, Robert Bégouën and Gilles Toscello. We were underground for several hours in a cave that has only been seen by approximately 1,000 visitors since its discovery on July 20th 1912 by Max, Jacques and Louis Bégouën (the father of Robert), the three brothers who would, two years later, discover the cave that still bears their name, Les Trois-Frères. Since that visit we have been eagerly awaiting the publication of this book, and it certainly does not disappoint.

At the time of their first major discovery, the three brothers were aged 19, 17 and 16. Their interest in caving and archaeology had already begun with visits to the caves of Mas d'Azil and Enlène, the latter being very close to their own family's landholding, where Jacques discovered a magnificent example of a spear-thrower, before subsequent investigations were stopped by the owner, M. Moulis de Méritans. After that set back, the three boys had only one idea in mind: to find another cave.

Together with their companion, François Camel, the three boys decided to explore the resurgence of the River Volp. They used a boat to traverse the first 60 m of passage before they were able to continue on foot. They found a dry gallery a few metres above the level of the river and, almost immediately, began to discover engravings on the walls: bison, horses and reindeer. Further exploration was halted by a stalagmite grill. Three months later, on October 10th, Max, Louis and François Camel returned to the cave. By now the first obstruction had been widened to allow them through and a second 'cat-flap' was then passed, allowing them into a large passage, where they discovered the prints of both humans and animals in the mud of the floor and, at the end of this passage, they discovered the two magnificent clay bison, approximately 640 m from the entrance. The boys immediately convinced their father, Henri, to attempt the passage of the narrow chimney to reach the sculptures which – with difficulty – he was able to manage. The importance of the discovery was recognised immediately, and the remarkable conservation measures adopted by the Bégouën family from the very beginning of their exploration of the cave have continued to this day.

Visitors still follow the same narrow pathway marked out by the brothers, and there are still large areas of the cave floor that remain in pristine condition. It is impossible to view the two bison, sculpted from clay taken from a nearby chamber, without an almost overwhelming sense of wonder. These two figures have remained untouched since the day they were first made. A series of radiocarbon dates obtained from objects found in the cave give a date of around 13,686 BP firmly in the middle of the Magdalenian period. It is even possible to see the fingerprints left behind by the sculptors as they worked and smoothed the clay. The cracks in the figures almost certainly occurred relatively soon after their manufacture. Robert Bégouën pointed out to us the small, grey stones played behind the figures by his father when he was concerned that the models might suffer earthquake damage, but he was at pains to tell us that

apart from this, the figures have been untouched since their discovery. The clay from which the bison were made was taken from a small chamber at the end of the gallery containing a number of heel prints, which appear, from their size, to have been made by children or young adults.

The book, a monograph containing every known detail about the cave and its contents, is the end result of a labour of love on the part of Robert Bégouën and his collaborators for the past 15 years. They were determined to make a record of every engraving in the cave and they have succeeded in presenting these beautifully in a vast number of photographs and drawing, which, together with the detailed surveys provide the next best thing to a visit to the actual cave. The cave contains 371 figures, and you will find them all represented in the book, along with numerous others signs and lines, with the claviform clearly predominating. I was particularly pleased to see a series of photographs of the 12 pieces pieces of bone and two flints jammed into cracks in the walls, many now covered with calcite. This is something that can also be seen both in Les Trois-Frères and Enlène, and it is wonderful to have such small, but fascinating details included in the book. Among the figures in the cave are 41 bison, 16 horses, nine 'monsters' or imaginary creatures, four ibex, six deer, a lion, a bear and two humans. There are also 360 human imprints, both of feet and fingers, and even the perfectly preserved skeleton of a grass snake.

Even in a visit lasting several hours a visitor can only hope to take in a fraction of the wonders the cave contains, but with this book you can experience its riches at leisure, and the importance of its contribution to our knowledge of Le Tuc d'Audubert cannot be overstated.

Linda Wilson