Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

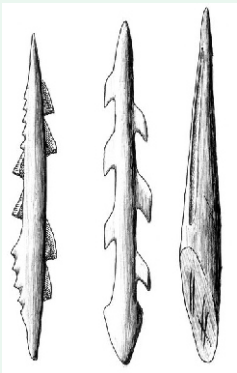
PREHISTORIC ROCK SHELTER PH 7



This model represents a temporary habitation site in the lee of a limestone cliff. Such shelters are common in the Dordogne area of France. The overhang of the cliff has been caused by rain water eroding on hard and soft bands of limestone over an immense period of time.

The model shows a scene which could have occurred between 10,000 and 18,000 years ago. At this time the northern hemisphere was suffering from the effects of the last glacial period. Much of Britain was covered by ice and those areas in the south which were ice free resembled the tundra regions of the world today. Further south, in the Dordogne and the Pyrennees in France, the effects of glaciation were much less severe, although in highland regions the temperature could still be very cold.

The period is often referred to by archaeologists as the Magdalenian Period, a name which is derived from a site called La Madeleine in the Dordogne. It was in France during this period that some of the most famous examples of prehistoric rock paintings were made. The site with which most people are familiar is at Lascaux, Dordogne (see below). The images at Lascaux consist mostly of representations of large animals, including aurochs (wild cow) and horses, most of which are known from fossil evidence to have lived in the area at the time. The other common theme of the paintings is human handprints.



Above: Bone harpoons made by Magdalenian people.





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It is important to remember that Magdalenian societies were not confined to the area now known as France, but were geographically widespread and Magdalenian sites have been found from Portugal in the west to the Ukraine in the east. Magdalenian peoples also made their way to what is now Britain.

Magdalenian societies seem to have been similar to more recent nomadic hunter-fisher communities in Canada and northern Russia. The period was earlier known as 'L'Age du Renne' (the age of the reindeer) because the people inhabiting some of the sites in France seem to have valued the reindeer as a food source. However, in other areas different food sources were utilised. In the Ukraine, mammoths were hunted and tents have been found made entirely from mammoth bones and skin. Perhaps the most famous of these was found at Mezhirich, dating from 15,000 years ago. The photos below show the excavated site and a modern reconstruction of it.



By the end of the Magdalenian Period very small flint blades were being produced. It is thought these microliths were used to give a razor-like edge to arrows and harpoons. As well as flint tools, the Magdalenians are best known for their elaborate worked bone, antler and ivory, including harpoons, but also some decorative items.
The photograph on the right shows a carving of a bison licking itself, found at La Madeleine. It may have been part of a spear thrower but, whatever the case, it shows a fine artistic eye.





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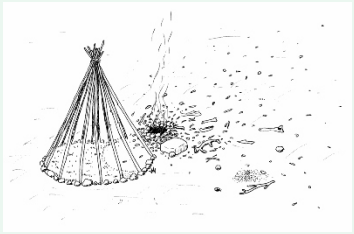
The model is based on evidence from excavations at Les Eyzies in the Dordogne. Photographs of this site as it is today can be seen below. The cave-lined Vézère valley, in which Les Eyzies is located, has been classified as a world heritage site by UNESCO because of the importance of the prehistoric finds that have been made in the area.

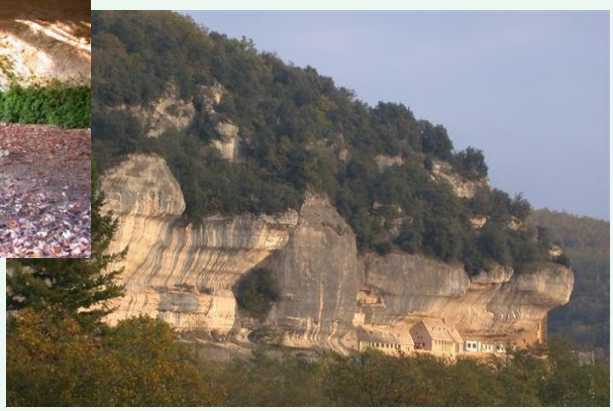


On the ground lie flints, imported from a few miles away and chipped on the spot. Several bones lie around the fire. On the ground is stretched a deer skin for scraping and treating. There is a wattle wind-break to provide some shelter. At Les Eyzies the cliff face was the main source of shelter, but many other sites show Magdalenian peoples used a variety of skin tents. The illustration on the right shows the probable structure of a tepee-like tent found at Pincevent, near Fontainebleau, dating from about 14,000 years ago. By the time the site was discovered the wooden frame had long since disappeared, but archaeologists could recreate the site from the stones used to hold the structure upright and to form a hearth.



Archaeological exploration at Les Eyzies has revealed traces of rock sculpture, including the so-called Venus figure (left). The walls were also often painted, although any images on an exposed site such as the one shown in this model would long since have disappeared through the effects of climate. Paintings inside more enclosed caves have survived. The examples reproduced on the model are based on originals at Font de Gaume.





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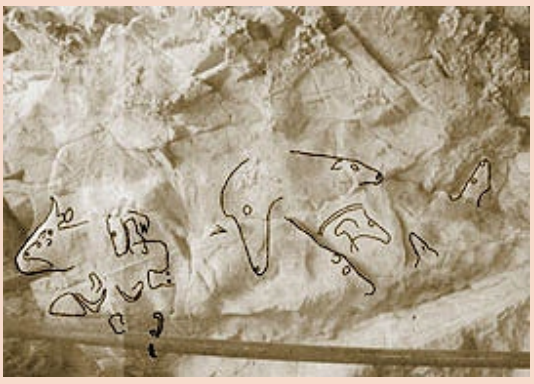
It used to be thought that there were no Magdalenian cave sculptures and paintings to be found in Britain. However, in 2003, stone age engravings and bas-reliefs were found on the walls and ceilings of caves at Cresswell Crags, Derbyshire (right). These are the most northerly finds in Europe and the most extensive collection of prehistoric bas-reliefs in the world. Subject matter includes representations of animals including bison and several different bird species. The engravers seem to have made use of the naturally uneven cave surface in their carvings and it is likely that they relied on the early morning sunlight entering the caves to illuminate the art.

The caves were occupied over an immense period of time. The main phases of Stone Age occupation were at around 43,000 BC, in a period between 30,000 and 28,000 BC and then again around 10,000 BC. Scientists and archaeologists have concluded, however, that it was most likely the engravings were contemporary with evidence for occupation at the site during a slightly warmer period in the last Ice Age around 13,000-15,000 years ago.



Above: A detail of the refliefs at Cresswell Crags, with some of the figures outlined in black.