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Donald Thomas Burgy
dburgy@aol.com

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A Symbol in the Ceiling Mural in the Cave of Altamira

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Drawings of the abstract symbol



Altamira mural drawing by Henri Breuil with redrawn signs

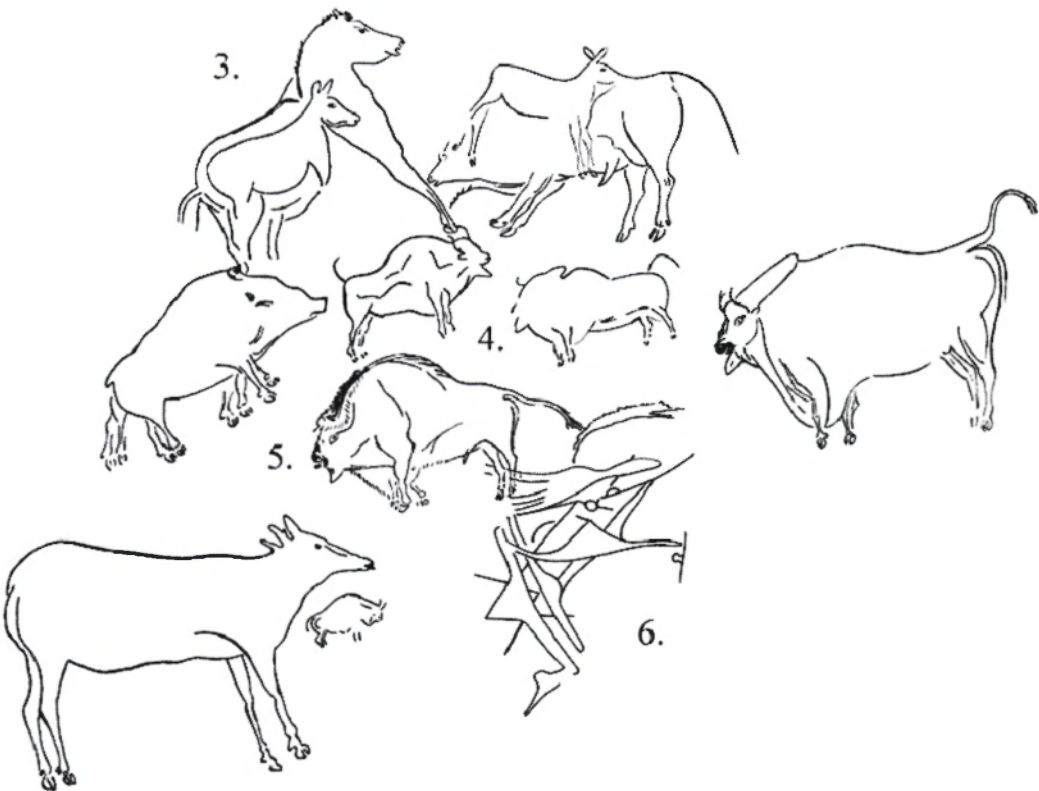
The great painted and engraved mural on the ceiling in the cave of Altamira in northern Spain contains an abstract symbol in a band of Summer animal images. The mural is dated to the Magdalenian culture, c. 13,500 years BP.

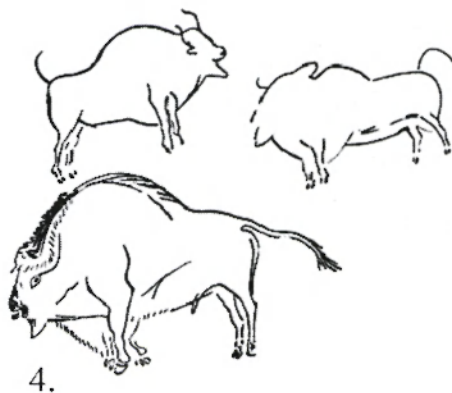
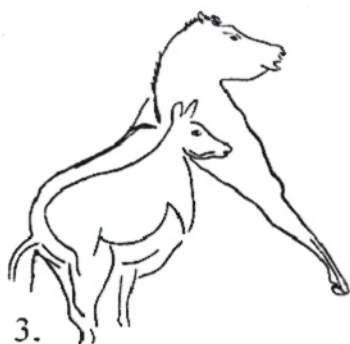
Here I read three parts of the abstract symbol: the sunrise-sunset sign, the sign of two solar azimuth angles overlayed upon it, and the three female figures above them.

In the mural's calendric bands of animal images, near the chamber's entrance, are painted scenes of late Autumn and Winter: a bison belling (1.) during the rut and the victor of the rut (2.) looking back toward his reclining harem.

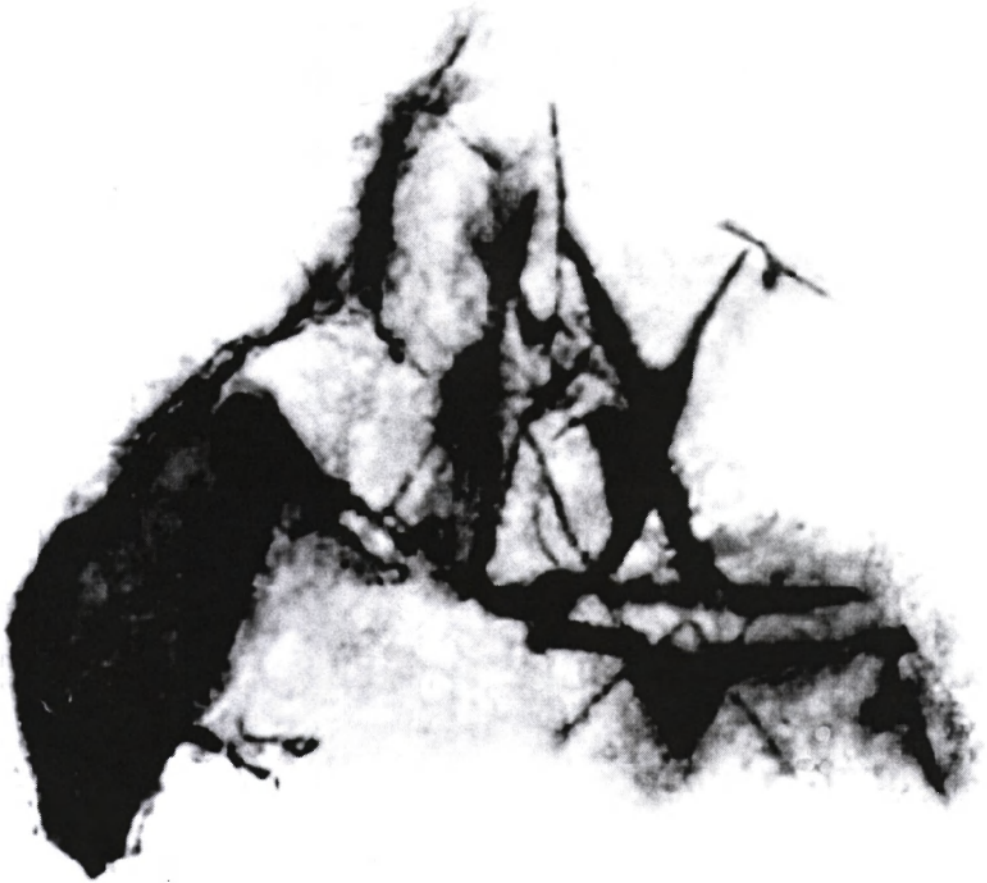


At the other end of the mural, in the deep end of the chamber, are Spring and Summer scenes: a foal and its mother (3.) running together and three smaller bison, (4.) not painted but drawn in charcoal. molting their winter coats. The abstract symbol is painted in the warm season position of the mural’s calendric sequence of animal images, near a molting bison (5.) providing fibers to the three spinsters of the abstract symbol. (6.)





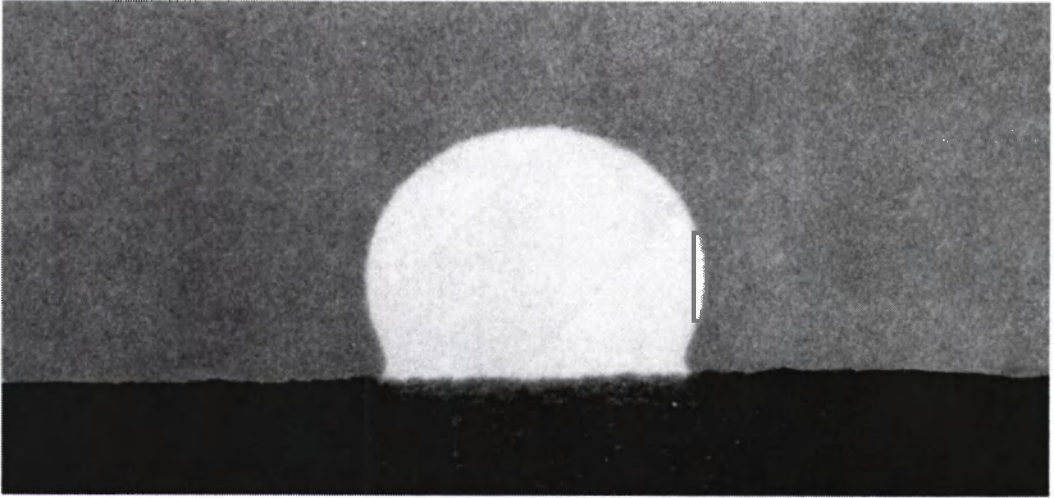
Details of Summer part of the Altimira mural drawing by
Henri Breuil with redrawn abstract symbol.



The symbol contains abstractions of the Sun seen on the horizon at sunrise and sunset. (7.) The solar signs are straight horizon lines with the Sun's disks tangent to them.



The disks are not circular. They record the appearance of the Sun's disk reshaped by refraction of its light. The greatest refraction occurs at the horizon during Summer sunsets when moist air is warmed and the troposphere expands to higher altitudes.



Photograph of the Sun's disk refracted.



Drawing of sunrise-sunset sign with refraction curves along its horizons.

It is Summer Solstice when the Sun's disk widens and curves along the horizon. The Altamira sunrise to sunset sign's rising and setting curves represent the warm conditions of Summer Solstice.

A seal inscribed with a Hittite hieroglyph of parallel sunrise and sunset signs (8.) from Alishar in Anatolia may be dated c. 2000 years BC.

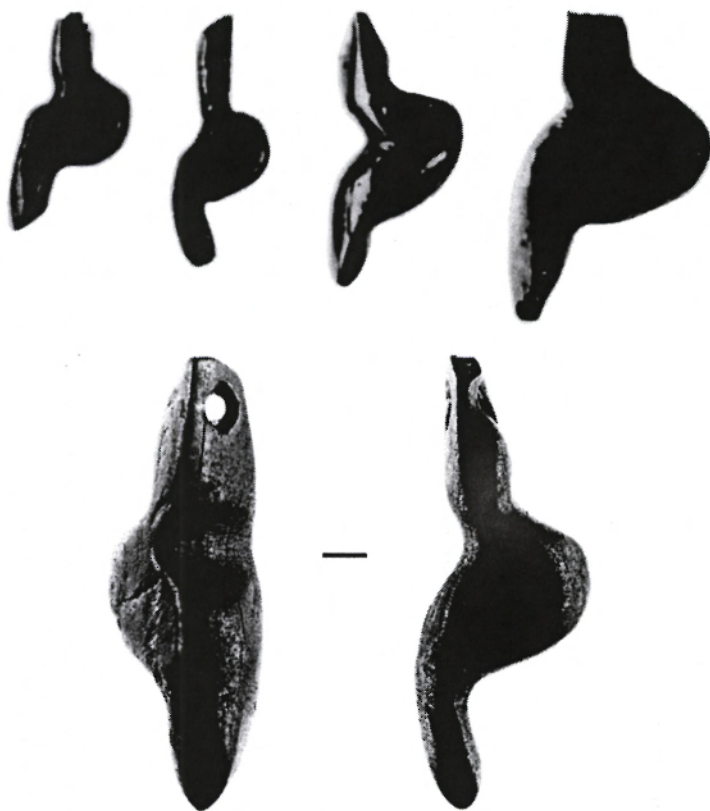
The seal is inscribed with a sunrise to sunset hieroglyph comprised of parallel horizon lines intersecting a circular rising Sun above and an elliptically shaped setting Sun below.

Altamira's sunrise to sunset sign signifies a rising Sun with refraction, warm air at sunrise, and a large triangular setting Sun with greater refraction by warmer air.

The Hittite solar sign's sunrise disk is not refracted. The Altamira sunrise sign's refraction, curving along the horizon, distinguishes it as the sign of a specific day, the warmest day of longest sunlight.



8.



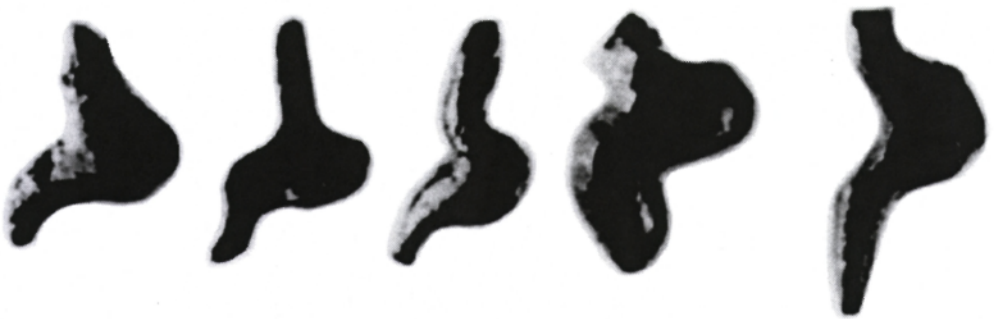
9.

Photographs of Petersfels female figurines one seen in two views

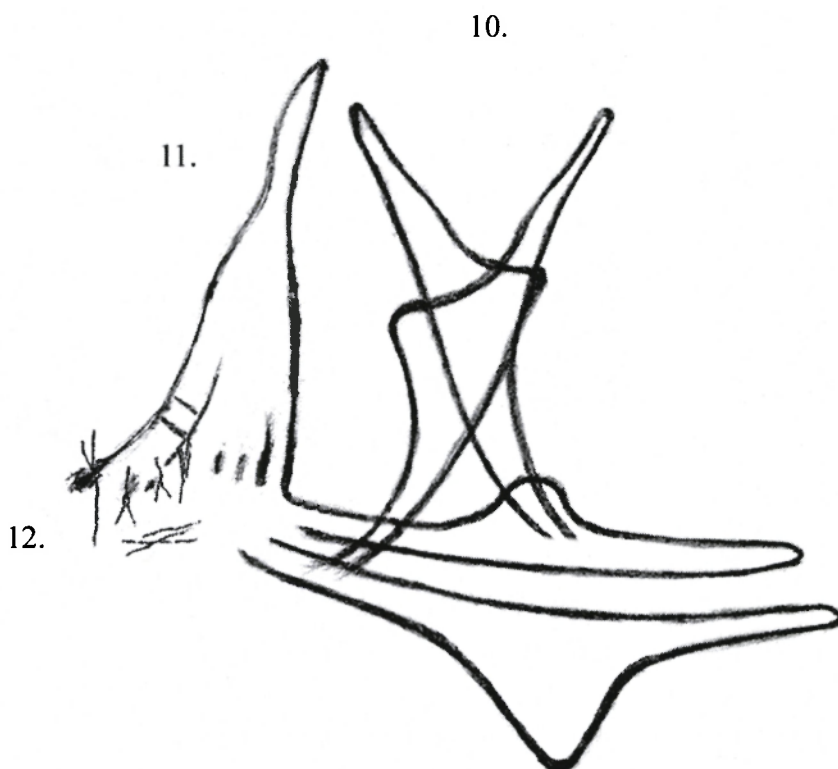
Female figurines (9.) ranging in height from 15 to 45 millimeters found at the reindeer and horse hunters' site of Peterfels, southern Germany, date to late Magdalenian culture, c. 12,500 years BC.

The figures carved in coal and sandstone are drilled through to be strung on a necklace. When worn about the neck they are seen as profile silhouettes similar in shape and simplicity to the three abstract female images in the Altamira symbol. Variations in their shape and size portray young, mature and old females.

The abstract images of females in the Altamira symbol are part of a widespread and well-know Paleolithic visual language tradition of abstract human images in painting, engraving and sculpture such as the Peterfels figurines.



The abstract symbol's images of the three females are simplified to profile silhouettes of mostly torso, buttocks and legs. All three stand on the sunrise to sunset sign's horizons. The crossed females (10.) stand on different horizons, one on sunrise and the other on sunset. The tallest (11.), wearing a long skirt, stands separately on both horizons.



The three females are astronomers who sight the Sun and Moon and record the days, weeks, months and years: one sights sunrise, a second sights sunset and a third sets the season's calendar by calculating from both solar and lunar sightings.

The three female images represent the Paleolithic progenitors of the myth of the Norns, old Urth, mature Verdandi and young Skuld, who sit and spin by a spring beneath Yggdrasil, the world tree of all life. They are the ancestors of the Greek Moirai: Klotho, "spinner" who spins the thread of life at birth, Lachesis, "allotment" who measures it, and Anthropos, "unturnable" who chooses when to cut it.

The tallest one standing separately is the old woman of time past, Urth who wears a calendric skirt to keep the tally. She weaves the fabric of history and wears it behind her in Altamira's abstract symbol. The twist signs engraved onto the painting of her skirt (12.) identify her as a spinster, a twister of thread, yarn, and lamp wicks.



13. Lespugue figurine

A 14.7 centimeter carved ivory female figure (13.) wearing a woven skirt behind her was found in a hearth inside Rideaux cave in France. She is known as the Venus of Lespugue and is dated to Perigordian V culture, 21,000 years BC.

The nearly nude female wears a skirt (14.) with a loose fringe of vertical warp lines. The warp hangs from a belt worn low on her hip to reveal her hip's twist sign (15.) indentifying her as a spinster, a twister of fibers into strands of thread, spinning them with her fingers along her hip.

The figure of old Urth of the Norns in Altamira's symbol wears a longer skirt (16.) than the one engraved on the Lespugue carved figure. The skirt flows behind the painted figure, its length signifies a greater time depth. The calendric bands of its weft lines record chronologies of a deeper past.



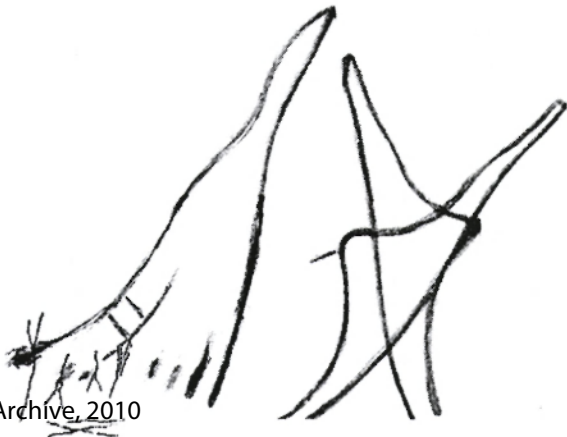
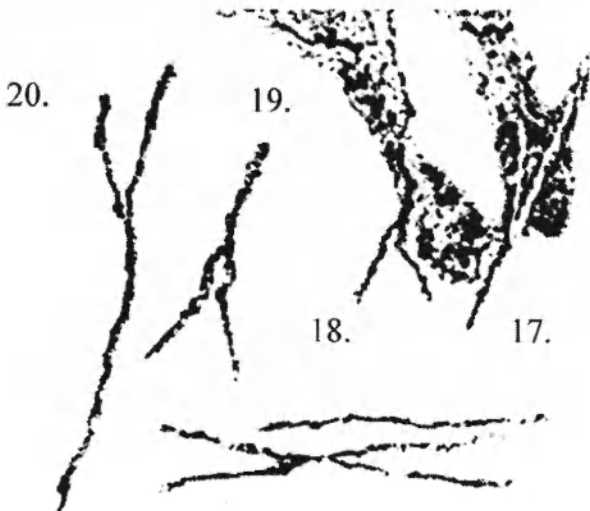
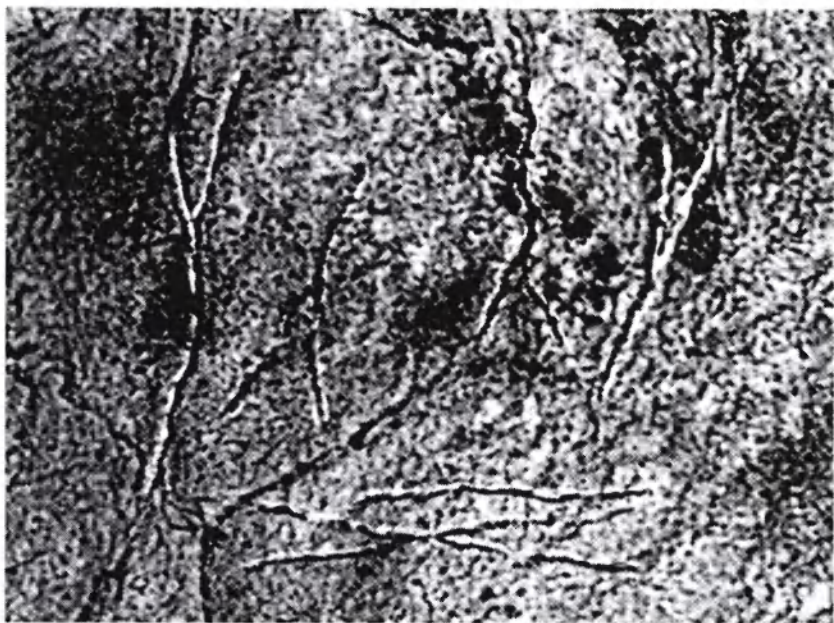
15.



14.



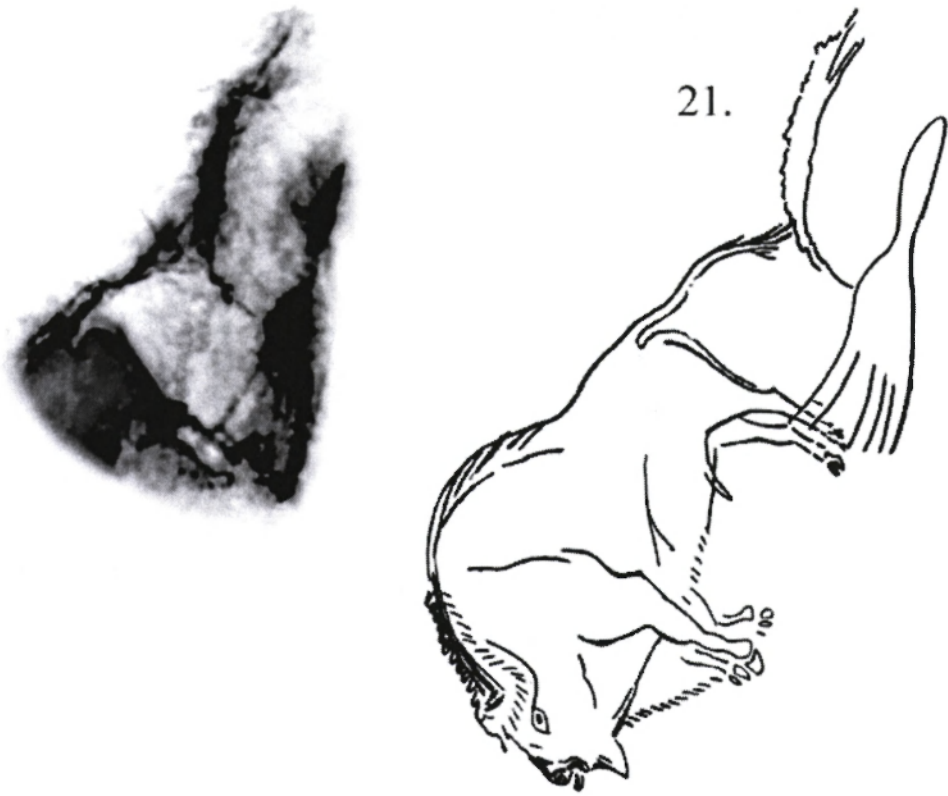
16.



In the warm weather band of the three smaller bison shedding their Winter coats, one smaller bison's rear legs extend to the abstract symbol and overlay the old woman's skirt. The legs overlay the skirt between a rectangular hide sign above, time measured in sewn hides, and the skirt's fringe below.



A twist (17.) is engraved onto the painted hoof of one leg and an inverted twist (18.) is engraved on the other leg. A straight inverted twist (19.) and a long undulating twist (20.) are engraved on the skirt's fringe below the legs. A twist intersecting a hoof indicates strands are twisted with glue made from bison hooves.



The molting bison provides its shed wool to the old spinster for twisting into strands by extending its tail to a long vertical bundle with a fuzzy shape.

The irregular shape behind the spinster represents a distaff (21.), a staff (probably a simple stick) for holding a loose bunch of wool from which fine threads are drawn for twisting by rolling them along her thigh. A single thin line descends from the distaff to the spinster's buttock to represent thread drawn from the loose bunch.

The three female figures, sunrise-sunset day sign and double solar azimuth year sign are painted with red ochre. The bison and distaff are drawn with black charcoal.



22.

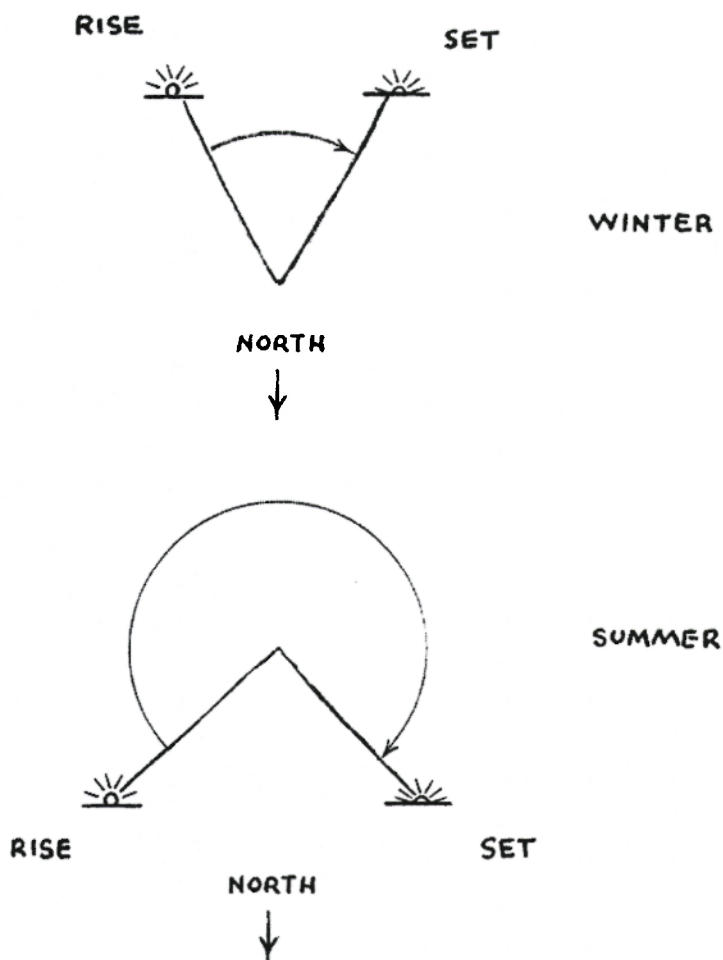
A carving of three vulvas and an inverted twist on a limestone block (22.) in Abri Blanchard in France dates to early Aurignacian culture, c. 30,000 years BC.

The vulvas signify the three female spinsters, 15,000 years earlier than Altamira. Each Norn is identified: in the upper left the small slender form of a youthful maiden, the middle form of a matron and in the lower right the large form of the old one.

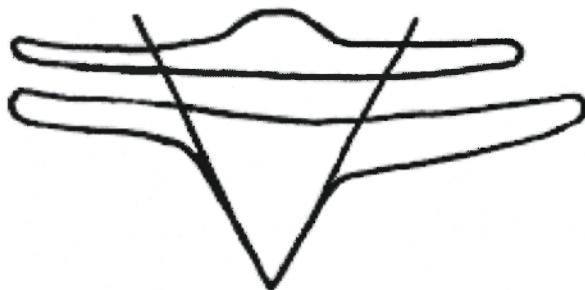
Altamira's three spinsters sign is one among many ancient variations by Paleolithic artists.

Burgy

V and Λ are astronomical time signs; each represents a solar azimuth angle, the angle between two lines of light to an observer, one from sunrise and the other from sunset, measured along the horizon. In Winter, the distance along the horizon from sunrise to sunset is less than 180° and more than 180° in Summer.

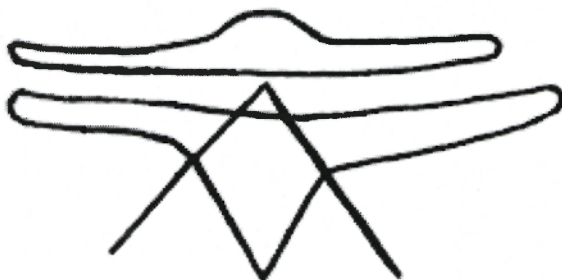


The narrow angle of a Winter Solstice azimuth (23.) forms the sunset's triangular shape. The Winter azimuth's two lines of light extend over both sunrise and sunset horizons and along the triangular setting Sun's sides to its apex below.



23.

The wide angle of a Summer Solstice azimuth (24.) is painted over the sunset sign's triangular Sun. The Summer azimuth angle's apex, representing an astronomer's sighting position, is centered between the sunrise and sunset horizons.



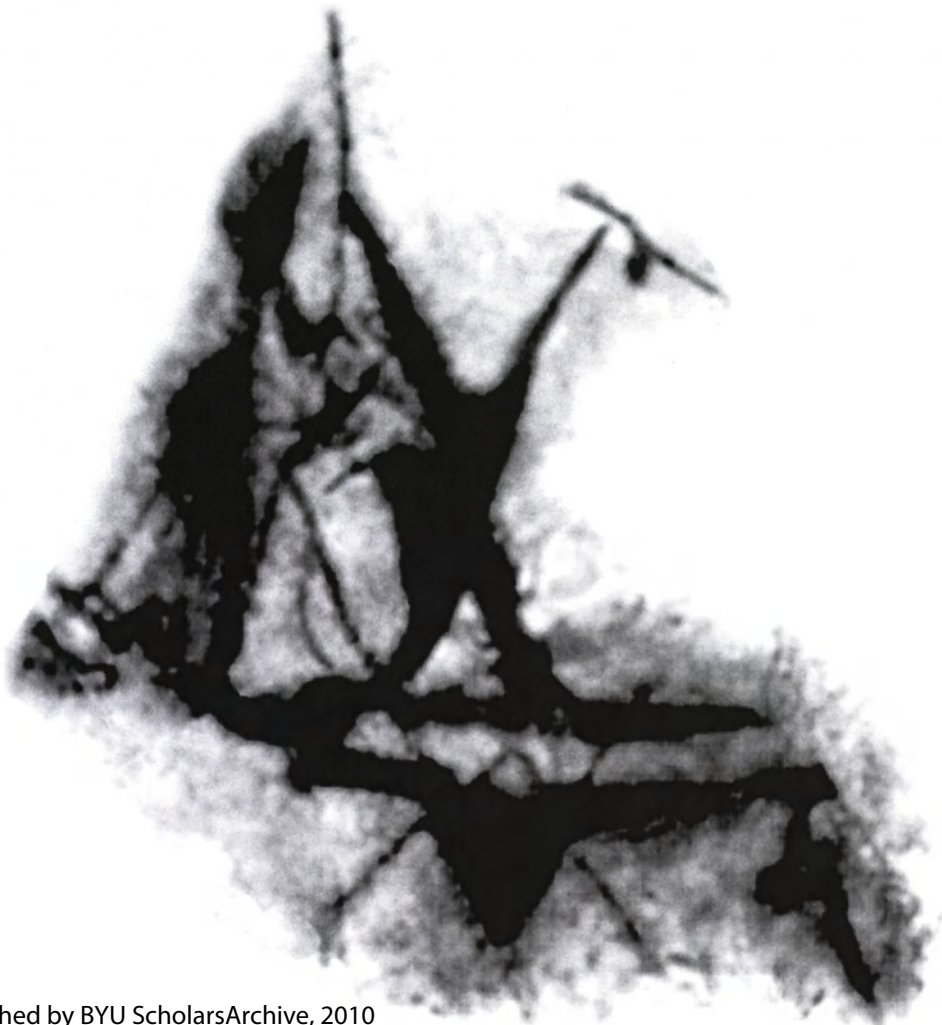
24.

The sign of two Solstice azimuths (25.) signifies a year from Solstice to Solstice from beginning to end.



25.

The year sign overlayed onto the rise to set day sign represents the whole year from first sunrise to last sunset that the three females of Altamira's abstract symbol oversee. They oversee all time.





The year sign's meaning is identical to the calendric subject of the mural as a whole. The mural depicts the annual sequence of animal images that are signatures of the seasons from Winter to Summer as a viewer walks deeper into the chamber to where the abstract symbol is.

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