

TUC D'AUDOUBERT

A quarter of an hour after noon on October 10th 1912, the three Bégouën brothers made an incredible discovery in the Tuc d'Audoubert cave. One of the brothers, realising the importance of the find, had made a note of the precise time. That evening they sent a telegram to their university professor saying, *The Magdalenian people also modelled in clay*. He replied, *Coming tomorrow*.

On September 15th 1999 Jean Clottes arranged for Damon and me to visit the 15,000-year-old bull and cow bison sculptures. I had read about the cave and seen the photographs of these incredible works of art, but to actually be inside this privately-owned cave was to be a dream come true.

The Cavernes du Volp consists of three cave systems, Les Trois Frères, Enlène, and Tuc d'Audoubert. Between them they house several of the art wonders of the world. The caves were made by the River Volp, which runs just here for a while underground beneath a limestone formation in the foothills of the French Pyrenees, creating a network of tunnels on three levels. The Volp emerges back into some of the most beautiful and unspoilt countryside I have ever seen at the entrance of the Tuc d'Audoubert cave.

Damon, Jean and myself stood in brilliant sunlight looking down at the stream that flowed gently from the enchanting Japanese-garden setting that surrounded the cave mouth. While our host, Count Robert, prepared the bathtub dinghy that would take us, two at a time, into the black throat of the cavern, we breathed the essence of the moss-covered rocks, ferns, and hanging vines reflected in the mirror-still surface of the water. The whole was dappled in sunlight shining through the leaves of the trees that hung over the stream. It was a bewitching scene and one of utter peace. A spirit of serenity surrounded the menacing black throat of the ancient sanctuary.



The exit of the underground Volp river

All was soon ready and the Count paddled off into the darkness, trailing a thin rope, which Damon let out from a coil as he stood in the river at the tunnel mouth. Five minutes later a call echoed out from the cave and Damon started to pull on the cord. Suddenly the tiny dinghy popped out of the cave.



Jean with Damon bringing back the bathtub boat

Damon and Jean clambered in and paddled off up stream. Soon the sacred vessel returned and it was our turn. I climbed in to the bow and knelt as though praying, which seemed only right because I was about to enter the presence of the ancient gods. As Count Robert's student started to paddle into the cavern I wondered how deep the water was so tested the depth with my paddle to find it just touched the bottom. I had the most eerie tingles run up and down my spine as the darkness enveloped us. The tunnel took a slight bend and there ahead of me were three will-o'-the-wisp helmet lights bobbing about. The darkness turned into a warm-grey gloom and very soon the boat grated against a shingle beach and we scrambled out.

The cave was about 10 foot high and 15 foot across at this point. Following the Count we crossed water-worn rocks and shingle to a single two-inch wide iron pipe that was attached to the wall of the cave about two foot above the water. We edged along this, leaning into the wall of the cave, for about 20 foot and arrived on another tiny shingle beach. To the right the river

disappeared into a black hole, while to the left a cavern that is grandly called the 'Salle Nuptiale' opened up before us.

While Jean showed us some animal engravings that had been done with sharp flints the Count unlocked the iron gates that guard the tunnel. We heard a shout and returned to a 12-foot high iron ladder that reached up to a three-foot wide hole at the top of the wall of the cave. Behind the ladder was a convoluted wormhole leading up to the same spot, which was the route taken by the Bégouën brothers in 1912 when exploring the cave and the same route the Magdalenians used 15,000 years before. We thankfully climbed the ladder, bypassing the acrobatic scramble, and arrived in a small chamber some eight foot round, out of which we hauled ourselves up a steep incline on iron rungs set into the rock. The tunnel got smaller and tighter and then extremely awkward before we eventually reached an iron gate. Again, feeling like the White Rabbit, we forced ourselves through the tiny doorway and fell out into a larger tunnel. Here Jean pointed out some more engravings, guardians of the sacred chamber that lay ahead.

Jean dropped to his knees and following suit I crawled after him. *Not bad*, I thought, *my old joints can take this*. I had spoken too soon as after another short upright passage we came to another rabbit hole. This time Jean dropped to his belly and pushed his helmet and light out ahead of him. My body temperature rose sharply as I watched the toecaps of his boots scrabbling against the rock to push his body forward!

I started off up the wormhole urged on by a witty remark from Damon! Unfortunately my battery, attached to the belt around my waist, added to my girth and I became firmly wedged in the hole. Luckily my fingers found a knob of rock to pull on and with much grunting I fell out at Jean's feet. By then a lot more grunting was going on behind me as Damon started his run, so I moved out of the way and followed Jean. We were now on the upper level of the underground cave system made by the river millions of years before.

Our next obstacle was a vertical squeeze that had to be done sideways to get the hips through between the stalagmites, but then we found ourselves in a respectable tunnel that we could walk along bent double.

The Count met us at this point and took over the lead, setting off at a good pace with us following along behind. The path was outlined by two strips of thin plastic tape so the cave floor on either side was untouched, remaining exactly as it was when the Count's father and uncles had first found it in 1912. We stopped to look at the calcified bear skull that had died in the cave long before the arrival of the Magdalenian people. Our torches lit a series of unbelievable scenes of beauty. White crystals shone like snowflakes above us while slender stalagmites joined pencil-thin stalactites pretending to support the roof of the cave. It was like a Christmas fairyland.

Again we stopped, but this time to examine two tiny footprints moulded in the surface of a little shelf of wet clay about a foot above the ground on the side of our pathway. We were looking at the imprints of a three-year-old Magdalenian child! The Count said that he thought that perhaps the mother carrying a child had rested it here for a moment.

The 15,000 years that separated me from the child disappeared. These people were our ancestors, every bit as clever as we like to think we are, but able to survive in an environment that would kill most of us off in a matter of days. On top of all that they were brilliant artists!

We followed on, turning this way and that, always sticking to the pathway; a narrow squeeze, a larger tunnel, and skirting around sections of the cave floor that had collapsed into the lower tunnels made by the river. Nowhere was there any art, the walls of the cave were untouched.

Time and space were so completely joined by now that I had no idea of either as separate identities. The Count turned to me and pointed off to the left and down into a large hollow space. "Sit and rest," he said. I settled down and waited. "Look behind you." On turning there were the *Bison*, three feet away from my nose. "Oh my God!" What a moment and what an impact! It was hard to believe my eyes. The *Bison* are unbelievably beautiful, immensely powerful, and full of religious purpose. The cow is ready for the bull who is scenting the air with flared nostrils. The act of conception is about to take place and a new life be created.



The Bison of Tuc d'Audoubert

The two *Bison* lean against a central rock that supports them, adding a scale to the scene. Because of the darkness of the cavern that surrounds the sculptures, you feel as though you are looking down from afar at a moment of real life.

A white ribbon encircles the *Bison*. No one is allowed to stand near them in case they accidentally fall on the art that was done 15,000 years ago. Slowly I crawled around the circle to inspect the sculpture from every angle, shining my torch this way and that so I could see the full effect of the shadows on the surface of the clay. The *Bison* are beautifully modelled. The great humps of both animals were exactly like the bison I had recently seen in Montana, where, 200 years ago they were still being hunted by the Red Indians. Here, 16,000 years ago, the bison had provided meat for the Magdalenian people.

The sculptures are a unique wonder of the art world: two foot long, eighteen inches high, three to four inches thick and modelled in clay. The surface had been smoothed with water to give the bison a shiny wet finish by the artist whose finger marks could be seen running down the flanks of the animals. The mane and beard were etched with a tool, but the markings along both lower jawbones were done by the artist's fingernail! The horns are rougher and not water treated. The clay has cracks running across the bodies

indicating that the sculptures have dried out slightly, although the clay we were sitting on was still quite pliable. I scraped a small ball of it from the trampled floor and kneaded it in my fingers and thought about the artist that had conceived this marvellous composition while forming a picture in my mind.



The artist working on the Bison 15,000 years ago

At last we had to drag ourselves from the scene and turned to the sunken cave floor behind, sliding down so we could stand beside a flat clay bed. Towards the rear wall of the cave, cut out of the floor, is a hole in the four-inch thick clay silt where a slab has been removed, the exact shape and size of one of the bison. Surely this was where the clay used to model them had come from. Lying on the ground were some fat sausages of clay, obviously rolled between the hands, something sculptors do as they prepare the clay they are about to use. It is a subconscious action shared by all those who work with clay. I felt a wonderful bond existed between me and the Magdalenian artist who had done this exquisite work so many years ago. How fortunate we both were to be sculptors!

In the clay floor we could see the imprints of footprints, a few of adults but also many children proving the young visited this sacred place. For me the purpose of the sanctuary was to obtain the blessing of the Goddess of Fertility on the new life that possibly was to be conceived in front of the mating *Bison*. I felt that here was a place where human life had been created. Once felt, the spirit of the place that exists in this sacred sanctuary can never be forgotten.

Our time was up! The rush of the modern world and our aeroplane waited outside this haven of peace.

On the way from the cave we again passed back through the tight wormhole. As I was following the Count I saw him lie on his back and enter the hole feet first and disappear. I followed suit. An astonishing feeling of passing from the womb of the cave, down a birth canal, out into the world, flooded through me with incredible power.



Genesis

I thought of my Symbolic Sculpture *Genesis* that was made out of the ancient rhombus symbol of Fertility, where each form gives birth to another while at the same time being born itself. None of the important things in life have changed over the last thousands of years!

We arrived back at the bathtub boat and Jean got in with me to leave. We paddled gently downstream towards the light at the entrance of the cave and experienced another rebirth as we passed out into the sunlight of a new day. I felt transformed, a different person, having knelt in front of the ancient gods of the Past. I am sure that the experience of Tuc d'Audoubert touches the inner being of all who have been there. *I am aware, therefore I am.*

I thought about the girl who had carried the three-year-old child into the cave, resting it on the shelf where it had left its footprints in the clay 15,000 years ago? What would have been going through the mind of the girl as she waded through the four-foot deep waters of the stream heading for the light at the entrance of the tunnel? Was she now carrying the beginnings of a new life after her visit to the bison altar? Would she have been aware of a sense of a sacred cleansing as she waded through the water on her way into the cave and one of divine blessing as she was herself reborn into the sunshine? I think she would have, because I believe the Magdalenians thought exactly as we do today; only the culture has changed, we humans have not.



Heading towards the reality of the Sun and the Moon



Robert Bégouën and Damon emerge from the tunnel

One can imagine the excitement of the Bégouën brothers as they came out of the cave for the first time and raced back to tell their father of their discovery before composing a telegram to their professor. What a moment that

must have been! I shall forever be in the debt of Count Robert for sharing such a privilege and to my friend Jean for arranging such a special trip.

It took seconds to model a tiny bison from the minute ball of clay I had scraped from the trampled floor beside the *Bison*. I wondered if 15,000 years ago the Shaman would have done the same thing and then given each supplicant a talisman as they left the sanctuary to protect the owner from evil. I know I certainly would have if I had been the Medicine Man!



A bison talisman of clay



European Bison in Russia

Over nine foot high at the shoulder and weighing 2,000 lbs, bison can charge at 40 mph. The Russian bison population fell to 12 animals in 1919 but today, due to a careful conservation, 3,000 roam the grasslands north of Moscow. These mighty beasts deserved to be worshipped!